A Sparrow in the Temple? The Ephemeral and the Eternal in Bede's Northumbria

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Abstract

Like the brief passage of a sparrow through a winter's hall, human life without meaning, without an idea of the everlasting, is fleeting. Seventh-century Northumbria was the stage on which a set of tensions between transient and permanent, native and Roman, particular and universal, were played out for high political and spiritual stakes. Material and ideological expressions of these tensions underpin the life and writings of the Venerable Bede, pre-eminent scholar and historian of his age. A bitter theological and liturgical conflict between the Irish and Roman churches, spectacularly resolved at the Synod of Whitby in 664, is matched by economic, social and material developments in church architecture, in the transition from oral to written history, the permanent alienation of land from the king's fisc and the adoption of coinage. The treatment and memorialization of the dead underwent complementary evolutions. In Bede's hands time itself was tamed, rationalised, rendered solid. In this paper the authors explore the mapping of an ideological revolution onto the material world of monastery and scriptorium, wood and stone, land and book, in Bede's Northumbria.

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13.1 Introduction

The seventh-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms underwent a dramatic period of conversion to Christianity, initiated by two almost parallel, but ultimately incompatible, campaigns of missionary activity: one inspired by Pope Gregory the Great (590–604); the other by the Irish monastic community on Iona. Beginning with kings, queens and their warrior élites, the process initiated something of an ideological and cultural revolution whose material and intellectual artefacts display strong petrifying tendencies. Our best evidence for these processes comes from their most lasting expression: the work of the Northumbrian scholar Bede (c. 673–735) (Fig. 13.1).

13.2 First Conversion

Bede's narrative of the conversion of the Northumbrian kings begins with a vision (a sort of fluid transaction, evolving with every retelling) revealed to Prince Edwin while he is exiled among the pagans of East Anglia: he is offered victory in return for faith (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, afterwards *HE* II.12: Colgrave and Mynors 1969. He wins his kingdom in battle in the year 617 and is invited by his Christian queen's Roman priest, the materially solid Paulinus, to fulfil his promise. He vacillates – for the best part of a decade. Eventually he calls his councillors to consider the matter. One of his chief men, clearly well-primed, makes the following statement (Bede is here probably drawing on a Canterbury tradition from one of his correspondents):

> This is how the present life of man on earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after

Fig. 13.1 The reconstructed Viking-period hall at Fyrkat, Denmark, evokes Bede's allegorical image of the life of pagan man as like the brief passage of a sparrow through a great hall. (Photo: Max Adams 2016)

the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all. If this new doctrine brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it. (*HE* II.13)

The language – part Bede's own spin, part a conversion-kit script fed by Paulinus – contrasts known and unknown, certain and uncertain, light and dark, warmth and cold, calm and raging storm, permanence and impermanence (as parallel, paired antonyms). The argument is won: Edwin receives the faith. Warming, as it were, to his theme, Bede relates a series of key stages in the conversion; but it is a fragile process, and Bede deploys his full rhetorical armoury to keep the narrative poised delicately between success and failure. In the ruins of the Roman *principia* at York where, in 306, Constantine the Great had been acclaimed emperor, Edwin builds a wooden church and is baptised there in 627. Under Paulinus's instruction he begins to replace it with a stone structure: the first material embodiment of petrification. The royal court travels north to the magnificent royal township of Yeavering (brilliantly excavated in the 1950s and 1960s by the archaeologist Brian Hope-Taylor) and there Edwin builds

a Roman-style grandstand, in wood, as a part of a mass conversion ceremony that lasts 36 days. The buildings at Yeavering represent the apogee of timber architectural sophistication in Northumbria; no stone structure was ever built there and the whole was never enclosed by fence, palisade or rampart. The few monumentally permanent structures recovered by excavation must stand for many, more ephemeral structures of accommodation and display – like a Glastonbury festival encampment of tents, stalls and arenas – that are not. And here one might parallel the transience of excavation with its inevitably compromised, petrified data records. Another wooden church is built at a place called *Cambodunum* – perhaps Doncaster in South Yorkshire. A third church is constructed, this time of stone, in the crumbling ruins of the former Roman *colonia* at Lincoln. Stone here equates both to a sense of *Romanitas* – examples of Roman stone architecture serving as visible models of monumentality – and to a confidence that those structures would stand up and stay up. One is forcibly reminded of the confidence of Victorian Ordnance Surveyors, chiselling datum lines on the sides of their churches, schools and bridges in the sure knowledge that they would stay there forever.

