

Alfred's Historia Ecclesiastica



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Woman: “King of the who?”

Arthur: “The Britons”

Woman: “Who are the Britons?”¹

“Oswald came with an army, small in numbers but strengthened by their faith in Christ, and destroyed the abominable leader of the Britons together with the immense force which he boasted was irresistible”.²

Cover illustration from *The Nuremberg Chronicle (Liber Chronicarum)*, one of the first printed books, first published in 1493.

¹ Python, Monty, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, (United Kingdom, 1975).

² Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. B. Colgrave (transl.), in: R. Collins and J. McClure (eds.), 'The Ecclesiastical History of the English People', (Oxford, 1994), (HE for short), HE, III.1, Bede was writing about the Welsh king Cadwallon however, not Arthur.

Introduction

“Should history tell of good men, and their good estate, the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good; should it record the evil ends of wicked men, no less effectually the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse, and himself with greater care pursue those things which he has learned to be good and pleasing in the sight of God.”³

So writes the early eighth century historian Bede in his preface to his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* henceforward *HE*) and the sentiment is echoed by Asser, bishop of Sherbourne, in the ninth century in his *Life of King Alfred*. That Asser, writing about a hundred and sixty years later, would refer to Bede was no coincidence. Bede's work was well thought of by King Alfred (r. 871-899), Asser's patron and the subject of his book. Alfred may even have found the *HE* important enough to have it translated into the Anglo-Saxon language. In the preface to pope Gregory the Great's (590-604) *Regula Pastoralis* (*Pastoral Care*), which Alfred translated himself, he says that "it seems better to me [...] that we should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know".⁴ Alfred was concerned that learning was declining. There were not enough men who could read Latin and so he felt it necessary to start a program of translation.

Was the *HE* one of the books that he wanted to be accessible to everyone? This is the question we will address here, and it means taking a closer look at Bede and his work, his motives and how the events he portrayed could have been perceived by Alfred. Inevitably a number of further questions shall arise and will have to be answered. Who was Bede? Did he give an impartial account of the Christianisation of the English? Who converted the English? Or for that matter, who were the English anyway? In the course of this paper these issues will be resolved.

But first we need to know a bit more about king Alfred.

1. King Alfred

The situation before Alfred became king

Alfred, born in 849, the son of a Wessex king, Aethelwulf, succeeded to the throne in 871, having outlived three elder brothers. England had long been divided into many small rival kingdoms of

³ HE, Preface.

⁴ Asser, 'Life of Alfred', in: S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources*, (London, 1983), §95.

varying power and influence. A complex past of wars, alliances, marriages and friendships both linked these kingdoms and kept them at each others throats. Alfred's grandfather Egbert had conquered the once powerful kingdom of Mercia in 829. Although by Alfred's father's time it was under its own king again, the two kingdoms seem to have gotten on well, even having an alliance of some kind.⁵

Yet even though Wessex had become more powerful, the state of affairs on the island at the time of Alfred's accession seemed grim, even desperate. The Vikings, or Danes, had been plaguing much of Europe since the end of the eighth century. Being pagan, they often attacked the poorly defended and usually rich churches and monasteries. This naturally shocked the Christians. Clerics played an important part in the administration of early medieval kingdoms and monasteries were important educational centres, which made the attacks even more detrimental. Increasingly the raids had turned into major attacks by marauding armies, and while plunder was still a main objective to them, subjugation and settlement were now also a great concern. Indeed in 865 a great Viking army had landed on the island and conquered Northumbria and East Anglia. In 871 they were reinforced by another army, and while being driven back by Alfred and his brother's efforts, thus averting danger for Wessex, they managed to conquer most of Mercia⁶.

Alfred's succession to the throne and his battle against the Vikings

In that same year Alfred's brother, Aethelred, was killed. Alfred now succeeded to the throne, since all his brothers were now dead. Asser, Alfred's biographer, has the following to say about Alfred's accession: "Indeed, he could easily have taken it over with the consent of all while his brother Æthelred was alive, had he considered himself worthy to do so, for he surpassed all his brothers both in wisdom and in all good habits; and in particular because he was a great warrior and victorious in virtually all battles." It seems that he started his reign "almost unwillingly" according to his biographer.⁷

A few years afterwards Alfred was defeated by Guthrum, an important Viking king, and fled into the marshes of Somerset. He and his followers made a fort and harried the Vikings from there. Until "in the seventh week after Easter [4-10 May], he rode to Egbert's Stone, which is in the eastern part of Selwood Forest [...] and there all the inhabitants of Somerset and Wiltshire and all the inhabitants of Hampshire –those who had not sailed overseas for fear of the vikings- joined up with him. When they saw the king, receiving him (not surprisingly) as if one restored to life after suffer-

⁵ Keynes,S. and Lapidge,M., 'Introduction', in: S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources*, (London, 1983), 11-12.

⁶ Wormald, Patrick, 'The ninth century', in: J. Campbell (ed.) *The Anglo-Saxons*, (London, 1982), 132. Asser, §46.

⁷ Asser, §42.

ing such great tribulations, they were filled with immense joy.”⁸ He managed to rally his forces and, to the great delight of many English historians, soundly defeated the Viking force in 879. In the next year Guthrum was baptised, with Alfred as godfather, and the Vikings went back to the lands they held. The threat they posed to Alfred and Wessex passed for a time. Alfred did not sit idle, though; he organised the defence of his lands and rallied support outside of Wessex. Having taken London from the Vikings and strengthened its defences, Alfred entrusted it to the Mercian ealdorman (a high noble or prince) Æthelred in 886⁹, further strengthening the bond between Wessex and Mercia, which his marriage to a Mercian noblewoman no doubt further strengthened. Alfred was keen to be seen not just as king of Wessex, but of all the “English”. He seems to have been quite successful, for “All the Angles and the Saxons – those who had formerly been scattered everywhere and were not in captivity with the Vikings – turned willingly to King Alfred and submitted themselves to his lordship”¹⁰

When another large Viking army invaded in 892, Alfred was ready for them. The invaders were defeated yet again. By then all the other Anglo-Saxon realms, including Mercia, had disappeared, fallen to the pagan invaders who built their own society upon the ruins. Alfred and Guthrum agreed on a frontier, roughly from London to Chester. The area to the north and east of this came to be known as the Danelaw, that is the area subject to the law of the Danes.

The Vikings had a profound impact on the intellectual climate in Britain. Alfred writes how he “recollected how – before everything was ransacked and burned – the churches throughout England stood filled with treasures and books.”¹¹ Though it is hard to prove without a doubt that the Vikings were responsible for the decline of learning, it seems very likely¹². The illiterate barbarian invaders cared little for books, and the fighting and occupation would do little to ensure the operation of the centres of learning. Whatever the exact cause it seems quite clear that schools did indeed cease to function in the period 835-885.¹³

“Wisdom is se hehsta cræft.”¹⁴

Once Alfred had the military might to keep the Vikings out of the land he controlled, he set himself to the revival of learning. Just as Charlemagne and his heirs strove to raise the intellectual

⁸ Asser, §55.

