

CONCERNING THE CONVERSION OF THE MIDDLE ANGLES AND THE LAST GREAT  
PAGAN PRINCE, PENDA OF MERCIA

by

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## **DEDICATION**

For Kameron, as a partial installment for the book I will one day write you.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his academic exploration of the king, Ceawlin, and the formative years of what would become Wessex, Rupert Matthews addresses a poignant obstacle to early English scholarship: the lack of written evidence. Matthews goes on to illuminate the dearth of academic discussion and proposes a solution:

Many historians have preferred not to delve too deeply into this period of our island history on the grounds that so little is known for certain, and so little ever will be known, that to speculate is fruitless. ... but there comes a time when simply avoiding the issue is no longer acceptable. ... it is time to speculate.<sup>1</sup>

The desire to understand “what it was that happened in Britain to destroy the old order and to create new nations”<sup>2</sup> does not, however, exclusively concern Wessex. The careful consideration and comparison of sound speculative academic works can only benefit each other as they work towards painting the bigger picture, offering a plausible view from a wider scope.

The creative portion of this thesis aims to contribute to the aggregate panorama of early England modeled by Matthews, by exploring the kingdom of Mercia and her tributaries. However, the very nature of the matter is that it cannot be tackled by a straightforward investigation. As such, the heart of this history must be approached in a delicate perambulation through the events and relationships that surround the subject, winding ever inward towards answering the questions that shroud the formation of Mercia and her last great pagan prince: Penda.

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<sup>1</sup> Rupert Matthews, *Ceawlin: The Man Who Created England*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

## I. Concerning the oral histories and the (re)introduction of the Roman alphabet

Under the Romano-British hegemony preceding the fall of the empire, Christianity had been established across the island of Britain and its people prospered and forgot the old ways. In the fifth century, the Roman empire was in decline. Far flung provinces like Britain could no longer be maintained, nor could Rome offer aid to its Celtic citizens facing foreign invasions from several fronts. As the native Britons fled into the mountains of Wales to escape their persecutors, Christianity became consolidated within cells of increasingly xenophobic Romano-Celtic societies. The pagan Germanic invaders pushed the native Christian inhabitants ever westward with a ferocity the British had not seen for generations. The urban dynamic so crucial to church organization and productivity was suddenly gone, “[a]mid the wreckage of deserted cities destroyed by the enemy.”<sup>3</sup> Under the circumstances, perhaps these British refugees might be forgiven for not sharing the word of Christ with their enemies.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, the British church remained an enigmatic peculiarity to most of the colonial invaders and immigrants until such time as foreign missionaries (Irish and Roman) endeavored to evangelize to the heathen Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Without readily available recourse to the written word, the origins of the pagan kingdoms are largely lost to legend as the histories were shared through the intimacy of music. Early English societies would not begin to adopt the written word until the Roman alphabet, riding the robes of Christian emissaries, had found its way back to the land of Britain. This is especially true of the kingdom of Mercia as it was the last sovereign province in Britain to convert.<sup>5</sup> That is not to say, however, that posterity is left with nothing to reconstruct the narrative of early English communities. Cultures that practiced preserving

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<sup>3</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People* [hereafter referred to as Bede *HE*.] I.22.

<sup>4</sup> Bede *HE* II.2. The British clergy were heavily censured by the Archbishop Augustine of Canterbury in 603 for

their reluctance to bring the faith to the pagan invaders.

<sup>5</sup> The royal Mercian household would not entirely convert until the death of King Penda in 655.



history through the oral tradition did so through the offices of hierophants, druids, or any other number of similar positions.

In Old English tradition, this was carried out by a 'scop' such as appears in *Beowulf*. The specific style that shaped these sorts of songs or epics can be understood in the context of 'interlace' as a literary device. The exploitation of this device acts as the

organizing principle closer to the workings of human imagination proceeding in its atemporal way from one associative idea to the next than to the Aristotelian order of parts belonging to a temporal sequence with a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>6</sup>

In this way the sacred stories and official histories may be transmitted to the society in an entertaining and engaging manner, making them memorable and communicable across the ages. The following collection of letters exhibits this style of oral history in the passages which are clearly indicated by the author as not being of his own devising. Recorded by a man of letters, these tales include interlaced plot lines such as the wives of Æthelfrīd and the wistful nostalgia for the Golden Age of King Arthur (both examples may be found in the formal performance piece of the Queen Kynsewith, wife of Penda who was King of Mercia until 15 November 655 CE). Despite the assiduous commitment of colonizers to collect the histories of the conquered peoples, much would of course be lost in translation.

*"Do not think about calling my ancestors a "pre-alphabet society." We are not defined by your alphabet. My history and my soul remembers beyond your simple system. Your alphabet cannot fully understand this history – a history that still exists. We have our own alphabet – one composed of speech, song, dance, art, land and so on. It is more complex and complete than your A – Z."*  
- Rebecca Doughty<sup>7</sup>

## II. Concerning the transmission of Christianity in Early Medieval England

The Roman empire contracted upon itself in the wake of the Frankish and Visigothic migrations across Europe in the fourth and fifth centuries. The new continental overlords

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<sup>6</sup> John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf," 14.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Doughty, "Do Not Think About Calling My Ancestors a 'Pre-Alphabet Society.'"

were nominally Christian, but they had no respect for the authority of Roman Catholic bureaucracy, and the church lost many of its communication networks across the west.<sup>8</sup> On the far edges of the map, where folk tread lightly around circles of fungus for fear they may find faeries, the Celtic church in Ireland experienced ecclesiastic isolation early and in its entirety. Adapting to the clan structure of the Irish tribes, the clergy reorganized within their ranks so that eventually the greatest episcopal influence came to lie with the abbots of monasteries rather than bishops. Seeing that the descendants of Woden were woefully ignorant of their spiritual peril,<sup>9</sup> St Columba founded the monastery of Iona off the western coast of Scotland in 565 with a mind to convert his neighbors. So it was that a representative of Irish-Celtic Christianity came to Britain, introducing Christian doctrine and philosophy into the local politics and diplomacy of the noble northern families.

In like manner, Pope Gregory the Great sent forth the famous entourage of 597 led by Augustine, who would become the first Archbishop of Canterbury once his people were established in Kent. Though the British church remained actively opposed to sharing its mysteries with the heathens, the most remarkable alliance of the age consisted of British Christians in Wales and their marcher neighbors, the pagan Mercians. What forces - tangible, social, spiritual - lie at the root of this last bastion of traditional Germanic religion? The conjectures that can be made in response must be teased from the exiguous corpus of heavily biased church histories and later medieval attempts to collect and record the old oral tales. At the time Adda was writing the letters collected here, Mercia offered the only substantial example of successful English and British cooperation, conducted perhaps paradoxically through mutual tolerance of the staunchest pagan and Christian influences to

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, "The Conversion of the West (350-700)," in *The Medieval Church*.

<sup>9</sup> The tribes invading England traditionally claimed descent from Woden; e.g. Bede gives that Hengist and Horsa were fourth from Woden (56), and William of Malmesbury's *Chronicle of the Kings of England* records "Woden, from whom almost all the royal families of these barbarous nations deduce their origin" (8).

be found on the island. By the time our anonymous collector compiled these communications for his benefactor Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Normans were in a similar position to that of their Anglo-Saxon predecessors. In each case, the occupying forces sought to validate their authority by incorporating indigenous history into that of their own.<sup>10</sup>

### **III. Concerning specific characteristics of Christianity in Celtic and Germanic cultures**

#### *A. Fatalism in medieval church histories and the idea of divine retribution*

Gildas, a sixth-century monk, wrote a polemic account of the British before and during the Anglo-Saxon invasions. In his work, *On the Ruin of Britain*, Gildas accuses his ancestral countrymen in no uncertain terms of bringing desolation upon themselves. Gildas felt convicted by God to warn his people that they followed a most ancient pattern wherein a general decline into depravity and destruction caused the perpetrators to be visited by the scourge of God (in this case embodied by Germanic invaders). For this, he provided a chapter full of biblical references to the suffering of the 'chosen people' experiencing their God's vengeance.

