Early Medieval Saints of England and Wales

The aim of this article is to examine the role of saints in the Early medieval church and how it contributed to the lives of the English and Welsh people. It also looks at the lives of five of the most popular and important saints and how their lives enriched the nascent church of the seventh century which itself was going through a time of extraordinary change as it moved from the Celtic model, which had survived on the western fringes of Britain to the newer Roman model brought in as a result of the Gregorian mission in AD597.

What made a saint?

The word 'saint' is derived from the Latin word 'Sanctus', which means holy. It was applied to God himself, but also to people and to things and within the latter two contexts it had the meaning of being set apart or consecrated for a sacred purpose or office rather than the high moral quality it is linked with in modern usage. The earliest use of the word 'saint' is found in the letters of St Paul such as Colossians 1:1-2 "to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae" which is addressed to all the faithful of the Colossian Christian community. Saints are God's holy people called to God's service and to live 'as is proper among saints' (Ephesians 5:3).This usage by Paul was always collective, but it quickly came to be applied to particular categories such as those who were martyred for their faith or the first monks and nuns. At the same time its usage in the singular form began to used as a sort of official title especially for bishops and by the fourth century finally evolved into a title of honour and respect for the most devout Christians who commanded public veneration for living their lives at an heroic level of Christian faithfulness and integrity. All that was required to declare a person a saint was a consensus of the people. Martyrs, in particular, were held in the highest esteem due to the manner of their deaths and people flocked to their burial sites to celebrate feast days. From the tenth century this process of canonisation or "calling out" came more and more into the hands of the bishop of Rome until in 1634 the present fixed process involving a minute inquiry into a candidate's life became the accepted pathway to sainthood.

There are two categories of saints, Martyrs who died for their faith and Confessors who lived good and holy lives. This distinction can be illustrated in the Anglo-Saxon period, which produced two King Edwards who were both canonised. Edward the Martyr was killed by an assassin in AD 979 in a familial dispute over the succession. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes his death as simply "King Edward was slain at eventide at Corfe gate and was buried at Wareham without any kingly honours". However, miracles soon followed, and his relics were translated to Shaftesbury in 980. In a charter of King Ethelred in 1001 he was called saint and martyr and in 1008 the laws of Ethelred ordered the observance of his feast all over England. Less than one hundred years later in 1066 another King Edward died. He had a reputation for holiness which began in his lifetime and was based on his accessibility to his subjects and his generosity to the poor. He also

was reputed to have seen visions and cured scrofula (the king's evil) by his touch. Both Anglo Saxons and Normans supported the cult that grew up around Edward and when exhumed in 1102 his body was found to be uncorrupted. However, it took until 1161 for Edward to be recognised as a saint by the Pope, Alexander III and to distinguish him from Edward the Martyr, he became known as Edward the Confessor as his cause for sainthood was granted as a result of his good and holy life.

To be associated with a saint enhanced the prestige of a locality and those with most to gain could engineer the growth of a cult. Relics were made from body parts or possessions and the sites enlarged to accommodate the pilgrims enticed there by promises of miracles. It was a form of religious tourism that brought wealth and investment to an area. Hagiographical accounts of the lives of saints also grew in popularity during the 7th and 8th centuries in England serving two purposes. Imitation of the life of Christ was the benchmark against which the saints were measured and in turn the saints became the benchmark by which the general population could measure themselves. A central part of hagiography was the performance of miracles in imitation of Christ and it was the ability of saints to perform miracles, both during their life and by means of their relics after death which attracted Cultic attention and enhanced the saint's reputation. Saints were more than economical and political commodities; however, they were fundamental to the belief of many Christians especially in the uncertain Anglo-Saxon world littered as it was with wars between different kingdoms and the Viking invasions. It was clearly understood that saints had gained a special communion with God entitling them to sit by him at the day of judgement and to intercede with him for the souls of others not yet in that glorious company. Christians in this period were fixated on the Second Coming and the end of time as it was known, and the missionaries and priests saw themselves as racing against time to save souls from eternal damnation. Saints had a two-fold role in this apocalyptic atmosphere, both as missionaries themselves in their earthly lives and also as conduits for Christians to reach salvation. Using a saint as a conduit for a particular message could ensure it would be received more generously by God. As Ramirez sums it up "saints lived in the real world… but their role in the afterworld was equally, if not more important to the Anglo Saxons who believed in them, treasured them and venerated them"[i]

St David (cAD 500-590)