⁹ Asser, §83.

¹⁰ Asser, §83.

¹¹ Alfred, 'Translation of Gregory's Pastoral Care', in: S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources*, (London, 1983), 125.

¹² Lapidge, M., 'Latin learning in ninth-century England', in: Idem, *Anglo-Latin literature*, (London, 1996), 425.

¹³ Lapidge, M., 'Latin learning in ninth-century England', 436.

¹⁴ “Wisdom is the highest virtue.” Alfred repeatedly reminds his readers. Pratt, David., 'Persuasion and invention at the court of King Alfred the Great', in: Catherine Cubitt (ed.), *Court culture in the early Middle Ages : the proceedings of the first Alcuin conference*, (Turnhout, 2003), 200.

standards on the continent, so Alfred assembled learned men to his court. These scholars were all churchmen, coming from all over England, Wales and Francia. He started a program to increase the accessibility of several works by having them translated. The standard of handwriting, which had deteriorated sharply in the latter half of the ninth century, was also greatly improved¹⁵. It was not just a case of the Vikings looting and pillaging and the destruction of libraries. Alfred felt that the Vikings were a punishment for their laxity in learning and towards God. He himself writes: "Remember what temporal punishments came upon us when we neither loved wisdom ourselves nor allowed it to others".¹⁶ Learning was an essential activity for those in positions of power for they had to be wise, in Alfred's eyes.¹⁷ This was the only way to rightly hold power. In one of the books that Alfred translated, namely Boethius *De Consolatione Philosophiae* Alfred adds the following which expresses that sentiment:

“Study wisdom, and when you have learned it, do not reject it. For I say to you without any doubt that you can come to power through wisdom, although you do not desire power. You need not care for power, nor strive after it. If you are wise and good it will follow you, although you do not desire it.”¹⁸

This idea that only wisdom would legitimise power was inspired by the Bible and in his desire for wisdom, Alfred is compared to Solomon by Asser:

“[...] he resembled the holy, highly esteemed and exceedingly wealthy Solomon, king of the Hebrews, who, once upon a time, having come to despise all renown and wealth of this world, sought wisdom from God, and thereby achieved both (namely wisdom and renown in this world [...])”¹⁹

Alfred, Christian king

Asser portrayed Alfred as a devout defender of Christianity. Asser knew Bede's work, and used it.²⁰ For a king who controlled all of the Anglo-Saxon territory unconquered by the Vikings and some of Wales, it could have been advantageous to be seen in the same light as the good kings Bede tells of. Asser went even further. The image painted is that of an almost saintly king, who was

¹⁵ Wormald, 'The ninth century', 159.

¹⁶ Alfred, 'Translation of Gregory's Pastoral Care', 125.

¹⁷ Pratt, David., 'Persuasion and invention at the court of King Alfred the Great', 190.

¹⁸ Sedgefield, W.J. (ed.), *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius: De Consolatione Philosophiae*, (Oxford, 1899; reprint Darmstadt, 1968), XVI.i p. 35, lines 18-24.

¹⁹ Asser §76.

²⁰ Asser §74, Asser mentions London as belonging to Essex. This was so in Bede's time, and Bede is the likely source (HE, II.3), but during Alfred's time it belonged to Mercia.

an avid visitor of saint's shrines since early childhood. Asser writes that when Alfred was “in the first flowering of his youth before he had married his wife, he wished to confirm his own mind in God's commandments, and when he realized that he was unable to abstain from carnal desire, fearing that he would incur God's disfavour if he did anything contrary to His will, he very often got up secretly in the early morning at cockcrow and visited churches and relics of the saints in order to pray”²¹ He was so devout that he asked God for an illness to keep him from this temptation. It seems his wish was granted, Alfred was stricken by a mysterious disease that caused him great discomfort, and he would suffer from ill health for the rest of his life. It almost makes the reader forget that this was the same king who defeated the Vikings. A number of historians experience the same feeling and have been unable to reconcile the seeming incompatibilities in the person of Alfred. These authors see him either as a hero or a “pious wimp”.²² Alfred seems to have been a complex character, able in battle, learned, pious, and possibly quite ill, all in one person.

Alfred idealised the past. He writes “And I would have it known that very often it has come to my mind what men of learning there were formerly throughout England, both in religious and secular orders; and how there were happy times then throughout England.”²³ This is generally taken to refer to the late seventh century, times which he would have read about in the *HE*.

As mentioned earlier, Alfred even translated three or four books himself. These translations are not only fascinating as important works of early English prose, but also because they offer an insight into Alfred's own ideas.²⁴ For while Alfred follows a text generally, he sometimes translates quite loosely or gives certain passages new meaning. Exactly who translated Bede's *HE*, however, is uncertain. It has been determined that the dialect of the Old English Bede is Anglian and that could point to a Mercian at Alfred's court.²⁵ Alfred had a number of Mercian helpers and one of them, bishop Werfrehth certainly did help Alfred with the translations. Study of his work, however, makes it unlikely that he was the translator of the *HE*²⁶. Since half of Mercia was under Alfred's reign by the (probable) time the translation was made, this would make Alfred's involvement seem all the more plausible.

In the eyes of Alfred, God's help was essential to defeat the Vikings, who remained a constant threat even after Alfred had defeated Guthrum and improved the defenses. The correct teaching of

²¹ Asser §74.

²² Nelson, J.L., 'Review article: Waiting for Alfred', in: *Early Medieval Europe, Volume 7*, (London, 1998), 123.

²³ Alfred, 'Translation of Gregory's Pastoral Care', 124.

²⁴ Wormald, 'The ninth century', 158.

²⁵ Keynes and Lapidge, 33. cf. Whitelock, Dorothy, *The old English Bede, Sir Israel Gollancz memorial lecture, British Academy*, (London, 1962).

²⁶ Whitelock, Dorothy, 'The prose of Alfred's reign', in: *From Bede to Alfred : studies in early Anglo-Saxon literature and history*, (London, 1980), 78.

the word of God and the proper observance of the ritual was generally seen as a way of securing this support. The message that initially made Christianity so attractive to the pagan Anglo-Saxon kings was one of divine support and victory for the believing king. The tales of their conversion and victories, and the learning of their age, as written down by Bede were an inspiration to Alfred²⁷ and he would have been aware of the parallels with his own situation.

2. *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum.*

The subject matter of the *HE*

In the *HE* Bede tells the story of the conversion of the “English people”. He tells us how this was accomplished and the part the kings of the many English kingdoms played in this process. These stories of kings and conversion would have been of interest to king Alfred. He himself was confronted by a horde of pagan invaders, just as his ancestors had been the invaders of a Christian realm. The conversion stories in the *HE* could have offered him hope for the conversion of the Vikings. So too could the kings in Bede's narrative have been inspirational.

