Royal women in Anglo−Saxon religious life: from political instrument to model of piety[1]

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There is no better indication of the singularity of the Christianisation process in post-Roman Britain than the pre-eminence attained by women connected with the royal families. Their early influence is illustrated, for example, by Queen Bertha of Kent, who lent her – and her court's – support to Pope Gregory the Great's mission to 'restore' Christianity to the island, which he entrusted in 596 to Augustine, the future Bishop of Canterbury[2]. The various dynasties vying for the thrones of neighbouring and competing kingdoms spearheaded the expansion of monasticism as an effective instrument to extend their areas of influence and consolidate their power[3], and it was their women who founded a significant proportion of monastic communities (double as well as only female houses)[4], assumed responsibility for spiritual direction in many of them and served as abbesses, a task that went well beyond spiritual care.

Religious and political role of monasteries

The extraordinary role played by the elite families and their female members was largely fostered by the fragility of Roman administrative structures on the island, which became evident from the 5th century onwards and precluded use of this model of functioning as a foundation on which to build the ecclesiastical structure, in contrast to developments in the Roman provinces on the continent. There, the Church was able to draw on this administrative framework to erect a solid episcopal structure based on dioceses, thanks also to widespread Christianisation in the urban centres, where the bishops served as civic leaders. In England, however, a very different episcopal system was forged, structured instead around the various kingdoms, whose monarchs were not always Christian[5]. Furthermore, owing to the paucity of major urban centres and the importance of kinship as the basis for social and political organisation, the few bishops there were tended to live under the wing of their patrons at court (sometimes the Christian queen as opposed to her pagan consort), in open dependence on their protectors, or their sees were located in rural religious communities[6]. By the 6th to 7th centuries, the kingdoms

[2] BEDA**,** *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, I.30, ed. J.L. MORALEJO, Madrid, 2013, pp. 91-92; C. STANCLIFFE, *Kings who opted out*, *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. P. WORMALD, D. BULLOUGH, R. COLLINS, Oxford, 1983, pp. 154-76; ID., *The British church and the mission of Augustine*, *St. Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. R. GAMESON, Stroud, 1999, p. 107; I. WOOD, *The mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English*, in «Speculum», 69 (1994), pp. 1-17; N. HIGHAM, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, Manchester, 1997; C. MARTÍNEZ MAZA, *La cristianización de Britania en dos epístolas de Gregorio Magno*, in «Athenaeum. Studi di letteratura e Storia dell'antichità», XC (2002), pp. 507-519.
[3] M. LAMBERT, *Christians and Pagans: The Conversion of Britain from Alban to Bede*, New Haven, (CT), 2010; L.M.C. WESTON, *Saintly lives: friendship, kinship, gender and sexuality*, *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. C. A. LEES, Cambridge, 2013, p. 381.
[4] B. YORKE, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, London, 2003, pp. 17-46.
[5] H. PRYCE, *Conversions to Christianity*, *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages Britain and Ireland*, c.500–c.1100, ed. P. STAFFORD, Oxford, 2009, pp. 147-149.
[6] *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. and trans. F.L. ATTENBOROUGH, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 24-61; *English Historical Documents*, I, c.500-1042, ed. and trans. D. WHITELOCK (2nd ed.), London, 1979, n. 31; J. BLAIR, *Church in Anglo−Saxon Society*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 69-70; B. YORKE, *Kings and Kingship, A*

of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex still only had one bishop each, the kingdom of Kent being an exception, with a bishop at Canterbury, the cradle of the Church in post-Roman Britain, and another at Rochester[7]. Rather than being a consequence of the needs of a Christian community – the development of which would require a more complex structure to function in accordance with its growth – this situation reflected the Church's dependence on the decisions taken at any given time by the various monarchs[8].

It was only thanks to the financial support and protection granted to the bishops by the Christian monarchs that the process of Christianisation continued, slowly but inexorably[9]. The benefit was mutual, for by supporting and expanding the new faith, the monarchs gained a powerful weapon that facilitated the construction and consolidation of ever larger political units, and thus they actively participated in the process, but more in their role as rulers rather than as simple devotees complying with episcopal directives[10]. In this scenario, it becomes clear that the founding of monastic communities played a strategic role.

Thus, the process of conversion to the new faith did not necessarily parallel the development of its more orthodox institutional apparatus: the expansion of Christianity was most successful where rulers saw the opportunities that the new faith offered as an ideological instrument in the service of their political ambitions and as an effective means to consolidate their territorial expansion[11]. It is thus not surprising that the Christian institutions were adapted to the singular social organisation of these kingdoms and that the success of the Church depended on its capacity to serve as a tool that buttressed the political strategies of competing kingdoms at such a delicate moment, when these were shaping their new order[12].

