Narrating providential history: Bede's account of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria in his *Historia ecclesiastica*

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This article takes Bede's account of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria as a case study in the mechanics and function of narrative. It is now recognized that Bede's sources for his Ecclesiastical History *were very limited and that in composing it he relied upon his own deductions as a historian and upon his narrative skill to provide circumstantial detail and causal connections. This article shows how Bede exploited oral narratives to create his account of Edwin's conversion, harmonizing three, conflicting explanations for it. It analyses his use of oral stories, including traditional story types and folkloric stories, and argues that he combined these with additional information of his own invention to endow his* History *with causality and plausibility. In this, Bede was following the rules of classical rhetoric.*

Bede's skills and accomplishments as a historian have rightly been highly celebrated: his rigour in investigating the past, his incorporation of original texts, his scrupulous referencing of his sources and his skill in converting many and diverse materials into a coherent historical narrative. His craft as a historian reached its apogee in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* but is manifest in earlier works such as the *Historia abbatum* and the *Chronica majora*, in the *De temporum ratione*, and in hagiographical and exegetical works. Modern scholarship has

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nuanced our understanding of Bede's historical abilities by emphasizing the profoundly religious and didactic nature of his work.[1] History could reveal the works of divine providence in the past as a lesson for the present and could give examples of Christian conduct, both good and bad, to admonish and encourage its audience.[2] As Alan Thacker has written, 'To study and to write history was to participate in a dynamic process: the unfolding of God's purposes for mankind as the world moved towards final judgment and the end of time.'[3]

This article is an exploration of Bede's understanding of the craft of a historian and the role of narrative in creating a coherent and persuasive history. It highlights the significance of traditional stories in his *Historia ecclesiastica* by taking as a case study the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria. By harmonizing disparate and sometimes conflicting sources, Bede produced a satisfying narrative of Edwin's conversion, endowed with a sense of realism through the creative addition of circumstantial detail. The article explores the issues raised concerning the role of oral testimonies and traditional stories in the *Historia* and by Bede's narrative strategies, emphasizing the importance of his understanding of the techniques of classical rhetoric.

The *Historia ecclesiastica* was constructed out of a fragmentary assemblage of data, from shards of information derived from diverse sources. Bede merged evidence of different origins – personal recollection, collective traditions and documentary and other written texts – in the construction of his *Historia*. In his preface, Bede scrupulously identified his informants, high-status individuals distributed across the English kingdoms, and highlighted the importance of Abbot Albinus of SS Peter and Paul, Canterbury in encouraging the project and in the retrieval of relevant papal letters from the Roman archives. Oral testimony formed a very substantial proportion of Bede's sources, particularly in his initial drafting of the *Historia* since different batches of evidence, including the Gregorian and other papal letters, reached him in stages over time.[4] This process

[1]   A useful summary is A. Thacker, 'Bede the Historian', in S.M. DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 170–90; see also V. Gunn, *Bede's Historiae: Genre, Rhetoric and the Constructions of Anglo-Saxon Church History* (Woodbridge, 2009) and N.J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede* (London, 2006).

[2]   *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969) (hereafter *HE*), Preface, pp. 2–3.

[3]   Thacker, 'Bede', p. 170.

[4]   D.P. Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia ecclesiastica*', *Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library* 48 (1966), pp. 145–72; J. McNamara, 'Bede's Role in Circulating Legend in the *Historia ecclesiastica*', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 7 (1994), pp. 61–9. R. Shaw, *The Gregorian Mission to Kent in Bede's* Ecclesiastical History: *Methodology and Sources* (London and New York, 2018) and *How, When and Why did Bede write his* Ecclesiastical History? (London and New York, 2022) (on this see the important review by M. Clear, *Peritia* 34 (2023), pp. 266–71).

has most recently been traced by Richard Shaw in Bede's account of the Gregorian mission; Shaw makes exceptionally clear how sparse Bede's sources were, particularly with regard to dated and datable information, and the extent to which he wove his narrative around them.[5]

Causal narrative is a crucial element in the enduring success of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, which remains a powerful description of the conversion of the English kingdoms despite the errors, omissions and flaws uncovered by modern research. The *Historia* is no longer taken as an authoritative record but rather as a masterwork constructed out of patchy and partial sources and designed to advertise a very particular view of the conversion. Bede's conspicuous reticence over the continuing presence of British Christians, for example, has drawn attention to his selectivity and significant silences.[6] Bede wished to show the workings of God in history, which could be revealed by showing the connections between events and their moral meaning. Moreover, his use of narrative is closely linked to his interest and understanding of chronology, as both could reveal divine providence at work. His achievement in the construction of a systematic chronology for the *Historia* facilitated by his adoption of incarnational dating has long been lauded.[7] For Bede the study of time and chronology was a profoundly religious one. Máirín MacCarron has shown how Bede's adoption of incarnational dating was not a simple matter of convenience, the employment of a system of dating applicable across regnal and other political boundaries; rather it was 'intended to remind the reader of divine intervention in human history', the paramount importance of the incarnation in both history and the present.[8] He positioned his history of the conversion of the English peoples and the growth of the church in the English kingdoms within an eschatological framework:

> the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon peoples at the ends of the earth fulfilled the biblical work of providence as foretold in the Old Testament and confirmed in Christ's last words to the disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel: *euntes ergo docete omnes gentes baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sanctus* ('Going out

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[5] Shaw, *Gregorian Mission*.
[6] Gunn, *Bede's Historiae*, pp. 144–81; R. Meens, 'A Background to St Augustine's Mission', *Anglo-Saxon England* [hereafter *ASE*] 23 (1994), pp. 5–17; R. Sharpe, 'The Naming of Ithamar', *English Historical Review* 117 (2002), pp. 889–94; C. Stancliffe, 'British and Irish Contexts', in DeGregorio (ed.), *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 69–83, at pp. 70, 74.
[7] W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 266–7; K. Harrison, *The Framework of Anglo-Saxon History to A.D. 900* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 76–98.
[8] M. MacCarron, *Bede and Time: Computus, Theology and History in the Early Medieval World* (London, 2019), p. 11.

therefore teach ye all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost').[9]

The art of relating events in the past was therefore essentially a religious one and integrally connected to the working of providence in human affairs. The didactic purpose of the *Historia ecclesiastica* was not limited to the exemplification of Christian virtue or moral instruction in the fate of the impious, but was woven into the very fabric of its narration. Bede invested the discrete episodes and anecdotes he found in his sources not only with a chronological structure but also with causation and narrative coherence. Their meaning is embedded in the manner in which he narrates them and positions them in relation to one another. The chronology which he painstakingly constructed scaffolds a moral meaning.

