

The Social and Political Problems of the Early English Church

By ERIC JOHN

ONE of the most rewarding trends in recent historiography has been the growing realization amongst scholars of the importance of studying the history of the English Church not only in the minds and hearts of her members but in their social and political connections as well. This does not mean, and has not meant, the subordination of intellectual and spiritual factors to a merely economic interpretation. I am not suggesting we should substitute a study of incomes for a study of sanctity, merely that, as the rich *corpus* of recent work on the seventeenth century has shown, the two are not quite unconnected. It seems to me that no period in the history of the English Church invites this kind of treatment more than the beginning: but we have so far largely treated a process that must have had important social and political implications in terms of saints and saintlike conduct. To parody a famous remark of T. S. Eliot, faith strikes, sanctity occurs, conversion sets in: and so in a way it does. Yet it is obvious from the most superficial study of the period that the early saints were deeply involved in the social and political games of the 'England' of their day. It is only necessary to point to the extreme tact and ingenuity which Theodore of Tarsus needed when he tried to give the diocesan structure of the early Church a rational shape and greater stability than the shifting marches of the tribal kingdoms that then made up 'England'. If one approaches the problem from a different direction, it is obvious that a religion which required literacy in two languages from a people who did not have an alphabet of their own could flourish only if it had stable communities where letters could be taught and a native clergy trained. In *this* world this could be done only if someone were prepared to give these communities the scarcest and most precious of all the sources of power and wealth, land. Surely we cannot hold back from asking on what terms was this land given, at what price was it got?

Comparatively recently the basic foundations of the early English churchmen's world have been subject to a considerable revaluation. Questions that once seemed definitively answered have been re-opened, and if new definitive answers are still not exactly thick on the ground, it is obvious to all but the most prejudiced and least informed that something was very wrong with the old learning. Prominent in this search for new bearings in early English history has been Herbert Finberg. It is fitting then on an occasion such as this that an attempt should be made to raise tentatively in a kind of agenda of questions and

approaches, some of the consequences of the new learning for the study of the beginnings of the Church.

It will be convenient as well as seemly to begin with people. The objects of the endeavours of the early missionaries seem to me to be less familiar, less like primitive versions of 'us', than they have done to most. They do not seem to have been very sure who they were themselves. Most early literary sources call them *Saxones*, or sometimes *Angli*, and do not attempt to differentiate between the two terms. Bede, of course, tried to separate *Angli* from *Saxones*: although he has persuaded the great majority of Anglo-Saxon scholars to follow him, in his day he failed to convince either his abbot or his bishop, his neighbour in Iona, his literary colleague in Malmesbury or, to judge by his practice, himself.¹ We may agree that these people had some sense of identity and we may as well call it English, but not without qualifications. They also had a very strong sense of their diversity and particularity. They were extremely vague about their Englishry and much more precise about being West Saxons and Mercians or Northumbrians, although even then there was room for bitter and protracted disputes about just who and what constituted Mercia or Northumbria.

These peoples, it seems to me, lacked that sense of identity amongst themselves, that clarity about who they were and what marked them off from strangers, which is a defining characteristic of real nations and true peoples. We ought not to study then the history of the early Church and its saints as though they formed part of the English nation and were aware that they did. This is a world in which the English nation is a very notional affair indeed, and the unity of the kingdoms that composed what Englishry there was was also precarious and contested. To put the point more particularly: how could a monk of Ripon or Lindisfarne not have loyalties to Deira and Bernicia, as well as to Northumbria and perhaps England? This is an obvious point, but it seems to me to have been too little regarded when looking at important problems of early Church history.

The kind of problems I have in mind primarily concern institutions and social structures: being historians and not sociologists, we can study these problems in depth as parts of processes which have middles and even ends—though origins are more obscure—that can be empirically investigated. In this case, what is more, most of the problems are focused by the career of a single individual, St Wilfrid. Now Wilfrid is few people's favourite saint. Pompous, proud, selfish, vainglorious, litigious, heedless of the welfare of the English and their Church, and in these days naturally triumphalist, is how he has seemed to a stream of distinguished scholars. It seems to me that if we go over Wilfrid's stormy career in the light of the caveats I have just entered, a rather different

¹ E. John, *Orbis Britanniae*, Leicester, 1966, pp. 4-5.

picture emerges, and one that, willynilly, affects current views on early English history in general.

Perhaps the oddest feature of Wilfrid's life is the radical disagreement of scholars on even the bare facts of his episcopal career. This disagreement is not due to paucity of evidence—or not primarily to this. We have a full and, by the standards of the time, good, biography of Wilfrid by one of his monks who knew him well, Eddius Stephanus. It seems likely that Eddius was brought to Northumbria by Wilfrid himself and that he visited Rome in his master's entourage,¹ and wrote soon after Wilfrid's death. In addition to this we have considerable information about him in Bede's *History* which uses, but does not acknowledge, Eddius' *Life*. Eddius' account of Wilfrid's early career is plausible enough—much more than many contemporary attempts at hagiography—up to a point. Wilfrid was unhappy at home, where an unsympathetic stepmother ruled, so he left for the Northumbrian court where he had influence with King Oswiu's Kentish queen. He was dependent on what she could do for him for a career and what she did was to send him to Lindisfarne to become a monk. After a while Wilfrid left on a 'pilgrimage' to Rome and on the way attracted the attention of the archbishop of Lyons and his brother. On his return he entered the archbishop's service, was tonsured, and might well have spent the rest of his life in Gaul if his patron had not been murdered. He himself narrowly escaped death and presumably had little alternative but to return to his native country. Here he was taken up by Alchfrith, the son of, and co-ruler with, King Oswiu of Northumbria,² and made abbot of his foundation at Ripon because he was ready to follow the Roman method of calculating Easter and abandon the Celtic custom followed at Lindisfarne and in the greater part of the British Isles. One

¹ *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. B. Colgrave, Cambridge, 1927, c. x. I have cited Eddius throughout by reference to the chapters for the convenience of those using the other modern editions of Eddius. I have consulted the notes to Dr Moonen's edition, s'Hertogenbosch, 1946, and cited them as *Moonen*, followed by the page reference.

² R. L. Poole, *Studies in Chronology and History*, Oxford, 1934, p. 64, says Alchfrith held "a *provincia*, or under kingdom, in what we roughly describe as the West Riding of Yorkshire." This identification is vital to Dr Lane Poole's whole argument: it is therefore worth pointing out that no compelling evidence supports it and most of what little evidence there is, is against it. Florence of Worcester, i, p. 25, says Alchfrith succeeded Æthelwald, who we know certainly was king of Deira as a whole.—Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* [=HE], iii, c. 23. It is difficult to evaluate Florence's information at all precisely but what he says is reasonable enough. There is no other evidence that Dr Lane Poole's *provincia* had any regular existence, indeed it must have been made up of a mixture of the old kingdom of Elmet plus bits of Deira proper, which is a curious amalgam. From Bede and Eddius it is evident that Alchfrith's kingdom lay in southern Northumbria since his authority enabled him to establish an abbot of Ripon and grant him land *æt Stanford*. Dr Lane Poole, *op. cit.*, p. 72, identified this place as Stainforth on the Ribble, which is not obvious linguistically speaking and lies very far west. This is the only possible identification that will allow Dr Lane Poole's thesis to stand. Most scholars have taken the name to be Stamford, and Colgrave, *op. cit.*, p. 155, identifies it as Stamford Bridge, near York, following Smith, as does *Moonen*, p. 242. This is much the most plausible identification and it would make Alchfrith lord of York, and ruler of Deira, not just a hypothetical portion of it.

may note how little conventional piety Eddius uses to explain Wilfrid's entry into the religious life, and the frank acknowledgement that the need for a place in life and the effects of taking the wrong side in a political squabble played an important part in making Wilfrid first a monk and then an abbot. Wilfrid's career was, of course, made at the synod of Whitby when he was chief spokesman of the Roman party which won the day. He had been ordained priest, as a step towards becoming a bishop, by the Frankish bishop of the West Saxons, Agilberht, just before the synod.¹ The difficulties arise when we ask what happened next.

Eddius is not easy to understand here. The bishop of the Northumbrians at the time of Whitby, 664,² was called Colman, and is so described by Bede.³ Eddius calls him *Eboracae civitatis episcopi metropolitani*:⁴ it is in the highest degree unlikely that Colman was in any sense bishop of York, let alone 'metropolitan'. York lay in Deira, and the royal power in Northumbria in 664 was held by the Bernician, northern, portion of the country whose chief ecclesiastical centre was Lindisfarne, which was Colman's base as bishop. Deira, or some of it, enjoyed a certain independence under Alchfrith. It is not certain, or perhaps even probable, that Alchfrith was the son of Oswiu's then Queen, who was a member of the Deiran royal family, but she seems to have enjoyed some influence over him. He had become an enthusiastic follower of 'roman' ways, presumably under her influence. Now, as Plummer long ago pointed out,⁵ Colman and his two predecessors cannot have been metropolitans as they had no suffragans; they used no territorial titles; and their bases were at Lindisfarne. It must follow, apparently, that Eddius is a barefaced liar who cannot be trusted in the simplest matters of fact. What is worse, the fabrication appears to continue immediately Eddius moves on to the next stage of his hero's career.

