

**Miraculous Moments:
Hagiography and History in the Early English Church**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the connections between hagiography and history in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (“The Ecclesiastical History of the English People”) by the Venerable Bede (died 735). The discussion of Anglo-Saxon saints focuses on the hagiographical and political reasons for including miracle stories in this text and how the traditional cults of these native saints represent the English Church within the larger framework of medieval Christianity. In particular the discussion has a Northumbrian focus and looks at King Edwin, St. Oswald, and the popular English saints Cuthbert and Æthelthryth, with specific reference to the political and spiritual contributions these figures made to the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England and to the moral and spiritual reform that is central to the internal message of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*.

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Introduction:

Hagiography, Miracles, and Reform in Bede's Northumbria

Anglo-Saxon saints are still making news. Just recently, the British Library successfully raised £9 million in order to purchase what for several years has been known as “St. Cuthbert’s Gospel” (formerly the “Stonyhurst Gospel”). This seventh-century manuscript was originally placed in the saint’s coffin – probably in 698, when it was moved into the main church at Lindisfarne – and removed in 1104, after which it was kept with other relics at Durham cathedral until the Reformation. The manuscript survives in excellent condition in its original binding, making it a rare and valuable example of an early medieval text. The CEO of the British Library, Dame Lynne Brindley, describes the book as “Europe’s oldest intact book” which has “unparalleled significance” to the British Library and to English heritage. But the appearance of this book in modern news stories also raises new questions about medieval writing, book production, and the subsequent readers for whom that writing was intended. The association of this book with a saint creates questions about sainthood and the traditional writing style of hagiography. This thesis will focus on the hagiographical records of Anglo-Saxon saints who were demonstrably historical persons, including St. Cuthbert, and their importance to the early written history of English Christianity.

The lives of saints are composed in a style known as hagiography, which stems from two Greek words: *hagios*, meaning “holy” or “saint,” and *graphē*, meaning “writing” (Head xiv). Thus, hagiography literally means “writings about the saints” or, alternatively, “holy writings” (Head xiv), and was a term applied to the recurring *topoi* and formulaic writing style of saints’

lives by critics and historians looking back at medieval literature and recognizing the prominent trends (Hill 35). Historical accuracy was not necessarily a primary consideration in this style of writing. Instead, the narratives incorporated various formulas and stylistic features that presented the saint in a specific manner to the ecclesiastical audience: “Hagiography [...] is dominated by *topoi*, by models and conventions, for it seeks to show through the surface detail of particular and individual human lives the underlying quality common to the saints in their service to God” (Thacker, “History” 170). The formulaic storylines and specific *topoi* associated with hagiography can be found in a wide variety of writing including “*Lives* of saints, collections of miracle stories, accounts of the discovery or movement of relics, bulls of canonization, [...] liturgical books, sermons, and visions” (Head xiv). It may therefore be useful to think of hagiography as a description of the themes and stylized writing techniques that apply to holy writing in general with a particular focus on saints and saintly behaviour. It should not come as a surprise, then, to find elements of hagiography in a historical document, particularly when it is a history of the Christian conversion of a society.

The Venerable Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) provides an excellent source of hagiography in a historical context which presents a narrative about the political and spiritual emergence of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England. The inclusion of the *vitae* of English saints within the *Ecclesiastical History* also reflects the political influence of hagiographic writing within the functions of the relatively newly established religion. Kings and other monarchs were the first to be converted to this new religion, and whether or not they accepted Christianity directly influenced the religious status of their kingdoms: “Christianity made progress in Barbarian England largely because it suited the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy [...]. Its success depended on the brutal realities and fickle chances of

succession, internecine warfare, and victory in battle” (Cameron 112). In addition to adopting the religion and influencing the religious choices of their subjects, royalty was ultimately responsible for the financial backing of the Christian conversion, from building monasteries to purchasing and importing books for their libraries. St. Cuthbert’s monastery of Lindisfarne, for example, was founded with the financial and political backing of King Oswald as a royal monastery designed to remain close to the subsequent kings of Northumbria (Rollason, “Hagiography” 97). St. Æthelthryth donated land at Hexham to Bishop Wilfrid, an aristocratic Church leader, on which he built a monastery in 674. She also founded her own successful double monastery on her family lands at Ely.¹

In addition to their financial contributions, the English aristocracy were often influential members of the Church who were responsible for running their own monasteries (Rollason, “Hagiography” 99). Royal church members included saints such as Oswald and Æthelthryth, wealthy and powerful bishops such as Wilfrid, and other, relatively unknown aristocrats such as “the nobles at Jarrow who objected to the monastic rule imposed on them by Ceolfrith” and “the retired warrior in the company of whom Wilfrid entered Lindisfarne” (Rollason, “Hagiography” 99). The aristocratic status of many of the Church members, particularly of those holding positions of power, led to a necessary interconnectedness between religious and political affairs, both of which affected the functioning of Church and state.

The promotion of ecclesiastical affairs by the English aristocracy provided the financial and political support essential for the success of the Christian conversion, but it also created conflicts of interest that some members, such as Bede, thought were hypocritical and required correction. Bede believed that the accumulation and open display of wealth, such as the elaborate

¹ For a discussion of the contributions of royal saints in Anglo-Saxon England, including St. Æthelthryth and her relatives at Ely, see Ridyard, *Royal Saints*.

dress worn by members of the monastic community and the opulent lifestyles led by the very leaders who were supposed to preach humility and poverty, were in direct conflict with the teachings of the Bible: “[Bede] was of the opinion that the spiritual leaders, pastors, and preachers of his own age and people were by and large idle, venal, ignorant and corrupt” and because of these beliefs he was “developing a programme of moral and spiritual reform” (Thacker, “History” 183).

The main source for Bede’s ideas of reform are laid out in a letter he wrote to Bishop Egbert during the final months of his life, in which he discussed the problems he saw in the Northumbrian Church and the solutions he felt would resolve them and fulfil God’s plan for the English people. In this letter, Bede explains there are powerful leaders within the Church who “have no men of true religion or self-control around them” and instead prefer to associate with “those who give themselves up to laughter, jokes, storytelling, eating, drinking, and other seductions of the soft life, and who prefer each day to fill their stomachs with feasting rather than their minds with heavenly offerings” (“Letter” 344-345).² Furthermore, Bede claims in his letter that there are bishops who are unsuited to the task and hold the position in a corrupt manner by either buying monastic lands for their own personal and political gain or collecting taxes from remote communities without fulfilling their ecclesiastical duties to those taxpayers. These people, most of whom were members of the aristocracy, were the representatives of Northumbrian Christianity even though they did not uphold Christian beliefs, something which Bede feels is not only unacceptable, but immoral in the eyes of God: “[T]he bishop who lives a holy life should not neglect the duty of teaching, and he would be condemned if he gave good instruction but failed to follow it in practice” (“Letter” 343). Thus, Bede wrote to Egbert about

² All quotations from “Bede’s Letter to Egbert” are from the Judith McClure and Roger Collins edition.

his ideas to transform the Church to a state reflecting idealized Christian values and he suggested an agenda for monastic restructuring that included further dividing Northumbria into smaller bishoprics, firmly implementing the monastic rule within religious enclosures, and expelling the religious leaders he perceived as corrupt.

While Bede's letter can be seen to express the views of a sick monk at the end of his life who recognizes the state of decline of the Northumbrian Church, there is evidence to suggest his ideas of reform are present throughout the entirety of his writing, and only become stronger in his later works.³ Bede's biblical commentaries, comprising the bulk of his literary output, contain allusions to these reform ideas in the stories that focus on restructuring and rebuilding for spiritual betterment: "These commentaries, in effect, can be seen as communicating in spiritual-allegorical terms what the *Ecclesiastical History* exemplifies literally through narrative; like that historical work, they set forth an ideal while at the same time pointing to its failed implementation" (DeGregorio, "Exegesis" 119). The ideal state of the Northumbrian Church was something Bede felt was attainable, but only through reform. By drawing attention to the failures, as he saw them, in the existing structure of the Church, Bede presented a systematic plan of reformation that would rebuild the Church to meet the standards outlined in the Bible.

While the letter focuses on the problems within the Church and the changes necessary to achieve its ideal state, the *Ecclesiastical History* alludes to these ideas of reform by including examples of holy men and women who demonstrate exemplary Christian behaviour in order to promote spiritual betterment and serve as models for readers to emulate. The process of monastic improvement outlined in this work was more than just a discussion of the changes necessary to correct the functioning of the Church in early eighth-century Northumbria; it was a deeply symbolic process that culminated in the realization of the English people as chosen by God to

³ See DeGregorio, "Exegesis" and "*In Efram*."

govern their island home and expand the knowledge of Christ to those in need through missionary activity: “[Bede] sought to chart how the English became part of the universal Church and to establish their particular role in the economy of salvation” (Thacker, “History” 172).

The consideration of the letter to Egbert in relation to a study of the *Ecclesiastical History* contextualizes Bede’s beliefs and highlights the allusions to Bede’s ideas of reform: “What [the letter] does is provide a context for the man and his work that otherwise might be hard to detect – one not of idealism or monastic detachment, as a reading of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* on its own might imply, but of polemic, a troubled sense of a present in decline and a desire to reform it” (DeGregorio, “*In Ezram*” 6-7). This thesis discusses such a contextualized reading of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* and focuses on the home-grown saints he presents as models of idealized behaviour. While contextualizing Bede’s writing with the content of this letter – written near the end of his life and after he finished his history – is discussed by several scholars and applied to the *Ecclesiastical History*, no one had dedicated a study of this length to Bede’s use of English saints in his historical writing as models of acceptable Christian behaviour that align with his agenda of reform. Alan Thacker initially developed these concepts in his highly influential article “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” which presents the letter as the intellectual context for the rest of Bede’s work, including the *Ecclesiastical History*. Thacker returns to and develops these ideas further in his later works, including “Bede and History,” which looks at Bede’s interpretation of history and hagiography in the *Ecclesiastical History*, the *History of the Abbots*, and the lives of St. Cuthbert and which discusses the implications of reform outlined in these works. Thacker’s ideas have been further discussed by other scholars including Scott DeGregorio in “‘*Nostrorum scordiam temporum*’: The Reforming Impulse of Bede’s Later

Exegesis” and “*In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church.” Both of these articles discuss the letter to Egbert as context for Bede’s written works biblical commentaries, as well as his history and hagiography, and provide evidence for Bede working allegorically within his commentaries in order to present his reform ideas for Northumbria. In “Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints,” Catherine Cubitt focuses on similar ideas when she discusses the hagiographic narratives of prominent Anglo-Saxons who were still personally remembered by surviving members of society. She further examines how the recorded memories of these people were constructed to fulfil moral and spiritual obligations which could potentially be applied to Bede’s idea of monastic improvement. My thesis aims to capitalize on and extend the work of these scholars by focussing on the hagiographical accounts of home-grown English saints recorded in the *Ecclesiastical History* that represent models of idealized behaviour intended to further Bede’s agenda of reform.

Bede derived many of his ideas about saintly behaviour from the writings of Gregory the Great, and he reproduced many of Gregory’s writings in order to construct and justify his position. The discussion below will explore how the home-grown English saints in the *Ecclesiastical History* fit into the context of Bede’s letter to Egbert and – when related to the writings of Gregory the Great reproduced by Bede for historical and moral significance – how their hagiographies were constructed to highlight Bede’s agenda for reform. This thesis interacts with and contributes to current scholarship concerned with Bede’s hagiography, history, and desire for change within the Northumbrian church. It ultimately seeks to show how, by writing about the conversion and history of his own people, Bede both constructs the ideal of the Northumbrian Church and also provides the steps necessary to achieve that ideal.

The examples which Bede uses to demonstrate model monastic behaviour often include hagiographical miracles – an element which has caused scholars to question the historical accuracy of the text and Bede’s motives in writing such a rigorously researched historical document.⁴ These miracles, however peculiar they may seem, work on both a symbolic and literal level to reflect the benefits of adhering to proper monastic behaviour. This relationship between symbolic and literal meaning is a key feature of hagiographic writing: “hagiographers and their audience believed simultaneously in the reality of the miraculous and yet were aware that a given miracle in a specific saint’s life might bear symbolic meaning as well” (Hill 46). The inclusion of miracles in a historical document, therefore, only enhanced the narrative and symbolic structure of the writing.

To the medieval mind, miracle stories were a logical explanation of natural events that also represented “God’s relationship with man” (Ward, *Bede* 71). Bede presents the English people of his day as chosen by God to govern the island of Britain and preach the word of Christ to those in need of enlightenment. The inclusion of miracles in hagiographical accounts of home-grown English saints demonstrates this relationship between God and the English people and emphasizes the need for them to accept the proper modes of behaviour and worship: “For Bede, miracles confirm the status of the English as a chosen people, whose conversion to Christianity earns them sovereignty of the island of Britain” (Rowley, “Reassessing” 228).

The relationship between the hagiographical miracles in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* and his underlying message of spiritual reform can be seen in the very language Bede uses to describe the holy miracles in his stories: “His most usual word for miracles is not *miracula*,” or “miracles,” “but *signa*” or “signs” (Ward, *Bede* 71). Therefore, “what was signified” in these miracles and hagiographical elements was important and “the wonder itself was secondary”

⁴ See Colgrave, “Bede’s Miracle Stories,” for a summary and response to these opinions.

(Ward, *Bede* 71-72). The fantastic elements in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* signify God's desire for the English people to emerge as the chosen people and provide concrete evidence for His approval of proper moral, theological, social, and liturgical practice. The saints who performed these miracles were ultimately rewarded by Christ for their devoutness and their exemplary discipline in following the teachings of the Bible and, as such, Bede could write hagiography about them that presented the idealized behaviour he expected from the leading members of the Northumbrian Church.