13.3 The Reverse

On the violent death of King Edwin in battle in 632 Paulinus's mission collapses. The church at *Cambodunum* is razed by fire; that at Lincoln stands roofless even down to Bede's day; the stone church at York lies unfinished. In the aftermath, the Northumbrian state itself is shattered; its successor kings and warrior élite apostatise; all is anarchy (a reverse trajectory, from permanence to transience). Paulinus flees with the queen and her children. Bede recalled that the year after Edwin's death was so hateful to memory that 'those who compute the dates of kings' had decided to abolish the memory of it (*HE* III.1). For him, even the solidity of time, which he himself concretised by the adoption of the AD system of reckoning, dissolves.

The process of petrification which, for Bede, meant the establishment of an enduring and universal Christian state, was not linear, then. Countering, liquefying forces of apostasy, violence and dynastic instability worked against it. It was in the nature of early Anglo-Saxon kingship that, insofar as it represented a nascent state apparatus, the state collapsed with the death of its kings. Networks of patronage, constructed and nurtured over the course of a reign, could only be maintained by a smooth succession, an all too rare event in the tribal post-imperial states of Europe. On Edwin's death his sponsorship of the green shoots of Christianity was void, his immediate successors reasoning, perhaps, that conversion had brought him and his people little reward. The institutional integrity of Edwin's church was vested entirely in his person and in that of his Bishop, Paulinus.

13.4 Second Conversion

In Bede's narrative it is only with the Irish mission, sponsored jointly by the abbot of Iona and the king of Dál Riata in 635, that a rational ideological relationship between church and kingship allowed permanent institutions of state to emerge, delivering Bede the core of his providential narrative and his chief protagonist, Saint Oswald. Oswald was King Edwin's nephew, from a competing dynastic branch of Northumbrian Germanic warlords. Exiled from youth in the Gaelic-speaking and thoroughly Irish court of Dál Riata in what is now Argyll, he was converted and educated on Iona. Returning to wrest control of Northumbria in the dark days after 633, he recovered the kingdom and immediately sent to Iona for a bishop, his personal commitment unquestioned. Bishop Aidan's mission to Lindisfarne succeeded where Paulinus had failed.

13.5 The Book of Land

The Lindisfarne mission was sustained, in the first instance, because it was a monastic foundation, and Oswald endowed it with considerable allodial estates with which to support its material needs. Land was held by the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon warrior élite for a life interest only. The right to enjoy the fruits of that land's surplus in the form of food and service renders was normally granted to proven warriors requiring estates on which to settle and raise the next generation of *gesiths*[1] for the king's war band. Those estates returned to the king's portfolio on the death of their tenant, to be gifted again on the same, provisional basis to a younger, active warrior – perhaps, but not necessarily, the previous tenant's son. Augustine, establishing his mission in Kent in 597, was given 'land befitting his rank' on which to found a new church and accommodate his missionaries, by King Æthelberht (*HE* I.26), regarding him as some sort of honorary *gesith*.

Kings and their holy men had to resolve a paradox: the church was offering an everlasting place at God's side for virtuous kings who converted their people and did right by the church; it was offering eternal prayers for their souls. Doing right meant generously endowing them with lands so that their warriors for Christ – milites Christi – might be nurtured and sent out to preach and minister to their people. It stood to reason that in return for an inalienable place in heaven, holy men and their successors should enjoy the same rights on earth. Land donated to the church must be 'booked', its boundaries recorded and remembered (petrified). Abbots and their followers and successors must be able to invest in that land and enjoy it in perpetuity: continuity was all. Two documents survive to demonstrate the importance of that contract: the tenth-century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (South 2002) is a record of the possessions and fortunes of the Lindisfarne community from its foundation; the ninth-century Durham *Liber Vitae* is the corresponding account of those visitors to the church who endowed it with gifts of land, relics, treasures and hard cash. Its first entry, a retrospective fiction, is King Edwin, followed by Oswald, then his brother Oswiu, then Oswiu's son, and so on (Stevenson 1841; Fig. 13.2).

