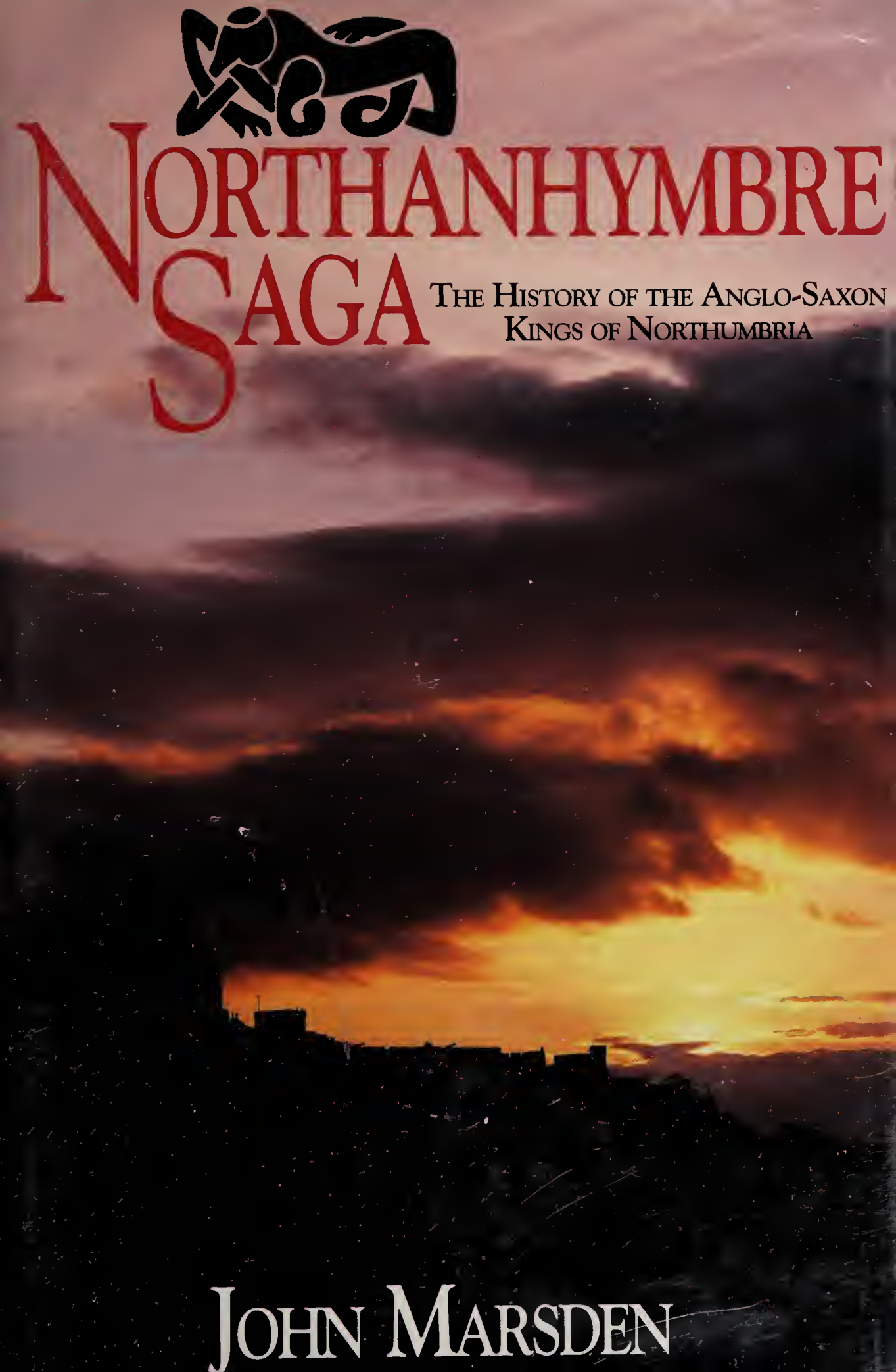

NORTHANHYMBRE SAGA

THE HISTORY OF THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGS OF NORTHUMBRIA

JOHN MARSDEN

Between the end of Roman Britain and the onslaught of the Viking Age, a warrior dynasty claiming descent from Woden emerged out of the battles in the shadow of Hadrian's Wall to carve a kingdom from the Humber estuary to the Firth of Forth and beyond.

For some two hundred years the kings of Northumbria bestrode the Anglo-Saxon world as the great power in the land. Their momentous achievement was first chronicled by Bede in the eighth century, but has been only rarely investigated by modern historians outside the confines of academic journals.

Northanhymbre Saga is the first thoroughgoing history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria to be written since medieval times, and certainly the first to be written specifically for the general reader.

The warlords and holy men of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria emerge from its pages as extraordinary historical personalities:- Ida the founder of the dynasty; the ferocious Aethelfrith who unified a kingdom north of the Humber; his rival Edwin the first northern overlord of the English kingdoms; Oswald the 'Christian Beowulf' schooled on Iona; his brother Oswy who threw back the surging power of pagan Mercia; Egfrith the last of the great Northumbrian warrior kings; and the enigmatic Aldfrith who stood at the dawn of the 'golden age' of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

John Marsden has drawn on the earliest surviving sources – amongst them the heroic Celtic literature of the Welsh tradition, the ancient annals of Ireland, and older fragments preserved in medieval chronicles – and the wealth of insight provided by modern historical and archaeological scholarship. He traces the deepest roots of the northern English among the Germanic mercenaries recruited by Rome to defend the northern frontiers of *Britannia* and reveals Northumbria as the first 'super power' of the Dark Ages in these islands.

Northanhymbre Saga is nothing short of real history, researched in the landscape as well as the library, and yet written 'first and foremost for such readers as might share its author's own curiosity about the north country in the remote but remarkable centuries between the leaving of the legions and the coming of the dragonships'.

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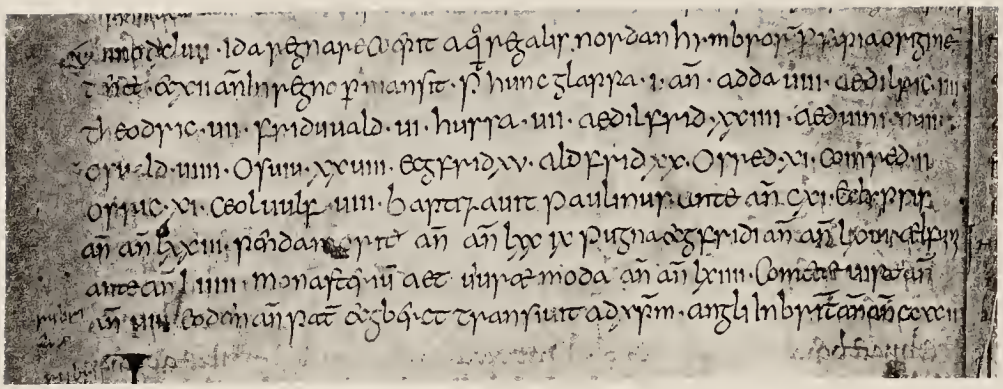
NORTHANHYMBRE SAGA



'*The Moore Memoranda*': This earliest surviving list of the Anglo-Saxon kings of Northumbria was added to the 'Moore' manuscript of Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica by a scribe at the monastery of Wearmouth/Jarrow in the year 737

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NORTHANHYMBRE SAGA

The History of the Anglo-Saxon Kings of Northumbria

John Marsden

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a little local history for my friends
Ian, Ailsa, Andrew and Toby Douglas

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AD 547-764

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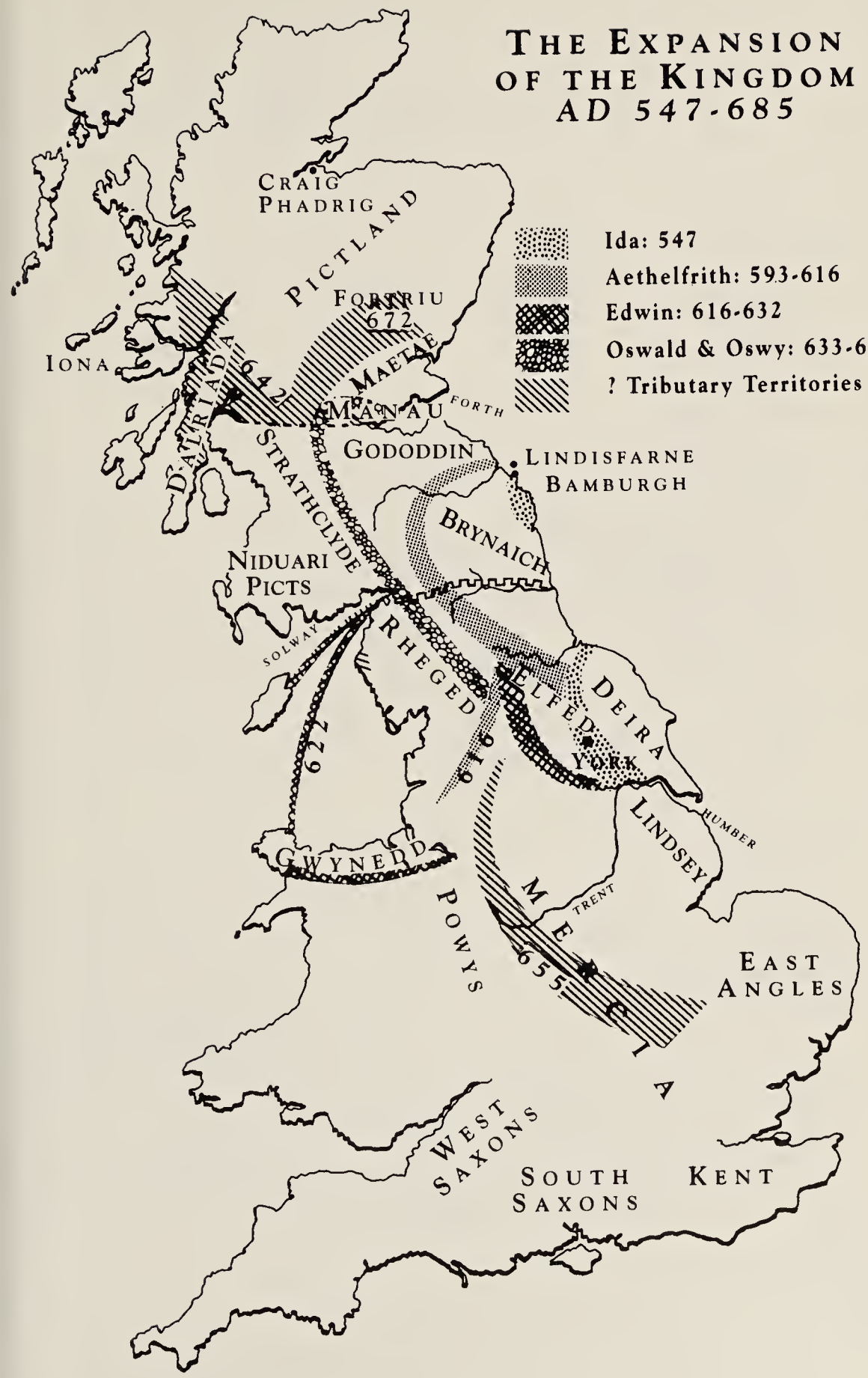
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The history of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria is set down in so many different languages – Old English, Old Irish, Britonic-Welsh and the ubiquitous Latin – as to demand of an author working from the primary sources all the skills of a superhuman linguist. My own precarious grasp on linguistic skills leaves me greatly in the debt of more able and accomplished assistance.

I must first and foremost acknowledge the generosity of my friend and colleague, John Gregory, not only for permission to use passages of his translations from Bede first published in our *The Illustrated Bede* (Macmillan, 1989), but also for finding the time to translate further passages from Bede and from Aethelwulf, Eadmer, Eddius, Folcard, Gildas, Nennius, Reginald of Durham, and the anonymous biographers of Gregory and Cuthbert.

I am similarly grateful for the permissions granted by David Campbell Publishers (S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, Everyman, 1982); the Edinburgh University Press (Professor K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin*, EUP, 1969); and Llanerch Publishers (Meirion Pennar, *Taliesin Poems*, Llanerch, 1988). I am indebted to the scholarship of those authors and the generosity of their publishers for the passages of their translations I have included in these pages.

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JM

PREFACE

It was on a visit to Orkney some dozen years ago that I first came across the *Orkneyinga Saga*, a history of the Norse *jarldom* of the northern isles set down by an Icelander in the thirteenth century and surviving as one of the most remarkable documents of the Viking Age. Peopled with *skalds*, sea-raiders, and a martyred saint, *Orkneyinga Saga* endures not only as history, but also as splendid storytelling in the ancient saga tradition of the northern world.

No truly comparable document has survived for the no less saga-worthy warlords and holy men of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria. The authority of Bede's history of 'the English church and people' as the pre-eminent chronicle of the kingdom has remained undisputed for more than twelve centuries, but the historian Patrick Wormald points to a significant disparity between Bede's understanding of the nature and purpose of history and that of the modern reader.

'At its crudest,' writes Wormald, 'the *Ecclesiastical History*'s main theme could be reduced to "At this time the A people received the Faith from Saint B under the rule of King C." Historians nowadays are keen to know not only *that* this was so, but also *how* and *why*.'

The origin of that disparity lies in the fact that Bede was a priest before he was an historian and his principal concern was to reveal the hand of God in the affairs of men. For reasons of intent as much as availability of source material, the Venerable Bede told us something substantially less than the whole story. Indeed, another modern historian, D. P. Kirby, has suggested that 'when we gaze deeper through the surface waters of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* we find the scene

darkens, currents swirl, and dimly we perceive in the black abyss of time the savage mien and baleful deeds of more fearsome beings.'

Such observations as these first prompted me to wonder whether a writer of Bede's time, perhaps with interests closer to those of the *Beowulf* poet and access to a range of sources even wider than that of the monastic library at Jarrow, might have set down a very different history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom *be northan Hymbre*.

Hence *Northanhymbre Saga*. I have set out to trace the history of the dynasty which emerged from the 'battles of kites and crows' in the shadow of the Wall, raised its royal fortress on the outcrop of the Great Whin Sill at Bamburgh, and forged a kingdom from the Humber estuary to the Firth of Forth and beyond.

I cannot share the proximity in time to my subject which the *Orkneyinga Saga* author enjoyed to his, but I do have the advantage of the imaginative scholarship of generations of historians and the hard evidence of the archaeologist's spade. I have drawn voraciously on the earliest surviving sources – the heroic Celtic literature of the Welsh tradition, the ancient annals of Ireland, and the illuminating fragments preserved in the medieval chronicles, as well as the more closely contemporary history and hagiography of the Anglo-Saxon world – in the hope that their voices from the past might help span a chasm of so many centuries. Nonetheless, I have filled no gaps with fiction and on those occasions where I offer my own cautious speculation, I have tried always to say so.

None of which should suggest that what follows is an academic treatise girded with footnotes to enter the arenas of the learned. *Northanhymbre Saga* has been written first and foremost for such readers as might share its author's own curiosity about the north country in the remote but remarkable centuries between the leaving of the legions and the coming of the dragonships.

'be northan hymbre . . .'

AN INTRODUCTION

If the business of history is the interpretative reconstruction of the past from its surviving documentary record, it might appear less than encouraging for the historian of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria to find that the earliest firmly dated document surviving from that period is inscribed on two stone slabs set in the wall above the chancel of St Paul's church at Jarrow – the church long renowned as the home of the Venerable Bede, the first English historian.

Those stones are carved with a contemporary inscription marking the dedication of a monastery – endowed with forty hides of land by King Egfrith – in that place on the 23rd day of April in the year AD 685.

DEDICATIO BASILICAE
SCI PAULI VIIII KL MAI
ANNO XV ECFRIDI REG
CEOLFRIDI ABB EIUSDEM
Q ECCLES DO AUCTORE
CONDITORIS ANNO IIII

> The dedication of the church of St Paul on the ninth of the kalends of May in the fifteenth year of King Egfrith and the fourth year of Ceolfrith, abbot, and with God's help, founder of this church.

Within a month of the ceremony of dedication, Egfrith lay slain by the Picts in battle beside Nechtansmere beyond the Forth and Northumbria's military pre-eminence amongst the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England

entered into dramatic decline. Its fearsome centuries of the iron sword would soon give way to its 'golden age' of literacy, learning and the Lindisfarne Gospels.

When the Jarrow scribe etched that inscription into stone, Northumbria had already been in existence as a unified kingdom for very nearly a century. Almost a hundred and fifty years had passed since its ruling dynasty had established a first precarious foothold on the fortress crag of the Great Whin Sill at Bamburgh. In the course of those hundred and fifty years, Northumbria had overwhelmed the ancient British kingdoms of the north and west, crushed the might of the greatest warrior king of Scotic Dalriada, thrown back the rising power of Anglo-Saxon Mercia on its southern border, and rendered tributary the Picts of the eastern Highlands.

When Abbot Ceolfrith's monastery was dedicated on Sunday the 23rd of April 685, Northumbria's dominion stretched from the north bank of the Humber into the hills beyond the Forth, Cuthbert the hermit-bishop of Lindisfarne had less than two years left to live, and the Venerable Bede was no more than thirteen years old.

Perhaps not entirely least among the extraordinary catalogue of achievements of 'the father of English history', it is to Bede that we owe the name of the kingdom of Northumbria, and consequently also the county name of Northumberland. But for Bede, writing on Tyneside in the third decade of the eighth century, *Northanhymbre* vastly outreached the boundaries of modern Northumberland. For him, as for his contemporaries and those who wrote before him, the tidal estuary of the Humber marked the frontier dividing the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from the northern English. Its tides presented a formidable barrier to an army of the seventh century or earlier, unable to force an advance across its waters any further downstream than Brough, and the Humber was seen as 'an arm of the Ocean' rather than an estuarial waterway.

This 'Sea of Humber' was at least as politically important as it was topographically significant in the Anglo-Saxon landscape and, in consequence, the northern English were known to the majority of writers before Bede as 'people of the Humber'. The *Historia Brittonum* – already an ancient chronicle when Nennius incorporated it into his historical miscellany of the ninth century – calls them *Saxones Ambronum*, apparently a corrupt form of the same territory known as *Humbrensium* to the

anonymous Whitby monk who set down the earliest *Life of Gregory the Great* in the seventh century. In a letter concerning the Synod of Hatfield in 680, Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, refers to Egfrith of Northumbria as *rege Hymbrensium*, 'king of the Humbrensians'.

Bede quotes Theodore's phrase verbatim in his *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum*, but he himself refers always to the king, the kingdom, or the people 'of the Northumbrians' in his Latin form of *Northanhymbrensis*. He was adapting a vernacular usage of *Northanhymbre*, apparently current in the north by the eighth century and deriving from the Old English *be northan Hymbre*, 'to the north of the Humber'.

It might even be possible to seek some measure of traditional significance for the Humber in folk memories of the sequence of settlement by Bede's own forbears of some three centuries before. As an expansive tidal waterway lying across the North Sea from the coastline of their homelands of northern Europe, the Humber offered the most probable and inviting point of entry to these shores for the Germanic peoples who came first as raiders and mercenaries during the Roman occupation and afterwards as invaders and settlers in the wake of the leaving of the legions. While Bede refers to the North Sea as simply 'the Ocean', it is called *mare Frenessicum* in the *Historia Brittonum* and John of Eversden, writing in 1300, says that 'it was called the Frisian Sea of old'. The Frisians, a Germanic tribe from the coastal regions of the Low Countries, were the great merchant adventurers of the Migration Age and the naming of the North Sea as the Frisian Sea underlines its centuries-long significance as the sea-road for land-seekers from the Baltic to the island the Romans called *Britannia*.

Just as the earliest document of *Northanhymbre* dates from 685, the first date assigned by the earliest chroniclers to the history of the kingdom is the year 547 when Ida seized the stronghold at Bamburgh for 'the royal race of the Northumbrians'. Whatever doubt might now be cast on the precision of that date – and almost all the dates between the end of Roman Britain and the beginning of the seventh century owe as much to conjecture as to indisputable chronology – 'AD 547', even as an approximation for some uncertain point in the mid-sixth century, retains at least the authority of tradition as the beginning of the history of the Anglo-Saxon kings of Northumbria.

Even if the recorded history of those kings can be said to have begun

in the year 547, Ida and his dynasty clearly did not spring out of a void on to their Whin Sill fortress in the mid-sixth century. While his Northumbrian kingdom emerged from the 'English settlement' of the fifth century which was itself a part of the *Volkwanderung*, the great migration of Germanic peoples into the vacuum left by the collapsing Roman empire, it will be possible to reveal the earliest origins of Northumbria in the greater antiquity of the four centuries of Roman occupation of these islands.

Bede certainly believed the forbears of his own 'English people' to have descended on these islands in the maelstrom which followed Rome's abdicating the defence of its province of *Britannia* in the year AD 410. Drawing on an unidentified source which can only derive from Anglo-Saxon vernacular tradition, Bede's *Historia* provides a concise and remarkable summary of the continental homelands of the Germanic peoples who forged the first English kingdoms.

> From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent and the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight, and those in the kingdom of the West Saxons who live opposite the Isle of Wight and are known to this day as the nation of the Jutes. From the Saxons, that is the region now called Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons and the West Saxons. And from the Angles, that is from the land called Angulus which lies between the kingdoms of the Jutes and Saxons, and is said to have remained unpopulated ever since that time, come the East Angles, the Midland Angles, the Mercians, and the entire race of the Northumbrians – that is the peoples who live to the north of the River Humber, as well as the other Anglian tribes.

Whoever they were and whenever they came, the tribes of Germanic warrior-farmers who evolved into Bede's *gens Anglorum* left no contemporary documentary record of their own concerning their arrival on these shores. They must have brought with them their *futhark*, the runic alphabet of the ancient northern world, and out of it emerged the earliest dialects of *Englisc* – the language now known as 'Old English' – but not in any written form until the eighth century. The earliest Old English writings were transcriptions of poetry deriving from ancient oral tradition and not until the ninth century did the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* set down the first vernacular account of the origins of the early English kingdoms.

The *Chronicle*'s entry of the settlement is drawn from Bede's *Historia*

supplemented with material from traditional royal genealogies and compressed into a largely spurious annalistic framework.

> AD 443 In this year the Britons sent to Rome, and implored aid against the Picts, but they had none because they were warring against Attila, the king of the Huns. And then they sent to the Angles, and implored the same of the princes of the Angle race.

Eminently reliable as Bede has proved to be for later Northumbrian history, his meagre sources on the pagan English made it impossible for him to have written a realistically historical account of the arrival of the 'English – or Saxons', even if such had been his intention. His version of the *Adventus Saxonum* was derived – and even in part transcribed – from his reading of Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae et Conquestu*, 'Concerning the Ruin and Conquest of Britain', which remains the only remotely contemporary British source surviving from the century following the end of Roman Britain.

The Welsh Annals enter the death of 'Gildas, wisest of the Britons' at AD 570 and his *De Excidio* was most probably written in Wales during the 530s as a letter of admonishment directed against the Romano-British warlords who governed what remained of the military and administrative structure of Roman Britain. Gildas describes these rulers as *tyranni* – 'Britain has kings, but they are tyrants' – accusing them of bringing down the barbarian hordes of *Saxones* upon the land and charging them with 'The Ruin and Conquest of Britain'. He gives few names and no precise dates, misinterprets his evidence and is infuriatingly vague, but Bede calls him *historicus* and Gildas does preface his polemic with an historical survey of a Britain left defenceless by the departing Roman legions and overwhelmed by an onslaught of hostile 'Picts and Scots'. Gildas' *Picti* and *Scotti* were, of course, the same enemies who had long beset the northern frontiers of Roman Britain.

The Picts were first recorded under that name in 297, but were certainly the same enemy identified as *Caledonii* by Tacitus in his history of Agricola's northern campaign of the first century. The Latin *Picti* translates as 'the painted people', which probably does refer to their wearing some form of warpaint or tattoo and may well have derived from a colloquial name applied to them by Roman troops who faced them in battle. Fighting a guerilla war from their unconquered mountain fastnesses beyond the Firth of Forth, they were a formidable military power, attacking by

sea as well as by land and the chain of Roman signal-stations along the north-east coast from the Tyne down to Flamborough Head was built to provide early warning of Pictish sea-raiders. Hadrian's Wall – which remains the most imposing fortification of Roman Britain and was still called 'the famous Picts Wall' as late as the eighteenth century – offers its own impressive testimony to the imperial appreciation of Pictish military might which had outfought Agricola in the first century, forced the abandonment of the Antonine frontier between the Forth and the Clyde in the second, and penetrated as far south as York and Chester before AD 300.

Across the Irish Sea in their hide-hulled curraghs came the *Scotti*, branded by Gildas as 'shameless Irish attackers'. The origin of the name used by Latin historians for the Irish raiders is uncertain, but may well derive from a Gaelic verb meaning 'to plunder'. Tacitus describes Agricola looking across to *Hibernia* from the coast of Galloway or Kintyre, and proposing that Ireland might be overpowered and held with no greater force than one legion and a contingent of irregulars. No such invasion was ever attempted and the threat of the unconquered Irish *Scotti* raiding Britain for slaves and silver became sufficiently menacing by the late fourth century to demand coastal forts, similar to those built against the Pictish threat in the east, to appear on the western seaboard, most prominently at Cardiff and Lancaster.

Faced with these 'loathsome hordes of the Scots and Picts', according to Gildas, the beleaguered Britons made three appeals to Rome for a restoration of military assistance. Gildas' 'three appeals' were probably based on nothing more historical than the Celtic tradition of the 'triad' form, but he does seems to have had a copy of a letter addressing 'the groans of the Britons to Agitius, thrice consul'.

> 'The barbarians drive us back to the sea, the sea drives us back to the barbarians; between these two kinds of death we are either slaughtered or drowned . . .'

This desperate plea was greeted with silence and at that point the principal Romano-British authority – identified by Gildas only as *tyrannus superbus*, the 'proud tyrant' – enlisted a force of 'the ferocious and unspeakable Saxons' to defend the island against the 'Picts and Scots'. Upon their arrival, the 'Saxons sank their terrible claws into the eastern part of the island', invited a second and more numerous contingent from

their homelands to join them, and then turned to mutiny, threatening 'to devastate the whole island unless more lavish gifts were heaped upon them'. Gildas describes the eruption of a full-scale revolt of Germanic mercenaries against their British paymasters and 'a fire heaped up and nurtured by the hands of the impious eastern people spread from sea to sea'.

This graphically acrimonious account – already two hundred years old when it came into Bede's hands – was to serve as his principal primary source for the coming of his own 'Saxon' forbears, but Bede was at least able to attempt to synchronise Gildas' evidence with the continental Latin histories in his library at Jarrow. If Gildas had a copy of an 'appeal to Agitius', he had no means of dating it. By contrast, Bede knew that the edict of the emperor Honorius had withdrawn the last Roman military protection from Britain in AD 410, the year when Alaric's Goths sacked Rome, and – accurately or otherwise – amended Gildas' 'Agitius, thrice consul' to the Aetius who began his third consulship in 446. Bede had access to a life of Germanus, a bishop of Auxerre who had visited Britain in the early 440s, from which he drew his account of Saxon mercenaries forming an alliance with the Picts they had been paid to fight and turning instead on their British paymasters. Bede himself numbers among his sources his extensive contact with the monasteries of Kent, and from them he was able to draw on Kentish vernacular tradition to identify Gildas' *tyrannus superbus* as *Vortigern* – which was most probably a title akin to 'high-king' rather than a personal name – and the leaders of the Saxon mercenaries as *Hengist* and *Horsa*, whose names appear in the Old English genealogies of the Anglo-Saxon kings of Kent. The resulting account of the *Adventus Saxonum* set down in the first book of Bede's *Historia* presents the coming of the English as a single historical event located in Kent in the mid-fifth century. While the existence of an historical Hengist cannot be entirely discounted, the Anglo-Saxon genealogies, which construct the descent of historical kings back to the god Woden through a sequence of heroes from Germanic tradition, clearly cannot be taken as entirely historically reliable. Indeed, Bede himself was treating his Kentish source with due caution when he wrote that the leaders of the Saxon mercenaries were 'said to have been two brothers, Hengist and Horsa'. He was not unfamiliar with the heroic poetry of the vernacular tradition and must have encountered the name of a legendary warrior called *Hengest* who appears in both the *Fight at*

Finnsburg fragment and the *Beowulf* epic, but he knew also that the Old English noun *hengest* meant 'stallion' and *horsa* meant 'mare'.

All modern historians now agree that Bede's conflation of Gildas' evidence with his own supplementary sources has allowed the Kentish focus to obscure the wider picture of the Germanic settlement of post-Roman Britain. The 'English settlement' was certainly a lengthy and multi-faceted sequence rather than a single historical event, and nowhere was this more assuredly the case than in the lands to the north of the Humber.

Nonetheless, one of Bede's Kentish sources seems to have found its way also into another early historical text which will make its own innumerable and invaluable contributions to the history of the northern English kingdom. This document is the enigmatic and extraordinary collection of material most conveniently known by the name of its compiler, 'Nennius, pupil of the holy Elfoddw'. Whilst Elfoddw can be identified as a bishop of Bangor whose obituary is entered at 809 and his pupil Nennius is accepted to have been writing in south Wales shortly before 830 and a full century after Bede, the precise origins and authorship of the work surviving in its earliest form as the British Library's Harleian manuscript 3859 have long been debated by the learned.

In his own preface, Nennius tells how he has 'undertaken to set down some extracts which were cast out by the stupidity of the Britons . . .'

> I have therefore made a heap of all that I have found, both from the annals of the Romans and from the chronicles of the holy fathers, from the writings of the Irish and the English, and from the traditions of our elders.

Whether in the role of author or, more probably, editor, Nennius compiled an historical miscellany ranging from a chronology of the six ages of the world through a battle-list of Arthurian victories to a sequence of Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies woven into a patchwork history of Britain under the collective title of the *Historia Brittonum*. The contents of this miscellany were all of great antiquity and included a wealth of material of very early English origin which had evidently passed through British hands before reaching Nennius in ninth-century Wales. Among these texts is a sequence of Kentish material, similar if not identical with that to which Bede had access, which includes – at least in its Nennian

transcription – an episode from the Vortigern/Hengist canon of illuminating significance for the origins of Northumbria.

> And Hencgist said to Guorthigirn 'I shall invite my son and his cousin to fight against the Irish, for they are fine warriors. Give them lands in the north, near the wall called Guaul.'
>
> And he bade him invite them, and he invited Octha and Ebissa with forty keels. They sailed round the Picts and laid waste the Orkney islands, and they came and occupied many districts beyond the Frisian Sea, as far as the borders of the Picts.

This Nennian account of Hengist's kinsmen *Octha* and *Ebissa* invited to settle in lands north of the Humber – which is what is meant by 'beyond the Frisian Sea' – in return for their long-range naval campaign against the Irish is of quite strategic importance. Firstly it finds impressive historical support in the Irish annals. A chronology attached to the Nennian Kentish chapters – and to which Bede seems not to have had access – offers a date around the year 425 for the Vortigern/Hengist episode and the *Annals of Ulster*, the earliest and most reliable Irish chronicle, enters 'The first prey by the Saxons in Ireland' at 434. A space of ten years between the first and second waves of Saxon invasion would reasonably correspond to the Gildan and Bedan accounts and the Irish annal entry would well support the genuinely historical basis of the Nennian paragraphs.

There is nonetheless no pressing reason to accept Octha and Ebissa as much less semi-legendary than Hengist and Horsa. The Kentish material records Octha's returning south to Kent where the Kentish genealogies confirm his succession to the kingdom on Hengist's death. 'Ebissa' remained north of the Humber where he will yet have his own curious role in the genealogies of the Northumbrian dynasty.

The Nennian contribution has finally brought the history and tradition of the English settlement decisively north of the Humber and most specifically into the lands around the Wall.

If the deepest roots of the Northumbrian kingdom are to be found, then they must first be sought on the Wall.

Its seventy-three miles of fortification, punctuated by forts and milecastles and stretching from the Tyne to the Solway, were built by the legions under the emperor Hadrian in the first half of the second century

AD and first intended as a forward base for Roman conquest of the north. Within two hundred years the Wall had become the front line of the defence of the northern frontier of Roman Britain. It was on the Wall that the Pictish and Irish onslaught must have broken through when Rome abandoned its *provincia Britanniae* and the defence of that long-embattled frontier passed from the empire to Gildas' *tyranni*.

If their military response was to recruit Germanic warbands and settle them north of the Humber as a bulwark against the threat from the north, then they were doing no more than emulate the policy followed by Rome through two hundred years of its military occupation. The strategy of settling *foederati*, or tribal communities of Germanic warrior-farmers granted land in return for military service, had been in operation since at least as early as the beginning of the fourth century. When Constantine the Great was proclaimed emperor at York in 306, he found decisive military support in the person of 'Crocus, king of the Alemanni', who was almost certainly the chieftain of a settlement of Germanic *foederati* in the Vale of York. More than sixty years later, according to the fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, another 'king of the Alemanni' by the name of Fraomar had been sent to Britain with the rank of tribune after fighting a successful campaign in Gaul and assuredly arrived at the head of his own warband to be settled as *foederati*. Even earlier, barbarian tribesmen captured in battle seem to have found their way to Britain for settlement as *laeti* under military obligations similar to those of the more voluntary *foederati*. The Greek historian Zosimus records Vandal and Burgundian prisoners-of-war transported to Britain after their defeat on the Rhine in the third century.

Just as sword-belt buckles of mixed Roman provincial and continental style found in villa sites in the east of England demonstrate how aristocratic Romano-British homes enjoyed the defence of Germanic mercenaries, such archaeological evidence as a south German spearhead and fourth-century pottery found at Driffield on Humberside would support the presence of warbands from central and southern Germany settled in Britain as a deliberate component of Roman policy before the year 400.

Such a stratagem of 'setting a barbarian to catch a barbarian' had been evident in Roman military practice in Britain within little more than two hundred years of the conquest. When the network of 'Saxon Shore' fortifications was constructed no later than 285 along the coastline of

south and east England from Brancaster in the north to Porchester in the west, the forts and fleets of this *Litus Saxonicum* were deployed against Germanic sea-raiders who had been voyaging from their bases on the southern part of the Jutland peninsula and the northern coastal plain between the Elbe and the Weser to attack the imperial coastline of Britain and Gaul from at least the early third century. They were a sufficiently serious menace to require the appointment of a *Comes Litoris Saxonicum*, or 'Count of the Saxon Shore', to direct the coastal defences and yet, by the mid-fourth century, that officer had the distinctly Latinised Germanic name of Nectarides. His soldiers and seamen would have been of similar Germanic stock, recruited by the empire to fend off their own compatriots. Although the Latin historians describe Germanic warriors hostile to Rome as *Saxones* and those in Roman service as *Germani*, they were using different nomenclature for effectively the same people.

An exact parallel is to be found in the land forces defending Roman Britain. Indeed, by the third century the 'Roman' army in Britain included very few if any Romans. The legions were formally recruited from 'Roman citizens', but even as early as AD 100 included no recruits born anywhere near the banks of the Tiber and even an Italian-born soldier was a rarity in the ranks. Even more significantly, it was no longer the legions who did the fighting and the soldiers in the front line on the Wall served in auxiliary units recruited outside the heartland of the empire. By the year AD 200, when Roman forces in Britain numbered over 50,000 men, the divide between the *legia* and *auxilia* had diminished and the greater share of the defence of *Britannia* for the next two hundred years would pass to the *numeri*, units of irregulars most of whom had been recruited among the free Germanic peoples beyond the imperial frontier on the Rhine.

It was these troops, effectively barbarian warbands in the pay of Rome, who were deployed in the forts and milecastles of Roman Britain's northern frontier on the Wall. These were the fighting men typified by the clearly Germanic *Numerus Hnaufridi*, or 'Notfried's troop', commemorated in the famous inscription at Housesteads fort. The titles of many more such units stationed on the Wall indicate the great extent of 'barbarian' manpower in the northern garrisons. There were Syrian archers and Pannonians from Hungary at Carvoran, while Dacians from

Romania and Dalmatians from Yugoslavia were stationed at Birdoswald, but Germanic tribesmen were in the predominant majority.

A Frisian cohort at Rudchester and cavalry unit at Burgh-by-Sands were raised in the Scheldt area, while other units from what is now Belgium were deployed at Housesteads, Castlesteads, and Carrawburgh, and yet more raised in upper Germany and the Rhineland were at Risingham and Wallsend.

Clearly, the deployment of 'Saxon' mercenaries so deplored by Gildas would have been considered normal recruitment policy by a 'Roman' commander of the fourth century, who himself would have been most probably born a Rhinelander or a Romano-Vandal. The *Dux Britanniarum*, or 'Duke of Britain' commanding land forces from his headquarters at *Eboracum* when York was the military capital of Roman Britain, had the Latinised Germanic name of *Fullofaudes* in the year 367. He would certainly not have been surprised by Gildas' account of the mutinous insurgency mounted by 'Saxon' mercenaries, if only because AD 367 was the occasion of the onslaught described by Ammianus as the 'Barbarian Conspiracy'.

It began in the frontier zone to the north of the Wall, where units of *areani*, auxiliary scouts intended to give early warning of enemy movements, had been lured by promise of plunder into collusion with the Picts. The garrisons in the forts and milecastles were unprepared for the massive assault by the Picts and Irish *Scotti* while Saxon raiders pinned down Roman forces on the Saxon Shore. The northern defences were outflanked and overwhelmed. The fortifications and outposts of the Wall were plundered and burned, while wholesale desertion by auxiliaries and irregulars brought mutinous troops down on the countryside to ravage alongside the invader. The Duke of Britain was ambushed and captured and the Count of the Saxon Shore was killed, almost certainly at the hands of mutineers under their own command.

Evidence from Gaul and other parts of the western empire confirms that it was widely characteristic of Germanic mercenary troops to follow up their victories with mutinous revolt, even in alliance with the vanquished enemy. Bede's account of *Saxones* joining forces with defeated *Picti* against their own British paymasters is fully in line with similar scenarios reported elsewhere in the crumbling imperium of the *Pax Romana*.

Whatever Romano-British authority assumed control of the residual

military and political organisation of Britain when the imperial aegis was withdrawn in the year 410 would have found itself defending the northern frontier against the predictable Irish and Pictish incursions. When the Roman commander-in-chief Theodosius restored the northern defences after the devastating onslaught of 367, he had entrusted the guardianship of the region between the Wall and the old Antonine frontier to Romano-British tribes long sympathetic to the empire – the *Damnonii* on the Clyde and the *Votadini* on the Forth.

Welsh tradition echoed by Nennius records how Cunedda, chieftain of the Votadini, led a great westward migration of his people from their homelands around the Forth into north Wales, there to found the dynasty of Gwynedd, where his descendant Maelgwn, the 'Dragon of the Island', remains the only one of Gildas' *tyranni* who can be identified from the historical record. The Votadini migration has been judged as a Roman-directed initiative to establish a bulwark against Irish land-seeking in Wales on the Nennian evidence that 'Cunedag, with his eight sons . . . drove out the Irish from these lands with immense slaughter.'

Cunedda left just one of his sons in command of the fortress complex of the *Manau* at the head of the Forth and it seems more than likely that when the Picts came again in force – as they must have done after 410 – the Britons of the Votadini were too depleted to hold them. At that point the northern enemy would have 'dispossessed the native people of all the northern extremity of the country as far as the wall', just as Gildas describes. Faced with such an onslaught, the Britons would have followed the Roman example and brought in Germanic mercenary reinforcements. Those warbands would have been found close at hand and ripe for recruitment amongst the fighting men of the *numeri* settled around the Wall after discharge – or desertion – from former Roman garrisons and the warrior-farmers descended from *foederati* settlements in Yorkshire.

Such troops would have been following the custom of their kind if they had turned insurgent and even formed a rebel alliance with their enemy in the flush of victory. Their paymasters would have still been following the Roman model if they had recruited a new wave of mercenary reinforcement, even from the Germanic homelands across the North Sea. In the early fifth century, Britain clearly suffered a sequence of mutinies and revolts prompted by the absence of Roman gold for the payment of mercenary warbands. The most dramatic of these insurgencies

seems to have occurred around the mid-fifth century when the evidence of two south Gaulish chronicles pronounced Britain 'reduced to domination by the Saxons' in the year 450. This must have been the full-scale revolt which prompted the 'groans of the Britons' recorded by Gildas and the Roman failure to respond would have been far from unreasonable at the time when Attila and his Huns were breaking through the eastern frontier.

British resistance to the escalating sequence of raiding, mutiny and incursion achieved its greatest success in the later fifth century under Ambrosius Aurelianus whom Bede calls 'the sole survivor of the Roman race'. It was also the period more popularly considered the 'age of Arthur', when a Romano-British warlord passed through the gates of history into the timeless realm of Arthurian legend.

Whatever the historical reality of the Arthurian 'last great battles in the west', in the east – and most certainly between the Humber and the Wall – the 'English settlement' was almost fully accomplished by the end of the fifth century. The lands *be northan Hymbre* had been no stranger to the warriors whom the Romans called *Saxones* and *Germani*. If they came with Roman weaponry and wearing Roman armour, as they had done for almost three centuries, they still spoke in the Germanic accents of their homelands and brought with them their gods of the north – the hooded wanderer Woden, lord of the slain, and the skygod Tiw, arbiter of battles. But the *numeri* of the Wall and the *foederati* of the Wolds were now indistinguishable from their kindred who had followed them as sea-raiders and land-seekers. By the beginning of the sixth century their continental tribal origins remain only faintly discernible and the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians and their kind have reached the point of transformation into the *gens Anglorum*, Bede's Latin form of the name they were soon to call themselves – 'the English people'. None of which must suggest that total conquest was swiftly or suddenly accomplished. If the English had overwhelmed the eastern parts of Britain by the second half of the fifth century, the Celtic west was to hold out against them for longer than other regions of the western empire resisted Germanic domination. The expansion of Northumbria to the north and west was to be fiercely contested, firstly by the dynasties of the north Britons and later by the kingdom of Gwynedd which succeeded them.

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By the dawn of the sixth century, the background to Ida's founding of the Northumbrian dynasty in 547 has come more clearly into focus. The English were firmly established in the east, where their most ancient settlement reached from the Humber to the Wall, most densely populated in the fertile coastal plain and most sparsely on the north Yorkshire moorland and the Durham hills. To the north of the Tyne the British kingdoms stood solidly between the northern English and the southern borders of Pictland. The Picts themselves were now under pressure in the west from the Irish settlement of Scotic Dalriada which emerged around the year 500. There is evidence of Irish settlement in the Hebridean archipelago as early as the fourth century, but the migration of the royal family of Dalriada, the 'sons of Erc', from the coast of Antrim to the western seaboard from Kintyre up to Skye marks the beginning of a dramatic new phase of Caledonian history. The Irish settlement came into conflict with the Picts through much of the first half of the sixth century, and by 560 the Pictish king Bruide mac-Maelchon, son of Maelgwn of Gwynedd, had driven them back against their fortress capital at Dunadd in Kintyre. The arrival of the holy man Columcille – descended from the first Irish high-king Niall Nine-Hostager and destined to become 'Saint Columba of Iona' – from Derry marked a favourable shift in Dalriadan fortunes. The succession of Aidan mac-Gabran in 574 established Dalriada as a formidable kingdom of the west, independent of its Irish origins, and within three hundred years the *Scotti* of Dalriada were to give their name to Kenneth mac-Alpin's united kingdom of Scotland.

Whatever the eastward pressure from Dalriada, the Picts held the mountains and glens as far south as the Ochils, while south of the Forth and Clyde lay the border dynasties of the north Britons, who now appeared more Britonic Celt than Romano-British. If their origins lay in the frontier defensive strategy of Roman Britain, the 'client kingdoms' of the late fourth century had abandoned any veneer of Roman civilisation by the end of the fifth and reverted to the tribal culture and society of their Celtic forbears. On the Forth and south through the Lothians, the kingdom of the Gododdin – the Britonic form of the *Votadini* – held its hillforts at Stirling and Edinburgh, while on the Clyde, the kingdom of Alcluith rose to the peak of its power under Rhydderch Hael of the line of Ceredig in the second half of the sixth century.

To the south of Strathclyde lay the Pennine dominions of the dynasties of the *Gwyr y Gogledd*, 'The Men of the North'. The most eminent of

these, the kingdom of Rheged, achieved its greatest prominence under the warlord Urien of the line of Coel Hen, whose territories reached from Carlisle on the Solway to Catterick on the edge of the English settlement, while the less well-documented dynasties, the 'three hundred spears of the line of Coel', claimed lineage akin to that of Urien and held dominion in what is now the Border country.

Lesser kingdoms possibly deriving from the *Brigantes* – *Brynaich* to the north of the Tyne, and *Elfed* towards the Pennines in what is now West Yorkshire – would have been tributary, respectively, to the Gododdin and to Rheged, but lying closer to Northumbria fell the more swiftly to the expansion of the northern English.

Thus stood the lands and the peoples of the northern kingdoms in their 'heroic age' at the mid-point of the sixth century.

Into that scenario now strides the figure of the English warlord whose long shadow will fall across the two centuries that lie ahead in the lands *be northan Hymbre.*

'the royal race of the northanhymbra'

IDA AND THE SONS OF IDA

AD 547 – AD 593

At the end of the fifth and last book of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede added a form of chronicle 'to provide a concise summation of events earlier dealt with at greater length'. The first entry in that chronology notes a date and an event to which he had curiously made no earlier reference in his preceding historical narrative.

> In the year 547 Ida, from whom the Northumbrian royal family trace their origin, began his reign, and he held the kingdom for twelve years.

Bede completed his *Historia* in the monastery at Jarrow no earlier than the year 731, and probably in the following year, consequently his note of the accession of Ida in 547 can be firmly ascribed to a date no later than 732. It remains the earliest surviving record of the foundation of the Northumbrian dynasty of English kings.

Bede has long – and justly – been known as 'the father of English history', but for the generations of historians who came after him he might be more accurately celebrated as 'the father of the footnote', because the author of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* takes the greatest care, on more occasions than not, to acknowledge his sources. It is thus not unreasonable to enquire from where he derived his appended reference to Ida's foundation of the kingdom of Northumbria.

It was characteristic of the early chroniclers to relate significant events

to the dates of other events of comparable importance, and the date attributed to Ida is the same as that noted by the *Annales Cambriae*, the Welsh Annals appended to Nennius' miscellany, for the death of Maelgwn of Gwynedd. The Welsh annalist seems to have dated Maelgwn's death two years in arrears, possibly by linking it to the greatest severity of the plague in which he perished, but the year 547 does seem to have held its own especial significance for the early medieval historical imagination.

By the standards of that early medieval scholarship, Bede was a chronographer of the greatest sophistication, the first historian in Britain to date events to the years *Anno Domini* of the Christian era, and the key to his dating of Ida to 547 can be traced in one of the earliest manuscripts of his *Historia*, that known as the 'Moore Bede'.

The Moore manuscript – completed in the scriptorium at Jarrow shortly after Bede's death and now in the University Library at Cambridge – has been convincingly dated by the eminent historian Peter Hunter Blair to the year 737. At the end of Bede's text the Jarrow scribe has entered eight lines – now known as the 'Moore Memoranda' – listing the names and years of reign of the Northumbrian kings interpolated with a handful of chronicle fragments transcribed from Bede's foregoing history.

Such 'regnal lists' were one of the most primitive forms of historical record and often enter significant events dated to the 'year of reign' in which they occurred or to the number of years prior – *annos ante* – to the latest recorded reign. Bede was certainly familiar with such lists of Roman emperors and consuls which he found in the books brought from the continent for the library at Jarrow. Bede himself included a list of rulers of the ancient world – derived from the work of the seventh-century chronographer Isidore of Seville – in his *De Temporibus* of 703, and used other similar lists for the chronicle appended to his *De Temporibus Ratione* of 725.

The fact that regnal lists had been kept in Northumbria before Bede's time is confirmed by his own reference to 'those who calculate the dates of the kings' in Book III of the *Historia*, and the Moore Memoranda must derive from such a list of the Northumbrian dynasty to which Bede had access and which he used to arrive at a date *Anno Domini* for Ida's accession by a process of simple arithmetic. Bede added together the reigning years of all the kings from Ida to Ceolwulf, whom he knew to have succeeded in 729 and to whom he dedicated his *Historia*. The sum

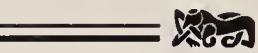
of those years – as they are recorded in the Moore Memoranda – amounts to 182, which he subtracted from 729 to produce his date of 547 for the accession of Ida. The accuracy of such a calculation depended not only on the accuracy of the years recorded by the regnal list, but also on the assumption that the kings ruled successively – questions which will merit some consideration later – but Bede's calculation served at least to satisfy the compiler of the earliest manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* who faithfully transcribes the *Historia*'s entry for 547.

The slightly later manuscripts of the *Chronicle* were copied from the Wessex original elsewhere in the country and added to it material of more specifically local interest. One of these regional variants, the northern recension known as the *Laud Chronicle* or 'E' manuscript, records both the location of Ida's dynastic capital and some details of its fortification in the entry for 547.

> In this year Ida assumed the kingdom, from whom arose the royal race of the Northanhymbra, and reigned twelve years, and he built Bebbanburh, which was first enclosed by a hedge, and afterwards by a wall.

The Old English *hegge* might be more accurately rendered in this case as 'stockade' and *wealle* as 'rampart', but the site chosen by Ida was the natural fortress crag on the massive outcrop of the Great Whin Sill at Bamburgh. It was not to be known by the *Chronicle*'s name of *Bebbanburh* – 'named' according to Bede 'after a former queen' and from which derives its modern name – until at least fifty years after 547, yet by the time of Ida's arrival it had long been a fortified site, even since prehistoric times. Its mass of black basalt looms out of the vast sheet of Plutonic rock which lies over much of Northumberland and sprawls at its eastern extremity into the North Sea as the reef-clustered island group of the Farnes. This rendered all eastern seaward approaches to Bamburgh difficult and dangerous, while its western landward face forms an unbroken cliff some fifty feet high dominating the surrounding landscape of moor, fen and fertile farmland.

Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* identifies Bamburgh by its Britonic name, in the variant forms of *Dinguayrdi* and *Dinguoaroy*, while the twelfth-century Irish *Book of Leinster* offers *Dun nGuaire*. All these versions of the same Britonic name of Din Guairi, 'the fort of the Guairi', confirm an earlier coastal hillfort of the Britons of Brynaich on the same basalt



platform where Bamburgh Castle stands today. The documentary record of Bamburgh in the centuries before Ida is sparse in the extreme, but a reference in Geoffroi Gaimar's *L'Estorie des Engles*, written in Norman-French in the mid-twelfth century, throws some pale light on the origin of Nennius' *Dinguoaroy*.

> Ida gained Northumberland.
> Know that he was the first king
> Of the English line who held it.
> This Ida reigned twelve years,
> And restored Bamborough.
> It was much decayed and ruined
> Since Ebrauc built it long ago.

Geoffroi was drawing on a lost Britonic source, probably deriving from the fourth-century Romano-British colony of *Armorica* in Gaul, to attribute Din Guairi to Ebrauc, a legendary chieftain of pre-Roman Britain. It may even have been the same 'very ancient book in British speech', claimed as a source for his *History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffroi's contemporary and namesake Geoffrey of Monmouth who credits 'Ebraucus' with the foundation of *Caer Ebrauc* which history transformed into the Roman *Eboracum*, English *Eoforwic*, Viking *Jorvik* and modern York.

The implication of Geoffroi's reference is that Ida found the ancient British site abandoned and ready for the re-fortification described by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Archaeological findings at Bamburgh would support just such a view and the archaeologist Brian Hope-Taylor's preliminary excavations there 'indicate that use of its natural fortress began in the pre-Roman Iron Age and continued through the Roman Iron Age into the post-Roman period.' Hope-Taylor goes on to identify Bamburgh and Yeavering Bell as hillforts of the Britons of Brynaich comparable to the Votadini *oppida*, or 'strongholds', at North Berwick Law and Traprain Law, and even to compare Din Guairi of Brynaich with Din Eidyn of the Gododdin, now Edinburgh on the Forth.

Whether the fortress of the Din Guairi outlasted Traprain Law to survive very long into the sixth century is uncertain, but it might be worth recalling Sir Thomas Malory's attempt to locate Lancelot's *Joyeuse Garde* in his fifteenth-century *Morte D'Arthur*. 'Some men,' wrote Malory, 'say it was Alnwick and some men say it was Bamburgh.' The

Romano-British warrior of the later fifth century identified by Nennius as Arthur has been sought in numerous northern locations, whether fighting his last battle of *Camlann* around the Wall fort of *Camboglanna* at Birdoswald or sleeping with his knights under the Eildon Hills. Whatever legendary traces of a Romano-British prototype of Malory's 'Lancelot of the Lake' might be sought at Bamburgh, a site occupied and fortified long before Alnwick, the etymological similarity of Nennius' *Dinguayrdi* and Malory's *Joyeuse Garde* cannot be totally discounted.

The Germanic – apparently Jutish – name of *Cynclincanberg*, or 'royal dwelling', attached to Bamburgh might have its origin in Ida's time or might equally indicate an earlier Germanic, presumably Jutish, presence. Brian Hope-Taylor's proposal of continuous settlement from the pre-Roman Iron Age through to the English foundation suggests a Roman coastal fort or signal station, certainly garrisoned by Germanic mercenaries, which became Ida's outpost of the English settlement in the fifth century. John of Eversden, who continued the chronicle of Florent of Worcester at about 1300, offers a fragment which seems to derive from the lost northern history used by Florent and other medieval sources.

> Hyring was the first king who reigned after the Britons in Northumbria . . . all the kings from Hyring to king Ida have either been omitted by or unknown to all the historians, and their records have either been burned in the land or carried from the land.

This Eversden reference is intriguing. First of all, it names a 'king' in the north between the Britons and Ida, for which there might be found some support in other early sources. One of the several kings who reigned in the same generation as the sons of Ida is identified by the regnal lists as *Hussa*, but significantly excluded from the genealogies listing Ida's sons. Fifty years after Ida, both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Geoffroi Gaimar's history note a 'Hering, son of Hussa' – both of whom will appear again in these pages – suggesting the probability that he was, in fact, 'Hering, son of Hussa, son of Hyring' and represented the descendant of the chieftain of an earlier English warband established on the coast below the Tweed before Ida's arrival and which retained a presence there for two further generations.

Whatever residual earlier English settlement confronted Ida at Bamburgh, or possibly on neighbouring Lindisfarne, it was either conquered by, or more probably allied itself to, the superior force of the newly-

arrived warband and the charismatic command of a chieftain claiming descent from Woden the All-Father.

No greatly informative documentary history of Ida and his sons has survived. Apart from the brief annal entry at the end of the *Historia*, Bede makes no reference to the first two generations of the 'royal race of the Northumbrians'. What can be told of their history needs to be gleaned from the northern history and its associated genealogies included in Nennius' miscellany and supplemented with illuminating and evocative fragments from the heroic literature of the north Britons, who were the first foes of Ida and his sons.

The lineage of Ida is set down in its earliest surviving form in the *de Nordhumbrensium et Anglorum regibus* entered by Nennius in the Northern History of the *Historia Brittonum*.

Woden begot Beldeg,
begot Beornec,
begot Gechbrond,
begot Aluson,
begot Inguec,
begot Aedibrith,
begot Ossa,
begot Eobba,
begot Ida.

As in all but one of the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies, the descent of Ida is traced from Woden through a line of ancestors recruited from the ranks of myth, tradition and, eventually, the frontiers of history. *Beldeg*, the offspring of Woden, has been identified by the tenth-century Wessex chronicler Aethelweard and the thirteenth-century Icelandic *skald* Snorri Sturluson as a Germanic form of *Balder*, the Viking name for the son of *Odin*, the Norse precursor of Woden. From *Beornec* to *Aedibrith* the names veer through shades of grey on the borders between traditional fiction and historical possibility, but *Ossa* and *Eobba* mark their point of entry into recognisable history.

These two names similarly appear in the earliest collection of English genealogies – found in the British Library's manuscript *Vespasian B.vi* set down in Lichfield in the ninth century and deriving from the same original as the Moore Memoranda – as *Oesa* and *Eoppa*. Elsewhere in

Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* the Kentish chapters tell of Hengist's son Octha and his cousin 'Ebissa', who settled 'on lands in the north near the wall called Guaul' after his campaigns against the Picts and Scots. Peter Hunter Blair's reading of Nennius suggests 'Ebissa' as a characteristically Nennian corruption of the Vespasian genealogy's *Eoppa Oesing*, 'Eoppa, son of Oesa'. The Old English *Oesa* would become the Britonic *Ossa* and W. F. Skene's introduction to his edition of the *Four Ancient Books of Wales* suggests this same Oesa as the *Ossa Cyllelawr*, 'Ossa with a Knife', identified by Welsh tradition as one of the Saxon enemies of Arthur at the end of the fifth century. Skene's proposal closely concurs with the implication of Nennius, who places his genealogy of Ida immediately after the chapter *de Arturo* and its account of the wars fought by Arthur against the Saxons.

> No one laid them low save he alone, and in all his battles he was victorious. And they, being defeated in all their battles, sought help from Germany, and their numbers were multiplied continually, and they brought kings from Germany to reign over them in Britain until the time when Ida reigned, who was the son of Eobba. He was the first king in Beornica, that is in Berneich.

The evidence of Nennius' miscellany would thus trace Ida's historical ancestry back through some three generations to the settlement of *foederati* recruited by 'Vortigern' between the Humber and the Wall in the mid-fifth century. Nennius is effectively locating Ida's forbears in the earliest English settlement, which entered through the gateway of the Humber into the Yorkshire Wolds, from Holderness, through the Vale of Pickering to the former Roman military capital of *Eboracum* at York. In this territory – known to Bede as *Deira* – lie the most ancient origins of the Northumbrian kingdom.

The origins of the name *Deira* are uncertain, but its root seems to lie in the Britonic *dubro* or *dyfr*, which translates as 'waters' and corresponds to the lands around the Humber's tidal estuary. The Nennian Northern History includes a genealogy of the kings of Deira, in line of descent – distinctly separate from the line of Ida – from a son of *Beldegg* which enters the name of *Soemil* and adds that:

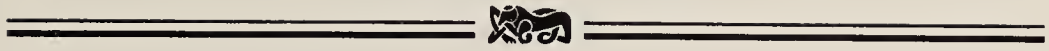
He was the first to separate Deur from Birneich.

Soemil occurs five generations before *Ulli*, elsewhere recorded as *Aelle*, king of Deira, whose death is entered at 588 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Calculating on a working basis of 'thirty years to a generation', Peter Hunter Blair estimates Soemil to have flourished in the later 440s, which was precisely the period of the major revolt of the *foederati* against their Romano-British paymasters. Blair's inspired deduction would propose a mutinous scenario quite typical of the fifth century in which Germanic settlers to the north of the Humber declared unilateral independence from their British overlords. When their chieftain Soemil separated *Deur*, the 'lands of the waters', from the dominion of the Britons of *Birneich* his impromptu territorial imperative would have claimed the first dominion of the English kingdom of *Northanhymbre*.