The centrality of causal narrative to Bede's purpose in his writings is demonstrated by his prose *Life of St Cuthbert*, written in 701 for the community of the church of Lindisfarne. It reveals with exceptional clarity how Bede created causal links between events which, in his sources, had been separate and unrelated.[10] Bede describes in his preface how he had taken the greatest care to investigate Cuthbert's life so that he did not set anything down 'without the most rigorous investigation of the facts' and 'without the scrupulous examination of credible witnesses'.[11] In practice, Bede relied heavily upon the earlier *Life of St Cuthbert* by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, written around 699x705, adding only thirteen new miracles. A comparison between the two Lives reveals how Bede reworked the miracles of the earlier *Life* to add chronological coherence and causation and to insert moralizing teaching. Where the anonymous author presents the miracles and events as isolated occurrences which happen sequentially but without explicit relationships to each other, Bede makes connections between them which often convey a moral message. Moreover, he expands on the anonymous *Life* by adding very many circumstantial details, which endow his version of an event with a strong sense of actuality. For example, in the anonymous *Life* two

[9] Matthew XXVIII. 9; MacCarron, *Bede*, p. 146.
[10] C. Cubitt, 'Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints', in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 29–66. On Bede's rewriting of the *Life of St Cuthbert*, see also C. Stancliffe, 'Cuthbert and the Polarity between Pastor and Solitary', in G. Bonner, D. Rollason and C. Stancliffe (eds), *St Cuthbert and his Community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 21–44; C.E. Newlands, 'Bede and Images of St. Cuthbert', *Traditio* 52 (1997), pp. 73–109.
[11] Bede, *Vita sancti Cuthberti prosa*, in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 142–3: 'sine certissima exquisitione rerum gestarum' and 'sine subtili examinatione testium indubiorum'.

miracles are recounted which take place during Cuthbert's youth. The first describes how while still a layman and shepherd, Cuthbert witnessed the passage of Aidan's soul to heaven; the second describes how he was miraculously provided with food on a hard winter's journey.[12] In the anonymous version, the episodes follow one another but have no causal connection; Bede, however, retains both miracles but rewrites them so that they are linked. The vision of Aidan's soul becomes a moment divinely ordained to stimulate Cuthbert's conversion to the religious life, while the following story of the provision of food becomes a further grace granted him by God to encourage his new resolve to enter the cloister. Bede supplies context and moral; he inserts a new incident in which Cuthbert refuses an offer of refreshment in order not to break his fast and adds new circumstantial detail, for example, about how the miraculous food was discovered, describing Cuthbert singing psalms and the shepherds' hut where the loaf was concealed. The whole tale is amplified and enriched with specifics: Cuthbert's virtue is enhanced by his determination in fasting and by his psalm-singing.[13] Bede's technique in his prose *Life of Cuthbert* of creating temporal and causal connections between events which in his source appear unrelated, and of furnishing his source material with contextual detail to create a greater veneer of reality, should alert us to his artfulness in the composition of the *Historia ecclesiastica*.[14]

This suggests that, paradoxically, Bede is at his least reliable when he is most plausible and that we should be wary of those parts of the *Historia ecclesiastica* where Bede provides explanation and causal connections between events. Shaw's analysis of the Gregorian mission to Kent has underlined how Bede presented his own historical inferences as fact and harmonized divergent, sometimes conflicting, testimonies.[15] Bede had already drafted his account of the conversion of Kent, relying chiefly upon hagiographical Canterbury traditions, before he received the dossier of papal letters truffled out of the archives in Rome at Albinus' request by the priest Nothelm. He dovetailed these skilfully into his narrative although they provided a different and more complex window into the progress of the mission. Gregory's letter chastising the missionaries for their desire to abandon their venture and return to Rome was interpreted by Bede as evidence of their fear of the

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[12]   Anonymous, *Vita sancti Cuthberti* I. 5–6, in *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 68–71.
[13]   Bede, *Vita*, c. 5, in *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 168–71.
[14]   On the connections which can be inherent in apparently disconnected episodes, see Cubitt, 'Memory', pp. 63–5.
[15]   Shaw, *Gregorian Mission*.

barbarous ferocity of the English people, which in turn supported his erroneous assumption that Pope Gregory had intended Augustine to be consecrated bishop only if his evangelizing was successful. Bede made Augustine return to Gaul to be consecrated following his success in Kent, where another letter of Gregory's (which was unknown to Bede) shows that the pope planned that he would be ordained *en route*. Bede threads the papal letters through his narrative, using them to anticipate and explain his ordering of events. He carefully lined his sources up to create a satisfying and coherent account. It reads well but is nonetheless a confection. Characteristics of Bede's account of Augustine's consecration – its fusion of different narratives, its insertion of papal letters into an already drafted narrative, his creativity in the construction of causal links between events – can all be found in his account of Edwin's conversion.

Bede's treatment of oral stories and traditional tales and his narrative technique

What value did Bede place upon oral testimonies and traditional stories? Why did he feel authorized to rework his material with such freedom, adding connections and contextual detail of his own invention? Bede listed his chief informants in his preface and also offered a brief explanatory comment on his historical method: 'I humbly beg the reader, if he finds anything other than the truth set down in what I have written, not to impute it to me. For in accordance with a true law of history, I have simply sought to commit to writing what I have collected from common report for the instruction of posterity.'[16] Here Bede validated his inclusion of oral traditions which he could not personally verify in terms that recalled the conventions of classical rhetoric. This had taught Bede not only the importance of common report (oral traditions handed down by individuals and communities) in strengthening the plausibility of an argument, but also the importance of circumstantial details – the inclusion of information about persons, places, times and motives - in lending verisimilitude.[17]

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[16] *HE* Preface, pp. 6–7: 'Lectoremque suppliciter obsecro ut, siqua in his quae scripsimus aliter quam se ueritas habet posita repperit, non hoc nobis inputet, qui, quod uera lex historiae est, simpliciter ea quae fama uulgante collegimus ad instructionem posteritatis litteris mandare studuimus'.

[17] M. Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of History, 400–1500* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 288–90 (for the definition of 'common report' see p. 290); R. Ray, 'Bede's *vera lex historiae*', *Speculum* 55 (1980), pp. 1–21, at pp. 4–5 and 7–9, *idem*, 'Bede and Cicero', *ASE* 27 (1998), pp. 5–29, and *idem*, 'Bede, the Exegete, as a Historian', in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 125–40, at pp. 128–9. Cf. W. Goffart, 'Bede's *uera lex historiae* Explained', *ASE* 34 (2005), pp. 111–16. See also G. Knappe, 'Classical Rhetoric in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 27 (1998), pp. 5–29.

Bede placed great importance on such details when studying the Bible – sacred history – in his exegesis, and his practice in the *Historia ecclesiastica* shows how highly he valued both in the composition of didactic history.[18]

The fabric of the *Historia ecclesiastica* is made up partly from documentary sources but predominantly from the report of oral testimonies that owed much to Bede's skill in the art of plausible narrative. Bede's creative invention was not a *jeu d'esprit* but a profoundly serious exercise in the composition of a didactic history which displayed the workings of God in history couched in a convincing fashion to teach his audience. Nor was his creativity in his *History* an unrestrained exercise of invention, for as Ray states with regard to his inclusion of miracles:

> when he published the *HE*, he was confident that in one sense it was true throughout – true to the Catholic faith, Roman obedience, and the practice of the Christian life. It makes no difference that Bede wanted his narrative to edify, or that he loved to record miracle stories. In a long tradition of historical writing, he thought that one gives moral lessons only from events that really took place, and he believed, based on a conception of Christian historical reality, that saintly wonders are undoubtedly among the things that actually happen.[19]

Bede did invent circumstantial details in his narrative and injected moralizing causation, creating connections between different episodes, but he did so with a basis of events which he believed to be true or were attested by common report. It is important to underline that Bede did not make up events although he was creative in their presentation and highly selective about what he reported. Bede's silences are often significant and he was perhaps influenced by St Augustine's teaching on lies, which condemned any sort of untrue statement but did permit silence as an acceptable strategy.[20]

Bede did not privilege documentary sources over oral but rather forged his *Historia* by creatively merging different types of evidence. Oral testimony could take a number of forms, including individual recollection, collective memory, eyewitness accounts and information handed down within communities. It is also important to note that oral traditions often interacted with literary and could themselves be

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[18] R. Ray, *Bede, Rhetoric and the Creation of Christian Latin Culture*, Jarrow Lecture (1997) and 'Bede, the Exegete'.