Although hagiography deals with supernatural elements in a corporeal setting both on a physical and spiritual level, many of the saints in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* were real people, well-known to prominent members of the Church and often only recently deceased. The stories about these saints, therefore, had to please both the living friends and relatives who still remembered them and the symbolic and literary structures of the hagiographic tradition. Bede uses the personal memories of these saints in conjunction with hagiographic *topoi* in order to construct his underlying structure of reform within his *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede presents the saints in this history as ideal Christians and formulates the miracles associated with their lives to highlight the spiritual, financial, and political contributions they made to the English Church. They are depicted as ideals, and they exist in an ideal landscape created by literary traditions: "In hagiography consistently the saint does not hesitate – he or she lives in a world where good and evil are clearly defined and where ambiguities are explicitly excluded" (Hill 39).

Of course, creating hagiographical narratives about home-grown saints and presenting them as ideal models of Christian behaviour are not exclusive to Anglo-Saxon England, and neither was the desire to sanctify important members of the Church who still survived in personal memory. Native saints hail from all Christianized regions and from various times. In

one way or another, they all reflect the political and social circumstances of their homelands and the desire for their native peoples to be chosen by God to perform an important role in the Christian story. For the purposes of time, scope, and interest, however, this thesis will focus exclusively on the native Anglo-Saxon saints that appear in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Because the *Ecclesiastical History* focuses on people and events associated with Northumbria, reflecting Bede's own heritage and interests, this thesis will also focus on saints and holy figures associated with that northern English kingdom. The first chapter, "Kings and Conversion in Northumbria," focuses on the two kings credited with the conversion of the Northumbrian people – Edwin and Oswald – and their presentation of proper Christian behaviour through hagiographic *topoi* and holy signs. The second chapter, "The Cuthbert Ascetic: Making an Anglo-Saxon Saint from Christian Hagiography," explores the cult of one of Northumbria's most popular saints – arguably Anglo-Saxon England's most popular saint – while constructing a framework within the hagiography designed to promote proper moral behaviour among powerful and important members of the Northumbrian Church. Finally, the third chapter, "The Woman Saint: The presentation of Æthelthryth in Anglo-Saxon Christianity," examines the complications of female sanctity, and by discussing the Northumbrian queen Æthelthryth explores the important role Anglo-Saxon royal contributions played in creating and maintaining the English Church. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of the morality and symbolism within Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and some of the far reaching effects this particular text has had in the Middle Ages and in modern times.

Chapter One:

Kings and Conversion in Northumbria

“The past cannot be fully known both because of the simple fact that it is gone [...] and because our ways of understanding differ from those of other eras. Thus, to know the past as it was is impossible; all we can do is to know it as it appears to us in the present, through the artifacts and documents we retain, and through our own modern consciousness” (Allen 5).

Bede completed his *Ecclesiastical History* in 731, nearly a century after the Christian conversion of Northumbria, and even longer after the first contact with the new religion in other English kingdoms. In writing this text, he relied on documents – letters sent between missionaries and Rome and records of the progress of ecclesiastical development – in order to compile evidence for his history of the conversion period. In much the same way that modern scholars look upon Bede’s writing and interpret it through the perspective of modern experience – by questioning the appearance of supernatural miracles in a historical document, for example – so too did Bede write the story of conversion from his own time and perspective: that of a monk who was raised in a Christian monastery and who wholeheartedly accepted the religion as truth. He therefore presents the people associated with the success of the conversion as divinely inspired and excellent in dispossession while the people who impede its progress are wrong and sinful. This allows Bede to portray the victors of the conversion as blessed by God and ultimately rewarded for their righteous actions, while the supporters of paganism and the heretical Christians who did not properly follow biblical teachings are punished for their sins and their inability to recognize the truth.

Bede presents the positive qualities attributed to the promoters of Christianity in his discussion of the Northumbrian kings associated with the Christian conversion: Edwin and

Oswald. Although both of these kings present strong pagan elements in the miracles associated with them – Edwin himself was a pagan for the majority of his life – and they both appear in other medieval writing as English saints and martyrs, only Oswald is sanctified in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and he is cast as the exceptional example of proper Christian virtue and kingship whose correct faith is rewarded by God through the posthumous miracles associated with his relics. Edwin, despite his conversion efforts and the Christian qualities ascribed to him, is merely an important historical figure in Bede's telling of history and does not qualify as a saint. This chapter will look at how these two Northumbrian kings were instrumental in converting the northernmost English kingdom and how Bede uses them to discuss his ideas of exceptional Christian behaviour – essential for his overarching agenda of reform – which is enhanced by divine signs from God.

Being the northernmost kingdom of Anglo-Saxon England, Northumbria – consisting of the two smaller kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia – proved rather difficult to convert to Christianity. Pope Gregory's mission, led by St. Augustine, reached Kent in 597 and marked the official beginning to the conversion efforts of Anglo-Saxon England. Christianity was not completely foreign to the English at this time, however; Bertha, the queen of Kent, a Christian Frankish princess, arrived in her new home with her own bishop and had established a church dedicated to St. Martin (Whitelock 153). The northern English were also aware of the Irish Christian mission at Iona, and had some prior contact with that monastery. Even the British, whom Bede describes as heretical and sinful for their failure to preach the word of Christ to the English, likely had Christian contacts with the Anglo-Saxons despite Bede's negative portrayal in the *Ecclesiastical History*.

Æthelberht was the first king of Kent to accept Augustine's teachings and convert his kingdom to Christianity, although the surrounding kingdoms were reluctant to follow suit. The process, however, was not so straightforward: he still met Augustine's party with extreme suspicion and likely only accepted their teachings because of his exposure to the new religion through the influence of Bertha (Hollis 222). On his death in 616, his successor revived paganism and Christianity struggled to hold its place among the English although it appears the queen and her daughter, Æthelburh, managed to maintain the religion. Ten years later, Æthelburh married King Edwin of Northumbria who was also hesitant to accept Christianity, although he agreed his queen could practice her religion unhindered and even promised to consider converting himself. Accompanying Æthelburh to her new home and kingdom was Paulinus, a newly consecrated bishop who had travelled from Rome with Augustine. His duty, according to Bede, was primarily to ensure that Æthelburh's heathen husband did not corrupt her but he was also expected to convert the northern kingdom. This process proved difficult due to the warrior lifestyle and deeply entrenched pagan beliefs of Edwin and his followers. Despite the king's initial resistance to his queen's religion, and the collapse of Christianity upon his death, Bede still notes Edwin's contributions to the Northumbrian conversion and describes him as a positive example of an intelligent and contemplative king who eventually accepted Christianity as the one true faith. Bede does not construct Edwin as a saint however, as he is described in other Anglo-Saxon texts,¹ and therefore he is not given the ultimate recognition because, even though he eventually came around to believing Christian teachings, he was initially hesitant and doubtful.

Bede describes two episodes in which God demonstrates His power to Edwin before the Northumbrian king finally decides to accept Christianity. The first of these signs occurs when an assassin, posing as a messenger, kills two of Edwin's thegns and wounds the king before being

¹ See Colgrave, *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*.

struck down. That same night, Edwin's first child – a daughter named Eanflæd – was born and Edwin promised Paulinus that if the Christian God would grant him “victory over the king who had sent the assassin who wounded him” that he “would renounce his idols and serve Christ” (*H.E.* ii.9; 167).² In order to prove his willingness to convert to the religion preached by Paulinus, Edwin gave the bishop his new-born daughter to be baptized: “She was baptized on the holy day of Pentecost, the first of the Northumbrian race to be baptized” (*H.E.* ii.9; 167). This significant contribution on Edwin's behalf generated the first Northumbrian infant to be raised according to Christian doctrine, something which had become commonplace by Bede's time.

Despite his promise, however, when Edwin returned after his successful revenge campaign, he rejected his pagan idols but did not immediately convert to the Christian faith: “But first he made it his business, as opportunity occurred, to learn the faith systematically from the venerable Bishop Paulinus, and then to consult with the counsellors whom he considered the wisest, as to what they thought he ought to do” (*H.E.* ii.9; 167). Even though he spent long hours contemplating Christ, a trait which was often desirable in hagiographic narratives, he was not committed to the faith and therefore was questioning what Paulinus had accepted as truth. He remained undecided and spent long hours trying to figure out which faith was the right one. This indecision meant that he did not fulfil his promise to God and to Paulinus, which, although he would eventually convert under the guidance of the bishop, was still breaking his word after receiving proof that God could grant him victory in war.

The second interaction between God and Edwin in Bede's narrative involves a vision which perhaps can be interpreted as a hagiographic miracle. Before his kingship, Edwin was living in exile and sought refuge from the reigning king of Northumbria, Æthelfrith, at the court

² All quotations from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* are from the Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors edition.

of King Rædwald in neighbouring East Anglia. Rædwald compromised Edwin's safety by considering a bribe in exchange for his life and Edwin, having found out about this through a close friend, sat alone contemplating what he should do. During this time, a person appeared and asked Edwin three questions: what would he give as reward to anyone who could save him, what would he do if someone made him more powerful than any English king before him, and would he be willing to follow the counselling and advice of the one who would save him and make him such a king. Edwin responded that he would give anything he could to the rescuer, would be eternally grateful to the one who made him such a powerful king, and would eagerly obey the teachings of the one who granted him these things. The man then placed his right hand on Edwin's forehead, saying, "When this sign shall come to you, remember this occasion and our conversation, and do not hesitate to fulfil what you are now promising" (*H.E.* ii.12; 181). The person suddenly disappeared, leaving Edwin to believe he was a spirit. The next day Rædwald decided not to betray Edwin, and Edwin subsequently killed Æthelfrith to become king of Northumbria and, through successful conquest and warfare, the over-king of all the English kingdoms except Kent, and many of the British kingdoms as well.

Years later, after he rejected his pagan idols but was still unconvinced about his promise to convert to Christianity, Paulinus approached Edwin and placed his right hand on the king's head, asking him if he knew the sign. Edwin trembled, but admitted he was ready to accept Christianity only if his counsellors and closest men agreed it was proper. After a long deliberation about the advantages and disadvantages of Christianity and paganism, the meeting ends in favour of the Christian faith and the idols previously worshipped by Edwin and his people were dramatically destroyed along with the shrine that held them. Through this drawn-out story about the king and his eventual acceptance of the Christian faith "Bede does everything he

can to make a significant event in the history of Northumbria, the conversion of a person who is to become the first Christian king in that part of England, in which Bede lived himself, look even more significant” (Lutterkort 97). Bede carefully constructs Edwin as significant, but not saintly. While his violent death in battle against a heretical Christian could have been described as martyrdom, making Edwin the saint he is in other medieval texts, in the *Ecclesiastical History* he is a significant king who initially introduced Christianity to Northumbria, but nothing more. The saint-king would have to wait for the next stable ruler of both Deira and Bernicia: St. Oswald.

In 633 King Edwin was killed and his wife was escorted back to Kent by Paulinus as the nation turned back to paganism. Edwin’s successor in Deira, Osric, had been converted by Paulinus, and Eanfrith, the successor in Bernicia, was educated as a Christian by the Irish mission at Iona. Neither of these kings, brief though their reigns were, upheld the Christian faith once their power was secured: “But no sooner had these two kings gained the sceptres of their earthly kingdom than they abjured and betrayed the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom to which they had been admitted and reverted to the filth of their former idolatry, thereby to be polluted and destroyed” (*H.E.* iii.1; 213). They were quickly punished for their rejection of Christianity when the British king Cadwallon “killed them both, executing a just vengeance upon them, though with unrighteous violence” (*H.E.* iii.1; 213). While the deaths of Osric and Eanfrith at the hands of Cadwallon are constructed here as being an act of vengeance by God, the British king is by no means portrayed as someone who follows the teachings of Christianity or otherwise acts on behalf of Christ. Although Cadwallon was Christian, Bede’s anti-British prejudice, and his desire to justify the slaughtering of the British people by the Germanic tribes which settled the island to become the Anglo-Saxons, leads him to present Cadwallon as a heretic who was “a barbarian in heart and disposition” and who “put all to death by torture” and “rage[d] through all

their land, meaning to wipe out the whole English nation from the land of Britain” (*H.E.* ii.20; 205). Bede describes Cadwallon’s rule as an “outrageous tyranny” which historians prefer to ignore when using the dates of kings (*H.E.* iii.1; 215). This bestial figure is eventually killed with the blessing of God, as Bede interprets this event, through the actions of one of His chosen saints and the next stable king of Northumbria: the saint-king Oswald.

Oswald was the son of Æthelfrith of the Bernicia royal line and the full brother to Eanfrith. While Edwin was in power, Oswald and his brothers lived in exile in Ireland, where they learned the Irish language and converted to Christianity at Iona. Oswald triumphantly comes into Bede’s story with a military victory over Cadwallon, ripe with religious significance, which instantly establishes this king as a model for Christian behaviour and ethics. On the eve of battle, Oswald and his men erect a cross in a place called Heavenfield, at which he and his army pray for God to defend them against Cadwallon’s larger army: “Let us all kneel together and pray the almighty, everliving, and true God to defend us in His mercy from the proud and fierce enemy, for He knows that we are fighting in a just cause for the preservation of our whole race” (*H.E.* iii.1; 215). This first image of the saint is one of an exceptional Christian, openly and enthusiastically demonstrating his devotion to God and instructing his followers to do the same. He wholeheartedly places his faith of a successful outcome of the battle in the hands of God, and because of this display of true and proper devotion – for the greater good of his people and not merely his own personal gain – he is successful in defeating Cadwallon and taking the throne of Northumbria: “They all did as he commanded, advanced against the enemy just as dawn was breaking, and gained the victory that their faith merited” (*H.E.* iii.2; 215). In this passage, Bede makes it clear that it is the faith of Oswald’s army that defeats Cadwallon, as their prayers at the

cross the night before demonstrate, and thus Bede construes their victory as a victory of God over the heretical Cadwallon, enacted by one of His chosen saints.

The initial events that introduce Oswald as Northumbria's warrior-saint in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, however, are not, strictly speaking, examples of pure Christian hagiography, but echo pagan rituals that predate English Christianity. The ritual of worshipping a tree – or in this case a wooden cross – in the centre of a field is reminiscent of the “world tree” mythology in which a tree grows in the middle of a great meadow and, when properly worshipped, has the power to heal people and animals (Tolley 156). While there are several versions of this myth that could have applied to the pre-Christian Germanic tribes in England, the general idea of worshipping a wooden object in the middle of a field – conveniently named Heavenfield, a supposedly old place name – is likely a Christian appropriation of a pagan ritual: “Was the troops’ enthusiasm fired not so much by pure Christian devotion focused on the novelty of seeing a cross of victory raised before battle, as by beholding a familiar pagan rite imbued with new spiritual power through the ingenuity of their leader?” (Tolley 153).

