

# Paganism in Conversion-Age Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* Reconsidered

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## Abstract

This article argues that the current understanding of English paganism relies too heavily on the belief that, when they wrote of the pre-Christian religion(s) of the English, Pope Gregory I (d. 604), in the letters preserved in his *Register*, and the Northumbrian monk Bede (d. 735), in his *Ecclesiastical History*, were describing English religion before conversion to Christianity as it really was. Their purpose in discussing English paganism, it is argued, was to provide succour and support for the process by which the English would be saved from eternal damnation in the face of the coming Day of Judgement. Neither Gregory nor Bede, both of whom came to be revered as Fathers of the Church, were passive observers of the conversion process. On the contrary, both men were active participants in the eradication of error amongst the English; error whose detail they had no interest or incentive to describe empirically. These were men who answered to a greater Truth – the Truth of the Word of God. It was this Truth which, this article argues, actually informed their descriptions of English paganism and should inform our understanding of their words on this subject.

With the notable exception of R. I. Page, the attitude that historians and archaeologists alike have taken to Bede's words about the religion(s) of the pre-Christian occupants of conversion-age Anglo-Saxon England has overwhelmingly been to accept what this eighth-century commentator has to tell us.<sup>1</sup> These responses have ranged from A. Meaney's happily confident 'Bede would have learnt quite a considerable amount about the paganism of the Anglo-Saxons from his elders and from oral tradition' and her '[because the beliefs Bede

<sup>1</sup> R. I. Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism: The Evidence of Bede' [hereafter Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism'], in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. T. Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen, 1995), pp. 99–129, took a critical view of Bede's narrative of the conversion of Edwin of Northumbria. I. N. Wood, 'Pagan Religion and Superstitions East of the Rhine from the Fifth to the Ninth Century' [hereafter Wood, 'Pagan Religion and Superstitions'], in *After Empire: Towards an Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians*, ed. G. Ausenda (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 253–67 (at p. 264) concludes that there was 'no single paganism but paganisms' in the Germanic lands.

recorded] were held and practiced within living memory ... he is unlikely to be reporting anything that is substantially untrue',<sup>2</sup> through D. Wilson's disappointingly positive 'we should accept what [Bede] has to say as an accurate, though very limited record',<sup>3</sup> to J. Blair's grudgingly accepting 'the descriptions [of pagan temples] are just a bit too explicit to be ignored'.<sup>4</sup> Even Page, after a detailed examination of Bede's story about King Edwin of Northumbria's conversion to Christianity, stated that his 'purpose was not to reject Bede as an authority on paganism, only to stress the weaknesses and ambiguities of his material'.<sup>5</sup> All have agreed, therefore, with striking unanimity, that Bede knew something about the religion(s) his religion was replacing and that he was prepared to tell his readers something about that religion.<sup>6</sup> While accepting that Bede did know something about the religion(s) of his forefathers,<sup>7</sup> it is the plan of this article to challenge the view that what Bede said in regard to Anglo-Saxon paganism can be accepted, by examining in detail the 'limited record' with which Bede provides the researcher who studies this important topic.

## I

The main outline of our knowledge about the non-Christian English is contained in two letters of Pope Gregory the Great, which were transcribed by Bede into his *Ecclesiastical History*. These letters were placed in reverse chronological order in the *Ecclesiastical History* (as chapters 30 and 32 in book 1), but since the two letters appear to represent a change of mind on Gregory's part, it makes sense to deal with them here in the chronological order in which they appear in Pope Gregory's *Registrum*.<sup>8</sup> The first letter that Gregory sent was to Æthelberht king of



<sup>2</sup> A. M. Meaney, 'Bede and Anglo-Saxon Paganism', *Peregrinatio*, iii (1985), 1–29, at 1.

<sup>3</sup> D. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (1992) [hereafter Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*], p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> J. Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, viii (1995), 1–28 (at 1) and reaffirmed in his *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005) [hereafter Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*], p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism', p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> For further comments see the following key texts: G. R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (Newton Abbot, 1981); Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*; A. M. Meaney, 'Pagan English Sanctuaries, Place-Names and Hundred Meeting-Places', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, viii (1995), 29–42; Wood, 'Pagan Religion and Superstitions', pp. 253–67; J. Hines, 'Religion: The Limits of Knowledge', in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. J. Hines (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 375–410; Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*; B. Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain, 600–800* (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Bede's famous, though rather uninformative, notes on the Old English months in his *De temporum ratione* survive to show us that he knew something of what he spoke and was unwilling to reveal much (Bede, 'De temporum ratione', in *Beda opera didascalica*, ed. C. W. Jones, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina [hereafter CCSL], 123A–C (1975–80); translated as Bede, *The Reckoning of Time*, ed. F. Wallis (Liverpool, 1999)), discussed most usefully in Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism', pp. 122–7, who would rob us of even this crumb of comfort in our search to understand the paganism which Bede described.

<sup>8</sup> R. A. Markus, 'The Chronology of the Gregorian Mission to England: Bede's Narrative and Gregory's Correspondence', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xiv (1963), 16–30.

Kent (in which Gregory called him *rex Anglorum*, another indication of the pope's uncertainty about the political situation in Britain) on 22 June 601. In this letter, Gregory encouraged Æthelberht to be vigorous in prosecuting the faith:<sup>9</sup>

And so, glorious son, protect that grace which you have received from Heaven with a concerned mind, hasten to extend the Christian faith among the races subject to you, redouble your righteous enthusiasm in their conversion, hunt down the worship of idols, and overturn the building of temples, by encouraging the morality of your subjects with your great purity of life, by terrifying them, by flattering them, by correcting them and by showing them the example of good deeds.<sup>10</sup>

The two key elements in this letter are the worship of idols and the existence of temples; both of these things were to be destroyed.

The second letter that Gregory sent was addressed to Abbot Mellitus (whom Bede described simply as 'abbot', but who in the heading of Gregory's register was described as 'abbot in Frankia'), and was dated to 18 July 601. In this letter Gregory tells the missionaries what they are to do with the religious paraphernalia that they will find during their missionary activities, and his instructions seem to represent a change in his plan for the conversion of the English:<sup>11</sup>

That the temples (*fana*) of the idols among that people ought not to be destroyed at all, but the idols themselves, which are inside them, should be destroyed. Let water be blessed and sprinkled in the same temples, and let altars be constructed and relics placed there. For if those temples have been well constructed, it is necessary that they should be changed from the cult of demons to the worship of the true God, so that, while that race sees itself that its temples are not being destroyed, it may remove error from its people's hearts, and by knowing and adoring the true God, they may come together in their customary places in a more friendly manner. And because they are accustomed to killing many oxen (*boves*) while sacrificing to their demons, some solemn rites should be changed for them over this matter. So on the day of the dedication, or the festivals of the holy martyrs, whose relics are placed there, they should make huts for themselves around those churches that have been converted from shrines, with branches of trees, and they should celebrate the festival with religious feasting. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for eating in praise of God . . . It is doubtless impossible to cut out from their stubborn minds everything at once . . . Thus the Lord made himself known to the

<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969) (hereafter *HE*), i. 32; *S. Gregorii Magni registrum epistularum*, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL, 140 (2 vols., Turnhout, 1982) and translated as *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, ed., J. R. C. Martyn (3 vols., Toronto, 2004), xi. 37 [hereafter *Epist.* and cited by book number and letter]; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1988) [hereafter Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*], pp. 45–7.

