INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI®

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
SANCTIFYING HISTORY:
HAGIOGRAPHY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ANGLO-SAXON
CHRISTIAN PAST

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Cynthia Wittman Zollinger, M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
2002

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Nicholas G. Howe, Adviser
Professor Lisa J. Kiser
Professor Karen A. Winstead
Professor Christopher A. Jones

Approved by

Adviser
English Graduate Program

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
ABSTRACT

The Anglo-Saxon literary tradition reveals a widespread desire to situate England's local history and customs with the patterns of universal Christianity. Dominant among the texts that survive from the period are saints' lives, spanning Latin and Old English, poetry and prose. Sanctifying History: Hagiography and the Construction of an Anglo-Saxon Christian Past explores the ways in which Anglo-Saxon authors such as Bede, Felix, the anonymous poets of Guthlac A and B, Cynewulf and Ælfric draw upon existing hagiographic traditions to articulate and explore England's place in the patterns of Christian time. These writers rewrite and reframe inherited narratives of sanctity, in the process crafting a synthesis between the newly-minted Christian history of a convert nation and the historical and theological traditions of the Christian faith. The literary interest in ancestral history offers a means by which the lessons of the past can be used to invigorate a Christian present.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the writings of the Venerable Bede. His Ecclesiastical History of the English People (731 C.E.) was the first work to offer the English a coherent narrative of a national past, providing the foundation for a local tradition of Christianity. The career of the saint that Bede constructs through figures such as Germanus and Lupus, Gregory the Great, and Aidan unites the disparate

ii
elements of England's Christian history into a reenacted paradigm of conversion. This
exemplary pattern finds its final fulfillment in Cuthbert, England's national saint whose
career reconciles these potentially divisive traditions. The second chapter focuses on
Guthlac, a seventh-century Mercian hermit whose life survives in both Felix's *Vita sancti Guthlaci* and in two Old English poems, *Guthlac A* and *B*. While the Latin
legend presents the English saint as a historical figure influential in the cultural and
political interests of his time, the Old English poems situate the saint within the
framework of salvation rather than local history. These versions of the legend reveal a
change in the use of the past from commemorative and ideological to devotional and
pedagogical, a shift that broadly reflects the Old English poetic interest in eschatology.

The third chapter continues this exploration into Old English verse hagiography
by focusing on two Cynewulf poems, *Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene*. Both of these
poems bring the missionary age of the Christian Church into an Anglo-Saxon setting,
finding in the past the patterns of spiritual life. Cynewulf's epilogues model the act of
reading this past, an act echoed in the events of *Elene* as the poem's characters engage
in the process of interpreting and reconciling the threads of history into the substance of
spiritual truth. *Fates* and *Elene* present a fragmented vision of the past that finds unity
in the Christian narrative, a vision that offers important insight into the imaginative
reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon history. The final chapter examines the vision of
Christian tradition reflected in the sermons of Ælfric. His *Catholic Homilies* (c. 990
C.E.) offer a primer of salvation history and Christian time from its birth in Genesis to
its completion at Judgment Day. As in *Elene*, Ælfric displays a concern with
establishing Christianity's claim on its Old Testament past, and seeks to articulate the
place of new converts in this historical tradition. England’s own conversion is included through Gregory the Great and Cuthbert, saints whose lives brought the Anglo-Saxons within the boundaries of the Roman Church. Moreover, Ælfric’s sermon collection incorporates these assembled narratives of the Christian tradition into the framework of contemporaneous Anglo-Saxon devotion, locating in the legends and texts of the past spiritual instruction for the present.

This project as a whole addresses the various ways in which Anglo-Saxon writers worked to create visions of sanctified history. These hagiographic works offer narratives in which the universal exemplars and patterns of Christian history are integrated into the social institutions and literary genres of Anglo-Saxon England, and the literary text of the saint’s life creates a sympathetic bond between the past and the values of the present. In this way the study of hagiography illuminates the Anglo-Saxon transformation of the cultural past.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can owe no one greater thanks than my dissertation director and adviser, Nicholas Howe. As a teacher and a scholar he has been a source of inspiration to me, and I have benefited immeasurably from his insight and guidance. I am very grateful for his always generous encouragement and support. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to the members of my committee, Lisa Kiser, Karen Winstead and Christopher A. Jones. Their invaluable comments and suggestions have led me to think about my work in new ways. I would like to thank Christopher Highley, Roberta Frank and Lisa Stepanski for writing on my behalf. I am also grateful to Joseph Lynch for his help in developing this project, to Charles Wright for his response to my discussion of Cynewulf’s Elene, to Stacy Klein for the many conversations that have improved my work, and to Thomas Head for his willingness to share his knowledge of hagiography with me. My dissertation was supported in part by the Corbett Fellowship awarded by the Department of English at Ohio State University. Sections of this project were presented at the Plymouth State College Medieval Forum and at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, and I would like to extend my thanks to the audiences of those sessions. Finally, on a personal note, I would like to express my gratitude to George Zollinger for his unflagging patience, enthusiasm, and support.
VITA

June 30, 1971 .................................................. Born – Toledo, Ohio

1993 ............................................................. A.B. English, Kenyon College

1993-1995 ....................................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, Ohio State University

Summer, 1994 .................................................. Institut Lyonnais, Lyon, France

1995-1996 ....................................................... Writing Consultant, The Writing Center, and Graduate Administrative Assistant, Folklore Archive, Department of English, Ohio State University

Spring, 1996 .................................................... Editorial Assistant to Lisa J. Kiser (editor), Studies in the Age of Chaucer

Summer, 1996 ................................................. Medieval Institute, University of Notre Dame

Spring, 1997 .................................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, Ohio State University

1997 ............................................................. M.A. English, Ohio State University

1997-1998 ....................................................... Adjunct Instructor, Emmanuel College, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Merrimack College

Summer, 1998 .................................................. Graduate Studies Administrative Associate, Department of English, Ohio State University

Fall, 2000 ....................................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, Ohio State University
PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Chapter 1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Chapter 2</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Chapter 3</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Chapter 4</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chapter 5</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the multi-faceted relationship between hagiography and the construction of a historiographical tradition in Anglo-Saxon England. The coming of Christianity transformed this Germanic culture’s relationship with its past through the values and textual traditions of the Church. Conversion necessarily complicated the culture’s understanding of its history by creating a rift between ancestral tradition and the new faith’s narrative framework of time and salvation. Almost as soon as this rift became apparent, however, poets and theologians sought to merge the divergent structures of the past into a coherent tradition. The texts that survive from this period witness these efforts to create a tradition that brings England’s local history and customs into the framework of universal Christianity.

The predominantly religious texts surviving from the period demonstrate the ways in which the textual encounter with the past was mediated and shaped by the ideology of the new faith. Even vernacular literary traditions memorializing the events of a distant past were used overwhelmingly to commemorate events from Christian rather than Germanic legend. Beowulf is the exception to the rule that finds its heroes in the likes of Juliana, Elene, Andreas, and of course Christ. The manifestly Christian tone of the majority of the texts that survive – biblical translations and
exegetical works, saints' lives, homilies, religious verse – reflects the Church's position as the gateway to literacy. The coming of Christianity did not however dissolve all sense of local or cultural identity. To the contrary, the monks, nuns and priests who made up the literate ranks of the Church were also Anglo-Saxons, and many sought to commemorate and otherwise record their own culture's history. Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* offer dramatically different approaches to the practice of English history, yet both join in offering invaluable sustained accounts of the period, recording for modern scholars much of what is known about the Anglo-Saxons.

Anglo-Saxon hagiography plays a special role in bringing local patterns of history into a meaningful relationship with the larger Christian worldview. Accounts of saints' lives permeate England's early literary culture, spanning Latin and Old English, poetry and prose. Narratives of saints' lives survive in religious and devotional genres like the homily and the martyrology, but they also provide the subject matter for traditional heroic verse. Hagiography occupies an important place generally in the construction of Christian history because the figure of the saint is rooted in a sequence of past events, yet enacts the universal pattern of salvation history that encompasses human life. Consequently it is not surprising to see that many Anglo-Saxon writers and scholars find in hagiography a means for exploring their cultural past and its connection to the structures of the Christian faith.

In this project, I explore hagiography as a historiographical genre, a form of writing that offers an opportunity to engage with and construct an image of the past that is able to respond to contemporary cultural concerns. In pursuing this approach, I
follow a path established by the work of scholars who have brought hagiography to the forefront of critical attention. While the study of hagiography was once marginalized at the disciplinary boundary between history and literature, it has now become an important area for examining the relationships between these two fields. The work of historians such as Peter Brown, Patrick Geary, and Thomas Head has shown how the holy narratives and relics of the past can offer a powerful focus for negotiating authority in the present.1 Literary scholars such as Thomas Heffeman and Karen Winstead have demonstrated how literary elements of a hagiographic text serve a social function.2 The interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter has also encouraged collaborations such as that of historian Pamela Sheingorn and literary scholar Kathleen Ashley, who employ the term 'social semiotics' to describe the intersection of literary, cultural and post-structural theory that locates their approach to the study of hagiography.3 These works and others have been influential in creating a climate that encourages one to read hagiographic works as cultural texts influenced by the environment of their production.

3 Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, Writing Faith: Text, Sign and History in the Miracles of Sainte Foy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), esp. 18-19; also Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). Another collaboration influential to the practice of hagiographic study (in this case the work of two historians) can be found in Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982; reprint, 1986).
The intersections between literature and history in the genre of hagiography have become an increasingly important focus of interest in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies as well. The study of saints' lives has always been an important element in the literary study of the Anglo-Saxon period, in part because of the prominent role saints play in the work of Cynewulf and others in the poetic canon, and because of the early examples of Anglo-Latin hagiography during the time of Bede. Where saints are an element of the inherited tradition of Christianity for Anglo-Saxons they have provided an opportunity for source study and the poetics of translation, and where they have been drawn from local tradition they have offered evidence for the historical and cultural traditions of the community. Anglo-Saxon hagiography has provided fertile ground for typological and figural forms of criticism, and saints such as Elene and Juliana have offered a rewarding focus for gender criticism. All of these approaches have drawn upon the unique cultural milieu of the Anglo-Saxons as they sought to explain the forms and roles that hagiography takes in textual tradition.

The proliferation of essays and articles devoted to hagiography demonstrates its importance to Anglo-Saxon studies. Similarly, new editions of Anglo-Saxon saints' lives have introduced existing material to a broader audience. However, there

---


5 See for example Elaine M. Treharne, *The Old English Life of St Nicholas with the Old English Life of St Giles*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, New Series no. 15 (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1997);
is no comprehensive exploration of the practice of hagiography in the Anglo-Saxon period. One reason for this no doubt lies in the very diverse forms that hagiography takes in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. One can rightly question whether the Old English poetic lives and the Latin *vitae* belong to the same genre, though the fact that vernacular hagiographies all have their roots in Latin sources affirms their close connection. Influential book-length studies by historians such as David Rollason and Susan Ridyard exclude Old English poetry from their field of research.\(^6\) Extended studies by literary scholars, on the other hand, frequently address hagiography primarily within the context of a specific author, text, or thematic interest. Clare Lees' recent book, *Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, is typical of this approach in that its exploration of hagiography in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* is mediated by the larger context of tenth- and eleventh-century Old English homiletic prose.\(^7\) While literary scholars have demonstrated how hagiography is a significant genre in the contexts that surround its production and reception, they have

---


not offered an in-depth inquiry into the changing narrative forms of hagiography during the period.

This project was conceived as an effort to take hagiography as its subject matter, and to construct a broad exploration of the genre in Anglo-Saxon England. For this reason I have chosen to work with texts representative of the major categories of literary hagiography in the period, specifically Anglo-Latin lives from the early literary tradition, heroic lives from Old English verse, and vernacular homilies from the late tenth century. It has not been possible in the limited framework of this dissertation to address every form of hagiography that survives; significant categories such as martyrologies, liturgical texts such as prayers and litanies, and Latin verse had to be set aside for future study. However, it is my hope that this project offers a starting point for examining the significant role that hagiography plays in the many literary forms that construct the Anglo-Saxon textual tradition.

This dissertation contributes to the field of Anglo-Saxon studies in a number of ways. Most immediately, it challenges the assumption that hagiography is a privileged genre distinct from other forms of writing in the period. My research demonstrates that the use of hagiographic material across a range of genres and contexts offers evidence for the important cultural as well as exemplary significance of the lives of English saints. For the Anglo-Saxons, who traced the beginnings of their Christian past back to the missionaries of Gregory the Great, hagiography provided a coherent framework for situating and exploring their cultural history. Consequently, the writing of history and the writing of hagiography in this period are much more closely intertwined than genre-based distinctions might suggest.
Moreover, while many scholars have recognized the overlap between hagiography and history in the biographical narrative of the Latin prose *vita*, this project shows that less explicitly historiographical genres such as Old English verse narratives and homiletics similarly participate in constructing a sense of the past and of Christian origins that responds to the needs of the culture. Commonly such genres have been treated as categorically distinct, and, with the exception of source study, few projects have examined vernacular texts in relation to Latin works. In this dissertation I have brought together works of various forms in both Latin and Old English in order to set saints' lives and the practice of history in a broader context. By exploring a wide range of texts, this project demonstrates that the intersections between hagiography and history reflect a more encompassing sense in which the Christian culture constructs and relates to its past.

Additionally, this study illustrates the ways in which hagiographic texts reshape the traditions of the past to influence the values and practices of the present day. The texts that I have chosen for this project are all artfully constructed narratives, and as such reflect an author's effort to shape their contents into a coherent work. In this context it is not surprising to find these authors expressing particular ideological interests through the figure of the saint. This study highlights the ideological implications found in hagiographic works as authors seek to transform the present through the vision of the past conveyed by these texts. While in this circumstance the use of hagiography reflects the exemplarity of the saint in providing models for individual life, it also exposes specific circumstances in which the saint is offered as a precedent for reforming the institutions of the local Church. This dissertation explores
the ideological and exemplary uses of hagiography both as it reflects the characteristics of the holy life, and as it is presented as an element of the encounter with the historical past itself.

"Sanctifying History: Hagiography and the Construction of an Anglo-Saxon Christian Past" explores the specific question of how Anglo-Saxon authors such as Bede, Felix, the anonymous poets of Guthlac A and B, Cynewulf and Ælfric draw upon hagiographic traditions to articulate and explore England's place in the patterns of Christian history. These writers rewrite and reframe inherited narratives of sanctity, in the process crafting a synthesis between the newly-minted Christian history of a convert nation and the historical and theological traditions of the Christian faith. As these authors look back upon the founding figures of English Christianity, they reveal through their work the past's uses as well as its significance. The literary retreat into former days offers a landscape for introspection, as these authors seek to find in the patterns of the past lessons that will invigorate a Christian present.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines Bede’s approach to the past in the context of late antique Latin tradition. His Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (731 C.E.) was the first work to offer the English a coherent narrative of their national past, and it also provided the foundation for a local tradition of Christianity. However, his project had its precedent in the earlier historical works of authors like Eusebius, Orosius, and Gildas. This chapter explores the Historia ecclesiastica within the context that these earlier works offer for the writing of Christian history. In particular, it seeks to show how Bede’s interest in the saints of England’s past led him to create a tradition of missionary sanctity that becomes a shaping element of Anglo-Saxon
history. His use of Constantius of Lyon’s *Life of St. Germanus of Auxerre* to supplement Gildas’ narrative of the early days of British Christianity lays the groundwork for the pattern of the holy life that will later be fulfilled in the careers of Gregory the Great and Cuthbert.

The second chapter explores the relationship between the *Historia ecclesiastica* and the local tradition of Northumbrian hagiography that forms a backdrop to Bede’s work. Gregory and Cuthbert, saints who join pastoral care and monastic asceticism in their careers, were the subjects of hagiographic works that predate the *HE*. The Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great* and the *Life of Cuthbert* by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne are the earliest hagiographies written by the Anglo-Saxons, and as such offer important insight into the structure and practice of hagiography that would influence Bede. The commemoration of these figures underscores the pattern of the saintly life that these men personify, a fusion of pastoral and ascetic interests particularly characteristic of Northumbrian monasticism. The hagiographic texts devoted to Cuthbert also offer a valuable opportunity to trace a saint through a number of different versions of his life. In addition to the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert*, Bede wrote both metrical and prose lives of Cuthbert before inserting the saint into the narrative of the *HE*. The literary effort that Bede devotes to Cuthbert provides a particularly valuable framework for exploring the saint’s relationship with the larger project of the *Historia ecclesiastica*.

The third chapter focuses on Guthlac, a seventh-century Mercian hermit whose life survives in both Anglo-Latin prose (Felix’s *Vita sancti Guthlaci*) and in Old English verse (*Guthlac A* and *B*). The different versions of the Guthlac legend offer
evidence for the influence of genre on the shaping of the life. The Latin legend establishes a textual continuity between Guthlac and the universal saints of the ascetic movement. Moreover, this English saint is constructed as a historical figure, influential in the cultural and political interests of his time even as he seeks to escape them through his retreat to the fens. While the Old English texts are based upon the tradition begun by Felix, they offer a different vision of the saint. The Guthlac of A and B reflects the heroic codes and poetic formulae of the vernacular verse tradition, but otherwise is largely dehistoricized from the culture. Both poems situate the saint within the framework of Christian rather than local history, employing Genesis and Judgment Day rather than kings and bishops as reference points for the legend's context. The didactic and eschatological elements of the saint's life are celebrated at the expense of the historical. These versions of the Guthlac legend unveil a dramatic shift in the use of the past from commemorative and institutional to devotional and pedagogical, a shift that broadly reflects the Old English poetic interest in eschatological spirituality.

The fourth chapter continues this exploration into Old English verse hagiography by focusing on two Cynewulf poems, *Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene*. Both of these poems cast the missionary age of the Christian Church in an Anglo-Saxon setting. Christianity's distant past is made familiar through the conventions of heroic verse. These poems also find in the past the patterns for spiritual life, identifying the saint as a subject for contemplation and imitation. Cynewulf's epilogues model the act of reading the past, refocusing the readers' interest from the events of long ago to the end of time. Moreover, *Elene* engages in a conversation with
the memories and traditions of the past itself, enacting in the events of the poem the process of interpreting and reconciling the threads of history into the substance of spiritual truth. Historical traditions collide in the events of Elene, and the uncovering of the Cross discloses the meaning buried in past events. Like the Guthlac poems, both Fates and Elene pair the past with the future, orienting the significance of past events within the framework of personal spirituality and the fate of the soul after death. However Elene offers as well a vision of history as a collection of fragmented traditions that only achieve true unity in the Christian narrative. This vision offers an important insight into the Anglo-Saxons' own imaginative reconstruction of their past through the vernacular transmutation of Biblical and hagiographic legends.

The final chapter returns to Gregory and Cuthbert again, this time examining their lives in the patterns of Christian history reflected in the sermons of Ælfric. His collection of Catholic Homilies was meant to introduce the principles of Christian doctrine to a vernacular audience. The work assembles Old and New Testament narratives and hagiographic accounts to offer an account of the trajectory of Christian time from its beginnings in Genesis to its completion at Judgment Day. Gregory the Great and Cuthbert are the only saints of native tradition to be included in the Catholic Homilies. These apostles to the English appear in a text otherwise overwhelmingly dominated by the apostles and martyrs of the early Christian Church. Ælfric's presentation of these two foundational figures in the English Church is based largely upon the tradition established by Bede, but his homiletic intent reshapes the relationship between local history and the universal narrative of Christian time. The account of the early days of the English Church embedded in the two saints' sermons
locates the Anglo-Saxon cultural past within the shared experience of salvation history. Moreover, in Ælfric’s hands this history becomes a tool for instruction. Gregory and Cuthbert illustrate spiritual ideals as well, serving as exemplars of monastic and pastoral values in a context that is enhanced by their identification with a golden age of the early Anglo-Saxon faith. The combined historical and didactic elements in the careers of these saints bring the past into the present age through the discourse of homiletics.

The texts explored in this dissertation suggest the ways in which Anglo-Saxon writers work to create a local tradition of Christian history. These hagiographic works offer narratives in which the universal exemplars and patterns of Christian history are integrated into the social institutions and literary genres of Anglo-Saxon England. Moreover, the literary text of the saint’s life creates a sympathetic bond between the past and the values of the present. In this way the study of hagiography illuminates the Anglo-Saxon creation of a sanctified past.
CHAPTER 1

In early Christianity, the writing of history was constructed through the same ecclesiastical and theological values as was the writing of hagiography. The Bible was the paradigmatic historical text, and Christian historians crafted (and, in the case of preexisting classical tradition, recrafted) the narration of the past to establish a providential perspective on the past. The moral framework employed by Christian history to construct and analyze God's will in the world shared important parallels with the didactic and exemplary aims of hagiography. Influential historians like Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c.340) and Gregory of Tours (d. 594) also wrote hagiographic texts, and their histories bring hagiographic material into a larger national or imperial framework.¹ Such texts stand in the relationship of microcosm to macrocosm; God's plan for humanity can be traced in the patterns of the holy life and on a larger scale in the events that compose the Christian community's history. As Walter Goffart observes, "For us to segregate [the lives and posthumous miracles of the saints] from history on the grounds that hagiography is a different genre would be as inappropriate as to exclude biography in other epochs."² The genres influence and

accommodate each other because saints are presented as agents in history, and because
the ideal of the Christian life offers a context for interpreting the patterns of history.
Hagiographic texts become a source of both information and perspective on the
writing of the past.

This tradition shaped Bede’s vision of hagiography and history. His interest in
hagiography displays his connection to this late antique world: just as he
commemorates the English saint Cuthbert, he also adapts lives of Felix and
Anastasius, and compiles a martyrology.3 Like Eusebius, his efforts as a hagiographer
prepared him for the larger project of writing an ecclesiastical history, and the Historia
ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum reveals a heavy reliance not only on his own
hagiographical writings, but also on those of others as he set down the history of the
English Church. Bede’s professed desire to create a sense of history expressive of the
moral values of Christianity incorporates a didactic and exemplary intention that is
equally characteristic of hagiography. As he writes in the preface to the Historia
ecclesiastica:

Siue enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor
solicitus instigatur; seu mala commemorat de prauis, nihilominus
religiosus ac pius auditor siue lector deuitando quod noxium est ac
peruersum, ipse sollertius ad exsequenda ea quae bona ac Deo digna
esse cognouerit, accenditur.

[Should history tell of good men and their good estate, the thoughtful
listener is spurred on to imitate the good; should it record the evil ends

3 For Bede’s list of his own writings, see Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, eds.
Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts, gen. eds. D.E. Greenway, B.F. Harvey,
M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969; reprint, 2001), 566-71. For a brief discussion of these
frequently-overlooked hagiographic works, see George Hardin Brown, Bede the Venerable, Twayne
English Authors Series, no. 443 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 65-73. Bede’s Martyrology has
recently been translated in Thomas Head’s Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology, Garland Reference
of wicked men, no less effectually the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse, and himself with greater care pursue those things which he has learned to be good and pleasing in the sight of God.] (2, 3)

Understanding history (as this statement directs) as a collection of good lives and bad lives emphasizes the common ideological framework that constructs both hagiography and history in the Christian tradition. The providential will of God is expressed through the fates of good and bad individuals, but also through the moral conflicts expressed in historical events.

Bede inherits this perspective and refines it in the pages of the HE. None of his predecessors approaches the seamless and enduring symmetry he achieves between the lives of England’s holy men and women and the life of the English nation. As C.W. Jones terms it, the HE is a “national hagiography.” The assemblage of saints active in the island’s conversion and the golden age of the early Church provides heroes for the foundation myth of the Anglo-Saxons as a nation and as a faith. In Bede

---

4 All citations of the Historia ecclesiastica are drawn from Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds., Ecclesiastical History of the English People. Page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.
5 Willard W. Dickerson III explores this association between individual life and history when he writes, “God was guiding history toward a preordained end; but he was doing so one life, one soul at a time. History was the cumulative product of countless individual decisions. Bede’s historical edifice was meant to give us insight into God’s great, eternal plan for history. He accomplished this, however, by keeping our eyes focussed on the lives of individual saints and sinners.” “Bede as Literary Architect of the English Church: Another Look at Bede’s Use of Hagiography in the Historia ecclesiastica,” American Benedictine Review 45, no. 1 (Mar 1994): 105. See also Roger D. Ray, “Bede, the Exegete, as Historian,” Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede, ed. Gerald Bonner (London: SPCK, 1976), 133, in which he speaks of the individual historiae within Bede’s Historia. Robert W. Hanning approaches this point from the opposite perspective as he writes, “Even as hagiography glorifies the Christian as isolated from or opposed to his environment (the world, or saeculum), it still rests on the notion of the church’s corporate personality in Christ. The Christian hero may free himself from the evils of the world by withdrawal to the desert or by death in the arena, but he can never free himself from history, which, like his soul, belongs to God.” The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 15.
the narrative of history comes out of the common ground between the providential understanding of the past that late antique historians like Eusebius and Orosius shared, and the legendary aspects of hagiography that bring individuals into the patterns of Christian history.

This chapter and the next examine the ways in which Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* creates for the Anglo-Saxons an understanding of cultural history that intersects with the uses of hagiography. The *Historia ecclesiastica* became the normative narrative of the Anglo-Saxons’ birth as a culture in their post-migration homeland. The *HE*’s historiographical vision went unchallenged in the Anglo-Saxon period, and its translation in reduced form into Old English likely in the 890s speaks to its enduring status as a cultural narrative. So too do the many surviving adaptations of its contents. While Bede himself relied heavily upon hagiographic texts and traditions in writing the *HE*, his work in turn provided the foundations for the literary and cultic commemoration of many saints celebrated by the Anglo-Saxons. Alcuin relied upon material from the *HE* in composing *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*. Many of Bede’s saints appear in the *Old English Martyrology*, including Sts. Chad, Eadberht, John of Beverly, and Aidan. Alfric later drew from Bede to provide narratives for Alban, Æthelthryth, Oswald, and Cuthbert. The *HE*’s significance as the dominant

---

influence on the practice of both history and hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England provides an essential starting-point for exploring the ways in which these two forms of narrative intersect throughout the period.

The second chapter will explore the Northumbrian hagiographic texts that provide a local framework for the project of the *Historia ecclesiastica*. This chapter focuses on how Bede’s familiarity with late antique writers and sources shaped the approach that organizes the *HE*, and situates the English nation within the patterns of the Roman past. While Bede is indebted to the work of many predecessors for the materials and methodologies he incorporates, his synthesis of ecclesiastical and national history reflects the new circumstances that accompany the conversion of the English and the creation of a Christian nation. A selective study of Bede’s use of historical and hagiographical sources reveals the outlines of the traditions on which the *HE* is based, but also the ways in which Bede creates a unique vision of his culture’s past.

The articulated and self-conscious practice of historiography that Bede develops is unmatched and unimitated throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. As D.P. Kirby notes, “The *Historia Ecclesiastica* […] had no successor or sequel.” Textual records remain; the project of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reveals a willingness to remember and to record the events of history, and the Old English translation of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* indicates the continuing power and relevance of this narrative of...
Christian origins. However the large-scale interpretive construction of the past, the 
winnowing and sifting through which Bede shaped his epic narrative, all but vanished 
after the HE. For this reason Bede's work has provided scholars with an invaluable 
perspective into the practice of history. As Goffart remarks, "No early medieval 
historian, not even Gregory of Tours, has been so intensively worked over. His 
endeavors have probably inspired more scholarship of high quality [...] than any other 
subject between St. Augustine and Charlemagne."\(^\text{12}\) Many share James Campbell's 
assessment of the HE as "the masterpiece of Dark Age historiography" (though they 
protest against his epithet for the period).\(^\text{13}\) Thanks to the enduring interest and 
exhaustive work of these and other scholars, the place of the HE in its historical and 
intellectual context is well mapped.

The wealth of available material offers a sense of the practices of late antique 
historiography that influenced the structure and content of the HE. A substantial area 
of Bede scholarship traces his work through the sources and influences that shaped his 
thinking and his writing: Eusebius/Rufinus,\(^\text{14}\) Augustine, Orosius, Jerome, Gildas, 
Gregory of Tours, Isidore of Seville, Gregory the Great, and most fundamentally the

\(^\text{12}\) Walter Goffart, "The Historia Ecclesiastica: Bede's Agenda and Ours," The Haskins Society 
\(^\text{13}\) James Campbell, "Bede," Latin Historians, ed. T. A. Dorey, Studies in Latin Literature and Its 
\(^\text{14}\) Medieval writers were familiar with Eusebius's Historia not through his original Greek text, but 
rather through Rufinus' Latin translation and continuation published c. 402. Rufinus' Latin version is 
available in Eusebius Werke 2.2. Die Kirchengeschichte, eds. Eduard Schwartz and Theodor 
Mommsen, Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 
1909). An English translation of the continuation is available in The Church History of Rufinus of 
University Press, 1997).
Bible itself.\textsuperscript{15} As such studies make clear, Bede was well-educated in the traditions of Christian thought. Bede's debts to the Fathers of the Church are well-established, as the efforts of men such as Eusebius and Orosius to tell the history of the universal Christian church support and authorize the mission of Bede's own \textit{Historia}. In addition, the national project of the \textit{HE} affiliates the work with another collection of late antique texts which foreground ethnic or regional views of history. Such works include Jordanes' \textit{History of the Goths} (d. c.564), and Gregory of Tour's \textit{History of the Franks}. These and other texts expanded the traditions of classical historiography by turning their focus to the 'barbarians' who dissolved the political coherence of the Roman Empire, and to the Christians who revitalized Rome as the capital city of the Western Church.

In this context, the writing of history was becoming increasingly affiliated with the Christian worldview, and the textual traditions of the changing world were dominated by the philosophical underpinnings of the new faith.\textsuperscript{16} As Goffart observes,


\textsuperscript{16} It must be noted that outside of the Empire, the dominance of the Christian world view in surviving texts is in no small part related to the Christian near-monopoly on literacy. As Michael Richter observes, "the barbarians already had a culture of their own when they encountered the Romans [...]. Due to the technology associated with writing, due to writing being inextricably tied to Christianity, and finally due to the propagandist nature of much of Christian literature, the Christian dimension is much more prominent in the sources than the traditional one." \textit{The Formation of the Medieval West: Studies in the Oral Culture of the Barbarians} (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 41.
Traditional nonsectarian history seems to have expired with an enigmatic collection of imperial biographies known as the Augustan History, whose date continues to elude scholarship; the only apparent certainty is that the work belongs no earlier than the last decade of the fourth century. From then on, the outlook of Latin historiography was urformly Christian even in works whose subject matter had no direct relation to the Church or the saints. 17

Moreover, the practice of Christian historiography grew to accommodate national and ethnic perspectives on the past. The Bible itself provided the precedent. While Rome and a vision of imperium figured largely as an idealization of Christian unity in the work of Eusebius and Orosius, the narrative of the Hebrew Bible provided a compelling historical tradition available to the tribes and nations that formed within the declining orbis Romanus. As Peter Brown writes, “the idea of Rome had shrunk to ever smaller dimensions, to be replaced by a different past -- a past brought close through Holy Scriptures that described so vividly and so appositely, the turbulent warrior-kingdom of ancient Israel.” 18 Christian historians from emerging national communities turned to the Old Testament for a narrative which bound the history of their people to the providential plan of God. “The theology of history,” Robert Hanning observes, “had become a multipurpose garment which Franks and Anglo-Saxons, as new Israelites, could wear as easily as Romans.” 19

In Bede’s HE, the national narrative of the Anglo-Saxons is rooted in the island’s imperial past. The memory of the Roman province of Britannia lingered in the textual traditions of the island. Latin culture did not have the same enduring influence in Britain as it did on the Continent. The memory of a Romanized culture

19 Hanning, The Vision of History in Early Britain, 42.
surrounded the Anglo-Saxons, but it was encountered as something foreign and unfamiliar. However, these dormant Roman roots found new life in Bede’s works. Despite the disintegration of these early ties, Rome was central to Bede’s history both as the source of Gregory’s Christian mission to the English, and more broadly as a reference point whose continuing relationship to the island guaranteed the continuity of the past to present.

J.N. Stephens stresses the importance of Rome in Bede’s narrative when he writes, “Bede’s great purpose and perhaps his achievement was to give the English a longer and a larger history than they thought.” As Stephens argues,

Perhaps we may say that Bede sought to show the gens Anglorum that they had a new history; to endow them with a new history. He showed them that they belonged first to the history of Britain, or rather to Roman history, and then to the catholic history of the Church. He showed them that their history began not with the annals of Saxon settlement or with Hengest and Horsa, but with the British landscape and Roman Britain. He showed them that they belonged to Britain as much as Britain belonged to them.

Bede reinforced this association by integrating Romano-British history, the early Christian history of the island, with the later narrative of the Anglo-Saxon conversion and the return of Christianity through Gregory the Great’s efforts at the close of the sixth century. While by the time of Bede the empire had ceased to be politically

---

20 The Old English poem “The Ruin” (discussed in Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, 47-48) evocatively illustrates the presence of this Roman past, as does an episode in the Anonymous *Life of St. Cuthbert* (retold also in Bede’s prose *Life of St. Cuthbert*) in which the bishop and members of the royal family tour Roman structures still standing in Carlisle. *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940; reprint 1985), 123.


relevant, the influence of Rome on the construction and tenor of English Christianity would be far-reaching. Indeed, as Bede’s assiduous coverage of the debate at the Synod of Whitby *HE* III.25 demonstrates, the Roman affiliation of the English Church was a defining element of its identity.

By associating the English faith with its Roman roots, Bede follows in the footsteps of Eusebius and Orosius, who narrate the development and growth of the Christian faith through its association with imperial Rome. These historians also offered Bede a model for tracing divine agency in the workings of the world and the actions of the holy and the wicked. Both offer an understanding of history that presents the will of God as the active ordering principle of human experience, a perspective that Bede adopted in his narration of the island’s past. Goffart describes the *HE* as:

a tale of origins framed dynamically as the Providence-guided advance of a people from heathendom to Christianity; a cast of saints rather than rude warriors; a mastery of historical technique incomparable for its time; beauty of form and diction; and, not least, an author whose qualities of life and spirit set a model of dedicated scholarship.

This providential approach to history opens a door for integrating hagiographical forms of narrative. As Goffart implies here, it is the deeds of saints, not warriors, that are celebrated in the national history of the faith. Holy men and holy women are

---

24 See *HE* III.25 (294-309) for Bede’s account of the Synod of Whitby.
25 Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, 235. See also Robert Hanning, who writes, “From his insight into the workings of providence in his age, Bede re-created the Christian past of his nation, viewing it as the manifestation of a universal order, so harmoniously adjusted by God that every individual act of conversion or accomplishment, from King Paulinus of Northumbria and his vigorous priest Coifi to Caedmon’s music-making, caused sympathetic vibrations on a national scale. This is Bede’s vision of God in history – perhaps the finest of all its type.” *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, 90.
presented as the active shapers of Church and community, and their successes provide the measure of the culture’s progress and growth as a Christian nation.

There are many parallels between Eusebius of Caesarea and his Anglo-Saxon disciple. The fourth-century bishop set out to create a text that supplemented the brevity of the chronicle form. His accomplishment established the first narrative history of the Christian Church. Eusebius’ writing is particularly concerned with the events fundamental to the foundation of the early Church: the spread of the apostolic mission across the Roman Empire; the ecclesiastical organization of the orthodox community (and the accompanying danger of heresy); and the persecutions launched against Christians by hostile emperors. The history of the ecclesia reaches its zenith in the person of Constantine, a resolution to the political oppositions that plague the Christian community in Eusebius’ narrative.

His adversary [Licinius] thus finally thrown down, the mighty victor Constantine, pre-eminent in every virtue that true religion can confer, with his son Crispus, an emperor most dear to God and in every way resembling his father, won back their own eastern lands and reunited the Roman Empire into a single whole, bringing it all under their peaceful sway.26

This sentence, conflating as it does the imperial embrace of Christianity with the reunification of the Roman Empire, unites the strands of Christian and secular history into providential history. It marks the moment when ecclesiastical history dissolves the boundary between Ecclesia and Imperium, when the coming of Christianity reconceptualizes the social institutions of a culture.

Eusebius concludes his narrative with lines that celebrate the Christian reign of Constantine and the prospect of an utopian society. This choice of an endpoint exposes the care with which Eusebius joined the destinies of Rome and of the Christian faith. When the *History of the Church* was translated from Greek to Latin in the fifth century, its translator Rufinus supplemented Eusebius’ text with the events of his own lifetime, thereby extending its contents through the reign of Constantine and ending at the death of Emperor Theodosius in 395. This continuation muddied the providential narrative and reciprocal relationship that Eusebius constructed between Constantine’s *imperium* and a new golden age of Christianity. Rufinus sets down the Christian emperor’s execution of his son and wife (both charged with conspiring against him), and details how Constantine and his succeeding offspring are led astray by proponents of Arianism. While the accumulation of events details the

---

27 The concluding lines of *The History of the Church* follow in their entirety: “His adversary [Licinius] thus finally thrown down, the mighty victor Constantine, pre-eminent in every virtue that true religion can confer, with his son Crispus, an emperor most dear to God and in every way resembling his father, won back their own eastern lands and reunited the Roman Empire into a single whole, bringing it all under their peaceful sway, in a wide circle embracing north and south alike from the east to the farthest west. Men had now lost all fear of their former oppressors; day after day they kept dazzling festival; light was everywhere, and men who once dared not look up greeted each other with smiling faces and shining eyes. They danced and sang in city and country alike, giving honour first of all to God our Sovereign Lord, as they had been instructed, and then to the pious emperor with his sons, so dear to God. Old troubles were forgotten, and all irreligion passed into oblivion; good things present were enjoyed, those yet to come eagerly awaited. In every city the victorious emperor published decrees full of humanity and laws that gave proof of munificence and true piety. Thus all tyranny had been purged away, and the kingdom that was theirs was preserved securely and without question for Constantine and his sons alone. They, having made it their first task to wipe the world clean from the hatred of God, rejoiced in the blessings that He had conferred upon them, and, by the things they did for all men to see, displayed love of virtue and love of God, devotion and thankfulness to the Almighty.” Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 332-333.

28 Hanning notes, however, that Eusebius did not incorporate Constantine into his earliest versions of *the History of the Church* because the events of the conclusion were unwinding around him. It is not until the third version that Constantine assumes a central role in the narrative. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, 28-29.

29 See above, n. 14.
triumph of the orthodox Christian faith over pagan and heretical backsliding, the path that Rufinus offers is by no means a smooth one.

The Rufinus Latin translation became the standard text in the Middle Ages (largely due to the decline of Greek literacy), and his additions paved the path for future adaptations of the Eusebian material as writers of Christian history constructed their own projects on the foundation of Eusebius’ scholarship. As R. A. Markus observes, “Christian historians in the fifth and sixth centuries seem to have regarded Eusebius’s work as definitive [...]. They took over where he left off, or, later on, where one or other continuator of Eusebius ended his continuation.”

According to Markus, Bede was unaware of the proliferation of Eusebian continuations. In the absence of this evolving textual tradition, the Eusebius-Rufinus version of the HE became the centerpiece in Bede’s conception of ecclesiastical history.

Bede’s debts to the Eusebius tradition were substantial. L. W. Barnard observes that Bede may have conceived of his own project as an independent supplement to the History of the Church, and whether that was the scholar’s intent or not, there is enough evidence in the text to suggest a more than superficial similarity between the two ecclesiastical histories. Bede shares with Eusebius an organizational scheme and a methodology. Like his fourth-century predecessor, he structures his material according to Christianity’s apostolic mission and its progression of bishops, and his integration of textual evidence (such as the letters of Gregory the Great) into the body of his history finds its precedent in the substantial interpolations of Eusebius’

32 Barnard, “Bede and Eusebius as Church Historians,” 106.
In addition, Bede adapts from Eusebius the narrative strategies that emphasize the continuity between secular and religious history within the interpretive schema of God’s will in this world. One common interest both share is the instrumental role that saints play in the history of the Church. Eusebius begins his history with Christ, and continues to narrate the history of the Church through the careers of the apostles and martyrs. Like Bede later, Eusebius writes hagiography outside of the project of the *Ecclesiastical History*. His saints’ lives include the *Martyrs of Palestine*, the *Life of Pamphilus*, and the *Life of Constantine*. Eusebius’ *History of the Church* becomes a martyrology in its own right as it assembles the trials and sufferings of the Church, particularly the events of the Great Persecution initiated by Diocletian in 303 during Eusebius’ lifetime. Eusebius provides an early example of how hagiographic interests invigorate and spur the telling of history. His literary career offers an important parallel to Bede’s own approach to writing history, just as his *History of the Church* offers a significant textual model.

In contrast, Orosius’s *Historiarum adversus paganos* does not focus on the history of the Church and its saints, but rather reinterprets the inherited history of classical tradition from a Christian perspective. At the request of Augustine of Hippo (though, as many have noted, in a manner completely antithetical to Augustine’s arguments[^34]), Orosius delved into the *civitas terrena* to present the history of the antique world as the workings of divine providence. The preface to

[^33]: Barnard, “Bede and Eusebius as Church Historians,” 107.
[^34]: See, for example, Hanning who writes, “Orosius constructed a most un-Augustinian history of Rome, in which the city and empire become monuments to God’s ordering of history. Orosius’ work restates and expands the premises of Eusebian historiography: the role of Rome in the divine scheme is that of a chosen nation progressing toward Christ, and finally enjoying triumphant union with the church [..].” *The Vision of History in Early England*, 38.
Orosius' *Historiarum adversus paganos* claims that he was called upon to provide practical evidence for the abstract theology of Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*. Beginning with the Flood (the first date offered is 1300 years before the founding of Rome) and scouring the available historical texts and traditions of the classical world, Orosius attempts to quantify the known history of human suffering before and after the rise of Christianity in order to rebut the charge that Rome’s fortunes had fallen since its conversion. This project resulted in an important expansion of Christian historiography. He integrated pre- and post-Christian history into a coherent worldview that brought the civilizations of the past into a referential relationship with Christianity. This approach provided a powerful precedent for Bede’s own project. As Howe writes, “Orosius incorporated the Roman past within Christian history and provided Bede with a model for reinterpreting a pre-Christian story of national origin.”

Orosius also reinforced the synergy between Rome’s political and spiritual significance in the stream of history. To argue as Orosius does that political institutions express God’s will in the world offers a radical reinterpretation of the relationship between Christian and secular history. Orosius’s exploration of secular history offers him an opportunity to theorize a moral basis for governance, and his conclusion that “all power and all ordering are from God” sanctifies a system in which tyranny and persecution are punishments for the sins of humanity. In this

---

way, the events of secular history acquire an important function as the litmus test for the evolution of Christian society.

The connections between Bede and Orosius are apparent at the beginning. The geographical introduction to Britain is likely modeled at least in part upon Orosius’ description of the continents and oceans of the world. Bede also relies heavily upon Orosius’ account to supply the early history of the British island. There is a larger sense in which the two are linked as well. “With Orosius,” Hanning observes, “progress and judgment resume their place at the center of the Christian historical imagination.” A similar understanding of Christian society can be seen in Bede’s own historical project, as the HE narrates of the spread of English Christianity throughout the kingdoms of the island nation. The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons is presented as a political as well as a religious process in the HE to the extent that Christianity offers English kings a new framework for worldly power as well as spiritual salvation. Defeats by pagan kings such as Penda are only temporary setbacks in the predestined spread of the faith. In this sense Bede shares with Orosius an understanding of the events of the secular world as ordered by providential history.