The Nennian genealogies appended to the *Historia Brittonum* indicate the presence of more than one dynastic line to the north of the Humber. The driving quest for *lebensraum*, which had motivated the entire epoch of Germanic migration, must have similarly motivated Ida's land-seeking north of the Tyne and his seizure of Din Guairi. Modern historians throw their own doubt on the plausibility of 547 for Ida's accession and propose that his dynasty was more probably established a decade later than the date calculated by Bede. In that light, the evident focal significance of 547 for both English and Welsh annalists might well be aligned with the evidence of an epidemic of bubonic plague reaching its greatest severity in that year. AD 547 was the year entered in the Welsh Annals as *anno mortalitas magna* – 'the year of the great mortality'. In the same year – two years too early according to modern chronographers – those annals record the death by plague of Maelgwn of Gwynedd, whom Gildas called 'the dragon of the island'. The significance of that year in the historical memory of the time must derive from the devastating impact of pestilence, and I am tempted to suggest the bold enterprise which brought Ida and his warband to the north as a flight from an older established settlement ravaged by bubonic plague. There is the ironic precedent of a similar epidemic playing some part in the 'Saxon revolt' of a hundred years earlier which led to the independence of Soemil's Deira and the year 547 would have been far from the first example of the rat as 'the unacknowledged legislator of history'.

Having established that Ida came north from a point of departure in the heartland of the Germanic settlement of Deira, it is at least as certain that he came by sea. The formidable obstacle presented to English expansion by the Yorkshire moors and the Durham hills, no less than



the reputation of Saxon pirates as the outstanding sea-warriors of the pre-Viking centuries, prompts the certainty that Ida voyaged up the north-east coast to seize Din Guairi, if it was defended at all, by seaborne assault.

Whether he came in the traditional 'three keels' which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records as the warfleet employed by Hengist and Horsa and other founding dynasts of English kingdoms, or whether he arrived with a larger fleet, is unknown, but archaeology can provide examples of the type of craft which Ida used for his venture. The boat found preserved in the peat at Nydam in southern Jutland in 1863 and dated to the beginning of the fifth century bears sufficient similarity to the vessel excavated in the seventh-century ship burial at Sutton Hoo to suggest that Ida's sixth-century vessel was of much the same design. The Nydam boat is broad and shallow amidships, some seventy-eight feet long and tapered toward both bow and stern. Clinker-built of thin planking secured by iron nails and fitted with a 'keel-plank' rather than a true keel, it was unlikely to have carried a sail and was certainly driven by oars. The provision for fifteen oars along each side would suggest a crew of few more than thirty, but it would have been as fast and buoyant as befitted what was effectively a pirate ship of its time.

Three such craft would have carried a company of some hundred warriors and that may well have been the size of Ida's original warband. The seventh-century code of laws set down by Ine of Wessex defined up to seven men under arms as thieves, from seven to thirty-five as 'a band', and a force more than three dozen strong as a *here*, 'a host' or an army. A hundred years after Ine, a force of some eighty-five warriors had almost captured the West Saxon kingdom and the military context of the fifth and sixth centuries suggests that Ida would have needed no greater numbers to hold what was little more than a pirate fortress on the crag at Bamburgh.

If the interpretation of the Nennian evidence brings Ida and his warband rowing north up the coast to make landfall on the beach below the ancient strongpoint at Bamburgh, later history demonstrates his seizure of Din Guairi to have been the most successful English forward base north of the Tyne, but it seems unlikely to have been the only one. The documentary evidence for a residual Germanic settlement around Bamburgh and even for a separate warband on Lindisfarne can be taken with the archaeological evidence of scattered sites along the coast

between the Tyne and the Aln to suggest Ida's pirate fortress as just one of a sequence of settlements scattered along the seaboard of Brynaich as far as the Tweed.

The overwhelming majority of early Germanic remains have been excavated from grave sites and the nature of pirate bases would demand a predominantly maritime theatre of operations. These coastal settlers were the successors of Germanic seafighters recruited by Rome for the Saxon Shore and the majority of their dead would have been buried at sea, leaving little or nothing for the archaeologist to uncover on land. The scarcity of the archaeological evidence need not necessarily imply a corresponding scarcity of settlement, although the English presence north of the Wall seems to have been confined to the coastal strip until late into the second half of the sixth century.

The eventual dominance of Ida's dynasty can already be detected in its earliest years, but can only be explained against an outline of the nature of kings and kingship in the English settlements and in the continental Germanic homelands. The word 'king' derives from the Old English *cyning* and the idea of 'kingship' seems to have been first imported into these islands with the tribal warbands settled here by Rome as *foederati* and *laeti*.

The primitive continental form of kingship was a temporary military command brought into effect only in time of war, when tribal warbands chose a warlord from their chieftains as military overlord for the duration of the campaign, according to Bede's evidence from seventh-century Northumbrian missionaries in Old Saxony. When such Germanic warbands were settled in Britain they were obliged to fight whenever required by the Roman and Romano-British authorities and were consequently moved on to a full-time war footing. The role of their warrior-king was similarly transferred from a temporary to a permanent basis.

The Germanic presence in Britain was of a military nature from its origin as Roman irregular troops to the armies of predatory warbands who overwhelmed the tenacious resistance of the Britons three hundred years later. Through those centuries of constant warfare, the Germanic 'king in time of war' became established as the principal – and permanent – office of government in the English settlements, yet by the mid-sixth century a 'king' such as Ida can have been little more than an aggrandized warlord. There is a clear echo of the continental Germanic tradition of

kingship to be found in the account of Ida's accession offered by Henry of Huntingdon's twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum*.

> The kingdom of the Northumbrians dates from the thirteenth year of the reign of Kenric [who succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex in 534]. The chiefs of the Angles who subdued that province, after a series of severe battles, elected Ida, a young nobleman of the highest rank, king.

The implication of Henry's version is that Ida established himself as warlord of a number of warbands who were operating north of the Wall between the Tyne and the Tweed, which would correspond with the greater weight of the historical and archaeological evidence. If Ida had failed to win supremacy in the older settlements to the south – in what amounted to the sub-kingdom of Deira – he might have moved north to seize a prominent coastal fortress where he could find allies among the warbands preying on the British territory of Brynaich and the fringes of the Gododdin territories to the north.

Ida emerged from a warrior-based culture where the king fought for glory and his warriors fought for the king. To leave a battlefield alive when the king had fallen was to be a *nithing*, an outlawed coward, and such an unfortunate survivor might be driven to hang himself, as a sacrifice to Woden, lord of the gallows. The greater the glory won by the king in battle, the greater the number of warriors who were drawn to his warband, earning gold and mead as their reward for the unswerving loyalty of their sword-arms. The Old English poet of the Gnomic Verses prescribed the way of the warrior king.

> The dragon belongs in its barrow, canny and jealous of
> its jewels . . .
> The king belongs in his hall, sharing out rings.

The account of Ida's accession in Nennius' Northern History brings the north Britons into conflict with the new power in the land, an English 'kingdom' in *Berneich* to compare with Soemil's *Deur* of a century before.

> Ida, son of Eobba, held the lands in the north of Britain, that is, north of the Humber sea, and he reigned twelve years, and he joined Dinguayrdi to Berneich, and these two lands became one land, that

> is Deura Berneich, in English Deira and Bernicia. At that time Outigirn then fought bravely against the English people.

The best efforts of specialists in ancient Britonic nomenclature have not been able to identify Nennius' *Outigirn* in the genealogies of the north Britons. The similarity to *Guorthigirn* might imply *Outigirn* as a title rather than a personal name, while the historical context might suggest him as chieftain of the Britons of Brynaich. Whoever he was, the tone of Nennius' phrase 'fought bravely against them' might fairly be taken as an apology for his inglorious despatch. The Nennian claim for Ida's having 'joined Dinguayrdi to Berneich' must mean his achieving of dominion over the Britons after his seizure of their fortress, and probable defeat of their warlord. However Ida established dominance over the British kingdom, Nennius confirms his transformation of *Brynaich* into the English dominion of *Baernice*, Latinised by Bede into his name-form of *Bernicia*.

Nennius' additional claim that 'these two lands became one land . . . Deura Berneich' might be taken to propose that Ida unified his outpost of Bernicia with the more ancient English dominion of Deira, to become ruler of the unified kingdom of *Northanhymbre* half a century before it is believed to have come into existence. This cannot have been the case, even if Ida's northern dynasty overshadowed his more southerly neighbour, because the most ancient regnal lists for Deira nowhere include Ida as one of its kings, and identify the shadowy figure of *Yffi* as Ida's contemporary and king south of the Tyne. While warrior bands from the north of Deira may have been drawn to Ida's battle-ranks, and Ida himself would have been a probable choice of 'king in time of war' for all the northern English, the geographical divide between the extensive territories of Deira and the coastal confines of Ida's Bernicia would militate against any claim that he unified the two.

Reginald of Durham includes the earliest detailed topography of the territories of the two kingdoms in his twelfth-century *Life* of Ida's great-grandson Oswald and he confirms the clear territorial division between Deira and Bernicia existing prior to the early seventh century.

> The kingdom of the Deirans was of old from the river Humber to the bed of the source of the Tyne; and that of the Bernicians extended at once its border and its area from the source of the Tyne to the Scotwad, which is called *Froch* [Forth] in the Scottish tongue.

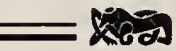
> But all that lies between the rivers Tyne and Tees was at that time but a desert waste, and therefore subject to no man's dominion, and therein was but the den and dwelling-place of wild and woodland beasts.

The *Historia Brittonum*'s unified kingdom of 'Deura Berneich' can only be explained from the north British viewpoint of the original Nennian source, to whom the English expansion into the Brynaich of the Britons would have appeared as effective annexation by Deira and an ominous enlargement of 'Saxon' dominion.

A curious reference in William of Malmesbury's twelfth-century *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 'Deeds of the English Kings', suggests that the advent of Ida marked the shift in the status of Northumbria to that of an independent kingdom from subjection to the older dynasty of the Kentish kings.

> For during the space of ninety-nine years, the Northumbrian leaders, contented with subordinate power, lived in subjection to the kings of Kent. In the year, therefore, of our Lord's incarnation, five hundred and forty-seven . . . the principality was converted into a kingdom, and the most noble Ida, in the full vigour of life and strength, first reigned there. But whether he himself seized the chief authority, or received it by the consent of others, I by no means venture to determine, because the truth is unrevealed.

Joseph Stevenson, the editor and translator of William's history, adds that he cannot trace any authority for this statement and points to the evident political separation of Bernicia and Deira at the time. William of Malmesbury has much reliable material that derives from his own exclusive sources, but he is just as capable of sacrificing historical rigour in the cause of narrative fluency. It is possible that he was speculating on the basis of the list of *bretwaldas*, those early kings credited by Bede with some form of tenuous national overlordship, of which one was Aethelberht of Kent in the later sixth century, but such an interpretation cannot be synchronised with the evident informality of sixth-century English kingship and kingdoms. Just as William could have had no source of knowledge of Ida's state of health in 547, he seems to have read his own very medieval view of relations between the sixth-century English kingdoms into the evidence of Nennius and Bede.



There remains no documentary account of the fate of the Britons of Bernicia, and certainly no evidence of their wholesale slaughter by Ida's warband. Brian Hope-Taylor's archaeological investigations in the 1950s – most especially at Yeavering where an unbroken pattern of settlement has revealed an English *vill*, or royal township, growing up around the site of a British hillfort – suggest that Bernicia's native Britons became the subjects, even the willing subjects, of the new English dynasty. Hope-Taylor points to the similar possibility that the Britons of Berneich would have been recruited, or conscripted, to fight in the English *here* during the warfare of the generation of the sons of Ida. He proposes that Brynaich had decayed in the shadow of the rising power of the Gododdin to the north, probably to the point of becoming tributary to the British kingdom of the Lothians.

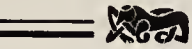
In that context, the arrival of Ida would have amounted to no more than the appearance of a new 'lord protector', and there is no doubt that his Germanic warband, armed and armoured little differently from the later 'Roman' forces, would have been nothing new to a people who had been defended by Frisians, Rhinelanders and other 'barbarian' irregulars through at least two centuries of the later *Pax Romana*. Such a cautious recognition which might have greeted Ida's warband at Bamburgh, or even the three keels of Hengist and Horsa in Kent, might be echoed by the lines of the *Beowulf* poet.

> From where do you come conveying gold-ornamented shields, grey mail-coats and visored helmets, and that heap of war-spears?

There is also the early evidence of English kings married to queens with Britonic names, indeed the queen Bebba for whom *Bebbanburh* was named is one example. Another is Ida's queen whom Nennius calls 'Bearnoch', which sounds suspiciously close to Brynaich, suggesting a cognomen rather than an authentic personal name.

Ida survived to rule Bernicia for twelve years, according to Bede, Henry of Huntingdon, Florent of Worcester and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – eleven years according to the *Historia Regum* attributed to Symeon of Durham, or fourteen years according to William of Malmesbury.

The jigsaw of evidence and interpretation leaves an overwhelming impression of 'King' Ida as a charismatic warrior chieftain. While he lived, he was the overlord of an alliance of warbands between the Wall and the Tweed, even beyond the Tweed toward the Forth, but that



alliance would have disintegrated immediately after his death. The Moore Memoranda's inferred date of 559 for the end of Ida's reign corresponds conveniently, even rather too conveniently, with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s entry of the accession of Aelle, the son of Yffi according to the *Vespasian* genealogy, to the kingdom of Deira. In the seventh century, there was to be at least one occasion when the unified kingdom of Northumbria reverted to its component sub-kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia following the death of a dominant king, and the assertion of Deira released from the shadow of Bernicia was only to be expected in the vacuum left by Ida.*

The genealogies interpolated into the Nennian Northern History derive from the same original as both *Vespasian B.vi* and the Moore Memoranda to provide the earliest list of the offspring of Ida.

> Ida had twelve sons, whose names are:
> Adda, Aedldric, Deodric, Edric, Deothere, Osmer, and one queen, Bearnoch.

At which point Nennius' Latin text tails off into the next generation. The tradition of 'twelve sons' might be as much a formality of ancestral potency as an authoritative historical record if it were not for the evidence of the *Chronicle of the Angles* compiled from older texts by Symeon of Durham in the twelfth century. Symeon lists the six sons of Ida 'begotten in lawful marriage' and adds six more to make up the full complement of twelve sons.

> Ocga, Alric, Ecca, Osbald, Scor, Sceotheri; these were the sons of concubines.

The importance of these bastard 'sons of Ida' will emerge in the eighth century when successors to Ida's kingdom based their claims on descent

* The evidence of Nennius, the Moore Memoranda and the Vespasian genealogies, taken alongside later material derived from them, offers a confusion of names and years of reign to provision a great and lengthy feast of speculation for generations of historians. To transcribe even the most important of those lists and their variants in full at this point would seriously disrupt any semblance of narrative history and would also detract from the substance of the argument of this chapter. Nonetheless, the texts of the major lists are significant primary sources of Northumbrian history and, for the purpose of supplementary reference, full translations are included in the appendix of genealogies between pages 237 and 240.

from these illegitimate forbears. Those claims are supported in the Vespasian genealogies, most notably in the case of the kings Coenred and Ceolwulf of the line of *Ocgings*, 'the sons of Ocga', whose lineage is traced back to *Ocg Iding*, 'Ocga, son of Ida'.

The evidence of Nennius, Symeon's source and *Vespasian B.vi* must be taken alongside that of the Moore Memoranda's list of the names and years of reigns of the first generation of Ida's successors.

> After him Glappa – one year,
> Adda – eight,
> Aedilric – four,
> Theodric – seven,
> Friduuald – six,
> Hussa – seven.

Of these, Nennius confirms Adda, Aedilric or *Aedldric*, and Theodric or *Deodric* as legitimate sons of Ida, while Glappa, Fridwald or *Friduuald*, and Hussa were of a different parentage.

Although Bede assumed – on the basis of the order of succession firmly established by his own time – that these kings followed each other in sequence, other regnal lists of Ida's successors offer divergent accounts of their names and years of reign. Florent of Worcester, working at the end of the eleventh century from a source closely related to Symeon's, identifies Aelle as the ruler of Deira from 559 and adds that . . .

> During Aelle's lifetime, Adda, the eldest son of Ida, reigned over the Bernicians seven years; Clappa, five years; Theodulf, one year; Freothulf, seven years; Theodric, seven years; and Aethelric, two years.

Symeon's *Chronicle of the Angles* offers another variant list of kings.

> Adda, the son of Ida, reigned three years.
> Ethelric, the son of Ida, reigned seven years.
> Theodric, the son of Ida, reigned seven years.

As does the *Historia Regum* attributed to Symeon, of which the early chapters have been shown by Peter Hunter Blair and Michael Lapidge to be the work of Byrtferth of Ramsey around the year 1000. Byrtferth attributes eleven years to Ida – probably calculating from an earlier dating of his death as occurring in his twelfth year of reign. Ida's successor –

according to Byrtferth – was Glappa who ruled for one year, followed by eight years for Adda, seven years for *Ethelric*, four years for *Theoderic*, seven years for *Frithuwold* and seven years for 'king Hussa'.

My purpose in indicating something of the complexity of this widely divergent regnal listing is not to arrive at any definitive sequence of succession to the kingdom of Ida. Historians and chronographers have expended some gallons of ink to do so and arrived at no more than speculative computations, not simply because of the divergence and unreliability of the evidence but, at least in my view, because of the nature of that succession in the context of the times.

The nature and background of Ida's kingship has already been explored in terms of an overlord of an alliance of warbands, and the most likely fate of such an alliance under such a commander would be to disintegrate on his death. The evidence surviving from the regnal lists and genealogies supports just such a scenario, yet there was no capacity in the historical techniques of the early medieval period to effectively record such a scheme of succession. Genealogies traced the linear descent of kings from earlier kings, just as the earlier regnal lists recorded the names of kings and their years of reign. In the event of Ida's demise, individual warbands under his authority would have reverted to the command of their own chieftains, unless a powerful successor had been in a position to assume immediate overall command. The alliances and allegiances of those warbands would have shifted with the prevailing winds of war. It might be reasonable to propose Glappa, who is not recorded as Ida's kin, as a warrior chieftain who assumed power until Ida's eldest son, Adda, was able to establish his own power base, as it would be to propose Aelle seizing power in Deira far from the immediate attention of any power-hungry sons of Ida. Those sons of Ida and other warrior chieftains would have seized command of whatever warbands fell within their influence in some simulation of the old Germanic tradition of 'kings'. The rivalries implicit in that warrior-based society must have brought warlord against warlord and the 'reign' of such 'kings' would hinge only on the loyalty of their fighting men and the strength of their own sword-arms. There is no record of Ida falling in battle, but if he died in his bed he was the only Northumbrian king known to have done so for the next hundred years. A king could secure his kingdom only by the sword and could certainly expect eventually to lose his dominion, and with it his

life, as the natural order of things in the sixth – and later – Anglo-Saxon centuries.

It was beyond the scope of the compilers of regnal lists and genealogies to trace such a complex and chaotic state of kingship and command within the framework of historical techniques geared to the sequential succession established by the later English kings. It must be the case that many of the kings recorded by the Moore Memoranda ruled at the same time, although over different warbands in different territories.

This approach to the chronology of the early kings poses its own chronological dilemma, because Bede's assumption of sequential succession is immediately disallowed. He apparently calculated the date of 547 for Ida's accession from the Moore Memoranda's 'years of reign' of his successors. If those successors did not reign in such direct sequence and commanded various warrior alliances even at the same time then Bede's date for Ida must be placed too early. His degree of error may well be quite marginal, a matter of probably no more than ten years, and its association with the death of Maelgwn and the plague of the 540s remains an important point of reference.

The dating of Ida's sons must – on the firmest evidence of Nennius' miscellany – relate to the period of the warlords of the British kingdoms who fought an escalating campaign against the northern English, between 570 and the early 590s. The account of these Anglo-British wars, contained in the *Historia Brittonum*'s chapters of Northern History and prefaced by a regnal list of the successors of Ida, remains the only surviving narrative history of the last ascendancy of the warlords of the north Britons.

> Adda, son of Ida, reigned eight years. Aedlric, son of [Ida], reigned four years. Deodric [Theodric], son of Ida, reigned seven years. Friodolguald [Fridwald], reigned six years. In his time the kingdom of the Kentishmen received baptism from the mission of Gregory.
>
> Hussa reigned seven years.
>
> Four kings fought against him, Urbgen, Riderch hen, Guallauc and Morcant. Deodric fought valiantly against Urbgen and his sons. During that time, sometimes the enemy, and sometimes our citizens were worsted, and Urbgen blockaded them for three days and three nights in the island of Metcaud; and, while on campaign, he was murdered

on the instigation of Morcant, out of envy because he was more skilled than all other kings in the conduct of warfare.

The immediately apparent anachronism of the Nennian dating of the 'mission of Gregory' to Kent to the time of Fridwald might be dispelled by Peter Hunter Blair's suggestion that the English and British material 'heaped up' by Nennius was incorrectly synchronised, consequently assigning Augustine's conversion of Kent in 597 to Fridwald's reign calculated on the basis of the Moore Memoranda's regnal years to 579–85. Scribal error would seem to be a plausible explanation, but a manuscript of Florent of Worcester's history includes a note of Fridwald's reigning in Deira for seven years. This was amended to 'Bernicia' by a later hand and must be treated with caution, but it might nonetheless indicate these early Northumbrian kings ruling in different parts of the north country at different times, depending on the prevailing balance of power and the disposition of rival warbands, and an elderly Fridwald retaining some dominion in a territory south of the Wall, even as late as 597.

The light thrown on the Nennian narrative by the poetry of the Britonic bards reveals this whole period as the glorious twilight of the Men of the North. The bards were far more than just harper-poets in the Celtic world and carried their own great political and cultural significance. They were the namers and anointers of kings, makers of battle-song and keepers of the flame of the Celtic warrior creed. They sustained all the ancient traditions – even into the Christian period – and acted by turns as professional eulogists and licensed jesters to the rulers they served in return for the richest of rewards.

Let my lord
who doesn't seek misfortune,
give me the value of my song,
great will be the bounty
of his gifts.

Thus sang the Taliesin who is named among the bards of the time of Ida and his sons listed in the early chapters of the *Historia Brittonum*'s Northern History.

> Talhaern Tataguen was then famed in poetry; and Neirin and Taliessin and Bluchbard and Cian, who is called Gueinth Guaut, were together at the same time famed in British poetry.

Of these the names of Talhaern, the bard Bluch and Cian 'of the Wheat Song', are no longer any more than names, but a body of the north Britonic poetry of Taliesin and Aneirin passed into Welsh hands where it has survived in the medieval manuscripts of the ancient books of Wales. Aneirin, Nennius' *Neirin*, was the poet of *Y Gododdin*, the epic elegy on the warriors who fell in the last great battle of the north Britons against Northumbria at Catraeth, and his elegaic tone contrasts with the exultant celebrations of Cynan of Powys, Gwallawg of Elfed, and Urien of Rheged by 'Taliesin the Ardent'. 'Taliesin,' writes his recent translator Meirion Pennar, 'knew not of such anguish. His was the age of great Brythonic confidence. He sang praises to the leaders who did most to consolidate the Brythonic kingdoms and to stem the tide of the Saxon advance.' The poems preserved in the thirteenth-century manuscript of the *Canu Taliesin*, the 'Book of Taliesin', evoke the world of the sixth-century warlords of the north Britons in their hillfort strongholds. His images of torcs of gold reflected in the golden mead leave a vivid impression of nights of feasting in the halls of the 'three hundred swords of the tribe of Cynfarch' where the glow of firelight flickers across weaponry and war-gear lining the walls.

> In the hall of the men of Rheged
> there is every
> esteem and welcome,
> offerings of wine
> for jubilation,
> fair lands
> for me as riches;
> riches a-plenty
> and gold, gold;
> gold and gift,
> esteem . . .

Taliesin's verses are echoed by the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, the largely contemporary 'Triads of the Island of Britain', which similarly survive in a thirteenth-century manuscript. The Triads were a form of bardic mnemonic where the names of warlords and their queens, heroes and

battles, were set down in groups of three and accompanied by poetic fragments of their tradition. 'Urien, son of Cynfarch' is listed by the Triads among the 'Three Bull-Protectors of the Island of Britain' and the 'Three Battle-Leaders of the Island of Britain'. *The Red Book of Hergest* similarly attests . . .

> Urien of Rheged, generous he is, and will be,
> and has been since Adam.
> He, proud in the hall, has the most wide-spreading sword
> among the thirteen kings of the North.

These *Gwyr Y Gogledd*, the 'Men of the North', were the warlords who bore down on the sons of Ida. Each of their warbands – or *teulu* – is numbered as three hundred warriors, again in the Celtic triad form.

> The three hundred swords of the line of Cynfarch,
> and the three hundred shields of the line of Cynnwyd,
> and the three hundred spears of the line of Coel;
> on whatever expedition they might go in alliance,
> they would never fail.

So the ancient genealogy *Bonedd Gwyr Y Gogledd* surveys the battle ranks of the north Britons – the warriors of Rheged as the 'line of Cynfarch', those of Strathclyde as 'the line of Cynnwyd', and the border dynasties as the 'spears of the line of Coel'. The triad form of three hundred should not be taken literally. There are occasions when it certainly described much greater armies, the 'three hundred' referring to that number of warrior chieftains who rode to battle, each with his own complement of fighting men. When these dynasties did 'go in alliance' against the sons of Ida, they would appear to have all but driven them into the sea, besieging the English on *Metcaud* – the Britonic name for Lindisfarne – for 'three days and three nights'.

The siege of Lindisfarne marked the climax of a long campaign of skirmishing and pitched battles fought by 'Urien of the Bards', lord of Rheged, against the expansion of the northern English of Bernicia and Deira. Urien's power base in the north lay around Carlisle and the Solway, where Sir Ifor Williams, the eminent authority on early Welsh literature, identifies Urien's capital of *Llwyfenydd* on the river Lyvennet in Westmoreland and records a medieval Welsh tradition which considered Cumberland as *Tir Rheged*, 'the land of Rheged'. Taliesin glorifies

him as 'battle-victorious, cattle-reaving' and tells of his raiding as far as the Forth against Manau of the Gododdin . . .

with Manau's battle in his sights
for more spoils
and plenty of booty besides.
A hundred and sixty calves and cows,
all of one colour,
milch cows and oxen
and many a thing of beauty as well.

The southern reaches of Urien's dominion lay in north Yorkshire and Taliesin implies that Urien himself came from Catraeth, identified with Catterick. He is called 'lord of Erch' and the river Ark falls into the Swale near Catterick. Nearby lay his stronghold of the south, probably at the hillfort site at Richmond and on the Roman road which would have had its own attraction for Urien the cattle-raider.

I saw the lord of Catraeth
across the flat-lands

writes Taliesin, always unstinting in his acclamation of Urien's battle-prowess.

If there's an enemy on the hill,
Urien will make him shudder.
If there's an enemy in the hollow,
Urien will pierce him through.
If there's an enemy on the mountain,
Urien will bruise him.
If there's an enemy on the dyke,
Urien will strike him down.

When Taliesin calls Urien 'king of the baptised world', he draws attention to the fact that these Britonic warlords were also Christian, retaining the faith of the last century of Roman Britain. Their northern English enemies were pagan – at least until the mission of Paulinus and his baptism of the first Northumbrian Christians in 627 – and the Britons saw themselves fighting in the tradition of Arthur, whom the *Historia Brittonum* records as carrying 'the image of Lady Mary, ever virgin, on his shield' in the battle of *Guinnion*.

Taliesin's battle-songs have been interpreted as portraying Urien's warriors fighting Pictish and Saxon raiders around the western reaches of the Wall, but he provides his most vivid account of Rheged in battle against Northumbria in his *Gweith Argoed Llwyfain*, the apparently important conflict at the 'Wood of Llwyfain'. There have been various attempts to identify the battle site from Cumbria to Coquetdale, but Sir Ifor Williams offers the best-argued case for a site in the region of Catraeth, linking the placename *Llwyfain* with the vicinity of Leeming Lane in Yorkshire, where the old Roman road would have marked out the southern frontier between Rheged and Deira. The English commander of 'four hosts' is named as *Fflamddwyn*, 'the flame-bearer', a Britonic name which cannot be certainly identified with any Northumbrian king. Earlier historians proposed Ida 'the Burner' as Fflamddwyn, but Nennius does stipulate Urien fighting against Ida's sons and modern opinion generally identifies Fflamddwyn as Theodric, whom Nennius clearly specifies as 'fighting bravely against Urien and his sons'. The Triads mention Fflamddwyn as the betrayed husband of *Bun*, one of the 'Three Faithless Wives of the Island of Britain', and Taliesin's elegy *Marwnad Owain*, 'The Keening of Owain', identifies Owain, son of Urien – included in the Triads as one of the 'Three Fair Princes of the Island of Britain' – as slaying Fflamddwyn in battle.

> When Owain killed Fflamddwyn,
> it was no more to him than to sleep.
> The great host of Lloegr sleep
> with a glaze in their eyes . . .
> Owain punished them harshly
> like a pack of wolves chasing sheep.

This killing of the Northumbrian warlord by the son of Urien may have marked out the significance of the fight at Argoed Llwyfain, and it might still be no anachronism to suggest Fflamddwyn of 'the great host of Lloegr' as 'Ida the Burner'. The Moore Memoranda suggest a date around 559 for the death of Ida, which may be as much as a decade too early and the end of the 570s would fall well within the *floruit* of Urien and of Owain.

Taliesin certainly testifies to Owain ap Urien's presence, traditionally at the head of his warband celebrated as 'The Flight of Ravens' and riding 'Cloven-Hoof', his warhorse included in the Triads as one of the

'Three Plundered Horses of the Island of Britain', in the fray which lasted through all the hours of daylight and must at the least have been a conflict of some numbers. 'Four hosts' must have numbered in hundreds and Taliesin's battle-song of the English defeat has every tone of a victory celebration. Perhaps, after the period of warfare which Nennius calls 'that time [when] sometimes the enemy, and sometimes our citizens were worsted', the victory in the wood of Llwyfain marked the turning-point in the resistance of the Britons of the north against the English.

Saturday morning
there was a great battle
from the time the sun rose
to the time it set.
Fflamddwyn mustered his men
in four hosts.
Goddau and Rheged form their ranks.
Summons from Argoed to Arfynydd,
they will not have respite
for the length of a day.
Fflamddwyn bellowed
with great commotion:
'Have my hostages come,
are they ready?'
And answered Owain,
the scourge of the east,
'They haven't come,
they don't exist,
they aren't ready.'
And the whelp of Coel
would be a pathetic warrior
before he would pay anybody a hostage.
Urien,
lord of Erechwydd,
shouted:
'If there's to be a meeting for a parley,
let's raise our banners above the mountain,
let's lift our faces up to the edge,
let's raise our spears above the heads of men

and make for Fflamddwyn and his followers.'
Before Argoed Llwyfain
was many a corpse,
because of warriors
crows got red
and men rushed
with their ageing lord.
I'm preparing for their conquest
the song of the year.

In the way of the Britonic bardic tradition, Taliesin's exultant battle-song would have been carried by the harpers into the farmsteads of the Pennines, the hillforts of the Lothians and the shores of the Clyde. The victory of Urien would have been sung in the firelight of evenings bringing warbands seeking glory to join the ranks of Rheged. The Britons were a people as closely bonded by their ancient tribal culture as by strands of genealogy. The tribes of the Clyde, the Forth, the Solway and the Pennines – like their Welsh kindred – were the *Cymry*, deriving from the Britonic *combrogi* or 'people of the same country', and surviving in the county names of Cumberland and Cumbria as well as in the modern Welsh national identity.

Thus came about the alliance of kings which moved against the coastal heartland of Bernicia to besiege the English on the island of Metcaud. Nennius names the warlords who fought against the sons of Ida as *Urbgen, Riderch hen, Guallauc*, and *Morcant*, who alone remains unidentified elsewhere. Three *Morcants*, or Morgans, can be found in the genealogies of the Men of the North, none of whom can be firmly pinpointed as the Morcant named by Nennius. One of them might have been a son of Rhydderch of Strathclyde and the other two are a grandfather and grandson of the line of Coel. It has been suggested that 'Morcant' might have been a sub-king, even an exiled sub-king, of the Britons of *Brynaich* or the chieftain of a contingent of the Gododdin whose treachery sparked a blood-feud between the Britons of Rheged and the kingdom on the Forth which ran on into the seventh century.

By contrast, Morcant's three allies are clearly identifiable. Nennius' *Urbgen* is Urien of Rheged, 'the golden lord of the north', while *Riderch hen* is Rhydderch the Old, lord of the 'three hundred shields of the tribe of Cynnwyd', who ruled the kingdom of Strathclyde from 'the fortress of

the Britons' on Dumbarton Rock. Gwallawg, clearly identified by Taliesin as a warlord of *Elfed*, the Pennine kingdom centred near *Loidis*, or Leeds, is also to be found in the Triads among the 'Three Pillars of Battle of the Island of Britain'.

While the personalities and incidents of the campaign are recorded by Nennius, the strategic context of the siege of Metcaud remains enigmatic. The evidence of the *Historia Brittonum* leaves many gaps and offers little explanation. It enters the names of the four British warlords who fought against the successors of Ida and goes on to add in the next sentence that 'Urbgen blockaded them for three days and three nights on the island of Metcaud.' *Metcaud* is the Britonic name for Lindisfarne which appears elsewhere in Nennius and the Welsh Annals – and similarly in Irish sources as *Inis Metgoit* – in connection with the saints Aidan and Cuthbert of Lindisfarne. Nennius does not specifically state that all four kings were present at the siege, but every authority accepts that they were and only Rhydderch cannot be incontrovertibly located in Urien's battle formation. The Nennian reference to Morcant's involvement with the death of Urien in the course of the campaign confirms his presence, and lines in Taliesin's battle-song for Gwallawg of Elfed testify to his part in the battle.

> In the battle by the sea,
> goaded by the muse,
> he struck at the men of York.

The date of the siege is nowhere indicated, but hinges on the identification of the English king of the time. Although some authorities have suggested Theodric as the king under siege, Hussa is the name most decidedly indicated by Nennius. The reign of Hussa calculated on the basis of the Moore Memoranda – and the dates of such a calculation must be rendered the more accurate as they approach the year 593 – would have run from 585 to 593. So Urien must have attacked at some point after 585, probably sooner rather than later, which assigns the siege to a date probably no later than 590.

The question remains as to why this powerful alliance of the Men of the North besieged Lindisfarne when the capital fortress of the dynasty of Ida lay on the shore of the mainland at Bamburgh. If the warriors of Bernicia found themselves confronted by so formidable a foe, they would surely have taken up their defensive position in the impregnable

fortress of Din Guairi rather than on the tidal island of Lindisfarne exposed to attack on all sides. There has been one very imaginative explanatory proposal that the siege was laid from the sea, with a British warfleet blockading the harbour of the English pirate stronghold on Lindisfarne. There is certainly the evidence of Taliesin for Gwallawg of Elfed as a sea-warrior – 'for his fleet he supplied an abundance of spears' – but the geographical logistics must militate against the naval scenario. The voyage from the Solway and the Clyde would be implausibly tortuous by comparison with a landborne thrust to the east, and a seaborne offensive would be equally inappropriate for the warband from the Pennines.

Every attempted analysis of the strategy and nature of the war on Lindisfarne is necessarily speculation, and I can offer no more than my own speculative scenario. Its key premise is that the king besieged on Lindisfarne was not one of the sons of Ida.

Hussa is nowhere listed by the genealogies as a son of Ida, yet there are later references, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to 'Hering, son of Hussa' and in Reginald of Durham to a 'Hyring' as a king in Bernicia before Ida. From these fragments, I would propose the succession of Hussa from an earlier English dynasty on the coast of Northumbria – specifically on Lindisfarne. This English name for Metcaud implies a derivation of *Lindis* from the early Germanic settlement of the *Lindiswaras* on the south bank of the Humber, where the lesser English sub-kingdom of Lindsey was eventually engulfed by Mercia. If this earlier settlement on the Northumbrian coast, numbering Hyring amongst its chieftains, had been overshadowed by Ida's foundation, it is at least likely that its own warlord would have reclaimed the dominion of his forbears in the vacuum left by the death – or departure – of the last of Ida's sons.

That same vacuum would have offered the opportunity for the north Britons to strike at the English coastal settlement now bereft of a king of the *Idings*. Nennius certainly implies that the stalemate situation – 'sometimes the enemy, sometimes our citizens were worsted' – was transformed into a resurgence of the Britons at the siege of Lindisfarne. If Hussa's ancestral power base had been sited on Metcaud, the fortress of the Idings at Din Guairi might have been overshadowed if not abandoned and it would be against a reinstated capital on Lindisfarne that the Britons would seek to launch their attack.

Trapped between the Men of the North and the waves of the Frisian Sea, the English of Bernicia were threatened with being flung back into the Ocean from which they had come. The act of treachery which rescued them from such a fate was a symptom of those rivalries seemingly endemic to the Britons in their Heroic Age. The most graphic example is the 'blood-fray of Ardderyd' – fought between rival British dynasties in 573 according to the Welsh annalist – involving such horrific slaughter on the banks of the Esk as to drive Merlin insane into the woods of Celidon.

In a similar instance of internecine rivalry, Urien of Rheged was struck down by one of his own kind whilst leading the war of the Britons against the desperate stand of the English on Lindisfarne. The motive for his slaying, according to Nennius, was the envy of his ally Morcant 'because he [Urien] was more skilled than all other kings in the conduct of warfare'. The deed and its perpetrator, Llefan – or Llovan – of the Severing Hand, are listed in the Triads as one of the 'Three Atrocious Assassinations of the Island of Britain' and the bitter elegy of Llywarch Hen, warrior-poet of the line of Coel and cousin to Urien, tells of his bearing the severed head of Urien from the Northumbrian shore.

Like the sullen agitation of the sea
was the war-expanding tumult,
Of Urien of the ardent grasp . . .
A head I bear on my arm,
He that overcame the land of Bryneich,
But, after being a hero,
Now on the hearse.
A head I bear by the side of my thigh,
That was the shield of his country,
That was a wheel in battle,
That was a ready sword in his country's battles . . .
Eurdyl will be sorrowful
from the tribulation of this night,
And from the fate that is to me befallen;
That her brother should be slain at Aber Lleu . . .
Morcant and his men would drive onward,
Collecting a host to burn my lands.
He was a cheese-maggot that scratched against a rock . . .

There is commotion in every region
In pursuit of Llovan Llawdivro . . .

Llywarch's poem is of great length and the lines quoted here are selected purely for their points of information. He confirms the assassination as an incident in the battle by the sea and confirms also the death of Urien by the severing of his head, itself a powerful symbol from pagan Celtic tradition. There is the scathing 'maggot' reference to Morcant and the accompanying anxiety that the instigator of the death of Urien will now turn his malice against the lands of Rheged. The reference to the sorrow of Urien's kin is accompanied by the implication that the killing was done at night, and followed by the threat of vengeful pursuit of Llefan the assassin, but especially interesting is the location of the deed. *Aber Lleu* has been convincingly located by Sir Ifor Williams at Ross Low, where the rivulet Low runs into the sea opposite Lindisfarne.

The Celtic keening for Urien evokes the sharper political focus of his death. The Men of the North had lost their 'high king'. The alliance would have disintegrated under the pressure of internal treachery and its sundered warbands ridden home dejectedly to the lands of the Cymry.

The death of Urien was one of those accidents of history bearing consequences unimaginable to its perpetrators and marked the beginning of the end of Celtic Britain. The foothold carved by Ida on the Great Whin Sill had been rescued from certain destruction to emerge as the supreme military power of the north inside a generation.

The north Britons were to come once more in arms against 'the Oppression of the Saxons', as Northumbria's land-seeking is called by the Triad of 'The Three Oppressions of the Island of Britain'.

But when the heroes of the Gododdin came to Catraeth they rode into the death-dealing shadow of Aethelric's son . . .

'ravin as a wolf'

AETHELFRITH, SON OF AETHELRIC

AD 593 – AD 616

'The continuous history of Northumbria, and indeed of England,' writes Sir Frank Stenton, the Oxford historian of the Anglo-Saxons, 'begins with the reign of Aethelfrith, son of Aethelric, grandson of Ida, king of Bernicia.'

The earliest date in the history of Northumbria noted by Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* – apart from the entry of 547 in his appended chronology – is that of Aethelfrith's victory at Degsastan, which is placed in 'the year of our Lord 603, the eleventh year of his reign of twenty four years, and the first year of the reign of the Roman emperor Phocas'. The battle of Degsastan had no evangelical significance, reflecting only the defeat of a Christian king by a pagan warlord. No monasteries were founded to mark the victory and Bede could have had no religious purpose in according Aethelfrith the stature which he implies. He was entering his own judgement, supported by every other historian through all the following centuries, that Aethelfrith was the first great leader to appear among the northern English, and – in Stenton's phrase – 'the real founder of the historic Northumbrian kingdom'.

Bede attributes to Aethelfrith a ferocity in war so unparalleled among all other kings that he needed to turn to the prophecy of Saul in the Book of Genesis for a fittingly impressive Biblical comparison.

> . . . Aethelfrith, a most mighty king and most ambitious for glory. He ravaged the nation of the Britons more than any other English ruler, for which he might be judged worthy of comparison with Saul, once king of Israel, but for his ignorance of divine religion. No ealdorman and no

king made tributary to the English, or peopled with English settlers, more territory of the Britons, after exterminating or subjugating the natives. To him might be justly applied the words in which the patriarch, when blessing his son, foretold the character of Saul:

'Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.'

Bede's recognition of the might of Aethelfrith corresponds to Henry of Huntingdon's appellation of *Ethelfrid ferus*, 'Aethelfrith the Ferocious', no less than to the bitter resentment of him found throughout the Britonic references preserved in Welsh tradition, where his death on the battlefield is listed in the Triads among 'The Three Fortunate Assassinations of the Island of Britain'. The Nennian genealogy identifies him as the son of Aethelric, second son of Ida, and adds that 'he is Aedlferd Flesaur'. *Flesaur* in the Welsh of Nennius' time would have been *Flesor* or *Flexsor* in the Britonic of his earlier source, deriving from the Latin *flexus*. Thus the Britonic epithet translates as 'Aethelfrith the Twister'.

It is similarly in the Britonic tradition that the first appearance of 'Aethelfrith the Ferocious' might be traced in the bardic epic of *Y Gododdin*. This vast and complex elegy for the fallen heroes of the Men of the North survives in the thirteenth-century manuscript of the *Book of Aneirin*. It was edited and analysed in the last century by William Skene and again in the 1930s by Sir Ifor Williams, but its full significance was finally revealed in 1969 by the outstanding scholarship of the late Professor Kenneth Jackson. His annotated translation of *Y Gododdin* laid bare the rich seam of history and tradition preserved in the lines of this 'oldest Scottish poem' set down at the end of the sixth century by the same *Neirin* listed by Nennius.

Y Gododdin is a sequence of elegies on the heroes of the Britons who rode on an otherwise unrecorded raid against the northern English and were slaughtered in a defeat of cataclysmic proportion. The words of its opening line carry their own unearthly resonance, described by Sir John Lloyd, the eminent historian of Wales, as 'fragments of an older music . . . a genuine relic of a long-forgotten strife, a massive boulder left high on its rocky perch by an icy stream which has long since melted away.'

This is The Gododdin. Aneirin sang it . . .

Aneirin's verses and their appended *gorchanau*, or associated elegaic lays,

abound with a wealth of detail of warriors and warfare from which can be discerned a stark outline of the conflict at Catraeth.

The raid had evidently been long-planned and well-prepared in the hall of a warlord of the north Britons.

> From the retinue of Mynyddog they hastened forth;
> in a shining array they fed together round the wine-vessel.
> My heart has become full of grief for the feast of Mynyddog,
> I have lost too many of my true kinsmen.

The poet tells of twelve months of feasting and gift-giving hosted by *Mynyddog Mwynfawr* – 'Mynyddog the Wealthy', lord of Din Eidyn of the Gododdin – in his hall at Edinburgh on the Forth to assemble a great warband to challenge the rising power of the northern English.

The symbolism of the 'mead-feast' as the warlord's wage to win the warrior's loyalty occurs throughout Britonic and Old English battle-poetry. The golden colour of the mead reflects the gold of generous gift-giving, just as its honey-sweetness, intoxicating effect and bitter aftertaste have their own metaphorical significance in the way of the warrior, 'earning his mead' in the blood-fray. The *Beowulf* poet quotes the warrior Wiglaf to just such effect.

> I remember the time when, as we drank mead there in the beer-hall, we would promise our lord, who gave us these treasures, that we would repay him for these battle-accoutrements, the helmets and the tough swords, if a need such as this should befall him.

Wiglaf's creed is echoed by the poet of the *Finnsburg* fragment.

> Never have I heard of sixty victors in a battle between men behaving more nobly and more worthily, and never of youths better repaying shining mead than his young warriors.

But Aneirin's most famous reference to the mead-feast is stamped with the bitter taste of the savage defeat awaiting the men who rode to Catraeth.

> The pale mead was their feast
> and it was their poison.

The gathering of Mynyddog's warband must have come in the wake of the collapse of the siege of Lindisfarne and been prompted by the

Northumbrian capture and occupation of the southern outpost of Rheged at Catraeth shortly after the death of Urien.

> The men went to Catraeth with the dawn,
> their mettle shortened their lives.
> They drank sweet, yellow ensnaring mead;
> for a year many a minstrel was glad.
> Red were their swords, may their spears never be cleansed;
> lime-white shields and square-pointed spear-heads
> before the retinue of Mynyddog the Luxurious.

Catraeth was clearly located by Taliesin as within the dominion of Rheged by his repeated references to Urien, and to his son Owain, as 'lord of Catraeth', but the evidence of Aneirin indicates that it had come into Northumbrian hands when he describes the fallen Gododdin as 'men cut down in *Lloegr*', meaning 'the territory of the English'. Catraeth would have provided a tempting target for a Northumbrian warband after the siege of Lindisfarne when the lands of Rheged were laid desolate by rival British predators. It had been the Roman base of *Cataracto*, was to continue as the Northumbrian royal *vill* of *Cetreht*, and had long been a strategically important site, first on the network of Roman roads and later on the border between Bernicia and Deira and the territories of the Britons. The seizure of Urien's Catraeth by the English was a bold challenge which could not be ignored by the Gododdin of the north.

The warband sent forth by Mynyddog – and he himself seems to have been too old or infirm to have ridden at its head – numbered some three hundred according to Aneirin.

> Three hundred men hastened forth,
> wearing gold torques, defending the land
> – and there was slaughter.

The Celtic 'triad' configuration of 'three hundred men' would have amounted to a total force of many times that number if it referred to the chieftains 'in the front rank' of three hundred warbands, while another verse claims that the English host numbered 'a hundred thousand'.

> The men went to Catraeth with the dawn,
> their fears shifted their abode;
> a hundred thousand and three hundred cast at each other,
> bloodily they splashed spears.

The verse celebrating 'Hyfaidd the tall' claims two thousand English to have been slaughtered 'in one hour'.

> In the front rank, armed in the battle shout,
> a mighty man in combat before his death-day,
> a leader charging forwards before armies;
> there fell five times fifty before his blades,
> of the men of Deira and Bernicia there fell a hundred score,
> they were annihilated in one hour.

Professor Jackson accepts that the figure of 'a hundred thousand' must be poetic licence for 'a very great host' of the English which outnumbered the British warband, but he cannot accept Ifor Williams' view that the Britons numbered no more than three hundred. Jackson's estimate of a British force of some three thousand would be the most realistic number of the men who rode to Catraeth against an English host which might credibly be estimated at as many as five, but no more than ten, times that figure.

Although Welsh tradition claims Owain ap Urien was killed at Catraeth, the names of the fallen warriors celebrated by Aneirin are largely unknown elsewhere, and even Mynyddog is nowhere else recorded. The Gododdin are, of course, familiar as the tribe of Britons known to Ptolemy and the Roman historians as the *Votadini*, one of the northern 'buffer' states established by Theodosius on the Antonine border, and a powerful tribal kingdom in the north of post-Roman Britain. The region of the Manau around the head of the Forth fell within their dominion and from there Cunedda and his sons rode into Wales to found the British kingdom of Gwynedd.

On Aneirin's evidence the warband who rode to Catraeth drew its manpower from a wider territory than the lands of the Gododdin in the Lothians and the Borders. Warriors described as coming from 'beyond Bannog', the chain of hills spanning the land between Dumbarton and Stirling, and 'beyond the Sea of Iuddew', the Firth of Forth, must have travelled from the land of the Picts to join Mynyddog's host. Other regions of origin named by the poet include *Aeron* or Ayrshire, *Rhufoniog* in Denbighshire, *Eifionydd* around Snowdon, and *Mon* or the island of Anglesey, as well as *Elfed* in the Yorkshire Pennines and *Gwynedd* in north Wales. Mynyddog had clearly selected his warband from amongst

all the enemies of the English to assemble a force of the very finest fighting men of the Celtic tribes.

They rode into battle as cavalry and appear even to have fought on horseback.

> The retinue of Gododdin on rough-maned horses like swans,
> with their harness drawn tight,
> and attacking the troop in the van of the host,
> defending the woods and the mead of Eidyn.

Cavalry warfare was generally unknown amongst the fighting formations of the Dark Ages and the prominence of mounted warriors among the Gododdin is an indicator of the residual influence of the Romans.

As Aneirin proclaims the battle honours of the fallen Britons, he refers again and again to their earlier victories over the *Lloegrywys* or the English, specifically the English of Bernicia and Deira. Those references are evidence of a long and widespread sequence of conflict between the Britons and the *Saeson* or Saxons, which must have continued throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, but apart from the cryptic references in bardic poetry remains largely unrecorded.

> Though they were slain they slew,
> and they shall be honoured till the end of the world;
> and of all us kinsmen who went, alas, but for one man
> none escaped.

Y Gododdin would imply that Aneirin himself rode with the warband and lived to mourn their defeat until his own death, entered in the Triads as one of 'The Atrocious Assassinations of the Island of Britain', but whether his claim that only one warrior survived the conflict can be taken as historical record or poetic licence is unknown. It must, in the last analysis, mean that the Gododdin were decimated in a blood-drenched rout before the ramparts at Catraeth.

No comparable English victory over the Britons is recorded before the reign of Aethelfrith, yet similar slaughter of the Scots of Dalriada at Degsastan and the Welsh Britons of Powys at Chester is recorded by Bede as the hallmarks of his ascendancy. Something had dramatically changed in the military command of Northumbria between the siege of Lindisfarne and the killing-ground of Catraeth. It can only have been

the emergence of a warlord 'most mighty and most ambitious for glory' in the person of Aethelric's son.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* enters his accession at the year 593.

> In this year . . . Aethelfrith succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbria. He was the son of Aethelric, son of Ida.

The *Chronicle*'s date corresponds to Bede's entry of 603 as 'the eleventh year of his reign of twenty four years'. Bede is followed by all but one of the early medieval chroniclers. That sole exception is the *Historia Regum*, attributed to Symeon of Durham but in part the work of the tenth-century Byrtferth of Ramsey, which records a reign of 'twenty eight years'. The Nennian genealogy follows the consensus of twenty-four years, but adds a further detail of its own.

> Eadfered Flesaurs reigned twelve years in Berneich and another twelve in Deur; he reigned twenty four years in the two kingdoms.

Aethelfrith's reign over both Deira and Bernicia is of two-fold importance, principally because he is the first king reliably recorded as the ruler of both kingdoms and consequently credited with unifying them into the greater dominion of *Northanhymbre*, but additionally for the light it might throw on his rise to such power.

Although his reign marked the beginning of a sequence of formal succession to the greater kingdom of Northumbria, Aethelfrith himself emerged out of the earlier period when a 'king' was little more than the chieftain of a warband whose glory depended on the power of their swords and the extent of their swordland. When Aethelfrith commanded the northern English at Catraeth it would have been as the 'king in time of war' of an alliance of warbands drawn, on the evidence of Aneirin, from both Deira and Bernicia. The dramatic impact of his victory would have greatly reinforced his authority and attracted more warriors to his battle ranks. The location of Catraeth within Deiran territory would also suggest that Aethelfrith's standing was at least as great south of the Tyne as in the coastal power base around Bamburgh.

To place the date of the battle of Catraeth at around 590 and before Aethelfrith's formal accession in 593 would accord him the status at that time of a warrior prince, or *aetheling*, rather than a king. Support for such a proposal is to be found in William of Malmesbury, who records Aethelric, father of Aethelfrith, succeeding Aelle as king of Deira.

On the death of Alla, Aethelric, the son of Ida, advanced to extreme old age, after a life consumed in penury, obtained the kingdom, and after five years was taken off by sudden death.

He was a pitiable prince, whom fame would have hidden in obscurity, had not the conspicuous energy of his son lifted up the father into notice.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* supports William's evidence in its entry for 588.

In this year Aelle died and Aethelric reigned five years after him.

Florent of Worcester proposes that it was Aethelric who united Deira with Bernicia.

AD 588 Aelle, king of Deira, died in the thirtieth year of his reign, and after him Aethelric, the son of Ida, reigned five years over both provinces.

Florent is alone among the chroniclers in attributing the unification of Northumbria to Aethelric and possibly misread, misinterpreted, or was misled by, his unidentified source in appending the phrase 'over both provinces', elsewhere applied to Aethelfrith, to his father, Aethelric.

Reginald of Durham's colourful portrait of Aethelfrith includes a more characteristic significant detail in naming him as Aelle's assassin.

He showed himself on many occasions to be a harsh and dreadful tyrant. For example, he not only drove from his kingdom Aelle, king of the Deiri, whose daughter he had married, but after inflicting a series of defeats on him and expelling him from several refuges, he finally deprived him of his life and throne together.

He sought nothing but the glory of renown and an honoured name, and to make the fame of his power more widely known. And this he learned to achieve in the manner of the heathen, believing that to be occupied continually in the monstrous toils of warfare and the splendid trappings of military life was the sole path to glory.

Aethelfrith was the first son of Aethelric, who was the second son of Ida; and with the decline of Ida's sons he took their place as rightful king, being Ida's grandson. Aethelfrith, therefore, was the son of King Aethelric, who was the second son born to Ida and his wife the queen;

for by a concubine Ida had other sons, who could not properly be accorded the same high status.

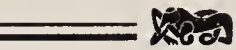
From this 'harmony of the chroniclers', it is possible to construct a speculative scenario of the emergence of Aethelfrith from the kaleidoscope of contesting warlords and warbands in the last decade of the sixth century.

Aethelric, the second son of Ida, established himself in Bernicia in the years after Ida's death. The years of his reign are variously recorded by the sources – four years according to the Moore Memoranda and the Nennian regnal list, seven according to Byrtferth of Ramsey and Symeon of Durham, and two according to Florent. These variant regnal years are as likely to be the product of scribal error as otherwise, but all agree that Aethelric's reign in the kingdom of his father was a brief one.

Whether Aethelric was driven out by his legitimate brothers or by the bastard offspring of Ida, he evidently survived to claim swordland to the southward and into Deira, and the long years of 'penury' described by William of Malmesbury would correspond to his precarious grasp on some lesser territory, possibly to the south of the Wall. As his son grew to manhood – and Aethelfrith would have grown to manhood through the 570s – the youthful energy of the *aetheling* would probably have directed itself towards the kingdom of the ageing Aelle, who had ruled in Deira since 560. Successful skirmishing against Aelle's warbands, represented in the 'series of defeats' recorded by Reginald, would have won 'the glory of renown' for Aethelric's son and drawn more fighting men to his battle-host. By the later 580s, Aethelfrith would have harried Aelle, 'expelling him from several refuges' before finally putting him to the sword in 588, which year the *Chronicle* assigns to the death of Aelle.

Having overthrown the king of Deira, Aethelfrith would have passed the titular succession to Aelle's kingdom to his own father, who is recorded by the *Chronicle* as reigning there for five years. Those years of reign would place the death of Aethelric in 593, which is the year all the sources assign to the succession of Aethelfrith, who by then must have proved himself unrivalled as the warlord of the northern English in the blood-fray of Catraeth and established his own claim to Bernicia, probably on the death of Hussa.

If Aethelfrith emerged as the warlord of Bernicia in 593, his succession to Deira and establishment of the unified kingdom of Northumbria would



seem to have been dated to the occasion of his marriage to Acha, daughter of Aelle and princess of Deira. Recording that union, Reginald of Durham adds his very low opinion of Aethelfrith's marital morality.

> Because he was a heathen and offered the customary worship to idols, he owned no fixed bond of marriage. However, he had taken to wife the daughter of King Aelle, but, ambitious for glory and ignorant of the faith of true religion, he slew her father with the sword and proceeded to persecute his wife's brother Edwin, who was for long in exile.

Whether Aethelfrith maintained a queen in both of his two sub-kingdoms, or kept a concubine in Bernicia as well as a legitimate consort in Deira, he certainly fathered sons on two women. His 'political' marriage to Acha of Deira bore the sons who would eventually succeed to his kingdom and is fully acknowledged by the historians. Not so his liaison with the 'other' queen who is recorded only by the *Historia Brittonum* of Nennius.

> Eadfered Flesaurs . . . gave Dinguoaroy to his wife, whose name was Bebbab, and it took its name of Bebbanburth from the name of his wife.

Bede's two references to the origin of the name of *Bebbanburh* describe it only as 'the royal town named after Bebba, a former queen'. Precisely why Bede should be so coy on the identity of the queen for whom was named the great fortress of the Northumbrian kings and whose posterity is assured in the place-name of Bamburgh is unclear. He may have been embarrassed by the promiscuity of Northumbria's last pagan king, but it would be no less typical of the first English historian if his evasion were prompted by his distaste for the British Celts. The name *Bibba* is said to translate from the Old Welsh as 'beautiful traitress', and Bebba – not alone among Northumbrian queens – might well have been a Briton, as is indicated by the curious destiny of the son she bore to Aethelfrith.

The seven sons of Aethelfrith are listed in the Nennian genealogy as Anfrid, Osguald, Osbiu, Osguid, Osgudu, Oslapf, Offa. Reginald of Durham, working from a closely similar source, enters the names in a more recognisable English form than the Britonic Welsh of Nennius.

> King Aethelfrith . . . was the father of the following seven sons: Eanfrith, Oswald, Oswy, Oslac, Oswdu, Oslaf, Offa.

Alliterative names of the sons of kings were characteristic of Anglo-Saxon genealogies. Oswald and Oswy, who were both to succeed to their father's kingdom, are attested as the offspring of Acha, and it would follow that she was also the mother of the less renowned *Oslac*, *Oswdu*, *Oslaf* and *Offa*. Eanfrith alone stands apart from that alliterative sequence, and I would suggest that he was Bebba's son.

When Aethelfrith fell in battle on the river Idle in 616, his family escaped to find safety in the north. While Oswald and Oswy found their way to Scotic Dalriada in Argyll, Eanfrith, the eldest son, chose a different route to the north-east, through the territories of the Britons and into the safety of the land of the Picts beyond the Forth. There he took as his wife a sister of the Pictish king Gartnait, son of Uuid, who bore him a son Talorcan, who was enabled to become himself a king of the Picts, by virtue of the Pictish tradition of matrilinear succession. The daughter of that same union became the second wife of Beli, king of the Britons of Strathclyde, and bore him a son who could similarly claim the matrilinear right of succession to become *Bridei mac-Beli* – or 'Bruide, son of Beli' – the Pictish warlord who was to slay Egfrith of Northumbria at Nechtansmere.

