ÆTHELTHRYTH: A CONVENTIONAL SAINT?

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There has been much research in recent years into the roles which women could occupy in Anglo-Saxon England, and their position in society before the Conquest. The Church provided influential models for female behaviour and chief amongst these models must have been that of the virgin martyr. In an age and place where Christians were no longer punished by the state for their beliefs it would have been difficult to live up to the demands of this role. However it is clear that Latin hagiography was used in this period both to construct and to interpret women’s lives, in both senses of the word.

The influence of the conventions of Latin *passiones* can be readily seen in surviving versions of the ‘Life’ of Æthelthryth. The most detailed account of Æthelthryth and her family appears in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* and this portrait forms the basis for Ælfric’s version of her life and parts of the *Liber Eliensis*. Bede knew the *Life of Wilfrid* but this book hardly mentions Æthelthryth, except to note her virtue, the fact that she was older than her husband Ecgfrith and that she granted some land to Wilfrid.¹ This lack of information is somewhat surprising given what we know of the queen’s close friendship with Wilfrid and it suggests that Æthelthryth was not considered to be such a significant figure at the time of the book’s composition. The development of Æthelthryth’s legend after her death is an excellent example of the way in which cults grow over a period of time and how whatever is known about the saint’s actual life is later re-interpreted by analogy with other hagiographical works.

Presumably Bede had access to other sources from Ely, but he also drew on other lives of saintly royal women and used them as a model for his treatment of Æthelthryth.

One of the principal models for Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* as a whole was, of course, Gregory of Tours’s *Historia Francorum*. Gregory was not the only Frankish writer to whose works Bede had access. He was acquainted, in part at least, with the works of Venantius Fortunatus, who wrote for and about St Radegund, who

also left her royal husband, Clothar I, to take up the religious life.\(^2\)

It is known, too, that Bede used Frankish models for some of his other works, notably drawing on Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St Martin* (possibly in a version by Venantius Fortunatus) for his *Life of St Cuthbert*.\(^3\)

The English Church was strongly influenced by that of Frankia, particularly in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period, and Frankish religious houses provided models for monastic life in Northumbria, including the model of the double-house ruled by an abbess. Bede tells us much about the interaction between the English and the Franks. He tells us that Æthelberht of Kent was married to Bertha, a member of the Merovingian royal family, and that the king's wife brought her bishop with her to England. We know too that St Augustine, Gregory the Great's emissary, travelled through Gaul on his way to England and brought Frankish interpreters with him. He later returned to Gaul to be consecrated archbishop of the English in Arles. As Christianity took hold in England, so did the desire to travel to Rome and this necessitated journeying through Gaul. Benedict Biscop, founder of the Wearmouth-Jarrow monastery where Bede lived, and Wilfrid, Æthelthryth's powerful ally, both travelled in Gaul and were influenced by the monastic system there. Indeed, Wilfrid was sent by King Alfrith to Clothar III to be consecrated as a bishop in Paris in 665.\(^4\) Not only did English men and women go to Frankia, but important religious figures from that country came to England too. In 680 John, abbot of St Martin's monastery in Rome, came to England on the instructions of Pope Agatho, accompanied by monastic advisors from Tours.\(^5\) It was probably through this sort of interaction that Frankish works like those of Gregory of Tours came to the library at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow.

We also learn from Bede that English women took up the religious life in Frankia and indeed acquired positions of influence and authority. Æthelthryth's sisters became in turn abbess of the double monastery of Faremoutiers-in-Brie. Bede tells us:

Anno dominicae incarnationis DCXL Eadbald rex Cantuariorum transiens ex hac uita Earconbercto filio regni gubernacula reliquit; quae ille suscepit XXIIII annis et aliquot mensibus nobilissime tenuit. . . . Cuius filia Earcongotae, ut condigna parenti subolese, magnarum fiiit uirgo uirtutum, seruiens Domino in monasterio quod in regione Francorum constructum est ab abbatissa nobilissima uocabulo Fara in loco qui dicitur In Brige. Nam eo tempore necdum multis in regione

\(^2\) Bede definitely had some knowledge of Venantius Fortunatus's *De virginitate* although he may not have known the whole poem. For a discussion of Venantius Fortunatus's works in England see R.W. Hunt, 'Manuscript evidence for knowledge of the poems of Venantius Fortunatus in late Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, viii (1979), 279-87 and the appendix 'Knowledge of the poems in the earlier period' by Michael Lapidge, 287-95.