The consequences of 'booking' land in perpetuity were profound. First, the establishment of permanent, stable settlements, with continuity of management, of agricultural policy and ideology, expressed all those attractions which made the life of Edwin's flitting sparrow so depressingly transient. The concentration of resources of man- and womanpower fostered innovation in husbandry and farming; in the clearing, ploughing and protection of land and in the development of such engineering marvels as tide-powered

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[1]*Gesith*: a free-born, weapon-bearing member of the Anglo-Saxon nobility, liable for armed service and entitled to hold land for a life interest after having served in the king's war band.
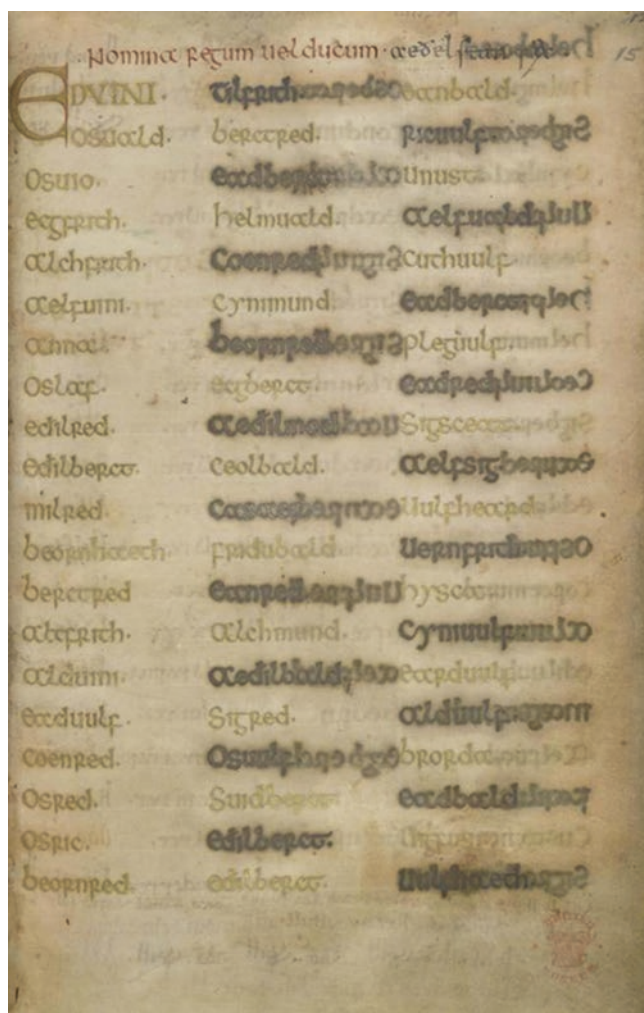
Fig. 13.2 The Durham *Liber Vitae*, showing the list of supposed royal donors to the church of Lindisfarne, with King Edwin inserted before the real founder, King Oswald. 'Bookland' or freehold land was held in perpetuity and its gift recorded on timeless vellum. MS Cotton Domitian A VII, f. 15r. (By permission of British Library)

corn mills (the earliest dated is at the monastic complex at Nendrum, at the head of Strangford Lough in Northern Ireland – dated, ironically by dendrochronology to 619. McErlean and Crothers 2007). Eventually the fruits of what amount to long-term capital investment led to the establishment of *scriptoria*. The reintroduction of writing as a component of Anglo-Saxon culture was revolutionary: booked land and its now-fixed boundaries were recorded; bibles and psalm books copied and distributed; talented scribes and illustrators recruited and nurtured. By the end of the third quarter of the seventh century monasteries had been established across Northumbria, in East Anglia, Mercia, Wessex and elsewhere. The material fact of written text surviving from the period is strong evidence for the petrifying tendency that followed from the conversion and an influx of literate lawyer/scholars. The contrast between orally curated

and transmitted knowledge, enshrined in the regnal lists of the 'computers', the songs of bards, the incantations of shamans and the whole body of customary law held by tribal elders and the, so to speak, petrifying potential of pen and vellum, were not lost on any of the parties. Written communication was adopted as a tool of permanence; of statecraft.

Those who computed the dates of kings were able to write their regnal lists down on vellum. Archbishops could enter into correspondence with the pontiff in Rome; kings vicariously with their counterparts across Christianised Europe. Moreover, powerful bishops and abbots, the equal in rank of any of the king's councillors, might advise, admonish, guide and foster their kings. They would, in time, as Colm Cille (St Columba) had in Dál Riata, exercise influence over the succession, legitimising kings whose policies favoured them; petrifying their dynastic ambitions, at least in theory. It is not difficult to see, in the development of this relationship, a sort of civil service operating through the medium of senior church figures – both male and female – which ensured the survival of the state regardless of the person of the king; and here, surely, is the keystone of the petrification process.

