

AGENTS UNTO THEMSELVES: RECONSTRUCTING  
THE NARRATIVE OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE  
ANGLO-SAXON CONVERSION

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ABSTRACT

The legacy of Christianity in Britain is unique, as that region is one of very few known to have converted to the Christian faith twice. The conversion of Britain's Anglo-Saxon newcomers demonstrates a confluence of three different religious cultures: the traditional Germanic paganism of the Saxons, the Roman Christian belief system introduced from the continent, and the unique brand of Christianity practiced by the Irish. In the midst of this competition among faiths, how did women exercise their agency to assert their beliefs and influence others? Recent studies have demonstrated how instrumental women were in the original proliferation of Christianity in the Roman world, and early chronicle sources seem to hint that they might have played a similarly significant role in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Nevertheless, many of these early monastic authors utilized a practice of narrative emplotment to frame their female "characters" in a manner that was consistent with their own theological worldview.

A close reading of these early Anglo-Saxon sources is necessary to draw out the relevant clerical perspectives and present a more nuanced analysis of the role of women in

the Saxon conversion. Combined with a synthesis of recent scholarship in the fields of Anglo-Saxon religion and gender issues, this analysis will establish a framework for reconstructing the lost narrative of these influential medieval women. The issues that will be discussed in this paper will include how elite women served as religious gatekeepers in introducing the Christian faith to the English kingdoms, how abbesses and other prominent women of the cloisters bolstered the faith and helped establish a new religious status quo, and why the authors of early medieval chronicle sources sought to narratize the roles of women to fit their own social agendas.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Agents unto Themselves: Reconstructing the Narrative of Women’s Roles in the Anglo-Saxon Conversion,” presented by Alexander Frederick Strub, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND SOURCE ANALYSIS

The history of Christianity in the British Isles is a tempestuous one, fraught with fervent rivalries and competing political ambitions. During the seventh and eighth centuries, another power struggle existed between insular forms of worship and the continental establishment. The tumultuous nature of this period presents something of a dilemma: few primary sources survive and those that are extant can be unreliable because of the authors' own political and social agendas, which further obscure the true nature of the events they describe. With insufficient primary sources to determine the exact nature of events during this period, scholars are compelled to compare the limited source texts with archaeological discoveries and genetic studies to create a more complete picture of the period. The gaps in our understanding caused by the dearth of reliable written sources may well, however, be the very thing that has engendered such a fascination with this period in later generations.

One of the unique problems associated with this period of British history concerns understanding the extent to which early medieval women were able to exercise agency socially, politically, and economically. As chroniclers have always tended to obscure the roles played by women, the amount of information available is fragmented and must be coaxed from the record with care. As Pauline Stafford so aptly put it, “shorn of interpretation and judgment, the bones of [Saxon noblewomen] are bare and sparse.”<sup>1</sup> Uncovering the “true” nature of Anglo-Saxon women’s activities and influence has become something of a preoccupation for a cadre of devoted scholars because of the ramifications of these facts. By better understanding the roles inhabited by these early medieval women, we may also come

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<sup>1</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 3.

to a better understanding of the development of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons. The questions this thesis will address rest upon two issues: the extent to which women contributed to the promulgation of the Christian faith in the early middle ages and the degree to which religious issues became enmeshed in sociopolitical and ethnocultural divisions of the era.

When the Anglo-Saxons migrated to Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries, the idea that women could utilize their agency to influence large-scale religious conversion was certainly not new. Indeed, women had played a very prominent role in the early development and growth of the Christian faith, teaching sermons, leading public prayers, serving as missionaries, and dying as martyrs. However, the legacy of prominent Christian women in the Roman world was diminished as the Bishop of Rome and other like-minded clerics of the new regime sought “to create and manipulate Christian historical memory,” as Nicola Denzey puts it.<sup>2</sup> By the eighth century, after the fledgling Christian movement had grown into an established religion, certain proponents of the new order sought to marginalize these women of influence who had helped make the very establishment of their religion a possibility from the start.

The Anglo-Saxon incursions of the fifth and sixth centuries marked the advent of a new religious frontier in Britannia, a former Roman province where Christianity had earlier taken root.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, mounting rivalries between divergent branches of the Christian faith caused a power struggle between Irish, Frankish, and Roman forms of the church that

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<sup>2</sup> Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain c. 600–800* (London: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 109-112.

continued well into the eighth century. The confluence of these rivalries produced a unique opportunity for women once again to come to the forefront and utilize their agency to influence their changing society.

Following a brief analysis of the primary and secondary source literature, the first part of this thesis will explore the roles played by secular elite women in the promulgation of the Christian faith in Anglo-Saxon England during the sixth through eighth centuries. Through a close reading of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, the lives of several royal women will be examined. This section will begin with a discussion of how the earliest of these Christian queens, Bertha of Kent, was able to use her position as the wife of a pagan king to spread her faith. Her influence on her husband and her contemporaries will be considered. The lives of Bertha's daughter Æthelburh and granddaughter Eanflæd will be examined next. An analysis of how these two queens helped to establish and preserve a tradition of royal religious patronage in the kingdom of Northumbria during the seventh century will follow. A comparison of these three main examples will demonstrate how Anglo-Saxon queens sponsored missionaries, patronized ecclesiastical institutions and influenced sociopolitical changes.

The second part of this thesis will examine how women from the secular aristocracy were able to become influential religious elites in Anglo-Saxon England. The impact of the unique double monasteries that developed during the sixth and seventh centuries will be considered, along with the origins of this practice in Irish monasticism. Bede's treatment of Hild and Æthelthryth, two contemporary Northumbrian royal abbesses, will be analyzed, emphasizing the role of abbesses in influencing Christian religious tradition and the Anglo-Saxon political climate. The manner in which Anglo-Saxon religious elites contributed to the

spread of Insular forms of worship to the continent will also be discussed, including an examination of the hagiographies of Balthild and Leoba, two Anglo-Saxon monastic women with lengthy careers in Frankia. The thesis will conclude with a brief discussion of how the narrative enplotment of elite women by monastic sources obscured their legacy as active participants in the growth of the Christian faith.

### **Primary Sources**

The Anglo-Saxon women of the fifth and sixth centuries existed in a frontier province that had fractured into various petty kingdoms and was in a state of intense cultural and religious flux. Determining the roles played by women in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons requires a careful reading of the primary sources. Although many early medieval chroniclers did discuss the roles inhabited by elite women, they tended to either minimize or reframe the roles of the women they described, for the most part sidelining them from the all-important narrative of conversion and consolidation.

The most prominent of these early chronicle sources is, of course, the work of Bede. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is the only surviving authored text from the early Anglo-Saxon period produced during or near the dates of the events that he principally describes.<sup>4</sup> Bede's primary agenda in writing this text was to "graft English Christianity onto the wider world" of Christian history and theology.<sup>5</sup> His work is a sequel of sorts to that of Eusebius (c. 260-340), the early Roman Christian historian whose worldview and historical

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<sup>4</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ix, xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> N.J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 54.

methodology Bede sought to emulate.<sup>6</sup> Given that the England of his day was neither united religiously nor politically, Bede used his narrative to credit the Roman Christian faction as the preeminent instigator of the spread of Christianity in Britain, with Æthelberht of Kent as a new Constantine and the Northumbrian dynasty of Bede's day as heirs of his legacy of conversion. As a proponent of the new Christian *romanitas* fostered by the papal faction, Bede's writings tend to neutralize, rather than outright denigrate, the historical significance of his female subjects, redirecting the reader's attention to other matters he deemed more suitable, whether it be the spiritual sanctity of those same women, or the literary aggrandizement of male characters in their place. Nevertheless, his work is significant to this discussion because he cannot avoid alluding to the considerable influence wielded by women of his day, despite his attempt to render them less significant than the male actors he highlights.

Several of the later chronicle sources, which usually derived their information from Bede, are more useful for measuring the social climate that was present at the time of their writing and determining the historical perspective of the Anglo-Saxons of the eighth century and later. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example, primarily echoes Bede for its entries for those pivotal early years of Anglo-Saxon Christianity before commencing to record more recent events.<sup>7</sup> Other sources, such as hagiographies of the period, must be read even more carefully, as they tend to imprint a specific eschatological narrative structure upon the individuals' lives they describe. Although the women in these texts are sometimes presented

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<sup>6</sup> Bede, xviii, xxviii.

<sup>7</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Michael Swanton (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), 44-45, 128-129.

as exercising substantial agency, their actions are generally enplotted by the authors in such a manner as to reflect virtue or piety as their primary attributes, rather than their influence in society as secular actors.

