POWER, PASSION AND POLITICS IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND
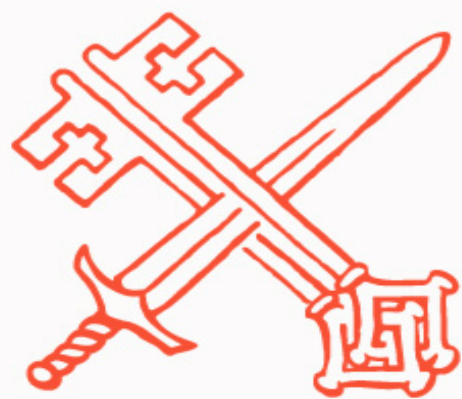
THE PRIVATE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

DR. JANINA RAMIREZ

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'*For I know, that, although during my life some have despised me, yet after my death you will see what sort of man I was, and that my doctrine was by no means worthy of contempt.*' From Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*

Life and death. Glory and contempt. Doctrine and devotion. Anglo-Saxon saints have navigated their way across many centuries, down to our modern world, preserved on street corners, national flags and village halls. While remembered as little more than a name in many cases, the saints of the first millennium were the movers and shakers, the decision makers of the time.

About the Author

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POWER, PASSION AND POLITICS IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

THE PRIVATE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

DR. JANINA RAMIREZ

This work is dedicated to Dan, Kuba, Kama, Babi, Papa, and all those who love and inspire me. *Aere Perennius.*

'All it takes to make a man a saint is grace. Anyone who doubts this knows neither what makes a saint nor a man.'

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, VII, 508

Introduction

Saints' names echo through the centuries. Today we may walk down St Gregory Street, past St Bede's Primary School, or find a church dedicated to St Cuthbert. The saints are in our peripheral vision, part of the subtext of the nation, but the actual people behind the names are shrouded in the mists of time. Inhabitants of a 'dark age', figures like Alfred the Great, Edward the Confessor or Bede the Venerable straddle the part of our collective memories that dissolves legend with historical fact, myth with real people. But the saints can provide a pin upon which to hang other evidence of a lost past. They are fascinating in their diversity, and can reveal a great deal about the times in which they lived and died. It is now their time for reassessment; time to reveal their private lives.

Growing up in a Polish/Irish Catholic household, I am well acquainted with the saints. Images of the traditional early saints, like Christopher, Catherine and Peter, jostled for supremacy next to Padre Pio and Pope John Paul II. Comforting faces peering out from frames, they provided the young me with a sense that an army of righteous, sacred souls were guiding me through life. These early interactions with the saints left a lasting impression. Although I now approach them as historical figures, rather than the focus of devotion, this experience allowed me to reconcile my own probing academic view on medieval saints with a more fundamental understanding of the spiritual potency these individuals can command.

However, my recent renewed fascination with the saints, and the Anglo-Saxon ones in particular, began while reading a tabloid newspaper. I have been passionate about the

Anglo-Saxon period from the first moment I encountered the Old English 'Elegies' as an undergraduate student. One passage from *The Wanderer* in particular seemed to resonate down the centuries:

'Her bið feoh læne,	'Here money is fleeting,
her bið freond læne,	here friend is fleeting,
her bið mon læne,	here man is fleeting,
her bið mæg læne,	here kinsman is fleeting,
eal þis eorþan gesteal	all the foundation of this world
idel weorþeð!'	turns to waste!'
The Wanderer.[1]	

Old English texts like this offer timeless insights into the human condition, and yet they grew from the minds and imaginations of people with their own distinct views, attitudes, concerns and symbolic frameworks. It's the world of *Beowulf*, of mystical smiths crafting unimaginably beautiful jewellery, of wandering monks in the wilderness, of the clash and howl of hand-to-hand combat. It was a world that, to me, seemed both within my reach and at the same time impossible to grasp fully, as to understand it I had to learn more about the people themselves and the landscapes (both intellectual and real) that they inhabited.

However, as I flicked through newspaper pages, past models, actors, politicians and celebrities, I began to wonder what an Anglo-Saxon version of such a publication would look like. Whose faces would be staring out at me? Whose lives would readers be following? Who would be the pin-ups and heroes of the Anglo-Saxon period? Traditionally, we might think it would be kings, queens, nobles and warriors. But we are overlooking a far more prevalent and influential body of individuals, whose importance resonated across the social spectrum – the saints. Representatives of a powerful, all-pervading Church, their designation as extra-special

Christians ensured their celebrity and reputation. It is their stories that have been passed down the centuries, and their names that are repeatedly tied to specific places and events.

