

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand why Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics in the early medieval period. Soil was collected from locations which were connected to the cult of a saint, to serve as relics. These relics were then often utilised for their miraculous healing or protective properties, which were described in detail by Bede. The soil relics of saint Oswald have been thoroughly described in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, more so than any other source. As a result of this, it remains the main case study of this thesis. Researching this phenomenon has shown that soil relics were revered because soil acted as an excellent medium to hold the essence of a saint. Soil relics could cure rural people, who struggled more than elite people to access successful healing through conventional methods. Roman customs of soil veneration certainly affected Anglo-Saxon soil tradition, as many of their soil veneration practices are shared by both cultures.

Miraculous Soil:  
Anglo-Saxon Soil Veneration in the Early Medieval  
Period

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 642 AD king Oswald of Northumbria died in the Battle of Maserfelth.<sup>1</sup> After this event, a cult grew around his relics and he was sanctified for his faith and for the philanthropy he performed during his life.<sup>2</sup> Oswald's deathplace resonated profoundly with Anglo-Saxons. Anglo-Saxons collected soil there to serve as relics, leaving a hole, according to medieval accounts, as deep as a man's height.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this thesis is to explore why Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics in the early medieval period. To understand this question, the case study of Oswald of Northumbria will be investigated, as his soil relics encapsulate many of the themes of this thesis. Documented soil relics which have been kept until the modern day appear to be very rare.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to understand their significance we must rely not on material evidence but on contemporary accounts, such as that of Bede (d. 735), who described Oswald's soil relics at length around 731 AD. Bede describes the miracle-producing properties of sanctified soil in several chapters of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. This thesis will now refer to it as the *EH* throughout. Oswald's soil relics were most often venerated for their healing and miracle-producing properties. From a modern perspective, it can be difficult to imagine how germ-ridden, blood-enriched soil could be praised for its healing abilities, but in a

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<sup>1</sup> The location is known as either Maserfelth, Maserfield or Maserfeld. This thesis will continue to use Maserfelth, as this is how it is written in: Bede. Collins, Roger and McClure, Judith (eds). *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. (Apple Books E-Book, 1999), Book 3 Chapter 9, 216.

<sup>2</sup> Vicky Gunn, *Bede's Historiae: genre, rhetoric, and the construction of Anglo-Saxon church history*, (Boydell Press, 2009), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3, Chapter 9, 202-203.

<sup>4</sup> Julia MH Smith, "The remains of the saints: the evidence of early medieval relic collections," *Early Medieval Europe* 28, no. 3 (2020): 410. Smith describes one example of a soil relic with a label which states that it was taken from the church in which Peter was first buried.

similar vein, soil and manure are indispensable for their ability to fertilize crops, providing food and health for a community.<sup>5</sup>

As Alexandra Walsham writes, “a relic is a material object that relates to a particular individual and/or to events and places with which that individual was associated”.<sup>6</sup>

Relics are usually easily transportable and most often do not decay.<sup>7</sup> This definition however certainly varies depending on the type, time period and location of the relic. Soil relics were most commonly mixed with water and consumed orally, or kept on the person for protection, as was the case with other contact relics. Soil relics, tomb dust or ash required water to create a coherent, useable item.<sup>8</sup> The ingestion of soil connected the saint, their sacred origin and its consumer harmoniously. The *EH* describes how virtue could be obtained from relics associated with several different saints.<sup>9</sup> Oswald’s soil relics were distinctive, however, in that they were able to perform miracles which were unique for this period.<sup>10</sup> Soil relics were mundane in form compared to the gold and jewel-embellished corporeal relics of the later medieval periods, in which the collection of relics flourished.<sup>11</sup> Some reliquaries contained soil or dust relics, but according to Luchterhandt

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, "Dynamic Dirt: Medieval Holy Dust, Ritual Erosion, and Pilgrimage Eco-poetics," *Open Library of Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2019), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and remains," *Past and Present, supplement 5* (2010): 11-12. And Julia MH Smith, "Care of relics in early medieval Rome," In *Church, Faith and Culture in the Medieval West*, Bolton, Brenda, Anne J. Duggan and Damian J. Smith (eds), (2014): 179-180. Whilst Smith provides a practically identical explanation of what a relic is, she includes more explanation of contact relics made of natural materials.

<sup>7</sup> Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and remains," 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Julia MH Smith, "Portable Christianity: relics in the medieval west (c. 700-1200)," In *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 181, (University of Glasgow, 2012), 150.

<sup>9</sup> This includes some description in varying degrees of the relics of Saint Alban, Saint Oswald and Saint Peter.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," In *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 426.

<sup>11</sup> Manfred Luchterhandt, "The popes and the loca sancta of Jerusalem: Relic practice and relic diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean after the Muslim conquest," In *Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500–1500*, (Routledge, 2017), 39.

“natural substances do not feature prominently”.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps due to this, or the private nature of soil relics, the topic of soil as a contact relic has been understudied. Overall, prior research has been dedicated mostly to the corporeal relics of the later medieval period, which remained in churches.<sup>13</sup>

This thesis attempts to extract understudied information from accounts of soil relics, which were utilised within early medieval cults by the Anglo-Saxons. This will be achieved by evaluating the cultural, religious, and traditional aspects of their veneration, a multi-layered process which led to the popularisation of soil relics. This thesis is comprised of three sub-questions, answered across three chapters, aimed at illustrating why Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics. Chapter 2 will evaluate Bede’s presentation of Saint Oswald of Northumbria in the *EH*. Bede is one of the main sources for information regarding Oswald, writing a little less than a century after Oswald's death.<sup>14</sup> His *EH* is the most extensive source on Oswald’s soil relics. The information provided by Bede was utilised by others who detailed Oswald’s relics, including Reginald of Durham (d. 1190). The *EH* remains the main focus of this chapter, as it will allow for an evaluation of Bede’s impression of Oswald’s sanctity, whilst comparing and critiquing how Bede presents other soil relics, which will show why Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics specifically. The third chapter explores how Anglo-Saxons perceived relics, water, blood and soil. By researching the demand for soil relics and their healing properties, this question will ask how cultural and religious forces popularized soil relics and promoted sainthood in the

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<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Hahn, "What do reliquaries do for relics?," *Numen* 57, no. 3-4 (2010): 290. And Luchterhandt, "The popes and the loca sancta of Jerusalem," 45. Luchterhandt’s analysis of the Lateran loca sancta reliquary, suggests that soil relics made up 15% of the total relics which were uncovered there.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 157. Key historians on corporeal relics include Julia Smith, Rebecca Browett, Miri Rubin and Patrick Geary. See bibliography for the works of Rubin and Geary which focus on corporeal relics of the central and late medieval periods. Julia Smith features heavily in this thesis as she has also written extensively on contact relics of the early medieval period.