David was renowned as a teacher, bishop and founder of churches and monasteries mostly within modern day Wales. His mother Non (herself proclaimed a saint) was a devout Christian of noble descent whilst his father Sant was a local ruler. Tradition has it that David's birth was surrounded by divine signs which hinted at his future role as a priest and bishop. Much of his early life is shrouded in mystery and what is known about him depends on a hagiographical *Life* written about 1090 by a writer more concerned to further the independence of the Welsh bishops from Canterbury. What is known is that as a young man he chose the Church over royal life and his devotion to prayer and

asceticism led him to monasticism. In his lifetime he founded ten monasteries in South Wales the most famous being at Glyn Rhoslyn, now known as St David's in Pembrokeshire, which became the spiritual centre of Welsh Christianity. David adopted the Rule of St Anthony of Egypt for his monasteries, which combined hard manual labour with study fortified by a very austere diet. A notable aspect of his work was that of preaching and he travelled throughout South Wales encouraging people to live a life of holiness and simplicity so that they might devote themselves fully to prayer and service to others. One of the most significant events in David's life was his attendance at the Synod of Brefi in AD 550, which was called to oppose the teachings of Pelagius who argued that people had free will and could make their own choices and that Salvation was achievable through effort and moral behaviour rather than by God's grace. This was contra to the teaching of the Church which stated that mankind was born with original sin and could not achieve salvation without divine intervention. Legend tells that David preached such a powerful sermon at the Synod that the earth beneath him rose to form a hill allowing the entire assembly to hear him clearly. It was at this Synod that David was officially recognised as the leader of the Welsh Church and his monastery at Glyn Rhoslyn declared the metropolis of Wales. The cult of David was approved by Pope Callistus II in 1120 who also stated that two pilgrimages to St David's equalled one to Rome. [ii]

St Aidan of Lindisfarne (d. 651)

Aidan was largely responsible for introducing Christianity to Northumbria. The main source of information about Aidan was St Bede writing in c731, when he could draw on the elderly monks on Lindisfarne when describing his work. Little is known about his early life other than he was an Irishman who had travelled to Iona off the Scottish coast in order to become a monk. Bede describes how Aidan arrived from Iona at the king's request to convert his people. King Oswald knew Iona well for he had spent his youth there when his uncle seized the throne in 616.

When King Oswald asked for a Scottish bishop to preach the gospel to himself and his people, first another man was sent, an austere man who was unsuccessful. The English people ignored him, so he returned home, and reported toto the assembled coil that he had been unable to do any good among the people to who he had been sent to preach. They were uncivilised, stubborn and barbarous. [iii]

Aidan suggested that the previous missionary might have been too severe, and so the community decided to consecrate Aidan as bishop and sent him with twelve companions arriving in 635. Bede praised Aidan's love of prayer and study as well as his gentleness and humility and his care for the sick and poor and tells of their arrival in Northumbria:

When Aidan arrived, at his request the king gave him the Island of Lindisfarne for his bishop's seat. Here the tide ebbs and flows twice a day so the place is surrounded by the sea and becomes an island. Again twice a day the shore becomes dry and is joined to the

land…The bishop was not skilled at speaking English, and when he preached the gospel, it was most delightful to see the king himself interpreting God's word to his commanders and ministers for he had learnt to speak fluent Gaelic during his lengthy exile.[iv]

Bede also describes how Aidan lived: he preferred to travel on foot and engage people in conversation. If they were pagan, he taught them about Christianity and if they were believers, he encouraged them. Each Lent he would spend the time on the Farne Islands in solitude. Among the miracles he was associated with was an attack by King Penda of Mercia who reached Oswald's fortress at Bamburgh and set fire to it. Aidan saw the flames and prayed until the wind changed direction and the flames engulfed Penda's men who were forced to retreat. Aidan died in his own church after sixteen years as bishop.

St Hilda (614-680)

Most of what is known about Hilda comes from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and he writes of her life as a royal princess as well as her life after she became a nun. She was related to both the royal families of Northumbria and East Anglia and for the first thirty-three years of her life she lived a secular life as a royal princess in the Northumbrian Court. She was one of the first in the north to become a Christian as she was baptised along with King Edwin by the Gregorian missionary Paulinus on Easter Day AD 627 in York. Whether she accepted the teaching of Paulinus or if she simply had to follow the king's example is unknown, but she would have seen the influence women had in a Christian court and the monasteries offered a new set of options for Anglo Saxon noblewomen to follow. In an age when marriage secured dowries and political affiliations it might seem counter Intuitive for a noblewoman to join a monastery but there were three reasons it might happen; firstly it was a place of safety and comfort for a widow; secondly, an unwanted or barren wife could be placed there by her husband enabling him to take a new wife and thirdly it could be politically or financially expedient for noble families to found a monastery with an aristocratic woman at its head. Land would be granted to the woman but kept within the control of the family unlike marriage where land and wealth was passed to the husband by means of dowries. Founding a monastery meant its land productivity and loyalty was secure. For the noblewoman being head of a monastery gave her many personal benefits such as the chance to become educated, to have the respect of her community, to live in comparative luxury and a certain level of freedom not shackled to the politics of a court.