<sup>10</sup> Martyn translates 'boni operis exempla monstrando aedifica' as 'by showing them buildings that are examples of good deeds', but the *aedifica* is adjectival in this sentence.

<sup>11</sup> *HE*, i. 30; *Epist.*, xi. 56.

Israelites in Egypt; yet he preserved in his own worship the forms of sacrifice which they were accustomed to offer to the devil and commanded them to kill animals when sacrificing to him (Leviticus 17: 1–9). He thereby changed their hearts . . . yet since the people were offering them to the true God and not to idols, they were not the same sacrifices.

In this letter the temples were to be reused; only the idols in them were to be destroyed. And the sacrifices that the Anglo-Saxons were accustomed to make to their gods were to be made instead in celebration of Christian festivals, so turning an act of demon-worship into an act of divine celebration.<sup>12</sup>

The models that Gregory was using for his conversion of the English were based firmly in the pages of the Old Testament and in the pages of Roman history. The second of the two passages cited above, the manner of the English conversion was to be the same as the way God had converted the Israelites, and the pages of Leviticus provided Gregory with his blueprint. In the first of the passages, Æthelberht was to be rewarded for his robust support of the conversion with access not just to the joys of everlasting life but also to the more earthly reward of everlasting fame. In the letter that Æthelberht received, he was promised that he would be as famous as Constantine the Great:

For thus Constantine, once our most pious emperor, recalled the Roman Republic from the perverse cults of idols, and both subjected himself to almighty God our Lord Jesus Christ, and together with his subject races, converted himself to Christ wholeheartedly. Thus it came about that he surpassed the fame of the ancient emperors . . . you should hasten to spread the knowledge of one God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, among the kings and races subject to you, so that you may both surpass the ancient kings of your race in praises and rewards, and the more you have wiped away the sins of others from your subjects, the more secure you may become about your own sins, before the terrifying judgement of almighty God.

To Gregory, therefore, ‘paganism’ equalled the worship of idols, since that was the lesson he must have constantly drawn from his knowledge of the ancient world and of the Bible, and this theme repeatedly emerges in his letters. The conversion of the English was not the only conversion with which he was involved. In 593, for example, Gregory sent letters to the bishop of Tyndari, in the northern part of Sicily, and to Libertinus praetor of the island. The letter to Libertinus does not survive, but the one to Bishop Eutychius urges him, in alliance with Libertinus, to ‘bring

<sup>12</sup> For the importance of sacrifice to Gregory, and especially the role of the priest in the Eucharistic sacrifice, see G. R. Evans, ‘Gregory the Great on Faith and Order’ [hereafter Evans, ‘Gregory the Great’], in *Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo*, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum (2 vols., Rome, 1991) [hereafter *Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo*], ii. 161–8, at 165. For a discussion of these letters see R. A. Markus, ‘Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy’, *Studies in Church History*, vi (1970), 29–38; H. Mayr-Harting, *Two Conversions to Christianity: The Bulgarians and the Anglo-Saxons* (Reading, 1994).

back into the unity of the Church . . . the worshippers of idols and adherents to the dogma of the Angelii'.<sup>13</sup> In 594, Gregory turned his attention to Sardinia, which had proved a hotbed of paganism throughout the sixth century. He sent to Sicily two men, Abbot Cyriacus and Bishop Felix, and in support of their activities, in May of that year, he wrote a series of letters to various potentates in Sardinia.<sup>14</sup> In one letter, to the nobles and landowners of Sardinia, he warned them to 'restrain [their peasants] from the error of idolatry' and, in the face of the 'end of the world', to stop 'watching the worship of stones by those entrusted to' them. Gregory further enquired why they had 'taken the enemies of God under [their] control and yet disdained from subduing them to God and recalling them to him'.<sup>15</sup> In another letter addressed to Hospiton, leader of the Barbaricini (a people driven out of Africa by the Vandals and settled in the mountains around Cagliari in Sardinia), who, it transpires from Gregory's letter, was already a Christian, though most of his people had yet to be converted, Gregory described the pagan Barbaricini as living 'like senseless animals, and do not know the true God, worshipping sticks and stones'.<sup>16</sup> A month later, in June 594, Gregory wrote to Bishop Januarius of Cagliari exhorting him to appoint a bishop to Fausiana where pagans were 'living like wild animals'.<sup>17</sup> The following year, Gregory reported to the empress Constantina on the progress of the missionary activity in Sardinia 'where there were many heathen offering sacrifices to idols in the manner of debased heathenism'.<sup>18</sup> Just as the mission to the English was being launched, Gregory also turned his attention to Corsica where 'those who were once Christians had reverted to worshipping idols.' The recipient of Gregory's letter, Bishop Peter of Laeria, was urged to 'explain [to the Corsicans] why they should not worship stocks and stones'.<sup>19</sup> The conversion of the English was part of a much wider action on the part of Gregory to bring pagans within the Christian fold before the Last Judgment. And the unifying theme of descriptions of these 'pagans' was that they were 'worshippers of idols',<sup>20</sup> a theme that stretched back to the early Roman emperors who 'worshipped gods of wood and stone'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Epist.*, iii. 59; these Angelii are otherwise unknown.

<sup>14</sup> J. Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (1980) [hereafter Richards, *Consul of God*], pp. 234–7; *Epist.* iv. 23–7.

<sup>15</sup> *Epist.*, iv. 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Epist.*, iv. 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Epist.*, iv. 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Epist.*, v. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Epist.*, viii. 1. What little we know about Corsica in the late sixth century is summarized in D. Ramos-Lissó, 'Gli interventi di Gregorio Magno in Corsica: aspetti religiosi, socio-economici e politici', in *Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo*, i. 103–8.

<sup>20</sup> *Epist.*, v. 37 in this letter 'running riot' over the Christian Roman empire.

<sup>21</sup> *Epist.*, v. 36. Idols as the object of pagan veneration appear in a number of other Gregorian letters, for example, *Epist.*, viii. 4, 19; ix. 205; x. 2; xi. 36, 38.