Another issue in discussing the lives of early Anglo-Saxon women is the lack of contemporary or near-contemporary independent hagiographical or biographical texts. Carol Neuman de Vegvar notes that the majority of the information available on these women is derived from documentary sources such as Bede's history, or in references made in the *vitae* and correspondence of their male counterparts or official documents associated with the monastic institutions they founded or maintained.<sup>8</sup> De Vegvar also suggests that the extant references to these women found in other sources may sometimes be an indicator of the existence of hagiographical *vitae* of their own which have since been lost.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, most monastic authors in Anglo-Saxon England are clearly conflicted when attempting to integrate women of influence into their historical narratives. Bede, for example, appears cognizant of the influence wielded by the women he describes, but he is reticent about actually crediting any accomplishments expressly to their agency. By contrast, the tenth-century hagiographer Ælfric of Eynsham also discusses women at length, but he enplots them into a narrative of religious tropes that obscures the deeds and attributes of the historical women he describes, as in his treatment of Æthelthryth..<sup>10</sup> The goal of these early

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<sup>8</sup> Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "Saints and Companions to Saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 51.

<sup>9</sup> De Vegvar, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham. *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, trans. Walter Skeat (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1881), 433-440.

clerical authors does not appear to be to deprive these women of their agency so much as it is to coopt it for their own purposes, or even merely to neutralize its significance. Their worldview was not wholly compatible with the notion that women could influence the shaping of political or social affairs. As such, these authors tended to frame women in ways that meshed with their religious and cultural perspective or furthered their own agendas. It should not then be particularly surprising that these authors resorted to scriptural tropes in an almost Aristotelian effort to categorize these individuals in a manner consistent with their paradigm.

### **Secondary Sources**

Any discussion regarding modern scholarship on women's issues in particular—and Anglo-Saxon history in general—must begin with the work of Doris Mary and Frank Stenton. Their combined scholarship represents a foundational corpus of medieval English historiography. In *The English Woman in History* (1957), Doris Mary Stenton describes an Anglo-Saxon world where men and women were more or less equal partners until the impetus of “feudal law” acting in conjunction with an ignoble clergy stifled them. She tends to highlight the ways in which the treatment of women during the Anglo-Saxon period differed from later times, expressing that:

The evidence which has survived from Anglo-Saxon England indicates that women were then more nearly the equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any other period before the modern age. In the higher ranges of society this rough and ready partnership was ended by the Norman conquest, which introduced into England a military society relegating women to a position honorable but essentially unimportant. With all allowance for the efforts of individual churchmen to help individual women, it must be confessed that the teaching of the medieval Church reinforced the subjection which feudal law imposed on all wives.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), 28.

Rather than attributing the marginalization of Anglo-Saxon women to a plurality of contemporary societal causes, she asserts that such oppression was actually at a minimum during this period, and that the Norman invaders were the real culprits.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, Christine Fell and Stephanie Hollis presented nearly opposite treatments of the social roles of Anglo-Saxon women. In her *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (1984), Christine Fell expands upon the ideas built by the Stentons, identifying the Norman Conquest as the primary watershed that caused the degeneration of women's effective agency in English society. While she acknowledges some of the denigration present in early clerical literature, she dismisses its significance as "ineffectual in practice." Rather, she asserts that:

in the first enthusiasm for Christianity we not only see men and women engaging as equals in the challenge of a new religion and way of life, we see also women specifically asked to take a full and controlling part. No women could have been asked to take on so powerful a role as the early abbesses unless they were used to handling power, but Christianity is certainly not at this stage cramping their range of activity and responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

In *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church* (1992), Stephanie Hollis asserts that women's position in Anglo-Saxon society had already begun to decline prior to the Norman Conquest, more or less in tandem with the continental social norms of the Carolingian age. Hollis identifies several points where "clerical dis-esteem" is indicated, from the literary reworking of women's roles to the diminishment of their collective political agency.<sup>13</sup> Where Fell sees

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<sup>12</sup> Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), 2.

women of influence acting as independent agents, Hollis notes that these same women (and those of later times) were under spiritual and social siege from the hegemonic powers:

As the power of bishops gained ascendancy, abbesses lost to them the autonomous control of their houses; formally precluded from dealing with the world at large, their sphere of influence diminished radically, and the status of women's communities with it.<sup>14</sup>

Clare Lees and Gillian Overing present the clearest discussion of the relationship between women and Anglo-Saxon clerical culture in *Double Agents* (2001).<sup>15</sup> One of the authors' more significant contributions is their effort to confront the "paradigms of absence in Anglo-Saxon culture,"<sup>16</sup> which range from a simple lack of information regarding women or women's issues, to deliberate efforts to minimize their contributions or frame them as formulaic archetypes. They also discuss methodological concerns in more recent historiography of the Anglo-Saxon era. They assert that one of the main problems with dealing with the issue of the suppression of female agency is a lack of consideration for the extent to which many women were able to live very productive lives in Anglo-Saxon society and the considerable effort required to "demystify the naturalizing forces of patristic rhetoric" and its paradigm-framing influence.<sup>17</sup>

In her *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England* (1996), Karen Louise Jolly addresses several issues associated with the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh and eighth centuries, including the role of women in the conversion process and the degree to which

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<sup>14</sup> Hollis, 275.

<sup>15</sup> Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Lees and Overing, 40-41.

<sup>17</sup> Lees and Overing, 172.

paganism coexisted with Christianity. As a part of her discussion of women's roles, Jolly emphasizes the significance of marriage as a conversion tool. She makes an important connection between the "formal" religion displayed in literary sources from the period and "popular" beliefs of the illiterate peasantry that have not survived in a well-documented form. She concludes that there is an important disconnect between the literary texts and what was actually believed by the people at the time.<sup>18</sup>

Pauline Stafford and Janet Nelson have both provided a foundation for serious discussion of Anglo-Saxon women's issues. Stafford's *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (1983)<sup>19</sup> focuses on the roles of elite women in the spheres of family, society, and politics. In *Gender, Family and the Legitimation of Power: England from the Ninth to Early Twelfth Century* (2006), Stafford deals with elite women and their roles in medieval family politics. Janet Nelson's work, well-represented in the collection *Courts, Elites, and Gendered Power in the Early Middle Ages* (2007), delves into the social psychology of the period, describing how "early medieval courts, then, were mental constructs as well as social microcosms... [offering] high-born women (as well as men) agency, a public, and cultural space."<sup>20</sup> In particular, Stafford and Nelson provide significant contributions to the topic of women's agency in the early middle ages, including

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<sup>18</sup> Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 20-21, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1983), xii.

<sup>20</sup> Janet Nelson, "Gendering Courts in the Early Medieval West," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 195.

discussions of the political contributions and influence of abbesses and nuns, and how inheritances and marriage alliances made elite women key players in the hierarchy of wealth.

### **Methodology**

In order to extract examples of Anglo-Saxon women's social and religious agency from the chronicle sources, this paper will briefly examine the manner in which the chronicle authors enplotted these women into their narratives. The twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricœur defined narrative enplotment as drawing a "meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents" and "the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession."<sup>21</sup> In other words, by framing a given set of events into a narrative structure, an author gives added meaning to these events. Early medieval authors, such as chroniclers and hagiographers, used women as narrative elements to further their own agendas in this fashion. This was often done through the use of tropes, common narrative elements with which a given audience may likely be familiar. Hayden White includes all figures of speech in his definition of trope as a "deviation from literal speech or the conventional meaning and order of words."<sup>22</sup> A medieval author might use familiar tropes when comparing a historical queen in his narrative to biblical characters, such as Jezebel or the Virgin Mary, to shape his narrative to influence his readers in a certain way. Jane Chance envisions an Anglo-Saxon population in this period that was heavily influenced by tropes to the point of psychological internalization, which would also explain the proclivity of medieval authors incorporating

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 104.

such literary forms into their narratives in this manner.<sup>23</sup>

As such, the composition of medieval narratives was done with specific objectives in mind. Tony Davenport states that as a genre of literature, the writing of history would have been understood to “[require] imagination and rhetorical skills.”<sup>24</sup> Although a given author may “claim that he is writing of real events of the past,” he may nonetheless apply the term “history” to “material which is far from factual,” confounding the order of events and bringing the veracity of the narrative into question.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true in the case of hagiography, where the authors sought to “[distill] the workings of a divinely ordered universe into a manageable, imitable, human-scaled accounting.”<sup>26</sup> Jamie Kreiner asserts that medieval hagiographers understood this form of narrative to be “a more effective form of influence” on their intended audience, thus, “the hagiographers’ own cognitive theories informed their writing.”<sup>27</sup> Nor was this kind of narrative structuring limited to hagiographies alone. By using “a narrative constructed of stories with a local provenance,” Bede sought to influence his primarily elite Anglo-Saxon audience in the same manner.<sup>28</sup> Bede structured his *Ecclesiastical History* to be a sort of Anglo-Saxon sequel to the existing Christian narratives

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<sup>23</sup> Jane Chance, *Woman As Hero In Old English Literature* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Tony Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>25</sup> Davenport, 92-93.

