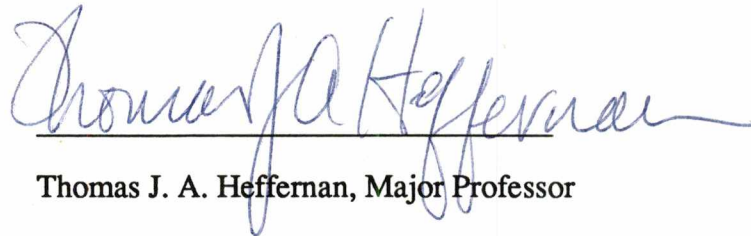
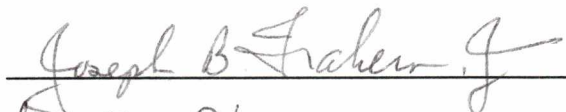
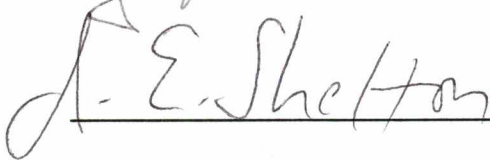


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ANGLO-SAXON ABBESSES

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee

Frances Elaine Oswald

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover why the abbesses of the Anglo-Saxon church were held in such esteem, and to detect any significant changes in attitude towards them over the course of six centuries. After establishing the status of women in the 5th to the 10th centuries, an attempt was made to define the high status of women in the light of the contemporary social situation and the conditions of life in early medieval England.

This period saw the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to England, and their subsequent displacement by the Normans. Between AD400 and 500, the Romano-British society in lowland Britain was partially conquered by Anglo-Saxon immigrants who came from Denmark and Saxony. In the ninth and tenth centuries Britain was swept by new waves of invaders from Scandinavia - the Vikings. The course of Viking invasions destroyed many monasteries and left Wessex the chief power in Britain, and by 939 "England" existed in roughly the same geographic terms as it does today. In 1066 Duke William of Normandy conquered England, and this signified the end of Anglo-Saxon England. However, even before the Norman Conquest, the status of religious women had declined. This fact is clearly seen in the absence of women as heads of monasteries, and in the decline of the double monastery. Several important religious developments occurred during this period, greatly affecting the prevailing attitudes towards women.

The 5th century saw the advent of Christianity in Britain. The Celts had been among the first to adopt Christianity, and a Celtic Church in the west was established before the Roman Church. The 7th century saw the emergence of Roman Christianity as the dominant theology, for this was proclaimed as the official religion at the Synod of Whitby in 664. Subsequent centuries saw the blending of Germanic and Christian traditions which culminated in the strict active enclosure of religious women.

The primary sources for such a long period are diverse and variable in quantity and quality. They can be divided into three main categories: Narrative history (chronicles, histories, annals), documentary records (laws, charters, wills) and material sources (coinage, architecture, metalwork, manuscripts). Other kinds of sources are place names, poems, letters, saints' lives and royal biographies. Secondary sources concerned with general history of the period and the history of women were used to determine the social setting in which men and women of this period lived. Sources concerned with religious history and theology were used to determine the paradigms of Christianity.

An examination of these sources revealed that the eminence of abbesses was greater and their involvement in public affairs was more considerable before the tenth century. Wisdom and education were seen to be the special provinces of women, and they were held to be intellectually superior to men. The reason for the eminent position of abbesses of double monasteries lies in the confluence of the monastic traditions with the Germanic heritage, which placed no restrictions on the active participation of women in society.

As the period moves towards its close, a shift in attitudes is revealed by the change in heads of monasteries, the laws and charters and in the literature. When a structural change in the hierarchy of the Church led to the bishops gaining more power, the power of the abbesses declined. The reason for the bishops gaining control of the double monasteries was economic, but it was helped by the anti-feminine ideas current in Christianity. The diminishment of power of the abbess was able to take place after men and women of the Church had been separated from each other.

PREFACE

Like Doris Stenton, I am curious as to how and why Anglo-Saxon women seemed to have had such respect from their partners, and to have held such positions of power. Stenton entered the field via her husband's studies of the Anglo-Saxons, but she became particularly fascinated by the women of the times. She concluded that:

... women were then more nearly the equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any other period before the modern age... (13)

Other historians have been intrigued by the lack of gender discrimination in English society, in the period from the 5th to the 10th century; Christine Fell cites the first serious statement by the historian, Sharon Turner (1768-1847) who admired Anglo-Saxon women, as being:

... this exaltation of the female sex to that honour, consequence and independence, which European laws studied to uphold. As the education of youth will always rest principally with women ... it is of the greatest importance that the fair sex should possess high estimation in society; and nothing could more certainly tend to perpetuate this feeling than the privilege of possessing property in their own right, and at their own disposal (7).

Turner's remarks were followed by Montalambert, who said, somewhat aphoristically, in 1869:

[Anglo-Saxon] woman is a person not a thing. She lives, she speaks, she acts for herself (Fell 8).

At the end of the nineteenth century, Lina Eckenstein makes her views clear in her preface to Woman under Monasticism:

The right to self-development and social responsibility which the woman of today so persistently asks for, is in many ways analogous to the right which the convent secured to womankind a thousand years ago.

She consistently asserts that with the disappearance of the double monasteries, women were deprived of their only non-domestic employment, and thus ended their prominent roles in society.

The curiosity of contemporary historians cannot be so easily satisfied as that of our colleagues from the past. We still know so very little about these women; yet resources exist which can illumine that long dead world. The sources which we can examine are grave sites, manuscripts, wills and charters, runes, jewelry, place names and churches. Manuscripts which we should ordinarily think to be the single richest repository are oftentimes disappointing. They are not plentiful; many were not preserved, and also much less was written in this primarily non-literate society. Alfred is the only king whose writings survive from this period. One of the main sources is Bede's Ecclesiastical History, but as a Christian, Bede did not always think it seemly to record pagan customs.

My purpose in this investigation, is to find out more about the nature of these "masterful and independent Anglo-Saxon ladies," as Doris Stenton refers to them, and why they suffered the loss of their independence between the 5th and the 10th centuries. The chapters cover four main areas of enquiry: the reconstruction of

England as it was both before and after Anglo-Saxon settlement and the nature of the Anglo-Saxons who settled there, the examination of Christianity in England, the examination of the double monasteries, and the re-examination of some notable women. Chapter one examines evidence of how England was deserted by the Romans and then settled by Germanic peoples who placed no restrictions on women's active participation in society. Chapter two examines the two differing strains of Christianity which were prevalent in England, and the rise and fall of monasticism. Chapter three discusses double monasteries and the predominance of these communities between 600 and 900, and also lays the foundations for chapter four, which is a closer analysis of the women who ruled these monasteries. The fall of the double monastery led to a much reduced role for women; these women who had been in the right place at the right time to form a unique episode in English history.

Criticism of the women of the Anglo-Saxon period has been an area neglected by both feminists and Anglo-Saxonists, despite recent works by Helen Damico, Christine Fell, Stephanie Hollis, Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, and Alain Renoir. I am indebted to these historians who paved the way for my research.

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CHAPTER I

The Anglo-Saxons

The Making of England

Between AD400 and 500, the Romano-British society in lowland Britain, which had lasted for over 300 years, was invaded and partially conquered by Anglo-Saxon immigrants who came from Denmark and Saxony. The terms "British" and "English" are often used indiscriminately, but, historically, the British (i.e. the Celts) were the original islanders and the English were the Anglo-Saxon newcomers, and this distinction will be used throughout this paper. Around 410 the Romans ended their responsibility for the defence of Britain, but Britain had been a Roman province for so long that Roman influence remained for a long time after that date. Historians recognize that the western provinces of the empire remained *Romanitas* for centuries after the Germanic tribes took over. However, when Britain began to be depleted of its Roman garrisons, the lowland Romano-Britons were under increasing attack from the Scotti tribes of Ireland, the Picti tribes from the land north of the Firth of Forth, and the Anglo-Saxon raiders. According to the 5th century Gallic Chronicles Britain suffered a large scale invasion in 408, and what was happening is a matter for conjecture by historians. There seems to have been opposing factions arguing about whether the native militia should rush to the aid of the Roman troops in Gaul, that is whether the defence of the Roman Empire was paramount, or whether they should look out for themselves and protect Britain from the Germanic invaders. It seems that the advocates of local defence elected

two leaders in quick succession - Marcus was elected in 406, and killed before the year ended, and he was followed by Gratian, who also only lasted for four months. In December 406, Gaul was invaded by huge armies of Vandals, Alans and Sueves, and the time had come for Britain to elect a leader from the rival faction -- one who saw the larger picture. This proved to be Constantine III, who knew that if these conquering forces were not checked they would pose a threat to Britain too, and he marched to the defence of Gaul with a British army. Unfortunately, he managed to offend the Roman emperor, Honorius, and he was executed in 411. Meanwhile, his offensive strategy had left Britain even more defenceless, and the ruling classes who were left in Britain asked Honorius for his help. There was no deliberate imperial decision to abandon Britain to its fate. Honorius authorized the British to defend themselves, yet this "semi-autonomy" in military matters appears to have caused the end of Roman-occupied Britain.

The Gallic Chronicles states that "in the reign of Honorius (ob 423) Britain was forever lost to the Roman name" (Fisher 7). Zosimus, a late 5th century Byzantine writer, confirms that the Britons organized their own defence, took up arms and "braving every danger freed their cities from the invading barbarians" (Wood 41).

There are two contemporary sources which throw some light on this period. One source is the Confessions of St. Patrick, who returned to Britain in 415, and found the Roman system of local government to be still intact. The other source is a biography of St. Germanus of Auxerre, written by Constantius of Gaul circa 480. Germanus first came to the island in 429 to combat the spread of Pelagianism, and

then made a return visit in 447.¹ At the time of his visit, the Roman rulers had left Britain; rival factions were fighting for supremacy, and as in all revolutions the political instability led to social change. The abdication of the Romans could be construed as a chance for self-government by the indigenous peoples, so that these people were ripe for the teachings of Pelagius and his belief in their ability to govern themselves. It is not surprising that the Catholic Church took steps to combat this heresy by securing their jurisdiction over Britain, and they must have succeeded for, on his later visit, Germanus confirmed that Britain was still essentially Roman in administration and orthodox in worship, and still holding out against Saxon raids.

So when did Britain fall to the Saxons ? The Gallic Chronicle says that the island fell under Saxon domination in 441 or 442. The British cleric, Gildas, who wrote De Excidio et Conquestu Britannie in the 540s, says that in 446, Vortigern made the fatal step of inviting Anglo-Saxon mercenaries over to the island. Vortigern, one of the ruling dynasty of Powys, was the dominant, political figure in Britain between 425-50. He was a Pelagian and the leader of the party which was hostile to Rome (Fisher 13). Gildas states that Vortigern had opponents with

¹ Pelagianism - Pelagius was a British monk who sharply criticized Augustine's Confessions, and had a major confrontation with him in 416. Pelagius did not agree with Augustine's doctrine of original sin; on the contrary, he believed that man has unlimited potential for moral transformation. Elaine Pagels draws an analogy between these two conflicting beliefs and the theories of political power, which has relevance to the 5th century. She says that the extreme version of original sin appeals to those politicians who doubt "the human capacity for self-government"(149). While for those who have no faith in human potential, the theory does "not only validate secular power but justify as well the imposition of church authority"(125). As the Britons no doubt felt that they had the capacity for self-government, the religious doctrine of Pelagius would have been a welcome reinforcement of their nationalistic tendencies.

Roman names, such as Ambrosius Aurelianus and Vitalinos, and these would have been leaders of the pro-Roman party. Both sides used Anglo-Saxon mercenaries.

Hengist and Horsa were two of Vortigern's Anglo-Saxon mercenaries who revolted in 449 when supplies and money ran out, and settled in Kent. Other warriors who came and stayed were Aelle who arrived in Sussex and Cerdic and Cynric who sailed up Southampton Water to Hampshire (Fisher 15). According to Gildas, these Anglo-Saxons "devastated with fire all the neighboring cities and lands ... until it burnt nearly the whole surface of the island, and licked the western Ocean with its red and savage tongue" (Wood 44). The Britons who were not enslaved by the Anglo-Saxons fled to the forests, the offshore islands and to the Celtic Iron Age hillforts, which they renovated. However, the common Germanic enemy did prove to be a stimulus for stopping the civil war and uniting the rival Roman and British factions. Subsequently, there was warfare between the British (with the legendary Arthur being one of the leaders) and the Anglo-Saxons for the next thirty years (c.460-90). The series of battles between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons culminated in the siege of *Mons Badonicus* (probably Liddington Castle in Wiltshire) in 490 (Wood 51). Gildas claims a great victory for Ambrosius Aurelianus and the British when they vanquished Aelle, overking of the South Saxon settlers. There was peace for the next forty years, and the Germanic people did not penetrate further into Britain. However, they were firmly entrenched in most of the coastal areas of southern Britain. Archaeologists have been able to corroborate this peace by the lack of 6th century Anglo-Saxon pottery in areas such as Essex and Hertfordshire, which had yielded both late 4th and early 5th century finds. Judging by the grave finds, Anglo-Saxon expansion in the Upper Thames area ceased for fifty years after Badon Hill (Wood 51). The settlement of the Anglo-

Saxons can also be traced by the excavation of cemeteries -- there are either pottery cremation urns or, if the bodies were inhumed there were personal belongings buried with them. The same cemeteries were used for both cremation and inhumation, and the same potters made both cremation urns and accessories for inhumation, so there was obviously a choice of rite permissible. Whatever the rite, it is apparent that the pagan Anglo-Saxons believed in an after-life (Mayr-Harting 14).

The peace gained by the battle of *Mons Badonicus* was not to be a permanent victory for the Britons and by the end of the 6th century they had been reduced to the position of a subject population, and pushed westwards. Around 600, the kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons, as delineated by Bede, began to take shape, and they had established a heptarchy which was the beginning of England.