The monastic foundations played an undeniably important role in the Christianisation of Britain, as has been underlined by other scholars[13], especially when

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Companion to the Early Middle Ages Britain and Ireland, c.500 – c.1100, ed. P. STAFFORD, Oxford, 2009, pp. 84-85; ibid. TH. PICKLES, Church Organization and Pastoral Care, p.167.

[7] B.YORKE, Joint kingship in Kent c.560 to 785, in «Archaeologia Cantiana», 99 (1983), pp. 1-19; EAD., The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, c.600–800, Harlow, 2006, p. 152.

[8] YORKE, Nunneries cit. not 4, pp. 52-60; BLAIR, Church in Anglo-Saxon Society cit. (note 6), pp. 291-340.

[9] C. STANCLIFFE, Kings and conversion: some comparisons between the Roman mission to England and Patrick's to Ireland, in «Fruhmittelallerliche Studien», 14 (1980), pp. 70-7; P.S.WILLIAMS, Religion and Literature in Western England 600—800, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 93-95; S. FOOT, Monastic Life in Anglo Saxon England 600—900, Cambridge, 2006, p. 90.

[10] A. ANGENENDT, The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons considered against the background of the early medieval mission, in «Settimane de studio del centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo» 32 (1986), pp. 747-92; B. YORKE, The reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts, St. Augustine and the Conversion of England, ed. R. GAMESON, Stroud, 1999, pp. 152-73; P. FOURACRE, Britain, Ireland, and Europe,c.500–c.750, A Companion to the Early Middle Ages Britain and Ireland, c.500–c.1100, ed. P. STAFFORD, Oxford, 2009, pp. 137-138.

[11] C. STANCLIFFE, Oswald, 'most holy and most victorious king of the Northumbrians', Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint, ed. C. STANCLIFFE AND E. CAMBRIDGE, Stamford, 1995, pp. 33-83; HIGHAM, The Convert Kings cit. (note 2); D. TYLER, Reluctant kings and Christian conversion in seventh-century England, in «History» 92 (2007), pp. 144-61; PICKLES, Church Organization and Pastoral Care cit. (note 6), pp. 170-171.

[12] P. WORMALD, Bede, "Beowulf" and the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in honour of the 1300th Anniversary of the Birth of Bede, given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974, ed. R.T. FARRELL (British Archeological Reports, 46), Oxford, 1978, p. 57; WILLIAMS, Religion and Literature in Western England cit. (note 9), pp. 93-95; YORKE, Kings and Kingship cit. (note 6), pp. 76-77.

[13] S. FOOT, Parochial ministry in early Anglo-Saxon England: the role of monastic communities, in «Studies in Church History» 26 (1989), pp. 43-54; J. BLAIR, Debate: ecclesiastical organisation and pastoral care

the episcopal structure was still in the process of formation and therefore fragile. One explanation for the expansion of this monasticism, which was unusual since it was not a consequence of Christianisation but rather its initial stimulus, is that community life gained popularity among elite circles as an attractive alternative way of life for devotees committed to an ascetic ideal[14]. However, one cannot consider solely this religious explanation, nor should monasticism be analysed as a circumstance unique to the process of Christianisation in England. The proliferation of monasteries must also be analysed in political terms, because as previously explained, they played an essential role in the expansion and consolidation of the nascent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Thus, the foundation of monasteries formed an additional strategy on the part of royal houses or aristocratic groups with aspirations to rule, as the authority over such monasteries assumed by a member of a royal family conferred a stable influence over the region and populations surrounding the monastery[15]. Furthermore, monastic foundations provided the Anglo-Saxon monarchs with a highly useful means to keep their finger on the pulse of the territory under their rule, rapidly detect any possibility of insurrection and guarantee the stability of their reign, which was indispensable to ensure the flow of taxes.

One of the most distinctive features of the Church in post-Roman Britain prior to the Viking invasions is undoubtedly the frequency with which royal women were appointed abbesses of the first monastic foundations, with the support of their male relatives[16]. Furthermore, in recognition of their work, which the Christian historiographical tradition limits to the fulfilment of their religious duties, many of them were subsequently proclaimed saints after their death[17].

Through this new ascetic authority figure, the elite attained not only a profound influence at local level, but also a closer connection with their counterparts on the continent and with Rome because the first generation of noble Anglo-Saxon nuns were educated and consecrated in Frankish monasteries[18]. Some of them then returned home to found and direct communities, a process that began in the late 7th century[19]. In addition, the withdrawal of some royal women to a life consecrated to God exerted a very positive effect on the stability of the various kingdoms simply by reducing the number of marriages, which obviously reduced the number of legitimate offspring and therefore limited the number of candidates for the throne. Furthermore, monastic retreat also represented an alternative form of investing the family's reproductive capital, seeking the same political and social utility as that obtained through marriage alliances[20]. In short, the aim was to consolidate royal power and dynastic continuity through the combined use of several strategies.