To uncover the lives of Anglo-Saxon saints is to open a window onto a fascinating and rich period in our nation's history. Archaeological discoveries over the past century have rendered the term Dark Ages redundant. Far from 'nasty, brutish and short',[2] life in the Anglo-Saxon period could be vibrant and exciting. Anglo-Saxons didn't simply live in wooden huts, but in grand palace and monastic complexes like those at Yeavering and Winchester. They weren't primitive, uncivilised people, but were instead capable of technical wizardry that could produce stunning objects like the Sutton Hoo shoulder clasps and the Lindisfarne Gospels.

This close-up of the Sutton Hoo shoulder clasp shows two overlapping boars executed in gold and garnet cloisonné. The skill required to cut the garnets, secure them in the gold fittings with no adhesive, and include a minutely detailed chequerboard-impressed piece of gold leaf behind each gem is testament to the technical skills that Anglo-Saxon jewellers possessed.

The evidence from this period is regrettably sparse. For every spectacular collection of metalwork discovered, like the Staffordshire Hoard, many hundreds have been lost. With literacy in the hands of a few, far fewer documents

survive from this period than from those either side. But occasionally certain individuals, places and objects speak across the millennium. The saints are the best-documented individuals of their time, so opening up their stories should also shed light on the periods in which they lived.

This is not a 'warts and all' reveal about the seedy side of saints' lives. It is incredibly hard to find out almost anything truly private about them, since they were public people, with connections to the world of power and politics. Vellum was very expensive, and scribes would write the authorised and publically acceptable version of history, so any hints of scandal or personal insight are only ever subtly or accidentally expressed. But the idea of writing about the private side of saints' lives evolved from a desire to move outside the established canonical information that has been regurgitated over the centuries, to explore the real settings that the saints inhabited and the worlds of which they were a part.

This is an interdisciplinary study, which crosses the boundaries between archaeology, art history, history, literary studies, linguistics, theology and palaeography. And this book is also a journey across the landscapes of Britain and Ireland. Travelling over the terrain that these Anglo-Saxon individuals may have crossed can be a means of getting closer to them. Ancient echoes resonate particularly strongly in some locations. The artefacts, too, are of paramount importance. They were witnesses of the time, and reading their imagery and symbolism can be a way of hearing a true voice across the ages. But to understand the Anglo-Saxon saints, it is essential to begin by understanding the period in which they lived.

What is Anglo-Saxon England?

The Anglo-Saxon period, roughly AD 450 to 1066, is often described as a 'dark age': a time when the failing of the

Roman Empire triggered a wave of barbarism that swept away the civilised society that preceded it. The original tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes came over from territories around the modern-day Netherlands, northern Germany and Denmark after the collapse of Roman military control in AD 410. Sources state that the bewildered Romano-British, who were being attacked on different borders by Picts and Scots, initially invited the Germanic soldiers over as mercenaries to help them defend themselves.[3]

The question of exactly how and why so many Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to England is one that divides scholars.[4] The two divergent approaches suggest they arrived either through aggressive conquest or via peaceful and gradual settlement. While there is some evidence for destruction and conflict, the *Adventus Saxonum* (coming of the Saxons) hasn't provided the archaeological record with the mass of graves and mutilated skeletons that the Viking incursions did. It seems expedient to think of the arrival of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes as beginning with military expeditions, which were followed by a more steady flow of settlers across the North Sea.

The Germanic homelands left behind by these settlers may have been subject to flooding and over-farming, so their movement across the North Sea could have been prompted by a search for more fertile land to cultivate. Yet they settled in great enough numbers to transform the linguistic, cultural and social framework of England. In a famous passage, the Venerable Bede gives a context for where these tribes came from:

> Those who came over were of the three most powerful nations of Germany: Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent, and of the Isle of Wight, and those also in the province of the West Saxons who are to this day called Jutes, seated opposite to the Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is, the country which is now called Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West Saxons. From the Angles, that is, the country which is called Anglia, and which is said, from that time, to remain desert to this day, between the provinces of the Jutes and the Saxons, are descended the East Angles, the

Midland Angles, Mercians, all the race of the Northumbrians, that is, of those nations that dwell on the north side of the River Humber, and the other nations of the English.[5]

This was mass immigration, and it was to transform the complexion of the British Isles permanently and profoundly.

