

# **Basan and Bata - The Occupational Surnames of two Pre-Conquest Monks of Canterbury**

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BASAN AND BATA: THE OCCUPATIONAL SURNAMES OF TWO PRE-CONQUEST MONKS OF  
CANTERBURY.

Eadui Basan and Ælfric Bata were probably active at Christ Church contemporaneously in the first quarter of the eleventh century. The former was a prolific scribe and the latter a schoolmaster, redactor and author. Both were given, or adopted, sobriquets, which this paper will argue were based on rare medieval Latin words, and, perhaps most importantly, provide early examples of occupational surnames.

Eadui Basan came to the attention of modern scholars, in 1971, due to the palaeographical skills of T. A. M. Bishop. Bishop was able to find eleven examples of Eadui Basan's 'deliberate hand'<sup>1</sup> in charters and manuscripts related to Christ Church, Canterbury. Perhaps the most notable of these is the Arundel Psalter<sup>2</sup> datable to between 1012 and 1023,<sup>3</sup> which Richard Pfaff describes as 'not only a one-man but a very individual production'.<sup>4</sup> Eadui did not simply copy the text of the *Romanum* version of the Psalter but later also made corrections to bring it into conformity with the *Gallicanum* version and he even provided the illuminations. His status as a pre-eminent scribe of Christ Church is confirmed by his having penned the forged re-foundation charter of that house, dated 1006. He wrote this onto blank leaves between the gospels of Luke and John in a then century-old continental Gospel book given to Christ Church by King Æthelstan.<sup>5</sup> This charter describes how the secular clerks were ejected from Christ Church and confirms the renewed

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<sup>1</sup> T. A. M. Bishop, *English Caroline Miniscule* (Oxford, 1971), xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> London, BL, Arundel 155.

<sup>3</sup> The Passion of Archbishop St Ælfheah (martyred 19 April 1012) is in the calendar of the Arundel Psalter, but his translation to Christ Church on 8 June 1023 is not.

<sup>4</sup> R. W. Pfaff, 'Eadui Basan: Scriptorum Princeps?', in *England in the Eleventh Century: The Proceedings of 1990 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. C. Hicks (Stamford, Lincolnshire, 1992), 267-284, at 273.

<sup>5</sup> London, BL, Cotton Tiberius A. ii.

Benedictine monastery in its holdings, and thus 'secured for the establishment its distinctive status as a monastic community'.<sup>6</sup> We know the name of this prominent scribe because of an autograph in his distinctive hand at the end of an eleventh-century Gospel book now preserved in Hanover.<sup>7</sup> The inscription reads:

Pro scriptore precem ne tempnas fundere pater. Librum istum monachus scripsit EADUUIUS  
cognomento BASAN. Sit illi longa salus. Vale seruus dei .N. & memor esto mei.<sup>8</sup>

Eadui was not a unique Anglo-Saxon name; *Domesday* records over one hundred occurrences of the name in varying forms.<sup>9</sup> The obituary lists from Christ Church, recorded in London, BL, Cotton Nero C. ix, name two possible Eaduis; *Eadwius sacerdos et monachus*, who died on 22 September<sup>10</sup> and *Edwinus sacerdos*, who died on 22 December.<sup>11</sup> It seems likely that *Eadwius* and not *Edwinus* was our scribe, and not just because of the closer similarity of the name. *Eadwius* is specifically recorded as a monk, and reformed monasticism was of particular interest to Eadui Basan, as demonstrated by the virulent attack on secular clerks in the forged re-foundation charter and the famous illustration on f.133 of the Arundel Psalter in Eadui's own hand.<sup>12</sup> In this illustration a monk cowers at the feet of St Benedict proffering a book labelled *Lib ps* (i.e. a Psalter) to the saint. As Eadui was the scribe and illustrator for the Psalter in which this illustration appears, it seems likely that this was a self-portrait of Eadui dedicating his work to the father of Benedictinism. Though it can never be known whether these two similarly-named *sacerdotes* were contemporaries - as obituary lists record only the day of death on which to remember the departed, and not the year of their passing - it does seem

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<sup>6</sup> Pfaff (1992), 278.

<sup>7</sup> Hanover, Kestner Museum Hs. W. M. XII<sup>2</sup>, 36 (f.183v). See pl. 40 in Hicks (1992).

<sup>8</sup> Loosely translated: Father do not neglect to say a prayer for the scribe. The monk who wrote this book EADUUIUS second-named BASAN. Let there be to him long health. Good Health to the servant of God .N. and be mindful of me.

