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Monks Praise the Female Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: Hild of Whitby and Edith of Wilton

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Abstract

Female saints and abbesses made powerful contributions to the conversion of England in the seventh and eighth centuries and to its religious life in the tenth and eleventh centuries. However, the documentary record about these women is not only sparse, but also mediated mostly through hagiographies written by men. It has been argued on the basis of these hagiographies that minimal respect was accorded to English female saints during the early medieval period. This thesis tests that assertion by studying the lives of two eminent examples from the beginning and the end of the Christian Anglo-Saxon era: Hild of Whitby (d.680) and Edith of Wilton (d.987). Reading the historical record with sensitivity to context and culture supports the view that female sanctity was multi-faceted and honoured by both genders from late antiquity through to the Middle Ages.

Keywords

Hild of Whitby, Edith of Wilton, Bede, Goscelin, hagiography, female saints, Anglo-Saxon.

Summary for Lay Audience

Hagiography (an account of a saint's life written for devotional purposes) is a difficult genre to use for understanding history. By nature a hagiography is formulaic and other-worldly.

Hagiographies of female saints are especially challenging when consulted to understand the lives of such women, because they were written by men. Seldom are the voices of early medieval women themselves preserved in the historical record of any kind. This thesis attempts to clarify the real lives of two particular female saints of early medieval England by studying their hagiographies. One woman is from the beginning of the period: Hild, abbess of Whitby, a monastery in northern England housing both men and women. We know about her life from the pages of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* written by a monk named Bede in about 731. The other is close to the end of the period: Edith, a royal young lady brought up in the Wilton convent in southern England. The *Life of Edith* was written by another monk named Goscelin about 1080.

The lives of these two women are examples taken from among many of the vital impact of their female gender and noble status on the religious scene of early medieval England. In some ways Hild's and Edith's lives were comparable, in others not so much, but it is apparent from studying the surviving records that the respect accorded to them both as women and as saints was something they had in common. In addition, it appears that while the political status of English women faded away as the centuries went by, opportunities for them in the religious sphere remained. Most interesting of all, it seems that the depiction of female sanctity in hagiographies written by men (much having to do with heroic defence of their virginity) was not objectionable to contemporary women but embraced by them. Not only in our estimation today, but also in the

eyes of their contemporaries, female saints in early medieval England lived lives full of both earthly and heavenly significance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract		i
Keywords		i
Summary for Lay Audience		ii
Table of Contents		iv
Introduction		1
Chapter One	The Disappearing English Royal Women	6
Chapter Two	The Art of Writing and Re-Writing Hagiography	37
Chapter Three	Hild of Whitby	55
Chapter Four	Edith of Wilton	84
Conclusion		103
Bibliography		113

INTRODUCTION

The Lord gives the word; great is the company of women who bore the tidings.
Psalm 68:11 NRSV

A remarkably great company of women in early medieval England received the word of the Lord and bore the tidings to their society through their transformed lives. The contribution of female saints and abbesses to the conversion of England was as significant as that of the male saints and bishops. However the documentary record about these women is mediated mostly through hagiographies written by men: a double challenge of interpretation because of genre and authorship.

Recent research into women's history in the medieval era has elicited many trajectories of thinking on the topic, one of which is women's spirituality. The evidence concerning Anglo-Saxon England in particular suggests that at the time, women were capable and respected, albeit within their prescribed role as associates with their male counterparts in church and kingdom.¹ Previously it was thought that the lot of English women deteriorated drastically in political, economic, legal and ecclesiastical terms after the Norman Conquest. Lately, however, scholars such as Stephanie Hollis, Pauline Stafford, and Barbara Yorke have argued that the change came not with the Normans but with the Benedictine Reforms of the tenth century, when Patristic, as opposed to Anglo-Saxon, views on the role of women began to take hold in England.² Even more

¹ The use of the term "Anglo-Saxon" is a contested matter in academia in recent years. Most now say "Old English" for the language, to indicate its continuity with Middle and Modern English. Some prefer "early medieval England" for the era, because the term "Anglo-Saxon" has been appropriated by white supremacist groups, and charges have been made of systemic racism in this field. I chose to say "Anglo-Saxon" here because it is the best descriptor for the people in my study. Hild, Bede, Cuthbert and Æthelthryth were Angles; Edith and her relatives were Saxons. There is much to say about Irish and British subcultures and saints in early medieval England, but that is beyond my scope. A defence of continuing to say "Anglo-Saxon" in some contexts of scholarly work can be read at <http://www.fmass.eu/>

² The principal studies are Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1992); Pauline Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England," *Past and Present*, 163 (1999): 3-35; and Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

recently, feminist historians and critics such as Clare Lees and Gillian Overing have joined Hollis in arguing that a somewhat derogatory attitude toward women began in the eighth century with Bede and other male writers of female saints' lives.³ On the other hand, Sarah Foot is one scholar who has challenged both these interpretations.⁴ Others such as Diane Watt and Katie Bugyis have delved into women's writing activities and discovered a wealth of evidence about their energetic spirituality and occupations alongside those of men.⁵ Nevertheless, by the late eleventh century, there were at least two shrines in Britain (those of Cuthbert in Durham and Laurence of Canterbury in Aberdeenshire) where women were not allowed to set foot, so great was the church's distrust of their gender. How did this happen? Why, at the very same time, was the cult, or at least the hagiography, of female saints flourishing?

To contribute to understanding the extent of change in the activities of and attention to women during the period, this paper compares the lives of two English women who had much in common but lived in different centuries. Both were royal princesses, lived in convents, and were regarded as saints after death. They are Hild of Whitby, d.680, whose life is recorded in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* written about 730; and Edith of Wilton, d.987, whose *Life* was written by Goscelin of St-Bertin about 1080. The aim is to read below the surface of what the hagiographers wrote about these women, in order to discern as far as possible how they actually lived their lives, compared to what was emphasized in the writing. It appears that attitudes toward female

³ Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

⁴ Sarah Foot, "Bede's Abbesses," in *Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages*, edited by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Katie Bugyis, and John Van Engen (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020). <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/lib/west/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=6146406>

⁵ Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650-1100* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, *The Care of Nuns: The Ministries of Benedictine Women in England during the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

sanctity as an ideal did not change as much as society did over the centuries in early medieval England.

Basic to understanding this topic is first to be familiar with the historical context of women's lives in early and late Anglo-Saxon England as far as we are able. Chapter One surveys the political and ecclesiastical environment in each era. Obviously many changes occurred between the conversion to Christianity and the Norman Conquest, and women's lives were affected in ways and for reasons that are not as simple as might first appear. Contemporary writing, and particularly the genre of hagiography, is discussed in Chapter Two. Scholars today try to read between the lines to discover more than meets the eye in their sources; this is especially true for women's history in the early medieval era because their own voices are so seldom present in the textual record. Diane Watt and Catherine Clarke have done much research into the nature of writing by and about medieval English women and their contributions to texts that appear to be by men.⁶ Chapter Two also reviews what was thought during the period to be important in the cult of saints: the oral tradition, the relics, the earthly location of remembered events, the written *Lives* and *Miracles* as a genre and the production of such texts. The final portion of Chapter Two will examine to what extent and for what purposes various authors altered their sources to produce new or updated hagiographies. Just as it can be proven that traditions about male saints could be written or re-written to present a politically expedient slant, so also, in theory, the same could have happened regarding the approved activities of women.

⁶ Catherine Clarke, "Literary Production Before and After the Conquest," in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 41-50.

With this context in place, it is then possible to examine in more detail in Chapters Three and Four the recorded lives of Hild and Edith. Is there a detectable difference in men's attitude toward female saints between the seventh and eleventh centuries? Some historians claim that Hild, abbess of Whitby, was a more powerful figure than Bede admits; it does appear that the kind of power she wielded (if she did) had been suppressed by the time the tenth-century abbesses lived. Edith lived a much shorter life than Hild (she died at age twenty-three whereas Hild was sixty-six) and so had little time for accomplishments besides her fame for piety. However, the tradition about Edith says much about the lives of her abbess mother Wulfthryth and her sister nuns, and the ones generations later who hired a man to write Edith's hagiography nearly a century after her death.

Whether the craft and content of hagiography changed over the centuries is a matter that involves more factors than ecclesiastical misogyny. Interpretation depends on the pre-suppositions that historians bring to their sources, and what motives they attribute to the gaps in information. It is arguable that women gradually and unwittingly effaced their own visibility in books and in the historical record in general because of social changes, not simply in response to antipathy from the church. Between the seventh and the eleventh centuries there was certainly a shift in men's attitudes toward women in public life. This is seen somewhat in the case of queens, but especially in the case of abbesses, who lost their accustomed role of wise female counsellors to male kings. They and their sisters generally lost the privilege of having an education and status comparable to that of men. It might be expected that over the time period, female saints (a category overlapping with that of abbesses) suffered the same loss of respect. Did female saints cease to be taken seriously as persons, thenceforth to be seen merely as embodied ideals as

defined by men? The Conclusion of this essay will argue that the hagiographies of Hild and her contemporaries on the one hand, and Edith and her contemporaries on the other, show that the conceptualization of female sanctity remained fairly consistent from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. While the ultimate virtue was always virginity or at least chastity (an ideal that seemed acceptable to contemporary women of all kinds), service to the church and holy living were also significant factors contributing to their reputations. Bede and Goscelin managed to draw pictures of female saints that were more realistic and imitable than many previous and subsequent ones.

The hagiographies of the two women featured in this paper situated each of them in their social context and within the belief system of the monks who praised them. The more we see this belief system as multifaceted and nuanced, the better we can discern the individuals behind the texts, and better understand that the authors who wrote about them did not treat their gender with contempt. On the contrary, we can discover evidence of them acknowledging women's ability, agency, and value. A fair understanding of how Hild and Edith were seen by their male and female peers is a small but important contribution to the history of women's spirituality.⁷

⁷ In the following pages, all translations from the Latin and Old English sources are my own unless otherwise specified.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DISAPPEARING ENGLISH ROYAL WOMEN

The religious transformation of England from pagan to Christian in the seventh and eighth centuries was wrapped up with the power politics of the day.¹ Pope Gregory's best spiritual intentions when he sent Augustine on a mission to Kent in 597 soon gave way to practicalities. Calculated manoeuvring, perfunctory 'conversions,' mass baptisms, and war against fellow Christians in the name of power advantages came more to the fore than heavenly aspirations. Nevertheless, many hundreds of men and women professed faith and flocked to the dozens of monasteries that mushroomed all over the land during these years.²

Royal women were prominent players in the early development of the English church.³ Their contribution as queens and abbesses is probably under-rated. The frequency with which women founded and governed monasteries is surprising, and accounts for the preponderance of female royal saints originating at this time. Holiness in obscurity is not the path to recognition as a saint, but as abbesses, women were in the public eye, and those who were especially devout were acclaimed as such. More women qualified as saints in seventh- and eighth-century England than at any other time. Jane Schulenburg calls this era the 'golden age' of female sanctity in Europe

¹ This has been the theme of a number of monographs. Two of the more recent are by Nicholas Higham: *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997); and *Re-Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge, 2006).

² Following John Blair and Sarah Foot, they could be called 'minsters' instead of 'monasteries' in recognition of much pastoral activity in their neighbourhoods as opposed to seclusion. Here I will use the more usual term 'monastery,' especially for the double houses. See John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ The topic is explored in Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

and particularly in Britain, where 40% of new saints were women (compared to 10-15% the rest of the time).⁴

The first purpose of this chapter is to determine to what extent these women were extraordinary or typical of their class and gender in their time. To do so, it is necessary to compare women's experiences in politics and monasteries in the early and late Anglo-Saxon periods. The second purpose is to question the argument that the role and power of English women went into decline as a consequence solely of churchmen's attitudes toward them. Many non-religious changes transpired between the seventh and eleventh centuries that had a bearing on women's own choices and on the nature of the surviving evidence for historians.

1.1 Seventh-century politics

While men and women in monasteries prayed, studied, taught, and practiced works of charity, bishops and kings played a game of mutual exploitation to strengthen their respective ecclesiastical and territorial kingdoms. Anglo-Saxon kingship was always about the struggle for power. How the church contributed to that power was in accordance with a shrewd awareness of its own best interests. Bishops knew that the social system was such that ritual behaviour would cascade downward from kings, and that kings had the power to protect the church. Kings knew that political, legal, educational and ideological advantages flowed from alliance with the church. Strategic marriage alliances, literacy in service of the government, appropriation of symbols of power: all these played a part in the complex manoeuvring for advantage. As one example of the

⁴ Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 63-65.

intermarriage of professed Christians of different kingdoms, consider the line of Edwin of Deira who married the Kentish princess Æthelburh, daughter of Æthelbert, the first royal convert. Their daughter Eanflæd married Oswiu of Northumbria; the son of that union, Ahlfrith, married Penda's daughter Cyneburh of Mercia; their son Peada married Oswiu's daughter Ahlflæd, on condition that he accept baptism for himself and his followers and a mission of northern clergy.⁵ Baptismal sponsorships, such as that of Rædwald by Æthelbert, were a means of ritualizing liege relationships between kings. Literacy, a gift of the church, allowed Æthelbert to order the laws of Kent to be written down, and Edwin to accomplish the same for hidages (tribute due) and letters in the next generation. Church affairs also offered opportunities to showcase oneself by chairing a synod such as Oswiu did at Whitby in 664, or by founding a monastery such as Oswald did with Lindisfarne – a clone of Iona – as a statement of his allegiance in the Celtic direction rather than toward the Roman tradition in the south.⁶

Some convert kings dedicated their female kin to the service of God. Bede tells us that Edwin offered his newborn daughter Eanfled for baptism, who when she grew up married Oswiu, who in turn offered their daughter Ælflæd as a consecrated virgin – both of them in thanksgiving for military victory, both future abbesses of Whitby, and both counted as saints.⁷ The “Kentish Royal Legend” tells of a whole collection of princess abbess-saints in that kingdom, in turn linked by marriage to the ruling dynasty of East Anglia, from which came four abbesses of Ely.⁸

⁵ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.9, III.15, III.21. Hereafter referred to as *HE*. The English version used here is *Ecclesiastical History of the English People, with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, translated by Leo Sherley-Price; revised by R. E. Latham and D. H. Farmer (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1990).

⁶ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 117, 171, 211.

⁷ Bede, *HE*, II.9, III.24.

⁸ David Rollason, *The Mildreth Legend: a Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England*. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982).

Barking was founded and patronized by the royal family of Essex, and Wimborne by that of Wessex.⁹

The noble abbesses, while devoted to their faith and “married” to Christ, also served the interests of their families, in much the same manner as queens were ambassadors for their own dynasties when they married into other kingdoms. A strong tradition of respect for female advice was a feature of Germanic culture.¹⁰ The role of the queen is not only deduced from the historical record, but also prescribed in Old English literature. A queen was expected to support her husband with good counsel, to mediate in disputes, and to strengthen bonds within the household and with allies. In *Maxims*, a set of gnomic poems (c.800), part of the noblewoman’s role was with her husband *him ræd witan boldāgendum bām ætsomne* [to know advice for them, the hall-owners, both together].¹¹ The author of *Beowulf* says a queen *þætte freoðuwebbe fēores onsēce æfter liġetorne lēofne mannan* [is required to be peaceweaver of spirits when there is injury between friends].¹² Royal women are important in *Beowulf*. They give significant formal orations in the hall, and the widowed Hygd has the authority to offer the vacant throne to Beowulf.¹³ Wealhtheow is *friðusibb folca* [peace-pledge between nations]; Hrothgar’s daughter Freawaru is betrothed to a rival king in hopes *þæt hē mid ðy wīfe wælfæhða dæl sæcça ġesette* [that he with

⁹ Barbara Yorke, “Sisters under the Skin? Anglo-Saxon Nuns and Nunneries in Southern England,” in Keith Bate et al. (eds.), *Medieval Women in Southern England (Reading Medieval Studies 15, 1989)*, 95-117, at 97.

¹⁰ Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 151-161; Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 11, 35, 87; Pauline Stafford, “Queens and Queenship,” in *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c.500-c.1100*, edited by Pauline Stafford (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 459-476.

¹¹ *Maxims* I.81-92, at Peter Baker, “Old English Aerobics,” <http://www.oldenglishaerobics.net/maxims1.php>.

¹² *Beowulf* line 1942, in *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, Fourth Edition, edited by R.D. Fulk, Robert Bjork and John Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

¹³ *Beowulf* 612-628, 1167-1186, 2369.

the woman might settle the strife of murderous feuds between the parties].¹⁴ Modern historians have structured their understanding of this cultural practice around the term “peaceweaver.” Megan Cavell reminds us, however, that this word *fripuwebbe*, which has so informed modern historiography, occurs but three times in the whole Old English corpus, and in the poetry where it appears, the business that it represents is not gendered female.¹⁵ Yet although the critical construct may well have out-stripped the word that suggested it, the social and political function of noble women is not in dispute.

A royal wife from another kingdom could be more than just a passive presence at a foreign court, a breeder of heirs. She was an advisor, a hostess, and a diplomat, and her influence was considerable both for good and for evil. Pope Boniface V wrote to Edwin’s Christian bride Æthelburh encouraging her to convert her husband; Redwald’s unnamed pagan queen persuaded him not to kill Edwin because it would be dishonourable, and she later caused him to apostasize; Ecgfrith’s second wife Iurminburgh turned her husband against Bishop Wilfrid after queen Æthelthryth left him.¹⁶ Some cases were inversions of what a peaceweaving queen should be. The Mercian king Peada’s Bernician wife Ahlflæd betrayed her husband to death at the hands of Mercian nobles. Her sister Osthryth, wife of Æthelred of Mercia, had to referee a war between her husband and her brother Ecgfrith of Northumbria, apparently unsatisfactorily as she ended up murdered.¹⁷ (This may have been partly because she enshrined the relics of her uncle Oswald of Northumbria, Mercia’s enemy.) Offa’s daughter Eadburh, married to Beorhtric King of Wessex,

¹⁴ *Beowulf* 2017, 2028-9.

¹⁵ Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 280-295.

¹⁶ Bede, *HE* II.11, 12, 15; Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, in *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, translated by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chapter 24.

¹⁷ Bede, *HE* III.24, V.24.

accidentally killed her husband with poison intended for someone else, and had to flee to Francia, where she ended her days in disgrace. King Alfred's biographer Asser tells us that this episode left such a bad taste in the mouth that the Wessex aristocracy ever after minimized the honour of the king's wife; she was neither titled Queen nor viewed as throne-sharer (literally and figuratively) as she was in the rest of England.¹⁸ Such scandalous, and no doubt rare, counter-examples call into question just how much the peaceweaving ideal worked out in reality. The point remains that queens occupied powerful positions, with attendant opportunities and perils alike.

Some historians have argued that Bede wrote *Historia Ecclesiastica* in such a way that the role of queens in the conversion of England was minimized.¹⁹ Stacy Klein observes that Bede alters the traditional understanding of queens as offering political advantages to kings via alliances, picturing them as peaceweaving with the heavenly kingdom instead. As royal wives were typically acquired by bargaining, in the conversion era the negotiation involved the new religion, and Klein notices that the price of queens grows ever steeper.²⁰ Bertha comes to Æthelbert of Kent in 580 on condition she be allowed to practise her faith; their daughter Æthelburh is given to Edwin on condition he accept Christianity; Peada of the Middle Angles may marry Alhflaed Oswiu's daughter in 654, on condition that all his people be baptised. Nevertheless, while thus inadvertently revealing queens' significant function in the conversion process, Klein thinks that Bede attempts to minimize their contribution to it. He does this in three ways. One is to omit information that it is hard to believe he did not have, such as Pope Gregory's letter to Æthelbert's

¹⁸ Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 13-15, in *Alfred the Great*, translated and edited by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge. (London: Penguin Books, 1983).

¹⁹ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 225-8; and Klein, *Ruling Women*, chapter 1.

²⁰ Klein, *Ruling Women*, 15, 21.

wife Bertha urging her to work on her husband's conversion. It is possible that he was unaware of the letter, but strange, given that Gregory was Bede's hero and he had all the other documentation. Another is to portray queens as inimical to Christianity. There is no doubt that some were, such as Rædwald's wife. Finally, he represents their Christian influence as insignificant compared to that of bishops, especially Paulinus, Wilfrid and Theodore, all of whom are shown to over-shadow the queens they undoubtedly dealt with. Klein's interpretation has some merit. One must admit that even if we could show Bede's motivation was not misogynistic (more on this in the following chapters), the effect does obscure women's participation in England's conversion.

Stephanie Hollis explains that queens were bound to clash with the ambitions of bishops to be the confidants of kings.²¹ To be displaced as throne-sharer would be intolerable. Hollis suggests that many reigning queens were inimical to the new religion. It is possible that they feared the church's teachings on consanguineous unions or 'unequal yoke' (Christian-pagan matches) which had the power to break up their marriages. Even a lawfully-married Christian queen could not politically submerge herself in her husband's identity as the church desired, if she were to be a successful peaceweaver. On the other hand, for a bride to adhere to the customs of her own people implied her husband's people were subject to the bride's family. Some historians have pointed to Bertha's Frankish origins to explain why she was not presented as the means of conversion of Æthelbert: Kent must not be seen as submitting itself to the religion of another kingdom.²² It was a balancing act. Pauline Stafford mentions that the foreign-ness of an in-

²¹ Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 161-5.

²² Klein, *Ruling Women*, 26. She cites historians Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972) and Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

marrying wife and new religious practice could combine to make her a potential object of resentment in her new home.²³ Such women were vulnerable, especially as widows: Æthelburh fled Northumbria after Edwin's death, and Osthryth was murdered by Mercian nobles. In the violent politics of the early Middle Ages, women had no guaranteed protection. Indeed their status as women placed by marriage between rival families could leave them especially exposed. It is not hard to see why opting for a nunnery rather than a palace might be a wise choice for an English princess.

1.2 Double monasteries

An alternate career path open to royal women was as abbess of a double monastery. Double monasteries, where communities of men and women lived in one location under a female abbess, were a regional idiosyncrasy, which the English copied from Frankish and Irish examples. In the eighth century there were certainly eighteen double houses in England, plus twenty more probable ones; there were also dozens of men's houses, but it is impossible to say whether there were any exclusively female.²⁴ The advent of the abbess as head of a double house was a remarkable adaptation of English culture to the needs of women and the church.

English practice and Roman canon law collided on numerous points obviously, including marriage. The Anglo-Saxons customarily granted women the freedom to leave their husbands; nor could a married woman be cast aside against her will.²⁵ As mentioned above however, when

²³ Stafford, "Queens and Queenship," 465.

²⁴ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 37, 51.