These two themes of kingship and conversion are therefore important to look at in greater detail. But let's take a look at Bede and how he wrote his history first.

The Venerable Bede

“I, Bede servant of Christ and priest of the monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul which is at Wearmouth and Jarrow, have, with the help of God and to the best of my ability, put together this account of the history of the Church of Britain and of the English people in particular, gleaned either from ancient document or from tradition or from my own knowledge. I was born in the territory of this monastery. When I was seven years of age I was, by the care of my kinsmen, put into the charge of the reverend Abbot Benedict and then of Ceolfrith, to be educated. From then on I have spent all my life in this monastery, applying myself entirely to the study of the Scriptures; and, amid the observance of the discipline of the Rule and the daily singing in the church, it has always been my delight to teach or to write. At the age of nineteen I was ordained deacon and at the age of thirty, priest, both times through the ministration of the reverend Bishop John on the direction of Abbot Ceolfrith. From the time I became a priest until the fifty-ninth year of my life I have made it my business, for my own

²⁷ Wormald, Patrick, 'Bede, Bretwaldas and origins of Gens Anglorum', in: P. Wormald, D Bullough and R. Collins (eds.) *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, (Oxford, 1983), 120.

benefit and that of my brothers, to make brief extract from the works of the venerable fathers on the holy Scriptures, or to add notes of my own to clarify their sense and interpretation."²⁸

So Bede writes about himself towards the end of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. After this passage Bede gives an impressive list of some sixty books by his hand. Bede was a copious writer and wrote many commentaries on the Scripture. His work is considered unoriginal by some, but he managed to piece together and clarify the ideas of his predecessors, which fit perfectly with his aim to master and pass on much of the Christian learning.²⁹ While he wrote in Latin like all scholars of his time, it was evident to him that there were relatively few people on the island who could understand the language, so he also translated prayers and Scripture into his native tongue.³⁰ Thus the writing of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, his most famous work, was possible because Bede, considered to be one of the most learned men of his age, grew up in a monastery that was endowed with a very extensive library by its founder, Benedict Biscop.³¹

Bede as historian

Bede's main example is the similarly named *Ecclesiastical History*³² by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c.260-c.340). Eusebius described the history of the Church in the Roman Empire in the fourth century and set the standard for the genre, as he leaves secular affairs out of his work. Bede though, draws from more traditions as we shall see. He dedicates the work to king Ceolwulf, with the purpose of instructing and edifying, as he himself says in his preface³³. It seems his audience was appreciative yet critical. The king had even reviewed the draft of the work. It shows that kings, at Bede's time at least, were educated and took an active interest in church affairs. Asser also mentions a similar interest in Alfred.³⁴ Curiously the dedication in *the Old English Bede* adds a command to the reader which is not present in the original: "I wrote this for your benefit and for your people; because God chose you as king, it behoves you to teach your people."³⁵ This has been taken as evidence that Alfred had the work translated, and he certainly did take this idea of a king's duties to heart. Both Charlemagne and Charles the Bald encouraged learning in similar fashion, Alfred

²⁸ HE, V.24.

²⁹ Campbell, J, 'Bede I' , *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, in: Idem, (London, 1986), 1.

³⁰ Farmer, D.H., 'Introduction', in: B. Radice (ed.), *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (London, 1990), 19-35, 22.

³¹ Campbell, J, 'Bede II' , *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, in: Idem, (London, 1986), 30.

³² Campbell, 'Bede I', 4.

³³ HE, Preface.

³⁴ Asser, §88.

³⁵ Whitelock, Dorothy, *The old English Bede, Sir Israel Gollancz memorial lecture, British Academy*, (London, 1962), 71. cf. HE, Preface.

even visited the Frankish royal court as a child, en route to Rome³⁶, and the potential influence of their example on Alfred cannot be ignored.

While the writing of history at the time may not have been quite the same as theology³⁷, as James Campbell suggests, it is true that the historians were often, like in Bede's case, Christian scholars with a Christian view of the world. In Christian historiography spiritual truths were more important than objective truths. Historians also sought to reconcile the world they saw with that of the Bible, and to show the hand of God in events.³⁸ In this way it was related to exegesis, the commenting on the events portrayed in the Bible,³⁹ a task Bede had set himself to often before writing his history. According to Judith McClure "Bede's work as a historian cannot be treated in isolation from his writings on the Scriptures."⁴⁰ His exegetical work led him to become very familiar with the kings from the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*, and his conception of what his *History* should be like is likely influenced by that knowledge. Indeed reading Bede one could almost consider the English as the chosen people of God in a new Israel.

Bede calls his work a history and indeed it has a number of qualities which are still valued by historians today⁴¹. Bede gives a comprehensive list of his sources, both literary and oral, and he includes several documents to corroborate his story.⁴² Most notable are the letters of Gregory the Great, but letters from other popes are included as well.

The listing of sources was common practice in the genre of hagiography, that is the writing of saints lives and the miracles attributed to them, and gives the stories an aura of reliability. This was important because educated Romans, for whom the first saints lives were written, tended not to have much belief or interest in contemporary miracles. The miracles in the bible on the other hand were perfectly acceptable, seeing as how the book was regarded as being divinely inspired. Yet from the fourth century onwards, when the *Life of Saint Anthony* was written by Athanasius, hagiography became a very important genre. Saints' lives and miracles were a useful way of telling the people of God's power and teaching them Christian virtues. Saints were considered intermediaries to God and their cults and worship of their relics would remain an important part of religious devotion for many centuries.

Bede had himself written several Saint's lives, so it is small wonder then that he "made his

³⁶ Nelson, J.L., 'The political ideas of Alfred of Wessex', in: Idem, *Rulers and ruling families in Early Medieval Europe :Alfred, Charles the Bald and others*, (Aldershot, Hampshire, 1999), 129.

³⁷ Campbell, 'Bede II', 31.

³⁸ Jong, M de, 'Karolingische annalen', in R.E.V. Stuip & C. VelleKoop (eds.) *Koningen in kronieken*, (Hilversum, 1998), 24.

³⁹ Jong, de, 'Karolingische annalen', 37.

⁴⁰ McClure, Judith, 'Bede's, Old Testament kings', in: P. Wormald, D Bullough and R. Collins (eds.) *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, (Oxford, 1983), 76.

⁴¹ Campbell, 'Bede II', 45.

⁴² HE, Preface.

Ecclesiastical History a chronological hagiography as well as a record in the manner of Eusebius⁴³".