The evidence of the Welsh and Gaelic sources for Bebba and for Eanfrith expands on that of Bede's *Historia* – where later he will be dismissed as a short-lived apostate pretender to Bernicia – and provides substantial confirmation of Eanfrith's Brito-Pictish connections, which would only derive from his mother, Bebba, being herself a Briton.

The date of Aethelfrith's marriage to Acha of Deira would be of no slight historical value if only because it can be taken as the date of his formal accession to both kingdoms and consequently as the date of his unification of Northumbria. An accurate approximation can be approached through the dates of Oswald, the eldest son borne by Acha to her husband. Bede gives the year 642 as the date of Oswald's death and adds that he was killed in 'his thirty-eighth year' which would place Oswald's date of birth no later than 605. His parents' marriage – and with it the unification of Northumbria – might be placed no less than nine months earlier to fall in the year following the victory at Degsastan in 603.

The great importance which Bede attaches to that year is reflected in its significance as the first date in Northumbrian history recorded in the narrative chapters of his *Historia* and can be taken as Bede's landmark

of the beginning of the chronology of the unified kingdom. Seen in this perspective, Degsastan becomes an event of unprecedented importance in Northumbrian history, a fearsome clash of arms, numbering among its dead at least one brother of Aethelfrith and probably a son of Aidan, king of Scots, in a devastating defeat for the kingdom of Scotic Dalriada.

Before bringing the battle of Degsastan into sharp focus, an outline of the nature of early English weaponry and warfare might helpfully illustrate its military context. Like the great majority of Dark Age armies, the Anglo-Saxons fought on foot. They may well have ridden to battle on horseback and there is substantial evidence for the use of horses by the upper social orders in the earlier seventh century, although the earliest reference to a Northumbrian army riding on campaign is not recorded before Egfrith's war against the Picts in 685.

The cavalry tactics of the Gododdin were a remarkable exception when the English warrior fought beside his king on foot. In his twelfth-century Arthurian saga, Wace of Jersey claims the 'Saxons knew not how to fight with the lance or how to bear arms on horseback' and his contemporary, Florent of Worcester, records that it was 'contrary to the custom of the English to fight on horseback'.

The weaponry and wargear of the warrior and his warlord are certainly those of the foot-soldier. The chieftain, like the warriors of his body-guard, wore a *byrni* – described by the *Beowulf* poet as a 'mail-shirt, tough, with rings interlocked by skilful hands' – under a cloak of dyed wool fastened by an ornate brooch at the throat or on the right shoulder. His *helm* was in the style of the seventh-century Sutton Hoo and Benty Grange helmets and his weapon was the double-edged iron *sweord*, the 'splendid ancestral sword' of the *Beowulf* poet, its three-foot blade inscribed with runes and sheathed in a wooden scabbard.

His fighting-man wore a tunic of unbleached wool or linen over cross-gartered breeches and carried a *gar*, an ash spear more than six foot long. The ashen *gar* was so typical of the warrior's weaponry that the Old English poets called the fighting man *garberend* or 'ash bearer' and the warband *garheap*. The better-armed warrior would have carried, if not a sword, a traditional *seax* or *scramaseax*, the single-edged fighting knife of eighteen to twenty-six inches long, 'cruel and sharp in conflict' according to the *Beowulf* poet. The *helm* was a rarity and largely formed of leather.

Certainly the warrior's headgear would be no more than a leather 'Phrygian' cap, and only the best-accoutred warlord would wear a helmet in the semi-visored Vendel style.

The most tactically significant item of wargear was the *scild*, the round shield of limewood some thirty-two inches in diameter and studded and fitted with a heavy central boss. The visual impact of a battle-rank some hundreds or thousands strong defended by their *linden scild* prompted such Old English terms as *lindwered*, 'a shield-bearing warband', and even *lindwiga*, for 'a warrior'.

The shield defined the characteristic stratagem of the Anglo-Saxon fighting formation as the *scildburh*, or 'shield-wall', where an army formed up in a daunting phalanx of leathern-clad limewood shields. Behind and beneath their shield-wall, the warbands would endure the volleys of spears, javelins and arrows of the enemy onslaught, to advance in a line or wedge-formation until the battle was joined in the *lindcroda*, or 'shield-clash'. Then the weight of the war-sword and the slice of the scramaseax bore the heat and burden of the day until the tide of battle drove the survivors of the defeated warband to flight. The Old English fragment describing the tenth-century victory of Aethelstan's host 'in the battle about Brunanburh' tells how the warriors of Wessex and Mercia

> . . . sliced through the shield-wall and hacked the linden battle-targes with swords.

Florent of Worcester provides a vivid portrayal of the warrior king in battle as valid for Aethelfrith at Degsastan as for Edmund Ironside at Sherston in 1016.

> There he arranged the positions and division of his forces, placed all the best men in the foremost ranks, supporting them and the remainder of the army, and, addressing each by name, exhorted and entreated them to remember that they were about to fight for their country, their children, their wives, and their homes, and by an excellent address stirred up the courage of his troops: then he ordered the trumpets to sound and the army to advance by degrees. The enemy's army did the like. When they came to a spot where they could join battle, the hostile standards met with tremendous uproar; they fought with sword and spear, and with the greatest obstinacy.

It is not difficult to imagine the Celtic cavalry of the Gododdin broken on the Northumbrian shield-wall at Catraeth, and a similarly savage fate awaited the Scots of Dalriada when their warlord Aidan mac-Gabran challenged Aethelfrith's ascendancy at Degsastan in 603. Aidan – or *Aedan* – son of Gabran was the warrior king who brought the Irish settlement on the western seaboard of Scotland back from the edge of destruction to the high peak of its power.

Celtic mythology attests an Irish presence in the Western Isles in the hazy antiquity of the legendary hero Cuchulainn. There had evidently been Irish settlement on the Scottish mainland since the end of the third century and Bede includes an account of the emergence of 'the Irish in Britain' in the first chapter of his *Historia.*

> As time passed, Britain received a third people, the Irish, in addition to the Britons and the Picts, and they settled in the territory occupied by the Picts. They left Ireland under the leadership of Reuda, and either by treaty or by the sword claimed lands among the Picts which are their home to the present day. It is after that leader that they are still known as the Dalreudini, because in their language *daal* means a part.

Whatever its distant origins, the real history of Scotic Dalriada began when the royal family of the Irish kingdom of Dalriada – Angus, Loarn, and Fergus, the sons of Erc – set sail from their lands in Antrim to establish their kingdoms in Argyll, 'the seaboard of the Gael'. The foothold established by the three sons of Erc spanned the western seaboard from the Mull of Kintyre across the sea from Ireland to the Hebrides. To the east rose up the natural frontier of the hill range of Drumalban, the 'Spine of Britain', and beyond it lay the ancient tribal dominions of the Picts. The arrival of an alien tribe of Celtic warrior stock must have posed a threat to the Picts as great as the northern English were to become in the later seventh century.

The Picts consistently achieved their greatest military success whenever their tribes were brought together under the overlordship of a high king. That may have been the case on those occasions when they overran the Roman frontiers on the Antonine and Hadrianic walls and was certainly so in the mid-sixth century when they fought under *Bridei mac-Maelchon*, Bruide the son of the same Maelgwn of Gwynedd whom Gildas called 'Dragon of the Island'.

Succession to the high kingship of the Picts is a question widely

debated by historians, but it would seem to have been handed down through the maternal line. Bede believed it so, and the evidence of the sons of kings of Strathclyde and Northumbria succeeding to Pictish kingdoms would substantially support him. By that principle of succession through a mother of Pictish stock, Bruide mac-Maelchon came to govern the alliance of Pictish tribes from his fortress of Craig Phadrig above the Moray Firth, and his warbands came in arms against the expansion of Dalriada in the time of Gabran, the grandson of Fergus mac-Erc. Gabran was slain in the Pictish onslaught which drove his people back against their capital hillfort at Dunadd in 559. The *Annals of Tigernach* call Gabran *Ri Albain*, 'king of Scotland', but acknowledge his successor, Conall mac-Comgall, as only *Ri Dal Riata*, 'king of Dalriada'. When Aidan succeeded Conall in 574 he is entered in the annals, like his father, as *Ri Albain*, which bears testimony to his restoration of Dalriadan fortunes.

The sources for these early years of Scotic Dalriada derive principally, if not exclusively, from the history and hagiography set down in the scriptorium on the holy island of Iona. The *Annals of Ulster*, though compiled in the tenth and eleventh centuries, are the most ancient Irish annals and derive from a *Chronicon Hyense*, the lost chronicle of Iona. At least as ancient is the *Vita Sancti Columbae*, the earliest and most authoritative life of Columcille, written by Adamnan, the ninth abbot of Iona, at the end of the seventh century and it is he who provides the most dramatic account of the succession of Aidan mac-Gabran to his father's kingdom.

Following the death of Conall, Columcille emerged from three nights of visions of angels on the island retreat of Hinba to name Aidan mac-Gabran as the new king at Dunadd. Aidan was not the eldest of the surviving sons of Gabran and his claim on the kingdom appears to have been less than fully legitimate. In consequence, Columcille's vision of an angel bearing a scourge and a book of glass must have provided some much-needed divine authority for Aidan's succession. However rightful his claim, Gabran's son was a man of power in the lands of the Gael and, within a year of his coronation, he came to the conference of kings on the hill of Druim Ceatt in Derry and there established the independence of Scotic Dalriada from the thrall of the Irish high king.

The thirty-four years of Aidan's reign – from 574 to his death around 608 – are agreed by most of the annals, but Tigernach and the *Chronicon*

Scotorum deriving from him extend those regnal years to thirty-seven, prompting the suggestion that Aidan had established his own sub-kingdom in exile among the Britons of Lothian before he returned to Dunadd to claim Dalriada. For whatever reason buried in Welsh tradition, he acquired the Britonic epithet *Aeddan Fradwr o'r Gogledd*, 'Aidan, Traitor of the North', which would perhaps correspond with the evidence of his later ambitions toward the lands around the Forth.

The political and military history of Aidan's reign is complicated by the fragmentary nature of the sources, but he nonetheless emerges as the key figure in the expansion of Dalriada and the only warlord to rival Aethelfrith by the last two decades of the sixth century. He had fought a sea-war against Pictish or renegade Irish pirates in the waters around Orkney in the year 580 and some four years later he began a long campaign in the British and Pictish territories around the Forth. Adamnan records Aidan's victory in 'the battle of the Miathi', which must have been won over the Maetae Picts of the Ochils around Stirling, and a further conflict – 'the slaughter of the sons of Aidan at the battle of Circend in which Aidan was conquered' entered in the *Annals of Ulster* at 594 – seems to have been fought even deeper into Pictish territory at the Howe of Mearns in Forfar. All of this testifies to Aidan's warbands ranging over the lands of the Gododdin and the southern Picts and would have brought them within range of Northumbrian ambitions in the aftermath of Catraeth.

Columcille prophesied the deaths of the elder sons of Aidan, some of whom Adamnan records as slain in the campaign against the Miathi and another killed in 'the land of the Saxons', and the escalating conflict between the rival territorial ambitions of Aidan's Dalriada and Aethelfrith's Northumbria inevitably led to a decisive contest of arms between the Gaels and the English which came about at Degsastan.

Bede's *Historia* contains the earliest surviving account of the conflict and he suggests that it was the last battle in a war of some duration, which itself must have emerged out of the skirmishing between rival warbands in the Lothians as far as the shores of the Forth. There is even a trace of evidence unearthed by Kuno Meyer, the eminent authority on the ancient Irish tradition, for an Irish raid on Bamburgh. This is a reference in the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* to a lost saga of 'The Hosting by Fiachna, son of Baetan, king of Ulster, to *Din nGuaire i Saxonaib*'. 'Din Guairi in Saxonland' may very well provide the fragment

of evidence for an otherwise unrecorded attack on Bamburgh by a *fian*, or roving Irish warband, in the course of a guerilla war against Aethelfrith's Northumbria.

Whatever the course of that war, it was to reach its momentous conclusion at the battle of Degsastan which is confirmed by all the sources as a bloody conflict incurring a terrible death toll. Bede tells how almost the entire Dalriadan army was cut down in Aidan's bid to check the expansion of Aethelfrith's Northumbria.

> These successes of his provoked Aedan, king of the Irish inhabitants of Britain, to march against him with an immense and mighty army; but he was defeated and took to flight with a few survivors, while almost his entire army was cut down at a famous place called Degsastan, meaning Degsa's stone. Also in this battle Theobald, Aethelfrith's brother, was killed with all the army that he commanded. Aethelfrith put an end to this war in the year of our Lord 603, the eleventh year of his reign of twenty four years, and the first year of the reign of the Roman emperor Phocas. And from that time to the present day, no Irish king in Britain has dared to do battle with the English.

The precise composition of the contending armies at Degsa's stone has been the subject of some speculation, but there is firm evidence for warriors from the Irish mainland fighting for Aidan. The *Annals of Tigernach* confirm the presence of a warband from Ulster in Aidan's host when they name the Irish warrior who slew 'Eanfrith, Aethelfrith's brother'.

> A battle with the Saxons by Aidan; and there Eanfrith, Aethelfrith's brother, fell by Maelumai, son of Baetan; and there [Aidan] was conquered.

Kuno Meyer identifies *Maelumai, son of Baetan* as *Maelumai Garg*, 'Maelumai the Fierce', a great-grandson of Niall of the Nine Hostages and the first authenticated *rigfenid*, or royal champion, of Ulster. His obituary is entered in the annals at 610, and his father, Baetan, is described in an old Irish manuscript as a 'king with fame over Erin and Alba', adding that 'Aedan, high king of Alba, did homage to noble Baetan at Rosnaree'.

The 'Eanfrith' slain by the Ulster warrior according to the Irish annals must have been somehow confused with Aethelfrith's brother Theobald who is recorded as a fatality by the more reliable English sources. Eanfrith

was the name of Aethelfrith's eldest son, who was no more than a small boy in 603 and was not killed in battle until thirty years later, but there is no English evidence for a brother of Aethelfrith by that name and most authorities believe the Irish annalist to have muddled the names of Aethelfrith's two closest male kin.

The northern recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* follows Bede's account of Degsastan, with the addition of a reference only otherwise recorded by Geoffroi of Gaimar.

Hering son of Hussa led the host thither.

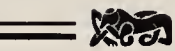
The chronicler's use of the Old English word *here* or 'host', which is usually applied by the *Chronicle* to an enemy army, has been interpreted to imply Hussa's son as fighting for the Scots against the Northumbrians. If this had been the case then it would set a precedent for disinherited Northumbrian princes finding sanctuary as warriors-in-exile in Dalriada, as indeed Aethelfrith's own sons were to do over a decade later. Nonetheless, the *Chronicle* is at its least reliable on Scotic affairs, and the greater probability must be that of Aidan's leading his own host, even as *guledic* or overlord of an alliance of Scotic and Irish Gaels with Pictish and north British warbands. It would have been equally characteristic of the 'warband strategy' of the time for Aethelfrith to have led a similar coalition of allied English warbands. This included, on Bede's evidence, Theobald with 'the army that he commanded' and, quite plausibly, Hering, Hussa's son, leading a third contingent of fighting men, arguably from Lindisfarne. If the Irish annals preserve an accurate record of 'Eanfrith' as an otherwise unknown brother of Aethelfrith, then he would have fought at the head of a fourth English warband.

However the forces were composed, they fought on a now-forgotten field which Bede considered too well-known to require any further identification than 'a famous place called Degsastan, meaning Degsa's stone'. The battlefield of Degsastan must assuredly lie in the Border country, and while it has been suggested as the Dalstone near Carlisle or even further east in Lauderdale, the weight of authoritative opinion would place Degsastan in the upper reaches of Liddesdale along the Dawston burn leading into the watershed which divides the source of the Liddel Water from that of the North Tyne. The ancient earthwork of the Catrail, sometimes called the 'Picts Work' and believed to have marked the borderline between the dominion of the northern English and that

of the Strathclyde Britons, would have served as Aidan's route of invasion from the north west. Skene discerns the Catrail crossing the upper Liddel valley where Aidan would have sought the pass by the Dawston burn to bring his 'immense and powerful army' into the North Tyne valley and south of the Cheviot range. Thus it would have been in Liddesdale that Aethelfrith would have laid his ambush and it is not difficult to imagine the shield-wall of the English host ranked on the slopes of the rounded hill, formerly known as Dawston Rigg and probably the site of the monolith Bede knew as 'Degsa's stone', rising up from the Dawston burn.

Aethelfrith's victory was clearly of the most signal importance. He had crushed the Britons of the Gododdin and rendered their dominions tributary. Now he had thrown back the armies and allies of the greatest warrior-king of the Gaels of Alba. Whether the victory similarly achieved a right of tribute over Scotic Dalriada cannot be certain, but Bede was able to claim some measure of English dominion over Gael and Pict as well as Briton by the time of Aethelfrith's son, Oswy, and Anglo-Gaelic relations had certainly improved to the point where Aethelfrith's family could find sanctuary in Dalriada when the victor of Degsastan himself fell in battle in 616. Whatever other tides of history were re-directed in 603, the year of Degsastan is acknowledged by all the sources as the first of Aethelfrith's twelve years of formal government over Bernicia and Deira and, by implication, the date of his marriage to Acha, daughter of Aelle. The blood-fray at Degsa's stone marked the formal unification of the kingdom of Northumbria under Aethelfrith at the pinnacle of his dominance.

While the armies clashed on the banks of the Dawston burn another contest, of the spirit rather than the sword, was in progress on the border of the West Saxons and the *Hwicca* in what are now the counties of Gloucester and Worcester. There Augustine, Pope Gregory's missionary to the English, met with the Welsh bishops of the ancient church of the Britons to persuade them to accept the authority of Rome in the person of himself, to recant their heretical adherence to the calendar of the Celtic church, and to accept the Petrine tonsure and Paschal feast of the Roman orthodoxy. Bede, of course, provides the fullest account of this negotiation which he arranges, from the triad form of his British source, into a sequence of three confrontations, two conferences and a retributive blood-letting. He tells how the Britons first considered the



arguments of Augustine, supported by all the royal and martial panoply of the newly-baptised Aethelbert, king of Kent, and then sought the judgement of a holy man, whom Bede calls 'a religious and wise anchorite'. When the British clergy – most of whom came from the monastery of *Bancornaburh* at Bangor-is-Coed on the Dee – brought the anchorite's judgement to a second conference with Augustine, their answer was delivered in the splendidly intransigent Celtic tradition as an emphatic 'no'. Augustine's response was to threaten the Britons with the prophecy of the punishment of God delivered by the hand of their enemies, effectively presenting them with a choice between obedience to Rome or death by the sword.

Bede's detailed account of that prophesied retribution has thrust into prominence a massacre of monks which was realistically no more than an accidental incident associated with the last of Aethelfrith's victories, the conflict entered in the Welsh and Irish annals as the battle of *Caerlegion*. Bede may not have appreciated the irony of a pagan king of Northumbria as a vehicle of divine retribution, but he certainly relished the opportunity to reveal Augustine's prophecy inflicted with the full weight of Aethelfrith's sword on the 'perfidious Britons'.

> Aethelfrith, that mighty king of the English, of whom we have spoken, mustered a great army at the City of the Legions – called by the English Legacaestir, but by the Britons, more correctly, Carlegion – and made a great slaughter of that heretic nation. When about to commence battle, he saw that their priests, who had assembled to offer prayers to God for their soldiers taking part, were standing some distance away in a safer place; and he enquired who they were and for what purpose they had assembled there. Most of them were from the monastery of Bancor, where there are said to have been so many monks that, although the monastery was divided into seven sections, each under its own superior, none of these sections contained less than three hundred men, all of whom lived by the labour of their own hands.
>
> Most of these monks, after completing a three-day fast, had assembled with others to pray at the scene of battle, and they had a guard named Brocmail to protect them from the swords of the barbarians while they prayed. When he learned the reason for their arrival, King Aethelfrith said, 'Then if they cry to their God against

us, they too, unarmed though they are, are fighting against us, attacking us with prayers for our defeat.' He therefore gave the order that they should be attacked first, and then destroyed the rest of the accursed army, but not without heavy losses on his own side. It is said that of those who came to pray about twelve hundred were slain in the battle, and only fifty escaped by flight. Brocmail and his men fled at the first assault, leaving those whom they should have defended unarmed and exposed to the sword-thrusts of the enemy.

Bede's *Brocmail* has been identified in the genealogies as *Brochfael Ysgithrog*, 'Brochfael of the Tusks', who had long been succeeded as king of Powys first by his son and later by his grandson. The fact that he is found at the head of the monks of Bangor suggests that he had abdicated his kingdom to enter that monastery, a royal retirement far from rare in the seventh and eighth centuries. It was also no rarity for such a king-turned-monk to emerge from the cloister to aid his kingdom at a time of crisis and the appearance of Brochfael before the warband of Aethelfrith would be perfectly in line with other similar examples of the period.

Taliesin 'sang before a renowned lord where the Severn winds, before Brochfael of Powys who loved my muse', and his reference to 'the meadows of Hafren' would locate the court of Powys on the bend of the Severn at Shrewsbury where Brochfael's dominion spilled over the Welsh border into the modern counties of Shropshire and Cheshire. Brochfael had been succeeded as king of Powys by his son Cynan, celebrated by Taliesin as 'Brochfael's son with the far-flung territory', who was in turn succeeded by his son Selyf – otherwise *Selim* or *Solon* – recorded by the annals as the 'king of Powys' slain in the battle with Aethelfrith.

Bede offers no precise date for the carnage of *Carlegion*, placing it only at some point after the death of Augustine in 604. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* not only misreads Bede to date the battle literally within a few years of Augustine's death, but also to reduce the monastic body-count by a thousand and confuse Brocmail with Selyf – as 'Scromail' – in its entry for 606.

And in this year, Aethelfrith led his army to Legaceastre and there slew numberless Welsh; and so was fulfilled the prophecy of Augustine, which he uttered: 'If the Welsh refuse peace with us, they shall perish at the hands of the Saxons.' There were also slain two hundred priests,

who came thither that they might pray for the army of the Welsh. Their chief was named Scromail, who thence escaped with some fifty.

The true date of Aethelfrith's attack must be determined from the Irish and Welsh annalists who also place Bede's detail into a clearer historical context. The bald entry in the *Annales Cambriae* at 613 identifies Brochfael's grandson, Selyf ap Cynan, as the Welsh warlord slain in the conflict:

The battle of Cair Legion, and there fell Selim, son of Cinan.

The corresponding entry at 613 in the *Annals of Ulster* adds a reference to the slaughtered monks of Bede's account to the Welsh annalist's information:

The war of Caer-legion, in which holy men were slain, and Solon son of Conan, King of the Britons, fell.

Tigernach follows both the date and the detail of the *Annals of Ulster*, adding:

Etalfraidh was the victor who immediately afterwards died.

From this sequence of annal entries, set down in a period when the Welsh and Irish annals ante-dated their entries of Northumbrian affairs by three years, it is possible to confirm a date of 616 for the battle, which fully corresponds with Bede's statement that Augustine's prophecy was fulfilled 'long after his death'.

The authority of Bede locates the slaughter of the monks of *Bancor* at 'the City of the Legions' or modern Chester, and it is from him the greater conflict has become known to history as 'The Battle of Chester'. The Welsh Triad calls it *Gweith Perllan Vangor*, 'The Battle at Bangor Orchard', which might suggest that, having slain the twelve hundred monks at Chester and put their protector 'Brocmail' to flight, Aethelfrith pursued the warbands of Powys to Bangor itself.

Bede's enthusiasm for the fulfilment of the Augustinian prophecy and the consolidation of Aethelfrith's evil reputation in Welsh tradition must not be allowed to overstate the significance of the conflict. It is the only battle recorded for Aethelfrith's reign between Degsastan and his death, but that certainly does not mean it was the only one that he fought in more than a decade. Its strategic importance lies in its evidence for the greatly expanded dominion which enabled him to bring his army to the

northern frontier of Powys, even to the shores of the Irish Sea, without hindrance. Aethelfrith of Northumbria had laid the foundations of the kingdom which would reach from the Humber to the Forth and – in the words of Peter Hunter Blair – transformed 'what had begun as a pirate band at Bamburgh into the strongest military power in northern Britain'. Nonetheless his war on Powys was no campaign of conquest. There is no evidence that he intended to drive a strategic wedge between the Britons of the north and their Welsh *cymry* and certainly none that he left an army of occupation encamped on the Dee.

This had effectively been no more than a raid on a rival power and it proved to be the last victory of 'Aethelfrith the Ferocious', who rode back from the Dee into an ambush by the English king whom Bede numbers as the fourth *bretwalda*, or overlord of the southern English kingdoms.

> The fourth was Raedwald, king of the East Angles, who even in the lifetime of Aethelbert [of Kent] was winning the leadership for his own people.

However renowned in his own time, Raedwald of the Wuffings, king of East Anglia, has never achieved the personal fame of the more celebrated Anglo-Saxon rulers, yet he bequeathed the most impressive memorial to posterity of any of his rivals. Bede tells how Raedwald adopted the Christian faith on a visit to Aethelbert's kingdom of Kent, and yet contrived also to retain the pagan faith of his Germanic forbears. In his hall, according to an eye-witness quoted by a very disapproving Bede, stood a shrine to the 'White Christ' alongside a pagan altar for 'demonic sacrifice' to the old gods of Valhalla. That adherence to the rites of the Germanic tradition has borne the most remarkable fruit for the archaeologist in the magnificent hoard of wealth and weaponry interred in Raedwald's 'ship-burial' at Sutton Hoo. It is perhaps no less characteristic of this enigmatic English king that his mortal remains have not so far been found by the archaeologists excavating Sutton Hoo and may yet await discovery in a Christian grave in another place.

Raedwald's host of East Angles lay in readiness to fight in Aethelfrith's last battle on the east bank of the tributary of the Trent crossed by the Roman road from Doncaster to Lincoln, near Retford in Nottinghamshire. Henry of Huntingdon, drawing on sources independent of Bede, provides a vivid account.

A battle was fought between them on the borders of Mercia, on the eastern bank of the river Idle: from whence, it is said 'the river Idle was stained with English blood'. The fierce king Aethelfrith, indignant that any one should venture to resist him, rushed on the enemy boldly, but not in disorder, with a select body of veteran soldiers, though the troops of Raedwald made a brilliant and formidable display, marching in three bodies, with fluttering standards and bristling spears and helmets, while their numbers greatly exceeded their enemies. The king of the Northumbrians, as if he had found an easy prey, at once fell upon the close columns of Raedwald, and put to the sword Rainer, the king's son, with the division he commanded, his own precursors to the shades below. Meanwhile Raedwald, enraged, but not appalled, by his severe loss, stood invincibly firm with his two remaining columns. The Northumbrians made vain attempts to penetrate them, and Aethelfrith, charging among the enemy's squadrons, became separated from his own troops and was struck down on a heap of bodies he had slain. The death of their king was the signal for universal flight.

Henry follows Bede in dating the battle on the Idle to the year 617, but it must be more accurately placed at 616 by reason of Bede's chronological system dating the calendar year from September to September. The Welsh association of the battle of Chester with 'Bangor Orchard' would imply an autumnal setting for the conflict, if only because an orchard is most evidently more than a stand of trees at that season and if such were the case, it would solve two problems.

A date in the late autumn would place Aethelfrith's defeat – on Bede's reckoning – into the year following its true year, effectively moving it from 616 to 617. The same seasonal location might also explain Aethelfrith's defeat, as he would have disbanded his levied troops after the victory in Powys to allow their returning home for the harvest. When he headed east towards Deira, he would have been accompanied only by his *gesithas*, the bodyguard of warrior nobles which Henry of Huntingdon describes as 'a select body of veteran soldiers'.

When the Welsh Triad lists the death of 'Edelfled Ffleissauc, king of Lloegr' among the 'Three Fortunate Assassinations of the Island of Britain', it names 'Ysgafnell son of Dysgyfdawd' as Aethelfrith's assassin. *Ysgafnell* is otherwise unidentified and the presence of a Welsh warrior in the ranks of the East Angles on the Idle is at the least unlikely.

Welsh nicknames for English warlords occur throughout the Triads and 'Ysgafnell' must be just such a cognomen for Raedwald the Bretwalda, certainly on the evidence of Florent of Worcester, who alone among the English chroniclers seems also to get the date right.

> AD 616 . . . Raedwald, King of the East Angles, slew Aethelfrith, King of Deira and Bernicia, in a battle near the river called Idle.

It would be too fanciful to wonder if the Sutton Hoo sword in the British Museum is the blade which cut down Aethelfrith of Northumbria. Neither would it compare in importance with the presence of the man who fought at Raedwald's side, the exiled son of Aelle of Deira whom Bede will call *rex anglorum*, king of the English . . .

'rex anglorum'

EDWIN, SON OF AELLE

AD 616 – AD 632

The sequence of events which led to the death of Aethelfrith on the Idle is a miniature saga of assassination and exile, persecution and revenge which had begun with the seizure of Deira more than twenty years before. The central character of that saga is Edwin, son of Aelle, a man Sir Frank Stenton called 'a typical king of the Heroic Age'. Edwin was destined to succeed Aethelfrith as king of a unified Northumbria, to follow Raedwald as overlord of the seven kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England, and to earn unqualified approval in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* as the first Christian king of the northern English.

The Nennian genealogy traces Edwin's lineage from Woden, through Soemil, who 'was the first to separate Deur from Birneich' when he forged the first English dominion north of the Humber out of the mutiny of Germanic *foederati* in the mid-fifth century.

> Soemil begot Sguerthing, begot Giulglis, begot Usfrean, begot Iffi, begot Ulli, begot Aedgum.

Edwin's father, Aelle or Nennius' *Ulli*, died – according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – in 588. In his *Life of Oswald*, Reginald of Durham names Aethelfrith as Aelle's assassin and accuses him of pursuing Aelle's son into exile.

> He had taken to wife the daughter of King Aelle . . . he slew her father with the sword and proceeded to persecute his wife's brother Edwin, who was for long an exile. This young man sought out hiding-

places wherever he could in the territory of the English, because he foresaw that nowhere within reach of the power of Aethelfrith would he find safety, when his father had been killed by his own son-in-law. After his father's death, therefore, he took refuge with Raedwald, the noble son of Titylus, whose father was Uffa, from whom the kings of the East Angles name their descent; and there he stayed, under the protection of the king of the East Angles.

The anonymous *Life of Gregory the Great* – written at Whitby some years before Bede's *Historia* and to which Bede is believed to have had no access – expands on Reginald's reference to Edwin at Raedwald's court with a prophetic anecdote.

We will tell the story, not in the condensed version in which we have heard it, but we will strive to tell the truth and briefly relate what we believe to have happened, even though we have not heard the account from those who knew him best . . . and this event occurred long before the days of anyone now alive.

We all know it to be true that King Edwin was an exile at the court of Raedwald, king of the East Angles. Wherever he went, he was pursued by his rival, the tyrant Aethelfrith, who drove him from his country and sought by bribes of money to have him killed. During that time when he was in fear of his life, it is said that one day a man appeared to him, fair to look on and crowned with the cross of Christ, who began to comfort him, promising him a happy life and the kingdom of his people, if he would obey him. When Edwin declared that he would obey if he could prove to him the truth of his promise, the man replied, 'You will prove it to be true, and you must obey the one who first appears to you in this form and with this sign. He will teach you to obey the one living and true God who created all things, the God who will give you what I promise, and who will show you through that man all that you must do.'

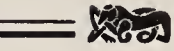
If Bede did not know the Whitby *Life* he certainly knew of this story, which evidently enjoyed a wide currency throughout the monastic tradition, from another source to include his own greatly expanded version in the *Historia*.

Persecuted by Aethelfrith, he travelled in secret for many years as a fugitive through many lands and kingdoms, until at last he came to

Raedwald and begged him to save his life and protect him from the wiles of his powerful persecutor. Raedwald welcomed him and promised to do as he asked. But when Aethelfrith learned that he had appeared in that kingdom and was living as a friend at the king's court among his retainers, he sent messengers to offer Raedwald a large bribe to kill him, but met with no success. He sent a second time, and a third, offering greater sums of money and threatening Raedwald with war if he refused. Raedwald, whether cowed by his threats or corrupted by his gifts, yielded to his request, and promised either to kill Edwin or to hand him over to Aethelfrith's envoys.

A loyal friend of Edwin discovered this, and in the first hour of the night entered the bedroom where he was preparing to sleep, and calling him outside he told of the action the king had promised to take against him. And he added, 'If you wish, I shall take you from this kingdom this very hour, and bring you to a place where Raedwald and Aethelfrith can never find you.' Edwin replied, 'I am grateful for your kindness, but I cannot do as you propose; I made an agreement with this great king and I cannot be the first to break it when he has done me no harm and as yet shown no enmity towards me. Indeed, if I am to die, let it be he rather than some lesser man who accomplishes my death. For where should I now take refuge, after wandering so many years through all the kingdoms of Britain to escape the snares of my enemies?' So his friend went away, and Edwin stayed alone outside; and while he sat sadly before the palace, he grew deeply troubled in his thoughts, not knowing what to do or where to turn.

For a long time he suffered this silent anguish of mind, *consumed by inward fire*, when suddenly at dead of night he saw silently approaching him a man whose face and dress were unfamiliar, and he was greatly alarmed at his strange and unexpected appearance. But the other came up and greeted him, and asked him why he sat awake there on a stone, alone and sorrowful, at an hour when all other men were at rest. Edwin asked in return what concern it was of his whether he spent the night indoors or outside. The stranger replied, 'Do not suppose that I am ignorant of the reason for your sorrowful vigil and your sitting here outside in solitude. I know very well who you are, and why you are sad, and what impending evils you fear. But tell me what reward you would give to one, if such there be, who would release you from these sorrows and persuade Raedwald neither to harm you nor



to deliver you to your enemies to be slain.' Edwin replied that he would give such a man everything in his power in return for such kindness. The stranger went on, 'And what if he were to promise, and not in vain, that your enemies will be destroyed, and that you will be king and surpass in power not only all your ancestors, but all who were kings before you among the English people?' Edwin, encouraged by his questions, did not hesitate to promise that he would show ample gratitude to such a benefactor. Then he asked Edwin a third question: 'If he who can truthfully predict such good fortune for you can also give you advice for your salvation and way of life, and better and more useful advice than your parents or any of your kinsmen knew, will you consent to obey him and accept his salutary counsel?' Without hesitation, Edwin at once promised to follow in every particular the guidance of one who would rescue him from so many grievous troubles, and raise him to the kingdom. On receiving this reply, the one who spoke with him at once placed his right hand upon his head and said, 'When you encounter this sign, remember this moment and our conversation, and do not delay the fulfilment of your present promise.' And with these words, it is said, he suddenly vanished, that Edwin might realise that it was not a man who had appeared to him, but a spirit.

The young prince remained seated there alone, heartened by the comfort given him, but also deeply disturbed and anxiously wondering about the identity and origin of the one who had spoken with him. Meanwhile his friend mentioned above came to him, and greeting him cheerfully said, 'Get up and go inside. Put aside your anxieties and set your body and mind at rest, for the king's heart is changed, and he has no plan to harm you, but rather to keep faith with you. When he privately disclosed to the queen the plan that I reported to you, she dissuaded him from his purpose, and warned him that it was unworthy of so great a king to sell his best friend, in the hour of his need, for gold, and – even worse – to sacrifice his honour, which is more precious than any wealth, for love of money.' To be brief, the king kept his word, and not only refused to betray the exile to the enemy messengers, but even helped him to gain the kingdom. Soon after the messengers returned home, he raised a great army to overthrow Aethelfrith, giving him no time to bring his whole army together; and when Aethelfrith's heavily outnumbered force engaged

> with him, Raedwald slew him on the Mercian border on the east bank of the river Idle. Raedwald's son Regenhere was also killed in this battle. And so Edwin, in accordance with the vision he had received, not only escaped the snares of the king his enemy, but on his death succeeded to his kingdom.

Thus Bede presents his account of the succession of Edwin to Aethelfrith's kingdom as an omen of the coming of Christianity to Northumbria, because – as the Whitby author concludes – 'it is said that it was the Bishop Paulinus who first appeared to him in that form.'

This supernatural appearance may well – as Peter Hunter Blair has suggested – originate in a more earthly encounter. There had been contact between the East Anglian and Kentish courts during Raedwald's reign and Paulinus had been in England since 601. It is quite possible that his missionary travels would have included at least one visit to Raedwald's court in the course of which he made his first acquaintance with the future king of Northumbria.

I have quoted Bede here at such great length because it is with Edwin's succession that the history of Northumbria as a Christian kingdom, the great theme of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, begins. Bede's central historical thesis proposes that a king – and his kingdom – will flourish in direct accordance to his adherence to the church and its teachings, and it was Edwin who provided him with his first outstanding example.

Here was a king who came into his kingdom on the prompting of a prophetic vision and who succeeded the ambivalently Christian Raedwald as a bretwalda with even greater dominion. Bede seeks to show how Edwin's marriage to a Christian queen, the baptism of first his daughter and later himself by a priest of Augustine's church, and the wholesale conversion of his subjects, was rewarded by ever-greater military triumph and expansion of his kingdom which would enjoy a stability and security unknown since the time of the *Pax Romana*. Bede's history is written always from his own perspective of monastic Christianity but the stories he tells – and tells so well – retain much of the idiom of the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition of the *Beowulf* poet.

Nonetheless, as vividly as Bede portrayed Edwin, the image he created must have been less than a wholly accurate one, and a wider perspective will confirm Edwin of Northumbria as a king cast very much in the

mould of his pagan forbears. Such a more accurately detailed portrait of that historical Edwin must first be sought in his earliest years.

Bede tells of Edwin's 'wandering so many years through all the kingdoms of Britain', which was often the way of the warrior in the Old English tradition, echoing the cult of Woden, the hooded lord of the slain, bearing his spear-shaft as he wandered the world of mortal men with his ravens flying over him. It is reflected in Beowulf's coming to Hrothgar's hall as clearly as it would have been in the arrival of Edwin in Raedwald's kingdom. But such an heroic destiny lay far ahead for the child-prince left fatherless when Aethelfrith slew Aelle of Deira. Edwin was born – according to the reliable chronology of Bede – in 584 and was no more than four years old when he was driven from his father's kingdom. He would certainly have been protected by whatever *gesithas* had survived the swordblades of Aethelfrith's warband and those 'loyal friends' would have carried him to safety as far as possible from Northumbria. So it was – according to Reginald of Durham – that Edwin's childhood was spent in Wales.

> Cadwan, who reigned on this side of the Humber, brought up Edwin with his own son Cadwallon.

'This side of the Humber' indicates a 'Southumbrian' origin for Reginald's information and his source would have been the monastic tradition of *Beardaneu* at Bardney in Lincolnshire. The monastery at Bardney had been generously favoured by the Mercian royal family in the person of Aethelred, son of Penda, and his queen, Osthryth, princess of Northumbria. Situated close to the border of Mercia with Gwynedd, Bardney tradition preserved material from Welsh and Mercian sources to which Reginald gained fortuitous access. He is supported, albeit in garbled form, by Geoffrey of Monmouth and also, more valuably, by Welsh tradition.

The Welsh Triads name 'Edwin, King of Lloegr' as one of 'The Three Great Oppressors of Mon, nurtured in the Island', contrasting Edwin's early years as a fosterling in Gwynedd with his later war of conquest on *Mon*, the Britonic name for the island of Anglesey, which is affirmed by Bede's reference to his seizure of the 'Mevanian islands'. His years at the court of Cadfan, king of Gwynedd, brought Edwin into early contact with Cadfan's own son, Cadwallon, who was destined to become his most dangerous and determined foe. A feud – and a deadly feud it

certainly proved – might very well have developed from a jealous boyhood rivalry between natural and foster sons, and Geoffrey of Monmouth's tale of both boys conceived at the same moment might bear a greater symbolic import than mere fantastical storytelling.

Cadfan, who is only sparsely noted in the sources, is remembered by little more than an inscribed tombstone now preserved in the church at Llangudwaladr, close by the site of his hall at Aberffraw on the west coast of Anglesey. He succeeded to the kingdom of Gwynedd on the death of the 'Iago', or Jacob, whose obituary is entered by the annalists in the year of the battle of Chester. A variant manuscript of the Welsh Annals adds a significant note of its own in its entry for that year.

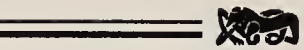
> The battle of Caerleon, in which Seysil, son of Cinan, and Iago, son of Beli, died, with many others.

Charles Plummer, the esteemed editor of Bede, proposed that annal entry as a clue to the motive for Aethelfrith's otherwise unexplained war on Powys. If Iago of Gwynedd fell in the battle beside Selyf of Powys, it would follow that warriors of Gwynedd fought beside those of Powys in the fray. Geoffrey of Monmouth's reference to Edwin's moving from Gwynedd to the court of 'Solomon' – by whom he means Selyf of Powys – would correspond with the great weight of evidence for Aethelfrith's unrelenting pursuit of Edwin, if his Welsh campaign was prompted by the sanctuary granted by the kings of Gwynedd and Powys to the fugitive prince of Deira. Bede tells how Aethelfrith threatened war on Raedwald for just the same reason and no other motive for the 'battle of Chester' would seem so clearly characteristic of 'Aedlferd Flesaur'.

Bede provides a further clue to Edwin's exile 'through many lands and kingdoms' in a list of his royal offspring.

> Osfrith and Eadfrith, the sons of King Edwin and Coenburg, daughter of Cearl, king of the Mercians; both sons were born while he was in exile.

The English kingdom of Mercia on the border of Wales – hence its name from the Old English *mearc* for march or border country – would have lain directly in Edwin's route east from Wales. After his stay at Cearl's court – where his apparent first marriage to Cearl's daughter suggests an attempt to enlist Mercian support against Aethelfrith – Edwin travelled on to the court of the most powerful English king, Raedwald of East



Anglia. There he established the alliance which would defeat Aethelfrith on the Idle and win the kingdom of Northumbria for the thirty-two year old Edwin of Deira.

The death of Raedwald following soon after the victory on the Idle left his ally Edwin of Northumbria well placed to succeed him – as Bede records – as the fifth bretwalda.

> The fifth was Edwin, king of the Northumbrians, the people who live north of the river Humber, and Edwin enjoyed still greater power, ruling over the entire population of Britain, both English and Britons, with the sole exception of the Kentish people. He also brought under English rule the Mevanian islands, inhabited by Britons and situated between Ireland and Britain.

The authority of the bretwalda is as uncertain a political concept as the origin of the term is unclear. Bede implies an overlord – perhaps on the model of the Irish *ard ri* or high king – over all the English kingdoms. The exception of Kent from such an authority may have derived from its traditional status as the oldest Anglo-Saxon dynasty first established by 'Hengist and Horsa'. While William of Malmesbury claimed that Northumbria lay under Kentish dominion until the advent of Ida, Bede's reference must have been coloured by Kent's distinction as the first English kingdom to accept the Christian mission of Augustine. Whatever the precise authority of the bretwalda, he can have been no more than overlord of a loose confederacy of kingdoms based – in the manner of the old Germanic alliances – on the allegiance of individual chieftains to a high king. Bede's claim for Edwin's 'ruling over both English and Britons' suggests some command of tribute from the British tribes whose territories fell under his authority and the etymology of his title may have derived from an Old English word-form of *bret-walda* for 'wielder over the Britons'.

Bede's *Historia* passes swiftly from Edwin's succession to Northumbria in 616 to a detailed account of his conversion to Christianity in 627. Yet, between these two landmarks in Edwin's saga lay a full decade in which he seems to have followed the way of the warlord in much the same manner as Aethelfrith before him. Edwin's continuation of Aethelfrith's war on the Britons was certainly being won in those first ten years of his reign. His first target must have been the Pennine kingdom of Elfed – known to the English as *Elmet* – which seems to have

sustained its own native king and resisted Northumbrian domination, even through Aethelfrith's reign. The Nennian Welsh Annals enter the death of a *Ceretic* at 616, representing a true date around 619, and the northern history of the *Historia Brittonum* includes a corresponding note in the entry for Edwin in its regnal list.

> Edguin, son of Alli, reigned seventeen years. And he occupied Elmet, and drove out Certic, the king of that land.

The conquest of Elmet would have brought Northumbrian dominion to the Pennines and beyond them lay the British dominion of the Welsh kingdoms. There whatever resistance had been offered by *Certic* – or more probably the Britonic *Cerdic* – of Elmet would have been a small matter compared with that presented by the fearsome Cadwallon of Gwynedd.

Bede affirms that Edwin's conquest of the 'Mevanian islands' of Anglesey and Man – the Triad's third 'Great Oppression of Mon' – was achieved before his conversion.

> As an augury of this king's acceptance of the faith and entry into the heavenly kingdom, his earthly power had increased until he held under his sway all the kingdoms of the English and Britons in the land of Britain, a power more extensive than that of any previous English king. As I recorded above, he also made the Mevanian islands subject to the English. The first of these, which lies to the south, is larger in size and more fertile, measuring nine hundred and sixty hides by English reckoning, while the second extends to over three hundred hides.

In the second decade of the seventh century, Bede's *Mevanias insulae* formed a part of the kingdom of Gwynedd, the kingdom to which Cadwallon, son of Cadfan, succeeded in the same year – according to Welsh tradition – as Edwin won Northumbria.

The fragments of evidence for Edwin's war on Gwynedd are principally found in Welsh sources, but his feud with Cadwallon spanned the greater expanse of his reign, from the seizure of Anglesey to his last battle at Hatfield in 632. The Northumbrian conquest of the 'Irish Sea province' of Anglesey and Man demonstrates the presence of a substantial naval component in Edwin's war-machine which drove Cadwallon from his

kingdom and warships must also have been deployed in the siege entered in the *Annales Cambriae*.

The besieging of king Cadwallaun in the island of Glannauc.

Glannauc, the tiny isle of Priestholm off the eastern tip of Anglesey, must represent Cadwallon's last foothold on Gwynedd from where he escaped by sea into exile, probably among the Pictish *Cruithne* in Ireland.

The Welsh annalist has confused the situation by entering the siege of Glannauc at 629, representing a true date between 630 and 632. This would be far too late to correspond with Bede's evidence of the seizure of the 'Mevanian islands' which preceded Edwin's conversion in 627 and the Welsh tradition of a seven year exile. The solution may once again lie in scribal error, where a date of '629' or *DCXXIX* was entered in error for *DCXIX* or 619, representing a true date no later than 622, which would well correspond with all the other evidence for Cadwallon's chronology and bring him back to Wales around 629 to wage his war of vengeance on Edwin.

Having pushed Northumbria's advance over the Pennines to the shore of the Irish Sea, Edwin's attention was directed southward when the blade of a West Saxon assassin came within inches of success. Bede relates this incident – in his finest saga style – as an episode in the long process of the conversion of Edwin by Paulinus and dates it to 626, the year after Edwin's marriage to the Kentish princess, Aethelberg.

> The occasion of the [Northumbrian] people's conversion to the faith was that King Edwin became related to the kings of Kent by taking as his wife King Aethelbert's daughter Aethelberg, who was also called Tatae. When Edwin first sent ambassadors to ask her brother Eadbald, who was then king of Kent, for her hand in marriage, he received the reply that it was unlawful for a Christian maiden to be married to a heathen, for fear that the faith and sacraments of the King of Heaven might be profaned by union with a king who was utterly ignorant of the worship of the true God. When the messengers brought back this reply, Edwin promised to put no obstacle of any kind in the way of the Christian faith which the maiden practised; on the contrary, he would allow her and all her retinue, men and women, priests and attendants, to continue in the Christian faith and to follow the Christian form of worship. He also said that he too would accept the same

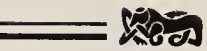
religion, provided that it was found, when examined by his advisers, to be holier and more worthy of God.

And so the maiden was betrothed and sent to Edwin, and by the terms of the agreement Paulinus, a man beloved of God, was ordained bishop to accompany her and, by daily instruction and the celebration of the heavenly sacraments, to protect her and her retinue from being defiled by their association with the heathen.

The following year there came to the kingdom an assassin called Eumer, sent by Cwichelm, king of the West Saxons; his intention was to deprive King Edwin of both his kingdom and his life, and he carried a two-edged knife treated with poison, so that if the wound inflicted by the blade failed to kill the king, the poison would complete its work. He came to the king on Easter Day near to the river Derwent, where at that time there was a royal estate, and was admitted on the pretext of delivering a message from his master; and while cunningly explaining his pretended mission, he suddenly leapt up, drew the knife concealed in his clothes, and attacked the king. Seeing this, Lilla, a thane devoted to the king, at once interposed his own body to take the thrust of the dagger, as he had no shield to hand to save the king from death; but the enemy plunged in the blade with such force that he not only killed the thane but also wounded the king through his body. Swords were drawn and Eumer was at once attacked from all sides, but in the confusion he killed yet another of the thanes named Forthere with the treacherous weapon.

The same night, the holy night of Easter Day, the queen bore the king a daughter, who was named Eanflaed; and when the king, in the presence of Paulinus the bishop, gave thanks to his gods for the birth of his daughter, the bishop for his part began to thank the Lord Christ, and to assure the king that it was in answer to his own prayers that God had granted the queen a safe delivery, without serious pain. Delighted by his words, the king promised to renounce his idols and serve Christ, if He would grant him life and victory in battle over the king responsible for sending the assassin who had wounded him; and, as a pledge that he would keep his promise, he entrusted his daughter to Bishop Paulinus to be consecrated to Christ. She was baptised, the first of the Northumbrians to receive baptism, on the Feast of Pentecost, together with eleven others of his household.

When the king's wound was healed, he summoned his army,



> marched against the West Saxons, and joined battle; and he either slew or forced to surrender all whom he discovered to have plotted his death. Returning home victorious, he would not accept the sacraments of the Christian faith immediately and without due consideration, even though he had not worshipped idols since his promise to serve Christ.

The northern recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the same incident under the year 626 suggested by Bede, entering a dramatic concluding detail of its own in Edwin's slaughter of West Saxon kings.

> In this year Eomer came from Cwichelm, king of the West Saxons, thinking to stab king Edwin; and he stabbed Lilla his thane, and Forthere, and wounded the king. And on the same night a daughter was born to Edwin, who was called Eanflaed. Then the king promised to Paulinus, that he would give his daughter to God, if by prayer he would obtain from God that he might slay his foe who had sent the assassin thither. And he went against the West Saxons with an army, and there slew five kings, and many of the people.

From the evidence of the *Chronicle*, Edwin still followed in the old way of the warrior, whatever Christian gloss Bede might seek to apply to the historical record, and his choice of a queen from the kingdom of Kent must have been related to the Kentish independence from the dominion of the bretwalda. A political marriage was the long-established device in the expansion of royal power, indeed Edwin's own sister had become Aethelfrith's queen when he sought to annex Deira into his unified Northumbrian kingdom and a Kentish queen would similarly legitimise Edwin's authority over the entire heptarchy of English kingdoms. His expanded dominion must have appeared as an ominous threat to the kingdom of Wessex, which suggests a probable motive for the West Saxon conspiracy to assassinate an overlord of such unprecedented power. If political power was Edwin's ambition, then his baptism might be seen as the price of such greater glory, and the presence of Augustine's bishop Paulinus in Aethelberg's retinue was clearly the means to that end.

The faith of the pagan Germanic chieftain was always inextricably linked to his success in war and if the Christian baptism proffered by Paulinus assured victory in battle, it could offer no greater lure for a

'typical king of the Heroic Age'. None of this would have been lost on the shrewd and tenacious Paulinus, however cautiously Edwin approached conversion. Edwin's caution might be variously explained, because this was no simple matter of personal faith – indeed there is convincing Welsh evidence that he had already been baptised in his youth – but the public declaration of the baptism of a king, which would carry with it the conversion of his kingdom to Christianity. The Germanic chieftain had long been the religious head of his people. Tacitus offers evidence in his first-century *Germania* of the 'priest-king' who had emerged, by the time of the English settlements, as the Woden-descended embodiment of the fate and fortune of his people, personally responsible for the quality of the harvest as much as for the tide of battle. This concept of kingship lies unexpectedly close to the thesis of Bede's *Historia* where the religious adherence of the king is the lodestone of the destiny of his kingdom, an idea clearly rooted in the ancient Germanic origins of the *cyning*. The 'cult of kingship', as it is called by the historian William Chaney, was sustained from the pagan age of Germanic migration through to the 'golden age' of Northumbrian Christianity. Alcuin, writing home to Northumbria from Charlemagne's court just months before the first Viking attack on Lindisfarne in 793, offers concise testimony.

> In the righteousness of the king is the prosperity of the whole people, the victory of the war-host, the mildness of the seasons, the fruitfulness of the land.

Edwin's kingdom included the Bernicia of the Idings as well as his own patrimony of Deira and he numbered among his subjects many who had fought only a decade before in the warbands of the pagan Aethelfrith. To commit such a people to the faith of Paulinus was a weighty decision which needed to be underwritten by the most convincing evidence of accompanying good fortune. Therein lay the importance of the frustrated assassination attempt, and Edwin acknowledged it by committing his newborn daughter to the faith in company with a test-batch of his subjects. The success of his war of vengeance in Wessex would have provided further evidence, and yet Edwin still procrastinated. Bede explains that he needed 'to consult with his wisest counsellors as to what course of action they recommended' and he was evidently carefully judging the reaction of thane and warrior across the vast territories of his kingdom.

Bede sets the scene for Edwin's baptism with his saga of Edwin's vision

at the hall of Raedwald, in which the prophetic night-visitor had, of course, been Paulinus.

> One day, the man of God came in to him, placed his right hand upon his head, and asked if he recognised this sign. The king trembled, and would have fallen at his feet, but Paulinus raised him up and said to him, in a voice which seemed familiar, 'See, by God's help you have escaped from the hands of the enemy you feared; and again, by His gift, you have gained the kingdom that you desired. Remember the third promise that you made, and hesitate no longer. Accept the faith and keep the commandments of Him who saved you from your earthly adversaries, and raised you to the honour of an earthly kingdom. If from this time you will obey His will, which He reveals to you through me, He will deliver you also from the everlasting torment of the wicked, and give you a place with Him in His eternal kingdom in heaven.'

Bede's account of the conversation between Edwin and his high-priest, Coifi, who is persuaded to declare 'in all frankness, that I have found the religion which we have hitherto professed to be altogether powerless and unprofitable', cannot be taken as any form of true historical record but effectively summarises what must have been long consultative negotiations to harmonise the new faith with the old order. It concludes with a vivid portrayal of Coifi's dramatic role in a Northumbrian 'twilight of the gods'.

> The king publicly accepted the gospel preached by blessed Paulinus, renounced idolatry, and confessed his faith in Christ. And when he asked the high priest of their religion who should be the first to profane the altars and shrines of the idols, together with their precincts, he replied, 'I will: I worshipped these things in my foolishness, and now that the true God has granted me wisdom, there is no one who could more fittingly set an example to all by destroying them.' And at once, casting vain superstition aside, he asked the king to give him arms and a stallion to mount in order to destroy the idols; for the high priest of this religion had not been permitted to bear arms or to ride except on a mare. So girded with a sword and with a spear in his hand, he mounted the king's stallion and made for the idols. At the sight of this, the common people thought him to be mad; but he did

> not hesitate, on approaching the shrine, to profane it by casting into it the spear which he held. Then, full of joy in his knowledge of the worship of the true God, he ordered his companions to destroy and set alight the shrine and all its precincts. The place where the idols once stood is still pointed out, not far from Eboracum to the east, across the river Derwent, and today it is called Godmunddingaham. Here it was that the high priest in person, inspired by the true God, desecrated and destroyed the altars that he himself had dedicated.

Bede, probably unwittingly, serves to underline the Germanic tradition of the priest-king, in which Coifi is no more than a counsellor to the supreme spiritual authority of the *cyning*. Their relationship contrasts dramatically with that described by Adamnan between Aidan of Dalriada and his priest Columcille of Iona, where Columcille's vision on Hinba of the angel with the book of glass commanding the succession of Aidan corresponds to the rite of the druids naming the high kings of Ireland on the hill at Tara. The druids of the Gael, like the bards of the Britons, were the keepers of ancient tradition in the Celtic world, but Paulinus had no need to negotiate with any such pagan shamans and carried his mission directly to the Germanic priest-king in the person of Edwin, whose decision served to instruct his clearly subordinate priest-counsellor in the person of Coifi.

Coifi's enthusiastic assault on the pagan holy places is located by Bede at *Godmunddingaham*, the village of Goodmanham near Market Weighton in the Yorkshire Wolds where the earliest Germanic settlement north of the Humber has been confirmed by archaeology and more than a hundred Iron Age burial barrows around Market Weighton attest an even older sacred significance.

So it came about that Edwin of Northumbria, son of Aelle of Deira, fulfilled the promise he had made at Raedwald's court and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records his baptism in its entry for the year AD 627.

> In this year king Edwin was baptised with his people at Easter by Paulinus.

With characteristically Celtic contrariness, the corresponding entry in the *Annales Cambriae* dramatically disrupts the English version of events.

> Etguin was baptised, and Run, son of Urbgen, baptised him.

Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* concurs with the Welsh annalist, despite the confused attempt at correction added by a later scribe and entered here in parentheses.

> Eanfled, his daughter, received baptism on the twelfth day after Whitsunday, and all his people, men and women, with her. Eadguin was baptised the following Easter, and twelve thousand people were baptised with him. If anyone wishes to know who baptised them, (this is the account I was given by Bishop Renchidus and Elbodus, the holiest of bishops) that Rum map Urbgen (that is Paulinus, Archbishop of York) baptised them, and for forty days he continued to baptise the whole race of Humbrensians, and through his preaching many believed in Christ.

The welter of confusion surrounding this Nennian evidence for Edwin's conversion is almost impossible to reconcile with the authority of Bede's *Historia* and the earlier support for Bede in the Whitby *Life of Gregory* from the Deiran tradition.

The solution must lie in the provenance of the Nennian material. His *Historia Brittonum*, compiled in Wales in the fourth decade of the ninth century, drew its 'Northern History' from a north British source set down in its earliest form in the seventh century, probably at Ninian's monastery of Whithorn on the Solway. By the time that material had come into Nennius' hands, Bede's *Historia* had been established for a hundred years as the standard history of the English people and a ninth-century author would have needed to reconcile any earlier Britonic variants with the authoritative Bedan account. Thus an ancient Britonic reference to a baptism of *Eadguin* must be set into Bede's chronology at a date around 627 where the mass baptism of 'the whole race of the Humbrensians' might be reasonably appended on his authority. At some point – in Nennius' time or later – the prevailing historical orthodoxy insisted that the priest officiating at Edwin's baptism must have been the Paulinus so firmly identified by Bede, hence the interpolation of 'that is Paulinus, Archbishop of York' to qualify the entry of 'Rum map Urbgen' as the baptising cleric.