The boundaries of the kingdoms were defined by geographical features such as the forested Weald between Kent and Sussex, or swamps and marshes. In the south were the kingdoms of Kent, of the South Saxons (Sussex) and of the West Saxons (Wessex); the midlands had the kingdoms of Mercia, of the Middle Angles (Leicestershire), of the East Angles (East Anglia), and of the Lindsey (Lincolnshire); even in the west there was a kingdom of the Hwicce (Worcestershire and Gloucestershire). North of the River Humber was Northumbria with two dynasties - Bernicia in the north and Deira in the south (Mayr-Harting 15).

So, at the end of the 6th century, the country was now firmly settled by Anglo-Saxons, and a group of leading kingdoms was beginning to emerge. The chief ones being Northumbria - most powerful in the 7th century, Mercia - which challenged Northumbria to win supremacy in the 8th century, and Wessex - which

emerged as leader in the early 9th century. However, by the end of the 9th century Wessex was the only remaining English kingdom, for the other kingdoms had been lost to the Danish invaders who raided and then settled in the north. By 871 they had conquered most of the country excepting Wessex, and the other royal dynasties had become extinct. Alfred ruled from 871 to 899 and he just saved Wessex by making a treaty with Guthrum after the battle of Wedmore in 878. The treaty provided for a boundary line to be drawn across the country from Chester in the north-west to London by way of Watling Street, the old Roman road. The Danelaw would operate north and east of this line, while Alfred and the English would rule everything south and west of the line. The ruling dynasty of Alfred the Great would include Edward the Elder (899-925), Athelstan (925-939), Edgar (959-975), Edward the Confessor (1042-1066) and finally Harold II (1066). The period of Anglo-Saxon England was brought to its final close by the invasion of the Normans and the subsequent reign of William the Conqueror.

The last truly great king of Anglo-Saxon England was Athelstan who became king in 925, and ruled over most of Britain. Wood states that "if Offa gave form to the idea of a kingdom of all the English and Alfred laid the foundation, it was Athelstan who turned it into a fact" (148). Athelstan, a West Saxon, marched north in 927 and took York from the Danish Vikings, and then went on to attack the city of Bamburgh in Northumbria, where he drove out Ealdred Ealdulfling who had ruled everything north of the Tees. Those British kings of the north, Constantine of the Scotti, Owain of the Cumbrians and Donal, king of the Strathclyde Welsh, went on to submit to him. Not content with this realm, Athelstan proceeded to conquer the five northern Welsh kings who then acknowledged his overlordship as *mechteyrn* (Great King) and paid him a massive yearly tribute. Looking for new

lands to conquer, Athelstan turned his attention to the west and expelled the west Welsh (the Celts of Cornwall) from Malmesbury. William of Malmesbury, writing centuries later, is one of the sources for these events and he mentions a great court held at Exeter over Easter 928 which probably signified the successful conquest of Britain. Athelstan overcame all further insurrection and consolidated his rule when he defeated his combined Celtic and Danish opponents at the great battle of Brunanburh in 937. Only fifty-nine years previously his grandfather, Alfred, had defended a few square miles of Somerset, at Athelney, as being the only remaining territory of the West Saxons. Now, Athelstan had taken back the Danelaw and much more, and he ruled Britain on a scale not seen since the Roman times. When Athelstan died in 939, bishop Cenwald described him as "King of the Anglo-Saxons, Emperor of the Northumbrians, ruler of the pagans and guardian of the Britons" (Wood 149). The land itself began to reflect the rule of one overlord, for not only were the old Roman cities such as Dorchester and Exeter restored, but the areas of settlement were consolidated into shires.

Characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons

Who were these Anglo-Saxons ? The tribes who came to Britain consisted of the Saxons who originated in Old Saxony (north-west Germany), and the Angles who were originally from where Germany and Denmark meet, and the mysterious Jutes from Friesland and the Danish peninsula of Jutland. Roughly speaking, the Saxons who came to England settled in south and west, the Angles settled in the north and midlands, and the Jutes in Kent and Hampshire.

We know very little about these conquering Germanic tribes. In fact, most of our contemporary studies are based on what Cornelius Tacitus wrote in 98A.D.

in his ethnographical Germania, and we have to assume that the cultural characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons had not changed much during the next 400 years. Tacitus was an educated, upper-class Roman with an interest in the Celtic and Germanic peoples in the north and west of the empire. He considered himself to be "dedicated to writing history without anger or bias," and he seems to be a reliable narrator.

According to Tacitus, the Germani were of pure blood, for they remained uncontaminated by foreigners, and thus they were all big, with reddish hair, and fierce-looking blue eyes. When they fought in battle their mothers and wives remained near to them, to praise them and treat their wounds. Tacitus records that when the Germani are wavering in battle, they are rallied by their womenfolk "thrusting forward their bared bosoms." He comments that this action made them realize the fear of enslavement - "a fate which the Germans fear more desperately for their women than for themselves." Tacitus also notes their reverence for women: the Germani believe that "there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy." The men, therefore, asked for their advice, and what is more, they followed it (108). As further corroboration, crystal balls have been found among Anglo-Saxon female grave goods, testifying to woman's role as *burgrunan*, the wise woman (Fell 33). It is apparent that, from the earliest times, the Germanic woman was valued as highly as her male counterpart, and that her prophetic abilities were respected.

From his own Roman stance, Tacitus perceptively sees that the Germanic respect for women is "a reverence untainted by servile flattery or any pretence of turning women into goddesses" (108). The Germani therefore respected women for their actual qualities of wisdom and knowledge, and did not just revere them as

symbols of what men thought they ought to be. Indeed, one goddess of the Germani was Nerthus, and she was associated with the practical qualities of peace and good harvests. Her influence continued throughout later Christian times, as an 11th century manuscript shows - this is a charm to improve the land and is directed to *eorþan modor*.

The respect for women is shown in a concrete way as we see in one very important statement by Tacitus - that dowry is paid by the husband to the wife herself (not to her family). David Herlihy concludes from this male dowry that women were a scarce commodity, and valued accordingly. There is a direct correlation between the increase in the female population during the Middle Ages in Europe and the decrease in male dowries, which gradually faded away completely. Eventually, as the female population increased, the system of payment did a complete reversal and became a female dowry, paid by the father of the bride to the husband. (By this era women had become so protected that they were not considered competent enough to handle their own money.) The prevailing social attitude thus became one of buying a husband for a daughter, and if a father could not afford husbands for his daughters, then they would remain single.

It is interesting to note that the dowry described by Tacitus is not "gifts chosen to please a woman's fancy," but gifts to enhance the bride's wealth and strength, such as oxen, a horse and bridle, or shield, spear and sword. He comments that the bride is entering her husband's home "to be the partner of his toils and perils, that both in peace and in war she is to share his sufferings and his adventures" (117). Germanic women are not hurried into marriage either, so that when they do marry they match their husbands in age and in strength (118). This

observation strengthens our impression that marriage is a partnership to these people.

Herlihy adds to the accumulation of evidence that women were valued, by giving us the information that young women of childbearing age were protected by a *wergild* which was three times that of a male freeman. Even a female fetus, when aborted through injury to the mother, commanded more *wergild* than that of a male fetus, (assuming that one could distinguish the sex) (8). We are, therefore, in no doubt that women were prized very highly in these early Germanic tribes.

Obviously, women of childbearing age were valued for their ability to reproduce and thus for their scarcity - for the mortality rate in childbirth was high. Yet this aspect does not account for the reverence with which they were regarded, and if women were valued only for their breeding function, then early marriages would have been the norm, instead of at a later age as Tacitus indicates. On the contrary, we see women being regarded as equal partners and as advisors in both war and peace. And their prophetic and religious qualities were held in high esteem. A woman's value to the tribe was reflected both in the dowry paid to her, should she choose to marry, and in the law requiring recompense for her death, even if it were before her birth.

The Anglo-Saxons in England

As Tacitus is the only informant which we have about the Germanic peoples, we have to assume that these cultural norms were continued by the tribes who settled in England, and that the women came with their men and continued to be their equal partners both in peace and in war. Warfare continued in England on several fronts, for not only were they fighting amongst themselves for the

supremacy of neighboring kingdoms, but the native Britons were still mounting offensives from the mountains, and the Danish raids were becoming more prevalent.

This period of Anglo-Saxon settlement is a confused one for historians, for we know that there was much fighting and striving for supremacy, but we have few records. The excavation of the Sutton Hoo burial ship in 1939 has contributed to our view of this period and has shed some light on Anglo-Saxon kingship. The ship is now believed to be the cenotaph of the only East Anglian *bretwalda*, Raedwald. The contents of the ship included a royal standard, a ceremonial whetstone, a helmet, coat of mail, shield, sword, silver dish, two silver spoons, purse and coins which are dated circa 650 (Fisher 115). The forty coins are Merovingian and the silver spoons and dish are Byzantine, which gives us more evidence of contact with the East Mediterranean - Mayr-Harting believes them to have been presents (126).

There were probably many different types of leaders among the first Anglo-Saxon settlers. Mayr-Harting cites Tacitus: kings were chosen for their noble blood, and warleaders for their prowess, *reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt*. He elaborates this by saying that once the power of the warleader had been established, he could construct an appropriate genealogy dating back to Woden, and thus demonstrate his noble blood (17). The genealogies of some of the royal families are preserved in the Cotton Vespasian B VI manuscript (c.800). These genealogies add an interesting dimension to the background of royal kings such as Offa, Wuffa of the East Angles, and Cerdic. All of these kings claimed to be of royal descent when they came to Britain - with Offa tracing his ancestry back to Woden, Wuffa to Caesar and Cerdic to Adam. However, it is more likely that

they were *duces ex virtute*, that is to say possessing a strong arm, a good sword, and a band of followers, the *comitatus* (Mayr-Harting 17). Michael Wood agrees and suggests that although these kings claimed that they were royal before they came to Britain, this is not the case and in fact, their pedigrees suggest that they were merely "descendants of *condottieri* who had seized their chances in the fifth and sixth centuries" (62). However they acquired power, we know that by 731 there were several Anglo-Saxon kings holding supremacy over lesser tribes, for Bede uses the Latin word *imperium* to indicate that they ruled over more than one realm. He lists seven kings who have this degree of power:

Aelle of Sussex (477-514)

Ceawlin of the West Saxons (560-593)

Aethelbert of Kent (593-616)

Raedwald of the East Angles (617-625)

Edwin of Northumbria (625-635)

Oswald of Northumbria (635-642)

Oswy of Northumbria (642-670)

Much later, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle refers to these seven kings as *brytenwalda* (or *bretwalda*), which means "a king whose power is widely extended." The Chronicle also adds Ecgbriht of the West Saxons (800-836). It seems that after the warleader had settled in a territory, he aspired to exercise a measure of hegemony over the neighboring kingdoms. The one who achieved superiority became *bretwalda* and imposed his will on the other kings, but his authority was not transmitted through heredity; his realm was held by force. The Anglo-Saxons also adopted the Roman ceremonial customs which they found in Britain; for example, a passage where Bede describes Edwin as being always preceded by a standard-

bearer shows that the Anglo-Saxons conferred "legitimacy or prestige on their rule" by emulating the Romans (Wood 68).

The Anglo-Saxon rulers had pushed the native Britons into Wales or Cornwall, and enslaved them in the occupied territories. They felt superior to the vanquished Britons, and they referred to the indigenous tribes as *wales* which means "foreigner," and which later became "Welsh." The attitude of the Anglo-Saxon women towards these *wealisc* seems to have been very contemptuous, for there is an ethnic class distinction apparent in the references to the blonde daughter of a nobleman (*hwitlocced*) and the dark-haired Welsh slave (*wonfeax*) in the Exeter Book (Fell 24). Their contempt for the indigenous people would probably indicate that there was not much intermarriage, and that the Germanic races remained "of pure blood," at least in the early years of their conquest.

Status of Anglo-Saxon Women

Due to the lack of primary sources in this field, the historian has to make assumptions and create probable hypotheses from whatever is available. Sometimes we can deduce ideas from what is not present; for example, since Bede makes no disparaging references to non-virgins, we may assume that virginity was not a highly-prized commodity to Anglo-Saxons. This fact will be of importance in the later hagiographies of the great Anglo-Saxon women, which cite virginity as being a prerequisite for sanctity.

It is inevitable that my findings concerning the status of Anglo-Saxon women will be biased towards those that relate to women of high social status; the ones whose lives were deemed worthy of note. Little, if anything, is known of the peasant or the slave class, or even of the farmer and his wife, for in England in the

6th century, the Anglo-Saxons were the richer people, being the conquerors, and a study of the poorer people would correspond to a study of the Britons. We are thus only discussing the richer, English women.

Women in Literature and Language

In the first century after Anglo-Saxon settlement there was oral literature only and we cannot be sure what continuity there was between oral and written heroic poetry. But since the named characters in the early poetry belong to the Germanic past, we can assume some continuity in the way in which poetry represents people (Fell 34). Christine Fell examines Beowulf and concludes that women were of assured status, wore gold, poured out the drinks at feasts, and gave out gifts - just as men did. She also quotes from another poem, Widsith, in which the gold-wearing queen distributes gifts (35). So, both the lord and the lady were ring-givers - this was not a prerogative reserved for males. While the husband was away fighting, the woman administered his possessions back home, kept the peace, and also provided evidence of his wealth and power by decorating the court. She also supplied him with children and thus ensured the dominance of a ruling family. When the lord returned from battle, the lady did not relinquish her position but shared it with him (Fell 35).

