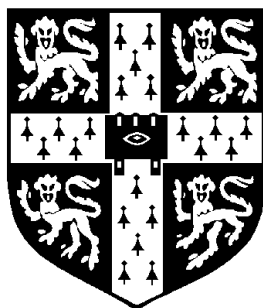


H. M. CHADWICK MEMORIAL LECTURES 31

SARAH FOOT

**WHY WERE THERE NO MARTYRS IN  
THE EARLY ENGLISH CHURCH?**



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterizes it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H. M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

Why were there no martyrs in the early English Church?

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**WHY WERE THERE NO MARTYRS IN  
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Listen, we have heard tell from ancient days  
of twelve illustrious heroes under the stars,  
thanes of the King. Never did their power fail  
in combat engagement when standards clashed,  
once they had dispersed, as the Lord Himself  
High-King of heaven showed them by lot.  
These were renowned men on earth  
brave captains and keen for campaign,  
Cheerful warriors, when shield and arm  
on the field of plunder kept helmet safe  
on the plain of doom. (*Andreas*, ll. 1–11)<sup>1</sup>

Thus opens a late-ninth or early tenth-century Old English poem known as *Andreas*. Based on a Latin adaptation of a Greek apostolic narrative, ‘The Acts of Matthew and Andrew in the city of the Cannibals’, it tells of the adventures of the apostles Matthew and Andrew among the man-eating Mermidonians.<sup>2</sup> Alongside accounts of monsters, wonders and marvels, the text reflects on the courage and obedience of the saints, virtues that it depicted as being as appropriate to warriors as to evangelists.<sup>3</sup> It also testifies to an understanding among the early medieval English that the apostolic life was dangerous: to preach the gospel (especially to unbelievers in far-off lands) was to risk one’s life for the sake of Christ. The same connection between death and discipleship lies at the heart of the Cynewulf poem, *Fates of the Apostles*, which catalogues briefly the misfortunes suffered by the disciples in order to fulfil Jesus’ last instruction that they should be witnesses to him ‘even to the uttermost part of the earth’.<sup>4</sup> Cynewulf wrote of the twelve: ‘noble heroes, who showed great

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<sup>1</sup> *Andreas: an Edition*, ed. and transl. Richard North and Michael D. J. Bintley (Liverpool, 2016), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> This lecture has had a long gestation and I owe debts to several students and colleagues for helping me to frame my ideas into a single argument. Successive generations of third-year students in the Faculty of Theology and Religion in Oxford taking papers on The English Church and Mission and, latterly, Saints and Sanctity in the Age of Bede have made valuable suggestions. Rose Lyddon’s research on Bede’s martyrs and on gendered martyrdom in early England has overlapped with my own at several points, as I acknowledge below. I have also discussed the influence of martyr cults in tenth- and eleventh-century monasticism with my doctoral student, Sumner Braund. Simon Loseby and Rosalind Love generously read and commented in detail on the entire text; Markus Bockmuehl and Richard Dance made a number of useful comments; I owe specific points of detail to Lesley Abrams, Simon Keynes and Tessa Webber. I am also grateful to the audience that attended the virtual lecture for a stimulating discussion. All such errors as remain are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Edward B. Irving, ‘A reading of *Andreas*: the poem as poem’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 12 (1983), 215–237, at p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1: 8.

courage and attained glory in the eyes of God'; declaring, 'Apostleship is honoured throughout the world.'<sup>5</sup>

Stories about the heroic deeds of the first apostles, and about later Roman martyrs, together with copies of their passions, may have reached England as early as the late sixth and early seventh century, brought by the first missionaries who came to preach to the pagan Germanic peoples settled in the lowland areas of the former Roman province of Britain.<sup>6</sup> Successive generations of evangelists from Rome brought with them items that the nascent Church among the English would need for worship, including relics of the holy apostles and martyrs; later, English clerics such as Wilfrid and Benedict returned from their visits to Rome with martyr-relics in their luggage.<sup>7</sup> Narratives about the deeds of those Christian heroes were certainly known in the English Church by the time of the late-seventh-century archbishop, Theodore.<sup>8</sup> Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne (d. 709), provided valuable testimony as to the popularity of these cults in his generation, writing dedicatory poems, *tituli*, for new buildings that celebrated the twelve apostles and the Virgin.<sup>9</sup> The authors of the vernacular poems that I just quoted clearly drew on these legends in order to construct their texts. They bear witness to the familiarity of ninth- and tenth-century monastic audiences (and quite possibly also the laity) with the content of such narratives, and they made explicit a connection between apostolic mission and martyrdom at the hands of secular power that one might consider commonplace. These poets assumed that those who ventured among strangers for the sake of the gospel risked danger, persecution, and frequently death.

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<sup>5</sup> *Fates of the Apostles*, lines 4–6, 11–15, ed. Kenneth R. Brooks, *Andreas and Fates of the Apostles* (Oxford, 1961), p. 56; transl. Craig Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems* (Philadelphia, PA, 2017), p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> Aileen O'Leary, 'Apostolic Passiones in early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Kathryn Powell and Donald Scragg (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 103–19.

<sup>7</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [hereafter *HE*], I. 30, ed. and transl. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 108–9 for relics brought by Mellitus. For Wilfrid, who brought back 'a great many holy relics, for the edification of the churches of Britain, writing down what each of the relics was and to which saint it belonged', see *Vita S Wilfridi* [hereafter *VSW*], ch. 33, ed. and transl. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge 1927; reprinted 1985), pp. 66–7; cf. *ibid.*, ch. 55, pp. 120–1. Benedict Biscop's relic-collecting trips were recounted by Bede, *Historia abbatum*, chs. 4, 6, ed. and transl. Christopher Grocock and I. N. Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 30–1, 35–6.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Thacker, 'In search of saints: the English church and the cult of Roman apostles and martyrs in the seventh and eighth centuries', in *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*, ed. Julia M. H. Smith (Leiden, 2000), pp. 247–77, at pp. 269–72.

<sup>9</sup> Aldhelm, *Carmina ecclesiastica*, ed. R. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera*, MGH, Auctores antiquissimi, 15 (Berlin, 1919), pp. 11–32; transl. Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier, *Aldhelm: the Poetic Works* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 46–59. Aldhelm's prose and verse *De virginitate* further reveal his detailed knowledge of the deeds of many late Roman virgin martyrs, women as well as men, cf. Michael Lapidge and Michael W. Herren, *Aldhelm: the Prose Works* (Cambridge, 1979); Thacker, 'In search', pp. 269–70.

Yet that was not the experience of those who worked as evangelists among the Anglo-Saxons. No one died in order to make the English Christian – apart, of course, from Jesus himself. No missionaries suffered death as a direct result of their actions in converting the pagan English.<sup>10</sup> Or, at least, if any apostles did lose their lives in that endeavour, none of their literate contemporaries, or their successors, made any record of their sacrifice for the faith that now survives, nor did they preserve their relics in shrines where the faithful might show their devotion. Why the conversion of the English was achieved without martyrs, when the same is true of few if any other missionary endeavours across cultures, except in the case of the slightly earlier conversion of the early medieval Irish,<sup>11</sup> is a question that I have long pondered. The invitation to give this lecture gave me an ideal opportunity to try to wrestle with this problem, even though I was aware of the faint irony in my choice of topic. This seems not to be a question that would have interested Chadwick nor, I would venture to suggest, one that he himself would ever have asked.<sup>12</sup>

### **The earliest Christian Martyrs**

Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching frequently linked discipleship with suffering, sometimes, as in Matthew's gospel, in terms of paradox: 'Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For he that will save his life, shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it.'<sup>13</sup> Those who proved willing to take upon themselves the task of witnessing to Jesus' teachings and promises of salvation needed to understand that their obedience could lead to the giving up of their own lives; yet the act of losing everything (and potentially enduring ignominious suffering) also meant that they would eventually achieve glorious beatitude and eternal life.

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<sup>10</sup> As noted by Thacker, 'In search', p. 248; cf. Alan Thacker, 'Rome of the martyrs: Saints, cults and relics, fourth to seventh centuries', in *Roma Felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, ed. Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Carol Neuman de Vegvar (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 14–49, at p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Clare Stancliffe, 'Red, white and blue martyrdom', in *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock *et al.* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 21–46.

<sup>12</sup> Impressively wide-ranging as were his intellectual concerns, Chadwick's own publications and the syllabus that he designed for his Department of Anglo-Saxon and kindred studies display curiously little interest in the Church, or in ecclesiastical history. For example, his *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (Cambridge, 1905) contains no chapter on the Church. This disregard for organised religion seems particularly odd in a vicarage child of Chadwick's generation; he was born in 1870 when his father was vicar of Thornhill Lees in Yorkshire. While earlier lecturers in this series have, of course, mentioned various aspects of church culture in their essays, most have focused centrally on topics that would have resonated more directly with Chadwick, rather than on the history of Christianity. Only one previous speaker has talked about martyrs: Pádraig Ó Riain, *Anglo-Saxon Ireland: the evidence of the Martyrology of Tallaght*, H. M. Chadwick Lecture 3 (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 16: 24–5.

The Acts of the Apostles recorded the fulfilment of both that warning and promise in Luke's narrative of the death of the protomartyr Stephen, who just before his execution had a vision of Christ ('the son of Man') standing at the right hand of God. As Bede noted in his commentary *On Acts*, it was in order to strengthen the blessed martyr's endurance that the doors of the heavenly kingdom were opened, and so that the innocent man being stoned might not stumble, the crucified God-man appeared in heaven.<sup>14</sup> Emphasising the similarities between the manner of Stephen's dying and Christ's crucifixion (itself, of course, a sort of martyrdom, in that it was a death accepted voluntarily),<sup>15</sup> Bede went on to reflect on the fact that Stephen, 'as though he were a stranger to the world' ('quasi advena mundi') suffered death outside the city, as had Christ. 'For [Stephen] had no permanent city here, but with his whole heart he sought the city to come', such that, as his persecutor stretched out his hands towards the stone, 'the martyr directed the gaze of his pure heart to heaven'.<sup>16</sup> St Paul had accepted the inevitability of this fate in writing to the Corinthians: 'For I think that God hath set forth us apostles, the last, as it were men appointed to death. We are made a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men.'<sup>17</sup>

Since its earliest days, the Christian Church has commemorated the deeds of apostles and martyrs in its liturgies, promoting the cults of those individuals and groups who died for the sake of Christ in whatever circumstances, missionary martyrs among them.<sup>18</sup> In common with the other two Abrahamic religions, Christianity articulates an understanding of martyrdom that sees it – as the word itself suggests – fundamentally as an act of witness. That act necessarily requires an audience able (and willing) to attest to the fact that individuals whom they commemorated as martyrs died specifically because of their religious loyalties. Those believers then become vital witnesses to the significance of that holy death, through their willingness to preserve the memory of those deeds for future generations.<sup>19</sup> Judaism has a long tradition of martyrdom in response to persecution, which may have had a significant influence on the development of early Christian ideas about dying for the faith, although the precise extent of the debt remains disputed.<sup>20</sup> Islam

<sup>14</sup> Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum*, 7: 56, ed. M. L. W. Laistner, CCSL, 121 (Turnhout, 1983), p. 38: 'Ad confortandam ergo beati martyris patientiam caelestis regni ianua panditur et, ne innoxius homo lapidatus titubet in terra, deus homo crucifixus apparet coronatus in caelo'.

<sup>15</sup> Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum*, 7: 58, ed. Laistner, p. 38: 'Non enim habuit hic manentem ciuitatem, sed futuram tota mente quaerebat, et iuxta rerum mutationem martyr mundi cordis ad caelos intuitum dirigit, persecutor durae ceruicis manus ad lapides mittit ...'

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor 4: 9; compare Philipians 1: 21: 'For to me, to live is Christ: and to die is gain.'

<sup>18</sup> Jolyon P. Mitchell, *Martyrdom: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York, 2004), pp. 34–5; David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 1–11.

<sup>20</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 31–78 argued strongly that the origins of martyrdom lay



similarly recognises as martyrs both those who die in holy war and those killed unjustly, especially while professing their religion, whether at the hands of non-Muslims (sometimes in the context of missionary endeavours), or as a result of sectarian tensions between different Islamic groups.<sup>21</sup> For Christians, the preservation of the memories of those who suffered to carry the faith to new peoples and cultures has often formed a significant part of the shaping of narratives about the formation of recently-converted societies, and the consequent making of new identities. Tertullian's famous phrase in his *Apology* (written in 197) that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church', has continued to resonate long beyond his own day.<sup>22</sup> The accuracy of contemporary and later narratives about wide-scale persecution of Christians in the Early Church has been challenged by modern scholars, most recently and comprehensively by Candida Moss, who has argued that the 'Age of the Martyrs' was a fiction, a set of piously exaggerated stories designed to marginalize heretics and inspire the faithful.<sup>23</sup> Yet, in the pre-Conquest church in England, those tales were believed and played, as we shall see, a significant role in shaping ideas about sanctity.

### Martyr cults in England

Let me return to my question: how significant was it for the development of the Anglo-Saxon Church that, for all their enthusiasm for venerating the cults of the martyrs of the Early Church (including those who had died in Roman Britain for professing the faith), the English cultivated no *native* ecclesiastical martyr cults of their own before the eleventh century?<sup>24</sup> Two points of clarification need making here. First, the cults of native, English, saints only began to emerge once the faith had become well-established among the Anglo-

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securely in Jewish piety, as did Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London, 1986), pp. 436–7. Compare also Brent Shaw, 'Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996), 269–312. But for G.W. Bowersock (*Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 1–21), the Christian concept of martyrdom was only constructed in the century between c. 50 and 150 AD. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA, 1999). For a different perspective on Christian borrowings of pagan and Jewish noble death traditions see Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (London, 2013), chs. 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> Cook, *Martyrdom*; see ch. 5 for the specific question of missionary martyrs in medieval Islam; and ch. 8 for discussion of the entirely different context of contemporary radical Islam.

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, ch. 50; quoted by Moss, *The Myth*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Moss, *The Myth*.

<sup>24</sup> As Bede testified in his *Historia*, the cult of the Christian martyr from Roman Britain, Alban (who may have died around the year 303) survived into the Anglo-Saxon period: *HE*, I: 7, 18, 20; pp. 28–35, 58–61, 64–5. From at least the eleventh century Alban was known, anachronistically, as the *protomartyr Anglorum*, according to Goscelin of St Bertin, writing c. 1091: *Translatio S. Mildrethae virginis*, ch. 24, ed. D. W. Rollason, 'Goscelin of Canterbury's account of the translation and miracles of St. Mildrith (*BHL* 5961/4): an edition with notes', *Mediaeval Studies* 48 (1986) 139–210, at p. 191.

Saxons. The earliest concrete evidence for devotion to notable ascetics, confessors, and virgins from the English race along similar lines to cults in contemporary Gaul appears only at the end of the seventh century, around one hundred years after the first Roman mission. Secondly, my title is – arguably – slightly misleading. I want to question the lack of English *clerical* martyrs, especially but not exclusively the apparent dearth of missionaries killed on English shores. I deliberately exclude lay Christians (like Edwin or Oswald of Northumbria, or in the ninth century, Edmund of East Anglia) who died in battle at the hands of unbelievers; they became saints, but were not culted as martyrs until long after their deaths.<sup>25</sup> It follows that I am not defining martyrdom as ‘the perceived attainment of sanctity by the suffering of violent death’ as some have done, particularly when discussing royal or princely martyrs in northern Europe.<sup>26</sup> Instead, I see it as ‘the sacrifice of life for the sake of the Christian faith’.<sup>27</sup> We will have cause in due course to consider the relevance of a third kind of martyrdom, that witnessed by those who lived rather than died as ‘martyrs’ by pursuing extremes of personal asceticism that made their lives ‘a kind of daily immolation for Christ’.<sup>28</sup> But for now our focus is on red martyrdom of blood. So: why did it take the English so long to get to that point of creating a home-grown clerical martyr cult?

The first, near-contemporary, record of the slaughter of an English churchman on English soil in terms that portray that death as martyrdom relates to the year 1012.<sup>29</sup> Archbishop Ælfheah, having been captured by the Danes in Canterbury and taken to London, was, according to the Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>25</sup> Edwin died at Hatfield Chase in 633 and was buried at Whitby (Bede, *HE*, II. 20; III. 24, pp. 202–3, 292–3); attempts to create a martyr cult for him there were only partly successful. In the sixteenth century Pope Gregory XIII approved his cult implicitly by including Edwin among English martyrs depicted in the wall paintings of the English College in Rome (D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (5<sup>th</sup> edn, Oxford, 2011), s.v. Edwin). The cult of St Oswald (d. 642) developed rapidly after his death, thanks to Bede’s promotion of his cult (*HE*, III. 6, 9–13, pp. 230–1, 240–55) and its spread in continental Europe, but as I will show, Bede never described Oswald as a martyr; see below p. 36. The deaths of Edmund of East Anglia in 869 and the West Saxon king Edward the Martyr in 978 are discussed further below, pp. 39–42. See Rosalind Hill, ‘Holy kings-the-bane of seventh-century society’, in *Church, Society and Politics*, ed. Derek Baker, *Studies in Church History* 12 (1975), 39–43; David Rollason, ‘The cults of murdered royal saints in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983), 1–22; Nicole Marafioti, *The King’s Body: Burial and Succession in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 2014), especially ch. 5 (on Edward the Martyr); Margaret Cormack, ‘Murder and martyrs in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, ed. Margaret Cormack (Oxford and New York, 2001), pp. 58–77.

<sup>26</sup> Haki Antonsson, ‘Some observations on martyrdom in post-conversion Scandinavia’, *Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 28 (2004), 70–9, at p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Thacker, ‘In search of saints’, p. 247.

<sup>28</sup> Stancliffe, *Red, white and blue*, p. 21. Edward E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: the Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, DC, 1950); see further below, pp. 31–2.

<sup>29</sup> Chertsey Abbey preserved the memory of a large number of monks who had died at the hands of the Danes; their names appear in the List of Saints’ Resting Places preserved in the manuscript of the *Liber Vitae* of Hyde Abbey (British Library, Stowe MS 944) But they were not there described as ‘martyrs’. See further below, pp. 38–9.

Chronicle, put to death by his captors on the Saturday of the octave of Easter (19 April) at the end of a drunken feast, ‘his holy blood falling on the ground as he sent his holy soul to God’s kingdom.’<sup>30</sup> The chronicler was probably writing in London at some time after 1016 and before the translation of the archbishop’s body back to Canterbury in 1023. He recorded the prelate’s burial in St Paul’s minster, adding: ‘And God now reveals there the powers of the holy martyr’ (‘*7 þær nu God sutelað þæs halgan martires mihta*’).<sup>31</sup> Following his conquest of England in 1016, the Danish king, Cnut, took an interest in this very recent martyr, playing a leading role in the translation of the archbishop’s incorrupt body from London back to his archiepiscopal seat in Canterbury in June 1023.<sup>32</sup> Ælfheah’s cult did not, however, thrive. After the Conquest, it was one of those about which the first Norman archbishop, Lanfranc, expressed the greatest scepticism.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the fact that none of the clergy in London or Canterbury in the early eleventh century had previous experience of promoting the cult of any earlier, native ecclesiastical martyr made them uncertain about how best to advance the spiritual claims of one who had died for Christ in such unpromising circumstances, after being pelted with the bones and ox-heads on which his tormentors had feasted.<sup>34</sup>

By the early eleventh century, English monastic houses following the Rule of Benedict had become accustomed to the daily reading of a prescribed portion of the martyrology in Chapter each morning, beginning with the announcement of the feast for the following day.<sup>35</sup> The Latin martyrology that circulated most frequently in tenth- and eleventh-century England, that of Usuard of St Germain-des-Prés, provided details of saints’ cults for every day

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<sup>30</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [hereafter *ASC*], s.a. 1012 C(DE), ed. K. O’Brien O’Keeffe, *The ASC, a Collaborative Edition, vol 5, MS C* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> I have discussed the political implications of this translation, and specifically the opportunity that it presented to Cnut to make reparation for the sins of his fellow countrymen during the reign of Æthelred the Unready, in my ‘Kings, saints and conquest’, in *Conquests in Eleventh-Century England: 1016, 1066*, ed. Laura Ashe and Emily Joan Ward (Woodbridge, 2020), pp. 140–64, at pp. 158–60.