The pagan emperors of Rome's past confined their gods in buildings of stone. While the imagery of the pagan temple rarely finds a resonance in Gregory's letters, it pervaded his mental world and occupied the physical landscape which he inhabited on a daily basis. Old Testament figures like Abraham were, to Gregory, pagans who worshipped in temples.<sup>22</sup> Jews, whom Gregory saw as practising a superstition and who were the subject of missionary activity launched by Gregory, also used temples in their acts of worship.<sup>23</sup> In Rome itself the evidence of pagan worship in temples was all around him. Admittedly Rome had been sacked and the Lombards dominated much of northern Italy. But the landscape was still urban and cosmopolitan, even if some of the cities were being depopulated. Virtually all the Roman cities in northern Italy continued in existence, even if elsewhere in southern Italy town life largely came to an end. In Rome, the population had decreased, and many of the classical buildings had fallen into ruin, but much remained standing, too. In Gregory's day, Christian Rome was being built on the foundations of its ancient buildings and in particular on the old temple sites. The Pantheon, for example, used for the worship of all the pagan Roman gods, was in the sixth century converted into the church of Santa Maria Rotonda. The Roman tradition of municipal patronage was transformed into a Christian pious church-building programme. In the words of one modern archaeologist, 'the church saved the temple', without which much that has survived to the modern day from ancient Rome would have crumbled into dust.<sup>24</sup> The model for reusing pagan temples for Christian churches was one that came from Gregory's very own doorstep. This was precisely the sort of activity that he and those of aristocratic standing in Rome were undertaking at the same moment as he was urging Mellitus to reuse the pagan temples of the English.

Gregory's authority was the Bible; his assistants in understanding the Bible were the Fathers (of whom he came to be one) and the pronouncements of the Church councils; his early education was in the pagan authors; and his world was dominated by an urban and cosmopolitan outlook which was at one and the same time being transformed while remaining recognizably part of the classical world.<sup>25</sup> Above all, Gregory was a communicator of the Christian message, a message that would bring salvation to those who had yet to receive the word of God.<sup>26</sup> Gregory, moreover, expected that the world would come to an end at any moment. He was living through the end of the Roman world and to him

<sup>22</sup> *Epist.*, viii. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Richards, *Consul of God*, pp. 228–31.

<sup>24</sup> C. Pietri, 'La Rome de Grégoire', *Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo*, i. 9–32, at 13–14, 17–18. See also T. Brown, 'The Transformation of the Roman Mediterranean, 400–900', in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. G. Holmes (Oxford, 1992), pp. 1–57, at 22–9.

<sup>25</sup> Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge, 1997) [hereafter Markus, *Gregory the Great*], p. xii.

<sup>26</sup> G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 15.

that presaged the Day of Judgement. But rather than waiting supinely, Gregory's knowledge that all time was about to come to an end drove him on to 'work harder on behalf of the church in her hour of glory'. In his *Moralia*, for example, the image that he created for his audience was one of the Church preaching its way across a crisis-ridden world as the Last Judgement approached.<sup>27</sup> When he wrote to King Æthelberht he reminded him that 'the end of the present world is now at hand, and the kingdom of saints is about to come.'<sup>28</sup> For Gregory, the conversion of the English was a matter of considerable urgency, a key part in the process of 'reversing the direction of the Fall and bringing the people of God up to God'.<sup>29</sup> The last word on Gregory's imperative is perhaps left to the great man himself. In a letter dated in September 591, he urged the bishop of Narni in Umbria 'to convert . . . the pagans . . . so that either heavenly compassion will help in their conversion even in this life, or if they happen to be carried off, they cross over absolved of their sins, which is even more desirable'.<sup>30</sup> The conversion process was driven on by a greater truth than mere anthropological observation: it was the truth of eternal salvation in the face of the coming apocalypse.

Bede revered Gregory the Great. He knew that Gregory was a doctor of the Church and he saw this pope as the 'English apostle', the man who had 'made our nation, till then enslaved to idols, into a church of Christ'.<sup>31</sup> In the words of Henry Chadwick, 'Bede [was] a historian with a thesis: namely, that the chair of St Peter [was] and ought to be the uniting force, the criterion of authentic orthodoxy, the determinant voice telling the churches in Britain how things ought to be done.'<sup>32</sup> 'For him', Gerald Bonner wrote, 'the faith of the Fathers was as his own and their enemies were to be regarded as his.'<sup>33</sup> Such a stance makes it hardly likely that Bede would contradict Gregory, an acknowledged doctor of the church, on any point, even if he thought that point to be faulty.<sup>34</sup> This is especially the case as it is now becoming apparent to those who study Bede's work that he saw himself as a doctor of the Church, too, following in the footsteps of Gregory, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, and indeed making biblical commentaries on works that these great men had not ventured to explore.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Markus, *Gregory the Great*, pp. 51–4.

<sup>28</sup> *Epist.*, xi. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Evans, 'Gregory the Great', p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> *Epist.*, ii. 2.

<sup>31</sup> P. Meyvaert, *Bede and Gregory the Great* (Jarrow, 1964), p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> H. Chadwick, 'Gregory the Great and the Mission to the Anglo-Saxons', in *Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo*, i. 199–212 (at 199–200).

<sup>33</sup> G. Bonner, 'Bede and Medieval Civilization', in *Anglo-Saxon England*, ii (1973) [hereafter Bonner, 'Bede and Medieval Civilization'], p. 74; see also J. Hill, *Bede and the Benedictine Reform* (Jarrow, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Bonner, 'Bede and Medieval Civilization', p. 75, argues that Bede did not have a 'servile' attitude to the Fathers, 'disregarding patristic exegesis if it seemed to him unreasonable'.

<sup>35</sup> *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*, ed. S. DeGregorio (Morgantown, 2006) [hereafter *Innovation and Tradition*].



## II

An understanding of Bede's historical method is also crucial to any understanding of his construct of English paganism. The phrase *vera lex historiae*,<sup>36</sup> which appears in the preface to his *Ecclesiastical History*, was long seen by historians as unproblematic; it was assumed that it meant that Bede approached his sources, such as 'the trustworthy testimony of reliable witnesses', with simple honesty.<sup>37</sup> Historians now recognize, however, that this interpretation of Bede's phrase is too simplistic.<sup>38</sup> In a series of important articles, Roger Ray has shown that Bede's phrase *vera lex historiae* was founded on a rhetorical rule used extensively in the ancient world, a rule that was founded in the 'rhetorical doctrine of probability'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the *vera lex historiae* was neither *the* true law of history (merely *a* true law) nor was it to be seen as the unimpeachable truth. Rather the principle underlying this particular 'law of history' 'authorized the use of oral traditions whose factual worth might be suspect but which recorded a truth which, if not actually true, ought to have been true. At this point, the standard rhetorical rules of intentional probability might be brought into play. Inventional probability allowed the historian, if the main facts were known but identifiable witnesses or documents were unavailable in sufficient quantity or detail to verify them, the latitude imaginatively to create 'probable contents' which 'met two broad tests: everyday experience and common belief'. The author, then, might use his imagination to add 'colour' to the facts of the case, so long as he was not being mendacious, but adding detail to well-known truth. Colour was added for 'didactic effect', 'to influence the thought and behaviour of the reader, to teach by example'.<sup>40</sup> The resulting narrative is therefore 'like the truth as people know it'. And one of the key tools of this form of 'inventional rhetoric' is the use of reported speech which the writer almost never heard but might impute to a character in his narrative if it seemed reasonable that the character would have spoken those words.<sup>41</sup>



<sup>36</sup> Translated by B. Colgrave in the standard edition of Bede's *HE* as 'the principles of true history', but which is now translated as 'a true law of history'.

