



Conversion and Unification

2

By the time of the British victory at Mount Badon (c. 500) Roman political authority had collapsed in the West. But although the Western Roman Empire was a thing of the past, Roman political institutions survived, in altered but recognizable form, in the organization of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the Church has been regarded as a kind of transfigured Empire, its administration paralleling the old Roman civil administration with dioceses, provinces, parishes, and even a central authority in Rome. Where Roman emperors had once exerted political sway over the inhabitants of Western Europe, Roman popes now claimed responsibility for their immortal souls. And just as the emperor Constantine had established an imperial capital at Constantinople that rivaled Rome itself, so now an intense rivalry developed between the Roman pontiff and the patriarch of Constantinople.

Accordingly, the Church has been termed the ghost of the Roman Empire. To be sure, the ghost metaphor belies the very tangible ecclesiastical organization of the early Middle Ages and the significant impact of the Church on the lives of European Christians; yet there is some value in regarding the church, in the political sense at least, as an institutional legacy of the defunct empire.

The Celtic Church

In England, however, Christianity did not survive the Germanic invasions but receded with the Britons themselves into the mountains of Cornwall, Wales, and Cumberland (in northwest England).¹ In these rough

¹ For a good account of the early English Church see C. J. Godfrey, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1962). Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*, I (London, 1955), provides a splendid and comprehensive selection of original documents in English translation from the period c. 500-c.1042.

lands the Britons found sanctuary against the military thrusts of the Anglo-Saxons, and here the British Church endured. Although several generations passed before Celtic Christianity made any headway against the heathen Anglo-Saxons, Celtic missionaries were spreading their faith in other directions. In the fifth century, the fabled British missionary St. Patrick (d. 461) had introduced Christianity to the Scots of Ireland, and other missionaries were undertaking the task of Christian conversion in Galloway (south-western Scotland). Thus, although Christianity virtually disappeared from England with the completion of the Anglo-Saxon conquest, it continued to flourish in the lands that Englishmen call "the Celtic Fringe": Cornwall, Wales, Cumberland, Galloway, and above all, Ireland.

In the days of St. Patrick, the Celtic Church had been in contact with continental Christianity, but with the passage of time it became increasingly isolated. Despite its isolation—or perhaps because of it—the Celtic Church flourished remarkably, particularly in Ireland. During the sixth and seventh centuries it far exceeded the Church on the continent in the rigor of its scholarship, the depth of its sanctity, and the dynamism of its evangelical work. Irish monastic schools were perhaps the best in Western Europe at the time, and a rich Irish artistic tradition culminated in the illuminated manuscripts of the eighth century which were the wonder of their own age and still excite admiration in ours.

Because of its lack of contact with the papacy and continental Christianity, the Celtic Church developed certain practices and customs that were unique and, from the continental standpoint, suspicious. The tonsure of Celtic monks differed from that of continental monks; the Celtic method of calculating the date of Easter was at variance with the continental method. Matters such as these might well seem trivial today, but to a continental churchman of the early Middle Ages the Celtic celebration of Easter on the "wrong" day and the peculiar Celtic tonsure (the front half of the head was entirely shaved) seemed bizarre and even perverse.

More important, the Celtic Church differed from the continental Church in organization. On the continent the key unit in ecclesiastical administration was the dioceses, ruled by a bishop; in the Celtic Fringe it was the monastery, ruled by an abbot. The Celtic Church did have bishops, but their functions were spiritual and sacramental only. They had no administrative power at all, and they usually lived in monasteries under the authority of the abbot.

Celtic monastic life was peculiar, too, by continental standards. Celtic monks led simpler, harsher, but less regulated lives than their continental counterparts. The unique combination of profound dedication and relatively loose discipline does much to explain the wide-ranging and highly successful evangelical activities of the Irish monks. In the sixth and seventh centuries, they traveled far and wide across Western Europe, spreading the Christian faith into the remaining pockets of paganism and bringing the intense piety of Celtic Christianity to regions only nominally Christian. For our purposes, the most significant of these Irish evangelists was St. Columba (d. 597), who

worked with great success toward the conversion of the Picts. In about 590, Columba founded a monastery on the island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland; the monastery became a fountainhead of missionary activity among the Picts of Scotland and the English of Northumbria.

With the founding of Iona, the Celtic Church took up at last the immense task of converting the Anglo-Saxons. But, as it turned out, the Celtic spiritual penetration of Anglo-Saxon England from the north began almost concurrently with an entirely distinct Christian missionary endeavor from the south. In 597, the very year of St. Columba's death, a group of Christian evangelists sent by the Roman pope, St. Gregory the Great, and led by the Benedictine monk, St. Augustine, made contact with King Ethelbert of Kent. So it was that the seventh century saw Anglo-Saxon heathendom under spiritual assault from two independent and historically distinct Christian traditions.

The Roman Church and Benedictine Monasticism

As England was developing from the chaos of the early Anglo-Saxon conquests to the somewhat stabler Heptarchy, much larger Germanic kingdoms were forming on the continent. A powerful Germanic tribe known as the Franks had established a kingdom in Gaul and the Rhinelands; it was Catholic in religion but only superficially so, barbaric, poorly governed, and yet rather more sophisticated than the contemporary kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England. The Germanic Visigoths had founded a loosely organized kingdom in Spain, destined to be overwhelmed in the early eighth century by the advancing Muslims. Italy, after a series of upheavals, was ruled in part by the Byzantine Empire, in part by a savage Germanic tribe known as the "Long Beards" or Lombards. In Rome itself the papacy maintained a precarious independence. Throughout these lands of Western Europe, scholarship was all but extinct, culture had sunk to a primitive level, the cities were moribund, and political and economic organization was rudimentary (except in Byzantine Italy). Germanic culture and institutions were everywhere in the ascendancy; and among the rough aristocracy of this epoch, fighting skill and loyalty to clan and lord were the appropriate virtues.

The taming of this crude, violent society by the intellectual and cultural values of antiquity and the teachings of Christianity was yet to be accomplished. The sixth-century Church, throughout much of the barbarian West, was little better than the lay society that surrounded it. Ineffective, ignorant, and frequently corrupt, it stood in desperate need of revitalization and reform. All things considered, isolation was by no means a disadvantage to the Celtic Church. Yet the continental Church of the sixth century had within it the strength to recover and to assume its great mission in the world. Its reform centered above all on two institutions: Benedictine monasticism and the papacy.

Christian monasticism arose in Egypt in the third century, but it did

not become a significant factor in the life of the Church until the fourth. After the conversion of Constantine and his rise to power in 312, Christianity became a favored religion. Profession of the Christian faith was no longer the perilous and heroic act it had been in the days of the martyrs. As converts poured into the now-respectable fold, men of unusual piety began to seek a more rigorous Christian way of life—one that would enable them to withdraw from the sinful world and devote all their energies to communion with God. Many of them found what they were seeking in monasticism.

Traditionally, Christian monasticism was of two types: eremitic (hermit monasticism) and cenobitic (communal monasticism). During the fifth and sixth centuries increasing numbers of fervent believers became cenobitic or eremitic monks. The lives of the hermit monks were bewildering in their variety. Some established themselves atop tall pillars and remained there for many years; others retreated to the desert, living in a state of uncompromising austerity. And the monastic communities of the age tended to be equally diverse. Both hermit monks and cenobitic monks often carried the mortification of the flesh to extreme lengths, indulging in severe fasts, going without sleep for prolonged periods, wearing hairshirts, and whipping themselves.

The great contribution of St. Benedict (c. 480–c. 544) was the bringing of order to monastic life. A Roman of aristocratic background, his emphasis on the practical Roman virtues of discipline and organization transformed the monasticism of his day and infused it with new vigor. St. Benedict founded many monasteries in his lifetime, the most important of which was Monte Cassino, built on a mountaintop between Rome and Naples. But more important than his monasteries was the rule he created for their governance.