There is a temptation to speak of the 'Anglo-Saxon kingdoms' as if they were all part of a unified whole. However, each kingdom had very rigid and defined ways of differentiating themselves from those on their borders. Archaeological finds suggest that different tribes wore their jewellery in recognisable arrangements to indicate their tribal affiliation.[6] Most textiles from the period have been lost, but it is probable that their dress was differentiated too.[7] A recent equivalent would be the clans of Scotland, each clearly distinct from the other through the colour and design of tartan displayed on their kilts. The hostilities between neighbouring tribes – who apparently on the surface were not so different – could be more violent than any aggression towards external threats. Yet there were also a number of factors that bound the Anglo-Saxon tribes together. They all spoke a similar Germanic tongue and followed the same polytheistic religion, and their social structure was based on tribal affiliation and loyalty to the lord of the hall.

Only a handful of writers recorded the Anglo-Saxon period, including Gildas, Bede and Adomnán. However, there are law codes, theological treaties and vernacular texts from the later part of the period to consolidate our knowledge. Alongside these, of course, there are the large numbers of saints' lives, known as hagiographical texts. These do not belong in a single genre, since they often range widely, focusing on topics such as warfare, sexuality, torture and politics, and they can be in Latin or in the vernacular. To read these texts requires a working knowledge of dead languages, and because of their often formulaic and theological subject matter, saints' lives are usually only

studied by a small number of historians and literary scholars. Yet behind the symbols and metaphors lies a rich well of information about the Anglo-Saxon period that still has much to offer.

Although this book is about Anglo-Saxon England, it will be apparent from the off that this is a fluid and complex term. How do we define what Anglo-Saxon England is? It is essentially a racial term, and these are fraught with difficulty. The names 'English', 'British', 'Scottish', 'Irish', 'Welsh', 'Manx' and 'Cornish' are still divisive, and the roots of many of these lie in the period discussed in this book.[8] This was the time of the birth of nations, and these racial distinctions feed on a latent belief in the 'differences' between the separate parts of the United Kingdom. There is certainly a historical basis for these differences.

With the coming of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes from the Germanic homelands, the Celtic Britons seem to have moved their strongholds into areas to the west: Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, western Scotland and Ireland. Connected through the early medieval period by ties of trade, marriage and political allegiance, these territories still preserve a native Celtic language, and although each is distinct and different from the other, they have their roots in an older vernacular tongue.[9] What is incredible, however, is that the language of modern-day England – that lingua franca English, which has absorbed elements from Latin, French, Scandinavian and others – has virtually no survivals from the earlier British Celtic tongue that was spoken in this region for centuries. There was, essentially, a linguistic cleansing. The many changes brought about by the *Adventus Saxonum* were most clearly evinced in language and religion. The Celtic fringes remained Christian – a religion that had arrived with the Romans – while Anglo-Saxon England was pagan.[10]

To fully understand the saints of Anglo-Saxon England, it is important to position this little kingdom within a wider

geographical and ideological framework. What happened in England was, and remains, profoundly influenced by events, ideas and people outside of its ever-changing boundaries. As we now have a racially fluid, diverse mix of people living within the British Isles, so in the early medieval period there was constant interaction, intermarriage and integration between different groups. Studying the lives of saints undermines the idea of medieval life as local and parochial. They, more than most members of medieval society, moved locations, met with people from different lands and backgrounds, and established or settled in ecclesiastical sites or monasteries that were often geographically distant from their place of birth. The medieval world was not one of racial segregation and national pride, but rather one where individuals relocated to those places that were most politically or economically expedient.

This book will examine the saints that circled and entered Anglo-Saxon England, since their actions and personalities affected the complexion of sanctity within. The saints of Ireland, Wales and Scotland, as well as missionaries from Rome and the Continent, and the movement of individuals across the North Sea, are all of great significance. As a result, early medieval scholars have devised the term 'Insular' to talk of the British Isles – literally 'of the isles'.[11] It is most important, for example, when considering how and why the Anglo-Saxon pagans of England converted to Christianity, to examine the efforts of Patrick and the twelve apostles of Ireland. The work of Columba in particular, founding a monastery at Iona and encouraging missionary activity in the pagan north of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, would influence the early saints of England in many ways.

