

"Bede or *Beowulf*? Constructing the narrative in the making of early medieval England."

[title slide one]

In 927, King Æthelstan of Wessex and Mercia, conquered the Scandinavian kingdom of the Northumbrians centred on York and at a meeting on 12th July at Eamontbridge, by Penrith on the Cumberland-Westmorland border (the frontier between the kingdoms of Strathclyde and England), confirmed peace with pledges and oaths with the chief non-English kings ruling Britain, having previously received the submission of the English king of northern Northumbria, based at Bamburgh. These kings included Hywel, king of the West Welsh, Constantine, king of the Scots and Owain, king of Gwent. At, or soon after Eamontbridge, Æthelstan's court poet Peter, wrote to the Queen Mother and announced Æthelstan's creation of England:

"...he now rules with this

England made whole..."

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Æthelstan called himself *rex totius Britanniae* and the kings of the Scots, Cumbrians, North and South Welsh, the Archbishop of York, Northumbrian bishops, witnessed his charters; his coins asserted grand styles such as *rex Anglorum* ('king of the English'), and *rex totius Albionis* ('king of the whole of Britain.').

The new kingdom that Æthelstan proclaimed in 927 was to become the 1000-year realm - which is headed by his collateral descendants today in 2023. However, it came under immediate threat when a Celtic alliance of the kings of the Scots, Strathclyde Welsh, the Picts,

the King of Dublin and Viking leaders from Ireland and the Western Isles, and Northumbrians all came together, their intention to restore the kingdom of Northumbria in York, as a buffer zone between the Scots and south English. They met Æthelstan in battle at a place called Brunanburh, in 937, perhaps the greatest battle since the English first came to Britain, remembered decades later as the 'Great War,' - among the dead were two of Æthelstan's cousins. It was recalled lavishly in the contemporary poem, the *Battle of Brunanburh*:

Here King Æthelstan, leader of warriors

Ring-giver of men, and also his brother,

The æthling Edmund, struck life-long glory

In strife round Brunanburh, clove the shield-wall

Hacked the war-lime, with hammers' leavings...

Professor Michael Wood suggests that the location of the battle was possibly at Wendun, or 'Went Hill'; the River Went was an important boundary stream, the frontier of the Northumbria/Mercia and which crossed the vital Roman road to York between Doncaster and Castleford, near the present day A1.

After this stunning victory, Æthelstan made his theoretical claims become a reality. His grand designs reached beyond England; he was an imperialist who looked to Europe for inspiration to model his kingship on and he has been called an English Charlemagne. Æthelstan's half-sisters bound him in a web of continental marriage alliances - his nephew was the Carolingian French-king Louis IV, his brother-in-law the German Otto I.

Æthelstan's proclamation in 927 was no bolt from the blue. The nation state was not acquired, as was later claimed of the British Empire, in a fit of absent-mindedness. It was the consequence of two centuries of cultural wish-fulfilment but was by no means a foregone

conclusion. Like most revolutions, it came about with the power of the pen, not the sword and was ultimately enabled by existentialist forces.

To begin with, Æthelstan was never supposed to be king in the first place. He was something of an outsider, and like all outsiders, was in a hurry to prove his place in history. In 924, Æthelstan was 'chosen as king by the Mercians,' where his earliest extant charter is witnessed solely by Mercian witnesses (he is styled *rex Anglorum*, king of Anglia). A half-brother, Ælfward was initially backed by Winchester in Wessex, but his death cleared the way for Æthelstan.

Æthelstan was crowned king of the 'Angles' and 'Saxons' at Kingston-on-Thames, the boundary between the two old kingdoms, using a revised coronation *ordo* that specifically referred to the two peoples, and Archbishop Æthelhelm of Canterbury used new regalia: a crown, a ring, sword and rod of office in what was probably the first coronation of an English king; Æthelstan is the first king to appear crowned on coins, too.

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The Wessex/Mercian dynamic in early medieval England cannot be underestimated. Æthelstan's coronation in 924 was a symbol of unification between two quite distinct regions which had been kingdoms only a generation earlier. To understand how England came to be, we must go back much further than Æthelstan, back to his famous grandfather, King Alfred of Wessex and to the myths and legends of the migratory age in sub-Roman Britain, three centuries before.