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in Anglo-Saxon England, in «Early Medieval Europe», 4.2 (1995), pp. 193-212; E. CAMBRIDGE, D. ROLLASON, *Debate: the pastoral organisation of the Anglo-Saxon Church: a review of the 'minster hypothesis'*, in «Early Medieval Europe» 4.1 (1995), pp. 87-104.

[14] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) III.14, p. 214; YORKE, *The conversion of Britain* cit. (note 7), pp. 156-158; CH. THOMAS, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, Berkeley, 1981, pp. 346-55; J. CAMPBELL, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, London, 1986, pp. 93, 96-7; R.A. MARKUS, *Gregory the Great and his World*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 69-82.

[15] FOOT, *Monastic Life* cit. (note 9), pp. 86-87.

[16] YORKE, *Nunneries* cit. (note 4), pp. 17-46.

[17] L. ECKENSTEIN, *Women Under Monasticism*, New York, 1963, pp.79-80; C. NEUMAN DE VEGVAR, *Saints and Companions to Saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context*, Holy Men and Holy Women Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts, ed. P.E.SZARMACH, Albany, 1996, pp. 52-53.

[18] PICKLES, *Church Organization and Pastoral Care* cit. (note 6), p. 161.

[19] WILLIAMS, *Religion and Literature in Western England* cit. (note 9), pp. 119-120.

[20] B. YORKE, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, London, 1990, 81-83, 136-142; EAD. *The conversion of Britain* cit. (note 7), pp. 224-225.

The retirement of widowed queens to a monastery was another very effective strategy employed to promote a peaceful succession to the throne and the transmission of wealth to the legitimate heir, a practice also attested on the continent. For example, one of the canons of the third council of Saragossa, held in 691, forbade widows of the Visigoth kings to remarry and ordered them to enter a monastery for life and remain cloistered[21]. These widows, as well as royal women set aside by their husbands, were thus given public recognition for having been pre-eminent figures in the kingdom and granted a useful role to play in furthering their dynasty's interests, but were denied the opportunity to intervene in the affairs of court[22]. Furthermore, this prevented a second marriage and the consequent loss of their dowry or diversion of their family's wealth, these resources being used instead to found monastic communities under their direction[23]. Such was the case of St. Eormenhild, who on the death of her husband King Wulfhere of Mercia, returned to Kent to take the veil[24]. Domne Eafe, married to Merewalh of Mercia and great-granddaughter of King Æthelberht of Kent, founded the double monastery of Minster-in-Thanet during the reign of her cousin King Ecgberht of Kent, and her three daughters also became abbesses and saints: her eldest daughter Mildburh was abbess of Much Wenlock[25] and Mildrith became abbess of the monastery led by her mother in 664[26], but little is known of Mildgyth[27]. Meanwhile, Æthelthryth retired to Coldingham monastery after she was abandoned by her husband, King Ecgfrith of Northumbria[28].

The power of royal abbesses

When a dynastic house consecrated one of its female members to the service of an existing community or took the initiative and established a new foundation under her direction, the monastery in question was endowed with donations from the foundress's family (often the king's family) and from the families of local noblewomen who entered the community[29]. The fact that the spiritual director of the monastery was a woman from a royal house or even an emeritus queen unquestionably provided a powerful incentive for other women from the same family line or from related dynasties to join the monastery. Such monastic communities therefore had a strong family component and mirrored the network of relationships and interactions existing among the same elite families in the secular sphere[30]. Given their continuing ties with and dependence on the

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[21] *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos*, ed. J. VIVES, Barcelona, Madrid, 1963, chapter 5, p. 480.

[22] M. DEANESLY, *The PreConquest Church in England*, London,1961, pp.199-207; NEUMAN DE VEGVAR, *Saints and Companions to Saints* cit. (note 17), pp. 52-53; S. FOOT, *Veiled Women*, Aldershot, 2000, chapter 2; Ead., *Monastic Life* cit. (note 9), pp.150-152.

[23] ECKENSTEIN, *Women Under Monasticism* cit. (note 17), p. 81; S. HOLLIS, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate*, Woodbridge-Rochester, 1992, p. 80.

[24] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) IV.13, pp. 212-213.

[25] WILLIAMS, *Religion and Literature in Western England* cit. (note 9), pp. 55-56.

[26] D.W. ROLLAWSON, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England*, Leicester, 1982.

[27] D. WHITELOCK, *The Pre-Viking Age Church in East Anglia*, in «Anglo-Saxon England» I (1972), p. 12.

[28] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) IV.19, p. 225.

[29] P. WORMALD, *Bede and the Conversion of England: The Charter Evidence*, Jarrow, 1984, p. 22; FOOT, *Monastic Life* cit. (note. 9), pp. 90-92.