As Christianity came over from Ireland, it also edged its way into England from Rome with Augustine, via the Christian continent. The influence of the papacy, and the premise that Pope Gregory the Great's mission to the Anglo-Saxons in 597 AD 'saved' their pagan souls from damnation,

would lead to a particularly esoteric form of Roman Christianity setting down roots in England. Although Anglo-Saxon Christians considered themselves at the edge of the world, the missionary fervour of the newly converted English would have wide-reaching effects throughout the medieval period. As Roman and Irish missionaries moved in, so Anglo-Saxons moved out, taking their ideas, art and culture across the known world.

The notion of geographically distinct countries in the early medieval period was problematised by the absence of maps and ways of defining and enforcing borders. Racial identity could be crafted, but one small scratch of the surface reveals that diversity was the norm. English kings married Franks, Welsh princesses married Irish rulers, and Danish conquerors tied themselves to the Crown through political and marital allegiances. This nation's history is one of racial complexity, and the saints are similarly diverse. The majority of saints covered in this work come from mixed lineage; they travelled and tied themselves to a pan-European notion of Christendom, rather than to a boundary-specific idea of nations. There are always the exceptions, but there are lessons on diversity and tolerance to be learnt from delving back into the Anglo-Saxon period.

End of an Era?

The Anglo-Saxon period is traditionally seen to end in 1066, with the Norman Conquest and its cataclysmic impact on all levels of society, art, architecture and the landscape. Technically, this is correct, since with the defeat of the nobleman proclaimed king, Harold Godwinson, a separate Anglo-Saxon identity became subsumed beneath a French-speaking elite. This would remain the case for many centuries, until ultimately the Hundred Years' War severed the bonds between the ruling classes of England and France. However, the end of Anglo-Saxon England in terms of Anglo-

Saxon saints and an England that resembles our modern geographical boundaries began much earlier. The biggest threat to Anglo-Saxon identity came from across the North Sea, not far from where the original Germanic settlers heralded in the fifth century. The Vikings began to attack the British coast at the end of the eighth century, and they would never go away.

The efforts of Alfred the Great made sure that the total transformation of Anglo-Saxon England into a pagan Viking outpost was halted in the ninth century. Through his astute military leadership, he managed to secure a fragile relationship with the Scandinavian settlers in the north, paying vast amounts in Danegeld (a heavy tax upon the Anglo-Saxons, paid to Viking rulers) to stop their repeated attempts to take the whole of England. Alfred's successors, particularly charismatic and influential leaders like Edgar, maintained their uniqueness as Anglo-Saxon leaders in the face of Scandinavian rulers across the virtual borderline of the Danegeld. They halted the process for a few generations, but never removed the threat completely. There was a cultural and social evolution taking place, whereby Anglo-Saxons were absorbing Viking elements, as well as Viking DNA.

By 1016, Anglo-Saxon England was finally and convincingly absorbed by Scandinavia. England had a Danish king. Cnut is reduced in history to a few anecdotes, such as his fabled encounter with the sea.[12] But, as English history has traditionally been taught, it is an overlooked fact that the majority of Anglo-Saxon England was already Scandinavian in terms of taste, culture, intermarriage and economics by the tenth century. And this conquest was completed by Cnut, who was declared King of Denmark and of England. We all know William the Conqueror changed the face of England, but with Cnut the British Isles became as Scandinavian as it was English.

The events of 1066 were the culmination of over two centuries of Viking assaults. Harold Godwinson first fought the Danes at Stamford Bridge and held them back, so preventing a second wave of northern Viking conquest. He then succumbed to William of the Norsemen (the Normans) at the Battle of Hastings. One way or another, the Vikings succeeded, and even that most saintly of kings, Edward the Confessor, was brought up in Normandy under the watchful eye of Norman lords themselves only a few generations settled in the north of France, having a century or so earlier left their Scandinavian lands. In terms of Anglo-Saxon saints, the pagan Vikings did little to encourage their cults, apart from ensuring martyrdom for a few. With the arrival of the Normans, native Anglo-Saxon saints were sidelined, and Anglo-Saxon culture was subsumed beneath that of Normandy.