Perhaps the appropriation of pagan customs is why Oswald was ultimately successful in converting Northumbria to Christianity, while Edwin's contemplative approach to the new religion only resulted in a short-lived period of Christian dominance which ended with the king's death, followed by a period of political turbulence and warfare. Edwin and his followers did not rededicate pagan spaces and practices for Christian spirituality, but they dramatically destroyed the idols and shrines associated with paganism. Upon the realization that Christianity was the proper and true religion to follow, Edwin's high priest of his previous faith armed himself and mounted a stallion – forbidden acts for one of his position – and immediately set out to destroy the idols to “set an example to all” (*H.E.* ii.13; 185). He impaled the idols with a spear, and

ordered his companions to burn the shrine to the ground, “greatly rejoicing in the knowledge of the worship of the true God” (*H.E.* ii.13; 185-87). The passionate acceptance of Christianity by Edwin and his immediate advisors does not necessarily filter down to his subjects, however, who were rather alarmed at the sight of their high priest behaving so strangely: “The common people who saw him thought he was mad” (*H.E.* iii.13; 185). Thus, although Bede states that “King Edwin, with all the nobles of his race and a vast number of the common people” converted to Christianity, there is perhaps reason to suspect resentful attitudes or a lack of conviction in the king’s new religion. As far as Bede is concerned, Edwin is not a saint and although he experiences signs from God that Christianity is the proper faith for him and his kingdom, his prolonged resistance and passionate desecration of pagan sites ultimately fails to convert Northumbria on a permanent basis.

Oswald, on the other hand, was more tactful in his appropriation of pagan rituals and spaces which he incorporated into sites for Christian worship. After the initial Christian mission was sent to England from Rome, Pope Gregory the Great – whose writings Bede frequently quotes in his own work – sent a letter of instruction which Bede includes in the first book of the *Ecclesiastical History*. The letter states:

I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them [...]. When these people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their heads and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God. (*H.E.* i.30; 107)

By attaching Christian significance to the pagan ritual of worshipping the world tree, “a symbol of support, sustenance and guardianship” (Tolley 173), Oswald succeeds in convincing his army to pray to God with him before going into battle, an act which ultimately secures victory against Cadwallon in Bede’s narrative. Whereas Edwin fails to convert Northumbria completely through his passionate disregard for pagan rituals, and by asking his high priest to destroy his shrine, Oswald succeeds because he follows the wise advice of Pope Gregory by allowing pagan rituals and holy places to continue to exist but as reconstituted examples of Christian worship.

After assuming the throne with the help of God, Oswald wants to convert the population of Northumbria to Christianity: “Oswald, as soon as he had come to the throne, was anxious that the whole race under his rule should be filled with the grace of the Christian faith of which he had had so wonderful an experience in overcoming the barbarians” (*H.E.* iii.3; 219). Here Bede presents the image of the ideal Christian king, who desires his entire people, from the wealthy aristocracy surrounding him to the poor commoners in rural areas, to be converted to Christianity. This represents one of the key virtues that Bede feels is missing in the church of his day: the desire to go out and preach the Christian word to the rural taxpayers and include everyone in the spiritual benefits that Christianity had to offer. Bede presents this as Oswald’s first concern as a Christian king, whereas Edwin’s first desire as a Christian king was to destroy a pagan shrine. Thus, although Edwin is an important figure in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* for his role in the initial conversion of Northumbria, he is not a saint like Oswald and despite his preference for contemplation he does not possess the qualities to exemplify ideal monastic behaviour in his political position. Bede is clear about this and wants to demonstrate how his idealized image of the Northumbrian church, according to his ideas of reform, could become a reality in his own time. He therefore relegates King Edwin to the role of an important and

influential king while he presents Oswald as the idealized saint who seamlessly blends Christianity and kingship during his reign as Northumbria's king.

Bede's reform agenda emerges from his portrayal of Oswald as a Christian saint-king – the only one in the *Ecclesiastical History* to possess both saintly virtues and successful kingship simultaneously – and his refusal to construct the saint as a martyr, despite the nature of his death and the occurrence of posthumous miracles. In fact, Bede never uses the word “martyr” to describe Oswald and instead focuses on four traits that he believes are exemplary Christian virtues to be followed and that, as his letter to Egbert suggests, were seriously lacking in the Church of his day: “Bede concentrates on Oswald's possession of four Christian virtues: his faith; his humility; his generosity to the poor and strangers; and his concern to establish and extend the church” (Stancliffe, “Holy” 61). The example cited above, re-enacting a pagan ritual to ensure military success, demonstrates three of these virtues: his decision to erect the cross expresses his faith in the religion of Christ; his passion in helping his soldiers secure this Christian symbol in the ground demonstrates his humility; and his ingenuity in worshipping Christ through a method that would have been familiar to both pagans and doubting Christians in his army reveals his concern to establish and extend the church.

Oswald's generosity, in conjunction with the other three virtues, becomes particularly clear in an episode that takes place during an Easter celebration. Here, Oswald sits down to a magnificent feast served on a silver platter when a military officer interrupts and informs the king of the multitude of poor and starving peasants seeking assistance from the king. Oswald “at once ordered the dainties which had been set in front of him to be carried to the poor, the dish to be broken up, and the pieces divided amongst them” (*H.E.* iii.6; 231). Here, again, Oswald differs greatly from Edwin resulting in the former being honoured as a saint while the latter is

merely an important figure in Northumbrian history. Bede praises Edwin's generosity and the peacefulness of his kingdom, but this king does not show the same conviction as Oswald, who embodies the idealized attributes of Christian kingship. The virtue of generosity, exemplified by living humbly with concern for those less well-off, is an idea which fits within Bede's own agenda of monastic reform. It is, moreover, closely linked with the teachings of Gregory the Great who, in a letter to Æthelberht of Kent, wrote about the importance of being a good Christian king: "Increase your righteous zeal for their conversion; [...] strengthen the morals of your subjects by outstanding purity of life [...] and by showing them an example of good works" (*H.E.* i.32; 113). Gregory goes on to explain, "It was thus that Constantine, the most religious emperor, converted the Roman State from the false worship of idols and subjected it and himself to Almighty God" (*H.E.* i.32; 113). This leads some scholars to associate Oswald, who embodies these qualities, with the figure of Constantine which at the same time endows Bede's analogy of the English Conversion with historical Christian significance.³

Perhaps Oswald's most influential decision affecting the successful conversion of the England's northernmost kingdom was to request the assistance of Bishop Aidan, the Irish monk from Iona. Together they founded Lindisfarne, the royal monastery located on a tidal island close to Oswald's political centre of Bamburgh but not directly attached to the royal household. This significant division of church and state allowed Aidan to focus on converting the people and train new converts as priests, instead of busying himself with political affairs: "The establishment of this monastery was crucial since it provided a training ground for Anglo-Saxon recruits, instructing them in the religious life, but also educating them in the Psalms and thence in Latin, in reading and writing, in the study of the Bible, and so initiating them into the whole

³ For further discussion on Oswald fulfilling the Constantine role as described by Gregory the Great, see Stancliffe, "Holy."

world of Christian learning” (Stancliffe, “Irish” 79). The Irish had developed techniques for learning Latin as an ecclesiastical language and understood the conversion process facing the Northumbrians: “The Irish had already pioneered the teaching of Latin as a foreign language [...]. They also pioneered the use of the vernacular, both prose and verse, for devotional and teaching purposes” (Stancliffe, “Irish” 79). Thus, through establishing an educational centre at Lindisfarne, teaching Latin as the ecclesiastical language, and using the English language in order to understand Christian teachings – in much the same way pagan rites were appropriated to understand the spiritual significance of Christ – the Irish Christians, led by Aidan, were properly equipped to convert successfully all the northern English where the Roman-trained Paulinus attached to Edwin’s court had previously failed.

The establishment of Lindisfarne also allowed Aidan and Oswald to remain close – Bede states that the king initially acted as the translator for the Irish bishop – but not dependent on each other, a situation which led to a greater ability to reach the Northumbrian laity and convert the people. Bede states that Aidan, in particular, was adamant about reaching the population: “He used to travel everywhere, in town and country, not on horseback but on foot [...] in order that, as he walked along, whenever he saw people whether rich or poor, he might at once approach them and, if they were unbelievers, invite them to accept the mystery of the faith” (*H.E.* iii.5; 227). The idea of a humble bishop walking amongst the rich and poor and talking to everyone equally is not a quality Bede ascribes to Paulinus, who always remained closely connected to the royal family. The ultimately unsuccessful conversion during Edwin’s reign may be partly credited to Paulinus’ close association with the royal house, and specifically with Queen Æthelburh. This association restricted him from reaching the rural population, something Aidan realized was important.

Aidan's superior Irish training at Iona prepared him to understand the conversion processes necessary for Northumbria, namely that including the all classes of society would ensure success. Bede can forgive Aidan, therefore, for continuing to follow the Celtic methods of calculating Easter because the Irish Christians eventually realized the error of their ways.⁴ Aidan still acted as the model of exemplary Christian behaviour that Bede directly contrasts with the problems he saw in the monasteries of his own time: "Aidan's life was in great contrast to our modern slothfulness; all who accompanied him, whether tonsured or layman, had to engage in some form of study, that is to say, to occupy themselves either with reading the scriptures or learning the psalms" (*H.E.* iii.5; 227). Not only did he impose this strictness upon his followers, he lived it himself: "Aidan taught the clergy many lessons about the conduct of their lives but above all he left them a most salutary example of abstinence and self-control. [...]. [H]e taught them no other way of life than that which he himself practised" (*H.E.* iii.5; 227). The saintly virtues associated with Aidan – to be discussed below in connection with St. Cuthbert – combined with the exemplary virtue of King Oswald meant these two formed an ideal team for converting the Northumbrian people, a process in which, according to Bede, they were ultimately successful.

Oswald's ability to reach all levels of society with his religious zeal is exemplified in the practices associated with his cult after his death. Oswald "was killed in a great battle by the same heathen people and the same heathen Mercian king as his predecessor Edwin in a place called [...] *Maserfelth*" (*H.E.* iii.9; 241-43). Bede could have construed this death at the hands of his kingdom's sworn enemies as a martyrdom, as in later accounts of Oswald's life. But Bede was careful not to dwell on the king's death in battle, summing it up in one short sentence before

⁴ For Bede's justification of Easter, see Faith Wallis' edition of *The Reckoning of Time*.

moving on to the lists of miracles performed posthumously by the saint: “Thus, while some of Bede’s contemporaries may have regarded Oswald’s status as similar to Edwin’s, and in time both certainly became regarded as ‘martyrs’, Bede himself regarded Oswald, and Oswald alone, as a saint-king – and a saint thanks to the life he lived as a king” (Stancliffe, “Holy” 41). Because martyrdom focuses solely on the death of the saint, the details of his life as a holy person are overshadowed by his brutal death at the hands of heathen enemies, making the actual death itself the example of sanctity within the story. For Bede, whose underlying objective was to promote monastic reform, the death of St. Oswald was not the most important part of the saint-king’s life; rather, Bede wanted to demonstrate the qualities of Christianity and exceptional kingship for which Oswald was honoured as a saint in order to promote his actions and personality as the true saintly examples, rather than concentrating solely on his violent death. By focusing on his life and deeds, Bede presents Oswald as the ideal Christian king – something he perhaps felt was lacking in his own time – who successfully converted Northumbria and demonstrated all of the qualities expected of an exceptional ruler and a holy saint.

His death, therefore, was nothing more than an unfortunate passing and the miracles that occurred afterwards were the evidence Bede needed to show how this saint-king truly represented the ideal person to reach both rich and poor in the conversion of Northumbria. Immediately after telling of his death, Bede goes on to relate two miracles that occurred at *Maserfelth*, although he is careful to point out that despite the small sampling he has recorded “sick men and beasts are healed to this day” at the site where Oswald fell (*H.E.* iii.9; 243). The first of these miracles involves a sick horse, who rolls over the spot where Oswald was killed and is immediately healed. Upon realizing the significance of what had just happened, the rider marked the spot and went on to tell an innkeeper whose niece “had long suffered from paralysis”

(*H.E.* iii.9; 243). She too was brought to the spot and healed where Oswald fell in battle. The second miracle involves a travelling Briton who takes soil from the spot because it is greener than the rest of the field, which leads him to suspect it is a marker for where a holy man fell. Later that evening, he hangs the small pouch of dirt on a wall-post and while the rest of the house catches fire and burns to the ground, the post remains untouched by the flames.

These two miracles stand out for a couple of reasons: first, they involve laymen and are not concerned with the ecclesiastical centres and the traditional functions of hagiography; and secondly, they have strong pagan overtones that reflect Oswald's introductory battle in which he appropriates a pagan tradition in order to convince his army to pray to Christ. The first miracle involving the horse reflects "the strong associations which horses had with death and the afterlife among the Germanic peoples" before they settled England and converted to Christianity (Thacker, "*Membra*" 100). Horses were often "sacrificed and buried as companions and protectors in their masters' graves" but "they were also psychopomps who conducted the soul to paradise" (Thacker, "*Membra*" 100). Despite the importance of the horse in pre-Christian Germanic mythology, the inclusion of an animal in a Christian hagiographical context was unorthodox: "Reference to animal cures is most unusual in early Anglo-Saxon hagiography" (Cubitt, "*Universal*" 426). Bede's use of a horse to locate the spot where Christian saint Oswald was killed demonstrates, once again, an appropriation of a pagan belief which is reconstituted to demonstrate Christian significance.

