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SAINT OSWALD, CHRIST AND *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*:  
MUTABLE SIGNS AT A CULTURAL CROSSROAD

A Dissertation  
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Scott Hutcheson MacKenzie  
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## Abstract

The first decades following a country's conversion to Christianity are sometimes marked by experimentation with native expressions of piety. Out of the multicultural environment of early Christian Northumbria such experiments created an insular Germanic version of sanctity. In the mid-seventh century, Oswiu of Northumbria (642-670), the younger brother and successor to King Oswald, constructed an elaborate narrative of God's plan for England (without consent or guidance from the Roman Church). His narrative would weave his family into the sacred fabric of his nascent, Christian kingdom. Through skillful manipulation of oral tradition, material culture and *sacri loci* he crafted a unique interpretation of his brother's death, an interpretation that Bede later canonizes in his *Ecclesiastical History*. King Oswiu, developed a novel form of the sacred by fusing certain established topoi of Christian sanctity with cultural elements from the Germans, Irish, Britons and Picts. Oswiu created the first Germanic holy warrior. Oswald with his dual nature as martyred warrior-king and humble saint represented a uniquely hybrid model of Germanic Christian sanctity as an *imitatio* for his people.

It is this same cultural and intellectual environment, that gave birth to the Anglo-Saxon poetic masterpiece, *The Dream of the Rood*, which I suggest was written during the reign of King Aldfrith (685-705). Whereas Oswiu wished to consolidate political power through aligning his family with the newly introduced religion, the poet of the *Dream of the Rood* focused on exploring a related issue, the dual nature of Christ. The

poem draws inspiration from the same font of political, cultural, and spiritual ideas that Oswiu used when he created his martyr-king. The inversions of traditional roles — Christ as warrior in *The Dream of the Rood* and warrior-king Oswald as martyr and humble servant of God — represent an outgrowth of the spiritual milieu that existed in seventh century Northumbria.

*The Dream of the Rood* and the narrative of St. Oswald's martyrdom reflect not merely Germanic ideals but a unique worldview stemming from the cultural and ethnic diversity of Northumbria. Both also reflect a desire by the Northumbrians to include themselves in the narrative of the Christian faith.

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### List of Abbreviations

- AClon*        *The Annals of Clonmacnoise being the Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408*, edited by Denis Murphy (Dublin: University Press, 1896).
- AG*            Tacitus, *Germania and Agricola*, edited by W. S. Tyler (New York: Appleton & Co., 1856).
- ALI*            *The Ancient Laws of Ireland and Certain other Brehon Law Tracts*. 6 vols. Edited by W. Nielson Hancock, et al. (Dublin: Alexander Thomas & Co., 1865-1901).
- ASC*            *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, translated and edited by Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998).
- AT*            *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores, Vol. II, Annales Tigernachi, Ex Codice Bodleiano, Rawlinson 488*, edited by Charles O'Connor (London: T. Payne & Co., 1825).
- AU*            *Annals of Ulster*, edited and translated by William M. Hennessy (Dublin: Alexander Thomas & Co., 1887).
- Beowulf*        *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Edited by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
- CK*            *The Cycles of the Kings*, Myles Dillon. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).
- Conf*            St. Patrick, *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life*, edited and translated by A. B. E. Hood (London: Phillimore & Co., Ltd., 1978).
- CScot*            *Choricon Scotorum*, edited and translated by Gearóid Mac Niocaill and William M. Hennessy (London, 1866; repr. Wiesbaden, 1964).

- DEB* Gildas, *De Excidio Britannia*, in *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*. Arthurian Period Sources 7. Edited and translated by Michael Winterbottom (London: Phillimore & Co., Ltd., 1978).
- DDDH* “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” Whitley Stokes (Paris: *Revue Celtique* XXII, 1902).
- EEK* *The Earliest English Kings*, D. P. Kirby (London: Routledge Press, 2000).
- EHD* *English Historical Documents: c. 500-1042*, edited by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- FMAS* *Fasti Monastici Aevi Saxonici: An Alphabetical List of the Heads of Religious Houses in England Previous to the Norman Conquest to which is Prefixed a Chronological Catalogue of Contemporary Foundations*, edited by Walter de Gray Birch (London: Trübner and Co., 1873).
- HB* Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, translated by J. A. Giles (Willits, CA: British American Books, n.d).
- HE* Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
- IEP* *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- LC* *Life of St. Columba*, Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995).
- MMWT* *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, edited by Patrick Ford, (University of California Press, 1977).
- NHI* *A New History of Ireland: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, edited by Daibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- OH* *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica: Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Angloroum, Historiam Abbatum, Epistolam ad Ecgberctum*. Edited by Charles Plummer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896).

- ONK*            *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, edited by Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford, Lincolnshire: Watkins Press, 1995).
- PCB*            Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1967).
- PIMS*           Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies.
- PT*             *The Poems of the Taliesin: English Version*, edited, translated, and annotated by Ifor Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975).
- RC*             *The Ruthwell Cross*, edited by Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- Táin*            *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge*, translated by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- TBDD*           *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* CELT: The Corpus of Electronic Texts, [database on- line] (accessed 22 September 2009), <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G301017/index.html>.
- VC*             *Adamnani Vita St. Columbae*, edited by J. T. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920).
- Vercelli*        *The Vercelli Book*, edited by George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).
- WT*             Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein, The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1978).
- VSH*            Charles Plummer. *Vita Sanctorum Hiberniae: Partim Hactenus Ineditae ad Fidem Codicum Manscriptorum Recognovit Prolegomenis Notis Indicibus Instruxit*. Vols. 1 and 2. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).
- YG*             Aneirin, *Y Gododdin*, edited and translated by A. O. H. Jarman, (Llandysul, Dyfed, Wales: Gomer Press, 1988).

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## Introduction

Swa ic Hring-Dena hund missera  
weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac  
manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard,  
æscum ond ecgum, þæt ic me ænigne  
under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde.  
(*Beowulf*, 1769-1773)<sup>1</sup>

The Venerable Bede, in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, describes a conversation between the Northumbrian King Edwin (616-632) and one of his thegns. Speaking in response to the efforts of conversion by the Italian missionary Paulinus, an unnamed counselor suggests to the king why they should consider adopting the new religion. The earl compares human existence to the flight of a sparrow through the king's mead-hall on a winter's evening. He says,

You are sitting feasting in winter, with your commanders and ministers, a fire is burning in the middle of the hall, while storms of rain and snow prevail outside; a sparrow flies swiftly through the room. It flies in at one door, and immediately out at another; while it is within, it is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, it immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which it had emerged. So too this life of man appears for a short space, of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems right that it be followed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "So I, for one hundred half-years ruled the Ring-Danes under the sky and protected them in war from many nations across middle-earth, with spear and sword; so that I cannot count any adversary to me under the expanse of the sky."

<sup>2</sup> "quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio, et calido effecto caenaculo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus hiemalium pluuiarum uel niuium, adueniens unus passeium domum citissime peruolauerit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit. Ipso quidem tempore, quo intus est, hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed tamen paruissimo spatio serenitatis ad momentum excursu, mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur. Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Unde si haec noua doctrina certius aliquid attulit, merito esse sequenda uidetur." Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) II.13, 182-184. Other authors see the hall only as analogous to the life of man; see James W. Earl, "Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in *Beowulf* and other Old

With the collapse of Roman authority and its associated infrastructure of cities and military control over the course of the fifth century, uncertainty and chaos enveloped Europe during the early Middle Ages. The world of the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh and eighth centuries was no less hostile or insecure. Their land was sparsely populated and human settlements were widely scattered, separated by thick forest and wasteland, especially to the north. What settlements did exist were usually hostile to strangers.<sup>3</sup> In this world there was a need for a defender against the inexorable forces of chaos. The king and later the Christian saint became the touchstones for stability in those uncertain times.

The Anglo-Saxons who sailed for England in the early fifth century AD went for opportunity, gold and glory. However, the fortune-hunters from the Germanic coast soon found themselves transformed from raiders and mercenaries into conquerors and kings. As they began to settle in the new land, circumstances obligated a redefinition of Germanic kingship. The initial stages of the migration were dominated by warriors and their war-leaders. On the continent, according to Tacitus, writing in the first century AD, the latter role traditionally was separate from that of tribal king,<sup>4</sup> though in the last two

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English Poetry.” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding* 10, no. 3 (1987): 167. I believe that the hall with the king also is representative of the temporary microcosm that humans create for themselves to keep at bay the forces of chaos.

<sup>3</sup> David Hill, *The Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 16-17. Though generally believed, due to the influence of medieval romances, to be heavily forested from shore to shore, forest cover was, at least in the eleventh century, islands of medium to large forests, separated by waste and open land. Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 3, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *Germania and Agricola*, ed. W. S. Tyler (New York: Appleton & Co., 1856), 20, 23. See VII: *Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt. Nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas, et duces*

centuries of the Roman Empire there was increasing movement to the warrior-king.<sup>5</sup> This trend in kingship may have been underway among the Anglo-Saxons before the migration. Regardless, I will argue that during the course of the fifth century the role of war-leader fused with and supplanted the traditional role of king in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England. These were people living on a new frontier, and they had to adapt in order to survive and, ultimately, to flourish. This new ideal of kingship was no longer was no longer confined to merely spokesman for the tribe and the symbol of its fertility, as it traditionally was on the continent. The king became both the worldly and otherworldly protector of the people. For the first time all of the power in the tribe became concentrated in the hands of one man. By the beginning of the sixth century the Anglo-Saxon king provided protection from enemies, settled disputes among members of the tribe, and was the symbol of fertility and productivity.

However, after the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, the king changed. His position as symbol of quasi divinity was diminished, and he was now made distant from the nexus of divine power by the emergence of the cult of the saints. The Christian saint

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*exemplo potius quam imperio, si prompti, si conspicui, si ante aciem agant, admiratione praesunt . . .* (VII: "They choose their kings for noble birth, their generals for merit. These kings have not unlimited or arbitrary power, and the generals do more by example than by authority, if they are energetic, if they are conspicuous, if they fight in before the front of the army, they lead because they are admired").

<sup>5</sup> The Germanic kingdoms that warred or were conquered by the Romans had to evolve a new form of kingship. The warrior-king was a response to stresses such as perpetual war and negotiating with the Romans, who favored working with a single king. Edward James, "The Origins of Barbarian Kingdoms: The Continental Evidence," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 42-46. Herwig Wolfram, *The History of the Goths*, trans. Thomas J. Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 94, 96. Independently, the continental Anglo-Saxons, who had limited exposure to the Roman military (aside from pirate raids along the Saxon coast of England in the fourth century), also formed this type of permanent crisis, warrior-king in England during the mid-fifth and early sixth century, due to constant warfare as they went about conquering the Britains.

was a remarkable social innovation bequeathed to Europe and Asia by late-Classical Christians. As efficacious spirits of the holy dead, they permeated Christian culture. Since they were not angels, demons or demi-gods, but real people who once lived and worked among their fellow Christians, they were accessible. As Peter Brown observed, the saints took the place of the non-human beings who linked the ego with the divine. The saints had human faces and the living could retain a bond of human social relationships such a patron and client.<sup>6</sup> Their bones remained on the earth as totemic protectors of the people. Members of the Christian community could venerate saints while gazing at their remains. They were concrete symbols of the power and favor of divinity. Such an earthly presence radiated a personal and familiar feel which, in part, led to the widespread appeal of the cult of the saints.<sup>7</sup>

Proximity to the sacred was a comforting and stabilizing factor within a community. Long before the arrival of Christian saints to the Germanic lands, the king was the link to the divine for his tribe. Nobility and prowess in battle were in themselves not sufficient qualities to make a king. Descent from the gods was the one distinguishing trait that the Germanic nobles used to differentiate themselves from other claimants to kingship.<sup>8</sup> As Germanic kings converted from their traditional pagan beliefs to

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<sup>6</sup> John H. Corbett, "The Saint as Patron in the Work of Gregory of Tours." *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981): 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 50, 58, and 60.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991), 18.



Christianity, they were compelled to drop their familial link with the pagan divine.<sup>9</sup> Yet this transition did not lead to the demise of sacral kingship; it merely changed form. In an effort to regain what was lost, a few Anglo-Saxon kings sought to unite themselves with the Christian divine hierarchy through the production of royal saints.<sup>10</sup> Within one or two generations following conversion to Christianity, males of the Anglo-Saxon royal line began to take on the mantle of holiness.<sup>11</sup> However, to gain a position in Christ's celestial kingdom a king had to renounce his earthly one. By their sacrifice of worldly power, they could become eternal, invincible protectors of their people once they died. Their personal sanctity would also restore the divine link to their family line and assure their family's continued political dominance. By the seventh century, in Latin Christendom, the path to sanctity most often passed through the monastery. Many would follow the example of the first medieval royal saint, St. Sigismund, a Merovingian king of Burgundy (516-524).<sup>12</sup> Through the seventh and into the eighth centuries, Anglo-Saxon kings either abdicated

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<sup>9</sup> N. J. Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 39; William Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 24-28. The convert kings were pragmatists. They were initially only interested in what tangible aid the Christian God could provide for them when combating their enemies. Clovis I (481-511) informed God that he would only become Christian if God gave him a victory over the Almanni *and* gave the king evidence of his miraculous power. Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Classics, 1974), 143. Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* informs us that King Eadwine of Northumbria required several years and numerous proofs of God's power before he would convert (*EH*, II.11-13).

<sup>10</sup> Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, trans. Éva Pálmai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43-45.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Yorke, "The Adaptations of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 244-245.

<sup>12</sup> Sigismund was a brutal king who, in the Merovingian fashion, murdered his son to retain his throne. After he was overthrown in 522, the king led a hermetic life near a monastery that he founded. He was killed in 524 despite the pleas of the local bishop. After the king's death the bishop forgave his many heinous sins and named him a saint. Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 67-69.

their thrones and lived a monastic life or took to the road and lived out life as a religious pilgrim. Among the Anglo-Saxon kings who chose this life are: Sigebert of Essex (d. 660), Cadwalla of Wessex (d. 688), Sebbi of Essex (d. 693), Coenred of Northumbria (d. 704), Offa of Essex (d. 709), and Ine of Wessex (d. 726).<sup>13</sup> Eadwine of Deira (d. 633) and Oswine of Deira (d. 651) were killed while they still ruled, but St. Oswald's cult pre-dates these and all other Anglo-Saxon royal cults. Eadwine and Oswine's cults, which probably arose in the 680's, seem to have been designed to oppose Oswald's.<sup>14</sup> None of the royal saints had cults that approached the popularity and success of Oswald's.

It was not until 642 following the death of Oswald, the king of Northumbria, that a ruling warrior-king joined Christ's celestial empire.<sup>15</sup> Oswald's successor, Oswiu, the brother of the former king and new saint, created a new concept of royal Christian martyr, the warrior-saint.<sup>16</sup> He fused two roles—the secular warrior and the Christian saint—that had, up until then, existed on opposite poles of the power continuum of early

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<sup>13</sup> Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 78-79; Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 92-93.

<sup>14</sup> Oswald and his brother Oswiu were Bernicians. The Deiran royal family fled when Oswald took the throne, and Oswiu destroyed the remainder of the Deiran dynasty when he had Oswine killed in 651.

<sup>15</sup> Emperor Constantine the Great, though a saint in the Eastern Church, was not considered a saint in Western Christendom. As Marc Bloch suggests, "Difficulties of communication, a distinctive type of social and political structure, and a religious mentality and ecclesiastical organization very different from those of Latin Christianity, combined to cut off this Empire more and more from the West." Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, English trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), xviii-xix. Bede, in fact, never refers to Constantine as a saint despite his bringing Christianity to the Roman Empire and his connection with St. Helena.

<sup>16</sup> In the sixth and seventh centuries, royal saints were modeled on St. Martin of Tours as conceived of by Sulpicius Severus. They were anti-heroes who, like Christ, represented peaceful resistance, self-sacrifice, humility and spiritual integrity, rather than armed combat, pride in prowess and martial victory. Triumph for a saint was not the defeat of his or her enemy but death. John Edward Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), 2-3.

medieval Europe.<sup>17</sup> How did such a concept develop? What were the circumstances and the cultural milieu that led to this revolution in Christian sanctity? Finally how did this creation of a unique form of saint influence the culture of Northumbria and produce the dual image of suffering Christ and warrior Son in the poem *The Dream of the Rood*? These are the subjects of this work.

As the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie so colorfully observed, historians can be divided into two groups, truffle hunters, who scratch at the surface of events more comfortable in the detailed study of a text or word, and parachutists, who jump from great heights and are able to discern wide patterns in landscapes as they float down to earth. This dissertation will travel the latter path. Such a task requires a broad perspective utilizing numerous and diverse primary sources. My approach to the issues will represent a blend of the *Annales* school of historical research and New Historicism. By combining elements of geography, history, and anthropology with the New Historicist aim of simultaneously understanding historical context, cultural and intellectual history through literature, I plan to reveal how the seventh century Anglo-Saxon people of Northumbria, who had hybridized culturally and ethnically with the northern Celtic tribes, produced an intellectual and cultural environment that produced a regal warrior saint. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* will be central for my study. For the political and religious history of early Anglo-Saxon England, Bede has been a favorite source for

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<sup>17</sup> Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 10-11; Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 213.

modern historians,<sup>18</sup> and in many cases it is the only source. However, Bede has also won favor among historians because through his writing he constructs a coherent narrative that extols chronology and causation.<sup>19</sup> Yet these are the very factors that should put historians on guard. On this subject Hayden White tells a cautionary tale when he says that,

. . . narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as development processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications.<sup>20</sup>

Bede had a clear view of his world and how it ought to be. His writings reflect his vision of God's divine plan for Northumbria, and he has shaded (perhaps unconsciously) his accounts of events to fit with that plan.

Bede is not unique in this. While other authors of the period are not always as organized as Bede, they too have an agenda for which the scholar must be vigilant. Writing history about the early medieval period is an art of balancing the possible, the probable and the plausible. Much of the Anglo-Saxon documentary material from Northumbria before the ninth century is lost. In order to understand the milieu under which Oswiu created St. Oswald, I need to examine texts from their world (Celtic, Latin and Anglo-Saxon). Texts need to be related to their context and read as a dialogue

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<sup>18</sup> N. J. Higham, *(Re-) Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge, 2006), 35-36.

<sup>19</sup> N. J. Higham, *(Re-) Reading Bede*, 37-39, 101; Catherine Cubitt, "Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Saints," in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>20</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative, Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), ix.

between the author and his contemporary audience. The Anglo-Saxons in Northumbria were conquerors and as such were able to write their interpretation of historical events. Yet they were not the only literate people in the region. Many of the peoples with whom the Northumbrians interacted have left written records. Some confirm Anglo-Saxon accounts while others oppose or provide additional layers of meaning. Because Oswald and Oswiu lived among the Irish and married into the courts of British kingdoms, I must listen to the voices of these people in an attempt to gauge their cultural influence. With this in mind I shall supplement Bede's view of early medieval Northumbria with sources from both the kingdom's allies and enemies. These will include a number of non-traditional sources ranging from the British (Welsh language): *Y Gododdin*, Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*, Gildas's *De Excidio Britannia*,<sup>21</sup> and the *Poems of the Taliesin*; the Irish (Irish language): Irish annals, Irish law codes, literature, and saints' lives; the Anglo-Saxons (Old English): poetry and *vitae sanctorum* in an attempt to broaden my perspective of the period.

The first three chapters build a historical and cultural context for the region and lay the foundation for understanding the milieu that led to the creation of a sainted warrior-king and the warrior Christ of Northumbria. Much of the kingdom's lands were unconquered by the Romans and therefore differ from the rest of England. Thus, in the first chapter I will discuss the invasion and conquest of England by the Anglo-Saxons

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<sup>21</sup> Gildas (c. 497-570) was a British monk living in western Briton. Though he wrote in Latin he was a P-Celtic speaker who viewed the Anglo-Saxons as foreign invaders. The *Historia Brittonum*, created by Nennius, a Welsh speaker but written in Latin, dates to 829, the fourth year of the reign of Merfyn Frych (826-844), king of Gwynedd. It is a synchronizing history extending from creation until 680.

during the fifth and sixth centuries and illustrate how the process north of the Humber differed from that of the south. In southern Britain the people were gathered, as Gildas, one of our few eyewitnesses, attests, into small bands lead by tyrants. Dispatching these roving gangs was relatively easy work for organized warriors from *Germania*. This period represents the darkest of the “Dark Ages,” and sources are to be viewed critically. To test some of the reports given by Gildas, I supplement the chapter with data from archaeological sites which either confirm or deny his contentions. At the end of the chapter I introduce the Anglo-Saxon King Ida whose family line was to rule Northumbria from the mid-sixth century through the first half of the eighth century.

Chapter 2, which builds on the first chapter, focuses on the conquest of the Celtic north, a region dominated by well-established and non-Romanized Celtic tribes. The Anglo-Saxons, who moved into what was to become Northumbria, encountered more organized resistance to their advance than did their southern cousins. This was because the tribes of the North retained their cultural identity and political unity during the Roman occupation of the South and remained independent of Rome.<sup>22</sup> The departure of the Romans had little impact on them. As a result, the Anglo-Saxon invaders, instead of overawing the Celtic kingdoms of the Gododdin, Rheged, Strathclyde, Pictland and Dál Riata, had to fight protracted wars that lasted decades. However, as time passed and the Anglo-Saxons established themselves among the northern people, they were begrudgingly accepted. They continued to fight battles but they also began to trade and

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<sup>22</sup> While these tribes occasionally warred with the Romans and had economic relations with the Romano-British people (often traveling south of Hadrian’s Wall for trade), they were unconquered and independent of the Roman government.

intermarry among the indigenous people, leading to cultural blending. This chapter focuses on the consolidation of the kingdom of Northumbria by the warrior king Æthelfrith (the father of the future king and St. Oswald and his brother Oswiu), why his political alliances were directed north toward the Celtic peoples instead of south among the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and his military conquests. While I cover rather well-known historical territory in these two chapters, my emphasis is on the independence and military strength of the Irish, Picts and Britains of the North. Some of these kingdoms retained their political independence and cultural identity well into the seventh and eighth centuries. Their interactions with the emergent kingdom of Northumbria shaped its political and cultural development and influenced the course of the Christian faith during its early development in the kingdom. My extensive use of Irish annals, Irish and northern British poetry and Celtic *vitae sanctorum* will allow the reader to become familiar with the Celtic peoples and gauge their degree of influence on the Anglo-Saxons and their contribution to the construction of the saintly warrior-king.

Æthelfrith's close relations with the Celtic people in part explains why when he was defeated and killed by Eadwine of Deira (616-634), his children fled to exile among the Irish and Picts. Chapter 3 is concerned with exploring the subtleties of Oswald and Oswiu's youth in exile among the Irish, their conversion to Irish Christianity at Iona, and how these experiences affected their kingship when they returned. To that end I explore the differences and similarities among Irish and Germanic kingship and how the brothers blended these disparate approaches to ruling into a unique form of kingship. I end the chapter with a discussion regarding the ongoing process of conversion to Christianity

among the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the political advantage that Oswald and Oswiu were able to leverage using Christian traditions and practices, the Church hierarchy, and the cult of the saints.

Chapter 4 takes an in-depth look at how and to what advantage King Oswiu developed the warrior-king saint in his brother. This chapter explores the political, cultural, social and religious environs under which King Oswiu (642-670) developed his idea for a sainted warrior-king. Once created, the king used a newly established royal cult of St. Oswald to maintain his political power among subordinate kings and allies. This chapter then discusses the rise of the ecclesiastical cult of St. Oswald developed at Hexham *ca.* 675 and how the two cults of St. Oswald temporarily struggled for control of the saint and his relics. Ultimately, the ecclesiastical cult came to dominate the royal cult, due in part to the arrival of the cult of the cross to England in the closing decades of the seventh century. The deft maneuvering of the clerics at the abbey of Hexham closely associated St. Oswald with the cross he erected at Heavenfield and thereby connected him with the True Cross and Christ.

Chapter 5 explores the rise of the cult of the cross in England and its symbiotic relationship with the cult of St. Oswald. Inspired in part by Oswald's cross at Heavenfield and in part by the discovery of a fragment of the True Cross by Pope Sergius in 701, the late seventh and early eighth centuries witnessed a flurry of cross building in Northumbria and across Christian England. One particularly impressive example in Northumbria, the Ruthwell Monument, is found within the borders of the former kingdom of Rheged. On the Ruthwell Monument's broad surfaces are sculpted sacred



Christian symbols and scenes from the New Testament. On the narrower faces, in addition to inhabited vine scroll, is a poetic work from *The Dream of the Rood* tradition, a tradition that includes the early eighth century Ruthwell Monument inscription, *The Dream of the Rood* found in the tenth century *Vercelli Book* and the early-eleventh century Brussels Cross.<sup>23</sup> The presence of the short *Dream of the Rood* poem, the Ruthwell inscription contains only thirteen lines of poetry, on the eighth century monument suggests the possibility of parallel development between the emergence of St. Oswald's Northumbrian cult and the debate regarding the nature of the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

The medieval mind divided the world into a series of mutually exclusive opposites.<sup>24</sup> These include good/evil, human/monster, man/woman, man/God and warrior/saint. The poem on the Ruthwell Monument represents, as I argue in this chapter, a portion of a longer poem that was in existence during the seventh century and was similar in sophistication to the one found in the *Vercelli Book*.<sup>25</sup> While the Ruthwell

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<sup>23</sup> The Brussels Cross dates to the eleventh century and has a short inscription in Old English written in Roman letters. *Rod is min nama. Geo ic ricne cyning bær byfigynde, blode bestemed. þas rode het Æþelmær wyrican and Æðelwold hys beropor Criste to lofe for Æfrices saule hyra beropor. /* "Rood is my name, long ago a powerful king I bore trembling, drenched in blood. Æþelmær ordered this rood be made and Æðelwold his brother, in Christ's honor for the soul of Æfric their brother." Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of The Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 348. While an important part of the tradition, it is well outside the scope of my discussion.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Brooks, *Anglo-Saxon Myths: State and Church, 400-1066* (London: Hambledon Press, 2000), 79-80, has suggested that when using early medieval sources, the earliest and simplest version may not always represent the most historically accurate. Likewise, in the case of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition, I believe that one cannot assume that the Ruthwell poem, because of its early age suggests that the seventh century exemplar was a simple, less elaborate version of the tradition. Moreover, the poem in

poem deals with the events directly associated with the Crucifixion and the Deposition, it does touch upon the dual nature of Christ. It raises questions such as how can the human and the divine coexist, yet each retains its distinctive nature? How can such extreme opposites—an immutable, infinite entity and a mutable transient being—coexist in one individual? Likewise how can a warrior-king, who is in the sight of God a murderer, be a saint? These issues, God/man and saint/warrior, were being raised at the same time in Northumbria. King Oswiu in the 640s, and later the abbey of Hexham during the 670s, merged the warrior with the saint in the person of St. Oswald. During the same period a poet through *The Dream of the Rood* tradition merged binaries throughout the poem to illustrate the union of polar opposites.

While *The Dream of the Rood* is decidedly not a theological treatise, it does represent in richly allusive language what I feel was the shared concern in late-seventh century Anglo-Saxon England regarding the complex questions concerning the merging of opposites in one being. While the Ruthwell poem hints at the complexity of the question, I need to expand beyond the earliest example of *The Dream of the Rood*, the early eighth century Northumbrian fragment of the poem found on the Ruthwell monument, and analyze the blending of opposites in *The Dream of the Rood* as recorded in the *Vercelli Book*.

Chapter 6 expands upon the analysis of the lines of poetry on the Ruthwell Monument and presents an in-depth examination of the longer version of *The Dream of*

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the *Vercelli Book* may not, therefore, be a more elaborate and theologically and poetically sophisticated version of the tradition.

*the Rood* tradition, as presented in the tenth century *Vercelli Book*. In this chapter I propose the hypothesis that the cults of St. Oswald created a belief structure that promulgated the idea that dual natures embodied in a warrior-king/saint, even if they superficially appear to be in conflict, could exist in a single holy individual. Likewise, *The Dream of the Rood* presents an explanation of the dual nature of Christ. I suggest that the poem opens an intellectual window through the metaphor of the warrior Christ and speaking cross through which the dual nature of St. Oswald may be seen. In other words, the poem provides an opportunity to see how the intellectual and cultural milieu of Northumbria led to the acceptance of opposites to exist in one individual. The poet, by joining opposites throughout the poem, lays the foundation for understanding the union of the sacred and the profane in Christ and in St. Oswald. By alternating images of the cross as a symbol of punishment, blood-stained and battered, with the image of the cross as a symbol of victory covered with gold and jewels, the poet reveals through the passion the two-fold nature of Christ for the edification of the audience. The poet also represents the two-fold nature of the world. Things need not be seen as binaries; they can have gradations and blend together. By presenting this complex theological issue in this manner, the poet's readers/hearers could clearly see the division of the two natures of Christ. Readers/hearers of the poem could also envision the merging of the warrior/saint not as a contradiction but as a sublime reality. The existence of a very early version of the poem on the Ruthwell monument, written in Northumbrian dialect in Anglo-Saxon runes, suggests that this belief structure evolved early in Northumbria's Christian development and concurrently with the rise of St. Oswald. By examining *The Dream of the Rood*, we

may have a glimpse of how the late-seventh century Northumbrian mind solved two thorny philosophical issues, the dual nature of Christ and the existence of a warrior-king saint.

## Chapter 1

### Strangers in a Strange Land: Anglo-Saxons in Briton from the Late Fourth to the Seventh Century

Much of what was written during the Golden Age of Northumbria (early seventh to mid-eighth century) was all but obliterated by the Viking invasions of the late eighth and ninth centuries. Almost all of the remainder was homogenized by Alfred's scribes. However, powerful and enduring poetic images remain: St. Oswald, the Northumbrian warrior-king and saint, planting the cross at the battle of Heavenfield,<sup>26</sup> Christ, the proud young warrior, eagerly climbing onto the cross to shield his people from evil,<sup>27</sup> and Cædmon's inspired praise to the heavenly kingdom's *weard*,<sup>28</sup> singing to his *maecti*.<sup>29</sup> All represent distinctive features of the multifaceted Northumbrian culture of the seventh and eighth centuries. I propose that Anglo-Saxon Northumbrian culture (especially with regard to religious development and artistic expression of faith) is differentiated from the Anglo-Saxon culture found south of the Humber primarily as a result of the former's cultural introgression with native Celtic peoples. Many factors combined in the formative years of the kingdom to produce a people whose worldview, though similar to their more southern cousins (particularly in language, religion and shared history), set them apart

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<sup>26</sup> Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) III.2, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Swanton, ed., *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1987), lines 33b-41b, 95.

<sup>28</sup> I translate *weard* as "guardian." It was not uncommon for this term to be applied to earthly warrior kings such as Hroðgar, whom Beowulf urges on saying, *Aris rices weard, uton hraðe feran . . .* (*Beowulf*, 1390). Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> A. H. Smith, ed., *Three Northumbrian Poems: Cædmon's Hymn, Bede's Death Song and the Leiden Riddle* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1978), 42.

from the general body of Anglo-Saxon culture. The region is mountainous, and there is a tendency for segments of the population to develop in relative isolation. Living at the edge of the known world, as Turner suggested in his Frontier Thesis on the American West, may have had a formative effect on the Anglo-Saxons moving into the region.<sup>30</sup> However, I will argue that the overriding contributory factor that set Northumbria apart from the rest of Anglo-Saxon England was its multicultural population. I believe that this cultural hybridity<sup>31</sup> expressed itself in a social ethos in which features of the Germanic and Celtic worldview exist in such icons as the depiction of the Germanic warrior Christ, whose narrative depiction is part and parcel of the imaginative dream tradition of the Celts. In this chapter I will explore how the unique historical and anthropological contributions of the various peoples of the region led to a blending of traditions, often termed “Insular,” to produce Northumbrian culture. My methodology is obviously indebted to the *Annales* school of historiography, though in a modified form to reflect the importance of cultural and linguistic approaches. I view my work as giving less prominence to the traditional *mentalités* approach and more emphasis to the analysis of

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<sup>30</sup> Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893, had many flaws, not the least of which was how he ignored the presence of the numerous Indian peoples whose subjugation was required by the nation’s westward march and assumed that the bulk of newly acquired lands was actually democratically distributed to yeomen pioneers. What I believe is instructional here is that the Anglo-Saxon’s were free to experiment and, in their case, actually benefited from their encounter with the native population.

<sup>31</sup> To me, as a former biologist, the term “hybridity” means simply “a mixture.” However, because of my earlier training, I also place a premium on that state. One need only think of hybrid vigor, a term that implies that the mixed offspring has genetically superior qualities to those of the individual parents. In the context of Northumbria, I do not view hybridity in post-colonial terms. Rather, I see it as a necessary condition for the development of the Warrior/Christian saint. While Bede may have had some concerns regarding racial (or perhaps linguistic) essentialism, he did consider the Anglo-Saxon Northumbrian kings to be king of all the people in the land, both Germanic and Celtic.

the social history of cultural practices. In this chapter and the next I will review the history of late Roman Britain and early Anglo-Saxon England always with an eye toward the events that led to the formation of the Northumbrian kingdom and people.

### **The Topography, Peoples and Languages of Sixth- and Seventh-Century Northumbria**

We begin with geography since the landscape is a profoundly formative influence in the lives of all pre-modern peoples. Geographically, what was to become the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria differed markedly from what we consider Northumbria today (Figure I). During its Golden Age, the kingdom encompassed the lands between the Humber and Tweed Rivers on the east coast and from the Ribble River to the area around Solway Firth on its west coast. The interior of the kingdom is mountainous, dominated by the Pennine Chain which runs south to north (with a highpoint of 2,930 feet at Cross Fell) and further west by the broad range of the Cumbrian Mountains. The region's harsh winters, the average January temperature was 32°F and the land was covered with snow for more than 50 days per year,<sup>32</sup> along with dense forests (particularly in Bernicia) and the elevated terrain, tended to isolate communities and tribes and restrict east-west movements through a few key corridors, such as the Stainmoor pass. Since Roman times it was known that those who controlled the passes through the mountains controlled the

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<sup>32</sup> England had a more continental pattern of weather from the fifth through tenth centuries, producing much colder winters, but warmer summers. David Hill, *The Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 8-9.

region. Movement from the coast into the mountainous region was facilitated by several navigable rivers (see Figure I).<sup>33</sup> The Tweed, Tyne, Wear, and Tees all penetrate the



**Figure I: Topography of Northumbria**

interior of the kingdom, and it was along these highways that the invading Anglo-Saxons first made gains in their conquest of the region.

<sup>33</sup> Terrain Map, “Bamburgh, UK,” Dec. 2009, <http://maps.google.com/maps?hl=en&tab=wl>.



### **The Celtic Peoples and their Languages**

Before the Anglo-Saxons first landed on the island and began their conquest, the lands around Hadrian's Wall were home to three distinct cultural groups. The area was dominated by numerous Celtic tribes, such as the Picti, Votadini, Brigantes and Parisi, who had coalesced from smaller tribes and while having had contact with the Romans, remained unconquered, and for the most part had not mixed with the Romans. By the late fourth century, after the Dál Riata Scots had established a permanent kingdom on the Scottish southwest coast, Northern England's Celtic speakers can be divided into two major linguistic groups and within this distinction further divided by tribal allegiance. On the British Isles the Celtic language is divided into Brythonic (British/Welsh/Pictish) and Goidelic (Gaelic). These two groups are commonly named for their treatment of the /k<sup>w</sup>/ sound in proto-Indo-European. In the Goidelic family the /k<sup>w</sup>/ evolved into a /k/ sound (written as a "c" in Irish), giving Q-Celtic its name. In Brythonic, the ancestral /k<sup>w</sup>/ sound developed into the bilabial /p/ which characterizes the P-Celtic family. On the island of Britain this latter branch was the most common form of the Celtic language. When the Anglo-Saxons invaded the lands north of the Humber River, there were several major tribes of Britons who spoke P-Celtic, including the peoples of Elmet, Gwynedd, Strathclyde, Gododdin and Rheged. Additionally, both the northern and southern Picts spoke a dialect of P-Celtic.

While current scholarship views the differences between the language of the Picts and Britons as a difference of dialect, contemporaries such as Bede viewed them as two distinct language groups. In his *Ecclesiastical History* Bede described the vast kingdom

and power of King Oswald. One factor which he felt was important was, “consecutus est; denique omnes nationes et provincias Britanniae, quae in quattuor linguas, id est Brettonum, Pictorum, Scottorum, et Anglorum, diuisae sunt, in ditione accepit” (In fact, he brought under his dominion all the nations and provinces of Britain, which are divided into four languages, the Britons, the Picts, the Scots, and the English).<sup>34</sup> To be fair to Bede who was writing in the 730s, the language of the Picts and Britons began to diverge during the Roman period, and the process of linguistic separation was accelerated when Oswald, in 638, conquered Lothian, lands along the southern shore of the Firth of Forth, further isolating the Picts of the North from the Britons of the South and West. The fourth group, the Dál Riata Scots, the Irish, whose culture developed in almost complete isolation from the Romans, spoke Q-Celtic, a branch of the Celtic language remarkably distinct from P-Celtic (and nearly unintelligible to the latter group). For example, at the phonological level we can see the marked difference with some transparency. The voiceless bilabial stopped phoneme [p] of the indigenous British Celts is a reflex of the proto-Indo-European voiceless velar stopped phoneme [k]. Thus we have Continental Gaulish *petuar[ios]* and the Welsh *pedwar* “four.” However, the Old Irish—represented in the sounds of the émigrés from Dál Riata—word for “four” is *cethair* (cf. Latin *quattuor*) and appears to retain the earlier \*PIE [k]. One can imagine the level of incomprehension that might have resulted from such basic phonological differences.

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<sup>34</sup> Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) III.6, 230.

Into this mix of Celtic peoples came Germanic conquerors, the Anglo-Saxons. After their initial landing on the southeast coast of England, these tribal warriors, who ultimately dominated the region politically, spread their Germanic culture and language among the Celtic peoples as they moved throughout the island. In all but the regions of Wales, Cornwall and those north of the Humber, the Celtic culture was erased. The lands of the West resisted the Germanic invaders and remained dominated by their native Celtic rulers.<sup>35</sup> In the region of what was to become Northumbria, a fusion of cultures took place. Who those people were, how they began to coexist with one another, and the nature of the Germano-Celtic culture that they produced are the subject of this chapter. By 642, the year in which St. Oswald, king of a reunited Northumbria, was killed outside of the small Mercian town of Oswestry, the Anglo-Saxons had become the masters of most of the British Island south of the Firth of Forth. What is surprising is that these conquerors, who were relatively few in number, managed, in less than 200 years, to dominate large regions of land and have overlordship of the indigenous people.

My story begins with a miscalculation by a Romano-Celtic prince. Sometime in the mid 440s a few war bands of Anglo-Saxon tribes from the coast of modern Frisia were hired, traditionally by Vortigern, to come to southern England to defend his lands against savage invaders of overwhelming power (probably Picts and/or Dál Riata Scots). The Anglo-Saxons dispatched the invaders with ease. Once in place the Germanic mercenaries realized that the island was attractive, fertile and easily subdued and, to the

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<sup>35</sup> Though even in Wales the native Celtic peoples did not remain completely uninfluenced by their increasingly powerful Anglo-Saxon neighbors.

horror of their former employers, earnestly began their conquest of the island. One of the intriguing issues I will treat is how a relatively small number of Anglo-Saxons were able to wrest control of the island from its million or so inhabitants and to marginalize the native population. I will also seek to explain how the conquerors of the lands north of the Humber were the only Anglo-Saxons who did not obliterate Celtic culture as they conquered and took control. The ancestors of Oswald did rule the Britons, but they also blended with the local population physically, culturally and intellectually, and it was this admixture of Germanic and Celtic peoples, unique to England, who conceived of and produced the concept of a Christian warrior-saint.

But let us return, briefly, to an England before the Anglo-Saxons. The years immediately before the departure of the Roman legions from Briton, 406–410, probably represent the most thoroughly documented period in Romano-British history. After 410 there is essentially silence. Following the withdrawal of the last Roman legions from Britain until the writings of Bede in the early eighth century, there exists sparse (at best) documentary history. Fortunately, sparse does not mean an absence. Even in the darkest of the “Dark Ages” there are a few faint, flickering lights to guide our way. Though we lose the historical narratives which fifth-century imperial chroniclers such as the Theban Olympiodorus and Orosius, a native of Spain, who gave us information for the years 406–410, we gain, for the first time, voices of the Britons themselves. Gildas (c. 497–570), long discredited, has in the past 30 years attracted the attention of scholars and has been

(cautiously) returned to the fold of reliable source.<sup>36</sup> We also have the writings of St. Patrick (c. 390-461), in particular, his *Confessions*. Their writings are the product of their age and their land. They can tell us a great deal about the social, political and religious environment of fifth and sixth century Britain. Although the life of St. Germanus is more removed geographically, his description of his visit to England in 429 and the Gallic Chronicles both may also serve as guides to our investigation.

### **Sub-Roman Britain**

At the close of the fourth century, Roman Briton, more than any other imperial province, was dependent on the Roman administrative government for its bureaucracy, economic machinery, taxation and military. During the reign of Emperor Claudius, the conquered tribes of southern Briton seem to have abandoned their traditional culture and embraced the role of Roman dependent. Despite their dependence, the Romano-British at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century invoked the ire of the Roman emperors by sending forth generals bent on taking the imperial throne. Had the Romano-British lacked the proclivity for raising usurping tyrants, they may have remained under the (admittedly failing) Roman administrative protection through the fifth century. But that was not the case. The Romano-Britons raised and sent forth their last emperor, Constantine III (AD 407-411),<sup>37</sup> along with all of the remaining Roman military, taking advantage of the fact that the Roman military had not responded effectively to the Rhine

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<sup>36</sup> Patrick Sims-Williams, "The Settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 12 (1983), 10-14, 30; David Dumville, "The Chronology of *De Excidio*, Book I," in *Gildas: New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1984), 64-66; E. A. Thompson, "Gildas and the History of Britain," *Britannia* 10 (1979), 203, 215, 225-226.

<sup>37</sup> All dates listed for monarchs will be regnal years unless otherwise stated.

crossing of the Vandals and Alans. Unfortunately for the Britons, this latest pretender was defeated militarily and executed by Honorius.

The withdrawal of the legions alone in itself was not a sufficient cause for what was to be a complete and devastating collapse of the social order in Britain. The isolated Northern Province had developed a reputation, in the late fourth century, for spawning usurpers. Magnus Maximus (383-388), a charismatic and effective general, was declared emperor of the West by his British troops. In the fifth century the Britons supported a rapid succession of *tyranni* (Marcus, Gratius and Constantine III), each of whom they initially liked and then, just as quickly, had killed and replaced by another. Before the ascension of Constantine, the Britons usually were first punished for their indiscretions, forgiven and then welcomed back into the fold. Regrettably for the Britons, the world had changed, and they were soon to find themselves abandoned. After the execution of Constantine III in 411, the Romans did not return to Britain as they had done in the past. Honorius began a program of rather brutal persecution against Constantine's supporters who were gathered along the Rhine in Germany, and Britons who were supporters of Constantine must have been rather pleased by the emperor's preoccupation with the Germans, no doubt taking the opportunity to quietly walk away from whatever appointments they may have held under the usurper. After a few years of waiting for the wrath of the emperor to pass, Zosimus tells us that they wrote asking for the return of the Roman military. Honorius's answer was that that they need attend to their own security.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, ed. Green and Chaplin (London, 1814), 75.

The removal of the military as well as the commensurate departure of the imperial payroll, taxation apparatus, and associated coin appears to have immediately ground to a halt the economy of Britain. No doubt because of building economic and military pressures, after 402 there is no indication of any bronze coinage circulating. The bronzes were coins minted for general commercial activity and were the life-blood of a provincial economy. These coins were exchanged for the gold and silver brought into the province to pay troops and government officials and were used by the populace for commercial transactions. What coin was available after 402 seems to vanish after 406. The collapse of the money economy had immediate and profound repercussions across Britain. Commercial operations such as pottery ceased immediately. Without money to purchase the pots etc., these industries died out. After the first decade of the fifth century, there are no pots made on a potter's wheel. In fact, most of the pottery from 410 onward is a crude grass-type, non-wheel pottery made at home.<sup>39</sup>

Abandoned by the Roman Empire, the indigenous people became culturally isolated and primitive. Conditions in the former imperial province deteriorated so dramatically in the first two decades following the departure of Roman rule that by the 420s the people lived in a condition less technologically and culturally advanced than the Iron Age peoples who surrendered to Claudius in AD 43. So thoroughly Romanized were

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<sup>39</sup> K. R. Dark, "Pottery and Local Production at the End of Roman Britain," in *External Contacts and the Economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. R. Dark (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1996), 58-60; Christopher A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons A.D. 400-600* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), 133-135; David A. Hinton, "The Fifth and Sixth Centuries: Reorganization Among the Ruins," in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Garland, 1999), 53.

the Britons of the provinces of *Maxima* and *Flavia Caesariensis* that they no longer retained their earlier tribal identity and/or its associated political structure. With the collapsed economy and no urban administrators to govern them, the people quickly abandoned the cities, seeking isolation from one another in the countryside. Gildas, probably writing ca. 520 (see more below), gives us an eyewitness account of the disorder of his time. Despite his very confused chronology and vexingly vague references to people and places, and his admittedly jaundiced view of the Britons, he does shed some light on this time (if viewed with caution). He observes that,

relictis civitatibus muroque celso iterum civibus  
fugae, iterum dispersiones solito desperabiliores iterum ab hoste  
insectationes, iterum strages accelerantur crudeliores; et sicut  
agni a lanionibus, ita deflendi ciues ab inimicis discerpuntur  
ut commoratio eorum ferarum assimilaretur agrestium. nam  
et ipsos mutuo, perexigui uictus breui sustentaculo  
miserrimorum ciuium, latrocinando temperabant: et  
augebantur externae clades domesticis motibus, quod  
huiuscemodi tam crebris direptionibus uacuaretur omnis regio  
totius cibi báculo.<sup>40</sup>

It was into this world that the first waves of Anglo-Saxon warriors found themselves in ca. 443. Within two short generations following the departure of Roman authority the Britons had devolved into Hobbs's worse nightmare—factions squabbling and fighting each other as resources decreased and pressure from the Irish and Picts increased.

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<sup>40</sup> “ . . . they left their cities, abandoned the protection of the wall and dispersed themselves in flight more desperately than before. The enemy [Picts and Irish], on the other hand, pursued them with more unrelenting cruelty than before, the pitiable people were torn apart by their foe like lambs by the butcher, so that their life became like that of the beasts of the fields; for they turned their arms upon each other, for there being only a little amount of food for brief sustenance to the wretched people. Thus foreign calamities were augmented by internal disorders; so that the whole country was entirely destitute of food” (Gildas, *De Excidio Britannia*, § 19).



Yet, how did a small number of immigrant foreign warriors (by some estimates, only between 10,000 and 20,000) dominate a population, which ca. 410 was between 1 to 3 million,<sup>41</sup> so completely and in such a short time? Early studies had attempted to place Saxons in significant numbers along the Saxon Shore (*Litus Saxonicum*). The Romans recruited Saxon and Angle warriors during the fourth century to serve as *laeti* or *foederati* to defend the southern and eastern coasts. *Laeti* were people that Romans settled in depopulated regions. *Foederati* were free barbarians who were settled within the empire but kept their own leaders and laws in exchange for fighting.<sup>42</sup> They remained after the departure of the Roman military and joined with the invading Anglo-Saxons of the mid-fifth century.<sup>43</sup> While *Litus Saxonicum* could either mean the shore defended from the Saxons or the shore populated by Saxons, there is no literary mention of *laeti* or *foederati* serving in England, nor is there archaeological evidence to support a large population of these people prior to the fifth century.<sup>44</sup> What evidence we do have indicates that the Anglo-Saxons appear in Britain around the mid-fifth century. The overwhelming majority of the immigrants were male, professional warriors. For the period between the mid-fifth and seventh centuries, 47 percent of male inhumations included weapons in the burials.<sup>45</sup> The weapon burials peak at 61 percent of male burials between the late fifth and

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<sup>41</sup> Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 66-67.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>43</sup> J. N. L. Myres, *English Settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 86-114.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, *The End of Roman Britain*, 33-35.

<sup>45</sup> Heinrich Härke, "Warrior Graves? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite," *Past and Present* 126 (1990): 25, 40-41. Weapon burial was a Germanic rite not practiced by the Celtic people of Britain. However, by the beginning of the sixth century it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic graves. David A. Hinton, "The Fifth and Sixth Centuries: Reorganization

mid-sixth centuries.<sup>46</sup> Based on the absence of Anglo-Saxon burials prior to the fifth century and the large number of weapon burial graves in the fifth and sixth centuries, I will assume that the traditional account given by Gildas is the more likely case. Most are familiar with the story of King Vortigern (called Gurthrigern by Gildas)<sup>47</sup> who invited in the Angles to assist him in his fight against the Picts. Vortigern probably was one of the local tyrants who had taken control in the southeast of Britain, most likely Kent.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps he was a former member of the Romano-British elite who had gathered a sizable number of Britons around him for mutual protection. Whoever he was, he invited the Saxons to his land and, following a typical Roman pattern for dealing with barbarians, expected to pay them off with the promise of some land after they finished the chore he gave them. Things did not work out as he planned. The “guest workers” quickly overthrew their benefactor and made the first step toward the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England.

### **Anglo-Saxon Movement into Northumbria**

Unlike the tales seventh-century Anglo-Saxons told themselves when harkening back to their advent in England, their conquest of the island was not part of a divine plan (pagan or Christian, depending on the ruler) in which they tied themselves genealogically

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Among the Ruins,” in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (New York: Garland, 1999), 72-73.

<sup>46</sup> Heinrich Härke, “Warrior Graves,” 30.

<sup>47</sup> Gildas § 23. Gildas, *De Excidio Britannia*, § 19, in *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom. Arthurian Period Sources 7 (London: Phillimore & Co., 1978), 97.

<sup>48</sup> Adding to Gildas’s description, Nennius places the Saxons on the island of Thanet in the year 447. Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, §§ 31, 36.

to the probably mythic Hengest and Horsa. Neither was the conquest of the 440s widespread nor definitive; however, in retrospect it seemed unavoidable. While the number of Anglo-Saxons who trickled into England in the fifth century is remarkably small relative to the indigenous people, the Britons of southern England were ripe for conquest by any organized, traditional military power. Had the Anglo-Saxons not come in during the mid-fifth century, it is likely that the southern, Romanized portion of England would have fallen to the Picts, Scots or perhaps the Britons of the Northwest. These northern peoples, who had not been brought under the control of the Romans, retained their tribal organization and were making significant inroads into the South. The Saxons, as they moved west and north across the island, became one more player in a power struggle that was to last for the next two centuries.

As implied by contemporary writers such as Gildas and later ones such as Nennius and Bede, the conquest of the South by Anglo-Saxons over the Romanized Britons was accomplished with relative ease and was all but complete by the first decades of the sixth century. It was during the late fifth and early sixth centuries that the more gradual process of state making, whereby small Anglo-Saxon “kingdoms” were absorbed by larger more powerful ones, leading to the production of the familiar early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, was well apace. By the mid-sixth century most small principalities had coalesced into what we know as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex, Essex, Sussex, East Anglia, Kent and Mercia (though Mercia was more of a loose amalgamation than the others). Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* names Ælle, king of the

South Saxons<sup>49</sup> (477-491), as the first bretwalda—chief-king. Much is unknown about Ælle; however, his early date implies that the Anglo-Saxons had quickly taken control of southern England from the Britons and were in the process of dividing the spoils and establishing hierarchical relationships among themselves (Figure II).



**Figure II. Late Sixth Century British, Irish, Picts and Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms**

<sup>49</sup> Bede, *HE* II.5, 148.

### **Northumbria, Kingdom Formation and Tribal Hidage of Mercia**

By 616 the unification of Bernicia and Deira by the Anglo-Saxons was complete, and most, if not all, of the British kingdoms of the Old North had been brought under the control of what can be thought of as the Kingdom of Northumbria. The history of Bernicia and Deira, I suggest, presents an opportunity to observe, albeit incompletely, the process of kingdom consolidation that must have occurred across England during the early Anglo-Saxon period. The martial events from the mid-sixth to early seventh century do not represent the eradication or the cultural apartheid of these defeated polities, but rather the subordination of the weaker kingdoms which were then integrated into a more powerful Northumbrian kingdom. This process is not unlike the consolidation of proto-kingdoms into the larger, familiar kingdoms such as Wessex, Kent or East Anglia. While this process occurred in the South earlier, in fifth and sixth century, and is, for the most part, lost to history, Æthelfrith's conquests of his British, Pictish and Irish neighbors, in addition to the subordination of Deira, present a clear picture of Anglo-Saxon kingdom making. During the closing decade of sixth century and first decade of the seventh, the various kingdoms conquered by the Bernicians were placed under the rule of Æthelfrith as their supreme lord. While we lack direct records of these events, we may compare this process with clues to the existence of sub-kingdoms in the South.

The Tribal Hidage, probably from Mercia and first written between the mid-seventh and second half of the eighth century, exists in one extant copy found in the

British Library, MS Harley 3271, which dates from the eleventh century.<sup>50</sup> The Tribal Hidage is a listing of the land holdings for 35 seventh-century political units of varying size. While it is a unique document, having no continental analog, it was not unique in its time. It lists the number of hides (a hide is roughly equal to 120 acres, about enough land to sustain one free family) that are to be found in a given territory. Contemporaries usually referred to any of the peoples and their lands listed in the Tribal Hidage as either *provincia* or *regnum*, terms which Bede used interchangeably. Rulers of the territories listed could be called *rex*, *subregulus*, *princeps*, *dux*, *praefectus* or *comes*.<sup>51</sup> Bede, in a discussion of Peada, son of Penda and the king of Mercia (30,000 hides), names him *princeps*.<sup>52</sup> When referring to Tondberht, ruler of South Gyrwe (600 hides), a dependent kingdom of Mercia, he too is named *princeps*.<sup>53</sup>

Some of the larger territories listed, such as Mercia, Wessex, Sussex, and Hwicce, are familiar kingdoms; however, many of the others listed are either unknown (Noxgaga, 5,000 hides; Ohtgaga, 2,000 hides), or we are unable to place them with confidence (Whitgara, 600 hides, was believed to be the Isle of Wight), or they are merely administrative subunits. For this essay the value of this document lies in its identification of peoples who were in the process of being absorbed into larger kingdoms. Even though many of the “kingdoms” had been subsumed into the more powerful ones, the royal

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<sup>50</sup> David Dumville, “The Tribal Hidage: An Introduction to its Texts and Their History,” in *The Formation of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 225.

<sup>51</sup> *EEK*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> *HE*, III.21, 278.

<sup>53</sup> *HE*, IV.19, 390.

dynasties of those lands were retained. To the high kings, the rulers of small territories may have been sub-kings or princes, but to their own people they were still king and held a great deal of autonomy from their overlord. They could raise an army for their (and the high king's) defense, they could tax their people, and they retained administrative and judicial control over their lands. This state of affairs was clearly one of practicality. The high-king could not, in the early Middle Ages, administer all of the lands of a large kingdom. Retaining the king of a territory within one's own eased rule of the land. The subordinate families were kept in line by the threat of force, and this arrangement worked well while the overlord was alive and powerful.

While there is no extant Tribal Hidage for Northumbria, one must certainly have existed. Bede was familiar with the number of hides in various kingdoms and supplies readers of his *Ecclesiastical History* with information that appears to have been common knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Lack of documentation from Northumbria is not uncommon. Though Northumbria is, for the seventh and eighth centuries, the richest source of hagiography and, of course, Bede's history, we have almost no charters or law codes. The absence of a Tribal Hidage for the region does not surprise.

We have seen that the kingdom of Northumbria contained the two component sub-kingdoms of Angles, Bernicia and Deira. In addition to these lands, King Æthelfrith's conquest added numerous smaller British, Pictish, and Irish kingdoms that were subordinate to the king and paid him tribute. By 616, the territories within his

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<sup>54</sup> *HE*, IV.13, 14, 19, 372, 382, 396.

sphere of influence would include the Manu Gododdin, Maetae Picts, and the enigmatic Miathi, all from the headwater region of the Firth. His victory, such as it was, at Degaстан probably earned him temporary control over the Dál Riata of Áedán mac Gabrán (574-608) and his son and successor, Eochaid Buide (608-629). His power also extended over the Britons of Strathclyde, Rheged, and Elmet. His campaign into the region around Chester may also have solidified his hold on the western British kingdoms and brought the kingdom of Powys under the shadow of his hand. Yet, while all these territories were subordinate to Northumbria, all retained their own royal dynasties and their individual cultural identity, and all interacted in more ways than just through warfare. They intermarried, exchanged noble children in fosterage, and some received the Christian faith. Northumbria in the first quarter of the seventh century was a kingdom not just of Anglo-Saxons, but represented a true blend of northern tribes—Germanic and Celtic. King Eadwine (616-633) would retain the territory of Æthelfrith, and even add to it during his reign. When Eadwine was killed by a coalition of Angles from Mercia and Britons from the West led by Cadwallon, Northumbria would fragment. It was into this political world that the sons of Æthelfrith returned from their exile upon the death of Eadwine in 633. And it is to their story that I now wish to turn.