The case of one saint in particular is illustrative of Bede's agenda, for Bede is selective in what he tells his readers. Saint Wilfrid, whom we meet again later, was a very controversial figure. Wilfrid lived more like a nobleman than a holy man and was much concerned with wealth and influence. He does not fit our notions of an ideal saint. Bede omits much of his life, to make it fit better into *his* vision as well. We know this from other sources, but we lack contemporary references to many of the events Bede tells of, and many of his sources are no longer available to us. His list of sources, too, though extensive, is increasingly shown to be incomplete, perhaps on purpose. Might not Bede be painting a rosier picture in more instances than just Wilfrid's case? It is very likely that he was indeed. Writers of history were under no obligation to give an objective rendering of events. These histories are often works of "purposeful construction", that portray events in ways that the writers wished them to be, and in doing so, sometimes even helped that which they expressed come to pass.⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, Bede is not always entirely accurate in his version of the conversion of England. He gives an awful lot of credit to the Roman mission, but the influence of other parties cannot be disregarded. When Northumbria was converted its clergy did not come from Canterbury, but rather from the neighbouring Irish.

The Irish, having never been conquered by the Romans, had been converted by British missionaries like Patrick. They had developed a vibrant Christian culture in the fifth century⁴⁵, but deviated from the Roman church on a number of points. These differences were much to the chagrin of Bede who goes on to tell of problems between the two church traditions. A particular point of concern for Bede is the correct calculation of Easter, which some of the Irish clergy held to be at another date, than the rest of the Catholic world. This was just a symptom of deeper divergences between branches of the church, but for Bede who had written three books on chronology, this matter was of great importance indeed. Even though Bede disliked the disunity in the church that the differing traditions bring, he nevertheless could not ignore the Irish part in the conversion. It is becoming increasingly clear that the conversion was even more complex than just the efforts of the Augustine mission and the Irish effort.

There must have still been Christians in the areas occupied by the pagan Anglo-Saxons.⁴⁶ Bede says nothing of the fate of the Britons who were subjugated by the invaders and in the past it

⁴³ Campbell, 'Bede I', 5.

⁴⁴ Stacey, Robin Chapman, 'Texts and society', in: Thomas Charles-Edwards (ed.), *After Rome*, (Oxford, 2003), 242.

⁴⁵ Hunter Blair, Peter, *The World of Bede*, (Cambridge, 1970), 32-33.

⁴⁶ Brooks, Nicholas, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', in J M H Smith (ed.), *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*, (Leiden, 2000), 237-243.

has been assumed that they all fled or were expelled from their lands. Today this is considered less likely.⁴⁷ There is evidence that there was still a British clergy of some sort in Kent when Augustine arrived.⁴⁸ When Bede mentions the Britons at all, he focuses on their failings and sees those failings as justification for the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons⁴⁹. However archaeology seems to hint at a significant British population. In the past, burials were considered very significant evidence for the presence of pagan or Christian peoples, but many archaeologists have become more careful about such conclusions. It seems clear that the way in which many were buried in the fifth and sixth centuries in Kent followed British rather than Germanic custom.⁵⁰ Still, this survival of Christian Britons in the Anglo-Saxon lands is no proof that Bede was wrong saying that the Britons did nothing to convert the English.⁵¹

The Franks also played an active part in the conversion; Bede however is almost completely silent about that.⁵² The North Sea was never much of a barrier, far from it, in fact. In the early middle ages, it connected different peoples and lands by ties of blood and trade. It did not hinder the migration of the Anglo-Saxons, nor later that of the Vikings. It is interesting to note that Saxons settled on both sides of the English Channel, and that there was much traffic between the Anglo-Saxons and their kin in the Frankish lands. This probably made the finding of interpreters for the missionaries much easier,⁵³ and the missionaries could not have even reached the island without aid from Frankish bishops on their way. Also the fact that Æthelberht, the king of Kent, was married to a Frankish princess, at least points at some of the connections between the south of the island and Francia. All this has to be pieced together often from other sources, besides the *HE*. Bede does tell us that Agilbert, a Frankish bishop, took an active part in the conversion of Wessex.⁵⁴

The Anglo-Saxons would have been subjected to Christianity from all directions, not just the Augustine mission and the Irish, and perhaps that mission was less critical than Bede suggests.

So although Bede is often almost seen as a modern historian, one should be very cautious in doing so. For his concerns are not the same as ours. Of course how Alfred regarded the *HE* is a different matter entirely, so let us get back to the story of the conversion of England.

⁴⁷ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 234.

⁴⁸ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 240.

⁴⁹ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 233.

⁵⁰ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 235. cf. Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 154: "Probably the bulk of the population in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was of Romano-British descent.

⁵¹ Campbell, J, 'Observations on the conversion of England', in: Idem, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, (London, 1986), 72.

⁵² Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 160.

⁵³ *HE*, I.25.

⁵⁴ *HE*, III.7.

The conversion of Aethelberht

After a relatively brief introduction in which he sketches the history of the island before the invasion and settlement of the peoples who came to be the English, the story starts in earnest with the coming of the missionary Augustine. Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory the Great at the head of a sizeable mission to convert the “English”. They landed in the kingdom of Kent in 597 and were welcomed by king Æthelberht. He had married a Frankish Christian princess, Bertha, who had brought along her own bishop, Liudhard. Because of the marriage and likely contact with other Frankish Christians besides, Æthelberht would already have been somewhat familiar with Christianity, when Augustine arrived. The king granted the priests freedom to preach, though he did not immediately allow himself to be baptised, because the missionaries words "were new and uncertain" and he could not so easily abandon the old beliefs of his people.⁵⁵ At some point in 597⁵⁶ he was baptised and his capital, Canterbury, became the first bishopric and base of operations for the conversion, since as Bede writes this gave the missionaries greater freedom to preach and build churches everywhere.

Besides the story of Æthelberht's conversion, Bede has two other things to tell about Æthelberht that would be of interest to a royal audience. The first is that he used his influence, either as overlord or as uncle, to convert his nephew Sæberht⁵⁷. The second, and which the *HE* gives us a much clearer picture of, is the letter of Pope Gregory, in which he spells out just what is expected of Æthelberht as a Christian king.

“Almighty god raises up certain good men to be rulers over nations in order that he may by their means bestow the gifts of his righteousness upon all those whom they are set. We realize that this has happened to the English race over whom your Majesty is placed, so that, by means of the blessings granted to you, heavenly benefits may also be bestowed upon your subjects. So, my most illustrious son, watch carefully over the grace you have received from God and hasten to extend the Christian faith among the people who are subject to you. Increase your righteous zeal for their conversion; suppress the worship of idols; overthrow their buildings and shrines; strengthen the morals of your subjects by outstanding purity of life, by exhorting them, terrifying, enticing, and correcting them, and by showing them an example of good works; so that you may be rewarded in heaven by the One whose name and knowledge you have spread on earth. For He whose honour you seek and maintain among the nations will

⁵⁵ HE, I.26.