[19] Ray, 'Bede's *vera lex*', p. 13.

[20] On Bede's silences see n. 6 and related text; P.J. Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, 2004).

incorporated into literary works and transmitted in them, just as, indeed, Bede's *Historia* acts as a vehicle for oral stories and remembrances. Bede relied not only upon the individual recollections of venerated figures – such as Bishop Wilfrid, who could, for example, vouch for the unlikely fact that St Æthelthryth had preserved her virginity despite her two marriages – but also upon stories and tales of a traditional type. An illuminating example is the story of Caedmon's miraculous gift of song at the monastery of Whitby during Hild's abbacy, which John Niles has shown belongs to an attested type of folktale. Such stories feature significantly in Bede's description of Edwin's conversion. Bede deployed all his different sources, documentary and oral, to further his overriding aim of demonstrating God's working in history, and without differentiation of their evidential value.[21]

A pioneering article by D.P. Kirby published in 1966 set out the people and places which supplied Bede with information. Kirby emphasized the extensive dependence of the *History* upon information transmitted orally and its fragmentary nature; his survey made manifest the gaps in Bede's coverage, and he briefly raised the question of the reliability of his information.[22] His study was in effect an account of the communities and networks within which the oral information Bede drew upon was circulated, the cadres of social memory. Kirby's analysis of Bede's informants was taken further by Nick Higham, who emphasized the elite and clerical nature of his networks.[23] An important article by John MacNamara drew upon folklore scholarship to argue for Bede's active participation in contemporary oral culture. The oral stories in Bede's *History* were transmitted by individuals but shaped by the communities within which they were circulated. Bede himself was part of this process, circulating oral stories, but, as a scholarly author and member of a learned and literate class, he endowed the versions he recorded with textual authority and a certain interpretative spin. Bede did not passively pass on oral stories but interacted with them: 'In this communal process of sharing oral narratives Bede inevitably entered the world of legends, and these legends shaped his work as much as his work shaped them.'[24]

In trying to understand Bede's use of oral material it is instructive to consider the historiography on the *Histories* of Herodotus, who also relied heavily on such traditions.[25] Naturally, it has to be acknowledged

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[21] Cf. R. Shaw, 'What Bede's Use of Caveats Reveals About His Attitude to His Sources', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 59 (2015), pp. 1–24. J.D. Niles, 'Bede's Cædmon, "The man who had no story" (Irish Tale-Type 2412B)', *Folklore* 117 (2006), pp. 141-55.

[22] Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources'; MacNamara, 'Bede's Role' and see below n. 41.

[23] N.J. Higham, *Bede as Oral Historian*, Jarrow Lecture (2011).

[24] MacNamara, 'Bede's Role', pp. 61–9, quotation from p. 67.

[25] A useful overview can be found in N. Luraghi, 'Introduction', in N. Luraghi (ed.), *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 1–15.

that the two historians are separated by over a thousand years, by
centuries of literate culture and by Christian beliefs and practice.[26]
Nevertheless, scholarly discussions of the purpose and significance of
oral stories within the *Histories* of Herodotus can be illuminating for
the student of Bede. Oswyn Murray, for example, has argued that
Herodotus should be understood not as a historian who simply draws
upon a pool of oral traditions but one who was shaped by and
belonged to a tradition of oral storytellers.[27] His *Histories* include not
only many stories which can be matched with tale types identified by
folklorists, but also those which display narrative patterning and
stereotyped actions and events.[28] These were moulded through their
retelling in social groups within which they were transmitted and
conform to their cultural expectations.[29] They therefore have great
potency for their audience, expressing ways of understanding both past
and present so that they can play an important role as explanatory
devices.[30] Their familiarity lends weight to their testimony and endows
the narrative with pleasurable tales. Questions of how far individual
stories encapsulate authentic events are complex, as traditional and
familiar patterns can influence behaviour and actual episodes can be
reshaped according to traditional patterns.[31] Murray argued that for
contemporary society it was the chain of transmission behind a story
which mattered more than truthfulness in its reliability.[32] Scholarly
focus has shifted to the meaning ascribed to such stories and to
Herodotus' own skilful deployment and his possible reworkings of
tradition.[33]

These observations are helpful in understanding Bede and oral
traditions. While Bede was an outstanding scholar, formed through his
study of the Bible and the Fathers, he was also immersed in oral
traditions, monastic talk particularly about past holy men and a shared

[26]   See the strictures of Ray, 'Bede's *vera lex*', p. 21.
[27]   O. Murray, 'Herodotus and Oral History', pp. 16–44, at p. 34, and *idem*, 'Herodotus and Oral
       History Reconsidered', pp. 314–25, at p. 316, both in Luraghi (ed.), *Historian's Craft*; also
       Luraghi, 'Introduction', p. 11.
[28]   D. Boedeker, 'Epic Heritage and Mythical Patterns in Herodotus', and V. Gray, 'Short Stories
       in Herodotus' *Histories*', in E.J. Bakker, Irene J.F. de Jong and H. Van Wees (eds), *Brill's
       Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 97–116 and 291–317 respectively. Gray, 'Short
       Stories', p. 299 defined short stories in Herodotus 'by their presentation of stereotyped
       patterns of action of limited complexity which are concentrated and highly wrought'.
[29]   D. Boedeker, 'The Two Faces of Demaratus', *Arethusa* 20 (1987), pp. 185–201, at p. 187.
[30]   E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker, 'Introduction: Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus'
       Histories', in E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker (eds), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in
       Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 1–56, at p. 37.
[31]   Baragwanath and de Bakker, 'Introduction', p. 56. And see C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Reading
       Greek Culture Text and Images, Rituals and Myths* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 244–84.
[32]   Murray, 'Herodotus and Oral History Reconsidered', p. 316.
[33]   Murray, 'Herodotus and Oral History', pp. 16–44.

lay and ecclesiastical tradition of storytelling.[34] He was writing from within contemporary historical culture and participated in it. He records, for example, with approbation the decision of 'all those who compute the times of kings' to suppress the reigns of the apostate kings Eanfrith and Osric, and although he records these kings as examples of divine punishment, he too added their regnal years to Oswald's.[35] Bede must have recognized that multiple versions of some of the stories he included were in circulation; as we shall see, the account concerning Edwin's exile closely resembles stories about other figures told in Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid*. He was creative in his retelling of the stories that came to him: the miracle of Caedmon's poetic gifts, a version of a folktale, must have a Whitby source, but Bede creatively dramatizes it. He was a virtuoso in the reworking of such material. Bede may perhaps have prized more highly testimonies from revered, high-ranking churchmen and women, but stories of a traditional type lie at the heart of his *History*.