Movement north into what was to become Deira and Bernicia was far slower and consolidation of power more difficult. The first Angles to push into these northern regions did not meet bands of ill-disciplined and cowardly (if Gildas is to be believed) men led by local tyrants. The north of England was well settled by Celtic peoples with a long and intact tribal heritage and a willingness to fight for their warrior-king. In brief,



they were war-like people not dissimilar to the invading Anglo-Saxons. In what was to become Anglo-Saxon Northumbria lived several distinct, well-organized tribes of Britons. The Gododdin (also known as the *Votadini*) occupied lands north of the Tweed and were centered on Edinburgh (*Din Eidyn*). To the west were the tribes of Rheged, whose tribal center seems to be Carlisle and Eden Valley. The kingdom of Strathclyde had its power centered around Dumbarton. There was also the tenacious kingdom of Elmet, a triangle shaped kingdom with its point on the Humber estuary, located in what is today West Riding Yorkshire, and its core functions in the district of Leeds bounded by the Rivers Ouse and Aire. Additionally, to the far west were the Welsh<sup>55</sup> tribal kingdoms of Gwynedd and Powys. All of these tribes had had contact with the Romans but had never been subjugated to the degree of the tribes of the South.

Further north lived the Picts. These people most probably were the Caledonians described by Tacitus in AD 98. The term *picti* is not used to describe these people until the victory of Constantius I over the Picts in 306. The Maetae and Manau were the tribes of southern Picts, who lived in the vicinity of the Firth of Forth, and they had even less contact with the Romans than the various northern tribes of Britons. To keep these people—whom the Romans saw as marauding sea-pirates—in check, a chain of signal stations along the northeast coast from the Tyne River to Flamborough Head was constructed. Their military prowess on land was the primary reason for the construction of Hadrian's Wall. They were also the barbarians who, in Gildas's memorable

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<sup>55</sup> I will use this anachronistic designation of these peoples more for convenience than how they described themselves. The name Welsh is from the Old English *wealh* or *wealisc*, "foreigner."

description, come “ . . . like dark throngs of worms that wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm”<sup>56</sup> and overrun the Antonine wall.

The Dál Riata Scots, like their compatriots in Ireland, had very little dealings with the Romans and an impressive tradition of warfare to rival that of the Anglo-Saxons. Citing Gildas again, they were differentiated from the Picts “only in manners but were inspired with the same avidity for blood.”<sup>57</sup> Their raiding of the western coast was so intense that at the end of the fourth century the Romans constructed a series of coastal forts similar to those that they built on the east coast to oppose the raids by the Picts. Irish raids of the west of Britain continued well into the fifth century. In one of those raids during the first decade of the fifth century, St. Patrick was taken to Ireland as a slave. His story in the *Confessions* describes the relative ease by which the Irish crossed and raided the western coast.<sup>58</sup>

The invasion of Deira, the region of Northumbria roughly found between the Humber and Tees River, probably began at the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth and most likely came from East Anglia. Emboldened by the successes in the south of England, the Anglo-Saxon invaders began to move north. Sometime in the early sixth century, some adventurers, possibly Eoppa and Yffi, crossed the Humber into the lands of Deira. This region and what was to become the northern kingdom of Bernicia

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<sup>56</sup> . . . *quasi in alto Titane incalescenteque caumate de artissimis foraminum caverniculis fusci vermiculorum cunei*. Gildas, *De Excidio Britannia*, § 19.

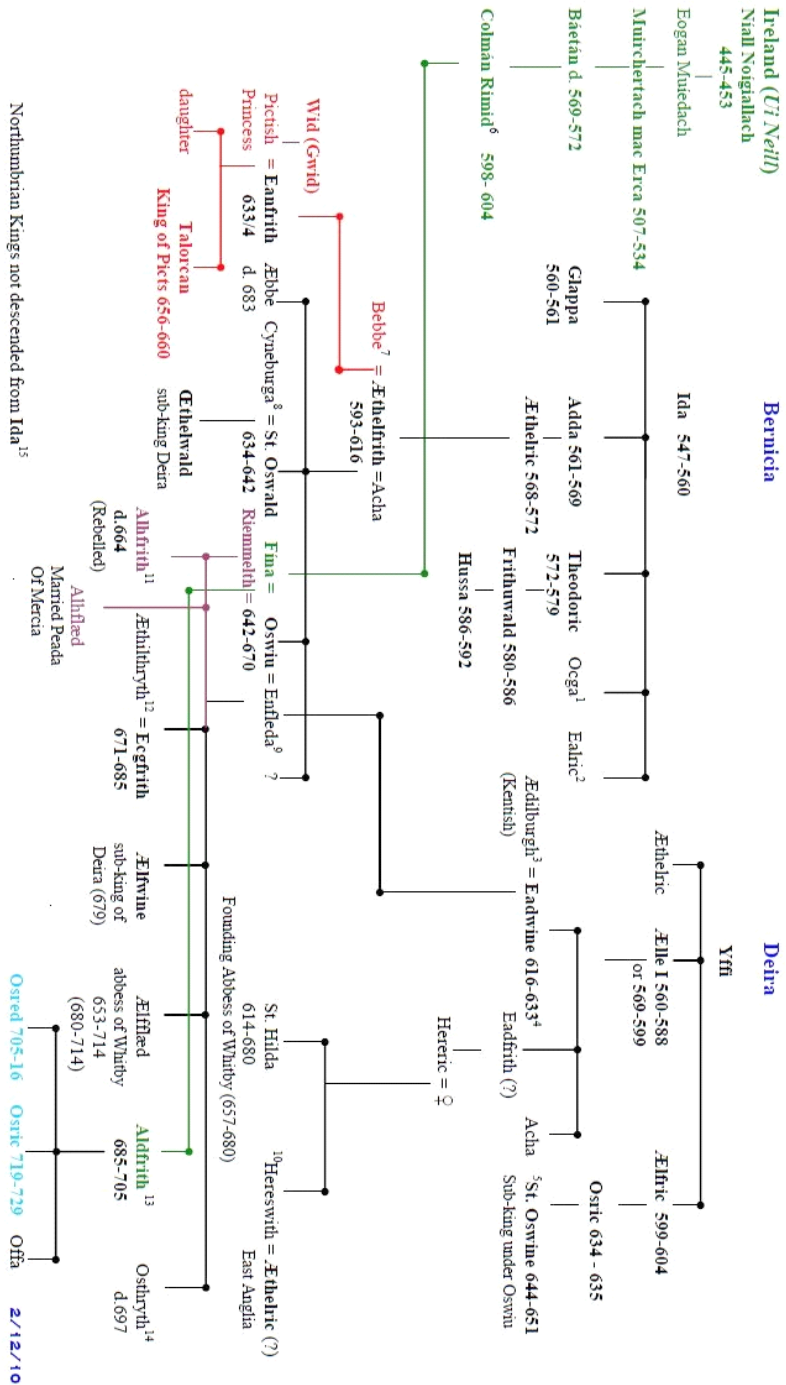
<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> St. Patrick, *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life*, ed. and trans. A. B. E. Hood (London: Philimore & Co., 1978), §10, 18, and 19.

retained the name given by the original Celtic inhabitants. The Angles, at first, made halting progress as they moved north to the Tees River. However, they were able to subjugate or drive out the Britons who lived there. At some point in the second quarter of the sixth century, an invasion force drove north of the Tees and seized the British Iron-Age fortress *Din Guardi*. This elevated, costal fortress gave the invaders secure access to the sea, which was probably the route they used for their initial invasion. During the second half of the sixth century, the mists of mythology begin to part, and the first verifiable historical persons begin to emerge. Ida, son of Eoppa, was the Anglo-Saxon king who seized *Din Guardi*, the fortress that under his grandson Æthelfrith was to be called Bebbanburg (Bamburgh). Ida is a semi-mythical character about whom we know little more than his name. We know only that he seized the hill-fort from the Britons around 547, establishing the ruling dynasty of Bernicia and later Northumbria. We do have more historical information on some of his sons, though very little is known about most of them. Most of what we know is that these sons were embroiled in a series of wars between the Celtic inhabitants of this region that were to last another 60 years.

### **Out of Myth into History: The Northern Realm 547-603**

For the numerous sons of Ida (five or six of them, see Figure III) the order of their reigns is confused. The conquest of the northern part of the island was certainly a slow process that was wrought with numerous reversals. One of the sons of Ida, either Husa (586-592) or, according to some sources, Theodoric (572-579), had to fight vigorously to fend off a coordinated attack on Bamburgh by a coalition of Britons led by Urien, king of Rheged, Riderch Hen, king of Strathclyde (*Damnonii*), Gwallawg of Elmet, and Morcant,



### Figure III: Anglo-Saxon Kings of Bernicia and Deira 547-782

a king or prince of Gododdin (*Votadini*). Nennius tells that King Husa of the Bernicia and his sons were isolated by the Britons on the Island of Morcant (Lindisfarne) for three days and nights. During the siege, Morcant is reported to have plotted and carried out the assassination of Urien—from envy, according to Nennius.<sup>59</sup> It is possible that Morcant, by killing Urien, saw an opportunity to eliminate two problems. The Angles still held *Din Guardi* and could probably have held out on Lindisfarne until they were supported either from Deira, the fortress, or both. A British victory was by no means a certainty, but we must remember that Theodoric was not a tactician of Urien's caliber. However misguided his goals (as we shall see), it is important to realize that the realm of the Gododdin lies primarily along the costal lands between the Firth of Forth and the River Tyne—the same lands on which the Bernician kingdom was being established. By making a deal with Husa, he rid himself of a powerful British rival, and removed some of the pressure the Angles placed on his lands.

Urien was, at that time, a beloved king and a strong opponent of the Angles and is celebrated in several poems from *The Taliesin* (late sixth century, see below). In one of the many encomia of Urien, the bard praises the prowess of Urien claiming that,

From Urien Rheged.  
The protector of Rheged,  
The praise of Ier, the anchor of the country.  
My inclination is on thee,  
Of every hearing.

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<sup>59</sup> *Husa regnavit annis septem: contra illum quattuor reges Urbgen et Riderchhen et Guallanc et Morcant dimicaverunt. Deodric contra illum Urbgen cum filiis dimicabat fortiter. in illo autem tempore aliquando hostes, nunc cives vincebantur et ipse conclusit eos tribus diebus et noctibus in insula Metcaud et dum erat in expeditione, iugulatus est Morcanto destinante pro invidia, quia in ipso prae omnibus regibus virtus maxima erat instauratione belli* (HBI, § 63).

Heavy thy spear-throwing,  
 When the battle is heard,  
 When they resort to battle,  
 A smarting is made.  
 Fire in houses before day,  
 Before the sovereign of the cultivated plain,  
 The most fair cultivated plain,  
 And its most generous men.  
 The Angles are accustomed to be without homage  
 From this most valiant king.<sup>60</sup>

Needless to say, the death of Urien caused the coalition to fragment and the Angles to more firmly establish themselves into the political landscape of north Britain. While the Anglo-Saxons pass over this event and most of the other conflicts with the Britons in silence, the Britons of the region record several of their battles against the encroaching Angles through their rich bardic tradition. Many of the martial events of the sixth-century Britons have, through uncertain transmission, found their way into medieval Welsh manuscripts.<sup>61</sup>

That they were able to fend off the Anglo-Saxons during the invasion period is revealed by their voice through two epic poems, *The Gododdin* and *The Taliesin*. *The Gododdin*, written by Aneirin, is an epic poem from northeast Northumbria, dating to the late sixth century. It purports to represent an eyewitness account of a battle in which the Britons are utterly routed by the Bernicians. There are two extant versions (A and B), both found in a single mid-thirteenth-century manuscript (Cardiff MS 2.8). The B version has been shown through orthographic evidence to be a copy of a ninth-century

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<sup>60</sup> Taliesin, "Song for Urien Rheged," *Book of Taliesin*, XXXII.

<sup>61</sup> See Dumville for an acceptance of transmission by scholars but no clear explanation of how they were transmitted. *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, "Northumbria."

manuscript. The work itself is a collection of elegies for fallen warriors at the battle of Catraeth (ca. 590),<sup>62</sup> a battle fought between the Britons and either Theodoric (572-579), Husa (586-592), or Æthelfrith (593-616) of Bernicia. The second collection of poems gives insight into the political world of the Britons at the end of the sixth century, as well as introducing characters who will play an important role in the religious and cultural ties between the Northumbrians and the Britons of the seventh and early eighth centuries. *The Taliesin* is a collection of poems and encomia to King Urien of Rheged. Of the 57 poems in the manuscript, most scholars agree that only 12 represent authentic works written by a historical poet named Taliesin.<sup>63</sup> The others seem to represent part of a bardic tradition and have been ascribed to a mytho-historic character found in Welsh tales, often associated with Merlin, Arthur and Welsh pagan deities. The existence of this other bard is greatly in doubt.<sup>64</sup> The Peniarth 2 manuscript, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, dates to the second half of the fourteenth century, but represents a copy of a tenth-century manuscript based on internal evidence.<sup>65</sup> Eleven of the poems believed to be written by the historical Taliesin (late sixth, early seventh century) are encomia to the battle prowess of King Urien of Rheged and one to his son Owain.<sup>66</sup> The *Taliesin* poems point toward a battle or series of battles waged around Wensleydale, about 30 miles southeast of York on the Humber River.

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<sup>62</sup> Both the exact date and location of the poem have yet to be verified. It is believed that Catraeth is Catterick in North Yorkshire.

<sup>63</sup> Ford and others, *The Poems of the Taliesin: English Version*, ed. Ifor Williams, 1975.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Patrick K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 17.

<sup>66</sup> *The Taliesin*, xlv.

*Din Guardi* was retained by the Anglo-Saxons not without the help of serious infighting among the Britons. After Urien's death hostilities cease briefly. Unfortunately for Morcant, the peace of the *Gododdin* was not to last long. Sometime during the last two decades of the sixth century, the concord came to an end. The poet Aneirin laments that,

Men went to Gododdin, laughter loving,  
Bitter in battle, each blade in line.  
A brief year they were quiet, in peace.  
Bodgad's son with his hand took revenge.  
Though they went to churches for shriving,  
Old men and young, noble and lowly,  
The certain meeting with death came to  
them.<sup>67</sup>

The Angles, no doubt anxious to secure their land route between their outpost at *Din Guardi* and the kingdom of Deira, pushed their advantage and engaged the Britons at the battle of Catraeth (Catterick). If the battle described in *The Gododdin* took place after the siege of Lindisfarne, it was most likely fought by King Æthelfrith (593-616). Hussa was no longer king; he was probably deposed and/or killed by Æthelfrith. As a result, the deal that he made with Morcant was also void. Æthelfrith was an aggressive warrior-king clearly intent on consolidating and expanding his power. His first step would require subjugating the Britons in the land that he considered his kingdom. His victories were, according to Bede, swift and decisive. So successful was his conquest that Bede says that,

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<sup>67</sup> Gwyr a aeth Ododin chwerthin ognaw, Chwerw yn nhrin â lläin yn ymdulliaw, Byr flynedd yn heddd ydd ýnt yn daw, Mab botgat gwnaeth gwynnyeith gwreith e law Ket elwynt e lanneu e benydyaw A hen a yeueing a hydyr a llaw Dadyl diheu angheu y eu treidaw Aneirin, *Y Gododdin*, ed. and trans. A. O. H. Jarman (Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1988) poem VII.



His temporibus regno Nordanhymbrorum praefuit rex fortissimus et gloriae cupidissimus Aedilfrid, qui plus omnibus Anglorum primatibus gentem uastauit Brettonum; ita ut Sauli quondam regi Israeliticae gentis comparandus uideretur, excepto dumtaxat hoc, quod diuinae erat religionis ignarus.<sup>68</sup>

While we have no more records of battles with the Britons in the vicinity of *Din Guar*, it seems plausible that Æthelfrith, having defeated the Gododdin close to his coastal strongholds, pushed the Britons to a few isolated enclaves at the margins of his kingdom. With his base secure he seems to have sought to dominate the wider region around him. During the 590s, he campaigned in Mercia, the region around Elmet (which his successor Eadwine does conquer ca. 617) and pressed his advantage against the remaining Gododdin. At some point, the Angles find themselves battling a certain Tudfwlch Hir in the area near Catraeth (Catterick). Probably overwhelmed by Æthelfrith's force (we know that he always struck his enemies with a heavy hand), Tudfwlch appealed for aid from the Gododdin main fortress of *Din Eidyn* (Edinburgh). In response to his call, an elite band of warriors marched to meet the Bernicians at what apparently was to be their final battle.

A disaster, keening of comrades,  
His campaign was, hot-blooded killer.  
There marched on Catraeth  
No hero whose heart  
Aimed so high at a feast;  
No man of such parts  
Came from Eidyn's fort:

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<sup>68</sup> “At this time, Æthelfrith, a very brave king, and most eager for glory, governed the kingdom of the Northumbrians, and ravaged the Britons more than any other English ruler. He might indeed be compared to Saul, once king of the Israelites, excepting only this: he was ignorant of the true religion” (*HE*, I.34).

He drove the foe in flight,  
Tudfwlch Hir, out of house and homeland.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the fantastic account of 600 Briton warriors standing firm and slaughtering a massive army of Angles many times their size, the battle was decisive in favor of the Bernicians. The army of the Gododdin was wiped out almost to the man. We have Aneirin's account of the survivors, of which the poet was one.

Men went to Catraeth, they were renowned.  
Wine and mead from gold cups was their drink,  
A year in noble ceremonial,  
Three men and three score and three hundred gold-torqued.  
Of all those who charged, after too plentiful drink,  
But three escaped through prowess in battle,  
The two war-hounds of Aeron and Cynon returned,  
And I, from my blood-shedding, for my song's sake.<sup>70</sup>

With the cream of the Gododdin military crushed, Æthelfrith must have easily moved along the southern shore of the Forth, taking *Din Eidyn* and perhaps the British stronghold at Stirling. After the beginning of the seventh century, the Gododdin are heard from no more. However, Æthelfrith's swift movement along the Forth River brought him to the attention of, and ultimately in conflict with, Áedán mac Gabrán (574-608), king of the Dál Riata Scots.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ny chryssiws gatraeth, Mawr mor ehelaeth, E aruaeth uch arwyd, Ny bu mor gyffor, O eidyn ysgor, A esgarei oswyd, Tutuwlch hir ech e dir ae dreuyd* (YGI, xiii).

<sup>70</sup> *Gwyr a aeth gatraeth buant enwawc, Gwin a med o eur vu eu gwirawt, Blwydyn en erbyn urdyn deuawt, Trywyr a thri ugeiut a thrychant eurdorchawc, Or sawl yt gryssyassant uch gormant wirawt, Ny diengis namyn tri o wrhydri fossawt, Deu gatki aeron a chenon dayrawt, A minheu om gwaetfreu gwerth vy gwennawt* (YGI, xxii, 16).

While Æthelfrith was busy consolidating his kingdom westward at the expense of the Gododdin, Áedán was expanding east, well beyond the borders of his western kingdom, into the lands of the southern Picts and the western Gododdin along the Forth River. In 582 or 583, he was the victor of the battle of Manu.<sup>71</sup> The Manu<sup>72</sup> are most likely a branch of the Gododdin, who lived in the Forth River valley. No doubt emboldened by his success, Áedán continued his aggressive campaign in the region. In his *Life of Saint Columba*, Adomnán tells that St. Colum Cille [Columba] foretold of a more costly victory in his campaign along the Froth River. In the 590s, Áedán won a pyrrhic victory at the battle of Miathi,<sup>73</sup> a battle which may have been fought northwest of Stirling in the Ochil Hills.<sup>74</sup> The saint, miles from the battle on the island of Iona, said to his followers that “the victory is granted to Áedán but it is not a happy one.”<sup>75</sup> It was at this battle that he lost 300 men and two of his sons, Artuir and Eochaid Finn. As the territorial ambitions of the two kings increasingly overlapped, conflict between the two powers became inevitable. The first reported skirmish between the Scots and the Angles

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<sup>71</sup> Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba*, ed. and trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin, 1991), 269.

<sup>72</sup> *Manu* is the Irish equivalent of the Welsh *Manaw*, the name of a British territory occupied by the Gododdin (Sharpe, 269).

<sup>73</sup> There is much speculation regarding the identity of these peoples. Some, Anderson and Anderson, 1961, associated them with the Manu Gododdin and proposed that the two battles were the same. Sharpe, 1991, suggests that they may represent an isolated tribe of Picts or possibly a non-Indo-European people, 269-271.

<sup>74</sup> F. T. Wainwright, *The Problem of the Picts* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1955), 23-24.

<sup>75</sup> *Aidanoque, quamlibet infelix, tamen concessa victoria est.* J. T. Fowler, *Adamnani Vita St. Columbae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 98.

took place ca. 598 at a battle in the Pictish province of Circhenn (Tayside). Áedán was defeated, and his son, Domangart, was killed.<sup>76</sup>

A more decisive battle was to come five years later. Tension between the two kings must have been on the increase as they were increasingly overlapping in areas of conquest. Áedán, in an attempt to strengthen his army for a final battle against the Bernicians, formed a coalition of British kings, possibly from Strathclyde and Powys, in the hope of defeating the encroaching Angles. Áedán also had an alliance with a certain Atheling Hering, son of Hussa, presumably the former King Hussa of Bernicia. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 603,

Her Ægðan Scotta cining feaht wið Deolreda 7 wið  
Æðelferþe Norðhymbra kining æt Dægsanstane, 7 man ofsloh  
mæst ælne his here. Þær man ofsloh Theodbald Æðelferðes  
broðor mid eallan his weorode. Ne dorste siððan nan Scotta  
cininga lædan here on þas þeoda. Hering Hussan sunu lædde  
þone here ðider.<sup>77</sup>

Anglo-Saxons did not practice primogeniture, nor was the king's family (during the early Middle Ages) guaranteed right of succession.<sup>78</sup> Germanic kings were primarily war-leaders. While they lived, they may have had an aura of supernatural powers, but this glow did not necessarily extend to their sons. The family lacked a divine mandate to rule.

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<sup>76</sup> *The Annals of Clonmacnoise being the Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408*, ed. Denis Murphy (Dublin: University Press, 1896), erroneously list the event as happening in 590 and include two other of Áedán's sons, Artuit and Eochaid Finn, as being killed at the battle.

<sup>77</sup> AD 603. "In this year Áedán, king of the Scots, fought with the Dál Riata, and with Æthelfrith, king of the Northumbrians, at Dægsanstan; and they killed almost all his raiding army. Theobald, brother of Æthelfrith, with all his troops, also was slain. None of the Scottish kings dared afterwards lead an army against this nation. Hering, the son of Hussa, led the army there." *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21.

<sup>78</sup> Despite the fact that the king's family was not guaranteed the right to rule, all of the kings of Bernicia from 547 to 759 with the accession of Æthelwold Moll (759-765) were descendants of the same family, just different branches.

For Anglo-Saxons, political power came from the blade of a sword, and one effective way to gain and keep power was to kill rival males (usually kin) and their families.<sup>79</sup> It would seem that Husa may have suffered this fate at the hands of Æthelfrith, and his son Hering was forced to flee for his life. No doubt eager for revenge and a chance to regain power, Hering led Áedán's Dál Riata army to Degsastan in the hopes of crushing Æthelfrith. Such, however, was not to be his fate. By all accounts the battle, though costly to the Bernicians, was a crushing defeat for the Scots and their allies. So complete was the loss that we do not hear about Áedán's activities again, and his last years are shrouded in mystery. Degsastan, just one year before he was to assume complete control over Deira established Æthelfrith as the dominant warlord of the North of Briton and positioned him to become bretwalda to the Anglo-Saxons south of the Humber.

### **Æthelfrith and the Unification of Northumbria: 604-616**

Deira, which was the southern half of what was to become the kingdom of Northumbria, encompassed the lands from Hadrian's Wall south to the Humber River. The ruling family of these Anglo-Saxons traced their ancestry to the semi-mythic founder Yffi. The first king of Deira of whom we know more than just his name was king Aelle I (569-599), a son of Yffi. Ida of Bernicia may have been a thegn of Yffi and led the northern Angles to Bamburgh in his name. Even though the expeditionary force that moved into Bernicia came from, and was initially subordinate to Deira, by the end of the sixth century, the structure of that relationship had changed such that Deira became

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<sup>79</sup> This was a Germanic practice which is well attested to in Merovingian Gaul, as recorded by Gregory of Tours in *King of the Franks*. Weak sons of former monarchs were either killed or their heads were shaved and they were exiled (or placed in a monastery after the acceptance of Christianity).

subordinate to the Bernician kings. In 603/4 the arrangement of autonomy for Deira was terminated by Ida's great-great grandson King Æthelfrith of Bernicia (593-616) when he took control of Deira from Aelle's brother Ælfric (599-603/4).<sup>80</sup> Though not recorded, the takeover of Deira must have involved military action, or at least a visible military threat. To further solidify conquest of Deira and the subsequent union of Northumbria under one chieftain, Æthelfrith married Aelle's daughter Acha. Shortly after the marriage, Æthelfrith expelled most of Aelle's family, including the future king Eadwine and his children.<sup>81</sup>

Notwithstanding the close ties between Deira and Bernicia, the two kingdoms were quite different politically. Deira was essentially at peace during the late sixth century. Prosperity often accompanies peace, and the kingdom seems to have been richer than its northern cousin. While the Bernician house maintained close ties with the kingdoms to the north and west, not just in combat but also through intermarriage and trade, the Deiran royal house emphasized closer ties with the kingdoms south of the Humber. The peace that Deira experienced may have been the result of it falling under the protection of Rædwald's East Anglia. When expelled from Deira, the exiled Eadwine (616-633/4) first wandered through Mercia seeking support and eventually married Cwenburh, the daughter of King Cearl (d. ca. 626).<sup>82</sup> Possibly in response to the

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<sup>80</sup> The details regarding the taking of Deira by Æthelfrith are passed over in silence by Bede. It was no doubt a military takeover. What is less known is whether Æthelfrith waited for the natural death of Ælfric, killed him in battle or had him assassinated (Æthelfrith did seem to like poisoning rivals).

<sup>81</sup> For a genealogy of the two Anglo-Saxon dynasties and associated Picts, Irish, and Britons see Appendix 1.

<sup>82</sup> *HE*, II.14, 186.

increasing power of Penda, he left Mercia and sought the protection of East Anglia. Even though he was under the protection of Rædwald, he continued to strengthen ties with Kent,<sup>83</sup> perhaps hoping to forge relations with Kent's Merovingian allies. Kirby rightly suggests that the Eadwine saw the value of increased ties with Kent. His children by Ædilburgh would be related to the Merovingian king of Gaul. Additionally, his wife's Christian beliefs, and the papacy's interest in extending the Faith in Anglo-Saxon England, would have put him in contact with Rome.<sup>84</sup>

Regardless of his future plans, Eadwine sought to avoid death at the hands of Æthelfrith or his agents. The year in which Eadwine fled Mercia for East Anglia is uncertain. He may have fled when Æthelfrith's power began to pressure King Cearl.<sup>85</sup> We know that Penda (who ultimately kills Eadwine in 633) may have begun his rise to power in Mercia as early as 607, though probably not quite that early.<sup>86</sup> Penda, who was a fierce rival of the Mercian king Cearl, may have seen Eadwine as a potentially dangerous enemy, or he may have been willing to assassinate Eadwine in return for a later favor from Æthelfrith. The reach of the Northumbrian king had indeed grown far. Hereric, Eadwine's nephew, had fled to the British kingdom of Elmet, seeking protection from the Bernicians. King Ceretic, a descendant of Gwallawg, initially offered Hereric protection,

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<sup>83</sup> While living in East Anglia under the protection of Rædwald, he chose to marry Ædilburgh, the daughter of King Æthelberht and sister of King Eadbald (616-642), rather than the sister of Rædwald. We are not told of the fate of his first wife Cwenburh.

<sup>84</sup> D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), 65.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>86</sup> Nicholas Brooks, "The Formation of the Mercian Kingdom," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Basset (London: Leicester Press, 1989), 164-165.

but then had him poisoned at court.<sup>87</sup> Safe havens were clearly few in number. Eadwine opted to go to East Anglia, the one kingdom that could stand against the power and influence of Bernicia.

Rædwald must have been eager to assist Eadwine. The exile's presence would give him an opportunity to challenge his nemesis, the warrior-king Æthelfrith, and perhaps become the dominant power in the region. Nevertheless, Æthelfrith did try to convince Rædwald to have Eadwine killed, and he is reported, after a few attempts, to have accepted the bribe.<sup>88</sup> According to Bede, Eadwine was made aware of the impending betrayal and was preparing to die. While waiting, an angel comes to him and extracts a promise of his conversion at a later date. Eadwine makes the deal with the angel sent to him, and King Rædwald is convinced by his wife not to kill a guest in his house. While Bede uses this event to presage Eadwine's acceptance of Roman Catholicism from Paulinus when shown the sign, it also shows that Rædwald was ready to go to war with Æthelfrith.

The battle was not long in coming. In 616, Æthelfrith had completed a campaign near Chester where he defeated Selyf "Serpent of Battles" map Cynan, King of Powys. At the battle Selyf, much of his army and 200 monks from the British monastery of Bangor-is-coed (*Bancornaburg*), who had come to pray for the Britons, were killed.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *HE*, IV.23, 410.

<sup>88</sup> *HE*, II.12, 176.

<sup>89</sup> *HE*, II.2, 140-142. Bede calls the Britons and the monks heretics and claims that their slaughter was the result of St. Augustine's prophesy. The seven British clergy, when they met (reluctantly) with Augustine in 597, refused to accept his three conditions to come into the Church: celebrate Easter at the correct time, accept baptism according to the rite of the Holy Roman Church and preach to the people in



Either later that year (during the same campaign) or in 617, Rædwald and Eadwine got the opportunity to battle Æthelfrith. They assembled a large force and met the Bernicians on the east bank of the River Idle before their full army had arrived. By the afternoon of 20 May 616, Æthelfrith was defeated and killed and his army scattered. After the battle Eadwine, with the support of Rædwald, assumed the throne of a united Northumbria. Early in his reign, Eadwine ruled as a sub-king under the power of his ally and benefactor, Rædwald, but this was not to last. Even before the death of Rædwald ca. 626, Eadwine had taken full control of the political and military apparatus that was reluctantly bequeathed to him by his former nemesis. By the time Paulinus converted Eadwine's court, the kingdom of Northumbria was again the seat of power in England.

As for the children of Æthelfrith,<sup>90</sup> they were pursued by the vengeful wrath of Eadwine. Eanfrith, the eldest son and only child (as far as we know) from the union of Æthelfrith and Bebbe, fled to the hill-forts in Ochils, seeking the protection of his mother's people, the southern or Maetae Picts.<sup>91</sup> Eanfrith was probably a young adult at the time of his exile. Most authorities believe that he went to stay with his mother's people and while there married a Pictish princess, the sister of the Pictish king Gartnait mac Uuid of the royal line of Gwid. Their son, Tallorcen, later becomes king of the Picts

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fellowship. The Britons refused. Bede, throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* shows great tolerance for the Irish and Picts but really seems to despise the Britons. As I will discuss below, this may be related to the alternate belief that Eadwine received baptism, according to Nennius, from Rhun ap Iuri, the son of the warrior-king Urien of Rheged, before Paulinus was said to have done so in 627.

<sup>90</sup> In the next chapter I will discuss the historical features of the returning sons of Æthelfrith. I will limit my discussion to the sons who became king: Eanfrith, Oswald and Oswiu.

<sup>91</sup> Æthelfrith's wife, Bebbe, was most likely the sister of Nechtan mac Uerb, king of the Picts, 595-615.

(656-660). The children of Acha, the younger sons and their sister, Æbbe, escaped west to Argyll into the lands of the Dál Riata, probably Iona. While at the monastery of Iona, the two younger boys, Oswald and Oswiu, learned the Celtic language, were schooled and baptized in the Christian faith, and received an education not dissimilar to that of an Irish lord. It was during their exile (616-633) that Oswald and his brothers Eanfrith and Oswiu became immersed in the culture of and traditions of the British, Irish and Picts, converted to the Irish form of the Christian faith and were introduced to their traditions. I now turn to the story of Oswald—his long residence in Ireland, his later return to Northumbria and his subsequent fashioning of a hybrid Celtic/Anglo-Saxon kingship—a template upon which his brother Oswiu will construct the ideal of a royal warrior-saint.

## Chapter 2

### **The Return of the Kings: The Sons of Æthelfrith and the Rise of the Warrior-Saint**

All that is gold does not glitter,  
Not all those who wander are lost;  
The old that is strong does not wither,  
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.  
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,  
A light from the shadow shall spring;  
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,  
The crownless again shall be king.

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*<sup>92</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine that within a very few days of 20 May 616 news of Æthelfrith's fall became known at Bamburgh, and fewer days still after that when Eanfrith, his brothers and an unspecified number of thegns fled to the Celtic kingdoms of the North and West. As the only son of Æthelfrith who was, by 616, an adult, Eanfrith was King Eadwine's (616-633)<sup>93</sup> most visible rival for the kingdom of Bernicia. Eanfrith, in addition to his own political aspirations, was the son of a Germanic warrior and as such was honor bound to avenge his father's death. Many at Æthelfrith's court probably hoped and expected him to kill Eadwine, but that day was never to come. We do not know the number of warriors that fell with Æthelfrith near the old Roman road from Lincoln to Doncaster where it crosses the River Idle (though we do know that the defeat was decisive), nor do we know if the loyalties given to Æthelfrith passed on to his eldest, Pictish son, Eanfrith. Perhaps there were too few remaining after the battle, or perhaps he

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<sup>92</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien always believed that the story of Oswald's exile, return to his kingdom and death would have made an excellent Anglo-Saxon epic. *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 34.

<sup>93</sup> All years listed for monarchs are regnal years unless otherwise stated.

did not well follow the tradition of garnering his own loyal band while still in his father's house, advice that the *scop* of *Beowulf* would echo not too many years later.

Swa sceal ge[ong] guma gode gewyrcean,  
 fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,  
 þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen  
 wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,  
 leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal  
 in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.<sup>94</sup>

In any event, the children of Æthelfrith were forced to flee. However, not all of them may have been in Northumbria at the time their father fell on the banks of the River Idle. In all probability Æthelfrith, who had foraged his kingdom at the expense of his Celtic neighbors, may have adopted some of their cultural practices in an attempt to reduce the necessity of constant war. One of these practices was the fostering of children to subordinate nobles, a very common practice among the Irish and other Celtic people but rare among the Germanic people. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the lives of Oswald and Oswiu while in exile among the Irish and to determine how this long period of isolation from their native lands and people influenced their cultural attributes, style of kingship and, ultimately, how it may have influenced Oswiu to develop the concept of a warrior-king saint.

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<sup>94</sup> “Thus should a young man, in his father's house accomplish good things with splendid rich gifts so that afterwards, when older, his chosen companions remain with him, loyal people when war comes. By such generosity any man prospers” (*Beowulf*, 20-25). *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). All passages from *Beowulf* will be from Klaeber's 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Translations are my own.

### The Flight of Æthelfrith's Children

Eadwine of Deira, the new lord of Northumbria, must have had his smiths prepare a special blade just for the killing of Eanfrith. To Eadwine this young man represented a real threat to his consolidation of power and one that needed to be eliminated with dispatch. As for the sons of his sister Acha (Æthelfrith's second wife), we do not know if his avunculate status toward the oldest boys, Oswald and Oswiu,<sup>95</sup> would have stayed his hand. Clearly Æthelfrith's marriage to Eadwine's sister had earned neither he nor any of his male relatives mercy at the hands of the now fallen king. It is probable that if caught they would have been killed. Eadwine was, if nothing else, pragmatic. Familiar with his Frankish allies' proclivity toward familial homicide, and the short-term gains it produced, he no doubt planned to emulate them. Just three years earlier, Lothair II (613-629), the sole king of the Franks and a relative of his wife, had solidified his grip on the throne by cunningly capturing four rival princes and ruthlessly dispatching his cousin Sigibert II (613) and his brother. Among the Merovingian kings, as described by Gregory of Tours, killing rival kin, even brothers (one might say *particularly* brothers), was an accepted, even expected, practice.<sup>96</sup> Despite Bede's portrait of Eadwine as a meek and pious man, his reign displays no indication that he was in any way a less effective, merciless warrior

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<sup>95</sup> The relationship of a uterine sister's son was closer than that of a father to his own (presumably) son. This practice was laid out in Irish legal tracts but is also found across numerous cultures. Jaski, "Cú Chulainn, *gormac* and *dalta* of the Ulstermen," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 37 (1999): 29; Thomas J. Garbáty, "The Uncle-Nephew Motif: New Light into its Origin and Development," *Folklore* 88, no. 2 (1977): 223-225; Tomas Ó Cathasaigh, "The Sister's Son in Early Irish Literature," *Peritia* 5 (1986): 128-160.

<sup>96</sup> The killing of relatives in order to assume kingship was also prominent in the very fragmented kingship structure of Ireland. Fosterage (see discussion below) was one way that a chieftain was able to assure that he had allies who were not also rivals. Peter Parkes, "Celtic Fosterage: Adoptive Kinship and Clientage in Northwest Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 2 (2006): 365.

than his predecessor. But then Æthelfrith had no matrilineal kinship ties with Eadwine's kin. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that Eadwine attempted to hunt down the sons of his former enemy. Perhaps he permitted his nephew's exile, in deference to his sister, but there is no record of Eadwine's intentions.

Eanfrith's flight took him first to Edinburgh and then north across the Forth to one of the numerous hill-forts that dotted the Ochil Hills. His mother, Bebbe, was the sister of King Nechtan mac Uerb (595-615) and the aunt of the reigning King Cinioch mac Lutrin (615-634). While we hear no more of Eanfrith until the death of Eadwine at the hands of Cadwallon and Penda in 633, we may assume that while in exile he began the process of integrating himself among the Picts, strengthening (maternal) familial ties and beginning the formation of military alliances which he would later use in his bid to retake Bernicia. Of those 17 years in exile, all we know is that he took a Pictish princess for a wife. She was the granddaughter of Gwid, the father of several Pictish kings (though never a king himself), and the niece of King Nechtan (595-615); her name, unlike that of her male kin, is lost to history. Their son, Tallorcen, would reign briefly as the king of the Picts (656-660).

While Eanfrith journeyed northeast to the Picts, his father's other sons traveled north and west into exile among the Dál Riata Scots in Argyll. Aside from Bede and the kings' list of the Picts, the sources are mute regarding the years of Eanfrith's exile. Regarding Oswald and Oswiu's many years among the Irish, we have rather a good deal

more information.<sup>97</sup> Oswald (presumably born either in 605 or 606), the first son of Æthelfrith and the Deiran queen Acha, was ten or eleven years old at the time of his father's defeat and death. While specific information regarding alliances made by Æthelfrith was either passed over in silence or unavailable to Bede and, therefore, us, it is not unreasonable to assume that his decisive victory over Áedán mac Gabrán in 603 may have inclined Æthelfrith to send Oswald and perhaps his brother Oswiu to foster with Eochaid Buide (608-629), the king of the recently subjugated Dál Riata and the son of his old nemesis Áedán mac Gabrán (574-608). A foster relationship between the two kingdoms could have greatly reduced tension and firmly established the Dál Riata into the growing sphere of Northumbrian client states.

### **Fosterage Among the Celtic Peoples**

While fosterage is reported among most Indo-European peoples, its role among Germanic people was relatively minor.<sup>98</sup> Yet fosterage of Oswald and Oswiu among the Irish, both in Dál Riata and Ireland, greatly influenced the trajectory of their kingships and has direct bearing on the evolution of Oswald from Germanic warrior-king to saint. There are scattered references in the Icelandic sagas (though these date well outside this

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<sup>97</sup> There may have been several additional children who accompanied Acha in to exile; four sons, Oslac, Oswudu, Oslaf, and a daughter, Æbbe (who later became abbess of Coldingham); see *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (E) Peterborough*, 617. The Irish annals record the death of Osric mac Æthelfrith, prince of the Saxons, at the battle of Seawyne in 627, along with many of his nobles. Denis Murphy, ed., *The Annals of Clonmacnoise being the Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408* (Dublin: University Press, 1896), list the year 627; *Annals of Ulster*, ed. and trans. William M Hennessy (Dublin: Thomas & Co., 1887), record the event in the year 629. More on this below.

<sup>98</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, "Anglo-Saxon Kinship Revisited," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1997), 179.

time period), but there is a roughly contemporaneous reference to Beowulf's fosterage by King Hreðel.<sup>99</sup> Though it was a foster relationship, it does conform to the client type fosterage found among the Irish. Rather, the character Beowulf tells us that,

Ic wæs syfanwintre, þa mec sinca baldor,  
 freawine folca æt minum fæder genam;  
 heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning,  
 geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde;  
 næs ic him to life laðra owihte,  
 beorn in burgum, þonne his bearna hwylc,  
 Herebeald ond Hæðcyn oððe Hygelac min.<sup>100</sup>

As Klaeber suggests in his text notes for this passage, the age of seven was an important age for a young boy to enter into the service of his monastic teacher and begin ecclesiastical fosterage.<sup>101</sup> Bede says that “cum essem annorum septem, cura propinquorum datus sum educandus reuerentissimo abbati Benedicto, ac deinde Ceolfrido.”<sup>102</sup> What sets Bede's (and the accounts of others) fosterage apart from that in *Beowulf*, I believe, is the verb *genam*, which suggests the act of taking of an inferior's son by a status superior. It implies an act of selection by King Hreðel. Such was not the

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<sup>99</sup> I have discussed the date of *Beowulf*, which I believe to be early eighth century, elsewhere; see Scott MacKenzie, “The Anglo-Saxons and their Struggle with Chaos: “When a Man is Unable to Change His Fate then He Must Endure It Well” (M.A. Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2002), 8-9.

<sup>100</sup> “I was seven winters old when the treasure-giver, friendly lord of the people *took* me from my father, king Hreðel, *guarded and kept me*, gave me treasure and feast, kept kin in mind; I was not to him, a warrior in his stronghold, any more hateful, than each of his sons Herebeald and Hæðcyn, or Hygelac my lord” (*Beowulf*, 2428-2434). While this passage does not specifically mention fosterage, it is implied in the half line *heold mec ond hæfde*.

<sup>101</sup> Klaeber, in his note on 2428ff. also assumes fosterage and cites Bede's own reminiscence of his fosterage (*Klaeber's Beowulf*, 245). But see Parkes, 2006, who argues for a much earlier age of fosterage.

<sup>102</sup> “When I was seven years, I was *given*, by the care of my relatives, to the most reverend abbot Benedict, and finally Ceolfrith for education,” Bede, *EH*, V.24.



form of fosterage found in either secular or ecclesiastical Ireland during the early medieval period.

For late Iron Age and early medieval Celtic peoples, particularly the Irish, fosterage was an integral part of their culture. It served as a buttress that supported their protean sociopolitical structure.<sup>103</sup> The unit of sociopolitical administration is the *tuath*; a unit often but erroneously referred to as a “tribe.” It includes people bound together by kinship and mutual dependence. Social relationships in Ireland were governed both by customary law, as administered by the *brehons*,<sup>104</sup> and politics, as dictated by nobles and kings. Within the *tuath* members could be divided into three levels (king, noble and farmer) with as many as 15 ranks. All social ranks and their various obligations were carefully and clearly defined in the legal tracts.<sup>105</sup> Male social status was reflected by the size of his kin group, both agnatic and fostered, and the number of clients who were under obligation to him. Clientship was a tightly regulated contractual relationship based on protection and dependence that linked together people of different social ranks. All clientship, from the highest king to the lowest farmer, shared a common feature. It was initiated by the social superior who gave a gift (*rath*) that placed an obligation of reciprocity on the recipient for the life of that individual.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, “Anglo-Saxon Kinship Revisited,” 179.

<sup>104</sup> The *brehons* were members of Iron Age and medieval Ireland’s learned class. They administered and interpreted the law. Other members of their class included poets, historians/genealogists and druids.

<sup>105</sup> Nerys Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 194-196, 254-255.

<sup>106</sup> Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, 150-152.

The system of client-allegiance fostering (child-rearing by status inferiors) was an ancient custom, tightly regulated by an intricate web of law. Through this system a family (typically a ruling family) was able to expand its non-agnatic kin and therefore increase its political power. Unlike Dickensian images of fostering conjured by the institution as it was during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, early medieval Irish fosterage was not an act of charity; rather, it was a legal relationship designed to perpetuate interfamilial alliances for generations. For the early medieval Irish, fostering had two important purposes. First, it served as a means to strengthen alliances between two clans or divisions of a clan (i.e., septs). Second, it enabled the child to receive an education from someone who had special skills, such as war-craft or druidism. The foster parents, usually the client of a lord, though occasionally members of the child's *máithre* (maternal kin), were responsible for the child's education and care, and in return the birth parents gave a fosterage *rath* (fief, usually accounted for in cattle) to offset the cost of raising the child.<sup>107</sup> There are numerous literary examples of fosterage in Irish culture for the giving of one's child into the keeping of another for their education. In the *Tain Bó Cuailnge* king Conchobar considered with great care who should raise his sister's son. Many of the champions in *Togail Bruidne Ui Derga* were accompanied by their foster brothers or foster sons.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Parkes, "Celtic Fosterage," 363.

<sup>108</sup> *The Tain: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge*, trans. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 23-25. Also see *Togail Bruidne Ui Derga* (the Destruction of Ua Derga's Hostel) in *Early Irish Literature*, trans. Myles Dillon (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 27.

The section of the Irish law code, the *Senchas Már* (the Great Antiquity),<sup>109</sup> that deals with fosterage, the *Cáin Íarraith*, implies, though it does not explicitly state, that the age at which fostering would start is seven;<sup>110</sup> however, there is some evidence to suggest that it may actually have begun as early as infancy.<sup>111</sup> Though there is debate on the beginning of fosterage, it ended at puberty (14 for girls and 17 for boys) with the child returning to his or her parents.<sup>112</sup> During the long period of time that the child was in the custody of the foster parents, particularly if they were fostered since infancy, a bond of affection developed between fosterers and foster child that often was greater and more enduring than that found among biological kin.

Secular literature and linguistic evidence both highlight the close, affective bond that existed between Celtic foster parents and their foster children. Most Indo-European languages have two sets of words for parents, one formal and the other affectionate. In other words, a father-mother set and a daddy-mommy set.<sup>113</sup> In Old Irish the daddy-mommy set (*aite, muimme, data daitiucán*) was used exclusively in reference to foster-parents. Culturally and linguistically in Old Irish, there was no affective term for the birth

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<sup>109</sup> The *Senchas Mar* is a remarkable document that contains a sweeping array of laws that govern and define social interactions in early medieval Ireland. The text is believed to date from the sixth and seventh centuries. For this paper, all citations of Irish law come from W. Nielson Hancock and others, eds. *The Ancient Laws of Ireland*. 6 vols. (Dublin and London, 1865–1901).

<sup>110</sup> Daibhi O Croinin, *Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 338. While the complete work is not available, the *Cáin Íarraith* (the regulation of fosterage) has rules and *brehon* commentary that imply the age for fosterage of boys and girls is seven years. Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 87-88. However, what was legislated and what was practiced probably differed. The passage from the *Táin* in note 89 has the newborn Sétanta assigned god-fathers who begin his education immediately after birth. The law codes of Ireland may not reflect cultural practice but serve, instead, as a system of redress.

<sup>111</sup> Daibhi O Croinin, *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, 362-364, 370.

<sup>112</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 193), 78-79.

<sup>113</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 80.

mother, *máithir*.<sup>114</sup> In Ireland, before the *Cáin Adomnán* redefined the nature of motherhood, the birth mother's role was to give the child a place among its patrilineal and matrilineal kin. The *muimme*, foster mother, was the woman who loved and instructed the child. The foster father had similar, though not as overt, feelings for the *daltae*.<sup>115</sup> Aside from close affiliation that forms between parents and children during a child's early development, the primary reason that foster families lacked the competition and turmoil found in biological families was that foster children were not rivals for inheritance of lands or titles. So important a part of their social ordering was fostering among the Irish that, during his twelfth century exploration of Ireland, Gerald of Wales (in his admittedly harsh critique of the island and its people), exclaims,

Woe to brothers among barbarous people. Woe to kinsmen too. When alive, they are relentlessly driven to death; when they are dead and gone, vengeance is demanded for them. If they have any love or loyalty, it is only for their foster-sons and foster-brothers.<sup>116</sup>

Oswald's father, Æthelfrith, after he assumed kingship in 593, directed his military and political attention primarily north and west into the Celtic regions of England. Why he tended to ignore the lands of the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms may have had to do with the hostility that he and his people encountered from the well-organized kingdoms of Britons who, naturally, responded to them as invaders. Æthelfrith was born in Bernicia, a frontier kingdom relatively isolated from their fellow Anglo-

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<sup>114</sup> Bitel, *Land of Women*, 86-87; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 82.

<sup>115</sup> Bitel, *Land of Women*, 84-85, 88.

<sup>116</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara (London: Penguin, 1982), §101.

Saxons, surrounded by indigenous Celtic peoples. The name “Bernicia” is a Celtic word probably referring to the people the Anglo-Saxons forced off the land. Given the conditions under which the Bernicians lived, it is not difficult to imagine that many of them, Æthelfrith in particular, were bilingual—speaking Anglo-Saxon and a dialect of P-Celtic. Furthermore, after two generations of interactions and intermarriage, life among the Celtic peoples clearly had made strong cultural inroads among the children of Ida.

We know that Æthelfrith’s first wife, Bebbe, was from the royal family of the Picts, and while her fate after 604, following Æthelfrith’s marriage to the Deiran princess Acha, is never discussed by Bede, she may simply have remained as his primary wife until the end of his life. The *Senchas Már* of the sixth and seventh centuries recognized nine different unions between men and women,<sup>117</sup> and the tracts likely represent the codification of a general Celtic practice. Of the nine, a woman usually entered into one of three basic types of unions which would legitimize her offspring. She could be *cétmuinter* (chief wife), an *adaltrach* (secondary wife) or a concubine (either formal or informal).<sup>118</sup> Germanic tradition may have differed slightly, but polygamy among the nobility was common enough to be mentioned in the law codes of Kent. Children of such unions were able to inherit lands and titles from their father as long as he acknowledged them.<sup>119</sup> I suspect that Æthelfrith would have been more inclined to follow the Celtic marriage

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<sup>117</sup> W. Nielson Hancock and others, eds. *The Ancient Laws of Ireland*, vol. 2 (Dublin and London: Thomas and Co., 1865-1901), 356-357. T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 24-25; Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 47-49; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 2000, 108-111.

<sup>118</sup> Bitel, *Land of Women*, 8-9.

<sup>119</sup> Margaret C. Ross, “Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 5, 15-17.

practices if for no other reason than to increase his status among the Celtic lords who were his political peers and often advisories. By participating in the traditions of the people with whom he wished alliances, Æthelfrith would have strengthened his position of power in the North of England.

After the death of Æthelfrith, his children, according to Bede, fled into exile. In the first chapter of Book Three of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede tells his readers,

filii praefati regis Aedilfridi, qui ante illum regnauerat, cum magna nobilium iuuentute apud Scottos siue Pictos exulabant, ibique ad doctrinam Scottorum cathecizati, et baptismatis sunt gratia recreati.<sup>120</sup>

With the death of the king it would be reasonable to assume that the two wives went their separate ways. If Bebbe still lived she would have brought her son Eanfrith to the Pictish royal house for protection, exile, and possible military support. Even if she were not living, Eanfrith could have expected to receive a warm reception from his Pictish kin, who are assumed to trace kinship through matrilineal descent.<sup>121</sup> What Bede does not explain is why Acha, a Deiran princess, and her Anglo-Saxon children fled to and were accepted by the Irish (see Figure III for regional powers). In all probability, Oswald, the

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<sup>120</sup> *HE*, III.1, 212: “. . . the sons of the afore mentioned Æthelfrith, who had reigned before him, with many of the nobility, were living in exile among the Scots or Picts, and were instructed there according to the doctrine of the Scots, and received the grace of baptism.”

<sup>121</sup> Bede tells us that this is how the Picts traced their royal lines. There has been some debate about the veracity of the claim; however, the consensus is that the Picts used some form of matrilineal method for determining king; see M. Miller, “Eanfrith’s Pictish Son,” *Northern History* 14 (1978): 51. Nevertheless, Eanfrith went to the Picts.



**Figure IV. Topography of Northwestern England, the Inner Hebrides and Ireland**

eldest child of Acha and Æthelfrith, who was about 12 years of age when his father died, had already been living as a fosterling in the household of an Irish noble. It was to that family, no doubt, that Acha and her remaining young children fled after Æthelfrith's defeat at Idle. That said, it is likely that Oswald and his brother Oswiu were sent, possibly as early as infancy, to the household of an Irish prince of the recently subjugated Dál Riata Scots of Argyll and later to one or more nobles of the ruling Uí Neill branches of Donegal; either the dominant Cenél Conaill or the temporarily ascendant Cenél nEógan.<sup>122</sup>

Many families would have greatly desired to be associated with the powerful Northumbrian king. Because of their noble status the children could expect to have

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<sup>122</sup> See Figure III. Cenél Conaill was the clan to which Colum Cille and all but one of the first nine abbots of Iona belonged. However, the Cenél nEógan held the kingship of Tara when Áedán mac Gabráin was defeated.

several different foster families. The higher the stature of the noble, the greater the number of foster parents they would have. The alliance forged at Druim Cett<sup>123</sup> between the Dál Riata and the Cenél Conaill<sup>124</sup> would have opened an avenue among the Dál Riata of Argyll, their king and clients in Antrim and their allies among the Ui Neill. The monastery of Í (Iona) would have served as a nexus between Ireland and Argyll, possibly with the abbot acting as a fosterer himself. In the first decade of the seventh century, the clamor to foster the sons of Æthelfrith, arguably the most powerful warlord on the British Isles, must have been akin to that found in Irish epic literature. In the *Tain Bó Cuailnge*, the birth of Cú Chulainn occasioned an intense rivalry among the men of Ulster at Emain Macha. All wished to foster the newborn, and each made his case as to why he should be chosen. In the end, Morann (druid advisor to King Conchobar) selected six foster families to raise the hero.<sup>125</sup> The circulation of foster-children was one of the most important ways in which the Irish strengthened alliances between a patron and his clients.

### **Oswald and Oswiu's Life Among the Irish**

Given the youth of Oswald and Oswiu, they would have quickly acculturated to the Irish. So much a member of their Irish families would they become that it is possible that they would have considered Irish rather than English their native language. We have

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<sup>123</sup> The convention at Druim Cett has traditionally been assigned to 575 (according to the *Annals of Ulster*). According to Richard Sharpe, *Life of St. Columba* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 312-313, this date is too early, and the convention probably occurred sometime around 590.

<sup>124</sup> Tension along the border between the northern Ui Neill (situated in Counties Donegal and Derry) and the Ulaid of Antrim, had been escalating since the battle of *Móin Daire* Lothair (563) when the Ui Neill, with the aid of the *Cruthini* of Derry, pushed their frontier east to the river Bann. The Ulaid king was the overlord of the Dál Riata. The convention at *Druim Cett*, brokered by Colum Cille, ended hostilities and forged an alliance between the Dál Riata and the Cenél Conaill which was to last most of the seventh century.

<sup>125</sup> *Táin*, 23-25.



Bede's testimony as to Oswald's fluency in Irish. He tells us that when Áedán preached to the Anglo-Saxon court in Irish,

Ubi pulcherrimo saepe spectaculo contigit, ut euangelizante antistite, qui Anglorum linguam perfecte non nouerat, ipse rex suis ducibus ac ministris interpretis uerbi existeret caelestis; quia nimirum tam longo exilii sui tempore linguam Scottorum iam plene didicerat.<sup>126</sup>

While with his foster family, Oswald's education and maintenance as a foster-child would have followed the strict regulations as codified in the Irish *Senchas Már*—a recording of the traditional laws of the Irish, primarily concerned with social ordering.<sup>127</sup> As a prince, he would have received treatment commensurate with his social rank while in his foster-father's house. Oswald would have been given his own horse and taught riding. He would have learned archery, the use of sword, shield and spear for war, hunting, and courtly board games. As a member of his foster family's kin group, he would have participated in battles under the banner of his foster father. He would have eaten the best quality of food and had an allotment of clothing.<sup>128</sup> Most importantly, while fostered he would have formed a complex network of social connection among his foster family, their extended family and their clients.

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<sup>126</sup> "It was indeed a beautiful sight, when the bishop was preaching the gospel, to see the king acting as an interpreter of the heavenly word for his ealdormen and thegns . . . [for] the king had gained a perfect knowledge of Irish during the long period of his exile" (*HE*, III. 3, 220).

<sup>127</sup> Daibhi O Croinin, *Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 338. The *Cáin Íarraith* (the regulation of fosterage) discusses feeding, luxuries and describes the program for the education for the different classes and genders of children.

<sup>128</sup> Parkes, 2006, 362.

