BEDE'S NATIVE SOURCES FOR THE
HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA

BY D. P. KIRBY, M.A., Ph.D.
LECTURER IN MEDIEVAL HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL.

Bede, a monk of the Northumbrian monastery of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, completed his Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum in 731, and in it he described the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century. The H.E. was the work of a mature scholar, written towards the end of a life spent in varied academic disciplines, but historians have tended to neglect the limitations placed on Bede as a historian by the nature of the source-material with which he had to deal. Earlier written records did exist, but they were few; essentially, Bede was dependent on oral tradition. Oral tradition, however, whatever its historical reliability, was both localized and itself dependent on the stimulus provided by the royal or ecclesiastical patronage of a hagiographical cult. In addition, Bede was obliged to seek information about the period of the conversion from ecclesiastical centres throughout England, but not all responded to his enquiries as well as they might. Bede was repeatedly faced with gaps in his knowledge which he could not fill because information was unavailable. Consequently, though he succeeded in writing what was for the age a brilliant and unique consecutive history of the English Church from the time of St. Augustine, his history could not but be partial and fragmentary.

This study is concerned with the practical difficulties which faced Bede as he wrote the H.E. and seeks to emphasize the imperfect nature of the evidence he was obliged to use. The study falls into two parts, the history of Northumbria and the history of the southern kingdoms. Because of the greater proportion of

---

Northumbrian material in the _H.E._ more is known of the Church in Northumbria than in any other kingdom, and an analysis of the Northumbrian element in the _H.E._ provides the most satisfactory understanding of English historiography in the early eighth century. The extent of oral tradition and its limitations for historical purposes are most clearly revealed in Bede's Northumbrian chapters. As Bede was living in Northumbria it proved easier to collect information about the Northumbrian Church than it did about the Church in the southern kingdoms. The greater the distance information had to travel to Bede, the greater the risk of failing to discover very much; but no clear pattern emerges as to why Bede was provided with more information about one kingdom than about another. To his request for information the church of Canterbury responded fairly well, the East Anglian centres rather patchily, the West Saxons in only a limited way, the Mercians—if they were ever approached—apparently not at all. And when information was received, whether from a Northumbrian or West Saxon centre, it came from a specific church or monastery; apart from the essentially localized nature of all such material, it was left to Bede to attempt to relate in time and context the historical traditions of one region to those of another.

**I. The History of Northumbria**

(i) *The preservation of oral tradition in the monasteries*

The ecclesiastics of Bede's time all appear to have had their own anecdotes about their teachers and predecessors, and Bede was able to make great use of such personal reminiscences. The _H.E._ is a mosaic of personal memories, but for stories about a figure of the past to survive for very long they had to be preserved by a self-perpetuating community. One of the oddest features of Bede's Northumbrian chapters is his treatment of James the Deacon, the companion of Paulinus, the first Northumbrian missionary, who was resolute enough to remain in Northumbria when Paulinus' mission broke down and who lived to play a part in the Synod of Whitby (664). The broad outlines of the life of James the Deacon are recorded in a superficial way, but there is an
absence of detail about the man. It is difficult to see why he did not become one of the great legendary figures in the Northumbrian Church, unless it proved impossible to recover anecdotes about him from the oral tradition of the area where he spent most of his time. James the Deacon lived in a small village near Catterick after the flight of Paulinus (H.E. II. 20), and unless there was a monastic community there which survived after his death any local traditions would soon die out. This is what may be conjectured to have happened.

Any survey of the hagiographical literature of the seventh century shows clearly that traditions about a great churchman or king of the past were preserved at the monastic foundation with which they or their descendants (if they were royalty) were most closely associated. The Lives of the saints which were written in Northumbria were no exception and were commissioned by the monastery most intimately concerned with the saint in question. The earliest extant Life of an English saint is the anonymous Lindisfarne Life of St. Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne and hermit of Farne, written 699-704. Bede subsequently wrote a prose Life of St. Cuthbert at the request of the community at Lindisfarne in which he made use of the earlier anonymous Life. After the death in 709 of Wilfrid of York, founder of the monasteries of Ripon and Hexham, Eddius Stephanus, companion of Wilfrid, was urged to write a Life of the bishop by the community at Hexham. An anonymous Life of Ceolfrith, abbot of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow monastery, was written at that monastery c. 716 and subsequently used by Bede in his History of the Abbots of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. In the early eighth century Whitby was a double-monastery, presided over by Abbess Aelfflaed and her mother Eanflaed, daughter of Edwin, king of Northumbria; it was to Whitby that the relics of Edwin were translated and traditions about Edwin were included in a

1 Ed. B. Colgrave, Two Lives of St. Cuthbert (Cambridge, 1940).
2 Ed. B. Colgrave, op. cit.
3 Ed. B. Colgrave, The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddi Stephanus (Cambridge, 1927). This Life was known to Bede when he wrote the H.E. (Colgrave, op. cit., p. xii).
4 Ed. C. Plummer, Baedae Opera Historica, vol. i.
Whitby *Life of Gregory*, the pope who sent Augustine to England, written c. 704-16. In one or two instances, where early written *Lives* did not exist, Bede is known to have drawn on the oral tradition of a monastery particularly associated with a given saint. Lastingham, founded by Cedd and governed in turn by Cedd and his brother Chad, provided information about Cedd and Chad (*H.E.* Preface). What Bede includes of the traditions about John of Beverley, except for one incident narrated by Herebald, abbot of Tynemouth but formerly a member of John’s entourage (*H.E.* V. 6), he received from Bercthun, abbot of Beverley (*H.E.* V. 2-5).

What is particularly important for the historian is that, although, for example, a body of tradition about St. Cuthbert at Lindisfarne and Farne might be preserved at Lindisfarne, there is nothing to show that these particular traditions would survive elsewhere. The restricted nature of oral tradition is well demonstrated by the materials relating to St. Cuthbert. Both the anonymous writer and Bede affirm the use only of good authorities and most trustworthy witnesses, and Bede submitted his *Life* to Herefrith, priest and later abbot of Lindisfarne as well as one of Bede’s informants, and to others for correction, after which it was read before the community at Lindisfarne to be accurately weighed and examined. What so impressed the men of Bede’s time were the miracles, said to have been performed by Cuthbert either during the early years of his life at the monastery of Melrose or subsequently at Lindisfarne and Farne, and by his relics after his death: and what is so useful for the study of oral tradition is that both the anonymous writer and Bede took care to supply the names of their informant for a particular story. Cuthbert died in 687, and, as there was not a great interval between his death and the writing of the *Lives*, many people might be presumed to have been able to contribute. Indeed, stories were still appearing when Bede revised his *Life*, but he decided not to