In time, a new duality developed in the political geography of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Kings were necessarily peripatetic (fluid), their entourage travelling between royal estates, consuming their annual renders in turn – hence the 36 days spent at Yeavering: a tenth of a year spent consuming a render that represented a tenth of the king's *feorm*. Archbishops, bishops and abbots might, and did, travel; but they were not peripatetic. They were domiciled, and in time the minsters of the seventh century swelled to become centres of both production and consumption: the most permanent and sustainable settlements in the land, investing infrastructure in the landscape that survives as an indelible stratum of its cumulative palimpsest.

Bede's partisan position on statehood, Latinity and faith paints a necessarily negative picture of pre-Christian political and religious culture. Tribal kingship was constrained and institutionalised by customary law, by long-held bonds of kinship and tradition. The art, oral history, poetry, architecture and world view expressed in exuberant visual, highly fluid designs, magnificent palaces like Yeavering, rich mythologies and the supreme crafts of the pre-Christian tribal societies of North-west Europe provide counterpoints to the narrative of their Christian successors.

13.6 Turned to Stone

Bede may have over-engineered his narrative edifice, but one does not have to look far for confirmation of the petrifying tendency elsewhere in the Early Medieval landscape. In Ireland, material expressions of a sense of permanence and solidification are found in the transition from wooden to

Fig. 13.3 Inscribed stone cross from the graveyard of an early medieval monastic complex at Cooley, Moville, County Donegal. The stem of the cross is depicted as a point: a skeuomorphic representation of a wooden stake. (Photo: Max Adams 2017)

stone structures and memorials during the seventh century. Charles Thomas's (1971) pioneering work in identifying skeuomorphic representations, in stone, of objects previously fashioned in wood – house shrines with finials modelled on wooden crucks; incised wheel-headed crosses with bases sharpened to a point like stakes (Fig. 13.3) – reveals a fashion for translating artistic ideas from an impermanent to a permanent medium, echoing earlier manifestations of a similar phenomenon (Fowler, Chap. 8, this volume). Michelle Brown (2017) has made an eloquent case for the translation of fluid zoomorphic and La Tène decorative motifs, from a vibrant metalworking (a fluid and cyclical expression of display) tradition, directly onto the pages of the illuminated manuscripts of Iona and its daughter foundation on Lindisfarne. The Irish monastic enclosure itself, often circular and concentric in form, with its increasingly private and exclusive zones (*sanctus, sanctior, sanctissimus)* echoes an idea of eternality, a model of the temple of Jerusalem – a subject which we will address in detail as it relates to Northumbria. The desire to tap into the authority of the Old Testament, so richly echoed in the pages of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and in his many exegetical commentaries, is also monumentalised in Abbot Adomnán's *De locis Sanctis*, which he is said to have written on Iona from detailed verbal descriptions given him by the castaway Gaulish bishop Arculf. The work is effectively a Blue Guide to the Holy Land, complete with a plan of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, whose fourth-century Anastasis covered and monumentalised the foundation rock of the faith. The story of that manuscript's creation is told by Bede, who made a copy for himself (*HE* V.15). The very idea of a copy, a simulacrum and multiplication of a work handed down by ecclesiastic or biblical authority, carried greater weight in the Early Medieval Period than it does now. Iona's founder, Colm Cille, was himself said to have been expelled from Ireland for making an unauthorised copy of a text (Lacey 2013).

The landscapes of the Atlantic west were nothing if not well-endowed with the standing monuments of a lost Roman and prehistoric past and in memorialising their own spirituality in stone the Christian monks were tapping into a deeper sense of permanence: an inherited landscape stratified in meaning. The great stone preaching crosses found across greater Northumbria at Gosforth, at Ruthwell and at Bewcastle (Fig. 13.4) – perhaps replacements or copies of wooden crosses long-decayed – are concretised narratives, like the words inscribed using the permanent ink in *scriptoria*. Here Bede, writing as a historian, proposed a counterpoint between traditional knowledge passed down from ancestors and writings in archive – *traditio maiorum* and *litterae antiquorum* (*HE* 5. 24) – between that transmitted by word of mouth and that established in text, between the fluid and the permanent. Evoking the origin myths of the Brittonic and Pictish peoples, he had to rest the authority of his narrative on the spoken word passed down through time and no longer traceable to source: 'it is said that' – *ut fertur* and *ut perhibent* (*HE* 1.1). But the history of the English people, whom God foreknew – *quam praescivit* – is that he had destined them – *destinavit* – for salvation on the initiative of Pope Gregory, prompted by divine inspiration – *divino admonitus instinctu* (*HE* 1.22, 23). This is providential history, beyond the flow of human time, and Bede signifies its authority by quoting letters of Pope

Fig. 13.4 The seventh or eighth-century carved stone cross at Bewcastle, Cumbria. The faded inscription visible on the left side in the runic alphabet: designed to be carved across the grain of a wooden artefact. Such crosses are probably stone copies of wooden preaching crosses. (Photo: Max Adams 2020)

Gregory held in the papal archives. The written text holds the unfolding of God's purposes unchanging in perpetuity.

