

The Lost Breviarium Compertorum and Henry VIII's First Act for the Dissolution of the Monasteries, 1536

by RICHARD REX
Queens' College, Cambridge
E-mail: rawr1@cam.ac.uk

A challenge has recently been made to the venerable tradition that the passage of Henry VIII's first act for suppressing monasteries (1536) was facilitated by the presentation in parliament of details of monastic sexual misconduct gathered during the royal visitation of the monasteries in 1535–6. This article, by following up clues missed in the evidence cited for that challenge, precisely identifies a now lost source, last sighted in the hands of John Bale, which casts important new light on the visitation and, it is argued, was very probably the exact document presented to parliament in 1536.

On the authority of Hugh Latimer, it has long been believed that Henry VIII's first act for the suppression of monasteries had a relatively easy ride through parliament in spring 1536 because evidence of what was by Christian standards rampant sexual immorality in the monasteries and nunneries of England was presented to it. What Latimer said, in a sermon delivered in the presence of Edward VI some thirteen years later, was this:

I woulde not that ye should do wyth chauntrye priestes, as ye dyd wyth the Abbotes, when Abbeyes were put downe. For when theyr enormities were fyrste read in the parliment house, they were so greate and abhominable, that there was nothyng

BL = British Library; *L&P* = *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII*, London 1862–1932 (cited by volume [and where relevant by part]) and number; PRO = Public Record Office, at The National Archives

I should like to thank the meticulous but anonymous reader for this JOURNAL for several helpful comments and suggestions, and in particular for invaluable advice as to disentangling Thomas Bartlett (Barthelet) from Thomas Berthelet (see below at nn. 26–9).

but downe with them. But within a whyle after, the same Abbottes were made byshops as there be some of them yet alyve to save and redeme theyr pentions.¹

He knew what he was talking about because, in March 1536, he was an eyewitness in the House of Lords as the recently appointed bishop of Worcester. Most historians of the dissolution of the monasteries have connected his comment with the details of sexual misbehaviour gathered by the royal commissioners who carried out a rapid visitation of English monasteries and nunneries in the second half of 1535 and early 1536. This very different type of monastic visitation took a peculiar interest in the sex lives of monks and nuns, and the commissioners coined their own word, ‘comperts’, to describe what they found out. ‘Comperts’, an obvious Anglicisation of ‘comperta’, means ‘things that have been found out’, or findings. The only instances of this obsolete word listed in the *Oxford English dictionary* come from the years 1535–9.

An extant summary of a large sample of these findings, known as the *Compendium compertorum*, has seemed particularly significant in this context, although it is necessary to emphasise at once that two documents survive under this title, and it is important to distinguish them. They were juxtaposed by the nineteenth-century collators who arranged the state papers of the reign of Henry VIII in the order in which they now stand in their bound guard books.² The first of them, the one that historians generally mean when they mention the *Compendium*, recapitulates the ‘comperts’ from the religious houses of northern England. It consists of sixteen leaves of paper within a vellum cover, and its title, written on the front cover in a later hand, defines its scope as the province of York and the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield: *Compendium compertorum per Doctorem Layton et Doctorem Legh, in visitatione regia Provincia Eboracensi ac Episcopatu Coven. & Lichfelden*. It is tempting to infer that this document is either the clean copy or the duplicate that William Blithman told Cromwell he was

¹ *The seconde sermon of Master Hughe Latemer, whych he preached before the kynges maiestie ... the xv day of Marche. M.CCCC.XLIX*, London 1549 (RSTC 15274), sig. D3r–v. There is possible corroboration in a narrative among the Wyatt papers: ‘A chronicle and defence of the English Reformation’, in D. M. Loades (ed.), *The papers of George Wyatt*, London 1968, 127–61. However, the statement (p. 160), ‘When this acte was read in the parliament, all thabominacions of their religious persons, which was before in the visitacion fownd was opened which abhorred all mens eares to heare’, may merely be an echo of Latemer.

² PRO, SP1/102, fos 84–100, 101–4 (L&P x, no. 364). The northern *Compendium* covers about 120 houses; that for Norwich about another 30. The documents are properly distinguished in Anthony N. Shaw’s superb doctoral dissertation (for which I had the privilege of acting as external examiner) ‘The *Compendium compertorum* and the making of the suppression act of 1536’, unpubl. PhD diss. Warwick 2003, 398. See also G. W. Bernard, *The king’s reformation*, New Haven 2005, 258–65, and Peter Marshall, *Heretics and believers*, New Haven 2017, 228–9.

making after two of the royal commissioners, Richard Layton and Thomas Legh, had concluded their tour of the north in February 1536. However, if so, he used a different hand in the *Compendium* from the one he used in writing to Cromwell.³ But even if this document is not Blithman's work, it will have been related to it.