<sup>14</sup> George Hardin Brown, *A companion to Bede*, Vol. 12 (Boydell Press, 2009), 15.

Anglo-Saxon period. The third and final sub-question, answered in Chapter 4, investigates the cultic practice surrounding the veneration of soil relics, a tradition which echoed the practices of late antique Romans, who also revered heroes, experienced healing miracles and venerated soil.<sup>15</sup> These similarities will be studied and criticised to gain deeper insight into the cultic practices of Anglo-Saxon soil tradition. This will attribute to understanding the background of soil relic veneration.

The study of relics is well-documented, a trend which continues to rise, as evident from the large quantity of recent texts and debate.<sup>16</sup> However, as mentioned, attention has focused on the relics which have resided in churches, with few historians researching or publishing work on soil relics specifically.<sup>17</sup> Charles Freeman for example, has dedicated some limited but interesting discussion to Oswald and soil relics, whilst providing an engaging comparison to cultic practices of the Romans of late antiquity.<sup>18</sup> Julia Smith likewise provides information on the curation and portability of relics, but does not regularly specify soil relics.<sup>19</sup> This is because many contact relics such as soil seldom still

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust: how relics shaped the history of Medieval Europe*, (Yale University Press, 2011), 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> There are not especially large amounts of debate regarding soil relics specifically, as soil relics have not been the main focus of discussion, unlike this thesis. However, debate does arise around soil relating to Oswald's cult, including where he was buried, see Stancliffe, "Where was Oswald killed." and the relevancy of Roman influences of early medieval relic culture, is described in: Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, Chapter 6, 75-90.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 157.

<sup>18</sup> Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, 31-32. The first part of Freeman's discussion is very similar to the parameters set out in this thesis, including relics the early medieval period, after which he examines how Roman influences could affect relic veneration in this period. There is however a lack of soil relic analysis, which does not go further than a mention of the soil relics at Maserfelth, before suggesting that ancient pagan customs related to soil veneration on page 94. This thesis aims to improve this absent analysis of soil relics.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 166. and Smith, "The remains of the saints", 410. Within *Portable Christianity*, Smith describes uncatalogued soil being found among other relics. In the remains of saints, Smith utilises relic labels to identify some soil as being taken from the church in which Peter was first buried. She does not however provide analysis on the undocumented samples of soil, which appears to be the same among other historians, including Susan Morrison who focuses on pilgrimages which collected soil relics.

have documentation.<sup>20</sup> The study of soil relics is necessary, as this thesis will demonstrate, as they provide insight into the use of relics among rural people, who generally sought-after relics which connected to the landscape around them.<sup>21</sup> By researching this gap in the historiography of soil relics, this thesis will hopefully answer questions about contact relics and their relevance in the early and later medieval periods, as well as posing avenues for future research.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 148. Whilst the labels can survive, as labels could updated, they are most often detached from the relic which they formally accompanied.

<sup>21</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 426-427.

<sup>22</sup> Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and remains," 14.



## Chapter 2: How were Oswald and the soil relics involved in his cult presented by Bede in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*?

### Introduction: Saint Oswald

King Oswald of Northumbria reigned from 634 AD until his death in 642 AD. After his death, he was venerated as a saint locally, before his cult spread across Europe. By the eighth century he was one of the most revered saints in central Europe.<sup>23</sup> Oswald was not born a Christian, but instead converted to Christianity in Ireland before returning home to Northumbria, where he overthrew the king at the Battle of Heavenfield and took control himself.<sup>24</sup> Bede describes two locations associated with Oswald which were revered by Anglo-Saxons. The first location pertains to the area beneath a cross at Heavenfield which was erected in the soil by Oswald and prayed at, before the battle against the Britons, whereupon Oswald achieved victory.<sup>25</sup> This victory was portrayed not only as a victory for Oswald, but as a victory for Christians over pagan Britons. The deathplace of Oswald is the second location, another battlefield, located at Maserfelth.<sup>26</sup> Soil relics were retrieved from these sites; Bede wrote that “people have often taken soil from the place where his body fell to the ground, have put it in water, and by its use have brought great relief to their sick”.<sup>27</sup> Other relics associated with Oswald included chips of the cross at Heavenfield, his bodily remains and the stake which pierced his head.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Eric P Baker, "III.—St. Oswald and his Church at Zug," *Archaeologia* 93 (1949): 130. Whilst the information by Baker appears quite dated, the information he provides has not been altered by more recent historians, including Gunn, *Bede's Historiae*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, 110.

<sup>25</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 2, 227.

<sup>26</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 248. For some analysis of this event and some information regarding the debate on where Oswald was killed, see Clare Stancliffe, "Where was Oswald killed," *Oswald: Northumbrian king to European saint* (1995): 93.

<sup>27</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216.

<sup>28</sup> Wilfrid Bonser, "The Magic of Saint Oswald," *Antiquity* 9, no. 36 (1935): 422. And Alan Thacker, "Membra disjecta: the division of the body and the diffusion of the cult." *Oswald: Northumbrian king to European saint* (1995): 99-101. See Thacker for more recent contributions on what constituted as Oswald's relics.

Oswald's death was not obviously holy, as he was dismembered and beheaded, with his head and right arm displayed as trophies. This would not have been considered especially holy in this period, as there was an importance placed upon on the whole, perfect body.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, the cult of Oswald began to flourish. Among Anglo-Saxons, warrior kings were popular figures, although not often sanctified.<sup>30</sup> Oswald's elevation to sanctity is unique among saints within the early middle ages; Oswald is neither the traditional virgin, confessor nor martyr. Indeed, Bede did not consider Oswald to be a martyr.<sup>31</sup> According to Bede, Oswald's sanctity and healing power were established during his life, due to his faith and his warm-heartedness towards those who were impoverished or unwell.<sup>32</sup> Bede recounts a story in which Oswald provides his silverware to poor people, who were seeking alms from the king on Easter day.<sup>33</sup> Oswald "at once ordered the dainties which had been set in front of him to be carried to the poor, the dish to be broken up, and the pieces divided amongst them."<sup>34</sup> The healing miracles and faithful acts Bede describes act as evidence for Oswald's sanctity.<sup>35</sup> Oswald slotted neatly into the established hagiographical tradition for this same reason, he was an unusual saint, but his miracles were conventional.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, despite his uniqueness as a warrior king who died and was dismembered, Oswald's sanctity and cult were easier to assimilate.<sup>37</sup> Bede further emphasises Oswald's sanctity, by referring to his remains as *ossa*, which refers to

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<sup>29</sup> Danielle Westerhof, *Death and the noble body in Medieval England*, (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2008), 75-78.

<sup>30</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 432.

<sup>31</sup> Susan J Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults*, (CUP Archive, 1988), 244.