St. Benedict's rule was characterized by Pope Gregory the Great as "conspicuous for its discretion." The life of the Benedictine monk was austere, but not excessively so. He ate, slept, and dressed simply but adequately. His day was divided into a regular sequence of activities: there was a time for eating, a time for sleeping, a time for prayer, and a time for work. The Benedictine order had no central organization. Each monastery was autonomous (subject to the jurisdiction of the local bishop), and each was under the full and unquestioned authority of its abbot. On important matters the abbot was to consult the whole community of monks, but ultimately his word was final. Still, St. Benedict cautioned his abbots to respect the views of their monks, not to "sadden" or "overdrive" them or give them cause for "just murmuring." Here, as elsewhere, is the element of discretion to which Pope Gregory alludes and which was doubtless the chief reason for the rule's phenomenal success. St. Benedict tempered his sanctity with a keen knowledge of human nature. His monks had to submit to the discipline of their abbot and the authority of the rule; they had to practice poverty and chastity; they had to work as well as pray. Still, for all of that,

the life St. Benedict prescribed was not for spiritual supermen alone, but one any dedicated Christian might hope to follow.

St. Benedict's rule transformed Western monasticism, revitalized the Church, and inspired many of the most prominent participants in the conversion of England. Benedictine monasteries became islands of peace, security, and learning in a sea of barbarism. They operated the best, often the only, schools of their day. Their extensive estates—the gifts of generations of pious donors—served as models of the most efficient agricultural techniques known in their time. They were the supreme civilizers of the early Middle Ages.

The other great invigorating institution in the early medieval Church was the papacy. For centuries the popes, as bishops of Rome and heirs of St. Peter, had claimed spiritual dominion over the Church, but they had seldom been able to exercise it until the pontificate of St. Gregory the Great (590–604). A man of humility and deep piety, St. Gregory was the first Benedictine pope. He was also the most powerful pontiff of the early Middle Ages. His pontificate represents, in effect, an alliance between the papacy and the Benedictine order.

Both parties profited from the alliance: Benedictine monasticism received a powerful impetus from papal support, and wherever the Benedictines went papal authority followed. When the Benedictines converted a heathen land, they converted it not merely to Christianity, but to Christianity as practiced and interpreted by the Roman Church. Hence, Benedictine evangelism was a potent factor in the spread of papal power and in the spiritual unification of Christendom.

The Benedictines in England

Pope Gregory the Great was a man of many talents. Like St. Benedict, he possessed in full the practical genius of his aristocratic Roman forebears and was a brilliant administrator as well as a sensitive pastor. He was a notable scholar too, by the standards of his day, and is traditionally grouped with the great fourth-century intellectuals—St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine of Hippo—as one of the four "Doctors" of the Latin Church. Much of his theological writing failed to rise far above the level of his day, but his *Pastoral Care*—a handbook on the duties of bishops and priests—is a work of extraordinary practical wisdom; it became one of the most admired and widely read books of the Middle Ages.

Paradoxically, Gregory never set foot in England and yet is one of the central figures in early English history. Bede relates that, prior to his elevation to the papacy, Gregory encountered a group of fair-haired young boys from England who were being offered for sale as slaves. Asking the name of their race, he was told that they were Angles. "That is appropriate," he replied, "for they have angelic faces, and it is right that they should become fellow heirs with the angels in heaven." The story is hard to believe;

it seems unlikely that Gregory would risk his saintly reputation by indulging in such a deplorable pun. Bede himself is suspicious of the tale, but he includes it to illustrate "Gregory's deep desire for the salvation of our nation."

It was this deep desire that inclined Pope Gregory to send a band of missionaries to begin the conversion of the English. His devotion to the Benedictines prompted him to entrust the hazardous task to a group of monks of this order led by St. Augustine (not to be confused with the philosopher St. Augustine of Hippo). The ultimate effect of Augustine's mission was not only to win England to the Christian faith but also to enlarge enormously the scope of the Benedictine order and the authority of the papacy.

In 597 St. Augustine's mission arrived in Kent. This small kingdom was an ideal place to begin the work of conversion. It was the closest Anglo-Saxon kingdom to the continent; its king, Ethelbert, was momentarily the pre-eminent monarch of England and held the title of *bretwalda*. His queen, Bertha, was a Christian and a member of the Frankish royal family. At Queen Bertha's request, a Frankish bishop was residing in the Kentish royal household. Ethelbert received Augustine's mission courteously, permitted the monks to establish themselves in the royal town of Canterbury ("Kent City"), and in time became a convert to the new faith. Following Ethelbert, a great many Kentishmen were baptized, and significant progress made in converting the client kingdoms of Essex and East Anglia. Returning briefly to the continent, Augustine was consecrated by papal order as "archbishop of the English nation," thereby becoming the first in a line of archbishops of Canterbury that extends to this day.

In accordance with the sagacious instructions he received in letters from Pope Gregory, Augustine permitted his English converts to retain those aspects of their former heathen customs and rites that were not inconsistent with Christianity. Old heathen temples were neither abandoned nor destroyed, but were converted to Christian use. In general, Gregory and Augustine displayed a respect for the integrity of Anglo-Saxon folkways that would delight an anthropologist.

Almost from the beginning, St. Augustine was aware of the activities and potential rivalry of the Celtic Church. He attempted to secure its submission to his own archiepiscopal authority, but a series of unsuccessful summit conferences with leading Celtic ecclesiastics made it clear that the Celts would cling fast to their unique system of calculating Easter, their age-long independence, and their haircuts. The tension between Celtic and Roman-Benedictine Christianity was to continue for many decades.

It is no coincidence that Ethelbert of Kent, the first Anglo-Saxon monarch to become a Christian, was also the first to issue a series of written laws, or "dooms." The *Dooms* of Ethelbert are the first in a long series of Anglo-Saxon vernacular law codes running down into the eleventh century. They represent the first literary fruits of the encounter between Christianity

and Anglo-Saxon culture. For although Ethelbert's *Dooms* are concerned largely with Germanic custom, they were undoubtedly committed to writing at the instigation of the Church, which was then the almost exclusive custodian of the written word. Indeed, the first *doom* in Ethelbert's list provides explicitly for the protection of ecclesiastical property. Other *dooms* deal with customary fines and *wergeld* rates: If a man cuts off another's ear he must pay twelve shillings; he must pay fifty shillings for an eye, six shillings for a front tooth, ten shillings for a big toe. In publishing these *dooms*, Ethelbert was not claiming the right to legislate but was merely specifying and clarifying the ancient customs of his people. In Germanic law the authority of the king was strictly limited by the customs of the folk.

The Conversion of Northumbria

Upon the death of Ethelbert in 616, Kent, Essex, and East Anglia underwent a heathen reaction. The *bretwaldaship* passed momentarily to East Anglia, but the center of evangelical activity shifted to the remote kingdom of Northumbria.

As we have seen, Northumbria came into being shortly after 600 through the unification of two northern kingdoms, Bernicia and Deira. The founder of Northumbria was a Bernician warrior-king named Ethelfrith (d. 616) who won a series of victories over the Celts, the Scots, and the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Deira, thereby establishing himself as the dominant power in the north and bringing the kingdom of Deira under his sway. The Deiran heir, a talented young warrior-statesman named Edwin, went into exile for a time at the East Anglian court; but in 616 Edwin's forces defeated and killed Ethelfrith and Edwin became king of Northumbria (616-632). Now it was the Bernician royal heirs who were driven into exile. They found refuge in Scotland where they fell under the influence of the Celtic monks of Iona.

Meanwhile, Edwin was proving himself a monarch of rare ability. He maintained a firm peace in Northumbria, led a highly successful military expedition against the Welsh, and even took his army on a triumphant campaign southward across the midlands into Wessex. Near his northern frontier he founded Edinburgh, which still bears his name. Edwin was a *bretwalda* of unprecedented authority, dominating his Anglo-Saxon contemporaries as no king before him had done. Even though his power rested on the ephemeral foundation of his own personal leadership and military skill, his reign represented an important step in England's long evolution toward political unity.

