Alenka Divjak

EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ROYAL SAINTS

St Æthelthryth of East Anglia

St Mildrith of Kent

St Oswald of Northumbria

St Edmund of East Anglia

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PREFACE

For a long time, I did not pay any attention at all to the *saint's life*, regarding it as an obsolete and boring literary genre which deserves hardly any attention. This notion, however, underwent a thorough revision during my studies for an MA at the School of English, the University of Leeds, in the distant academic year 1994/95. Within the module Anglo-Saxon Christian Prose and Poetry, organised by the late Dr Mary Swan, the intrinsic value of the *saint's life* and its research potential were fully recognised. The genre's didactic and idealising nature, its vital dependence on rigid narrative patterns and its ambiguous relationship with reality – all those features being initially regarded as weaknesses – turned out to be the genre's most thought-provoking attributes and they make for valuable research topics. In addition, the *saint's life* is deservedly praised by medievalists as a valuable indirect source of information on various religious and secular aspects of medieval life which would otherwise be most likely lost to posterity.

After nearly thirty years which have since passed, I am still sincerely grateful to my former supervisors Dr Mary Swan and Emerita Professor Joyce Hill. They directed my attention to the Anglo-Saxon royal saints, men and women whose *saints' lives* encompass a considerable amount of indirect historical and sociological evidence, encapsulating in this way a considerable portion of early English history which would otherwise vanish without a trace. I was also advised to focus my attention on the highly relevant issue of gender-specific models of male and female sanctity. If in Anglo-Saxon England the sanctity of royal women was inseparably associated with the rather narrow confines of the monastic environment, being a reward for the royal women's contribution to the foundation and maintenance of monasteries, their male counterparts were active on a far larger scale: in politics, in warfare and in the judiciary, winning their sanctity on the battlefield or as innocent victims of conspiracies. Both supervisors suggested the analysis of two saintly abbesses – St Æthelthryth of East Anglia and St Mildrith of Kent – and two kings martyrs – St Oswald of Northumbria

and St Edmund of East Anglia – all of whom left a permanent trace in the spiritual landscape of early Anglo-Saxon England. My decision to accept the research proposal neatly coincided with my fascination with the early Anglo-Saxon age which was distinguished by high intellectual and cultural achievements.

This textbook is a revised and expanded version of my master's thesis, which was written and submitted at the University of Leeds in the early autumn of 1995. My decision to re-examine and rewrite the original thesis is based on my belief that, after the lapse of nearly thirty years, a thorough revision of the original thesis would be the only proper response to the dramatic progress achieved in the field of Anglo-Saxon hagiography. Apart from that, I sincerely believe that hagiography should be popularised among the wider student population focusing on social studies and humanities because its interdisciplinary nature crosses the conventional boundaries of individual academic disciplines. As the *saint's life* in general and the *saints' lives* of Anglo-Saxon royal saints in particular are something of a novelty to most targeted students, the topic must be handled with care. Because the material is indeed distant in terms of time and content to its target group, students need further support and guidance. This textbook also wants to remind the students of the wealth of the existing knowledge in this field, which is reflected in the extensive bibliographies attached at the end of each chapter. Consequently, in addition to eminent scholars, who can be regarded as classics and whose works served as a foundation on which my work was built nearly thirty years ago – among them: Dorothy Whitelock, Antonia Gransden, Susan Ridyard, Barbara Yorke, Stephanie Hollis, Michael Lapidge, David Rollason, Michael Swanton, Peter Clemoes, J. E. Cross, Christine Fell, David Herlihy, Joyce Hill, Jo Ann McNamara, Suzanne F. Wemple, Susan Millinger, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, Pauline Stafford, F. M. Stenton, K. P. Witney, R. H. Hodgkin, etc. – the textbook also encompasses numerous up-to-date bibliographical units that are mostly available online.

Today, as I am publishing my second, expanded and far more mature version of my work, I would like to thank in particular Mr Tomaž Zalaznik, the director of Nova revija, zavod za humanistiko (Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities), Ljubljana, who waited with infinite patience for the manuscript to be eventually released. I was so overwhelmed by the achievements accumulated in my chosen field and by the quantity of bibliographical materials amassed in the course of thirty years that devoting proper attention to them turned out to be a time-consuming task. I am also deeply grateful to Jason Blake and Olga Kabalin, who did the copyediting of the manuscript and thus put many of my worries to rest.

Maribor, the final days of the Old Year 2023

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The veneration of saints was an essential element in the religious and spiritual life of the Middle Ages. Saints were believed to be heavenly protectors invested with special curative and spiritual powers, masters over the forces of nature, mediators between God and the faithful. Consequently, their shrines came to be venerated as a link between Heaven and Earth, the transient world and the heavenly kingdom. Christianity originally identified two basic types of saints: martyrs and confessors. Martyrs dominated the scene in the first three centuries A.D., when the Christians came to be regarded as the enemies of the Roman state. Acccording to hagiographic tradition, they refused to worship emperors as deities, which was an act of disobedience punishable by imprisonment, torture and death. The executed victims came to be commemorated by their fellow Christians as martyrs who ascended directly to heaven to be reunited with God. In the fourth century, however, Christianity rose from disgrace. In 312, Constantine I (306-337) won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and attributed his victory to the power of the Christian God. The age of Constanine and his descendants was highly conducive to the rise of Christianity which witnessed - among others - the emergence of another saintly figure, the confessor (holy man). Unlike the martyr, who was tortured in the most gruesome manner and eventually executed, the confessor's death was natural, albeit often painful due to a lingering disease. His sanctity, attested by numerous miracles,[1] was based on renunciation, asceticism, the fight against evil spirits and self-inflicted tortures, reminiscent of the Passion of Christ. If the

1 Klaniczay, 2021, 219: 'Whilst the sainthood of martyrs was evident to the immediate community who witnessed their suffering and passion …, for confessor saints two additional elements were needed. One was public knowledge of the exemplary religious virtues of the saints, during their life or immediately after their death … The second requirement was confirmation of the supernatural power of the saints by the miracles that occurred through their intercession, via their relics.'

martyrs lived and died in all parts of the Roman empire, the first confessors found shelter in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts. Apart from hermits and monks, confessors also comprised holy women, saintly bishops, abbots, missionaries, and royal women in Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England (Claniczay, 2021, 218-219).

Pope Sylvester I and Emperor Constantine;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great

1.1 The *saint's life* and its subgenres

The *saint's life*, designed as a vehicle for further veneration of saints, was a highly popular genre in all parts of the Christian world, from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, the Baltics and Russia. It is a distinctly didactic genre, without which the spiritual landscape of the Middle Ages is impossible to imagine. It celebrated the religious devotion and heroism of exceptional, high-born Christians who were promoted by the Church as a new spiritual elite, surpassing the rest of mankind in terms of piety, charity, chastity, asceticism, and religious devotion (Boyer, 1980, 30-31) (Farrar, 1973, 86-87). Apart from that, the renunciation of the transient world and a successfully completed transition from the secular to the spiritual sphere was a must for any potential saint. By applying

rigid criteria for the elevation to sanctity, the Church deliberately restricted the number of saintly individuals to a tiny minority, emphasising in this way the elite position of Christian saints.

The required criteria for sanctity were impossible to meet. As a result, the individuals whom the Church was willing to elevate to sanctity had, when necessary, to be altered beyond recognition. For that reason, the *saint's life*, as a highly idealising genre, had to obliterate all those features of the individual's character which might put their saintliness under scrutiny. Instead of that, the *saint's life* emphasised the individual's exceptional virtues, aligning their credentials with those characterising the famous saints from the earliest age of Christianity. The material for an individual *saint's life* was therefore carefully selected and reshaped into a conventional and fixed pattern of saintly virtues which linked the saint with a universal saintly community.[2]

The *saint's life* can be divided into various sub-genres, the most notable being *vita, passio, translatio, miracula* and *lectiones.* However, scholars agree that the line between individual sub-genres is a fine one and their actual number is difficult to determine.[3] In addition, different sub-genres focus on different hagiographic aspects. The *vita*, for example, emphasises the saint's renunciation of the secular world, their saintly life, spiritual battles, and posthumous miracles. The *passio*, on the other hand, concentrates on the tortures and the martyr's death the protagonist has to endure as a result of their absolute adherence to the Christian faith and clash with pagans. *Miracula* were collections of miracles performed by the saint during their lifetime and posthumously,

2 See, for example, Boyer, 1980, 29, 32-33: virgins, holy bishops and popes, penitents, martyrs, kings martyrs and confessors; Bremmer Jr., 1994, 201: martyrs and confessors, and Farrar, 1973, 83-84: virgin martyrs and confessors.

3 For further discussion on the sub-genres of the *saint's life*, see Schulenburg, 1990, 297-298, where she concentrates on the *vita*, but she also briefly discusses the *miracula* and the *translatio*; Bremmer, 1994, 201, the *vita* and the *passio*; Lapidge, 1975, 252-253, the *passio* and the *vita*; Farrar, 1973, 83-84, uses the same classification, while Rollason, 1982, 1-2, briefly discusses the *vita*, *miracula*, *translatio* and *lectiones*. See also Bridges, 1984, 12-13: the *virgin martyr passio*, the *vita* and the *conversion legend*.

while *lectiones* were intended for liturgical reading in monastic communities. Finally, it is necessary to mention the *translatio* focusing on the relocation of the saint's bodily remains to a more prestigious place within the same community or to another religious institution.

Since pen, ink and parchment were considered to be the most reliable and permanent means of preserving and promoting the glory of saints, religious communities produced or commissioned hagiographic texts to enhance the prestige of their saints, and to promote their curative powers. Monks and priests reading the *saints' lives* in the presence of the faithful also greatly contributed to the popularity of the genre. Frequent revisions of *saints' lives* suggest that despite its stereotypical nature and its strong focus on timeless, saintly virtues the *saint's life* was in its essence flexible enough to adjust to the demands of a particular period as well as to the demands of an individual religious community.[4] In other words, within the hagiographic conventions of the *saint's life*, the writers still retained sufficient space to manoeuvre and actively communicate with their audiences in various time periods.[5]

1.2 Veneration of native saints in early Anglo-Saxon England

As mentioned in 1.0, the *saint's life* singled out certain social groups as being particularly suited to saintly worship. In Anglo-Saxon

4 For a further discussion on the nature of the genre, see, for example, Jones, 1974, 51-57, where he cautions against seeing the *saint's life* as a piece of realistic writing. A similar view is supported by Woolf, 1966, 64-65. Schulenburg, 1990, 285-286, 304-308, also regards the *saint's life*, especially the *vita*, as a living literary genre which provides ample indirect evidence concerning social and cultural history.

5 Rollason in his Preface to *The Mildrith Legend*, 1982, 6, argues that a medieval hagiographer had considerable freedom to 'express his own attitudes and to reflect those of the audience. In the first place, while presenting his saint as a type of sanctity, he was still at liberty to emphasise different aspects of that type. His works thus reflected his own and his audiences' concept of sanctity – what sort of person was

England it was bishops, abbots, scholars, abbesses and kings martyrs who were believed to be highly eligible for sanctity.[6] Many of them belong to the early Anglo-Saxon period that spanned approximately four hundred years, from the fifth to the ninth century. In this early age, Anglo-Saxon England was divided into various kingdoms (namely, Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Kent, Essex, Sussex and Wessex), also known under the collective term Heptarchy.[7] That was the age when Anglo-Saxon England reached its first apex in the field of scholarship, culture and religion. Its intellectual and artistic achievements won international recognition, especially during the influential Carolingian Renaissance, initiated by Charlemagne (768-814). But the exceptional erudition of Anglo-Saxon scholars, which they acquired in their native centres of learning and which they transplanted to the Continent, would have been unthinkable without the substantial infrastructural, material and moral assistance of the Church in Anglo-Saxon England. The Church in turn would have been unable to amass the necessary material wealth with which it fostered learning, literature and culture without relying on the generous support of the Anglo-Saxon royal families who in the seventh century took the groundbreaking decision to convert to Christianity. As the only social group which possessed sufficient material means to fund the conversion process and as the only political force powerful enough to institutionalise the new religion, the kings, queens and other members of this extremely tiny, but highly influential layer of the Anglo-Saxon society were instrumental in bringing the conversion process to a successful conclusion.

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most likely to be regarded as saints and in what way their sanctity was manifested. The concept of sanctity was not uniform but varied from place to place and from period to period.'

6 For a detailed list of Anglo-Saxon saints, see the *List of Anglo-Saxon Saints*. Retrieved 22 October 2021, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Anglo-Saxon_saints.

7 The term heptarchy – seven kingdoms – was used already by the twelfth-century historiographer Henry of Huntingdon (Campbell, 1986, 213). For the use of the term in the sixteenth century, see Goffart, 1997, 53-60.

The Church, thus, elevated to sanctity a restricted number of royal men and women who vitally contributed to the development of Christi-

A map showing the general locations of the Anglo-Saxon peoples around the year 600; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_of_Northumbria, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED

anity (Rollason, 1988, 94). In fact, the membership in the secular royal elite and the membership in the spiritual elite were not mutually inclusive. The saintly honour was not automatically attached to all the royals but had to be – at least in theory – earned the hard way, according to the strict criteria developed by the Church. Consequently, the very few royal men and women elevated to sanctity can be regarded as the elite within the elite, and being in consanguinity with such superior saintly figures was a source of enormous prestige to the royal families. Whereas the pagan ancestors of Anglo-Saxon kings traced their origin back to pagan gods that surrounded them with an aura of divinity and stressed

their separation from the common people,[8] forging an intimate, familial bond between the converted royal families and the new spiritual elite of Christian saints was a highly effective method of emphasising the elevated nature of those families' reign.[9] The royal families were quick to recognise other advantages of Christianity as well: a more advanced administrative system, friendly connections with the papacy, international recognition, and the consolidation and enhancement of royal prestige (Swanton, 1987, 9-11). The new religion established a permanent link between Anglo-Saxon England and the Mediterranean world, singling out Rome as the most favourite destination of kings and ecclesiastics alike (Pengelley, 2010, 67-68). Christianity was also responsible for the introduction of many important cultural, social, economic and agricultural innovations (Turner, Fowler, 2016, 249-263). And on top of that, by entrusting the achievements of pious kings and their saintly relatives to pen, ink and parchment, Christianity saved from oblivion not only the most distinguished protagonists in the conversion process, but also a considerable portion of early English history.

1.3 The afterlife of Anglo-Saxon saints after 1066

Royal families also acted as generous patrons who founded numerous monastic communities. They were as a rule headed by their family members who were – in turn – frequently elevated to sanctity. Consequently, those religious communities, which served, among others, as the burial sites of royal saints, men and women, enjoyed an enor-

8 For detailed royal genealogies of pagan Anglo-Saxon kings, see Moisl, 1981, 216-248.
9 In his article 'The cults of murdered royal saints in Anglo-Saxon England', 1983, 15-16, Rollason observes: 'Royal families presumably gained prestige when saints appeared in their lineage or were associated with them, and their quest for such prestigious associations may explain the proliferation in England of other types of royal saints: royal abbesses such as Mildrith of Thanet and Æthelthryth of Ely; kings such as Oswald and Edmund who had been killed by pagan invaders; and kings such as Edward the Confessor and Sigeberht of East Angles whose sanctity arose out of alleged chastity and self-denial.'

mous degree of social and spiritual prestige and attracted the faithful from far and wide.[10] The veneration of native royal saints was so firmly anchored in the Anglo-Saxon society and the belief in their effective intercession with God was so profound that their cults did not decline even if their families were no longer in existence. Neither did the collapse of the Heptarchy in the late ninth century lead to the abolition of their cults. The kingdom of Wessex, the only member of the former Heptarchy to survive Viking incursions in the ninth century (Rollason, 1987, 144-145) (Ridyard, 1988, 239-240), fostered further veneration of earlier Anglo-Saxon saints (Davis, 1989, 104-105). The kings of Wessex, often seen as foreign intruders outside their kingdom, tried to appease popular resentment by paying special regard to the cults of local saints (Rollason, 1988, 152-154) and by patronising influential monastic communities, especially those associated with the former royal families.

Norman knights and archers at the Battle of Hastings, as depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Hastings

10 Yorke, 1990, 174: 'The Church saw the value of recognising members of royal dynasties as saints, for it not only encouraged more royal donations, but provided a model and a focus for the religious devotions of the local population'.

However, after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, in the so-called post-conquest period, monastic communities lost their traditional royal and local protectors and had to face the greed of the new Norman nobility (Cownie, 1995, 47-48). In the times of trials and challenges which marked the new Anglo-Norman era, the presence of a native saint offered a source of spiritual protection to hard-pressed monastic communities. The question is, however, how effectively the Anglo-Saxon monks advertised the thaumaturgic powers of their native saints to impress the new Norman lords, both secular and ecclesiastical. A rather hotly debated issue among the scholars is the actual degree of the Norman (dis)belief in the reliability of Anglo-Saxon saints. The first school of thought argued that the Norman ecclesiastical authorities tried to establish more rigid criteria of sanctity, thus seriously underestimating and downgrading the cults of many Anglo-Saxon saints.[11] The other school of thought, by contrast, was more inclined to believe that the foreigners did not obstruct the cults of native saints. It was abbots in particular who quickly recognised the saints' vital contribution to the welfare of the monastic communities.[12] In the turbulent post-conquest period, the new abbots especially emphasised the role of saints as spiritual protectors of monastic property. Consequently, the *lives* of native saints abound with passages describing various punishments inflicted on thieves and others who preyed on monastic property (Aird, 1993, 12) (Cosgrove, 2009, 72-73).

The early Anglo-Norman era also witnessed a new surge in hagiographic activity which was already highly developed in the previous

11 Knowles, 1963, 117-119; Barlow, 1979, 191; Rollason, 1982, 59.

12 An influential supporter of this view is Ridyard, 1988, 251-252; 1986, 179-206. Rollason, 1989, 220-233, also seems to have revised his view that the Norman ecclesiastical element was predominantly sceptical of the Anglo-Saxon saints. For a detailed account of the Norman appropriation of Anglo-Saxon saints, see Zatta, 1999, 371-373. Some other historians, however, do retain certain doubts about the Norman attitude towards Anglo-Saxon saints, for example, Hayward, 1998, 67-93. For a suggestion that there was a certain degree of scepticism to be detected in Lanfranc's attitude towards Anglo-Saxon saints, even though not on a national basis, see Rubenstein, 1999, 285-286, 289.

Anglo-Saxon age and which served as a source of inspiration in the post-conquest period as well. Apart from popularising a number of foreign saints, the writers of Anglo-Saxon England produced several Latin and vernacular accounts of their own saints,[13] men, women, royals, bishops, scholarly monks, abbots and abbesses. However, in the troubled post-Conquest era, monastic communities feared that the texts produced in the previous age might be found wanting in the eyes of the new ecclesiastical elite. In order to dispel any potential doubts about the thaumaturgic powers of their saints, and as an established cult had to rely on written evidence rather than on hearsay, hagiographers hired by anxious monastic communities produced necessary written evidence or revised older accounts (Whalen, 1995, 123-135). As the communities wanted the texts to be written or revised in such a manner as to appeal to the taste of the new continental ecclesiastical elite, the services of hagiographers educated in continental centres of learning, such as, for example, Goscelin of St Bertin from Flanders,[14] were in high demand. The monks' hagiographic activities were motivated primarily by the fear that their communities might lose their status as the guardians of prominent native saints. Their fears, however, turned out to be unfounded. Anglo-Saxon saints prevailed, their cults survived, underwent further development and kept influencing the spiritual life of the entire medieval period.

1.4 Anglo-Saxon royal saints: active kings versus reclusive abbesses

This textbook focuses on four remarkable royal saints from the early Anglo-Saxon period: St Oswald of Northumbria (ca. 634-642), St

13 Latin sources of the Old English *saints' lives* are discussed in detail by Zettel, 1982, 17-37, and Cross, 1982, 38-62. Vernacular sources are presented by Scragg, 1979, 223-277, Kerr, 1957, Horstmann, 1886, and Wormald, 1934.

14 For Goscelin, see Rollason, 1982, 20-21, 60-62; 1986, 139-210. For his hagiographic work, see Millinger, 1984, 111-116, 125, fn. 5. For highly detailed information on Goscelin, see Barlow, 1962, pp. xlvi-xlviii.

Æthelthryth of Ely (636-679), East Anglia, St Mildrith of Thanet (ca. 660-after 732), Kent, and St Edmund of East Anglia (†869/70). The discussion centres primarily on gender-based differences between the kings martyrs Oswald and Edmund and the abbesses Æthelthryth and Mildrith. There is a general consensus among Anglo-Saxonists that the sanctity of royal men on one hand and the sanctity of royal women on the other hand were constructed in a distinct, gender-specific way. According to this line of argument, royal women owed their saintly status to their role of pious nuns, abbesses, foundresses and generous benefactresses of monastic communities. The saintly status of kings martyrs, by contrast, was based on their violent death at the hands of the pagans, political enemies or family members.

Nevertheless, even within this rigid pattern there was still room for creativity. This is suggested by the account of St Oswald in the famous *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (henceforth *HE*) by The Venerable Bede, a monk and scholar whose life straddled the seventh and eighth centuries, and by the account of the martyrdom of St Edmund handled by Ælfric of Eynsham (a monk and abbot from the tenth/eleventh centuries) in his vast *Lives of Saints*. Bede created an account of a highly influential ruler, equally feared and admired, who left his stamp on the history of Northumbria. In addition, Oswald's military fame was the topic of various Irish and Welsh written sources which considerably supplement the information about Oswald collected by *HE*. However, the Battle of Maserfield in 642 turned out to be a military failure which resulted in his death and the dismemberment of his corpse. Bede faced the demanding task of transforming Oswald's death and defeat into a glorious spiritual victory which brought him sanctity. He therefore had to present Oswald as a saint imitating Christ, who refused physical violence, patiently endured all the pain and humiliation, and died a martyr's death. However, at the same time he had to depict Oswald's rejection of physical violence in such a way as to prevent his discreditation as a warrior and a king in the eyes of the laity. That was indeed a must if he wanted to make this model of sanctity acceptable in the eyes of a traditional aristocratic society that was infused with a military culture. The task was all the more challenging as in Bede's lifetime this hagiographic

model was only gradually taking roots in Anglo-Saxon England. It was in fact a hagiographic novelty which was accepted by the Church only gradually and reluctantly.

A few centuries later, Ælfric faced a similar challenge. Edmund's encounter with pagan Danes in 869/70 led to his death, and in this position Edmund was highly suited to be depicted as a king martyr. However, this hagiographic model of a king martyr rejecting secular warfare and severing all his ties with the transient world had to be handled with care and caution. Ælfric's decision to promote such a saintly figure was even more ambiguous, as in the 990s, when he composed his collection of *saints' lives*, England was exposed to well-organised and persistent Danish raids. How to glorify Edmund's refusal to engage in a physical encounter with the pagan Danes without questioning his military competence and without compromising his kingship? In other words, how to convince the audience that by giving up secular warrior culture in his final moments, Edmund in fact acted in a highly heroic manner?

Oswald's and Edmund's final moments, which led to their saintly status in the first place, occupy a prominent position in their respective chapters. At the same time, close attention is given to the political and social circumstances which led to the emergence and further evolvement of their cults. The role of Oswald's family in the establishment of his cult is fully explored in *HE*, but what political and ecclesiastical factors fostered the cult of St Edmund, whose dynastic background remains an enigma? Both chapters enclose additional material which provides further information on the era, even though that information is not always directly related to the two saints *per se*. To sum up, this introduction has raised many issues which will be considered with due attention in Chapters 2 and 4.

Unlike Oswald and Edmund, who are discussed separately, Æthelthryth and Mildrith share space in a single chapter, which is consequently the most extensive one in this textbook. The juxtaposition of both women saints in Chapter 3 makes possible a more systematic presentation of the differences and similarities between the two. Both

women saints presided over distinguished monastic communities and the role of the monasteries in the development of Christianity in this particular age cannot be overestimated. However, it is extremely difficult to find any tangible historical evidence with reference to Ely in the early Anglo-Saxon age. By contrast, Thanet is, thanks to a number of preserved charters from this early age, a much better documented case. The preserved historical evidence offers at least some glimpses into the economic activities at Minster-in-Thanet and highlights the monastery's links with the royal families of Kent and Mercia. Apart from that, the preserved correspondence between St Eadburga, Mildrith's successor, and the influential Anglo-Saxon missionary St Boniface (675-754), the patron saint of Germany, implies the remarkable level of literacy developed at Thanet. The paths towards monastic life taken by both Æthelthryth and Mildrith also differ in spite of their adherence to the same monastic ideal. According to hagiographic tradition, Queen Æthelthryth embarked on a monastic career as a mature woman, while Mildrith was a monastic child. Even though the monastic sphere was physically limited to the rather narrow confines of the monastic estate, its social significance was much broader as the monasteries took on a range of important religious and social tasks. Both the Church and the royal families therefore had some very good grounds for promoting the sanctity of women leaders of monastic communities as those institutions which fully addressed so many social and spiritual needs of the age.

In conclusion, a significant part of the history of early England is encapsulated in the *lives* of Anglo-Saxon royal saints – not only the traditional battle- and politics-focused history, but also its more inclusive version that encompasses demography, inter-family dynamics, education and upbringing, art and literature. This textbook should therefore serve as an incentive for students of English history and literature to explore the earliest period of English history and culture in a less conventional way, in this case through the lenses of hagiography, which is a particularly challenging field of scholarly research. Indeed, it can be notoriously difficult to disentangle history from hagiography, and to recognise the historical nuclei hidden under the layers of

fiction. In addition, how to explain why certain saints endured, being venerated even today, while others sank into obscurity and why the attempts to cult certain individuals totally backfired? Studying history and literature via hagiography is worth the effort by all means, for it is thought-provoking and mentally exciting at the same time. That applies in particular to the early Anglo-Saxon royal saints, the elite within the elite, who by playing a central role in the conversion process vitally contributed to the cultural and scholarly excellence of this early age. It is only fair that the memory of them should be kept green in both history and hagiography.

