One Nation Under God:

The Unifying Narrative of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*

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In the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), Bede attempts to create a unifying narrative for the disparate British peoples by aligning British history with the Roman Catholicism of the English and centering on the historical and spiritual connection to Rome. This narrative focus affects Bede’s treatment of Celtic Christianity, in particular Celtic saints, which he must acknowledge as an important historical force, while attempting to make peripheral to Roman Catholicism. As Bede struggles to integrate these Celtic saints into his history, he highlights the Celtic conflicts, particularly the Easter Controversy, Romanizes and Anglicizes Celtic saints, and even places them on the historical sidelines to suggest the superiority of Roman Catholic figures.

The obstacle to Bede’s narrative preference for Roman Christianity is that the practices sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church were not the only form of Christianity in early medieval Britain. There was also a separate sect of Irish Christianity which was significantly different in practice from the Roman Catholic traditions. Bede frequently mentions the Easter controversy: in calculating the date of Christ’s resurrection, the Irish priests reached a different conclusion than the Roman church. Bede, in fact, wrote extensively on the date of Easter, and supported the Catholic model. Yet although he was devoted to the Roman Catholic model, Bede is still often sympathetic or reverent towards Celtic saints, while maintaining the distance of a Roman believer.

Bede’s account of the *Ecclesiastical* *History of the English People* displays a genuine concern for the proper structure of the Christian traditions and community in England. After a lengthy description of the British Isles, Bede’s account begins by skipping over most of early British history, and simply touches on each point at which the Romans came to Britain. The first figure mentioned is Gaius Julius Caesar, who conquered Britain. Bede claims that Claudius then re-conquered Britain, saying that “no Roman, either before or since Julius Caesar, had dared to land on the island” (1.3). This is probably not true, but in any case Caesar and Claudius seem to be the first disparate points of interest that Bede finds in Britain’s history. One might question what place the military actions of two foreign pagans has as the focus of an ecclesiastical history of Britain. Bede, in his history, is very much attempting to legitimize the concept of a British Christian lineage, which although intended for the island of Britain, favors not the British but the English people. Bede begins his narrative before the Angles, the ancestors of the English people, arrived in Britain. In pointing out these early links to Rome, before Christ, he traces the influence of Christianity in Britain back to a period before the Angles or even before Christ. Preceding the arrival of the Angles, pagan Roman emperors were, in a sense, figures of Christian import, the symbols of Roman organization and control which would eventually inspire the structure of the Church. Bede later focuses on the English, whom he credits as popularizing and establishing Christianity brought from Rome, and eventually bringing the proper Christian establishment to Britain, as I will show. It also speaks to the type of history which Bede is attempting to write: that is, a historical one. While many of his miracles must be taken with a grain of salt, it seems that Bede’s interest in fact is at least equal to, if not greater than, his interest in building a narrative. He draws on records and texts to a great extent. The Roman armies kept detailed records of their campaigns, while early British history was mostly legend. However, the preference for Rome also reveals Bede’s bias towards the Roman Catholic Church, and indicates that his history uses Rome as the focal point for the ecclesiastical aspects of his text.[[1]](#footnote--1)

Despite his general adherence to records, the structure and organization of Bede’s historical writing sometimes more closely resembles a story. For example, Bede begins his history focusing almost entirely on the connection between early Britain and Rome, and the subsequent Christianization and development of Britain, with little mention of Ireland save for his initial description of the British Isles. His focus is on placing Britain within the lineage of Roman Christianity. Bede is required to address Irish Christians because of St. Aidan, whom he seems to view not as an Irish saint, but an English saint of Irish origin. Aidan is from Ireland and educated at a monastery on the island of Iona. This launches into Bede’s next chapter, backtracking to 565 AD and essentially summarizing the *Vita* of Columba.