This book will take 1016, and the dramatic build-up to the overthrow of an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom, as the climax of the Anglo-Saxon period. Yet as with all historical divisions used to define groups of people – be they terms like 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Celtic' – or periods, such as 'late antiquity' or 'early medieval', there is no black and white. There are rarely historical moments when entire populations acknowledge that they have left behind one era or identity and emerged into another. Change can be sudden, as with the events of 1016 or 1066, but their effects can take generations to be realised.

Grace, Notoriety and the Saints

The quote here, by the seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, provides a clear equation for defining sanctity: 'All it takes to make a saint is grace'. Grace = Saint. However, trying to understand this definition today is difficult. So many intellectual, religious and social changes have taken place over the past few centuries that it is now

hard to give any clear-cut meaning to the words grace, saint or, indeed, man. What makes a saint, like what makes a man, presents an endless web of alternatives and possibilities.

The word 'saint' conjures up a variety of associations in our modern minds. Some might connect it with suffering, self-deprivation, charity, service to the weak and devotion to Christian values. Others might envisage miracles, martyrdom and heavenly attributes like stigmata, while others still might feel it is a word wrapped up in superstition, religious fanaticism and the power of the papacy. It is an emotive word, and one that has developed a different set of meanings in recent centuries. A saint is defined, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as 'a person acknowledged as holy or virtuous and regarded in Christian faith as being in heaven after death'. Our modern notions of the word 'saint' are very different to those of the medieval period.

In the early years of the Church all Christians were referred to as 'saints'. For example, Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians:

> *Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God, to all the saints who are at Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus.*
>
> Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, 1:1

There seems to have been little distinction between types of saints in the first centuries of Christianity. But during the years of persecution (through the third century and into the fourth), martyrs were held in particular esteem.[13] Christians would flock to their sites of burial to celebrate feast days, and commune with the remains of those who had died for their faith. As the cult of saints grew, the burial places and body parts of early martyrs became prized. But in AD 313 the Emperor Constantine the Great ended the persecution of Christians and promoted the faith across the Empire, so sanctity took on a different complexion. It was no longer easy to die a martyr's death, although some of the saints

covered in this book managed it at the hands of Germanic or Viking pagans. Instead, saints were made.

Individuals could earn their status as 'saint' through performing miracles or selfless acts, and living an exemplary Christian life. But the rules were lax. The early Church recognised all manner of people, from hermits to popes, monks to soldiers and virgins to rulers as saints. When it comes to understanding the saints of the Anglo-Saxon period, these distinctions become all the more relevant, as at this stage in the history of the Church what constituted a saint could reach across a broad spectrum of characteristics. All that was needed to declare someone a saint was a consensus of the people, so anyone in the public eye could earn this title.

Far from being one-dimensional, pious figures – part of a faceless mass of the blessed – Anglo-Saxon saints were complex, socially significant individuals. Among those declared saints during the early medieval period, we encounter the full range of human achievements and failings. Every one is driven by those basic characteristics that bind humanity together across centuries: the desire for love, fame, adulation, power, wealth, legacy. Many Anglo-Saxon saints are especially pious, and do or say things that set them apart, making them worthy of particular attention both during their lifetime and beyond. But most are wrapped up in the politics and power of their time: players on a bloody and often morally questionable stage.

The lines between secular and sacred, the worldly and the otherworldly, are incredibly hard to define in the early medieval period. A king could be a saint, and a bishop could rule like a king. The idea that someone could be declared a saint simply due to popularity is something that is hard to grasp from our twenty-first century perspective. To us, the word saint presumes that the individual commemorated was particularly pious and holy. But sanctity in the early medieval period was equivalent to notoriety. And the

treatment of their cult after death is also hard to fathom from our modern perspective. Why did cult centres arise and why did medieval people believe that the relics of saints had powers?

It might help to cite a modern equivalent. In 1997 Princess Diana died in a tragic car accident. She was a member of the royal family, mother to heirs to the throne, and of noble birth herself. She had lived her life in the glare of public attention, with both good and bad things written about her. She did many acts of kindness and magnanimity, but she also lived a very real life, complete with temptations and extravagances. She moved in circles alongside other important people, some of whom also performed good deeds, such as Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela. Her unexpected death created a fascinating response around the world, as there was a mass outpouring of grief on an unprecedented scale. People travelled to her home to lay flowers, and there they wept for a woman they might not have known personally, but with whom they felt a connection. And after her death there followed a long and complicated process of blame, forgiveness and, eventually, an attempt to commemorate her. The Diana Memorial was envisaged as a point of convergence for modern-day pilgrims.