<sup>9</sup> O. von Feilitzen, *The Pre-Conquest Personal Names of Domesday Book* (Uppsala, 1937), 238.

<sup>10</sup> Noted by Pfaff (1992), 267, based on A. Boutemy, 'Two Obituaries of Christ Church, Canterbury', *English Historical Review*, 50 (1935), 292-99, at p.295.

<sup>11</sup> Noted by the present writer from R. Fleming, 'Christchurch's Sisters and Brothers: Canterbury Obituary Lists', in *The Culture of Christendom: Essays in Medieval History in Memory of Dennis L. T. Bethel*, ed. M. Meyer (London, 1993), 115-53, at p.132.

<sup>12</sup> See pl. 41, Hicks (1992).

likely, given the prevalence of the name in *Domesday*, that the monk-scribe Eadui acquired the sobriquet, *Basan*, so that he could be differentiated from others of that name.

It is with the *cognomento Basan* part of the autograph that we are concerned. Surnames, in the sense of an hereditary last name passed on paternally, were very little used in Anglo-Saxon England. In order to differentiate one man from another of the same name, second-names based upon place of origin, physical characteristic or occupation were used. Pffaf speculated that *Basan* might be 'a corrupt form of the colour adjective *basu*, purple, perhaps related to the Gothic word for berry'.<sup>13</sup> He supports this argument with an analysis of the kneeling figure from f.133 of the Arundel Psalter, discussed above as possibly being a self-portrait of Eadui. Pffaf sees the face of the monk as 'not only shaded (as is Benedict's) but curiously mottled by nine or so little double marks, like double inverted commas'.<sup>14</sup> He further deduces that these might represent a widespread birthmark, presumably of a berry colour.

The word *basan* meaning sheep's leather is, however, a recognised word in later medieval Latin. The earliest examples of it from R. E. Latham's *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, are from the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Considering Eadui's occupation as a scribe, sheep-leather (i. e. parchment) would be a highly appropriate nickname. The use of an obscure Latin word as a sobriquet is totally in keeping with the intellectual culture of the day. James Campbell comments, 'It is the Latin of men with little grasp of, and no feeling for, the Latin language. Its style was achieved by never using one word, where two could be made to do, preferably of obscure origin and infrequent usage'.<sup>16</sup> The word passed into the English language as 'basan', 'bazan' or 'bazin' meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'sheep-skin

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<sup>13</sup> Pffaf (1992), 280 references J. Bosworth and T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1882-98), 68.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 280.

<sup>15</sup> R. E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, (London, rept. 1999), 45.

<sup>16</sup> J. Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1982), 207.

tanned in oak- or larch-bark; distinguished from roan, which is tanned in sumach', the earliest recorded example of usage being from 1714.<sup>17</sup>

If Eadui's *cognomentum* can be understood as an extremely obscure Latin word, perhaps Ælfric's second-name Bata can also be understood as such. Ælfric Bata was a school-master at Christ Church, but he was not fondly remembered there. Both of St Dunstan's hagiographers, Osbern and Eadmer, tell a tale in which Ælfric Bata is portrayed as the villain. Apparently the multi-tasking St Dunstan was able to intervene from beyond the grave to prevent a certain Ælfric *cognomento Bata*, from despoiling or disinheriting Christ Church, whilst simultaneously curing a lame man by appearing to him in a vision.<sup>18</sup> Ælfric Bata was, however, more than just Christ Church's schoolteacher, he was also a redactor of scholarly works and an author in his own right. David Porter quite rightly comments that 'details about Bata's life are very sketchy'.<sup>19</sup> Bata claimed to have been a student of the more famous Ælfric, but it is not known whether this was at Eynsham or at Winchester.<sup>20</sup> We know from the 'despoiling story' that he spent some time at Christ Church, but it is unlikely that he spent his whole career there, as the *Colloquies* he wrote describe a community ruled by an abbot, whereas Christ Church was, of course, ruled by an archbishop or dean.

Bata's literary career began with three redactions of Ælfric of Eynsham's *Colloquy*. Porter argues that the first known work of Ælfric Bata consisted of the additions to the version of Ælfric's *Colloquy*, in an eleventh-century Christ Church compilation manuscript, London, BL, Cotton Tiberius A. iii. Bata followed these

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<sup>17</sup> [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) accessed on 30/6/04.

<sup>18</sup> W. Stubbs, ed., *Memorials of St Dunstan*, Rolls Series, 63 (1874), 140-2, and 229-31.

<sup>19</sup> D. W. Porter, 'Ælfric's *Colloquy* and Ælfric Bata', *Neophilologus*, 80 (1996), 639-60.