<sup>32</sup> *Translatio Sancti Ælfegi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi et martiris* (BHL 2519, ed. and transl. R. Morris and A. R. Rumble, in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. A. R. Rumble, Studies in the Early History of Britain (London, 1994), pp. 283–315.

<sup>33</sup> See further below, p. 51.

<sup>34</sup> Neither the cult of St Alban, nor the more recent ones of Edmund of East Anglia or Edward of Wessex, both of which had become popular in early eleventh-century England, provided useful models for the creation of a clerical cult, particularly not that of a saint who had died in such ambiguous circumstances.

<sup>35</sup> The addition of a reading from the martyrology to the daily meeting of Chapter was an innovation introduced as part of the Aachen reforms of 817 by Benedict of Aniane: *Capitulare monasticum*, §69, ed. A. Boretius, MGH, *Capitularia regum Francorum*, I (Hanover, 1883), 347. Baudoin de Gaiffier, ‘De l’usage et de la lecture du martyrologe: témoignages antérieurs au XIe siècle’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 79 (1961), 40–59, at p. 50. The practice was prescribed for English monasteries by the *Regularis Concordia*, ch. 21, ed. Thomas Symons, *The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation* (London, 1953), p. 17, and see also *ibid.*, p. 28, n. 1.

of the calendar year, including more than two thousand figures ranging from Old Testament times to the mid-ninth century. To these names individual monastic houses will have added those of their own local saints, for the English had by this time cultivated plentiful native saints of their own.<sup>36</sup> Few of those extra names were those of men or women who had died a martyr's death, yet monastics had always showed a keen sensitivity to the particular status accorded to martyrs among the saints, aware of the psalmist's teaching 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the words saint and martyr had in earlier generations sometimes been used synonymously by hagiographers as, for example, by the anonymous author of the *Life of Cuthbert*, both in relation to that saint (whom he twice described as a martyr), and of English saints more generally.<sup>38</sup> Alan Thacker has suggested that this indicates the esteem in which the relics of early Roman martyrs were held in England. A handful of Anglo-Saxon clerical martyrs also feature among those confessors and saints commemorated in the liturgy and in saints' lives written or copied in England. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede introduced his compatriots to the story of the two brothers Hewald, killed by the Old Saxons because they feared that the foreign missionaries would turn their own people away from their old gods and compel the whole land to accept Christianity.<sup>39</sup> Bede noted the feast of these two priests and martyrs among the Old Saxons on 3 October in his *Martyrology*.<sup>40</sup> Boniface, another, better-known English missionary martyred by pagans on the Frisian coast at Dokkum in 754, had rapidly made his way into English calendars and liturgical commemoration after his death. Cuthbert, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 760) energetically promoted his cult, having corresponded with the evangelist in life, and sent condolences to Boniface's successor Lull on his death.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Hamilton, 'Understanding the Church's Past: Usuard's Martyrology in tenth- and eleventh-century England', *Medieval Worlds* 10 (2019), 46–60, at pp. 47–8.

<sup>37</sup> Ps. 115 (116): 15; quoted by Bede, *Expositio apocalypseos*, 21: 20 (Sardius, the colour of blood, signifies the glory of the martyrs), ed. Roger Gryson, CCSL 121A (Turnhout, 2001), p. 541; *In epistolas septem catholicas*, [1 Peter], 1: 7 (the endurance of the saints is well likened to gold), ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 121 (Turnhout, 1983), p. 228; transl. D. Hurst, *The Venerable Bede: Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1985), p. 73; *In principium Genesis*, II. 4.1 (in relation to the death of Abel, who was elsewhere described by Bede as the first martyr), ed. C. H. W. Jones, CCSL 118A (Turnhout, 1967), p. 73; and in his *Acta et passio Anastasii*, BHL 408, par 39, p. 414, line 586.

<sup>38</sup> For details, see further below, p. 34; Thacker, 'In search', pp. 261–2.

<sup>39</sup> Bede, *HE*, V. 10, pp. 480–5.

<sup>40</sup> Bede, *Martyrology*, 3 Oct, ed. J. Dubois and G. Renaud, *Edition Pratique des Martyrologes de Bède de L'Anonyme Lyonnais et de Florus* (Paris, 1976), p. 181: 'V Non. Oct. Apud Antiquos Saxones, natale duorum Hewaldorum presbyterorum: qui cum Willibrordo episcopo venientes in Germaniam, transierunt ad Saxones: et cum ibi praedicare Christum coepissent, comprehensi sunt a paganis et sic occisi: ad quorum corpora noctu multa diu lux apparens, et ubi essent et cuius essent meriti declaravit.'

<sup>41</sup> Cuthbert letter to Lull, 754, ed. Michael Tangl, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, MGH, Epistolae selectae 1 (Berlin, 1955), no. 111, p. 240; for the promotion of Boniface's feast in

All these celebrated figures had, however, died in foreign mission fields, whereas no record survives of a single missionary who died on English shores. Nor, unlike their immediate neighbours in Francia, did the English commemorate as martyrs those clerics who had died violent deaths in the decades following the conversion period. We know of eighteen bishops murdered in Francia between 580 and 754, among them Leodegar of Autun and Praeiectus of Clermont. Although these men were killed in the context of wider political disputes (frequently as a result of the treachery of other nobles) fifteen of the eighteen were commemorated not just as saints but as martyrs after their deaths, despite the ambiguities of their behaviour in life.<sup>42</sup> As Paul Fouracre has argued, ‘the killing of so many holy men in Merovingian Francia had the effect of refocusing the genre of “Passiones” on contemporary figures’ (whereas the Spanish church, by contrast, venerated late antique martyrs from the age of the persecutions).<sup>43</sup> Although close connections linked the English and Frankish churches from the last decades of the sixth century onwards, these Frankish martyrs seemingly found no counterparts among the Anglo-Saxons. The one figure who most obviously exercised episcopal power on a Frankish model – and who supposedly came closest actually to suffering martyrdom – was bishop Wilfrid. Even so, despite the provocative behaviour that led the Northumbrian king, Ecgfrith to imprison the turbulent bishop for an extended period after his return from Rome in 679,<sup>44</sup> it was not in England but in Francia, at an earlier point of his career, that Wilfrid had allegedly come closest to losing his life alongside his Frankish patron Aunemundus (whom Stephen called Dalfinus).<sup>45</sup>

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England see Petra Kehl, *Kult und Nachleben des Heiligen Bonifatius im Mittelalter (754–1200)* (Fulda, 1993), pp. 51–5. Archbishop Cuthbert saw Boniface’s mission as a continuation of that of Augustine to the pagan Anglo-Saxons: Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, 1989), pp. 108–42.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Fouracre, ‘Merovingian history and Merovingian hagiography’, *Past and Present* 127 (1990), 3–38; Cormack, ‘Murder and martyrs’, pp. 58–77.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Fouracre, ‘Why were so many bishops killed in Merovingian Francia?’, in *Bischofsmord in Mittelalter*, ed. Natalie Fryde and Dirk Reitz (Göttingen, 2003), pp. 13–35, at p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> *VSW*, ch. 36–39, pp. 72–9. Bede never mentioned this episode which, as Thacker has noted, cannot easily be reconciled with other evidence that the bishop had left Northumbria for Mercia by 680: Alan Thacker, ‘Wilfrid [St Wilfrid] (c. 634–709/10), bishop of Hexham’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004); accessed 28 Feb. 2020, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-29409>.

<sup>45</sup> According to Stephen, Wilfrid ‘despoiled and ready for the prize of martyrdom, was spared from sharing his patron’s fate because the ‘dukes’ of the Franks so admired the ‘handsome’ (‘formosus’) foreigner that they ordered him to be spared. And so, Stephen continued, ‘now our St Wilfrid has become a confessor like John the Apostle and Evangelist’: *VSW*, ch. 6, pp. 12–15; Fouracre, ‘Why were so many bishops killed?’, p. 29. It is, however, impossible for Wilfrid to have been present at Aunemundus’ death, since this probably occurred c. 662 (Fouracre, ‘Merovingian History’, p. 26; or in 660: Thacker, ‘Wilfrid’), whereas Wilfrid had returned to England at the end of 658. Fouracre (‘Merovingian history’, pp. 26–7, n. 85) has suggested that Stephen invented Wilfrid’s presence at Aunemundus’s martyrdom to establish his hero’s holy status early in his hagiography. Cf. W. T. Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus’ Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an early English Saint’s Life*

Whether the absence of evidence about early English ecclesiastics who had died for the faith really demonstrates that no such martyrdoms had taken place in Britain before the time of Ælfheah remains unclear. My inability to identify any clergy who were culted as martyrs before the eleventh-century archbishop might, of course, result from the deficiencies of the surviving evidence, rather than the fact that none of the men and women involved in the process of bringing the Christian faith to the pagan English died in that evangelising endeavour. On the face of it, however, we might imagine that the interest that the early English Church took in the cult of martyrs elsewhere (especially in Roman martyrs) makes it less likely that any clerics who had died as part of efforts to convert their own compatriots would have gone unremembered. In this context, it is also worth recalling that in other early medieval cultures such as that of early medieval Francia, the *topos* of the forgotten martyr, lying neglected and untended in his tomb until miraculously rediscovered, was commonplace.<sup>46</sup> Certainly there were martyrs in the Romano-British Church: Alban, his alleged companion Amphibalus (although his remains were not miraculously rediscovered until the later twelfth century),<sup>47</sup> Julius and the implausibly named Aaron among them, and Alban's cult at least persisted into Bede's day. Bede mentioned also a martyr Sixtus, whom Augustine had encountered – but did not wholly approve – in Canterbury.<sup>48</sup> Yet none of the ecclesiastics from Rome, Francia, Ireland or elsewhere who came to Britain to bring the gospel to the pagan *gens Anglorum* was remembered either close to his or her own times or – significantly – in later centuries as a martyr. Why not? In other temporal and geographical contexts, mission usually did imply martyrdom, or at least presented evangelists with a serious risk of suffering persecution and possibly death.

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(Lewiston, NY, 1992), pp. 32–3, 44. I am grateful to my student, Rose Lyddon, for reminding me of the ostensible reason why the Frankish leaders decided to spare the young cleric.

<sup>46</sup> Jeremy K. Knight, 'Britain's other martyrs: Julius, Aaron and Alban and Caerleon', in *Alban and St Albans: Roman and medieval architecture, art and archaeology*, ed. Martin Henig and Phillip Lindley (Leeds, 2001), pp. 38–44, at p. 38

<sup>47</sup> The miraculous 'discovery' of the remains of Amphibalus and his companions on 25 June 1177, just three days after Alban's own feast, and their translation the following year to a shrine in St Alban's abbey was reported first by Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum*, ed. H.O. Coxe (5 vols, London, 1841–5), II, 389–97; Florence McCulloch, 'Saints Alban and Amphibalus in the Works of Matthew Paris: Dublin, Trinity College MS 177', *Speculum* 56 (1981), 761–85, at pp. 767–9.

<sup>48</sup> In the *Obsecratio Augustini* (not included in the version of the *Libellus responsionum* that Bede preserved in his *History*, I. 27, pp. 78–103), Augustine asked the Pope to send him some relics of St Sixtus to replace those of a local (i.e. presumably British) martyr of the same name at a shrine where no miracles were occurring and about whom the elders (*antiquiores*) had acquired from their predecessors neither an account of his passion, nor any liturgical rites: M. Deanesly and P. Grosjean, 'The Canterbury edition of the answers of Pope Gregory to Augustine', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 10 (1959), 1–49, at pp. 28–9. It seems most likely that the Sixtus whom Augustine had in mind was the second pope of that name. See Nicholas Brooks, 'Canterbury, Rome and the construction of English identity', in *Early Medieval Rome*, ed. Smith, pp. 221–46, at pp. 237–8.

Across the two millennia of Christian history, missionaries from different places have confronted significant danger when carrying the gospel news to unbelievers in foreign lands. As well as the apostles of the Early Church celebrated in Old English poems, we may call to mind those from Britain and Ireland who died trying to take the faith to pagans east of the Rhine: the two Hewalds and Boniface whom I have already mentioned, or the Irish monk Kilian, beheaded in Wurzburg in 689.<sup>49</sup> Other missionaries to the same region, including Sturm, Liudgar and Willehad narrowly escaped the same fate.<sup>50</sup> Anskar, the ninth-century Frankish missionary to Scandinavia, was probably unusual in his claim to have received a visionary injunction from the Almighty to ‘Go and return to me crowned with martyrdom’ (‘Vade, et martyrio coronatus ad me reverteris’).<sup>51</sup> In the end he proved unable to fulfil that charge, which perturbed him greatly during his final illness. However, Rimbart, his disciple and hagiographer, noted that Anskar’s life had involved so much toil and constant bodily suffering that ‘his whole life was virtually a martyrdom’ (‘omnis quippe vita eius fere martyrium fuit’).<sup>52</sup> In one sense, martyrdom necessarily involves an element of choice, particularly when the act of witness by dying for the faith did not come unexpectedly, but only after the saint had made a deliberate decision to accept death rather than denying Christ or agreeing to participate in a non-Christian religious ritual (such as sacrificing to other gods, or eating meat formerly sacrificed to idols).<sup>53</sup> The act of voluntarily accepting death for the faith itself reflects and imitates Christ’s own death. One might consider it, as Jonathan Riley Smith argued (in the context of those crusaders deemed to have achieved martyrdom by dying in battle), as a perfect kind of Christian death, ‘the supreme act of love of which a Christian was capable’.<sup>54</sup> Should we therefore argue – as Guy Halsall suggested facetiously – that there were no martyrs in the early English Church because the missionaries ‘did not try hard enough’?<sup>55</sup>

Since the Enlightenment, some writers have wondered whether there is something not just rash but abnormal in the idea of yearning for death, even death in so deserving and potentially expiatory a cause.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps all the missionaries to the pagan English were unusually well-provided with an

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<sup>49</sup> *Passio minor Kiliani*, ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, 5 (Hanover, 1910), pp. 722–8.

<sup>50</sup> See James T. Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690–900* (Turnhout, 2009), p. 167.

<sup>51</sup> Rimbart, *Vita Anskari*, ch. 3, ed. G. Waitz, *Vitae Anskarii et Rimbarti*, MGH, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, 55 (Hanover, 1884), p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 40, p. 74.

<sup>53</sup> See Boyarin, *Dying for God*, p. 121.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan J. Riley Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (London, 1986), p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> [https://twitter.com/Real\\_HistoryGuy/status/1233093771597942785](https://twitter.com/Real_HistoryGuy/status/1233093771597942785) [accessed 28 Feb 2020].

<sup>56</sup> G. E. M. de Ste Croix, ‘Why were the early Christians persecuted?’ *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 6–38; Candida Moss, ‘The discourse of voluntary martyrdom ancient and modern’, *Church History* 81 (2012), 531–51, at 533–4.

instinct for self-preservation and thus contrived to avoid (or run away from) potentially dangerous situations. That would seem on many fronts both an unlikely and reductionist argument, especially given the strength from the outset of English devotion to martyr saints, including those who actively sought death for Christ. Bede quoted approvingly the words of Ignatius of Antioch before his martyrdom – ‘I am God’s wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts that I may be made pure bread’ – in his commentary *On Revelation*, when explaining the millstone that the angel would throw into the sea as representing the grinding (‘contritio’) of punishments.<sup>57</sup> He wrote in the same text of the glory to be enjoyed by the souls of those slain for the word of God after the suffering of their bodies, and his expectation that the number of souls destined to be gathered into blessed immortality would be augmented through martyrdom.<sup>58</sup> Modern commentators have, however, seen Ignatius’ craving for martyrdom as ‘pathological’, bordering on mania, and contrary to the normal human desire for self-preservation.<sup>59</sup>

So-called ‘voluntary’ martyrdom cannot, in fact, as Candida Moss has shown, be distinguished from normative martyrdom, even though some writers in the early Church did discuss deaths that they felt unable to deem proper martyrdom. For example, Clement of Alexandria distinguished the true martyr both from those who rush to death (who are ‘without witness’, *amartyros*) and from heretics who would not consider martyrdom out of impiety or cowardice. Polycarp of Smyrna’s eventual death in 156 AD, following a period when he had gone into hiding to escape his persecutors, was described as martyrdom ‘according to the gospel’ by his third-century biographer, who contrasted his hero with the failure of another figure, Quintus, who had initially rushed towards death, only to recant when he saw the wild beasts.<sup>60</sup> Moss has demonstrated that while ancient Christians understood the significance of death for Christ in different ways, we should avoid any temptation to impose our own distinctions or typologies on those writings. However squeamish we may feel about the eagerness with which Ignatius and Anskar sought martyrdom, the early Church did not distinguish ‘voluntary’ self-sacrifice from any other sort of martyrdom. Whether any of the early evangelists among the English had wanted to die at pagan hands we cannot know, but we do know that, if any of them did pay that ultimate price, it went unrecorded. No one made them into martyrs.

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<sup>57</sup> Bede, *Expositio apocalypseos*, 18.21, p. 485; the quotation is from Ignatius’ letter *Ad Romanos*, 4.1.

<sup>58</sup> Bede, *Expositio apocalypseos*, 6. 11, p. 303.

<sup>59</sup> de Ste Croix, ‘Why were the early Christians persecuted?’, pp. 23–4; Donald Riddle, *Martyrs: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago, IL, 1931).

<sup>60</sup> Moss, ‘The discourse’, pp. 541–5.



The history of martyrdom in the British Isles goes back to the days of the great persecution which began in 303 under the emperors Diocletian in the East and Maximian in the West ending only when Christians were permitted to worship in 313. The British priest, Gildas, who wrote a scathing religious jeremiad on the state of the church in Britain at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (On the ruin and fall of Britain) in the middle years of the sixth century, bears important witness to the existence of cults of local martyrs in his own day. He described the evangelisation of Roman Britain with some enthusiasm, noting how ‘an island numb with chill ice and far removed, as in a remote nook of the world, from the visible sun’, was warmed by the presence of Christ’s rays, even whilst observing dolefully that Christian precepts were received lukewarmly (‘tepide’) by the inhabitants.<sup>61</sup> Then Gildas turned to the fate of believers under Diocletian’s tyranny:<sup>62</sup>

God, therefore, increased his pity for us; for he wishes all men to be saved, and calls sinners no less than those who think themselves just. As a free gift to us, in the time (as I conjecture) of this same persecution, he acted to save Britain being plunged deep in the thick darkness of black night; for he lit for us the brilliant lamps of holy martyrs (‘clarissimos lampades sanctorum martyrum’). Their graves and places where they suffered would now have the greatest effect in instilling the blaze of divine charity in the minds of beholders, were it not that our citizens, thanks to our sins, have been deprived of many of them by the unhappy partition with the barbarians. I refer to St. Alban of Verulam, Aaron and Julius, citizens of Caerleon, and the others of both sexes who, in different places, displayed the highest spirit in the battle-line of Christ.

Bede used Gildas’s account in his own narrative, thinking it important to show that the island of Britain had played its part in this collective act of witness against the tyranny of the pagan Romans. As he explained, Diocletian’s was the longest and most cruel of the Roman persecutions, lasting for ten years and involving the ‘burning of churches, the proscription of innocents and the slaughter of martyrs.’ ‘In fact’, Bede continued, ‘Britain attained to the great glory of bearing faithful witness to God.’<sup>63</sup> This statement led naturally into the next chapter of the *History* which narrated at length the events leading up to the martyrdom of ‘Illustrious Alban, fruitful Britain’s child’, as Venantius

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<sup>61</sup> Gildas, *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*, §8–9, ed. and transl. M. Winterbottom, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works* (Chichester, 1978), pp. 18–19 (translation) and 91–2 (text).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, §10, pp. 19 and 92. Knight, ‘Britain’s other martyrs’, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 6, pp. 28–9; compare J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People: a Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1988), p. 12.