In the pages of Bede, Edwin's warlike prowess and successful statesmanship acquire a fundamental historical significance because of his conversion to Christianity. Like Ethelbert of Kent, Edwin had a Christian wife. Indeed, he was wed to a daughter of Ethelbert himself, Ethelberga, who took with her to Northumbria a vigorous chaplain named Paulinus. King

Edwin was subjected to Christian pressure from several quarters: from his devout wife, from Paulinus, and from the pope. In one of his letters to Ethelberga, the pope gave this counsel: "Persist, therefore, illustrious daughter, and to the utmost of your power endeavor to soften the hardness of his [Edwin's] heart by insinuating the divine precepts, etc." To King Edwin, the pope wrote,

Hear the words of your preachers, and the Gospel of God which they declare to you, to the end that believing . . . [in] the indivisible Trinity, having put to flight the sensualities of devils, and driven from you the suggestions of the venomous and deceitful enemy, and being born again by water and the Holy Ghost, you may, through His assistance and bounty, dwell in eternal glory with Him in whom you shall believe.

After a time Edwin succumbed. At a royal council of 627 he and his counselors accepted Christianity in its Roman-Benedictine form. Bede tells of an episode in this council which, whether authentic or not, provides insight into the mood of the age. It is one of the most famous anecdotes of early English history—as familiar to English schoolboys as the story of George Washington and the cherry tree to Americans. According to Bede, one of Edwin's *Witan* (a member of his council), on considering the question of Christian conversion, advised his monarch as follows:

The present life of man, O king, in comparison to that time which is unknown to us, seems to me like the swift flight of a sparrow through the hall wherein you sit at dinner in the winter, with your chieftains and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, while the storms of rain and snow rage without. The sparrow flies in at one door and immediately out at another. While he is within he is safe from the wintry storm, but after a brief interval of fair weather he immediately vanishes from sight into the dark winter from which he came. So this life of man appears for a brief interval, but we are utterly ignorant of what went before or what will follow. So if this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.

As the council concluded, the chief priest of the heathen gods is reported to have embraced the new religion and, with him, King Edwin himself. The Roman Church had won a notable triumph in a remote but powerful land.

The chagrin of the Christian party must have been great when, six years after his conversion, Edwin was killed in battle (632). His adversary, the heathen King Penda of Mercia (c. 632–654), laid waste to Edwin's kingdom, and as a result of the catastrophe Northumbria collapsed briefly into political and religious chaos. But with the fall of Edwin and the Deiran royal house, the two heirs of the Bernician dynasty, long in exile in Scotland, returned to claim their inheritance. These two princes, bearing the engaging names of Oswald and Oswy, brought with them the Celtic Christianity they had learned at Iona. Oswald, the older of the two, won the Northumbrian throne by defeating the Mercians and Welsh in 633. At this crucial encounter, known appropriately as the battle of Heavenfield, Oswald set up

a wooden cross to symbolize his devotion to the new faith. But his victory must have evoked a mixed reaction among the Christians of Edwin's former court whose devotion to the Roman Easter and the Roman tonsure made it difficult for them to accept the alien ways of the Celtic Church.

Under the patronage of King Oswald (633–641) and his successor Oswy (641–669), Celtic Christianity established itself firmly in Northumbria. The Celtic missionary, St. Aidan, founded a monastery on the isle of Lindisfarne off the coast of northern Bernicia, which became a focal point of Celtic Christianity and culture. And in the middle decades of the seventh century Celtic missionaries carried the Gospel south of the Humber into Mercia and other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

But it was Northumbria, above all, that witnessed the collision and cross-fertilization of the Roman and Celtic traditions. The Celtic influence, radiating from Iona and Lindisfarne, was countered by the activities of Roman-Benedictine missionaries such as the fervent and uncompromising St. Wilfrid of Ripon (634–710). And despite the Celtic leanings of King Oswald and King Oswy, Roman Christianity, with its disciplined organization, its impressive ceremonial, and its majestic tradition, gradually advanced against the conservative and loosely administered Celtic Church.

The final victory of Roman Christianity in Northumbria was achieved at a synod held at Whitby in 663 in the presence of King Oswy.² Present were leading churchmen from all over England, representing both the Roman and the Celtic observances. The chief issue in question was the Easter date. Oswy, who had previously celebrated Easter according to the Celtic reckoning, was upset that his wife, who followed the Roman custom, should be keeping the Lenten fast while he was enjoying the Easter feast. The Easter issue symbolized a far more fundamental question: would England remain in isolation from continental Christendom by cleaving to the customs of the Celtic Christians, or would it place itself in the mainstream of European Christianity by accepting the guidance of the papacy and the customs of European Christianity? St. Wilfrid of Ripon saw the issue clearly when he addressed the Celtic churchmen at Whitby in these words:

Although your fathers were holy men, do you imagine that they, a few men in a corner of a remote island, are to be preferred before the universal Church of Christ throughout the world? And even if you Columba—or may I say, ours also if he was a servant of Christ—was a saint of potent virtues, can he take precedence before the most blessed prince of the Apostles [St. Peter, whose vicar and representative the pope claimed to be] . . . ?

The synod of Whitby closed on an almost comic note, as King Oswy, determining that Peter possessed the keys to the kingdom of heaven, agreed to follow Peter's vicar, the pope, in all matters: "Otherwise, when I come to the gates of heaven, he who holds the keys may not be willing to open

² Sometimes dated 664. Bede's chronology is disputed.

them." Bede reports this statement in all seriousness, but another source reports that Oswy smiled as he uttered those words. Probably he had decided long before the synod opened to cast his lot with Rome. The question at issue was momentous, but the answer may well have been a foregone conclusion. For by the time of Whitby it must have been growing increasingly clear that the Roman way was the way of the future.

Celtic Christianity by no means expired with the synod of Whitby. It endured long thereafter, contributing much to Christian culture and the Christian life. But little by little it abandoned its separatist character. In 716 Iona itself submitted to the Roman observance, and in later years the churches of Wales and Ireland followed.

The Roman Church was quick to consolidate its victory. The acceptance of Roman authority and customs at Whitby was followed by a thorough reorganization of the Anglo-Saxon Church along Roman lines. The architect of this great administrative undertaking was St. Theodore of Tarsus, a distinguished scholar from Asia Minor who, having traveled to Rome, was sent to England by the pope to become archbishop of Canterbury. Theodore arrived in England in 669 at the age of sixty-six. He set about at once to divide the land into dioceses and selected devout, energetic bishops to rule them. The rational episcopal structure that Archbishop Theodore imposed upon the Anglo-Saxon Church was given unity and direction by a regular series of conciliar assemblies over which he presided. In the course of his twenty-one-year archiepiscopacy, Theodore succeeded in superimposing upon the multiplicity of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms a unified church, with clearly delineated territorial bishoprics, and with ultimate administrative authority centered at Canterbury. So it was that the English Church, shaped by the coherent political principles of the Roman papacy and, indirectly, the Roman Empire, achieved a degree of territorial coherence and administrative centralization that contrasted sharply with the instability of the Anglo-Saxon states. As the political unity of the Roman Empire underlay the spiritual unity of the Roman Church, so the unity Theodore imposed upon the English Church prefigured the political unity of England itself.

Theodore was a celebrated scholar who had earlier studied in Athens. He was accompanied on his journey to England by another scholar of eminence, a North African churchman named Hadrian. The Latin learning of Hadrian complemented the Greek scholarship of Theodore, and together they made Canterbury a distinguished intellectual center. Theodore established a school there which provided instruction in Greek and Latin letters and the principles of Roman law. The Roman legal tradition, which had virtually disappeared from Western Europe, was well known in Theodore's Byzantine homeland, and he was able to introduce it into England along with his native Greek tongue. Through their wide experience and broad culture, Theodore and Hadrian brought to seventh-century Canterbury the rich intellectual legacy of the Mediterranean world.

The Northumbrian Renaissance

But it was in Northumbria rather than at Canterbury that Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical culture reached its highest degree of creativity. Here, at the northernmost edge of Christendom, the stimulating encounter between Celtic and Roman-Benedictine Christianity resulted in an intellectual and cultural achievement of the first order. In Northumbria during the later seventh and early eighth century, Anglo-Saxon culture—and perhaps the whole of Christian culture in the early Middle Ages—reached its climax.