37 J. Campbell, “Bede,” 162. See also Colgrave and Mynors, ed., *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English Peoples*, 14n for a brief discussion of Bede’s use of Orosius, Pliny, Gildas, and Solinus as well as the possible influence of Gregory of Tours on the geographical description of the island.


40 The Northumbrian Edwin (HE II.12, 174-183) provides a good example of a king who is led to Christianity not only through the promise of individual salvation, but through the assurance that he would have greater power and authority than any previous king who ruled the English. An exploration of the political aspects of the Anglo-Saxon conversion can be found in N.J. Higham’s *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
However, he is not able to share the latter’s confidence that the new age of the Christian faith brings with it an ever-increasing improvement in the world. Rather, Bede understands himself to be living in an age of decline. His final vision of the Church in the *HE* offers a portrait of tranquility and holy life, yet he offers ominous forebodings. Speaking of many Northumbrians’ rejection of the warrior life for the monastic, he writes noncommittally “Quae res quern sit habitura finem, posterior aetas uidebit” [What the result will be, a later generation will discover] (560, 561). What Bede fears the result will be is set out in the *Letter to Egbert* when he advises the bishop to shut down corrupt monasteries “ne nostris temporibus uel religione cessante, amor timorque interni deseratur inspectoris, uel rarescente copia militiae secularis, absint qui fines nostros a barbarica incursione tueantur” [“lest in our times either religion come to an end together with the love and fear of Him who sees within us, or with the diminishing of our military forces those who should defend our borders against barbarian incursions disappear”]. Within the *HE* as well, Bede offers a murky vision of contemporary times. In the context of the death of Ecgfrith, he writes “Ex quo tempore spes coepit et uirtus regni Anglorum ‘fluere ac retro sublapsa referri’” [“From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to ‘ebb and fall away’.”] (428, 429). As a writer of not only Christian history, but also Christian chronology, Bede knew that he lived in the sixth age of the world, in which “ut aetas decrepita ipsa totius saeculi morte consumenda” [“like senility, this [Age

42 This point will be developed more fully in the next chapter in the discussion of Cuthbert.
will come to an end in the death of the whole world]. He could see a pattern of
decline in recent events. As Markus writes, “unlike Orosius he lacked the
determination to make optimism prevail over his historical perspective.”

Bede also departs from Orosius’ example in his interest in ‘good men and their
good estate.’ While Bede shares with Eusebius a desire to celebrate and memorialize
the saints and martyrs of his time, Orosius demonstrates the opposite in his work,
dwelling upon the wicked and the devastating consequences of their pursuit of power.
The ambitions of men like Xerxes, Alexander the Great, and Nero go beyond mere
cautionary tales to become emblematic of the chaos and violence wracking the pre-
Christian past. In this way Orosius reflects the moral vision that Bede and Eusebius
also bring to the interpretation of history, but with a particular focus on sinners rather
than saints. This is a direct result of the interests shaping the Historiarum adversus
paganos, as his professed goal is not to establish the sanctity of the current age, but
rather to prove that things were worse earlier.

Eusebius and Orosius together offer a compelling foundation for Bede’s HE.
Their Rome-centered view of Christian history and didactic interpretation of the past
provides a starting-point for understanding the historiographical influences that
constructed Bede’s own project. However, these historians can only offer a broad
perspective on the influences that gave the HE its unique form. A clearer sense of
Bede’s approach to history can be found in his use of the surviving local tradition, in

---

43 “De Temporvm Ratione,” Bedae Venerabilis Opera: Pars VI Opera Didascalica 2, ed. Charles W. 
464; Bede: The Reckoning of Time, ed. and trans. Faith Wallis, Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 29 
(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 158.
the texts and saints’ lives that Bede incorporated into his vision of the English past. The abstract notion of Romanitas that Eusebius and Orosius offer finds concrete expression in the early accounts of the island’s Roman history, and the patterns of sanctified history are conveyed through the lives of local saints. The early events of the island’s British past offer a framework for exploring the textual traditions that shape Bede’s historical vision, and consequently provide the next subject of study.

Bede was not the first to set down the story of Britannia – the island’s Romano/British past has its own author in the sixth-century Briton Gildas. The earliest surviving work of insular history, Gildas’ De Excidio Britanniae offers a compelling parallel to Bede’s own project as the British ecclesiast encapsulates the events of the island’s history. These commemorated events begin with the Roman conquest of the territory and end with the British victory over the Saxons at Badon Hill, a battle which Gildas dates to the first year of his life, forty-four years previous to the act of writing. The influence of Gildas on Bede was substantial, as the later author incorporated much of the earlier work into his own. However, Bede was not above making his own alterations to the inherited story of British Christianity, and his use of hagiographic texts and elements reframes the history of the Britons and their faith in order to link the early Christianity of the island with its later reestablishment among the Anglo-Saxons.

In his analysis of the HE Hanning asserts, “where else did Bede find the inspiration for interpreting national history in terms of political and ecclesiastical
heroes, of saintly leaders and Christian generals, if not in Gildas? Nevertheless, there are substantial differences in the strategies employed by both works. Much of the contrast between the two texts is due to their dramatically different rhetorical purposes. Gildas’ ‘history’ is only a history in a secondary sense as the author’s primary intent is to castigate the depravity of the Britons of his day and age. The historical content of the text is collected to support his major contention that the culture-wide accumulation of sin and corruption puts the island’s inhabitants in grave peril of God’s judgment, the shaping force of providential history. Consequently, the events of Gildas’ historical narrative function only to expose the wickedness and cowardice of past Britons and to establish the relationship between a Britain “erecta cervice et mente” [“stiff-necked and haughty”] (90, 17) and the ruinous path of the island’s past.

The supporting role that history plays in Gildas’ argument is further emphasized by its brevity (less than twenty percent of the work is devoted to what modern scholars would identify as historical narrative) and by the overwhelming dominance of the Old Testament prophets. Nevertheless Gildas draws upon the Old Testament through its portrayal of the history of the Israelites, which serves as a model for the history of the Britons. Gildas uses the Old Testament narratives to illustrate the consequences of sin and corruption, and to warn his audience of the dangers that lie ahead if they do not repent. Gildas also draws upon the Old Testament to provide examples of leaders who have stood up to corruption and have been rewarded for their efforts. By doing so, Gildas is able to draw parallels between the history of the Israelites and the history of the Britons, and to make a case for the necessity of change.

47 “Haec erecta cervice et mente, ex quo inhabitata est, nunc deo, interdum civibus, nonnumquam etiam transmarinis regibus et subjectis ingrata consurgit” [“Ever since it was first inhabited. Britain has been ungratefully rebelling, stiff-necked and haughty, now against God, now against its own countrymen, sometimes even against kings from abroad and their subjects”] (90, 17). All quotations from Gildas are drawn from *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom, History from the Sources, gen. ed. John Morris (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978). Page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.
Testament’s value as historical precedent, asserting that God’s punishments in Israel’s past will become Britain’s future without a national change of heart. In this way, Gildas employs the trope of figuration central to the medieval conception of history, finding his basis for the interpretation of local history in the Scriptural past. As he explains in his introduction, “Ista ego et multa alia veluti speculum quoddam vitae nostrae in scripturis veteribus intuens, convertebar etiam ad novas, et ibi legebam clarius quae mihi forsitan antea obscura fuerant, cessante umbra ac veritate firmius inlucescente” [“I gazed on these things and many others in the Old Testament as though on a mirror reflecting our own life; then I turned to the New Testament also, and read there more clearly what had previously, perhaps, been dark to me: the shadow passed away, and the truth shown forth more boldly”] (88, 14).

If Gildas constructs Britain as a *praesens Israel*, a “latter-day Israel” (98, 28), it is an allusion accompanied by bad as well as good implications:

si, inquam, peculiari ex omnibus nationibus populo, semini regali gentisque sanctae, ad quam dixerat: ‘primogenitus meus Israel’, eiusque sacerdotibus, prophetis, regibus, per tot saecula apostolo ministro membrisque illius primitivae ecclesiae dominus non pepercit, cum a recto tramite deviarint, quid tali huius aetatis facturus est?

[For (I said to myself) when they strayed from the right track the Lord did not spare a people that was peculiarly his own among all nations, a royal stock, a holy race, to whom he had said: ‘Israel is my first-born son’, or its priests, prophets and kings, over so many centuries the apostle, minister and members of that primitive church. What then will he do with this great black blot on our generation?] (88, 15)

As the title would suggest, *The Ruin of Britain* is certainly not the celebration of a nation’s Christian faith, nor would anyone find in it the affirming national identity that Bede brings to the *HE*. Gildas considers the Britons as congenitally inferior to Roman
stock and views the invasions of Saxon barbarians as divine retribution. The polemicist writes, “Moris namque continui erat genti, sicut et nunc est, ut infirma esset ad retundenda hostium tela et fortis esset ad civilia bella et peccatorum onera sustinenda, infirma, inquam, ad exequenda pacis ac veritatis insignia et fortis ad scelera et mendacia” [“It was always true of this people (as it is now) that it was weak in beating off the weapons of the enemy but strong in putting up with civil war and the burden of sin: weak, I repeat in following the banners of peace and truth but strong for crime and falsehood”] (95, 24).

The censures of this British Jeremiah provide much of Bede’s information about the character and history of the Britons. While Bede’s characterization of the Britons is substantially less vitriolic than Gildas’, suggesting that he may have intentionally softened the portrait his source presented, it is nevertheless clear that the opposition in the HE between the Britons and the Saxons overlays the events of a more recent past on the foundation of Gildas’ polemical prose. As Goffart observes, “There are hardly any villains [in the HE] except the now dominated British.” The persistence of the less-than-flattering portrayal of the Britons, however, is in no small part due to the excoriation of their own historian. De Excidio Britanniae offers an accommodating model of providential history that is incorporated by Bede into the foundational mythos of Anglo-Saxon England. There is no reason to alter the vision of history he inherits from Gildas. Rather, Bede leaves untouched the Briton ecclesiast’s prediction of Saxon conquest as the judgment of God personified.

Unsurprisingly, few British saints are celebrated in Gildas' castigation of his people. Consequently, to compare Bede to Gildas is to compare the hope and blessings of God's favor to the threat of God's wrath, to compare the tales of 'bonis bona' ["good men and their good estate"] (HE 2, 3) to the depravities of bad men and the corrupted institutions of a culture, to compare the rise and spread of a renewed Christian faith to its post-Romanitas decline and fall across an island nation. Both men write within a century of invasions that will completely alter the culture (in Bede's case, even the language) of insular Christianity; both predict the destruction that will devastate their communities in the years that follow.49 Both men, too, set out to educate their audience in a life of Christian virtue.

However, each draws upon this past to impart a different lesson to the audience. Gildas works from the premise that the referent for Britain's history is the Bible. The path of a 'latter-day Israel' can be found in the words of the prophets, and the island's history is oriented within the framework of universal Christianity. This is in no small part due to the nature of his sources; as Gildas professes, "quantum tamen potuero, non tam ex scriptis patriae scriptorumve monimentis, quippe quae, vel si qua fuerint, aut ignibus hostium exusta aut civium exilii classe longius deportata non compareant, quam transmarina relatione, quae crebris inrupta intercapedinibus non satis claret" ["I shall do this as well as I can, using not so much literary remains from this country (which, such as they were, are not now available, having been burnt by enemies or removed by our countrymen when they went into exile) as foreign tradition: and that has frequent gaps to blur it"] (90, 17). Gildas' reliance on the

49 Bede's prescient understanding of England's vulnerability to foreign invasion in his Letter to Egbert is fulfilled in the Vikings who would land in Lindisfarne by the end of the century.

35
outside perspective and his exegetical understanding of history have the effect of reconstructing the local history of Christianity through the textual tradition available to him. He forces the reader's gaze outside of the nation, finding models for faith not on the island (with the notable exception of St. Alban), but rather in the shared Christian heritage of scripture and Romanitas. This contrasts significantly with the cultural construction of Christianity in Bede, a Christianity rooted in the English landscape. While Bede too shares Gildas' reverence for Roman tradition, his work is nonetheless intently focused on the growth and development of a distinctly English church. He benefits from a textual tradition rich in local content, and the consequence of this is that the HE offers a much more developed and concrete portrayal of a nation’s Christian heritage and evolution.

Nowhere is this contrast more clearly exposed than in each author's use of hagiographic material. Gildas interprets the saints and martyrs as instrumental in the foundation and support of British Christianity, and as emblems of God’s favor and reassurance in times of trouble. The end of the persecutions is marked by the installation and veneration of these new saints in the ecclesiastical reconstruction of the church.

laetis luminibus omnes Christi tirones quasi post hiemalem ac prolixam noctem temperiem lucemque serenam aurae caelestis excipiunt. Renovant ecclesias ad solum usque destructas; basilicas sanctorum martyrum fundant construunt perficiunt ac velut victoria signa passim propalant. Dies festos celebrant

[Glad-eyed, all the champions of Christ welcomed, as though after a long winter's night, the calm and serene light of the breeze of heaven. They rebuilt churches that had been razed to the ground; they founded, built and completed chapels to the holy martyrs, displaying them]
everywhere like victorious banners. They celebrated feast days.] (92-93, 20)

The British saints and martyrs have an important role to play in the history of the island as well, but with the exception of Alban, Aaron and Julius, these saints are unnamed and unknown — and of these three, only Alban has a narrative connected with the mention of his name. Others, commemorated vaguely as those who “diversis in locis summa magnanimitate in acie Christi perstantes” [“in different places displayed the highest spirit in the battle-line of Christ”] (92, 19), lose the sense of location and narrative tradition central to memorializing the saints. Consequently the British saints are incorporated into the text as a community without individuation or history — they are located in reference to the persecutions, but otherwise ‘timeless’ as a conduit of God’s grace to the Britons.

Ironically, this lack of historicity and sustained hagiographic tradition is in part due to the Saxon invasion. Gildas, bewailing the lack of vigorous Christianity among his people, observes, “quorum nunc corporum sepulturae et passionum loca, si non lugubri divortio barbarorum quam plurima ob scelera nostra civibus adimerentur, non minimum intuentium mentibus ardorem divinae caritatis incuteren” [“[The martyrs’] graves and the places where they suffered would now have the greatest effect in instilling the blaze of divine charity in the minds of beholders, were it not that our citizens, thanks to our sins, have been deprived of many of them by the unhappy partition with the barbarians”] (92, 19). His complaint offers the image of a people alienated from their saints, a culture exiled from the patrons who act for them and represent them in the kingdom of heaven. His statement also suggests that it is the
memory of these saints, a memory continually inspired by the proximity of the saints in the geography of this world, that has left his nation. If local traditions of a sanctified history are lost to him, it is not surprising that he turns to the Scriptures and to the memory of *Romanitas* to reconstruct a frame of reference for his people and provide models of good behavior for a corrupted clergy. Robbed of the memory of England’s own saints, he includes abbreviated versions of the legends of Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna and Basil of Caesarea, martyrs to Roman persecution at the other end of the Empire. Similarly he incorporates references to the apostles, and to the prophets and priesthood of the Old Testament to reinforce the values of the priestly life and the necessity of bearing public witness to the Christian faith. In this sense Gildas’ treatment of saints parallels his treatment of history, as he makes a virtue of a limitation by incorporating the exemplars of universal Christianity as a source of inspiration, identity, and referential meaning for the Britons.

Bede is bound by the same limitations as Gildas — he cannot create hagiographical tradition out of nothing, and the strategies of figuration that Gildas employs would be out of place in the *HE*. Nevertheless, Bede’s treatment of pre-Mount Badon history (Gildas’ endpoint) is far more discursive than the Briton’s approach, in no small part thanks to a broader survey of sources. In addition to Gildas, Bede incorporates the work of Orosius, Fortunatus and Constantius of Lyon among others (sources as ‘foreign,’ however, as the ones that provide Gildas with his material). The incorporation of this additional material fleshes out the historical

---

50 It is important to note that this assemblage of holy men is clearly targeted to the clergy, a point affirmed by the fact that some figures are not even named, the circumstances of their martyrdom being assumed enough to establish their identity.
construction of this period in time, but it also offers saints a much more instrumental role in the history of the Britons. The figures of Germanus of Auxerre and Lupus of Troyes, two Gallic saints who do not even appear in Gildas' narrative, dominate Bede's portrayal of early British Christianity. From material drawn from Constantius of Lyon's *Life of St. Germanus* and Prosper's *Life of Germanus*, Bede compiles a descriptive account of how these two saints fought the spread of the Pelagian heresy and won the British people back to the orthodox practice of the Christian faith.

Viewed within the broader project of the *HE*, it is easy to see why Bede chose these saints to add to his narrative. The role these men played in a battle pitting Continental orthodoxy against insular heresy undoubtedly resonated with a man who located the distinctive character of English Christianity at the synod of Whitby and its embrace of Roman ecclesiastical practices. Unlike Gildas who presents his people as receptive to heresy, Bede portrays the Britons as reluctant to embrace heresy and welcoming of the message that Germanus and Lupus bring: "Verum Brittanni, cum neque suscipere dogma peruersum gratiam Christi blasfemando ullatenus uellent neque uersutiam nefariae persuasionis reftitare uerbis certando sufficerent, inueniunt / salubre consilium, ut a Gallicanis antistitibus auxilium belli spiritalis inquirant" ["The 51 "Mansit namque haec Christi capitis membrorumque consonantia suavis, donec Arriana perfidia, atrox ceu anguis, transmarina nobis evomens venena fratres in unum habitantes exiitiabiliter faceret seiuangi, ac sic quasi via facta trans oceanum omnes omnino bestiae ferae mortiferum cuiuslibet haeresios virus horrido ore vibrantes letalia dentium vulnera patriae novi semper aliquid audire volenti et nihil certe stabiliter optinenti infigebant" ["This pleasant agreement between the head and limbs of Christ endured until the Arian treason, like a savage snake, vomited its foreign poison upon us, and caused the fatal separation of brothers who had lived as one. And as though there were a set route across the ocean there came every kind of wild beast, brandishing in their horrid mouths the death-dealing venom of every heresy, and planting lethal bites in a country that always longed to hear some novelty – and never took firm hold of anything"] (93, 20). While Gildas is eager to condemn the British for their embrace of foreign heresies, he says nothing about the Pelagian heresy that had its birth in Britain.

---

51 "Mansit namque haec Christi capitis membrorumque consonantia suavis, donec Arriana perfidia, atrox ceu anguis, transmarina nobis evomens venena fratres in unum habitantes exiitiabiliter faceret seiuangi, ac sic quasi via facta trans oceanum omnes omnino bestiae ferae mortiferum cuiuslibet haeresios virus horrido ore vibrantes letalia dentium vulnera patriae novi semper aliquid audire volenti et nihil certe stabiliter optinenti infigebant" ["This pleasant agreement between the head and limbs of Christ endured until the Arian treason, like a savage snake, vomited its foreign poison upon us, and caused the fatal separation of brothers who had lived as one. And as though there were a set route across the ocean there came every kind of wild beast, brandishing in their horrid mouths the death-dealing venom of every heresy, and planting lethal bites in a country that always longed to hear some novelty – and never took firm hold of anything"] (93, 20). While Gildas is eager to condemn the British for their embrace of foreign heresies, he says nothing about the Pelagian heresy that had its birth in Britain.
Britons had no desire at all to accept this perverse teaching and so blaspheme the grace of Christ, but could not themselves confute by argument the subtleties of the evil belief; so they wisely decided to seek help in this spiritual warfare from the Gaulish bishops”] (54, 55). Bede follows the account of Constantius of Lyon when he describes the visitation of Germanus and Lupus to the island.\textsuperscript{52} The British population is on the side of the saints in these legends – “regionis uniuersitas in eorum sententiam promta transierat” [“the whole country readily turned to their way of thinking”] (56,57). They unanimously ratify their acceptance of the missionaries’ beliefs in public debate, and when it becomes necessary for Germanus to return to the island a number of years later to combat a fresh outbreak of the heresy, he finds that “populum in ea qua reliquerat credulitate durantem” [“the people as a whole had remained true to the faith from the time Germanus had left them”] (64, 65). In this way Bede establishes a tradition of Christian orthodoxy on the island, supplementing the account of Gildas with materials that present the Britons more favorably, and solidifying a foundation for English Christianity that links the Briton and Saxon nations in a common religious heritage. When Bede condemns the Britons for the crime that “numquam genti Saxonum siue Anglorum, secum Brittaniam incolenti, uerbum fidei praedicando committerent” [“they never preached the faith to the Saxons or Angles that inhabited Britain with them”] (68, 69), he is censuring them for not preserving the coherent Christian tradition that, in fact, the \textit{HE} sets out to reconstruct.

The insertion of Germanus and Lupus is indicative in other ways as well of the dramatically different function that hagiographic narratives serve in Bede’s history. The contrast to Gildas throws into relief, for example, the extent to which Bede is capable of incorporating the content and the episodic form of the *vita* into the historical progression of events that makes up his work. While Gildas’ evocations of the saints are brief martyrological entries in keeping with the system of allusion that gives his work its coherence, the hagiographic inclusions in the *HE* more closely approximate the narrative form of holy legend, sometimes summarizing a source text (as in the case of Cuthbert), sometimes abridging it (as in Germanus and Lupus). Bede systematically reconstructs and synthesizes the hagiographic traditions available to him to locate in the lives of the saints the themes central to the *HE* and the local growth of the Christian faith.

Consequently Bede’s treatment of Germanus and Lupus addresses only events and miracles related to their English mission, nine out of a total of forty-six books in Constantius of Lyon’s text. The primary focus of this narrative is the battle against the Pelagian heresy. Miracles are employed to establish the *bona fides* of the saints’ mission and the power of the uncorrupt faith: two cures performed by Germanus offer a public refutation of the teachings of the heretics, and the bloodless ‘Alleluia’ victory over the Picts brings the power of the orthodox faith to the battlefield. Significantly, however, the legends devoted to Germanus and Lupus also introduce the apostolic model of pastoral care that supports the narrative of the *HE*. Bede describes the saints in the following passage:
Interea Britanniarum insulam apostolici sacerdotes raptim opinione praedicatione uirtutibus impleuerunt, diuinusque per eos sermo cotidie non solum in ecclesiis uerum etiam per triuia, per rura praedicabatur, ita ut passim et fideles catholici firmarentur et deprauati uiam correctionis agnoscerent. Erat illis apostolorum instar et gloria et auctoritas per conscientiam, doctrina per litteras, uirtutes ex meritis.

(In the meantime the island of Britain was soon filled with the fame of the preaching and the miracles of these apostolic bishops. They preached the word of God daily not only in the churches but also in the streets and in the fields, so that the faithful and the catholic were everywhere strengthened and the perverted recognized the true way; like the apostles, they acquired honour and authority for themselves through a good conscience, their learning through the scriptures, and the power of working miracles through their merits.) (56, 57)

These words parallel a passage in the *Vita S. Germani*, but gain new meaning in the context of the HE. Similar words will later be applied to Augustine and the Roman missionaries, to Aidan, and to Cuthbert. One miracle attributed to Germanus, the diversion of an out-of-control fire which leaves the saint’s house untouched, echoes an episode in Bede’s prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, reinforcing the parallelism between Germanus and Cuthbert. The ‘Alleluia’ victory is linked as well to the saints’ broad

---

53 “Interea Brittaniarum insulam, quae inter omnes est uel prima uel maxima, apostolici sacerdotes raptim opinione, praedicatione, uirtutibus impleuerunt; et cum cotidie inruente frequentia stiparentur, diuinus sermo non solum in ecclesiis uerum etiam per triuia, per rura, per deuia fundebatur ut passim et fideles catholici firmarentur et deprauati uiam correctionis agnoscerent. Erat in illis apostolorum instar et gloria, auctoritas per conscientiam, doctrina per litteras, uirtutes ex meritis. Accedebat praeterea tantis auctoribus adsertio ueritatis itaque regionis uniuersitas in eorum sententiam prompta transierat.” Constantius of Lyon, *Vie de Saint Germain d’Auxerre*, 148. [“And now it was not long before these apostolic priests had filled all Britain, the first and largest of the islands, with their fame, their preaching, and their miracles; and, since it was a daily occurrence for them to be hemmed in by crowds, the word of God was preached, not only in the churches, but at the crossroads, in the fields, and in the lanes. Everwhere [sic] faithful Catholics were strengthened in their faith and the lapsed learned the way back to the truth. Their achievements, indeed, were after the pattern of the apostles themselves; they ruled through consciences, taught through letters and worked miracles through their holiness. Preached by such men, the truth had full course, so that whole regions passed quickly over to their side.”] Hoare, “Saint Germanus of Auxerre,” 87.

54 As Howe notes, “Of the many hagiographical passages in the *Historia*, the Life of Germanus occupies a particularly vital position. It is the first to celebrate the saint as the missionary [...] who works to win the salvation of the island.” *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, 67.

55 See “Bede’s Life of Saint Cuthbert,” ch. 14. Bede’s inclusion of this miracle is an innovation in his text, and echoes in turn an episode of Gregory’s *Dialogues*.
success at proselytizing the nation: “Itaque apostolicis ducibus Christus militabat in
castris” [“Indeed, with such apostolic leaders, it was Christ Himself who fought in
their camp”] (62, 63).

Germanus’ and Lupus’ actions also model for the Britons the veneration of the
saints. At one point, Germanus demonstrates the efficacy of relics by healing a blind
child. The HE also remarks on his visit to Alban’s tomb:

ubi Germanus omnium apostolorum diuersorumque martyrum secum
reliquias habens, facta oratione, iussit reuelli sepulchrum pretiosa
ibidem munera conditurus, arbitrans opportunum ut membra sanctorum
ex diuersis regionibus collecta, quos pares meritis receperat caelum,
sepulchri quoque unius teneret hospitium.

Germanus had with him relics of all the apostles and various martyrs;
and, after praying, he ordered the tomb to be opened so that he might
place his precious gifts in it. He thought it fitting that the limbs of
saints which had been gathered from near and far should find lodging
in the same tomb, seeing that they had all entered heaven equal in
merits. (58-60)

Germanus takes from the site a secondary relic, a portion of earth which visibly
contains the blood of the martyr. The patronage of this saint guarantees their safety on
the return passage to Gaul, and consequently the fame of Alban is incorporated into
Germanus’ legend on the Continent as well as in Britain.  

The fact that Bede makes
an explicit link between Germanus’ mission to the Britons and the veneration of Alban
is intriguing, as it sustains the expanded role Alban plays in the HE.

The figure of Alban offers the strongest opportunity for comparing the
different roles of hagiography in the histories of Gildas and Bede because this early
martyr is the only saint to receive narrative development in both texts. It is clear that

---

56 See Book 18, ll. 26-29 in the Life of St. Germanus of Auxerre (Vie de Saint Germain d’Auxerre, 158).
Bede had access to Gildas' version of the Alban legend when he constructed his own, and it is similarly clear that he chose not to use it as a model (though both men likely worked from the same source text, the *Passio Albani*). The description of Alban’s martyrdom in Gildas is foreshortened in such a way as to throw its emphasis on the miracle at its center, the dry crossing of the Thames:

> ut oratione ferventi illi Israeliticae arenri viae minusque tritae, stante diu arca prope glareas testamenti in medio Iordanis canali, simile iter ignotum, trans Tamesis nobilis fluvii alveum, cum mille viris sicco ingrediens pede supensis utrumque modo praeruptorum fluvialibus montium gurgitibus aperiret

Thanks to his fervent prayer, he opened up an unknown route across the channel of the great river Thames - a route resembling the untrodden way made dry for the Israelites, when the ark of the testament stood for a while on gravel in the midstream of Jordan. Accompanied by a thousand men, he crossed dry-shod, while the river eddies stayed themselves on either side like precipitous mountains. (92, 19-20)

As Hanning aptly notes, Gildas “emphasized those elements in Alban’s martyrdom which paralleled the Old Testament.” The rest of the narrative is highly compressed: the juridical interrogation, a highly stylized type-scene in the *passio*, is reduced to an oblique reference to “coram impiis Romana tum stigmata cum horribili fantasia praefrentibus” [“the presence of wicked men who displayed the Roman standards to the most horrid effect”] (92, 19); the martyrdom itself goes unmentioned except for the observation that Alban’s intended executioner was changed “in agnum ex lupo” [“from wolf to lamb”] (92, 20). While Alban’s legend occupies a unique place as the only explicitly hagiographic episode in Gildas’ historical section (if he is Britain’s

---


‘national saint,’ he is also the only saint in the *Excidio* with an accessible past), it shares the same abbreviated attributes as the exemplars presented in the later discussion of the priesthood. This treatment exposes Gildas’ efforts to identify Scriptural patterns in the British past.

In contrast, Bede’s integration of Alban into the *HE* results in a much more articulated portrayal of Britain’s martyr. Bede follows the conventions of the *passio* more closely, preserving the thread of narrative that extends through Alban’s encounter with the confessor whose life he saves, the debate with the Roman judge and Alban’s profession of faith, the progression of the saint to his place of execution, and the death of the martyr and its aftermath. Bede focuses intently on the human encounters and social issues that shape the saint’s martyrdom. The legend encapsulates the thematic interest in conversion that pervades the *HE*, demonstrating through its progressive layers (the individual, the community, the secular Roman hierarchy) the apostolic conversion of a nation. Consequently, Bede includes aspects of the legend not present in Gildas’ version, descriptions and events revelatory of the saint’s inner state. Alban’s experience illustrates for readers a spiritual pedagogy especially apparent in the following lines: "Quem dum orationibus continuis ac uigiliis die noctuque studere conspiceret, subito divina gratia respectus exemplum fidei ac pietatis illius coepit aemulari, ac salutaribus eius exhortationibus paulatim edoctus relictis idolatriae tenebris Christianus integro ex corde factus est" ['When Alban saw [the cleric] occupied day and night in continual vigils and prayers, divine grace suddenly shone upon him and he learned to imitate his guest’s faith and
devotion. Instructed little by little by his teaching about salvation, Alban forsook the darkness of idolatry and became a wholehearted Christian”] (28, 29).

In a similar vein, Bede emphasizes the communal response to Alban’s martyrdom. While Gildas remarks only that Alban was ‘accompanied by a thousand men,’ in Bede’s narrative the saint encounters “hominum multitutinem utriusque sexus, condicionis diuersae et aetatis” [“a great crowd of people of both sexes and of every age and rank”] (30, 31). “Denique,” Bede notes “cunctis pene egressis iudex sine obsequio in ciuitate substiterat” [“In fact almost everyone had gone out so that the judge was left behind in the city without any attendants at all”] (32, 33). The irony that even the judge’s attendants attend the martyrdom of the saint underscores the symbolic displacement of secular authority, suggesting that the martyr becomes the locus for community in a Christian culture.

This great mass of people prevent Alban from crossing the bridge over the Thames, and consequently in this case the parting of the water affirms the baptism and the consecration of a new Christian community. Bede’s baptismal imagery is reinforced by an accompanying miracle absent in Gildas, the creation of a stream at the place of execution.

In huius ergo uertice sanctus Albanus dari sibi a Deo aquam rogauit, statimque incluso meatu ante pedes eius fons perennis exortus est, ut omnes agnoscerent etiam torrentem martyri obsequium detulisse; neque enim fieri poterat ut in arduo montis cacumine martyr aquam, quam in fluuiio non reliquerat, peteret, si hoc oportunum esse non uideret. [When he reached the top of the hill, St Alban asked God to give him water and at once a perpetual spring bubbled up, confined within its channel and at his very feet, so that all could see that even the stream rendered service to the martyr. For it could not have happened that the martyr who had left no water remaining in the river would have desired}
it on the top of the hill, if he had not realized that this was fitting.] (32, 33)

The paired water miracles foreground the sacramental embrace of Christianity, and this implicit image becomes explicit in the martyrdom of Alban’s intended executioner, who “etsi fonte baptismatis non est ablutus, sui tamen est sanguinis lauacro mundatus ac regni caelestis dignus factus ingressu” [“though he was not washed in the waters of baptism, yet he was cleansed by the washing of his own blood and made worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven”] (34, 35).

The contrasts between these two versions of the Alban legend highlight how hagiography, grounded in the events of temporal history but constructed as well from the rhetorical and exegetical strategies of figuration and typology, becomes an eloquent instrument for the ideological reconstruction of the past. Both Bede and Gildas present the martyrdom of Alban as a historical event, a locatable marker in the linear progression of time. However, both also reconstruct the narrative to serve their purposes and reinforce their view of Britain’s providential history. Gildas’ version of the legend condenses the events of the passio in order to emphasize the typological significance of Alban’s parting of the Thames, thus affirming Britain’s identification as a ‘latter-day Israel.’ Bede, however, recognizes in the conversion and martyrdom of Alban a pre-enactment of the national conversion story he seeks to tell in the HE. By preserving the narrative form of the passio, Bede appropriates not only the literal but also the symbolic meaning of the text to orient his readers’ attention to the significance and practice of conversion in England’s history.
Late-antique writers like Eusebius, Orosius and Gildas provide an important framework for understanding Bede’s desire to incorporate early Romano-British events into a history of the English people. Bede continued to stress the Roman roots of the Anglo-Saxons even after the fall of the British. The Gregorian mission in 597 brought with it ecclesiastical structures that provided the island with a national identity as well as a religious unity. This idea is expressed through the nomenclature of ‘Angli’ that Gregory the Great applies without differentiation to the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants his missionaries are sent to convert. The pope constructed his plans for the ecclesiastical organization of the territory from the premise that the island was a nation rather than a collection of kingdoms. As Patrick Wormald observes, Gregory’s assumptions about the ‘English’ became a self-fulfilling prophecy: “the point about his vision of a single ‘ecclesia’ for a single ‘gens Anglorum’, however it arose, was that this powerful image soon acquired a reality of its own.” Bede did much to bring Gregory’s vision to reality. Not only did he offer the readers of the _HE_ a vision of a unified Roman Britain in their past, and not only did he popularize the term ‘English’ to describe the Germanic tribes who settled the island and displaced the Britons, his history of a national church would provide England with its first history of the _gens Anglorum_, a people defined by the boundaries of a Christian nation. In Bede’s history, his Anglo-Saxon readers find a rich tradition of common identity with a connection to the Roman past and with a continuing history in the local texts and

---

60 “Bede transmitted an image of Roman Britain as a single realm conquered by Claudius and inherited by Constantine, the Romans occupying north to Hadrian’s Wall and establishing their domination of the further parts of Britain as well as over the adjacent islands (_HE_ 1. 11).” D.P. Kirby, _The Earliest English Kings_ (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 18.
traditions of the English church. In this way Bede expands the tradition of Eusebius, Orosius, and Gildas, finding in the island's Roman past the foundation for a locally-constituted tradition of sanctity and the providential plan for a nation's salvation.

Equally importantly, however, these authors introduce the moral discourse of the Christian faith as a shaping element of a people's past. The patterns of history are illustrated by progressions of good and bad lives, and the fates of nations as well as individuals are determined by divine will. In a moral universe, saints are presented as agents of historical progress as well as models of individual spirituality. In such a context saints are heroic figures as their personal sanctity serves both as an illustration of God's favor and as a support for the Christian community. This idea is adopted and continued by Bede, who locates English saints at the center of the narrative he constructs of his own people's history. The close relationship between the Christian faith and the interpretation of the past and the role that holy men and women play as historical figures in this world are important legacies that Bede and other medieval writers inherit from Eusebius, Orosius and Gildas.

The next chapter will continue this discussion of the literary foundations of the *HE*, but from a different perspective. In the late seventh and early eighth centuries, the Anglo-Saxons became active participants in their own textual history. A proliferation of Northumbrian saints' lives written before Bede's *HE* provide valuable insight into the processes through which Anglo-Saxon Christians viewed and constructed their local past. The *HE* came at the end of this concentrated hagiographic tradition, and as a work it recapitulates and reframes the practice of local history that these texts exemplify. These anonymous Northumbrian authors provide the next focus
for exploring the intersections of history and hagiography in the composition of Bede’s *Historia*. 
CHAPTER 2

While the previous chapter sought to set the *Historia ecclesiastica* in the context of late-antique historiographical texts, this chapter examines Bede's roots in the vigorous hagiographic tradition of Northumbria. *Vitae* composed there in the late seventh and early eighth centuries created a precedent for the project of the *HE* by commemorating saints linked to the local institutions of Northumbrian monasticism or the history of the Northumbrian faith.¹ In the span of Bede's lifetime, his contemporaries wrote lives for Gregory the Great (pope and apostle to the English), Cuthbert (hermit and bishop of Lindisfarne), Ceolfrid (abbot of Wearmouth), and Wilfrid (bishop of York).² Bede himself wrote metrical and prose lives of Cuthbert and the *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* in addition to the *Historia


ecclesiastica. These works taken together reveal a shared desire to memorialize the origins and foundations of the local Church, and thus to associate individual sanctity with the saint's success in establishing and fortifying the institutions of the Christian faith.

The historical (and historiographical) value of these texts can be traced through the contents of the lives themselves, which construct the saints as agents in local history, and their role as cultural documents in a community with no other extant tradition of historical narrative before the HE. In Bede's time and the place, George Hardin Brown reminds us, "History and hagiography are not different categories." While the degree of consanguinity between hagiography and history is a matter of negotiation for every life that survives, these Northumbrian vitae offer a great deal of insight not only into the individuals and events that shaped the northern English church, but also in the making of history itself and the motivations that inspire to writing the past. It is these related concerns that lead Walter Goffart to characterize Northumbria as "excellent terrain for the birth of historical writing," and to interpret the HE within the context of these works. Goffart identifies this burst of localized productivity with an ideological battle in the Northumbrian church centered on the figure of Wilfrid, a Deiran bishop in the Roman tradition who was a focus of

---


4 George Hardin Brown, Bede the Venerable, Twayne English Authors Series, no. 443 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 95.

controversy in life and death. He theorizes that the Whitby Life of Gregory and the anonymous Life of Cuthbert were written to provide an alternate historical tradition to that promulgated by the cult of Wilfrid. While Goffart convincingly argues for understanding Wilfrid as the unacknowledged motivation for a local tradition of hagiographic commemoration, it is not necessary to accept his hypothesis to see the broader point that these lives are shaped to express the institutional interests of the Northumbrian Church.

Because Bede incorporates material from these preexisting vitae into his work, he offers scholars an opportunity to explore the ideological implications of his decisions as a historian and an author. While the progression from the Life of Cuthbert in poetry and prose to the Lives of the Abbots to the Historia ecclesiastica demonstrates a movement from close reliance on a source text towards a more fluid combination of various sources, Bede still based his writings upon the work of others. For this reason, Bede’s adaptation of existing textual traditions offers a basis for understanding his construction of the local past. The HE is the preeminent example of the ideological implications of this reconstruction—in expanding the framework of history from the Angles to the Anglo-Saxons (and even further back to the Britons and the Romans), Bede creates a coherent narrative of conversion on a national scale. In

---

6 Wilfrid was a bishop most famous for his exertions in converting the northern Church to Roman usage, for his volatile relationships with Northumbrian kings Ecgfrith and Aldfrith (who stripped him twice of his episcopacy), and for converting the people of Sussex. Controversy surrounded Wilfrid as a political figure (in addition to his unstable relationships with Ecgfrith and Aldfrith, he also later became guardian of the child king Osred), as an ecclesiastical figure (Wilfrid acted to consolidate rather than disperse ecclesiastical power by resisting the creation of new episcopal sees), and as an opponent of Irish religious practice. A narrative of Wilfrid’s life survives in The Life of Bishop Wilfrid cited above, and events from his career can be found throughout the last three books of the HE.

7 Goffart, Narrators of Barbarian History, 264

8 As Goffart observes, “Bede’s genius did not extend to conceiving novel literary designs.” Narrators of Barbarian History, 249.
this sense Bede affiliates cultural unity with ecclesiastical unity, linking the kingdoms of the island in a common past that is shaped through their embrace of the Christian faith and the practices and institutions of the Roman Church.

However, Bede also constructs the *HE* to celebrate a particular ecclesiastical pattern of holy life that he roots in the foundation of the English Church. This is the *exemplar* of the monk bishop, prefigured (as noted in the previous chapter) by Germanus and Lupus, established by Gregory, Augustine and his companions, and later repeated in the careers of northern bishops such as Aidan, Chad, and Cuthbert. This chapter takes for its focus the two men who later were embraced as national patron saints of the English: Gregory and Cuthbert. Both men play prominent roles in the *HE*; both men are the subjects of independent hagiographies commissioned by Northumbrian monasteries (Whitby in the case of Gregory, Lindisfarne in the case of Cuthbert). For this reason, these saints give a sense of the traditions that intersect in Bede’s writing of the *HE*. As their posthumous reputations prove (primarily thanks to Bede and the enduring influence of the *HE*), these saints become synonymous with the foundations of the English Church. While the final chapter in this dissertation will examine the tenth-century portraits of Gregory and Cuthbert that appear in Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies*, this chapter looks to their beginnings, to the roles these men play in the visions of the past constructed by Northumbrian monks.

Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), pope of Rome (590-604), was celebrated by the English for his active efforts to convert the Germanic inhabitants of Britannia at the close of the sixth century. The Gregorian mission of 597 sent Augustine and his
fellow monks to the shores of England to bring Christianity to a barbarian people living at the edge of the fallen empire. For this reason the veneration of Gregory as a saint has particular roots in English tradition; Aldhelm was the first to stress the pope’s special relationship as apostle to the English, and the Whitby Life of St. Gregory is the earliest surviving work of hagiography devoted to the saint’s memory (as well as being one of the earliest surviving works of Northumbrian hagiography). Gregory’s association with the English conversion makes him a compelling historical as well as holy figure, and thus he occupies an important place in the Northumbrian environment that provided a context for Bede’s work.

The Whitby Life of Gregory, thought to be written between 704 and 714, constructs Gregory’s relationship to the local past less through historical narrative than through miraculous legend, hagiographic tropes and literary devices. Little is known about the circumstances under which this work was composed and even less is known about the author, likely a monk or a nun affiliated with the monastery at Whitby. However the anonymous author’s work expresses a different set of concerns than the

---

9 For Gregory’s perception of the Anglo-Saxons as barbarians, see HE II. 1, “Ecce lingua Brittaniae, quae nihil aliud nouerat quam barbarum fendere, iamdudum in diuinis laudibus Hebreum coept alleluia resonare” (“Lo, the mouth of Britain, which once only knew how to gnash its barbarous teeth, has long since learned to sing the praises of God with the alleluia of the Hebrews”) (130,131). See also I.xxiii for Bede’s description of the missionaries’ fear in encountering a “barbaram feram incredulamque gentem, cuius ne linguam quidem nossent” [barbarous, fierce, and unbelieving nation whose language they did not even understand] (68, 69). All quotations and translations drawn from the Historia ecclesiastica are from Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts, gen. eds. D.E. Greenway, B.F. Harvey, M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969; reprint, 2001). Because of frequency of use, references will be cited parenthetically.


11 Colgrave, Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, 47-48.

12 The possibility that a nun was the author of the Whitby Life has some precedent in that there is at least one contemporary female author: Huneberc of Heidenheim who wrote the Hodoepirion of St. Willibald.
local monastic and institutional interest in the past reflected by the other Northumbrian hagiographers (including Bede). The Whitby Life celebrates the spiritual rather than historical narrative of the saint’s career, exploring through Gregory the universal qualities of sanctity framed by the discourse of signs. It is organized in almost direct antithesis to the principles of linear and chronological narrative embraced by other contemporary hagiographers. The episodic accumulation of miracles, the interpolation of the Northumbrian martyr-king Edwin, and the discourse on the right reading of signs suggests a work motivated entirely by the demands of sanctity rather than any desire for historical accuracy or commemoration. In this sense the Whitby Life is unique among the works that survive from the Northumbrian environment, an exception to the rule that identifies the hagiographies of this time and place with the interests of institutional history.