Despite being baptised by a Gregorian missionary, Hilda followed the example of Aidan and the Celtic Church when governing her monasteries, first of all in Hartlepool then founding the double monastery at Whitby in AD657. In double monasteries men and women lived in separate dormitories but came together to hear Mass. Women were occupied in similar work to those at Court, such as spinning and weaving but were also given opportunity to read and write. Men were occupied with crafts such as glassmaking and metalwork. Whitby became famous for its learning and training of at least five bishops. But its finest moment came with Hilda hosting the Synod of Whitby in AD664.

Hilda herself supported the Irish party in the debate over the date of Easter but accepted the decision in favour of Rome.

Bede tells that as well as building up the library at Whitby Hilda also encouraged the young cowherd and poet Caedmon to write his vernacular poems about Catholic doctrine. Although the vast majority have been lost Bede managed to save nine lines of a hymn to Creation which reveal the depth of teaching that they engendered. Hilda enjoyed great personal prestige and kings, learned men and the common people would seek her advice. Hilda died in 680 and can be considered as an excellent example of how in the Anglo-Saxon church a woman could attain great influence and authority.[v]

St Cuthbert (635-687)

St Cuthbert was the most popular English saint until the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket in 1170. Once again, Bede is the guide to Cuthbert's life though his *Life of Cuthbert* is hagiographical.[vi] Each chapter tells of a miraculous happening in the life of Cuthbert. This was to emphasise the fact Cuthbert was a man of God who shared in divine qualities and even in the power of miracles. These, for Bede, were to be expected in the early days of Christianity in England just as they had been prominent in the early church. It was necessary for the church to be nourished by miracles until faith was firmly established when they would no longer be needed. The stories also contain a wealth of historical detail, which otherwise would not be known. For example, in ch 3 the story of wind changing direction at Cuthbert's prayer and stopped monks from being carried out to sea on rafts also reveals that peasants jeered at the monks for abolishing the pagan ways of worship:

No one is going to pray for them. Let not God raise a finger to help them! They have done away with all the old ways of worship and now nobody knows what to do. The saint listened to them and then knelt down and prayed… At once the wind changed right about and bore them safe and sound to land…seeing this the country people burnt inwardly with shame at their impiety.

Interweaved with the miraculous happenings it is possible to trace Cuthbert's personal history. He was born of a well to do Anglo Saxon family and as a young man became a monk at Melrose in AD 651. After a few years, together with the Abbot Eata, he moved to Ripon to start a monastery on land given to them by the King's son Alcfrith. As Alcfrith insisted on the Roman practices being adopted whilst the Melrose monks still followed the Celtic customs, it was a short-lived appointment and they returned to Melrose where Cuthbert was made prior in c AD 661. He would also go out into the local area preaching missions for a week or a month at a time. After the Synod of Whitby in AD664, Cuthbert adopted the Roman ways and also transferred to the abbey on Lindisfarne as prior and gradually brought them into the new customs also. The life of a hermit attracted him more and more and in AD676 he resigned the priorship and settled on one of the remote Farne Islands where he made a cave dwelling and tried to live a life of solitude, though visitors from Lindisfarne and other places constantly interrupted him. In AD685 his fame as a

good and holy man led to him being chosen as Bishop of Hexham. He persuaded Eata, the Bishop of Lindisfarne to exchange Sees with him and Cuthbert spent the next two years preaching teaching and conducting visitations of his diocese:

This venerable man of God, Bishop Cuthbert, following the teaching and practice of the Apostles, adorned his office with good works. He protected the flick committed to him by constant prayer on their behalf, by wholesome admonition and- which is the real way to teach -by example first and precept later. He delivered the poor man from him that was too strong for him, the poor and needy from him that despoiled him. He took care to comfort the sad and faint hearted and to bring back those that delighted in evil to a godly sorrow. He strictly maintained his own frugality and took delight in preserving the rigours of the monastery amidst the pomp of the world.[vii]

Cuthbert was only two years a bishop before he died and was buried at Lindisfarne. Eleven years later hi reputation as a holy man in his life confirmed by miracles after his death led to his body being elevated to a shrine in the church. In this process it was discovered that his body was discovered to be uncorrupted. The action of being elevated was the equivalent of canonisation in the early medieval church. Only those honoured by burial above ground was considered worthy of having a liturgical cult. After the Vikings destroyed Lindisfarne in AD875 several members of the community travelled round Northern England with the body and relics eventually finding a home in Durham in AD 995 where they built a church to house his relics and they remain in Durham Cathedral today.