Bede, in the more comfortably Anglicized late seventh century, summarizes the sentiment thus: "the pagans proved to be God's just punishment on the sins of the nation, just as the fires once kindled by the Chaldeans destroyed the walls and buildings of Jerusalem."<sup>11</sup> This concept of divine retribution for apostasy and hypocrisy was a common theme for Christian apologists, ubiquitously adopted as a motif by medieval ecclesiastes writing of pagan campaigns that were victorious against civilized Christians.

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<sup>10</sup> *C.f.* William Wells Newell, "William of Malmesbury on the Antiquity of Glastonbury Author(s)": the exhumation of the sepulchre of the fabled King Arthur by Norman churchmen probably abetted by the royal family - the Plantagenet dynasty newly established by Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

<sup>11</sup> Bede *HE* I.15..

Geoffrey of Monmouth repeats the sentiment in his twelfth-century quasi-historical account where his treatment of the British plight serves as an allegory for the Norman invasion and subsequent occupation: “God decided to take vengeance on them by suffering a foreign people to come and drive them away from the lands of their forefathers.”<sup>12</sup> In Geoffrey’s work, however, we may observe a shift out of the traditional fatalism of the church fathers towards a more hopeful view of redemption. Though he validates the idea of divine retribution, Geoffrey immediately pleads for his people, appealing to a vengeful God for an alternative to the bleak punitive measures they surely deserve, a chance to “restore this people to its former dignity.”<sup>13</sup>

*B. Permutation of power dynamics: right to rule and kinship structures*

Within the philosophy of monotheism lies the seed for a supernatural right to rule. When force is no longer appropriate or feasible, an appeal to a unanimously agreed upon code of ethics presents the opportunity to enforce morality through a supreme office. In the hands of a clever leader the ideology could, and would, be exploited to serve the state in many capacities across a plethora of cultures and religions as an extra-secular justification for control. The Anglo-Saxon tribes were generally egalitarian. The king was expected to consult with the elders and elites of his community, and it would not do him well to alienate them. Christianity acted as a catalyst that caused a shift away from equity towards the age of statecraft by offering a “centralized, hierarchic institution dependent on and allied with the king [which] increased his influence over society” through the “introduction of literacy ... and the subsequent development of at least rudimentary forms of bureaucracy.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 274.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 274.

<sup>14</sup> Tyler, “Reluctant Kings and Christian Conversion,” 146.

Furthermore, Christianity proved to be especially effective for consolidating power when wielded against its own adherents. Early Christianity was, by its nature, open to interpretation in many aspects that would be addressed in international councils initiated on grand scales.<sup>15</sup> Factions have always presented as integral parts of church development. From its earliest beginnings, “the habit of repressing religious dissent was built into normative Christianity and the laws to carry it out were embodied in the prestigious Roman law and in the church’s canon law.”<sup>16</sup> Translated to the secular theatre, religious dissent could be a platform from which to facilitate a shift in power. Factions of the politically powerful could use the platform of Christianity to distinguish themselves from their rivals so that “early Christian kings developed the strategy of the unbaptized son to neutralize this opposition.”<sup>17</sup>

Such was the case for the son of the West Saxon King Cynegils. King Cynegils would become a Christian with close affiliations with Northumbria, while his son Coenwalh represented traditional values and married the sister of Penda for a Mercian alliance. The strategy was particularly effective in that it could easily be dropped when convenient, as when Coenwalh put aside his Mercian wife and allied himself with Christians. The church had no compunction with a Christian setting aside a spouse who would not convert; in effect, noble confederations contracted through pagan marriage rites might be dissolved “honourably” in favour of a more appealing match - politically or otherwise. This facet of Christianity would be seductive to notable figures involved in the fluctuating power dynamics as the early English began their kingmaking in earnest. Though polygamy was sometimes condoned at the highest social levels to facilitate alliances, Germanic tribal kinship systems typically prohibited the practice. Tacitus recorded in his *Germania* that “the

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. Emperor Constantine’s Council of Nicea, 325 CE.

<sup>16</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Tyler, “Reluctant Kings and Christian Conversion,” 157.

matrimonial bond is strict and severe among them ... Almost singly among the barbarians, they content themselves with one wife ... Adultery is extremely rare ... Its punishment is instant.”<sup>18</sup> Considering the rapidly evolving socio-political landscape of the Germanic tribes in Britain, it is not hard to imagine a general apathy towards antiquated cultural values. Indeed, this apathy was observed by the medieval fatalists as a recurring phenomenon; for example, Gildas tells us that “[n]o sooner were the ravages of the enemy checked, than the island was deluged with a most extraordinary plenty of all things, greater than was before known, and with it grew up every kind of luxury and licentiousness.” Access to abundant resources caused morality to become less communal, more individual, and thus ripe for the centralizing forces of Christianity. Concurrent with the progressive repudiation of traditional values, Christian marriage might then offer an opportunity that could be made advantageous to its participants.<sup>19</sup> This sort of behaviour would cast pagan egalitarianism as primitive and outdated, but it would also create a space for the veneration of simpler times.

#### **IV. Concerning the socio-political landscape of early seventh-century England**

In the early years of the seventh century, King Æthelfrīd had worked assiduously to consolidate his power north of the River Humber through martial compulsion, decrees of political exile, and marriage alliances.<sup>20</sup> Æthelfrīd laid the groundwork for an expansive system of lesser kings to remain under ‘imperium’ that did not, however, expand so far as to claim fealty from the provinces of Mercia or Elmet that lay south of the River Humber. This border, so to speak, was most likely respected to some degree as a result of the similar

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<sup>18</sup> Tacitus, *Germania*, 18-19.

<sup>19</sup> For example, King Coenwalh and his Mercian wife; or King Eadbald of Kent, who set aside his wife under the advice of Bishop Mellitus (Bede *HE* II.6) so that he might marry a Christian Merovingian princess (Malmsebury), reinforcing the Frankish-Kent alliance.

<sup>20</sup> *C.f.* Michelle Ziegler, “The Politics of Exile in Early Northumbria.”

expansion of Mercian influence, “Penda was an overking who exercised *imperium* over numerous tributary kings.”<sup>21</sup> Christianity at this point was probably no more than a curiosity to Æthelfrīð, the strange religion of a peculiar ascetic group too far away and too weak to be influential. However, his rivals - and eventually his own children - would seek refuge from the politically neutral monastics of Iona and Dal Riada. These political refugees would be the conduit for the introduction of Christianity into the Northumbrian kingdoms, most notably during the reigns of Edwin (r. 616-633) and Oswald (r. 634-642).

Far to the south and east lay the kingdom of Kent, held by hereditary succession some five generations when Roman Christianity arrived at the court of King Æthelbert.<sup>22</sup> Catholic Christianity had arrived in Kent with the Princess Bertha, daughter of the King of Franks,<sup>23</sup> who married King Æthelbert under the “condition that she should have freedom to hold and practise her faith unhindered with Bishop Liudhard.”<sup>24</sup> This marriage alliance marked the commencement of Anglo-Roman communications on a formal stage as the court in Kent exchanged letters with Pope Gregory I. This brilliant and gifted pope saw the opportunity to acquire a strong ally and voice in the northern islands where much of the church’s influence had long since evaporated. Rome needed a loyal champion, and King Æthelbert sought to secure his own power through association with ancient institutions that boasted spectacular architecture, armies, art, and knowledge. These advantages would

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<sup>21</sup> Damian Tyler, “An Early Mercian Hegemony,” 3. Probably through the ancient custom of ritualistic gift giving in exchange for tribute. Such relationships were further reinforced by an “institutionalized system of hostage taking” (10) that would eventually develop into the medieval custom of noble sons being fostered in houses far from their own.