The Whitby Life’s distinctive presentation of its subject matter may in part reflect its circumstances at the beginnings of a local literary tradition. Its early date of composition offered the author of the Whitby Life an opportunity to construct rather than conform to a tradition of local hagiography. The author also demonstrates no familiarity with influential late antique hagiographic texts such as Athanasius’ Life of St. Antony and Sulpicius Severus’ Life of St. Martin. While the author did have written sources that provided material for his text, including Gregory’s writings, the Liber pontificalis, and even possibly stories from John Moschus’ early seventh-century Pratum spirituale, these works influenced the text in matters of content, not

13 Colgrave, The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, 48; Goffart, Narrators of Barbarian History, 265.
14 Thacker argues for the Whitby author’s knowledge of some version of Moschus’ writings in “Memorializing Gregory the Great,” passim.
style. The absence of a definable influence suggests that the author is, as Colgrave suggests, “clearly experimenting.” If this was the case, the evidence of other eighth century hagiographies suggests that this experiment was a failure – there is little in what survives to suggest much of an impact on later Anglo-Saxon hagiographers like Stephen of Ripon or Bede, who rely much more heavily on historiographic forms of episcopal biography.

It is common for scholars to see the Whitby *Life* as a flawed text by an unpolished author. Thus Goffart expresses a widely-shared opinion when he writes, “The Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great*, though quaint and entertaining, is an exceptionally crude hagiography. Its enduring value is as an example of authentically naïve, half-educated writing.” Whatever its weaknesses from a literary or historical point of view, however, the Whitby *Life* serves an extremely valuable purpose as it illustrates one author’s effort to build a hagiographic text without a model. There is a vivid sense of audience expectation that comes through the text, a sense of the readership that shapes the content of the life. The Whitby *Life* also brings the questions and issues surrounding its presentation of Gregory to the surface of the text. It self-consciously exposes to view its process of assembling and interpreting signs to identify and shape the career of a saint. This work differs from the more stylized narratives of its contemporaries, providing insight into the making of hagiography.

---

Goffart argues that the motivation for the text’s composition was to commemorate the Anglo-Saxon conversion.17 If so, the text offers an approach to hagiography that demonstrates surprisingly little interest in (or knowledge of) the local Northumbrian past. The narrative begins with the saint’s early history, his writings and signs of his sanctity, moves into England to discuss English kings and the legends of Edwin, returns to miraculous events attributed to Gregory, discusses the saint’s scholarship in more detail, presents miracles that reflect the pope’s power of loosing and binding, and concludes by constructing the importance of Gregory as an exemplar.

“Id vero scrupulum nec ulli moveat, licet horum ordo preposterus” [“Therefore let no one be disturbed even though the arrangement of the stories is confused”] (130, 131), the author writes late in the Whitby Life, acknowledging that the organization of the text is a departure from the expectations a reader might bring to the genre.

Despite this ordo preposterus, the text nevertheless acquires a loose coherence through the Whitby author’s thematic interest in signs. The topic is first introduced in the third chapter with the question of “qualiter doctor noster sanctus Gregorius vir ceteris incomparabilis sit, nobis in sanctitate [...] venerandus” [“how far our holy teacher the incomparable Gregory ought to be honoured by us as a saint”] (76, 77). The Whitby author writes,

De quo librum scribere cupientes cum paucu eius de gestis audivimus signorum, nec fastidium sit legentibus precamur, si aliquid de laude

---

17 Goffart argues eloquently on this point, observing “The Whitby Life of Gregory the Great does little else than underscore the existence of the century-old Gregorian mission. In the early 700s, reminders were needed; the Gregorian envoys to Kent and York were unknown to the Irish; the first Roman mission was virtually forgotten; and, all around, the Wilfridians had their own version of the facts. [...] The Whitby Gregory proclaimed that, no matter what initiatives were taken by the latecoming Wilfrid, a Gregorian mission to Northumbria had come before, and Edwin had been the first Christian king.” “The Historia Ecclesiastica: Bede’s Agenda and Ours,” The Haskins Society Journal 2 (1990): 37.
tanti viri loquamur uberius. Multi igitur a miraculis vitam quidem sanctorum solent considerare, atque a signis sancta illorum merita metiri, et hoc nec inmerito. Nam sepe eos Deus qui est mirabilis in sanctis suis quos pre ceteris amat, iam miraculis facit coruscare pre ceteris.

[We wish to write a book about him, though, in the record of his deeds, we have heard of few miracles: but we pray our readers not to feel distaste if we praise the great man somewhat exuberantly. For many are accustomed to judge the lives of saints by their miracles and to measure their merits and holiness by the signs they perform; nor it this unreasonable; for often God, who is glorious in his saints that he loves beyond other men, makes them shine above other men by the miracles they perform.] (76, 77)

This statement suggests a measure of signs and miracles used to determine the worthiness of a candidate for commemoration, and while the author inserts an appropriately Gregorian dismissal of the miracle as the sole determinant of sanctity, he also perpetuates its importance by including miraculous events of dubious provenance into the text (including some clearly attributed to other saints in Gregory’s Dialogues). There is a tension between the Life’s (and Gregory’s) repeated dismissal of the miracle as a privileged form of sanctity, and the text’s valorization of the miraculous event attributed to the saint. In one early circumstance, the author’s assertion that the quality of humility is “signis et miraculis maiorem” [greater than signs or miracles] (84, 85), is illustrated by a miracle, a divine pillar of light that exposes Gregory in the night as he attempts to flee his appointment as pope.

The Whitby author defends against the reader’s implied skepticism concerning the limited nature of the hagiographic tradition and particularly the miracle tradition

---

18 “Quibus etiam est pure agnoscendum, quia ut ille sanctus vir, ‘Sunt,’ inquit, ‘plerique qui, etsi signa non faciunt, signa tamen facientibus dispares non sunt.’” (“Such men clearly recognize that there are many, like this holy man [Gregory], who, as Gregory himself said, do not perform miracles but are not unequal to those who do”) (78, 79).
19 Thacker, “Memorializing Gregory the Great,” 63-64.
devoted to Gregory. Nevertheless the author asserts that despite the paucity of sources, “in eis tantum de hoc clarissime fame viro signa sanctitatis qui requirunt, his possunt agnoscere satis evidenter indiciis” [“any who are only looking for such miracles as prove the sanctity of this renowned man, can find the proof clearly enough in this evidence.”] (80, 81). The evidence of signa extends beyond miraculous events to include aspects of the mundane that bear deeper significance. Gregory’s desire to convert the English, for example, is constructed by the Whitby author as an act of prophecy: “in signum sanctitatis ad gratiam prophete singulari fertur dono de nobis intellegentie pervenisse” [“as a sign of holiness, he attained to the grace of prophecy, shown in his unique gift that enabled him to understand our needs”] (90, 91).

The Whitby author’s interest in finding spiritual evidence in the mundane extends as well to the words of the text. The earliest and most famous example of the author’s interest in the interpretive possibilities of language occurs in Gregory’s encounter with the English youths, an episode common to both the Whitby Life and Bede’s HE:20 This episode’s significance is contained in a series of puns that spark the future pope’s interest in the conversion of the English.21 In response to Gregory’s curiosity, the youths offer the following exchange:

20 Readers of Bede know this as the episode of Gregory at the slave market, but in the Whitby version there is no mention of whether the youths were slaves or not. Other differences include the ages of the youths (the Whitby Life notes “Quos quidam pulchrosuisse pueros dicunt et quidam vero crispos iuvenes et decoros” [“Now some say they were beautiful boys, while others say that they were curly-haired, handsome youths”] (90, 91); Bede terms them pueri and the words attributed to Gregory (Bede includes an additional interchange in which Gregory bewails their heathen status, saying, “‘Heu, pro dolor!’ inquit ‘quod tam lucidi uultus homines tenebrarum auctor possidet, tantaque gratia frontispicii mentem ab interna gratia uacuam gestat!’” [“‘Alas, that the author of darkness should have men so bright of face in his grip, and that minds devoid of inward grace should bear so graceful an outward form’”] (132, 133).
21 The rhetorical term for the wordplay that the Whitby author employs is paronomasia, and it can be found discussed in Bede’s De schematibus et tropis: “PARONOMASIA, id est, denominatio, dicitur, "PARONOMASIA, id est, denominatio, dicitur,
“Anguli dicuntur, illi de quibus sumus,” ille dixit, “Angeli Dei.”

[They answered, “The people we belong to are called Angles.” “Angels of God,” he replied. Then he asked further, “What is the name of the king of that people?” They said, “Ælli,” whereupon he said, “Alleluia, God’s praise must be heard there.” Then he asked the name of their own tribe, to which they answered, “Deire,” and he replied, “They shall flee from the wrath of God to the faith.”] (90, 91)

This event occupies a place of prominence in the Whitby Life, presenting Gregory as a prophetic reader of signs. With spiritual insight the saint finds in the languages of the world around him the expression of God’s will and guidance. Wordplay plays an important role in constructing Gregory’s relationship with the English. When Gregory embarks upon his own mission of conversion, God’s desire for him to remain in Rome is expressed through the visitation of a locust. “E cuius nomine statim quasi sibi diceret, ‘Sta in loco,’ agnovit” [“At once he recognized from the name of the insect that he was, as it were, being told to stay in the place”] (92, 93). Again, a verbal clue offers Gregory prophetic knowledge, although in this case he resists its meaning, if unsuccessfully.

The systematic interpretation of verbal signs is employed by the author as a narrative strategy linking the world of Rome to the world of England. The Whitby Life briefly acknowledges the men associated with the Gregorian mission, listing

quoties dictio poene similis ponitur in significacione diversa, mutata videbilec littera vel syllaba” [PARONOMASIA, that is to say, denominatio or wordplay, is the name of the figure in which two very similar words differing only by a letter or a syllable are used in different senses”]. Bede, Libri II De Arte Metrica et De Schematibus et Tropis: The Art of Poetry and Rhetoric, ed. and trans. Calvin B. Kendall, Bibliotheca Germanica Series Nova Vol. 2, gen ed. Hans Fix (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 1991), 174, 175.

22 While ‘locusta’ is interpreted as ‘Sta in loco’ in the text, Colgrave notes, “The original form of the phrase was probably loco sta, loco being a locative.” Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, 146n.
Augustine, Mellitus, and Laurentius. It also acknowledges the coming of Christianity to England by noting the conversion of Æthelberht, and then Edwin, a king "in gente nostra" ["of this race of ours"] (94, 95) who united England under his rule. Edwin is constructed not through his historical identity, as one might expect, but rather through a continuation of the wordplay that distinguished Gregory’s earlier encounter with the English. He is “Aelli prefati filius, quem sub vaticinatione alleluia laudationis divine non inmerito minimus” ["the son of Ælli, whom we have very rightly mentioned in connection with that prophetic Alleluia of divine praise"] (94-95). The Whitby author further develops the significance of the Angli/angeli and alleluia/Ælli puns, breaking them down into their component parts to give them new meaning. The author argues, for example, “Et Aelli duabus compositum est sillabis quarum in priori cum e littera adsumitur et in sequenti pro i ponitur e, all vocatur, quod in nostra lingua omnes absolute indicat” [And Ælli is made up of two syllables: if in the first syllable we take away the e and in the second replace i with e, it becomes ‘alle,’ which in our language means absolutely all”] (94, 95). Edwin’s name is similarly constructed within this mode of interpretation: “Eduinus, cuius nomen tribus sillabis constans, recte sibi designat sancte misterium trinitatis" [“Edwin’s name, consisting of three syllables, truly signifies the mystery of the Holy Trinity”] (96, 97).

The profusion of wordplay that accompanies the introduction of the English youths into the narrative of Gregory’s life not only links a Roman saint to England,  

---

24 Thacker provides additional discussion of the Alleluia pun and its association with Archbishop Theodore in “Memorializing Gregory the Great,” 77-78.
but also links an English king to Rome. Once Edwin is introduced into the narrative, the word-play so prevalent in the early chapters of the Whitby Life disappears. It seems clear that these verbal puns serve to bridge history and geography – they open a space for local traditions of sanctity that share with Gregory a concern with interpretation and meaning, with reading the signs that shape the conversion history of the English. When the relationship is established, the verbal cues fall away.

With the introduction of Edwin, one might expect the author to move into a narrative of the Northumbrian conversion or the king’s life. The Whitby Life does offer an account of Edwin’s conversion at the hands of Paulinus, and a comparatively lengthy (two chapter) narrative of the translation of Edwin’s relics to Whitby in the time of Æthelred. However, what historical value these accounts may offer is subordinated to their meaning in the context of signa. Although only three legends that concern the king are included in this work, all of them foreground a debate over meaning and interpretation. In one episode, Paulinus (missionary to Northumbria and the king’s counselor) is confronted by a crow whose cawing is read as a bad omen in the pagan tradition of the Anglo-Saxons. The bird’s swift death by an arrow shot by one of Paulinus’ companions allows the missionary to accommodate its significance to the Christian point of view. Paulinus himself is introduced to Edwin in a dream vision as the heaven-sent sign of his future conversion, and in death the missionary’s soul

---

25 David Rollason observes also that venerating Edwin was an effort to stress the Roman rather than Irish foundations of the Northumbrian Church. As Rollason writes, “The inclusion in this life of a long section devoted to King Edwin of the Northumbrians and his conversion to Christianity by the Roman missionary Paulinus [...] must also have been intended to emphasize the links of the Northumbrian with the Roman church.” “Hagiography and Politics in Early Northumbria,” in Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints’ Lives and Their Contexts, ed. Paul E. Szarmach, SUNY Series in Medieval Studies, gen. ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany: SUNY University Press, 1996), 101.
assumes the shape of a swan. The sanctity of Edwin's relics is also revealed through a
dream vision (though the dreamer resists its message not once but twice). While these
episodes offer corroborating details that locate the events with the people and places of
Northumbrian history, the author's use and focus on the heightened discourse of
spiritual meaning contained within these events reflects the same mode of
interpretation expressed earlier through language. This same interest in the
interpretive significance of events is reflected in the miracles the author later attributes
to Gregory. Many of these wonders – hosts and relics that bleed, blasphemous
magicians that are blinded – direct the observer to the deeper spiritual truth encoded in
the miracle, reinforcing the unity between the event and its meaning.

Although the Whitby Life asserts a claim on Gregory that is rooted in the
English past, the contents of the life reveal the author's interest in interpretation rather
than commemoration, in signs rather than events. Consequently, the Whitby Life adds
little to our historical understanding of the English conversion. It remains for Bede to
explain the events of Edwin's life and death, just as it remains for Bede to further
substantiate the connection between Gregory and the English. The scarcity of local
historical narrative distinguishes the Whitby Life from the tradition of Northumbrian
hagiography. However this authorial choice reflects a different epistemological
framework than the other lives (and the HE). The Whitby author does not assemble
and name authorities to guarantee the truthfulness of the vita; instead, the author
asserts that the knowledge of the past is inevitably imperfect. When introducing the
account of Edwin's conversion, the Whitby author writes:
Quod non tam condenso quomodo audiviumus verbo, set pro veritate certantes, eo quod credimus factum brevi replicamus et sensu, licet ab illis minime audiviumus famatum qui eius plura pre ceteris sciebant. Nec tamen quod tam spiritualiter a fidelibus traditur, tegi silentio per totum rectum rimamur, cum etiam sepe fama cuiusque rei, per longa tempora terrarumque spatio, post congesta diverso modo in aures diversorum perveniet. Hoc igitur multo ante horum omnes qui nunc supersunt, gestum est dies.

[We will tell the story, not in the condensed form in which we heard it, but we will seek to tell the truth and briefly relate what we believe to have happened, even though we have not heard it from those who knew him better than most. However, we do not hold it to be entirely right to hide in silence what is related so sincerely by faithful witnesses, for often the account of any event which happened long ago and in distant lands and which was put into shape in later times, reaches the ears of different people in different forms. For this happened long before the days of any of those who are still alive.] (98, 99)

The same perspective appears in the conclusion of the *Life* when, speaking of Gregory, the author writes, “si quid horum que scripsimus de hoc viro non fuit, quae etiam non ab illis qui viderunt et audierunt per ore didicimus, vulgata tantum habemus, de illo eius etiam esse in magno dubitamus minime” [“if anything we have written did not concern this man – and, remember, we did not learn about them directly from those who saw and heard them but only by common report – in his case we have little doubt on the whole that they were true of him, too”] (130-133). As these words imply, the event is less important than the meaning it conveys.

The Whitby *Life* introduces a number of issues that will continue to be significant in Bede’s later construction of Gregory. It establishes a claim on Gregory as an English saint, most significantly in the early chapters that integrate English
legends and figures into the Gregory tradition. In this sense Gregory creates a starting point and a precedent for an English tradition of sanctity. This work also offers a foray into the epistemological basis for evaluating holy legend and spiritual tradition. It is clear that Bede will bring different standards and a different purpose to his efforts to authorize his view of England's Christian history. In the absence of a larger framework, however, the Whitby Life offers us an eclectic attempt to define the values of sanctity and the codes that govern its interpretation. It guides its audience to the meaning expressed in its collection of texts and traditions. It demonstrates a prescient skepticism for the reliability of historical tradition. It finally seeks to illustrate what is truly knowable about the figure of the saint, the spiritual rather than historical significance of holy men and holy women.

The Whitby Life stands in contrast to Bede's highly localized and concrete presentation of Gregory as an agent in history. While both authors share sources such as the Liber pontificalis and Gregory's own writings, the resulting narratives bear almost no relation to each other, to the extent that it is not even clear if Bede knew of the earlier work.27 Regardless of what Bede knew of the Whitby Life, however, the project of the HE necessitated a very different treatment of the saint. Bede does not enjoy the luxury of a single focus such as the Whitby author brought to his treatment

Lord in the Day of Judgment, he will bring us - that is, the English people - instructed by him through God's grace”] (82, 83).

27 The debate over whether Bede knew of and had read the Whitby Life before composing his own work is inconclusive. Bertram Colgrave argues for Bede's ignorance of the text (Earliest Life of St. Gregory the Great, 57-59) and Levison offers a brief exploration of the debate in “Bede as Historian,” 123 n.3. More recently, Kirby postulates that Bede could have had secondhand knowledge of the Whitby Life, or could have received a copy of it after writing the HE (“Bede's Native Sources,” 65). Goffart argues for Bede's knowledge of the text in Narrators of Barbarian History, 305-306. There is a consensus, however, that regardless of Bede's access to the text, the Whitby Life nevertheless preceded the composition of the HE.
of Gregory. His desire to both celebrate the saint and locate him within the narrative of England’s conversion complicates a purely biographical approach, and the compromise that he found necessary to impose is visible in the organization of the text. The Gregorian materials bridge two books in the *HE*; the last chapters of the first book incorporate the saint within the events of the early Church, while the first chapter of the second book encapsulates the life of the pope. While the practice of hagiography and history is intertwined in the pages of the *HE*, this separation introduces an intentional discontinuity. For this reason it is fruitful to examine the ways in which the two narratives offer different approaches to the Gregorian tradition.

Gregory first appears in the *HE* directly after Bede closes the history of the Britons by stating, “Sed non tamen divina pietas plebem suam, quam praesciuit, deseruit; quin multo digniores genti memoratae praecones ueritatis, per quos crederet, destinauit” [“Nevertheless God in His goodness did not reject the people whom He foreknew, but He had appointed much worthier heralds of the truth to bring this people [the Saxons and Angles] to the faith”] (68, 69). As the text goes on to explain, the much worthier heralds of truth are Gregory’s missionaries. Bede introduces Gregory by noting the year of his accession to the pontificate (592) and the year in which Gregory ordered the mission to England (596; they arrive in 597), establishing dates that become important markers in the chronology of English conversion. Bede’s account of the conversion is much more detailed than that of the Whitby *Life*. The narrative of the conversion is also much more national in scope, highlighting the career of Augustine among the Kentish peoples and placing the Northumbrian conversion in a broader perspective.
While the Whitby Life and Bede’s HE are largely constructed from the same range of Gregory’s writings, the Whitby author does not seem to share Bede’s access to the *Libellus responsionum*, the text that in turn is the most significant influence on Bede’s presentation of the mission to the Anglo-Saxons. The effect of the incorporated letters in the HE is two-fold: it constructs a relationship between Augustine and Gregory that presents them as equally important in shaping the early Anglo-Saxon church, and it reenacts Gregory’s involvement with England through his own words. Gregory is as alive and as present in the letters preserved in the HE as he was in the actual conversion. In the absence of his own journey to England, Gregory becomes almost solely a construct based on the writings available to the English.

As Bede makes clear, however, these writings were supplemented by research and the collection of sources (both oral and written) to supplement the materials of Gregory’s life. Gregory provides the best circumstances for Bede’s historical method in action, as he offers a documented tradition that, while geographically and temporally distant, is still accessible to a determined researcher. Bede credits Abbot Albinus and Nothelm with introducing him to a wealth of new material, again likely unavailable to the Whitby author:

> Institutus diligenter omnia, quae in ipsa Cantuariorum prouincia uel etiam in contiguis eidem regionibus a discipulis beati papae Gregorii gesta fuere, uel monimentis litterarum uel seniorum traditione cognouerat, et ea mihi de his quae memoria digna uidebantur per religiosum Lundoniensis ecclesiae presbyterum Nothelmum, siue

---

28 As Colgrave notes in the preface to *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, “[Bede] gives a list of [Gregory’s] works in which he includes the *Homilies on the Gospels* and the *Homilies on Ezekiel*, the *Libellus Responsionum*, which he quotes in full, the *Moralia*, the *Regula Pastoralis*, and the *Dialogues* [...]. The Whitby monk is also familiar with the *Dialogues*, the *Moralia* or at any rate the prefatory letter to Leander, the *Regula Pastoralis*, the *Homilies on the Gospels*, and the *Homilies on Ezekiel* [...].” (28).
There [Albinus] carefully ascertained, from written records or from the old traditions, all that the disciples of St Gregory had done in the kingdom of Kent or in the neighbouring kingdoms. He passed on to me whatever seemed worth remembering through Nothhelm, a godly priest of the Church in London, either in writing or by word of mouth. Afterwards Nothhelm went to Rome and got permission from the present Pope Gregory to search through the archives of the holy Roman church and there found some letters of St Gregory and of other popes. On the advice of Father Albinus he brought them to us on his return to be included in our History. (2, 4, 5)

The rich evidence available from both Roman and English records provides the substance for Bede’s narrative of the mission. These records and traditions dramatically reconstruct Gregory’s role in the conversion of the English. His role as apostle and teacher is expanded by Bede to stress his active participation in the spiritual and political interests that guide and shape the Anglo-Saxon Church.

This is the portrayal of Gregory that dominates the historical narrative of Book One. The overwhelming influence of the Libellus responsionum centers the early events of the conversion on Gregory, making him an active figure and substantiating his prominent role in English Christianity. The majority of the chapters that chronicle the Gregorian mission (eight out of twelve) incorporate transcriptions of Gregory’s letters, and the answers Gregory submits in response to Augustine’s questions take up over half of the space devoted to this subject matter.29 The letters as a whole work to

29 The comparative relationships suggested by these observations address the chapters that begin with 1.23 and end in 1.33. While episodes involving Augustine, Mellitus and other Gregorian missionaries...
demonstrate the wisdom and strength of will of a pope who compels his apostles on their journey to England when their courage weakens, who seeks to inspire a king new to the mantle of Christian kingship, and who tolerates the cultural practices that affect Anglo-Saxon religious practices.

In addition, the letters establish the extent to which Gregory’s vision shaped the organization and orthodox practices of the newly-established Church. Augustine’s series of questions allows Gregory to articulate his position on institutional matters including the regular life of the clergy, liturgical customs, the consecration of bishops, and inter-Church relations between England and Gaul. In addition, other letters spell out the diocesan organization of the newly converted territory. Gregory proposes sees in London and York, and the organization he proposes is largely implemented even if the London see must be replaced by Canterbury due to its inhabitants’ resistance to conversion. He writes to Augustine, “Tua uero fratemitas non solum eos episcopos quos ordinauerit, neque hos tantummodo qui per Eburacae episcopum fuerint ordinati, sed etiam omnes Britanniae sacerdotes habeat” [“You, brother, are to have under your subjection those bishops whom you have consecrated as well as those who shall be

also take place in Book Two of the HE, these events occur after Gregory’s death. The hagiographic digression concerning Gregory in II.1 is also not included because its subject matter is less overtly concerned with the events of the English conversion. It is worth noting, however, that no excerpts from the Libellus responsionum are included in this brief life, although the book itself is mentioned.

30 “Quia melius fuerat bona non incipere quam ab his, quae coepta sunt, cogitacione retrorsum redire, summno studio, dilectissimi filii” [“My dearly beloved sons, it would have been better not to have undertaken a noble task than to turn back deliberately from what you have begun”] (70, 71).

31 “Et nunc itaque uesta gloria cogitacionem unius Dei, Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, regibus ac populis sibimet subjiciat ut antiquos gentis suae reges laudibus ac meritis transeat” [“And now let your Majesty hasten to instil the knowledge of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into the kings and nations subject to you, that you may surpass the ancient kings of your race in praise and merit”] (112, 113).

32 “Et quia boues solent in sacrificio daemonum multos occidere, debet eis etiam hac de re aliqua sollemnis inmutari” [“And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this”] (106-109).
consecrated by the bishop of York, and not those only but also all the bishops of
Britain"] (106-107). Unaware of or unconcerned with regional or regnal boundaries,
Gregory structures English Christianity around the idea of a national church, and this
organizational plan becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as ecclesiastical boundaries
come to supercede political ones. Gregory weighs in as well on concerns that affect
the lay practice of Christianity, some with cultural ramifications. For example,
Gregory’s position on marriage between degrees of kinship flies in the face of
Germanic practice – as the Pope is well aware. Without lessening the severity of the
offense, Gregory offers a compromise which allows those with preexisting marriages
in this category to receive the sacraments. This compromise is typical of his approach
to Anglo-Saxon spirituality, in that he seeks to accommodate or reshape cultural
practices to conform to the spirit rather than the letter of orthodox practice.

Bede’s reliance on the Libellus responsionum allows him to portray Gregory as
an individual intimately connected with the growth and nurture of the English Church.
Though the letters are unearthed in Rome, they give Gregory a presence in England.
Through this epistolary tradition, Bede is able to reconstruct the pope’s significance in
the local history of England’s conversion. It is no coincidence that the letters also
strengthen England’s identification with Roman orthodoxy, a potent attraction given
Bede’s concerns with heterodox Irish practices. What the letters do not do, however,

33 Patrick Wormald, “Bede, the Bretwaldas and the Origins of the Gens Anglorum,” in Ideal and Reality
in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, eds. Patrick
34 Bede’s use of the Libellus responsionum does not end with Gregory, but rather continues to trace the
letters sent by subsequent popes to the English, suggesting and reinforcing the idea of an open channel
between the foundational figures in the English Church and the Papal See.
is offer a sense of the pope as a holy figure. Such an intention seems far removed from the platform Bede constructs for Gregory’s mission.

The desire to celebrate Gregory as a saint is more central to the treatment of Gregory that opens Book Two in the HE. The change in tone is immediately obvious as Bede shifts from the narration of events and letters that close the previous book into an abbreviated form of the hagiographic vita. The events of Gregory’s life are summarized in a self-contained narrative limited to one chapter. In this chapter the connections and contrasts between the Whitby Life and Bede’s approach to Gregory’s past become most evident. Like the Whitby author, Bede defends his choice to view Gregory as an English saint: “Quem recte nostrum appellare possimus et debemus apostolum” [“We can and should by rights call him our apostle”] (122,123). His account of the saint’s ancestry and early life is based on the version in the Liber pontificalis that also shapes the Whitby Life’s narration of these events, and he shares the Whitby author’s interest in Gregory’s scholarship and the accomplishments of his pen.

Despite these similarities, however, it is clear that Bede’s version of Gregory’s life is more substantially shaped by the episcopal values of sanctity prized in the HE than by the miracles and signs offered as primary evidence in the Whitby Life. The portrait of Gregory that Bede constructs echoes and reinforces the paradigm of sainthood that is continually reenacted in the HE. Gregory refines the model Germanus supplies, and expands the ideal of sanctity to embrace the ascetic practices that shape English monasticism. Like Germanus, Gregory is presented as a missionary and defender of orthodoxy. Bede introduces to the legend an account of
Gregory’s successful refutation of heretical belief in Constantinople, an addition that not only reinforces the connection between Gregory and the previous missionary saints of Gaul, but also reflects the author’s continuing interest in the supports of orthodox Christianity and the Anglo-Saxon Church’s own successful defense against heterodox practices at the Synod of Whitby.

Like Aidan and Cuthbert later, Gregory also offers an ideal of pastoral ascesis. Gregory’s own preference for monastic life even as pope becomes a forceful model for the English Church. The pastoral ministry of the Church is constructed from the foundations that Gregory establishes for his missionaries, and Gregory himself provides the model of the mixed life. Bede writes,

\[ \text{nos credere decet nihil eum monachicae perfectionis perdidisse occasione curae pastoralis, immo potiorem tunc sumsisse profectum de labore conversionis multorum quam de propriae quondam quiete conversationis habuerat; maxime quia et pontificali functus officio domum suam monasterium facere curauit [...].} \]

We need not believe [...] that he had lost any of his monastic perfection by reason of his pastoral cares. It would appear that he profited more by his efforts over the conversion of many than he had done from the quiet retirement of his earlier way of life. This was largely because, while fulfilling his pontifical duties, he turned his own house into a monastery [...]. (124, 125)

Bede also discusses the care of souls that defines Gregory’s ministry, whether it be his generosity to the poor or his efforts to convert the English. In these and all respects, Bede exalts Gregory as an exemplar and the fullest expression of the qualities of sanctity celebrated in the *HE*. The figure of Gregory provides the prototype and the inspiration for the values Bede attributes to Anglo-Saxon spirituality: the strong bond to Roman orthodoxy, the monastic principles of ecclesiastical organization, the
personal asceticism transformed to accommodate compelling obligations to this world, the energetic devotion to the ideals and practical necessities of pastoral service. While these ideals shape the portrayal of virtually every ecclesiastical saint in the HE, Gregory is the first and only one to successfully balance all things in himself.

Intriguingly, however, Bede builds his claims for Gregory's exemplarity without the conventional tool of hagiography: the miracle. This marks his clearest departure from the tradition of the Whitby Life. It would be surprising in the mass of new information Bede and his researchers uncovered about the saint if he had not run across some of those miracles incorporated in the Whitby Life. While it is possible that Bede was unaware of a miracle tradition associated with Gregory, his inclusion of the legend of Gregory and the slave market calls this conclusion into question. If Bede was familiar with this legend, then it is likely that he may have been aware of other miracles associated with Gregory in the Whitby Life. Nevertheless, this legend is the only narrative that the Whitby Life and Bede's account of Gregory's life have in common, and the placement of the legend outside of the chronological narrative (after the epitaph of the saint in an otherwise straightforward account moving from birth to death) suggests that Bede did not want it to be read as part of the definitive tradition he assembled.\(^{35}\) The fact that Bede does not attribute any miraculous attributes to the

\(^{35}\) The reason Bede offers for including this legend, included at beginning and end, also has a somewhat defensive quality attributable to the repetition. At the beginning he remarks, "Nec silentio praetereunda opinio, quae de beato Gregorio traditione maiorum ad nos usque perlata est\" ["We must not fail to relate the story about St Gregory which has come down to us as a tradition of our forefathers"] (132, 133). At the episode's end, he notes "Haec iuxta opinionem, quam ab antiquis accepimus, historiae nostrae ecclesiasticae inserere oportunum duximus\" ["I have thought it proper to insert this story into this Church History, based as it is on the tradition which we have received from our ancestors"] (134, 135). The stress that Bede places on the traditionality of the source suggests that he might not be altogether comfortable with its reliability - a conclusion not surprising given the fact that Bede's accounts of Gregory are overwhelmingly dominated by textual sources. Goffart suggests that the
encounter (it does not reveal Gregory’s grætia prophete as it does in the Whitby Life) similarly implies that the story was included merely for its cultural value and human interest, and not meant to support the weight of his claim for Gregory’s sanctity.

This is not to suggest that Bede is uncomfortable with the inclusion of miracles in the HE. Although much has been made of the lack of miraculous content in Lives of the Abbots, miracles provide Bede with much of the substance of his history and dominate Books IV and V in the HE. The locations of the miracles in the text, however, suggest one of two things: either that the miracle is validated by an established source text (the miracles of Germanus provide the example for this category as they are drawn from Germanus’ vita); or that the miracle is substantiated by a local tradition accessible through the memories and oral legends of the English.36 In the absence of an available Continental tradition of Gregorian hagiography, and in the all-but-impossible circumstance of deriving the events of Gregory’s Roman life from the local legends of the Anglo-Saxons, it makes sense that Bede was more comfortable basing his treatment on Gregory on the primary materials discovered in Nothhelm’s trip to Rome and on what was available in the Liber pontificalis and in Gregory’s own writings. It is also possible that Bede excised miracles from the Gregory tradition for deliberate reasons. Joel T. Rosenthal observes that miracles are rarely associated with scenes of conversion in the HE. He writes, “Conversion was for

placement of the Angli episode reflects its legendary status: “[It], deprecated as an opinio, was deployed as an epilogue to Gregory’s biography, a poetic summation of the pope’s apostolate rather than an authentic incident in his life.” Narrators of Barbarian History, 304.

36 See Joel T. Rosenthal, “Bede’s Use of Miracles in ‘The Ecclesiastical History,’” Traditio 31 (1975): 328-335. According to Rosenthal, the profusion of miracles in Books Four and Five of the Historia ecclesiastica reflects Bede’s desire to locate the miraculous in more recent times and, in the majority of these recent cases, with an identified source.

75
Bede a rational or a spiritual process, whereas miracles were wonders to be savored by those who had already joined the élite."\(^{37}\) In such a context, the lack of a miracle tradition attributed to Gregory fits a larger pattern in Bede’s text.

Regardless of the circumstances, this absence of miracles foregrounds the fact that Bede’s treatment of Gregory embodies a different set of concerns than the Whitby Life. While the Whitby author is primarily focused on establishing Gregory as a saint and a figure worthy of veneration, Bede is also interested in specifying the historical relationship between the life of Gregory and the foundation of the English Church. Both authors join in celebrating the exemplarity of the saint’s holy life, but Bede locates his presentation of Gregory more compellingly within the patterns of English history rather than the didactic interests of the holy life. Consequently, while Bede’s account does not offer the engaging and provocative insight the Whitby Life gives us into the invention of a hagiographic tradition, it explicitly models the strategies and techniques that Bede employs to join the substance of hagiography to the practice of history.

Bede’s celebration of Cuthbert in the Historia ecclesiastica suggests the powerful role that Gregory’s influence continues to play in the Historia’s valorization of an English saintly tradition. Both figures are cut from the same cloth, uniting a passion for monasticism and a devotion to pastoral care in their careers. In this sense Cuthbert continues the pattern epitomized in Gregory, fusing a commitment to personal asceticism with a missionary impulse. The obvious parallels between the two men extend beyond

the literary, as Cuthbert's career was shaped not only by the cultural conditions of the England of his time, but by the ecclesiastical structures and values that had been introduced by the Gregorian mission. Cuthbert could model his life upon Gregory, just as Gregory sought to pursue the monastic example of Benedict. It is clear that Bede also saw a resonance between the two men's careers. Taken together, the Gregory and Cuthbert lives offer a beginning and an endpoint to the English conversion in the HE – as Alan Thacker observes, “Gregory thus opens and Cuthbert concludes the three central books of the Historia Ecclesiastica, which deal with what Bede regarded as the golden age of the English church.”

If Gregory is remembered as the apostle to the English, Cuthbert becomes a patron saint, a unifying figure to a nation joined in its embrace of the Christian faith. His career marks the end of what Bede sees as the vital fusion of monastic and episcopal interests that distinguished the foundations of the English church.

The HE is only one of four eighth-century Northumbrian texts that narrate the events of Cuthbert's career. These other works make it possible to address Bede’s treatment of Cuthbert in the HE in the context of a textual tradition. This tradition is

---


39 Wallace-Hadrill discusses the ecclesiastical and political value of Cuthbert's role as patron saint, writing “He brings together not merely Lindisfarne and Rome in his career but Bernicia and Deira in his cult.” “Bede and Plummer,” 380. A brief discussion of the political implications of the veneration of the Bernician saint Cuthbert can be found also in David W. Rollason's “Hagiography and Politics in Early Northumbria,” 106-107. Cuthbert later achieves a truly national profile in the ninth and tenth centuries as his cult is venerated by the kings of Wessex as well as his home community of Northumbria. The Historia de Sancto Cuthberto (c. 946) offers evidence of this later interest in the saint. For a discussion of the tenth-century worship of Cuthbert, see David Rollason, “St Cuthbert and Wessex: The Evidence of Cambridge. Corpus Christi College MS 183” in St Cuthbert, His Cult and Community to AD 1200, eds. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989; reprint 1995), 413-424.
dominated by the work of Bede himself, who first wrote a poetic Life of Cuthbert (the *Vita sancti Cuthberti metrica auctore Beda*, conventionally abbreviated *VCM*) between 705 and 716,\(^{40}\) and then returned to expand this material in a prose Life (the *Vita sancti Cuthberti prosaica auctore Beda*, *VCP*) thought to be written in 721 (roughly ten years before the *HE*). These texts in turn draw from earlier material presented in an anonymous prose life, the *Vita sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo* (*VCA*), composed between the years 699 and 705.\(^{41}\) Bede certainly knew and used the text of the *VCA* because he acknowledges it as a source in the preface of the *HE*. He writes, “quae de sanctissimo patre et antistite Cudbercto uel in hoc uolumine uel in libello gestorum ipsius conscripsi, partim ex eis quae de illo prius a fratribus ecclesiae Lindisfarnensis scripta repperi adsumsi, simpliciter fidem historiae quam legebam / accommodans” [“what I have written about the most holy father Bishop Cuthbert, either in this volume or in his biography, I took partly from what I had previously found written about him by the brethren of the church at Lindisfarne, accepting the story I read in simple faith”] (6, 7). The saint who appears in the *HE* is shaped first by this anonymous text, and then most influentially by the prose life that Bede later reworks. The relationship of these texts reveals Bede’s interest in commemorating Cuthbert’s career, and in identifying him with the narrative of sanctified history set forth in the *HE*.

The anonymous monk of Lindisfarne who first set down the life of Cuthbert less than twenty years after the saint’s death in 687 sought to establish this English

---

\(^{40}\) Michael Lapidge, “Bede’s Metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti*,” in *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and Community*, 79.

\(^{41}\) General information on the dating and composition of the manuscripts is drawn from Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of St Cuthbert*, 11-16.
monk and bishop in the ascetic pattern of saintly life that dominates early works of hagiography. In an organization that reflects lives of Martin and Benedict, four books structure the saint’s miraculous actions within the framework of the saint’s career. The priority in this vita lies less with interior expressions of spirituality than with exterior ones – the content of the life is dominated by miracles (a number of which suggest echoes of saints such as Martin, Benedict and Columba), suggesting that the signs of Cuthbert’s sanctity can be traced in the accumulation of wonders that distinguish his career.

The contents of the anonymous life of Cuthbert reveal an author working adeptly within the patterns that underwrite the literary traditions of hagiography. While this life is one of the earliest to be written in Anglo-Saxon England, it nevertheless draws from an established tradition to construct the career of the Northumbrian bishop and hermit. This pattern had been powerfully set forth by early ascetic vitae like Athanasius’ Antony and Sulpicius Severus’ Martin of Tours, and its values had influenced the institutions of Irish Christianity, in turn an important influence on the Northumbrian ecclesiastical climate. The anonymous author created his portrait of Cuthbert in the reflection of these great saints, finding in their vitae the words that would introduce the English to the man of God from their own past.

42 Dominic Mamer, St Cuthbert: His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 12; also Alan Thacker, “Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St Cuthbert,” in St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community, 111.
Thus the prologue and the preface of the VCA (with the exception of a few
proper names and transitional expressions) are taken in their entirety from the Life of
St. Antony and Life of St. Martin. Lengthy interpolations of text from the Life of St.
Antony occur when the author describes Cuthbert’s entry into the monastic life at the
beginning of Book II, and his solitary life on Farne Island at the end of Book III. In
this way the interpolations translate the circumstances of the saint’s career from the
prior example of the desert hermit. Not surprisingly, there is no reference to Antony
in Book IV, devoted to Cuthbert’s appointment as bishop. Rather Martin continues
the pattern by providing the words used to describe Cuthbert’s episcopal career.
Cuthbert’s humilitas in corde [humility in heart], his uilitas in uestitu [poverty of
dress], and the way in which “ita plenus auctoritatis et gratiae, implebat episcopi
dignitatem, non tamen ut propositum monachi, et anchoritae uirtutem desereret”
[being full of authority and grace, he maintained the dignity of a bishop without
abandoning the ideal of the monk or the virtue of the hermit] (111, 112) are drawn
from Sulpicius Severus’ description of the bishop in the Life of St. Martin.

The influence of texts like the Life of St. Antony and the Life of St. Martin upon
the VCA can be overstated – despite the obvious parallels between Cuthbert and these

---

44 Colgrave, Two Lives of St Cuthbert, 60-64. Colgrave’s editorial practice recognizes interpolations in
the text by italicization and marginal notation. See also Alan Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” in
Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill,
eds. Patrick Wormald with Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 136-
37.
45 All quotations and translations from the VCA are drawn from Colgrave’s Two Lives of St. Cuthbert.
Page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.
46 “Idem enim constantissime perseverabat qui prius fuerat. Eadem in corde humilitas, eadem in uestitu
eius uilitas erat: atque ita, plenus auctoritatis et gratiae, implebat episcopi dignitatem, ut non tamen
propositum monachi uirtutem desereret.” Sulpicius Severus, Vie de Saint Martin vol. I, ed. and
trans. Jacques Fontaine, Sources Chrétienes, ed. C. Mondesert, no. 133, Série des Textes Monastiques
saints (Martin in particular), literary references to these works are rare, and Antony
and Martin as individuals and saints are never mentioned in the text (though Antony
will later be mentioned by Bede in the VCP). As Stancliffe notes, "the anonymous
enunciates the general characteristics of Cuthbert’s life as a monk, hermit, or bishop in
specific chapters which consist largely of quotations from other works – and then
appears to leave these general principles on one side while he gets on with the next
batch of miracle stories." 47 Cuthbert is more frequently developed through Biblical
allusion, an approach that reflects the hagiographic interest in finding Biblical
precedent and the figure of the imitatio Christi in the saint. 48 However, despite their
brevity, the interpolations from the Life of St. Antony and the Life of St. Martin
acknowledge the influence of a hagiographic tradition highly influential in the
construction of English, and particularly Northumbrian, sanctity. The examples of
Antony and Martin construct Cuthbert alternately as ideal hermit and ideal bishop.