The food they ate, the clothes they wore, their friends and lovers, and the social and cultural mores inculcated into them were Irish. Because their formative years were spent almost exclusively among the Irish, Oswald and Oswiu would have seemed more like Irish than Germanic princes to the Anglo-Saxons when they returned to Bernicia. However, they did not entirely lose their Germanic identity. They went into exile with a number of Æthelfrith's thegns as companions, who, though relatively few in number<sup>129</sup> and subject to similar pressures for acculturation, helped the princes retain some vestige of their Germanic heritage. Though very young when they fled Bernicia (Oswiu was only three or four when his family fled), both Oswald and Oswiu retained enough of their Germanic identity to prove adept at hybridizing the two cultures for their political and military campaigns.

As I mentioned above, we can be reasonably certain that the children of Æthelfrith began their new lives first among the Dál Riata Scots of Argyll but probably were also fostered in the territories of the Dál Riata in Antrim and among the Uí Neill in Donegal. The hub and quite likely the organizing entity for their travels back and forth across the Irish Sea was the monastery of Í (Iona).<sup>130</sup> While they learned Irish social and material culture from their secular parents, they would have learned the Christian faith

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<sup>129</sup> Oswald and Oswiu went into exile with 12 companions, according to Adomnán in *Vita St. Columbae*, ed. J. T. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 92.

<sup>130</sup> Iona was founded in 563 by Colum Cille, a prince of the Cenél Conaill of the ruling Uí Neill. Granted the island by Conall mac Congall, the king of the Dál Riata Scots, the island monastery remained a nexus between the two divisions of the Dál Riata and between them and the kings of Tara. Colum Cille's influence at the conference of kings held on All Saints Day at Druim Cett (Daisy Hill) in 590, not the unreasonably earlier date of 573 as recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*; see Richard Sharpe, *Life of St. Columba* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 312-313. The presence of Áed mac Ainmirech and Áedán mac Gabrán implies that the purpose of the meeting was to establish relations between the northern Uí Neill and the Dál Riata of Antrim and Argyll.

from the abbots of Iona, all members of the Cenél Conaill and therefore related to the Irish princes who were fostering them. Their conversion among the Irish (probably after the death of Æthelfrith, who was pagan) was to have important implications for the development of the Catholic Church in Northumbria in the seventh century, and it would also facilitate the cultural mixing of the Germanic and Celtic peoples, as is witnessed in their art and literature.

While the details of their exile are lost to history, there are hints that the deeds of Bernician princes were remembered by the people of their Irish fosterers. These additional few records lend support to Bede's assertion (often our sole source for events of the seventh century) that Oswald and Oswiu were raised among the Irish. And not just among the Dál Riata. Having arrived in Argyll around the year 500, the Dál Riata, over the century of close contact with Anglo-Saxons in Northumbria, had out of necessity modified some of their cultural and political practices.<sup>131</sup> If Oswald and Oswiu also spent some of their fosterage in Ireland, they would have been exposed to Irish forms of kingship, unmodified by association with Germanic neighbors. Thus, in addition to Bede's vague account of their flight to the Picts and Irish, where he tells us they remained until 633, there are three important Irish sources that place the Northumbrian princes in Ireland and highlight their involvement in the dynastic politics and battles of the Dál Riata, Uí Neill and their clients. The first reference I will examine is contained in the epic poem, *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga (The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel)*. The second

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<sup>131</sup> While there is no direct evidence for this, an analogous situation arose among the Welsh of Gwynedd and Powys after their many years of direct contact with the Anglo-Saxons. T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 364, 369.

source is the record of Oswiu's marriage to an Irish princess and the subsequent birth of their child Aldfrith, known as Flann Fína in Ireland and Iona, who later becomes king of Northumbria (685-705). The third source comes from an entry in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*.

The *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* is an Old Irish vernacular poem dating from the late eighth or early ninth century and found in the *Lebor na Huidre* (*The Book of the Dun Cow*) written before 1106.<sup>132</sup> Though the text is dated to ca. 775-800, the oral tradition of the poem is of much greater antiquity. Part of the tale may be derived from the origin tale *De Síl Chonairi Móir* (Concerning the Race of Conaire Mór), presumed to have been written by the sixth-century Munster poet Colmán mac Lénéni, a man who dedicated part of his craft to tales of the kings of Tara. Conaire Mór, the subject of the two poems, was the semi-mythological high-king of Ireland and the presumed ancestor to many of the Érainn peoples of Munster, as well as to the Dál Riata of County Antrim and those in Argyll in western Scotland.<sup>133</sup> While the tale is associated with the Ulster Cycle,<sup>134</sup> most of the action takes place in Leinster. The focus of the *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* is on the struggles of King Conaire Mór and his unwarranted death brought about by his violation of a series of *gessa* (taboos) which were placed on him before he could become king of Tara. At the end of the tale, Conaire and his loyal followers are attacked at Da Derga's

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<sup>132</sup> Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), xvi-xvii, 24-25.

<sup>133</sup> Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 62-63; James Carney, "Language and Literature to 1169," in *NHI*, 485.

<sup>134</sup> Formerly called the Red Branch Cycle by nineteenth-century antiquarians, the Ulster Cycle is a large body of verse and prose which includes the Irish epic *Tain Bó Cuailnge*. The tales, transcribed as early as the eighth century but based on earlier, pre-Christian oral legend, focus on the exploits of the traditional heroes of the Ulaid in eastern Ulster, set about one century before the birth of Christ.

hostel, where they are eventually defeated and the king beheaded. What is relevant to our discussion regarding the Anglo-Saxon sons of Æthelfrith is that among the 40 rooms described in the hostel, each with its complement of Celtic heroes, one is *Imda na Saxanach* (Room of the Englishmen) and their foster brothers.

#### Imda na Saxanach

‘At-connarc isind leith atúaid din tig. Nonbur. Noí monga forbaidi  
foraib. Noí camsi fogarti impu. Noí lennae corcraí tairsiu cen delgae  
indib. Noí manaise .ix. crowsceith déirg úasaib’. ‘Rusfetamar’ ol se.  
‘.i. Ósalt & a da chomalta. Osbrit Lamfota a da chomalta. Lindas & a  
da chomalta. Tri rígdonna do Saxanaib sin filet ocond rí.  
Conrainfet in lucht sin búaid n-gníma.’<sup>135</sup>

The three Englishmen are referred to as *rígdonna* (crown princes), and the first named is Ósalt (Oswald). Oswald and his brothers may have been added to the tale because it was known that he lived among the Irish for at least 18 years. In all likelihood the number of rooms in the hostel (*bruidne*), which is one of five *sid* (a junction between the real world and the Otherworld) in Irish vernacular literature,<sup>136</sup> probably grew in number to include important heroes from regions each generation the tale was told. The poet (or poets) was doing what a good *fili* should do by following the dictum of Irish law that reads, “He is

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<sup>135</sup> The Room of the Englishmen: “‘On the northern side of the house I beheld nine men. Nine very yellow manes were on them. Nine linen frocks somewhat short were round them: nine purple plaids over them without brooches therein. Nine broad spears, nine red curved shields were above them.’ ‘We know them,’ quoth he. ‘Oswald and his two foster-brothers, Osbrit Longhand and his two foster-brothers, Lindas and his two foster-brothers. Three crown-princes of England who are with the king. That set will share victorious prowess.’” Translation based on Whitley Stokes, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* (Paris 1902). [Reprinted from *Revue Celtique* 22 (1901) 9-61, 165-215, 282-329, 390-437; 23 (1902) 88].

<sup>136</sup> Thomas F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 121-123.

no poet who does not synchronize and adjust all the stories.”<sup>137</sup> Thus we have Anglo-Saxon princes among the heroes of the hostel in their own room.

If the children of Æthelfrith, arguably the most powerful warlord of the late sixth and early seventh centuries, participated in the politics and warfare of various clans while in Ireland, it is not surprising to find *rígdonna* of England walking among the great heroes of early Irish legend. Aside from the dictum of Irish poetic law, the presence of three Saxon princes at the denouement of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, an origin tale, should not surprise the reader. For decades, anthropologists and ethnographers have catalogued and analyzed non-synchronic groupings of regional heroes in mytho-historic tales.<sup>138</sup> The supposition is that by including as many important characters as possible at an event, the prestige of that event is increased. A similar expansion of characters may have occurred in the telling of events associated with the Trojan War.

Alfred Lord proposed that Homer’s *Iliad* was amended to include local heroes who could not possibly have stood together at the gates of Troy.<sup>139</sup> Lord analyzed the catalogue of heroes in Homer’s *Iliad* in parallel with his analysis of the song of the *Wedding of Smailagi Meho*, a story that recounts events associated with the late sixteenth-century leaders of Bosnia. In the Bosnian wedding song, the great leaders of Bosnia are summoned

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<sup>137</sup> E. J. Gwynn, “An Old-Irish tract on the privileges and Responsibility of Poets,” *Ériu* 13 (1942) 1-53.

<sup>138</sup> Alfred B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Alfred B. Lord, “Homer, The Trojan War and History,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 8, no. 2-3 (1971): 80-107; John Miles Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 37-49.

<sup>139</sup> Alfred B. Lord, “Homer, The Trojan War and History,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 8, no. 2-3 (1971): 85-92.

to a wedding. What he observed is that in the numerous versions collected (all from the twentieth century) there is considerable overlap and expansion in the characters. Lord believes that the oral poets heard shorter lists from other poets which displayed regional heroes and simply combined them into their own version to be inclusive. The resultant tale produced a wedding where many of the people invited were not contemporaneous. Those in attendance did, however, represent men of high status from the major politico-geographic regions of the country for their time. Thus, by having all of the most distinguished individuals at the feast, its importance is elevated.

Lord proposes that an analogous situation occurred when Homer composed the *Iliad*. To underscore the importance of the Trojan War for the Greeks, Homer included several catalogues of heroes from other tales with which he was familiar. Each of the major districts of Greece at that time became represented by their local heroes, even though the figures probably did not live at the same time. As is the case with the Irish poem *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, most of the characters could not have interacted because they were not contemporaneous. What should be borne in mind is that the redactors of the poem included contemporary heroes to give the tale added relevance and depth. One can suppose that with each new version of the tale the number of rooms increased to accommodate new heroes. For seventh-century hearers of this tale, such inconsistencies would either be deemed irrelevant or be passed over unnoticed. The reality of the interaction was not what was important to the medieval reader; it was what the interaction symbolized that mattered. Modern readers should be aware that an oral epic may describe an actual historical event and give it flavor, but the details and chronology are to be viewed with skepticism.

Aside from purely literary sources, a second piece of evidence places the Anglo-Saxon princes in the middle of the Irish political world. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* has one entry that records the involvement of an Anglo-Saxon prince at a battle in the Irish midlands. While an entry in an ecclesiastical chronicle may seem to represent a more objective source and argue more strongly for the presence of Anglo-Saxon princes in Ireland than the poem mentioned above, it is well to remember that all texts have their intended audience and each author his own agenda. However, the inclusion of an Anglo-Saxon prince in a list of those who fell at a battle does not seem to have any overt political design. That said, the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* is a chronicle translated from Irish Gaelic into English in 1627 by Connell MacGeoghegan of Lismoynty (Co. Westmeath). The original manuscript of MacGeoghegan's translation is lost, but the text has been shown to belong to a group of related texts which all have a common stem manuscript originating at Clonmacnoise.<sup>140</sup> Later daughter manuscripts (1660 and 1663) of MacGeoghegan's original can be found in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin and in the British Museum.<sup>141</sup>

The annals report much of the same information contained in the *Annals of Ulster* but give prominence to historical events occurring near Clonmacnoise on both sides of the

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<sup>140</sup> *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* along with other annals of the Clonmacnoise group, the *Annals of Tigernach* and the *Choricon Scotorum* stem from a core manuscript (now lost) which originated at the monastery of Clonmacnoise, dating to the early tenth century. Kathryn Grabowski and David Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Medieval Ireland and Wales: The Clonmacnoise-group Texts* (Bury St. Edmunds: St Edmunds Press, 1984), 155, 182-183, 209. There is a risk, particularly since the original manuscript is missing, that the translator was using this passage to show England's dependence on Ireland. During the seventeenth century the Irish were struggling to craft a national identity while under occupation by the English, and the Irish translator may have had a nationalist agenda. That said, this is our only non-literary source (though it does lend some credence to the passage of the Anglo-Saxon princes in the *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*) for the presence of Anglo-Saxon princes in Ireland at this time.

<sup>141</sup> John C. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Oxford: ABC-Clío, 2006), 72.



River Shannon, often giving greater details than found elsewhere. Written in central Connachta, it presents a record of events as perceived by those outside of the influence of the northern Ui Neill. The participation of a hitherto unknown brother of Oswald and Oswiu, Osric, son of Æthelfrith,<sup>142</sup> at the battle of Seawyne (the battle is named Fid Eóin, according to the *Annals of Ulster*) is recorded for the year 627,

The battle of ſeawyne wherein Moylekeigh mSeannoile, K. of the Picts was killed; Many of Dalriada were killed, as Connall Kearn their prince, the nephewes of Aidan were killed, Rigallan m c Conyng and Failve m c Eahagh & *Offrick mc Alfrith the prince of the Saxons with many of his nobles, were likewise killed.* Eahagh boye, sonne of King Aydan of Scotland, in the 20th year of his raigne died.<sup>143</sup>

The name Osric may represent a younger brother of Oswald who was not listed in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (617) as fleeing to exile with Acha and her children. The name Osric could also represent a conflated form of one or more of Æthelfrith's sons. Os- (divine or god) was a common prefix in the names of Æthelfrith's sons. The addition of ric, which may be derived from either Old Irish *ri* (king, chieftain), or Anglo-Saxon *rica* (influential man or ruler), or *rice* (strong or powerful), to the familial prefix Os- would be understandable given the potential for transmission errors. It may also represent one of the numerous spelling variants found in the annals. Which prince or princes were present

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<sup>142</sup> The *Annals of Tigernach* record the same battle but name *Oisiric mac Albruit rigdomna Saxon*. The suggestion that this Osric was the son of the Deiran King Ælfred has been rejected on linguistic grounds in favor of Æthelfrith. H. Moisl, "The Bernician Royal Dynasty and the Irish in the Seventh Century," *Peritia* 2 (n.d.): 105-109. He proposes that the Irish annals have numerous examples where A is substituted for /Æ/ and the b, which in Irish orthography can represent the voiced labial fricative β, closely resembles the Old English pronunciation of f, as found in Ælfred. The -t in Irish orthography can be represented by a final d, giving Ælfred/ Ælfredh, much as is evidenced in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*.

<sup>143</sup> *AClon*, 101. Italics are my addition.

at the battle, we may never know with certainty; however, that one or more of the sons of Æthelfrith (mc Alfrith *[sic]* prince of the Saxons) was present seems to have been deemed important by the chronicler. For my purpose, the chronicle entry supports the assumption that the Northumbrian princes were active in military campaigns in Scotland and in Ireland. Engagement in armed conflicts, in addition to gaining valuable experience and training, would have earned them supporters from their foster parents' kin and clients, who would have had a reciprocal obligation of service to assist them in war. Oswald and Oswiu's training as warriors among the Irish, and the royal alliances that he and his brother formed while in exile, would have prepared them to join with their half-brother Eanfrith and his Pictish supporters in an attempt to regain the monarchy of Bernicia upon Eadwine's death.

In addition to Dál Riata support, Oswald and Oswiu, perhaps while campaigning in Ireland, may have formed an alliance with certain kings of Tara. While in exile it appears that Oswiu, the younger brother of Oswald, and the man who was to succeed him on the throne of Northumbria in 642, had an Irish wife. Her name was Fína, and she was the daughter of the Uí Neill king of Tara Colmán Rimid (598-604) from the Cenél nEógan. From that union the future Northumbrian king Aldfrith (685-705), called Flann Fína among the Irish, was born. Bede considered Aldfrith to be a bastard child of Oswiu, not recognizing the king's relationship with Fína as legitimate. Bede was thinking as a cleric and as an Anglo-Saxon. The Church favored monogamy, and Anglo-Saxon law had a narrower

definition of legitimacy than did the Irish.<sup>144</sup> As described above, Irish law as found in the *Senchas Már* and *Cáin Lanamna* (Law of the Couple) recognized nine different legal relationships between men and women. Most typically, for women of high status these relationships fell into three categories: primary wife (*cétmuinter*), secondary wife (*adaltrach*) or legal concubine. Oswiu, raised among the Irish and having a mother who was probably an *adaltrach*, would have recognized his legal options with regard to mating and resultant children. It appears that Fína was a legal concubine and had the support of her family. Oswiu, even though he was fostered in Ireland, was a foreigner and would have been considered a *cú glas* (literally, grey dog—an Irish kenning for wolf, a common designation for outsider).<sup>145</sup> Their child Aldfrith would have been a *glas fine* (grey kinsmen), and as such his care, because of Oswiu's status as a landless noble, would fall to his mother's kin, who would raise him and give him status within their *fine*. This arrangement was probably acceptable to Aldfrith's maternal kin because he would have held the status of *gor mac* (dutiful son). Under this system, the *gor mac*, a sister's son, is adopted by the maternal kin group and temporarily resides with them, fights in their battles, tends their fields, but asks for no share in the family's lands. He is returned to his father's kin when they have property to spare. Oswiu, because of his status as an exile, had no lands of his own; however, there must have been an expectation that Oswald and Oswiu would regain their kingdom in order for the daughter of a king to enter into such a relationship. No doubt by the time Aldfrith was born Oswiu's brothers Eanfrith and Oswald were planning to recapture Bernicia and

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<sup>144</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England." *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 6, 12-14.

<sup>145</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 75, 550.

restore their former lands and titles. Assuming that Aldfrith was born between 630 and 632, that day was to come very soon.

### **The Rise and Fall of King Eadwine and the United Northumbria**

During Oswald's long exile, the *bretwalda*, King Eadwine had been hard at work expanding the southern and western boundaries of his kingdom (see Figure V). Unfortunately for Eadwine, he roused the anger of the Cadwallon king of Gwynedd and the ambition of the Penda sub-king of Mercia. Cadwallon ap Cadfan had, for almost a decade, been warring on and off with Eadwine. Pressed hard by the marauding king of the Northumbrians, the Welshman sought alliances among the Angles of Mercia, Irish, Britons and Picts. Cadwallon may have begun his search for allies as early as the mid-620's so that he could eliminate the threat to his territories posed by Eadwine's conquest of Elmet,<sup>146</sup> the last independent British kingdom east of the Pennines. When Elmet fell, the Anglo-Saxons controlled the Aire Gap, a strategic pass through the mountains that permitted easy access to the west of England. Securing this pass positioned Eadwine well to use Chester as a base (the territory conquered by Æthelfrith in 616) to strike at the

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<sup>146</sup> While it held strategic importance, Eadwine's conquest of Elmet may also have been, in part, retribution for the assassination of his nephew.



**Figure V: Late Sixth Century Northern British, Irish and Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms**

heart of Gwynedd. According to the Welsh Annals for the year 627, Eadwine had brought the Islands of Mevanian Môn (Anglesey) and Mann, formerly possessions of Cadwallon, under his sway<sup>147</sup> and besieged Cadwallon on the Island of Ynys Lannog (Priestholm). Also at that time Welsh Bardic tradition records rising tension and animosity between the

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<sup>147</sup> Bede, *HE* II, 5; see also D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London: Routledge, 2000), 71.

kings of the men of Gwynedd and Northumbria. Based on the *Moliant Cadwallon* (Lament for Cadwallon), possibly composed by Cadwallon's personal bard, Afan Ferddig, it would appear that at one time Eadwine and Cadwallon had been allies (possibly aiding him while in exile). At some point this relationship broke down, and the Welsh felt betrayed by Eadwine's attacks on their islands and other territories.

Neud ar arch Brynaich ni ryddadlas  
 Ac Edwin arnu yn dad rhwy dwyllfras.  
 Ni buglawdd ei wartheg, nis arllafas—neb.  
 Cyman a gweithen i dan addas  
 Ar wyneb Cymru, Cadwallon was.<sup>148</sup>

Æthelfrith, the old Northumbrian king, had attacked and subjugated the kingdom of Powys, but there is no record of open conflict between him and Gwynedd. The line of the Lament—"he [Cadwallon] has not negotiated at the bidding of the Bernicians with Eadwine ruling"—implies that he may have forged a treaty with the old king and expected Eadwine to honor the arrangement.

Threatened by Eadwine's growing naval power in the Irish Sea and his military campaigns launched from Chester, Cadwallon may have sought the assistance of Æthelfrith's exiled sons in the hopes of securing the Dál Riata as allies. That he had campaigned in Irish territory is recorded in the *Triads of Wales* (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*)

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<sup>148</sup> "He has not negotiated at the bidding of the Bernicians [Northumbrian English] With Edwin ruling over them as a chief patriarch, the great deceiver. His cattle will not bellow; none will make a sound. For the honor [lit.: 'face'] Of Wales, Cadwallon's land." *Moliant Cadwallon* exists only in a seventeenth-century manuscript but may be based on a contemporary poem. I. L. Foster, "The Emergence of Wales," in *Prehistoric and Early Wales*, ed. I. L. Foster and Glyn Daniel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 231.

found in *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (*The Red Book of Hergest*).<sup>149</sup> It appears that Cadwallon had spent some time in Ireland where he may have encountered one or more of Æthelfrith's sons.

Three Faithful Households of the Island of Prydain: The household of Cadwallawn son of Cadfan, who were with him seven years in Ireland; and in all that time they demanded no pay nor compensation from him.<sup>150</sup>

There is, of course, no record of an alliance between Cadwallon and the sons of Æthelfrith. Nevertheless, Cadwallon would have welcomed having motivated allies such as Oswald and his brother Eanfrith. Eanfrith's Pictish allies and Oswald's spear-thegns from Dál Riata could have provided Cadwallon with the tactical edge he needed in defeating Eadwine, the most powerful king (according to Bede) on the island. Whether they had assistance or not, the armies of Cadwallon and Penda drew Eadwine's Northumbrian army into battle near Bardney, routing it and killing the king. If the brothers were to have assisted Cadwallon, their attack would most likely have come from the north and the west, their respective strongholds of power, placing them in proximity of Bamburgh. Yet, despite the lack of evidence, within a very few weeks of Eadwine's defeat and death at Hatfield Chase in October 633, Eanfrith, first son of Æthelfrith, returned to his lands in Bernicia at the head of a Pict and Anglo-Saxon army and claimed the kingship. The rapidity of Eanfrith's appearance and acquisition of the Bernician throne implies that he and his Pictish army were near at hand and aware of the activities

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<sup>149</sup> Jesus College MS 111, ca. 1380.

<sup>150</sup> Rachel Bromwich, ed. and trans., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein, The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff : University of Wales, 1978), 86.

in the South. Likewise, as we shall see, immediately after the betrayal and fall of Eanfrith, Oswald and his army were well positioned to recapture the kingdom when it was about to fall again.

The defeat of Eadwine did not mean that all of Northumbria was returned to Eanfrith. While Eanfrith was securing Bernicia, Osric, Eadwine's first cousin, secured the ancient capital at Yeavering, on the edge of the Cheviot Hills in what is now the county of Northumberland, and took control of Deira. However, neither king was secure on his throne. Since Eadwine's defeat Cadwallon had been driving northward, probably in an attempt to conquer the region, but was stopped by Osric, who laid siege on him at a fortress possibly at or near York.<sup>151</sup> However, by the early summer of 634, Cadwallon and his army broke the siege, and Osric was killed and his army overrun. Eanfrith came south suing for peace with his heretofore ally, but since treachery was not beneath Cadwallon, he had the Bernician king killed. An arrangement between Cadwallon and Æthelfrith's sons would help explain the seemingly trusting efforts on the part of Eanfrith to parlay with Cadwallon and the ease with which he was killed by subterfuge.

Pressing their most recent victories, it appears that Penda and Cadwallon were intent on capturing the capital of Bamburgh, thus eliminating the Northumbrian kings entirely. This was not to happen. Oswald, *cum paruo exercitu, sed fide Christi munito*, of Irish and the remnants of his Anglo-Saxon thegns<sup>152</sup> met the superior forces of Penda and

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<sup>151</sup> *HE*, III.1, 213.

<sup>152</sup> The army was probably made up almost entirely of Irish. Very few Anglo-Saxons would have placed their trust in an untried son of a former king. Bede does not give a number of Anglo-Saxons who



Cadwallon at the propitiously named Heavenfield on the Tyne just outside of Hexham. Cadwallon was killed and his army dispersed. Penda fled back to Mercia, biding his time until he could strike again.

### **Christianity in Northumbria**

Just before the decisive battle of Heavenfield in 634, Bede tells us that some warriors put together a wooden cross, and the king, seized by religious zeal, held it aloft while his men piled dirt around it. Oswald called to his army saying,

Flectamus omnes genua, et Deum omnipotentem, uiuum, ac uerum in commune deprecemur, ut nos ab hoste superbo ac feroce sua miseratione defendat; scit enim ipse, quia iusta pro salute gentis nostrae bella suscepimus.<sup>153</sup>

For Bede, the race to which Oswald refers is the Anglo-Saxon race. They were God's new chosen people, and the kings of Northumbria were like the Biblical kings of old. Christianity came into Northumbria first to the Anglo-Saxons, though Bede quickly and quietly passes over the fact that the Irish were the ones to bring it to them. Instead of describing the extensive missionary work of the Irish during Oswald's reign, Bede holds forth the stirring image of King Oswald planting the cross in the ground before his battle with pagans, claiming the land for God and then leading his troops in prayer. The association of Oswald with the cross ties him to some of the great Christian leaders who had battlefield epiphanies. Emperor Constantine (as well as the Merovingian king Clovis)

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went with Æthelfrith, but he says they were few. Adomnán says only 12 Anglo-Saxons accompanied Oswald into exile in his *Vita St. Columbae*, ed. J. T. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 92.

<sup>153</sup> "Let us all kneel and pray to all powerful, ever living, and true God to defend us in his mercy from the proud and fierce enemy; for he knows that we are fighting in a just cause for the preservation of our race." Bede, *HE* III. 2, 214.

served as the royal font from which the Christian faith sprang onto their respective lands. Oswald and the cross also foreshadow his ties to Christ that are forged by his brother following his death in 642.

Oswald's act, according to Bede, signifies the first time that a cross had been raised over Bernician soil<sup>154</sup> and, by doing so, constructs a narrative that casts the Anglo-Saxons and, in particular, the Bernician kings as the bringers of light to the dark isle of England. Of course this was not entirely true, as Bede most likely was aware. There are hints and fragmentary evidence to suggest that the Britons who lived in the Kingdom of Northumbria had a familiarity with Christianity, even indications of Christian religious leaders. There was, however, no well-organized Christian infrastructure.<sup>155</sup> For the overwhelming majority of Anglo-Saxons, there was no Christianity in Northumbria until the mass baptism at York of Eadwine and his nobles on Easter Sunday, 12 April 627—a tale glowingly reported in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.<sup>156</sup> I pass over the details of this event with the exception of the location of the baptism in part because the first Roman mission north of the Humber failed. The selection of York as the site for Eadwine's baptism by Paulinus, the current priest of Ædilburgh (Eadwine's Kentish wife)<sup>157</sup> and a companion of St. Augustine, was to be the fulfillment of the plan by St. Gregory the Great to have two archdioceses in England, one in Canterbury and one in York. Paulinus

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<sup>154</sup> Bede, *HE*, III.1.

<sup>155</sup> Rosemary Cramp, "The Making of Oswald's Northumbria," in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Lincolnshire: Watkins Publishers, 1995), 31-32.

<sup>156</sup> Bede, *HE*, II.12-14.

<sup>157</sup> She was the daughter of Æthelberht, king of Kent and first Christian king (597-d. 616), and the sister of Erkenwald, bishop of London, d. 693.

consecrated Honorius archbishop of Canterbury at Lincoln in 627, after which Eadwine and Eadbald (king of Kent, 616-640) requested two *pallia* from Rome. The pallium for York did not arrive in time. The pope dispatched the pallium in June of 633, but two months later Eadwine was dead and the kingdom was in shambles. There was little stability in York during the brief reign of Osric of Deira, and when he was killed in the summer of 634, Paulinus, along with Ædilburgh and her surviving children, fled south first to Kent and then to Merovingian Gaul.<sup>158</sup> Had the see been established at York, it is very likely that church in Northumbria would have been firmly within the sphere of influence of the Church in Rome, and thus the influence of the Irish Christians on the Northumbrians Church would never have happened.

The defeat of Eadwine by Cadwallon and Penda disrupted Rome's plans for more than a century and had a profound impact on the nature and character of the Northumbrian Church. The Church of Bernicia and Deira was not to have strong Roman leanings as it would have had under the reign of Eadwine; rather, with the accession of Oswald as king, a man who was exiled among the Irish for 17 years and who probably was fostered, in part, by the monks in Í (Iona), Christianity north of the Humber came to be dominated by the teachings of the Irish for the rest of the century. As a result it was to spur conflict between clerics who held to the teachings of Rome and those of the Irish.

Oswald, whose immediate concerns had less to do with spiritual matters and more to do with war, moved quickly to secure his kingdom, and according to Bede had little

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<sup>158</sup> Eadwine's children, Eanflæd (daughter) and his remaining son Uscfrea, along with his grandson Yffi fled to the Merovingian Gauls. The two boys died in infancy among their guardians, thus ending the Deiran dynasty. Bede, *HE*, II.20, 204.

trouble uniting Bernicia and Deira following his victory. The death of Osric at York and the flight of Eadwine's children to Kent and then Merovingian Gaul created a political vacuum in the southern kingdom that Oswald recognized and into which he skillfully positioned himself. As the victor of Heavenfield, he drove out the armies that had been ravaging the region for the better part of a year. Oswald restored order and with no dynastic rivals, coupled with his descent from Eadwine's sister Acha, he was accepted by the Deiran nobility and people as king. Upon returning to Bamburgh, Oswald turned to matters spiritual (and no doubt political) and sent to Iona for a bishop to preach the Christian faith to his people. Through his request to Iona, he probably was fulfilling an obligation he had to those who fostered him, in particular Abbot Ségéne (623-652). The relationship of monastic houses and their members in Ireland, like the secular world, was based on the socio-political system of patronage. Abbots of powerful mother houses wielded supreme control over the brothers of their house, as well as abbots and monks of subordinate houses. By the mid-seventh century Iona had several daughter houses and would have been interested in expanding its influence into Northumbria. Oswald had been given the gift of refuge and training among the Dál Riata and the Uí Neill. He had also been baptized on Iona, and it is possible that Abbot Ségéne had stood as Oswald's godfather. If not he, then certainly one of his secular kinsmen such as Domnall mac Aedo, king of Tara (628-642). The ties of fosterage and spiritual parentage would have pulled at Oswald and compelled him to honor his obligations. It was also prudent for the new king, who could count on few allies in the beginning, to maintain strong ties with the Irish and the Dál Riata. He may have need of them in the future. Hence, the pivotal

significance of the complex tradition of Irish fosterage and patron-client relationships began to structure the religious and political nature of Northumbria for the next century.

## Chapter 3

### Oswald: Christian King and Warrior-Saint

ARTHUR: How do you do, good lady. I am Arthur, King of the Britons. Whose castle is that?  
 WOMAN: King of the who?  
 ARTHUR: The Britons.  
 WOMAN: Who are the Britons?  
 ARTHUR: Well, we all are. We're all Britons and I am your king.  
 WOMAN: I didn't know we had a king. I thought we were an autonomous collective.  
 ARTHUR: I am your king!  
 WOMAN: Well, I didn't vote for you.  
 ARTHUR: You don't vote for kings.  
 WOMAN: Well, 'ow did you become king then?  
 ARTHUR: The Lady of the Lake, [angels sing] her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water signifying by Divine Providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. [Singing stops] That is why I am your king!  
 DENNIS: Listen—strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony. (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*)<sup>159</sup>

When Eadwine, king of Northumbria and fifth *Bretwalda*,<sup>160</sup> fell at Hatfield Chase in the kingdom of Lindsey, 12 October 633, Oswald and the other sons of Æthelfrith who had been exiled and in fosterage among the Irish and Picts for 18 years prepared for their return. With the king dead the greater part of the following year found Northumbria wracked by destruction. Cadwallon, king of Gwynedd and, to a lesser degree, Penda of Mercia who defeated Eadwine pursued a vicious campaign of

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<sup>159</sup> *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Act I, Scene III.

<sup>160</sup> *Bretwalda* was a title first assigned Ecgberht, king of Wessex (802-839), by a late ninth-century Wessex chronicler indicating that he was considered the over-king of all the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. This is the same region that Bede claims seven other kings held *imperium*. However, the term may also mean more generally “ruler of the Britain.” For a good review, see Steven Fanning, “Bede, Imperium and Bretwaldas.” *Speculum* 66, no. 1 (1991).

destruction that tore through the fields and towns of Deira and Bernicia. Much to the dismay of Bede, the brutality of Cadwallon, a Christian, was even greater than that of the Mercians, who were *idolis deditus et Christiani erat nominis ignarius*.<sup>161</sup> Cadwallon, no doubt tired of paying excessive tribute to the Northumbrians, determined that his nemesis was weak enough for him to strike and thereby free himself from this burden. Additionally, some of the ferocity with which the Welsh king persecuted the Northumbrians, may have been revenge for a personal betrayal by Eadwine. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Eadwine tore the Mevanian Islands, that is, Môn (Anglesey) and Mann, from Gwynedd's control in 627.<sup>162</sup> He also besieged Cadwallon on the Island of Ynys Lannog (Priestholm), defeating and forcing him to flee to Ireland. The *Moliant Cadwallon* (*Lament for Cadwallon*, ca. 630) implies that he and Eadwine had been allies at an earlier time (the former possibly aiding him while in exile at an earlier time). To make matters worse, Eadwine may have used the alliance to dupe the Welsh and more easily take their lands. The Lament calls Eadwine the "great deceiver"; the savagery with which Cadwallon devastated Northumbria may have been retribution for Eadwine's act of dishonor. Bede, our only source for the events of that year, was appalled by the Welsh king's actions. According to him,

. . . at uero Caedualia, quamuis nomen et professionem haberet Christiani, adeo tamen erat animo ac moribus barbarus, ut ne sexui quidem muliebri, uel innocuae paruulorum parceret aetati, quin uniuersos atrocitate ferina morti per tormenta contraderet, multo tempore totas eorum

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<sup>161</sup> *HE*, II.20, 202.

<sup>162</sup> *HE*, II.5, II.9, 148, 162.

prouincias debacchando peruagatus, ac totum genus Anglorum  
Brittaniae finibus erasurum se esse deliberans.<sup>163</sup>

Bede's description of the chaos that had enveloped Northumbria is reminiscent of Gildas's imagery of the fate of the Britons at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons a century and a half before. Yet, while Bede does not wring his hands quite as desperately as did Gildas, clearly the situation in Northumbria was dire. For the first time since Ida took control of *Din Guardi* in 547, the Anglo-Saxons north of the Humber were defenseless. An invading army had free reign across the countryside, and there was no war-leader who could organize an effective resistance against it—though a few tried.

The first to step into the political void was Osric, Eadwine's cousin, who took the kingship of Deira. He and his army were able to contain for a short while the carnage wrought by Cadwallon when he trapped the king of Gwynedd and his army in York during the spring and early summer of 634. However, by summer's end Cadwallon broke through the siege, killed Osric, and scattered the remnants of Deiran resistance. Flush with his new victory, Cadwallon began scourging the country with renewed vigor. So great was the state of anarchy and so dangerous had the situation become that Paulinus<sup>164</sup> fled with Eadwine's queen Æthelburh, along with her remaining children, to the court of

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<sup>163</sup> “ . . . but Cadwallon, though he bore the name and professed himself a Christian, was so barbarous in his disposition and behavior, that he neither spared women, nor the innocent children, but with savage cruelty tortured them to death, ravaging all their land for a long time, and resolving to cut off all the race of the English within the borders of Britain.” *HE*, II.20, 202-204.

<sup>164</sup> He was a member of the missionary group from Rome to Kent in 601. He accompanied Æthelburh, daughter of Æthelberht, king of Kent (593-616), to Northumbria when she married Eadwine of Deira. While there he began the process of converting the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. However, his mission there failed.



her brother Eadbald (616-640), the king of Kent<sup>165</sup> The next player to brave this chaotic world was Eanfrith, son of Æthelfrith and Bebbe, who had been exiled in Pictland.<sup>166</sup> Since Osric, who took the kingship of Deira, seemed to have his hands full with Cadwallon, Eanfrith took the opportunity to reassert his claim to the throne in Bernicia. After the death of Osric, Oswald's half-brother Eanfrith attempted to sue for peace from the king of Gwynedd, presumably a former ally. He and 12 of his advisors were received by Cadwallon under the guise of a truce and then treacherously slaughtered for their efforts. His actions make it apparent that he came to Northumbria as a conqueror.

### **The Return of the Children of Æthelfrith: King Oswald**

This was not the first time that Cadwallon had shown himself to be less than honorable. Not entirely trusting their Welsh ally, it is not difficult to imagine that Eanfrith and Oswald had planned for betrayal (though they probably did not expect Eanfrith to be killed). Positioned near Bamburgh and most likely concealed from Cadwallon were Oswald and his composite army of Irish, Dál Riata and Anglo-Saxons. Coming from the west, he and his remaining brothers engaged and defeated the combined armies of Gwynedd and Mercia, killing Cadwallon and driving the invaders from Northumbria. In October of 634, Oswald, son of Æthelfrith, re-established a Bernician on the throne of Northumbria. His victory at the battle of Heavenfield brought peace and restored order to

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<sup>165</sup> When Oswald became king, Æthelburh felt unsafe there and fled to Merovingian Gaul where she and her children shortly died. Bede is silent on their cause of death.

<sup>166</sup> The advisors were probably a mix of Anglo-Saxons who remained loyal to Æthelfrith's family and Picts, among whom Eanfrith (Æthelfrith's son) had been living for the past 18 years. For a complete genealogy, see Figure III.

a kingdom that had been wracked by war and destruction since the autumn of 633. He avenged the death of his half-brother Eanfrith, who was killed by Cadwallon, and secured his family's rule over a united Northumbria, a dominance that would last uninterrupted for more than a century.

The defeat of Mercia and Gwynedd secured the kingship of a reunited Northumbria for Oswald. The aristocrats of Bernicia, according to Bede, welcomed Oswald and the re-establishment of Æthelfrith's line. Deira's nobles, defeated and scattered, raised no serious objection to Oswald's rule and during the course of his reign came to embrace him as their king. Granted, the descendants of Yffi and Ælle hung on to existence by a very few threads. Eadwine's line was shattered. His wife's escape to her brother's court in Kent left her feeling threatened by the perceived wrath of the new Northumbrian king whose reach extended well south of the Humber, so she gathered her children and sought refuge among her maternal kin in Merovingian Gaul. Her flight proved futile. All of the children died, apparently of natural causes, within two or three years of their exile. All that remained of the Deiran royal house was Oswine, the child of the ill-fated Osric. This last thread was cut by King Oswiu, Oswald's brother, in 651, thus ending the royal lineage of Deira and allowing Oswald and Oswiu to consolidate their advantage.<sup>167</sup>

With his significant enemies dead or defeated, Oswald took the seat of power at Bamburgh fortress. As he did so, the Germanic warrior-class and the people of

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<sup>167</sup> Ironically, Oswine, who was sub-king of Deira before Oswiu had him killed, became something of a rival saint to Oswald.

Northumbria (a mixture of Britons and Anglo-Saxons) saw the return of their king. But, when they gazed at their new monarch, what did they see in him that made him king? What qualities radiated from this man—a complete stranger to most of them, a faint memory to others—that permitted his acceptance as their ruler? Certainly it was not his dress and speech. His accent, if he was able to speak Old English at all, would have been that of an Irish aristocrat. Regrettably, Bede does not paint a scene of Oswald's return and restoration to the throne. After 18 years of exile among the Dál Riata and Uí Neill of Ireland, Oswald would have appeared to the Anglo-Saxons, outwardly at least, as an Irish king, possibly a foreign conqueror. Yet despite his publicly exotic presence, Bede gives no indication that there was any resistance to his installation as the legitimate king of Northern Angles. Perhaps the presence of a victorious army camped within sight of Bamburgh aided their decision. Oswald's education in the craft of kingship took place at the court of Irish princes. Their system of governance was strikingly different from the Anglo-Saxon form of kingship. Ireland in the late sixth and early seventh centuries resembled the much earlier tribal form of governance common to ancestral Indo-European peoples. Yet, during his brief eight-year reign, during which he ruled primarily as a Germanic king, Oswald was able to interweave disparate elements of Irish and Germanic rule on a Christian platform, producing a hybrid monarchy that surpassed either prior form, for a time, in power and reach. The goals of this chapter, therefore, are twofold. First is to analyze, in a targeted manner, the structure of Irish and Anglo-Saxon kingship, bringing to the fore those characteristics that I believe to be the most relevant

features of the hybrid kingship of Oswald and Oswiu. I should say at the outset that although some of my narrative may seem introductory, the discussion of kingship and patronage, particularly among the Irish, is enormously complicated and had to be constructed from a host of ancient and modern texts. Second, I will frame the proposition that Oswiu selected certain salient features from Oswald's kingship, dressed them in Christian robes and introduced the unique idea of a saint who was also a ruling warrior-king. Within this milieu, the heroic Christ as represented in *The Dream of the Rood* and carved on the Ruthwell monument stood as a counterpoint to Oswald.

### **The Question of Kingship**

Kingship, like so many familiar institutions, while easily recognizable, is far more difficult to define rigorously. The proceeding statement may seem counterintuitive. If something is recognizable, then certainly it should be quantifiable, yet this is usually not the situation. To illustrate I offer an unrelated example from my work in animal behavior. Imagine viewing a litter of puppies at play. They stalk one another, pounce, bite, and commit an array of behaviors which, if viewed in another context, would appear as predation or aggression, yet we watch with amusement knowing that we are watching play. But how do we know? What signals are present? As the animals age the lines between play and aggression become blurred. As we analyze their behavior in finer and finer detail, our list of play characteristics becomes vast. This is also true with kingship. Mature European kingship, such as might be portrayed in a Shakespearian history, is easy to recognize. Our king, let us say Henry VII, would be the possessor of absolute power

over a nation and its people. He would be the final authority of the courts, the military and, ultimately, the Church. He would be dressed in grand robes, sitting in his vast throne room doted on by the scores of nobles and courtiers. Yet even these images answer so few questions. What does a king do? The simple answer is that a king rules a people. It sounds straightforward, but by what (or whose) authority? Who may become king? What makes one man a general while another is king? The anthropological and sociological literatures on this subject are vast, sometimes inconclusive, subject to the winds of intellectual trends, and often contested. After an initial and brief discussion on Indo-European kingship in general, I will limit the scope of this chapter and confine it to two forms of kingship, Irish and Germanic (as displayed by the Anglo-Saxons), which developed side by side during the early Middle Ages and were blended to form a unique type of kingship in Northumbria under Oswald and his descendants. I will further limit my analysis to the different ways in which these two systems acquired, retained and projected royal power. Even this is no small task.

Kingship is an ancient institution, probably far more ancient than our archaeological records indicate. All Indo-European societies for which we have historical records had, in their earliest phases of development, one man who was the ruler of the people and the land they inhabited. Our first glimpse of an individual whom we might call a king comes from the Pontic-Caspian steppes region. The remains of recognizable

chieftains<sup>168</sup> as distinct from the other members of his tribe date from about 5200 BC. These men of power (identified by their wealth of grave goods, the general health of their skeletal remains and their possession of a mace clearly no longer used as a weapon but as a symbol of power) seem to have arisen concurrently with the domestication of cattle, sheep and goats.<sup>169</sup> In these early societies their role appears to have been tripartite in nature. They were war-leaders, adjudicators and semi-divine priests.

Since these petty kings arose before the divergence of the proto-Indo-European peoples, it seems reasonable to assume that all daughter languages, at one time, shared a cognate word for king. Linguistic evidence supports this assertion. While most languages or language families developed unique names for their rulers, a few that remain have a broad regional usage. The original words for king and queen can be constructed from Indo-Iranian and Celtic.<sup>170</sup> The Vedic *rájan* (king) and the Old Irish *rígain* (queen) derive from the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) *\*(h)rēǵnih*, which should have a masculine counterpart, *\*(h)rēǵo* / *\*(h)rēǵn-*.<sup>171</sup> Nouns from the verb *\*(h)reǵ* can be seen in the Vedic *rasti/rajati* (rules, directs), Latin *rego* (I draw straight, regulate), Gaulish *regu*, (I

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<sup>168</sup> The Indo-European chieftain differs from the headman of Neolithic tribal communities. A chief among the Indo-European pastoral and agricultural communities seemed to hold great power derived from his coercive authority seated in his role as war-leader and also his role as tribal priest. J. P. Mallory, *In Search of Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 111, 125. But see Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 253-255, for an opposing view.

<sup>169</sup> David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 160-161, 182.

<sup>170</sup> The Celtic and Indo-Iranian people, because of their relative isolation and their tradition of an autonomous, but conservative intellectual class, held on to features of kingship which were faint memories in other peoples. The propensity of the learned class to hold their laws and traditions as sacred and inviolable preserved their ancient culture like a fly in amber.

<sup>171</sup> M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 412; Anthony, 160.

straighten), and Old Irish *rigíd* (stretches, directs, rules). Verbal compounds of *\*(h)reġ* as a second element give the meaning -ruling, -ruler. From the Italo-Celtic and Indo-Iranian, the *\*(h)reġ* in a free-standing form replaced the n-stem noun producing Old Irish *‘rí*, Gaulish *rix*, Latin *rex* and Vedic *rāj* for the word king.<sup>172</sup> The connection between the word for king and making things straight implies that the king guided the people. He drew the boundaries of law, and he protected the boundaries of the tribal lands. If he was a good king, things ran well, straight, in his kingdom. A crooked king, one who is not straight, could expect dire results. By the early Middle Ages most Indo-European peoples had developed kingship that was far greater in scope than the earlier tribal kings, except for two geographic areas. These were to be found at the extremes of the Indo-European lands, the Celtic people of Briton and Ireland and the Vedic of India.

By the sixth century, most European monarchies had great kings who ruled large swaths of land in which one might find peoples of different lineage and even language. During the fifth and sixth centuries across the continent Germanic tribes were blending with the fading remnants of the Roman Empire. In Gaul, for example, the king of the Franks ruled both the Franks and the Gallo-Romans. By the eighth century so complete was the fusion of these peoples under their king that neither the Franks nor the Burgundians could imagine what happened to the Romans. As monarchy among most Indo-European peoples shifted from the tribal king to a form of great king (modeled on eastern kingship), the title for king also shifted away from its early Indo-European roots,

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

often taking on expansive titles such as “emperor” or the name of a man (*e.g.* Julius Caesar) who had once wielded absolute power, as we see in the title “czar.” Yet a few traditional tribal societies lingered into the early Middle Ages. Among them, the monarchy found in Iron Age and early medieval Ireland remained in a condition much like the ancient Indo-European tribes. Irish kingship was a kingship centered on the *tuatha*. The kinship basis of the *tuatha* is central to understanding Irish kingship and the host of familial traditions which these people shared and believed sacral. The kings of Ireland (and India) were severely restricted in their actions and powers by a vast array of kingship laws, customs and taboos. This was the system of kingship which Oswald and his brother Oswiu were to learn in their exile, and it was this system that Oswald grafted to the Germanic form of kingship after he inherited Northumbria.

In order to understand the powers of Irish kingship, it is best first to understand its limitations. The king in early Indo-European tribes probably had multiple roles. He was priest, law-giver, judge, and war-leader.<sup>173</sup> Over time, in Ireland, as with most Indo-European peoples, the king lost his priestly role through specialization within the tribe, though he did retain his semi-divine nature. Within most cultures the earliest division of powers resulted in the loss of priestly power by the king and the rise of a separate class to assume that role. In India and in Rome, the king, *raj*, *rex*, was often paired with high-

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<sup>173</sup> *IEP*, 420-423. David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel and Language*, 160-161, 182. William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 14, 63-65. D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 15.



status priests, the Vedic *brahmán*- and the Latin *flamen*.<sup>174</sup> The central position of the king as priest had been removed. So too in Ireland, the king's priestly role was taken over by one of the educated class, the *druí*, the druids. However, as we shall see, in Ireland the loss of powers that the king suffered was not limited just to his position as head priest.

### Characteristics of Irish Kingship

By the time that the *Críth Gablach* (CG), the legal tract dealing with social status in early medieval Ireland was written (early eighth century)<sup>175</sup> the king's role as lawgiver and judge was little more than a distant memory. The legal tracts require that all kings of a *tuatha*, if they are to be considered king, must have a *brithem* (judge).<sup>176</sup> It was the responsibility of the judge, independent of the king, to settle all legal disputes within the kingdom. Even Irish vernacular literature, which typically ascribes more powers to the kings of Ireland than they may have enjoyed, presents only a faint image of a king sitting in judgment. In the *Cycle of the Kings*, Conn Cétcathach (Conn of the Hundred Battles), the eponymous founder of the kingdom of Connacht and third-century AD "king of Ireland," had his power as judge usurped by his *brithem* (judge), who issued 49 judgments while Conn was absent.<sup>177</sup> The implication of the segment of the tale is that in the past the king was often included in the legal decisions made by his judge, but that it was only a courtesy, one that was being adhered to less and less. Sometime before the

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<sup>174</sup> *IEP*, 419.

<sup>175</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Law," in *A New History of Ireland: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 344.

<sup>176</sup> *Ancient Laws of Ireland and Certain other Brehon Law Tracts*, vol. 4. (Dublin: Thomas and Co., 1879), 537.

<sup>177</sup> Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 11-12.

first century AD the legal apparatus of Ireland transferred from the king to the *druí*<sup>178</sup> and may have been in the process of becoming the purview of the *filid* (seers), a class of intellectuals who preserved and transmitted all native traditions through verse.<sup>179</sup> Through further specialization the law became the domain of a specialized group within the *filid*, the *brehon* (*brithemoin*, the makers of judgment), where it remained for more than a millennium. In early Irish culture, the *brehon* “discovered” laws in the traditional lore which then become permanent and immutable. As experts of the law they became the arbitrators of litigation among the different classes and kindred of the *tuatha*, controlling a judiciary independent of the king. Indeed, the laws within the *Senchas Már* and the *CG* placed restrictive regulations on the powers of the kings, severely curtailing their legal role.<sup>180</sup> Since the law was presumed whole and therefore did not require addition or alteration, the king possessed no law-giving authority, except for limited decisions made during in an emergency, usually restricted to bringing in a threatened harvest or mustering an army in response to an invasion.

Yet even warfare was tightly regulated by law and custom. Most of the “wars” recorded in the annals were usually ritual raids conducted when the king was not given his legal share of the harvest. One need only examine the ease with which the Irish were overrun by the Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Norse did not follow Irish

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<sup>178</sup> Nora Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), 21-22, 42. These accounts are based on observations in Gaul by Caesar and by Strabo, but we may assume that similar trends were occurring in Ireland.

<sup>179</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, “Early Irish Law,” 349-350.

<sup>180</sup> *ALI*, I, 41, 43, 83, 231-233; IV, 51.

rules of ritualized warfare. The Irish would fight an engagement until the leader was bested or killed. When this happened, the fight was over. The Vikings had no problem continuing with the battle after their leader had fallen and may have fought harder in order to retain their honor and obtain revenge. The Irish king, whose role had been eroded by the application of laws, seems little more than an ancient figurehead so wrapped in custom and taboo that his only responsibilities were drinking, playing chess and leading the occasional cattle-raid.

From the above discussion it would appear that the Irish king held little power among his people, yet it was a coveted position eagerly sought after by the eligible nobility. In the hands of a clever and resourceful man, the kingship, despite the limitations imposed upon it by custom and law, could be a very powerful, albeit subtle, source of wealth and power. His position as war-leader, and more generally, his right to act on behalf of the *tuatha* when dealing with other *tuatha* was the core of the Irish king's power. Many saw the potential for wealth and power, and as a result, competition for kingship was keen, often ruthless. As with most Indo-European peoples, access to kingship was regulated by custom and law. In order to become king a man had to be a member of one of the royal families of the *tuatha*. These were families whose members came from the same *derbfine*, that is, agnatic descendants of a common great-grandfather (see Figure V).<sup>181</sup> One's degree of relatedness to the sitting king, as long as he was within

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<sup>181</sup> The "Law of Limitation" discovered by Eoin MacNeill, 1921, is based on annals, regnal lists and genealogies determined that a family was banned from putting forward a candidate for king if more

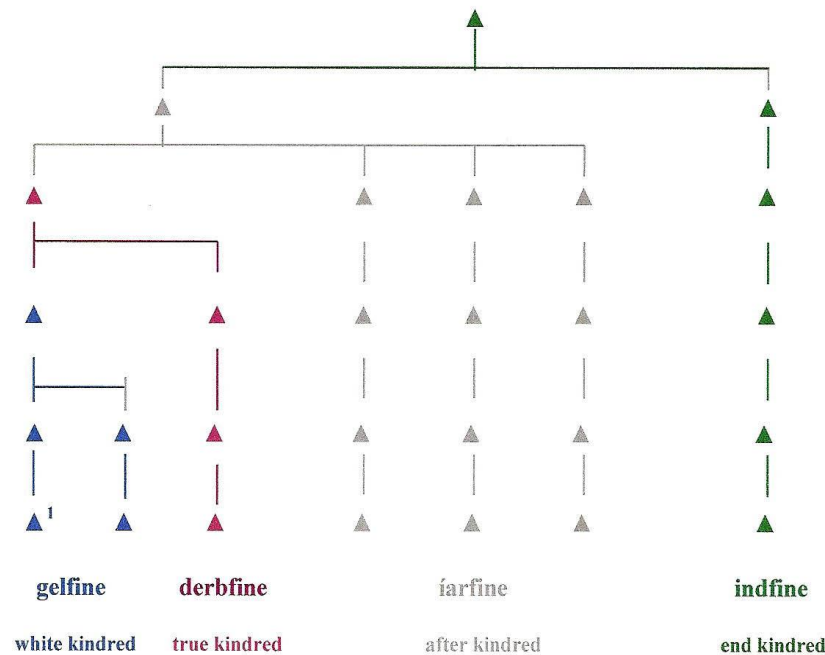


**Figure VI: Structure of Recognized Early Medieval Irish Kinship**

the proscribed kin group, was usually not a factor in determining his potential for succession. The son of the reigning king rarely followed his father on the throne (though he often was king after his father's successor). The kingship usually went to the man with the greatest seniority,<sup>182</sup> but the wealth of the nobleman based on his material wealth and the number of clients dependent and beholden to him was also a determining factor. He must be of good moral character. He must be a man of full lawfulness; he must be a man consulted for knowledge, and he must be learned and calm.<sup>183</sup> Further, he should have no

than three generations had passed since the last member was king. Rules of relatedness are put forth in *ALI*, 41, 43.

<sup>182</sup> *ALI*, IV, 373.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, 355.

defect in body and should present himself with dignity, wisdom, strength, good speech and valor in battle.<sup>184</sup>

The *brehons* defined three levels of kings.<sup>185</sup> At the lowest level of kingship was the *rí tuatha*, the king of a single tribe. Succession to the throne was a sensitive issue that occupied the minds of both the nobles and the *brehons* of medieval Ireland. Early in their history the Irish realized that there was the potential for violence during the change from one king to another. The pool of men who could be selected as king was fixed by law and was termed the royal *derbfine* (*ríg domnae*, the making of the king). Any branch of that *derbfine* that did not have a member sit as king within three generations would fall out of the list of potential candidates. Those were the families with the most to lose, and there would seem to be little to motivate them not to use violence to remain in the royal kin. To forestall violence, the king appointed his heir, called the *tánaise rí*g, meaning “second” or “following,” during his kingship. The *tánaise rí*g would probably be appointed at the king’s inauguration after agreement with a council of the *ríg domnae* had been ratified by the *airecht*, assembly of nobles.<sup>186</sup> The Irish law tracts also describe two grades of over-king, the *ruiri*, superior king, and the *rí ruirech*, king of superior kings.<sup>187</sup> These forms of kingship were constructed by the king himself. The *ruiri* was the king of his *tuatha* and

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<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 329, 331, 345.

<sup>186</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 522-523; T. M. Charles-Edwards, “Early Irish Law,” 349-350; Megan McGowan, “Royal Succession in Earlier Medieval Ireland: The Fiction of Tanistry,” *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-2004), 363-364; Nerys Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 182. And see F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1973), 36-37.

<sup>187</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 130-132.

overlord of at least two other *rí tuatha*. His status as over-king was a relationship of personal dominance over certain *rí tuatha* but did not give him sovereignty over the members of the *tuatha* directly. The *tuatha* owed the *ruiri* no fealty, only their king, who was bound by the fealty given from a client to his patron. While they might fight in the *ruiri*'s military campaigns, they would do so only at the request of their *rí tuatha*, and they fought under their own king's banner. The relationship of the *rí tuatha* to *ruiri* and, in turn, *ruiri* to *rí ruirech* illustrates the nature of power relationships that permeate Irish culture.

In order to understand the complex and often interlocking lines of power in Ireland and therefore the power of the kingship, one must first understand the socioeconomic system of clientage and its absolute importance to relationships among the people of Ireland. The most basic political unit in Ireland was the *tuatha* ruled by the *rí tuatha*. During the early Middle Ages there were approximately 150 kingdoms on the island. The *tuatha* represents a society of interrelated individuals that was naturally divided based on social rank, which in turn was determined by that individual's control of productive property and social standing.<sup>188</sup> Within medieval Irish society, every freeman could be a lord (*flaith*), a client of a lord (*céle*),<sup>189</sup> or both. These webs of relationships bound individuals to one another through a set of mutual responsibilities that extended beyond the boundaries of the kin group. The king and his people were tied to the land—not just for sustenance but also by restrictive laws and traditions. These customs were not

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<sup>188</sup> Nerys Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, 150.