---

insert this new crop because the work was considered to be well-balanced without them. The anonymous writer cites his authorites as Elias, priest of Lindisfarne (I. 3), Plecgils, a priest (II. 3), Tydi, a priest who told his story at Lindisfarne (II. 4), Tydi again and others unnamed (II. 5), Tydi again (IV. 6), and Penna, a priest (IV. 5). Drawing on an incident in her own life, Aelfrlæd, abbess of Whitby, told one story (IV. 10), and Trumwine, ex-bishop of Abercorn and then in retirement at Whitby, related a story originally told by Cuthbert himself (I. 3). Aethelwald, prior of Melrose, provided one anecdote (IV. 4), but since it concerned a member of his own family it was probably not monastic but family tradition. Tradition from Melrose is not otherwise reflected in the anonymous Life. Bede filled in more of the Melrose background and of Cuthbert's friendship with Boisil, prior of Melrose, from Sigfrith, a monk of Melrose then at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow (c. 6), and from Herefrith of Lindisfarne (c. 8). Bede's informants for Cuthbert's life at Lindisfarne and Farne were Trumwine, ex-bishop of Abercorn (c. 1), Aethelwald, then abbot of Melrose, who added additional details to his story (c. 30), Ingwald, a monk of Monkwearmouth, who claimed to have heard the story he told from Cuthbert himself (c. 5)—a story which appears in the anonymous Life without any specified authority—Cynemund, monk of Lindisfarne (c. 36), Baldhelm, priest of Lindisfarne (c. 25), and Herefrith again (c. 37) for a long account of Cuthbert's death. The impression is that the number of authorities was actually fairly limited. Bede's use of the same informants in some instances as the anonymous writer emphasizes the circumscribed nature of the circle of story-tellers. Any surviving Melrose tradition was not widely known at Lindisfarne, and Lindisfarne tradition itself was preserved by a small clique. Though the abbess of Whitby might recall an incident in her own life in which Cuthbert had figured prominently, there is no reason to suppose that she would be familiar with a larger body of tradition about Cuthbert, still less to suppose that any such body would be preserved at Whitby. This impression of the localization of oral tradition is confirmed more than once by the information Bede was able to acquire from monasteries in the southern kingdoms. The
consequence of this is that Bede's view of the history of the English Church was shaped by the interests of the monastic or episcopal centres with which he happened to be in touch. If, for whatever reason, he failed to establish contact with a given monastery, any traditions which survived at that monastery about a great figure of the past would be lost to him.

When Bede received information based on oral tradition he can have had very few means of testing what he was told, and the problem of the reliability of oral tradition in England in the early eighth century lies at the heart of the historical study of the *H.E.* First-hand eye-witnesses could take Bede a long way back in time; he had spoken to men who could remember Aidan, bishop of Lindisfarne (*d.* 652) (*H.E.* III. 17), as no doubt Bishop Wilfrid could, for he had spent some six years on Lindisfarne prior to Aidan's death. The scope for error was wide, however; Bede had heard from Wilfrid himself concerning relations between Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria, and Queen Aethelthryth (*H.E.* IV. 19), and therefore was writing c. 730 on the basis of information given him before 709 about events which took place c. 673. An interesting example of the way in which memories could be transmitted orally is provided by Eddius's account of how Bishop Wilfrid related his reminiscences—which covered the long period c. 650-709—towards the end of his life to his priest and kinsman Tatberht as they were riding along together (c. 65); but who could say whether the old man always told the truth or even whether Tatberht correctly remembered what Wilfrid told him? Apart from some consensus of general agreement there was no absolute way to verify trustworthiness. The touchstone for all criticism of Bede's oral information must be the words of the anonymous author of the Whitby *Life of Gregory* (c. 16), himself, of course, using oral tradition, that the same incidents were remembered differently by different persons. The occasion for this statement was the difficulty of testing what was true or untrue in the traditions about Edwin, king of Northumbria (617-34). The writer of the Whitby *Life* had his reservations about an incident in the life of Edwin, said to have occurred while Edwin was an exile in East Anglia and before he became king, which was not told on the authority of those who
had known Edwin best; Bede gives a version of the same story without any reservations (H.E. III. 12). The Whitby writer provides evidence, therefore, that oral tradition could become suspect within a period of some ninety years at most, and Bede that an originally doubtful story could become an unquestioned part of tradition. Bede's great interest in the first phases of the Conversion obliged him to write about a period of time well removed from his own and to handle materials not always of demonstrable authenticity. Occasionally it proved difficult to discover traditions of events several years in the past. Though Bede had spoken to men who had known Aidan, he evidently found it no easy task to collect stories about the saint for he says that he has written about Aidan only in so far as he could learn from those who knew him (H.E. III. 17). Aidan had been eclipsed by the fame of St. Cuthbert. In his Life of St. Cuthbert (c. 17) Bede stated that no one before Cuthbert had dared to lead a hermit life on the island of Farne because it was inhabited by demons, but when he came to write about Aidan in the H.E. Bede discovered that Aidan had been in the habit of retiring to pray there (III. 16).

Oral tradition, therefore, if it were to survive for more than one or two life spans, could only do so in a community of persons interested in preserving stories of the past. The memory of a particular saint would be treasured only by a very limited circle of people and within a very limited geographical area. Even within those restricted limits there might be marked differences in the content of tradition. When Bede came to write the H.E. he had to make a tremendous effort to gather and weave together in a coherent narrative the fading stories and memories of those few of his contemporaries, both trustworthy and untrustworthy, to whom he could make his interests known.

(ii) Bede and Northumbrian monastic traditions

The Northumbrian monasteries which are known to have provided Bede with substantial information at one time or another relating to the history of the early Church in England are Lindisfarne, Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, Hexham, Melrose, Beverley and Lastingham; but it is also probable that a great
deal of material was also derived either directly or indirectly from oral tradition at Whitby and/or Gilling.

Bede's metrical *Life of St. Cuthbert* and the later prose *Life* familiarized him with the career of a man whose posthumous cult represented him as one of the most outstanding personalities of the Northumbrian Church. When Bede was writing the *H.E.* he condensed the mass of information about Cuthbert, and in a few masterly chapters (IV. 27-29) set Cuthbert's career as monk, missionary, bishop and hermit in the framework of the general history of the Northumbrian Church. Bede's *History of the Abbots* of his own monastery involved the co-ordination of written record, tradition and his own personal knowledge in the study of the successive abbots of an evidently important Northumbrian monastery. It is an indication of Bede's scholarship that he did not permit either the Cuthbert material or that from his own monastery to dominate the text of the *H.E.* Understandably, however, he took pride in the instrumental part played by his monastery in the conversion of Nechtan, king of the Picts, to the Roman Easter, c. 715 (H.E. V. 21).

Bede records information received from Acca, bishop of Hexham, who had been a companion of Wilfrid, bishop of York (H.E. III. 13), and it may be that the details Bede adds to Eddius' account of Wilfrid were supplied by Acca (H.E. III. 28: IV. 15-16). As Bede also derived information from Wilfrid (H.E. IV. 19), however, he could have learnt the details in question from Wilfrid, though it was certainly Acca who told Bede about the vision of an invalid boy at Wilfrid's South Saxon foundation at Selsey (H.E. IV. 14). But not all Bede's information about Wilfrid in Northumbria came from Wilfridian circles. Bede's account of how Chad was made Bishop of York in 665 is undoubtedly from Lastingham (H.E. III. 28, V. 19). In so far as Wilfrid's career affected other communities, traditions about him would be remembered by those communities, and there can be little doubt that the reference to Wilfrid's brief and unhappy rule at Lindisfarne on the death of Cuthbert (H.E. IV. 29) was based on Lindisfarne tradition. From Lindisfarne also probably came Bede's account of the expulsion of Wilfrid from Northumbria in 678 (H.E. IV. 12); this account differs from that by Eddius in
its exclusion of any reference to the part played by Archbishop Theodore in Wilfrid's downfall, and the whole narrative of the incident is but the background to the subsequent division of the Northumbrian diocese and the appointment of Eata, ex-pupil of Aidan, as bishop first of Lindisfarne and then of Hexham (H.E. IV. 12: 27-28).