The brevity of these and other references to saintly tradition however also
underscores the fact that that the anonymous author is not interested in creating an
abstract exemplar, a personification of saintly values in a way that the Whitby Gregory
becomes. Rather, this Lindisfarne monk is particularly committed to creating a
historically-rooted and culturally-immediate figure. In description and detail the
anonymous author composes the most localized version of the Cuthbert life. Bede’s
later practice in the VCP and the HE of identifying the sources that provided him with

47 Stancliffe, "Cuthbert, Pastor and Solitary," 27.
48 An exploration of the significance of specific Biblical references in the VCA and VCP is provided by
Benedicta Ward’s "The Spirituality of St Cuthbert" in St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community, 65-76.
his information has an enthusiastic predecessor in the author of the *VCA*. The anonymous author attributes to witnesses knowledge of many of the events in Cuthbert’s career, events that would have been in the memories of men still living. The anonymous author acquires his knowledge of Cuthbert’s youth both through the words of the saint himself passed down through others, and through the saint’s companions such as the priest Tydi of Melrose (“adhuc vivens” [“still alive”] (84, 85)), a source for many of Cuthbert’s monastic and episcopal miracles. The author’s statements suggest a living transmission of the Cuthbert legend that can be traced through the monasteries of Northumbria. The author offers himself as a witness to the posthumous miracles that occur at the saint’s tomb, writing “multa mirabilia cotidie in praesentia nostra Domino prestante aguntur” [“many miracles are wrought daily in our midst by the power of the Lord”] (134, 135) and remarking upon one miracle that occurred “nuper” [“lately”] (134, 35), and another “quod in praesenti anno factum est” [“which happened only this year”] (136-137). The author’s efforts to validate the contents of his work through the authority of named local figures emphasizes the saint’s close connection with the Lindisfarne community, and Cuthbert’s life as continuous with the events of the present day.

The anonymous life of Cuthbert further stresses the saint’s identification with the kingdom and the people of Northumbria. While Cuthbert’s career is characterized

---

50 Stancliffe, “Cuthbert, Pastor and Solitary,” 27.
51 “Primum quidem ponimus quod in prima aetate accidisse relatu multorum didicimus, ex quibus est sanctae memoriae episcopus Tumma, qui spiritalem Dei electionem predestinatam a sancto Cuθberhto audiens didicit, et presbiter nostrae ecclesiae Elias” [“First we record an incident of his early youth, known to us through the reports of many, among whom are Bishop Tumma of holy memory, who learnt from St Cuthbert’s own lips that God’s choice of him to a spiritual office had been predetermined, and Elias also, a priest of our church”] (64, 65).

82
by miracle stories, these miracle stories play a particular role in moving the saint through space and identifying him with locations in the Northumbrian landscape. The miraculous events in Cuthbert's life are strongly associated with places as well as circumstances. The VCA in particular goes to great lengths to stress the locations identified with occasions: he has a vision of Aidan's soul on the banks of the Leader; his horse miraculously discovers bread and meat in a house's roof in Chester-le-Street along the Wear; he is visited by an angel in the monastery of Ripon; he is ministered by otters at Melrose; he and his men feed on dolphin meat in the region of the Niduari. The vita inscribes the saint's life upon a map of the region. The topographical interest of the author of the VCA is particularly interesting in the context of Bede's later treatment of the material in VCP, in which he strips the Cuthbert legend of much of its geographical specificity. Thus this earliest life of Cuthbert asserts the local roots of this saint, identifying through place and tradition his relationship with Lindisfarne, and with the territories of the saint's life and ministry.

This vivid sense of geography also underscores the saint's pastoral mission. The anonymous author describes Cuthbert, at the time a prior of Melrose, as "inter montana docens rusticanos et baptizabat eos" ["teaching the country people among the mountains and baptizing them"] (84, 85), and offers a similar image later when Cuthbert as bishop delays his journey to Carlisle to minister to his congregation:

"Namque congregato populo de montanis, manum ponens super capita singulorum, liniens uctione consecrata benedixerat uerbum Dei predicans, manserat ibi duos dies" ["For when the people had gathered together from the mountains, he placed his hand

52 Ironically, Cuthbert's body will undergo a similarly circuitous route in the time of Viking invasion before it finds a home first at Chester-le-Street, and finally at Durham.
on the head of each of them, and anointing them with consecrated oil he blessed them, and remained there two days preaching the word of God.”] (116, 117). Cuthbert’s efforts to bring the sacraments to the common people who live in remote territories offers a sense of the saint’s dedication. The mountains offer a vivid illustration of the saint’s devotion to pastoral care, just as the sea will later be identified with the perfection of the hermit.

Cuthbert is also located within the social world of Northumbria. Lay men and women such as Kenswith (II.vi), Hildmer (II.viii), Hemma (IV.iii), and Sibba (IV.vii) merit Cuthbert’s miraculous intercession, and their stories serve to define the saint in part through his association with men and women once living and still remembered. Early events in Cuthbert’s life also orient the saint within the social institutions of the culture. Stancliffe conjectures from glimpses of a youth spent in fosterage and an adolescence spent in military pursuits that Cuthbert came from a family of some social stature, “lesser nobility or [...] perhaps well-to-do members of the freeman class.” Unlike St. Guthlac, a Mercian contemporary of the saint whose social position and military exploits are explored in detail, these secular aspects of Cuthbert’s early life allusively presented are tangential to the narrative. Royal figures are also a shaping presence in the narrative, represented in the intersection of the monastic and political

---

53 These lines describe confirmation, a sacrament that was associated in the early Middle Ages with baptism, but could be received only at the hands of a bishop or bishop’s auxiliary. For further information on the practice of confirmation, see Joseph H. Lynch, The Medieval Church: A Brief History (London: Longman, 1992; reprint 1993), 278-280.


55 In the case of his military service, for example, the author employs the familiar if frustrating hagiographic topos of mentioning it only to say he will not be mentioning it: “Omitto namque quomodo in castris contra hostem cum exercitu sedens, ibique habente stipendio paruo, tamen omne spatium habundanter uiuens diuinae auctus est” [“I omit, therefore, how when dwelling in camp with the army, in the face of the enemy, and having only meagre rations, he yet lived abundantly all the time and was strengthened by divine aid”] (72, 73).
worlds that is characteristic of seventh- and eighth-century Northumbria. Cuthbert
has links to the ruling family of the time – King Ecgfrith is instrumental in his
appointment as bishop (IV.i), and the saint is described as visiting the queen in
Carlisle (IV.viii). Cuthbert also has a close relationship with the king’s sister
Ælfflaed, abbess of Whitby. Cuthbert’s prophetic visions of the king’s death and the
succession of his exiled brother Aldfrith also suggests a connection between the saint
and the political events of his time. While the saint’s miraculous foreknowledge is an
act of spiritual insight rather than intervention (in this way contrasting with the more
direct involvement of a figure like St. Guthlac, a point to be discussed in the following
chapter), the Cuthbert prophecy is not without political consequence as it offers a
saintly warrant for the succession of Aldfrith (“qui nunc regnat pacifice” [“who now
reigns peacefully”] (104-105), notes the author) while effectively glossing over the
circumstances of his exile on Iona.

This earliest life of Cuthbert illustrates the themes that shape the distinctive
color of Northumbrian, and indeed Anglo-Saxon, sainthood. Sanctity in this
Christian society is identified with the institutions of the faith, particularly the
monastic institutions that play a preeminent role in Northumbrian Christianity. The
fusion of pastoral and solitary elements in Cuthbert’s career reflects contemporary and
local structures of ecclesiastical organization that locate bishops within monastic

\(^{56}\) J. Campbell, “Elements in the Background to the Life of St Cuthbert and his Early Cult,” in \textit{St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community}, 3-19.

\(^{57}\) “Postquam igitur ab Ecfrido rege et episcopis Saxorum omnique senatu deposcenti, ad episcopatum nostrae ecclesiae Lindisfarnensium electus est” [“So afterwards he was elected to the bishopric of our church at Lindisfarne at the request of King Ecfrith and the bishops of the Saxons and all the council”] (110, 111).

\(^{58}\) Campbell attributes Aldfrith’s exile to “fear of his half-brother Ecfrith, who would have killed him if he could have caught him.” “Elements in the Background to the Life of St Cuthbert and his Early Cult,” 18.
communities, even as the saint conforms to the more general expression of the holy life modeled by Martin of Tours. Additionally, the saint is also identified through his relationship with secular authority, and particularly royal authority. While again this is a common attribute of sanctity, it acquires added significance in Anglo-Saxon culture because the bonds linking monasticism to royalty are particularly close (through royal funding and royal retreat), and because royal figures themselves are disproportionately venerated as saints.¹⁹

Most importantly, however, the anonymous author of the *VCA* constructs the Northumbrian saint within the context of local history. The anonymous author employs criteria familiar to modern scholars in the shaping of this life; sources are identified and acknowledged, and the people and geography of the *VCA* provide a structure for locating the saint in time and place. Even the miraculous aspects of the *vita* serve an important purpose not only in constructing the saint in terms of the traditional patterns of sanctity associated with the confessor, but also by offering a local confirmation of this tradition. Miracles in this legend become more immediate, and the past itself becomes more tangible as it is associated with the places and people of the Northumbrian Christian faith. When Bede turns his attention to Cuthbert, he inherits this historiographical approach along with the contents of the *VCA*. The sense of historical method that modern scholars find admirable in Bede has its roots in this local form of hagiography, and the anonymous author offers an early example of the tradition that culminates in the *HE*.

Bede demonstrates a particular interest in Cuthbert, devoting two compositions to the saint's memory and preserving a place of honor for him in the HE. He owes a substantial debt to the author of the VCA for his subject matter. Because Bede so thoroughly incorporates the material of the VCA (while assiduously avoiding verbal parallels\textsuperscript{60}), his narrative is largely structured by its contents. Where there is such a clear and acknowledged relationship between the two texts, it is easy to see where Bede's departures from the VCA offer evidence for not only different authorial perspectives but different thematic interests in the presentation of the saintly life.

While Bede's VCP expands upon the contents of the VCA dramatically, the VCA nevertheless survives as a core narrative. There is no event or miracle found in the VCA that is not included in the VCP,\textsuperscript{61} suggesting that while Bede felt free to add, he was unwilling to remove material validated by the earlier text, "quod compertum et probatum sit" ["what has been received on good authority and tested"] (VCA, 62, 63). Bede does demonstrate a practice of eliminating the transitional material between chapters in the VCA, material that is either composed of abstract discussions of Cuthbert's sanctity or accumulations of miracles that the anonymous author claims are too numerous to mention. Bede also eliminates the interpolations of Antonian and Martinian description constructing the saint as ideal monk and bishop, references that the author of the VCA uses to encapsulate major movements in the saint's career. This pattern of elimination in part can be seen to arise out of the contrast of organizational structures in the two works: Bede cuts out much of the material that introduces or

\textsuperscript{60} Colgrave, Two Lives of St Cuthbert, 15.
\textsuperscript{61} Colgrave helpfully cross-references the events between the two texts. Moreover, a chart comparing the contents of a number of Cuthbert texts can be found in B. A. Blokhuis, "Bede and Ælfric: The Sources of the Homily on St. Cuthbert," in Beda Venerabilis, 133-135.
concludes the four books of the VCA because he deserts the four-book structure in favor of a chapter-based chronological narrative. Where one chapter flows into the next, the necessity of introductions and conclusions falls away.

Bede’s organization reveals another literary departure from his source: his effort to highlight relationships between events of the saint’s life and establish patterns of cause and effect. He interprets the episodes of Cuthbert’s life, identifying their significance to the saint’s career and reputation, and explicating the patterns of sanctity expressed through them. A frequently cited example of this practice occurs in Chapter IV when Bede identifies the vision of Aidan’s soul taken into heaven with Cuthbert’s conversion to monastic life. “Cumpunctus est multum hoc uisu Deo dilectus adolescens, ad subeundum gratiam spiritualis exercitii, ac promerendae inter magnificos uiros uitae felicitatisque perennis” [“The youth beloved of God was strongly moved by this vision to subject himself to the grace of spiritual discipline and of earning everlasting life and happiness amid God’s mighty men”] (166, 167). Bede creates a deeper interpretive context for the events of Cuthbert’s life, thus giving the life an internal coherence and shaping it to be a teaching text.

The interpretive framework of the text also influences Bede’s presentation of the saint himself. While the anonymous author presents the pastoral characteristics of the saint, Bede valorizes the saint as teacher and preacher to a much greater extent.

---


This focus is evident even from the very beginning of the life, appearing as early as the first episode from Cuthbert’s youth in which he is accosted by a younger boy who charges him with betraying the dignity of his future position by participating in frivolous play. Where the VCA presents the boy as saying “hec tibi et tuo gradui contraria nature propter agilitatem non conueniunt” [“these unnatural tricks done to show off your agility are not befitting to you or your high office”] (64, 65), in the VCP the boy continues “Ludere te inter paruulos non decet, quem Dominus etiam maioribus natu magistrum uirtutis consecrauit” [“It is not fitting for you to play among children when the Lord has consecrated you to be a teacher of virtue even to your elders”] (158, 159). This early emphasis on Cuthbert’s role as a teacher is further emphasized in other youthful miracles in which Cuthbert engages in acts of public preaching before turning to religious life. One episode that Bede adds to the early events of Cuthbert’s life (and perhaps significantly, the only new miracle that he adds to the narrative adapted from the VCA’s Book I) places the young man among a community of people jeering at a group of monks being swept out to sea by a sudden windstorm. The predicament of the monks calls into question the efficacy of Christian belief, and Cuthbert responds to the situation by addressing the people:

Prohibuit probra deridentium Cuthbertus, Quid agitis inquiens fratres, maledicentes his quos in loetum iam trahi uidetis? Nonne melius esset et humanius Dominum pro eorum deprecari salute, quam de illorum gaudere periculis? At illi rustico et animo et ore stomachantes aduersus eum, Nullus inquiuant hominum pro eis roget, nullius eorum misereatur Deus, quo et ueteres culturas hominibus tulere, et nouas qualiter obseruare debeant nemo nouit.

[Cuthbert stopped the insults of the blasphemers, saying: “Brethren, what are you doing, cursing those whom you see being carried away even now to destruction? Would it not be better and more kindly to
pray to the Lord for their safety rather than to rejoice over their dangers?” But they fumed against him with boorish minds and boorish words and said: “Let no man pray for them, and may God have no mercy on any one of them, for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows.”] (162-165)

This episode establishes a common pattern in the Cuthbert life, words fulfilled by miraculous deeds. Many of Cuthbert’s miracles are associated with scenes of preaching, in a sense creating teachable moments as they provide dramatic illustration of the truth of his words. In this case, Cuthbert’s prayers miraculously bring the rafts of the monks to land, and the people turn back again to the Christian faith.

Significantly, even as this episode highlights the young man’s natural affinity for instructing the people, it simultaneously underscores pastoral care as an area of weakness in the English Church. The complaint of the people on the shore is specific – it is not that they prefer to worship the old gods, but rather that they have not been taught how to worship the new. As such, this episode offers a revealing illustration of the reform agenda frequently expressed obliquely in Bede’s writing and explicitly in his Letter to Egbert. In this Bede continues a practice that Alan Thacker identifies in his biblical commentaries: “he shows a particular preoccupation with the teachers and preachers who were to act as the successors of the prophets and apostles and to

\[VCP\] ch. IX also chronicles the pagan backsliding of local populations in times of crisis: “Nam et multi fidem quam habebant, iniquis profanabant operibus, et aliqui etiam tempore mortalitatis neglecto fidei quo imbuti erant sacramento, ad erratica idolatriae medicamina concurrebant, / quasi missam a Deo conditore plagam per incantationes uel alligaturas, uel alia quaelibet demoniacae artis archana cohiberet ualent” [For many of them profaned the faith they held by wicked deeds, and some of them also at the time of the plague, forgetting the sacred mystery of the faith into which they had been initiated, took to the delusive cures of idolatry, as though by incantations or amulets or any other mysteries of devilish art, they could ward off a blow sent by God the creator”] (184, 185).

\[90\] Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
guide God’s chosen people along the way of salvation." Through his writing career Bede idealizes men and communities that combine a commitment to teaching with the values of asceticism. In the Cuthbert of the VCA Bede finds a powerful expression of these ideals, an engaging portrait of a saint that combines the asceticism of an Antony with the pastoral energy of a Martin. However he also supplements the contents of the VCA to further stress the role the saint plays as teacher, including sermons not in the VCA. In the vision of Aidan’s soul, for example, Bede adds a short exhortation preached by Cuthbert to the shepherds who accompanied him. A more dramatic sermon occurs later at the death of Ecgfrith when the saint offers a lengthy discourse on preparing for times of trouble (words that his monastic audience misinterprets as referring to the plague). The construction of saint as ideal teacher, while present in both versions of Cuthbert’s life, is particularly central to Bede’s conception of Cuthbert, as it moves the saint beyond the model of the hermit and the wonderworker to associate him with the teacher of the English, Gregory.

While Bede celebrates the ideals of pastoral care that Cuthbert personifies, he is also driven to identify these ideals not only with the personal sanctity of the saint but with the institutional structures of Northumbrian monasticism. He works to associate the saint with the values and patterns of institutional history. This practice is immediately evident in the circumstances of Cuthbert’s early monastic career. While the saint travels and ministers to the people during his time at Melrose, there is no particular explanation or motivation given to his actions in the VCA. The first

66 See also Abraham, “Bede’s Life of Cuthbert,” 28.
reference to Cuthbert’s pastoral career in this work is the rather unadorned statement in II.iv, “Alia die proficiscebat iuxta fluuium Tesgeta tendens in meridiem inter montana docens rusticanos et baptizabat eos” [“On a certain day, he was going along the river Teviot and making his way southward, teaching the country people among the mountains and baptizing them”] (84, 85). In the VCP, however, Cuthbert’s commitment to pastoral care is identified with a particular role model (Boisil), and a particular position in the monastic hierarchy (prior).

Post obitum uero dilecti Deo sacerdotis Boisili memoratum praepositi officium Cuthbertus suscepit, et per aliquot annos spirituali ut sanctum decebat exercens industria, non solum ipsi monasterio regularis uitaec monita, simul et exemplum praeferebat, sed et uulgus circumpositum longe lateque a uita stultae consuetudinis, ad coelstium gaudiorum convertere curabat amorem.

[“So after the death of Boisil the priest beloved of God, Cuthbert undertook the office of prior which we have mentioned before, and, for a number of years, he was busy with spiritual works, as befitted a holy man; and not only did he give the monastery itself counsels concerning life under the rule and an example of it, but he sought moreover to convert the neighbouring people far and wide from a life of foolish habits to a love of heavenly joys.”] (184, 185)

The introduction of Boisil is one of the most dramatic departures from Bede’s source. A priest and monk at Melrose, Boisil is presented as a saint in his own right, the first to welcome Cuthbert into monastic life (ch. VI), and to envision his later episcopal career (ch. VIII). The two men have an intimate relationship; on his deathbed Boisil leads his student through the Gospel of John before finally succumbing to the plague. As Cuthbert’s relationship with his mentor makes clear, the passion for pastoral care and ascetic retreat that the saint personifies are not unique to him, but rather express the ideals of his monastic community.

92
Bede further stresses the institutional basis for these qualities when he addresses Cuthbert’s move to take on the position of prior at Lindisfarne. As prior, Bede makes clear, not only did Cuthbert bear the responsibility of teaching the laity, he also faced the unenviable task of educating the monks and enforcing monastic practice in the monastery. Cuthbert’s arrival at Lindisfarne is accompanied by a new imposition of a Rule. This was not a change easily accepted by everyone; as Bede explains, “Erant autem quidam in monasterio fratres, qui priscae suae consuetudini quam regulari mallent obtemperare custodiae” [“Now there were certain brethren in the monastery who preferred to conform to their older usage rather than to the monastic rule”] (210, 211). Cuthbert’s success in converting these men from their previous way of life presents the saint as instrumental in the reform of monastic practice at Lindisfarne.

In this same chapter Bede explains the unique ecclesiastical organization of the Lindisfarne community:

Aidanus quippe qui primus eiusdem loci episcopus fuit monachus erat, et monachicam cum suis omnibus uitam semper agere solebat. Unde ab illo omnes loci ipsius antstites usque Hodie sic episcopale exercent officium, ut regente monasterium abbate, quem ipsi cum consilio fratrum elegerint, omnes presbiteri, diacones, cantores, lectores, caeterique gradus ecclesiastici, monachicam per omnia cum ipso episcopo regulam servent. Quam vivendi normam multum se diligere probauit beatus papa Gregorius, cum sciscitanti per literas Augustino quem primum genti Anglorum episcopum miserat, qualiter episcopi cum suis clericis conversari debeant [...].

67 What the characteristics of this Rule were is unclear; however Goffart convincingly argues that this Rule was not the Benedictine Rule, and indeed that Bede went out of his way to avoid endorsing the Benedictine Rule. The Narrators of Barbarian History, 314-315.

68 This point is also discussed in Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” 140-141. While Thacker does not assert that the Rule embraced by Bede is explicitly Benedictine, he nevertheless argues that Bede is being constructed as “a Northumbrian Benedict” (141).
Aidan, who was the first bishop of this place, was a monk and always lived according to monastic rule together with all his followers. Hence all the bishops of that place up to the present time exercise their episcopal functions in such a way that the abbot, whom they themselves have chosen by the advice of the brethren, rules the monastery; and all the priests, deacons, singers and readers, and the other ecclesiastical grades, together with the bishop himself, keep the monastic rule in all things. The blessed Pope Gregory showed that he greatly approved of this way of life when Augustine, the first bishop he had sent to the English, asked him in his letters how bishops ought to live with their clergy [...]. (208, 209)

This explanation (which continues from this point to incorporate material from the Libellus responsionum) reveals that this was not common practice in Northumbria, yet that Bede found it admirable. The association of this practice with both Aidan and Gregory, men who play a prominent role in the sense of history and sanctity that underwrites the HE, emphasizes the common ground between the Irish and Roman traditions that intersect in the history and values of the Lindisfarne community. As Thacker writes in the context of the HE, “The Ionian Irish were seen as the evangelists who brought the Gregorian plan to fulfillment [...].”⁶⁹ That Cuthbert will later step into this role reinforces his position as the intermediary between the two traditions, but also creates a powerful association with the founding saints of England’s past who exemplify the fusion of pastoral and ascetic values (an association more clearly developed in the HE).

Consequently it is clear that Cuthbert is located in the context of institutional concerns to a much greater extent in the VCP than in the VCA. Even during the aspect of Cuthbert’s life that takes him out of the monastery, his retreat to Farne Island, the saint pays tribute to the monastic way of life. As he says modestly in the VCP, “Sed

"But," said he, "the life of the monks ought rightly to be admired, for they are in all things subject to the commands of the abbot’"

In the four lengthy chapters devoted to the saint’s death (a dramatic expansion of the two sentences it receives in the VCA), Cuthbert turns his attention to the interests and future of Lindisfarne and offers a final exhortation on keeping the peace within monastic life. This homily on peace, however, is disrupted by the saint’s unexpected excoriation of the Irish position in the Easter controversy: “Cum illis autem qui ab unitate catholicae pacis uel pascha non suo tempore celbrando, uel peruerse uiuendo aberrant, uobis sit nulla communio” [“But have no communion with those who depart from the unity of the catholic peace, either in not celebrating Easter at the proper time or in evil living”] (282, 284, 285).

This attack on Irish practice is all the more remarkable because while this issue is so central to the HE, it is never mentioned elsewhere in the VCP and, as David Rollason observes, “the vehemence of this speech is unlikely to reflect [Cuthbert’s] real views.” However, the identification of this sentiment with Cuthbert’s final words underscores the extent to which this treatment of the saint aligns him with Roman orthodoxy.

In this way the saintly career of Cuthbert is closely associated with the values and institutions of Northumbrian monasticism. The introduction of Boisil at Melrose connects Cuthbert to a preexisting practice of holy life; as Lenore Abraham writes, “the figure of Boisil underlines the continuity of the monastic tradition.” So too does the vision of Aidan’s soul, a saint that only the VCP acknowledges as the founder of

---

Lindisfarne. Bede also devotes substantial space to those who follow in Cuthbert’s footsteps, suggesting that Cuthbert is only the beginning of an ongoing tradition of holiness in that community. Eadberht, the bishop who eventually succeeds Cuthbert and who is instrumental in the saint’s translation, is himself buried in Cuthbert’s tomb and works wonders after his death.\textsuperscript{72} Aethilwald, and then Felgild, retreat to the hermitage on Farne Island, and both become holy men. The reputation these two men have for sanctity is such that when a miracle of healing is performed with a calfskin used to protect the structure from drafts, Bede is not sure who should receive credit for performing the miracle: “Quod tamen utrum meritis eiusdemi beati patris Cuthberti, an successoris eius Ediwaldi uiri aeque Deo dediti ascribendum sit, internus arbiter nouerit. Neque aliqua ratio uetat utriusque merito factum credi, comitante etiam fide reuerentissimi patris Felgildi, per quem et in quo miraculum ipsum quod refero sanationis completum est” [“But whether this ought to be ascribed to the merits of the same blessed father Cuthbert or of his successor Aethilwald, a man equally devoted to God, He knows who judges the heart. Nor does any reason forbid us to believe that it was wrought by the merits of both, accompanied also by the faith of the most reverent father Felgild, through whom and in whom the miracle of healing, to which I refer, was wrought”] (300-303). By extending his narrative beyond the saint’s death to encompass these men, Bede creates a local tradition of sanctity. Cuthbert as an individual is a great saint, but he is also in a broader sense an exemplar of the values Bede identifies with the golden age of Northumbrian monasticism. Consequently, it is not surprising that Bede works to identify Cuthbert so closely with the institutions of

\textsuperscript{72} The phrasing in the VCP is very ambiguous, but in the HE Bede makes it clear that Eadberht joins Cuthbert in working miracles and wonders.
monastic life, and surrounds the saint with holy men who establish and continue the practices associated with this saint’s life.

By focusing on Bede’s departures from his source, this exploration of the \textit{VCP} has glossed over much that is similar in these two lives. Both works preserve the privileged relationship between the saint and royal power. Both works establish Cuthbert’s sanctity through miracles; in fact, miracle legends make up a substantial part of the new material that Bede adds to the \textit{VCA}. Both construct their saint in a local context. If this text can be seen as moving towards Bede’s later writings, it approaches much more closely the \textit{Lives of the Abbots} with its local focus and commemorative interest in monastic history than it does the \textit{HE}. However, when Bede brings Cuthbert into the framework of the \textit{HE}, he introduces the saint into a much broader sense of the past and a much wider conception of the saintly life. Inevitably the saint’s prominence decreases, but he is positioned within a discourse of national instead of institutional sanctity, and as such becomes emblematic of a larger pattern of holy life.

Bede first introduces Cuthbert briefly in the \textit{HE} when he explains in the introduction how he obtained material about the saint’s life, remarking that he drew in part from the \textit{VCA}, and added to it what he was able to collect and verify through oral tradition. This early mention aside, however, references to Cuthbert are almost exclusively limited to the narrative of his life and saintly career that is presented in Book IV. While his contemporary Wilfrid’s career is scattered through three books of the \textit{HE}, a circumstance that reflects the varied spheres in which that saint participated (including serving as defender of Roman orthodoxy at the Synod of Whitby,
missionary to Sussex and Frisia, and appellant for the dominance of papal over royal prerogative in the Northumbrian Church), Cuthbert has only one role to play in the history of the English, the exemplary one of saintly monk and bishop. The highly circumscribed presentation of Cuthbert's career reaffirms his identity as a new Gregory, a holy man whose saintly vocation is expressed through the pairing of pastoral care with personal asceticism.

The saint enters the Historia through his relationship with Ecgfrith and the circumstances that surround Ecgfrith's death. Bede's first direct reference to Cuthbert in the text accompanies his description of Ecgfrith's ill-fated attack against the Picts, a defeat that Bede suggests was God's punishment for the king's previous merciless attack against the Irish a year earlier. Cuthbert is presented as among the many who try to talk the king out of this course of action: "Siquidem anno post hunc proximo idem rex, cum temere exercitum ad uastandam Pictorum prouinciam duxisset, multum prohibentibus amicis et maxime beatae memoriae Cudbercto, qui nuper fuerat ordinatus episcopus" ["'Indeed the very next year the king rashly took an army to ravage the kingdom of the Picts, against the urgent advice of his friends and particularly of Cuthbert, of blessed memory, who had recently been made bishop"] (428. 429). The king's rejection of their advice leads to the end of the Northumbrian dominance of England: "Nam et Picti terram possessionis suae quam tenuerunt Angli, et Scotti qui erant in Britannia, Brettonum quoque pars nonnulla libertatem receperunt; quam et hactenus habent per annos circiter XLVI" ["For the Picts recovered their own land which the English had formerly held, while the Irish who lived in Britain and some part of the British nation recovered their independence, which they have now
enjoyed for about forty-six years"[(428, 429). This somewhat inauspicious introduction places Cuthbert on the declining slope that leads to the present.

In the following chapter, Bede begins the narrative of Cuthbert’s life. The six chapters that Bede devotes to the saint’s career, death, and posthumous miracles occupy a significant place in the organization of his text as they close Book IV, the section of the HE that celebrates a golden age of ecclesiastical power. In Book IV the conversion of the English nation is all but complete, heterodoxy has been defeated, and monasteries and the episcopacy acquire social prominence as religious and political institutions. Much of Book IV is devoted to commemorating the founding of monasteries, the royal men and women who retreat into monastic life, the miraculous events associated with monasteries, and the relationships between bishops and kings. Cuthbert takes his place in this context, introduced at the time of his appointment as bishop by Ecgfrith in the year of the king’s death. In this way the saint is introduced through the intersection of royal and ecclesiastical interests, but the description of his life quickly turns its focus on the different stages of Cuthbert’s career, alternately prior, hermit and bishop.

Necessarily the HE requires a much more abbreviated account than those found in the VCA and VCP. Bede skillfully distills the forty-six chapters of the VCP into six in this work. Of these six, only three deal with the events of Cuthbert’s life. The first chapter summarizes Cuthbert’s entrance into monastic life and details his relationship with Boisil and his pastoral ministry, first as prior of Melrose, and then as prior of Lindisfarne. The second chapter addresses Cuthbert’s retreat to Farne Island, his life as a hermit, and his reluctant appointment as bishop. The third chapter

99

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
recapitulates the saint’s prophecy to Herbert that they will enter heaven together, and briefly describes his death. The three remaining chapters detail the posthumous miracles that occur at Cuthbert’s tomb, including the miraculous preservation of his body at its translation and two miracles of healing. Surprisingly, Bede introduces new material in this brief reworking of Cuthbert’s life. The *HE* account gives a little more insight into monastic politics, detailing the complicated circumstances of Cuthbert’s appointment as bishop of Lindisfarne,\(^\text{73}\) and noting that Wilfrid occupied the Lindisfarne episcopacy for a year before Eadberht stepped into the position. Additionally, both healing miracles included after the saint’s translation are new.

These new additions shed some light on how the context of the *HE* affected Bede’s treatment of the Cuthbert legend. The two miracles that he includes at the end of the life attract interest in part because the miraculous events of the saint’s life that make up so large a part of both the *VCA* and the *VCP* are all but absent in the *HE* version. While Bede describes the digging of the well and the out-of-season barley harvest that enable Cuthbert to be self-sufficient on Farne, his description of the events is vague enough to admit for the possibility of natural as well as divine agency. The only other miracle attributed to the saint during his lifetime in the *HE* is his miraculous foreknowledge of his death and the boon he grants Hereberht to accompany him in death to eternal life. Consequently it is clear that Cuthbert’s career as a wonder-worker in life is diminished in this version of the text. However, the addition of the two posthumous miracles suggests that this does not come about because of some

\(^{73}\) The complications arise from the fact that the open seat was at Hexham, not Lindisfarne, and consequently it was necessary for Eata to transfer to Hexham so that Cuthbert could move into his place at Lindisfarne.
newly-developed skepticism on Bede’s part. Instead, by including the two new miracles of healing that occur at Cuthbert’s tomb Bede stresses the saint’s ability to enter into present life. These miracles, Bede asserts, happened to men still living, as recently as three years earlier. In this context the miracle becomes a link to the time that the saint represents, eliminating the boundaries between the past and the present. As Lutterkort observes, these posthumous miracles “underline the lasting contribution Cuthbert made to the conversion of Northumbria and the living tradition of his sanctity, his living cult.” In this way the meaning of the miracle changes in the HE: while it still serves in a diminished fashion to emphasize the sanctity of Cuthbert in his own time, it more significantly works to bring the saint into an active relationship with recent time.

Moreover, the additions that Bede makes to the saint’s ecclesiastical career, including Cuthbert’s episcopal appointment and the fate of the Lindisfarne bishopric after his death, underscore the movement he began in the VCP to identify Cuthbert with the institutional history of the Lindisfarne monastery. This point is further supported by the fact that much of the material included in the abbreviated narrative of

---

74 Interestingly, it is the VCA, not the VCP, that similarly includes posthumous miracles that occur in the ‘our time’ of the author.
73 Karl Lutterkort, “Beda Hagiographicus,” 94.
76 This use of the miracle in the Cuthbert chapters is also broadly indicative of Bede’s use of miracles in the HE. Joel Rosenthal argues that Bede employs miracles from the recent past rather than the distant to demonstrate a continuing vitality in the Christian faith. “The miracles of more recent days were granted by divine providence in order to show that while the heroic days may have been over, there was still a need for Christian heroism. […] The faith that one imbibed from Christian parents must be shown as no whit inferior than that newly acquired by recent converts.” “Bede’s Use of Miracles in ‘The Ecclesiastical History,’” 330.
the *HE* is material that Bede himself added in the *VCP*.\(^{77}\) Thus Boisil assumes a prominent role in this narrative, the description of the Lindisfarne ecclesiastical structure accompanies Cuthbert’s appointment as prior, and Eadberht joins his holy merits to Cuthbert when their shared tomb becomes a place of miraculous healing. Cuthbert’s life becomes a part of the ongoing narrative of England’s early monastic history. The people who are a part of his life occur in other places in the text as well – Boisil appears to Egbert, an English monk who lives in self-imposed exile in Ireland, in a dream vision, and the references to Aidan, Augustine and Gregory in the description of Lindisfarne’s organization in this case are not references to common knowledge (as in the *VCP*), but rather to the narratives of these men whose reputations and deeds are preserved in the *HE* itself. This new context gives a deeper resonance to the association that Bede seeks to make between Cuthbert and the shared way of life these men embody, between the English saint and the Irish and Roman men who paved the path before him.

Consequently, when Bede adapts the *VCP* to incorporate Cuthbert into the *HE*, he chooses material that identifies the saint with the preexisting patterns of sanctity that shape the history of the English Church. The career of the saint is exemplified through a series of associations that identify him with the themes that give the *HE* its unity. As Thacker writes, “He is the most perfect exponent of a pastoral ideal which Bede saw exemplified by such forerunners as Augustine, Aidan, Cedd and Chad, and

---

\(^{77}\) There is one significant exception to this observation, however – the description of Cuthbert's death is much closer to the brief account of the *VCA* than it is to the dramatically expanded version attributed to Herefrith in the *VCP*.  

102

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
such later figures as John of Beverley.”78 Unlike these other men, however, Cuthbert becomes synonymous with the idealized vision of the past that Bede promulgates in the HE. He becomes an emblem of that “retrospective golden age” that Walter Goffart aptly characterizes as “a stick with which to beat the present.”79 For this reason it is not surprising to see Ælfric include Cuthbert in the Catholic Homilies, as he embraces the vision of history that the HE constructs. In the late tenth century the veneration of Cuthbert offers a compelling example of efforts to reclaim and commemorate the history of the early English Church.

78 Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” 145.
79 Goffart, Narrators of Barbarian History, 254.
CHAPTER 3

The popularity of Gregory and Cuthbert illustrates how a particular vision of sanctity grew out of the ecclesiastical environment of Northumbria. The Guthlac tradition, on the other hand, offers a refracted perspective on the traditions that shape the literary and historical construction of Anglo-Saxon saints. Guthlac of Crowland was a Mercian hermit who died in 714 or 715. He belonged to the generation that followed the foundational monastic saints described in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (731), men and women like Cuthbert, Wilfrid, John of Beverly, and Æthelthryth. The events of his life were first set down in Felix's *Vita sancti Guthlaci*, written between 721-741, and then later in two Old English poems preserved in the Exeter Book.

The poems devoted to Guthlac are unique as they provide the only example of a native English saint commemorated in Old English heroic verse. Whether by chance or choice, the saintly heroes of Old English verse are decidedly remote – the apostle Andrew, the virgin martyr Juliana, the empress Elene, the Old Testament hero Judith, all figures of a distant time who recall the spreading faith’s roots in the Mediterranean region. With the exception of Elene (who was thought to be native to England, a point discussed in the next chapter) these holy figures bear no special bond to the Anglo-Saxons; assembled together they suggest a poetic interest in capturing and
reformulating foreign elements of a shared Christian past. Guthlac, however, is rooted in the native landscape of England's fens. He retreats into the wilderness and finds his inspiration in the example of the desert fathers. His own 'desert' – in reality a swamp – offers a cogent symbol of the geographically- and culturally-contingent transformation of the early Christian model of ascesis.

The surviving versions of the Guthlac legend, differing as they do in language, genre and scope, offer a vivid illustration of the narrative techniques and exemplary structures that shaped Anglo-Saxon attempts to establish and revisit a sanctified past. The contrast between the Latin and Old English versions of Guthlac demonstrate two well-traveled roads which arrive at the same end of memorializing and authorizing the events of England's Christian history. Both approaches are accompanied by developed traditions of exemplarity and historicity. The formal as well as cultural distinctions between the Latin prose vita and the Old English verse life impose different literary contexts on the shape and presentation of what is essentially shared hagiographic material.

This is not to suggest that these two forms of hagiography are mutually exclusive, and in fact all of the Old English poetic lives find their precursor in Latin (or, less commonly, Greek). Innovation in Old English poetry is more frequently expressed by organizing structures of theme, metaphor and allusion rather than by contributing to or altering the contents of the actual plot.¹ True to form, both Old

¹ In his early study of the Cynewulf poems Claes Schaar goes so far as to argue that all of Old English hagiography is fundamentally derivative of Latin sources, noting "the range of the poet's supposed originality narrows in proportion, as more versions of his legend get known. Only the Anglosaxonisms, in fact, are certain instances of the poet's independence of the Latin original." *Critical Studies in the Cynewulf Group*, Lund Studies in English, no. 17 (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1949), 12.
English Guthlac poems are based upon episodes also present in Felix’s Latin *vita*.

However the exact nature of the relationship between the prose and verse versions is a matter of dispute. In the case of *Guthlac B* there is consensus that Felix’s work served as a principle source. However, *Guthlac A* is more inconclusive. Jane Roberts explores a number of texts that may have influenced the work, including Gregory’s *Vitae patrum*, Old English and Latin versions of the *Visio Pauli*, and the *Seafarer* in addition to Felix’s *vita*, and concludes “In the face of the reiterated and unsuccessful attempts by many to prove or disprove literary indebtedness, it might be safer to categorise Felix’s *Vita sancti Guthlaci* as an analogue rather than a source for *Guthlac A*.“2 Roberts’ work suggests that *Guthlac A* should be read within a larger context of both Latin and Old English forms.

The transition of the Guthlac legend from Latin to Old English verse permits a unique opportunity to examine the divergences and the continuities expressed in these two types of insular hagiography. The fact that both the Latin *vita* and the vernacular life are native products of English Christianity suggests that contrasting elements are employed to strengthen local traditions of sanctity. On the one hand, Anglo-Saxon writers adapt local legend to the authoritative form of the Latin prose life, situating the saint within the exemplary structures of the universal church. On the other, the poetics of Old English heroic verse locate the saint within the oral forms of cultural history that define a community’s sense of itself and of its past. The movement between the two gives evidence for significant changes in audience and intent. Nevertheless there

is also a shared purpose, as all of the Guthlac texts work to bring the exemplary patterns of the past into a living relationship with the culture of a people at a present moment.

To trace the influence of Latin tradition on this English life, it is first necessary to explore the debts that Crowland’s hermit owes to his ascetic predecessors. Certainly the dominant pattern of exemplarity that shapes the *Vita sancti Guthlaci* is the memory of figures like Antony, Martin of Tours, and even the Northumbrian bishop Cuthbert. Within the text itself are allusions to works such as the *Vita Antonii*, Jerome’s *Vita Pauli*, Sulpicius Severus’ *Vita sancti Martini*, Gregory’s *Dialogues*, the *Vita Fursei* and Bede’s prose *Vita S. Cuthberti*.\(^3\) The examples of these saints not only guide the hagiographer’s pen, they also influence the saint’s actions. Guthlac finds his inspiration in the literary remains of this inherited tradition: “Cum enim priscorum monachorum solitariam vitam legebat, tum inluminato cordis gremio avida cupidine heremum quaerere fervebat” [“For when he read about the solitary life of monks of former days, then his heart was enlightened and burned with an eager desire to make his way to the desert”] (86, 87). Life comes to imitate an art devoted to the representation of a life, as saints model themselves on the holy figures contained within the pages of the past. Even Antony, the proto-hermit in desert hagiography and the founder of the ascetic movement, bases his retreat to the desert on the Biblical

---

\(^3\) Bertram Colgrave, *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1956) *passim.* All quotations and translations of the *Vita sancti Guthlaci* will be drawn from this text.
prophet Elijah, recognizing "a servant of God ought to take as his model the way of life of the great Elijah and to use it as a mirror to organize his own life [...]".4

Because Guthlac is so clearly constructed by the example of other ascetics, it is helpful to realize the tradition that shaped this saint's life. The ascetic *vita* originally evolved from the *passio* of the martyr, a narrative which commemorated the tortures and deaths of Christians at the hands of Roman persecutors. When the persecutions ended with the acceptance in Rome of Christianity, the social isolation of the hermit and monk became a symbolic extension of the public sufferings of the martyr. The idea of 'martyrdom' was broadened to embrace the voluntary renunciation of the world that characterized the ascetic saint.5 The earliest desert lives (those of Antony, Paul, Hilarion and Malchus) were composed in the fourth century and were set in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine. These lives embraced ascetic solitude while illuminating the early forms of monastic community that gathered around such saints.

However, Christianity's increasing role as a social institution and its growing success as a missionary faith in Western Europe made certain adaptations necessary to the conventions of the desert. In particular, the heroes of hagiography grew to embody a fusion of ascetic principle with institutional responsibility, a combination reflective of the necessary work involved in introducing and stabilizing the organizations of the Christian faith in foreign (and frequently hostile) territories.

5 James Earl observes, "The content of hagiographic narratives, of course, changed with the growth of monasticism and the disappearance of martyrdom (in the strict sense) as the most compelling model for the Christian life. Even as the martyrology was becoming an important part of the liturgy, the Lives of the new ascetic movement captured the imagination of some of the most important writers of the period, and thus also the Christian community at large." "Typology and Iconographic Style in Early Medieval Hagiography," in *Typology and English Medieval Literature*, ed. Hugh T. Keenan, Georgia State Literary Studies, gen. ed. Victor A. Kramer, no. 7 (New York: AMS Press, 1992), 95.
Sulpicius Severus' late-fourth century *Life of St. Martin* marks the beginning of a pastoral tradition founded on the basis of ascetic practices. Despite Martin's episcopal appointment and a career famously spent working wonders and destroying shrines in the forests and villages of Gaul, the saint lives a life withdrawn from the community, dwelling austerely in the fellowship of his monks in an isolated setting possessing "eremi solitudinem" [the solitude of the desert]."6 Later holy figures like Gregory the Great and Cuthbert similarly merge their pastoral responsibilities with a monastic inner life.7 The shift in the ideals and responsibilities of ascetic sanctity were closely linked to the requirements of conversion and instruction as Christianity spread.