Bede's account of the conversion of King Edwin

Bede's depiction of royal conversions was very considered, constructing them as exemplary episodes which displayed personal belief and genuine piety.[36] Æthelberht of Kent gave a respectful reception to Augustine and his fellows, attentively listened to their teaching and, having adopted the new faith himself, refused to force it upon his people.[37] The conversion of Peada, king of the Middle Angles and son of Penda of Mercia, was accompanied by a marriage alliance with the daughter of the Christian king, Oswiu of Northumbria. Bede comments that Peada, once persuaded of the new teaching, declared that he would have converted regardless of his marriage.[38] Personal conviction in response to teaching is the cause of kingly conversion.

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[34] For monastic talk see Cubitt, 'Memory', pp. 35–6, and *eadem*, 'Monastic Memory and Identity in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in W.O. Frazer and A. Tyrell (eds), *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain* (London, 2000), pp. 253–76.

[35] *HE* III. 1, pp. 214–15: 'cunctis placuit regum tempora computantibus', and *HE* III. 9, pp. 240–1 where Bede himself computes Oswald's reign to include the year of his predecessors.

[36] J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 72–97, and *idem*, 'Bede and Gregory of Tours: Their Views on the Personal Qualities of Kings', in his *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 96–114; J. McClure, 'Bede's Old Testament Kings', in P. Wormald with D. Bullough and R. Collins (eds), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 76–98; C. Stancliffe, 'Oswald "most holy and most victorious King of the Northumbrians"', in C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, 1995), pp. 33–83; S. Foot, 'Bede's Kings', in R. Naismith and D.A. Woodman (eds), *Writing, Kingship and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 25–51; Gunn, *Bede's* Historiae, pp. 159–73.

[37] *HE* I. 25–6, pp. 74–9.

[38] *HE* III. 21, pp. 278–9.

Edwin's reign was of great importance to the history of Northumbria. Bede naturally highlights the king's conversion through the Gregorian missionary, Paulinus, and consequently his adherence to the authority of Rome, but also eulogizes his achievements as ruler: the unification of the two kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia, Edwin's extension of his authority over the southern English kingdoms and to the Isles of Man and Angelsey, and the unrivalled peace and prosperity he achieved wherever his authority extended.[39] Bede had good reasons to magnify the success and benefits of Edwin's rule. Whatever the reality behind his aggrandizing rhetoric, the security during his reign was a stark contrast to the terrible events which followed his defeat and death at the Battle of Hatfield Chase in 633. Northumbria was then invaded by the hostile forces of Penda of Mercia and of Cadwallon, king of Gwynedd, who, according to Bede, embarked on a devastating slaughter of the people. The territory of Northumbria reverted to its two constituent kingdoms, ruled by Kings Osric and Eanfrith, who, although previously Christians, apostasized and repudiated the Christian church. Both were killed by Caedwalla who gained control of the kingdoms for a year until he was in turn defeated by King Oswald. The disastrous conclusion of the reign of Northumbria's first convert king was a deeply traumatic event. Edwin's reign was therefore a watershed moment for many reasons and left a strong imprint upon public memory and ecclesiastical tradition.[40]

Bede's skills of imaginative reconstruction were deployed in his description of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria, which wove together oral testimonies and stories with the evidence of documentary sources.[41] The letters of Pope Boniface V concerning the consecration of Bishop Paulinus and Edwin's marriage to the Christian princess, Æthelburh, provided vital information, particularly on the dating of Edwin's conversion.[42] These diverse sources were assembled

[39] For a summary account, see R. Cramp, 'Eadwine [St Eadwine, Edwin] (c. 586–633)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn (accessed 22 February 2024); D. Rollason, *Northumbria 500–1100* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 38, 40, 46–7, 100, 118–19; T. Pickles, *Kingship, Society, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon Yorkshire* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 17–20, 31–4, 57–68, 94–103.

[40] *HE* II. 20, pp. 202–3. MacCarron, *Bede*, p. 108 notes how the Whitby *Life* shows the importance of memories of Edwin. Rollason, *Northumbria*, pp. 39–44; Pickles, *Kingship*, pp. 57–8.

[41] For a different reading of Edwin's conversion which also stresses its episodic nature, Bede's narrative skill and its incorporation of oral traditions, see C. O'Brien, 'The Hero's Journey in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*: The Case of King Edwin', in E. Cambridge and J. Hawkes (eds), *Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Art, Material Culture, Language and Literature of the Early Medieval World* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 365–75.

[42] On the arrival of the papal letters, see P. Hunter Blair, 'The Letters of Pope Boniface V and the Mission of Paulinus to Northumbria', in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (eds), *England before the Conquest* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 5–13. P. Meyvaert, *Bede and Gregory the Great*, Jarrow Lecture (1964); Shaw, *Gregorian Mission*, p. 159, n. 106; and J. Story, 'Bede, Willibrord and the Letters of Pope Honorius I on the Genesis of the Archbishops of Canterbury', *English Historical Review* 127 (2012), pp. 738–818, at pp. 785–97.

into a cohesive narrative, emphasizing Edwin's thoughtful deliberation about conversion and the new faith. It can be briefly summarized as follows:

> **HE II. 9:** Edwin's rule over Northumbria was marked by unprecedented success, extending his overlordship over the whole of Britain. His conversion came about through his marriage to Æthelburh, the daughter of the deceased Kentish king Æthelberht and sister of the current king, Eadbald. Æthelburh brought with her the Roman missionary, Paulinus, as her marriage had been dependent upon Edwin's tolerance of her faith and of evangelization. Paulinus was consecrated bishop on 21 July 625 by Archbishop Justus of Canterbury. On Easter Day 626, an assassin sent by the West Saxon king, Cwichelm, was thwarted in his attempt to murder Edwin. On the same day, Æthelburh gave birth safely to a daughter, Eanflaed. Paulinus interpreted these happy events as evidence of divine favour and urged Edwin to convert in gratitude. Edwin promised to convert if he succeeded in taking vengeance on Cwichelm and offered the Christian consecration of Eanflaed as a pledge. She was baptized on Pentecost 626 along with eleven (or twelve) other members of the royal household.[43] However, despite victory over the West Saxons, Edwin temporized. He ceased worshipping idols but was reluctant to accept the faith 'at once and without consideration'. Undertaking instruction from Paulinus, he spent much time pondering the faith and consulting his counsellors.[44]
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> **HE II. 10:** Pope Boniface V's letter to Edwin.[45] This is undated but datable to 624–5. Boniface extends the faith to Northumbria and Edwin in obedience to Christ's commandment to evangelize all nations, reminding him of the success of King Eadbald and urging Edwin to convert.
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> **HE II. 11:** Pope Boniface V's letter to Æthelburh, also undated but datable to 624–5 with its companion letter to Edwin. He encourages the queen to work for Edwin's conversion and to send news to him of her success in this matter.
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> **HE II. 12:** A flashback to Edwin's period of exile at the court of King Raedwald of East Anglia, where the Northumbrian prince took refuge

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[43] Bede reports the baptism of Eanflaed and her fellows twice, once in *HE* II. 9 (pp. 166–7) where he states she was baptized with eleven others, and for the second time in *HE* V. 24 (pp. 564–5) where the number is twelve, as noted in *Beda Storia degli Inglesi (Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum)*, ed. M. Lapidge and trans. P. Chiesa, 2 vols (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, [Milan], 2008), vol. 2, p. 728.