Wilfrid's most striking achievement in Northumbria in the eyes of Bede must have been his successful championing of the Dionysiac cycle for dating Easter at the synod of Whitby (664). The man who successfully carried the new Easter to the Picts and Scots was the Northumbrian, Egbert, who died in 729, and for whom Bede had the greatest respect (H.E. V. 9). For Bede, the success of this mission was the culminating event in the H.E. The story of the vision of a monk of Melrose in which Boisil, late prior of Melrose, ordered him to tell Egbert to instruct the Scots in the true Easter (H.E. V. 9) must have come from Melrose; the story itself raises the possibility that Bede was particularly interested in Boisil, who figures so prominently in his Life of St. Cuthbert, because of his alleged part in the vision. Of Egbert's original vow, made in Ireland at the time of the plague in 664, to live always as an exile from England, Bede learnt from an old priest, no doubt an inmate by that time of Bede's own monastery (H.E. III. 27). Egbert sent, among others, Willibrord, to work among the continental Saxons. Eddius records (c. 26) that Willibrord was one of Wilfrid's pupils at Ripon and, as Acca told Bede a miracle story concerning King Oswald on the authority of Willibrord (H.E. III. 13), it may be that the references to Egbert's part in the continental mission came from Acca. Of Egbert's work among the Picts, Bede records nothing in detail (H.E. III. 27); he may have missed the opportunity to derive information from the Pictish envoys of King Nechtan who came to his monastery c. 715 seeking further information about the Roman Easter. Egbert must have worked in Pictland before this date for in 716-17 he went to Iona and remained there until his death. The absence of detailed information about the Picts right up to the time of writing the H.E. suggests the possibility of a subsequent breakdown in Northumbrian contacts with the Picts in the circumstances attendant on the deposition of King Nechtan in 724.
It is clear, on the other hand, that contact was not lost with Iona in these years. Adamnan, abbot of Iona and writer of the *Life of St. Columba*, visited Bede’s monastery in 686 or 688 and was won over by Abbot Ceolfrith to the Roman Easter; without doubt Bede’s information of the missionary work of Columba among the Picts (*H.E.* III. 4), Egbert’s death at Iona (729) (*H.E.* V. 22), and probably the statement that Iona was the chief monastery among the Scots (*H.E.* III. 21), comes from Iona. His information about the dimly remembered mission to the southern Picts of Ninian, a Briton and founder of a monastery at Whithorn, must have come from Whithorn, Bishop Pecthelm of Whithorn being a personal acquaintance of Bede (*H.E.* III. 4: V. 13).

Acca of Hexham, whose knowledge of and interest in the past events may perhaps be detected in the pages of the *H.E.*, was certainly keenly interested in miracle stories associated with Oswald, king of Northumbria, and it was from Acca that Bede gathered two (*H.E.* III. 13; IV. 14). Indeed, it was probably from the church of Hexham that Bede derived most of the material about Oswald which he included in the *H.E.* Acca was the most important bishop in Bernicia in Bede’s day, and to him Bede dedicated most of his theological works. It is not impossible that Acca was related to the Bernician dynasty—there are several instances of Anglo-Saxon bishops related to royalty—and any such kinship would help to explain the expulsion of Acca in 732, in the same year that Ceolwulf, king of Northumbria, was first deposed. The community of Hexham preserved the dates of the battles and death of Oswald, and made an annual pilgrimage to the site of his great victory, Heavenfield, near Hexham (*H.E.* III. 2; IV. 14). Oswald’s niece, Osthryth, daughter of Oswiu of Northumbria (643-71) and queen of Aethelred of Mercia, translated some of the relics of Oswald to Bardney in Lindsey between c. 675-97 (*H.E.* III. 11). This information could have reached Bede from the monastery of Partney, near Bardney. Bede was in touch with Partney because he names Deda, abbot of Partney, as the source for certain details of the work of Bishop Paulinus in that province (*H.E.* II. 16). It is interesting, however, that the exiled Wilfrid was bishop of Leicester from 691; if the translation took place after 691 it
could reflect the interests not only of Queen Osthryth but also of members of the Hexham community. And whenever the translation occurred information about it could still have passed into Hexham tradition as a result of Wilfrid's sojourn in Mercia. Certainly, there is reason to suppose that Hexham was the storehouse of tradition about King Oswald.

A south Northumbrian body of tradition related to Oswine, king of Deira (643-52). Oswine was a member of the Deiran royal family and second-cousin to Eanflaed, the queen of Oswiu of Bernicia, as well as to Oswiu himself. When Oswine was assassinated by Oswiu in 652 it was Eanflaed who insisted that a monastery be founded at Gilling, the place of his slaying (H.E. III. 24); and Trumhere, a kinsman of King Oswine, was the first abbot (H.E. III. 24). Eanflaed retired on Oswiu's death to Whitby where her daughter, Aelfflaed, was abbess, so that it is quite possible that Whitby as well as Gilling could have become a centre of tradition about King Oswine. There is no evidence that Bede had knowledge of any other Deiran monastery with reason to be interested in the king.

The two sets of traditions, the Bernician about Oswald and the Deiran about Oswine, reflect the rivalry which existed between the two kingdoms. If Oswald was said to be the most Christian king of the Northumbrians (H.E. III. 9), Oswine was said to be so devout and humble that the Northumbrians were unworthy of him (H.E. III. 14). Bede's references to Aidan are significant in this connection. Aidan's missionary career in Northumbria falls into two periods; in the first he is associated with Oswald (635-43) in Bernicia, in the second with Oswine (643-52). There is little trace of Aidan's association with Oswiu in Bernicia, though a chance story from Lindisfarne refers to Oswiu and Aidan at the time of Oswiu's marriage to Eanflaed (H.E. III. 15). The geographical break in the setting of the stories in which Aidan figures is not because he had no dealings with Oswiu but because of the localized interests on which Bede was drawing. It is to be noted that in the stories about Aidan and the kings, Oswald and Oswine, the intention is less to illustrate the saintliness of Aidan than to extol that of the kings. Aidan was intended to be a figure of only secondary importance. Bede used
them to illustrate the mission of Aidan, for he could derive only partial and general information about the bishop from tradition at Lindisfarne, but in so doing he was altering their purpose.