Go back ten centuries and Diana would most probably have been declared a saint. A cult certainly would have grown up around her. She would have been buried at the heart of a new ecclesiastical complex, her relics on display to offer the visitor the hope of divine intervention and miracles. That she hasn't been declared a saint can be explained by two factors: the rigour with which canonisations are treated in modern times has led to far fewer saints; and our notions of what constitutes a saint have changed as we have moved towards a more secular world, where the Christian Church in many countries has less control over worldly matters. Yet her example should highlight some of the problems that have arisen in terms of

defining the word 'saint' within the medieval period. It encompasses notions of piety, virtuous living and generosity, but it is also wrapped up in celebrity, public profile and social status.

This book will look at men and women who were celebrated as saints during a time when the process of canonisation was not formalised. Now it is a laborious and complex process, with an entire branch of the Vatican – the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints – dedicated to working through reams of evidence and numerous claims. To be declared a saint, an individual has to have been dead for at least five years,[14] and be proved beyond scientific doubt to have performed miracles. This was not the case in the medieval period. Hundreds of people could be declared saints every decade, and they made up 'the blessed dead in heaven' (*OED*), of which there are many thousands.

In many ways, the saints discussed in this book, particularly those who were intimately bound up with the ruling powers of the time, share characteristics and narratives with other figures from their lifetime. But the fact that they had a role within the Church meant that their stories were recorded with the stylistic formulae and narrative flourishes that had originated with the first martyrs and, further back still, the Bible. One text which seems to have influenced Anglo-Saxon writers significantly was the *Life of St Martin* (the Bishop of Tours known as 'the hammer of the heretics', who died around AD 397), written by Sulpicius Severus. Another was the *Life of St Anthony*, the desert hermit who died in AD 373.[15] Echoes of these exemplary saintly texts resonate through the written lives of Anglo-Saxon saints, and it often appears that writers were using narratives and symbols that were recognisable of the genre, rather than rooted in reality. The saints could become characters in a broader fictional genre, and loosen ties with actual living individuals.

Why do Saints Matter?

In some cases the information written about a particular saint is fragmentary, a mere reference. But this has prevented their names from being lost among the millions of anonymous men and women who lived alongside them. This fact, combined with the faith of the Christian communities that kept their memory alive for centuries, ensures that they serve as identifiable individuals, intimately connected with the periods in which they lived. That they were considered 'sacred', and their bodies thought to be able to exert power by performing miracles and ensuring pilgrimage for long after their death, also made the preservation of their memory expedient. As Robert Bartlett says: 'of all the religions, Christianity is the one most concerned with dead bodies'.[16] This fascination with not just the saintly lives of the individuals covered by this book, but also with their physical remains, meant that, unlike the majority of secular figures, their legacy continued after their death in a very real sense.

The communities in which they had lived, and the people that would benefit from developing a focal point for worship after their death, could engineer cults. Official saints' lives were written, relics were made from the individual's body parts or possessions, and the sites connected with them were enlarged to accommodate the streams of pilgrims they hoped to entice with promises of miracles. Sanctity was big business, and relics would change hands for the sort of money today associated with a Picasso painting. Medieval pilgrims were the equivalent of modern-day tourists, bringing wealth and investment to the communities that housed the relics of saints.

Saints and their relics were important because they enhanced the prestige of local churches, monasteries and towns or provinces. And their significance was not lost on the political decision makers of early medieval England.

Bodies could be moved and stories modified to ensure that a particular site (perhaps a struggling monastery or a church that had suffered a scandal) could be tied to a particular saint. There is a trend during the tenth century towards royal patrons nurturing those saints' cults that enhanced the special status of the royal line.[17] This was an exercise in PR and advertising, and the trappings of a saint's cult were meticulously designed to create new centres of power.