The post which does not burn brings Oswald's life and death full circle, reminding the reader of the wooden cross he and his army erected at Heavenfield and the world tree mythology that it represents, again reconstituted to demonstrate Christian significance. These two miracles are similar in how they appropriate pagan beliefs and, more importantly, in how they both

involve laymen who, although Christian, are not formally educated monks associated with a monastery or who are looking to promote the Christian faith to the rural population. The development of miracle stories associated with the cult of St. Oswald that are reported to occur at the battlefields in which he fought – as they are presented in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* – reflect the completeness of the conversion that occurred during Oswald's rule by demonstrating how supernatural occurrences formerly associated with pagan ideas were now associated with Christ, even among members of the lower class of Northumbrian society. Thus, the ideas of Gregory the Great – who suggested Augustine should appropriate pagan traditions into Christian understanding rather than obliterating them altogether – proved successful in the conversion process of Northumbria at the hands of the saint-king Oswald: “Thus, while some outward rejoicings are preserved, they will be able more easily to share in inward rejoicings” (*H.E.* i.30; 109). The “outward rejoicings” of linking horses with the afterlife and worshipping the world tree are taken to new levels of understanding when they are associated with the Christian teachings of St. Oswald, who successfully taught the people of his kingdom to recognize the “inward rejoicings” of Christianity as the true religion.

Oswald's cult was not purely the reconstitution of pagan elements in a Christian context, however. The cult of the saint-king was also associated with the Northumbrian royal family and a number of monasteries in his northern English kingdom, as well as in Mercia:

Bede's account in the *Historia ecclesiastica* indicates that it [Oswald's cult] developed at two contrasting types of location: at the ecclesiastical sites of St Peter's, Bamburgh and the monastery at Bardney in Lindsey, and at the battlefields of Heavenfield, where Oswald erected a wooden cross before victory over Caedwalla and the British, and at that of *Maserfelth* where he met his death. (Cubitt, “Universal” 425)

Oswald's niece, Osthryth, collected the saint's bones and enshrined them at Bardney. Although the Mercians consistently fought Northumbria and did not want to worship the relics of one of their most hated leaders – even though they knew Oswald was a saint – the relics spoke for themselves when they were left to wait outside overnight and a beam of light “stretched from the carriage right up to heaven and was visible in almost every part of the kingdom of Lindsey” (*H.E.* iii.11; 247). The monks of Bardney recognized their error and wholeheartedly enshrined Oswald's bones as holy relics belonging to a royal saint.

The miracles associated with these enshrined relics also reflect hagiographic traditions and concern a higher class of citizens than the miracles that occurred at the battlefields: “The nature of the miracles performed is also different: the actors involved were high-status individuals such as Osthryth and those in the religious life [...]. The miracles take the form of human healings such as the exorcism of devils and do not involve animals” (Cubitt, “Universal” 426). The relics – and the water used to clean them – were reputed to exorcize demons and purify unclean spirits. A man healed by the dirt collected from the site where the water used to clean Oswald's bones was dumped claimed “as soon as this maid reached the porch of the house with the casket she was carrying [which contained this dirt], all the evil spirits which were oppressing me left me and departed to be seen no more” (*H.E.* iii.11; 249).

Bardney was not the only monastery associated with the hagiographical miracles of St. Oswald. Oswald's brother and successor to the Northumbrian throne, Oswiu, took the saint-king's head and hands – which had been removed from the rest of his body and placed on stakes by the men who killed him – and brought them to Lindisfarne and Bamburgh where they continued to be associated with ecclesiastical miracles and royal associations: “Bede's account indicates two different types of devotion to Oswald: that of the peasants who honoured rural

places associated with him and sought his help in the cure of both animals and humans and that of the monks and clergy for whom Oswald's sanctity resided in shrines and relics and whose healing miracles imitated biblical and hagiographical models" (Cubitt, "Murdered" 61).

Thus, through the pagan-inspired miracle stories associated with the fields in which Oswald fought key battles, and the hagiographic influence of the enshrinement of Oswald's relics at royal and monastic centres, Bede makes the saint-king Oswald an integral figure in his *Ecclesiastical History*: a demonstration of the ideal king for converting his people to the Christian faith and the ideal saint because of his religious passion and remarkable character. The images of Oswald Bede presents "intertwine traditional and folkloric elements with orthodox Christian symbolism" in which "the mixed nature of popular belief" and "orthodox Christian elements mingled harmoniously with ideas derived from outside learned Christian tradition" (Cubitt, "Murdered" 81, 83). In Oswald, Bede constructs the ideal model who represents all the positive qualities he thought necessary in a saint and in a Christian king and – in light of the evidence from his letter to Egbert about his ideas of reform and his preference for the teachings of Gregory the Great outlined in the beginning of the *Ecclesiastical History* – the sort of character Bede believed was sorely missing from the Northumbrian church of his own time.

By recognizing the efforts of both Edwin and Oswald as important kings who initiated the process of Christian conversion in Northumbria, Bede presents these men as models of behaviour that he would like to see in his own time. Edwin, the intellectual and contemplative king who was the first to accept Christianity in the northern kingdom, was an important political figure although his resistance to the faith and inability to reconstitute pagan practices into lessons of Christianity disqualified him from being considered a saint in Bede's eyes. Oswald, however, presented all the elements of an excellent Christian king and saint: faith, humility, generosity,

and the success in converting all of Northumbria from the aristocracy surrounding him to the laymen who still preferred pagan beliefs and practices. By utilizing the teachings of Gregory the Great and appropriating pagan customs as representations of Christian spirituality, Oswald was able to reach all levels of people in his society and include them in his love of Christianity and his faith in Christ. Bede considered these qualities more important than Oswald's brutal death at the hands of heathens – an event that in itself would have qualified Oswald to become England's first Christian martyr – and subsequently were the focus of the stories he recorded about this saint. Instead of only noticing the sanctity of a man who died in the name of his faith, Bede constructs Oswald as the ideal saint-king whose balance between exceptional Christian behaviour and excellent political skills made him the model of kingship that permanently brought Northumbria into the orbit of Christianity and upheld a standard of practice that was admirable when compared to the standards of Bede's own time.

Chapter Two:

The Cuthbert Ascetic: Making an Anglo-Saxon Saint from Christian Hagiography

“The Christian saint is not remembered as wise or great or righteous but as a humble and sinful human being who learned [...]. The hagiographer is one who shows this life of discipleship to the readers for their encouragement and imitation” (Ward, “Spirituality” 75).

While the saint-king Oswald modelled the virtues required of an ideal Christian king – complete with his ability to reconstitute pagan practices as representations of Christian significance – St. Cuthbert provided the model for excellent Christian behaviour in the monastic setting. Taking up the last six chapters of book four, Cuthbert – arguably Anglo-Saxon England’s most popular saint in both medieval and modern times – is a significant feature in the *Ecclesiastical History* and an important figure in the development of the English Church. The location of this story within the overall narrative of Christian conversion increases Cuthbert’s significance as a model of idealized behaviour: “Cuthbert, in short, with his place at the conclusion of the three central books devoted to what Bede regarded as the greatest period of his people’s history, was meant to represent the finest fruit of the conversion initiated by Gregory the Great. He is the most perfect exponent of a pastoral ideal” (Thacker, “Reform” 144-45). Bede combines the accumulation of Christian virtues and practices that he considered the most important – and perhaps the most lacking in his time – in the figure of Cuthbert, who acts as a model of exceptional behaviour for other members of the church to follow.

Bede portrays Cuthbert as the ideal teacher who, like Aidan, goes out of his way to bring the Christian word to everyone including the royal family and isolated rural communities. Bede pays particular attention to his ability to contact the latter: “Not only did he teach those in the monastery how to live under the Rule and show them an example of it at the same time, but he also sought to convert the neighbouring people far and wide from a life of foolish customs to a love of heavenly joys” (*H.E.* iv.27; 433). This desire to travel “far and wide” in order to reach sections of the population who lived far from a monastery represented an essential duty that Bede believed bishops in his own church were not performing. He expresses his concern about this monastic laxity in his letter to Egbert: “For we have heard, and it is indeed well known, that there are many of the villages and hamlets of our people located in inaccessible mountains or in dense forests, where a bishop has never been seen over the course of many years performing his ministry and revealing the divine grace” (“Letter” 347). By using this saint as a model for exemplary behaviour, Bede emphasizes that Cuthbert not only showed concern for rural Northumbrians, but also worked continually to ensure their proper Christian education: “Giving himself up gladly to this devoted labour, he attended to their instruction with such industry that he would leave the monastery and often not return home for a whole week, sometimes even for two or three weeks and even occasionally for a whole month” (*H.E.* iv.27; 433-35). By writing about Cuthbert – a real person who was still remembered by many people within the church – in a way that emphasizes his ability to perform the duties of a bishop in such an exemplary manner suggests that the ideals of a reformed Northumbrian church were achievable in Bede’s own time and there was no excuse beyond greed and laziness for why these qualities were entirely lacking.

The *Ecclesiastical History* was not the only place where Bede wrote about Cuthbert, however, and his earlier works about the popular English saint also portray him as the

ecclesiastical ideal and a model of Gregorian teachings. Bede wrote two hagiographic lives of the saint – the first in verse and the second in prose – based on an existing life by an anonymous Lindisfarne monk written not long after the translation of Cuthbert’s body. In his two lives, Bede presents Cuthbert as an exemplary holy father who serves both as an ideal of the Christian Church and a model Northumbrian and is thus the perfect home-grown saint: someone who demonstrates all the qualities Bede thought were desirable in a Christian.

Of the three previous written lives of Cuthbert, Bede’s prose life is the most popular based on surviving manuscript evidence (Colgrave, *Lives* 1). This popularity could be attributed to Bede’s ability to organize the hagiographic details about Cuthbert’s life into a coherent narrative – a quality which both makes those details easier to read, and allows Bede to impose his own ideas of reform through the narrative structure he creates: “Narrative is essentially an artifice, a literary device, the function of which is to create the illusion of actuality and to endow fragmented and disconnected events with meaning” (Cubitt, “Memory” 47). The structure of narrative creates a cause-and-effect construction in which the miracles and hagiographic details associated with Cuthbert are the effects of some cause that becomes evident throughout the course of the narrative. Bede organizes the effects in such a way that the causality is not just attributable to divine intervention from God, but it is a presentation of Cuthbert as an example for the betterment of the Northumbrian church: “Bede’s causality is rooted in his priorities not in the reality of Cuthbert’s life” (Cubitt, “Memory” 47). In rewriting the anonymous monk’s version of Cuthbert’s life, first in verse and later in prose – which would effectually replace the anonymous prose work – Bede “transforms Cuthbert into an exemplar of monastic and pastoral perfection” through “his reworking of miracles” which “converts them into lessons for aspiring monks” (Cubitt, “Memory” 48). In effect, Bede’s “narrative framework is provided by a model

of spiritual progression and by an ideal of monastic life” (Cubitt, “Memory” 48). Even his earlier hagiographic writings about St. Cuthbert incorporate Bede’s ideas about the declining state of the Northumbrian church, and the monastic laxity he discussed in his letter to Egbert. These motifs provide an underlying layer of meaning to his narrative that emphasize the flaws in the church, as Bede sees them, and presents practical solutions to those problems through the presentation of Cuthbert as an ideal saint.

The very first chapters of both the anonymous monk’s and Bede’s prose text reveal Bede’s method of endowing the events of Cuthbert’s life with a message of spiritual reform. In this telling passage, Cuthbert, as a little boy, is playing with his peers until a three-year-old child, in a passage that echoes Matthew 21.16, reminds the saint that his behaviour is unbecoming of such a great bishop. In both versions, Cuthbert corrects his ways and immediately adopts the persona of the devout ascetic for which he later became famous. Bede ascribes a boastful nature to this young playful Cuthbert, a trait not emphasized in the anonymous monk’s text, describing him as “agile by nature and quick-witted,” traits which:

he very often used to prevail over his rivals in play, so that sometimes [...] he [...] would triumphantly look round to see whether any of them were willing to contend with him again [...]. [H]e used to boast that he had beaten all who were his equals in age and even some who were older (*V.P.* i; 157).⁹

This boastful pride is not mentioned in the anonymous monk’s version of story; it merely states that the young Cuthbert “surpassed all of his age in agility and high spirits, so that often, after the others had gone to rest their weary limbs, he, standing triumphantly in the playground as though he were in the arena, would still wait for someone to play with him” (*V.A.* i. 3; 65).

⁹ All references to Bede’s prose *vita* (*V.P.*) and the anonymous Lindisfarne monk’s *vita* (*V.A.*) refer to Bertram Colgrave’s edition in *Two lives of Saint Cuthbert*.

Although both writers portray Cuthbert as a very athletic and capable youth, Bede emphasizes his childish pride: a sin which he repents with episodes of pain and suffering, both physical and spiritual, in his adult life. By constructing his hagiography in this way, Bede creates the moral framework in which his narrative can unfold: Cuthbert as a child commits the sin of pride, frequently and willingly, and throughout the rest of his life he must atone for this sin through prayer and the acceptance of physical anguish. Although this sin is forgivable because of Cuthbert's youthful ignorance and his later devotion to God, it gives purpose to Cuthbert's devout asceticism and presents the overall narrative as a story of reform and forgiveness. This theme is absent from the anonymous monk's version of Cuthbert's life in which young Cuthbert is merely athletic and capable – without sin – and as an adult he is not constantly plagued with spiritual and physical pain.

Bede's narrative structure of sinful pride and repentance reflects the writer's own ideas about the state of the church in Northumbria and the process of reform he feels is necessary: "Bede's system of meaning lies in his ideology of the Christian life and agenda for the moral renewal of Northumbria" (Cubitt, "Memory" 48-49). The proud and boastful young Cuthbert reflects Bede's view of the pride and vanity of the Northumbrian church, and the immediate change in behaviour from sinful to respectful at the advice of an innocent child represents the process of recognition and reform that Bede hoped the church would follow once he drew attention to its flaws. Bede himself becomes the child in this analogy who has the broader perspective of the situation of an innocent bystander. Cuthbert is ultimately rewarded both in the afterlife as one of God's chosen saints and on earth where he is honoured with an elaborate enshrinement for the humble acceptance of his sins and the purity of his will to repent. In much

the same way, Bede thought that the Northumbrian church would be rewarded by God and able to reach its full potential if it followed his reform program.