<sup>189</sup> F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 28-29.

vague ancestral memories but were the law according to the *brehon*, a class of the *filid*. If kinship bound related individuals, then clientship tied all the peoples of Ireland to one another. There was no adult male—free or slave, king, noble or farmer—who was not enmeshed in the intricate web of clientage. Through this system a man established his status among peers, acquired wealth or protection, and gained power. Those who lacked the support of both kinship and clientage were considered outlaws and were void of social protection.

Due in part to their Indo-European heritage and in part to the nature of their island, Ireland was dominated by a pastoral economy from the Iron Age through the early Middle Ages. Much of the soil in the interior was too heavy for ploughing before 900 but very rich and suitable for the grazing of animals.<sup>190</sup> Because of the quality and distribution of land, the main agricultural product from Ireland was cattle. As a result the unit of wealth in Ireland was the milk cow. Fees related to *éraicc* (Anglo-Saxon *wergild*) are often measured in *cumals*, a high unit of value. One *cumal* is the value assigned to one female slave. A *cumal* is also equal to 10 cows.<sup>191</sup> The cow had other commercial applications in addition to the *éraicc*. We see the exchange of cattle repeatedly in the epic the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, the centerpiece of the eighth-century Ulster Cycle. In one example

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<sup>190</sup> Nancy Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 6-8. J. H. Andrews, "A Geographer's View of Irish History" in *The Course of Irish History*, ed. Theodore W. Moody and Felix X. Martin (Niwt, CO: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1995), 18-19.

<sup>191</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 482-483.

Queen Medb of Connacht,<sup>192</sup> the most vibrant female character from Celtic mythology, seeks to borrow Donn Cuailnge, a prize brown bull, for one year from Dáire mac Fiachna. She offers,

fifty yearling heifers in payment for the loan, and the  
Brown Bull of Cuailnge back . . . and if Dáire himself  
comes with the bull I'll give him . . . a chariot worth thrice  
seven *cumal*.<sup>193</sup>

Cattle formed the base of the Irish economy. They were the unit of exchange commonly used between patron and client.

While superficially similar to feudalism, the patron-client relationship of the Irish was fundamentally a bond based on economics; military service was a minor aspect. Clientship was a contractual, personal relationship of dependence and protection that linked people of different rank. The act of acceptance of patronage was a ritual that extended back into antiquity. One person would submit himself to another by “going into the house of another” and receive a *rath*, a gift or grant. Acceptance of this gift placed the subordinate under obligation to perform specific duties; the types of obligations owed the patron were dependent on the status of the client. Two types of clientship were recognized under *brehon* law: base clients (*dóer chéile*) and free-clients (*sóer chéile*). The lowest level in Irish society was the *dóer chéile*. They represent the most important

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<sup>192</sup> Medb is able to dominate her husband, King Ailill, and to rule as a king herself because she represents the apotheosis of fertility, sovereignty and perhaps Ireland itself. Medieval Ireland did not have a ruling queen.

<sup>193</sup> *The Tain: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge*, trans. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 55.



political and economic nexus of early Irish lordship. Since they were also the largest group, they represented the greatest portion of the lord's income. The base client received a *rath* of cows from their patron and made repayment in food renders, that is, cooked food and other manufactured items for the lord's table. Additionally, they were required to provide manual service at certain times of the year. One third of all fees paid to the base-client belonged to the lord. If they were to default or miss a payment, they were subject to heavy fines.<sup>194</sup> If they attempted to dissolve the contract, they lost honor and were assessed heavy fines which were often paid by their relatives.

The free-client received a smaller *rath* of cattle from his patron, and over the course of a seven-year obligation the lord received a little more than he gave. Free clients, the *bóaire* were middle rank farmers, who could end the contract with their patron without penalties simply by returning the initial *rath* to the lord. While under contract the free-client retained his free status but owed his lord homage and manpower service.<sup>195</sup> The number of free-clients, while they did provide a source of income, was more important to the patron as a means of increased social status among his peers.

The highest clientships were those made between kings. The patron king usually presented his client king with a *túarasndal*, which was usually honorific items such as bridals, horses, or swords.<sup>196</sup> The client king returned tribute usually in cattle. If the subordinate did not fulfill his obligation, the patron could fine the client and demand full

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<sup>194</sup> Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, 165-166.

<sup>195</sup> Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, 157; Binchy, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 23; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 530.

<sup>196</sup> Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, 151.

repayment of the *rath*, or he could legally raid his client king's territory to retrieve what was owed plus any extra costs of the expedition. Many of the wars listed in the annals are in fact skirmishes for repayment of debt. The motivation for Queen Medb to attack Ulster in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* was the refusal by Dáire mac Fiachna, a subordinate king, to rent for one year Donn Cuailnge.<sup>197</sup> Medb, a mythological figure who represents Ireland itself, could be considered to represent a king of the highest status. Her status reflects that of the *rí ruirech*, who was a king who in turn had subordinated a number of *ruirig* and their subordinate *rig* through the exchange of the *rath* and reciprocal obligation. Dáire mac Fiachna's refusal, which was anticipated by Medb, gave her legal standing to invade his land and seize the bull. The law did, however, prevent over-kings from annexing territory from another *tuatha*, and he could not place a member of his family in the kingship of that *tuatha*.

If we were to seek an analogue in contemporary society to the power exerted by the Irish kings, it might be found in criminal organizations like the Mafia. The kings sold protection to subordinates and received payments throughout the year for their support. He had numerous people who owed him favors and obligations and were compelled to pay for protection. The exercise of power in Ireland was through subtle coercion of subordinates and peers to one's own advantage and not through direct military conflict. The more clients one had, the greater one's power. In addition to his kin, he had the members of his *tuatha* under obligation to him. A clever king would also expand his

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<sup>197</sup> *Táin*, 57-58.

political reach and power through fosterage. As the highest member of the Irish social scale, he could place his children among his subordinates, which would weaken them financially and limit their acquisition of clients. The Irish law codes do provide a few rights granted to the king, but not to other nobles, that allowed him to hold power and to weaken his competitors. Kings would travel a circuit around the *dûn*, royal fort. These were centrally located forts primarily for the purpose of storing and receiving food renders. When an over-king was entertained in a client king's *dûn*, the *dûn* became the place where the client king's food renders fed the over-king and his company. It was also where the over-king could connect with the client-king's nobles. Making himself accessible at the expense of his subordinate allowed the over-king inroads to the nobles of the *tuath*, and it also prevented the subordinate king from entertaining his clients and possibly expanding his own client base.<sup>198</sup>

Despite the ordered world of the legal tracts on kingship, the reality of seventh-century Irish kingship was one that was changing. Contact with the Romans via Wales and the Welsh kingdoms and with the Anglo-Saxons in southern Scotland had begun to erode the traditional form of kingship. As had occurred in Wales during the sixth and seventh centuries, the traditional power of local *rí tuatha* was eroding as regional and provincial kings grew in power.<sup>199</sup> Still, many of the features of Irish governance were unknown to the Germanic people, and Oswald brought many of these traditions with him when he returned to Northumbria. Let us now turn from Ireland to a brief review of

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<sup>198</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 527-528.

<sup>199</sup> Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, 22-23.

Anglo-Saxon kingship and, in particular, the traditions inherited through Æthelfrith by his sons Oswald and Oswiu.

### **Germanic Kingship**

Before Oswald could rule a Germanic polity and construct a hybrid rule, he had to be accepted by the Anglo-Saxon warrior elite, and to do this he had to present himself as a Germanic king. Unfortunately, to many of the Anglo-Saxons (particularly those from Deira) Oswald appeared and likely sounded similar to an Irish prince and, therefore, an outsider. After defeating Penda and Cadwallon he would have made his way to Bamburgh Castle, Northumbria's seat of power. It is probable that before the battle with the invaders, Oswald and his brothers had been in contact with Bernician elders, putting forth their genealogy as credentials to legitimate their rule. As in Ireland, kingship was a jealously guarded familial right. To be a king one must have a relative who was king. Eligibility for Anglo-Saxon kingship had a far narrower familial range than did the Irish. In fact, Anglo-Saxon families primarily focused on the nuclear family and did not even have a term for family members beyond cousin or for extended family such as the *derbfine* found in Ireland.<sup>200</sup> While potentially anyone whose great-grandfather was king had a claim to the throne, Anglo-Saxons were more restrictive, usually confining kingship to descendants of a common grandfather.

As to what discussions took place when Oswald (and his army) arrived at Bamburgh Castle, the historical records are silent. Unlike the narrative that Bede

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<sup>200</sup> Lorraine Lancaster, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society-I," *The British Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 3 (Sept 1958): 234-235.

presented describing the debate at Eadwine's court on whether to accept Christianity or not, Oswald's first few weeks as king are passed over. Clearly he was from the proper family, the son of King Æthelfrith, whom even Bede refers to as a good king, but that may not have been enough for the Anglo-Saxon elders. Familial association was only one factor in determining who should be king. We can assume, however, that the Anglo-Saxons would expect Oswald to behave as an Anglo-Saxon king ought, if he wanted to command their loyalties. Such behavior was principally prowess in battle.

His decisive victory over the invading kingdoms certainly would have earned Oswald admiration and respect among the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. Germanic tribal society thrived on warfare and the honor brought by bravery and loyalty to one's lord in battle. It was the bond that superseded kinship and tied warriors together in the *commitatus*. Tacitus, in his *Germania* (AD 98), describes a king as a war-leader of great courage and prowess first and foremost.

VII Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt. Nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas, et duces exemplo potius quam imperio, si prompti, si conspicui, si ante aciem agant, admiratione praesunt . . .

XIV Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute vinci, turpe comitatu virtutem principis non adaequare. Iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse. Illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est. Principes pro victoria pugnant, comites pro principe . . . <sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup>Tacitus, *Germania and Agricola*, ed. W. S. Tyler (New York: Appleton & Co., 1856), 20, 23. **VII:** "They choose their kings for noble birth, their generals for merit. These kings have not unlimited or arbitrary power, and the generals do more by example than by authority, if they are energetic, if they are

On the continent the two offices, general and king, were separate. The kings were the leader of the people and represented the tribe with other kings and the gods. The generals were called upon in time of war, and their role was to win battles. They were honored members of the community, but their political role was minor. Among the Anglo-Saxons who arrived in small bands led by one or two chiefs, the two roles, religious leader/leader of the people and war-leader, blended together. Kings from the continent did not journey to England. It was the realm of adventurers who made themselves kings through conquest. Though not all war-leaders in Anglo-Saxon England were kings, by the sixth century all kings were the chief war-leaders, and all other chieftains were subordinate to him. Among the Anglo-Saxons, the king led his warriors to battle. It is interesting to note that Germanic kings traced their genealogies back to the gods, just as did the Anglo-Saxons. However, while the continental Germanic tribes traced their lineage back to Frey, the god of earth, fertility, and peace,<sup>202</sup> the Anglo-Saxons traced their lineages back to Woden, the god of battle.<sup>203</sup> Oswald, by obtaining victory against overwhelming odds at Heavenfield, had shown his mettle in battle. He was brave, and he was victorious. Courage in battle would allow his followers to obtain glory. Victory would provide his warriors with gold and wealth that was glory's handmaiden. This was the type of man

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conspicuous, if they fight in before the front of the army, they lead because they are admired." XIV: "When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the leader to be surpassed in valor, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valor of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from battle. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief."

<sup>202</sup> Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 29-30.

<sup>203</sup> As I discussed above in Chapter 1, the vast majority of Anglo-Saxons who came to England in the fifth and sixth centuries were warriors, as has been suggested by the high percentage of warrior graves from that period.

that the Anglo-Saxons of Bernicia and Deira could pledge their allegiance. Since the Northumbrian Anglo-Saxons had no other valid candidate for the kingship, and Oswald's victorious and threatening army was camped in their capital, his acceptance as king was assured.

But precisely how did the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon warrior elite understand kingship? The expectations and the powers of an Anglo-Saxon king differed from those of the Irish, yet Oswald was raised as an Irish prince and his only direct exposure to kingship was among the Irish of the ruling Uí Neill and the Scots of the kingdom of Dál Riata. Had Oswald tried to rule based only on the Irish model, he would have been dispatched with alacrity by those whose loyalty he sought. Oswald, however, appears to have been a shrewd man and knew that he must be a king like his father. No doubt he had learned many of the Anglo-Saxon's expectations of a king from the thegns who had accompanied him and his family into exile 18 years earlier. Once king, Oswald retained and expanded his power by merging the coercive elements of clientship and patronage from Irish kingship (which in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms he spread via the waters of the baptismal font) with the iron of the sword, the glory obtained in battle and the gold of treasure, so valued by the Anglo-Saxons, to produce a hybrid monarchy.

In many ways Anglo-Saxon kingship must have seemed strange to Oswald. Even their word for king had a different root meaning than did the analogous Irish term. It had little to do with the king's role as ruler of a people and more to do with where he was derived. The Old English word for king is *cyning*, which means "son of the race" or

“member of the tribe.”<sup>204</sup> He issues from the tribe; he is created by it and represents the tribe. While representing the tribe would not have been a foreign concept to Oswald from his long years in Ireland, much else differed. His primary role was to protect the people in his capacity as war-leader and to promote the well being of the tribe with the aid of his trusted council of elders.<sup>205</sup>

Although Anglo-Saxon legal tradition extends back to Æthelberht of Kent (560?-616), these were laws made by the king primarily to regulate crimes and assign fees for transgressions. The Anglo-Saxons had no tradition of an independent group (such as the *brehons* of Ireland) who controlled the law, which regulated not only crimes and fines but also the actions of the king, even determining the criteria for his selection. Unlike Ireland, there were no written laws among the Anglo-Saxons that defined the role and nature of the king. In order to determine what a good king would look like to the warrior aristocracy of Anglo-Saxon England, we need to turn to literature.<sup>206</sup> Although its date is contested, the poem *Beowulf* is a work roughly contemporaneous with Oswald’s kingship.<sup>207</sup> Within the tale are descriptions of numerous kings; however, four dominate

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<sup>204</sup> The Italo-Celtic and Indo-Iranian term for king can be found in the Old English word *ricē*, (“rule,” “reign,” “power,” “authority”) which found its way into the language via the proto-Celtic *\*rīgion* > Old Irish *ríge* (“kingship,” “kingdom”); West, 413.

<sup>205</sup> Leo Carruthers, “Kingship and Heroism in *Beowulf*,” in *Heroes and Heroism in Medieval Literature*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 19-20.

<sup>206</sup> Patrick Wormald, “Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy,” in *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early Christian Society and its Historian* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 32-33, 37.

<sup>207</sup> Craig R. Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England* (New York: Garland, 1996), 172. Roy Michael Liuzza, “On the Dating of *Beowulf*,” in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York, Garland, 1995), 281-282. For an early seventh-century date, see H. Munro Chadwick, “The Heroic Age, An Excerpt,” in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre



the tale: Scyld, Hroðgar, Hygelac, and Beowulf. These four kings taken together may serve as a model of idealized Germanic kingship. Scyld Scefing, the mythological founder of the Danes, is, by his very name, both the shield of his people and their sheaf (a royal fertility symbol).<sup>208</sup> The *scop* praises Scyld for relieving the distress of the Danes saying,

oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum,  
monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,  
egsode eorlas, syððanærest wearð  
feasceaft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,  
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,  
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra  
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,  
gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning! (*Beowulf*, 4-11)<sup>209</sup>

Probably nowhere else in the poem do the Anglo-Saxon origins shine forth so clearly. Here in Scyld is the embodiment of the good Anglo-Saxon king. He is a warrior-king whose conquests fill the treasury from which his warriors will benefit. He has also pacified all of his neighbors so that his people will prosper unharnessed by enemies. This king represents a fusion of the mythological gods Frey and Woden. He is prosperity, fertility and war in one persona. Of the four only three receive the epithet of *god cyning* (Scyld, line 11, Hroðgar, line 863, and Beowulf, 2390). Other kings in the poem are

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Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 32. Sam Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 132. Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Beowulf: The Paganism of Hrothgar's Danes." *Studies in Philology* 78, no. 5 (1981): 91-92.

<sup>208</sup> This symbol ties Scyld with the fertility god Frey.

<sup>209</sup> "Often Scyld Scefing took away mead benches from enemy troops in many nations, he terrified warriors, even though when first he was found destitute, he experienced consolation, grew under the clouds, prospered in honors until each of the surrounding people, over the whale-road had to heed him to pay him tribute: that was a good king!" (*Beowulf*, 3).

praised as protectors of their people, usually with compound words of praise. Thus, we have Beowulf described as the *Wedrahelm*, “the helm of the Weather-Geats” (2705), Hroðgar is *eorla hleo*, “defender of warriors” (1865, 2142). The king must keep his people safe from the external forces of chaos that seek to overthrow the order of their society. A strong lord protects his people, and they thrive under him. After the king, the most stabilizing factor in a Germanic tribal group was the mead-hall. Its importance in the community is highlighted by its prominent position in the beginning of the poem *Beowulf*. For a people surrounded by the uncontrollable forces of nature and in constant strife with neighboring tribes, it is not surprising to see the hall as a major stabilizing factor in their community. It was the center of power and the gathering place of warriors who were responsible for maintaining stability in the world. The construction of the hall symbolizes the divine ordering of the cosmos, and the destruction of a hall can be seen as symbolic of cosmic destruction.<sup>210</sup> Oswald’s victory at Heavenfield ended a year of widespread terror and destruction in Northumbria. His killing of Cadwallon and driving Penda back to Mercia to brood and lick his wounds for almost a decade placed the mantle of defender of the people on the shoulders of the new king. Returning to sit in his hall, the Germanic symbol of peace, Oswald solidified his power.

With military victory comes the distribution of treasure and gifts of gold rings, usually armbands. In order to be considered a good king, Oswald needed to be generous. These gifts created a bond between the king and his warriors. In fact, such gift giving tied

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<sup>210</sup> Martin Green, “Man, Time, and Apocalypse in *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *Beowulf*,” in *Old English Shorter Poems*, ed. Katherine O’ Brien O’ Keefe (New York: Garland, 1994), 290.

them closer to him and disrupted the bonds to their own kin. Loyalty to one's lord and courage in battle were the goals of a warrior; the bonds of family were secondary. In *The Battle of Maldon* such virtues are extolled by Byrhtwold in discussing his lord Byrhtnoð:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,  
 mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lylað.  
 Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,  
 god on greote. A mæg gnornian  
 se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.  
 Ic eom frod feores: fram ic ne wille,  
 ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,  
 be swa leofan menn, licgan þence. (*Battle of Maldon*, 312-319)<sup>211</sup>

Courage in the face of death was the hope of the Anglo-Saxon warrior. He wished only for a strong lord to serve and to earn immortality in the memory of men. Hroðgar is praised as a *beaga bryttan*, “ring-giver” (80, 352) and a *sinces brytta*, “treasure-giver” (608, 1107) and as such had a loyal following. Despite his inability to defeat Grendel and thereby properly protect his people, he is still praised for his generosity and retains many of his warriors. When times get bad, a king has to rely on the loyalty he engendered early in his career. Hroðgar knew well that,

Swa sceal ge[ong] guma gode gewyrcean,  
 fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,  
 þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen  
 wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,

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<sup>211</sup> “Courage the braver, heart the bolder, mind the stronger as our strength lessens. Here lies our lord all hacked up, a good [man] on the earth. A kinsman should be sad who think to go from this battle-play. I am old of life, I will not leave but by the side of my lord, by so beloved a man I think to lie.” *The Battle of Maldon* in John C. Pope, *Seven Old English Poems* (New York: Norton, 1966), 27.

leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal  
in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.<sup>212</sup>

Thus, he was able to retain his men. Oswald would surely have recognized the importance of building a loyal base of warriors from among the Anglo-Saxons of Bernicia and Deira and would have adopted a generous program of gift giving. Because he was a returning exile and his father had been killed when he was so young, Oswald would not have had the opportunity to engender loyalty as advised by the *scop*. No doubt after his victory at Heavenfield he quickly adopted a generous program of gift-giving to his warriors and those who would swear loyalty to him from Bernicia and Deira.

### **The Mixing of Irish and Germanic Kingship Under Oswald**

Bede is silent on Oswald's distribution of treasure to his warriors, but we may assume that it was sufficient to make him a successful warrior-king. What we do know is that the king was generous to his people. Bede recounts the events of an Easter feast when,

quia tempore quodam, cum die sancto paschae cum praefato episcopo consedisset ad prandium, positusque esset in mensa coram eo discus argenteus regalibus epulis refertus, et iamiamque essent manus ad panem benedicendum missuri, intrasse subito ministrum ipsius, cui suscipiendorum inopum erat cura delegata, et indicasse regi, quia multitudo pauperum undecumque adueniens maxima per plateas sederet, postulans aliquid elemosynae a rege. Qui mox dapes sibimet adpositas

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<sup>212</sup> "Thus should a young man, in his father's house accomplish good things with splendid rich gifts so that afterwards when older, his chosen companions remain with him, loyal people when war comes. By such generosity any man prospers." *Beowulf*, 20-25.

deferri pauperibus, sed et discum confringi, atque eisdem  
minutatim diuidi praecepit.<sup>213</sup>

From this passage we learn much regarding Oswald's kingship. First, we can see that he has integrated a practice of a *rí tuatha* into his kingship. Access to an Irish king was required annually by law at an *óenach*.<sup>214</sup> It appears that Oswald used the occasion of the Easter feast to serve a similar function, allowing him more direct access to his people. While we, unfortunately, do not have a date for this Easter feast reported by Bede, it seems, based on Bede's description, that this event occurred as early as the second year of Oswald's reign (635), given that Aidan was already bishop of Lindisfarne (635-651). Adopting this practice so early in his reign is an apt illustration of Oswald's political shrewdness. Second, it shows that Bede considered him generous to his people. Not only does he have his servants take the food to the poor, but he also has them break up the silver plates on which the food was served and distribute that to the poor as well. The giving of alms was certainly a time-honored Christian practice, but the king was also asserting his semi-divine role of symbolizing prosperity and fertility by providing

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<sup>213</sup> Bede, *HE*, III.6 230: "... when on a certain time, on the day of holy Easter when he had sat down to dinner with the bishop a silver dish was placed before him full of rich food, and they were just ready to bless the bread, the servant, whom he had appointed to relieve the poor, came in on a sudden, and told the king, that a great multitude of needy persons from all parts were sitting in the streets begging some alms of the king; he immediately ordered the meat set before him to be carried to the poor, and the dish to be cut in pieces and divided among them."

<sup>214</sup> An *óenach* was a gathering of the people, believed to be and often referred to as a fair. It originated as funeral games held at traditional sites associated with mythological burials. By the ninth century they were increasingly held at major church sites on liturgical feast days. It was an occasion for the king and the people to meet and conduct business. T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 556-559. S. J. Connolly, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 405. There does not appear to be an Anglo-Saxon analog, with the possible exception of the gatherings at Yeavering held by King Eadwine (616-633).

nourishment to the people. His generosity with the distribution of silver to the needy in the streets again shows the open hand of the king. Importantly, Oswald gave silver to the common people, which showed generosity, but it also demonstrated that he reserved the distribution of gold for his warriors, as was expected from Germanic kings.

Many of the Germanic customs of kingship would have been alien to Oswald. In Ireland kinship was the most important tie in the *tuatha*, followed by clientship. In seventh-century Northumbria warriors at the household of the king were drawn from distant families and even distant kingdoms. They all sought the company of a powerful, successful king so that they could share in his glory. As a result, kinship ties became less important among Anglo-Saxons, whereas loyalty to one's king and brothers-in-arms became paramount. So strong was their loyalty that thegns could not leave their lord's or comrade's death unavenged. An episode from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, though dating to the eighth century, typifies this aspect of the warrior's ethic. In 755 [757]<sup>215</sup> Cynewulf, king of Wessex, stopped to visit his mistress. To this tryst he brought only a small number of retainers as bodyguards. A certain Cyneheard, hearing that the king was exposed, took the opportunity to attack him while vulnerable. Though the king fought bravely, the attackers eventually overwhelmed him. His thegns, who were unaware of the attack until they heard the screams of the woman, came upon Cyneheard's large band and were offered money and life if they left quietly. The warriors refused because they were compelled by honor to avenge their king. They fought the superior force, and were all killed save one. When the main body of the king's army heard of

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<sup>215</sup> Unbracketed date is the date listed in the chronicle. Date in brackets is adjusted to modern calendar.

the ambush, they rushed to the battle site, and Cyneheard made them the same offer. Again it was refused. Cyneheard informed them that among his company were several blood-relatives of theirs. In response, the leader of Cynewulf's warriors said that no relative was dearer to him than the king. Cyneheard and his band were then killed.<sup>216</sup>

By contrast, under the Irish system, military service for the king was a legal obligation, and its terms were limited by law, which was outside of the king's control. While an Irish warrior might have strong loyalties to his *rí tuatha*, such a situation as the one described from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* likely would not have happened in Ireland. Kinship was supreme in Ireland. One's loyalty to the king or chieftain in battle was never greater than that of loyalty to the members of the *fine*. Kin were the people who would support a man financially, they were the ones with whom he shared the family land, and they were the ones who would exact revenge or financial recompense if

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<sup>216</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. and ed. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 47-49, <http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/asc/a.html>: 7 se Cynewulf oft miclum gefeohtum feaht uuip Bretwalum 7 ymb .xxxi. wintra þæs þe he rice hæfde he wolde adræfan anne æþeling se was Cyneheard haten 7 se Cyneheard wæs þæs Sigebryhtes broþur 7 þa geascode he þone cyning lytle werode on wifcyþþe on Merantune 7 hine þær berad 7 þone bur utan beeode ær hine þa men onfunden þe mid þam kyninge wærun 7 þa ongeat se cyning þæt 7 he on þa duru eode 7 þa unheanlice hine werode oþ he on þone æþeling locude 7 þa utrædde on hine 7 hine miclum gewundode. 7 hie alle on þone Cyning wærun feohtende oþ þæt hie hine ofslægenne hæfdon 7 þa on þæs wifes gebærum onfundon þæs cyninges þegnas þa unstilnesse 7 þa þider urnon swa hwelc swa þonne gearo wearþ 7 radost 7 hiera se æþeling gehwelcum feoh 7 feorh gebed 7 hiera nænig hit gepicgean nolde'. Ac hie simle feohtende wæran oþ hie alle lægon butan anum Bryttiscum gisle 7 se swiþe gewundad wæs. Ða on morgenne gehierdun þæt þæs cyninges þegnas þe him beæftan wærun þæt se cyning ofslægen wæs þa ridon hie þider 7 his aldormon Osric 7 Wiferþ his þegn 7 þa men þe he beæftan him læfde ær 7 þone æþeling on þære byrig metton þær se cyning ofslægen læg 7 þa gatu him to belocen hæfdon 7 þa þærto eodon 7 þa gebed he him hiera agenne dom feos 7 londes gif hie him þæs rices uþon 7 him cyþdon þæt hiera mægum him mid wæron þa þe him from noldon 7 þa cuædon hie þæt him nænig mæg leofra nære þonne hiera hlaforð 7 hie næfre his banan folgian noldon 7 þa budon hie hiera mægum þæt hie gesunde from eodon 7 hie cuædon þæt tæd ilce hiera geferum geboden wære þe ær mid þam cyninge wærun þa cuædon hie þæt hie hie þæs ne onmunden þon ma þe eowre geferan þe mid þam cyninge ofslægene wærun. 7 hie þa ymb þa gatu feohtende wæron oþ þæt hie þærinne fulgon 7 þone æþeling ofslogon 7 þa men þe him mid wærun alle butan anum se wæs þæs aldormonnes godsunu 7 he his feorh generede 7 þeah he wæs oft gewundad.

the individual was injured or killed, and if killed would care for his children. Though the system of kinship among adult males was declining in importance relative to the loyalty given to the war band and chief among the Anglo-Saxons, it was still important. The events of 755 concerning Cyneheard and recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* would not have received so much space if they were not meant to illustrate an ideal. Clearly someone wanted to emphasize the importance of loyalty to one's lord over the loyalty to one's kin. Oswald recognized that kinship was still an important tie and that he might also be able to graft the patron-client system of Ireland into the kinship system of Anglo-Saxon England.

Thus, much of what Oswald learned regarding kingship in Ireland, regarding the subtle use of power built on leverage of unequal personal relationships, utilizing the patron-client system, would have to be creatively applied in England. After the initial victory at Heavenfield, much of his army would have disbanded. Oswald needed a system to defend his weak kingdom from external threats while he built up his military power.<sup>217</sup> A remarkable feature of Oswald's kingship is how infrequently he went to war. Bede only mentions two battles that Oswald fought: his victory at Heavenfield and his defeat and death at Oswestry near the Welsh border. Bede, as we know, would leave out bits of information that detracted from what he believed to be God's plan for Northumbria. It would not be seemly for Oswald to be seen an aggressive warrior-king

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<sup>217</sup> His victory at Heavenfield, we are told, was accomplished with a small army. His forces were small and composed of Picts, Scots and Irish, many of whom would return to their lands after the campaign. No doubt it was a while before he had many thegns flocking to his banner.



conquering his neighbors as Scyld did. However, we are aware that Oswald was involved in at least one other battle in 637 when he completed the destruction of the Gododdin by laying siege and then taking their fortress at Edinburgh.<sup>218</sup> In the *Annals of Ulster* it is recorded that his brother Oswiu conducted a military campaign during Oswald's reign in Strathclyde.<sup>219</sup> Oswald was able to rule by resorting to the sword infrequently. His years of training among the Irish and their political machinations taught him a different way to assert dominance—a valuable lesson when one considers the probable weakness of his military. The subordination of kings through gifts and the incurring of reciprocal obligation would allow him to exercise non-military control over his allies and enemies. It should be recalled that most of the neighbors of Northumbria were Celts. This strategy would have worked particularly well with the kingdoms ruled by Britons and Welsh. The Celtic system of grants and reciprocal obligation, that is, a patron-client system, was one with which they were familiar. The Welsh had diverged from the Irish model more than other Celtic peoples and developed a more militaristic kingship, probably brought about by their long association with the Romans. The other kingdoms, Rheged and Strathclyde, may have been, like the Welsh, in transition to a system of the great king. The Dál Riata, partly because of their isolation from the Irish in Ireland and their proximity to the Anglo-Saxons, were also on their way to a Germanic form of kingship, but they were still under obligation to follow the old Celtic system. Oswald was able to subjugate the

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<sup>218</sup> 637, *Annals of Ulster*, ed. and trans. William M. Hennessy (Dublin: Thomas & Co., 1887), 102-103.

<sup>219</sup> 641, *AU*, 104-105.

Britons through this system, but the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms presented a different problem.<sup>220</sup> They were not bound, or even familiar with, the laws that wreathed the Celtic kingships. For them, a different strategy would be needed.

The spread of the Christian faith opened possibilities for Oswald among the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Christian theology and early practices, particularly surrogate Christian parentage, provided him with an opportunity for such manipulations. He could modify the system of god-parentage and use it as a proxy for Celtic fosterage, a system that the Anglo-Saxons used sparingly, if at all. Standing as godfather for monarchs was a method extending his honor to guarantee the faith of the king and his people. It was a form of suretyship, a fundamental component of the Irish patron-client system. Oswald, it seems, discovered a way to use the zeal that often occurs following the first one or two generations after conversion to increase his power. Anthropological research has demonstrated that following conversion godparent complexes, though they can vary in nature from one society to another, do share fundamental features that do not vary across wide separations of time and space. One of these is that the kinship produced by sponsorship was often more binding than other types of kinship because of its spiritual base.<sup>221</sup> Oswald used this tactic to win the support of the king of Gewisse and thus earned a valuable ally along the southern border of Penda's Mercia. Oswiu, as we shall see in the

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<sup>220</sup> The kingship among the Welsh, Picts and the other Celtic tribes of England differed in degree rather than in kind from that of the Irish. An examination of their kingship, while interesting, is outside the scope of this work.

<sup>221</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 19-20.

next chapter, used this technique often in his political planning. The subordination of other monarchs through the new faith, along with the steel of the sword that was more familiar to Anglo-Saxons in the subjugation of kingdoms, secured his kingship in Northumbria and led Bede quickly to declare him *Bretwalda*. It is not my contention that Oswald's faith was not genuine. He was raised among the Irish, who had been Christian for almost two centuries. For several years of his fosterage (as was typical for most Irish nobles' sons), he lived among monks, in his case on the island of Iona, where he would have become intimate with the ideals and beliefs of Christianity as practiced by the Irish. As a prospective king, certain members of Iona's community<sup>222</sup> would have likely instructed him in his role as an agent of God's plan on earth. As an Irish noble and a life-long Christian, he would have desired to spread the Gospel to his recently liberated people. As a king and political animal, Oswald would have recognized the value of indoctrinating Northumbria in the Irish faith and having the support of the Irish Christians, especially among the powerful Cenél Conaill, the clan from which the abbots of Iona were drawn, and their clients, such as the chastened but potentially dangerous Dál Riata. Oswald was exercising to the best of his ability all of the resources required to create order in the complex and conflicted world of early seventh-century Northumbria. The new king merged qualities of Irish and Germanic kingship to create a new form of

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<sup>222</sup> Bede tells us that the children of Æthelfrith were converted among the Irish (*HE*, III.1). As discussed in the previous chapter, this was initially among the Dál Riata Scots. Most probably Oswald was instructed by the abbots Fergna (Virgno), 608-623, and Ségéne, 623-652. Both were members of the royal Cenél Conaill, the current ruling branch of the northern Uí Neill.

leader, Christian and multinational, that would have important implications for Northumbria during the following century.

## Chapter 4

### Holy Warrior, Sainted King

þat weore uni-mete care; of Arðures forð-fare.  
 Bruttes ileueð ȝete; þat he bon on liue.  
 and wunnien in Aualun; mid fairest alre aluen.  
 and lokieð euere Bruttes ȝete; whan Arður cumen liðe.  
 Nis nauer þe mon iboren; of nauer nane burde icoren.  
 þe cunne of þan soðe; of Arðure sugen mare.  
 Bute while wes an witeȝe; Mærlin ihate.  
 he bodede mid worde; his quiðes weoren soðe.  
 þat an Arður sculde ȝete; cum Anglen to fulste. (*Brut* 14,290-14,298)<sup>223</sup>

One can only imagine the magnitude of despair that rippled through the kingdom of Northumbria following the defeat and death of Oswald at Maserfelth. Their king, their protector, had been slain by one of Northumbria's fiercest enemies, Penda of Mercia. This was the same Penda who, side by side with Cadwallon, scorched the Northumbrian landscape eight short years earlier. Oswald had put an end to Penda's and Cadwallon's marauding, but now the survivor of that unholy duo had returned to take his revenge on their king. Not only was the army defeated and Oswald killed, but his body, like that of his predecessor, King Eadwine (616-633), was hacked asunder with his head and arms placed on pikes in a macabre parody of the crucifixion. The destruction, anarchy and fear that followed Eadwine's death must have been foremost on the minds of the warriors and people of Northumbria. On this occasion, however, few could hope for the good fortune that Oswald's unexpected return had brought. Their king and savior who had walked

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<sup>223</sup> Layamon, *Brut*. Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1963-1978).

among them for a relatively short a time was gone. As news of his death spread to the scattered settlements of Northumbria, the kingdom braced for what they must have expected would be a repeat of the carnage wrought after the fall of Eadwine, but the anticipated assault from Mercia never came. Few then alive could have foretold that within the space of a few years following their beloved king's murder, that he would return transfigured as a spiritual warrior—one of God's Christian saints. In this chapter it will be my purpose to explore the complex cultural and political terrain through which Oswald's brother Oswiu successfully navigated to transform an Anglo-Saxon/Celtic warrior-king into a humble *miles Christi*, and how once this novel holy warrior was created it took on a life of its own. Not only was Oswald embraced by the numerous ethnic groups within the Northumbrian kingdom, but his essence was also added to by clerics, artists and artisans, ultimately transmuting and strengthening (during the course of a century) the king's creation by uniting him inexorably with Christ and the cross.

Oswald's death, unfortunate as it was, occurred near a town that Bede calls *Maserfelth*. As to the exact location of this place, Bede is annoyingly vague. In part due to Bede's silence on the location of *Maserfelth* and the fact that no record of that location remains, speculation as to where Oswald fell abounds (see Figure VII). This has led some to suggest that *Maserfelth* may be found in the kingdom of Lindsey on the southern border of Northumbria.<sup>224</sup> This Anglo-Saxon kingdom just south of the Humber

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<sup>224</sup> Charles Plummer, ed., *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica: Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum, Historiam Abbatum, Epistolam ad Ecgbertum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 154-155. Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta: The Division of the Body and the Diffusion of a Cult," in *Oswald:*

# Oswestry and Bardney



Figure VII: Oswestry and Bardney

*Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford, Lincolnshire: Watkins Press, 1995), 99-100.

would make, due to its proximity to Northumbria, a convenient site for the death and later veneration of the saint-king.<sup>225</sup> That Oswald would have been campaigning there is most sensible. Lindsey, which by the seventh century had been reduced to a minor kingdom, periodically small. In many ways it is an attractive location for the fall of Oswald, alternated as a subject territory of either Northumbria or Mercia. It is not difficult to imagine that Oswald fell to Penda battling for control of that kingdom. Additionally, the monastery at Bardney, which was to become the final resting place of Oswald's torso, is found in Lindsey. This monastery was established by Oswiu's daughter, Osthryth, and her husband, King Æthelred of Mercia (675-704), sometime between 679 and 690. The remains of Oswald (minus his arms and head) were translated there sometime after the founding of the monastery.<sup>226</sup> Yet Bede makes special mention that several of the first miracles associated with Oswald at the site of *Maserfelth* were experienced by Britons,<sup>227</sup> possibly implying that the Anglo-Saxons were a minority population. If Oswald fell in Lindsey, a region dominated by Anglo-Saxons for over a century, this would probably not be the case. A location more remote and in a Celtic dominated region might be more likely.

While the case for *Maserfelth* lying somewhere in the kingdom of Lindsey is superficially attractive, tradition holds that Oswestry, located in Shropshire along the Welsh border, is the site of Oswald's final battle. By the end of the seventh century,

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<sup>225</sup> Thacker, *ONK*, 99.

<sup>226</sup> *HE*, III.11, 246.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*



Oswestry (derived from the Old English *Oswaldestreow*, Oswald's tree) already held an association of Oswald's cross, the appellation also reflected in its Welsh name *Croesoswald*, Oswald's cross.<sup>228</sup> This area, just a few miles to the south of Chester, was on the extreme southwestern edge of Mercia where it shared a border with Powys, Gwynedd and Rheged. Æthelfrith had campaigned there in 616, exacting tribute from the Welsh kingdoms. Eadwine also campaigned in this region during his wars against Gwynedd in the 630s, and Oswald may have returned to assert Northumbria's continued dominance. He may also have been in the region to support Gewisse and to further apply pressure on Mercia's southern border, a tactic designed to turn Penda's eyes away from Bamburgh. Whatever the reason, and despite the loss of their king, it would seem fortune was on the side of the Northumbrians. Since Oswestry sits almost 100 miles from the Northumbrian border, Oswald's people had time to prepare a homeland defense. Penda's army, despite its victory, would likely have taken quite a beating and would have been in no condition to quickly turn north and invade. While in their weakened state Penda's army was also exposed to Oswald's allies inhabiting the upper Thames Valley of Gewisse (later the kingdom of Wessex) and the British kingdom of Rheged,<sup>229</sup> and as such would have had to proceed with caution, at least for the first few weeks after the battle. While Mercia licked its wounds, Oswald's brother Oswiu was able to quickly secure the throne for himself. An able warrior who returned to Northumbria with his

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<sup>228</sup> The first record of the name does not appear until the early twelfth century. Clare Stancliffe, "Where was Oswald Killed?" in *ONK*, 89, 91.

<sup>229</sup> Rheged was the home kingdom of Oswiu's wife Ríemmelth, the grand-daughter of their beloved king Urien.

brother, he was able to gain the loyalty of the thegns at Bamburgh and the surrounding area while calling upon his allies among the Dál Riata, Rheged and the Picts.

Even though Mercia was unable to invade Northumbria, Oswiu was powerless to avenge his brother's death or immediately to retrieve his body. It took the new king one year, according to Bede, before he could stage a raid in the area of Oswestry in order to retrieve Oswald's head and arms from the stakes upon which Penda had left them.<sup>230</sup> Whether the purpose of the raid was just to recover his brother's remains or to finish the objectives of Oswald's last mission is not known. Nevertheless, while camping on the Welsh border lands, Oswiu discovered a curious practice among the local people that he used to his advantage. It should be noted that before the battle of Winwaed in 655 Oswiu's position as king of Northumbria was not secure. He may have cobbled together a confederation of Oswald's supporters in Bernicia, exerted some dominance over the kingdoms of northern Britain, and retained the tepid loyalties among the Scots of Dál Riata, the Irish and the Picts, but he had lost Deira.

The Deirans had never liked Bernician rule. They hated but feared Æthelfrith, Oswald's father, who as a warrior-king was very successful. Yet when he was killed at the River Idle, Eadwine had no difficulty (we are told)<sup>231</sup> reestablishing the loyalties of the Deirans, compelling Æthelfrith's children to flee. Oswald was respected and, as the region's savior from Penda and Cadwallon, the Deirans were content to follow him.

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<sup>230</sup> *HE*, III.12, 252. It seems he also brought the stakes with him, *HE*, III.13, 254.

<sup>231</sup> *HE*, II.9, 162 and III.1 212.

However, the turmoil that followed the death of Oswald must have seemed like the perfect opportunity for Deira to raise one of their own to the throne. The rebellion of the Deiran nobles weakened the delicate web of alliances that Oswiu's brother had formed, almost to the point of breaking. The immediate and most threatening result of this weakness was that the Northumbrian kingdom fragmented, producing a dangerous enemy to the south. The kingdom of Deira came to be ruled by Oswine, the second cousin of King Eadwine (616-633).<sup>232</sup> Not only had Oswine become the king of Deira, he also seems to have had a charismatic personality, something Oswiu sorely lacked. Bede, not often given to gushing about secular leaders, could barely limit his praise of the young king, of whom he says,

Erat autem rex Osuini et aspectu uenustus, et statura sublimis, et affatu iucundus, et moribus ciuilis, et manu omnibus, id est nobilibus simul atque ignobilibus, largus; unde contigit, ut ob regiam eius et animi, et uultus, et meritorum dignitatem ab omnibus diligeretur, et undique ad eius ministerium de cunctis prope prouinciis uiri etiam nobilissimi concurrerent. Cuius inter ceteras uirtutis et modestiae, et, ut ita dicam, specialis benedictionis glorias etiam maxima fuisse fertur humilitas, ut uno probare sat erit exemplo.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Oswine, who later and ironically for Oswiu became a saint of some popularity, was the son of Osric, the same Osric who was killed by Cadwallon in 634 along with Eanfrith. For more detail see Figure III.

<sup>233</sup> "King Oswine was of a graceful aspect, and tall of stature, pleasant in discourse, and courteous in manner; and most bountiful, to noble as well to the ignoble; so that he was beloved by all men for his qualities of body and mind, and persons of the first rank came from almost all provinces to serve him. Among other virtues and modesty, if I may so express it, humility is said to have been the greatest, which one example will suffice to prove." *HE*, III.14, 256-258.

Bede also makes reference to the special and close relationship that existed between Oswine and Aídan, bishop of Lindisfarne, further highlighting the threat posed to Oswiu. One can only imagine the response of Oswiu to this peripeteia. This was the same Aídan who came from Iona at the request of his brother Oswald and was granted the island of Lindisfarne for his abbey and episcopal see. In all probability Oswiu grew up around the bishop while he was in exile among the Dál Riata. Oswine's relationship with Aídan, Oswiu rightly feared, could cut into his support among the Dál Riata and the Irish kings of Tara. In addition to being a military and political threat, Oswine was usurping Oswiu's control of the Ionian Church at Lindisfarne by befriending Bishop Aídan. Aídan's support of Oswine could have pushed Oswiu to the religious sidelines and threatened to undermine his control of the increasingly influential Christian Church. Many of Oswald's alliances were based on his superior position in regard to Christianity. With this power in jeopardy, Oswiu needed to retain his authority among the clients that Oswald made while standing as godfather of various Anglo-Saxon kings. The new king seemingly spent much of the first year after his brother's death watching his list of allies grow thin.

### **The Birth of a New Type of Christian Saint**

What Oswiu lacked in charisma he more than made up for in shrewdness. N. J. Higham has called Oswiu "the most opportunistic and successful of the convert kings to date, demonstrating repeatedly a capacity to react imaginatively to the changing world by

which he was confronted and to exploit a broad range of strategies.”<sup>234</sup> During the late summer of 643, the seed for one of those imaginative responses may have begun to take root under the shadow of Llanymynech Rock in the Cambrian Mountains. Bede reports that local Britons and Anglo-Saxons came to the site where Oswiu’s brother fell in battle for the purpose of veneration.<sup>235</sup> As Oswiu went to retrieve his brother’s remains from the stakes, he may have witnessed pilgrims coming to the shrine and carrying away some of the soil or slivers of wood from the stake that impaled Oswald’s head and arms for their curative properties. As he watched the devotion to his brother’s impaled remains, what factors came together for Oswiu to envision a saintly warrior-king? What paradigm influenced his thoughts so profoundly that as he gazed upon the shattered remains of his brother he, now a warrior-king himself, could conceive of a new form of sainthood? To be sure, Oswiu was a rare individual even among his family. He was born an Anglo-Saxon, but like his brothers had been fostered among the Irish. He was one of the youngest of Æthelfrith’s children, only three or four years old when fostered, and as a result much of his worldview would have been that of an Irish noble. We know that he lived not only among the Dál Riata of Argyll but also in Ireland. While there, probably in County Derry, he had an Irish wife, Fína, the daughter of Colmán Rimid, king of Tara (598-604) and leader of the Cenél nEógan of the northern Uí Neill. We know that they had at least one child, the future King Aldfrith (685-705), who remained in Ireland after

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<sup>234</sup> N. J. Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 276.

<sup>235</sup> *HE*, III.9.

his father's return to Bernicia.<sup>236</sup> For a man of the early seventh century, living on the extreme northwest fringe of what was the known world, Oswiu was a remarkable amalgam of different ethnicities. Like his brother Oswald he was able to balance his Irish upbringing with that of his Anglo-Saxon heritage. Oswald had been able to quickly readapt to the Anglo-Saxon culture, and Oswiu, at least as shrewd as his brother, had an additional eight years at the Anglo-Saxon court to learn.

However, those years were not spent idly at court. Oswald, who was childless for most of his reign, used his brother as a political tool. One of the most important actions of Oswald was to reestablish close ties with his father's political allies. To that end, sometime in the 630s he had Oswiu marry a second wife. Her name was Riemmelth, a member of the royal house of Rheged and either the daughter or granddaughter of Rhun map Urien.<sup>237</sup> Practically, this alliance gave Oswald support on the northwestern border of Mercia, which helped keep Penda contained. For Oswiu, it granted him insight into the activities of the British Church, a church about which present scholars have relatively little information. That the British Church was vibrant in seventh-century England we need only recall Bede's almost gleeful account of the killing of 1,200 monks from Bangoriscoed by Æthelfrith in 616.<sup>238</sup> Though Bede is essentially silent on matters concerning the British, unless he needed a foil for the Roman Church, the British remained independent and viable through the seventh and possibly the first half of the

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<sup>236</sup> See Chapter 1, Figure III, page 32.

<sup>237</sup> Rhun map Urien was the son of the beloved King Urien of Rheged. Rhun, according to Nennius, was the man responsible for the baptism of King Eadwine and 12,000 of his subjects (*HB*, §63).

<sup>238</sup> *HE*, II.2. Also see Chapter 1, page 44.

eighth century.<sup>239</sup> Due to the paucity of records regarding the activities of the British Church outside of Wales, we know little of their liturgy or of their cult of the saints. We do, however, know some of their history. King Urien was a beloved king about whom many encomia were written by Taliesin, a sixth-century poet at Urien's court. We know that he was a Christian, for Taliesin referred to him as the "perfect prince of baptism" and "most generous man of baptism."<sup>240</sup> He was clearly a hero of his people, and his wars with the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders may have earned him the status of hero in the British Church—possibly even a saint. Riemmelth, as a descendant of Urien, would have been well versed in the tales and laments associated with the fallen king. Oswiu would have been exposed to these stories from his wife and her retainers. The similarities between the deaths of Urien and Oswald present interesting possibilities. Both were Christians and both died fighting against ruthless pagan invaders. In Urien's case, he was killed by treachery and decapitated while supporting the Gododdin in their war against the Anglo-Saxons under the pagan King Hussa (586-592)<sup>241</sup> of Bernicia. Oswald was killed by Penda, the pagan king of Mercia, and was also decapitated. Both kings were beloved by their people, and while there are no extant encomia for Oswald, there are many laments from the *Taliesin* that mourn the loss of their great king. Unfortunately,

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<sup>239</sup>Damian J. Tyler, "Early Mercia and the Britons," in *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 93-94. British churches and sacred places seem to have remained in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, based on place names. The Primitive Welsh \**eglēs* < British Latin \**eclesia* can be found in English place names such as Eccleswall. When naming a church site, the Anglo-Saxons preferred to use their own word *cirice* > church. Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 79-80.

<sup>240</sup> WT, XXXI, XXXII; see also Chapter 1, 32-33.

<sup>241</sup> He was a grandson or great-grandson of Ida (547-560) and the king who was forced from the throne of Bernicia by Oswald and Oswiu's father, Æthelfrith (593-616). See Table I.

any record of Urien's sanctity has not survived the centuries. If Oswiu had not gotten the actual idea for a sacred king from the tales of Urien, then perhaps the soil for its conception had been made fertile.

Even though the Anglo-Saxons living near Oswestry were probably pagan, most of the Britons were, in all probability, Christian. For Oswiu, Christian veneration of Oswald's remains must have also brought to mind his earliest religious experiences among the monks of Iona. Fostered for part of his life on the holy island, he was familiar with the nascent cult associated with St. Colum Cille and the power over earthly events that the saint still held. Saints had great authority and brought prestige to those associated with them—even more to those who happened to be related by blood to the saint.<sup>242</sup> Of the first nine abbots of Iona, eight were drawn from the same kin group, the Cenél Conaill, the one to which Colum Cille belonged. Association with the sacred power of the founding saint kept his kinsmen in control of the monastic community for over 140 years. One branch under Ninnid, son of Fergus, supplied abbots who ruled Iona for almost 80 years without interruption. Not only were the abbots of Iona kin to the saint, but five of the six kings of Tara who reigned after the death of Colum Cille were also close kin of this major saint. The sacred power of the Cenél Conaill was bolstered during the seventh and early eighth centuries by the inclusion of up to nine additional minor saints within the

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<sup>242</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003), 35-36; Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, translated by Éva Pálmai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 86-88.



same kin group.<sup>243</sup> The significance of blood relation with saints would not have been lost on Oswiu.

The Abbot Ségéne (623-652) would have begun his rule as abbot when Oswiu was about eleven years old, living in exile. Ségéne may even have been one of Oswiu's foster fathers.<sup>244</sup> During his years as abbot, Ségéne aggressively promoted the cult of Colum Cille and was adept at extending the influence of Iona along with her secular allies in its wake.<sup>245</sup> During his years on Iona, he would also have been exposed to stories of the cults of saints in Gaul and in Rome and the importance and power that was conveyed to the saint's guardians. As patron and sole guardian of the saint-king, Oswiu's prestige would have risen.<sup>246</sup> Wasting no time he quickly gathered the remains of his brother and removed them from the site, which was destined to remain a shrine of popular religion for the next nine hundred years.<sup>247</sup>

As a pagan locus of veneration, Oswestry had three features that rendered it exceedingly attractive. First, it was the scene of a great battle where a charismatic king met a heroic but brutal end. Second, after Oswald died, Penda had the king's head and

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<sup>243</sup> I list five saints in addition to Colum Cille from the Cenél Conaill for this period; see Table III. See also Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*, 110; and see Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 310-311 for additional saints.

<sup>244</sup> It was a common practice for noble Irish boys to have several foster parents. With the introduction of Christianity, a monk or abbot would often serve as one of the foster fathers for a noble boy during part of his life. (See Chapter 2).

<sup>245</sup> Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 41, 46.

<sup>246</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 94-98.

<sup>247</sup> Clare Stancliffe, "Where was Oswald Killed?" In *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, edited by Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford, Lincolnshire: Watkins Press, 1995), 86-89.

arms separated from the remainder of his body and placed on three wooden stakes.<sup>248</sup> These three grisly totems, partly through their tripartite nature and partly due to the body parts they bore, enhanced the otherworldly power of the site. Third, within a short distance from where the body hung was a well that had been the location of religious activity since the Iron Age. Wellsprings and even shafts dug into the earth have long been held by Indo-European peoples to be a passage to the otherworld and have been associated with pre-Christian Iron Age veneration (more below).<sup>249</sup> While this preternatural triad made it an appealing pagan setting for worship, these very same features led to ecclesiastical shunning (initially) of the cult of St. Oswald.<sup>250</sup> Oswiu, after completing whatever errand brought him to the Welsh border, gathered Oswald's parts (though not the torso or legs) as well as the stakes upon which the arms and head were propped and returned to Bamburgh. Bede informs us that once he returned he built a chapel dedicated to St. Peter in the fortress, specifically to house the arms of Oswald, which were placed in a silver reliquary seen later by Alcuin.<sup>251</sup> He gave the head to the monks at Lindisfarne, believing—we may presume—that it would receive the same sacred veneration which he had lavished on his brother's arms. If in fact he did expect

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<sup>248</sup> I am assuming one stake for each arm, though there is no mention of the number of stakes. Nevertheless, for a Christian audience, the display must have appeared as a macabre parody of the Crucifixion.

<sup>249</sup> Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 22-27.

<sup>250</sup> It seems that the Irish monks (and the monks at Hexham) accepted the cult of Oswald by at least 664. Bede recounts how Acca, later bishop of Hexham (709-731), during the plague of 664 while visiting a dying monk cured him by mixing a splinter of the *oaken stake which impaled Oswald's head* in water. *HE*, III.13. Associating a pagan symbol of worship, the stakes, with the cross, will be discussed in great detail in the following chapter.

<sup>251</sup> *HE*, III.6, 12, Alcuin, *Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, edited and translated Peter Godman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

that, he was greatly disappointed. What the monks did instead was to take the head and quietly bury it, albeit with the dignity befitting the remains of the king who had granted them the land for their monastery.<sup>252</sup> Oswiu could only have been puzzled by their actions. He had seen Britons, presumably Christians, venerating Oswald's remains. They came to the site, gathered soil from where Oswald fell and bled, and took shavings from the stakes upon which his remains were impaled as curatives.<sup>253</sup> Presumably, he had heard the people talk of the miracles associated with his brother's remains—no doubt some of these were the very same ones which Bede, 80 years later, included in his history. Oswiu had given the monks what would soon become the relics of a martyred Anglo-Saxon saint. He may have been attempting to subordinate the monastery by bestowing a great gift. However, this attempt failed. Yet Oswiu was doing something new with the saint's relics. He had created new meaning for the bones of Oswald, meaning that would ultimately confer political advantage to him and his descendents, but was not at first recognized by the monks from the abbey. For the Irish monks at Lindisfarne, the head represented two very strong taboos; one was pagan, the other was ecclesiastical.

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<sup>252</sup> Alan Thacker, *Membra Disjecta: The Division of the Body and the Diffusion of a Cult*, in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford, Lincolnshire: Watkins Press, 1995), 101-102.

<sup>253</sup> *HE*, III.8, 9, 13. Bede tells in some detail the curative features of the soil from Maserfelth, and he also tells of the cures associated with the Cross at Heavenfield. As I will describe below, these are the same features that become associated with the remains of Oswald when they fall under the control of the ecclesiastical authorities at Bardney and Hexham.

## The Cult of the Head

The Irish monks would have recognized the head as a symbol of power, but it was one with which they preferred to keep at a distance. At some point during the spiritual development of most Indo-European cultures, the severed head came to be viewed as a powerful symbol charged with supernatural meaning. The practice of gathering heads as totems did not originate with the Indo-Europeans, nor was it well represented in the literature except among the peoples of the North.<sup>254</sup> Numerous archaeological sites from across north and western Europe and which span the Iron-Age through the high Middle Ages confirm the Germanic and Celtic peoples' veneration of severed heads. The importance of head cults, as one would expect, varied among cultures and across time. Though reduced in importance by the late Iron-Age among the Germanic peoples and possibly the Anglo-Saxons, echoes of head hunting can be found in their art and literature.<sup>255</sup> Probably the most famous Anglo-Saxon literary example for gathering corporeal war-trophies, in this case the head and arms of Grendel, can be found in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. As I have suggested earlier in this essay and elsewhere, this was a poem roughly contemporaneous with the death of Oswald. The poem *Beowulf* recounts the adventures of the Geat Beowulf who travels to Daneland to aid King Hroðgar, who is unable to defeat the monster Grendel. Early in the tale, the warrior

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<sup>254</sup> *IEP*, 492-493.