<sup>22</sup> Æthelbert was the descendant of the renowned Hengist. Upon invitation from the British King Vortigern, Hengist led the Germanic mercenary force into England c. 449. He was rewarded for his service with lands in Kent upon which his people settled.

<sup>23</sup> Son of Clothar, son of Clovis I - Merovingian Kings whose lineage would eventually produce Charlemagne; Clovis was the first to unite the Franks following his conversion c. 497. A comparison of continental and English tribal unification exposes conversion to Christianity as the crux upon which success would lie.

<sup>24</sup> Bede *HE* I.25.

lend a gravitas and prestige to Æthelbert's administration that had hitherto been unprecedented amongst the early English kingdoms.

And thus has the stage been set. Celtic Christianity makes inroads with exiled Northumbrian æthelings. Roman Catholicism is established and flourishes in Kent. The British church guards its secrets jealously and their nobles ally with the neighboring pagans of Mercia to reclaim ancestral lands lost to the expansion of rival Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Christianity diffused across the island in a sort of spiritual pincer movement, the advance of which was checked by Mercian control of the centre, so to speak.<sup>25</sup> That Mercia stood as the last significant bastion of pagan religion in England implies two main logical antecedents, to wit: a) the advantages of Christianity did not outweigh the benefits of Penda's largely successful imperium, and b) Penda felt compelled by duty to maintain the ancient religion and rituals that formed the foundation of his political and social relationships. Anthropologically speaking, Christianity would usher the older chiefdoms into statecraft while Penda's Mercia remained an exemplar of the traditional and mostly egalitarian social systems that venerated a chief for the strength of his character or martial ability. Penda strikes a romantic figure in this light: the last Great Pagan Prince, a personification of the trope close to every early English heart, a keening ache for the surely sweeter days of yore.

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<sup>25</sup> See map on page 24.



## EDITOR'S PREFACE

The importance of the following collection of communications can best be understood in the context of medieval historiography and literature of settled post-invasion forces in Britain. For the early English, the most contemporary and credible history comes from the works of the Venerable Bede, most notably the early eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, or *A History of the English Church and People*. The Anglo-Norman era produced a much wider corpus of British histories, but these necessarily depended heavily on the much earlier works of Bede and often incorporated the trademark bias of the dominant culture cultivating a “precedent for the dominions and ambitions of the Norman kings.”<sup>26</sup> In this respect, the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth present an aberration from the norm in that he attempts to meld the history of the British, English, and Norman peoples into a cohesive and semi-linear narrative where the deeds of the British are afforded a more sympathetic light than had hitherto been customary. An examination of the sources and motivations of both Bede and Geoffrey will shed light on the extenuating purpose of this critical edition concerning the communications of the Northumbrian raised Brother Adda evangelizing to the Mercian peoples.

### **I. SOURCES AND MOTIVATION OF THE VENERABLE BEDE**

Much of Bede's career is known to us: he was raised in the church from impressionable boyhood, exhibiting a natural inclination for piety and academics. Leo Sherley-Price, the translator for the Penguin edition of *A History of the English Church and People*, remarks that “Bede's scholarship and devotion must have been

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<sup>26</sup> *Tatlock*, 426; qtd. by Thorpe, 10.

recognized as exceptional”<sup>27</sup> for he was admitted to the diaconate<sup>28</sup> at nineteen, six years earlier than the traditional age of admission. Eleven years later Bede would receive the office of priesthood and spend the rest of his life dedicated to scholarship, “doubtless gathering material for his *History*, which he completed in 731.”<sup>29</sup> The mention of Abbot Utta appears twice in Bede’s *History*: first, as the source of a tale of miracles performed by the famed Bishop Aidan (Book III, chapter XV); and secondly as the biological brother of Adda, who comprised a part in the delegation of Northumbrian clergy sent to Mercia following the conversion of the sub-king, or prince, Peada, son of Penda c. 653. This appeal to oral authority lends contemporary credibility to the enormous task of recording in letters the histories of peoples that had previously been embodied by song. The letters of Adda may have indeed contributed to Bede’s account on one or many levels and will be discussed in section III of this preface.

Bede was largely concerned with the dissemination of Celtic Christianity and its eventual decline in light of the “the highly developed and centralized system of the Roman Church.”<sup>30</sup> Like Gildas, the British ecclesiastic historian of the sixth-century, Bede saw the Germanic invaders and their subsequent domination of the Britons as God’s righteous retribution against a people who had fallen into blasphemy and hypocrisy. Ironically, Bede’s own concerns with British Christianity are superimposed on the pagan prince, Penda of Mercia, in Bede’s *History*. According

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<sup>27</sup> Leo Sherley-Price, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>28</sup> *I.e.* to be made a deacon of the church.

<sup>29</sup> Sherley-Price, 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

to Bede, this pagan allowed missionaries to practice at will in Mercia, but he harboured a reluctance to convert informed by a distaste for “any whom he knew to be insincere in their practice of Christianity once they had accepted, and said that any who despised the commandments of the God in whom they professed to believe were themselves despicable wretches.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the most telling motif in Bede’s work is his condemnation for hypocritical Christians whereby the heathen King Penda is afforded a bit more respect than his erstwhile ally, Cadwalla, King of the Britons. Though Bede records the Mercians to be “idol-worshippers ignorant of the name of Christ,” Cadwalla is denigrated as “utterly barbarous in temperament and behaviour ... with no respect for the newly established religion of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Cadwalla receives harsh treatment by Bede for his faith because such Britons represented a willful schism amongst Christians who should otherwise be united to convert the adherents of heathen religions; one has higher standards for the educated than for the ignorant, and all that. As such, Bede presents the narrative of the British islands so that Roman Catholicism manifests as the most logical and prudent practical philosophy. Though his works are vast and comprehensive, Bede necessarily neglects to inform his readers of life outside the purview of the church, specifically that of the Mercian kingdom prior to the reign of King Wulfhere.<sup>33</sup> Bede’s attitude towards the blasphemous nature of the British church sets the tone for a continued negative historical treatment of the Britons until such time as the Anglo-Norman champion, Geoffrey of Monmouth, offered a refreshed perspective.

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<sup>31</sup> Bede *HE* III.23.

<sup>32</sup> Bede *HE* II.20.

<sup>33</sup> Reign of King Wulfhere: 658 - 675 CE.

## **II. SOURCES AND MOTIVATION OF GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH**

The career of Geoffrey of Monmouth was somewhat similar to that of his historical predecessor Bede. He was an ecclesiastical scholar who was eventually consecrated as a priest, though he held this office only a few years before his death. Geoffrey's motivations were clearly political in nature with a goal towards redeeming those worthy ancestors of the Britons who dwelt on the edges of the map some six hundred years by the time he adopted this mission. In this, Geoffrey may be credited as one of the most significant forces in the literary movement of romantic nationalism that would sweep across European cultures and culminate in the chivalric works of the next few centuries. The key to Geoffrey's success was his masterful blend of allegory and legend that captured and intrigued twelfth-century readers. Superimposing contemporary Norman politics and customs onto the most romantic figures of King Arthur and his descendant King Cadwalla, Geoffrey was able to promote a nationalist platform that offered common ground for the distinct cultures of the Welsh, English, and Normans to converge upon.