Janemarie Luecke also concludes that women were traditionally esteemed, especially in their role as *freothu-webbe* (peace-weaver). For example, in Beowulf, she explores the counselling of Hrothgar by Wealtheow, and the offering of the crown to Beowulf by Hygd. Although the women seem like pawns amidst the fighting men, the role "demanded wise, strong women gifted in political and social analysis." She sees the role of *freothu-webbe* as being of paramount importance to

a king who ruled over several hostile tribes, for he had only become an overking by conquering the weaker tribes and he could only retain this authority by holding fast. The woman who married into a hostile tribe went both as ambassador and as a woman whose *wif-lufu* would create blood ties between the tribes. If she did not succeed in keeping the peace, she could return to her own tribe (Luecke 56). Thus, we can sum up by saying that just because women were not the heroic subjects of most poetry, it did not indicate that they played a passive, minor role in society. It merely indicates that most of the poetry was written by men, about war leaders whom they admired.

The only writings that we know to be by women are in Latin, which attests to the literacy and education of women, and we have extant letters from women such as Eadburg, Bugge, Leoba, Aelflaed and Berhtgyd. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen suggest that there is a great deal of remaining work to be done in Old English studies, because we should be analysing the writings left by anonymous writers for indications of a female author. Old English, like all the Indo-European languages, showed gender by means of inflected endings. An example which is widely debated is in The Wife's Lament where the feminine endings of *minre sylfre* (my own self) and *geomorre* (mournful) establish that the speaker is female, an important distinction in oral poetry. Olsen takes issue with critics such as R. C. Bambas, who claim that the feminine endings were merely a "scribal error" (14). She asserts that the feminine endings were used because the poet was female "like the *trobairitz* of Provence," and driven to write about her own personal experiences. Thus the poem is not only about the emotions of women, but is also performed by a woman. Previous research has concluded that the author was a man writing from a woman's point of view. Olsen suggests that we

examine words which distinguish the character and appearance of women, "especially in the context of a dual-gender language," and when they are examined, then maybe we will find that "anonymous" is a woman.

There was no shame in being ruled over by a woman, or in being protected by her. Scholars are familiar with the plight of the lordless man, through The Wanderer, and Fell has used the late 7th century laws of Ine of Wessex to demonstrate that a lordless man may choose an abbess as his *hlaford*, and she would then assume full responsibility for him. Thus the *hlaford* does not have to be male. Another 7th century law is the first clear statement of a woman's right to receive wergild for those under her protection: Ine states that whether the protector is "*abbod sie oððe abbodesse*," there will be a full right of half wergild due (Fell 123). Also, the letters of Lull, Denehard and Burghard to Abbess Cyneburg make it clear that they are coming to place themselves under her protection. In his essay, "Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians," F. T. Wainwright states that Aethelflaed ruled Mercia both during her husband's lifetime (he was sick for nine years before he died in 911) and afterwards. Her title was *Myrcna hlaefdige*, which is the exact equivalent of his, *Myrcna hlaford*.

The concept of the lord having an obligation to protect his tribe is seen in the husband-wife relationship, too. We see from the records of the male dowry, that is the gifts given to the bride after the marriage which were known as the *morgengifu*, that women were in scarce supply in early Anglo-Saxon times, and men had to buy a bride. However, Christine Fell points out that the verb *bicgan* should be construed as "to pay for," and not as "to own." The *morgengifu* was a gift to the woman herself and she had the disposal of it however she wanted, either in life or after death. The Old English verb *agan* is used where "to own" is required, and

even then this does not have the sense of ownership which we assume in modern English. *Agan* implies that an owner takes full responsibility for crimes committed by a person in his community, and that he presses for recompense if one is injured. Because a man "bought" a bride does not indicate that she was his possession, and if he owned her it was only in the sense that she was one of his tribe (15).

Abbesses and women who owned manors carried the same burden of responsibility for those in their charge, so that this "ownership" was not confined to males.

Legal documents

From the time that the Anglo-Saxons settled in England in the 5th century there was legislation to protect the legal rights of women, but this was gradually eroded as the Church gained a stronger influence over the law codes (Fell 56). For example, a woman could walk out of a marriage which did not please her, and if she took the children she could also take half the property. In the 7th century, the laws of Aethelbert state that:

If a wife wishes to depart with her children, she shall have half the goods. If her husband wishes to keep the children, she shall have a share of the goods equal to a child's.

(Stenton 8)

Neither could the wife be held accountable for her husband's crimes, as we see in the 7th century laws of Wihtred of Kent which state that:

if a man sacrifices to devils without his wife's knowledge he is liable to pay all his goods; if they both sacrifice to devils they are liable to pay all their goods.

(Fell 59)

Widows, too, were protected by law and they had a right to choose whichever lifestyle they wanted. Aethelbert's laws numbers 75 and 76 are designed to protect the widow from abduction, and the compensation to be paid by the abductor is

doubled should the widow be *unagen*, or without protecting kinfolks. And there was protection for all women from rape and seduction (Fell 61). In short, women were held to be legally as capable as men, but at the same time their vulnerability from physical attack was protected. Needless to say, we do not know how strictly these laws were enforced, but their presence does add weight to the opinion that women were not thought to be inferior to men in early Anglo-Saxon times.

Female Presence in Place Names

We also have proof of the capability of women in the places which were named for them. Frank Stenton published the definitive study on place names, and in a brief article, "The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies," he cites the most well-known example as being Bamburgh (Bebbe's fort), or Bebbanburg as it is called in Alfred's translation of the Historia Ecclesiastica. Bebbe, the wife of Aethelfrith, must have been quite a woman to have such a strategic fort named for her, for Bamburgh was the first port of entry for the raiding Danes. Further examples date back to 680 in Bognor (Bugge's shore) and 690 in Fladbury (Flaede's burh).

While the Domesday Book is the primary record of place names, Stenton goes further and points out many examples of place names which may not have been recorded until the 12th century, but which were clearly of Old English origin. Yet, by Norman times "few Englishwomen were in a position to leave their names to manors and villages" (82). In Derbyshire alone, there are thirty places of settlement bearing Old English female names, commemorating the lady of a tun, or village. Other examples are Edburton in Sussex (Eadburg's tun) and Chellington in Bedfordshire (Ceolwynn's tun). The earliest word for village was *ham* and this

was not used after the 8th century, yet we have many places incorporating a woman's name and *ham* - Babraham and Wilbraham in Cambridgeshire, Hubberholme in Yorkshire and Hardham in Sussex being but a few. The original meaning of *burh* was a fortress which could be held against an enemy, or maybe a monastery, and Stenton has found at least ten examples of female names marking these early sites (83). A late 7th century charter from Malmesbury refers to Tetbury as *Tettan byrig*, and Stenton concludes that when connected with a woman's name *burh* is more likely to have meant monastery than fortress. If place names show that women gave their names to lands brought under cultivation, such as estates and manors, monasteries and fortresses, they show that women occupied prominent positions in society from the earliest times (86).

This chapter has examined how, when the Romans left Britain in the early 5th century, the island was settled by Germanic immigrants. Despite efforts by the native Britons to hold on to their territory they were pushed westwards, and the Anglo-Saxons carved out kingdoms and strived for supremacy among themselves. These fascinating Germanic peoples seem to have remained ethnically pure and to have continued their cultural traditions in the new country. Germanic traditions included treating women as equal partners, if not prizing them more highly than their male counterparts. Women were valued and highly esteemed for their ability to give wise advice and to be peace-weavers. They held the same status as men, being ring-givers, wearing gold, and administering their realms with the title of *hlaefdige*. Evidence for the high esteem in which women were held is found in literature, laws and place names. It is apparent that the Germanic heritage had trained generations of women to hold prominent positions in government and in the

role of diplomat: society "expected them to advise their warriors, especially in the art of peace" (Luecke 55).

CHAPTER II

Religion in England

The Coming of Christianity

When the pagan Germanic tribes settled in England in the 5th century they found an indigenous people who must have been a mixture of Christian and pagan, for the descendents of the native Roman population were still largely Christian, whereas many of the Pictish and Celtic tribes remained pagan. So by the year 600 the situation in the British Isles was very complicated. In this area of approximately 120,000 square miles there were several "antagonistic ethnic groups" (Lynch 45). There were the Picts in northern Britain, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the south and east, and the Celts in the west and in Ireland. The three families of languages, Celtic, Pictish and Germanic each had different dialects within themselves, and there was also a fairly widespread knowledge of Latin, particularly in the monasteries of the Celtic lands.

Of these three ethnic groups, the Christians worshiped the same God and his Son, Christ, yet they worshiped with some liturgical and organizational differences. Roman Christians had organized themselves under a single leader in each community, called a bishop, and their beliefs were embodied in a hierarchical structure based on a written creed, the canon of scripture and the writings of the church fathers. It was also "firmly rooted in the world of tangible things" such as land and buildings (Lynch 14). But within the formality of this religion, a more ascetic sect had broken away and formed an independent movement. Christians who wanted to live a more "world-denying" life had founded monasteries as a

"counterculture, a criticism of contemporary life" (Lynch 30). This monasticism was the form of Christianity which had taken root in Ireland, which had never been conquered by the Romans, and which had spread to some parts of Britain.

Of the Christians in Britain, the larger population of Celtic Christians was descended from the Britons who had inhabited the island long before the Romans came with their own form of Christianity. By the time that the Germani came there was only a small number of Roman Christians remaining because the bishoprics were actually abandoned when the Roman civilisation vanished (Lynch 42). When the great influx of Germani settled in England they found people who were also still pagan, or who were either Celtic or Roman Christians. The two groups coexisted in a peaceful manner as is apparent from the remains of a villa in Lullingham, c.337-40, which was shared as a temple for worship - with Christians on the upper floor, and pagans on the lower floor (McNeill 21).

Christianity appears to have reached Britain by way of Iraneus. The earliest recorded Christian mission to the Celtic tribes of western Europe was by Iraneus, who was active in southern Gaul until his death in 202 (McNeill 11). However, there were apocryphal legends which date Christianity even earlier. Gildas tells of Joseph of Arimathea being sent in 63 to establish a church in Glastonbury. This town has been an active seaport on the Severn estuary since earliest records and would have been well situated for an entrance point from the continent. Bearing in mind that archaeological evidence shows Mediterranean trade in the 1st century, it is possible, albeit not probable, that Joseph did come and establish a church here. The evidence of Christianity in Britain during the latter period of Roman occupation is more substantial: there is a record of three British bishops attending the Council of Arles in 314, and there is the excavation of a Christian word wheel in Cirencester,

and the representation of Christ (with the Chi-Rho monogram behind his head) in the mosaic floor of a villa in Hinton St. Mary, Dorset (Mayr-Harting 32). Mayr-Harting agrees with Lynch that the number of Christians were small - there had been a pagan revival in the 4th century with new temples being built at Lydney, Gloucestershire and Maiden Castle, Dorset - and that their Christianity would not have been attractive to the Germani, for after all it had not helped the Britons to withstand their Germanic conquerors.

The Pagans

Both the pagan Germanic tribes and the pagan Britons would have had some gods and goddesses in common. We know that the earliest Germanic settlers had a cult of Woden and a cult of Thor, for all the Germanic peoples shared a common stock of mythology. Woden was the god of poetry, runes and war, while Thor was god of funerals and of the dead. Forty to fifty place-names survive in England which demonstrate pagan associations, for example; the ancient name of an Essex half-hundred, *Thunres Stapol* (Thurstable), means Thor's pillar. However, none of these religious place names are later than the mid 7th century. Three pagan gods have also given enduring names to days of the week; Tiw, Woden and Thor.

The similarity of the pagan religion of the Britons with that of the Germanic races may stem from their common Indo-European heritage. Names like Ravenshead, Boarshead and Heronshead deal with animals as sacred to the Celtic Britons as to the Germanic and Celtic peoples on the Continent. Tysoe in Warwickshire is a place where we have evidence of the stratifying of religions. This Anglo-Saxon place-name derives from Tiw's *hoh* or hill-spur, and on the hill at Tysoe is carved an ancient, pre-Roman, red horse. In the Celtic world, horses

were associated with war gods and red was the color of death - the red horse therefore being an omen of disaster and a protection against enemies. When the Anglo-Saxons came they retained the religious association of the site, but dedicated the red horse to their own war god, Tiw, and named it for him (Mayr-Harting 28).

Celtic Christianity - The Welsh Church

In the 6th century the Christian missionaries were making great progress in the north and west of the island among the pagan Britons. Sir Cyril Fox studied the topography of Britain and he made a distinction between the Highland Zone (Scotland, Wales, Devon, Cornwall, and the Pennines), and the Lowland Zone (which is composed of the remainder of England). He pointed out that the Lowland Zone is easy prey for invaders, whereas the Highland Zone is able to "preserve its cultural unity on an older basis and to engage in quite independent activity" (Cited in Mayr-Harting 33-34). Christianity in the Highland zone, that is in Wales and Cornwall, where the native Britons had been pushed by invaders, continued uninterruptedly. Contacts with Gaul had kept the British Church alive, and we have evidence of these continuing contacts in an excavated farmstead of Dinas Powys in Glamorgan, where 5th and 6th century pottery, glass and wine jars from the Mediterranean have been found. Leslie Alcock has shown a synthesis of Celtic and Mediterranean culture in 6th century Wales by examining the inscriptions on memorial stones, which stand significantly near to the coast. He found that dedications to St. David, the patron saint of Wales, are found to have spread beyond Wales to Cornwall, Brittany and north Britain. Other Welsh saints, Carranog, Gwbert, Pedrog, Briog and Meugan also have dedications in both

Cornwall and Brittany, and reciprocally, many Breton saints are represented in Cornwall (Mayr-Harting 35).

The Gaulish contact was influential to the Celtic Church, since the ancient route used by travelers went through the Loire basin in Gaul to western Britain. Sir Cyril Fox was the first to identify that this same trade route was used by the Druids during their trade in pale gold: from Ireland via Anglesey to London via Watling Street through Dover and on to continental Europe and beyond. Celtic evidence for this gold route was uncovered at Llyn Cerrig Bach in Wales, in 1942, when 138 gold objects were recovered (Ross & Robins 115). Despite the economic importance of Wales, Mayr-Harting does not see the Welsh Church as contributing to the Anglo-Saxon conversion (39). The Welsh and the Cornish peoples remained very hostile to the Anglo-Saxons - they preferred to fraternize with their clansmen on the continent. There was a two-way migration between Brittany, Wales and Cornwall as the Britons were pushed further westwards.