The interpolation is a clear nonsense. The Paulinus who baptised Edwin at Easter 627 was one of the second company of clerics sent by Pope Gregory to reinforce Augustine's Kentish mission in 601 and was almost certainly, like Augustine, an Italian. Such a man could not poss-

ibly be confused with the Briton identified as 'Run, son of Urbgen' by the Welsh annalist and 'Rum map Urbgen' by the Nennian history, which name might be more authentically represented as *Rhun*. The patronymic of *map Urbgen* or 'Urbgen's son', claims this Rhun as a son of Urien of Rheged, the warlord of the north Britons slain in the siege of Lindisfarne. No other *Urbgen* is to be found in the Britonic genealogies and the entry of a king's son into the church was far from uncommon. A hagiographical tradition, totally unsupported by chronological plausibility, suggests Kentigern, the great saint of the Men of the North patronised by Rhydderch of Strathclyde, as a son of Owain ap Urien who succeeded his father as 'lord of Catraeth'.

A second son of Urien might very well have been the Rhun of the Nennian sources, entering the church, most probably at Whithorn, and certainly in his later years after the fathering of offspring recorded elsewhere in Nennius' miscellany. The contact between the northern *cymry* of Rheged and Strathclyde and the dynasty founded in Gwynedd by Cunedda of the Gododdin could certainly have brought a son of Urien as a visiting cleric to the zealously Christian court of Cadfan at Aberffraw. The young Edwin, raised there as Cadfan's foster-son, would have been instructed in the Christian faith – albeit in the Celtic orthodoxy of the British church so disparaged by Bede – and placed under the greatest pressure to renouce the heathenism of his Germanic forbears.

It is no great leap of speculation to propose the young Deiran prince in exile baptised at the court of his foster-father by a priest of the British church. Such a conversion would certainly have been entered in any northern history at Whithorn – most especially if Rhun, son of Urien, had any part in its authorship – which was included by Nennius in his *Historia Brittonum*. The later amendment of the original material to comply with Bede's history can be read as no more than scribal confusion, and only the question of Edwin's personal belief remains unclarified. In the context of the early seventh century that need present no great problem. If Edwin had been baptised into Celtic Christianity at Aberffraw, his adult travels through the English kingdoms, and certainly the fiercely pagan Mercia, would have prompted a diplomatic reversion to the faith of his fathers. Bede's account of the ambivalent religious observances in Raedwald's hall tells of the 'White Christ' merely set beside Woden and Tiw in the iconography of the pagan English world, and

there is no reason to assume Edwin's beliefs differed greatly from those of his host and ally in East Anglia.

A baptism into the Celtic church by a priest of the Britons would have counted akin to paganism by Paulinus – and little better than that by Bede. The public declaration of conversion to the church of Augustine would have carried an incomparable political significance for Edwin the Bretwalda rendering his childhood baptism by Rhun as a detail of the least importance.

If only for its political import, Bede's account of the baptism of Edwin at York on the twelfth day of April in the year 627 endures as a landmark in the saga of the Northumbrian kings.

> So King Edwin, with all the noblemen of his race and a vast number of the common people, received the faith and regeneration by holy baptism in the eleventh year of his reign, the year of our Lord 627, about 180 years from the arrival of the English in Britain.
>
> He was baptised at Eboracum on Easter Day, the second of the ides of April, in the church of Saint Peter the Apostle, a wooden structure which he had hastily built there while he was under instruction to receive baptism; and in the same city he established an episcopal see for his teacher and bishop, Paulinus. Soon after his baptism, and on the advice of Paulinus, he set about building a stone basilica, larger and more impressive, on the same site, which was to enclose the oratory that he had built before.
>
> From that time until the end of Edwin's reign, a period of six years, Paulinus continued to preach the word of God in that kingdom with the king's consent and favour; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed and were baptised. Indeed it is said that so great was the zeal for the faith and the desire for the saving grace of baptism among the Northumbrians that on one occasion Paulinus, when visiting the royal estate at Adgefrin with the king and queen, spent thirty six days with them there administering catechism and baptism. During all that time he did nothing from morning till evening but give instruction in Christ's saving Word to the people who flocked there from every village and district; and after their instruction, he baptised them for the remission of their sins in the river Glen, which was close by.
>
> These events happened in the kingdom of Bernicia. In the kingdom

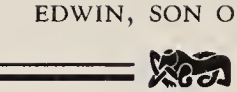
> of Deira, where he very often stayed with the king, he used to baptise in the river Sualua, which flows past the town of Cataracta; for the church there was in its infancy, and it had not yet been possible to build oratories or baptistries.

Bede's account of Paulinus' mass-baptisms is especially interesting in that the two locations he identifies – *Cataracta* in Deira and *Ad Gefrin* in Bernicia – are both significant examples of British settlements which had become English royal estates. The baptisms in the Swale were conducted close to the *vill* at *Cetreht*, formerly the Roman *Cataracto* and the *Catraeth* of Urien's Rheged. Similarly the Bernician baptisms in the Glen took place in the river below the royal estate of Ad Gefrin under the shadow of an ancient hillfort of the Britons of Brynaich.

Bede's *Ad Gefrin* – a Britonic name which translates as 'by the hill of the goats' – has been uncovered by the archaeologist Brian Hope-Taylor at Old Yeavering beneath the hillfort on Yeavering Bell at the northern extremity of the Cheviot range. Hope-Taylor's remarkable excavations uncovered a sequence of almost unbroken settlement at Yeavering from around 2,000 BC to the later seventh century when Bede records 'this royal estate was abandoned during the reigns of Edwin's successors, and another was built to replace it at a place called Maelmin.'

While nothing of Yeavering's history as a stronghold of the Britons has survived in the early sources, the Nennian account of the campaigns of Arthur does claim 'his first battle was at the mouth of the river called Glein.' If Nennius intends the Northumbrian Glen, it falls into the Till just a few miles from Yeavering in the fiercely-contested frontier zone between Brynaich and the English settlements of the fifth and sixth centuries. The lower slopes leading down to the Glen were the site of the expansive timber buildings of the royal estate, even township, of Ad Gefrin. Amongst them a hall and temple date from the early years of Aethelfrith's kingdom, but the greater expansion of the site was accomplished during Edwin's reign. He would have raised the most imposing of the sequence of great halls, which bears striking comparison with *Heorot*, the hall of Hrothgar described by the *Beowulf* poet.

> The greatest of hall-buildings . . . a timber-built hall, magnificent and agleam with gold: of buildings here below the heavens this one in which the great ruler lived was the most eminently celebrated among earth's inhabitants. The lustre of it cast light over many lands.



Among the buildings of Edwin's *vill*, the structure recorded in the archaeological report as 'D2' includes numerous burials which confirm it as a temple already standing when Paulinus came to Ad Gefrin. The archaeological evidence indicates a pre-Christian temple adapted for Christian use by Paulinus, who was faithfully following Pope Gregory's expressed policy of converting pagan sacred places to Christian worship. Non-structural post-holes, identified in that building and nowhere else on the Yeavering site, located wooden pillars which were removed at some point before Ad Gefrin was destroyed by fire in the devastation of Northumbria following Edwin's death. These can only have been totems of the pagan cult of the 'world ash tree', called *Yggdrasil* by the Vikings and found throughout the northern world, which would have certainly gone the way of Coifi's pagan shrines in 627.

The anonymous monk of Whitby tells a story of Edwin and Paulinus 'hurrying to church surrounded by a crowd of people who were still bound to heathenism.' When 'the hoarse cry of a crow sounded in an unfavourable region of the sky', Paulinus commanded that it be shot dead, recognising the crow as a pagan symbol of prophecy evocative of Woden's ever-attendant ravens. The Whitby manuscript taken with the evidence of Yeavering for the first decade of Edwin's reign would certainly support Brian Hope-Taylor's proposal 'that Paulinus found Ad Gefrin a centre of vigorous, native paganism.'

The grandeur of the great hall at Ad Gefrin – like Hrothgar's 'banqueting-chamber greater than the children of men had ever heard tell of' – might be seen as a symbol for the high point of Edwin's Northumbrian kingdom, portrayed – even acclaimed – by Bede as years of peace and prosperity bearing comparison with the *Pax Romana*.

> At that time, as far as King Edwin's power extended, Britain is said to have enjoyed such peace that, as the proverb has it even today, a woman with her new-born child could walk across the whole island from sea to sea and take no harm.
>
> Such was the splendour of his reign that not only in battle were standards carried before him, but even in peace-time, as he rode with his thanes about his cities, estates and kingdoms, a standard-bearer always preceded him; and wherever he walked along the roads, the type of standard called *tufa* in Latin, and *thuf* in English, was regularly carried in front of him.

Thus Bede portrays the English successor to the Roman high command of the *Dux Britanniarum* in the person of a Christian king of Northumbria, yet there remains the ironic presence of old Germanic elements in Bede's deliberately 'Roman' portrait of Edwin *rex Anglorum*. Whatever administrative or ceremonial assemblies are indicated by the 'auditorium' design of a third major building at Yeavering, the most practical purpose of Edwin's royal progresses would have been the consumption of the abundant produce of the royal estates scattered across the extensive territories of the kingdom. Seen in that setting, the thirty-six days of Paulinus' baptismal ministry in the Glen would correspond to a month of royal feasting in the mead-hall at Yeavering before the royal progress moved on to the *vill* at *Cetreht*.

The fact that the Christian Constantine the Great was declared emperor in the same Eboracum where Edwin was baptised by Paulinus would certainly not have escaped the learned Bede, but he may not have fully appreciated that the *Dux Britanniarum* so impressively emulated by the *rex Anglorum* would certainly have been a Germanic warlord in Roman service. The 'standard called *tufa* in Latin, and *thuf* in English' suggests the iron 'standard' found above the symbolic resting-place of Raedwald's head in the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo. Its animal effigy, shaft and cross-bar are all paralleled in the *tufa*, which is only first recorded in the late fourth century, has no identifiable earlier Roman provenance and most probably derived from the insignia of Germanic mercenaries recruited for the Empire beyond its Rhine frontier.

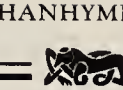
Just as the British hillfort of Din Guairi became Ida's capital fortress at Bamburgh, so York was restored to its former Roman prominence as the capital city of Edwin's kingdom. The long process which transformed the military capital of Roman Britain at *Eboracum* into the royal capital of Northumbria at *Eoforwic* is far from clear, but its Roman heritage was to be long remembered. Bede referred to the city always as *Eboracum* and its Latin name remained in learned use until the thirteenth century. Eboracum was an early centre of Germanic settlement from at least the fourth century when the forbears of the English of Deira were settled in the Vale of York and the Wolds of Humberside as the mercenary *foederati* of Roman, and later post-Roman, Britain. Romano-Saxon ware has been discovered in excavations of the Mount at York and Germanic graves have been found in the burial grounds of the Roman city. At Heworth,

less than a mile from the great fortress of the Sixth Legion, is an extensive cremation cemetery where Roman burials have been found beside fifth-century Germanic cremation urns in an unbroken sequence of interment. While the cemetery evidence around Sancton and Driffield provides a similarly unbroken sequence through to the sixth and seventh centuries, there is a gap in the archaeological record at York obscuring its history between the fifth-century English settlements and its emergence in Edwin's reign. If York suffered dramatic depopulation through those two hundred years, the reason may well have been flooding. The Durham archaeologist, Professor Rosemary Cramp, points to flood evidence in excavations at Hungate and Clifford's Tower which would have coincided with the mutiny of Germanic mercenaries in the mid-fifth century of Edwin's ancestor Soemil.

While York retained a traditional ancestral importance for Edwin, born a prince of Deira, it must have carried no less significance for Paulinus. In 601, Pope Gregory wrote urging Augustine 'to send to the city of Eboracum a bishop' and envisaged the new church in the 'land of the Angles' organised around the centres of the Roman province of *Britannia*. Paulinus would have known of the Papal instruction and would himself have seen continental churches built on the ruins of the Roman forts where the new barbarian overlords held their courts. The church, or more modestly the *oratorium*, at York in which Edwin was baptised by Paulinus was a hurried timber structure on the site of the Roman cavalry fortress. Bede tells how a more substantial church 'in the Roman manner' was commissioned by Edwin on the same site and on the prompting of Paulinus' continental taste.

> Soon after his baptism, and on the advice of Paulinus, he began to build a stone basilica, larger and more impressive, on the same site, which was to enclose the oratory that he had built before. So the foundations were laid, and he began to build his square church around the earlier oratory; but before the walls reached their full height, the king was cruelly slain and left the work to be completed by his successor.

In its entry for the year 626, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* throws the ominous shadow of the pagan Penda over the achievement of Paulinus' mission to Edwin's Northumbria.



> And the king within a twelvemonth was baptised at Easter with all his nobles. This was done at York, where he first commanded a church of wood to be built, which was hallowed in the name of Saint Peter. There the king gave Paulinus a bishop's see; and there he afterwards commanded a larger church to be built of stone.
>
> And in this year Penda succeeded to the kingdom [of Mercia] and reigned thirty winters.

The succession of Penda as king of Mercia was as significant a landmark in the history of that kingdom as had been Aethelfrith's unification of Northumbria some two decades before.

Penda, son of Pybba, was 'Woden-sprung' from a lineage which the *Chronicle* traces back to a Germanic king in the continental homelands. His forbear Offa, 'king of Angel' or Angeln in Schleswig-Holstein, has been identified as the hero celebrated in Germanic legend as 'the best of all mankind between the seas'. As befitted such impressive ancestry, Penda was a ferocious warlord, the slayer of at least five kings, and no less ferocious a pagan. His tribe of the *Mierce*, 'the border folk', were named from the frontier between their territory in the English midlands and the Welsh dominions of the Britons which was marked by the hills of Cannock Chase. As the overlord of the English tribes of what is now the Midlands, he overwhelmed Raedwald's East Anglia to lay the foundation of the dominance of the Mercian kingdom which attained its supremacy among the English heptarchy under another Offa in the ninth century.

Whether or not Penda was 'conquered' by Cadwallon – as Reginald's source would claim – Mercia and Gwynedd found common cause to come together in alliance against Northumbria. Cadwallon had ample motive for a war of vengeance on the northern *bretwalda*, while Penda's resentment of Edwin's unprecedented power can only have been further fuelled by the attachment of that power to the Kentish Christian mission.

Cadwallon's exile is nowhere reliably detailed. While Reginald of Durham and Geoffrey of Monmouth place it across the Channel amongst the expatriate Britons of 'Armorica' in Gaul, a more probable Irish exile is attested by the older Welsh tradition where a fragment included in the *Canu Taliesin* celebrates Cadwallon's triumphant return.

> When Cadwallawn came
> Over the ocean of Iwerdon,
> He regulated heaven as high creator.

Wherever Cadwallon might have endured exile, Welsh and English sources agree on his returning to rally his Welsh warbands for war on Northumbria. A ninth-century elegy in *The Red Book of Hergest* enumerates Cadwallon's battle honours.

> Cadwallawn, before he came to his end,
> Fought to our ample satisfaction,
> Fourteen great battles
> For fairest Prydein,
> And sixty skirmishes.

The poem may even represent a later recension of the work of Cadwallon's own bard, but that later Welsh scribe must have re-sited many battlefields in more familiar Welsh locations. Consequently the verses place none of Cadwallon's battles outside of Wales, when at least one was certainly fought in the north of England. No little confusion has stemmed from the similarity of the Welsh names for two different conflicts. Edwin's last battle, fought according to English sources at *Haethfeld* in south Yorkshire, was known to both the Nennian *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* as the battle of *Meicen*. The *Red Book* celebrates another victory won by Cadwallon around *Cefn Digoll*, the Long Mountain, in the region of *Meigen* in Powys.

> Cadwallawn the illustrious
> Encamped on Digoll Mount,
> For seven months and seven battles daily.
> Cadwallawn encamped on the Havren,
> And on the further side of Dygen,
> And the devourers were burning Meigen.

The same conflict – in which the Severn ran red with blood – is included in the Welsh Triad listing 'The Three Discolourings of the Severn'.

> Cadwallawn when he went to the battle of Digoll,
> and the armies of the Cymry with him;
> and Edwin on the other side,
> and the armies of Lloegr with him.
> And the Severn was discoloured from its source to its mouth.

The Triad of the 'Three Fettered Warbands of the Island of Britain' numbers a 'Belyn of Llyn' as fighting Edwin, possibly as an ally among Cadwallon's 'armies of the Cymry'.

> And the third, the War-Band of Belyn of Llyn
> when fighting Edwin at Bryn Edwin in Rhos.

Another Welsh source, the *Moliant Cadwallon* discovered by Sir Ifor Williams, tells how Cadwallon 'did not parley at the demand of the men of Bernicia, since Edwin of the great treachery was their leader' and pursued the retreating Northumbrians.

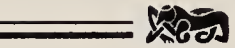
These cryptic fragments serve at least to evoke a bitterly fought war on Welsh soil spilling over into English territory. There Cadwallon was joined by the Mercian forces of his ally, Penda, and the *Moliant Cadwallon* tells of a 'muster for the burning of York' which would correspond with the English evidence for the disrupted building of Paulinus' church.

Bede's *Historia* provides the most authoritative account of the final destruction of Edwin *rex anglorum*.

> For seventeen years Edwin had ruled most gloriously over the English and British races, and for six of those years, as I have said, he had been a soldier for the kingdom of Christ, when Caedwalla, king of the Britons, rebelled against him. Caedwalla received help from Penda, a vigorous son of the royal house of the Mercians, whose reign over that nation extended for twenty two years from that time, with varying fortunes. A fierce battle was fought on the plain called Haethfeld, in which Edwin was killed; the date was the fourth of the ides of October, in the year of our Lord 633, and Edwin was forty eight years old. His entire army was slain or scattered. Also in this war, one of his sons, Osfrith, a warlike young man, fell before him, while the other, Eadfrith, was forced to desert to King Penda, who later murdered him in contravention of an oath, during the reign of Oswald.

Henry of Huntingdon adds a colourful paragraph from his own sources to Bede's account.

> Report says that in the battle just mentioned, the plain of Hethfeld reeked throughout with red streams of noble blood; it was, indeed, the scene of a sudden and deplorable slaughter of the bravest warriors.



The battle of Haethfeld was fought on the moorland of Hatfield Chase, some seven miles north-east of Doncaster, on the twelfth of October. Falling after September it was dated by Bede's chronology to the year 633, which would be more accurately rendered as 632.

Having slain Edwin with his sons and destroyed his army, the combined host of Wales and Mercia entered on a devastating onslaught on his kingdom. The destruction must have fallen swiftly on the royal *vill* at *Campodonum* near Doncaster, where Bede tells of a church 'burnt down, together with the entire estate, by the heathen who slew King Edwin'. Peter Hunter Blair suggests that Bede's grandparents, if not his parents, would have remembered it vividly and 'may have seen the valley of the Tweed aflame with burning straw on harvested fields'. Their memories must have coloured the *Historia*'s account of the year of fire and sword *be northan Hymbre*.

> At this time a great slaughter took place among the Church and people of the Northumbrians, all the more brutal in that one of the perpetrators was a heathen and the other a barbarian, and even more savage than the heathen. Penda and the whole Mercian race worshipped idols in ignorance of the name of Christ; but Caedwalla, though a Christian by name and profession, had the temperament and character of a barbarian. Showing no mercy even to women and innocent children, he tortured everyone to death with bestial savagery, and for a long time spread havoc throughout their lands, intending to extirpate the entire English race from the land of Britain.

The excavations at Yeavering have provided evidence of the destruction of Edwin's *vill* by the firebrands of Cadwallon, just as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s entry for 632 records the Christian mission of Paulinus as the first notable casualty to follow in the wake of Edwin's death at Haethfeld.

> In this year Edwin was slain, and Paulinus returned to the Kentish people.

Bede tells how Paulinus fled south to Kent by the only safe route of a sea-voyage in the retinue of Edwin's queen Aethelberg, her surviving children and an escort of loyal thanes. The *Historia* goes on to dismiss the following twelve months as 'the year of apostasy', when the great majority of Paulinus' flock baptised in the Swale and the Glen swiftly

reverted to their former paganism in the face of the threat of Penda's warbands.

The evidence of the Irish annals – where the word *cath* for 'battle' signifies the death of a warlord – confirms that news of Edwin's destruction had reached Iona and there was entered into the chronicle that would provide the source for the *Annals of Tigernach*.

> The battle of Edwin, son of Aelle, the Saxons' king who ruled all Britain; and in this battle he was conquered by Catguollaun, king of the Britons, and Penda the Saxon.

The new interest shown by Irish annalists in Northumbrian affairs after 616 can be explained by the presence in Dalriada and in Ireland of Oswald and Oswy, sons of Aethelfrith of Northumbria, throughout Edwin's reign. No one would have been more aware than they of the implications of the note entered into the *Historia Brittonum*'s genealogy of the kings of Deira.

> The two sons of Edguin fell with him in the battle of Meicen, and the kingship was never again held by one of his stock, because none of his line survived that battle, but all were killed with him by the army of Catguollaun, king of the land of Guendota.

No one, perhaps, other than Eanfrith, the firstborn son of Aethelfrith and Bebba, who was drawn out of his exile in the land of the Picts to claim his father's kingdom from the hosts of Cadwallon and Penda.

The fall of Edwin, Northumbria's first Christian king, thrust his kingdom into its year of apostasy and flame-scorched slaughter.

When the cross was raised again by a king of the northern English, it was the Celtic cross of Iona which cast its shadow over the vallum of the Wall at the battle called 'Heaven's field' . . .

'bright blade, blessed hand'

OSWALD, SON OF AETHELFRITH

AD 632 – AD 642

Between the death of Edwin in October 632 and Oswald's victorious return to his father's kingdom in the last weeks of 633 lay more than twelve months of anarchy and devastation in the lands to the north of the Humber.

The immediate consequence of the battle at Hatfield Chase was the collapse of the kingdom of Northumbria into its component dominions of Deira and Bernicia, each under its own short-lived warlord. Bede immediately links the political doom of those two successor kings with their reversion from the Christianity adopted by Edwin to the paganism of his predecessors, and it is on the authority of Bede's *Historia* that this history has assigned the year of the apostate kings, Eanfrith and Osric, to the reign of Oswald.

> After Edwin's death in battle, the kingdom of Deira, to which his ancestors had belonged and where his reign had begun, passed to a son of his uncle Aelfric; his name was Osric, and he had received the mysteries of the Christian faith through the preaching of Paulinus. But the kingdom of Bernicia, the other ancient division of Northumbria, passed to Eanfrith, son of Aethelfrith, who claimed descent from its royal family. Throughout Edwin's reign, the sons of this Aethelfrith, his predecessor, were living in exile with a large company of young nobles among the Irish and the Picts, and while there were instructed in the faith as taught by the Irish and regenerated by the grace of baptism. On the death of their enemy the king they were

allowed to return to their own country, and the eldest of them, Eanfrith, became king of Bernicia. Both of these kings no sooner gained the crown of their earthly kingdom than they foreswore and betrayed the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven into which they had been initiated, and surrendered themselves again to defilement and destruction in the filthy practice of idolatry.

Before long both were slain by Cadwalla, king of the Britons, and met their just retribution at the hand of a heathen. First, in the following summer he killed Osric, who had rashly laid siege to him in a fortified town. Cadwalla suddenly broke out with all his men, caught Osric unprepared, and destroyed him and his entire army. He then occupied the Northumbrian kingdoms for a whole year, not like a victorious king assuming government but like a cruel tyrant ravaging and tearing them apart with dreadful loss of life. Finally when Eanfrith imprudently came with an escort of only twelve thanes to sue for peace, he visited the same fate upon him. Even today that remains an ill-omened year and hateful to all good people, both because of the apostasy of the English kings who cast aside the mysteries of the faith, and because of the savage tyranny of the king of the Britons.

Consequently all those who calculate the dates of the kings have agreed to expunge the memory of the apostate kings and to assign that year to the reign of their successor, Oswald, a man beloved of God.

Whilst dutifully following Bede's guidance on regnal listing, the succession of these apostate kings might perhaps deserve some closer attention here.

First of all, the swift dismantling in the face of crisis of the Northumbrian kingdom into its two *provincia* of Deira and Bernicia lends later support to a similar situation which followed on the death of Ida. The nature of a kingdom, and even more so the greater *imperium* of the bretwalda, hinged entirely on the charismatic leadership of its warlord. The death of the *cyning* in battle as the point of collapse of his dominion into its component warbands is clearly reflected, even as late as the fourth decade of the seventh century, in the succession of lesser kings to Deira and Bernicia.

Edwin's own issue could provide no successor on his death. Of his two sons born by Coenburg of Mercia, one fell beside him at Haethfeld and a second 'Eadfrith, was forced to desert to King Penda'. Bede's sympathetic

account of Eadfrith's fate cannot remove the suspicion that Coenburg's son may well have argued his Mercian lineage in pleading for clemency from the Mercian king, even with a view to succeeding his father as a tributary king of Northumbria. Whatever their negotiated agreement – and Bede confirms that there was such an understanding – Penda was not long to honour it and 'later murdered him in contravention of an oath, during the reign of Oswald'. As Bede formally dates Oswald's reign from the death of Edwin, the death of Eadfrith could have occurred at any time between October 632 and August 642, while the murderous reputation of Penda would suggest the earlier rather than later date. Edwin's infant son Wuscfrea and daughter Eanfled, both of them under five years old, escaped with their mother Aethelberg to Kent, accompanied by Osfrid's son, Yffi, apparently named for the Deiran king identified by the genealogies as Edwin's grandfather.

The nearest surviving claimant to the kingdom of Deira was Edwin's cousin Osric, son of Aelle's brother Aelfric. This Osric must have been at least middle-aged in 632, but managed nonetheless to rally whatever forces had survived Haethfeld and its aftermath and lay siege to Cadwallon who was encamped in 'a fortified town'. Some authorities have identified that town as York and, although Bede does not name it as *Eboracum*, it would certainly have been the most likely forward base for Cadwallon's war on Northumbria. Wherever Osric's siege was laid, it was broken by a surprise attack launched by the Welsh host which shattered the last remnant of Deiran resistance to the invader. Apparently, Osric had numbered among the nobles baptised by Paulinus, but the new Christian faith would not long have sustained any popular credibility after Haethfeld. Edwin's public conversion followed so swiftly by death and defeat appeared, from the pagan Germanic perspective, as a harbinger of ill fortune prompting a return to the old pagan gods.

Hence the 'ill-omened year' of apostasy, so abhorrent to Bede and quite inevitable in a warrior-based society so recently converted. Nonetheless, this pagan reversion in the second quarter of the seventh century was not an exclusively Northumbrian phenomenon. Penda's defeat of Christian kings in East Anglia and Wessex was similarly followed by a dramatic revival of paganism among the East Angles and the West Saxons. This pagan 'counter-reformation' was a direct result of Penda's ferocious championship of the old gods which was to flourish until he himself was slain in battle on the river Winwaed in 655.

While the pagan resurgence appears to have overwhelmed the newly-converted Northumbrians, there remained one remarkable survivor of Paulinus' ministry. This tenacious holy man was the enigmatic 'James the Deacon', who stayed on in Northumbria to minister to Paulinus' flock when his bishop fled south to Kent. James not only survived the dangerous year of Cadwallon's atrocities and Edwin's apostate successors, but lived to witness the triumph of Roman orthodoxy at Whitby in 664. There is some small irony to be found in the location of James the Deacon's brave outpost of the faith at Catterick, on the same royal estate where Paulinus had baptised his Deiran converts in the river Swale and the heroes of the Gododdin had ridden to their deaths beneath the ramparts of Urien's former fortress of Catraeth.

While Bede confirms Osric of Deira as a convert of Paulinus' mission, his counterpart in Bernicia had received the faith from a different Christian creed. Eanfrith, like his half-brothers Oswald and Oswy and their sister Aebbe, had fled north when their father was slain on the Idle. Oswald would have been no older than twelve and his brother, Oswy, no more than four years old when they found sanctuary with the Irish of Dalriada in Argyll. Eanfrith, the eldest surviving son of Aethelfrith, would have been older than Oswald and must have reached his later teenage years by 616. Bede is careful to qualify his claim for the conversion of the sons of Aethelfrith as taking place 'among the Irish and the Picts'. If Oswald and Oswy were baptised and educated on Iona – as Bede says they were – the inference must be that it was Eanfrith who was accepted into the Christian faith in Pictland. The difference is largely one of geography rather than theology, because the Christian church among the Picts in the early seventh century was effectively and predominantly that of an outpost of Iona. Bede certainly believed Columcille to have personally converted the Picts to Christianity in the later sixth century and while his belief was long accepted as an historical fact there is no evidence to be found in Adamnan for any wholesale conversions in Pictland to bear comparison with those of Paulinus' mission in Northumbria. The establishment of the Christian church among the Picts was a very gradual process largely accomplished in the seventh century and involving *peregrini* monks of Iona and Ireland from its earliest stages. Eanfrith's Pictish connections are well attested by his marriage to a Pictish princess and the succession of his son, Talorcan, as a king of the Picts, and cannot be unrelated to his mother's north British stock. In

the light of these factors, Eanfrith's exile would be best located among the 'southern' Pictish tribes whose hillforts in the Ochils lay close to the Manau of the Gododdin across the head of the Firth of Forth. That territorial proximity had led to a complex interrelationship, if not an intermingling, of the Britons of Manau and the Maetae Picts, which would suggest that Eanfrith's first sanctuary was found among his mother's people around Edinburgh, or more probably Stirling, where his Pictish contacts grew out of their links with the neighbouring Maetae.

The expansion of Edwin's Northumbria into the Border country and towards the Forth, where his *tufa* standard must have been the first Roman-style military insignia seen in two hundred years, can only have presented the most ominous prospect to the Maetae Picts. They had suffered savage slaughter at Roman hands at the end of the second century, and their hostility to the *rex Anglorum* is reflected in the esteem accorded to Eanfrith, the first-born son of Edwin's enemy Aethelfrith, in being chosen as consort for a Pictish princess of royal blood. The death of Edwin at the hands of Penda and Cadwallon provided Eanfrith with the opportunity to reclaim his Northumbrian birthright, and quite possibly to do so by negotiation rather than force of arms. The Britons of Manau were *cymry* of the same line of Cunedda as was Cadwallon and when Eanfrith came south, probably escorted by a Brito-Pictish warband, he might have feasibly sought some common cause with the Brito-Welsh of Gwynedd, which would well correspond to Bede's reference to Eanfrith's coming 'to sue for peace'.

Eanfrith was acknowledged by Bede as 'king of Bernicia', and his approach to Cadwallon might appear as his offering himself as a tributary client king, to thereby bring an end to the ravaging of Northumbria. Whatever Eanfrith might have imagined or intended, Cadwallon would have seen him as just one more warlord of the Lloegr to be put summarily to the sword.

While the precise details of Eanfrith's baptism remain a matter of informed speculation, the conversion of his half-brother Oswald on Iona is impeccably authenticated. By the time of Oswald's arrival in Dalriada in 616, the monastery on Iona, or *I-Columcille*, had been established for some fifty years and was approaching the period of its greatest importance. The island Bede called *Hii* had long been a sacred site before the coming of Columcille, when the pre-Christian druids had sought out the most ancient geological forms as their holy places. An outcrop of

Achaean rock some three miles in length lying across the narrow sound off the Ross of Mull, it contains no fossil remains because it is older than any life on earth. Iona is an island forged in the beginning of the world and will be the last place on earth, according to Gaelic foretelling, to be destroyed on the Day of Doom. It had drawn saints of the Irish church, even Brigid and Padraig in Irish tradition, before Columcille's curagh reached its shore, but it was his foundation of the island monastery in 565 which most clearly marked the entry of Iona into the historical record.

There Aidan mac-Gabran was anointed *ri Albain* by Columcille, himself blood-kin to the Ui Neill dynasty of Irish high-kings, and I-Columcille became not only the royal church of the Scotic kingdom of Dalriada, but also that of the Ui Neill dynasts in Ireland. The abbots of Iona were of the same stock as the founder, who himself had been laid in its earth for twenty years when the sons of Aethelfrith arrived in quest of sanctuary in the year 616.

The *comarb*, or successor, of Columcille who gave that sanctuary to the Northumbrian princes was the abbot Fergna, who had not only known Columcille but also, according to Adamnan, been selected to witness the vision of miraculous light surrounding the saint. Oswald's initiation into the Christian faith could not have been administered by more auspicious hands or in a more auspicious church, and was to exert the most profound influence on the saga of the kings of Northumbria. That influence was reciprocated by the new interest shown in Northumbrian affairs by the Iona chroniclers and there came a surge of prominent entries of northern English affairs in the Irish annals from the early seventh century.

While the annals note the formal historical record, the historian Hermann Moisl has traced a sequence of fragmentary evidence in the saga literature of Irish tradition to suggest English warbands fighting in the seventh-century dynastic wars of the Gael. Moisl treads, often incautiously, on the frontiers of historical record, but his immensely credible conclusions carry such remarkable significance for two generations of Northumbrian kings as to demand full consideration here.

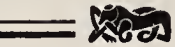
While Bede confirms that the sons of Aethelfrith 'were instructed in the faith' among the Irish and the Picts and even the most noble residents in the monastic community were allotted manual tasks, there is no evidence that Oswald or Oswy received any other form of education on

Iona. Literacy was rare among the kings of Northumbria, as it was among all kings of England before Henry I, and the reliable evidence for two literate kings of the northern English before the end of the eighth century is itself a great achievement of Northumbria's golden age, but neither of those kings was a son of Aethelfrith. Oswy was certainly not literate – on the documentary evidence of the foundation of the monastery of *Medeshamstede* at Peterborough in 656, where the charter attests his attendance only with the signatory mark of a cross – and it is improbable that his elder brother was any better educated. If the Northumbrian princes were not intended for the church, they would have been otherwise educated in Scotic Dalriada, no less a warrior-based society than the seventh-century English kingdoms, and it is inconceivable that the thirty-year-old Oswald who won the victory at Hefenfeld was untutored or inexperienced in the way of the warrior.

Against that backdrop, Moisl's sequence of references to Saxon warriors and their warbands fighting in Irish wars during the years of the exile of Aethelfrith's sons in Dalriada begins to assume its Northumbrian significance. The saga-stories of the 'King Cycle', set down in Old and Middle Irish between 700 and 1200, resemble the Germanic *heldensage* of the migration age in their being an historical rather than a mythical genre. *Gein Branduib meic Echach*, 'The Birth of Brandubh son of Echoid', claims that Aidan mac-Gabran brought armies of 'Saxons, Britons and the men of Scotland' to fight in Irish dynastic wars, while another saga from the same cycle tells of one of Aidan's grandsons bringing 'Saxon' warriors to Ireland to intervene in a dispute in Munster. A related text names the allies recruited by the Ulster king Congal Caech for his war on Domnall mac-Aed of the Ui Neill.

> Congal brought together the forces of Saxonland with their king Garbh, the son of Rogarbh . . . and the men of Alba under the four sons of Eochaidh Buidhe, by name Aedh of the Green Garb, Congal Menn, Suibhne, and the eldest Domhnall Brec. And he brought all these forces with him to give battle . . . on Magh Rath.

Although the 'Saxon' names are total fiction – 'Garbh, son of Rogarbh' translates as 'Rough, son of Very Rough' – this reference well corresponds to the historical record of the battle of Mag Rath where Congal Caech's alliance with Domnall Brecc, king of Dalriada, met with disastrous defeat in 637. By then Oswald was firmly established as king of Northumbria



and the presence of a 'Saxon' warband with the Dalriadan host at Mag Rath would imply his fulfilling some military obligation – if not alliance – of Northumbria to the kingdom of Scotic Dalriada.

Moisl suggests that Oswald himself fought beside Domnall Brecc's predecessor, Connad Cerr of Dalriada, against Maelcaich and the Irish Cruithne in the battle of Fid Eoin in 628. The saga-story *Togail Bruidne da Derga*, 'The Destruction of Da Derg's Hostel', identifies three *rigdomna do Saxonaib*, 'princes of Saxonland', of which one is named as *Osalt*. This *Osalt* certainly corresponds to an Irish form of the Northumbrian Oswald, and Bede records Saint Wilbrord, his own contemporary, telling how 'stories' of Oswald were enjoying widespread currency during his own pilgrimage in Ireland.

If Oswald had fought in Dalriada's wars, he would have placed the king of Dalriada under a reciprocal military obligation. Thus when Eanfrith fell to Cadwallon, it was Oswald's turn to fight for his father's kingdom and he would have turned to Domnall Brecc, the grandson of Aidan mac-Gabran who had succeeded to the kingdom of Dalriada around 630, for his warriors. Beyond noting that it was 'an army small in numbers', Bede's *Historia* includes no details of the forces with which Oswald won back Northumbria, but the late medieval Scottish historian Fordun records a substantial, if conditional, Dalriadan contingent in his battle-ranks.

> Oswald and the other nobles who had sojourned seventeen years in exile in Scotland, being certified of his [Edwin's] death from trustworthy information, came into the king's presence, and begged him to grant them their liberty, and graciously deign to vouchsafe them some help whereby to win back their father's kingdom. The king, accordingly, freely gave them full leave to go away or come back – and even promised them help against Penda or any of the Saxons; but he altogether refused it against Cadwallo and the Britons, who had long been bound to the Scots by the friendship of a faithful alliance.
>
> Moreover, though less moved thereto by a liking for the Saxon race than by zeal for the Christian religion, he sent with them a strong body of warriors, to the end that they might safely cross the marches of his kingdom. Being, therefore, supported by so large a host, they entered their father's kingdom, and were gladly welcomed by the inhabitants.

Fordun is drawing on Scottish sources independent of Bede and his evidence for a Dalriadan warband recruited as Oswald's escort concurs with the implications of the Irish sources.

It is quite possible now to offer a speculative scenario for the invasion which culminated in the dramatic victory at Hefenfeld. Bede implies Oswald's return from seventeen years of exile to win back a kingdom with little more than a warband of companion thanes and a Celtic cross. He would probably have been able to rally some Northumbrian levies in the north of Bernicia, if only by virtue of his being Aethelfrith's son, and Adamnan numbers his retinue of *gesithas* as 'the twelve men who had been baptised with him during his exile among the Scots'. The military fact of the matter must have been a strengthening of his battle-rank by a substantial body of fighting men from Dalriada and Oswald could have legitimately called on Domnall Brecc for such a contingent of Dalriadan warriors, just as Domnall could refuse to allow his warriors to engage in conflict with the Britons of Gwynedd to whom he was bound in some form of alliance.

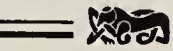
In the event of action those warriors must have abjured their king's instruction to lend their swords to Oswald's battle, and their decision is best explained by their greater obedience to the church of I-Columcille than to their king at Dunadd. The abbot Segine had succeeded Fergna as the *comarb* of Columcille in 623 and Adamnan's evidence attests Segine's personal friendship with Oswald. Whatever the substance of Domnall Brecc's 'faithful alliance' with the Britons of Gwynedd – and he was at war with their *cymry* of Strathclyde within a decade – it would not be allowed to stand in the way of the expansion of the Columban church to the powerful English kingdom of Northumbria and it is significant that Welsh sources imply monks of Iona accompanying Oswald's army on its invasion.

Oswald, in company with his brother Oswy, their English *gesithas*, and an escort of warriors and holy men from Dalriada, would have advanced into the valley of the North Tyne and there rallied whatever Northumbrian forces he was able to command. When news of the invasion reached Cadwallon, probably in York, he would have marched north up the old Roman Dere Street towards Hexham and then west along the Roman military road until he approached Oswald's position on the vallum of the Wall to the east of Chollerford. In his camp, on the eve of the battle which the *Annals of Inisfallen* called 'the wounding of Catguollaun',

Oswald experienced the vision described by Adamnan in his *Vita Columbae*.

> For as this same King Oswald, after pitching his camp, in readiness for the battle, was sleeping one day on a pillow in his tent, he saw Saint Columba in a vision, beaming with angelic brightness, and of a figure so majestic that his head seemed to touch the clouds. The blessed man having announced his name to the king, stood in the midst of the camp, and covered it all with his brilliant garment, except at one small distant point; and at the same time he uttered those cheering words which the Lord spake to Jesua Ben Nun before the passage of the Jordan, after Moses' death, saying, *'Be strong and of a good courage; behold, I shall be with thee.'* Then Saint Columba having said these words to the king in the vision, added, 'March out this following night from your camp to battle, for on this occasion the Lord has granted to me that your foes shall be put to flight, that your enemy Catlon shall be delivered into your hands, and that after the battle you shall return in triumph.' The king, awaking at these words, assembled his council and related the vision, at which they were all encouraged; and so the whole people promised that, after their return from the war, they would believe and be baptised, for up to that time all that Saxon land had been wrapt in the darkness of paganism and ignorance, with the exception of King Oswald and the twelve men who had been baptised with him during his exile among the Scots.
>
> On the very next night, King Oswald, as he had been directed in the vision, went forth from his camp to battle, and had a much smaller army than the numerous hosts opposed to him, yet he obtained an easy and decisive victory – for King Catlon was slain, and the conqueror was ever after established by God as the Bretwalda of all Britain.
>
> I, Adamnan, had this narrative from the lips of my predecessor, the Abbot Failbe, who solemnly declared that he had himself heard King Oswald relating this same vision to Segine the abbot.

The vision of Oswald on the eve of battle was an event of the greatest religious – and political – importance. It stood full square in the Irish tradition of Columcille as warrior-saint to recruit the great holy man of Scotic Dalriada and the Irish Ui Neill dynasty as the patron of Oswald's victory and lay the blessing of Iona on the Christian kingdom of Northumbria. When Oswald, supported by monks from Iona, announced such



a vision to the Dalriadan warband in the Northumbrian camp, no 'faithful alliance' of Domnall could have held back their sword-arms from the battle blessed by Columcille.

Bede set down the first full account of the shield-clash of Briton, Gael and Saxon on 'Heaven's field' in the third book of his *Historia Ecclesiastica.*

> After the murder of his brother Eanfrith, Oswald arrived with an army small in numbers but protected by their faith in Christ, and he slew the accursed leader of the Britons and all that vast army he boasted none could resist, at a place called in English Denisesburn, meaning the stream of Denise.
>
> On approaching this battle Oswald set up the sign of the holy cross and on bended knees besought God to send heavenly succour to his worshippers in the hour of their need; and the place is pointed out to this day and held in great reverence. Indeed it is said that when the cross had been quickly made and a hole made ready for it to stand in, Oswald himself, fired by his faith, seized it and placed it in its hole and held it upright with both hands, until the soldiers heaped up the soil and made it fast in the ground. Thereupon he raised his voice and cried aloud to the whole army: 'Let us all kneel, and together pray the almighty, ever-living and true God to defend us by His mercy from a proud and cruel enemy; for He knows that the war we have engaged in for the deliverance of our people is a just war.' They all did as he had ordered and, advancing thus against the enemy as dawn appeared, won the victory as the reward for their faith. At the place where they prayed countless miracles of healing are known to have been wrought, a sure proof and memorial of the king's faith.
>
> The place is called in English Hefenfelth, meaning Heaven's field, a name given it in ancient times in evident anticipation of what was to come; for it signified that Heaven's standard was to be set up there, Heaven's victory won, and Heaven's miracles to continue unceasing to the present time. It lies to the north near the wall with which the Romans encompassed the whole of Britain from sea to sea to protect it against barbarian attacks. It was in this place that the brothers of the nearby church of Hagustaldesea long ago established the custom of gathering each year on the eve of the anniversary of King Oswald's death and holding a vigil for the salvation of his soul; and on the

following morning they would sing many psalms of praise and offer the holy sacrifice and oblation on his behalf. As this custom has grown, they have lately built a church on the site and made the place more sacred and esteemed than any other in the eyes of all men. This is as it should be, for as far as we know there was no symbol of the Christian faith, no church, and no altar erected anywhere in the land of Bernicia until their new leader in war, inspired by his zeal for the faith, set up this standard of the holy cross before doing battle with his monstrous enemy.

The field of the battle is crossed to the east of Chollerford by the road that runs along the Wall, where a modern cross stands at the roadside. On the hill rising to the north a church stands on the site of the church which stood in Bede's time where Oswald was believed to have raised his battle-standard and to which the monks of Hexham made their annual pilgrimage. Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* calls it the battle of *Catscaul* and records Oswald as bringing down Cadwallon in the fray.

He killed Catgublaun, king of the land of Guenedota, in the battle of Catscaul, with great slaughter of his army.

The Welsh name supports Bede's location 'to the north near the wall' if Nennius' *Catscaul* represents the Welsh *Cad-ys-gual*, 'the battle of the Wall'. Bede also agrees with Nennius that it was Oswald who slew Cadwallon, 'the accursed leader of the Britons', and adds the site as 'at a place called in English Denisesburn'. 'The stream of Denise' is identified by a medieval charter with Rowley Burn some five miles to the south of Oswald's camp, which suggests that the attack launched over the rampart of the vallum was pursued over the wild country south of the Wall. The Welsh bard records the death of Cadwallon at Hefenfeld in the enigmatic conclusion to the elegy in *The Red Book of Hergest.*

From the plotting of strangers and iniquitous
Monks, as the water flows from the fountain,
Sad and heavy will be the day for Cadwallawn.

'The plotting of strangers' would suggest 'strangers' from Dalriada in the Northumbrian ranks, but the reference to 'iniquitous monks' can only indicate a monastic complement, and certainly from Iona, accompanying Oswald's victory. The battle was fought fifty years before Adamnan's Law, the *Cain Adomnain*, proscribed holy men taking physical part in

'The dedication of the church of St Paul
on the ninth of the kalends of May
in the fifteenth year of King Egfrith …'

The contemporary inscription marking the dedication of Bede's monastic church at Jarrow in 685 remains as the earliest firmly-dated document from the history of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria.

Dedication stone, St Paul's Church, Jarrow

'The deepest roots of the Northumbrian kingdom must first be sought on the Wall ...'

The seventy-three miles of the Roman Wall built by the legions from the Tyne to the Solway were garrisoned and defended by predominantly Germanic mercenary warriors whose compatriot successors were to forge the kingdom of *Northanhymbre*.

Hadrian's Wall west of Housesteads fort

'AD 547. In this year Ida assumed the kingdom,
from whom sprang the royal race of the Northanhymbra,
and reigned twelve years, and he built Bebbanburh ...'

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

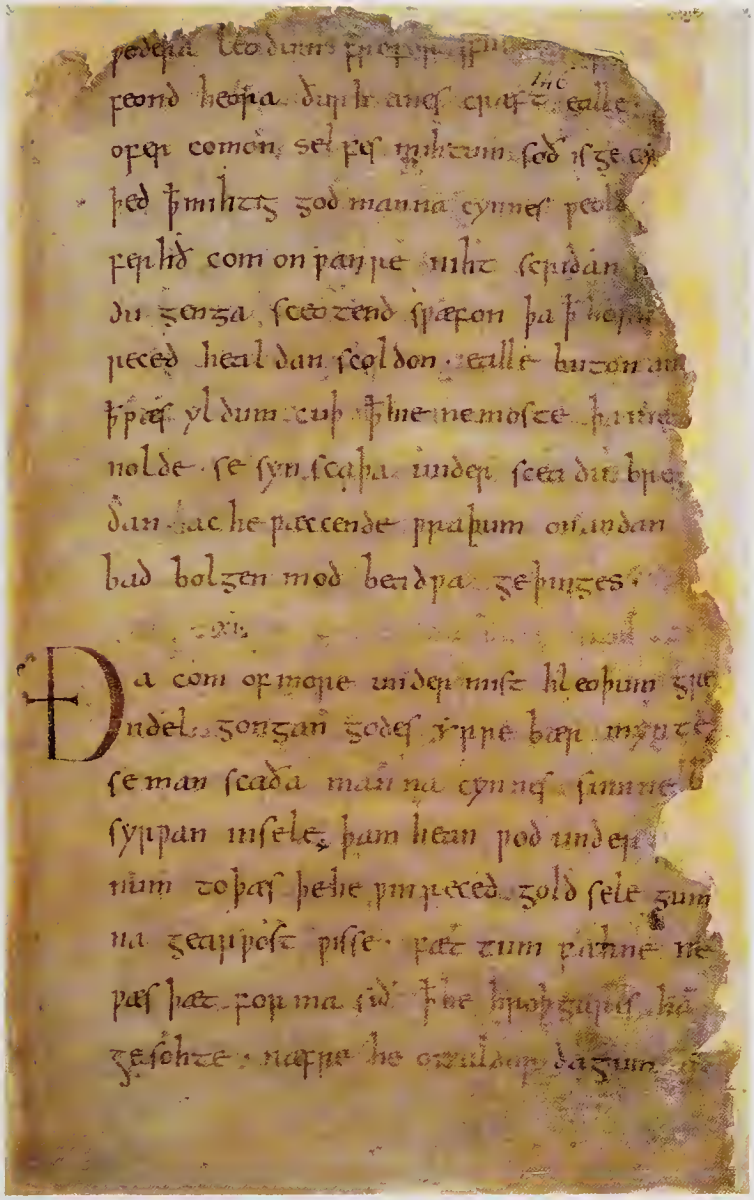
The medieval castle at Bamburgh stands on the same site of the *Din Guairi* of the Britons where Ida built the pirate stronghold which became the capital fortress of the Northumbrian kingdom.

Bamburgh, Northumberland

'By the hill of the goats'

The hillfort on Yeavering Bell rises above the fields where stood the Northumbrian royal *vill* of *Ad Gefrin*. Archaeological excavation of the seventh-century building complex has revealed the foundations of a great mead-hall closely akin to the *Heorot* described in the *Beowulf* poem.

Yeavering Bell, Northumberland



'From the moor Grendel came advancing under the bank of mist: he bore upon him God's anger. The abominable ravager meant to snare one of the human stock in the lofty hall …'

The descent of the Grendel monster on Hrothgar's hall of Heorot as it was set down in the only surviving manuscript of the Old English *Beowulf* poem.

British Library: Cotton Vitellius Axx fo 148^{r}

'The fight at the pool of the herons'

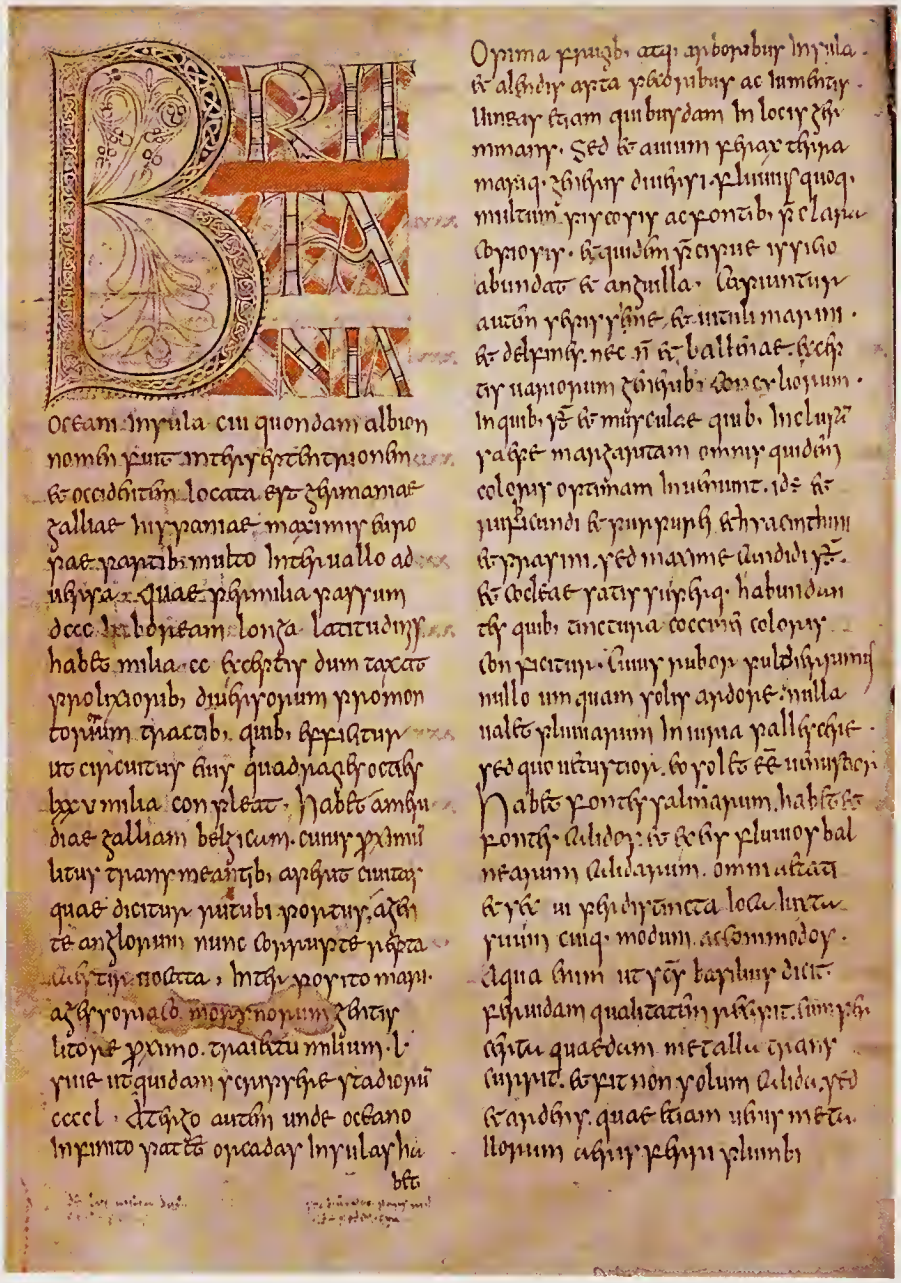
The eighth-century Pictish carved stone at Aberlemno near Forfar stands only a few miles from the battlefield where Egfrith's Northumbrian army suffered devastating defeat at the hands of Bruide mac-Beli's Picts in 685. The figures of Pictish and English fighting men can only represent a commemoration of the decisive battle fought on Dunnichen Moss beside Nechtansmere.

Pictish cross-slab, Aberlemno churchyard, Angus

The Coppergate Helmet

The eighth-century iron helmet embellished with copper alloy found in the excavation of the Coppergate site at York. Identical in style with those worn by the English warriors on the Pictish carving at Aberlemno, it is unrivalled as the best-preserved survival from the arms and armour of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria.

Anglo-Saxon helmet, mid-8th century



'Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum'

The decorated opening page of the first book of Bede's *Historia* from the 'Leningrad' manuscript completed at Wearmouth/Jarrow around 746. In both its form and its content, this pre-eminent Bedan document represents a high peak of achievement of the 'golden age' of literacy and learning which flourished in the wake of Northumbria's centuries of military supremacy.

Schedrin State Public Library, St Petersburg: MS. lat Q.V.I. 18 f.26^{v}

warfare and it is even possible that Columban monks actually fought at Hefenfeld. Both Adamnan and Bede suggest Oswald launched his attack at night – a tactic far more characteristic of Celtic guerilla warfare than the shield-wall strategy of English armies – and the element of surprise under cover of darkness would have been a decided advantage for his outnumbered forces.

However it was won, the victory on 'Heaven's field' delivered Northumbria from the ravages of Cadwallon and reclaimed for Aethelfrith's son his father's kingdom, re-uniting Bernicia with Deira, where Oswald's succession was assured by his lineage as the son of Acha, daughter of Aelle of Deira. Of yet greater importance, at least for Bede, was Oswald's restoration of the Christian faith to the northern English.

> As soon as Oswald gained the kingdom, he was anxious that all the people under his rule should be filled with the grace of the Christian faith, whose power he had experienced to the full in his victory over the heathen. So he sent to the Irish elders, among whom he and his escort had received the sacrament of baptism when in exile, and asked them to send him a bishop, by whose teaching and ministry the English people that he ruled might learn the blessings of faith in the Lord and receive the sacraments.

Bede clearly discerns divine intervention in the victory and, while it is likely that the host of Gwynedd outnumbered Oswald's force even when strengthened by Domnall's 'strong body of warriors', Bede would have exaggerated any such disparity to the greatest miraculous effect. What remains is the firm impression that Oswald owed no small debt to Iona, whether by virtue of diplomatic influence or visionary prompting, for his victory. He returned to I-Columcille on at least the one occasion described by Adamnan, and lost no time in fulfilling his obligation. The *Annals of Ulster* enter the foundation of an 'Iona in the east' on Lindisfarne immediately after 'the battle of Cathloen, King of the Britons'.

Inis-Medgoeth was founded.

However savagely Cadwallon and Penda had devastated the mission of Paulinus, James the Deacon was still ministering in Swaledale and he cannot have been doing so in total isolation; yet it was to 'the Irish elders' that Oswald sent for his bishop.

The abbot Segine responded to Oswald's appeal as befitted the

opportunity to extend the authority of I-Columcille to the greatest of English kingdoms and – as Adamnan confirms – to the greater imperium of the bretwalda.

> He obtained his request without delay, and was sent Bishop Aidan, a man of great gentleness, holiness and moderation, who had a zeal for God.

Bede's reference to 'Bishop' Aidan raises further intriguing questions, the first of them by his note of an earlier Iona mission to Oswald's kingdom.

> It is said that when King Oswald asked the Irish for a bishop to teach the faith to him and his people, another man of sterner temperament was sent at first; but although he preached among the English for some time he met with no success, and the people were unwilling to listen to him. He therefore returned home and announced at a meeting of the elders that he had been able to make no headway in teaching the nation to which he had been sent, for they were an intractable people of stubborn and uncivilised character.

Bede's 'it is said' always refers to an anonymous, usually anecdotal, source and this passage certainly derives from the monastic tradition of Lindisfarne. Bede inferred that this earlier unsuccessful mission had been a first response to Oswald's request and such an inference cannot have been precisely accurate. Firstly, it would have been almost impossible for Oswald to have established himself in the kingdom, requested a priest from Iona who found the task beyond him and returned home, and repeated the request to obtain 'Bishop Aidan' who established his first English church on Lindisfarne, all within no more than eighteen months between the victory of Hefenfeld and the foundation of Lindisfarne in 635.

It would be more realistic to suggest that the principal priest who accompanied Oswald's invasion remained in Northumbria, probably with his companions, as a missionary to Oswald's kingdom. Such a cleric would very probably have met with the failure recorded by Bede. He would have spoken no English and relied entirely on his native Gaelic and monastic Latin. He would have looked like a rough-hewn island Gael in a habit of undyed wool, with the aspect of a stern ascetic whose patience with Oswald's Northumbrian Woden-fearing subjects would have been at best short. Such a man would have soon returned to Iona

to report the bretwalda's kingdom as beyond the reach of the Irish church. At that point, probably in the spring of 634, Oswald sent to his friend the abbot Segine for a more effective evangelist. He may even have named Aidan, whom he might well have already known personally and who swiftly became an intimate friend in Northumbria.

A no less significant question is the episcopal status of the 'Bishop Aidan' sent from Iona, because there were no bishops on the island. Columcille had lived out his monastic life as a priest, as is confirmed by Bede and the Irish sources, and so had all his successors in the abbacy of I-Columcille. Bede tells nothing of Aidan's career before his arrival in Northumbria from Iona, apart from his own construction of the 'conference' of the Columban elders to discuss the failure of the first mission to Northumbria. Bede tells of Aidan's attending this conference and offering himself 'to instruct an ignorant and unbelieving people'. A more substantial account of 'Aedhan, son of Lughar' is to be found in the *Martyrology of Donegal.*

> He was of the race of Eochaidh Finn Fuath-nairt, from whom Brighit descends. He was a bishop of Inis Cathaig, and at Inis Medcoit, in Saxonland; and it was on a pilgrimage that Aedhan went to Inis Medcoit.