The source list for *The History of the Kings of Britain* - as told by Geoffrey - largely resemble the bibliographies of many of the historians of his times to include: Gildas, sixth-century; Bede seventh-century; Nennius, ninth-century; and the miscellaneous evidence to be found in any number of private collections, chronicles, hagiographies and the like. Although a large portion of his *History* can be corroborated by one or even several other sources, the most engaging episodes lack extant corroborative evidence. This has provided historians with a lively debate for centuries over the validity of his contribution to history, and he is more often

referred to in literary circles than in serious historical context. Not even forty years after his death, William of Newburgh would disparage Geoffrey for his fictional portrayal of his predecessors which he presumed to be the product of “an inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons.”<sup>34</sup> Lewis Thorpe, the translator of the Penguin Classics edition of Geoffrey’s *History*, offers the following plausible explanations for Geoffrey’s sources:

[1] that Geoffrey had a source-book and that this book has disappeared without leaving any other trace; [2] that Geoffrey’s source-book is lost indeed, but that we can trace his use of at least one written Old Welsh source...; [3] that Geoffrey’s essential source was really oral tradition, personified, as it were, in his friend Walter the Archdeacon (himself, no doubt, a widely-read man); or [4] that behind the Geoffrey of Monmouth of the Vulgate text of the *History* there lies a pseudo-Geoffrey who had earlier written the variant text, an arch-hoaxer.

The following collection of communications offers a glimpse into the sort of source material that may have informed the more fantastic anecdotes of Geoffrey’s *History*.

### **III. CONSIDERING THE COLLECTIVE HISTORICAL SILENCES**

The people and places traditionally neglected by English and Norman historians offers a creative scholar the unique opportunity to make educated conjectures about those involved. The events that led to the alliance between Mercia and Wales are largely shrouded in mystery, annotated as a matter of fact devoid of context. Integral to the account of the Anglo-British alliance across all sources is the contemporary character, King Edwin of Northumbria, whose exile from his lands (c. 604 - 616 CE) is another contributing factor in the collective silence. For Geoffrey,

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<sup>34</sup> Thorpe, 17.

this absence of definitive proof provided the space in which he wrought the imaginative tales of those monumental men and kings: Cadwalla, Penda, and Edwin.

For Bede, Edwin's exile is no more than its summative conclusion of conversion commencing in the court of King Rædwald of East Anglia and culminating on the cusp of battle with the West Saxons. Geoffrey makes a much more intimate use of this gap in Edwin's history to afford him a tragic backstory that positioned Edwin as a foster brother to the future King Cadwalla. This early acquaintance with the Britons serves to explain the source of the animosity between the Britons and Northumbrians, though their motives may be easily understood under the simple context offered by Bede: that Cadwalla "was set upon exterminating the entire English race in Britain."<sup>35</sup> That Cadwalla fought fiercely to regain the lands of his ancestors while Edwin sought to expand his empire is a facet of British history that cannot be denied by any account, and which relegated Cadwalla to a place of infamy. Geoffrey wished to exonerate Cadwalla from the accusations of barbarity and paganism by offering a new perspective whereupon the British plight could be reexamined under the context of personal intrigue, betrayal, and extenuating circumstances. That is to say, he romanticized the portions of history that could plausibly withstand his treatment without altering the natural narrative or perspectives therein.

Brother Adda's oeuvre contained in the present work may be considered under the suggested proposals given by Thorpe to consider the source material of Geoffrey. It is, perhaps, all but fancy, or it may indeed comprise a portion the

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<sup>35</sup> Bede *HE* II.20.

collection which Geoffrey referenced as the “very ancient book”<sup>36</sup> presented to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, to aid in his project concerning the history of Britain. Certainly many elements of the socio-political landscape of Adda’s letters can be cross-referenced to credible historical sources and may have yet served to inform the works of Bede. Being largely anecdotal, however, Bede surely discounted these letters as valid source material in much the same way as posterity would look upon Geoffrey’s *History*. The true worth of these letters are the instances that provide evidence of Geoffrey’s careful collusion of facts and fiction from various sources that work towards his ultimate goal of pleasing his patrons with patriotic propaganda to present the peoples of Britain as a rich amalgam of complex and interlaced histories. In editing this collection, it has been the intent to note any events that may be corroborated by trusted historical sources or otherwise.

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<sup>36</sup> Monmouth, *History*, 51.







## Dedication

To the venerated Geoffrey of Monmouth:

Wulfric, humble servant of God at the Priory of St Paul, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Some time ago you expressed a desire to know more of the English settlers that pushed your British ancestors into the lands where you now dwell. Hardly hoping to find anything of consequence that was not already recorded by the venerable Bede at Jarrow Monastery not too far from here, I endeavoured to assist you in this task. As it so happens, after the defeat of Edgar the ætheling and Malcolm, King of Scotland, by William the conqueror at Gateshead fell, the monks of the Abbey of Gateshead transferred north of the river. In so doing, many of their possessions were lost or misplaced or sent abroad for safe keeping. I was able to discover that most of their records and what remained of their codex collection was sent to a small monastic house in Gisborough which has since become the Augustinian Priory of St Mary, presided over by an old colleague of mine. I have collected any such correspondence as pertains to the origins of the English on the Island, but I fear it is not much. Knowing the fantastic stories that live free within you, I am sure you will be able to do much with even this little I can contribute. I wish you the best in your undertaking of compiling a history that may draw together the various races of this land, it is a worthy venture.

Yours in Christ,

Brother Wulfric, anno domini 1129

*[Letter I from Adda to Utta]*

To my dear brother the Abbot of Gateshead, Utta<sup>37</sup>

Adda, humble priest and missionary to the Middle Angles south of the River Trent

It is with great joy that I may relate to you the conversion of a notable figure to the true Faith, one Peada, son of Penda, King of Mercia. I have set out with my brothers Cedd, Betti, and Diuma to baptize Peada's people when they are informed of the decision made by their King and his thegns. There have been many goings-on in At-Wall<sup>38</sup> since you left for your continental voyage. It occurred to me that your absence meant that this event would go wholly unrecorded. So I have taken it upon myself to transcribe the episode, giving what evidence I may for context, that you might add this tale to your ever-growing compilation of historical events.<sup>39</sup> My quill is in no way comparable to the majority of stories found in your collection but it is, perhaps, unique in that I believe I am the first priest of letters that has been made welcome amongst the Mercian nobility. What is more, I believe I will be in a singular position to measure the breadth and scope of paganism amongst these Middle Angles, the better to focus our attentions. Having written the body of the text before this small preamble, I can say with no doubt that I will most contentedly continue in this capacity for so long as you deem appropriate, or so long as I am able.

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<sup>37</sup> Utta was the Abbot of Gatehead, named twice by the "Venerable" Bede as a source in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.

<sup>38</sup> The remnants of Hadrian's wall in the area of Newcastle in Northumberland, on the north bank of the River Tyne; Gateshead is on the south bank.

<sup>39</sup> For more on Bede's historical account and sources *cf.* Editor's Preface, 15-20.

*The Baptism of the Middle Angles*

[AD 653]

The baptism of the noble Mercians came about as a result of yet another marriage between the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. Peada, the pagan prince of Mercia, son of Penda, the king in that land, sought the hand of the princess Alchfleð,<sup>40</sup> princess of Northumbria. Peada had met Alchfleð on a state visit when his own sister, the princess Cyneburh of Mercia, married the prince Alhfrið of Northumbria.<sup>41</sup> But the marriage of Peada was borne of political motivation, not a love match like that of Alhfrið and Cyneburh. Now, we know these unions are permissible under the eyes of God as Pope Gregory addressed just such an issue in his correspondence with Saint Augustine of Canterbury. And while it is a sin for a man to marry his brother's widow, it is perfectly acceptable for two siblings to wed siblings from another family,<sup>42</sup> as this only forms deeper bonds, fervently needed in these war-torn times. The prince Alhfrið, who as you know is quite friendly with his Mercian brothers- and sisters-in-law, was adamantly against the match from the start. He urged Peada to look elsewhere for a bride lest he rue his decision for the rest of his life (there seems to be no small amount of animosity between Alhfrið and

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<sup>40</sup> The daughter of King Oswy and Eanflaed.

<sup>41</sup> The son of King Oswy and Eanflaed.