In the case of Oswiu (643-71), the important Northumbrian events of the reign are related in one way or another to Whitby history. The account of the critical battle of Winwaed, 656 (H.E. III. 24) is really but a prelude to an account of Oswiu’s dedication of his daughter, Aelfflaed, to perpetual virginity—at Hartlepool and Whitby; and when the great Northumbrian synod of 664 met to determine between the Celtic and the Roman Easter it met at Whitby. Oswiu was buried at Whitby. As with Oswine, so with Oswiu, ex-queen Eanflaed and her daughter, Aelfflaed, are common factors in the surviving material. Eddius shows (c. 60) that on an important later occasion Abbess Aelfflaed was a source of information about Aldfrith, king of Northumbria (685-704). At almost every stage in an analysis of Bede’s Northumbrian chapters describing the deeds of the early Christian kings, with the exception of Oswald, the historian is brought back to the great monastery at Whitby. This is true not only of the traditions about Oswine and Oswald but also of Edwin (617-34). The earliest period with which Bede had to deal in the history of Christian Northumbria was the reign of Edwin and the mission of Paulinus, bishop of York. For this period he possessed copies of a few undated papal letters, but was largely dependent upon oral tradition. The materials for the conversion of Northumbria in Edwin’s reign have recently been subjected to critical study which has questioned the historicity and accuracy of Bede’s account.¹ One of the fundamental problems of the reign is that Nennius, writing his Historia Brittonum about 826, claimed on the authority of two British bishops, Renchidus who is otherwise unknown, and Elbobdus, styled archbishop of Gwynedd in the Welsh annals, who died in 809, that Edwin was baptized not by Paulinus but by a Briton, Rhun, son of Urbgen.² Nennius was

² Ed. T. Mommsen, M.G.H., Auct. Ant., xiii (1894), 111-222 (pp. 206-7). Rhun, son of Urbgen, is usually regarded as the son of that Urbgen, ruler of
not able to amplify this statement so that it is difficult to see it as a well-known piece of British propaganda, and neither can it be dismissed casually as Welsh legend. Elbobdus can have had no cause to spread worthless legend; he it was who brought over the Church in North Wales to the Roman Easter in 768. He himself belonged to a Welsh Romanizing party. That St. Chad was able to find two British bishops to consecrate him in 665 (H.E. III. 28) makes it not at all improbable that a British bishop could have been active in Northumbria in Edwin's reign. But all reference to such British missionaries in Northumbria had been suppressed in the traditions of the reign which Bede received. It is not certain from where Bede did receive his information about the reign of Edwin. The Whitby Life of Gregory clearly reveals the early eighth-century Whitby interest in the king. Abbess Hild, who died in 680, was a relative of Edwin, and asÆlfflaed, grand-daughter of Edwin, was abbess when the Life of Gregory was written it is evident that Whitby must have been well placed to collect stories about him. But Bede does not say that he received information about Edwin from Whitby. He only names Deda, abbot of Partney in Lindsey, as his informant for details of Paulinus' work in that province (H.E. II. 16). All the incidents in the H.E. in which Edwin and Paulinus figure are located in Lindsey or Deira, with the exception of the mass baptisms at Yeavering in Bernicia (H.E. II. 14), which shows not so much that Paulinus worked mainly in these southern regions but that most of Bede's information was drawn from the south. There may have been a link between Partney monastery and Whitby, but it is unlikely that traditions of Deiran events were preserved in a Lindsey monastery and a Deiran source must lie behind a great part of Bede's narrative (e.g. H.E. II. 13-14, 20). Bede certainly had extensive knowledge of Abbess Hild of Whitby (H.E. IV. 23) and of Caedmon, the Whitby poet (H.E. IV. 24).

Rheged, who fought the Bernician Angles in the 580s and 90s, and Rhun was therefore probably an important figure in North Britain in the early seventh century; cf. K. H. Jackson, "On the Northern British Section in Nennius", Celt and Saxon, pp. 20-62 (pp. 31, 41 f.).

Mrs. N. K. Chadwick, "The Conversion of Northumbria", Celt and Saxon, pp. 143-5; Dr. Colgrave, "The Earliest Life of St. Gregory the Great", ibid. p. 125 (note 1) is not convinced.
It has been argued that Bede was not in direct contact with Whitby because the Whitby Life of Gregory was unknown to him and he has virtually no information about Whitby affairs after c. 680; but the material for the chapters on Hild and Caedmon was presumably collected immediately prior to the writing of the H.E. and there does occur a passing reference to the early eighth-century translation of the relics of King Edwin (H.E. III. 24). Bede has little to record about Lindisfarne after the death of Cuthbert, but he was certainly in close touch with that monastery. The possibility that the Life of Gregory was sent to Bede but arrived too late to be quoted verbatim in the H.E. still remains a possibility, and as Bede does retell in his own words two stories which are found in the Life of Gregory it is quite likely that he was drawing on Whitby tradition, communicated orally. But there were certainly many intermediaries through which Bede could have drawn on Whitby material if not from Whitby direct. Information could have come from York, for example, for some of Edwin’s relics were at York and three Whitby men became bishops of York—Bosa, John of Beverley and Wilfrid II, the latter bishop when the H.E. was written. On the other hand, Bede’s knowledge of York history was very slight. A second possible intermediary was the monastery at Gilling, founded at the instigation of Eanflaed. The anonymous Life of Abbot Ceolfrith of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow (c. 2, 3) records that his brother Cynefrith was abbot for a time there and that Ceolfrith first entered Gilling monastery, and hence it is possible that there was a subsequent link between Bede’s monastery and Gilling through which Whitby traditions could have been transmitted. But Ceolfrith is also known to have spent some time at St. Botulf’s monastery at Iken (Life of Ceolfrith, c. 4) and Bede does not appear to have been in touch with Iken. What does seem certain is that Bede’s account of the early Christian kings of Deira bears every indication of having been shaped by the interests of members of the Deiran dynasty and monastic houses associated with them.

It is very probable that the Bernician counterpart to the Deiran monastery of Whitby was originally the monastery of Coldingham (St. Abb’s). This monastery, where Aebbe, half-sister of King Oswiu, presided was clearly one of the most influential communities in Bernicia until it was burnt down in the 680s. A double-monastery like Whitby, it was inhabited by both Irish and Angles (H.E. IV. 25); there Cuthbert visited Aebbe and Queen Aethelthryth first entered the religious life, King Ecgfrith was a visitor to his aunt, and Aebbe was instrumental in securing the release from captivity of Wilfrid of York. Bede does not appear to have used, or even discovered, any body of tradition about Oswiu or Ecgfrith comparable to that about Edwin, Oswald or Oswine; it is conceivable that had Coldingham monastery survived into his own day, Bede’s Bernician material would have been much more copious. But the traditions even about kings could fade quickly if not cultivated by an interested party, and if Bede failed to contact the right monastery information would elude him. Alchfrith, son of and co-ruler for a time with King Oswiu, appears but fleetingly in early eighth-century writings, remembered primarily because of his patronage of the young Wilfrid. Nothing would be known of the rule of Aethelwald, son of Oswald, in Deira were it not for the Lastingham records (H.E. III. 23).

Of great value, in fact, to an understanding of the H.E. would be a closer study of the gaps in Bede’s picture, of the men of whom he has little or nothing to say. Bede was particularly interested in the history of the Church in England before the death of Archbishop Theodore (690), believing that the years since then had seen a decline in the spirituality and vigour of the English Church. Bede devoted scant attention to the men of his own generation, and hence the rather patchy quality of the last book of the H.E. This explains the general absence of information about such centres as Whitby or Lindisfarne after c. 680-90. There was a cycle of stories about Aethelwald, Cuthbert’s successor on Farne, for example, but only a fragment has survived (H.E. V. 1).¹

¹ C. Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica*, ii. 272 noted that Bede uses an anecdote about Aethelwald in the metrical *Life of Cuthbert* which is not found elsewhere.
Even for the years before c. 690, however, there are surprising ommissions. There can be no doubt that Bede at times excluded information he had obtained because it could not be well integrated into the framework of the H.E. In the case of Bishop Wilfrid, Bede no doubt curtailed the material about Wilfrid not through any dislike of the bishop but simply for reasons of space. What is difficult to understand is Bede’s treatment of the history of the church of York. Of this important Deiran centre Bede records virtually nothing after the departure of Paulinus. Acca of Hexham had known and studied under Bosa, bishop of York and Bede accepted what was probably Acca’s favourable picture of him (H.E. V. 20), but little is said of Bosa in the H.E. and the account of John of Beverley, Bosa’s successor at York, is mainly from Beverley tradition (H.E. V. 1-5). Bede simply failed to tap any considerable vein of York tradition.