The chapter on Columba begins with a placement by reference to 565 as the year in which “Justin the Younger succeeded Justinian and ruled as Emperor of Rome” (3.4). This placement with reference to a Roman Emperor is used by Bede in other chapters, but not frequently. It is used here to indicate the recurring Roman focus of the text, even as the following chapter is devoted to an Irish saint. Yet even the summary of Columba’s life is barely a cursory glance. Columba’s *Vita* was written by Adamnan, who is himself mentioned by Bede in *Ecclesiastica*. *The Life of Columba* covers a vast host of miracles and prophecies attributed to the saint, some occurring in Ireland, some in Northern Britain, and many on the island of Iona. The monastery which Columba founded at Iona, and where he was laid to rest, is mentioned both by Bede and Adamnan. Bede makes sure to remark that “The island itself belongs to Britain, and is separated from the mainland only by a narrow strait; but the Picts living in that part of Britain only gave it to the Irish monks long ago, because they received the Faith of Christ through their preaching” (3.3). Bede’s assurance that the island somehow belongs to Britain despite literally being given to the Irish seems almost paradoxical. It implies partially that the Picts, a British tribe preceding the English, are not the true British people, and thus cannot control ownership of Britain. Although another of Adamnan’s works is mentioned, the *Vita* of Columba is not. In fact, Bede notes that the disciples of Columba “are said to have been recorded” (3.4) by Irish disciples, but does not specify anything about the portrayal of Columba. Bede continues that “whatever type of man he may have been, we know for certain that he left successors distinguished for their purity of life, their love of God, and their loyalty to the monastic rule” (3.4). He also says that Columba established an alternative rule in Iona, where an abbot held the highest authority, even over bishops, a practice established “contrary to the usual custom” (3.4) by Columba, who Bede emphasizes was himself not a bishop, but only a monk. These descriptions of Columba are oddly evasive for Bede, even passive-aggressive, as if he is acknowledging Columba’s authority and importance while simultaneously casting doubt on his true significance to English Ecclesiastica. His disciples are clearly pious, yet Bede creates uncertainty around the figure of Columba, as if in his alternative practices the Celtic Columba is not quite worth full exploration in the distinctly English *Ecclesiastic History*.

In the *Vita* by Adamnan,Columba undertakes miracles and teachings in a host of locations and interacts with many people. The names of these people and locations are generally traditionally Celtic, and many of them are placed as being Irish or Scottish (Reeves). The legend of the Saint is distinctly Celtic, and not much concerned with English society. Columba is associated with Scotland, and in particular Iona, which is off the Scottish coast, as well as his depiction as the saint who, as Bede says, “came from Ireland to Britain to preach the word of God in the provinces of the northern Picts, which are separated from those of the southern Picts by a range of steep and desolate mountains” (3.4). This description serves to set Columba apart from the rest of Britain. The area of the northern Picts is distinguished from the southern Picts, who Bede claims have already been converted by Bishop Ninian, “a most reverend and holy man of British race” who was taught “the mysteries of the Christian Faith in Rome” (3.4) . Bede then summarizes Ninian’s conversion of the southern Picts, almost as a contrast of a Roman Catholic, English saint to Columba’s Celtic saint. Ninian is presented as the converter of the Picts who are more united with the rest of Britain, while Columba is identified with the more savage area set apart from Britain, both physically and socially.

The major indicator of Columba’s flawed nature is the Easter Controversy. This is mentioned multiple times throughout the history, often in conjunction with Celtic observers. The controversy centered around the timing of the observance of Easter. Bede had devoted significant scholarship to proving the Roman Catholic *computus* of Easter, an astronomical calculation based on the date of Passover, most notably in his works *De Temporibus* and *De Temporum Ratione*. The current calculation of Easter for the Western church is based on this same computus. The Celtic Easter was calculated through a different process, with which Bede took great issue. For Bede, the controversy seems to be an indicator not of heresy per say, but of a primitive ignorance. He correlates the incorrect observance with the absence of the Catholic Church. It is not simply piety and belief which are the goals of the Church, but uniformity of information. A personal relationship with God is not the focus of Bede’s religious vision. Instead, it is a uniform relationship between one nation and God. Those who maintain a pious life, but do not adhere to the correct structures of belief, are not participating in the spiritual unification of society. Hence Bede’s focus on the timing of Easter, the most important Christian feast. Symbolically, Easter is a celebration of the core belief of Christianity, the dual humanity and Godhood of Jesus, and the significance of his sacrifice and resurrection. To unify Britain under Christianity, Bede would have all the British peoples celebrate this core belief at the same time. The fractures within the Church’s belief in Easter mirror the fractures within Britain which Bede’s *Historia* attempts to end, and the unity of belief that Bede strives for mirrors the increasing unity of Britain.