Æthelstan's grandfather, Alfred of Wessex, is so much more famous than Æthelstan. This is not because he was the first king of England as is often erroneously believed, but because he was the last surviving English king during the Viking invasions. The Viking army had established themselves at York 868-9 and Thetford 869-70. Edmund, king of East Anglia was captured and

brutally killed; in 870 they were in Reading and by 871 the Vikings had overthrown the ancient kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia.

Enter Alfred, 'England's 'darling,' who became king of the West Saxons in 871 at this 'darkest hour.' After many battles, Alfred 'made peace' with the Vikings, in that he bought them off. There were more treaties in 876-7 and payments of tribute and the Vikings settled the area of the 'Five Boroughs' (Lincoln, Leicester, Nottingham, Stamford and Derby) and land around Northampton, Bedford and London.

But in 878 a winter raid on the royal estate of Chippenham almost captured Alfred. It was Christmas, they were under a truce, and under the strict observance of the Twelve Days festivities. Another Viking army landed at Devon, possibly with the intention to take Alfred - but they both failed. Alfred was taken, if not by the Vikings, but certainly by surprise and he fled into the Somerset marshes, with only a 'small troop' where he fortified Athelney.

Bishop Asser's near contemporary *Life of King Alfred* describes the ignominy of the escape from Chippenham in graphic detail:

'King Alfred with his small band of nobles and also with certain soldiers and thegns, was leading a restless life in great distress amid the woody and marshy places of Somerset. He had nothing to live on except what he could forage by frequent raids, either secretly or even openly, from the Vikings as we all as from the Christians who had submitted to the Vikings' authority.'

The brutal reality was that this final invasion of Wessex was aimed at no less than the complete conquest of Wessex and there was no inevitability about Alfred's survival either, after the escape from Chippenham in 878. But in an astonishing turn-around in May 878, Alfred met his army at Egbert's Stone east of Selwood, defeating the Vikings in battle at his royal manor at Edington in Wiltshire. Alfred besieged Chippenham and forced their surrender; they gave hostages to Alfred, but this time he gave none in return; three weeks later Guthrum

came to Aller (near Athelney) and Alfred, a true son of Rome, baptised rather than executed Guthrum.

At this point we must pause the narrative, dramatic though it is. The problem with Alfred's reign is that almost all of the written sources may have originated with Alfred himself or his immediate entourage, including Asser's *Life* and the famous 'Anglo-Saxon' Chronicles. If that desperate winter and spring of 878 was a '1940' moment, then Alfred anticipates by over 1,000 years the other great 'saviour' of England, Winston Churchill, who was fond of saying: 'I shall leave it to history *but remember that I shall be one of the historians.*' Churchill as historian had access to official secrets and confidential cabinet papers no other historian had, putting him like Alfred, at the centre of not only the politics, but the writing of the politics, too. The Viking voice has no contemporary or near contemporary written record; the sagas date from the twelfth century leaving us only with English sources.

Asser's Life of Alfred is the earliest known biography of an Early English king, written in 893, partly to strengthen the English resistance. The story of the manuscript is itself instructive of how history is made as well as written. The surviving manuscript was dated to c1000, salvaged by John Leland from the destruction of the Reformation in the 1530s and was destroyed in the fire of 1731 at Ashburnham House - luckily a facsimile was made in 1722. Asser was a Welsh priest from St David's, who didn't meet Alfred until 885. Asser was writing under the influence of Alfred himself. He styles Alfred as 'king of the Angul Saxons' throughout, the Vikings are pagans and the English as Christians, thereby perhaps setting out the Holy War. It is at the point of Alfred's desperate days in the Somerset marches that the legend of Alfred and the cakes (from the late tenth century *Life of St Neot*) was interpolated by Archbishop Parker, who got hold of the manuscript of Asser's *Life* sometime after Leland's death in the 1560s and obviously thought that if Alfred hadn't burnt the cakes then he should have done. The myth reveals how desperate the situation for Alfred was and how this was becoming legend only a century later; the story snowballed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the legend gradually becoming 'fact.'