Celtic Christianity - The Irish Church

The Irish Church became very influential in the Lowland zones where the Anglo-Saxons settled. St. Patrick (c.390-460), the founder of the church in Ireland, had established an organization based on bishops and territorial dioceses which was modeled on the Roman church. Nevertheless, the period between 540 and 615 proved to be the age of monastic founders and not of the diocesan bishops, because, in Ireland, Christianity was adapted to life in a tribal society. A larger proportion of the Irish population entered monasteries than in any other country; they seemed to have found an ideal outlet for their talent and energy and love of learning (McNeill 70). Notable among these was Columba, a member of the

O'Neill family, who founded the monastery on the island of Iona in 563. He composed the Rule which would be the basis of Celtic monastic life. The Irish monasteries were derived from the monasteries of Egypt, whose deserts had become retreats for Christians fleeing from persecution. Once again the route through Gaul proved to be the link between these similar monasteries in the east and the west.

The austere life style of monasteries in the east and in the west were similar. Yet the Irish valued learning much more highly than the Egyptian monks did, and they were sensitive to nature. Mayr-Harting refers to the Irish scribes as "great writers in the margin" - margins in which their personal responses to the forces of nature can still be read today. As an example of this he quotes from a 9th century manuscript of Cassiodorus on the Psalms, which has a note in the margin: "Pleasant is the glint of the sun today upon these margins, because it flickers so" (88).

Monasteries became more important in Ireland than dioceses, and abbots became more important than bishops, so that by the 7th century monasteries were the effective centers of church life. Kathleen Hughes has put forward several reasons for the growth of monasticism - the main one being the sacrosanctity of family property. Each monastery was closely allied with a clan and the abbot was usually a kinsman of the tribal chief. Aristocratic families could found monasteries and retain an interest in them as long as the abbot founder was a member of the family, and his or her successors could be from the family too. On the other hand, the bishops of the 6th century tried to keep lay families away from church property and exclude them from church government (Mayr-Harting 86).

The Irish monasteries took over the responsibility for education which had previously been acquired in the colleges where the druids and bards underwent exacting courses. Twelve years of disciplined study was needed to earn the rank of *ollam* which was the highest achievement. However, the instruction of the druids and bards had been entirely oral, and our only records are in the heroic tales, poems and law tracts which survive, unfortunately, only in Middle Irish copies of Old Irish originals. Before Christianity writing had been limited to the oggam script, but after conversion, the Irish learned to read and write and soon moved to the forefront among Latin writers and teachers. Such became the reputation of these monastic centers of learning that in the time of Brendan the Voyager, c.486-578, seven shiploads of scholars came up the Shannon to pursue their studies at Clonfert. And Bede mentions that in 664 many English nobles and commoners were in Ireland for sacred learning. Both bards and Christians continued to flourish side by side for many centuries in Ireland, the *insula sacra*, and the Druidic culture was never destroyed by force as it had been by the Romans in Britain and Gaul, for the Romans never reached Eire. Ross and Robins hypothesize that the Druids had been destroyed in Britain because they had held the gold which was the economic key to Celtic wealth and power (116).

Music had always had a high standing with the Celts and of course this became an integral part of the monastery curriculum; many monks were verse makers. Eugene O'Curry recites the story of a harper who had to qualify for admission as an *ollam* by proving his ability to induce slumber, tears or laughter at will in his spellbound listeners (McNeill 133). One of the hymns of praise composed in an Irish monastery survives today in its translation from the Celtic, "Be Thou My Vision." Music being an important feature of Celtic monastic culture

is highlighted in the story of Caedmon; he departed from the company assembled in the mead-hall when the time came for him to sing because he had no musical ability, until he became inspired by God. Caedmon was a British name, so it is assumed that he was a Celt.

The monasteries were also renowned for their illuminated manuscripts. In the monastic scriptoria, where the codex had replaced the more clumsy roll, the beauty and skill used in manuscripts such as the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels is well known. However, the monks did not only confine themselves to writing religious works; they read classical pagan authors too. St. Aldhelm, who died in 709, warned his friend, Eahfrid, against the perils of pagan philosophy (McNeill 121). The church became a great repository for many of the Celtic pagan legends, which it proceeded to amalgamate into Christian culture: pagan temples were reconsecrated as churches, and charms and spells were adapted for Christian prayer.

The Irish used Latin as a sacred language, and it required long training to gain facility in this language, which is another reason why the monasteries took over the functions of schools. Ironically, the Irish were the ones who preserved a grammatically correct form of Latin since they learned it from books, while on the continent the spoken vulgar Latin was diverging significantly from classical Latin (Lynch 47). The Irish monks were also adept in Greek and Bede obtained his Greek from one of these teachers (McNeill 121). So, the Christianity which the Irish missionaries were to bring to mainland Britain was a syncretism of the pagan love of nature, music and learning combined with the worship of Christ.

In four centuries of monasticism, the Irish clergy incorporated into their love of nature and music an ascetism which denied physical pleasures. In the

Catalogue of Saints of Ireland, the 9th century writer constructs church history as being of three orders. The First Order which ended in 544, consisted of 350 non-celibate bishops under St. Patrick. They had one liturgy, and a tonsure from ear to ear, and they were the most holy (*sanctissimus*). The Second Order were relatively holy (*sanctior*): they were rigidly ascetic bishops and presbyters who avoided women and excluded them from monasteries. The Third Order, who were merely *sanctus*, were desert-dwellers living on herbs and water and alms. Obviously, as the clergy became more removed from the world they became less holy in the opinion of this writer.

The Irish Celts had a great zeal for pilgrimages and missionary work. When King Oswald reunited Bernicia and Deira in 634 and asked the monks of Iona to come to Northumbria, they responded by sending Aidan to found a monastery at Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne then became so renowned that it superseded Canterbury as the ecclesiastical center of England for the next thirty years, because of the calibre of the monks and the strong Northumbrian *bretwalda*, who sponsored them. Christianity spread from Northumbria to other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the reigns of Oswald (635-43) and his brother Oswy (643-71), and Lindisfarne became the prime training school for the missionaries. It was not the only one though, for Malmesbury in Wessex had an Irish abbot, as had Burgh Castle in the region of the East Angles. The Mercians also took their Christianity from the Irish and Northumbrians. Thus the main flow of Christianity in the 7th century came from the Irish monks and their pupils. "Not St. Augustine, but Aidan," wrote Bishop J. B. Lightfoot in 1890, "is the true Apostle in England" (cited in McNeill 108).

The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons

The Germanic settlers had come from areas untouched by Roman influence, and in the Lowland zones of Britain where they settled, Roman culture had almost disappeared, as had the Latin language and Christianity. In theory, the remaining Romano-British bishops of Wales, Devonshire, Cornwall and Strathclyde should have endeavoured to convert the Anglo-Saxons, but continuing bitterness made this impossible. Neither did the Frankish bishops across the English Channel, only thirty miles from Kent, take any initiative to convert the pagan newcomers (Lynch 50).

The church in Rome, however, was alert to the possibility of bringing the gospel to these pagans, and there is probably a grain of truth in the story of how Pope Gregory became interested in converting the Anglo-Saxons (Mayr-Harting 58). When Pope Gregory I (590-604) saw some blond, blue-eyed barbarians for sale in the markets of Rome, he asked who they were. On being told that they were *Angli*, he responded that they were indeed *angeli* (angels) of God. He decided to convert these people "who dwell in a corner of the world and remain in the wicked worship of wood and rocks." Gregory took an important initiative and sent forty monks with St. Augustine to Kent in 597; after which he was able to rejoice that 10,000 Angles had been baptized (Lynch 50).

Augustine may not have found it quite so easy to set up a base, for he found the old Roman towns and churches in ruins. According to Bede, he had to travel as far as the Severn river in Wales in order to meet any Church leaders. There, at Bangor-is-Coed (Bancornaburg), he met seven bishops and some monks and invited them to join with him in converting the Anglo-Saxons (McNeill 48). However, the meeting did not go very well, for Augustine started off with a non-

negotiable condition: the Britons were to adopt the Roman date for Easter and to adopt the Roman baptism rites. Seemingly the Britons were not interested in the eternal salvation of their Anglo-Saxon oppressors, and furthermore they were antagonized by the subsequent threats of Augustine when they had refused to help him. When 12,000 monks of Bangor were later massacred by Aethelfrith, the event was viewed by Bede as divine retribution for their disobedience (McNeill 48). It is apparent that the tightening solidarity with Rome which was manifesting itself on the continent was not taking place in Britain, where the Celts respected Rome but did not obey her.

Augustine went on to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity without help from the Britons, and he introduced them to the rule of St. Benedict, who had built a monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy in 530. For the first time a pagan people was being converted by missionaries sent directly from Rome. So, the newborn Anglo-Saxon church became proud of its ties to St. Peter and his representative on earth, the Pope. In the 7th and 8th centuries we see a continuing traffic of letters and pilgrimages to Rome, and newly-chosen archbishops of Canterbury went to Rome to receive the *pallium*, the purple, woollen liturgical garment that confirmed their office. As Lynch says: "In short, Pope Gregory's mission had created a church loyal to the papacy at the western fringe of the world" (51).

The Synod of Whitby

How did Pope Gregory's mission affect the Celtic Christians in the north of the country? The two separate missions, Roman and Irish, succeeded in functioning together without friction for about sixty years and then came a serious breach. Oswy, the Christian king of Northumberland had a Kentish wife who

differed from him in that she observed the Roman date for Easter, and this, of course, led to their fasting for Lent at different times. The king called a synod, which took place at the monastery in Whitby in 664, where he presided over a debate between the Roman and the Irish parties in which the issues of Easter and the tonsure were to be finally settled. At this synod the unequivocal doctrines of Gregory the Great were propounded by Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface of Crediton, and Wilfred of York. Also on the Roman side were Agilbert, Agatho, James the Deacon and the sub-king Aldfrith. The Celtic side were represented by Abbess Hild of Whitby, Bishop Cedd and Abbot Colman of Lindisfarne. Wilfred was a gifted orator who soon convinced King Oswy that the whole of England should conform to Roman dogma. His rhetorical style was aimed at patronising the converts of Columba - "beloved of God in their rustic simplicity," and Hild and Cedd soon yielded for the sake of peace (McNeill 113). Even Colman had to concede that it was St. Peter who had been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Lynch 52). As a result, king Oswy was swayed by the Roman contingent and he agreed to accept their principles. Colman left and went on to lead his monks away from Lindisfarne back to Iona, and thence to found a monastery at Mayo, where they were able to continue their own customs in peace. In England the Roman customs were widely adopted, including the rule of St. Benedict, and the Celtic tonsure was replaced by a shaven circle on the crown of the head. However, not all Celtic customs were obliterated, for J. L. Gough Meissner has shown the ascendancy of the Celtic party in Mercia and Wessex well into the 8th century (cited in McNeill 113). Iona was the last outpost in Britain to resist Roman rites, and they conceded in 710. Nevertheless, the Welsh still retained the Celtic Easter, and their refusal to conform deepened the rift between the English and the Welsh Christians

for centuries. Although Theodore styled himself "Archbishop of the Island of Britain" in the Acts of the Synod of Heathfield in 680, the Welsh remained unresponsive and continued to call their land "Britannia" (McNeill 195). Bede, xenophobe that he was, referred to them as "that perfidious race."

Roman Christian Doctrine and the Anglo-Saxons

Lynch considers that once the Anglo-Saxons had been introduced to Christianity they created the "most orderly and dynamic church in the west" (55). With great zeal and efficiency they quickly became literate and proceeded to spread the word. Some monasteries were already in place to train the local clergy to read Latin and others were quickly founded. It is not by chance that Bede, the most learned westerner of the 8th century, was an Anglo-Saxon, for after taking over England they turned their formidable talents towards the church and education.

The Anglo-Saxons proceeded efficiently to convert the rest of Europe too. In the winter of 677-78 when Wilfrid of York was traveling to Rome he had to break his journey and spend the winter in modern Holland. He used his time there to convert the native Frisians, and his efforts became the first wave of missionary enthusiasm. Within thirty years there were hundreds of Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns working as missionaries among the Frisians, Saxons, Alemanians, Thuringians and Bavarians (Lynch 56). The Anglo-Saxons were well suited to this task, for not only were they learned in Latin and capable of creating an orderly church organization, but they spoke what was basically the same Germanic language. Two of the outstanding leaders were Willibrord (658-739) from Northumbria, who was renamed Clement by the Pope, and Winfrith (675-754) who was renamed Boniface. By the time that Boniface was martyred in Frisia in

754, Anglo-Saxon missionary work had transformed the north-eastern borders of Latin Europe (Lynch 58).

However, in England after the first flush of religious enthusiasm had worn off, there was some tension being created by the conflict between church laws and the Germanic culture. For instance in 669, Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, had a problem in reconciling his Christian interpretation of marriage with the Anglo-Saxon views. He found it impossible to enforce a rigid code of law. For example, the English had always permitted remarriage in the case of one marriage partner being carried off into captivity or even on entering a religious house. It was difficult for the Anglo-Saxons to accept the religious attitude that marriage was a bond broken only by death, for slavery or captivity of a partner made nonsense of this. So, the compromise that Theodore made was to allow remarriage after five years absence of the marital partner. In 672, Aethelfrith secured permission from her husband, Ecgrith of Northumbria, to lead the life of a nun, but these concessions would become much harder to obtain after the death of Theodore. When he died in 690, his successors were even less tolerant of local customs, and we see that in 695 Wihtred enacted four laws relating to unlawful marriages. The most disturbing part is that the laws did not define what constituted unlawful marriage - this was to be for the church to decide. In this way the church was giving itself a lot of authority and becoming much more prominent in secular life.