Finally, it must be remembered that there were a great many monastic houses in Northumbria which appear only in passing in early eighth-century writings. Among such houses in Deira were Thridwulf’s monastery in Elmet (H.E. II. 14), Tunnaceaster (H.E. IV. 22), Hartlepool, Kaelcacaester (Tadcaster) and Hackness (H.E. IV. 23), Watton (H.E. V. 3), and Ovington (near Whitby ?) (Bede’s Life of St. Cuthbert, c. 34); in Lindsey were Partney (H.E. II. 16), Bardney (H.E. III. 11), that of the Abbess Aethelhild (H.E. III. 11), and Ad Barvae (H.E. IV. 3, 6); and in Bernicia were Gateshead (H.E. III. 21), Paegnalaech (H.E. III. 27), Dacore in Cumberland (H.E. IV. 32), Tynemouth (H.E. V. 6), a monastery at the mouth of the river Coquet (Life of St. Cuthbert, c. 24), one at Carlisle (Life of St. Cuthbert, c. 27), and an unnamed monastery near Lindisfarne (Life of Cuthbert, c. 45). This list, of course, by no means represents all the monasteries in Northumbria in the seventh century. It must not be supposed that the monastic houses to which Bede repeatedly refers were necessarily more influential and important than the lesser-known houses to which only a passing reference occurs. Melrose appears quite often in the early eighth-century sources, but only because of interest in Cuthbert and Egbert. Bardney, on the other hand, was the monastery to which the relics of King Oswald were translated and where Aethelred of Mercia retired after his
abdications. The unnamed monastery at the mouth of the Coquet was famous for its companies of monks. From some of these lesser-known centres, Partney, Dacore and Tynemouth, Bede did receive material for the *H.E.*, but it is inconceivable that he can have contacted every monastic house in Northumbria and certainly there is no evidence that he did. But once the localized nature of the oral tradition upon which he was drawing is appreciated, it is apparent that Bede groped his way through those monastic houses with which he chanced to be in touch to information about a limited selection of personalities only. Each monastic community possessed its individual traditions and, depending on which communities Bede relied for information, so his view of the age of the conversion would vary accordingly. The problem for the historian is to attempt to assess to what extent an ecclesiastical history of Northumbria compiled from lesser-known centres would have modified or even transformed that of the *H.E.*

II. *The episcopal and monastic traditions of the southern kingdoms*

(i) *Kent*

Bede acknowledged a primary debt among his southern correspondents to Abbot Albinus of Canterbury for information concerning the mission of St. Augustine, not only in Kent but also in the adjoining regions (*H.E.* Preface). Much of this information, and the contents of papal letters, was brought to Bede by Albinus’ assistant in the research work, Nothelm, a priest of London, who actually visited Rome for information and went in person to Monkwearmouth and Jarrow (*H.E.* Preface). Either from Canterbury itself or from the results of Nothelm’s researches in the papal archives, Bede was provided with the texts of the letters of Pope Gregory to Augustine and his companions and to the Kentish court. These letters provided dated documentary pegs on which the oral account of the conversion of Kent at least could be hung. It is quite evident that Bede’s whole account of the conversion of Kent and the details of the establishment of the see of Canterbury come from Canterbury. Bede gives no sign of knowing anything very much about any ecclesiastical centre in
Kent other than Canterbury, certainly no indication that he received information directly from elsewhere. Even the church of Rochester, the important diocesan centre of west Kent, is only referred to incidentally. But as Bede is known to have communicated with the bishop of Winchester and the bishop of Lindsey (H.E. Preface), it is possible that he wrote to all the bishops. For the southern kingdoms this would be, in the circumstances of the time, one of the best ways of approaching his task. If this is so, many bishops, among them the bishop of Rochester, did not respond.

Canterbury, however, served Bede relatively well, though the limited interests of a religious community in this period had their effect on the records submitted to him. Nothing which did not relate to Canterbury history reached him. Only the monastery of Reculver, out of all the Kentish monasteries, is mentioned in passing (H.E. V. 8). What Canterbury provided, apart from valuable papal letters and details of episcopal consecrations in Kent and the neighbouring kingdoms, was Canterbury tradition about the church of Canterbury. There is no question but that these traditions were of fundamental importance to Bede, for the Augustinian mission formed one of the most significant chapters in the ecclesiastical history of the English nation and the preservation of so much information about a distant time and an event so central to early English history has been of the utmost value to historians. It is important to note, however, that, once the documentary sources are set aside, Bede's account of the Augustinian mission was based on Kentish oral tradition and subject to the same limitations as Northumbrian oral tradition. It is evident, for example, that without the papal documents the chronology of Canterbury affairs in the late sixth and early seventh centuries would have been hazy in the extreme, because the Canterbury episcopal lists were imperfectly preserved before the time of Mellitus (619-24). In the account of how Augustine first encountered King Aethelberht (H.E. I. 25), Canterbury provided Bede with the sort of material which would fit well into a saint's Life, and in the story of the way in which Archbishop Laurentius converted King Eadbald (H.E. II. 5-6), a critical turning point in the fortunes of the missionaries in
England, they were offering a pious legend. The ecclesiastical saga of how Augustine found himself opposed by recalcitrant British bishops (H.E. II. 2) is a problematical narrative which requires very careful treatment before it can be used as evidence for Augustine's lack of diplomatic skill; it appears to be both anti-British and even slightly hostile to Augustine, and it may not derive from Canterbury but from a west Mercian monastery.\(^1\) In contrast to these fragments of oral tradition about Augustine is the precise and factual account of Theodore's journey to Kent, 668-9 (H.E. IV. 1-2), obviously from Canterbury. It is rather interesting that Canterbury tradition appears to have known nothing about the part played by Benedict Biscop, abbot of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, in bringing Theodore to England, to which Bede refers in his History of the Abbots (c. 3). Copies of Theodore's legislation (H.E. IV. 5) and the proceedings of the synod at Hatfield (H.E. IV. 17) were probably circulated throughout the land. Much of the material relating to Theodore's activities outside Kent, of course, probably came from the traditions of the region in which they were set, as in the case of the treaty between Ecgfrith and Aethelred (H.E. IV. 21) and the Northumbrian incidents (H.E. III. 25 : IV. 22, 28); or from some religious community with an indirect interest in Theodore through some event in the life of their local saint, as in the case of the account of the meeting between Theodore and Chad (H.E. IV. 2), certainly from Lastingham.