<sup>32</sup> Loredana Lazzari, Patrizia Lendinara, and Claudia Di Sciacca, (eds), *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: Adopting and Adapting Saints' Lives Into Old English Prose (c. 950-1150)*, (Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales, 2014), 35. And Gunn, *Bede's Historiae*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 6, 208-209.

<sup>34</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 6, 208.

<sup>35</sup> Lazzari, Lendinara and Sciacca (eds), *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Gunn, *Bede's Historiae*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

bones, rather than *corpus*, a decomposing body.<sup>38</sup> This would suggest that his body was incorrupt; due to his dismemberment however, this was not actually the case. Evidently, Oswald was an unusual saint, but as this thesis will show, the persistence of his cult was characteristically Anglo-Saxon.<sup>39</sup>

### Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

The *EH* certainly made an impact in Europe, it is the highest quality writing found within this period, clearly a mature product of Bede's writing, written towards the end of his life.<sup>40</sup> The *EH*'s popularity is evident in the sheer quantity of manuscripts which still survive, more than 150 copies, despite few books in this period surpassing more than one remaining copy.<sup>41</sup> Bede was influential and accepted, his work contributed to the development of hagiographical writing.<sup>42</sup> Bede wrote the *EH* at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Abbey in Northumbria, obtaining his sources within the buildings well-stocked library.<sup>43</sup> He refers to many of the oral and written sources which he employed.<sup>44</sup> Bede's main source of information regarding Oswald was most likely the *Vita Columbae*, written by Adomnán, an abbot of Iona.<sup>45</sup>

Bede does not hide his intentions behind writing the *EH* in 731; he was dedicated to spreading the word of God in England through his retelling of salvific miracles.<sup>46</sup> Bede's

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<sup>38</sup> Marianne Malo Chenard, "King Oswald's holy hands: Metonymy and the making of a saint in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*," *Exemplaria* 17, no. 1 (2005): 47-48. Chenard writes that Bede refers to *Ossa* when referring to Oswald's remains more than any other saint in the *EH*.

<sup>39</sup> Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 95.

<sup>41</sup> Mark C Amodio, *The Anglo Saxon Literature Handbook*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 79.

<sup>42</sup> James Howard-Johnston and Peter Brown, *The cult of saints in late antiquity and the Middle Ages: essays on the contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 182.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 10-11.

<sup>44</sup> Paul J Stapleton, "Alcuin's York poem and liturgical contexts: Oswald's adoration of the cross," *Medium Ævum* 82, no. 2 (2013): 102. And Amodio, *The Anglo Saxon Literature Handbook*, 80.

<sup>45</sup> Stapleton, "Alcuin's York poem and liturgical contexts," 190.

<sup>46</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 12 and 16-17.

devotion to miracles within the *EH* is best shown through a comparison with his earlier works; in the *Lives of Abbots* (c. 725), he does not attribute a single miracle to any of the holy abbots, a stark contrast from the fifty-one miracles within the *EH*.<sup>47</sup> When describing miracles, compared to later historians, Bede generally attributes more significance to God, who in his eyes performed the miracle, rather than ascribing more importance to the saint and their relic.<sup>48</sup>

### The power of soil relics

In the case of Oswald, his soil relics primarily heal the sick, although other varieties of miracle associated with Oswald are also described in the *EH*. As mentioned, the specificity of the healing ability of Oswald's relics comes from accounts of his care for the sick.<sup>49</sup> Bede wrote "while he was alive he never ceased to care for the sick and the poor, to give them alms, and offer them help".<sup>50</sup> Bede explicitly records that soil relics were collected for the purpose of healing.<sup>51</sup> After this, he describes a story whereby an animal is healed. In this example, Bede describes how a horse was ridden awkwardly whilst writhing in pain, until landing on the exact unmarked spot where Oswald died, "Forthwith the pain ceased, and the horse stopped its frantic struggles; then . . . stood up completely cured".<sup>52</sup> After which, the noble who owned the horse brought a girl with paralysis to the location, "They put her in a cart, brought her to the place and laid her down there. In a short time she fell asleep and when she woke up she found that she was healed of her infirmity."<sup>53</sup> These examples of healing relate specifically to the location

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<sup>47</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 98.

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Browett, "Touching the holy: the rise of contact relics in medieval England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68, no. 3 (2017): 496.

<sup>49</sup> Adrian R Bell and Richard S. Dale, "The medieval pilgrimage business," *Enterprise & Society* 12, no. 3 (2011): 606.

<sup>50</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216-217.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216-217.

where Oswald died; those who were sick lay on the soil of the deathplace for a period of time and are healed. Evidently, Bede made a distinction between the static soil of the locations associated with Oswald's cult and the transportable soil relics. The location that the soil came from was important, as it connected directly to Oswald's presence, however the healing qualities of the location could, as this thesis will show, be carried within the soil.

This is illustrated, for example, in another miracle recounted by Bede, where a man is exorcized through the medium of soil.<sup>54</sup> The miraculous nature of the soil relic is emphasised here, as an unnamed clergyman had already attempted to cure the man with conventional exorcism rites, but was unsuccessful. This example is especially thought-provoking, as the soil was sourced neither from Heavenfield nor Maserfelth.<sup>55</sup> Instead, the soil was sourced from a location outside Bardney monastery where Oswald's bones had been washed.<sup>56</sup> "[M]any sick people had been healed by the soil of the floor on which the water, used for washing his bones, had been poured out."<sup>57</sup> In the case of the exorcised man, the protective power of this soil had continued influence; he kept it on his person.<sup>58</sup> Bede describes how people placed soil relics and parts of the cross in water to utilise healing power.<sup>59</sup> Relics were often kept at home or worn on the person for protection,

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<sup>54</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 11, 220-221.

<sup>55</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 427-432. A distinction between the locations of Oswald's cult should be made here. Bede describes the miracle-producing nature of the location in Heavenfield where Oswald erected a cross before successfully winning the Battle of Heavenfield in 634 AD, as well as his deathplace at Maserfelth. Both the location of the cross and his deathplace formed localized traditions in Oswald's veneration.

<sup>56</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 11, 220. And Thacker, "Membra disjecta," 100-107. Thacker writes that Oswald's bones were first recovered by Oswiu in 643, where they were taken to Bamburgh and enshrined. After this, Queen Osthryth took the relics to Bardney between 679. This was a very important moment in the construction of Oswald's cult, as miracles took place at Bardney's shrine and the water washed from Oswald's bones. Additionally, Oswald's cult was successfully promoted by Queen Osthryth, pushing ecclesiastical communities to sanctify Oswald.

<sup>57</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 11, 221.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 11, 218-219.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 202.

submerged in water for providing doses of healing power or protection.<sup>60</sup> The necessity for the involvement of water in this process is clear, as water extracted virtue from Oswald's bones before it was collected in the soil below.