[44] *HE* II. 9, pp. 166–7: 'statim et inconsulte'.

[45] For dating, see R. Shaw, 'When Did Augustine of Canterbury Die?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* [hereafter *JEH*] 67 (2016), pp. 473–91, at pp. 483–4.

from the hostility of King Æthelfrith of Bernicia. Despite initial resistance, Raedwald accepts bribes from Æthelfrith to betray Edwin. Edwin was warned of the danger by a faithful friend later that night but refused to break the pact with his East Anglian host. Left alone, Edwin sat outside in long silence in the dark in great mental anguish. A stranger suddenly appeared to him, who questioned him three times on how he would reward someone who was able to save him from his present troubles, destroy his enemies and give him unsurpassed success as a king and provide better teaching about salvation. Edwin promised to follow the new teaching if he could obtain the other benefits. The stranger suddenly disappeared, after having laid his hand on Edwin's head as a sign which would be repeated when Edwin was called upon to honour his pledge. Edwin was then immediately informed that Raedwald had changed his mind and rejected Æthelfrith's bribe. Raedwald and Edwin go on to defeat Æthelfrith at the river Idle. However, Edwin continued to delay until Paulinus came to him and laid his hand on the king's head, sternly reminding him of his promise to convert.

HE **II. 13:** Edwin again deferred conversion, this time to consult his leading men. He promised Paulinus that they would all be baptized if they agreed. This preface cues in the story of the debate in the feasting hall with speeches by the pagan priest, Coifi, on the poor rewards he has received for his own zeal in pagan belief, and by an unnamed magnate who compares the temporary joys of pagan earthly existence to the flight of a sparrow from the cold and storm outside through a warm and tranquil hall. Paulinus convinces Coifi to accept the new faith and the pagan priest denounces paganism. Edwin accepts the new faith, and Coifi rides to Goodmanham to desecrate the pagan shrine there.

HE **II. 14:** With Edwin's conversion and that of his nobles finally achieved, Bede reports his baptism on Easter day (12 April) 627 at York, along with his sons and leading Northumbrians.[46] The conversion of Northumbria proceeds apace under Paulinus, who on one occasion spent thirty-six days baptizing at the royal palace of Yeavering in Bernicia. In Deira, Paulinus baptized in the river Swale, near Catterick.

Analysis of Bede's account of the conversion of Edwin

These chapters deserve closer scrutiny. There are, in fact, four different explanations of Edwin's conversion. The first, his marriage to a

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46   *HE* II. 14, pp. 186–7.

Christian princess from Kent, is followed by three individual tales, each providing a different further reason for the king's change of faith: Edwin's pledge following the failed assassination attempt and his subsequent victory, his promise to adopt at a later point a new faith when in exile with Raedwald, and the deliberations at the royal council with Coifi and Paulinus. Bede integrates them into a pregnant sequence, into which he also splices Pope Boniface's letters, interrupting the narrative flow from Chapter 9 to 12 (as I shall discuss below), from Edwin's promise after his successful revenge against the West Saxons to the flashback to his vision at Raedwald's court. As with the conversion of Æthelberht of Kent, Bede combines diverse and divergent stories into a single account, harmonizing rather than highlighting the tensions between them.[47]

Remembering the conversion of Northumbria

Bede's sources for these chapters reached him through different channels and on different occasions. Edwin's conversion had taken place about hundred years earlier, so memories – accurate and inaccurate – had been handed down across only a couple of generations.[48] Bede's account included personal and eyewitness recollections, particularly those for the baptisms performed by Paulinus, for example, in the river Glen at Yeavering and in the river Swale, near Catterick.[49] One old man, baptized at Littleborough in Lindsey, even recalled the bishop's physical appearance, 'tall, with a slight stoop, black hair, a thin face, a slender aquiline nose, and at the same time he was both venerable and awe-inspiring'.[50] (Although it has to be said that these words read disquietingly like a description of papal portraits in Roman mosaics, such as those of Pope Pelagius II at San Lorenzo fuori le mura and of Honorius and Symmachus (or Gregory) at Sant'Agnese in Rome.[51]) It

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[47] N.K. Chadwick, 'The Conversion of Northumbria: A Comparison of Sources', in N.K. Chadwick et al., *Celt and Saxon Studies in the Early British Border* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 138–66, at pp. 138–9; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1988), p. 65.

[48] On the reach of oral memory with Bede's circle see Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources', pp. 346–7, and for a general discussion see Murray, 'Herodotus and Oral History Reconsidered', pp. 319–20.

[49] *HE* II. 14, pp. 188–9.

[50] *HE* II. 16, pp. 192–3: 'uir longae staturae, paululum incuruus, nigro capillo, facie macilenta, naso adiuncto pertenui, uenerabilis simul et terribilis aspecto'.

[51] See G. Ladner, *Die Papstbildnisse des Altertums und des Mittelalters*, 3 vols (Vatican City, 1941–84), vol. 1, pp. 1–64, 69, 78–80; E. Thuno, *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 13–38, 152–5; J. Osborne, 'The Portrait of Pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome: A Re-examination of the So-called "square" Nimbus in Early Medieval Art', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 47 (1979), pp. 58–65. My thanks to Caroline Goodson and Alan Thacker for discussion on this point.

is striking that Bede was able to list the names of some of those baptized at different times by Paulinus.[52] Traditions and stories clearly circulated about Edwin and the Northumbrian conversion.

Whitby, the dynastic monastery of Edwin's family and where his body was buried and venerated, was also a repository for his memories, many of which are recorded in the anonymous *Life of Gregory the Great*. This was composed there in the early eighth century during the abbacy of Ælfflaed, daughter of the previous abbess, Eanflaed, and granddaughter of Edwin.[53] The traditions of the *Life of Gregory the Great* therefore offer insights into how much was known in learned and informed Northumbrian circles concerning Edwin, Paulinus and the conversion. It records for the first time two stories also found in Bede's *History*, the story of Pope Gregory's encounter with the Anglian slave boys and the story of Edwin's exile in East Anglia with King Raedwald, including the details that Æthelfrith used bribery in his attempts to have Edwin killed and the implication that the mysterious stranger may have been a 'sending' of Paulinus.[54] Two episodes not transmitted by Bede describe how Edwin, while still in the catechumenate, ordered a crowing bird thought by the crowd present to be an unpropitious omen to be killed to demonstrate the vanity of pagan tradition, and that on his death, Paulinus' soul ascended to heaven in the form of a swan.[55] Finally, the *Life of Gregory* records the miraculous discovery of Edwin's dismembered remains after the Battle of Hatfield.[56] The community at Whitby was vocal in promoting Edwin as a saint and as the prime mover in the conversion, describing him as foreordained before even his conception to be a 'vessel of mercy'.[57] However, it is remarkable how little information the Whitby *Life* contains about Edwin's conversion. While Paulinus is prominent, his association with Æthelburh is never mentioned. Nor indeed, is there any reference to the queen herself or to her marriage to Edwin and its significance for his adoption of Christianity, a surprising omission given Æthelburh was the grandmother of the community's abbess,

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[52] *HE* II. 14, pp. 186–7.
[53] *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1968), c. 18, pp. 102–3. And see P. Hunter Blair, 'Whitby as a Centre of Learning in the Seventh Century', in M. Lapidge and H. Gneuss (eds), *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 3–32, at pp. 3–14; Pickles, *Kingship*, pp. 163–4. On the importance of Whitby as a source of information for Bede see Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources', pp. 352–4.
[54] *Earliest Life*, ed. Colgrave, c. 16, pp. 98–101.
[55] *Earliest Life*, ed. Colgrave, c. 15, pp. 96–9; c.17, pp. 100–1.
[56] *Earliest Life*, ed. Colgrave, cc. 18–19, pp. 100–5.
[57] *Earliest Life*, ed. Colgrave, c. 14, pp. 96–7.