Fortunatus described him.<sup>64</sup> For Bede, it mattered that Alban's cult had survived into his own day because this attested to an unbroken continuity of faith on British shores (despite the barbarian interruption and divisions of which Gildas had written), witnessing to God's knowledge of and love for the inhabitants of this island. Yet that solitary example of the survival of native cult from Roman times provided a stark contrast with what Bede otherwise saw as the manifold failures of the British clergy, particularly their derelictions in not converting the English and their refusal to co-operate with Augustine's mission.<sup>65</sup> Apart from their preservation of Alban's memory, Bede saw nothing to praise in the actions of the British – the 'unchosen race' in Sandy Murray's evocative phrase. Their inaction had led directly to the necessity for the church in Rome to intervene and arrange for a mission to this pagan people worshipping sticks and stones at the corner ('angulus', angle) of the known world.<sup>66</sup>

### The first missions to the English

As Bede reported it, only in the last decade of the sixth century did Christian missionaries engage upon concerted, organised – and papally-inspired – mission to the pagan inhabitants of post-Roman Britain. Even then, that first Roman mission got off to a slow start. In 596, Pope Gregory sent monks from his own monastery in Rome to travel to Britain in order to preach the word to the English. Although the group set off obediently enough, they had not gone far on their journey before they became 'paralysed with terror. They began to contemplate returning home rather than going to a barbarous, fierce and unbelieving nation whose language they did not even understand.' Augustine, their leader, returned to Rome to ask Gregory if they might be released from his charge, but the pope firmly set them back on track, urging them not to let 'the toilsome journey nor the tongues of evil speakers' deter them, but to hold fast to the eternal reward that would await them. He thought also of their practical needs and arranged that Frankish interpreters accompany the Roman monks to England, since they would be able to talk to the pagan English in their own tongue.<sup>67</sup> We may feel sceptical as to whether the issue of not being

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<sup>64</sup> 'Albanum egregium fecunda Britannia profert', that line which Bede quoted came from a poem by Venantius Fortunatus: *Carmina*, VIII. Iii, ed. F. Leo, MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi, IV. 1 (Berlin, 1881), p. 185.

<sup>65</sup> See further below, p. 21.

<sup>66</sup> Alexander Murray, 'Bede and the unchosen race', in *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies* ed. Huw Pryce and John Watts (Oxford 2007), pp. 52–67. For the image of the English race, living in the corner of the world ('gens Anglorum in mundi angulo posita') and worshipping trees and rocks see Gregory the Great, *Epistolae*, VIII. 29, ed. L. M. Hartmann, MGH, *Epistolae*, II (Berlin, 1899), p. 30.

<sup>67</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 23–4, pp. 68–73. The Pope had earlier had a similar notion; see his letter to Candidus in 595 asking him to buy English boys and train them to become missionaries to their own people:

able to communicate distressed the missionaries more than their fear at what they might encounter among ‘a barbarous, fierce and unbelieving nation’. Their familiarity with the fates suffered by earlier generations of evangelists from the first apostles onwards cannot have inspired them with much optimism about the likely consequences of travel to such an alien land. The Roman missionaries may have started from the presumption that to spread the gospel would be to put themselves in harm’s way.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, even though they were greeted with some caution when the party eventually arrived on the island of Thanet – the Kentish king choosing to meet them in the open air for fear of the magic they might be able to perform indoors – the Roman missionaries and their Frankish companions were rapidly welcomed, given the necessities to support themselves, and positively encouraged to preach to the local populace. The king was persuaded by their example, their preaching, and devout way of life, and he, together with a large number of his people, accepted the faith and were baptised.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, Bede reported that this first group of missionaries ‘kept themselves prepared to endure adversities, even to the point of dying for the truths they proclaimed’.<sup>70</sup> Perhaps he hoped to demonstrate that despite not having had their faith thus tested, Augustine and his companions did adhere to the self-sacrificial principles espoused by their apostolic role models.

Bede provided similar narratives about the initial successes of missionaries in the other English kingdoms as they travelled up the eastern seaboard, their voyages recounted in ways that mirror the travels of St Paul around Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. Fresh initiatives in each kingdom began with an approach to the local ruler and members of their courts; on each occasion, as Bede would have us believe, the evangelists were welcomed, and their message of Christian hope heard.<sup>71</sup> Admittedly, some recipients of these endeavours responded with initial caution, or in the case of the East Anglian king, Rædwald, outright ambivalence; famously, he retained two altars inside his pagan temple, one to pagan gods as well as one for Christian sacrifice of

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Gregory, *Epistolae*, VI. 10, ed. P. Ewald and L. M. Hartmann, MGH, *Epistolae*, I (Berlin, 1881), pp. 388–9.

<sup>68</sup> It is also possible, however, that the missionaries were as much, or even more concerned by the recent death of the Frankish king, Childebert II (575–596), ruler of Burgundy and Austrasia, through whose lands the group had hoped to travel: Roger Collins, ‘Rome, Canterbury and Wearmouth-Jarrow: three viewpoints on Augustine’s mission’, in *Cross, Crescent and Conversion: Studies on Medieval Spain and Christendom in Memory of Richard Fletcher*, ed. Simon Barton and Peter Linehan (Leiden, 2007), pp. 17–42, at pp. 25–7.

<sup>69</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 26, pp. 76–7.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: ‘... et paratum ad patiendum aduersa quaeque uel etiam moriendum pro ea quam praedicabant ueritate animum habendo.’

<sup>71</sup> Barbara Yorke, ‘The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts’, in *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. Richard Gameson (Stroud, 1999), pp. 152–73.

eucharist.<sup>72</sup> On other occasions, it took time, and a good deal of debate, to win people round, but during this first phase, according to Bede, even if these foreign missionaries may have feared the threat of encountering physical violence, none was ever harmed, or – reportedly – put to death.

That situation would change after the end of the lifetime of the first generation of English kings who accepted conversion. Their sons in many instances chose not to follow their fathers' examples but elected to revert to the paganism of their ancestors. Bede presented this as apostasy, the deliberate turning away from the true faith that they had once espoused, although it is perhaps more likely that during the first stages of the conversion royal families did not act collectively in choosing to follow the teachings of this new god, but rather determined that some of their number (hedging their bets) should remain pagan, while others followed their king to the font. Perhaps the re-assertion of traditional religion was one way in which a young king sought to win his nobles' support after his accession. The younger kings who replaced the Christian rulers of Kent, Essex and Northumbria may never have adopted Christianity in the first place.<sup>73</sup>

Whatever their motives, the consequences of this turn away from Christ in the 630s had considerable implications for churchmen, whose anxieties about the dangers of evangelisation among fierce and barbarous peoples suddenly acquired a fresh immediacy. On Æthelberht's death in 616, when his son had taken over the realm, Bede reported that 'there followed a severe setback to the tender growth of the church'.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, on the death of the Christian King Sæberht of Essex, 'the tempest of troubles became yet more violent', for when he died, he left three sons as heirs who had all remained pagan. They had no understanding or interest in the Christian faith and in the end expelled their bishop, Mellitus, from Essex, forcing him to return to Kent. Once there, Bede tells us, the bishop and his companions determined that they should all return to their own country (that is, go back to Rome) 'rather than remain fruitlessly among these barbarians who had rebelled against the faith'. Mellitus and Justus (bishop of Rochester) thus fled to Gaul, where they may have remained for some time.<sup>75</sup> Lawrence, bishop of Canterbury, was on the brink of following their example, abandoning his flock and fleeing for safety, only to change his mind in light of a nocturnal vision from a furious St Peter,

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<sup>72</sup> Bede, *HE*, II, 15, pp. 188–91.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972; 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 1991), pp. 75–6; Barbara Yorke, 'The adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon royal courts to Christianity', in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 243–57, at pp. 244–5.

<sup>74</sup> Bede, *HE*, II, 5, pp. 150–1.

<sup>75</sup> Bede, *HE*, II, 5, pp. 152–3; see David P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1991), pp. 40–41; Ian Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English', *Speculum* 69 (1994), 1–17, pp. 7–8.

who asked him pointedly, ‘to what shepherd he would commit the sheep of Christ when he ran away and left them in the midst of wolves’.<sup>76</sup> Peter reminded him forcefully that he himself had suffered death, even the death of the cross, at the hands of infidels and enemies of Christ in order that he might be crowned with him. As a consequence, Lawrence stayed put, electing to take the risk of persecution and even death. That change of heart proved instrumental in persuading the new king to abandon his idolatry and accept baptism.<sup>77</sup>

In Northumbria, Paulinus, who had accompanied the Christian Kentish princess Æthelburh north on her marriage to the pagan Edwin and persuaded him to convert, felt the necessity to flee back to Kent by boat with the queen and her children when, as Bede alleges, ‘the affairs of Northumbria had been thrown into such confusion that there seemed no safety except in flight’, after Edwin’s death in 633.<sup>78</sup> A great slaughter of the church and people of Northumbria supposedly took place at this time, yet no one preserved the names of any clergy who died during this period of apostacy; indeed, the thriving ministry of James the Deacon beyond this period of crisis suggests that Paul-inus’s party might perhaps safely have remained in the north after all. This ‘true churchman and saintly man’ had accompanied Paulinus to Northumbria and was presumably, like him, of Italian origin. Yet, James stayed behind when the rest of the mission departed, ‘teaching and baptising and rescuing much prey from the ancient foe’. He was still tending to his flock in 664, when he attended the synod of Whitby to speak on the Roman side. After the decision in favour of the Roman Easter, he taught many people in the region chant in the Roman manner.<sup>79</sup> Stenton, rather pointedly, described him as ‘the one heroic figure in the Roman mission’.<sup>80</sup>

So apparently, no one died to bring the faith to the English. Indeed, the only missionary reported to have suffered any bodily harm was Lawrence, bishop of Canterbury, whom St Peter scourged long and hard while castigating him with apostolic severity for presuming to contemplate abandoning his flock.<sup>81</sup> Let me return to my question: why not? In the next sections of this essay, I intend to work through a series of possible explanations in turn. It is most likely, of course, that no one simple answer can be provided – otherwise someone would surely have pointed it out before; I am far from the only scholar to whom this problem has occurred.<sup>82</sup> But some of the solutions I shall propose may seem more plausible than others, and I will suggest that one

<sup>76</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 6, pp. 154–5; cf. Matt 10: 16; John 10: 12.

<sup>77</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 6, pp. 154–5.

<sup>78</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 20, pp. 204–5.

<sup>79</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 16, 20; III. 25, pp. 206–7, 298–9.

<sup>80</sup> F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Oxford, 1971), p. 116.

<sup>81</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 6, pp. 154–5; I owe this point to Jessica Coulson.

<sup>82</sup> Stancliffe, ‘Red, white and blue’; Thacker, ‘In search’, pp. 247–8.

reason above all may have proved particularly important in explaining the absence of evidence of missionary martyrdom.

### Some reasons why

Let us start with the missionaries themselves and the faith that they preached. Might we find the reasons within the nature of Christianity? Was martyrdom a feature of the experience of the earliest Christians in the Roman world, arising directly from the threat that this Middle Eastern expression of monotheism presented to the practice of Roman religion (particularly to its imperial cults), but one that ceased to have relevance after the adoption of Christianity across the empire? While the persecution of Christians across the empire ended with Constantine, this did not of course instantly bring an end to the suffering experienced by Christians who sought to minister (and especially to evangelise) beyond areas where Rome held sway. To argue that the espousal of Christianity among non-believers had suddenly ceased to be dangerous seems so unlikely as to deserve immediate rejection. Given both the fears apparently articulated by those who found themselves working, or preparing to work, among the pagan English, and the history of the fate of martyrs across time in the centuries before and after the Gregorian mission, I see no reason to challenge the proposition with which I began. Mission to unbelievers usually carried with it a real risk of martyrdom.

#### a) Missionary methods

More profitably, we could consider whether the methods adopted by the missionaries had any impact on the reception of their teaching by their new flock. Bede would probably have agreed with the assertion that much of the success of both the first Roman mission, and that of Aidan and his Ionan-trained companions among the Northumbrians, arose directly from the manner in which they sought to convey the details of the faith. The narrative that he recounted about the failure of the first monk from Iona who arrived in response to King Oswald's call for someone to evangelise his people – a man of 'harsher disposition', to whom the Northumbrians were unwilling to listen – and the subsequent achievement of the more moderate Aidan certainly implies that Bede believed some missionary methods, perhaps those specifically designed not to cause conflict, had greater initial success than others.<sup>83</sup> Frustratingly, Bede tells us little about how any of the missionaries tackled the task of catechesis. In many ways, we learn more from the letters from different popes to English kings and queens that Bede quoted in his *History* about those elements of the Christian faith which were believed to be essential and which

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<sup>83</sup> Bede, *HE*, III. 5, pp. 226–9; Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 94–9.

aspects of pagan belief missionaries should in turn seek to denounce.<sup>84</sup> Did the evangelists try to focus more on the positive, hope-inducing elements of the Christian message, avoiding what preachers in today's Church refer to as the hard sayings of Jesus, and the more uncompromising passages of the letters of St Paul?<sup>85</sup> The longest of the different conversion narratives in Bede's *History*, his account of Northumbrian mission, alleges that the promise of eternal life proved particularly important to King Edwin's thegns, as illustrated by the celebrated speech likening the life of man on earth to the flight of a sparrow in winter through the king's hall.<sup>86</sup> Seemingly, aspects of the Christian religion could be explained in ways that made the new faith attractive to the early English nobility and the wider population. This proved a religion that could acculturate itself well to Anglo-Saxon cultural norms and speak across the bounds of gender and social class, translating a message originally articulated in the Mediterranean world into one that made sense to a Germanic society focused round a leader and his warband.<sup>87</sup>

Missionary narratives tend to suggest that the methods adopted by groups of evangelists to Germanic peoples in separate parts of western and northern Europe did not differ significantly. These frequently (if not universally) involved a top-down approach that started with the royal court (or the circle immediately around a tribal leader) before missionaries tried to disseminate the faith more widely among the general population. While that apparently worked for Augustine in Kent, Paulinus in Northumbria, and Wilfrid at the court of Aldgisl in Frisia, it proved the undoing of the Hewalds in Saxony: their preaching directly threatened the Saxons' sense of self.<sup>88</sup> If kings and other military leaders had played a significant part in determining the religious practice of their non-Christian subjects, then this strategy would have made a good deal of sense; without what we would now term 'leadership buy-in', missions were doomed to failure. Kings' overt support for, and material protection of missionary clergy may have played a significant role in ensuring their personal safety among the wider pagan population, even when they then

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<sup>84</sup> For further discussion of this problem see my "'Approaching the stony and barren hearts of the pagans": the place of catechesis in the Anglo-Saxon missions', in *Rooted and Grounded: Faith Formation and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Steven Croft (London, 2019), pp. 86–103. Also Owen Phelan, 'Catechising the wild: the continuity and innovation of missionary catechesis under the Carolingians', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010), 455–74.

<sup>85</sup> F. F. Bruck, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (London, 1983).

<sup>86</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 13, pp. 182–5.

<sup>87</sup> Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf* and the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. R. T. Farrell, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 46 (1978), 32–95; reprinted in Patrick Wormald, *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian*, ed. Stephen Baxter (Oxford, 2006), pp. 30–105.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen, *VSW*, ch. 26, pp. 52–3; James Palmer, 'Wilfrid and the Frisians', in *Wilfrid, Abbot, Bishop, Saint: Papers from the 1300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conferences* (Donington, 2013), pp. 231–42; Bede, *HE*, V. 10; Knut Schäferdiek, 'Der Schwarze und der Weiße Hewald: Der erste Versuch einer Sachsenmission', *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 146 (1996), 9–24.

ventured further from the royal courts. Yet, had pagan kings formerly enjoyed quasi-sacral roles, their conversion to Christianity would subtly have altered their responsibility to act as mediators with the gods in securing the material prosperity and well-being of their people.<sup>89</sup> In this context it is scarcely surprising that so many accounts of successful missions involve the reversal of temporal misfortunes and the provision of plenty for the new converts; think of Wilfrid's capacity to end three years of famine among the South Saxons, or Bishop Daniel's advice to Boniface about Christians who lived in lands of plenty.<sup>90</sup> We would thus need to credit Roman, Frankish and Irish missionaries with the capacity to explain the Christian faith in ways that made it both attractive and unthreatening to early English cultural mores and to the people's sense of their own distinct identity within their separate kingdoms and smaller tribal groupings. Pope Gregory's abrupt change of mind over the question of how to treat pagan temples looks like just such an accommodation, designed to soften the missionaries' impact and avoid the tensions that coercive policies would inevitably occasion.<sup>91</sup>

Certainly, the potential appeal to kings of a religion that spoke of a sovereign god and his everlasting dominion seems obvious. Christian teaching offered the potential to reinforce a hierarchically-ordered society and to legitimate royal power (or that of tribal leaders).<sup>92</sup> Similarly, the technology of literacy that came with a religion of the book would in time bring manifest advantages to royal administration and government.<sup>93</sup> Material patronage of the new faith provided a number of opportunities for conspicuous displays of royal wealth and prestige such as through donations of land, the sponsoring of the building of churches (especially churches in the unfamiliar medium of stone), the commissioning of liturgical vessels, or the copying and illumination of manuscripts. Whether or not the rulers of Kent had hesitated over accepting conversion via their Frankish neighbours for fear of thereby losing their political autonomy, they and other English leaders may have welcomed opportunities that would bring them closer to a wider Christian world and a whole range of new artistic and cultural influences. All these issues might help to explain why missionaries seem to have enjoyed a particular protection when working among the English that their counterparts elsewhere did not share.

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<sup>89</sup> See further below, §d.

<sup>90</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV. 13, pp. 372–7; Bishop Daniel of Winchester, letter to Boniface, 723–4 AD, ed. Tangl, *Die Briefe*, no. 23, pp. 38–41.

<sup>91</sup> Discussed further below, pp. 28–9.

<sup>92</sup> Compare Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* (1978; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1982, reprinted London, 2019). Donovan's particular success lay not only in his capacity to translate Christianity into terms the Masai could grasp but also in capitalising on their own developed sense of community by equipping people already recognised as leaders or possessing particular skills to act, effectively, as their ministers.

<sup>93</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1990).



Rather than looking at the potential significance of the missionaries' pedagogic gifts, or the appeal to English audiences of the faith that they preached, let us turn instead to consider matters relating to the recipients of their evangelising endeavours.

b) The prior conversion of the early English

Firstly, we should consider the possibility that the English were – despite what Bede would have us believe – essentially Christian already, or at least had arrived at a state in which they were receptive to gospel teaching. Alternatively, we might conjecture that the faith had either persisted much more deeply across the whole of lowland Britain after the end of Roman rule, and/or that earlier missionary efforts, especially those made by their immediate neighbours, the northern Franks, had had a more effective and enduring impact on the pagan Angles and Saxons than Bede's account implies. In either eventuality, the English population not only in Kent, but further west and north, would have had sufficient exposure to Christian teaching that neither the priests among the first envoys from Rome, nor their successors, would prove as alien to the Anglo-Saxons as, for example, would Roman Catholic missionaries in early modern Japan,<sup>94</sup> or Anglicans in nineteenth-century Melanesia.<sup>95</sup> Bede consistently underestimated (or perhaps better, deliberately minimised) the strength and enduring reach of the Romano-British Church after the Anglo-Saxon settlements, criticising their clergy for failing to obey the gospel injunction to spread the faith among their pagan Germanic neighbours because that suited his wider argument about God's purposes for the English race and the means by which they came to Christ.<sup>96</sup> Bede also said nothing about the survival into the post-Roman period of sites of Christian worship in the south west attested by archaeological and epigraphic evidence,<sup>97</sup> nor about the region around Hadrian's Wall. The recent discovery in the rubble of a building (perhaps a sixth-century church) of a lead chalice inscribed with lettering in Greek, Roman and possibly ogham alphabets as well as Christian symbols (including crosses, chi-rho motifs, angels and the figure of a bishop) sheds new

<sup>94</sup> Miyazaki Kentaro, 'Roman Catholic Mission in Pre-Modern Japan', in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. Mark R. Mullins (Leiden, 2003), pp. 1–18.