While this structure of sin and reform is developed throughout the narrative of his prose life of the saint, Bede provides far less detail in the shorter supplement in the *Ecclesiastical History*. He draws attention to his earlier work, however, in his summary of Cuthbert's life, and suggests that he intends the inclusion of Cuthbert in the larger work to recapitulate the general idea of reform for moral betterment that he developed throughout his hagiography: "Within Bede's text, the saint's missionary activities in the countryside and remarkable sensitivity to the danger of episcopal greed are in accordance with what we know about Bede's own ecclesiastical ideals" (Aggeler 23). In addition to constructing Cuthbert's life as an allegory for the reform Bede wanted to see in the Northumbrian church, he further uses his narrative abilities to present Cuthbert as the exemplary saint by presenting him as the culmination of Northumbrian Christian practices while still being a model representation of Gregorian ideals.

Cuthbert represents the amalgamation of both the Irish and Roman Christian ideals that were present in Northumbria during the conversion period as well as the combination of the contemplative and active hagiographic lives, emerging as the superior saint in both theory and practice while exemplifying all the qualities Bede thought were lacking in the church by his own time. Cuthbert experienced first-hand the effects of the Synod of Whitby and the official decision to follow the Roman methods of tonsure and reckoning of Easter, an issue which Bede, as perhaps the most accomplished computist of his day, thought was of the utmost importance.¹⁰ The most significant error, as he saw it, of the Irish Christian monks – led by St. Aidan who had come to Northumbria at the request of Oswald – was their incorrect calculation of the date of

¹⁰ Bede's discussion of the Synod of Whitby and the importance of the correct calculation of the date of Easter occur at *H.E.* iii.25; 295-309 and v.21; 533-553.

Easter. Bede believed their asceticism and emphasis on pilgrimage far outweighed their ignorance, however, and because they eventually corrected their ways to follow the Roman method of calculating Easter, they were ultimately forgiven: “Although Bede does not hide the fact that Aidan and the Columban Irish [...] calculated the date of Easter incorrectly, that does not prevent him from eulogizing Aidan as a saint, and highlighting the respect in which he was held even by bishops trained on the continent” (Stancliffe, “Irish” 72). Bede’s praise for the Irish monks in part represents his beliefs about correct behaviour levelled at the monastic audience of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Even the Irish monks – despite being gravely mistaken about their Easter calculations – demonstrated superior restraint and respect for God’s word, compared to Bede’s fellow Northumbrians:

Whatever Bede thought of these [Irish] practices he describes them with much respect, and one might suspect from his later complaints about monastic laxity [...] that he almost used the virtues of the Celtic saints as propaganda, feeling it a good thing for his readers and hearers to realize the lengths to which these saints were willing to go to deepen their spiritual experience. (Colgrave, *History* xxiii)

In the case of St. Cuthbert, Bede makes no attempt to hide that the saint was initially tonsured in the Irish manner and that his mentor, Eata, was a disciple of Aidan himself and would have calculated Easter incorrectly according to Bede’s standards (Stenton 126). Instead, Bede used Cuthbert’s Irish Christian roots and ultimate acceptance of the Roman method of calculating Easter to present the saint as emerging from both traditions to become the model Northumbrian saint: “Bede saw Cuthbert as a latter-day embodiment of the best virtues of the leaders of the Irish mission” and structured his narrative of the saint so that he could “expose the shortcomings,

as he saw them, of his own time in comparison with the merits, as he understood them, of a previous age” (Kirby 384).

The amalgamation of Irish and Roman practices within the narrative life of St. Cuthbert reflects the best qualities of both traditions and shows Bede’s ability to align Irish Christian hagiography with Gregorian ideals, constructing a narrative that includes exemplary models of Christian practice despite the mistaken ways of the Irish Christians surrounding the calculation of the date of Easter. Bede combines these two traditions in his prose narrative by elaborating scenes of suffering in his account of Cuthbert, and turning details briefly mentioned or glossed over by the anonymous monk into explicit discussions in his writing: “Bede documents two kinds of suffering that the earlier Lindisfarne author usually ignored,” namely “harsh opposition and even persecution” and “the suffering of protracted bodily illness” (Foley 104). While the anonymous monk does mention some infirmities Cuthbert faced in his record of the saint’s life, he generally catalogues them as events that occurred and goes into no further detail. He does not express the internal agony experienced by Bede’s Cuthbert – the personal devils he continuously fought – or the specific details about his bodily pains.

This increased suffering fits into the austerity of the Celtic tradition, imitating the internal demons faced by desert fathers, such as St. Antony, who sought the contemplative life in order to ward off personal devils and achieve a mental state closer to God. These scenes in Bede’s writing, however, also echo the theology of Pope Gregory the Great, who “frequently addressed the theme of prolonged suffering in his various works, including the *Moralia*, the *Dialogues*, and in his *Forty Gospel Homilies*” (Foley 107). By writing in detail about Cuthbert’s physical and spiritual suffering, Bede casts Cuthbert in the role of the “hero in matters both pastoral and theological, as representing the norm of Roman tradition” (Foley 107).

Gregory believed earthly suffering was good for the afterlife of the soul and as such suffering should be especially welcome to monks: “Gregory always wrote his exegetical and didactic treatises with applications for the monastic life in mind. More than that, Gregory frequently addressed the theme of prolonged suffering in his various works” (Foley 107). Bede’s prose narrative of Cuthbert’s life clearly demonstrates this suffering. He discusses the saint’s pain in terms of his own personal agenda. For example, one of the sources for Cuthbert’s constant internal agony which was not recorded by the anonymous monk is the after-effects of a plague he suffered while a monk at Melrose:

[A]s the swelling which appeared in his thigh gradually left the surface of his body, it sank into the inward parts and, throughout almost the whole of his life, he continued to feel some inward pains, so that, in the words of the apostle, “strength was made perfect in weakness.” (*V.P.* viii; 181-83)

While there may be some truth to this story – a 1899 exhumation of Cuthbert’s bones by Dr. Selby Plummer revealed that “the bones of the sternum and the clavicle showed extensive signs of disease [...] of tubercular origin, and it was this which was mistakenly associated in Cuthbert’s own day with the prevailing epidemic plague from which so many of his contemporaries died” (Bonner 17-18) – it is the moral significance behind it that concerns Bede, and the way in which he presents it in his prose narrative reflects his underlying intentions. By borrowing the ideas of desirable suffering outlined in Gregory’s works, Bede shows his reliance on the great pope for his own ideas about how the church should operate and, consequently, the specific areas where he felt the Northumbrian church was failing: “Bede valued Gregory’s

writings very highly, and his reliance on them in crucial sections of his own commentaries shows how much they influenced him” (Thacker, “Reform” 134).¹¹

Gregory’s viewpoint on pain and suffering further enhances Bede’s ideas of monastic reform because of its association with the sin of pride: “[T]he suffering of grave affliction helps the Christian, and especially the monk, to conquer human pride. As such, suffering is even desirable” (Foley 108) and, by contrast, the amassing of wealth and power in order to live a lavish and ambitious life allows the sins of pride and vanity to run unchecked. In a letter addressed to Augustine cautioning him against becoming too proud of the miracles he was performing while converting the English people, Gregory writes: “And if you remember that you have at any time sinned against your Creator either in word or deed, always call this to mind in order that the memory of your guilt may suppress the vainglory which arises in your heart” (*H.E.* i.31; 111). This theology characterizes the proud youth Bede portrays instead of the anonymous monk’s athletic but otherwise not sinful boy. By emphasizing the internal suffering experienced by Cuthbert for the entirety of his adult life as a result of his prideful youth – and presenting that suffering as desirable based on the advice of Gregory the Great – Bede uses Cuthbert’s body allegorically to demonstrate his desire to reform the monastic community and eradicate the un-Christian behaviour, as he understood it, that was prevalent in the monasteries of his own time.

The attitude of the monastic community in Bede’s church towards wealth and power mimicked that of the royal class from which many monks came:

Some, probably very many, monks and clerks drank and thought like noblemen, owned slaves and treasures and probably lived in halls like noblemen. It was a particular source of distress to their critics [such as Bede] that they also dressed like noblemen. When

¹¹ Thacker notes several instances where Bede borrows from Gregory in his biblical commentaries including the *De Tabernaculo* and *In Lucam*. See Thacker, “Reform” 134.

Cuthbert's sober garb is stressed, it is because other clerics were less restrained.

(Campbell, "Background" 13)

The descriptions of Cuthbert's vestments suggest a monk should dress humbly, and the descriptions of his excessive internal suffering recommend that a monk should not be excited by wealth and material things. He should recognize these appeals as sins disguised by the devil as temptations and constantly fight them in order to achieve God's favour. He should be aware of any sin he has committed, even if it is the pride of a child at play, and should welcome the harsh suffering it takes to repent such a sin as Cuthbert does in Bede's prose narrative.

Cuthbert's internal strife is even symbolized in his feast day of March 20. This date "is one of only twelve days in the calendar year which always occurs in Lent" (Foley 111). Bede was arguably the "most accomplished computist of his day" and he was certainly passionate about the methods of reckoning Easter and deeper symbolic significance of the event; therefore, "it could hardly have escaped his notice that Cuthbert's feast day always falls during the Lenten season" (Foley 111). This is a time reserved for private contemplation, and private reading as well as fasting. Cuthbert's feast day, therefore, would only have been celebrated with an actual feast on the years when it fell on a Sunday, the only day on which it was acceptable to suspend the fast of Lent (Foley 112). In addition to the lack of splendour concerning his feast day, which reflects the saint's desire for austerity and a humble existence, Bede's *vita* was more suitable for private reading during Lent because it included descriptions of internal contemplation and suffering while emphasizing the Gregorian ideals of a Roman Christian saint who represented all of Northumbria. Thus it encouraged personal reformation on a spiritual level, which, when incorporated into the greater work of the *Ecclesiastical History*, reflects Bede's ideas of monastic reform as a whole.

In the same way that Bede in Cuthbert's life combines two competing forms of the monastic life, so too he mixes the contemplative and active saintly lifestyles associated with Irish and Roman founding fathers. The hagiography associated with both of these forms of saintly lives emerged after the age of martyrs when Christians were no longer persecuted for their religious beliefs (Clayton 147). The contemplative life involved a "solitary monk, wrestling with temptation and practicing a life of austerity and prayer" who generally followed the example of the desert father St. Antony (c. 251-356) (Clayton 148). These saints preferred a life of solitude in order to overcome temptations and better communicate with God while saints following the active life focused on the communal organization of a monastery "in which the monks lived a life of obedience and work, with the profits of the latter being distributed to the poor" (Clayton 148). These monks followed the example of St. Pachomius (c. 292-346) (Clayton 148). While it was widely believed that the contemplative life was superior because it allowed the individual to come closer to God, the practical application of this life in a monastic setting proved to be undesirable because it interfered with important monastic duties such as teaching and physical labour. The purely monastic life, however, was also restrictive because it required monks to spend all their time performing duties, and allowed little if any time to contemplate God privately and deal with personal repentance. A balanced mixture of the two types of monastic lives gradually became the ideal, one which Gregory the Great favoured for its practical and theoretical benefits: "For Gregory, the best Christian life on earth seems to be what was known later as the 'mixed' life, a combination of action and contemplation, exemplified for him in teachers and preachers whose pastoral duties and instructions alternate with periods of withdrawal and prayer" (Clayton 150). Bede, too, adopted a preference for a mixed life, and exemplified this ideal through his hagiography about St. Cuthbert.

The parallels between Cuthbert and the contemplative life of St. Antony lie in Cuthbert's move from the monastery at Lindisfarne to Cuthbert's Island, a small island not far from Lindisfarne, and then to Farne, an island separated from Lindisfarne by seven miles of water, where he spent his last days: "[H]e retired to a certain place in the outer precincts of the monastery which seemed to be more secluded. But when he had fought there in solitude for some time with the invisible enemy, by prayer and fasting, he sought a place of combat further and more remote from mankind" (*V.P.* xvii; 215). This gradual movement away from civilization and towards a contemplative life mimics the moves of Antony who retreated from society, first to a deserted fortress on the Outer Mountain, and then to the more isolated Inner Mountain (Aggeler 20). Both Aidan, the founding father of Northumbrian Christianity in the Celtic tradition, and Eadberht, bishop of Lindisfarne at the end of seventh century, retreated to Farne Island for rest and prayer, but their visits were periodic and always undertaken with the intent of returning to their ecclesiastical duties (Aggeler 20). Cuthbert, according to Bede, had obtained permission of his fellow monks and abbot before retiring into solitude for what he hoped would be the rest of his life: "Now after he had completed many years in that same monastery [Lindisfarne], he joyfully entered into the remote solitudes which he had long desired, sought, and prayed for, with the good will of that same abbot and also the brethren" (*V.P.* xvii; 215). It is only after he performed years of exemplary work for the betterment of the Northumbrian church – as dictated by the hagiography of the active life – that he is permitted to leave his duties in order to follow the contemplative life. Later, as Bede informs the reader, he would return to the monastic setting when he was appointed bishop, a position he could not refuse. In his first attempt at following the contemplative life, therefore, Cuthbert follows the movements of St. Antony in his attempt to

“make Farne Island a northern version of Antony’s retreat on the Inner Mountain” (Aggeler 20) and live completely isolated from the outside world.

Despite being the model for a purely contemplative life whereby connections to the outside world and monastic duties such as preaching are forsaken for personal betterment through purification, Antony does not entirely cut himself off from society, and visitors flock to his place of seclusion in order to interact with this most holy saint. Central to the hagiography of Antony is a speech in which the saint explains the importance and danger of fighting internal demons, using examples from his own trials. Even though he is isolated in contemplation at this point in the story, Antony’s preaching to the assembly on the Outer Mountain is crucial to his *vita* as it presents the central moral theme of that narrative.