13.7   Burial, Relics and Incorruption

The ephemeral existence of the sparrow flitting through Edwin's hall is reflected in two centuries of pagan burial practice: the furnished graves of the so-called Migration Period up to what used to be called the 'Final phase' of the early seventh century. The dead of the earliest Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in eastern England were cremated. Cremation was a process of elemental transformation through fire into smoke and ashes, its residues carefully curated – petrified – in a ceramic urn (plastic clay, converted by fire to artificial stone) whose previous purpose had very often been the fermentation and consumption of ale (Williams 2005; Perry 2013). Cremation, very often in large communal cemeteries, was followed by inhumation in cemeteries full of individuals accompanied by a variety of personal possessions: spindles and spindle whorls, beads and chatelaines for women; spears, swords, knives and belts for men; sometimes by animals, sometimes by slaves. Such conspicuous consumption of material goods echoes the transitory nature of existence: land

was not heritable; goods were not heritable but were cast out of what we might term the systemic context and into the archaeological as a form of de facto refuse. By the end of the seventh century grave goods in Christian cemeteries were rare: personal items were invested in a new generation; the grave, ironically, was no longer a permanent place of rest but a mere embarkation point on a greater journey on which such goods were not required. The retention of personal possessions, particularly valuable objects like arms and jewellery, by the living was later to be more overtly inventoried in a raft of Anglo-Saxon wills that survives from the eighth century onwards. The message is clear: cultural capital (materially solid) is retained in the living system while the soul (a fluid) passes on its way.

Two conspicuous burials buck this trend and yet reinforce the petrification tendency. In 687 Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, died on Inner Farne and was, in spite of his own admonition, interred in a stone sepulchre in the church on Holy Island. Eleven years later, when he was exhumed and translated, his body was found to be incorrupt (and therefore petrified, or fossilized. *Prose Life of Cuthbert* 42: Farmer 1983). His mortal remains were re-wrapped, placed in a wooden casket and kept above ground as precious relics. The ultimate inspiration for this experiment, and its proof of great

Fig. 13.5 Sceatta of King Aldfrith (685–705). Coins concretised the king's name and authority and provided an enduring material manifestation of commerce. (By permission of Keith Chapman)

sanctity, may be the famous letter of St Paul (*I Corinthians* 15: 51–53):

> Behold, I show you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'.

There are echoes, too, of the sorts of monumental interment familiar to Anglo-Saxons who peered inside Roman sarcophagi containing lead coffins in which bodies might be preserved almost as though they had just died. A more immediate and relevant precedent may have been the story of former Northumbrian Queen Æthelthryth, who died in 670 as abbess of Ely, who was exhumed in 695 (2 years before Cuthbert's translation) and also found to be incorrupt (*HE* II.8). She was reburied in a Roman stone sarcophagus that had been 'found' in the ruins of the nearby Roman town of *Grantacaestir*, modern Cambridge. The cult of relics allowed Christian communities to retain their holy men and women within the living church, to literally fossilize them. It is a moot point whether they understood and practiced embalming techniques in order to ensure the incorruption of their favoured saints. Indeed, a case can be made that Cuthbert was originally interred in a lead casket with eternality in

mind (Adams 2014: 353ff). The eternality of the church was being expressed in the deaths of its heroes and heroines.

13.8 A Brief Word on Coinage

After a break of nearly three centuries, the first post-Roman British royal silver coinage was introduced by a contemporary of Bede, the Iona-trained King Aldfrith (685–705), or Flann Fina to use his Irish name. The *sceattas* are small silver coins carrying the inscription +ALDFRIDUS (with the 'S' reversed: Fig. 13.5). Aldfrith was himself literate – indeed, the Irish knew him as a *sapiens*, a scholar – perhaps the only literate English king before Alfred (871–899). The reverse of the coin depicts a beast, probably a horse, with a flared tail. Only 26 examples had been recovered by the time of David Metcalf's (2006) study of the coinage,[2] but they represent a probable 8 obverse and 15 reverse dies (Metcalf 2006: 152) and a notional output of, perhaps, 2500 coins per die. We are probably missing many other examples of dies. Their distribution is concentrated north of the River Humber (i.e. in Northumbria) and along the East coast of England and Metcalf suggests a distribution via Frisian coastal traders, in substantial numbers. These are tiny coins: no more than 1.25 g in weight: but the symbolism of such a large coin