But saints were not just politically and economically important. They were the linchpin of belief for many Christians. Saints were understood to have gained a special communion with God, which entitled them to sit by Him at the Day of Judgement, and to intercede on behalf of other people with Him. Early medieval Christians were fixated on the coming of the end of days, and missionaries and evangelists were racing against time to draw people to the 'true faith' to save their souls from eternal damnation. Saints played their part, both as missionaries themselves and as a conduit for Christians to help them reach salvation. They were spiritually elevated, and praying to a particular saint could ensure that a message would be received more effectively by God. Maximus of Turin wrote:

> The martyrs will keep guard over us, who live with our bodies, and they will take us into their care … Here they prevent us from falling into sinful ways, there they will protect us from the horrors of hell.[18]

The divide between living and dead was less fixed then, and the saints acted as portals between the two. There are clearly links between the veneration of saints and the setting up of household deities in earlier societies. This fact was not lost on later Protestant reformers, who saw the cult of saints as a superstitious barrier to individual communion with the divine. They would cite biblical quotations like 'There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 2:5) to undermine the roles of saints as mediators.[19] Yet the saints were passionately believed in

by early Christians, not least because of their capacity to perform miracles, both during their lives and after death.

The supernatural nature of miracles is proclaimed throughout the Gospels, as Christ performs feats of magic by raising Lazarus from the dead and healing the blind, sick and infirm. Indeed, in very early wall paintings of Christ performing miracles he is shown with a wand, a symbol of his magical role as healer. That saints could perform miracles in imitation of Christ is one of the central themes in hagiographical texts. These miracles could take on many complexions; so Cuthbert gains the respect of ravens, while a clod of earth where Oswald's body was washed prevents a building from being completely consumed by fire. It was this belief in the efficiency of relics to continue performing miracles that enhanced the cult of saints.

There was a transcendental element to saintly relics, which was connected with the position of the saint in heaven. Individuals could possess their own relics, or seek to be buried near to the site of a saint, in the hope that, when God called all the faithful together at the Day of Judgement, their proximity to a part of a saint would bring them closer to Him. It is possible to see relics as a form of fast-track ticket to a privileged place in heaven. A saint's body would be brought back together in perfection after death, and if a wealthy Anglo-Saxon could die possessing a part of that saint, then they would be drawn towards him or her at the end of days.

Saints did matter profoundly in a spiritual sense to those who believed in them during the early medieval period, and they continue to matter to those who believe in them today. Christians across the world still report miraculous cures at the hands of holy people, as well as weeping statues and bleeding pictures. Saints, sanctity, relics and an unerring belief in the tenets of the Christian faith remain entrenched throughout the world. Saints lived in the real world, as this study will prove, but their role in the afterworld was equally,

if not more, important to the Anglo-Saxons who believed in them, treasured them and venerated them.

Anglo-Saxon Saints: Fact and Fiction

This study will look at individual saints chronologically, and attempt to untangle historical fact from the web of myths and legends that have grown up around their names. There is a sense of a developing narrative among the saints. They move from the early martyrs, like St Alban, to the missionary fervour of St Augustine, and are replaced by theological scholarship in the time of Bede, before moving on to the intimate relationship secured between Church and State displayed between King Edgar and Athelwold. A similar development could be charted by focusing on the reigns of kings or royal houses. But I want to give insights into the world of Anglo-Saxon England by looking at a group of people who are arguably well known, but have secured their legacy through texts that often don't present reality.

 The earliest saint covered by this book, Alban, was not an Anglo-Saxon, but his legacy was given muscle most significantly by later Anglo-Saxon rulers and churchmen. He was a martyr, prepared to die for his faith, and his story is recounted with an almost macabre celebration of suffering. Brigid, Patrick and Ninian similarly predate the Anglo-Saxon period, but their roles in developing the Celtic form of Christianity, which was to exert such an influence on the early Church in England, is of paramount importance. What's more, aspects of their cults, such as Brigid's association with a pagan goddess and Patrick's political game-playing, make them fascinating characters who encapsulate a great deal about the way conversion developed within the British Isles.

 The importance of Gregory the Great and Columba centres on the early Roman and Irish missions to the pagan English. Columba, an exile and member of the powerful Uí Néill clan,

set up the influential monastery of Iona, while the Roman mission made inroads to the south, particularly in Kent. While superficially very distinct characters, with Columba exemplifying the Irish tradition and Pope Gregory a sophisticated Roman with the most powerful job in Christendom, a strength of will and desire to evangelise ran through the veins of both men. With Cuthbert, the peace-weaver, the two approaches appear deliberately harmonised, and cult objects like the Lindisfarne Gospels exemplify attempts by the Anglo-Saxon Church to bring the two disparate approaches of the Irish and Roman parties closer together.