Christianity and Women

As the church became more prominent in civil life, its teachings became more biased against women. Certain clerics believed that women were more libidinous creatures than men; women were felt to be a threat because of their

sexuality, which was "in need of the bridle best applied by fathers, husbands, and confessors" (Rosenthal 269). Bede informs us of correspondence between Pope Gregory and Augustine of Canterbury which shows that churchmen were seeking ways to exclude women physically from the church.

a woman must not be prohibited from entering a church during her usual period, for this natural overflowing cannot be reckoned a crime: and so it is not fair that she should be deprived from entering the church for that which she suffers unwillingly.

(Rosenthal 270)

Although Gregory's answer is sympathetic to women in that it does not prohibit them from entering the church, it shows an overt bias which had not been previously deduceable from extant records of the Germanic peoples. Prior to Christianity, Germanic traditions had placed no restrictions on women's active participation in society.

The church fathers were forcing Germanic society to segregate women from men, and we must ask how it was that they were able to eventually succeed in doing so? The answer lies not so much in religion as in the balance of economic and political power. The monasteries were usually well endowed and as such the church looked upon them in a covetous manner. Schneider has pointed out that taken individually, the monasteries were not of much account. However, when the monasteries became part of the hierarchy of the church, they became a force to be reckoned with (304). Accordingly, bishops of the church pursued a policy of gaining control of the monasteries, and one of the ways in which this could be done was by means of religion itself.

Religious teachings could be used to stress the inferiority of women, so that their male counterparts could take over the choice positions within the church on

good authority. Christ had preached that the souls of men and women were equal, but the more ambivalent attitude of St. Paul allowed his teachings to be interpreted to suit the church fathers who were looking for ways to exclude the eminent women of the church. Saint Paul's dictum was completely alien to the Germanic culture:

Let a woman learn in silence with all subjection.
But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority
over the man, but to be in silence.
(I Tim.2.12)

Another early father of the church, Jerome in the early 5th century, preferred not to teach women at all but expediency had prevailed. It seems that he had devoted a lot of time to educating women in holy matters, but obviously as a last resort, for he explains "If men asked me questions about Scripture, I would not be speaking to women" (Labalme 12-13). Jerome also confirms his misogynistic attitude in his letters to Laeta, instructing her how to teach her child, Paula: for reading and writing she needs a good teacher, a man of erudition and not a silly woman, so that she will not have to unlearn anything later on in life. However, it must be noted that Jerome was advocating the education of a girl.

The male ecclesiastics promoted the ideology that the preservation of virginity was essential for sanctity, especially in women. This mode of thinking coincided with the rise in esteem for the Virgin Mary, who was regarded as sexless so that many theologians dismissed as heresy the question of whether Jesus had siblings. The Virgin Mary became established as the symbol of perfection, and as an ideal unattainable by other earthly women, although they were encouraged to emulate her virginity. Not only had Paul stressed women's inferiority, but he had encouraged virginity as a way of life for both men and women. His plea for

continence in I Corinthians 7 was the main source of inspiration to advocates of virginity in later centuries, although interpretations of it varied.

However, virginity was not a prerequisite for the Anglo-Saxon abbesses. It appears that a great number of the religious women had led normal secular lives before coming to the monasteries, and that many were widows. Schneider comments that the *ancillae Christi* were called *feminae*, suggesting that they had once been married. Bugge's house in Kent was actually referred to as *monasterium sanctimonialium feminarum*. This term distinguished them from the young initiates, aged between seven and fourteen, who were not married and who were referred to as *puellae*. However, Schneider concludes that "the company of virgins was not very large in comparison to the women who entered later in life" (50).

Later hagiographers do tend to represent the nuns as virginal even though they may well have had children. The reason why the hagiographers are keen to label the saintly abbesses as virginal may be due to either a wish to portray them as being superior to ordinary women - that being the reason for their sanctity. Or, it may be that our modern usage of the word *virgin* is misleading. M.Esther Harding thinks so, and points out that using the modern connotations of the word, the Latin equivalent would have been *virgo intacta*, meaning an untouched virgin. She has argued a convincing case for the virginity of Mary as being a psychological state, and not a physical fact:

A girl belongs to herself while she is still virgin - unwed
- and may not be compelled either to maintain chastity or
to yield to an unwanted embrace (103)

She cites modern evidence of such uses of the word *virgin*: there is a word in Eskimo which has the same meaning - "she-who-will-not-have-a-husband." And Tahiti women claim that a virgin belongs to herself alone: she is "one-in-herself."

Harding sums up this state as belonging to a woman who is not influenced by the considerations which cause married women to "trim their sails;" the woman is totally independent. Thus the significance of the term *virgin* needs to be examined, for its primitive sense is merely to mean "unwed." If virginity does indeed relate to the state of mind of having psychological independence, then there is no anomaly in married abbesses being referred to as *virgin* in their vitae, for once a woman entered the monastery she had only to consider herself; she became "one-in-herself."

Stephanie Hollis comments that there is a "near absence of sexuality" as a subject in Anglo-Saxon literature, and that this is consistent with the Germanic tradition of comradeship between the sexes (103). The emphasis placed on virginity by the church fathers took on a more ominous aspect when they became overly concerned with the sexuality of women, and sought to protect their virginity. So much was written on the subject that virginity treatises have come to be considered as a genre. Both Augustine and Jerome wrote copiously on the subject. Later, Aldhelm (born 640) wrote to Hildelith, abbess of Barking, and her nuns, Justina, Cuthburg, Osburg, Scholastica, Ealdgith, Burngith, Hidgith, Eulalia and Tecla, on the matter. His treatise, De laudibus virginitatis, refers to grades of perfection in virginity - marriage is brass, chastity is silver and virginity is gold (Lucas 25).

Yet, in these early days of Christianity, although the subjugation of women may have been preached in the churches it did not much affect society. The Anglo-Saxons had historically revered their women as prophetesses and seers, and venerated them for intellectual achievement. What was therefore more appropriate than that Anglo-Saxon women should find a whole new niche for their abilities by

founding monasteries ? After all, the administration of monastic lands was only an extension of administering their manorial lands and running a household.

Furthermore, they could advance their educations with impunity, for the menfolk considered education to be a form of effeminacy (Labalme 9). Bede confirms that women traveled freely abroad for education too (Bede III.8).

Despite popular conceptions that women escaped into monasteries away from the harsh realities of continual childbearing, or even to avoid relationships with men, it seems that the monastic life was eminently suitable for these talented, capable women. They had a background of centuries of training for administration, counseling, healing, and diplomacy. That a woman should find this outlet for her talents, either after childbearing was finished or as an alternative career where she could be "one-in-herself," was hardly surprising. We have few records of Anglo-Saxon women, but what little we do know shows them to be intellectual, spiritual and talented. It is evident that they did not enter the monastic life in order to escape from discourse with men, because we know that women trained men, traveled with them and had close intellectual relationships with them. In short, the partnership between these women and men was as it always had been - equal and symbiotic.

CHAPTER III

Double Monasteries

Anglo-Saxon Women and the Double Monastery

By the 7th century the time was ripe for the convergence of Anglo-Saxon women and the monastic tradition, for these women were seeking a new role. The Germanic tribes had emigrated and settled in England because of the poverty and bad climate of their own lands. Having subdued the native tribes and carved out their own territory, their next step was to establish a dynasty and consolidate their territory. However, if the warrior was to fight less and stay at home, he would have more time to administer his own estates. Consequently his need for an equally capable wife may have also diminished. Although an hypothesis, it may have been the case that as the need for women's advice and administrative talents diminished they became more valued for domestic matters such as child-rearing. The records suggest that Anglo-Saxon women were concerned about this turn of events and took steps to stop this from happening. They turned towards the church, where the monastic tradition, with its emphasis on learning, was the ideal outlet for their skills. Not only could they be useful in a practical way, by administering estates, scriptoriums, libraries and hospitals, but they were still fulfilling their role as peace-weavers. The ruling families may not need to use the females to unite warring tribes as much as when they were striving for territory, but the advantages of having an abbess in the family were many. By founding a monastery where family members could be buried, the family was perpetuating its own memorial cult, and it could

also promote its own members as saints. This public relations aspect would help to establish the family as a ruling dynasty in the local area. The Germanic woman could continue to perform many of her traditional functions of diplomacy by using her monastery as a meeting place for synods and councils. And the monastery would be a stronghold for family members in need of spiritual or material support. It seems that the Anglo-Saxon kings would have nothing to lose by the females of the family founding monasteries with their wealth, for it was not going out of the clan. It was also maybe a way of hedging their bets with the new Christian God. The woman could act as peace-weaver in her role as bride of Christ, just as she had done as a bride going to an enemy tribe. We see that by the middle of the 7th century monasteries governed by women had become a characteristic of English life, and that women had adapted their traditional roles to the monastic life.

Accordingly, it is not coincidental that the women played a large part in Christianizing the nation. Bertha, the wife of Aethelbert of Kent (560-616), converted him, and their daughter, Aethelburg, went on to convert her husband, Edwin of Northumbria. Edwin was baptised in York on Easter Sunday, 627. Bede tells of his conversion using the beautiful image of a sparrow swiftly flying through a warm hall in the depths of winter, in order to convey the brevity of man's life and the mystery of his origin and ultimate destination.

Women began to found religious communities too. The first religious house for women is thought to be one in Folkstone, founded in 630 by Eanswith, the daughter of king Eadbald of Kent. The next one was probably that of Aethelburg, who returned to Kent after her husband's death and founded Lyminge in 633. And a short time later, the East Anglian princess Seaxburg married Earconbert of Kent (640-64) and founded Sheppey for her daughter, Eormengild. Mildrith has given

rise to many legends because she founded a monastery at Thanet when she was given lands there by Egbert of Kent (664-73) as wergild for the murder of her two brothers. Monastery founding continued apace; at the end of the 7th century we have a record of five abbesses in Kent alone. Wihtred and Werburg's charter to churches and monasteries confirms abbesses of Upminster in Thanet, South Minster, Folkestone, Lyminge and Minster in Sheppey. Building of monasteries did not take place only in the south, for we also know that Ebbe, sister of the Northumbrian bretwaldas, Oswald and Oswy, founded Coldingham. In 666 Barking was founded by Earconwald, and in 673 Ely was founded by Aethelfrith. Cuthberg, the sister of Ine of Wessex (688-725) founded Wimborne in the same period. It is no accident that these abbesses were from the ruling families - they were women who were in need of employment. There was also an economic factor, for on what would a woman spend her wealth when she no longer needed a horse and sword ? By founding a monastery, she was still using her wealth to enhance her own life style, just as she had in the old country. The only difference was that now her talents were focused and structured in the monastic life. Labalme recognizes these Anglo-Saxon abbesses as being gifted intellectually and trained far beyond the vocational skills of healing and care-giving. She confirms that they were, without exception, venerated for intellectual achievement and recognized as poets, scholars, historians, administrators or "discriminating patronesses" (1).

The Rise and Fall of the Double Monasteries

The Latin word *monasterium* and its Old English derivative *mynster* were used to describe religious communities which supported themselves from the surplus produce of the estates. They were free of taxes and obligations. Early in

the 6th century and perhaps earlier, the double monastery or *monasteria duplicia* had originated. This was a religious house in which men and women served God together; there were common religious services and a common church under the supervision of an abbess. Mary Bateson concludes that:

... without exception, abbesses presided over all those that are known in England, and administered the property which the two sexes held in common (182).

Bateson theorizes that in the first period of monasticism all houses in England were double monasteries. They were not peculiar to England or Ireland, but were also known in Gaul.

However, the double monastery had fallen into decay in Gaul by the 7th century, where we see evidence that the church had difficulty in coping with the concept of men and women working together, and that it strived to obtain full control of the monasteries. Methods of control escalated and in 697 the double monastery of Limours was placed under the jurisdiction of an abbot and given to the monks of St. Vincent's monastery in Paris. In 747 Pope Zacharias forbade nuns to read the lesson publicly at mass or to sing psalms at mass. Then came the edict that women were not to serve the altars or to take on any masculine duties. The Second Council of Nice in 787 actually forbade double monasteries, but it did allow existing ones to continue provided that they followed these rules:

1. Monks and nuns may not dwell in one building, for living together leads to immorality.
2. No monk may enter a house of nuns, and no nun may speak alone with a monk.
3. No monk may sleep in a house of nuns, nor may he eat alone with a nun.

4. And when the means of life are brought from a house to the canonesses, the abbess and an old nun must receive the same outside the door.
5. When a monk wants to see a female relative in a monastery, he may see her and say a few words in the presence of an abbess, and then quickly depart.

(Bateson 163-4)

We can conclude from this act, which transformed the double monastery into a nunnery, that the intention was to keep religious women isolated from the world as well as from their brothers in religion. This represents a radical difference from the comradeship which the early men and women of the church must have had.

Monks and nuns who were educated together had established a close working relationship much like the enviable partnerships on which Tacitus had remarked. This partnership is exemplified in the remarkable group of missionaries who worked with Boniface. Men who had received their training, education and advice from women did not disdain their abilities, and Schneider notes that there are no " 'anti-feminist' voices among the early Anglo-Saxon writers" (195). She traces a negative attitude towards women as dating from when the corporate, spiritual life which existed between the sexes was broken. The comradeship which was a Germanic legacy survived the first monastic period and:

The close working acquaintance that created mutual understanding between men and women was a result of the double house.
(Schneider 195)

However, the double monastery did not survive past the 10th century. The integration of the monasteries into the hierarchy of the church led to the disappearance of monasteries on the continent and eventually in England too, where it was precipitated by the Viking raids.

Few monasteries in England physically survived the Norse incursions of the 8th and 9th century and the subsequent disruption enabled the Roman church to reform the double monasteries as single sex ones. Although in the reign of Alfred the Great the English church was reinvigorated, clerical women never again regained the power which they had in early Anglo-Saxon times. An abbess had served no superior but the king himself; she had managed the estate and the income from it, and had held her land by the right of tenure. In the second monastic age women continued to become nuns who were subject to an abbess; however, the abbess had lost her autonomy and was under the control of the bishop.