\(^5\) *HE*, iv, 18; Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 388-90.
Æthelthryth was also one of Anna's daughters and thus it can be seen that she had powerful models from within her own family for her desire to take up the religious life. Furthermore, Æthelthryth's sister, Seaxburg, who was married to Eorcenberht and was the mother of Eorcengota, succeeded Æthelthryth as abbess of Ely. Hild was also a member of Anna's family and Bede tells us that she too intended to join a monastery in Frankia at Chelles, near Faremoutiers, but she was asked by Bishop Aidan to stay in England where she eventually founded, or reorganized, a double-house at Whitby. The women of the East Anglian royal family then had considerable connections with the Frankish church and so presumably must have had some knowledge of important continental saints like Radegund.

It seems reasonable to think that Bede would have known about Radegund through the writings of Gregory of Tours, who was a great supporter of the queen and partly responsible for giving such credibility to the idea of her sanctity, even if he did not know Venantius Fortunatus's version of her life or the slightly later life written by a nun at Poitiers called Baudonivia. In any case he would surely have known about such an important saint through verbal accounts given by English monks who had visited Gaul like Benedict Biscop.

Radegund's legend is particularly interesting as an example of the ways in which women modelled themselves on hagiographic ideals.
and it tells us how women could achieve a degree of power and autonomy through the Church. Radegund was inspired, at least according to her hagiographers, by the model of the virgin martyrs of Late Antique Rome, whose suffering at the hands of pagan persecutors she actively desired to emulate. Venantius Fortunatus, for example, tells us that whilst she was a child Radegund would often speak of her desire to be a martyr if the opportunity presented itself ‘frequenter loquens cum parvulis, si conferret sors temporis, martyra fieri cupiens’. Not only does this demonstrate Radegund’s life-long piety but it is also a reflection of conventional late antique passiones in which the female saint is said to conceive the desire to live as a virgin for God at a very young age. Venantius, then, is using such lives as a model for his portrait of Radegund.

Venantius Fortunatus also stresses that the queen began to live an ascetic life during her marriage to Clothar. He says that she dispensed alms to the needy and built a house for poor and sick women at Athies, where she lived as a child. Venantius describes how the queen herself bathed the sick and prepared potions to heal them. He stresses the contrast between her status and the lowliness of the tasks she chose to perform ‘Sic devota femina nata et nupta regina, palatii domina pauperibus serviebat ancilla’. Venantius uses the term ancilla, indicating that this behaviour is part of Radegund’s special devotion to God and also suggesting the ancilla dei motif of martyr legends, thus implicitly comparing Radegund to those women. Venantius stresses that even while she lived in the palace as the king’s wife, Radegund endeavoured to pursue as monastic an existence as possible, preferring to eat beans and lentils to elaborate dishes. He also tells us that she would rise in the middle of the night and sit in the cold, praying, before returning to her husband’s bed where she was unable to get warm again.

Radegund did not enter the religious life, however, until after the death of her brother, who was murdered by her husband. She then continued to tend the sick and poor and to carry out all the most menial and unpleasant tasks. Again Venantius stresses Radegund’s determination to persecute herself in imitation of the suffering of the virgin martyrs ‘quia non essent persecutionis tempora’. In particular he recounts that she burned herself deliberately with hot metal. Her self-inflicted tortures are quite gruesome and clearly very extreme. They are not mentioned by Gregory of Tours who is more interested in political events but for Venantius these details provide the evidence that Radegund is to be

9 Vita Radegundis, 1, 2; Krusch, MGH srm, ii, 365. ‘speaking often with other children about her desire to be a martyr, if the opportunity should present itself in her time’. All translations from Latin and Old English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

10 Vita Radegundis, 1, 4; Krusch, MGH srm, ii, 366. ‘thus the pious woman who was a queen by birth and marriage and the mistress of the palace, served the poor like a slave-girl’.

11 Vita Radegundis, 1, 26; Krusch, MGH srm, ii, 373. ‘although it was not an age of persecution’.
understood as a true saint rather than just as a very pious woman. The rest of Venantius’s account focuses on miracles worked by the saint or in her name. Miracles were, of course, one of the foremost tests of sanctity in the early Middle Ages and so they are also included to demonstrate Radegund’s worthiness to be honoured as a saint. As Jo Ann McNamara says:

Simply put, the miracles are the whole point of the *Vitae* and the cults they served. Modern students of popular religion are only beginning to assess this material from the viewpoint of the people for whom it was written. For the beneficiaries of the saint’s largesse and for those dependent on her cult, the world was peopled by spiritual magnates as it was by earthly ones. Women who had been influential on earth and who had shown that they had the ear of a heavenly sovereign continued to be the focus of the hopes of their dependants when they had migrated to his court.¹²

Thus accounts of miracles performed by the saint before or after her death provide reassurance to her supporters that she is indeed especially favoured by God and able to extend the divine protection she enjoys to them.