This thesis has shown already how the custom of taking soil from Oswald's deathplace 'became very popular'.<sup>61</sup> Even though Oswald's holy blood could not have enriched the soil at the deeper parts of the hole, soil was still extracted for its healing properties.<sup>62</sup> Seemingly, soil had properties which allowed for the potentially infinite absorption of sanctity. Rainwater and blood would likely have inadvertently mixed with soil at Oswald's deathplace, increasing the quantity of the perceived available soil relics. The process of multiplying soil relics with water is also shown at Bardney Monastery, as due to Oswald's washed bones, the location itself became sanctified. Overall, this means that healing power from important locations could be carried in soil, new locations could be sanctified with water and water could increase the quantity of soil relics.<sup>63</sup>

Bede shows that Oswald's relics did not only provide healing or exorcistic miracles. He describes how a bag of the soil from Oswald's deathplace survived a fire, "the whole house was burnt down with the single exception that the post on which the soil hung, enclosed in its bag, remained whole and untouched by the fire."<sup>64</sup> This account showcases the incorruptibility of the soil. Oswald's corporeal relics similarly remain incorruptible, as his arm famously did not decay.<sup>65</sup> This example shows that soil could be carried from

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<sup>60</sup> Godefridus JC Snoek, *Medieval piety from relics to the Eucharist: a process of mutual interaction*, Vol. 63, (Brill, 1995), 12.

<sup>61</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216.

<sup>62</sup> Bonser, "The Magic of Saint Oswald," 419.

<sup>63</sup> Lucy Donkin, "Earth from elsewhere: burial in terra sancta beyond the Holy Land," In *Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500-1500* (Routledge, 2017), 12.

<sup>64</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 10, 204.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 chapter 6, 209.

Oswald's deathplace whilst remaining efficacious. This thesis has already noted how the newly exorcized man kept a bag of soil on his person for continued protection.<sup>66</sup> Contact relics such as soil were essential in Christian history, they could be carried, kissed and absorbed by all the senses.<sup>67</sup> Bede describes a comparable relic, carried on the neck in a small bag in the first book of the *EH*, Germanus (d. 448) "tore down from his neck the little bag which hung down close to his side, containing relics of the saints".<sup>68</sup> The transportability of soil relics is certainly relevant in their veneration. They could 'disguised' as ordinary soil, thus making them immune to confiscation or theft.<sup>69</sup> Being able to carry a physical relic held more value to Anglo-Saxons than verbal blessing or witnessing an enshrined relic, which explains the attraction of soil relics.<sup>70</sup>

The examples in this chapter have shown that Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics because soil could absorb sanctity and so could be revered and utilised in healing practices, even when other methods failed. This chapter has also shown that Bede presents Oswald's cult and the soil relics associated with it attractively. Soil relics were incorruptible, available and transportable, whilst remaining efficacious. For these reasons, Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics. Bede showcases soil in this way, as he regards soil as an ideal vessel of sanctity.

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<sup>66</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 11, 207.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 156. And Ora Limor, "Earth, stone, water, and oil: objects of veneration in Holy Land travel narratives," In *Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500-1500* (Routledge, 2017), 4.

<sup>68</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 1 Chapter 18, 84.

<sup>69</sup> Limor, "Earth, stone, water, and oil," 7. See Limor for the theft of contact relics, which appears to have had less discussion attributed to it, compared to thefts of more popular, corporeal relics.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

## Chapter 3: How did Anglo-Saxons perceive relics and the constituents of soil relics?

### Introduction

As the previous chapter has already explored how soil relics were used, this chapter will try to explain how soil relics were perceived, laying emphasis on their use by the rural population. Bede remarks that the veneration of relics was done so “*a cunctis*”, meaning “by all”.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, if someone of high status in this period was asked to explain what their wealth was comprised of, they were likely to first provide a rundown of their relics.<sup>72</sup> Their collection however was unlikely to contain ‘less valuable’ soil relics, which as this chapter will show, were more common among rural people. More famous relics were displayed in shrines, which underscored their authority and power.<sup>73</sup> Soil relics however were rarely displayed in shrines. Bede wrote that Germanus placed precious relics into Saint Alban’s tomb, which acted as a shrine. Soil relics from Saint Alban’s deathplace however, were taken away by Germanus for use, rather than being included in the shrine.<sup>74</sup> This chapter will build on these observations to investigate how the Anglo-Saxons perceived relics and the elements associated with soil relics, namely water and blood.

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<sup>71</sup> Chenard, "King Oswald's holy hands," 54.

<sup>72</sup> Benedicta Ward, "Relics and the medieval mind," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10, no. 4 (2010): 274.

<sup>73</sup> Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 1 Chapter 18, 84. See Morrison, "Dynamic Dirt," 14. for some analysis of Germanus taking the soil relics away from Saint Alban’s tomb, which they also compare to the soil relics of Saint Oswald.



### Relics and the ecclesiastical space

During the eighth century, access to shrines, including touching relics, was encouraged.<sup>75</sup> A saint without a shrine could be seen as less worthy of veneration. Oswald had a shrine, but it was reserved for his more valuable corporeal relics, just as with saint Alban.<sup>76</sup> The quantity of relic shrines accelerated from the seventh century onwards, thus strengthening the social position of nobles who owned them. By the second half of the eighth century however, royalty began to impose episcopal control of relic shrines, altering shrines towards purely ecclesiastical use.<sup>77</sup> The cults surrounding Oswald and Alban developed during this period, but their higher-grade corporeal relics were separated from their contact relics.<sup>78</sup> Through this development, the laity could control relics and designate if water should be added, if relics should be divided and how relics should be used.<sup>79</sup> Soil relics however remained separate, belonging to the communities or individuals which procured them. Perhaps the commitment of relics to episcopal shrines pushed peasants to obtaining their own relics, such as soil from accessible battlefields.

### Rural piety

Bede's account of Oswald's soil relics show that rural people could access and collect relics for themselves, independent of the church.<sup>80</sup> He writes that "Since that time many are known to have obtained the grace of healing at this place . . . they have found the

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<sup>75</sup> Cynthia Hahn, "Seeing and believing: The construction of sanctity in early-medieval Saints' Shrines," *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (1997): 1105. And James E Cross, "Oswald and Byrhtnoth: A Christian saint and a hero who is Christian," *English Studies* 46, no. 1-6 (1965): 94.

<sup>76</sup> Hahn, "Seeing and believing," 1083.

<sup>77</sup> Howard-Johnston and Brown, *The cult of saints in late antiquity and the Middle Ages*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> This refers to soil taken from their respective deathplaces.

<sup>79</sup> Rachel Koopmans, "'Water mixed with the blood of Thomas': contact relic manufacture pictured in Canterbury Cathedral's stained glass," *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 5 (2016): 557.