Consequently the dominant expression of English asceticism would follow the pattern of Cuthbert rather than Guthlac. Nevertheless, these men were near contemporaries and the Cuthbert *lives* provide the closest context for Felix's *Vita sancti Guthlaci*, a text written after the *VCP* but before the death of its dedicatee, King Ælfwald of East Anglia, in 749. The chronology of Guthlac's life suggests that the saint was born in 674 or 675, shortly before Cuthbert's first retreat to Fame Island in 676.8 The lives of the two would overlap by at least twelve years. The influence of

---

8 The year of the saint's death is attributed to 714 or 715 depending on the source. Jane Roberts discusses the tradition of dating Guthlac's death briefly but with great detail, and presents the evidence for the two competing dates -- *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* supports the 714 date, while the Douai manuscript of the *Vita sancti Guthlacii* records 715. This discussion can be found in *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, ed. Jane Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 1-3. The time of the saint's birth can easily be extrapolated from the internal chronology of the text.

109

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the prose *vita* on the text is clear – Bede’s words can be found throughout Felix’s writing, and the death of Guthlac owes much to the earlier example of Cuthbert.\(^9\)

However, the most significant influence on the presentation of Guthlac’s *vita* is not the example closest at hand, but rather that most distant in time and geography. The contents of this Mercian saint’s life pick up echoes throughout of many previous saints’ careers, but the most sustained is the connection with Antony. One of the earliest critical approaches to the Guthlac legend addresses this relationship.

Benjamin Kurtz, the author of a 1926 monograph titled “From St. Antony to St. Guthlac: A Study in Biography,” ably traced the parallels between these two works in particular and other works in addition. He offers us a portrait of the biographer at his desk,

 [...] with the *Vita Antonii*, the *Vita Cuthberti*, and the *Dialogi Gregorii* open before him, and perhaps the *Vita Martini* as well, while with the plan and spirit of the *Antonius* as model he pieces out the details of the Guthlac oral tradition with passages and phrases from his four manuscripts, drawing at first most largely from Evagrius, later most often from Bede.\(^10\)

Within the varied career of this hermit saint is assembled the military profession of a Martin, the spiritual battles of an Antony, the miracles of a Benedict, and the death of a Cuthbert. The connections with Martin and Cuthbert are the most tenuous on the level of content. Felix displays an almost complete lack of interest in the forms of

---

\(^9\) Colgrave, *passim* (marginal notations denote borrowings from other texts); Benjamin Kurtz, “From St. Antony to St. Guthlac: A Study in Biography,” *University of California Publications in Modern Philology* 12.2 (Mar 1926), 126.

\(^10\) Kurtz, “From St. Antony to St. Guthlac,” 126. More recently, David Rollason has argued, “Like Antony, Guthlac turned from the world to a monastic or quasi-monastic community, learned virtues from those around him and then sought solitude, overcame demonic temptations, notably those of despair and lust, and was besieged by demonic hosts; and, as with Antony, powers of prophecy and miraculous healing flowed from victory over them.” *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1989), 77.
pastoral asceticism personified by these bishops — what service Guthlac does provide to the Christian community is conducted on recognizably Antonian terms as pilgrims seek out the saint in his isolation. In a similar vein, Benedict’s dedication to the institutions of monastic life is only briefly shared by the Mercian hermit, although Guthlac does continue to receive and instruct ecclesiastical visitors from both regular and secular life. Nevertheless, versions of two of Benedict’s miracles do appear in Guthlac’s *vita*; both, appropriately enough, concern straying monks.11

The parallels to Antony, however, are the most developed and the most coherent. Felix structures much of his saint’s early efforts to flee the world from Antony’s example. While the education Guthlac receives in letters owes nothing to the proudly illiterate Antony, the education he receives in the virtues of others is drawn directly from the Evagrian Latin translation of Athanasius’ text.12 In similar fashion the temptations and assaults of the devils parallel closely those that appear in the *Life of Antony* (with the exception of lust — a temptation modestly hidden by the author but exposed by Kurtz).13 Like Antony, the saint becomes a wonder-worker sought out by people willing to brave the fens; like Antony, Guthlac never returns to society once he withdraws from the world.

---

11 The first miracle can be found in *Guthlac* ch. 43 (132-136) and *Benedict* ch. 12 (180-181), in which travelling monks stop at the home of a woman for refreshment. In both cases the monks lie to the abbot and deny their actions, but the miraculous prophetic sight of the saint lays their sins bare. The second miracle is located in Guthlac ch. 44 (136) and Benedict ch. 18 (186-187), in which visitors hide casks in the road to the saint’s dwelling. In both cases there are distinctions between the narratives, but the essential content is the same. “Life of Saint Benedict by Gregory the Great.” *Early Christian Lives*, trans. and ed. Caroline White (NY: Penguin Books, 1998).

12 *Guthlac* ch. 23 (86); *Antony* ch. 4 (10-11). Kurtz compares the original Latin of the two texts side-by-side in “From St. Antony to St. Guthlac,” 106.

13 Kurtz, “From St. Antony to St. Guthlac,” 112-114. The scholar argues that the identification of the temptation ‘lust’ is implied through the nature of the devils’ assaults — attacking him in the middle of the night, plunging him into water, dragging him through thorn bushes, and scourging him with whips.

11
Unlike Antony, however, Guthlac is an English saint. While he may be an initiate into the universal community of saints, he was born into a community of Anglo-Saxons. The identification between this saint and his kin-group is first reinforced by the naming of the child. Felix remarks, “ex appellatione illius tribus, quam dicunt Guthlacingsas, proprietatis vocabulum velut ex caelesti consilio Guthlac percepit” [“he received the personal name of Guthlac from the name of the tribe known as the Guthlacingsas; it being as though by divine plan”] (76, 77). Such a portentous name immediately calls to mind the Heroic Age custom of naming a tribe after its leader, a custom illustrated very early in *Beowulf* by the example of Scyld Scæfing, ancestor of the Danes and the source of the tribal appellation “Scyldingas.”

In the case of Guthlac, however, the circumstances are reversed and the act of naming bears a different significance. Felix constructs an etymology of the name that invests it with Christian rather than literal meaning: “Nam ut illius gentis gnari perhibent, Anglorum lingua hoc nomen ex duobus integris constare videtur, hoc est ‘Guth’ et ‘lac’, quod Romani sermonis nitore personat ‘belli munus’, quia ille cum vitiis bellando munera aeternae beatitudinis cum triumphali infula perennis vitae percepisset” [“For, as those who are familiar with that race relate, the name in the tongue of the English is shown to consist of two individual words, namely ‘Guth’ and ‘lac’, which in the elegant Latin tongue is ‘belli munus’ (the reward of war), because

---

14 It is interesting to note, however, that religious communities also used this strategy of parallel naming, although to what extent can only be postulated. James Campbell observes that in Alcuin’s writing the term *Bealdhunings* was applied to a clerical community under the leadership of Bealdhun. Such phraseology reveals much about how cultural structures may have impacted the Anglo-Saxon Church. It is unlikely, however, that this was meant to be the primary association in the case of Guthlac. James Campbell, “Elements in the Background to the Life of St. Cuthbert and his Early Cult,” *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community*, eds. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989) 13.
by warring against vices he was to receive the reward of eternal bliss together with the victor's diadem of everlasting life" (76-79). As the interpretation of Guthlac's name suggests, the author of the prose text recasts the Anglo-Saxon cultural motifs that shape the saint's early life into allegorical structures.

In similar fashion, just as Guthlac read the lives of the desert fathers he also was educated in "valida pristinorum, heroum facta" ['the valiant deeds of heroes of old'] (80, 81). The legendary examples of the warriors of the past led him first to the life of a warrior (and unlike Martin of Tours, Guthlac had few qualms about the violence of such a life). The bloody career of the adolescent saint exposes the distance between the sanctified models of textual tradition and culturally-derived examples of meritorious behavior:

Et cum adversantium sibi urbes et villas, vicos et castella igne ferroque vastaret, conrasis undique diversarum gentium sociis, inmensas praedas gregasset, tunc velut ex divino consilio edoctus tertiam partem adgregatae gazae possidentibus remittebat.

['[B]ut when he had devastated the towns and residences of his foes, their villages and fortresses with fire and sword, and, gathering together companions from various races and from all directions, had amassed immense booty, then as if instructed by divine counsel, he would return to the owners a third part of the treasure collected. '] (80, 81)

That this unusual form of tithing is offered by his biographer as evidence for the future saint's holiness (and is aligned with more conventional markers such as the spiritual tokens at his birth and the uncommon maturity of the young child) suggests a bold (some might say unsuccessful) attempt to reconcile religious values with the demands of warrior life. As with Martin, the model of the miles Christi provides a metaphorical
expansion of the early military career of the saint, and his youthful encounters on the battlefield prefigure the spiritual conflicts that will besiege the hermit at Crowland.

The *valida pristinorum heroum facta* may have inspired the young warrior, but the fates of these same heroes of old provide the motivation for the young monk.

Nam cum antiquorum regum stirpis suae per transacta retro saecula miserabiles exitus flagitioso vitae termino contemplaretur, necnon et caducas mundi divitias contemtibilemque temporalis vitae gloriam pervigili mente consideraret, tunc sibi proprii obitus sui imaginata forma ostentatur, et finem inevitabilem brevis vitae curiosa mente horrescens, cursum cotidie ad finem cogitabat[...].

["For when, with wakeful mind, he contemplated the wretched deaths and the shameful ends of the ancient kings of his race in the course of the past ages, and also the fleeting riches of this world and the contemptible glory of this temporal life, then in imagination the form of his own death revealed itself to him; and trembling with anxiety at the inevitable finish of this brief life, he perceived that its course daily moved to that end [...]."] (81-83)

Ironically the heroes and kings of his culture, once exemplary, now serve only to warn the saint. Because Felix seeks to establish Guthlac as a paragon of both paths of life available to him, he is frankly enthusiastic in his portrayal of the saint’s early life and heroic military career. It is not until this moment of reflection that the reader is exposed to the clear opposition between the secular and religious worlds that drives the saint’s retreat into monastic life.

The exemplary function of kings, good and bad, in the narrative is especially meaningful because of the roles that they play both within and in relation to the text. Felix records that he undertook his task at the request of East Anglian king Ælfwald, "[i]ussionibus tuis obtemperans" ["[i]n obedience to your commands"] (60, 61).

While it is not unusual for a work such as this to be dedicated to a king, in this
particular case it provides an interesting context for the inclusion of a subplot unique to Felix's *Vita* detailing the saint's agency in securing the throne for the Mercian prince Æthelbald. The relationship between Guthlac and Æthelbald is a distinctive and intriguing element of the *Vita sancti Guthlaci*. The saint serves as a spiritual counselor to Æthelbald during the prince's exile, and his religious support of Æthelbald translates into political patronage. At one point Guthlac tells him, "'rogavi Dominum, ut subveniret tibi in miseratione sua, et exaudivit me et tribuit tibi dominationem gentis tuae et posuit te principem populorum'" [''I have asked the Lord to help you in His pitifulness; and He has heard me, and has granted you to rule over your race and has made you chief over the peoples''] (148, 149). After his death, the saint appears in a vision to Æthelbald and promises, "'Non in praeda nec in rapina regnum tibi dabitur, sed de manu Domini obtinebis; exspecta eum, cuius dies defecerunt, quia manus Domini opprimit illum, cuius spes in maligno posita est, et dies illius velut umbra pertransibunt'" [''Not as booty nor as spoil shall the kingdom be granted you, but you shall obtain it from the hand of God; wait for him whose life has been shortened, because the hand of the Lord oppresses him whose hope lies in wickedness, and whose days shall pass away like a shadow''] (150, 151) All occurs as the saint foretells, and Æthelbald achieves his throne within the year.

The relationship between Guthlac and Æthelbald is all the more interesting because of the role kings play in the culture and as emissaries of the faith. While it had always been a strategy of the Christian church to enlist the efforts of the powerful in the conversion of a people, the relationships between king and Church in Anglo-Saxon England were particularly significant. A disproportionate number of Anglo-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Saxon saints come from the royal families. As Susan Ridyard remarks, “Royal sanctity was not exclusively an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon [...]. What was characteristically Anglo-Saxon, however, was the ubiquity and the persistence of the royal cult.” Even Guthlac, though not a king himself, descends from a royal line: “Huius etiam viri progenies per nobilissima inlustrium regum nomina antiqua ab origine Icel digesto ordine cucurrit” (“Moreover the descent of this man was traced in set order through the most noble names of famous kings, back to Icel, in whom it began in days of old”) (74, 75). Some kings derive their spiritual reputation from the traditional practice of their office – such is the case of the martyred kings Edwin and Oswald who died in battle with heathen invaders. However, others achieve the reputation of holiness from their complete rejection of the values of secular society, and it is in the latter group that Guthlac can be found. While such a choice is uncommon in the first generations of the conversion, the years that span Guthlac’s life offer a series of kings who withdraw from society to pursue the religious life. Æthelred ascends to the throne in 675 after the death of his brother Wulfhere, and becomes a monk in 704. His successor Coenred also withdraws from public life to journey to Rome in 709 in the company of Offa, king of the East Saxons. Contemporaneous kings of Wessex, Caedwalla and Ine, similarly journey to Rome at the end of their careers.

---


16 All of the information contained in this paragraph is drawn from *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel With Supplementary Extracts from the Others* vol. I, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 40-43.

The impetus and consequence of such royal humility has been addressed by Clare Stancliffe, who argues that this phenomenon is almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon:

"Amongst all the Germanic peoples of the barbarian west, kings voluntarily abandoning their rule for the sake of the religious life are found only in England."18

One possible explanation that Stancliffe offers for this localized phenomenon is the powerful influence of Irish Christianity which preserved no special ecclesiastical role for the king. Kings shared with nobles and peasants the same personal obligations of the soul, and the requirements of penance and contrition were unmitigated.19

Consequently, the royal monk and pilgrim took center stage as a spiritual exemplar and, as Stancliffe observes,

The potency of such examples is indicated by the patterning of conversions. Sigebert in the 630s was an outlier. The phenomenon of kings adopting the religious life gathers momentum only in the latter part of the seventh century, peaking in the years 685-710 when no fewer than six kings took this decision. This pattern of conversions, especially as it involved three consecutive kings of Wessex and two of Mercia, coupled with the joint pilgrimage of Cenred and Offa, implies that once the movement had begun in earnest, the example of other monk-kings exerted a powerful influence.20

It is worth noting that the years marking the intensity of this phenomenon, 685-710, span the years of Guthlac's adult life. Consequently, the saint's own retreat into the monastery in 698 or 699 can be situated not only within the narrative pattern of the ascetic vita, but also within this cultural pattern that Stancliffe terms 'the penitent king.'

---

18 Stancliffe, "Kings Who Opted Out," 158. The author immediately qualifies this assertion with two later exceptions to the rule: Carloman (who steps down in 747) and Ratchis (749). However, Stancliffe notes that these kings may have been influenced by the Anglo-Saxon missionaries active on the Continent in this period.
In some cases, there may have been political dimensions to the royal retreat.

Timothy Lundgren points out the fact that the Mercian king Æthelred’s retirement into the monastery had been preceded by the murder of his wife, and that the years of Æthelred’s and Coenred’s reigns were marked by political upheaval. Consequently it is not difficult to infer that the turn to monastic life was not in all cases voluntary. However, the example of Sigeberht in the *Historia ecclesiastica* suggests that the impulse could be genuine. Bede writes,

So greatly did he love the kingdom of heaven that at last he resigned his kingly office and entrusted it to his kinsman Egric, who had previously ruled over part of the kingdom. He thereupon entered a monastery which he himself had founded. He received the tonsure and made it his business to fight instead for the heavenly kingdom. When he had been in the monastery for some considerable time, it happened that the East Anglians were attacked by the Mercians under their King Penda. As the East Anglians realized that they were no match for their enemies, they asked Sigeberht to go into the fight with them in order to inspire the army with confidence. He was unwilling and refused, so they dragged him to the fight from the monastery, in the hope that the soldiers would be less afraid and less ready to flee if they had with

---

21 Timothy Lundgren, “Hereward and Outlawry in Fenland Culture: A Study of Local Narrative and Tradition in Medieval England” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1996), 37. Lundgren argues that Guthlac may have been a political exile who chose monastic life over that of an outlaw.
them one who was once their most vigorous and distinguished leader. But remembering his profession and surrounded though he was by a splendid army, he refused to carry anything but a staff in his hand. He was killed together with King Egric, and the whole army was either slain or scattered by the heathen attacks.”

The wretched death and shameful end of this king ironically proves the sincerity of his conversion to monastic life. The phenomenon of royal retreat demonstrates that the exemplary pattern of the saint’s life could be and was brought to bear on the social identity of kings in this period. Whether genuine or politically motivated, the model of the penitent king actively displaces the secular function of the king and warrior with the religious figure of the monk and saint.

In a similar fashion the Vita sancti Guthlacis works to fuse and supplant these cultural figures of exemplarity with their spiritual counterparts. In the text the warrior becomes the miles Christi, and in the world kings give up their thrones for the holy life. The social importance of sanctity comes to influence the practice and position of kingship, to the extent that when the devil tempts Guthlac’s companion Beccel to murder the saint, he can use the following inducement: “hoc ipsius animo proponens, ut, et, si ipsum interimere potuisset, locum ipsius postea, cum maxima regum principumque veneratoriam, habiturus foret” [“The devil suggested to him that if he could slay him, he would afterwards live in Guthlac’s dwelling and also enjoy the great veneration of kings and princes”] (112, 113). The heroic models of warrior and king have shifted on a cultural level to accommodate the influence of Christian patterns of exemplarity. If these conceptions find a home in Felix’s vita, then they are even more evocatively expressed in the Old English poems. The literary codes of

22 Colgrave and Mynors, eds., Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, 268-269.
heroic virtue in Anglo-Saxon verse provide a new vocabulary for articulating the saintly life.

The Old English poetic versions of the Guthlac legend locate themselves within an synthesis of Old English and Christian textual traditions. The Guthlac of Old English poetry still bears the recognizable form of an Antony or a Martin, but is powerfully influenced also by the heroic discourse of Old English verse. In this way Guthlac can be seen to serve as a local example of the larger strategy by which missionary Christianity adapted itself to the cultures of its converts. Peter Brown, writing generally about the Church of the early Middle Ages, observes, "What was most characteristic of the period was not in the drift of Latin beyond the reach of all members of the 'Christian people.' It was the urge, on the part of a reformed upper clergy, to communicate in whatever language lay to hand." In the context of Anglo-Saxon England, the shift in language was no mere act of translation but an attempt to expand and reconstitute the structures of history and representation in the culture. Form changed dramatically in the interests of preserving function. To preserve the conjoined qualities of exemplarity and historicity, the biographical model of Latin hagiography gave way to the literary enactment of heroic verse.

The Guthlac poems are subject to the same difficulties of dating that face almost all Old English poems. The Exeter Book, the manuscript containing the Guthlac poems, was compiled in the second half of the tenth-century. Like many of the poems which survive in the manuscripts of the late tenth century, however, it is

---

more likely that the Guthlac poems' original date of composition lies much earlier. Jane Roberts' extensive analysis of the text's internal evidence supports this conclusion, although she is only able to propose "an earlier rather than later time of composition within the Anglo-Saxon period."²⁴ The poet of Guthlac A's assertion that "Hwaet we þissa wundra gewitan sindon; / ealle ðas geeodon in ussera / tida timan" ["Indeed, we are witnesses of these miracles; all these happened in our time's time"] (1.752-54) tempts us to locate the poem within the century of the saint's death in 714/715, but the formulaic register of the statement discourages the literal reading of these lines. The contents of the poem make clear, however, that time has its meaning only in the framework of salvation history. The phrase in ussera tida timan is suggestive less of the years that encompass the eighth century than the passing of the final age and the inevitable movement of human history to the time of Judgment.

There is the implication, also, that ussera tida timan finds the patterns of Christian history in a past that is always present. In this sense, ussera becomes expressively possessive, as the existence of wonders in 'our time's time' allows the reader to situate the miracles of the past within the conceptual framework of the always-present encounter with the text.²⁵ Brown recognizes this form of reading in his discussion of the hagiography of the late antique Church when he writes, "the passio abolished time. The deeds of the martyr or of the confessor had brought the mighty

²⁵ In his discussion of oral history Thomas Heffernan observes that "an understanding of the past is contingent upon present circumstance wherein the past is continually reconstructed by the present." Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; reprint, 1992) 23-24. In the above case, it appears that the past is reconstructed in the present, for the purpose of recognizing and validating the patterns of sanctified history. This necessarily opens into the topic of figuration as a constructing element of Christian history, a subject which will receive fuller development at a later point.
deeds of God in the Old Testament and the gospels into her or her own time. The reading of the saint’s deeds breached yet again the paper-thin wall between the past and the present.”

In the Guthlac poems, both poems refashion and excise aspects of the saint’s career for the purpose of foregrounding the Christian narrative and diminishing competing secular interests. One particular example proves telling – the exclusion of kings. While Felix’s narrative clearly acknowledges the political aspects of both the text’s commission and the saint’s career, this aspect of the legend has been completely eliminated from the poetic version. Certainly this omission simplifies the two narratives which already seek to distill the long career of the saint to a more compressed episodic framework. However the absence of the kings also suggests a deliberate attempt to locate the saint outside the chronology of the secular world. Because the written history of the Anglo-Saxons is organized according to regnal years, the elimination of defining political elements such as Guthlac’s ancestry, his relationship with Æthelbald, and his dispossession of Ceolred systematically removes the landmarks that locate the saint within native traditions of history. At the most basic constitutive level, the Guthlac poets displace the saint from his position in measurable time.

27 Alexandra Hennessey Olsen argues that this episodic focus is broadly characteristic of Old English poetic hagiography: “they [the authors of Andreas, Juliana, Judith, Elene and Guthlac] do not combine biography and polemic; instead, each explores in depth a theme which is merely a brief, conventional episode in a Graeco-Latin work.” “De Historiis Sanctorum: A Generic Study of Hagiography,” Genre 13 no. 4 (Winter, 1980): 423.
In similar fashion, the poet of *Guthlac A* divests the saint of his military career as well. The military construction of Guthlac's saintly life is not associated with a symbolic movement from literal to spiritual warfare as it is in Felix's *vita*. The only mention in the poem of Guthlac's warrior past may be contained within this oblique reference to the temptations of Guthlac's early life:

{o:er hyne scyhte |D a e t he sceadena gemot
nihtes sohte |7 þurh neþinge
wunne æfter worulde |swa ðoð wraæcmaecgas
þa þe ne bimurnað |monnes feore
þæs þe him to honda |þuþe gelæded
dutan hy þy reafe |rædan motan.28 (l. 127-130)

[The other one [the devil] egged him on that he should seek out the assembly of raiders at night and through audacity he should strive after the world as do banished men who care nothing for a man's life who brings plunder to their hands except that they might be able to dispose of the spoil.]

If this does refer to Guthlac's military career, it does so in a considerably less flattering tone than Felix does. While the uncertain relationship between *Guthlac A* and Felix's *vita* might admit the possibility that the poet was unfamiliar with the saint's previous vocation, this seems highly unlikely given how central the conversion from soldier to *miles Christi* is to the legendary construction of this figure. Instead, as with the elimination of the kings, it is more likely that the poet employed a deliberate pattern of omission intended to divest the saint of his bonds to the community and to refashion secular values into exclusively spiritual ones.

In such a context it is no coincidence that *Guthlac B* is introduced by the initiating event of human history, the fall of Adam and Eve, and *Guthlac A* opens with

28 All quotations are drawn from Jane Roberts' *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*. Translations are mine.
the promise of its final fulfillment, the return of the sanctified soul to the heavenly homeland. Taken together, the poems link the beginning and end of Christian time. Constructed around the tenuous boundary between the material and spiritual worlds (and the saint’s role in transcending this boundary), both address the soul’s journey at the end of life, exile and the promise of a heavenly homeland. In these works the sense of the local has been displaced by the universal as the poems orient the saint within the framework of salvation history.

As a consequence it might appear that the Guthlac poems actually resist instead of embrace any cultural sense of specificity. Indeed it is somewhat ironic that the poets employ the episodic structures and imaginative tropes of Old English verse to disassociate the figure of the saint from distinguishing historical markers in the culture’s memory. While the metaphorical (and even metaphysical) expansion of Old English tropes frees the saint from the bonds of time, however, they even more firmly substantiate his identity as a personification of shared cultural values and as an idealized synthesis of religious and secular codes in the community. The portrayal of Guthlac is dominated by the images and the conceptual metaphors of a warrior culture. In both poems the passive virtues of the saint are recast as the active conquests of the hero.

In such a manner Guthlac A joins the miles Christi to the cultural construction of the warrior hero. While the rich Latin tradition of representing spiritual values in the vivid terms of military conflict was commonplace in ascetic hagiography (i.e. Antony and Martin), the metaphor achieves new heights in Old English verse.
hagiography as heroic diction dominates the representation of sanctity. The narrative of Guthlac A celebrates the saint’s heroic defiance of the devils of Crowland, and his successful defense of the territory. Guthlac is termed “Christes cempa” (Christ’s soldier, l. 153) and “eadig oretta” (blessed warrior, l. 176); these words and constructions appear repeatedly in descriptions of the saint. In similar fashion the author introduces the vocation of the hermit by claiming,

fore him englas stondad

gearwe mid gæsta wæpnum, beorh hyræ geoca gemynnde,
healdað haligra feorh, witon hyra hyht mid dryhten:
þæt synd þa gecostan cempan þa þam cyninge þeowað
se næfre þa lean alegeð þam þe his lufan adreodeð. (l. 88-92)

“Before them angels stand, ready with spiritual weapons, they are mindful of their comfort, they protect the lives of the holy ones, they know their hope is with the Lord: these are the proven soldiers who serve the King who never withholds the reward to the one who suffers his love.”

This image of angels with drawn weapons and the saint as a member of a holy comitatus, the warrior band of God, introduces the trope that will construct the poem. Guthlac’s verbal battles with the devils, the spiritual torments he suffers at their hands, and even his rescue by his protector, the apostle Bartholomew, all reinforce the identification of the saint with the martial themes of Old English verse.

Guthlac illustrates the poetic effort to recast the social construct of the hero within the institutional context of the Anglo-Saxon Church. The expressive trope of spiritual warfare is rooted firmly in the saint’s monastic perfection and holy virtue.

29 This is by no means a phenomenon exclusive to the Guthlac tradition. Readers of Beowulf may not be surprised to find holy figures such as the virgin martyr Juliana, the missionary apostle Andreas, and even The Dream of the Rood’s Christ constructed whole-cloth from the same system of heroic images and poetic formula. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen goes so far as to argue, “hagiographic narratives kept alive […] the heroic tradition itself because the saints took the place of secular heroes.” Guthlac of Crowland: A Study of Heroic Hagiography (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 3.
The war-band of angels accompanies the *ānþuend* (1.88), the one who lives alone. The isolated Guthlac is not the lone hero, but rather a warrior in a spiritual community of warriors, protected as the thane of the Lord (“He him sige sealde 7 snytrucræft, / mundbyrd meahta” (1.184-85) [He granted him victory and wisdom, the protection of [His] powers]). As Alvin Lee observes, “What has happened [...] is that the old dryht loyalties of lord and thane have been transferred to the sky and made cosmic principles.”

A similar association is stressed in the closing words of the poem – the ascension of Guthlac’s soul to heaven reinvokes the image of the war-band, Christ’s chosen thanes and the community of the saints:

> Swa soðfæstra sawla motun  
> in ecne geard, up gestigan,  
> rodera rice, [...] þæt beoð husulweras,  
> cempan gecorene Criste leofe;  
> beað in breostum beorhtne gelefan,  
> haligne hyht, heortan clæne;  
> weordiað waldend. (1.790-792; 796-800)

> “Thus the souls of the steadfast in truth will be able to ascend up into the eternal dwelling-place, the kingdom of heaven, [...] they are communicants, chosen warriors dear to Christ; they bear in their breasts bright faith, blessed hope, a pure heart; they worship the Lord.”

The saint joins his companions, the ‘soðfæstra sawla,’ in the heavenly halls of that eternal Lord.

---


31 The common usage in modern parlance of ‘Lord’ as a synonym for God lessens the metaphorical impact, but it also offers evidence of the successful, indeed seamless, assimilation of the vocabulary of the faith to the political structures of the early Middle Ages. It is worth noting that this was not merely a poetic conceit – as J.M. Wallace-Hadrill observes, Alfred also employs the term *dryhten* as a synonym for Christ in the *Cura pastoralis*. Wallace-Hadrill writes, “[Alfred] sees Christ’s lordship in a hierarchical way that has direct application to the kind of society Alfred himself governed; Christians are really God’s war-band under Christ’s kingship and that of Christ’s deputy, the earthly king.” *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, Ford Lectures, 1970 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 144-145.
In parallel fashion, Christ's thanes are opposed by a war-band of devils, an inversion (and indeed negation) of the loyalties of *comitatus*. Such is the case in *Guthlac A*, in which the devils, the exiled thanes of the Lord, assemble to assault the saint both spiritually and physically. In an echo of Antony, the fundamental conflict between saint and devil is over territory. Guthlac is chosen by God to reclaim the devils' earthly refuge,

```
þær hy bidinge
earme ondsacan æror mostum
æfter tintergum tidum brucan
donne hy of waþum werege cwoman
restan ryneþragum; rowe gefegon:
wæs him seo gelyfed þurh lytel fæc. (1.209-214)
```

[where they, the wretched adversaries, were previously permitted to rest, to spend time after torment when they, accursed, came from wandering to stay for a snatched moment; they rejoiced in rest; this had been allowed to them for a little time.]

The conflict is established between the heirs of the heavenly kingdom and the dispossessed, between the loyal thanes of Christ and the exiles forced to wander the earthly sphere. In a culture where the bonds of fellowship and loyalty knit retainers to their lord and to each other, devils are “waerlogan” (l. 623), promise-breakers.

32 “[T]he mutual loyalties of the dryht are parodied and made demonic through their identification with the society of hell, even though they are still described in terms of the conventional patterns.” Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden*, 13.

33 “When many people, in their desire to see him and their eagerness to question him, spent the night outside his door, they heard noisy voices, as of a number of people saying to Antony, 'Why have you moved into our home? What have you got to do with the desert? Leave other people's property alone. You cannot live here; you cannot endure our attacks.' At first those outside thought that some men had entered using ladders and were engaged in a dispute inside, but when they peeped in through the gaps, they saw no one and then they realized that demons were fighting Antony” (*Early Christian Lives*, 17-18).

34 The same term is used in *Genesis*, in which God “[s]ceop þam werlogan/ wræcliecne ham weorce to leane/ helleheafas, hearde niðas” [Made for the promise-breaker an exiled home, a reward for his labor, the wailings of hell and painful oppression] (l. 36b-38). From *The Junius Manuscript*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records vol. 1, ed. George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931).
The extended metaphor of *comitatus* points up the contrast between God’s chosen companions and his banished thanes. The exile of the *wærloga* is permanent; the exile of the *sodfæst* only temporary as he gains the reward of the heavenly homeland. In a sense, as Rosemary Woolf argues, the betrayal and exile of Satan provides the original pattern for the forms of social betrayal and ostracization recognized in the culture of *comitatus*. “[H]is disobedience to God had an intrinsic likeness to the revolt of a *pegn* from his lord, and his subsequent punishment of being an outcast from heaven was a fate of which the exile of a *pegn* from his natural place in his lord’s hall might well appear the earthly shadow.”\(^\text{35}\) The implications of Woolf’s argument suggest that the narrative of Christian history integrates pre-existing cultural practices and social structures into the sanctified structures of past *exempla*, a remarkably relevant context for understanding *Guthlac A* poet’s attempt to resituate the warrior ethos in the figure of the saint.

The poet of *Guthlac B* similarly works within these poetic themes, fashioning the saint as a warrior and using the Genesis narrative to provide a foundation for the pattern of exile and repatriation repeated in Old English representations of the Christian faith. The similarities between the works are so pronounced that the two poems were originally presented as a single text in manuscript and in early editions of the works.\(^\text{36}\) However, their differences are notable as well, and it is by placing


\(^{36}\) It has become conventional in modern scholarship, however, to treat the poems as separate, a judgment substantiated by the independent narrative frameworks that introduce each poem. The division between the poems had initially been complicated by disagreement about where *Guthlac A* actually began. The first twenty-nine lines of the poem had been held to be an epilogue to *Christ III* rather than a prologue to *Guthlac A*. Missing these lines, the identification of *Guthlac A* as an autonomous poem was more doubtful. Lawrence K. Shook’s exploration of the thematic and textual traditions that bind the introduction to the poem as a whole supports what has now become the standard
Guthlac B in contrast to the strategies of Guthlac A that it is possible to see how this poetic reconstruction of the saint reframes the focus and the significance of the saint's legend.

While Guthlac A tells the story of the saint's battle with the devils of Crowland, Guthlac B takes for its subject matter instead the saint's final battle with death. Heroic diction and the epithets of war dominate the portrayal of the saint's last days. Death is personified:

ne mæg ænig þam
flæsce bifongen þeore wiðstondan
ricra ne heanra ac hine ræsceth on
gifrum grapum: swa wæs Guðlace
enge anhoga ætryhte þa
æfter nihtscuan, neah gebyded,
wiga wælgifre.37 (ll. 993-999)

[Nor may any powerful or humble that is surrounded by flesh resist with his life but it will rush upon him with greedy clutches: so the cruel solitary one, the bloodthirsty warrior, was closely joined to Guthlac then after the shade of night,..]

In similar fashion, Guthlac describes the imminence of his death by saying, "Wiga nealæçð, / unlaet laces"(l. 1033-34) [The warrior approaches, ready for battle].38 The construction of death as a military foe and the description of the saint's fatal affliction as a "hildescurun, / flæcor flænuhracu"(l. 1144-45) [war-shower, flickering force of arrows] highlight the systematic association of passive suffering with active heroism.

---

37 These lines suggest an intriguing parallel with the description of Grendel in Beowulf.
38 Interestingly, while wiga is translated as warrior, it is applied only to the personification of death in the poem, suggesting a possible specialized use of the term.
In similar fashion the warriors' hall is transformed to serve as a potent reminder of human mortality. The poet reshapes the convivial and communal image of the passing of the cup, an image made familiar by the example of Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*, into an illustration of shared doom:

```
bryğen wæs ongunnen
þætte Adame  Eve gebyrmdæ
æt fruman worulde. Feond byrlade
ærest þære idese 7 heo Adame,
hyre swæsum were, sipþan scencæ
bittor bædeweg þæs þa byre sipþan
grimme onguldon gafulraedenne
þurh ærgewyrht þætte ænig ne wæs
fyra cynnes from fruman siðdan,
môn on moldan, þætte meahte him
gleoerogan 7 bıbugan þone bleatan drync
deopan deaðwegenes (ll. 980-991)
```

[that drink was begun that Eve brewed for Adam at the beginning of the world. The enemy poured it out first to the woman, and she to Adam, her beloved man, afterwards gave to drink the bitter cup for which their descendants afterwards cruelly paid the price on account of deeds of old so that there was none of humankind from the beginning since, men on earth, who could prevent and turn aside that wretched drink of the deep deadly cup]

The manner in which the poet appropriates a cultural ritual expressive of community and shared loyalty to symbolize humanity's debt to sin is dramatic and powerful.\(^\text{39}\) It is also illustrative of this poet's much more critical approach to the values and terminology of heroic culture. Words like *cempa* and *oretta* freely applied to the saint in *Guthlac A* almost vanish in this poem – *cempa* is only used twice (ll. 889 and 901) in the lines which overview the saint's early battles with the devils (the subject matter

---

of Guthlac A), and oretta never appears. Martial vocabulary predominates in
descriptions of the saint’s torments, but not in accounts of the saint’s resistance. The
saint’s bravery is well established, but it is clear that this poet consciously declines the
poetic invitation to arm his saint with the attributes of the warrior.

In addition to illustrating the Guthlac B poet’s selective use of the formulas of
heroic verse, the above example suggests that Genesis again provides the narrative
backdrop to this version of the Guthlac legend. However, while Guthlac A takes its
interest in the conflict that arises out of the devils’ loss of the heavenly homeland,
Guthlac B dwells instead on humanity’s exile from Paradise. The opening lines of the
poem speak of Creation and the devastating loss of Eden:

Siðjan se eøel waðgengewearð
Adame 7 Euan, eardwica cyst,
beorht, oðbroden, 7 hyra bearnum swa,
eaferum æfter, þa hy 7 on úncyðdu,
scomum scudende, scofene wurdon
on gewinworuld; weorces onguldon
deopra firena þurh deades cwealm. (l. 852-858)

[After the country became untenable for Adam and Eve, the best of
earth-dwellings, that bright place was taken away from them and their
children as well, and their heirs after, then they, hastening shamefully,
were thrust into parts unknown, into a world of struggle; for their deeds
of heinous wickedness they were punished by means of death’s
destruction.]

The poet establishes the contrast between Adam’s birthright, “leomu lie somud 7 lifes
gæst” (l. 838) [limbs and body together, and life’s soul], and the saint’s unavoidable
fate, when “lic 7 leomu 7 þes lifes gæst / asundrien” (ll. 1176-77) [limbs and body
and life’s soul are separated]. However, the hope and the triumph of the poem is the
promise of repatriation that heaven offers. Consequently, the poem is constructed less
to establish the accomplishments of the saint’s life than to place its primary focus on his death, at once that ancient debt owed to Adam and Eve’s transgression and the gateway into the heavenly homeland.40

The patterns of exile dominate this version of the legend. Death for Guthlac is a release from the exiled wanderings of human life and a return to the side of a gift-giving Lord:

```
\textquote{\[Then my days on earth will have passed away, sorrow abated, and I afterwards will be able to obtain the rewards of new gifts before the knee of the Creator, and ever afterwards follow forth the Lamb of God in eternal joy. My spirit is now ready to go there, eager for the journey.\]}
```

In similar fashion, the motif of the journey home becomes the shaping metaphor for Guthlac’s life and last days. The poet writes “\textquote{[W]æs se bliþa gæst / ðus on forðweg’}(ll. 944-945) [The blissful spirit was eager for the onward course] after Guthlac is assaulted with his final illness. Constructions which employ similar terms are frequent in the poem (“forðsîþas fûs”(l. 1050); “sîþas fûs” (l. 1077)). Certainly the metaphorical application of the idea of exile to life on earth is commonplace in the elegies of Old English verse. However the hoped-for reunion described by other poets like Cynewulf and the author of the \textit{Seafarer} finds its fulfillment in the figure of

40 An abbreviated overview of Guthlac’s miracles and the torments of the devils is introduced by the lines “Us secgåð bec / hu Guðlac weard þurh Godes willan / eadig on Engle’ [Books tell us how Guthlac became through God’s desire blessed among the English] (ll.878-880).
Guthlac. His final journey to heaven accompanied by angels marks a path to the heavenly homeland for those exiles still living on earth.

The journey that Guthlac takes is paralleled by another journey in the text undertaken by his companion and servant Beccel. The narrative account of Guthlac’s death is shaped by the interaction of these two men, and their relationship evokes the cultural concept of *comitatus*, in that the bond between servant and saint reenacts the bond between thane and lord. When Guthlac feels the imminence of his death, he instructs Beccel to travel to Pega, the saint’s sister, to inform her of his passing and to promise their reunion in the next world. After the saint’s death, Beccel sets off on a sea voyage.

Swegl hate scan
blac ofer burgsalo; brimmwudu scynde,
leot, lade fus; lagumearg snyrede
gehlaested to hyðe þæt se hærnflota
æfter sundplegan sondlond gespearn,
grond wið greote. Gornorsorge wæg
hate æt heortan hygegegeomurne,
meðne modsefan, se þe his mondryhten
life bilidene last wearidian
wiste wine leofne. (ll. 1330-1339)

[The sky shone hot, bright over the dwellings; the ship hurried, fast-running, eager for its journey; the sea-horse hastened loaded into the harbor so that after the tossing of the sea the sea-ship strode upon the sandy shore, ground against the earth. He bore burning sorrow at heart, a mournful mind, he who knew his lord and dear friend deprived of life remained behind.]

---

41 The closeness of the bond between the two men is reflected by the saint’s words: “Nu ic for lufan þinne / 7 geferscype þæt wit fyrm mid unc / longe læstan nelle ic læstan þe / æftæ unrotne æfter ealdorlege, / meðne, modseocne, minre geweorðan / soden sorgwealmum” (“Now for love of you and the fellowship that we two have long sustained between ourselves I do not desire to leave you eternally sad after death, weary, sick at heart, to become grief-stricken for me”) (1.1257-1262). Of course, as Beccel’s response to his death will shortly show, this wished-for hope is not to be.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
This passage is almost a complete retreat into formula, and as such is a telling imposition of poetic form on the content of the narrative. The linking of the sea voyage and the internal suffering of Beccel shifts the poem firmly in the landscape of Old English elegy. This strategy continues the exilic themes that situate Guthlac’s death within the narrative of Christian history, but it also reimposes the cultural meaning of the concept upon the larger metaphoric pattern.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Beccel’s response comes out of a culturally-situated experience of loss and a literal as well as spiritual identification with the exile. His elegiac lament of the saint’s death is reminiscent of *The Wanderer*, also in the Exeter Book:

```
Ellen bīp selast þam þe oftost sceal
dreogan dryhtenbealu deope behycgan
þroht, þeodengedal, þonne seo þrag cymeð
wefen wyrdstafun. þæt wat se þe sceal
āswæman sarigferð, wat his singgiefan
holdne biheledne; he sceal hean þonan
geomor hweorfan þam bið gomenes wana
ðe þa earfeda oftost dreogðed
on sargum sefan. (ll.1348-1356)
```

[Courage is best for him that most often must endure the loss of a lord, consider deeply the hardship, separation from a lord, when the time comes woven by fate’s decree. That one knows that he must grieve sorrowing in his soul, knows his generous treasure-giver is buried; he must sadly and wretchedly depart from that place; the man who in his pained heart continually endures those hardships will have want of joy.]\(^{42}\)

\(^{42}\) In comparison, *The Wanderer* offers these lines: “Wat se þe cunnað / hu słipen bið sorg to geferan, / þam þe him lyt hafað leofra geholenæ. / Warað hine wraæclæst, nales wunden gold, / ferdloca freorig, nales foldtan blæð. / Gemon he selescegas ond sincbege, / hu hine on geogude his goldwine / wenede to wiste. / Wyn eal gedreæs!” (ll. 29-36) [He who experiences it understands how painful grief is as a companion, he who possesses few beloved supporters. The path of exile occupies him, not twisted gold, the frozen breast, not the riches of the earth. He remembers retainers and the receiving of treasure, how in youth his lord entertained him. Joy has perished completely!]. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., “The Wanderer,” in *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records vol. III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 134-135.
The saint’s transition and the experiences of those left behind resituate the concept of death from the spiritualized and abstract *bittor heædeweg* of the Genesis narrative to Old English patterns of loss and mourning. Inevitably Guthlac’s death reinserts him into the communal structures he fled as a hermit. He returns as a brother to his sister, and is remembered by Beccel not as a saint but as a lord. His death and his memory permit the re-introduction of his local identity. Beccel describes him as “se selesta [...] ðara þe we on Engle æfre gefrunen / acennedne” (1359-1361) [the best that we have ever heard born among the English]. The elegiac recapitulation of the saint’s identity brings the thread of local narrative back to the forefront, asserting a native claim on the universal pattern of Christian sanctity.