Was Alfred and Wessex as 'alone' as his sources make out? Other evidence throws some light on what was going on. Coinage and marriage show evidence of Wessex-Mercian alliances in the mid-ninth century, an ongoing policy. The great heathen army pushed Wessex and Mercia into closer alliance, and in 868 Alfred married Ælhwit, of Mercian royal descent, and coinage again evidenced the alliance. A charter of 875 given by King Ceolwulf II Mercia, demonstrates how he was accepted as king of Mercia (*rex Merciorum*) by his subjects since it was witnessed by his bishops and ealdormen, but Alfred's *Chronicle* dismisses Ceolwulf as a "foolish thegn" who had been granted Mercia by the invaders. But the Watlington Hoard (in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford), discovered in 2015, includes 13 examples of the rare 'Two Emperors' penny which shows Alfred and Ceolwulf seated side by side below a winged figure of Victory or an angel, suggestive of another alliance between Wessex and Mercia - dated between 878-879 the very moment in time Alfred and his band supposedly stood 'alone.'

It cannot be disputed that after the battle of Edington everything changed. In 879 the Vikings shared out the land in East Anglia, the last stage of settlement following Northumbria in 876 and eastern Mercia 877 but Alfred's victory discouraged a third Viking army from invading Wessex, which sailed for the Continent where it remained until 892. The treaty with Guthrum, made between 886-890 was agreed and confirmed with oaths by King Alfred, King Guthrum, the 'councillors' of the English race and all the people in East Anglia; the borders were up from the Thames to the Lea, to Bedford, then up the Ouse to Watling Street. This was the limit of Alfred's success; he had reconquered and restored the Wessex-Mercian hegemony (including Kent) of the mid-ninth century. But it was not England as we know it.

Alfred was certainly aware of Cicero's maxim, 'if you want peace, prepare for war,' but in addition to building dozens of fortified towns, or burghs, and establishing military service, Alfred knew that the great war against the pagans had to be won by the faith. It is at this point that the fusion of Christianity and Englishness really takes off and to achieve this, Alfred turned to the greatest written work in early medieval England, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed by the venerable monk in around 730, long before the Vikings arrived, and written in Northumbria. Alfred appreciated that he could mobilise his people by

faith and by their race. He had the History translated from Bede's Latin to Old English and it is in this translation that the word *Engla-lond* first appears. Bede's original version was cut by a third, to form a streamlined account of the arrival and conversion of the peoples who became the English. It appears to have been quite widely copied and was designed to be read aloud. The abbreviations and translation into English gave it a national status rather than an ecclesiastical history.

Bede's translated *History* and Alfred's *Chronicles* make much use of the word *Angelcynn* which was defined primarily as 'the English race, the English people,' - but not necessarily 'England.' This was a deliberate design by his court scholars to promote the racial superiority and just cause of the *gens Anglorum*, in Bede's original words. The Vikings – or *vikingr* to give it its contemporary word, meaning 'raider' were portrayed not only as pagans – *pagani* – but also thieves, the worst of all crimes in early medieval society. Alfred successfully turned a war between competing faiths into a war between the just 'English' and the 'other,' darker forces of evil. It was unique to his time and uniquely powerful, but it not original, since Bede had done this before.

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It is to Bede that we now turn. Bede was a monk who lived in the late seventh and early eighth century at a time of immense intellectual achievement, the time of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the high tide of the Christian faith following the conversions of the English and before the dark age of heathen invasions. Bede wrote his magisterial *Ecclesiastical History* both as a lesson and as a warning to his contemporary rulers, dedicating it to King Ceolwulf of Northumbria. Bede wrote of an English people well before an English kingdom existed; his models were the Chosen People from the scriptures, the children of Israel and so the English people was a literary construct, and a pious hope. Bede's conception of the 'Angles' was that of the Canterbury church and of its papal founder but his vision of England was that of God's dealings with a Chosen People – the *gens Anglorum* were a people of the Covenant as much as the Israelites of the Old Testament.