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2.0 ST OSWALD OF NORTHUMBRIA: DYNASTIC ASPECTS OF HIS CULT

The earliest account of St Oswald is found in *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (henceforth *HE*) written in 731 by Bede 'The Venerable' (673-735), a monk and scholar from the monastery of Jarrow in Northumbria. The facts about Oswald's life are collected mostly in the third book of *HE*, while the fourth book provides details about his posthumous miracles and his growing cult in England and abroad at the end of the seventh century. All these details, when interconnected into a meaningful whole, provide the following sequence of events.

Oswald crowned as a king, from a 13th-century manuscript; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_of_Northumbria

Oswald's father, King Æthelfrith of Northumbria, died in 616. Around that time, Oswald, along with his mother and siblings, found shelter in the Gaelic kingdom of Dalriada in western Scotland. Oswald converted to Christianity, learned Irish and developed a permanent spiritual bond with the nearby island of Iona, the centre of Irish Christianity in Britain. He returned to his homeland after the death of his maternal uncle Edwin, who was converted to Christianity, together with his family, court and population in 627. However, the success of Christianity in Northumbria was short-lived. In 633, Edwin fell in battle against the united coalition of pagan Mercians (under King Penda of Mercia) and Christian Britons (under Cadwalla, the ruler of Wales), and Northumbria relapsed into paganism. A year later, Oswald managed to defeat Cadwalla in the fa-

mous Battle of Heavenfield and thus regained the mastery over the kingdom. Even more importantly, in order to reconvert Northumbria, he summoned to his kingdom Irish monks from Iona. He donated to them the islet of Lindisfarne near his capital Bamburgh, where the monks set up a famous monastery and established a diocesan seat for the entire kingdom. Oswald re-Christianised the country and ruled efficiently until his defeat and death in the Battle of Maserfield, 642, fought against the Mercian king Penda.

2.1 Oswy: the establishment of a dynastic cult

Oswald was succeeded by his younger brother Oswy (642-670), who found himself in a precarious position after Oswald's death, being surrounded by domestic and foreign rivals. However, Oswy managed to supress all the opposition, and made himself a force to be reckoned with. His results in the field of religion are even more impressive. Apart from building a number of monasteries, his convocation of the Synod of Whitby in 664 changed the course of Northumbrian history. At the synod, the kingdom opted for the Roman model of Christianity, sidelining the Celtic one promoted by Oswald and the monks of Lindisfarne, and this shift encouraged Northumbria to join the mainstream of Roman culture. The Church of Northumbria benefitted in particular from this new orientation. Due to its ability to combine Celtic and Roman influences, the Church of Northumbria experienced an unprecedented intellectual growth, and the knowledge accumulated in Northumbrian centres of learning enabled Anglo-Saxon scholars and missionaries to vitally contribute to the evolvement of the Carolingian Renaissance in the next century. In addition to that, Oswy orchestrated the sanctification process of his brother Oswald. A year after the Battle of Maserfield, Oswy managed to find his brother's head and hands; at the order of King Penda, these had been put on stakes. He moved Oswald's head to Lindisfarne and his hands to the royal residence in Bamburgh, where he erected the Church of St Peter to guard the

precious relics. Oswald's headless body was later, in the 670s or 680s, buried in Bardney Minster in Lindsey, Mercia, at the initiative of Oswy's daughter Queen Osthryth (Bintley, 2014, 171-181).[15]

Thanks to Oswy, St Oswald, the defeated king, killed in battle against his pagan enemies, was transformed into a king martyr. That was indeed a groundbreaking innovation, one that was initiated by Oswald's family rather than by the Church. In establishing the cult, Oswy – metaphorically speaking – ploughed the wasteland, challenging both the established ecclesiastical notions of sanctity and traditional secular concepts of honour and prestige. From a secular perspective, a defeat in battle was considered to be a source of deep shame, and the death by beheading, together with the dismemberment of a corpse, was the fate of executed criminals in Anglo-Saxon England. Apart from that, criminals were not buried in church cemeteries, so even after the execution a considerable physical and spiritual distance was still being kept between the outcasts and ordinary mortals.

Still, Oswy's efforts bore fruit. He managed to present his brother's defeat as a glorious spiritual victory, transforming the defeated king into a martyr who had fallen in the fight against the pagans (Dyson, 2014, 42-43). In other words, thanks to Oswy's innovative approach, Oswald was associated with the spiritual elite that was believed to possess special thaumaturgic powers and the ability to mediate between the living and the dead. Oswald's family in turn also benefit-

15 In the second half of the ninth century, during the invasion of the Great Viking Army, the monks of Lindisfarne decided to flee. Among the valuables taken to safety was the head of St Oswald, first transferred to Chester-le-Street (Hodgkin, 1952, 2nd vol., 555-556), and later, in 995, to Durham in the north of England. His headless body, which originally rested in the convent of Bardney Minster, Lindsey, was translated to Gloucester in 909, under the supervision of Æthelflaed, the daughter of Alfred the Great (Rollason, 1978, 95). His hands rested for a long time in Bamburgh, until they were supposedly stolen by a monk from Peterborough in the early eleventh century (William Hunt, Oswald (605?-642) (DNB00), Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Vol. 42. 30.5.2020. <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Oswald_(605%3F-642)_(DNB00)>.)

ted from his elevation to sanctity, being given a hitherto unknown competitive edge over their rivals. What is more, the common folk accepted Oswald's cult as their own, and they actively contributed to its popularity by visiting and worshipping the places associated with the saint. Healing powers were attributed in particular to two sites associated with the king martyr: Heavenfield, where he had defeated Cadwalla at the beginning of his reign, and Maserfield, where he had suffered a defeat and death (Runstedler, 2016, 13-15).

2.2. Ecclesiastical misgivings

The image of a king martyr gaining sanctity via his death in battle, created by the lay royal elite and supported by the population, presented an astonishing novelty for the Church, which had yet to find a proper response to this daring innovation. The signs show that the Church was – at least initially – reluctant to acknowledge the new cult (Thacker, 1995, 98-99) and did not share the enthusiasm for Oswald the saint with the Northumbrian ruling family and the population. First, the Church feared that Oswald's sanctification would revive the pre-Christian notions of the divine nature of rulers who in the pagan era were seen as descendants of Woden and other Germanic deities (Moisl, 1981, 215). The veneration of kings as saints might therefore lead to the reinforced spiritual authority of royal families who would in this way regain their demigod nature, which they had lost in the process of Christianisation. The Church encouraged the mindset that the rulers acted as Christ's representatives on earth, but in no way did it want to grant a saintly status to a ruler, a warrior and a layman who had never officially abandoned his secular position, even though it was Christianity which he defended on the battlefield.

Second, the Church in Northumbria was disturbed by the veneration of springs and wells at Heavenfield and Maserfield in association with St Oswald, seeing this practice as a die-hard remnant of the bygone pagan era (Cubitt, 2000, 57, 61). Third, the

Church felt uneasy about the unconventional burial of Oswald's relics, which were not interred in one single place, as different parts of his body rested in different monastic communities (Rollason, 1978, 81). This type of burial aroused unease in medieval England, where monasteries tended to advertise themselves as guardians of supposedly complete and undecayed bodies of saints. The Anglo-Saxons respected Roman law regarding the burial of the dead, which emphasised and protected the bodily integrity of the deceased. That was in line with the values of the European West, which, unlike the practices often seen in religious centres in the Christian East, tended to reject the dismemberment of corpses and the veneration of their bodily fragments (Rollason, 1978, 80). Finally, Oswald's head was also a cause for concern, as the severed heads of distinguished enemies were a fetish in Germanic and Celtic mythologies (MacKenzie, 2010, 144-147). This explains why the monks at Lindisfarne accepted Oswald's head, buried it respectfully, but refused to worship it as a relic; nor did they show any eagerness to encourage the cult of a beheaded ruler because of its direct pagan connotations (Mac Kenzie, 2010, 154).

The Church began to soften its position only in the 670s, demonstrating its altered mindset by founding a monastery at Hexam in 674, near Heavenfield, and then the cult began to acquire more ecclesiastical features. Particular emphasis was given to the worship of the cross erected by Oswald before his victorious battle against Cadwalla. The miracles associated with Heavenfield had distinctly monastic connotations, being performed among the monks, not among the ordinary people. The Church definitely favoured the victorious Battle of Heavenfield with its emphasis on the liberation of Northumbria and the reintroduction of Christianity. As such, the battle was far less ambiguous from an ecclesiastical perspective than the disastrous Battle of Maserfield that led to Oswald's death and his controversial rise to sanctity (MacKenzie, 2010, 178-179).

2.3 Dissemination of Oswald's cult

The Church of Northumbria was reluctant to recognize the new cult, not only because of its unconventional nature and lay origins, but also because of the tensions which existed between the Church of Northumbria and the royal family in the late seventh and early eighth century. The reconciliation between the royal family of Northumbria and St Wilfrid (ca. 633-709/10) as the most notable representative of the Church of Northumbria, which was achieved at the beginning of the eighth century, was beneficial to the growth of Oswald's cult. As Wilfrid was a leading ecclesiastical figure with excellent international connections and a keen admirer of Roman ways, this reconciliation accelerated the dissemination of Oswald's cult not only in Northumbria, but also across the Island. At that time, the Anglo-Saxons were actively involved in missionary activities in Frisia and Germany, being supported in this undertaking by ecclesiastical institutions at home (Hyland, 1996, 141-174), and St Oswald consequently achieved an international recognition in ecclesiastical circles. The extinction of Oswald's royal family ca. 725 did not diminish Oswald's popularity, as implied by Alcuin's poem *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Euboracensis Ecclesie* (ca. 730-804), which dedicates to Oswald a considerable number of verses. An Old English version of Bede's *HE*, and the *Old English Martyrology,* both from the ninth century, further reflect his well-established saintly position in the early Anglo-Saxon age. The account of St Oswald is also included in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, a hefty collection of hagiographic materials from the 990s – a rare distinction, as Oswald, together with St Æthelthryth of Ely, St Edmund of East Anglia, St Swiðun and St Alban, is a member of a tiny group of native saints who figure in the collection. The later medieval period also produced a number of texts, e.g. the Latin life of St Oswald by Reginald of Durham in the twelfth century, the *South English Legendary* from the late thirteenth century, and various other religious texts, which continued to be written until the Protestant era (Rollason, 1978, 165-167). In the tenth century – the

age in which Wessex expanded to the north, which in the second half of the ninth century was occupied by the Vikings (Whitelock, 1959, 70-88) – Oswald's importance further increased as the kings of Wessex felt respect for Northumbria, its traditions, history and saints (Davis, 1989, 104-105). St Oswald was considered to be such an asset that Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd, the Lady of Mercia, had his corpse translated from Bardney to Gloucester in Mercia, the site of her residence, and her nephew, King Æthelstan of Wessex (924-927) (927-939), went even so far as to claim descent from the saint to reinforce his rather weak claim to the throne (Lyon, 2020, 28-30). St Oswald, together with St Cuthbert,[16] The Venerable Bede, Oswin and other early Northumbrian saints, retained his prestige in the Norman era as well. Even though the Normans controlled the country and punished rebellions – especially in the north (Aird, 1993, 12) – with ruthless severity, they seemingly did not obstruct the veneration of native saints. The Anglo-Norman intellectual elite emerging in the next century valued Bede, Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, Anglo-Saxon saints, and Anglo-Saxon history as part of their spiritual heritage, which all contributed to Oswald's timeless popularity in medieval England. On the Continent, Oswald's visibility was on the rise as well. Southern Germany, Austria, northern Italy, Tyrol and Switzerland venerated St Oswald as one of the Holy Helpers, the patron saint of farmers and livestock, and the intercessor with God for an abundant harvest and good weather (Jansen, 1995, 230-231, 237-238).

16 St Cuthbert (ca. 634-687), a hermit and Bishop of Lindisfarne, was immensely popular among all the strata of the Northumbrian society; he did not avoid contact with high-born individuals, men and women (Campbell, 1989, 10-11), which at least partly explains the popularity of his cult.

Saint Oswald's church, Bad Kleinkirchheim, Carinthia, one of many churches and place names which commemorate Oswald; https://orthochristian.com/73006.html

To summarise, Oswald underwent an astonishing transition from a defeated king to a European saint. That, however, would have been impossible to accomplish without the active engagement of his energetic family and without their ability to clearly articulate this innovative view of sanctity. The warrior king, having fallen in battle with pagans, is worthy of being elevated to sanctity. In order to enforce this notion, Oswald's family did not hesitate to challenge the spiritual prerogatives of the Church, being highly aware of the spiritual, social and political benefits, which Oswald's saintly status was bringing to both his family and the kingdom.

2.4 *Historia ecclesiastica*

Bede, like his superiors, was initially reserved towards the idea of Oswald as a martyr. He does not mention him in an early version of his *Martyrology*, and in his *Chronica Maiora* he gives the main credit for the beginnings of Christianity in Northumbria to King Edwin and his assistant Bishop Paulinus (Thacker, 1995, 112-113). But in *Historia*

eccleasiastica (henceforth *HE*) Bede eventually ascribed to Oswald an important role in the Christianisation of Northumbria, creating an account which served as a basis of all later hagiographic narratives about the saint. When Bede eventually started viewing Oswald as a martyr, he focused on compiling a long list of Christian virtues which demonstrated Oswald's eligibility for sainthood. As a result, Oswald's image is highly idealised. At the same time, however, Bede highly values the secular aspects of Oswald's kingship: his military competence and his capable kingship. It is clear throughout *HE* that Bede approves of military, administrative and diplomatic abilities of secular rulers and wants them to fully focus on the matters of the state. In addition, he expects them to exercise their religious devotion as laymen, not as monks or hermits. Towards the rulers in their prime who retreated to the monasteries – in other words, opted out – Bede had reservations (Foot, 2017, 25-51) (Higham, 2013b, 11-12). He appreciated the contribution of secular rulers to the successful Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons and understood their vital role in the preservation of the existing social structures. Bede had a statesman's mentality (Burch, 2015, 145) and, despite his commitment to monasticism, he understood the political realities of his time (Stancliffe, 1983, 157-158). After all, he dedicated his *HE* to King Ceolwulf, who came to power in 729 after the extinction of Oswy's line.

Bede therefore faced the difficult task of depicting Oswald as a saint. Oswald was after all a king, a statesman, a war leader, a husband and a father, who performed distinctly mundane tasks and who lost his life while fulfilling the most mundane duty associated with kingship: waging war against the enemies of his kingdom. Bede held Oswald's piety in high regard; nevertheless, he could not simply declare Oswald to be a king martyr without supporting his claim with sufficient evidence. He therefore had to handle his narrative in such a way as to underline Oswald's Christian virtues in order to make him eligible for sainthood. As a result, Bede did his best to trim dynastic conflicts, emphasising instead Oswald's proselytising efforts and Christian virtues, and on top of that, he invested considerable effort in depicting Oswald's final military confrontation as a spiritual victory.

2.4.1 Dynastic conflicts in Oswald's family

The early history of Northumbria was characterised by the conflicts between its two constituent parts, the subkingdoms Bernicia and Deira. The Bernicians were ruled by the Idings, the descendants of King Ida, who began to rule in 547. His grandson Æthelfrith, Oswald's father, proved to be a competent ruler. He reunited Bernicia and Deira by marrying Acha, the daughter of King Ælle of Deira, about whom virtually nothing is known, and banished his wife's brother Edwin from the kingdom (Kirby, 1991, 67-69). Æthelfrith is kept in Bede's good books in spite of his paganism (McCann, 2015, 29-30) and his inclination towards bloodshed. After his victory at the Battle of Chester in 613, he ordered the slaughter of about 1250 British monks from Bangor Monastery who came from the convent to pray for the victory of the British (Hodgkin, 1952, 2. vol., 199). In 616, Æthelfrith was defeated by the East Anglian king Raedwald and replaced by his brother-in-law Edwin, who had previously lived as a refugee at Raedwald's court. He returned from exile in 616, after Æthelfrith's defeat, and ruled until 633, when he was defeated by the Welshman Cadwalla and Penda of Mercia.

The Venerable Bede writing the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, from a 12th--century codex at Engelberg Abbey, Switzerland; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede

All these data, though related as concisely as possible, are highly indicative of the barbarian age, which was dominated by the law of the strongest. Bede definitely tries to cover up compromising details and rarely records the facts that might call into question the moral standards of Oswald and his relatives (Yorke, 1990, 77-78) (Teitsworth, 2017). That the relations between the relatives were really strained is, for example, implied by Bede's brief remark that immediately after Oswald's rise to power (*HE* 2.20) Edwin's Kentish widow Æthelberg fled Northumbria, together with her son and her husband's son from a previous relationship.

Neither can Bede conceal other indecencies in the family, especially Oswy's actions triggered by his concern for the unity of Northumbria. In 651, Oswy orchestrated the murder of Edwin's cousin Oswin who ruled Deira after Oswald's death, and even Oswald's son Œthelwald, who succeeded Oswin in the same position, was no longer on the scene after Oswy's victory over Penda in 655 (*HE* 3.24). On top of that, Oswy also deposed his own son Alfrith as a ruler of Deira. On that basis, it can be argued that Oswald was a member of a ruthless dynasty that was willing to sacrifice even its closest kin when it came to defending royal authority and the unity of the kingdom. In summary, Bede tends to cover up the compromising details that would reveal a relentless power struggle between the dynasties of Deira and Bernicia, and between the Idings themselves. Bede seemingly knew that Oswald's family was hiding skeletons in the closet, and he endeavoured not to stir the already troubled waters (Hare, 2006, §17) as that would have distorted his idealised vision of St Oswald.

2.4.2 Oswald's proselytising efforts and Christian virtues

In *Historia eccleasiastica*, Oswald is distinguished by piety, humility, and generosity to the poor, the promotion of Christianity, and cultivation of friendly relations with the Church (Collins, 1983, 20-21). Bede especially praises Oswald's zeal in spreading Christianity. Since Aidan, an Irish monk from Iona and the first Bishop of Lindisfarne, did not

yet speak English at the time of his arrival in Northumbria, Oswald escorted him around the country and translated his sermons. Apart from being seen as a protector of Christianity and a king proselytiser in his own Northumbria, Oswald is also depicted as spreading Christianity beyond the borders of his kingdom. He thus persuades King Cynegils of Wessex to accept Christianity, and marries his daughter. The memory of this event is preserved in a fictional and megalomaniacal form in the Middle German poem *Oswald*, where Oswald, apart from his wife and father-in-law, converts enormous crowds of pagans to Christianity (Jansen, 1995, 232-233).

Historia ecclesiastica also preserves an unforgettable scene highlighting Oswald's generosity. Aidan and Oswald are sitting together at the table at Easter when Oswald learns that a crowd of paupers is waiting in front of the palace. The king orders his servants to take away a large silver bowl full of victuals, crush it into small pieces and divide the fragments as alms. Aidan, deeply moved by this gesture, touches Oswald's right hand and declares that this hand should never rot. The generous king is reminiscent of St Martin of Tours, who cut his military cloak in two to share it with a beggar (Mertens, 2017, 10, 36-37), which is probably one of the most iconic scenes in Western European hagiography.

Modern statue of St. Aidan beside the ruins of the medieval priory on Lindisfarne; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aidan_of_Lindisfarne, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED

Aidan turned Oswald's hand into a symbol of generosity and peace. However, the stories about Oswald circulating among the British (Welsh) and the Irish in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries underline secular, military and folkloristic aspects of his hands, which have no place in *HE*. Thus, the early ninth-century Welsh *Historia Brittonum* mentions both Oswald's victory over Cadwalla and his defeat at Maserfield, nicknaming the famous king the White/Shining Blade. The nickname highlights both the divinity of Oswald's sword and the divine power of the sword's owner, implying that Oswald was a hero of Celtic folklore tradition (Ziegler, 2006, §18). Various Irish annals further emphasise Oswald's focus on warfare when they record his involvement in various conflicts among the Irish themselves. As an exile among the Irish, he was treated in a manner appropriate to his exulted social status, but the rulers who offered him hospitality expected him to repay their generosity with military cooperation (MacKenzie, 2010, 71-78). Celtic accounts suggest that Oswald's hands, which Bede tamed and Christianised by presenting them as the hands of a generous and benevolent Christian ruler, were in fact the hands of a warrior. Oswy, who fully understood their military potential, had them interred in his main residence where they became the centre of a cult favoured especially by the warrior elite (Ziegler, 2006, §22).

2.4.3 Oswald's military confrontations:

The Battle of Heavenfield – *bellum iustum* (just war)

The Battle of Maserfield – the path to martyrdom

2.4.3.1 The Battle of Heavenfield – *bellum iustum* (just war)

Bede focuses on Oswald's two decisive battles: his victory over the British King Cadwalla at Heavenfield in 634 (*HE* 3.1 and 3.2), and his defeat and death in the Battle of Maserfield in 642. In chapter 3.1, Bede

emphasises the numerical superiority of Oswald's enemies at Heavenfield, and in 3.2 the exiled king and his companions are said to have erected a cross on the eve of the Battle of Heavenfield. This scene prompted scholars to draw parallels between Oswald and Emperor Constantine, who before the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 had a dream in which he was promised to win in the sign of the Cross (Bintley, 2014, 178-179). In addition, Oswald's victory at Heavenfield can be regarded by medieval standards as a just war, *iustum bellum*, a concept used by such prominent ecclesiastical authorities as St Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Bishop Ambrose of Milan († 397) to justify the use of military force by Christians (Hare, 1997, 20-23) (Cross, 1971, 270-273) (Hill, 1980-81, 57-80). Cadwalla is an invader, an outsider who occupies and ravages Northumbria, treating its inhabitants as a defeated race. He is a Christian, but an adherent of Celtic Christianity which Bede rejected as heretical. Oswald's position in the Battle of Heavenfield is crystal clear: he is a defender of his people and, more importantly, his victory over numerically stronger opponents is a sign of divine favour.

Heavenfield: cross and battlefield; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Heavenfield, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

The question is, however, whether Oswald's army was in fact as small as claimed by *HE*. He spent his exile in Dalriada, which had close ties with Ireland, and the Irish annals report that Oswald took part in battles between various Irish clans (MacKenzie, 2010, 71-78).

It is hard to believe that he would have embarked on the reconquest of his kingdom without adequate political, military and spiritual support. However, if Oswald was in reality installed on the throne of Northumbria with the assistance of the Irish, *HE* remains silent on this point. On the other hand, the *Life of St Columbus*, *Vita sancti Columbae*, from the early eighth century, clearly articulates high expectations the Irish had with reference to Oswald's rise to power. According to the *Life*, on the night before the battle, St Columbus (521-597), the founder of the monastery at Iona, appears in Oswald's dream and promises him victory (Reeves, 1874, 1st vol., Ch.1). The scene is highly reminiscent of Constantine's dream on the night before his victorious Battle of the Milvian Bridge. But the dream is also firmly anchored in the ancient Irish gift-giving culture. By bestowing the precious gift of victory on Oswald, St Columbus is fully entitled to some form of reciprocation. In order to repay Columbus's generosity, Oswald would be obligated to swear loyalty to Iona and by implication to the Irish, as, according to the Irish tradition, the giver of a superior gift is the dominant partner in the giver-recipient relationship (MacKenzie, 2010, 183-184).

2.4.3.2 The Battle of Maserfield – the path to martyrdom

Unlike Oswald's victorious battle at Heavenfield, which was described in *HE* in considerable detail, Bede's account of Oswald's battle at Maserfield is evasive. If the location of the Battle of Heavenfield is known, i.e. Hexam in Northumbria, the location of Maserfield is unclear. According to the most common explanation, Maserfield is Oswestry on the Welsh frontier, in present-day Shropshire in the west of England. An alternative location has also been suggested, namely, Lindsey in central England, the contested territory between Northumbria and Mercia for almost the entire seventh century. Oswald definitely did not lose his life within the borders of his kingdom. His invasion deep into a foreign country (Damon, 2006, §13) is indeed difficult to define as a defensive and just war, and in all fairness, Bede nowhere claims it to be such. The Battle of Maserfield seems to have been an act of aggres-

sion either against the Welsh or the Mercians, pure and simple, and as such it had to be dealt with as evasively as possible.