²⁵ Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), 57; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 56-63.

the new religion came, queens were vulnerable to losing their positions. The church struggled over many years on the one hand to replace the strong ties of kinship in blood/ marriage with kinship in Christ, and on the other to promote the Christian idea of marriage as exclusive, indissoluble, and forbidden within certain degrees of consanguinity. These sometimes mutually exclusive ideas, foreign to both Germanic and Celtic culture, required that certain adaptations were made by the English church to facilitate the conversion.²⁶ In these adjustments, noblewomen had the most to lose politically, but much to gain ecclesiastically.

Theodore's *Penitential* (c.700) makes provision that a man may divorce a pagan wife.²⁷ In addition, although the Church Fathers had preferred widows not to remarry, in this period the English church was lenient in this regard. A greater problem arose with royal women such as Æthelthryth who wished to desert their husbands to enter nunneries. The church decided to allow separation by mutual consent if a spouse wished to enter a monastery. Opportunities thereby opened up not only for Christian widows but also for married women who felt a vocation. Now, along with the virgins (such as Æbbe of Coldingham, sister of Oswald and Oswiu of Northumbria), some of whom had been entered into monasteries as infants (such as Mildrith of Minster-in-Thamet and Ælflæd of Whitby), we also have the married women who entered nunneries after the deaths of their husbands or upon separation from them. The latter group were so numerous in the double monasteries that Bishop Aldhelm, in *De Virginitate* written for the nuns of Barking c.700, included some sentences to accommodate their existence.²⁸ It was he who

²⁶ Hollis *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 38-40, 48-74.

²⁷ *Penitential* documents can be perused at <http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/index.php?p=index>

²⁸ Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, in *Aldhelm, the Prose Works*, translated by Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979). Within Aldhelm's long spiel on virginity there are short asides in faint praise of chastity as second best at VIII, IX, XIX, and LX. It is hard to find a pithy quotation because of Aldhelm's convoluted prose style.

explicitly expanded the acceptable states for women – for the Church Fathers only virginity, widowhood, or matrimony (the least spiritual by a long shot) – to include those who dissolved their marriages. Examples abound in the seventh century of formerly-married abbesses. Cuthburga, who founded Wimborne (possibly the first West Saxon nunnery), was separated from her husband King Aldfrith of Northumbria. The earliest of the Kentish double monasteries was Lyminge, founded for Æthelburh by her brother King Eadbald when she was forced to retreat to Kent from Northumbria after the death of her husband Edwin in 633. Sheppey was founded for Queen Seaxburh, widow of King Earconbert. Æthelthryth, separated from her husband Ecgrith, became abbess of Ely.²⁹ Hild of Whitby was probably a widow.³⁰ Numerous examples can also be found of queens who retired to nunneries in later Wessex, from Ealhswith the widow of King Alfred onwards.

Withdrawal of royal ladies to a nunnery could resolve family problems (where will she live?), avert a political crisis (what if she re-marries?), and often enabled kings to avail themselves of the talents of well-placed abbess relatives. Abbesses did not forfeit their privilege of advising the men. In fact they were sometimes seen in the sources to be counsellors in public forums: Hild advised kings and nobles, Æbbe spoke up at a Northumbrian council in 680/81, and Ælfflæd did the same at the Synod of Nidd in 705.³¹ Life as an abbess would likely be congenial to a princess or a former queen, providing her with a position of power, wealth and independence of action. Without questioning her personal spiritual vocation, to be sure there were also some practical advantages to her family. Endowing a monastery kept landed property from passing to another

²⁹ These four examples are found in Yorke, “Sisters Under the Skin,” 101 and 96, and Bede, *HE* IV.19.

³⁰ Christine Fell, “Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch,” in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: a Symposium*, edited by Bekker-Neilson et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 79.

³¹ Bede, *HE* IV.23; Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, chapters 39 and 60.

kin group by marriage.³² It was not hitherto the usual Germanic custom – but more acceptable to the church than marrying a cousin. In some cases, relegating surplus daughters to a nunnery was a way to remove them from the marriage market, either permanently or until they were needed for advantageous unions, as we shall see later. Another adaptation of custom was to use the nuns as intercessors, a function which would have accorded well with women’s peaceweaving role. From the beginning the English church had worked to put an end to feuds by encouraging payment of *wergild* instead, which morphed into donation of land to monasteries.³³ King Egbert founded Minster-in-Thanet because he had killed his nephews. Queen Eanflæd insisted that Oswiu found Gilling Abbey to atone for his servant murdering Oswine his cousin, a crime within the kin, for which there was no compensation in English custom.³⁴ The nuns would have been able to pray not only for the souls of the murdered men, but also for those of the men who had murdered them.

The presence of men in mixed houses with the women had several possible advantages: men’s physical labour, provision of the sacraments within the house and in pastoral care of the neighbourhood, pooling of economic resources, possibly some protection from attack.³⁵ The early documentation does not articulate any notion of strict gender segregation. There is no evidence that they were segregated at Whitby, and definitely not at Coldingham where Bede says the men and women were constantly visiting each other.³⁶ He implies that they were separated at Barking and Ely, but this may have been wishful thinking.³⁷ Yorke

³² Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women* (London: Routledge, 2000), 45.

³³ David Rollason, *The Mildreth Legend*, 49, 50.

³⁴ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 230.

³⁵ Information in this paragraph is from Foot, *Veiled Women*, 50-60.

³⁶ Bede, *HE* IV.25.

³⁷ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 245. The narrative only makes sense if the men and women had contact with each other. The whole community gathered to hear Æthelthryth’s prophecy and at her graveside.

mentions evidence of a seventh-century Wessex monastery (location unknown) where the men and women sang together in choir and read the liturgy alternately.³⁸ It seems a mixed congregation was the accepted norm.

Sarah Foot attributes the missionary success of the Anglo-Saxon church to the fact that the energies and talents of women in double monasteries were used to advantage:

The acceptance of the idea that women could fulfil spiritual functions - as teachers, preachers, and ministers of baptism, as well as the caritative functions of alms-giving, caring for the sick and raising and educating children - gave the Church a valuable impetus in its first few generations when the supply of competent clergy was very limited.³⁹

The double house provided an outlet for both religious devotion and administrative talents of aristocratic women as the heads and active members of communities which played a prominent role not only ecclesiastically but in the political, economic and social spheres.

1.3 Education

Women were graduates and founders of monastic schools. There is evidence of at least a dozen monastic schools taught by abbesses at the forty or so double monasteries known to have been founded by the mid-eighth century.⁴⁰ The school at Whitby under Abbess Hild made a vital

³⁸ Yorke, "Sisters under the Skin," 97.

³⁹ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 59. The point is taken, although one might question whether women preached at mass or baptized unless *in extremis*; Foot provides no evidence here. Hollis says that although women were not supposed to either preach or baptize, it appears they did both, yet her only tenuous evidence for English nuns baptizing is for Leoba on the Continent, in the context of a taunt from the laity over a scandal at her convent. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 244, 280.

⁴⁰ Stephanie Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School, Late Seventh to Twelfth Century: History, Saint-Making and Literary Culture," in J. Brown & D. Bussell (eds.), *Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 33-55, at 35.

contribution to the church by educating men for the priesthood.⁴¹ The six bishops trained there probably constitute only the most prominent example, by both quality and quantity, of the training of clergy under royal abbesses. The school taught by Hildelith at Barking came into existence too late to make the same kind of impact, but Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* provides evidence of high academic standards there; he says the nuns studied the Scriptures, the Fathers, history and grammar (but there is no evidence that they tackled computus and astronomy as monks usually did).⁴² If they could appreciate the verbosity of Aldhelm's 'hermeneutic style,' then their Latin reading and comprehension skills were superior. The Barking school did not appear to have educated the men and women who joined St Boniface's eighth-century English mission to the Continent (although Boniface is known from extant letters to have been in contact with Hildelith), but Barking may have played a role in equipping women to teach at other double monasteries in the south of England which did help to staff the Bonifacian mission.⁴³

Modern scholars consider neither the quality nor the quantity of the surviving literary output of Anglo-Saxon women very impressive, despite their access to education. In the next chapter we will survey the few survivals. Hollis attributes the scarcity to disproportionate and deliberate destruction of texts authored by women, in favour of preserving male compositions.⁴⁴ This is not something that can be proven; so much was lost, for many reasons. A more fruitful avenue of new research looks at women's contributions lying hidden within the collaborative nature of textual production that was typical of the time. Even male-authored histories contain more

⁴¹ Bede, *HE* IV.23.

⁴² *De Virginitate* 4: Aldhelm says they studied not only scripture but also "the old stories of the historians and the entries of the chroniclers ... the rules of the grammarians" and the poets. But he qualifies with "unless I'm mistaken." It appears their curriculum was the *trivium* but not the *quadrivium*.

⁴³ Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School," 36.

⁴⁴ Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School," 37.

than first meets the eye. By discerning the multiple layers of surviving texts, historians can uncover evidence of female authorship, or at least oral tradition, which are the legacy of educated females in early England.

1.4.1 Jumping to the Eleventh Century: Queens marginalized from political power

The upheavals of the ninth and tenth centuries, and even the peaceful years under the more successful kings of the tenth and eleventh, utterly transformed the political and ecclesiastical landscape of England. Danes ravaged all the coastlands and settled in the Danelaw. Norwegians pillaged Northumbria and set up a kingdom in York. The seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms fought against the invaders and then among themselves. The one English dynasty that emerged victorious was that of Wessex, notably Alfred's grandson Æthelstan (d.939), the first king of all England, and Edgar the Peaceable (d.975), who reigned during St Edith's lifetime. After Edgar's reign, things fell apart again under Æthelræd the Unræd, and England was ruled for a time by Cnut (d.1035) and his sons, kings also of Denmark and Norway. With the return of an English king, Edward the Confessor, to the throne, came also a great deal of Norman influence in church and state.⁴⁵

Once the tumult and the shouting died, it seems that the power and esteem once accorded to queens and abbesses had seriously eroded, until by the eleventh century they seem invisible compared to their lively presence in the historical record of the earlier era. In this regard, the evidence regarding abbesses is stronger than that for queens.

⁴⁵ Marc Morris, *The Norman Conquest* (London: Hutchinson, 2012), 69, 71, 78.

It is a matter of debate to what extent the ideal and/or the reality of the role of queen underwent a seismic shift between the earlier and later Anglo-Saxon periods. The historical record (charters and chronicles) contains little about queens during the Danish invasions.⁴⁶ We have to look before and after the ninth century to find powerful queens. Offa's wife Cynethryth (d. after 798) had coins minted with her effigy, and of course there is Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians (d.918), who after the death of her husband defended her kingdom from the invaders for seven dangerous years. Alfred's mother Osburh was apparently interested in books, as Asser says she encouraged her sons to learn to read, but that is all we know of her.⁴⁷ His wife Ealhswith and his other daughter Æthelgifu are shadowy characters mentioned by Asser only in regard to being the founding abbesses of nunneries at Nunnaminster and Shaftesbury.

By the late tenth century, Mercian queens were being consecrated alongside their kings.⁴⁸ The rites were not like those for the king, but more similar to those for the consecration of an abbess. Klein suggests the nation had come some way toward the notion of the office of queen, parallel in some respects to that of king. However, she says it is questionable whether the increasing symbolic status of queens was accompanied by an increase of actual power. It may have been a case of erecting institutional barriers to keep them from arrogating powers deemed inappropriate for them.⁴⁹ Æthelstan had no wife whose influence we could examine, but when Edgar's queen Ælfthryth (d.1000) was appointed patroness of all women's convents, it appeared that her advisory role was being strategically removed from politics and relegated to female religion.

⁴⁶ Stafford, "Queens and Queenship," 461.

⁴⁷ Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 23.

⁴⁸ Stafford, "Queens and Queenship," 471.

⁴⁹ Klein, *Ruling Women*, 14.

There is little literary evidence to inform women's history during these years. Two important texts relate to English queens in the eleventh century: the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* about Emma, the widow of Kings Æthelræd and Cnut, and the *Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster*, commissioned by the Confessor's widow Edith.⁵⁰ Their interpretation is problematic. Perhaps they demonstrate forceful women taking charge of the presentation of their own lives; yet the experiences related suggest less honour than queens used to have. Hollis says the *Life of King Edward* shows Queen Edith with no political role, only patroness of convents. She says it reveals that a tradition of women's leadership in partnership with men was being replaced with an emerging picture of retiring feminine virtue: the activity of 'throne-sharing' turns into passively 'sitting at the feet' of the king.⁵¹ On the other hand, a number of strong women from Bible and church history were depicted in widely-circulated inspirational biographies written by churchmen during the ninth century: Elene (Helen), Judith, and Esther.⁵²

1.4.2 Jumping to the Eleventh Century: Abbesses and nuns disappear from the record

As may have happened with queens, the political power once enjoyed by seventh- and eighth-century abbesses certainly did not extend to their tenth- and eleventh-century counterparts. Abbess or queen used to be two parallel and equally prestigious career paths, but no longer. Starting even in the mid-eighth century, abbesses no longer attended church councils unless

⁵⁰ *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, edited by Alistair Campbell and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). *The Life of King Edward who Rests at Westminster*, edited by Frank Barlow (London: Nelson, 1962).

⁵¹ Hollis *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 211.

⁵² Klein, *Ruling Women*, Chapter 4.

directly concerned with the business thereof.⁵³ There is a remarkable disappearance of abbesses and nuns from the historical record, which contrasts greatly to the abundant evidence for active women religious in the earlier centuries, to the point where some historians have suspected their presence to have been deliberately erased.

The Lindisfarne *Liber Vitae* of the early ninth century lists the names of 198 queens and abbesses worthy of remembrance by the Northumbrian church.⁵⁴ It was indicative of their presence in the general consciousness. In early Anglo-Saxon England, women were authors and recipients of many letters to and from male clerics. Concerns related to women and the church at large were debated with their participation at various councils in the seventh through ninth centuries. Women were seen to participate in political, economic, intellectual and spiritual affairs with vibrancy. Then all this changed.

Efforts toward providing good enough education for women to enable them to write well are nowhere in evidence in the later period, and the exchange of letters and poems between male and female religious is not found again until the closing decades of the eleventh century.⁵⁵ There are no surviving texts written by monastic women in the tenth and eleventh centuries, not even a single letter, though there are a few traces of lost works attributable to their authorship.⁵⁶

(Female literature will be explored more in the next chapter.) We have the two Latin *encomia* for Emma and Edith already mentioned, translations into Old English of the Benedictine Rule

⁵³ Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 189. Quoting Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils*, 43-44.

⁵⁴ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 23-25.

⁵⁵ Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School," 37.

⁵⁶ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and Liber Confortatorius* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 4. However, Katie Bugyis argues in *The Care of Nuns* that glosses added to liturgical texts may have been added by women.

specifically for women, and a tract for abbesses by Æthelwold. The only vernacular work addressed to a woman was a homily on Judith by Ælfric. Rosamund McKitterick considers the contention by paleographer Malcolm Parkes that there was a tenth century scriptorium at Nunnaminster to be pure conjecture.⁵⁷ If she is right (and it is not proven either way), then there is next to no concrete evidence of women's literacy (i.e. ability to write) at this time.

Hollis attributes the paucity of information to both disproportionate destruction of material, and also marginalization by churchmen: "Their [women's] assistance as teachers and scribes in advancing the conversion were no longer required, and churchmen no longer regarded them as partners in the same spiritual and intellectual endeavour."⁵⁸ The evidence (or lack thereof) may well indicate a decline in education of female monastics in the later period. By that time double monasteries had been replaced with more strictly segregated houses, but it is not clear why that alone would diminish opportunities for women. Hollis suggests that the role of the convent schools was now the education of secular aristocratic women, not nuns.⁵⁹ Instead of being active participants in many aspects of society, the royally-patronized nunneries of the later period were cut off, and functioned mainly as elite boarding schools. Wilton Abbey, where Edith grew up, was a clear example, as well as Barking and its sister house at Horton, both of which had a Wilton-educated teacher. Ultimately, according to Hollis, the better-educated queens came to fill the niche once occupied by royal abbesses.

⁵⁷ Rosamund McKitterick, "Nuns' Scriptoria in England and Francia in the Eighth Century," *Francia* 19.1 (1992): 25, responding to M.B. Parkes, "A Fragment of an Early-tenth-century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript and its Significance," *Anglo-Saxon England* 12 (1983): 129-140.

⁵⁸ Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School," 9.

⁵⁹ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 309, 332, 336.

Recent research by Katie Bugyis, challenging the idea that the convents of the later period had an intellectual environment inferior to that earlier, will be explained more fully in the next section. It remains that case, however, that the profusion of sources relating to English religious women in the seventh and eighth centuries (commensurate with those available for the men) contrasts remarkably with the scantiness of the record for female religious (but not for male) in the tenth and eleventh centuries.⁶⁰ None of the numerous early foundations survived on any scale as nunneries into the later period, and none of them appear as nunneries in Domesday Book. Of enclosed nunneries following a rule, there were only nine or ten in England in the year 1000, all in the south connected to the Wessex dynasty. There were no Benedictine congregations at all, male or female, in the north in this period.⁶¹ Only one of the female houses apparently active at the Conquest could claim to have been founded before AD 900, and even in that case (Barking Abbey) a continuous history cannot be demonstrated.

The nunneries of the second phase were all new foundations. Shaftesbury was the first of the new wave, founded by King Alfred for his daughter Æthelgifu. It was followed by Nunnaminster in Winchester, established by Alfred's widow Ealhswith, and Romsey and Wilton, which were founded in the reign of Edward the Elder probably for members of his family. Two further nunneries were built at Amesbury and Wherwell early in the reign of King Æthelred Unræd by his mother Ælfthryth. The written records for all these well-patronized nunneries are disappointingly slight, and even they are relatively abundant compared to the absence of evidence for the poor, ephemeral, illiterate small houses that must have existed.

⁶⁰ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 60.

⁶¹ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 100.

Female religious vocations were recognised by the *Regularis Concordia* mandating the new regime of the tenth-century Benedictine Reform of the monasteries.⁶² In fact, the document was translated into the vernacular and glossed with feminine pronouns for the use of nunneries.⁶³ However, Foot says it is striking how scanty is the evidence of any activity for nuns actually happening, even for the royal foundations, although there is much for monks.⁶⁴ The silence of the sources on this subject raises various questions. It might indicate that no such narratives were composed in the tenth century. If they were not, Foot asks whether the authorities thought that female houses were not in need of reform, or could it be indicative of a reluctance to record such information. Abuses in male monasteries were frequently chastised. Did the women simply reform themselves easily without a struggle, or were they reticent about possible failings lest the aristocracy hesitate to entrust their daughters?⁶⁵

The possibility that the silence of the sources reflects the actual disappearance of the early English nun, rather than deliberate suppression of evidence as per Hollis, could be explained in various inter-related ways: the delayed impact in England of Carolingian ecclesiastical reforms which sought to limit women's activity within the church, the devastating effect of viking raids on English monastic life, or the decline of the double house as a useful social institution beyond the mid-eighth century.

1.5.1 Factors in the Disappearance: Benedictine Reforms

⁶² *Regularis Concordia* (The Monastic Agreement), translated by Thomas Symons (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953).

⁶³ Joyce Hill, "Making Women Visible: An Adaptation of the *Regularis Concordia* in Cambridge Corpus Christi College 201," in *Conversion and Colonization in Anglo-Saxon England*, edited by C.E Karkov and N. Howe (Tempe AZ: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006).

⁶⁴ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 89.

⁶⁵ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 93 and 77.

The Carolingian church reforms of the ninth century overflowed from Frankia to England, but not right away.⁶⁶ The Frankish nunneries were ordered by the authorities to enforce strict segregation of the sexes, no longer to educate boys, to cease admitting male pilgrims or even bishops, and not to leave the nunnery for any reason. There was a growing concern with priestly status and power, such that no woman should usurp sacerdotal functions, approach the altar, or touch anything sacred. Abbesses were forbidden to bless men or bestow the veil on women. English texts mandating similar reform surfaced in the next century, efforts being led by Bishops Æthelwold and Oswald and Archbishops Dunstan and Wulfstan. Their ideology was articulated by various means, one of them the *Regularis Concordia*, and another the homilies of Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham.

Catherine Cubitt takes Ælfric to task for what she sees as a derogatory attitude toward women.⁶⁷ After exploring his obsession with virginity, which he shared with his peers, Cubitt goes on to claim that Ælfric rarely mentions female religious and nunneries in his writings. She detects a “strong negative undertow” whenever Ælfric talks about women; he seems to distrust the resolve of nuns and warns in general against pride and indecency. His preoccupation with gender behavior was shared by those in the highest circles and reflected in new laws, which according to Cubitt were designed to keep women in their place, i.e out of power. Cubitt seems excessively hard on Ælfric and the English Benedictine Reform in general, but some of her points have

⁶⁶ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 67-71. See also Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, “Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience ca. 500-1100,” in *Medieval Religious Women, Vol 1: Distant Echoes*, edited by John Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 51-86.

⁶⁷ Catherine Cubitt, “Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England,” *Gender & History* 12, (2000): 1-32.

validity. It is true that we do not know the name of a single house of nuns founded by Dunstan, Æthelwold or Oswald, despite the fact that the *Regularis Concordia* mandated them. Although very keen to refound men's monasteries which had existed in the time of Bede, they made no attempt to restore earlier nunneries; they only reinvigorated the existing Alfredian nunneries such as Nunnaminster and Shaftesbury. One of the revivals was Ely, which had been a double monastery, but was refounded as a male community.⁶⁸

Pauline Stafford explains how the reformers were mostly concerned with issues of monastic endowment, lay interference in and control over that endowment, and with clerical behavior.⁶⁹ Both the growing number of local priests and also the clerics who lived in minsters were considered too closely linked with lay society, and needed to be distinguished more clearly from the laity. Reformers wrote as though members of many communities lived a life difficult to distinguish from that of the lay nobility – not only land-owning but even being married and having families. It was not a new problem: Bede railed against this very thing in his letter to Egbert.⁷⁰ Reform now aimed to set the clergy (and their property) apart, and ideally to move in the direction of a more monastic life enforcing the Divine Office, celibacy and all other stipulations of the Benedictine Rule. Stafford says that for reformers such as Ælfric, gender hierarchy was another fundamental point of reference, as Cubitt asserted. Yet at the same time, their writings acknowledged that women equally aspired to Christian monastic ideals. Thus, the *Regularis Concordia* addressed abbots and abbesses alike, and was glossed and translated into

⁶⁸ Yorke, "Sisters under the Skin," 109.

⁶⁹ Pauline Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England," *Past and Present* 163 (1999): 3-35.

⁷⁰ In Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People, with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, translated by D. H. Farmer (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1990), 344-345.