Both poets see Guthlac as the keystone to a local tradition of sanctity. The author of *Guthlac A* locates the events of Guthlac’s life within living memory, exclaiming, “Hwylc wæs mara ðonne se? / An oretta ussum tidum,/ cempa, gecyðde þæt him Crist fore / woruldlicra má wundra gecyðde” (ll. 400-403) [Who was greater than he? A warrior alone in our time, a soldier reveals that for him Christ made known more worldly wonders], and concluding “Hwæt we þissa wundra gewitan sindon; / ealle þas geeodon in ussera / tida timan” (ll. 752-754) [Indeed, we are witnesses of these miracles; all these have happened in our time’s time]. The repeated insistence on the saint’s place in the living memory of the culture joins subject matter to genre, casting the events of the saint’s life in a culturally-resonant form. In a similar fashion, the *Guthlac B* poet narrates Guthlac’s death through the metaphors and tropes of Old English elegy. Exile provides a framework for Christian history that
is at once evocatively illustrative of the shared spiritual condition and culturally rooted in the social institutions that shape Anglo-Saxon culture.

Thus these poets create sanctified history, a narrative of the past that unites the native memorial forms of the culture with the universal patterns of Christian history. The figure of the saint connects the native construction of heroic virtue with the values of the Christian faith, and this connection establishes a continuity between secular and religious visions of the past. Both poems manage to be at once the product of the words and images that construct Old English narratives of oral history and the herald of the eternal forms of salvific history, the circular patterns of life, death, and judgment that each soul must undergo.

Moreover, the Guthlac of poetry serves as a figure of the familiar past, an emblem of living memorial history brought into a fluid relationship with the present. The temporality of the saint is not irretrievably fixed. Instead the saint brings together cultural values and didactic content in a context of shared time, an 'our time' that links past and present in a common framework. In this way the past becomes an element of the present, an internalized rather than externalized form of history. And just as the familiar past of the Guthlac legend can find a place in a memorializing present, the figural link established between Guthlac and the Genesis narratives similarly reaffirms the continuities between the remembered past and Christian forms of history. This connection is rooted in medieval strategies of figuration, described by Erich Auerbach in the following terms:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the
Figuration offers an interpretive model in which the past and the present (and future) are engaged in a reciprocal relationship. In this context, Guthlac stands at the juncture between past and future. Through his exemplary life, he serves to bring the patterns of the Christian past into the present through the practice of *imitatio Christi*. Simultaneously, however, Guthlac’s life and death enact the promise of future salvation. By fulfilling the Genesis narrative, Guthlac brings together the past and future of Christian time. He also brings this universal sense of time into the context of local history. The heroic transformation of the Guthlac legend in the two poems continues the literary recolonization of the oral past begun in the Biblical narratives of the Junius landscape. However, it goes beyond these efforts to find in the cultural forms of memory and verse the patterns for conceptualizing an integrated vision of history.

These three versions of the Guthlac legend provide us with an understanding of how the structures of exemplarity bring the events of the past into a relationship with the present setting of the reader. Guthlac’s chroniclers found models for this saint in the Latin traditions of the Church and in the oral traditions of the culture. Certainly the presentation of this English saint had its roots in the pre-existing necessity of reconciling religious and heroic codes of conduct in converted Anglo-Saxon society, and the career of Guthlac deftly fuses ascetic sanctity and the heroes of old into a coherent pattern of exemplarity. More importantly, however, the legends of Guthlac...

---

also provide us with insight into how these contrasting genres and historical traditions come to reconstruct the cultural past. The celebration of a local saint reaffirms the meaning and the relevance of salvation history in this once-pagan culture, and the hagiographic reinvention of the literary forms of cultural history enables native authors to find the past in the present through patterns of exemplarity and figuration.

The culturally-situated forms of Latin and Old English hagiography that structure the Guthlac legend lay the groundwork for examining the traditions of Anglo-Saxon sanctity within the larger context of Christian time.
CHAPTER 4

The thematic interest in the eschatological history of universal Christendom that infuses the Old English adaptations of the Guthlac legend is pursued on a broader scale in the contents of the Vercelli Book. Works like the *Dream of the Rood*, *Andreas*, *Fates of the Apostles*, and *Elene* commemorate foundational events central to the Church and chronicle the spread of the faith through the cities and nations of the world. While *Dream of the Rood* and *Elene* focus on preserving the memory and meaning of the Crucifixion, *Andreas* and *Fates of the Apostles* trace the agency of the apostles in creating a universal Church after Christ's death and resurrection. The contents of *Elene* and *Andreas* center upon the conversions of individuals and communities. In *Elene*, those who embrace Christianity come to include Constantine, his mother Elene, the Jewish elder Judas Cyriacus, and the entire people of the Jews; in *Andreas*, the apostles Matheus and Andreas successfully convert the cannibal nation of the Mermidonians.

The historical interest in conversion and the growth of the Church is coupled with the application of these themes to individual life. Saints like Elene and Andreas make personal journeys that lead to revelation and sanctity as well as institutional journeys that enable the spread of Christianity through the conversions of nations. The exemplary model of the saint opens up a pedagogical relationship between text
and reader that is repeatedly enacted in the works themselves. *Dream of the Rood*, *Fates of the Apostles*, and *Elene* all contain narrator figures who locate in the memory of the past lessons for negotiating the transition from the present life to salvation. The interpretive repositioning of the past that takes place in these poems aligns these works as well with the other texts which populate the Vercelli Book: twenty-three homilies (many of which explicitly incorporate the theme of judgment), as well as the poems *Soul and Body I*, and *Homiletic Fragment I*. The contents of the book as a whole suggests that the vision of history that drives the compilation of this manuscript is eschatological; the end to come is partnered with the beginnings remembered. Consequently, the Vercelli Book offers the reader a presentation of Christian history that is at once universal and intimately personal. The knowledge of the past is applied to the benefit of the individual as it charts the travels of the soul at life’s end. Doomsday awaits at the end of worldly time, but at the end of each individual life as well, and in this way reflections on the past gain their meaning in the context of this shared and inevitable future.

If the homiletic concerns of the Vercelli Book suggest that the lessons of the past can shape and influence the patterns of individual life and personal sanctity, it is important to acknowledge that these lessons influence and are influenced by cultural traditions as well. The surviving corpus of Old English poetry suggests a fruitful convergence of the Christian vision of history and time with the structures of

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Germanic verse. The Christian historical tradition is revitalized by heroic poems that take for their subject matter holy men and women.

This poetic impulse also illustrates a desire on the part of native poets and ecclesiasts to accommodate this inherited past in familiar terms. A true synthesis of Christian and local history was conceptually possible through the idea of figuration, which allowed the narrative of salvation history to be reenacted by each community of believers. The layering of meaning that presented the events of the past as discrete moments in time and yet also as prophetic manifestations of a universal pattern offered Anglo-Saxons a means for encountering the unfamiliar legends of the Christian faith. Poets accommodated new traditions within the literary forms of their own remembered past. However, the Old English poems also open up a vantage-point for the Anglo-Saxons to gain an understanding of their own past through conversion narratives of the adopted faith. The vernacular adaptations of the founding events of Christianity encompass a cultural as well as universal sense of the past. The spread of the faith in these narrative poems functions not only as milestones in the institutional history of the Church, but also as prefigurations of the conversion of the English people. This imaginative translation of the past allows Anglo-Saxon writers to incorporate their perspectives into the legends of Christianity that precede England’s conversion.

The poems of the Vercelli Book demonstrate the confluence of the individual, cultural and ecclesiastical uses of history, layered interpretive structures assembled to support the Anglo-Saxon creation of a sanctified past. They connect the vision of history reflected in the culture’s literary traditions to the narrative of salvation history rooted in the biblical, liturgical and hagiographic traditions of the Christian Church.
Two poems in the Vercelli Book offer a clear illustration of these principles in action, *Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene*. These two texts share a common authorial signature, Cynewulf, and a common interest in the apostolic mission after Christ. They demonstrate as well the didactic interpretation of Christian history characteristic of the Cynewulf corpus of poems. *Fates* and *Elene* illustrate the linking of the legendary past with ecclesiastical and pedagogical forms of heroism and exemplarity, elements associated as much with the Old English approach to verse hagiography as with the particular practice of an author like Cynewulf or a collection like the Vercelli Book.

Cynewulf's poems have attracted substantial interest, even if the identity of the poet himself remains undetermined. His name survives in runic symbols present in the epilogues of four poems scattered in the Vercelli and Exeter Books -- *Fates of the Apostles, Elene, Juliana* and *Christ II – The Ascension*. However, attempts at identifying this author have proved futile. Perennial efforts have been made to date the poet, but the most recent study on the question has only reaffirmed its uncertainty.

---

2 The poet offers a clue to the significance of the runes in *Fates* when he writes, “Her meg findan for<e>þances gléaw, / se þe hine lysted þleoðgiddunga, / hwa þas fitte feðde” (l. 96-98) [Here the one wise in forethought, he who takes pleasure in poetry, may find, who composed this poem.] Other lines in the poem spell out the purpose of the included name: Nu ic þonne bidde beorn se þe lufige / þæt he geomrum me / þone halga<Æ> heal helpe bidde, / frïðes ond fultomes” (l. 88-91) [Now therefore I ask the man who takes pleasure in this that he pray for aid for mourful me from the holy troop, for safety and help]. All quotations from *Fates of the Apostles* are drawn from *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, ed. Kenneth R. Brooks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961; reprint Oxford: Sandpiper Books, 1998). Line numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

3 Patrick W. Conner argues that the poet wrote in the early tenth century, based upon his source study linking *Fates of the Apostles* to what he claims is a Usuardian recension of Bede's *Martyrology*, and his subsequent dating of that text to 875. "On Dating Cynewulf" in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Robert E. Bjork, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England Vol. 4, gen. eds. Carl T. Berkhout, Paul E. Szarmach and Joseph B. Trahern, Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 23-55. However, the use of this text as a source has been effectively called into question by John M. McCulloh in "Did Cynewulf Use a Martyrology? Reconsidering the Sources of The Fates of the Apostles" *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2001): 67-83. McCulloh argues that the source text in question is not, in fact, the work of Usuardus.
As a consequence, the only context that exists for the Cynewulf poems can be found in the poems themselves. However, even this determination has been subject to debate. At one point the Cynewulf ‘corpus’ threatened to engulf the majority of Old English poetry but it is now commonly held to include only the four poems containing the poet’s runic signature. Even the categorization of these four is subject to contention. Daniel Donoghue, for example, has called the authorship of two of the four signed poems into question.

Questions of authorship notwithstanding, the signed works exhibit a shared thematic cohesiveness. In an early analysis of the Cynewulf poems Charles W. Kennedy assembled characteristics of the poet’s interests: “the evidences of ecclesiastical learning, the simple piety and serene faith, the dread of coming judgment, the craving for the intercession of the saints and the prayers of the righteous.” More recently Earl Anderson has recognized common ground in the poems’ subject matter, noting “they reveal a central concern for the ways in which

4 Cf. S.E. Butler, who notes, “At one time, Cynewulf was even given credit for Beowulf – in fact, for almost everything in the corpus of Old English poetry except Caedmon’s Hymn.” “The Cynewulf Question Revived,” Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 83.1 (1982): 15. While S.K. Das’s Cynewulf and the Cynewulf Canon (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1942) originally provided a basis for supporting the stylistic unity of the four signed poems, Butler’s work effectively dismantled his argument by pointing out substantial methodological flaws in his study. Nevertheless, these four poems commonly remain identified as Cynewulf’s work. A fuller discussion of this issue can be found in Joseph D. Wine, Figurative Language in Cynewulf: Defining Aspects of a Poetic Style, Studies in Old Germanic Languages and Literature, vol. 3 (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), particularly 1-16.

5 Donoghue argues that Cynewulf may have appended his runic signature to a preexisting poem in the cases of The Fates of the Apostles and Christ II. Style in Old English Poetry: The Test of the Auxiliary, Yale Studies in English, no. 196 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 107-16.

God repeatedly reveals Himself to mankind through the continuing apostolic mission, and Gunnhild Zimmerman argues that the collection is organized around the concept of pilgrimage. These thematic links connecting the Cynewulf poems similarly provide a structure to this study’s approach to Fates and Elene. However, it should be recognized that such elements delineated as characteristic of Cynewulf’s verse are also broadly reflective of the poetry of the Vercelli Book as well. Andreas fits this profile, as does Dream of the Rood.

More uniquely Cynewulfian is the substance of the epilogues that identify the author. The epilogues of all four poems are constructed along parallel lines (likely reflecting the fact that the poet had to incorporate the same runes into each work). Cynewulf recapitulates similar themes by having the speaker present himself as fearfully awaiting death’s journey and the Judgment of God. Rune-coded passages alternately describe the passing of the world (Elene, Fates), the terror of doomsday (Juliana), or both (Christ II). The autobiographical tone of the epilogues allows the poet to orient the coming end of his own life within the eschatological expectations of salvation history, and as such serves to bring an individual point of view to the traditions of the Christian Church.

---

7 Earl Anderson, Cynewulf: Structure, Style, and Theme in His Poetry (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983) 23. Anderson lists in his discussion four shared elements that he judges central to Cynewulf’s verse: “a unified subject matter, a commitment to book learning, a style of composition that combines native formulaic techniques with the conventions and patterns of the Latin rhetorical tradition; and a conceptual development that maintains two complementary dimensions – a concern for the welfare of the community as a Christian ordo, and a commitment to a fundamentally mystical religious experience” (23).

Fates of the Apostles resonates within the Cynewulf epilogues’ focus on human death and divine judgment, multiplying through the sufferings and deaths of the apostles the pattern of the martyrs’ rejection of this world and the rewards of the next. Unlike the poet, the apostles actively embrace their deaths in Fates, and the poem chronicles their courageous efforts to bring Christianity to a hostile world. The sufferings of the saint become heroic qualities as the narrator attributes to the assembled apostles the courage of a warrior band on a journey that every person must undertake. The sense of imminent death that the epilogues express is the unifying focus of this martyrological poem and the repeated reenactment of that moment constructs these saints within an exemplary framework joining them to Christ and the heavenly kingdom on the one hand, and the reader and the terrestrial world on the other. Moreover, the poem’s focus on conversion on a grand scale creates a foundational narrative for the Christian faith that identifies its evangelical mission with the earliest saints, Christ’s apostles. In its efforts to memorialize the missionary campaigns of the apostles Fates creates a history of conversion and a geography of the faith. The legends of the saints are distilled to their essentials and overwritten on a map of the Mediterranean world. Among the purposes this poem was constructed to serve, doubtless one was to establish that all of these far-flung locales held a key to the kingdom of heaven through the saints that lived and died there.

Fates relates as well to the Vercelli poems’ narrative interest in individuals and relics historically linked to Christ (the Cross in Dream of the Rood and Elene; the apostles in Fates and Andreas). The poems reinforce Christ’s presence in the timeline of human history by recounting legends associated with what he left behind. Such
works serve to establish a historicity in contrast to the otherworldly role Christ performs as humanity’s judge and king of the angels in heaven.9 Similarly, the apostles are presented in Fates as historical figures who have conquered the path through this world that leads to salvation in the next. Consequently Fates intertwines the missionary geography of Christianity’s earliest days with the spiritual geography that marks the transition from death to life, from the earthly to the spiritual realm.

It is clear that Fates has its basis in received Anglo-Latin tradition and in the established literary form of the martyrology. Scholars have looked to contemporaneous martyrologies, including the pseudo-Bede and Usuardus’s work, to establish a source for the text.10 However, the most compelling arguments have proposed that Cynewulf drew his material from a variety of sources which may have included but likely were not limited to surviving martyrologies.11 Nevertheless, while evidence suggests that the poet incorporated material from other hagiographic sources such as full-length vitae (as Cross argues in the example of St. Thomas12), the structure and style of the martyrology dominate the work. The episodes devoted to the saints are concise, usually between five and ten lines long, and the poet telescopes into

9 This is an observation I hope in the future to develop in more detail in the context of a more extensive examination of the Vercelli Book.
11 This point was first established by J.E. Cross in “Cynewulf’s Traditions about the Apostles in The Fates of the Apostles,” in Cynewulf: Basic Readings, ed. Robert E. Bjork (NY: Garland Publishing, 1996), 79-94, and was recently brought again to public attention by McCulloh in “Did Cynewulf Use a Martyrology? Reconsidering the Sources of The Fates of the Apostles.”
12 For a discussion of this and other additional source material, consult Cross, “Cynewulf’s Traditions about the Apostles in The Fates of the Apostles,” 80.
this brief space only that information necessary to establish and contextualize the saint's death. Consider one of the shortest entries in *Fates*, the death of Philip:

Philipus was
mid Asseum, ðanon ece lif
þurh rode cwealm ricene gesohte,
syðdan on galgan in Gearapolim
ahangen was hildecordre. (l. 37-41)

[Philip was among the Asians, from then he sought eternal life quickly through death on the cross when in Hierapolis he was raised up on the cross by a troop of armed men.]

Its brevity encapsulates the martyrological interest in the who, where and how of the saint's death.\(^{13}\)

The formal similarity the poem bears to the genre of martyrlogy should not distract, however, from what is a developed and sustained interest in transforming martyrological content through the tools of vernacular poetics.\(^{14}\) The heroic epithets and martial diction of the poem emphatically define these saints in terms of the warrior ethos of Germanic culture. Consider the example Andrew offers, “sy ^an hildeheard, heriges byrhtme, / æfter guðplegan gealgan þehte”(l. 22-23) [when bold in battle, by the clamor of the pagan army, after battle-play he stretched out on the cross]. The apostles are presented as a *comitatus* (“Twelve wæron, / dædump domfaeste, dryhtne gecorene”(l. 4-5) [They were twelve, famous for their deeds, chosen by the Lord]), described as *ædelingas*, nobles or princes, and celebrated for their courageous

---

\(^{13}\) James Boren identifies these elements as the major structuring devices of *Fates*: “The parts of this structure I designate, respectively, the locative element (*Romebyrig*) - definition of the place or locale in which the action takes place; the instrumental element (*Nerones*) - the means by which an end is attained (in the case of the apostles, their persecutors, who are the salvation of the saints), an element susceptible to significant variations by the poet; and the nominative element, which designates the subject of the individual narrative sequences.” Boren, “Form and Meaning in Cynewulf’s *Fates of the Apostles*,” in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, 58.

\(^{14}\) The use of martial descriptions characteristic of *Fates*, for example, is not an element of the prose *Old English Martyrology*. 

147

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
deaths at violent hands. "Dus da ædelingas ende gesealdon, / XII tilmodige. Tir unbraecne / wegan on gewitte wuldres þegnas" (85-87) [Thus the princes gave their last, the twelve noble-hearted ones. Heaven’s thanes carried in mind indestructable glory].

In addition to the role that heroic vocabulary plays in constructing the presentation of the apostles, the eschatological framework that supports the poem similarly links it in theme and tone to works like *The Seafarer* and *The Phoenix*. While it is unlikely that there was any direct correlation between these works, the extended verbal metaphors which appear in these and other Old English poetic texts suggest a common fund of conceptual images. For example, Cynewulf’s description of the heavenly homeland resonates with the lines that end *The Seafarer*:

\[
\text{Ic sceal feor heonan,} \\
\text{an elles forþ eardes neosan,} \\
\text{sið asettan, nat ic sylfa hwær,} \\
\text{of þisse worulde: wic sindon uncud,} \\
\text{eard ond eðel. Swa bid aelcum menn,} \\
\text{nemþe he godeundes gastes bruce. (Fates l. 109-114)}
\]

[I must alone hence seek a homeland far away, journey from this world; even I know not where, the dwellings are unknown, the homeland and the native land. So it will be to every person unless he partake of the divine spirit.]

\[
\text{Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,} \\
\text{ond þonne gepencan hu we þider cumen,} \\
\text{ond we þonne eac tilien, þæt we to moten} \\
\text{in þa ecan eadignesse,} \\
\text{þær is lif gelong in lufan dryhtnes,} \\
\text{hyht in heofonum. (Seafarer, l. 117-121)\textsuperscript{15}}
\]

[Let us be mindful where we may have a home, and then think how we might come thither, and then we each may strive, so that we might go

there to that eternal blessedness, where there is life to be had in the Lord’s love, hope in heaven.]

While there is very little overlap in terms of words or formulas, their similarity nevertheless suggests the commonality of a topos which is, in fact, ubiquitous in Old English verse. As the earlier discussion of the Guthlac poems suggests, the metaphor of the heavenly homeland underwrites much of the conceptual basis for eschatology in Old English poetics.

A similar parallel can be found in Cynewulf’s use of the journey as an organizing principle. The always-expressive metaphor of the journey layers the literal narrative of the apostles’ lives over its spiritual and moralistic application to the life’s journey shared by all.16 All seek their heavenly homeland in this poem, and the disparate yet shared fates of the apostles mark out the path to the kingdom of God. Cynewulf constructs the poem around this extended topos in part by means of the spiritual geography that structures the martyrrological content of the work.17 The poet provides a vision of Christianity expanding ever outward, yet bound together by the spiritual community of the saints.

16 This conclusion finds fuller development in the work of Constance Hieatt, who writes, “Only after examining the journeys of the sidfrome [ready for a journey] apostles can the poet contemplate his own sid without feeling sidgeomor [weary of travel], and finally advise us all to aim our individual journeys towards heaven [...]” “The Fates of the Apostles: Imagery, Structure, and Meaning,” Cynewulf: Basic Readings, 70. See also Nicholas Howe, who observes, “In the poet’s vision, the apostle and the scop both exemplify the Christian life of the wanderer in search of his final home. This wandering is not in itself purposeless or random, for the voyage taken will determine the destination achieved at death.” The Old English Catalogue Poems, Anglistica vol. 23 (Copenhagen: Rosenhilde and Bagger, 1985), 100.

17 Howe locates the organizational schematic of Fates in Orosian geography, arguing “Using Rome as its point of departure, the geographical catalogue in Apostles provides a sequence of places arranged in proper order. Cynewulf makes no attempt to explain the precise location for each site of martyrdom or to measure the distance between them. He relies instead on an easterly axis to provide a clear order for his catalogue.” Howe, The Old English Catalogue Poems, 93.
The interplay between the physical and spiritual worlds supports the eschatological framework of the poem. Much of the narrative of the poem is engendered by the conflict between the secular power of the fallen world and the spiritual power of the heavenly kingdom. God's might does not flow into the world in this poem; rather, God's chosen saints escape, and by escaping conquer the pagan authority of the martyrs' persecutors. *Fates* exposes the distance between the two worlds and locates the power of the saints in their ability to cross the chasm into the heavenly realm. The apostles' exemplarity lies in their successful negotiation of the transition after death.

The poem's epilogue stresses Cynewulf's similar desire to ascend to the home in the heavens, the spiritual hope of the soul. In the concluding lines of the poem, the poet writes "þær is hihta mæst, / þær cyning engla clænum giðdeð / lean unhwilen" (l. 118-120) [There is the greatest of hopes, where the king of angels grants to the pure an eternal reward]. The otherworldly promise of a heavenly homeland under the power and authority of the king of angels offers a pure respite from the cruel exercise of earthly authority in *Fates*. The apostles conquer the physical power of the secular world with the spiritual power that has its home in heaven, and in so doing are rejoined with the source of their might. In this way, the saints become an emblem of the authority of God in this world as well as the next.18

---

18 Cynewulf's other hagiographic poems are similarly oriented around the issue of God's authority and its expression in the world. The interpretation of *Juliana* benefits from this framework -- the poet stages a clear conflict between prefect and saint, and the highly symbolic (and intentionally fictionalized) ending to the poem commemorates the transition of power. *Elene* even more clearly engages this issue, and the multi-layered characterizations contained in the poem offer its readers a highly sophisticated presentation.
The movement from this world to the next also foregrounds the contrast between spiritual and physical forms of time. The assembled fates of the apostles may resemble a martyrrology's deracinated sense of the past as saints are stripped from their historical context when they take their position in the cyclical calendar of the church. (Such is the case with the other poetic martyrrology from the period, the *Menologium*.)

However, the focus on the apostles definitively locates the work in history because the heroes are assembled in the time of Christ and their actions lead to the birth and spread of the Christian Church. In this poem Cynewulf excises the patterns of liturgical time (no feast days are included in the poem) in favor of twelve repetitions of the same historical moment, a shared moment of conversion writ large across the world. And yet that moment is more than historical, as it comes to be reenacted in new lands at a later age. Such, no doubt, would have been the attraction to a poet from a people whose own conversion still lived in the memory of their culture. The historical construction of the poem prepares the ground for its figural echoes in the ongoing process of conversion that affects northern Europe throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

Moreover, Cynewulf's epilogue brings the events of the poem into his present in another way – by exploring the intersection of lived time and eternity in the experience of every person's life. The eschatological reframing at the conclusion of the poem recreates the contrast between the material and the spiritual at the end of time and in the framework of salvation history. In the epilogue the apostles vanish, the world is unmade and the path to heaven undiscovered. Death claims the poet's body but the poem survives, and with it the poet's hope for redemption through the
intercession of others. The shift from the past to eschatological time (repeatedly enacted through the apostles’ deaths and passage to the heavenly kingdom) is encompassed in the epilogue, and with it the didactic connection of the past with the poetic present of author and audience.

Like *Fates of the Apostles*, *Elene* traces the spread of an apostolic faith across the world. This work narrates the legend of the *Inventio crucis*, the discovery of the True Cross. While different versions of the Invention legend exist, *Elene* reflects the hagiographic tradition popular in the Latin West that attributes the Cross’s discovery to Helena, mother of Constantine the Great. The events of the narrative include Constantine’s battlefield vision of the Cross and conversion to Christianity, the empress’s journey to Jerusalem at her son’s request to recover the physical artifact, her confrontation with the Jewish people, and the discovery and miraculous confirmation of the Cross and its nails. An epilogue to the poem contains the runic signature of Cynewulf.

Cynewulf’s *Elene* is adapted from the Judas Cyriacus legend. While the specific text that served as the poet’s source is unknown, this particular version of the *Inventio crucis* circulated widely in the West and provided the basis for the

---

popular identification of Helena with the finding of the Cross.\textsuperscript{20} The narrative owes its nomenclature to the central figure of Judas (baptized Cyriacus), a Jewish wise man and Christian convert who ultimately discloses the Cross’s location to Helena. With the Judas Cyriacus legend, however, Cynewulf inherited a muddied chronology, mismatched events from Constantine’s reign, and a main character (Judas Cyriacus) thought to be entirely fictional.\textsuperscript{21} As Louis De Combes writes, “Never have historical chronology and common-sense been more imprudently set at naught by popular fancy in the above legend.”\textsuperscript{22} More recent historical discussions of the Judas Cyriacus legend have employed the term ‘historical fiction’.\textsuperscript{23}

Despite its demonstrable failures as a reliable historical record, this legend offers an engaging perspective into the crafting of history itself. The Judas Cyriacus legend dramatically enacts a battle for the past as it seeks to resolve the breach between Christianity and its Judaic roots. This polemical work seeks to establish the preeminence of the Christian worldview, and narrates the miraculous revelation of the


\textsuperscript{21} “[Judas] was definitely a non-historical person created for the sake of the legend’s message” Drijvers, \textit{Helena Augusta}, 177.

\textsuperscript{22} Louis De Combes, \textit{The Finding of the True Cross}, trans. Luigi Cappadelta, The International Catholic Library, ed. Rev. J. Wilhelm, vol. 10 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1907), 263. De Combes assembles the following list of complaints: “In four generations a family, of which the father was already an old man in A.D. 33, has reached the year 327; the manifestation at the Milvian bridge is transported to the banks of the Danube; Eusebius, the Arian bishop of Nicomedia, who baptised Constantine on his death-bed, is confounded with Pope Eusebius, who was made bishop of Rome in 309; Julian the Apostate is made to succeed Constantine; nor was there in the fourth century any bishop of Jerusalem of the name of Judas or Cyriacus”(263–4).

Cross and concomitant conversion of the Jews. The legend’s interest in establishing the Christian ownership of Hebrew tradition affirms the conquest not only of the past but the future as the victory of Christianity joins both in the framework of salvation history and the overarching narrative of Christian time.

Cynewulf’s *Elene* preserves this interest in crafting a unified narrative of Christian history. Moreover, aspects of the Old English text suggest that Cynewulf sought to articulate connections to his own culture’s circumstances. While the poet adhered closely to the events of the legend, his poem reveals echoes of the Anglo-Saxons’ own history, a national narrative combining elements of the Roman *imperium*, Germanic tradition and Christian conversion. The plot of *Elene* hinges on precisely these intersections of identity as it explores the alliance between the Christian faith and the Roman Empire and dramatically expands the role that the barbarians play in the poem. At the core of the text is conflict among the traditions that shape the understanding of the past, and the Old English poem adds to Jews and Christians the invading tribes, a force assembled under the banner of Germanic legend. While Cynewulf inherits the plot of his work, elements unique to the Old English poem suggest his intention to highlight the symmetry between the historiographical concerns of the legend and the Anglo-Saxons’ relationship with their own past.

Cynewulf further explores the lessons of this past in the poem’s epilogue. The poet switches in tone from history to homily in the lines that conclude *Elene* as he reenacts on a personal level the narrative recovery of the Cross into his own life through the study of the legend. In this way Cynewulf models for his readers the significance of the Cross and its history to every Christian. The contents of the
epilogue shift the focus of the work from past times to the end of time as it focuses on the judgment awaiting every person after death. Moreover, the epilogue also describes Cynewulf's own engagement with the poetic process, as the poet attributes his inspiration and knowledge to the study of the Cross and the gift of God's revelation. In this way the epilogue and the events of the narrative unite in attributing the preservation and validation of the Christian narrative of the past to God's revelatory power in the world.

The narrative and epilogue of *Elene* together reveal Cynewulf's interest in the interpretation of the past. In this poem he investigates the uses of history on both the cultural and individual levels. The discovery of the Cross becomes a powerful metaphor for both the reconciliation of historical traditions and the requirements of personal salvation. Consequently, these interpretive approaches offer an expressive connection between the local circumstances of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and the broader patterns of the Christian faith.

The Judas Cyriacus legend contains many elements that challenge or contradict what is known of Constantine's reign. The intersections between legend and history are first exposed in the narrative interpolation of Constantine's vision. In the Western Church, this vision is most commonly associated with Constantine's defeat of the Roman ruler Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. In the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius recounts a version of this narrative (received, he claims, directly from Constantine) that illustrates its major elements: the vision of the Cross with its

\[\text{[Footnote]}\]

\[\text{[Footnote continuation]}\]
assurance of military victory; the divine visitation; the appropriation of the Cross as a battle standard. While accounts may disagree on the details (for example, Lactantius's *De Morte Persecutorum* sets the vision on the eve of battle at the Milvian Bridge, while Eusebius claims the vision occurred before Constantine's campaign began), these early narratives join in identifying the circumstances of the vision with the internal political struggles of Rome.

When the Judas Cyriacus legend incorporates Constantine's vision into its narrative roughly a century later, however, this setting is dramatically altered. Instead of associating it with the emperor's invasion of Rome and his war against Maxentius, this legend locates the vision on the banks of the Danube in the face of invading barbarians. This suggests more than a simple shift in scenery because the vision on the Danube opens up a new sense of geography, connecting Rome to the Eastern settings that provide the landscape for the Cross's discovery. Moreover, the context has changed from civil war to the defense of the Empire, forging in a more explicit way the connection between Constantine's new faith and the political integrity of the imperial realm. This transplanted vision compellingly illustrates the fusion of spiritual

---

26 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 204.
27 Han J.W. Drijvers and Jan Willem Drijvers suggest that the vision's shift from the Tiber to the Danube reflects the eastern roots of the Judas Cyriacus legend, observing "These wars were probably more known in the East than Constantine's war against Maxentius." *The Finding of the True Cross: The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac: Introduction, text and translation*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 565 (Lovanii: In Aedibus Peeters, 1997), 22. Both Eastern and Western versions of Constantine's vision would survive in the Middle Ages, and in some cases were preserved even within the same work. Amnon Linder offers examples of hymns which acknowledge and merge aspects of the two versions, and notes that Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurae* presents both versions together in its narrative of the Cross's finding. "The Myth of Constantine the Great in the West: Sources and Hagiographic Commemoration," *Studia Mediaevalia* 36 Series 16 no. 1 (1975): 64-66.
and political interests expressed in the act of conversion, a theme expanded and
restaged in the narrative through the conversion of the Jews.

The shift in circumstances from civil war to barbarian invasion offers a
dramatic set of associations for the Old English poet. Cynwulf’s understanding of
the encounter on the Danube situates the legend within the remembered Germanic
past. Located in a period characterized by E. Gordon Whatley as “the beginning of the
historical era in which the barbarian Christians of the West were still living,” Elene
enacts the conflict between the Germanic and Eastern European tribes and the forces
of imperial Rome. A battle only briefly described in the Latin sources is dramatically
expanded, and the unspecified barbarians that Constantine faces across the Danube in
the Latin tradition acquire identities that are rooted in Germanic historical tradition.
They become “Huna leode 7 Hreðgotan, / [...] Francan 7 Hu[g]as” (1.20-21) [the
people of the Huns and the Hrerogoths, [...] the Franks and the Hugas]. These are
recognizable names in Anglo-Saxon legend: Waldere (though its Old English version
survives only in a fragment) is set in the court of Attila the Hun; Widsith mentions in
its catalogue of travels the Huns and the Franks; Beowulf includes references to the
Franks and the Hugas. In the invading forces, the “fyrda mæst” (1.35) [the greatest of
armies], can be found the echoes of Germanic legend, the ghosts of the Anglo-Saxons’
own Continental past. Consequently the invading tribes with their accompanying
beasts of battle (the “wulf on wealde” (1.28) [wolf in the woods] and “urigfeðera earn”
(1.29) [dewy-feathered eagle], conventional tropes in Old English verse) suggest not

28 E. Gordon Whatley, “The Figure of Constantine the Great in Cynwulf’s ‘Elene,’” Traditio 37
29 All Old English quotations are drawn from P.O.E. Gradon’s Cynwulf’s ‘Elene,’ 2nd ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992). Translations are mine.
only an attempt to dramatize the largely-invented tale of a battle over five hundred 
years previous, but also a desire to illustrate vividly that the events contained in Elene 
intersect with the framework of Anglo-Saxon history.

If Anglo-Saxon readers find their ancestral memories on one side of the 
Danube, however, they find their spiritual traditions on the other. Thanks to Bede’s 
Historia ecclesiastica, Anglo-Saxon literary culture had two strands of history 
intersecting at its core – that of the people, and that of the island. At the time of the 
poem’s setting, the inhabitants of Britain were under Roman rule. Constantine himself 
was made emperor in Britain upon his father Constantius’s death in York. As early as 
the end of the seventh century Celtic traditions record the Constantine legend in some 
form,30 and later English tradition would hold his mother Helena to be the daughter of 
a British king.31 The Anglo-Saxons were the heirs of this British past, and Elene links 
this local legacy to the historical foundations of imperial Christianity.

In this context, the battle between the Romans and the invading tribes bears the 
freight of the cultural past. Elene’s opening lines offer Cynewulf an opportunity to 
articulate the fault line present in Anglo-Saxon culture between the pre-conversion

31 An account of English beliefs concerning Helena is offered by Frances Arnold-Forster, who provides 
an overview of local histories that identify her as the daughter of the British king Coel (the original ‘Old 
King Cole’), and her birthplace as Colchester. Through Henry of Huntingdon, Geoffrey of Monmouth, 
and evidence supplied by church dedications, Arnold-Forster traces the English claim on Helena to the 
11th century and attributes the basis for this legend to “a phrase in two Latin authors, which speaks of 
Constantine as ‘taking his rise from Britain.'” Studies in Church Dedications or England’s Patron 
Saints, vol. I (London: Skeffington & Son, Piccadilly, 1899), 185. A more recent exploration of 
Helena’s English roots in the broader context of the Constantine tradition can be found in Linder, “The 
Myth of Constantine the Great in the West,” 91-93.
past and the Christian sense of history. His amplification of this episode necessarily sympathizes with the Romans, but acknowledges as well that two frames of reference intersect in his narrative. The battle on the Danube brings these historical traditions face to face, recognizing but simultaneously displacing the pagan past in favor of the Christian point of view. The victory of the Cross becomes an important symbol of resolution, as it prefigures the conversion that awaits the Anglo-Saxons in a new land. Moreover, the literary construction of the poem is analogous to this transformation. The poetic structures of alliterative verse that preserve ancestral memories of Continental wars in this case give shape to the narrative celebration of the Church’s history. The epithets of the heroic past transform and are transformed by the heroes of the new faith.

This battle also initiates the process by which the spiritual interests of the Christian faith become identified with the political interests of Constantine and the Roman Empire. In a poem about conversion, it is significant that the only ones to remain unconverted are the invaders who challenge the boundaries of the imperium; they cannot be incorporated into the Empire, and indeed their existence defines the limits of Rome’s influence. The fusion of Romanitas and the Christian faith celebrated by this poem finds the Continental tribes doubly estranged from the normative narrative of Christian history. The later successful barbarian conquest of Roman territory (including Britain and Rome), and the conversions of new nations carved from the Empire lay in an unacknowledged future.

Cynewulf enriches his poem with a geographical knowledge of where the empire’s boundaries are, and the symbolic role they play in articulating a vision of the expanding Roman faith. The resurrected Cross offers a vision of unity mapped over the communities surrounding the Mediterranean Sea as the news of its discovery spreads “æfter burgum swa brimo fæðm[a]ð” [throughout the cities as far as the sea’s embrace] (l. 971). This depiction of the empire ringed around the sea offers an expressive image of spiritual community. The sea journey described in lines 225-275, another substantive addition by the Old English poet, introduces an additional element of geographic specificity to the poem lacking in other versions of the legend. In this way it reflects the movement of the poem as it courses from the periphery to the center and back again. Elene herself actively seeks to link Rome to the events that happen in the East. She sends messengers to inform Constantine of the discovery, who in turn sends his command back with her men to build a church on the site. She instructs Eusebius, bishop of Rome, to travel to Palestine for the purpose of consecrating Judas bishop of Jerusalem. She sends a bridle made from the nails of the Crucifixion back to Constantine, and finally she herself prepares to journey back “to eðle”(l. 1219), to her homeland at the end of the poem. The energy of the poem is focused on enforcing Rome’s ideology on the boundaries of the empire.33

33 While Whatley identifies the close connection between Rome and Jerusalem with the more substantive role that Constantine plays in the Old English poem, he acknowledges that the well-worn path between the two cities reinforces the identification of the Roman Empire with the Christian faith: “The result of [the changes Cynewulf makes] is that Rome and Jerusalem are drawn closer together in Cynewulf’s poem than in the Latin text, and Judas’ struggle with Elene is depicted as part of a process of conversion which begins with the emperor’s own vision, victory, and baptism, and which culminates in the successful integration of the Holy Land into his new Christian empire, and the confirmation of the Roman Christian pax and ordo throughout the world”(“The Figure of Constantine the Great in Cynewulf’s ‘Elene,’” 176). See also Earl Anderson’s discussion of Christian ordo and the populus dei in Elene in Cynewulf, 126-133.
Across the sea, however, lies Jerusalem. Distant from Rome yet occupying the center point of Christian geography, the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem pose a challenge to the unanimity of the new imperial faith. The schism between Christians and Jews divides two faiths that share a history, yet disagree on its interpretation. Elene’s quest lays bare the dispute between the two communities, and this dispute is resolved by the Cross’s material rediscovery. The physical relic of the Crucifixion validates the Christian understanding of the past, and it reunites the historical narrative joining the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament. Significantly, however, it is not Elene who finds the Cross but Judas, and it is in Judas Cyriacus that two faiths with a common past are reconciled through a figure of conversion.

Elene’s journey to Jerusalem and her notorious interrogation of the Jewish people acknowledge the Jews’ privileged relationship with the spiritual past through their identity as the original populus Dei. She harangues them with the loss of this favored identity, assaulting them with the words of Moses and David and Isaiah. As her familiarity with the prophets indicates, the empress recognizes that the history of the Jews is also the history of the Christians. The Jews contain the Christian past in their writings and their lineage. For this reason Elene searches for her answers in their history. While her condemnation of the Jewish nation is unremitting in its refusal to recognize Christ as the Messiah, nevertheless Elene seeks knowledge among its

---

34 As Linder writes in “Ecclesia and Synagoga in the Medieval Myth of Constantine the Great,” “As a historically-oriented religion, Christianity had to come to terms with its Jewish origin, which it preserved as a permanent source of influence in the canon of the Old Testament” (1031). For a literary discussion of the contrast between Jewish and Christian forms of knowledge in Elene, see Catherine Regan, “Evangelism as the Informing Principle of Cynewulf’s Elene,” in Cynewulf: Basic Readings, 251-280 and Thomas D. Hill, “Sapiential Structure and Figural Narrative in the Old English Elene,” in Cynewulf: Basic Readings, 207-228.
written traditions. She expects the location and fate of the Cross to be recorded, but
Jewish scholars and wise men are ignorant of the existence of Christ and the events of
the Crucifixion. This lost history emphasizes the breach between the two faiths, and
the Jewish people are presented as wholly unaware of the divergent narrative of
Christian history.

Such is not the case with Judas, however, who knows of Christ through an oral
narrative passed down through his family. The figure of Judas has attracted interest in
part because of the legend’s claim that Stephen the protomartyr was his brother and
that his father Symon was witness to the deliberations that led up to the Crucifixion.
Many scholars of the Judas Cyriacus tradition have identified these family
relationships as typological rather than literal, based in part on the significance of
Judas’ name.35 This lineage establishes Judas’ role as a conduit to the Hebrew past, a
role that becomes explicit as he reveals the significance of the Cross to his audience of
learned Jews in lines 436-453. He repeats a message handed down from his
grandfather to his father, both men who were convinced of the divinity of Christ:

“Gif þe þæt gelimpe on liifdagum
þæt ðu gehyre ymb þæt halig treo
frode frignan 7 geflitu ræran
be ðam sigebeame on þam sódcyning
ahangen wæs, heofonrices weard,
eallre sybbe bearn, þonne þu snude gecyð,
min swæs sunu, ær þec swylt nime.
Ne mæg æfere ofer þæt Ebreæ þeod,
ræþeæhtende rice healdan (II. 441-449)

[“If it happens in your lifetime that you hear wise ones ask about that
holy tree and raise strife concerning that victory tree on which the True
King was hanged, the guardian of the heavenly kingdom, child of all

and Synagoga in the Medieval Myth of Constantine the Great,” 1037; Drijvers, Helena Augusta, 180.
162

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
tribes, then you quickly reveal it, my dear son, before death takes you. Never after that will the Hebrew people, wisdom-concealing, be able to rule a kingdom.

Judas and his family blur the boundaries between Christian and Jew, and in this way introduce the spiritual resolution that Judas Cyriacus comes to personify. The Jewish saint bridges the two traditions, and by reuniting the history of the Christian faith with its origins he opens the door to the rediscovery of the Cross in the material world.