<sup>26</sup> Jamie Kreiner, *The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 94-97.

<sup>27</sup> Kreiner, 95-96.

<sup>28</sup> Higham, 70.

of his day, furthering his agenda selectively with miracle tales and hemming in the characters he describes with scriptural tropes whenever it suited him. This “acceptance of persuasive rhetoric in the writing of history and of superstitious material in the chronicler’s record” must be kept in mind when analyzing the details of these medieval narratives.<sup>29</sup> As the aim of this paper is to draw out the roles of women in the Christian conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, two primary archetypes of elite women will be analyzed: the secular elite women (e.g. queens) and the monastic (e.g. abbesses).

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<sup>29</sup> Davenport, 94.

## CHAPTER 2

### SECULAR WOMEN AS PATRONS, MODELS AND AGENTS OF CONVERSION

The careers of queens and other elite women comprise the most obvious examples of female agency that may be gleaned from early Anglo-Saxon primary sources. Given that power in a monarchy was centered in the sovereign and his (or her) chief nobles, it is unsurprising that royal consorts would be able to exercise considerable influence. Bede records many examples from the seventh and eighth centuries of queens and consorts among the Anglo-Saxons influencing their husbands to convert to Christianity and leading the way to introducing the religion into their domains.<sup>1</sup> The notion of eminent women playing a role in the spreading of a religion was not new; the inception of this practice may be traced back to the prominent Christian women of the later Roman Empire, such as Empress Helena, mother of Constantine. This legacy was to have a lasting effect on later Christian women.

Bede stands out in his presentation of women exercising considerable agency in the promulgation and sustaining of Christianity in Britain during this period, even if his narrative—and those based on him—streamline these contributions or relegate them to the role of catechistic tropes. As a result, it is possible to use Bede and other historians to illustrate some of the activities of Anglo-Saxon women who had a considerable impact on the re-emergence of the Christian religion in Britain following the Anglo-Saxon incursions of the fifth century. Bede particularly emphasized the role of queens in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon elite. Queens such as Bertha of Kent and Æthelburh of Northumbria appear to

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<sup>1</sup> Bede, 39-41, 84-85, 105-107.

have played a crucial role not only by influencing their royal husbands to be baptized, but by spearheading the re-opening of entire kingdoms to the Christian faith.

### **Queen Bertha: An Early Patron of the British Church**

The Roman Curia welcomed the opportunity to advance its interests by encouraging queens in their religious missions. The late sixth century pope, Gregory the Great (r. 590-604), made this point clearly in a letter written directly to Queen Bertha in 601, in which he likened her to the Empress Helena. Additionally, the pope provided encouragement to motivate the queen towards the achievement of his objectives for the Anglo-Saxon people and chided her for her failure to succeed up to that point. His flowery, diplomatic language cannot conceal his naked efforts at political manipulation:

We bless Almighty God, who has been mercifully pleased to reserve the conversion of the nation of the [Angles] for your reward. For, as through Helena of illustrious memory, the mother of the most pious Emperor Constantine, He kindled the hearts of the Romans into Christian faith, so we trust that He works in the nation of the [Angles] through the zeal of your Glory [ie. Bertha]. And indeed you ought before now, as being truly a Christian, to have inclined the heart of our glorious son, your husband, by the good influence of your prudence, to follow, for the good of his kingdom and of his own soul, the faith which you profess, to the end that for him, and for the conversion of the whole nation through him, fit retribution might accrue to you in the joys of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

By invoking the Empress Helena as a trope, Gregory sought to influence Bertha to emulate an historical precedent of an influential secular woman serving as an agent of conversion. Yet as much as Pope Gregory might have wished, Queen Bertha was no mere papal pawn. She was the great-granddaughter of Clovis, King of the Franks, and as such her interests would have lain with Merovingian political ambitions, rather than papal ones, although the

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Gregory, "Registrum Epistolarum," Book XI, Letter 29, trans. James Barmby, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1898.) Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360211029.htm>.

two occasionally overlapped. Bertha's marriage to Æthelberht of Kent was thus more a political move on the part of the Franks: Bertha brought the Frankish bishop Liudhard with her to Britain well before the arrival of Augustine's missionaries in Kent in 597. Bede asserts that the Frankish royal family assented to her marriage only on the condition that she "be allowed to practice her faith unhindered," with Liudhard accompanying her to "support her faith."<sup>3</sup> It is likely that his presence in Bertha's household was intended for more than attending to the Queen's spiritual needs alone. Whether Bishop Liudhard's presence was expressly intended to convert Æthelberht cannot be known for certain, although Barbara Yorke believes that presumption to be reasonable.<sup>4</sup>

Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* provides some additional details that supplement Bede's longer narrative, stating that King Charibert "had a daughter who afterwards married a husband in Kent and was taken there."<sup>5</sup> Based on Gregory's description and a rough chronology of the events, D. P. Kirby suspects that Æthelberht was not king yet, possibly not even the son of the king, when he married Bertha before 560.<sup>6</sup> Thus Charibert might have made a calculated political decision to manipulate the Kentish succession by granting their preferred candidate the prestige of a powerful marriage alliance. Kirby indicates that the involvement of the early Kentish royals "either directly or indirectly in a Christian Frankish sphere of diplomatic and cultural influence" was a factor of prime

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<sup>3</sup> Bede, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain c. 600–800* (London: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Ernest Brehaut (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), IV 26.

<sup>6</sup> D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London: Routledge, 2000), 24-28.

importance in their conversion.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Augustine's mission did not arrive until many years later in 597 is noteworthy. It could indicate that Æthelberht could admit a prominent papal presence in the kingdom only after his accession to the Kentish throne, or indeed, only after years of coaxing by his Frankish consort. Æthelberht's own indebtedness to his Frankish in-laws for political support might then explain the courteous reception that Bede indicates he provided to Augustine and his companions, welcoming them into his capital, providing them with housing and permitting them to preach their gospel, despite Bede's allegation that Æthelberht was also very superstitious and feared the Christians as sorcerers.<sup>8</sup>

#### Bertha's Interactions with Rome

This interpretation of events also casts Gregory's letter to Bertha in a very different light, written as it was in the years following the arrival of Augustine's mission. Even though Æthelberht's tolerance of more Christians in his kingdom was likely due to Bertha's influence, the pope obviously viewed this achievement as insufficient. The failure of Bertha and Bishop Liudhard to encourage Æthelberht's conversion might have encouraged the Pope to push the matter further. Gregory's instructions to "let your solicitude infuse into him [Æthelberht] increase of love for God, and so kindle his heart even for the fullest conversion of the nation subject to him" and to "acquit yourselves devotedly and with all your might in aid of our ... most reverend brother and fellow bishop [Augustine], and of the servants of God whom we have sent to you, in the conversion of your nation" indicate that he expected Bertha to intercede personally to bring about Æthelberht's conversion, and that the arrival of

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<sup>7</sup> Kirby, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Bede, 39-41.

Augustine and his missionaries was intended specifically to bolster this endeavor.<sup>9</sup> Bede was surely aware of Gregory's correspondence to Bertha, yet he deliberately chose to exclude it from his history, instead focusing on Gregory's correspondence with Augustine and King Æthelberht, who is enplotted in the text as a new Constantine in the same manner that Bertha is compared to Helena.<sup>10</sup>

Although Bede's own references to these events focus largely on the interactions between Gregory and Augustine, he does provide another bit of information about Queen Bertha, relating how she utilized the ancient Roman church of St. Martin at Canterbury as her personal chapel. Judith McClure and Roger Collins, the editors of the 2008 Oxford edition of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, believe that the existence of this shrine "hints at the survival of Christian worship in post-Roman lowland Britain prior to the arrival of Augustine" and that Bishop Liudhard's accompaniment of Bertha indicates "the previous existence of a Christian community to whom he would minister."<sup>11</sup> Bede further affirms that St. Martin's became the headquarters of the Roman mission following the arrival of Augustine, and that it served as the site of Æthelberht's baptism and the epicenter of the subsequent Christian ministry throughout Kent.<sup>12</sup> Queen Bertha may therefore be seen as the first royal patron of a Christian church in Anglo-Saxon England. The precedent of queenly patronage of ecclesiastical institutions that she established would eventually become a predominant practice among Anglo-Saxon royalty.

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Gregory, "Registrum Epistolarum," Book XI, Letter 29.

<sup>10</sup> Bede, 58-60.

<sup>11</sup> Bede, 371-372.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, 40-41.