<sup>95</sup> David Hilliard, 'The making of an Anglican martyr: Bishop John Coleridge Patteson of Melanesia', in *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, ed. Diana Wood, *Studies in Church History* 30 (1993), 333–45; cf. Rachel Moriarty, 'Vivian Redlich, 1905–1942: a martyr in the tradition', *ibid.*, pp. 454–63.

<sup>96</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 22, pp. 68–9. For Bede's attitudes towards the British see W. T. Foley and N. J. Higham, 'Bede on the Britons', *Early Medieval Europe* 17 (2009), 154–85; Murray, 'Bede and the unchosen race'.

<sup>97</sup> For example, Sherborne, Exeter, Gloucester, Worcester, Carlisle, Wareham, Cirencester etc. See Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), particularly chs. 4 and 5; Malcolm Lambert, *Christians and Pagans: The conversion of Britain from Alban to Bede* (New Haven, NJ and London, 2010), ch. 1.

light on Christianity in that region.<sup>98</sup> The conversion of the western Midlands and the origins of dioceses among the Hwicce and Magonsaetan – subjects on which Bede was again silent – must, as Patrick Sims-Williams has shown, have been effected rather differently from the evangelisation of the eastern seaboard, and was probably driven by local indigenous clergy who successfully (if modestly) spread the faith among new neighbours without preserving records of their missionary triumphs.<sup>99</sup> Nor did Bede provide much detail about the Christianisation of English settlers in the north west, beyond his brief mention of Ninian and the church at Whithorn in Galloway, which had come under Bernician control in the second half of the seventh century.<sup>100</sup> We might also recall the deaths of the 1200 monks from the British monastery of Bangor, who attended the battle of Chester in order to pray for a British victory against Æthelfrith, pagan king of the Northumbrians. In hands of a writer who did not share Bede's hostility to the British, these might have been construed as martyrs for their faith.<sup>101</sup> In the 670s, Bishop Wilfrid appears to have appropriated some 'consecrated places' in the Pennines that British clergy had deserted, in the words of his biographer Stephen of Ripon, 'when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation'.<sup>102</sup> If those clergy had only recently abandoned their places of worship, as seems likely, then they might well have been ministering to English as well as British families in the local villages before Northumbrian forces drove them out.

A range of different sorts of evidence (including that of place-names as well as material culture) thus points to continuing Christian religious practice in sub-Roman Britain and on into the early Anglo-Saxon period. Additionally, we should consider the possible influence of the Frankish church on Christianity in southern England before the arrival of the Roman mission in 597. Ian Wood has reminded us of the extent to which Pope Gregory had wanted to involve the Frankish church in the English mission (and for how long he had made preparatory arrangements to ensure the mission's success before the despatch of the first monks from Rome).<sup>103</sup> Gregory's letters testify to the efforts that he made to persuade Frankish rulers and their queens to take an active role in their neighbours' evangelisation.<sup>104</sup> Wood has also argued that the Franks claimed some political hegemony over south-eastern England in the

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<sup>98</sup> *Current Archaeology* 368 (1 October 2020): <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/news/christian-chalice-found-at-vindolanda.htm>

<sup>99</sup> Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England* (Cambridge, 1990), chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>100</sup> Bede, *HE*, III. 4, pp. 222–3. See Peter Hill, 'Whithorn, Latinus and the origins of Christianity in Northern Britain', in *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain*, ed. H. Hamerow and A. MacGregor (Oxford, 2001), pp. 23–32.

<sup>101</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 2, pp. 140–3.

<sup>102</sup> Stephen, *VSW*, ch. 17, pp. 36–7.

<sup>103</sup> Wood, 'The mission'.

<sup>104</sup> Collins and McClure, 'Rome', pp. 26–30.

second half of the sixth century, although that view is disputed.<sup>105</sup> When the pope commented disapprovingly on the reluctance of their ‘neighbours’ to respond to English requests for conversion, he would appear, Wood suggests, to have talked of Frankish, not British derelictions.<sup>106</sup> Bede did, of course, tell us about Æthelberht’s Christian wife, Bertha (daughter of the former Merovingian king, Charibert I, 561–7, and the Frankish bishop, Liudhard, who had accompanied her to Kent on her marriage to support her in the faith.<sup>107</sup> With her household, the queen apparently worshipped in an ancient church on the east of the city of Canterbury, dedicated to a Gallo-Roman saint: Martin of Tours.<sup>108</sup> This might point to the survival of Christian worship in post-Roman eastern Britain before Augustine’s arrival, since Bede reported that St Martin’s church had been built ‘in ancient times’. On the other hand, it might indicate that there had been some earlier Frankish missionary engagement in the region, endeavours that had involved the rebuilding of an earlier structure and its rededication to the Gallic saint, whose cult had grown rapidly after his death in 397.<sup>109</sup>

Which of those alternatives we should prefer takes on a different complexion when considered in the light of the recently-published findings from the Prittlewell burial. The assemblage of goods in that burial chamber sheds light on the cultural connections of the East Saxon elite in the late sixth century, which extended across the Christian world as far as Byzantium. The excavation team has argued that there is a high probability that the burial predates Augustine’s arrival in 597, and it might even be earlier than 590. Barbara Yorke has suggested that Rricula, the Christian sister of Æthelberht of Kent and wife of the East Saxon king Sledd, might have curated the assemblage of goods, including the Christian symbol of the two gold foil crosses laid over the eyes of the corpse.<sup>110</sup> This apparent desire to seek the protection of the Christian god after death points to the infiltration of Christianity north of the Thames in the decades before the Roman mission.

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<sup>105</sup> I. N. Wood, *The Merovingian North Sea* (1983); I. N. Wood, ‘Frankish Hegemony in England’, in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: the Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M. O. H. Carver (1992), pp. 235–41. For a contrary view see, for example, Collins and McClure, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, n. 39, p. 371, and their article ‘Rome’.

<sup>106</sup> Wood, ‘The mission’, pp. 5–10.

<sup>107</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 25, pp. 72–5.

<sup>108</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 26, pp. 76–7; the surviving building dates from the post-Roman period but incorporates a good deal of Roman fabric and so may have replaced an earlier structure: H. M. and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1965), I. 143–5. Charibert’s share of Francia had included Tours, so it is not surprising that Bertha should have shown an interest in Martin’s cult.

<sup>109</sup> Ian Wood, ‘The Franks and Sutton Hoo’ in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500–1600*, ed. I. N. Wood (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 1–14.

<sup>110</sup> Although Bede never explicitly described Rricula’s conversion and baptism, the fact that he named her, as Barbara Yorke has noted, probably indicates that she had become a Christian: Barbara Yorke, ‘Historical context’, in *The Prittlewell Princely Burial: Excavations at Priory Crescent, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, 2003*, ed. Lyn Blackmore *et al.* (London, 2019), pp. 341–8, at p. 347.

While not demonstrating that the East Saxon people had been converted to the new faith, the Prittlewell collection does show that Christianity was not unfamiliar, at least to the elite. As Yorke has argued, ‘the great missionary campaigns recorded by Bede may have marked not so much the introduction of Christianity into a province as its movement out of the royal courts to the population as a whole on an organised basis’.<sup>111</sup>

c) Anglo-Saxon attitudes

If lowland Britain were perhaps not, therefore, quite the desolate barbarian pagan wilderness that Augustine’s sheltered Roman companions first imagined and so feared as they reluctantly made their journey north, what other aspects of the society and culture of the Anglo-Saxons might have made them willing to accept foreign missionaries without violence? Were the early medieval English essentially a friendly people, always willing to welcome strangers into their midst? Preparing this lecture, I found myself remembering a scene from one of my favourite books from childhood: *Asterix in Britain*. Mocking British cultural habits, the authors depicted a scene in the midst of Julius Caesar’s invasion of Britain, when the Britons inexplicably stopped fighting each afternoon at 4pm to drink cups of hot water, sometimes with a dash of milk.<sup>112</sup> Should we see the pagan English as peaceable and open-minded, and eager to share their domestic rituals with outsiders? All our evidence about the warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons from both written and material sources indicates the implausibility of such a suggestion. In the world of *Beowulf* and the Staffordshire Hoard, of blood-feud and intense military rivalry between tribes and kingdoms, strangers were always the objects of suspicion and risked their lives whenever they travelled to regions where no one could vouch for them.

Durkheim argued that religion works as a window onto social dynamics; it might therefore be more relevant to ask whether there were aspects of early medieval English society which differentiated it from that of other comparable peoples in contemporary Europe. If so, that might explain the different fate suffered by missionaries to the continental Germans and to Scandinavia, where martyrdom was widely attested during the conversion era (particularly, as we have already noted, the martyrdom of kings and princes rather than missionaries and other clergy).<sup>113</sup> Yet everything we know about barbarian societies in the West suggests that Anglo-Saxon social structures were, at least in origin, broadly similar to those elsewhere in northern Europe, particularly among peoples with less long-term exposure to Roman culture especially in those qualities that medieval writers used to differentiate the nations: ‘descent,

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>112</sup> *Asterix in Britain*, text by Goscinny; drawings by Uderzo; translated by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge (London, 1970).

<sup>113</sup> Antonsson, ‘Some observations’; Norman W. Ingham, ‘The sovereign as martyr, East and West’, *The Slavic and East European Journal* 17 (1973), 1–17.

customs [which I would understand to include religious practice], language and law', to quote Regino of Prüm.<sup>114</sup> Yet in Germany, east of the Rhine and in Scandinavia, societies which might appear quite similar to Anglo-Saxon England, martyrs both clerical and royal are recorded during the conversion period.

More surprisingly, the one area that stands out as similar to early medieval England and markedly unlike the rest of continental Europe is Ireland. Martyrdom was, as Clare Stancliffe has shown, virtually unknown in medieval Ireland before the start of Viking raiding; although missionaries met with strong opposition, there is no evidence any were killed because of their religion.<sup>115</sup> Like the earliest English Christians, clergy in the Irish church took a significant interest in martyrdom and in the cults of the martyrs of the Early Church. St Patrick declared in his *Confessio* his willingness, should he be judged worthy, to sacrifice his life for Christ, aspiring ardently to share the cup that he drank.<sup>116</sup> I am not qualified to discuss which aspects of early Irish social structure might be relevant to this theme, but it is clear that the differences between the nature of early medieval Irish society and that of lowland Britain after the migration period are more striking than the similarities. One might therefore need to look for quite different explanations to account for this element of their shared history.

#### d) Anglo-Saxon religion(s)

If we reject the idea that a uniquely Anglo-Saxon social structure might in some way have contributed to framing English ideas about martyrdom, what about the nature of pre-Christian religion among the Anglo-Saxons and the ways in which it shaped early English society and culture? Did the apparent physical safety of missionaries to the pagan English reveal anything about the nature of their pagan religions, and more specifically their attitudes towards people dedicated to the worship of the gods and matters relating to the sacred and the taboos that surrounded them? This possibility would have appealed directly to H. M. Chadwick, for one of his early papers related to the ancient Teutonic priesthood.<sup>117</sup> It could have been the case, for example, that, once accepted and welcomed by kings, representatives of the new faith would have become subject to same sorts of constraints as their pagan religious

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<sup>114</sup> Regino, letter to Archbishop Hatto of Mainz, ed. F. Kurze, *Regionis Prumiensis Chronicon*, MGH, SRG 50 (Hanover, 1890), xix–xx: 'sicut diuersae nationes populorum inter se discrepant genere, moribus, lingua, legibus'. Cf. Walter Pohl, 'Telling the difference: Signs of ethnic identity', in *Strategies of Distinction: the Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 17–69.

<sup>115</sup> Stancliffe, 'Red, white and blue martyrdom', p. 37; cf. L. Gougaud, 'Les conceptions du martyre chez les irlandais', *Revue bénédictine* 24 (1907), 360–73, at p. 361.

<sup>116</sup> Patrick, *Confessio*, §§37 and 57 (echoing Matthew 20: 22): [https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio\\_latin#57](https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_latin#57); Gougaud, 'Les conceptions', p. 360.

<sup>117</sup> H. M. Chadwick, 'The Ancient Teutonic priesthood', *Folk-Lore* 11 (1900), 268–300.

counterparts, before kings started issuing law-codes which translated clergy and church property into English social structures and stipulated penalties for the abuse of their status. Bede's account of the 'high priest' Coifi in Northumbria suggests that the person of a priest was circumscribed by various behavioural taboos; the prohibition on his carrying arms would also imply that he could expect to be free from bodily harm (or, at least, that any who attacked him could expect punishment).<sup>118</sup>

Alternatively, might the pagan English simply not have considered matters of faith and ritual to be sufficient import for it to be worth killing someone who professed a different religion? We have already touched on the fact that the new faith seems readily have acculturated itself to Anglo-Saxon social, cultural, and political norms but we have not explored why the English were able to adapt and adopt the faith so readily. An explanation along these lines would involve reference to a number of different reasons in tandem. We would need to explain how the circumstances of migration and settlement might have caused the English seemingly to adopt a more flexible (not exactly tolerant, but perhaps pluralistic) attitude towards religion than their 'blood and bone' compatriots who remained on the mainland.<sup>119</sup> A good deal of evidence suggests a strong connection in early Germanic religions between religious practice and place, with some cults focusing on ancestral burial grounds, and others on natural landscape features such as trees, standing stones, rivers, springs and so on.<sup>120</sup> The dislocations involved in the migration to Britain might seriously have disrupted the settlers' inherited religious practices (and with them some of their certainties about the powers of the gods), but migrants had been settled in parts of southern Britain for several generations by *c.* 600 and would have had ample time by then to have developed fresh cults in their new localities. Yet a social memory of those disruptions might conceivably have made them more susceptible to the proselytising of Christian evangelists, and more willing to accept the inevitability of condemning their unbaptised distant ancestors (whose remains lay far away in their former homeland) than some of their continental counterparts would prove, most notoriously Radbod of Frisia.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Bede, *HE*, II. 13, pp. 184–7; Julia Barrow, 'How Coifi pierced Christ's side: a re-examination of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* II, chapter 13', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (2011), 693–706.

<sup>119</sup> Boniface wrote a letter to churches of English *c.* 738, urging them to assist him in his missionary endeavours among the Germans: 'Have pity on them', he wrote, 'because their repeated cry is "we are of one and the same blood and bone"': Boniface, *Epistolae*, 46, ed. Tangl, pp. 74–5.

<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Michael D. J. Bintley, *Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2015), especially chapter 1: 'Holy trees and inculturation in the conversion period'.

<sup>121</sup> The dramatic story of the Frisian king Radbod who refused to go through with his baptism once he realised what it would mean for his ancestors is told in the anonymous *Vita Wulframni*, ch. 9, ed. Wilhelm Levison, *MGH, SRM*, 5 (Hanover, 1910), 661–73, at p. 668; Ian Wood, 'Saint Wandrille and its hagiography', in *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages: Essays presented to John Taylor*,

Another possibility might be that, at least at first, the English merely added the Abrahamic God to the pantheon of Germanic gods, only gradually moving towards a monotheistic understanding once the faith was more deeply, and securely implanted. Without getting side-tracked into an anthropological discussion of missionary encounters with pagan peoples in other eras, I am struck by the potential parallels between the mission to the early English and the celebrated account that the American Catholic priest Vincent Donovan gave of his work among the Masai Mara in the 1960s. He wrote eloquently about the ways in which he succeeded in communicating to this illiterate and nomadic people how the ‘High God’ of the Christians differed from their tribal gods, and how, in effect, he had always known and loved the Masai; they had just not known him. That is a message that would have resonated directly with Bede (and one which went some way to tackling the problem of unbaptised ancestors, which proved as much an issue for the Masai as it had for the pagan Frisians and Saxons).<sup>122</sup>

The attitudes that different groups of missionaries displayed towards the outward signs of English pagan religions, and the extent to which churchmen proved willing to compromise, for example, over the reuse of pagan sites or religious buildings, might have proved equally significant. Although Pope Gregory originally wrote to Æthelberht, the first Christian king in Kent, instructing him to ‘suppress the worship of idols; overthrow their buildings and shrines’, he changed his mind soon after sending that letter, rejecting the use of coercive methods.<sup>123</sup> Writing to Mellitus (one of the second group of ministers of the word despatched from Rome to assist in the English mission) while he was on his way to England, Gregory urged him to be less confrontational and to seek to accommodate English customs. He recommended that Mellitus should avoid destroying pagan idol temples, and only remove the idols within them, before reconsecrating the buildings, so that they might be changed ‘from the worship of devils to the service of the true God.’<sup>124</sup> Advocating some degree of continuity in religious practice for this pagan people, the pope recognised that change would come gradually to their ‘stubborn minds’.<sup>125</sup> We

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ed. I. N. Wood and G. A. Loud (London, 1991), pp. 1–14, at pp. 13–14. For discussion of the context in which this story was written (in the 740s, when the fate of pagan ancestors was a live topic of debate between different missionaries east of the Rhine) see Rob Meens, ‘With one foot in the font: the failed baptism of the Frisian king Radbod and the 8th-century discussion about the fate of unbaptized forefathers’, in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, ed. Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 577–96.

<sup>122</sup> Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*.

<sup>123</sup> Bede, *HE*, I. 32, pp. 112–3.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 30, pp. 106–7; Robert Markus, ‘Gregory the Great and a papal missionary strategy’, in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. G. J. Cuming, *Studies in Church History* 6 (1970), 29–38, at pp. 32–6.

<sup>125</sup> Lesley Abrams, *Bede, Gregory and Strategies of Conversion in Anglo-Saxon England and the Spanish New World*, Jarrow Lecture 2013 (Jarrow, 2013), pp. 4–6.

can only speculate as to whether this new strategy helped to save the evangelists from the harm they would have experienced had they energetically followed the pope's original guidance. A further important element in all successful missions relates to the translation of Christian sacraments into forms that corresponded to aspects of pagan religious culture. That the English might have been receptive to teaching that explained the Eucharist as sacrifice seems obvious and would have made it easier for them to see how this ritual replaced their sacrifices to the pagan gods. (Rædwald's caution in this matter comes to mind again). Similarly, water appears to have played a prominent part in many pagan Germanic cults, as was shown for example by the trouble that Willibrord got into in Frisia when he violated a spring dedicated to the God Fosite.<sup>126</sup> Since water is associated with cleansing and renewal in many world religions, it does not seem implausible that baptism proved readily explicable to the Anglo-Saxons, who may have welcomed opportunities to participate in such a concrete ritual marking their transition into the body of new believers.<sup>127</sup>

e) The unremembered dead

It is, of course, entirely possible that some clergy did die, but either in contexts where they were working alone (or perhaps in pairs), so that no Christians witnessed their deaths, or when those who were present did not deem their demise to constitute martyrdom. As we have already noted, the only way in which someone can become a martyr (a witness for the faith) is for someone else to witness to their suffering and prove sufficiently inspired by their devotion to Christ to record their deeds for posterity and build a cult. Even martyrs whose deaths had been unobserved, or were rapidly forgotten, could be remembered retrospectively (sometimes as a result of visions), as was the case with the inventions of martyrs in sixth-century Gaul, or the late discovery of Alban's companions.<sup>128</sup> We must therefore allow for the possibility that groups of missionaries travelled into areas of Britain where the Christian faith had not penetrated (and perhaps where royal control was either slight, or contested, for example in border regions) and met with death from uncomprehending pagans, but without the memory of this being preserved by anyone present. There is little to be done with the silence of the sources on this point, yet we might note that Bede showed little interest in describing unsuccessful missions, which did not fit well into his overarching argument. Exceptionally, he mentioned the Irishman, Dícuill, who had established a small monas-tery among South Saxons and tried to preach the faith, but people did not want to hear his teaching. They did not, however, object to him or his lifestyle enough to kill

<sup>126</sup> Alcuin, *Life of Willibrord*, chs. 10–11 ed. W. Levison, MGH, SRM, 7 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1920), 113–141, at pp. 124–6.

<sup>127</sup> For a discussion of wider issues relating to conversion and baptismal liturgies see Owen Phelan, 'Forging Traditional Liturgy: Exegesis, Mission, and Medieval Baptism', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 107 (2012), 830–862, particularly in an English context, pp. 835–9.