From the later *Vita sanctae Radegundis* by Baudonivia we learn more about the ways in which aristocratic women were able to use the Church as a means of gaining control over their own lives, and this can enhance our understanding of the reasons why so many Anglo-Saxon women of royal descent became involved in the development of monastic communities. It is an interesting feature of Baudonivia’s description of Radegund that it dwells more on Radegund’s struggles with her husband, and shows how she actually came to free herself from his authority to a large extent, than does Venantius’s biography. Baudonivia recounts how Radegund, learning that Clothar had come to Tours and was seeking to reclaim her as his queen, wrote to the bishop of Paris, who was travelling with the king, and asked the bishop to intercede with Clothar on her behalf, entreating him not to journey to Poitiers. Radegund also used her influence over important clerics to acquire relics for the monastery, including a finger of St Mammas from Jerusalem. She desired finally a piece of the true cross and Baudonivia compares her to St Helen who was sent by her son Constantine to uncover the location of the true cross in Jerusalem.¹³ Venantius also wrote two hymns to Radegund on this subject. It is clear that the acquisition of important relics was a way of bringing prestige to the house and also its founder.¹⁴


Radegund, therefore, was able to achieve a degree of autonomy for three main reasons: she was of royal lineage, she apparently had access to money which she could control (even if it was given to her by her husband) and she was literate in Latin. In fact Venantius Fortunatus suggests that it was normal for women of Radegund's class to be taught to read 'Quae puella, inter alia opera, quae sexui eius congruebant, litteris est erudita ...'.\(^{15}\) Clearly the other nuns at Poitiers were literate too and it would seem reasonable to conclude from this that Anglo-Saxon women who achieved important positions within Frankish monastic communities could also read. These attributes, especially wealth, are also necessary for sanctity, as Jo Ann McNamara has pointed out:

Of those women who did receive the approval and support necessary to make the transition to sainthood (in Merovingian Gaul), all were foundresses or abbesses of monastic communities. Each began life in a noble family and came into possession of a substantial fortune. An examination of the dozen or so biographies available to us indicates that there were consistent principles at work in the creation of these saints. The miracles attributed to them reveal a pattern peculiarly suited to forwarding the purposes of the communities to which they had devoted their earthly influence and wealth. In death, as in life, the female saints were noble and wealthy; they were aristocrats in heaven, celestial courtiers busy with the patronage of the flock of nuns who promoted and benefitted from their cults.\(^ {16}\)

It should be noted also that the female saints of conventional virgin-martyr legends are almost invariably aristocratic. There appears to be an implicit link in such hagiographical works between social and spiritual status which is mirrored in the early medieval Church.

We can see this same pattern in England. Those women who achieved power through the Church were aristocratic or royal and they were able to donate land and money to the Church, as Æthelthryth did even during her marriage. There is no proof that literacy was common amongst Anglo-Saxon women in English monastic communities, but there is no proof that it was not. Aldhelm apparently wrote for the nuns of Barking\(^ {17}\) and we do know that Boniface's female companions were able to read.\(^ {18}\) It should also be remembered that the actual ability to read and write is not so important if you are powerful and rich enough to have scribes to

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\(^{15}\) *Vita Radegundis*, 1, 2; Krusch, *MGH srn*, ii, 365. 'as a girl she was taught letters amongst other skills appropriate for her sex'.

\(^{16}\) McNamara, 'A legacy of miracles', 39.

\(^{17}\) He states this in his introduction to the prose *De virginitate*. The Latin text is found in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica auctores antiquissimi*, xv, ed. Rudolph Ehwald (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), 228-9.

\(^{18}\) For a discussion of Boniface's female correspondents see Christine E. Fell, 'Some implications of the Boniface correspondence', *New readings on women in Old English literature*, eds Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 29-43.
copy letters for you and read to you, as women like Æthelthryth surely were. The key element again appears to be money. Women who were able to give patronage to the Church were in return protected by it and were provided with a space in which they could operate independently of male relatives.