The document for Norwich diocese is just four leaves of paper, headed simply 'Compendium compertorum'. Despite generic resemblances that led the editors of *Letters and papers* to conclude that both documents are in the same hand, this is not the case.⁴ The Norwich document is in the hand of John ap Rhys (another of the royal commissioners), who authenticates it at the end with his name, notarial cipher and the comment 'Concordat cum compertis' ('it agrees with the comperts'). It can be very confidently identified with a paper that Legh and ap Rhys told Cromwell they were sending to him with a letter of 11 November 1535. Writing from Westacre Priory, they say they are enclosing 'an abridgement of the compertes from the last ye had unto Crabbehouse', and they draw his attention in particular to the notes on West Dereham. The surviving Norwich *Compendium* ends with an entry for Crabhouse Priory (which stood beside the Great Ouse, a few miles north of Downham Market), and includes an entry for West Dereham.⁵ It must therefore be the enclosure sent with that letter. The notarial attestation shows that this summary had been prepared from original 'comperts' that are now lost. It is striking that while numerous letters sent to Cromwell by the various commissioners in 1535–6 refer to enclosed 'comperts', only one example of this primary material, which must have been considerable, is known to survive. This is a sheet of paper headed 'Compendium compertorum apud Chertsey', which was sent to Cromwell by Thomas Legh with a letter dated 29 September.⁶

It has seemed to most historians who have considered the matter that the two summary documents are examples or drafts or copies of the sort of thing that was read out in parliament in 1536 to the horror of the assembled members.⁷ However, in his recent study of the dissolution,

³ William Blithman to Thomas Cromwell, Ludlow, 28 Feb. 1536, PRO, SP1/102, fo. 83r (*L&P* x, no. 363).

⁴ *L&P* x, no. 364, says they are in the same hand. But the differences in the way the two scribes construct 'G' is the most marked of numerous subtle differences between the handwriting of the two papers. Compare the G of Grenesley and Garadon (85r) with those of Gilbertus (102r) and Gargrave (104r).

⁵ Thomas Legh and John ap Rhys to Cromwell, Westacre, 11 Nov. 1535, PRO, SP1/99, fo. 34r (*L&P* ix, no. 808). For West Dereham and Crabhouse in the *Compendium* see PRO, SP1/102, fos 104r, 104v (*L&P* x, no. 364 [3]).

⁶ Legh to Cromwell, 29 Sept. 1535, PRO, SP1/97, fos 47 (letter) and 48 (*comperta*) (*L&P* ix, no. 472).

⁷ See, for example, John Lingard, *A history of England*, London 1819–30, iv. 229–30; F. A. Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English monasteries*, London 1889, ii. 335–8; David

James G. Clark has challenged this interpretation. While agreeing that this looks at first sight as though it might ‘embody the casebook spoken of by Latimer’ (not that he actually speaks of a ‘casebook’, though that is what most historians have inferred), Clark argues that the text is ‘the only one of its kind’ and ‘only a partial return from three dioceses’, and that there is ‘no trace of, or reference to, another matching booklet’.⁸ As he rightly observes, the material from the northern visitation, which is the bulk of what survives, hardly looks likely to have been ready in time for formal presentation to parliament in early March.⁹ Moreover, he argues, Latimer’s words do not constitute proof that a document of this kind was formally read out, but might simply reflect the parliamentary reaction to the claims made in ‘the opening clause of the statute itself’.¹⁰

The preamble to the first act for the suppression of monasteries (27 Henry VIII c. 28) starts as follows: ‘Forasmoch as manifest synne, vicious, carnall and abhomynable lvyng is dayly used & commytted amonges the lytell and smale Abbeys Pryoryes and other Relygyous Houses of Monkes Chanons & Nonnes.’ A little further on it continues thus: ‘And albe it that many contynuall vysytacions hath bene hertofore had by the space of two hundreth yeres and more, for an honest and charitable Reformation of such unthrifty carnall & abhomynable lvyng, yett neverthesse lytell or none amendement ys hytherto hadde, but ther vycyous lvyng shamelesly increaseth & agumentith.’¹¹

These are grave accusations, but they do not constitute evidence,¹² and they do not sound like the reading out of the ‘enormities’ that Latimer recalled. It is hard to imagine such airy generalisations eliciting cries of ‘down with them’, unless perhaps from an audience already primed by

Knowles, *The religious orders in England, III: The Tudor age*, Cambridge 1959, 291; and Marshall, *Heretics and believers*, 231.

⁸ James G. Clark writes as though the material is a single document, stating that the *Compendium* covers some 120 religious houses and that it was the result of ‘circuits in the province of York, and the dioceses of Coventry and Lichfield, and Norwich’: *The dissolution of the monasteries: a new history*, New Haven 2021, 250–1. They are indeed partial returns, but there are two extant (see above), and they cover five dioceses, not three: the northern compendium includes the four dioceses of York, Durham, Carlisle and Coventry and Lichfield; the Norwich compendium covers part of Norwich diocese (and the letter under which it was submitted tells us that there was at least one earlier instalment).

⁹ *Ibid.* 322–3. Here Clark may be on stronger ground than Shaw, who inclines to see the northern *Compendium* as the document presented in parliament: ‘Comperta compertorum’, 396–7, 406. The timing does look very tight, and the northern *Compendium* does not strike me as a presentation copy, but as an advanced draft. In particular, it lacks any notarial attestation, which would reduce its value for parliamentary purposes.