Of course Columba is far from the first holy man to come to Britain, and Bede does not treat him as a pioneer. That credit goes to St. Alban, who Bede and common canon credit as the first British martyr. Alban comes before Columba, but arguably is actually less historically significant. He is impressive in terms of his *passio*, particularly as a converted pagan, but he does not establish an abbey, nor does he teach widely. The only converts Alban makes are those who are almost supernaturally converted, spiritually moved by witnessing Alban’s *passio* (1.7). Alban can be considered a founder in the sense that he begins the incredibly significant tradition of saintly martyrdom in Britain. The impact of his *passio* in converting several others who are also martyred reflects this foundational role, with these martyrs representing the power of Alban in establishing this tradition, and prefiguring the many martyrs who follow. Bede in fact only mentions one martyr in direct connection to Alban, an unnamed soldier who refuses to execute him and is himself executed. Yet he also says that there was a great crowd who came to see Alban executed, and that “in that same persecution Aaron and Julius … and many others of both sexes” suffered (1.7). This is expanded in the much later 13th-century *Life of St Alban* by Matthew Paris, where many in the crowd are converted and become martyrs, furthering the concept of Alban as a foundational martyr. It is notable that Bede claims that in later times a church was built on the site of Alban’s martyrdom, in an attempt to establish Alban as a founder figure in a more literal sense.

Similarly Germanus, although he was Gaulish and did not establish a monastery, is treated by Bede as a British saint. He and his companion Lupus are chosen by a Gaulish synod to be sent to Britain in order to combat the Pelagian heresy. Bede says that “the island of Britain was rapidly influenced by the reasoning, preaching, and virtues of these apostolic bishops, and the word of God was preached daily not only in the churches, but in streets and fields, so that Catholics everywhere were strengthened and heretics corrected” (1.17) This description is one of several where Bede connects Germanus and Lupus (the focus is generally more on Germanus) to the apostles in spreading Christianity. It both implies a foundational role akin to the apostles, and gives Germanus a more direct link to the apostolic origins of the church, and thus to the Church in Rome established by Peter. The two also visit the tomb of Alban, where Germanus deposits relics “of all the Apostles and several martyrs” (1.18). This further links Germanus to the legacy of British sainthood and martyrdom begun by Alban, although Germanus is not a martyr.

Germanus and Alban are given a more thorough, and positive, treatment as founders by Bede because they represent the Roman Catholic tradition. Alban does this in his non-clerical nature, and relative surface-level practice and belief. He is a lay martyr, and that is his only function, so no story of him details the specifics of his belief or shows him teaching - his converts are inspired by the experience of witnessing his *passio*. It is unclear in Bede’s text whether the priest who initially converts Alban is Celtic or Roman, although it is in fact more likely that Alban was converted by a Celt, because Christianity took hold in Ireland much earlier than in Britain. Yet the story does not specify, at least until much later rewrites, and because Alban really only serves to promote piety and strength of belief, and not doctrine, Bede has no reason to take issue with his beliefs. Germanus, on the other hand, is very explicitly a doctrinal Catholic, sent from Europe, where the Church was only Roman. Although he is not British or English, this makes Germanus even more important to Bede’s Britain than Alban. Germanus arrives to combat heresy which deviates from the correct Catholic practice, and although it is not the Easter heresy, this still makes him a champion of the system which Bede uses as the framework to unite Britain. In a sense, as the first really significant Roman clergy, Germanus and Lupus are like re-iterations of the apostles, helping to establish the true belief in a new land.