<sup>80</sup> In Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 216, soil relics are specifically taken from accessible places including the Maserfelth battlefield. In Book 5 Chapter 18, 419, soil is also taken from the deathplace of Hædde (d. 705), unfortunately Bede does not mention the location of his deathplace.

means of curing the sicknesses of themselves and their friends”.<sup>81</sup> Soil relics worked without the need of an ecclesiastical mediator, this is evident from the account of the exorcism, where the conventional approach of the clergyman is ineffectual.<sup>82</sup> The clergy, who had greater overall access to relics, were more interested in corporeal relics, which they would have considered more significant.<sup>83</sup> Soil relics were specifically important for rural piety, as impoverished people were less able to visit shrines, instead obtaining relics from the landscape.<sup>84</sup> This satisfied the increasing demand for relics, which grew over this period.<sup>85</sup>

The use of soil relics within rural piety also reflects the needs of the peasantry. Rural people likely felt defenceless against sickness, plague, demon possession or fire, all of which Oswald’s soil relics protect from in the *EH*.<sup>86</sup> In another instance, Bede recounts the example of cattle being healed through soil relics: “... the men of that kingdom used to take soil from the place and put it in water for the benefit of the sick, and both sick men and cattle who drank it or were sprinkled with it, were healed.”<sup>87</sup> Such examples of animal healing were unusual for this period.<sup>88</sup> This suggests that soil relics were used by rural, agricultural people, as their needs are expressed in the power that soil relics have to heal their livestock. In this miracle and many of those associated with Oswald, Bede does not mention the specific names of the individuals involved. Most of his stories instead star unnamed peasants, although miracles which were experienced by noble or clergymen

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<sup>81</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 17, 27.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 11, 220-221.

<sup>83</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 426-427.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 428.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 161-162.

<sup>86</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 427.

<sup>87</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 5 Chapter 18, 479. The location where the soil was taken from in this example was the area where the bishop of Winchester Hædde died.

<sup>88</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 426. Whilst Cubitt mentions cattle, horses were also healed, see Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 202-203.

were more likely to be believed.<sup>89</sup> It would seem, however, that the unnamed peasants referred to by Bede were those who benefited the most from soil relics.

The *EH* and the soil relics described within, were utilised not only by the educated clergy, but also by a wider audience.<sup>90</sup> Through the retelling of these miracles, Bede displayed the benefits and virtues of Christian life, whilst showcasing the accessible, effective and plentiful qualities of soil relics.<sup>91</sup> By promoting contact relics, such as soil, in hagiographies such as the *EH*, a tension in the lack of readily available corporeal relics could have been reduced.<sup>92</sup> After the eighth century, the importance of contact relics lessened, as the saints' corporeal remains slowly became more easily accessible.<sup>93</sup> As a result of this development, it is possible that soil relics simply began to fall out of fashion. Browett suggests this, by asking "why venerate the secondary relics when you could access the saint's corporeal remains?".<sup>94</sup>

### Soil appreciation

The tradition of worshipping soil relics could, however, derive from an inherent appreciation of soil, instead of a lack of access to higher-grade relics. The prosperity of kingdoms and individual communities had long depended on soil fertility for agriculture.<sup>95</sup> Archaeology shows that early Greek settlements were located in valleys

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<sup>89</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 426 and see 429-429 for more information on the believability of peasants against elite people.

<sup>90</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 114.

<sup>91</sup> Gunn, *Bede's Historiae*, 169.

<sup>92</sup> Browett, "Touching the holy," 504.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 501.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 501.

<sup>95</sup> Verena Winiwarter, "The art of making the earth fruitful: medieval and early modern improvements of soil fertility," In *Ecologies and Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Brill, 2010), 95. And Eric C. Brevik, Jeffrey A. Homburg, and Jonathan A. Sandor, "Soils, climate, and ancient civilizations," In *Developments in Soil Science*, vol. 35 (Elsevier, 2018), 17-20. Brevik, refers quite generally to soil fertility and the prosperity of kingdoms, for a specifically medieval discussion, see Winiwarter. Whilst she focuses more on the central to late medieval periods, the discussion of soil fertility and the success of kingdoms can be applied to the early medieval period.

with good soils, the fertility of Athens allowed the *polis* to grow into a regional power.<sup>96</sup> In the Bible, soil was associated with the origin of man; God “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, both Virgil (d. 19 BC) and Pliny the Elder (d. 79) wrote about the importance of agricultural knowledge, whilst regularly referencing soil fertility and how to measure it.<sup>98</sup>

This inherent appreciation of soil is also apparent in the rituals which controlled the collection of soil relics. The collection of soil relics in the *EH* was an orchestrated action, requiring kneeling with hands outstretched and most likely a verbal blessing, which was not dissimilar from the act of praying.<sup>99</sup> This ritualistic act would have invested the collector in the soil relic, even before witnessing miracles. By collecting the soil, the participant held the physical form of the saints of the past, which would have inspired them in their faith.<sup>100</sup> The inherent appreciation of soil is apparent in this collection ritual. The association between soil fertility and the continued success of civilisations also enhanced the inherent perceived value of soil.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> David R Montgomery, *Dirt: The erosion of civilisations*, (University of California Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>97</sup> Genesis 2:7, Crossway ESV Permanent Text Edition, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Benno P. Warkentin, (ed), *Footprints in the soil: People and ideas in soil history*, Elsevier, 2006, 6-7. For the exact example referenced by Warkentin, see Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IV: Books 12-16*, Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 370, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 466-468.

<sup>99</sup> Limor, "Earth, stone, water, and oil," 8. And Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 2, 197. Bede regarded Oswald's hand as important. This is noticeable through the attention and imagery he allocates to Oswald's hands throughout his account of him. For more information on this, see Chenard, "King Oswald's holy hands," 33-34.

<sup>100</sup> Hahn, "Seeing and believing," 1079.

<sup>101</sup> Reginald of Durham describes how the land was particularly productive during Oswald's reign, perhaps this created an association between soil fertility and Oswald's cult. Annemiek Jansen, "The Development of the St. Oswald Legends on the Continent," *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (1995): 234-235.