[30] P. STAFFORD, *Queens, Dowagers and Concubines: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*, London, 1988, p. 99; J.T. SCHULENBERG, *Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500–1100, Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. M.ERLER AND M.KOWALESKI, Athens (Ga), 2000, p. 118.

secular world, at least in the early days, it is not surprising that the success of these communities was subject to decisions taken by the monarch's *entourage*.

The variety of communities reflects the vitality of monasticism and the absence of a consistent, uniform strategy. Thus, the communities were not the product of an *a priori* design derived from a decision taken by the episcopal hierarchies. Some of them barely survived a generation and had only a meagre number of nuns, whereas others were so populous they were able to establish sister houses to which former members of the mother house moved as abbesses, as was the case of the community founded by Seaxburh (widow of Eorcenberht of Kent) in Sheppey, with 67 members.

In order to guarantee the sustenance over time of monastic communities that had been endowed lands by the novices, their families or the monarch, such grants in perpetuity were recorded in charters that guaranteed the cession of the land[31], thus preventing appropriation of the foundations by the ecclesiastical authorities. Indeed, the possibility of confiscation by a bishop was so alarming that the Council of Hertford, the first synod of the Anglo-Saxon Church held in 670[32], ruled against interventions of this nature[33]. At the same time, this decree reveals the extent to which the monastic communities enjoyed a certain level of autonomy from episcopal authority and depended more on the will of the monarchs and the patronage of the elite than on the ecclesiastical institution itself.

However, it was not only their properties that rendered these communities hubs of economic dynamism, but also their demand for the specialised consumer goods necessary for liturgical activities, which stimulated trade at a time when commerce had been weakened by the end of Roman rule[34]. Moreover, their extensive charitable work among the most disadvantaged and the sick gave them considerable importance in the surrounding area and undoubtedly increased the prestige of the head of the foundation. The monasteries, therefore, exerted not only a spiritual but also a social influence, enabling their elite directors to consolidate their social networks and capitalise on a major asset in a territory where kinship relations still played a decisive social and, above all, political role.

An added benefit enjoyed by the monastic communities was the fiscal immunity granted them by the sovereigns, although in return, the *ius regium* obliged them to provide troops and food and to undertake public works[35]. This type of service represented a heavy burden for the monasteries, and the abbesses, who were also responsible for financial

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[31] E. JOHN, *Land Tenure in Early England: A Discussion of Some Problems*, Leicester, 1964, pp. 10-11, 24-25; P. CHAPLAIS, *The origin and authenticity of the royal Anglo-Saxon diploma*, reprinted in *Prisca munimenta*, FELICITY RANGER (ed.), London, 1973, pp. 28-12; WORMALD, *Bede and the Conversion* cit. (note 28); A. RICHARD, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1988, pp. 45-47, BLAIR, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* cit. (note 6), pp. 87-91; PICKLES, *Church Organization and Pastoral Care* cit. (note 6), pp. 163-164.

[32] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) IV.5, pp. 202-204.

[33] C. CUBITT, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils, c.650-c.850*, London, 1995; A. RUMBLE, *Introduction: Church Leadership and the Anglo-Saxons*, *Leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church: From Bede to Stigand*, ed. A. RUMBLE, Suffolk, 2012, pp. 1-24; S. KEYNES, *Church Councils, Royal Assemblies, and Anglo-Saxon Royal Diplomas*, *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. G.R. OWEN-CROCKER, B. W. SCHNEIDER, Suffolk, 2013, pp. 17-182.

[34] S. WOOD, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West*, Oxford, 2006; PICKLES, *Church Organization and Pastoral Care* cit. (note 6), pp. 163-164.

[35] N. BROOKS, *The Development of Military Obligations in Eighth- and Ninth Century England*, *England Before the Conquest. Studies in primary sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. P. CLEMOES, K. HUGHES, Cambridge, 1971, pp. 69-84; R.P. ABELS, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1988, pp. 43-48; WILLIAMS, *Religion and Literature in Western England* cit. (note 9) pp. 134-135.

management, needed to administer their resources wisely if they were to meet their obligations[36]. An early 8th century letter addressed to St Boniface by an abbess in Kent hints at the various tasks she assumed as director of the monastery, which went far beyond spiritual matters[37]. She laments the *servitium* due to the monarch and the poverty and barrenness of the land, which rendered it extremely difficult to ensure the community's survival. This testimony clearly illustrates the range of responsibilities that the abbesses shouldered and paints a picture of these women that transcends the ideal model transmitted by hagiography of women consecrated exclusively to the service of God, prayer and charitable works.

Another characteristic that also departs from the archetype of monastic life was the considerable freedom of movement enjoyed by abbesses, who left their communities to attend court and even travel to Rome (as revealed by the correspondence between Boniface and Eangyth and Heaburg, around 720), despite the Church's reluctance to permit monks and especially nuns to journey beyond the limits of their communities[38]. We also know that the abbesses maintained close relationships with male members of other communities or laymen whom they visited or hosted as guests, carrying out functions that were unusual for a woman, and even more so if she was cloistered. Such was the case of the future abbess of the famous monastery of Whitby, Hild, who was visited by Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, and other men, after he had appointed her abbess of the double monastery in Hartlepool in 649[39].