The account of the battle and its aftermath is therefore short and fragmented, and the fragments of the event are scattered over several chapters. Oswald's death is first mentioned in *HE* 3.9,[17] in a single paragraph stating, namely, that the battle took place on 5 August and that Oswald was 38 at the time of his death. This brief remark is followed immediately, in the same chapter, by a series of miracles which occurred at the site of the battle and the report on miracles continues in 3.10. The next chapter, 3.11, reports that Oswald's niece Ostryth (decades after the battle) had his bodily remains translated to Bardney in Mercia, and only 3.12 provides some glimpses of Oswald's final moments.[18]

17 Bede: 'After which period, Oswald was killed in a great battle, by the same pagan nation and pagan king of the Mercians, who had slain his predecessor Edwin, at a place called in the English tongue Maserfelth, in the thirty-eighth year of his age, on the fifth day of the month of August' (Sellar, *HE*, III.9, 1907, 197).
Latin original: 'Quo conpleto annorum curriculo occisus est, commisso graui proelio, ab eadem pagana gente paganoque rege Merciorum, a quo et prodecessor eius Aeduini peremtus fuerat, in loco, qui lingua Anglorum nuncupatur Maserfelth, anno aetatis suae XXXVIII., die quinto mensis Augusti.' (Venerabilis Beda Presbyter (672/3-735 A.D.), *Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum*, the Latin Library).
18 Bede: 'Nay, it is said, that he often continued in prayer from the hour of morning thanksgiving till it was day; and that by reason of his constant custom of praying or giving thanks to God, he was wont always, wherever he sat, to hold his hands on his knees with the palms turned upwards. It is also commonly affirmed and has passed into a proverb, that he ended his life in prayer; for when he was beset with the weapons of his enemies, and perceived that death was at hand, he prayed for the souls of his army. Whence it is proverbially said, "Lord have mercy on their souls," said Oswald, as he fell to the ground' (Sellar, *HE*, III.12, 1907, 204).
Latin original: 'Denique ferunt, quia a tempore matutinae laudis saepius ad diem usque in orationibus persteterit, atque ob crebrum morem orandi, siue gratias agendi Domino semper ubicumque sedens, supinas super genua sua manus habere solitus sit. Uulgatum est autem, et in consuetudinem prouerbii uersum, quod etiam inter uerba orationis uitam finierit. Nam cum armis et hostibus circumseptus iamiamque uideret se esse perimendum, orauit pro animabus exercitus sui. Unde dicunt in prouerbio:

Bede claims that Oswald, realising that his death was near, prayed for the souls of his soldiers, but, again, no further details have been given to shed any light on the cause of war, the location of the battle, and the size of Oswald's army. In other words, the account is cryptic and Oswald's actual military activities on the battlefield remain enigmatic. However, even though the battle itself is evasive, Bede's message is clear. Oswald is a saint because in his final moments he is no longer focused on physical warfare and the trappings of kingship. Ultimately he made the necessary spiritual and physical transition from the secular transient world to the heavenly kingdom, leaving behind all mundane concerns, especially warfare as the most notorious aspect of secular authority. His refusal to continue the conflict and his consequent rejection of secular warrior culture in the face of death, according to the ecclesiastical teaching, make him eligible for sanctity.

Oswald's apparent unwillingness to fight is reminiscent of St Martin (316-397), who, according to Sulpicius Severus, his first biographer, also refused to fight the enemy army. However, to refute the accusation of cowardice, he was prepared to face the enemy army on his own, but unnecessarily, because the enemies themselves had asked for peace (Francese, 2011, Section 4), and Martin's reputation was restored. This scene can be read as an admonition that the honour of a saint refusing to engage in a physical combat is always safe, not only in heaven, but in this transient world as well. Hagiographers indeed went to great lengths to convince especially the lay audience that the saint's rejection of physical warfare was not an act of cowardice but a feat of bravery, an act of honour, surpassing the most brilliant feats of heroism on the battlefield.

Bede, likewise, faced the same problem: how to convince the audience that Oswald's defeat in fact carried far more weight in terms of prestige than his victories and that it was his death at the hands of his pagan enemies which gave him access to the saintly pantheon.

'Deus miserere animabus, dixit Osuald cadens in terram.' (Venerabilis Beda Presbyter (672/3-735 A.D.), *Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum*, the Latin Library).

Bede had to roll up his sleeves and get to work with all his ingenuity to transform a formidable war leader into a martyr whose military reputation, however, had to remain intact in spite of his failure on the battlefield. Paradoxically, by passing over in silence any memories of the actual battle, Bede in fact created the conditions for Oswald's sanctification. He does not say anything about the actual, physical battle and focuses exclusively on Oswald's prayer on the verge of death. In this way, Oswald, although technically still a king, leaves behind all trappings of secular power, and renounces the transient world in order to focus on the afterlife. At the same time, by avoiding the details about Oswald's actual military engagement, Bede also nipped in the bud any potential questions about what had gone wrong on the battlefield, which might have cast a shadow over Oswald and opened his military expertise to criticism. Even though he had lost the Battle of Maserfield, his secular reputation had to remain unblemished.

Bede's oblique account of Oswald's final battle suggests that it was difficult to convert into a martyr this king known for his military prowess, the king who styled himself Bretwalda, the ruler of the whole of Britain (*HE* 3.6). That was a title he could not have obtained without frequent and intimidating displays of military force. It was easier to describe Oswald as an exemplary king in the style of virtuous Old Testament rulers (Burch, 2015, 148-149) than a martyr who rejected warfare in favour of spiritual values. Bede's highly reserved presentation of Oswald's final moments suggests that it was virtually impossible to bring to the common denominator the two conflicting principles: rejection of military violence as a precondition for sanctity and constant warfare as a precondition for the prosperity of the kingdom. Furthermore, Oswald fought his final battle in a foreign country, which was definitely not an act of piety. No wonder that a saintly status was granted to him by the Church only with considerable reluctance and after a lapse of nearly thirty years after his demise.

2.0 APPENDIX: St Æbbe – Oswald's elusive sister – or, what went wrong?

2.1 Æbbe in the eighth-century sources

Bede is interested exclusively in those actions of Oswald that contributed to the rise of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons. Nevertheless, his portrayal of the king is surprisingly coherent, especially when compared to his extremely brief and scattered references to Oswald's only sister Æbbe, also figuring in *HE*. Bede briefly refers to her twice in his fourth book. He first mentions her as the aunt of Oswy's son, King Ecgfrith, and the abbess of Coldingham (*HE* 4.19). In the second note, however, he criticises the secular nature of her monastic establishment, discreetly blaming her for the chaotic state of affairs at Coldingham (*HE* 4.25). If his first note is neutral, the second reference has permanently shaped our perception of Æbbe as an incompetent monastic leader.

According to Bede, *Æbbe* did not run the monastery with sufficient firmness to eradicate dissipation and improper practices in her foundation, even though she was according to *HE* personally honest and sinless. Coldingham was a double monastery, consisting of two separate communities of monks and nuns, headed by the same abbess. Bede suggests that the comfortable and luxurious life of its inhabitants, the neglect of worship, and sexual improprieties made Coldingham notorious. The collapse of the monastery, as a punishment for the wickedness of its inhabitants, was foretold to the abbess by the itinerant monk Adamnan, the future Bishop of Iona. The warning helped for a while, but the residents soon resumed their old ways, and after Æbbe's death the convent met its fate, being burned down and abandoned.

Bede says nothing more about Æbbe in his *HE*, but despite the cryptic nature of his two notes, he nevertheless communicates some highly relevant information. Æbbe was the aunt of King Ecgfrith, the

son and heir of King Oswy. In other words, she was the sister of St Oswald as well! In his *Life of St Cuthbert*,[19] ca. 721, Bede mentions that Æbbe was a (half)sister of King Oswy, *soror uterina regis Oswy* (Colgrave, 1940, 188-189). This translates as maternal half-sister,[20] but in Æbbe's case this information is not further explored. According to Bede's *Life,* Ch. 10, Æbbe invited St Cuthbert, the most distinguished saint in the English north, next to Oswald, to visit her convent, and he accepted her invitation for a few days. Interestingly, there are no hints in the *Life* that there might have been anything wrong within the monastery; Æbbe is described as a virtuous woman, and the account focuses primarily on a miracle performed by the saint. As usual and in line with his ascetic practices, Cuthbert stood neck-deep in the sea water all night, and in the morning two otters wiped his legs with their fur. A monk from the monastery secretly followed him and saw everything. Cuthbert forgave him for his spying, but he demanded that the frightened monk remain silent about the event until Cuthbert's death.[21]

A similar narrative is recorded in the anonymous *Life of St Cuthbert*, which originated in Lindisfarne around 700,[22] and which served as Bede's source for his *Life*. Here too Cuthbert visits Coldingham, and here too it is pointed out that he was invited by Æbbe, about whom the *Life* does not say anything compromising either (Book II, §13). The *Life* does not mention her consanguinity with Oswy, but gives the information that she was a widow, without any further explanation (Colgrave, 1940, 80-81). The anonymous *Life* does not imply any irregularities at Coldingham, and the bulk of the space, as with Bede, is

19 Medieval Sourcebook: Bede: The Life and Miracles of St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindesfarne (721) (Paul Halsall, June 1997, halsall@murray.fordham.edu, Fordham University); https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/bede-cuthbert.asp, 1.6.2023.

20 Glosbe. Latin-English Dictionary. <https://glosbe.com/la/en/soror%20uterina>.8.6.2020.

21 For further analysis of the scene, see Hustler, 1997, 245.

22 The Life of St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisarne whom the Holy Church commemorates on the 20th of March; https://www.stcuthbertorthodoxchurch.org/files/Life-of-Saint-Cuthbert.pdf, 1.6.2023.

devoted to the aforementioned miracle.[23] Finally, Æbbe is mentioned in the *Life of St Wilfrid* (early eighth century), where she is portrayed in a very positive light as an ally of Bishop Wilfrid. It was she who in 681, at the height of the dispute between her nephew King Ecgfrith and the bishop, persuaded her nephew to release Wilfrid from prison when the king was visiting Coldingham with his queen (Colgrave, 1940, Ch. 39, 78-79).

Although the data on *Æbbe* are extremely sparse (Eckenstein, 1896, 101-102), it is possible to venture some conclusions even on the basis of these very few preserved fragments. According to Bede and *The Life of St Wilfrid*, Æbbe was Oswy's (half)sister and aunt of King Ecgfrith and, according to the anonymous *Life of St Cuthbert*, a widow. Unfortunately, any further knowledge of her has been lost to posterity (Colgrave, 1940, 81) (Ziegler, 2020). Why the preserved non-Bedan sources do not refer to her flawed leadership at Coldingham, and whether her leadership was in reality the failure Bede claims it to be, remain open questions to the present day.

2.2 *HE*: Bede's vision of Anglo-Saxons as the Chosen People

Since *HE*, especially its fourth book, consists predominantly of exemplary bishops, abbots, monks and abbesses, Æbbe's departure from the high ecclesiastical standards reached by other ecclesiastics is all the more striking. In addition, Book 4 is primarily devoted to the rulers who can take the credit for the rise of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons and its further evolvement. But Æbbe's nephew Ecgfrith is not on the list. He became embroiled in a dispute with Bishop Wilfrid,

23 For the Latin originals of both lives, see *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*. A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne, and Bede's Prose Life. Texts, translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave, Cambridge University Press. First published 1940. First paperback edition 1985. Re-issued in this digitally printed version in 2007; https://dokumen.tips/documents/two-lives-of-saint-cuthbert.html?page=6, 1.6.2023.

the most powerful figure in the Northumbrian Church. His disregard for Cuthbert's warning not to launch a war expedition to Scotland in 685, which resulted in the king's death, is another example of his conflicting relationship with ecclesiastical figures in Northumbria (*HE* 4.26). *Historia ecclesiastica* implies that Ecgfrith and Æbbe are black sheep among notable rulers and exemplary ecclesiastics (Higham, 2013a, 8-9, 19-20). The report on Æbbe's lack of success in a religious sphere (*HE* 4.25) is immediately followed by the account of Ecgfrith's failure in the secular world (*HE* 4.26), which further highlights their problematic status in the seventh century which has been regarded by the scholarship as an era marked by impressive achievements in the political and ecclesiastical sphere.

In his *HE*, Bede was equally overwhelmed by the missionary achievements of his countrymen at home and abroad. The Anglo-Saxons are, in his eyes, the Chosen People who have embraced Christianity, opting for its orthodox Roman Catholic version, and transforming it into the leading faith on the entire Island. Thus the Anglo-Saxon monk and later Bishop of Lindisfarne St Ecgberht (†729) persuaded the monks at Iona to adopt the Roman version of Christianity in 716 (McCann, 2015, 22-23), and the Anglo-Saxons successfully Christianised their Germanic cousins, Frisians and Saxons, on the Continent.

It can be argued that Bede's *HE* is an enthusiastic and idealised vision of the history of Christianity on the Island from the age of the Romans to Bede's own time, with the Anglo-Saxons figuring as the main heroes in Christianisation of the Island. The Anglo-Saxon achievements in this field are the subject of four out of the five books which constitute *Historia ecclesiastica* (Sellar, 1907, 3-8). Bede, who was born in 673 and died in 735, of course did not experience the times of St Oswald and Oswy, but he lived long enough to hear of the tragic death of King Ecgfrith (685) and the violent end of his sister Queen Ostryth (697). He also experienced the reign of Ecgfrith's half-brother Aldfrith (685-705), the turbulent reign of his problematic sons Osred († 716) and Osric († 729) and witnessed the extinction of

Oswy's lineage. As well, Bede survived St Cuthbert († 687), St Wilfrid († 709), St Æthelthryth († 679) and St Hilda of Whitby († 680), who were iconic figures without whom the beginnings of English history are impossible to imagine. All these exceptional personalities were his contemporaries!

2.3 The urge for ecclesiastical reforms in the eighth century

Unlike the seventh century and the first years of the next century, the second and the third decades of the eighth century, as observed by Bede, were less encouraging, being marked by a series of short-lived rulers and a rapid growth of inappropriate practices in the Church. That Bede was aware of the threat is evident from his letter of 734 to his former disciple, Archbishop Egbert of York, the cousin of King Ceolwulf, to whom Bede dedicated his *HE* (Giles, 1845, 138-155). In his letter, Bede is particularly critical of quasi-monasteries established by the nobles who wanted in this way to permanently appropriate the land their ancestors had received from the kings in exchange for military service (Kubrusly de Freitas, 1982, 136-138). The monastic appropriation of royal land was damaging to the prosperity of Northumbria as the kings no longer possessed sufficient means with which to repay the military aristocracy for their service. As a result, the secular nobles were leaving the country, and its military strength suffered accordingly (Hodgkin, 1952, vol. 2, 417). Bede was also concerned about the monks' distinctly luxurious lifestyle and their adherence to the aristocratic warrior culture, which, in his opinion, had no place in the monastic environment (Hare, 2006, §17). However, in this respect Bede's admonitions did not fall on fertile grounds. Anglo-Saxon aristocratic society, both secular and ecclesiastical, was deeply attached to pre-Christian traditions, the heroic ethos and an aristocratic way of life, seeking inspiration in Germanic heroic legends. The monasteries as aristocratic and royal foundations, accommodating royals and the aristocracy, also had a hand in cultivating such values. They preserved

many ancient Germanic poems, and even in distinctly Christian literature, such as the *lives of saints* and the poems about the Old Testament heroes, there is a noticeable emphasis on the traditional heroic ethos (Divjak, 2012, 140-142).

Bede understood that the position of the Chosen People could be lost by neglect, so he watched the events in Northumbria in the 720s and 730s with deep concern. His misgivings were shared by other Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics throughout the entire eighth century as they reported on the decline of religious discipline and declining moral standards in the Church of Anglo-Saxon England. The synod held in unidentified 'Clovesho' (probably near London) in 747, for example, drew attention to the declining discipline and the worldly lifestyle of monks and nuns, who should live a quiet, orderly life, and avoid wearing extravagant and lavish robes (Hodgkin, 1952, vol. 2, 417). Equally critical was St Boniface (ca. 675-754), the most influential Anglo-Saxon missionary among the Frisians and Saxons, styled as the Patron Saint of Germany. In his letter to Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, Boniface criticised the pilgrimages of women to Rome (who often ended up as prostitutes in Lombardy, France, and Gaul), while also scolding the monks for donning lavish dress, for lust, impurity, laziness in their studies, being critical of drunkenness among the clergy (Hodgkin, 1952, 419-420).[24] The letters penned by the distinguished

24 35. Boniface to Archbishop Cuthbert of Canterbury Reporting the Establishment of Frankish Synods and the Obstacles to His Work (747): C. H. Talbot, The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Leoba and Lebuin together with the Hodoepericon of St Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St Boniface (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954). The Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies. Medieval Sourcebook: The Correspondence of St Boniface: https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/boniface-letters.asp (19.6.2020).
Bibliotheca rerum Germanicarum, Monumenta Moguntina 3, ed. Philippus Jaffé (Berlin, 1866), Bonifatius Cudherhto archiepiscopo Cantuariensi de muneribus litterisque missis gratias agit. A sese in synodo quae statuta sint, significat. Suadet assiduitatem. Addit de feminarum Romam peregrinatione coercenda, de monasteriis per laicos non regendis, de vestium luxuria; pp. 200-210; https://ia600906.

Northumbrian-born scholar and close advisor of Charlemagne Alcuin of York (ca. 735-804) reminded his Northumbrian colleagues of inappropriate practices in their monasteries: sexual offences, greed, gluttony, drunkenness, secularism, vanity, a love of sport, hunting, feasting, and an inappropriate admiration of pre-Christian heroic poetry (Hodgkin, 1952, vol. 2, 420).[25] Bede's brief remark on the corruption at Coldingham can be therefore read as a cautionary tale. Both his letter to Egbert and his cryptic reference to the decadence at Coldingham resonated rather harmoniously with a general feeling prevailing among his ecclesiastical (near) contemporaries that in the eighth century the Church of Anglo-Saxon England no longer possessed the energy, zeal and focus which had distinguished it in the previous century.

2.4 Æbbe's cult – rehabilitation after 400 years

2.4.1 The activities of Durham Cathedral

In view of all this ecclesiastical criticism levelled at monastic men and women in the eighth century, and in view of Æbbe's alleged poor performance in the monastic sphere, it is understandable why in the early Anglo-Saxon age she had no chance of being venerated as a saint. She had to wait until the early twelfth century for her elevation to sanctity, which coincided with the renaissance of the cult of St Cuthbert (c. 634-687) under the auspices of Durham Cathedral

us.archive.org/13/items/bibliothecareru03jaffgoog/bibliothecareru03jaffgoog.pdf (22.6.2020).

25 Biblotheca rerum Germanicarum 6, ed. P. Jaffé, W. Wattenbach in E. Dümmler, Alcuini epistolae, Alcuinus Higbaldum episcopum Lindisfarnensem multa admonet. Memorat de Ecgfridi regis Merciorum obitu inopinato, Monumenta alcuniana (Berlin, 1873), str. 353-358; https://books.google.si/books?id=aFoRAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ms&source=gbs_book_other_versions_r&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=true (22.6.2020).

in the North of England. The cathedral, which had acquired Cuthbert's remains in 995, showed a similar interest in other Northumbrian saints, Cuthbert's (near) contemporaries, which led to a systematic acquisition of their bodily remains and their internment in Durham. Thus, according to Simeon of Durham (active ca. 1090 – ca. 1128), the search for relics started in the eleventh century with Alfred Westou (active ca. 1020 – after 1056), a sacristan in the cathedral, who travelled – allegedly on St Cuthbert's orders – across Northumbria, collecting the relics of the saints and transferring them to Durham.[26] Among the relics kept there, the most famous were those of St Oswin, St Bede and St Æbbe. In fact, it was Æbbe who rather surprisingly surpassed in popularity all the saints buried in Durham, with the exception of Cuthbert and Oswald (Whitehead, 2019, 9-11). Durham Cathedral was apparently determined to build its reputation and visibility on the entombment of the saints associated with the former kingdom of Northumbria, with Cuthbert as a central figure within this saintly group (Whitehead, 2019, 5-6).

2.4.2 The activities of the monks at Coldingham

The cathedral's promotion of Æbbe had a practical character as well. At the beginning of the twelfth century, King Edgar of Scotland (1097-1107) donated Coldingham to the monks of Durham, who established a daughter foundation on the donated estate ca. 1139. As Coldingham in the past belonged to the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, the monks found it expedient to further strengthen their spiritual links with this preeminent kingdom of a bygone age. In order to increase the visibility of the new foundation at Coldingham, which in the twelfth century was politically part of Scotland but spiritually and ecclesiastically part of England, the new monastic community needed a saint of an

26 David Rollason (ed.), Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie = Tract on the origins and progress of this the Church of Durham, (Oxford, 2000).

unambiguous Northumbrian descent from the early Anglo-Saxon age (Whitehead, 2019, 7). Æbbe, as the founder of the original monastery at Coldingham, the sister of the legendary St Oswald of Northumbria, and Cuthbert's acquaintance, was an ideal choice – all the more so because her convent was under the spiritual influence of Lindisfarne, which in turn was associated with St Cuthbert as one of its bishops.

In the 1160s and the 1170s, St Æbbe appeared in a liturgical text from Coldingham. She was mentioned in calendars from the same century, 2 November and 25 August being recorded as two of her spiritual 'birthdays' (Whitnah, 2017, 209), and in the 1190s the central hagiographic text *Vita et miracula sancte Ebbe virginis* was written most likely by Reginald of Durham. After 1188, the monks built an oratory on the cape (St Abb's Head), the alleged site of Æbbe's monastery in the seventh century, while the new monastic community housing her coffin was located about two miles away from the cape (Whitnah, 2017, 214-215).

The cult of St Æbbe deserves consideration for many reasons. It is not entirely clear what was actually hidden in Æbbe's coffin, which, according to the *Life of St Ebbe*, was discovered by shepherds on the site of the original convent on the cape and transferred to the church of the new convent in Coldingham. Her *Life* is vague on this point because the text seemingly does not dare to deny Simeon of Durham's claim that, in the eleventh century, Alfred of Westou transferred Æbbe's remains from Coldingham to the mother institution of Durham (Whitehead, 2019, 17-18). More importantly, Æbbe is portrayed in the *Life* as a virgin who rejects a mighty suitor and takes refuge on the cape at Coldingham that miraculously turns into an island, preventing Æbbe's suitor from accessing the saint (Whitnah, 2017, 219-221). By transforming Æbbe into a virgin saint, the monks at Coldingham further elevated her status in the saintly hierarchy, as virgins, according to the teaching of the Church, occupied the top position in the saintly pantheon (Ch. 3.3.1, str. 75).

Nor does the *Life* try to conceal or contradict Bede's criticism of Æbbe's leadership (Whitehead, 2019, 15-16), diverting instead the attention from her weakness to her main virtue attributed to her by

the monks: the miraculous ability to heal. She was recognised in the twelfth century as the saint who helped with paralysis, blindness, swelling, insanity, deafness, and mutism. She was particularly successful in solving the last two afflictions, especially in the case of affected children (Bailey, 2017, 278, 283) (Salter, 2015, 92, 95, 99, 103-104). Interestingly, mostly young and poor women (ca. 62%) resorted to St Æbbe (Bartlett, 2003, xxiii-xxiv), while Durham Cathedral remained a strictly male institution, with St Cuthbert as its figurehead (Whitehead, 2019, 22). The fact that her miracles took place mostly in the oratory on the cape suited the monks at Coldingham perfectly. Because of their subordination to Durham Cathedral, they could not contradict their mother institution, which claimed to be the guardian of Æbbe's bodily remains, but rightly and, without any reservations, they considered themselves to be the masters of the area around Coldingham, especially the cape where Æbbe's monastery had once stood and where her healing miracles were presumably taking place (Powell, 2014, 84-85).

The monks at Coldingham made it. They knew how to derive the maximum benefit from the traditions associated with the saint. The widow was transformed into a virgin who, with God's help, defended herself against an intrusive suitor. The monks at Coldingham did not pay much attention to Æbbe's coffin, which was located in the new convent at Coldingham. They wanted to redirect public attention to the cape, the site of Æbbe's original monastic community (founded in the distant seventh century). In the twelfth century, they built an oratory on the cape. They regarded this as the most sacred site, as it was invested with miraculous healing properties where Æbbe's ability to intercede with God on behalf of the sick and the needy came to the fore. And finally, even though they did not try to conceal Bede's disturbing reference to her poor leadership of the monastery, they managed to neutralize the weakness attributed to Æbbe by Bede, namely, by emphasizing her numerous healing miracles and by drawing attention to her spectacular path towards monastic seclusion (Bartlett, 2003, xxvii-xxviii).

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3.0 ST ÆTHELTHRYTH OF ELY AND ST MILDRITH OF THANET: TWO DIFFERENT PATHS TOWARDS THE SAME DESTINATION

In the seventh and eighth centuries, monasticism presented a groundbreaking social novelty in Anglo-Saxon society. It was supported by royal families who donated extensive landed properties to found monasteries, which soon came to be regarded as highly valued religious and social institutions. Apart from fulfilling religious duties and functioning as centres of learning and scholarship, monasteries served as administrative units, royal residences, centres of trade and crafts, as well as promoters of advanced agricultural techniques. This set of secular tasks clearly reveals that kings still regarded the monasteries, in spite of their religious role, primarily as their family estates to which they assigned various political and social responsibilities (Yorke, 1989, 99) (Rollason, 1982, 36). The monastic institutions in this early age were predominantly double monasteries, separate communities of monks and nuns ruled by the same abbess of royal descent.[27] The close cooperation of consecrated men and women under the collective leadership of royal abbesses transformed double monasteries into highly efficient centres of political, religious, economic and cultural power. The very fact that the abbatial position passed from one royal woman to the other reflects the determination of the royal families to retain undisputable control over the institutions, which effectively addressed so many contemporary religious, social and economic needs at this early stage of Christianity.

27 For double monasteries, see Hillaby, 1987, 562: '… They were a Gaulish institution. Double houses of men and women became popular and developed vigorously in the Frankish lands in the 6th century, and were exported to England in the early seventh century. There a number of princesses of the Kentish royal house espoused the regular life organised in such double houses which have thus now come to be called princess minsters. From Kent they were adopted in most Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.' See also, Harmeling, 1996, 108-109.