## Water

As discussed, water could be added to soil relics for ingestion and facilitated their multiplication. A key element in agricultural knowledge, water also connected to the four main areas of understanding sickness, including wet or dry and warm or cold.<sup>102</sup> Medieval medical practice consisted of balancing the elements and humours, which explains the intent behind mixing water with soil for use in healing. Furthermore, ‘holy’ water was embedded in the lives of Christians, who experienced baptism and healing through its powers.<sup>103</sup> For example, Jesus reportedly healed a blind man by combing both soil and own his spittle.<sup>104</sup> This thesis has noted Bede’s description of how water could be added to soil relics and splinters from either Oswald’s cross or the stake which pierced his decapitated head. Bede makes no distinction between the types of healing which could result from the mixing of Oswald’s contact relics with water; they either heal either people or livestock.<sup>105</sup> Corporeal, higher-grade, relics in the *EH* do not heal livestock, nor are they regularly mixed with water.<sup>106</sup>

## Blood

Similarly, blood was equally relevant in the cult of soil relics, as blood transferred Oswald’s virtue from his body to the soil. In another instance, Bede describes how Germanus “collected a heap of soil from the place where the blood of the blessed martyr had been shed, to take away with him. In it the blood still showed”.<sup>107</sup> In this passage, Bede focuses on the blood being taken, rather than the soil. Whilst this precedes Bede’s

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<sup>102</sup> Winiwarter, "The art of making the earth fruitful," 99.

<sup>103</sup> James A. Arieti, "Magical Thinking in Medieval Anti-Semitism: Usury and the Blood Libel," *Mediterranean Studies* 24, no. 2 (2016): 194.

<sup>104</sup> John 9:6, Crossway ESV Permanent Text Edition, 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 2, 184.

<sup>106</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 9, 202. And Book 5 Chapter 18, 392. In Book 3 Chapter 11, 253-256. Oswald’s bones are washed with water, however, the water is mixed with soil.

<sup>107</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 1 Chapter 18, 76-77.

account of Oswald's life, the parallel suggests that the soil from Oswald's grave is a vessel for his blood. In this case it is the blood that renders the soil miraculous. On the other hand, soil could also become sanctified from the events which took place on it, such as the Christian victory over pagans at Heavenfield.<sup>108</sup> Presumably, soil relics taken from site of the cross at Heavenfield received their healing power from God through the medium of the cross, fragments of which were also used as a healing relic.<sup>109</sup> Blood was perceived in this period to have belonged with the soul of a person, medieval understanding suggested that if the soul was resurrected, so was its body and blood.<sup>110</sup> Consequently, soil was an obvious relic in the *EH*, as soil could innately hold the blood, or soul, of Oswald and other saints.<sup>111</sup> Bede describes Oswald's blood as *sanguis*, which refers to blood within the body, not *cruor*, gore or blood that has been shed, despite referencing the area where Oswald was slain in bloody combat.<sup>112</sup> In so doing, Bede emphasises the corporeality of Oswald's blood in the soil relics.

As this chapter has shown, despite Bede writing that relics were venerated by everyone, soil relics were specifically venerated by rural Anglo-Saxons. Soil relics were ideal for rural Anglo-Saxons as they could be accessed without the need of an ecclesiastical mediator. Additionally, Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics in conjunction with water and blood, as this aligned with common practices in Christian worship. These same practices

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<sup>108</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 3 Chapter 2, 184.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3 Chapter 2, 184.

<sup>110</sup> Bettina Bildhauer, "Medieval European conceptions of blood: truth and human integrity," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 562-563.

<sup>111</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede specifically describes blood being held in the soil of saints including Saint Alban in Book 1 Chapter 18, 84-85 and Hædde in Book 5 Chapter 18, 392.

<sup>112</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History, Volume II: Book 3*. Translated by J. E. King. Loeb Classical Library 248, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), Book 3 Chapter 10, 374. And Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," *Church History* 71, no. 4 (2002): 705-706.

did not however originate in the medieval period but, as the next chapter will show, they derived from ancient civilisations.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bildhauer, "Medieval European conceptions of blood," 557.

## Chapter 4: How did Roman traditions of soil veneration affect Anglo-Saxon soil customs?

### Introduction

Many early medieval religious practices were shared by polytheistic religions. For this reason, this chapter will illuminate the evolution of these traditions, as other scholars generally have not focused on the developments of soil veneration between the ancient and early medieval periods. Most historians have assumed that cultural or religious traditions involving soil veneration were entirely independent of each other. Karl Morrison has noted the contributions of Van den Eynde, Dvornik and Ladner in promoting the relevance of ancient cultures on medieval traditions.<sup>114</sup> Charles Freeman has written that traditions of sacred ruler veneration and relic worship were inherited by people from the early medieval period from ancient cultures, including the Romans.<sup>115</sup> Like other historians, Freeman does not specify that early medieval cultures inherited practices of soil veneration from Romans. This chapter aims to fill the gap in this discussion. This chapter will begin with a short discussion of the pagan features of late antique Romans, before continuing with late antique Christian Romans.

### Pagan Romans

Before their conversion to Christianity, Romans worshiped multiple gods. They also venerated heroes, mortal people whose extraordinary lives were documented in stories. Roman heroes were treated similarly to the saints revered by early Christians. Through cultic practice, both cultures revered specific people with an associated story or myth,

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<sup>114</sup> Karl F Morrison, *Tradition and authority in the western church, 300-1140*, (Princeton University Press 2015), foreword page 10.

<sup>115</sup> Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, 31 and 93. Freeman discusses sacred rulers on page 31 and shrines and relics on page 93.



who, according to their belief, transcended into the afterlife, after which they were often venerated at a dedicated shrine.<sup>116</sup> This pagan ritual translated easily into early Christianity, as is clear from Christian commemorative rituals which also took place at revered locations.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, the practice of considering some rulers to be sacred which existed in Roman custom was also adopted by Christianity. This thesis has shown how Oswald's actions as king facilitated his ascension to sainthood.<sup>118</sup> As a result of these similarities in cultic practices and traditions, it can be difficult to distinguish between early Christian and pagan customs.<sup>119</sup> Anglo-Saxons specifically would have experienced features of late antique Rome in their own homeland, as many distinctive Roman remains were still visible in early medieval Britain.<sup>120</sup> As the following paragraphs will show, Bede repeatedly draws attention to the vestiges of late antique Roman custom in the *EH*. These factors would have made British land and history feel inherently Roman to Anglo-Saxons.<sup>121</sup>

Soil veneration was implicitly appropriated by Anglo-Saxons from late antique Romans, who also valued soil. Pliny the Elder wrote that some Roman farmers would distil soil through a wine strainer with water, with the intent of drinking the liquor for the purpose of testing the fertility of the soil.<sup>122</sup> Romans regarded soil so highly, that they regularly referred to it.<sup>123</sup> Soil was considered by many Romans to not only describe the dirt on the

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<sup>116</sup> Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, 31. And Alex Woolf, "The Britons: from Romans to barbarians," *Regna and gentes: The relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval peoples and kingdoms in the transformation of the Roman world* (2003): 11-12.

<sup>117</sup> Freeman, *Holy bones, holy dust*, 31. Freeman shows how these pagan rituals were similar to Christian rituals.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Wallace, *The Presence of Rome in Medieval and Early Modern Britain: Texts, Artefacts and Beliefs*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 28.