Ultimately, Columba’s story mainly serves to set the context for Aidan, the saint who follows in the narrative. Bede treats Aidan as a much more significant saint, and more legitimate despite his Celtic background and practices. Bede’s treatment of Aidan speaks deeply to the relationship between Irish Christianity and Britain. It is undeniable that Irish priests were significant to British conversion, as a separate group from Rome. This is the point of the Columba narrative. However, the placement and summarization of the Columba narrative shows Bede’s unwillingness to accept the true import of Ireland, primarily motivated by the Easter controversy conflict. Aidan receives much better treatment than Columba. The English Christian King Oswald sends to Ireland for a bishop, Bede explaining that Oswald was baptized in Ireland while in exile. Oswald himself is a semi-messianic figure: I would say Arthurian, but Bede’s text predates Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Although Arthur exists vaguely in historical records before the *Historia*, the Arthurian ideal is generally considered to be largely a result of Geoffrey’s work. Regardless, Bede reflects a similar sentiment in his portrayal of Oswald, who brings an era of Christian piety as well as peace after the turmoil of conflicts following the death of the Christian King Edwin. Oswald is also one of the comparatively less numerous saints who is a king and not a clergy member (although given the huge number of saints, this is still a large number). In the wake of Edwin’s death there is a chaotic period of slaughter, which Bede attributes mainly to the pagan King Penda of Mercia, and King Cadwalla. The latter calls himself a Christian king, yet Bede says he “was utterly barbarous in temperament and behaviour” and “had no respect for the newly established religion of Christ” (2.20). Oswald defeats Cadwalla in a semi-miraculous battle: he has a much smaller force, but after commanding his army to pray to “the true and living God Almighty” in front of a cross which he has erected, he wins the pivotal battle (3.2).

Although the Arthurian ideal did not actually exist when Bede was writing, the sentiment behind Oswald is very similar to Geoffrey’s Arthur, because Bede and Geoffrey both seek to create a common British story through their respective *Historiae*. The main difference is that Geoffrey’s history amalgamates many disparate traditions in order to create a single narrative. I would call Geoffrey’s work, in terms of actual chronicle, more fiction than history. His origin for the British people as descendants of Brutus, a Trojan warrior, is a complete fantasy reminiscent of the Aeneid. Arthur, too, is mostly a fiction, as are figures like Merlin and Lear. Yet these figures often draw on important traditions which Geoffrey pulls from the history of Britain: Brutus harkens to the cultural legacy the Roman conquest left on Britain, and the desire for Britain to become equal to the glory of Rome. Merlin combines Welsh traditions of the mad prophet Myrddin with the prophetic hermits of Christian hagiography. Arthur himself pulls from many sources, from the Celtic warrior kings like Fionn MacCumhail to the conquests of Roman Caesars. Bede, on the other hand, seeks to place the diverse cultures of the island under one Christian narrative, and unify the cultures through conversion. Oswald is an important symbol of this unification. In defeating both pagans and a false, evil king claiming to be Christian, with the suggestion of divine aid, Oswald eliminates any doctrinal threat to Catholic belief. This creates unity and ushers in an era or prosperity, supporting Bede’s vision that the best Britain is one which gives up what he sees as divisive diversity in favor of a single doctrine.