English for use in both female and male communities. Although there was greater emphasis on claustration for women, monks too were instructed *vagando nequaquam frequentent* (that they should not gad about visiting) unnecessarily.⁷¹

Female houses, however, unlike the male monasteries, still had the function of sheltering noble unmarried, repudiated or widowed women, not to mention their claims on inheritance and privilege. So in this context, how was the long tradition of lay royal involvement with religious communities to be handled? In the case of the queen, the reformers aimed not to destroy that involvement, but to rebrand it. Edgar's queen Ælfthryth was given a job as patroness of female houses parallel to that of the king in relation to male. However in some cases it was not a happy relationship. Barking, Shaftesbury, and Wilton (where Edith lived) were particularly hostile and the source of much invective against Ælfthryth.⁷² It was very much a family squabble, since these abbeys housed Edgar's cousins and former wives, and at Shaftesbury were the relics of Edward the Martyr, whom Ælfthryth was accused of murdering. At each of these convents, the nuns wished to keep control of their own land, and not let the queen get her hands on it. Thus the royally connected nunneries moved further towards the important advantage of institutional autonomy. Stafford says, "In so far as that would ultimately be linked to a stricter enclosure, it was a dubious victory."⁷³ On the other hand, the nunneries that accepted the queen's control were the ones that by the early twelfth century had disappeared.

⁷¹ That no man should enter the nunnery is in paragraph 7; that the abbess should be elected by the community according to the Rule (not appointed from outside) in paragraph 9; that there should be no secular overlordship apart from the King and Queen in paragraph 10; that there should be no unnecessary trips abroad in paragraph 11 ("gad about" is Symons' translation).

⁷² Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries," 24-25.

⁷³ Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries," 32.

Without a doubt the Benedictine Reforms imposed a whole new lifestyle on monasteries compared to that of the earlier era. However, Sarah Foot points out that to suppose that the change led to the demise of the double house in England is to reconstruct the sequence of events in the wrong order. The double houses had already disappeared by the time the Reforms crossed the Channel, and the new attitude was given out after the fact to justify their passing.⁷⁴

Research that may turn a conventional understanding of the impact of the Benedictine Reforms on its head has been done recently by Katie Bugyis.⁷⁵ She has traced the persistence of many of the pastoral and liturgical ministries performed by nuns in the early Anglo-Saxon period right through to the central Middle Ages. By examining letters, cartularies, translation accounts, miracle collections, mortuary rolls, and liturgical books as well as the hagiographies under consideration here, Bugyis has shown evidence of abbesses being occupied with orchestration of their communities' liturgies, ornamentation of sacred spaces, custody of saints' shrines, writing and copying, training successors, and instruction of those under their care. At least some sisters continued to liturgically read the gospel, hear confessions, and offer intercessory prayers for laity, fellow religious men and women, and clerics. They seemed also to perform ministries around the altar—handling the consecrated elements, eucharistic vessels, liturgical books, and saints' relics.⁷⁶ It appears that the Reforms were more on paper than in fact.

1.5.2 Factors in the Disappearance: Vikings

⁷⁴ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 70.

⁷⁵ Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, *The Care of Nuns: The Ministries of Benedictine Women in England during the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁷⁶ Bugyis, *Care of Nuns*, 292-293.

The impact of Danish and Norwegian invasions in the ninth century on the communal religious life generally and on its female expression in particular was calamitous. They seemed to cause the complete disappearance of women's communities in coastal areas of Kent and Northumbria. The result was not only loss of lives and treasure. The repositories of written records were destroyed, and the dispersal of the communities responsible for their safe-keeping put an end to ritual forms of remembrance of the dead.⁷⁷ There were a few cases of continuity, such as the cults of Saints Cuthbert and Mildreth, which were re-established in new communities, and many relics were translated from devastated areas to regions under Wessex control. But most monasteries were obliterated. It is complicated why women's houses failed to resurface in the monastic reorganization of the tenth century, given that they had lost the same physical fixtures and mechanisms of commemoration as those of men. Their disappearance may have had more to do with the fact that during the viking threat, nuns often fled home for safety, and much convent land was appropriated for military use.

⁷⁷ Sarah Foot, "Remembering, Forgetting and Inventing: Attitudes to the Past in England at the End of the First Viking Age," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1999): 185–200.



Female religious houses in England c.600 – c.900⁷⁸

⁷⁸ The two maps are from Foot, *Veiled Women*, 38 and 90.



Female religious houses in England, 940 – 1066

Sarah Foot notes that the marked diminution in the number of female religious sites is apparent even in areas far from Danish incursions. She also shows that the decline in the number of charters for women's communities began in the second half of the eighth century, before the start of the Viking Age.⁷⁹ She speaks about the changes in the political landscape as the smaller, independent kingdoms of England were either subsumed within those of their larger and more powerful neighbours or brought down during the Danish wars. By the time there are signs of a revival of interest in monasticism, in the reign of King Æthelstan, there is only one royal house left in England, with landed interests clustered in the south.⁸⁰ Foot says that although this fact is definitely linked to the demise of the large royally-supported double monasteries, there had already been other outlets for female religious expression before the hegemony of the Wessex dynasty. The rest of the aristocracy also set up family foundations for commemoration of the dead of their own kin groups. For some reason these also seemed to disappear.⁸¹

If the viking raids undoubtedly affected the nunneries, Barbara Yorke points out that they need not have led to their disappearance. The vikings did not settle on church lands in Kent or Wessex in the way that they did in East Anglia, and she points to examples from Frankia showing that a monastery could recover from attacks within a few years if the will and the rights to the lands still existed.⁸² The problem in southern England was that neither of those conditions was present, the lands having been transferred to the Wessex kings, who had no interest in maintaining former

⁷⁹ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 78.

⁸⁰ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 64. See also Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 190-191.

⁸¹ There was also a decline in the activity of market towns which has been attributed to the vikings but in fact began before they arrived on the scene. Socio-economic changes not viking-related were obviously happening. Nicholas Higham, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 249.

⁸² Yorke, "Sisters under the Skin," 104.

Kentish nunneries. In Wessex itself, they preferred to found completely new nunneries, perhaps to mark the beginning of a new era.

1.5.3 Factors in the Disappearance: Religious and social trends

Doubting that the vikings and the reformers could have so obliterated the nun population as the scant evidence implies, Sarah Foot took the research into a different direction by seeking out ways that women could satisfy spiritual vocations other than by entering a Benedictine monastery with a permanent landed endowment whose record persisted in the historical sources. She says the emphasis on the royally patronised houses in the contemporary literature had the effect of obscuring other avenues still open to women. When a form of religious life formerly available to both genders (the double monastery) fell into disfavour, women sought ways to fulfil their vocations on the edges of the secular world instead of in the cloister, and in fact had been doing so since the seventh century. Foot says the sisters of the pre-Viking Age did not vanish during the ninth century, nor were their later counterparts silenced deliberately by the authors of contemporary or later medieval sources. Their numbers were underestimated, not because there were so few, nor because they were ignored, but because of a lack of understanding on the part of historians of the language of the tenth-century religious life, i.e. the difference between *nunne* (an avowed woman in a secular environment) and *mynece nu* (a cloistered woman, the feminine equivalent of *munuc*, monk).⁸³ Awareness of the terminological subtleties opens up a wealth of previously obscure references to religious women living outside the usual nunneries. Alongside female congregations organised on Benedictine

⁸³ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 99.

lines, there were many small houses with bits of land, sustaining a little community for only one or two generations before fading away. There were also groups of female religious who lived under the protection of male houses (such as at Durham); and numbers of single, devout women whose institutional affiliation (if any) cannot be determined. There was no “erasure” of women’s experience, but rather we did not know how to see it.

Foot suggests that the apparent reduction in the foundation of new women's houses may be explained by new patterns of landholding.⁸⁴ She says that the point at which charters for female communities become more infrequent corresponds to the period when charters first began to state explicitly that military obligations were required of all booked land (i.e. vested by a charter, as opposed to folkland). Once the booking of a portion of a family's estate for the creation of a minster no longer secured exemption from military services, such landholding was no longer tax-efficient. Instead of endowing a monastery for a devout daughter, a family might now choose to allow her a life interest in a portion of their estates that would revert to the kin on her death.

Undoubtedly another factor was a growing reluctance to patronise mixed-sex congregations because of new anxieties about the cohabitation of supposedly celibate men and women. Perhaps there were suppressed scandals that we can now never know about. Of equal importance are the desires of the women themselves. While there were obviously features of the religious life that appealed to hundreds of Englishwomen during the conversion era and made it an attractive alternative to marriage, life in the nunnery must have seemed less appealing once it was more cloistered, so that there were perhaps fewer applicants.

⁸⁴ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 64.

With Foot's interpretation, the apparent under-representation of women's religious houses in the sources from the later period need not be the result of a gendered bias in the survival of evidence, nor the deliberate erasing of women in texts composed by men. Rather, it reflects a shift in the pattern of landed endowment of female houses, and the changing aspirations of religious women.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to place the religious women of two different periods of Anglo-Saxon England into their political, ecclesiastical, and social contexts. The first of the two aims was to discover whether abbesses were extraordinary in their day. It is now apparent that they filled positions that were entirely appropriate to their culture, class and gender. That the double monasteries multiplied so quickly suggests that they suited English society. They allowed noblewomen opportunities for personal fulfilment and service to the church which they seemed to seize with gusto. The second aim of this chapter was to question whether the status of women suffered as a result of church attitudes. Yes, their position and opportunities did seem to have regressed by the eleventh century, as access to education and influence was withdrawn, but no, the reasons were not only religious but also social and political. Already we may see that Hild and Edith, at first glance having much in common as high-born English female monastic saints, would have had significantly different experiences in the seventh and tenth centuries. The next chapter will move us a little closer to understanding these two women, by studying first the contemporary literary production by and about women like them, and then hagiography as a genre.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ART OF WRITING AND RE-WRITING HAGIOGRAPHY

Chapter One alluded to some of the challenges of interpreting the literature of Anglo-Saxon England. Bede, for example, is now understood to have expressed in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* a conversion process that he would have liked to have happened rather than what really did.¹ When even the practical writings – the political and the ecclesiastical – present difficulties, how much more so the spiritual. Letters and hagiographies are complicated genres encompassing more than meets the eye, yet they are the material needed to understand the experiences of the abbess/saints who are the topic of this study. Another problem is that there are so few surviving texts written by women, so that we are almost always looking at women through the eyes of men. This is the case with both Hild and Edith. The men who wrote about women may have remodelled what they knew to suit an agenda, perhaps to record an idealized woman not quite what she was really like. We can see in instances where we have more than one source that emphasis is laid on different aspects of a saint's life, and this is the case for men as well as women. We do have clear evidence of Bede tinkering with his source for his *Life of Cuthbert*. There are also indications of other male writers tailoring the lives of female English saints such as Leoba (d.782). Did men deliberately attempt to belittle the activities of women and stifle their voices? Diane Watt says yes; she coins the word “overwrite” to mean replace the information in a source text with one's own interpretation.² I do not wish to dispute that this happened, only that motives may be other

¹ All the historians I have read for this paper, friends and foes of Bede alike, agree that he carefully chose his emphases. See especially Nicholas Higham, *Re-Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge, 2006).

² Diane Watt, “Literature in Pieces: Female Sanctity and the Relics of Early Women's Writing,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, edited by Clare Lees (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 357-380, at 364.

than pure misogyny. Just as Sarah Foot discovered concerning the so-called “disappearance” of nuns in the tenth and eleventh centuries, it may be a question of better understanding the data. Once again, we are troubled by the lack thereof. This chapter will first survey the texts available to us, then discuss the genre of hagiography and its relation to the cult of female saints specifically. Finally, it will lay the foundation for analysis of the hagiographies of Hild and Edith in the following chapters, by examining how and why other saints of both genders were portrayed the way they were.

2.1 Women Writing and Written About

Outstanding in the present day among scholars of women’s literature in early medieval England are Diane Watt, Catherine Clarke, Clare Lees, and Gillian Overing.³ They all have worked to piece together what remains of texts written by women, anonymous texts that may have been written by women, what is known to have been lost, and what has been said about women authors, to form a picture of women’s involvement in the production and consumption of hagiographies, letters, devotional works, poems and prayers in early England. All are convinced that over the generations, women’s writing was lost, suppressed, deliberately destroyed, or “over-written” by men, and that women were perceived (and perceived themselves) as lacking the authority to be called authors. Watt and Stephanie Hollis both think Bede is particularly guilty of this. They discuss the negative impact on women’s power caused by the Benedictine

³ Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650-1100* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). Catherine Clarke, “Literary Production Before and After the Conquest,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700-1500*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, “Women and the Origins of English Literature,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700-1500* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); and *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). An earlier joint publication by Lees and Overing, “Birthing Bishops and Fathering Poets” in *Exemplaria* (1994): 35-65, is Chapter 1 of *Double Agents*.

Reform alluded to in the last chapter, but also note that Bede had a tendency to suppress women's voices already in the eighth century. This is shown in how he presents the lives of Hild and Ælfflæd, abbesses of Whitby, which will be covered in Chapter Three. First it is helpful to lay the foundation by surveying some of what these historians have discovered about feminine writing in England, starting with the earliest.

We know that writing was happening at Barking Abbey. Aldhelm in paragraphs I and II of *De Virginitate* thanks Abbess Hildelith (d. about 725) for her many letters. Bede says that he used a now-lost *liber* of Barking as his source for the visions and miracles depicted in *HE* IV.7-10. He nevertheless neglected some information available first-hand from the women that we now would think important. Bede does not acknowledge Abbess Hildelith as the author or patron of his source (it was probably a communal production by resident nuns), or the existence of a school, or Barking's engagement with literary culture.⁴ One might try to excuse Bede on the grounds that Wearmouth-Jarrow where he lived is a long way from Barking in Essex near London, and he may have been unaware of anything about Barking beyond what he had to hand in that one little book. Yet this is not the case. Bede in *HE* V.18 praises Aldhelm and his writings, specifically naming *De Virginitate*, so he must have been aware that it was dedicated to Hildelith and her female students.

The "Kentish Royal Legend," a collection which includes the *Life of St. Mildreth*, was written at about the same time. The surviving fragments, written in Old English quite possibly by nuns, show the active and important lives of Mildreth, Seaxburh, and other women of the time and

⁴ Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 43, 46; Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 308; Lees and Overing, "Women and the Origins of English Literature," 35.

place, featuring their role in founding monasteries, and significant bonds between mother and daughter, sister and sister, mentor and pupil, abbess and successor.⁵ Little of this is mentioned by Bede, only a brief account of Seaxburh, and it would be surprising if he did not know about it, since he was familiar with Seaxburh's sister Æthelthryth.

We have letters dating from the eighth century by Leoba at Wimborne, Eadburh and her daughter Bugga at Minster-in-Thanel, Hildelith at Barking, Ecgburh and Cyneburh of Gloucester, and Ælfflæd of Whitby. Ten letters in the extant set of correspondence written to the missionary Boniface in Germany (716-753) were from English women.⁶ They reveal women's vital roles in literary productivity and exchange, their endeavours as students and teachers, and strong bonds of friendship and kinship.⁷ Boniface often expresses his gratitude to the English abbesses for their gifts and prayers.

Based on this evidence of literacy, historian Rosamund McKitterick is willing to accept at least a possibility of nuns' scriptoria in southern England at an early date.⁸ Citing Bernhard Bischoff, she states that the earliest scriptorium demonstrably including women as scribes was at Chelles in Charlemagne's day (late eighth century, not in the lifetimes of the women under consideration here), where there were at least nine nuns writing (but not illuminating) manuscripts.

McKitterick admits the evidence of nuns' scriptoria in England is disappointingly ambiguous and

⁵ David Rollason, *The Mildreth Legend*.

⁶ Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 69. Some of these letters are in Charles H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany: being the lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Sturm, Leoba, and Lebuin, together with the Hodoeporicon of St Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St. Boniface* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954). See also <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/boniface-letters.asp>

⁷ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, chapter 1; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, chapter 4; Schulenburg *Forgetful of their Sex*, chapters 6 and 7.

⁸ Rosamund McKitterick, "Nuns' Scriptoria in England and Francia in the Eighth Century," *Francia* 19.1 (1992): 1-36.

we have no manuscripts as proof.⁹ It is interesting that in a 735 letter Boniface thanked Abbess Eadburh (probably of Wimborne) for her gifts of books and requested a deluxe copy of Peter's Epistles.¹⁰ Since he specifically asked her to copy it out in letters of gold, she may have been a skilled scribe. Equally she may have been a patron, and not necessarily of nun's writing but that of monks since Wimborne was a double monastery, and further, it may mean instead that she was a purveyor of books from elsewhere. In a previous letter of 720 she had apologized that "I have been unable to obtain a copy of *The Sufferings of the Martyrs* which you asked me to send you, but I shall send it to you as soon as I can." As for evidence of female scriptoria in other places, there is nothing to go on.

One of Boniface's correspondents was Leoba (d. 782), an Englishwoman educated at Wimborne Abbey in Wessex, who joined the mission to Germany, becoming abbess of several nunneries in succession.¹¹ A respected figure, she was consulted by bishops, and she was the only woman allowed to enter into the monastery of Fulda to confer with ecclesiastical leaders on issues of monastic rule. Hildegard, wife of Charlemagne, was her friend. She was one of only three English nuns remembered in a surviving near-contemporary hagiography, along with Hild and Æthelthryth whose biographies were embedded in Bede's *HE*.¹² Leoba's was written by Rudolf of Fulda fifty years after her death. Historians seem to agree that Rudolf's *Vita* is not to be trusted, mostly because he strove to satisfy his audience by portraying Leoba as perfectly

⁹ McKitterick, 25.

¹⁰ Letter dated 735 in the Boniface Correspondence. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/boniface-letters.asp>

¹¹ "Life of Leoba," in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, edited by Charles H. Talbot (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954).

¹² Lees and Overing, "Women and the Origins of English Literature," 35.

orthodox in behaviour.¹³ According to him, at Leoba's home monastery of Wimborne a wall separated male and female members of the community, the abbess only spoke to her priests through a window, and it being a strictly enclosed monastery, Leoba was allowed to travel to Germany only because of her extraordinary learning. In fact we have no good evidence that English nunneries were so strictly cloistered at that time. Rudolf says that Leoba was admitted to councils of bishops, but does not speak of her leadership in education or producing books (if they did), nor is she mentioned as advisor of secular rulers as Hild was. Nevertheless he does indicate that she was a wise, intelligent and literate woman.

Rudolf acknowledges among his sources a previous disorganized account of Leoba's life which contained testimonies from her friends. Lees and Overing quote one sentence, suggesting that Rudolf's Latin is ambiguous concerning whether the testimonies were written down by the friends themselves or by men.¹⁴

Ego enim gesta omnia non didici, sed pauca quae refero a viris venerabilibus ad meam noticiam pervenerunt, qui ea quattuor discipularum eius, Agathae videlicet et Tecia, Nanae et Eoleobae, fideli relatione comperta, singuli pro captu ingenii **sui** sicut sibi tradita sunt litteris mandare et ad exemplum posteris relinquere studuerunt. [For I did not learn all her deeds, but the few which I report came to my notice from venerable men, discovered by faithful telling, just as passed on to them by four of her disciples, namely Agatha et Tecia, Nana and Eoleoba, who each according to **his/her** own ability, took care to commit to writing and to leave as an example for posterity.]

¹³ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, Chapter 9; Foot, "Women, Prayer and Preaching in the Early English Church," in *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition*, edited by Santha Bhattacharji *et al.* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 70-71; Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, Chapter 4; Yorke, "Sisters under the Skin," 97.

¹⁴ Lees and Overing, "Women and the Origins of English Literature," 36. The full text of the *Vita Leobae* is at https://www.dmgh.de/mgh_ss_15_1/index.htm - page/118/mode/lup

Although Lees and Overing think it is possible that the nuns recorded their reminiscences with their own hands, the sentences immediately following show otherwise. Rudolf tells how a priest named Mago frequently visited the named nuns and heard their memories of Leoba. Then,

Hic itaque nonnulla gestorum illius memorabilium ab eis adnoscens breviter quidem adnotare curavit, sed nimis obscura reliquit ...
 [Therefore learning from them the memory of some of her deeds, he took care to note down briefly, but left it extremely obscure ...]

so that Rudolf had trouble understanding the meaning. It is an example of the difficulty of oral history.

A stellar example of literature that we know was authored by an Anglo-Saxon woman is the *Hodoeporicon of St Willibald* written at the double monastery of Heidenheim in Germany by Willibald's sister the nun Hugeburc (aka Hygeburg) in 778.¹⁵ In the text she identifies herself as an Anglo-Saxon woman but without revealing her name. This was not known until 1931, when (in one of those discoveries so exciting to historians) Bernard Bischoff decrypted it from a cipher Hugeburc had inserted between the two manuscripts of her *Life of Willibald* and her other composition, a short *Life of his brother Winnebald*.¹⁶ Hugeburc tells Willibald's story with the usual hagiographical ingredients about his childhood and so on, but concentrates especially on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She titled it a *hodoeporicon* (Greek 'itinerary') instead of a *vita*, apparently writing down the details at Willibald's dictation and focusing on the stages of his journey, the scenes he saw and liturgical events he experienced, rather than on a typical

¹⁵ Huneberc, "Hodoeporicon of St Willibald," in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, edited by Charles H. Talbot (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954). <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/willibald.asp>

¹⁶ Carolyne Larrington, "Hugeburc," in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1093/ref.odnb/49413>

succession of miracles. Hugeburc's initiative in her task, her creative approach, and her Latin style all reveal her intelligence and education.¹⁷

After the ninth century, women writers seem to disappear. There is evidence of women's participation in literary production in the later period for both political or religious purposes, but women's own voices are displaced by the authors that they (or their advocates) hire.¹⁸ The last chapter mentioned the books about the widowed queens Emma and Edith which safeguarded their reputations. Religious books included the *Liber Confortatorius*, the *Life of Wulfhild*, and the *Legend of Edith*, all by the expatriate Flemish monk Goscelin of St. Bertin, whose writings will be discussed in Chapter Four. Apart from those, there are no surviving texts written by or commissioned by monastic women in the tenth and eleventh centuries, not even a letter.¹⁹

The dearth of women's writing in the later period suggests a sharp decline in the education of female monastics. Hollis believes that the replacement of double monasteries with more strictly segregated houses diminished both opportunities for education of women, and respect accorded them by the clergy.²⁰ Women ceased to write on their own, and when they participated in the production of books about themselves, it was at the cost of surrendering their own voices. But that is not all. Hollis says:

The lack of early female saint's lives written by women is not a reflection of the general level of their literary skill; rather ... interest in the lives written by women was insufficient to generate enough copies to ensure their survival.²¹

¹⁷ Michael Lapidge, "Hygeburg," *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Hoboken: Wiley and Sons, 2013), 251; Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 99.