<sup>255</sup> The archaeological and literary data seem to support the belief that the human head, often in association with wells and posts, was considered a sacred object. Because of the lack of other contemporary historical sources, I have combined these data to support this proposal.

Beowulf has his famous first battle with Grendel, where he manages to wrench the arm from the terror of Herot Hall through his superior hand and arm strength. Tearing the arm free from Grendel, the beast flees into the night. So overjoyed were the Danes to finally be freed from the curse of Grendel that their king Hroðgar commands the arm to be displayed in a place of honor,

Ðæt wæs *tacen sweotol*,  
 syþðan hildedeor hond alegde,  
 earm ond eaxe — þær wæs eal geador  
 Grendles grape— under geapne hrof (*Beowulf*, 833b-  
 836b).<sup>256</sup>

With the sign of a presumed defeated enemy on the wall of the hall, the Danes rejoice. Yet an arm is not a head and does not hold the same power. Enraged by the grievous wounding of her son Grendel and the hall-joy of the Danes, Grendel's mother returns for revenge, killing a favorite of the king. Beowulf is again forced to confront the monster and his mother, this time in their lair. After he defeats Grendel's mother, he removes Grendel's head, and he again returns to Herot with his superior token of victory for proper display.

Ða com in gan ealdor ðegna,  
 dædcene mon dome gewurþad,  
 hæle hildedeor, Hroðgar gretan.  
 Ða wæs be feaxe on flet boren  
 Grendles heafod, þær guman druncon,  
 egeslic for eorlum ond þære idese mid,

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<sup>256</sup> *Beowulf*, 30. "That was a *clear token* once the brave man fastened the arm, from hand to shoulder, there altogether was Grendel's claw under the high roof."

wliteseon wrætlic; weras on sawon.  
 Beowulf mapelode, bearn Ecgþeowes:  
 `Hwæt, we þe þas sælac, sunu Healfdenes,  
 leod Scyldinga, lustum brohton  
*tires to tacne, þe þu her to locast. (Beowulf, 1644-1654)*<sup>257</sup>

The head was a sure sign of death and final defeat of the enemy. Beowulf needed to retrieve the head of the monster and return it to the hall so that all could see that they were free from the terror that had plagued them for so many years. The parallels between Grendel's head and arms and Oswald's head and arms will be discussed in the following chapter.

An additional example of human skulls from Germanic legend found its expression alongside Biblical imagery on one panel of the Franks Casket. Dating from early eighth-century Northumbria, the box, made of whale's bone, is richly carved on the sides and lid in high relief, with a range of scenes with accompanying text in both the runic and Roman alphabets and in both Old English and Latin. Pictured on the front panel are two scenes; on the right is the Adoration of the *Magi*, and on the left, the tale of Weland's revenge.<sup>258</sup> In the latter, the evil King Nidud captured the smith god and during his imprisonment cut the ligaments of his legs to prevent his escape. As revenge Weland

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<sup>26</sup> "Then they came walking in the older of the thegns valiant in deeds, dignified in glory, warrior daring in battle, greeted Hroðgar. Then was dragged on the floor by the hair, Grendel's head, to where the men drank to the lords and women terrible before them. The men looked on the wondrous spectacle. Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgþeow, 'Indeed we gladly brought to you this lake prize son of Helfdane, lord of the Scyldings, *a token of victory* which you look on here . . .'" (*Beowulf*, 56). The head was a clear sign of victory, one that was greater than merely an arm. Italics are my addition.

<sup>258</sup> Spelled Weland among the Anglo-Saxons. Also spelled Wayland, We(i)land, Weyland; German Wieland; Norse Volund. I will address the juxtaposition of Weland's vengeance with the adoration of the *Magi* in the next chapter.

kills the two sons of his captor and makes goblets from their skulls. He then serves a drink to the dead boys' father in one of the skull cups. The Germanic people, though creative in their utilization of the severed head, seem to restrict its use to terror<sup>259</sup> and vengeance.<sup>260</sup>

It is among the Celtic peoples of Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, however, that the cult of the head reached its most elaborate expression.<sup>261</sup> For these peoples, decapitation of one's enemy and retention of the head as a trophy served numerous cultural functions. For the warrior elite, it represented a mark of honor, military prowess, warranted vengeance or merely served as a good luck item.<sup>262</sup> Irish warriors would often return from battle and affix the heads of fallen enemies to the gate or door of their house as a totem of protection and luck. However, sometimes the head was fated for more grisly display. Celtic literary sources from the early medieval period provide strong and graphic imagery for head hunting and its veneration in Ireland and Britain from the Iron Age

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<sup>259</sup> Penda seems to have used this method quite often on his enemies. Not only was Oswald dismembered and his head and arms placed on stakes, but also the remains of Oswald's predecessor, Eadwine (d. 634), were treated in a similar manner. Though not recorded it seems likely that the other five or so kings killed by Penda may have been displayed in a similar fashion.

<sup>260</sup> Historically, we find that the Germanic people used human heads as war trophies. Tacitus, in the *Annals*, describes the visit of Germanicus to the Teutoburg Forest where in AD 9 Varus and three legions suffered a devastating defeat. He describes with obvious horror the scene. "Varus's first camp with its wide circumference and the measurements of its central space clearly indicated the handiwork of three legions. Further on, the partially fallen rampart and the shallow fosse suggested the inference that it was a shattered remnant of the army which had there taken up a position. In the center of the field were the whitening bones of men, as they had fled, or stood their ground, strewn everywhere or piled in heaps. Near, lay fragments of weapons and limbs of horses, and also human heads, prominently nailed to trunks of trees." At this site the heads of some of the defeated Romans were gathered and nailed to trees as a sign of victory and as a warning to others who might follow. It seems that the message was received by the Romans. Given the ferocity of the defense and the treatment of the captured and the dead, the Romans gave up any further plans of striking north of the Rhine.

<sup>261</sup> PCB, 62.

<sup>262</sup> *ibid.*, 62.

through the early medieval period.<sup>263</sup> Oswiu, growing up in Ireland and among the warrior elite, must have heard tales of, and perhaps participated in, the collection of heads as war trophies.<sup>264</sup>

The archaeological record of Britain and Ireland also speaks to the prevalence of cultic activity associated with severed heads. Abundant Iron-Age archaeological sites in Britain, Ireland and Gaul demonstrate that heads were gathered and served as important cult items.<sup>265</sup> Burial of heads in pits placed them in closer proximity to the otherworld. Its placement may have been a sacrifice or to honor the skull for its service. Skulls with and without artifacts have been found in rivers, springs and wells.<sup>266</sup> The well, like any projection into the ground, in pre-Christian belief represented a nexus between the world

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<sup>263</sup> *Fled Bricenn* (Bricriu's Feast), a tale from the Ulster Cycle, the great Ulster hero Cú Chulainn and three other heroes vie for the champion's portion of the feast. While they squabble over who is bravest, a churl challenges the great warriors of Ulster to a head-chopping contest. He permits each hero to cut off his head which he then picks up, promising to return the next night for his turn. Of the four heroes of Ulster who cut off the intruder's head, only Cú Chulainn has the courage to meet the churl the next evening and let the stranger strike at his head. As a reward for his valor, Cú Chulainn gets to keep his head and earns the champion's portion of the feast for life. As an Irish hero, Cú Chulainn is no stranger to decapitation. Throughout the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Recension I, ninth century), his prowess in battle is often represented by the number of severed heads he is able to collect. The gathering of heads from the field of battle is the gold standard by which heroes are judged, and Cú Chulainn was not the sole practitioner of this art. Also from the Ulster Cycle is Conall Cernach, a hero said to nearly equal his foster-brother Cú Chulainn in power and resolve. Tales associated with him reveal that he never slept without the head of a Connaught man beneath his knee. Not to be outdone by their northern enemies, the savage Connacht warrior, Fothad Canainne, son of the mythological Mac Nia, would not sit down to dinner before placing the heads of recently slain enemies at his table. In an ironic twist, Fothad was beheaded by Ailill Flann Beag, the jealous husband of his lover. However, even after death Fothad's head continued to recite love poetry to his beloved. In the Irish *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, the head of King Conaire Mór praises Mac Cécht for his loyalty and courage, then blesses him for bringing him a drink of water that finally quenches his unnatural thirst.

<sup>264</sup> As we shall see below, Oswiu decapitated Penda at the battle of Winwæd in 655.

<sup>265</sup> PCB, 62-66.

<sup>266</sup> Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: New Amsterdam Books, 1983), 45-46; D. S. Neal, "Northchurch, Boxmoor, and Hemel Hempstead Station: The Excavation of three Roman Buildings in the Bulbourne Valley," *Hertfordshire Archaeology* 4 (1974-1976): 111-114.



of the living and the otherworld of magical beings and the dead. For pre-Christian peoples these sites were sacred and were their source of healing, fertility, wisdom and protection. Some Christian missionaries who discovered these sites sought to destroy them. However, following the edicts of Pope Gregory the Great, these sacred sites were Christianized to serve the growing Christian population of a region. As a result, most pagan sacred wells in Ireland, Wales and Britain became associated with local saints. Thus, the well became a focus of veneration for both Christian and non-Christian. The practice of placing severed heads in wells continued across Britain well into the Middle Ages (from my brief analysis, dozens of wells extending from Northumbria to London and west to the Welsh border), despite prohibitions from the Church, firmly tying the cult of heads to sacred wells.<sup>267</sup>

Given the collection of potent symbols, Oswald's severed head, the sacred well and wooden stakes, the site at Oswestry must have been a fountainhead of power that bathed the surrounding countryside. As Bede later tells us, people traveled from great distances to gather some of the soil from the site—so much, in fact, that during Bede's day the hole from where the soil had been removed was as deep as a man.<sup>268</sup> Oswiu cannot be blamed for exploiting a powerful religious site. He may even have believed that his brother had become imbued with holy qualities—though there is no evidence to

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<sup>267</sup> Anne Ross, "Severed Heads in Wells: An Aspect of the Well Cult," *Scottish Studies* 6 (1962): 37-40; Geoff Marsh and Barbara West, "Skullduggery in Roman London?" *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 32 (1981): 86-102.

<sup>268</sup> *HE*, III.9.

substantiate that proposal. He certainly realized that he could turn the popular veneration of his brother to his advantage. Armed with the relics from Oswestry, Oswiu returned to his troubled kingdom. The power of popular support for the cult of his charismatic brother ultimately strengthened his political position. His endowment to the church at Lindisfarne with a powerful relic may have been an attempt to regain the political backing of Bishop Aídan and stabilize his fledgling kingship, but it failed.

### **Oswald's Head and Arms**

The monks at Lindisfarne did not accept Oswald's head as a relic for veneration. Their reasons, we may presume, were based both on cultural and religious objections. The pagan practices associated with severed heads would have been well known to the Irish monks of Lindisfarne. Not only was their native Irish literature replete with stories of warriors gathering severed heads as trophies, but many of the monks may have witnessed the practice by the *féiana* in their native lands of Ireland and Dál Riata. These were groups of warriors who existed on the fringe of Irish society. They did not serve any lord and maintained themselves primarily by raiding. Though they could act as a protector of a community, they were more often considered to be dangerously violent. Referred to as *latrunculus* in Irish *Vitae Sanctorum*, they were particularly hated by Irish monks because the monks often were their victims. They posed so great a threat that their actions are thwarted by the intervention of numerous Irish saints.<sup>269</sup> Given the way they

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<sup>269</sup> VSH I, cviii; Máire Johnson, "Preserving the Body Christian: The Motif of "Recapitulation" in Ireland's Medieval Hagiography." *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 10 (May 2007): §§ 2-4, 19, <http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/10/johnson.html>.

responded, the monks seemed unable to reconcile any practice that held such powerful pagan overtones with the Catholic Church. Better to bury Oswald's head and avoid any of the unwanted attention that the cult of the head might bring to Lindisfarne.<sup>270</sup>

Their aversion to enshrining the head of Oswald may have extended beyond their fear of the pagan cult of the head. What may have troubled the monks of Lindisfarne more than enshrinement of a severed head was that they felt uncomfortable possessing a relic from a saint whose body had been divided. While the Eastern Church was tolerant of translating saints from one location to another and even subdividing the saint's body,<sup>271</sup> the West appeared more conservative in their approach to holy remains. The Theodosian Code, issued in AD 439, states that

Humatum corpus nemo ad alterum locum transferat; nemo  
martyrem distrahat, nemo mercetur.<sup>272</sup>

Since 439 the official Roman position on the veneration of saints was that it should take place at the tomb of the saint.<sup>273</sup> Through this practice Rome was able to retain its

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<sup>270</sup> The monks at Lindisfarne did ultimately have a change of heart regarding the head of Oswald. When they abandoned the monastery in 875, fleeing to Durham, they took the bones of St. Cuthbert and placed the head of Oswald in the saint's coffin.

<sup>271</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, "Claims on the Bones of Saint Stephen: The Partisans of Melania and Eudocia," *Church History* 51 (1982): 142-143; Alan Thacker, "The Making of a Local Saint," in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48-53.

<sup>272</sup> "The buried body may not be transferred to another location; no one may tear apart a martyr nor may a martyr be sold." *Imperatoris Theodosii Codex* Book IX.xvii.7, <http://ancientrome.ru/ius/library/codex/theod/liber09.htm#17>.

<sup>273</sup> While the Theodosian Code may have been invoked from time to time by the Roman Church, it also participated in the subdivision of saintly remains. Rome's insistence that saints' bodies remain intact may have been no more than an attempt to retain control over the political power associated with relics. The dispensation of *brandea* may be seen in this light. Also see Clark, "Claims on the Bones of Saint

dominance as a site of pilgrimage for centuries. The Vatican was, however, willing to part with secondary relics. Known as *brandea* (pieces of cloth or silk that had had been in contact with the remains of a saint), they were treated as relics and were the only ones that the popes would permit to leave Rome. The papacy expected that within a tomb the faithful would be in the presence of the entire earthy remains (those that were recovered) of the saint. Roman authorities had little tolerance for the translation of saints and even less for the division of holy bodies, at least this was the case during the sixth and seventh centuries. This is not to say that intact bodies were a necessary condition for the worship of a martyr at his tomb. They certainly would have been familiar with stories of decapitated saints. St. Dionysius (St. Denis), the first bishop of Paris and the patron saint of the Merovingians, was decapitated ca. 270. His body and head were buried and a small chapel erected over the spot of his murder, which became a famous site of pilgrimage during the fifth and sixth centuries. In 630 King Dagobert (620-639) founded an abbey for Benedictine monks, replacing the original chapel by a large basilica. Probably the best known relics, the head and problematic remains of St. John the Baptist, were divided after they and their shrine at Sebaste were desecrated under Julian the Apostate (AD 362), the bones being partly burned. Some of the rescued relics were carried to Jerusalem, then to Alexandria, and in that city on 27 May 395 the relics were placed in a basilica.

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Stephen: The Partisans of Melania and Eudocia” for a good example of the political implications of holy bones.

It would seem that the division of sacred bodies, though technically forbidden, was a tightly regulated practice. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) invoked the Theodosian Code when he turned down Empress Constantia's request for the head of St. Paul. His stated reason was the dire consequences that befell those who would dare disturb or divide the remains of the saints.<sup>274</sup> To placate the empress, the pope offered to send her fillings from the chains that bound St. Peter (a secondary relic with much less spiritual and political power).<sup>275</sup> The monks of Lindisfarne, isolated from the political machinations between Rome and the Eastern Empire, followed the edict and refused to venerate the head of Oswald especially because the arms of the fallen king, held in a separate location, were also the focus of veneration.

However, by the late sixth and early seventh centuries the prohibition against division of saintly remains was relaxed, at least in Gaul. During this period Frankish clerics had developed a keen interest in the phenomena of holy incorruption and began to remove modest appendages such as finger-nail clippings, locks of hair, or teeth for separate veneration, believing that their actions would not offend the saint.<sup>276</sup> The Merovingians seemed to be operating within the letter if not the spirit of the law laid down by the Roman authority. These small shavings from the saintly body did not detract

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<sup>274</sup> Alan Thacker, "The Making of a Local Saint," in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48-50.

<sup>275</sup> Pope Gregory the Great was no stranger to the political world. He had been prefect of Rome prior to selling all of his possessions and becoming a monk. When pope, he negotiated a treaty with the Lombards and assumed the role of both the civil and spiritual leader of Rome. His dealings with the East were complicated by the fact that he was a subject of the emperor and often had to defer to him on ecclesiastical matters. It is not surprising therefore that the pope would manipulate control of saints' relics (and their associated power) as a means of political leverage against the emperor.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 52; Thacker, *ONK*, 101.

from the whole make up of the saint, and in a sense his or her body remained intact. It is precisely this innovative yet still conservative bending of the rules by the churchmen in Gaul that in contrast to Oswiu's action marks his proposition as so bold. It must have been difficult for the clerical authorities to ignore that he (a secular ruler) usurped the authority of a bishop by naming a saint. It was even more audacious because Oswiu named his own brother, a warrior-king who died in battle, for that sacred title. Oswiu presented to the monks at Lindisfarne a divided corpus for veneration. He did not keep Oswald's fingernails or a tooth, rather he kept the arms of the putative saint. In other words, he kept more than half of the then available saintly body. For Aídan such an offering was unacceptable.<sup>277</sup> Perhaps he would have been more receptive to the concept of Oswald as saint if he were given control over the entire remains of the former king.

Let us now return to Oswald's role as secular ruler. This was perhaps the final and possibly the greatest objection that the Lindisfarne monks had against veneration of Oswald. Never before had a warrior-king been made into a Christian saint. Constantine, the Roman emperor who accepted Christianity, and Clovis, the Merovingian warrior-king who turned away from his old gods and accepted Christianity for himself and the people of Gaul, were heroes of the faith, but neither was regarded as a saint in the West.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Ironically, a similar portion of Aídan's remains were gathered by Colman and some of his followers after their defeat at the Synod of Whitby (664) and returned to Ireland.

<sup>278</sup> Emperor Constantine the Great, though a saint in the Eastern Church, was not considered a saint in Western Christendom. As Marc Bloch suggests, "Difficulties of communication, a distinctive type of social and political structure, and a religious mentality and ecclesiastical organization very different from those of Latin Christianity, combined to cut off this Empire more and more from the West." Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, English trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), xviii-xix. Bede, in fact, never refers to Constantine as a saint despite the emperor's role in bringing Christianity to the Roman Empire and

Secular leaders were to be guided, supported or opposed by ecclesiastical authorities but not venerated. Christianity had a long history of conflict with secular rulers. In their early history the Christians were usually the target of persecution. After conversion, the kings were a necessary evil who could protect the Church in a secular, often violent world. But always the two worlds were separate. This is not to say that soldiers who gave up the sword for a life of contemplation could not and had not been sanctified. St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) served in the Roman military but left that for a religious life. St. Guðlac (674-714), a member of the Mercian royal line and a warrior prince, was accepted as a saint because he had given up his life as a warrior and retreated into the Fens of Crowland to lead an aescetic life.<sup>279</sup> In addition to Oswald the seventh and eighth centuries could boast several other Anglo-Saxon kings who could lay claim to sainthood, even though all but two of these had put down the sword and taken up a monastic life.<sup>280</sup> As a saint, Oswald was different. He was a warrior-king until his last breath, fighting against (fortunately for Oswiu) a pagan enemy who threatened his Christian land. In 642

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his connection with St. Helena. Oswald was not the first active warrior to become a saint. Saints Sergius and Bacchus, third century Roman soldiers, became Christian martyrs when they refused to sacrifice to pagan gods. However, Oswald was the first warrior-king of the Germanic nations to become a Christian saint.

<sup>279</sup> There are examples of martyred warriors-saints who did not give up their military profession. For example, the paired martyrs Saints Sergius and Bacchus were Roman soldiers who were in the Roman army at the time of their martyrdom during the third century.

<sup>280</sup> These included: Eadwine of Deira, d. 633, Oswine of Deira, d. 651, Sigeberht of Essex, d. 660, Cadwalla of Wessex, d. 688, Sebbi of Essex, d. 693, Coenred of Northumbria, d. 704, Offa of Essex, d. 709 and Ini of Wessex, d. 726. Of these only Eadwine and Oswine were still king when they died. Oswald's cult pre-dates all of these, with Eadwine and Oswine's cults seemingly arising to oppose Oswald's. None of the royal saints had cults that approached the popularity and success of Oswald's.

the Christian establishment could not accept a warrior-king. However, by the next generation they did.

Undeterred by yet another snub from Bishop Aídan, Oswiu placed the power of his kingship behind the development and expansion of the royal cult of St. Oswald. The arms (at least the right one), we are told by Bede and later writers such as Alcuin (c. 735-804), remained incorrupt.<sup>281</sup> The head of Oswald, since we have no mention of its condition, can be assumed not to have fared as well. With Oswald's head quietly buried in the cemetery at Lindisfarne, Oswiu became the sole authority regarding the veneration of his dead brother. His complete control of Oswald's cult seems to have lasted throughout the full length of his reign and was dominated by his sons and successors, Ecgfrith (670-685) and Aldfrith (685-705).<sup>282</sup> His actions were unprecedented. Oswiu had created a saint outside of the authority of the Church and without official sanction. Traditionally, it was the role of the local bishop to declare an individual a saint. Yet it was not until the establishment of the monastery at Hexham (ca. 674) during the reign of Ecgfrith that we see any interest by ecclesiastical authorities in the cult of Oswald. As I shall discuss in more detail below, the Church authorities accepted Oswald as a saint some time during the last quarter of the seventh century, though their version of Oswald's

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<sup>281</sup> *HE*, III.6 Alcuin, *Alcuin the Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, ed. Peter Godman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 30-31.

<sup>282</sup> By the reign of Ecgfrith, the royal cult of Oswald began to receive competition from the clerical establishment.



sanctity, i.e., their ecclesiastical cult, would differ from that of Oswiu's royal cult.<sup>283</sup>

Oswiu had created the first native Anglo-Saxon saint, and his model for the royal sanctity would serve as a template for holy kings for the next several centuries.

Though Bede lists Oswiu as the seventh *Bretwalda*, his position as king of Northumbria was far from certain until 655, following the battle of Winwæd. It is safe to assume that Oswiu was not so filled with hubris that he was unaware that his kingship stood on the edge of a knife. While at Oswestry he must have thought back to his days at Iona during the abbacies of Fergnae Brit (607-623) and Ségéne (623-652). Both abbots held great power and authority over the political and religious affairs among the various kings of the Irish and Picts, in part, by residing in the divine glow of their kinsman, St. Colum Cille. Oswiu, by imbuing his brother with holy attributes, could inherit his brother's authority over the nascent Anglo-Saxon Church through which he could continue to consolidate his power.

For those living in the seventh century (and well beyond), the power of the supernatural was a very real and tangible force in people's lives.<sup>284</sup> One point that may be

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<sup>283</sup> The first report that Oswald's sanctity was accepted by the Church comes from an account of a plague-stricken monk in Ireland. As he lay dying from the 664 plague he spoke to Acca, then a young monk (later bishop of Hexham), saying that he "had heard of an extremely holy king of your race named Oswald and how since his death the occurrence of frequent miracles has borne witness to his outstanding faith and virtue," *HE*, III.13. Bede also describes the vigil of the monks of Hexham as they went each year to Heavenfield (after 674) on the day of Oswald's death. The abbey of Selsey (established by St. Wilfrid while in exile from Northumbria, 681-685) in the kingdom of the South Saxons also had the feast of St. Oswald on their liturgical calendar ca. 681 (*HE*, IV.14, 378). *The Calendar of St. Willibrord* (MS Paris Lat. 10837) from the early eighth century includes St. Oswald's feast day. Willibrord also took some relics of St. Oswald with him to Ireland and Frisia. By the ninth century the story of St. Oswald was contained in the *Old English Martyrology*. See *An Old English Martyrology*, ed. George Herzfeld. Early English Text Society 116 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner & Co., 1900), 138-139.

taken from the above discussion of the cult of the head is that common belief, whether pagan or Christian, held that the supernatural world constantly impinged on the world of mortals and that certain powerful individuals were needed to appease and mediate those forces. The division between the seen and unseen world was not as sharp as it is today, and it was holy men and women who served as a nexus between the two realities. They were the representatives of the divine on earth. When a king sought to choose which god was best for his people, he would consult with these spiritual men in order to make his choice. They alone had access to the real power of the supernatural that ebbed and flowed through the world of the living. That the Anglo-Saxons believed in that power one need only read how desire for that power and authority seduced a certain Beccel into attempted murder of St. Guthlac because he realized that,

. . . si ipsum interimere potuisset, locum ipsius postea, cum  
maxima regum principumque venerantia habiturus foret.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> I use the term supernatural for my and my readers' convenience. Use of the word *supernaturalis* was rare before the twelfth century, with the exception of the ninth century scholar John the Scot; see Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12-13. Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender, and Identity* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2007), 11-12, argues that the Anglo-Saxons did not divide their world into natural and supernatural but rather into human and non-human. Monsters, elves, dwarves and other creatures were merely wonders of the non-human world. Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 33, is troubled that the medieval marvels, i.e., the supernatural, merged so easily with everyday life that no one questioned their reality. For Iron-Age and early medieval Britons, Anglo-Saxons and Celts though, there was a line of demarcation between life and death; however, the one between natural and supernatural was less clear. In both cases the two poles blended with one another to form a continuum, and one realm constantly intruded on the other.

<sup>285</sup> “. . . if he could kill him[Guthlac] he could afterwards live in his dwelling and enjoy the veneration of kings and princes.” Felix's *Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 112.

Holy men held great status in Celtic and Germanic society, and Oswiu and his men witnessed the veneration of his brother at the site of his fall in battle. They heard the stories of cures and saw the preternatural symbols of the site. They may have believed that Oswald had become transformed into a spiritual being who could give aid to the living. All Oswiu needed to do in order to spread the royal cult was return to Bamburgh with the relics and disseminate tales of the curative and protective properties of the shrine and Oswald's relics.

### **King Oswiu Presents the Royal Cult of St. Oswald**

The manner in which Oswiu transmitted the story of the fall of the earthly King Oswald and the rise of the warrior-saint are lost. Presumably, he would have commissioned an oral tale to spread the word of the royal cult of St. Oswald. Its absence from the extant written record may imply that either it lived only through oral tradition or if written, then not in sufficient number to cross the centuries, falling prey, like so many other Northumbria documents, to time and the depredations of the Vikings at the end of the eighth century. That this tale is lost to us is not surprising—so few secular Anglo-Saxon tales made it through the sieve of time. A third possibility for its absence from the written record may be that the royal cult, during the course of the seventh century, lost some of its popularity following the rise of the official ecclesiastical cult of St. Oswald.<sup>286</sup> By the time Bede was writing his history of England, the boundaries between the two cults, which were initially distinct, had begun to blur. Nevertheless, how Oswiu's *passio*

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<sup>286</sup> The rise of the ecclesiastical cult was around 674 with the founding of the monastery at Hexham. A foundation that was close to, and became guardians of, the Heavenfield site.

of St. Oswald spread across England in the seventh century with such rapidity has much to do with the worldly attentions to kingship by Oswald. For that, Oswiu was in debt to his brother. During his short reign Oswald had pacified (temporarily) his aggressive neighbors and established treaties with numerous other kingdoms, both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon. Oswald, following the guidance of his bishop, Aídan,<sup>287</sup> established a network of churches beginning in the first year of his kingship, through which he was able to spread the Christian faith and his political influence south of the Humber. It was through this infrastructure that Oswiu was able to disseminate widely and rapidly the cult of St. Oswald. Oswald and Oswiu had an advantage over other Anglo-Saxon convert kings. As fosterlings they had learned the craft of kingship in Ireland, and the Irish kings had had two centuries of experience developing ways to bend the ecclesiastical framework of monasteries and churches to their political advantage. Other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that were recently converted took decades to learn these lessons and grow their influence through the establishment of monasteries and churches.<sup>288</sup> Oswiu had the additional advantage of watching and learning as his brother extended Northumbrian hegemony by skillfully manipulating Anglo-Saxon kings through the use of baptism and control of the Anglo-Saxon church hierarchy. He extended his brother's program of politico-ecclesiastical colonialism through the founding of several monastic houses that were

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<sup>287</sup> *HE*, III.3.

<sup>288</sup> An extreme example comes from Gewisse, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in the Thames Valley. Their first king to be baptized was Cynegils in 634 for whom Oswald stood as godfather. It was not until ca. 690 during the reign of King Ine that the first royal monastic houses were established. Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003), 28-29.

under royal control and not beholden to Lindisfarne.<sup>289</sup> Through these establishments Oswiu was free to disseminate his royal cult of St. Oswald without obstruction by the powerful bishop. As his handpicked missionaries went forth into Gewisse, Essex and southern Mercia, the royal cult of St. Oswald ploughed the soil for Oswiu's politico-religious hegemony to take root. The extent of Oswiu's enterprise is not known. Our sources are nearly silent on the subject of Oswald's cult in the years immediately following his death in 642. Though limited, there is evidence that the cult did spread across England and into Ireland<sup>290</sup> during the reign of Oswiu. In England one of the earliest recorded foundations dedicated to St. Oswald was in Gloucester sometime around 660.<sup>291</sup> This church was either established by Cenwealh, king of Gewise (642-672),<sup>292</sup> or more likely by Peada, the son of Penda.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> These would be the so-called royal monasteries, most of which were nunneries or dual houses headed by royal women. They included Hartepoole in Durham, established ca. 640, Whitby, 657, and Coldingham, ca. 660. *FMAS*, 3-6. See also Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 198.

<sup>290</sup> *EH*, III.13, 252. The informant is widely believed to be Acca, a close friend of Bede and later bishop of Hexham (710-734). The event may have been the plague of 664, a time when Acca, then a young man, was on pilgrimage in Ireland. I will discuss this episode in more detail below.

<sup>291</sup> Walter de Gray Birch, *Fasti Monastici Aevi Saxonici: An Alphabetical List of the Heads of Religious Houses in England Previous to the Norman Conquest to which is Prefixed a Chronological Catalogue of Contemporary Foundations* (London: Trübner and Co., 1873), 4.

<sup>292</sup> Cenwealh was the son of Cynegils, the king for whom Oswald stood as baptismal sponsor. Oswald also married Cynegils' daughter Cyneburh.

<sup>293</sup> In the years leading up to the pivotal battle of Winwæd in 655, the Mercians and Bernicians, in addition to minor skirmishes, had been intermarrying in the hope, no doubt, of establishing a semblance of strained toleration between the two dynasties. During the years between 642 and 655, Penda was consolidating his power in Mercia and extending his influence to neighboring kingdoms, notably Gewisse, Essex and East Anglia. In 651 Oswiu arranged a marriage between his son Alhfrith and Penda's daughter Cyneburh. The following year Peada, sub-king of southern Mercia, requested a marriage with Oswiu's daughter Alhflæd. In addition to his daughter, Oswiu saw to it that several missionaries accompanied the bridal party to Mercia, presumably to serve as Alhflæd's private clergy. Oswiu sent missionaries to Mercia to encourage Peada to accept Christianity and to expand his authority. Penda still presented a very real threat to Oswiu's kingdom and kingship, and it was in his best interest to undermine the Mercian king's authority; the church was, for Oswiu, a means to a political end. The ploy apparently worked. Sometime in

From the time that Penda killed Oswald in 642, two dominant kingdoms, Mercia and Northumbria, were moving slowly but inexorably to war. Both Oswiu and Penda had been engaged in diplomacy with and coercion of their neighboring kingdoms. They had tried to reduce tensions through dynastic marriages, but those only seemed to exacerbate the situation. Bede tells us that in the autumn of 655 Penda led 30 *duces* into battle against Oswiu.<sup>294</sup> Among those opposing the Northumbrian king were Æthelhere of East Anglia, Cadafael ap Cynfedw, king of Gwynedd (and a relative of the former terror of Northumbria, Cadwallon), and Oswiu's nephew, Æthelwald, sub-king of Deira and son of King Oswald. In all, it was a formidable force. The initial attack, which came in November, drove Oswiu and his son Alhfrith north, forcing a retreat to the former Gododdin stronghold of *Iudeu* (probably at Stirling, just north of the Forth River) where he found refuge.<sup>295</sup> It seems that Penda, an old man in 655, was not interested in a protracted winter siege. His goal may have been simply to reduce Northumbria to a dependent kingdom and collect his annual payments. Oswiu, greatly outnumbered, accepted Penda's demand for treasure. Content with his winnings Penda and his army withdrew to his territory. Oswiu may have been buying time and was unwilling to accept defeat. He and his son Alhfrith along with a small force pursued the retreating army.

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653/4 Peada travelled north to one of Oswiu's royal estates and was baptized *Ad murum* by Bishop Fínán, Aídan's successor as bishop of Lindisfarne and a close ally of Oswiu. This act established Oswiu as both Peada's father-in-law and spiritual father. These close ties subordinated Peada to Oswiu and effectively placed southern Mercia under Oswiu's control. Following his baptism Peada returned to Mercia accompanied by four priests, Cedd, Adda, Betti, and Diuma. All but Betti can be shown to have had close personal and dependent ties to King Oswiu. While preaching in southern Mercia any one of these priests could have established the Gloucester church dedicated to St. Oswald.

<sup>294</sup> *EH*, III.24

<sup>295</sup> *EEK*, 80.

They caught up with them on the banks of the Winwæd River (believed to be the River Went). The counterattack by the Northumbrians was unexpected, and the Mercian army was caught unprepared. It is probable that much of Penda's force was not interested in battle given that their pockets were full of Oswiu's gold. As a result, many of the *duces*, including Cadafael and Æthelwald, withdrew before the battle. While much of Penda's army remained, the battle was a rout for Oswiu's forces. Bede tells us,

Et quia prope fluuium Uinuaed pugnatum est, qui tunc prae  
inundantia pluuiarum late alueum suum immo omnes ripas  
suas transierat, contigit, ut multo plures aqua fugientes,  
quam bellantes perderet ensis.<sup>296</sup>

However, not all escaped the blade. When Oswiu encountered Penda at the battle, he decapitated him, avenging his brother's death and guaranteeing that this persistent threat to his kingdom would not rise again. As for Æthelwald, he is never again mentioned in Bede's history. We may assume that he either fled or more likely was killed. In his place Alhfrith was made sub-king of Deira. The immediate effect of Winwæd was to elevate Oswiu to the position of undisputed master of England. It was not until this battle that his kingship was secure and he could hold the title of *Bretwalda*. When Oswiu returned to his stronghold at Bamburgh for the winter of 655/6, he could rest contentedly knowing that he was the most powerful monarch in England. His dominance over the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was unrivaled, and his sway over the Britons, Irish and Picts matched

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<sup>296</sup> "The battle was fought near the river Winwæd, which then, with the great rains, had not only filled its channel but overflowed its banks, so that many more were drowned in flight than destroyed by the sword." *EH*, III.24.

that of his brother and father. Yet with all his military gains, he continued spreading his brother's cult. With his new political and military supremacy, he was in a position not only to influence the northern episcopal sees but also extended his influence to the see at Canterbury and its new archbishop, Deusdedit (655-664). Why would a king who had achieved all of his military goals still press for the sanctity of his brother? The answer is that, as a Christian king, he had lost his link to the divine. Ties to the pagan pantheon that supported his sacral kingship were lost. His descent from the pagan god Woden, which his father had boasted, would be rejected by his Christian allies in the Church. He needed a sacred relative in 655 almost as much as he did in 642. Having a sacred relative greatly benefitted Oswiu. A link to the Christian holy would guarantee that he and his kin group would remain the masters of Northumbria.

### **Reestablishment of Sanctity**

Oswiu, through the construction of his brother's sanctity, had deftly fused two of the most powerful symbols in the early medieval world—the king and the Christian saint—into one person. The magical abilities associated with Indo-European kingship have been explored in earlier chapters. However, these were powers associated with the pre-Christian gods and incompatible with the Catholic Church. Once a king accepted Christianity for himself and his people, he was required to set aside his ancient pagan powers. The loss of the divine aura associated with kingship could not have sat well with early medieval monarchs. For countless generations these men were tied to the fertility and well being of their people. Their link to the divine was one of the fundamental factors



that set them apart from their community. The divine powers of kingship that conversion to Christianity had, by necessity, stripped away were in the process of being replaced slowly by kings across Europe. Oswiu, perceiving his political weakness, created the sainted warrior-king, which restored the aura of holiness to the kingship. In a sense King Oswiu, while no one was watching, quickly poured old pagan wine into new Christian bottles.

In 2000, Gábor Klaniczay suggested a model to explain how royal sanctity reemerged in Europe during the early Middle Ages. His thesis proposes that during the conversion period of a region a synthesis of elements from three separate traditions, all intimately associated with the developing Christian Church, intertwined to confer a new divinity on Christian kings. For him the fundamental elements were the sacred and divine attributes ascribed to the Hellenistic and Roman emperors. Christianity was born in Palestine and spread through the Near East and finally into the Roman West. Christians, believing that their God was the source of all that is divine, strongly opposed the idea of a divine emperor. Despite opposition the belief structure served as the foundation of future divine kingship. The second source is derived from the charismatic qualities associated with the Germanic pagan kings (e.g., long hair of the Merovingian kings). As I discussed in Chapter 3, the chieftains and kings were regarded as war-leaders, but they also were imbued with priestly powers and looked upon as semi-divine. However, Christians authorities viewed these powers as relics from discredited pagan gods that, therefore, had no reality. Yet, despite ecclesiastical efforts to extinguish the divine pagan light, a faint

glow remained. The third source of medieval royal sanctity came from the Christian cult of the saints which developed in the fourth century.<sup>297</sup> In particular, the special status that Christian saints earned by their martyrdom, their place in heaven, inspired believers to pray to saints seeking intercession on their behalf, and also strengthened their claims to divine status. None of these sources of sanctity alone was sufficient for a royal apotheosis. For holy kingship to reemerge, each element required careful balance.

Medieval royal sainthood should not be regarded as a Christianized version of the first two traditions or a secular and political distortion of the third. Many scholars have argued that the royal sanctity merely represented the continuation of the pagan divine descent,<sup>298</sup> but I believe that this is not the case. Non-Christian Germanic kings claimed divinity through their family line, which they claimed originated with the gods (e.g., Woden or Frey). According to Klaniczay's proposal the kings, as new Christians, needed to renounce this now heretical sacred line of descent.<sup>299</sup> Since their old gods lost power and status under Christianity, the kings lost (temporarily) their tie to divinity. As a means to regain their holy status, secular kings inserted themselves into the celestial hierarchy. In the paradigm of the early medieval world, Christ was viewed analogically as emperor. In that position he appointed kings to govern the earthly kingdom that paralleled the

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<sup>297</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 4-8; Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, trans. Éva Pálmai, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83-85.

<sup>298</sup> William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), presents the most strident example.

<sup>299</sup> Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*, 79-80.

heavenly one. Kings became Christ's vicars on earth, but in the early Middle Ages they were not yet imbued with the sacred quality of saints (or that of their forefathers). Shortly after the acceptance of Christianity, some kings restored sacred status to their royal lines through abdication and assumption of a monastic life, by the sanctification of female siblings or daughters, usually holy virgins, or as in the case of King Oswald, martyrdom. Once they reestablished sanctity securely anchored in a Christian context, the royal families could again claim sacred descent. Contrary to Chaney's argument, there was—out of necessity—a complete break with the pagan source of divinity and a restoration of sacredness of the king's line through the Christian faith. The temporal proximity of the conversion experience may even have strengthened the claim to holiness by the kings.

Oswiu went beyond merely reestablishing the sacred to his royal line. Through his creation of St. Oswald, he established the ultimate protector of his people and thereby assured the security of his kingship. The king was the defender of his people. Oswald had shown that in life he was able to drive out the Welsh and Mercian invaders and to keep them at bay during his reign. His death, though tragic at first glance, allowed Oswiu to claim that his brother was not only a king but also a holy man. A testament to his holiness was displayed in St. Peter's chapel at Bamburgh castle. Oswald's incorrupt arms, his sword arm in particular, stood as a sign of divine favor and protection. Enshrined in the ancestral stronghold, they served as a symbol of both earthly and spiritual protection. In life those arms defended his people against the many threats found in the earthly kingdom. As a saint, the holy king now sat at the court of the Christian God, where he

would be able to provide even greater protection for his people than he could while living. St. Oswald had become a transcendent figure. He died both as a pagan hero and as a Christian saint. Oswiu could modestly claim that he was his brother's metaphorical right hand on earth, and as such it would be well to support him.

But more than just a saint, Oswald wore the mantle of martyr. A Christian martyr is one who dies for the Christian faith, and King Oswiu was able to present Oswald's fall in battle as a death for the faith. Dying at the hands of a pagan and the symbolic manner in which his body was displayed went far in supporting Oswiu's proposition. According to Bede, the veneration of Oswald as Christian saint was immediate and spontaneous. It is clear that Oswiu used his brother's death to create a martyr to support his own (rather tenuous) claim to the Northumbrian throne. In fact, over the next several decades he and his descendants continued to accumulate Oswald's body parts and utilized them in their plan to consolidate power. Oswiu's daughter, Osthryth, the wife of the Christian king of Mercia, Æthelred (675-704), miraculously found and translated the remains of Oswald's body to the royal monastery at Bardney.<sup>300</sup> Oswiu also used the less popular cult of St. Eadwine<sup>301</sup> to his advantage. He had that king's head buried at York (again without much

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<sup>300</sup> This was a Mercian house that she and her husband founded. It is probably not a coincidence that the monastery is located a few miles from the site of the battle of Winwæd (655) where Oswiu defeated and killed Penda. Oswiu wanted the Mercians to know that it was not just military power that was to hold them subject to Northumbria.

<sup>301</sup> Eadwine was a rival of the Bernicians, but because of intermarriage, Ecgfrith could claim Eadwine as a maternal grandfather, and he was also Oswiu's uncle.

reverence by the clerics) and the body translated to Whitby, where Eadwine's widow and Oswiu's daughter were later to be abbesses.<sup>302</sup>

Two generations after the conversion of Æthelberht of Kent in 597, England still lacked native saints. Because of the relative ease of conversion and the resultant absence of dead missionaries, the Anglo-Saxon faithful were compelled by need to import continental saints for veneration. Unlike Ireland, another island whose conversion to Christianity was without bloody incident, the Anglo-Saxons did not have a generation of monastic founders to worship, nor did they have a tradition of venerating the learned class.<sup>303</sup> Drawing on the plurality of traditions that were present in Northumbria, Oswiu constructed a sacred narrative of Oswald. By sanctifying Oswald, Oswiu created an Anglo-Saxon Christian saint (most importantly, a saint related to him), restored his sacred line in the Christian faith, acquired a power normally reserved for bishops,<sup>304</sup> continued to strengthen his hold on the Northumbrian kingship and returned the title of *Bretwalda* north of the Humber. The construct of Oswald's form of sanctity was so radical that it was not again successfully reproduced until the kingship of St. Olaf of Norway (d. 1030).<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Oswiu was buried at Whitby in 670.

<sup>303</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 4-6.

<sup>304</sup> Alan Thacker, "The Making of a Local Saint," 55-58.

<sup>305</sup> Unlike the cult of St. Oswald which retained his death in battle as his source of martyrdom and initially held little interest for the clergy in Northumbria, the cult of St. Olaf was quickly appropriated by the Church, and the method of his death was "changed" from dying in battle at the hands of pagans to being killed in his throne room by perfidious attackers. The cults of St. Eadwine, d. 633, and St. Oswine, d. 651, never had very widespread popularity and were cults whose inception came from the Church. Likewise St. Sigeberht of the East Saxons, d. 660, though he died a martyr and had been king, had abdicated and was a

### **The Royal and Ecclesiastical Cults of St. Oswald**

The Church authorities could not ignore the royal appropriation of the cult of St. Oswald for very long. The cult, which had strong popular appeal, quickly became widespread in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and in Ireland. Oswald's cult from its beginning was one that stood outside of the established church and catered to the needs of the common people. Oswiu must have begun the royal cult around 643 or 644, shortly after he retrieved his brother's head and arms from Oswestry. In the early years of the cult's development, due in no small part to Penda and his military activity, its spread was probably restricted to Northumbria and a few churches in southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms subordinate to Oswiu. After 655 and unencumbered by the aggressive Mercian king, Oswiu, through his emissaries, was able to spread the royal cult of St. Oswald across England and into Ireland. So far in this Chapter I have addressed the means by which the cult was spread and not the nature of the cult itself. What were the characteristics of the royal cult, and how did it differ from the later ecclesiastical cult? To reconstruct the two cults we must consult Bede's history, our only reliable source for the features of Oswald's cults during the middle and late seventh century. While reading Bede one must exercise vigilance. Bede had a specific vision of the unfolding of God's plan in Northumbria, and he embellishes where he feels it necessary and omits events and people whom he believes run counter to his argument. That Bede considered Oswald a saint is not in doubt.<sup>306</sup> He

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monk when forced to lead the army to the battle that caused his death. During the battle he used only a staff as a weapon, refusing to draw blood.

<sup>306</sup> See *EH* III.7 for one example.

was, however, more ambivalent regarding the king's status as a martyr. That point aside, Bede records eleven distinct posthumous miracles related to St. Oswald. Of those I associate five with Oswiu's royal cult at Bamburgh and Oswestry and five with the ecclesiastical cult centered at Hexham. The eleventh miracle combines elements from both cults and will be described in more detail at the end of the chapter (see Figure VIII for a summary). The miracles that are associated with the royal cult at Oswestry and Bamburgh all occurred in the secular world and benefited animals or non-clerical (except one), non-noble people. They were simple, personal miracles: a cured animal, protection from fire, or a cure from a longstanding infirmity. The first of the royal cult miracles that Bede records occurs to a rider and his horse. The horse, suddenly stricken by an illness, tires and drops to the ground, foaming at the mouth. Bede sets the scene:

memorabilis occubuit. Nec mora, quiescente dolore  
cessabat ab insanis membrorum motibus, et consueto  
equorum more, quasi post lassitudinem in diuersum latus  
uicissim sese uoluere, statimque exurgens quasi sanum per  
omnia, uirecta herbarum audius carpere coepit.<sup>307</sup>

The man marks the location so that he can find it again later. When he reaches a village, he meets a family with a paralyzed daughter. They bring her to the location where the

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<sup>307</sup> “At length, after much rolling about in extreme anguish, the horse happened to come to the very place where the famous king died. Immediately the pain ceased, the beast gave over his struggles, and, as is the custom with tired horses, turned gently from side to side, and then starting up, perfectly recovered, began to graze on the green herbage.” *HE*, III.9.

### **Royal Miracles**

*Ecclesiastical History*, Book III.6

- Aidan's blessing of Oswald's arm proves prophetic. Oswiu enshrines his brother's uncorrupt hand and arm(s) in St. Peter's chapel, Bamburgh (ca. 635-642).

Book III.9

- Sick horse is cured when it rolls onto precise spot of Oswald's death.
- Paralyzed girl from nearby village brought to site and cured.
- Soil from site cures people and animals. So efficacious is the dirt in curing maladies that by Bede's time a hole the height of a man had been removed.

Book III.10

- Briton takes some soil from where Oswald was killed (he knew it was holy because the grass was greener there). Soil protects a wooden post from fire.

### **Ecclesiastical Miracles**

Book III.2

- Moss from Heavenfield cross cures monk at Hexham of broken arm.
- Splinters of wood from Heavenfield cross mixed with water cure illness.

Book III.11 (680- 697)

- Oswald's body discovered by his niece Osthryth (Oswiu's daughter) and translated to Bardney. Monks refuse body until a column of light illuminates it during the night.
- Soil from floor where Oswald's bones were washed (Bardney) cures a monastic guest of demonic possession.

Book III.12 (after 680)

- Boy cured of recurrent fever at Oswald's tomb at Bardney.

Book IV.14 (after 681)

- Sts. Peter and Paul tell a boy at Selsey monastery Sussex that due to St. Oswald's intercession no one but he will perish from plague. Boy then taken to heaven by Oswald.

### **Admixture of Royal and Ecclesiastical Miracle**

Book III.13

- Dying Irish scholar saved from plague in Ireland by future Bishop of Hexham, Acca. Cure was in monastery, but Acca added splinters from post that held Oswald's head (not of the Cross, as one would expect in a monastic setting) to water for a cure (664?).

**Figure VIII: Royal and Ecclesiastical Miracles Associated with St. Oswald**



horse was cured and set her on the ground. Bede then reports that,

obdormiuit parumper; et ubi euigilauit, sanatam se ab illa corporis dissolutione sentiens, postulata aqua, ipsa lauit faciem, crines composuit, caput linteo cooperuit, et cum his, qui se adduxerant, sana pedibus incedendo reuersa est.<sup>308</sup>

These and the other three miracles associated with the royal cult of St. Oswald all take place at or near the site of the king's death, away from any church and without the presence of any church official. Though none are reported from this time period, there must have been some miracles associated with the arms of Oswald, though access to the Bamburgh site may have been restricted to the elite class.

Thus, Bamburgh and Oswestry served all levels of Northumbrian society in the seventh century. The Oswestry *locus* because of the secondary nature of the relics, its proximity to a sacred well, the openness of the site and the abundance of material (i.e., soil) served the masses. The remains of Oswald that were in the stronghold of Bamburgh, his arms and the posts that bore his head and arms, presumably had more restrictions on their availability to the people. The practical aspect aside, Oswiu also had spiritual designs. By establishing two holy sites for the veneration of Oswald, one at the southwest and one at the northeast pole of the Northumbrian kingdom, Oswiu created an axis of the sacred that bound and protected his kingdom. The sword hand of the sainted king in the Bamburgh stronghold and the blood of his sacrifice on the battlefield of Oswestry

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<sup>308</sup> “ . . . she slept awhile, and when she awaked found herself healed of her infirmity. After which she called for water, washed her face, put up her hair, and covered her head with a linen, and returned home on foot, in good health, with those who had brought her.” *Ibid.*

became sacred zones protected through the beneficence of God. Oswiu, having grown up among the Irish, may have envisioned divine protection radiating out from these two central cores of holiness through concentric circles, sacralizing the landscapes.<sup>309</sup> Oswiu, because of his relatedness to St. Oswald, had secured divine protection for himself and his family line. Establishing two *loci* of holiness governed by his brother protected his kingdom. In the seventh and eighth centuries few would doubt the efficacy of the divine to protect.

Bede's silence concerning the cultic site of Bamburgh is curious. Jarrow is relatively near Bamburgh. The fortress was the location where Oswald's charitable acts for the poor took place. At Bamburgh Oswald was accessible to his people. Bede had always portrayed Oswald as a generous man who cared for his people and had close interactions with them. He had preached the gospel when he translated for Aídan,<sup>310</sup> and he gave food and silver to the poor during an Easter feast.<sup>311</sup> This was the site of Oswald's only earthly remains for almost 50 years, yet no miracles save the incorruption of the arms is mentioned. Perhaps Bamburgh became a cult site for the warrior elite where Oswald's military prowess, embodied in his arms, was venerated. It is not difficult to imagine that Bede would not have been interested in promoting the warrior-elite sub-cult of Oswald's sanctity. Bede wanted his readers to remember that Oswald was a friend of the poor and the common people and included miracles that reflected that tradition.

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<sup>309</sup> see John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 221-228, for Irish influence on English conceptions of sacred landscape.

<sup>310</sup> *HE*, III.3.

<sup>311</sup> *HE*, III.6.

Bede intentionally plays down Oswald's involvement in martial activity. But Oswald was a warrior who died heroically in finest Anglo-Saxon fashion. His tale would have made popular listening in secular halls as well as the communal areas of Northumbrian monasteries. Veneration of a warrior lifestyle and the possibility that such a life was a route to sanctity could not have set well with Church authorities.

Many of the monks who populated the monastic houses of seventh- and eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England, particularly within one generation of conversion, were drawn from the elite class (with the notable exception of Bede). In Northumbria more than a few of these men either had fought at the side of King Oswald or had fathers or brothers who had. Even if they had no direct connection with Oswald's house, their status as "former" members of the warrior elite class would have easily allowed them to identify with Oswald and to have looked upon a saint who was also a warrior-king with favor. That the hierarchy of monastic houses was drawn from the nobility and that their tastes changed little when they donned the habit and accepted the religious life is well recorded. One need only turn to Alcuin's letter of 797 to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne questioning the monks' interest in heroic legends asking, *Quid enim Hinieldus cum Christo?*—What has Ingeld to do with Christ?<sup>312</sup> Or to the letter of 764 by Abbot Cuthbert of Wearmouth/Jarrow seeking a qualified harpist from a former countryman

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<sup>312</sup> Dümmler, Ernst, ed., *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi* (II) *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Epistolae in Quatro 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), 183.

Bishop Lul of Mainz.<sup>313</sup> Clearly the monks reveled in heroic tales often to the chagrin of some of their more conservative ecclesiastical leaders.<sup>314</sup> Yet Oswald's legend was ideal for a monastery filled with former warriors. It had, as Tolkien once suggested, the makings of a great heroic Anglo-Saxon tale,<sup>315</sup> but it was also an inspiring saint's legend. Oswald brought Christianity to his people, preached the gospel with his own lips while providing translations for Bishop Aidan's sermons; he was charitable, generous, a defender of his people and a solid warrior. For the former warriors and princes living in monasteries, Oswald was the perfect blend of secular and sacred. Yet the ecclesiastical cult of St. Oswald sought to play down the issue of his warrior past. In fact, the only battle mentioned is his victorious one at Heavenfield where he erected the cross.

Though Oswiu helped spread the cult of his brother throughout Northumbria and the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, it was not until the reign of his son Ecgfrith (670-685) that the Church began to show interest in the cult. Soon afterward, official veneration of St. Oswald began at Hexham. Shortly after its founding (in 674),<sup>316</sup> the monks at Hexham began to hold a vigil at the site of the cross erected by Oswald at Heavenfield, also the site of Oswald's victorious battle over Cadwallon and the pagan Penda. They would come, according to Bede,

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<sup>313</sup> *English Historical Documents: c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 832.

<sup>314</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 223-225.

<sup>315</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, 34.

<sup>316</sup> *FMAS*, 5.

In quo uidelicet loco consuetudinem multo iam tempore fecerant fratres Hagustaldensis ecclesiae, quae non longe abest, aduenientes omni anno pridie quam postea idem rex Osuald occisus est, uigilias pro salute animae eius facere, plurimaeque psalmorum laude celebrata, uictimam pro eo mane sacrae oblationis offerre. Qui etiam crescente bona consuetudine, nuper ibidem ecclesia constructa, sacrationem et cunctis honorabiliorem omnibus locum fecere.<sup>317</sup>

By building a church and adding the feast of St. Oswald to their liturgical calendar, it is apparent that the monks at Hexham, in addition to embracing the cult of their former king, were also interested in taking control of the cult from the royal family. The monks, as Bede tells us, go to the site from Hexham and venerate Oswald *and* the cross that he erected before the battle. The monks at Hexham established a symbiotic relationship between Oswald and the growing cult of the cross, thereby strengthening both in Northumbria. During the seventh century, but especially after the Council of Hatfield (680),<sup>318</sup> the cult of the cross had increasingly becoming the focus of devotion in Anglo-

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<sup>317</sup> *HE*, III.2: “To here also the brothers of the church of Hagulstad [*i.e.* Hexham], which is not far from there, repair yearly on the day before that on which King Oswald was afterwards slain, to watch there for the health of his soul, and having sung many psalms, to offer for him in the morning the sacrifice of the holy oblation. And since that good custom has spread, they have lately built and consecrated a church there, which has attached additional sanctity and honor to that place.”

<sup>318</sup> In a new attempt to reconcile the issue of Christ’s hypostasis, Emperor Constantine IV (652-685) called the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople for the autumn of 680. Pope Agatho (678-680) called the provincial bishops to a Roman council to draft a resolution reaffirming the Orthodox position before the delegation was to go to Constantinople. To that end he sent a delegation to England headed by John the Archcantor, who notified Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury (669-690), of the papal order. Archbishop Theodore called the Council of Hæthfeld (Hatfield) in September of 680, and bishops from across England gathered to discuss and ratify the Orthodox position. As a result, the Council of Hatfield quickly embraced and ratified the Roman position. On 7 November 680 the Council of Constantinople condemned the Monothelite conception of Christ.

The Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical representatives at the council had little difficulty accepting the Roman tenets of Christianity.