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[2] Another eight have been recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme: data retrieved from https://finds.org.uk/database/search/results/q/aldfrith+coin, November 16 2017.

issue in a land whose economy had previously been based on bullion (scrap and hacksilver, both recyclable as fluid, molten metal in the smith's transformatory forge) cannot be exaggerated. This is the implementation of a state-sponsored commercial apparatus, a physical manifestation of both the king's peace and his control of the flow of silver both in and beyond his kingdom. The social impact of the materialisation of royal power was to reinforce, and petrify, the idea of a stable, permanent state among its people. Equally importantly, the coinage acts as an independent witness to Bede's narrative of material petrification, of liquid moulded and solidified, enduring forever with the stamp of royal and divine authority. The paradox of a coinage, bearing the king's name and God-given authority, which would be melted down, recycled and re-branded by his successors was, perhaps, an uncomfortable and ironic reminder of the provisionality of petrification.

13.9 Building the Temple

Bede was brought into the enclosed life of the monastery at the age of seven, in the early years of Wearmouth and just before Jarrow was founded in 681. As a child, he saw the construction phases of stone buildings designed in the Roman style, introduced into Northumbria by its founder, Benedict Biscop, from exemplars in Gaul and using the craft skills of masons and glaziers brought over from there (*Lives of the Abbots* 5: Farmer 1983: 189ff), and the highly petrifying technology of mortar mixers, for which Sophie Hüglin (2011) has explored the workings and the Europe-wide distribution.

The young Bede must have watched the Wearmouth mortar mixer (Cramp 2005: 91–5) with some fascination, for he remembered it, and years later he drew on that memory while writing his commentary on the *Book of Genesis*. In discussing the Tower of Babel, he noted the use of pitch as a bonding material for construction which, he said, signifies concentration on earthly and base pleasures; by contrast, he observed (with reference to 1 *Kings* 5.17–18) that masons (*caementarii*) cut the large and precious stones for the foundations of King Solomon's Temple. This led him to a reflection on the subject of mortar (*caementum*). It is made from stones burned and reduced to ash by fire; previously firm and strong, these stones, 'softened after a short time with the addition of a brilliant whiteness, and better bound together by the infusion of water, can even bind together other stones placed in the wall, while they themselves not long afterwards also gain better strength than they seem for a short time to have lost'(*In Principium Genesim*, Jones 1967; trans. Kendall 2008: 236): petrification made visible.

Elsewhere in Northumbria, at the same time that Wearmouth was under construction, Wilfrid (633–709) was undertaking a similar building programme at Hexham. He and Biscop had travelled together to the continent of Europe twenty years previously, and there they encountered mainstream Western Christendom in all its forms, including the architecture of the Romanesque realised in stone construction. In the 670s and 680s this form and material emerged in Northumbria under their influence. It introduced a new and visually arresting dimension to the landscape of an area in which timber was the building material of choice across all social levels, right up to the halls of the kings (Hope-Taylor 1977).

The transition from timber to stone was radical, carrying connotations of the universal Christendom of Rome in the post-Synod of Whitby era. For Northumbrians, living within sight of the ruins of the Roman Wall and other frontier forts, and the towns of Corbridge and Carlisle, where elements of the Roman-era city walls and water supply infrastructure were still evident in 685 (*Prose Life of Cuthbert*, 27), the new stone structures evoked the sense of a lost past also evoked elsewhere in England by the author of the poem *The Ruin* (Crossley-Holland 1984: 59–60). This lost past was being brought back to life in Northumbria: the crypt at Hexham is built entirely of spolia: stones from Corbridge (Bidwell 2010: Fig. 13.6); the chancel arch of the church at Escomb seems to have been taken intact from the fort of Binchester; the small single-cell church at Jarrow, in use today as the chancel of the parish church, is built of stones from the forts of Wallsend and South Shields; while at Wearmouth most of the cut and shaped ashlar of the doors and window frames and the quoins of the tower and west end wall of St Peter's church are imported from Roman sites (Turner et al. 2013; Bell 2005: 212). In Bede's own church, we see another manifestation of the ideological made material, in the earliest window glass in England. These translucent fragments refracted and coloured sunlight and, trapping the rays, fixing them onto the walls and floor of the church, rendering visible and almost tangible that which was otherwise ephemeral.