<sup>128</sup> Above, p. 10.



him, or apparently to cause him harm, just as the first Irish missionary from Iona was able safely to return to his island home having failed in his attempted evangelisation in Bernicia, and James the Deacon continued quietly to minister in Deira after the death of Edwin.<sup>129</sup>

This raises a different question. Were there clergy who died as a direct result of their attempts to take the faith to pagans, and whose deaths did not go unwitnessed, but were not seen as martyrs because the early English church developed a definition of martyrdom that deemed their suffering insufficient? We might recall the importance that Gildas and Bede both placed on the native British martyrs who died during Diocletian's persecution. Their suffering provided the template by which all future deaths for Christ on these shores would be judged. The cases of any unfortunate missionaries to the English who might have lost their lives on their first arrival in a remote rural pagan settlement may not have met that same standard. Had local tribesmen killed the strangers first without asking questions about their intent, the evangelists would have had no opportunity to profess their choice for death in Christ over life. This explanation would mean that the answer to my question about why no clergy were martyred in the early English Church rests on English definitions of what constituted martyrdom. In their eyes, we might argue, in order to become a martyr, a missionary would have had to reject an opportunity to apostatise and turn to the pagan gods, before preferring to die for the faith. To Bede, and to his contemporaries and successors, true martyrs had to have suffered persecution before their death. The treatment of the first apostles at the hands of secular authorities and that of Christians in the third-century Roman church would, by this argument, have defined for the English a normative model of 'real' martyrdom to which no religious figure who died in England before Ælfheah conformed (and, as we saw, it is debatable whether even he did so). The suffering that any missionaries to the English or early native clergy might have endured, including being killed by pagan rulers and their armies, would – on this reasoning – simply not have been thought to equate to the ordeals to which their persecuted predecessors of the Roman era had been exposed.<sup>130</sup> Let us turn to consider the interest taken in Roman martyrdom by early English clergy.

### **The cult of martyrs in seventh- and eighth-century England**

One of the most striking features of the early English Church is the importance that its members placed on the cult of martyrs, as we have already seen. The

<sup>129</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV. 13; III. 5; II. 20, pp. 372–3; 228–9; 206–7.

<sup>130</sup> Consider for example the terms in which Bede described his Martyrology in the list of his writings at the end of the *HE*, V. 24, pp. 570–1: 'A martyrology of the festivals of the holy martyrs, in which I have diligently tried to note down all that I could find about them, not only on what day, by also by what combat ('quo genere certaminis') or under which judge they overcame the world.'

continuance of native British martyr-cults obviously helped to establish an understanding of the nature of martyrdom among the Christian English. As well as the exemplary case of Alban, there were also Aaron and Julius in south Wales and the mysterious Sixtus in Kent.<sup>131</sup> Successive generations of missionaries brought relics of the martyrs from Rome; they established churches dedicated to the apostolic martyrs Peter and Paul, Andrew, Matthew, and Bartholomew, as well as to early Roman martyrs like Lawrence, Pancras, or the four crowned martyrs. In this matter, as Thacker has argued, Rome set the tone and largely determined which cults would thrive in this country. It took at least a century for a stable ecclesiastical hierarchy to be established in England and for native English saints' cults to emerge; only from the late eighth century onwards did churches begin to be dedicated to local saint.<sup>132</sup> During the earlier period, foreign cults, especially (even disproportionately) those of Roman martyrs, flourished here to a degree beyond that witnessed in Rome.<sup>133</sup> This interest in the example of the apostles, and especially of apostolic and Roman martyrs, manifested itself in the desire of early English monastic audiences to read about and meditate upon their deeds. As well as the aforementioned apostolic apocryphal passions that circulated widely in this period, we find evidence for familiarity with the lives of Roman martyrs in a range of texts.

In his 'opus geminatum', a pair of works in prose and verse on virginity, Aldhelm recounted for the nuns of Barking stories about the heroic deeds of exemplary virgins. He drew a direct connection between living a chaste life on earth and future heavenly rewards, promoting particularly the model of the female virgin as a 'miles Christi', a warrior for Christ, thereby setting notably high standards of behaviour for his audience to emulate.<sup>134</sup> Modelled on a treatise on virginity by Ambrose, Aldhelm's text provided a general discussion of virginity that was followed by a long catalogue of male and female virgins, listed in the sequence of salvation history from the Old Testament to the Early Church, drawing consistently on patristic ideals of chastity and purity as the means of overcoming sin and obtaining heavenly bliss. More than half of the saints to whom Aldhelm referred in this text were martyrs, and in his account of female virgins he focused overwhelmingly on women who suffered martyrdom, such as Agnes, Agatha, Cecilia, Eulalia, and Justina, dwelling (sometimes almost pruriently) on the physical torments to which their bodies

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<sup>131</sup> See above p. 10.

<sup>132</sup> Thacker, 'In search of saints' dedications', pp. 257–8.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248

<sup>134</sup> Sinéad O'Sullivan, 'Aldhelm's *De virginitate*: Patristic pastiche or innovative exposition?', *Peritia* 12 (1998), 271–95, at p. 278. See also T. Cramer, 'Containing Virginity: Sex and Society in Early Medieval England', *Haskins Society Journal* 21 (2009), pp. 47–67.

were exposed, while emphasising the shame of their defilement.<sup>135</sup> Spurning earthly marriage in favour of preserving their virginity, these women all welcomed their bloody fates as witnessing their faith in Christ. Among those whose feats he celebrated, only Constantina, daughter of the Emperor Constantine, contrived to reject her father's plans for her marriage without having to suffer martyrdom to preserve her life; all the others had to die to remain inviolate.<sup>136</sup> Quite how Aldhelm's female readers will have responded to this catalogue of violence and suffering we cannot of course determine. But the cumulative effect of the recitation of extremes of torture must have given those readers who persisted through the sequence of disconnected episodes a clear understanding of the extent to which these women suffered in order to confess their faith and preserve their virginity. Against such an historical measure, what sort of contemporary misfortunes could conceivably be of an equivalent severity and so deserve a martyr's crown? The verse version of Aldhelm's treatise emphasized that point further by distinguishing martyrs from other sorts of saints, marking them out as especially worthy because of the shedding of blood. This might seem an ideal to which women in the early English church could not hope to aspire. Yet in his earlier prose account, Aldhelm had appeared to suggest that virgins and martyrs might be equal in merit and obtain the same hundred-fold rewards. 'Certain (authorities)', he wrote, 'are accustomed to allot the sheaves of the hundred-fold harvest, sprouting abundantly in the fallow lands of the gospel and putting forth grain-bearing ears of corn, to the martyrs who pour out their holy blood in the manner of a stream for the glory of the Christian faith.'<sup>137</sup>

Aldhelm was thus following a well-established patristic precedent when he depicted the preservation of chastity as a kind of martyrdom.<sup>138</sup> The idea of life-long martyrdom, the daily bearing of witness to Christ by taking up one's cross and suffering in life for his sake had a long history in patristic writing. It became associated with ascetic forms of monasticism and the spiritual warfare of the monk in western Europe in part as a result of the influence of early

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<sup>135</sup> Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001), pp. 110–24. Hana Videen, 'Blod Swat and Dreor: Poetic and religious discourses on blood in Anglo-Saxon literature' (unpublished PhD thesis, King's College, London, 2016), p. 138, n. 50 has calculated that 55% of the saints whom Aldhelm discussed in his *De virginitate* were martyrs. 37% of his male saints were martyrs, and he described the martyrdom of eight; of the twenty-two female saints he discussed, seventeen (77%) were martyrs, and he described the deaths of fourteen.

<sup>136</sup> Aldhelm, *De virginitate*, xlvi, ed. Ehwald, p. 302; transl. Lapidge and Herren, p. 115; I owe this point to Katherine Sykes. Scholastica was denied 'the opportunity for bloody martyrdom ('*cruentae passionis*') (*ibid.*, xlvi, p. 300), but Aldhelm, who gave her the epithet of confessor, did not describe her rejection of any potential suitors.

<sup>137</sup> Aldhelm, *De virginitate*, xix, ed. Ehwald, p. 249, transl. Lapidge and Herren, p. 76.

<sup>138</sup> Stancliffe, 'Red, white and blue', pp. 29–30.

monastics such as St Anthony, and later St Martin of Tours.<sup>139</sup> These ascetic figures fought demons in spiritual combat and suffered every kind of bodily torment by choosing lives of physical hardship, enduring ‘a kind of daily immolation for Christ’.<sup>140</sup> Jerome had written to Eustochium, advising her to rejoice at her mother’s conversion: ‘It is not only the shedding of blood which is accounted a confession, but also the service of a devoted mind is a daily martyrdom.’<sup>141</sup> Similarly, Sulpicius Severus made explicit in a letter written just after St Martin’s death his belief that, even though the saint had not suffered the sorts of torments that led earlier martyrs to die, ‘nevertheless he achieved martyrdom although he shed no blood (‘sine crurore martyrium’).’ The sufferings that Martin did endure – hunger, sleeplessness, fasting, insults, persecutions of the wicked – Sulpicius saw as borne for the sake of eternity.<sup>142</sup> Gregory the Great argued in his *Dialogues* that there are ‘two kinds of martyrdom, one that is hidden and one that is public. Martyrdom is secret or hidden whenever the soul is eager and ready for suffering even if there is no open persecution.’ He was confident from his own reading of Christ’s teachings that there could be martyrdom without external suffering, provided that the soul was ready to sacrifice itself to God on the altar of the heart.<sup>143</sup> Clare Stancliffe has shown how Irish missionary endeavours may have helped to disseminate such ideas about non-physical martyrdom in seventh- and eighth-century northern England.<sup>144</sup> We find their influence, for example, in the first, anonymous Lindisfarne Life of St Cuthbert, in which the saint was described after his death as a ‘holy martyr’, and on another occasion as the ‘holy and incorruptible martyr of God’ (‘sancti martyris Dei incorruptibilis’).<sup>145</sup>

Aldhelm’s younger contemporary, Bede, demonstrated a similar interest in apostolic and Roman martyrs throughout his career, and expressed from his earliest completed commentaries onwards, the same confidence in the eternal

<sup>139</sup> E. E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: the Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, 1950).

<sup>140</sup> Stancliffe, ‘Red white and blue’, p. 21.

<sup>141</sup> Jerome, *Epistola*, 108. 31, to Eustochium, ed. Isidore Hilberg, *CSEL* 54–6 (Vienna, 1996), 55, 349: ‘non solum effusio sanguinis in confessione reputatur, sed deuotae quoque mentis seruitus cotidianum martyrium est’; cf. Stancliffe, ‘Red, white and blue’, p. 30. Compare also Ambrose, *De uirginibus*, ch. 2. 9, *PL* 16, col. 191A–191B, where he writes of the double martyrdom experienced by Agnes, that of modesty and of religion as she obtained martyrdom while preserving her virginity: ‘Habetis igitur in una hostia duplex martyrium, pudoris et religionis: et uirgo permansit et martyrium obtinuit.’ For the influence of Ambrose on Aldhelm see Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, p. 56.

<sup>142</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Epistola*, 2. 9–13, ed. J. Fontaine, *Vie de Saint Martin* (3 vols., Paris, 1967–9), I, 328–30; cited by Stancliffe, ‘Red, white and blue’, p. 31.

<sup>143</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, III. 26, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, *Sources chrétiennes*, 260 (Paris, 1979), p. 370; transl. Odo John Zimmerman, *Saint Gregory the Great Dialogues* (Washington, DC, 1959), pp. 160–1; Malone, *The Monk*; Cormack, ‘Murder and martyrs’, pp. 58–77; Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York and London, 2004), p. 65.

<sup>144</sup> Stancliffe, ‘Red, white and blue’, pp. 29–31.

<sup>145</sup> On Bede’s use of language in his Lives of Cuthbert see further below, p. 34.

rewards to be enjoyed by those who persisted in the faith in face of persecution. In the shorter chronicle that he included in his *On Times* and in his *On Revelation*, Bede emphasised the spiritual virtue of endurance as manifested by the church's earliest martyrs. Martyrdom featured directly in another relatively early commentary on the *Acts of the Apostles*, where Bede devoted a good deal of attention to Stephen, the church's protomartyr, noting that there was a direct connection between apostolic mission and martyrdom. In the so-called Greater Chronicle (*Chronica majora*) that made up the sixty-sixth chapter of his *On the Reckoning of Time*, completed in 725, Bede explained this link more fully. He depicted the stoning of Stephen as providing the impetus for the scattering of the apostles away from Jerusalem and thus the beginning of the Church's mission to the ends of the earth.<sup>146</sup> He went on to provide brief notices of the deaths of several martyrs (and various other individual saints), including Britain's proto-martyr Alban, Aaron and Julius, and other martyrs of the Roman persecution (*s.a.* 4258). Reinforcing his message about the eschatological significance of the continuation of martyrdom throughout history, he explained how the crowing of Enoch and Elijah with the virtue of martyrdom would inaugurate the eighth and final age of the world.<sup>147</sup> Manifestly, Bede saw suffering and persecution as an inevitable part of earthly life, as experienced by the faithful from the time of Abel, the first martyr, 'to the last one of the elect to be born at the end of time' as he explained in his commentary on the first epistle of Peter. Drawing on a homily of Gregory the Great, he argued that 'it is very ancient and constant for the elect of God to bear the adversities of the present life for eternal salvation'.<sup>148</sup> He thus recommended his readers to imitate the feats of the martyrs and accept, or even welcome, suffering. Bede appears, as Paul Hilliard has argued, to have seen adversity as 'a means of perfecting Christians by detaching them from the world'.<sup>149</sup>

Bede's hagiographical writings, each one representing a revision of a pre-existing saint's life, consistently displayed an interest in saints who suffered for the sake of Christ. He transposed into prose, for example, the metrical work of Paulinus of Nola about the Life and Passion of St Felix the

<sup>146</sup> Bede, *De temporum ratione* [hereafter *DTR*], ch. 66, ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout, 1977), p. 496; transl. Faith Wallis, *Bede, On the Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool, 2004), p. 196: 'after the stoning of Stephen the Church was scattered throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria'.

<sup>147</sup> Wallis, *On the Reckoning of Time*, p. 242.

<sup>148</sup> Bede, 'On 1 Peter', 4: 12, ed. Hurst, pp. 254–5, transl. Hurst, p. 112; P. C. Hilliard, '*Quae res quem sit habitura finem, posterior aetas videbit*: prosperity, adversity, and Bede's hope for the future of Northumbria', in *Bede and the Future*, ed. P. N. Darby and F. Wallis (Burlington, VA, 2014), pp. 181–205, at p. 192.

<sup>149</sup> Hilliard, '*Quae res*', p. 193. Cf. 1 Peter 4: 1–2, ed. Hurst, pp. 251–2; transl. Hurst, p. 107: 'any of the saints who has subjected his body to the violence of the persecutors for martyrdom has without doubt kept from sinning to the end of his life, as far as this is humanly possible.'

Confessor.<sup>150</sup> In Bede's hands, Felix became a more active agent than in the original verses, while still himself the recipient of divine miracles. Bede carefully recast Paulinus's depiction of his subject as 'a martyr who shed no blood',<sup>151</sup> into a narrative about an 'unconquerable confessor and most attractive teacher' ('confessor invictissimus, et doctor suavissimus'),<sup>152</sup> who rose above earthly suffering to complete his glorious career and win the crown of life.<sup>153</sup> While we can read Paulinus' construction of Felix as 'a bridge from the cult of the martyrs to the cult of the ascetic saint', as Lucy Grig has put it, we should note that for Bede, Felix was always a priest and confessor, and one who had achieved great feats in the face of persecution, but was never a martyr.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, although Bede followed the example of Cuthbert's first hagiographer in describing that saint as a martyr in the verse account he wrote of his life,<sup>155</sup> when he came to create the prose version, and again in his *Greater Chronicle*, he avoided any use of that epithet.<sup>156</sup>

The third saint whose deeds Bede tackled, the Persian monk Anastasius, fell into a different category, for he was a true martyr, and one whose suffering and martyrdom at the hands of the Persian king, Chosroes II, had occurred not in the distant past, when the first apostles had begun to spread the faith among unbelievers, but within living memory, just one year after the baptism of Edwin of Northumbria at Easter in 627.<sup>157</sup> Bede's interest in Anastasius' life – and especially the torments he endured before his death – found reflection not only in his revision of the earlier, inadequate passion, but in his inclusion of an entry

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<sup>150</sup> Bede, *HE*, V. 24; Bede, *Vita sancti Felicis* (BHL 2873), PL 94, cols. 789–98; translating Paulinus, *Vita Felicis*, written as two of his *Natalicia*, poems to be delivered annually on Felix's feast day (14 January): *Natalicia* 3–4 = *Carmina* 14–15, ed. F. Dolveck, *Carmina, Paulini Nolani*, CCSL 21 (Turnhout, 2015).

<sup>151</sup> Paulinus, *Carmen*, 14, line 4: 'sine sanguine martyr'.

<sup>152</sup> Bede, *Vita S Felicis*, PL 94, col. 794.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 798.

<sup>154</sup> Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London, 2004), p. 105; cf. D. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters and Poems* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), pp. 160–97.

<sup>155</sup> He did so in passages that relate to miracles performed at the saint's tomb: Bede, *Vita metrica Sancti Cuthberti* [*VCM*], ch. 41 (ed. and transl. Lapidge, pp. 300–1), cf. Anon, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, IV. 16, ed. and transl. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of St Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 134–5; *VCM*, ch. 43 (pp. 302–3); cf. Anon, *VSC*, IV. 17 (pp. 136–0); and *VCM*, ch. 39 (pp. 296–9), where Bede provided a narrative not in the anonymous *Life*, which reports the burial of Bishop Eadberht in the sepulchre containing 'the immortal glory of the holy martyr'.

<sup>156</sup> Bede, *Vita S Cuthberti*, ch. 43: 'beatus pater' (ed. Colgrave, *Two Lives*, pp. 296–7); ch. 44, 'sanctissimus ac Deo dilectus pater' (pp. 298–9); or ch. 45: 'vir Dei' (pp. 300–1). *DTR*, ch. 66, s.a. 4652: 'reuerentissimus antistes' (p. 530). Bede did include Felix, confessor, in his *Martyrology*, but made no mention there of St Cuthbert.

<sup>157</sup> In the list of his works in *HE*, V. 24, pp. 566–71, Bede stated that he had 'corrected according to the sense as best I could the book of the life and passion of St Anastasius, badly translated from the Greek and worse emended by some unskilled person'; translated (slightly differently from the version by Colgrave and Mynors) by Carmela Viricillo Franklin, *The Latin Dossier of Anastasius the Persian: Hagiographic Translations and Transformations* (Toronto, 2004), p. 194.

for this saint in his *Martyrology* under the date of his feast, January 22.<sup>158</sup> He also juxtaposed a detailed narrative of Anastasius's life and passion in his Greater Chronicle with an account of the conversion, thanks to the preaching of Paulinus, of Edwin, 'the most excellent king of the English living across the Humber in north Britain'.<sup>159</sup> The connection between the two events provided support for Bede's view that God was still working out his purposes for humanity in his own era.

The most powerful testimony to Bede's particular interest in martyrs is the work that he called a 'martyrology of the festivals ('martyrologium de nataliciis') of the holy martyrs'. Describing this work, he explained, 'I have diligently tried to note down all that I could find about them, not only on what day, but also by what sort of combat and under what judge they overcame the world.'<sup>160</sup> This emphasis on combat following a formal legal process sheds some light on the sorts of death that Bede considered to constitute martyrdom. He did not follow Irish writers who depicted 'white' martyrdom as the daily martyrdom of ascetic life, a manifestation of devotion that involved the preservation of chastity, the giving up of all personal possessions, separation from others, and, above all, the mortification of the will.<sup>161</sup> Bede's interest lay primarily in men and women who suffered 'red' martyrdom and actually shed their blood for testifying to Christ. He saw such true martyrs as dying after the example of the first apostles, including Peter and Paul who 'consecrated for the ages this joyous occasion [of their joint feast on 29 June] with their blood'.<sup>162</sup> It is striking how historical a compilation this was: the vast majority of those whom Bede commemorated had died in the earliest days of the church, and he focused much more on Italian and Roman saints than on those from other parts

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<sup>158</sup> Bede, *DTR*, ch. 66, s.a. 4591, p. 524; *Martyrology*, ed. Quentin, pp. 58–60; transl. Benjamin Savill: '22 January. At *ad Aquas Salvias*, the [feast] of St Anastasius, monk and martyr of Persia: who, after the very many torments of imprisonment, lashings and chains which he had endured from the Persians in Caesarea of Palestine, afterward had many punishments inflicted upon him in Persia, and at last was beheaded by their king, Chosroes.' Cult of Saints, E05436 - <http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E05436>

<sup>159</sup> Bede, *DTR*, ch. 66, s.a. 4591, pp. 227–8.