⁵⁶ Bede I.26. Bede gives no exact date, but he does say that ten thousand are baptised at Christmas. It seems likely the king would have been Christened before that. See also Fletcher, R. *The Conversion of Europe, from paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD*, (London, 1997), 117.

⁵⁷ Wormald, 'Bede, Bretwaldas and origins of Gens Anglorum', 111.

also make your glorious name still more glorious even to posterity.”⁵⁸

Pope Gregory, was regarded as the apostle of the English, because he was the instigator of the Augustine mission. His writings were of great influence on Bede and on Alfred as well, who translated Gregory's *Regula Pastoralis* into Old English.

The importance of kings in the process of conversion

Throughout Bede's history the courts are central to the spread of the new faith. “In his accounts, missionaries concentrate their attentions on rulers and are only successful in establishing permanent bases if, and while, they have the support of the reigning monarchs.”⁵⁹ If a king adopted the Christian faith, his followers often would do likewise. The problem for the mission, however, was that England had no unity by any means. The land had a multitude of kings and underkings, of vastly varying power and influence. In many ways they were similar to the Germanic war chiefs, that Tacitus (c. 55 - c.120), a Roman politician and historian, describes⁶⁰ in his book *Germania*. The Germanic chief's lot was one of continual strife. Only by warring on his rivals could he obtain the spoils he needed to reward his noble retainers, and only by securing a large and able following could he successfully make war on his rivals⁶¹. Bede says that the “Old Saxons”, that is the Saxons on the continent, have no kings but are ruled by *satraps*.⁶² Whether the difference between these king-like rulers and 'true' kings is anything more than a matter of scale is perhaps a matter for debate, but it would seem that the Anglo-Saxon kings had much in common with these petty kings.

Germanic kings played an important part in religion. The Germanic gods were first and foremost the gods of the kings and it was their task to act as intermediary to those gods for the benefit or 'luck' of the tribe⁶³. In fact the kings claimed to be descended from the gods themselves and that was the quality which made them more than just a war leader. The main god from which the Anglo-Saxon kings were descended was Woden. Bede even lists him as ancestor of many dynasties, though, perhaps not unsurprisingly, not as a god.⁶⁴ “The crucial figure, consequently, in any conversion was the sacral king, and the fact that in Anglo-Saxon England the paths of the new religion were made smooth was in every kingdom due to the role played by its ruler.”⁶⁵

Yet even if the ruling king was convinced to become a Christian, this did not necessarily

⁵⁸ HE, I.32

⁵⁹ Yorke, Barbara, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', in: R. Gameson (ed.) *St. Augustine and the conversion of England*, (Thrupp, 1999), 152.

⁶⁰ Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede*, 32-33.

⁶¹ Campbell, J, 'The first Christian kings', in: Idem (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, (London, 1982), 54.

⁶² HE V.10.

⁶³ Chaney, William A, *The cult of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*, (Manchester, 1970), 11-12.

⁶⁴ HE, I.15. Chaney, *The cult of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*, 16. Also Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 155-156.

⁶⁵ Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 156.

mean that the kingdom was or stayed so too. Any one of a dynasty's princes could become king, and the violent deaths of their predecessors meant that a large number did indeed do so. Many of them remained pagan. Æthelberht's son and the sons of the East-Saxon king Saberht who was baptised, but whose sons stayed pagan, are good examples of this.

“After the death of Æthelberht, when his son Eadbald had taken over the helm of state, there followed a severe setback to the tender growth of the Church. Not only had he refused to receive the faith of Christ but he was polluted with such fornication as the apostle declares to have been not so much named among the Gentiles, in that he took his father's wife.”⁶⁶

Eadbald's people followed his example and reverted to paganism. But according to Bede God's punishment was inescapable, "for he was afflicted by frequent fits of madness and possessed by an unclean spirit."⁶⁷ The whole Roman mission nearly failed, for when Saberht followed Æthelberht into God's kingdom, Christianity died in the realm of the East-Saxons for a time.⁶⁸ His successor renounced the faith, and drove the bishop out of his kingdom, besides. Again God's direct influence in the world can be seen, for Bishop Augustine's successor, Lawrence, was visited in a dream by Saint Peter on the very night before he is to leave the island. In the dream he was scourged by the apostle, and severely berated for leaving his flock, and the following day the wounds were very real.

“The king [Eadbald] was amazed and asked who had dared to inflict such injuries on so great a man. When he heard that it was for the sake of his salvation that the bishop had suffered such torments and wounds at the hands of the apostle of Christ, he was greatly afraid. So he banned all idolatrous worship, gave up his unlawful wife, accepted the Christian faith, and was baptized; and thereafter he promoted and furthered the interests of the Church to the best of his ability.”⁶⁹

So while Christianity seems to have been accepted readily, the Anglo-Saxons were not so quick as to give up paganism quite so readily, as Bede would like. The practice of King Rædwald of the East Angles is a good example of an attitude which may have been common among the early converts. For “in the same temple he had one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar on which to offer victims to devils.”⁷⁰ God would aid a pious and virtuous king and grant him victory. This was the message that was used again and again to win over the hearts of the warrior-

⁶⁶ HE, II.5.

⁶⁷ HE, II.5.

⁶⁸ HE, II.5.

⁶⁹ HE, II.6.

⁷⁰ HE, II.15.

kings.⁷¹ To support their claims the missionaries could turn to the examples of Constantine and the Old Testament.

Christianity was made attractive to the Anglo-Saxon king eager to expand his power, success and fame. It did not always work out well. The killers of the East-Saxon king Sigeberht, declared “that they were angry with the king and hated him because he was too ready to pardon his enemies”.⁷² It hardly seems a capital offence, but if the king's role in the pecking order of the war-band is taken into account, a different picture emerges. A king's power was based on rewarding his followers. Here the king shows favour, not to his best retainers, but to his enemies, by forgiving them, and in doing so upsets the whole social system.⁷³

Many of the conversion stories conform to the model written by Gregory, bishop of Tours from 573 to 594, who wrote about the conversion of the Merovingian king Clovis (r. 481 - 511). His bride, just like Æthelberht's, introduced him to the true faith. The similarities do not end there, in fact the Clovis story can be reduced to four essential elements which are common to nearly all the conversion stories. First, and already mentioned, is the role of a Christian queen in converting her pagan husband. Next the power of God to bring victory in battle. Thirdly the king is reluctant to abandon the old ways and gods and fears the displeasure of his followers if he does so. The final element is a happy ending in which the king is baptised and many of his followers are also.⁷⁴

The conversion of Edwin

The story of Edwin (r. 616-633), a Northumbrian king, has elements of the formula but are applied by Bede with an interesting twist. Northumbria was actually two kingdoms, Bernicia and Deira, though sometimes one dynasty would be powerful enough to rule both kingdoms. Edwin was already a powerful, and often victorious king before his conversion, so his story is slightly different. Even so Bede managed to explain his success as a sign from God that he would become a Christian⁷⁵. His victory was an omen of things to come as it were. Edwin hoped to forge an alliance with the kings of Kent, and so asked to marry Ethelburga, a daughter of Aethelbald. This was granted after Edwin gave assurances that she would be allowed freedom to practice her faith, and Edwin showed some interest himself. Edwin was attacked and wounded by an assassin sent by the king of Sussex. He survived even though he was wounded and promised to accept the Christian faith if God granted him victory against the South Saxons. Though he was victorious, he hesitated and the pope wrote to him, and urged him to be baptised. When Edwin was finally ready to accept the faith, he

⁷¹ Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 166.