One of the great patrons of this renaissance was a well-born Northumbrian named Benedict Biscop, a man of vigor and piety and a devoted Benedictine monk. Benedict Biscop made several trips to Italy and southern Gaul, and, indeed, was a companion of Archbishop Theodore and Hadrian on their journey from Rome in 668–69. In southern Europe Benedict experienced the ordered life of long-established Benedictine monasteries and collected large quantities of books and precious works of art, which he brought back with him to his native Northumbria. He founded two great Northumbrian monasteries of the strict Benedictine rule—Wearmouth (674) and Jarrow (681)—which he filled with his books and other treasures. These two houses became the foci of Roman-Benedictine culture in Northumbria, while the older establishment at Lindisfarne remained the center of Celtic culture.

Both cultures contributed to the renaissance in Northumbria. The impressive artistic achievements of the age seem to be predominantly Celtic in inspiration. The magnificently illuminated Lindisfarne Gospels are executed in the complex curvilinear style typical of Celtic art, although scholars have also detected an Anglo-Saxon influence in them. The Latin literature of the period is, of course, primarily Roman-Benedictine in inspiration; and it has been suggested that the same impulse that gave rise to the Latin writings of the Northumbrian renaissance also produced the written, vernacular version of the Germanic epic poem *Beowulf*.³

The achievements of the Northumbrian renaissance lay in many fields—in art, architecture, poetry, paleography, and manuscript illumination. But the supreme achievement of the age was the scholarship of the Venerable Bede (c. 673–735). In the writings of Bede, particularly his *History of the English Church and People*, the intellectual tradition of Western Europe attained a level unequalled since the fall of Rome.⁴

Bede was a product of the Roman-Benedictine tradition. He spent his life under the Benedictine rule at Jarrow, where he was an exemplary monk. He was also a superb scholar whose investigations were made

³ The earliest extant version of *Beowulf* is from tenth-century Wessex, but philological evidence suggests that the Wessex text is based on an earlier version from central or northern England.

⁴ Bede's masterpiece is most readily available in Leo Sherley-Price, tr., *A History of the English Church and People* (Baltimore, 1955).



ILLUMINATED PAGE FROM THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS, c. 700
This most beautiful of early manuscript books is a product of the
Northumbrian Renaissance. *British Museum.*

possible by the fine library that Benedict Biscop had installed in the monastery in 681. Bede seems to have regarded his theological writings as his most important work, but his fame in later centuries rests primarily on his history. It was a pioneer effort, unprecedented in scope, and at the same time a work of remarkable maturity. Bede possessed a strong historical conscience—an acute critical sense that caused him to use his sources with scrupulous care, evaluating their reliability and often quoting them in full. Bede was by no means a scientific historian in the modern sense. His history is embroidered with numerous visions and other miraculous events, for he was a man of faith who accepted the possibility of miracles. But even in his miracle stories he demonstrates far greater caution—far more respect for the historical evidence—than was customary among his predecessors and contemporaries.

Bede's broad historical vision—his sense of structure and unity—sets his work apart from the dry annals and credulous saints' lives that typify the historical writing of his day. And his miracle stories fit logically into the basic structure of his work. For it was Bede's purpose to narrate the miraculous rise of Christianity in Britain and its crucial role of imposing coherence and purpose on the chaos of human events. In Bede's hands the history of the Britons and Anglo-Saxons and the rise of Christianity among them acquire shape and direction. In effect, Bede is recording the developing synthesis between the Germanic and the Christian cultures—the gradual softening of the savage, martial traditions of the primitive Anglo-Saxons by the peace, love, and humble labor characteristic of the Christian life. And of course, to Bede the Christian life *par excellence* is the life of the Benedictine monk. In one of the closing paragraphs of his history, Bede records—too optimistically—the triumph of monastic peace over Germanic violence:

As peace and prosperity prevail in these days, many of the Northumbrians, both noble and humble, together with their children, have laid aside their arms, preferring to receive the tonsure and take monastic vows rather than study the arts of war. The result of this trend will be seen in the coming generation.

It is characteristic of this man who regarded Christianity as the supreme organizing force in history that he should be the first major historian to use the Christian era as his chronological base—to date events not in terms of kings' reigns or lunar cycles but in terms of Christ's birth.⁵ Thus Bede's sense of chronology and historical development resulted in the division of history into the two eras, B.C. and A.D.

Finally, Bede gave to his contemporaries the concept of an "English people." At a time when England was divided into numerous individual kingdoms and loyalties were limited to one's clan or local lord, Bede conceived the notion of "Englishmen" and made it the subject of his history.

⁵ Bede took the idea from a sixth-century scholar, the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus.

Thus, Bede accomplished at the intellectual level what Archbishop Theodore had accomplished at the level of ecclesiastical organization. In the face of the savage particularism and petty struggles of Anglo-Saxon kings, both men saw England as one. It is fitting that later ages should honor the administrative genius of Theodore and celebrate Bede as "the first articulate Englishman."

The Return to the Continent

We have seen how the Benedictine order had its genesis in sixth-century Italy, how it was harnessed by Pope Gregory at the century's end to the task of converting the Anglo-Saxons, and how its encounter with Celtic Christianity in seventh- and eighth-century Northumbria evoked a cultural flowering. During the eighth century, the dynamic Roman-Benedictine Christianity of England was carried back to the continent by Anglo-Saxon missionaries and scholars to reinvigorate the Frankish Church and to spread civilization and the Gospel among the heathen Germans east of the Rhine. The greatest of these Anglo-Saxon missionaries was the Wessex monk, St. Boniface (d. 754). Working under the general direction of the papacy, and supplied with books and assistants by his Wessex countrymen, St. Boniface was the representative of three great dynamic forces of his day: the papacy, the Benedictine order, and the ecclesiastical culture of Anglo-Saxon England. During the 740s, with the cooperation of the Frankish kings, St. Boniface devoted himself to the reform of the Frankish Church, enforcing the strict observance of the Benedictine rule in monasteries and reconstructing Frankish diocesan organization on the same disciplined pattern that Theodore of Tarsus had earlier established in England. It was this reformed Frankish Church that provided the necessary environment for the impressive cultural achievements of Charlemagne's reign a generation later.

St. Boniface also devoted himself to the immense undertaking of Christianizing the heathen peoples of Germany. The task was far too great for a single man or a single generation, but Boniface made a promising beginning. Among the several Benedictine houses he founded in Germany was the monastery of Fulda, which, like Wearmouth and Jarrow in Northumbria, became a notable intellectual and evangelical center. Boniface devoted himself particularly to the conversion of the Saxons, Hessians, and Frisians, and it was at the hands of the latter that he died a martyr's death in 754.

Northumbria too participated in the work of evangelism on the continent. The fiery Northumbrian Benedictine, Wilfrid of Ripon, had been active in missionary work across the Channel long before Boniface undertook his mission. Much later, in the reign of Charlemagne (768-814), the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin of York, a student of a student of Bede's, was the leading intellectual at Charlemagne's court. A product of the Northum-

brian renaissance, Alcuin became the chief figure of the later and better-known Carolingian renaissance.

In England itself, ecclesiastical culture declined from the summit attained in Bede's day, and in the ninth century it was virtually annihilated by the Vikings. Norse raiders sacked Lindisfarne in 793, Jarrow in 794, and Iona in 802. But before its demise in the north, this culture had spread its creative influence among the Franks and Germaus. Having transformed the Anglo-Saxon world, the potent civilizing force of Benedictine evangelism now returned to the continent to provide the intellectual and spiritual foundations for Charlemagne's empire.

The Movement Toward Political Consolidation: Mercia

During the 220 years following the death of Bede in 735, the unity of England, foreshadowed in the ecclesiastical organization of Archbishop Theodore and in the historical work of Bede, was achieved at the level of secular politics. The chief historical theme of these years is the gradual trend toward political consolidation and, at length, the genesis of the English monarchy.