After the second half of the 10th century we see the advent of the female communities, with the first one being at Nunnaminster, Winchester (Schneider 302). Lucas has a poor opinion of these communities:

... the English nun of the Middle Ages is a poor descendant of the pious, disciplined and scholarly ancestor of Anglo-Saxon times (50).

The politically powerful women of the 7th and 8th centuries no longer founded their own monasteries, or entered them. Schneider claims that "no royal widow of the tenth and eleventh centuries entered a monastic community" (306). There are cases of royal women who retained religious interests, but these women were powerful only because of their royal connections, and not because of the reputation for wisdom and sanctity which the abbesses had possessed. By the 10th century, absolute segregation had occurred; the Regularis Concordia ascribes to Queen Aethelfrith the care of all the female communities of the realm while the patron of the monks was the king. Women were still founding monasteries, but for different reasons. For example, Aethelthryth, the widow of Edgar (959-75), refounded monasteries in Amesbury and Wherwell - but she did so in order to consolidate her

son's regime and in expiation for her part in the murders of her first husband (Aethelwold) and her stepson (Edward). Schneider confirms that the bishops had replaced abbesses as being the politically decisive members of society, and that "abbesses had lost their political eminence by the time of the Benedictine reform" (35).

The large number of royal ladies who founded monasteries and became abbesses is peculiar to England, and I believe this to be because of the particular affinity between the customs of the Celtic church and the characteristics of the Germanic women. For instance, one of the duties of a royal Germanic woman was to preserve the memory of her family, and this is demonstrated by Eanflaed's daughter, Osthryth. She developed Bardney into a cult center for her uncle Oswald (Schneider 33). The flexibility of the Celtic church allowed Germanic women to exercise their abilities to the full and provided a new outlet for their talents. They could manage the lands and church while continuing in their roles as wise diplomats, and at the same time they were maintaining the family wealth and perpetuating the memory of the family. Yet, although the Celtic church had apparently accommodated these Germanic traditions, the rigidity of the Roman church did not allow for women as a decisive force. Schneider concludes that:

The overall explanation for the rise of the Anglo-Saxon double house therefore lies in the Germanic past, and for its fall, in the Christian future (36).

Double Houses in England

Dagmar Beate Schneider has collated lists of double monasteries and she conservatively concludes that the following ones were double monasteries:

In the north:

Nazeingbury
 Carlisle
 Hartlepool
 Whitby
 Tynemouth
 Coldingham

In the east:

Barking
 Ely
 Minster in Thanet
 St. Peter in Thanet
 Eangyth's house in Kent
 Aethelhild's monastery near Partney

In the midlands:

Repton
 Much Wenlock

In the south-west:

Wimborne
 Bugge's community in Wessex
 Ecburgh and Wietburh's house in Wessex

(Schneider 18-23)

On the other hand, some houses are assumed to be double but as they are only known to us through entries in annals or other references, we cannot confirm where they were located or whether they were double monasteries with any certainty.

Women of unidentified houses:

Aebba of Thanet	Ecburgh in East Anglia
Aelfflaed	Hereswyth
Aescburh	Irmigi
Aethelburh	Irminburh
Aethelthryth (Alcuin's friend)	Mildgyth
Aethelburh	Nerienda
Aette	Nothgyth in Sussex
Berhtgyth	Noththryt
Cuoenburh	Ricthryth
Cynethryth	Sigegyth in Wessex
Duhchae	Werburch in Northumbria
Eadburh (Boniface's correspondent)	Wilnoth in Kent
Eanburh in Mercia	

(Schneider 18-23)

Schneider also points out that in one rare instance a woman had attached herself to a male community, and that Aethelflaed had joined a community of monks because there were few female communities. However, the normal case was for men to join women's houses, at least up until the disappearance of the double monasteries.

Rules of Cloister and the Monasteries

Cloister, or *claustrum*, meaning that which is shut up or closed, was originally associated with the idea of incarceration. It has historically been identified with monasteries, because monks require a certain separation from the world in order to foster an atmosphere which is conducive to prayer. Monasteries, like medieval towns, established a physical barrier around their territory which gave them a measure of protection against marauders too. However, in the later Anglo-Saxon times, there seems to have been a trend towards constraining women inside monasteries; that is, the strict enclosure of nuns. Some of the earliest patristic writings emphasize the need to protect the brides of Christ. Saint Jerome, in his letter to Eustochium, warns a virgin who ventures outdoors:

...Jesus is jealous. He does not wish your face
to be seen by others ...

(Schulenberg 53)

Schulenberg also cites Caesarius of Arles (470-542) as being the first one to recommend strict cloistering for women:

She who desires to preserve religion in an immaculate
heart and a pure body, ought never, or certainly only
for great and unavoidable necessity go out in public... (54)

Schulenberg has also noticed that the companion guide for monks has no such strictures. She adds that "Stricter enclosure is demanded of nuns than monks; essentially a double standard exists" (59). Between 750 and 850 at least a dozen laws were passed in Gaul, requiring strict, unbroken claustration for women and the issue became the most important topic of church legislation (Schulenberg 58). Of course, enclosure was also becoming an issue in England with the growing influence of the Roman church there. The *Vita* of Leoba, written in 836, describes

Wimborne as being "surrounded with high and stout walls..." and that the monks and nuns therein practised enclosure. However, Wimborne was still controlled by the abbess at this stage (Schulenberg 60). The Regula Monachorum, which was probably written in the 9th century, describes in detail the physical enclosure: it emphasizes high walls and doors with strong locks. The bishop, on the outside of the walls, controlled the keys and determined who entered or left the monastery.

The Regula Monachorum advises the nun:

...dearest one, let your convent become your tomb:
there you will be dead and buried with Christ...

and further goes on to justify the authority of the bishop:

Therefore the tomb is watched over by a bishop
whom God installed as the primary guardian ...
(Schulenberg 60)

Now, there seems to be some discrepancy between the women who ruled monasteries, advised kings and traveled as missionaries, and the virgins whom the church fathers were seeking to protect by locking them up. The social conditioning resulting from the constant reiteration that women needed protection led to the gradual erosion of the privileges and responsibilities of the abbess. Historians disagree as to how strictly the actual practice of claustration was practised, for references to claustration were compiled by male writers and record either cases of 'just' punishment meted out to nuns who lapsed, or exhortations to nuns to maintain strict enclosure (Schulenberg 69). Certainly by the 11th century nuns had no choice of which order to enter - all rules for women were of strict enclosure. A Cistercian monk of the 12th century, Idung of Prufening, rationalized why nuns needed protection:

...the feminine sex...has four formidable and declared enemies.
Two are within the sex itself: lust of the flesh and frivolous
feminine inquisitiveness. Two are without: the casual lechery
of the masculine sex and the wicked envy of the devil.
(Schulenberg 62)

Enclosure meant a growing disparity in the educational lives of the monks and nuns. The incarcerated nuns could no longer travel or receive visitors and so their only means of education was from manuscripts provided by the bishop, and thus subject to censorship by him. Soon the nuns were not regarded as learned any more and noble families ceased to send their sons to them for education. This in turn led to another lack of contact with the outside world, and once contact with the noble families was broken so too was the source of wealth. The spiral of decline continued with nunneries becoming more impoverished financially and intellectually as the bishops starved them of outside contact. And of course, royal and noble women no longer rushed to join such places, or to found monasteries. St. Radegund, who died in 587, had recognised the way in which events were leading, and feared for the vulnerability of her enclosed nuns, as her "Letter of Foundation" indicates:

...or if any person, possibly even the bishop of the diocese,
shall wish to claim, by some new-fangled privilege,
jurisdiction of any sort over the nunnery...
(Schulenberg 73)

By the middle of the 9th century, the church had escalated ways to bring the richly endowed monasteries under its control. Abolishing the double monastery and placing all monasteries within the jurisdiction of the bishop was one way to accomplish this. The main obstacle was the royal abbesses who ruled the double monasteries; they had much more power than did abbots of male houses, and they had influential connections. The process of transferring the control of the double

monasteries from the abbess to the bishop was achieved by strict enclosure, which led to the nuns becoming economically helpless. A contributory factor to the policy of enclosure was the social conditioning induced by the repetition of ideology found in patristic writings, which emphasized the vulnerability of women and the need to protect their virginity. There were different and more restrictive expectations for women than for men.

After double monasteries had disappeared, precipitated by the physical destruction caused by the Viking raids of the 9th century, all new religious foundations were single-sex ones. These subsequent nunneries were impoverished and thus was the very real power of the Anglo-Saxon abbesses stripped away.

CHAPTER IV

Notable Anglo-Saxon Women

Builders of Monasteries

Women were actually building monasteries as well as ruling them, as several early charters show. An anonymous 7th century charter illustrates this:

I, Nothelm, king of the south Saxons will gladly give to you, my sister, Nothgy, some portion of land for the founding of a monastery on it and the building of a church which may be devoted to the divine praises...

(Fell 123)

And another grant states:

I, Aethelmod, ...grant for the relief of my soul, to you, Beorngyth, venerable abbess, and to Folcburg, and through you to your monastery, 20 hides by the river Cherwell... that you may hold it by right and your authority, as much as you claim for your monastery...

(Fell 123)

Seaxburg, the widow of king Eorcenbert of Kent, resigned as regent in 668 and bought a piece of land from her son, Hloth. On the Isle of Sheppey she built a monastery which was still being discussed with admiration in the 11th century:

Then it pleased the saintly queen Seaxburg that
she would there build a minster for delight and for glory;
and she had it built, as men used to tell,
so that for thirty years there never stilled the sound
of groaning wagon nor complaining slave.

(Fell 120)

Nor was Seaxburg the only one - Aldhelm, the abbot of Malmesbury, wrote a poem in praise of Bugge the daughter of Centwine, king of Wessex (676-85):

Bugge, the high-born daughter of king Centwine
erected this church as a glorious achievement...
(Fell 119)

Aldhelm's further descriptive lines allow us to visualize what a marvelous piece of work the church must have been. It was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the light of the sun illuminated the church through windows of glass. The light was reflected in altar-cloths of gold embroidery, a gold chalice and a silver paten. The cross of gold gleamed with silver and jewels and the air was filled with fragrance from incense burners. There was music rising to fill the very rafters, from sung hymns and psalms accompanied by a ten-stringed lyre. We do not know how Bugge found her glassmakers, for it was a skill unknown in England at that time, and Benedict, building a church at Monkwearmouth in 674, had to bring in Gaulish glassworkers (Fell 119) The townspeople must have been awestricken at the sight of this magnificence, especially compared with the hovels in which they lived.

The worship was of course shared by men and women - Bede tells us that "readers, man and woman, open the sacred volumes." We are aware of the names of many prominent women because they were prayed for at the altar: an early 9th century manuscript, Liber Ecclesiae Dunelmensis, lists the names of people to be remembered in prayers, and the second section is devoted to the names of 198 queens and abbesses. Fell makes a pertinent comment on the fact that despite all the good deeds of these people, they are now reduced to unidentifiable names in a list, such as Edgyth, Uerngyth, Tidburg or Ecburg. Anglo-Saxon women would not have been surprised at the transitoriness of their lives, for it was a subject which preoccupied the race. Fell comments that in an age when life expectancy on average was only 32 years for a male, and 30.5 years for a female, it was not surprising that

they "occupied themselves with meditations on that which might endure a little longer." Anglo-Saxons expected to either die of starvation, be wrecked at sea or burned to death. Or they could fall from a tree, be executed on the gallows or be killed by spear or sword or wolf. Fell adds that their day-to-day existence must have been filled with pain, because many excavated bones show arthritic complaints (Godden & Lapidge 186). Yet they did not dwell on their pain and suffering, but concentrated on creating things of beauty which in some cases have endured for over 1000 years. Their achievements are remarkable.

The Royal Abbesses

The majority of the royal Anglo-Saxon abbesses were canonized. In this period there was little centralized control on the process of canonization of a saint, and there was frequently intense competition between local churches to advance the claims of their particular saint. The prerequisites for sanctity appear to have been worldly power, high status, and economic prominence - all of which are attributes of the royal abbesses. Schulenburg has compiled statistics from the Bibliotheca Sanctorum and established that there were 2274 saints canonized between 500 and 1100. Women represent only fifteen percent of the number which indicates that it was more difficult for them to achieve the criteria. However, as Schulenburg substantiates, the number of females increased to forty percent of saints canonized in Britain during the period 650-750. This represented the peak of an active period for women in the church. Correspondingly, as women's active roles in the church declined after 750, so too did the number of female saints. Schulenburg has also established a correlation between the number of new religious foundations in France and Belgium and the number of female saints in the same period. The peak

years for the building of new foundations, 600-750, corresponds to the period showing the increase in the numbers of female saints, 650-799 (Schulenburg 102). The slight lag in time allowed for the abbess to establish her sainthood, after founding the monastery. If data could be tabulated for England by itself it would no doubt show the same correlation between the foundation of monasteries and the increase in the number of female saints. The church was thus a significant power base for women from wealthy and powerful families. Schulenburg refers to them as "builder-saints," for many, like Seaxburga, proved themselves to be competent architects and building contractors as well as advisors and educators.

Duties of the Abbess

We have already seen that the abbess was responsible for her nuns and monks in exactly the same way that a secular lord was responsible for his retainers. Nuns and monks swore an oath of allegiance, *oboedientia*, to their abbess and she in turn gave them her *defensio* (Schneider 304). But, the responsibilities of an abbess were greater than those of a secular lord because she had also to provide spiritual care. The position of abbess was not a sinecure; her administrative tasks alone were quite formidable. Specific duties for the head of a monastery were laid out in the Rule of Benedict and later, in 747, in the decree of the Council of Clovesho, and they make it clear that the abbess was responsible for the support of the community. The abbess had to make a decision about every prospective nun and monk and the applicants had to be investigated in detail, for once accepted they could never be turned away. After making the decision that an applicant was suitable, the abbess had to decide whether or not she could afford to clothe and feed the new member, for she was supposed to supply her *familia* with all necessities.