¹¹ *Statutes of the Realm*, London 1817, iii. 575–8 at p. 575.

¹² ‘The preamble of a Tudor statute cannot ... be taken as unimpeachable evidence’: Knowles, *Religious orders*, iii. 295.

familiarity with the sort of shocking details collected by the commissioners. It is possible that the reading of the preamble incited howls of fury. But it is not likely.

It is worth observing here, chiefly because it seems not to have been remarked upon before, that the first act for the suppression of monasteries, astonishingly, does not appear in the sessional print of the statutes passed in the final session of the 'Reformation Parliament' (4 February–14 April 1536).¹³ Nor is it found in the various collected editions of the statutes published from the 1540s onwards (which merely reissue the sessional prints).¹⁴ The sessional print for the spring parliament ends at 27 Henry VIII c. 27, 'An acte establyshinge the courte of augmentations'.¹⁵ The reason for not printing the act on the monasteries can only be conjectured. But perhaps the regime was worried that publishing it might provoke discontent or even rebellion before the suppression got under way. Even though the suppression act was mentioned in the preamble to the act for the Court of Augmentations, a passing reference (in an act which, printed at the back of the booklet, and of a strongly technical and administrative nature, would probably attract little attention) may have been deemed less inflammatory than printing the act of suppression itself, which would have meant highlighting its baldly explicit title on the contents page.

Clark develops his argument further by suggesting that, far from being designed to harvest evidence with which to discredit English monasticism, the visitations of 1535 were a serious attempt to promote observant reform in the religious life in England, and were often favourably received as such.¹⁶ But this intriguing notion does not stand up to close scrutiny. Observant reform is usually driven from within religious orders, not by sceptical and hostile outsiders who rarely spent more than a day in any house they visited. As Dom David Knowles showed convincingly, over fifty

¹³ Not even Shaw comments on this, though the fact that he cites the statute, with typical thoroughness, direct from the statute rolls in the House of Lords suggests that he was aware of it: '*Compendium compertorum*', 388–90.

¹⁴ *Actes made in the session of this present parlyament holden upon prorogation at Westm, the iii day of February, in the xxvii yere of the reygne of our moste drad soveraygne lorde kynge HENRY the viii*, [London 1536] (RSTC 9391). For a later collected edition see, for example, *The second volume conteyning those statutes which have ben made in the tyme of the most victorious reigne of kyng Henrie the Eight*, London 1551 (RSTC 9303.7). The act was printed without its preamble in Ferdinando Pulton's *An abstract of all the penall statutes which be generall in force*, London 1577 (RSTC 9526.7), fos 226v–227v, which notes 'a Statute not imprinted'. The preamble is first printed only in William Hawkins (ed.), *The statutes at large, from Magna Charta to the seventh year of King George the Second*, London 1735, i. 815–18.

¹⁵ *Actes made in the session ... at Westm, the iii day of February*, fos xli.v–xlvi.v.

¹⁶ 'the threshold of a new beginning of observant reform': Clark, *Dissolution*, 254–63, esp. p. 262.

years ago, some of the conditions imposed upon monasteries in this visitation went far beyond even the letter, let alone the spirit, of the various monastic rules.¹⁷ The insistence that enclosure excluded venturing outside the precincts for any reason was utterly impractical and was greeted with anxiously polite incredulity, as abbots and priors besieged Cromwell with requests for dispensation from this absurdity. The point was to make life difficult, not to make observance rigorous.

Nor is the evidence adduced to suggest that this Henrician ‘reform’ of 1535 met with a favourable reception persuasive. Thus, while Abbot Robert Hamlyn of Athelney certainly used the phrase ‘thankes be to god’ in a letter to Cromwell after the visit of the royal commissioner Dr John Tregonwell, it is stretching a point to interpret this as a ‘heartfelt declaration’ by someone who wished ‘to identify themselves with a spirit of reform’. What Abbot Robert wrote was that Dr Tregonwell had carried out his visitation at ‘oure poure monastery ... wher he fonde (thankes be to god) the house yn metely good order, as yt wyl apere at hys returne’. And the purpose of his letter was to request a dispensation allowing him to leave the monastery precincts on monastic business, notwithstanding the new injunctions.¹⁸

There is in particular no justification for the claim that some sort of folk memory of this supposed observant reform lingered on until the turn of the century. The evidence offered for this is taken from none other than the future Protestant archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot. It is worth citing this claim:

It seems there was some slight recollection of this successful reformation as far off as the end of the Tudor era. George Abbot recalled how their ‘carnall kinde of behaviour ... was afterwarde amended in England, may bee testified by the survey, which by Visitation of the Kings Commissioners was taken under King Henry the eight of famous memory’.¹⁹

Abbot did indeed write these words, but it is important to put them in their context. Having remarked on the ‘carnall kinde of behavior’ that had already overwhelmed the monasteries in the days of St Bernard of Clairvaux, which he illustrates with a five-line citation from Bernard himself in characteristically acerbic mood, Abbot proceeds, with unmistakable irony:

how this was afterwarde amended in England, may bee testified by the survey, which by Visitation of the Kings Commissioners was taken under King Henry the

¹⁷ Knowles, *Religious orders*, iii. 275–9.