This newly unified kingdom is the context of the Britain to which Aidan is sent. Oswald is the unifying force, but Aidan has the knowledge and ability to teach. In fact, it is Aidan’s ability as a nourishing figure which is most highlighted by Bede. He claims that the Irish originally sent a bishop “of a more austere disposition,” who was unsuccessful in converting the Britains, and reported that the British were “an ungovernable people of an obstinate and barbarous temperament” (3.5). At an Irish conference on the matter of how to preach to Britain, Aidan says:

“Brother, it seems to me that you were too severe on your ignorant hearers. You should have followed the practice of the Apostles, and begun by giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually nourished them with the word of God until they were capable of greater perfection and able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ.” (3.5)

This quote gives an idea of Aidan’s saintly character. Aidan is generally characterized as compassionate, as well as empathetic and active in not just teaching and the occasional miracle, but also enacting his values in life. His sainthood is greatly emphasized in description of interpersonal interactions, and Bede says, “His life is in marked contrast to the apathy of our own times” (3.5). Bede recounts that when Aidan travelled he meditated and prayed with his companions constantly, and always spoke to everyone he met. He also gave wealth and spoke out against wrongdoing, even of the wealthy and powerful. He even used monetary donations to buy slaves their freedom. Bede’s Aidan does accomplish miracles, but overall his saintliness seems more a result of personal conduct which can be emulated by all Christians, and in particular his teaching practices, which can be emulated by clergy. Aidan’s perfection as a bishop is also exemplified by his closeness to King Oswald, and Oswald’s holiness as a king is exemplified in his closeness to the bishop.

Aidan and Oswald’s linked holiness is important in establishing Aidan as a figure of British Roman Catholic history, despite his Celtic origins. The connections between the two are deeper than Oswald inviting Aidan to Britain. Oswald is instructed in Christian practice by Aidan directly, and they even share a joint miracle in a sense. At a lavish Feast of Easter the two are seated together, when Oswald is informed that a crowd of poor people outside is calling for the king’s charity. “Oswald at once ordered his own food to be taken out to the poor, and the silver dish to be broken up and distributed among them” (3.7) After witnessing this display of generosity, Aidan seized the king’s right hand and proclaimed “May this hand never wither with age” (3.7). Bede claims that when Oswald was killed in battle, the proclamation was carried out, as his arm was severed and remained miraculously preserved, and in Bede’s time was preserved at Bebbanburh at Saint Peter’s church. This joint miracle shows the saintly nature of both figures. It additionally supports a unification of the British monarchy, particularly the ruling English monarchy which Oswald was a part of and which continued to reign during Bede’s time, with the Church. The physical preservation of Oswald’s body in response to his pious acts, but facilitated by Aidan’s recognition, symbolizes a sense that acts of virtue and piety by the monarchy, which would be seen as positive even from a secular viewpoint, carry even greater transcendent value, as well as a certain holy and sacred lasting power, when paired with the religious power of the Catholic Church. Good ruling practices become transcendent when paired with holy authority. This additionally reflects Oswald’s own saintly status, and the holy powers which his body is granted after death, as a reflection of his eternal reward. Although Oswald is involved with a miraculous battle, all of the other miracles, even those at the site of the battle, occur after his death. Not only does this signify the transcendent nature of holy benefits, it also displays to Anglo-Saxon rulers the power that Christianity could have on their legacy, as Bede reports that both the site of Oswald’s battle and his tomb become famous after his death for their healing powers. Similarly, Aidan does not have the resources to give to the poor to the same extent as Oswald, but he can offer the resources of a greater power which extend beyond death and the physical world.

The extent to which Bede links Oswald and Aidan is another tactic for creating a narrative by which Britain is given the structure for a more unified nation. The ideal kingship of Oswald which Bede portrays is intrinsically linked to his holiness, and it is this same holiness which is represented by his link with Aidan: Oswald’s piety causes him to send for Aidan, and is evident in the esteem he obviously holds for Aidan. Thus, the ideal of a single perfect leader for England, which Geoffrey would eventually turn into the Arthurian ideal, becomes linked by Bede to a leader who is pious in both mind and deed, not only praying before battle and causing a miraculous victory, but also actively pursuing a Roman Catholic foundation for the country and through the union of king and clergy performing miracles.