The Irish calendar expands on Bede's portrait, identifying Aidan as of the distinguished lineage of Saint Brigid of Kildare and as bishop of first *Inis Cathaig* and later *Inis Medcoit*, the Irish form of Nennius' *Metcaud* for Lindisfarne. The Irish martyrologist's location of Aidan's first see at Inis-Cathaig, Scattery Island in the Shannon opposite Kilrush in County Clare, proves Aidan as a more exalted churchman than any humble brother of the Iona community. Additionally, the evidence of the *Martyrology of Oengus* associates 'Aedan, the brilliant sun of Inis Medcoit' with *Cell Mor*, the 'Great Cell' of the monastic complex founded from Iona on the Hebridean island of Tiree.

From these evidences, Aidan of Lindisfarne appears as a more imposing ecclesiastic than is suggested even by Bede and his Lindisfarne sources. If he had been educated on Tiree, as Oengus suggests, then he would have been an *alumnus* of an important daughter house of Iona, who had returned to Ireland as a bishop of an island monastery in the Shannon. He would certainly have presented a more polished and distinguished emissary of the Columban church than some brother monk who had

been little more than chaplain to a Dalriadan warband, and clearly a more suitable 'bishop' for the most powerful kingdom in 'Saxonland'.

None of which must suggest that he was a grand bishop in the Roman style. Bede qualifies his reverence for Aidan with disapproval of his adherence to the Celtic orthodoxies and William of Malmesbury, himself abbot of a monastery founded by an Irish hermit, contrasts the ascetic Celtic nature of Aidan's mission with the stone-built splendour intended by the earlier mission of Paulinus.

> Paulinus . . . received the *pallium* from Pope Honorius, as is known. When he was expelled, the Scots – Aidan, Finan, and Colman – wished to be exalted neither by the *pallium* nor by the dignity of a town, but hid in the island of Lindisfarne.
>
> For the Scots also, who by favour of the kings of the Northumbrians had filled the province, were accustomed rather to hide in swamps than to dwell in lofty towns.

Aidan's mission in Oswald's kingdom was the foundation of an 'Iona in the east' in full accordance with the first tenet of the monastic rule of the Columban church.

> Be alone in a separate place near a chief city.

Thus it was that Aidan chose *Inis Medcoit*, as he would have known the tidal island which lay in full view of Oswald's capital fortress and royal township of Bebbanburg, for his church. While he 'completed in York the noble mynster which his kinsman Edwin had before begun', in the words of Aelfric's tenth-century homily, the site of Paulinus' oratory was clearly not to be the principal church of Oswald's kingdom. His Christianity had been initiated and nurtured in the Celtic church where an island, and only a carefully chosen island, should be the site of the principal church of the kingdom. Bede's account of the foundation of Lindisfarne bears testimony to Oswald's central role as the zealous royal patron of the church and its bishop.

> When the bishop arrived, the king granted him the island of Lindisfarne, as he requested, to be his episcopal see. With the ebb and flow of the tide, this is a place that is twice a day encircled by the waves of the sea, like an island, and twice rejoined to the mainland when its shore becomes exposed again. In all matters Oswald listened humbly and joyfully to the bishop's advice, and showed great concern to build

up and extend the Church of Christ within his kingdom. The bishop was not fully conversant with the English language, and on many occasions it was delightful to watch while he preached the gospel, and the king himself, having acquired a perfect knowledge of Irish during his long exile, acted as interpreter of Heaven's word for his aldermen and thanes.

From that time many missionaries from Irish territory began to arrive in Britain as the days went by, who preached the word of the faith with great zeal to the English kingdoms ruled over by Oswald; and to those who believed, such of them as held the rank of priest administered the grace of baptism. Churches were built in various places, and the people gladly flocked together to hear the Word. By the gift of the king estates and lands were granted for the establishment of monasteries, and English boys together with their elders were given systematic instruction by Irish teachers and taught to observe the discipline of a Rule.

Symeon's twelfth-century *History of the Church of Durham* reveres Aidan's church as the parent of Northumbria's extraordinary sequence of monastic foundations.

From the church of Lindisfarne, all the churches and monasteries of the Bernicians took their origin.

The monastery on the Tweed at *Mailros* was among the earliest foundations. It was located on a loop of the river close to the old Roman site of *Trimontium* – named for the three peaks of the Eildons – at Newstead a little way downstream from the later twelfth-century Melrose Abbey. There the young Cuthbert, a future bishop of Lindisfarne, joined an already well-established community in 651, the year of Aidan's death. Another early foundation from Aidan's monastery was Northumbria's first nunnery at *Heruteu*, 'the island of the hart' at Hartlepool, under the mysterious Heiu described by Bede as 'the first woman in the kingdom of the Northumbrians to take the vows and habit of the religious life, when she was ordained by Bishop Aidan.'

Further north lay the double foundation of monks and nuns at *Coludesburig*, Coldingham on the Berwickshire coast, established by Oswald's sister, Aebbe, as an expansion of her first church founded before 640 on the nearby – and characteristically Celtic – headland at

St Abbs. Aebbe was one of the first in the series of Northumbrian queens and princesses turned abbesses and saints and the *Breviary of Aberdeen* records her exile in Dalriada with Oswald and Oswy.

> Ebba, a glorious virgin, uterine sister of Oswald, king of Northumbria, was sent with her seven brothers to exile in the land of the Scots, and, along with her brother king Oswald and his brothers, was received and cherished with honour by Donald Brecc, king of the Scots. And like her brothers and many more, so she received the faith of Christ from the Scots.

Aebbe, who lived until 683, was a daughter of Acha and – presumably – Aethelfrith and could have been little more than a tiny infant in 616. She would not have been granted sanctuary with her brothers on the exclusively male preserve of I-Columcille and must have been educated on *Eilean nam Ban*, the 'island of the women', close by in the Sound of Iona. Other hagiographical sources suggest that Domnall Brecc sought her for his queen and a political marriage to a princess of Northumbria would certainly have assured a military alliance between Domnall and Oswald, but such a union was not to be. Aebbe – according to the *Breviary* – preserved her chastity to take the veil from 'Saint Finan, a Scot by race, bishop of Lindisfarne', who succeeded Aidan on his death in 651.

Like his sister and his bishop, Oswald entered the church calendar as a saint and, by virtue of his death in battle against the pagan, as a martyr. His extraordinary personal qualities of courage, holiness and generosity spring from Bede's pages with a vivid immediacy, sufficient to suggest Oswald as a 'Christian Beowulf' to the distinguished Bedan authority, Bertram Colgrave.

> It is not for nothing that the Northumbrian people, whose heroic poetry had idealised the conception of a warrior king, should have chosen just such a warrior king as their earliest saint, a Christian Beowulf, who died defending his people against the dragon of heathenism.

The earliest, if cryptic, reference to Oswald's sanctity is perhaps to be found interpolated into the regnal list of Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*.

> Oswald, son of Eadfred, reigned nine years. He is Oswald Lamnguin.

The Britonic *lamnguin* can be variously translated from its components – *guin* for 'white', 'bright' or 'blessed' and *lamn* for 'blade', 'arm' or 'hand' – as 'bright blade' or 'blessed hand', of which the latter is perhaps the most probable intention in the light of Bede's famous anecdote.

> It is wonderful to relate of one elevated to such a height of kingly power, that he was always humble, kind and generous towards the poor and towards strangers.
>
> For example, it is said that once on Easter Day when he was sitting at dinner with the bishop, and a silver dish was placed before him on the table full of royal fare, they were about to raise their hands to ask a blessing on the bread when one of his officers, whose duty it was to bring relief to the needy, suddenly came in and told the king that a large crowd of poor people from every district was sitting in the precincts, asking for alms from the king. He at once ordered the meal that had been served to him to be taken out to the poor, and the dish to be broken in pieces and divided among them. When he saw it, the bishop who sat with him was delighted by the act of mercy, and took his right hand and said: 'May this hand never wither with age.' And his prayer and blessing were fulfilled, for when Oswald was killed in battle his hand and arm were severed from his body, and they remain undecayed to this day. They are preserved in the royal town named after Bebba, a former queen, stored in a silver casket in the church of Saint Peter, and are venerated with due honour by everyone.

The enshrinement of the 'blessed hand' in the chapel of the royal fortress at Bamburgh is further detailed in Aelfric's homily.

> The arm was laid reverently in a shrine wrought of silver-work in Saint Peter's mynster at Bamborough, by the sea strand, and lieth there as sound as when it was cut off.

The mutilation of Oswald's corpse on the battlefield bequeathed a rich fund of relics, which were later impressively attested by the medieval Durham historians. Oswald's head was retrieved from Mercia by his brother Oswy and interred at Lindisfarne. When Lindisfarne was abandoned in the Danish invasion of the 870s, it was placed in Saint Cuthbert's coffin to be carried to safety and when Cuthbert's remains emerged from their long and troubled wanderings to find a final resting place at Durham in the tenth century, Oswald's head was interred with them.

Symeon was present in Durham Cathedral at the translation of the relics of Cuthbert and Oswald in 1104. If Reginald was not an eye-witness to the ceremony he certainly knew those who had been, which renders the detailed description in his *Life of Oswald* at least worthy of note here.

> The roundness of the head, completely spherical, is extraordinary, and it gives off a wonderfully sweet fragrance; it has a glassy colour, glowing a deep yellow all over which surpasses the yellowness of wax and is closer, in its greaty beauty and loveliness and in its gleaming brightness, to the appearance of gold. It is a sphere of large dimensions, in width, in length, and from front to back; and a smooth line, like the circle of a helmet, rises and falls around the middle of its curvature. Its bulk is considerable, but . . . when held in the hands it seems quite light, although to the eyes of observers, judging by its size, it looks a heavy weight. The forehead is broad and prominent, the nose of moderate proportions. The length of the face and cheeks lend the face a certain nobility, clear testimony to his manly glory.

Symeon's *History of the Church of Durham* similarly reports on the state of the 'blessed hand' some five hundred years after Aidan's benediction.

> His head was buried in the cemetery of the said church [of Lindisfarne], but his arms and hands, which the king by whom he was killed had ordered to be cut off, were buried in the royal city [of Bamburgh]; the right hand and arm continuing uncorrupt, according to the benedictional prayer of bishop Aidan; . . . This was frequently attested by a monk of our church of Durham, named Swartebrand, a man venerable from his grey hairs and his abundant simplicity of character, who was himself an eye-witness.

The cult of Oswald, unlike that of Cuthbert, had spread far beyond the confines of Northumbria by Bede's eighth century and its extent is similarly confirmed by Aelfric's homily.

> His fame spread widely throughout those lands, and also to Ireland, and also southward to Frankland.

His feast-day is entered in all but one of the surviving pre-Conquest English calendars, and similarly in the calendar of Saint Wilbrord who carried relics of Oswald with him to Frisia and on to his own eventual episcopal see at Utrecht. A tenth-century nun at Gandersheim in Saxony

hymned 'King Oswald, whose praise is sung by all the world' and dedications to him are, indeed, to be found from Hexham to Prague. Peter Hunter Blair surveys the evidence for Oswald's exploitation by the medieval relics industry in a tone of wry incredulity.

> Was not Oswald's right arm at Peterborough, his left arm at Gloucester and his third arm at Durham, one head at Durham and another in Luxembourg, and yet the entire body at St Winnoc's in Flanders?

This must not suggest ridicule of the genuine esteem surrounding the memory of a great king and brave martyr, and yet Oswald was the son of Northumbria's last pagan king and elements of recently-abandoned Germanic paganism surrounded the new Christianity. The significance of Oswald's raven companion in the medieval iconography, especially in Germany, would not have been lost on the pagan Penda. Similarly, Bede's careful note of the unusual posture assumed by Oswald in his personal devotions cannot be without a pre-Christian undertone.

> It is said, for example, that he often remained at his prayers from the time of the office of matins until daybreak, and because of his frequent habit of prayer and giving thanks to God, wherever he sat he used to have his hands on his knees with the palms upward.

While such arduously prolonged periods of prayer reflect the ascetic practice of the Celtic church, William Chaney suggests Oswald's uncharacteristic devotional posture may have derived from the 'ritual attitude used by his pagan predecessors in offering intercessions'. The head and hands of the priest-king were anciently held to be sacral objects and associated with fertility. Consequently, the widespread distribution of Oswald's relics, like those of Edwin's remains which were interred from York to Whitby, might yet reflect traces of the pagan distribution of tokens of fertility to ensure the harvest throughout the kingdom.

The extent of Oswald's kingdom certainly represented vast territories, a legacy of the *imperium* of both Aethelfrith and Edwin the bretwalda. Bede records Oswald's succeeding Edwin as 'the sixth bretwalda' and adds the somewhat ambitious claim that 'he brought under his control all the peoples and kingdoms of Britain.' Bede's claim might be more realistically made for his brother Oswy, and then only at the pinnacle of his power, than for Oswald. Penda's Mercia certainly held the English midlands against Northumbria until 655, but the absence of battle and blade

in the English sources for Oswald's reign attests the general peace and prosperity enjoyed under a powerful and benevolent king. Bede's chapters on this 'most Christian king of the Northumbrians' are predominantly concerned with miracles and monasteries, and record only two battles, the first at Hefenfeld bringing Oswald to power and the last at Maserfeld, the occasion of his martyrdom. In a rare note of the external relations of Oswald's kingdom, Bede tells of his attendance at the baptism of the West Saxon king, Cynigils.

> At this time the people of the West Saxons received the faith of Christ during the reign of Cynigils . . . the king himself received instruction and, together with his people, was cleansed in the waters of baptism. It happened at that time that Oswald, the most holy and victorious king of the Northumbrians, was present there and acted as his godfather. It was a beautiful alliance and well-pleasing to God, in which Oswald first accepted as his son, regenerate and dedicated to God, the man whose daughter he was to take as his wife.

Reginald of Durham identifies the princess of Wessex who became Oswald's queen as 'Kyneburg', whose name might be more accurately rendered as *Cyniburg*, the mother of Oswald's son, Oethelwald, 'the only son he possessed on earth' and who will yet have his own treacherous part to play in the battle on Winwaed. Reginald alone notes Cyniburg's name, which is inexplicably omitted from the *Liber Vitae* of Lindisfarne's list of royal consorts, and his *Life* is similarly the source for an anecdote of Oswald's marital history. The story, which is nowhere else recorded, tells how the king fell victim to the plague and miraculously recovered when a vision persuaded him to adopt a monastic celibacy. If such a story had come to Bede's notice, he would surely have recorded it and it is significant that there is no record of any pestilential epidemic in Oswald's reign. I can only suspect Reginald of confusing Oswald's connubial disruption with that of his nephew, Aldfrith. Plague was rife in Aldfrith's reign and the vows of celibacy taken by the monkish Aldfrith and his saintly queen Cuthburg, herself a West Saxon princess, are widely attested.

Whatever the fortunes of Oswald's marriage to Cyniburg, it would most certainly have assured his authority as bretwalda in the south-west, just as a sequence of terse entries in the Irish annals indicate Northumbrian military activity on its northern frontiers with Dalriada, Strathclyde

and the Manau. While these border wars were fought in the years of Oswald's reign, they would seem to have been fought under the immediate command of his younger brother and eventual successor as king and bretwalda, Oswy.

The evidence of Y *Gododdin* and Bede's claims for Aethelfrith's 'ravaging the territories of the Britons' confirms that the power of the north Britons had been thrown back through the early decades of the seventh century and implies their lands rendered tributary to Northumbria. The expansion of Scotic Dalriada on their north-west frontiers would certainly have preoccupied the north Britons and southern Picts into Oswald's reign, even to the extent of overshadowing the Northumbrian advances on their southern border. By the beginning of Oswald's time, the Northumbrians had long settled and held that border country beyond the valley of the Tweed and at least as far as the southern slopes of the Lammermuir hills. Saint Cuthbert was born somewhere in that region no later than 634, the year after Hefenfeld, and he was the son of English parents who had been settled in that sheep-farming hill country for at least one generation. If, as seems probable, Oswald and Oswy had fought with their warbands in Dalriada's Irish wars and the obligation of the Scots had been well honoured at Hefenfeld, the evidence of 'Saxons' in Domnall's forces at Mag Rath would confirm a further reciprocation of military obligation amounting to an Anglo-Scotic alliance. In the event of such an alliance, Northumbrian warbands would have been drawn into Domnall's disastrous war with the north Britons in the last years of Oswald's reign. It can only have been in the course of that conflict when the territories north of the Lammermuirs were finally won from the Gododdin by the northern English.

The defeat of the Dalriadan allies of Congal Caech at Mag Rath around 637 proved the beginning of the end for Domnall Brecc. He turned his ambition against the Strathclyde Britons by an encircling strategy, advancing from the north into their easterly territories which bordered the Gododdin lands around Stirling. Around 638 the *Annals of Ulster* enter a defeat for Domnall at 'Glend-Mureson' which has been placed in the valley of Murieston Water some twelve miles from Edinburgh. Tigernach enters the same conflict in his annal.

> The battle of Glend-Mairison, in which Domnall Brecc's people fled.

In their entries for the same year, both Tigernach and the *Annals of Ulster* enter the terse *Obsessio Etin*. This 'siege of Etin' records the besieging and conquest of Din Eidyn, the fortress of the Gododdin and once the stronghold from which Mynyddawg sent forth the 'Noble Retinue of the Island of Britain' to their deaths at Catraeth. The great weight of historical opinion on the period agrees that this siege of Etin could only represent the Northumbrian capture of Edinburgh which led to the English penetration of the upper Forth, where Stirling – Bede's *Urbs Giudi* and the Britonic *Iudeu* – was assuredly in Northumbrian hands by Oswy's reign.

While Northumbria seized the Manau, and brought the northern English within striking distance of the southern Picts, Domnall Brecc's war against Strathclyde finally brought him to the disaster at Strathcarron in Stirlingshire entered by the *Annals of Ulster* at 641.

> Domnall Brecc was slain at the end of the year, in December, at the battle of Srath Cairuin by Owain, King of the Britons.

The felling of Domnall by Owain, the warlord of the Strathclyde Britons, is vividly rendered by a bardic line interpolated into the later manuscript of Aneirin's elegy for the Gododdin.

> And the head of Dyfnwal Frych, ravens gnawed it.

A fragment of a lost *Life* of Columcille set down by Cummene the White, abbot of Iona, and added by the scribe Dorbbene to the earliest manuscript of Adamnan's *Vita Columbae* describes the death of 'Freckled Donald' as fulfilling the prophetic warning of the saint to Domnall's grandfather, Aidan mac-Gabran, almost seventy years before. Should the successors of Aidan 'turn against my kin who are in Ireland,' warned Columcille, 'the hearts of men shall be turned against them and their foes shall be greatly strengthened against them.' 'Now,' wrote Cummene, 'this prophecy has been fulfilled in our own times in the battle of Mag Rath', when Domnall joined Congal Caech's war on the Ui Neill high-king and 'ravaged without the slightest provocation' the territory of Columcille's royal kindred.

In the same year as the death of Domnall, both Tigernach and the *Annals of Ulster* enter 'the war of Ossa against the Britons' which would seem to represent a Northumbrian advance up the Forth from Edinburgh towards Stirling. While Oswy pushed the frontiers of his brother's king-

dom through the Manau and towards the Pictish hillforts of the Ochils, war clouds were gathering to the south of the Humber where Mercia prepared to bring Oswald's reign to its bloody and brutal end on the battlefield of Maserfeld.

After the death of Edwin at Haethfeld and the murder of his son Eadfrith, Penda withdrew to his Mercian heartland, leaving Cadwallon to devastate Northumbria and Oswald to reclaim his patrimony. While Oswald was granting Aidan the land for his monastery on Lindisfarne, Penda was enlarging Mercia at the expense of the East Angles and slaying two East Anglian kings in the process. Oswald's patronage among the West Saxons would have hindered Penda's ambitions in that direction, and his next strategic target must have been Northumbria itself. Additionally, the advance of the Iona mission among the northern English could only have enraged Penda to a second pagan onslaught on a Christian kingdom *be northan Hymbre*, no less than Oswy's conquest of the Gododdin in alliance with Domnall Brecc's war on Strathclyde would certainly have enraged Penda's old allies among their Welsh *cymry*.

Such thoughts are little more than my own speculation, but it cannot be accidental that the *Annals of Ulster* enter 'a coming together of the Saxons against Oswald' in the year after the 'siege of Etin', when Welsh anger would have naturally turned to an alliance with Penda to seek vengeance on Northumbria. It is Cynddylan, the Welsh warlord of the mid-Severn valley bordering Mercia, who is recorded by Welsh tradition as taking up arms to avenge the Men of the North.

Although Bede makes no reference to Welsh-Briton involvement in Penda's war on Oswald, Reginald's passing reference in his account of the Maserfeld campaign suggests Penda's Mercians fighting in alliance with the Welsh.

> Saint Oswald had subdued the kingdom of the Mercians and driven the heathen King Penda in flight into Armonica Walia. There, Penda assembled large forces of the heathen, and at the place we have mentioned he met the Christian king with his deadly ally, and killed him.

Penda's war is entered in the Welsh annals as 'the battle of Cocboy' and an interpolation in *Y Gododdin* records Cynddylan's warband fighting in the battle at Maserfeld and in an attack on Lichfield.

Only Reginald offers any account of the campaign leading up to Maserfeld, which has the substantial authority of his exceptional access to

Welsh and Mercian sources. He indicates a Northumbrian pre-emptive strike against Mercia driving a defeated Penda into Wales, from where he leads an attack, evidently with Welsh allies, against Oswald's forces whose guard is lowered in the wake of their early success. It is a strikingly similar scenario to that which destroyed Oswald's father in battle on the Idle, and was to bring Oswald to an identical fate on the field of Maserfeld in the Welsh marches.

> The field on which the glorious martyr fell, which lies on the borders of the Angli and the Walenses, still continues to bear witness to the saint's merits by new portents and miracles. On this spot he was beheaded and suffered martyrdom, and his venerable head, together with his sacred and incorrupt hands, was fixed on stakes for a whole year, to be an object of derision and scorn. For he forced the heathen king Penda to seek refuge in the land of Walia, and thus, encamped there free from fear, he dismissed his army. While Saint Oswald was encamped there, feeling secure and in no fear of danger, Penda unexpectedly appeared with his heathen army and endeavoured to accomplish the holy king's death in battle. But the man of God, hitherto renowned for his honour as a soldier, refused to consider flight, in case he should seem a man unskilled in the conduct of battle. He considered it dishonourable to be found vanquished and disgraced at the end, when hitherto he had appeared to all to be a vigorous and victorious warrior. And so he summoned a small force of soldiers and proceeded to commit himself to Christ, gladly choosing to die for the honour of the Lord and the faith of the Cross, and for the salvation and freedom of his Christian people . . . He therefore advanced to battle with great confidence, seeing that he was summoned by the Lord's mercy to a martyr's crown. Penda had gathered a large force of the heathen, and suddenly advanced to the field of battle, where he slaughtered a great number of the Christian people together with their holy and most Christian king.

Reginald's description of the relic of Oswald's head offers its own evidence of a single battle-wound which must have been the death-stroke of his martyrdom.

> On one side of his venerable head there is a hole made by an enemy sword in the battle in which he fell, which is wide enough for three fingers to be inserted in the skull.

The battle is recorded from the Welsh-Mercian viewpoint in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* which attests the ferocity of the Northumbrian resistance at least to the extent of adding Penda's brother Eoua, or *Eoba* in the Welsh annals, to the body count.

> Penda, son of Pybba . . . was the first to separate the kingdom of the Mercians from the kingdom of the Northerners. He fought the battle of Cocboy, in which fell his brother, Eoua, son of Pippa, king of the Mercians, and Oswald, king of the Northerners, and he was victorious through the arts of the devil. He was not baptised and never believed in God.

Bede's *Historia* enters Oswald's last battle in tones of Christian elegy.

> Oswald, that most Christian king of Northumbria, reigned for nine years, including that year which had been made an object of loathing by the unholy savagery of the king of the Britons and the insane apostasy of the English kings. At the end of this period Oswald was killed in a great battle against the same heathen people, the Mercians, and their heathen king, as had slain his predecessor Edwin. The date was the fifth of August, and he was thirty eight years old. The place where he died is called in English *Maserfeld*.

The location of the battlefield has been the subject of no little debate, but the weight of evidence places it in Shropshire and specifically around Oswestry, which name would derive from the Old English *Oswaldes-treow* commemorating Penda's display of Oswald's dismembered head and limbs on stakes as battle-trophies. Reginald places the battlefield on the Welsh border between *Scrobesbyrig* and *Waneloc*, respectively the Old English names for Shrewsbury and Wenlock.

> This field, which had the honour to be consecrated with the holy king's sacred blood, had the name of Maserfeld. The place is barely half a mile from the dyke of King Offa, which divides Anglia from north Walia, and fully seven miles from Scrobesbyrig, and about sixteen miles from the abbey of Waneloc.

Reginald locates the site of Penda's stakes 'not far from' the field of the battle, which has suggested that 'Oswald's Tree' was raised on the ramparts of the hillfort of Hen Dinas close to Oswestry.

William Chaney finds in Penda's stakes a reflection of the same

Germanic pagan cult of the world ash tree as might be traced in the post holes at Yeavering and even Oswald's cross at Hefenfeld. However ironic, such a suggestion reflects the saintly Oswald as a king still rooted in the Germanic tradition which might also be found in his dying words recorded by Bede.

> When he saw that he was surrounded by the enemy forces and about to be slain, he prayed for the souls of his army; and this is the origin of the proverb, 'God have mercy on their souls, said Oswald falling to the ground'.

If Oswald's dying prayer had been for his heathen enemies in emulation of 'Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do', Bede would assuredly have said so. Instead, his last thoughts were for the *gesithas* of his warband and, in the moment when his death-stroke fell, Oswald 'the most holy and victorious king of the Northumbrians' was, at the last, Aethelfrith the Iding's son and a warlord Woden-sprung.

Penda of Mercia strode from the killing ground at Maserfeld as the pagan power in the land and in his dark shadow Northumbria was destined to disintegrate once again.

He would put Bebbanburg to the torch before he fell to the sword of the Northumbrian king destined to become the seventh bretwalda . . .

'the seventh bretwalda'

OSWY, SON OF AETHELFRITH

AD 642 – AD 671

> And in the same year that Oswald was slain, Oswiu his brother succeeded to the kingdom of the Northanhymbra; and he reigned thirty years less two.

Thus the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 642 enters the succession of the last of Aethelfrith's sons to the kingdom of the northern English. Similarly Bede's *Historia* lists Oswy's succeeding Oswald 'to rule over all the southern kingdoms, which are divided from the north by the river Humber and the lands bordering on it'.

> The seventh was his brother Oswy, who for some time held sway over almost the same territory, and who also subdued and made tributary most of the Picts and Irish in the north of Britain.

Such pinnacles of power can only have appeared as a very distant prospect in the precarious political circumstances which surrounded Oswy's succession. After the death of Oswald, Northumbria had once again fragmented into its two component sub-kingdoms, of which Oswy could claim no more than the northern dominion of Bernicia from his fortress capital at Bamburgh. South of the Tyne, Deira had reverted to the last of the line of Aelle in the person of Oswin, son of the Osric slain by Cadwallon, while beyond Deira's southern frontier on the Humber estuary, Penda stood unchallenged as the great power in the land. Against such a backdrop, the prospects for Oswy – then only 'a

young man, aged about thirty' according to Bede – would appear at best unpromising and at worst decidedly hazardous.

> He was attacked both by the heathen Mercians who had killed his brother and also by his own son Alchfrith and his nephew Oethelwald, the son of his brother and predecessor.

Bede's ominous paragraph has led many historians to assume Oswy besieged from without, beset from within, and even as tributary to Mercia from the beginning of his reign until his great victory over Penda on the Winwaed thirteen years later. While Oswy clearly did not inherit the secure sovereignty of his predecessor there is enough evidence in Bede alone, if it is taken in the light of Oswy's own background and perspective, to suggest that his situation was in fact much less beleaguered than might at first appear.

Until he could command a united Northumbrian battle host, Oswy was in no position to challenge Penda with any confidence of victory. Nonetheless – and most importantly for Bede – there was no hint of a return of the apostasy of Oswald's immediate predecessors. Aidan remained as bishop of Lindisfarne, and Iona had somehow succeeded where Paulinus' Kentish mission had failed in holding Northumbria for the faith. Oswy's Christianity, nurtured like that of his brother on I-Columcille, remained fast and while Oswin of Deira – 'a man of great piety and devotion' according to Bede – may have assserted independence from Bernicia he remained generously loyal to the see of Lindisfarne. Christianity in Northumbria had assuredly survived the demise of its royal saint Oswald, and Oswy, however greatly threatened by Penda's power, was far from being hopelessly pinned down behind the stockade at Bamburgh.

Only a year after Maserfeld, Bede demonstrates him as perfectly capable of bringing a warband unhindered into the Mercian heartland to retrieve his brother's relics from Oswestry.

> After a year his successor Oswy arrived with an army and removed them, burying the head in the cemetery of the church of Lindisfarne but the hands and arms in the royal city.

In the same year of 643, Oswy's standing as an English king was sufficiently prestigious to secure a Kentish princess of royal Deiran lineage as his queen, although Bede's account does show that the journey of the

royal bride-to-be from Canterbury to Bamburgh, which would have passed through the full extent of Penda's territory if attempted by land, was judiciously accomplished by sea.

> A priest named Utta was at once sent to Kent to bring Eanfled, daughter of King Edwin, to marry King Oswy. The priest intended to travel there by land but to return with the maiden by sea, and went to Bishop Aidan to beg him to pray to the Lord for his companions and himself at the start of their long journey.

It would seem that Oswy's early reign as king of Bernicia was not subject to such intolerable pressure as might at first be supposed. Indeed, the key factor in the first decade of his reign might be more accurately discerned in his own decidedly northern orientation. Oswy had, after all, been carried into exile in Argyll when he was no more than four years old and, unlike his older brother, would have had virtually no recollection of the Northumbrian homeland to which he returned in 633. Such evidence as can be found for his activities throughout Oswald's reign places him on the northern frontier, probably at the siege of Din Eidyn and similarly in alliance with Domnall Brecc at war with the Britons around the Manau. There is, additionally and importantly, the substantial evidence, largely ignored by Bede, of Oswy's marital and extra-marital liaisons which cannot be devoid of political significance. It would appear that Eanfled was not Oswy's first queen, on the evidence of an intriguing Britonic note entered in the genealogy included in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*.

> Osguid begat Alcfrid, and Aelfguin, and Echfird . . . Osguid had two wives, of whom one was called Rieinmelth, daughter of Royth, son of Rum, and the other was called Eanfled, daughter of Eadguin, son of Alli.

While Eanfled is fully documented by Bede, 'Rieinmelth' is unnoticed by his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This omission must have been another instance of his distaste for British queens, because the Nennian reference is confirmed by the *Liber Vitae Lindisfarnensis*, the 'White Book' in which were entered the names of royal and ecclesiastical benefactors of Lindisfarne from its earliest inception. The *Liber Vitae* list of Northumbrian kings is followed by a list of their queens, which curiously omits the name of Oswald's queen Cyniburg, but does enter a *Roegnmaeld*

immediately before *Eanfled*. This *Roegnmaeld* would correspond to an Old English form of the Nennian *Rieinmelth* as further confirmation of Oswy's first wife. The Britonic etymology of the name well befits the lady's lineage, if *riein* represents an early usage for 'queen' and *mellt* translates from modern Welsh as 'lightning'. The name, more accurately rendered as *Rhiainmelt* in Old Welsh, thus translates as 'Queen of the Lightning'. Such a name might well have been bestowed on a daughter of 'Royth', corresponding to the Britonic *Rhoeth*, if his father 'Rum' was – as is indicated by references elsewhere in Nennius – no less than Rhun, son of Urien of Rheged, the British priest who baptised the young Edwin at the court of Gwynedd.

That confirmation of Oswy's first marriage serves at least to illuminate the awkward genealogy of his eldest son, Alchfrith, who is variously mentioned by Bede as a hostile dissident and elsewhere as his father's ally in battle. Oswy married Eanfled no earlier than 643 and if Alchfrith were the son of that union he could have been no more than eleven years old in 655 when he was recorded fighting in battle beside his father on the Winwaed. Alchfrith must necessarily have been in his mid-teens to have ridden to war and consequently could not have been the legitimate son of parents married in 643. Rhiainmelt would have been wed to Oswy prior to that date, thus during Oswald's reign and most probably at some point in the north British wars of the late 630s. If Rhiainmelt had married Oswy around 638 and died in the first year of his reign, then he could well have been the father of a sixteen-year-old son in 655 and would also have been free to marry Eanfled in 643.

No less illuminating are the political implications of such a marriage between a Northumbrian prince and a Briton princess at a strategic point in Anglo-British relations. The union of Oswy and Rhiainmelt would have carried with it significant political overtones for both Northumbria and Rheged and these have been variously interpreted by authorities on the period. The documentary record of Urien's kingdom remains at best fragmentary even at the peak of its importance, but appears to evaporate almost entirely with his death at Lindisfarne before 590. Apart from the probably short-lived succession of his son Owain to the kingdom, no further lords of Rheged are reliably entered in the sources and Urien's heartland around Carlisle is not again recorded until 685, when it re-emerges as a western outpost of Northumbria. Rheged, like the territory of the Gododdin, had been under increasing pressure from Northum-

brian expansion since the last decade of the sixth century. That pressure, aggravated by the trival rivalries endemic to the British kingdoms, certainly brought about the collapse of Rheged at some point after the effectively final destruction of the Gododdin which must have followed the siege of Din Eidyn. It has been suggested that Rheged was annexed to Northumbria at, if not immediately prior to, Oswy's succession and his marriage to Rhiainmelt interpreted as setting the seal on Northumbria's peaceful conquest of Urien's domain. It is not possible to categorically deny, let alone disprove, such a proposal, but royal marriages were not customarily recorded as carrying a kingdom as their dowry. If Rhun succeeded Owain to Urien's kingdom, he must have survived to abdicate, presumably in favour of his son Rhoeth, and to enter the church and officiate at the early baptism of Edwin.

No record of the reign, if such it was, of Rhoeth in Rheged has survived, but his kingdom could only have been in great decay by the fourth decade of the seventh century. It was also locked in a desperate rivalry with the Gododdin, a possible legacy of the assassination of Urien contrived by Morcant at Lindisfarne, and its best chance of survival might have been offered by an alliance with Northumbria. A royal marriage was very often the device of political alliance and such a scheme of things could well have lain behind Oswy's union with Rhiainmelt, who might herself have been the only surviving heir to Rheged by 638. That speculation would propose an allied host from Northumbria and Rheged laying siege to the Manau Gododdin at Edinburgh and Stirling, while Domnall of Dalriada moved against their *cymry* on the Clyde. However marginal these complexities of Anglo-British relations might appear – and Bede evidently considered them unworthy of mention – they do underwrite the intense involvement of Oswy in the far north of his kingdom. From the viewpoint of the Forth and the Solway the precarious situation of Deira on the frontier with Mercia would have seemed a very distant matter indeed, and Oswy's kingdom must have centred in the first years of his reign on the ancestral fastness of Bamburgh looking north to lands beyond the Tweed.

Such a background would also explain how Oswald's brother even survived to become the seventh bretwalda. If he had fought at Maserfeld, it is unthinkable that he could have escaped alive from the battlefield described by Henry of Huntingdon as 'whitened with the bones of saints'. No son of Aethelfrith would have been allowed to outlive that blood-fray

and if Oswy had fought in Oswald's host his head would have assuredly been impaled on a stake beside that of his saintly brother. He must have been otherwise engaged on Northumbria's northern frontier and taken no part in Oswald's defeat by Penda. Oswy and Penda were destined by history to engage in a long-running and bitterly-fought contest of arms, which several historians have reasonably interpreted as developing into a personal feud. That feud, if such it was, brought Penda's warbands north to the capital of Bernicia and put Bamburgh twice to the torch before the last English pagan king finally fell on the Winwaed in 655.

Oswy's war with Penda has the benefit of Bede's *Historia* as its principal primary source and consequently can be firmly placed on more secure historical ground. While Mercia stood as the unchallenged superpower among the English kingdoms after Maserfeld, Penda shared little of the ambition of the new empire-building breed of Anglo-Saxon kings. He was, as had been his forbears, essentially a raiding warlord in the old Germanic tradition. After the defeat of Edwin at Haethfeld, Penda soon returned south to his people of the Mierce, leaving Cadwallon to occupy and devastate the conquered lands north of the Humber. Penda dealt brutally with the kings of the East Angles who appeared as neighbouring rivals to his own tribal territory, slaying no less than three of them and compelling another, Aethelhere the last of the Wuffings, to become his vassal. The English midlands were Penda's territory and the neighbouring Welsh Britons were his frequent allies, but beyond that sphere of influence, while he was ready and able to raid and plunder, he was prompted invariably by loot and vengeance rather than any latter-day land-seeking.

So it was that Penda fell on the old enemies among the West Saxons to drive Coenwalch, son of Cynigils, from the kingdom of Wessex. So too it must have been in the north. Penda held the midlands as far north as the Humber and Oswin's Deira must have lived in the greatest fear of advancing Mercian warbands. It has been suggested that Oswy's friendship with Sigbert of the East Saxons, who visited Northumbria and brought a Lindisfarne monk south as his bishop, might have outraged the pagan Penda, but it must also be acknowledged that Penda had begun to tolerate Christianity in his own kingdom by the later 640s and even allowed the baptism of his son Peada by 653. Consequently, no single specific motive for Penda's war on Oswy's Bernicia can be surely identified, but Bede describes a sequence of savage attacks as *intolerabiles inruptiones* of which at least two reached the royal capital at Bamburgh.

Neither can be exactly dated, but the earliest occurred during the lifetime of Aidan and can thus be placed before, even if not long before, Aidan's death in 651 on the evidence of Bede's account.

> During the time of his episcopate an enemy army of Mercians led by Penda laid waste the land of Northumbria far and wide with godless destruction, until they reached the royal town named after the former queen Bebba. They could not capture the town either by assault or by siege, and so attempted to destroy it by fire. They tore apart the small hamlets that they found in the neighbourhood and carried to the town a great mass of beams, rafters, partition walls, wattle and thatch, which they piled high round the wall on its landward side. When they saw the wind to be favourable, they started a fire in an attempt to burn down the town. At that time the most reverend bishop Aidan was staying on Farne Island, about two miles from the town. He often used to go into retreat there to spend time in silent prayer, and in fact the site of his solitary dwelling on the island is pointed out to this day. When he saw the tongues of fire and the smoke being carried by the wind over the town walls, he is said to have looked up to heaven in tears and raised his hands, saying: 'See, Lord, the great evil that Penda does.' At these words the wind at once changed direction away from the town and hurled back the flames upon those who had kindled them. Some were injured and all were terrified and they abandoned further assault on the town, realising that it was under divine protection.

However divinely deflected, that Mercian attack was not to be the last of Penda's 'intolerable incursions'. Aidan died at the end of August 651 and the timber buttress against which he breathed his last survived, indeed still survives, as an esteemed relic of the Irish bishop who became the first saint of Lindisfarne. Bede's note of its earliest remarkable survival provides evidence of another Mercian attack on Bamburgh after 651.

> A few years later Penda, king of the Mercians, invaded the region, destroying everything he could by fire and sword, and the village in which Aidan died, including the church, was burnt down. But, miraculously, only the buttress on which he was leaning when he died could not be destroyed by the flames, though they devoured everything around it.

Further evidence for 'the great evil Penda does' has been uncovered by the archaeological investigation of Yeavering. The 'Phase IV' buildings of the royal township have been firmly assigned to Oswald's restoration of the kingdom after its devastation by Cadwallon, and Brian Hope-Taylor's excavations suggest their later destruction by fire corresponds to 'a result of Penda's burning and pillaging of the district' described by Bede.

Oswy's military resistance to Penda's attack before 651 is, somewhat unexpectedly, evidenced by a passing reference in the anonymous Lindisfarne *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, which tells of the young Cuthbert 'dwelling in the camp of the warriors, in the face of the foe'. Cuthbert entered the monastery at Mailros around August 651, when he would have been about seventeen years old and his military service could not have occurred very much before that time, which would place the future bishop of Lindisfarne in the ranks of Oswy's levies raised while Penda's host besieged Bamburgh around 650.

Whatever security Oswy had enjoyed in his northern fastness was clearly under serious threat by 651. Perhaps the need to confront Penda with a unified Northumbria lay behind Oswy's attempts to annex Deira, but he was not destined to succeed by the stratagem of dynastic marriage, the force of arms, or even by his last resort of regicide. Eanfled, the daughter of Edwin granted sanctuary in Kent in 632, would have been the last direct heir in the line of Aelle and Oswy's choice of her as his queen cannot have been made without a view to legitimating his claim on Oswin's Deira. When that device proved to be less than effective, Oswy turned to the more forthright stratagem of the sword and Bede's account displays the historian writing once again in saga-maker style.

> At the start of his reign Oswy shared the kingly status with Oswin, of the family of King Edwin and a son of Osric. Oswin, a man of great piety and devotion, ruled the kingdom of Deira for seven years of great prosperity, and was loved by everyone. But even with him Oswy, who ruled the northern part of the land across the Humber, that is the kingdom of Bernicia, was unable to live at peace; and as the causes of their quarrel increased he murdered him in tragic circumstances. The two kings raised an army against each other, but Oswin saw that he could not go to war against an enemy who had stronger forces, and decided that it would be better for the present to abandon his intention of fighting and wait for more favourable times. He therefore dismissed

> the army he had raised at a place called Wilfaraesdun, meaning the hill of Wilfar, about ten miles to the north-west of the vill of Catar-acto; and he ordered them to return to their homes. He himself with only one loyal thane named Tondhere went to take refuge in the home of Hunwald, a nobleman whom he also believed to be a good friend. But sad to say, it proved far otherwise; for he and his thane were betrayed by the nobleman, and Oswy had them killed by his reeve Aethelwin, arousing universal disgust. The deed was done on the thirteenth of the kalends of September in the ninth year of his reign at a place called In Getlingum.

Even the assassination of its king did not persuade Deira to unite with Oswy's Bernicia, and would appear to have even further alienated the northern English south of the Tyne from the king at Bamburgh. Oswin was succeeded by Oethelwald, Oswald's son and evidently now a rival to Oswy's ambition, and Deira moved into alliance with Penda.

The sources for the by now inevitable confrontation of Penda and Oswy are very much less than cohesive, but all at least agree that it was a campaign fought across the whole expanse of Northumbria, with Oswy first retreating up to the Forth and then advancing back into Deira to seize victory on the river Winwaed in the region of Leeds.

Penda's incursions must have driven Oswy to retreat to the furthest north of his kingdom, even as far north as Stirling – called *Urbs Giudi* by Bede and *Iudeu* by Nennius – from where he attempted to buy off Penda's hostilities with a ransom. Bede and Nennius offer separate and irreconcilable accounts of what appears to be the same event, although it remains possible if unlikely that they represent two separate incidents. They also might suggest the possibility that Oswy had bought off Penda's attacks on earlier occasions. Bede confirms Oswy's ten-year-old son Egfrith as held hostage by Penda's queen in 655, which can only be interpreted as a token of Mercia's tributary dominance, and the historian Sir Charles Oman has suggested that the marriages of Oswy's son Alchfrith and daughter Alchfled to a daughter and son of Penda – both of which can be dated to before 653 – were similarly tokens of tribute. These marriages may indeed have been as Oman suggests, though they could be more probably interpreted as seals set on treaties of ransom, and Oswy was at least powerful enough to demand the Christian baptism of Penda's son, Peada, before consenting to his marriage to a

Northumbrian princess. There remains, however, clear evidence that Oswy offered tribute to Penda at the outset of the Winwaed campaign and that his offer of ransom not only failed to bring an end to hostilities but resulted in Oswy's finally carrying the battle to Penda and his allies in the south of Northumbria at *Winwaedfeld*.

Nennius describes that conflict by its Celtic name-form of *strages campo Gai*, 'the slaughter of the Field of Gai'.

> Oswy killed Pantha [Penda] in Gaius' Field, and the slaughter of the field of Gai now occurred, and the kings of the Britons, who had gone out on campaign with King Pantha to the city called Iudeu, were killed. At that time Oswy handed over all the riches that were with him in the city into the hands of Penda, and Penda distributed them to the kings of the Britons, which is called the *Atbret Iudeu*.
>
> Catgabail, king of the land of Guenedota, was the only one to escape with his army, rising up in the night: for this reason he was called Catgabail Catguommed.

Bede's account of the same war is framed in terms befitting an ecclesiastical history.

> At this time King Oswy was being harried beyond endurance by the savage attacks of Penda, king of the Mercians, whom I have often mentioned, and who had killed his brother. Finally Oswy was forced to promise that he would give him a vast quantity of royal treasures and tributes, precious beyond belief, as the price of peace, on condition that Penda would return home and cease from his utter devastation of the kingdom. The faithless king, who had determined to destroy and exterminate his entire people from the humblest to the greatest, refused to agree to his proposal, and Oswy looked to the help of God's mercy to save him from the merciless heathen. He made a vow: 'If the heathen will not receive our gifts, let us offer them to Him who will, the Lord our God.' So he vowed that if the victory should be his he would offer to the Lord his daughter to be dedicated to the life of holy virginity, and also that he would give twelve small estates to build monasteries; and with this, he went to battle with a very small army.
>
> It is said, in fact, that the heathen had an army thirty times as great; for they had thirty legions experienced in war and led by most

noble commanders, whom King Oswy and his son Alchfrith confronted with an insignificant force. Oswy's other son, Egfrith, was held hostage at that time by Queen Cynwise in the kingdom of the Mercians; while Aethelwald, son of King Oswald, who should have helped them, had joined the enemy, and guided them against his native land and his own uncle. When battle was joined, however, Aethelwald withdrew from the fray and awaited the outcome in a place of safety. So the battle commenced, and the heathen were put to flight and cut down. The thirty royal commanders who had come to their aid were almost all killed, including Aethelhere, brother and successor of King Anna of the East Angles. The cause of the war was slain, with the loss of all his thanes and followers. The battle was fought near the river Winwaed, which owing to heavy rain at the time had overflowed its banks and flooded a wide area of land around its course; so that the water claimed many more victims in the rout than the sword destroyed in battle.

Any attempt to reconcile these two versions of events can only be made on the hazardous frontier between history and speculation, but there, nonetheless, it might be possible to reconstruct a plausible course of events from the seemingly divergent early sources.

Nennius' *Atbret Iudeu*, 'The Restitution of Iudeu', must represent Oswy at his lowest ebb, isolated on the northern edge of his kingdom, his son held hostage in distant Mercia, offering treasure as the price of peace. Bede proposes that Penda turned away the offering, while Nennius claims that it was passed to 'the kings of the Britons'. Precisely which 'kings of the Britons' are intended is unclear, but it would seem unlikely that Penda's host was actually present and besieging Oswy at Stirling, and more probable that the Mercians were otherwise engaged in plundering Bernicia. In that situation, Oswy's tribute would have been offered by emissary rather than handed over the ramparts at Stirling. Penda – whom Bede describes at this point as 'the faithless king' – and his Welsh allies would have negotiated with the Northumbrians through the intermediary of sympathetic Gododdin warlords in the Lothian region. Penda, as has been shown, was a raider rather than a conqueror, engaged on plunder and otherwise concerned only to isolate the Northumbrian king from any effective alliances of his own. At that point, Oswy most needed a truce with Penda or the support of a powerful and effective ally. Nennius

proposes that Penda was offered a ransom of 'all the riches that were in the city' of Iudeu, which can only imply Oswy offering looted British treasure as the price of peace with Penda. Such a ransom could similarly have been passed by the Mercian to his Gododdin emissaries to buy their loyalty from any risk of alliance with Oswy, which Nennius' British source would naturally interpret as the restoration of stolen wealth to its former British owners, and record as 'The Restitution of Iudeu'. No detail of any such course of events would necessarily have been available to Bede, who would have known only from his Bamburgh sources that a ransom had been offered to and rejected by Penda, intent on a war of attrition of which the consequences would have been all too evident in Bernicia. These disparate accounts of events might thus be attributed to different access to sources. Nennius' British history would know of the Gododdin involvement and associate it with Oswy at Stirling. Bede would have known of Oswy's offer and interpreted the devastation of Northumbria as evidence of its rejection. Penda would, as on earlier occasions, have returned to Mercia with the proceeds of his looting and probably with every intention of returning again at a future season.

At that point all the sources confirm Oswy's southward advance against Penda and the battle on the Winwaed. The location of the battlefield where 'King Oswy brought this war to an end' on the 15th November 655 is specified by Bede as 'in the district of Loidis' and on his authority it has been sought around the city of Leeds but the precise site remains in dispute. The great weight of both ancient and modern opinion favours the river Went, a tributary of the Don, as Bede's *Winwaed*, which would be the Old English form of the Britonic *Wenned*. Gervase of Canterbury marked the Went as *Wenet* in the twelfth century, while Geoffrey of Monmouth, drawing on his Britonic sources, similarly names the river as *Wenned*. The point where the Went crosses the old Roman road near Ackworth moor to the south-east of Leeds would well satisfy the requirements of Bede's evidence.

Bede's account of Oswy's victory is more concerned with divine intervention than strategy and tactics, yet describes Oswy's modest forces confronting an allied host of far greater numbers. He also leaves the impression of an extended conflict culminating in a rout of Penda's army trapped between the blades of the enemy and the river in full flood. Welsh tradition suggests fighting spread over two days and the bardic

stanza also accurately corresponds with the fact that the 15th November was a Sunday in the year 655.

> On Sunday their blades assumed a ruddy hue;
> On Monday was seen a pool knee-deep of blood.
> Twenty hundred perished in one hour.

It is possible that Oswy's warband surprised and destroyed overwhelmingly superior numbers by military genius or divine intervention, but there are coincidental evidences to tentatively suggest the Northumbrian host strengthened by allies of the Gael, from Scotic Dalriada, if not from Ireland itself. There may be a clue to that effect in the Irish annals, where the death of Penda in the battle of Winwaed is as widely recorded as the death of Cadwallon in Oswald's victory at Hefenfeld, where I have already indicated the nature and extent of Irish interest. The contrastingly sparse annal entries of the death of Oswald at Maserfeld reflect an absence of any direct Irish involvement. Dalriada was itself at a low ebb in the decade after the death of Domnall Brecc, but Bede proposes it as tributary to Northumbria in Oswy's reign and if it had been so before the battle of the Winwaed then Oswy could certainly have called on support from its warriors. Otherwise, Oswy's personal links with the northern Ui Neill of the Irish mainland were of long standing and cannot be disregarded in any quest for an ally. In his early years he had formed a relationship with a princess of the Ui Neill, which bore a son who would succeed to the kingdom of Northumbria. When the death of Aidan brought a second Irish abbot from Iona to Lindisfarne, the new Bishop Finan was himself the son of the northern Ui Neill high-king Rimidh and thus the brother of Oswy's former mistress, the princess Fina. All of which must cast new light on Bede's account of Oswy's vow that 'if the heathen will not receive our gifts, let us offer them to Him who will'. The promise of greater patronage for the church on Lindisfarne, itself a daughter foundation of Iona, would certainly have encouraged a Ui Neill bishop to lend all possible aid within his gift to a future bretwalda at war with a pagan enemy.

There is also the Nennian implication that 'the slaughter of the field of Gai' was launched, like the battle of Hefenfeld, in darkness. The semblance of similarity between the twin victories of Oswald and Oswy may be entirely coincidental, but it would seem that both battles were fully entered in the Irish annals, were won against overwhelming

numerical odds, resulted in generous benefits for the Columban church in Northumbria, and were both fought at night in a strategy characteristic of the Celtic rather than the Anglo-Saxon warrior. All of this suggests to me the possibility of Oswy's victory on the Winwaed being won with allies from the dominion of the Gael.

Oswy was at least better served by his allies than was Penda by his. Bede points to the thirty *duces regi*, by which he can only mean allied tributary sub-kings, who made up Penda's host and 'almost all' of whom were slain in the battle. Of those, just three are identified by name: one who fell in the fray, one who withdrew to observe the tide of battle, and one who crept away under cover of darkness. A scribal error of punctuation – identified by J. O. Prestwich and amended in the translation used here – once suggested the identification of Aethelhere of the East Angles as the 'cause of the war', when Bede's *auctore belli* can only have been intended to apply to Penda. Aethelhere was no more than a tributary vassal of Mercia and the entry of his death amounts to no more than a scrap of incidental information which Bede was reluctant to discard. Oethelwald, the treacherous sub-king of Deira who had served as ally and guide for Penda's raids north of the Humber, set himself apart from the Mercian forces to await the outcome of the battle. The original extent of Oethelwald's ambition can only have been to reclaim his father's kingdom of Northumbria. His uncle's succession to Bernicia had excluded him from the heartland of the Idings, and the murder of Oswin in Deira presented his only available opportunity to achieve his goal. His Deiran grandmother and a shared antipathy to Oswy's intentions would have made some common cause with the Northumbrians south of the Wall, and Oethelwald was evidently an unprincipled opportunist. He submitted to Penda with a clear eye to self-preservation and a view to eventual sovereignty over a unified Northumbria, even if needs be as a vassal of Mercia. There is no record of his fate after the battle, but he would have had no alternative in the event of Oswy's victory but to go into exile, if indeed he survived long enough to do so. There might just be a fragmentary footnote to Oethelwald's fate buried in the *Victoria County History* of Yorkshire where a 'pre-Conquest slab' is recorded at St Gregory's Minster, Kirkdale, some six miles from Lastingham near Whitby. Lastingham, according to Bede, was granted by Oethelwald to Bishop Cedd for the monastery of *Lastingaeu* and the Kirkdale slab is

incised with a cross and the name *Oethilwalde* in a runic script, which may represent the obscure epitaph of Oswald's treacherous son.

Nennius enters his note of the third of Penda's allies on the Winwaed as 'Catgabail, king of the land of Guenedota'. Cadafel of Gwynedd had succeeded Cadwallon to the Welsh kingdom and evidently also to the alliance with Penda. His desertion from the battlefield 'in the night' has entered his cowardice into Welsh tradition, and hence Nennius' note that 'for this reason he was called Catgabail Catguommed'. The cognomen is a disparaging word-play on the Welsh name, where *Cadafel* would mean 'battle-seizer' and *Cadguommed* precisely the opposite. Hence *Catgabail Catguommed*, 'Battle-Seizer, Battle-Refuser' and the Triads are at least as uncomplimentary when they list 'Cadafel son of Cynnfeddw in Gwynedd' among the 'Three Kings who were Sprung from Serfs'. Cadafel did nonetheless manage to survive the 'slaughter of the field of Gai' to die a more peaceful death in monastic retirement, according to the Welsh Annals, in 682.

The most significant casualty of the Winwaed campaign was, without question, Penda of Mercia, condemned by William of Malmesbury as the 'destroyer of his neighbours and the seed-plot of hostility'. When Oswy slew Penda he brought down the last pagan king of the English. Bede credits Oswy with 'having cut off the heathen head', while Henry of Huntingdon's very secular view portrays Penda's last battle as the just retribution for a heathen warlord with the blood of no less than five Christian kings on his hands.

> In the river Winwaed is avenged the slaughter of Anna,
> The slaughter of the kings Sigberht and Ecgric,
> The slaughter of the kings Oswald and Edwin.

At the age of almost eighty when he fell in battle, Penda was certainly very old by seventh-century standards and must have presented something of an anachronism by the mid-650s. He was the last of his fearsome pagan kind, and his death must mark the effective end of English paganism.

Bede's claim for Oswy as 'the seventh bretwalda' is most true of the three years following the great victory on the Winwaed, which established him as the most powerful of the English kings. He had re-united Deira and Bernicia into Northumbria and not only established his authority over

the English kingdoms, but also – according to Bede – 'made tributary most of the Picts and the Irish in the north of Britain'.

> King Oswy ruled over the Mercian people and the other peoples of the southern kingdoms for three years after King Penda was slain; and he also brought most of the Pictish people under English rule.

With his southern dominions secure, Oswy was able to turn his attention back to the northern frontiers. As so often with Pictish affairs, there is no detailed evidence for the extent or the nature of Oswy's overlordship beyond the Forth, but there are sufficient fragments to offer support for Bede's claims. The Pictish king-lists appear to confirm the succession of their kings on some form of matrilinear principle, almost invariably the sons of Pictish princesses and their consorts from the royal lines of other kingdoms, Britons, Scots, or – in the case of Talorcan – Northumbrian English. Talorcan, son of Eanfrith, could have legitimated his claim to a kingship of the Picts, even if only of the southern Picts beyond the Forth and below the Grampians, by right of his Pictish mother's descent as a daughter of *Uuid*. Alfred Smyth, an eminent authority on early Scottish history, suggests impressively that this Uuid is probably the same 'son of Neithon', king of the Strathclyde Britons, as the *Gwid* named in *Y Gododdin* as a Pictish warlord riding on Mynyddog's raid on Catraeth. By whatever right of succession, Talorcan must confirm the Northumbrian dominion over the Picts proposed by Bede. Oswy's war machine had been advancing beyond the Lammermuirs through the Lothians and along the Forth to the point where he was able to impose his nephew on the Picts as a Northumbrian 'client king', while Talorcan's date of succession around 653 would even suggest his being placed there to hold Northumbria's northern frontier while Oswy was distracted by Penda's offensive in the south. The Irish annal entry of a battle at *Srath-Ethairt* in 654 where Talorcan defeated a grandson of the Dalriadan dynast, Aidan mac-Gabran, must represent a significant Northumbrian advance – albeit by Pictish proxy – in the far north. The Irish annals enter the death of Talorcan at around 657 or 658 when the Pictish succession passed to two brothers – Gartnait followed by Drust – who seem to have been the sons, presumably by a Pictish queen, of Domnall Brecc. Domnall's death at the hands of Owain of Strathclyde in 642 left Scotic Dalriada at its weakest point in almost a century, when it would have most probably fallen under the Northumbrian overlordship indicated by

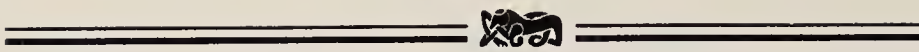
Bede and confirmed by the quote from the Cummene *Life* of Columcille added into Adamnan's *Vita Columbae*. Cummene, writing at the peak of Oswy's power, blames Domnall Brecc's battle at Mag Rath for betraying a convenant made to Columcille and bringing the saint's vengeance down on the royal house of Dalriada.

> And from that day to this, they have been trodden down by strangers – a fate which pierces the heart with sighs and grief.

Cummene's 'trodden down by strangers' must correspond to Bede's claim of Oswy's rendering tributary 'the Irish in Britain', and the succession of two princes of Scotic Dalriada as kings of Picts can only reflect two more client kings of Northumbria in Pictland.

Oswy appears to have similarly controlled his outlying dominions in the south through the placement of client kings. His son Alchfrith became the sub-king of Deira, and, while Oswy himself retained strategic control of Lindsey south of the Humber and Mercia north of the Trent, the southern Mercians were ruled by his son-in-law, Peada, son of Penda. These strategically-placed sub-kings and far-reaching alliances would support Oswy's eminence as the bretwalda for the remaining years of his reign.