In the mind of Wilfrid's biographer, the church of Hexham with 'the great depth of the foundations, the crypts of beautifully dressed stone, the vast structures supported by columns of various styles and with numerous side-aisles, the walls of remarkable height and length, the many winding passages and spiral staircases leading up and down' recalled the world of Rome: 'we have never heard of its like this side of the Alps' (*Life of Wilfrid* 22: Farmer 1983, 128ff). Wilfrid's church at Ripon, of dressed stone supported with columns and side aisles, carried his biographer even more deeply into a recollection of Moses building the Tabernacle in the desert and of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (*Life of Wilfrid* 17).

Bede, too, picked up reference to the Temple. Alone among scriptural exegetes, he wrote commentaries on both the Tabernacle and the Temple (*De Tabernaculo* Hurst 1969; trans. Holder 1994; *De Templo*, *Corpus Christianorum*

Fig. 13.6 The crypt at Hexham Abbey, constructed by Bishop Wilfrid from 674 using Roman spolia from the nearby town of Corbridge. These mouldings and many others, including Latin inscriptions, are incorporated into the fabric of the vaults. (Photo: Max Adams 2020)

Series Latina. Hurst 1969; trans. Connolly and O'Reilly 1995; O'Brien 2015). Bede's technique in exegesis was to offer not only a literal interpretation of the texts, but an allegorical approach in which a person, place or event in the Old Testament stands as a figure or type for one in the New Testament. The figure could be typological, referring to Christ or his church, tropological, that is moral, referring to the individual believer in the present, and anagogical, referring to the joys of heaven to come (*De Schematibus et Tropis*, Kendall 1975). Thus, understanding of the Temple can move from the macrocosm of history and cosmos, to Christ and his body the Church and to the microcosm of the Temple as the individual (O'Brien 2015, 5). The Tabernacle of Moses (a portable sanctuary recalling the itineracy of territorial lordship) was built 'on the route by which one reaches the land of promise, whereas [the Temple] was built in the land of promise itself and in the city of Jerusalem … that it might afterwards stand in the fatherland itself and the royal city, built on an ever inviolable foundation'. The Temple is a figure of Christ 'as the uniquely chosen and precious cornerstone laid in the foundation, and of us as the living stones built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets' (*De Templo*, 1:1). Bede takes the image of Christ as the cornerstone from the

Psalms (118, 22) wherein 'the stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner', brought forward into the New Testament (*Acts* 4.11; *Ephesians* 2.20) and with God's people as living stones (1 *Peter* 2.5); and then from St Augustine, for whom 'the stones of the church are of more worth than those of the Temple because they are living stones' (*De Civitate Dei* 18.48 – Dombart and Kalb 1955). As Gianluca Foschi observes (Chap. 14, this volume), churches as built structures were not conceived of as being reconstructions of the Temple: this could not be constructed in exegesis; rather is the church the fulfilment of the Temple.

Henry Mayr-Harting argued (1976: 13) that the description of the universal church in *De Templo* and the building of the church among the *gens Anglorum* in *Historia Ecclesiastica* 'form a kind of diptych'. While the Temple refers typologically to the life of Christ and his church, and anagogically to the life to come, Bede placed the English people and their history firmly in a providential context by constructing his chronology around AD dating, thus setting the events within the Sixth Age of the ages of world history he had previously set out in a chronicle (*De Temporum Ratione*, 66). The *gens Anglorum* was the nation he foreknew and did not reject, but for whom he had a plan to send them worthy heralds from

Rome to bring them to the faith (*HE* 1.22). As in the building of the Temple, a theme of unity and harmony lay beneath the different elements of the structure, each of which forms part of a coherent plan in the design of God's providence (Connolly and O'Reilly 1995: 39). In the living temple of Christ's church, anyone who 'wants to live or preach otherwise [other than that which the church has received from the Apostles] and prefers either to despise the apostolic decrees or propose something novel according to his own whim is not a pillar fit for the temple of God' (*De Templo* 18.7).