## Bertha's Influence on Others

Bede hints that Æthelberht's nephew and sub-king, King Sæberht of Essex, was also subsequently converted by members of Augustine's company, paving the way for Christianity's reintroduction to that kingdom as well.<sup>13</sup> Later medieval legends credit Sæberht and his queen, Æthelgoda, as the patrons of the original religious house located on the site of the much later Westminster Abbey on Thorney Island in the Thames, alleging that the royal couple was even buried there.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not the legends are true, the fact that Æthelgoda was given joint credit for the establishment of this church alongside her husband is significant in light of the efforts of later medieval chroniclers to diminish or ignore most acts of female agency.

Karen Louise Jolly actually uses Queen Bertha as a model for her theory of acculturation in her monograph, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England*. Jolly asserts that Bertha is representative of a wider movement in Saxon culture, where women at every level of society influenced religious and cultural choices. Even though women of the lower classes are seldom represented in contemporary sources, Jolly believes that it would not be unreasonable to extrapolate that "similar processes undoubtedly occurred in the homes of the less socially prominent."<sup>15</sup> If her assumption is correct, then Queen Bertha would not only have served as a primary influencer in her own husband's conversion, but also as an inspiration to other women in the kingdom of Kent.

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<sup>13</sup> Bede, 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> Emma Mason, *Westminster Abbey and Its People, c. 1050-c. 1216* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1996), 2-4.

<sup>15</sup> Jolly, 45.

Bede's initial account of Bertha's role in her husband's conversion could perhaps have been taken as an isolated event were it not for the fact that he continues to provide additional examples of elite women using their agency to bring about religious change. These include King Oswald of Northumbria marrying the daughter of the newly converted West Saxon king in the 630s, the daughter of Oswiu of Northumbria marrying the king of the Middle Angles in 653 on condition of the conversion of all his people, and a brief note about Queen Eafa having already been baptized in the land of the Hwicce prior to the conversion of her husband and his kingdom in 681.<sup>16</sup> In each of these brief vignettes, women are designated as playing prominent roles in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, but the exact nature of their personal agency in these events is not explained.

### **Queens in Northumbria and Elsewhere**

Bede's next account of a Saxon queen is even more intriguing, because it represents almost the exact opposite of what occurred in the case of Æthelberht and Bertha. Bede recounts that King Rædwald of East Anglia had previously "been initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith" while visiting Æthelberht's now-Christianizing kingdom of Kent in the early seventh century, but that, upon his return home, his unnamed consort persuaded him to make some religious changes. Rædwald's queen was pagan, and persuaded him to accept a status quo similar to what must have existed in Kent prior to Æthelberht's conversion. In this case, Bede alleged that Rædwald actually erected a Christian shrine and a pagan altar within the confines of the same temple.<sup>17</sup> As Bede indicated that Rædwald secured his own kingship

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<sup>16</sup> Bede, 120, 144, 192-193.

<sup>17</sup> Bede, 98-99.

only during the lifetime of Æthelberht,<sup>18</sup> it is possible that Rædwald's accession was the mirror image of Æthelberht's, with Rædwald compromising his new Christian faith in order to appease his own consort and her allies out of social or political expediency.

Another possibility may be that Rædwald's consort was influenced by Queen Bertha's achievements, and persuaded her husband to provide her with a personal pagan shrine similar to the Kentish queen's Christian one. Political elements might also have been a factor, as Æthelberht's conversion symbolized his close ties to both the Roman pope and the Merovingian king. East Anglia did not possess similarly international political ties, so Rædwald's conversion might have suggested his subservience to Æthelberht. If this were the case, the nameless East Anglian queen might have been acting out of political shrewdness to strengthen her husband's reputation and role.

#### Æthelburh, Daughter of Bertha

Lees and Overing note that Bede chose not to emphasize the significance of Bertha's role in the Kentish court, even though she was the progenitor of an important generation of royal women who linked the original ecclesiastical foundations of Roman Christianity in Kent with Bede's own native Northumbria.<sup>19</sup> Rather, Bede offered specific information about those Northumbrian queens without emphasizing their connections to Bertha, most significantly with respect to Bertha's daughter, Æthelburh, and her own daughter Eanflæd. Initially, Æthelburh's story appears simply to parallel her mother's. Her guardians rebuffed King Edwin's proposal at first because marriage to a heathen was unacceptable, granting

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<sup>18</sup> Bede, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Lees and Overing, 34.

consent only once Edwin swore that the young princess's right to worship would not be impinged. Additionally, she would have her own cavalcade of Christian courtiers, including her own personal bishop—just as her mother had had.<sup>20</sup> Æthelburh thus appears to have become the royal patron of her own Christian colony in the northern lands, again taking her cues from her mother. Bede even included a letter to Queen Æthelburh from Pope Boniface, urging her to “pour into [Edwin's] mind a knowledge of the greatness of the mystery in which she [had] believed” in order to “kindle his understanding” through “frequent exhortations.”<sup>21</sup>

The repetition of this pattern of papal epistles indicates that the popes understood the queens' roles as both patrons of churches and powerful personal and political influencers. The importance of this may be emphasized by the fact that Bede did not include Gregory's earlier letter to Bertha in his text, thereby demonstrating facts outside of the narrative world that Bede created in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Yet once again, Bede gives primary credit for the king's conversion to the bishop rather than the queen, despite the significance of the queen's role as indicated by the papal letter. Lees and Overing make note of this, demonstrating that Edwin's conversion was “certainly facilitated” by his marriage to Æthelburh, but that despite Bede's inclusion of Pope Boniface's letter, all evidence of Æthelburh's direct action in the account of her husband's conversion was omitted.<sup>22</sup>

One significant difference between Bede's account of Queen Æthelburh and that of her mother concerns Æthelburh's actions after her husband died. Bede recorded that in 633

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<sup>20</sup> Bede, 84-85.

<sup>21</sup> Bede, 91-92.

<sup>22</sup> Lees and Overing, 34-35.

there was a terrible battle, in which there was a great slaughter of the northern Christians by the pagan King Penda of Mercia. With King Edwin slain and Northumbria in disarray, Æthelburh emerged as a leader of the people. She ensured the preservation of the core of Northumbria's Christian elite by taking her children and surviving courtiers into exile in her homeland of Kent, along with some of Northumbria's royal treasure and holy relics.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Bede credited most of these actions to her companion, Bishop Paulinus, as if Æthelburh were completely powerless to ensure their safe asylum in her home country. These actions represent nothing less than hard-fought dynastic preservation—the dead king's heirs were brought safely into exile and the more important Christian relics were preserved to be used as symbols of dynastic legitimacy. Through her own agency, Queen Æthelburh helped ensure the survival of Christianity in northern England in the wake of a pagan resurgence.

#### Eanflæd, Daughter of Æthelburh

Bede's pattern of presenting influential Christian queens in his historical work persisted through the next generation into his own lifetime. Æthelburh's daughter Eanflæd was alive during Bede's lifetime, making Bede a near contemporary source for the events of her life. After her father Edwin's demise in 633, Eanflæd departed her mother's native Kent to marry King Oswiu of Northumbria.<sup>24</sup> As her husband was already a Christian, Eanflæd was able to devote her energies to other pursuits than his conversion. Bede records that Eanflæd petitioned Oswiu for a land grant on which to build a monastery, making her the

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<sup>23</sup> Bede, 105-107.

<sup>24</sup> Bede, 105-107.

latest in what had become a dynastic line of female patrons of the church.<sup>25</sup> In one interesting aside in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede noted that Queen Eanflæd and her “people” (i.e. her retainers and her faction at court) deliberately followed the Roman Catholic observance of Easter, despite the predominance of the Irish practice in Northumbria at the time. Eanflæd even brought her own chaplain from Kent to lead her separate observance.<sup>26</sup>

Although her kingdom was now chiefly a Christian realm, Eanflæd followed her grandmother’s example by leading what was in essence a religious counter-culture in opposition to the practices of the preeminent faction at court. Her religious choices might have influenced her husband Oswiu’s actions at the decisive Synod of Whitby in 664, where the Roman practice finally achieved supremacy over Insular traditions. Queen Eanflæd was also the patron of the renowned and controversial Bishop Wilfred, a fact that both Bede and Stephen of Ripon, Wilfred’s eighth-century hagiographer, substantiate. Bede records that Eanflæd was responsible for both Wilfred’s original admittance to the monastery of Lindisfarne and for sponsoring his subsequent pilgrimage to Rome.<sup>27</sup> Stephen of Ripon confirms this, stating that Wilfred “found grace in her sight.”<sup>28</sup> As the stated purpose of Wilfred’s journey was to compare and contrast common Insular practices with the monastic and ecclesiastical traditions of Rome, this may represent Eanflæd’s deliberate intervention in influencing religious change in Northumbria, especially in light of Wilfred’s role as chief advocate of the Roman practice at the Synod of Whitby. After the death of her husband,

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<sup>25</sup> Bede, 151-152.