The progressive consolidation of royal power during the seventh and eighth centuries can be illustrated by the evolution of the *bretwaldaship*. Prior to the reign of King Edwin of Northumbria (616-632), a *bretwalda* might demand allegiance and collect tribute from one or two neighboring kingdoms, but elsewhere his pre-eminence seems to have been chiefly honorary. Indeed, the *bretwaldas* of southern England appear to have been ignored completely by Bernicia and Deira north of the Humber. Moreover, the *bretwaldaship* tended to flit from one kingdom to another—from Sussex to Wessex to Kent to East Anglia—never remaining in one place more than a generation. We are dependent on Bede for the names of the early *bretwaldas*, and it may well be that in attributing the *bretwaldaship* and its implied hegemony to these early kings, Bede was mistakenly injecting into a chaotic past the relative orderliness of his own day.

However this may be, the rise of Edwin of Northumbria to the *bretwaldaship* marks a new phase in England's political evolution. The smaller kingdoms of earlier years were gradually absorbed into the larger ones until, by the later seventh century, three kingdoms—Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex—had come to overshadow all the others. To speak very generally, Northumbria was the leading Anglo-Saxon kingdom in the seventh century, Mercia in the eighth, and Wessex in the ninth and tenth.

The epoch of Northumbrian hegemony is celebrated in the pages of Bede's history, and the great days of Wessex are recorded in the writings of King Alfred the Great's court and in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Mercia left to posterity no impressive scholarly works and no history of its age of greatness. The power of Mercia's eighth-century kings cannot be gainsaid, but local patriotism prevented both the Northumbrian Bede and the later

Wessex authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from portraying the rival Mercian state sympathetically. We must therefore use these sources with caution and beware of underestimating the statesmanship of the Mercian kings or the creativity of Mercian culture.

Mercia's political and military power was impressive indeed. Even Northumbria in its greatest days lived under an almost constant Mercian threat. Mercia's powerful heathen monarch, Penda, had challenged the Northumbrian hegemony more than once in the seventh century, defeating and killing King Edwin in 632 and King Oswald in 641 before being killed himself in battle against King Oswy in 654. During much of his reign, Penda exerted an authority over the kingdoms south of the Humber exceeding that of the earlier southern kings whom Bede called *bretwaldas*. By the end of his reign, he had vastly increased the extent of his kingdom—by absorbing a number of small neighboring states—and had exerted his supremacy over both Wessex and East Anglia. A remarkably effective heathen warrior-king, he is portrayed by contemporary Christian writers as something of a devil.

Penda's Christian son, King Wulfhere (657–674), resumed his father's drive for control of southern England, establishing dominion over Essex and the town of London, cowing Wessex, and winning the allegiance of Kent and Sussex. At his death he was endeavoring to subdue Northumbria itself. Had he succeeded, his authority over England would have been virtually uncontested.

The growth of Mercian power was interrupted for the half century after Wulfhere's death by a resurgence of Wessex, particularly in the reign of its able king, Ine (688–726). Sussex, Essex, and Kent passed for a time from Mercian into Wessex control. It was obvious by now that these smaller states were far too weak to maintain their independence, and the only question that remained was—which of the two “superpowers” would dominate them, Mercia or Wessex? During most of the eighth century Mercia not only successfully reasserted its dominion over these states, but usually managed to dominate Wessex as well.

Mercian supremacy in the eighth century resulted from the intelligent exploitation of its strategic position and considerable resources by two able and long-lived kings: Ethelbald (716–757) and Offa (757–796). Mercia under the leadership of these monarchs was a powerful state that dominated the midlands and exacted tribute and allegiance from the kingdoms to the south and east. Offa described himself in official documents as “king of all the English,” and the royal boast was not too far from the truth.

The reality of Mercian power is well illustrated by a contemporary document known as the Tribal Hidage—a comprehensive assessment schedule that seems to have regulated tribute payments owed to the Mercian kings by various lesser kingdoms in southern and central England. In the early days of the Anglo-Saxon settlements the term “hide” had denoted a unit of land sufficient in extent to support the household of a single warrior.

By the time of the Tribal Hidage the hide had become the key unit of assessment. In the centuries to come, royal governments would exact taxes and military service from their subjects on the basis of the number of hides of land each subject owned. The fact that the eighth-century Mercian monarchy should produce a document enumerating the hides of most of the Anglo-Saxon peoples south of the Humber testifies to a far-flung administrative system and a central organization of unprecedented scale.

The reigns of Ethelbald and Offa witnessed not only an unparalleled degree of political power but also a resurgence of commercial activity. King Offa's minters produced considerable quantities of the silver pennies that remained the basis of the English currency for centuries to come. The very term “penny” was probably derived from the name of Offa's predecessor, King Penda. And the importance of commercial activities between the dominions of Offa and the empire of his illustrious contemporary, Charlemagne, is demonstrated by a remarkable treaty between these two monarchs. In it, Charlemagne addresses Offa in these words:

You wrote to us about merchants. We extend to them our personal protection, as is the ancient custom for those engaged in trade. If treated wrongfully, let them appeal to us or our judges, and we will see that they have full justice. Similarly, should any of our subjects suffer injustice in your kingdom, they shall appeal to you for a just remedy, so that no trouble may occur between our subjects.

It is significant that English merchants were sufficiently active on the continent at this time to require a formal arrangement between two rulers, and perhaps even more significant that Offa should take such a broad view of his royal responsibilities as to intervene in behalf of English traders abroad. In Offa's hands, Anglo-Saxon monarchy was assuming new and larger dimensions.

Many details of Offa's reign are hidden from us by a lack of historical evidence. He has rightly been termed the most obscure great monarch of Anglo-Saxon England. As one historian recently wrote: “We can be sure that Offa was a crucial figure in the development of Anglo-Saxon institutions, without being able to find out exactly what he did.”⁶ Two centuries after Offa's death, King Alfred of Wessex spoke respectfully of his laws, but the laws themselves have since vanished. We have no contemporary account of his reign nor any celebration of his deeds. But we do know that Offa extended very considerably the limits of the Mercian kingdom and the scope of Mercian royal authority. He advanced his power westward at Welsh expense and delineated his western frontier by constructing a remarkable earthen boundary marker known as Offa's Dike, which has been called “the greatest public work of the whole Anglo-Saxon period.” At his death, the venerable royal dynasties of Sussex, Essex, East Anglia,

⁶ Eric John, *Orbis Britannae*, p. 35.

and Kent had ceased to rule, and the vague suzerainty of the earlier bretwaldship was in the process of being transformed into a direct control and absorption of subject lands.

Offa's program for Mercian hegemony had the effect of temporarily subverting the hierarchical unity that Archbishop Theodore had earlier imposed on the English Church. Under Theodore, the archbishopric of Canterbury had stood unchallenged at the apex of the hierarchy; but in 735 a second archbishopric was established at York in Northumbria. It was inferior in prestige to Canterbury but nevertheless a potential rival. King Offa, it seems, demanded a separate archbishopric for Mercia, and accordingly in 787 a new archbishopric at Lichfield emerged. Shortly after Offa's death, however, it disappeared, and thereafter the English Church was dominated by its two remaining archbishoprics of Canterbury and York.

The Church was active during Offa's reign. General councils continued to meet, and, at a lower level, country parishes were gradually taking shape. The development of an effective parish system was of immense importance to both Church and society in the early Middle Ages. The Church had emerged from the highly urbanized Roman Empire with a diocesan organization based on the city. With the disintegration of Roman imperial society, the cities declined and the countryside came to the fore, but several centuries elapsed before the Church adjusted its organization to the needs of the rural society in which it worked. Peasants and small freeholders often were obliged to go many months without seeing a priest or attending mass. The answer to this unsatisfactory condition was found in the country parish, administered by a priest who was supported by the enforced tithes of his parishioners. The parish system developed only gradually, but in the eighth century, both in the empire of Charlemagne and in the kingdom of Offa, it was making significant progress.

In both ecclesiastical and secular affairs, Offa's reign marks a crucial stage in the development of the Anglo-Saxons. With the Northumbrian monarchy in the doldrums and Mercian power unchallenged south of the Humber, with a vigorous and statesmanlike monarch who could negotiate with Charlemagne on terms of equality, Offa's England attained a degree of stability such as the Anglo-Saxons had never before experienced.

The Movement Toward Political Consolidation: Wessex

The eighth-century Mercian kings gave England political coherence but fell short of giving it unity. With Offa's death in 796, competence departed from the Mercian royal line, and the leadership of southern England gradually passed to Wessex.