¹⁸ Clark, *Dissolution*, 255. Compare the citation offered there with Abbot Robert Hamlyn to Cromwell, 4 Nov. 1535, PRO, SP1/98, fo. 174r (*L&P* ix, no. 763).

¹⁹ Clark, *Dissolution*, 256 (ellipsis as on that page).

eight of famous memory, when by othes of the religious persons themselves, much Sodomitry & other uncleannesse was detected...²⁰

George Abbot, it transpires, saw in 1535 not a successful reformation, but a spectacular *exposé* of monastic corruption. This is just what one would expect from an author engaged at that moment in anti-Catholic polemic: the book in which he mentioned it was called *The reasons which Doctour Hill hath brought for the upholding of papistry*.

Still more interesting, though, is how Abbot continues the passage just cited, for in doing so he alludes to the publication of some of the ‘comperers’ in print. This is a clue which, when pursued, leads to evidence of the existence of another substantial, but now lost, and largely forgotten, compilation of findings from the 1535 visitation. Abbot goes on as follows:

when by othes of the religious persons themselves, much Sodomitry & other uncleannesse was detected, and afterwarde was published to the world by a printed booke, some notes wherof are to be seene in the French Apologie of Henry Stephanus made in defence of Herodotus.

This makes the unfamiliar suggestion that the sins of the monks were published in print. The work to which Abbot is referring can be identified as Henri Estienne’s *L’Introduction au traite de la conformite des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes: ou, Traite preparatif à l’Apologie pour Herodote*. Despite appearances, Abbot need not actually have read this in French, because an English translation had appeared the year before. Whether he used the French or the English, though, his marginal note refers to ‘Cap. 21’, and chapter 21 of the *Apology for Herodotus* was indeed his source, for Estienne provides there a series of details concerning the ‘whoredoms, adulteries, incests and sodomies’ of English priests and monks who are identified by name and monastery. The English translation of Estienne is opaque about what his source was, rendering Estienne’s observations as

a short treatise in French (wherein this story is set downe) taken out of an English booke, containing an inventory (or catalogue) of the villanies discovered in the visitation of Monasteries, Covents [*sic*], Collegiate Churches, and other religious houses in England, by the commandement of king Henry the eight.

The original French is no clearer, referring to ‘l’extract auquel cela est escript, tiré d’un livre Anglois’.²¹

²⁰ George Abbot, *The reasons which Doctour Hill hath brought for the upholding of papistry*, Oxford 1604 (RSTC 37), 412. Clark’s footnote for this, ‘Abbot 1604, 37’, perhaps confuses the RSTC number with the page reference: *Dissolution*, 579 n. 284.

²¹ Henri Estienne, *A world of wonders: or, An introduction to a treatise touching the conformitie of ancient and modern wonders: or, A preparative treatise to the Apologie for Herodotus*, London 1607 (RSTC 10553), 183, and *L’Introduction au traite de la conformite des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes: ou, Traite preparatif à l’Apologie pour Herodote*, [Geneva] 1566, 295.

Given that the scholar-printer Estienne was based in Geneva, the likelihood is that his source was a printed book by an English exile. The obvious candidate is the prolific John Bale, and an examination of his output reveals two works in which he provided details of monastic sins and crimes from the 1535 visitation. The first was Bale's *Scriptorium illustrium Maioris Brytanniae ... catalogus*, though this gives only a small sample of what is to be found in Estienne's *Apology*. Estienne's immediate source was Bale's *Acta romanorum pontificum*.²² All the details Estienne cites can be traced here.

In these two works, however, Bale does something much more useful for the historian than simply name and shame a few dozen monks. In the *Catalogus*, he provides invaluable details about his source:

I have with me now the visitations of a hundred monasteries of both sexes, and of eighteen priestly colleges, conducted and collated by the royal commissioners Richard Layton LLD, Thomas Bedyll (Archdeacon of Cornwall), and Thomas Berthelet, notary. In these houses, sodomites and the sexually incontinent were found in such quantity that you would have thought there was a new Gomorrah in each one. The book is called 'Breviarium compertorum in monasteriis, conventibus, collegiis, &c'.²³

In the *Acta* he adds the name of Thomas Legh to a list of the royal visitors, and a few lines later he referred to his source under exactly the same Latin title as before.²⁴ Only then, in each case, did he launch into the salacious details.

Some important inferences can be drawn from these two passages. First of all, the Latin title *Breviarium compertorum in monasteriis, conventibus, collegiis* can be taken as the proper title of what was a formal document – probably compiled in Latin. Bale is explicitly telling us what the book 'is called'. Secondly, it was a duly attested compilation. It was clearly attributed to, and probably signed by, three royal commissioners, and was notarially authenticated. The role of the notary in the preparation of the *Breviarium* can be taken as that of authenticating it as a trustworthy summary of the more

²² John Bale, *Scriptorium illustrium Maioris Brytanniae, quam nunc Angliam & Scotiam uocant: catalogus*, Basel 1557–9, i. 665; and *Acta romanorum pontificum*, Basel 1558, sigs **8r–***1v. The colophon to the former work bears the date September 1557, and that to the latter, July 1558.