In praising the virtues of these abbesses, the *vitae* and chronicles of the early Middle Ages provide a further glimpse of skills that transcended those of an ideal Christian, revealing their abilities in administration and economic management, as mentioned above, and commending their competence, prudence and wisdom. For example, Abbess Æthelburh of Kent (daughter of Bertha and mother of Eanflæd) was remembered for running her convent at Lyminge «in a manner worthy of her brother» [40]. Some abbesses even exercised their religious authority beyond their monastery and maintained a prominent presence not only at council meetings but also at court, the most paradigmatic example of which is Hild, remembered by Bede as a counsellor to kings and princes[41]. Furthermore, her monastery at Whitby hosted the synod held in 664[42] and was also one of the most outstanding educational centres in the region, responsible for training an entire lineage of future bishops of Northumbria. The instruction provided at Whitby thus proved essential in the education of the incipient ecclesiastical hierarchy[43]. Bede records that Hild required the members of her community to devote time to studying the scriptures so that they would be equipped to serve at the altar. We know of five members of that community who attained the rank of bishop and we can assume that a similar training was given to future priests and abbesses[44].

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[36] N. BROOKS, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: The Work of the Last Twenty Years*, in «Anglo-Saxon Egland» 3 (1974), pp .211-31.

[37] *Epistola* XIV, trans. E. KYLIE, *The English Correspondence of Saint Boniface*, London, 1924, n° 8, pp. 61-67; B. YORKE, *The Bonifacian mission and female religious in Wessex*, in «Early Medieval Europe» 5, 1998, pp. 145-172.

[38] As recorded in the Council of Hertford, which forbade monks to wander: BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2), IV.5, p. 203.

[39] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2), IV.21, p. 228.

[40] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) IV.6, p. 205.

[41] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) IV.21, pp. 228-229; HOLLIS, *Anglo-Saxon Women* cit. (note 22), p. 181.

[42] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) III.25, pp. 176-177; EDDIUS, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 10, ed. B. COLGRAVE, Cambridge, 1927, p. 20.

[43] P.H. BLAIR, *Whitby as a Centre of Learning in the Seventh Century*, *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. M. LAPIDGE, H. GNEUSS, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 3-32.

[44] NEUMAN DE VEGVAR, *Saints* cit. (note. 17), pp. 63-65.

Hild's successor at Whitby monastery, the Abbess (and saint) Ælfflæd (654-714), daughter of King Oswiu of Northumbria and Eanflæd, also exerted a great influence on the ecclesiastical life of the period[45]. She not only attended the synod held on the east bank of the River Nidd but also advised the king, bishops, clergy and nobles of the realm, and was thus recognised as «the best of advisers and a constant source of strength for the whole realm». [46] At this synod, she mediated on behalf of Bishop Wilfrith in his quest to regain his bishopric in Northumbria, an unusual intervention for a woman which reveals her capacity for action in spheres normally reserved for men. Ælfflæd was present at court when Wilfrith was imprisoned, and she threatened Ecgfrith, the son and successor of King Oswiu of Northumbria, with the wrath of God if he did not allow Wilfrith to leave the kingdom unscathed[47]. The sources suggest that Ælfflæd and Cuthbert of Lindisfarne forged an alliance to support Wilfrith's return and Aldfrith's accession to the throne after the death of his half-brother, King Ecgfrith[48].

Further examples include Abbess Ebba of Coldingham, the daughter of King Æthelfrith and aunt of King Ecgfrith, who took part in the deliberations of a Northumbrian council in 680-681, and the daughter of the renowned Domne Eafe, St. Mildrith, Abbess of Minster-in-Thanet, who together with four other abbesses attended a *witenagemot* [king's council] held at Baccanceld in Kent[49] around 696-716, taking part in the meetings of one of the foremost political bodies of the Anglo-Saxon monarchies at the time.

Female leadership in the early monastic communities of the post-Roman period has not gone unnoticed by scholars who approach this scenario from a gender perspective. The role of royal women in monastic expansion has been seen as an indication of their important standing in the Anglo-Saxon courts, and even as a legacy of the greater openness of native pre-Christian societies[50], as opposed to the marginalisation of women in Roman society, whose lives were limited to the domestic sphere. The spiritual direction entrusted to women has also been seen as another example of the new opportunities that opened up for them in the public sphere[51]. As we have already seen, their access to the court accorded them several direct benefits such as privileges and immunity for their communities, enshrined in charters that by way of guarantee, ratified their communities' autonomy and safeguarded their properties against episcopal claims[52].