<sup>26</sup> Bede, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Bede, 268-269.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen of Ripon, *Vita Wilfridi*, trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 7.

Eanflæd retired to Whitby, a monastic community that had been founded by her kinswoman, Hild, to serve as abbess there alongside her daughter Ælflæd.

Although the information that may be gleaned from Bede and his contemporaries is scanty, a close reading of the *Ecclesiastical History* and the few other extant primary sources illustrates that elite laywomen played an integral role in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. These early Anglo-Saxon elite women introduced their families to their religion, facilitated the introduction of Christian missionaries into their communities, communed with popes, gave their patronage to bishops and ecclesiastical and monastic centers, and helped to preserve their faith in the face of adversity from neighboring pagans. The popes would not have bothered to write letters to these queens if they did not believe that they possessed the agency to accomplish the actions they recommended. While a complete understanding of the roles played by Anglo-Saxon women in the conversion is unobtainable due to the limitations of the sources in both their content and quantity, the addition of some modest conjecture provides for some tantalizing glimpses of the noteworthy deeds of remarkable women.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE AGENCY OF ABBESSES AND MONASTIC WOMEN

The comparative frequency with which early medieval chronicles include discussions of the activities of abbesses indicates that it was a preeminent role for elite women in Anglo-Saxon England. Virginia Blanton notes that it was customary for Anglo-Saxon aristocratic laywomen to hold positions of power, influence, and wealth in their society, so the prestige and power afforded to Anglo-Saxon abbesses is unsurprising within that social context.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Blanton asserts, the monastic life offered elite women such advantages as “education, as well as the education of others, power within the hierarchy of the church, and local governance over the estates of the monastic community.”<sup>2</sup> Abbesses and other women of the cloisters served as community leaders; administrators of property; patrons, founders, and leaders of monastic houses; missionaries, master scholars, and instructors; and political advisors. However, over the past thirty years, modern scholars have often disagreed on the significance of the roles played by Anglo-Saxon abbesses. Christine Fell sees a marked gap between the portrayals of women found in practical and literary evidence that she considers it a “difference ... so great between women in reality and women in literature that they cannot properly form part of a single study.”<sup>3</sup> While noting the “traces of anti-female propaganda”<sup>4</sup> that may be found in some clerical writings from the period, she contrasts this with evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Blanton, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Fell, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Fell, 13.

presenting nuns and abbesses as adept scholars and even landholders in their own right.<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Hollis notes that the clerical stereotyping of women that had its genesis in this period was debilitating. Although noting the possibility of the “powerful and socially influential role of Anglo-Saxon noblewomen” serving as a counterweight to the “misogynist strands of ecclesiastical teachings,” Hollis is extremely skeptical that either courtly or monastic women could have indefinitely resisted the “undermining social pressures to which both regulatory and hagiographic literature point.”<sup>6</sup> Christine Fell emphasizes early Anglo-Saxon monastic women as empowered participants in society, while Stephanie Hollis sees the monastic women of subsequent generations as socially oppressed and laden with societal limitations in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The fundamental question at the root of these scholarly debates appears to be to whether the cloisters served as a female sanctum, liberating women from the masculine manipulation of the secular world, or if it operated as a set of regulatory boundaries deliberately imposed upon women by an increasingly patriarchal clergy to hem them in. In other words, did the monastic lifestyle foster or constrain female agency in Anglo-Saxon England? The answer to this question is of course far more complex than a simple yes or no, as aspects of both perspectives are true. Monastic women could be seen as exchanging one set of boundaries for another: trading the agency of matrimony and motherhood for one of contemplation and community. Additionally, the prospects for agency afforded to Anglo-Saxon monastic women changed over time, with outside forces introducing limitations during the clerical reforms in later centuries.

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<sup>5</sup> Fell, 100, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Hollis, 8.

## The Institution of Double Monasteries

Entering the cloister was an Anglo-Saxon woman's most direct path to literacy and a promising career as a teacher or scribe. In areas where Celtic Christianity predominated, opportunities for women religious might have been more flexible. Total celibacy was not absolutely mandated for clergy in either church at this time, leading to the role of "priest's wife" or even, in the case of Celtic monastic houses, "abbot's wife."<sup>7</sup> There is also considerable evidence for "double houses" in England during the seventh and eighth centuries, which were monastic institutions consisting of a linked monastery and convent.<sup>8</sup> These double monasteries flourished in both Ireland and northern Frankia, as well as in Anglo-Saxon England; however, as their existence among contemporary Continental houses was limited, they were most often an "Insular" institution. Although double houses were usually placed under the leadership of a sole abbess,<sup>9</sup> they were occasionally governed jointly by an abbot and abbess. In England and Frankia, the paired abbot and abbess were often a brother and sister from a royal lineage,<sup>10</sup> but in Ireland they were sometimes a married

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), 40-42.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 275.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Schulenburg, 272-278.

couple.<sup>11</sup> Jan Gerchow notes some of the advantages offered by such double monasteries in more rural settings: the close proximity between the male and female houses permitted the monks to carry out parish functions, administer the Mass, and defend the women, if necessary.<sup>12</sup> This might have been in emulation of the Irish double house at Kildare, where the monks and nuns lived and worshipped without the strict separation practiced by later institutions in England.<sup>13</sup> The German hagiographer Rudolf of Fulda described Wimbourne, one of the later Anglo-Saxon double houses, as fortified with “strong and lofty walls” and with strict rules established to keep the genders separate.<sup>14</sup> Joan Nicholson considers this to be “wishful hindsight” on Rudolf’s part, asserting that this concept of total separation of the sexes is atypical of the monastic scenes portrayed by Bede, where male and female monastics occupied separate living quarters but still appear to interact directly on occasion.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, elite Anglo-Saxon women appear to have played a large role in the establishment of these double houses. For instance, although Rudolf described Wimbourne as having been established in “olden times” by Anglo-Saxon kings, Stephanie Hollis points out that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* actually attributed the foundation of the monastery in 718 to

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 145.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Gerchow, “Early Monasteries and Foundations (500-1200),” in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Gerchow, 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, “The Life of Leoba,” in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, ed. C.H. Talbot (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 205-226. Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/leoba.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> Joan Nicholson, “Feminae Gloriosae: Women in the Age of Bede,” in *Mediaeval Women*, ed. Derek Hill (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 19.

its first abbess, Cuthburh, sister of the King of Wessex.<sup>16</sup><sup>17</sup> She also notes that Aldhelm, the bishop in whose see the monastery lay, granted this double house at Wimbourne a charter guaranteeing its right to free elections, especially the right to choose its own abbess.<sup>18</sup> These elite women of the cloisters were thus able to found a monastery by their own initiative and select their own leadership in perpetuity. Gerchow adds that abbesses were permitted to carry out the confession and absolution for the nuns within their stewardship.<sup>19</sup> Of the sixty-five known female monastic institutions founded in the English kingdoms between the seventh and the ninth centuries, at least nineteen have been confirmed with certainty to have been such double houses.<sup>20</sup>

#### Origins Among the Irish

The putative origins of the double houses of the Anglo-Saxons were attributed to the establishment of a similar double house by the legendary Saint Brigid at Kildare in Ireland. Later generations of Irish missionaries may therefore have inspired the Anglo-Saxons to establish their own double houses. The monk Cogitosus, Brigid's hagiographer, recorded that Kildare was founded due to public demand, with monastics of both genders pledging

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<sup>16</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> Hollis, 275.

<sup>18</sup> Hollis, 275.

<sup>19</sup> Gerchow, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Gerchow, 17.

themselves from the start.<sup>21</sup> Cogitosus does not date this event, but it had to have occurred prior to Brigid's passing, which the *Annals of Ulster* placed between 524 and 528.<sup>22</sup> Christina Harrington points out that although Cogitosus assured the reader that "in the century preceding him... a consecrated nun... developed a national following and built herself a large monastery for followers of both sexes," he did not explain to his audience how Brigid "acquired the land or the temporal authority" to found such a unique institution.<sup>23</sup> Philip Freeman notes that Kildare was also unique in that the monks and nuns were permitted to worship together, although their living quarters were divided by partitions.<sup>24</sup> The double monastery of Kildare grew to be so influential that it rivaled Saint Patrick's own monastic institution of Armagh as the most eminent monastic house in Ireland.<sup>25</sup> Cogitosus certainly asserted the monastery's claim to religious dominance across the whole island.<sup>26</sup> Harrington notes that the rivalry between the establishments at Kildare and Armagh had as much to do with their respective founders, Brigid and Patrick, as it did with the actual political climate of

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<sup>21</sup> Cogitosus. "Vita Brigitae" in "Cogitosus' Life of St Brigit: Content and Value," ed. Sean Connolly, and J.-M. Picard. *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 5–27.