Even so, the great edifice of Northumbrian domination was showing the first signs of erosion before 670. Oswy was already an elderly man by seventh-century standards, and had reached middle age before he attained the peak of his power. Whatever military manoeuvrings he manipulated on the northern frontiers, his interest south of the Tweed was increasingly directed towards matters of ecclesiastical moment. Bede mentions no further warfare between 655 and Oswy's death and his chapters concerning those fifteen years centre on the politics of the psalter rather than the sword. The unprecedented power of the Christian bretwalda provided every opportunity for a corresponding expansion of the power of the Church, and bishops soon emerged as important political figures, even as king-makers, in their own right. The age of ascetic Celtic evangelism, personified in Aidan of Lindisfarne, was transformed within a decade into the age of power-broking prince bishops which dawned at the bitterly-contested council at Whitby in 664. The simple Celtic church of Oswald's restoration was already being overlaid in the 650s with a new superstructure of ecclesiastical grandeur. Even on Lindisfarne, Bede notes the episcopacy of Finan as the occasion of



the rebuilding of Bishop Aidan's church in a manner 'befitting an episcopal see, although he constructed it in the Irish manner entirely of hewn oak, not of stone.'

On the eve of the Winwaed campaign, Oswy dedicated his infant daughter to the religious life and promised to endow the church of Lindisfarne with twelve estates, each of ten *familiae*. Bede notes that six were in Bernicia and six in Deira, and they illustrate the process by which monastic economy and land-holding was so dramatically to develop in seventh-century Northumbria. Oswy's endowment effectively transferred the rents of these estates from the royal treasury to that of the church. Each *familia*, Bede's Latin form of the Old English *hide*, was an allotment of land sufficient to support one family unit and an annual proportion of its income was payable, invariably in kind, to the royal landowner. Oswy's endowment consequently transferred the produce of a hundred and twenty family farms to the church of Lindisfarne for the support of its monastic community. On such royal generosity was the vast monastic wealth and power of the Northumbrian church to be amassed through the reigns of Oswy and his successors. A similar endowment to found the monastery of *In Getlingum* at Gilling in Yorkshire is recorded by Bede as Oswy's atonement for the death of his Deiran rival.

> This was the place where King Oswin was killed. Queen Eanfled, his kinswoman, to atone for his unjust death had asked King Oswy to make a grant of land there to Christ's servant Trumhere, as he too was kin to the dead king, for the building of a monastery; and in the monastery continual prayers were to be said for the eternal salvation of both kings, namely the one who was murdered and the one who ordered his murder.

The royal lineage of Abbot Trumhere of Gilling is an early and signal example of a long sequence of high-born Northumbrian ecclesiastics whose royal kinship entangled their monastic careers in royally-endowed foundations with every ebb and flow of secular politics. Aebbe, the abbess of Coldingham, was the sister of Oswy and Oswald, just as the abbess Hild was a daughter of Edwin's nephew Hereric, born in exile among the Britons of Elmet during the reign of Aethelfrith. Hild had planned to enter the religious life at Chelles in Gaul, but had been recalled to Northumbria by Aidan as abbess of a daughter house of Lindisfarne on the south bank of the Wear in the 640s. Aidan later appointed Hild as

abbess of Heiu's foundation of *Heruteu* at Hartlepool and there Oswy placed his daughter Aelfled into her care. The infant Aelfled's entry into the church on 'the island of the hart' was accompanied by an endowment of ten hides – almost certainly one of the twelve estates granted to the church in 655 – for a new 'double' house of nuns and monks under Hild's abbacy. This was the foundation on 'the bay of the lighthouse' at Whitby – like Hartlepool and Jarrow the former site of a Roman signal station – known to Bede by its Old English name of *Strenaeshalc*.

> Hild obtained an estate of ten hides at a place called Strenaeshalc, and built a monastery there, and the king's daughter became first a disciple there in the life of the Rule.

'The Rule' was, ironically, the Celtic monastic regime employed by Aidan at Lindisfarne and deriving from the 'Columban' Rule of Iona. Hild of Whitby was a pupil of Aidan and a convinced devotee of the Irish church, who governed her expanding monastic dominion, of Whitby, Hartlepool and later Hackness, in strict accordance with the Celtic monastic ordinances. The irony lies in Oswy's selection of the church at *Strenaeshalc* – most easily accessible by sea from the further reaches of his kingdom – for the momentous council in 664 which has entered the history books as the 'Synod of Whitby'.

The debate was called by Oswy to resolve for Northumbria the theological controversy of 'The Paschal Question', the doctrinal chasm hinging on the dating of Easter in the Christian calendar which had emerged between the Celtic and Roman churches over two hundred years.

Other points of divergence – not least the Celtic tonsure which flouted the Petrine form of *corona spinea* demanded by Roman orthodoxy – had entrenched two opposing theological camps into a contest between Roman authoritarianism and Celtic intransigence. This was the conflict which brought the Frankish church down on the Celtic-tonsured head of the Irish holy man Columbanus when he refused to allow his brother *peregrini* to celebrate any 'dark Pasch' in their continental outposts of the mid-sixth century, which had prompted Augustine's mission to Kent to attempt to coerce British bishops to submit to Petrine dogma, and which Oswy of Northumbria sought to resolve in council above the bay of the lighthouse.

Bede's *Historia* sets the scene at Strenaeshalc in the year 664.

At this time there arose serious and recurrent controversy about the date of Easter. Those who had come from Kent and Gaul declared that the Irish observance of Easter Sunday was contrary to the practice of the universal Church.

James, once deacon of the venerable archbishop Paulinus, observed the true, catholic Easter along with all those that he could instruct in the better way. Queen Eanfled, too, and her court, who had with her a priest from Kent named Romanus who followed the catholic practice, observed Easter according to the tradition she had seen in Kent. As a consequence, it is said to have often come about in those days that Easter was celebrated twice in a single year, with the queen and her court still observing Lent and celebrating Palm Sunday at the very same time as the king had finished the fast and was keeping Easter Sunday. During the lifetime of Aidan, this disagreement about the keeping of Easter was borne with patience by everyone, because they knew full well that although he could not keep Easter otherwise than according to the practice of those who had sent him, nevertheless those works of faith, piety, and love that he set himself diligently to perform were true to the practice of all the saints.

After the death of his successor Finan, another Irishman, Colman, became bishop, and a more serious controversy arose not only about the observance of Easter but about other matters of church discipline. It came to the ears of the rulers themselves, King Oswy and his son Alchfrith. Oswy, who had been taught and baptised by the Irish and was also well versed in their language, believed that nothing could be better than their teaching; whereas Alchfrith had been taught the Christian faith by Wilfrid, a man of great learning, and knew that his teaching was really to be preferred to all the traditions of the Irish.

In consequence of the dispute that had arisen in Northumbria about Easter, and the tonsure, and other church matters, it was arranged that a council should be held to settle the dispute in the monastery called Strenaeshalc, meaning bay of the lighthouse, whose abbess was at that time Hild, a woman devoted to God. It was attended by both kings, father and son; Bishop Colman with his clergy from Ireland; and Bishop Agilbert [of the West Saxons] with the priests Agatho and Wilfrid. James and Romanus were on their side, while Abbess Hild and her followers were on the side of the Irish, which included the venerable Bishop Cedd; he had been ordained by the Irish long before

and acted at that council as a most scrupulous interpreter for both sides.

Bede sets down the ensuing debate in an apparently verbatim account fully attentive to every theological and scriptural detail, but which also reveals much of the historical *realpolitik* of central interest here.

Colman of Lindisfarne spoke first to claim the authority of the gospel of John and the practice of I-Columcille for the Celtic adherence of Lindisfarne. Colman was an islander-abbot whose faith had been forged in wild places and hardened by unrelenting wind and wave. In the councils of the learned, he must have been the easiest of meat for Wilfrid, abbot of Ripon and spokesman for the Roman orthodoxy, who could claim the authority of Peter to disparage the Irish tradition as an heretical intransigence against the *unitas catholica*.

> 'The Easter which we observe is the one we saw celebrated by everyone at Rome, where the blessed apostles Peter and Paul lived, taught, suffered and were buried. It is a usage we found to be universal in Italy and in Gaul, lands which we have travelled over for the purpose of study and prayer. In Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and every part of the world where the Church of Christ is scattered, we learned that this practice is followed by different nations speaking different tongues, and all at one and the same time. The only exceptions are this people and their accomplices in stubbornness, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who from these two remotest islands in the Ocean, and from only parts of them, pursue a foolish struggle against the whole world. Your fathers may have been holy men, yet are they, a few men in one corner of a remote island, to have precedence over the universal Church of Christ throughout the world?'

Wilfrid's words echo the disparaging irony of Cummian, the abbot of Durrow newly adherent to the Roman orthodoxy, when he pursued the same debate with Segine, abbot of Iona.

> Rome is in error, Jerusalem in error, Alexandria in error, Antioch in error, the whole world is in error; only the Scots and Britons know what is right . . .

Precisely what caused Oswy to decide against the tradition of I-Columcille and for the *unitas catholica* of the Roman cause will never be certainly known. If he had brought the land of the Scots under

Northumbrian political domination, the ecclesiastical authority of its church in his own kingdom can only have been undermined. Oswy the bretwalda must have greatly feared any political isolation with its attendant threat of encircling enmity when the church had already proved itself as much a political as a spiritual power in the land. His Kentish queen was surrounded by Augustinian churchmen more than anxious to bring the most powerful of English kings within the Roman spiritual fold, and hostile bishops made dangerous foes. He may even have been ultimately concerned – as Bede implies – to seek the blessing of Saint Peter and thus ensure his entry into the Kingdom of Heaven with all the majesty of his earthly kingdom.

> 'He is the keeper of the gate, and I will not contradict him. I desire to obey his commands in everything, in case when I come to the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven he, who by your testimony holds the keys, should turn away, and there be no one to open for me.'
>
> When the king had spoken, all those who sat or stood there, both high and low, expressed their agreement; and they gave up their inaccurate observance and were quick to adopt what they now knew to be the better rule.

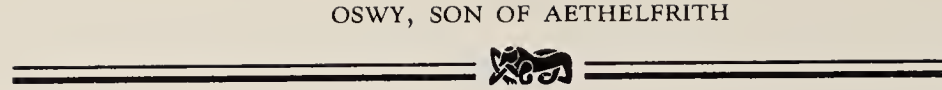
Oswy's decision must have been guided by political interest, and yet the suspicion remains that he had been most substantially convinced, as had his son Alchfrith, by the silver tongue and continental veneer of the same Wilfrid whose ambition was to surge so voraciously in the wake of the decision at Whitby. The resolution to bring the vast Northumbrian kingdom within the realm of catholic unity had, without any shadow of doubt, vastly less bearing on the realm of liturgy than on more secular imperatives of power and land. If the Paschal controversy was a political issue for Oswy, it was assuredly no less for Wilfrid, abbot of Ripon, the future bishop of York and saint of Hexham.

Born in 634, the year after Hefenfeld, he was the son of a nobleman well-connected among King Oswald's companions. After the early death of his mother, the fourteen-year-old Wilfrid left home to escape a harsh stepmother and sought refuge in the household of Oswy's queen. When one of the king's thanes fell ill and retired to the monastery on Lindisfarne, Wilfrid accompanied him and there acquired his monastic education. Queen Eanfled encouraged him in his ambition to visit Rome and through her Kentish connections arranged for him to travel to Gaul

in company with Benedict Biscop, another young man of the royal household with ecclesiastical aspirations and destined to found the monastery of Wearmouth/Jarrow. While Biscop pressed on to Rome, Wilfrid broke both his outward and homeward journeys at the ancient monastery of Lyons. On his return to England he had acquired a pronounced leaning towards Roman styles of spirituality and splendour sufficient to make a great impression on the Wessex court. There he was introduced to Alchfrith, who brought him north and sponsored his career in Northumbria, first with ten hides of land at Stanford and afterwards with forty hides at Ripon. By 663, Wilfrid had been ordained priest by the Gaulish Bishop Agilbert of the West Saxons on a visit to Oswy's court and installed as abbot of Ripon where he displaced the resident Melrose community of the Irish abbot Eata, amongst them Wilfrid's immediate contemporary the future Bishop Cuthbert of Lindisfarne. A year later he was leading for the Roman case at Whitby to reclaim the Northumbrian church for the Roman fold.

Whatever impression Wilfrid's triumph left on the aged James the Deacon is nowhere recorded. James had seen the first foothold of the Roman church north of the Humber overwhelmed and his bishop Paulinus sent scurrying back to Kent by Cadwallon's onslaught over thirty years before. He had seen the Irish church succeed on Lindisfarne where Paulinus had failed at York, and he lived to see Aidan's successor Colman – with a substantial contingent of both Irish and English monks – ignominiously evicted from Lindisfarne by Wilfrid at Whitby. Bede's account of the retreat of the Irish church from its 'Iona in the east' reveals how very deep the Celtic strain had been ingrained in Lindisfarne tradition.

> Evidence of the great frugality and austerity practised by Colman and his predecessors was afforded by the place over which they ruled, for on their departure only a very few buildings were found there, apart from the church, consisting only of those necessary to any civilised community. They owned no wealth apart from their livestock, since any money they received from the rich was at once given to the poor. They had no need to save money or provide accommodation in order to receive the rulers of the world . . . and so free were they from any taint of avarice that none accepted grants of land and endowments for building monasteries unless compelled by the secular rulers.



There could be no more dramatic contrast with the ecclesiastical grandeur 'in the Roman manner' to which Wilfrid aspired at Ripon and Hexham.

Tuda, an Englishman schooled in southern Ireland to accept the Roman orthodoxy, succeeded Colman to the bishopric only to die of the plague within a few months. The Celtic-inclined Eata of Melrose, although personally appointed by Oswy fulfilling a promise to Colman, succeeded only as abbot. Lindisfarne fell, if only temporarily, from its episcopal eminence, and it was Wilfrid who became bishop of the see of Northumbria. If Wilfrid's star was moving into the ascendant, there were already indications of the rancorous career that lay ahead of him as 'turbulent priest' to three generations of Northumbrian kings.

Whilst in Gaul for his consecration as bishop, Wilfrid was abruptly displaced from his Northumbrian see, probably as a consequence of his association with Alchfrith, who had fallen from his father's favour and disappears from history to suffer exile or an early death. In the course of Wilfrid's two-year absence, Bede implies Oswy's reversion in some measure to his old Celtic sympathies, installing Chad of Lichfield as 'caretaker bishop' in Wilfrid's episcopacy and Colman's choice of Eata at Lindisfarne.

> The brothers who preferred to stay in the church of Lindisfarne when the Irish departed were put under the charge of a new abbot, Eata, a most reverend and kindly man who was abbot of the monastery of Mailros. This is said to have been done by King Oswy at the special request of Colman before his departure, as Eata was one of twelve boys of English race that Aidan took at the start of his episcopate to give a Christian education; and the king had great love for Bishop Colman because of his innate good sense.

Such temporary reverses would present no obstacle to a man of Wilfrid's ambition and, on the arrival of Theodore of Tarsus as the new archbishop at Canterbury, he was restored to his former supreme authority in Northumbria to the furthest extent of Oswy's imperium beyond the Forth.

But by that same year of 669, the first cracks were beginning to appear in the vast edifice of northern English dominance. The Northumbrian client kings in Pictland were to hold on to their power only as long as Oswy lived, but the Mercians had already served notice of their inevitable bid for independence when they brought down Peada, Oswy's sub-

king south of the Trent. There are already dark hints to be discerned in Bede's account of the power struggle at the Mercian court in 657.

> This people occupy territory said to consist of five thousand hides and separated by the river Trent from the northern Mercians, whose land extends to seven thousand hides. But . . . Peada was treacherously murdered, betrayed, it is said, by his own wife at the very time of the Easter festival. Three years after King Peada's death, Mercian leaders named Immin, Eafa and Eadbert rebelled against King Oswy and set up as their king Penda's young son Wulfhere, whom they had kept in hiding. They drove out the rulers appointed by the foreign king, and bravely recovered both their lands and their freedom.

If Oswy's daughter Alchfled did have a hand in the murder of her husband, Peada, then it would suggest sinister undercurrents in Mercia, where the sudden production of 'Penda's young son Wulfhere' as heir to his father's kingdom by rebel thanes carried no guarantee of any rightful lineage and succession.

Whatever the implications of these intrigues in the southern extremities of Northumbrian dominion, Oswy remained as bretwalda and beyond the reach of any military threat. When the church of *Medeshamstede*, endowed with vast estates of 'all the lands which are situated thereabout', was dedicated at Peterborough in the heart of Mercia, his eminent attendance in the assembly of kings and bishops is entered with due ceremony by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 664.

> At the hallowing of the monastery King Wulfhere was there, and his brother Aethelred, and his sisters Kyneburh and Kyneswith . . . and there was Wilfrith the priest, who was afterwards a bishop.
>
> These are the witnesses who were there, and who wrote with their fingers on Christ's cross, and agreed to it with their tongues.
>
> 'I, King Wulfhere, with the kings, and with earls, and with dukes, and with thanes, the witnesses of my gift, before the archbishop Deusdedit, confirm it with the cross of Christ. +'
>
> 'And I, Oswiu, king of the Northumbrians, the friend of this monastery and of the abbot Saxulf, approve it with the cross of Christ. +'

However precarious the circumstances of his succession and no less ominous the shadows gathering around Northumbria at his death, Oswy remains remarkable for his achievement of the greatest extent of

Northumbrian dominance. No less remarkable is the fact that he died in his bed, an achievement unrivalled by any of his predecessors with the possible if unlikely exception of Ida.

The death of Oswy, son of Aethelfrith, on the 15th February 671 is noted in Bede's *Historia* with the imperious shadow of Bishop Wilfrid, now fully restored to royal favour, falling across the royal deathbed.

> Oswy, king of the Northumbrians, was stricken with an illness from which he died, at the age of fifty-eight. At that time he had become so devoted to the customs of the Roman and Apostolic see, that he intended, if he recovered from his illness, even to go to Rome and end his life there among its holy places; and he had asked Bishop Wilfrid to act as his guide, with the promise of a considerable sum of money.
>
> He died on the fifteenth of the kalends of March, leaving his son Ecgfrid as heir to his kingdom.

The peaceful passing of Oswy was darkly overshadowed by the war clouds already gathering beyond the Forth and south of the Humber.

Their ominous portents emphasise the apt irony of the name of Oswy's son and successor translating from the Old English as 'the sword's edge' . . .

'the sword's edge'

EGFRITH, SON OF OSWY

AD 671 – AD 685

For Egfrith, son of Oswy, the way of the Northumbrian warrior king was to be mapped by an ironic symmetry. The military history of his reign began on the same embattled northern frontier with Pictland where it was to end with his death by the sword's edge almost fifteen years later.

While the *Historia Ecclesiastica* remains the central primary source for the years of Egfrith's reign, Bede's handling of Northumbria's relations with the Picts was so hedged about with his own particular protocols as to demand expansion from other sources if it is to provide the full story. Newly extensive contacts between the Northumbrian and Pictish churches had emerged only within the first years of the eighth century, and Bede was a recently ordained priest in his thirties when Nechtan, son of Derile, succeeded as king of the Picts in 706. Nechtan was certainly a Christian king and one with a greatly evident interest in church affairs. For reasons of political interest in stemming the influence of Iona – and by implication of Dalriada – in Pictland, Nechtan sought to reform the Pictish church in 'the Roman manner'. To that purpose he appealed to Bede's monastery at Jarrow for guidance on the calculation of Easter and also for the more secular services of Northumbrian stonemasons. This new contact with Pictland clearly encouraged Bede's interest in the peoples beyond the Forth and those pro-Pictish sympathies left their mark on his *Historia*. While he included a full account of Egfrith's death in battle in 685, there is no reference to the devastating defeat of the Picts in the early 670s, which must have been diplomatically avoided as

a still-sensitive subject in Pictish monastic circles even half a century after the event.

Bede's omission is made good by Eddius Stephanus in his *Life of Wilfrid*, the immediately posthumous biography set down by a priest of long service in the bishop's own household. The eminent Wilfridian authority D. P. Kirby has contrasted Eddius with Bede as a chronicler of a very different side of the same ecclesiastical history. Bede spent his whole life in his monastery and would only have personally encountered kings amid the restrained and formal circumstances of royal visits to Jarrow. He had almost certainly never himself witnessed an act of violence or the ferocious eruption of regal rage. Eddius was a Kentishman by birth who accompanied Wilfrid in most of the English kingdoms and on his extensive continental travels. He would have followed the course of innumerable and often violent court intrigues, certainly witnessed a coup d'état in Gaul and served his master during Wilfrid's long months of imprisonment. Consequently Eddius, always the devotedly loyal 'priest of Wilfrid' and all too aware of successive conflicts between church and state, records Egfrith's crushing defeat of the Picts in 672 principally in order to attribute it to the king's generous obedience to the wishes of his bishop.

> For in his early years, while his kingdom was still weak, the bestial tribes of the Picts felt a fierce contempt for their subjection to the Saxons and threatened to throw off the yoke of slavery; and they gathered together countless tribes from every nook and cranny in the north, like swarms of ants sweeping from their hills in summer, building a mound to protect their home from ruin. On hearing this, King Egfrith, though humble among his own people and magnanimous towards his enemies, prepared a troop of cavalry at once . . . and with the help of the brave sub-king Beornheth, he attacked with his little band of God's people the vast and invisible forces of the enemy. And he slaughtered an immense number of their people, filling two rivers with the corpses, so that, strange to relate, their slayers crossed the rivers with dry feet in pursuit of the crowd of fugitives; and their tribes, reduced to slavery, remained subject under the yoke of captivity until the day when the king was slain.

Eddius' account is rich in clues from which it is possible to reconstruct the situation on the northern frontier at the beginning of Egfrith's reign.

The Picts – whose military victories were invariably achieved under a high-king such as they had not known since the death of Bruide mac-Maelchon in 584 – had been a subject people governed by puppet rulers imposed on them by Northumbria through the last decades of Oswy's reign. The last of these client kings was Drust, son of Domnall, whose reign was abruptly terminated soon after the death of Oswy according to the *Annals of Tigernach* at 672.

The expulsion of Drust from his kingdom.

The despatch of the Northumbrian vassal signalled the uprising of the tribes of Pictland so swiftly and savagely suppressed by Egfrith in Eddius' account. There is no reference to this rebellion being led by a new Pictish high-king, and if such there had been he would certainly have numbered among the corpses which filled two rivers. The entry of Bruide, or *Bridei*, son of Beli, at 672 in the Pictish king-lists suggests an overlord who seized power in the wake of Egfrith's victory.

Bruide mac-Beli was one of the greatest warlords of Pictland, emerging from the Maetae Picts of *Fortriu* around Tayside, to progressively assert his authority over all the Pictish kingdoms in the course of the 670s and become sufficiently powerful to challenge Egfrith's Northumbria in 685. All of which lay far in the future for the devastated, fragmented and subjugated tribes of Pictland in 672.

By way of a footnote to the conflict of that year, Eddius' reference to *Beornheth* as a 'sub-king' prominent in Egfrith's victory is especially interesting. Archaeological evidence for a seventh-century English hall – similar to those at Yeavering – on the site of an earlier British hillfort on Doon Hill near Dunbar corresponds to the Northumbrian fortress of *Dynbaer*. This served as the stronghold of a succession of northern English warlords – perhaps even beginning with Oswy in the later years of his brother's reign – who held the effective office of 'warden' of the Pictish march and were variously endowed with the titles of *sub-regulus*, *praefectus* and *ealdorman* through Egfrith's reign and for half a century after. Beornhaeth is the first named of these border lords and Eddius' identification of him as a 'sub-king' would imply that Egfrith installed an English thane to administer his Pictish subjects after the expulsion of the client king and the crushing of the subsequent uprising. By 680, the Northumbrian monastery of *Abercurnig* at Abercorn on the Forth was well enough established to become the seat of a Northumbrian bishop

and with the Pictish frontier thus secured, Egfrith was free to re-direct his attention elsewhere for more than a decade before he had need again to venture north in arms.

The eldest surviving legitimate son of Oswy was born around the year 646. His mother was Eanfled, daughter of Edwin, and Egfrith could have asserted his royal Bernician and Deiran bloodlines to legitimate his succession as king of a united Northumbria. His childhood provided him with a salutary education in the seventh-century way of the warrior king. His father would have been regularly engaged in warfare during the precarious years after Maserfeld and Egfrith would have seen the 'great evil Penda does' at first hand before being sent south into Mercia as a hostage at the court of Penda's queen. Only after his father's great victory on the Winwaed would the ten-year-old Egfrith have been restored to Bamburgh, and yet just a few years later he was to be married, assuredly as a political formality rather than any precocious teenage passion, to a princess of the royal house of the East Angles.

The selection of a consort from the frontier of Mercia must have represented some political stratagem in Oswy's long-term plans for control of Penda's former kingdom, but it was to prove a source of increasing irritation for the adolescent prince. Egfrith's bride, a handsome woman at least twelve years his senior, was *Aethelthryth*, as the chaste Saint Etheldreda of Ely is expansively and eulogistically entered in Bede's *Historia*.

> Egfrith married a wife named Aethelthryth, daughter of Anna the king of the East Angles . . . She had been married before to an ealdorman of the southern Gyrwas called Tondbert, but he had died shortly after and she was given in marriage to King Egfrith. Although she lived with him for twelve years, she preserved intact the glory of perpetual virginity. I enquired about this myself, when some had cast doubt on it, and was assured of its truth by Bishop Wilfrid of blessed memory, who said he had indisputable evidence of her virginity in that Egfrith had promised to give him lands and great wealth if he could persuade the Queen to consummate the marriage; for Egfrith knew that she loved no man more than Wilfrid.

Entry of Northumbrian queens and princesses into the church was no less customary than the death of kings and princes in battle in the seventh century. The custom seems to have been heralded by Edwin's baptism of his new-born daughter Eanfeld to initiate Paulinus' mission

in 626, but Oswy was to exceed Edwin's precedent when he dedicated his daughter Aelfled to the religious life on the eve of his victory on the Winwaed. Such vocational abbesses of the blood royal as Saint Hild of Whitby were the impressive exceptions and the nunnery of those times might be most realistically appreciated as a place of safety for politically vulnerable royal womankind. There is no evidence of monastic retreats suffering attack, even in the turbulent onsets of Cadwallon and Penda, until the advent of the Viking age and the Northumbrian church appeared largely secure from secular hostilities throughout these centuries called by Reginald of Durham 'the time of the kings'. Aebbe, daughter of Aethelfrith and sister to Oswald and Oswy, would have found herself a hostage in Gwynedd, Pictland or Mercia had she not secured the safety of the abbess' cell at Coldingham. Reginald records that Oswald's queen, Cyniburg, 'took the veil and ended her life in holiness' after the battle of Maserfeld, just as Oswy's queen Eanfled joined her daughter Aelfled as joint abbess at Whitby on her husband's death. Their pragmatic example was to be invariably followed by later Northumbrian queens, but the case of Etheldreda was a decidedly exceptional one of conviction rather than convenience. She had preserved her virginity through her first marriage and continued so to do when she became the wife of the teenage Egfrith. It would seem at least likely that Egfrith's advancing manhood prompted him to exert pressure for the consummation of nuptial relations, which anxiety would have become more urgent when he succeeded his father to the kingdom. Egfrith had seen more than enough of warrior kings at war to realise his own need for a legitimate heir who could ensure succession of the line of the Idings.

In the light of these circumstances, Bede's evidence must suggest Bishop Wilfrid – who seems to have served Etheldreda as spiritual counsellor – as exploiting the king's marital ardour for the acquisition of every possible ounce of gold and hide of land. The newly conspicuous ecclesiastical grandeur and burgeoning monastic foundations of the 670s lend support to such a proposal, but the maidenhead of the saintly queen was apparently beyond the most generous earthly price. Before the end of 672, the marriage was dissolved and Etheldreda permitted to take her long-desired nun's veil. Bede's account implies the dissolution of the royal marrriage accompanied by a sizeable endowment of Etheldreda's

nunnery at Ely with East Anglian estates originally included in her dowry and granted by Egfrith as the price of divorce.

> For a long time she had been asking the king for permission to leave behind the cares of the world and to serve Christ . . . in a monastery; and when at last she obtained her request she entered the monastery of Abbess Ebba, an aunt of King Egfrith, at a place called Coludesbyrig, receiving the veil and habit of a nun from Bishop Wilfrid. A year later, she herself became an abbess in the district called Elge, where she built a monastery and became the virgin mother of many virgins dedicated to God.
>
> Elge, in the kingdom of the East Angles, has an area of about six hundred hides, and resembles an island, being surrounded by marshes and water, and it derives its name from the large number of eels caught in the marshes. Christ's handmaiden wished to have her monastery there because, as we have said, her own ancestors came from the kingdom of the East Angles.

Wilfrid, who would have served as the officiating priest for both Etheldreda's entry into holy orders and the foregoing dissolution of her marriage to Egfrith, seems to stand behind almost every major transaction between church and state from his appointment to the Northumbrian see in 669 until his inevitable and acrimonious break with Egfrith almost ten years later. These were the years of Wilfrid's scaling the highest pinnacles of his power and, correspondingly, the decade of his greatest grandeur. He had chosen York as his episcopal seat and there brought the church long ago intended by Paulinus to completion. At Ripon, where he had displaced the monks of Melrose, he began, in 671, to build his church 'in the Roman manner' of mortared stone. While Eddius compared it to 'the temple of Solomon', the modern historian Alfred Smyth suggests its splendour as representing the profits of Northumbrian annexation of the kingdoms of the north Britons.

> It is clear that Wilfrid's building programme at Ripon was financed by plunder and endowments from confiscated British church lands in the Pennines. The estates which Egfrith had granted to Wilfrid included Yeadon in Airedale which must have been in Elmet . . . Ribble, Dent and Catlow all formed part of the remoter highlands of Rheged in the

> northern Pennines. Wilfrid and his king were presiding at Ripon over the dismemberment of at least part of the Rheged kingdom.

The following year of 672 saw the foundation of Hexham – built on land granted by 'the saintly queen Etheldreda' with stone from the Roman garrison town of *Corstopitum* at Corbridge. Eddius attributes its deep foundations, crypts of dressed stone, great walls and variously styled columns to the divine inspiration which guided Wilfrid's architectural ambitions, but while Ripon and Hexham were rising up as its splendoured symbols, the first cracks began to appear in the edifice of Wilfrid's worldly wealth and power.

With the despatch of Etheldreda to her nunnery in the marshes of East Anglia, he had lost his most lucrative access to royal generosity and Egfrith's new queen, Iurminburg, displayed nothing of her predecessor's disposition to 'love no man more than Wilfrid'. Iurminburg's alarm at the extent of the bishop's wealth and power was so hostile as to cause Eddius to denounce her as an 'impious Jezebel'.

> King Egfrith's queen, named Iurmenburg, was that time tortured by envy, owing to the persuasion of the devil. This sorceress with her words now shot poisoned arrows from her quiver into the king's heart . . . for she eloquently described to the king all the worldly glories and riches of the holy bishop Wilfrid, the number of his monasteries, the greatness of his buildings, and the countless army of his followers arrayed in royal vestments and arms.

Eddius' indictment might better reveal the nature of the bishop's vast episcopal dominion as 'bishop of the Saxons to the south and the Britons, Scots and Picts to the north' than the queen's jealousy. Wilfrid's imperium had advanced to the point where there was only one man in England with the power to restrain his ambition. That man was Theodore of Tarsus, the learned Greek appointed by the Pope as archbishop of Canterbury and summoned north by Egfrith to review the episcopal organisation of Northumbria. Eddius suggests the archbishop was bribed to serve as the 'instrument' of a king whose queen had turned him against a saintly bishop, but later historians have more generously recognised Theodore as a skilful ecclesiastical administrator whose reconstruction of the English church has largely and remarkably endured through thirteen centuries. His proposals amounted to the most draconian curtailment of

Wilfrid's imperium as they are recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 678.

> In this year the star comet appeared in August, and shone for three months every morning like a sun-beam. And bishop Wilfrid was driven from his bishopric by king Egfrith; and two bishops were hallowed in his stead: Bosa to Deira, and Eata to Bernicia. And Eadhed was hallowed bishop of the people of Lindsey; he was the first of the bishops of Lindsey.

To which the northern chronicler might have added the establishment two years later of a fourth see at Abercorn, Bede's *Abercurnig* on the Forth, where Trumwin was appointed as bishop of the Picts. While the significance of the comet of 678 can only be interpreted in terms of its symbolism for the Anglo-Saxon imagination, the division of Wilfrid's vast Northumbrian see into four new bishoprics lies firmly in the earthly realm of *realpolitik*. Theodore's policy of bishoprics organised along secular tribal lines divided the northern English heartland of the Northumbrian church into territories corresponding to its earlier component kingdoms. Lindisfarne, restored to its former episcopal status with Eata elevated from abbot to bishop, administered Bernicia, while Bosa, trained at Whitby under the Celtic regime of Hild, became bishop of Deira with his episcopal seat at York. The frontier dominion of Lindsey south of the Humber became a bishopric in its own right, as soon afterwards did the Pictish churches tributary to Northumbria from Abercorn. At a single stroke, Theodore had effectively sliced up Wilfrid's jurisdiction, and with it the greater part of his vast estates, passed its portions into other episcopal hands and deposed him from his see.

Egfrith's advocacy of Archbishop Theodore's reorganisation precipitated the inevitable quarrel with Wilfrid in 678. A bitter confrontation between king and bishop ended with the expulsion of Wilfrid from the kingdom when the rejected bishop strode from the royal presence along the road to Rome, there to pursue his grievances in an audience with the Pope. Eddius tells of his pausing dramatically on the threshold of Egfrith's hall to prophesy that the derisive mockery of the king's companions would be transformed into 'bitter tears twelve months from that day'.

The course by which Wilfrid's prophecy came to be fulfilled in battle on the Trent in 679 must be set in the wider context of the history of

Northumbria's relations with Mercia on the southern frontier. Mercia's dominion to the south of the Trent had already achieved some form of nominal independence under Wulfhere even while it lay within the imperium of Oswy the bretwalda. His death had prompted the Picts to rise in arms to test the mettle of his successor, who proved himself more than able to meet the challenge. Undeterred by the Pictish experience, Wulfhere of Mercia marched with his allies against Northumbria's southern frontier to reclaim Lindsey for the *Mierce* before meeting Egfrith's host in 674. Eddius' account of the destruction of the Southumbrian alliance not unexpectedly attributes the victory, at which Wilfrid was personally present, to his bishop's blessing on the still-obedient Egfrith.

> King Egfrith ruled the people with God's bishop in justice and holiness . . . and, emboldened by God, he broke the necks of unruly peoples and their warlike kings, and always in all things gave thanks to God. For Wulfhere, king of the Mercians, proud of heart and insatiable in spirit, stirred up all the southern peoples against our kingdom, intending not merely to make war on it but to reduce it to paying tribute in a spirit of servitude; but he did not have God for his guide. Egfrith, however, king of Deira and Bernicia, stout-hearted and faithful, on the advice of his counsellors and with the guidance of the bishop . . . and with an army no larger than theirs he attacked the proud enemy and, with God's help, defeated them with his small force, slew countless numbers of them, and put the king to flight. Egfrith then laid his kingdom under tribute, and when Wulfhere later died of some cause, he ruled in peace over a larger territory.

Wulfhere survived his defeat to fight just one more battle in the twelve months before his death and turned on Wessex, probably intending to exact retribution for the West Saxon refusal to join his war on Northumbria. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* enters the last year of the reign of *Wulfhere Pending* at 675.

> In this year Wulfhere, son of Penda, and Aescwine, son of Cenfus, fought at Bedanheafod, and the same year Wulfhere died, and Aethelred succeeded to the kingdom.

Aethelred, who is entered in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as another 'son of Penda', pursued similar martial ambitions and is recorded ravaging Kent in the *Chronicle* for 676.

Three years later – and ominously just twelve months after Wilfrid's prophecy of 'bitter tears' – Aethelred advanced along the same warpath trodden by both his father and his brother to encounter a Northumbrian shield-wall where the river Trent marked the divide between north and south Mercia. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* enters the ensuing conflict – and its most eminent casualty – at 679.

> In this year Aelfwine was slain by the Trent, where Ecgferth and Aethelred fought.

Bede's account expands on the *Chronicle* in his *Historia*, yet omits any note of who was the victor in the blood-fray on the Trent.

> In the ninth year of Egfrith's reign, a great battle was fought between him and Aethelred, king of the Mercians, near the river Trent, and Aelfwin, brother of King Egfrith, was killed. He was a young man about eighteen years old, and much loved in both kingdoms; for King Aethelred had married his sister, who was called Osthryd. There seemed now to be good reason for fiercer strife and prolonged hostilities between the kings and their warlike peoples, but Archbishop Theodore, beloved of God, became the agent of God's help and utterly extinguished the flames of this great peril by his wholesome advice. As a result, peace was restored between the two kings and their peoples, and no life was forfeit for the slaying of the king's brother, but only the customary compensation in money was paid to the king who had the duty of vengeance. The peace thus made was maintained between these kings and their kingdoms for a long time.

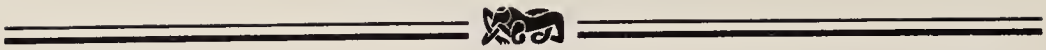
Bede's account would suggest that Aelfwin, Egfrith's younger brother, had been charged with the guardianship of Northumbrian dominions south of the Humber, effectively as Northumbrian sub-king of Mercia north of the Trent. Such a likelihood would correspond to Bede's reference to his being 'much loved in both kingdoms' and even propose Aelfwin as commander of the Northumbrian warband encountered by Aethelred's Mercians. Although Bede and Florent of Worcester both agree with the *Chronicle* that Egfrith 'fought' on the Trent, he might well have led only his own retinue while his brother commanded the greater Northumbrian force. The death of Aelfwin under those circumstances would have signalled a Northumbrian withdrawal, which would have been followed by 'greater strife and prolonged hostilities' when

Egfrith returned to Mercia with a new battle-host in pursuit of a blood feud. It was clearly only the intervention of Archbishop Theodore which was to prevent that further bloodshed. Whether he was actually present on the field is not recorded, but his good offices somehow achieved an end to hostilities and secured a truce along Northumbria's southern frontier which was to endure for half a century.

While Theodore was striving for peace in Mercia, Bishop Wilfrid had arrived in Rome to demand a papal mandate for the restoration of his Northumbrian see. He was sympathetically received by Pope Agatho who summoned a synod of bishops to give due consideration to Wilfrid's grievances. Whether by virtue of his own persuasive skills or through the influence of his powerful continental friends, Wilfrid's case was granted the full endorsement of the Holy See. After a tour of continental shrines to assemble a collection of sacred relics, Wilfrid returned to Northumbria to confront Egfrith and Theodore armed with a papal missive demanding the full restoration of his lands and jurisdictions.

It would take more than even a petition from the see of Rome to break through the wall of hostility which awaited Wilfrid in England and he was to meet with the most inhospitable reception on his return. Eddius accuses Egfrith of conspiring to have Wilfrid killed in Gaul, but the attempted assassination had misfired. The bishop's apparently miraculous survival must have fuelled the royal rage no less than the fulfilment of Wilfrid's dark prophecy in the battle of the Trent. Egfrith would have found a ready ally in Archbishop Theodore, who had always stoutly resisted papal intervention in his arch-episcopal affairs. Eddius records how the appearance of Wilfrid brandishing his papal missive in the Northumbrian court provoked Egfrith to the most violent reaction.

> On the order of the king and his counsellors, and with the agreement of the bishops who held his bishopric, they decided to imprison him, and to keep him in prison for nine months with no token of respect. And forthwith when the letter from the Apostolic See was opened and read, the king with his flatterers – dreadful to relate – became angered, and despised the judgement of Peter the apostle and chief of the apostles, who has the power from God to loose and bind; and swearing an oath by the salvation of his soul, he gave strict command that our holy bishop, stripped of everything but the clothes he wore, should be kept in solitary confinement, that all his subjects should be



scattered far and wide, and that none of his friends should visit him.

The king's officers took our holy bishop and led him, *'as a lamb to the slaughter'* who *'opened not his mouth'*, to the reeve of the royal borough of In Broninis. They placed before him the holy bishop, who at that time might have been called the light of Britain by reason of the great merits of his faith, and commanded him, in the king's words, to guard him carefully in the dungeons, hidden in foul darkness, without the knowledge of any of his friends. The aforesaid thane was loyal to the king and, on his urgent bidding, kept the bishop under guard in secret dungeons, where the sun rarely shone by day and he lacked the courtesy of a lamp by night.

Eddius' account of Wilfrid's imprisonment, embellished with biblical parallels, speaks of Wilfrid's dark dungeon filled with heavenly light and of the miraculous healing of his captor's wife causing the terrified thane to beg Egfrith to imprison the awesome bishop in another place.

He sent messengers to the king, saying, 'I adjure you by my life and your salvation not to compel me to punish this holy and innocent bishop, to my perdition, any longer; for I prefer to die than to scourge him; for he is guiltless.' On hearing this, the king in anger ordered the bishop to be taken to his town of Dynbaer to a harsher reeve named Tydlin, whom he commanded to imprison him, so noble a man and so great a bishop, in solitary confinement, bound hand and foot. In obedience to the king's command, the reeve ordered his smiths to make iron fetters, and measuring our holy confessor's limbs they set about the task with diligence, but without good reason; for God was opposing them. For the chains were always either too tight and narrow to go round his limbs, or so wide and loose that they fell free from the feet and hands of the evangelist and baptist.

Even in his dungeon at Dunbar, high on the Lothian coast and probably the most remote place of captivity in Northumbria, Wilfrid's powers were proving at least a match for the king. But it was the queen, according to Eddius, who had been the instigator of Wilfrid's downfall and it was against Iurminburg that the captive bishop next turned his wrath. By whatever medical or miraculous cause, the queen was seized with muscular spasms so severe as to threaten her life. Egfrith's aunt, the abbess Aebbe, diagnosed heavenly wrath at the internment of Wilfrid and the

king was persuaded to order the prisoner's release. Iurminburg was instantly relieved of her condition and Wilfrid's custody commuted to exile.

Released from Dunbar in the year 681, Wilfrid found almost every English kingdom closed to him. He went first to Mercia – a choice which carries its own sinister implications in the light of the recent battle on the Trent – but Egfrith's sister Osthryth was Aethelred's queen and she ensured that there was no welcome there. In Wessex, he was similarly refused by a West Saxon king wed to Iurminburg's sister and it was only among the pagan South Saxons that Wilfrid was able to find sanctuary.

While his turbulent priest was engaged upon the conversion of Sussex far to the south, Egfrith's hostile attentions were directed west over sea. In the month of June 684, he despatched the first English warband to attack the Irish mainland since the late fifth century. The seaborne assault provides firm evidence that Northumbria maintained some naval capability in Egfrith's reign, and if the fleet was launched from the Solway Firth it further confirms Northumbrian control of the former British kingdom of Rheged by the early 680s. The raid was commanded by a warrior thane, identified only as *Berht*, and had – on the evidence of the Irish annals – every appearance of a punitive expedition against the heartland of Finnachta, the Irish high-king of the race of the southern Ui Neill.

The *Annals of Ulster* enter the 'Saxon' raid among other calamities of the year 684.

> A great storm. An earthquake in the Island. The Saxons wasted Magh-Bregh and several churches in the month of June.

While the *Annals of Tigernach*, the *Fragmentary Annals of MacFirbis* and the *Chronicon Scotorum* draw their almost identical entries at that year from a shared Iona exemplar, the Clonmacnoise sources offer somewhat greater detail, incorporated in the *Annals of the Four Masters* at 684.

> The tenth year of Finachta. The devastation of Magh-Breagh, both churches and territories, by the Saxons, in the month of June precisely, and they carried off with them many hostages from every place which they left, throughout Magh-Breagh, together with many other spoils, and afterwards went to their ships.

Bede's *Historia* provides an English perspective on the events, but one which nonetheless reflects a forthright sympathy for the 'harmless race' of Erin.

> In the year of our Lord 684, Ecgfrith, king of the Northumbrians, sent his ealdorman Berht to Ireland in command of an army, and grievously devastated a harmless race who had always been most friendly to the English nation; indeed, his hostile force spared neither churches nor monasteries. The islanders, as far as they could, resisted force with force, invoking the merciful help of God and imploring heaven to avenge them with long and unceasing imprecations.

As extensive as are these contemporary records of the events of Egfrith's war on Ireland, only one source, the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, provides even the most cryptic clue as to its cause.

> The Saxons, the plains of Moyebrey with divers churches wasted and destroyed in the month of June, for the alliance of the Irish with the Brittaines.

The most thoroughgoing investigation of Egfrith's motives by a modern historian is unquestionably the work of Alfred Smyth who suggests a two-fold causality. Egfrith's sweep with fire and sword across the territories and monasteries of *Magh-Bregh*, the plain of Brega in the eastern kingdom of Leinster, was directed at targets close to the ancient capital of the high-kings at Tara. Smyth proposes the raid as prompted by the sanctuary granted in Ireland to those whom Egfrith perceived as his enemies, who included one possible rival for his Northumbrian kingdom.

The relationship between Oswy and the princess Fina of the northern Ui Neill had borne a son out of wedlock, and the bastard Aldfrith, called by the Irish *Flann Fina* or 'blood of the wine', was highly regarded by the Gael and living on Iona, if not in Ireland itself, at the time of Egfrith's raid. The Iona annalist's note of the battle on the Trent transcribed into the *Annals of Ulster* appears principally concerned with the death of Aelfwin, the last legitimate brother and heir to the childless Egfrith.

> The battle of the Saxons, in which Ailwine, son of Ossu, was slain.

It was similarly entered in the *Annals of Tigernach* and the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, and must reflect Irish awareness of Aldfrith as the only, if

illegitimate, successor to the kingdom of Northumbria. Nonetheless, Aldfrith was Egfrith's senior, possibly by as much as ten years. He had been educated on Iona and was highly respected as a poet and scholar rather than a man of war and there is no evidence of his sudden emergence in the 680s as a rival for the kingdom anywhere other than in Egfrith's imagination.

If Aldfrith represented a long-standing irritation, there must have been a more immediate flashpoint to bring a Northumbrian warband into Leinster in 684. Such a provocation may well have been discerned by Alfred Smyth's meticulous reading of the Irish annals which suggests the sudden appearance in 682 by warbands of the north Britons fighting as mercenaries in Irish wars. Smyth proposes these warriors as being active along a hundred and sixty miles of the Irish east coast territories from 682 until 709.

> They are first heard of in Ulster which suggests that they came from northern Britain rather than Wales, after which the same or other warbands worked their way down the east coast from Antrim, through Down, Louth and Dublin to Wicklow. Their first appearance in Ireland coincided with a time when Egfrith of Northumbria was engaged in a major offensive against his northern neighbours. The arrival of these Britons in north-east Ireland would fit in well with the migration of a warrior elite from Galloway or from Cumbria and the Solway plain who were driven to seek their fortune at the courts of Irish kings always in need of warriors for their own incessant warfare. If we view these warriors as part of the exiled warband of Rheged, then their earliest appearance in eastern Ireland in 682 makes sense at last out of the punitive expedition dispatched by Egfrith of Northumbria against eastern Ireland in 684.

Such a provocation would similarly concur with the Clonmacnoise annalist's blaming Egfrith's aggression on 'the alliance of the Irish with the Brittaines'.

The significance of the cause of Egfrith's Irish war pales, at least in the view of Bede, beside its terrible consequences.

> One may well believe that those who were deservedly cursed for their wickedness swiftly paid the penalty for their guilt by the avenging hand of the Lord.

Bede goes on to claim the death of Egfrith and the devastation of his battle-host by the Picts at Nechtansmere, less than twelve months after the raid on Brega, as clear evidence of divine retribution for the war on Ireland. In so doing, he certainly reflects Lindisfarne's disapproval of Egfrith's military policy. The Lindisfarne monk Egbert, who eventually entered the monastery on Iona, warned his king against the Irish raid as sternly as the newly-appointed bishop Cuthbert was to rebuke Egfrith's military intentions beyond the Forth in the following year.

Cuthbert – the Lammermuir shepherd who became the great saint of the northern English – enters into the history of the Northumbrian kings as a figure of awesome importance in 685. His early life is obscure, but the fragmentary evidences found in Bede and the 'Anonymous Life' set down on Lindisfarne propose that he was born around 634, certainly in the north of Bernicia and probably in the valley of the Tweed. He may well have been of noble birth and was certainly placed in the care of a foster-mother at the age of eight, growing up to serve in some military capacity in Oswy's wars, but it was on the night of the last day of August in 651 that the consecutive history of Saint Cuthbert can be securely said to begin. He is recorded as tending sheep in the Lammermuir hills when he experienced a vision of a soul ascending to heaven, and made his way down to the bend of the Tweed at Old Mailros to enter the monastery there. He had seen the ascending soul of Aidan of Lindisfarne and that vision prompted his entry into the church. Bede tells how his appearance entirely unheralded at the gate of the monastery caused its abbot Boisil to exclaim 'Behold, the servant of the Lord', and there can be no doubt that Cuthbert was a man possessed of an extraordinary charisma of sanctity. He served as the guestmaster when the Melrose community was at Ripon and afterwards undertook the onerous duties of prior when he accompanied Eata to Lindisfarne to succeed the abdicated Colman in 664. He sought the path of the monk-solitary which led him to the more remote sea-girt hermitage on the island of Inner Farne, some few miles down the coast from Lindisfarne to the south of Bamburgh. Cuthbert's hagiographers might be expected to punctuate every stage of his life with miraculous occurrence and divine blessing, but it would be only the most intransigent sceptic who could not admit that this holy man of Northumbria must have been one of those somehow 'set apart' from the generality of humankind in life and after as *sanctus*. This brief excursion into hagiography is intended only to provide a backdrop to

Cuthbert's reluctant emergence from his hermit's cell into the saga of the kings.

There is a corresponding significance to be found in the terms of Egfrith's grant of the estate of Carham in the Tweed valley to the church of Lindisfarne to mark his victory over Wulfhere of Mercia in 674. The tenth-century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, primarily an annotated inventory of the lands of Lindisfarne, notes Egfrith's grant as made specifically to Cuthbert – and not only in his office of prior.

> He accomplished this [victory] through the help of St Wilfrid, who was with him, but especially through the prayers of St Cuthbert, who was absent.
>
> After the battle King Egfrith gave to St Cuthbert Carrum and all its possessions.

Egfrith had evidently noted Cuthbert's qualities by 674, and it seems unlikely that they had not similarly attracted the attention of Theodore, who might well have been aware of Cuthbert as a potential successor when he appointed the aged Eata as bishop of Bernicia in 678. Although Egfrith's wars on the Irish and the Picts earned him stern rebukes in the monastic histories, he had been earlier and elsewhere regularly noted for his piety. It is possible that he so distrusted the newly regal splendour of the church, which had largely fuelled his hatred of Wilfrid, that the king felt the time had come for an episcopal appointment of the most eminent spiritual quality. If such had been Egfrith's qualification for the premier churchman of his kingdom, he needed to seek no farther than Cuthbert's hermitage on Farne.

In the more concrete terms of ecclesiastical politics, Cuthbert's succession as bishop of Lindisfarne grew out of the further episcopal reorganisation of the Northumbrian church which followed the death of Abbess Hild of Whitby in 680. Trumwin was appointed bishop of Abercorn with jurisdiction over the Picts and a second Bernician bishopric was established at Hexham. Eata, who had been a member of Aidan's community some fifty years before, had administered his see from Hexham. For reasons of his great age, Eata returned to Lindisfarne, retaining the rank of bishop but apparently in semi-retirement. Tundbert, whom Bertram Colgrave identifies as a kinsman of Bede's abbot Ceolfrith, was appointed bishop of Hexham, but held the office for just four years until – for reasons unknown but possibly not unconnected with Egfrith's Irish adventure – he departed his see in 684. Egfrith summoned Archbishop

Theodore to a synod on the river Aln for the appointment of a bishop to the vacant see and the choice fell inevitably upon the hermit of Farne. Fully content with his ascetic solitude, Cuthbert was reluctant to accept the burden of the most eminent see in the kingdom. He had endured long experience of monastic administration through his years as prior and the responsibility of a bishop of Lindisfarne by the late seventh century was no modest undertaking. The generosity of three kings had endowed Aidan's church with vast monastic estates, and the responsibilities of its bishop might be realistically compared to those of a chief executive of a modern nationalised industry, to which must be added the bishop's political role, itself bearing comparison with that of a modern cabinet minister. This was the world in which Wilfrid moved and Cuthbert's essentially Celtic spirituality drew him ever further from the realm of power and land to seek 'the deep peace of the running wave' in the company of the seabirds and the seals.

But the king would brook no reluctance and determined to go to any length, even by boat to Farne, to secure Cuthbert as his bishop. Bede's account is drawn from the earliest record set down by the anonymous Lindisfarne author. In his turn, Symeon revised Bede's chapter into his own *History of the Church of Durham* with the addition of details of the important endowments made to mark Cuthbert's succession as bishop of Lindisfarne.

> It so happened that a large synod was congregated, under the presidency of archbishop Theodore of blessed memory, and in the presence of the most pious and God-beloved king, Egfrith, at a place called Twiford – which means the double ford – near the river Alne; where by the unanimous consent of all, the blessed father Cuthbert was chosen to the bishopric of Lindisfarne. When he refused to be withdrawn from his seclusion, even after many messengers and letters had been despatched for the purpose, at length the king himself, accompanied by the most holy bishop Trumwine, and many other ecclesiastics and noblemen, sailed to the island. Several of the brethren came thither from the isle of Lindisfarne, for the same purpose. They all knelt down, and they adjured him by the Lord, they wept and prayed, until they carried him off to the synod; he also weeping while he abandoned his beloved retreat. On his arrival there, the united wishes of the assembly overcame his repugnance, and he was

compelled to bend his neck so as to accept the office of a bishop; induced thereto chiefly by the words of Boisil, the servant of the Lord, who, with a prophetic mind, had foretold him all that should come to pass, and had predicted that he should become a bishop. However, he was not at once ordained; but the winter, then close at hand, was allowed to pass over. Thus after he had dedicated to God nine years of a life of solitude, he was, by His good pleasure, elevated to the honour of the bishophood, being consecrated at York, on the seventh of the kalends of April, in the year of our Lord six hundred and eighty five, on Easter day, in the presence of king Egfrith. Seven bishops met together for his consecration, the chief of whom was archbishop Theodore, by whom also the office of ordination was performed. He was at first elected to the bishopric of the church of Hexham, in the room of Tunbert, who had been deposed from that diocese; but because he much preferred the church of Lindisfarne, in which he had resided, it was arranged that Eata should return to his see in the church of Hexham, and that Cuthbert should undertake the government of the church of Lindisfarne.

The said king and Theodore gave him the whole land in the city of York which extends from the wall of the church of St Peter, as far as the great gate towards the west, and from the wall of that church, as far as the city wall upon the south; they gave him also the vill of Craik, with a circuit of three miles around it, that he might have a dwelling in which to rest on his way to York, or on his return thence. There he appointed a residence for monks; but because this land was inadequate for the purpose, he received as an augmentation Lugubalia, which is called Luel, embracing a circuit of fifteen miles, where he also established a congregation of nuns.

'Other lands,' adds Symeon, 'were also assigned to him, which it would be tedious to specify', but the topographical details he does provide already reveal their own variously important significances. The first of them is his quite specific translation of the name for the place of the synod. Bede calls it *Ad Tuifyrdi* and translates this as 'at the two fords', but Symeon must have been drawing on more detailed local knowledge to specify 'the double ford'. There is just one double ford on the Aln, at Whittingham – very probably a royal *vill* and certainly conveniently located for access along the old Roman roads – which has been convincingly proposed as the site of the historic assembly. The estate in York,

and another some ten miles to the north at Crayke, would have certainly fallen into the see of Deira and represented a territorial token of the pre-eminent status of the Bernician bishopric of Lindisfarne in the Northumbrian church. Of similar significance is the grant of lands at 'Lugubalia, which is called Luel'. This estate at Carlisle was sited at the heart of the British kingdom of Rheged and provides firm and final evidence of northern English annexation of the once great kingdom of Urien. There also would have been the launching place of the seaborne attack on Brega and, ironically, it was there that Cuthbert, accompanying the queen on a sightseeing tour of the Roman ruins, was to experience his prophetic vision of the death of Egfrith in battle against the Picts.

The royal progress through the last months of Egfrith's reign seems to be possessed, at least in retrospect, of its own valedictory symbolism. After the consecration of Cuthbert at York, the *Eboracum* of the Romans where the first Northumbrian Christian king had been baptised by Paulinus, Egfrith is next to be found on Tyneside at the service of dedication of Saint Paul's church at Jarrow. The monastery at Jarrow had grown out of the earlier foundation at Wearmouth and the two were regarded as a single monastery on two sites. Both had been founded with endowments made by the king to Benedict Biscop, one of the most remarkable personalities of the Northumbrian church, into whose care at Wearmouth the seven-year-old Bede had been placed to begin his monastic career. Biscop was of noble birth, a thane of Oswy's household whose intellectual aspirations led him towards the church. He made his first journey to the continent as companion to Wilfrid and when the two went their separate ways at Lyons it was Biscop who pressed on to Rome where he was the first Northumbrian, probably even the first Englishman, to enter the city since the end of the *Pax Romana*. After two further pilgrimages to Rome, separated by an extended tour of seventeen continental monasteries in the course of which he took monastic vows, Biscop came back to England as travelling companion to the newly-appointed archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus. After a two-year stay in Canterbury he journeyed again to Rome, his fourth visit, and on his return to England made his way to his native Northumbria, where, in 674, Egfrith granted him an endowment of fifty hides of land at the mouth of the Wear for the foundation of a monastery dedicated to Saint Peter at *Wiraemuda*. Biscop's continental travels had encouraged his taste

for learning and, most especially, for books to such an extent that he was certainly the first eminent bibliophile in English history. He had accumulated a remarkable library along his travels and that library was housed, amidst the craftsmanship of imported Gaulish stonemasons and glass-makers, in the monastery to which the young Bede was admitted in 680. Two years later, Egfrith endowed a further forty hides of land to support a second monastery, dedicated this time to Saint Paul, beside the mouth of the Don tributary of the Tyne at Jarrow. Biscop assigned his friend and fellow bibliophile, Ceolfrith, to be abbot of *In Gyrwum*, where Bede accompanied him into the monastery where he was to write his great *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum*. So it was that Bede must have stood among Ceolfrith's assembled monks at the dedication of his monastery on the twenty-third of April in 685. He was little more than ten years old and already marked out as a scholar of promise who would be recognised even within his own lifetime as the most learned man in Europe.

King Egfrith, by contrast, had less than a month to live when he honoured the ceremony of dedication with his royal presence, and would have set out from Jarrow to complete his preparations for war against the newly resurgent Pictish threat beyond the Forth. While there is no record of any act of Pictish provocation in the spring of 685 and the consensus of English sources condemns Egfrith as the unmitigated aggressor, a modern military strategist might most realistically interpret the Northumbrian invasion of Pictland as a pre-emptive strike in the inevitable confrontation of two northern warrior kings of titanic stature.