Still from a gender perspective, the proliferation in the English kingdoms of monasteries run by royal women, as opposed to the paucity of such monastic communities in the rest of the island, has been interpreted as an indication of the status of women in

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[45] She is named both *discipula* and *magistra* of life under the monastic rule: BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) III.24, p.174; NEUMAN DE VEGVAR, *Saints* cit. (note 17), p. 88.

[46] EDDIUS, *The Life* 59-60, ed. cit (note 41), pp. 126−133; J.L. NELSON, *Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages*, *Women in the Church*, ed. W.J. SHIELS, D. WOOD, Oxford−Cambridge (Mass.), 1990, p. 65; YORKE, *Nunneries* cit. not 4, pp. 162-165.

[47] EDDIUS, *The Life* 39, ed. cit. (note 41), pp. 78-79.

[48] BEDE, *Life of St. Cuthbert*, ed. B. COLGRAVE, Cambridge,1985, pp. 230-231; HOLLIS, *Anglo-Saxon Women* cit. (note 22), p. 268.

[49] A.W. HADDAN, W. STUBBS, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3, Oxford, 1871 (repr., 1964), pp. 238-40.

[50] YORKE, *The conversion of Britain* cit. (note 7), p.167.

[51] P. STAFFORD, *Agire da donna.Modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (secoli VI-X)*, *Reading Women in annals : Eadburg, Cuthburg, Cwenburg and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, *Atti del convegno (Padova, 18-19 febbraio 2005)*, ed. C. LA ROCCA, Turnhout, 2007, p. 289; YORKE, *The conversion of Britain* cit. (note 7), p. 247.

[52] BROOKS, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* cit. (note 35), p. 222; S. KEYNES, *The Diplomas of King AEthelred 'the Unready*, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 28-39.

these kingdoms, where they even had the capacity to own and transmit land[53]. The ties that united these women have been reconstructed and analysed, and it has been possible to recapture their networks, which became so strong and wide-ranging that they even stretched across to the continent[54]. However, any authority that can be deduced from the work of women in the expansion of monasticism and consequently of Christianity should not be overemphasised. Rather, such authority should be analysed in the context that fostered it, which is none other than a patriarchal political power and an elite that did not hesitate to use its women[55]. These latter possessed neither the power for autonomous action nor control over the means of production, and although they belonged by birth to a privileged group, their position was that of a subordinate. Their capacity for intervention depended on the political objectives of the families to which they belonged and the strategies devised by men to consolidate their rule and the incipient monarchies. Such was the case of the dynasty founded by Æthelberht I and Bertha of Kent, which abounded with women who achieved sainthood, not coincidentally those who, as abbesses, had also served as key players in forging ties with the kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia.

Indeed, female leadership in monastic life on the island was largely encouraged by the Anglo-Saxon kings[56], who installed women from the royal house in this privileged position so that they could play a political role in the religious sphere of the same magnitude as that played by their female relatives in the secular sphere, who served to strengthen ties with other dynastic houses through marriage. In both roles, women forged or consolidated support and ensured the stability of the monarchy at home and abroad. This enabled male capital to be redirected towards consolidating the sovereign's nexus of supporters at court, an essential network in such societies at a time when kinship ties and loyalty to male heads of the family constituted a powerful instrument in the political struggle.

Holy abbesses: a spiritual reading of Christian historiography.

In Book IV of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede records the lives of two of the great abbesses mentioned above: Hild and Æthelburh. Both were declared saints and both founded a monastery (Whitby and Lyminge, respectively). Bede's portrayal of these women observes the typical precepts of Christian historiography in dwelling on the qualities that should adorn the ideal Christian, offering a reading largely at odds with the development of monasticism at the dawn of the early Middle Ages that I have described above.

It is clear that these abbesses performed their duties without the constant episcopal supervision that their counterparts on the continent were subject to, among other reasons because the ecclesiastical fabric in Britain was still very weak. Bede, however, was writing at a time when the Church as an institution had consolidated its power structures and all religious intervention centred on the figure of the bishop. Consequently, his work only contains fleeting glimpses of the abbesses' relative freedom of action, which is otherwise practically invisible as he consciously or unconsciously

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[53] B. YORKE, *The Adaptation of the Royal Courts to Christianity*, *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. M. CARVER, York, 2003, pp. 243-58.

[54] D. WATT, *Female sanctity and the relics of early women's writing*, *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. C. A. LEES, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 368-369.

[55] STAFFORD, *Agire da donna* cit. (note 49), pp. 283−284; FOOT, *Veiled Women* cit. (note 21); YORKE, *Nunneries* cit. (note 4).

[56] YORKE, *Kings and Kingship* cit. (note 6), pp. 86-87.

strove to paint a picture much more in keeping with the canons of feminine conduct common in the Church at the time.