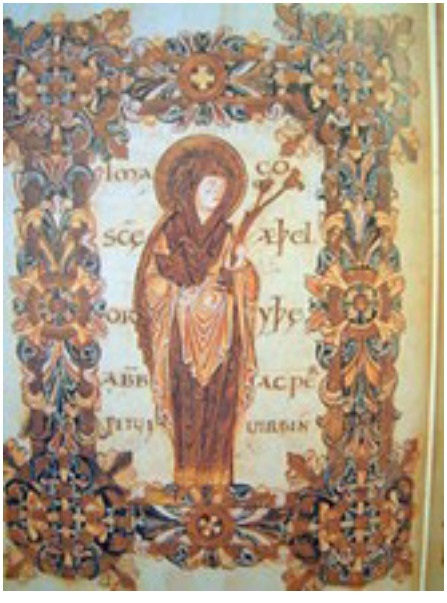
The Church, which highly appreciated the contribution of royal women in the development of this important religious institution, elevated to sanctity many royal abbesses. Hagiographic records played an important role in cementing their saintly status, emphasising in particular the abbesses' radical break with the world outside the narrow confines of their monastic communities. However, the question arises whether the saintly women of royal descent could actually sever their ties with the outside world in view of numerous economic, social and political functions the monasteries had to fulfil in this particular era. Apart from that, a royal abbess was expected to intercede with her relative the king on behalf of her community (Ridyard, 1988, 212) and she was fully entitled to his support, which further confirms the dynastic character of the monasteries in this early age. Consequently, one can wonder whether hagiography, with its emphasis on seclusion, confinement and idealisation, was a suitable medium to adequately evaluate multiple and multifaceted competences of royal abbesses. With such questions in mind, this chapter focuses on St Æthelthryth of Ely and St Mildrith of Thanet, two remarkable Anglo-Saxon abbesses of royal descent, and virgin saints, whose shrines attracted crowds of pilgrims. Apart from discussing both abbesses from a hagiographic perspective, the chapter also endeavours to highlight the historical women hidden under the layers of hagiography. In other words, the motto *Hagiography versus history* runs as a common thread throughout the entire chapter.

3.1 St Æthelthryth of East Anglia

St Æthelthryth (*dies natalis* 23 June, ca. 635-679), also known as Etheldreda or Audrey, was the daughter of the East Anglian king Anna (ca. 636-654). Her saintly reputation was built on her ability to remain a virgin despite her two marriages, to Prince Tondberht of South Gyrwe,[28] and to King Ecgfrith of Northumbria (670-685). It took her

28 South Gyrwe, an area on the Mercian and East Anglian border.

twelve years to persuade Ecgfrith to grant her a divorce and she spent the rest of her life in the monastic sphere. She lived for one year in the double monastery at Coldingham, headed by Ecgfrith's aunt Æbbe, and then moved to East Anglia (673) where she founded a double monastery at Ely. She presided over the community for six years, leading a life of austerity and asceticism. In her forties, 679, she died of plague, being buried at her own wish in the common graveyard.



Saint Æthelthryth from Benedictional of St Æthelwold, 10 C British Library; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%86thelthryth

The Venerable Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*HE* IV. 19, IV. 20) is our principal source on her life and earliest cult. According to Bede, her body, which was found to be undecayed, was reburied in the church at Ely in the presence of her sister and successor Sexburg, St Wilfrid of Northumbria, and many other people in 695. Among other early sources referring to St Æthelthryth we must

mention Bede's *Martyrology* from the early eighth century, as well as the Old English translation of his *Historia ecclesiastica*[29] and *An Old English Martyrology*,[30] both from the ninth century. In general, very little is known about the monastic life at Ely between 700-970, apart from the names of Æthelthryth's earliest successors, also sanctified, her sister Sexburg, Sexburg's daughter Eormenhild, and Eormenhild's daughter Werburg (Ridyard, 1988, 181).[31] The *Liber Eliensis*, a Latin chronicle from the twelfth century, claims that the monastic community was destroyed by the pagan Vikings in the ninth century. In the Viking age, a community of lay priests seemingly continued to hold religious services at Ely until their replacement in 970 with a community of Benedictine monks.[32] In the late Anglo-Saxon age, St Æthelthryth had a prominent place in calendars,[33] *þa halgan*,[34] and

29 *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. Miller (Early English Text Society (hereafter cited as E. E. T. S.), o.s., xcv-xcvi, cx-cxi, 1890, 1898, 2 pts).

30 *An Old English Martyrology*, ed. George Herzfeld, EETS, o. s. 116 (London, 1900), 23 June, pp. 102-103.

31 Bede mentions Sexburg as Æthelthryth's successor, while the abbacy of Eormenild and Werburg is mentioned in post-Æthelwold sources (Fell, 1994, 33).

32 They were patronized by Æthelwold of Winchester (Rollason, 1988, 137-138) (Davis, 1989, 111), one of the most energetic supporters of the Benedictine revival. For Æthelwold (904/9-984), his career as a bishop of Winchester and his contribution to the promotion of the West-Saxon dialect, his school at Winchester, and his friendship with King Edgar (944-975), see Gneuss, 1971, 63-83.

33 Æthelthryth's death and translation are recorded in *English Kalendars before A.D. 1100*, ed. Francis Wormald, Henry Bradshaw Society, vol. 72 (London, 1943):
dep. 23 June, nos. 2-20
tr. 17 October, nos. 3, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14-16, 18-20.

34 There are two principal texts on the resting places of Anglo-Saxon saints: *Secgan be þam Godes sanctum þe on Engla ærost reston* (*Tale of God's saints who first rested in England*) from the first half of the eleventh century, and another pre-conquest text, the so-called Kentish Royal Legend, *Þá hálgan* (*the saints*), also from the eleventh century. If the *Secgan* focuses on Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, *þa halgan* focuses on Kentish, Midland and East Anglian saints, mentioning, for example, Eadburga at Lyminge; Mildrith at Minster in Thanet; Eormengyth one mile to the east to the Minster, Æthelthryth at Ely, Eormenild at Ely with Seaxburg (Rollason, 1978, 61-93).

even in Ælfric's *Saints' Lives,*[35] which in general adopted a highly selective attitude towards the native saints.[36] In the early 1020s, Ely was twice visited by the Danish king Canute the Great, together with his wife Emma, which further reflects the community's prominent position.[37]

Like several other English monasteries, Ely also experienced troubles after 1066, in the so-called post-conquest period. Its position was further aggravated by its involvement in Hereward the Wake's rebellion in 1071 (Hart, 1992, 630-631) as Ely was for a short period of time a centre of native resistance and a shelter for the rebels. The monastery had to suffer consequences; it was heavily fined by William the Conqueror (1066-1087) and a considerable portion of its property was alienated by the new Norman nobility (Thompson and Stevens, 1988, 335-336). The reign of William II (1087-1100) continued to be a drain on the monastery's resources, but during the reign of Henry I (1100-1135) the community regained its wealth and prestige. In the times of trials, the spiritual assistance of St Æthelthryth and her saintly family turned out to be invaluable. Their spiritual potential was effectively used by the monks to augment the position of Ely as a site of exceptional sanctity (Brown, 2010, 229-230). The ambitious plans the community had with this sororal group are evident in the hagiography by Goscelin, who was hired by the community in the 1080s (Blanton, 2008, 762-763), as well as in the *Liber Eliensis*, and *Historia Eliensis*, both from the twelfth century. Apart from the texts originat-

35 *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 4 vols., EETS o. s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (Oxford, 1881-1900; repr. in 2 vols., 1966), pp. 432-441, vol. I.

36 Apart from her legend, only three other Anglo-Saxon saints are included in the collection: St Edmund of East Anglia (Skeat, Ch. 32, 20 November, pp. 314-334, vol. II), St Oswald of Northumbria (Ibid., Ch. 26, 5 August, pp. 124-143, vol. I) and St Swiðun (Ibid., Ch. 21, 2 July, pp. 440-471, vol. I), together with the British proto-martyr St Alban (Ibid., Ch. 19, 22 June, pp. 414-431, vol. I).

37 Canute's visits need to be set in a wider context of his reconciliatory policy towards prominent East Anglian monastic communities, which in the early years of his reign favoured his Anglo-Saxon opponents and served as their burial places (Parker, 2018, 16-17, 20-21).

ing in the monastery, many non-Ely hagiographic materials, Latin, Old French and Middle English, also highlight the elevated position of Æthelthryth and her saintly relatives in medieval England.

3.2 St Mildrith of Thanet

In the late sixth century, Kent was the richest and the most cosmopolitan Anglo-Saxon kingdom. In 597, the Kentish royal family under Ethelberht I (560-616) converted to Christianity, being the first Anglo-Saxon royal family to take this groundbreaking decision. The conversion process in Kent, which invested its royal family with an air of exceptional spiritual prestige, is presented in considerable detail in the so-called *Kentish Royal Legend*, a collection of *saints' lives*, celebrating Kentish royal saints and their saintly relatives outside Kent. The most memorable narrative element in the collection is the miraculous foundation of the double monastery of Minster-in-Thanet in the seventh century. Its foundress and the first abbess, the Kentish princess Domne Eafe, was later succeeded by her daughter Mildrith (*dies natalis* 13 July, †732/733), who died as an aged woman of around seventy, sometime after 732. Mildrith's cult began to develop soon after her death. Her body was relocated from St Mary's Church at Thanet to the Church of SS Peter and Paul within the same community by her successor and close relative Eadburga in the presence of Archbishop Cuthbert between 733-748. Mildrith was a popular saint and 13 July, the date of her death, her *dies natalis*, the day of her spiritual rebirth, is recorded in numerous English calendars.[38] Unfortunately, no contemporary or nearly contemporary version of her *life* has survived, even though the accounts of her sanctity must have started to be written

38 Mildrith's death is recorded in Wormald, *English Kalendars*, Henry Bradshaw Society, vol. 72 (London, 1934):
Dep. 13 July, nos. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14 (14 July), 16, 17, 19, 20.

soon after her translation.[39] The oldest surviving hagiographic accounts, Latin and vernacular, which are likely to be based on the lost older texts, date back to the early eleventh century (Rollason, 1982, 15-40) (Witney, 1984, 20-21).

Saint Mildrith; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mildrith

The Viking raids had a destructive effect on Minster-in-Thanet, but not on Mildrith's cult, which retained its appeal in both the late Anglo-Saxon and the Danish period (1016-1041). It was especially favoured by the Danish king Canute the Great, who in 1035 orchestrated Mildrith's translation from Thanet to St Augustine's Abbey

39 See Hillaby, 1987, 566: '… for Lives of a number of 7th- and early 8th-century saints were written only a short time after their deaths—a tradition adopted from the Franks. A Life of Mildburga's sister, Mildred, was composed between her death in 732 and her translation, not later than 748'.

in Canterbury (Rollason, 1982, 36). This action was instrumental in raising Mildrith's saintly visibility, as shown by her increased presence in post-1035 calendars (Nijenhuis, 2001, 129). In the early years of the post-conquest period, Lanfranc, the new archbishop of Canterbury, limited the ecclesiastical autonomy of St Augustine's Abbey. On the death of Abbot Scotland in 1087, he chose as Scotland's successor Wido, whom the abbey refused to accept. In 1089, there was a rebellion against the new abbot organised by both monks and townsmen of Canterbury which ended with the expulsion of the rebellious monks from the community. Wido's predecessors had commissioned extensive building activities whose completion under the new abbot in 1091 was marked with the magnificent translation ceremony in the same year. On this occasion, the relocation of St Mildrith, St Augustine and other early archbishops within the church (Sharpe, 1990, 502-516)[40] was accompanied by vibrant hagiographic activity. It was Goscelin, the Flemish monk of St Bertin, who was recruited by the abbey to commemorate its saints, working on this time-consuming project for nearly a decade (Powell, 2013, 23).[41] He wrote Mildrith's *Vita*,[42] her *Translatio*,[43] and *Libellus contra inanes sanctae virginis Mildrethae usurpatores,* an angry response to the claim of the monks of St Gregory's Priory, Canterbury, that their house safeguarded the relics of St Mildrith.[44]

40 For further information on Wido, his reasons for organizing Mildrith's translation and his positive attitude towards Anglo-Saxon saints, see Sheffield, 2010, 44-45.
41 For Goscelin, see Rollason, 1982, 20-21, 60-62. His hagiographic work: Millinger, 1984, 111-116, 125, fn. 5. For the detailed information on Goscelin, see Barlow, 1962, xlvi-xlviii, and Whalen, 1995, 126-127.
42 *Vita Deo dilectae virginis Mildrethae* (BHL 5960).
43 *Textus translationis et institutionis monasterii beatae Mildrethae cum miraculorum attestatione* (BHL 5961/4).
44 For the quarrel between St Augustine's Abbey and St Gregory's Priory over the ownership of Mildrith's relics, see Rollason, 1982, 64-65, 67-68. For constant rivalry between the two communities, see also Sharpe, 1990, 502-503.

3.3 The path to monasticism

The discussion of St Æthelthryth in this chapter is based on Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (henceforth *Historia*) and the discussion of St Mildrith on Goscelin's *Vita Deo dilectae virginis Mildrethae* (BHL 5960) (henceforth *Vita*). The *Vita* is a hagiographic text, pure and simple, but Bede's *Historia,* albeit primarily a hefty collection of highly organised historical material, also encompasses numerous hagiographic elements. Consequently, both the *Vita* and Bede's account of St Æthelthryth share a certain number of hagiographic parallels: 1) the royal descent of both saints, 2) their strong inclination for monastic life, 3) their arduous path to monasticism, 4) the monastic life in their respective communities, 5) final illness, 6) death, 7) the translation ceremony, and 8) posthumous miracles, which all together underline Æthelthryth's and Mildrith's eligibility for sanctity. This chapter, however, focuses primarily on their dedication to monasticism, and their monastic life as those two essential elements which considerably contributed to their necessary public visibility and the recognition of their sanctity. However, the presence of these two identical hagiographic elements in both texts does not result in the creation of two identical saintly images. St Mildrith, a monastic child whose dedication to monasticism matched the expectations of her family, is juxtaposed with St Æthelthryth, the twice-wedded royal consort, whose monastic plans ran against her husband's wishes. Apart from that, both women seem to have embraced a rather different set of priorities within their monastic communities, Æthelthryth being obviously focused on asceticism, while Mildrith's distinguishing feature seems to be gentleness. These differences – which will be further explored in the next sub-chapters – imply that the hagiographic pattern of an Anglo-Saxon royal abbess and a virgin saint, no matter how rigid in its insistence on the preservation of virginity and the life of monastic renunciation, tolerated certain modifications as long as they did not clash with the concept of monastic seclusion.

St Augustine's College chapel; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Augustine%27s_Abbey HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED

3.3.1 St Æthelthryth — the reluctant consort

Ely was the resting place of St Æthelthryth and her saintly relatives. However, no other member of this sororal group could compete with Æthelthryth in terms of saintly prestige. Neither Sexburg and Eormenhild, wives and mothers, nor the virgin saints, Werburg and Wihtburg, could equal Æthelthryth, the twice-wedded virgin wife. Her first marriage to Tondberht, the prince of South Gyrwe, a strategically important area on the Mercian and East Anglian border (Yorke, 1997, 63, 70) is mentioned briefly by Bede: 'vir habuerat uxorem, princeps videlicet australium Guruiorum, vocabulo Tondberc' (*HE*, IV. 19, 252).[45] In her second marriage, also dealt with in a very succinct form, the focus is on her constant pleas with her husband, Ecgfrith of North-

45 Translation: She had before been given in marriage to another, to wit, Tondbert, ealdorman of the Southern Gyrwas (p. 201).
All the translations are taken from Sellar, A. M. (ed.), *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*. A Revised Translation with Introduction, Life, and Notes. London: George Bell and Sons. 1907; <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/cd92/e32a14eeb8d0c386a491411c2bd9a1e1c6be.pdf?_ga=2.225803354.1974913874.1575392575-1960795731.1572993054> 23.3.2020.
All Latin quotations are taken from *Venerabilis Bedae Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. George M. Moberly (Oxford, 1881).

umbria, to allow her to leave his court: 'Quae multum diu regem postulans ut saeculi curas relinquere, atque in monasterio, tantum vero regi Christo servire permittetur' (Ibid., 253).[46]

Æthelthryth, the wedded virgin saint, however, had distinguished spiritual companions. Thecla and Cecilia, Christian martyrs from the Roman age, for example, were also virgin wives, and the *lives* of some other Anglo-Saxon women saints reflect the Anglo-Saxon awareness of this early pattern of female sanctity.[47] Nevertheless, Æthelthryth's physical rejection of two husbands must have been, in spite of the ecclesiastical glorification of virginity, a rather extreme event and even a source of certain embarrassment to the ecclesiastical circles in early Anglo-Saxon England (Brown, 2010, 27-28). In other words, even though St Æthelthryth met all the official criteria for sanctity, such as the renunciation of the life of luxury, the rejection of her royal status, and the life of asceticism within a monastic community (Chenard, 2003, 6), her obviously unilateral wish to opt out (Ibid., 28-29) did not exactly correspond with the ecclesiastical notion of a submissive wife. Consequently, Bede had to word the affair with a certain degree of caution in order to prevent his readers from seeing Æthelthryth as a rebel against the ecclesiastical authority. His caution must have been even more in place as his *Historia* was written ca. 50 years after the saint's demise, when the memory of her was still firmly anchored in time and space, and as a result, Bede could not shape and reshape her saintly image at his pleasure.[48]

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46 Translation: She had long asked of the king that he would permit her to lay aside worldly cares, and to serve only Christ, the true King … (p. 201).

47 For example, Cuthburga, sister of King Ine of Wessex (689-726), who was married to Aldfrith (685-704/5) of Northumbria, Kyneburga, daughter of Penda of Mercia (†655), was married to Alhfrith of Deira (ca. 630 – ca. 664), the eldest son of Oswy (642-670) of Northumbria, and Ethelburga, wife of King Ine, managed to avoid this aspect of marital life. The stories of Cuthburga, Ethelburga and Kyneburga are recorded in Horstmann, 1886, Cuthburga, pp. 77-78, Kyneburga, pp. 71-72, and Ethelburga, pp. 74-76.

48 The Venerable Bede enjoyed a high degree of reputation as a historian in the medieval period (Gransden, 1992, 1-29), and even some modern historians believe

He therefore emphasised the support she had received in her spiritual struggle from St Wilfrid, one of the most important ecclesiastical figures in early Anglo-Saxon England. Apart from that, despite her yearning for monasticism Bede's Æthelthryth never rebels against her family's decision to marry her off, and other Anglo-Saxon royal women also submit to parental authority in similar situations.[49] Monastically oriented royal wives employed subtler strategies to have their way.[50] For example, some wives are depicted as having abandoned their marital life soon after the marriage. The other royal women adopted the role of ideal Christian consorts and mothers of worthy heirs, materialising their wish for monastic life later after the fulfilment of their duties in the secular world.[51]

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that there is a certain degree of veracity in his account of St Æthelthryth (Thompson, 1996, 484-486). For a far more sceptical view of Æthelthryth's virginity, see Stafford, 1983, 81, who argues that Æthelthryth was in reality sterile and that her removal to a monastery was highly desired by her husband. For a similar view, see also Chenard, 2003, 28-29.

49 This point is further explored by Hollis, 1992, 71: 'That Bede was unable to find among his sources something more straightforwardly analogous to the Roman Lives of female saints, not a single daughter refusing to be coerced into the bestial embrace of a persistent suitor by obdurate parents, nor gallantly withstanding the frenzied onslaught of a pagan husband with whom she has been forced into marriage, entirely against her will, suggests that the conversion of England was not marked by domestic conflicts between parents and monastic aspirations of their daughters, and this silence makes it likely that the post-Conquest Lives of early Anglo-Saxon women saints have needed a certain amount of artistic licence to bring them into conformity with the notion of Virginity Preserved as the essential definition of female sanctity, of whose establishment Bede is the harbinger'.

50 Millinger, 1984, 17, for example, observes that 'choosing the monastic life might require an extreme strength of will. Episodes in which women have to overcome a strong family opposition of family or spouse to become nuns are common in the hagiographies of medieval women saints. The conflict certainly became a hagiographic commonplace, but it is, I would suggest, one which often corresponds with historical reality'.

51 For further comment on Christian consorts, see Ridyard, 1988, 88-92, who deals in detail with the comments of royal abbesses at Ely, discussing also the cases of

St Æthelthryth's two chaste marriages highlight the central position of virginity as a vital element of female sanctity from the very beginnings of the Christian Church.[52] In fact, female sexuality was an object of contempt and suspicion within the early and medieval Church, and by ecclesiastical standards only the state of virginity, i.e. the rejection of sexuality, enabled a woman to be spiritually and intellectually equal to a man (Tibett Schulenburg, 1986, 32-33) (Hofmann, 2007, 2-3). As a result, even though the Church elevated to sanctity many widowed or divorced royal women and carefully handled the rhetoric of virginity in order not to offend this influential social group, it was the category of virgin saints who were held in the highest esteem by the Church (Luecke, 1984, 58) (Chenard, 2003, 30-31).

3.3.1.1 The translation ceremony

Æthelthryth's virginity played a central role in a high-profile public event staged by Sexburg, her sister and successor at Ely, and attended by the faithful from far and wide. According to Bede, in 695, she organised the translation of Æthelthryth's body from the common graveyard to a prestigious position within the monastic church. The religious ceremony served as a unique opportunity for the monastery to create, cement and advertise the image of Æthelthryth as a virgin saint. As virgin saints occupied the highest rank in the saintly hierarchy, being the saintly elite within the saintly elite, Ely's insistence on Æthelthryth's virginity clearly reflects the community's ambition to be seen as a site of the highest-ranking sanctity. Bede's account of the event encompasses all the essential elements typical of the translation process: the finding of a marble sarcophagus matching Æthelthryth's

Sexburg and her daughter Eormenhild, two ideal Christian queens, consorts and mothers. For the role and function of royal consorts, see also Schulenburg, 1988, 105-106.

52 McNamara and F. Wemple, 1977, 94-96; McNamarra, 1984, 11-18; Tibett Schulenburg, 1978, 117-118.

height perfectly, the presence of an important ecclesiastic, the discovery of the saint's undecayed body, a crowd of people, and the recognition of her sanctity by the voice of people (Schulenburg, 1988, 103).[53] Bede also identifies reliable witnesses who saw her undecayed body, the most telling evidence of her physical and spiritual purity. According to Bede, Wilfrid witnessed the miraculous preservation of her body: 'Cumque corpus sacrae virginis ac sponsae Christi aperto sepulchro esset prolatum in lucem, ita incorruptum inventum est, ac si eodem die fuisset defuncta, sive humo condita; sicut et praefatus antistes Vilfrid, et multi alii qui novere, testantur' (*HE*, IV, 254).[54] Another witness attending the translation, Æthelthryth's physician Cyfrid, also testifies to her immunity against the ravages of time: 'vidique

53 Schulenburg, 1990, 297-298, observes: 'During this early period, it was this act of translation that publicly recognised the sanctity of the individual and the establishment of her cult: it was equated with an informal canonisation for these popular saints. The saint's translation frequently provided the occasion for the actual redaction of the *vita*, with the purpose of providing a co-ordinated promotional effort of advertising or 'selling' the saint and her cult.' See also Rollason, 1982, 1-8, Schulenburg, 1990, 286-287. In the thirteenth century, however, canon law began to regulate the canonisation process much more strictly in order to avoid local abuses (Lapidge, 1975, 245).

See also Klaniczay, 2021, 219: 'The dissemination of such a reputation of sanctity was regarded as a divine sign: vox populi – vox Dei. The second requirement was confirmation of the supernatural power of the saints by the miracles that occurred through their intercession, via their relics. All this was then consecrated by a solemn ceremony arranged by the bishop, elevating the (incorrupt) corpses of the saints (from which a good odour emanated) and transferring them to the altars of their churches. There was no need of higher permission for these newly established cults: their presence in the local, diocesan, or regional calendars, the continuing veneration of their relics, and the regular celebration of their feasts were sufficient to make them local or regional patrons'.

54 Translation: When the grave was opened and the body of the holy virgin and bride of Christ was brought into the light of day, it was found as free from corruption as if she had died and been buried on that very day; as the aforesaid Bishop Wilfrid, and many others that know it, testify. When the grave was opened and the body of the holy virgin and bride of Christ was brought into the light of day, it was found as free from corruption as if she had died and been buried on that very day; as the aforesaid Bishop Wilfrid, and many others that know it, testify (p. 202).

elevatum de tumulo, et positum in lectulo corpus sacrae Deo virginis quasi dormientis simile,'[55] noticing also her clean clothes, another indicator of her spiritual and physical purity: 'Sed et linteamina omnia quibus involutum erat corpus, integra apparuerunt, et ita nova, ut ipso die viderentur castis eius membris esse circumdata' (Ibid., 255).[56]

A mediaeval painting of the translation of Æthelthryth at Ely, attended by her sister Seaxburh; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seaxburh_of_Ely

In his account of the translation, Bede clearly diminishes the role of Sexburg and her nuns as witnesses to Æthelthryth's sanctity in favour of Wilfrid and Æthelthryth's physician. Male authority is obviously more trustworthy than the evidence of women, even though it was Sexburg who was the first to see, wash and clothe her sister's corpse after being buried for sixteen years (Watt, 2013,

55 Translation: I found the body of the holy virgin taken out of the grave and laid on a bed, like one asleep (p. 202).
56 Translation: Besides, all the linen clothes in which the body had been wrapped, appeared entire and as fresh as if they had been that very day put about her chaste limbs (p. 202).

10-11) (Wragg, 2022, 73). Bede is equally unappreciative of Sexburg's role in initiating and organising the sanctification process, even though her action presented an influential novelty in the subsequent veneration of saints in early Anglo-Saxon England. The translation itself was modelled on similar religious practices in Gaul, which further highlights the cosmopolitan nature of Ely and its residents (Styler, 2019, 47, 49-50). The translation therefore reveals Sexburg's competence, professionalism, and her determination to introduce to Ely more advanced religious practices already adopted by comparable institutions abroad. She aimed high indeed. However, Sexburg as a 'crafty, well-informed leader who was able to transform and elevate her sister's reputation, and thereby the reputation for saintliness of her entire family' (Wragg, 2022, 73) was obviously not Bede's type.

3.3.2 St Mildrith – the molested novice

Unlike St Æthelthryth, who gave up her elevated social position in her late thirties or early forties, Mildrith virtually grew up in a monastic environment. She was, according to the legend, a monastic child, being raised by her mother as a nun, which was in line with the tendency of Anglo-Saxon royal families to have some of their daughters consecrated in their infancy or early childhood.[57] In fact, Mildrith's monastic inclinations, such as presented in the *Vita*, may have corresponded rather well with the wishes of the Kentish king Ecgbert (664-673), the cousin of her mother Domne Eafe, to see a certain number of his women relatives safely accommodated in the monastic environment as part of his plan to settle an old family feud.