The *History* although a church history concerned with the English conversion to Christianity has gone down as the first 'history' of the English. It is immensely detailed, records dozens of kings, battles and dates from the arrival of the English in around 400 AD into Bede's own time in 700 AD. It forms the basis of the Anglo Saxon Chronicles started by Alfred, backdated to the English arrival. It is authoritative and factual. It is chronological and firmly centred upon dates. It can be said to be the foundation text of all later histories of England, reference books and school textbooks.

The problem is, that Bede made a fair bit of it up. About a quarter of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is devoted to miracle stories – performed by saints or by God directly and which were expected in an age of faith; the very conversion of the English people was a consequence of divine intervention. Bede's intention was not to write *the* true law of history but *a* true law using oral traditions which may have been factually suspect, but which recorded a truth which ought to have been true. What did not make it into Bede's history was, in effect, no longer a part of English history.

The only other insular narrative source for early English history in the period c380-890 is the monk Gildas, possibly living in Cirencester, who wrote a short moralising sermon on the sins of the British in around 540; that's it until the late ninth century 'Anglo-Saxon' Chronicles begin, written at King Alfred's behest to narrate the rise of Wessex and the defeat of the Vikings by himself. There are no independent 'witnesses,' and no lost sources for this time that the Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the Anglo-Saxon *Chronicles* were based upon.

No doubt Bede based his work on letters, charters, hagiographies and oral memories but he decided to tidy up the mess of the post Roman era and invent the origin myth of the English in those "dark ages" after Rome. According to Bede, and copied by the later Anglo Saxon Chronicles, and thereafter very history book into the 20th century, the English arrived in 449 AD, a preposterously specific date. To personalise the founding origin, Bede gave us the

fictitious Saxons Hengist and Horsa (which means 'Gelding' and 'Horse', that is, lesser heroes or gods who were descended from Woden) an origin myth not unlike the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. The late ninth century Anglo Saxon *Chronicle* sets the date 449 in stone but has Hengest and Horsa land at Ebba's Creek, near the Roman fort of Richborough, Kent, one of the 'Saxon shore forts.' From there, the English settlement moves east to west suggestive of a concerted campaign where the natives could not hold off the Early English advance forever, so at the battle of Dyrham in 577, Gloucestershire, the British kings of Coinmail, Condidan and Farinmail were killed and Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath captured.

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'Britain' was a theatre of many kingdoms. We should not assume, therefore, that the larger kingdoms that emerged in the 700s were either inevitable or that the single 'kingdom of England' that emerged in the 900s was going to happen, either. Until the ninth century, no clear mechanism for royal succession existed. The Northumbrian over-kingdom was constructed from the kingdoms of the Bernicians and Deirans. Bede also us how Mercia was divided between southern and northern Mercia. The Tribal Hidage dates from c700 and lists kingdoms of Wessex, Sussex, Kent and smaller units which may have been lost kingdoms – the *Gyrwe* of the Fens or the *Arosætna* near Redditch, Worcestershire, the *Hwicce* in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, with titles like *sub-regulus* and *regalis*.

A grant by Uhtred, sub-king of the Hwicce, to Æthelmund, ealdorman and 'prefect' of King Æthelbald of the Mercians, dates to 770. The grant includes Ealdred, also 'sub-king' of the Hwicce, in the witness list.

Christianity may even have survived in the Hwicce region after the Romans departed and the British Christians may have converted the incoming pagan Anglo-Saxons; the earliest church in Worcester, St Helen's, may have served as the seat of a British bishop. The continuity of salt production and of Christian practices and possible existence of ecclesiastical authority, suggest that the Hwicce region was ordered and stable before the coming of the Mercians,

and possibly a British state possessing Droitwich as its own unique resource and so the Mercians assumed control of British authority as well as British territory. A grant of King Edgar to his thegn Æthwold at Kineton, Warwickshire, in 969, shows the boundary distinctions between Mercia and the Hwicce still existed. The rule of the sub-kings of Surrey, the South Saxons, Kent and the East Saxons was not finally ended until 825-8 when Ecgberht, king of the Wessex, relieved the Mercian over-kings of their south-eastern kingdoms, helped by the Viking assaults on Kent in the 790s.