<sup>37</sup> For what follows see R. Ray, 'Bede's *vera lex historiae*', *Speculum*, lv (1980) [hereafter Ray, 'Bede's *vera lex historiae*'], 1–21; for the translation see p. 13. See also W. Goffart, 'Bede's *vera lex historiae* Explained', *Anglo-Saxon England*, xxiv (2005), 111–16.

<sup>38</sup> Beginning with C. W. Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (New York, 1947), pp. 80–93.

<sup>39</sup> Ray, 'Bede's *vera lex historiae*', 4.

<sup>40</sup> R. Ray, 'The Triumph of Greco-Roman Rhetorical Assumptions in Pre-Carolingian Historiography' [hereafter Ray, 'Triumph'], in *The Inheritance of Historiography*, ed. C. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (Exeter, 1986), pp. 67–84, at 68–72.

<sup>41</sup> R. Ray, 'Bede and Cicero', *Anglo-Saxon England*, xvi (1987), 1–15 (at 9) where he shows how Bede invented the speeches made at the synod of Whitby in 664 taking his 'governing image' from the Bible and in particular the account of the Council of Jerusalem to be found in the Acts of the Apostles. Moreover, Bede applied to his account of Whitby the archetypal paired speech of 'Roman deliberative oratory' in a tradition that goes back to the rhetorical schools of the Roman and Greek past.



To Bede, it was important that those who argued for Christ had at their disposal the best weapons to combat the error that confronted them. 'Piety and sound doctrine', he argued, 'were sometimes not enough' and 'eloquence' had to be used where necessary. Ray has shown without any doubt that Bede understood, used and applauded inventional rhetoric in which the author of a history might take a utilitarian view of his purpose 'subordinating even [what we as modern commentators would see as] the truth to the end in view'.<sup>42</sup> To Bede, the end in view was the conversion of the English and the banishment of English paganism from those shores, a process which was still ongoing in his own day. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was not simply a record of the conversion but a crucial part in the conversion process, showing by example the rectitude of the Christian message. Bede, moreover, did not come to write the *Ecclesiastical History* by some accident of fate; Bede was deliberately sought out by Abbot Albinus of Canterbury to write the *History* precisely because he was the greatest biblical scholar of his day with a reputation that extended far beyond the boundaries of his native Northumbria.<sup>43</sup> In the light of this evidence, to assume that Bede was in some way a disinterested observer of the events which he described is very unwise. He had a model of paganism, inherited from Gregory the Great, the writings of other Fathers of the Church, the Bible, and even the works of pagan authors of the past, according to which paganism was characterized by the worship of idols that were housed in temples presided over by high priests who had responsibility for leading the folk in the worship of their deities. The way in which Bede used this framework for his reconstruction of the conversion can best be seen in his handling of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria (616–33).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ray, 'Triumph', pp. 75, 77; Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, p. 5; see also R. Ray, *Bede, Rhetoric, and the Creation of Christian Latin Culture* (Jarrow, 1997), p. 7: 'Yet Bede certainly knew, with Jerome, that the truthful narrator, even the Evangelist, may write for true what they know is not if only the inscribing of a recognised error will serve a desired rhetorical end.' On p. 9, 'for Bede and Jerome conscious falsification in a good cause was not the hard question it was for Augustine'. And on p. 13, 'the rhetorical tradition, as Bede knew, authorises the hedging of bets: a story not known to have happened in fact may nevertheless be useful if it is congenial to the narrator's cause and meets one or more of the criteria of verisimilitude'. In addition to Roger Ray's *Speculum* article cited above, see also his 'Bede, the Exegete, as Historian', in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. G. Bonner (1976), pp. 125–40.

<sup>43</sup> As M. B. Parkes has shown in *The Scriptorium of Wearmouth-Jarrow* (Jarrow, 1982), pp. 15–23, by 720 Bede's fame was such that the scriptorium of Wearmouth-Jarrow was kept extremely busy reproducing copies of Bede's works. Parkes also demonstrated just how extraordinary the scriptorium was; it produced works to a recognizable and uniform standard, an achievement that was unique in scriptoria of Europe north of the Alps.

<sup>44</sup> The dates of Northumbrian history have proved a fruitful area for historical discussion. In dating the events of Edwin's reign, I have followed S. Wood, 'Bede's Northumbrian Dates Again', *English Historical Review*, lxc (1983), 280–96, who, by championing Wilhelm Levison's solution to resolving Bede's dates in his *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), app. 6, stoutly defended Bede's dates for these events against D. P. Kirby, 'Bede and Northumbrian Chronology', *English Historical Review*, lxxviii (1963), 514–27. For the full variety of approaches to Northumbrian chronology, see Wood's first eight footnotes.

## III

The conversion of Edwin was of immense importance to Bede, since Edwin was the first of the Northumbrian kings to accept Christianity.<sup>45</sup> The immediate context for Edwin's conversion was an assassination attempt made on him by Cwichelm, king of the West Saxons, on Easter Day 626.<sup>46</sup> The significance of the date of the assault would not have been lost on Bede's audience, since it pointed both to the horror of the event and to the beginnings of Edwin's own rebirth in the faith of Christ. On that very day, Edwin's Christian queen was delivered safely of a daughter. The daughter was called Eanflæd, and she was given to Paulinus 'to be consecrated to Christ' and was baptized on Pentecost, another crucial date in the Christian calendar. In surviving the attempt on his life, Edwin also promised to 'renounce idols and serve Christ' (which, according to the analysis given above, should be translated as 'renounce the old ways and serve Christ') if Paulinus's God would allow him his life and victory against the instigator of the crime, the king of the West Saxons. Bede informs his readers that Edwin's campaign was a great success,<sup>47</sup> and that, keeping to his word, Edwin renounced 'idols', though he refused to be converted without careful consultation with his leading men.<sup>48</sup> Chief among those leading men was Coifi, 'primus pontificum'<sup>49</sup> (first of the pontiffs, that is, chief priest), who, according to Bede, spoke first:<sup>50</sup>

see, king, what manner of thing is being expounded to us; for I most surely admit to you, which I have learned beyond doubt, that the religion which we have held up till now has no virtue or utility in it. For none of your followers has applied himself to the worship of our gods more zealously than I, but nevertheless there are many who receive from you more ample gifts and greater honours than I, and prosper more in all things which they plan to do or get. But if the gods had value, they would rather help me, who have been careful to serve them more devotedly. It remains, therefore, that

<sup>45</sup> See also Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism', pp. 102–11, 119–22.

<sup>46</sup> The beginnings of the kingdom of the West Saxons are now dated to the years 686–8 during the rulership of Cædwalla. Bede himself usually uses the term *Gewisse* when referring to this territory until 688. See B. Yorke, 'The Jutes of Hampshire and the Origins of Wessex', in *The Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. S. Bassett (Leicester, 1990), pp. 84–96, at 93–4, and now her *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1995), p. 59.