<sup>22</sup> *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, trans. Sean Mac Airt & Gearoid Mac Niocaill (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983) Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100001A>.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Freeman, *The World of St. Patrick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212.

<sup>25</sup> Freeman, 97-98.

<sup>26</sup> Cogitosus, 5-27.

the time.<sup>27</sup> This would of course also have had to do with Kildare's uniquely gendered space. Unfortunately, the exact origin of Brigid's double house at Kildare is difficult to pinpoint, because Brigid of Kildare was conflated with the old Irish deity of the same name to such a degree that the reported details of her life are called into question. Like many hagiographies, her *vita* is replete with accounts of miracles and legends that Harrington suspects may be remnants of earlier pagan traditions.<sup>28</sup>

The sixth century Irish missionary Columbanus may have also had a hand in the perpetuation of the double monastery, albeit indirectly. Although he did not found any double monasteries himself, Columbanus' followers brought such institutions to the continent, establishing houses at Faremoutiers, Chelles and Jouarre in the northeast of Gaul.<sup>29</sup> These foundations were significant in that their only direct precedent was Brigid's institution at Kildare, for Columbanus had not personally sponsored the foundation of these institutions. The degree to which the agency of monastic women directly contributed the spread of this unique practice to England and Gaul may be a matter of conjecture; however, Barbara Yorke sees a correlation between these Columban monasteries and their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Yorke believes that by founding their own double monasteries, the Anglo-Saxon royal houses were integrating themselves into the sociopolitical network of the northern Frankish aristocracy.<sup>30</sup> The formation of such ties with the double houses in Frankia may therefore

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<sup>27</sup> Harrington, 78-79.

<sup>28</sup> Harrington, 63-67.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Yorke, 35-36.

have been a key political motivator. The royal abbesses who headed these institutions thus represented “the link between monastic foundation and cultivation of dynastic identity.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Royal Women as Abbesses**

Carol Neuman de Vegvar notes that the appointing of royal women as abbesses might have benefited Anglo-Saxon kings both spiritually and materially, explaining their widespread practice of sponsorship of these institutions. De Vegvar postulates that widows or unmarried sisters or daughters who would otherwise need to be maintained by the royal court would be encouraged to found abbeys instead.<sup>32</sup> Any lands or wealth that might have been owed to their potential suitors as dowries would instead stay attached to the royal household, and could be used to maintain the clergy at such royally-sponsored institutions. Barbara Yorke indicates that the practice of appointing princesses and widowed queens as abbesses may also have granted a measure of sacrality to the Saxon royal dynasties by allowing the kings to participate in ecclesiastical leadership vicariously through their kinswomen.<sup>33</sup> The close familial ties that existed between these newly-minted abbesses and the royal family would also serve to make them excellent agents for serving their dynasty’s interests in influencing, educating, and leading the clergy at their monastic houses.<sup>34</sup> These abbeys could also serve as staging areas for proselytization. As the royal households were generally the

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<sup>31</sup> Yorke, 35. Although double monasteries were rare in later times, certain key foundations, such as the early twelfth century institution at Fontevrault, seem to have attempted to reconnect with their Frankish past.

<sup>32</sup> De Vegvar, 52-53.

<sup>33</sup> Yorke, 30.

<sup>34</sup> De Vegvar, 52-53.

first to convert in any given Anglo-Saxon kingdom, the Christian clergy expected the kings to arrange for the conversion of their subjects following their own conversions. The implementation of these abbeys enabled the royal women (who were often instruments of conversion in the first place, as stated earlier) to help facilitate this task.<sup>35</sup>

#### Bede's Abbesses: Hild and Æthelthryth

Although many Anglo-Saxon royal women pursued careers within the cloister, the most well-documented of these are Hild of Whitby and Æthelthryth of Ely, primarily because of Bede's depiction of both women in his *Ecclesiastical History*. He recorded significant details about the lives of both women, and even went so far as to compose a hymn in honor of Æthelthryth's virtues. Virginia Blanton notes that although "Bede's interest in Æthelthryth and Hild marked them as two of the most significant women in late seventh-century Northumbrian society," Bede was much more interested in their position as spiritual leaders and role models than in the power or agency they wielded by founding monastic houses and engaging in patronage.<sup>36</sup> Despite his proclivity towards the spiritual, some of the details Bede provides in his text, even if ancillary, may offer clues as to the importance of these women in their society. Both Hild and Æthelthryth were scions of the seventh-century Northumbrian royal family; both went from the royal palace to influential careers as abbesses; both founded important monastic houses. Finally, both were later canonized by the Catholic Church. However, despite their similarities, Bede treated the ecclesiastical careers of these two

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<sup>35</sup> De Vegvar, 52-53.

<sup>36</sup> Blanton, 22-23.

contemporary abbesses differently.

Bede described Hild as being so wise and prudent “that not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sometimes sought and received her counsel when in difficulties.”<sup>37</sup> He also noted the significant role Hild played in the education of the Northumbrian clergy, with the most prominent example being the training of five bishops at Hild’s own establishment of Whitby, which became one of the most famous monastic houses in England.<sup>38</sup> The educational institution at Whitby was apparently so prolific in this respect that Frank Stenton referred to the double monastery as a “nursery of bishops.”<sup>39</sup> Because the bishops were the most eminent Christian leaders in Britain at the time, this would have been a most prestigious assignment for an abbess.

Much of Bede’s discussion of Hild centers on her participation in the pivotal Synod of Whitby in 664, where several conflicts between Insular Christian and Roman Christian practice were resolved. By this time, Hild’s reputation and influence among the clergy was so great that her kinsman, King Oswiu, selected her double monastery to be the site of the synod, rather than any of the many male-dominated institutions in his kingdom. Jo Ann McNamara notes that by presiding over the synod, Hild “assumed a prestige usually reserved for bishops,” which was even more noteworthy considering that the chief contenders of both

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<sup>37</sup> Bede, 211.

<sup>38</sup> De Vegvar, 52-53.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Stenton, “The Historical Bearing of Place Name Studies: The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society,” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Olsen (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990) ,79.

the Irish and Roman parties were bishops themselves.<sup>40</sup> While Oswiu might have expected Hild's support in the pending political struggle as a near kinswoman, her authoritative status with both clerical factions must have been impressive enough for Oswiu to believe she might be able to help convince the losing faction to conform. Thus, Hild's role in this synod appears to be more significant than Bede gives her credit for in his text.

Bede notes that Hild and her followers were markedly on the side of the Irish faction, but he neglects to mention Hild's response to the pro-Roman decision at Whitby.<sup>41</sup> Although Bede is silent on the matter, the hagiographer Stephen of Ripon records a letter from Pope John VI to the kings of Mercia and Northumbria in 704, in which the Pope mentions that Abbess Hild and her supporters had made serious accusations against Bishop Wilfred, a leading supporter of the Roman faction.<sup>42</sup> Rather than acquiescing to the decision made at the Synod of Whitby, Hild used her influence and political acumen to resist this attempt to Romanize her monastic house. Richard Abels asserts that Hild actually formed "the nucleus of a post-Whitby 'Irish' faction," together with the remaining partisans who had not departed Northumbria in protest.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to Hild's active role in the politics of her day, Bede's discussion of Æthelthryth is much more focused on her personal virtues, rather than her political agency. At one point Bede even interrupts his own narrative to include a special hymn he had written

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<sup>40</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 127.

<sup>41</sup> Bede, 154.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen of Ripon, 117.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Abels, "The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics," *Journal of British Studies* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1983), 16-17.

in Æthelthryth's honor. Bede's narrative of her life begins with Æthelthryth's attempts to maintain her virginity through two unsuccessful royal marriages, eventually renouncing her queenship to become a nun.<sup>44</sup> In 673, Æthelthryth founded her own double monastery at Ely, in the marshy Fen country of East Anglia, an institution that would later achieve much renown; yet Æthelthryth only presided over the abbey of Ely for six years before dying of a tumor in 679.<sup>45</sup>

Where Hild's importance lay in her role as an influential sociopolitical figure during her own lifetime, Bede emphasized Æthelthryth's significance more in what occurred after her death. Bede recounted that her tomb was opened and her body was found to be incorrupt. He also retold the accounts of several miracles associated with the deceased abbess's relics.<sup>46</sup> Blanton notes that the various cultural signs included by Bede in his discussion of Æthelthryth's life, such as her virginity and the incorruptibility of her corpse, were related to concerns held by the Anglo-Saxons historically, including the developing nature of the Anglo-Saxon church and clerical reforms.<sup>47</sup> The later cult of St. Æthelthryth that developed at Ely was derived from these accounts. Blanton believes that by focusing on the virtues of royal women like Hild and Æthelthryth, rather than their actions, Bede was able to

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<sup>44</sup> Bede, 203-204.