In the early Middle Ages sophisticated bureaucratic government was unknown to Western Europe, and whatever the resources of a state, its success in the ruthless political competition of the period depended heavily on the military and administrative talents of its ruler. Thus, Mercia prospered mightily under Ethelbald and Offa but declined under their less

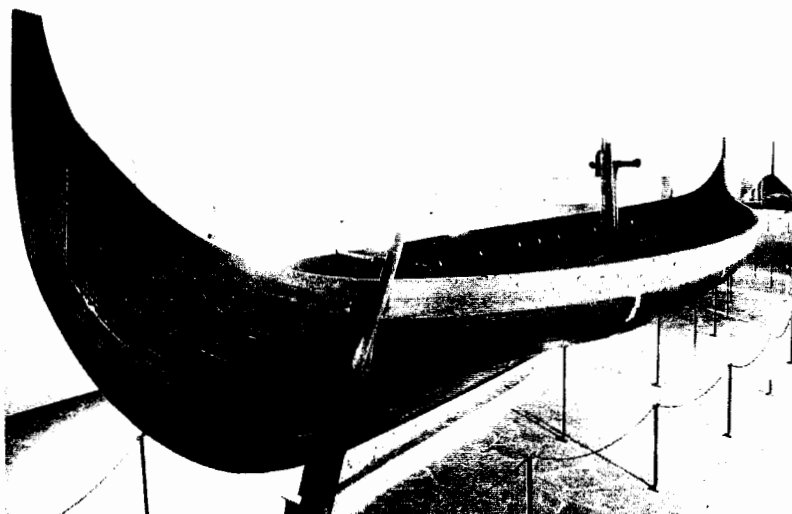
able successors. On the continent, the Carolingian Empire of the Franks declined similarly in the years following the death of Charlemagne in 814. Accordingly, the rise of Wessex in the early ninth century depended not merely on its wide extent and the relative abundance of its human and material resources, but also, and above all, on the skill of its monarchs.

It was the gifted King Egbert of Wessex (802–839) who won for his kingdom the hegemony that Mercia had so long enjoyed. At the battle of Ellendon in 825 he routed the Mercian army and won control of the lesser states of southern England—Kent, Sussex, and Essex. Shortly afterward he received the submission and allegiance of East Anglia and Northumbria, and for a brief time he ruled even in Mercia itself. Egbert's power was impressive, though less so than Offa's. But unlike Offa, Egbert had the good fortune to be succeeded by a series of remarkably able heirs. Egbert's reign was merely the beginning of a long epoch in which the Wessex monarchy, tempered by the fires of a terrifying Viking invasion, endured to become the sole royal power in the land. Egbert's descendants were to become the first kings of England.

The Viking Age and the Birth of the English Monarchy

The era of Mercian ascendancy corresponded approximately to the period in which Charlemagne and his gifted predecessors expanded the power of the Frankish kingdom to such an extent that it became virtually coterminous with continental Western Christendom. We have already noted the impressive intellectual upsurge at Charlemagne's court, and the role played by the Northumbrian Alcuin in this Carolingian renaissance. The hegemony of Wessex, on the other hand, was concurrent with the decline of the Carolingian Empire and the coming of the Viking Age. Traveling from their Scandinavian homeland in their long ships, the Vikings carried their activities of pillage and conquest far and wide across northern Europe and the Atlantic. They subjected the Franks and Germans to fierce harassment, established a powerful dynasty in Russia, raided Islamic Spain, settled Iceland, and even touched the coast of North America.

Although the reasons for the Viking outburst are a matter of considerable scholarly dispute, it is possible to suggest certain contributing factors. For one thing, a steady rise in population and political consolidation in Scandinavia may have prompted many adventurous spirits to seek their fortunes and satisfy their land hunger abroad. In addition, improvements in Viking shipbuilding seem to have added significantly to the mobility of these warriors. Charlemagne himself may have contributed unknowingly to the future debacle when he subdued and conquered the Frisians, a powerful maritime people who lived along the northern shore of Europe east of the Rhine. The Frisians had previously functioned as a buffer between Western Europe and Scandinavia, and, with their defeat, the barrier was removed. After Charlemagne's death in 814, Europe's defensive posture grew slack. Three decades later, in 843, Charlemagne's grandsons divided



The Gokstad Ship, an 80-foot Viking vessel, was found buried in Norway. It could be sailed or rowed (by 16 pairs of oars) and carried as many as 70 people. *Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.*

his huge, unwieldy empire into three parts, creating thereby the nuclei of modern France, modern Germany, and the long strip of intermediate lands over which France and Germany have contested ever since. Although Charlemagne's heirs were by no means weaklings, they represented a distinct decline in leadership, and the struggles among them created a political-military vacuum that proved irresistible to the Viking raiders.

Neither Charlemagne nor Offa had possessed any navies to speak of, and the English Channel had effectively separated the two powers. But to the seafaring Vikings, the Channel was less a barrier than a boulevard. They harried the lands on either side without partiality, plundering coastal settlements and sailing up rivers to bring havoc and terror deep into the interior of England and the continent. Their first raids struck England, for they found it expedient to ignore continental Europe until the passing of Charlemagne. It is said that the great Frankish emperor wept on seeing Viking ships off the north Frankish coasts on their way to England, and Alcuin wrote a letter expressing profound sympathies when the Danes sacked Lindisfarne in his native Northumbria in 793.

The first Viking raid struck the Dorset coast of Wessex around 787. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that on the arrival of three long ships, the chief royal official of the threatened community—the port reeve—rushed to the shore to inquire their business. The Vikings made emphatic reply, killing the reeve and looting and sacking the town. It was a portentous episode, for in subsequent years countless other raiders came from Scandinavia



THE NORSE INVADERS
Carved decorations and sculpted figures such as this chieftain's head are expressive of the rude vigor of the Norse peoples. *Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.*

to devastate and plunder the land. When Wessex inherited the political hegemony that Mercia had formerly exercised, it also inherited the ominous and ever-increasing Norse threat.

Organized into small groups of ships' crews, the Vikings had the immense advantage of mobility and surprise over their more numerous, sedentary victims. At first confining themselves to plundering expeditions, they gradually conceived the idea of conquest and settlement. Norwegian Vikings attacked and overran Ireland, founded a state centering on Dublin, and remained in occupation of northern Ireland for generations thereafter. Another Viking band established a permanent settlement in northern Frankland at the mouth of the Seine. Its ruler, a Viking chieftain named Rollo, was converted to Christianity and was granted official recognition by the Frankish king, Charles the Simple, around 911. This Seine settlement evolved and expanded in later years into a powerful duchy known as Normandy, which gradually assimilated French culture, French institutions, and the French language, but retained the martial vigor of its Viking past. The establishment of the Norman duchy went unmarked in English annals, but Normandy was to play a crucial role in England's later history.

Midway through the ninth century, the Viking attacks on England began to change from plundering expeditions to campaigns of conquest. In 850 a large group of Danish Vikings spent the winter on the Isle of Thanet (off Kent) rather than return to their homeland at the close of the raiding season. In 865 a Danish host began a series of bloody and highly successful campaigns that shortly won them virtually all of England outside Wessex. The local kingdoms and subkingdoms that had survived the eras of Mercian and Wessex hegemony were destroyed, and of the monarchies of the ancient Heptarchy only Wessex endured.

In the wake of these lightning conquests came Danish settlers in such numbers as to change permanently the social and institutional complexion of large areas of England. These areas of Danish settlement and occupation, known later on as the "Danelaw," included: (1) Yorkshire (southern Northumbria), where the most intensive settlements occurred; (2) East Anglia; and (3) a large tract of central and eastern Mercia that came to be known as the "Five Boroughs" after its five chief centers of settlement—Lincoln, Stamford, Nottingham, Leicester, and Derby. For centuries these three Danish districts differed sharply from the remainder of England in their traditions and customs.