<sup>47</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 'E' version, *sub anno* 626, says that Edwin 'destroyed there five kings'.

<sup>48</sup> *HE*, ii. 9. Colgrave translated *primates* as 'counsellors', though 'leading men' would be a better interpretation. At this point, Bede interjects two letters of Pope Boniface V (chs. 10 and 11) and an account of Edwin's time in exile at the court of Rædwald of East Anglia (ch. 12) after which (ch. 13) he tells of Edwin's discussions 'cum amicis principibus et consiliariis suis' (with his principle friends and his counsellors).

<sup>49</sup> The use of the word *pontifex* suggests that Bede was thinking of something more exalted than 'chief priest'. See P. N. Jones, *A Concordance to the Historia Ecclesiastica of Bede* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), pp. 402–3 and Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis conditum a Carolo Dufresne, Domino du Cange* (8 vols., Paris, rev. edn., 1840–50), v. 346–7, where he associates the word with *episcopus* or *sacerdotes summi*.

<sup>50</sup> *HE*, ii. 13.

if on examination you find these new things, which are now preached to us, better and more effectual, we should hasten to receive them without delay.

Coifi's act of surrender prompted another of the king's *optimates* to add his voice to the call for change before Coifi, even more dramatically, declared that 'for a long time [he had] thought that what we worshipped was nought' and advised the king to 'deliver to the flames the temples and altars we have consecrated without reaping any profit'. Coifi then volunteered to be the first to begin the process by which the old religion would be expunged. Mounted on a stallion and carrying arms (Bede wrote that neither action was allowed to one of their high priests – presumably because, like a Christian priest, he was not supposed to fight and draw blood), Coifi 'profaned the shrine by casting the spear into it'. Bede ended this captivating account with the rhetorical verisimilitude demanded by the rules of his genre: 'The place where the idols once stood', he stated, 'is still shown, not far from York, to the east, over the river Derwent. Today it is called Goodmanham, the place where the high priest, through the inspiration of the true God, profaned and destroyed the altars which he himself had consecrated.'<sup>51</sup>

Bede's story of the conversion of King Edwin is a dramatic one, but how should the details of his story be read? Is it possible to accept unquestioningly his picture of Coifi the high priest speaking out against and then destroying the 'idols and temples' of his people? There is a general topos in Bede's story of Coifi's submission to Christianity that finds a resonance in other conversion tales which needs to be highlighted at this point in the discussion. The similarity, for example, of Bede's tale with Gregory of Tours' description of the conversion of Clovis, king of the Franks, at the turn of the fifth century is striking. Although there was no high priest in Gregory's story, Clovis' wife, Clothildis, was given similar words to speak by Gregory as Coifi was given by Bede. Clothildis told Clovis to stop worshipping gods of stone, wood and metal – in Gregory of Tours' account transformed into the Roman gods of Jove, Saturn, Mercury and Mars – which were worthless. Later Clovis himself recognized the futility of worshipping the old gods. During a battle with the Alamans, his army was in danger of losing the conflict, at which point Clovis promised to be converted should God bring him victory, which He duly did. Clovis then, before he would convert, took counsel with his people who 'spontaneously rejected their mortal gods' in favour of the religion preached by St Remigius who, as he baptized the newly converted, urged them to 'burn what they had once worshipped'.<sup>52</sup>

In the context of Clovis's conversion and of Bede's understanding of the historian's task, it looks as if in his story of the conversion of Edwin

<sup>51</sup> Bede may have been thinking of the altar of Baal, overthrown by Gideon (Judges, VI. 25–31).

<sup>52</sup> *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis libri historiarum* X, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, I, 1 (Hanover, 1951), book ii, caps. 29–31, at 74–8.

he put into the mouth of one man the feelings that he thought must generally have prevailed at the moment at which Edwin chose Christ. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill wondered if, although the Latin of Coifi's reported speech read like Bede's own words, he had heard the tale in direct line from someone who was actually present.<sup>53</sup> Given what is now known about Bede's use of the principle of inherent probability, a more likely interpretation would be that Bede was giving a well-known topos (one which he may have borrowed from Gregory of Tours)<sup>54</sup> the plausibility of reported speech. It must have been true, Bede would have argued, that those around Edwin recognized the truth in Paulinus's message, hence their acceptance of it, and if there had been a high priest at this event, then he, too, would have acknowledged the power of Christianity. Undoubtedly, this high priest would have said the same sorts of things that Coifi said; Bede's Coifi,<sup>55</sup> after all, was merely reciting what others more generally had said in the face of the Truth of the Christian Word.<sup>56</sup>

A deeper analysis of the story of Edwin's conversion begins to throw up further problems which point in the direction of seeing Coifi's role in it as a Bedan rhetorical flourish. To begin with, it is not at all certain that the Anglo-Saxon non-Christian religion(s) had a hierarchy of priests. Applying what else is known about the northern religions in general to the problem of Anglo-Saxon non-Christian religion(s) makes it doubtful that there existed a 'proper religious organisation and a vocational priesthood'.<sup>57</sup> In the earliest law code, moreover, that of Æthelberht of Kent dating to before 604, the place of the newly instituted Christian church was at the very pinnacle of Kentish society. The king received his compensation at a ninefold rate, the same as a priest's and less than the elevenfold due to the bishop and the twelvefold due to the church.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, p. 71.

<sup>54</sup> Ian Wood wondered if Bede's account of Edwin's conversion was in some way reliant on Gregory's tale of Clovis' conversion. See I. N. Wood, 'Gregory of Tours and Clovis', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, lxiii (1985), 249–72, reprinted in *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, ed. L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (Oxford, 1998), pp. 73–91, at 91.

<sup>55</sup> The name 'Coifi', although unusual, is attested in a Northumbrian *liber vitae* dating from the beginning of the ninth century. Its owner is listed under the names of the monks. See *The Oldest English Texts*, ed. H. Sweet, Early English Text Society, original series, 83 (1885), p. 163, line 340.

<sup>56</sup> J. D. Niles, 'Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 126–41, takes Bede's account of Edwin at face value (at p. 127).

<sup>57</sup> O. Ilsen, 'Is There a Relationship between Pagan and Christian Places of Worship in Scandinavia?', in *The Anglo-Saxon Church: Papers on History, Architecture and Archaeology in Honour of Dr H. M. Taylor*, ed. L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (Council for British Archaeology, Research Report, 60, 1986), pp. 126–30 (at 129).

<sup>58</sup> P. Wormald, *The First Code of English Law* (Canterbury, 2005), pp. 3, 14; *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. F. L. Attenborough (Cambridge, 1922) [hereafter *Earliest Laws*], p. 5; P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century: I Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford, 1999), 93–101; P. Wormald, 'Inter cetera bona . . . genti suae: Law-Making and Peace-Keeping in the Earliest English Kingdoms', *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo*, xxxii (Spoleto, 1995), 963–96, at 965–6; 969–74; 984–5; 990–1. Of course, Bede (*HE*, ii. 5) made the point that one of Æthelberht's achievements had been to write laws 'designed to give protection to those whose coming and whose teaching he welcomed'.