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Bede created the written narrative of the repopulation of post-Roman Britain - King Æthelfrith of Northumbria was celebrated by Bede as “having first exterminated or conquered the natives.” Bede wrote of the *exterminum gentis* of the Britons by the English who he believed were God’s new chosen people. Bede sugars the pill by inventing the origin myth of the Britons themselves as incomers from “Amorica” (modern day Brittany) suggesting that since the Britons were immigrants, and their replacement by the English was a therefore natural racial progression but with an evangelical purpose (although he adds, with classic Bedan caution ‘so it is said.’). According to Bede, St Augustine landed at Thanet in 597 to begin the conversions of the pagan English which is where the mythical Hengest and Horsa in supposedly arrived, too, thus combining the origins of nationalism with Christianity.

Are we looking at mass migration and enslavement of the British natives by the English masters, or, more extreme, are we looking at the genocide of the British? By a process of actual slaughter alongside or followed by an apartheid system that restricted the native British to resources and status this was in effect, Professor David Dumville argues, genocide. Assimilation, flight or slavery were the only methods of survival when faced with invasion and colonisation. Bede may not have meant literal ‘extermination’ since it could also translate ‘to drive off’. There was southward emigration to western Gaul which may have continued for

centuries (to Brittany, or 'Little Britain') and to northern Iberia (Britoña in Galicia, Spain) and widespread individual settlements in post-Roman Gaul along the Atlantic coast.

Immigrants from northern Europe to Britain arrived in smaller numbers than previously thought, possibly as low as 6.2% net immigration in the period 430-730, that is 175,000 people in a population 2.6 million; this is in stark contrast to the 90% replacement of the gene pool by the Beaker people 4,000 years ago. A large rowing boat found in the Jutish bog deposit of Nydam dated to c400 suggests how they travelled and with up to 200,000 migrations over 100 years this is only around 2000 a year, between 100-200 boats of the Nydam type. Calculations suggest this would take 38 years, during May-August, using 20 boats in continuous transport. The marked increase in finds and cemeteries in the second half of the fifth century implies that the migrations were a process, rather than the single event we see in Bede and the later Chronicle narrative.

The proportion of DNA in modern central/southern England inherited from the Saxons suggests a range of 10-40%, 'clearly excluding the possibility of long-term Saxon replacement'; 35% of them originated from north-west Germany, Denmark another key place of origin. A study of the whole-genome sequences from individuals excavated close to Cambridge proposes that on average the contemporary East English population derives 38% of its ancestry from Early English migrations, with close ancestry to modern-day Dutch and Danish populations (and samples from a Kent a similar percentage), overall 20-40% of the ancestry of modern Britons, with a higher percentage in the east of England.

The cemetery of Berinsfield (Dorchester, Oxfordshire) in use from the late fifth-early seventh centuries suggests that Germanic immigrants and their descendants lived together with native Britons in the same social unit but did not intermarry, implying status differences, even prohibition of intermarriage, something we see in the early English law codes of the late seventh century.

A very different situation occurred in Warwickshire at Stretton-on-Fosse (up the road from here of course) where cemeteries demonstrate Romano-British and Early English concurrent use and thereby some form of interaction. The Germanic males were taller than the Romano-British males and it seems that here the incoming males took control of the local community and married native women, given continuity of textile techniques and epigenetic traits. But this type of settlement was much less frequent than the kin group model seen at Berinsfield.

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The idea that the migrations progressed from east to west like a military campaign needs challenging. Migration follows particular routes with established communities the initial destination rather than flooding a wide area. In England, the river Thames and Trent play a crucial part in the settlements. Rather than an east/west migration, a north/south divide seems more likely, with pockets of established immigrants since the late fourth century well before the legions departed. The cores of the later kingdoms of Wessex, Mercia and Northumberland all lie on the border between the lowland/highland prosperous zone of Roman Britain; Mercia means 'border dwellers' and Deira, the southern half of Northumbria, derives from the British Deur. This central-eastern settlement of the English almost exactly mirrors the wealthiest region, the 'Villa zone' of Roman Britain.