Alfred the Great

In 870 the Danish attack against Wessex began in earnest. It has seemed almost providential to English historians that in the following year there came to the Wessex throne a man of singular intellect and statesmanship, King Egbert's grandson, Alfred the Great (871-899). He was a monarch of many talents—a warrior, an administrator, a friend of scholar-

ship, and a leader of men. With his reign the history of the English monarchy truly begins.⁷

Alfred's accession occurred at a desperate moment in Anglo-Saxon history. In 872 he was obliged to purchase a truce from the Danes in order to gain the time necessary to put his forces in order. During this brief, expensive intermission, he began a thorough military reorganization of his realm, which continued throughout his reign. His military reforms rested on three major innovations: (1) His army—or *fyrd* as it is called in the Anglo-Saxon documents—was divided into two halves, each serving for six months. Thus, when one half was at home, the other half was under arms, insuring that at no time would Wessex be defenseless. (2) Large fortifications known as *burghs* were built at strategic points to defend against Danish invasion and, later, to serve as forward bases in the reconquest of the Danelaw. An important tenth-century document known as the Burghal Hidage discloses that extensive and precisely delineated territories surrounding each burgh were responsible for its maintenance and defense, with responsibility assessed in terms of the hide of land. (We have already encountered the hide as the assessment unit of the eighth-century Mercian Tribal Hidage, and we shall encounter it again as the basis for military recruitment and tax assessment.) In later years many of the burghs of Alfred and his successors evolved into commercial centers, and the meaning of the term gradually changed from "fortress" to "town." (3) Recognizing more clearly than his predecessors or contemporaries, either in England or on the continent, that the Vikings must be challenged on the seas, Alfred established a fleet. His biographer, the Welshman Asser, reports that Alfred built numerous ships, both large and swift, "neither after the Frisian design nor after the Danish, but as it seemed to him that they could be most serviceable." This disclosure provides a clear illustration of the creative intellect and imagination Alfred applied to the problems of war.

His military reforms were far-reaching, but time was required to carry them out; and for Alfred time was all too short. In 876 a Danish chieftain named Guthrum led a host against Wessex; and again early in 878, catching Alfred off guard in the dead of winter, Guthrum led his army across the land, forcing the king to flee into the marsh country of Somerset. There he found refuge at a royal estate on the Isle of Athelney. For a time almost all of England was at the mercy of the Danes.

Athelney was England's Valley Forge. Alfred held out with a small group of followers throughout the winter, and in the spring of 878 he was able to rally the Wessex fyrd. (The Danish army was too small to occupy Wessex completely or to prevent the summoning of Alfred's army.) The armies of Alfred and Guthrum met in pitched battle at Edington, and Alfred

⁷ On Alfred see Eleanor Duckett, *Alfred the Great* (Chicago, 1956). A biography of Alfred written by one of his own contemporaries is available in English translation: L. C. Jane, tr., *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (London, 1926).

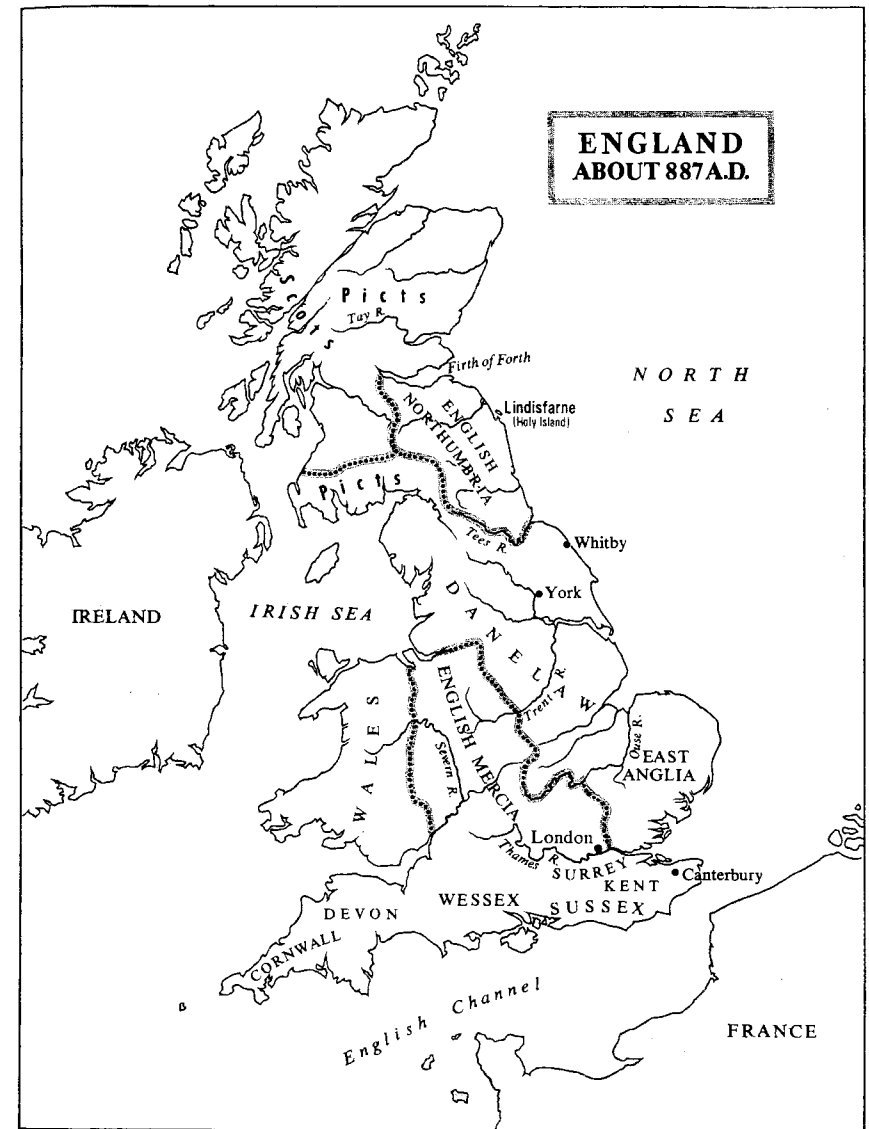
won a total victory. As a consequence, Guthrum agreed to accept Christianity and to abandon Wessex forever. One may well doubt the depth of Guthrum's conversion, but the fact remains that he was the first important Viking to become a Christian. His baptism in 878 foreshadows the ultimate Christianization of the entire Viking world and its incorporation into the mainstream of Western European civilization.

In this age of warfare, skillful military leadership was essential to a king's very survival. Alfred, the ablest of all the Anglo-Saxon kings, was a military commander of the first order. In the years after 878 he was obliged to cope with repeated attacks by Danish raiding parties, and all of these he repelled. Indeed he was able, little by little, to drive back the Danish power. In 886 he recaptured London, and later in the same year he entered into a new treaty with Guthrum which defined the boundary between English and Danish authority. The frontier ran approximately northwestward, along the old Roman road known as Watling Street, from London to Chester on the Irish Sea. By this new agreement a large section of Mercia was freed of Danish control, and in that once powerful kingdom Alfred established a subking or *ealdorman* named Ethelred. The future allegiance of English Mercia was insured by a marriage between Ethelred and Alfred's daughter Ethelfleda, known as the "Lady of Mercia."

The struggle with the Danes continued to the close of Alfred's reign and well beyond, but by Alfred's death in 899 the crisis had clearly passed. Southwestern England was secure, London had been recovered, a successful military policy had been established, and the authority of the Wessex monarchy was supreme in non-Danish England.

Alfred was more than a warrior. The creative intelligence that he applied to military reorganization was equally effective in law and administration. Several of Alfred's predecessors had issued law codes or dooms. Ethelbert of Kent had been the first to do so, and he was followed by other monarchs such as Offa of Mercia (whose dooms are now lost) and Alfred's own distant ancestor, Ine of Wessex (688-726). But these earlier kings—Offa perhaps excepted—seem to have intended merely to clarify existing law and provide for new conditions. None went so far as to actually repeal old customs or, in the strict sense of the word, make new laws. Alfred interpreted his lawmaking authority more broadly than his predecessors had. Although he was hesitant to create new laws, he exercised considerable latitude in his selection or rejection of old ones, thereby placing his own imprint on the legal structure of his day. In the preface to his dooms, Alfred expresses himself in these words:

Then I, King Alfred, collected these [laws] together and ordered that many of them which our forefathers observed should be written down, namely, those that I liked; and, with the advice of my Witan [council], I rejected many of those that I did not like and ordered that they be observed differently. I have not presumed to set in writing much of my own, because it was unknown to me what might please those who shall come after us. So



I have collected here the dooms which seemed to me the most just, whether from the time of Ine, my kinsman, or of Offa, king of the Mercians, or of Ethelbert, the first of the English to receive baptism; I have discarded the rest. Then I, Alfred, king of the West Saxons, showed these to all my Witan who declared that they were all pleased to observe them.