This placement in Kentish society strongly suggests that the arrival of Christianity did not involve a simple swap of one set of priests serving the old gods for a new set of priests serving the new God.<sup>59</sup> The church and its hierarchy were new to sixth-century Kentish society, obviously different from whatever may or may not have gone before them and needing to find a place in the barbarous society at the northern edge of the civilized world. And yet in Coifi the high priest, Bede had a non-Christian Northumbrian religious man exercising authority which was linked to that of the king and the territory over which the king ruled. It is a structure that looks remarkably similar to that which existed in the Christian kingdom of Northumbria in the period before the see was divided by Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury in the wake of Bishop Wilfrid's expulsion from the kingdom in 678. Paulinus, in Bede's construct of English paganism in Northumbria, was, therefore, an exact replacement for Coifi. This is very unlikely to have been the real situation. In Coifi, too, Bede had a high priest, a *pontifex sacrorum* (chief of the holy places)<sup>60</sup> or *primus pontificum* (chief priest), who was required to adhere to a set of rules, two of which were that he should not ride a stallion or carry arms. But these rules also applied to Christian priests (though they seem to have been followed more in the breach than the observance). St Boniface, for example, writing to Cuthbert, archbishop of Canterbury, in the mid-eighth century, complained of clerics, who, among other things, went hunting (presumably on horseback) and carried arms.<sup>61</sup> This fault in the English clergy had come to the attention of the authorities in Rome a century before St Boniface's letter of censure, where, in 679–80, clergymen were prohibited from carrying arms.<sup>62</sup>

Coifi's role in Bede's story of Edwin's conversion is interrupted by a speech made by one of the king's *optimates*. It is a speech that is perhaps

<sup>59</sup> *Earliest Laws*, p. 25; H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, *Law and Legislation from Æthelberht to Magna Carta* (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. 1–9, argued likewise.

<sup>60</sup> In his commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah, Bede used *pontifex* as synonymous with archbishop. See S. DeGregorio, 'Footsteps of his Own: Bede's Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah', in *Innovation and Tradition*, pp. 143–68 (at 165).

<sup>61</sup> E. Dümmler, 'S. Bonifatii et Lulli Epistolae', in *Epist. Merowingici et Karoloni aevi*, i (Berlin, 1916), no. 78, pp. 215–433 (at 354). It is a famous letter that also includes the comment about the excessive drinking habits of English priests, a habit which Boniface took to be a legacy from 'pagan' practices, and one which was at variance with those of the more civilized 'Franks, Gauls, Lombards, Romans and Greeks'.

<sup>62</sup> *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (3 vols., Oxford, 1871), iii. 133. We hear of another *princeps sacerdotum idolatriae coram paganis* (a leader of the priesthood of idolatry among the pagans) in Stephen's Life of Wilfrid (*The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 28–9), who was a *magus* and who tried to 'bind the hands' of Wilfrid's followers with his 'magical arts'. This example helps little in the attempt to understand the role Bede made for Coifi, who was evidently no *magus* in the form that Stephen described. This is not the place to discuss Stephen's *magus*, but it is worth noting that binding spells were common among non-Christians, including the ancient Greeks. See V. I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1991), at pp. 226–31. Binding spells also appears in the Bible (for example, Acts XII. 7); see also A. Murray, 'Missionaries and Magic in Dark-Age Europe', *Past and Present*, cxxxvi (1992), 186–205, at 199.

the most famous in all Anglo-Saxon history and it focuses on the human condition which, according to Bede's recitation of the event, might be likened to 'the flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall'.<sup>63</sup> While it is in the hall, the sparrow enjoys the warmth and comfort of the fire protected from the wind, rain and snow of the winter's day, but it soon exits into the 'wintry world from which it came'. So, the king's man is reported by Bede to have said, is the position of humans, appearing on the earth for the short span of his allotted life after which he returns to the world beyond the mead hall to the unknown world outside. A romantic interpretation of this passage might lead one to imagine that Bede really was recording the actual words of the counsellor, but, in the cold light of day, this seems highly unlikely. In using the story of the sparrow, Bede was echoing Psalm 83 (84), 'How lovely are thy temples, O Lord', which has long been identified as one of his particular favourites.<sup>64</sup> It seems arguable that this is what provided Bede (or his informant) with his analogy. That a non-Christian king's counsellor would have come up with one of Bede's favourite Psalms to flavour his story seems hardly credible and adds yet further weight to the proposition that Bede's account of Edwin's conversion has been augmented by the application the rules of inventional probability.<sup>65</sup>

In writing his story about Edwin's conversion, Bede based his account on two sources. The first was a Northumbrian tradition, which, it has been argued, provided Bede with material that had been preserved at Whitby,<sup>66</sup> where Edwin was taken to be buried (perhaps without his head, which Bede records was taken to York) following his death at the hands of Cædwallon and Penda in 633.<sup>67</sup> This tradition is found in the *Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* composed at Whitby sometime between 704 and 714, and which appears to have come down to the Whitby author by a separate route than that to which Bede had access.<sup>68</sup> The second was a Canterbury tradition based, it must be supposed, on Paulinus's account of his mission retold after his return to Kent in the wake of Cædwallon's devastation.<sup>69</sup> Neither tradition had a contemporary

<sup>63</sup> *HE*, ii, 13.

<sup>64</sup> D. K. Fry, 'The Art of Bede: Edwin's Council' [hereafter Fry, 'Art of Bede'], in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, ed. M. H. King and W. M. Stevens (2 vols., Collegeville, Minn., 1979), i, 191–207 (at 194–201).

<sup>65</sup> Fry, 'Art of Bede', p. 202, proposes that Bede was portraying Edwin's counsellors as 'proto-Christians' for an audience which would have recognized the allusion of the sparrow immediately. In doing so, Bede was hoping that his audience 'would admire Edwin and his' counsellors.

<sup>66</sup> B. Colgrave, 'The Earliest Life of St Gregory the Great, Written by a Whitby Monk', in *Celt and Saxon*, ed. N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1963) [hereafter *Celt and Saxon*], pp. 119–37, thought it unlikely that Bede copied the Whitby *Life*, written between 704 and 714, but rather followed a separate tradition (at 136).

<sup>67</sup> *HE*, ii, 20; iii, 24; *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1968) [hereafter Colgrave, *Earliest Life*], pp. 104–5.

<sup>68</sup> Colgrave, *Earliest Life*, pp. 136–7.