<sup>160</sup> Bede, *HE*, V. 24, pp. 570–1. For discussion of the implications of Bede's careful setting of each martyr's story within a specific chronology see Vicky Dunn, *Bede's Historiae: Genre, Rhetoric and the Construction of Anglo-Saxon Church History* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 142–3.

<sup>161</sup> Stancliffe, 'Red, white and blue', pp. 40 and 44.

<sup>162</sup> Bede, 'Liber hymnorum', vi, ll 7–8, ed. Michael Lapidge, *Bede's Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 384–5. Martyrs dominate the figures for whom Bede chose to write Latin hymns in order, as Michael Lapidge has argued, to make provision for feasts of the *sanctorale* not covered by the Old Hymnal in use at Canterbury and Wearmouth Jarrow. In addition to hymns for the Ascension, Pentecost, and Nativities of the Virgin and John the Baptist, Bede composed hymns designed for liturgical use relating to: the Holy Innocents, Agnes, SS Peter and Paul, the beheading of John the Baptist, and St Andrew (for whom he wrote two hymns). He also wrote a hymn for St Æthelthryth: *HE*, IV, 20, pp. 396–401; Stephen J. Harris, *Bede and Aethelthryth: an introduction to Christian Latin poetics* (Morgantown, WV, 2016).

of Christendom, as Thacker has noted.<sup>163</sup> Felice Lifshitz has argued that the key to understanding this text lies in the way that it serves to incorporate the English into a universal Christian story centred on Rome; it functions, in her words, as a ‘liturgical pendant’ to the Ecclesiastical History.<sup>164</sup> Yet, Bede chose to insert remarkably few insular examples into the calendar of saints that he had mostly derived from the Hieronymian martyrology. He did not, for example, elect to include the saint kings Edwin and Oswald, even though both were Christian victims of the pagan Penda of Mercia, and both were later remembered as martyrs (Oswald’s cult flourishing particularly in continental Europe).<sup>165</sup> Strikingly, his historical entries (as opposed to the briefer entries which merely stated the name, place and date of a saint’s death) included just three saints from the British Isles, Alban who had been martyred on 22 June,<sup>166</sup> and the two Hewalds, martyred among the Old Saxons on 3 October.<sup>167</sup> But he did also name one Englishwoman, Æthelthryth of Ely, on 23 June, even though she had died in her own bed, albeit having suffered horribly in her final months from a tumour of the neck.<sup>168</sup>

Bede likened Æthelthryth to Roman martyrs including Agatha, Agnes and Cecilia in his *History*. It seems to have been her similarity to those women in overcoming the obstacles that stood between her and her desire for the monastic life, that led Bede to deem Æthelthryth worthy of a place in his *Martyrology*, not merely the fact of her virginity. Her resistance to her second husband Ecgfrith, and her physical pains, corresponded to the endurance of earlier holy women who had stood firm against torture in order to achieve the heavenly rewards of martyrdom while preserving their perpetual virginity.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Alan Thacker, ‘Bede and his Martyrology’, in *Listen, O Isles, Unto Me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O’Reilly*, ed. E. Mullins and D. Scully (Cork, 2010), pp. 126–41, at pp. 130–1.

<sup>164</sup> Felice Lifshitz, in *Medieval Hagiography: an Anthology* (New York and London, 2001), pp. 169–97, at p. 173.

<sup>165</sup> See for example V. Gunn, ‘Bede and the Martyrdom of St. Oswald’, in *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, ed. Wood, 57–66. In electing not include Oswald in his Martyrology, Bede appears to have deviated from his exemplar; his version of the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* was closely related to the recension of that text surviving from Echternach, where Oswald was named: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 10837, f. 22v. My student Rose Lyddon explored the significance of Oswald’s omission from Bede’s *Martyrology* at length in her unpublished undergraduate thesis, ‘Bede’s Martyrs’ (University of Oxford, Faculty of History, 2019).

<sup>166</sup> J. Dubois and G. Renaud, *Edition Pratique des Martyrologes de Bède de L’Anonyme Lyonnais et de Florus* (Paris, 1976), p. 112.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 October, p. 181.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 June, p. 113. Bede thus seems to have been no more consistent in his choice of language to describe saints of different sorts than he was in his use of words for places: cf. James Campbell, ‘Bede’s words for places’, in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), pp. 99–119.

<sup>169</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV. 19–20, pp. 390–400. As Rose Lyddon has noted, (‘Bede’s Martyrs’), in many ways Æthelthryth’s story most closely resembles that of Thecla, the follower of the apostle Paul, who endured many struggles but died in her own bed at the age of 90: Bede, *Martyrology*, 23 September, ed. Dubois and Renaud, p. 176.



By promoting Æthelthryth's cult among those of mostly earlier martyr saints (as the only person of English extraction who had died in England named in his *Martyrology*), Bede drew a direct connection between the church of his own day, which rejoiced in a peace and prosperity that he worried might prove impermanent, and the earliest days of the church when believers suffered terrible torments, yet remained true to their beliefs. In his commentary *On Ezra*, Bede noted how shaken the Holy Church was during the time of the Great Persecution, yet how those trials paradoxically gave her strength: 'for though with the killing of the martyrs she seemed to be on the point of complete destruction, she was built up even better when they were crowned in secret. As miraculous happenings shone forth after their death, even more people would flock to the profession of the faith'.<sup>170</sup> The fact that Æthelthryth witnessed to (almost) equivalent suffering and yet triumphed to gain a heavenly throne thus constituted proof for Bede that God's saving power continued to work as efficaciously in eighth-century Northumbria as it had in third-century Rome. He made the point explicit in his *History*: 'Nor need we doubt that this which often happened in days gone by, as we learn from trustworthy accounts, could happen in our time too through the help of the Lord, who has promised to be with us even to the end of the age.'<sup>171</sup>

It is considerably easier to demonstrate that Bede (and to an extent also Aldhelm) adopted a notably austere view of martyrdom than it is to provide an explanation as to why they did so without falling into a potentially circular argument. Was it the fact that no stories had survived about native martyrs on British shores after Alban's time (with the possible exception of the dubious Sixtus) that meant that the English took such an interest in martyrs in the Roman church? And, if so, does that explain why they continued to use those figures as the standard against which to measure potentially heroic deaths for Christ in their own day? Or was it the fact of their articulating such a narrow definition of martyrdom – one that was notably more inflexible than that used by contemporaries in other parts of Europe – that meant that no one who died while confessing faith in Christ in England could be said to have measured up to that standard, and so earned the epithet 'martyr'? Churches in early medieval Gaul that had no martyrs of their own contrived to 'discover' the forgotten remains of heroic figures from the past, and invent accounts of their passions.<sup>172</sup> I said at the outset that my problem – the lack of evidence for early

<sup>170</sup> Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119A (Turnhout, 1969), p. 378; transl. Scott DeGregorio, *Bede, On Ezra and Nehemiah* (Liverpool, 2006), p. 208.

<sup>171</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV. 19, pp. 392–3. In seeking to show that miracle-working had not ceased after the time of the late Roman martyrs Bede may have been influenced by the example of Gregory the Great, who did the same for sixth-century Italy in his *Dialogues*: see Mechthild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 133.

<sup>172</sup> For example, Gregory of Tours, *In gloria martyrum*, chs. 50, 56, 62, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, I. 2 (Berlin, 1885), pp. 72–4, 76–7, 80.

English martyrs – related specifically to the absence of clerical martyrs. But at least in the period before the First Viking Age, we have seen that no secular figures who died at the hands of pagans were considered to have been martyrs either (even if both the kings Edwin and Oswald came to be remembered as such in later centuries). In the later part of tenth century, however, cults did develop of two native martyr kings: Edmund of East Anglia, and Edward of Wessex. We need to consider whether this represented a shift in ecclesiastical attitudes towards martyrdom, and, if so, whether that might in turn have made it more likely that the manner of Archbishop Ælfheah's death would have led to his recognition as a true martyr of the blood.

### **The First Viking Age and after**

We have already pondered, without reaching any firm conclusions, a range of social, political, or cultural issues that might have protected foreign missionaries to the pagan English from the risk of martyrdom. Further, we have noted that early English ecclesiastics drew an important distinction between falling victim to violence meted out by non-believers and suffering persecution, shame, and dishonour as a result of confessing Christianity before a hostile judge or secular ruler.<sup>173</sup> Military attack from (and later settlement by) foreign, non-Christian peoples in the ninth century during the course of the Danish wars may have created a different environment, in which we might have anticipated that clergy (whose churches were often the first targets of raiding warbands) could have suffered persecution and martyrdom. Yet contemporary English writers failed to attribute the status of martyrs to any members of religious communities who died at the hands of pagan warriors in the late eighth and ninth centuries. Alcuin wrote in emotional and hyperbolic terms immediately after the sack of Lindisfarne in 793 about how pagans had 'desecrated the sanctuaries of God and poured out the blood of the saints around the altar ... and trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God'.<sup>174</sup> If any of the monks of that community did lose their lives in that raid (for one could dispute both the severity and enduring consequences of that attack), the community of St Cuthbert did not preserve the names of the dead as martyrs.<sup>175</sup> The late Old English list of saints' resting-places preserved in the *Liber Vitae* of Hyde Abbey (British Library, Stowe MS 944, fos 36v-39r) did

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<sup>173</sup> On the necessary association between martyrdom and shame and self-humiliation see Rolf H. Bremmer, 'Shame and honour in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, with special reference to Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*', in *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: adopting and adapting saints' lives into Old English prose (c. 950–1150)*, ed. Loredana Lazzari et al. (Barcelona, 2014), pp. 95–120, at pp. 118–20.

<sup>174</sup> Alcuin, Letter to Higbald, bishop of Lindisfarne and his monks, 793, ed. E. Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi II*, MGH Epp. IV (Berlin, 1895), no. 20, pp. 57–8.

<sup>175</sup> The Lindisfarne *Liber Vitae* mentions no martyrs among those whose names it recorded for future commemoration.

mention two saints, Beocca, abbot, and Edor, masspriest, ‘who together with eighty monks were slain by heathen men at Chertsey’, yet the author did not attribute to them the status of martyrs of blood.<sup>176</sup> The date of their deaths cannot be known and the event was recorded in no other pre-Conquest source, although William of Malmesbury reported that the monastery of Chertsey had flourished until the coming of the Danes [in the ninth century], who destroyed the place ‘like so much else, burning the church, abbot, monks and all’.<sup>177</sup>

A legend about the heroic death of some ninth-century nuns from the monastery of Coldingham in the Scottish borders first appears only in the thirteenth-century history of Roger of Wendover. Having described an otherwise unattested landing of the Danes in Scotland in 870 and their ruthless behaviour towards all who came in their path, including holy matrons and virgins, Roger recounted the admirable acts of Ebba, abbess of this monastery. She supposedly persuaded her sisters to cut off their noses and lips with razors, choosing deliberately to mutilate themselves in order to avoid losing their virginity through rape at the hands of the approaching invaders. Revolted by the sight of this gruesome collective action, the Danes duly fled from the monastery, but not before setting its buildings and the holy inmates on fire, thus ensuring that the abbess and all her nuns attained the glory of martyrdom (‘ad martyrii gloriam pervenerunt’).<sup>178</sup> However, Roger’s imaginative narrative finds no echo in any earlier post-Conquest account of the effects of viking incursions in England, nor, of course, in any ninth- or tenth-century source.

One English king who did die as a direct result of Danish warfare – Edmund of East Anglia – was celebrated as a saint within a short time of his death, but not apparently as a martyr until over a century later. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reported laconically that the king had died after suffering defeat in battle against the Danes in 869.<sup>179</sup> Asser amplified the Chronicle’s

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<sup>176</sup> Felix Liebermann, *Die Heiligen Englands: Angelsächsisch und Lateinisch* (Hanover, 1889), §49: ‘Donne rested sancte Beocca abbod and Edor mæssepreost on Cyrtesige þam mynstre; and þar man ofsloh hundeahtatig muneca mid him.’ See also Simon Keynes, ed., *The Liber vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester: British Library Stowe 944: together with leaves from British Library Cotton Vespasian A. VIII and British Library Cotton Titus D. XXVII* (Copenhagen, 1996), pp. 100–1. I am grateful to Lesley Abrams and Simon Keynes for drawing this entry to my attention.

<sup>177</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, II. 73: 12, ed. and transl. Michael Winterbottom (Oxford, 2007), pp. 228–9.

<sup>178</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiae*, ed. H.O. Coxe, 4 vols, London 1841, I. 301–2; transl. J. A. Giles (2 vols., London, 1841), I. 191; discussed in Shari Horner, ‘Spiritual truth and sexual violence: the Old English “Juliana”, Anglo-Saxon nuns and the discourse of female monastic enclosure’, *Signs* 19 (1994), 658–75, at 671, quoting Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, ‘The heroics of virginity: brides of Christ and sacrificial mutilation’, in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, NY, 1986), pp. 29–72, at p. 47; reprinted in J. T. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago and London, 1998), ch. 3, quotation at pp. 146–7.

<sup>179</sup> *ASC*, s.a. 870: ‘King Edmund fought against the Danes, and the Danes had the victory, and killed the king and conquered all the land’.

account by stating that the king had died, together with a large number of his men, after fighting fiercely against the Danes, but made no reference to either his sanctity or martyrdom.<sup>180</sup> Yet the issue in the 890s of coins bearing (variant versions of) the legend *Sce Eadmund Rex* testifies to the early existence of a local cult in his memory, albeit one of a saint, and not necessarily a martyr.<sup>181</sup> Edmund's body was moved from the first place of its burial to a more appropriate shrine in a church in the town of *Beodricesworth* (later Bury St Edmunds) at some time before c. 940; the first written records of donations to the religious community that had care of his shrine date from that decade, although none referred to the king as a martyr.<sup>182</sup> Only in the 980s, when the monks of Ramsey Abbey in Cambridgeshire commissioned Abbo of Fleury to write them an account of Edmund's life and deeds, was the dead king constructed into a virgin martyr.<sup>183</sup> Modelling himself on Christ, Abbo's Edmund did not die on the battlefield but, having refused to fight his opponents, voluntarily submitted himself to torture. As 'a member of Christ, his weapons thrown aside', he stood before the impious Danish leader like Christ before Pilate, 'eager to follow in the footsteps of Him who was sacrificed as a victim for us.'<sup>184</sup> In Abbo's hands, the king, through his death, became mystically joined to Christ, a member of the heavenly body of priests, prophets and martyrs.<sup>185</sup> The lack of surviving details about the manner of Edmund's death caused Abbo little difficulty. He simply created a *passio* by weaving together a pastiche of quotations from well-known hagiographies of late Roman martyrs (especially of saints Sebastian and Dionysius), fleshed out

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<sup>180</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 33, ed. W. H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (new impression, Oxford, 1959), p. 26. Nor did the tenth-century Latin chronicler Æthelweard describe Edmund as a martyr, although he did note that the king, having been killed by the Danes near Thetford, was entombed in the place called *Bedeadoricesuuyrthe* (i.e. Bury St Edmunds): *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, book IV [869/870], ed. and transl. A. Campbell (London, 1962), p. 36.

<sup>181</sup> The so-called memorial coinage of St Edmund circulated in East Anglia and also in south-east midlands from the 890s onwards, probably minted by local Danish rulers in East Anglia: C. E. Blunt, 'The St Edmund Memorial Coinage', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 31 (1969), 234 to 255.

<sup>182</sup> P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* [hereafter S], nos. 507, 1526 (<https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/about/index.html>). The earliest extant document in the abbey's favour to refer to the king by the epithet 'martyr' is S 1213, a private charter dated 963 by which a layman, Wulfstan, granted four hides at Palgrave, Suffolk to God and the church of St Edmund. This text cannot be genuine in the form in which it has survived, and the dispositive clause, which includes the reference to the holy martyr, is particularly suspicious, having seemingly been crafted at Bury some unidentifiable time after the purported date of the donation.

<sup>183</sup> Abbo, *Passio S. Eadmundi*, ed. Michael Winterbottom, *Three Lives of English Saints* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 67–87. For a survey of the ways in which Abbo set Edmund into a longer Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian tradition of holy warrior kings see John E. Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 176–91.

<sup>184</sup> Abbo, *Passio*, ch. 10, p. 78.

<sup>185</sup> Marco Mostert, *The Political Theology of Abbo of Fleury* (Hilversum, 1987), p. 183; Damon, *Soldier Saints*, pp. 183–5.

with a surfeit of appropriate biblical quotations.<sup>186</sup> In Abbo's narrative, the vikings assumed the roles of persecutors, judges, and executioners on the model of the late Roman *gesta martyrum*.<sup>187</sup> He deftly added a splash of local colour by adapting various passages from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (for example by describing the king in terms reminiscent of those Bede used of Oswine, linking Edmund's martyrdom with that of Alban, and comparing his incorrupt body after death with St Cuthbert's).<sup>188</sup> The statement in the preface dedicated to Dunstan, in which Abbo claimed to have been present when the archbishop repeated the eye-witness account of the king's death which he had heard from the king's armour-bearer we may consider 'a mere corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude' to what was, in historical terms, 'an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.'<sup>189</sup>

The timing of the Ramsey monks' commission of a *Passio* portraying Edmund as a martyr can scarcely have been coincidental. In Abbo's hands, this saint-king became the first native English saint to have died in England whose cult as a martyr could successfully be promoted among his compatriots. Abbo wrote his Life just as interest was beginning to grow in the sanctity of another deceased king: Edward, the oldest son and successor of King Edgar, who had been murdered at Corfe in March 978. Initially buried 'without any royal honours' at Wareham, Edward's body was translated in February 979 to Shaftesbury Abbey, where a cult rapidly developed, fostered by miracles at the shrine.<sup>190</sup> A poetic passage in the D version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 979 lamented the consequences of the king's death in lyrical language: 'Men murdered him, but God honoured him. In life he was an earthly king; he is now after death, a heavenly saint.' Clearly composed sometime after the event, the statement 'and many wrongs and evil injustices rose up afterwards, and it grew greatly worse ever after' has some echoes of the writings of Wulfstan, archbishop of York (d. 1023).<sup>191</sup> Byrhtferth of

<sup>186</sup> Antonia Gransden, 'The legends and traditions concerning the origins of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds', *EHR* 100 (1985), 1–24, at pp. 6–7; *eadem*, 'Abbo of Fleury's 'Passio Sancti Eadmundi'', *Revue bénédictine* 115 (1995), pp. 20–78, at pp. 29–40.

<sup>187</sup> Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 59–78.

<sup>188</sup> Loredana Lazzari, 'Kingship and sainthood in Ælfric: Oswald (634–42) and Edmund (840–869), in *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: Adopting and Adapting Saints' Lives into Old English Prose (c. 950–1150)*, ed. Loredana Lazzari and Patrizia Lendinara (Barcelona, 2014), pp. 29–66, at p. 37.

<sup>189</sup> Abbo, *Passio S Eadmundi*, pref, ed. Michael Winterbottom, *Three Lives of English Saints* (Toronto, 1972), p. 67; W.S. Gilbert, *The Mikado* (London, 1885); Act 2.

<sup>190</sup> *ASC*, s.a. 980D(E).