In much the same way that Antony was expected to be isolated in an ascetic lifestyle but continue to perform miracles and preach sermons, Cuthbert’s retreat on Farne was not intended to be solely contemplative in Bede’s version of the story. Because this isolation is complicated by monastic duties and the need to spread the word of God, “Farne Island emerges as a paradoxical space, both an isolated contemplative retreat and yet a busy place of interaction between the saint and his visitors” (Aggeler 20). Even in the model which influenced this type of hagiographic life, Antony does not uphold the ideals of a pure contemplative saint. His preaching to the assembly exemplifies the need for the saint to continue to spread the word and act as a model for further Christians to follow. In Bede’s versions of Cuthbert’s life, the saint anticipated visitors and built a guest house in order to accommodate them: “the saint did not intend for his eremitic life to require absolute isolation; on the contrary, the building of the guest-house is clearly meant as a sign that visitors are encouraged” (Aggeler 21). And come they did – from Lindisfarne and from other areas, seeking the advice and healing miracles of Northumbria’s great

holy man: “Now many came to the man of God, not only from the neighbourhood of Lindisfarne but also from the remoter parts of Britain, having been attracted by the report of his miracles” (*V.P.* xxii; 229).

This constant stream of visitors once again demonstrates Bede’s monastic ideals through the combination of the superiority of the contemplative life with the necessity of actively teaching and fulfilling monastic duties: “Although Bede retained the traditional belief in the superiority of the contemplative life, he does not seem to have believed in a total retirement from the world and, indeed, clearly regarded the contemporary English church as too much in need of instruction and warning to be able to sacrifice some of its most pious members to a life of solitary prayer” (Clayton 115). This followed the saintly models outlined in the writings of Gregory the Great, who also believed the mixed life was the ideal path for a saint to pursue: “His [Bede’s] model was the Gregorian one, in which the interests of the church at large are preferred to those of the individual” (Clayton 156). Because of this standpoint, Gregory, and subsequently Bede, felt it necessary to focus on preaching and spreading the word of God in addition to personal devotion and battles with personal demons: “Gregory particularly emphasizes the role of preachers who bring others to God: this renders them superior to the pure contemplative” (Stancliffe, “Polarity” 38).

Bede twice provided evidence of Gregory preaching the communal or active life of a monk in the *Ecclesiastical History*, and once in his prose life of Cuthbert. In a letter to Augustine which Bede applies to Cuthbert’s ability to teach through example, Gregory states: “You, my brother, being conversant with the monastic rules, ought not to live apart from your clergy in the English Church, which, by the Guidance of God, has lately been converted to the faith” (*H.E.*

iv.27; 435).¹² This statement applies directly to the style of teaching by example during the delicate phase of conversion and Bede included it in the story of Cuthbert to demonstrate his excellent ability to uphold this Gregorian idea. It also applies to the issue of the purely contemplative life as the superior monastic ideal: if one is to pursue a life of pure isolation in order to better his personal relationship with God, he is forsaking his Christian duties to the church in order to follow a path of self-betterment. During the early stages of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, this seclusion was dangerous because it removed a model Christian teacher from the monastic community who had the ability to help a population still struggling with the new faith. Thus, by following a mixed life of contemplative and monastic duties, the saint could both better himself through personal purification and reach the population by performing monastic duties. By incorporating this idea into his hagiography about Cuthbert, Bede shows that “the ideal conversation involved a balancing of the contemplative and active lives; on the one hand, the preacher and teacher could only fulfill his role successfully if he essayed the monastic skills of withdrawal and contemplation, on the other, the monk could only achieve the contemplative ideal after long practice in virtuous living” (Thacker, “Reform” 132).

Through blending the contemplative and monastic styles of saintly life, and showing that Cuthbert exhibited qualities of both Irish and Roman Christian heritage, Bede constructs this saint not only as the ideal model of monastic behaviour but as the ultimate Northumbrian Christian who combined the positive qualities of all the influences that resulted in the conversion of the northernmost English kingdom: “Seventh-century Northumbria was heir to all these ways of balancing the contemplative and the pastoral life” (Stancliffe, “Polarity” 40). In Bede’s narrative, Cuthbert becomes the “Christ-like rebuilder of the Church” which is “an especially appropriate way of viewing the saint who embodied the best of both [Irish and Roman]

¹² See also: *H.E.* i.27; 81 and *V.P.* xvi; 209.

traditions” (Thacker, “History” 186). Although the idea of reform and the presentation of ideal models of behaviour lie behind the narrative of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede’s earlier versions of Cuthbert’s life reflect the same overall agenda: to present Cuthbert as the ideal Northumbrian saint whose life modelled the exceptional behaviour expected of monks and bishops and whose trials of pain and suffering were penance for his proud behaviour as an ignorant child.

Cuthbert exhibits model behaviour for members of the Northumbrian church – be they monks or bishops – in much the same way that Oswald represented the ideal model for the behaviour of Christian kings: “[B]oth Oswald and Cuthbert sought out and maintained close contact with ordinary people. They both showed great concern to spread the faith, not in any indirect way, but by preaching, teaching, and personal example” (Corbett 70). Through these two models Bede exemplifies the correct behaviour and religious zeal he felt was lacking in the church of his own day. Moreover, he also demonstrates how these two people – who were Northumbrians surviving in the memories of Bede’s contemporaries – could uphold these ideals, proving they were not just unrealistic practices brought to Anglo-Saxon England from Pope Gregory’s mission. This quality of Christian behaviour was not only obtainable for Bede’s contemporaries, it was previously practised by influential people in both the secular and monastic settings. With the contributions of these two model saints in mind, the final chapter of this thesis will focus on one more demographic of society that Bede thought required a Northumbrian model of saintly behaviour: women. Where Oswald and Cuthbert represent the ideal king and bishop, Æthelthryth represents the model for Northumbrian women in both secular and monastic settings.

Chapter Three:

The Woman Saint: The presentation of Æthelthryth in Anglo-Saxon Christianity

Unlike the twentieth-century reader Bede looks for an explanation, not in a history of child abuse, but in the help of God (Fell 20).

While Cuthbert represents the ideal Christian model for monks and bishops within the English Church, Æthelthryth embodies the female version of an Anglo-Saxon Christian popular saint and religious model. Much of the hagiography surrounding these two saints is similar, suggesting it was conventions of religious ascetics that impressed the Anglo-Saxon people above all (Fell 24). During their lifetime both Cuthbert and Æthelthryth preferred to wear coarse garments and refrained from eating and bathing unless necessary; they sought out the monastic life and were responsible for inspiring a large cult of followers both during and after their lifetimes; and they both insisted on a simple and humble burial. When their bodies were exhumed years after their deaths they were found to be incorrupt – an undeniable sign of their sanctity – and were ceremoniously translated to places of honour within their respective churches where they were subsequently venerated as saints (Rollason, *Saints* 35). But the hagiography of both these saints utilizes different models and is designed for different demographics of Northumbrian society. Where Cuthbert becomes a model saint for the monastic setting, Æthelthryth demonstrates the chastity and humility expected of women. She also shows her saintly virtues in both the secular and monastic settings, suggesting she is a model for members of the aristocracy – both male and female – who became important leaders and financial

contributors to the development of churches and monasteries. This chapter will look at how Bede interprets models of sanctity and virginity in terms of his own ideas of monastic reform and how he maps those interpretations onto the hagiography of St. Æthelthryth.

In his letter to Egbert, Bede complains of aristocrats founding or buying monasteries for personal gain and running them both inefficiently and immorally: “It is shocking to say how many places that go by the name of monasteries have been taken under the control of men who have no knowledge of true monastic life” (“Letter” 350-51). By demonstrating how Æthelthryth successfully crossed from the secular world to the monastic life, and founded a productive and prosperous monastery that she ran according to moral principles, Bede presents this saint as a model of exemplary behaviour not only for women, but also for members of the aristocracy who wanted to devote themselves to the monastic life.

In addition to frequently leaving behind the pleasures of aristocratic life to join the monastic world and better serve God, women played a vital role in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England and were active agents in accepting the new religion and promoting its ideals. The Frankish princess Bertha who was queen of Kent when Augustine made contact with the island played an instrumental role in convincing her husband, Æthelberht, to accept the missionaries. Her daughter Æthelburgh married Edwin of Northumbria and influenced his decision to convert the northern kingdom with the help of Bishop Paulinus: “In Bede, queens become the objects through which Christianisation is achieved” (Karkov 398). While Æthelthryth does not bring Christianity to Northumbria as a new religion – and her husband, King Ecgrith, was a devout Christian and the nephew of St. Oswald – she does bring with her a standard of Christian behaviour that Bede thought was missing in his own time. Moreover, she models this behaviour in both her roles as queen and abbess. Thus, Bede uses the hagiography of

Æthelthryth in the *Ecclesiastical History* to demonstrate the interconnectedness between royalty and religion and to demonstrate the successful approach to founding a monastery through the influence of an aristocrat.

While the mixed contemplative and active hagiographic lives and the ability to reach and convert the rural population feature heavily in narratives about St. Cuthbert, virginity was the ideal associated with the hagiography about *Æthelthryth*. As a hagiographic construct, virginity was easy to cast as “heroic vigilance” in a narrative by presenting the saint heroically upholding her religious beliefs despite physical, personal, and societal pressures (Elliot 28). On a practical level, a virgin’s “claims to sanctity could be anchored on seemingly secure moorings” because of the physical feat of remaining virginal throughout her life (Elliot 28). Gregory the Great also believed in the saintly virtues of virginity because in his opinion sexual intercourse – even within the legal bond of wedlock for the purposes of reproduction – required sinful desire regardless of the purity of intentions. In a letter responding to Augustine’s questions about the assimilation of Anglo-Saxon practices during the Christian conversion, Gregory writes: “[W]e do not reckon marriage as a sin; but because even lawful intercourse cannot take place without fleshly desire, it is right to abstain from entering a sacred place, for the desire itself can by no means be without sin” (*H.E.* i.27; 95). Thus, the absence of sexual intercourse may be equated with the absence of sin – even the necessary sin involved in reproduction – which allows for the hagiographical narrative development of a pure and holy saint.

Bede does not take *Æthelthryth*’s virginity for granted, however; he is careful to include “the most perfect proof of her virginity” from Bishop Wilfrid “because certain people doubted it” (*H.E.* iv.19; 391). The bishop relates a story about *Æthelthryth*’s husband, King Ecgrith, offering him lands and money if he would convince the queen to consummate their marriage.

This story provides secular drama and justifies Æthelthryth's virginity in the eyes of the church, but it is not the only proof, and not the most important evidence, that Bede uses to prove the saint's virginity. Bede also justifies Æthelthryth's virginal status by equating her with virgin saints from other times and places: "Nor need we doubt that this which often happened in days gone by, as we learn from trustworthy accounts, could happen in our time too" (*H.E.* iv.19; 393). In the hymn to virginity immediately following the prose hagiographic account of Æthelthryth's life and death, Bede places the English saint among the ranks of influential virgin martyrs, listing her after such saints as Agatha, Eulalia, Thecla, Euphemia, Agnes, and Cecily. Bede praises these virgin martyrs – whose hagiographic stories exercised a profound influence on Anglo-Saxon writings – and presents Æthelthryth as the latest member of this group while still maintaining her Englishness: "Nor lacks our age its Æthelthryth as well; / Its virgin wonderful nor lacks our age" (*H.E.* iv.20; 399). By including her in this list Bede acknowledges that God has blessed the English people by providing them with a virgin saint to sing in His choir: "Æthelthryth follows these figures as a new incarnation of female virginity" (Blanton 59).

Because of her inclusion in this list of female saints, some scholars view Bede's discussion of Æthelthryth as an Anglo-Saxon adaptation of the lives of the early Christian virgin martyrs. In the hagiography written about these women, the saint withstands graphic bodily torture, spiritual temptations from the devil, and brutal martyrdom in a heroic and steadfast manner, suffering in the name of God in a way few secular warriors could. The overarching moral frame of these narratives is that these women maintained their virginity "against heavy odds" (Hollis 67), meaning they did not give in to temptations or torture and were ultimately rewarded by God for their faith and perseverance. These narratives, much like Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, were designed to show how true faith in God could overcome earthly and

spiritual torments and was ultimately the more rewarding lifestyle while behaviour such as greed, vanity, and worshipping false idols only led to damnation: “Hagiography was not primarily concerned with what we should regard as biography but rather with the saint as model for the holy life for others to imitate” (Rollason, *Saints* 84).

It is noteworthy that there are no scenes of torture, temptation, or martyrdom in Æthelthryth’s hagiography, however, and the political situation in East Anglia and Northumbria during this time did not match the situation outlined in the literary models. Both Æthelthryth’s father – King Anna of the East Angles – and her second husband – Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria who was responsible for founding Bede’s twin monasteries of Wearmouth-Jarrow – were highly respected kings in Anglo-Saxon England and they are presented as positive Christian leaders within Bede’s narrative. Nevertheless, some scholars continue to argue that the essence of the virgin martyr stories – the woman maintaining her virginity “against heavy odds” – is still the model on which Bede based his hagiography of Æthelthryth: “The Church provided influential models for female behaviour and chief amongst those models must have been that of the virgin martyr. In an age and place where Christians were no longer punished by the state for their beliefs it would have been difficult to live up to the demands of this role” (Rosser 15). In order to make Æthelthryth fit this model, Bede needed to reconstruct the “heavy odds” against which Æthelthryth had to maintain her virginity.