<sup>45</sup> Bede, 205.

<sup>46</sup> Bede, 203-205.

<sup>47</sup> Blanton, 4-5.

demonstrate “the iconic roles of mother [and] virgin” while downplaying the roles they played in the development of the Christian church in England.<sup>48</sup>

### Balthild: the Queen-Saint

Queen Balthild is one example of an elite Anglo-Saxon woman who straddled the divide between the secular and the monastic worlds. Having been sold into slavery in Frankia at a young age, Balthild had to navigate the challenges of life at court, avoiding an unwanted marriage to a Frankish warlord before she was chosen by King Clovis II to be his queen in the mid-seventh century.<sup>49</sup> As queen, and later regent, Balthild worked closely with her ecclesiastical colleagues to pursue various charitable endeavors. Her hagiographer recorded that her husband Clovis assigned the Abbot Genesius to personally assist Balthild in this undertaking.<sup>50</sup> Later, she partnered with Bishop Eligius to purchase and liberate slaves, which Jane Tibbets Schulenburg describes as Balthild’s “favorite charity.”<sup>51</sup>

As an Anglo-Saxon, Balthild was able to use her position as queen of Frankia to patronize insular forms of worship in that country. She was a conspicuous supporter of the Irish monasticism promoted at Columbanus’s monastery at Luxeuil.<sup>52</sup> Balthild was also

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<sup>48</sup> Blanton, 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Vita Domnae Balthildis*” in *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography*, ed. Paul Fouracre and Richard Gerberding (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 120.

<sup>50</sup> “*Vita Domnae Balthildis*,” 121.

<sup>51</sup> Schulenburg, 326.

<sup>52</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 44-45.

involved in the founding of monasteries; Gerda Lerner notes that the Abbey of Chelles, which she founded, was built on the foundations of a ruined convent, and attracted so many men because of its reputation for learning that it became a double monastery.<sup>53</sup> The author of the *Vita Domnae Balthildis* stated that Balthild actually selected the first abbess of this institution, whom the author named merely as “the girl, Bertila.”<sup>54</sup> After a long career as a royal patron of the church, Balthild then retired to the Abbey of Chelles to serve side by side with the nuns she had patronized. Although Balthild did not take the title of abbess, the anonymous author of her *vita* makes it clear that she maintained some semblance of authority at the monastery, writing that Abbess Bertila “lovingly granted all things to [Balthild’s] petition” and followed her recommendations to offer gifts to the royal family at regular intervals to maintain the abbey’s reputation.<sup>55</sup> The author also alluded to an incident where there was a dispute between Balthild and some of the other nuns, which she seems to have resolved by using her position as the founder of the abbey—the author stated that the other nuns were forgiven after Balthild had a discussion with the priests.<sup>56</sup> Janet Nelson believes that Balthild was “a rarely gifted and creative early medieval politician” and that the “structural changes” she wrought in the Merovingian church may have had a lasting impact on Frankish dynastic and ecclesiastical institutions by strengthening the monarchy’s ties to

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<sup>53</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994,) 25-26.

<sup>54</sup> “*Vita Domnae Balthildis*,” 123.

<sup>55</sup> “*Vita Domnae Balthildis*,” 128.

<sup>56</sup> “*Vita Domnae Balthildis*,” 126-127.

the spiritual power of the church.<sup>57</sup> She further states that the hagiographer's depiction of Balthild as a "humble but persistent" saint is paradoxical in light of her political acumen as regent.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, not all hagiographers expressed favorable opinions of Balthild. In contrast to her anonymous hagiographer's accolades, Stephen of Ripon calls her "evil-hearted," compares her to "the wicked Queen Jezebel" and accuses her of having "persecuted the church of God" by conspiring with the Frankish nobility to order the execution of nine bishops, although he claims priests and deacons were spared.<sup>59</sup> According to Stephen's record, Bishop Wilfred was spared on this occasion only because he was an Anglo-Saxon, the same as Balthild.<sup>60</sup> Considering Stephen's negative portrayal of other female saint figures such as Hild, this might be another example of narrative enplotment, where the author has arranged the events in his narrative to fit his social or political agenda. In this instance, Stephen might have used Balthild's engagement in the blood-soaked Frankish politics of the day to frame his narrative of Wilfred as a near-martyr. Translator Bertram Colgrave notes that one surviving copy of Stephen's text identifies the queen involved in this event as Brunhild, rather than Balthild, which causes him to suspect that Balthild's participation in this event may actually be unlikely.<sup>61</sup> Janet Nelson believes that Stephen's objective in this

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<sup>57</sup> Janet Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: The Careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History," in *Mediaeval Women*, ed. Derek Hill (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 71-72.

<sup>58</sup> Nelson, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen of Ripon, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen of Ripon, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen of Ripon, 154-155.

portrayal “is not factual reporting, but the establishment of Wilfred’s saintly credentials.”<sup>62</sup>

She further asserts that Balthild’s ill-fame in this instance should not be used to infer that such actions were typical of Balthild’s regency.<sup>63</sup>

#### Leoba: the Missionary Abbess

As a point of contrast, other female monastics from this period are quite clearly displayed as utilizing their agency to promote the Christian faith. One of these prominent female missionaries during this period was a West Saxon nun named Leoba. Rudolf of Fulda, who authored her hagiography, recorded that she began her ecclesiastical career in the early eighth century at the double monastery of Wimbourne, where the initiates were forbidden to leave unless “there was a reasonable cause and some great advantage accrued to the monastery.”<sup>64</sup> Despite the isolation of the cloisters, Leoba’s reputation for piety and learning grew so great that the eminent missionary Boniface requested—by name—that she be permitted to join his mission in Germany. Rudolf recorded that Boniface “sent messengers... asking [the abbess] to send Leoba to accompany him on this journey and to take part in this embassy: for Leoba’s reputation for learning and holiness had spread far and wide and her praise was on everyone’s lips.”<sup>65</sup> Rudolf described the characteristics sought by Boniface in his potential missionaries as “from different ranks of the clergy,” “learned in the divine law,” and “fitted both by their character and good works to preach the Word of God,” which

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<sup>62</sup> Nelson, 66.

<sup>63</sup> Nelson, 67.

<sup>64</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

<sup>65</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

provides a good outline of what Leoba's credentials must have been in order for Boniface to request her for such an important task.<sup>66</sup>

As a member of Boniface's monastic embassy, Leoba was instrumental in the administration of the new double monastery of Bischofsheim, where she became the abbess sometime after her arrival in 748.<sup>67</sup> Located in Alemannia, Bischofsheim would have been on the frontier of Charlemagne's Frankish Empire during his efforts to Christianize the various Germanic tribes. Accordingly, the parishioners Leoba's abbey served would have been drawn from the surrounding populace, which was only in the early stages of Christianization.

Leoba was also a very literate woman, as described by Rudolf of Fulda in her *vita*. Her literary talents would have been useful in such monastic endeavors as the administration of an abbey or the pedagogical activities involved in training new acolytes or teaching the local parishioners. Rudolf recorded that

so great was her zeal for reading that she discontinued it only for prayer or for the refreshment of her body with food or sleep: the Scriptures were never out of her hands. For, since she had been trained from infancy in the rudiments of grammar and the study of the other liberal arts, she tried by constant reflection to attain a perfect knowledge of divine things so that through the combination of her reading with her quick intelligence, by natural gifts and hard work, she became extremely learned. She read with attention all the books of the Old and New Testaments and learned by heart all the commandments of God. To these she added by way of completion the writings of the church Fathers, the decrees of the Councils and the whole of ecclesiastical law.<sup>68</sup>

Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg notes the significance of this great reputation for learning, emphasizing that all of the authority, fame and respect that she had garnered as an abbess

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<sup>66</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

<sup>67</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

<sup>68</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

were tied to her education.<sup>69</sup> Her zeal for learning also translated into an effective pedagogical program at Bischofsheim—Rudolf recorded that Leoba’s teaching institution was so prolific that “there was hardly a convent of nuns in that part which had not one of her disciples as abbess.”<sup>70</sup> As the teacher of future abbesses, Leoba would have had a marked influence on the future of female monastic institutions in the German kingdoms.

Stephanie Hollis observes that Leoba’s example presented her hagiographer with a conundrum; although Leoba was a learned and well-beloved abbess, her lifestyle did not conform to clerical expectations for a monastic woman to remain cloistered away in “strict enclosure.”<sup>71</sup> Thus Rudolf ensured that Leoba’s long adventures away from monastic enclosures were represented as exceptional, presenting her virtues, rather than her actions, as worthy of emulation. Nevertheless, Leoba’s life was punctuated with an item of such significance that Rudolf of Fulda’s attempts at minimization cannot conceal: Boniface, her ecclesiastical patron and colleague, held her in such high regard that he requested that she be buried with him at the abbey of Fulda. Based on the details provided by Rudolf, it would seem that he considered this request to be scandalous. Rudolf noted that women were ordinarily forbidden entry to Fulda, as it was a male-only institution, but that Leoba and another nun would often visit the monastery to pray and have discussions with the monks. Moreover, after Leoba passed away, Rudolf alleged that the monks of Fulda were afraid to open Boniface’s sepulcher to honor his request, so they buried Leoba on the opposite side of

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<sup>69</sup> Schulenburg, 100.