<sup>191</sup> *ASC*, s.a. 979D; Dorothy Whitelock wondered if the passage had been written by Wulfstan: 'Archbishop Wulfstan, Homilist and Statesman', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (1942), 25–45, at p. 38. This same theme, of course, recurred in Wulfstan's *Sermo lupi* of 1014, see further below, p. 50. Wulfstan's assertion in that text that Edward's body had been burnt (*Sermo lupi*, line 79: '7 æfter þam forbærnde', ed. D. Whitelock, *Sermo lupi ad Anglos* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, 1952), p. 42) finds no corroboration elsewhere and is at odds with Byrthferth's contention that the body was incorrupt at the time of its translation: *Vita Oswaldi*, IV. 19, ed. and transl. Michael

Ramsey had already treated Edward as a martyr-saint in his *Life of Oswald* (written between 997 and 1002), describing him as predestined for such that fate and constructing the account of his death with several biblical allusions to Christ's suffering in his passion.<sup>192</sup> An early version of Edward's *Passio* was probably written for the occasion of his translation at Shaftesbury in 1001, although the text that now survives was written between 1050 and 1070.<sup>193</sup> Abbo's account of Edmund's death closely parallels the circumstances surrounding the aftermath of Edward's; specifically, as Nicole Marafioti has observed, the description of Edmund's abused corpse anticipated accounts of Edward's remains that would emerge in the 990s.<sup>194</sup> The construction and promotion of these two cults certainly point towards a nascent interest in the idea of home-grown royal martyrs in monastic circles in later tenth-century England.

Almost from the time of its foundation in 974 by Bishop Oswald and Æthelwine, ealdorman of East Anglia, the monks of the abbey of St Benedict at Ramsey showed a keen interest in the cults of the martyrs (and especially those of murdered kings). At some point between 978 and 992, probably not long after the murder of Edward the Martyr, Æthelwine arranged for the translation to Ramsey of the remains of two murdered Kentish royal saints, Æthelred and Æthelberht (grandsons of Eadbald, 616-640), from their resting place on an estate that he owned at Wakering in Essex.<sup>195</sup> In light of the marked similarities between the legend of the princes' death and the manner of Edward the Martyr's demise, it seems likely, as Rollason has argued, that Æthelwine revived their cult as a way of stimulating interest in Edward's cult 'by promoting an analogous legend'. In so doing, he may also have intended indirectly to criticise Ælfhere, ealdorman of Mercia, for his supposed role in Edward's murder.<sup>196</sup> Byrhtferth wrote an account of the Kentish princes' martyrdom, probably drawing on an earlier, eighth-century narrative (in which the dead young men are unlikely to have been described as martyrs);<sup>197</sup> the two

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Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey, the Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgrine* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 140–1. For the date of the *Life* see *ibid.* p. xxxviii; also Rollason, 'The cults of murdered royal saints', p. 2. For a distinctly more cautious approach towards attributing any passages in the *Chronicle* to Wulfstan see Sara Pons-Sanz, 'A paw in every pie: Wulfstan and the Anglo-Saxon *Chronicle* again', *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 38 (2007), 31–52. (I am grateful to Richard Dance for this reference).

<sup>192</sup> Byrhtferth, *Vita Oswaldi*, IV. 18, pp. 138–41.

<sup>193</sup> Christine Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr* (Leeds, 1971).

<sup>194</sup> Marafioti, *The King's Body*, p. 184.

<sup>195</sup> Alan Thacker, 'Saint-making and relic collecting by Oswald and his communities', in *St Oswald of Worcester: Life and Influence*, ed. Nicholas Brooks and Catherine Cubitt (London and New York, 1996), 244–68, at pp. 247–9.

<sup>196</sup> Rollason, 'The cults', pp. 18–19; as Rollason has shown, Byrhtferth made a direct attack on Ælfhere's involvement in the murder in his *Vita Oswaldi*, IV. 20, pp. 142–3; cf. Thacker, 'Saint-making', p. 249.

<sup>197</sup> Byrhtferth, *Passio sanctorum Ethelberti atque Ethelredi regiae stirpis puerorum*, ed. T. Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (London, 1882–5), II, 3–13; D. Rollason, *The Mildrith*

princes were also named in two eleventh-century litanies with Ramsey connections.<sup>198</sup>

Bishop Oswald of Worcester's personal interest in English martyr saints, among them a ninth-century Mercian prince martyr, Kenelm, likewise led to the active promotion of their cults at Ramsey, as various liturgical books from the abbey demonstrate.<sup>199</sup> The list of martyrs in the litany found in a psalter written in the last quarter of the tenth century, probably at Ramsey, ends with the invocation of five English martyrs: Alban, Oswald, Kenelm, Edmund, and Æthelberht (the king of East Anglia killed by Offa in 794).<sup>200</sup> A metrical calendar transcribed at Ramsey between 992 and 993 named Oswald, Kenelm, and Edmund of East Anglia.<sup>201</sup> The Ramsey litanies already mentioned commemorated Alban, Oswald, Kenelm, Edmund, and Edward, as well as the Kentish princes.<sup>202</sup> Furthermore, a calendar which Rebecca Rushforth has argued was written at Ramsey in the second half of the tenth century, then acquired by Abbo during his stay there in the 980s and taken back by him to Fleury, includes entries for the feasts of Alban and Kenelm, together with that of the Northumbrian king Oswald, who was here identified, for the first time in an English source, as 'rex et martyr'.<sup>203</sup> Oswald of Worcester's evident interest in English martyrs may have originated, as Alan Thacker has suggested, in his involvement in the struggle with Ealdorman Ælfhere during the 'anti-monastic reaction' that followed Edgar's death. But later in his career, it seems to have

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*Legend: a Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (Leicester 1982), pp. 15–18, 73–75.

Byrthferth also described the fates of three other early Northumbrian murdered kings later venerated as saints – Eardwulf, Ælfwald and Ealhmund – in the annals now incorporated into the *Historia Regum*: ed. Arnold, II, 30–68, at p. 52 (Eardwulf and Ælfwald), 45 and 63 (Ealhmund); Rollason, 'The cults', pp. 3–5. For Byrthferth's authorship of these annals see Michael Lapidge, 'Byrthferth of Ramsey and the early sections of the *Historia Regum*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 10 (1981), 97–112.

<sup>198</sup> Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints* (London, 1991), nos. IX.i, lines 65–6 and XXII.i, lines 65–6; for discussion of the origin of these two manuscripts and their connection with Ramsey see pp. 67 and 73–4. See also John Blair, 'A handlist of Anglo-Saxon saints', in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford, 2002), p. 507.

<sup>199</sup> Thacker, 'Saint-making', pp. 252–3.

<sup>200</sup> London, British Library MS Harley 2904, fo. 210r, lines 112–17; Lapidge, *Litanies*, p. 205. For the connection of this manuscript with Oswald and Ramsey see Michael Lapidge, 'Abbot Germanus, Winchcombe, Ramsey and the Cambridge Psalter', in his *Anglo-Latin Literature 900–1066* (London, 1993), pp. 387–417, at pp. 398–403.

<sup>201</sup> Oxford, St John's College, MS 17, fos 16r–21v; Michael Lapidge, 'A tenth-century metrical calendar from Ramsey', in his *Anglo-Latin Literature 900–1066* (London, 1993), pp. 343–86; the text of the calendar is printed at pp. 380–3.

<sup>202</sup> Lapidge, *Litanies*, pp. 133 and 188.

<sup>203</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 7299, fos 3v–9r; Rebecca Rushforth, *Saints in English Kalendars Before A.D. 1100* (London, 2008), p. 27. I owe this point to my student, Rose Lyddon. Oswald was also described as king and martyr in the calendar preserved in the Bosworth Psalter (London, British Library, Add 37517, fos 2r–3r), a text probably compiled at Canterbury between 988 and 1008: Rushforth, *Saints*, p. 28. However, in another Canterbury calendar of the early eleventh century – Paris, BN lat. 10062, fos 62–3 – Oswald only has the epithet 'king'. See Rushworth, *Saints*, table VIII, August.

evolved into a broader interest in martyrdom. For example, Oswald chose the feast of the four crowned martyrs of Rome (8 November) for the dedication of the rebuilt abbey church at Ramsey in 991.<sup>204</sup> Oswald's enthusiasm for promoting native cults was echoed among his contemporaries. Other English religious houses in the late tenth and eleventh centuries showed similar enthusiasm for the cults of 'innocent' royal martyr saints, adapting their cults, as Paul Hayward has shown, to meet their own moral needs and foster their sense of community.<sup>205</sup>

Does this constitute sufficient evidence for us to suggest that an earlier English reluctance to recognise martyrs in their midst had shifted over the century that followed the death of Edmund of East Anglia at the hands of the vikings? Might we argue that from this point the English Church began to envisage the genre of the martyr's *Passio* as appropriate for contemporary as well as long distant figures?<sup>206</sup> If so, can we discern any further changes in attitudes towards martyrdom during this period when England once again found itself under attack from pagan outsiders?

Ælfric's writings provide a useful perspective on the potential impact of Scandinavian warfare on attitudes towards death (and suffering) for the sake of Christ. His *Catholic Homilies*, in two sets of forty sermons, provided exegetical, lectionary-based material for the use of priests in the secular church; they were written while Ælfric was at Cerne Abbey, and made no reference to the troubles of his age. In the preface to the Second Series, however (which he dedicated to Archbishop Sigeric, after he had completed the whole sequence), Ælfric referred to 'being shaken by the great injuries of hostile pirates' after he had sent the copy of the first series to the archbishop, reporting that he had only managed to complete the work 'with a grieving mind' ('dolente animo').<sup>207</sup> By contrast, his *Lives of Saints*, completed and first disseminated between 993 and 998, show how far viking raids had influenced his ideas, not just in causing him to look back wistfully to an earlier era (the reign of Edgar) when bishops were worthy and miracles occurred, but even to wonder if he were living in the end times.<sup>208</sup> Mechthild Gretsch argued that Ælfric seems to have selected several of those commemorated in his *Lives of*

<sup>204</sup> Thacker, 'Saint-making', p. 253; Byrhtferth, *Vita Oswaldi*, V. 11, pp. 172–9.

<sup>205</sup> Paul Hayward, 'The idea of innocent martyrdom in late-tenth and eleventh-century English hagiology', in *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, ed. Wood, pp. 81–92.

<sup>206</sup> Compare Fouracre's comments about the Frankish church's readiness to do this in the seventh century: 'Why were so many bishops killed?', p. 32, quoted above, p. 9.

<sup>207</sup> Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies* II, ed. Godden, p. 1; transl. Jonathan Wilcox, *Ælfric's Prefaces* (Durham, 1994), p. 128; Susan Rosser, 'Ælfric's two homilies for May 3: the Invention of the Cross and the martyrdom of Pope Alexander and SS Eventius and Theodolus', in *Ælfric's Lives of Canonised Popes* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2001), pp. 55–73, at p. 68.

<sup>208</sup> Aaron Kleist's *The Chronology and Canon of Ælfric of Eynsham* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 135–44; Malcolm Godden, 'Ælfric's Saints' Lives and the problem of miracles', *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 16 (1985), 83–100, at p. 95.



*Saints* because of the parallels that their stories provided with contemporary circumstances, in order to point out the political and ethical lessons that a lay audience might draw from their example.<sup>209</sup> These were not texts designed to be read in a liturgical context, but ‘a specialised hagiographical collection’, designed for pious reading by laymen as well as monks.<sup>210</sup> In the vernacular preface to the *Lives of Saints*, addressed to his patrons, Æthelweard and Æthelmær, Ælfric explained that he had previously (i.e. in his *Catholic Homilies*) written about the Passions and Lives of Saints whom the English commemorate in church festivals, but he now proposed to write in English ‘a book about the passions and lives of those saints whom those who live in monasteries honor among themselves in their offices.’<sup>211</sup>

The different purpose and audience for the *Lives of Saints* goes a long way towards explaining why the selection of saints in that text differs so starkly from those included in his *Catholic Homilies* (only St Martin appears in both book II of the *Catholic Homilies* and in *Lives of Saints*). The saints chosen for discussion in the *Catholic Homilies*, as Joyce Hill has shown, mirror closely those found in Ælfric’s principal source collections (the homiliary of Paul the Deacon, and sermon collections of Smaragus and Haymo, together with the Cotton-Corpus legendary), and are all among those most often commemorated in the English church, as measured by the frequency of their inclusion in surviving liturgical calendars.<sup>212</sup> They also parallel the saints for whom blessings were provided in the Benedictional of Æthelwold, leading Mechthild Gretsch to suggest that this book might similarly have numbered among Ælfric’s models.<sup>213</sup> In his *Lives of Saints*, by contrast, Ælfric largely dealt with much less ‘popular’ figures. Indeed, his *sanctorale* departed so radically from Winchester’s usage not only in the individuals whose lives he explored, but in the feast days he assigned to several of them that Michael Lapidge has described some of his commemorations as ‘eccentric’.<sup>214</sup> Can we, however, find some logic behind these choices?

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94–7; Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, pp. 4–6.

<sup>210</sup> Joyce Hill, ‘The context of Ælfric’s saints’ lives’, in *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: adopting and adapting Saints’ Lives into Old English Prose* (c. 950–1150), ed. Loredana Lazzari and Patrizia Lendinara (Barcelona, 2014), pp. 1–27, at p. 19; cf. Malcolm Godden, ‘Experiments in genre: the saints’ lives in Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies*’, in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints’ Lives and their Contexts*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (New York, 1996), pp. 261–87, at pp. 261–2.

<sup>211</sup> Ælfric, *Lives of Saints* [hereafter *LS*], ed. and transl. Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, *Old English Lives of Saints: Ælfric*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA and London, 2019), I, 8–9: ‘be þæra halgena ðrowungum and life [ ... ] þe mynster-menn mid heora þenungum betwux him wurðiað’; cf. Hill, ‘The context’, p. 3.

<sup>212</sup> Hill, ‘The context’, see tables 1 and 2, pp. 23–7.

<sup>213</sup> Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, pp. 7–20.

<sup>214</sup> Michael Lapidge, ‘Ælfric’s *Sanctorale*’, in *Holy Men and Holy Women*, ed. Szarmach, pp. 115–29, at pp. 122–3.

Setting Ælfric's patterns of selection in a wider intellectual context, Joyce Hill drew attention to eleven saints (or groups of sainted companions), two of whom were included in the *Homilies* and nine in the *Lives of Saints*, who were not among the top thirty saints honoured in England, as indicated by their inclusion in contemporary calendars.<sup>215</sup> What Hill did not note is how many of those eleven had died as martyrs, having held out against torture and persecution without weakening in their commitment to Christ; only two (the celebrated monastic abbots Basil and Maur) did not suffer martyrdom. Gretsich has noted that Ælfric's decision to write in *Lives of Saints* about figures who could serve as models of heroic resistance against enemies would obviously have resonated in his own day; he may well have hoped that the example of these figures from the past might inspire contemporary acts of heroic devotion.<sup>216</sup> This may indeed explain why the twenty-nine feasts included in *Lives of Saints* disproportionately commemorate martyrs.<sup>217</sup> Three of the feasts (for the Nativity; the Cathedra of St Peter, and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross) are not saints' days; six more marked the festivals of holy men (and one woman): Basil, Macarius, Martin, Maur, Swithun, and Æthelthryth.<sup>218</sup> But all the remaining twenty concerned those who died after suffering horrible torments for professing the Christian faith, including all the other women named: Eugenia, Agnes, Agatha, Lucy and Petronilla (who starved herself to death), as well as the pairs of virgin spouses: Julian and Basilissa, Cecilia and Valerianus, and Chrysanthus and Daria.<sup>219</sup>

Reading Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* as in some measure a celebration of the cult of martyrdom (as well as in praise of virginity and the virtues of chastity in marriage) sheds rather different light on the motives behind at least some of his choices, especially of English saints.<sup>220</sup> Ælfric's loyalty to Winchester,

<sup>215</sup> Hill, 'The Context', p. 21: Alexander, Eventius and Theoldous (*CH* II. xviii); The Seven Sleepers (*CH* II. xxviii); Eugenia (*LS* 2); Basil (*LS* 3); Julian and Basilissa (*LS* 4); Maurus (*LS* 6); the Forty Soldiers (*LS* 10); Apollinaris (*LS* 21); Maurice and his companions (*LS* 26); Dionysius and his companions (*LS* 27); and Chrysanthus and Daria (*LS* 31).

<sup>216</sup> Gretsich, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, pp. 4 and 9.

<sup>217</sup> For a convenient list see Lapidge, 'Ælfric's *Sanctorale*', pp. 118–9.

<sup>218</sup> Whatley has noted how little insight these lives provide into the interior lives of monks, the rigours of monastic discipline, or indeed the nature of monastic life itself, these seemingly being topics that Ælfric did not think suitable for his lay readership: E. Gordon Whatley, 'Pearls before Swine: Ælfric, vernacular hagiography and the lay reader', in *Via Crucis: Essays on Early Medieval Sources and Ideas in Memory of J. E. Cross*, ed. Thomas N. Hill and Charles D. Wright (Morgantown, WV, 2002), pp. 158–84, at pp. 175–6.

<sup>219</sup> Shari Horner, 'The violence of exegesis: Reading the bodies of Ælfric's female saints', in *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. Anna Roberts (Gainesville, FL, 1998), pp. 22–43; Dabeny Anderson Bankert, 'Reconciling family and faith: Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* and domestic dramas of conversion', in *Via Crucis*, ed. Hill and Wright, pp. 138–57. Hana Videen has calculated the proportion of martyrs in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*: 'Blod, Swat and Dreor', p. 138, n. 52.

<sup>220</sup> Lapidge noted his failure to include Perpetua and Felicity, or the English martyr, Boniface, all of whom are indeed odd omissions ('Ælfric's *Sanctorale*', p. 120); that he did not mention Edward the

where he trained, and particularly to his teacher Bishop Æthelwold, readily explains his devotion to Swithun, but also to Æthelthryth of Ely, in whom Æthelwold took so great an interest. The bishop had had both of them depicted in similar fashion in the Benedictional of Æthelwold.<sup>221</sup> Ælfric based his life of the Ely saint on Bede's *History*, stressing God's intervention in preserving her virginity and drawing attention to her incorrupt body as proof of her perpetual chastity, but he did not follow Bede in comparing her directly with the virgin martyrs of the early Church.<sup>222</sup> Familiarity with Bede would have introduced Ælfric to many other English saints whom he could have discussed, and Lapidge has commented on some notable figures whom he omitted, including other virgin saints.<sup>223</sup> He did choose, however, to celebrate three native male martyrs: the Roman-British saint Alban, the Northumbrian king and martyr Oswald, and Edmund of East Anglia (saints in whom, as we have already seen, the community at Ramsey also took an interest).<sup>224</sup> Whatley has argued that this emphasis on 'secular kings and military saints from the same social caste as Æthelweard and Æthelmær themselves' means that 'the lay aristocrats who commissioned the work were given a narrow vision of the Christian past that seems designed to mirror their own hierarchical Christian society of secular and clerical nobility.'<sup>225</sup> Yet class may well have been a less significant determinant of Ælfric's selection than was the fact that all the individuals whom he did include shared the same fate in having died for Christ.

It would seem that in the later tenth century some English churchmen had indeed begun to adopt a different attitude towards the possibility that martyrdom could happen in their day, and on British shores. One obvious explanation for this shift in their thinking from that of churchmen of the pre-Viking Age may have been the troubles experienced by the nation as 'the heathens oppress and make war on the Christians and anger our Lord with cruel deeds' (as Ælfric wrote at the end of his account of the passion of the *Forty Soldiers*, martyred at Sebaste in 320 AD).<sup>226</sup> Still more significant would

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Martyr might be, however, because he had so recently died that his cult had not yet been established nationally (*ibid.*, p. 121).

<sup>221</sup> Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, pp. 169–72; for discussion of Æthelwold's interest in Swithun and Æthelthryth see *ibid.*, ch. 5.

<sup>222</sup> Ælfric, *LS* 19, ed. and transl. Clayton and Mullins, II, 194–203. Emphasising the importance of Æthelthryth as a national saint, Ælfric mentioned her at the end of his Passion of St Edmund: 'the English people are not deprived of the Lord's saints, when in England such saint as this holy king (Edmund), and the blessed Cuthbert and St Æthelthryth at Ely and also her sister, lie uncorrupted in body for the confirmation of the faith': *LS* 29, ed. and transl. Clayton and Mullins, III, 202–5; quoted Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, p. 227, cf. p. 230.