These odds are constructed in terms of the societal pressures of marriage and the subsequent production of heirs, rather than the brutal tortures and demonic interference of the martyr stories: “It was clearly surprising to Bede [...] as it can be to the twentieth-century reader that a woman could be married twice, the second time for a period of twelve years, and preserve her virginity throughout” (Fell 20). Bede outlines the biography of Æthelthryth’s life, revealing

that the saint was married twice: first to Tondberht, an ealdorman of the South Gyrwe, and after his untimely death to Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria. While the first marriage was apparently short – Tondberht “died shortly after the marriage” (*H.E.* iv.19; 391) – the second marriage lasted about twelve years. Bede constructs these two marriages, and especially the second one because of the length of time it lasted and its relevance to Northumbria, as the insurmountable odds which ultimately tested Æthelthryth’s virginity. The very foundation of marriage in Anglo-Saxon England required that one procreate and necessarily forsake one’s virginity: “The early Christian Church viewed marriage as a divinely ordained institution designed by God and strengthened by Jesus for the licit expression of the sexual impulse, the procreation of children, and the mutual pursuit of salvation” (McNamara 22). Coming from one notable Christian family and being married into another, it is unlikely that her East Anglian relatives or her Northumbrian husband easily accepted Æthelthryth’s decision not to fulfil her role as wife and mother of future heirs, especially with the problems of Northumbrian succession in question. Thus, Bede’s focus on Æthelthryth’s virginity despite her marital obligations – and his proof from Wilfrid that she was indeed a virgin – can be interpreted as a reconstitution of the pressures faced by the virgin martyr models he mentions in his hymn to virginity:

This journey into Christian virtue, which involved attempting to turn an ideal hagiographical model into the stuff of history, is characterised for Æthelthryth not by the persecutions of rabid Roman emperors but by her husbands’ pressure to consummate her marriage vows; it is completed at her death not by the slashing of the executioner’s sword but by the noxious poison of a plague boil. (Thompson 477)

In Bede’s hagiography, Æthelthryth apparently has no control over marrying either Tondberht or Ecgfrith: “There is plenty of evidence in Bede’s *Historia* that royal children, especially the girls,

were used as pawns in the games of political alliance” (Thompson 484). In the case of her first marriage, Æthelthryth’s father, King Anna, was facing increasing pressure from the Mercian King Penda – who would later kill him in battle – and desperately needed an ally to help fend off Mercia’s attacks. By marrying Æthelthryth to Tondberht, he could guarantee political allegiance from the South Gyrwe which would help him ward off Penda and the Mercian army (Thompson 484). After Anna’s death, his brother Æthelwold ultimately assumed the throne and the power to marry off Æthelthryth for political benefit. Penda was killed by King Oswiu of Northumbria who then became an overlord of many English kingdoms with extensive power over much of Anglo-Saxon England. By marrying Æthelthryth to Ecgfrith, Oswiu’s son and successor to the Northumbrian throne, Æthelwold was securing his alliances with the military power that was Northumbria and guaranteeing himself and his kingdom some level of protection from their expansionist movements (Thompson 484). Handing off the saint in this way meant the societal pressures facing her home of East Anglia controlled the general outcome of Æthelthryth’s life and the important decisions affecting it, providing a difficult scenario for the saint to maintain her virginity and ascetic behaviour.

The political backdrop of successions, allies, and enemies can be pieced together from the events described in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* but in the specific chapters pertaining to Æthelthryth none of these elements are mentioned. Bede simply states that Æthelthryth “had previously been married” (“quam [...] alter [...] uir habuerat uxorem”) to Tondberht, and “was given” (“data est”) to Ecgfrith as a wife (*H.E.* iv.19; 390, 391). In the first instance, the impersonal idiomatic use of the verb suggests neither passivity or activity on the part of Æthelthryth, but in the second instance, the passive form of the verb indicates that Æthelthryth had no real choice in the influential decision concerning her marriage and was controlled by the

societal pressures facing the East Anglian kings who had to use her as a bargaining piece for political and military gain. Thus, her duties as a member of the royal family of East Anglia superseded her desire to enter the monastic community in order to worship God more effectively. Her lack of agency in marrying either Tondberht or Ecgfrith, and her rejection of the associated duties of wife and mother create the “heavy odds” against which she must protect her virginity in Bede’s version of her hagiography.

Perhaps instead of trying to construct a hagiography for Æthelthryth based on the models of the ancient virgin martyrs, however, Bede was instead intent on constructing a new version of a female virginal saint who demonstrated exceptional virtues and exhibited model behaviour in the Christianised age of Bede’s Northumbria, suggesting that saints and miracles were still possible if proper asceticism and religious behaviour were followed: “What Bede and his readers needed was a woman who could ‘even in our time’ be ranged alongside the virgins of the early church who held steadfast in their faith against persecution” (Fell 21). Bede presents Æthelthryth as a virgin saint who existed in a Christian society and who successfully managed to combine her roles as secular and monastic leader with the religious manner of a saint and whose posthumous miracles and incorrupt body provided undeniable proof of her sanctity and of God’s favour for her exceptional and pious behaviour. Æthelthryth’s steadfast virginity allows her to focus on purity of mind and spirit in order to enhance her ability to worship God.

As a woman, Æthelthryth is stained by the original sin of Eve in the eyes of the church, and she can only truly overcome this sin by maintaining her virginity and remaining untainted by earthly desires: “Zeal frenzied tears the foe that conquered Eve; / Triumphs the saint, zeal frenzied tears the foe” (*H.E.* iv.20; 401). This ideology, in part, is derived from “Paul’s observation that married persons were bound to take thought for one another, while the celibate

were free to pursue the service of God” (McNamara 22). Without the sinful desire surrounding even legal sexual intercourse, a virgin could commit herself to God and pursue a divine path of commitment to Christ, a union which required the same amount of dedication and duty she owed a husband but without the sinful desire naturally involved in copulation. Thus Æthelthryth is able to devote herself wholeheartedly to worshipping God instead of fulfilling her husbands’ desires for heirs, a relationship that involved the same level of commitment “even though the bridegroom is different, requiring merely endless adoration rather than sex (Bede doesn’t put it quite like that)” (Fell 24).

By discussing Eve and the original sin which Æthelthryth overcomes by her earthly behaviour, Bede is once again constructing the narrative structure of sin and reform that he exhibited in the hagiography about St. Cuthbert – and which allegorically represents the path of reform he outlined for the Northumbrian church: “Bede’s masterpiece [the *Ecclesiastical History*] was in part at least ‘a gallery of good examples’, a collection of models of right living and teaching which demonstrated the way reform could be achieved” (Thacker, “Reform” 142). Bede goes one step further, however, in constructing Æthelthryth’s hagiography to represent allegorically the process of reform he wished to see in the Northumbrian church. In the final scene of Æthelthryth’s life, the saint makes her one and only speech to those gathered around her and preaches to them about her youthful sins and how her virginal life of ascetic behaviour combined with the painful death caused by the tumor on her neck were necessary in order to overcome those sins:

I know well enough that I deserve to bear the weight of this affliction in my neck, for I remember that when I was a young girl I used to wear an unnecessary weight of necklaces; I believe that God in His goodness would have me endure this pain in my neck

in order that I may thus be absolved from the guilt of my needless vanity. So, instead of gold and pearls, a fiery red tumour now stands out upon my neck. (*H.E.* iv.19; 397)

Not only does the revelation of Æthelthryth's youthful vanity give Bede's hagiographic narrative the structure of sin and reform, it also directly represents one of the sins he felt was unchecked in the church of his own day: vanity. In the narrative composed by Bede, Æthelthryth expresses her acceptance of the suffering caused by the tumour on her neck and embraces the repentance it represents, an acceptance Bede also felt was lacking within the church of his day: "According to this hagiographical voice, the punishment for woman's vanity is disease, for which women should be grateful" (Blanton 49). In his letter to Egbert, Bede complains of monasteries and their leaders maintaining inappropriate behaviour and being allowed to follow their sinful course unchecked:

[T]here are many such places, as we all know, that only in the most foolish way deserve the name of monastery, having absolutely nothing of real monastic life about them. Some of these I should wish to be turned from the authority of a council from luxury to chastity, from vanity to verity, from indulgence of the stomach and the gullet to continence and heartfelt piety. ("Letter" 349-50)

Bede demonstrates the positive side of all of these qualities in the hagiography of St. Æthelthryth that he includes in his *Ecclesiastical History*. The female saint presides over Ely in an exceptional manner and leads by example: practicing chastity, wearing coarse garments, rarely bathing, fasting, and constantly devoting her time to prayer. In her final speech, the saint admits to her youthful sin of vanity which – when considered alongside Cuthbert's youthful sin of pride and the lifelong suffering he endured in order to repent – places the young Æthelthryth allegorically in the position of Bede's Northumbrian church and the monasteries he claims do not

properly follow monastic conduct. Her commitment to virginity and ascetic behaviour as an adult are necessary components to her penance but also represent the requirements of reform that Bede thought necessary in order to correct the ways of the monastic community. The pain which Æthelthryth feels as a result of her tumour – which she attributes to God's will to force her to repent her youthful sin – also reflects Cuthbert's constant internal pain and the difficult process facing the Northumbrian church in order to complete Bede's agenda of reform.

While the hagiography about Æthelthryth constructs her as the idealized English virginal saint who allegorically represents Bede's program of reform for the Northumbrian church, the details of her life and necessary convictions of her personality have been rewritten in the *Ecclesiastical History* in order to serve Bede's purpose. In writing hagiography about the saints, "imitation is key to their remembrance – the lives of the saints followed that of Christ more perfectly than those of other individuals and could therefore be used as patterns of Christian living for others" (Cubitt, "Memory" 33-34). The narrative of St. Æthelthryth preserved in Bede's historical document emphasizes her ascetic and saintly behaviour in order to present her as a model of reform which Bede's ecclesiastical and secular audience should imitate. Her true personality, however, is lost under the expectations of hagiography: "The development of Æthelthryth's legend after her death is an excellent example of the way in which cults grow over a period of time and how whatever is known about the saint's actual life is later re-interpreted by analogy with other hagiographical works" (Rosser 15). The commitment to virginity which secured Æthelthryth's status as a saint, for instance, must have required a strong personal character which contradicts Bede's presentation of a quiet and devout ascetic.

In order to reject the consummation of both her marriages, Æthelthryth must have had considerable power of persuasion over the men in her life and a strong personality with which to

wield that power. Bede does not emphasise these qualities in his narrative, however: “The characteristic that Bede lays most stress on in this description of her [...] is her asceticism, her insistence on wearing wool not linen, on eating only once a day, on not taking hot baths except before the high feasts of the Church” (Fell 22). Even her ability to remain virginal despite societal pressures is explained by divine intervention: Bede states that the virginal saint could exist “in our time [...] through the help of the Lord, who has promised to be with us until the end of the age” (*H.E.* iv.19; 393). While the reference to God in conjunction with the preservation of Æthelthryth’s virginity allows Bede to assert that her chastity was a virtue highly praised in the eyes of the church, it also allows him to characterize her conduct as saintly without having to question the practical behaviour necessary in order to refuse the consummation of two marriages to important political figures. Thus, Bede suppresses any indications of how Æthelthryth behaved in her role as queen and wife in order to construct her as the ideal female saint whose virginity was a virtue which allowed the saint to focus her on her devotion to God and to remain free of sinful lust, even though the practical results of her conviction were counterproductive to society.

Æthelthryth must have been a woman with considerable influence in both East Anglia and Northumbria during her life. She occupied “every possible position of power a woman could claim in early Anglo-Saxon England,” assuming the roles of “princess, wife, queen, nun, and abbess” in succession (Karkov 398). With her political experience and her religious determination, Æthelthryth “was clearly a learned, powerful and persuasive woman” (Karkov 398): she required these qualities in order to fulfil successfully the various roles in her life that expected her to manage power. Bede suppresses this image of a strong, self-sufficient, and potentially headstrong woman, however, in order to present the hagiography of the “politically

and spiritually influential woman” (Karkov 398) as a model of ascetic piety, someone who demonstrated proper penance for her youthful sin of vanity and who could act as a model for monastic leaders who came from the aristocratic class. It is only by implication through reading between the lines that scholars can derive any ideas about her personality.

The presentation of idealized behaviour associated with the virgin saint despite the necessary political and societal pressures of marriage and the production of heirs demonstrates Bede’s exceptional ability to write hagiography about a woman who was only recently deceased and who still had living contacts within the ranks of the church. Moreover, Bede had to rely on his own narrative ability in order to cast Æthelthryth as a model of idealized behaviour that aligned with his program of reform: “[T]here is a limit to the extent that Bede could adapt known facts for hagiographical purposes, and there is a considerable difference between writing up the life of a saint who was still remembered in the nation’s royal and religious houses, and writing the life of a virgin saint for purposes of Christian edification within communities where that saint was no longer remembered personally” (Fell 25). Instead of merely trying to follow the models of the Roman virgin martyrs and saturating Æthelthryth’s hagiography with scenes of torture and the temptations of internal demons, Bede uses his narrative abilities to construct the Northumbrian queen as a female saint through her pious behaviour and the maintenance of her virginity with the help of God. The necessary downfall of this hagiographic construction, however, is the lack of agency awarded to Æthelthryth in the narrative which would form the basis for her cult.

Bede credits God with the saint’s ability to navigate two chaste marriages in order to preserve his image of the ascetic leader: “[Bede] supplements this narrative by saying that it was through God’s will and provenance that she [Æthelthryth] remained chaste” (Blanton 36). He

does this by associating the incorrupt nature of her body during her translation with God's will to preserve the virginal flesh of one of his chosen saints: "And the divine miracle whereby her flesh would not corrupt after she was buried was token and proof that she had remained uncorrupted by contact with any man" (*H.E.* iv.19; 393). In this passage, Bede grammatically reduces any agency associated with Æthelthryth by equating the *signum*, or 'sign' – translated as 'miracle' in the above quotation – of her uncorrupted body with the *indicio*, or 'proof', that she was virginal (Blanton 37). Thus, the miraculous sign of her uncorrupted body is proof from God that she was pure: "[I]t is only through God's fortitude that the body does not decay" (Blanton 37). Bede necessarily presents Æthelthryth as a vessel through which God demonstrated his preference for the virtue of virginity, rather than as a politically and spiritually important woman whose influence in both the secular and monastic spheres aided in the development of the Christian church in Anglo-Saxon England.

In order to avoid mentioning any undesirable behavioural associations with St. Æthelthryth that would contradict his presentation of her as the idealized female ascetic, Bede focuses on the practices and miracles associated with her body. Bede is "fixated on embodiment: the body as a physical object, the wondrous body, the virginal body, the chaste body, the perfection of the body, the healing of the body, the body as metaphor, the body as empirical proof of holiness, the body as place, the body as referent" (Blanton 4). His hagiography about Æthelthryth is fixated on the woman's body, the role that body is intended to play in the secular realm of society, and how that role changes when the body is committed to the Church and is blessed by God. The body of Æthelthryth, however, "is never revealed to us by those who wrote about her" including Bede, even though "it remains the focus of our [...] attention" as "an unfulfilled desire established [...] through Bede's words" (Karkov 399). The desire for the

female body is thwarted by her exemplary behaviour and virginal status throughout the narrative, although “the absence of a sexualized Æthelthryth is a potent reminder of the role her royal body was meant to fulfil” (Karkov 399).