<sup>42</sup> Bede *HE* I.27; Oswy and Eanflaed were first cousins, but marriage between such was not yet specifically prohibited, only discouraged.

his father Oswy, though you perhaps know more about the situation than I).<sup>43</sup> Peada would have none of it; he sought to secure his succession to the Mercian throne much like Coenwalh, King of the West Saxons, had done by his marriage to the sister of Penda a decade or so ago. Word of such westerly risings may not have been much on your mind as this was about the time you were off on your adventure to secure a bride for our own King Oswy, when the Bishop Aidan forewarned you of storms on the sea.<sup>44</sup> In case you cannot recall the circumstances, I shall give it here in brief, augmented as it were by my new privy access to Mercian lore.

Now, when Edwin, King of Northumbria was defeated by the British-Mercian alliance under the kings Cadwalla and Penda, Northumbria was split once more into the provinces of Deira, which went to Osric, and Bernicia, which went to Eanfrith.<sup>45</sup> During the subsequent occupation of the territory by the British, the Northumbrian nobles - Christians all through the work of the venerated Bishop Paulinus - fled to Kent. It was a dark year for the church when those princes, who should have been a beacon of light for their people, apostatized and returned to the pagan practices of yore. Perhaps they thought to secure their rule with adherence to those old gods still worshipped by King Penda. The King of the Britons, Cadwalla, had no such affinity however, being nominally a Christian himself and possessed of a firm

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<sup>43</sup> Bede *HE* III.14; King Oswy will suffer rebellious attacks from his son Alhfrith and his nephew Ethelwald. Peada will be murdered in the next year as a result of his wife's betrayal.

<sup>44</sup> Utta "was sent to Kent to bring back Eanflaed as wife for King Oswy: she was the daughter of King Edwin [of Northumbria] and had been taken to Kent when her father was killed" in battle against Penda. The legend has it that Bishop Aidan prophesied the storms Utta would encounter on this trip and so bestowed upon him a gift of holy oil with which to anoint the ship and save all on board from certain death. Aidan is credited for this miracle (Bede *HE* III.15).

<sup>45</sup> 633 CE.

conviction that his cause was most righteous.<sup>46</sup> The wounds wrought upon him by Edwin were coupled with what he perceived to be his ancestral duty as a descendent of those Romano-British heroes that made their stand at Mount Badon against foreign invasions. Along this line, the bards in these parts have begun to sing some common names in the ballads: Artur and Emrys, Uther and Ygraine. Here there be mead halls that whisper of dragons as if a one had been witnessed in this generation.

King Cadwalla destroyed Osric in battle and Eanfrith through treachery. And the mighty Saint Oswald paid him back in kind, as you know, at the battle on the heavenly field,<sup>47</sup> uniting Deira and Bernicia into Northumbria yet again. I remind you of all this so that the timing may be clear to you, for it was this year that Bishop Birinus was sent to minister to Cynegils and Cwichelm, brother Kings of the West Saxons. The following year saw Saint Oswald stand as godfather to King Cynegils at his baptism, whereafter Oswald was married to the beloved daughter of Cynegils, creating a strong northern alliance through marriage and Christian brotherhood.<sup>48</sup>

But while all this was happening, King Penda had invaded the Christian lands of the East Angles - much nearer to home for the West Saxons - and had killed the Kings Ecgric and Sigbert. In an effort to secure his immediate borders, Cynegils allowed his

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<sup>46</sup> Lynch, 11: "Christianity is very prone to split over disputes concerning belief, organization and discipline ... religious unity was difficult to achieve," and often these differences acted as a catalyst or justification for conflict.

<sup>47</sup> 634 CE, *Hefenfelth*, a hill north of the wall in Hexham, Northumberland.

<sup>48</sup> 635 CE.

son, Coenwalh, to marry the sister of Penda, thus establishing a Mercian alliance. Some years later<sup>49</sup> it was this multifaceted alliance that allowed Coenwalh to succeed to the West Saxon throne,<sup>50</sup> paying tribute to his goodbrother Penda and unworried by his neighbors to the north as they now shared the bond of blood through the birth of a son, Ethelwald, to Oswald and his Queen.

Peada sought to secure his succession to the Mercian throne by distancing himself from the pagan traditions of his father, just as Coenwalh had secured his throne by allying with the pagans while his father secured the Christian factions. So, though he had his qualms about the personal nature of this impending union, Alhfrīð begrudgingly offered his goodbrother<sup>51</sup> Peada advice towards conversion, as his father would never consign his daughter to a heathen household. Peada saw that he must humble himself at the court of Oswy and submit to the true Faith. Once he had announced his willingness to convert, King Oswy was much appeased and delighted, and at once organized a lavish festival to celebrate the marriage and baptism of his new son. Whatever influence Oswy had lost over his son when Alhfrīð married Cyneburh, it seemed to be restored through his intimate new connection with the son of Penda.

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<sup>49</sup> c. 643 CE.

<sup>50</sup>The only Wessex prince in two hundred years to succeed his father, "it seems possible that he was able to secure the kingship in spite of tradition by effectively distancing himself from his father's policies, represented by the northern alliance" (Tyler, "An Early Mercian Hegemony," 6).

<sup>51</sup> Gud-brother - (Scottish) brother-in-law [John Jamieson, 467]. Alhfrīð of Northumbria and Peada of Mercia are married to each other's sisters.

I will confess, Alhfrið may not have been completely wrong to advise Peada away from this marriage. Surely he knows his sister better than can Peada or even Oswy. She is but very young, yet she bears the weight of her nobility with the haughty manner the likes of which I have never encountered. She is quite devout in the faith, but there is no grace whatsoever in her uncompromising demeanour. As a wife, I have doubts of her success. Though, were she to renounce this secular world, I have no doubt that she would make an anchoress worthy of veneration. Presumably, only time will tell.<sup>52</sup>

“God keep you safe, most reverend brother.”<sup>53</sup>

Dated the twentieth of March, in the eleventh year of the reign of King Oswy, anno domini 653.

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<sup>52</sup> In less than a year Peada would lose his life as a consequence of this marriage: “during the Festival of Easter, Peada was foully assassinated through the treachery, it is said, of his wife” [Bede *HE* III.24].

<sup>53</sup> Bede *HE* I.30. The address, closure, and dating of these letters are modelled after the letters sent by Pope Gregory to various bishops in Britain. *E.g. Pope Gregory to Mellitus*: “God keep you safe, my very dear son. Dated the seventeenth of June, in the nineteenth year of the reign of our most pious...” & etcetera. .

*[Letter II Adda to Utta]*

To my dear brother the Abbot of Gateshead, Utta

Adda, humble priest and missionary to the Middle Angles on the River Severn

It is my delight to inform you of the progress of our ecclesiastic mission to the Mercian peoples. The king harbors strong opinions concerning the nature of man to say one thing while acting in a manner that belies the sentiment. He seems to have a rather intimate knowledge of our faith through his affiliations with the Christian royal house of Britons, but he has also seen many who have only put on the hood of religion for personal gain which ended in violence and betrayal. I fear there will be no conversion there, but he also does not impede our work sanctioned by his Christian son. And oh! the stories I have collected from the mouths of those most affected! I know that you will be most attentive.

For some many years we have been the recipients of war narratives that paint some king or other as the pagan villain cast against a Christian hero. But! In the Mercians we have seen the Pagan successful as Christians fall around him like so many martyrs, and in our own lands of Northumbria we see Christians fighting each other! This has presented no small amount of trouble for my brothers and I trying to convince these pagans of the power of Christ, they are loath to forsake the old gods when they have much to show for their devotions.



*Bernicia and Deira are reunited into Northumbria in the manner of the kings Edwin and Æthelfrīð [651]*

I recall our work amongst the Lindissi,<sup>54</sup> a humble community, in the year of the death of Bishop Aiden. This was also the year that saw the death of King Oswine of Deira and the end of the wars perpetrated by King Oswy. While the Northumbrian kingdom is strong under Oswy, the shameful manner in which the culmination of the northern wars was brought about surely predicated the waste and ruin of which I am about to write.