Ædffaed. Bede probably knew the Whitby *Life* as he had access to Whitby traditions.[58]

Traditions about Edwin also circulated outside Northumbria in the British kingdoms. The ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* reported that he was baptized in 627 by Rhun son of Urien, a member of the royal family of the British kingdom of Rheged, and that the ceremonies lasted for forty days. The same source states that the first wife of King Oswiu of Northumbria (d. 670) was Rhun's granddaughter, Rhiainfellt.[59] The historicity of the marriage with Rhiainfellt is confirmed by the appearance of her name in an Old English form, Rægenmæld, in first place in the list of queens in the *Durham Liber vitae*, in the early core of the book.[60] Alex Woolf has hypothesized a political context for these events in the form of an alliance between the kingdom of Rheged and Northumbria in which Edwin was the senior king. This, he argues, provoked the attack by Caedwallon and Penda which resulted in Edwin's death at Hatfield in 633.[61] The attribution of Edwin's baptism to Rhun poses hard questions about the English version of the king's baptism reported by Bede and the Whitby *Life of Gregory*. Some have tried to reconcile the accounts by suggesting that Edwin was baptized earlier in exile in Rheged or that Rhun was a sponsor of his baptism in 627.[62] Our sources are too few and fragmentary to allow us to resolve this historical puzzle, but the annals of the *Historia Brittonum* should alert us to gaps in our knowledge and the complexities of both the historical circumstances of Edwin's conversion and of its portrayal in English sources.

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[58] Pickles, *Kingship*, p. 58; Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources', pp. 145–72; A. Thacker, 'Memorializing the Cult of Gregory the Great: The Origin and Transmission of a Papal Cult in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries', *Early Medieval Europe* 7.1 (1998), pp. 59–84.

[59] For the *Historia Brittonum*, see *Nennius: British History and Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. J. Morris (Chichester, 1980), cc. 57, 63, pp. 36, 38. See the discussion by A. Breeze, 'Northumbria and the Family of Rhun', *Northern History* 50 (2013), pp. 170–9.

[60] *The Durham Liber Vitae: London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A. VII*, ed. D. Rollason and L. Rollason, 3 vols (London, 2007), vol. 1, p. 93, and see vol. 2, pp. 6, 42.

[61] A. Woolf, 'Caedualla *Rex Brittonum* and the Passing of the Old North', *Northern History* 41 (2004), pp. 5–24.

[62] See the comment of Pickles, *Kingship*, p. 99, and for interpretations, Chadwick, 'Conversion', pp. 156–66; C. Corning, 'The Baptism of Edwin, King of Northumbria: A New Analysis of a British Tradition', *Northern History* 36 (2000), pp. 5–15, argues for baptismal sponsorship and has a useful review of the options; F. Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom: The Golden Age and the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 35–7; Rollason, *Northumbria*, p. 121; C. Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, Whithorn Lecture (Whithorn, 2007), pp. 11–16, and *eadem*, 'British and Irish', pp. 77–8.

Traditional stories in Bede's conversion narrative of Edwin

Of the constituent elements in Bede's account of the conversion of Edwin, two and possibly three must have derived from oral accounts.[63] The story of Edwin's exile at the court of Raedwald and the appearance of the friend and the apparition of the stranger in *HE* II.12 contains three types of traditional story-elements or motifs. The first is a story about exile at a foreign court, in which the refugee's life is endangered by the attempts of his enemy to bribe his host to breach obligations of trust and hospitality, and in which the host king refuses to hand over the exile. This story type was circulating in early eighth-century Northumbria and more widely in early medieval Europe. Two analogues can be found in Stephen of Ripon's *Life of Wilfrid*, which was written in *c.*713 and almost certainly known to Bede.[64] The first tells of Wilfrid's own stay at the court of the Frisian king, Aldgisl, after his expulsion from Northumbria. Aldgisl was offered a huge bribe to hand over or kill the saint but he publicly refused, shaming the messengers with his refusal to break trust. Subsequently, the bishop's enemies attempt to bribe Pectarit, king of the Lombard kingdom, into betraying him. This triggers the second iteration of this story. Pectarit refuses and recounts the story of his own exile at the Avar court when the Avar king similarly spurned the messenger's promise of much gold and upheld his pledge to Pectarit. Bede's story of Edwin's exile conforms therefore to a known story type in contemporary local circulation.

The tale of Edwin's exile was embellished by another story of a traditional type, one without strong contemporary analogues but attested in wider folkloric and also in learned traditions. The miraculous appearance of the stranger and the pact made between the two that Edwin would adopt new teachings of spiritual welfare if the stranger's prophecies of his rescue and subsequent success were fulfilled echoes the tale type of a bargain. It resembles tales about bargains made with supernatural figures, a reflex most famously represented by the Faust legend and in deals with devils, seen for example, in the story of Theophilus.[65] It has significant resemblances to tales about fateful promises made in desperate circumstances which are be fulfilled at a

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[63] McNamara, 'Bede's Role', pp. 61–9. And see Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical* History, pp. 70–1.

[64] C. Stancliffe, 'Dating Wilfrid's Death and Stephen's *Life*', in N.J. Higham (ed.), *Wilfrid, Abbot, Bishop, Saint* (Donington, 2013), pp. 17–26.

[65] See S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols (Bloomington, 1955–7), M 200–M 299; bargains with supernatural figures M 242, with the devil M 210, supplemented by H.-J. Uther (ed.), *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, FF Communications 284–6, 3 vols (Helsinki, 2004), nos. 360, 361, 361*, 1182.

later time.[66] Edwin's promise is an inversion of the usual form of the motif where the bargain proves to be a bad one. It underlies Satan's temptation of Christ in the Gospels, a parallel which Bede's audience probably recalled. Bede's telling of Edwin's exile is remarkable for the clustering of traditional motifs (which Vladimir Propp argued was a characteristic of folktales), such as the three bribes offered to Raedwald and the thrice repeated question to Edwin, or the stories of exile and supernatural rescue.[67] Bede himself may have embellished the tale with additional details, possibly the motif of the triple questioning, or the role of Raedwald's wife in persuading him to reject the bribe, perhaps here derived from biblical stories like that of Esther, which serves the Bedan purpose of explaining the king's volte face.[68]

The episode of the failed assassination attempt also reads like a formulaic story about the heroic rescue of a king by his faithful retainers but the inclusion of the names of the West Saxon assassin, Eomer, and those of the Northumbrian thegns, Lilla and Forthere, may suggest it had a basis in fact or acquired reassuring circumstantial details.[69] If this event did take place, did it really coincide with the birth of Eanflaed? Or has her birth been integrated into the story to give it a Christian dimension? Edwin's pledge of conversion following on from successful revenge over his West Saxon enemy is again a traditional motif and seems designed to connect the story with his own change of belief.