Saxon England and permeated all aspects of ecclesiastical life. During the seventh century the cross is first lifted up in processional use and becomes a form of pastoral crosier.<sup>319</sup> Jeweled pectoral crosses, such as the one discovered around the neck of the incorrupt body of St. Cuthbert (d. 687), first appear. The cross became associated with Oswald after his death in 642 further legitimizing his sanctity and strengthening his power as a saint. As with all saints they gave their prayers on the day of Oswald's death, 5 August. However, by focusing veneration at Heavenfield, part of their action surely was meant to diminish the importance of the sites at Oswestry and Bamburgh, locations that were controlled by the descendants of King Oswiu and his followers. The entrance of Hexham onto the stage of the cult of St. Oswald has two effects. First, it brought the cult of the saint into the ecclesiastical mainstream. Oswald's feast was placed on the liturgical calendar, and the monks led the prayers and were in control of the veneration of the site. Second, it established a sub-cult that came into direct competition with the royal cult of Oswald. The cult, as it was originally established by Oswiu, was focused on *Maserfelth*, the place where Oswald as a protector of the people fell in battle, along with his sword wielding hands and arms which were enshrined at Bamburgh. The clergy of Hexham quickly associated Oswald and the cultic center with his victorious battle at Heavenfield where he erected the cross, and according to Bede,

Nec inmerito, quia nullum, ut conperimus, fidei Christianae  
signum, nulla ecclesia, nullum altare in tota Berniciorum  
gente erectum est, priusquam hoc sacrae crucis uexillum

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<sup>319</sup> Michael Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 45-47.

nouus militiae ductor, dictante fidei deuotione, contra  
hostem inmanissimum pugnaturus statueret.<sup>320</sup>

According to Bede, Oswald erected the first cross over Bernicia,<sup>321</sup> and that event was quickly tied to the growing cult of the cross that was spreading across Christendom in the seventh and eight centuries. The very first miracle Bede records in his *History* associated with Oswald was not tied to the royal cult, which predates the ecclesiastical cult by 30 years, but to Oswald's raising of the cross at Heavenfield and its subsequent curative power.<sup>322</sup> It is the cross joined with the saint's body that becomes the holy relic. Bede informs his readers that this miracle of Oswald's cross occurred just *ante paucos annos*. He says that Bothelm, a brother of Hexham, had broken his arm and asked that someone bring him a piece of the Heavenfield cross as a cure. When one of the brothers returned with the relic, Bede continues,

sedentibus iam ad mensam fratribus, obtulit ei aliquid de  
ueteri musco, quo superficies ligni erat obsita. Qui cum  
sedens ad mensam non haberet ad manum, ubi oblatum sibi  
munus reponeret, misit hoc in sinum sibi. Et dum iret  
cubitum, oblitus hoc alicubi deponere, permisit suo in sinu  
permanere. At medio noctis tempore, cum euigilaret, sensit  
nescio quid frigidi suo lateri adiacere, admotaque manu  
requirere quid esset, ita sanum brachium manumque  
repperit, ac si nihil umquam tanti languoris habuisset.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> "And not without merit, for it appears to us that there was no sign of the Christian faith, no church, no altar erected throughout all the nations of the Bernicians, before that new leader of the army, prompted by the devotion of his faith, set up the cross as he was giving battle to his savage enemy." HE, III.2, 216.

<sup>321</sup> HE, III.2.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> "... when the brothers were sitting at table, he gave him some of the old moss which grew on the surface of the wood. As he sat at table, having no place to lay up that which was brought him, he put the same into his bosom; and forgetting when he went to bed to put it by, left it in his bosom. Awaking in the

Bothelm is cured of his ailment by St. Oswald's cross. The two agents, Oswald and the cross, work synergistically to cure an Anglo-Saxon. The setting for this miracle, as it is with all of the ecclesiastical miracles, is the monastery. The beneficiary is either a monk, a guest of the monastery or an initiate. For Hexham and its affiliate houses, St. Oswald's miracles do not take place at open sacred sites like the heathen wonders of old, rather they are within the confines of an enclosed Christian holy place. Bede's selection of miracles for the ecclesiastical cult of Oswald conforms to hagiographic traditions. Miracles that were linked to Oswald's cross were never performed away from monastic settings. There are no reports of healings by Oswald's cross at Heavenfield or among the common people. They did not involve lay people or animals. In fact, the miracles of the ecclesiastical cult were for members of the clergy in their cloistered location. A final example will be illustrative. A young boy while training to be a monk at the monastery of Bardney was plagued by recurrent fevers. A brother who was watching over the boy advised him to pray at the tomb of St. Oswald saying,

Surge, ingredere ecclesiam, et accedens ad sepulchrum  
 Osualdi, ibi reside, et quietus manens adhere tumbae. Uide,  
 ne exeas inde, nec de loco mouearis, donec hora recessionis  
 febrium transierit. Tunc ipse intrabo, et educam te inde.<sup>7</sup>  
 Fecit, ut ille suaserat; sedentemque ad tumbam sancti  
 infirmitas tangere nequaquam praesumsit; quin in tantum  
 timens aufugit, ut nec secunda die, nec tertia, neque  
 umquam exinde eum auderet contingere. Quod ita esse  
 gestum, qui referebat mihi, frater inde adueniens adiecit,

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middle of the night, he felt something cold lying by his side, and putting his hand to feel what it was, he found his arm and hand as sound as if he had never felt any such feebleness." *HE*, III.2.



quod eo adhuc tempore, quo mecum loquebatur, superesset  
 in eodem monasterio iam iuuenis ille, in quo tunc puero  
 factum erat hoc miraculum sanitatis.<sup>324</sup>

As was traditional in saints' lives, the boy's vigil at the tomb of the saint produced the desired cure. Miracles of Oswald's ecclesiastical cult were performed in proximity to the saint's remains, and those remains were housed in a church. Oswald's cult, in its ecclesiastical form, reasserted and put into practice the Theodosian Code, issued in 439. Saints' bodies were not to be divided or moved from one location to another. Oswald's miracles became centered in clerical locations, and his relics were purged of any overt pagan associations. The other miracles performed under the aegis of the ecclesiastical cult and its related relics also followed more traditional hagiographic style. They included miraculous cures from the soil and dust taken from the church floor where water that washed the saint's bones had flowed,<sup>325</sup> and prayers to Sts. Peter and Paul in the presence of Oswald's relics are answered because of the intercession of St. Oswald.<sup>326</sup>

Not all monastic communities associated with Northumbria readily accepted the Hexham cult. At the end of the seventh century Lindisfarne continued to remain silent with regard to the cult of St. Oswald, though her long silence was about to end. The avoidance of the episcopal see from challenging Hexham's cult may have much to do

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<sup>324</sup> "Rise, go into the church, and get close to St. Oswald's tomb; stay there quiet, and do not leave it; do not come away, or stir from the place, till the time that your fit is to go off: then I will go in and fetch you away. The boy did as he was advised, and the disease dared not affect him as he sat by the saint's tomb; but fled so absolutely, that he felt it no more, either the second or third day, or ever after. The brother that came from there, and told me this, added, that at the time when he was talking with me, the young man was then still living in the monastery, on whom, when a boy, that miraculous cure had been made." *HE*, III.12.

<sup>325</sup> *HE*, III.11.

<sup>326</sup> *HE*, IV.14.

with the political turmoil stirred up by the actions of St. Wilfred (634?-709), who was a strong opponent of King Ecgfrith (670-685) and his half-brother King Aldfrith (685-705). Lindisfarne had lost its preeminent place as Northumbria's dominant episcopal see to Wilfrid and his allies following the Synod of Whitby in 664. The synod and additional actions by Wilfrid stripped Lindisfarne of much of her influence in Northumbria for the following two decades. As Lindisfarne's power waned the influence of bishop Wilfrid and his ecclesiastical empire centered at Ripon and Hexham grew. So reduced in stature was Lindisfarne that it had no bishop between the years 664-678. However, with the bishopric of St. Cuthbert (685-687), the see began to regain prestige, and some of its former power in Northumbria returned, permitting her to challenge the entrenched *regnum ecclesiarum* of Wilfrid.<sup>327</sup> The cult of St. Cuthbert that arose spontaneously after his death and the *vita* written by anonymous between 699 and 705 both furthered Lindisfarne's return to power.

Iona was not as shy in its opposition as was Lindisfarne. The monastery ignored the decision of the Synod of Whitby regarding the calculation of Easter (among other things) until 714, and was a strong opponent to the Wilfridian camp. Possibly as a show of solidarity with the descendants of Oswald and Oswiu, and in particular with his close friend King Aldfrith (685-705), Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona (679-704), describes the events at the battle of Heavenfield in his *Vitae St. Columbae* in a very different

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<sup>327</sup> Alan Thacker, "Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St. Cuthbert," in *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and Community to A.D. 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), 115.

manner than does Bede and his sources from Hexham. So important did Adomnán consider this point that he included it in the first chapter of the first book of the *Life of St. Columba* (written ca. 698). We are told that Oswald sees Colum Cille arrayed in shining robes, glimmering in the middle of the camp saying,

et haec confirmatoria contulit verba, eadem scilicet quae Dominus ad Jesue Ben Nun ante transitum Jordanis, mortuo Moyse, prolocutus est, dicens: “Confortare et age viriliter; ecce ero tecum,” etc. Sanctus itaque Columba, haec ad regem in visu loquens, addit: “Hac sequenti nocte de castris ad bellum procede; hac enim vice mihi Dominus donavit ut hostes in fugam vertantur tui, et tuus Catlon inimicus in manus tradatur tuas, et post bellum victor revertaris, et feliciter regnes.”<sup>328</sup>

In this passage there is no mention of Oswald planting a cross before the battle. Adomnán is less concerned with the militancy of King Oswald than is Bede. He quotes from the book of Joshua, spurring him to courage. Joshua is fastidiously avoided in Bede’s history. Yet Adomnán had several goals for his chapter on Oswald and St. Colum Cille. By placing this event in the first chapter of the first book of the *vita*, it is clear that Adomnán wished to cast the Northumbrian kingdom as a client-state to Iona. The act of gift-giving by a patron to a client in early medieval Irish society was a ritual of subordination. The giving of a *rath*, a gift of great value (one to which the recipient could not reciprocate in

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<sup>328</sup> VC, 91. “The blessed man revealed his name to the king and gave him these words of encouragement, the same the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, before he crossed the Jordan, Moses having died saying, ‘Be strong and act manfully. Behold I will be with thee.’ In the king’s vision Columba said this adding: ‘This coming night go out from your camp into battle for the Lord has granted me that at this time your foes shall be put to flight and Cadwallon your enemy shall be delivered into your hands and you shall return victorious after battle and reign happily.’”

kind), places the recipient in a subordinate position to the patron. As we saw in Chapter 3 this type of political arrangement was fundamental to Irish social order. It is not surprising that in Irish hagiography this type of gift-giving motif was common. For example, if St. Brigit gave a gift to St. Columba and he was unable to give her one of equal or greater value, the readers (hearers) would realize that St. Columba, and by implication Columbian houses, were subordinate to Brigit and her houses. In Irish hagiographic tradition, use of this ritual became a literary means through which one monastic community was able to subordinate another. In 635 King Oswald gave the island of Lindisfarne to Aidan of Iona. Not wanting to be in debt to the Northumbrian dynasty or perhaps wishing to reassert a small amount of control by Iona, Adomnán, by having St. Columba give the greater gift of kingship to Oswald, placed the king and his descendants in the service of Iona.

However, Adomnán's goal, no doubt, was twofold. He first wanted to highlight Oswald's strong ties (and by extension Aldfrith's) with the Irish. Secondly, his omission of the episode where Oswald planted the cross at Heavenfield undercut the position of Hexham and as a result may have been lending support to the royal cult of St. Oswald. The *vita*, at least the chapter discussing Oswald, also allowed Iona to insert itself into the theological power struggle that was still raging between Wilfrid and the northern Irish churches after the Synod of Whitby in 664.<sup>329</sup> After St. Wilfrid's death in 709, Eddius

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<sup>329</sup> The Synod of Whitby (664) was a conference orchestrated by factions of the Roman leaning church in Anglo-Saxon England and presided over by King Oswiu. Its mission was to discuss the failure of the Irish church to conform to orthodox practices. At issue, among many things, was the calculation of

Stephanus responded to Cuthbert's *vita* and fanned the flames of the 40-year struggle between the "Irish-leaning" monastics of Lindisfarne and Iona and those of the more Roman-oriented members of Wilfrid's *familia*. This theological and political struggle,<sup>330</sup> which began soon after Wilfrid's first appearance at the court of Alhfrith<sup>331</sup> ca. 660, may also have served as a stage upon which the struggle between the royal and ecclesiastical cults of St. Oswald took place. Iona, eager to reestablish its position among the Northumbrians, appears to have embraced the royal cult. Adomnán may also have been reminding his friend Flann Fína maic Ossu, the then King Aldfrith of Northumbria (685-705),<sup>332</sup> that as a patron of the Bernician monarchy the *familia* of Iona and the Cenél Conaill continued to offer their support. Adomnán was also the first abbot of Iona drawn from the children of Sétnae, son of Fergus. This was the royal branch of the Cenél

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Easter, the liturgy and the proper tonsure. Oswiu, in a surprise political move, sided with the Roman faction; for this see Richard Abels, "The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics," *Journal of British Studies* 23 (1984): 12. The Irish contingent from Lindisfarne, a daughter house of Iona and its stronghold in Northumbria, left the see led by Bishop Colmán and returned to Iona.

<sup>330</sup> For details on the political struggles of Wilfrid with the Northumbrian kings Ecgrith and Aldfrith, see Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially books XXIV, XXVII, XXXIV, XXXVIII, etc.; Alan Thacker, "*Membra Disjecta*," *ONK*, 109-112; D. P. Kirby, *EEK*, 109-110, 120-121.

<sup>331</sup> Alhfrith was the son of Oswiu and sub-king of Deira from 655-664 (see Table I). It seems that Wilfrid may have inspired him to challenge his father's support of Lindisfarne and its Irish calculation of Easter as a means of obtaining personal but congruent goals. Wilfrid wanted the Irish, whom he considered heretics, out, and Alhfrith presumably wanted his father's throne. These motives led to the Synod of Whitby in 664. Oswiu's ruling in favor of Wilfrid and his Roman allies was a stunning tactical move that caught Alhfrith by surprise and caused any support of his political coup to evaporate. Alhfrith disappears from the historical record after 664, and his half-brother Ecgrith is installed as sub-king of Deira that same year.

<sup>332</sup> Aldfrith was the son of Oswiu and a second wife Fína, the daughter of the Irish high-king Colmán Rimid (598-604). Prior to becoming king he was a monk at Iona and the author of Old Irish Wisdom Literature; see *Old Irish Wisdom Literature Attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: An Edition of Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu*, ed. and trans. Colin A. Ireland (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 52-53.

Conaill, and the abbot had more experience than all of his predecessors in political matters than Ségéne (623-652) and Colum Cille (563-597).<sup>333</sup>

However, by the beginning of the eighth century, the boundaries between the two distinct cults of St. Oswald had begun to blur. By the end of Aldfrith's reign or perhaps sometime during the sovereignty of his son Osred (705-716), administration of the relics at St. Peter's chapel had in all likelihood passed to clerics from Lindisfarne. By the time of Bede's writing (731) all of the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic kingdoms in England were Christian. The Archdiocese of Canterbury had had two very able and long-lived archbishops, Theodore of Tarsus (669-690) and Berhtwald (693-731), to govern the English Church during its critical development period. During their tenure they established numerous new bishoprics and improved the operation of the ecclesiastical system in England. The first quarter of the eighth century saw the cult of Oswald well established across England and Ireland and establishing a presence on the continent.<sup>334</sup> Even if control had not officially been handed over by the royal court, nevertheless, it was *de facto* in clerical hands. The Northumbrian kings may have loosened their grip on the cult because of its success and its apparently self-perpetuating nature. They also felt less threatened by the Wilfridian empire, whose power diminished considerably, though not entirely, after Wilfrid's death in 709. That the two cults had merged (at least by 731) is reflected in the last miracle that Bede records that involves relics of St. Oswald. Bede

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<sup>333</sup> Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 47-48.

<sup>334</sup> These would include the missionary activities of Willibrord (d. 739) in Frisia and St. Boniface (d. 754) in Germany.

tells the personal remembrances of his friend Bishop Acca of Hexham who while a young man undertook a spiritual pilgrimage in Ireland. During his time there the plague spread across Ireland probably in 664. While staying at an unnamed monastic house, he met a monk who was dying of the plague. The man knew that Acca was a Northumbrian and pleaded,

“Audiuimus autem, et fama est creberrima, quia fuerit in gente uestra rex mirandae sanctitatis, uocabulo Osuald, cuius excellentia fidei et uirtutis, etiam post mortem, uirtutum frequentium operatione claruerit; precorque, si aliquid reliquiarum illius penes te habes, adferas mihi, si forte mihi Dominus per eius meritum misereri uoluerit.” At ego respondi: “Habeo quidem de ligno, in quo caput eius occisi a paganis infixum est; et, si firmo corde credideris, potest diuina pietas per tanti meritum uiri et huius uitae spatia longiora concedere, et ingressu te uitae perennis dignum reddere.” Nec moratus ille integram se in hoc habere fidem respondebat. Tum benedixi aquam, et astulam roboris praefati inmittens obtuli egro potandum. Nec mora, melius habere coepit, et conualescens ab infirmitate, multo deinceps tempore uixit.<sup>335</sup>

This is the only miracle in which elements from the royal and ecclesiastical cults participate to produce a miracle. As is found in ecclesiastical cult miracles, the setting is a monastic house, and the characters are members of the clergy. However, instead of using

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<sup>335</sup> “‘We have heard, and his fame is most widespread, that there was in your nation a king, of wonderful sanctity, called Oswald, of whose outstanding faith and virtue is renowned even after his death by the working of miracles. I beseech you, if you have any relics of his in your custody, that you will bring the same to me; in case the Lord shall be pleased, through his merits, to have mercy on me.’ I answered, ‘I have indeed some of the stake on which his head was set up by the pagans, when he was killed, and if you believe, with a sincere heart, the divine goodness may, through the merit of so great a man, both grant you a longer term of life here, and render you worthy to enter into eternal life.’ He answered immediately, ‘That he had entire faith therein.’ Then I blessed some water, and put into it a chip of the aforesaid oak, and gave it the sick man to drink. He immediately found ease, and, recovering of his sickness, lived a long time after.” *HE*, III.13.

a splinter of wood or some adherent moss from the cross at Heavenfield to effect the cure, as would be expected, Acca uses splinters of wood from the post that supported the severed head of King Oswald. The posts that supported the head and arms of Oswald were gathered by Oswiu and placed in Bamburgh fortress. They were important relics of the royal cult and had a strong association with Oswestry and Oswald's death in battle. Thus, by the first quarter of the eighth century our sources suggest that the two wings of the cult of St. Oswald were joined.

Harmonizing the two cults of Oswald produced a resonance of the holy that reverberated far beyond that which Oswiu could have imagined when he viewed the shattered remains of his brother on a late summer afternoon in 643. For his part, Oswiu had united two of the most disparate yet most powerful symbols of early medieval Europe, the warrior-king and the Christian saint creating a hybrid entity that the world had never before seen. The ecclesiastical cult, during its decades of independent evolution, provided a counterpoint to Oswiu's creation. Its contribution was to intertwine Oswiu's warrior-saint with the cross of Christ and join it with the rising cult of the cross. Northumbria represented one of the most culturally diverse corners of Christendom. Within the boundaries of this small kingdom Picts, Britons, Irish and Anglo-Saxons lived and worshipped together under the umbrella of the Roman Catholic Church. Following the discovery of a fragment of the True Cross in the Vatican by Pope Sergius in 701, the cult of the cross grew rapidly in popularity among the people of Anglo-Saxon England; it inspired devotional art and literature and permeated the Church's liturgy. The synergy



that existed between the cult of the cross and the cult of St. Oswald is no better expressed than on the free-standing high-cross in one of the most culturally diverse corners of Northumbria at Ruthwell. The Ruthwell Monument with its version of *The Dream of the Rood* exemplifies the cultural exchange that was necessary for the creation of new perceptions of the divine. In the next chapter, I will explore the union of the cult of the cross and the cult of St. Oswald at Ruthwell and in *The Dream of the Rood* and how Northumbrian culture could produce their two unique characters, the saintly warrior-king Oswald and the warrior Christ.

## Chapter 5

### **St. Oswald, Christ and *The Dream of the Rood*: Mutable Signs at a Cultural Crossroad**

During the middle decades of the seventh century, the cult figure of Oswald, who was characterized by a unique pairing of opposites—warrior and saint—emerged from the Hiberno-British-Germanic culture that was early Christian Northumbria. Christianity was still in its infancy in Northumbria, and if it was to be successful it had to reflect, at least in part, the ideology of the ruling classes. As I have argued in my previous chapters, the idea of kingship in seventh-century Northumbria came to represent, with the return of Oswald and Oswiu, a unique blend of Celtic and Germanic value systems. Thus, the Christian holy man embodied in Oswald which emerges early from this tradition reflects a complex system of what appears to be mutually antagonistic beliefs: He is the tribal leader, he is a pious holy man and he is a conquering warrior. This new construction of warrior-saint represented a joining within one individual of distinctive yet opposing characteristics. King Oswiu seeking to consolidate his power used his brother Oswald as such a totemic figure, fusing in his person these distinctive qualities. His efforts appear to have been enormously successful since Bede, writing three generations later in his *Ecclesiastical History*, refers to Oswald without any apparent conflict as *sanctissimus ac*

*victoriossimus rex Nordanhymbrorum*.<sup>336</sup> By 735 the warrior-saint Oswald and his dual nature were an accepted part of the culture.

As the concept of Oswald's dual nature—humility joined to violent bellicosity—was coalescing in Northumbria, a new representation of Christ as warrior, which was also uniquely Northumbrian, and, as I will argue in this chapter, owed its inception in part to the cult of Oswald, found voice in the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, the single most important poetic embodiment of this idea in Anglo-Saxon England. The purpose of this chapter is to show how King Oswiu's construction of Oswald's dual nature as warrior-saint and the subsequent development of the cult built upon cultural tendencies present but latent in Northumbrian culture and parallels a pre-existing tradition upon which the theology of the hypostatic union of Christ's nature could be conceptualized in Anglo-Saxon England. The representation of Oswald's dual nature has its most powerful narrative analog in the Old English poems of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition. These supreme examples of Anglo-Saxon poetic culture, while most complete in the tenth-century *Vercelli Book*, have their earliest expression in runic characters on the early eighth-century, monumental Ruthwell Cross.

*The Dream of the Rood* on the Ruthwell Cross suggests some parallel development between the emergence of Oswald's Northumbrian cult and the debate regarding the nature of the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. While *The Dream of the Rood* is decidedly not a theological treatise, it does represent in richly

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<sup>336</sup> *HE*, III.7.

allusive language what I feel was a shared concern in seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England regarding the complex questions concerning the human and divine natures of Christ. How can human and divine coexist yet each retain its distinctive nature? How can such extreme opposites—an immutable, infinite entity and a mutable, transient being—coexist in one individual? To examine these questions I shall review first the earliest example of *The Dream of the Rood*, the early eighth-century Northumbrian fragment of the poem found on the Ruthwell monument, a work produced only a few decades later than the inception of the cult of St. Oswald (ca. 650). Following an analysis of the lines of poetry on Ruthwell, I will present an in-depth examination of the tenth-century version of *The Dream of the Rood* as presented in the longer *Vercelli* account of the poem.

The origins of the northern English rectangular, free-standing crosses has long been in dispute, but they are probably derived from the free-standing wooden crosses such as the one erected by St. Oswald at Heavenfield.<sup>337</sup> The Ruthwell monument was one of nearly 1,500 standing stone crosses produced in England during the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>338</sup> In Anglo-Saxon England, the flurry of cross building may have been spurred in part by Pope Sergius's (687-701) rediscovery of a fragment from the True Cross somehow temporarily misplaced in the Vatican. The pope's discovery led to a new wave of piety associated with the cult of the True Cross that swept across Europe and into

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<sup>337</sup> William G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* (London: n.p., 1927), 5. Ian Wood, "Constantine Crosses in Northumbria," in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>338</sup> Michael J. Swanton, ed., *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 47.

England. For the development of the Anglo-Saxon Church, this event could not have come at a more propitious time. As the seventh century drew to a close, many of the early impediments that had hindered the development of a united Church in Anglo-Saxon England were eliminated. At the dawn of the eighth century, all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were at least nominally Christian, the influential Irish monastery at Iona by 714, had accepted the Roman calculation of Easter, much of the British Church had submitted to the authority of the Anglo-Saxon dioceses,<sup>339</sup> and clerical pilgrimages between England and Rome (along with intellectual exchange) had increased dramatically.<sup>340</sup> At the time of the Sergius's discovery, two such travelers, Ceolfrith and Hwætberht, the current and future abbot of Bede's twin monastery Wearmouth/Jarrow, happened to be in Rome. One would expect that they, like so many others present for the event, would have been awed by the pope's discovery and shared their experiences with their brethren upon their return to England. As they recounted the events of the pope's discovery, their stories would have been heard by a then young Bede who was just beginning his writing career. The zeal associated with the cross may have influenced the emphasis of his work, for as Bede looked back on the history of England, he would establish the cross as the guiding beacon for Northumbria's political and religious development. Since Bede saw the

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<sup>339</sup> A notable example occurred in 730 when Pethelm became the first Anglo-Saxon bishop of the ancient British monastery, *Candida Casa*, Whithorn, originally founded by St. Ninian, the Apostle to the Picts, ca. 397. St. Cuthbert was granted Cartmel (land around Carlisle) in 685 by King Ecgrith of Northumbria (670-685); see *Historia de Cuthberto: A History of St. Cuthbert and a Record of his Patrimony*, ed. and trans. Ted J. South (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), § 6.

<sup>340</sup> St. Wilfrid of York and Benedict Biscop (Baducing) were the first recorded Anglo-Saxon Christian pilgrims to Rome, departing sometime in 652.

Northumbrians as God's new chosen people,<sup>341</sup> it made sense that the cross illuminated their history, just as it typologically shone forth from the lines of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>342</sup> By the time that Bede was an adult, the high cross in England, and particularly in Northumbria, was omnipresent. At his monastery it was carved in stone,<sup>343</sup> represented in paintings, and praised in the liturgy.<sup>344</sup> And Wearmouth/Jarrow was not unique. In Anglo-Saxon England between the last quarter of the seventh and the first quarter of the eighth century the cross emerged as the dominant Christian icon and became an integral part of the physical and spiritual landscape.<sup>345</sup>

With few enemies to contend with, the Northumbrians continued their expansion west to the Solway Firth during the closing years of the seventh century. The monument at Ruthwell represents one of the first religious icons built by the Northumbrians as they moved into a sparsely populated border region of the former British kingdoms of Rheged and Strathclyde (present day Dumfries). The Anglo-Saxon Church, at the end of the seventh century, sought to achieve supremacy in England through evangelical activity in the northern British kingdoms, an area that includes far southwest of Scotland where the

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<sup>341</sup> This concept was not unique to Bede. The Anglo-Saxons both north and south of the Humber saw themselves in this role. See Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>342</sup> George Hardin Brown, "Bede and the Cross," in *Cross and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Karen L. Jolly, C. E. Karkov, and S. L. Keefer (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>343</sup> Examples include the cross on Hereberecht's stone in St. Peter's Church at Wearmouth (674), St. Paul's cross (685), and the eighth-century Jarrow cross.

<sup>344</sup> At the end of the seventh century the Gallican Feast of the Invention of the Cross, 3 May, was added to the Roman calendar. Pope Sergius (687-701) revived the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross celebrated on 14 September. These along with the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday would have been celebrated by Bede's community.

<sup>345</sup> George Hardin Brown, "Bede and the Cross," 21.

monument was sited. While the Ruthwell monument may or may not have been associated with a monastic house (the lack of archaeological remains at the cross prevent the drawing of any conclusions), the area around the cross would have signified consecrated ground on which the worship of God could be conducted, and where the sacraments could be administered.

### **Ruthwell Monument and *The Dream of the Rood* Fragment**

The origin of the Ruthwell monument is shrouded in mystery. The presence of a tall, free-standing stone cross at Ruthwell during the Middle Ages is not recorded by Bede or any other medieval writer. The first mention of its existence is made by Reginald Bainbrigg, headmaster of the grammar school at Appleby and antiquarian, who took note of the cross, transcribed some of the runes written on its shaft, and wrote a short description of the tall standing cross and its runes for Camden's *Britannia* in 1599.<sup>346</sup> Regrettably, he was the last person to record seeing the cross standing, as it had for the first 900 years of its existence. In 1640, following the Reformation, the Church of Scotland General Assembly attempted to cancel out all vestiges of Roman worship and passed an act to demolish "Idolatrous Monuments." The serving minister at Ruthwell, the Rev. Gavin Young, while not able to openly defy the edict of the assembly apparently sought to protect the cross by ignoring the act. The General Assembly eventually ordered

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<sup>346</sup> Brendan Cassidy, "The Later Life of the Ruthwell Cross: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present," in *The Ruthwell Cross*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4. Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of The Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 13.

that the cross be destroyed, and it was cast down, probably around 1642.<sup>347</sup> Fortunately, the minister did not allow the cross to be ruined but carried out the Assembly's instructions with as little damage to the monument as possible, and for more than 180 years large parts of it lay scattered and buried throughout the church grounds. In 1799 the Rev. Henry Duncan who was then in charge of Ruthwell discovered a fragment of the monument while digging a grave. By 1802 he had found enough pieces to erect the lower portion of the monument in the manse garden, and by 1823 it was fully raised except for the missing crossbeam. Although Duncan was able to restore much of the original long column correctly, the crossbeam which he supplied was put in place backward.<sup>348</sup> For more than 60 years the cross stood in the garden; then in 1887 the Rev. James McFarlan had it brought into the church. Unfortunately, when it was placed in the church the cross was incorrectly oriented. When originally raised the present north side (with the panel of Christ subduing the beasts) would have faced west, the present south side (with the Crucifixion panel) would have faced east, and the current narrow east and west sides would have faced north and south respectively.<sup>349</sup>

In 1802, when the Duncan erected the lower portion of the Ruthwell monument, he unwittingly displayed the monument as it would have appeared for the first generation of its existence. Most scholars now believe that the Ruthwell monument was constructed in two phases, the lower Ruthwell I and the upper Ruthwell II, the two projects separated

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<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>348</sup> David Howlett, "Inscriptions and Design of the Ruthwell Cross," *RC*, 71.

<sup>349</sup> Fred Orton and Ian Wood, *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2.



in time by roughly 20 to 25 years.<sup>350</sup> The dating of the monument, as with everything Anglo-Saxon before the tenth or eleventh century, is a matter of intense debate. Scholars tend to place its completion anywhere as early as the late seventh century (though this is the minority view) to as late as the early ninth century.<sup>351</sup> Recently, Ó Carragáin has argued strongly for the majority position, setting the completion of phase I around 730.<sup>352</sup> While his thesis is compelling,<sup>353</sup> I tend to agree with Swanton and Orton, both of whom place the completion of phase I closer to the beginning of the eighth century. This earlier date would situate the construction of the monument near the end of the Northumbrian King Aldfrith's reign (685-705). Aldfrith was the son of king Oswiu and the Irish princess Fína, a daughter of Colman Rimid, king of Tara (598-604). King Aldfrith, who

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<sup>350</sup> Fred Orton, "Rethinking the Ruthwell Monument: Fragments and Critique; Tradition and History; Tongues and Sockets," *Art History* 21 (1998): 82. Ian Wood, "Ruthwell Contextual Searches," in *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and Fred Orton (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2003), 104-108.

<sup>351</sup> Late seventh or first quarter of the eighth century; see Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 38; 685-850, see Fred Orton, "Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments: Some Strictures in Similarity; Some Questions of History," in *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and Fred Orton (Morgantown: University of West Virginia, 2003), 91; Ian Wood, "Ruthwell: Contextual Searches," in *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, 108-111; first half of the eighth century, see Calvin B. Kendall, "The Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood*," in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>352</sup> Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 213.

<sup>353</sup> Many of the liturgical reforms instituted by Pope Sergius I (687-701) were celebrated in Rome by the early 690s. However, determining when and specifically what reforms reached Anglo-Saxon England is a more difficult to determine. Liturgy was a semi-oral tradition during the seventh and eighth century. Ceremonies were adapted for local communities, and one learned of changes to the liturgy often by chance. The liturgy was learned by listening to someone who had been to Rome or York. Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "The Necessary Distance: Imatatio Romae and the Ruthwell Cross," in *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 198. Bede informs his readers that John the Archcantor returned with Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith in 679 to teach the monks the mode of chanting as was done in St. Peter's in Rome (*HE*, IV.18). Thus the spread of later liturgical reforms may have reached the ears of the designers of Ruthwell as early as 700.

was born in Ireland probably between 630-632, was raised among Irish royals.<sup>354</sup> History also knows him as the Irish scholar Flann Fína, the author of a book of Old Irish Wisdom literature.<sup>355</sup> Prior to assuming the kingship of Northumbria, he either was a student or possibly a monk at Iona where he had Adomnán as his teacher.<sup>356</sup> This association could help explain their apparent close friendship.<sup>357</sup> Also during his time at Iona, Aldfrith cultivated a friendship with another student of Adomnán, the scholar Aldhelm (d.710).<sup>358</sup> Late in Aldfrith's reign Aldhelm sent the king a copy of his *Enigmata*, which, among other things, provides Biblical precedents from the Old Testament for talking trees, just like the cross in *The Dream of the Rood*.<sup>359</sup> It is possible that Aldfrith was inspired to build a grand Northumbrian cross after reading Adomnán's description of the wonders of the holy sites, particularly of the Church of Golgotha with its monumental cross. It has further been suggested that *The Dream of the Rood* was composed at the court of

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<sup>354</sup> See Chapter 2, 78-79 and Figure I.

<sup>355</sup> Ronald M. Smith, "The Speculum Principum in Early Irish Literature." *Speculum* 2 (1927): 432-434; Colin A. Ireland, ed. and trans., *Old Irish Wisdom Attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: An Edition of Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 52.

<sup>356</sup> *OH*, II, 263.

<sup>357</sup> For example, when Aldfrith took the throne of Northumbria in 685, Adomnán petitioned him to release the hostages that his half-brother King Ecgfrith (670-685) had taken while he conducted a military campaign in Ireland. Aldfrith quickly surrendered the hostages to Adomnán who then presented the king with a copy of his book, *De Locis Sanctus*, a document detailing the events of a pilgrimage by Arculf, a Gallic bishop, to the holy sites of Jerusalem. Aldfrith in turn had scribes make copies for, as Bede says, *minoribus ad legendum contraditus*. *EH*, V.15

<sup>358</sup> Michael Lapidge, "The Career of Aldhelm." *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007): 34-38.

<sup>359</sup> These are from Judges 9:8 and 9:15, 4 Kings 14:9 and Psalms 95:12. Andy Orchard, "The Dream of the Rood: Cross-References," in *New Reading in The Vercelli Book* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 238.

Aldfrith,<sup>360</sup> which would account for its inclusion on the monument at Ruthwell. The king, because of his intellectualism, wealth and strong ties to the region around southwestern Scotland, would make an ideal sponsor for an expensive edifice such as the Ruthwell monument, though we lack any evidence to support his (or anyone's) participation. Moreover, such a project would have required a substantial economic and organizational commitment, and a king would be one of the more likely patrons.

When the Ruthwell monument was built, it was an artistic anomaly for the region. Raised near the borders of the former British kingdoms of Strathclyde and Rheged and just south of the Irish kingdom of Dál Riata, the monument was one of the first Northumbrian Christian sculptures west of the Pennines Mountains. A cultural pastiche, Ruthwell shares similarities with the monumental stone crosses of Ireland and western Britain but retains its own distinctive artistic legacy. It was clearly an Anglo-Saxon edifice, but its Celtic influences are undeniable. The Ruthwell monument, like the standing stone crosses of Ireland and western Britain, was carved with Christian imagery on all four sides. However, two major structural differences set these two traditions apart. First, the cross arms of Ruthwell show no sign of an encircling ring, an identifying feature of Irish and western British crosses (the characteristic Celtic cross). Second, while the shaft of the Ruthwell monument was placed directly into the ground, crosses of the

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<sup>360</sup> Bruce Karl Braswell, "The Dream of the Rood and Aldhelm on Sacred Prosopopeia." *Medieval Studies* 40 (1978): 461-467.

Irish tradition insert the shaft into a rectangular stone base.<sup>361</sup> While the majority of the iconographic program of Ruthwell is, as Ó Carragáin supposed, a response to the discovery of the True Cross and the institution of the Feast of the Exaltation,<sup>362</sup> the west face of Ruthwell I ties the cross to the more extreme form of ascetic monasticism that one would find in Ireland and western Britain. The Northumbrian Church of the early eighth century was slowly severing its ties to the Irish Church and increasingly looking toward Rome for its liturgy and acceptable forms of monasticism.<sup>363</sup> However, the images on the monument with Celtic significance blended with a runic version of the Old English *Dream of the Rood* suggest a hybrid community at this cultural crossroad.

The monument itself is constructed of two blocks of red sandstone which, based on the color of the rock, were quarried from two different sites.<sup>364</sup> It stands approximately 18 feet high and is sculpted with sacred Christian symbols on the current north face, scenes from the New Testament on the current south face, and inhabited vine scroll on

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<sup>361</sup> Francoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period: to A.D. 800*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen & Co., 1965), 19-21, 24-47; John Higgitt, "Words and Crosses: The Inscribed Stone Crosses of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland," in *Early medieval sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John Higgitt (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986), 125-129; Nancy Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 162-165; Roger Stalley, "The Tower Cross at Kells," in *The Insular Tradition*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov, Michael Ryan, and Robert T. Farrell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 122-123. Crosses of the Picts are more problematical. There seems to be a preference for encircled crosses among the southern Picts, but this is not always the case even among crosses that are proximate both geographically and temporally. George Henderson, *The Art of the Picts: Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 162-164.

<sup>362</sup> Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "Liturgical Innovation Associated with Poe Sergius and the Iconography of the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses," in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in Honor of the 1300 Anniversary of the Birth of Bede*, ed. R.T. Farrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 131-147.

<sup>363</sup> John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81-82, 95-100.

<sup>364</sup> When Ruthwell I and II were joined the monument would have been painted, so the color difference would have been rendered irrelevant. Wood, "Ruthwell: Contextual Searches," 104-105.

the narrower current east and west faces. When the monument was brought inside the Ruthwell Church at the end of the nineteenth century (for its protection), it unfortunately was not oriented as it had been prior to the Reformation. The current south side of the monument originally, it is believed, faced east, the current north side faced west and so forth.<sup>365</sup> That said, the broad borders surrounding the sculptures depicting Christian imagery found on the east side (now south) and the west side (now north)<sup>366</sup> are written in Latin using variants of the Roman alphabet.<sup>367</sup> On the monument's east side the Latin inscriptions are drawn from the Gospels, while those on the west face are short, denotative statements.<sup>368</sup> All Latin inscriptions on Ruthwell I are read beginning from left to right across the top margin; they continue from top to bottom down the right margin and then from top to bottom on the left margin, and any remaining text is completed from left to right across the bottom margin.<sup>369</sup> The sculptures on the east and west faces of the monument were designed to be read from the bottom to the top. When first encountering the monument, viewers would begin their reading with the runic *titulus* on the vine-scrolled south side and then proceed in a clockwise (sunwise) manner to the east face.<sup>370</sup>

On Ruthwell I the east and west faces each had four sculpted panels depicting sacred scenes (the bottom image on the west face can no longer be seen). Based on the

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<sup>365</sup> Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, puts forth in some detail why this belief is the majority opinion, xxi; Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 145.

<sup>366</sup> From this point on I shall refer to the various sides of the cross based on its original orientation.

<sup>367</sup> R. I. Page, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Runes* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), 146, points out that there is a mix of Anglo-Saxon capitols and insular minuscules.

<sup>368</sup> Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 43-44.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 44; Howlett, "Inscriptions and Design of the Ruthwell Cross," 71-76.

<sup>370</sup> Howlett, "Inscriptions and Design of the Ruthwell Cross," 78-79; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 62; Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 145-147.

images found on the east and west faces, it has been suggested that the cross could be read as depicting the Church and monastic life, *ecclesia* and *vita monastica* (see Figure IX for entire Ruthwell Monument).<sup>371</sup> The east side of the monument has been described as representing the Church, and as one reads the sculptures from the base to the top of Ruthwell I, it marks a symbolic commitment to the Church.<sup>372</sup> Beginning at the base of the monument's east face, there is a now almost obliterated crucifixion scene with no inscription. This panel represents the Word<sup>373</sup> and is believed to mark the starting point for the liturgy. The panel above is the Annunciation (introduction of the Word),<sup>374</sup> with a Latin *titulus* derived from Luke 1:28.<sup>375</sup> Ascending to the next panel, there is a representation of Christ curing a blind man (understanding of the Word)<sup>376</sup> surrounded by a portion of John 9:1.<sup>377</sup> At the top of Ruthwell I is a sculpted image of a weeping woman wiping Christ's feet with her hair

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<sup>371</sup> Paul Meyvaert, "A New Perspective on the Ruthwell Cross: *Ecclesia* and *Vita Monastica*," in *The Ruthwell Cross*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 104-125.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-108; Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 186.

<sup>373</sup> Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 186.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>375</sup> Beginning at the top of the panel the text reads: + INGRESSVS ANG{ELUS AD EUM DIXIT AVE GRATIA PLENA} DNS, and finishes along the left border, TE[CVM] BE[NEDICTA] {TV IN MULIERIBVS}. And having entered the angel said to her, "Hail full of grace, the Lord [is] with you. You [are] blessed among women. Howlett, *RC*, 72; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxv.

<sup>376</sup> Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 186.

<sup>377</sup> ET PRAETERIENS VIDI[...T[...R[...]] A NATIBITATE ET S[...], suggesting a reading of ET PRAETERIENS VIDIT HOMINEM CAECVM A NATIBITATE ET SANAVIT EVM AB INFIRMITATE, "and passing he saw a man blind from birth and healed him from this infirmity." Howlett, *RC*, 72-73; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxv.



Figure IX. The four sides of the Ruthwell Cross. From left to right the north, west, south and east faces. Drawing by Henry Duncan (1833).

(Figure X) as a representation of penitence.<sup>378</sup> The *titulus* contains portions from Luke 7:37-38.<sup>379</sup> When the viewers come to the west face of the Ruthwell monument, they are presented with scenes thematically related to desert asceticism and *vita monastica*. At the base some scholars have suggested that there was a representation of the Deposition of Christ. However, this assessment is based primarily on the text of *The Dream of the Rood* fragment on the south side of the monument, but this interpretation is not widely accepted, especially given the extremely poor state of the panel.<sup>380</sup> The first readable sculpture on the west face is a depiction of the flight to (or from) Egypt with a Latin text based on Matthew 2:14 or 2:21.<sup>381</sup> The next panel with its *titulus* represents the hermit saints, Paul and Anthony, breaking bread in the desert.<sup>382</sup> The top panel of Ruthwell I depicts Christ crossed-nimbed, holding a scroll in his left hand and blessing with his right hand. He is standing on the heads of beasts who, symbolically, by crossing their legs recognize his holiness.<sup>383</sup> A paraphrase of Psalm 90 in Latin surrounds the panel.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 186.

<sup>379</sup> Top margin: +A[TT]V[LIT] [ALA]B[A]STRUM V[NGUE]NTI, down the right margin S[T]ANS [R]E[TR]O SECVS PEDES, continuing down the left margin, EIUS LACRIMIS COEPIT RIGARE PEDIS EIUS & CAPILLIS, then across the bottom, CAPITIS SUI TERGEBAT. “She took an alabaster jar of ointment and standing behind, close to his feet, she began to moisten his feet with tears and dried them with the hair of her head.” Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxv.

<sup>380</sup> Howlett, *RC*, 74, 91, is one of the few voices who accepts that the panel contained an image depicting the Deposition. Ian Wood, “Ruthwell: Contextual Searches,” 106. Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxix, represent the majority by rejecting the supposition that the lowest panel once depicted the Deposition.

<sup>381</sup> Top margin: MARIA ET IO[SEPHUS] [...] TV[...]. Howlett, *RC*, 74.

<sup>382</sup> Top margin: + SCS PAVLVVS ET A[NTONIVS] [...] FREGER[VN]T PANEM IN DESERTO. *Ibid.*, 75; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxix.

<sup>383</sup> Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxix.

<sup>384</sup> Top margin: +IHS XPS, RIGHT, IVDEX AEQVITATIS, left, BESTIAE ET DRACON[ES] COGNOVERVNT IN DE, bottom, SERTO SALVA[TO]REM MVNDI. Howlett, *RC*, 74; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxix.





**Figure X: Christ with a Woman Wiping his Feet**

The sculptures found on the west face, because of their theme of the desert and its associated asceticism, suggest a monastic setting for the monument and its associated

contemplative life.<sup>385</sup> In particular, based on the inclusion of the panel depicting the meal of Sts. Paul and Anthony,<sup>386</sup> the influence of the Irish and their more extreme form of solitary asceticism may be inferred. While not limited to Ireland, these saints were especially venerated among the Celtic peoples because they signified solitary monasticism. So important were Paul and Anthony to the Celtic Church of Ireland and northwest Britain that they were included in the Irish liturgy during the seventh and eighth century.<sup>387</sup> Their likeness was commonly found on other Christian monuments, though only in the Celtic north and west of England, thus further supporting an Irish-leaning foundation.<sup>388</sup> The celebration of desert asceticism on a Northumbrian monument may represent a religious and cultural fusion among the Celtic peoples and the Anglo-Saxons<sup>389</sup> that was beginning to disappear in the east of Northumbria.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Robert Burlin, "The Ruthwell Cross, *The Dream of the Rood* and the *Vita Contemplativa*," *Studies In Philology* 65, no.1 (Jan. 1968): 25-26.

<sup>386</sup> Paul and Anthony, along with St. John, were considered the founders of monasticism. The Irish had a particular affinity for Anthony, emulating his solitary existence. Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 13; John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1931), 16-20.

<sup>387</sup> Veneration of these saints was included in the *Stowe Missal*. "Ateoch frit na huile noeb-manchu ro miltigsetar erut sechnon in domuin ule, im Eliam & im Elesium i petarlaicc, im Eóin, im Pol, im Anton i mnua-fiadnaise"; Charles Plummer, *Irish Litanies* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1925), 32.

<sup>388</sup> Kirk Ambrose, *The Nave Sculpture of Vézelay* (Toronto: PIMS, 2006), 54; Michael Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 15.

<sup>389</sup> Meyer Shapiro, "The Religious Meaning of the Ruthwell Cross," *Art Bulletin* 26 (1944): 235-236, has suggested that the Celtic features on the Ruthwell Monument were a protest against the Anglo-Saxon church and its Roman leanings, though this view was dismissed quickly and is no longer accepted. See Kenneth H. Jackson, "The Sources for the Life of St. Kentigern," in *Studies in the Early British Church*, ed. Nora K. Chadwick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 342-344; Ian Wood, "Ruthwell Contextual Searches," 114; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 57.

<sup>390</sup> The last Irish abbot and bishop of Lindisfarne, the Irish monastic stronghold in Northumbria, was Tuda, who died of the plague in 664. From then on all leaders of the monastery were Anglo-Saxons. This is not to suggest that the Ruthwell Monument was of Irish construction that was later defaced with Anglo-Saxon runes. While some scholars of the nineteenth century believed that the runic inscription of a portion of *The Dream of the Rood* was a ninth-century addition, that theory has been discredited. Ó

While a monument of Ruthwell's sophistication isolated from an ecclesiastical or monastic setting seems counterintuitive, surveys of the area have produced no archaeological finds to support the existence of a medieval church or monastic community from the eighth century.<sup>391</sup> However, given the expense of the monument and the amount of skilled labor required to produce such a work of art, it is widely supposed that it was part of a religious community.<sup>392</sup> Most scholars view Ruthwell as a preaching cross designed to follow liturgical practices of the early eighth century, particularly the reforms instituted by Pope Sergius in the 680s.<sup>393</sup> If the community associated with Ruthwell were similar to Irish monastic settlements of the same period,<sup>394</sup> their footprint on the landscape would have been light and a lack of evidence unsurprising. If there were a monastic community associated with Ruthwell, even a short-lived one, then it would have been one of the few monastic communities in Northumbria that retained Irish

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Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 58-60; however, see R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 147.

<sup>391</sup> While there is no evidence of medieval structures, the Ruthwell Monument was constructed adjacent to an Iron-Age circular enclosure. Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 122.

<sup>392</sup> Ian Wood, "Ruthwell Contextual Searches," 112-113; Orton and Wood, *Fragments of History*, 196-197; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 58.

<sup>393</sup> Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "Liturgical Innovations Associated with Pope Sergius and the Iconography of Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses," in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Robert T. Farrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 131-147; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "A Necessary Distance: *Imitatio Romae* and the Ruthwell Cross," in *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 197-198; Calvin B. Kendall, "The Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood*," 131-132; Ian Wood, "Ruthwell: Contextual Searches," 110.

<sup>394</sup> Monastic settlements in Ireland were initially groups of wattle cells for individuals. Later these would be rebuilt of more lasting material, and common buildings would be constructed. Lisa Bitel, *The Isle of Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Communities in Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 58. However, even more established houses, such as the royal monastery at Coldingham, have been erased from the archaeological record. Simon Stronach and others, "The Anglian Monastery and Medieval Priory of Coldingham: *Urbs coludi* Revisited." *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 135 (2005): 397-401.

sympathies. This would not be unexpected if Aldfrith were the patron and this were a royal foundation. During his reign the king did not conduct military campaigns against his Celtic or Anglo-Saxon neighbors.<sup>395</sup> Instead he was content to rule over a smaller, secure kingdom. During Aldfrith's reign the wealthy kingdom began a period of political stability and intellectual pursuits that ushered in the Northumbrian Golden Age, which enabled a creative synthesis of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Mediterranean art and ideas. A pious man, Aldfrith may have fostered the expansion of the Anglo-Saxon Church into the western regions of his kingdom, one of which may have been at Ruthwell. A royal foundation from Aldfrith could explain the expensive monument with a fusion of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon imagery.

In addition to ethnicity, the iconography of the monument also raises the question of gender. Given the large number of panels on Ruthwell I that are representations of women (three of seven), it is possible that the monastery associated with Ruthwell may either have been a nunnery or a double house ruled by an abbess. The presence of a community of women responsible for Ruthwell could change our reading of the monument.

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<sup>395</sup> Aldfrith's half-brother Ecgrith (670-685) spent most of his kingship at war. Despite his defeat and death by the Britons, Dál Riata Scots and Picts at Nechtansmere (Dún Nechtain, now Dunnichen), he weakened them sufficiently that they posed no challenge to Northumbria until the mid-eighth century. Kirby, *EEK*, 118-120.

### ***Runic Dream of the Rood***

The Ruthwell monument is one of 37 extant rune stones from Anglo-Saxon England. All but two are from an ecclesiastical setting, and they range in sophistication from simple grave markers to the unique Ruthwell monument.<sup>396</sup> In addition to the Biblical and patristic panels sculpted on the east and west face of Ruthwell, the narrower north and south faces are sculpted with vine scrolls inhabited with depictions of birds and quadrupeds and surrounded by the runic *titulus*. Along the narrow borders of these faces of Ruthwell I is a runic inscription written in the Northumbrian dialect of Old English (see figure XI). While the symbolic nature of the vines is important,<sup>397</sup> it is the runic inscriptions that contain portions of *The Dream of the Rood* (lines 39-65, as found in the *Vercelli* manuscript)<sup>398</sup> on which I will focus. The Ruthwell monument is unique among Anglo-Saxon rune stones in that it is inscribed with a poetic text. The sculpture represents a pinnacle in religious symbolic sculpture from the Northumbrian Golden Age. The dual language of the cross suggests that the intended audience was, as would be expected in the region, a mix of several cultures, though the dominant group was Anglo-Saxon.

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<sup>396</sup> R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 130-134.

<sup>397</sup> The two interwoven inhabited vine scrolls growing from the base of the monument and extending up the north and south sides of the Ruthwell Monument appear frequently in seventh- and eighth-century Northumbrian art. In the Gospel of John, Christ was identified with the vine (John 15:1-5), and in patristic literature the vine became associated with the Tree of Life, which in turn became linked with the cross. J. Daniélou, *Primitive Christian Symbols* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 25-40.

<sup>398</sup> Fred Orton and Ian Wood, *Fragments of History*, 146.



**Figure XI: East and South Face of Ruthwell Monument (left). Detail of North face on right.**

As readers proceeded from the north to the south side, they encountered the Old English inscription of a portion of *The Dream of the Rood* written in Anglo-Saxon runes. The Anglo-Saxon (Futhorc)<sup>399</sup> inscription begins at the top margin, surrounding the inhabited vine scroll on the north side of the monument. The text proceeds down the right margin from top to bottom. It continues at the top of the left margin, going down to the base. However, unlike the east and west faces of the monument, the runic inscription on the vertical borders of the north and south faces are arranged not along the length of the border as was observed with the Latin text surrounding the Biblical panels, but in a

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<sup>399</sup> Futharc the Norse version of Anglo-Saxon Futhorc is an acronym for the first seven letters of the runic alphabet:  $\mathfrak{F} \mathfrak{H} \mathfrak{T} \mathfrak{B} \mathfrak{K} \mathfrak{L}$ , where the  $\mathfrak{T}$ , the thorn, represents “th.”

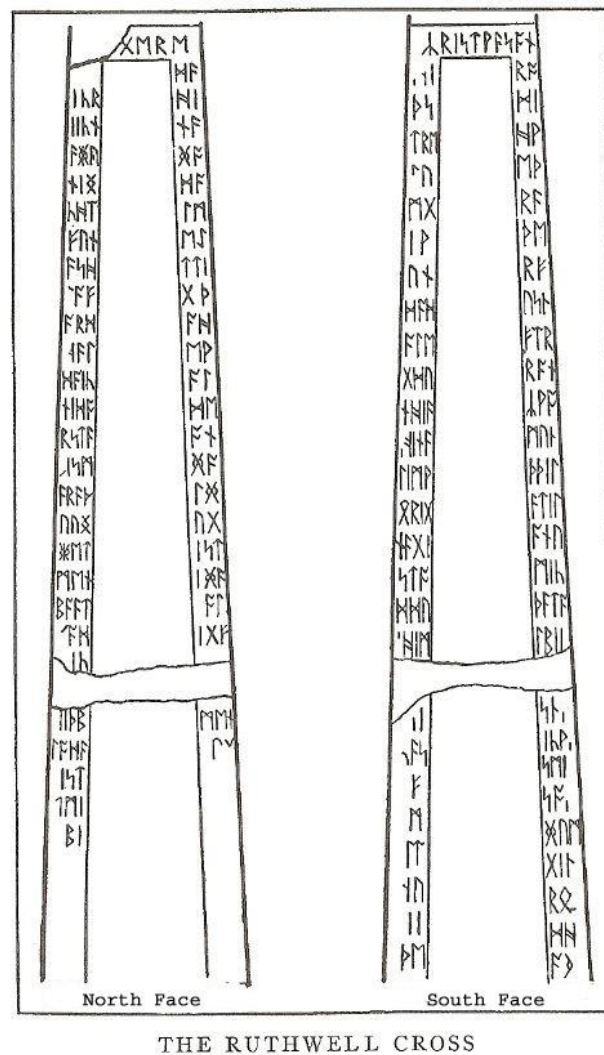


**Figure XII: Runic inscription from north and south face of Ruthwell I monument.** From Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 142.

succession of short horizontal lines containing groups of two, three or four runic letters

going down the right and left margin of the north and south sides of the monument (see Figure XII). This peculiar arrangement of the runes makes reading the text difficult and prompted Page to suggest that the runic inscription was not part of the original monument builder's plan.<sup>400</sup> However, as discussed above, this suggestion has been discredited. The reconstructed Ruthwell text below is based on Ó Carragáin and Howlett.<sup>401</sup>

Top and right border of north side:

[Ond]geredæ Hinæ God Almeʒttig. Ða He walde on galgu gistiga  
modig fore allæ men [b]ug[a] {ic ni dorstæ} [...]

Left border:

[ Ahof] ic riicnæ Kyniŋc.  
heafunæs hlafard hælda ic ni dorstæ.  
[B]ismæradu unket men ba æt[g]ad[re]; [i]c[ wæs] miÐ blodi bist[e]mi[d]  
bi{goten of Þæs Guman sida} [...]

Top and right border of the south side of Ruthwell:

[+]Krist wæs on rodi. Hwæðræ Ðer fusæ  
fêrran kwomu æbÐilæ til anum:  
ic Ðæt al [bihæald]. S[aræ] ic w[æ]s mi[ð] so[r]gu[m] gidræ[fi]d;  
h[n]a[g] {ic Ðam secgum til handa.}

Left Border:

MiÐ stre/lum giwundad  
alegdun hiæ hinæ limwœringæ; gistoddu[n] [h]im [æt] [his] [lic]æs [hea]f[du]m;  
[bih]ea[ld]u[n] [h]i[æ] [Ð]e[r] {heafunæs dryctin;} [...].<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 134

<sup>401</sup> Howlett, *RC*, 88; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and Rood*, xxi-xxvii.

<sup>402</sup> The following conventions, based on Ó Carragáin, will be used for the Ruthwell text: Letters partially visible are in italics, letters no longer visible are within square brackets [ ], lost letters, words and phrases supplied from other sources such as the *Vercelli Dream of the Rood* are between braces, gaps of any length are represented by three dots in square brackets [...]. "God almighty stripped himself when he



The inscription on the Ruthwell monument is more poetic than it is poetry. From the comparison below it can be seen that the Ruthwell *Dream of the Rood* represents an abbreviated form of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition.<sup>403</sup> In some places it has incomplete meter. The half-line *modig fore allæ men* / “brave before all men” (equivalent to *Vercelli* 41a) lacks an alliterative off-verse. Corresponding to *Vercelli* verse 56b, the Ruthwell *Krist wæs on rodi* / “Christ was on the cross” is missing the on-verse *cwiðdon cyninges fyll* / “they spoke of the king’s death.” The poet (sculptor) omits the on-verse for what would be *Vercelli* 62, giving only modified *Mið strelum giwundad* / “wounded with arrows.” More frequently than is found in the *Vercelli Book*, the Ruthwell poet turns to hypermetrics (48, 59 and 63). Below is the text from the *Vercelli Book* (39-65) with the corresponding lines from the Ruthwell monument in bold text.

- Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),***  
 40    strang ond stiðmod.    ***Gestah he on gealgan heanne,***  
       ***modig on manigra gesyhðe,***    þa he wolde mancyn lisan.  
       Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte. ***Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,***  
       feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.  
       Rod wæs ic aræred. ***Ahof ic ricne cyning***  
 45    ***heofona hlaford,    hyldan me ne dorste.***

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wished to climb the gallows, courageous before all men. I dared not bow [...]. I raised a powerful king. The lord of heaven I dared not bend [...]. Men insulted the both of us together; I was drenched with blood poured from the man's side [...]. Christ was on the cross. But eager ones came there from afar. Noble ones came together, I beheld all that. I was terribly afflicted with sorrows, I bowed to the hands of men. Wounded with darts. They laid him down limb spent, they took their stand at the head and feet of the corpse, there they looked upon the lord of heaven [...].” Howlett, *RC*, 88; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and Rood*, xxi-xxvii.

<sup>403</sup> See Andy Orchard, “*The Dream of the Rood*: Cross-References,” in *New Reading in The Vercelli Book* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 242-253, for a more complete argument regarding *The Dream of the Rood* tradition and Ruthwell.

- þurh drifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,  
 opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.  
***Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,  
 begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended.***
- 50 Feala ic on þam beorge gebiden hæbbe  
 wraðra wyrda. Geseah ic weruda god  
 þearle þenian. þystro hæfdon  
 bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw,  
 scirne sciman, sceadu forðeode,
- 55 wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft,  
 cwiðdon cyninges fyll. ***Crist wæs on rode.***  
***Hwæðere þær fuse feorran cwoman  
 to þam æðelinge. Ic þæt eall beheold.***  
***Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa,***
- 60 eaðmod elne mycle. Genamon hie þær ælmihtigne god,  
 ahofon hine of ðam hefian wite. Forleton me þa hilderincas  
 standan steame bedrifenne; ***eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod.***  
***Aledon hie ðær limwerigne, gestodon him æt his lices heafdum,  
 beheoldon hie ðær heofenes dryhten, ond he hine ðær hwile reste,***
- 65 meðe æfter ðam miclan gewinne.<sup>404</sup>

The existence of two texts from *The Dream of the Rood* tradition, one found on the eighth-century Ruthwell monument, the other in a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript held in an Italian library, presents several challenges to literary historians. Was the Ruthwell poem the original and the poem in the *Vercelli Book* a tenth-century

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<sup>404</sup> “Then the young hero undressed himself (who was God Almighty), strong and unflinching he climbed high on the cross brave in the sight of many so that he could redeem humankind. I trembled when the man embraced me I dared not bend to the earth to fall to the earth’s surface but I should stand fast. I was raised a cross, I raised the powerful king, heaven’s lord, I did not dare bend. The pierced me with dark nails on me were seen wounds open wicked wounds I did not dare harm any of them they mocked us both together I was entirely soaked with blood spilled from the man’s side afterwards he had sent his spirit I had to endure many cruel fates on the hill. I saw the God of hosts severely stretched out, darkness had covered with its clouds the Lord’s body, the bright light went forth in the darkness dark under the clouds. All creation wept they spoke of the king’s death Christ was on the cross. Nevertheless they came there eager from afar to the Lord. I beheld it all. Sorely I was afflicted with sorrow yet I bowed down to the warrior’s hands gently with great zeal they received Almighty God raised him from his heavy torment the men let me to stand covered in blood. I was all wounded with darts there they lay the limb weary one they stood at the head of the body they beheld heavens lord . . .”

elaboration? Was *Vercelli* a copy of the complete Northumbrian original from which the builders of Ruthwell picked bits and pieces to fit on their monument, or was there a now lost exemplar from which the Ruthwell and *Vercelli* poems were independently derived? Such questions, given the absence of intermediaries, are resistant to conclusive answers. However, there are some clues that indicate the *Vercelli* poem was ultimately derived from a full-length Anglian exemplar which passed through an intermediate Early West Saxon (EWS) version, both now lost. The *Vercelli Dream of the Rood* is written in Late West Saxon (LWS), a dialect used in the south of England during the tenth and eleventh centuries. The presence of a number of EWS forms scattered throughout the text suggests that the *Vercelli Dream of the Rood* was a copy of an earlier manuscript. On line 148 the EWS form *hiht* (hope, joy) is used alongside the LWS *hyht* on line 126. EWS spelling forms that retain the final *g* were used, such as in *hnag* (59) instead of *hnah* (bent down, humble) and *astag* (103) in place of *astah* (ascend). However, in other locations of the manuscript, forms that follow the more normative pattern of LWS spelling, using the final *h* instead of the earlier *g*, such as *fah* (13) and *gestah* (40), are found.<sup>405</sup> From these data one could conclude that an intermediate manuscript, possibly written during the reign of King Alfred (871-899), perhaps during the revival in veneration of the cross when Alfred received a fragment of the cross in 885, was used for the *Vercelli* version.<sup>406</sup>

The retention of Anglian forms found through the entirety of the *Vercelli Dream of the Rood*, not just those that correspond to the poem on the Ruthwell monument, may

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<sup>405</sup> Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 7.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 48.

imply that there was a Northumbrian version of about the same length.<sup>407</sup> The distinct Anglian feature of smoothing<sup>408</sup> is found in the word *wergas* / “criminal” (LWS, *weargas*). The meter of half-line 22a suggests that there once was the Anglian dative plural *\*bliwum* smoothed by either a final *h* or internal *g*.<sup>409</sup> *Vercelli* uses the verb form *besteman* / “to make wet” (22, 48) instead of the LWS form *bestieman* because of a front mutation.<sup>410</sup> While these differences do not prove that a *Vercelli*-length original was in circulation (either oral or written), it is suggestive. The existence of a full-length Northumbrian poem would not be surprising. It seems counterintuitive that an expensive and time-intensive edifice like the Ruthwell monument would be inscribed with a poem that did not already have a strong tradition that resonated with the patron and builders. To address the possibility that *The Dream of the Rood* found in the *Vercelli Book* more completely reflects the exemplar, and that the Ruthwell poem is an abbreviated fragment selected to conform to the context of the poem, I shall briefly compare some structural features of the two works.

*The Dream of the Rood* version that is found on the Ruthwell monument presents a narrative presumably from the perspective of the cross (though this is not explicitly stated on the monument). The narrator describes only the events directly associated with

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<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9, 39. Bruce Dickens and Alan S. C. Ross, eds. *The Dream of the Rood*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1954), 13. However, Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 10, proposed the existence of a generalized Old English poetic dialect that popular poems would achieve through transmission and may or may not account for some of the Anglian forms.

<sup>408</sup> *ea* becomes *e* before *r* and *c* or *g*. Samuel Moore, *Historical Outlines of English Sounds and Inflections* (Ann Arbor: George Wahr Publishing, 1963), 29.

<sup>409</sup> Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 7.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

the Crucifixion and the Deposition of Christ, unlike what is found in the *Vercelli Book*. While not always adhering to Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, the poem on Ruthwell, even in the absence of the *Vercelli* version, would seem to a modern reader a more or less complete work. Yet the problem of the speaker in the poem remains. While there seems to be an implication that the speaker of the Ruthwell poem is the cross, this point is vague at best (our acceptance of this may be shaded by our familiarity with the *Vercelli Book* poem). Ruthwell begins,

[Ond]geredæ Hinæ God Almeȝttig. Ða He walde on galgu gistiga  
modig fore allæ men [b]ug[a] {ic ni dorstæ} [...] (Ruthwell lines  
1-2)

[God Almighty stripped himself when he wished to climb the  
gallows, courageous before all men. I dared not bow.]

With our knowledge of *Vercelli*, it is clear that the speaker is the cross; however, if we had only the Ruthwell fragment, it would be difficult to conclusively make this claim. In both the Ruthwell version and the *Vercelli*, these lines refer to the cross in the third person, which would lead a reader unfamiliar with the full-length poem to assume that the narrator was an external observer. In the above four lines of the Ruthwell poem, there is no direct indication that the cross is the speaker. *Vercelli* follows the pattern. The text from the *Vercelli Book* says,

*Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),*  
*strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,*  
*modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan (Vercelli*  
*39-41)*

[Then the young hero undressed himself (who was God Almighty),  
strong and unflinching he climbed high on the cross brave in the  
sight of many so that he could redeem humankind.]

However, *Vercelli*, with the next half-line 42a, *Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte* / “I trembled when the man embraced me,” informs the reader again that the cross is the speaker.<sup>411</sup> This is again restated on 44a, *Rod wæs ic aræred* / “I was raised a cross.” Both half-lines are absent from Ruthwell. The Ruthwell version only informs that [*Ahof*] *ic riicnæ Kyniŋc* / “I raised a powerful king.” The Old English verb *ahebban* is vague regarding how the manner of action is performed. The subject could lift up, raise or exalt its object. Christ and the cross could have been raised by the subject of *ahof*. Without line 44a to clarify the nature of the subject as found in the *Vercelli Book* version, the meaning is vague. If, however, a complete version was in existence during the eighth century, medieval readers would be aware of the identity of the speaker. There was a certain need for economy of words that the builders that of the Ruthwell monument had to accept. They could omit certain verses and lines of the original, secure in the belief that their readers/hearers would have been familiar enough with the complete poem to have understood its entire meaning. The omission of the verses *þa he wolde mancyn lysan* / “for the redemption of humankind” or *Rod wæs ic aræred* / “I was raised a cross,” which would contextualize the preceding verse, would have been known to those who were familiar with *The Dream of the Rood* tradition as it existed in the eighth century. Given

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<sup>411</sup> It should be recalled that the poet introduces the cross as narrator on line 25 of *Vercelli*.

constraints of space, the designers of Ruthwell were able to pare down much of the poem while retaining a poetic form and the most important elements of the work.

Also missing from the Ruthwell inscription are the dreamer and the entire dream-frame. There is no backstory of the cross as is recorded in the *Vercelli* manuscript. The sorrows of the dreamer do not link him to the cross and by extension to Christ. The cross speaks (though the speaker is not identified as the cross on the Ruthwell monument) to everyone, not just to the dreaming witness. The reader of the Ruthwell focuses on the silent, heroic Christ who represents the divine nature of the Son. As in *Vercelli*, Christ climbs onto the cross by his own volition. On Ruthwell and in *Vercelli*, the divine Christ communicates his will through actions that affect the world. The Ruthwell version of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition is much more spare, more stark than is the *Vercelli*. Because of the lack of ornament that is found in the poetically superior *Vercelli* version, the cross and the hero as representations of the human and divine natures of Christ appear in sharper contrast.

From the text included on the Ruthwell Monument, it seems that this Ruthwell fragment of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition is less concerned with the theological issues associated with the redemption of humanity than it is on portraying an account of the events of Good Friday. The patrons of Ruthwell wanted to show that Christ willingly mounted the cross and died for humanity. The builders of the Ruthwell Cross wanted to include a segment of *The Dream of the Rood* that also revealed the concept of the dual nature of Christ. The union of the divine and human in Christ paralleled the concept of

their St. Oswald as a warrior-king who was able to isolate his bellicose nature from his holiness and become a saint. Christ was able to be fully human and, at the same time, fully divine. St. Oswald's warrior self became subservient to the holy saint. His actions were those commanded by God. St. Oswald, when he died, fused his two natures. The dual, *unġket*, as it does in the longer version of the poem, would suggest the rejoining of the human and the divine natures of Christ just before the moment of death. Both the king of Northumbria and the king of heaven had dual natures. The human in both of them was always a willing subject of the divine.

The Ruthwell Monument is a balance of opposites. The Latin panels show two sides of the Christian faith, the contemplative life of a monastic and the active life of those who live in the world doing God's work. They included a fragment of a well-known poem from *The Dream of the Rood* tradition to further highlight the union of opposites. The builders of the monument were familiar with the tradition and carved it on the cross as an apt expression of their piety and newfound veneration of the cross. Medieval readers would have been familiar with the poetic tradition of *The Dream of the Rood* and could fill in the gaps, grasping the full depth of the poem of the cross and savior. To better see that understanding I move now to the more detailed *Dream of the Rood* as found in the *Vercelli* manuscript.



## Chapter 6

### ***The Vercelli Dream of the Rood and the Dual Natures of St. Oswald and Christ***

The Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* exists in its most complete form in the *Vercelli Book*, Codex CXVII, discovered in 1822 at the chapter library of the cathedral at *Vercelli* in northern Italy. The relatively unadorned manuscript is written in Old English square minuscule and contains twenty-three devotional, prose sermons along with a group of six poems transcribed during the second half of the tenth century.<sup>412</sup> The manuscript was written in the tenth century, and we may assume that the *Vercelli Book Dream of the Rood* represents one of the longest versions of a group of poetic works that make up *The Dream of the Rood* tradition (see chapter 5). Earliest evidence of this poetic tradition comes from the runic inscription found on the Ruthwell Monument. The cross, which has been dated from the late seventh to early eighth century, contains thirteen lines of poetry written in the Northumbrian dialect and either matches exactly or paraphrase lines 39-65 as found in the *Vercelli Book Dream of the Rood*. That the Ruthwell fragment and the *Vercelli* poem are related is not in doubt.<sup>413</sup> The builders of the Ruthwell Monument likely used an exemplar of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition from which the Ruthwell and *Vercelli* derive. As I explored in the previous chapter, this earlier, now lost, exemplar was probably similar in length to the poem found in the *Vercelli Book*. Taken

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<sup>412</sup> *The Vercelli Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), xi, xvi-xvii; Gunhild Zimmermann, *The Four Old English Poetic Manuscripts* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1995), 183-185. Samantha Zacher and Andy Orchard, eds. *New Readings in the Vercelli Book* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3-5.

<sup>413</sup> Andy Orchard, "The Dream of the Rood: Cross-References," 242-245.

together the Ruthwell poem and *The Dream of the Rood*, for the one complements the other, elegantly express the belief structure of the Northumbrians regarding the presence of the dual natures both in Christ and in St. Oswald.

The medieval people divided their world into a series of mutually exclusive opposites.<sup>414</sup> These include categories such as good/evil, human/monster, man/woman, man/God and sword-bearing warrior alongside passive, non-lethal saint. *The Dream of the Rood* as inscribed on the Ruthwell Monument and in the *Vercelli Book* represents a resolution to one of these medieval conflations of binaries. In Northumbria at the end of the seventh century, there arose a challenge to these binary categories. The cult of St. Oswald exemplifies a fusion of the warrior-king and Christian saint. So, too, the union of the human and divine nature of Christ presented an intellectual challenge to the established binary paradigm. The content and structure of *The Dream of the Rood* as presented in *The Vercelli Book* explores how human and the divine can coexist within one entity yet each retain their distinctive nature. How could such extreme opposites—an immutable, infinite entity and a mutable, transient being—coexist in one individual? Likewise, how could a warrior-king, who according to the Church establishment died an unrepentant murderer, become a saint? The certainty of division between seemingly polar opposites—God/man and saint/warrior—was challenged at about the same time in Northumbria. In the 640s, King Oswiu combined the qualities of the warrior-king with a

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<sup>414</sup> Karen Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

Christian saint, producing the royal cult of St. Oswald. During the 670s, after decades of ignoring the cult of Oswald, the abbey of Hexham brought the cult of Oswiu's saint into the mainstream of worship by adding Oswald's feast day to their liturgical calendar.<sup>415</sup> Also in 680, at the Council of Hatfield, the Anglo-Saxon Church was called upon to review and ratify the orthodox tenets of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the dual nature of Christ.<sup>416</sup> While these issues swirled in the intellectual community of Northumbria, a new scholar king, Aldfrith (685-705), took the throne. It was during this very same period, possibly even at Aldfrith's court,<sup>417</sup> that a poet composed the first work of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition and in it, through the blending of characters and genre, explored the indwelling of the human and divine natures within Christ, illustrating the possible union of polar opposites.

In order to understand the development of thought that led to the Northumbrian fusion of opposites, I will utilize the two extant versions of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition. I believe that this early poetic tradition provides a window into the Northumbrian worldview (an intellectual mindset that differed from the other Anglo-Saxon lands of the time)<sup>418</sup> as the Northumbrians struggled to understand the complex

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<sup>415</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>416</sup> See footnote 309, Chapter 4, page 175.

<sup>417</sup> Bruce Karl Braswell, "The Dream of the Rood and Aldhelm on Sacred Prosopopoeia," *Medieval Studies* 40 (1978): 461-467.

<sup>418</sup> Northumbria was a cultural pastiche comprised of Irish, Pictish and Anglo-Saxon people and traditions. The depth of interactions among the dominant cultures did not exist elsewhere in England at this period. Because each culture was well developed by the seventh century, each contributed to the Northumbrian culture in important ways (see Chapters 3 and 4 regarding kingship and St. Oswald's cult). The Ruthwell Monument represents a type of cultural metaphor for Northumbria's culture (see Chapter 5).

issues of the warrior-king saint and Christ's hypostatic union. Although the Ruthwell Cross and the fragment of *The Dream of the Rood* carved in runes are important to the understanding of Northumbrian culture, I shall focus primarily on *The Vercelli Book* text because it represents a fuller expression of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition. Scholarship from the past fifty years suggests that the two poems were derived from the same source that was familiar in Northumbria during the late seventh and early eighth centuries.<sup>419</sup>

*The Dream of the Rood* is a dream-vision in which the events of Good Friday are related to the dreamer by a cross. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon *Genesis* and *Exodus*, the poem is far more original and does not represent an elaborate paraphrase of the Bible.<sup>420</sup> *The Dream of the Rood* represents, rather, an excellent condensation of one of the central doctrines in Christian history, the hypostatic union of Christ. The poet, through skillful manipulation of Christian, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon signs, is able to illustrate dense theological issues regarding the dual nature of Christ in a sympathetic and evocative manner. By representing Christ's human and divine nature as two characters in the poem, i.e., the cross and the young warrior, the audience is able to visualize and understand the division of Christ's nature. Through the poem they can experience the emotional impact

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Its balance of Irish (Celtic) and Anglo-Saxon features presents a unique and beautiful icon to the Christian faith that can be found nowhere else.

<sup>419</sup> John Fleming, "The Dream of the Rood and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism." *Traditio* 22 (1966): 54-55; Orchard, "The Dream of the Rood: Cross-References," 240-244; Howlett, *RC*, 85. Also see Chapter 5, 194-196.

<sup>420</sup> The Old English poems, *Genesis* and *Exodus* are found in *The Junius Manuscript* which dates to around 1000. *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), x.

of his human suffering while evading the difficult and potentially blasphemous question of Christ's consciousness at the moment of his death.

### **Structure and Genre of *The Dream of the Rood***

*The Dream of the Rood* simultaneously operates at many different levels, and scholars have suggested many different readings. During the last several decades they have considered issues ranging from eschatological concerns, soteriology, the Harrowing of Hell, the central role of the cross in Christian culture and liturgy, to the dual nature of Christ.<sup>421</sup> While the structure and content of the poem appear deceptively simple, a close examination of the text reveals its great philosophical depth. The poem is traditionally divided into six sections.<sup>422</sup> These include an introduction (lines 1-3), a description of the dreamer's vision of the rood (4-43), the rood's account of the crucifixion (24-77), the cross's position among humanity (78-94), its message to humankind (95-121), and the dreamer's description of his life and future hope of salvation (122-156).<sup>423</sup> My discussion

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<sup>421</sup> See for example Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "Crucifixion as Annunciation: The Relation of *The Dream of the Rood* to the Liturgy Reconsidered," *English Studies* 63 (1982): 487-505; Anthony R. Grasso, CSC, "Theology and Structure in *The Dream of the Rood*," *Religion and Literature* 23 (1991): 23-38; Jane Roberts, "Some Relationships between *The Dream of the Rood* and the Cross at Ruthwell," *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature* 15 (2000): 1-25; Carol Braun Pasternack, "Stylistic Disjunction in *The Dream of the Rood*," in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 404-424; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poem of The Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

<sup>422</sup> Based on Alvin A. Lee, "Toward a Critique of *The Dream of the Rood*," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975), 166-187. However, see also Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 58-78 and Pasternack, "Stylistic Disjunction in *The Dream of the Rood*," 407.

<sup>423</sup> See Appendix I and II for the Old English version of the poem and my translation.

will emphasize the first three sections of the poem with a concentration on lines 33-65. These latter lines are those that correspond to the Ruthwell Monument text.

What is the genre of the poem? Is it a dream-vision, a riddle, or a homily? At first glance it seems easy to assign the poem to a specific genre; however, after a deeper reading this certainty dissolves. Like the dreamer who at first sees a cross, gold covered and set with jewels, only to have the image shift upon closer examination to a bloodstained gallows, so too does the poem seem to shift and merge boundaries among genre. Initially, *The Dream of the Rood* (as the name implies) seems to be a dream-vision.<sup>424</sup> The language of the first part of the poem (up to line 78, after which the language shifts from visual to auditory—*Nu ðu miht gehyran*) is suggestive of that genre.<sup>425</sup> We are told in line 1b that the narrator wishes to tell *swefna cyst* / “the best of dreams” (or visions). This half-line is followed by five additional references relating to sight. Each time an important character or symbol is encountered in the dreamscape, the reader/hearer is alerted by the phrase *gesawe ic* (“I saw,” 4a) or *geseah ic* (14b, 21b, 33b and 51b, “I saw”<sup>426</sup>) which imply a dream or vision.<sup>427</sup> Yet the phrase *geseah ic* is not limited to dream-visions; it is also characteristic of Anglo-Saxon riddles.

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<sup>424</sup> The poem has no title in the *Vercelli Book*. The appellation reflects the dream-frame of the poem and its subject. With regard to genre, *The Dream of the Rood* is the earliest example of the dream-vision in Anglo-Saxon literature. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 241.

<sup>425</sup> Andrew Galloway, “Dream-Theory in *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer*,” *Review of English Studies* 45 (1994): 478-479; Neil D. Isaacs, *Structural Principles in Old English Poetry* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1968), 4-5.

<sup>426</sup> *Geseah* is the first person singular present, and *gesawe* is the first person singular present subjunctive of the Anglo-Saxon verb *geseon*.

<sup>427</sup> Orchard, “*The Dream of the Rood*: Cross-References,” 233-234.

Anglo-Saxon riddles typically begin with the phrase *Ic geseah* (“I saw”) or *Ic eom* (“I am”).<sup>428</sup> In *The Dream of the Rood*, the poet uses prosopopoeia to suggest the genre of Old English riddles. Initially, the identity of the major characters of the poem, the cross and Christ, are veiled. In a series of kennings the poet introduces clues to the identity of the tree/cross: *syllicre treow* (4b, “wondrous tree”), *wuldres treow* (14b, “tree of glory”), *wealdendes treow* (17b, “tree of the lord”), *hælendes treow* (25b, “savior’s tree”) and *wudu selestas* (27b, “best wood”). On line 29a the cross begins to tell the dreamer the tale of its life as if in an attempt to urge the dreamer to guess its nature. While the audience may recognize the cross (and Christ) at first mention, the poet has constructed the dreamer as naive and in need of instruction within the confines of the poetic frame. It is not until line 44 that the cross identifies itself to the dreamer as the cross upon which Christ was crucified. Now that the dreamer knows who the cross is, the cross tries to get him<sup>429</sup> to figure out the identity of Christ. Twice the cross employs poetic periphrasis to underscore the identity of the figure stretched on the cross during the passion. On line 33b, the cross says, *Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes* (“I saw the savior of humankind”), and again on line 51b, *Geseah ic weruda god* (“I saw the god of hosts”). However, it is

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<sup>428</sup> Riddles numbers 13, 19, 29, 34, 36-38, 42, 51-53, 55, 59, 64, 68, 75, 76, and 87 begin with *ic (ge)seah*, and numbers 14, 17, 18, 20, 23-25, 27, 45, 56, 60, 62, 63, 66, 71-74, 79, 80, 81, 88, 92, and 95 begin with *ic eom* or *ic wæs*. *The Exeter Book*, ed. George P. Krapp and Elliott Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 180-210, 225, 229-244.

<sup>429</sup> Up until this point I have avoided the question of the gender of the dreamer. While the gender of the poet is unknown, the dreamer is identified as male by the cross. *Nu ðu miht gehyran hæleð min se leofa* (“now you may hear my dear man,” l. 78). *Hæleð* is a masculine noun that is defined as “man,” “hero” or “warrior.” This same word is used to refer to Christ on line 39a.

not until line 56b, *Crist wæs on rode* (“Christ was on the cross”), that the cross reveals explicitly the identity of Christ to the dreamer.<sup>430</sup>

While the beginning of the poem is more closely associated with dream-visions and riddles, after line 78 it begins to have more in common with the homiletic tradition. It is this abrupt transition from dream-vision/riddle to homily that has led some scholars to believe that the latter part of the poem was a later (and inferior) addition, though this view is not widely held today.<sup>431</sup> The dreamer has identified the cross as the True Cross and the young hero as Christ. Now the dreamer will acquire a deeper understanding of the passion. The cross charges the dreamer to relate the experiences of the dream to all *reordberendum* (“speech-bearers,” 89b). The cross begins its sermon on line 78 by saying, *Nu ðu miht gehyran hæleð min se leofa* (“now you may hear my dear man”), as it explains how one may reach heaven through the cross and Christ. The homiletic quality of this section of the poem is highlighted by the inclusion of a paraphrase of the Apostle’s Creed between lines 101 and 109.

Deað he þær byrigde,    hwæðere eft dryhten aras  
mid his miclan mihte    mannum to helpe.  
He ða on heofenas astag.    Hider eft fundað  
on þysne middangeard    mancynn secan  
on domdæge    dryhten sylfa,  
æلميhtig god,    ond his englas mid,  
þæt he þonne wile deman,    se ah domes geweald,

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<sup>430</sup> On line 39b the poet does identify the *geong hæleð* (“the young hero”) saying, *þæt wæs god æلميhtig* (“that was god almighty). However, the cross continues the riddle game until line 56b.

<sup>431</sup> Bruce Dickens and Alan S. C. Ross, eds. *The Dream of the Rood* (New York: Appleton, 1966), 18; but see John Fleming, “*The Dream of the Rood* and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism,” 54.





crucifixion and the cross mark the way to heaven and away from the transitory, perhaps even illusionary, life on earth.

Nah ic ricra feala  
 freonda on foldan, ac hie forð heonon  
 gewiton of worulde dreamum, sohton him wuldres cyning,  
 lifiaþ nu on heofenum mid heahfædere,  
 wuniaþ on wuldre, ond ic wene me  
 daga gehwylce hwænne me dryhtnes rod,  
 þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode,  
 on þyssan lænan life gefetige  
 ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel.<sup>435</sup>

The mixing of genres and the ease of transition among them establishes a model that the poet will follow throughout the work. Whether by blending poetic genre or fusing apparent opposites such as divine and human, the poet constantly pushes at the boundaries of early medieval philosophical and theological conventions.

### **Imagery in *The Dream of the Rood***

The poet, in addition to blending genre, begins the text by juxtaposing then merging opposing images. A gold and jeweled emblem of victory hides its past as a bloodstained tool of execution. The poet introduces the idea of dual nature at the beginning of the poem when the dreamer describes the shifting appearance of the cross. At first the dreamer is struck by its exalted beauty and brilliance. He tells us that,

þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow  
 on lyft lædan, leohte bewunden,

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<sup>435</sup> “I have not many more powerful friends on earth, but they departed forth hence to the world of joy. They sought the world’s king. They live now in heaven with God the Father, they dwell in the realm of glory and I believe each day that the cross of God, which I here on earth beheld before in this transitory life, will carry me off and bring me where there is great bliss.” *Dream of the Rood*, 131b-139.

beama beorhtost. Eall þæt beacen wæs  
 begoten mid golde. Gimmas stodon  
 fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron  
 uppe on þam eaxlegespanne.<sup>436</sup>

The cross is *leohte bewunden* (“encircled with light”), *begoten mid golde* (“suffused with gold”). Glowing brightly the cross stands as a shining beacon which Christians can use to find their way through their dark and transient world. Yet this singular image of unity and beauty is soon disrupted. As the dreamer holds his gaze on the cross, its darker nature is revealed, and its appearance shifts.

Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte  
 earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan  
 swætan on þa swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed,  
 forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe. Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen  
 wendan wædum ond bleom; hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,  
 beswyled mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed.<sup>437</sup>

Beneath the shining and brilliant surface is agony and pain. The cross has shifted its appearance. It is no longer *begoten mid golde* (“suffused with gold”); now it is *beswyled mid swates gange* (“drenched with the flow of blood”). The gold and jeweled tree reveals, like a palimpsest, its true nature. Beneath its former fair aspect it is a gallows, an instrument of horrific torture and death. At first the dreamer seems unable to comprehend what has been revealed. Shaken by the cross’s oscillation between a shining tree of glory

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<sup>436</sup> “It seemed to me that I saw an exceedingly rare tree, extending into the air, encircled with light the brightest tree. All of the sign was suffused with gold. Jewels stood fairly at the surface of the earth there were also five upon the shoulder-span.” *Dream of the Rood*, 4-9a.

<sup>437</sup> “Yet I could perceive through that gold the former agony of the wretched ones, that at first it began to bleed on the stronger side. I was all troubled with sorrows, I was afraid for the fair sight. I saw the brilliant sign change covering and color; at times it was wet with moisture (blood) drenched with the flow of blood, at times adorned with treasure.” *Dream of the Rood*, 18-23.

and a dark instrument of torture and humiliation, he cries out in frustration, *Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed* (“I was all troubled with sorrows”). The dreamer is apparently unable to reconcile the cross’s disparate natures. He stares at the shimmering image of the rood a long while until the cross calls out, *þa word sprecaþ* (“then speaks words,” 27a). Through speech, the cross explains to the dreamer how it was taken from the forest and used (against its will) as a device of torture and death.

þæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman),  
 þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,  
 astyred of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,  
 geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban.<sup>438</sup>

This speech introduces the cross as a speech-bearer (in fact, it is the only speaker in the dream-vision section of the poem). By ascribing to it an independent and developed will, the poet establishes a frame that will allow equating the cross with the human nature of Christ. In this persona, the cross tells the dreamer that its true role was not realized until Christ (*geong hæleð þæt wæs god ælmihtig*) climbed onto it. As the vehicle by which Christ conquered death, the cross was transformed from a symbol of humiliation and defeat into a token of victory over death and sin and, within the context of the poem, as a representation of Christ’s humanity. As will occur throughout poem, instead of immediate recognition of the meaning of a vision, the dreamer, and therefore the audience, must proceed through a gradual process of revelation. The poet may have been

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<sup>438</sup> “It was years ago, I still remember that I was cut in the outermost reach of the forest, removed from my trunk. Strong foes seized me there fashioned me to be a spectacle for them; commanded me to hold their outlaws.” *Dream of the Rood*, 28-31.

following Paul's remark on the habits of human understanding (1 Cor. 3:2).<sup>439</sup> The dreamer having now grasped that the cross is the crucifix of Christ is ready to have the next, deeper level of meaning revealed.

### **The Cross as *Reordberend***

The speaking cross was first identified with the trope of prosopopoeia by Margret Schlauch.<sup>440</sup> Prosopopoeia in a religious lyric can be used to express an even more profound reality, and *The Dream of the Rood* poet uses this technique masterfully. The poet identifies humans as *reordberend*<sup>441</sup> (speech-bearers) on line 3a and again on line 89b (*reordberendum*). However, within the frame of the dream-vision, the only speaker is the cross; the dreamer does not speak, rather he gives a retrospective of the events of the dream. Beginning on line 27 the cross as a *reordberend*, a speech-bearer, speaks in the first person to convey its message to the dreamer. At first it describes how it was taken from the forest and fashioned as an instrument of torture (ll. 27-33a). Following its history, the cross gives its moving and personal account of the crucifixion (ll. 33-56).

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<sup>439</sup> See also *EH*, III.5. Bishop Aídan when discussing how to preach to the Anglo-Saxons said, *Uidetur mihi, frater, quia durior iusto indoctis auditoribus fuisti, et non eis iuxta apostolicam disciplinam primo lac doctrinae mollioris porrexisti, donec paulatim enutriti uerbo Dei, ad capienda perfectiora, et ad facienda sublimiora Dei praecepta sufficerent*. ("It seems to me, brother, that you were more severe to your unlearned hearers and did not at first, conformably to the apostolic rule, give them the milk of more easy doctrine, till being by degrees nourished with the word of God, they should be capable of greater perfection, and be able to practice God's sublimer precepts").

<sup>440</sup> Margaret Schlauch, "The Dream of the Rood as Prosopopoeia" in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 1940), rpt. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry*, ed. J. Bessinger and S. Kahrl (Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books, 1968), 25. While she suggests Ovid as a possible analogue, most scholars now do not go back to Classical models citing Christian literature of the cross speaking. Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*", 149.

<sup>441</sup> The word *reordberend* only appears seven times outside of *The Dream of the Rood*—4 times in *Christ of the Exeter Book*, once in *Daniel (The Junius Manuscript)* and once each in *Elene* and *Andreas*, both of which are in the *Vercelli Book*.

Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning,  
 heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste.  
 þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,  
 opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.  
 Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,  
 begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended.  
 Feala ic on þam beorge gebiden hæbbe  
 wraðra wyrda. Geseah ic weruda god  
 þearle þenian. þystro hæfdon  
 bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw,  
 scirne sciman, sceadu forðeode,  
 wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft,  
 cwiðdon cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode.<sup>442</sup>

The cross continues its description of Good Friday, describing the deposition of Christ and its own burial (ll. 57-75a). The cross ends its recitation of the past by describing its discovery and subsequent adornment as an image of salvation (ll. 75b-77). Next, the cross begins a sermon describing its position among humanity (ll. 78-94), finally completing its speech act and becoming silent following its message to humankind (ll. 95-121).

As a speech-bearer, the cross (within the frame of the poem) assumes a human persona and in this state comes to represent the human nature of Christ. Leiter has elsewhere suggested an identification of the cross with the dreamer and, by extension, with Christ stylistically, as well as figuratively, through verbal and syntactic parallelism.

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<sup>442</sup> "I was raised a cross, I raised the powerful king, heaven's lord. I did not dare bend. They pierced me with dark nails; on me were seen wounds, open wicked wounds. I did not dare harm any of them. They mocked us both together. I was entirely soaked with blood spilled from the man's side; afterwards he had sent his spirit. I had to endure many cruel fates on the hill. I saw the God of hosts severely stretched out, darkness had covered with its clouds the Lord's body; the bright light went forth in the darkness, dark under the clouds. All creation wept, they spoke of the king's death. Christ was on the cross." *Dream of the Rood*, 44-56.

In his essay, he equates the dreamer's sins with the nails piercing the cross and Christ.<sup>443</sup> Grasso proposes that the cross is meant to represent Christ since both it and Christ are imbued with a dual nature.<sup>444</sup> Cherniss sees the speaking cross as a type of hero's weapon, such as talking swords and spears from Anglo-Saxon riddles,<sup>445</sup> while Dockray-Miller proposes that the cross represents "an oppositional feminine Other against which Christ's masculinity is defined."<sup>446</sup> However, I suggest that the poet established the cross as Christ's human nature to demonstrate how divine qualities could mix with human. The poet accomplishes this through several means, but the most important is to establish the cross as a human figure by transforming it into a speech-bearer. I follow Woolf's suggestion that the cross in the poem represents the human aspect of the Son.<sup>447</sup> Hill agrees with Woolf and suggests that the idea for representing the human nature of Christ as the cross is derived from the liturgy.<sup>448</sup> However, Woolf was reluctant to say that *The Dream of the Rood* poet divided the human and divine nature of Christ completely.

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<sup>443</sup> Louis H. Leiter, "The Dream of the Rood: Patterns of Transformation," in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1967), 99-103.

<sup>444</sup> Anthony R. Grasso, "Theology and Structure in *The Dream of the Rood*," *Religion and Literature* 23 (1991): 28-29.

<sup>445</sup> Michael Cherniss, "The Cross as Christ's Weapon: The Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on *The Dream of the Rood*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973): 241-52.

<sup>446</sup> Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Feminized Cross of *The Dream of the Rood*," *Philological Quarterly* 76 (1997): 11.

<sup>447</sup> Rosemary Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*," *Medium Aevum* 27 (1958): 140-142. However, see John V. Fleming, "The Dream of the Rood and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism," 52-54, for an opposing view.

<sup>448</sup> Thomas D. Hill, "The Cross as Symbolic Body: An Anglo-Latin Liturgical Analogue to *The Dream of the Rood*," *Neophilologus* 77 (1993): 298. Though his suggestion has merit he is unable to link the specific liturgical practice (the burying of the altar cross on Good Friday and its resurrection on the morning of Easter Sunday) to Anglo-Saxon England at the time of the Ruthwell Monument. While liturgy is important to the understanding of the meaning of *The Dream of the Rood*, this particular practice, I believe, because of its relatively late date, ninth century, was not influential to the poetic tradition.

Whereas I propose that the heroic Christ represents the divine nature of Christ, she suggests that it embodies Christ's glorious humanity.<sup>449</sup> The poem, by depicting the two natures of Christ as distinct and yet joined, can stand as a revelation of mysteries that include the union of human and divine in Christ and the fusion of opposites found in the warrior-king saint.

While the poet, by specifically identifying humans as *reordberend* and then giving speech only to the cross during the dream-vision, symbolically transforms the cross into a human figure, which represents Christ's human nature (ll. 28-48), the *geong hæleð* ("the young hero," 39a) who remains silent represents the divine nature of Christ. Since the poet depicts Christ's human nature as distinct from the divine, the audience is able to forge an emotional connection with the suffering of the human Christ, even to pity him, while retaining a sense of awe for the incarnate Christ. I believe that the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition embraced and unveiled theological orthodoxy through the novel method of revealing the Son's dual nature. The poet, through the separation of Christ into his component human and divine natures, permits the audience to visualize a profoundly abstract theological issue in concrete terms.

In addition to the cross's ability to speak, the poet introduces several different linguistic cues to the audience that reinforce its association with Christ's human nature. *The Dream of the Rood* poet has a highly individual style and employs an extremely varied vocabulary, often exploiting double meanings of words for effect. The two most

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<sup>449</sup> Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*," 150.



cited examples of word play are the poet's use of the words *stefn* and *fah*. The word *stefn* has two distinct meanings in Old English. As a masculine noun it can mean "trunk" (l. 30a), or in the feminine form, "voice" (l. 71b). The application of the word *stefn* to a speaking tree could be construed as a pun (since the tree is the only speaker in the dream-frame of the poem), or it could signify the dual nature of the speaking tree. The word *fah* could be used by the poet as a play on the word's twin meaning of "guilty" or "stained".

Syllic wæs se sigebeam,      ond ic synnum fah,  
forwunded mid wommum.      Geseah ic wuldres treow,  
wædum geweorðode,      wynnum scinan,  
gegyred mid golde;      gimmas hæfdon  
bewrigene weorðlice      wealdendes treow.<sup>450</sup>

The use of *fah* / "guilty" could represent a contrast between the guilt of the dreamer and the innocent virtue of the emblem of the cross.<sup>451</sup> Likewise, the use of *fah* as "stained" represents the stain of sin on the dreamer, providing a contrast with the perfection of the tree of victory *wynnum scinan* ("shinning with joy," 15b). Conversely, *fah* could represent a type of unity between the dreamer "stained with sins" and the cross "drenched with the flow of blood." The form *beswyled* (l. 23a) appears to derive from the verb *beswyllan* ("to soak" or "drench") but may also suggest the verb *besyllan* ("to defile," "stain" or "soil").<sup>452</sup> Therefore, the cross could either be literally drenched with blood (as I have translated) or in a more figurative manner be stained or defiled with the guiltless

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<sup>450</sup> "Wonderful was the tree of victory, and I [was] stained with sins, sorely wounded with inequities. I saw the tree of glory exalted in coverings, shining in joy, adorned with gold, beset with jewels, nobly ringed, the tree of the Lord." *Dream of the Rood*, 13-17.

<sup>451</sup> Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 109.

<sup>452</sup> Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 64; Orchard, "The Dream of the Rood: Cross-References," 229.

blood of Christ. The word *aræred* (l. 44a) can either mean literally “to raise,” or in a more abstract sense, “to exalt.”<sup>453</sup> Since it is the cross speaking, *Rod wæs ic aræred* (“I was raised a cross”), the dual meaning of literal raising and figurative exalting parallels nicely with the shifting image of the cross as described by the dreamer between lines 4 and 23. All of the above examples blend an earthly meaning with a spiritual one, a technique that the poet uses with adroitness. That a poet would use words with multiple meanings to add texture and depth to a work is not groundbreaking. However, in the case of *The Dream of the Rood*, the poet who is constantly shifting among several genres and characters uses these specific words to highlight his message of uniting opposites. The meanings of the words, like the trajectory of the poem, convey the reader/hearer from the transient world to heaven.

### Rare Lexical Choices

The poet has a penchant for using rare or unique compounds that help express complex ideas. For example, the word *eaxlegespann* (shoulder-span), which is found only in this poem, is used to describe the rood’s cross-arms that bear five jewels (7b-9a).

Gimmas stodon  
fægere æt foldan sceatum,    swylce þær fife wæron  
uppe on þam eaxlegespanne.<sup>454</sup>

The image conjured by the word “shoulder-span,” especially with its juxtaposition to the five jewels representing the five wounds received during crucifixion, suggests a human

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<sup>453</sup> John Flood, “Aræred in *The Dream of the Rood*, and the Gospel of St. John.” *English Language Notes* 36 (1999): 1-2.

<sup>454</sup> “Jewels stood fairly at the surface of the earth, there were also five upon the shoulder-span.”

body and Christ's body in particular. Imagery of the human body associated with the cross is replete throughout the poem. Between lines 19b-20a, the dreamer observes of the cross *þæt hit ærest ongan swætan on þa swiðran healfe* / "that at first it began to bleed on the stronger side."<sup>455</sup> Swanton proposes that the use of the verb *swætan* ("to bleed") to describe the blood on the cross (instead of *fah*, "stained"; see line 13b) anticipates the poet's identification of the cross with the body of Christ. The blood on the right side of the cross refers to the blood from the spear wound that Christ received while on the cross, yet from the perspective of the dreamer the blood would be on the left side. In other words, the poet describes the wound from the viewpoint of the cross, not that of the dreamer.<sup>456</sup> Lastly, the cross is felled (the verb *fyllan* can mean "cut down" or "killed"), buried, raised from its "grave," and obtains eternal glory in heaven (ll. 73b-77b). Though the cross is a symbol of Christ's victory, it also becomes the means through which the dreamer and all righteous individuals hope to obtain heaven.

ond ic wene me  
 daga gehwylce    hwænne me dryhtnes rod,  
 þe ic her on eorðan    ær sceawode,  
 on þysson lænan    life gefetige  
 ond me þonne gebringe    þær is blis mycel,  
 dream on heofonum,    þær is dryhtnes folc  
 geseted to symle,    þær is singal blis,  
 ond me þonne asette    þær ic syððan mot  
 wunian on wuldre,    well mid þam halgum

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<sup>455</sup> *Swiðra* is the comparative form of the adjective that means stronger. It also refers to the right arm or side, which, since most people were (and are) right-handed, tends to be the stronger side. Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 14. See also *An Old English Dictionary*, ed. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929).

<sup>456</sup> Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 65.

dreames brucan.<sup>457</sup>

The dreamer sees the cross as the way to salvation. However, the poet has more lessons to teach the audience.

*The Dream of the Rood*, I believe, was meant to be read/heard repeatedly.<sup>458</sup> Through contemplation of the symbols presented by the poet, one would, in a step-wise manner, reach an understanding of Christ's sacrifice for humanity and his dual nature. The poet of *The Dream of the Rood* leads the audience from one level of meaning to another through deft employment of imagery, unique word choice, and the dramatic fact that the cross is a *reordberend*. The dreamer receives his initial education as he watches and contemplates the changes from one aspect to another by the cross. Only after the dreamer has witnessed and comprehended the more superficial meaning of his vision—that the cross is both an instrument of torture and a symbol of divine triumph—is he able

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<sup>457</sup> “. . . and I believe each day that the cross of God, which I here on earth beheld before, in this transitory life, will carry me off and bring me where there is great bliss, joy in heaven, there the people of the Lord are seated at the feast, there in everlasting bliss, and set me there afterwards I am able to dwell in glory, well with the holy ones to enjoy delight.” *Dream of the Rood*, 135b-144a.

<sup>458</sup> The version of *The Dream of the Rood* found in the *Vercelli Book* may have been for private devotion or for reading aloud. I suspect this because it is bound with a collection of Homilies. However, the Ruthwell *Dream of the Rood*, as discussed in Chapter 5, based on the sculptural images and the portion of the Anglo-Saxon text of *The Dream of the Rood* inscribed on the stone monument, may represent part of the liturgy in seventh- and eighth-century Northumbria. See especially: Éamonn Ó Carragáin, “Crucifixion as Annunciation: The Relation of *The Dream of the Rood* to the Liturgy Reconsidered,” *English Studies* 63 (1982): 487-505; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, “Liturgical Innovations associated with Pope Sergius and the Iconography of Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses,” in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Robert T. Farrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 131-147; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, “A Necessary Distance: *Imitatio Romae* and the Ruthwell Cross,” in *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 197-198; Calvin B. Kendall, “The Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood*,” 131-132; Ian Wood, “Ruthwell: Contextual Searches,” 110; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical*, 62, 79-110, 223-234.

to grasp the next, deeper level of meaning.<sup>459</sup> It is at this point (l. 28) that the cross speaks to the dreamer and tells him of its misfortunes and sufferings at the hands of enemies. At first the cross speaks as a cross, until its aspect shifts on line 33b when it describes its first glimpses of Christ.

Geseah ic þa frean mancynness  
efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan...  
strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,  
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.  
Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte.<sup>460</sup>

The act of physical contact between the cross and Christ completes the cross's transformation (temporary though it may be) into the human nature of the Son.

### Typology

*The Dream of the Rood* is not a paraphrase of the Gospels, but it does have certain parallels with them.<sup>461</sup> For example, the cross first receives Christ in a manner analogous to how Jesus receives the Holy Spirit through baptism. Luke says that Jesus came to where John the Baptist was baptizing people at the river Jordan:

Now it came to pass, when all the people were baptized,  
that Jesus also being baptized and praying, heaven was  
opened; And the Holy Spirit descended in a bodily shape,

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<sup>459</sup> The cross is a representation of the human nature of Christ.

<sup>460</sup> "Then I saw the lord of humankind hasten with great zeal so that he could climb on me . . . strong and unflinching he climbed on the high cross, brave in the sight of many, so that he could redeem humankind.

I trembled when the man embraced me." *The Dream of the Rood*, 33b-34, 40-42a.

<sup>461</sup> This issue was raised early in the scholarship of *The Dream of the Rood*. See Arthur R. Skemp, "The Transformation of Scriptural Story, Motive, and Conception in Anglo-Saxon Poetry." *Modern Philology* 4 (Jan 1907): 423; Howard R. Patch, "Liturgical Influence in *The Dream of the Rood*." *PMLA* 34 (1919): 233-234.

as a dove upon him; and a voice came from heaven: Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased. (Luke 3:21-22)

Both the baptism and the embrace of the cross by the young hero change the recipients outwardly. While the Son's nature was not changed by the baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit, his observable behavior was. Jesus, after his baptism and the temptations by the devil, begins his ministry. In a similar manner the cross, before encountering the *geong hæleð*, described itself as a reluctant instrument of torture. The cross did not utter any concerns regarding wounds it received when, as it says, *heton me heora wergas hebban* / "they commanded me to hold their criminals." It is only after the cross is embraced by the poet's representation of the divine nature of Christ, literally animated by and through him, that it assumes its role as the human nature of the Son. Only then does it express its dread of the torments that it must endure and fear of the wounds to be inflicted. The cross's apprehension of the pain that it is to endure is reminiscent of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, where he asked that the burden of crucifixion be taken from him. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the cross repeatedly tells the dreamer that it *fæste stod* ("stood fast," 38b and 43b), presumably at the bidding of the divine Christ, rather than attempt to avoid the coming torment. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the cross expresses pain and describes the wounds that it has received.

Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,  
feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.  
Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning,  
heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste.

þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,  
opene inwidhlemmas.<sup>462</sup>

The Synoptic Gospels relate that when Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray he asked God to release him from his obligation to die on the cross (Matthew 26:38-39). Both the humanized cross and the human Jesus feared their destiny, yet both submit to their Lord's will.

The cross, like the post-baptismal Jesus, seems to be aware of its fate. When it was embraced by the Lord—*Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte* ("I trembled when the man embraced me," 42a)—the cross has a change in character and becomes a representation of the human nature of Christ. Yet as early as line 33b when the cross first sees the approaching Christ, it seems to have foreknowledge of events.

þær ic þa ne dorste      ofer dryhtnes word  
bugan oððe berstan,      þa ic bifian geseah  
eorðan sceatas.<sup>463</sup>

Until this point, the cross had been used for sometime, (presumably) executing criminals, but had made no objection. On line 36a the cross says for the first of three times that it did not bend (ll. 42b and 45b). I take this to mean that it did not "flee" from its responsibility. However, the first time that the cross expresses fear of the events that are to come (l. 36a), it should not have knowledge of the divinity of Christ until they merge on line 42a. The cross's dramatic representation as the human nature of Christ, beginning

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<sup>462</sup> "I dared not bend to the earth, to fall to the earth's surface, but I should stand fast. I was raised a cross, I raised the powerful king, heaven's lord, I did not dare bend. They pierced me with dark nails. On me were seen wounds, open wicked wounds." *Dream of the Rood*, 42b-47b.

<sup>463</sup> "Then did I not dare, over the word of the Lord, bend or break, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble." *Dream of the Rood*, 35-37a.

at line 36a, has become superimposed over its narrative perspective in the poem. Overlaying ideas in Anglo-Saxon religious poetry, as in medieval religious art, was not considered problematic. For practitioners of Christian representational art, superimposition of images showing an individual engaged in several activities simultaneously, within the confines of a single illustration, elevated theme over realistic depiction, whether temporal or spatial. I include one example from figurative art as an example. In this image of the agony in Gethsemane, there are two images of Christ, one praying in the garden and one discovering his sleeping disciples (Figure XIII). Based in typological doctrine, temporality was less important because all events, past, present and future, were aspects of the history of redemption.

We can see such superimposition in other Old English poems such as *Juliana*, by Cynewulf, contained in the *Exeter Book*. Juliana was a Christian martyr who refused to marry a man who was not Christian, especially since he would not give up his worship of false gods. As punishment for her disobedience, her father gives Juliana to the suitor, who has her beaten, scourged, burned in fire, immersed in molten lead and finally beheaded. Early in the poem when she is arguing against the marriage, she seems to anticipate her future passion. Here she says to her tormentor,

Næfre þu þæs swiðlic sar gegearwast  
 þurh hæstne nið heardra wita,  
 þæt þu mec onwende worda þissa. (*Juliana*, 55-57)<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> “Never can you prepare so much pain of vile torments through violent hate that you will turn me from these words.” *The Exeter Book*, ed. George P. Krapp and Elliott Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 114.





Figure XIII: The Agony in Gethsemane<sup>465</sup>

Cynewulf knows of Juliana's martyrdom and has her speak as though her passion had already occurred. Likewise, in *The Dream of the Rood*, the cross (at times) speaks as if it were a representation of the Son's human nature before its transformation on line 42a.<sup>466</sup>

<sup>465</sup> Byzantine Gospel Book, Nicaea or Nicomedia, early 1200s, <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=1571>.

<sup>466</sup> *Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan. . . þær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah eorðan sceatas.* ("Then I saw the lord of humankind hasten with great zeal so that he could climb on me. . . Then did I not dare, over the word of the Lord, to bend or break, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble.") *Dream of the Rood*, 33b-34, 35-37a. The cross should not have known who the "lord

However, such temporal disjunctions while distracting to modern scholars would be passed over without notice by contemporary audiences. What was important for medieval listeners was not the strict line of cause and effect but the meaning revealed by the work.

### ***Geong Hæleð and the Divine Nature of Christ***

Regardless of the cross's foreknowledge of events, it was absolutely obedient to the will of its lord. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the divine nature of Christ is depicted as a young warrior rushing eagerly to climb to his death. The divine Christ *efstan elne mycle* ("hastens with great zeal," 34a) to climb the cross. In this scene, Christ prepares himself to mount the cross, much as a Germanic war-leader would prepare himself for battle.

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),  
strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,  
modig on manigra gesyhðe.<sup>467</sup>

This Christ is not the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 but a Germanic chieftain standing at the head of battle in defense of his people. From this perspective, it is easy to argue that the cross could be seen as a thegn, following the Germanic warrior code as it fought beside its chieftain Christ.<sup>468</sup> However, the cross faces a conundrum. It is compelled to

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of humankind" was. The revaluation does not come to the cross until line 41a when the cross "trembled when the man embraced me."

<sup>467</sup> "Then the young hero undressed himself (who was God Almighty), strong and unflinching, he climbed on the high cross brave in the sight of many." *Dream of the Rood*, 39-41a.

<sup>468</sup> Tacitus, *Germania and Agricola*, edited by W. S. Tyler (New York: Appleton & Co., 1856) XIV: *Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute vinci, turpe comitatus virtutem principis non adaequare. Iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse. Illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est. Principes pro victoria pugnant, comites pro principe.* (When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the leader to be

place obedience over the defense of its lord. By remaining passive in the face of enemies, the cross becomes its own lord's *banan* ("slayer," 66a).<sup>469</sup> As the passage from Tacitus attests, the thegns' obligation is to fight for the defense of their chief. The cross repeatedly tells the dreamer that it could have bent to the earth and destroyed the evil men (ll. 35-36, 37-38, 42-43, 45b and 47b), but the cross tells the dreamer,

þær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word  
 bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah  
 eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte  
 feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.<sup>470</sup>

The cross's obligation for obedience overrides its obligation to defend. Such imagery has been much commented on as an Anglo-Saxon convention of treating Christian subject matter in heroic terms.<sup>471</sup> While a heroic reading would certainly appeal to a populace dominated by a warrior elite, it is also evident that such a reading does not reveal the genuine complexity of the narrative. The poet was focused on redemption and eternal

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surpassed in valor, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valor of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from battle. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief.) See also, John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 112-128. *Beowulf*, lxxii-lxxvii. Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry* (The Hague: Moulton & Co., 1972), 30-33. Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 134-137.

<sup>469</sup> *Bana* is a neutral term that implies no criminal motive. However, the poetic personification of the cross heightens the tragic nature of the act. Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*, 128.

<sup>470</sup> "Then did I not dare, over the word of the Lord to bend or break, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble. I might have felled the foes nevertheless I stood fast." *Dream of the Rood*, 35-38.

<sup>471</sup> Guy Bourquin, "The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry," in *Heroes and Heroism in Medieval Literature*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 5-6; Kathleen Dubs, "Hæld: Heroism in *The Dream of the Rood*," *Neophilologus* 59 (1979): 614; Christina M. Heckman, "Imitatio in Early Medieval Spirituality: *The Dream of the Rood*, Anselm, and Militant Christology," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005): 143-146.

life, and through the poem the poet sought to reveal these deeper levels of meaning.<sup>472</sup> The image of a warrior-Christ defending his people would have been a familiar and comforting one that would draw the listener/reader into the poem. They would also have understood that the cross (acting as an obedient thegn) by staying its hand was actually doing its lord's bidding.

Loyalty and obedience to a human lord are laudable; they become sublime when the human nature of Christ submits to the divine will. The cross does not strike at the enemies because Christ commands it not to act. *The Dream of the Rood* poet, through the figures of the cross and the young hero, has created a representation of the two component parts of a whole, thereby revealing the dual nature that existed in Christ. The cross as a representation of the human nature and will of Christ must be passive and obedient to the divine. By dividing the two natures of the Son between the cross and the *geong hæleð*, the poet allows the audience to see the human Jesus interact with the divine.

Unlike the cross, which through the power of speech represents Christ's human nature, the divine nature of Christ remains silent. It is not a *reordberend*; instead, the will of God conveys its intentions through actions. God does not speak to humanity; his

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<sup>472</sup> I suggest that the poet seeks to instruct the audience by presenting increasingly deeper layers of meaning following Bishop Aidan's suggestion, "give them the milk of more easy doctrine, till being by degrees nourished with the word of God, they should be capable of greater perfection, and be able to practice God's sublimer precepts" (*EH*, III.5). *The Dream of the Rood* functions as an anagogic poem, extending its meaning beyond poetry and history by presenting many levels of understanding to its audience. As in Biblical exegesis, this poem may be read at four levels of meaning: literal historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogic levels.

providence is revealed by its effect on the world. Miracles were God's manifestation in the world. A typological view of history still regards events, people and places as signs of God's continuing action in the course of human affairs. Salvation did not end with the coming of Christ; the saints and the cross are part of the continuing salvation history.<sup>473</sup> All creation must obey the will of God, whether they are saints, the cross or the human nature of Christ. After Jesus makes his objections in Gethsemane, he accepts the command of God's will (Matthew 26:42). The cross, too, obeys the will of the divine. The poet describes the cross's acceptance when it encounters the divine:

Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes  
 efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan.  
 þær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word  
 bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah  
 eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte  
 feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.  
 Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),  
 strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,  
 modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lisan.  
 Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte. Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to  
 eorðan,  
 feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.  
 Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning,  
 heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste.<sup>474</sup>

The cross trembles as the divine and human natures, which were poetically separated, reunite after Christ climbs onto the cross. The wounds that Christ received become the

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<sup>473</sup> John Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender*, 80-81.