¹⁸ Catherine Clarke, "Literary Production Before and After the Conquest," in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 41.

¹⁹ Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School," 40.

²⁰ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 309.

²¹ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 274.

Hollis believes that benign neglect was only part of it. There may have been a systemic bias:

To a high degree, hagiographic ‘miracles’ are pure artifacts of journalism.... One way of explaining the fact that abbess-saints throughout the Middle Ages rarely made a significant impact unless their lives were written by a male ecclesiastic – though impossible to substantiate – is that women religious (increasingly the only permissible witnesses to the deeds of a female saint) were less adept at contriving a miraculous cast to their actions than were their male counterparts.²²

Combined with a campaign of extermination of female writing that Hollis believes was going on, these are accusations of major proportions. It will be useful at this point to consider in more detail hagiography as a genre and as a tool for promoting the cults of saints.

2.2 The Art of Writing and Re-Writing Hagiography

A hagiography was usually written in connection with the promotion and functioning of the cult of the saint who was its subject.²³ The church where a shrine was located needed written accounts of its saint’s holy life and posthumous miracles, and sometimes the discovery of his or her relics and their translation to the church in which they were to be venerated. A hagiography furnished material for the liturgy, for private devotional reading, for sermons preached to pilgrims, and for the vernacular homily on the saint’s life which might be part of the mass or the lesson at matins. A literary apparatus supporting a cult was essential in order to attract the

²² Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 281.

²³ The classic treatment of saints’ cult in late antiquity is Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; second edition 2015). See also Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Michael Lapidge, “The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 251-272; and Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

attention of influential people, and to intensify the devotion of people in general, much of which was focused on the relics. These were held in reverence well beyond the church neighbourhood. Not only were relics a source of prestige and revenue, and their presence believed to ensure the saint's protection of the church and its interests, but also they were thought to possess power, so that all types of people from kings to peasants came to the shrine in search of miraculous cures. Hagiography could be a vehicle for materialist claims advanced by the church for the land on which the relics lay. There were sometimes strong political overtones as well, as will be shown below. The cult was certainly about more than miracles, as Christians were urged to imitate the faith of the saints as detailed in the hagiography. There was a strong element of *imitanda* (things to be imitated) as well as *admiranda* (things to be amazed at). All hagiographers strove to present their subjects as holy according to conventional signs of sanctity. They employed appropriate tropes according to whether their subject was a martyr, a bishop, a monk, a mystic, or some combination. The *Lives* were characterized by commonplaces concerning, for example, the various stages of the saint's life and his or her conversion, virtuous practices, wonder-working, struggles with the devil, last words, sometimes martyrdom, and posthumous miracles. This menu of hagiographical features nevertheless allowed considerable scope for an author to express his own attitudes and to reflect those of his audience.

That audience changed over time. David Rollason has some insight on the difference between legend and cult, and how the two met in the writing (and rewriting) of hagiography:

The cults were subsidiary to the legend in this respect; for in themselves they were merely expressions of the pious, penitential and thaumaturgic aspects of medieval religion. They persisted, as did that of Mildreth at Minster-in-Thamet, at times when the relevance of the legend had faded away [i.e. the genealogy of the Kentish royal house]. What brought them to special significance was the link between the legends on which they were based and the attitudes and aspirations of particular groups of

people at particular moments in time. These groups often wrote new hagiographical texts or refurbished those which had lain dormant in libraries or perhaps even in the shrines of the saints. Far from being primarily a devotional genre out of touch with life beyond the monastery's or church's walls, hagiography appears intimately concerned with wider attitudes and aspirations, a living genre.²⁴

Here the evolving attitude toward female saints becomes interesting. Perhaps a better word than “evolving” would be “ambivalent.” From the first martyrdoms until the Reformation, the ultimate ideal for female saints was always virginity. For the many who were not virgins, the route to sanctity was renunciation of sex. For them both however, hagiography of English female saints took a long time to catch up to that of males. When it did, the writing was indeed based on the attitudes and aspirations of those reviving the cult.

In early hagiography, the primary trope marking the female saint's life is her staunch adherence to the faith and willingness to suffer in its defence. In the case of the virgin martyr, this suffering often takes the form of gendered forms of torture at the hands of pagan suitors.²⁵ Once the age of martyrs was past, the confessor saints sought a similar sacrifice by mortification of the flesh. They were known by their asceticism on the model of St Anthony, and their supernatural powers on the model of St Martin, both of whom set the pattern for subsequent male hagiography. It is less obvious that a comparable framework was available for those writing about female saints; the earliest hagiographies from Francia supplemented asceticism and healing miracles with other virtues appropriate to the time and place.²⁶ Virginity became less an issue than previously; more highly-regarded for abbesses was their administrative ability and hospitality. Saintly women such as Genevieve (d.512) and Radegund (d.587) bridged the

²⁴ Rollason, *Mildreth Legend*, 69.

²⁵ Early Christian saints did not have to be virgins. The pregnant Perpetua and Felicity obviously were not.

²⁶ Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, editors and translators, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 7. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/2027/heb.02015>

traumatic transition of cultures from Gallo-Roman to Frankish; later on they bridged the gap between the privileged and the oppressed. The outstanding virtue displayed by these saints was charity, which flowed out of their noble lineage and wealth, which in turn enriched the churches and monasteries with endowments and treasures such as relics. Regarding the same custom in Anglo-Saxon England, Susan Ridyard comments that people did not distinguish between piety and patronage the way we might: “By the exercise of patronage virtue was rendered effective.”²⁷ Saints were not expected to be completely other-worldly. Spirituality and sponsorship worked together throughout this period, as will be seen regarding Edith in Chapter Four.

As Schulenburg has argued, to be a candidate for sainthood, a person had to have visibility in society.²⁸ No doubt there were untold numbers of devout ordinary men and women, but noble status paved the way to recognition. It is remarkable how many royal individuals, especially women, became saints in Anglo-Saxon England. The Mildrith Legend lists at least seven female members of the Kentish royal house who were regarded as saints, and the number could be expanded if more distant relatives were taken into account. In East Anglia at about the same time we have Æthelthryth and six close female relatives. A comparable number could also be found from later Wessex among Edith’s family. Princesses vowed from infancy were particularly likely to become saints, as occurred with Mildrith, Ælfflæd, Eadburga and Edith. Loss of virginity was not an absolute bar to other royal women acquiring sanctity, however; formerly married women qualified as soon as they committed to a nunnery. Sexually experienced women

²⁷ Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: a Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 238. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1017/CBO9780511560187>

²⁸ Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, 59, 60.

may have been second-best, but according to Susan Ridyard, the cloister was the only route to sanctity for them all without exception among Anglo-Saxon female saints.²⁹

At all times asceticism was a huge aspect of sanctity. Beginning with the Church Fathers, physical bodies were problematic, and apparently female ones were especially repulsive. The Fathers considered women more likely than men to succumb to temptations of the flesh.³⁰ Jerome in particular often comes across as a misogynist. But to give Jerome the benefit of the doubt, it seemed to be the fleshly pollution of the married state that he abhorred, not the feminine gender itself, for he had a number of close female friends who were chaste, particularly the widow Paula. In fact, Rosalind Love thinks that Jerome may have afforded a model for later hagiographers such as Goscelin of how to cast widows in the best light.³¹ In the meantime, there was a cultural discrepancy. The theme of woman as temptress or full of lust is not evident in Old English literature. In *Beowulf*, the primeval sin was not sexual but betrayal of kin when Cain killed Abel. In the era of the double monastery, both sexes were thought prone to vanity, as we see the residents of Coldingham Abbey rebuked by Bede for feasting and adorning themselves with frippery, and Aldhelm was anxious about this too.³² A double standard for men and women religious was not yet in evidence in England.

²⁹ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 90, 235.

³⁰ Elizabeth Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol 2, No 2 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 155-184. <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/article/247332/summary>. The references are from pages 166 and 167.

³¹ Rosalind Love, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), cvii and cxiii. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/lib/west/detail.action?docID=4962923>

³² Bede, *HE* IV.25; Aldhelm *De Virginitate* paragraph LVIII. The nuns not only wore fine clothing but also did their nails and crimped their hair with curling irons!

The usual source for information about a saint was a compilation called a martyrology. There were others in existence in England at the time besides Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*.³³ One is the *Old English Martyrology* which dates from the ninth century. This work looks like a vernacular translation of a lost Latin martyrology which may have been compiled by Bede's friend Acca, bishop of Hexham, during the years 731–40.³⁴ Christine Rauer, in her examination of it for feminine content, concluded that it evidenced an inclusive and even-handed approach to male and female hagiography.³⁵ Roughly one in four of the over two hundred entries is for a female, which comports with other martyrologies of that era, including Aldhelm's and later on Ælfric's, and the gendering of female martyrdom is according to the expectations of hagiographical convention, i.e. suffering in defence of the faith.

In the early eighth century, a handful of English saints were thought of sufficient importance to merit stand-alone Latin *vitae*: Cuthbert, Guthlac, Ceolfrith and Wilfrid. All were men. The women saints have no *vitae* that survive; a few were memorialized by Bede in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, but in the majority of cases, the earliest extant written account of their claim to sanctity dates from the eleventh century or later.³⁶ This is surprising, since at a conservative estimate we can count the names of some forty female saints in Anglo-Saxon

³³ Bede wrote one that was admirable in the opinion of Alan Thacker: "Bede and his Martyrology," in *Listen, O Isles, unto Me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O'Reilly* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011). A legendary which was to have a large influence on English observance was the Cotton-Corpus Legendary, a collection of some 165 saints' *vitae* arranged in order of the calendar year. It seems to date from the late ninth century, and was drawn on extensively by Ælfric. However the only English saint in it is Guthlac. See Peter Jackson and Michael Lapidge, "The Contents of the Cotton-Corpus Legendary," in *Holy Men and Holy Women, Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 134.

³⁴ Michael Lapidge, "Saintly Life", 252, 259.

³⁵ Christine Rauer, "Female Hagiography in the *Old English Martyrology*," in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, edited by Paul Szarmach (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 13-29. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.3138/9781442664579>

³⁶ Rosalind Love, "Torture me, rend me, burn me, kill me! Goscelin of Saint-Bertin and the Depiction of Female Sanctity," in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 274-306, at 274. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.3138/9781442664579>

England, more than half of them clustered in the seventh and eighth centuries.³⁷ Why is there so little by way of hagiography for women of this era? A number of explanations are possible, rooted in why write a hagiography in the first place – a matter that connects to Hollis’ suspicion mentioned above that writing by and about females did not suit the men’s purposes. Doubtless there were reasons to promote a cult or spin a hagiography that were not purely spiritual. In a number of cases, there is clear evidence that this was done.

2.3 Political Expediency and Principled Motives

Some cults were used for political purposes to shore up a king’s legitimacy; others were promoted ostensibly for the good of the nation. Several historians have studied how the cults of murdered princes, notably Oswine of Deira, Edward and Edmund both of East Anglia, and Oswald of Northumbria, were promoted by successor kings as exercises in public relations.³⁸ The example of Oswald shows that kings had their hands all over such a procedure. His death on the battlefield having been construed as a martyrdom, Oswiu made a foray to gather his brother’s remains and enshrine them as cult objects, in order to legitimise his own kingship.³⁹ There are several more instances. In *The Life of St Guthlac*, written in the 730s twenty years after his death, Felix presents Guthlac not so much as a miracle-worker or model monk, but as a hermit sage

³⁷ From a list compiled by Cardinal Newman. <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia65/saints.html>

³⁸ David Rollason, “The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983): 1–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44510759>. Catherine Cubitt, “Sites and Sanctity: Revisiting the Cult of Murdered and Martyred Anglo-Saxon Royal Saints,” in *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 53–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0254.00059>

³⁹ Nicholas Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 223. Also, for an analysis of the promotion of the cult of Edward by his brother Æthelræd, see Susan Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 160–165.

consulted by many people, particularly the future King Æthelbald of Mercia.⁴⁰ The *Life of Wilfrid* is another case in point. D.P. Kirby explored two accounts of Wilfrid's life, by Bede and Stephen of Ripon.⁴¹ Even when written near in time to each other and to the subject, the two *Lives* had their different purposes, sources, and perspectives. While Bede sketched Wilfrid's efforts toward Romanizing the English church, between the lines of Stephen's book we may read about dynastic as well as ecclesiastical disputes, and Wilfrid's need to justify the legality of all his actions and protect his own communities of Hexham and Ripon from kings who disliked him. Another example of hidden motives lying behind hagiography is agreed by many historians: Adomnan's *Life of Columba* was published after the Synod of Whitby to shore up Columba's reputation after Wilfrid insinuated that he was not a *bona fide* saint.⁴²

A clear case of focusing a cult by rewriting an existing hagiography is the way Bede rewrote the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* (c.700).⁴³ Alan Thacker explains how Bede in 721 reshaped his material to highlight Cuthbert's pastoral efforts and his monastic and episcopal virtues, transforming a textual product of local collective memory into a more coherent narrative that served the wider purposes of the church as he understood them. It would not be surprising therefore if

⁴⁰ Bertram Colgrave, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Catherine Cubitt, "Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints," in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* edited by Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41-78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511496332.003>;

⁴¹ D.P. Kirby, "Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the Life of Wilfrid," in *English Historical Review* 98 (1983): 101-114. David Rollason, "Hagiography and Politics in Early Northumbria," in *Holy Men and Holy Women*, 95-114, at 108.

⁴² Bede, *HE*, III.25 near the end; Rollason, "Hagiography," 101-102.

⁴³ *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, texts, translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 130-53. Catherine Cubitt, "Memory and Narrative," 41-78. See also Clare Stancliffe, "The Irish Tradition in Northumbria after the Synod of Whitby," in *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 35.

he did the same in his portrayal of other problematic saints such as Augustine of Kent (less than exemplary in wisdom and humility), Aidan (Irish), or indeed Hild (a strong woman).

Hagiographies were sometimes written centuries after the death of a politically or morally useful saint. An example is St. Swithin written up by Ælfric about 996.⁴⁴ Nothing is known of the actual life of Swithin (d.862); his translation was the important thing. In Ælfric's narration, Swithin's miracles during and after his translation testified to the greatness of the age of King Edgar when the Benedictine Reforms began. According to Mechthild Gretsch, the principle which governed Ælfric's choice of saints for inclusion in his *Sanctorale* was not merely political expediency, but whatever contributed to the moral instruction of both monks and laity. Sometimes this overlapped with political concerns in the context of the ongoing national struggle with Scandinavian invaders, as Ælfric laid emphasis on saints celebrated throughout England and those who resisted tyranny.⁴⁵ Moral instruction is implicit in his account of Æthelthryth. We know of her from Bede, but then nothing until the refoundation of Ely Abbey in 970 by Ælfric's friend Bishop Æthelwold. The Abbey seems to have been abandoned as a result of the first wave of viking invasions, but the church was still there and both were revived, possibly for political reasons of Edgar's, and maybe so that the cult of Æthelthryth could be nurtured as the female

⁴⁴ Ælfric, *Old English Lives of Saints*, Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, editors and translators (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), volume 3, 207-237. For commentary see also Mechthild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 157-194. Gretsch notes that only six saints in the *Sanctorale* are English: Cuthbert, Alban, Oswald, Edmund, Æthelthryth and Swithin, the latter two given special importance. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=244434>.

⁴⁵ As well as Gretsch, see M.R. Godden, "Ælfric's Saints' Lives and the Problem of Miracles," *Leeds Studies in English* 16 (1985) for evidence that Ælfric selected particular miracles for their ethical value and their utility to encourage the English to resist the heathen. Also see Catherine Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 8, 21; Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women*, 163-189 for how Ælfric employs Esther as an example of godly marriage and queenly intercession against an enemy. Hugh Magennis in "Ælfric's Apostles," *Anglo-Saxon England* 44 (2015), 181-199, shows how he extracted ethical lessons for his particular audience.

counterpart to that of Swithin.⁴⁶ Even though Æthelthryth's story (how she refused to consummate her marriage) is in opposition to the reformers' teaching regarding a wife's duty to obey her husband, Ælfric (like Bede) used her to encourage chastity in marriage by implying her husband's consent.⁴⁷ The same didactic reimagining will come into play later when Edith's hagiography is written up in the eleventh century.

Conclusion

It is evident how imperatives beyond the purely spiritual could drive the writing of hagiography. During the conversion era, when English society was adapting to Christianity and grappling with the church's late antique heritage regarding the roles of women, writing by and about women surely was affected. Writing by women was in evidence early but disappeared; writing about women was rare at this time. In the surviving texts about women, their representation cannot be taken at face value any more than that of men. Both employed hagiographical conventions and arranged their material suitably for their purposes. Whether the disappearance of women's writing and/or the idiosyncratic presentation of them in men's writing might be rooted in misogyny is a difficult question, and one to keep in mind for the case study on Bede and Hild in the next chapter.

⁴⁶ Gretsche, 201.

⁴⁷ See Peter Jackson, "Ælfric and the Purpose of Christian Marriage: A Reconsideration of the Life of Æthelthryth, lines 120–130," in *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 235–260. The implied consent goes against even Bede's own evidence that the husband Ecgfrith beseeched Wilfrid to try to change Æthelthryth's mind.

CHAPTER THREE

HILD OF WHITBY

The little that we know of Hild's life is typical of noblewomen's experiences during the conversion era. As a royal great-niece of King Edwin, she was a peaceweaver – an advisor to kings – and also an abbess of excellent reputation in the church. Bede counted Hild among many Christians who laboured for the conversion of England. In the *Historia Ecclesiastica* he may have minimized the role of queens in the top-down conversion, but he did not neglect Hild's work in the bottom-up process. Like Aidan, Chad, and Cuthbert, who ministered among the people, Hild *in suo monasterio uitae exemplo praesentibus extitit; sed etiam plurimis longe manentibus, ad quos felix industriae ac uirtutis eius rumor peruenit, occasionem salutis et correctionis ministravit* [was not only an example of life to those that lived in her monastery, but also to many living at a distance, to whom came the report of her blessed industry and virtue, she ministered the means of salvation and improvement].¹

Bede is our only source of information about Hild. Aside from a few words in Eddius Stephanus' *Life of Wilfrid*, Book IV.23 of *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the only surviving record of Hild's life.

This chapter is not a *vita* strictly speaking, intended for use in the liturgy, but a short portion of biography embedded in a long book of history. Inevitably, a historian would wish to know more.

Hild as a person is widely admired today, but some historians find much that is objectionable in

¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.21(23). Edition by Charles Plummer, 1898, at *The Latin Library*. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/bede.html>. Chapter numbers have been updated since Plummer, whose numbers in Book IV are two less than in more recent translations such as those by Colgrave and Sherley-Price. When quoting from Plummer I will note both chapter numbers (if there is a difference) for ease of reference in English translations.

Bede's portrayal of her. This chapter will survey Hild's context, accomplishments, sources and legacy before considering the deficiencies charged against Bede.

3.1 Context: Whitby Abbey and Hild's Cult

Hild lived in the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria. During Hild's lifetime the area straddled two competing spheres of Christian influence: that of Canterbury linked to Rome, and Iona linked to Ireland. Hild herself was baptised by a Roman bishop from the Augustinian mission, yet her friends who helped her establish her monastery were Irish-trained according to the tradition of Columba. Whitby Abbey, known at the time as Streonæshalch, was on a remote coast of north Yorkshire. The distance by boat from Whitby south to Canterbury, the centre of the Roman mission, would have been over twice as far as the distance from it north to Lindisfarne, the centre of the Ionan mission. Needless to say, the underlying culture in the whole land during the conversion era of the seventh century would have been Anglo-Saxon paganism, dotted with pockets of a flourishing monastic religious life.

Although Bede tells us that Hild was famous in her day, the fame did not seem to last. Christine Fell, in her seminal essay "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," says that the early medieval observance of Hild's cult was in inverse proportion to her achievements.² She seems not as recognized as her deeds deserved. Her name appears in Lindisfarne's *Liber Vitae*, a list of those to be remembered at the altar, but she is scarcely mentioned in liturgy or church dedications except in York, and is commemorated in only one pre-Conquest calendar (that of St.

² Christine Fell, "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: a Symposium*, edited by Bekker-Neilson et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 95.

Willibrord).³ Her name appears in no surviving litany of saints.⁴ She is in the ninth century *Old English Martyrology* but not in Ælfric's late tenth-century *Lives of Saints*, nor the eleventh-century document called the *Secgan be þam Godes sanctum þe on Engla lande ærost reston* [the story about God's saints who rest in England], which lists some fifty churches each of which possessed the relics of one or more English saints.⁵ Hild's remains were supposedly evacuated to Glastonbury during the viking depredations of the ninth century, according to William of Malmesbury. He said that Abbot Tica fled south with the bones of Hild, Aidan, Ceolfrith, Benedict, Bede and other Northumbrian saints.⁶ He (or his interpolator) is scarcely to be believed regarding this, as Glastonbury Abbey was a notorious myth-manufacturer.⁷ Fell says there is reason to believe Hild's relics are still at Whitby, since the abbey's fourteenth-century missal in the readings for the feast of her translation implies the presence of her relics.⁸ Her cult pales in comparison to those of her contemporaries Cuthbert and Æthelthryth. In all, it is astonishing that so little was made of a person arguably so significant in the conversion of England.

3.2 Hild's Life and Accomplishments

Hild's grandfather was a brother of King Edwin of Deira. She was born to pagan parents in a part of the country that had not been in contact with either Augustinian or Columban missions at a time of murderous feuding among ruling families. Hild was baptised in 627 at age fourteen by

³ Fell, 78, 89-92.

⁴ Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991).

⁵ D.W. Rollason, "Lists of Saints' Resting-places in Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 7 (1978): 61-93.

⁶ William of Malmesbury, "De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie," paragraph 21, in *The Early History of Glastonbury* by John Scott (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1981), 69.

⁷ Particularly with respect to Joseph of Arimathea and Arthur. However it was not the only monastery to work hard at proving its venerable antiquity and relics. Scott, *The Early History of Glastonbury*, 27-33.

⁸ Fell, "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," 92.

Paulinus on the same day as the newly-converted Edwin, who seems to have taken her under his wing. Six years later Edwin was killed in battle. Apostate kings succeeded him, fighting among themselves and with Welsh invaders. Edwin's widow Æthelburh fled back home to Kent with her baby girl Eanflæd. The English church was in disarray. Aidan's foundation at Lindisfarne was just getting off the ground; the impetus of the Gregorian mission had all but petered out, Pope Gregory's design for dioceses had failed, and many bishoprics were vacant. Some parts of the country which had earlier been evangelized lapsed into public paganism.⁹

There is an information gap of almost twenty years from Hild's baptism to her decision to enter religious life. We next hear of her setting forth to find her sister Hereswith, who had married into the royal family of East Anglia, but Hereswith had already departed for a Frankish convent.¹⁰ Fell surmises that Hild had been recently widowed, since she was unlikely to have remained single for thirty-three years.¹¹ This would explain the impetus to seek refuge with her only remaining kin, and enter the religious life, both typical moves for women in that situation.