Aidan, like Columba, is a Celtic priest, and practices Celtic Christianity. Bede even points out that Aidan also errs in incorrectly observing Easter, one of the major indicators of the flawed nature of Celtic Christianity in Bede’s opinion. Bede says of Aidan, “He had *a zeal in God, but not according to knowledge*, in that he kept Easter in accordance with the customs of his own nation, which, as I have several times observed, was between the fourteenth and twentieth days of the moon” (3.3). Bede then explains the origin of the tradition as being a misled interpretation of Anatolius, whom he calls “holy and praiseworthy”. Bede is clearly critical, yet he is unwilling to fully denounce the Celtic traditions, and in particular Aidan. While Coumba is deligitimized as a foundational figure in spite of his clear historical significance, Aidan is legitimized as fully as possible in spite of the aspects of his figure which contradict Bede’s Roman Catholic framework for Britain’s history.

A possible reason for this favor by Bede is that Aidan, more than Columba, is undeniably significant to Britain. Aidan was connected to the abbey on the island of Lindisfarne, which was founded as the center of his episcopal see and where he was buried (3.3, 3.17). Lindisfarne was a significant site for the development of British monasticism: it is generally considered the foundational monastery of the northern part of Northumbria, and most of the south as well (Butler 124). For this reason, Celtic Christianity would remain much more present in Northumbria while the kingdoms to the south gravitated towards Rome. Lindisfarne was also the center of clerical scholarship and bookmaking - most famously the Lindisfarne Gospels, one of the earliest known books of scripture written on the island of Britain, was written at the abbey. The significance of Lindisfarne made Aidan’s position in British history essential, especially for a chronicler like Bede, to whom the early writings of Lindisfarne would be an important legacy. In fact, in his introduction Bede credits his account of Saint Cuthbert to a “[*Vita*] already compiled by the brethren of the Church of Lindisfarne” (Preface). Cuthbert is himself incredibly significant to Bede: as a Celtic descendent of Aidan’s tradition, Cuthbert nevertheless practices Catholic Easter, and is used by Bede to pull even Irish Christians into his united Roman Catholic vision of Britain.

Bede writes extensively on Cuthbert. The future bishop is trained at Lindisfarne, but after the Synod of Whitby, and so he upheld the correct Easter tradition. Cuthbert eventually also becomes the bishop of Lindisfarne. In describing Cuthbert’s training, Bede explains that the saint was initially trained by the Abbot Eata, the bishop of Melrose abbey, where he rose to prior and then preached and taught in that region, distinguishing himself. Eata becomes a bishop and is moved to Lindisfarne, and brings Cuthbert with him in order to instruct the Lindisfarne clergy “both in his official capacity as prior and by his personal example” (4.27). Making Cuthbert an instructive figure emphasizes his exceptional nature as a clergy member - like Aidan, Cuthbert is mostly distinguished by his extreme piety and kindness as a teacher, although he also performs miracles. Bede explains that this is an ancient tradition where the bishop would reside at Lindisfarne with his “household”, meaning attendant clergy from his previous abbey. Bede says,

“For Aidan, first Bishop of Lindisfarne, himself a monk, brought monks with him and established the regular life there. The blessed Father Augustine is known to have done the same earlier in Kent, which is shown in the letter addressed to him by the most reverend Pope Gregory” (4.27).

This explanation connects Cuthbert’s arrival at Lindisfarne with the legacy of Aidan and with St. Augustine, whom Bede credits as establishing the first church in Britain, in Kent (1.27), as well as setting up an early system of rules and norms for the English church. Bede links Augustine’s system with Pope Gregory in Rome, who also sent Augustine; the letter which Bede mentions is a long list of instructions sent from Gregory to Augustine, which answers questions from Augustine that clarify the doctrine and structure of the English church moving forward (1.23). By connecting the justification for Cuthbert’s transfer with traditions established by Augustine, following instruction from the Pope himself, Bede establishes the Celtic-trained Cuthbert as part of a tradition harkening to the Roman originator of formal English Christianity, Augustine, as well as the traditions of Rome. Including Aidan on this list suggests that he, too, is part of this lineage inherited from Rome, even though Aidan’s Celtic practice would not have originated with Augustine, but with much earlier Celtic Christians.