<sup>223</sup> Lapidge, 'Ælfric's *Sanctorale*', p. 121.

<sup>224</sup> Ælfric's life of Oswald is headed, 'Nonis Augustis [August 5<sup>th</sup>], Natale sancti Oswaldi, regis et martyris': *LS* 24, ed. and transl. Clayton and Mullins, III, 2–3.

<sup>225</sup> Whatley, 'Pearls before swine', p. 182.

<sup>226</sup> Ælfric, *LS* 10, ed. and transl. Clayton and Mullins, I, 325–6; quoted Godden, 'Ælfric's Saints lives', p. 95.

appear to have been the experience of this generation in having witnessed the death of the young king Edward, murdered – one version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle even used the verb martyred (‘gemartyrad’)<sup>227</sup> – at the hands of ‘treacherous and evil men’ (‘insidiantes et maligni’), as Byrhtferth described them.<sup>228</sup> The brutal slaying of a legitimately-appointed (and divinely-sanctioned) monarch occasioned an upsurge of interest in the stories of other young kings and princes who had died at the hands of political rivals. Prominent among them was, as we have seen, Edmund of East Anglia, whose death as he attempted to defend his kingdom from an invading pagan foe proved suitable for retelling after the example of well-known *passiones* of martyrs of the early Church.<sup>229</sup> Abbo’s invention of Edmund the martyr converted a figure whose defeat on the battlefield led his people into captivity under pagan rule into a virginal hero, who suffered interrogation and torment at the hands of his captors but preferred to die for Christ rather than submit to their demands.

Abbo’s literary exemplar and the growth of interest in (and concern for the proper keeping of) the cult of the newly-martyred Edward, may in turn have stimulated both Oswald’s enthusiasm for reviving the cults of earlier prince-martyrs and Ælfric’s decision to concentrate on martyrs’ passions when choosing material to rework for his *Lives of Saints*. Formerly a type of Christian devotion about which the English knew only at second hand, from their consumption of narratives about those who suffered during Roman persecutions, martyrdom had suddenly become both local and topical. Abbo had to resort to claims of remarkable longevity and feats of memory to give voice to a supposed eye-witness to the martyrdom of Edmund of East Anglia over a century after its occurrence. By contrast, the young West Saxon king, Edward, was no distant, ill-remembered figure. Bishops, ealdormen, and thegns had known him and seen him in formal and informal settings; they knew of his weaknesses of character and of rulership (and bishops and monks had cause to lament the damage done to Benedictine monasteries during his reign).<sup>230</sup> Edward’s murder led to a recalibration of the scale against which to measure martyrdom and thus created a climate in which it would prove possible in some

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<sup>227</sup> *ASC, s.a. 978C*; for the authorship of this annal (part of a distinct group of annals unique to the C manuscript of the Chronicle for the years 976 and 978–82), see Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition, Volume 5, MS C* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. lxii–lxiv. For a different perspective: Patrick Conner, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition, Volume 10, The Abingdon Chronicle, AD 956–1066 (MS C with reference to Bede)* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. xlv–xlvi.

<sup>228</sup> Byrhtferth, *Vita Oswaldi*, IV. 18, pp. 138–9.

<sup>229</sup> Robert Stanton, ‘National martyrs and willing heroes: piety and patriotism in two English Saints’ Lives’, in *The Propagation of Power in the Medieval West*, ed. Martin Gosman *et al.* (Groningen, 1997), pp. 191–204, at p. 195.

<sup>230</sup> D. J. V. Fisher, ‘The anti-monastic reaction in the reign of Edward the Martyr’, *Cambridge Historical Journal* 10 (1952), 254–270; Stanton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 372–3.

circumstances to recognise other violent deaths as those of martyrs for Christ. And just such an eventuality soon arose with the gruesome murder of the captive archbishop of Canterbury, Ælfheah, on 19 April 1012, a mere eleven years after Edward's body had been translated from the churchyard into the abbey church at Shaftesbury, and four years since the martyr's younger brother, Æthelred, had decreed that his feast should be celebrated annually throughout England.<sup>231</sup>

Writing in Saxony in the years immediately after the archbishop's death, Thietmar, bishop of Merseburg (d. 1018), had no difficulty in portraying Ælfheah as a martyr, likening him to Christ, and thus accentuating the symbolic significance of his dying during the octave of the Easter festival. In Thietmar's hands, the archbishop (whom he incorrectly identified with the more celebrated Dunstan), accepted the inevitability of his death 'as meekly as a lamb' ('ut mitis agnus'), declaring, 'I am ready and prepared for whatever you may now wish to do with me. Through the love of Christ, I no longer fear the possibility that I might be made a worthy model for his servants.' Echoing Jesus' words at the Last Supper, he went on, 'This my body ('Corpus hoc meum') I offer to you in guilt ('culpabile') .... realizing that you have the power to do with it as you wish. My sinful soul, over which you have no power, I humbly commit to the Creator of all things.'<sup>232</sup> Ælfheah's willingness to embrace the role of victim and accept death in the manner of his saviour on the cross had a significant impact on Thorkell, who, according to Thietmar, tried unsuccessfully to prevent his compatriots from harming 'the Lord's anointed' ('christus Domini').<sup>233</sup> That this athlete of Christ immediately obtained the joys of heaven was demonstrated by an instant miracle: one of the leading men among the Danes was suddenly crippled. The archbishop's stole, once white as a symbol of his innocence, had now become dyed with the red blood of martyrdom.<sup>234</sup>

While it seemed obvious to Thietmar that Ælfheah had earned his martyr's crown, that presumption would not necessarily have occurred to his counterparts among the English clergy, despite the recent precedent of King Edward's martyrdom. Indeed, in England, Ælfheah's cult developed rather slowly. The author of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, writing at much the same time as Thietmar, did indeed conclude that the murdered archbishop had been martyred, supporting this conclusion with evidence of the miracles performed

<sup>231</sup> *Edward King and Martyr*, ed. Fell, pp. 12–13; compare S 899, S. E. Kelly, *Charters of Shaftesbury* (Oxford, 1996), no. 29, dated 1001; V Æthelred 16, ed. Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), I, 240.

<sup>232</sup> Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, VII. 42, ed. R. Holzmann, *MGH, SSRG*, 9 (Berlin, 1935), pp. 449–50; translation adapted from that of David A. Warner, *Ottonian Germany: the Chronicon of Theitmar of Merseburg* (Manchester, 2001), p. 337.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, VII. 43, p. 450.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

at the place of his burial in London.<sup>235</sup> Yet in 1014, Archbishop Wulfstan made no specific reference to the archbishop's demise in his *Sermo lupi* beyond referring in general terms to the slayers of priests and the persecutors of monasteries ('mæsserbanan 7 mynsterhatan').<sup>236</sup> He did make numerous references to the sufferings experienced by the servants of God in his day, but ascribed these as much to the failings of their own compatriots as to the ill-will of pagans. Wulfstan considered the connection between these misfortunes and the earlier martyrdom of King Edward self-evident: 'a full great treachery it is in the world that a man should betray his lord's soul .... And [this has] happened: Edward was betrayed and then killed.'<sup>237</sup> Wulfstan's writings lend further support to the suggestion already made that the framing of Edward's brutal murder as martyrdom had a major impact not only in stimulating renewed ecclesiastical interest in the cults of other native royal martyrs, but also in creating an intellectual climate in which the death of a senior English clergyman at the hands of a drunken viking army could be interpreted as martyrdom, accepted voluntarily for the sake of Christ and in defence of the faith.

Ælfheah's martyr cult received a significant boost from the involvement of King Cnut in the translation of the saint's remains to Canterbury in 1023.<sup>238</sup> Yet the cult had only limited currency in pre-Conquest England outside Canterbury and Winchester (where Ælfheah had been bishop before his translation to the metropolitan see). The feast of his martyrdom (19 April) was marked in some eleventh-century calendars, but he was more usually described in these as bishop, or archbishop, than as archbishop and martyr.<sup>239</sup> The failure of the custodians of his relics first at St Paul's and then in Canterbury to create a *Passio* relating his heroic stand in the face of persecution and torture will not have helped Ælfheah's cause, and nor did the only extant English narrative of the manner of his death, where the Danes' drunkenness featured more

<sup>235</sup> ASC, *s.a.* 1012C; see above, pp.6–7.

<sup>236</sup> *Sermo lupi*, line 168, ed. Whitelock, p. 50; Nancy E. Atkinson and Dan E. Burton, 'Harrowing the houses of the holy: Images of violation in Wulfstan's Homilies', in *The Year 1000: Religious and Social Response to the Turning of the First Millennium* (New York and Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 49–62, at p. 58. The finished text of the *Sermo lupi* is normally dated to 1014, but an initial version may have been composed rather earlier, Simon Keynes has suggested: 'An Abbot, an Archbishop, and the Viking Raids of 1006–7 and 1009–12', *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007), 151–220, at pp. 203–13, which might explain the failure to mention the archbishop's martyrdom.

<sup>237</sup> *Sermo lupi*, lines 74–9, ed. Whitelock, pp. 41–2.

<sup>238</sup> Above, pp. 6–7.

<sup>239</sup> Two early eleventh-century calendars from Winchester gave him the epithet martyr (Ælfwine's Prayerbook, Cotton Tiberius D. xxvii, and the Trinity Computus, Trinity College, Cambridge, R. 15. 32) as did the Leofric Missal (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 579), where his feast was recorded on 17 rather than 19 April. In the Salisbury and Eadwig Psalters and in Cambridge University Library Kk.5.32 he appeared just as a prelate. His name appears more consistently in later eleventh-century calendars, but he was still not universally given the epithet martyr: Rushworth, *Saints in English Calendars*, table IV, April.

prominently than did the saint's piety. Indeed, the first Norman archbishop, Lanfranc, allegedly articulated doubts about the quality of Ælfheah's sanctity, questioning whether he could legitimately be memorialised as a martyr. However, Eadmer reported that Anselm succeeded in changing Lanfranc's mind about the saint's significance in part because he asserted that the archbishop had successfully converted many of his captors to Christianity before his death.<sup>240</sup> John of Worcester (who may have had access to a source that no longer survives) also maintained that Ælfheah had actively engaged in proselytising the Danes, asserting that the man who struck the fatal blow, a certain Thrum, had been confirmed by the archbishop on the previous day.<sup>241</sup> This seems not altogether implausible since, earlier in his career, Ælfheah had played a part in Archbishop Sigeric's policy of converting the Danes to make peace, confirming Olaf Tryggvason at Andover in the presence of Æthelred in 994.<sup>242</sup> The *Passio* that Lanfranc commissioned Osbern to write to promote Ælfheah's cult made much of the archbishop's ministry among the pagan army before his captivity, showing him preaching, ransoming prisoners and feeding the hungry. According to Osbern, these actions enraged the Danes, who feared that they jeopardised the success of their campaign to conquer England.<sup>243</sup> Ælfheah's continued preaching and teaching after his captivity may thus have been as relevant to the Danes' decision to end his life as was his refusal to allow ecclesiastical resources to be used for the payment of a ransom, on which Osbern placed so much emphasis.<sup>244</sup> But Osbern had to work hard to mould Ælfheah into a conventional martyr, modelled on St Lawrence and on Stephen, in particular: 'Whose merits were ever so alike as those of this our champion and Stephen, protomartyr? For both refused to plunder Church funds, both were forceful in curtailing evil. They were comparable in the manner of their death and equal in the love of their friends.'<sup>245</sup>

Despite the important precedent set by the creation of the cult of Edward, king and martyr, and the manifest growth of interest in reading about

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<sup>240</sup> Eadmer, *Life of Anselm*, ed Southern, p. 51; Stanton, 'National Martyrs', pp. 198–200. See also Jay Rubenstein, 'Liturgy Against History: The Competing Visions of Lanfranc and Eadmer of Canterbury', *Speculum* 74 (1999), 279–309. Richard W. Pfaff suggested that Lanfranc might have changed his mind in part because he believed that he could bolster his authority by aligning himself with Ælfheah: 'Lanfranc's supposed purge of the Anglo-Saxon Calendar', in *Warriors and Churchmen in the High Middle Ages: Essays presented to Karl Leyser*, ed. Timothy Reuter (London, 1992), pp. 97–108.

<sup>241</sup> John of Worcester, *Chronicon*, s.a. 1012, ed. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk (Oxford, 1995), II, 470–1.

<sup>242</sup> ASC 994; John Edward Damon, 'Advisors for peace in the reign of Æthelred Unraed', *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Diane Wolfthal (Brepols, 2000), pp. 57–78, at pp. 59–64.

<sup>243</sup> Osbern, *Vita S Elphegi*, §19, *Acta Sanctorum, April II*, p. 636A; Stanton, 'National martyrs', pp. 201–2.

<sup>244</sup> Osbern, *Vita S Elphegi*, §§28–9, p. 638C–E.

<sup>245</sup> Osbern, *Vita Elphegi*, §39, p. 640B.

native martyrs seen in Ælfric's writings for his lay patrons, Ælfheah's cult developed slowly and rather hesitantly and nearly foundered entirely after the Norman Conquest. So deeply had the English internalised their notion that 'true' martyrdom must be measured against the sufferings experienced by those unknown figures of the distant past who had suffered persecution, torture and death at the hands of Roman authorities, that even the callous execution of an archbishop captured in war was not automatically interpreted universally as an act that earned a martyr's crown. The fact that no English ecclesiastic from any earlier generation who had died in Britain had merited the designation martyr will clearly have influenced the response of Ælfheah's clerical contemporaries to his death. It is striking that he acquired the epithet martyr first from the communities who had known him in life: Winchester and Canterbury.

### Conclusion

Gerald of Wales, in a celebrated passage in his *History and Topography of Ireland* of 1185, castigated the prelates of that race for their failure to preach and instruct, chastise and correct their people. He lamented:<sup>246</sup>

But there was no one among them to raise his voice as a trumpet. There was none to mount on the other side and be a wall for the house of Israel. There was none to fight for the church of Christ even to exile, to say nothing of blood – that church which Christ had purchased for himself with his precious blood. Consequently, all the saints of this country are confessors and there is no martyr. It would be difficult to find such a state of things in any other Christian kingdom. There was found no one in those parts to cement the foundations of the growing church with the shedding of his blood. There was no one to do this service; not a single one.

Had Gerald been writing just fifteen years earlier, such arrogant Norman superiority about the absence of Irish martyrs would have been harder to sustain. But, of course, by the 1180s the English Church had acquired its own, glorious martyr: Thomas Becket. The Archbishop of Canterbury had been accosted by armed knights inside his own cathedral as he walked towards the altar where he was accustomed to say private masses and the canonical offices at the hour of Vespers on 29 December, 1170. Before the attack began, Becket commended his soul 'to God, the blessed Virgin, and the holy patrons of this church'. After the first attacker struck him between the shoulder blades (but did not fell him), he called again upon God, and the holy martyr-archbishops,

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<sup>246</sup> Gerald of Wales, *In topographia Hibernie*, § 105, ed. John J. O'Meara, 'Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hibernie: "Text of the First Recension"', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 52 (1948–1950), 113–178, at p. 169; transl. John J. O'Meara, *Gerald of Wales, The History and Topography of Ireland* (London, 1982), p. 113.



blessed Dionysius and St Ælfheah, before a cut to his head caused him to fall beside the altar of St Benedict. Having received three further blows, which together cut off the crown of his head, Thomas died.<sup>247</sup> One of his hagiographers, William fitz Stephen, stressed the prelate's willingness to die: 'For just as he was perceived not to resist death in his spirit, neither did he resist it by the opposition or dejection of his body, since he received a voluntary death from a longing for God, rather than a violent one from the swords of the soldiers.'<sup>248</sup>

In Thomas Becket, the ideal of martyrdom as a particular form of sanctity received a significant boost, which would have implications not only for the English church but across Europe.<sup>249</sup> His biographers portrayed the events leading up to the final confrontation inside Canterbury Cathedral as a series of signs foreshadowing his martyrdom, arguing that, even before he had returned to England, Thomas was 'secure in the Holy Spirit, not afraid to die for God and the cause of the church'.<sup>250</sup> Even when threats against his life became concrete, the archbishop allegedly continued to assert his preparedness for his own death, reminding the people in the homily at his final public mass on Christmas Day that they already had one martyr (in Ælfheah) and warning that they might soon have another.<sup>251</sup> In the words of Benedict of Peterborough, he chose cheerfully to drink the cup of the Lord rather than flee or call an army, just as Christ on the cross had refused to call for the support of legions of armies.<sup>252</sup> For those authors who rethought their memories of Becket in order to construct him as a saint and his death as martyrdom (on the model of earlier martyr saints including Polycarp of Smyrna, Perpetua, Abbo's Edmund of East Anglia, and, above all, Christ himself),<sup>253</sup> there was no question that they had witnessed a martyr's death in their own day. They did not share any of the doubts that earlier generations of clergy might have felt about whether Thomas's trials and sufferings equated to the persecution endured by martyrs of the early Church. As Michael Staunton has argued, 'the eagerness of some to place the murder before the altar [of the Cathedral] is explained by its symbolism of Thomas's murder as a sacrifice with Thomas as both priest and victim.'<sup>254</sup> If St Alban should rightly be seen as the protomartyr

<sup>247</sup> William fitz Stephen, *De vita passione sancti Thomae archiepiscopi et martyris*, §§139–40, ed. James Craigie Robertson, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury* (7 vols., London, 1875–85), III. 13–154, at p. 141.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, §142, p. 142.

<sup>249</sup> Haki Antonsson, 'Two twelfth-century St Magnus of Orkney and St Thomas of Canterbury', *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*, ed. Gareth Williams and Paul Bibere (Leiden, 2004), pp. 41–64.

<sup>250</sup> William fitz Stephen, *De vita Thomae*, §114, ed. Robertson, p. 117.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, §129, p. 130; cf. Edward Grim, *Vita S Thomae*, §79, ed. Robertson, II. 434.

<sup>252</sup> Benedict of Peterborough, *Passio S Thomae Cantuariensis*, ed. Robertson, *Memorials Thomas Becket*, II: 1–20, at pp. 17–19, cf. Matthew 26: 63; Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 187–8.

<sup>253</sup> Staunton, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 190–4.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

for the British, then Thomas Becket, not Archbishop Ælfheah, became, in the hands of his biographers, the proto-martyr of the English. This man, the first ‘genuine’ English clerical martyr, shed his blood for Christ 850 years ago this year, more than five and a half centuries after the first Roman missionaries had nervously set foot on the Kentish shore.

There are, as we have seen, many possible answers to my question, ‘why were there no martyrs in the early English Church?’ A range of explanations including the ways in which the faith was introduced among the pagan Germanic settlers of south-eastern Britain (before as well as after the Roman mission to Kent), and particularly the manner in which its Latin, Mediterranean practices were translated and acculturated to Anglo-Saxon social customs have proved significant. Above all, however, I would argue that English ecclesiastical authors developed an understanding of martyrdom built around their deep knowledge of, and respect for, the martyrs of the early Roman Church. Those figures became the standard against which any future martyrs would have to be measured. Their willingness to stand up for the faith against political and social pressures, to apostatise, to sacrifice, to eat meat sacrificed to idols, or to marry pagan husbands, together with their joyful acceptance of the pains of torture and hideous death, made them worthy of instant blessedness. No priest, monk, or nun who died at hands of pagans in England before the time of Ælfheah met those exigent standards. Even when the most senior prelate in England was hacked to death by a mob of ill-disciplined foreign soldiers, the narrative of the archbishop’s last days required a good deal of careful reshaping to make its subject appear to come close to earlier feats of voluntary endurance in the face of persecution. Ælfheah never conclusively passed that test, despite Anselm’s energetic defence of his cause. But Becket did, and he did so triumphantly. The English Church could finally recognise a true martyr in its midst in 1170, having by then acquired sufficient confidence in its own identity to separate its story from that of the early Church of Rome. The early English Church thus had no martyrs because it set the bar for attaining ‘the crown of life’ too high.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> James 1: 12; Revelation 2: 10.



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