The reunited narrative necessarily requires a relinquishing of the Jewish claim upon the Old Testament, and this act is nowhere more clearly visible than the lines in which the empress is counseled to craft the nails into a bridle in accordance with Zechariah 14:20 ("bið þæt beacen Gode / halig nemned 7 se hwæteadig / wigge weordod se þæt wicg byr[e]ð" (U. 1 193-95) [that sign will be called holy to God and the fortunate one who owns that steed will be honored in warfare]). Zechariah 14 prophesies the coming of time in which the Lord will descend to defend Jerusalem from its enemies and dwell in the city as ruler of the world, and Zechariah 14:20 promises "in die illo erit quod super frenum equi est sanctum Domino" ["In that day that which is upon the bridle of the horse shall be holy to the Lord"]. Consequently, the creation of the bridle intentionally links Constantine's rule with this prophetic tradition of the reign of God on earth. While other versions of the legend attribute to the queen the knowledge of Zechariah's prophecy and the desire to craft the bridle, in Elene she seeks advice from an unnamed wise man and must be instructed of the act's significance. If the unnamed man was a Jew (and nowhere else in the poem does

---

Elene seek advice from a Roman\(^\text{37}\), this suggestion is tantamount to a betrayal of the Jewish hope for the messianic age. The poem’s suggestion that Constantine fulfills the promise of the kingdom of God in this world underscores the Jews’ loss of their patrimony. By aligning this prophecy with Christianity’s historical narrative, the newly-converted Jews not only signal their acceptance of Christ as the fulfillment of the messianic promise, they apply the weight of their own traditions in support of the imperial arm of the Christian faith.

The change in the context of the Zechariah prophecy sheds new light on another minor but telling alteration that Cynewulf makes to the tradition. When the Jews are confronted with the nails of the Crucifixion, they convert “ealle ánmode” (l. 1117), unanimously. This marks a departure from other versions that explicitly include mention of the Roman empress persecuting and expelling the Jews who remain unconverted.\(^\text{38}\) As many scholars have noted, this unanimous conversion has eschatological implications, and may have been included to introduce the poet’s exploration of eschatological themes in the epilogue.\(^\text{39}\) However, the mass conversion

\(^{37}\) In the eleventh-century Old English Invention homily found in the *Classbook of St Dunstan*, the command to incorporate the nails into a bridle for Constantine comes from the heavens. *The Old English Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and trans. Mary-Catherine Bodden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 99.

\(^{38}\) For the purpose of comparison, consider these lines from Allen and Calder’s translation of the *Acta Quiriaci*: “After blessed Helena had encouraged all those in Jerusalem who had the faith of Jesus Christ and had completed all [her work], she persecuted the Jews, because they had not believed, and frightened them out of Judea” (68).

of the Jews also underscores the fact that this action transforms the identity of a nation and its relationship to its own past. The individual aspects of conversion vanish in the face of what is presented as a cultural process of reconciling with and embracing a new pattern of history.

It is likely that Cynewulf recognized the conversion of the Jews in the poem to be analogous to the historical circumstance of the Anglo-Saxons, a community whose understanding of the past is similarly transformed by its conversion to the Christian worldview. The Anglo-Saxons had long used the Old Testament and the Israelites as a context for understanding their history. This practice reflected a figural understanding of history that connected the past with the biblical patterns of Christian time. Moreover, this process was reciprocal as Anglo-Saxon traditions illuminated the culture’s understanding of the Old Testament. Such is the circumstance in the Old English *Exodus*, in which the biblical events of the poem are constructed to reflect a parallel with the Anglo-Saxons’ own ancestral migrations. In this case the stress placed in *Elene* on the unanimity of the Jews’ conversion and the excised reference to persecution suggests an attempt by Cynewulf to bring this event in line with the Anglo-Saxon cultural past. Bede’s account of England’s Christian history portrays

---

will not believe in the living Christ before the Antichrist is slain by God]. Linder provides an explanation of the origin of this tradition in “Ecclesia and Synagoga in the Medieval Myth of Constantine the Great,” 1039.

40 A discussion of the role of figuration in the Christian interpretation of history can be found in Erich Auerbach’s discussion of *figura* in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959; reprint Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-76, esp. 50-56. In the specific context of *Elene*, Whatley explores the parallels between the Old Testament and the vernacular narrative, at one point describing Constantine as “an Old Testament king in Anglo-Saxon dress.” “The Figure of Constantine the Great in Cynewulf’s ‘Elene,’” 189.

conversion as a communal event enacted on the national rather than individual scale, and Cynewulf’s version of the Judas Cyriacus legend preserves this emphasis intact.

Consequently, in *Elene* Cynewulf offers a model for reuniting his own culture’s fractured past. The transformations of past knowledge found in the unearthing of the Cross, the Jews’ conversion, and the conferral of the Zechariah prophecy offer a compelling parallel for an Anglo-Saxon poet who sought to reinterpret his own traditions within the Christian narrative of history. *Elene* serves as an example of this process, laying bare the perspectives that intersect in such an encounter with the past. *Elene* can be read as symbolically reconciling the Anglo-Saxons’ own pagan past with their Christian present. The crafting of the poem itself embodies this reconciliation, imbuing the poetic forms of the heroic past with a new understanding of history, the new narrative of Christian time.

Cynewulf’s epilogue, the verse lines 1236-1321 which follow the ‘finit’ (1.1235) in the manuscript, shifts the focus of the poem from the historical past to a devotional present. In these lines the narrator conveys his own experience of spiritual degradation and revelation guided by the narrative of the Cross, his knowledge of the transience of earthly things, and his vision of the Judgment that awaits every person after death. The epilogue dramatically re-enacts on a personal level the historical narrative of the poem as the poet brings the meaning of the Cross and the past into his own life.42

---

The epilogue dramatically reframes the events of the poem by introducing the context of personal salvation. Three strategic moves reorient the poem's significance from the historical to an eternally-present and future sense of Christian time. The first move occurs before the *finit* in lines 1219-1235, in which the events of the poem are situated within the liturgical calendar. These lines commemorating the feast of the *Inventio crucis* affirm the legend's place in the cycle of the liturgy, foregrounding the devotional and didactic purpose of the narrative. The second move in lines 1236 to 1256 links the poet's identification of the meaning and the power of the Cross with his own spiritual state at the end of life. In this sense the study of the Cross is affiliated with the revelation of the path to individual salvation. Finally the third move in lines 1256 to 1321 vividly describes the world's passing and the events of Judgment that will close the human experience of linear time. In the eschatological vision that concludes the poem, history is unwound in the exercise of salvation and damnation.

Implicit in these shifts of perspective is a focus on the individual experience of Christian time as something inevitably present, encompassed within the span of every life. History becomes didactic, and the events of the poem move beyond their literal significance to provide the basis for the universal experience of venerating the Cross.

The liturgical reinscription of the Cross provides the starting point. Lines 1219-1235 describe Elene's establishment of the May 3rd feast of the Invention, and contain a short prayer blessing those who celebrate this event in the church calendar. Traditionally these lines have not been examined in the context of Cynewulf's epilogue because the *finit* that concludes 1.1235 suggests a boundary between the contents of the source and the autobiographical insertion. Nevertheless, there is a
significant connection between the lines referring to the liturgical calendar and the themes developed in Cynewulf's epilogue. While the autobiographical passage undoubtedly responds to and refra...es of the individual life and liturgical time.

The festal significance of the legend is introduced as Elene turns back to Rome. She instructs representatives from the newly Christian community (still described in the poem, however, as "seleste / mid ludeum gumena" (ll.1201-1202) [the best of men among the Jews]) to remain strong in the Christian faith and to be guided by the teachings of their bishop Cyriacus. Before her final departure, she calls the entire community together to charge them with the commemoration of the Cross’s Invention. In this passage Cynewulf amplifies Latin lines that identify the date of this event. The Cross is described as "mærost beama / þæra þe of eorðan up áweoxe, / geloden under leafum" (ll.1224-1226) [the most famous of trees which grew up from the earth, laden under leaves], and the date of its feast is "syx nihtum ær sumeres cyme / on Mai[u]s monað" (ll. 1227-1228) [six nights before summer’s arrival in the month of May]. The poet’s approach to these lines aligns the Invention of the Cross explicitly with the coming of summer.

The connection between seasonal rebirth and the promise of salvation is further developed in the lines that follow, 1228-35. These lines establish that liturgical commemoration brings the historical events of the poem out of the past into the cycle of Christian time:

sie þara manna gehwam
These lines introduce the theme that drives Cynewulf’s epilogue: the fate of the individual soul after death. The festival of the Cross, itself a reminder of the death of Christ, serves to remind Christians of their own death, but also of the eternity that awaits afterwards. Each must face two doors, salvation and damnation. This brief image sets the stage for the eschatological interests that dominate Cynewulf’s epilogue.

As these observations suggest, the lines that conclude the Invention legend (1219-1235) contain the seeds of the transition from earthly to spiritual time that the poet amplifies in his epilogue. Cynewulf builds on the liturgical elements introduced in these lines, crafting a discussion that illuminates the spiritual meaning behind the historical. The epilogue itself demonstrates how to interpret the past, a meaningful addition to a poem that repeatedly locates knowledge in past traditions. In this sense the epilogue exposes the shifts in the uses and meaning of history within the poem as it orients both the events of Elene and the act of authorship itself within the master narrative of Christian time.
The autobiographical tone of the epilogue also reframes the Invention legend by constructing a parallel to the *inventio* of the poet. The narrator applies the themes of discovery and conversion to his own life and offers himself as the recipient of the Cross’s revelation in the world: “*nysse ic gearwe, / be ðære [rode] riht ær me rumran geÞeahht, / þurh ða mæran miht, on modes þeaht, / wisdom onwreah*” (ll. 1239-1242) [I did not know completely about the True Cross before a more spacious counsel, wisdom, was made manifest to me in my heart’s thought through the glorious power]. The revealed narrative of the Cross in itself inspires a more individual form of discovery. Significantly, however, revelation is rooted in historical traditions that already exist in the world. Constantine has the community of Roman Christians, Elene has the Scriptures, and Judas Cyriacus has family memories that date from the time of Christ. Cynewulf has books – he acknowledges that he found the legend of the Cross “on bocum [...], on gewritum cydan”(ll. 1254-1255) [in books [...], revealed in writings], and these narratives of the past provide the basis for revelation in the contemporary world of the poet and his audience.

Cynewulf constructs himself as benefiting from the lessons of his narrative, finding in the legend he translates an opportunity for understanding and articulating his own spiritual condition. The narrator in *Elene* describes his progress from being “*synnum asæled*”(l.1243) [bound with sins] to achieving “*rumran geÞeahht*”(l.1240) [broader knowledge] through God’s revelation. He finds in the pattern of his own life an outline for the patterns of time itself. Lines that could be read as the laments of an old man (“*nu synt geardagas / æfter fyrstmearce forð gewitene, / lifwynne geliden swa l toglideð*”(ll.1266-1268) [now former days are departing forth after the appointed
time, joys in life have gone as the sea departs]) are emblematic as well of the passing of the world ("swa þeos wor[ul]d / eall gewiteð / 7 eac swa some þe hire on wurdon / atydrêde tionleg nimeð, / ðonne Dryhten sylf dom geseceð / engla weorude"(ll.1276-1280) [Thus this world will completely depart and a destroying flame will take each likewise of those who were born, when the Lord himself seeks judgment with an army of angels]).

The runic passage intertwines images organized loosely around the contrast between youth and old age, categories that speak simultaneously to individual life and the ages of the world. As Gardner observes, the epilogue as a whole intertwines the path of personal spirituality with the overarching patterns of history. This passage in particular demonstrates an almost seamless movement from the sufferings of sinful life to the cataclysmic obliteration of the earthly realm to occur at the end of Christian time. Wealth and property are employed to embody the lost pleasures of youth and the apocalyptic destruction of the material realm. In this way the runic passage thematically links the poet’s earlier lament of his loss of youth and sinful past (ll. 1236-1251) to the vision of future judgment that closes the poem.

The runic passage also marks a transition between the intimate tone of the epilogue’s opening and the homiletic tone that accompanies Cynewulf’s movement

43 "The poet develops, then, a rough system of relationships based on the Germanic, as well as Christian, underworld, mid-world, upper-world concept [...] . On the level of private morality, this three-stage scheme corresponds to the movement in the life of man from the pride of youth, to the suffering and doubt of age, to salvation or damnation in the final Judgment. On the level of history, the scheme corresponds to the progress from the heroic youth of the Germanic band [...] to the decline of the band [...] to acceptance or rejection of universal Christendom." Gardner, “Cynewulf’s Elene: Sources and Structure,” 74. Earl Anderson also examines individual spirituality in the context of the overarching eschatological vision of the epilogue, noting “The vision is universal, the event cosmic, but at the same time intensely personal.” Cynewulf, 152.
into eschatology. The passage seeks to instruct as it dwells upon the impermanence of earthly life. Moreover, the closing lines of the poem (ll. 1286-1321) reinforce this didactic purpose with its dramatic enactment of Judgment Day. Each Christian must face his/her words and deeds in life before Christ; each Christian must take his/her place in one of three groups, the sodfæste (l.1289) [firm in truth], the synfulle (l.1295) [sinful], and the awyrgede worsceadan (l.1299) [accursed sinners]. All must be cast into the flames in order to be cleansed from their sins (though the sodfæste are spared the worst of the fire’s pain by God). After the purifying flames of judgment, the Lord separates the awyrgede worsceadan, condemned to hell, from the synfulle and the sodfæste, who join the angels in the heavenly kingdom. The apocalyptic images that close the poem and the description of Christ’s judgment offer the vivid reminder that the patterns of Christian time and earthly life have their fulfillment not in this world but the next.

The epilogue offers a descriptive amplification of the spiritual issues that underwrite Elene as a whole. The discovery of the Cross, literally a rediscovery of the past, lays bare the path of history linking the past to an eschatological future. The reenacted cycle of revelation and conversion is incorporated by the epilogue into a didactic pattern for individual life. Perhaps the most potent lesson of the past, however, is its transience and loss. As the runic passage declares in the elegiac tone so common to Old English verse, all things pass away. Even the saints must leave this world to realize their salvation in the next. In a poem in which the memory of Christ himself has all but vanished from Jerusalem, the bond that joins past to present is the active force of God’s will in the world. This force is expressed through the acts of
revelation and the restoration of the past that lead the heroes of *Elene* to the Cross, and it is expressed through the act of inspiration that sets the poet to his commemorative task. Reflection and revelation lead the poet to the written traditions of the Cross’s discovery, and in turn the divine gift of inspiration discovers in him “leoducræft” (l. 1250), the art of poetry that allows him to craft and revitalize the past.

In this sense the epilogue articulates a divinely-sanctioned view of history. The records and the memories of the Christian past are still retrievable in the world of the poem, and Constantine’s visionary apprehension of the Cross begins the process of assembling these scattered relics and remembrances into a living tradition. The symbol of the Cross unlocks the meaning of the past in the poem, and the miracles that accompany its physical resurrection convey the truth of this meaning. At every turn, revelation underpins the Christian recovery of the past. The writing of the past becomes a revelatory endeavor in itself, and, as Cynewulf’s epilogue demonstrates, its interpretation lays bare the spiritual patterns of Christian time.

The linking of revelation and interpretation consequently supports the vision of history enacted in *Elene*. In the encounters of Romans and barbarians, Christians and Jews, the poet finds a foreshadowing of the conflicts of faith and cultural identity in England’s own conversion history. The conversion of the Jews offers a pattern for reconciling the pre-conversion past with the narrative of Christian history. Moreover, as Cynewulf’s epilogue establishes, the past guarantees the future narrative of Christian time. History finds its meaning in the individual patterns of spiritual life, and its fulfillment in the world to come and the end of time. The discovery of the Cross, an event rooted in time and place, is recast in the epilogue as an emblem of the
universal Christian pursuit of salvation. In this way *Elene* reaffirms the connection between the patterns of the past and the enduring experience of the Christian faith.

The interrelation of historical narrative and eschatological instruction that receives such explicit development in Cynewulf’s writing awaits further discussion in the broader context of the Vercelli Book. Even from this limited perspective, however, it is possible to see how the commemorative and didactic purposes of history intersect in the poetic *lives*, and how such narratives provide engaging insight into the use and meaning of the past. These texts reconstruct the Latin records of the Church in the poetic forms of Old English tradition, and this process of translation reestablishes the Christian vision of salvation history within the conceptual metaphors of the culture. Moreover, the past is linked to the present as these narratives illustrate the process by which conversion in this world leads to salvation in the next. Cynewulf’s work demonstrates how Anglo-Saxon visions of history and time intersect on the communal and individual levels. These poems work to establish the foundations of a Christian past for a converted people, and yet they also minister to the soul. They create a poetic tradition for a new faith, and vividly illustrate the process of coming to knowledge and salvation. In this way these poetic works recreate in the past forms of cultural and spiritual exemplarity.
CHAPTER 5

If Old English poetic works suggest ways in which history can serve didactic ends, the Old English prose homilies make the lessons of the past explicit. The late Anglo-Saxon period is distinguished by its vernacular liturgical texts and sermon collections, books and manuscripts assembled in the intellectual environment of the tenth-century Benedictine Reform. Christopher A. Jones identifies the English Reform with the following elements:

A uniform observance of the Benedictine Rule in all English monasteries; the professed cultivation of royal over local aristocratic patronage; a harsh polemic against secular clerks and their expulsion from some cathedral chapters and minsters; the ‘restoration’ of a monastic episcopacy as witnessed by Bede in the ‘golden age’ of the Anglo-Saxon church; and, fuelled by that nostalgia, a pride in the ‘native’ element in Anglo-Saxon monasticism relative to continental trends of revival and liturgical embellishment.¹

The embrace of these ideals led to a revitalized interest in other aspects of the English faith as well, including the commemoration of the saints. The refoundation of monasteries under Benedictine reformers was paralleled by the translation of saints.²

² See David Rollason, Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 177-83. Rollason writes, “The large number of such translations [in the late Anglo-Saxon period] is in itself evidence for vigorous interest in the cult of saints. Moreover, it is notable that almost all the reformed abbeys appear to have carried out relic translations, which suggests that they were particularly concerned with the promotion of relic-cults” (178-179).
In this period the English Swithin and Breton Judoc were translated to Winchester, the episcopal see of the reformer Æthelwold. David Rollason also suggests this later period similarly marks increasing lay participation and interest in the cult of saints.³ Lay people embarked upon pilgrimages, and their yearly calendar (including their schedule of taxes and tithes) was organized by saints’ feast days.⁴

In this climate, the saint’s life played an important role in the liturgical and devotional texts of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Saints’ lives translated into the vernacular for the edification of clergy and laity provided an important focus for veneration and for instruction. They offered reading material for the personal reflection of monks, and preaching material for communities of monks and laity. Saints’ lives would have been read as part of the Night Office for monks,⁵ and as a part of the mass for the laity.⁶ Moreover, the Vercelli Homilies and the Blickling Homilies, texts of uncertain date that survive in late tenth-century manuscripts,

---

³ Rollason, Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England, 186-195
⁵ For Ælfric’s discussion of the use of saints’ lives as monastic liturgical texts, see Christopher A. Jones, Ælfric’s Letter to the Monks of Eynsham: “Omnius uero festiuitatibus sanctorum in toto anno legitimus uitas aut passiones ipsorum sanctorum siue sermones congruentes ipsi sollemnitatii et responsoria propria, si habeantur. Si alias, alia congruentia canimus et tertiam sedem de tractu euuangelii sicut et ubique semper sumimus.” (“But on all feasts of the saints, throughout the entire year, we read lives or passions of the saints themselves, or sermons appropriate to the given solemnity, and [we sing] proper responsories, if these are to be had; if not, we sing other appropriate ones and adopt for the third position [readings] from a homily on the gospel, as we do always and everywhere”) (146, 147).

176

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
demonstrate the fluid intersection between homiletics and hagiography. These homily collections include the \textit{vitae} of holy men and women with the more traditional homiletic interest in eschatology. Sermons in these collections commemorate, among others, the Virgin Mary, Martin, Guthlac, and Andrew.

The most prolific practitioner of the hagiographic homily was Ælfric. His \textit{Lives of Saints} offers a wide-ranging collection of saints' lives and other texts, providing an overview of the principle saints celebrated in the liturgies and martyrrologies of the Church. His \textit{Catholic Homilies} on the other hand closely reflects the influence of other sermon texts in its approach to combining hagiography and homiletics. This collection, containing two series of forty sermons each, was assembled to supply preaching material for the liturgical year. Combining the \textit{temporale}, the floating celebrations of the Church seasons, with the \textit{sanctorale}, the fixed-date feasts of the saints, Ælfric created a sermon collection that as a whole offers an overview of tenets and practices of the Christian faith, instructing its audience on...
how to lead a Christian life. Written early in Ælfric’s career (Peter Clemoes dates the
text to 989-92, suggesting that it is the first work written by Ælfric\(^{10}\)), the Catholic
Homilies introduces the significant events and the central figures of the Church in a
sequence of texts arranged liturgically rather than historically. While Catholic
Homilies incorporates a Christian narrative of time that begins with Genesis and ends
at Judgment Day, the linear organization of historical time is set aside in favor of the
commemorative structure of the liturgical calendar. Nevertheless the interest in the
events and figures of the past brings the framework of history into Ælfric’s homilies.

In Catholic Homilies, saints are not an exclusive focus of interest, but rather
appear alongside catechetical and exegetical homilies. However, sermons devoted to
saints make up almost half of the homilies in this collection, nineteen of forty homilies
in the First Series and fifteen or sixteen of forty in the Second.\(^{11}\) Like the Old English
hagiographic poems, the sermons devoted to the saints generally focus on an episode
in the saint’s career (most commonly the events leading up to a martyrdom). While
this approach limits the development of any saint’s distinct historical identity, it
nevertheless locates the figure within the broad categories of Christian history that
Ælfric’s writings incorporate: the holy patriarchs and prophets, Christ and his
apostles, the martyrs, and the confessors.\(^{12}\)

Godden suggests that the Catholic Homilies could have been written slightly later. Godden, Ælfric’s
Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary, EETS s.s. 18 (Oxford: Oxford University

\(^{11}\) See Michael Lapidge, “Ælfric’s Sanctorale,” in Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose
Saints’ Lives and Their Contexts, 116-117. Lapidge notes that the confusion concerning the number
accorded to the Second Series arises because one homily (II.xxvii) has two dates and two feasts
ascribed to it (127n).

\(^{12}\) An overview of this Christian past can be found articulated in Ælfric’s Sermo de memoria sanctorum
(LS XVI) in Ælfric’s Lives of Saints, Being A Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the
England's place in the narrative of history offered by the *Catholic Homilies* is defined chiefly by two saints, Gregory and Cuthbert. Consequently, this chapter will focus on the sermons devoted to these men. In the context of the *Catholic Homilies*, Gregory and Cuthbert serve as important foundational figures in the English Church. As missionary saints and bishops, they bring the English people into salvation history through conversion. Their careers also personify an ideal shared by both Bede and Ælfric, the fusion of monastic and pastoral values. Ælfric's approach to these two saints constructs them simultaneously as individual exemplars and as historical figures, providing for his English audience a sense both of their past as a nation, and of the way in which this past can continue to shape their present.

Ælfric opens his March 12th homily on St. Gregory with the words “GREGORIUS se hálga papa. Engliscr deode apostol” (l. 1) [Gregory the holy pope, apostle of the English people]. These parallel phrases inscribe the saint first in the context of the universal faith, and then in relationship to the English past. As hálga papa, Gregory serves as the preeminent bishop and pastor to the Christian world. As Engliscr deode apostol, he bears a special relationship with the Anglo-Saxons, leading them to Christianity by sponsoring the mission that lands on their shores. Appearing after saints like Peter, Andrew, and Stephen, the apostles and martyrs of the New Testament that appear in the first series of the *Catholic Homilies*, Gregory is similarly figured as an apostle, but of a very different time and place. The vision of apostolic sanctity that

---


179

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Gregory offers is that of the confessor rather than the martyr, a form of sanctity that finds its expression in the pastoral rather than heroic.

As England’s apostle, Gregory brings a barbarian nation into Christian history through conversion. Ælfric writes, “He is rihtlice engliscre deode Apostol. for ðan ðe he þurh his ræd. and sande ðus fram deofles biggengum ætbræd. and to godes geleafan gebigde” (ll. 3-6) [He is justly the apostle of the English people, because he, through his counsel and mission, rescued us from the devil’s worship and converted us to God’s faith]. The conversion of the English marks their entry into the narrative of Christian time that the *Catholic Homilies* presents. The Gregory sermon is notable for the way it synthesizes the concerns that shape the *Catholic Homilies*; as Malcolm Godden observes, “What marks the homily on Gregory is the way in which hagiography, history, and preaching are combined.”¹³ These elements are combined in a way that preserves and celebrates a specifically English point of view, even as the context of the *Catholic Homilies* affirms the shared experience of conversion. Ælfric balances the presentation of hálga papa and Engliscer deode apostol, but the message of the homily is the saint’s singular relationship with the ðus of the English nation.

Ælfric’s treatment of Gregory the Great parallels other depictions of Gregory in using his career as a focus for narrating the earliest days of the English conversion. Like the anonymous Whitby *Life of Gregory* and the hagiographic material included in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*, Gregory’s life is interwoven with England’s local sense of its history and its identity as a Christian nation. Ælfric emphasizes the role Gregory plays in England’s history by noting his association with the *HE*:

Many holy books relate his behavior and his holy life, and also the 'Historia Anglorum,' that which King Alfred translated from Latin into English. This book speaks plainly enough about this holy man. Now we desire to tell you something about him briefly, because the aforesaid book is not known to you all, even though it is translated into English.

Ælfric’s citation of Alfred’s rather than Bede’s version of the HE and his apparent assumption that the text is not widely known suggest that he intends his homily to offer important historical as well as didactic instruction to an English audience. His statement further implies that he himself based his homily upon the vernacular text, even though he appears to have worked more frequently from Bede’s Latin version.

This reference to the Alfredian translation of the HE effectively associates Ælfric’s work both with the inventor of English history, and with the most famous proponent of the vernacular. In this way Gregory’s life becomes identified not only with the historical traditions of the English people but their vernacular textual traditions as well.

In this, as in many of his sermons, Ælfric does not work exclusively from a single source. The Gregory sermon incorporates material as well from Paul the Deacon’s Vita Gregorii. This work can be found in the Cotton-Corpus legendary, the collection of texts that may have provided source material for many of Ælfric’s

---

hagiographic writings. The sources that he brings together in the Gregory homily are significant as they introduce the different threads of the narrative that make up this saint’s life. Gregory is presented as missionary and as preacher. This homily shifts in focus from the scenes of Roman Christianity to the English mission, a change that tellsingly contrasts a saint and a community mature in the practice of the Christian faith to the new converts of a distant land. The shifts in perspective expose the sometimes awkward fusion of biography and national history that can also be seen in other Anglo-Saxon versions of Gregory’s life. Both the Whitby Life of Gregory and Bede’s HE seem to struggle with how to reconcile and present the different aspects of the saint’s life. Certainly it must have been a challenge to narrate the life of a saint who had never set foot on English soil, yet who played such a central role in the history of the English faith. The Whitby Life of Gregory approaches this circumstance by focusing first on Gregory’s early life, then on the events associated with the English conversion and Edwin of Northumbria, and finally on the miraculous and literary fruits of Gregory’s career as a whole. In contrast, in the HE Bede constructs Gregory through two different narrative threads, first incorporating the saint into the account of the English conversion, and then in Book Two offering a hagiographic overview of the pope’s life. These narrative strategies suggest the difficulty that Anglo-Saxon authors had in balancing the traditions associated with Gregory’s saintly life in Rome against his overwhelming significance as the apostle to the English.

16 For further discussion of this issue, see above, Chapter Two.
The outlines of this division are visible in Ælfric’s text as well. The first half of the narrative is devoted to the events that lead to Gregory’s elevation to the papacy. The second details the events of the English conversion. In the case of Ælfric, the two settings of his narrative are aligned with his use of sources; he relies primarily on Paul the Deacon for his presentation of Gregory’s Roman life (with the exception of the slavemarket episode, drawn from the Old English Bede17), and draws upon Bede’s HE for local events.18 Ælfric’s use of the Paul the Deacon’s *Vita Gregorii* introduces new elements to the English treatment of Gregory, including a much fuller sense of his early career and his turn to monastic life. These new traditions are counterbalanced by his close adherence to Bede’s account of the English conversion. In Ælfric’s text, the biographical and historical aspects of the narrative complement and fulfill one another, offering a unified portrait of the saint. In this way, Ælfric successfully fuses the disparate elements of the saint’s tradition.

While Paul the Deacon’s *Vita Gregorii* is based in part upon Bede’s *HE*, it incorporates materials outside of the Bede tradition gathered from Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great himself.19 For this reason, the narrative of Gregory’s Roman life offers a different perspective than that provided by Bede in *HE* II.1. Ælfric narrates a version of Gregory’s life that begins with his noble heritage, a family history that includes in its line of descent a previous pope, Felix. The etymology of Gregory’s name (‘watchful’) is discussed, as is the saint’s youthful education. Upon his father’s death, Ælfric relates, Gregory turned to monastic life, founding seven

---

17 See above, n. 12.
19 For more information, see Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, 403.
monasteries and serving as abbot of one. Ælfric describes the saint’s perfection in the following terms: “He lufode forhæfednysse on mettum. and on drence. and wæccan on syndrigum gebedum; þærtœacan he ðrowade singallice untrumnyssa. and swa hé stiðlicor mid andwerdum untrumnyssum ofsett wæs. swa hé geornfullicor þæs ecan lifes gewilnode;” (ll. 44-48) [He loved continence in food and in drink, and vigils in private prayers. In addition to that he suffered continual illness, and just as he was afflicted the more severely with present illness, so he longed the more eagerly for eternal life].

After this description of the saint’s early life, Ælfric offers two narrative episodes to illustrate Gregory’s sanctity. The first is the familiar slavemarket episode. Ælfric adheres closely to the narrative of the Old English version of the Ecclesiastical History, in itself a faithful translation of the original Historia text. However, where both the Old English and Latin versions of the account position it outside of both the historical narrative of Gregory’s involvement in the English conversion and the biographical narrative of Gregory’s life, Ælfric inserts it in its appropriate chronological place. By shifting this legend’s location in the Gregory narrative, he stresses the causal and prophetic significance of the event. The move also asserts the place of the English in Gregory’s early career. Where the Bede versions of the slavemarket legend end with the community and pope joined in refusing the saint’s petition to embark upon his own mission of conversion, the Ælfric version goes on to

20 While the Old English Bede preserves the slave market episode intact in II.i, it dramatically departs from the HE’s presentation of Gregory elsewhere in the chapter. Almost all of the biographical information is excised; instead, the translator inserts a discussion of the pope’s epitaph. In this way the translator preserves the chronological narrative of the text (with the exception of the slavemarket episode), instead of inserting the saint’s life as a self-contained narrative as the HE does.
detail the connection between this event and Gregory's career as pope. In the homily this account is not isolated outside of the historical events of the saint’s life, but rather is integrated into a chain of events explaining the saint’s appointment to the papacy. The people of Rome described in the slavemarket episode who “noldon geðasian þæt swa geþungen lareow þa burh eallunge forlete” (ll. 86-88) [would not allow such a learned man and such an excellent teacher abandon the city entirely] are the same people who, a few lines later, “ðone eadigan Gregorium to ðære geðincðe anmodlice geceas” (l. 95) [chose unanimously the blessed Gregory to that office]. The proximity of the slavemarket episode to Gregory’s election as pope illustrates the pastoral obligations that bind the saint to Rome even as they encourage him to contemplate the conversion of the English.

The pastoral qualities of the saint are similarly demonstrated in the sermon that Gregory preaches in the time of plague, an onslaught of disease that carries off his own predecessor and leads to his appointment. This sermon within a sermon (absent from Bede) is preached by Gregory before his accession to the papacy, a point Ælfric stresses by noting that the event occurs “aer his hadunge” (l. 109) [before his consecration]. At first glance it appears digressive, and its length (forty-five lines in a life of 260 total) out of proportion to the other events that make up Gregory’s life. Moreover, the sermon illustrates only the saint’s rhetorical gifts, not (as one might expect in a vita) thaumaturgical ones. The pestilence continues unabated even after Gregory calls for the community’s repentance: “to dam swide awedde se foresæda cwealm. þæt hundehtatig manna on ðære ánre tide feallende of life gewiton. ða hwile þe þæt folc ða letanias sungon”(ll. 159-161) [the aforesaid plague raged so severely,
that eighty men, falling in that single hour, departed from life, while the people sang
the litanies]. That this episode does not offer evidence for the saint’s efficacy as an
intercessor is not surprising in that there are no miracles in this life of Gregory.
Instead, it is the sermon itself that is presented as the focus of attention.

Ælfric’s desire to incorporate a didactic sermon into the middle of Gregory’s
vita is not unique to this life and in fact, as Malcolm Godden observes, is emblematic
of his approach to hagiographic sermons in general.21 The theme of the homily is
repentance. Gregory identifies the plague as “godes swingle” (l. 111), God’s scourge,
and as punishment for sins past. He implores the people to turn to penitence and pray
for God’s mercy, to trust that no sin is too great to be forgiven, and to participate as a
community in the recitation of litanies as a public act of atonement. Godden argues
that Ælfric intended these lines to speak as much to his contemporary Anglo-Saxon
audience as to the Romans of the text, remarking “In its powerful call to repentance
under the threat of imminent death, with the promise of mercy and warnings against
despair, it recalls Ælfric’s own words in his preface to the Catholic Homilies; Ælfric
speaks here through Gregory, inviting a parallel between the Roman plague and the
contemporary troubles of the world’s end.”22 In this context, the performative aspect
of the homily brings the audience into the text; they step into the position of the
Romans as the preacher assumes the role of the saint. The lessons of the sanctified
past are brought into the present through the scene of preaching.

Additionally, Gregory’s early career and especially his plague sermon also
offer Ælfric the chance to connect the present moment to the historical past through

the metaphor of conversion. The vocabulary of conversion abounds in this sermon, but not in the context of the historical event. While the common terms associated with conversion in Old English – *gecyrrēdnys* (conversion), *awedan* (to turn, change, translate), *biegan* (to bow, submit, yield) – appear repeatedly in the homily, they are not generally employed to describe the conversion of the English nation. Only *biegan* is used in this sense, and this occurs not in the context of the mission, but in the first half of the text in which Ælfric speaks of the English as “to godes geleafan gebigde” (ll. 5-6) [converted to God’s faith], and in his description of Gregory’s petition to the pope to travel to England “de hi to criste gebigdon” (ll. 82-83), that they might convert to Christ. In descriptions drawn from the *HE*, Ælfric leaves behind the Old English Bede’s uses of verbs like *gecīerran* (turn, convert) and nouns like *gehwyrfednes* (conversion, change), but he preserves its more concrete constructions: “gelyfdon forwel menige. and on godes naman gefullode wurdon” (ll. 212-213) [very many believed, and were baptized in God’s name], “forwel menige […] forleton heora hædenscipe. and hi sylfe geðeoddon cristes gelāunge” (ll. 223-225) [very many abandoned their idolatry, and they joined themselves to Christ’s church], and, most simply, “angelcynn cristendom underfeng” (ll. 230-231) [the English people received Christianity].

The Old English vocabulary of conversion is employed more frequently in the context of the spiritual growth of the saint and the spiritual instruction of his

---


community. Gregory invokes the idea of conversion in the plague sermon when he preaches, “Geopenige ure sarnys ús infær soðre gecyrrrednysse” (ll. 113-114) [Let our suffering open to us the entrance of true conversion], and prays, “Uton awendan ure heortan” (ll. 139-140) [Let us turn our hearts]. The saint’s own turn to monastic life is similarly constructed as a conversion:

He eode aer his gecyrrrednysse geond romana burh mid пællenum gyrlum. and scinendum gymnnum. and readum golde gefraetewod. ac æfter his gecyrrrednysse he ðenode godes ðearfum. he sylf ðearfa. mid wácum wæfelse befangen; Swa fulfremedlice. he drohtnode on anginne his gecyrrrednysse swa þæt hé mihte ða gyũ beon geteald on fulfremedra halgena getele; (ll. 38-44)

[He went before his conversion throughout the city of Rome adorned with costly clothes, and shining gems, and red gold; but after his conversion he served God’s poor, he himself poor, clothed with a frail garment. He conducted himself so perfectly at the beginning of his conversion that he could then already be considered in the number of perfect saints.]

Ælfric’s appropriation of conversion vocabulary to express an internal relationship with spirituality gives a thematic unity to the sermon. Conversion offers a metaphor that bridges the gap between the ecclesiastical career of the saint and the historical creation of the English Church. Similarly, it allows the audience of the Catholic Homilies to see conversion as a spiritual as well as historical event, an act of repentance and devotion that can be both on the communal and individual level. In this way Ælfric fuses history and didacticism in his presentation of Gregory’s life by offering conversion as a focus for imitation as well as commemoration.

After the plague sermon, Ælfric turns to the events of the English conversion. The account of Gregory’s mission to the English follows closely (if in a necessarily abbreviated sense) the material found in the Bede tradition. The pope’s deferred
desire to convert the English is achieved through the missionaries whose names are preserved in the homily: Augustinus, Mellitus, Laurentius, Petrus, Johannes, and Justus. These monks journey to England where, accompanied by Frankish translators, they preach to the English and meet with the king Æthelberht. Some aspects of Bede’s original narrative are left out, most notably those that detract from the heroic and unique nature of the mission, such as the reluctance of Augustine and his men to complete their journey to England and the preexisting presence of Christianity in England either through its Roman past or through Æthelberht’s Frankish queen Bertha. Nonetheless, what remains is faithful to its source. Thus Æthelberht welcomes Augustine and his men with words and phrases that correspond closely to Bede’s Latin text:

\[\text{Pa andwyrde se cyning Ædelbriht Augustine, and cwaedo, ðæt he fægere word and behat him cydde. and cwaedo ðæt he ne mihte swa hrædlice þone ealdan gewunan ðe he mid angelcynne heold forlætan. cwaedo ðæt he moste freolice da heofonlican láre he leode bodian. and ðæt he him and his gefaran bigleofan ðenan wolde. and forgeaf him ða wununge on cantwarebyrig. seo waes ealles his rices heafod-burh; (ll. 198-204)\]

---

Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, 404. Both the Latin and Old English versions of the *Ecclesiastical History* note that the missionaries establish themselves at a church dedicated to St. Martin that had been established by Romans and used by the queen for her worship.

Compare this to Bede’s *HE* 1.25: “[... ] respondit ille dicens: ‘Pulchra sunt quidem uestra et promissa quae adferis, sed quia nova sunt et incerta, non nos possum adserere relitae eis, quae tanto tempore cum omnibus Anglorum genti servatai. Verum quia de longe huc peregrini venisti et, ut ego mihi uideor perspexisse, ea, quae uos uera et oprima credebatis, nobis quoque communicare desiderastiis, nolumus molesti esse uobis, quin potius benigno uos hospitio recipere et, quae uictuis sunt uestro necessaria, ministrae curaum, nec prohibemus quin omnes quos potestis fidei uestrae religionis praedicando sociatis.’ Dedit ergo eis mansionem in ciuitate Doruernensi, quae imperii sui totius erat metropolis, eisque, ut promiserat, eum administratione uictus temporalis licentiam quoque praedicandi non abstulit” [“Then he said to them: ‘The words and the promises you bring are fair enough, but because they are new to us and doubtful, I cannot consent to accept them and forsake those beliefs which I and the whole English race have held so long. But as you have come on a long pilgrimage and are anxious, I perceive, to share with us things which you believe to be true and good, we do not wish to do you harm; on the contrary, we will receive you hospitably and provide what is necessary for your support; nor do we forbid you to win all you can to your faith and religion by your preaching.’ So he gave them a dwelling in the city of Canterbury, which was the chief city of all his dominions; and, in accordance with his promise, he granted them provisions and did not refuse them freedom to preach.”]
[Then the king Æthelberht answered Augustine, and said, that he uttered fair words and promises; and said, that he could not abandon so hastily the old customs that he along with the English people held: he said that he could freely preach the heavenly lore to his people, and that he desired to extend to him and his companions sustenance; and he gave him the dwelling in Canterbury, which was the chief city of all his kingdom.]

As in the Bede tradition, the apostolic purity of the missionaries' lives attracts converts from among the Anglo-Saxons, and the king himself is brought to the faith by their good example.

The record of Gregory's interaction with the mission church is necessarily curtailed by Ælfric's decision to eliminate the lengthy *Libellus responsionum* that Bede used to establish the pope's influence upon the practices of the English faith. While this letter exchange between Augustine and Gregory demonstrates Gregory's involvement with the English Church in the *HE*, its contents addressing such issues as degrees of consanguinity in marriage and the question of a woman's impurity after childbirth would be overly digressive within the confines of the homily. Nevertheless Gregory is still presented as an active and engaged participant in the mission. His words accompany Augustine and his monks to England in another form. Ælfric includes a letter of encouragement by the pope that begins "Ne beo ge afyrhte" (l.175) [Do not be afraid], and concludes, "Se ælmihtiga god þurh his gife eow gescylded. and geunne me þæt ic mote eoweres geswinces wæstm on ðam ecgan eðele geseon. swa þæt ic beo gemet samod on blisse eoweres edleanes. ðeah de ic mid eow swincan ne mæge. for ðon de ic wille swincan" (ll. 183-187) [May almighty God through his

27 While Ælfric includes this letter, he omits the occasion of the letter. No doubt this was because it was written in response to the missionaries' desire to return to Rome and abandon their mission, an episode (as noted before) that is unacknowledged in the homily.

190

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
grace protect you, and grant to me that I may see the result of your labor in that eternal homeland, so that I will be found also in the happiness of your reward, although I cannot labor with you, because I desire to labor]. The homily also describes Augustine’s ordination as archbishop of the English “swa swa him gregorius ær gewissode” (l. 228) [just as Gregory previously instructed him], and remarks upon the letters and gifts that flowed from the pope to England.

Gregory is also acknowledged as the architect of the English Church. As Ælfric writes, “[Gregory] bebead þæt his [Augustine’s] æftergengan symle ðone pallium. and ðone ercæhād æt ðam apostolican setle. romaniscere gelædunge feccan sceoldon; Augustinus gesette æfter ðisum bispocas of his geferum gehwilcum burgum on engla ðode. and hi on godes geleafan ðeonde ðurhwnodon. ðo ðisum dægðerlicum dæge” (ll. 249-253) [(Gregory) instructed that his (Augustine’s) successor should always obtain the pallium and the consecration of archbishop at the apostolic seat of the Roman church. Augustine afterwards ordained bishops from his fellow-disciples for every city in the English nation, and they remained flourishing in God’s belief up to this present day]. This reference to the present day stresses the continuity of tradition linking the Church of Ælfric’s time to its establishment in the late sixth century. The figure of Gregory allows Ælfric to elide the disruptions of the Viking invasions and introduce a vision of the sanctified foundations of the English Christian faith that extends uninterrupted into the institutions of the present-day Church.