<sup>20</sup> C. L. White in *Ælfric: A New Study of his Life and Writings* (Boston, 1898), 122n assigns Bata's studies to Eynsham, but David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge, 1963), 761 states that Bata was a monk of Winchester.

limited alterations with more fulsome additions to Ælfric's *Colloquy* in the margins of Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum MS 16.2/ London, British Library, Additional 32246, and even more elaborate additions, practically amounting to a full re-write, in Oxford, St. John's 154.<sup>21</sup> Bata then moved on to author his own *Colloquies*, followed by his *Colloquies difficiliora*.<sup>22</sup> It is easy to understand that a sobriquet was needed for Ælfric Bata in order to differentiate him from Ælfric of Eynsham, whose work he was adapting.

Gösta Tengvik suggested that the byname *bata* related to the Old English word *batt*, meaning bat or cudgel which, Tengvik argued, denoted a person of stout appearance.<sup>23</sup> Ælfric Bata's sobriquet could, however, like Eadui Basan's, derive from obscure Latin and reflect his occupation and literary career. Bata may derive from the medieval Latin word *batero*, meaning 'batter' or 'rework', used of iron tools or the dressing and trimming of slate or stone. Once again this word is obscure and the examples of its usage date in Latham's word-list from the fourteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Ælfric the Reworker, would certainly describe his early scholarly efforts at redacting his master's *Colloquy*.

The name 'Bata' might also work as a pun in English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records an early English use 'to bate of' meaning 'to remove from or deprive of'.<sup>25</sup> Langland in *Richard the Redeless* (1399), uses the word in this sense:

And also in sothe the seson was paste  
For hertis yheedid so hy and so noble  
To make ony myrthe for mowtynghe that nyghed  
That bawtid youre bestis of here bolde chere.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> S. Gwara ed. and D. Porter trans. and intro., *Anglo-Saxon Conversations: The Colloquies of Ælfric Bata* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1997), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Edited in Gwara and Porter (1997).

<sup>23</sup> G. Tengvik, 'Old English Bynames', *Nomina Germanica*, 4 (Uppsala, 1938), 287-8.

<sup>24</sup> Latham (1999), 46.

<sup>25</sup> [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) accessed on 30/6/04.

<sup>26</sup> Loosely translated: And also in truth the season was passed, when you had hearts high and noble, to make any mirth because that moulting is near which will derive your beasts of their good cheer. For text and commentary see <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/richtext.htm> accessed on 30/6/04.

Used in this way 'Bata' can be seen as a bilingual pun referring to the felonious act that St Dunstan had prevented. Occupational sobriquets are still in modern usage in Wales, such as the baker, Dai Bread, the undertaker, Evans the death and the organist, Organ Morgan in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. Organ Morgan, was, of course, a clever pun encompassing both his occupation and his sexual proclivity – 'its organ organ all the time with him'.<sup>27</sup>

It is perhaps not too far-fetched, therefore, to discern a similar, crude pun in Bata's name, derived (like Basan's) from the tanning industry. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the noun 'bate' as 'an alkaline lye which neutralises the effect of the previous application of lime, and makes the hides supple...'<sup>28</sup> Andrew Ure in his *Dictionary of Arts, Manufactures and Mines*, (1875) commented, 'The bate consists in steeping the haired hides in a solution of pigeon dung'.<sup>29</sup> Though this usage is very late, one can easily imagine that the vocabulary of such an ancient industry may also have ancient roots. Ælfric could, therefore, at one and the same time, have had the nicknames redactor, despoiler, and pigeon faeces, reflecting his apparent lack of popularity at Christ Church.

This analysis of the bynames of the two Canterbury churchmen, therefore, has revealed three things. First, the predilection of eleventh-century intellectuals for obscure Latin carried over into their nomenclature. Secondly, that they can be considered early examples of occupational surnames; Eadui 'Parchment' and Ælfric 'the Redactor'. Thirdly, that bynames can cleverly imply a host of attitudes towards the bearer of the name; *basan* is, after all, the precious finished product of the tanning process, whereas *bata* is a rather smelly and unpleasant product used in the

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<sup>27</sup> D. Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* (London, 1954), 47.

<sup>28</sup> [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) accessed on 30/6/04

<sup>29</sup> quoted in *ibid.*

processing. Close attention paid to the cloistered and bilingual environment of the scriptorium and the processes involved in manuscript production has revealed in these two instances – where something is known of the individuals involved – the existence of very specific monastic sobriquets in the Late-Anglo Saxon period. It is to be hoped that future scholarship will decipher other elusive bynames and serve to build up a fuller picture of the meaning and uses of medieval nomenclature.