In this significant passage we can glimpse the king at work, surrounded by his council as Germanic monarchs had been since their most primitive days, respectful of past custom as had always been the case, and yet injecting into his traditional royal role a novel element of creative judgment.

To Alfred the warrior and Alfred the statesman must be added Alfred the intellectual. Like Charlemagne a century earlier, Alfred was a patron of learning who drew scholars to his court from far and wide—the Welshman Asser, a Frankish scholar from Rheims, several Mercians (including one with the intriguing name of Werwulf), and a number of others. And Alfred himself made a far greater personal contribution to scholarship than the half-literate Charlemagne had been able to do.

The renaissance of Charlemagne's era had been less an outburst of creative genius than a salvage operation designed to recover and preserve a classical-Christian heritage that was in danger of vanishing in the West. Charlemagne's scholars were not original philosophers but gifted schoolmasters who reformed the script, purged the Bible of scribal errors, established schools, copied manuscripts, and struggled to extend literacy and to preserve a correct liturgy. These were humble tasks, but they were desperately essential. The Anglo-Saxon renaissance of Alfred's time, generally speaking, was of the same type. By the late ninth century the intellectual flowering of Bede's Northumbria had long passed. Latin, the linguistic vehicle of classical culture, was becoming virtually unknown in England. Priests could no longer even understand the Latin mass, much less study the works of Bede and the Church Fathers. And the Anglo-Saxon language, which everyone used, had only a very slender literary tradition behind it. Alfred himself described the decline of Latin in these words:

So completely fallen away was learning now in the English race that there were very few on this side of the Humber who would know how to render their service book into English, and I doubt that there would be many on the other side of the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot think of so much as a single one south of the Thames when I took the realm.

The king may be exaggerating, but probably not very much.

Alfred was determined to revive ecclesiastical culture in his land, and he did what he could to create a literate priesthood. The scholars he gathered around him created a notable school at his court. A few monastic schools were established, too, but a general monastic revival seems to have been out of the question in these turbulent times. Alfred's most original contribution to learning rose from his conviction that aristocratic laymen should be educated—that his administrators and military commanders should have some knowledge of the civilized heritage of Christendom. Such

men were too preoccupied with the political and military hazards of their time to learn Latin, but Alfred hoped that they might be taught to read their native Anglo-Saxon. Accordingly, he and his court scholars undertook to translate into the vernacular some of the important Latin masterpieces of the day—Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, and Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*. A copy of the vernacular *Pastoral Care* was sent to every episcopal see in England in the hope that Alfred's bishops might be edified by Gregory's wisdom and common sense.

Alfred himself participated in the work of transition and often added comments of his own to the original texts. In the translation of Boethius, Alfred injects the revealing observation, "In those days one never heard of ships armed for war," and in the preface to the *Pastoral Care* he speaks nostalgically of the time "before everything was ravaged and burned, when England's churches overflowed with treasures and books." In passages such as these, one is reminded forcefully of the enormous disadvantages against which Alfred worked.

Associated with Alfred's reign is another literary monument in the English vernacular, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.⁸ This important historical project, although probably not instigated by Alfred directly, was very likely inspired by the general surge of vernacular writing with which the king was associated. Around 892, an unknown Wessex chronicler wrote a year-by-year account of English history and its Roman and British background, running from the birth of Christ to 891. The account is based on earlier sources, most of which are now lost. The identification and reconstruction of these forerunners have occupied several generations of scholars, and many aspects of the problem remain obscure. In general, the early entries are characterized by extreme verbal economy:

634: In this year bishop Birinus preached Christianity to the West Saxons.

635: In this year Cynegils was baptized by Birinus, bishops of Dorchester, and Oswald [king of Northumbria] stood sponsor for him.

636: In this year Cwichelm was baptized at Dorchester, and the same year he passed away. And bishop Felix preached the faith of Christ to the East Anglians.

639: In this year Birinus baptized Cuthred at Dorchester and stood sponsor for him.

Copies of the 892 chronicle were sent to a number of important ecclesiastical centers of the time, and in some instances the early entries were expanded to include facts and traditions available in other portions of England. One manuscript was sent to Northumbria where the entry for 634, for example, was elaborated as follows:

⁸ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is available in several modern English translations. One of the best is D. Whitelock, D. C. Douglas, and S. Tucker, ed. and tr., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1961).

634: In this year Osric, whom Paulinus had baptized, succeeded to the kingdom of the Deirans; he was the son of Elfric, Edwin's paternal uncle; and to Bernicia succeeded Ethelfrith's son, Eanfrith. Also in this year Birinus first preached Christianity to the West Saxons under king Cynegils. That Birinus came thither at the command of Pope Honorius, and was bishop there until his life's end. And also in this year Oswald succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbria, and he reigned nine years.

At several ecclesiastical centers the 892 chronicle was continued thereafter on a year-by-year basis. In subsequent years copies continued to be exchanged and taken from one monastery to another, with the result that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a very complex document indeed. To be precise, it is not one document at all, but a series of several related documents. Altogether, seven distinct manuscripts are extant, representing four more or less separate chronicles. Of these, three end in the later eleventh century—between 1066 and 1079—while the fourth continues to the accession of King Henry II in 1154.

The various versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written by many different chroniclers in several religious houses over a number of generations, are exceedingly uneven. At times they fail to rise above the level of bare annals; at others, they provide fairly comprehensive accounts of the events of their day, sometimes even attempting a degree of historical interpretation. The chroniclers, like modern journalists, tended to pass over periods of peace and cultural creativity with a few bare allusions to royal deaths and accessions but became eloquent in times of upheaval and disaster. So little is made of the fruitful reigns of Alfred's successors and King Canute, so much is made of the second Danish invasions and the Norman Conquest, that readers of the *Chronicle* are apt to be misled into regarding the period of Anglo-Saxon England as one vast, sterile bore relieved by occasional cataclysms. But whatever its shortcomings, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a unique phenomenon in the European vernacular literature of its day and provides the modern student with an invaluable if sometimes aggravating narrative of later Anglo-Saxon history. It is appropriate that from the reign that marks the genesis of the English monarchy should come this remarkable national history in the Old English tongue.

In many respects, then, Alfred's reign is the great watershed in the history of Anglo-Saxon England. It represents the turning point in the Danish invasions, the climax of the age-long trend toward political unification, and the first stage in the development of English royal government. Alfred once described himself modestly as one who works in a great forest collecting timber with which others can build. He was alluding to his efforts toward intellectual revival, but the metaphor is equally relevant to his military, administrative, and political achievements. As architect of the English monarchy, he gathered the wood and also provided a preliminary blueprint that would guide his successors in constructing a durable political edifice.

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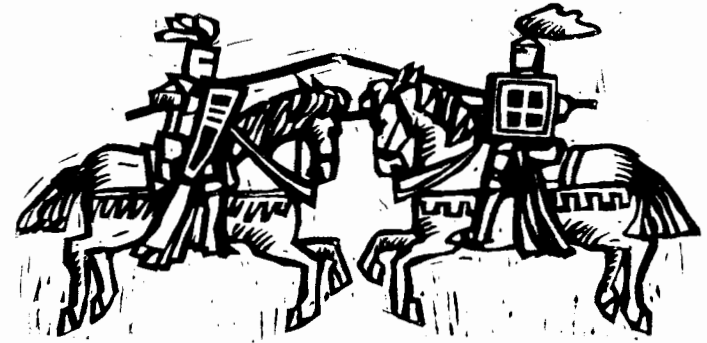
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