King Oswy, desiring to see the lands united as they had been under his saintly brother Oswald, took up arms against his kinsman, the good Christian King Oswine. Now, Oswine raised an army at Wilfaresdun, but to no avail. Upon seeing the strength his enemy had brought to bear, Oswine dismissed the war band so that there be no reckless loss of noble lives. Sending his men away, Oswine sought refuge in the house of his oldest and most trusted friend, Hunwald, some two days ride south from where the armies had almost come together. Along the way, this king and a select few of his thegns observed the wretched countryside, torn as it were by internecine wars that prevented the common people from trusting in the power of the One True God.

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<sup>54</sup> People of the province of Lindsey: “it seems unlikely that Oswine of Deira would have been powerful enough to control the Lindissi, and the probability is that they were subject to Penda” (Tyler, “An Early Mercian Hegemony,” 6).

I had it from the mouth of one who was there - a scop<sup>55</sup> who had travelled with Oswine for some many years - that the King Oswine was not defeated in honour, but betrayed by the very man from whom he begged succour. Hunwald the Duplicitous changed his colours and opened his hall to Ethelwine, Oswy's general, who slew Oswine under the protection of hospitality. After this, wandering warriors were seen walking the wolds of the Lindissi, the remnants of Oswine's disbanded army, adrift and left with no leader. It was not long before Oswy set his sights on subjecting this people to his rule, now that their borders were shared with him and not Oswine. But the Lindissi were hitherto tributary to Penda, and that pagan ferocity would brook no treaty, even though Oswy offered him many gifts to show what a magnanimous ruler he could be. The wayfaring soldiery of Oswine betimes found the camps of the war bands of Penda. Some would stay to fight their former foe, but most moved on for calmer retirement in the south, where the clans in Kent are kind to Christians. The same scop I mentioned above sang a haunting melody of the wars there, yet it was not without hope. I cannot recall it all, yet I will transcribe what I might:

A prudent man must recognize how appalling it will be  
when all the wealth in this world stands waste  
as even now randomly throughout middle-earth  
walls are standing, wind-blown, rime covered,

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<sup>55</sup> A scop, as in *Beowulf*, was an Old English appellation for a professional poet, particularly one who performs aloud.

the ramparts storm-beaten.  
The wine-halls are crumbling,  
the rulers are lying dead, deprived of pleasure,  
the whole proud company has fallen near the wall;  
some war snatched away and carried off along the onward road;  
one a bird bore away over the deep ocean;  
one the grey wolf dismembered in death;  
one a sad-faced man buried in the grave in the earth.  
Thus the creator of men laid waste this earthly abode until,  
bereft of the sounds of the citizens' revelry,  
the ancient gigantic structures stood desolate.  
He who has sagely reflected upon this foundation  
and, wise at heart, deeply contemplates this dark life,  
often recalls a multitude of violent assaults, and utters these words:  
Where has gone the steed? Where has gone the man?  
Where has gone the giver of treasure?  
Where has gone the place of the banquets? Where are the pleasures of the hall?  
Alas, the gleaming chalice; alas, the armoured warrior;  
alas, the majesty of the prince! Truly, that time has passed away,  
has grown dark under the helm of night as though it had never been.  
Now there remains among the traces of those dear people a wall...<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>“ *The Wanderer*,” an excerpt (lines 73-98a) from the anonymously authored Old-English poem found in the “Exeter Book,” Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501.

Long has this song resonated in my breast. It evokes such sorrow and longing as to break your heart, yet if I remember rightly it ends with a message of grace and hope through faith in Christ. This belief has been creeping into my mind: the best way to turn the hardened hearts of our people is to appeal to that emotive passion that beats within us all. I was visiting the court in Kent not long ago with my patron prince and, while Peada was otherwise engaged, I sought out the library of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop elect Deusdedit was happy to receive me, and he shared his many anxieties as the first Englishman to take this office - he hails from the court of King Coenwalh, did you know? That created a trifling amount of discomfort between the Mercian contingent and himself but it was easily smoothed over in light of the peace that seems to emanate from the hallowed ground in this place. Deusdedit showed me the collection of correspondence between the nobles of Kent and the Holy Father in Rome. Within was a passage from the great Pope Gregory dated some fifty-three years ago to Mellitus while he was still only an Abbot. In this letter he speaks of transfiguring pagan rituals into ceremonies for the Lord, consecrating sites of old magics with “Dedication or Festivals of the holy martyrs,” redirecting sacrificial harvest into “devout feasting,” transmuting temples to churches.<sup>57</sup> The pope was wise to direct this for all these actions are imbued with the heritage of our fathers and the dreams we have for our children, they are the very life force that circulates through the ley lines of society,

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<sup>57</sup> Bede *HE* I.30, “Chapter XXX: *A copy of the letter sent by Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus on his departure for Britain [601]*”

enervating and encouraging, though mysterious. There is an aspect that the pope could not possibly have understood, however, and that is the power of our oral history and songs. If we could translate the works of the divinely inspired Apostles of Christ into a narrative more relatable to our people, it would convince the traditionalists in a way that humility simply cannot achieve. Like the *Wanderer's Song*, they need heroes and epic deeds, victory over demons and dragons in songs they can sing! And hope, at the end, of things better to come.

May God bless you my dear brother.

Dated the twenty-third of April, in the twelfth year of the reign of King Oswy, anno domini 654.

*[Letter III Adda to Utta]*

To the Abbot of Gateshead, my brother Utta: Adda, humble priest and spiritual advisor to the Mercian nobility, west of the River Severn

Though Penda's queen hails from the house of the late Cadwalla, King of the Britons, she does not practice Christianity as many of her people do. Indeed, she seems to follow a strange and blasphemous blend of Christian and druidic rites. I was not exactly invited, but I happened across a devotion of sorts that set my mind racing with the implications. Though we name it 'miracle,' these old Christian Britons speak 'saint' and 'magic' with the same breath; and a prayer for the Madonna is the same call to the druid's Mother Earth.

I chanced to spy a woman richly wrought as she stepped upon the stairs that led into the earthen vault. A few moments passed before I was compelled to follow or else resign myself to hopeless wanderings in the dark. The sharp howl of the wind seemed to suffocate in the hushing weight of the barrow stairwell. Soft warm light swelled around a heavy embroidered curtain at the foot of the stairs and faint sounds of murmuring voices joined the gentle bleating of a lamb. This was the women's hall and, though it is not specifically prohibited for men to be in this place, it is considered a great disrespect to the women to enter unbid. I considered the tremor of my hands, the frightful gale that was so blessedly muted here, and resolved to announce my presence to those beyond the curtain.