There is no doubt that after Oswiu had decided to abandon the tradition of Columba for that of Peter, Bishop Colman resigned his see and withdrew to Ireland. According to Eddius, Wilfrid was elected to the vacant see like John

¹ *Eddius*, c. x.

² I have followed Mr Kirby, *EHR.*, LXXVIII, 1963, pp. 519 *et seq.*, and the late Père Grosjean, *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXXVIII, 1960, pp. 233 *et seq.*, in dating the synod 664, not 663 as is sometimes done. I cannot follow Père Grosjean's interpretation either of Wilfrid's motives, or of his part in the Whitby affair. He writes: "N'est-il bien clair que Wilfrid a cru devoir mettre à profit la présence en Northumbrie de l'évêque Agilbert. . . Le calcul de Wilfrid était bon: l'évêque franc lui remit la direction des débats."—*op. cit.*, p. 250. I cannot see any scope for Wilfrid's *calcul*. There is no evidence that Wilfrid had, or could have had, anything to do with the decision to convoke the synod, which must have been taken, as was the decision that concluded it, by Oswiu and the Bernician court. Wilfrid was wholly committed to the 'roman' party long before the synod and he would not have become abbot of Ripon had this not been so. As the most senior Deiran cleric and the senior Northumbrian representative of the 'roman' observance, it was inevitable that he should play a prominent role without any calculation on his part.

³ *HE.*, iii, c. 25.

⁴ *Eddius*, c. x.

⁵ *Beda's Opera Historica*, Oxford, 1896, II, p. 117.

the Baptist and the Prophet Ezekiel.¹ It is implied but not explicitly stated that the see in question was the one vacated by Colman—what Eddius called the metropolitan see of York. It is certain that this is what Eddius meant to convey since he speaks a little later of Wilfrid returning from consecration in Gaul *ad sedem episcopalem Eboracae civitatis*.² Again Eddius cannot be right. Bede tells us that Colman's successor was a southern Irishman called Tuda; that is, the new bishop was a man sufficiently remote from current controversies, a convinced 'roman' and yet perfectly familiar with the usages of Celtic monasticism, and so ideal for that time and place.³ Bede cannot have invented this and he goes on to explain that Tuda died soon after consecration. At this point he leaves the question of the Northumbrian episcopal succession for a long digression on the career of the monk Ecgberht which had ended only a short while before Bede was writing, more than half-a-century after the synod of Whitby. Bede then returns to the aftermath of Whitby, taking up his narrative as is his wont with the word *interea* which here as elsewhere is chronologically imprecise. He then tells us that Alchfrith sent Wilfrid to the kingdom of the Gauls to be consecrated bishop *eum sibi suisque*.⁴

What exactly did he mean? Eddius is quite unambiguous: Wilfrid was bishop of all the Northumbrians and his see was at York. But because of his omission of any mention of Tuda and his mistakes about the siting of the Northumbrian see and its canonical status he has found few scholars to agree with him. Most have preferred to follow Bede and ignore Eddius, but, as will be argued in a moment, Bede's account presents scarcely fewer problems than that of Eddius, not the least because of persistent ambiguities at the *crucis* in his narrative. As so often when faced with two conflicting accounts it is fatally easy to overlook the possibility that neither may be altogether candid. It seems to me that on close inspection a good case can be made out for Bede's being the more evasive of the two: that Eddius is doctrinaire rather than untruthful. It will be convenient, however, to follow tradition, take the sources separately, and concentrate first on the more reputable author, Bede.

Plummer, rejecting Eddius, supposed Bede to mean that Wilfrid was made bishop of Deira only, whilst Tuda was made bishop of Bernicia. When Tuda died, since Wilfrid had not returned from his Gaulish consecration, Oswiu made Chad bishop of all Northumbria with his seat at York.⁵ In 669 Chad was replaced by Wilfrid who was at last bishop of York and Northumbria. The interpolation of Chad into the story is based on Bede again. Bede says that Wilfrid stayed away a long time in Gaul, so Oswiu imitated his son's example and sent Chad to the south of England to be consecrated *Eburacensis ecclesie*—

¹ *Eddius*, c. xi. Mr Mayr-Harting has pointed out the importance of Eddius' presentation of Wilfrid as an Old Testament prophet in a forthcoming book.

² *Eddius*, c. xii.

³ HE., iii, c. 26.

⁴ HE., iii, c. 28.

⁵ *Bedae*, II, p. 323.

episcopus.¹ Then in 669 the new archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, was sent to England by the Pope. One of his first acts was to point out that Chad had been irregularly consecrated. Chad immediately offered to resign his *episcopatum* if he had not received it rightly² but Theodore assured him that he had no wish to deprive him of his *episcopatus* and completed the consecration *catholice ratione*. Eddius' version is very different. He confirms that Wilfrid delayed his return and when he did arrive back in Northumbria Oswiu had intruded Chad into York. He blames this on the liturgical conservatives and says that Theodore deposed Chad as an intruder, restoring Wilfrid to what was rightfully his.

Plummer's version of all this will not do as it stands. He does not explain how Chad came to be consecrated bishop of York which lay in the heart of Deira, of which he supposed Wilfrid's patron was king, and yet was deposed, not for intrusion into another's see, but merely because of the irregularity of his orders.³ One must go further than this and save Bede's candour by denying that Wilfrid was ever bishop of Deira and York before 669. Alchfrith and Wilfrid between them must have ruled only part of Deira, the country round Ripon and the West Riding. This step was taken by the late R. L. Poole in a paper that is still largely accepted as the definitive account of Wilfrid's career.⁴ Some difficulties suggest themselves straight away. Why does not Bede, who knew of Eddius' false version of the events of 664-9, correct him, at least silently, by saying unambiguously what Wilfrid was made bishop of? It looks in more than one place as though Bede is going out of his way not to contradict Eddius whilst conveying a totally opposed version of the same facts. Bede differs from Eddius mainly in what he leaves out.⁵

To make things worse, Eddius was writing very little after 700 when many people were still alive who knew perfectly well the basic facts of Wilfrid's career. Indeed in view of the long and stormy effect that career had on Northumbrian politics it is probable that very few people did not know enough of

¹ HE., iii, c. 28. ² HE., iv, c. 2.

³ According to Gregory the Great's *Responsa*, vi, HE., i, c. 27, Chad's consecration by a single bishop could be licit.

⁴ *Studies*, pp. 56-81, followed by F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford, 1967, pp. 124, 135. Levison, *Aus Rheinischer und Fränkischer Frühzeit*, Düsseldorf, 1948, p. 371, n. 2, seems to accept it. M. A. Carroll, *The Venerable Bede: His Spiritual Teachings*, Washington, 1946, p. 92, n. 179, gives a clear, slightly amended, summary of Dr Lane Poole's argument. The *Handbook of British Chronology* takes Eddius much more seriously. Mr J. Campbell, *Latin Historians*, ed. T. A. Dorey, London, 1967, rejects Dr Lane Poole's arguments altogether.

⁵ D. J. Kirby, *BjRL*, xlviii, 1966, p. 354, points out that: "Bede's knowledge of York history was very slight." It might on the other hand be that he preferred to keep a discreet silence on Deiran as distinct from general Northumbrian affairs as much as he could. Mr Kirby himself notes the curiously slight treatment of James the Deacon, p. 342, and explains this by a putative lack of a community to record his career, but he himself supplies some good reasons for supporting Nennius against Bede on the question of the baptism of Edwin in which James must have played some part on Bede's version, p. 352.

the facts to detect Eddius' lies at sight. It is very hard to believe that Eddius can have expected to deceive anyone by lies so barefaced as these and difficult to guess what his motives for telling them were. I do not think we can resolve these puzzles by merely looking at the words on the page, we must study them *in situ* and look a little at the kind of audience Bede and Eddius had in mind.

We know that Bede's audience was to be world-wide¹ and his fame second to none in English letters, whilst Eddius is read only by specialists and abused even by them. No doubt both our authors were writing to some degree with posterity in mind, but they can hardly have avoided seeing that posterity as much the same in its civility, its economic and social status grouping, as their own world.