From the seventh century onwards, Anglo-Saxon saints would grow in power, influence and intellect. Hilda and Aethelthryth were female saints in a male-dominated world. Originally members of royal households, they gained autonomy by becoming abbesses of their own monastic communities. Their influence was so great that Hilda's site at Whitby was chosen as the location for the decisive Synod of Whitby. Here, the inimitable Saint Wilfrid had a platform to empower both himself and the papacy, securing the backing of the Northumbrian royal family and ensuring primacy of Roman practices over Irish ones.

With characters like Bede and Alcuin, the story shifts from one of conversion to one of consolidation. Bede was declared a Doctor of the Church, and remains the only British person to receive this title. His monastery of Wearmouth–Jarrow was at the heart of a publishing campaign that resulted in the oldest surviving single copy of the Bible, and a collection of bestselling works penned by Bede himself. Similarly, the Northumbrian monk Alcuin became one of the most sought-after minds of his time. He was headhunted by the Emperor Charlemagne to become a foremost force behind the Carolingian Renaissance.

Viking raids on monasteries from the eighth century onwards affected both Anglo-Saxon Church and State. Alfred

the Great's efforts halted the complete conquest of England by Danes and propped up the failing Church. With royal backing the Anglo-Saxon Church would again become a force to be reckoned with. King Edgar realised the value of creating a close relationship with monks and clergy, and gave his support to the campaigns of Athelwold, Dunstan and Oswald. Leaders of the Benedictine Reform, which saw the variety of early monasteries honed into a more manageable and compliant form, they developed an intellectual and artistic campaign, led by an army of monks, which was to be the final flowerings of Anglo-Saxon saints. With Edward the Confessor, the narrative finally shifts away from Britain, towards the Continent, until ultimately Anglo-Saxon sanctity came to an abrupt end.

The lives of saints act as a lens through which broader social, historical, religious and artistic changes can be focused. They were the movers and shakers, the decision makers of their time. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of every Anglo-Saxon saint recorded, but rather a web of those individuals whose lives, locations and stories weave together to bring the time into focus. A favourite saint may well have been overlooked, but with the hundreds of men and women recognised as saints between the fourth and eleventh centuries, it's important to concentrate carefully on a few, rather than provide a cursory glimpse of many.

That said, in relation to their private lives there are some things that would have been common to all of them. In terms of the food they ate, the sort of clothes they wore and the buildings they lived in, there would be minor variations, yet there were many things they shared in common. The Anglo-Saxons ate a good deal of meat (pigs, goats, deer, sheep and cows), poultry (ducks, chicken and geese), fish (herring, eel, pike, salmon and roach) and shellfish (oysters, cockles and mussels), but fruit and vegetables formed the staple diet of most.[20] They did not have potatoes, tomatoes, bananas, lemons or other imported variants. Even native vegetables,

like carrots, would have looked different – less orange, and rather small and purpled. They also ate wild garlic, onion, leeks and legumes. In terms of crops, wheat was cultivated for bread, barley was used for brewing beer and oats fed livestock.

The majority of Anglo-Saxons' hot dishes would have been stews or broths made in a cauldron over an open fire. Bread could be baked in a clay oven or over a griddle, with flour ground either by water mills or hand querns. They could have flavoured dishes with home-grown herbs like dill and thyme, or used some imported spices, like ginger, cinnamon and pepper. Drinks like cider and mead could be sweetened with honey, but beer was drunk most regularly. Some wine may have been consumed, but the skills to make it in the British Isles died out with the Romans.

Everything was used to good effect, so a sheep could provide wool while alive, and meat and skins when killed. Likewise, a cow would be used for milk, leather and beef, while bones and horns could be used for drinking vessels or for carved objects like buckles and pins. Even the blood would be collected and used to make a form of black pudding. The wealthier the person, the more meat they would eat, and some high-class banquets would run to many courses, featuring elaborately spiced and flavoured dishes. But the majority of the saints featured in this book would have lived on a more modest diet, dictated by the seasons and the landscape.

Anglo-Saxon buildings were predominantly timber, with wattle and daub walls and thatched roofs. They tended to be designed on a 2:1 ratio, so were rectangular. At the heart of these halls was the hearth, which provided heat, food and light. Smaller *grubenhaus* would often be found in settlements, with sunken floors and pitched timber and thatched sides. These seem to have been the site of industrial activities like weaving, pottery making and metalworking. Our saints would have slept on a wooden-