Bruide, son of Beli and king – according to Tigernach – of *Fortrenn* or Fortriu on Tayside, had achieved the status of high-king of Picts by the early 680s, when both Tigernach and the *Annals of Ulster* enter his subjection of Pictish tribal outposts in the northern isles at 682 as 'the devastation of Orkney by Bruide'. Egfrith, son of Oswy of the line of the Idings, ruled the greatest extent of the Northumbrian kingdom between the Trent and the Tay. He had already savagely crushed one Pictish rising, at least survived two wars with the expanding power of Mercia, and dealt a brutal body blow to the Irish mainland, yet Egfrith had been sternly advised against a new Pictish war by no less than his bishop of Lindisfarne. Cuthbert had first-hand experience of the Picts – on the evidence of his expeditions *ad terram Pictorum* recorded by both Bede and the anonymous Lindisfarne author – and must have been aware of

the ominous threat posed by a Pictland united under such a warlord as Bruide mac-Beli. Bede, in his turn, interprets the disaster of Egfrith's last campaign as the consequence of royal disregard of wise counsel and retribution administered by 'the avenging hand of the Lord'.

> For the next year the king rashly led an army to ravage the kingdom of the Picts, against the urgent advice of his friends and in particular of Cuthbert, who had recently been made bishop; and when the enemy feigned flight, he was drawn into a narrow pass in the inaccessible mountains and killed with the greater part of his forces.
>
> He was in his fortieth year, the fifteenth year of his reign, and the date was the thirteenth of the kalends of June. As I have said, his friends warned him not to undertake this campaign; but since in the previous year he had refused to listen to the reverend father Egbert, who advised him against attacking the Irish who had done him no harm, he was punished for that sin now by not listening to those who would have saved him from destruction.

The most likely route of Egfrith's advance would have been an overland march to the north, crossing the Forth most probably at Abercorn and the Tay somewhere near Perth. The entry of the campaign in the *Annals of Ulster* adds 'Tula-aman burned', which Skene interprets as Egfrith's destruction of a re-fortified Roman site where the river Almond falls into the Tay to the north of Perth, at which point Egfrith had crossed the frontier of Northumbrian dominion. His advance along Strathmore – where the pass between the Grampians and the Sidlaw hills would correspond to Bede's 'pass in the inaccessible mountains' – would have brought his force into hostile Pictish territory. There he would have encountered the Pictish warbands who 'feigned flight' to draw Egfrith's advance south from Forfar and through a cleft in Dunnichen Hill to be trapped between the ramparts of a hillfort and the marshland at the edge of a lake, with enemy reinforcements just a few hundred yards away. At that point, suggests F. T. Wainwright's groundbreaking study of the battle, 'pursuit could easily turn to flight.'

While Bede does not name the battlefield, the variant names entered in Irish, Britonic and later English sources have led in modern times to its remarkably precise identification. The Iona annalist who set down the exemplar for the Irish sources knew it as 'the battle of Dun-Nechtain'

from the nearby 'fortress of Nechtan' surviving in the modern place name of Dunnichen.

> The battle of Dun-Nechtain took place on the twentieth day of the month of May, on Saturday.

Chalmers' *Caledonia* of 1807 identified the fortress of Nechtan at the village of Dunnichen, three miles to the south-east of Forfar.

> The remains of this ancient strength may still be seen upon an eminence on the south side of the hill of Dunnichen.

The battlefield is named by Symeon of Durham in company with other English medieval historians as 'Nechtanesmere, that is the lake of Nechtan', while Nennius enters a corresponding Britonic form deriving from a genuine northern Celtic original in his *Historia Brittonum*.

> That battle ever since has been called Gueith Lin Garan.

The battlefield was only distinguished by any form of place-name as a result of the conflict and Nennius' *Gueith Lin Garan*, 'the fight at the pool of the herons', led later historians to look for a lake in the area of Dunnichen as the site of the blood-fray. No such body of water was in evidence in the district in modern times, although Chalmers proposed it had been earlier identifiable.

> The Nechtan's-mere of Symeon was a small lake near the church of Dunnichen on the east, which was drained for its marle or its fuel about forty years ago.

A survey of Dunnichen in 1791 recorded ancient tumuli containing human bones, 'coarse earthenware' and 'rough stone coffins', but it was the great flood of 1947 which briefly restored some semblance of the landscape over which the battle had been fought. The flooding revealed a shallow basin surrounded by patches of marshy ground which must have been the watery grave of Egfrith's warband. The site also included traces of embankment, an old road along the southern edge of the hollow, and a medieval chapel seemingly built on a small island near the northern edge of the mere and probably indicating the boundary of an earlier burial ground.

Here then was the place where Egfrith of Northumbria fell by the sword's edge in 685. His death in battle and the destruction of his army

by Bruide's Pictish host is perhaps the more remarkable because the two warlords were – on the evidence of the Nennian genealogy – blood-kin.

> Osguid begot Alcfrid, and Aelfguin, and Echfird. He is the Echgfrid who fought a battle against his cousin, who was king of the Picts, named Birdei, and fell there with the whole strength of his army.

The Nennian *fratruelis* – effectively 'first cousin once removed' – would propose Bruide's mother's father as a son of Aethelfrith of Northumbria, who can only have been Eanfrith, the short-lived 'apostate king' of Bernicia. Eanfrith's Pictish bride must have borne him not only a son, the Talorcan who became a king of Picts, but also a daughter who became the wife of Beli, king of the Britons of Strathclyde. Their son would have thus come into his kingdom by the Pictish principle of matrilinear succession as the king of Picts, Bruide mac-Beli, who brought down his Northumbrian royal cousin in the fight at the pool of the herons.

All the sources agree on the date of the battle as Saturday, 20th May. Even more precisely, Cuthbert's vision of Egfrith's death at 'the ninth hour' – according to the anonymous Lindisfarne *Life* written no more than twenty years after the battle – suggests that it had been lost by three in the afternoon.

> At the time when King Egfrith was ravaging and laying waste the country of the Picts, though predestined by God's judgement finally to be defeated and slain, our holy bishop went to the city of Luel and visited the queen, who was awaiting the outcome of events there. On the Sabbath day, as priests and deacons, many of whom are still alive, have testified, at the ninth hour they were looking at the city wall and at the wonderful fountain once built there by the Romans, as their guide, Waga, reeve of the city, explained to them. The bishop stood leaning on his staff for support, his head bowed towards the ground; and again, he raised his eyes towards heaven and said with a sigh, 'Oh! oh! oh! I believe that the war is ended, and that judgement has been given in the battle against our people.' Then, when they asked him precisely what had happened, he concealed what they wished to know and replied, 'My little sons, look how strange the sky is, and recall how inscrutable are the judgements of God.' And after a few days they heard that it had been reported far and wide that a

sad and lamentable battle had occurred on the same day and at the same hour as it had been revealed to him.

A similar vision was experienced at the same hour in the land of the South Saxons by another Northumbrian bishop. Perhaps not surprisingly, Eadmer's eleventh-century Canterbury *Life of Wilfrid* takes the least generous view of Egfrith's death in battle.

> This indeed was just; for when he had not deigned to admit the man of life into his friendship or into any privileges within his power, but held him in contempt, it was right that he should die at the hand of the same enemy whom he formerly merited to vanquish and subdue to his authority, when he received Wilfrid as his friend. Now at the very same hour when this king was being overcome in a fierce battle in the kingdom of the Picts, Wilfrid, the servant of Almighty God, was celebrating the sacred rites of the Mass in South-Saxonia. After the words 'Lift up your hearts', the response 'We lift them up unto the Lord' was being spoken, when Wilfrid was rapt in a trance and saw in the same moment, through the Spirit of God, Egfrith slain by a blow to the head. Terrified by the vision, he was shortly afterwards struck with even greater terror. For as the Sequence of the Mass followed, and he was speaking the words 'Through Christ our Lord', he looked and, behold, two evil spirits brought before his eyes the soul of the king, a pitiful sight, and then carried it with them, groaning dreadfully, to the dungeons of hell. He at once called Acca, his priest, and told him everything that he had seen. The priest, greatly astonished and amazed at his words, could scarcely believe what he had heard; but at Wilfrid's bidding he made a note of the day and hour when the king was slain, and some days later the time was confirmed by news of the event.

Cuthbert, an altogether more sympathetic holy man, had already foretold Egfrith's death in the course of a prophetic conversation with the king's sister conducted on Coquet Island and recorded by the anonymous Lindisfarne biographer.

> Aelfled, a virgin and royal abbess, humbly begged God's hermit in the name of the Lord to cross the sea to meet her at Cocwaedesae. On bended knees the handmaid of God began to ask him many questions; and finally she boldly adjured him by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

> and by the nine orders of angels, and asked him how long her brother King Egfrith would live. At her solemn adjuration the man of God, in fear of the Lord, began to speak indirectly of the brevity of human life, and added these words, 'Handmaid of the Lord, is it not a short time though a man were to live twelve months?' She at once realised that he had spoken of the king, and wept bitterly; and just so, a year later, that bitterness was renewed for her and for many others by the fall of the king and his household, slain by the sword of a cruel enemy.

It seems characteristic of Cuthbert to journey to Carlisle to join Egfrith's queen Iurminburg while she awaited news of her husband's fate in battle. She spent those anxious days in the monastery there and although Cuthbert was unwilling to reveal the full import of his vision to the entire retinue, Bede tells how he took the queen aside for personal guidance.

> He at once went in to the queen and spoke to her privately, it being the Sabbath day, and said, 'See that you mount your chariot early on Monday – for it is not lawful to travel by chariot on the Lord's Day – and go and enter the royal city with all speed, in case perchance the king has been slain.'

Iurminburg had as evidently won the friendship of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne as she had provoked the hatred of Wilfrid of Hexham, and when she took the nun's veil, as was expected of widowed queens, Symeon of Durham records Cuthbert as performing the offices of her consecration into the nunnery at Carlisle.

Symeon's *History of the Church of Durham*, alone among the English sources, also records Egfrith's place of burial after his death at the pool of the herons.

> He was killed at Nechtanesmere, that is the lake of Nechtan, along with a large portion of the troops which he had taken with him to plunder the land of the Picts.
>
> This happened, as the same father Cuthbert had predicted, upon the thirteenth of the kalends of June, in the fifteenth year of his reign.
>
> His body was buried in Iona, the island of Columba.

Further confirmation of Egfrith's interment on I-Columcille is provided by the Celtic bard, Riagal of Bangor, whose lines on the battle are to be found in the Irish annals.

This day the son of Ossa was killed with green swords.
Although he did penance, he shall lie in Hi after his death.
This day the son of Ossa was killed, who had the black drink . . .

It is almost impossible to overestimate the cataclysmic impact on the kingdom of Northumbria of the defeat at Nechtansmere, but the immediately dramatic consequence was unquestionably a crisis of succession. Egfrith's ill-starred marital history had left him childless and, in consequence, his death left the kingdom of Ida with no legitimate heir of Ida's line.

'Do not say he has no heir,' Cuthbert assured the anxious abbess Aelfled when she sought his prophetic counsel on Coquet Island.

'Do you see how many islands there are in this great wide sea? It would be easy for God to provide for Himself a man from one of these to put in charge of the kingdom of the English.'

'flann fina, king of the saxons'

ALDFRITH, SON OF OSWY

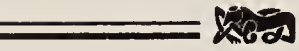
AD 685 – AD 704

> Ecgfrid's successor as king was Aldfrid, a man most learned in the scriptures, who was said to be the brother of Ecgfrid and the son of King Oswy; and he ably restored the shattered fortunes of the kingdom, though within narrower boundaries.

The few lines of Bede's *Historia* noting the succession of Aldfrith carry a burden of implication which greatly outweighs their unassuming tenor and modest proportions. Bede was too gifted an intuitive historian to fail to recognise, however quietly, the end of an era and with it the first dawn of a new age.

Through a hundred and forty years, each succeeding king of Northumbria had been announced as first and foremost a warlord and conqueror until, in 685, the new 'king of the Saxons' was everywhere entered as a man principally remarkable as 'most learned in the scriptures'. His task, nonetheless, was the restoration of a kingdom which had left the broken bones of its ascendancy in the blood-soaked mire of Nechtansmere. 'The shattered fortunes of the kingdom' is an emphatic phrase, quite rare in Bede and reflecting his recognition of the most disastrous reverse to be suffered by the northern English in all the centuries since their Germanic forbears first 'sought the land'.

> From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began '*to ebb and slide backwards*'. For the Picts recovered possession of their



> own land which the English had held, and the Irish in Britain and also some of the Britons regained their liberty, which they have preserved to this day for about forty six years.

All the territories to the north of the Forth and the Solway seized by Oswald, Oswy and Egfrith were lost in the shield-clash of a single afternoon.

Scotic Dalriada, although never to regain the military ascendancy of the reign of Aidan mac-Gabran, was nonetheless suddenly free of its tributary subjection by the English and whatever remained of the Gododdin of Manau must have amounted to those 'of the Britons who regained their liberty' after Nechtansmere. Bruide mac-Beli had been a prince of the Strathclyde Britons before he became the high-king of Picts and Alfred Smyth has suggested that Bruide may well have contrived an alliance of the surviving warbands of the Gododdin, the Britons of Strathclyde, and elements from Scotic Dalriada with the hosts of Pictland. The ominous threat of such a hostile coalition would have left Egfrith with no alternative to a pre-emptive strike, even one launched in the face of wiser prophetic counsel from Lindisfarne.

The Strathclyde Britons may even have moved into the power vacuum created by the war of 685 to exert a measure of imperium over the Picts and the Scots into the first years of the eighth century, but it is the Pictish tribes who emerge – at least from the Northumbrian perspective – as the newly-assertive victors of Nechtansmere and the aggressive threat on the northern frontier for almost half a century. In consequence, the northern frontier of Northumbria was drawn back to the south bank of the Forth and the English thane serving in the role of 'warden of the northern march' from his fortress at Dunbar was suddenly and dramatically charged to hold the front line of the kingdom. Whether *Urbs Giudi* at Stirling was still held for Northumbria after 685 is uncertain as it may well have been overrun by the Maetae Picts, but Abercorn on the Forth did remain in English hands, if now with a new strategic importance as a military forward-base rather than its former significance as an episcopal seat. Trumwin, formerly 'bishop over the Picts' was numbered by Bede among the refugees who fled the renewed pressure on the 'no man's land' around the Firth of Forth.

> Very many of the English were either slain by the sword, or enslaved, or else escaped from the land of the Picts by flight . . . Trumwine,

who had been appointed bishop, departed with his community from the monastery at Abercurnig, which remained within English territory but stood close to the firth which marks the division of the lands of the English from the lands of the Picts.

While Northumbria had lost its tributary dominions north of the Forth, it had somehow retained control of the *Niduari* Picts in Galloway and the former lands of Rheged around Carlisle and the Solway. The monastery at Whithorn – known to Bede as the 'white house' of *Candida Casa* – remained within the authority of the Northumbrian church and became the seat of the newly-appointed bishop Pecthelm in 731.

Such then was the kingdom 'within narrower boundaries' inherited by Aldfrith, yet even the legitimacy of his succession seems to fall under the shadow of some doubt, at least on the part of Bede and those English medieval historians who closely followed him. Aldfrith was only 'said to be' the brother of Egfrith, invariably Bede's signal of his own doubt about the veracity of any hearsay source, but there is so great a weight of evidence in support of Aldfrith's ancestry as to leave almost no room for Bede's suspicion. He was – according to every Irish and one well-informed English source – the son born out of wedlock to Oswy by the Ui Neill princess, Fina.

He was also, if I have correctly interpreted the evidence of the closely contemporary *Lives* of Cuthbert, the successor to the kingdom chosen by the monastic king-makers on Lindisfarne. The reassurance offered by Cuthbert on Coquet Island to Egfrith's sister, the abbess Aelfled of Whitby, when she pleaded for the name of his prophesied successor to her brother's kingdom, must have been based on something more reliable than the foreknowledge of the holy man. 'By the same Unity and Trinity,' Aelfled enquired, 'I adjure you to tell me whom he will have as his heir', and the anonymous Lindisfarne biographer records Cuthbert's reply.

> He was silent for a moment, and then said: 'You will find him to be no less a brother to you than the other.' This seemed indeed incredible, but she asked him more precisely where he was. He bore with her patiently, and said: 'Handmaid of God, why do you wonder though he be on an island beyond this sea?'

Aelfled's realisation of the meaning of Cuthbert's cryptic response is set down by the two most reliable sources in terms of significant geographical

variance. Bede includes his version of Aelfled's recognition of her half-brother as the subject of Cuthbert's prophecy in his prose *Life of Cuthbert*.

> So she understood that he was speaking of Aldfrid, who was said to be the son of Egfrid's father, and at that time was in exile among the islands of the Irish for the study of literature.

The Lindisfarne author, writing during Aldfrith's reign and almost twenty years before Bede, specifically identifies Bede's 'island of the Irish' as Iona.

> She now quickly realised that he had spoken of Aldfrid, who now reigns peacefully, and who then was on the island called Ii.

Just as Cuthbert's prophecy of Egfrith's death in battle would have been informed by his own knowledge of the situation in Pictland no less than by intelligences reaching Lindisfarne from Abercorn, Whithorn and even Iona, so his foretelling of Aldfrith's succession must have derived from contacts with Iona. Bede's unswerving adherence to the Roman orthodoxy did not best dispose him towards Iona, but Lindisfarne does seem to have maintained contact with its former parent church through the two decades since the abdication of Bishop Colman.

It is widely agreed by every authority that it was Cuthbert who healed the deep scars left on the Lindisfarne community by the great council at Whitby and the formality of his conversion from the Celtic tradition of Melrose to the Roman calendar and tonsure was – certainly in the opinion of Bertram Colgrave – of the letter rather than the spirit.

> It is clear that he belongs to the Celtic rather than to the Roman tradition, and that, in spite of his dying attacks upon the Celtic 'heretics', he lived and died after the manner of the typical Irish monk.

Egbert, the monk of Lindisfarne who had warned Egfrith against his Irish adventure, must have been in substantial contact with the church on Iona even before 684. He it was who finally persuaded the community of I-Columcille to abandon their ancient Celtic orthodoxies in favour of the 'catholic unity' in 716 and Egbert would also have known of Aldfrith's presence on Iona, even if he was not already in personal contact with Egfrith's half-brother, before 685.

All of which must throw a new light on Cuthbert's prophecy. King Egfrith's increasingly hazardous military adventuring would assuredly leave him dead on some battlefield, and wiser counsel on Lindisfarne must have given no little forethought to the question of succession in that eventuality and in the absence of any legitimate heir. The risk of an ambitious warrior thane contriving to seize the kingdom on Egfrith's death could have held no attractions for the Lindisfarne community while the Picts to the north and the Mercians to the south were successfully asserting themselves as powers in the land. The usurping of the kingdom by a power-hungry military adventurer, encircled by hostile rivals and foreign foes, would have threatened warfare and destruction to compare with, if not exceed, that inflicted by Penda's wars on Northumbria. Faced with such a prospect, the monks of Lindisfarne must have prayed ardently for a king who was a man of the psalter rather than the sword.

Oswy's eldest son, already grown to the sagacious maturity of his middle age, well-connected among the Irish and the Scots, schooled in the scriptures and renowned for his scholarship, would be the natural choice of a well-endowed church anxious for peace and prosperity. Such a successor was Aldfrith, whose unfortunate accident of illegitimate birth would have thus been rendered a detail of the least significance in the eyes of Cuthbert's community. The question of Aldfrith's illegitimacy has a more serious disadvantage for the modern historian in terms of the fragmentary documentary record of his life before his succession in 685. If Bede has little enough to offer, the Anglo-Saxon genealogies contribute nothing at all on Aldfrith and his background must first be sought in the Irish sources.

Oswy had spent his own childhood in Scotic Dalriada, largely on Iona, and some part of his early manhood fighting in the dynastic wars on the Irish mainland, when he would have encountered many eligible Irish noblewomen, amongst them the princess of the Ui Neill who is claimed by the Irish sources as Aldfrith's mother. The eighth-century martyrologist, Oengus the Culdee, details her name and lineage.

> Fina, daughter of Colman Rimidh, son of Baedan, son of Muircertach, son of Muiredhach, was mother of Flann Fina, king of the Saxons.

The princess Fina was, on this evidence, of the blood royal in the line of Niall Nine-Hostager. Her father, Colman Rimidh, was of the *Cenel*

Eogain, a northern clan of the Ui Neill, and had risen to share the office of high-king with Aed Slaine of the southern line of Niall.

Tigernach – in common with the annalists of Inisfallen and Clonmacnoise – enters Aldfrith's Irish name and English paternity beside his learned reputation and royal destiny.

> Ealdfrith, Oswiu's son, called Fland Fina by the Gaels, a wise man, king of the Saxons.

Aldfrith's distinguished bloodline – reflected in his Irish name of *Flann Fina*, 'blood of the wine' – linked him not only to the kings of Ireland and Northumbria but also and significantly to an abbot of Lindisfarne. The successor to Bishop Aidan was the Finan entered under the eighth of January in the *Martyrology of Donegal*.

> Finan, son of Rimidh. AD 659.

His death is entered in the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, but it is in the *Annals of the Four Masters* that his title of 'bishop', unknown elsewhere in the Columban church, is awarded especial mention at 659.

> Finan, son of Rimidh, a bishop, died.

The sibling similarity of the names alone might have raised the suspicion – here confirmed by the Irish sources – that Bishop Finan of Lindisfarne was born the son of the high-king Colman Rimidh, and thus brother to the princess Fina. The monks of Lindisfarne must have counted it a remarkable omen that their chosen successor to the kingdom was no less than the nephew of their own former abbot and bishop, and future saint.

By contrast with this wealth of documentation from the early sources, the date of birth of 'Flann Fina, son of Ossa' is nowhere recorded and must remain a matter of speculation. That speculation is most firmly based on the evidence of William of Malmesbury, the twelfth-century historian who has the benefit of an accidentally especial insight. His eminent seventh-century predecessor in the abbacy of Malmesbury had been Aldhelm, the author of two letters cryptically addressed to his friend and contemporary, King Aldfrith of Northumbria, which have survived to throw their own light on the king's obscure early history. Aldhelm's letters indicate that the two men had been close friends in their student days, and it would follow that anecdotal material on

Aldfrith's youth survived in Malmesbury monastic tradition through the four centuries until William's time.

Aldhelm's letters confirm that he stood sponsor at Aldfrith's confirmation, whilst both were fellow-students and thus close contemporaries. Any accurate approximation of the date of Aldfrith's birth must therefore hinge on Aldhelm's evidence set against what is known of Oswy's personal history. The year of Aldhelm's birth is believed to be 639, when Oswald had been king for five years and his brother, Oswy, would have been the husband of Rhiainmelt of Rheged and enmeshed in Northumbria's conquest of the Gododdin around the Forth. Soon after Oswy's succession to his brother's kingdom in 642 he took the Kentish princess Eanfled as his queen, at a time when the church frowned sternly on Christian kings taking concubines. Consequently, Oswy's relationship with the Ui Neill princess Fina must have conceived a lovechild either before 633 or – more probably in my view – during an extended return to Ireland or Argyll during an interregnum between the death of Rhiainmelt and his marriage to Eanfled. This was also precisely the period of Northumbrian involvement in the wars of Domnall Brecc when Dalriada was closely allied, if not tributary, to the northern English.

To propose Aldfrith as born before 633 is manifestly improbable. It would place him in his early fifties on his succession and over seventy on his death. He was eventually succeeded in 705 by his eldest son, then aged only eight, which would demand that Aldfrith fathered the first of two, and possibly three, sons in his late sixties, a feat of virile fertility which must be considered unlikely. If Aldfrith had been born of an inter-marital relationship conducted in Ireland or Dalriada around the year 640, his date of birth would pose no further problem. If he had been born in, for example, 641 or even 642, he would have succeeded to the kingdom in his early forties and died at the age of no more than sixty-three. He would have fathered his eldest son at the quite feasible age of fifty-six and become the father of as many as two more boys before approaching the age of sixty. Further support for this later date of birth is found in Aldhelm's evidence. Aldhelm would have been his senior by no more than three years and sponsored the confirmation of his younger contemporary at the quite customary age of twenty-six. All of which would argue a date of birth around 641 and correspond with William of Malmesbury's claim that he was Egfrith's elder brother, effectively by some five years.

> Though the elder brother, he had been deemed by the nobility unworthy of government from his illegitimacy, and had retired to Ireland, either through compulsion or indignation. In this place, safe from the persecution of his brother, he had from his ample leisure become deeply versed in literature, and had enriched his mind with every kind of learning.

If Aldfrith was born in his mother's country of Ireland, he would certainly have spent his infant years there and probably followed his father to England, perhaps to provide the security of an heir to the kingdom in troubled times, before the birth of Egfrith in 645 or 646. Within a few years of Egfrith's birth, Aldfrith must have been sent south to a place of safety during the wars with Mercia. Aldhelm was educated under the aegis of Archbishop Theodore and his abbot Hadrian at Canterbury and also by Maeldubh, the Irish founder of the monastery at Malmesbury. Aldfrith might well have shared his studies at either or both monastic schools. His Irish kinship would suggest Malmesbury, while the good offices of his stepmother's royal Kentish family would have facilitated Canterbury. The evidence of a lengthy academic education would imply both places of learning, while the extended absence from Northumbria of Oswy's eldest son would also explain why it was the younger Egfrith who was held hostage at the Mercian court in the dangerous prelude to Oswy's victory on the Winwaed.

An ungenerous modern historian has described Aldfrith as 'perhaps better fitted to rule a convent than a kingdom' and his view may well reflect that of the thanes of Northumbria on the death of Oswy in 671, while William of Malmesbury asserts Aldfrith's illegitimate birth as prompting the succession of the younger Egfrith to the kingdom of Northumbria in 671. William's evidence might equally suggest Aldfrith driven into exile by his brother's hostility or following the route of numberless English monks who crossed to Ireland – 'like bees after honey' according to Aldhelm – in pursuit of learning. The reason for Aldfrith's return to his mother's country might be more evident if the date of his departure thence was certainly known. If he left for Ireland shortly after Egfrith's succession in 671 – as William implies – he would seem to be foregoing any dynastic ambition and, perhaps with some relief, devoting himself to study as 'Flann Fina, the chief sage of knowledge in Ireland'. Aldhelm would suggest otherwise. His first letter to Aldfrith welcomes

him back to England in 685 after 'thrice two circling years' and would suggest that he left as late as 679 to spend six years in Ireland. Egfrith may have persecuted his elder brother, for reasons of paranoid imagining or political intelligence, and driven him into exile. Whilst in Ireland, Aldfrith's own attributed poetry describes himself as an exile and the raid on Brega in 684 implies some element of dynastic vendetta.

Whatever his motive or occasion, Aldfrith spent some years in Ireland, enjoying the hospitality of all five provinces as a travelling scholar and acquiring the poetic art of the Irish bards. The evidence for that assertion lies in fifteen stanzas of Irish verse found in the *Book of Leinster*. The esoteric accomplishment of the verses is largely lost in any attempt to render the ancient and arcane poetic style into some corresponding English form, but a few lines might convey something of its flavour.

Ro dheat inis finn Fail
In Eirinn re imarbhaidh,
Iomad ban, ni baoth an breas,
Iomad laoch, iomad cleireach.

It is natural, in fair Inis-fail,
In Erin, without contention.
Many women, no foolish boast,
Many laity, many clerics.

The poet declares himself an 'exile travelling the five provinces round' and salutes in turn the virtues of 'Armagh the splendid', Munster's 'kings, queens and poets a-many', 'Cruachan's land of heroic name' in Connaught, 'Tirconall the glorious', 'hardy warriors in Ulster from hill to glen', 'weapons bright, horsemen bold and sudden in noble Boyle', Leinster's 'flourishing pastures from Dublin to Slewmargy's peak', 'the broad rich country of Ossorie', and 'Ireland's bulwark' of Meath.

The man who set down these verses was not only highly skilled in the arcane complexities of the poetic art of the *filidh*, but had also assimilated the Celtic idiom of the wandering bard repaying his welcome with a flourish of poetic tribute. In Aldfrith's verses to 'fair Inisfael' – according to the Irish literary historian, Douglas Hyde – 'he compliments each of the provinces severally as though he meant to thank the whole nation for hospitality.' A manuscript in Trinity College, Dublin, contains an

extended variant of the poem in which an additional quatrain serves as a scribal colophon identifying its author.

> Flann Fina, son of Ossa,
> Arch-doctor in Erin's learning,
> On the banks of the river Ren [composed this];
> Received his due, as was natural.

Whatever reworking may have been applied to whatever original text, Flann Fina's salute to fair Inisfael provides evidence of Aldfrith's accomplishment in the bardic arts and his portrayal of himself as 'an exile' well corresponds to William of Malmesbury's evidence. Another Irish text, less impressively attributed to Aldfrith, survives in four manuscripts of which none is earlier than the fourteenth century. *The Wise Sayings of Flann Fina* is a sequence of twenty-four couplets, each of them offering a Christian homily framed in the form of a proverb.

> Woe to the man who loves mankind,
> and does not love God who loves him.
> Woe to him who sees the night that swims past,
> and does not fear the long night.

For all their resonant echoes of the Celtic Christian tradition, these lines have been pronounced at best medieval reworkings of rather more ancient originals and at worst a medieval forgery. A seventh-century exemplar cannot be entirely discounted even if no such original has survived, but the real significance of the *Wise Sayings* lies in the testimony they bear to Aldfrith's Irish reputation. If a medieval author used the colophon of 'Flann Fina' to enhance the intellectual authority of his own writings, Aldfrith's Irish name must have been no less than a by-word for wise counsel. All the English sources echo the Irish claims for Aldfrith as 'the wondrous sage' and 'Erin's chief sage of learning'. Bede calls him *vir doctissimus*, Eddius twice describes him as *sapientissimus*, and Alcuin acclaims him *rex simul et magister*, all attesting Aldfrith's educational accomplishment. If he had been born and spent his infancy in Ireland, then the Irish Gaelic must have been his first language. His earliest learning would have been acquired from monastic tutors, probably with an Irish monk accompanying him to Northumbria, and afterwards with Maeldubh's Irish community at Malmesbury, which would have provided a first grounding in Latin, probably supplemented with some schooling

in the bardic arts. His further education – on Aldhelm's evidence – with Theodore and Hadrian at Canterbury, would have encompassed advanced studies in scriptural and cosmographical disciplines and in the language and literature of Latin and Greek as well as the English vernacular tradition of Caedmon.

The entry in the *Fragmentary Annals* of MacFirbis includes the additionally illuminating description of 'Flann Fina, the wondrous sage' as 'Adamnan's pupil'. Adamnan mac-Ronan, 'High Scholar of the Western World', became the ninth abbot of Iona, the *comarb* or successor of Columcille, in 679 and may have been a member of the monastic community for some time before that year. The evidence of the anonymous Lindisfarne author places Aldfrith on Iona in 685 and his presence there six years into Adamnan's abbacy well corresponds to the annalist's *alumnus Adomnan*. Aldfrith may indeed have been preparing himself to enter holy orders, which would have been quite customary for a seventh-century prince approaching middle age, if his destiny had chosen so different a course. William of Malmesbury tells how the news of Nechtansmere reached I-Columcille and brought Oswy's Irish son into the kingdom of his father.

> While a more than common report everywhere noised the death of Egfrid, *'an intimation of it, borne on the wings of haste'*, reached the ears of his brother Alfrid . . . the very persons who had formerly banished him, esteeming him the better qualified to manage the reins of government, now sent for him of their own accord, and fate rendered efficacious their entreaties. He did not disappoint their expectations; for during the space of nineteen years he presided over the kingdom in the utmost tranquillity and joy, doing nothing at which even greedy calumny itself could justly carp, except the persecution of that great man Wilfrid. However, he held not the same extent of territory as his father and brother, because the Picts – insolently profiting by their recent victory, and attacking the Angles, who had become more indolent through a lengthened peace – had curtailed his boundaries on the north.

William's words make it quite clear that Aldfrith inherited not only his half-brother's kingdom but also his two most onerous burdens of kingship, the resurgence of the Pictish threat and of Wilfrid the bishop.

Some thirteen years passed before the Picts again entered

Northumbrian history, but Wilfrid was back in the kingdom within twelve months of Aldfrith's accession. His vision of Egfrith's hell-bound soul followed swiftly by the succession of the monkish Aldfrith must have offered Bishop Wilfrid renewed hope of restored fortunes. His conversion of the South Saxons – where the swords of his armed retinue overwhelmed the hostile reception presented by pagan warriors – followed by his mission to the Isle of Wight appears to have pleased the Archbishop of Canterbury. Wilfrid's reconciliation with Archbishop Theodore can only have facilitated a return to Northumbria and the restoration of his former see of York and his monasteries at Ripon and Hexham with all their vastly lucrative endowments – although recorded by Eddius as Aldfrith's initiative – owed no less a debt to the archbishop's good offices.

> Aldfrith, a most wise king, succeeded to the kingdom and in the second year of his reign, in accordance with the archbishop's command, he reverently summoned Saint Wilfrid our bishop from exile to his presence. First, he granted him the monastery at Hagustaldesia, together with all the possessions attached to it; and after a period of time, in accordance with the judgement of the most blessed Agatho, bishop of the Apostolic See, and of the holy synod, he restored to him his own episcopal see in the city of Eboracum and the monastery of In Hripis, together with their revenues, after expelling the alien bishops. But he possessed them in security, amid the rejoicing of his followers, for five years only.

This new harmony between a bishop so rigidly inclined to Rome and a king schooled on Iona was doomed to degenerate from an uneasy truce through ever greater turbulence into an ultimate trial of strength, albeit of the spirit rather than of the sword. It is equally possible to imagine king and bishop engaging in learned theological debate as it is to imagine the proud Wilfrid enraging the 'arch-doctor in Erin's learning'. Both possibilities are evoked by Wilfrid's loyal priest and chronicler, Eddius Stephanus.

> At times there was peace and trust in plenty between the wise king and that holy bishop, and the joy of a virtually perfect friendship; but at other times the cauldron of evil boiled up, and many were corrupted. And thus they continued to live for many years, vacillating between agreement and discord, until finally, when the flames of enmity were

> at their height, the holy man of God was banished by King Aldfrith, and withdrew from Northumbria.

Eddius' 'cauldron of evil' amounted to an escalating dispute over endowments and revenues considered by Wilfrid as the perquisites of his office, but the first indication of his inevitable expulsion was to appear within a year of his restoration as a consequence of the death of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne.

Cuthbert had foretold his own passing to Herebert, the hermit of Derwentwater, soon after his vision of Nechtansmere when he must have been already painfully aware of the physical damage inflicted by the asceticism he had endured in his years as a hermit. He had been bishop for less than two years when foreknowledge of swiftly approaching death moved him to return to the island of Farne. There, on the night of the twentieth of March in the year 687, one of the monks attending his last hours lit the two torches which were to signal the passing of their hermit-bishop to the community on Lindisfarne. At the moment of his death – according to Bede's transcription of the monk Herefrith's first-hand recollection – the brothers in attendance on Farne were chanting the psalm beginning *'O God, thou hast cast us off and hast broken us down'*.

> Far away on the island of Lindisfarne, a brother had been keeping watch and awaiting the hour of his death in a watch tower facing towards Farne, and on seeing the signal he ran quickly to the church, where the whole community of the brothers was assembled and singing the psalms of the night office. It happened that as he entered they too were singing the psalm mentioned above, and events showed that this was ordained by divine providence. For after the man of God was buried, such trials shook that church like a great gust of wind that many of the brothers chose to leave the place rather than live among such perils. A year later, however, Eadbert, a man of outstanding virtues . . . was consecrated to the bishopric; and the storms which caused such havoc were dispelled.

Bede – for his own reasons – does not disclose the nature of the 'storms which caused such havoc', but Symeon's *History of the Church of Durham*, unhindered by eighth-century caution, points quite clearly to the eye of the storm.

> But after the man of God was buried, so violent was the storm of trial which shook that church, that many of the brethren chose rather to depart from the place than to encounter such perils; while the affairs of the see were for that year managed by the venerable bishop Wilfrid, until a successor for Cuthbert should be elected and ordained.

Where Cuthbert the holy man had harmonised the demands of the council of Whitby with the Celtic spirit of Aidan's island monastery, Wilfrid the proud prince-bishop would have rooted out every trace of Columban sympathy as heresy. It might not be too wide of the historical mark to suggest that the brothers who 'chose to leave the place rather than live among such perils' were fleeing the ordeal of a witch-hunt.

Aldfrith's sympathy would assuredly have lain with the spirit of I-Columcille so ingrained in the Lindisfarne tradition. The most reliable evidence of that inclination on the part of the king is his choice of the ascetic hermit, Drythelm of Melrose, as his own spiritual counsellor perhaps on the model of the Irish *anmchara*. Drythelm was the most impressive example of a Celtic mystic in Bede's Northumbria. He had been a married layman living in the far north-west of the kingdom, in what is now Ayrshire, who fell ill to the point of death. Suddenly restored to life, he abandoned wife, work and family to enter the monastery of *Mailros* on the Tweed, where his testimony of first-hand experiences of heaven and hell established him as an extraordinary visionary and ascetic. He would emerge from chanting the psalter in the icy Tweed in the depth of winter to assure the brothers that 'I have been colder'.

The bishop Wilfrid and the hermit Drythelm represent the polar extremes of the church of Aldfrith's reign, and it is significant that Bede's *Historia* confirms the king as a devotee of the mystic of Melrose.

> He also told his visions to King Aldfrid, a most learned man in every respect, who listened to him so eagerly and attentively that, at the king's request, he was admitted to the monastery and crowned with the monastic tonsure; and the king very often went to hear his story, whenever he visited those parts.

The church of Lindisfarne had served in the office of king-maker to Aldfrith, who himself had been a student of a *comarb* of Columcille and perhaps even preparing for his own entry into the Celtic church when called home by history. Any affront to the church of Aidan and of Cuthbert

would be counted an affront to 'Flann Fina, king of the Saxons' and Wilfrid's days in his restored episcopacy would have been already numbered by the spring of 688. The death of Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, in 690 can only have aggravated the situation. Eddius – and Eddius alone – claimed that Theodore had intended Wilfrid to succeed him to the archepiscopacy. If such had been Wilfrid's own ambition he would have most certainly asserted it immediately on Theodore's death, at which point the resentment felt by other English bishops to such presumption would have served as Aldfrith's final prompting for his expulsion of Wilfrid in 691.

Still unbowed, Wilfrid journeyed south to find sanctuary in Aethelred's Mercia as bishop of the Middle Angles and in that capacity he was to preside over the translation of the incorrupt remains of his saintly former patron, Etheldreda, at Ely in the October of 695. Seven more years were to pass before Berhtwald, the new archbishop of Canterbury, summoned a council of bishops at Austerfield in west Yorkshire to call Wilfrid to account. Wilfrid conducted his own defence, arguing the impressive list of his achievements through almost forty years of ecclesiastical office, but it was to no avail. Indeed he would have enraged Aldfrith beyond imagining by his reference to the triumph at Whitby as an uprooting of 'foul weeds planted by the Irish'. The bishop was summarily outlawed by his peers and his king who demanded he relinquish all episcopal authority and retire to Ripon forbidden to emerge from the monastic precincts without express royal permission. When Wilfrid adamantly refused to comply, Archbishop Berhtwald imposed the ultimate sanction of excommunication on the recalcitrant bishop and his ecclesiastical household. Wilfrid turned to his own last court of appeal and he set out once again – almost incredibly in his seventieth year – on the road to Rome.

While Berhtwald was preparing the case against Wilfrid, Aldfrith had other and more urgent concerns on his embattled northern frontier with Pictland. It is curious that, while Aldfrith's learning and wisdom are fully and generously attested by all the sources, only the regnal list appended to Henry of Huntingdon's chronicle credits him with any warlike accomplishment. There, as elsewhere, Aldfrith is described as 'learned in the scriptures' and also as 'vigorous in warfare'. Elements of Yorkshire tradition which claim that he died of battle-wounds are discredited by the most authoritative contemporary evidence and it would seem that Henry's *strenuus in belli* represents nothing more than a medieval diplomatic formality. Aldfrith was undoubtedly a man of

sufficiently formidable character to be accepted by a proud people as their king, but already over forty when he succeeded to the kingdom and past the age to enter into the way of the warrior king even had he been so inclined. Consequently, he would have assigned military command of the Pictish march to the warrior thane who was slain in battle with the northern enemy in the last few years of the seventh century.

Henry of Huntingdon's chronicle for 699 sets an event entered only briefly in the earlier sources most fully into context.

> Beorht, the general of Egfrid already named, became a victim to the maledictions of the Irish, whose churches he had destroyed, just as his master had before suffered. For in like manner as Egfrid invading the territory of the Picts fell there, so Beorht, marching against them to revenge the death of his lord, was slain.

The earliest reference to what can only be the same event appears under the year 698 in the chronology appended to Bede's *Historia*.

> Bertred, an ealdorman of the king of the Northumbrians, was killed by the Picts.

The death of Bede's *Bertred* is widely recorded by the Irish annalists, whose interest would support Henry of Huntingdon's identification of him as the same Berht who had commanded Egfrith's Irish adventure of 684. The early *Annals of Ulster* and the later *Annals of Clonmacnoise* both follow Tigernach's entry at 698.

> A battle between the Saxons and the Picts; and there fell Beornhaeth's son, who was called Beorhtred.

The agreement between Bede and the Irish sources on the date of 698 must discredit Henry of Huntingdon's date of 699, the discrepancy being best explained by Henry's following the entry for 699 in the – sometimes chronologically erratic – *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

> In this year the Picts slew Beorht the ealdorman.

It would be reasonable to deduce, even from such disparate documentation, that Berht – also known as *Beorht* and *Beorhtred* – was slain in 'a battle', rather than any lesser conflict, with a Pictish force, but whether as an incident in a routine border patrol, a more substantial expedition to punish Pictish raiding, or the culmination of a blood feud

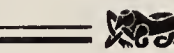
avenging Nechtansmere, is unknown. It would be no less reasonable to suggest that Berht's campaign was fought in the frontier country around the upper reaches of the Forth and probably in the region of Stirling where the enemy would have been the Maetae Picts of the Ochils.

The Irish annalists identify Berht as the son of the same Beornhaeth who had fought beside Egfrith to fill two rivers with Pictish dead in 672. He had, therefore, served as the strategically placed thane, even sub-king, commanding the northern frontier and in that same capacity would have also fought at Nechtansmere. As a principal among the *gesithas* defending the king in his last battle, Beornhaeth would have been slain beside Egfrith in accordance with the warrior's ancient creed of loyalty to the royal 'ring-giver' even until death in the blood-fray. The office of 'warden' on the Pictish frontier was both hereditary and of great importance, on the evidence of the imposing titles accorded it in Old English sources. The Berht slain in 698 was known by Eddius as *secundus a rege* and *reges princeps*, to Bede as *praefectus*, and to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as *ealdorman*. These various titles indicate the thane as an effective 'sub-king', and Berht was followed in that capacity by his son, Berhtfrith, who will later wreak vengeance on the Picts for the deaths of his father and grandfather.

It is nothing less than remarkable to find a Northumbrian thane on the eve of the eighth century holding the same line of defence against the same enemy as the tribal king of the Votadini appointed by Theodosius in the second half of the fourth century. Such an unbroken sequence of guardian warlords – Romano-Briton followed by north Briton followed by northern English – through four centuries offers impressive support to the modern historian James Campbell's claim for the Picts that 'no people had so long a history as a menace on the same frontier'. If the tide of Pictish power which reached its flood in 685 was the consequence of the emergence of Bruide mac-Beli as the Pictish high-king, it did not ebb away in the event of his death, which is entered by Tigernach at 693.

Bruide, son of Beli, king of Fortriu, died.

So passed the greatest of the Pictish warlords, the high-king who had restored the Pictish territories to their furthest southern frontier and brought down the last great warrior king of Northumbria, just as his brother, Owain of Strathclyde, had brought down the last great warlord of Dalriada, Domnall Brecc.



It is just one of many ironies of the sacred earth of the *Relig Odhrain* that Iona's ancient burial place of kings serves both Egfrith of Northumbria and Bruide of Pictland, blood-foes and blood-kin, as their last resting-place. Skene's *Chronicle of the Picts* notes of Bruide that 'in his time flourished Saint Adamnan'. It is a similar synchronicity of history that the abbot of Iona who must have officiated at the interment of Egfrith as he certainly did at the burial of Bruide was the same Adamnan, son of Ronan and *comarb* of Columcille, who is recorded as Aldfrith's tutor. The Old Irish *Life of Adamnan* tells how the body of Bruide 'was brought to Iona; and his death caused Adamnan grief and sorrow.'

> Then Adomnain said: 'Many wonders performs the King who was born of Mary . . . giving death to Bruide, Beli's son. It is strange that, after he has been king of the north, a hollowed stump of withered oak should enclose the son of the king of Al Cluaithi.'

Seven years before his mourning of the high-king of Picts, Adamnan had made his first entry into the history of the Northumbrian kings as the emissary of the high-king of Ireland to the court of Aldfrith. The new king of Northumbria, endowed as he was with the most distinguished Irish connections, presented *Finnachta Fledach* – 'Finnachta of the Feastings', high-king of the southern line of Niall Nine-Hostager – with the opportunity to bring home the sixty hostages seized from Brega by Egfrith's warband of 684. The emissary chosen by Finnachta for that diplomatic purpose was eminently placed for the task as his own *anmchara*, or spiritual adviser, and recently monastic tutor to Aldfrith of Northumbria. The *Annals of the Four Masters* at 686 provide the fullest account in the Irish sources of Adamnan's diplomatic mission to 'the North Saxons'.

> Adamnan went to Saxon-land, to request the prisoners which the North Saxons had carried off from Magh-Breagh the year before mentioned. He obtained a restoration of them, after having performed wonders and miracles before the hosts; and they gave him great honour and respect, together with a full restoration of everything he asked of them.

The *Annals of Ulster* succinctly confirm the Four Masters' entry under the same year.

> Adamnan brought back sixty captives to Ireland.

Adamnan's visit to Northumbria marked a watershed in his own career. The scholarly abbot took the opportunity to visit the monastery of Wearmouth/Jarrow where he must have been greatly impressed by the stone-built architecture, windows of coloured glass, and the great library assembled by Biscop and Ceolfrith. So impressed was he with the church, which was already emerging as second only to Rome among the cultural centres of Europe, that Adamnan was to return for a longer visit in 688. Bede, who would have met Adamnan on at least one of these visits, was no less impressed by the ninth abbot of Iona.

> Adamnan, the distinguished abbot and priest of the community of Saint Columba . . . was sent on a mission from his people to King Aldfrith and had decided to see our monastery also, where he showed in his character and his words a wonderful prudence, humility and devotion.

Bede was anxious to record how his own abbot Ceolfrith was to persuade Adamnan of the error of Iona's 'defiance of the universal custom of the Church, whether in the keeping of Easter or in respect of any other ordinances'. Adamnan's experience in Northumbria was to redirect his own theological practice, if not that of I-Columcille itself, but he was, nonetheless, able to harmonise his revised orthodoxies with his commitment to the Columban tradition. On his return to Iona after his second visit to Northumbria, Adamnan began work on his *Life of Columba*, in which he attributes his own immunity to the plague – then rife in northern England – to the intercession of his patron.

> In Saxonia, also, when I went to visit my friend King Aldfrid, where the plague was raging and laying waste many of his estates, yet both in its first attack, immediately after the war of Ecfrid, and in its second, two years subsequently, the Lord mercifully saved me from danger, though I was living and moving about in the very midst of the plague. Now, to what other person can this favour granted them by God be attributed unless to Saint Columba?

Of greater importance in these pages is the light cast by Adamnan's Northumbrian mission on the personality of Aldfrith. Adamnan's own reference to 'my friend King Aldfrid' attests their earlier familiarity proposed by the annalist's *alumnus Adomnan*, just as Adamnan's choice of 'a book about the holy places' as his diplomatic gift to the Northumbrian king further confirms the learned literacy of the royal taste. The volume

was eventually placed in the library at Jarrow and there came to the notice of Bede.

> The same man wrote a book about the holy places which has been of great value to many readers, and for which he used information dictated to him by Arculf, a bishop of Gaul, who had gone to Jerusalem to visit the holy places.
>
> On his voyage home he was driven off course by a violent storm onto the west coast of Britain. He was very gladly welcomed by Adamnan, and listened to even more gladly, to the extent that Adamnan was quick to commit to writing whatever he testified to having seen in the holy places worthy of record.
>
> Adamnan presented this book to King Aldfrid, and through his generosity it was circulated also for lesser folk to read. The author himself was sent back to his own land enriched by many gifts from him.

The gift of *De Locis Sanctis* confirms Aldfrith as a Latin scholar with interests geographical no less than spiritual. Bede's *History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* includes further evidence of the cosmographical curiosity of the royal bibliophile.

> In exchange for the book of the cosmographers, a wonderful piece of workmanship which Benedict [Biscop] had bought in Rome, he acquired from King Aldfrid who was very learned in the scriptures, eight hides of land near the river Fresca which he assigned to the monastery of the blessed apostle Paul.

The evidence for Aldfrith's literacy and learning is greatly expanded by the implications of the second of the two letters addressed to him by Aldhelm of Malmesbury. This *Epistle to Acircius* addresses him as *Acircio* – a cryptic allusion which itself assumes a remarkable classical literacy – and describes him as 'governing the sceptres of the northern empire'. Aldhelm recalls their friendship as students some twenty years before, referring specifically to Aldfrith's confirmation as his receipt of the 'sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit'. Aldhelm enlarges on the theme in an erudite disquisition, illustrated with quotations from Virgil and other classical authors, on the significance of seven for poetic metre. Aldhelm's *Epistle to Acircius* has been dated to around the year 690 and is considered to be the most difficult tract written by the foremost classical and

vernacular poet of his day and addressed to a reader of very comparable literacy and poetic accomplishment. When Aldhelm's evidence is set in the context of the Irish and English acclaim for Aldfrith's intellectual accomplishment, it lends its own support to the remarkable claim first made in 1922 by Professor Albert Cook of Yale University in his paper on *The Possible Begetter of the Old English Beowulf and Widsith.*

Professor Cook makes an impressive case for Aldfrith's significant creative involvement in two of the surviving masterworks of Old English literature. If his thesis is extended by more recent collateral research into Irish saga literature and the whole set against the background of Northumbria on the eve of the eighth century, then the achievement of Aldfrith might well eclipse all the collected battle-glory and martyred sanctity of his forbears of the line of Ida.

The *Beowulf* poem survives in only one Old English text, that of the British Library's Cottonian manuscript *A xv*, which has been reliably dated to the very end of the tenth century, but it is generally agreed that the text itself is of much greater antiquity and the tenth-century manuscript must derive from an exemplar set down as early as the eighth or even the later seventh century. The story of the poem is widely familiar, but a skeletal outline might perhaps serve some useful purpose. Beowulf is a warrior hero of the Geats from the north of the Jutland peninsula who finds his way to the court of Hrothgar the Dane. There he slays first the fearsome monster Grendel who had long preyed upon Hrothgar's hall of Heorot and soon afterwards Grendel's mother when she wreaks vengeance for her dead offspring. Beowulf's return to his homeland, in the second and shorter part of the poem, brings him into battle with a hoard-guarding dragon. The fire-breathing *wyrm* is slain in the combat, but not before inflicting fatal injuries on Beowulf, whose funeral pyre dominates the closing lines of the narrative.

The date of the original poem has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, but more recent opinion would tend to favour an earlier over a later date for its first written composition. The raw material seems as timeless as the primeval northern world it echoes and the themes from which *Beowulf* is formed must have first reached these shores with the oral tradition of the earliest Germanic settlers. That tradition supplied the repertoire of the *scops*, the poet-harpers of the mead-feasts, passing through all the generations of hands which reworked the themes into numerous variant forms, each one corresponding to local landscape and

lineages. Only when these oral themes were structured into the form set down on a written page could the work we know as *Beowulf* be said to have come into being. The date of that first composition can be reasonably placed within a timespan of a hundred years.

No Old English saga would have boasted a hero from the Scandinavian lands after the last decade of the eighth century when the first Viking raids fell on these islands. Thus the *Beowulf* poet wrote no later than the 790s, and certainly – on the evidence of the Christian overlay superimposed on the poem's pre-Christian bedrock – no earlier than the mid-seventh century. The names chosen for his characters by the *Beowulf* poet echo those found in the unhistorical sequences of the Anglo-Saxon genealogies where nomenclature from the Germanic heroic age links the royal dynasties of the English kingdoms to the Woden described by Patrick Wormald as 'the god of the warband'. Wormald extracts from the genealogies the names of *Sceaf, Scyld, Beaw, Heremod, Eormanric, Offa, Finn* and *Hwala* and notes seven of them occurring in *Beowulf*, four occurring in *Widsith* and some occurring in both. The proposal of these parameters would place *Beowulf* on the cusp of the seventh and eighth centuries when a recently converted Germanic people was still inspired by an heroic pagan past and not yet in fear of the dragonships bound west-over-sea.

The language of the *Beowulf* poet was decidedly the *Englisc* of the Angles and consequently confirms his work as a product of either Mercia or Northumbria. Some earlier authorities have pointed to Mercia, suggesting that the *Offa* mentioned in the poem might be linked to the great eighth-century Mercian king of that name. The Offa in *Beowulf* was certainly the Migration Age king of Angeln, a putative forbear of the Mercian Offa as he was of Penda, but there was also an eighth-century Northumbrian Offa, claimed to be a son of Aldfrith, which would at least diminish the Mercian title to *Beowulf* on that count. The excavation of the richly-endowed ship-burial at Sutton Hoo – so strikingly evocative of the burial of *Scyld Sceafing* in *Beowulf* – redirected scholarly attention to the Mercian sub-kingdom of the East Angles as the source of the poem. The Sutton Hoo finds are indeed akin to the artefacts described in the poem, but no more so than the revelation of the hall at Yeavering is evocative of the *Heorot* where Beowulf confronted Grendel. The East Anglian *Heorot* has yet to be uncovered by the archaeologist's spade, as indeed has any Sutton Hoo ship burial *be northan Hymbre*, but the

decorative art of the Book of Lindisfarne so closely reflects that of the Sutton Hoo treasure as to propose similar craftsmanship as a feature of the world of Bede.

At least as significant as the archaeological evidence is the landscape – certainly that of England rather than the Baltic homelands – into which the poem is set. The lines describing the dark uplands patrolled by Grendel and his mother would correspond to the landscape suggested by the Cheviot range, the hills of Durham or the Yorkshire moors to the Old English imagination.

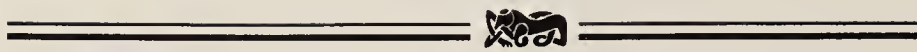
> They haunt an uncharted territory – wolf-infested hillsides, windy crags and the perilous waterways . . . where a mountain stream, a torrent, goes down beneath the gloom of the crags, underground. It is not many miles distant from here that the tarn is to be found.

Similarly, the watchman on the headland who sights Beowulf's arrival west-over-sea might be imagined on the crag at Bamburgh or Flamborough Head, where Symeon placed the first English landfall of the Germanic forbears of the Idings.

The landscape of *Beowulf*, even to modern recognition, is the landscape north of the Humber, and if its setting evokes Bede's Northumbria, the world and time of *Beowulf* evokes the world and time of Bede's history with a startling and realistic immediacy. Beowulf himself is a warrior-in-exile, alike to Edwin and Oswald. The mead-hall of Heorot lying below the monster-haunted fells must have stood on fields alike to those where once the timber halls of *Ad Gefrin* stood below the former hillfort of the Britons on Yeavering Bell. The battle-gear of Ida's warband coming ashore at Din Guairi must have matched that with which the poet garbs Beowulf's fighting men.

> Battle-corslet shone, tough, with rings interlocked by skilful hands; shining iron link jangled in their mail-coats. As soon as they came marching up to the hall in their combat-gear, the sea-wearied men deposited their broad shields against the wall of the building . . . spears, the seamen's equipage, ashwood shafts grey at the tip, stood stacked together – the iron-clad troop were done credit by their weapons.

While *Beowulf* vividly evokes the backdrop of Bede's *Historia*, the restrictions imposed on a monastic author of his time would have



forbidden Bede – although himself a vernacular poet – from writing any such work. Alcuin, the Northumbrian monk at the court of Charlemagne, deplored any revival of a literature from the old pagan tradition and there is no reason to doubt that Bede of Jarrow and Aldhelm of Malmesbury shared the same view. *Beowulf* and the other Old English texts of the warrior's way are proposed by one modern authority as 'literature for and by and about the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy'. So they clearly are, but there is no evidence for that 'Anglo-Saxon aristocracy' as literate beyond a precarious grasp of runes incised on its swordblades and the English kings of proven literacy before Henry I might be counted on the fingers of one hand. Sigebert, son of Raedwald the bretwalda, must be included among them by virtue of his monastic education in Gaul, while Alfred of Wessex was unrivalled as a king equally renowned as reader, writer and warlord. Bede would have been unlikely to have submitted the first draft of his *Historia* to Ceolwulf of Northumbria in 732 if the king had been unlettered, but his predecessor Aldfrith still stands alone as the pre-eminent proven literate king of the northern English.

None of this would more than coincidentally link him with the *Beowulf* masterwork if it were not for his well-documented Irish associations. The early church in Ireland took a very different view of the vernacular tradition to that of Aldhelm and his English contemporaries and the instruction in such matters issued by an Irish synod reveals a characteristically Celtic generosity towards the pre-Christian wellsprings.

> If we find the judgements of the heathen, taught to them by their better nature, to be good and not displeasing to God, we shall keep them.

That guidance is well borne out by the evidence for the export by an Irish monastery of a copy of the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, the great epic of Cuchulainn from the eighth-century Ulster Cycle, in exchange for the cosmography of Isidore of Seville. James Carney, an authority on the literary history of Ireland, shows Isidore's book to have been in use in Irish monastic schools, where it provided the source for vernacular genealogies tracing the ancestry of monsters and unnatural beings back to Cain in the *Book of Genesis*. Such a genealogy is found in the early Irish sources in a form closely comparable to that referred to by the *Beowulf* poet and would suggest the work of Isidore being drawn to the

notice of the young Flann Fina. There are further correspondences to be found between Adamnan's inclusion of an aquatic monster from Irish folk tradition in his *Life of Columba* and the uncharacteristic watery setting for Beowulf's combat with serpents and unnatural beings. The monstrous reptiles in Irish lore were all denizens of rivers and lakes as a result of their banishment by Saint Patrick from the land of Erin. That Irish tradition contrasts with the invariable siting of the Old English *wyrm* in a land-locked barrow mound. The *Beowulf* poet blends both traditions into his hero's monstrous combats and it might be worthwhile to mention once again that Aldfrith was the friend and pupil of Adamnan.

James Carney discerns a complex series of convincing parallels between the structure and symbolisms of the Irish saga of the cattle raid of the hero Froech, the *Tain Bo Froech*, and significantly comparable features of *Beowulf*. He points to both works emerging in their written form by the eighth century and even suggests the Irish characteristics of *Beowulf* as sufficiently pronounced for the poem to have been written on Iona.