Thus, the ideal member of a monastic community is characterised in Bede's work by strict observance of the cloister, leaving all pastoral activities in the hands of the now more numerous and better equipped clergy, thanks, paradoxically, to the first abbesses' commitment to creating mixed communities that served as centres of culture and religious training. Bede's works do not show women leaving their communities to set out on a pilgrimage or travel to Rome. Only one abbess crosses the boundaries of her community, albeit her transgression is minimal and is legitimised by a fully justifiable reason. This case concerns Ethelhild, abbess of the double monastery of Bardney in the territory of Lindsay, who left her monastery to visit Queen Osthryth of Mercia while this latter was in the vicinity. The queen spoke of the healing properties of the relics of her uncle, King Oswald of Northumbria, and of their curative power. In addition, the saint's bones had been washed before being placed in their final repository, and the soil onto which the water had been poured also acquired miraculous properties. The abbess persuaded Osthryth to give her some of this dust and then returned to her monastery, where later, armed with the power of the relic, she was able to exorcise a guest staying in the men's quarters; all that was needed to drive away the presence of the devil tormenting him was for a servant to enter the house holding a small casket containing the sanctified dust[57]. This anecdote clearly illustrates the process whereby female protagonism usually considered inappropriate was reframed to conform to correct conduct. Thus, despite Ethelhild's transgression in violating the limits of the cloister and engaging with the secular world, her action is portrayed as acceptable because it serves to attest to the holiness of King Oswald and also provides an eye witness from the monastery (the abbess) to a miracle, when a blinding light from heaven completely illuminated the wagon containing the saint's relics as they were being transported to Bardney.

The miracle that Ethelhild achieves fails to conceal a situation that was improper, namely that she entered the men's quarters in the monastery after receiving news that a guest was suffering from demonic possession. Nevertheless, she succeeded in exorcising the victim by exposing him to the relics of Oswald, which exerted a healing effect as soon as they passed through the door. This sequence would only have been possible in a double monastery, a common type of community in early Christianity in Britain (and also in Frankish territory), with examples such as the monastery of Barking, led by the abbess Æthelburh and later Hildelith, or that of Whitby led by Hild. Bede strongly disapproved of double houses, and consequently he takes pains to emphasise that the male and female quarters in such monasteries were separate, as illustrated by the case of Bardney, where Ethelhild has to enter a different house. Moreover, to avoid a compromising situation, Ethelhild does not enter alone but is accompanied by another nun and the priest.

Quite different is the image that Bede conveys of another double monastery, this time more in keeping with his negative opinion of this type of monastic community. His account concerns the monastery of Coldingham, also led by an abbess, Ebbe, which was consumed in a fire that had been foretold, as a consequence of the sinful behaviour of its inhabitants. Bede learnt of the events from a fellow priest, Eadgils, who was living there at the time[58]. The residents' occupations, Bede reports, were unsuitable for those whose lives were consecrated to God, and the cells had become places for eating, drinking, gossip and other frivolous pastimes. The nuns spent their time weaving fine robes with which to clothe themselves in the manner of brides or to win the friendship of

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[57] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) III.11, p.154.
[58] BEDA, *Historia* ed. cit. (note 2) IV.23, pp. 236.

men from the outside world. Frightened by the vision of the monastery's tragic end, the community residents initially corrected their behaviour, but after Ebbe's death, they resumed their wrong-doing. The monastery was thus punished not only for the immorality that reigned within it, but also for the contact the nuns sought with laymen. These alleged carnal relations were probably no more than a smokescreen for disproportionate criticism of more likely practices, such as the women's active involvement in the surrounding society and their close relations with the local laity, both of which were very common in the monastic communities of the post-Roman period.

In Bede's work, therefore, the nuns embody the ideals of the Church of his own time, and any action that might depart from those precepts is suppressed or reformulated in accordance with the prevailing models. Predictable roles consistent with the religious practices of the time are applied to the past and an attempt is made to exalt the qualities that correspond to this ideal model and can be wielded as evidence of the sanctity they confer.

Thus, in Bede's hands, the figure of Hild becomes a reflection of the historiographical archetype[59], denatured and depoliticised to such an extent that he omits to mention her powerful relatives and allies or the family connections that linked her to her successors as abbesses in Whitby, including Eanflæd (626 until after 685) [60] and her daughter Ælfflæd (654-713). Instead of recording this more secular side of Hild, which provides a glimpse of the nascent kingdoms' perception of the usefulness of establishing monasteries and their active involvement in the foundation of new communities, Bede focuses on a vision of Hild as the embodiment of the virtues of all good Christians: upright, pious, pure, charitable and devout, committed to observance of the monastic rule and its teaching, and also demonstrating exemplary conduct as she faced suffering and illness. He maintains a similar approach to Seaxburh, ignoring her role as founder of the monastery at Minster-in-Sheppey and failing to mention her royal parentage or that she was succeeded by her daughter Eormenhild[61].