<sup>474</sup> "Then I saw the lord of humankind hasten with great zeal so that he could climb on me. Then did I not dare, over the word of the Lord, to bend or break, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble. I might have felled the foes nevertheless I stood fast. Then the young hero undressed himself (who was God Almighty), strong and unflinching, he climbed on the high cross, brave in the sight of many, so that he could redeem humankind. I trembled when the man embraced me. I dared not bend to the earth, to fall to the earth's surface, but I should stand fast. I was raised a cross, I raised the powerful king, heaven's lord, I did not dare bend." *Dream of the Rood*, 33b-45.

wounds of the cross. Through the union of the two natures, the will of the Father becomes the will of the Son without conflict. Here the human nature of Christ sets aside its fear and submits to the will of the Father.

The two natures of Christ are more tightly united by the nails that wound the cross and the young warrior in the same manner. They have become one and the same:

þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,  
 opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.  
 Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,  
 begoten of þæs guman sidan.<sup>475</sup>

On line 48 of *The Dream of the Rood*, the poet signals to the audience the completion of the union of the divine and human nature of Christ through the use of the dual pronoun, *unc* (*unȝet* on Ruthwell Cross). *Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere* (“they mocked us both together”). This pronoun is typically used to show a special closeness between two individuals, such as a warrior and his thegn. In this case, the pronoun *unc* ties the humanized cross and Christ together so that the hearer/reader can see that the two natures are one. The poet amplifies the dual pronoun by using the words *butu* (“both”) and *ætgædere* (“together”). Once the reunion of the human and divine natures is complete, the cross resumes its speech, but now it speaks for a unified Christ who was crucified and raised for humanity’s redemption. The merging of two members of the dual pronoun can be seen in another *Vercelli* poem, *Body and Soul*. In this poem the soul returns to its body

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<sup>475</sup> “They pierced me with dark nails; on me were seen wounds, open wicked wounds. I did not dare harm any of them. They mocked us both together; I was entirely soaked with blood spilled from the man’s side.” *Dream of the Rood*, 46-49a.

that is decaying in its grave. In *Body and Soul I*, the soul scolds the body for its sinful life and dreads their union at Judgment Day.

Ac hwæt do wyt *unc*?  
 Sculon wit þonne eft ætsomne siððan brucan  
 swylcra yrmða, swa ðu *unc* her ær scrife!”  
 Fyrnað þus þæt flæschord, sceall þonne feran onweg,  
 secan hellegrund, nallæs heofondreamas, (*Body and Soul*, 100-104)<sup>476</sup>

The use of the dual form of the pronoun *unc* again signals the union of these two members. Once joined at Judgment Day, the body and soul suffer the same fate. Although they are two in death, they will again become one as they were in life. In part two of the same poem, another soul looks forward to the reunion of the soul and body.

Wolde ic þe ðonne secgan þæt ðu ne sorgode,  
 forðan wyt bioð gegæderode æt godes dome.  
 Moton wyt þonne ætsomne syþan brucan  
 ond *unc* on heofonum heahþungene beon. (*Body and Soul*,  
 156-159)<sup>477</sup>

In both cases the union of the soul with its body is signified by the dual form of the pronoun *unc*. The barriers of distinction between the two entities are eroded to the point that the two become one, though with two natures, as implied by the poem. They are two inseparable sides of the same coin. This situation is not unlike that found in *The Dream of the Rood*. The union of the divine and the human on the cross is the symbol of victory

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<sup>476</sup> “But what shall we two do when he has united us again? Then together we will suffer such miseries as you before did decree for us. Thus it reviles the body, then it need must depart, afflicted by deeds, seek the abyss of hell, by no means the joys of heaven.” Italics are mine. *Vercelli*, 57.

<sup>477</sup> “I would tell you then not to be troubled for we two will be gathered at God’s judgment. Then afterwards we two can rejoice and we two will be illustrious in heaven.” *Vercelli*, 58.

over death and the redemption of humankind. Christ's two natures are initially represented as distinct so that the deeper meaning may be revealed. Within the context of the poem, the cross spoke and the divine acted. The two natures of Christ presented separately reveal the mystery of his dual nature. At the crucifixion they are rejoined much as the body and soul on Judgment Day. This dramatic division of the hypostasis of the Son allowed *The Dream of the Rood* poet to reveal and to make explicit the theory of dual nature—an idea that I argue was already existent in Northumbria embodied in the cult of St. Oswald. The poet symbolically exposes the two aspects of Christ's nature and, by doing so, explains a difficult religious and cultural concept in a way that the audience can understand.

### **St. Oswald's Dual Nature**

Before 700 Northumbria was a multicultural region that contained a collection of several distinct ethnic and linguistic groups that referred to themselves by their tribal affiliation. In the decades leading up to the eighth century, this culturally diverse land slowly coalesced into a political entity that had its own unique culture.<sup>478</sup> However, the polyethnic group found in Northumbria did not become a people until they were united under a single king. As the Anglo-Saxons asserted their dominance over north and northwest England, they created the Northumbrian people composed of an amalgamation of four ethnic groups under the rule of an Anglo-Saxon king: the Anglo-Saxons, Britons

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<sup>478</sup> Edward James, "The Origins of Barbarian Kingdoms: The Continental Evidence," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 46- 47.



(such as the former independent kingdoms of Rheged and Strathclyde), Irish (Dál Riata Scots) and Picts. The Anglo-Saxons and Celtic peoples of the North had belief systems that were not in conflict, and the interactions among these groups beginning in the mid-sixth century often complemented or enhanced the other. Though the dominant military group in Northumbria was Anglo-Saxon, the culture of the new people was a unique hybrid formed by the different groups. Bede, as he was writing his history, recognized the emergence of a united people, and he was the first writer to name the people Northumbrians and their kingdom Northumbria.<sup>479</sup> The blending of these ethnic groups produced a cultural milieu in which the concept of a saint who was simultaneously a warrior-king arose.

The idea that two natures folded into one individual and were governed by a single will harmonized well with the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic pagan past. Among Germanic peoples veneration of the king as semi-divine was not uncommon and was practiced well into the tenth century.<sup>480</sup> As I discussed earlier,<sup>481</sup> the Anglo-Saxons, after they migrated from Germany, fused the role of king, primarily a symbol of tribal fertility and prosperity, with the battle-leader. Before the Germanic migrations of the fifth century, the two roles were delegated to two different men.<sup>482</sup> The fusion of the two

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<sup>479</sup> *EH*, I.15; II.5, 20; III. 22, 26; IV.2.

<sup>480</sup> William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 71-73, 75-105; Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, trans. Éva Pálmai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80-81.

<sup>481</sup> Chapter 3, 110-111.

<sup>482</sup> Tacitus, *Germania and Agricola*, ed. W. S. Tyler (New York: Appleton & Co., 1856), 20, 23. **VII: Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt. Nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas, et duces exemplo**

functions among the Anglo-Saxon in England seems to have come about because of opportunistic war-leaders becoming kings and, by necessity, uniting the two offices into one person. The eponymous Danish king, Scyld Scefing, from the poem *Beowulf* illustrates the point well. His very name, Scyld Scefing,<sup>483</sup> represents a fusion function of two Germanic deities: Woden, the god of war, and Frey, the god of the harvest, each with very different natures. Scyld (from Old English *scield* < Germanic *\*skelduz*) is a shield or protector, an object of war. The shield is an icon for the war-god Woden, a deity that most royal Anglo-Saxon genealogies have as their progenitor.<sup>484</sup> Scefing, the son of sheaf (Old English *scēaf* < Germanic *\*skauf-*), is the royal symbol of fertility and agricultural prosperity and, much like the olive branch, symbolic of peace and prosperity. The sheaf is an icon of the Germanic god Frey, the god of kingship for Germanic tribes and the Anglo-Saxons before the migration.

The harmonious union of the two apparently opposed Germanic deities in one individual may have already been a tradition among the people of Northumbria. As the Northumbrians became a distinctive people composed of Anglo-Saxons and Celts, there

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*potius quam imperio, si prompti, si conspicui, si ante aciem agant, admiratione praesunt . . . (VII: They choose their kings for noble birth, their generals for merit. These kings have not unlimited or arbitrary power, and the generals do more by example than by authority, if they are energetic, if they are conspicuous, if they fight in before the front of the army, they lead because they are admired.)*

<sup>483</sup> *Scyld Scefing* can either mean “Shield,” “son of Sheaf” or “Shield with a Sheaf.” Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 278. For my discussion I will use the second meaning, “Shield,” “son of Sheaf,” though “Shield with a Sheaf” would work as well for the blending of disparate traits.

<sup>484</sup> ASC Peterborough A, 552 and 597 Wessex genealogy; 626 and 755 Mercia; Northumbria 547 Bernicia and 560 Deira. See also Hermann Moisl, “Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies and Germanic Oral Tradition,” *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981): 227-228; David Dumville, “Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists,” in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P.H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1977), 82-86.

was a blending of culture, traditions, laws and literature. The literature of the northwestern Celtic people also tells of deities who have more than one nature in their makeup. Some tales from the region describe an otherworldly female deity known as the Mórrígan. Composed of three deities (Badb, Macha, and Mórrígan), she/they had associations with both war and fertility. One emanation of the tripartite goddess of war, Macha, though usually associated with battle in early Irish literature, has also been linked with Anu (Welsh Dôn), the Celtic goddess of the land and prosperity.<sup>485</sup> I suggest that the hearers and writers of these tales would have seen Macha/Anu and Woden/Frey as representatives of two poles of a supernatural continuum. Like a magnet, one required the presence of the other. If the Anglo-Saxon king could embody the two Germanic gods and the Irish Macha/Anu could exist in one being, then the stage was set, as the Northumbrian people laid aside the old gods for a Christian saint who also symbolized a dual nature. The internalization of the Celtic and Germanic traditions by the Northumbrian people provided a cultural template for the creation of this type of saint. It is this blending of traditions which may have influenced Oswiu when he created the cult of the warrior-saint Oswald.

King Oswiu in many ways represents the quintessential Northumbrian. He was born to an Anglo-Saxon father who had a Pictish wife. Between the ages of four to twenty-one he lived in exile among the Dál Riata and the Irish. Like his brother he was equally fluent in Irish and English, and probably spoke a British dialect of P-Celtic.

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<sup>485</sup> Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 290, 293. Emain Macha and Ard Macha are named for this goddess, 350.

During his exile he was baptized at Iona, where he learned Christianity from the Irish. He married an Irish princess during this period, and shortly after his brother Oswald's installation as king of Northumbria, he married another princess, this time from the British royal house of Rheged. His diverse cultural background, along with his politically opportunistic nature, prompted the king to visualize, when he looked on the tortured remains of his brother, not a dead king, humiliated in his defeat, but an exalted martyr and Christian saint. He was the first of his people (that we know) to weave together the disparate cultural threads to produce a uniquely Northumbrian concept, the warrior-king saint. Assuming, as I do, that the original author of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition was a Northumbrian living at the end of the seventh century, it seems reasonable that some of the cultural elements upon which Oswiu drew in the 640s would be similar elements used by the anonymous poet fifty years later. It is also likely that the poet was familiar with the history of Oswald and constructed an image of Christ as an idealized Northumbrian warrior based, in part, on the Oswald cult. Oswald, the warrior-king-saint was a chimera. He was a warrior-king who died in battle, but he was also a pious, humble saint. His cultic persona was constructed by his brother to represent a political figure that embodied two diverse and opposite attributes—warrior and saint. It was a duality that the Northumbrians readily accepted. The consensus reached at the council of Hatfield in 680<sup>486</sup> (i.e., among other things, the dual nature of the Son) further inspired *The Dream of*

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<sup>486</sup> In a new attempt to reconcile the issue of Christ's hypostasis, Emperor Constantine IV (652-685) called the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople for the autumn of 680. Pope Agatho (678-680) called the provincial bishops to a Roman council to draft a resolution reaffirming the Orthodox position

the *Rood* poet and lent credence and strength to the concept of a dual nature for St. Oswald. Additionally, it allowed for the representation of a Christ who fit with the sensibilities of the Anglo-Saxon warrior elite.

Our primary source for Oswald's life, kingship and sainthood is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.<sup>487</sup> Bede had a very specific agenda for his history of the Anglo-Saxons. In sum, he was trying to demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxon people were God's new chosen people, and thus he tells his story in such a way as to reveal the rightness of God's divine plan for the Northumbrians.<sup>488</sup> Bede's primary interest is to show how

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before the delegation was to go to Constantinople. Archbishop of Canterbury Theodore (669-693) called the Council of Hæthfeld (Hatfield) in September of 680, and bishops from across England gathered to discuss and ratify the Orthodox position which they did. On 7 November 680, the Council of Constantinople condemned the Monothelite conception of Christ. Other than Bede's account of the Council of Hæthfeld (Hatfield), there exists only a ninth-century forgery. According to Bede, "... Theodore, by the grace of God, archbishop of the island of Britain, and of the city of Canterbury, being president, and the other venerable bishops of the island of Britain sitting with him, the holy Gospels being laid before them, at the place which, in the Saxon tongue, is called Hæthfeld (Hatfield), we conferred together, and expounded the true and orthodox faith, as our Lord Jesus in the flesh delivered the same to his disciples, who saw Him present, and heard his words, and as it is delivered in the creed of the holy fathers, and by all holy and universal synods in general, and by the consent of all approved doctors of the Catholic church; we, therefore, following them jointly and orthodoxly, and professing accordance to their divinely inspired doctrine, do believe, and do, according to the holy fathers, firmly confess, properly and truly, the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, a trinity consubstantial in unity, and unity in trinity, that is, one God subsisting in three consubstantial persons, of equal honor and glory." *HE*, IV.17.

<sup>487</sup> There is ample evidence for Oswald's sainthood. In England his feast day was on the Hexham liturgical calendars by the third quarter of the seventh century (*EH*, III.2), the calendar of Selsey (Sussex) by 681 (*EH*, IV.14), and the Bardney (Mercia) calendar by ca. 700 (*EH*, III.11). It was celebrated in Ireland as early as 664, *EH*, III.13, and by the eighth century on the continent (Frisia), *EH*, III.13. His relics were enshrined at Bamburgh castle, and later, newly discovered relics were translated to the Mercian monastery at Bardney where numerous miracles occurred. He is included in the *Old English Martyrology*, and Ælfric wrote a *vita* of St. Oswald in 996 or 997 in a third series of homilies, *The Lives, or Passions of the Saints*. In one revival of Oswald's cult, the Flemish hagiographer Drogo of Saint-Winnoc (c. 1030-84) depicted him as a heroic and saintly king who was martyred while fighting pagans. See his *Sermo secundus de s. Oswaldo (Second Sermon on St. Oswald)* [BHL 6364]. See also Chapter 4, 163-178.

<sup>488</sup> Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 72-107; N. J. Higham, *(Re-) Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context*, (London: Routledge Press, 2006), 182-184; George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 112-113.

Oswald (the hero of Book III) helped spread Christianity across his kingdom. After gaining the throne Oswald sent to Iona, rather than Canterbury, for a bishop to preach to his people.<sup>489</sup> Bishop Aídan, a scholarly and gentle man, was sent to preach to the Northumbrians. However, Aídan could not speak English, but as Bede tells us (with some relish) King Oswald translated for him:

Ubi pulcherrimo saepe spectaculo contigit, ut euangelizante  
antistite, qui Anglorum linguam perfecte non nouerat, ipse rex  
suis ducibus ac ministris interpretis uerbi existeret caelestis;  
quia nimirum tam longo exilii sui tempore linguam Scottorum  
iam plene didicerat.<sup>490</sup>

The Gospel reached the ears of the Northumbrians for the first time coming from the lips of their King Oswald. However, this was not to be the only part of the king's body that spread Christianity across his kingdom.

In recording the king's life, Bede avoided placing a sword in Oswald's hand. In fact, Bede only tells of two battles that Oswald engaged in during his kingship; the first, his victory at Heavenfield, and his last, his defeat and death at Maserfelth. However, the martial actions of the king were noticed and recorded by the Irish. Oswald's siege and conquest of *Eten* (Edinburgh) are recorded in the Irish Annals<sup>491</sup> but not by Bede or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. The Irish, it appears, were more accepting of Oswald's warrior

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<sup>489</sup> Oswald was probably fulfilling an obligation that he had made to the abbots of Iona who helped raise him and baptized him.

<sup>490</sup> "It was indeed a beautiful sight when the bishop was preaching the gospel, to see the king acting as an interpreter of the heavenly word for his ealdormen and thegns . . . [for] the king had gained a perfect knowledge of Irish during the long period of his exile." *HE*, III. 3, 220

<sup>491</sup> *AU*, 634 and *AT*, 638.

nature than were the Anglo-Saxon clerics. For example, Adomnán in his *Vita St. Columba* (in Irish, *Colum Cille*) presents a strikingly different image of the battle of Heavenfield (634) than the one presented by Bede. Admittedly, Adomnán wrote his account of the battle to remind his friend King Aldfrith (685-705) of the aid that St. Colum Cille had given his ancestor King Oswald. Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona (679-704), was a friend of Aldfrith when the latter lived in Ireland and was known as Flann Fína. In Adomnán's *Vita*, St. Colum Cille (521-597) visits Oswald in a dream the evening before the battle and we are told that,

et haec confirmatoria contulit verba, eadem scilicet quae Dominus ad Jesue Ben Nun ante transitum Jordanis, mortuo Moyse, prolocutus est, dicens: 'Confortare et age viriliter; ecce ero tecum,' etc. Sanctus itaque Columba, haec ad regem in visu loquens, addit: 'Hac sequenti nocte de castris ad bellum procede; hac enim vice mihi Dominus donavit ut hostes in fugam vertantur tui, et tuus Catlon inimicus in manus tradatur tuas, et post bellum victor revertaris, et feliciter regnes.' Post haec verba expectatus rex senatui congregato hanc enarrat visionem; qua confortati omnes, totus populus promittit se post reversionem de bello crediturum et baptismum suscepturum.<sup>492</sup>

Adomnán places Oswald in the tradition of Joshua, thereby acknowledging him as a warrior for God. The Irish Church, even though it was increasingly coming under control

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<sup>492</sup> VC, 91. "The blessed man revealed his name to the king and gave him these words of encouragement, the same the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, before he crossed the Jordan, Moses having died saying, 'Be strong and act manfully. Behold I will be with thee.' In the king's vision Columba said this adding: 'This coming night go out from your camp into battle for the Lord has granted me that at this time your foes shall be put to flight and Cadwallon your enemy shall be delivered into your hands and you shall return victorious after battle and reign happily.' After hearing these words the king awoke and described his vision to the assembled council: All were strengthened by this and the whole people promised that after they returned from battle they would accept the faith and receive baptism."

of Rome, still maintained some differences. The Irish accepted Oswald's military side more than did Bede. The *Vita* of St. Colum Cille served as a reminder that this side of Oswald was well known. Additionally, Adomnán, who would have been aware of the cult of St. Oswald, structured his chapter on Oswald and Colum Cille to establish a hierarchy between the two saints.<sup>493</sup> In Irish hagiographic tradition (as in Irish secular society) gift exchange between patron and client was a common practice. When one saint gave a gift of greater value than the other could return, it placed the recipient in a subordinate position, thus establishing a hierarchy that lasted for generations. Adomnán was reminding his friend king Aldfrith that the kingship of Northumbria was a gift given to St. Oswald by God through the hands of St. Colum Cille. As a result, the kings of Northumbria owed an obligation to Iona. King Aldfrith would have recognized the significance of Adomnán's message.

Bede, on the other hand, was more interested in presenting Oswald's pious nature. His account of the battle of Heavenfield is very different from that of Adomnán's. Colum Cille is absent from Bede's version of the story. He was not interested in having the Irish, particularly those from Iona, have any prominence in Oswald's life.<sup>494</sup> Instead, the two stars of the event are St. Oswald and the cross. So strong had the association between

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<sup>493</sup> Though Adomnán would have been aware of Oswald's sanctity in Anglo-Saxon England and in Ireland by the beginning of the eighth century, he never refers to Oswald as a saint.

<sup>494</sup> There are many possible reasons why Bede omitted mention of the Irish saint. As I suggested above, Bede was not very interested in showing Oswald's martial nature. Additionally, the Irish of Iona did not accept the Roman calculation of Easter until 714, and by Bede's time (ca. 700-735) the dominant influence of the Catholic Church in Northumbria came from Rome. Even though the Irish Church had been instrumental in the development of the Northumbrian Church from 630s, its influence had been waning since the loss at the Easter Controversy at the Synod of Whitby in 664.



Oswald and the cross become by the second quarter of the eighth century that Bede placed it in the saint-king's hands as Oswald's first independent action in the *Ecclesiastical History*. Before his battle with the dual scourge of Cadwallon and Penda, Oswald seized Christ's symbol of victory and planted it into Northumbrian soil:

ubi uenturus ad hanc pugnam Osuald signum sanctae crucis erexit, ac flexis genibus Deum deprecatus est, ut in tanta rerum necessitate suis cultoribus caelesti succurreret auxilio. Denique fertur, quia facta citato opere cruce, ac fouea praeparata, in qua statui deberet, ipse fide feruens hanc arripuerit, ac foueae inposuerit, atque utraque manu erectam tenuerit, donec adgesto a militibus puluere terrae figeretur; et hoc facto, elata in altum uoce cuncto exercitui proclamauerit: 'Flectamus omnes genua, et Deum omnipotentem, uiuum, ac uerum in commune deprecemur, ut nos ab hoste superbo ac feroce sua miseratione defendat; scit enim ipse, quia iusta pro salute gentis nostrae bella suscepimus.' Fecerunt omnes, ut iusserat, et sic incipiente diluculo in hostem progressi, iuxta meritum suae fidei uictoria potiti sunt.<sup>495</sup>

Oswald's hands form an important focus of this passage. Bede's point that "the king himself, full of faith, laid hold of it [the cross] and held it with both his hands, till it was set fast by throwing in the earth," shows that the king consecrated the very soil and brought Christianity to Northumbria. Oswald's action is reminiscent of Constantine and his use of the cross as a sign for military victory. The king's hands are involved in several

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<sup>495</sup> " . . . when Oswald, was about to engage in battle, he erected the sign of the holy cross, and on his knees prayed to God that he would send heavenly aid to his worshipers in their great distress. In fact it is reported, that a cross being made in haste, and the hole dug in which it was to be fixed, the king himself, full of faith, laid hold of it and held it with both his hands, till it was set fast by throwing in the earth and this done, raising his voice, he called to his army, 'Let us all kneel, and jointly pray to the true and living God Almighty, in his mercy, to defend us from the haughty and fierce enemy; for He knows that we have undertaken a just war for the safety of our race.' All did as he had commanded, and accordingly advancing towards the enemy with the first dawn of day, and they obtained the victory, as their faith deserved." *HE*, III.2.

acts of piety that would qualify him as a saint. One such act was his charity to the poor and helpless:

et indicasse regi, quia multitudo pauperum undecumque adueniens maxima per plateas sederet, postulans aliquid elimosynae a rege. Qui mox dapes sibimet adpositas deferri pauperibus. . . . Quo uiso pontifex, qui adsidebat, delectatus tali facto pietatis, adprehendit dexteram eius, et ait: 'Numquam inueterescat haec manus.' Quod et ita iuxta uotum benedictionis eius prouenit. Nam cum interfecto illo in pugna, manus cum brachio a cetero essent corpore resectae, contigit, ut hactenus incorruptae perdurent. Denique in urbe regia quae a regina quondam uocabulo Bebbia cognominatur, loculo inclusae argenteo in ecclesia sancti Petri seruantur . . . <sup>496</sup>

Oswald's generosity to the poor may have been an *imitatio Christi* and at the very least marked him as a committed follower of Christ. Aídan's blessing foreshadows the miracle of St. Oswald's arm, which remains incorrupt and marks him a saint.<sup>497</sup> Aídan and Bede used this anecdote to show that the king was following the teachings of Christ as described in the Gospels. Through his charitable and his pious acts they believed that Oswald would have earned a seat at the feast in heaven with God.<sup>498</sup> I suggest that by

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<sup>496</sup> " . . . and [he] told the king, that a great multitude of needy persons from all parts was sitting in the streets begging some alms of the king; he immediately ordered the meat set before him to be carried to the poor. The bishop [Aídan] who was sitting near was delighted by the pious act and grasped him by the right hand and said, 'May this hand never decay.' His blessing and prayer were fulfilled in this way; when Oswald was killed in battle his hand and arm were cut off from the rest of his body and they have remained uncorrupt until the present time. They are in fact preserved in a silver shrine in St. Peter's Church in the royal city which is called after Queen Bebbe." *HE*, III.6.

<sup>497</sup> Penda had King Oswald's head and arms separated from the remainder of his body and placed on three wooden stakes. They remained there for about one year after which Oswiu retrieved them and returned them to Bamburgh. The arms were miraculously incorrupt, which is believed to be a sign of a holy life, divine favor and a mark of a saint. This was particularly true for saints in Merovingian Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England. Sts. Cuthbert and Æthelthryth of Ely are two other Anglo-Saxon saints whose status was recognized by the incorrupt condition of their remains.

<sup>498</sup> It was believed, during this period that saints dwelt in heaven with God, but were also present on earth and involved in the day-to-day activities of those who paid them reverential attention. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2003), 154-155.

juxtaposing the king's charitable act with the feast of the resurrection, Bede sought to link Christ's sacrifice for the world with a foreshadowing of Oswald's sacrifice for the Northumbrian people. It was his death that warranted the mantle of martyr and saint.

Bede assures his readers that upon his death Oswald went immediately to heaven:

Hac etenim die idem rex ab infidelibus in bello corporaliter  
extinctus, mox ad sempiterna animarum gaudia adsumtus in  
caelum, et electorum est sociatus agminibus.<sup>499</sup>

Oswald's death in 642 at the hands of Penda, the pagan king of Mercia, must have resonated with the Northumbrian Christians. Not only was he killed and his army routed, but also his body was brutally hacked asunder and his head and arms were placed on wooden pikes to produce a macabre parody of the Crucifixion.

Porro caput et manus cum brachiis a corpore praecisas iussit rex,  
qui occiderat, in stipitibus suspendi. Quo post annum deueniens  
cum exercitu successor regni eius Osuii abstulit ea, et caput  
quidem in cimiterio Lindisfarnensis ecclesiae, in regia uero  
ciuitate manus cum brachiis condidit.<sup>500</sup>

The display of his dead body, reminiscent of Christ on the cross, may have inspired Oswiu to consecrate his brother. When the arms interred in St. Peter's chapel were found to be incorrupt, his sanctity was assured. Oswiu and his successors focused the royal cult on the martial exploits of Oswald and his defense of the people. In this context, Oswald's

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<sup>499</sup> "It was on this very day [5 August] that the king was slain in battle by the heathen and was immediately carried to the everlasting joys of the souls in heaven, joining the ranks of the elect." *HE*, IV.14.

<sup>500</sup> " . . . but the king [Penda] that slew him commanded his head, hands, and arms to be cut off from the body, and set upon stakes. But his successor in the throne, Oswiu, coming there the next year with his army, took them down, and buried his head in the church of Lindisfarne, and the hands and arms in his royal city." *EH*, III.12.

hands could be viewed as a symbol of the former king's military might. After all, the hands in the reliquary once held sword and shield to protect the Northumbrians. For the military elite, King Oswald represented the ideal Germanic hero. He died in a desperate battle defending his people and was worthy of honor. Oswiu, primarily because his grip on the Northumbrian throne was weak, raised the royal warrior-king to the status of Christian saint. The Christian elite of Northumbria for their own reasons softened the king's bellicosity by emphasizing his charity, humility and piety. His warrior exploits were passed over in silence by the Northumbrian Church. They preferred to focus on his role as intercessor and benefactor. However, his role as military leader did not fade away. The cultic site where he was killed in defense of his kingdom remained an important pilgrimage destination. The soil where his blood spilled maintained its curative properties in the eyes of his people. The Northumbrians and Irish accepted Oswald's dual nature. They accepted that he could become a saint without having to lay down his sword or abdicate his office.

With the arrival of the cult of the cross in the early eighth century, the ecclesiastical cult of St. Oswald, which hitherto had primarily been interested in placing him in a clerical setting, devised a new way of establishing an even firmer basis for Oswald's sanctity by associating him intimately with the cross. Heavenfield and the monastery of Hexham became the focal point for veneration of both St. Oswald and the True Cross. Oswald's cross, according to Bede, was the first cross raised over Bernicia, and it presumably served as a model that spawned considerable cross building that

occurred in Anglo-Saxon England over the next centuries. The passion for the cross that exploded across England in the last quarter of the seventh century and Oswald's association with it strengthened his cult as it spread from the British Isles to the continent.

Within the context of the Christological debates that reached England in the middle of the seventh century, Oswald's cult developed its concept of the saint's dual nature. Northumbrians at the council of Hatfield (680) supported the orthodox position of the Son's dual nature with little controversy due in part to their experience with the less nuanced model of dual nature available to them in the persona of St. Oswald. The warrior-king saint represented a blending of apparent opposites contained within the body of one man. Acceptance of St. Oswald's dual nature facilitated an intellectual understanding of the union of the human and divine in the Son.<sup>501</sup> Oswald's cult was strengthened by its increasing association with the cross and by extension Christ. The warrior-Christ from the polysemous poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, which was written at this time, represents another intellectual product from this milieu.

Many of the crosses built in England were preaching crosses<sup>502</sup> or were associated with monasteries. Currently, the remains of approximately 1,500 standing stone crosses from the medieval period can be found in England, and most of these are in

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<sup>501</sup> In Anglo-Saxon England, the concept of the Son's dual nature predated the development of St. Oswald and his dual nature.

<sup>502</sup> *Bedae Vita Sancti Cuthberti* in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), xxxvii.

Northumbria.<sup>503</sup> While this number is large, we have no estimate of the number of wooden crosses constructed for the same purpose, but given their relative ease of construction and the potential for portability, their number must have been substantial. So abundant were stone crosses in Northumbria that they and the closely related art forms of carved coffins and boxes, such as the coffin of St. Cuthbert (d. 687) and the Franks Casket, have come to represent the pinnacle of what has been called Insular Art. This art form is indigenous to the northern British Isle and Ireland and is not the product of any one ethnic group, but a mix of traditions that stands as an emblem of seventh- and eighth-century Northumbrian art and culture. It represents a syncretism of style among Anglo-Saxon, British, Irish, and Pictish artisans who were living and producing their work in England and Ireland.<sup>504</sup> Much of this work was spawned during the Golden Age of Northumbria, broadly speaking, from the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth centuries, reaching its pinnacle during the reign of King Aldfrith (685-705). It was during this period that material culture as represented in the Franks Casket and the Ruthwell Cross were produced. Latin literary culture flourished and spread during this period. It is also the time of the greatest outflow of Latin prose. Bede and Alcuin are just two exemplars. All of the seven Latin saints' lives from Northumbria are products of this time.

During the reign of King Aldfrith (685-705), Northumbria was politically stable and wealthy. The actions of his immediate two predecessors, Oswiu and Ecgfrith, had

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<sup>503</sup> Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1996), 47.

<sup>504</sup> Rosemary Cramp, "The Insular Tradition," in *The Insular Tradition*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov, R. T. Farrell and M. Ryan (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 283-284.

subjugated their more aggressive neighbors and deepened ties with others. In 685 Northumbria was a Christian state surrounded by other Christian states. Though the last years of King Oswiu's reign witnessed a reduction in the breadth of his kingdom, his son, the bellicose Ecgfrith, restored the size of the kingdom and continued to expand and anglicize the neighboring British kingdoms. The first of these was probably Rheged, which may have been annexed when then prince Oswiu married Riemmelth ca. 638.<sup>505</sup> Strathclyde having been squeezed by the Dál Riata, Picts and Northumbria ceased to be a military power in the region by the 680s. The diminishment of Celtic power in northwest England would have given the Northumbrian dynasty control of the lands in the vicinity of Carlisle and the Anglo-Saxon Church access to the western regions, formerly the stronghold of the British Church. Evidence for Anglo-Saxon dominance is illustrated by Ecgfrith's grant of land around Carlisle, the capital of the kingdom of Strathclyde, to St. Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne, in 685. By the end of the first quarter of the eighth century, Pehthelm became the first Anglo-Saxon bishop of the ancient British monastery *Candida Casa* (Whithorn), deep within Strathclyde's former territory. It was just south of this region that the Ruthwell Cross, a Northumbrian monument that contains a segment of *The Dream of the Rood*, was built by artisans from the numerous ethnic groups in the region.

The reign of King Aldfrith (685-705) marked the pinnacle of the Northumbrian Golden Age. During this twenty-year period, the kingdom was at peace, leading to an

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<sup>505</sup> This was the same year that Oswald successfully conquered Edinburg.

outpouring of written works and art. All of the Northumbrian saints' lives were written around 700. Bede's *History* was compiled during this time. There was an increase in church building and the foundation of monastic houses.<sup>506</sup> There was a massive increase in the construction of stone crosses. Some of the crosses were simple, while others such as those at Bewcastle and Ruthwell were richly adorned. One can imagine that under the patronage of a scholar king like Aldfrith, who was trained at Iona and maintained close relations with the leading scholars of his age, that a texturally rich work like *The Dream of the Rood* would have been produced. Aldfrith's kingship gave Northumbria a brief opportunity to rest from the warfare that dominated the kingdom during the seventh century and would return in the mid-eighth century, ultimately leading to the kingdom's defeat by the invading Danes and its fading from history.

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<sup>506</sup> There are three lives of St. Cuthbert (one prose life by Anonymous [699-705], a verse [705] and a prose [715] life both by Bede), one of St. Gregory the Great (704-714), St. Wilfrid (710), and St. Ceolfrith (704). Monastic foundations include Coquet, Jarrow, Crayke, Carlisle, Watton, Bardney, and Elmete. Because of the almost complete lack of charters from Northumbria before the Viking period, dates for church foundations are too broad to assign specifically to Aldfrith's reign.



## Conclusion

### *Oswaldus sanctissimus ac victoriossimus rex Nordanhymbrorum*

King Oswald was the hero of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. He dedicates almost the entirety of Book Three to him and the events that he shaped. Oswald established Christianity among the Northumbrians, but he was not the first king to do so.<sup>507</sup> His reign was relatively short when compared with that of his brother and his nephews.<sup>508</sup> He was successful in war but was not a conqueror like his father Æthelfrith or his brother Oswiu. Oswald was unique, and his fame and power grew greatly after his death, due in part to his brother and in part to Bede.

Oswiu became king upon the brutal death of his brother Oswald in 642. He did not attempt to recover his brother's remains for a year following his death.<sup>509</sup> We may assume that he did not fulfill his duty of honor because his position as king was weak, and he was unable to expose himself or his kingdom. When he did recover his brother's remains, he discovered that they had become an object of veneration by the Christian and pagan people of the region. Oswiu gathered Oswald's head and arms and returned them to his fortress of Bamburgh, where he had the arms enshrined as sacred relics. Oswiu had done what no other king had done. He had usurped the power of the bishop and created a

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<sup>507</sup> King Eadwine was the first Christian Northumbrian king, and he was more closely tied with the Roman as opposed to Irish Church. However, he was killed and his line scattered. In addition, the missionaries that he brought with him fled when the king was killed, so he had little lasting influence.

<sup>508</sup> Oswald reigned 8 years, Oswiu 28 years, his sons Ecgrith 15 and Aldfrith 20 years.

<sup>509</sup> *HE*, III.12.

Christian saint. Further, he had created a royal saint<sup>510</sup> who had died while still holding his throne. These two features of Oswald set him apart from royal saints for the next 350 years.<sup>511</sup>

The purpose of this dissertation was two-fold. The first was to examine the cultural and intellectual environment of seventh-century Northumbria to determine what factors led to the creation of a royal warrior-saint in that kingdom. The second was to examine the Northumbrian poem *The Dream of the Rood*, which I propose is about the dual nature of Christ, and determine what common traditions drawn upon.

What I determined was that Northumbria was unique among the Anglo-Saxon kings for two reasons. First, it was at the edge of the known world. Frontier people tend toward a greater mixing of classes, and there is more cultural innovation. The second factor is that the kingdom had closer ties with what could be perceived as the Other. The Anglo-Saxons who were to become Northumbrians were in close contact with powerful Celtic kingdoms. For over 150 years (c. 500-650) the peoples of Dál Riata, Pictland, Strathclyde, Rheged and Gododdin warred with the Anglo-Saxon invaders. The peoples also had religious, cultural and political exchange. When Æthelfrith was defeated by Eadwine in 616, his wife and children fled not to southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms but to the north and west to the Irish and the Picts. Oswald and Oswiu were fostered among the

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<sup>510</sup> Oswald was not the first. St. Sigismund, a Merovingian king of Burgundy, was made a saint by the local bishop in 524. However, Sigismund had given up his royal power before his death and sanctification.

<sup>511</sup> There are two exceptions, both from Northumbria. Eadwine, d. 634, and Oswine, d. 651, were killed while still ruling kings, and both were venerated as saints. However, both were made saints by bishops after Oswald's sanctification, and neither cult was particularly popular.

Irish both in Ireland and in southern Scotland. They converted to Christianity at the Irish monastery of Iona. While in exile (for 18 years) they become Irish speakers and adopted the ways of Irish nobility. When Oswald returned to the Northumbrian throne (634), he brings Irish ways with them, and these become integrated into the Northumbrian culture.

The monks at Iona send a bishop to the Northumbrians who establishes a bishopric at Lindisfarne. For the next 75 years the Northumbrian Church is dominated by the Irish. In addition to the Irish practices of liturgy and monasticism coming to Northumbria, many pilgrims and lay Irish people came to the kingdom. With them they brought their language and their cultural traditions.

Oswiu, who becomes king in 642, has an Irish wife and a British wife from the kingdom of Rheged. We can be sure that he was not an isolated case regarding intermarriage. The kingdom of Northumbria was not a homogeneous Anglo-Saxon kingdom, which would be typical of those south of the Humber. The cultural pastiche in Northumbria permitted a break with the traditional medieval paradigm. The medieval people divided the world into a series of mutually exclusive opposites.<sup>512</sup> These include good/evil, human/monster, man/woman, man/God and warrior/saint. Within Northumbria, at least for a time, these strict, exclusive categories, because of cultural mixing, broke down. This different way of viewing the world may have suggested to Oswiu that a warrior-king need not abdicate his throne to become a Christian saint. The categories of king and martyr could overlap. This idea was not rejected. The popularity of

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<sup>512</sup> Karen Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

the warrior-saint increased in Northumbria and eventually spread, first to Ireland then to other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The Northumbrian Church hierarchy was initially silent regarding the warrior-king saint. They neither accepted nor rejected the concept. However, in the late 670s the monastery at Hexham appropriated the cult of St. Oswald, and within a very few years they were in control.

The acceptance of the cult of St. Oswald by the Church came at the same time that the cult of the cross arrived in England. In 680 the council of Hatfield ratified the orthodox position of the Roman Church regarding the dual nature of Christ. While the dual nature of Christ was preached, I am not certain what percentage of those who heard the liturgy, whether lay or ecclesiastical, understood the concept. The fusion of opposite or at least mutually exclusive constructs, divine and human, within one individual would have been difficult to grasp. However, the dual nature of Oswald may have eased understanding of the concept.

No doubt it was an issue that troubled the minds of Christians. *The Dream of the Rood*, which I suggest may have been written at the court of King Aldfrith, or if not there then probably during his reign, addressed this problem of dual nature. So important was the issue and so well known that the poem was carved on the early eighth-century Ruthwell Monument. The poem through its mix of genre and shifts in imagery illustrates the Northumbrian worldview. For Northumbrians, there could be a mix of traits. A gold covered cross could morph into a bleeding cross which could morph into a bleeding

man/God. This flexibility of thought in *The Dream of the Rood* mirrors the intellectual flexibility that led to the creation of a warrior-king saint.

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## **Appendix**

**Appendix I: *Dream of the Rood* from *The Vercelli Book*<sup>513</sup>**

- Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst        secgan wylle,  
 hwæt me gemætte        to midre nihte,  
 syðþan reordberend        reste wunedon!  
 þuhte me þæt ic gesawe        syllicre treow  
 5    on lyft lædan,        leohte bewunden,
- beama beorhtost.        Eall þæt beacen wæs  
 begoten mid golde.        Gimmas stodon  
 fægere æt foldan sceatum,        swylce þær fife wæron  
 uppe on þam eaxlegespanne.        Beheoldon þær engel dryhtnes ealle,  
 10    fægere þurh forðgesceaft.        Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga,
- ac hine þær beheoldon        halige gastas,  
 men ofer moldan,        ond eall þeos mære gesceaft.  
 Syllic wæs se sigebeam,        ond ic synnum fah,  
 forwunded mid wommum.        Geseah ic wuldres treow,  
 15    wædum geweorðode,        wynnum scinan,
- gegyred mid golde;        gimmas hæfdon  
 bewrigene weorðlice        wealdendes treow.  
 Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold        ongytan meahte  
 earmra ærgewin,        þæt hit ærest ongan  
 20    swætan on þa swiðran healfe.        Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed,
- forht ic wæs for þære fæggran gesyhðe.        Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen  
 wendan wædum ond bleom;        hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,  
 beswyled mid swates gange,        hwilum mid since gegyrwed.  
 Hwæðre ic þær licgende        lange hwile  
 25    beheold hreowcearig        hælendes treow,
- oððæt ic gehyrde        þæt hit hleoðrode.  
 Ongan þa word spreca        wudu selesta:  
 “þæt wæs geara iu,        (ic þæt gyta geman),  
 þæt ic wæs aheawen        holtes on ende,  
 30    astyred of stefne minum.        Genaman me ðær strange feondas,

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<sup>513</sup> *The Vercelli Book*. Editor George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 61-65. Translation is my own.

- geworhton him þær to wæfersyne,      heton me heora wergas hebban.  
 Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum,      oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,  
 gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge.      Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes  
 efstan elne mycle      þæt he me wolde on gestigan.  
 35      þær ic þa ne dorste      ofer dryhtnes word
- bugan oððe berstan,      þa ic bifian geseah  
 eorðan sceatas.      Ealle ic mihte  
 feondas gefyllan,      hwæðre ic fæste stod.  
 Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð,      (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),  
 40      strang ond stiðmod.      Gestah he on gealgan heanne,
- modig on manigra gesyhðe,      þa he wolde mancyn lysan.  
 Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte.      Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,  
 feallan to foldan sceatum,      ac ic sceolde fæste standan.  
 Rod wæs ic aræred.      Ahof ic ricne cyning,  
 45      heofona hlaford,      hylðan me ne dorste.
- þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum.      On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,  
 opene inwidhlemmas.      Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.  
 Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere.      Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,  
 begoten of þæs guman sidan,      siððan he hæfde his gast onsended.  
 50      Feala ic on þam beorge      gebiden hæbbe
- wraðra wyrda.      Geseah ic weruda god  
 þearle þenian.      þystro hæfdon  
 bewrigen mid wolcnum      wealdendes hræw,  
 scirne sciman,      sceadu forðeode,  
 55      wann under wolcnum.      Weop eal gesceaft,
- cwiðdon cyninges fyll.      Crist wæs on rode.  
 Hwæðere þær fuse      feorran cwoman  
 to þam æðelinge.      Ic þæt eall beheold.  
 Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed,      hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa,  
 60      eaðmod elne mycle.      Genamon hie þær ælmihtigne god,  
 ahofon hine of ðam hefian wite.      Forleton me þa hilderincas  
 standan steame bedrifenne;      eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod.  
 Aledon hie ðær limwerigne,      gestodon him æt his lices heafðum,  
 beheoldon hie ðær heofenes dryhten,      ond he hine ðær hwile reste,  
 65      meðe æfter ðam miclan gewinne.      Ongunnon him þa moldern wyrcan

- beornas on banan gesyhðe;      curfon hie ðæt of beorhtan stane,  
 gesetton hie ðæron sigora wealdend.      Ongunnon him þa sorhleod galan  
 earme on þa æfentide,      þa hie woldon eft siðian,  
 meðe fram þam mæran þeodne.      Reste he ðær mæte weorode.  
 70      Hwæðere we ðær greotende      gode hwile
- stodon on staðole,      syððan stefn up gewat  
 hilderinca.      Hræw colode,  
 fæger feorgbold.      þa us man fyllan ongan  
 ealle to eorðan.      þæt wæs egeslic wyrd!  
 75      Bedealf us man on deopan seape.      Hwæðre me þær dryhtnes þegnas,
- freondas gefrunon,  
 ond gyredon me      golde ond seolfre.  
 Nu ðu miht gehyran,      hæleð min se leofa,  
 þæt ic bealuwara weorc      gebiden hæbbe,  
 80      sarra sorga.      Is nu sæl cumen
- þæt me weorðiað      wide ond side  
 menn ofer moldan,      ond eall þeos mære gesceaft,  
 gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne.      On me bearn godes  
 þrowode hwile.      Forþan ic þrymfæst nu  
 85      hlifige under heofenum,      ond ic hælæn mæg
- æghwylcne anra,      þara þe him bið egesa to me.  
 Iu ic wæs geworden      wita heardost,  
 leodum laðost,      ærþan ic him lifes weg  
 rihtne gerymde,      reordberendum.  
 90      Hwæt, me þa geweorðode      wuldres ealdor
- ofer holmwudu,      heofonrices weard!  
 Swylce swa he his modor eac,      Marian sylfe,  
 ælmihtig god      for ealle menn  
 geweorðode      ofer eall wifa cynn.  
 95      Nu ic þe hate,      hæleð min se leofa,
- þæt ðu þas gesyhðe      secge mannum,  
 onwreoh wordum      þæt hit is wuldres beam,  
 se ðe ælmihtig god      on þrowode  
 for mancynnes      manegum synnum  
 100      ond Adomes      ealdgewyrhtum.

- Deað he þær byrigde,      hwæðere eft dryhten aras  
 mid his miclan mihte      mannum to helpe.  
 He ða on heofenas astag.      Hider eft fundað  
 on þysne middangeard      mancynn secan  
 105 on domdæge      dryhten sylfa,
- ælmihtig god,      ond his englas mid,  
 þæt he þonne wile deman,      se ah domes geweald,  
 anra gehwylcum      swa he him ærur her  
 on þyssum lænum      life geearnaþ.  
 110 Ne mæg þær ænig      unforht wesan
- for þam worde      þe se wealdend cwyð.  
 Frineð he for þære mænige      hwær se man sie,  
 se ðe for dryhtnes naman      deaðes wolde  
 biteres onbyrgan,      swa he ær on ðam beame dyde.  
 115 Ac hie þonne forhtiað,      ond fea þencaþ
- hwæt hie to Criste      cweðan onginnen.  
 Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig      anforht wesan  
 þe him ær in breostum bereð      beacna selest,  
 ac ðurh ða rode sceal      rice gesecan  
 120 of eorðwege      æghwylc sawl,
- seo þe mid wealdende      wunian þenceð.”  
 Gebæd ic me þa to þan beame      bliðe mode,  
 elne mycle,      þær ic ana wæs  
 mæte werede.      Wæs modsefa  
 125 afysed on forðwege,      feala ealra gebad
- langunghwila.      Is me nu lifes hyht  
 þæt ic þone sigebeam      secan mote  
 ana oftor      þonne ealle men,  
 well weorþian.      Me is willa to ðam  
 130 mycel on mode,      ond min mundbyrd is
- geriht to þære rode.      Nah ic ricra feala  
 freonda on foldan,      ac hie forð heonon  
 gewiton of worulde dreamum,      sohton him wuldres cyning,  
 lifiaþ nu on heofenum      mid heahfædere,  
 135 wuniaþ on wuldre,      ond ic wene me

- daga gehwylce      hwænne me dryhtnes rod,  
 þe ic her on eorðan      ær sceawode,  
 on þyssan lænan      life gefetige  
 ond me þonne gebringe      þær is blis mycel,  
 140 dream on heofonum,      þær is dryhtnes folc
- geseted to symle,      þær is singal blis,  
 ond me þonne asette      þær ic syþþan mot  
 wunian on wuldre,      well mid þam halgum  
 dreames brucan.      Si me dryhten freond,  
 145 se ðe her on eorþan      ær þrowode
- on þam gealgtreowe      for guman synnum.  
 He us onlȳsde      ond us lif forgeaf,  
 heofonlicne ham.      Hiht wæs geniwad  
 mid bledum ond mid blisse      þam þe þær bryne þolodan.  
 150 Se sunu wæs sigorfæst      on þam siðfate,
- mihtig ond spedig,      þa he mid manigeo com,  
 gasta weorode,      on godes rice,  
 anwealda ælmihtig,      englum to blisse  
 ond eallum ðam halgum      þam þe on heofonum ær  
 155 wunedon on wuldre,      þa heora wealdend cwom,  
 ælmihtig god,      þær his eðel wæs.



## Appendix II: *Dream of the Rood* English Translation

Lo, I wish to tell      the best dream,  
 which came to me      in the middle of the night,  
 after the speech-bearers      lay at rest!  
 It seemed to me that I saw      an exceedingly rare tree  
 5      extending into the air,      encircled with light  
  
 the brightest tree.      All of the sign was  
 suffused with gold.      Jewels stood  
 fairly at the surface of the earth      there were also five  
 upon the shoulder-span.      All the angels of the Lord kept watch over there  
 10      beautiful by creation.      Indeed this was not the cross of the wicked,  
  
 but holy spirits,      gazed on him there  
 men on the earth,      and all this glorious creation.  
 Wonderful was the tree of victory      and I stained with sins  
 sorely wounded with inequities.      I saw the tree of glory  
 15      exalted in coverings      shining in joy  
  
 adorned with gold      beset with jewels  
 nobly ringed      the tree of the Lord.  
 Yet I could perceive      through that gold  
 the former agony of the wretched ones      that at first it began  
 20      to bleed on the stronger side.      I was all troubled with sorrows  
  
 I was frightened for the fair sight.      I saw the brilliant sign  
 change covering and color;      at times it was wet with moisture (blood)  
 drenched with the flow of blood,      at times adorned with treasure.  
 Yet I lying there      for a long while  
 25      sorrowful watched      the tree of the savior,  
  
 until I heard      it call out.  
 Then [it] began to speak words      the best wood:  
 “it was years ago      I still remember  
 that I was cut      in the outermost reach of the forest  
 30      removed from my trunk.      Strong foes seized me there  
  
 fashioned me to be a spectacle for them      commanded me to hold their outlaws  
 men carried me on their shoulders      until they set me on a hill,  
 many enemies made me sufficiently fast there      Then I saw the lord of humankind

- hasten with great zeal      so that he could climb on me.  
 35    Then did I not dare      over the word of the Lord
- to bend or break,      when I saw the surface  
 of the earth tremble      I might have felled  
 the foes      nevertheless I stood fast.  
 Then the young hero undressed himself      (who was God Almighty),  
 40    strong and unflinching      he climbed on the high cross
- brave in the sight of many      so that he could redeem humankind.  
 I trembled when the man embraced me      I dared not bend to the earth  
 to fall to the earth's surface      but I should stand fast.  
 I was raised a cross      I raised the powerful king,  
 45    heaven's lord,      I did not dare bend.
- They pierced me with dark nails      on me were seen wounds  
 open wicked wounds.      I did not dare harm any of them  
 they mocked us both together      I was entirely soaked with blood  
 spilled from the man's side      afterwards he had sent his spirit  
 50    I had to endure many      cruel fates
- on the hill.      I saw the God of hosts  
 severely stretched out      darkness had covered  
 with its clouds      the Lord's body,  
 the bright light      went forth in the darkness  
 55    dark under the clouds.      All creation wept
- they spoke of the king's death      Christ was on the cross.  
 Nevertheless they came there      eager from afar  
 to the Lord.      I beheld it all.  
 Sorely I was afflicted with sorrow      yet I bowed down to the warrior's hands  
 60    gently with great zeal      they received Almighty God
- raised him from his heavy torment      the men left me  
 to stand covered in blood.      I was all wounded with darts  
 there they lay the limb weary one      they stood at the head of the body  
 they beheld heaven's lord      and he rested himself there for awhile  
 65    weary after a great battle.      The men began to form a sepulcher
- in sight of the slayers      they carved it from bright stone  
 they set the victory lord within      [and] began to sing a dirge for him  
 sadly in the evening      when they intended to depart

70 in sorrow from their mighty prince. He rested there alone  
 Nevertheless we were weeping there a good while

we stood in our station after the voice of the warriors  
 went up. The corpse cooled,  
 fair dwelling of the soul. Then one man began to fell us  
 all down to the earth. That was a dreadful fate!  
 75 A man buried us deep in a pit. Yet the Lord's thanes

friends found me  
 adorned me with gold and silver.  
 Now you may hear my dear man  
 that I experienced pain from the evil-doers  
 80 grievous sorrow. Now the time has come

that it happens to me far and wide  
 that men over the earth and all those who honor me  
 pray to this sign. On me the son of God  
 suffered awhile for that I am now glorious  
 85 a tower under heaven, and I am able to heal

everyone of those who is in awe to see me.  
 Long ago I became the hardest torture  
 most hateful to people before I opened to them  
 the true way of life, the speech-bearers.  
 90 Lo, the lord of the world honored me

over all trees of the forest Guardian of heaven  
 in the same way he honored his mother Mary herself  
 Almighty God, for all men  
 [honored] her over all wohumankind.  
 95 Now I bid you, my beloved man

tell this vision to men,  
 reveal in words that it is the tree of glory  
 on which Almighty God suffered  
 for humankind's many sins  
 100 and Adam's deed of old.

There he tasted death, yet the Lord rose again  
 with his great power to help men.

He ascended to heaven. Hither again he will come  
 to this middle-earth to seek humankind  
 105 on judgment day. The Lord himself,  
  
 almighty God and with his angels,  
 when he will judge, he who has the power of judgment  
  
 each one as they earlier here  
 in this brief life deserves.  
 110 Nor might any there be unafraid  
  
 before the word that the Lord says:  
 he will ask before the multitude where is the man  
 who for the name of the Lord would taste  
 bitter death as he before did on the cross.  
 115 But they would be afraid and few would think  
  
 what they might begin to say to Christ.  
 Not any there need be afraid  
 who before bore him in their breast the best sign.  
 But through the cross they shall see the kingdom  
 120 from earthly way every soul,  
  
 who intends to dwell with the Lord.”  
 Then I with glad heart prayed to the cross with  
 great zeal, where I was alone  
 in small company. My soul was urged forward  
 125 on the way forth endured much in all  
  
 from longing. Now is to me hope of life  
 that I may be permitted to seek the tree of victory  
 alone more often than all men,  
 to honor it well, my desire for it is  
 130 great in my heart, and my protection is  
  
 directed to the rood. I have not many more powerful  
 friends on earth. But they departed forth  
 hence to the world of joy they sought the world's king  
 they live now in heaven with God the Father,  
 135 they dwell in the realm of glory and I believe  
  
 each day that the cross of God

which I here on earth beheld before,  
in this transitory life will carry me off  
and bring me where there is great bliss  
140 joy in heaven where the people of the Lord  
  
are seated at the feast where in everlasting bliss  
and set me where afterwards I am able  
to dwell in glory, well with the holy ones  
to enjoy delight. May the Lord be a friend to me  
145 who here on earth before suffered  
  
on the gallows tree for the sins of humanity,  
he redeemed us and gave us life and  
a heavenly home. Hope was renewed  
with joy and with bliss, for those who endured the fire there  
150 the son was victorious in the expedition  
  
mighty and successful when he came with many  
a host of souls, into God's kingdom,  
Lord Almighty to the angels bliss  
and all the saints who before in heaven  
155 dwell in glory, when the Lord  
  
God Almighty, came where his home was.

### VITA

Scott Hutcheson MacKenzie was born at Mt. Pleasant, New York on 22 January 1958. He lived in Harrison, New York until June of 1974 when his family moved to Silver Spring, Maryland. There he attended John F. Kennedy High School in Wheaton, Maryland, and received his high school diploma in 1977. Beginning at the University of Maryland in the history department he shifted his major and graduated in 1982 with a Bachelor of Science in Zoology. Upon graduation Mr. MacKenzie was employed as a molecular biologist at the National Institutes of Health, in the National Cancer Institute. In the fall of 1985 he accepted a teaching assistantship at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and began his study toward a Master of Science in Zoology. The degree was conferred in 1988.

Mr. MacKenzie worked as a molecular geneticist at the Department of Animal Science at The University of Tennessee between 1991 and 2004. After much reflection he returned to the study of the Middle Ages, his intended field when a history major. To that end he began study toward a Master of Arts in English in 2000. This degree, with the thesis, *The Anglo-Saxons and their Struggle with Chaos: 'When a Man is Unable to Change his Fate then he must Endure it Well,'* was awarded in August 2002. He continued his interest in the Anglo-Saxons, their literature and culture and completed the Ph.D. from the Department of English in December 2010.