<sup>70</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

<sup>71</sup> Hollis, 274.

the altar.<sup>72</sup> That she was afforded burial in such an institution at all indicates how influential Leoba's career had been.

The degree of learning and influence exhibited by these Anglo-Saxon abbesses is substantial, considering that later hagiographers such as Ælfric tended to overlook such attributes.<sup>73</sup> These monastic women emerged from their cloisters to engage in political disputes with bishops and kings, travelled to foreign lands to spread their faith, and instructed male pupils alongside their female ones. Although Bede was eager to draw his audience's attention to virginal and maternal tropes, the women of his time were more than archetypal constructs sequestered behind closed doors. These Anglo-Saxon monastic women were agents in their own right, who thought and acted for themselves and had a profound influence on the politics, religion and culture of their society.

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<sup>72</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

<sup>73</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham, 433-440.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Despite the minimizing agenda of the medieval chroniclers, their texts reflect examples of influential elite women who contributed to the growth of the Christian faith by directly exercising their agency. Anglo-Saxon queens and other royal women encouraged their husbands to convert, established Christian enclaves and patronized bishops and monasteries. Anglo-Saxon abbesses maintained monasteries as centers of learning, trained bishops and other abbesses, and went on missionary ventures to convert neighboring peoples. Where the queens planted, the abbesses watered. However, the “Age of the Abbesses” came to a halt with the advent of later monastic reforms, which did away with double monasteries and attempted to ensure that nuns stayed within their cloisters.

When compared with the established ecclesiastical practices of later generations, there appears to be a shift away from the outpouring of female agency that contributed to the rebuilding of Christianity in the British Isles. The English Benedictine Reform, which culminated in the *Regularis Concordia* of 973, established a universal standard rule for English monastic institutions for the first time, limiting the independence formerly asserted by female monastics and decreasing the popularity of the double houses.<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Hollis notes that the influence of prominent abbesses waned as bishops began to increase in power,

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<sup>1</sup> *Regularis Concordia: The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation*, ed. Thomas Symons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). This English Benedictine reform movement was derived from the Benedictine reforms that originated decades earlier at Cluny and Gorz in Frankia.

which also caused the status of women's monasteries to diminish.<sup>2</sup> In later years, Bertha, Balthild, Leoba, Hild, and Æthelthryth were all recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as saints, even as the Church worked to downplay their individual contributions to the Christian movement. As the sociopolitical influence of abbesses declined, the male clergy increasingly framed them in archetypal language, drawing attention away from their actual agency. Their hagiographies reveal a concerted effort to enplot these women into a narrative the church found to be archetypally sound. Jane Chance emphasizes the prominence of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon typography, asserting that "the importance of any female saint in England depended in part on her literary and religious relationship with the virgin."<sup>3</sup> Helene Scheck believes that the Virgin's central role in Anglo-Saxon culture actually contributed to "the increasing marginalization of women by deflating the active power of queenship, the highest attainable position for women."<sup>4</sup> She asserts that the depiction of Mary as "celestial queen" that was just starting to develop during this period presents her with the attributes of a meek intercessor, which would have presented a stark contrast with the idea that women could also be influential rulers and leaders.<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Hollis considers Chance's estimation of the clergy's role in the promulgation of these tropes to be overstated, and instead posits the notion that while these biblical tropes (and even the very concept of separate female stereotypes) were growing in the cultural and literary traditions of the period, the conception

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<sup>2</sup> Hollis, 275.

<sup>3</sup> Chance, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 97.

<sup>5</sup> Scheck, 97.

of these ideas was a long and slow process.<sup>6</sup> Thus, even while these eminent queens and abbesses were striving to strengthen the Christian faith, other proponents of their religion were increasingly working to deemphasize their role.

Female saints were more or less fitted to this mold, their lives reshaped into narratives that corresponded to the authors' expectations and ideals. The archetype of the blessed virgin certainly appears to have been the most popular, surfacing throughout myriad hagiographies. The monastic fascination with untainted virginity is understandable, given the role the Virgin Mary played in their theology, but the virginal trope was utilized as a substitute for female agency, which the Church did not want to encourage. The dilemma that surfaced when the prominent women of their time did not readily fit into the virginal stereotype led the chroniclers and hagiographers to pursue other scriptural comparisons, such as Deborah, the prophetess, or Judith, the righteous widow.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of these early elite women was diminished in the historical record because the authors who described them enplotted them as archetypes of ideal femininity. Because they emphasized cultural and religious tropes above the significance of these women's accomplishments in spreading Christianity, the chroniclers effectively neutralized them. By focusing on these tropes, the authors redefined what was important about these women. The significance of an abbess, for example may thus be transmuted from her role as a community organizer, scholar, teacher, and leader into her role as a chaste and obedient virgin, in the same vein as Mary. The resulting narratives sideline the eminent women of early Anglo-Saxon Christianity in a retelling of history that furthered the agenda of the

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<sup>6</sup> Hollis, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Chance, 13.

Roman papal faction while ignoring nearly all the contributions of contemporary women.

For instance, although the Synod of Whitby was an important seventh century crisis in the Anglo-Saxon Christian community in which several elite women were key participants, Bede avoids any discussion of these women as active agents in the political and religious matters of their day, instead utilizing hagiographical tropes in his narrative. Queen Eanflæd and the abbesses Hild and Æthelthryth were all contemporaries, but they are seldom mentioned in connection to each other, despite the fact that they would have been well acquainted as members of the Northumbrian royal dynasty. Hild's presence is depicted at the synod, but Bede's decision not to include her words or deeds at that event has, in effect, silenced her. This omission is more pronounced given the fact that Bede mentions that Eanflæd and Hild each supported opposing factions in the controversy.<sup>8</sup> Given the influence wielded by these two prestigious women, they would likely have been rival leaders in the courtly politics associated with the synod, but the significance of the roles they played is left to conjecture. Meanwhile, Æthelthryth is completely sidelined as a political actor, as Bede focuses more on building her reputation after her death than on anything she actually did during her life.

Bede was not alone in this effort to marginalize acts of female agency. The monastic authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* followed Bede's lead, mentioning these early elite women only in passing, as in the case of Cuthburh's founding of Wimbourne in 718, or Queen Frithugyth's pilgrimage to Rome in 737.<sup>9</sup> Rudolf of Fulda contradicts himself when he refers to Leoba as being exceptional as a woman who left the confines of the cloisters,

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<sup>8</sup> Bede, 153-154.

<sup>9</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 41-45.

because he then refers in passing to other nuns who served and travelled with Leoba on numerous occasions.<sup>10</sup> Stephen of Ripon describes Hild as a “most pious nun” and an “abbess... of pious memory” despite highlighting her agency as a powerful source of conflict for Bishop Wilfred.<sup>11</sup> The anonymous author of the *Vita Domnae Balthildis* notes the influence Balthild wielded at her monastery only after describing her as abrogating her agency to otherwise unnamed priests.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the sanctity of both Æthelthryth<sup>13</sup> and Balthild<sup>14</sup> is expressly linked to their avoidance of interaction with men altogether, eschewing marriage for the seclusion of the cloisters.

The narrative enplotment of Anglo-Saxon women by early medieval chroniclers served to characterize them as tropes that were familiar to medieval audiences. The reader of these early Anglo-Saxon histories and hagiographies is left with a pastiche of fact and fiction; details about otherwise inscrutable people and events are intermixed with scriptural allegories and unattributed miracle tales. Nevertheless, from a close reading of those same sources, a clearer image of early Anglo-Saxon women may be gleaned. The glimpses of these pivotal individuals that may be perceived from Bede and the other sources offer insight into the ways elite women were able to exercise agency during the formative centuries of Anglo-Saxon culture. These elite women were instrumental in the reintroduction of the Christian faith to the British Isles. Whether as queens, abbesses or nuns, these women used their

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolf of Fulda, 205-226.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen of Ripon, 21, 117.

<sup>12</sup> “Vita Domnae Balthildis,” 127.

<sup>13</sup> Bede, 202-205.

<sup>14</sup> “Vita Domnae Balthildis,” 118-121.

positions within their own spheres of influence to change the religious and political climate of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and consequently helped to forge a Christian identity in England that endured for a millennium.

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