Radegund and women like her formed both a practical model for Æthelthryth's behaviour and for the later development of her legend. Bede includes a poem in celebration of Æthelthryth's virginity in his Historia ecclesiastica and it seems likely that this was inspired by the knowledge that Venantius Fortunatus had written poems for Radegund. In Bede's poem Æthelthryth is compared with a list of saints all of whom are Mediterranean virgin martyrs; she is put in similar company later in the Anglo-Saxon period when she is celebrated by Ælfric in his Lives of saints. 19

It is clear that Æthelthryth was regarded as especially important because her life mirrored in certain ways the legends of the martyrs, especially, of course, in regard to her virginity which she performed the rather unusual feat of preserving through two marriages. 20 According to Bede, Æthelthryth lived a life of extreme asceticism which can be seen to be similar to Radegund's, wearing only woollen garments, bathing only before major festivals, and then only after all the other nuns, and eating as infrequently as possible. 21 Ælfric repeats these details and is clearly interested in the fact that this royal woman engaged in the most menial tasks. Models for this sort of behaviour can be found in conventional Latin hagiography, and indeed some of the lives in the Vitaepatrum and related legendaries tell of aristocratic virgins who, having entered a monastery in disguise, set about performing all the most unpleasant chores. 22 The contrast between high status and humble behaviour in saints' lives functions in the same way as the contrast between the weakness of women and the strength they achieve through their devotion to God. Female saints are considered good models for Christians because they most clearly illustrate the power which can be attained through faith. This point is made explicitly by Venantius Fortunatus at the beginning of his Vita sanctae Radegundis:


20 For a discussion of the circumstances surrounding Æthelthryth's marriages see Stephanie Hollis, Anglo-Saxon women and the church: sharing a common fate (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1992), 67-74.

21 HE, iv, 19; Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 392.

22 See, for example, the Life of Eugenia in the Vitaepatrum, in Patrologia Latina, lxiii, cols 606-20. Ælfric includes a version of this vita in the Lives of saints.
Like Venantius Fortunatus writing about Radegund’s lifelong desire for pain and death, Æthelthryth’s hagiographers dwell on the queen’s physical suffering and her acceptance of it. Bede writes that she died of a plague which also afflicted other members of the community, but tells later of a tumour which grew under her chin. Bede emphasizes her suffering and attributes to her a typically saintly reaction to this affliction. He says that the queen, like the martyrs undergoing torture, welcomes pain. Ælfric chooses to include this speech in his version:

Pa on þam eahteodan geare siðdan heo abbudisse was heo weard geuntrumod swa swa heo ær witegode swa þæt an geswel weox on hire swuran mycel under þam cynn-bane and heo siwde þancode gode þæt heo on þam swuran sum geswinc bolode. Heo cwæd ic wat geare þæt ic wel wyrðe eom þæt min swura boe geswenct mid swylcere untrum-nyssse forðan þe ic on iugode fætweode minne swuran mid mænig-fealdum swur-beagum and me is nu gebuht þæt godes ærlætnysse þonne me nu þis geswel scynð for golde and þæs hata byrne for healic gumstanum. 24

Again we see the idea that the true saint actively desires to suffer so that Æthelthryth’s tumour, rather than being a terrible punishment, can actually be interpreted as a sign of God’s love for the queen as through her pain she is able to reach a higher level of spiritual insight.

Ælfric’s biography of Æthelthryth is an edited version of Bede’s story. He introduces the relevant facts right away:

We wyllað nv awritan þeah de hit wundorlic sy be ðære halgan sancte æeldryðe þam engliscan mædene þe was mid twam werum and swa-þeah wunode mæden swa swa þa wundra geswuteliað þe heo wyrco gelome. Anna hatta hyre fæder east

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23 Vita Radegundis, 1, 1; Krusch, MGH srm, ii, 364. ‘So great is the generosity of our redeemer that he wins mighty victories through the female sex and, despite their frail physique, he renders women glorious through strength of mind. Those who are born weak Christ makes strong through faith, so that, when those who are seen as fools are crowned with their merits by him who made them, they gather up praise for their creator who hides the treasures of heaven in earthen vessels.’

24 Skeat, Lives of saints, 434, 436. ‘Then in the eighth year after she became abbess, she became seriously afflicted, just as previously she had foretold, for a big tumour developed on her neck under her chin, and she gave many thanks to God that she suffered this particular affliction on her neck. She said, ‘I know indeed that I deserve to be afflicted on my neck with such a disease, since in my youth I adorned my neck with very many necklaces. It seems to me that God’s justice may cleanse the guilt as this swelling shines on me instead of gold and this hot burning instead of sparkling gemstones’’. 
It can be seen that Ælfric is interested primarily in Æthelthryth's virginity, the miracles associated with her which are taken as proof of her chastity, and her royal background, in particular the fact that she comes from a family noted for its support of the Church. These are the special qualities which make Æthelthryth fit to be included in Ælfric's work. He stresses too that she is English and thus her sanctity shows the importance of the English Church.