The touchstone for unity in the English church being built in the seventh century was conformity with the practices of the universal church in observing the date of Easter. In this there was conflict, for the Irish church of Iona, which had sent the mission to Northumbria in 635, followed its own traditions. This conflict runs as a thread throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* from its first mention in Book 2, Chapter 4 to its eventual resolution at 5.22 when the monastery of Iona eventually agreed to conform. The turning point in the conflict, and the centrepiece of the *History* came at 3.25, in 664 at the Synod of Whitby where Bede, through the mouth of Wilfrid in the debate, challenged the obstinacy of his opponents in their foolish attempts to stand out against the whole world. Then, in language entirely consistent with the criticisms of those who are not fit pillars of the Temple, Wilfrid condemned those who, knowing the decrees of the apostolic see and the universal church refuse nevertheless to follow them: 'without doubt you are committing sin'. The king's decision at the end of the debate rested on acknowledgement of the authority of St Peter expressed in the gender-dependent petrification pun of *Matthew* 16.18 whereby Peter (*Petrus*) is the stone (*petram*) upon which the church is built. Whitby fossilized the fluid, and to Bede distasteful, heterodoxy of Insular practice into monumental orthodoxy.

Bede's thinking is teleological, and the Temple of Solomon is provisional. It is still daily being built, partly in a state of pilgrimage here on earth and partly reigning with Christ in heaven; but it will pass away, leading to higher things, according to Bede's anagogical reading. (*De Schematibus at Tropis* 120–1) The author of the *Revelation* saw a new heaven and a new earth after the first earth had passed away, and in the heavenly city of Jerusalem 'I saw no temple therein, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it'. (*Revelation* 21.22) The Sixth Age of the world, ushered in by the birth of Christ, is running its course. In the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede's account of the English people in the Sixth Age, at the end of Book 5, which has been a study of the pilgrim church (Rollason 2001), draws to a close by looking towards the perpetual kingdom (5.23) as the saints wait attentively on Christ's Second Coming, 'though no one knows the day nor the hour, but only the father. (*Matthew* 24.36; *De Temporum Ratione* 123B, Jones 1977; Wallis 1999). Petrification is provisional.

13.10 Conclusion

Fluid to solid: in the introductory chapter to this volume, Hüglin and Gramsch, seeking ways to describe and interpret change in matter and society, propose petrification 'as a process of consolidation and stabilization ... in matter or mind', leading to something more permanent, even "eternal"', and they ask whether particular petrification processes are confined to the material world or whether they 'can be seen as mirroring, following, triggering, or contradicting changes in social life and general world views'. In this chapter we have reviewed developments in seventh-century Britain and Ireland, using the writings of the Venerable Bede as a lens through which to view processes of change: in religious conversion; in burial practice; in documenting landholding; in the use of metal coinage in exchange; in architecture. We argue that all these are processes of consolidation; that the material and the societal are intimately interconnected; that in the image and metaphor of the Temple, Bede conceptualised the emergent society of his day in a teleological frame, looking to the eternal.

Out of the conversion missions dispatched from Rome and Iona, and the ideological revolution which they precipitated, emerged a permanent partnership of church and kingship, the foundation of medieval statehood. Bede's carefully-wrought metaphor, of the brief life of the sparrow flitting through the eaves of a royal hall in winter, captures his sense of the ephemeral. History, not least his own, proved him right. Writing of these events a hundred years later he was able to portray the fragility of the conversion with the complacency of hindsight. Even so, care must be taken not to swallow Bede whole. The culture of Early Medieval kingship, with its oral history, customary tribal law, landed wealth and territorial continuity, enjoyed its own sort of institutional and cultural permanence. The exuberance and artistic integrity of its metalwork and wooden architecture, poetic tradition and mythologies rooted in ancient pantheistic traditions are reminders that Bede's deterministic, providential view of history was a fulfilment of his own agenda. Even he, writing to Bishop Ecgberht in 735 within a year of his death (*Letter to Ecgberht*: Colgrave and Mynors 1969), felt constrained to warn of dynamic, corrupting and destabilising elements in both state and church that threatened to undermine the foundations of the new Jerusalem built by the *gens Anglorum* in his green and pleasant land. A sparrow flitted, at large, beneath the eaves of the Temple. The stones of its walls, the material, were held together only by the cement of the immaterial: the spiritual and the divine. Petrification was indeed provisional. A hundred or so years after Bede, St Cuthbert's own community embarked, supposedly under pressure from Viking raids, on an enforced wandering in which the coffin containing his relics became an allegorical Tabernacle,

returning the cycle to its beginnings before they found a permanent temple site on Durham's peninsula. Bede, in writing the history of these processes, was not just moulding them to his own purpose; he was also attempting to intervene directly in their outcome. Historians, wittingly or unwittingly, are still winding the handle of the cement-mixer whose liquid-turned solid metaphor so struck Bede as a child at Wearmouth.

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