The same criteria applied to children who were handed over to monastic care; the abbess personally had to accept them into the community (Schneider 122).

Bede describes the office of an abbess as *officium*; with two aspects of the office being *regimen* and *ministerium* or power and authority together with service. These qualities may be described as spiritual guidance plus motherly affection, i.e. the care of both body and soul. Bede employs this term both for abbesses in general, and in particular for abbesses Hild, Aelfflaed, Eanflaed of Whitby, Ebba of Coldingham, Aethelburh, Hildelith of Barking, and Hereburh of Watton. Alcuin also uses the term to refer to Aethelfrith. (Schneider 102). Schneider also points out that the frequently used term *mater* combines both aspects of the office, suggesting power and service. She cites instances of this usage in *mater venerabilis*, *mater familias*, *mater congregationis*, and *mater omnium* (111). Christine Fell comments on the letter from Lull, Denehard and Burghard, addressed to abbess Cyniburg, and she suggests that the tone endorses the fact that Cyniburg was regarded as their spiritual mentor and secular lord. Their relationship would have been similar to that of Hild and her brilliant scholars; Cyniburg is their *domina dilectissima*, to whom they write with love and reverence. Again, Fell emphasizes the degree of power and legal responsibility which the abbess had.

The power and authority of abbesses was far reaching. Abbesses were asked for their advice and help in both spiritual and political matters just as Germanic women always had been, and their monasteries were the meeting places for synods and councils. Records confirm that abbess Ebba participated in the Northumbrian Council of 680-81, and that Saint Mildred, the abbess of Minster-in-Thanet, attended a *witenagemot* at Baccaneld in Kent in the last years of the 7th

century, together with four other abbesses. Abbess Aelfled, who attended the Synod of Nidd, was referred to as "the best of advisers, and a constant source of strength to the whole province." At this Synod, she addressed and advised not only bishops and abbots, but also the king and the archbishop, "with inspired words" (Schulenburg 110-12).

Abbesses were powerful enough to provide fugitives with asylum too. The chronicler known as Florence of Worcester informs us that a double monastery was used as a place of asylum in 697, when Aethelfrith received Guthlac at Repton. Bede also mentions two persons who sought asylum from worldly justice: Adamnan of Coldingham, who had committed a crime while still in the secular life, and an unnamed visionary of Wenlock. The fact that these three fugitives sought protection from the female heads of monasteries testifies to the far-reaching authority of these women. In short, abbesses inspired just as much respect from the community as Germanic women had traditionally held. Their prominent roles were not to survive, however. Schneider points out that in the 10th and 11th centuries, after the double monasteries had lost political eminence, no royal widows became abbesses, which seems to indicate that the position had lost its appeal for them (306).

Learning of the abbesses

How do we judge whether Anglo-Saxon women were learned? There are three criteria which are usually used: references to their learning by contemporaries or historians recording events which had happened during living memory, written works by women, or references to female teachers. Our evidence for the learning of Anglo-Saxon women is scant, but what there is provides a tantalizing glimpse of

the brilliance and erudition of society at that time. Men and women worked together for the glory of God and their deeds are handed down to us in the form of an isolated church, or a stone cross, or an illustrated manuscript. We can only guess at the marvelous works which must have illuminated the "dark ages," uniting men and women of different tribes in a quest for perfection. Men and women worked as partners - finding ways to glorify God and to spread the word. The church provided an outlet for women's talents outside the domestic sphere.

When we examine the writings of the period the only major work attributed with certainty to a woman is that of the Life of Willibald, written in 775. It was written by Hygeburg, a nun in the monastery of Heidenham. She was one of the indomitable Anglo-Saxon women who were summoned by Boniface to leave England and convert the pagans. The Life of Willibald, although not remarkable for its style, makes it clear that this nun shared Willibald's intellectual curiosity: they were both deeply interested in natural phenomena such as volcanic eruptions. Peter Dronke dismisses her prose as being "exuberantly crammed" and "enhanced by rare words and phrases, new formations and coinages, by alliteration..." (33). Maybe Hygeburg had more of a scientific temperament than a literary one, for she was a master of cryptography and skilfully signs herself in cipher. Fell remarks on Hygeburg's prowess and suggests that it may not have been unusual, for the unknown people who ordered the stones at Hackness demonstrated the same skills. The stones at Hackness are carved with four languages: text in Latin, two forms of the runic alphabet and a further script resembling oggam (114).

Fortunately, we are in the position of being able to examine some letters that survive from the period; the most informative of those being part of the corpus known as the Boniface Correspondence. There was probably a vast corpus of

Anglo-Saxon letters, for we know that Alcuin and Aldhelm were letter writers, and Bede quotes from letters. However the survivors are minimal. The Boniface letters are still extant because they were copied and preserved on the continent, and thus were not subjected to the destruction caused by the Viking raids, the Norman Conquest or the Dissolution of Monasteries.

Most of the letters are linked with the German mission which Boniface originated, but they do span a full century; with the first one being written in the 670's and the last one being from Lull in the last quarter of the 8th century. In the total of 150 letters, 16 are from men to women, and two are from Boniface to mixed religious communities. There are 10 letters from women, including one which has a postscript from a man asking to be remembered to the recipient. Fell uses this example to point out the friendly co-operation which existed between men and women at this time (31).

Leoba (died c.779)

Leoba was a relation of Boniface, and he had known her as a child before he left for Germany. Her biographer, Rudolf of Fulda, tells us that in 748 Boniface asked her to leave her monastery at Wimborne and help him convert the pagans. She went on to become abbess of Bischofsheim and a great friend of Hildegard, wife of the emperor Charlemagne. Rudolf adds that many of her pupils became superiors of others "so that there was hardly a convent of nuns in that part which had not one of her disciples as abbess." Leoba was renowned for her love of scholarship combined with a practical common-sense. Rudolf states:

For, since she had been trained from infancy in the rudiments of grammar and the study of other liberal arts, she tried by constant reflection to attain a perfect knowledge

of divine things so that through the combination of her reading with her quick intelligence, by natural gifts and hard work, she became extremely learned.

(Fell 115)

Yet Leoba took care not to indulge in ascetism; she said that "lack of sleep dulled the mind especially for study." Rudolf tells us that she enjoyed being read to, but however sleepy she may have been, she always detected any errors in the reading. Her partner and friend, Boniface, arranged that after her death her bones should be buried near to his own, so that "they who had served God in their lifetime with equal sincerity and zeal should await together the day of Resurrection" (Fell 116).

In her letters to Boniface, Leoba ventures into Latin verse, but her only surviving composition is the one included in her first letter to Boniface - written when she was still very young in 732. She humbly asks him for his assistance:

I beg you also to be so kind as to correct the unskilled style of this letter and to send me, by way of example, a few kind words which I greatly long to hear.

(Emerton 60)

Leoba calls her lines *versiculi* or little verses, and Fell argues that they have been treated with unwarranted severity because they are based on the style of Aldhelm. So too is most of the correspondence, both prose and verse; indeed, the composition of Old English poetry depended on reiterated use of stock phrases (38). Patrick Sims-Williams would agree that "Education in letter-writing was clearly based on imitation," and furthermore that is why letters were preserved, so that they could be copied (211).

Sims-Williams quotes from this letter from Leoba:

I have learnt this art from the teaching of Eadburg,
who continues unceasingly to search into the divine law.

(212)

in order to show not only a pupil struggling alone with Latin and metrics, but also to attest to a knowledgeable female teacher, Eadburg, who was versed in "more abstruse biblical studies." Eadburg has also received commendation from Boniface, for in 735 he asks her to copy out in gold the epistles of Saint Peter, and he addresses her as:

dearest sister who has brought light and consolation
to an exile in Germany by sending him gifts of spiritual books.

The fact that Boniface asked Eadburg to complete such a work indicates that she was thus quietly building up a reputation for her fine scriptorium, as well as for her erudition.

Bugge (8th century)

Bugge is known through her correspondence with Boniface too. She appears to be another abbess with a fine scriptorium, for he writes to her asking for books to be copied. She was abbess of an unknown monastery in Kent, and she wrote to Boniface asking for his opinion on the merits of a pilgrimage to Rome at that time. It was a particularly bad time to travel on the continent, which was fraught with the dangers of warfare, and Boniface does not presume to advise her. He does, however, summarize the problems of the Saracen threats, and he passes on her request to a colleague in Rome. His colleague in Rome, a fellow English-woman called Wihtburg, must have advised Bugge that it was safe to proceed, for other sources make it clear that she did complete her pilgrimage. A letter from Aethelbert of Kent, written in the mid 8th century, mentions having consulted with the *venerabilis abbatissa Bugge* when she returned from Rome and took up the

rule of her monastery again. Many religious women, undaunted by the battle zones, did complete pilgrimages,

Berthgyth (8th century)

Berthgyth was a Benedictine nun, resident in Thuringia, who wrote to her brother Balthard. Her letters form part of the Boniface Correspondence. They were probably sent in the decade of the 770's, in the same period when Hygeburg was also in Germany converting the pagans. Berthgyth had traveled to Thuringia with her mother, Cynehild, at Boniface's behest and when her mother died, Berthgyth was painfully lonely. She wrote three times to Balthard begging him to visit her "using every stylistic resource at her disposal" in order to persuade him (Dronke 30). Peter Dronke is impressed by her very touching letters which he compares favorably with the vernacular songs for a lover, *winileodas*. He parallels the "evocation of solitude and tears and longing" with The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer by virtue of the naked emotions expressed in them. Letter number 143 (Tangl) expresses her longing:

Do you not know for sure
that among all the living there is none
whom I set higher than your love?
(Dronke 31)

Berthgyth also utilizes Biblical language, beginning with Job's cry of grief, and going on to David's contrast between divine solace and human loss (32). It is impossible not to be moved by such poignant requests to see her brother once more, and we are reminded of the emotional strength of these women who were called away to duty - alone and far away from kinfolks. Anglo-Saxons set great store by family connections and when a husband died the wife would often return

to her own family. Yet Berthgyth's attachment to duty keeps her in Germany, alone and friendless, as her letter shows:

For I am alone,
abandoned and deprived of the help of kindred;
for my father and mother have left me...
(Dronke 31)

Even so, her grief stays in control and she is able to express it in the form of the standard Latin verse in rhymed octosyllabic couplets. The recitation of a magic spell "Elonqueel et Michael, Acaddai, Adonai ..." demonstrates her absolute desperation to see Balthard. Balthard only exhorts her not to cling to love of him, but to devote her heart to God, and Dronke sees in their exchange an echo of Abelard's similar advice to Heloise (32). It is easy to underestimate the sacrifices required from women who were pioneers in the educational or missionary fields, and who trod this lonely route rather than marrying. The women had to have enormous courage to take their religion across the sea in frail boats, and then to preach to warring pagan tribes. Even ruling monastic lands in the relatively peaceful England would have required all the resourcefulness and courage of the abbess; she had to retain all her lands and income from marauders and provide for her incumbents.

Hild (died c.680)

Hild, abbess of Streonaeshalch, was also a traveler and a teacher. Bede has left us in no doubt about her admirable qualities, yet we have only tantalizing details about her life. Despite her apparent fame, her name 'Hild' does not appear on the list of 198 women to be remembered in prayers, the Nomina Reginarum et Abbatissarum. This name proves to be enigmatic, and Fell surmises that 'Hild' is a

hypocoristic form of a name found in that list, as this is the only instance of 'Hild' appearing as a personal name in the whole corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature. She assumes that 'Hild' was the first element of the name, because it would be desirable for the name to alliterate on 'H' as she was the daughter of Hereric and Breguswith. The name of Hild's sister was Hereswith, which contained the first element of the father's name and the second element of the mother's name. Fell argues that this suggests a family who was careful of its nomenclature and its alliterative practises, and that 'Hild' was probably a shortened version of Hildigyth, Hildithry or Hildeburh, whose names do appear on the Nomina Reginarum et Abbatissarum (Bekker-Nielsen 76-78).

Bede gives us to understand that Hild lived for 33 years in the world before she entered the service of God. She was pagan until the age of 14, when she was baptised on Easter Day, 627. At the age of 33, she left her native Northumbria and went to her sister, who was the dowager queen of East Anglia. However, Hereswith had already left East Anglia to take up her retirement at the religious house in Chelles, so Hild determined to follow her there. The reasons for Hild's sudden move to East Anglia have been conjectured as probably involving the death of her husband, and the need to return to kinsfolk. Bede's reticence is puzzling, and Fell assumes it to be because the husband of Hild remained an unconverted pagan, and Bede was concerned only to report the glories of Christian England.

One of the puzzling details is that Hild was 33 years old, and thus old in Anglo-Saxon terms - an analysis of skeletons has shown that most men and women died between the ages of 30 and 40. However, Hild was not allowed to retire for Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne asked her to head a religious house, on the north side of the river Wear. The exact location of this remains a mystery, but Westoe or

Monkwearmouth have been suggested. Hild's next appointment was to Hartlepool, or Hereteu, which Bede translates as *insula cerui*. A few years later she moved to Streonaeshalch, which in the 12th century was identified as Whitby. This move seems to have been in 657 and is somehow connected with King Oswy giving both his daughter and twelve estates into the care of Hild. Fell asserts that Bede must have known what prompted Hild's move and how she gained possession of the estates, but that he chooses not to tell us because he is only concerned with the excellence of Streonaeshalch after Hild had transformed it. Hild went on to live until the exceptional old age of 66; she was greatly loved and called *mater* by all who knew her. Bede goes on to tell us that she was loved for her wisdom and that Whitby became the first and greatest center of learning in all Britain. As part of her qualifications for sanctity, Bede describes a dream of Breguswith, the mother of Hild. Just before Hild was born, Breguswith dreamt of:

a most precious necklace ... it seemed to spread such a blaze
of light that it filled all Britain with its gracious splendour

Bede extends the imagery of a blaze of light to Hild herself, who fulfils the dream:

for her life was an example of the works of light.