57 For Abbess Ælfflæd, the daughter of Oswy of Bernicia, as the most notable example of an oblate, see Nicholson, 1978, 16-17. See also Yorke, 2003, 110-111.

3.3.2.1 The foundation of Minster-in-Thanet

In the 640s, the right of Ecgbert's uncle Eormenred, Domne Eafe's father, to inherit the throne was ignored in favour of his younger brother Eorcenberht, Ecgbert's father (Witney, 1984, 5-6). This irregularity in succession had serious political implications for the kingdom. Eormenred's two sons, Æthelred and Æthelberht, were most likely killed at the instigation of their cousin, King Ecgbert, at the royal court at Eastry. It is likely that they had designs on the throne and that they were young men at that time, not mere boys as the *Vita* depicts them. In any case, Ecgbert was aware of the moral and political damage of this act and, with the assistance of the Church, sought to make amends (Kirby, 1991, 44) (Yorke, 1990, 34-35).[58] He succeeded in making peace with Domne Eafe, the sister of the murdered princes, by granting her the land to found a monastery on the islet of Thanet, Minster-in-Thanet,[59] which came to occupy a preeminent position among the Kentish monastic communities. By acting as a generous benefactor, Ecgbert killed two birds with one stone. He expiated his sin and removed his rivals' womenfolk from a secular sphere.

Domne Eafe consented to the reconciliation which offered her the opportunity to settle in Kent after having divorced her Mercian husband Merewalh.[60] Today it is impossible to check the veracity of Goscelin's explanation that the divorce took place at the wish of both partners, each being eager to concentrate on the heaven-

58 For a detailed account of the turbulences in the Kentish royal family in the second half of the seventh century, see Witney, 1984, 7-14.

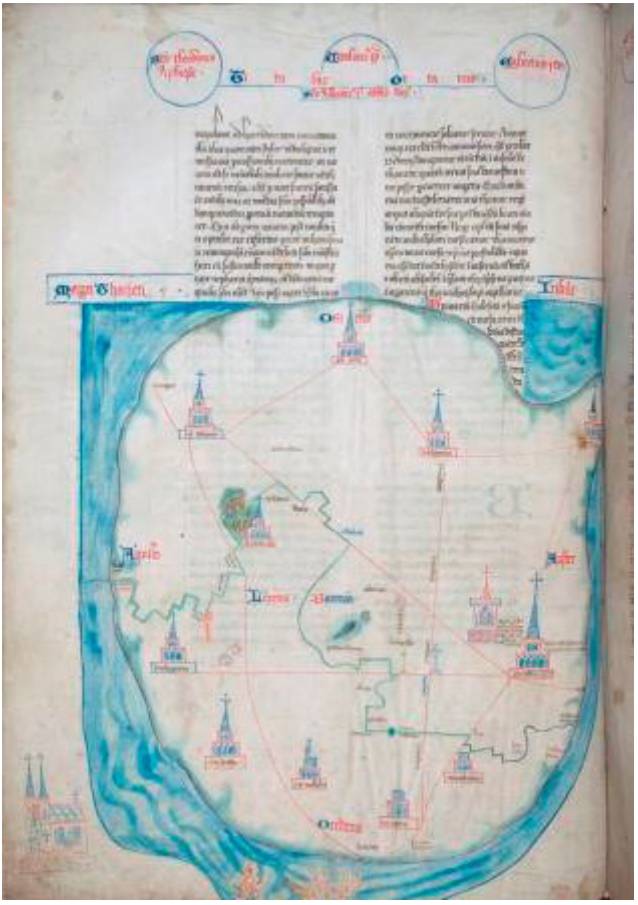
59 Rollason, 1982, 39-40; Witney, 1984, 7-14; Kirby, 1991, 44; Yorke, 1990, 34-35.

60 For exhaustive information on Merewalh, see Hillaby, 1987. According to the *Life of St Mildburga*, he was converted to Christianity ca. 660, had two sons from a previous union who succeeded him as kings, and after his separation from Eafe he retired to a monastery. Domne Eafe returned to Kent with all her three daughters; her only son died in his infancy, but only Mildrith remained at Thanet with her mother. Mildburga returned to her father's land, where she became the abbess of Wenlock, while Mildgyth moved to Northumbria.

ly kingdom after having given up their earthly possessions (Ch. 4, 115). But even in the eyes of the Church, that staunch believer in the indissolubility of a marital union, this divorce was beyond reproach (Hollis, 1992, 72) (Hillaby, 1987, 580). This combination of exemplary piety and unblemished moral reputation invested Domne Eafe with undisputed moral authority, which enabled her to return to Kent not as a destitute divorcee in need of a shelter but as a worthy representative of her murdered brothers, soon to be regarded as martyrs and elevated to sanctity.[61] Her acceptance of Ecgbert's offer was additionally motivated by her preference for the intellectually and culturally advanced Kent over the less sophisticated land of her husband: 'ubi, inter sanctorum luminaria et populos diuina religione florentes, beatius quam inter rudes adhuc Cristicolas Domino seruiat' (Ch. 5, 118).[62]

61 The accounts of their martyrdom can be defined as a sub-genre, the *passio of murdered kings and princes* (Rollason, 1983, 11-14). The energy and persistence with which the cults of murdered kings and princes were promoted reflect the ecclesiastical alertness to negative implications of such acts. Its support for the victims is further corroborated by the fact that monasteries often served as burial grounds for murdered kings and princes and that at least some of them were founded as an act of penance by a guilty party (Rollason, 1983, 5, 13-14; 1988, 143; 1982, 49-50), (Nijenhuis, 2001, 128-129), (Holland, 2020, 143-144).

62 All quotations from Goscelin's *Vita Deo dilectae Virginis Mildrethae* are taken from Rollason's edition in *The Mildrith Legend*, 1982, 104-143. Translation: … where amidst the lights of the saints and the people flourishing in divine religion, she may serve the Lord more devotedly than amidst even now rough worshippers of Christ.



Isle of Thanet (Trinity Hall Cambridge MS.1); "Cursus cervae", the path taken by Domne Eafe's hind is marked with the green line; https://www.trinhall.cam.ac.uk/library/the-queen-and-the-saint-two-royal-women-of-kent/

According to the legend, she is far from being a passive recipient of royal favour, as, by having used a clever device, she managed to trick the king into granting her more land than he was originally prepared to (Hollis, 1998, 50-51) (Wragg, 2022, 83-84). Thus, she wished to receive from the king as much land as her domesticated hind could

encompass within one day (Kanno, 2016, 143-145). According to the legend, when the king's adviser Thunor, the murderer of the young princes, angrily opposed the king's consent to her wish, being shocked at the miraculous speed with which the hind was obtaining large tracts of land for Domne Eafe's foundation, the ground opened and swallowed him (Ch. 5, 118).

3.3.2.2 Mildrith's (monastic) upbringing

Goscelin's *Vita* is careful to whitewash the reality: the instigator of the murder is Thunor, the king's adviser, who takes the initiative without the king's knowledge and consent. Apart from that, the legend is equally at pains to demonstrate that Domne Eafe's choice of a monastic career for herself and her daughter is an act of the greatest dignity and devotion which has nothing to do with the diminished status of her royal branch in Kent and the fact that Merewalh's throne was inherited by his two sons from a previous union.[63] On the contrary, in the *Vita*, Mildrith's position of a monastic child is depicted as a source of enormous prestige, as she is, according to Goscelin, encouraged in her vocation by the leading ecclesiastical authorities of her time, namely, Archbishop Theodore and Hadrian, the abbot of St Peter's in Canterbury (Ch. 6, 119-120).[64] The pious Domne Eafe is depicted as having reared her daughter in an atmosphere of piety. Her habit of dressing Mildrith soberly, and her endeavours to instil in the girl an interest in spiritual matters: 'hanc preclara genitrix non aurotextis uel gemmatis purpuris, sed uirtutum monilibus et diuinis dotibus

63 For a feeling of resentment among truncated royal branches, their vision of certain political events and the saintly status of some of their members, see Stafford, 1999, 24-25. For a view claiming that the famous St Hilda of Northumbria entered a monastery because as a member of the defeated royal branch of Deira she had no future in the secular world, see, for example, Fell, 1980, 76-99.

64 For the prestigious position of Canterbury, the capital of Kent and the leading ecclesiastical centre in Anglo-Saxon England, under Theodor and Hadrian, see Stopford A. Brooke, 1892, 234, 236, 261; Brooks, 1996, 63-65.

adornare atque ad ardentem lampadem ipsius oleum indeficiens amministrare satagebat' (Ch. 6, 119)[65] correspond nicely with St Jerome's recommendations about the proper upbringing of girls destined for monastic life (Coon, 1997, 37-38).

At the same time, Goscelin is eager to depict Mildrith as cherishing monasticism and the life of piety, renunciation and humility entirely of her own accord. That links Goscelin's account with *vitae* of other consecrated Anglo-Saxon royal virgins who, even though being handed over to monasteries as infants or children, reveal unmistakable signs of future saintliness at an early age (Zottl, 2010, 119, 130). Thus, according to the *Vita*, Mildrith displays from her childhood onwards all conventional signs of a pious nun, feeling contempt for the mundane and preference for the spiritual: 'Hec enim non ut terrigena sed ut celigena id est non quasi in terris sed in celo nata, ita a tenera etatula spernebat infima et anhelabat ad superna' (Ch. 6, 119),[66] which is a typical hagiographic approach.

3.3.2.3 The ordeal at Chelles

In the legend, Mildrith receives her education at the abbey of Chelles, an elite monastic institution in Gaul – alongside a marriage proposal from a high-born suitor, which she understandably rejects. This episode, which has not been properly elucidated to the present day, serves as an additional opportunity to highlight her monastic inclinations (Ch. 10, 123). As a result of her refusal, Mildrith has to undergo a series of tortures linking her to a certain degree with popular

65 Translation: ... the illustrious mother endeavoured to adorn her not with gold--woven cloth and the purple ornamented with precious stones, but with necklaces of virtues and divine endowments, and to administer unfailing oil to her burning lamp.

66 Translation: … For this one was born not as a terrestrial but as heaven-born, that is, not as if born on earth but in heaven, so she from the tender age spurned the lowest and aspired to the highest.

women martyrs from the earliest age of Christianity. They likewise reject marriage offers of influential suitors and pay for their determination first with a series of tortures and then with a martyr's death, their fates being the topic of the *passio*.[67] The enraged abbess, an evil female and tormentor (Kanno, 2016, 156-157), a relative of the rejected suitor, tries to burn Mildrith in a lighted oven, but Mildrith remains unhurt by the fire, being even safer among the flames than among human furies: 'Tutior hic erat innocentia inter flammicomos uigores quam inter humanos furores' (Ch. 11, 124).[68] Having realised the futility of her attempts to burn Mildrith,[69] the abbess uses various forms of physical violence: 'teneram puellam allidit in terram, calcat pedibus, terit calcibus, tundit pugnis acsi plumbatis et cestibus, lacerat et laniat uenenatis unguibus, discerpit et extirpat crines furiosis tractibus' (Ch. 13, 126).[70] However, unlike virgin martyrs, Mildrith is not destined to die a martyr's death. She is rescued first by divine intervention, which prevents the abbess from murdering her: 'Iam denique hanc suffocasset, extinxisset, enecasset, nisi alioquo forte interueniente diuina

67 The pattern of a virgin martyr and the stages in her *passio* are presented, for example, by Farrar, 1973, 84: 'The following constitutes the *topoi* for a virgin-martyr: her good character is briefly mentioned at the outset; her chastity is in some wise challenged, but her virginity is never lost, a figure of authority, but not necessarily a judge, tries to sway her, often in a trial-like setting, the saint delivers a series of set speeches either praising Christ, expounding some point of doctrine or rebuking the foolishness of the pagans and the impotence of their gods; she undergoes various torments, in some of which God intervenes to prevent her being harmed; she is killed by a sword blow; miracles occur after her death; a church is built on a site associated with the martyr.' See also Wogan-Browne, 1994, 173-174.

68 Translation: Here innocence was safer among the fiery vigours than among human furies.

69 This scene, linking Mildrith with the three boys thrown into a Babylonian furnace as punishment for their refusal to worship idols, is further analysed by (Love, 2013, 280) (Kanno, 2016, 159-160).

70 Translation ... she dashes the tender girl to the ground, kicks her with her feet, tramples her with heels, thrashes her with fists as if with lead balls and gauntlets, tears and flails her with predatory nails, grabs and pulls out her hair with furious strokes.

manus succurrisset' (Ibid., 126),[71] and then by her mother, who sends ships to Gaul to rescue her daughter after reading a letter by Mildrith that was hidden in a psalter and sent to her from Chelles.

The image of St Bathild – the foundress of the Chelles Abbey which educated Mildrith as well; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balthild_of_Chelles

However, the idea that Mildrith's chastity may have been threatened in the double monastery at Chelles, which she had joined with the express purpose of receiving monastic training, only to experience there the ordeal of her life was not without a historical nucleus.[72] The need for

71 Translation: ... eventually, she would have strangled, destroyed, murdered her if by some chance the divine hand hadn't come to her rescue.

72 In the second half of the seventh century, Chelles was run by St Bertila, not Wilcoma, as Goscelin names her, the first abbess of the monastery which had been refounded by St Bathilda, the famous Merovingian queen and the resident in her own foundation from 665 until her death in 685. That means that Mildrith's stay at Chelles in the 670s coincided with those of Bathilda and Bertila, two remarkable women saints. It is therefore even more difficult to explain how Mildrith came to be molested in the institution enjoying such a high reputation. According to Brooks, 1996, 55, Mildrith must have received an unwelcome marriage proposal and after refusing it she had difficulties leaving the monastery. After Mildrith, there was no other Anglo-Saxon princess residing in the monastery, an implication that Mildrith's 'martyrdom' had some basis in reality.

eligible brides was strong in the early medieval period (Herlihy, 1985, 1-22) (Stafford, 1999, 16-17), and the shortage of marriageable women could encourage nobles to break ecclesiastical prohibitions in order to seek suitable brides in monastic institutions. As a result, nunneries – often double monasteries – housing so many high-born women with first-rate dynastic connections needed efficient political protectors. In Merovingian Gaul, for example, women monasteries tended to be located within the city walls in order to discourage aggressive magnates from abducting nuns (Geary, 1988, 147). In early Anglo-Saxon England, aggression towards consecrated women increased in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, after the extinction of the majority of those Anglo-Saxon royal families which had been responsible for the foundation of several wealthy double monasteries in the conversion period. The extinct royal families were replaced by other rulers who felt far less attachment towards the monastic institutions with which they had no familial ties. As a result, the new kings were hardly motivated to fund and sustain expensive monastic institutions (Yorke, 2003, 63); they were always in need of additional material resources and privileges, and desirous of being exempted from taxation, road repairs and military service (Brooks, 1971, 69-84). In such circumstances, the new kings and their magnates did not hesitate to molest and abduct nuns, even though such actions incurred the wrath of monks, ecclesiastics and saints alike (Eckenstein, 1896, 123, 125-126).

To summarise, the preservation of virginity against all odds is the central topic in the *Vita*, being explored in greater detail and with much more emphasis than any other aspect of Mildrith's life before and after her nightmare in Gaul (Hollis, 1998, 56). The episode must be seen as an ordeal from which Mildrith must emerge with unblemished reputation in order to prove her capability of presiding over the most distinguished monastery in Kent, which had been founded in such dramatic circumstances.

3.4 Monastic life – the abbatial position

3.4.1 St Mildrith – hagiography versus history

Mildrith's activities in the secular sphere are documented in charters from the seventh and eighth centuries (Witney, 1984, 15-16), and one of them records, for example, her attendance at the *witenagemot* (Royal Council) at Baccanceld in Kent about 696-716 (Schulenburg, 1988, 111, 124, fn. 36). However, apart from her close interaction with her maternal relatives, the kings of Kent,[73] the preserved charters also reveal her links with Æthelbald of Mercia (716-757), one of the most competent kings of the early Anglo-Saxon age. In one of the preserved charters, ca. 716/7 A.D., he grants to Mildrith whom he addresses as his kinswoman, a toll remission for one ship at the port of London (S86),[74] and in another charter (S87) a 'toll-remission on one ship throughout the Mercian realm.'[75] The transactions between Æthelbald and Mildrith (Brooks, 1971, 125-126) suggest that Mildrith was a shrewd politician who recognised the growing influence of Mercia in southern and central England in the early eighth century. Even though Mildrith's maternal dynasty remained in charge in Kent until its extinction in 762, the far-sighted abbess found it advisable to secure in advance the patronage of her paternal dynasty, the ambitious kings of Mercia, future lords of Kent (Yorke, 2003, 56). Apart

73 For the charters of the Kentish kings addressed to Mildrith, see England, Anglo-Saxon & Danish Kings, v4.3 Updated 26 July 2022, https://fmg.ac/Projects/MedLands/ENGLAND,%20AngloSaxon%20&%20Danish%20Kings.htm#_Toc389126245, 14.6.2023.

74 A.D. 716/17 for ? ca. 733 (29 October). Æthelbald, king of Mercia, to Mildrith, abbess, and her familia in Minster-in-Thanet; remission of the toll due on one ship at London. *Latin; The Electronic Sawyer. Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters;* https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/86.html, 22.5.2023.

75 A.D. 737 for ? 716/17 (29 October). Æthelbald, king of Mercia, to Mildrith, abbess, and her church; remission of the toll due on one ship. *Latin, The Electronic Sawyer. Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters;* https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/87.html*, 22.5.2023.*

from that, both charters provide evidence that Thanet was, like many other contemporary monastic communities and religious institutions, heavily involved in trade (Varley, 2021, 13-14). In view of the fact that Æthelbald controlled London, the main port in England, Mildrith's friendly policy towards Mercia makes even more sense.

Goscelin's *Vita*, however, never mentions Mildrith's political talent and business skills which were vital for the survival and prosperity of Minster-in-Thanet, focusing instead in great detail, and in line with hagiographic conventions, on her saintly qualities. An ideal nun is humble and does not yearn for secular functions (Millinger, 1984, 119-120), but if she is compelled to accept a leading position within her community, she does so with perfect modesty and humility. Mildrith was appointed by her mother to succeed her as abbess, a hereditary abbatial status being a distinguishing feature of early Anglo-Saxon double monasteries (Luecke, 1984, 58), and even Goscelin, who minimises secular aspects of Mildrith's abbatial position, is not trying to conceal the fact. However, he words the situation in such a way that Mildrith, in spite of accepting the post from her mother, emerges even from this unmistakably secular situation as a model of humility. Goscelin argues that, by having accepted this post, she did a favour to her ailing mother who wanted to be relieved of her abbatial duties and who eventually resigned with the archbishop's consent: 'Venerabili autem Domneua supplicante et pre diuturna egritudine se excusante, adhuc sacratissimus archipontifex superaddidit benedictionem dignissime Mildrithe, et pro ipsa matre tamquam spiritualem Saram prole innouandam ordinat in principem domus ac familie diuine, et abbatissam consecrate sanctimonialis choree' (Ch. 21, 135).[76]

Mildrith's authority as abbess is not based on fear, punishments and threats, but she endeavours to set a good example to the oth-

76 Translation: When the venerable Domneua begged to be dismissed for the sake of her prolonged illness, the most sacred archpontiff bestowed his blessing on the most virtuous Mildrith, and for the mother herself, as the spiritual Sarah to be rejuvenated by the offspring, he ordains her to be the head of the house and the divine family, and the abbess of the consecrated pious choir.

ers with her own behaviour, wishing to be loved, not feared: 'Ire uirtutis uia non tam imperat quam monstrat, non tam documentis quam exemplis comites prouocat. Ut omnibus precellentior, ita apparebat humilior. Ministra esse malebat quam magistra, prodesse quam preesse, famulatu quam precepto caritatis obsequium docere. Mansuetudine magis quam rigore, patientia quam terrore uincere curabat, diligi potius quam timeri satagebat' (Ch. 23, 136).[77] A charismatic woman, she is admired by all her nuns, who compete to imitate her in piety, humility and vigilance: 'Una erat in eis contentio, que humilior, que obedientior, que vigilantior, que in omni probitatis emulatione sanctissime matri esset proximior' (Ibid., 136).[78] Apart from all these qualities – humility and piety on one hand and patience and personal gentleness on the other – Mildrith is praised by Goscelin for her ability to learn and study, being depicted as reading in her cell. In her youth, she was given a good education, and at Chelles, she is depicted as surpassing all other disciples and equalling her teachers: 'Tradita ergo litterali discipline, docentes se precurrebat diuina capacitate. Vix audierat et docta erat. Thesaurizata memorie nec uolucres celi nec fures poterant auferre. Condiscipulas superabat, magistras equiperabat uel preueniebat' (Ch. 8, 121). It is interesting, however, that even though Goscelin uses the cliché of a saint as a precocious child and a talented student (Boyer, 1980, 27-36) with an adult mind (Kreutzer, 1986, 134-145), he in fact never refers to any intellectual activities taking place at Minster-in-Thanet in Mildrith's lifetime. Yet, there is a certain amount of historical ev-

77 Translation: To follow the path of virtue, she did not so much command but pointed out, not so much with documents rather than with examples did she encourage her companions. As she was superior to all, so she appeared inferior. She preferred to be a servant rather than a teacher, to be useful rather than in charge, to teach obedience to charity by service rather than by commandment. More with gentleness rather than with severity, with patience rather than with terror she strove to win, she endeavoured to be loved rather than feared.

78 Translation: There was one contention between them, who was humbler, more obedient, more watchful, who was nearer the most holy mother in the emulation of every probity.

idence implying that Minster was a monastery with a firmly established tradition of learning under Mildrith's successor and relative Eadburga (abbess from 732/733-751).[79] She was a correspondent of the influential Anglo-Saxon missionary St Boniface, the Patron Saint of Germany, and a teacher of his relative, St Leoba,[80] who took part in the Anglo-Saxon missionary activities among the pagan Saxons and Frisians in the eighth century. During the conversion process, backed by the Carolingian rulers, Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the Continent heavily relied on the intellectual, moral and material support of monastic communities at home, and Boniface's correspondence with Eadburga implies that Thanet held a prestigious position in the field of learning and scholarship (Beach, 2009, 14-15).

3.4.1.1 Mildrith's successors at Thanet

Eadburga was also the *spiritus agens* of St Mildrith's cult which began to develop soon after her death. She had Mildrith's corpse translated from St Mary's Church to the new Church of SS Peter and Paul at Thanet by 748 at the latest (Rollason, 1982, 16) (Yorke, 1990, 38). The importance of this event was emphasised by the presence of Archbishop Cuthbert and a crowd of people (Ch. 28, 143), while the incorruptibility of Mildrith's body, her similarity to a sleeping person, and the cleanness of her clothes served as visible signs of her spiritual and physical purity: 'Tum miracula miraculis occurrunt. Inueniunt virginem vestibus mundissimis et toto corpore post tot scilicet annos integram et incorruptam, ita ut uideretur magis dormire in thalamo quam putrescere in sepulchro. Hac quippe incorruptione et odoris suauitate diuina benignitas digna-

79 Eadburga's identity, her Kentish-West-Saxon royal origin and her friendship with St Boniface are discussed by Witney, 1984, 15-18.
80 For a rather different view, namely, that Leoba was more indebted to the double monastery at Wimborne in Wessex rather than Minster-in-Thanet, see Wynbourne, 1996, 84, and Yorke, 1998, 152.

ta est propalare, quanta sibi seruierit mentis et corporis puritate' (Ibid., Ch. 28, 143).[81]

Church of St Mary the Virgin, Minster-in-Thanet; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minster-in-Thanet#/media/File:St_Mary_the_Virgin_Minster-in-Thanet_1.jpg, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED

Like her predecessor, Eadburga also recognised the growing power of Mercia in southern England. Mildrith's elevation to sanctity could be partly explained as Eadburga's attempt to win for her community the patronage of the formidable Mercians even before their actual arrival in Kent by directing their attention to their half-Mercian relative Mildrith. As a scion of the Kentish and Mercian royal families, Mildrith had a more universal appeal than her Kentish mother (Hollis, 1998, 56), who had actually founded the monastery (Yorke, 2003, 165). It was the foundation of a monastery rather than monastic life alone which was normally rewarded with the elevation to sanctity, and this shift of attention in Mildrith's favour, in-

81 Translation: Then the wonders of wonders occur. They discover the virgin in the cleanest clothes and her whole body, apparently after so many years, intact and uncorrupted, so that it was seen that she was rather sleeping in a chamber than rotting in a grave. By this incorruption and the sweetness of the odour, the divine benevolence thought it fit to announce how well she had preserved the purity of her mind and body.

stead of promoting the foundress of the monastery, Domne Eafe, clearly reflects Thanet's political calculations. Eadburga's efforts to further cultivate the links between Thanet and Æthelbald of Mercia, established under Mildrith, paid off, as shown by Æthelbald's charter addressed to Eadburga in 748 (S91). In the charter, he grants her the remission of half the toll due on a ship, claiming consanguinity with Mildrith.[82] However, compared to the grants he had made to Mildrith, he was obviously less generous to Eadburga. His limited generosity to the abbess with whom he had no familial ties further emphasises Mildrith's central role in safeguarding the welfare of the community in the eighth century.