²³ 'Apud me ad praesens sunt visitationes centum monasteriorum utriusque sexus, et octodecim collegiorum sacerdotalium, per commissarios regios Ricardum Layton legum doctorem, Thomam Bedill archidiaconum Cornubiensem, et Thomam Bertheletum notarium factae et collectae. In quibus, tanto numero reperti sunt Sodomitae et incontinentes, ut in unoquoque eorum credideris novam adfuisse Gomorram. Liber vocatur Breviarium compertorum in monasteriis, conventibus, collegiis, etc': idem, *Catalogus*, i. 665

²⁴ Idem, *Acta*, sig. **8r–v.

detailed ‘comperts’ from which it had been compiled.²⁵ The notary in question, Thomas Barthelet or Bartlett, is not to be confused with the king’s printer, Thomas Berthelet. Even though in the *Catalogus Bale* spells the name exactly like that of the printer, he gives it as ‘Bartheletum’ in the *Acta*. The form ‘Bartlett’ is preferred here for the notary, to avoid ambiguity. Bale’s notary ‘Thomas Barthelet’ is presumably to be identified with the notary who, as ‘Thomas Bartlett’, was working for Archbishop Warham in 1526.²⁶ Bartlett seems to have passed subsequently into the service of Archbishop Cranmer, who wrote to Cromwell in 1535, asking him in turn to take the man on, because he did not wish to be ordained to the priesthood, which left Cranmer unable to offer him a suitably remunerative position.²⁷ Over the next couple of years a Thomas Bartlett (or Bertlett) is named in various letters as a clerk or servant to Cromwell, once or twice in connection with the dissolution of the monasteries.²⁸ With a fine sense of poetic justice, Cromwell provided for Bartlett by requiring the prior and convent of Canterbury Cathedral to grant him (with another of Cromwell’s servants) the reversion of a lease on one of their properties.²⁹

Thirdly, John Bale, working in Basel in 1558, had the actual *Breviarium* itself in his possession. One can only speculate about when and how he had acquired it, but it was presumably before he was chased out of Ireland by irate Catholics in the second half of 1553, following the death of Edward VI. If he did take it both to and from Ireland, it was something he valued very highly, as he took it with him when he had to abandon much else in his haste to escape. The likeliest explanation as to how the

²⁵ Compare the authentication of the partial *Compendium* for Norwich diocese submitted by Legh and ap Rhys in November 1535. See n. 5 above.

²⁶ See Clement Browne to Archbishop William Warham, Biddenden, 6 Dec. 1526, PRO, SP1/40, fo. 59r (*L&P* iv/2, no. 2695). I owe this reference to the kindness of my colleague Andrew Zurcher, of Queens’ College, Cambridge.

²⁷ Thomas Cranmer to Cromwell, Knoll, 1 Mar. 1535, PRO, SP1/91, fo. 2r (*L&P* viii, no. 306). Although ‘spelling’ in the modern sense was not an exact science in Tudor times, the rendering of the name as ‘Thomas Barthelet’ in this letter, and as ‘Thomam Bartheletum’ in Bale’s *Acta*, increases the confidence with which the notary can be identified as Warham’s former secretary and distinguished from the king’s printer.

²⁸ Robert Layton to Cromwell, Paternoster Row, London, [ca. June 1535], BL, MS Cotton Cleo. E IV, fo. 56 (*L&P* viii, no. 955), mentions ‘Bartlett your clerk’ in relation to the royal visitation of 1535. ‘Bartlett your servant’ was with Layton when he surprised the prior of Langdon (Kent) *in flagrante* in October 1535, and it was Bartlett who captured the prior’s ‘tendre damoisele’ as she fled. See Layton to Cromwell, Canterbury, 23 Oct. 1535, BL, MS Cotton Cleo. E IV, fos 154–5 (*L&P* ix, no. 668), printed in T. Wright (ed.), *Three chapters of letters relating to the suppression of the monasteries*, London 1843, 75–7. Shaw shows that ‘Barthelet’ was with Layton at the start of his visitation in 1535, and still with him towards its end: ‘Compendium compertorum’, 37.

²⁹ Thomas Goldwell, prior of Canterbury, to Cromwell, Canterbury, 4, 25 June 1536, PRO, SP1/104, fos. 110r, 200r (*L&P* x, nos 1053, 1199).

Breviarium came into his hands in the first place is that he received it direct from Thomas Cromwell, who secured his release from imprisonment in the mid-1530s and took him under his wing as the playwright and director for his troupe of travelling players.³⁰ After it had served its immediate political purpose (to be discussed next), he would have appreciated its polemical potential in the hands of a man like Bale.