Their world was very small and very upper-class. Bede's *History* ranges widely over the Britain of his day in both space and time. It has a multitude of characters but only three of them are revealed as not of the highest social class: the surely mythical Caedmon; an unnamed, mentally deranged tramp for whom Chad performed a miracle;² and a dumb, deformed pauper healed by John of Beverley.³ For the rest it is a world of kings, queens, abbots and abbesses, monks and nuns, bishops and secular magnates, of the highest social standing. Bede was writing for, and was aware he was writing for, an élite who wanted to know about the doings of their own kind, which is hardly surprising since he knew perfectly well that the future of the Church he was writing about lay with just this class of person. One may cite his important and neglected general statement on the early days of the English nunneries.⁴ Perhaps more significant because it is so trivial a point to get into a work like this, is Bede's remark about two of King Edwin's children who died in infancy. They have no importance whatever in Bede's narrative; none the less their fate is recorded with the note *et iuxta honorem vel regis pueri vel innocentibus Christi congruum in ecclesia sepulti sunt*.⁵ Bede, it will be remembered, has hardly more than this to say of James the Deacon. He would have found, to judge by his *History*, our obsession with the free peasant of Anglo-Saxon England very hard to understand.

Bede's audience then, and Eddius' too, was small, upper-class and in consequence necessarily involved in personal relationships with each other, as well as in social and political relationships. It was a world torn with feuds and tensions, public as well as private, if the two can be distinguished. This world had all the jealousies and spite of small, enclosed, and established élites. Bede himself was accused of heresy and forced to defend himself before his bishop, who happened to be Wilfrid, and very cross it made him.⁶ He had learnt from Gildas

¹ There is even a translation in Japanese.

² HE., iv, c. 3.

³ HE., v, c. 2.

⁴ HE., iii, c. 8. The passage is discussed at length below.

⁵ HE., ii, c. 20.

⁶ *Ep. ad Plegwine*.

apparently¹ the trick of presenting history as the story of the punishment of, and divine retribution for, the despisers of God's commands, and his intention is both to persuade and to warn the powerful amongst the English of the importance of fostering the Church. Page after page is devoted to the success of the faithful such as Oswald who accepted his victory over Cadwallon as proof of the efficacy of the Christian God;² the downfall of the wicked after initial success—again the obvious example is Cadwallon—looms large; and the rewards of sanctity are compared with the horrors of Hell. The vision of Hell and its horrors is an integral part of Bede's purpose. But he was only too aware of the limitations of supernatural sanctions in his world, and if his collection of moral *exempla* was to be acceptable to the Englishmen of his day it was not possible for him to say all he knew or reveal all he thought.

Mr Wallace-Hadrill has recently pointed out that Bede like Gregory of Tours "withheld dangerous material."³ We need look no further than his preface with its hint of royal censorship. Or we may turn to the end of his *History* and what he says of Northumbrian monasticism. If one compares what he says there with what he wrote only months later from his death-bed to his bishop, the extent of his reticence is plain. Further Bede was not writing for Northumbria but for the English. A good deal of Bede's information and some of his incentive came from south of the Humber.⁴ This part of England had once been tributary to the Northumbrian kings but was now subject to Æthelbald of Mercia, who is treated a good deal more gently by Bede than he was by St Boniface. Mercian susceptibilities were of some importance to Bede. Bearing all this in mind, I think we can see a little better what Bede was at in his dealings with Wilfrid.

The main difficulty in Dr Lane Poole's version of Wilfrid's career comes from what Bede says about Chad's tenure of the see of York. He saw clearly that if Bede's evidence is to be taken as complete and candid Chad cannot have been intruded into Wilfrid's see and therefore cannot have been deposed for that reason either. Bede seems to me to mean that Chad was consecrated to the see after Wilfrid had left to go to Gaul. He explains Chad's election by saying that after Wilfrid had left, Oswiu made Chad bishop of York *quo adhuc in transmarinis partibus propter ordinationem demorante* (Wilfrid). The *quo adhuc* surely

¹ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, II, Berlin, 1968, p. 37. As Mr Wallace-Hadrill points out, one must allow Bede to have learnt this lesson from the Bible too. Eddius has a similar ideology which must be derived entirely from the Old Testament.

² HE., iii, c. 3.

³ *Art. cit.*, p. 38. Mr J. C. Campbell, *art. cit.*, has an important discussion of this point, p. 177: "Had we to rely on the *Ecclesiastical History* for our knowledge of the Church in the first generation of the eighth century we should know little of it. . . There can be little doubt that Bede's failure to describe the conduct of those of his contemporaries of whom he disapproved was deliberate." Mr Campbell goes on to discuss Bede's treatment of Wilfrid in a section of the greatest interest.

⁴ v. Bede's *Preface* to HE., pp. 5 *et seq.*

implies a causal relationship between Wilfrid's delay and Chad's election. Bede is implying that Wilfrid forfeited his see by his neglect of it, and since he gives no explanation of what caused Wilfrid's delay but a perfectly respectable reason for Chad's replacing him, he really avoids blaming either. If this is so then Bede as well as Eddius is telling us that Wilfrid was bishop of York—and the Northumbrians. This seems to fit into his chronological survey which Plummer appended to the *History* where Bede says s.a.664 *Ceadda ac Wilfrid Nordanhymbrorum ordinantur episcopi*.¹ When Bede, or anyone else, speaks of the see of the Northumbrians they cannot be shown to mean a part only of Northumbria. Nothing therefore in Bede's text requires us to think that Wilfrid and Chad were ever joint bishops or anything other than successive bishops of the whole see. It is also apparent that if Wilfrid delayed his return from Gaul he did not delay his consecration which took place the same year as Chad's, the same year as his election—this is confirmed by Eddius²—so Wilfrid was really quite speedy in securing consecration.

When we come to Bede's account of Chad's deposition we find him evasive in the extreme. He twice uses the word *episcopatus*. Chad on being challenged concerning the legality of his consecration immediately laid down his *episcopatus*, which might mean either his see or his episcopal dignity. Theodore replied that he ought not *eum episcopatum dimittere*³ and completed his consecration *catholice ratione*. The obvious implication is that Chad's orders were defective on liturgical or canonical grounds⁴ and the defects were supplied by the archbishop. It is therefore with some surprise that the attentive reader discovers Chad in the next chapter living in retirement at Lastingham and available for preferment as bishop of the Mercians. Bede has used the ambiguity of *episcopatus* to cover up the fact that Chad laid down both dignity and see and that Theodore restored only the rank. The reasons for this reticence seem obvious. By the time Bede wrote Chad was the ornament of the tradition of the chief Mercian see, Lichfield. Wilfrid, too, was always more highly regarded in Mercia than he was in Northumbria. Everything, including sense, in an eirenic work such as this, suggested a certain glossing over of the difficult beginnings of both Wilfrid's and Chad's careers. It is noticeable that Eddius, vigorous partisan as he is of his hero, is careful to avoid criticizing Chad personally for his intrusion. It follows that we cannot take Bede's *History* as a safe foundation for the chronology of Wilfrid's career as Dr Lane Poole did, especially if we intend to rely as much on Bede's silence as did Dr Lane Poole.

It also follows that Eddius cannot be as corrupt as his modern readers have

¹ HE., v, c. 24.

² Eddius, c. xii.

³ HE., iv, c. 2.

⁴ Chad was excluded from the probably mid-eighth-century verse martyrology that mentions all the bishops of York up to Wilfred ii.—H. Quentin, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, II, pp. 642-4.

freely supposed. Can we then, accepting that neither of our sources is free to tell the whole truth and both have motives for suppressing inconvenient facts, make some sense of Wilfrid's career?

The first problem is the business about the metropolitan see of York. York had been a metropolitan see.¹ We know little of the history of the York area between the days of Roman Britain and those of Bede but we do know that the Northumbrians were confined to the coast until late in the sixth century. Elmet, the British kingdom lying in the Leeds area, was still unconquered in Æthelfrith's reign: its conquest was most probably achieved by Edwin, that is after the arrival of the Gregorian mission.² In view of the nearness of York to Elmet it would be unwise to assume too early a break in the York succession. Nor is it safe to underrate the possibility of the survival of traditions about York's former status. In Canterbury, which had been in English hands probably longer than any other part of Britain, it was still known that the old church given by Æthelberht to Augustine was formerly dedicated to St Martin.³ It cannot then be ruled out that Eddius knew of York's original status.

Gregory the Great certainly did and proposed to create a province based on York for England north of the Humber. Paulinus had consequently placed his *cathedra* there and Eddius was likely to know both these facts. I should explain Eddius' deliberate ascription of a see and a status to Colman he never possessed by this knowledge. He probably knew York had once been a metropolitan see; he certainly knew that the Pope meant it to resume its status. So when writing a *Life* of the hero of the party of Peter, what better way of attesting his orthodoxy than to describe the see of the Northumbrians as the Pope said it should be?