<sup>69</sup> Paulinus became bishop of Rochester and died in 644 (*HE*, v, 24).

written authority.<sup>70</sup> The Northumbrian tradition had Edwin as its focus, while the Canterbury tradition was one in which Paulinus was the hero of the story as he strove to convert the pagan king. Bede then applied inventional probability to the events surrounding Edwin's conversion, a methodology with which he was thoroughly familiar and which he demonstrably used elsewhere in his works, to provide his readers with an account of Edwin's conversion which seems likely to have happened.<sup>71</sup> There is no doubt that Edwin's conversion did happen and that he was converted (possibly not for the first time)<sup>72</sup> by Paulinus; what is in serious doubt is the extent to which we should trust Bede's account of Coifi's role in that event.

#### IV

When Bede turned his attention to the apostasy of King Rædwald of East Anglia, he again used the imagery of the Bible. Rædwald, in Bede's account, had been converted to Christianity at the court of King Æthelberht of Kent,

<sup>70</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, p. 65, supposes that the Northumbrian tradition was 'oral' while the Canterbury tradition was 'written'. I cannot quite see why this distinction needs to be made. Both versions could have been oral and/or written and since Bede does not give his source for this account, it seems wisest not to privilege one version over another by ascribing to it a written authority. One is also left to wonder, moreover, just how Paulinus's mission would have been viewed in Kent during the remainder of Paulinus's life. Paulinus became bishop of Rochester after his escape from Northumbria and died in 644. From this perspective the Roman mission to the north must have looked very unsuccessful. After 634, Celtic Christianity held sway in Northumbria under the patronage of the powerful Bernician dynasty, and from this perspective, Paulinus's mission must have looked like a valiant, but in the end futile, attempt at conversion to Roman Christianity. Only after 664 and the synod of Whitby, or perhaps only after Theodore's archiepiscopacy and the synods of Hertford (672) and Hatfield (679), must the significance of Paulinus's mission have become apparent. Peter Hunter Blair, 'The Letters of Pope Boniface V and the Mission of Paulinus to Northumbria', in *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 5–13 (at 6) argued that, apart from the letters of Boniface V, there were no contemporary documents that related to Paulinus's mission, a view with which D. P. Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, iil (1966), 341–71 (at 352), would concur. Wallace-Hadrill's point about the hero of the story being Paulinus and not Edwin is, however, well made.

<sup>71</sup> Ray, 'Triumph', p. 78.

<sup>72</sup> There is a further tradition which seems to have its root in British sources dating from the seventh century. This assigns a prominent place to a certain Rhun son of Urien who, depending on one's reading of the text, either actually baptized Edwin and his followers or was responsible for their conversion. Rhun was a historical figure who, in his early life, had fought with his father against the Bernicians. Since Edwin was a Deiran, this connection to a sworn enemy of the Bernicians does not seem unlikely. The importance of Rhun's role is stressed by K. Jackson, 'On the Northern British Section in Nennius', in *Celt and Saxon*, pp. 20–62, at pp. 32–3, and by N. K. Chadwick, 'The Conversion of Northumbria: A Comparison of the Sources', in *Celt and Saxon*, pp. 138–66. J. Campbell, 'Bede I', in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (1986), p. 23, has dismissed their championing of this role for Rhun, but it seems unwise to dismiss the suggestion out of hand. Chadwick's case is a powerful one, and it is not possible to exclude completely a role in Edwin's conversion for a British ruler of a territory that dominated the Solway Firth with its focus at Carlisle (Chadwick, p. 159).



the initiator of Augustine's mission to Kent in 597.<sup>73</sup> When he returned home, according to Bede, Rædwald was 'seduced by his wife and certain evil teachers' to place an altar for Christian sacrifice and a smaller altar for 'offering victims to demons' in the same 'temple'. In acting this way, Rædwald's last state was worse than his first because he seemed to be 'serving both Christ and the gods whom he had previously served' in the manner of the 'ancient Samaritans', who were renowned for adopting other people's gods as they saw fit.<sup>74</sup> The story was given its believable quality by citing the eye-witness account of King Ealdwulf of East Anglia (d. 713) to the continued existence of Rædwald's temple up until his own day.

It has been traditional amongst scholars to argue that Rædwald's actions represent 'a brave attempt by a defeated Christian king at a form of religious syncretism',<sup>75</sup> and that Rædwald, as a polytheist, would have had little difficulty in finding a space in his temple for another god to fit within his existing pantheon of gods. The Christian God was constructed by those who worshipped Him at this time as a jealous God who would suffer no rival; the pagan gods coexisted in the minds of those who worshipped them and so, the argument goes, the prospect of welcoming another amongst their number should not have caused great difficulty. This explanation is certainly plausible, but there is another suggestion that works well with the evidence, too, if Rædwald's actions are placed within the framework created for Bede's account of King Edwin's conversion.

Bede knew that Rædwald had accepted conversion at the hands of a Kentish king, and he knew, too, that Rædwald had rejected Christianity as he had begun to throw off Æthelberht's overlordship.<sup>76</sup> It has long been known that conversion to Christianity was intimately linked to overlordship, and it might equally be possible to suppose that, in the early stages of the conversion, when adherence to Christianity was optional, the rejection of Christianity was a sign of a king's rejection of another king's claim to overlordship.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Rædwald may have gone further and after Æthelberht's death ensured that the East Saxons and the people of Kent, for a short while at least, rejected Christianity, which

<sup>73</sup> I. N. Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English', *Speculum*, lxxx (1994), 1–17.

<sup>74</sup> *HE*, ii. 15; II Kings, XVII. 29.

<sup>75</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, pp. 75–7; S. Newton, *The Reckoning of King Rædwald: The Story of the King Linked to the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* (Colchester, 2003), pp. 11–12, is the most recent commentator to follow this line of argument.

<sup>76</sup> *HE*, ii. 5 where he said of Rædwald that 'while Æthelberht was still alive, [he] acted as military leader of his own people.'

<sup>77</sup> M. O. H. Carver, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Sutton Hoo: An Interim Report', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M. O. H. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 343–72 (at 365) saw the burial ground as a deliberate reaction to the arrival of Christianity. This view was upheld in more detail in his *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context*, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, 69 (2005), pp. 313, 492.

both peoples did following Æthelberht's death in 616.<sup>78</sup> It may even be possible to speculate that Edwin's reluctance to accept Christianity stemmed in part from the continued overlordship of Rædwald who had been responsible for placing Edwin on the Northumbrian throne; a point which is revealed by Bede only because he chose to recount the story of Edwin's exile at Rædwald's court as part of his narrative about Edwin's conversion.<sup>79</sup> There was, therefore, a strong political element to Rædwald's rejection of Christianity. Bede chose to ignore this point, deciding instead to recount a tale, based on inherent probability, that Rædwald had much in common with the Samaritans of old, and that he chose to try to serve the True God and the false gods in the same temple. In the context of the analysis given in this article, it is precisely how one would expect Bede to recount such a tale.