Finally, the *Breviarium* exactly fits the bill for the sort of thing that could have caused the uproar Latimer reports as having erupted in the parliament house. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what else this compilation could have been meant for, given that it was never published. However, if the ‘comperts’ were to be presented to parliament for political reasons, to help lever a challenging and revolutionary act onto the statute book, then it would have been entirely appropriate to present it with all the formality of a duly authenticated legal document, buttressed by the authority of three doctors of law, all of whom had been active in the royal visitation. As for the reading aloud of the document in parliament, it is worth remembering that, five years before, the opinions of the European universities on the invalidity of the king’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon had likewise been read out, first to the Lords and then to the Commons. Although the *Breviarium* was doubtless a Latin text, its narrow scope and repetitive nature would have made it amenable to impromptu translation and we can be sure that its sensational contents would have been presented to parliament in English.

As far as can be ascertained, the *Breviarium* itself is no longer extant. All that survives are the excerpts Bale printed in the 1550s. What we know, however, demonstrates that the *Compendium compertorum* was not, as has recently been suggested, the only thing of its kind. The *Breviarium*, with its grand title and notarial attestation, was presumably a finished manuscript of presentation quality. The *Compendium* looks more like a working text, perhaps a draft for a supplement to the *Breviarium*. Its coverage was entirely different from that of the *Breviarium*, which seems to have encompassed only religious houses in the dioceses of southern England (definitely including Canterbury, Chichester, Winchester, Salisbury and Bath and Wells). One might conjecture that the *Compendium* was left as a working draft because, after the spectacular success of the *Breviarium*, it was no longer needed. The act passed easily, the suppression was soon under way, and the necessary reputational damage had been done.

An analysis of the institutions covered by Bale’s extracts is revealing, and what is offered here overlaps with an earlier analysis conducted by Anthony Shaw on the basis of the English translation of Bale’s *Acta* published in 1574 as *The pageant of popes* (which therefore lacked the details of the

³⁰ For Bale’s association with Cromwell and his players see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: a life*, London 2018, 417–20.

source provided in the *Catalogus*).³¹ Bale refers to ten religious houses, all of them male: Abingdon Abbey, St Augustine's Abbey in Bristol, St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, Bath Abbey, Battle Abbey, Bermondsey Abbey, Canterbury Cathedral, Maiden Bradley Priory, Monkton Farleigh Priory and Shulbrede Priory. He also includes data from two collegiate churches – Chichester Cathedral and the Chapel Royal of St George at Windsor. The authenticity of the text is confirmed by the fact that forty-two of the forty-nine monks named can be identified from entirely independent sources as belonging to the institutions concerned. Thus the incestuous Abbot Thomas of Abingdon can be identified as Abbot Thomas Rowland, whose signature headed the rest at the surrender of his house on 9 February 1538.³² Of the sixteen named at Battle Abbey, nine (including Abbot John) can be certainly, and another two probably, identified with men who signed the surrender deed on 27 May 1538, while one had left the abbey by summer 1536.³³ The surrender deed for Canterbury Cathedral Priory does not survive, but six of the nine men named by Bale can be identified among the signatories to the royal supremacy there on 12 December 1534, and all nine can be identified from some source or other.³⁴ Of the thirteen monks of St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury whom Bale names, eleven (including the abbot, John Essex) were among the signatories of the surrender deed on 30 July 1538, and one had left the religious life by the end of 1535.³⁵ And three of the four monks of Shulbrede were granted dispensations to abandon the religious life.³⁶ Richard Lyncombe and William Bewshon of Bath Cathedral Priory signed up to the royal supremacy on 22 September 1534.³⁷ The prior of Monkton Farleigh, 'Ludovicus', is evidently Lewis Brecknock, and Abbot William of Bristol is William Burton.³⁸ As for Prior Richard of Maiden Bradley, with his 'five whores and six bastards', he stars in one of Richard Layton's ebullient letters to Cromwell, as having 'but vj. children', with 'one dowghter mariede' thanks to a dowry from the priory's

³¹ Shaw, 'Compendium compertorum', 38–42, 46–7, 50–2, 55–6, 60–1.

³² *Eighth report of the deputy keeper of the Public Records*, London 1847, appendix II, 7.

³³ *Ibid.* 9. For the dispensation releasing John Crosse see D. S. Chambers (ed.), *Faculty office registers, 1534–1549*, Oxford 1966, 11.

³⁴ *Seventh report of the deputy keeper of the Public Records*, London 1846, appendix II, 282. In any case, all nine can be traced in Joan Greatrex, *Biographical register of the English cathedral priories of the province of Canterbury, c. 1066–1540*, Oxford 1997, assuming that Bale's 'Thomas' Morton is properly John Morton.

³⁵ *Eighth report of the deputy keeper*, appendix II, 15. For the dispensation releasing William Godmersham (Bale gives his name as Godmerston) see Chambers, *Faculty office registers*, 11.

³⁶ Chambers, *Faculty office registers*, 49, 93.

³⁷ *Seventh report of the deputy keeper*, appendix II, 280.