However, the Celtic Cuthbert is portrayed as part of a Roman legacy, partly because for Bede the major distinction between the Celtic and Roman practice was the Easter issue, which at this point had been mostly resolved in the favor of Rome’s practice. The focus on Easter is of course a simplification of two traditions which varied in many ways, but simplifying the difference in this way allows Bede to create the illusion of a Britain unified under Roman Catholic practice. At the Synod of Whitby the division is essentially solved, and thus preceding Celtic monks like Cuthbert are portrayed as part of Bede’s Roman Catholic tradition. This conversion also occurs retroactively, in a sense. With Cuthbert, the Celtic leader of the Celtic-founded Lindisfarne, as part of Augustine’s legacy, the true legacy of Lindisfarne is converted to the Roman Catholic tradition. Hence the listing of Aidan after Augustine. Bede knows that Aidan is an important precursor to Cuthbert, both as a founder of Lindisfarne and because he firmly established Irish Christianity to Britain. But if Cuthbert follows the Roman Catholic Easter, this makes him part of the Roman Catholic tradition to Bede, and therefore Augustine is his spiritual ancestor. One solution to this paradox would simply be to acknowledge the dual lineage of clerical influence in Britain. But Bede cannot do this, as his unifying narrative for Britain is dependent upon the Roman Catholic tradition as the one truth. Therefore, Aidan is considered an honorary Roman Catholic monk, who, again, was true to God as best he could be, and could not be blamed for being taught the wrong beliefs.

The conclusion of Bede’s *Historia* brings the emphasis back to the Easter Controversy and Rome. Chapters 21 and 22 are essentially the conclusion of the narrative: chapter 24 is a summary of current events when the book was written; the final chapter is a summary of the entire chronology of the book, and a personal note which serves about the same function as the flaps of a book jacket, giving a very brief author biography and a compilation of Bede’s works. In Chapter 21, Nechtan, King of the Picts, becomes convinced through what Bede claims is his own study, with no influence, that the Celtic Easter practices which the Picts have been following since their conversion by Columba are incorrect, and he “asked help from the English people, whom he knew to have based their practice long previously on the pattern of the holy Roman apostolic Church” (5.21). Nechtan sends Abbot Ceolfrid, who Bede calls a “successor of the above mentioned Benedict”, a message requesting a “letter of guidance that would help him refute those who presume to keep Easter at the wrong time” (5.21). Ceolfrid responds with a long letter giving a detailed argument for the timing of Easter, in which he quotes both the Old and New Testament as proof for the correct method of determining dates. He also addresses the justification for the Catholic tonsure. In this justification, Ceolfrid goes out of his way to point out that an incorrect tonsure is not damning, but that the proper tonsure is better. Ceolfrid references Adamnan, a Celtic monk who wore the Celtic tonsure, which Ceolfrid claims is based upon the cut of Simon, whom Peter cursed, rather than that of Peter, the saint who founded the church, and wore a Catholic tonsure. Ceolfrid uses this example to show that he still considers Adamnan wise and holy despite this. He even claims that observing Catholic practice converted Adamnan to the Catholic method of Easter, which he attempted to preach upon his return to Scotland.

In this letter, Ceolfrid’s position parallels that of Bede. The Celts are seen as pious, but flawed, because they do not adhere to the legitimate Catholic legacy which Ceolfrid represents as a successor to Benedict - most likely the Benedict mentioned here is Benedict Biscop, whose pupils included Ceolfrid and Bede himself. King Nechtan exclaims greatly over the enlightenment of this letter, and establishes the Catholic Easter and practice among all his clergy. Bede writes, “the reformed nation was glad to be placed under the direction of Peter, the most blessed Prince of the Apostles, and secure under his protection” (5.22). The Catholic teaching is seen as gladly accepted as a means of “direction of Peter”, a guideline with an apostolic origin. It is the exact structure, the specific way of keeping tonsure and the specific justifications for the timing of Easter, which link the Roman Catholic customs to the divine words of scripture. The specificity of these traditions gives deepened legitimacy to religious practice, and strengthens the unification of those who practice Catholicism, regardless of the secular divisions which existed in Britain at the time. Bede repeatedly argues for these specific traditions, and against the Celtic variations, to promote this unity and suppress any divisive sentiment.