We have seen how the paucity of the historical record has been supplemented by archaeology and indeed, recent scientific DNA analysis, which itself is under constant review. Bede wrote that he had sought to put on record 'those events which *I believe* to be worthy of remembrance...' echoing Isidore of Seville's words: 'History is a branch of grammar because whatever is worthy of memory is committed to writing.' But what of those events not thought to be worthy of remembrance?

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There is another story of the English, a tale told word-of-mouth from generation to generation for perhaps three centuries before committed to writing. It was a story of heroes and kings

from the old country in the days before the migration. The hero, Beowulf, might even be part-human, part animal – a wolf, or bear – his name whispered in dark corners of the halls in awe and fear; so mighty were his powers that he ripped the monster Grendel from limb from limb before vanquishing its mother under the water. He reigned for fifty years before fighting a dragon to the death, before being buried in a ship under a mound with all his treasure. Significantly, nowhere else is the name ‘Beowulf’ found in early English documents or literature.

Beowulf is the longest epic poem in Old English, more than 3,000 lines long, and survives as a single manuscript – and only just, since it nearly perished in the same fire that destroyed Asser’s *Life of Alfred* in 1731. It is a work of charisma, a fantasy of hot-blooded heroes and monsters in stark contrast to Bede but in its own way, informs us of historical facts as well as adding colour to the artefacts. The poem is the living, breathing world that was excavated at Sutton Hoo in 1939. It is littered with references to warriors, armour, helmets, halls, swords, cups, golden neck-ring, objects and gifts. *Beowulf* is a multi-layered depiction of the heroic life contained in a living tradition of sung poetry. History in this way resides in stories and songs, not textual records and annual chronicles, where the sung past is contiguous to the present; the repeated phrase in the poem ‘on that day of this life’ suggests the relevance of the vanished age to the living one. It is an historical narrative, but it is not linear and there are no ‘dates’: there are memories of the glorious warrior past, fame and glory with flashbacks and an irony about the destruction to come. The poem displays a deeply absorbed sense of the myth of the ancestral migration from the Continent as the founding and defining event which gave the Germanic tribes a shared identity.

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In *Beowulf*, friends and kinsmen flocked to Hrothgar’s ranks and he built a mead-hall, a throne-room where he would dispense his ‘God-given goods to young and old.’ This ‘hall of halls,’ was named Heorot with gables ‘wide and high.’ After Beowulf kills Grendel, and then Grendel’s mother, the hall was rebuilt in even greater splendour with gold threaded hangings

and the scene is set for feasting, drinking and gift-giving. Beowulf is given a gold standard, breast-mail and helmet. This 'bling,' is exactly the sort of treasure found at Sutton Hoo.

Beowulf rules for fifty years until he must fight his final monster- a dragon. The poem *Beowulf* is devoted to the freeing of human habitations from the ravages of supernatural creatures that inhabit the fens and from a dragon residing in a prehistoric burial-mound. The audience would not have felt these themes fantastic or trivial. Monsters were there to advise, warn and teach the audience and Old English literature abounds with dragons, serpents, giants, demons, dwarfs and elves. Significantly, Grendel lives on the margins; he is a 'border-walker,' condemned among the kin of Cain, and who bears 'God's ire.' He is a cannibal, haunting the margins, among the 'giants and elves and orcs'. Grendel was the outsider and his place on the borders of civilised life reflects the understanding of how landscape functioned in post-Roman Britain.

And he was real to the people of the time of *Beowulf*. In the boundaries of a charter dated 739, there is a reference to 'grendeles pyt,' and in half a dozen other charters, too, Grendel is mentioned. In Derbyshire and Worcestershire there is a Drakelow ('dragon's hill' from the Old English *draca*); Wormhill near Cambridge derives from *wyrm*, the Old English for serpent or dragon.