³⁸ See D. M. Smith (ed.), *The heads of religious houses: England and Wales, III: 1377–1540*, Cambridge 2008, 245, 394.

resources.³⁹ Identifying the secular clergy named at Chichester and Windsor is more challenging, because the records for the 1530s at both places are patchy. At St George's Windsor, three out of the ten named in Bale can be identified, all of them among the minor canons or vicars choral.⁴⁰ As for Chichester, Anthony Shaw found that of eleven men named there, only one, John Champion, was among the cathedral canons, but that another five could be identified as vicars choral in records of visitations in the 1520s.⁴¹

Even more remarkably, just one man, Richard Layton, conducted the visitations at eleven of the twelve institutions featured in Bale's extracts, namely at Abingdon, Bath, Battle, Bermondsey, Bristol, Canterbury (both houses), Chichester, Maiden Bradley, Monkton Farleigh and Shulbrede – all of them between the beginning of August and the end of October.⁴² It is not known who conducted the visitation of Windsor, or when, though Shaw's conjecture that the visitor there, too, was Layton seems highly plausible.⁴³ The fact that we now know the full scope of the source on which Bale was drawing (it was not simply 'Layton's Act Book'⁴⁴) makes the prominence of Layton's work in Bale's selections very striking. That Bale should by chance have lit upon eleven institutions that Layton had visited in a sample of just twelve out of over 100 included in the *Breviarium* is vanishingly improbable on the assumption that the most sensational material was distributed evenly among the reports of the various commissioners. It is neither conceivable in itself nor reconcilable with what is known of Layton's movements that he could have personally visited all of the institutions covered by the *Breviarium*. And given that

³⁹ Layton to Cromwell, Bristol, 24 Aug. 1535, BL, MS Cotton Cleo. E. IV, fo. 300r–v (*L&P* ix, no. 168), printed in Wright, *Three chapters of letters*, 58–9. See Bale, *Acta*, sig. ***1r for his 'quinque meretrices et sex spurios'. He is identified as Richard Jenyn in Smith, *Heads of houses*, 476.

⁴⁰ For Henry Woodward, Nicholas Wyddon (given as Whyden by Bale) and George Whythorne (given as Whitethorne by Bale) see Edmund H. Fellowes, *The vicars or minor canons of His Majesty's Free Chapel of St. George in Windsor Castle*, Windsor 1945, 71–3. Fellowes (p. 16) reports a gap in the records from 1531.

⁴¹ For Champion, who had the prebend of Waltham from 1525 until his death in 1538, see *Fasti ecclesiae anglicanae, 1300–1541*, VII: *Chichester diocese*, ed. Joyce M. Horn, London 1964, 47. For the vicars choral see Shaw, 'Compendium compertorum', 52.

⁴² For references to Layton's visits to all these places, see *L&P* ix, nos 42 (Bath, Maiden Bradley, Monkton Farleigh), 168 (St Augustine's Bristol), 350 (Abingdon), 444 (Battle, Chichester, Bermondsey) and 533 (Shulbrede). It is worth noting that Thomas Bartlett, the notary who authenticated the *Breviarium*, had certainly been with Layton in Kent, and may well have been with him throughout his tour. Shaw charts this material meticulously, and produces from it a persuasive itinerary for Layton's visits to these places: 'Compendium compertorum', 337.

⁴³ Shaw, 'Compendium compertorum', 64–5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 336. See also MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, 306.

the names of Bedyll and Legh were also put to the document, it seems reasonable to conclude that the fruits of their labours were included in it. However, Clark has argued very plausibly that Layton was the most prurient of the commissioners.⁴⁵ Certainly his letters to Cromwell contain the most memorable material reported by any of the visitors, and generally provide the entertaining highlights quoted by modern historians. The most tempting inference is that Bale, who shared Layton's eye and taste for scandal, was drawn to the things he cited because they were the best stuff in the book. There was doubtless also material contributed by the other commissioners. But Bale cites nothing that can definitely be traced to anyone other than Layton. So it seems very likely that the material which sparked uproar in parliament in March 1536 was the dirt Layton had dug up and carted back to London. This minor royal and ecclesiastical functionary may, therefore, have played a disproportionately major role in the dissolution of the English monasteries.

The *Breviarium* also confirms that the initial gathering of the *comperta* was purposeful. That Layton's material was the most explosive and the most useful of what was brought in probably tells us that he was the most gifted of the agents Cromwell appointed for this task. But Layton's letter to Cromwell of June 1535, in effect his job application, had made it clear from the start that he saw nothing of value in the monastic life. Far from seeking out 'goode religion (if any be)' and looking 'to fynde monk chanons frear prior abbott or any other of what degree so ever he be that shall do the kyngs highness so good seruys [service] in this matter' (as Clark has argued), Layton was saying that he did not expect to find any 'goode religion' (the parenthesis is all-important) and that Cromwell would never find any members of religious orders who would 'do the kynges hyghnes so good servys in this matter' as Layton himself – a secular priest.⁴⁶ He clearly knew already what Cromwell wanted, and his personal interview with Cromwell before hastening off on his mission would have given him explicit instructions on what really mattered. The fact that enquiries into the morals of monks and nuns were to be comprehensive, and not simply limited to the current situation or the period since the last visitation, shows that the point of the investigation was not to promote moral reform but to stockpile political ammunition. Although there is no reason to suppose that the outcome of 1540 – the complete eradication of English monasticism – was in anybody's mind in 1535 or even 1536, the nature of the moral inquisition carried out by Cromwell's agents (in Layton's case, with peculiar gusto and brio), and the apparent