⁷² HE, III.22.

⁷³ Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 166.

⁷⁴ Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 103-104

⁷⁵ HE, II.9 also Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 122.

first conferred with his advisers, the pagan priest is amongst the most enthusiastic converts when they are all finally baptised. Although this account perhaps gives a distorted view of Anglo-Saxon paganism. According to Barbara Yorke “He [Bede] can be suspected of a tendency, found in other medieval Christian writers, to portray Germanic paganism as a negative mirror-image of Christian practice”.⁷⁶

3. Kingship

The *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, gives a confusing account of the kings and their relationships in war and peace. Sometimes the same person is called both *rex* (king), and *princeps*, (prince or chief). Some are denounced as *subregulus* (underkings) while the rule of some of the more powerful is described as having *imperium* (sovereignty).⁷⁷ Bede's inability to adequately describe many of the rulers' standing, seems to underline the suspicion of a dynamic political state of affairs in which the rulers, whatever their title, were in constant competition. They were ever trying to increase their power and status and trying to diminish that of their rivals. It was a world in which the question of what a king was, was not yet fully resolved. Bede however, does tell us what a *Christian* king ought to be like, by showing us portraits of several particularly colourful kings and writing briefly of the deeds of others. In this way the *HE* has aspects of a “mirror for princes”, which was a popular genre throughout the middle-ages. Bede gives two main types of Christian kings. One is the victorious Christian king, converting the heathens and rewarded by God, examples of which have already been given earlier, and the other gives up rule to serve God.⁷⁸ These latter kings would have been inspirational to Alfred so it is important to take a closer look at some of them.

Cadwalla, Ine and Coenred

Some of the early Christian kings seem to have had the unusual habit of abdicating and going to Rome on a pilgrimage. Some even became monks there. A prime example of this is the West Saxon king Cadwalla., (r. - 688), who “after ruling his people most ably for two years, gave up his throne for the sake of the Lord and to win an everlasting kingdom, and went to Rome.”⁷⁹ There he was baptised by the pope, and promptly died.

Cadwalla was succeeded as king by Ine, a successful king, seeing as he managed to rule for thirty-seven years. His law-code was an important work and inspiration for kings to follow. He too

⁷⁶ Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 153.

⁷⁷ Campbell, J, 'Bede's Reges and Principes', in: Idem, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, (London, 1986), 85-90. Cf. McClure, Judith, 'Bede's, Old Testament kings', 98.

⁷⁸ Campbell, 'Bede's Reges and Principes', 97-98.

⁷⁹ HE, V.7.

abdicated and went on a pilgrimage to Rome, and even more interesting is that he is said to have been accompanied there by several other Anglo-Saxon kings.⁸⁰ This example it would seem had some following. In the year 709 Coenred, king of the Mercians and Offa, the king of the East-Saxons travel to Rome to become monks. Bede mentions the fact that Offa was a young man and that it was hoped he would take over the rule of the kingdom, but nevertheless “left his wife, his lands, his kinsmen, and his fatherland for of Christ and for the Gospel in order that he might receive 'a hundredfold in this life' and in the world to come, life everlasting”⁸¹. This curious practice, of willing abdication, apparently, to enter a religious community was very unusual in early medieval Europe, and can be seen as a public demonstration of the royal houses' acceptance and commitment to Christianity.⁸² The practice was however discouraged by the Church and was soon replaced by the joining of a religious order, or the founding of a nunnery, by a close relative of the king, such as a sister or daughter. In fact Alfred ordered a monastery to be built near Shaftesbury, and “He appointed as its abbess his own daughter Æthelgifu, a virgin consecrated to God”.⁸³

Oswald

Edwin was killed in battle against Penda. His successors Osric and Eanfrith who were pagan, were killed by the British king Caedwalla, who had been subject to Edwin, but rebelled. Eanfrith's brother, “Oswald came with an army, small in numbers but strengthened by their faith in Christ, and destroyed the abominable leader of the Britons together with the immense force which he boasted was irresistible”.⁸⁴ Bede describes that before the battle Oswald has a cross set up, and that he and his men pray to God for victory. The whole scene is very reminiscent of the story of Constantine's vision and battle at the Milvian bridge in 312.⁸⁵ Interesting about Oswald is that he sends for Irishmen to administer to the spiritual needs of his people. Oswald had received baptism as an exile among the Irish, so it isn't all that strange. The Irish part in the conversion process is noteworthy however. Oswald gave the island of Lindisfarne to the Bishop as the place for his see. Lindisfarne would later grow to be an important monastery, famous not only for its books but also for its riches, which the Vikings took a liking to in 793. Bede describes the king as translating the bishop's sermons, from Irish to English, to his ealdormen because the bishop does not speak English⁸⁶. Perhaps this was one of the models which prompted Alfred to his own programme of translation. Of course the virtues of Oswald would have been of interest too. While being a powerful king, a *bretwalda* in the *ASC*, Os-

⁸⁰ HE, V.7.

⁸¹ HE, V.19

⁸² Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 163.

⁸³ Asser, c. 98.

⁸⁴ HE, III.1.

⁸⁵ HE, III.2.

⁸⁶ HE, III.3.

wald remains humble and the *HE* contains a wonderful story on his generosity. Oswald, just about to share a rich meal on a large silver with the bishop, hears that a great crowd has gathered begging for alms. The king promptly has the food on the dish distributed and the dish cut up and also handed out. (In the *Life of Alfred* Asser gives an account of Alfred's division of his taxes. Alms for the poor are certainly not forgotten.) Oswald was slain in battle against Penda, the same heathen Anglo-Saxon king that had also vanquished Edwin.⁸⁷ Bede attributes quite a number of miracles to the soil he was slain on, and his bones, but these are less relevant to our inquiry.