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Beowulf's final – and fatal - battle with the dragon is deeply associated with the power of the landscape, for the dragon guards a hoard in a 'stone-roofed barrow' which is disturbed and rouses the dragon to a fury. This warning to tomb-raiders illustrates how past peoples were ever present in the minds of Beowulf's time and reminds us how the landscape was littered with Roman temples, Neolithic long barrows, Bronze Age barrows and Iron Age trackways. The Germanic immigrants reused barrows and pre-historical monuments in the sixth-eighth centuries, as physical expressions of land claims and links to ancestors, giving sense to a landscape that the newcomers did not find empty. There was a cultural remoteness of the

pre-conversion Early English from the Roman remains in the English landscape. This was still in a landscape dotted with the remains of the Roman stone world, re-used in later centuries but in the migration period they would have been derelict places of awe and wonder, referred to directly by Bede and more obliquely in vernacular poetry, most famously *The Ruin* which describes the wondrous wall-stones, halls and baths (it could be Roman Bath) with that phrase *enta geweorc* (the works of giants) which also appears in *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*.

The loss of connection to the vernacular tribal past in gaining written laws, chronicles, and a sweep of history from creation to salvation means that people no longer participate in the remembered past or its transmission which makes *Beowulf* such a vital link to that tribal past.

The Old English poems have none of the certainty of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* - rather a grief for those who have gone before, the ghosts of the vanished heroes in the ruins of the past. They consider not only the transient nature of life on earth but the memory of migration and pilgrimage from across the sea, (*Beowulf's* 'whale-road'), a reminder of the cultural identity of the Early English as immigrants from an old land. Bede saw the ruins all around him as reminders not of judgement but of past success and how the Christian church could restore and regenerate.

Where we have the heroic death and dramatic funeral of the fictional Beowulf, we also have a detailed description of Bede's own deathbed. The scholar's death is as heroic as the warrior's. Beowulf was buried with his weapons, but Bede dies with his pen in his hand. Cuthbert the deacon, disciple of Bede and later Abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow writes to Abbot Cuthwin with news of Bede's passing on 25th May, 735. Taken ill before Easter, Bede continued his prayers and teaching until the end, weeks later, even though breathless, in pain and with swollen feet. Bede urges his pupil, a boy named Wilberht, to keep writing, saying (like any good schoolmaster does): 'It is not hard. Take your pen and mend it, and then write fast.' Even into the evening, when he had shared out his few treasures – spices, incense and cloths – and bade a tearful farewell to the fellow monks, he tells the boy Wilberht to finish the last sentence, which he does, whereupon Bede sits on the floor of his cell, singing, before breathing his last.

Bede's influence was immediate and enormous. Archbishop Egbert of York was Bede's friend and former pupil at Jarrow – he and his successor Æthelbert built up a school of York on the model of Jarrow. Their pupil was Alcuin who became director of the Palace School of Charlemagne. Bede's books were copied up to the age of printing, with a degree of accuracy usually reserved for the Bible. Over ninety manuscripts written or owned in Early English which contain works by Bede survive, 10% of all manuscripts from this period. Five copies of the *Ecclesiastical History* survive from the eighth century - eleven copies survive from ninth century France and Germany. William of Malmesbury, one of the key post-Conquest historians drew extensively on Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* in the early twelfth century.

Conclusion

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And so it is Bede, not *Beowulf*, that sets the tone for the triumphant narrative of the English and their manifest destiny. To conclude with Aethelstan's kingship of all England and his stunning victory at Brunnanburh, where the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle boasts that

Since Angles and Saxons

Came here from the east

sought out Britain over the broad ocean,

Warriors eager for fame, proud war-smiths

overcame the Welsh, seized the country.

The migration myth of conquest was repeated by Chaucer over four centuries later, in the Tale of the Man at Law:

A pagan army and a pagan fleet
Had made their conquest of this northern shore,
To Wales had therefore fled a Christian core
Of ancient Britons dwelling in our isle...

And from there, it is only a short leap to the most brilliant but mercurial poetry of our local bard, William Shakespeare, who in the play *Richard II* has John of Gaunt claim:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This fortress built by Nature for herself....
.....This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England...

The reality though, was not this concocted tale of alternative facts, but small boats, memories and migration, songs of the old country and assimilation into the land that those migrants now inhabited, which they would one day - by chance rather than by design - come to know as 'England.'

Thank you