It seems probable that Gregory's intention was known and discussed at Whitby. Bede tells us that Tuda succeeded Colman, and then Chad and Wilfred succeeded him: from what he says it is clear that the see of the Northumbrians has been moved from Lindisfarne to York but he gives no reasons and makes no comment. Bede says that Tuda was consecrated bishop of the Northumbrians⁴ but does not say where his *cathedra* was placed. But he does speak of the election of an abbot of Lindisfarne in such a way that the election appears to be part of the arrangements necessitated by the departure of Colman. Later he tells us that from ancient times the abbot of Lindisfarne had been part

¹ *Eborius Episcopus de civitate Eboracensi provincia Britanniae*, attended the council of Arles in 314.—S. Frere, *Britannia*, London, 1967, p. 332. J. C. Mann, *Antiquity*, xxxv, 1961, pp. 316–20, showed that York was one of the four British metropolitan sees of the day.

² N. K. Chadwick, *Celt and Saxon*, Cambridge, 1963, p. 151.

³ HE., i, c. 26. I am told by my archaeologist friends that it is not possible to identify the patron saints of churches in this period from inscriptions. Presumably then the knowledge of the patron of this church must have been preserved by oral tradition which seems to me interesting.

⁴ HE., iii, c. 26.

of the bishop's *familia*¹—this is an implicit denial that the bishop was subordinate to the abbot in the Celtic manner. This is certainly true from the time Lindisfarne became a bishop's seat again in 678, but for a generation before that Lindisfarne had been ruled by an abbot without a bishop. There is no evidence that before Whitby there had ever been an abbot at Lindisfarne other than its proper ruler, St Aidan, and his two successors as bishops of the Northumbrians. It seems most unlikely that after Whitby the appointment of an abbot as well as a bishop resident at Lindisfarne would have been made with all the schismatic overtones that arrangement had. I take it that Tuda either moved to York or meant to. At any rate there is no doubt that before the year was out the see had moved south. This meant that the bishop of the Northumbrian and Bernician king moved away from his court to York—and the potentially breakaway province of Deira. There is no doubt, then, that the move was made very soon after Whitby: there must have been a compelling reason, and I suggest that one of the consequences of the synod was an acceptance of Gregory's original wishes for the siting of the principal northern see.² With the exception of the omission of Tuda—and by the time Eddius wrote I doubt if he was of much interest to anyone except someone with a historian's sense of detail like Bede—Eddius gets things right, albeit in a pedantic and legalistic way.

Let us now turn to Wilfrid's stay in Gaul and its reasons. Eddius is scarcely less reticent about them than Bede. He ascribes Chad's intrusion to the remains of the party of Columba—he calls them, tendentiously, Quatrodecimans—but does not consider Chad to be of their number, and he says specifically that Wilfrid was ignorant of Chad's intrusion until his return.³ Bede does not offer any explanation of Wilfrid's delay either and this is odd since such important and embarrassing consequences followed from it. Just what kind of reasons can Wilfrid have had? We know that it cannot have been his desire for an imposing consecration which he had secured before the year was out. It seems to me that the delay, like the synod of Whitby itself, is best explained by the perennial tensions of Northumbrian politics.

An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* some years ago pointed out that Alchfrith's conversion to 'roman' ways added religious to the

¹ HE., v, c. 27.

² Another of Gregory's wishes seems relevant here since it can be shown to have been heeded before Bede recorded the document. HE., i, c. 27, contains the famous or notorious *Responsa*, cl. vi (which seems likely to be genuine) which requires that episcopal consecrations be arranged at a time when other bishops were at hand. Except in cases of dire necessity no consecration might take place without the witness of three or four bishops. Gregory suggests that visits by bishops from Gaul would make suitable occasions. This suggestion sounds very appropriate for its period and very unlike the work of a forger. Since on Bede's own admission there was only one fully licit bishop in England in 664 it is not surprising that Wilfrid should go to a Gaulish synod for consecration, especially if he knew of the papal demand, which I think he did. It is worth noting that Cuthbert was consecrated by Archbishop Theodore and six other bishops.—HE., iv, c. 28.

³ Eddius, c. xiv.

existing political and dynastic tensions between Bernicia and Deira. Oswiu's conversion nipped this development in the bud, but it looks as though there was a price to be paid: obedience to papal commands and the removal of the Northumbrian *cathedra* to Deira. First a neutral bishop is elected but dies untimely and there is not much alternative to Alchfrith's brilliant young abbot, who had played so great a part at the synod. Plummer pointed out that it is evident from Bede's *History* that at some point Alchfrith rebelled against his father. Since Alchfrith disappears from history and Bede's pages after Whitby, he conjectured reasonably enough that this was when the rebellion occurred. Since this implies that the rebellion and its failure lay after Wilfrid's election and departure, it seems no very daring conjecture to explain Wilfrid's delay and Chad's intrusion as part of the aftermath of the rebellion. Oswiu could not at this point recall his see from York to Lindisfarne but at least he could see to it that he was served by a safe Bernician bishop instead of the client of his rebellious son.¹ I should think Eddius no less reticent here than Bede and I find his claim that Wilfrid was ignorant of Chad's election incredible. It seems much more likely that Wilfrid had heard bad news from Northumbria and he stayed in Gaul until he judged it safe to return. When he returned he was not without friends, and powerful ones. We are told that he acted as bishop on occasion for the Mercians² and it is plain that his relations with the rising dynasty of Mercia were already close. By 669 Oswiu was pretty well forced to accept Wilfrid unless he were prepared to add the Pope to his enemies, significantly just at a time when the Mercians were prepared to accept 'roman' Christianity.

In 678 Oswiu's son Ecgrith rejected Wilfrid, ejected him from York, divided the see and neither he nor his successors ever completely restored Wilfrid again. Eddius says that the Queen turned Ecgrith against Wilfrid because of his temporal possessions and the number of his monasteries. Archbishop Theodore was persuaded to act as accomplice in Wilfrid's disgrace and consecrated three bishops in what had once been the undivided see of the Northumbrians. Further Eddius claims they were unacceptable to Wilfrid as *aliunde inventos et non de subiectis illius parrochia*.³ This is scarcely illuminating, little more so than Bede who offers no explanation at all beyond the bare mention of a quarrel between Ecgrith and Wilfrid.⁴ In 678 the king of the Mercians was Æthelred, who was always Wilfrid's friend,⁵ except when it was inexpedient

¹ *Beda*, II, pp. 198-9.

² *Eddius*, c. xiv.

³ *Ibid.*, c. xxiv. Dr Colgrave, p. 168, was puzzled by this passage and concluded that since the intruded bishops were all noted Northumbrian clerics Eddius was "amazingly inaccurate in his description of these men as being picked up elsewhere." I think he misunderstood what Eddius was trying to say. He tells us that three men not subject to Wilfrid's *parochia* were intruded into his *episcopatus*. If Eddius was using *parochia* in its Celtic sense of monastic connection, which must have been known to him, the sense is clear and accurate. The men were not Wilfrid's monks: they were clearly deliberately chosen to be uncongenial to Wilfrid.

⁴ HE., iv, c. 12.

⁵ *Eddius*, c. xlviii *inter alia*.

to offend Ecgfrith.¹ Some of the monasteries, whose number so offended Ecgfrith's queen, lay in Mercia and he died in one of them when on his way to obey a summons from Ceolred of Mercia who had promised "to order his whole life after my instruction."²

Now Wilfrid's lifetime and his tenure of power at York coincided with the ebbing of Northumbrian power south of the Humber and the rise of a new, Mercian hegemony in its stead, a process complete by the time Bede wrote his *History*. Oswiu certainly ruled all England as *brytenwealda* but this hegemony was seriously challenged on his death by Wulfhere of Mercia. His son Ecgfrith, Wilfrid's implacable opponent for most of his career, was temporarily successful in restoring Northumbrian hegemony,³ and as a result reannexed Lindsey.⁴ Wilfrid then, from the circumstances of his career, was little more *persona grata* with the Bernician dynasty than he was in Merovingian Gaul. It looks very much as though it was his identification with the cause of the party of *romanitas* together with his powerful Mercian connections, that made him both dubious to the Bernician dynasty and very difficult to get rid of altogether. It can scarcely be a coincidence, then, that Wilfrid's ejection in 678 occurred at a time when Northumbrian-Mercian relations were at breaking point and his fall was soon followed by the battle of Trent. Of this battle Sir Frank Stenton remarked: "The battle of Trent proved to be one of the decisive incidents in early English history, for Ecgfrith never again attempted to conquer any part of southern England, and his successors were kept from adventures in the south by the new dangers which threatened their northern border."⁵ I would suggest that when tension was building up between Northumbria and Mercia, Wilfrid's Mercian connections became anathema to Ecgfrith who saw his power gradually waning before his southern rival, his bishop's friend. Certainly the break-up of Wilfrid's supra-tribal monastic connection was an important object of Northumbrian royal policy. It seems to me that it was his defence of this connection that accounts for Wilfrid's litigation at Rome much better than the division of his see. At any rate the synod that led Wilfrid to make his last voyage to Rome in 703 intended to force Wilfrid to allow Archbishop Beorhtwald of Canterbury to nominate new abbots and abbesses. Stress is laid in a *Northumbrian* synod on the demand that Wilfrid should surrender all his Mercian properties.⁶ The king did not seek them for himself, nor did he, as Ecgfrith had done in 678, try to nominate new incumbents for the Northumbrian monasteries. Surely the point is that what mattered to the Northumbrian court, and what drove Wilfrid to Rome in protest, was the dissolution of this inter-tribal connection. It seems that Wilfrid was a little too English and too little Northumbrian for the northern establishment's liking.