St Wilfrid (633-709)

The achievements of Wilfrid make him one of the important figures in the Anglo Saxon Church. Most of what we know of him comes from his biographer, Eddius, who paints a picture of a forceful and vigorous personality who aroused both hatred and affection. Also conceived as a hagiographical essay, the *Life of Wilfred* is filled with Old Testament allusions, which place Wilfred in the long line of prophets.

Born into a noble Northumbrian family, Wilfred was educated at Lindisfarne, which was the centre of the Celtic church, but growing dissatisfied with its insularity he went to Canterbury and then Rome where he studied Canon Law and Scripture under the Archdeacon Boniface. On his way home he stayed in Lyon for three years and saw how the church in Gaul was organised especially the power, wealth and importance of the local bishop. On his return to England he was appointed Abbot of Ripon and although brought up in the heart of the Celtic church, Wilfred was very much a Roman in his outlook and fought fiercely for the Roman liturgical practices to be adopted at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664. He also rebuilt his abbey church in stone rather than the thatched wooden constructions of the Celtic church and introduced the Benedictine Rule of life. After the Synod he was appointed Bishop but owing to a dearth of English bishops to consecrate him, he returned to Gaul for consecration but found on his return in AD666 a new king, who had appointed someone else. In AD 699 Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury eventually reinstated Wilfred and the following years were among his most

successful. He obtained large endowments of land for his churches, all of which were built in stone and adopted the lifestyle of the Frankish bishops which he had observed in Lyon. His diocese was co-terminus with the kingdom of Northumbria which stretched from the Wash to the River Forth with York at its centre. But Wilfred fell out with King Egfrith when he persuaded his wife Queen Etheldreda to separate and become a nun in AD 672. There was also criticism of his power and wealth. In AD678-81 Theodore together with Egfrith divided the diocese of Northumbria into four without Wilfred's knowledge or consent. Although the division was a sensible decision, the way it was carried out was not and Wilfred felt he had been deposed. As a result he took his case to Rome, the first Anglo Saxon to do so. Wilfred's case was upheld but Egfrith refused to obey and imprisoned Wilfred only releasing him on condition that he left the kingdom. Wilfred went to Sussex, which was the last pagan area of England and converted first the king and then the people to Christianity. Recalled to the north in AD686, Wilfred soon had to retire to Mercia and again took his case to Rome. Eventually he agreed a compromise at the Synod of Nidd in AD705 and until his death presided over the See of Hexham and his monasteries around the country dying in AD706. He was buried in Ripon, which became the centre for his cult along with Hexham. Wilfred could be counted as many things among them a founder of monasteries, an apostolic pioneer and a church builder and he introduced a greater element of splendour and dignity into the C7th English Church. His biographer, Eddius described Wilfred as being the first bishop among the English race " who learnt to deliver to the churches of the English the Catholic manner of life"[viii] He also used Wilfred's own voice to summarise what these achievements were:

I have been a bishop now for nearly forty years...After the death of those elders whom Pope Gregory sent to us, was I not the first to root out from the church the foul weeds planted by the Scots? Did I not convert the whole Northumbrian nation to celebrating Easter at the proper time as the Holy See demanded, and to having the proper Roman tonsure in the form of a crown instead of your old way of shaving the back of the head from the top down? Did I not teach you to chant according to the practice of the early church, with two choirs singing alternately, but simultaneously for responsories and antiphons and doing the responses and chants together antiphonally? Did I not bring the monastic life into line with the Rule of St Benedict never before introduced into these parts? [ix]

This brief survey began with a Celtic saint and ends with a saint who was proud to teach the "Catholic manner of Life" espoused by the reforming Pope, Gregory VII. Tracing their lives also paints a picture of how the church changed during the C7th as kings were converted followed by their people. The missionary saints were alongside them all both physically and spiritually on their journeys to faith. Not to be forgotten is the saint whose work has kept this history alive and that is the Venerable Bede, the only English Doctor of the Church who spent his life documenting this early period of history, and producing many Lives of the saints and abbots. Sequestered in his monastery at Wearmouth he

nevertheless knew what was happening in the world and how important knowing the history of his age and the ages before him was in order for faith to continue and remain vibrant.

Further Reading

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[i] Ramirez J., *The Private Lives of Saints* (ebook 17/294)
[ii] See also Farmer, David (Ed) *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* 5th Edition (Oxford 2003) 138-9
[iii] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English speaking people* book 3 ch 5
[iv] Ibid. book 3 ch 3
[v] See Ramirez *op cit* ch 7; Farmer *Oxford Dictionary* 249-50
[vi] Farmer, D., (Ed) "The life of Cuthbert" in *The Age of Bede* (1965 Penguin Classics) 43-104
[vii] *Life* ch 26
[viii] Eddius, The life of Wilfred in Farmer, *The Age of Bede xiv,* 122
[ix] Eddius, op cit ch 48 in Farmer *The Age of Bede* 158