Eadburga's successors Sigeburh and Selethryth, both of them closely linked to the Mercian rulers (North, 2011, 183-184) (Witney, 1987, 92, 95-96),[83] appear to have been equally successful in winning the royal favour. Under their leadership, Minster-in-Thanet remained one of the richest monasteries in Kent even after the extinction of the Kentish dynasty in 762 (Rollason, 1982, 35)[84] and in spite of the community's increasing vulnerability to the Viking attacks (Witney, 1987, 96-97). The prestige of Minster and other Kentish royal abbeys seems to have declined after the replacement of the kings of Mercia with the West-Saxon rulers in 825. The new masters were traditionally indifferent to the royal monastic communities,[85] and there are signs that Minster-in-Thanet's independence was, like that of many other monastic houses in Anglo-Saxon England of this period, under an increasing threat of lay and ecclesiastical authorities (Eckenstein, 1896,

82 A.D. 748 (London, May). Æthelbald, king of Mercia, to Eadburga, abbess, and her familia in the minsters of St Mary and SS Peter and Paul, Thanet; remission of half the toll due on a ship (? at London). Latin; *The Electronic Sawyer. Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters;* https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/browse/archive/Canterbury,%20St%20Augustine's.html, 23.5.2023.

83 For further information on the tendency of the rulers of Mercia to install their womenfolk into the monasteries in satellite provinces, see Wragg, 2017, 109-110.

84 For the Mercian rule over Kent, see Witney, 1987.

85 For the reasons why the royal house of Wessex did not favour monasteries as dynastic institutions, see Holland, 2020, 263-264.

126). However, as long as Minster was protected by the Mercian kings, whose daughters, women relatives and protégées resided in the monastery, all the attempts of the archbishopric of Canterbury to take control over Minster failed. It was only after 825, i.e. ca. 827, that Archbishop Wulfred eventually managed to force Abbess Cwenthryth, the daughter of his late enemy, King Coenwulf of Mercia (796-821), to cede Minster-in-Thanet to his control (North, 2011). After the loss of the necessary royal support, the monastery gradually sank into obscurity, being abandoned in the early eleventh century, and in 1035 Mildrith's corpse was translated to St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury.

3.4.2 St Æthelthryth – the saint and nothing but the saint

The monastic life at Ely prior to Æthelthryth's death and afterwards is extremely poorly documented. The ravages of time, such as the Mercian raids in the eighth century and the Viking occupation of East Anglia in 869/70, must have taken their toll on Ely. Hardly anything is known about the community in the pre-Viking age except the names of Æthelthryth's earliest successors (Ridyard, 1988, 181) (Fell, 1994, 33), those of her sister, niece and great-niece. Bede is completely silent on the secular aspects of Æthelthryth's abbatial function, even though it was these factors rather than the life of renunciation as such that ensured the prosperity of the community. He is equally silent on the origin of her wealth which made possible the foundation of Ely. He seemingly ignored the fact that royal consorts possessed considerable material resources and landed property of their own which they were allowed to alienate from their husbands' families (Schulenburg, 1988, 108-109). Apart from that, running highly complex institutions, such as monasteries, required first-rate managerial and political skills, and such skills could be obtained only by means of extensive and thorough training, which was reserved for a tiny minority of high-ranking women, queens and princesses (Harmeling, 1996, 105-106) (Wragg, 2022, 64). The management of monastic communities presented a unique opportunity for royal women to fully demonstrate their managerial, political

and business skills, and to remain visible on the wider social scene even after their transition from the secular to the monastic sphere.

Ely Cathedral from the southeast; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ely_Cathedral, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED

Since in East Anglia the conversion was a slow and arduous process (Whitelock, 1971, 3-6), royal support, protection and generosity were the necessity. Bede claims that due to a lack of female monasteries, East Anglian nobles were sending their daughters to Gaul in order to be educated and consecrated as nuns (*HE*, III 8, 155). Æthelthryth was among the first founders of monastic houses in eastern England (Yorke, 1990, 70) (Whitelock, 1971, 7-8). She ruled over the monastery which soon became a residence for retired royal women and was one of the wealthiest monastic institutions in East Anglia (Yorke, 1990, 70). Unfortunately, the historical Æthelthryth remains hidden under the layer of hagiographic details.

3.4.2.1 Bede's vision of an ideal nun

Bede depicts Æthelthryth as a saintly, pious and ascetic nun who sacrificed her secular power and influence for religious life, performing feats of asceticism. She wears unhealthy woollen clothes: 'numquam lineis, sed solum laneis vestimentis uti voluerit'

(IV. 19, 253),[86] takes a hot bath only three times a year: 'in calidis balneis, praeter imminentibus sollemnis majoribus, verbi gratia paschae, pentecostes, epiphaniae, lavari voluerit' (Ibid., 253),[87] and even then, she goes to the bathroom only after all other nuns have already finished. Bede stresses in particular two qualities typical of a high-born woman saint: humility and contempt for the privileges connected with her exulted social status (Millinger, 1984, 119-121). Apart from waiting on her nuns in the bathroom, which is an obvious act of service, she also refuses to be buried anywhere but among other members of her community and demands a wooden coffin: 'et aeque ut ipsa jusserat, non alibi quam in medio eorum, juxta ordinem quo transierat, ligneo in locello sepulta' (Ibid., 254).[88]

She mortifies her flesh not only by wearing coarse woollen clothes, but also by reducing the number of her daily meals to one a day, unless compelled by circumstances to do otherwise: 'Raro praeter majora sollemnia, vel arctiorem necessitatem, plus quam semel per diem manducavit' (Ibid., 254),[89] and spends all her days praying in the church: 'semper, si non infirmitas gravior prohibuisset, ex tempore matutinae synaxeos, usque ad ortum diei, in ecclesia precibus intenta perstiterit' (Ibid., 254).[90] Bede's account implies that asceticism as the most rigorous form of monastic life must have had a special appeal for Æthelthryth. If tortures, physical violence, execution and energetic defence of the Christian faith against pagan persecutors (a common lot of early martyrs) were denied to her in

86 Translation: … she would never wear any linen but only woollen garments (p. 201).

87 Translation: … and would seldom wash in a hot bath, unless just before the greater festivals, as Easter, Whitsuntide, and the Epiphany (p. 201).

88 Translation: … and, as she had ordered, was buried among them in a wooden coffin in her turn, according to the order in which she had passed away (p. 201).

89 Translation: She seldom ate more than once a day, excepting on the greater festivals, or some urgent occasion (p. 201).

90 Translation: Always, except when grievous sickness prevented her, from the time of matins till day-break, she continued in the church at prayer (p. 201).

the undisputedly Christian age of the late seventh century, virginity, commitment to God and asceticism linked her, by ecclesiastical standards, with Agnes, Agatha, Cecilia and other famous virgin martyrs. Even though she was not executed like her saintly predecessors, a debilitating illness which she endured with Christian stoicism – she is dying of plague, having a tumour in her neck – links her, according to Bede, with the martyr saints Agatha, Cecilia and Agnes. In a typical saintly fashion, she did not complain, seeing her illness as a deserved punishment for the life of opulence she lived in the secular world: 'Scio certissime, quia merito in collo pondus languoris porto, in quo juvenculum me memini supervacuam munilium pondera portare: et credo quod ideo me superna pietas dolore colli voluit gravari, ut sic absolvar reatu supervacuae levitatis, dum mihi nunc pro auro et margaritis, de collo rubor tumoris, ardoque promineat' (Ibid., 255).[91]

However, apart from obeying the rules of hagiography, Bede may have had a more pressing reason for depicting Queen Æthelthryth as a model nun. In his lifetime, royal widows and divorcees as well as noble women were entering monastic communities in great numbers. Even though widows and divorcees were seen by the Church as second best compared to consecrated virgins, their wish to retreat into monastic institutions could not be ignored as the prosperity of monasteries depended primarily on the generosity of this elite social group of secular women (Yorke, 1989). However, the Church clearly questioned the ability of widows and divorcees to exchange their previous life of opulence with the trials of monasticism (Watt, Lost Books, 2012). Bede's emphasis on Æthelthryth's rigour and monastic discipline probably reflects his awareness of a pressing contemporary problem as well as

91 Translation: 'I know of a surety that I deservedly bear the weight of my trouble on my neck, for I remember that, when I was a young maiden, I bore on it the needless weight of necklaces; and therefore I believe the Divine goodness would have me endure the pain in my neck, that so I may be absolved from the guilt of my needless levity, having now, instead of gold and pearls, the fiery heat of a tumour rising on my neck' (p. 202).

his determination to advocate the model of an unblemished monastic woman.

The woman saint who emerges from Bede's account is not an energetic abbess, responsible for a community of monks and nuns who must be properly fed, housed, clothed and tended when sick. There are no references to any scholarly activities at Ely either. Many double monasteries were capable of writing hagiography and Ely itself most probably produced the *life* of Æthelthryth soon after her translation in 695. That would be in line with the monastic custom in Gaul where the *lives* tended to be written soon after the completion of translation ceremonies (Hillaby, 1987, 566), and Ely did follow the practices adopted by monastic institutions abroad, as indicated by the translation ceremony in 695. However, if Bede ever relied on the now lost *life* of St Æthelthryth, he 'used it only sparingly' (Watt, 2013, 6) and if the *life* made any references to Ely's scholarly activities, Bede chose to ignore the fact (Fell, 1994, 31-33).

His silence is all the more striking as St Æthelthryth was his (near) contemporary, along with many other notable ecclesiastical women, abbesses, queens and princesses, all of them raised to sanctity. In fact, Bede's age witnessed a plethora of highly talented consecrated women, and it is virtually impossible to list them all. Suffice it to mention only a few of them: Sexburg; Domne Eafe, her daughters Mildrith, Mildburg and Mildgyth; Mildrith's relative and successor Eadburga; Ethelburga of Barking (Essex); Cuthburh, a divorced wife of Aldfrith of Northumbria, the foundress of Wimborne, the most prestigious double monastery in Wessex; Cwenburh, Cuthburh's sister and successor at Wimborne; in Northumbria it would have been virtually impossible for Bede to overlook Hild of Whitby, and her successor, Oswy's daughter Ælfflæd of Whitby,[92] as well as many other saintly women active in the same age. On the basis of all that has been said, it can be concluded that Bede relentlessly insisted on his role of a hagiographer who

92 For Bede's denigrating attitude towards abbesses in Northumbria and his tendency to underestimate their intellectual and political merits, see Wragg, 2017, 109-110.

consequently systematically severed all Æthelthryth's links with the outside world and in so doing he changed his saintly abbess into an unsolvable mystery.

3.4.3 Conclusion

The *saint's life* is a highly conventional and idealising medium of expression. Nevertheless, in spite of its essentially stereotyped nature, it manages to combine uniformity and variety. For example, in both the *Historia* and the *Vita* the life of renunciation led in a monastic community is an essential precondition for a royal woman to be elevated to sanctity. Nevertheless, St Æthelthryth and St Mildrith are depicted as having taken different paths towards monasticism, which in turn were highly influenced by their families' dynastic plans. St Æthelthryth, as suggested by Bede, was needed as a marriage pawn, while Mildrith's consecration, in view of dynastic turbulences in seventh-century Kent, must have been accepted with a deep sigh of relief by the ruling Kentish dynasty.

Apart from that, Mildrith's status of a monastic child could hardly be regarded as a controversial situation, as royal families tended to accommodate a certain number of their daughters within monastic communities. Æthelthryth's transition from the secular to the religious sphere, by contrast, must have been accepted with a certain degree of disbelief. Bede's and Goscelin's accounts also imply that hagiographers had priorities of their own. Goscelin highly praises Mildrith's education, devotion, and gentleness, while Bede highlights Æthelthryth's asceticism. And finally, even though the elevation of both women to sanctity was the result of a combined effort of influential ecclesiastics and the saints' female relatives within the monastery, the rationale behind both cults is not exactly identical.

St Æthelthryth's claim to sanctity, in spite of its unconventional nature, or precisely because of it, is so appealing that she could hardly be eclipsed by any other saintly resident at Ely. Mildrith's saintly

visibility, by contrast, is more difficult to explain. What did this apparently gentle woman do in order to eclipse two strong personalities, the shrewd Domne Eafe and the learned Eadburga? Or was her elevation to sanctity in reality the result of political calculations at Minster-in-Thanet?

Both hagiographic accounts emphasise their abbesses' saintly qualities through which they earned their place in the saintly pantheon. An abbess actively interacting with the outside world in the role of a royal councillor, a businesswoman and a politician was definitely not on Bede's and Goscelin's agenda. But even if Goscelin refused to reveal any information on this point, the preserved charters reflect Mildrith's multiple roles as well as secular and political aspects of her abbatial position. St Æthelthryth, by contrast, has been fated to remain the saint and nothing but the saint.

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4.0 ST EDMUND OF EAST ANGLIA: IT'S TIME FOR A NEW SAINT!

Throughout the ninth century, the Anglo-Saxons were exposed to Viking attacks. The preserved historical evidence amply testifies to the devastation caused by the invaders, but as long as the coast was their main target, the raids sporadic,[93] and the interior of the Island basically untouched, everyday life mostly continued as usual. But by the 850s even the hinterland was no longer safe. The Vikings first took winter quarters, and then the so-called Great Heathen Army started conquering the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms – Northumbria in 867, East Anglia in 869, and a major part of Mercia in 873/874, while Essex, Sussex and Kent had already merged with Wessex in the 820s. As a result, the familiar world of the Heptarchy was collapsing like a house of cards. In the 870s, Wessex was the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom capable of effective resistance (Hodgkin, 1952, 508-522, vol. II.), but in the early months of 878 it was on the verge of destruction. Alfred of Wessex (871-899) eventually won a decisive battle at Edington later in the same year, pursued the Danes to their stronghold at Chippenham, and starved them into submission. Under the terms of the Treaty of Wedmore, concluded sometime between 878 and 890 by Alfred and his defeated opponent Guthrum, the Danish holdings in East Anglia were legitimised and came to be known as the eastern Danelaw. However, in spite of the treaty, it took a decade and more to pacify the Vikings, mostly the Danes (Downham, 2008), who integrated into Anglo-Saxon England but did not assimilate, remaining a distinct ethnic group (Scholerman, 2021, 6-7). Guthrum, who had his power base in East Anglia, had to convert to Christianity, together with his warrior elite, with Alfred acting as his spiritual godfather.[94] The Scandinavians were relatively

93 However, the intensified attacks in the 830s and 840s had already heralded an invasion on a grander scale (Novko, 2016, 16-17).

94 For the reasons which led to the Great Heathen Army's gradual loss of impetus, see MacNeill, 2019, 75-95.

densely settled in East Anglia and they left a permanent mark on the region. In the tenth century, West-Saxon kings managed to reconquer those parts of England which in the previous century had been occupied by the Vikings, but in the early eleventh century the tables were turned again (Scholerman, 2021, 11). In 1016, the Danish king Canute (1016-1035) took control over England, which stayed in the hands of his family until 1041 when the royal family of Wessex regained its position, retaining it until 1066.

4.1 Historical facts

St Edmund (*dies natalis*, 20 November, †869/870), king of East Anglia (ca. 855 to 869), is an elusive figure, with equally obscure ancestry. According to hagiographic tradition, he died a martyr's death during the Viking invasion of East Anglia in 869/70. Numismatic evidence suggests he succeeded a certain Aethelweard to the throne of East Anglia ca. 855, which means that he ruled ca. 14 years, long enough to make a stamp on the kingdom (Pinner, 2010, 28).[95] Whitelock also underlines the fact that he issued coins in sufficient numbers, which implies that he ruled for a rather long period of time (1967-69, 218). The events taking place on 20 November 869/70, Edmund's *dies natalis*, the day of his physical death, his spiritual rebirth, have remained a mystery to the present day. Did he fall in battle? Was he killed after the battle? Was there any fighting at all? Was he executed after failed negotiations with the victorious Vikings who may have wanted him to be their puppet king (Mason, 2017, 2) (Ridyard, 1989, 66, 69, 94)? That was, after all, the practice which they applied in the conquered kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria (Smyth, 1977, 207-208). Where exactly was he killed (Mason, 2012)?[96]

95 For Edmund's consecration as king in 856, see Whitelock, 1971, 18.

96 Mason favours Norfolk in East Anglia as the scene of Edmund's final moments, Hellesdon as the site of his death, and Lyng as the place of Edmund's first burial. He also draws attention to widely branched river systems in Norfolk which, according

Edmund is mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the years 866 and 869: 1) in 866, East Angles made peace with the Viking Great Army, which took winter quarters there; the East Angles had to supply the newcomers with horses; 2) in 869, the Vikings defeated the army of East Angles and killed King Edmund.[97] Asser, who wrote his *Life of King Alfred, Vita Ælfredi regis Angul Saxonum,* in 893, claims that Edmund was killed in battle.[98] Both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser imply that Edmund met his death on the battlefield and they do not refer to any martyrdom on Edmund's part (Whitelock, 1969, 217-218) (Pinner, 2010, 28-29). Nevertheless, the absence of any tangible historical evidence, as well as the mystery surrounding Edmund's death, invested posterity with a considerable amount of creative freedom to construct the image of a martyr king, who was killed in a confrontation with pagan Danes. This hagiographic construction in turn resonated rather well with the spiritual and political needs of various prominent social groups in different stages of the medieval period, which led to the evolvement of a vast elaborate cult of national importance (Pinner, 2010, 30).

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to his theory, enabled the Danes to sail deep into the interior of East Anglia. According to Mason, Edmund wanted to protect North Elmham, episcopal see of East Anglia, near Hellesdon.

97 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The authentic voices of England, from the time of Julius Caesar to the coronation of Henry II*, tr. and collated by Anne Savage (London: Book Club Associates, 1984), p. 92. See also Hodgkin, 1952, vol 2, 522-536.

98 Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, p. 18, tr. Albert S. Cook, New York, Chicago, London, Boston: Ginn & Company, 1906; https://www.gutenberg.org/files/63384/63384-h/63384-h.htm#sec_74%2019, 12.8.2022: 33. The Danes triumph. That same year Edmund, King of the East Angles, fought most fiercely against that army; but, lamentable to say, the heathen triumphed, for he and most of his men were there slain, while the enemy held the battle-field, and reduced all that region to subjection.

A 12th-century depiction of Edmund's martyrdom (Morgan Library & Museum, New York); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_the_Martyr

4.2 Bury St Edmunds

The monastic house inseparably associated with St Edmund is Bury St Edmunds, *villa regia*, the royal villa of Beodericeworth in East Anglia, Suffolk. Its pre-Viking origins and its initial associations with the cult of St Edmund are obscure, but there is a suggestion that in the early seventh century Beodericeworth was the site of a monastery. The location may have been chosen as the site of Edmund's final resting place due to its position as a political and religious centre of some importance (Ridyard, 1989, 220). In the tenth century, the church which guarded the body of St Edmund was supervised by secular priests (Gransden, 2005, 72). It is only in the early eleventh century that Bury St Edmunds came to be regarded as a monastic institution (Toven, 2003, 20). The mon-

astery remained in the good books of the Danish king Canute (1016-1035), whom the monks adopted as their putative founder in the late eleventh century (Gransden, 1992, 91-92) (Pinner, 2010, 25-26). Nevertheless, they established the most cordial ties with Edward the Confessor (1042-1066). The king appointed his personal physician Baldwin to the abbatial position in the monastery after the death of its abbot Leofstan (Gransden, 1992, 91-91) and granted the abbey complete jurisdiction over its territories. The signs of royal favour continued to be bestowed on the abbey in the post-conquest period, after 1066, when the monastic community enjoyed the favour of William the Conqueror (1066-1087) and this beneficial royal patronage continued in the High Middle Ages. The monastery retained its reputation as a popular pilgrimage site of national importance until the dissolution of the monasteries when, in 1539, Edmund's shrine was destroyed and his body buried in an unknown location (Farmer, 1985, 42).

It is impossible to identify Edmund's first place of burial, which may have been close to the site of his martyrdom, referred to as Haglesdun, and whose identity remains unresolved to the present day (Gourlay, 2017, 75). It is not even known with any certainty when Edmund was translated to Bury St Edmunds, only that his relics were definitely at the abbey between 926 and ca. 951 (Ridyard, 1989, 213) or even sooner, in the 890s, as suggested by Young (2018a). According to Herman and Goscelin, the two hagiographers residing at Bury in the late eleventh century, secular priests were replaced by Benedictine monks in the Canute era (Hope, 2018, 51), and this shift from secular priesthood to monasticism had a significant impact on the veneration of St Edmund.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bury_St_Edmunds, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

The implication is that in the era of secular priests the access to the saint's bodily remains was easier and less restrictive, as suggested by a story about a pious woman named Oswyn who each year trimmed Edmund's hair and pared his nails; these offcuts were treated as valuable relics.[99] Benedictines, by contrast, made Edmund's shrine less accessible (Gourlay, 2017, 83-84) and monastic chronicles mention drastic punishments befalling those who dared to approach the corpse without permission or to treat it improperly. The monks had excellent grounds

99 For the hagiographic cliché of a pious woman caring for a saint's body, see Gransden, 1992, p. 87. See also Skrózewska, 2011, 351.

for being fiercely protective of St Edmund's body, which was the abbey's most valued possession. It was believed to have remained whole and undecayed, immune to the ravages of time, which was a sign of exceptional chastity, even virginity. The idea that St Edmund was a virgin saint was willingly embraced by more than one party. Both the Danish elite of East Anglia and the kings of Wessex in this way effectively silenced all potential claimants to the throne of East Anglia (Ridyard, 1989, 226) (Rowsell, 2012, 4). Bury St Edmunds further enhanced its visibility as the guardian of a saint of the highest reputation, and last but not least, the virgin Edmund could serve as a role model for clerical celibacy, which was a highly valued element of any monastic reform (Pinner, 2010, 76-77).

4.3 St Edmund and the Scandinavian world

The initiators of the cult of St. Edmund are shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, scholarship has identified the three groups which may have derived significant benefits from the veneration of St Edmund: the Anglo-Saxon population of East Anglia, the kings of Wessex, and the local Scandinavians. The local Anglo-Saxon population undoubtedly found it difficult to come to terms with the Viking occupation of East Anglia and its detrimental impact on their social and material position. In such circumstances, their sense of their separate English identity was strengthened and they created various cultural binaries to stress their spiritual superiority over the newcomers: civilised Anglo-Saxon Christians on one side and barbaric Scandinavian pagans on the other. In other words, the veneration of St Edmund, the victim of this particular group of intruders, may have been used by the Anglo-Saxons as a spiritual and emotional compensation for their eroded material and social status under the new lords (Novko, 2016, 28). The second group with a clear-cut interest in promoting the cult consisted of the kings of Wessex, descendants of Alfred, especially his grandsons Athelstan (924-929) (927-939) and Edmund (939-946), motivated by territorial ambitions and political concerns (Ridyard, 1989, 223-226) (Pinner, 2010, 25).

The West-Saxon endorsement of the cult coincided rather neatly with their effort to integrate East Anglia more firmly into the newly developing kingdom of England under the hegemony of Wessex (Gransden, 1992, 50-51). The active endorsement of the cult of St Edmund, the king of East Anglia, would provide Wessex with an opportunity to obliterate at least some traces of regional independence (Farmer, 1985, 31-49, 40) which might lead to the rebirth of the kingdom of East Anglia.

Apart from this Anglo-Saxon royal and popular support for the cult (Gransden, 1992, 82), there is some circumstantial evidence that the cult attracted considerable attention of the third party, the Scandinavians who had settled in East Anglia and the adjacent regions of Mercia in the ninth century (McGuigan, 2015). Even though the majority of the Viking population seems to have been initially rather reluctant to convert (Huffman, 2018, 16-17), Christianity was on the rise among the Scandinavians in England. The Viking elite appreciated the benefits associated with Christianity: easier interactions with the native population, uninterrupted trade with Christians in England and abroad, and international recognition (Novko, 2016, 43-44) (Doughty, 2017, 34). Edmund may have been venerated in East Anglia as early as the 890s, i.e. at least twenty years before the West-Saxon conquest of the region in 918, as indicated by the coins minted in East Anglia in his honour (Sheldon, 2011, 46-47). The Church may also have had a hand in issuing and minting the St Edmund memorial coins in the 890s (Schneider, 2018, 44-45), which further suggests

A St Edmund memorial penny; (British Museum); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_the_Martyr, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED

that the new Danish elite cooperated with the surviving structures of the Christian Church in order to integrate themselves more fully into their new homeland (Novko, 2016, 34).

In addition, in the 980s, the learned monk Abbo wrote his influential account of the martyrdom of St Edmund at the instigation of the monks of Ramsey (Essex), whose patron was St Oswald of Worchester, Archbishop of York and a descendant of the Vikings who had settled in East Anglia, together with Guthrum. The ecclesiastical credentials of Oswald's Scandinavian family are impressive. He was the nephew of Oda, Archbishop of Canterbury, and a relative of Oscytel, Archbishop of York, a supporter of Oswald's foundation at Ramsey, and Thurcytel, Abbot of Crowland and later Bedford Abbey (Sheldon, 2011, 46-47) in Lincolnshire, another area densely settled by the Vikings. In other words, Oswald may have been at least indirectly involved in commissioning Abbo's account of St Edmund, which further implies a significant contribution of the Scandinavian elite to the evolvement of the cult. However, apart from taking part in the bourgeoning cult of St Edmund, the Scandinavians in East Anglia also created their own vision of events leading to the death of St Edmund. In other words, they developed a secular legend, a kind of spin, to relieve their ancestors of the responsibility for Edmund's death and to present the Viking conquest of East Anglia as a matter of honour and filial devotion (Gigov, 2011, 68-69).

The narrative which is trying to exonerate the Scandinavians from their responsibility for Edmund's death is found in *Flores Historiarum* (Flowers of History) by Roger of Wendover, an English chronicler of the early thirteenth century. The account reflects a tradition which may have been in circulation in East Anglia during the reign of King Canute (1016-1035), but its origins may be pushed even further, into the late ninth century. In this case, the evolvement of a narrative about St Edmund would coincide with the minting of St Edmund memorial coinage, since such coins could not have been in circulation without there being a firmly established cult in the background (Gigov, 2011, 69).