⁴⁵ Clark, *Dissolution*, 251–2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 237. Compare Layton to Cromwell (no place given), 4 June 1535, at BL, ms Cotton Cleo E. iv, fo. 13r–v: 13v for 'goode religion'; and 13r for the second citation (*L&P* viii, no. 822).

scope and character of the *Breviarium*, combine to suggest that Cromwell himself may already have had some idea of where he wanted to go.⁴⁷ That all the material in the *Breviarium* that we can securely date had been gathered by the end of October 1535, moreover, suggests, given that Layton was once more on the road soon after Christmas, that this first dossier from the royal visitation was compiled late in 1535, presumably with a view to its deployment in the next parliament (it is hard to imagine what else it was for, though another possibility is publication).⁴⁸ It is likely also that it played an important part in the regime's thinking over the winter of 1535–6. Even if Cromwell had some idea where he wanted policy to go, his was probably not the only voice in the discussion.⁴⁹

Although Bale's extracts from the lost *Breviarium compertorum* have been almost entirely overlooked by historians for more than a century, it should be noted in conclusion that while they were never well known, they were noticed from time to time in the centuries after their publication. Bale's *Acta romanorum pontificum* itself appeared in an English version, *The pageant of popes*, but as it was never reprinted, its influence was limited.⁵⁰ Some of Bale's reports were rehashed from time to time in minor Protestant polemics under the Tudors and Stuarts, and occasionally later.⁵¹ Among more serious scholars, John Speed picked the story up from Estienne in the second, expanded edition of his *History of Great Britaine*, and from him it passed to Thomas Fuller.⁵² But neither was aware that Bale was the ultimate source. A generation later, Jeremy Collier drew on Bale's comments in the *Catalogus* for his ecclesiastical history.⁵³ What makes the recent obscurity of Bale's material more

⁴⁷ This interpretation differs somewhat from that of Shaw, who suggests that Cromwell's role has been exaggerated and that of King Henry and other councillors unduly diminished: '*Compendium compertorum*', 407–15. That Henry had the final say is, of course, axiomatic.

⁴⁸ Layton to Cromwell, York, 13 Jan. 1536, *L&P*x, no. 92, shows that he was at York by mid-January. He presumably left London on his new mission around Epiphany.

⁴⁹ See Shaw, '*Compendium compertorum*', 413–14, and MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, 309–10, although this interpretation depends heavily on the testimony of the 'Chronicle and defence of the English Reformation': Loades, *Papers of George Wyatt*, 159–60.

⁵⁰ John Bale, *The pageant of popes*, London 1574 (*RSTC* 1304). The extracts from the 'breviary of things founde out' are at sigs *c2v–*c3r.

⁵¹ See, for example, Lewis Evans, *The hatefull hypocrisie and rebellion of the Romishe pre-lacie*, London 1570 (*RSTC* 10591), sigs A5v–A7r; anon., *An answeare for the time unto that foule, and wicked defence of the censure*, London 1583 (*RSTC* 5008), 87; anon., *The friers chronicle*, London 1623 (*RSTC* 11511), sigs D1v–D2r; and William Hughes, *The man of sin*, London 1677 (Wing H.3343), 183–4.

⁵² John Speed, *The history of Great Britaine*, London 1623 (*RSTC* 23046.3), 1043; Thomas Fuller, *The church-history of Britain*, London 1655 (Wing F.2416), 316–17.

⁵³ Jeremy Collier, *An ecclesiastical history of Great Britain, chiefly of England*, London 1708–14, ii. 398.

puzzling is that Cardinal Gasquet mentioned the charges published in the *Pageant* in his study of the dissolution.⁵⁴ But Gasquet was unaware of what Bale himself had written about his source in the 1550s, and was in any case intent upon casting as much doubt as he could upon the work of the royal commissioners for the visitation. Since Gasquet's time, the only mention of the material found in Bale's *Pageant* has been a characteristically perceptive discussion in Anthony Shaw's excellent, and regrettably unpublished, doctoral dissertation on the *Compendium compertorum*. Yet while he spots the link between this material and Layton's 1535 itinerary, and argues effectively against Gasquet in favour of its evidential value, the intermediate origins of this material in Bale's *Acta* and *Catalogus*, together with Bale's precise description of their source, eluded even Shaw's attention.⁵⁵ Now that Bale's full testimony to its character and scope has been retrieved and recognised in its own right as an invaluable source, the lost *Breviarium compertorum* can at last be appreciated as having been the first significant product of Henry VIII's visitation of the monasteries and as having played a pivotal role in the story of their dissolution.

⁵⁴ F. A. Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English monasteries*, London 1888–9, i. 327–8.

⁵⁵ Shaw, 'Compendium compertorum', 39–42