¹ *Eddius*, c. xl.

² *Ibid.*, c. lxiv.

³ *Ibid.*, c. xx.

⁴ HE., iv, c. 12.

⁵ *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 85.

⁶ *Eddius*, c. xlvii.

If I am right in this, Eddius is only a little less reticent than Bede in his reporting of Wilfrid's trials. Obviously Wilfrid cannot have been unaware of the importance of his Mercian connections both as a source of difficulty, and usually, as a source of strength and a defence. He can scarcely have avoided being something of a politician and making political calculations and some of his troubles he plainly asked for. The evidence, however, still suggests to me that Wilfrid had much higher aims than mere political success and that the welfare of the Church as he saw it was an important object of his policies. What is more, it seems to me that in broad outline he was quite right. To see the reasons for this we must leave the world of inter-tribal politics for the problems of contemporary social structure. We may as well begin with Wilfrid's part in the quarrels between 'romans' and Celts.

One has only to read through Bede to see how the Celts he knew, what we should call the Welsh roughly speaking, brought out the venom in a historian otherwise conspicuous for his tact and wide sympathies: Bede is much more anti-British than Eddius for instance. Ostensibly the issue that divided English and Celt was the proper mode of calculating Easter. This issue was at once important and trivial. As a matter of ritual and liturgical custom rather than a doctrinal heresy, we have, or ought to have, learnt from the social anthropologists how very important such matters are to primitive peoples. In pre-literate, or barely literate, societies, such a matter as the calculation of Easter can be also an expression of social identity. In spite of this, with certain exceptions, most of the Christian world did not rate the matter very highly. Bede himself says the difference only arose because of the isolation of the Celtic world from the rest of Christendom;¹ he did not say what caused the isolation. He has usually been followed in what seems a reasonable explanation, no one having produced a better one. It is evident that agreement about the keeping of Easter did not obtain in continental Europe.² Even in Ireland itself Dr Hughes has recently pointed out: "There is no evidence that the controversy, long-drawn out as it was, raised anything like the same bitterness in Ireland as it did in England."³ It is obvious that the bitterness found in England was because the liturgical dispute had important social bearings.

In Northumbria the basic tension between Bernicia and Deira was annually paraded when one side of the court fasted for Palm Sunday whilst the other feasted for Easter Day: just as every Easter after Whitby was a basic confrontation of Briton and Saxon. In the south of Ireland where no secondary issues were involved liturgical revision and conformity seem to have been achieved fairly easily from renewed contacts with the Continent. Even that citadel of conservatism, Iona, conformed in Bede's lifetime, although it cannot have

¹ HE., iii, c. 4.

² Mgr Ryan in *Essays presented to A. Gwynne*.

³ K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, London, 1966, p. 108.

been palatable to its monks to be told how to calculate Easter by a province that stood for the most part *in statu pupillari* to the tradition of Columba. In point of fact it was only in the confrontation of Briton and Saxon that violence and bitterness marks the controversy and one wonders if the Welsh would have been the last to conform without the disincentive of Anglophobia? Now although the Easter question was clearly the main one discussed at Whitby and one that always occupied Bede's thoughts, it was not all that was at issue between Roman and Celt. It was these further questions that throw more light on Wilfrid's conduct. I am speaking of conflicting notions of the hierarchical structure of the Church, which seems to me more complicated on both the Celtic and Roman sides than it has seemed to others.

Continental Christianity had inherited the bias of imperial Rome towards *urbanitas*.¹ By the seventh century the idea that a bishop should have his *cathedra* in a town, and the way of looking at a diocese as though it were a type of imperial unit of local government, were so deep-rooted as to have survived a decline in town life to a point where *urbanitas* was nothing but a hindrance to decent church order.² In the ancient world towns supported schools and a general cultural life that could occasionally produce an Ambrose or an Augustine, as well as lesser men, for the Church. But early medieval Europe was a rural place where wealth and power were based on the domination of the land and its cultivators. The natural form of ecclesiastical structure for such a world was much more the monastery than the urban episcopal diocese. Gaulish monasticism, deriving as it did from an imitation of the life of the Egyptian monks, had inherited an eremitic bent. The disorders of the times often sent these monks flocking to towns for protection and this naturally increased the bishop's power over them. In any case ancient canon law gave monks, who were legally laymen, little protection against a hostile bishop, even if there had been any effective means of enforcing the law. It seems to me that the source of the obvious weakness of the Gaulish Church at this period lay in the way in which the episcopate was strong enough to control and limit the development of a native monasticism without being strong enough to guide the Church in general, and in being without many of the kind of bishops who might have sought to give this kind of guidance.

The Celtic world had the great advantage that it had no towns. It was, therefore, forced on conversion to find a type of ecclesiastical structure suited to its own needs. The solution was the tribal monastery, often, if not always, with a hereditary abbacy and one in which, although bishops would certainly be found for essential sacramental purposes, the ruler of the community was the

¹ E. Ewig, 'Kirche und Civitas in der Merowingerzeit', *Settimane di . . . Spoleto*, VII, 1960, pp. 45 *et seq.*

² M. Roblin, 'Cités ou Citadelles', *Revue des Etudes Anciennes*, LXXIII, 1951, pp. 301-11.

abbot. In some cases the abbot would himself be in episcopal orders and for many parts of Western Europe for some generations such a monastery would not have been easy to distinguish from a 'normal' episcopal *familia*: but in others, such as Iona, the abbot was not a bishop and such an arrangement would certainly have seemed unconventional if not scandalous to many. It does not seem to me sensible to speak as though the bureaucratic city-based episcopate were of the very essence of the Church and to use it as a model to apply to all periods and places. One cannot look at a blue-print of a social structure and judge it as good or bad, or one cannot do this sensibly. One must apply the test of function and results. If we do this it seems obvious that it was certain forms of Celtic monasticism that really mattered in the seventh century.

It must be obvious that the decisive task of the day was a missionary one, to convert the pagan, largely Germanic, peoples on the fringe of Christian Europe, and reform the decayed institutions of Gaul and elsewhere. By and large, the only organized groups of men who undertook missionary work on any scale were the Irish. In addition to this, without any tradition of literacy behind them or any residual Roman influence, they made some of their monasteries centres of learning that compared at least favourably with continental centres that could boast much longer traditions. If we take a single example, the obvious one, of St Columbanus, it is evident what one mission could do to reform a well-established but decadent Church.¹ Columbanus quarrelled with the Frankish bishops over the mode of reckoning Easter, of course, but in his letter to the Pope he is much more concerned that men as corrupt as these urban bishops should interfere with his monasteries. It is possible that Columbanus changed his method of calculating Easter before he died, and if he did not, his monks certainly did within a decade.²

Columbanus' idea of monasticism is worth looking at and easily accessible. It is evident from his *Regulae* that he had rejected the eremitical form of monasticism for a coenobitic rule subject to an authoritarian abbot. In this he was taking much the same 'eccentric' line as St Benedict had done a generation or so earlier. We now know that this kind of monasticism was much less common than used to be thought. Whether Columbanus himself knew Benedict's *Rule* may be doubted but it is not impossible since he greatly admired Gregory the Great's writings, as it may also be doubted if there were ever more than a handful of communities professing the *Rule* exclusively and completely before the tenth century.³ But certainly the *Rule* is first found outside Monte Cassino in

¹ Courtois, *Settimana di . . . Spoleto*, IV, 1957; G. M. Walker, *Opera S. Columbani*, Dublin, 1957, intro.

² Walker, *op. cit.*, p. xxxiii.