According to Roger of Wendover,[100] Lothbrok, a member of the Danish royal family, went fowling in his boat when he was caught by a sudden storm and driven by the wind to the coast of East Anglia. He was given a hospitable reception by King Edmund, who made him a member of his court and entrusted him to Bern, the royal hunter, who soon became jealous of Lothbrok's superior hunting skills. Bern killed Lothbrok, but the crime was revealed and Bern duly punished: he was put into a rudderless boat and left to his own devices. Unfortunately for Edmund and East Anglia, the boat landed on the shores of Denmark. Lothbrok's sons recognised their father's boat, had Bern tortured to squeeze the truth out of him, and he in turn lied that Lothbrok had been killed by Edmund. Lothbrok's sons launched an invasion not only on East Anglia but on all of England, captured St Edmund, and the rest is hagiography, which transformed Edmund into a martyr and imitator of Christ.

100 Rogeri de Wendover Flores Historiarum, vol. 1, Londini: Sumptibus Societas, M.DCCC.XLI, 303-309; https://archive.org/details/rogeridewendover01roge/page/310/mode/1up?view=theater, 10.7.2022.

4.4 St Edmund – the imitator of Christ

St Edmund memorial coins minted in the 890s point to an early and broadly popular local cult. Unfortunately, its beginnings are shrouded in mystery and at this earliest stage the emphasis was probably on Edmund's royal position rather than his death at the hands of the Vikings (Cross, 2014, 174). Later, in the tenth century the monks at Ramsey commissioned a Latin *passio, Passio Sancti Eadmundi Regis et Martyris*, written by the aforementioned Abbo of Fleury ca. 985-987.[101] It is the earliest surviving account of St Edmund and it contains the nucleus of the legend which was reiterated in the centuries to come (Whitelock, 1967-69, 225).[102] It is interesting, though, that the

101 *Vita sancti Eadmundi regis Anglorum et martyris auctore sancto Abbone abbate Floriacensi (apud Surium, Acta sanctorum, ad diem 20 novemb.), Documenta Catholica Omnia, De Scriptoribus Ecclesiae Relatis, Migne JP, MPL 139, 0507 - 0520B; https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/0945-1004,_Abbo_Floriacensis_Abbas,_Vita_Sancti_Edmundi_Regis_Anglorum_Et_Martyris,_MLT.pdf.* For the English translation, see *The Passion of Saint Eadmund by Abbo of Fleury. Ed. Lord Fracis Hervey. Corolla Sancti Eadmundi: The Garland of Saint Eadmund King and Martyr. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company: 1907. [pp. 7-59]; https://torrencia.org/edmund/lattrans.html.*, 7.11.2022.

102 Brief summary of Abbo's text: [Abbo] 'begins with a description of the geography and history of the British Isles, particularly praising the fecundity of East Anglia. Edmund's birth and accession to the throne is treated briefly, along with his qualities as king, but it is the king's death that occupies the bulk of the text. The Viking invaders are minions of the devil, sent to tempt Edmund into despair. Inguar demands that Edmund submit to him, but Edmund refuses and is put to death, dying "like Christ before the governor Pilate" (quasi Christus ante Pilatum). The Danes hide Edmund's head, but once the Danes have departed, remembering the 'former benefits, and gentle nature of their king' (antiquam beneficiorum memoriam et ingenitam regis clementiam), the inhabitants of East Anglia search for the head. The head, protected by a wolf, calls for their attention, is found, reunited with the body and buried in a "chapel of rude construction" (uili opere . . . basilica). Inspired by the frequent miracles wrought near this tomb, the citizens exhumed Edmund's body, intending to translate it to Bury-St-Edmunds, and found it incorrupt. Several miracles ensue at the new church, and Abbo closes with a meditation on Edmund's incorruption.' Abbo of Fleury on St Edmund; https://saintedmund.org.uk/abbo-of-fleury-on-st-edmund/, 10.8.2022.

legend was written nearly a century after Edmund's death, not at Bury, the centre of Edmund's cult, but nearly forty miles away, at Ramsey (Essex). Abbo seemingly ignored local traditions, relying instead on the information he had obtained from Archbishop Dunstan who in turn had gained his knowledge of the saint at the court of Athelstan of Wessex. It is also interesting that Abbo's *Passio* does not provide any tangible details about Edmund's family and reign, apart from conventional hagiographic references to his exemplary kingship and exulted lineage. As all the historical evidence which may have existed once was lost, the historical Edmund remains an enigma to the present day.

4.4.1 Rejection of military culture

Abbo's version was translated into Old English by the Anglo-Saxon monk Ælfric of Eynsham, ca. 993.[103] Even though Ælfric's version is shortened by nearly two thirds compared to Abbo's *Passio*, it basically retains the same sequence of events: the Danish invasion, Edmund's refusal to submit to a pagan overlord, his captivity, martyrdom, decapitation, the concealment of his head by the pagans in order to prevent a Christian burial, a wolf protecting the head, the erection of a small chapel over the site of Edmund's burial, the translation of his body to Bury St Edmunds and posthumous miracles. According to the hagiographic tradition initiated by Abbo and adopted by Ælfric, St Edmund's refusal to defend himself with weapons when being captured in his hall, enduring instead all kinds of ill treatment with Christ-like resolution, is the key moment in the legend.

The portrayal of Edmund as a martyr king renouncing warfare culture and lay masculine values was in fact an essential stage in the sanctification process (Kelly, 2020, 2-3, 6-7). A king dying in battle, albeit against the pagans and for a Christian cause, did not possess the necessary saintly credentials in the eyes of the Church if he was still part of

103 For further information on Ælfric, see Keating, 1998, 14-15.

the secular world at the time of his death. According to the teaching of the Church, sanctity was reserved only for those who severed their links with the secular world for good, rejecting warfare in particular as the most obvious manifestation of secular authority. Consequently, the final moments of a martyr king had to be presented in hagiography in such a way as to leave no doubt that the king, as a candidate for sanctity, in his final moments completed the required transition from the secular to the spiritual world, that he relinquished the trappings of power, wealth, social prestige and all other elements associated with the royal position. On top of that, as warfare is the most distinguishing aspect of secular royal power, the martyr king as a candidate for sanctity can no longer be engaged in any kind of physical combat. Instead, in his final moments, the emphasis is on his spiritual fight: patience in the face of adversity, refusal to yield to paganism, and above all, the imitation of Christ and other saints by patiently enduring the tortures and death inflicted on him by his pagan enemies.

The Kingdom of East Anglia (early Anglo-Saxon period); with Ely and Bury St Edmunds on the map; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%86thelthryth, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 1.0 DEED

4.4.2 Ælfric's focus on non-violence in an age of violence

In the 990s, Anglo-Saxon England was again exposed to the Danish incursions which were systematic, well organised and bent on the conquest of all of England. To make things worse for the English, in the 990s and the early eleventh century the Danes had an excellent chance of success, as they did not face any effective resistance comparable to the dogged determination of Alfred of Wessex in the 870s. Apart from that, the age was notorious for civil unrest which was handled with ruthless severity by Alfred's descendants. In order to prevent criminal offences, they did not hesitate to use heavy fines, blinding and mutilation as a means of punishing and intimidating not only the affected individuals but also their families who could ill afford to provide for their non-functioning family members (Firth, 2016, 6-7) (Ibid., 2019, 59-61).

In such difficult circumstances (Ciaran, 2013, 324), Ælfric faced a demanding task of making his saint credible in the eyes of the laymen who constituted the audience for his *Lives of the Saints* in the first place (Jordan, 2015, 11-12). How to preach non-violence in a violent age? In the first place, Edmund's departure from secular preoccupations and his rejection of a physical combat had to be depicted in such a way as to keep Edmund's honour intact. His military competence and his kingship must never be subjected to doubt and ridicule. Ælfric therefore had to make Edmund's decision to reject actual fighting as credible and dignified as possible. He does not conceal the fact that Edmund was a king in the historical and geographical context of East Anglia in the late 860s, and that his death was a result of his fatal clash with the Great Heathen Army which invaded England in the 860s and 870s. According to Ælfric, Edmund was unable to provide a proper military response to the Viking threat as the Vikings systematically weakened East Anglia beforehand, slaughtering its inhabitants and, above all, liquidating its army. In the historical reality, Edmund's army was unlikely to be a match for the Great Heathen Army which swept eastern England. Ælfric's account therefore confirms that even hagiographic narratives can reshape reality only to a certain extent and his St Edmund is therefore a figure who si-

multaneously belongs to the world of history and hagiography. It can be argued that historical details help to raise a level of credibility in the text, and thus the value of St Edmund in the eyes of the faithful:

> And se fore-sæda hinguar færlice swa swa wulf
> on lande bestalcode and þa leode sloh
> weras ond wif and þa ungewittigan cild
> and to bysmore tucode þa bilewitan cristenan.[104] (ll. 39-42)
>
> (And the aforesaid Hingwar suddenly, like a wolf,
> stalked over the land and slew the people,
> men and women, and witless children,
> and shamefully tormented the innocent Christians.)

Although Edmund says that he himself never flees and feels responsible for his people:

> Næs me næfre gewunelic þæt ic worhte fleames
> ac ic wolde swiðor sweltan gif ic þorfte
> for minum agenum earde and se ælmihtiga god wat
> þæt ic nelle abugan fram his biggengum æfre
> ne fram his soþan lufe swelte ic libbe ic (ll. 78-82)

104 All the quotations are taken from Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* (1881) by Ælfric, translated by Gunning, Wilkinson and Skeat; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/%C3%86lfric 27s_Lives_of_Saints/Of_Saint_Edmund, 3.2.2023. *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints' Days Formerly Observed by the English Church, Edited from Manuscript Julius E. VII in the Cottonian Collection, with Various Readings from Other Manuscripts, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, Early_English_Text_Society«Early English Text Society, Original Series, 76, 82, 94, 114, 2 vols (London: Trübner, 1881–1900).

(It was never my custom to take to flight,
but I would rather die, if I must,
for my own land; and almighty God knoweth
that I will never turn aside from His worship,
nor from His true love, whether I die or live.),

he cannot protect them, as reminded by his bishop, because he is a king without an army and as such in a disadvantageous position from the very beginning:

Eala þu leofa cyning þin folc lið ofslagen
and þu næfst þone fultū þæt þu feohtan mæge ·
and þas flot-men cumað · and þe cucenne gebindað
butan þu mid fleame þinū feore gebeorge ·
oððe þu þe spa gebeorge þæt þu buge to him. (ll. 68-71)

(Alas, thou dear king thy people lie slain,
and thou hast not sufficient forces with which thou mayest fight,
and these seamen will come and will bind thee alive,
unless thou save thy life by means of flight,
or thus save thyself by yielding to him.)

Nevertheless, even a king bereft of his army can act with dignity and that was the path chosen by Edmund according to hagiographic tradition. In order to save the country, he is prepared to yield to Hinguar's authority on condition that he should accept Christianity, but when all the hope of surrender under reasonable terms (ll. 48-55) is gone, he decides to die rather than yield to a pagan. So, he calmly waits for the enemies in his hall where he is eventually captured and the rest is *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ), pure and simple.

4.4.3 Edmund's final moments – the imitation of Christ (imitatio Christi)

Edmund throws away his weapons and refuses to defend himself against the Vikings rushing into the hall. Ælfric directly links this act with Christ's prohibition to Peter to protect him with weapons against a crowd of Jews:

> Hwæt þa eadmund cynincg mid þam þe hinguar com
> stod innan his healle þæs hælendes gemyndig
> and awearp his wæpna wolde geæfen-læcan
> Cristes gebysnungum þe for-bead petre
> mid wæpnum to winnene wið þa wælhreowan iudeiscan. (ll. 101-105)

> (Then Edmund the king, when Hingwar came,
> stood within his hall mindful of the Saviour,
> and threw away his weapons, desiring to imitate
> Christ's example, who forbade Peter
> to fight with weapons against the bloodthirsty Jews.)

What follows is reminiscent of the Roman judicial process aimed at the Christians in the Roman age, as depicted in the *passio*. A saint is denounced, brought before a judge, magistrate, procurator or governor, interrogated, commanded to sacrifice to Roman gods and renounce Christianity. After their refusal to yield and bow to the secular authority, they are exposed to numerous tortures until they are finally executed, imitating in this way the Passion of Christ. He himself had been captured by the Jews, brought before Pilate, procurator of Judea, interrogated, tortured and sentenced to death (Earl, 1999).

Edmund's final moments can be therefore viewed as the imitation of Christ, pure and simple:

Hpæt þa arleasan þa eadmund gebundon
and gebysmrodon huxlice · and beoton mid saglū
and spa syððan læddon þone geleaf-fullan cyning
to anū eorð-fæstū treope · and tigdon hine þær-to ·
mid heardum bendū · and hine eft spuncgon
langlice mid spipū · and he symble clypode
betpux þā spinglū mid soðan geleafan
to hælende criste · and þa hæþenan þa
for his geleafan purdon podlice yrre
for-þan-þe he clypode crist him to fultume. ·

(Then those wicked men bound Edmund,
and shamefully insulted him, and beat him with clubs,
and afterward they led the faithful king
to an earth-fast tree, and tied him thereto
With hard bonds, and afterwards scourged him
a long while with whips, and ever he called,
between the blows, with true faith,
on Jesus Christ; and then the heathen
because of his faith were madly angry,
because he called upon Christ to help him.)

Edmund's position of a Christian martyr is further strengthened by the reference to St Sebastian, who had been perforated with arrows as part of his martyrdom:[105]

105 Rosemary Woolf (1966, 63), for example, made the following observation: '… Abbo's Latin Life, is in itself interesting that in it Edmund is transformed into a martyr. Both the Chronicle and Asser's *Life of Alfred* relate that Edmund was killed in battle against the Danes, but in Abbo's account, Edmund refuses to fight, and is put to death in a form of martyrdom modelled upon that of St Sebastian.'

Hi scuton þa mid gafelucum swilce him to gamenes to
oð þæt he eall wæs besæt mid heora scotungum
swilce igles byrsta swa swa sebastianus wæs. (ll. 116-118)

(They shot at him with javelins as if for their amusement,
until he was all beset with their shots,
as with a porcupine's bristles, even as Sebastian was.)

And finally, after refusing to renounce Christianity, he is beheaded at the order of Hinguar:

Þa geseah hingþar se arlease flot-man · 119
þæt þæt se æþela cyning nolde criste þið-sacan
ac mid anrædū geleafan hine æfre clypode
het hine þa beheafdian and þa hæðenan spa dydon. ·

(When Hingwar, the wicked seaman,
saw that the noble king would not deny Christ,
but with steadfast faith ever called upon Him,
then he commanded men to behead him, and the heathen did so.)

Edmund's behaviour is therefore modelled on the Passion of Christ although Edmund 'is not in fact the Christus but rather one striving to follow Christ as perfectly as possible' (Farrar, 1973, 86), which links Edmund with other saints whose primary task is to imitate Christ as faithfully as possible (Pinner, 2010, 44-45), especially in his patient suffering at the hands of the pagans. In Christian typology all martyrs ultimately imitate Christ through their sacrifice and Edmund is no exception. The Danes are compared to the Jews who captured Christ and handed him over to Pilate, the procurator of Judea. Hinguar resembles Pilate, Edmund is mocked and beaten, like Sebastian, and perforated with arrows (Hope, 2018, 58-59), while tied to a tree, which is evoca-

tive of the Crucifixion. Apart from that, it is possible to recognise other parallels with the Scripture: Herod decapitates John the Baptist, his friends come and bury the body, in St Edmund's case locals retrieve the body and find the head (Hope, 2018, 83). Eliah had a raven as a servant; Edmund is given a wolf as a guardian. St Edmund was beheaded, but severed heads presented a typical hagiographic cliché and a phenomenon associated with Christian and Celtic traditions alike (Stouck, 2000, 59-72) (Lauro, 2012, 160-178) (Dyson, 2014, 32-43).

Ælfric uses the word wolf in his description of Hinguar, and there was indeed an element of ferocity in the Vikings previously unknown in early Anglo-Saxon England (Smyth, 1999, 24-25). In addition, he depicts Hinguar and Hubba, leaders of the Viking army, as associates of the devil (l. 30). Nevertheless, Ælfric does not overreact, being much more restrained in his representation of the Viking violence than Abbo (Jordan, 2015, 11) (Earl, 1999), even though the Vikings personified the stressful contemporary reality of the 990s. Abbo, by contrast, seems to have been less reluctant in this respect. The flogging which had befallen St Edmund in Abbo's *Passio* may have been the little understood process of blood eagle, an extremely brutal manner of execution that the Vikings reserved for a highly selected number of high-born enemies. Smyth goes even so far as to suggest that Hinguar (Ivarr) was both a war leader and a high priest and that Edmund was in fact treated as a sacrificial victim to Odin (1977, 210-212) (See also Young, 2018b, 59-60). In this respect, Ælfric's more moderate representation of hagiographic violence presents a significant departure from Abbo's original.

The martyrdom of Edmund: Folios 14r and 14v from the 12th century Passio Sancto Eadmundi (Morgan Library & Museum, New York); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_the_Martyr

However, the model of a martyr king substituting active warfare with patient suffering at the hands of his enemies (Faulkner, 2012) (Rowsell, 2021) must have been ambiguous. That the image of St Edmund, such as that initiated by Abbo and further promoted by Ælfric, was not wholeheartedly embraced by posterity is implied by later hagiographic narratives. Even though they retain the traditional image of a martyr king, they tend to redress the balance between military and spiritual aspects of Edmund's sanctity and that is the topic of the Epilogue.

4.5 Epilogue

In the later medieval period, Edmund came to be regarded as a perfect example of Englishness, a patron saint of the English and a martial saint whose banner was used by the English kings when they went to war (Webster, 2020, 636-651).[106] The monks at Bury may have

106 However, in 1350 St Edmund was replaced in this position by St George who has retained the status of the patron saint of England ever since (Fornasini, 2009, 34).

had a hand in constructing the Englishness of St Edmund, especially from the 1090s onwards, as indicated by the activities of two contemporary writers: Herman the Archdeacon, who composed *De Miraculis Sancti Edmundi,* and Goscelin of St Bertin, who revised Herman's work in the same decade. In other words, the monks of Bury started to cultivate the image of St Edmund not only as a patron saint of East Anglia, but also 'as a representative of all of England' and they probably took 'the earliest step towards the idea of Edmund as a patron saint for all of England', as evidenced by the liturgical practices in the monastery (Hope, 2019, 22) (Ibid., 2018, 263) (Ridyard, 1989, 230-231).

Apart from transforming St Edmund from an East Anglian saint into one of the most potent symbols of Englishness, Bury St Edmunds was also instrumental in promoting the image of St Edmund as a relentless protector of monastic property, both movable and immovable. This image was originally created by Abbo and further developed in the next centuries. According to Abbo, Edmund caused the thieves who had wanted to break into his church to be caught in the act and as a result of their misdeed they were hanged by Bishop Theodred of London (909-926). Furthermore, Abbo's account can be singled out as the earliest recorded case of a vindictive native saint in the period between 970 and 1170, when the veneration of native saints reached its apex in medieval England (Lynch, 2018, 116-117). The hagiographies of other Anglo-Saxon saints written in the same period also depict the saints as severe advocates of their monasteries' rights, but Edmund stands out from the crowd in his relentless severity. However, even though Abbo was the first hagiographer to present St Edmund in this sinister light, the focus in his *passio* remains on the saint's imitation of Christ. Later hagiographies, by contrast, attributed to Edmund a growing number of punitive miracles, where the targets of Edmund's wrath are struck with disease and mutilated or even die as a result of their transgressions against the saint and his monastery.

This post-Abbo emphasis on the saint's violent physical reactions when monastic rights and properties were at stake may to a certain degree be explained by the difficulties the abbey faced after the Nor-

man Conquest (1066), when it had to ward off the territorial appetites of its neighbours, powerful Norman nobles. In addition, in the same period, the abbey had to find an effective diplomatic response to an alarming attempt by the bishops of East Anglia to change Bury St Edmunds into an ecclesiastical see (Browett, 2016, 191) (Bugyis, 2015, 36). Even though the plan eventually backfired (Gransden, 1982, 69-70), the event itself is nevertheless highly indicative of the monastery's precarious position.

In the times of distress, when the abbey had to resist the appetites of secular and ecclesiastical rivals, Edmund's alleged divine assistance was invaluable. The percentage of punitive miracles in *De miraculis* is uncommonly high (Pinner, 2010, 84-86), while his healing miracles remain in the background.[107] According to Herman's *De miraculis*, when St Edmund was in a state of rage even the kings themselves were not immune to his anger.[108] Thus, according to the legend, he killed the Danish king Sweyn who had wanted to impose taxes on the mon-

107 For a rather different view, see Hope (2018, 61-62), who emphasises the prominence of healing miracles at Bury in the same period, which may be due to the fact that Baldwin was a notable physician. Even more importantly, healing was a central act in medieval cults and the main purpose of pilgrimages, as seen in contemporary accounts of other saints which advertise healing competencies of their shrines.

108 Some examples of his punitive acts, as listed by Webster, 2020: '… One of his foremost miracles involved an apparition in which he was said to have appeared and to have stabbed to death the Anglo-Danish ruler, Swein Forkbeard, with a spear.' This 'became Edmund's defining miracle, establishing him as a defender of English rights and a fearsome adversary ... It was not the only example of Edmund's revenge. One member of Edward the Confessor's household went mad at the saint's instigation after entering the church at Bury brandishing an axe. The death of King Stephen's son Eustace, in 1153, was said to have been St Edmund's retribution for attacks mounted on the abbey's lands. In addition, the enduring nature of the legend of the death of Swein at the saint's hands is shown in the account of a vision said to have been experienced by Edward I in 1291. In the context of the king's efforts to secure revenues from monastic communities, and the abbot of Bury, John de Northwold's failing efforts to recover royal favour, the king's vision involved St Edmund threatening him with the same fate as Swein. Edward relented: there was every incentive to rulers to respect the saint and what were perceived to be his rights, as well as to honour Edmund and seek his intercession.'

astery and the town in 1013.[109] And it is this very image of St Edmund slaying the intimidating Danish king which vitally contributed to the evolvement of St Edmund into an active, warlike saint and a symbol of Englishness. However, the monks may have felt that the emphasis on revenge and punishment was too intense and in order to redress the balance, they commissioned the Revisions of *De miraculis* undertaken first by Osbert de Clare between 1125 and 1134 and then by Abbot Samson at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. In the Revisions, considerably more weight is given to healing miracles (Pinner, 2010, 94-96), and this tendency continues to be present in Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 240, a manuscript from the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Here the emphasis is on healing (57%) and there is only one punitive miracle (2%) (Pinner, 2010, 136). The fifteenth century witnessed a further step in the same conciliatory direction. John Lydgate, a famous author, monk and resident of Bury St Edmunds, strongly dwelt on Edmund's punitive actions in his poem *The Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund*, but in later editions of the poem the saint's severity was mitigated, his healing potentials being prioritised instead (Fornasini, 2009, 39-40).

John Lydgate prays at the shrine of St Edmund, from a folio of Lives of SS Edmund and Fremund (British Library); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_the_Martyr, HYPERLINK »https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/« CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED

109 For further discussion of the scene, see Pinner, 2010, 87-89; 2015, 57-58.

In conclusion, St Edmund's image is controversial: a martyr king and imitator of Christ on one hand, and a relentless avenger and zealous protector of monastic property on the other. The post-Abbo and post-Ælfric monastic records emphasise a more relentless aspect of Edmund's sanctity. An increasing number of punitive miracles implies that the image of a martyr king rejecting secular masculinity with its emphasis on active physical combats and execution of secular justice was found wanting even among the hagiographers. They attributed to the saint bold and energetic acts which served as an acceptable bypass channel to emphasise more masculine aspects of this highly popular saint. Even though their accounts did not undermine the traditional concept of a martyr king, they nevertheless challenged this model of male royal sanctity and exposed its ambiguous nature.

4.0. APPENDICES

4.1 Appendix 1: The Ragnar Lothbrok legend and Northumbria

Apart from the Anglo-Danish legend, referred to in Chapter 4. 3., which explains the Scandinavian occupation of East Anglia as an act of vengeance for the death of Lothbrok, dutifully exacted by his sons (Smyth, 1977, 52, 55) (Gigov, 2011, 51-53), the Ragnar Lothbrok tradition relates a very similar tale. This version of the Lothbrok legend, the so-called Northumbrian version, derived its name from the alleged place of its origin, being initiated by the Scandinavians in England and preserved in its most coherent form in *The Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok (Ragnars saga loðbrókar)* and *The Tale of Ragnar's sons (Ragnarssona þáttr)*.[110] Both texts were written in Iceland in the thirteenth century,

110 For example, Ari Thorgilsson the Learned, in *Íslendingabók*, *The Book of Icelanders*, takes a note of the death of St Edmund at the hands of Ragnar's sons, which means that ca. 1120-1133 the legend of Ragnar Lothbrok already circulated in Ice-

but they rely on older narrative traditions about the Viking conquest of Northumbria which may go back to as early as the end of the ninth century (McGuigan, 2015). Ragnar Lothbrok, beyond doubt the most remarkable fictitious hero of the late Viking age, made himself famous by carrying out numerous raids against the British Isles and the Holy Roman Empire. He eventually decided to crown his exceptional career by invading Northumbria only to be defeated by the Northumbrian king Ælla and thrown into a snake pit where he met a grim death. In the course of time, Ælla himself became the victim of revenge taken by Ragnar's sons, who defeated the Northumbrian army, conquered the kingdom, and executed the defeated king in an extremely brutal fashion, using the so-called blood eagle method of execution, and the victory of Ragnar's sons over Ælla is celebrated in a number of Old Norse poems (Kries, 2002, 50-52). According to the legend, Ragnar left behind a wolfpack of sons, the most famous of them being Ivar (Hinguar) the Boneless, Halfdan, Björn, Sigurd and Ubbe. Unlike the fictitious Ragnar,[111] his alleged sons are historical figures, members of the Danish royal family[112] and their existence is corroborated by var-

land (Allport, 2021, 57-72). Gigov argues that the Ragnar Lothbrok legend supplanted the Lothbrok Anglo-Danish version as early as 1027 when Sighvat the Scald composed a praise poem in honour of Canute the Great, Tog-drapa, Stretch-song, in which he refers to the death of Ælla (2011, 56).