<sup>121</sup> Wallace, *The Presence of Rome in Medieval and Early Modern Britain*, 37.

<sup>122</sup> Rebecca Lines-Kelly, "Soil: our common ground—a humanities perspective," In *Supersoil 2004: Proceedings of the 3rd Australian New Zealand Soils Conference* (University of Sydney, 2004), 7.

<sup>123</sup> Clifford Ando, *Roman Social Imaginaries: language and thought in the context of empire*, (University of Toronto Press, 2015), 19-25.

ground which grew your crops, but also your native homeland, your *patria*.<sup>124</sup> In the Roman mindset, soil connected one directly to a place or territory. The materiality of soil even facilitated the transportation of *patria*.<sup>125</sup> Towards the end of the Roman occupation of England, Magnus Maximus (d. 388) received a sample of Roman soil, in an unknown quantity, so that he could sleep better and be healthier.<sup>126</sup> This sample was placed in a specific area on the ground, after which a fort was built on top of it. Through this act, Magnus Maximus considered the essence of Rome to have been transported to Britain; the soil kept him continuously healthy and well rested, as if he was living in Rome.<sup>127</sup> Evidently, Maximus thought that by transferring the soil of one location to another, the virtue or essence of that place could be transferred. This mindset certainly existed among Anglo-Saxons, who upon taking soil from specific locations such as Oswald's deathplace, also transported the virtue or sanctity of that soil.

### Christian Romans

Magnus Maximus showcases the fluidity between late antique pagan and Christian Roman practice. Whilst the practices of soil veneration did not undergo any major changes between pagan and Christian Romans, some alterations did occur. From this point onwards, the focus on soil veneration will shift to late antique Roman Christians. Material objects were first employed as mediators between the spiritual and physical world by Christians in the third and fourth centuries, when they revered important deceased individuals with the aid of objects.<sup>128</sup> The cult of relics which revered the dead

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<sup>124</sup> Ando, *Roman Social Imaginaries*, 19.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 17-18. Ando describes many elements of *patria*, providing examples of the transportation of soil.

<sup>126</sup> Wallace, *The Presence of Rome in Medieval and Early Modern Britain*, 15-18. Whilst sleep deprivation appears to be the main concern of Magnus Maximus, his health is also directly improved by the soil.

<sup>127</sup> Ando, *Roman Social Imaginaries*, 20. Additionally, Ando mentions that Roman priests carried clumps of soil outside of the Roman empire, so that they could still swear oaths, whilst in contact with Roman soil.

<sup>128</sup> Smith, "Portable Christianity," 145.

specifically, spread out of Rome into Europe in the early medieval period, as part of a religious reform movement.<sup>129</sup> Ancient Roman traditions spread through physical mediums, including relics, art, architecture and text.<sup>130</sup> When early Christians worshiped the dead, the inclusion of relic veneration in this practice was rooted in the customs of the ancient Romans before them.<sup>131</sup> Both late antique Romans and Anglo-Saxons experienced relic collection, storage and competition for sought after relics.<sup>132</sup>

### Venerated locations

Much like Anglo-Saxons, Romans collected water and other materials including oil, wax, dust and soil for the benefits of their protective or healing power.<sup>133</sup> These items were specifically carried by late antique pilgrims, who brought them on their journey to protect themselves from the dangers of travel, including disease, snake bites and medical affliction. These objects were connected to a location, rather than a hero or a saint.<sup>134</sup> They provided the framework of amorphous, natural materials used for their curative powers, having been blessed by God or his mediator. They were often, but not always, related to story or myth, often deriving from a specific area with an attached legend.<sup>135</sup> These locations either had a biblical past or, much like Anglo-Saxon soil relics, they were simply found in a venerated area.<sup>136</sup> In Ora Limor's summary of the relics taken by

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<sup>129</sup> Erik Thunø, *Image and relic: mediating the sacred in early medieval Rome*, Vol. 32 (L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 13.

<sup>130</sup> Candida R Moss, *Ancient Christian martyrdom: Diverse practices, theologies, and traditions*, (Yale University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>131</sup> Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and remains," 23-24.

<sup>132</sup> Jaś Elsner, "From the culture of spolia to the cult of relics: the Arch of Constantine and the genesis of late antique forms," *Papers of the British School at Rome* (2000): 158. And Howard-Johnston and Brown, *The cult of saints in late antiquity and the Middle Ages*, 148-150. And Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and remains," 19-20. All three of these sources include various examples of relic collection, storage and competition for relics. Elsner focuses on Rome, whilst Walsham, Howard-Johnston and Brown focus on Anglo-Saxon examples.

<sup>133</sup> Luchterhandt, "The popes and the loca sancta of Jerusalem," 40.

<sup>134</sup> Limor, "Earth, stone, water, and oil," 3-4.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

Roman pilgrims, the parallels between the treatment of similar natural relics by Anglo-Saxons is glaring. She writes: “Rather than souvenirs, they were signs, symbols, and replacements for the holy places themselves, retaining in their fragmentary and lowly matter all the virtues and miraculous powers of those places”.<sup>137</sup>

Evidently, both Romans and Anglo-Saxons believed that the power of locations could transfer through natural relics, such as soil. Limor reinforces her argument with references to *Egeria's eulogiae*. This pertains to a letter, written by an ancient Roman writer, Egeria, which described her pilgrimage to the holy land between 381 and 384.<sup>138</sup> In the letter, she describes fruit, grown on the soil of *Sinai*, the Mountain of God. This “blessed” fruit took on the virtue of the holy soil beneath it. Unlike soil, it could be eaten, saturating the body with holiness.<sup>139</sup> The significance of the holy fruit to her is evident in that she dries some to give to her “beloved sisters”.<sup>140</sup> Through the medium of water and soil, fruit inherited virtue from a venerated location, just as saintly virtue could be transferred through soil and water in the *EH*.