At this point (647), Aidan had been at Lindisfarne for twelve years. He must have befriended Hild at some point previously, for when he summoned her to return to Northumbria, she relinquished her desire to go to Frankia where so many princesses were at that moment receiving religious education, and turned instead to the prospect of pioneering the monastic lifestyle in nearly-pagan Northumbria. Nicholas Higham speaks of "the low level of Christianization outside the rarefied atmosphere of some courts and monasteries," even in the heartland of English and

⁹ All this is covered in the *HE*. For the relapse into paganism see III.30.

¹⁰ Fell, "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," 80. Bede says Chelles but that nunnery wasn't founded until 658. It may have been Faremoutiers or Jouarre.

¹¹ Fell, "Hild," 79, 80.

Irish missionary efforts.¹² Bede tells us that Cuthbert strove to suppress idolatry, incantation and the use of amulets among other ‘devilish arts;’ the east Saxons reopened their pagan temples when there was a severe outbreak of plague in the 660s; Theodore’s *Penitential* made it clear that superstition remained prevalent.¹³ It is all the more impressive that Hild agreed to return.

She lived for one year with a small group of (we presume) sisters, and then undertook the position of abbess at Hartlepool when its founder Heui departed, where she organized a regular life for the religious women. From there she went to Streonæshalch, now known to us as Whitby. The original endowment from King Oswiu was ten hides, perhaps later enlarged but no records survive. There was a church named for Saint Peter and an altar dedicated to Gregory. The rule was the same as that observed at Hartlepool, presumably the one taught by Aidan at Lindisfarne, not likely Benedictine. The abbey would seem a hybrid of Roman and Irish in character. It was situated not on an exposed headland in the Irish manner, but half a kilometre from the coast in a sheltered location.¹⁴ It seems to have been the burial site of the Northumbrian royals. Hild founded another house at Hackness only a year before she died. She is presented as the counsellor of kings and aldermen (albeit they are unnamed) and as an educator who required her pupils to study the Scriptures so as to attain the learning necessary for high office in the church.

Bede then shifts his narrative from historical to hagiographical mode with three conventions of the genre. Hild’s mother had a pre-natal dream that her daughter would be ‘a shining light.’ At

¹² Nicholas Higham, *Convert Kings*, 37.

¹³ *HE* III.30 and IV.27; Penitential documents are at <http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/index.php?p=index>

¹⁴ Tony Wilmott, “The Anglian Abbey of Streonæshalch-Whitby: New Perspectives on Topography and Layout,” in *Early Medieval Monasticism in the North Sea Zone*, edited by Gabor Thomas and Alexandra Knox, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 20 (2017):91. <https://www.academia.edu/44302934/>

the end of thirty-three years (the age of Christ) in the religious life, she is perfected by seven years of sickness. Her exemplary death is heralded by two separate visions of her ascent to heaven in a beam of light, revealed to distant sisters. The historical note that Hild hosted the famous Synod of Whitby called by Oswiu, where the adoption of the Roman method of dating Easter was agreed in 664, was told previously in Book III.25. The story of Hild acting as patron for Cædmon, the first composer of Christian songs in English, is told after her hagiography in Book IV.24. All we know of Hild's own personality we must deduce from her aim to nurture charity, community, chastity, piety, and education among her people. We are told nothing about any shrine, any miracles, any cult. Her purported miracle of changing serpents into stones (actually ammonites that may be found in the area) is a fourteenth-century concoction.¹⁵

3.3 Textual Sources

It would seem obvious that Whitby would have provided itself with a *vita* of its own saint. However, if there was one, the *Life of Hild* has not survived, not even in an eleventh-century revision like many other early *Lives*. Historians surmise that Bede, writing about Hild fifty years after her death, relied on at least an in-house tradition if not a written *Life*. J.E. Cross has persuasively argued in favour of the existence of such a *Life* on the basis of certain unusual features of the entry for Hild in the *Old English Martyrology*.¹⁶ He believes the author blended information from Bede plus another lost source. The paragraph in the *OEM* is a short summary but does mention one thing that Bede does not: that Hild's friends saw a

¹⁵ Fell, "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," 89.

¹⁶ J.E. Cross, "A Lost Life of Hilda of Whitby: The Evidence of the *Old English Martyrology* in the Early Middle Ages," in *Acta* 6, Albany, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies (1982): 21-43.

vision of a cross lifting her up at her death. Cross notes evidence for similar blending of information in the entries for Aidan, Fursey, and Columba.

Diane Watt strongly censures Bede for “overwriting” his now-lost female-written sources for both Hild’s and Æthelthryth’s lives.¹⁷ Yet for that time period, Richard Gameson says “there is no hint in the contemporary sources of books having been made in honour of saints as part of their cults.”¹⁸ We may surmise that any such writings would have been used in-house, not copied and distributed, and therefore likely destroyed in the viking devastation. It is unclear what books there may have been. Bede does say plainly in the *HE* that he used a lost *liber* of Barking as his source for the visions and miracles he described. On the other hand, Christine Fell finds no reason to believe there ever was a “lost *Life of Æthelthryth*,” predating Æthelwold’s revival of her cult at Ely in the tenth century. If it were not for Cross’s research, we would have little reason to posit a lost *Life of Hild* that Bede could ignore. Whether it is possible that its existence eluded Bede but reached the author of the *OEM* would be an interesting avenue of research. If so, Bede could not be blamed for failing to cite his source, a fault not typical of him as he is usually punctilious in this regard.

3.4 Hild’s Legacy

We can deduce more about Hild’s impact on her society by looking within and beyond the chapter that Bede left us. Her legacy endured in at least five ways: the Synod of Whitby, the

¹⁷ Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, chapter 1.

¹⁸ Richard Gameson, “Northumbrian Books in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries,” in *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives*, edited by Richard Gameson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 74.

songs of Cædmon, the alumni of her school, her successor Ælfflæd, and the first textual *Life of Gregory* which was written in her monastery.

3.5.1 Legacy: The Synod of Whitby

Some historians argue that Hild's role at the synod was belittled by Bede. Lees and Overing do not like the way Bede structured his book, separating the statement about Hild's hosting the synod (Book III) from the rest of her rather hazy life (Book IV).¹⁹ Eddius Stephanus also wrote about the synod in the *Life of Wilfrid* fifty years after the fact; Bede's account in *HE* is eighty years after, and is longer. Both of them indicate Hild as hostess; Bede adds that she favoured the Celtic side, but neither one gives her a speaking part. As Stephanie Hollis remarks, "Hild herself is seen and not heard; of the letters that she and Theodore subsequently sent to Rome opposing Wilfrid's reinstatement to his Northumbrian see, Bede seemingly knows nothing."²⁰ Sarah Foot thinks Bede made Hild's role at Whitby invisible because that was the fact, not from his wish to suppress her: "Misogyny did not drive Bede either to diminish Hild's role or depoliticise her sanctity; he did, indeed, leave her silent, but he also silenced all the Irish participants apart from Bishop Colman, and further on the Roman side, put no words into the mouths of the priest Agatho, James the deacon, or the cleric called Romanus."²¹

Bede almost but not quite makes the outcome of the Synod of Whitby attributable to the peaceweaving role of Oswiu's wife Eanflæd, by making it seem that the divergence between the

¹⁹ Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents*, 26-27.

²⁰ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 255.

²¹ Foot, "Bede's Abbesses," in *Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages*, edited by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Katie Bugyis, and John Van Engen (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 261-275, at 270.

Northumbrian (Celtic-Iona) and Kentish (Roman-Canterbury) customs had become a marriage problem.²² However, he does not go so far. In his account, the outcome is the work of kings and bishops, supposedly theologically debated, but in reality no doubt through quite worldly political machinations. It is difficult to imagine that the date of Easter (or more specifically of the Lenten fast) had suddenly become so problematic, since the couple had been married for over twenty years, and, as Higham remarked, “it cannot be said that Oswiu suffered from excessive religiosity.”²³ It was about authority and his own power to manipulate. Rifts were appearing in the Northumbrian dynasty, between Oswiu of Bernicia and his son Ahlfrith of Deira. Richard Abels thinks that Ahlfrith may even have planned the synod to humiliate his father by being the one to champion the Roman observance which was bound to win, but his father out-witted him.²⁴ Oswiu set the Ionans up for failure in order to out-manoeuvre Ahlfrith’s insubordination. He reinforced his overlordship of southern England by joining the Roman camp, while at the same time maintaining some Ionan friends in opposition to Wilfrid, among them Hild. It was political manoeuvring at the highest levels. In Higham’s view, the synod was never meant to be a forum for debate.²⁵ Whitby was chosen as the venue so as not to give the home advantage to the Lindisfarne contingent. One might wonder whether Oswiu would not have wanted Hild to speak up on the Celtic side, and requested her silence. The kinship bond may be relevant, as Hild was a cousin of Oswiu’s wife Eanflæd. Of the three possibilities – that Hild did assert herself but Bede did not record it (he might not have known), that she said nothing at all, or that she spoke privately to Oswiu ahead of time – the third seems to fit the context. So instead of Hollis’

²² Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 240.

²³ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 256.

²⁴ Richard Abels, “The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics,” *The Journal of British Studies* 23 (1983): 1-25. <https://www-jstor-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/stable/175617>

²⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 258.

opinion that Bede wrote as if the women were invisible when they were not,²⁶ it is conceivable that Hild diplomatically withdrew.

3.5.2 Legacy: Cædmon

Peter Hunter Blair reminds us that, like the significance of Hild of whom we know so little, the significance of the mere nine lines of Caedmon's poetry which survive is greater than first appears.²⁷ These hymns made the Christian faith accessible to the illiterate pagan Anglo-Saxons. In this time of social turmoil, Hunter Blair asks, "How, then, did one teach even the nobility, let alone those yokels who jeered at Cuthbert saying that they had been robbed of their old ways of worship and no one knew how the new worship was to be conducted?"²⁸ Bede says Cædmon's extensive collection of verses (almost all of which was lost) *multorum saepe animi ad contemptum saeculi et appetitum sunt vitae caelestis accensi* [often kindled the souls of many to despise the world and they sought the heavenly life].²⁹ The manuscript history of the one nine-line hymn indicates that it became widely known in its vernacular version. According to Christine Fell, its teaching value is equalled by its literary significance, as the momentous shift is made from oral to written transmission.³⁰ In Bede's Latin: *At ipse cuncta quae audiendo discere poterat, rememorando secum et quasi mundum animal ruminando in carmen dulcissimum convertebat, suaviusque resonando doctores suos vicissim auditores sui faciebat.*³¹ [And all that he could learn by hearing, he remembered, and like a clean animal chewing the cud, he turned

²⁶ Hollis *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 246, 252.

²⁷ Cædmon's Hymn can be read at <https://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/medieval/caedmon.html>.

²⁸ Hunter Blair, "Whitby as a Centre of Learning," 24. He is referring to an incident in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* 3.

²⁹ Bede, *HE* IV.22 (24).

³⁰ Fell, "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," 98.

³¹ *HE* IV.24.

into very sweet song, and by sounding so delightful he in turn made his teachers into listeners.] It was an audio experience. In the Old English *HE*, the gist is similar except for the last phrase: *Ond his song ond his lēoð wæron swā wynsumu tō gehýranne þætte þā seolfan his lārēowas æt his mūðe wreoton ond leornodon.*³² [And his songs and his poems were so pleasant to hear that his teachers themselves from his mouth wrote and learned.] Now it seems Cædmon's songs were being written down. If indeed Bede missed what happened but Hild really did encourage vernacular writing, she was being remarkably innovative.

The tale of Cædmon is a point of contention with feminist historians. Whereas Higham interprets Bede's motive in including it is to provide further evidence of the spiritual wealth of the community over which Hild ruled,³³ Lees and Overing find that he belittles Hild's contribution to material and cultural wealth in respect to Cædmon and more.³⁴ They scorn the hymn itself as "patriarchal" because it praises the Father as Creator, and they see Bede promoting himself instead of Hild as Cædmon's patron. She is mentioned only as "the abbess," not by name. Lees and Overing judge Bede as having a typical self-promoting masculine perspective, like listing his own books at the end of *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Bede emphasizes the product over the process – the hymn itself over Hild's patronage – in the same way as he praised the alumni of her school rather than Hild's work in educating them. Inasmuch as she only anonymously promotes the poet, and does so in the interests of patriarchal Christianity, Bede has erased her from the cultural record.

³² Peter Baker, *Introduction to Old English*, 2nd edition (Blackwell, 2007), 210.

³³ Higham, *Re-reading Bede*, 163.

³⁴ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 21-29.

These observations seem rooted in a particular twentieth-century attitude toward masculinity rather than an appreciation of the world-view of the day. Perhaps it would be *a propos* here to point out a managerial decision on Hild's part that was valued at the time even if it goes by modern terminology. Hild was a consensus-builder and a team-player. When informed of Cædmon's vision, she summoned everyone together to determine whether it was God-sent. The inclusion of others in the decision was at least clever manoeuvring, if not more charitably seen as wisdom in action. This is one way to evaluate the story without importing an interpretation that would have baffled Hild and Bede.³⁵

3.5.3 Legacy: The alumni of Hild's monastic school

It appears that Whitby was the foremost training centre for clergy in seventh-century England, producing a total of six men qualified as bishops within a single generation, and an unknown number of priests no doubt. Nicholas Higham suggests that Oswiu transferred some of the more learned of his clergy and many of the available manuscripts from Lindisfarne to his new foundation, and Richard Gameson believes Whitby may have had an extensive library.³⁶ The calibre of graduates was impressive and they spread throughout England. Ætla went to minister in Dorchester-on-Thames in Wessex. Tatfrith went to the west Midlands kingdom of the Hwicce; Bede says he had great learning but died before his consecration as bishop. Oftfor studied under Hild at Hartlepool and Whitby, and also under Theodore at Canterbury and went to Rome; he also ministered among the Hwicce. Alcuin in *The Bishops and Saints of York* celebrated others who remained nearer home: Bosa was "good, pious, observant of the Rule," Wilfrid II was

³⁵ Thank-you to Dr. Jane Toswell for these insights.

³⁶ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 251; Gameson, "Northumbrian Books in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," 48.

known for “good deeds, sweet character, generous gifts to beautify the church,” and John of Beverley “reigned over the church, a man renowned for his piety, faith, merits and intellect.”³⁷ Bede especially admired John who had ordained him as deacon and then priest, filling five chapters of *HE* with his miracles.³⁸

Basic literacy would have been required on the part of both male and female monastics for study of scripture as mandated by the Rules. Beyond that, there was much variation in education. Bede certainly saw Hild as a keen educator, yet gives no indication that she herself was particularly learned. Hollis blames Bede for being vague about the school at Whitby, saying only that education there consisted of Scripture and good works.³⁹ It may be significant that at least two of Hild’s episcopal graduates continued their education in Canterbury. John of Beverley received his medical knowledge from Theodore, not Hild.⁴⁰ Bede may say little about the Whitby curriculum because there was little to say. There and at that point in time, education was probably rudimentary.⁴¹ But if Bede is vague about Hild’s school, he similarly records nothing of the monastic school at Barking when he writes about Abbess Hildelith; and although he was enthusiastic about the Canterbury school, he was short on details of the curriculum there also.

There is no reason to believe that Bede thought less of women’s education than that of men. Nor is it surprising that he had more contact with men than with women. All of Bede’s surviving letters and all but one of his longer works which carry any sort of dedication or address were

³⁷ Alcuin, *The Bishops and Saints of York*, translated and edited by Peter Godman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) lines 857ff, 1084ff, 1216-17.

³⁸ *HE* V.2-6.

³⁹ Stephanie Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 308.

⁴⁰ *HE*, V.3.

⁴¹ Calvin Kendall, “Bede and Education,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, edited by Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99-112, at 100.

directed at male clergy or monks.⁴² The only work to have been written expressly at the request of a woman was the short piece *On the Canticle of Habakkuk*, addressed to “my dearly beloved sister in Christ.” He did not name this nun (or perhaps abbess), so we do not know her identity or her house, but the content of this little book helps us understand Bede’s view of the purpose of education. Benedicta Ward has found this book in no way condescending to the sisters.⁴³ She finds it different from Bede’s other writings to clerics who had preaching and teaching duties and therefore needed explanation of the various senses of the text and its orthodox interpretation. To the nun, he explains the mystical meaning of Habakkuk and emphasizes love. His approach is in keeping with his conception of women as life-givers and nurturers.⁴⁴ Ward thinks that Bede never emphasized learning as an end in itself, but only to lead to godly wisdom. This he enjoined on men and women alike, for the purpose of transforming English society to have a heart for Christ. She mentions his letter to Egbert, in which he pleaded for more piety and never mentioned education.⁴⁵ She draws our attention to the passages in *Historia Ecclesiastica* praising the uneducated Owine and Cædmon. Owine, a friend of Chad, was *minus sufficebat meditationi scripturarum, eo amplius operi manuum studium inpendebat. ... cum illi [episcopi] intus lectioni uacabant, ipse foris, quae opus esse uidebantur, operabatur* [less capable of meditating on the Holy Scriptures, therefore he the more earnestly applied himself to the labour of his hands. ... while they [the bishops] were engaged within in reading, he was outside, doing such work as needed to be done].⁴⁶ It seems that Cædmon never learned to read, for he depended on oral teaching from the other monks: *cuncta quae audiendo discere poterat* [all that he could learn by

⁴² Higham, *Re-Reading Bede*, 44.

⁴³ Benedicta Ward, “To my Dearest Sister: Bede and the Educated Woman,” in *Women, the Book and the Godly*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane Taylor (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 105–11.

⁴⁴ Ward, 108-109.

⁴⁵ “Bede’s Letter to Egbert,” translated by D.H. Farmer, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1990).

⁴⁶ *HE* IV.3.

hearing], not by reading.⁴⁷ Hædda, bishop of the West Saxons, could be added to the list: *Bonus quippe erat uir, ac iustus, et episcopalem uitam siue doctrinam magis insito sibi uirtutum amore quam lectionibus institutus exercebat.* [He was a good and just man, and exercised his episcopal duties informed more by his innate love of virtue, than by what he had gained from reading.]⁴⁸ In all these cases piety is reckoned more important than learning, even for men, so we may assume that if it seems a woman's piety was valued above her learning, it was not a gendered bias.

Sarah Foot agrees with Ward on some points but not regarding women teachers. She concurs on the importance that Bede gave to prayer and contemplation and the importance of attending to spiritual teaching. But in this commentary written for nuns he clearly pictured an intelligent and educated audience, able to appreciate his scriptural allusions, and Foot goes on to ask whether it is far-fetched to suppose that Bede envisioned the nuns themselves teaching and preaching to others, as well as showing by example how to live.⁴⁹ She follows Alan Thacker in referencing several of Bede's statements that could be read as picturing women preachers.⁵⁰ In his commentary on Ezra, Bede reflects favourably on the fact that there were both *cantores atque cantrices ducentae* [male and female song-leaders].

Bene autem cantoribus etiam cantrices iunguntur propter sexem uidelicet femineum in quo plurimae repperiuntur personae quae non solum vivendo verum etiam praedicando corda proximorum ad laudem sui creatoris accendant et quasi suavitate sanctae vocis aedificantium templum domini adiuuent laborem.⁵¹

[And well were the female singers joined to the male singers, because of their gender namely female, among which many persons were found, who not only by living but by preaching (literally 'telling forth,' and Bede might mean singing), the hearts of

⁴⁷ *HE* IV.22(24).

⁴⁸ *HE* V.18.

⁴⁹ Foot, "Women, Prayer and Preaching," 62- 63.

⁵⁰ Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 130-53, at 131.

⁵¹ Bede, *In Ezram*, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina CXIXa* (Brepols, 1969), 257.

neighbours were ignited to praise of their creator, and, as if by the sweetness of holy voice, helped the work of building the Lord's temple.]

Again, in his *Homilies*, Bede says that not only pastors, bishops, priests, deacons, and rulers of monasteries are to be understood as doing pastoral work:

sed omnes fideles qui vel parvulae suae domus custodiam gerunt pastores recte vocantur in quantum eidem suae domui sollicita vigilantia praesunt.⁵²
[but all the faithful who also take care of their little houses are rightly called pastors inasmuch as they have charge over those same houses with vigilant concern.]

Bede is probably not as straightforwardly encompassing women in the office of preaching as Thacker implies, but these words do suggest inclusivity in his thinking.

Stephanie Hollis blames Bede (and historians such as Hunter Blair) for not saying that it was probably Hild herself who taught her monks to read.⁵³ She suggests that he is deliberately ignoring Hild when he says it was men, not she, who taught Cædmon the Bible. There is no way to prove this. Hollis also seems to read a bad attitude into Bede by suggesting he was prejudiced against Celtic influences such as Whitby had. He dated the arrival of true learning in England with Theodore, a decade before Hild died, so in his view, Whitby was behind the times. After Theodore came, there was less need for monasteries like Hild's to educate clergy, and so they lost respect in his eyes.⁵⁴ However, as mentioned above, pedagogy at Whitby might well have been fairly elementary in fact, and not just in Bede's opinion.

3.5.4 Legacy: Ælflæd

⁵² Bede, *Homelia I.7*, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina CXXII* (Brepols, 1969), 49.

⁵³ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 257.

⁵⁴ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 268-9. Hollis notes that nevertheless the tradition of learned nuns in Northumbria continued, as Alcuin wrote to nuns there.

Besides the bishops, another alumna of the Whitby school was King Oswiu's daughter Ælfflæd who grew up there. She was Hild's second cousin – yet another instance of how intertwined royal kin and church were at the time. Ælfflæd had been consecrated as an infant in thanksgiving for Oswiu's victory over the pagan Mercian king Penda. She succeeded Hild as abbess, assisted in later years by her widowed mother Eanflæd, who may have sought refuge at Whitby at some point after the death of Oswiu in 670.

Having been brought up under the mentorship of Hild, Ælfflæd learned to be a capable and assertive woman who counted Cuthbert among her close friends and advised kings and bishops on political matters.⁵⁵ Ælfflæd's political importance is obvious from the fact that she was present at King Aldfrith's deathbed.⁵⁶ Bede says in *HE* III.24 that she was first a pupil and then a teacher of the Rule.⁵⁷ He mentions Ælfflæd only once more in passing in IV.26, where he says she found Bishop Trumwine a comfort and help in administration of the monastery. Christine Fell doubts that Ælfflæd needed help any more than the capable Hild would have, but one may remember that Aidan advised Hild when she was a beginner also.⁵⁸

Eddius tells us how Ælfflæd became involved in the power struggle between her brother King Ecgfrith and Bishop Wilfrid, and advocated in a public forum at the synod of Nidd for Wilfrid's reinstatement in his see. She is shown speaking up plainly: *beata abbatissa Ælfflæd, semper*

⁵⁵ Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, 23 and 34, in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* edited by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵⁶ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 181.