Finally, the famous debate in Edwin's royal hall concerning the merits of Christian conversion probably had an ecclesiastical origin. The dialogue of Coifi and the royal counsellor concerning the more favourable prospects of life under the Christian God has the superficial appearance of an oral story but seems rather to belong to learned tradition. Danuta Shanzer has noted Bede's skill and artistry in his construction of the flight of the sparrow through the hall, and its implicit allusion to Jesus's words in Matthew X.26–31 where God's oversight of even such insignificant creatures as sparrows is compared with his care for individuals. Bede's description of the bird's swift journey echoes the themes of light and darkness, life and death, and

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[66] For example, with the tale of Rumpelstilzchen, which may have further parallels with Edwin's conversion story in the king's pledge of his daughter's consecration and that of the father in Rumpelstilzchen. See Uther (ed.), *Types*, no. 500.

[67] V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edn (Austin and London, 1968). The apparition of the stranger has stimulated many interpretations, see, for example, R. North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 323–9.

[68] My thanks to Willum Westenholz for this suggestion.

[69] H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972), pp. 223–4; Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 67–8.

the known and the hidden.[70] Other aspects of this episode, such as Coifi's throwing of the spear, also have Christian resonances, as Julia Barrow has argued.[71] It is surely a type of conversion dialogue, a rhetorical device which enables proponents of a faith to set up a debate on the advantage of different faiths or confessions in order to demonstrate the superiority of their own. It can be compared, for example, to Bishop Daniel of Winchester's letter to the missionary, Boniface, on conversion. Daniel advocates rational argument with pagans about the nature of their beliefs and suggests Boniface point out the prosperity of the Christian world compared to the cold barrenness of the heathen.[72] Coifi's desecration of the pagan shrine at Goodmanham by mounting a mare and throwing a spear into the sanctuary is another carefully considered element, showing the emptiness of pagan ritual taboos in the face of the Christian faith. It recalls the similar demonstration in the Whitby *Life of Gregory* when the prophetic crow is shot down. Was the localization of the scene at Goodmanham another Bedan addition?

The development of Bede's narrative of Edwin's conversion

These stories with their diverse origins and different agendas are given equal weight in Bede's account and smoothly integrated into his narrative. How did Bede create his chronology of Edwin's conversion? Bede had access to some precise dates – Paulinus' consecration as bishop, the birth and baptism of Eanflaed, Edwin's baptism – while the letters of Pope Boniface could be dated through the information on the lengths of pontificates supplied in the *Liber pontificalis*.[73] The date of Edwin's baptism is recorded in a particularly prominent fashion. In the *Historia ecclesiastica*, it is described as taking place: 'anno regni sui undecimo, qui est annus dominicae incarnationis DCXXVII, ad aduentu uero Anglorum in Brittaniam annus circiter CLXXXmus'.[74] It appears in a similar form, with the addition of the imperial regnal year of Heraclius and the indiction, in the *Major Chronicle*.[75] It must have

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[70] D. Shanzer, 'Bede's Style: A Neglected Historiographical Model for the Style of the *Historia ecclesiastica*?', in C.D. Wright, F. Biggs and T.N. Hall (eds), *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill* (Toronto, 2007), pp. 33–6.

[71] J. Barrow, 'How Coifi Pierced Christ's Side: A Re-examination of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* II. 13', *JEH* 62 (2011), pp. 693–706. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 71–2; D.K. Fry, 'The Art of Bede: Edwin's Council', in M.H. King and W.M. Stevens (eds), *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, 2 vols (Collegeville, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 191–207 also adduces some patristic and biblical parallels.

[72] Boniface, *Epistolae*, in *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. M. Tangl, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae selectae (Berlin, 1916), pp. 49–50.

[73] See Shaw's analysis, *Gregorian Mission*, pp. 139–54.

[74] *HE* II. 14, p. 186.

[75] *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, trans. F. Wallis (Liverpool, 1999), p. 228.

been derived from a written source, such as an annotated regnal list, a liturgical calendar or from a paschal table or set of annals; the date of Eanflaed's baptism may come from the same source.[76] Bede was able therefore to date Edwin's conversion to 627. The timing of the Roman mission to Northumbria (and with it Edwin's marriage to Æthelburh) in 625 could be deduced from Paulinus' consecration by Archbishop Justus, perhaps calculated, as Shaw suggests, from the bishop's epitaph at Rochester.[77] The letters of Pope Boniface provided additional information about Edwin's marriage to Æthelburh and its importance for his conversion. It is an open question how much Bede knew about the Kentish marriage and its implications for Edwin before he received Pope Boniface's letters since, as we have seen, the anonymous Whitby hagiographer fails to mention it. The papal letters were not his only source of information, however, since he was able to relate both the birth and baptism of Æthelburh's daughter, Eanflaed, and the flight of Paulinus, Æthelburh and her children to Kent, and her concern to ensure her children's safety by sending them to King Dagobert in Gaul.[78]

The arrival of two successive dossiers of information from Kent strengthened Bede's understanding of the chronology of the Northumbria mission. The first tranche, carried by Nothelm, may have included material about Paulinus' death date and the length of his pontificate; the second, consisting of papal letters, will have illuminated Edwin's diplomatic marriage to his Kentish princess and its role in the conversion.[79] Pope Boniface V's letters to Edwin and Æthelburh were part of a batch that included his letter to Justus of Canterbury, bestowing the pallium upon him.[80] Paulinus' consecration in 625 provided a more precise chronology for the mission than the date of the baptisms of Eanflaed and Edwin in 626 and 627 respectively, and revealed to Bede the slow pace of Edwin's adoption of the new faith.

The delay between 625 and 627 may have given Bede some pause for thought, perhaps even disquiet. Edwin was, in the words of the Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great*, a 'vessel of mercy', foreordained as such even before his conception.[81] Why did this hero of Roman Christianity in Northumbria hesitate so long before embracing the faith? His

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[76] Story, 'Bede', pp. 785–97 suggests the possibility of notes on a liturgical calendar.

[77] Shaw, *Gregorian Mission*, pp. 48, 110, 140.

[78] *HE* II. 20, pp. 204–5.

[79] See n. 77.

[80] *HE* II. 8, pp. 158–61. Pope Boniface's letters refer to King Eadbald of Kent as Adulualdus; for this spelling see P. Shaw, 'Orthographic Standardisation and Seventh- and Eighth-century Coin Inscriptions', in T. Abramson (ed.), *Studies in Early Medieval Coinage. Vol. 1: Two Decades of Discovery* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 97–112, at pp. 97–101. Hunter Blair, 'The Letters', p. 6; Shaw, *Gregorian Mission*, p. 159, n. 106; Story, 'Bede', pp. 785–97.

[81] *Earliest Life*, ed. Colgrave, c. 14, pp. 96–7.

procrastination may have been problematic especially if there were other factors at play in the conversion, such as the political entanglements of the kingdoms of the British and of Kent. In Bede's *Historia*, however, this delay was depicted as a reflection of the king's sincerity and profundity. The characterization of the king as a man of deep thought whose hesitancy in conversion reflected not temporizing but rather his noble and deep-thinking personality also served as highly effective narrative glue which enabled Bede to unify his disparate sources.[82]

Bede's presentation of Edwin's conversion is crafted with exceptional skill to unify the different and discordant elements within it and to show the providential nature of his kingship. The presentation of Edwin as a master of profound spiritual reflection is one part of this, another is the motif that Edwin's acceptance of the faith was contingent upon the counsel of his wise men. These two ideas enable Bede to connect his three stories into a near seamless narrative. The king's deliberations explain the almost two-year gap between evangelization and conversion, and enable Bede to incorporate the two stories of the king's pledge of conversion in acknowledgement of divine good fortune. The consultation motif actually stands in contradiction to both these stories, since Edwin promises to become a Christian in return for personal success but the temporizes on the grounds that he needs to consult his wise men.