Despite the self-denial and embodiment of physical ideals demonstrated by following ascetic practices, which ranks spiritual significance over bodily necessity, “[t]here is an element of spectacle in all this” (Karkov 400), in which the body is being simultaneously presented to the audience, through the focus on chastity and personal habits, and denied by the saint’s denial of her body to anyone but God. The reader’s eyes are directed towards Æthelthryth’s body throughout the entire narrative because of the very denial to see or appreciate it. Æthelthryth says she adorned her neck with jewels as a youth, but nothing about her beauty or vanity is mentioned during the narrative of the secular portion of her life. In the hagiography about Oswald and Cuthbert, Bede presents the men actively pursuing their Christian objectives and physically participating in preaching and practicing their faith for the betterment of others. Oswald’s cross at the beginning of his hagiography – appropriating previous pagan rituals – demonstrates that saint’s ability to relate to his subjects and convince them to follow the Christian faith. Cuthbert travels to the remote and rural communities of Northumbria in order to teach them about God, which shows how this saint actively preached the Christian word. There is no evidence that Æthelthryth preached or reached out to those in need in Bede’s hagiographical account. Instead, the narrative focuses exclusively on her body: specifically the saint’s denial of her body through ascetic behaviour when she is alive and the elaborate treatment of her body after she dies. So while embodiment is important in both Oswald and Cuthbert’s narratives – especially with the brutal dismemberment of Oswald’s body after his death and Cuthbert’s ascetic practices which led to the incorrupt state of his body ten years after his death – they are not the only features of

these narratives, nor are they the most important. In the case of Æthelthryth, however, her saintly actions and practices are limited solely to her corporeal self and to the chastity and ascetic practices associated with her body (Karkov 400).

Paradoxically, it is the very body that Æthelthryth denies which becomes the site of her veneration as a saint. Sixteen years after her death, her sister, who succeeded her as abbess at Ely, exhumes Æthelthryth's body to wash her bones and translate them to a place of importance within the church. Much like Cuthbert, her flesh is found to be incorrupt: "When the tomb of the sacred virgin and bride of Christ was opened and the body brought to light, it was found to be as uncorrupt as if she had died and been buried that very day" (*H.E.* iv.19; 393). The posthumous preservation of the body she denied in life demonstrates to Bede's audience that Æthelthryth was indeed blessed by God, and that allowed her body to be preserved pure and uncorrupted in death. Even though incorrupt bodies are a common element in hagiographical writing, they are not a necessity: "Although not essential, the preservation of the body and clothes from decay was evidently regarded as a sure sign of sanctity and a great bonus to the cult" (Rollason, *Saints* 38). Most saints are venerated for the deeds they performed while alive, and for the fortitude with which they accepted physical and spiritual punishment. After their death, miracles of healing generally occur at places where the saint's relics are stored. The preservation of their bodies after death is a mere bonus that ensures that the saints are indeed worthy in the eyes of God. For Æthelthryth, however, it becomes the main justification for her inclusion among Anglo-Saxon England's native saints: "Unlike bishops and other holy men, the elemental details of her daily life are secondary to the posthumous realization of bodily incorruption" (Blanton 27). By downplaying the behaviour and attitude necessary to remain a virgin despite two politically charged marriages, Bede must focus on the posthumous incorruptibility of Æthelthryth's body in

order to assure his audience that she was indeed a saint. Æthelthryth's bodily denial – through wearing coarse garments, fasting, rarely bathing, and constantly praying – combined with her speech that welcomes the tumour as penance for her youthful vanity, thus become examples of model behaviour that Bede expected his monastic readership to emulate.

The subsequent treatment of Æthelthryth's body by her sister and the nuns at Ely is paradoxical, yet it is also the very process by which Bede can prove the woman was a saint. Æthelthryth's body is washed, clothed in linen, and placed in a marble sarcophagus – miraculously procured – by the altar in the church where it is worshipped by pilgrims seeking miracles from the saint and her relics: “So the maidens washed her body, wrapped it in new robes, carried it into the church, and placed it in the sarcophagus which they had brought, where it is held in great veneration to this day” (*H.E.* iv.19; 397). While living, Æthelthryth refused to clean her body regularly and Bede states she was never clothed in anything but the coarsest of materials. She also denied herself proper sustenance– unless absolutely necessary – through constant fasting so that while she managed to survive, she could hardly have been a healthy woman. After her death, however, that same body is carefully washed, finely clothed, and moved from the humble wooden coffin to a miraculous marble sarcophagus where it is venerated with the utmost respect. It continues as a healthy, appreciated entity that is given all the material comforts it was denied during the saint's lifetime: “[I]n the living body the saint rejected what was appropriate and acceptable to her corpse” (Fell 24).

The notion of her body being treated after death in a way Æthelthryth herself consistently rejected while alive is expanded to Æthelthryth's life as a whole: “[E]verything rejected by the saint when on earth is exactly what she is offered when in heaven” (Fell 24). Æthelthryth denied her marital duties to both her husbands in order to devote herself entirely to the duties of worship

expected by God. She lived out the monastic portion of her life in ascetic denial, while her body was lavishly treated and cared for after her death. She spent the majority of her life repenting for her youthful sin of vanity, only to be honoured in God's virgin choir after her passing. The message Bede constructs through this hagiography is that this life requires hard work and sacrifice so that the next life will be filled with reward. Æthelthryth recognized her sin of vanity and properly repented for it, she was not concerned with material things or her own personal wealth because she was focused on worshipping God, and she denied her body everything that was given to it after her death. By constructing her life in this way, Bede successfully demonstrates that by recognizing personal weaknesses and properly repenting for them, she received in the afterlife far greater rewards than could ever be conceived in this life. In the greater context of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede uses this notion, exemplified by the events in Æthelthryth's hagiography, to promote his idea of reform and the ultimate reward that awaited the Northumbrian church if its members were willing to correct their ways and atone for their sins.

These concepts of physical denial and devotion to God also represent the ideal solution to the monastic greed and vanity Bede saw within the English Church. By denying her body, her personal power, and the ability to influence her path in life, Bede's narrative of Æthelthryth presents the woman as a saint who, through the very living example of her existence, worshipped God in such an ideal manner that all the things she denied herself in His name were given to her plentifully after her death. Her speech against the vanity of jewels she wore in her youth reprimands the church leaders in Bede's own time who were not far removed from their royal status in dress and lifestyle choices. The message of this story is that by giving herself completely to God with a total disregard for personal gain, Æthelthryth is ultimately rewarded in

the afterlife with every comfort she could ever want. Regardless of the details surrounding her actual life, Bede presents her in this manner not only in order to advance his moral ideals and promote his visions of monastic reform, but also to promote the ideals of morality and reform integral to the *Ecclesiastical History* as a whole.

Conclusion:

Some Considerations on Early English Morality

In writing about the Christian conversion of Anglo-Saxon England, and particularly about the native saints who substantially influenced the conversion process, Bede constructs his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as a work geared towards moral and spiritual enlightenment. He structures the narrative in a manner that presents the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England as the direct will of God, thus justifying his own claims about the need for monastic reform in order to follow His designated plan for the English people. The political progression of this narrative, with its succession of kings and their importance to the conversion process, provides an organizing principle for the underlying symbolism of moral advancement and allows the political events of the kingdoms to take on important spiritual significance: “[T]he inner experience, either psychological or spiritual, is reflected by the external events of the narrative” (Hill 45). The “inner experience” of the narrative is Bede’s idea of reform as a process of spiritual fulfilment, which unfolds alongside the “external events” of the narrative of history.

This symbolic structure of the *Ecclesiastical History* reflects the underlying meaning found in Bede’s scholarship in general, explicitly restated at the end of his life in his letter to Egbert. The very act of writing historical and religious documents required a structured moral framework as a guiding purpose for the narrative as a whole: “In the hagiographical tradition little interest if any was paid to physical features; it was the moral quality above all else that mattered” (Mackay 79). Thus, it was not only natural that Bede included miraculous elements in his history; indeed, it would have seemed strangely out of place – and perhaps even wrong – for

him to exclude any physical manifestations of God or stories about His chosen saints. His history was focused on ecclesiastical history, and the Church was the institution responsible for the worship of God and interpretation of His word. Therefore, the very act of interpretation was an act of God and according to writers like Augustine – whose work was familiar to Bede based on library evidence of Wearmouth-Jarrow and Bede’s own literary allusions – “interpretation can be nothing other than the indication of the relation of the *facta* to the order of time, created and controlled by God, and which contains their ‘meaning’” (Davidse 10). Bede thus symbolically and physically links the entire existence of Anglo-Saxon England, and the history of its conversion, to the existence of God and the teachings of the Christian faith.

This calls into question our own ideas about history and the distinctions between history and hagiography that seem so obvious to our modern scholarship (Davidse 1). Our notion of history as a rigid, factual and chronological sequence of events is interrupted by theoretical discussions of subjectivity, creativity, and underlying purpose. The simple process of recording certain events and not recording others, despite all attempts to be unbiased, shatters the ideal of objectivity. Bede includes miraculous elements in his *Ecclesiastical History* that undermine our idea of a rigid historical method in which miracles have no place. Yet his meticulous process of gathering information and requesting books and copies of letters was a procedure that provided an approach to history that resonates with modern historians. As Sharon Rowley notes, “Bede’s groundbreaking emphases on chronology and evidence helped shape the historiography of the Western world” (*Old English* 1). His history was an impressive undertaking, in scope as well as style. The process of gathering information and recording a history of a specific people required an admirable amount of creativity and dedication: “Material from such disparate sources, however authoritative, must have been extremely difficult to date and arrange into a coherent

chronological narrative” (Thacker, “History” 179). Despite the underlying moral structure demonstrating the benefits of monastic reform throughout the work, or perhaps because of it, the *Ecclesiastical History* remains a remarkable history in the modern sense for its ability to synthesize a vast amount of information and create a coherent and organized narrative.

Bede’s primary concern, however, was not the facts of succession or even missionary activity that led ultimately to the Christianization of the English kingdoms, which modern readers view as the “historical” aspect of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Rather, he wanted to show the symbolic relationship between the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the teachings of the Bible. In Scott DeGregorio’s words, Bede “engaged that history not as a historian, but as a theologian for whom history was the history of salvation, presented originally to the biblical Israelites and now bestowed on the Church as Israel’s successor” (135). This connection between the history of the Anglo-Saxons and biblical history elevates the English people to the new chosen people of God, and emphasises the need to reform the monastic community in order to align with His plan. In order to get this message across without openly insulting the royalty and leaders of the Church, Bede presents Anglo-Saxon England as the ideal land, with the ideal people, waiting to be accepted by God in a state of spiritual enlightenment. As such, the “historical and hagiographical works of Bede [...] cannot be divorced from his exegetical works of the same period. They are all informed by the same overriding moral and spiritual concerns, they are all driven by the same agenda” (Thacker, “History” 183). That agenda was to demonstrate the correct methods of behaviour expected of Christians in order to reform what Bede saw as the greed and vanity of the English Church.

Although Bede died just four years after completing the *Ecclesiastical History*, it was widely read and became very popular, as the many surviving manuscript copies attest. Despite

wars, conquest, vandalism, reform, and ignorance about the preservation or importance of medieval manuscripts, there are still more than one hundred and sixty copies extant of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Colgrave, *History* xvii). Several of these manuscripts can be dated to very shortly after Bede's death, providing authoritative versions of the text, judging by the accuracy of the copyists (Goffart 235). By 786, there was a copy at Mainz which was quoted in several works composed there, and the English missionaries on the continent brought copies with them until the popularity of the text spread and "the *History* became popular all over western Europe" (Colgrave, *History* xxvii). The number of copies and the distance the text travelled from England attest to Bede's fame, and suggest at the same time that he was writing his history of the English Church for a wider audience than the Anglo-Saxon monastic and royal houses. The presentation of the Anglo-Saxons as a people chosen by God to become enlightened through Christianity, complete with native saints who exhibit the same strength of spirit as the ancient hagiographic models, also represents an English ideal intended for an audience outside of England. While the purpose of teaching the history and conversion of the English is implicit in the text, Bede's writing demonstrates through allusions, hagiographic tropes, and exegetical influence the scope of literary and religious education on the island. By using previous histories as his model, such as Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* which tells of the development of early Christianity in the first centuries following Christ's death, Bede equates his people with the religious elite in the eyes of God: "In showing that the English Church developed according to the Eusebian model, Bede is making the people of England, and especially of his beloved Northumbria, one of God's chosen tribes" (Brown 86).

In addition to the widespread Latin copies and editions, the *Ecclesiastical History* was translated into the vernacular in the late ninth or early tenth century and altered to suit a vastly

different political situation in late Anglo-Saxon England: “[T]he act of translating Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* around the turn of the tenth century both demonstrates the continued importance of the text in later Anglo-Saxon England, and increases that importance by making the work available to wider vernacular audiences in England” (Rowley, *Old English* 2). While this version of the *Ecclesiastical History* was not transmitted to the continent like the older Latin text, it was used widely by scholars in England including the tenth century homilist Ælfric, who used the Old English translation of Bede’s work for several of his homilies and saints’ *Lives*, among them his versions of the lives of Oswald, Cuthbert, and Æthelthryth.

The widespread popularity of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* in Anglo-Saxon England and in other regions meant it was read by numerous people although the target audience was primarily the literate members of the English Church or members of the royalty who could read and understand Latin or who had access to someone to explicate in in their own language. The translation into English allowed the work to be understood by English laymen who could access the text through public reading even if they were themselves illiterate. To all of the people reading this text, or even fragments of his text, the ideals of morality and proper methods of worshipping God are presented as integral elements to the history of the English Church. The models who exhibit those ideals – namely the home-grown saints who feature in the hagiographic narratives and miraculous elements in Bede’s history – are also models that represent the ideals of humility and chastity that Bede hoped would inspire monastic reform. From the Latin of the eighth century to modern English translations, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* continues to be read, and continues to teach us things about the history and spirituality of Anglo-Saxon England.

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