In this context it is clear that Ælfric shapes his presentation of Gregory to draw attention to the saint’s episcopal and pastoral virtues. Gregory is not presented (as
Cuthbert will be next) as a wonder-worker or ideal monk. While Bede dwells upon
Gregory’s asceticism, upon the ways in which Gregory’s career reconciles the
demands of the active and contemplative lives, and upon the literary output of this
Church Father, these elements are discarded by Ælfric who touches only briefly upon
Gregory’s career as a monk, speaks of Gregory not as a writer but as a reader
(commenting on his youthful appetite for learning), and sums up the saint’s literary
career with the unadorned statement that “Se eadiga gregorius gedihte manega halige
traht-bec” (l. 254) [The blessed Gregory wrote many holy treatises]. Instead Ælfric
simplifies the saint’s career and his function in the sermon to stress Gregory’s pastoral
ministries, the simultaneous role he plays as pope to the people of Rome and
missionary to the English nation.28 The stories integrated into the saint’s life
emphasize Gregory’s desire to bring people to God, a desire expressed through the
discourse of conversion.

Fundamental to Ælfric’s presentation of Gregory, however, is his effort to
commemorate the pope as an English saint. The personal pronoun underscores the
local claim on Gregory; he is the saint who “ús fram deofles biggendum ætbræd” (ll. 5-6)
[withdrew us from the devil’s worship]. The apostle Gregory brings to the tenth-
century audience of the Catholic Homilies the story of their own cultural past, the
legend of the coming of the faith to the Anglo-Saxons. The homily defines the pope
overwhelmingly through his relationship with the English conversion, and offers a

28 R.A. Markus writes of Gregory, “He did not distinguish missionary from pastoral work; preaching to
the unconverted was quite simply part of the bishop’s pastoral care.” “Augustine and Gregory the
Great,” in St Augustine and the Conversion of England, ed. Richard Gameson (Phoenix Mill, UK:
Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999), 43. Ælfric seems to pursue a similar conflation of the two categories
in this homily as he stresses the similarities between both aspects of the saint’s career.
historical account of the early events that marked the coming of Christianity. In this way Ælfric continues to integrate his presentation of the saint’s life with a narration of the local past. He creates a vision of Christian history that preserves and commemorates the local foundation of the Anglo-Saxon faith through the hagiographic encounter with the saint.

Moreover, by incorporating Gregory into the project of the Catholic Homilies Ælfric integrates this local past into the broad patterns of salvation history. Through his involvement in the English conversion, Gregory creates a place for the Anglo-Saxons in the overarching narrative of Christian history spanning Creation to Judgment. His life evokes the apostolic pattern that dominates the early saintly lives of the CH, and while the Anglo-Saxon conversion may follow a different script than the early missions and martyrdoms of Christ’s apostles, it nevertheless illustrates the shared experience of coming to the faith. By situating Gregory and the English conversion within this universal framework, Ælfric creates an identity for the English that simultaneously acknowledges their cultural origins and their place in the patterns of salvation history.

If Gregory is constructed as England’s apostle, as a figure who guides the entry of the English into the universal faith, Cuthbert serves as an important symbol of the new faith’s establishment in Anglo-Saxon culture. While Ælfric celebrates native saints in other texts,29 Cuthbert is the only English saint to be included in the Catholic Homilies. Following upon Gregory, his placement in the text affirms the sense that

29 The Lives of Saints includes Æthelthryth, Alban, Oswald, Edmund and Swithin; the Vita Æthelwoldi commemorates Æthelwold.
the seeds planted by the Gregorian mission flowered into an English tradition of sanctity. As Alex I. Jones observes, Cuthbert's "Christian life follows from Gregory's evangelization of the English." While in historical fact the events of Cuthbert's life occurred almost a century after Gregory's monks arrived in England, and while three books in Bede's *HE* relate the works of the many holy men and holy women who established the faith in the intervening years, nevertheless there is a continuity between Gregory and Cuthbert that suggests the birth and maturation of the English Church. Ælfric does not work as overtly as Bede to depict Cuthbert as an English Gregory, but he nevertheless illustrates through the saint's ascetic life, pastoral mission, and thaumaturgical power a native strain of holiness that participates in the tradition of those saints from other times and places commemorated in the *CH*.

Ælfric's decision to include Cuthbert among the saints of the *Catholic Homilies* corresponds to the saint's presence in the English liturgical calendars and martyrologies of the tenth century. The extant calendars from the period reveal the saint's popularity, as not only is Cuthbert widely represented, but he is identified with two feast days, the feast of the deposition on March 20, and the feast of the translation

---

30 Alex I. Jones, "Ælfric's Life of Saint Cuthbert," *Parergon* n.s. 10 (1992): 41. Jones argues that the progression of homilies from VII to XV are thematically interrelated in such a way as to provide the following narrative (I have inserted the homily numbers in brackets to reflect the organization of the table in Jones' text): "At this time we should in our self-sacrifice [VII] imitate Christ whose example in offering enlightenment to the gentiles [VIII] was followed in Gregory's evangelization of the English which produced [IX] a saint such as Cuthbert, child [X] of the Church, personified by Benedict [XI] just as Moses was nurtured by the spirit [XII] and the eternal Christ [XIII] whose unique sacrifice [XIV] is constantly renewed for our redemption [XV]" (41). However it is not necessary to accept Jones' argument to acknowledge that the progression from Gregory to Cuthbert gives Ælfric an opportunity to explore the foundations of the early English Church.


194

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
on September 4. Bernadette Moloney suggests a close connection between the contents of the *Catholic Homilies* and monastic liturgical calendars, observing from the evidence of two roughly contemporaneous missals that “it is relevant to note that those [feasts] distributed among the two series of *Catholic Homilies* are in fact very similar to the first grade feasts in the *Leofric* and *Jumièges* calendars.” No other native English saint appears as a first grade feast in both calendars (though Edward is commemorated as such in the *Jumièges*, and Guthlac in the *Leofric*). Consequently if Ælfric used such a calendar as the framework for the *Catholic Homilies*, the inclusion of Cuthbert reflects the saint’s preeminent status in the feasts celebrated by the English Church.

---

32 *English Kalendars before A.D. 1100* vol. I, ed. Francis Wormald, Henry Bradshaw Society, vol. 72 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1932). The March 20th feast can be found on 4, 18, 32, 46, 60, 74, 88, 102, 116, 130, 144, 158, 172, 186, 200, 214, 228, 242, 256; the September 4th feast can be found on 10, 80, 94, 108, 122, 136, 150, 164, 178, 192, 206, 234, 248, 262. See also Dumville, *Liturgy and the Ecclesiastical History of Late Anglo-Saxon England*, 56-57. David Rollason discusses the little that is known of the September 4th feast, noting that while the translation to Durham was held on this date, its presence in earlier calendars suggests that it commemorated an earlier translation of the saint. Rollason recognizes the feast’s association with Wessex, noting “The 4 September feast certainly appeared prominently in later West Saxon calendars [...] Moreover the sequence of its appearance in West Saxon texts suggests that the impetus for its diffusion came from the royal city of Winchester, which would of course be consistent with royal influence.” “St. Cuthbert and Wessex: The Evidence of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 183,” in *St Cuthbert: His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, eds. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989), 416, 419. The feast also provided an occasion for a fair in Durham that can be traced back to the eleventh century. For further discussion of St. Cuthbert’s festival, see David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England*, 190-91.

33 Bernadette Moloney, “Be Godes Halgum. Ælfric’s Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in England in the Tenth Century,” in *Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England: Essays Presented to Fitzroy Pyle*, ed. John Scattergood (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1984), 33. Moloney identifies these first grade feasts as “the four feasts of Christ – Circumcision, Epiphany, Invention of the Cross, Nativity; the four feasts of the Blessed Virgin; the feasts of St Michael, the apostles, John the Baptist, St Paul, St Stephen, the evangelists Matthew and John, All Saints, the Martyrdom of the Innocents; the ‘English’ feasts: Sts Gregory, Cuthbert, Benedict, Augustine (Leofric also has Guthlac here, Robert King Edward); and finally a small group from Rome and Gaul – the martyrs, Pope Clement and Lawrence, and Bishop Martin of Tours” (28).

34 Moloney, “Be Godes Halgum,” 39n. None of these native saints appear in Ælfric’s later *Lives of Saints* either, although in that text English saints are more widely represented.
These liturgical calendars illustrate the prominence the saint achieved in the culture at large. As Gerald Bonner writes, "it is clear that the veneration of St Cuthbert seems to have been diffused throughout England during the tenth century."

In part this was likely related to the events associated with the saint’s relics and his community in the ninth and tenth centuries. The community of Cuthbert first moved from Lindisfarne to Norham during Ecgred’s tenure as bishop (830-45), and then in 875 left Lindisfarne again, travelling from place to place in Northumbria before settling in Chester-le-Street 883. The *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* (*HSC*) narrates the story of the saint and his posthumous career, detailing his early life (based upon material drawn from Bede, although recombined in an almost unrecognizable form), delineating the saint’s acquisition and defense of his territorial holdings, and narrating his relationships with Anglo-Saxon and Danish kings. This text further constructs Cuthbert as a king-maker in death. On one occasion, the saint instructs his community to ransom the Viking slave Guthred and support his rule in York, and on another Cuthbert appears to Alfred in a vision that ensures his victory over invading Vikings and the claim of his royal line over all Britain.

These new traditions are not incorporated into Ælfric’s homily, but they reflect the close relationship that the kings of Wessex sought to establish with

---

35 Gerald Bonner, “St Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street,” in *Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, 389.
37 One possible reason that the *HSC* was not used by Ælfric is that the text may not have been written until the eleventh century. While many agree that at least parts of the *HSC* are tenth-century, a recent treatment of the question argues that the entire text is a product of the eleventh century. See Ted Johnson South, ed. and trans. *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: A History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record of His Patrimony*, Anglo-Saxon Texts, ser. eds. Andy Orchard and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 25-36. For a contrasting position including an overview of the dating issue, see Luisella Simpson, “The King Alfred/St Cuthbert Episode in the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto*: Its

196

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Cuthbert in the tenth century. The *HSC* details gifts from Alfred, Edward, Æthelstan, and Edmund. The saint is constructed as a patron of the royal family, a tradition continued by Cnut in the eleventh-century. Such an association had obvious political benefits for the Wessex rulers. Cuthbert’s prophecy to Alfred similarly appears to have developed out of these efforts to assert the saint’s patronage; as Luisella Simpson argues, “St. Cuthbert’s promise to King Alfred [...] allegedly fulfilled when Alfred *regnum Britanniae accepit* (section 18), would have borne a very precise meaning to a mid-tenth-century Cuthbertine author. I suggest it would have symbolized in essence the lawful entitlement of the house of Wessex to Northumbria.”

The power of the saint’s reputation and life can be seen reflected in the ways in which they were reused and adapted to express contemporary concerns and political interests. Cuthbert became an important focus of worship during the Wessex reconquest of Northumbria because the saint’s cult offered the Wessex kings an opportunity to create important political ties. As David Rollason writes, “The royal devotion to St Cuthbert [...] may have been intended to express the West Saxon kings’ aspirations to rule the north where their power was by no means assured either in theory or in practice.”

Similarly it can also be said that the Wessex interest in Cuthbert benefited the saint by spreading his cult and reputation to a much wider community of believers.

---

Significance for Mid-Tenth-Century English History,” in *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community*, 397-411.


40 See for example Rollason’s discussion of the contents of CCCC 183 which concludes that the texts included in this manuscript were of Wessex, not Durham, provenance. “St Cuthbert and Wessex,” 415-417. This suggests that the cult of Cuthbert had its own established life in the south.

197

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
The saint would be moved once more to Durham in 995, only a few years after Ælfric likely completed the *Catholic Homilies* in 992. Nevertheless, Ælfric’s homily reveals nothing of the political or cultic interests that fueled the lively tenth-century interest in Cuthbert. Ælfric draws only upon Bede-authored texts, and his narrative of Cuthbert’s life ends with the miraculous preservation of the saint’s body after death, omitting even later miracles that Bede includes in the *VCM, VCP* and *HE*. In this way Ælfric stresses the saint’s association with the foundations of the English faith in the past rather than the position he occupies in relation to contemporary national interests. Ælfric’s handling of the Cuthbert tradition suggests his desire to identify the saint with a time in which the fate of the faith was far from certain, in which the pastoral agency of the bishop was a crucial element in educating the people in a new faith, and in which miracles offered direct confirmation of the saint’s words. Cuthbert signifies something more for his English audience than exemplarity; he is a powerful symbol of Bede’s golden age, of a past in which the institution of monasticism took hold in England and in which holy men and women led the way in converting not only the native inhabitants of the island, but also those Germanic nations that remained on the Continent. Cuthbert plays an important role in the *Catholic Homilies* as the only native saint, and as an ecclesiast and miracle worker who becomes a foundational figure for the English Church.

As noted before, the Cuthbert homily itself is a very conservative reworking of Bede’s writings on the saint. Ælfric acknowledges Bede as his source in the opening

---

41 Clemoes, “Chronology,” 56. It is intriguing to consider Godden’s argument for dating *CHII* to 995 in the context of Cuthbert’s translation to Durham, although there is nothing in the text to suggest that Ælfric had any knowledge of it. For Godden’s evidence for dating *CHII* to 995, see Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, xxxii-xxxvi.
of the homily, remarking "Beda, se snotera engla ðeoda láreow ðises halgan lif. endebyrdlice mid wulderfullum herungum. ægðer ge æfter anfealdre gerecednysses. ge æfter leoðlicere gyddunge awrát" [Bede, the wise teacher of the English people set down this holy man’s life in an orderly manner with glorious praises both through prose as well as through versified song] (II.3-6). The poetic and prose versions of the life correspond to the VCP and the VCM, and it is also likely that Ælfric drew from the Historia ecclesiastica, and perhaps even the VCA. These texts offer varying literary treatments of what is a fairly stable tradition. While (as discussed in Chapter Two) the contents and organizations of the Cuthbert texts may differ from work to work, the narrative pattern of the saint’s life remains relatively consistent in its presentation of Cuthbert’s alternating careers as monk, hermit, and bishop.

The relationship between these source texts and Ælfric’s homily has been the subject of study. B.A. Blokhuis argues that the organization and word choice of the Cuthbert homily suggest that Ælfric relied primarily on the VCM and HE for his abridgment of the life; more recently Malcolm Godden has upheld Blokhuis’ conclusions but also offered his own argument that Ælfric incorporated material from the VCP and phraseology from the VCA. In an exploration of Ælfric’s use of the VCM and VCP, Alex Jones concludes that “Ælfric’s life is an epitome of both Bede’s

43 In the case of the VCA, Godden bases his conclusion on E. Gordon Whatley’s argument in the Cuthbert entry of the Acta Sanctorum that maintains that the anonymous text was indeed an influence, but Godden suggests the possibility that this influence may have come second-hand through glosses of Bede’s prose Cuthbert narrative, and thus that Ælfric may have been unfamiliar with the text of the VCA itself. Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction Commentary and Glossary. 412-414; E. Gordon Whatley, “Acta Sanctorum,” Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture vol. I, eds. Frederick M. Biggs, Thomas D. Hill, Paul E. Szarmach, and E. Gordon Whatley with the assistance of Deborah A. Oosterhouse (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 159.
texts, for it contains no episode that is not in both.” However, Jones’ study also establishes that there are a great number of episodes that fit this criterion yet are nevertheless discarded by Ælfric. Consequently, even as Ælfric’s relationship with his sources becomes clearer, the question of why he designed his text as he did offers no easy answers. Godden sums up this issue when he writes,

The situation is an extraordinary one for a number of reasons: why did Ælfric use all these sources, since they contain largely the same material; why in particular did he choose to make such extensive use of the very difficult metrical life; how did he acquire copies of these lives, especially the anonymous life; how much did the different structures and stylistic techniques of the three lives affect his own writing?

The consensus that the VCM served as the primary influence upon Ælfric’s homily offers some insight into the homilist’s intentions. Of the four, the metrical life is the least historically and geographically contingent version of Cuthbert’s life. It is the most universal in its perspective. As George Hardin Brown notes, “Bede places Cuthbert in a cosmic setting as the patron of the English but honored universally.” Cuthbert is introduced in the company of other apostolic and universal saints such as Peter and Paul, Bartholomew, and John Chrysostom. Michael Lapidge writes, “it is part of Bede’s purpose to remove the episodes of Cuthbert’s life from the temporal

---

44 Alex I. Jones, “Ælfric’s Life of Saint Cuthbert,” 36. Jones’s study does not address the possible influence of the VCA or the HE on Ælfric’s text. Blokhuis’ study of all four texts in relationship to Ælfric’s homily demonstrates a high (but not perfect) correspondence between episodes included in Ælfric’s homily and those present in the VCA, but a very poor correspondence with the contents of the HE. This result is likely related to the fact that the HE eliminates a large part of the material that can be found in Bede’s earlier Cuthbert texts. Blokhuis, “Bede and Ælfric: The Sources of the Homily on St Cuthbert,” 133-135.

45 Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction Commentary and Glossary, 413.

46 George Hardin Brown, Bede the Venerable, Twayne English Authors Series, no. 443 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 70.
and local and to situate them in a timeless, placeless framework."  

Ælfric’s homily reflects this perspective, as he offers little local detail in his version of Cuthbert’s Life. The highly articulated landscape of the VCP is absent from the text; only two major landmarks, Lindisfarne and Farne, are identified in the poem. The description of Farne Island provides a clear illustration of the distance between Ælfric and other source traditions. While Ælfric identifies Farne simply but poetically by writing “bæt igland is eal beworpen. mid sealtum brymme. on sæ middan” (ll. 164-65) [that island is completely surrounded with the salty water, in the middle of the sea], the VCP offers a much more localized sense of geography: “aliquot milibus passuum ab hac semiinsula ad eorum secreta, et hinc altissimo, et inde infinito clauditur oceano” [“it is some miles away to the south-east of this half-island, and is shut in on the landward side by very deep water and on the seaward side by the boundless ocean”].

The relationship of the island to Lindisfarne, the unique circumstance of its connection to the mainland, and even the miles marking distance give a vivid sense of a retreat that is isolated yet wedded to the coast of England. Ælfric’s choice not to incorporate this highly-articulated sense of landscape and location likely reflects the immediate audience of his homily, not the Northumbrian monks who would have appreciated Bede’s attention to detail, but rather a West Saxon community who had little sense of the northern terrain of the saint’s life. By a similar argument, local men

47 Michael Lapidge, “Bede’s Metrical Vita,” in St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community, 91. See also B.A. Blokhuis, who notes, “It [the VCM] lacks almost all of the personal and local details that abound in VCA, such as names of witnesses, villages, monasteries, rivers, etc.” “Bede and Ælfric: The Sources of the Homily on St Cuthbert,” 108.

and women who are named in other versions of the Cuthbert text are left largely unidentified in Ælfric’s text. In this context, the less-localized narrative of the VCM would have done much to mitigate the geographical and temporal distance between the setting of the legend and Ælfric’s tenth-century audience.

While Ælfric streamlines his inherited sources and eliminates unfamiliar details, he preserves the historical and spiritual dimensions of Cuthbert’s life that Bede constructs. His acknowledgment at the sermon’s beginning uses Bede, “se snotera engla ðeoda láreow” (l. 4) [the wise teacher of the English people], to tell the tale of another engla ðeoda láreow, a saint who exemplifies pastoral devotion in the English Christian community. The beginning of the homily suggests a parallel to Gregory. Where Gregory is se hálga papa, Cuthbert is introduced as se halga biscop (l. 1), the blessed bishop. This symmetry between the two men is further encouraged by the first episode in Cuthbert’s life, in which he is chastised by a younger boy for betraying his future rank through childish games. The child says to the future saint, “Geswic la leof swa unðæslices plegan. and geðeod þe to gode. de þe to bishope his folce geceas. þam ðu scealt heofonan rices infær geopenian” (ll. 17-19) [Cease, dear one, from such inappropriate play, and subject yourself to God, who chose you as bishop for his folk, for whom you shall open the doorway to heaven’s realm].49 The reference to Cuthbert as a bishop who will lead his people to the heavenly kingdom, following as it does after the Gregory sermon, reinforces Cuthbert’s own future identity as England’s own apostle.

49 This passage is based upon the VCM: “Quid te, care, levi subdis per inania ludo, / Quem Deus aetherio sublimis honore sacravit / Praeficiens populis, caeli quibus atria pandas?” (ll. 63-65). Werner Jaager, ed., Bedas metrische Vita sancti Cuthberti, Palaestra 198 (Leipzig: Mayer and Müller, 1935). The VCA and VCP make no mention of heaven in this context.
This episode is followed by the miraculous healing of the saint's injured knee by a mysterious visitor, the vision of Aidan's soul, and the miracle of the warm loaf hidden in the roof of a cottage. The account of the assumption of Aidan's soul is reduced to a bare sentence, stripped of the significance it bears in the VCP as an inspiration for the saint's turn to monasticism, and even of the opportunity it offers in the VCM for Cuthbert to expound upon his vision. On the other hand, Ælfric creates a new context for the miracle of the loaf by noting that it occurred while the saint was "bodigende godes gelefan" (l. 52) [preaching God's faith]. This preaching mission seems to be Ælfric's innovation, as it is mentioned by no other text. In discussing this point, Godden writes, "Though Ælfric makes extensive use of the Vitae he changes or adds details, perhaps unconsciously. The most puzzling is the statement that Cuthbert was preaching before he became a monk (line 52): Ælfric seems to envisage him having an earlier status as a cleric." Whether this inclusion is conscious or not, it serves to underscore Ælfric's desire to emphasize the saint's career as a preacher, an important theme in the Cuthbert sermon.

This theme is reasserted when Ælfric introduces the saint's pastoral career through a series of miracles that are connected to occasions of preaching and ministry. These miracles include an eagle who supplies the saint and his companion with food, illusionary flames of the devil that are vanquished by the saint, a burning house preserved through Cuthbert's prayers, and a possessed woman healed by the saint's will. Each of these miracles is coupled with a reference to Cuthbert's preaching. Cuthbert crosses paths with the eagle when he travels "swa swa his gewuna wæs.

---

ymbe geleaffulre bodunge. ĥæt he ðam ungælæredum folce. lifes weig tæhte” (ll. 97-99) [as was his custom, preaching about the faith, so that he might declare to the untaught folk the way of life]. The false flames of the devil interrupt the saint’s efforts to instruct the people that “hí wære wæron wid deofles syrwum. ðy læs ðe hé [...] fram ðære bodunge. heora mod abrude” (ll. 114-116) [they should be on their guard against the devil’s snares, lest he withdraw their minds from the preaching].

Cuthbert’s audience returns chastened and eager to hear the saint’s words. The possessed woman is the wife of a man who “gelomlice his lare breac” (l. 138) [frequently partook of his learning].

In these episodes, Ælfric preserves the association between preaching and miracle much as he receives it from Bede. However, he maintains this pattern even if it means rearranging his source texts. Such is the circumstance in the account of the burning house, a miracle that Bede does not explicitly link with an occasion of preaching. To the description of Cuthbert’s miraculous diversion of the flames, Ælfric adds the following passage:

He wolde gelome. leodum bodian. on fyrlenum lande. unforhtigende; Hwæt da him geude. se ælmihtiga god. fægre getingynsse. ðam folce to lare. and him men ne mihton. heora mód behydan. ac hi eadmodlice. him geandetton. heora digelnyssa. and elles ne dorston. and be his dihte. digellice gebetton; (ll. 131-136)

[Fearless, he would frequently preach to the people in the remote country. Indeed then the Almighty God gave to him a fair eloquence for preaching to the people, and men could not conceal their minds from him, but they humbly confessed their secret thoughts to him, and dared not do otherwise, and atoned secretly by his command.]
These words are drawn in part from lines in both the VCP and the HE that describe Cuthbert as he assumes the position of prior after Boisil’s death. While Cuthbert’s role as prior and his relationship with Boisil go unmentioned in Ælfric’s homily (apart from a brief reference to Boisil’s prophecy in lines 250-252), the miracles detailed above occur as part of Cuthbert’s unacknowledged ministry as prior. Consequently, the use of this passage fits well in the above context as it supports Ælfric’s larger point that Cuthbert’s devotion to pastoral care bears miraculous fruit.

After detailing this succession of miracles and the public ministry of the saint, Ælfric moves on to present Cuthbert’s retreat to Fame Island, the miracles that occur there, and his appointment as bishop. While he abbreviates the material available to him, he does not make major changes in it. Ælfric maintains the saint’s associations with Ælfælæd, Ecgfrith and Theodore, three figures who serve to orient the life within a historical context. He also commemorates Cuthbert’s return to public life by offering a description of the saint’s qualities as bishop, a passage that combines elements from all three of Bede’s texts.

Hwæt ða síððan se halga cuðberhtus lindisfamensiscere gelæunge leodbiscop. mid ealre gecneordnysse. his folces gymde to geefenlæunge. ðæra eadigra apostola. and hi mid singalum gebedum gescylde wið deofi. and mid halwendum myngungum. to heofonan

---

51 Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary, 421. The passage from the VCP is as follows: “Porro Cuthberto tanta erat docendi peritia, tantus amor persuadendi quae coeperat, tale uultus angelici lumen, ut nullus praesentium latebras ei sui cordis celare praesumeret, omnes palam quae gesserant confitent proferrent, quia nimirum haec eadem illum latere nullomodo putabant, et confessa dignis ut imperabat poenitentiae fructibus abstergerent” [“So great was Cuthbert’s skill in teaching, so great his love of driving home what he had begun to teach, so bright the light of his angelic countenance, that none of those present would presume to hide from him the secrets of his heart, but they all made open confession of what they had done, because they thought that these things could certainly never be hidden from him; and they cleansed themselves from the sins they had confessed by ‘fruits worthy of repentance, as he commanded’.”]. Colgrave, Two Lives, 186, 187. See also HE IV.27, 432-433.

52 Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary, 426.
tihtæ. and he swa leofode. swa swa hé sylf lærde. and á his bodunga. mid gebysnungum astealde. and eac mid wundrum wel geglengde. and mid sóðre lufe symle geswette. and gemetegode mid micclum gedylde. and wæs swiðe estfui on ælceræ sprææċ; He nolde awendan his gewunelican bigleofan. ne his gewææda. ðe hé on westene hæfdæ. ac ða stiðnyssæ. his stearcan bigleofan. betwux læwedum folce. on his life geheold; He wæs swiðe welig. væðulum and ðearfum. and symle him sylfum. swiðe hafenleas; (11.259-271)

[Indeed then afterwards the holy Cuthbert, suffragan bishop of the Lindisfarne church, with all diligence took charge of his people in imitation of the blessed apostles, and protected them with continual prayers against the devil, and induced them to heaven with healthful exhortations, and he lived just as he himself preached, and always supplied his preachings with examples, and also adorned them abundantly with wonders, and sweetened them always with true love, and moderated with great patience, and he was very devout in every speech. He would not change his usual diet, nor his dress, that he had in the wilderness, but then held to the rigors of his rigid diet among the lay folk during his life. He was very wealthy for the poor and destitute, and continually for himself very poor.]

In this lines, Ælfric assembles the ideals of sanctity personified by Cuthbert. These collected words lay heavy stress on the saint’s responsibility for his people, on the education and protection of the flock, on the importance of preaching effectively, and on a life of charity and asceticism. It is not difficult to see in this portrait a reflection of the values that Ælfric embraced in his own life as a Benedictine monk and Christian teacher.

Cuthbert’s appointment as bishop is followed by various miracles of healing and the saint’s prophetic vision of Ælflæd’s herdsman’s death. The sermon then turns to the death of the saint himself. Ælfric follows the precedent of the HE in his presentation of the final events of the saint’s life. Cuthbert meets with Hereberht, who petitions the saint to allow him to journey to heaven with him. The homily provides a seamless progression from Cuthbert’s conversation with Hereberht to the saint’s
journey home and immediate death. Only a few short lines detail the deaths of both men, a marked contrast to the much lengthier expositions in both the VCM and the VCP. Ælfric also departs from all three texts by eliminating the posthumous miracles of the saint recorded by Bede. Only the saint’s incorrupt body provides evidence for Cuthbert’s sanctity after death in the homily. This suggests that Ælfric is not interested in the cultic commemoration of the saint, but rather in the historical and exemplary value of the holy life.

Upon viewing the homily as a whole, it appears clear that Ælfric is committed to preserving the narrative of the saint’s life much as he inherited it from Bede. What changes he makes are either omissions likely motivated by the constraints of a preaching genre, or alterations intended to heighten the thematic elements of the saint’s career. Ælfric’s Cuthbert homily offers a remarkably faithful adaptation and consolidation of the Bede texts. The 340 prose lines of his text reveal the homiletic pressure to condense and simplify his narrative (especially when viewed in the context of the 974 poetic lines of the VCM), yet the homily offers a much more comprehensive overview of the saint’s career than the HE’s 331 lines that skip over Cuthbert’s early life, omit the vast majority of miracles attributed to the saint, and barely touch upon the saint’s career as bishop.

Ælfric’s successful adaptation of Bede’s Cuthbert tradition likely reflects the extent to which Bede’s own concerns with pastoral care and monastic life dovetail with those of the tenth-century monastic reform. Bede provided a valuable ecclesiastical and historical tradition for the Benedictine Revival. As Patrick

53 For an argument that Ælfric’s omissions reveal a pattern of thematic organization as well, see Jones, “Ælfric’s Life of Saint Cuthbert,” 39-41.
Wormald asserts, "The exceptional hold which monasticism now took on the English Church [...] must be put down to the immortal picture of its origins painted by Bede the monk. This is as striking an illustration as any in English history of how one historian’s vision of the past can determine the future." Bede’s portrait of a Northumbrian golden age associated with monasticism offered an attractive vision of the past for tenth-century reformers. Moreover, his literary and theological works created a place for the English in the patterns of salvation history and in the literary traditions of the Christian church. Ælfric in particular relied heavily upon Bede’s historical and exegetical writings as sources for the Catholic Homilies. Consequently it is not surprising that Cuthbert, as Gregory before him, is constructed largely from the pattern established by Bede.

Ælfric’s use of Bede to construct this life of an English saint participates in the Northumbrian writer’s sense of history, and yet Ælfric does not use history in the same way. As Malcolm Godden argues, the Cuthbert homily begins a practice followed later by the Benedict and Martin homilies in which “[t]he context of history is pared away to be almost invisible.” Comparing Ælfric’s Cuthbert to the Bede texts, Godden notes that the historical elements and biographical narrative do not play nearly as large a role as they do in other versions of the Life, declaring “There is no indication of the period of history at the beginning, and not until line 213 do we have a

---

55 Malcolm Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary, xli.
reference to historical context at all.”

Godden is correct in his observations; the historiographical value of the homily is very limited, and Ælfric seems to pursue an intentional policy of obscuring and omitting contextual references. His homily reveals an author with very different approach than Bede who surrounds his reader with named sources, geographical landmarks, and a clear chronology.

These elements, suggesting as they do a loss of a specific historical sense of the past, suggest that the associations with the holy past gain their meaning through a new framework. In the Cuthbert homily, this framework is the narrative of salvation history that shapes the project of the Catholic Homilies. Clare Lees identifies this use of the past with the liturgical function of homiletic writing, arguing,

Ælfric embeds history and hagiography in the story of salvation. History to a large extent is here hagiography, and hagiography is framed by the sequences of preaching and meditative reading that witness the central role of the liturgy in the Benedictine reform. The liturgy therefore structures the remembering of the past in the present in Ælfric’s great sequences of homilies and saints’ lives.

Both the practice of hagiography and history is reshaped by homiletic values that seek to find in the past narratives that can transform the present. As a bishop and monk, Cuthbert offers this opportunity by personifying the values that the Reform itself comes to embrace. Consequently, Ælfric’s conservative approach to a saint who is acquiring new dimensions in the context of the tenth century suggests that he is intentionally looking back to an earlier pattern of the saintly life associated with the Northumbrian golden age and the time of conversion. The time of miracles and the

57 Godden, “Experiments in Genre,” 277. The comment concerning l. 213 refers to Ælflæd’s visit and Cuthbert’s prophecy of Egfrith’s death.
spread of the faith associated with Cuthbert offers for the homilist an exemplary model with compelling parallels to the ecclesiastical present of the tenth-century English Church. In this way Ælfric uses the past to provide a didactic and inspirational source for the patterns of spiritual life in present times.

However, it is important to remember as well that Cuthbert is more than an abstract exemplar in the context of the Catholic Homilies. He is also a concrete manifestation of the conversion of the English to the faith, a representative of England’s place in salvation history. While many of the Northumbrian monasteries and landmarks have fallen away, the saint still occupies an English landscape. Ælfric discards the names of many men and women who knew Cuthbert or who benefited from his miracles, but he preserves the names of those memorialized in the HE: Ælflæd, Ecgfrith, Theodore, Trumwine, Hereberht, and even Boisil (though he does not appear in the narrative).\(^{39}\) The miracles that shape his life offer a sense of the saint’s individual holiness, but they also demonstrate the will of God as a shaping element of the Anglo-Saxon past. Cuthbert becomes a figure of an English tradition of sanctified history, and his saintly life commemorates the birth of the faith and the inception of Christian history in Anglo-Saxon culture.

In this chapter I have only begun to explore the opportunity Ælfric offers for examining the relationship between the lives of English saints and the patterns of Christian history. The lives of Alban, Æthelthryth, Oswald, Edmund and Swithin in Lives of Saints and the Vita Æthelwoldi offer a broader sense of the English tradition than that which appears in Catholic Homilies. By focusing on the Gregory and

\(^{39}\) The one exception is Aldfrith, described by Ælfric (but not named) as Ecgfrith’s “cyfesborena broðor (ll. 254-55) [bastard brother].
Cuthbert homilies, however, I have sought to demonstrate how these two saints bring together in their lives a sympathetic relationship between homiletics and history. These saints, preeminent in English tradition, illustrate the patterns of individual life on a communal scale. Both Gregory and Cuthbert serve an important function in the Catholic Homilies as embodiments of the English past. Their careers narrate the foundation and spread of the Christian faith among the English people, and they become important figures in the beginning of a saintly tradition in Anglo-Saxon culture. Gregory and Cuthbert demonstrate an exemplarity that encompasses the salvation of a people, not merely the individual soul. The audience listening to their lives participates in both levels of the texts, recognizing in these homilies their shared history as an English people, but also the individual experience of conversion and salvation that shapes every holy life. The presence of Gregory and Cuthbert in the Catholic Homilies also commemorates the entrance of Anglo-Saxon history into the framework of Christian time, and the enduring traditions of the Anglo-Saxon Church. By narrating the lives of these men, Ælfric seeks to reinvigorate the present with the lessons of the past. These saints contain the memories of the English conversion, a historical moment that offers a focus for both personal and institutional renewal in the tenth-century present day.

Within the terms of this study, Ælfric offers another vision of the changing relationships between hagiography and history. Comparing Ælfric to Bede and Felix highlights the distance between the eighth-century Latin historiographical approach to the saint's life demonstrated by these authors and the didactic concerns that influence the contents of Ælfric's sermons. Ælfric shares with these early works of Anglo-Latin
hagiography a desire to commemorate the foundations of Christianity in England, and thus his sermons devoted to Gregory and Cuthbert preserve many of the events encountered in Bede's historical narrative. However, his accounts of England's past do not seek to rival Bede's and Felix's efforts to locate their saints within the political, ecclesiastical and social landscapes of the seventh and eighth centuries. The early Latin lives written by these men preserve a concern with chronology that is expressed both internally in the narration of events that make up the life of the saint, and externally in relation to datable events and individuals that set the saint within a particular historical moment.

Writing almost three centuries after Bede, Ælfric is less concerned with constructing this articulated sense of context. Saints like Gregory and Cuthbert acquire their meaning in his sermons as historical figures linked to the Anglo-Saxon conversion and the refoundation of the Church in England. However their careers also signify that England's history extends beyond this local context to participate in the larger narrative of the Christian faith. The position that Gregory and Cuthbert occupy in the Catholic Homilies demonstrates how England's past can be situated within the framework of a more universal sense of salvation history. In this larger context, conversion is a reenacted event that initiates every people's entry into the narrative of Christian time.

This overarching vision of Christian history demonstrated in the Catholic Homilies is also characteristic of certain other vernacular works examined in this study. Cynewulf and the anonymous authors of Guthlac A and B establish their saints within the eschatological narrative of Christian theology rather than in the defined
context of local historiographic narrative. As Latin vitae are translated into Old
English, the life is frequently framed by a prologue or epilogue that reinforces a
narrative of salvation history instead of honoring the sequence of chronological time.
These poets employ references to Genesis and Judgment Day, historical events in the
Christian tradition that determine the human condition and the fate of the soul. In this
context the saint’s historical identity is subsumed into a didactic reflection on
individual salvation. The poets’ lack of concern in establishing a historical identity for
the saint is similarly demonstrated by their act of translating hagiography into heroic
verse. The language of vernacular poetry constructs the saint within the familiar
heroic virtues and epithets of the culture, and thereby associates the saint with the
legendary past of Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Ælfric’s vernacular homilies share with poems like Elene, Fates of the
Apostles, and Guthlac A and B the purpose of locating lessons for present life in the
Christian past. The homiletic value of the saint’s life is acknowledged and celebrated
in these texts intended for a vernacular audience. The Catholic Homilies and Lives of
Saints reveal a similar desire to locate the traditions and legends of the Christian faith
in a broad sense of the past that differs from the historical specificity of the eighth-
century vitae. However, as the examples of Gregory and Cuthbert illustrate, many of
Ælfric’s later lives preserve the biographical form of the vita found in the Latin
sources. Ælfric also limits the scope of his translation efforts because he, unlike the
vernacular poets, does not seek to recast the saints of the homilies in the shape of an
Anglo-Saxon hero.
Ælfric's work brings together elements from both Latin and vernacular literary traditions. His sermons devoted to the English saints preserve a sense of the local past even as they are situated within the larger framework of Christian history. He also shares with the vernacular poets a heightened awareness that the patterns of the past gain their meaning from the drama of individual salvation. The Old English works explored in this study reconstruct earlier narratives to bring the legends of the past into the present through the performative genres of homily and heroic verse. These texts suggest an expanded audience for the lessons of history in the tenth century, as vernacular readers and listeners benefited from efforts to translate into Old English the texts and traditions of the Anglo-Saxon Christian Church.

The texts explored in this project all share the desire to record and in some cases remake the traditions of the past to incorporate an Anglo-Saxon cultural perspective. In the case of early Anglo-Latin lives, Anglo-Saxon authors participated in the literary traditions of the late antique Church as they sought to use local figures and events to construct a Christian history for the English and a native tradition of sanctity. In Old English verse, poets employed the literary conventions of their own culture to identify the saints with the timeless context of the Anglo-Saxon heroic past. Both strategies created a local tradition of Christian history reaching back to before the events of the Anglo-Saxon conversion to establish a sense of continuity with the universal history of the Christian faith. Ælfric brought an added level of openness to this pursuit, as he set the early events of the English Church within the larger context of Christian history and theology through the framework of the Catholic Homilies.
In this dissertation, I have traced how the literary commemoration of the saints in Anglo-Saxon texts reveals the culture’s conception of its past in relation to the patterns of Christian history. If saints’ lives can offer valuable insight into periods which otherwise produced relatively few texts, they have also been castigated for being “treacherous repositories of historical data.” While many hagiographies (including those included in this study) were written at least a generation after the saint’s death, they nonetheless reveal how Anglo-Saxon authors conceived of and constructed their Christian past.

As noted in the introduction, this study has set aside for later exploration many other forms of hagiography that survive from the period, including martyrologies, Latin poems, and liturgical texts such as litanies and prayers. It also concludes historically at the end of the tenth-century, at a time when English saints were again becoming a focus of interest and commemoration. A late tenth-century resurgence in the writing of saints’ lives began with Lantfred’s *Translatio et miracula S. Swithunii* (c. 975) and Abbo’s *Passio S. Eadmundi regis et martyris* (c. 985-87), and continued with vitae devoted to Dunstan, Æthelwold, and Oswald, celebrated Benedictine reformers. All of these lives were written in Latin, and the majority were written by

---


61 Lantred’s *Translatio et miracula S. Swithunii* is available in the *Acta Sanctorum Jul.*, vol. I, 321-37. Abbo of Fleury’s *Passio S. Eadmundi* can be found in Michael Winterbottom, *Three Lives of English Saints*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972), 65-87. Both Wulfstan (c. 996) and Ælfric (c. 1006) wrote lives of Æthelwold; both lives can be found in *Wulfstan of Winchester: The Life of St Æthelwold*, eds. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom, Oxford Medieval Texts, gen. eds. D.E. Greenway, B.F. Harvey, M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 1-69 and 70-80 respectively. A translation of Ælfric’s *Life of St. Æthelwold* can be found in *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, second edition, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 903-911. Byrhtferth of Ramsey wrote the *Vita Oswaldi* (c. 997-1005), available in *The Historians of the*
non-English authors or by authors who were not living in England. Abbo and Lantfred were from Fleury (though thought to be living in England at the time of the Lives’ composition), the anonymous B who wrote the Vita sancti Dunstani, while likely to have been English, was associated with Liège, and Adelard, author of a later Life of Dunstan, was from Ghent. This late tenth-century interest in commemorating native English saints, particularly as practiced by hagiographers associated with reformed monasteries both on the Continent and in England, suggests that the desire to create new saints was closely linked to the institutional interests of the Reform.

This interest would be renewed in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries as a new generation of hagiographers (again predominately foreign-born) set out to record the lives of Anglo-Saxon saints. Hagiography offered a powerful tool for Norman ecclesiastics to create a pre-Conquest claim on monastic holdings. Antonia Gransden writes that the period is characterized by “the author’s anxiety to define the rights and possessions of the saint’s (or other ecclesiastic’s) see or monastery.” More specifically, Ted Johnson South identifies this general pattern in the case of the Cuthbert cult when he writes of “a veritable explosion of historical writing which coincides with the Norman refoundation of the monastic community under Bishop

---

William."\(^{65}\) In this new context, the connection that hagiography offers with the past becomes an essential part of the Norman ecclesiastic strategy to confirm and consolidate their authority. Moreover, the ‘professional hagiographer’ makes an appearance in this period, as men like the Flemish monks Goscelin and Folcard circulate from religious community to religious community writing lives.\(^{66}\) New saints from the tenth century such as Edburga of Winchester and Edith of Wilton enter written tradition in this period, and saints from Bede’s time such as Birinius and Erkenwald acquire new lives.\(^{67}\) The desire to preserve and rewrite traditions speaks to efforts to establish a sense of continuity at the local level in the face of social upheaval. The sanctified past acquires new meaning in the dramatically different circumstances of late-eleventh and twelfth-century England.

This continuing practice of hagiography at the close of the Anglo-Saxon period highlights the importance of saint’s life’s as a reservoir of historical and cultural content as well as a pattern of personal exemplarity. The potential that the cult of saints offers for constructing and reconstructing local forms of identity is reflected in the texts that span the Conquest and create links to the past through the extension of

\(^{65}\) South, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, 12.


saintly patronage. While the post-Conquest afterlife of Anglo-Saxon saints extends beyond the boundaries of this project, these developments in Latin hagiography continue to speak to the issues that shaped this dissertation, albeit from a different perspective. For this reason I look forward to exploring the continuing uses of hagiography and the traditions of the sanctified past in the Anglo-Saxon period and beyond.


_____. "Cynewulf's Elene 1115b-24, the Conversion of the Jews: Figurative or Literal?" *English Language Notes* 25 no. 3 (Mar 1988): 1-3.


224


225

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


_____.* Bede’s Native Sources for the Historia Ecclesiastica.” In *Anglo-Saxon History: Basic Readings*, ed. David A.E. Pelteret, 55-81. Basic Readings in


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


234

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


_____.

_____.

_____.


_____.


_____.

235

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