Before I could muster the courage to give voice to my open mouth, the curtain pulled back. I was beckoned inside by a cascade of shadows and encouraging tones, though I cannot say as I could recall a single word that might prove the sentiment. I was led by a young woman to a low bench close to the hearth fire and looking upon a modest shrine of the Madonna in a fountain. She sat beside me and was very still, gazing into the fire with all the peculiar intensity of a child. I leaned nearer towards her and asked, "Was it wise to lead me here, lass?" When she looked at me, I looked about us conspiratorially. She laughed brightly and with great delight, breaking the charm that had held her fiercely in check moments before. "Forgive me, father, if I have alarmed you. Please know you are most welcome to seek shelter here on this evening. In fact, I suspect my mother will be quite pleased to have you here on this day above many others." When I asked what made this gathering special, the girl smiled with carefully controlled excitement and whispered, "We are giving thanks to the Holy Mother in observance of the first new moon after midwinter. Tonight my grandmother will lead the devotion, just like you!" I realized then who she must be, "You are the Princess Mildgyth." I was rewarded with a graceful bow of her head and a polite, "your cup is mine to fill." At this point she blushed and jumped up, "I will be back anon!" She said urgently, "Worry not!" and flashed a winsome smile. She was gone as if by fae craft into the shadows that I could now inspect at leisure. There were several large woven textiles hanging about in various states of completion that caused light to be transmuted through the hall in a transfixing yet unassuming manner. At the far end of the hall hung the largest complete work - a masterpiece of Celtic geometrical design, gold and scarlet entwined upon a deep emerald field -

shielding much of the light and noise of the hall from the small livestock pen where the mournful lamb could still be softly heard. "Please, eat, drink, and be welcome, Father." Mildgyth returns, her flushed face beaming, to hand me a wooden mug of mulled wine. Brown bread lay atop the cup, warming in the steam from the wine. "Thank you, child." I took the ritual gifts with as much joy as I believe she also felt at being given the honour of distributing hospitality presents. I confess I took more pleasure in my respite from the bitter cold and the offering of those simple tokens than perhaps I should have done on a day meant for the meditation of the dark. The girl remained politely at my side while I ate the bread and drank the wine. She hummed a slow tune that had been sung at the mead hall earlier that day. These Britons are a deep and complex people, their tales are every bit as haunting and heroic as many of our own best songs. This song in particular, without fail, always summons the memory of mother in midwinter, as she stood on the shore of the Shadow Lake the year we lost the sounder.<sup>58</sup> I was imagining her thus when Mildgyth whispered words of her grandmother arriving. For a moment in my mind, Queen Kyneswith wore the checked wool of the northern tribes rather than the finery afforded to her by status and custom as a British princess and an English Queen. Blinking in barely banished confusion, my eyes sought the source of disorientation and alighted upon the Queen as she wove her way toward the shrine of the Madonna. The hearth fire was partially banked so that the muted roar of flames dulled to a comfortable crackling as the Queen began to speak:

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<sup>58</sup> Sounder *n.* - a herd of wild swine. Pigs were a mainstay of the Anglo-Saxon diet.



“Sisters, pay heed: attend the tale I have to tell,  
and make such judgements as seem fit.  
I would pass to you this night, a story full of darkness  
Yet renewal too, makes an appearance.  
Some here now will know the moments I share.  
Mildgyth, your mother’s myths are your future miracles,<sup>59</sup>  
Mind always there was much before you,  
We women must weave peace within the wars  
And there are many ways we may see to it”

The following recitation - for rehearsed it certainly was, as I discovered later - consisted of a complex narrative imbued with moral and ethical reflections and advice concerning events that inevitably constitute some of the most defining points in the times of our parents. I have had the privilege to hear the Queen’s tale twice now and I recount it to you here with only half the intimacy and intensity that the spoken word provokes.

*Edwin in Exile and the Effect on the English [c. 604 - 618]*

A lifetime ago, the northern realms of Deira and Bernicia were ruled by two great families whose patriarchs were practically brothers in their treatment of each other.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, the friendship of the fathers was solidified by a wedding of the

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<sup>59</sup> Mildgyth was one of three daughters of King Merewalh that would all be recognized as early English Saints. King Merewalh was himself a client king to Penda and probably married to one of Penda’s daughters. Penda set Merewalh over the kingdom of the Magonsæte, north of Hwicce, c. 628 (Lynch).

<sup>60</sup> Ælle, King of Deira (r. 569 - 599) and Æthelric, King of Bernicia (r. 568 - 572).

children. So it was that Prince Æthelfrīð of Bernicia married Princess Acha of Deira, and the fathers were pleased that their brotherhood would now be buttressed by blood. But dark designs lay smoldering deep within the heart of Æthelfrīð and he had many years to plot the usurpation of the Deiran throne. Though rule of Deira should have passed directly to Acha's brother Edwin, he was only a boy when the good King Ælle made his journey to the Otherworld. Unable to resist Æthelfrīð's unwelcome advances, Edwin was exiled and Æthelfrīð forged a united 'Northumbria' upon the fires of conquest.

Of his first woman, Acha, we know little; for she was much confined to the birthing halls and weak of constitution elsewhere. Of his second woman, Bebbe - mother of Oswy, the current king in the north - she now resides in the city named for her, Bebbanburgec.<sup>61</sup> Of his children we know much more, for they have changed the world and every one of the brood has since adopted the Christian faith. The eldest son, Eanfrīð, renounced Christianity when he succeeded to the throne, thus his reign was cut short by the will of God.<sup>62</sup> The second son, Oswald, has made the ranks of Christian heroes venerated by the church as a saint. Oswald was slain at the Battle of Maserfelth by my own husband, the mighty King Penda,<sup>63</sup> though it grieved him to do so. Oswald need not have found us enemies. But for the dishonourable murder of

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<sup>61</sup> Bamburgh, Northumberland, UK.

<sup>62</sup> Bede explicitly designates the short reign to be the product of divine retribution: "they were justly punished by meeting their death at the hands of the godless Cadwalla, king of the Britons" (III.1). In point of fact Cadwalla was nominally Christian. In this, however, Bede shows his erudite prejudice and likens the practice of British Christianity to heathen behaviour.

<sup>63</sup> 642 CE.

Eanfrīð by my brother Cadwalla, Oswald was ever compelled to meet our warbands with hostility. But these are tales for another time, for tonight we speak of Edwin, whom Æthelfrīð displaced, discounted, and disdained.

Upon the birth of his dynastic heir, Æthelfrīð caused his goodbrother Edwin to leave the realm. This was only a year or so after the calamitous council called by that austere Archbishop Augustine whereby the prophecy was pronounced against our British clergy: ““if they refused to accept peace with fellow-Christians [that is to say adopting Roman doctrine and observing Easter in accordance with modern calculations], they would be forced to accept war at the hands of enemies; and if they refused to preach to the English the way of life, they would eventually suffer at their hands the penalty of death.”<sup>64</sup> (The prophecy was fulfilled some several years later when Æthelfrīð descended like a scourge of God and defeated the warband of that renowned war chief Brocmail, slaughtering even the convocation of monks from Bangor for their participation through prayer.)<sup>65</sup> Thus during these turbulent trials and tribulations, Edwin of Northumbria sought respite in the far north and west with the monks of Iona under a man we have all heard of: the saintly Bishop Aiden, who has only just forsaken this world for the next.<sup>66</sup> It was there where

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<sup>64</sup> Bede *HE* II.2.

<sup>65</sup> Bede *HE* II.3. Commentary concerning the attack on the British armies at Chester (c. 607 CE) offers yet another example of Bede’s proscription of divine retribution against heretical Christian philosophy and practices.

<sup>66</sup> Bishop Aiden (d. 651 CE) was a key figure in the conversion of Northumbria to Celtic Christianity. King Oswald of Northumbria granted him the right to the isle of Lindisfarne where he established an abbey in 634 CE.

Edwin's ears first heard the words of the Gospels but, as he had yet to reach maturity, he could not quite hear the truth in the message.

After a time, the boy grew up. He was often to be found practicing the arts of combat with the Pict tribes that surrounded and supported the monastery. Eanfrid, son of Æthelfrīð, kept an eye on Edwin on his periodic visits as emissary to the Picts, and they formed a bond that would serve them both well in later years. Indeed, I do believe it was around that time that Edwin introduced Eanfrid to a family that had been kind to him - a family ripe with daughters from which Eanfrid would select a bride and secure a formal alliance for the newly unified Northumbria.<sup>67</sup>

When Edwin had grown enough to face his fate on his own, the monks bequeathed upon him their blessings and ample provisions that would allow him to seek his destiny elsewhere. With the obstinate reservation of a boy who must prove he is a man, Edwin acted fearless and refused the offer of companionship on his journey to everywhere and nowhere. The women of the tribes wept to see him go, the men offered advice and fond farewells, and Edwin rode into the heather to disappear further along the ridge line. Who can say where he went those days? For he kept no account and allowed himself to be driven by *awen*.<sup>68</sup> He told us once upon a time that he happened across an adventure that would take him over the swan-road to the land of the Franks. There Edwin found purpose for a short while in the court of

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<sup>67</sup> Eanfrid most likely wed a Pictish Princess as his son, Talorgan, would be styled King of the Picts.