The conversion of Northumbria is introduced by the statement that the increase of Edwin's earthly rule was a presage of his subsequent conversion.[83] Bede then sows the seed of the king's gradual conversion by commenting that, when Edwin received Æthelburh as a bride, he promised not to stand in the way of her Christian faith or that of her entourage, 'nor did he deny the possibility that he might accept the same religion himself, if, on examination, it was judged by his wise men to be a holier worship and more worthy of God'.[84] This allusion to the judgement of his wise men anticipates the final episode in Edwin's conversion, the debate in the royal hall. The second step in Edwin's gradual decision-making is then the West Saxon assassination attempt, Paulinus' teaching and Edwin's pledge to convert. Edwin, however, procrastinated even after triumphing over Cwichelm: he was

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[82]   On Edwin's temporizing, see Chadwick, 'Conversion of Northumbria', p. 164; Mayr-Harting, *Coming*, pp. 66–8; Stancliffe, 'Oswald', pp. 62–3. Gunn, *Bede's* Historiae, suggests the influence of Gregory the Great's *Regula Curae Pastoralis*, pp. 160–2, but I am uncertain that Edwin's internal debates over conversion equate to Christian *discretio*.

[83]   *HE* II. 9, p. 163.

[84]   *HE* II. 9, pp. 162–3: 'Neque abnegauit se etiam eandem subiturum esse religionem, si tamen examinata a prudentibus sanctior ac Deo dignior posset inueniri.'

'unwilling to accept the mysteries of the Christian faith at once and without consideration', although he gave up the worship of idols:

> But he first made it his business, as opportunity occurred, to learn about the faith systematically from the venerable Bishop Paulinus, and then to consult with the counsellors whom he considered the wisest, as to what they thought he should do. He himself being a man of great natural sagacity would often sit alone for long periods in silence, but in his innermost thoughts he was deliberating with himself as to what he ought to do and which religion he should adhere to.[85]

Bede's eloquence and his vivid characterization of Edwin as a deep thinker mask the internal contradictions in his account: on the one hand, Edwin is so delighted with Paulinus that he promises to become a Christian, even offering his daughter as a pledge if he is victorious against the West Saxons. On the other, success achieved, he is reluctant to accept the faith and not only seeks more information about it, but also makes any conversion conditional upon his council's approval.

The difficulties of Edwin's delay are further underlined by Bede's introduction to the miraculous vision experienced by the king in exile in East Anglia, which he explicitly and implicitly connects to the failed assassination attempt and its aftermath, as I shall explain. However, the flow of his narrative is interrupted by the insertion of the two letters of Pope Boniface. The chronological fit is awkward, for one might have expected them to illustrate the account of Edwin's marriage rather than to follow the birth of his daughter, but Bede presumably felt that the pope's wise words on the advantages of the faith provided a sample of the sort of instruction Edwin might have received. Bede returns to the East Anglian story, and dovetails it into his narrative by explaining that Paulinus attempted to precipitate Edwin's acceptance of the faith by reminding him of his vow in exile. Again, Bede has a lot of explaining to do. The vision in East Anglia is presented as a further divine means of softening the king to receive the faith, while Paulinus is given knowledge of this episode so that he may use the reminder of it to trigger the king's conversion. Edwin's hesitancy is explained as a disbenefit of his elevated royal status, which impedes a humble and unconditional acceptance of the faith. Thus Bede harmonizes these two

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[85] *HE* II. 9, pp. 166–7: 'non statim et inconsulte sacramenta fidei Christianae percipere uoluit..... uerum primo diligentius ex tempore et ab ipso uenerabili uiro Paulino rationem fidei ediscere et cum suis primatibus, quos sapientiores nouerat, curauit conferre, quid de his agendum arbitrarentur. Sed et ipse, cum esset uir natura sagacissimus, saepe diu solus residens ore quidem tacito sed in intimis cordis multa secum conloquens, quid sibi esset faciendum, quae religio seruanda, tractebat.'

conflicting stories – Edwin's procrastination after this West Saxon victory leads Paulinus to remind him of his earlier pledge. The image of the king's solitary meditations on the faith was designed by Bede to create a deep narrative connection to his telling of the exile story. After his rejection of his friend's warning and advice to flee, Edwin 'remained alone outside, sitting sadly in front of the palace with his mind in tumult, not knowing what to do or which way to turn'. It is in this state, that the nocturnal visitor, a stranger, appears to him, as he 'remained long in silent anguish of spirit and "consumed with inward fire"'.[86] This motif returns after the narration of the visit from Paulinus. The king is sitting alone, in accordance with his usual custom of lonely and intense deliberation on the faith, when Paulinus places his right hand on the king's head fulfilling the nocturnal visitor's promise.

The reminder of Edwin's pledge in exile does indeed lead the king to accept the faith. He agrees, saying that he will consult with his leading men so that, if they agree, they may all be baptized together. Bede shifts the ground here, for previously Edwin's desire for the agreement of his council is a condition of his conversion, whereas here the king accepts the faith but wishes to bring his leading men to baptism with him. The story of Edwin's council in his royal hall with the motif of the sparrow's flight and Coifi's speech is the concluding stage of his long and convoluted journey to conversion, showing how the king brought his leading men to the new faith and culminating in the baptism of Edwin, all his nobility, and many of the Northumbrian people in 627.[87]

Bede's masterly account of Edwin's adoption of the faith is a prime example of his commitment to causal narrative – one of the defining characteristics of his understanding of his historical craft – and to the embedding of moral messages within it. The motif of the thinking king not only explains why Edwin's conversion was so late in following his exposure to Christianity through his wife Æthelburh and Paulinus' teaching, but also presents him as a figure of exemplary royal piety – Edwin, the pre-eminently successful ruler, who governed with sincere faith and in a consensual manner. It also enabled Bede to foreground Paulinus' role and teaching. Above all, it forged an integral connection between Edwin's military victories, over the West Saxons after the assassination attempt, and over the Bernician king Æthelfrith at the Battle of the River Idle. This link was vital since Edwin's conversion in 627 was followed little more than five years later by his defeat at the

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[86] *HE* II. 12, pp. 178–9: 'remansit Eduini solus foris, residensque mestus ante palatium, multis coepit cogitationum aestibus affici…diu tacitis mentis angloribus et caeco carperetur igni'.
[87] *HE* II. 14, pp. 186–7.

Battle of Hatfield in 633, one of the worst disasters in Northumbrian history. This sequence of events was hardly an advertisement for the divine favour bestowed upon Christian kings, so Bede had to work hard to create a narrative of success and triumph to displace the humiliations of the Battle of Hatfield and its aftermath, a sequence otherwise difficult to reconcile with the idea that conversion to Christianity led to earthly success and prosperity.

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