³ John, *Revue Bénédictine*, LXXV, 1965, pp. 212 *et seq.* Dom Hubert Dauphin, *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 1968, p. 1112, in a review of *Orbis Britanniae* does me the injustice of supposing me

company with Columbanus' *Regulae* and in houses of his connection.¹ I have spoken, as is customary, of Celtic monasticism, and certainly, as the activities of the tradition of Columba, as well others less famous, show the will to do missionary work and the ability to sustain it were not confined to Columbanus and his connection. None the less, in the importance of what was achieved Columbanus stands head and shoulders above the rest. It is, therefore, of some importance to ask, as Dr Hughes has asked, how typically Celtic was Columbanus,² and to see that for all we know he was not more typical than Benedict's Monte Cassino or Gregory the Great's little monastery in Rome. At any rate there were important and fruitful connections between all three.

It cannot be a coincidence that outside Celtic Christendom the only source of missionary activity was Gregory's Roman monastery from which Augustine and his companions were sent to Canterbury. Gregory was a thoroughly authoritarian abbot, filled with the spirit of Benedict's ideal abbot.³ Tension between the monk, Gregory style, and the more traditional-minded clergy was felt in Rome itself, perhaps more strongly than elsewhere.⁴ Even if Columbanus expressed himself strongly about the local episcopate, the monk-party in Rome agreed with him and, a few years after Columbanus' death, Gregory's true heir

ignorant of the text of Dom Guy Ferrari's book on *Early Roman Monasticism* because I cited it, and referred the readers to Professor D. Bullough's review in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. I had, of course, consulted Dom Ferrari's book directly but wished to direct the reader to Professor Bullough's important comments on his conclusions. I was therefore aware that Dom Ferrari cited the traditional view of the basically Benedictine character of early English monasticism, with which I do not agree. I did not mention his remark because it seemed foolish to cite a book about Roman monasteries as an authority for a cliché about English monasticism, and churlish to chide it on a matter of peripheral concern for the subject of the book. Dom Dauphin appears to argue that, because one of the most ancient manuscripts of the *Rule* is of English provenance, this proves Benedictine monasticism existed in England before the tenth century. This scarcely follows in the era of the *regula mixta*. Benedict Biscop adopted an eclectic ruled based on his experience of the way of life in seventeen different monasteries.—*Bedae Opera*, I, p. 374. Wilfrid certainly introduced the *Rule* into Northumbria and, if Dom Hallinger is correct, probably into England.—*Eddius*, c. xiv and cf. c. xlvii. But it cannot have been followed fully in his monasteries in view of what Eddius tells us about the way Wilfrid controlled the abbatial succession and the nature of his will.

¹ John, *art. cit.*, p. 218. ² *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

³ Etienne Delaruelle, 'L'Eglise Romaine et ses Relations avec l'Eglise Franque', *Setimane di. . . Spoleto*, VII, 1960, p. 161: "Cette époque n'est pas celle des *Dictatus Papae* et l'on sait déjà que ce pape n'est pas un canoniste, mais un pasteur et un moine; il ordonne, mais à la manière de l'abbé dans la Règle de saint Benoît: *Ausculta fili.*"

⁴ The extremely unpleasant story of the death of Gregory's immediate successor, Sabinian, in the *Whitby Life* of Gregory is probably an echo of this controversy. Sabinian replaced monks appointed by Gregory with secular clergy.—Duchesne, *Liber Pontificalis*, I, p. 315, n. 6, and cf. the epitaph *loc. cit.* The next pope, Boniface IV, was a disciple of Gregory and a lover of monks but he was succeeded by Deusdedit who once again deposed monks and restored the secular clergy. The most important pro-monastic pope after Gregory was Honorius I (625–38). He founded a monastery; was admired by the Columbanian monk Jonas, and gave the first charter of exemption from episcopal authority to a community of monks, Columbanus' foundation at Bobbio; cf. his obituary in *LP* and Duchesne's notes. It would be interesting to know if the savagery of the reaction to Honorius' doctrinal indiscretions had anything to do with these Roman politics.

in more ways than one, Honorius I, granted Bobbio the first charter of exemption from episcopal control in history. In this way the monks were by implication recognized as part of the clergy, a policy which, if the Augustinian mission is anything to go by, Gregory the Great fully shared. The importance of the charter of exemption for the future of the Church and the achievement of an authentic Benedictine monasticism cannot be more than mentioned here. Columbanus' monks returned the compliment. The cult of Peter, which in early Merovingian Gaul had been very much an 'also ran' behind that of Martin and Denis, the local saints, was promoted by them to the status of principal Gaulish cult, whose most exalted clients were, of course, the Pippinides.¹ The importance of the cult of Peter in early medieval papalism has long been known.

I am suggesting that the conventional antitheses by which we judge this period, or at least English historians do, either contrasting Celtic and continental Christianity or opposing Celtic individualism to Roman organization, will not altogether do. We need to look at certain kinds of monasticism, less rare perhaps in the Celtic world, but not demonstrably common even there. We need to oppose these more or less coenobitic monasteries to that *damnosa hereditas* of imperial Rome, the traditional diocese, which had long outlived the social structure that was its *raison d'être*.²

From its geographical as from its social situation, the infant English Church was placed in the middle of all this, and it is by no means easy to see just what the consequences of Whitby were where it mattered, in ecclesiastical organization. The removal of the see of the Northumbrians from Lindisfarne suggests that there were consequences and that these were important. It also suggests that the pull of urban tradition was strong, and, if what I have written above has any force, the removal was not obviously a reform. We must here face an important question about contemporary English society: were there in fact any towns? The older learning discounted the possibility. We have been told for a long time that the Anglo-Saxons hated town life and ignored or abandoned the

¹ Delaruelle, *art. cit.*, pp. 163 *et seq.*

² A good deal of confusion on this point is due to the fact that work done on English diocesan organization is concerned for the most part with the twelfth and later centuries. It is instructive to compare some of the detailed studies of the diocese of the high middle ages, say C. R. Cheney, *English Synodalia*, taken in conjunction with the same author's Ford Lectures, *From Becket to Langton*; or F. Barlow, *Durham Jurisdictional Peculiars*, with what Bede and Eddius have to say about the nature of the episcopal office. We may notice their assumption, especially clear in the key text, Bede's letter to Ecgberht, that the bishop baptizes and confirms his entire flock. It scarcely seems that there was any trace of a true parochial organization in England before the tenth-century reformation when the evidence is clear. On the Continent St Boniface's reform legislation for the Frankish Church is relevant. He even found it necessary to order the subjection of the clergy to their diocesan bishop; cf. Herr Ewig's brilliant essay in H. Jedin and J. Dolan, *Handbook of Church History*, III, London, 1969, pp. 13-14. Parishes were, after all, what the dioceses of the high middle ages were all about.

Romano-British foundations they found here; the trouble with this learning is that contemporaries did not talk like this at all. In his exposition of the Gospel of Mark, Bede writes: "Ut cum forte villam aut oppidum, aut alium quemlibet locum in quo sit domus orationis Deo consecrata, intramus."¹ In his *History* he says St Alban was martyred *iuxta civitatem Verolamium*,² which could be an antique reminiscence, but he describes Paulinus' first convert as *praefectus* of the city of Lincoln, which could not.³ He speaks of Oswald's royal city,⁴ as well as giving a description of London which points undeniably to a thriving urban community. All these references seem to point to a number of towns as going communities of some kind.⁵

Certainly if the early English had not towns they showed remarkable foresight in choosing the sites of important future urban centres in which to put their bishops. Winchester was not the first West Saxon see, but its foundation dates from the first generation of West Saxon Christianity. The foundation decree speaks of a see *in Wentanam civitatem*.⁶ It was plainly an urban centre of some importance by 1066,⁷ and in the light of this Mr Biddle's excavation reports are of special interest.⁸ It looks very much as though there was continuous occupation of Canterbury.⁹ Worcester was the seat of a bishop before 700 and literary evidence exists to show it was an urban centre of sorts not more than a century later. Professor Finberg has some interesting observations on Gloucester, Bath, and Cirencester in this connection.¹⁰ Perhaps the most interesting of these early examples is a real *exceptio quae probat regulam*, the primitive West Saxon see of Dorchester. No one would expect on the traditional learning to find continuity with Roman Britain here, but there is some interesting evidence.

Bede says Birinus the apostle of Wessex was given *civitatem quae vocatur Dorcic* for his see.¹¹ It is really a very odd choice as a centre of the West Saxon see and hardly surprising that Winchester was quickly found more suitable. After all even in the tenth century Dorchester lay on the marches of Wessex proper, and, to judge by its attachment to Ramsey, was deemed to belong to the *scir* of the ealdormen of East Anglia, not Wessex. Something of the expla-

¹ Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, xcii, 243 B.