111 There is a possibility that Ragnar is at least partially modelled on Reginheri, member of the House of Godfred, who in 845 sailed up the Seine, sacked Paris, and extracted Danegeld from Charles the Fat (McTurk, 1991, 5-6). McTurk (1991, 9-10) also argues that Lothbrok is in fact a woman whose name should be read as Lothbroka, on the basis of the runestone at Maeshowe in the Orkney Islands which reads "This mound was raised earlier than Lodbrok's; her sons they were bold ...".

112 Denmark was in the ninth century preoccupied with constant confrontations with their Frankish neighbours and torn apart by dynastic tensions which resulted in the split of the family into two contentious branches, the House of Godfred, which remained in charge, and the House of Harald, which had to go into exile (Kacani, 2015, 35-36) and then held Frisia on behalf of the Carolingians (Lewis, 2016). The position of Ragnar's son within this messy environment is not entirely clear, but in 873 Halfdan and Sigfred/Sigurd shared the throne (Kacani, 2015, 43-44).

ious non-Scandinavian sources.[113] However, only Ragnar's sons Ivar, Halfdan and Ubbe are relevant for our current purpose as those commanders who directed military operations in England in the 860s and the 870s, being the leaders of the Great Heathen Army (Kacani, 2015, 89-89).[114] It is therefore urgent to examine their vital role in the fateful events in the 860s and 870s to fully understand Edmund's hopeless position in 869/70 that led to his subsequent defeat and martyrdom.

The Great Heathen Army landed first in East Anglia in 865, stole horses and redirected their operations towards Northumbria, where they defeated the united forces of Osberht and Ælla in 867. Then, in 869/70, they attacked East Anglia, killed Edmund and harassed Wessex in the early 870s. Alfred bought peace with the Vikings after the Battle of Ashdown in 871. Even though he was victorious, he needed

113 For his sons, see Adam Bierstedt (2020): 'The "Ragnarssons", particularly Ivarr beinlausi, Halfdanr (possibly bynamed Hvitserkr), and Bjorn Ironside (but probably less Sigurðr snake-in-the-eye – he's mentioned exactly once in a non-Norse source) are considered to be historical figures due to their presence in records from outside of Scandinavia. Ivarr is attested in Early English and Irish annals (usually as Yngvar, an older form of the name), Hálfdanr is attested in annals and in charter evidence from Northumbria, Bjorn Ironside is found in Frankish and Galician annals, and the voyage he led into the Mediterranean alongside Hásteinn is attested in Islamic sources. With such a wide-ranging set of sources, it's hard to deny that these leaders are historical. They seem to have referred to themselves as brothers, and Asser's "Life of Alfred" refers to them as such.'

114 Sigurd is unlikely to have taken part in the invasion on England because he prioritized Denmark. He was likely king in Denmark between the 870s and 880s (Kacani, 2015, 98-99) (MacNeill, 2019, 82-83), and he seems to have been on a war footing with the Franks throughout his reign, as implied by various contemporary annals which set the time of his death on the battlefield against the Franks in the late 880s or early 890s.

Björn does not appear to have been one of the commanders either. According to William of Jumièges, an eleventh-century historian, Björn, also known as Bier Costae Ferrea, or 'Bier Iron Ribs', first sacked various French towns, Jumièges, Nantes, Anjou, Tours, and Orleans and then sailed along the Atlantic coast of Spain, entered the Mediterranean, molested Northern Africa, and even sailed to Italy. On his return home, he was shipwrecked on the coast of England and ended his days in Frisia in prosperous circumstances (Kacani, 2015, 83-84) (MacNeill, 2019, 81).

peace and the deal gave him some years of respite, while the Vikings in the meantime seized a significant part of Mercia. It can be argued that Ragnar's sons were the driving force behind this first wave of invasions which swept Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia. However, in the second wave, from the mid-870s onwards, the Vikings harassing Wessex (Doughty, 2017, 24-26) were no longer led primarily by Ragnar's sons. Wessex had indeed an incredible stroke of luck. In fact, the Great Heathen Army, after succeeding beyond expectations in the 860s and in the mid-870s, experienced a split of leadership when the top commanders either died or left Wessex behind in order to devote their attention to more pressing obligations elsewhere (MacNeill, 2019, 75-76).

Ivar, the notorious pagan Hinguar in the legend of St Edmund, was ambitious beyond measure. Apart from targeting northern England, he was eyeing Ireland, where he was active as early as the 850s. During this period, he struck an excellent deal with another ambitious Viking war leader, the Norwegian Olaf the White, and they ruled jointly.[115] From 868 and 873, Ivar is absent from Ireland, which perfectly coincides with his activities in England. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also confirms that Ivar was in England at the time of Edmund's defeat in 870 (Kacani, 2015, 92). After Edmund's death, Ivar returned to Dublin, where he died of sickness in 873, being the ruler of both York and Dublin (Smyth, 1977, 234-235) (Kacani, 2015, 93-94) (Gigov, 2011, 25).

Halfdan was defeated by Alfred of Wessex at the Battle of Ashdown in 871 (Kacani, 2015, 99). In 874, he made a truce with Alfred, pocketed the money and withdrew to Northumbria. He had numerous pressing reasons for removing himself and his troops from any further involvement in the Viking conquest of Wessex under the leadership of Guthrum in the 870s. He had to address heavy losses in the Viking army and face the dissatisfaction of his own men, who wanted to settle down after a decade of constant warfare (MacNeill, 2019, 84-

115 (Smyth, 1977, 113-114) (Kacani, 2015, 90-91) (Gigov, 2011, 2-23) (MacNeill, 2019, 76-77).

86). He had to manage Northumbria and quell the uprisings of the Anglo-Saxon population; he shared the Danish throne with his brother Sigfred/Sigurd in 873, and finally, after Ivar's death in Ireland, he wanted to take his brother's place in Dublin. His stay in Ireland turned out to be fatal. In 876, he lost his life in a battle against the Norwegian forces (Kacani, 2015, 95-96) (Gigov, 2011, 26).[116]

Ubbe seems to have taken part in the battle with West-Saxon forces in Wessex, 878. Unlike his brothers Ivar and Halfdan, he obviously cooperated with Guthrum rather closely. Between 871 and 877, he may have been stationed in modern Wales where he was recruiting an army consisting of the Welsh so hostile to the Anglo-Saxons that they were willing to cooperate even with the heathens. Luckily for Wessex, Ubbe was defeated and slain (MacNeill, 2019, 79-80). When recording the victory of the West-Saxon forces in 878, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not give his name, describing him as the brother of Ivar and Halfdan, but it is Ubbe who seemingly best fits into this scheme (Kacani, 2015, 96-97).[117]

As the only surviving Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Wessex may have justifiably praised Alfred as its saviour, but luckily for Alfred and Wessex, in the second wave of the invasion, the sons of Ragnar simply had too much on their plate to act with the same focus and determination as they had done immediately after their arrival in England in the late 860s. Their ambitions were, geographically speaking, so wide and varied that the leaders of the Great Heathen Army virtually overstretched themselves. Unfortunately, East Anglia and its ruler did not have the

116 For further details about his final years, marked by decline and the loss of success and popularity, see Smyth, 1977, 258-260.

117 Gigov, on the other hand, is more reluctant to accept this identification: 'this conclusion is based on the testimony of non-contemporary sources and should be, therefore, approached with caution' (2011, 21). In some sources, for example, The *Annals of Lindisfarne* and the *History of St Cuthbert*, Ubbe is styled as duke of Frisia, which Kacani attributes to Ubbe's familial links with the House of Harald which held Frisia on behalf of the Carolingians, and as such Ubbe was eligible for this position (Kacani, 2015, 110-111). See also Lewis, 2016.

same stroke of luck. Edmund could not resist the deluge which had swept his kingdom in 869/70 in all its raging intensity as his army – if he had any at all – was no match for the Great Heathen Army, which was numerous, fresh and eager to fight and plunder. However, though defeated, Edmund was not fated to be viewed by posterity as a loser, and ironically, the Scandinavian share in propagating his saintly fame is impossible to ignore.

4.2 Appendix 2: Edmund and the twenty-first century

In her article 'Edmund of East Anglia and his miracles', Fornasini (2009) mentions a 2006 campaign launched by BBC Radio Suffolk and *The East Anglian Daily Times* for St Edmund to be reinstated as England's patron saint instead of St George. The petition went to 10 Downing Street and the House of Commons, only to be vetoed by the British government (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_the_Martyr). The idea, which has supporters of its own, however, was rejected not only by the government but also by quite a few individuals who see Edmund as a military failure.[118] Some views, which are quoted in full, are given below.

Robinson: Why would we want a German whose only claim to fame is losing a battle to the Vikings as our patron saint?

Michael: … you have not given the full story of Edmund. He was king of East Anglia and when the Danes invaded he disbanded his army without a fight. The Danes then captured and killed him as you describe. He was not king of England and he was not English. His father was King Alcmund of Saxony and he was born in Nuremberg in Germany. He is rightly venerated as a martyr but as a soldier and king he was a failure. I wouldn't want someone born in Germany who disbanded his army without a fight as our patron saint.

George: I understand that Edmund was in fact German, born in Nuremberg. I am not anti-German at all but, I can imagine it now, at the next World Cup. The Germans would love to see the English waving the flag of St Edmund the German. Not for me, I'm afraid.

Michael: … St Edmund was a German who came to England and became king of East Anglia. When the Danes invaded he disbanded his army and ran away. They caught him hiding under a bridge and

118 BBC Suffolk Home, 24 September 2014; https://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2006/09/21/st_edmund_2006_feature.shtml, 11.11.2022.

killed him. After such a disaster the Saxons had to restore morale so they said that he did not fight because he followed the teachings of Christ and the Danes had killed him because he would not give up his faith. So he became a martyr. And there were miracles to confirm it – the talking wolf that guarded his head and the fact that his head and his body were rejoined without a mark. As king he should have defended his kingdom and he cannot be patron saint and defend England now. There is nothing wonderful about the Saxons.

Mervyn Lemon: Please give a balanced view. Remember, Edmund LOST to the Danes. East Anglia became part of the Danelaw as a direct result of Edmund LOSING! Only King Alfred THE GREAT of Wessex was left to defeat the Danes and KEEP us ENGLISH. If Alfred had LOST, like Edmund, then we would not need a patron saint of England, because we would now be DANELAND! There is one version of Edmund's death that suggests he was so arrogant that he thought he was St Stephan and, when captured, he challenged the Danes to try to kill him with arrows, like St Stephan. No-one knows how he died, which should be a cause for concern. Just read Bernard Cornwall's new book, *The Last Kingdom*.

John Trott: Isn't St Edmund only famous for being a loser? Sounds like just the man for England the way things are at the moment.

The participants in the debate often refer to St Edmund as a German, as according to *De Infantia Sancti Edmundi* by Geoffrey of Wells (active in the middle of the twelfth century), Edmund was of a continental Saxon descent. Later versions, such as Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 240 (late-fourteenth century), and John Lydgate (fifteenth century), depict Edmund as a Saxon born in Nuremberg and adopted by Offa of Mercia. What is more, in both texts Edmund is depicted as a competent warrior who gives up the fight with the Vikings only to avoid further bloodshed! This bold creative approach is no concern of this textbook; nevertheless it would be improper not to mention it at least in passing due to the impression it creates. Abbo's hagiographic

construction of St Edmund as a martyr king, even though not openly undermined by posterity, has obviously been found wanting up to the present day. This later medieval depiction of St Edmund as a secular warrior with a series of victories to score presents a rather daring retreat from traditional hagiographic narrative and as such it definitely deserves further attention.

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5. CONCLUSION

This textbook discusses four remarkable and widely venerated saints from the early Anglo-Saxon age: St Æthelthryth of Ely (ca. 635-679), St Mildrith of Thanet (†732/733), St Oswald of Northumbria (†642), and St Edmund of East Anglia (†869/870). They descended from the royal families who materially and politically supported the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh century.[119] The Church rewarded their religious zeal by elevating to sanctity a certain number of their family members, and by doing so it invested the royal families with an aura of hitherto unknown spiritual prestige. The converted royals and especially their saintly relatives were not fated to sink into oblivion, as their proselytising efforts were duly remembered in hagiographic literature.

The *saint's life* as a highly idealising hagiographic genre was particularly suited to celebrate the new spiritual elite that was believed to possess special thaumaturgic powers. The *saint's life* is further divided into numerous sub-genres, with the *vita* and the *passio* each occupying a prominent position. The *passio* focuses on the tortures and the martyr's death the saint has to endure in a hostile pagan environment. The *vita*, by contrast, stresses the saint's piety, their renunciation of the transient world, and asceticism. Their death, which is natural albeit often painful due to a lingering illness, is followed by posthumous miracles as the most evident sign of their saintliness. Consequently, monasticism, with its emphasis on asceticism and renunciation, was a highly valued form of religious manifestation and its adherents – holy men and holy women – served as highly influential role models for future saints.

The Anglo-Saxon women saints are inseparably connected with monasticism. They were recruited from the ranks of abbesses, primar-

119 Edmund is a slightly different case because we know so little about him and because his cult was fostered by the others rather than by his immediate family, about which virtually nothing is known. The veneration of St Edmund is explored in detail in Chapter 4.

ily royal women who presided over the monastic communities founded by themselves or their families. As consecrated nuns, they were expected to renounce their royal status and privileges and embrace a life of poverty, chastity and humility. Accordingly, their female relatives within the monastery could easily join forces with the Church to stage elaborate public events, which led to their sanctification. Their elevation to sanctity in turn fostered the composition of the *saints' lives,* especially *vitae* and *translationes*, to further cement their saintly status. Yet, in spite of all the efforts of the *saints' lives* to describe the lives of Anglo-Saxon saintly women as a series of sacrifices, in reality their renunciation of the royal status was never absolute. Royal nuns and abbesses remained closely connected with their families. After their demise or abdication, the abbatial position normally passed to their close relatives within the community, which clearly demonstrates the royal determination to retain control over their family foundations.

Anglo-Saxon royal nuns basically fall into two categories: chaste widows and divorcees on one hand, and consecrated virgins on the other. The two categories, however, did not occupy an equally prestigious position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which decidedly preferred virginity over chastity. Chaste widows, Christian wives and mothers could and did obtain a saintly status in Anglo-Saxon England. Nevertheless, in spite of their social influence and active participation in the Christianization of the country, and in spite of their vital role in founding monasteries, they were seen as second best compared to virgin saints. According to Christian teaching, virginity was the particular virtue in a woman saint which enabled her to be on a par with a man. The determination with which Æthelthryth and Mildrith defended their virginity reveals their keen awareness of this hierarchical relationship within the community of saints. Virginity therefore served as an essential precondition for a saintly woman to join the highest-ranking saints, the elite within the elite.

By embracing monasticism, consecrated royal women had relatively easy access to the saintly pantheon. The sanctity (martyrdom) of the Anglo-Saxon kings, by contrast, was made of more problematic stuff,

being based on their death in confrontation with the pagans, political enemies or family members, with this textbook focusing primarily on the first manner of death. Thus Oswald of Northumbria met his death in the Battle of Maserfield against his pagan neighbours, and Edmund was executed by pagan Vikings. They were still kings at the time of death, and as such fully involved in the intricacies of this transient world. According to hagiography, though, a saint was one who resolutely turned his back on the worldly affairs for good, which means that an innovative approach was needed to make both kings convincing as Christian saints. Their *passiones* therefore developed an explanation that both kings martyrs in their final moments, even though technically still kings, acted as imitators of Christ. As such, they were no longer involved in further fighting – the most evident manifestation of secular kingship. Rather, they replaced their military engagement with spiritual heroism: patient suffering and death at the hands of the pagans. This kind of behaviour was reminiscent of Christ's refusal to defend himself with weapons, choosing instead patient suffering and a martyr's death.

However, the ecclesiastics and laymen alike felt uneasy about the notion of devout Christian kings winning their saintly status by suffering defeat and death in confrontation with pagans. Even from a hagiographic perspective, it was difficult to depict the king's rejection of physical warfare and its replacement with spiritual battle in such a way as to preserve the king's credibility and reputation intact. Caution indeed was in place as both Oswald and Edmund suffered defeats which had serious implications for their kingdoms. After the Battle of Maserfield, Oswald's Northumbria was on the verge of disaster, while East Anglia, after Edmund's death, lost its independence for good. Both The Venerable Bede in his account of St Oswald, and Ælfric in his *Life of St Edmund* understood the delicate nature of their task. Bede deliberately turned the Battle of Maserfield into an unsolvable mystery by providing a fragmented and ambiguous account of Oswald's actions on the battlefield. Ælfric depicted Edmund as a commander of an annihilated army who could hardly launch an offensive in such circumstances, which fully explains Edmund's determination to reject a military response.

Both hagiographic models – that of a saintly abbess and that of a king martyr – insist on distinctive gender-based roles. A saintly woman is expected to be active within a monastic sphere, while a king martyr dies a violent death at the hands of the pagans or his political enemies. Nevertheless, both models still retain a considerable amount of freedom in the choice of details. For example, both Bede's Æthelthryth and Goscelin's Mildrith embraced monasticism, but the path towards their chosen vocation and the priorities within their monastic communities seemed to be rather different. Likewise, considerable differences between Oswald and Edmund can hardly escape one's notice: Oswald fell in battle, while Edmund was probably executed as a captive. Oswald's cult was initiated by his ambitious family, while Edmund's sanctity was fostered by various social groups who hoped to benefit from his cult. To summarise, the *saint's life* was, in spite of its conventional structure, a highly flexible genre which offered so many creative opportunities to talented writers and so much food for thought to its audience(s) that it was simply fated to prosper, impress and survive.

Alenka Divjak: EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ROYAL SAINTS: ST ÆTHELTHRYTH OF EAST ANGLIA, ST MILDRITH OF KENT, ST OSWALD OF NORTHUMBRIA, ST EDMUND OF EAST ANGLIA

Ljubljana, 2024.

This highly interesting study focuses on four early medieval insular saints, only two of which (at best) are still today known outside Britain, namely the two English kings Oswald of Northumbria (ca. 634-642), and Edmund of East Anglia (†869/70). The two female saints discussed here, St. Æthelthryth and St. Mildrith are hardly known today either in Britain or on the continent, although they are briefly mentioned even in the Penguin Dictionary of Saints under their modern names Etheldreda/Audrey and Mildred.

However, both the two saintly kings and the two saintly abbesses can serve as paradigms for many other such lesser saints of the Early Medieval Western world, as they belong to an extensive class of dynastic saints (German *Geblütsheilige*), i.e. Saints from Royal Families normally known for their merits as founders of monasteries, churches or dioceses. None of the four saints targeted here, despite their royal lineages, fit that bill exactly, and Oswald and Edmund belong to the much rarer group of kings styled to be martyrs through their death in battles. Thus they can be compared to royal martyrs like St. Oswine of Deira in the 7th, Salomon of Brittany in the 9th, King Edward in the 10th, St. Olaf of Norway and St. Magnus of Orkney in the 11th (that the latter was not a king, but an Earl, is beside the point) or St. Eric of Sweden in the 12th century..

All these saints, as the four discussed in Divjak's book, are accessible through their *vitae*, usually written in Latin relatively soon after the events, and also the basis for the veneration of these saints. These *Lives of Saints* as part of Early Medieval hagiographic literature were long out of fashion in historical and philological research as being considered boring and excessively sanctimonious. Now, however,

we begin to appreciate them for the insights they offer into history, church politics and especially the history of mentality as a subtext to the actual story of the lives and miracles of the respective saints.

That exactly is the aim of the study in question, namely to see the interrelation between the saint and the interests of his/her royal families, the hagiographer and his/her agenda with secular and church politics. To this end, the texts are analyzed for their value for these topics, and in the case of St. Æthelthryth of Ely and of St. Edmund, the lives are also quoted in the original with translations given: Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* in the case of Æthelthryth, Ælfric's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* in the case of Edmund. Why, in the discussion of Oswald and Mildred, the primary texts are not given a voice (with very rare exceptions in footnote 17 on pp 42f and pp 84f) is hard to understand, seeing that Oswald's vita as well as Mildrith's are both in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* as well as other sources.

An excellent feature of the book is the discussion of the afterlife of the saints after the Norman conquests. As opposed to the somewhat unorganic inclusion of a section on the sons of Ragnar loðbrók in Britain, the political and monastic reasons for the continued veneration of some of the old Anglo-Saxon saints are lucidly explained and shed an unexpected light on church politics in the late 11th century.

In sum, this book is highly enlightening reading for anybody interested in Early Medieval British mental and/or political history and also in the process of the creation of Medieval saints, a process that is often considered to be very foreign to modern religious thinking.

R. Simek 27th March 24

Dr. Milček Komelj

Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts

Ljubljana

Novi trg 3

Review of Alenka Divjak's monograph manuscript

Dr Alenka Divjak's work demonstrates a profound knowledge of Anglo-Saxon medieval history and its literature. On the basis of this knowledge, and her knowledge of the specialist literature, she confidently and competently raises and solves questions about literary and cultural-historical matters, in particular about family relations in Anglo-Saxon ruling circles.

In EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ROYAL SAINTS: ST ÆTHELTHRYTH OF EAST ANGLIA, ST MILDRITH OF KENT, ST OSWALD OF NORTHUMBRIA, ST EDMUND OF EAST ANGLIA, Divjak sheds light on the concept of the status of sainthood in the Early and High Middle Ages, especially sainthood among English kings and their sisters and other female relatives. The text is based on an examination of historical facts, in so far as they are available, and of records, most notably those of the Venerable Bede. Divjak's reflections on these sources have allowed her to glean significant insights from chapters in Church history, particularly on the principles of hagiography. Using these insights, she clarifies the genesis of the literary and theoretical genre of medieval saints' biographies, with their constants or regular features that are shaped in accordance with the historical tradition or political and ecclesiastical expectations of the time; she also sheds light on the attitudes towards individuals who attained sainthood after having previously been warriors, focusing on the different criteria for their sainthood. All of this can only be explained through the knowledge of sources and history, reflecting on legends and, especially, applying knowledge of family relationships.

Divjak researches historical figures and saints who are well known from surveys of cultural history, especially of the Carolingian Renaissance, but who are generally less connected to Slovenian cultural tradition than the "continental" saints are – just as the earliest English visual arts, with their famous cathedrals and monasteries that document the lives or legacies of the local saints she studies, are less alive in our consciousness. That said, Divjak's "heroes" are all the more intensely connected with her knowledge of the English cultural tradition, which she (having studied English medieval literature at the University of Leeds) has obviously devoted herself to very thoroughly and with great dedication. It is therefore understandable, if not obvious, that her well-founded monograph aimed at connoisseurs and enthusiasts of Anglo-Saxon past, history and monastic life and its varied backgrounds should be published in English. Publication in English would make the work available to both enthusiasts and leading international scholars. Vouching for Divjak's knowledge of this topic is the fact that she has published two articles in the journal *Primerjalna književnost* / *Comparative Literature*: "Kralj mučenik in sproščena opatinja: dva netipična svetnika iz istega družinskega gnezda" (A King Martyr and a Merry Abbess: Two Atypical Saints from the Same Family Nest) and "Sv. Eteldreda iz Vzhodne Anglije in sv. Mildreda iz Kenta. Skupna hagiografska perspektiva: dve različni zgodbi" ("St Æthelthryth Of East Anglia And St Mildrith Of Kent. The Same Hagiographical Perspective: Two Different Stories").

Given the above, it is my view that this monograph is worthy of publication and I therefore happily recommend it as a valuable contribution to medieval English history.

Milček Komelj Ljubljana, March 27, 2024

EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ROYAL SAINTS: ST ÆTHELTHRYTH OF EAST ANGLIA, ST MILDRITH OF KENT, ST OSWALD OF NORTHUMBRIA, ST EDMUND OF EAST ANGLIA

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Oswald crowned as a king, from a 13th-century manuscript (New York Public library manuscript Spencer 1, folio 89 reverse); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_of_Northumbria

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Dr Alenka Divjak graduated from the Faculty of Education in Maribor, Slovenia, obtaining a bachelor's degree in Slovenian and English. She took her MA at the University of Leeds in Medieval English literature and obtained her PhD in Old Norse literature from the same university. Her research work has led her to explore a variety of topics, such as medieval romance, hagiography, the Slovenian historical and folklore traditions, and the history of education. She is a lecturer of Professional terminology in a foreign language at the Landscape Governance College Grm Novo mesto and at the Higher Vocational College Grm Novo mesto. She also cooperates with the Nova Revija Institute for Humanities, and New University's Faculty for Slovenian and International Studies in Ljubljana.

This study discusses four widely venerated Anglo-Saxon saints: St Æthelthryth of Ely (ca. 635- 679), St Mildrith of Thanet (†732/733), St Oswald of Northumbria (†642), and St Edmund of East Anglia (†869/870). They descended from the royal families who materially and politically supported the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh century. As a sign of appreciation, the Church elevated to sanctity a certain number of their family members, and by doing so it invested the royal dynasties with an aura of hitherto unknown spiritual prestige as saints were believed to be heavenly protectors and intermediaries between life and death. Apart from focusing on hagiography, especially the process of sanctification, the study also offers a glimpse of the early Anglo-Saxon age, its political history, achievements and the history of mentality, paying particular attention to the gender distinctive roles which determined the saints' path towards sanctity and sanctification.

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