(ii) Essex

Of Mellitus, bishop of London and then archbishop of Canterbury on the death of Laurentius, two stories were related to Bede, one set in the kingdom of the East Saxons and describing a pagan reaction (H.E. II. 5) and the other set in Canterbury (H.E. II. 7). Bede may have received both stories from Nothelm, who must have been familiar both with traditions at London and Canterbury, but it is likely that the story of the pagan reaction in

---

1 The episode is discussed at length by Mrs. Chadwick, "The Battle of Chester: A Study of Sources", Celt and Saxon, pp. 167-85, and the suggestion as to the original home of Bede's story is hers (pp. 171, 177).
Essex passed into Canterbury tradition when Mellitus returned to Kent and that no East Saxon tradition about his mission survived the pagan reaction. For, rather surprisingly, despite his personal acquaintance with Nothelm, Bede recorded nothing of the activities even of the later bishops of London, except very generally about Bishop Earconwald (H.E. IV. 6). In this instance Bede knew that the horse-litter, upon which the bishop used to be carried when sick, was still kept by his disciples and had effected many cures; Earconwald founded the monastery of Barking in Essex (H.E. IV. 6), and, since Bede was sent a written account of this monastery from which he extracted several chapters (H.E. IV. 7-11), the details about Earconwald could have come from these.

Barking, however, was the only East Saxon monastery about which Bede seems to have had any detailed information. From the Northumbrian monastery of Lastingham came the information about the work of Cedd in Essex, the establishment of the two missionary centres at Ythanceaster (Bradwell) and Tilbury, and the baptism of King Suidhelm (H.E. Preface, III. 22). There is no evidence of any contact between Bede and Cedd's East Saxon foundations. A list of bishops from Canterbury, a Lastingham account of the missionary work of Cedd, and a selection of miracle stories from the monastery at Barking provided the materials out of which Bede had to reconstruct the ecclesiastical history of the kingdom. This evidence does not permit the historian to say, for example, that Barking's growing prestige reflected new Romanizing influences which eclipsed the earlier Celtic foundations of Cedd; it simply happened that Bede came into touch, perhaps through Nothelm, with Barking monastery, but of those monasteries with which he had no communication nothing is known. A good indication of the limited nature of Bede's knowledge about distant kingdoms is provided by his account of a pagan reaction which occurred among the East Saxons after the plague of 664 and the death of Cedd; it is clear that Bede only found out about this important event in the history of the Church in Essex from a chance meeting with a priest, a man who had actually been a companion of the bishop of Mercia who was sent to counter the reaction (H.E. III.
30). Where East Saxon history touched on Northumbrian, Bede could draw on Northumbrian tradition. The conversion of Sigeberht, king of the East Saxons, by Oswiu of Northumbria, and the baptism of the king by Finan, bishop of Lindisfarne (H.E. III. 22) would probably be remembered at Lindisfarne and the account derived from there. But so thin and diverse was Bede's material for the kingdom of the East Saxons that he did not attempt to establish any precise dates for East Saxon history, leaving its chronology very ill-defined.

(iii) East Anglia

Even more than in the case of Essex Bede was able to use Northumbrian tradition to provide a framework for the history of the kingdom of East Anglia. Raedwald, king of East Anglia, had protected and aided Edwin, King Eorpwald was converted by Edwin, and Bede knew that Aethelhere, the king he regarded as responsible for the battle of Winwaed, perished in that conflict (H.E. II. 12, 15; III. 24). Apart from such pieces of information, Bede was again dependent on the quantity and quality of the material sent to him from those East Anglian centres with which he was able to make contact. In consequence, although he received more information from the East Anglian monasteries, his account of the kingdom has the same patchwork effect as that of Essex.

King Aldwulf, who was related to the Northumbrian royal family (H.E. IV. 23), lived in Bede's time and told, probably on a visit to Northumbria, how Raedwald had set up two altars, one to Christ and one to pagan gods (H.E. II. 15). Bede states in his Preface that the East Anglian information was derived partly from tradition, partly from Albinus and Nothelm, and partly from Abbot Esi. No doubt it was East Anglian tradition that Raedwald was baptized at the court of Aethelberht of Kent (H.E. II. 15). From Canterbury Bede received an episcopal list and probably the account of the division of the East Anglian diocese by Theodore (H.E. IV. 5). There is no evidence that Bede had any direct contact with the bishoprics of Dunwich or North Elmham. Abbot Esi's monastery is unnamed and unidentified. King Sigeberht of East Anglia, returning from exile on the
continent in the early 630s a Christian, gave an Irish pilgrim, Fursa, the site of Cnobheresburg (Burgh Castle) for a monastery, and Bede later obtained a Life of Fursa, parts of which he incorporated in the H.E. (III. 19). Burgh Castle could have been Esi's monastery, but this is unlikely because the monastery seems to have broken up c. 650 during the course of a Mercian attack on East Anglia. King Sigeberht subsequently abdicated, however, and entered a monastery which seems to be distinct from Burgh Castle but which Bede does not name (H.E. III. 18). A medieval identification with Bury St. Edmunds seems improbable; in East Anglia, during the seventh century, this site must have been very exposed to the Mercian attacks of King Penda. But it is likely that Esi was abbot of the monastery into which Sigeberht withdrew, and that from Esi came the story of how Sigeberht was dragged out to fight Penda and the Mercians. So far as the Life of Fursa is concerned, Bede had known an old monk of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow who had known a man who had seen Fursa in East Anglia (H.E. III. 19), so that a copy of the Life could have been brought into Northumbria, if not by this man then by someone similarly placed. Fursa himself was a wandering pilgrim from Ireland whose stay in East Anglia was of limited duration, and so far as can be seen he was independent of the main missionary group. It was not because he was of particular importance or even that he was a rare phenomenon in the early history of the East Anglian Church that he came to have a place in the H.E., but simply that Bede chanced to come into possession of his Life and made use of it to fill in the detail of East Anglian history.

Unquestionably the main missionary group in East Anglia centred around the dimmer figure of Bishop Felix. Sigeberht's accession after a pagan phase in East Anglian history coincided with the arrival from Burgundy of Bishop Felix, who was appointed by Archbishop Honorius to preach the Gospel to the East Angles; Sigeberht gave Felix a see at Dunwich, and king and bishop worked together—the king founding a school such as he had seen in Gaul and Felix assisting in the work of education.

It appears that Bede received two accounts of Sigeberht and Felix (*H.E.* II. 15; III. 18). The first could have been received from King Aldwulf, for the narrative is placed immediately after the reference to Raedwald's double altar which came from Aldwulf. The second could have come from Abbot Esi. It is interesting to find Bede incorporating a dual account in this way, and this is not the only indication of a certain lack of co-ordination with the East Anglian material. Bede implies at one point (*H.E.* III. 18) that he intended to devote a special chapter to Anna, king of the East Angles, who was so blessed in Bede's eyes with saintly offspring, but this he never does. Anna was the father of several saintly daughters, among them Aethelthryth, the queen of Ecgfrith of Northumbria and later abbess of Ely, in whom Bede was very interested (*H.E.* IV. 19). Bishop Wilfrid and Aethelthryth's physician, Cynefrith, both supplied Bede with details about her (*H.E.* IV. 19), and no doubt on the situation and early history of Ely. Despite the number of passages on East Anglian history, however, Bede's account of the kingdom is fragmentary, the traditions scattered in time and space. He provides little information about East Anglia after the death of Anna, and presumably he discovered little. King Aldwulf's interests were probably channelled along the line of his own pedigree, through his father, Aethelhere, back to Raedwald. Aethelhere had another brother besides Anna—Aethelwald, his successor. Bede was interested in Anna because of the association of Anna's daughter, Aethelthryth, with Northumbria but he had no cause to take a particular interest in Aethelwald and there is no indication that he came into contact with an informant who did; Aethelwald, king of East Anglia, like Aethelwald, king of Deira, was known to Bede through the Lastingham traditions relating to Cedd (*H.E.* III. 22). Had Bede been in touch with Aethelwald's church at Rendlesham, near Sutton Hoo, he would doubtless have been well supplied with information, but there is no evidence that he was, any more than with Anna's foundation at Blythburgh or St. Botulf's at Iken. Many East Anglian monastic houses were probably unknown to him.
(iv) *Wessex*