Professor Cook of Yale was writing some thirty years before Carney and largely unaware of the Irish perspective on *Beowulf*, yet he does propose Aldfrith as the author of the Old English *Widsith*. That poem – included in the *Exeter Book* but of much greater antiquity than its eleventh-century manuscript – is described by its translator, S. A. J. Bradley of York University, as 'one of the longest-lived poems in the Anglo-Saxon corpus'.

> Its speaker is himself a poet – a symbolic poet who has travelled all the known world and the near and far reaches of history as no real man could have done in one lifespan.

This *Widsith* poet, who 'had travelled through most of the peoples, nations and tribes upon the earth' was possessed of an imaginative creativity fired by cosmographical works such as that purchased by Aldfrith from Benedict Biscop. 'I have been with the Scots and with the Picts' sounds well in the voice of the Flann Fina who saluted the splendours and hospitality of 'fair Inisfael'. Cook moves on from this attribution of *Widsith* to propose Aldfrith as commissioning the writing of the *Beowulf* poem from the oral tradition of the mead-halls.

I would go further, even so far as to propose Aldfrith himself as the author of the *Beowulf* poem. He had been educated in classical and

vernacular traditions at Malmesbury and Canterbury, in Ireland and on Iona. His Irish poetry still extant demonstrates a remarkable competence in the rigorous disciplines of the Celtic bards. The landscape of *Beowulf* is vividly Northumbrian, from Flamborough Head as the *Hronesnaesse* of Beowulf's funeral pyre to Yeavering as the hall of *Heorot*. Curiously, the *vill* of *Ad Gefrin* had been recently abandoned before 685 in favour of the royal township of *Maelmin* at nearby Milfield and the decayed timber remains lying under the 'hill of the goats' must have vividly evoked Grendel's ravaging of Hrothgar's hall to an imagination schooled in the Irish myths and sagas no less than the Homeric epics. Indeed, *Beowulf* is so rich in parallels to the *Iliad* as to suggest its author as fully familiar with that Greek masterwork as with the Germanic mythos sung to the harp by the Anglo-Saxon counterparts of the Irish bards.

A man highly skilled in the poetic traditions of three civilisations, inspired by Irish sagas and Homeric epics, educated in Christian learning yet free of the constraints of monastic jurisdiction, distanced from the harsh realities of the warrior's way yet placed in the cultural ambience of the Germanic elite and standing on the threshold of Northumbria's eighth-century 'golden age' must be the most eminent candidate for the authorship of *Beowulf*.

Aldfrith, son of Oswy, remains the only such genius who can be precisely identified across the chasm of almost thirteen hundred years.

'I have heard tell,' wrote the *Widsith* poet, 'about many men ruling over nations . . . one man governing the land in succession to another.' The succession of kings had dominated all the centuries of the dynasty of Ida and must have loomed ominously over Northumbria as dawn broke on the eighth century. Aldfrith the king was in his sixties and an old man by the standards of his time as he approached the year of his death. For a hundred and fifty years the succession had passed to each new king by blood-kinship or battle-victory, and Aldfrith himself had claimed the kingdom only through the death in war of his childless half-brother. Before the end of the seventh century, a new disorder of succession was already tainting more southerly kingdoms and was to infect Northumbria within fifty years. Powerful and ambitious thanes were always alert to a chink in legitimate succession whereby they themselves could claim a kingdom, if not by the conspiratorial production of a royal heir of spurious kinship then by the bold battle-sword or the covert assassin's blade.

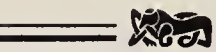
Aldfrith's late marriage would have prompted an anxiety among his

loyal thanes to compare with the opportunism it would have suggested to their ambitious fellows. His queen Cuthburg was a princess of the West Saxons and a younger sister of Ine, king of Wessex. She appears to have been of a religious inclination, apparently entering the abbess Hildelith's nunnery at Barking before Aldfrith's death and founding her own strictly-segregated double-monastery at Wimborne in Dorset soon after 705. Florent of Worcester provides his own curious note of the marital relations of Aldfrith and his queen.

> [Ine's] sisters were Saints Quenburg and Cuthburg, the latter of whom built a monastery for holy virgins at a place called Winburn.
>
> Aldfrid, king of the Northumbrians, married Cuthburg; but before his death, both renounced connubial intercourse for the love of God.

The course of marital celibacy chosen by the royal couple carries only the very faintest echo of Egfrith's chaste queen Etheldreda in that the vows taken by Aldfrith and Cuthburg would relate equally to the Irish influence on Aldfrith as to the queen's monastic interests. The Celtic tradition did for a time produce a vogue for vows of celibacy within the married state whereby husband and wife, usually in later life, became 'two hermits in one house, brother and sister before the altar of God'. The practice was eventually discouraged, but probably not by such extreme ascetics as Aldfrith's *anmchara*, Drythelm of Melrose. The royal celibacy cannot have been instituted before 696 when Aldfrith's eldest surviving son, and eventual successor, Osred, was conceived. If the later eighth-century Osric and Offa were genuinely the sons of Aldfrith as the medieval sources claim, then marital relations cannot have been relinquished before 700, only some four years before the king's last and fatal illness.

It would seem, however, that no sooner had his wife entered the church than another religious dignitary returned to overshadow the last year of Aldfrith's reign. Deposed by his king and excommunicated by his archbishop, Wilfrid had set out for Rome where a papal inquisition had once again exonerated him of suspicion of guilt. Eddius records the aged Wilfrid's desire to end his days in the Apostolic See but he seems to have been similarly *persona non grata* in Rome as in Northumbria and so, with his reliquary replenished and his papal mandate renewed, Wilfrid bowed to diplomatic pressure and took the long road back to Northumbria. En route he fell seriously ill, probably the victim of a stroke, but



was sufficiently restored by a vision of Saint Michael to reach Canterbury where harmonious relations were restored with Archbishop Berhtwald. From Kent, the indomitable bishop moved on to Mercia where his welcome would have been the warmer for the absence of Osthryth, Aethelred's queen, Egfrith's sister and Wilfrid's old enemy, who had been slain by 'Southumbrian' assassins according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 697.

The warmth of Wilfrid's welcome extended only as far as the southern frontier of Northumbria and whilst offering a courteous welcome to Wilfrid's emissary priests, Aldfrith remained unmoved by their papal missive and begged them to pester him no more with 'this matter of Wilfrid your master'. Eddius might be expected to attribute the king's eventual change of heart to a consequence of the most extreme heavenly chastisement.

> Now the divine vengeance, with no delay, seized the king and bound him fast in the chains of sickness.
>
> The king in his wisdom at once realised that he had been stricken by the Apostolic power and, moved to penitence, confessed the sin he had committed against Bishop Wilfrid in defiance of the judgements of the Apostolic See. And he said in witness of this, 'If only he could accept my invitation to visit me while I yet live, I would at once make amends for my sin.' However, he made a vow to God and Saint Peter that, if he rose healed from that bed of sickness, he would heal every wound in accordance with the wishes of Saint Wilfrid the bishop and the judgement of the Apostolic See. 'But if, by God's will, I die, I bid my heir, whoever succeeds me in the kingdom, to come to peaceful terms with Bishop Wilfrid, for the good of my soul and of his own.' These words were heard and reported to us by most trustworthy witnesses, including Aelfled, the abbess and wise virgin, truly the daughter of a king, and the abbess Aethelberg; and they were confirmed by many other witnesses.
>
> But the king grew faint, and for many days lost the power of speech; and finally he died.

'In the year of our Lord 705', according to Bede's *Historia*, 'Aldfrid, king of the Northumbrians, died in the twentieth year of his reign.' The *Annals of Ulster* enter the death of Aldfrith in the same year as his friend and tutor Adamnan on Iona at 704.

Adamnan, abbot of Iona, rests in the 77th year of his age.
Aldfrith the Wise, son of Oswiu, dies.

The Ulster annalist's date is followed by Tigernach's obituary of 'Aldfrith, son of Oswiu, that is Flann Fina with the Gaedil', as it is by the other Irish sources and also by the *Annales Cambriae*.

Alchfrit, king of the Saxons, died.
Adomnan fell asleep.

The Celtic divergence from Bede's dating is best explained by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 705.

In this year Aldferth, king of the Northumbrians, died on the XIXth of the Kalends of January at Driffield.

The 'nineteenth of the kalends of January' would read as 14th December by the modern calendar and, falling later than September, would be counted by Bede's chronological system as in the year following. In consequence, Aldfrith's obituary would be more accurately entered in the last weeks of 704 according to modern reckoning.

The place of his death is traditionally identified as 'Little Driffield' – as distinct from the nearby Great Driffield – in modern Humberside where lay the ancient heartland of Deira. The Old English placename of *Deirafeld* would translate as a clearing in the 'woods of the Deiri', but whether this was the site of Aldfrith's principal residence is unknown. The two most likely sites of a principal royal township of Edwin's kingdom have been proposed as Aldby, near Malton, and Londesborough, near Market Weighton, and both lie within twenty miles of Driffield. Certainly Goodmanham, where Edwin's priest destroyed his pagan temples, lies only twelve miles from Driffield and the Humberside place names of Kirkella, Elloughton and Westella would seem to commemorate Aelle of Deira.

Here then is the landscape of the earliest English settlements to the north of the Humber, where prehistoric barrow mounds might have first suggested *Biowulfes biorh*, 'Beowulf's barrow', to the *Englisc* imagining. Tradition has long claimed it as the last resting place of Aldfrith, king of Northumbria, and this *Deur* which Soemil long ago separated from *Birneich* would well enfold the remains of 'Flann Fina, son of Oswy, king of the Saxons'.

The reign of Aldfrith serves historians of Northumbria to divide the epoch of the warlords from the golden age of learning.

By contrast, his passing must mark the dawn of its decades of decline in the lengthening shadows of the usurpers, murderers and tyrants stalking the kingdom as its 'great winter' draws on . . .

'the great winter'

THE LAST OF THE IDINGS

AD 704 – AD 764

'For a hundred years after Aldfrith,' warned Sir Frank Stenton, 'no Northumbrian king was ever secure among his own people.'

The subsequent historical record would firmly support that view, but the documentary evidence for the year 705 records only the unexceptional formality of the passage of the kingdom of Northumbria from Aldfrith to his firstborn son. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* obituary for Aldfrith concludes with the formal note that 'Osred succeeded to the kingdom' and Bede is only marginally more informative.

> Aldfrid, king of the Northumbrians, died in the twentieth year of his reign. He was succeeded by his son Osred, a boy about eight years old, who reigned for eleven years.

Only Eddius, the priest of Wilfrid, sets down a singularly dramatic account of the events surrounding Osred's succession as a short but ferocious power struggle in arms between two prominent Northumbrian thanes. Berhtfrith, the warrior thane who had followed his father as the 'sub-king' on the Pictish frontier, appears to have undertaken the guardianship of Aldfrith's son at a time when a 'boy-king' was not considered to be an acceptable successor. But Berhtfrith's sponsorship did not prevent the seizure of Aldfrith's kingdom by a rival thane. Eadwulf ruled Northumbria for no more than two months, but it was long enough for Wilfrid, already well-placed as tutor to the usurper's son, to seize his opportunity. Eddius, again, records the bishop's move.

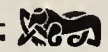
> For a short time, Eadwulf succeeded as king, and our holy bishop, returning from exile with Eadwulf's son, sent messengers to him from Hrypis, as to a friend; but the king, persuaded by his counsellors because of their long-standing malice, gave the messengers a stern and stubborn reply in these words, 'I swear by my salvation that unless he leaves my kingdom within six days, then any of his company whom I find shall perish.' After these harsh words, a conspiracy was formed against the king, and he was driven from the kingdom after a reign of two months. In his place a boy of royal birth named Osred, son of King Aldfrith, became king, and was made the adopted son of our holy bishop.

It might be most realistic to interpret Eddius' account as evidence for Wilfrid, rejected by the usurper, entering into an alliance with Berhtfrith to depose Eadwulf in favour of the young Osred. Eddius proposes the loyalist conspirators as having seized the fortress at Bamburgh and holding it under siege from the usurper's host when he reports Berhtfrith's first-hand account of the crisis of February 705.

> 'For when we were besieged in the city of Bebbanburg, surrounded on all sides by an enemy force, and sheltering in a narrow cleft in the rock, we took counsel amongst ourselves and vowed that, if God granted our royal boy his father's kingdom, we would fulfil the apostolic mandates concerning Bishop Wilfrid. And when this vow was made, the hearts of our enemies were at once changed, and they all made haste to befriend us with an oath; and the gates were opened to set us free from our confinement, our enemies were vanquished and the kingdom was ours.'

The prominent element of the miraculous in Eddius' account must not be allowed to overshadow its historical authenticity, which is corroborated by the topographical feature, still evident today, of a deep incision in the north face of the basalt crag beneath Bamburgh Castle which can only be the same 'narrow cleft' where the defenders sheltered to await the lifting of the siege in 705.

The restoration of the kingdom to Aldfrith's son was most significant for Eddius as the occasion of the final restoration of Wilfrid. The boy-king was swiftly gathered under the episcopal aegis as 'the adopted son of our holy bishop', the ritual vindication of the turbulent priest was at last



assured, and the synod of reconciliation on the banks of the river Nidd was no more than a formality. The abbess Aelfled testified to Aldfrith's deathbed change of heart in favour of Wilfrid and the thane Berhtfrith told of the miraculous raising of the siege of *Bebbanburg*. Berhtwald, archbishop of Canterbury, had journeyed from the south for the occasion and presided over the resolution of 'a pact of peace without condition'. The monasteries of *Hagustaldesia* and *Hripis* at Hexham and Ripon were restored – 'with all their revenues' – to Wilfrid. Absolved in the eyes of church and state, if not of history, Wilfrid entered retirement in the monastery at Oundle in Northamptonshire. Eddius' account of the valedictory tour of his Mercian churches has every appearance of the prestigious progress of a prince-bishop and Wilfrid must certainly have presented a gaunt and imposing figure in his last years. He was already over seventy and had survived the hazards of exile, at least one attempt on his life, and months of harsh imprisonment. In the course of his final monastic tour, Wilfrid announced the meticulous bequest of his estates for the endowment of his churches on his death, as a farsighted assurance against the malice of future kings, and the appointment of the strangely appealing Acca as his successor to the see of Hexham. That disbursement of his power and land was Wilfrid's last recorded act.

When he died at Oundle in 709, Wilfrid was seventy-five years old and his personal qualities remain, even at this great distance of time, quite remarkable. He was an arrogant, ambitious and insufferable autocrat, but it is too easy to contrast him unfavourably with the gentle spirituality of his contemporary Cuthbert of Lindisfarne. Just as the ascetic simplicity of the slab inscribed *Cuthbertus* evokes the running wave on the shore of Farne even within the mighty fortress-shrine at Durham, so the great crypts of Roman stone which Wilfrid set deep into the earth beneath his churches at Ripon and Hexham almost tangibly evoke his indomitable spirit. In the last historical analysis, men cast in the same stern mould as Wilfrid of Hexham are the movers and the shakers of kingdoms.

By contrast with his adopted father and despite the auspicious omens of his succession, the life and reign of Osred was dissolute, distasteful, and effectively of brief duration. It would seem that command of the kingdom must have fallen to Berhtfrith in a form of regency until the

boy-king approached the age of eighteen. The brief and brutal war on the Picts, fought when Osred was not more than fourteen, was certainly conducted by Berhtfrith on the evidence of the bald entry for the year 711 in the chronicle appended to Bede's *Historia.*

> Bertfrith, an ealdorman, fought against the Picts.

The Irish sources agree with Bede's date of 711 and the *Annals of Ulster*, drawing on Iona's access to Pictish sources, are able to add more substantial detail of their own.

> A slaughter of the Picts of the plain of Manau, by the Saxons, wherein Finnguine son of Deileroth was untimely slain.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* adds a further geographical footnote to the earlier sources when it locates the battlefield precisely 'between Haefe and Caere' and indicates Berhtfrith, son of Berht, son of Beornhaeth, following the same warpath as his forbears on the Pictish march. There he avenged his father and grandfather in a death-dealing defeat of the Maetae Picts fought in the Manau of the Gododdin between the river Avon near Linlithgow and the river Carron near Stirling. His victory of 711 was the first Northumbrian success on the Pictish frontier for forty years and the chronicler's naming of 'two rivers' as the boundaries of his blood-fray can only represent a consciously ironic echo of Egfrith's victory of 672.

Apart from his entry of Berhtfrith's battle, placed between the boy-king's succession in 705 and violent death in 716, Bede is discreetly unforthcoming on the history of Osred's reign. Aldfrith's son seems to have found some favour with Saint John of Beverley, according to the eleventh-century *Vita Johannis* by the monk Folcard who describes Osred as 'a man of religion and faith' in whose time 'the affairs of churches and monasteries were made secure by the royal protection'. It must be noted that the sole monastic endowment recorded for Osred's reign is the grant of the church of South Dalton in east Yorkshire to 'the see of York for the church of Beverley', and that Folcard is entirely alone among the sources in having a favourable word for Osred. William of Malmesbury damns him as 'disgracing the throne for eleven years, spending an ignominious life in the seducing of nuns' and 'ultimately taken off by the hostility of his relations'. William would have drawn on the evidence of

a letter written by Boniface, bishop of Mainz, which indicts Aldfrith's son as a notorious example of reprehensible royalty.

> Osred, too, the spirit of licence drove to lust and the frenzied rape of consecrated virgins in the convents of nuns, until by a mean and contemptible death he lost his glorious kingdom, his young life and impure soul.

William's sources would similarly have included the writings of Aethelwulf, a ninth-century monk of the cell of Lindisfarne at Crayke near York, whose *De Abbatibus* provides the most extensive early Northumbrian account of Osred.

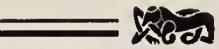
> He was vigorous in his deeds and words and in all his acts, but alas, undisciplined in his early years, he was an unruly youth: he knew not how to tame the wanton senses with the mind, despising the Thunderer's laws, but was most mighty in arms, and bold in his own strength. He did not respect the nobles, or even worship Christ as he ought, but devoted all his life, alas, to empty deeds, while life remained in his body. Hence it was that his earthly life endured but a little while, and he could not long survive. This, then, was the man who destroyed many by a pitiable death, but compelled others to serve their Father above, and to be tonsured and live in monasteries.

If Osred came into the full command of the kingdom at the age of eighteen, he was to hold it for no more than twelve months and his death is entered in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 716.

> In this year Osred, king of the Northumbrians, was slain on the southern border . . . then Coenred succeeded to the kingdom, and held it two years; then Osric, and held it eleven years.

The meaning of 'the southern border' is uncertain, but it would suggest the border with Mercia and place Osred's death on Humberside. Henry of Huntingdon records that he 'fell in battle by chance of war near Mere' which might represent a scribal error for 'near Merce' in Henry's source, but the place of Osred's demise is less significant than its violent nature. William of Malmesbury attributes his death to 'the hostility of his relations' and the Scottish chronicler Fordun names the conspirators.

> Osred, . . . king of the whole of Northumbria, died, slaughtered through a plot of his kinsmen, subjects of his – namely Cenred and



> Osric; who reigned after him . . . and left only this to be recorded of them, that they expiated the blood of their slaughtered lord, the king, and polluted the air by their foul end.

The reign of Osred, son of Aldfrith, marked a decided downturn in the fortunes of the dynasty of the Idings and when he was slain in 716 the legitimate line of the sons of Ida through Aethelric died with him. Osred's death passed the kingdom to another line of the Idings, which claimed the kingdom through its descent from a son of a royal concubine of the sixth century, and a shadow – faint at first but growing ever darker – of questionable legitimacy must hang over all those who were to succeed him.

The interregnum of Eadwulf marked the first emergence of a usurper unconnected with the royal house and, however short-lived, proved it possible for a noble to seize the kingdom by right of nothing more than judicious timing and a well-placed warband. The topography of the vast territory to the north of the Humber, dominated by the Cheviot range and the Border fells to the north and the Pennine chain to the west, confronted a royal army with almost insuperable difficulties of long-range military operations. The same forbidding terrain which enabled independent warlords of the northern English to maintain themselves in the fastnesses of hill and fell for forty years after the Danish destruction of Northumbria provided warrior thanes in the mould of Eadwulf with a north country well-suited to insurgent ambition through the later eighth century. Before and betwixt such usurper warlords, ostensibly legitimate scions of the royal house of Bernicia could still claim the kingdom by right of descent from one of the 'twelve sons' of Ida. While the Vespasian genealogies underwritten by the medieval historians support their claims, such lineage remains suspected of as great a debt to the contrivances of tradition as to the true bloodline of the first dynast of Bamburgh. Whatever the true worth of their claims to the kingdom, the Northumbrian kings of the eighth century bear little comparison with their extraordinary predecessors. Northumbria was irretrievably entered on a vertiginous descent from its former and phenomenal political prominence among the English kingdoms.

None of which must suggest that Northumbrian civilisation followed the same downward course as did the kingdom's political destiny. The 'Golden Age of Northumbria' endured from the succession of Aldfrith

through the eddying political turbulence of the eighth century to the cataclysmic impact of the Viking onslaught. The gospel book of Lindisfarne was written and decorated during the episcopacy of Eadfrith who succeeded to the see in 698. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* was begun within five years of the death of Osred and completed in 731, a year only otherwise significant as a new low point in the fortunes of the royal line. The monk Alcuin, himself taught by a pupil of Bede, had brought the monastic school and library at York to its illustrious peak before he left Northumbria for the court of Charlemagne in 782, just eleven years before the northmen first struck at Lindisfarne.

Sir Charles Oman eloquently proposes the slaughter of Osred in 716 as the beginning of the end for the dynasty of Ida, the first frost of the great winter of the Northumbrian kingdom.

> This was the commencement of that series of murders and coups d'état which make the history of Northumbria for the next hundred years a miserable record of blood and treason.

Coenred, the successor of Osred, is acidly dismissed by William of Malmesbury as 'a draught from the same cup' and history records nothing of him but his name, the dates of his two-year reign and his claim to descent from Ocga, a son of Ida by one of his concubines.

The Osric – identified by Symeon of Durham as 'the son of king Aldfrith' – who succeeded on the death of his fellow conspirator Coenred in 718 is no less obscure than his predecessor despite the eleven-year duration of his reign. The death of Osric and succession of Ceolwulf was accompanied by ominous celestial portents, according to Bede's *Historia*, 'in the year of our Lord 729'.

> Two comets appeared around the sun, striking great terror into all who saw them. One of them rose before the morning sun, while the other followed the setting sun at evening, seeming to portend dire disaster to East and West alike.
>
> Soon after Easter, on the VIIth of the ides of May, Osric, king of the Northumbrians, departed this life after a reign of eleven years, having appointed Ceolwulf, brother of his predecessor Coenred, to be his successor.

Only his appointment of Ceolwulf as his successor to the kingdom served to afford the obscure Osric a favourable mention from William of Malmesbury.

> Osric, indeed, deserved a happier end; for, as a heathen says, *'he was more dignified than other shades'*, because, while yet living, he had adopted Ceolwulf, Coenred's brother, as his successor. Then Ceolwulf ascended the height of empire, the seventh in descent from Ida.

The principal reason for the exceptional distinction awarded Ceolwulf by the medieval historians, indeed for his survival as anything more than a mere name in the king-lists, is Bede's prefatory dedication of his *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum* 'to the most glorious king Ceolwulf'.

> It was with great pleasure, your majesty, that at your request I formerly submitted the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, which I had recently published, for your study and approval; and it is with equal pleasure that I now deliver it again for transcription and fuller scrutiny at your leisure.
>
> I warmly welcome the sincerity of your commitment, not only in lending an attentive ear to hear the words of holy scripture, but in devoting yourself to learn the acts and sayings of men of the past, and in particular of the famous men of our own race. For if history gives a good account of good men, the thoughtful listener is encouraged to imitate the good; while if it records evil of wicked men, the faithful and devout listener or reader is similarly inspired to shun whatever is harmful or perverse, and to follow more strictly the course that he knows to be good and pleasing in the sight of God.
>
> You yourself clearly perceive this truth; and in your concern for the spiritual health of your people you wish this History to be more widely published, for the instruction of yourself and those subjects over whom divine authority has set you.

Bede's preface certainly attests the literacy of his king, but William of Malmesbury, accurately or otherwise, claims an extraordinary intellectual eminence for Ceolwulf the Ocging.

> A man competent in other respects, and withal possessed of a depth of literature, acquired by good abilities and indefatigable attention. Beda vouches for the truth of my assertion, who, at the very juncture when Britain most abounded with scholars, offered his History of the

> Angles for correction to this prince more especially; making choice of his authority, to confirm by his high station what had been well written, and of his learning, to rectify by his talents what might be carelessly expressed.

For all William's estimation, the undertones of Bede's dedicatory preface reveal more of the monastic historian's own anxiety than its respectful protocols impart of the royal intellect. Bede had already witnessed the upheavals which followed in the wake of the succession of 729 and enters them in the closing narrative pages of the *Historia*.

> Both the beginning and the subsequent course of Ceolwulf's reign have been filled with so many serious disturbances and misfortunes, that it is as yet impossible to know what to write about them or how it will all end.

Bede clearly recognised that Ceolwulf was no king of the stature of an Oswald or an Edwin and seems to have offered his manuscript as an exemplary record of former stronger kings rather than to seek any seal of approval from this heir of the line of the Ocgings. Whatever might have been Ceolwulf's response to Bede's *Historia* is nowhere recorded, but it is difficult to imagine a monkish monarch of lesser lineage as anything other than painfully embarrassed by such authoritative testimony to the momentous achievements of predecessors in the more distinguished bloodlines of Ida and Aelle.

Bede diplomatically omits the details of the early troubles besetting Ceolwulf's reign, but the 'disturbances and misfortunes' to which he refers must have been those recorded in the *Historia Regum* of Symeon of Durham at 732.

> In this year also, king Ceolwulf, being taken prisoner, received the tonsure, and was sent back to his kingdom. He was imbued with an extraordinary love of the Scriptures, as the truthful Beda testifies in the beginning of his preface. In the same year, bishop Acca was driven from his see. In this year also Alric and Esc, with many others, were slain on Thursday the Xth of the kalends of September.

The persecutions of Acca and Ceolwulf are more accurately placed at 731 in the annal – known as the *Continuatio Bedae* – appended to Bede's own concluding chronology in the Moore manuscript of the *Historia*, while Acca's removal from his bishopric of Hexham is entered in the

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 733. Symeon's entry of the multiple killings of the twenty-third of August and the expulsion of Acca immediately following the persecution of Ceolwulf might suggest all three events as related incidents in a political insurgency. Northumbrian churchmen were often members of royal families and the persecution of king and bishop alike at the same time would thus indicate Acca of Hexham as blood-kin to Ceolwulf the Ocging. The kidnapping of the king and his compulsory tonsure – a pastime earlier enjoyed by the dissolute Osred – seems to have amounted to no more than the derisive flexing of insubordinate muscles by rebellious thanes. Nonetheless, the entry of the same incident in the *Annals of Ulster* at 731 is especially illuminating.

> Entry into religion of Echaid, son of Cuidin, King of the Saxons; and he was put into fetters.

The evidence of Bede's *prefatio* attests Ceolwulf's literacy no less than the mock tonsure derides his monkish personality. Ceolwulf had evidently acquired sufficient education to distinguish him, with Aldfrith, from the illiterate generality of Northumbrian kings. The fact of the notice in the Irish annal and its use of the Irish name of *Echaid* can only indicate that Ceolwulf had spent some part of his earlier life in pursuit of learning in Ireland and may also, like Aldfrith, have been called from some Irish monastic retreat to assume the burden of the kingdom.

Ceolwulf endured that burden for some six more years before his abdication and voluntary entry into the church briefly noted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 737.

> King Ceolwulf received Saint Peter's tonsure.

William of Malmesbury provides a more loquacious account.

> Ceolwulf, thinking it beneath the dignity of a Christian to be immersed in earthly things, abdicated the throne, after a reign of eight years, and assumed the monastic habit at Lindisfarne, in which place how meritoriously he lived is amply testified by his distinguished interment near Saint Cuthbert, and by many miracles vouchsafed from on high.

Lindisfarne's granting of a place of retirement to the king was bountifully rewarded by the generous endowments made to the monastery on his abdication and listed by Symeon in his *History of the Church of Durham*.

> When he entered the monastery of Lindisfarne, he gave to Saint Cuthbert his royal treasures and lands, that is to say, Bregesne and Werceworde, with their appurtenances, together with the church that he had built there, and four other estates also, Wudecestre, Hwitingham, Eadulfingham, and Eagwulfingham.

The land grants made by Ceolwulf to the church of Saint Cuthbert were expansive indeed and appear to correspond – according to modern interpretation of Symeon's placenames – to Brainshaugh and Warkworth, Woodhorn, Whittingham, Edlingham and Eglingham in Northumberland. An entry in the *Red Book of Durham*, referring to this same endowment, records the 'appurtenances' of the estate of *Werceworde* as a long stretch of coastline between the rivers Lyne and Aln with a hinterland as far inland as Brinkburn. The generosity of the 'royal monk' to the monastery of Lindisfarne not only greatly enriched the patrimony of Cuthbert but also conferred a new licence on its monastic community, according to Reginald of Durham.

> On the instigation of this royal monk, the monks of the church of Lindisfarne were permitted to drink wine or beer; for previously they used to drink only milk and water, according to the ancient custom of Saint Aidan.

One other event of the reign of Ceolwulf was more widely recorded than any other, probably than any other single occasion in the whole Northumbrian eighth century. That event – entered by every English historian, all the Irish and a great many continental sources – was the death at Jarrow on 25th May 735 of *Baeda Venerabilis*. The death of Bede deprived posterity of the most authoritative and reliable contemporary historian of the northern English and the documentary history of the following decades of Northumbria is dramatically the poorer bereft of Bede's monumental contribution. Nonetheless, there were others who worked on in the discipline he had pioneered with such mastery and one of the earliest of them was almost certainly Bede's own last pupil. The letter written by the monk Cuthbert who served as Bede's amanuensis has survived as an evocative first-hand account of the death of the 'father of English history' and also as testimony to the skill of its author. This same Cuthbert, who went on to become abbot at Jarrow, is almost certainly the author of the *Continuatio Bedae* and arguably also of the

'anonymous' *Life of Ceolfrith*. He may even have expanded the *Continuatio* annal into a more substantial chronicle which provided a major source for much of the *Historia Regum* 'attributed to' the twelfth-century Symeon of Durham.

It is Symeon who records the succession of Eadbert, the scion of a second branch of the line of Ocga, to the kingdom in 737.

> In the same year, Ceolwulf resigned the kingdom of the Northumbrians, and became a monk in the island of Lindisfarne; and Eadberht, his uncle's son, succeeded in his stead.

Eadbert – son of Eata and grandson, like Ceolwulf and Coenred according to the Vespasian genealogy, of *Lioduald*, great-grandson of Ida – was cast in the mould of the earlier warrior kings. If Eadbert was a flawed casting by comparison with Egfrith and the sons of Aethelfrith, he was certainly the most effective aspirant to the way of the warrior among the Northumbrian kings of the eighth century. Whether or not the two decades of his reign can be given credit for even temporarily 'arresting the decay of the kingdom which Bede foresaw', Sir Frank Stenton quite accurately singles out Eadbert as 'the last Northumbrian king to lead effective expeditions beyond the northern border'.

The military history of Eadbert's northern wars is at best a partial jigsaw of documentary fragments, but might allow for the construction of a speculative outline here. The Maetae Picts and their warlord 'Finnguine, son of Deileroth' had been slaughtered by the thane Berhtfrith on the plain of Manau in 711. Twenty years later, Bede wrote of a 'peace treaty' between the Picts and English 'at the present time' in the summary of current affairs which concludes his *Historia*, and he had earlier recorded the correspondence between the Pictish king Nechtan and his own abbot of Jarrow. The unification of the Pictish kingdoms under Bruide mac-Beli seems to have not long survived his death and the Maetae Picts butchered by Berhtfrith would not seem to have been the same Picts ruled by Nechtan who was writing so respectfully to Ceolfrith at much the same time. The annals record warfare between Pictish kingdoms into the eighth century which would certainly argue against any unity of Pictish kingdoms akin to that administered as high-king by Bruide, and whatever the imperium of Nechtan mac-Derile he was driven from it – according to the Irish annals and not mentioned by Bede – in 729. The departure of Nechtan may have been the signal for a renewal

of hostilities with Northumbria, but Eadbert – on the evidence of the Jarrow chronicler – was at war with a Pictish enemy on the northern frontier when a Mercian warband invaded Northumbria in 740.

> Aethelbald, king of the Mercians, treacherously devastated part of Northumbria, and Eadbert, king of the Northumbrians, was occupied with his army fighting against the Picts.

The entry of 'the burning of York' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 741 is entered also by Symeon's *Historia Regum* on the twenty-third of April in the same year.

> The monastery of the city of York was burnt on Sunday the eleventh of the kalends of May.

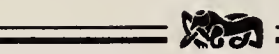
It is certainly likely that York was burned by a Mercian warband in the course of the raid into Deira recorded by the *Continuatio Bedae* and no less probable that Aethelbald's invasion diverted Eadbert from his Pictish adventure, but no more precise details of the events of the 740s are recorded, unless Symeon's *History of the Church of Durham* is taken literally when it proposes Eadbert as everywhere victorious.

> When at length he had either reduced to subjection or overcome in battle all who opposed him, not only did all the neighbouring kings of the Angles, Picts, Britons, and Scots keep peace with him, but were happy in showing him marks of deference.

Symeon's eulogy, however overstated, would certainly correspond with the evidence of the *Continuatio Bedae* and the Irish annals for the war against the Strathclyde Britons conducted with apparent success in the second half of Eadbert's reign. His conquest of Kyle and other British territory in what is now Ayrshire is recorded by the Jarrow chronicler at 750.

> Eadbert added to his kingdom the plain of Cyil and other lands.

The Irish annalist enters a defeat of the Picts by the Britons – possibly around Dumbarton – in the same year, which would suggest strategic liaison between Eadbert and the Picts. That co-operation must have led to the coalition of Pictish and Northumbrian forces which attacked *Al Cluith*, the fortress capital on Dumbarton Rock, in the campaign entered by Symeon's *Historia Regum* at 756.



> King Eadberht, in the eighteenth year of his reign, and Unust, king of the Picts, led an army to the city of Alcwith; and they received the Britons into alliance on the first day of August. But on the tenth day of the same month, nearly the whole army perished, which he led from Ouoma to Newbanrig; that is, to the New Town.

Eadbert and his allies appear to have imposed peace terms on the Strathclyde Britons but Symeon's last sentence is an enigma. He does not say how or by whose hand 'nearly the whole army perished', or even which army, because a battle presumably fought at Newburgh in Fife would not lie on the march home to Northumbria.

Whatever the realities of the military history on the northern frontier, Eadbert had shown no weak indecision in his handling of enemies within Northumbria on the evidence of Symeon's *Historia Regum* at 750.

> King Eadberht led bishop Cynewulf captive to the city of Bebba, and made him abide in the church of Saint Peter in Lindisfarne.
>
> Also Offa, son of Aldfrid, an innocent man, took refuge by compulsion at the relics of Saint Cuthbert the bishop; almost dead with hunger, he was dragged unarmed from the church.

The date of 750 suggests that Northumbrian interests hostile to Eadbert seized the initiative while the king was engaged in the conquest of Kyle. It would seem that the 'innocent' Offa, claimed as a third son of Aldfrith and persecuted by Eadbert, must have amounted to an insurgent rival for the kingdom with the implied support of the bishop of Lindisfarne. Eadbert must have seen such a subversive coalition as a serious threat and – on the evidence of Symeon's own variant account in the *History of the Church of Durham* – one to be put down with all necessary force.

> One of the royal family, named Offa, in order to escape the persecutions of his enemies, fled to the body of Saint Cuthbert, but having been forcibly dragged away from it, he was wickedly put to death. Hereupon, king Eadbert highly displeased laid hold upon bishop Cynewulf, and commanded him to be imprisoned in Bebbanburch, and in the meantime the bishopric of Lindisfarne was administered by Friothubert, bishop of Hexham, until the king becoming appeased, released Cynewulf from his confinement and permitted him to return to his church.

Whatever his success in the way of the warrior, Eadbert had lost any taste for power and glory within two years of his war against the Strathclyde Britons. In 758, he was to abdicate in favour of his son and join his brother Egbert in the cloisters of the church at York. Egbert, friend and pupil of Bede and in his turn tutor of Alcuin, was an imposing figure among the churchmen of eighth-century Northumbria. He appears to have served his brother as king's counsellor and to have exerted an influence which the late bishop Wilfrid might have envied. While the retirement of Eadbert into the church is widely recorded by all the sources, Symeon's *History of the Church of Durham* offers the most informative account.

> In the twenty-first year of his reign, whilst he was flourishing in peace and dignity, beloved and favoured by all, he surrendered his kingdom to his son, named Osulf, and subjected himself to the service of Almighty God as a clerk, notwithstanding that the kings of the Angles had previously urged him with much importunity not to take this step, and were willing even to have resigned to him a part of their kingdoms as an addition to his own, provided he would consent to retain his position in his own realm. But he preferred the service of God to all riches and sovereignty, and in that service he continued for ten years, even to the end of his life, when he was buried at York, in the same porch as his brother Ecgbert, who had died three years before.

The entry of yet another king of Northumbria into the church would – on a less generous assessment than Symeon's – support Bede's complaint of many years before that monasteries were in danger of becoming little more than 'gentlemen's clubs' for retired nobility. It would also, on the clear evidence of the historical record, mark the point at which the kingdom of the northern English entered into the last years of its decline into anarchy. Eadbert's son and heir, Oswulf, survived his succession by no more than twelve months and Symeon's *Historia Regum* enters his violent death in 759.

> Eadberht, king of the Northumbrians, of his own accord, gave up the kingdom bestowed upon him by God to his son named Osulf, who during one single year held, parted from, and lost the kingdom: for he was wickedly put to death by his family, on the ninth of the kalends of August, near Mechil Wongtune.

The death of Oswulf on 24th July at Market Weighton in the south of Deira was followed by the swift succession of a thane, unconnected to any royal house, who claimed the kingdom – according to the Jarrow chronicler – only as the choice of 'his own people'. The Latin *plebs* corresponds to the Old English *folc*, and implies a revival of the ancient Germanic imperative of acclamation by the warband. Such was the succession of the thane Aethelwald Moll as king of Northumbria entered in Symeon's *Historia Regum* at 5th August 759.

> Ethelwald, who was also called Moll, began to reign on the nones of August.

Aethelwald Moll is nowhere recorded in the genealogies and the only clue to his origins might be found in a letter from Pope Paul I to Egbert, archbishop of York and his brother, King Eadbert, urging the restoration to the church of three monasteries in north Yorkshire. These had been earlier granted by an abbess to the 'abbot Forthreth . . . stolen by a king and given to his brother, a patrician named Moll'. No other record of any such theft of monastic land has survived and there is certainly no entry in the genealogies of a king's brother named 'Moll'. The most likely candidate for the 'king' intended by the papal missive can only be the thane Eadwulf who usurped the kingdom in the months after the death of Aldfrith in 704. He may well have had a brother, also a thane, 'named Moll', and the geographical proximity of the deaths of Aldfrith at Driffield and Oswulf at Market Weighton to three monasteries in north Yorkshire suggests, if only to me, that Aethelwald Moll was retrieving in 759 the kingdom seized by his forbear half a century before.

Whatever his claim to the succession – and his involvement in the death of Eadbert's son is certainly not beyond suspicion – the reign of this 'Ethelwald, who was also called Moll' was ill-starred by destiny and accompanied by omens of ill-fortune. The *Continuatio Bedae* enters the affliction of the kingdom by plague in 760 and the *Historia Regum* of Symeon records Aethelwald's crushing a rising in the north of Bernicia and putting a second son of Eadbert – the Oswin whom Florent of Worcester calls 'a most noble aetheling' – to the sword in the Eildon hills on the ninth of August in 761.

> At the commencement of his third year, a severe battle was fought on the eighth of the ides of August beside Eldunum, near Mailros. In which, after three days, Oswin was slain on Sunday. King Ethelwald, or Moll, obtained the victory in the battle.

In the following year, the *Historia Regum* enters a royal wedding solemnised at the royal *vill* of Cetreht.

> The foresaid king Ethelwald took Etheldryth as his queen at Caterecta on the kalends of November.

The kingdom was spattered with blood and racked by pestilence when its usurper king wed his queen at Catterick where the ghosts of the Gododdin who still haunted that ancient battlefield must have smiled with a grim satisfaction on the first day of November in the year 762.

In the year 764, wrote the chronicler, 'was the great winter . . .' The dark and cold coming of the eightieth year after Nechtansmere marks the end of Northumbrian kings worthy of saga-fame.

In that year, Abbot Cuthbert wrote from Jarrow to Lul, the bishop of Mainz who had himself once been a student at Bede's monastery.

> I have sent in accordance with your wishes the books about the man of God, Cuthbert, composed in verse and prose. And if I could have done more, I would gladly have done so. For the conditions of the past winter oppressed the island of our race very horribly with cold and ice and long and widespread storms of wind and rain, so that the hand of the scribe was hindered from producing a great number of books.
>
> Concerning the works of Bede of blessed memory, of which you have no copies, I promise to assist your wishes, if we live.

Symeon of Durham entered the same great winter in his history of the kings as the setting for a significant obituary.

Deep snow hardened into ice, unlike anything that had ever been known to all previous ages, covered the earth from the beginning of winter till nearly the middle of spring; by the severity of which the trees and shrubs for the most part perished, and many sea creatures were found dead.

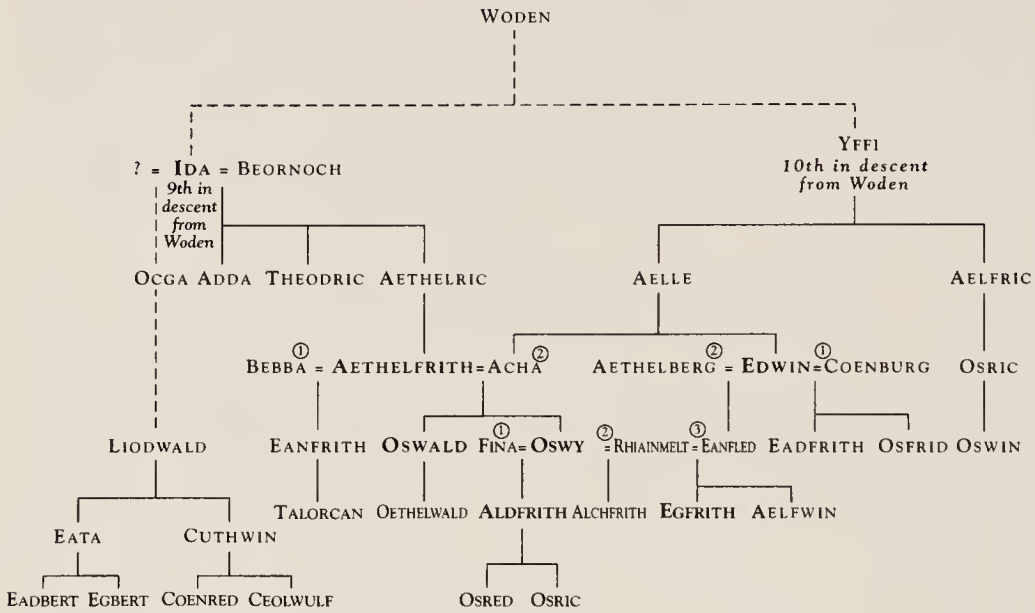
Also, in the same year, died Ceolwulf, formerly king, at this time a servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, and a monk.

'In this year was the great winter.'

A usurper thane had seized the kingdom of the dynasty of Ida and the last of the Idings died as a monk in the church of Cuthbert on Lindisfarne.

The saga is told.

Appendices



In the interest of clarity, this chart includes only those names bearing directly on the succession of kings. The names of queens are included only where they indicate separate matrilinear descent bearing on the succession. Collateral lineages are similarly included only where they bear on later succession to the kingdom. Lines of descent indicated ––––– indicate the omission of generations of doubtful historical authenticity.

'from woden sprang all our royal kin'

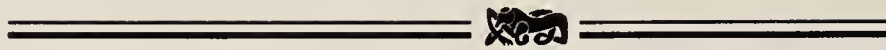
THE GENEALOGIES

THE 'MOORE MEMORANDA'

The regnal list and accompanying annal fragments known as the 'Moore Memoranda' are appended to the manuscript of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum* now in the library of University College, Cambridge, and known as 'The Moore Bede'. The Memoranda appear on folio 128^{v} above an Old English fragment of Caedmon's hymn, and were probably written by the Jarrow scribe of the preceding *Historia* text. The last entry in the regnal list attributes a reign of eight years to Ceolwulf who succeeded in 729 and abdicated to become a monk of Lindisfarne in 737, the year confirmed as the date of the manuscript.

Anno D[X]LVII [AD 547] Ida, *from whom the Northumbrian royal family trace their origin, began his reign, and he held the kingdom for* 12 years. *After that* [reigned]

Glappa 1 year, Adda 8, Aedilric 4, Theodric 7, Friduuald 6, Hussa 7, Aedilfrid 24, Aeduin 17, Osuald 9, Osuiu 28, Ecgfrid 15, Aldfrid 20, Osred 11, Coinred 2, Osric 11, Ceoluulf 8.



THE NENNIAN GENEALOGIES

The historical miscellany of the *Historia Brittonum* attributed to Nennius survives in thirty-three different manuscripts, the most famous of which is catalogued in The British Library as *Harleian MS 3859*. The Northern History of chapters 62–5 includes these interpolated genealogies of the Northumbrian kings – set down at various times in the late seventh and mid-eighth centuries.

[Bernicia]

Woden begot Beldeg, begot Beornec, begot Gechbrond, begot Aluson, begot Inguec, begot Aedibrith, begot Ossa, begot Eobba, begot Ida.

Ida had twelve sons, whose names are
Adda, Aedldric, Decdric, Edric, Deothere, Osmer, and one queen, Bearnoch.

Ealdric [Aethelric] begot Aelfret [Aethelfrith].
He is Aedlferd Flesaur.
And he had seven sons, whose names are:
Anfrid, Osguald, Osbiu, Osguid, Osgudu, Oslapf, Offa.

Osguid [Oswy] begot Alcfrid [Aldfrith], and Aelfguin [Aelfwin], and Echfird [Egfrith].

Osguid begot Ecgfird. He is Ecgfird [the brother of] . . . Ailguin [Aelfwin] begot Oslach, begot Alhun, begot Adlsing, begot Echun, begot Oslaph.*

Ida begot Eadric, begot Ecgulf, begot Liodguald, begot Aetan.
He is Eata Glinmaur.
He begot Eadbyrth and Ecgbirth the bishop, who was the first of their nation.

* This genealogy, tracing the descent of an otherwise unrecorded 'Oslaph' back to the nineteen-year-old Aelfwin killed in battle in 679, is an enigma unless it is significant that Oslaph, the sixth generation from Oswy, might have been Nennius' own contemporary.

[Deira]

Woden begot Beldegg, [begot] Brond, begot Siggar . . . begot Sebald, begot Zegulf, begot Soemil.
He was the first to separate Deur from Birneich.
Soemil begot Sguerthing . . . begot Giulglis, begot Usfrean, begot Iffi, begot Ulli [Aelle], [begot] Aedgum [Edwin], [begot] Osfird and Eadfird.

THE VESPASIAN GENEALOGIES

The manuscript fragment catalogued as *Cotton Vespasian B. vi* was written in Mercia, probably in Lichfield, in the early ninth century. It includes the genealogies of the kings of Northumbria, written in Old English and arranged in descending order, on ff. 109^{r}/109^{v}.

[Deira]

Eduine son of Aelle
Aelle son of Yffi
Yffi son of Uuscfrea
Uuscfrea son of Uilgils
Uilgils son of Uestorualcna
Uestorualcna son of Soemel
Soemel son of Saefugul
Saefugul son of Saebald
Saebald son of Siggeot
Siggeot son of Suebdaeg
Suebdaeg son of Siggar
Siggar son of Uegdaeg
Uegdaeg son of Woden

[Bernicia – genealogy of Egfrith]

Ecgfrith son of Osuio
Osuio son of Ethilfrith
Ethilfrith son of Ethilric
Ethilric son of Ida
Ida son of Eoppa
Eoppa son of Oesa
Oesa son of Ethilberht
Ethilberht son of Angengeot
Angengeot son of Alusa
Alusa son of Ingibrand
Ingibrand son of Wegbrand
Wegbrand son of Beornic
Beornic son of Beldaeg
Beldaeg son of Woden

[Bernicia – genealogy of Ceolwulf]

Ceoluulf son of Cuthuine
Cuthuine son of Lioduald
Lioduald son of Ecguald
Ecguald son of Edhelm
Edhelm son of Ocg
Ocg son of Ida

[Bernicia – genealogy of Eadbert]

Eadberht son of Eata
Eata son of Lioduald
Lioduald son of Ecguald
Ecguald son of Edhelm
Edhelm son of Ocg
Ocg son of Ida

'in the time of the kings'

A CHRONOLOGY

abbreviations:
c. : circa
m. : married

Ida and the sons of Ida
547–593

547	Ida at Bamburgh.
	Death of Maelgwn of Gwynedd.
560	Succession of Aelle to Deira.
565	Foundation of Iona.
574	Succession of Aidan mac-Gabran to Dalriada.
588	Death of Aelle of Deira.
c.590	Siege of Lindisfarne.

Aethelfrith
593–616

c.593	Battle of Catraeth.
593	Succession of Aethelfrith to Bernicia.
597	Death of Columcille.
	Arrival of Augustine in Kent.
603	Battle of Degsastan. Aethelfrith m. Acha of Deira.
	Unification of Bernicia and Deira into Northumbria.
c.608	Death of Aidan mac-Gabran.
616	Battle of Chester.
	Battle of the Idle. Death of Aethelfrith.

Edwin
616–632

616	Succession of Edwin.
619	Northumbrian conquest of Elfed.
c.622	Northumbrian conquest of Man and Anglesey.
625	Edwin m. Aethelberg of Kent.
626	Baptism of Eanfled.
	Edwin's war on the West Saxons.
	Succession of Penda to Mercia.
627	Baptism of Edwin. Conversion of Northumbria.
630	Succession of Domnall Brecc to Dalriada.
632	Battle of Haethfeld. Death of Edwin.

Oswald
632–642

632	Succession of Eanfrith to Bernicia and Osric to Deira.
633	Deaths of Osric and Eanfrith.
	Battle of Hefenfeld. Death of Cadwallon.
	Succession of Oswald to Northumbria.
635	Aidan in Northumbria. Foundation of Lindisfarne.
c.639	Siege of Din Eidyn.
c.642	Northumbrian conquest of Manau.
642	Battle of Strathcarron. Death of Domnall Brecc.
	Battle of Maserfeld. Death of Oswald.

Oswy
642–671

642	Succession of Oswy.
c.643	Oswy m. Eanfled.
c.650	Mercian attack on Northumbria. Siege of Bamburgh.
651	Assassination of Oswin. Death of Aidan.
	Succession of Finan as bishop of Lindisfarne.
c.653	Second Mercian attack on Northumbria.
653	Succession of Talorcan as king of Picts.
655	Battle of the Winwaed. Death of Penda.
c.655	Foundation of Gilling.

657	Death of Talorcan.
	Foundation of Whitby.
	Succession of Wulfhere to Mercia.
660	Egfrith m. Etheldreda.
661	Death of Finan.
	Succession of Colman as bishop of Lindisfarne.
664	Synod of Whitby. Abdication of Colman from Lindisfarne.
668	Consecration of Theodore as archbishop of Canterbury.
671	Death of Oswy.

Egfrith
671–685

671	Succession of Egfrith.
672	Expulsion of Drest, king of Picts.
	Pictish uprising crushed by Egfrith.
	Succession of Bruide mac-Beli as high-king of Picts.
	Foundation of Ripon.
	Etheldreda enters nunnery at Coldingham.
673	Foundation of Hexham. Foundation of Ely.
674	Wulfhere's Mercian invasion crushed by Egfrith.
	Foundation of Wearmouth.
678	Expulsion of Wilfrid.
679	Battle of the Trent.
	Death of Etheldreda.
	Succession of Adamnan as abbot of Iona.
680	Bede enters monastery at Wearmouth.
	Wilfrid imprisoned by Egfrith.
682	Foundation of Jarrow.
683	Death of Aebbe.
684	Northumbrian raid on Ireland.
	Cuthbert appointed bishop of Lindisfarne.
685	Consecration of Cuthbert at York. Dedication of Jarrow.
	Battle of Nechtansmere. Death of Egfrith.

Aldfrith
685–704

685	Succession of Aldfrith.
	Flight of Bishop Trumwin from Abercorn.

686	Adamnan's first visit to Northumbria.
	Release of Irish hostages to Adamnan.
	Restoration of Wilfrid.
687	Death of Cuthbert.
688	Adamnan's second visit to Northumbria.
691	Aldfrith's expulsion of Wilfrid.
693	Death of Bruide mac-Beli.
698	Death of Berht in battle with the Picts.
c.702	Synod of Austerfield. Excommunication of Wilfrid.
704	Death of Adamnan.
	Death of Aldfrith.

The last of the Idings
704–764

704	Eadwulf's usurpation of the kingdom.
705	Siege of Bamburgh. Succession of Osred.
706	Synod of Nidd.
709	Death of Wilfrid.
711	Berhtfrith's defeat of the Picts.
716	Death of Osred. Succession of Coenred.
718	Succession of Osric.
729	Succession of Ceolwulf.
c.731	Northumbrian see at Whithorn.
731	Persecution of Ceolwulf. Acca expelled from Hexham.
732	Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum*.
735	Death of Bede.
737	Abdication of Ceolwulf. Succession of Eadbert.
740	Eadbert's war on the Picts.
	Mercian invasion of Northumbria.
750	Eadbert's conquest of Kyle.
	Persecution of Offa and Cynewulf.
756	Eadbert's war on Dumbarton.
758	Abdication of Eadbert. Succession of Oswulf.
759	Death of Oswulf. Succession of Aethelwald Moll.
761	Battle of Eldunum. Death of Oswin.
764	The great winter. Death of Ceolwulf.

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abbreviations:
ed. – edited by
trs. – translated & edited by
rep. – reprinted
rev. – revised edition

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INDEX

OE. : Old English
Br. : Britonic
Gael. : Gaelic
Lat. : Latin
Nbria. : Northumbria
k. : king of
bp. : bishop of
ab. : abbot/abbess of
qu. : queen of
s. : son of
d. : daughter of

John Marsden was born in Hull in 1946 and educated at Beverley Grammar School and the University of Leicester. He worked as a journalist and copywriter until becoming a full-time freelance writer in 1986.

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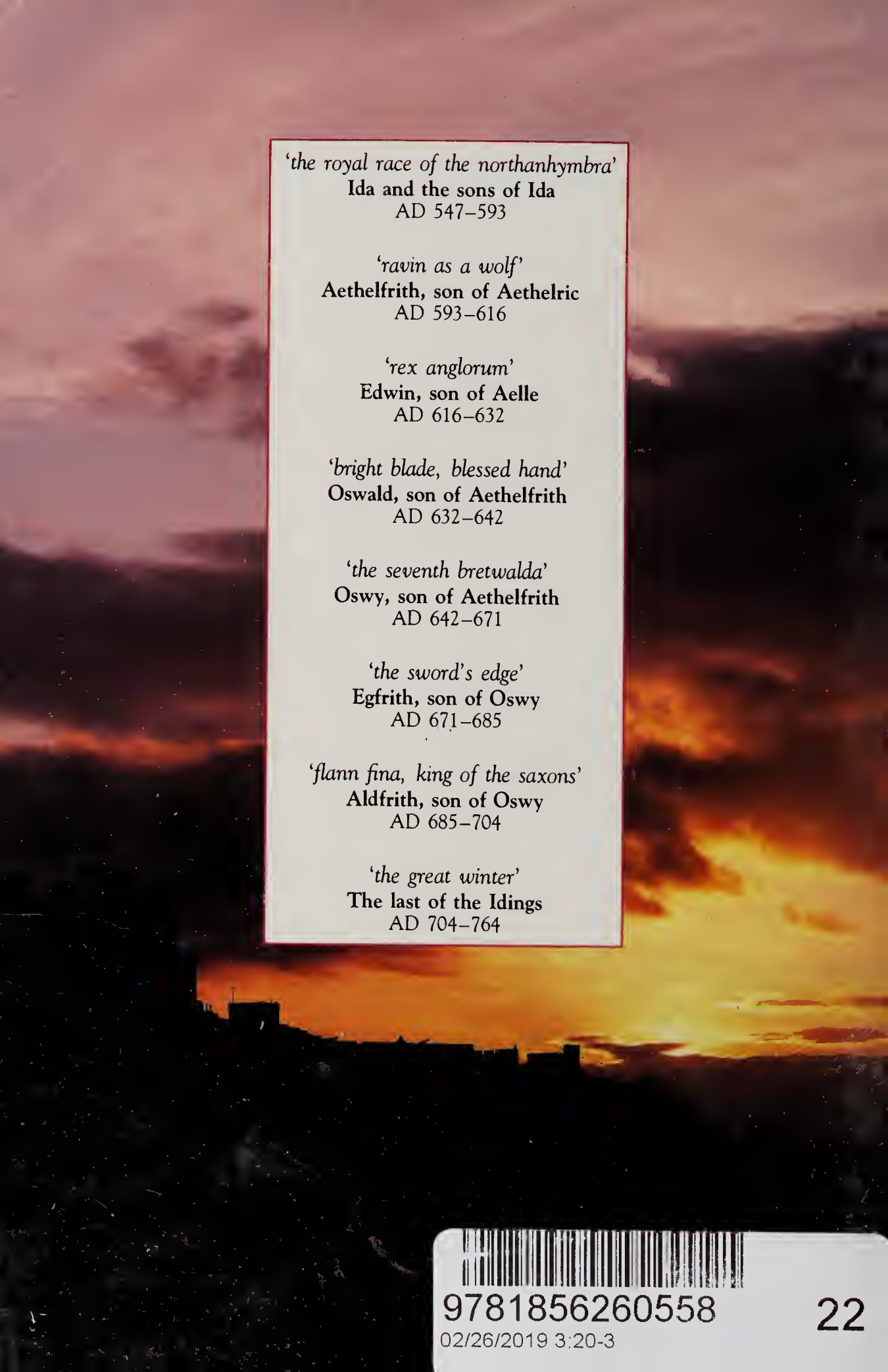
John Marsden is married and lives in Northumberland on land anciently granted by King Egfrith to the monastery of Lindisfarne.



'the royal race of the northanhymbra'
Ida and the sons of Ida
AD 547–593

'ravin as a wolf'
Aethelfrith, son of Aethelric
AD 593–616

'rex anglorum'
Edwin, son of Aelle
AD 616–632

'bright blade, blessed hand'
Oswald, son of Aethelfrith
AD 632–642

'the seventh bretwalda'
Oswy, son of Aethelfrith
AD 642–671

'the sword's edge'
Egfrith, son of Oswy
AD 671–685

'flann fina, king of the saxons'
Aldfrith, son of Oswy
AD 685–704

'the great winter'
The last of the Idings
AD 704–764

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