⁵⁷ *HE* III.24.

⁵⁸ Fell, "Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch," 86.

totius provinciae consolatrix optimaque consiliatrix ... benedicto ore suo dixit... [blessed abbess Ælfflæd, always the source of strength and best advisor to the whole province ... said this helpful saying].⁵⁹ Ælfflæd was an independent-minded woman: her predecessor Hild had been Wilfrid's enemy, as was Theodore, who subsequently made efforts to reconcile everyone.⁶⁰ Unlike Eddius, Bede mentions the Synod of Nidd very briefly, and Ælfflæd not at all in connection with it.⁶¹ Yet he does speak well of her in his *Life of Cuthbert* chapter 23.

Venerabilis ancilla Christi Ælfflæd, quae inter gaudia virginitatis non paucis famularum Christi agminibus maternae pietatis curam adhibebat, ac regalis stemata nobilitatis potiori nobilitate summae virtutis accumulabat.
[The venerable handmaid of Christ Ælfflæd, who amidst the joy of her virginal state took charge of a not small company of nuns with motherly affection. She added to her royal rank the yet greater nobility of a high degree of holiness.]⁶²

Feminists might disdain Bede's categories, but in his worldview saintly motherhood is eminently laudable. Lees and Overing, for example (whose notion of worthy womanhood is as much culturally determined as Bede's), consider Bede's epithet for Hild "mother to all" is derogatory because it is emptied of her power to produce.⁶³ But to Bede and his contemporaries, the title "Mother" is in no way demeaning. Nurturing roles attributed to saintly women were terms of highest praise. In the same way Goscelin many years later stressed that the spiritual progeny of the abbesses of Ely were more important than real children.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, LX, in *The Life of Wilfrid* edited by Colgrave, 129.

⁶⁰ Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, LIV.

⁶¹ *HE* V.19. Another of Bede's omissions concerns Æbbe of Coldingham. In *HE* he mentioned only relatively mild austerities on her part (IV.19), and failure to govern her own monastery strictly (IV.25). Yet in Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid* chapter 39, Æbbe sharply rebukes King Ecgrith over his treatment of Wilfrid, and he listens to her advice. It may be true that Bede was not impressed with women's involvement in politics.

⁶² *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 230.

⁶³ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 28.

⁶⁴ Rosalind Love, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), cx.

Lees and Overing think that the dual emphasis on virginity and spiritual rather than actual maternity devalues real familial connections between women.⁶⁵ Hild, as far as we know, had no child; but evidently Bede was not above ignoring inconvenient facts.⁶⁶ If Hild had had a pagan husband and an unbaptized child, he would likely leave them unmentioned. Doubtless Bede valued spiritual motherhood such as that between Hild and Ælfflæd above any blood relationship. He is more likely to speak of biological sisters than mothers. Within the same sentence he notes Æthelburh of Barking as spiritual mother and teacher, and also beloved sister by blood of Bishop Earconwald, and Æthelthryth is called spiritual mother to her nuns, and also actual sister of Sæxburg.⁶⁷ The formerly married Sæxburg is treated cursorily by Bede but more fully in the Kentish Royal Legend, which is of course all about family connections. The high value placed on blood kinship in Germanic culture is evident in many letters and *vitae* from England and Frankia.⁶⁸ Hild herself was on her way to join her sister at Chelles when she changed her mind and returned to Northumbria to commence her abbatial career. Viewing the texts through a different lens, we may see more evidence of family love than Lees and Overing allow.

3.6 Life of Gregory

⁶⁵ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 43.

⁶⁶ For example, he would like to forget “the apostasy of the English kings Osric and Eanfric, for it has been generally agreed that the names of these apostates should be erased from the list of Christian kings and the year of their reign ignored.” *HE* III.1 and III.9.

⁶⁷ *HE* IV.6 and 19.

⁶⁸ Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, 271-305.

Only two texts survive of all that could have been written at Whitby.⁶⁹ Both were preserved on the Continent, and both are connected with Ælfflæd.⁷⁰ One is a letter that she wrote to another abbess, in the convoluted ‘hermeneutical’ style of Aldhelm popular in the day, indicating an appreciable facility in Latin which must have been the result of a good education as well as intelligence. The other is the earliest known version of a *Life of Gregory* produced under Ælfflæd’s patronage. The cult of Gregory in Whitby, well distant from Canterbury, may have been based on written as well as oral source material, coming from Ælfflæd via Theodore.⁷¹ Her mother Eanflæd having been baptized by Paulinus together with Edwin and Hild, and brought up in Kent, it was natural that the Augustinian mission would have been remembered at Whitby, even though the foundation was Irish in origin, through both Oswiu its patron and Aidan its mentor, both educated at Iona.⁷²

The *Life of Gregory*, written sometime between 704 and 714, quickly went out of sight until the 19th century.⁷³ It came to light in 1866 in a codex at St Gall in Switzerland. It was immediately obvious from the text that the author was an English person who had lived at Whitby. The manuscript of the only surviving copy was written on the Continent, probably in the early ninth century, according to Bertram Colgrave who published his edition and translation in 1968.

⁶⁹ Rosamund McKitterick believes the discovery of a few styli among feminine items such as spindle whorls and loom weights in the excavations at Whitby is scarcely proof of the presence of a female scriptorium there. “Nuns’ Scriptoria” 25-26. There may not have been an industry, but certainly writing was happening there.

⁷⁰ The survival of a few books on the Continent suggests to us the huge quantity of them, and not only women’s, that must have been lost over the years in England. As Gameson notes, “The circumstance that we have no Northumbrian copies of the other thirty or so works that Bede listed in the autobiographical note at the end of the *Ecclesiastical History* is a sobering reminder of how enormous have been the losses.” Richard Gameson, “Northumbrian Books,” 47.

⁷¹ Mechthild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 26.

⁷² Hunter Blair, “Whitby as a Centre of Learning,” 17; and D.W. Rollason, “Hagiography and Politics in Early Northumbria,” in *Holy Men and Holy Women*, 101.

⁷³ Bertram Colgrave, *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 60.

Colgrave notes that the *Gregory* author was familiar with scripture and had some limited knowledge of Jerome and Augustine, but may have read snippets in anthologies.⁷⁴ He disagrees with Gameson regarding the resources in Whitby's library. The writing manifests rather less competence in Latin on the part of the author than that of Ælfflæd.⁷⁵

Andrew Breeze speculates whether the author was a woman.⁷⁶ His evidence lies in allusions to women's concerns (children, food preparation); knowing Gregory's mother's name; having women's actual words quoted, unlike the men whose speech is indirect; and no demonstrated knowledge of liturgy or canon law or men's activities such as hunting. Breeze concludes that if the author was a woman, the poor Latin and dearth of primary source material proves that they did not have access to as good an education as men. His argument neglects the fact that Whitby was a double monastery. Perhaps, since the *Life of Gregory* was a rare survival of the place and moment, we should not generalize about the extent of the library or the quality of female learning at Whitby on its basis. Nor do we have enough evidence to draw any conclusions about the author; suffice it to say it is not necessary to assume the author was a man.

Diane Watt is favourable toward the idea of the *Life of Gregory* having had female authorship, probably as a communal effort.⁷⁷ However, she admits one telling factor against the idea: it leaves out information that would have been important to female noble relatives of Edwin whose translation and cult is celebrated in the document. Ælfflæd is credited, but neither the

⁷⁴ Colgrave, *Earliest Life*, 37.

⁷⁵ Fell, "Hild," 95; Colgrave, *Earliest Life*, 40.

⁷⁶ Andrew Breeze, "Did a Woman Write the Whitby Life of St. Gregory?" in *Northern History* 49:2 (2012): 345-350. <https://doi.org/10.1179/0078172X12Z.00000000019>. Breeze also wrote a controversial article about a possible woman author of the Welsh legend *Mabinogion*. "Did a Woman Write the Four Branches of the Mabinogi?" *Studi Medievali* 38 (1997).

⁷⁷ Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 31-39.

consecration of her mother Eanflæd, nor the name of her grandmother is mentioned; and most surprisingly, there is no mention of Hild at all. Even so, Watt condemns Bede for ‘probably’ using this source without citing it, and blames him for ignoring female writers: “we have an example of the sort of unacknowledged underwriting that may lie behind Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*.”⁷⁸ It seems unwarranted to be annoyed about two matters that are entirely her assumptions: that the writer was a woman and that Bede knew it.

Whether the *Life of Gregory* was authored by a nun or a monk, the book still calls for honour due to a school established by Hild in an illiterate and pagan wilderness, and its very existence ranks among the other accomplishments of her cultural legacy.

3.7 Bede’s Omissions

The matters discussed so far relate to what Bede wrote or at least alluded to in his material on Hild. Other issues arise from what some historians think that he left out – what Lees and Overing call the ‘creation of absence’ by ignoring the women.⁷⁹

One claimed deficiency is Hild’s work as a manager. Hollis finds that Bede presents Hild as a conventionally pious abbess with little to do.⁸⁰ This could hardly have been the case in reality.

⁷⁸ Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 39. See also Watt, “Literature in Pieces,” 366-367.

⁷⁹ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 40.

⁸⁰ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 249-251.

It is difficult to reconstruct the economic details of the Northumbrian monasteries, because there are no surviving charters.⁸¹ Bede could have thrown some light on this, but he is obscure on the details of any monastic foundation. It is unclear whether the extensive estates at Streonæshalch consisted of the original ten hides donated by Oswiu plus land that Hild inherited from her own kin or took over from another donor.⁸² Regarding the day-to-day running of a large organization, we can only surmise the administrative effort that was involved. For Bede to have left out the details is not unreasonable, but given the scope of activities there, we can surmise that it was a thriving community. Bede does say that Aidan and other men admired Hild's wisdom and from time to time offered guidance, that she was "constantly occupied in establishing a regular life," and that she "carried out her appointed tasks with great energy."⁸³

Lees and Overing and Hollis all think that Bede obsesses about female morbidity and mortality to the exclusion of meaningful activities. They regret "the formal demands of the hagiographic genre where women's deaths take precedence over their lives..." or "Bede's accounts of Barking, Ely and Faremoutiers, consisting of a handful of details overridingly concerned with death, burial, and disease, [which] give no very encouraging impression of the preoccupations of monastic women."⁸⁴ The observation may be accurate in those cases (less so for Whitby) but it should be remembered that this hagiographical trope was the same for contemporary men, as is seen in the *vitae* of Cuthbert and Guthlac, where the accounts of their illnesses and deaths went on for pages. Overcoming suffering was the whole point of sanctity, and that 'activity' was what

⁸¹ Foot, *Veiled Women* (Routledge, 2000), 75. Archaeological excavations have uncovered an estate larger than formerly thought, including a glassworks nearby, but the dating cannot be exact to Hild's own lifetime. Tony Wilmott, "The Anglian Abbey of Streonaeschalch-Whitby," 87. <https://www.academia.edu/44302934/>

⁸² Fell, "Hild," 85.

⁸³ *HE* IV.23.

⁸⁴ Lees, *Double Agents*, 37; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 260.

made the saints powerful after death. Holy living and holy dying went together. It is good to be aware that what might be thought horrible in the modern age was thought meritorious in the medieval.⁸⁵

This point helps explain another aspect of Bede's hagiographical writing: his admiration of virgins. Although he does not explicitly downgrade non-virgins such as Hild, he does make a special point of praising the virgins Æthelthryth and (to a lesser extent) Æthelburh and Earcongota.⁸⁶ However much he may have admired Hild, and been fascinated with Æthelburh's visions, Bede was downright enthusiastic about Æthelthryth. She was the closest English saint he could find on the lines of the virgin martyrs, and not even close at that. Since she was hardly a "persecuted virgin" such as those so vividly pictured in the martyrologies and celebrated in Bede's poem for Æthelthryth, with their evil pagan fathers or suitors and subjection to torture, Bede and others rebranded the English virgin saints to fit the present circumstances. Not only their holy dying, but also their holy living could be accented.

Æthelthryth, not Hild, was the only native female saint in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. Why, asks Christine Fell, did both he and Bede wax lyrical about Æthelthryth and her virginity when it seems to us incredible and we would rather hear about down-to-earth Hild?⁸⁷ It was because they so admired asceticism. Æthelthryth, once released from her marriage to Ecgfrith, moved after one year from the relative luxury of Coldingham to Ely where, for the remainder of her days, she

⁸⁵ Even more surprising than Æthelthryth's acceptance of her tumour is when Bede tells us that Bishop Eadberht was buried in Cuthbert's tomb: "His wish, to die not suddenly but through long and wearing illness, had been granted." *Life of Cuthbert* 43.

⁸⁶ Bede, *HE*, III.8 and IV.19,20.

⁸⁷ Christine Fell, "Saint Æthelthryth: a Historical-Hagiographical Dichotomy Revisited," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 38 (1994): 18-34.

wore only wool instead of linen, ate once a day, and declined to bathe except on the eve of the high feasts. Bede admired the way she mortified the flesh, like his hero Cuthbert, a feature conspicuously absent from his account of Hild.⁸⁸ Unlike Whitby, at Ely we hear of no cultural activity, no intellectual efforts, no eminent visitors (except Wilfrid). Fell wonders exactly how much Æthelthryth renounced her aristocratic privileges. She did have her own servants helping her bathe the other nuns, and a personal physician. There may be truth in Watt's belief that Bede constructed her hagiography as an idealized example of female piety that did not reflect her real life.⁸⁹ Apparently the monastic imagination was, Fell suggests, more stirred by asceticism than status, and we will see in the next chapter on Edith that this remained the case long after the eighth century. Perhaps Hild's experience was a more normal occurrence in Bede's mind, not worthy of hymning like he did for Æthelthryth. Her life offered to the hagiographer no sensational preservation of virginity, extreme self-denial or flashy martyrdom, only hard work and service to her community.

Another aspect of early Anglo-Saxon Christianity that some historians think Bede over-wrote is the confessor role that leaders had, based at that time on friendship and sympathy rather than sacrament and regulation. Hollis believes that the role of priest-confessor grew out of the close friend and mentor relationships of Christian men and women.⁹⁰ She sees the early saints like Cuthbert, Guthlac, Aidan and Chad bearing sympathetically with the confidences, sorrows and struggles of their friends. Then all this changed with the authoritarianism of Wilfrid and

⁸⁸ Fell, "Saint Æthelthryth," 22, 25.

⁸⁹ Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, chapter 1; "Literature in Pieces," 370.

⁹⁰ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, chapter 4.

Theodore. Hollis has a very interesting quotation from a letter of Abbess Eangyth to Boniface, where she moans that one of her responsibilities was:

...universarum commissarum animarum promiscui sexus et aetatis et multorum mentibus et diversis moribus deserviturae et postea ante sublime tribunal Christi rationem redditurae non solum pro manifestis peccatis gestorum sive dictorum, sed simul pro occultis cogitationibus, quae hominis latent, Deo tantum teste.
[care for the souls of those of either sex and of every age which have been entrusted to us. For this care involves ministering to many minds and various dispositions, and afterwards giving account before the supreme tribunal of Christ both for obvious sins in deeds and words, and for secret thoughts which men ignore and God alone witnesses.]⁹¹

It sounds very much like the work of a confessor, however not yet sacramental, for the rite of absolution was not solidified until the twelfth century. Early evidence from the Continent, and strictures in Theodore's *Penitential*, indicate that women were recommending penance as though they were priests. Hollis extrapolates this information to question whether Hild may have been doing the same, but Bede censors it by only remarking that people came to her for advice. As with other matters, it may be so, but our evidence consists mostly in speculating on something absent.

All agree that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is an exercise of historiography in service of a particular vision of the conversion of England. Bede was not intending to talk about economics and schools, but about miracles, so it is hardly fair to blame him for not doing a good job on the topic we wanted him to talk about instead. He dwelt on spiritual topics, and this in a particular fashion regarding Whitby. If there were not many Hild miracles for Bede to report, it may have been because that was not the preoccupation of Whitby's people. Perhaps it was a case of what was quoted from Hollis in the previous chapter: "that women religious ... were less adept at

⁹¹ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 134. Hollis does not give the reference, but I quote here from Michael Tangl, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, 2nd edition (Berlin, 1955), 22-23.

contriving a miraculous cast to their actions than were their male counterparts.’⁹² But this assumes that Hild’s memory was preserved only by the women and not the men of her double house. More likely it was the culture of their community, as Hollis does explain.⁹³ Gregory the Great who was venerated at Whitby had warned against taking pride in miracles.⁹⁴ His ideal was interior conversion, charity and humility, as seen in his instructions to the Augustinian mission in Kent and as written in Whitby’s *Life of Gregory: cuius nos virtutem [i.e. patientia] signis et miraculis maiorem esse cognoscere, sanctus docuit agnoscendo Gregorius* [Gregory taught us to recognise that this virtue (patience) is better than signs and miracles].⁹⁵ While Bede was beginning to show signs of respecting episcopal hierarchy more than humble service, moving away from the Ionan ideal toward the Roman – we might say less Chad and more Wilfrid – Whitby kept the more egalitarian approach to Christian community. Hild is featured as humble. Bede did not find her roles as advisor, manager, or teacher particularly noteworthy because his ideals were self-denial and observance of a rule, and for these virtues he did praise her.

Conclusion

Was Hild’s life ignored, her *Life* overwritten, her cult downplayed, to minimize her achievements in the eyes of male church authorities? Over the last twenty or so years, several historians are saying that Bede is particularly guilty of failing to give women due credit as writers, teachers, managers, public figures, and individuals with fully developed personalities and accomplishments beyond preserving their all-important virginity. Others have found no

⁹² Hollis *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 281.

⁹³ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 126-127, 248.

⁹⁴ Bede, *HE* I.31.

⁹⁵ *Vita Gregorii* paragraph 7 and see also paragraph 4, in Colgrave, *Earliest Life*, 85 and 79-81.

reason to charge him with this crime. Nicholas Higham, for example, says, “Hild is depicted in highly favourable terms, as beloved of the Lord and as a figure through whom the conversion history of the Northumbrians was bound together across much of the seventh century.”⁹⁶ Sarah Foot declares, “I have little sympathy with readings that have depicted Bede as misogynistic and do not believe that he ever deliberately downplayed the role of women.”⁹⁷ On the other hand, Stephanie Hollis, Clare Lees and Gillian Overing would all agree with Diane Watt when she blames Bede for “over-writing” his female-written sources, treating the women as idealized specimens of feminine piety, and omitting their important educational, political and economic activities in favour of the spiritual.⁹⁸

A more balanced assessment emerges if we keep in mind that Bede may not have been thinking in terms of gender at all. Thacker says Bede’s method in *HE* was always to point to models of ideal behaviour.⁹⁹ According to Sarah Foot, his advocacy of virginity and “best practice” were not gender specific but applied to everyone.¹⁰⁰ His criticism of soft living at Coldingham Abbey for example, was directed to “all of them, men and women alike.”¹⁰¹ So much depends on the particular gloss one puts on the information (or lack thereof) given by Bede. Assumptions based on modern notions are risky, since we do not know enough of what Bede thought about gender roles. There is room for moderns to disagree with Bede on what “best practice” should be, but perhaps unfair to charge him with misogyny. It is possible that he was

⁹⁶ Higham, *Re-Reading Bede*, 162.

⁹⁷ Sarah Foot, “Bede’s Abbesses,” 275.

⁹⁸ Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, chapter 1; Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, “Women and the Origins of English Literature,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700-1500*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

⁹⁹ Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal,” 142.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women*, 22.

¹⁰¹ *HE* IV.25.

sometimes silent because there was nothing to say. He was certainly conscious of the distinguished role of noble abbesses, and as Benedicta Ward says, the importance of realigning their loyalties toward heaven, instead of politics, inheritance or earthly kin.¹⁰² To him, the saintly life had a particular aspect. Æthelthryth may have suited it best, but Hild also qualified in her way, and Bede speaks of her intelligence and industry with admiration. Like Radegund in sixth-century Francia, Hild and Æthelthryth bridged two cultures at a pivotal point in history. It was because of women like them that pagan societies were able to transition to Christian ones.

Bede tells us that Hild's mother Breguswith dreamed that her yet-unborn daughter would be a jewel which emitted such a brilliant light that all Britain was lit by its splendour. If Hollis is disappointed that Bede thought the light would be the fame of her sanctity, rather than her wisdom and labour, that is her modern point of view.¹⁰³ Bede's next sentence is, *Quod nimirum somnium veraciter in filia eius, de qua loquimur, expletum est, cuius vita non sibi solummodo sed multis bene vivere volentibus exempla operum lucis praebeat.* [This dream was surely fulfilled in her daughter, whose life offered a shining example not only to herself but to all who wished to live well.] Hild's virtues are shown by Bede in a manner that made sense to him and can be discerned if one refrains from reading motives into the text.

¹⁰² Ward, "To my Dearest Sister," 110-111.

¹⁰³ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 253.

CHAPTER FOUR

EDITH OF WILTON

Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (d. c1100) lived three and a half centuries after Bede (d. 735). Both were biographers of female royal saints: Bede wrote about Hild fifty years after her death in 680; Goscelin wrote about Edith one hundred years after hers in 984. Whereas Bede was a scholarly monk who never left the Northumbrian region where he was born, Goscelin was a professional hagiographer who came to England from his monastery in Flanders sometime in the 1060s to join the household of his patron Bishop Herman of Ramsbury, and travelled much around southern England.¹ After Herman's death in 1078, Goscelin spent over ten years in peripatetic exile, moving from monastery to monastery seeking patronage with his saints' Lives. He was in great demand as a hagiographer, and although the full scope of his *corpus* is disputed, he certainly wrote Lives for Wilton, Sherborne, Barking, Ely, Ramsey, and St Augustine's, across the whole breadth of southern England. Goscelin composed probably thirty texts about twenty saints, nearly half of them women, which establishes his credentials for us regarding the contemporary depiction of female sanctity. He was esteemed as a researcher of sources and an excellent literary stylist.² Goscelin's hagiographies of Saint Edith and her mother Wulfthryth of Wilton, and her cousin Wulfhild of Barking, are very important here, as the only surviving near-contemporary accounts of female communities in the late Anglo-Saxon era.³

¹ Biographical information about Goscelin can be found in Stephanie Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 217-224; and in Rosalind Love, "Torture me, rend me, burn me, kill me," 274-306.

² D.W. Rollason, *Mildreth Legend*, 62.

³ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 247. The Latin edition consulted for this thesis is *Vita Edithae* in "La Legende de Ste. Édith en prose et vers par le moine Goscelin," *Analecta Bollandiana* 56 (1938): 5-101.

This chapter will trace what historians know and think about Edith with roughly the same outline that was used in Chapter Three for Hild: first her context and cult, then her life and accomplishments, followed by an examination of the sources, and her legacy. Edith's legacy is small in comparison to Hild's, of whom there was plenty to say and interpret. Edith did not live as long and the topics for historians mostly address how Goscelin wrote about her. Like the conclusion of Chapter Three that considered whether Hild's life story was packaged according to Bede's program, the conclusion of this Chapter Four will discuss the motivations of Goscelin and the nuns of Wilton Abbey with regard to packaging the Legend of Edith. The two women were typical examples of their gender and class in their day, but in the particulars, Edith had more in common with Hild's contemporary Æthelthryth than with Hild herself. That comparison shines more light on the driving factors behind the hagiography.

4.1 Context: Wilton Abbey and Edith's Cult

Whereas Hild was a pioneer who founded a monastery in a remote region among pagans whose culture is opaque to us, Edith was born and raised in an environment that had been thoroughly Christian for centuries. Wilton Abbey seems to have been founded by King Egbert of Wessex in 802, and over the years it was home to many Wessex princesses, including two daughters of Edward the Elder. In the early 960s, Wilton was used by Edward's grandson Edgar as a handy repository for a discarded consort and her baby daughter, who happened to be little Edith and her mother Wulfthryth.⁴ As mentioned in Chapter One, one of the advantages of taking of a vow to lead a religious life was that a woman was less likely to be married against her will. By the tenth

⁴ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 318; Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 140.

century, ecclesiastical and royal legislation theoretically upheld the force of such vows.⁵

Unfortunately for Wulfthryth, however, she was not safe in Wilton nunnery, because the infatuated King Edgar carried her off from there to his residence in Kent, where she gave birth to Edith. After a year or so, the two returned to Wilton, where Wulfthryth became abbess.

Although for many women, a nunnery was a refuge, cases may be found of royal women exploited by means of them. When Edward the Elder's second wife Ælfflaed retired to the Wilton nunnery, it is not clear whether she voluntarily made room for Edward to marry his next wife Eadgifu, or she was forced. A century later, Edward the Confessor sent his wife Queen Edith to Wilton as part of his struggle with her over-mighty Godwin relatives.⁶ It would not have been a harsh punishment, for Wilton was blessed with many comforts, including hot baths such as Edith enjoyed.⁷ Apparently one of the functions of the Abbey was as a boarding-school for young noble-women, for whom an advantageous marriage could be arranged after a few years of education.⁸ A couple of high-profile examples shortly before the Conquest are the aforementioned Edith Godwinson and Margaret of Wessex, future queens of Edward the Confessor and Malcolm of Scotland respectively. It is clear from the sources that Wilton, like other large convents, was a busy place with much contact with the royal court. But for a woman beyond the age for finishing-school, relegation to a nunnery was no longer the honour it had been in Hild's day. It signified withdrawal from, not opportunity for, involvement in the public forums of state and church. Less incentive for capable women to choose this path, plus enforcement of the

⁵ Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 123.

⁶ Marc Morris, *The Norman Conquest* (London: Hutchinson, 2012), 73.

⁷ *Vita* of Edith 23, translated by Kathleen Loncar and Michael Wright, in Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 57. An English version of the *Translatio* is also in this volume.

⁸ Pauline Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England," *Past and Present* 163 (1999), 17; Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 327.

Benedictine obligation to elect abbots and abbesses from within the community, combined to result in few late Anglo-Saxon abbesses being royal.⁹

So little information is preserved about tenth century nunneries that, together with the usual gap between rhetoric and reality, it is hard to tell whether Wilton implemented all the strictures of the Benedictine Reforms. Chapter Two above referred to how Queen Ælfhryth's efforts as patroness of nunneries were perhaps not appreciated by some nuns. Stephanie Hollis suspects that Wilton did not cooperate with the reformers during the abbacy of Wulfhryth.¹⁰ We do not know whether she instituted the Divine Office as detailed in the *Regularis Concordia*. Clausturation was evidently not enforced, if episodes in Edith's legend are accurate. The stone wall that Wulfhryth had built around the abbey precincts at the end of her administration may have been practical (keep burglars and fugitives out – both were a problem) rather than symbolic (keep nuns in). As we will see, there are clues in Goscelin's *Vita* that suggest neither Edith nor her community respected Bishop Æthelwold.

Unlike Hild's cult at Whitby which may have begun (we lack any evidence) but evaporated, Edith's cult at Wilton had a delayed start and picked up momentum. It did not begin to take hold until her translation in the 1040s about sixty years after her death, even though she had earlier (thirteen years after her death) been publicly acknowledged as a saint by her half-brother King Æthelræd, and a magnificent shrine had been erected by Cnut.¹¹ The oral tradition was not written down by Goscelin until Edith had been dead for a century. Once the cult was buttressed

⁹ Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (Bloomsbury, 2003), 85.

¹⁰ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 257-64.

¹¹ *Translatio* 12.

by good Latin liturgical material, it flourished. Edith subsequently became a major saint in England with many church dedications and her name appearing in seven surviving litanies.¹² Readings for her feast on 16 September are in the *Sanctorale* of the Sarum liturgy which was predominant in the whole land by the fifteenth century.¹³ (Hild is not included in the Sarum *Sanctorale*.) In 1425 the Bishop of Salisbury granted an indulgence to any who visited Edith's shrine on her feast-day. The community at Wilton lasted (with difficulties) until the Dissolution, at which time its buildings were pulled down, having already fallen into ruin.¹⁴

There are two slightly different surviving manuscripts of the Legend of Edith: the Rawlinson copy dedicated to the Norman Archbishop Lanfranc, and the Cardiff copy which seems to have been intended to be kept at Wilton. The Prologue to the *Vita* names Abbess Godgyfu (1067-90) as the one who commissioned Goscelin to write it. Her motive may be deduced from the strong imprecations (and punishments) cast on people who stole Wilton lands.¹⁵ The abbey needed a powerful supporter to defend its estates. At least this could explain the Rawlinson manuscript, dedicated to Lanfranc. This version emphasizes Dunstan's role in Edith's life. In Stephanie Hollis' opinion, Goscelin was attempting to ingratiate himself to Lanfranc, a source of lucrative patronage who was about to decide, or had recently decided, whether Dunstan's sanctity would be endorsed by the new Norman regime.¹⁶ It is odd then that the *Translatio* starts out with a

¹² Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991).

¹³ Mary Dockray-Miller, "The St. Edith Cycle in the Salisbury Breviary c.1460," in *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2009): 50. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/lib/west/detail.action?docID=3003698>. See also The Gregorian Institute of Canada, on website *The Sarum Rite*, <https://hmcwordpress.humanities.mcmaster.ca/renwick/companion-2/companion/companion-to-c-sanctorale-2-august-november/>

¹⁴ "Houses of Benedictine Nuns: Abbey of Wilton," in *A History of the County of Wiltshire: Volume 3*, ed. R B Pugh and Elizabeth Crittall (London, 1956), 231-242. *British History Online*. Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/wilts/vol3/pp231-242>.

¹⁵ *Translatio* 14 and 15.

¹⁶ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 234-236.

factual error: Dunstan was supposed to have received a vision calling him to elevate Edith's remains thirteen years after her death, but he was already dead by then. We would also wonder why the Cardiff version for Wilton has Edith devoted to Lanfranc's compatriot St. Denis while the Lanfranc version has her devoted to her English grandmother St. Ælfgifu and her aunt St. Eadgyth.¹⁷ The Cardiff manuscript, which omits the *Translatio*, offers more concrete details from Edith's life than Lanfranc's does, such as the manual of devotions that she copied for her personal use, the alb that she embroidered for herself when she was appointed abbess, and her pets. We can only wonder whether Goscelin left the last two details out of Lanfranc's version because he feared they might be thought unbecoming of a saint. Hollis thinks he would have left out even more (such as Edith's luxurious clothing and her influence at court) if he had been better informed about Norman prejudices.¹⁸ Both Hollis and Watt consider all the homely details were included in the Cardiff version because it was the one meant for the nuns of Wilton, and it encapsulated the best memories of their new patron saint.¹⁹

4.2 Edith's life

Edith spent her whole short life at Wilton. As a toddler, she allegedly stretched out her little hands to choose holy items such as a nun's veil, instead of the worldly treasures laid out before her (*Vita* 5). Edith was taught by two Lothingarian tutors hired by her father the king. One suspects the stricter churchmen would be glad to know that Edith's tutors supposedly remained outside the wall and spoke to her through a curtained window (*Vita* 7). It is questionable whether

¹⁷ *Vita* 8, compare pages 35 and 63 in *Writing the Wilton Women*. Subsequent references to the *Vita* here will be parenthetical in the body rather than multiple footnotes.

¹⁸ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 224.

¹⁹ Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 136-138; Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 240, 247,8.

there truly was such a degree of clausturation at Wilton, given the apparent amount of comings and goings at the convent. Goscelin seems to regard reading and writing as normal accomplishments for female religious, and celebrates especially Edith's feminine and artistic attributes: her sweetness, her "holy cheerfulness," her painting, handwriting, music, and embroidery (*Vita* 8 for reading; for her other accomplishments 6, 10, 11, and 16). She was also devout. The Wilton nuns kept a devotional booklet with prayers written in Edith's own hand (*Vita* 8). She served the sick and the poor (*Vita* 11). She was said to wear a hair shirt beneath her fine clothing (*Vita* 12). The fact that Edith daily wore the deluxe purple clothing of a princess is a reminder that however pious her heart might be, the perks of her noble status were not absent from her life. The King her father granted all her requests for clemency toward captives, and for founding of churches. (*Vita* 11).

Nobles and foreign kings honoured Edith with visits, letters, and gifts, and church leaders begged her intercession (*Vita* 11). Archbishop Dunstan and Bishop Æthelwold were supposedly her mentors (*Vita* 9). Edith was not above a little back-talk: When Æthelwold questioned her gorgeous wardrobe, she replied: "*Credo, O pater reverende, nequaquam deterior mens Deo aspirante sub hoc habitabit tegmine quam sub caprina melote. Habeo Dominum meum, qui non vestem, sed mentem attendit.*" [Believe, reverend father, a mind by no means poorer in aspiring to God will live beneath this covering than beneath a goatskin. I have my Lord, who pays attention to the mind, not the clothing.] (*Vita* 12) Edith donated her own silver to purchase a fragment of a Crucifixion nail as a holy relic for her house. When covetous Æthelwold wanted a sliver, Edith's miraculous power caused the iron filings to be reunited to the nail overnight (*Vita* 14). The only other miracle associated with Edith during life was that her chest of lovely

garments was miraculously preserved from a fire in her bedroom (*Vita* 13). At her father's insistence, Edith was consecrated as abbess over three nunneries, but she refused to leave Wilton and her mother (*Vita* 16). Her royal status is brought to attention again when a faction conspiring against Edgar's unfortunate successor Æthelræd offered Edith a princely marriage and the throne. Edith refused (*Vita* 19).

The most touching anecdote about Edith is that she had a menagerie of wild animals including a tame stag (*Vita* 11). Goscelin says their gentle demeanour toward her was as though she had tamed the lions in the Roman arena. He employs more typical hagiographical conventions concerning Edith's death after a brief illness, at the age of only 23. Dunstan had a premonition of it (*Vita* 22), and one of the sisters heard an angel choir singing at that moment (*Vita* 24). On the thirtieth day after her death, her mother received a vision saying Edith was in heaven (*Vita* 25).

Edith's remains were enshrined in the church, and thence she (and particularly her incorrupt thumb with which she had crossed herself (*Vita* 21) protected herself and her community. It is interesting that initially her legacy does not consist very much in curative miracles which are needed to incite popular devotion. First, she twice prevented a monk of Glastonbury and a sister from her own house from stealing relics of her clothing (*Translatio* 2). She inflicted two vengeance miracles: blindness on the thieving craftsmen building her shrine, and death on a man who had occupied Wilton lands (*Translatio* 13-15). Goscelin then relates five healing miracles, and a prisoner miraculously freed from his fetters (*Translatio* 16-19). The emphasis remains, however, on a vigorous defence of the claims of her abbey.

In what ways does Edith's story parallel that of Hild? Obviously they were both female, noble, and devout. Otherwise the differences outnumber the similarities. Hild lived to the (at that time) old age of 66, probably a widow; Edith died at age 23, a virgin. Hild entered the monastic life late; Edith as an infant. Hild managed a double monastery; Edith was a resident. Hild ran a school; Edith had private tutors. Kings and princes came to Hild for advice; they came to Edith for favours. Hild taught her community to surrender aristocratic privilege *ita ut in exemplum primitivae ecclesiae nullus ibi dives, nullus esset egens, omnibus essent omnia communia, cum nihil cuiusquam esse videretur proprium* (so that according to the example of the early church, no one there was rich, no one was lacking, everything was common to everyone, when nothing seemed to be one's own property). Edith on the other hand kept her royal clothing, her pets, and her money – she had a beautiful oratorium built for herself at her own expense.²⁰

Edith was not very much like Hild. It was her mother Wulfthryth who had more in common with her seventh-century counterpart. Both were (Hild probably, Wulfthryth certainly) sexually experienced. Both were capable women who managed large establishments. Both negotiated with kings concerning their lands. Both were responsible for raising and educating the youth of the nobility in their monastic schools. In fact, it seems from Goscelin's account that until the 1040s, it was Edith's mother Wulfthryth who was venerated at Wilton. As though he struggled to find enough material on Edith, Goscelin interrupted his tale of her miracles to tell several of Wulfthryth's. During her lifetime she restored sight to a blind man; worked a vengeance miracle on one sheriff who had jailed two of her priests and on another who had violated sanctuary when pursuing a robber into the monastery; and she obtained the visiting relics of the Celtic saint Ywi

²⁰ HE IV.21(23) compared to *Vita* 20.

by rendering the reliquary immobile. Posthumously there were a vision and three healing miracles at her tomb (*Translatio* 3-11). She had also, together with Edith, procured a Crucifixion nail relic for the benefit of her community (*Vita* 14).

In some ways Edith was more like Bede's heroine Æthelthryth. There is an interesting parallel between the way Bede raised Æthelthryth to greater heights of admiration than Hild, and the way Goscelin did the same for Edith over Wulfthryth. It seems that for reasons more religious than political, the virgins were thought more worthy of the effort of cult development than the women better known for managing their establishments. Chapter Three explored the relative importance of Hild and Æthelthryth in Bede's mind. Here my argument concerning Edith and Wulfthryth will be developed by first looking at the sources that Goscelin used to write up his *Vita* of Edith, followed by the way he shaped the material.

4.3 Sources

Just as with Hild, our quest for more complete information about Edith is hampered by the lack of an extant *Life* written by people who knew her. At least the chain of transmission of the oral tradition concerning Edith is short and strong. Historians have agreed that it is surprising that Wilton had no written *Life of Edith*, since obviously it was a literate house. Edith used to read about her own female saintly forebears (*Vita* 8). Hollis mentions that some scholars see a reluctance of the late tenth- and early eleventh-century English to record the lives of their saints; or perhaps they were later destroyed if thought to be in inferior Latin or suspect.²¹ Goscelin's

²¹ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 278 footnote.

prologues to both his *Lives* of Edith's relatives Wulfhild and Wulfthryth did indicate that he used written as well as oral sources for those works. Hollis explains that the Barking sources that he described as *patriis libris* [local books] presumably meant vernacular writings.²² However, in his dedication of the *Life of Edith* he implied that she had no existing *vita*. In his *Translatio*, he draws upon an account of a miracle attributed to her which was recorded in the vernacular at the instruction of Abbess Brihtgifu in whose reign it occurred (*Translatio* 16), but all else seems to be oral testimony. Brief writings in Old English seem to have been sometimes available, but not fully developed Latin *vitae*.

Evidence of more written remembrance of Edith than was previously thought to exist is brought forward by Katie Bugyis.²³ There is extant a 15th century chronicle of Wilton Abbey which records miracles and details not found in Goscelin's *Legend of Edith*. The unnamed author seemed to have had a source written by Edith's contemporaries that Goscelin may have mined. The additional detail on posthumous miracles of Edith and her mother Wulfthryth, and many more personal names than Goscelin reported, suggest a woman author within the community taking care to record her sisters' history.²⁴ If Bugyis' argument is true, this would be an example of literature written by females later "over-written" by a male, a typical move according to Hollis and Watt.²⁵ Another interpretation might be that Goscelin rejected certain details available to him because they were unverified. Rollason thinks he was characterized not only by admirable style but also by impeccable research, tracking down and acknowledging sources, and providing

²² Stephanie Hollis, "Barking's Monastic School, Late Seventh to Twelfth Century: History, Saint-Making and Literary Culture," in *Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community*, edited by J. Brown & D. Bussell (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 18-19.

²³ Katie Bugyis, "Recovering the Histories of Women Religious in England in the Central Middle Ages: Wilton Abbey and Goscelin of Saint-Bertin," *Journal of Medieval History*, 42:3 (2016), 285-303.

²⁴ Bugyis, 295-299.

²⁵ Diane Watt, "Literature in Pieces," 364-365.

names where possible.²⁶ In any case, the fact that the Wilton Chronicle (and other writings) even exists shows that nuns and abbesses were literate throughout this period. Yet for some reason, they preferred to outsource the *vitae* of their own resident saints.

Of course, Goscelin's claim to have based his accounts mostly on oral testimony does not prove absence of sufficient literacy at Wilton to write their own books. A comparison could be drawn with Barking Abbey, considerably less wealthy and prestigious than Wilton or the other Wessex nunneries (eg. Shaftesbury, Nunnaminster). As Hollis describes it, the Barking community lacked any evidence of intellectual endeavours, yet maintained "a respectable standard of functional literacy," and did have written records of at least Wulfhild.²⁷ Nevertheless, Abbess Ælfgifu followed the lead of Wilton to commission Lives of three Barking saints from Goscelin. Her purpose in doing so seemed to be to counter the objections of the Norman bishop of London to her intended translation of these saints into her newly built church. Hollis says, "Ælfgifu was one of a number of heads of predominantly English religious communities who sought to defend their indigenous saints and in some cases their own offices against Norman hostility by commissioning written *vitae*." Other historians agree.²⁸

Susan Ridyard, arguing against the idea that the Normans despised the Anglo-Saxon saints, says, "The legend and cult of the saint was essential to the proper functioning of the religious community; and the Norman churchmen had nothing to gain by rendering their communities

²⁶ Rollason, *Mildreth Legend*, 62. In the case of St. Mildreth, Goscelin did extra research to defend her cause at Minster-in-Thamet against the claims of St Gregory's Priory.

²⁷ Hollis, "Barking," 13, 20.

²⁸ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 175; Rollason, *Mildreth Legend*, 65.

incapable of functioning properly.”²⁹ They at least acknowledged and sometimes enthusiastically promoted the cults, for example that of Cuthbert in Durham, and Mildreth in Minster-in-Thanet, both of which cults flourished both before and after the Conquest.³⁰ The Normans did, however, expect proper and respectable documentation.³¹ Some Norman objections to the cults of English saints were theologically valid, but Hollis thinks ethnic and gender bias also played a part. In her view, Norman prejudices could be overcome by a male cleric equipped by his continental education to write Latin in a polished style.³² Goscelin in fact took pains to defend the reliability of female testimony when he wrote about Edith and her relatives. Throughout the *Vita* and *Translatio* he draws on women’s eyewitness accounts, just as in the Prologue he wrote:

... inter reliqua que ipse oculis conspexere, affirmant confidenter cum aliis idoneis testibus ea que ab his venerabilibus matribus audiere, que ipsam sanctam virginem et videre, et devotissime sunt obsequute; quarum et parentele et religiose vite non minorem fidem quam libris noscuntur habere. Neque vero is sex a testimonio veritatis refellendus erit ...³³

[among the rest which they saw with their own eyes, they affirm confidently with the other capable witnesses that which they heard from the venerable senior mothers, who both saw the holy virgin herself and devotedly obeyed her, whose high birth and religious lives are known to be held in not less credibility than books. Nor will their sex be a reason for detracting from the truth of their testimony.]

Similarly, in the preface to his *Life of Wulfhild*, Goscelin again defends female testimony:

Huius quoque generis fidelia testimonia non respuenda docet prima et angelica nuncia

*resurrectionis Domini Maria sanctarumque prophetissarum turba.*³⁴ [The first and angelic

²⁹ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 251-252. The idea that the Normans held the English saints in contempt dates back to David Knowles in 1940. See Ridyard, 6.

³⁰ Symeon of Durham. *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie*, edited and translated by David Rollason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Rollason, “Goscelin of Canterbury’s Account of the Translation and Miracles of St Mildreth: an Edition with Notes.” *Medieval Studies* 48 (1986), 145.

³¹ Rollason, *Mildreth Legend*, 59. Proper documentation meant not only reliable testimony but also orthodox. For example in 1185 Jocelyn of Furness rewrote the hagiography of Glasgow’s St. Kentigern (aka Mungo) to remove the tale of a pseudo-virgin birth. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/Jocelyn-LifeofKentigern.asp>

³² Hollis, “Barking,” 18.

³³ Prologue to *Vita Edithae* in *Analecta Bollandiana* 56 (1938), 37. See also Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 24; and Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 123-135.

³⁴ Prologue to *Vita Wulfhildae*, in *Analecta Bollandiana* 32 (1913), 12. See also Love, “Torture Me,” 301.

messenger of the Lord's resurrection Mary, and the crowd of holy prophetesses, teaches that this kind of faithful testimony ought not to be rejected.] The proper functioning of the cult, then, was not so much a matter of excluding female input, but expunging incoherent suspect traditions.

4.4 The Representation of Edith

As we saw in Chapter Three regarding Bede's tale of Æthelthryth, the Norman hagiographers were not the first to shape their material in order to paint admirable portraits of feminine sanctity, nor was Goscelin the only one who did. He may, however, have been among the more honourable. As Ridyard explains regarding Osbert of Clare's twelfth-century hagiography of Eadburga of Nunnaminster, there was a "wide range of human deeds and motives which may have determined the diffusion of Eadburga's cult ... [and] the meaning which that cult may have held for men and women who can be variously understood as devout, mercenary, competitive, opportunist, fraudulent or simply confused."³⁵ Bede of course could never be accused of mercenary motives, but as time went on there is certainly an element of self-preservation on the part of the guardians of the cults of local saints. To put it crassly, the saints needed to be marketed.