West Saxon traditions, like those of Kent, reached Bede from an episcopal centre. Daniel, bishop of Winchester, was Bede’s primary source for Wessex and the Isle of Wight and a subsidiary source for Sussex (*H.E. Preface*). Daniel’s information was generally relevant directly to his bishopric, and of early monasticism in Wessex he seems to have been silent, but if all the bishops had provided Bede with the same amount of material his picture of the early English Church would have fewer gaps. Bede’s brief account of Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne, was more likely derived from Pecthelm, bishop of Whithorn and previously a student under Aldhelm, than from any southern source (*H.E. V. 18*). Daniel was interested in the conversion of the Thames valley Saxons, under their kings Cynegils and Cwichelm, in the first half of the seventh century by Birinus, a missionary from Rome, the establishment of a bishopric at Dorchester-on-Thames and its subsequent transfer in the time of King Cenwalh to Winchester, the division of the diocese of Winchester into two in his own time, and the attachment of the one-time South Saxon diocese of Selsey to that of Winchester (*H.E. III. 7; IV. 12, V. 18*). From Daniel also came the account of the Isle of Wight, describing how Caedwalla, king of Wessex in the mid-680s, ravaged the island and how two royal princes from the island were permitted the rites of baptism before execution (*H.E. IV. 16*). In the course of this latter account, mention is made of a monastery at Redbridge (Hants.), which would otherwise be unknown, and there must have been a great many monasteries in early Wessex of which no trace has survived. Daniel’s account, therefore, is essentially an episcopal as opposed to a monastic account of the conversion of Wessex. Bede’s reference to the gift of part of the Isle of Wight by Caedwalla to Wilfrid was certainly from Wilfridian tradition in Northumbria (*H.E. IV. 16*). In the same way as it is difficult to see why Bede did not make greater use of Nothelm for East Saxon affairs, so it is equally difficult to understand why he did not incorporate more of the information which Pecthelm, a first hand authority for traditions about Haeddi, bishop of
Winchester (H.E. V. 18), had to offer. From a letter of Waldhere bishop of London, to Berhtwald, archbishop of Canterbury, written 704-5, 1 it may be inferred that Haeddi opposed the division of his diocese, so that perhaps controversy associated with his name induced Bede to gloss over his episcopate. An interesting feature of West Saxon history to emerge from the H.E. and other early sources is the close contact and relationship between West Saxon and Northumbrian personalities—Oswald and Cynegils: Cenwalh and Wilfrid: Alchfrith and Benedict Biscop: Ecgfrith and Eormenburh (sister-in-law of Centwine, king of Wessex): Aldfrith and Cuthburh: Pecthelm, Aldhelm and Haeddi. Perhaps, however, such personal ties were no more marked between Northumbria and Wessex than between Northumbria and any other kingdom, only better documented. Certainly they did not lead Bede to stress or elaborate the West Saxon traditions in the H.E.

As the account of the ravaging of the Isle of Wight reveals, Daniel was particularly interested in the career of Caedwalla, and there are some indications that West Saxon traditions were being arranged to focus on Caedwalla, which had the effect rather of distorting the early history of the kingdom; it is possible that originally there were two royal lines in the area later to become Wessex, one at Dorchester-on-Thames and one at Old Sarum in Wiltshire, and that in about 685-6 the Dorchester line, in the person of Caedwalla, began the effective consolidation of Wessex, the two royal genealogies then being fused together to give the appearance of one royal line with Birinus as the apostle of all Wessex. 2 Certainly nothing is known of the early Church in Wiltshire and west Wessex, and whatever independent traditions may have survived at Sherborne they did not pass into the received account of the conversion of Wessex. Daniel’s bishopric was the heir to that of Dorchester, and his whole interest was concentrated upon it and upon Caedwalla. Probably some considerable allowance should be made for the existence of an independent


Celtic influence in the westerly regions of emerging Wessex. Glastonbury appears to have been a British foundation which was not Anglicized until the time of King Ine in the late seventh century, and it is possible that Sherborne and Shaftesbury were originally British monasteries. An Irish scholar, Maildulf, was the founder of Malmesbury monastery, and another Irish missionary, Dicuil, had a monastery at Bosham in Sussex (H.E. IV. 13). In view of the fragmentary nature of the sources it cannot be presumed that traces have survived of all the British and Irish missionaries at work in English territories.

(v) Sussex

Bede derived some information of the conversion of the South Saxons from Daniel, perhaps relating particularly to the way in which Selsey became a part of the diocese of Winchester; primarily, his account of Sussex was derived from Northumbrian tradition in Wilfridian circles, possibly indirectly from Selsey itself, through Acca of Hexham, and from Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid*. The confused presentation by Eddius and Bede of the fate of King Aethelwalh of Sussex, Wilfrid's benefactor, at the hands of Caedwalla of Wessex, and the ambiguity of Wilfrid's early relations with Caedwalla, have for long indicated the partial character of surviving information about Sussex. The materials for the conversion of the South Saxons are of peculiar interest, for Bede's account may be supplemented by that of Eddius, which is earlier. Eddius and Bede do not provide two widely different views of the early Church in Sussex, because Eddius' account was seen by Bede and because the information of both related specifically to the activities of Bishop Wilfrid. The interests of Eddius, of course, were centred on Wilfrid; Bede took a wider view, in so far as his sources permitted, and was interested in the context of Wilfrid's mission. Eddius describes how Wilfrid went into Sussex as an exile after having been expelled from Wessex, how he was warmly received by Aethelwalh, and how after having preached to the king and queen

he was permitted to evangelize the South Saxons with his episcopal see at Selsey; Wilfrid was subsequently approached by Caedwalla, then a royal exile, who asked the bishop to teach and help him, and when, through Wilfrid’s support, Caedwalla had mastered Wessex he invited Wilfrid to join him as his chief counsellor (cc. 41-42). Bede was interested to note that there was an Irish missionary at Bosham, who had met with no success (H.E. IV. 13). Perhaps this comment on Dicuil’s lack of success was Selsey propaganda. Bede also discovered that Queen Eafa, a princess of the Hwicce, was a Christian at the time of her marriage to Aethelwalh, that Aethelwalh was baptized in Mercia, and that his godfather, Wulfhere of Mercia, gave him out of his recent West Saxon conquests the Isle of Wight and the Hampshire province of the Meonware. The previous baptism of the king would not be gathered from Eddius. Bede, on the other hand, has nothing to say of Wilfrid’s relations with Caedwalla, which aspect of Wilfrid’s career was perhaps no more relevant to a general history of the Conversion than many other chapters in Eddius’ Life; but it is Bede who records that Caedwalla attacked the South Saxons and slew King Aethelwalh before he became king of Wessex (H.E. IV. 15). There can be no certainty that Wilfrid had any dealings with Caedwalla before the death of Aethelwalh; and it may be that Caedwalla’s enhanced reputation in going to Rome to die there a baptized Christian (H.E. V. 7) led Eddius to exaggerate the degree of intimacy between the two men. Caedwalla’s hostility to Sussex in the first place is made intelligible by Aethelwalh’s possession of West Saxon territories. The account of Wilfrid’s missionary activities in Sussex has many points of interest. Bede describes a drought, which he says had lasted for three years, and mass suicides of the population as a result. Men were joining together in bands and throwing themselves from cliffs into the sea. It is known that the sacrifice of men by hurling them over cliffs was not unknown in pagan Norse settlements in Iceland, and Scandinavian tradition recorded that in times of famine women and men would throw themselves from cliffs, believing that they would go to the gods.  

one instance in which Bede, perhaps without even being aware of it himself, is evidently describing a pagan phenomenon, and there is no reason to doubt that a famine did actually occur at this time. Eddius does not refer to the famine, nor does he include Bede's story that rain fell on the day the South Saxons were baptized by Wilfrid. This charming touch may be no more than a version of a later miracle story attached to Wilfrid. The way in which Wilfrid taught the South Saxons to fish is similarly mentioned only by Bede but lacks miraculous overtones.