² HE., i, c. 7.

³ HE., ii, c. 16.

⁴ HE., iii, c. 12.

⁵ *Eddius*, c. xxxvi *et seq.*, speaks of Osfrith *praefectus . . . quae praeerat Inbroninis urbi regis* (*Moonen*, p. 367, discusses the identification of this place and tentatively chooses Broomridge in Northumberland; Colgrave remains agnostic). Osfrith was given charge of Wilfrid and the passage suggests that Broomridge, if that is where it was, was some kind of centre of government and contained at least what Colgrave called dungeons. The anonymous *Life* of Cuthbert, ed. Colgrave, Cambridge, 1940, pp. 116, 122, speaks as though Carlisle were still inhabited. Bede's *Life*, Colgrave, *op. cit.*, p. 243, is specially interesting on this.

⁶ Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, III, pp. 126-7.

⁷ Harmer, *Writs*, no. 111 and commentary.

⁸ *Antiquaries Journal* in progress.

⁹ *Civitas Capitals*, ed. J. S. Wachter, Leicester, 1966, p. 91.

¹⁰ *Gloucestershire Studies*, Leicester, 1957, pp. 58 *et seq.*

¹¹ HE., iii, c. 7.

nation of this odd choice is suggested by the existence of a town there in Roman British times as a late inscription reveals.¹ Professor Frere, moreover, thinks Dorchester was occupied rather than destroyed by the invaders.² It would be unwise then to dismiss too easily the familiarity of the contemporary sources with the *civitas*; but it is incredible that they can have been of sufficient size to support an efficient diocesan organization of either the classical or the properly medieval type.

However one looks at it, the vitality of the English Church depended on its monasteries: the diocese, especially where associated with these decayed urban remains, is not likely to have been of much real value. Now the young English Church was particularly fortunate in that it was well-placed to draw on the experience of the Celtic and Gaulish monasticism, already beginning to influence each other. The sources of influence of Irish monasticism on the new English Christians need no demonstration, the Frankish sources are less familiar.³ Bede himself tells us⁴ of the daughter of a king of Kent who went to a convent in Brie, adding that since there were so few convents in England many nuns from Britain went to Gaul. He points out that girls, it is implied of high birth, went especially to Brie, Chelles, and Andelys. This is supported by casual references in saints' lives. There is such a reference in the most ancient *Life* of St Gertrude. St Mildred, who later became abbess of Minster in the isle of Thanet, went to Chelles and we know from the *Life* of an abbess of Chelles that more than one English king asked her for teachers to be sent. Professor Finberg has suggested that the first abbess of Wenlock in Shropshire, a Frankish nun called Liobsynde, came to England as the result of such an invitation.⁵

¹ R. Wright, *RIB.*, no. 235, which mentions a *beneficiarius consularis* apparently established there. I take it that this is the evidence behind Frere, *Britannia*, p. 195. It is just worth noting that Professor A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1964, II, p. 595, points out that *beneficarii* belonged to a class that "sometimes rose to be bishops." The inscription is, of course, pagan. I am indebted to my colleague Dr G. B. Jones for drawing my attention to this inscription.

² *Britannia*, p. 377. He also assumes that Romano-British towns none the less died out "later."—*Civitas Capitals*, pp. 87 *et seq.* It is easy to imagine that some or even all British towns would succumb to the English invasions but as it is clear that some did not and were occupied, it seems to me that a good deal more evidence than Professor Frere adduces is necessary to allow one to dismiss all continuity of urban life from the scene.

³ For some of what follows I am indebted to a personal communication from the late Père Grosjean. I alone am responsible for the interpretations put upon the evidence.

⁴ HE., iii, c. 8. It should be remembered that Frankish and Irish influences were not mutually exclusive. There were Irish monks and more than one Irish *paruchia* in Francia.—Grosjean, *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXXXV, 1957, pp. 373 *et seq.*; Hughes, *op. cit.*, cap. 9.

⁵ *The Early Charters of the West Midlands*, Leicester, 1961, pp. 208–9. For St Gertrude, see Grosjean, *art. cit.*, pp. 388 *et seq.*; for Chelles, see *Vitae Bertilae*, ed. Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, s.r. Merovingicarum*, VI, p. 106. An East Anglian princess, Æthelburg, was abbess of Farmouëtier-en-Brie.—F. M. Stenton in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. P. Clemoes, London, 1959, pp. 44 *et seq.* Hereswith, sister of St Hilda and one-time wife of an East Anglian king, became a nun at Chelles.—Stenton, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Hilda herself intended to go to Francia at one time.—Cf. Grosjean,

All this must have had an effect on English church life. It cannot be a coincidence that the double monastery, so popular in early England, is found earlier in Gaul but not in Ireland. It will be noticed that our evidence points to the influence of a group of monasteries lying in that part of Gaul most closely connected with the kindred of the rising Pippinides: this can hardly be unconnected with the close associations of the Anglo-Saxon monk-missionaries of the next generation with the Carolingians. But it cannot be denied that it was English monasteries, all-male communities influenced by the Celtic world like Jarrow or Malmesbury, rather than mixed communities influenced by the Frankish, that counted: the urban diocesan episcopal *familia* has little to show.¹ Alcuin alone must say much for York but there is not much else. Canterbury under Theodore was, of course, very important but was it the cathedral or the monastery? The fact that early kings of Kent and archbishops of Canterbury were buried in the monastery is surely significant. In the light of all this St Wilfrid's litigation takes on a slightly different aspect.

It would follow that the universal criticism heaped on his head for resisting the division of the Northumbrian see into three is misplaced, as is the assumption that Archbishop Theodore assisted King Ecgfrith in a matter pertaining to the good order of the Church and nothing more. When dioceses were split in the early Middle Ages or the boundaries of provinces changed, politics were never far away. One might cite the history of the see of Magdeburg in Ottonian times; the history of north-west France, especially the see of Dol, throughout the period; and, coming nearer home, the inglorious history of the province of Lichfield in the next century. In so far as these new dioceses fed on monasteries,² they must have done as much harm as good.

If we turn to Wilfrid's litigation it is obvious that it was his vast monastic connection that mattered to him and drove him to Rome, not the division of the diocese. In his first plea before the Pope, Wilfrid seems prepared from the beginning of the lawsuit to accept the division of the diocese.³ He tells the Pope: "if again it has been decided to appoint bishops in the same see over which I have been ruling . . . let only such be preferred with whom I can serve God in unity." This is Wilfrid's initial plea, and it is to be noticed that before the suit has opened he concedes the principle of the divided diocese: what he is claiming in effect is the right to choose his colleagues. He goes further and says he is willing to accept an increase in the number of the northern bishops, not

Anal. Boll., LXXVIII, 1960, p. 368; cf. also E. Ewig, 'Milo et eiusmodi similes', *Sankt Bonifatius*, Fulda, 1954, p. 418 and n. 31. I do not think this list is exhaustive.

¹ Cf. the late Dr Colgrave's interesting remarks on the limitations of Whitby as an intellectual centre.—*Celt and Saxon*, p. 130.

² *Rev. Bén.*, LXXV, 1965, p. 227. One of Archbishop Theodore's earliest canons sought to protect monasteries from bishops.—*HE.*, iv, c. 5.

³ *Eddius*, c. xxx.

only if the Pope decrees so, but if Archbishop Theodore and his fellow bishops think it expedient. In effect the Pope gave him nominal restoration, but in fact only the right to choose his colleagues.¹ Not surprisingly in view of the Mercian orientation of Wilfrid's *familia*, this was never obeyed. In view of the provocative choice of bishop—and it is often overlooked that Wilfrid was not offered colleagues, but first ejected and then presented with three men to take his place all chosen as likely to be unwelcome to him²—his persistence in opposition is intelligible. Wilfrid's last plea was largely undertaken in defence of his monastic connection.³

Obviously with Wilfrid's Mercian connections it is hardly surprising that the Northumbrian court should regard him with suspicion: it may be, however, that Wilfrid was not motivated by political considerations, or not primarily. I should judge his political involvement as no more than the consequences of his attempt to be a truly Catholic bishop.

Wilfrid's connection was a great one and his power was mainly shown by either acting as titular abbot himself or getting the abbot or abbess to make over the monastery's property to him personally.⁴ It must be noted that Columbanus had just such a connection which was maintained, as Wilfrid's was not, for some time after his death; so did every monastic reformer of note until the triumph of Cluny made them unnecessary. What these connections were aimed against was the intrusion of the family into the monastery. The main problem was the choice of abbot or abbess. It is obvious that from the first the family sought to intervene in the monastery and turn the abbatial office at least

¹ *Eddius*, c. xxxii.