It seems certain, at least if Bede is to be believed, that Æthelthryth's fame spread through the actions of her sister Seaxburg. It seems that Seaxburg herself knew about famous continental saints through her daughter and sisters and was aware of the necessary requirements for sanctity. When Æthelthryth died, she was put in a wooden coffin but sixteen years later Seaxburg decided to have her remains translated. This was, of course, essential in order that Æthelthryth should be recognized as a saint, but it also presented the opportunity for her remains to be examined. Incorrupt remains were considered to be a sign of sanctity and the queen's body was found to be undecayed and, more miraculously still, the wound on her throat was healed. Seaxburg was clearly anticipating this turn of events as she had the foresight to have the surgeon who lanced her sister's tumour attend the elevation. Bede adds as further evidence of Æthelthryth's sanctity that the sick were healed by touching the cloth which covered her body or the coffin she had lain in. Again this is a conventional feature of medieval hagiography as miracles became more important as a sign of sanctity in an age free of martyrdom. Because miracles were so important for the development of a cult, the belief that they could occur at Ely after Æthelthryth's death must have brought visitors and money to the monastery.

It is interesting to note that Bede describes the death and elevation of Seaxburg's own daughter Eorcengota, who died in the monastery at Faremoutiers, in a similar way. Perhaps she also provided a model for the development of Æthelthryth's legend and cult. When Eorcengota is made aware that she is about to die through a dream, she prepares for death by visiting the elderly, sick and distinguished famulae Christi in the monastery. Miracles occur at the moment of her passing:

Ipsa autem nocte in cuius ultima parte, id est incipiente aurora, praeestis mundi tenebras transiens supernam migrauit ad lucem, multi de fratribus eiusdem

25 Skeat, Lives of saints, 432. 'We now intend to write, even though it is amazing, about the holy saint Æthelthryth, the English maiden who was married to two men and nevertheless remained a virgin, as the miracles which she often worked clearly show. Her father, Anna, king of the East Angles, was a very Christian man, as he showed by his deeds, and all his family were honoured by God'.

monasterii, qui aliis erant in aedibus, iam manifeste se concentus angelorum psallentium audisse referebant, sed et sonitum quasi plurimae multitudinis monasterium ingredientis; unde mox egressi dinoscere quid esset, uiderunt lucem caelitus emissam fuisse permaximam, quae sanctam illam animam carnis uinculis absolutam ad aeterna patriae caelestis gaudia ducebat. Addunt et alia, quae ipsa nocte in monasterio eodem diuinitus fuerint ostensa miracula; sed haec nos ad alia tendentes suas narrare permittimus.26

Another of Seaxburg's sisters Æthelburg, who was abbess of the monastery at Faremoutiers-in-Brie, is also given special mention by Bede because, like Æthelthryth's, her body was discovered to be undecayed when she was exhumed. The abbess's incorrupt corpse is taken as a sign of her spiritual and bodily purity, 'Et aperientes sepulchrum eius, ita intemeratum corpus inuenere, ut a corruptione concupiscientiae carnalis erat inmune'.27 Undoubtedly stories of saintly women and their exploits did reach England from Gaul and were known both to Bede and to English women who were influential in the Church.

Æthelthryth became an important saint for the Anglo-Saxons for a number of reasons. Her friendship with Wilfrid demonstrated her worthiness, while her ability to grant land to the Church and eventually to found a house would have given her great influence within the religious establishment. Her royal status, virginity, asceticism and physical torments are all essential features of her life. Moreover, her cult was deliberately promoted by her powerful family after her death. Most importantly of all, Æthelthryth's story could be fitted into accepted Late Antique and Merovingian literary models of female sanctity and could be used to demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxon Church could also produce examples of extreme devotion to God and spiritual strength in the face of adversity. As Bede says:

Nostra quoque egregia iam tempora virgo beauit;
Aedilthryda niter nostra quoque egregia.28

26 HE, iii, 8. 'At the very end of the same night, just as the dawn was breaking, she passed from the darkness of the present world into the light of heaven. Many of the brothers of the monastery who were in other buildings related that they clearly heard choirs of angels singing, as well as the sound of what seemed to be a mighty throng entering the monastery. Hurrying out to discover what was the matter, they saw a very great light coming down from heaven, which bore away the holy soul, now freed from the bonds of the flesh, to the eternal joys of the heavenly country. They also relate other miracles which were divinely manifested in the monastery on the same night; but as we must turn to other matters, we will leave them to be related by her own people'. Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 238-9.

27 HE, iii, 8. 'they found her body as untouched by decay as it had also been immune from the corruption of fleshly desires'. Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 240-1.

28 HE, iv, 20; Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 398. 'Indeed an extraordinary virgin has blessed our age also, our amazing Æthelthryth also shines'. My translation.