Oswiu (Oswy) and Oswine

Oswald had another brother Oswiu, who succeeded him to the throne. Though his rule seems to have been troubled. Deira split from Bernicia under its own king Oswine. According to Bede “King Oswine was tall and handsome, pleasant of speech, courteous in manner, and bountiful to nobles and commons alike; so it came about that he was beloved by all because of the royal dignity which showed itself in his character, his appearance, and his actions; and noblemen from almost every kingdom flocked to serve him as retainers.”⁸⁸ Oswiu had him murdered. Apparently the bishop Aidan foretold his death saying “I know that the king will not live long; for I never before saw a humble king. Therefore I think that he will very soon be snatched from this life; for this nation does not deserve to have such a ruler.” Bede gives a poignant message to any ruler here; A king must be virtuous but still keep his eye on the realities of ruling. Oswiu took a practical approach and built a monastery where Oswine was killed, so that prayers could be said daily for his forgiveness, and the soul of the deceased.

The pagan Penda had a son Peada who he made king of the Middle Angles under him. Peada asked for Oswiu's daughter, Alhflaed, in marriage, and Oswiu consented on the condition that Peada would be baptised. This seems very unusual to us, since Bede is otherwise very negative about Penda. Apparently neither Oswiu or Penda thought so and Peada was baptised and married Alhflaed. Naturally the followers and retainers were also Christened. Bede goes on to make an unusual statement about Penda; “Now King Penda did not forbid the preaching of the Word, even in his own Mercian kingdom, if any wished to hear it. But he hated and despised those who, after they had accepted the Christian faith, were clearly lacking in the works of faith. He said that they were despicable and wretched creatures who scorned to obey the God in whom they believed.”⁸⁹ Penda and Oswiu being allies for a time would be a likely explanation for both the marriage and Bede's unexpected positive remark.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ HE, III.9.

⁸⁸ HE, III.14.

⁸⁹ HE, III.21.

⁹⁰ Campbell, 'Observations on the conversion of England', 76.

After the apostasy of the successors of Sigeberht, the East Saxons remained pagan, but Bede reports that King Sigeberht of the East Saxons was friendly with Oswiu and visited him often in Northumbria. Every time Oswiu would try to persuade Sigeberht to adopt the Christian faith till after much discussion he seems to have won out. “He took counsel with his followers and, after he had addressed them, they all agreed to accept the faith and so he was baptised with them by bishop Finan”⁹¹. This is one of the cases Bede mentions where one king acts as godfather at the baptism of another king. The similarity between these accounts and Alfred's being godfather to Guthrum are hardly coincidental. There is also a similarity between the ceremony and the adoption into a king's family. This was important to the Anglo-Saxons and can also be seen in *Beowulf*.⁹²

The East Saxons were once again a Christian kingdom. Though Sigeberht was murdered by his own kinsmen shortly after,⁹³ the East Saxons seemed to have remained nominally Christian. That is until an outbreak of the plague in 663/4 caused one of the East-Saxon kings of the time, Sighere to revert to paganism along with his half of the kingdom, though only for a short while.⁹⁴

In a striking parallel to Oswald's great victory. Oswiu is forced to battle Penda after an attempt to buy him off failed. With a small force, but secure in their faith they achieved a massive victory. Oswiu continues the campaign and finally manages to slay Penda, becoming lord over Mercia as well, and bringing them into the Christian fold.

The next tale concerning Oswiu is peculiar for a number of reasons. It is about the synod of Streanaeshalch, (Whitby) which tried to solve some of the differences between the Irish and the Roman church⁹⁵. Bede makes the correct calculation of easter the main topic of the synod, though it probably was less important than some of the other issues.⁹⁶ The spokespersons for both sides are St. Wilfrid, for the catholic side, and Bishop Colman for the Irish. When each have spoken, Wilfrid concludes that the Catholic calculation is based on the authority of St. Peter, and that the Lord gave the keys of heaven to Peter. Oswiu asks Colman if this is true and he acknowledges that. Then the king asks if St. Columba, whose ways the Irish follow can claim as great authority as Peter. After that, many of the Irish conform to the Catholic practice and Colman leaves with some followers to Ireland. Once again we see a king taking an active interest in church affairs, his decision in a matter of theology, brings greater unity to the Church of the Anglo-Saxons. It therefore seems peculiar that this whole chapter was left out of the Old English translation of the *HE*.⁹⁷ It would be a chapter of interest to Alfred, and so could be interpreted as an argument against his involvement. But then

⁹¹ HE, III.22.

⁹² Campbell, 'Observations on the conversion of England', 75.

⁹³ HE, III.22.

⁹⁴ HE, III.30.

⁹⁵ Although there wasn't actually a single Irish church

⁹⁶ Collins, R. and J. McClure, 'Introduction', in: R. Collins and J. McClure (eds.), *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (Oxford, 1994), xix.

⁹⁷ Whitelock, *The old English Bede, Sir Israel Gollancz memorial lecture, British Academy*, 63.

again, the translator left out almost everything concerning the calculation of Easter, so perhaps he was just not interested in chronology. But now it is time to turn away from this specific example of unity to how the English unity was achieved in broader terms.

4. Alfred and the creation of the English Identity

Just because Bede calls his work a history of the English people, does not mean that there actually *was* one English people. There were certainly many different English kingdoms, but the people who lived in those kingdoms were themselves descended from invaders of very mixed origin. Although the peoples that came to the island are commonly known as the Anglo-Saxons, most historians agree that the invasion consisted of not just Angles and Saxons but also of Jutes, Frisians, Franks, Scandinavians and quite possibly adventurers from all over the Germanic world.⁹⁸ Exactly when these diverse settlers and conquerors began to be seen as one people is unclear.

It is clear, however, that the creation of a single 'English' identity was a lengthy process. This process has been noticed in other peoples throughout history and is known as ethnogenesis. One must beware of “the dangers of thinking that the civilisation of this age was characterised by modern notions of 'Irish' or 'English' nationalism.”⁹⁹ Loyalties were always first to kin and lord. Yet it has puzzled historians that people in all parts of what is now England shared a common identity long before their neighbours did.¹⁰⁰

Romanitas

Though the Anglo-Saxons conquered much of Britain, and much which had been Roman fell into disarray, one of the things that helped create the English identity was actually becoming more Roman.¹⁰¹ Although the Britons were the heirs to the empire, and Christian, it does not seem that they passed on much of their ways to the invaders. Rather, it was the Roman mission to Kent that from the very beginnings preserved strong ties to its point of origin, and so spread something of *Romanitas*.

The city of Canterbury, or *Durovernum Cantiacorum*, as it was known in Roman times, was largely depopulated by the time the missionaries arrived. With huts built between the rubble of the old stone buildings and over the old street grid, it probably bore little resemblance to the ancient city.¹⁰² It is significant that despite this, Augustine chose this city as the site of his first church,

⁹⁸ HE, V.9, Campbell, J, 'The Lost Centuries', in: Idem (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, (London, 1982), 27, 31.

⁹⁹ Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede*, 229.

¹⁰⁰ Wormald, 'Bede, Bretwaldas and origins of Gens Anglorum', 104.