² One of them was closely associated with Chad's intrusion into York; another was Eata, who had been ejected from Ripon to make way for Wilfrid; a third was closely associated with Whitby, a house hostile to Wilfrid.—*Eddius*, c. liv. The first two can be seen as inclining towards liturgical conservatism, if one wishes, but not the third. Whitby was closely associated with the immediate family of Edwin and the 'southerners', and therefore with the 'roman' party. It is here that the first *Life* of Gregory was written. See Colgrave on the *Life* in *Celt and Saxon*. Mr Wallace-Hadrill, *EHR.*, April 1969, has some suggestive remarks about the purpose behind this *Life* in his review of Dr Colgrave's edition which confirm the 'roman' rather than the Celtic orientation of the house. Yet St Hilda and her community opposed Wilfrid. What all three new bishops had in common was a probable antipathy to the Mercians.

³ *Eddius*, c. li, shows that Wilfrid wanted only protection for his *parochia* and their lands; he is prepared to let what may happen to York so long as he can keep his monasteries of Hexham and Ripon. The usual opinion that Wilfrid's main object in litigating in Rome was to preserve his diocese intact seems very unjust to him. Although Aldhelm's remarks about the Welsh refusing to so much as eat with English Christians has almost reached the status of something every schoolboy may be supposed to know, *Eddius*, c. xlix, is less familiar. Part of this last attempt to break up Wilfrid's connection was directed against Wilfrid's monks at Ripon, and presumably elsewhere. They were excommunicated. If one of their priests or abbots ate with a layman and blessed the food, it was to be cast away "as if offered to idols." Vessels which they had touched had to be washed before anyone else did. It is impossible that *Eddius* can have invented this; it happened only a little while before he wrote.

⁴ *Ibid.*, c. xxi.

into a family fief. This was apparently the case even in Irish monasticism, as the history of Iona shows. Even Bede took hereditary succession of this kind for granted when he relates a miracle performed by St John of Beverley for an abbess, healing her sick daughter whom she intended to succeed her.¹ The early history of Gloucester abbey shows it to have been in the same case,² and the Withington dispute shows the system at its worst.³ Even Wilfrid expected a kinsman, though an experienced monk, to succeed him at Ripon,⁴ and several more instances are noted by Plummer.⁵ There were attempts to evade or mitigate this system. Bede's own abbot sought a papal privilege to prevent a kinsman succeeding him,⁶ and was successful at least for a time. But it was Wilfrid who made the most sustained attempt to circumvent the system by his vast connection on the lines of the Celtic *paruchia* which had been successful elsewhere. By the end of Wilfrid's life it must have been obvious that political conditions meant an end to the connection and in his will, in which he considered himself competent to choose his successor at Ripon, he left a third of his property to his abbots and abbesses "so that they may be able to purchase the friendship of kings and bishops."⁷

The need for monks to bribe their bishop speaks volumes for the nature of early English episcopacy, and it must throw light on Wilfrid's long fight against so many of his brother bishops. I have already pointed to the obvious resemblances between Wilfrid's and Columbanus' lives and their monastic policies. It is relevant to point also to the generation following Wilfrid. In England Bede's strictures on the family monasteries of his old age and his broad hints about the quality of the Northumbrian episcopate in his letter to Bishop Ecgberht go some way to bear out Wilfrid's conduct. Bede dates the serious decline of the Northumbrian Church to a point in effect very near the time of Wilfrid's death.⁸ Wilfrid's true successors must be sought on the Con-

¹ HE., v, c. 3.

² *Orbis Britanniae*, pp. 83-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴ *Eddius*, c. lxiii.

⁵ *Beda*, II, p. 262.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 393.

⁷ *Eddius*, c. lxiii.

⁸ In his letter to Ecgberht and his dating of the rise of the fraudulent monasteries. There may be a little more to be said for these communities than Bede allows. The evidence suggests that the pagan English were polygynous and continued to be so for some time after the conversion. There is direct evidence that the pagan Germans whom St Boniface sought to convert—who seem to have been regarded as rather similar sorts of people to the 'Anglo-Saxons'—were polygynous, since Gregory II allowed them to contract bigamous marriages under certain conditions.—*S. Bonifatii et Lulli Epistolae*, ed. Tangl, Berlin, 1955, no. 26. The decisive evidence seems to me, however, inferential. It appears to have been a widespread Germanic custom for sons to marry surviving stepmothers.—D. Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, London, 1952, p. 150. It is known to have happened twice in Anglo-Saxon history when Æthelberht's son and, in the ninth century, King Ælfred's brother and the daughter of Charles the Bald were involved. This appears to be a clear case of one of the customs which social anthropologists call the levirate and widow inheritance. It is not possible in this case to distinguish which since there was no issue of either marriage, and the criteria for distinguishing which custom obtained is whether the biological father was regarded as the true father of children of this marriage (i.e. widow inheritance) or whether the dead husband was deemed the true father (i.e. the levirate). Since this custom was mentioned by Gregory the Great—or whoever

continent,¹ notably his disciple Willibrord. Willibrord and Boniface seem to have disliked many of their contemporary bishops much as Wilfrid did his,² and to have sought similar remedies, breeding their own bishops in their monasteries.

At this distance just how secular-minded a man Wilfrid was cannot be known with certainty. But judged against the standards of his day—standards, that is, embodied in the lives and careers of what all would concede were the best churchmen of their day, Gregory the Great, Columbanus, and so on—Wilfrid does seem to belong in this company. Like them he could not always keep clear of politics and they like him have some dubious episodes to explain away. At any rate Wilfrid seems a truly representative ‘English’ churchman of his day in a way that no one else was. The great champion of Rome and Peter, he never got much change out of Peter’s vicar, who perhaps hardly understood his very Celtic policies. His missionary zeal, his belief in authoritarian communities, under the authority of St Benedict’s *Rule*, all place him amongst a small group of dedicated monks,³ who whatever their origins, Irish, Roman, English, had a

wrote the *Responsa*—without any further discussion of the problems of paternity to which the levirate must have given rise, I should think it safer to suppose that the Anglo-Saxons practised widow-inheritance. Like the levirate, it is in all known cases invariably accompanied by polygyny. My colleague Professor Worsley points out to me that both my instances are royal, and in primitive societies it does not follow that royal customs are necessarily practised by commoners too. But the discussion of the issue in the *Responsa* and its incorporation in Bede suggests to me that it was a common custom. Professor Worsley also points out that to an overwhelming majority of primitive tribes, this custom would be as detestable as it was to Gregory the Great; the Anglo-Saxons were very savage indeed. It does not follow that because a society admits polygyny many or most men have more than one wife. In most surviving polygynous societies most men are monogamous. Demographic reasons make it possible for a limited degree of polygyny to be possible even in societies with a roughly equal number of men and women. In Anglo-Saxon society the probable degree of violence, especially in the North, must have accentuated the number of young widows. We cannot of course estimate the degree to which polygyny was practised, but at least it is possible that men of high status groups, to which Bede’s family abbots plainly belonged, who were prepared to live a monogamous life, tempered with religious offices of some kind, may have felt themselves to have undergone a *conversatio morum* more intense than Bede allowed. Some searching questions about Anglo-Saxon kinship structure, and some important doubts about the existence of the Germanists’ putative tightly organized families, are raised by Dr Baric, ‘Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society’, *British Journal of Sociology*, ix, pp. 3–4. I owe a good deal here to discussions with Dr Baric and Professor Max Gluckmann.

¹ Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, Oxford, 1946, pp. 50 *et seq.*

² Ewig, *Sankt Bonifatius*, pp. 412–40, for an idea of what diocesan politics on the Continent were like in the next generation after Wilfrid’s death. From Bede’s letter there were certain similarities between the Northumbrian bishops of the time and those like Milo of Trier, whom Willibrord and Boniface seem to have disliked because they came from families where “herrschte eine religiös-kirchliche Gesinnung, die aber nicht von der art Bonifatius war” nor perhaps of Wilfrid or Bede either.

³ At the council of 703 Wilfrid defended himself and his long career; what he thought he had done well is not without interest. He makes no reference whatever to his episcopal career. He is proud of having extirpated Celtic heresies but for the rest his pride is in his monastic achievements. He taught the Northumbrians the right tonsure; the use of double antiphons in primitive fashion; the introduction of the *Rule*. This passage deserves more notice in assessments of Wilfrid’s motives than it has been given.

vision of a Church very different from the one they actually lived in and did a remarkable amount to bring it about.¹

¹ Since the above paper was written *Christianity in Britain*, ed. M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson, Leicester, 1968, has appeared. Several of the papers it contains are relevant to my subject. I was also unable to consult until too late Mr J. Campbell's important introduction to his edited translation of Bede's *History*, New York, 1968, which has some interesting remarks on Wilfrid.