<sup>68</sup> *Awen* appears in written history as early as the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* by Nennius and can be understood as a particularly Celtic interpretation of divine inspiration.

the Merovingian Queen Brunhilda who suffered endless betrayals and a brutal demise at the hands of her own kinsmen. The political machinations in the lands across the whale-house must have left a significant impression on Edwin, though I was blind to this until it was too late to address.

Elsewhere across this fair Island, our people continued to lose the lands that the great King Arthur had secured for us. Through brilliant collaboration, mutual respect, and an arduous affinity for acceptance of all, King Arthur led our father's fathers to forge a federation of equality between Britons and Angles. Thus did Christian priests and pagan druids coexist in our lands, lending the advantages of modern philosophy and ancient wisdom to the policies adopted during our long-lasting alliance. While every realm reported treachery from within, our union only suffered from external forces. In my youth, my father held the title of King of the Britons; my beloved husband's father was our champion and chief of defenses. He was humble and loyal all while demanding the utmost respect. We need not have called my husband a King at all but for the precocious advancements of the Saxon descendants of Ceawlin - the brother kings Cynegils and Cwichelm - and the Northumbrian empire expanding its influence over the lands of the East Angles upon the death of their king, Rædwald, which brings me back to our errant exile.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> For a brief discussion of the Old English style of interlace, *cf.* introduction p. 9; for a full discussion, *cf.* John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf."

Edwin roamed the realms in search of an ally to assist in assuming his rightful role as a king, and he finally found one in the land of the East Angles.<sup>70</sup> At that time, the east Angles were under the rule of King Rædwald and his wife - who was a good friend to Cwenburh, a wonderful woman who was once wont to walk the wealds hereabouts while we were only girls. As it happened, Edwin and Cwenburh fell very much in love and within a year they were expecting their first child. Not wanting to bring this new life into the world so far from the halls of their fathers, Edwin escorted his heavily pregnant partner back to Mercian lands. For her father was Ceorl, who was chief of our defenses while Penda and Cadwalla were far to the north securing fealty from the Pecsæte people.<sup>71</sup> So it was that when my menfolk returned home, they were introduced to the newest members of our community, Edwin and his babe.

In my husband and brother, Edwin could have found no stauncher allies. For many years they were inseparable. When Edwin wrested his throne from the tyrant Æthelfrīð, many of our men accompanied him while Cwenburh and their sons Eadfrid and Osfrid remained here until Edwin was firmly ensconced on his throne and sent for his family. Cwenburh became quite famous in her own right for her natural magics and it came to pass that she rose a man called Coifi to be the High

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<sup>70</sup> There are twelve years of mystery in the life of Edwin, as there are no reliable accounts that offer collaborative indication of his goings-on during this period. Bede tells us that Edwin “wandered as an unknown fugitive for many years through many lands and kingdoms” (II.12). Regardless of his adolescent adventures, all the sources agree that Edwin eventually found himself in the court of King Rædwald whose aid was key in the downfall of King Æthelfrīð

<sup>71</sup> Tyler, “An Early Mercian Hegemony,” 9: “Artefacts found in seventh-century barrow burials in the Peak District, the territory of the Pecsæte, ... include a range of high-status luxury goods ... and may have reached this comparatively obscure group as gifts from an overking, possibly Penda himself.”

Priest at the Northumbrian court. Between the old gods and the new that surrounded this land, for nearly ten years there was such peace that once my ladies and I travelled without arms all the way to Bebbanburgec to see Cwenburh and the boys.<sup>72</sup> But peace ne'er lasts forever, at least it shall not until such time as the return of the king, foretold by Emrys.

*The End of an Era of Peace*

[625-633]

Darkness invaded our golden era in the form of an ambitious Roman scholar of the church. When Edwin began to make overtures to Eadbald, king of Kent, he entered into marriage negotiations for the hand of Ethelberg, sister of the king. Cwenburh accepted this with the grace of an English princess, for it is not wholly uncommon for your kings to take multiple wives, though I have never had to share my Penda with another. Ethelberg, for her part, seemed to accept her future role as second wife with the same graceful equanimity as her new sister-wife; but she was beholden to the Catholic faith, baptized in infancy, and she brought her bishop Paulinus with her. Now Edwin had expressly sworn that there would be no impediments to the practice of her faith, just as Penda swore to my father that he would not hinder mine, but Paulinus affected effrontery at the mere idea that his charge should be amongst heathens, and he spoke sinister poisonous spells that slipped into the very fabric of our peace weavings. The year after his introduction to

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<sup>72</sup> Bede devotes a nostalgic bit to this time period, "so peaceful was it in those parts of Britain under King Edwin's jurisdiction that the proverb still runs that a woman could carry her new-born babe across the island from sea to sea without any fear of harm" (II.16).

the court, tragedy befell upon the northern courts. The exiled æthelings of Æthelfrīd had made allies of the West Saxon brother kings Cynegils and Cwichelm, and they were moved to send an assassin against the magicians in Edwin's court - so convinced were they that Edwin could only hold sway through dark forces. The assassin was successful in half his hateful marks. He did not manage to kill the gentle Coifi but Edwin's beloved thegn lost his life as did the darling of all our hearts, Cwenburh.

Edwin and Coifi were both beside themselves in sorrow. The remaining Queen was still in the women's hall recovering from the birth of a new daughter and was no comfort then. In his overwhelming lust for vengeance, Edwin is said to have stormed the small chapel where Paulinus held services and demanded that he invoke the power of his God to seek justice for the death of two such loved ones. This was, of course, exactly what Paulinus had intended. He had discovered that Edwin had entertained the idea of Christianity many years ago in the court of King Rædwald on the eve of the Battle at the River Idle where Æthelfrīd was slain. Now Paulinus was determined to bring Edwin under Christian rule by taking advantage of this knowledge. For his spell, Paulinus required a pledge of Edwin: that he would follow the practice of Catholicism and he would offer his new daughter as the collateral against this pledge. Edwin immediately acquiesced to the ritual and the new baby, Eanfleda, was baptized on the feast of Pentecost under the invocation of victory in the forthcoming wars with Wessex.



Edwin was victorious against Wessex but he was never after the same man. His heart had frozen into an insatiable state of revenge that tore a rift in every pattern he'd been part of. Coifi, however, had remained seemingly passive and logical while he attempted to discover the truth behind the murder of the queen. Eventually he discovered that Paulinus had instigated the assassination attempt. With no way to prove it, he set his mind to taking the Bishop out of the picture on his own. At last, Coifi decided that the only way to destroy the clutch of Christianity was to do so from within; he advised Edwin to convert so that he might depend on the authority of the church to expel this snake in their midst. Thus were the Northumbrians brought to the true faith in a duplicitous manner. Regardless of the manner in which it came to be, Coifi's plan was successful: his influence with both the king and church allowed for him to cause Paulinus to be driven out of the land and into Lindsey.

What follows this grows even darker

The sons of Cearl's beloved daughter

Found fault with god and faltered in their faith

Return did they to boyish haunts

To Cotswold hills and healing springs

To cast their idols upon fonts

To cast the beads of bishop off

Edwin knowing nearly nothing

Consumed with rage too riled to soothe

Blamed Penda for this added suffering

And war was born anew

But that, as they say,

is a tale for another time.

My hand is now grown weary and I hear the calls of women yon.

In peace, beloved brother, may God bless you.

Dated the eleventh of August, in the twelfth year of the reign of King Oswy, anno  
domini 654.

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