Hollis judges that Goscelin was representative of his time in regarding the virgin Edith as more worthy of liturgical commemoration than her mother Wulfthryth, a formerly married woman. Edith actually had less claim to sainthood, insofar as the number of miracles reported, and there are indications (as mentioned above) that the patron saint of Wilton was actually Wulfthryth until

³⁵ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 139.

the 1040s.³⁶ In fact, Diane Watt believes there was a *Life* of Wulfthryth that Goscelin incorporated into his *Life* of Edith.³⁷

Goscelin had to work hard to arrange what the nuns told him into a portrait of Edith amenable to her role as patron saint. Even in the late 1070s the nuns seemed dissatisfied with Edith as their protectress. Goscelin, who went to effusive lengths in her praise, nevertheless includes in the Legend how the sisters were then complaining about her not taking good care of their health or the well-being of their nunnery. *Translatio* 21 and 22 relate incidents where Edith appeared in visions to rebuke those who grumbled aloud that she was not helpful when the nuns suffered from plague and the monastery lands were being despoiled. Goscelin in an aside admonishes such lack of faith in Edith. Recounting visions is patently an effort to use unverifiable means to shore up a faltering cult.

There is more solid evidence of Goscelin tinkering with his source material to create an idealized woman of Edith than there was of Bede doing so with Hild or even Æthelthryth. In the case of Edith, we clearly see an accentuation of humility, sweetness, and charity. This was necessary for Goscelin to do, since his sources provided him with no heroic efforts either in defence of her virginity or in self-denial.

The hagiographical trope of virginity had to be tuned for Edith, as it had been for others before her. Goscelin was able to use the classic motif of Christian maiden importuned by a lustful suitor

³⁶ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 279.

³⁷ Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 122.

in his *vitae* of Edith's cousin Wulfhild and of Mildreth of Thanet.³⁸ Yet it was not possible for hagiographers to force every female subject into this scheme. Rosalind Love explains that some simply could not be made to conform because they were married women who had borne children (notably the Ely ladies Sæxburh and Eormenhild, and of course Wulfthryth); in other cases (such as virginal abbesses Æthelburh and Hildelith of Barking) there were detailed known sources which excluded that convention; and similarly with several other women saints, where there is no real sense of crisis over the preservation of the saint's maidenhood.³⁹ The threatened-virginity pattern does not apply in the case of Edith either. Hollis sees Goscelin resorting to an alternate hagiographical theme instead: passionate quest for union with the heavenly Bridegroom:

Affatim rapitur ad sanctorum sollemnia, ad angelorum gaudia, ad ipsum
 sponsum glorie Christum illustrantum omnia, hunc tota conspiciens mente et eius
 sancto amoris icta vulnere, de medio studiorum tota ad ipsum contendit
 affectione, assumptisque pennis columbein eius sanctificos amplexus volare
 estuat et requiescere, clamans desideriiis sponse ...⁴⁰
 [Enough that she was enraptured to the feasts of the saints, the joy of the angels,
 Christ the Bridegroom himself illuminating everything in glory, seeing him with
 her whole mind and stricken with the wound of his love, from the midst of her
 studies she strove toward him affectionately, and rising up with the wings of a
 dove she burned with desire to fly to his holy embraces and rest, calling out with
 desire for her Spouse ...]

Goscelin also employs the contemplative model of sanctity, noting that when Edith went among the animals of her menagerie, she did so in the manner of a desert hermit (*Vita* 11). He simply excludes any battles with the devil such as those Antony had. Similarly, the motif of lonely pilgrimage and exile, typical in Anglo-Saxon and Irish writing both sacred and secular, would not work here in the context of a royally patronized nunnery full of ladies: *Erat tunc illa*

³⁸ Love, "Torture Me," 279-282.

³⁹ Love, "Torture me," 290-93; see also Love, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, cix.

⁴⁰ *Vita* 8. Noted in Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 276, 281.

virginalis et sponsalis Christi familia ex diversa seculi dignitatibus, ut solet, collecta: clara principum, procerum, optimatum que regni pignora. [That virginal and bridal family of Christ was gathered at that time, as usual, from various dignitaries of the world, the royal offspring of famous princes, nobles, and people of high rank.] (*Vita* 10) Goscelin flips the obvious aristocratic privilege of Edith over to a theme of heavenly *peregrinatus*, making her journey a spiritual one:

Non patrie urbes, non regicum patrimonium, non parentales thesauri regum antiquorum, non amplissimum ac modo felicissimum Britannici orbis imperium, non spes filiorum regum, non dotes regnorum celos ingredientem eius flectebant animum.⁴¹

[Not the cities of her homeland, nor her royal inheritance, nor the family treasures of ancient kings, nor the greatest and happiest rule in the British realm, nor hope of royal sons, nor a dowry of kingdoms, deflected her mind from her heavenly progress.]

The education of secular women was a primary role of the Wilton monastic school, according to Hollis. She says it was queens and princesses, not nuns and abbesses, who were educated at Wilton and praised for their learning in the eleventh century.⁴² Edith herself, she concludes, was not a professed nun but a secular member of the community. This would explain why she had private tutors not at the disposal of the rest of the nuns. More importantly, it explains why she received (and declined) offers of marriage to a prince chosen by the anti-Æthelræd political faction: apparently she was still in the marriage market. Otherwise that detail could be, as Ridyard sees it, an improbable hagiographical fabrication to show her commitment to renounce earthly queenship.⁴³ But it may be a fact, not a fabrication. If so, Goscelin's inclusion of that fact is compatible with his depiction of Edith as a consecrated virgin. The men begged, cajoled and threatened, but Edith would not be moved. Her hagiographer says, *Martirium est etiam inter*

⁴¹ *Vita* 8. Noted in Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 142-143.

⁴² Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 309.

⁴³ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 41. Ridyard also distrusts the claim that Edith was consecrated abbess of three nunneries.

delicias et divitias abstinentia. [Abstinence among delights and riches is also a martyrdom.]
(*Vita* 19)

Hollis and Ridyard have both concluded, from the incidentals that Goscelin disclosed of Edith's life based on the oral testimony he had, that she was remembered by her contemporaries not so much for exceptional piety as exceptional social status. She had private tutors and glamorous clothing, she was indulged by her father, she had private wealth at her disposal to purchase relics and build an oratorium.⁴⁴ The sanctifying gloss that Goscelin placed on her silver-spoon existence is that she wore a hair shirt under her fine clothing, and that she assiduously cared for the poor. He adapted the few memories the house possessed of Edith as a flesh-and-blood woman to create an idealized version of a humble young saint. He may have done this for the sake of Lanfranc's approval; it appears he did it with Wilton's approval. In any case, the *Legend of Edith* was probably instrumental in the survival of Wilton Abbey for four more centuries.

Conclusion

Since English women's education had suffered since the conversion era, their voices are difficult to discern in later times. They seem to have delivered their stories to be told by men. After the Conquest, when the few remaining convents needed to ensure their futures, abbesses turned to professional hagiographers like Goscelin to write respectable *vitae* for their patron saints. The decision at Wilton to promote Edith as a consecrated virgin had much to do with lingering attitudes of adulation for saintly purity and suffering for Christ. Her hagiography, therefore,

⁴⁴ Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 246-249; Ridyard, 146.

follows a long tradition extending back to late antiquity and onward through the Middle Ages. This chapter has shown how the genre was exploited by enterprising abbesses to women's advantage. The final chapter of this thesis will begin by delving further into hagiography as a genre sophisticated in its depiction of women, and how classic female martyrology could be received by its female audience in a surprisingly empowering way. From this point of view then, it is possible to discern, even in the male authorship of Hild's and Edith's hagiographies, ingredients acknowledging women's intelligence and agency.

CONCLUSION

Peter Brown in his classic work *The Cult of the Saints* explains how for members of the early church, the “very special dead” bridged the gulf between life and death.¹ The first Christians overcame their grief and fear when they witnessed miracles over the graves and relics of the saints. The martyrs were victorious over severe suffering, and this was not a past but an ever-present event for believers. Vivid accounts of their torture and then reintegration of their bodies before or after death brought emotional and physical healing to participants in their cults long after the actual events. In a subsequent article, Brown considers how the preaching of Augustine of Hippo and Caesarius of Arles, that Christians should imitate the martyrs’ holy and temperate lives, went against the grain in late antiquity when the celebration of the saints was robustly physical rather than intellectual.² He gets the sense that worshippers had no thought of being able to imitate the saint’s lives but concentrated on their deaths, particularly the superhuman triumph over torture and death that the martyrs had achieved. They simply wished to throw themselves bodily into celebrating that triumph. Augustine and Caesarius wanted to put an end to the drunkenness and immorality associated with saint veneration by instead emphasizing that the grace granted to the saints was accessible to every Christian as a power to transform lives, not just overcome death in a spectacular way. Brown says he would revise his earlier ‘patron’ model of saint veneration to now include the concept that worshippers needed to keep the saints ‘inimitable’ in order to maintain the needed gulf between the sacred and the secular that gave the saints their power. It was (and perhaps is) a thread that continued for centuries.

¹ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (enlarged edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

² Peter Brown, “Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity,” *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0254.00057>.

Certainly the emphasis on *imitanda* [things to imitate] is present in the hagiographies of Hild and Edith that we have examined, in all the *Lives of Saints* that Ælfric wrote, and in others that were outside the scope of this essay, but the element of *admiranda* [things to be amazed at] is seldom absent from the accounts of confessors and martyrs, male and female alike. Aldhelm at the beginning of our period dwelt on all the virgins who suffered torture; his contemporary Felix and then Goscelin four centuries later both dramatized battles with the devil that Guthlac and Mildreth won, just as St. Antony had in one of the very first hagiographies written.³ The violent deaths of many English kings subsequently construed as martyrdoms, such as Oswald (d.642), Oswine (d.651), Edmund (d.869), Edward (d.978), even Charles I (d.1649), also reminds us that sensationalism was the largest factor in their popular cult. Obviously, when people thronged to the shrines, Edith's shrine included, what they had in mind was to tap into the supernatural power of the saints to effect miracles, not so much to contemplate their good example.

But it is more complicated than that. In the early days when hagiographies were first produced, the stories had radically questioned gender distinctions and offered the possibility of transgressing the norms. The *Vita* of the transvestite St. Eugenia (d.258) is an example.⁴ That potential was still embedded in the hagiographies, as they were updated and republished in Anglo-Saxon England. The *passiones* were uniform in their outlines: the virgin martyrs' struggle is first with father, then with suitor, then with the state. Thomas Heffernan tells us:

In all three of these contests, the saints' lives exemplify the maid's intelligence ... her irresistible beauty ... and her insistence on principle.... Thus the archetype of

³ Aldhelm, *De Virginitate* XX to LVII.; Bertram Colgrave, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 103; Rollason, *The Mildreth Legend*; Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/vita-antony.asp>

⁴ Ælfric, *Old English Lives of Saints*, volume 1, 43-73.

renunciation presents the modern reader with a complex icon of female heroism which embodies in its complex nucleus ideals of female integrity, autonomy, and intellectual skills which are not easily recognized in our traditional view of the models presented to medieval audiences.⁵

Pauline Stafford suggests that tenth- and eleventh-century abbesses may have responded to these messages of strength and equality rather than those of weakness and difference pushed by church reformers.⁶ They successfully employed what means they could to protect their abbeys and the cults of their patron saints such as Edith.

Twelfth- and thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman hagiographies of female saints were full of lurid stories of virgin torture and martyrdom, more so than the earlier *Old English Martyrology* (which depicted women in various lifestyles) or the later collections (showing many married women devoted to charity).⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne wonders why the strenuous efforts of even a contemporary woman (Christina of Markyate, d.1155) to maintain virginity was a plot acceptable to the audience, which was demonstrably female. Did the women really think this scheme was relevant to them? She concludes that what the women found were lessons in feminine volition.

The fourteenth-century *South English Legendary* continued the theme. Of about one hundred readings, twenty-three were about women, and thirteen of those are virgin martyrs.⁸ Thomas Heffernan asks what people actually made of what looks to us like hackneyed, voyeuristic,

⁵ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/2027/heb.01200>, 269.

⁶ Pauline Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England," *Past and Present* 163 (1999): 13.

⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Saints' Lives and the Female Reader," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 27 no. 4 (1991): 314–332, at 314. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1093/fmls/XXVII.4.314>

⁸ *The Early South-English Legendary, or Lives of Saints*, edited by Carl Horstmann (London: Early English Text Society, 1887). Anne Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 141.

misogynous and deeply offensive reports of sexual abuse: “I would like to suggest that to the extent that we can say anything about voice, the best characterization is one of androgyny.”⁹ He says the virgin martyr:

rejects her parents, her brothers and sisters, her friends, her lover, the society, and its laws in single-minded pursuit of her goal, to embrace Christian fraternalism, to love Christ. Her deepest antagonism, however, is reserved for men, whether they be members of her family or strangers. In text after text, the saintly maiden is shown deceiving, rebuking, outwitting, displaying more courage, and finally triumphing over men. Despite this virtual abhorrence of males, these lives were held up to the faithful as models for living the virtuous life.¹⁰

Imitanda and *admiranda* continued to twine together in hagiography and cult. Fascination with the hideous deaths of the female virgin martyrs continued into the fifteenth century. Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars* tells us that the most popular saints in England on the eve of the Reformation were Katherine, Margaret, and Barbara, each supposed to have experienced bizarre tortures in late antiquity.¹¹ Duffy attributes the popularity of such figures to a combination of pious amazement plus entertainment value; they were “not so much a model to imitate, something most of them never dreamt of doing, but rather a source of power to be tapped.” As conduits of divine power, those saints who had achieved the ultimate holiness by overcoming torture were the superior ones. In this they were not meant to be imitated.

The story of Radegund in sixth-century Francia, with her excesses of self-inflicted bodily mortification, was not one to inspire imitation either.¹² She was mentioned earlier as analogous to Hild, both abbesses in pagan environments. The first hagiography of Radegund was written in

⁹ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 264.

¹⁰ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 292-293.

¹¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (NewHaven: Yale University Press, 1992), 171-178; quotation from page 175.

¹² Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 60-105. Radegund burnt herself with hot iron etc.

587 by her friend and later bishop Venantius Fortunatus. Some twenty years later, Radegund's fellow nun Baudonivia wrote a supplement to fill the gaps left by Fortunatus. Jane Schulenberg explains how the two accounts compare.¹³ The first, by a man, concentrates on Radegund's extreme asceticism and miracles. Baudonivia adds her friend's public role as peace-maker, proselytizer, and acquirer of relics. The latter, not the former, reminds us of both Hild and Edith. The constructed memory of Radegund is an interesting case study of hagiographical re-writing that reminds us of Goscelin writing about Edith, only in reverse: Radegund's *Life* is the testimony of a man, amended by a woman; Edith's is the testimony of women, amended by a man.

These medieval examples are not the first of women pushing back against their representations written by men. In late antiquity, the anti-female ideology of the Church Fathers did not entirely win the day. Consider the attitudes of the most misogynist of them, summarized by Elizabeth Clark.¹⁴ Jerome thought the stereotypic traits of women were their weakness and fickleness. Chrysostom calls women wicked, false, insulting, garrulous, irrational, and given to drink – “all the vices dear to the sex.” However we can see from the historical record that women were not silenced. They were, Clark argues, “able to find small openings for their own projects and expressions of value ... to gain positions of monastic leadership, and access to education and to travel.”¹⁵ Even Jerome and Chrysostom encouraged the actual women they knew – Paula for example, who headed a convent in Bethlehem – to pursue lives of study and extra-domestic activity. The demeaning patristic picture of womanhood was to some

¹³ Jane Schulenberg, *Forgetful of Their Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 42-46.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Clark, “Ideology, History, and the Construction of ‘Woman’ in Late Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 166-167.

¹⁵ Clark, “Ideology,” 184.

degree subverted from within, by the real experiences of women themselves. They had agency then, and continued to do so into the Middle Ages.

Women's agency

Stacy Klein sees much evidence in the literature that Anglo-Saxon women were not lacking in agency.¹⁶ Her study of cultural memes regarding queenship convinced her that we should not regard texts featuring women (in her book, real and legendary queens) as shaped primarily by gender norms. Anglo-Saxon writers situated the women they wrote about within current debates over non-gender-specific issues; they gave women identities that encompassed more than gender. Other kinds of differences, such as those between Christian and pagan, lay and religious, warrior and peace-maker, were important to everyone. If we could read the texts the way contemporaries read them, we would see that they pictured women as capable of affecting the great issues of society. It is the same with the hagiographies: contemporaries may have read them in ways we would not expect, finding in them not misogyny, but empowerment.

Still, the gender tug-of-war was continually pulling both ways. It was at the end of the eleventh century that the “no women allowed” rule turned up at the shrines of saints Cuthbert and Laurence. Simeon of Durham, in his history of Durham Cathedral written about 1097, is the first to tell stories of Cuthbert's supposed antipathy to the presence of women near his relics.¹⁷ They were forbidden entry to the church and yard, and those who attempted to transgress were stricken

¹⁶ Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 195.

¹⁷ Simeon of Durham, *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie*. Edited and translated by David Rollason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 105-109, 177.

with paralysis or madness. The point was perhaps to emphasize the unsuitability of married clerks serving at the Cathedral, and force the adoption of the Benedictine Rule that the Normans favoured.¹⁸ Oddly however, at the same time, somewhat to the north in Scotland, the same prohibition was supposedly enforced by St. Laurence (the second archbishop of Canterbury, d.619) at his shrine. Queen Margaret, the last Anglo-Saxon princess, niece of Edward the Confessor, spent some years at Wilton convent before her marriage to King Malcolm of Scotland. She was very much like Edith: dressing in royal finery with a hair shirt underneath, and devoting herself to the sick and the poor.¹⁹ The incident of St. Margaret's visit to Laurencekirk is omitted by her hagiographer, Turgot of Durham, but told in the *Vita Sancti Laurentii* written by Goscelin. When Margaret attempted to ignore the prohibition on women entering the church, she was stricken with pains in her whole body and had to be taken out.²⁰ The two cases demonstrate the extent of the fear that monks could be contaminated by contact with women, which had been growing for a long time. It might seem like a revival of the late antique proscription of women entering sacred spaces, because of male abhorrence of menstrual blood, pregnancy and child-birth.²¹ At the very beginning of the English conversion, Pope Gregory dismissed Augustine's concerns regarding this matter in the portion of Bede's *HE* called the *Libellus Responsorium*. Replying to Augustine's fussy questions regarding when women should be allowed to come to church, Gregory simply tells him to get over it.²² It was a good start to the conversion enterprise,

¹⁸ Rollason commenting on Symeon of Durham, *Libellus*, lxxxiii.

¹⁹ Catherine Keene, *Saint Margaret, Queen of the Scots: A Life in Perspective* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

²⁰ Alan Macquarrie, "An Eleventh-Century Account of the Foundation Legend of Laurencekirk, and of Queen Margaret's Pilgrimage There," *The Innes Review* 47 no.2 (1996): 109. See also Thomas Owen Clancy, "The Foundation Legend of Laurencekirk Revisited," *The Innes Review* 50 no.1 (2010): 83-88.

²¹ See Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, 215.

²² Bede, *HE* I.27, "Augustine's Eighth Question."

so that Anglo-Saxon women continued in the esteem to which they had become accustomed for a long while, until the tenth century or so.

Then the great age of the double monasteries, when men and women had lived and worked together, was over and gone. Women's usefulness had been closely tied to the needs of the conversion period in a frontier zone. Royal women like Hild, baptized into the new religion, stepped up to positions of power parallel to those of their queenly relatives. For a while, abbesses were privileged to operate with minimal episcopal direction. Some of them, like Hild, may have acted like pastors, or at least supervised pastoral activity. By the ninth century however, increasing centralization of authority in the hands of bishops made churchmen less disposed to accept these abbesses' self-government, mobility, and involvement in regional politics. Some historians such as Stephanie Hollis have argued a deliberate campaign of suppression of the accomplishments of the royal abbesses. To the extent that abbesses allowed this to happen, they were "complicit in their own erasure," as per Lees and Overing. Or perhaps, because of social changes, *vitae* of the abbesses composed within their communities may have simply and without malice slipped into oblivion with their houses. The royally-patronized nunneries of the later period managed better to keep their tradition. With the arrival of the new Norman regime, oral or vernacular textual sources were updated into Latin for the needs of new circumstances, but in the process obscured the experiences of real flesh-and-blood women such as Edith, and untold numbers of others who lived in the liminal space between convent and world. The sources tell us, if we know how to look, that these women were extraordinarily resourceful. The ones in the earlier era lived and worked in the public sphere; the ones in the later era were equally capable but flew under the historiographical radar. As Sarah Foot has shown, many figured out ways to

satisfy their religious aspirations in ways of their own choosing, that left them free to enjoy the income from their inheritances, as well as a good deal of personal independence. Further, Katie Bugyis has argued that even the ones in Benedictine convents were able to continue energetically fulfilling their responsibilities of prayer and service due to the success of their efforts to memorialize the deeds of their earlier saintly abbesses in calendars, litanies, *vitae*, and miracle collections.²³

How is this relevant to the portrayals of Hild and Edith? Bede had as his subject a woman with many opportunities and talents. He told how her accomplishments contributed to the conversion of England. Yet Hild's cult faltered and her virtues failed to capture the interest of succeeding generations. Goscelin's subject Edith was submitted to him by women like Baudonivia, needing to remember a woman that they knew, but unlike Baudonivia in that they chose not to write the *vita* themselves. Edith's legend was fashioned and her cult was employed to ensure the survival of Wilton Abbey up to the Reformation. Unlike Wilton, with its already long history before Edith, Hild's foundation flowered early but soon disappeared, not to be refounded as a Benedictine abbey until shortly after the Conquest, in politically contentious circumstances.²⁴ It would appear the revival of Hild's cult was not expedient for the later Anglo-Saxons.

When Bede and Goscelin praised the female saints of Anglo-Saxon England, they did not demean them but found new ways to make their hagiographies more edifying and imitable than previous ones, and perhaps even than later ones. The case studies of Hild and Edith have shown

²³ Bugyis, *Care of Nuns*, 295.

²⁴ William Page, "Houses of Benedictine Monks: Abbey of Whitby," in *A History of the County of York volume 3* (London, 1974), on website "British History Online." <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/yorks/vol3/pp101-105>

what a wealth of information is hidden in hagiographies. So much is revealed when we ask what is included and why, what is omitted and why, by whom was the text written, with what sources, for what reason. Further research into the lives of other abbesses not mentioned in this essay is likely to be equally rewarding. Already, scholars who are reading the texts closely have shed a whole new light on the real personal lives of Anglo-Saxon women in general and saints in particular, highlighting their intellectual experiences as readers, writers, teachers, and patrons of literature. It is also worthwhile to consider the indications that their male associates were well aware of religious women's value and influence in early English society.

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