(vi) Mercia

In the case of Kent, Essex, East Anglia and Wessex Bede received information about the Conversion from one or more of the religious communities in each kingdom. In vivid contrast, for the large and very important midland kingdom of Mercia Bede seems to have received nothing from any Mercian monastery or bishopric, unless the bishopric of Lindsey (H.E. Preface) be viewed as Mercian. There is nothing to show, however, that Cyneberht, bishop of Lindsey sent Bede very much more than a Lindsey episcopal list. Mercia is the one important Anglo-Saxon kingdom which the historian must approach entirely from the external viewpoints of others—Eddius, Bede, Nennius, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle—which has the effect of placing Mercian history in a unique position. This is particularly surprising, of course, because as Bede wrote Aethelbald, king of Mercia, was overlord of the southern kingdoms. Bede mentions in his Preface that Lastingham monastery supplied him with details of the work of Chad, who became bishop of Lichfield, and his chapter on Chad at Lichfield (H.E. IV. 3) forms the main body of material on the Mercian Church. Bede relates nothing of Theodore's division of the Mercian diocese, c. 675–679. There is no indication that he received any material direct from Lichfield, and what he knew of the see of Worcester appears to have come through Whitby and Wilfridian sources (H.E. III. 23). Of the bishopric across the Severn, apart from the name of Walhstod, bishop in 731, he appears to have known nothing. The same applies to that of Middle Anglia at Leicester. Middle Anglia was annexed to the Mercian kingdom by Penda in the first half of the seventh
century and entrusted by him to his son, Peada; Peada was converted in Northumbria by Oswiu and Alchfrith, and Bede knew of the two Scottish missionaries who were sent to the Middle Angles from Northumbria in Peada’s time together with the names of the first two English bishops of Mercia and Middle Anglia, one of whom was a Northumbrian (H.E. III. 24). It cannot be doubted that it was simply Northumbrian tradition which supplied him with this information, for Bede knew nothing in detail of their work. His knowledge of Bishop Jaruman of Mercia was limited to information acquired by chance from a passing priest (H.E. III. 30). Chad was only bishop of Lichfield for two and a half years, and it is not certain that this period was in any way a very formative one for the Mercian Church. Chad’s conspicuous position in the H.E. results simply from the fact that Bede was in touch with Lastingham. In the course of the H.E. Bede mentions as his authorities for particular stories directly or indirectly relating to Mercia, Trumberht, his own teacher (H.E. IV. 3), the companion of Bishop Jaruman (H.E. III. 30), and Pechelm, bishop of Whithorn (H.E. V. 13), a haphazard selection of individuals all with probably only a limited knowledge of Mercian affairs. Mercian history, of course, touched on Northumbrian at many points in the seventh century and Bede had a guide to the broad outlines of Mercian development from Northumbrian tradition alone. The career of Penda is a case in point, a career which could be supplemented by traditions from East Anglia of his dealings with that kingdom. It is possible that Bede approached Mercian episcopal centres and that none responded, or he may have been satisfied with the material he found to hand.

Lack of information from the bishoprics is paralleled by a similar lack from the Mercian monasteries. Bede knew of Chad’s monastery at Ad Barve in Lindsey, that Bishop Sexwulf of Lichfield had been founder and abbot of Medhamstede (Peterborough), and that Tatwine, archbishop of Canterbury, came from the monastery of Breedon-on-the-Hill (H.E. IV. 3, 6: V. 23); but these references are purely incidental and are not followed up by any account of the monastery in question. Bishop Wilfrid had a monastery at Oundle (H.E. V. 19), though
Bede had no apparent contact with it. Quite close to Northumbria geographically was the monastery of Repton, probably the most important of the Mercian houses, for several Mercian kings were entombed at Repton. Felix's *Life of St. Guthlac* (c. 20), founder of Crowland monastery, refers to Aelfthryth, abbess of Repton, which was clearly a double-monastery, for Guthlac studied there about 698-700.1 The letter of Waldhere, bishop of London, to Archbishop Berhtwald alludes to a meeting held by Coenred, king of Mercia, and his bishops concerning the reconciliation of Aelfthryth, c. 704. If the Aelfthryth of this letter was the abbess of Repton of the same name, the abbess must have been a person of political importance, and Repton possibly occupied a place in Mercia similar to that of Whitby in Northumbria. It is greatly to be regretted that no Repton records have survived. Oddly enough, Repton and Crowland are two of the monasteries associated with the church of St. Davids in South Wales in Rhigyfarch's *Life of David*.2 Felix's *Life of Guthlac*, rather strangely an East Anglian piece of hagiography about a Mercian saint, gives some details of the origin of Crowland monastery and affords a rare glimpse of the Mercian Church. Guthlac was visited on various occasions by the royal exile Aethelbald, Bishop Headda of Lichfield, and Abbot Wilfrid (Prologue; cc. 28; 39-40; 46-7). It would have been interesting to have known the name of Wilfrid's monastery. If Bede's *H.E.* were the only source for the Mercian Church nothing would be known in detail of Crowland at this period, or of any of the West Mercian monasteries such as Bath, Much Wenlock and Evesham which reveal themselves in charters and later monastic histories. It is unfortunate that for the kingdom bordering on the territory of the Welsh and the British Church, Bede's sources were at their most defective.

**Conclusion**

Bede's knowledge of early English history, therefore, was extremely fragmentary. His greater knowledge of Northumbrian

---

tradition, imperfect though even that was, meant that the H.E. was written from a Northumbrian viewpoint. This is why, for example, Penda of Mercia appears to have been so aggressive towards Northumbria, while it is clear that he must have been equally belligerent towards East Anglia, if not more so, and why only Scottish missionaries from Northumbria appear to have played such an important part in the conversion of Mercia. Bede was able to present the appearance of a synthesis by his literary genius and through his ability to minimize the effects of extensive gaps in his information by attention to themes, like the Easter Controversy, for example, with which he was best able to deal. Essentially, however, the H.E. is a variety of separate notices about different, often unrelated, centres at different periods; it is not impossible that a centre of missionary and administrative importance may have gone completely unrecorded because there was no information available or because there was no personality associated with it who had found posthumous fame at the hands of a few devoted followers. The historian is forced to recognize, therefore, that no continuous history of the English Church in the various kingdoms of the seventh century is at present possible, and that those ecclesiastical centres for which information does exist can best be studied as types, representative only of religious communities in prescribed regions at specific times.