¹⁰¹ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 222.

¹⁰² Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 222-224.

rather than one of the royal manses. Canterbury became the first bishopric of the English and its importance grew when Augustine was made the first metropolitan bishop, that is a bishop with papal authority to create sees and appoint bishops. Despite plans for the metropolitan sees to be London and York, Augustine and his successors remained a Canterbury¹⁰³. A bishop's authority was closely related to, or safeguarded by, a king's power, but when the power of Æthelberht began to wane, Canterbury and the Kentish church derived its authority from being as Roman as it could possibly be. *Romanitas*, therefore, was a key quality for the early archbishops there.¹⁰⁴

Rome held the barbarian rulers enthralled. Even in the areas distant from the old borders of the empire, the symbols of Roman power were in demand. The famous helmet found at Sutton Hoo, was based on a late Roman cavalry helmet and was crafted in Sweden. The Anglo-Saxons would have known how vast and powerful the empire had been, and that they now occupied a part of it.¹⁰⁵ Christianity was the religion of the empire, and adopting that religion would have been a way to become more Roman. A point the popes were apt to stress in their letters to potential converts.¹⁰⁶ The idea seems to have caught on, for from the early seventh century onwards, even the fashion seems to have shifted towards a more Roman form of dress.¹⁰⁷ The same style was also current in Francia, and perhaps even more significant it aped the Roman court. The empress Theodora and her attendants can still be seen wearing such attire in the San Vitale mosaics in Ravenna.

Another expression of this *Romanitas*, was the issuing of laws. Bede has the following to say of the king of Kent, Æthelberht: "Among other benefits which he conferred upon the race under his care, he established with the advice of his counsellors a code of laws after the Roman manner."¹⁰⁸ One of the first things a newly converted barbarian king did, was issue his own law code.

So the pagan Anglo-Saxons were interested in Rome, and the imagery of empire. Becoming Christian made them Roman, in a sense, and Canterbury's strong connection with Rome brought Rome closer to the English.

Angles

Bede calls his work a history of the church of the *Angles*, and though it was that, it was also the church of the other Germanic peoples that had settled there. Gregory never described the targets of the mission as anything else than *Angli*¹⁰⁹, and Canterbury always agreed with that, even though the people of Kent claimed descent from the Jutes. It would seem that the seed from which the idea

¹⁰³ HE, I.29.

¹⁰⁴ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 226.

¹⁰⁵ Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 156-157.

¹⁰⁶ Yorke, 'The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts', 159.

¹⁰⁷ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 245.

¹⁰⁸ HE, II.5.

¹⁰⁹ Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', 243.

of a *Gens Anglorum* germinated, came from one pope's misconception of the inhabitants of the island of Britain.¹¹⁰ It is likely that Bede's work further helped the idea take root among those who came to see themselves as 'English'. As Robin Chapman Stacey aptly put it "Image is not reality, but the deliberate deployment of images is an important part of the process by which reality can come to be defined."¹¹¹

Alfred made ready use of these images and the idea of a unified English people. In the mid 880's he acquired Mercia, a realm of Angles. The change of Alfred's title from *rex Saxonum* to *rex Anglo-Saxonum* reflects this, and Alfred went to great pains to foster this unity. Gregory's assumption that the island of *Britannia* was under one rule by the Angli, and Bede's elaboration of this idea, creating the idea of *the Church of the English people*, were useful to Alfred¹¹². The rule of Alfred over the Mercians was as things should be, and no doubt the common threat of the Vikings helped as well. In chapter five of book two, Bede gives a list of particularly influential kings that were later given the title Bretwalda in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC)*. This title, meaning either "Britain-ruler" or "wide ruler" is somewhat problematic. It was not a formally recognized title in any sense, and who this title was ascribed to seems to have depended on the preferences of the writer.¹¹³ There has been much discussion about this title, and whether or not Bede actually meant that the list of rulers given by him had 'imperial' powers or not. Whatever Bede intended the compiler(s) of the *ASC* used this notion and portrayed Alfred as the eighth Bretwalda, thus strengthening his claim to Mercia.¹¹⁴

5. Conclusion

While proof that Alfred was involved in the translation of *the Old English Bede* is still beyond our grasp, it seems he would indeed have profited by its further dissemination. Translation would clearly have been a benefit to this, as with the other titles that were translated into Old English.

Alfred had become king of all the Anglo-Saxons not under Viking rule. The advantage of fostering more unity among his subjects would have been greatly desirable both to create a united front against the Viking marauders and to secure his own power. There are a number of examples that Alfred worked hard to strengthen the ties with Mercia and win the Mercians hearts. He married a Mercian, worked with the Mercian nobles. He even entrusted London to a Mercian ealdorman. Finally he had a number of Mercian helpers in his inner circle.

¹¹⁰ Wormald, 'Bede, Bretwaldas and origins of Gens Anglorum', 124, 125.

¹¹¹ Stacey, Chapman, 'Texts and society', 242.

¹¹² Nelson, J.L., 'The political ideas of Alfred of Wessex', 135.

¹¹³ Keynes and Lapidge, 'Introduction', 11. For more on Bretwalda's see Wormald, 'Bede, Bretwaldas and origins of Gens Anglorum'.

¹¹⁴ Scharer, A., 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', *Early Medieval Europe* 5, (London, 1996), 181.

Bede's work set up the scaffold for the notion of an English people, built on Gregory's foundation, that Alfred could further build upon. The idea of a Bretwalda in a tradition of Bretwalda's needed Bede's list of powerful kings to lend it legitimacy.

The *HE* shows the “English people” as a Christian people, heirs to a new Israel. Just as the British had lapsed in their faith and been sent the scourge of the Anglo-Saxons, so too had the English been punished by the arrival of the Vikings. This was the message of Alfred and Asser, and if the English were to survive and even triumph they would need the support of God. This victory could only come about with a wise king. Alfred certainly strove to enhance the level of learning in his realm.

In many ways this was a rewriting of history, the victory had already been achieved, Wessex survived and expanded while the other kingdoms succumbed. The very existence of the Danelaw would serve as a reminder of the danger the English had faced and still faced from the Vikings and perhaps of the necessity of cooperation in the face of a common threat.

The *HE* presented Alfred with numerous examples of good Christian kingship. There are obvious parallels in a number of instances and Asser portrayed him similarly to the best of those early kings.

Alfred could well have had the work translated, for Alfred could have used it to show the common ground of his subjects and also his own qualifications as a good king. Alfred also took the examples of conversion seriously as his relationship with the Viking king Guthrum clearly illustrates.

It has been suggested that Asser's life of Alfred was intended as a “mirror for princes” for Alfred's own children¹¹⁵, if so Alfred would almost certainly have had a copy of the *HE* at hand for the same purpose, regardless of the language it was written in.

¹¹⁵ Scharer, A., 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', 205.

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