There is a clear bias present in the *Ecclesiastical History* towards the Catholic church of Rome. This results in a narrative which makes the Roman Church the true spiritual core of Britain, which is important for Bede because his narrative is both ecclesiastical and historical. The tactics by which Bede constructs history can be broken down using relatively modern historiography. Hayden White notes that history is composed of a construct that can be most simply boiled down to chronicle and story, followed by plot, argument, and ideology (my description is somewhat reductive, but I believe remains accurate). White’s “ideology” category is more significant to modern histories, but is not as applicable to medieval texts, nor really relevant to my argument, so I will not address it. Chronicle is simply the ordering of events as they occurred. This is less of an issue for medieval historians, as they are not particularly concerned with temporal accuracy, and chronicle is often sacrificed in favor of the other categories. Story is the ordering of events by cause and effect, in order to make a “discernible beginning, middle, and end” (White 7). This is, again, a fairly basic historical concept, and one with which medieval histories are less concerned. Although medieval history strives for tangible, real life causation, often causal connections are drawn where they do not exist, or events are added and fictionalized to fill out the story.

Plot, or “emplotment”, is the type of story which is created by the ordering of events. Bede’s history follows a general plot in which Britain begins as a land of chaotic conflict, and is civilized and ordered by means of religious organization, and sometimes secular organization with religious motivation or aid. This classifies the *Historia* as the type of plot which White calls a “Comedy”, in which humanity is able to reconcile chaos by means of the unification of conflicting forces; in this case, the social chaos of the many disparate and often warring groups of Britain are pacified and unified by the power of the English church. Although it is sometimes secular powers which are required to bring conflict to heel, as in the case of Oswald, these powers are ultimately directed by the Church and the divine power from which the Church takes direction. The form of Bede’s fourth part, the “argument”, falls into an Organicist framework, which sees individual events as part of a larger overarching phenomenon. White remarks that this framework is used by many nationalist historians, with the end result of many small historical events building something of much greater importance (White 15). The Organicist argument is a perfect summary of how Bede ties together the lives of disparate saints. The more Catholic Cuthbert becomes the culmination of the earlier Celtic saints, and thus can be used to obscure and justify their roles as still contributing to the Catholic nation of Britain. This is the essence of Bede’s structure, which through a series of disparate accounts of saints’ lives and passions, as well as church records, creates a greater sense of Britain as a nation under the divine will, which ultimately has an identity as a nation of specific Christian thought and organization.

Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* is a history following a Comedic plot which, like *Historia Regum Britanniae*, attempts to unify the fractious, often warring British people under one narrative. Bede uses a tactic of having many powerful unifying figures, an Organicist strategy by which both clergy and kings attempt to unite the country through a divine calling. His unification of Britain does not occur through amalgamation, but the elimination of division by the institution of a homogenous belief system founded in Roman Catholicism. This is affected by an emphasis on Roman Catholic foundational figures as the more important originators of the Christian tradition in Britain, and the depiction of Christian rule as the periods of true unification and prosperity in the country. The main issue of this unity through Christianity is that British Christianity had roots in both Roman and Celtic traditions, with Bede mainly taking umbrage with the latter over the problem of the Easter heresy. This means that Bede frequently manipulates the narratives of Celtic Saints in order to make them appear more in line with Roman Catholic belief, by aligning them with Roman Catholic figures and de-emphasizing their non-doctrinal beliefs, or by minimizing their importance, in order to eliminate any divisions within the traditions which he is using to create a singular Christian nation.

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1. Hereafter I will use the term English to refer to the Angles. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)