Bede lavishly portrays Hild with love and admiration, and it must have been her personality which made Whitby into such a center of excellence because all we know of what Hild actually did is reflected in the achievements of her *familiae*. Fell remarks that it is clear that Hild's fame was largely in her own lifetime and within her own locality; the cult of St. Hild is manifested in only three wells and thirteen church dedications (94). Bede makes clear her great concern with education, and with providing an adequate supply of priests for the new Christian communities. Hild must have been the one to personally instruct the prospective

bishops who were trained at Whitby. Female teachers were the norm and are frequently mentioned in double monasteries. The first *doctrrix* mentioned was Aelfflaed of Whitby and she taught, not a basic curriculum, but more advanced exegesis (Schneider 147). Leoba was a teacher and so too was Eadburg, who composed verses following the traditional Latin metrics (Schneider 147). Abbess Cyneburh must have also been an instructor, for Lull asked her to correct his writings.

Hild must have created a stimulating intellectual environment at Whitby. She was the one who made it possible for Caedmon, a layworker in the monastery, to receive the creative stimulus which enabled him to compose verse. Although only a layworker, he had obviously been exposed to both the teaching of the gospels and to traditional Old English verse. Fell comments on the degree of scholarly interest shown in Caedmon's work, which merits his inclusion ten times in the last twelve years of International Medieval Bibliography, whereas Hild is not mentioned once (95). Caedmon's surviving work is only nine lines of verse, yet it is the significance of the verse which accounts for the interest in him. He had combined two types of knowledge in his oral verse - he must have attended services and received Christian instruction to become familiar with the mode of worship, and he must have listened to enough oral poetry to become familiar with the metrical and alliterative phrases of Old English verse (97). Bede says that his teachers *aet his muðe wreoton and leornodon*, and this indicates that Caedmon's verses were written down. Fell is convinced that Caedmon exemplifies the shift being made at Streonaeshalch; from oral transmission of vernacular literature to written transmission. This alone would make it a source of illumination for all Britain. She gives full credit to the openmindedness and intellectual curiosity of Hild for

encouraging and recognising the literary value and teaching value of Caedmon's works (98).

However, the evidence of products of this center of learning remains elusive and scant. Whitby is known only by its achievements: from the number of bishops it trained for service, from the accomplishments of Caedmon and from the fact that it hosted the Synod in 664. Excavations have shown that there was an early Anglo-Saxon monastery there with a scriptorium, for styluses and bookclasps have been found. Yet only two manuscripts which originated there have survived, Aelflaed's letter and the Life of Gregory which have been located in continental libraries (Fell 84). It seems certain that Streonaeshalch was the focus of Viking raids, which accounts for the lack of remaining evidence. J. E. Cross has argued a convincing case for a lost life of Hild of Whitby, based on evidence in the Old English Martyrology, but knowing that this existed does not add to our understanding of the reputation which Whitby acquired. Nevertheless, Whitby was the pre-eminent center of learning in Bede's day, and was "the blaze of light which filled all Britain with its splendor."

Bede's account of Hild was written fifty years after her death, and it portrays a saintly and commanding figure. She laid stress on the virtues of righteousness, devotion and chastity, and followed the ways of the primitive church where all men had all things in common, and no one had any private property. Hild's advice was sought by kings and princes and she presided at the Synod of Whitby. She was loved for her wisdom, and she trained six future bishops: Bosa, John of Hexham, Wilfrid, Aetla, Tatfrith and Oftfor.

So, the impression we get of Streonaeshalch is one of intense intellectual and creative stimulation; an atmosphere which produced six bishops, Caedmon,

and a corpus of carved stones, and this must have been due to the influence and personality of Hild, a figure who will herself remain enigmatic.

Ownership of books

One of the ways in which western society assesses learning is by the possession of books; in Anglo-Saxon times there are records of both religious and lay women owning books, which we assume they could read. For example, Osburh, the mother of Alfred the Great, offered her *codex* to him as an inducement to learn to read. Werburh and her husband rescued the Codex Aureus from the Vikings. And Cuthswith, the 7th century abbess of Inkberrow, owned an Italian manuscript of Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes. The book contains the inscription *Cuthsuithae.boec.tharae.abbatissan* and we assume that she could read both the inscription and the book. H. Grundmann has reached the conclusion that apart from clerics, monks and perhaps king's sons, the only other literate group was represented by royal and aristocratic women (Schneider 141). Schneider adds to the evidence by pointing out that the iconography of the period tends to show women as holding books, whereas men usually hold swords (141).

To summarize, we can only assess the learning and achievements of these great abbesses by the contributions which they left for posterity, and the written evidence does not amount to a great deal. However, there are glowing references to women and their achievements in the works of Aldhelm, Boniface and Bede, which hint at the overwhelming contributions which women made to the age. Women were teachers, pilgrims, writers and missionaries; they ordered stone crosses and administered schools of learning which trained future bishops. They took part in

the shift from oral to written transmission of knowledge and they owned books. It is readily apparent that they worked in equal partnership with men for the glory of God, and together they transformed Europe.

Notable Abbesses

It is a relatively easy matter to obtain the names of royal abbesses who were canonized, from various martyrologies, and the following alphabetic list names the most well documented ones:

Aelfflaed, Abbess of Streonaeshalch (daughter of Oswy and Eanflaed of Northumbria)	died c.714
Bathildis, Queen of France, founded Chelles, Gaul	died 680
Bees (Bega), possibly Heiu, Abbess of Hartlepool	7th century
Bugge, Abbess of Withington (daughter of Centwine of Wessex)	7th century
Bugge, Abbess in Kent, friend of Boniface	8th century
Ceolburga, Abbess of Berkeley	died 805
Cuthburga, founded Wimborne (sister of Ine of Wessex)	died 725
Cuthswith, Abbess in Hwicce	7th century
Domneva (Ebba or Ermenburga) founded Minster-in-Thamet (daughter of Ermenid of Kent, married Merewald, king of Mercia)	died 690
Ebba, Abbess of Coldingham, founded Ebchester (sister of Oswald and Oswy)	died 683
Ebba, Abbess of Coldingham	martyred 870
Eadburg, Abbess of Minster-in-Thamet, founded St. Peter-in-Thamet	died 751

Eanflaed, Abbess of Whitby, founded Gilling	died c.704
Eanswitha, Abbess of Folkestone (daughter of Eadbald of Kent)	died c.640
Eangyth, Abbess who wrote to Boniface	8th century
Ecgburga, Abbess (daughter of Aldulf, of E. Anglia)	late 7th century
Ermenilda, Abbess of Ely, and of Sheppey (daughter of Erconbert & Seaxburg of Kent)	died 703
Ethelburga, Abbess of Lyminge (Daughter of Ethelbert & Bertha of Kent, married Edwin of Northumbria)	died 647
Ethelburga, Abbess of Barking	died c.678
Etheldreda, Abbess of Ely (daughter of Anna of E. Anglia)	died 679
Frideswide, founded monastery in Oxford (now Christchurch)	died 735
Hereburg, Abbess of Watton	7th century
Hild, Abbess of Hartlepool, founded Whitby	died 680
Hildelith, Abbess of Barking, founded Hackness	died 717
Leoba, Abbess of Bischofsheim, Germany	died 779
Merwenna, Abbess of Romsey	died 970
Milburga, founded Much Wenlock (daughter of Merewald of Mercia)	died 722
Mildred, Abbess of Minster-in-Thanel	died c.700
Modwenna, founded Burton-upon-Trent	died c.695
Modwenna, Abbess of Polesworth	died c.890

Osythe, Abbess of Chich	died 675
Seaxburga, Abbess of Ely, founded Sheppey (daughter of Anna, of E. Anglia, married Erconbert of Kent)	died 699
Tetta, Abbess of Wimborne	died c.772
Verca, Abbess near river Tyne	7th century
Walburga, Abbess of Heidenham, Germany	died 779
Werbunga, founded Trentham, Hanbury & Weedon (daughter of Wulfhere of Mercia)	died 699
Winifride, Abbess of Gwytherin	died c.650
Withburga, Abbess of Dereham (daughter of Anna of Kent)	died c.747

(Source: Parbury, Woman of Grace)

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Wisdom is the ability to utilize accumulated knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight. A close examination of English history from the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to the 10th century has illustrated that noble women were esteemed for their wisdom. Anglo-Saxon women had a Germanic heritage which had trained them to hold prominent positions such as *burgrunan* within the tribe. They were the repositories of the accumulated store of wisdom inherited from their Germanic ancestors, and they put this to good effect in the educating and Christianizing of England. Chroniclers, who wrote about the canonized abbesses, held definite ideas about the qualities which a woman should possess. Apparently the writers, and presumably most other men and women, believed that the abbesses should provide inspired guidance in times of trouble and should be educated and able to educate others. But not only did an abbess have spiritual responsibilities, she had practical ones as well, for she had to administer extensive lands and monies, direct her monastery and ensure that it was self supporting. There is no doubt of the intellectual energy and practical abilities of these women who ruled monasteries, and who were later canonized; it has been shown in laws, in literature, and in names of places and churches dedicated to them. It is apparent that the royal abbesses were following in the tradition of their

Germanic ancestors, and that they continued to merit respect from both men and women in society.

Traditionally, a Germanic wife had always been the equal partner of her spouse and shared in his "toils and perils." In short she was a member of the *comitatus* of her husband and lord. The warrior lord asked for her advice and followed it, for she was wise, as well as being a diplomatic peace-weaver. She was also generous with gifts and a ring-giver. As *hlaefdige*, she was equal in status to a *hlaford* and was capable of ruling alone should the need arise, as it frequently did during those turbulent times. The early Germanic tribes seemed to have placed no restrictions on women's active participation within society. These qualities would stand her in good stead in the colonizing of England, when society valued the ability of people to replace one another in case of need, and also later during the Christianizing of the nation.

After settling in Britain, the Anglo-Saxons remained ethnically pure and continued their own cultural traditions, with the women fulfilling the same roles. A woman's functions as ring-giver and peaceweaver were essential to bridge the gulf between the conquering Germanic tribes and the hostile natives. She took the role of a mediator who showed clemency to the native peoples and dispensed charity to them, while her warrior lord could remain unapproachable and fearsome. With the advent of the Christian missionaries in England, the almsgiving of the royal ladies took on a new dimension so that they became generous donors to the church, which in turn helped the indigenous poor. Thus did Anglo-Saxon women contribute to the harmony and peace which later led to the unification of three diverse ethnic groups into one kingdom.

By building a monastery and caring for the poor, the royal abbess was redistributing the spoils of war. But the monastery still kept the wealth within family control, as well as perpetuating the family memorial cult. The church was eager to encourage generous donations which filled its own coffers, and as inducement it held out the hope of salvation and future rewards in heaven. So the royal abbess was acting as a mediator between the warrior lord and God; thus she was still performing her traditional roles of peaceweaver and ring-giver.

The pioneer church had proven to be a new outlet for the talents of Anglo-Saxon women. Women entered the monasteries either before, during or after marriage, in order to pursue a fitting career which utilized their many talents. The Anglo-Saxon woman could still fulfil her inherited position as respected advisor both within and without the abbey walls. Royal women built monasteries and ruled them, and held them fast against marauders, and they still attended councils and synods, where their advice was greatly respected.

The abbess had carved herself a niche in the monastery, where she could turn her intellect towards education, and acquire all the knowledge that was currently available. The desire to share knowledge led women to go as missionaries to pagan tribes, and they were not daunted from traveling on extremely dangerous pilgrimages. Men and women working together created an orderly, efficient church which extended its frontiers and Christianized western Europe. Unfortunately, one could say that these abbesses were too efficient and successful. By training men for the church and making the church highly organized, they created a structure which no longer needed them once its pioneering days were over.

To the Germanic races, marriage had been regarded as an equal partnership. So, too, had been the relationship between men and women who worked together

in the church, for the glory of God. However, this *comitatus* relationship between men and women was to be eradicated. Once the church had become organized and men had been trained as bishops, the earlier practical need for women's talents diminished.

The royal abbesses had held too much power and had been too well connected to lose their monasteries by physical means. However, control of the economic resources could be achieved by social conditioning. The churchmen encouraged an ideology that women were vulnerable and in need of protection. Some clerics wrote virginity treatises which sought to delineate a female nature and to demarcate a female sphere. It became the policy of the church to protect women for their own good, by strictly enclosing them and thus isolating them from the world, so that the previously well-informed Anglo-Saxon women became incarcerated in their monasteries. And with the consequent loss of autonomy of the monasteries came a similar loss in public influence and visibility of the abbesses. Double monasteries, the emblems of female authority, were gradually impoverished and they faded into obscurity. Female clerics were only allowed to see and to teach other females, and by the 10th century, religious women existed only in nunneries and priories. The former abbesses, instead of being generous ring-givers and caring for the poor, became cared for and dependent. The disparity in male and female education which occurred led eventually to women being totally excluded from the later centers of learning, the universities. Once women and men had been segregated and their *comitatus* bond broken, the church was able to promote an exaggerated fear of women and their sexuality. Thus did the Germanic tradition of assuming the intellectual superiority of women become lost.

There is much more work to be done in the corpus of extant charters and wills which may shed further light on the roles of Anglo-Saxon women, so that changes in time can be correlated through changing laws. It may also be useful to study the comparative histories of other women. For example, if Scandinavian history can be examined, we may have some clues to a common Germanic inheritance, and also to the subsequent settlers in England, the Danes. We only know of the Germanic characteristics because of the descriptions given by Tacitus, so maybe we need to examine Celtic and Scandinavian history in order to probe more deeply into the history of these talented and intelligent women, who achieved so much before ancient prejudices were invoked against them.

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