Similar reasons may explain Bede's misleading description of monasteries such as Whitby, which are portrayed as resembling those that by his day were governed by Benedictine rule, without any mention of the major role played by the lay elite and especially those connected with the royal house. Bede's account evidences no interest in recording any monastic activities that did not adhere to the dictates of the monastic customs of his own time, and hence there are no references to monasteries as educational centres or to continuous interaction with the court. Rather, his intention was to paint a picture according to which monasteries in previous centuries had been governed by the cloister and other Benedictine rules.

Nevertheless, Bede's work reveals a few barely visible traces of the capacity for action that these women wielded. Abbess Ebbe of Coldhingham received Queen Jurmenburg and King Ecgfrith in her monastery, and when the former fell ill, Ebbe seized the opportunity to speak to Ecgfrith and urge him to release Bishop Wilfrith from prison and return his episcopal see and confiscated lands.

This unusual contact with the outside world is also present in Hild's life, where certain anecdotes reflect a life far removed from the canons of female monasticism. For example, Hild receives kings and princes in her monastery and acts as a private counsellor: «So great was her prudence that not only the common people but kings and

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[59] WATT, *Female sanctity* cit. (note 52), p. 368.

[60] C.A. LEES, G. R. OVERING, *Double Agents Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cardiff, 2009, pp. 31-2, 68-71.

[61] G. SAINT BERTIN, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. R.C. LOVE, Oxford, 2004.

princesses often took her advice when they were in difficulty». What Bede does do is conceal the abbess's leading role at the famous synod of Whitby, for it would be unthinkable to attribute prominence to a woman at any kind of ecclesiastical deliberation. Thus, he focuses his attention on the figure of Bishop Wilfrith, the only one depicted addressing the devotees of the Celtic Church, while Hild is relegated to the status of a mere attendee.

Consequently, we must exercise caution when interpreting Bede's image of the abbesses of the period. His work reflects a time when ecclesiastical structures were more fully developed and the bishops aspired to consolidate their authority as heads of the Church. Thus, the context in which he was writing accounts for his desire to downplay the nobility's previous leading role in the development of monasticism and the consequent process of Christianisation. One of the strategies employed to disentangle the monasteries from any kind of lay involvement was to forbid noble families to exert economic or administrative control over the monasteries, their property or their estate. In consequence, the Anglo-Saxon elite became less eager to invest their wealth in the foundation of new communities, and not only did the number of new foundations dwindle, but recently founded monasteries also went into decline.

Bede's vision of early British monasticism does not stray far from the prevailing account in Christian historiography[62], and consequently, his silence surrounding the undoubted role of women in the formation of these early communities was not unusual for the time. Such silence had already permeated continental Europe centuries earlier, and in my opinion, the lack of a parallel development in Britain reflects the different level of maturity of the respective ecclesiastical institutions and their consequently unequal capacity to drive the process of Christianisation as sole agent. On the continent, women's assumption of leadership roles was stifled once the socio-political and religious practices of the Roman Empire had been assimilated into the Church structure to facilitate smoother management and integration. It was then that women's participation began to be questioned and regulated and their presence in leadership positions restricted[63]. Gone were the early days when there was greater fluidity in the direction and governance of communities and women assumed responsibility for tasks according to need. As the institutional apparatus of the Church gradually consolidated in the 4th and 5th centuries, women became consigned to the sidelines, subject to male authority and restricted to menial activities considered appropriate to their inferior nature according to the misogynist male discourse that prevailed not only among the Christian authors but also in the society of the time[64].

In this process of suppressing all trace of female intervention, the women who had led monasteries in Britain and had participated directly or indirectly in the political life of the times were reframed as pious abbesses whose primary concern was to ensure the observance of orthodoxy and to safeguard the souls of the members of their community. At the same time, not only the hagiographers but also Christian historiography in general carefully sought to depict these women's entry into religious

[62] W. GOFFART, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550–800)*, Princeton (NJ), 1988, chapter 4; D.P. KIRBY, *Bede's Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum: Its Contemporary Setting*, Jarrow, 1992; HOLLIS, *Anglo-Saxon Women* cit. (note 22), pp. 250-252; PRYCE, *Conversions to Christianity* cit. (note 5), pp. 149-150.

[63] K. JO TORJESEN, *Cuando las mujeres eran sacerdotes. El liderazgo femenino de las mujeres en la Iglesia primitiva y el escándalo de su subordinación con el auge del cristianismo*, Córdoba, 1996, pp. 154-159.

[64] E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London, 1983, p.285; R.S. KRAEMER, *Her Share of the Blessings. Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*, N. York-Oxford, 1992, p.128.

life as the result of a freely-taken, individual decision spurred by the desire to satisfy their most intimate spiritual aspirations. However, as we have seen, dynastic strategies and social agency also played a part in their destiny.