In the *City of God*, Augustine (d. 430 AD) tells the story of a sample of soil which was taken from Jerusalem. This soil was found at the supposed location of Christ's entombment and resurrection. Augustine wrote that the ex-Tribune Hesperius hung the soil in a small bag in his bedroom, to protect him from evil. After the house was purified and protected, he requested that the soil should be buried, so that a place of prayer could be established on the same location. That place was then known for its miraculous

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<sup>137</sup> Limor, "Earth, stone, water, and oil," 4. Her mention of the replacements of holy places suggests that much like the Anglo-Saxon mindset, the Romans felt that the transportation of certain soils could replicate the powers of the location from which it originated.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

curative properties.<sup>141</sup> Another example of how soil could inherit the properties of the location it was taken from can be found in a reference to a sample of soil taken from the church Saint Peter (d. 67 AD) was originally buried in.<sup>142</sup> This example is especially interesting, as the soil relic was taken by an Anglo-Saxon or Irish traveller at around 700 AD, who brought it home from Rome.<sup>143</sup> Evidently, not long after Oswald's death, people of the early medieval period sought material contact with the Roman saints of old, through the medium of healing or protective soil.<sup>144</sup> Saints were not only venerated locally, but their cults travelled through regional boundaries, giving them a universal quality.<sup>145</sup>

#### Roman influence in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

Just as Roman tradition was inherited by Christians, Bede was also influenced by the past, specifically by ancient Roman texts. By identifying parallels between early Christian traditions and Roman customs within the *EH*, distinct similarities between the two become discernible. Bede explicitly employs tropes of early Christianity in his account of Oswald. Bede's description of Oswald erecting the cross at Heavenfield mimics the story of Constantine and his ethereal vision of the cross, which assured his victory as a Christian.<sup>146</sup> Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Oswald also converted to Christianity and Bede considers Oswald to have successfully Christianised many Northumbrians. Bede enforces this parallel by including the image of the cross in the *EH*. By doing so, Bede fills what he considers a to be gap between Anglo-Saxon culture and Christian Roman culture, showing Anglo-Saxon identity to be

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<sup>141</sup> Limor, "Earth, stone, water, and oil," 7.

<sup>142</sup> Smith, "The remains of the saints", 407-414.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 407-414.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 423.

<sup>145</sup> Cubitt, "Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England," 423-424. Soil, because of its transportable qualities, played a role in facilitating this universal veneration.

<sup>146</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 110. And Paul J Stapleton, "The Cross cult, King Oswald, and Elizabethan historiography," *British Catholic History* 33, no. 1 (2016): 35.

inherited from Roman culture.<sup>147</sup> Stapleton has written extensively on this cross and its cult. He suggests that Bede incorporated the cross into Oswald's legend later. Stapleton came to this conclusion through comparisons of the *EH* and Adomnán's hagiographical *Life of Columba*, where the cross is not mentioned.<sup>148</sup> Free standing objects such as trees or posts, acted as sacred pagan symbols in Anglo-Saxon England. Whilst Bede imitates Constantine's vision of the cross to create a feeling of authority in his writing, the cross is also a freestanding wooden object.<sup>149</sup> This image of the cross would have attracted pagans to Christianity, as it could be easily associated with free standing wooden objects in pagan tradition, whilst also rooting Oswald and his cult in Roman custom.<sup>150</sup>

This discussion shows that Bede explicitly creates a parallel between Oswald and Constantine to show that Roman culture was inherited by Anglo-Saxons. This parallel mirrors others identified in this chapter, which showed how Anglo-Saxons also implicitly appropriated Roman soil veneration practices. The late antique pagan Roman mindset regarding soil firstly encapsulated the idea that soil could be moved from a significant location, bringing with it the properties of the area it came from. Secondly, Christian Romans partook in this practice; they regarded soil taken from holy locations to have or bring with it, healing and protective properties. Roman practices of soil culture and tradition were implicitly inherited and continued by Anglo-Saxons. Through what the philosopher Stanley Cavell defines as 'the order of the ordinary', Rome felt both distant

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<sup>147</sup> Brown, *A companion to Bede*, 79.

<sup>148</sup> Stapleton, "The Cross cult," 35.

<sup>149</sup> Gunn, *Bede's Historiae*, 144. Gunn specifically references the cross at Heavenfield as an example of a freestanding object which pagans could associate with veneration of freestanding (often wooden) objects, which could have attracted them to Christianity.

<sup>150</sup> Stapleton, "Alcuin's York poem," 191. And J. C. Higgitt, "The Roman background to medieval England," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 36, no. 1 (1973): 8. Higgitt goes into detail, describing some attempts of Anglo-Saxons imitating Roman culture. This includes how this developed, by becoming more common in the later medieval periods.

and familiar to Anglo Saxons of the early medieval period.<sup>151</sup> Whether they realised it or not, Anglo-Saxons venerated soil in part because they inherited Roman traditions of soil veneration.

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<sup>151</sup> Wallace, *The Presence of Rome in Medieval and Early Modern Britain*, 5.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has shown that soil relics were venerated by Anglo-Saxons for numerous reasons. The practice of utilising soil relics in the early medieval period sprung from the tension created by the lack of readily available corporeal relics for rural Anglo-Saxons.<sup>152</sup> The cause of this deficiency can be attributed to the shift of relics towards enclosed shrines and churches in the early medieval period. Soil relics were especially relevant, as soil has a diffuse nature. Blood, water and saintly virtue could combine almost indefinitely with soil, meaning that the supply of relics could be easily multiplied. Additionally, soil was often an accessible material. As a result of this, soil relics were not only more available, but their mundane nature allowed them to be transported easily without fear of theft.

Anglo-Saxons turned to the physical medium of contact relics such as relic soil as they could take the relics into their senses, bringing them closer to God's power, without requiring an ecclesiastical mediator. As a result of this, soil relics were effective in alleviating the issues and concerns of individuals and communities, including healing the body in various ways, such as healing sickness, exorcism, disease and disability. The use of soil relics among rural people is shown through these concerns, as well as the ability for soil relics to heal animals and livestock, a value which corporeal relics did not hold.

The practice of revering soil was inherited by Anglo-Saxons from late antique Romans, which is evident in many similarities in soil veneration shared by both cultures. Soil relic veneration was largely inherited implicitly by Anglo-Saxons, whilst those who read the

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<sup>152</sup> The demand for contact relics such as soil would lessen after the eighth century, as corporeal remains of saints slowly became more accessible in shrines.



*EH* years later would have witnessed Bede explicitly adopting Christian Roman culture into the *EH*. Both Christians and pagans revered locations and the soil found at them. The practice of venerating locations is the most prevalent custom of soil veneration between Anglo-Saxons and Romans, as both civilisations revered certain locations and retrieved soil from them.

This thesis has attempted to fill the gap in the study of soil relics, to explain why Anglo-Saxons venerated them in the early medieval period. The scope of this thesis however is limited. If research were to continue on this subject, it would be interesting to explore soil relics connected to other early medieval saints. Whilst Oswald is a fruitful example, there are other saints worthy of further analysis, including Alban and Germanus. Soil veneration is likely to be a wide-spread phenomenon and it would be fascinating to see if there are further parallels between how cultures venerate soil, by exploring their specific soil rituals. Furthermore, a detailed study into comparing relic access and soil relic popularity would enhance the rural piety discussion in Chapter 3. Other facets of this thesis could inspire a deeper discussion on healing practices of rural Anglo-Saxon communities.

Soil was accessible, transportable and available. Overall, despite modern connotations of the uncleanliness of soil, Anglo-Saxons venerated soil relics because they provided effective healing to the communities and individuals which required it.

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