## V

It is not the intention of this article to argue that the conversion of Edwin by Paulinus or the rejection of Christianity by Rædwald did not happen: surely they did. The basic truth of Bede's narrative of the conversion is sound, a point which is often demonstrable from other, fragmentary sources. What is in serious doubt is the detail of Bede's narrative which includes temples and idols, high priests and sacrifices. Neither is it the intention of this article to argue that there were no well-built structures in late sixth-century Anglo-Saxon England which the missionaries might convert to Christian usage. Enough of what the Romans built in stone remained standing to form a lasting impression on the Angles and Saxons who populated post-Roman Britain. There is enough archaeological evidence to suggest that at specific sites, such as Verulamium, to name but one example, civic government continued well into the fifth century. At Verulamium the cult of St Alban, focused on a church building said by Bede to have been built 'when peaceful Christian times returned',<sup>80</sup> may well have had a continuous history from late Roman Britain through to the conversion period and beyond.<sup>81</sup> The community of Christians who accompanied Bertha to Kent on her marriage to Æthelberht used St Martin's Church, which, Bede wrote,

<sup>78</sup> This is an interpretation preferred by B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (1990), p. 62.

<sup>79</sup> *HE*, ii. 12.

<sup>80</sup> *HE*, i. 7. The phrase 'ubi postea', which immediately precedes 'redeunte temporum Christianorum serenitate', refers to Alban's martyrdom on 22 June and so suggests that Bede thought that the church at *Verulamium* dated from Roman times, rather from the immediate conversion period.

<sup>81</sup> T. Williamson, *The Origins of Hertfordshire* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 70–2; Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 66, n. 223 suggests that discontinuity of occupation, 'even if it was for as little as twenty years', characterized the religious settlement of Canterbury and that using pre-existing buildings as religious sites was a way of reclaiming Roman buildings that had fallen into disrepair.

was 'built in ancient times while the Romans were still in Britain'.<sup>82</sup> St Martin's is the most famous example of a reused Roman church, but it seems likely that there were other such refoundations.

In the same passage in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede asserted that once Æthelberht had converted to Christianity, he gave licence for Augustine and his followers to 'build and restore churches'. The archaeological evidence for these restorations remains slight, but it is known from the literary evidence that Christ Church, Canterbury, was founded on an old Roman church; the church of St Pancras, Canterbury, also has at its heart a Roman building, though whether it was a church or not remains unclear.<sup>83</sup> There is also some archaeological evidence for the reuse of Romano-British religious sites. Most famously at Lullingstone, Kent, the remains of a funerary temple, dating to around the year 300, were found under an abandoned church. The funerary site was associated with a villa that lay 50 metres to the east, and the church itself was built on the foundations of the temple with at least three sides of the Roman building being enclosed or built on by the chancel. Though there was little to suggest from the building that the church that stood on this site was Anglo-Saxon in construction, it is nonetheless tempting to see this church as representing the continuity of site usage between 'pagan temple' and 'Christian church' about which Gregory the Great wrote to Mellitus in 601.<sup>84</sup>

It has long been accepted that Gregory the Great knew little of the political situation in Britain when he sent Augustine's mission in 597 and when he dispatched reinforcements led by Mellitus in 601.<sup>85</sup> And yet despite this acknowledged fact about the lack of comprehension on Gregory's part, some still cling to the idea that he knew something about Old English non-Christian religion(s). This error is, moreover, compounded by the fact that Gregory is also seen as a passive observer of Anglo-Saxon affairs rather than as an active participant in the mission to save the English in the face of the coming Day of Judgement. In Gregory's position, a dispassionate observer might try to find out as much as he

<sup>82</sup> *HE*, i. 26; H. M. Taylor and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1965) [hereafter Taylor and Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*], i. 143–5.

<sup>83</sup> *HE*, i. 33; the evidence is summarized in T. Bell, 'Churches on Roman Buildings: Christian Associations and Roman Masonry in Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeology*, xxxii (1998), 1–18; Taylor and Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, i. 146–8. A general survey is in W. J. Rodwell, 'Churches and the Landscape: Aspects of Topography and Planning', in *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement*, ed. M. Faull (Oxford, 1984), pp. 1–25.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor and Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, i. 402; G. Meates, *The Lullingstone Roman Villa* (Maidstone, 1979); Kent County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR): TQ 56 NW 8–KE531 kindly supplied by Stuart Cakebread; Stone-by-Faversham might be another of these sites as might Lydd in Kent (Taylor and Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, i. 134–48; ii. 575–7); excavations at St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln suggest that there was a continuous history of Christian burial practice from the fifth to the eleventh centuries. See M. J. Jones, 'St Paul in the Bail, Lincoln. Britain in Europe?', in *Churches Built in Ancient Times: Recent Studies in Early Christian Archaeology*, ed. K. Painter, Society of Antiquaries, Occasional Papers, 16 (1994) [hereafter *Churches Built in Ancient Times*], pp. 325–47, at 325–32.

<sup>85</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn., Oxford, 1971), pp. 108–10.

could about the realities of Anglo-Saxon non-Christian religion(s), but to assume that Gregory was dispassionate is evidently wrong. Gregory the Great and Bede both derived their understanding of paganism from the Bible and the ancient world in which there were temples and there were idols. Anglo-Saxon non-Christian religion(s), on the other hand, had a different appearance which Gregory was not able to tell us about and which Bede was disinclined to reveal to his audience. In fact, given what is known of these two great Fathers of the Church, it would be surprising if their words were designed to inform their readers of the religion(s) they were certain were in error and which they were determined to destroy.

As long ago as 1978, Patrick Wormald pointed out that Bede was a 'fundamentalist' who 'produced a grammar in which nearly all illustrations of stylistic points come from the Bible'.<sup>86</sup> And unlike his fellow barbarian authors on the continent, Bede 'turned on the heroes of the English non-Christian past his unrivalled capacity for withering silence'. He did this because, as a child oblate, he was brought up in 'an island of Mediterranean culture on Northumbrian soil', separated from the Germanic world that surrounded it by the extraordinary transalpine vision (physically, spiritually and intellectually) of its founder, Benedict Biscop.<sup>87</sup> He ignored the non-Christian past also because he believed passionately in the mission of the Church, a mission that continued to have relevance in his own day, a mission that, by the eighth century,<sup>88</sup> was essentially monastic in character and outlook, and a mission in which he was playing (albeit with the written word) an active part. The threat that paganism had for Christianity was still real as Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History*. The *Ecclesiastical History*, according to Wormald, is a work written by a man who stood outside the world which he described, one who saw that world through the eyes of the biblical exegete,<sup>89</sup> and who saw himself as one of the Fathers of the Church in the mould of Gregory, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. He was a man who was working for the highest cause of all: the salvation of humanity. And this fundamental fact informed everything that he wrote, including the *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.

<sup>86</sup> P. Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy' [hereafter Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf'], in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. R. T. Farrell, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 46 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 32–90 (at 33–4 and especially 58–63).

<sup>87</sup> R. Cramp, 'Monkwearmouth and Jarrow in their European Context', in *Churches Built in Ancient Times*, pp. 279–94.

<sup>88</sup> Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 65, sees Christianity before 650 as having a distinct archaeological imprint from the monastic Christianity that followed it and of which Bede was a part.

<sup>89</sup> Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf', pp. 60–3.

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