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## Oswald of Northumbria: Pagan Hero, Christian Saint

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Oswald of Northumbria: Pagan Hero, Christian Saint

Caleb Lyon

## Saint Oswald: Christian Saint, Pagan Ancestor

Saint Oswald of Northumbria was many things. First a prince, then an exile, later a king and finally a saint. As a ruler he was likely the strongest of his day, reigning as a mighty overlord of the north with influence that may have extended as far south as the territory of the Mercians or even the West Saxons. The broader spread of organized Christianity among the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira is accredited to him, and soon after his death he was revered as a saint by many of the peoples of Britain. Oswald's influence, though great in life, was perhaps even greater in death.

The son of a defeated king, Oswald spent what likely consisted of his most formative years in exile among the Irish and Picts of the kingdom of Dal Riata. It is there he likely became Christian, and as a young man he may have fought for his newfound home during this time. Following the defeat of his father's successors at the hands of the Briton Cadwalla, Oswald returned to claim his kingdom, defeating the Britons with a numerically inferior force and establishing himself as ruler of Bernicia and Deira. Oswald then invited the bishop Aidan to his kingdom to spread the Christian religion and founded the famous monastery of Lindisfarne as his episcopal see. Oswald's rule lasted just short of a decade before he died fighting against the pagan Mercian king, Penda. However, his influence was to continue to spread even after his death.

Oswald was worshipped as a saint and claimed as a source of miracles by many. His veneration was particularly strong in his former kingdom, but over the coming centuries his worship would spread throughout the island of Britain. Æthelflæd, the Lady of Mercia, and her husband Æthelred recovered his remains from the north during their rule of Mercia. Likewise,

King Æthelstan of Wessex claimed him as an ancestor as he moved to expand his control further across the island.

Oswald serves as a fascinating microcosm of the merging of Pagan and Christian traditions in early medieval Anglo-Saxon England. Oswald is simultaneously the great warrior king of the Germanic past and the saintly king of the Christian present and future. He in some ways represents a broader cultural synthesis and is exceedingly valuable to study as a figure of two radically different kinds of kingship. However, most importantly Oswald represents the continuation of the pagan practice of invoking heroes or claiming divine figures as ancestors to reinforce legitimate kingship. Oswald became a new heroic ancestor for those who ruled after him, not just among leaders of Northumbria, but also among kings and nobles across Britain over several centuries.

## 1. Bede and The Saintly Life of Oswald

Early writings on the life of Oswald are scarce. The earliest substantial work detailing his rise to power and rule over what would become Northumbria is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede's depiction of the king and saint is fascinating, providing an image of a lord who is described as holy in life and in death, ruling not only as a figure of great piety, but also at times as a powerful war leader and king in a more traditional Anglo-Saxon mold. However, of more direct consequence is Bede's portrayal of Oswald as a saint. More directly, to Bede Oswald is a saintly king; Oswald is holy and achieves his sainthood before his death as a martyr. Oswald's status as a saint is what helps to make him a heroic figure within Bede's Christian context. While Oswald certainly fills all of the traits associated with a traditional Anglo-Saxon heroic king, he is also portrayed as heroic because of his holiness.

The *Ecclesiastical History* gives us a relatively brief account of Oswald's rise to power, initially omitting any discussion of the saint's boyhood. Immediately preceding Oswald's reign, the rule of Bernicia and Deira was taken by a pair of kings, Osric and Eanfrid, in 633.<sup>1</sup> The two were ineffectual, but this is a secondary crime to their primary failure within Bede's narrative: that they reintroduced the pagan traditions of their predecessors. They left behind Christianity, which had been introduced during the life of Oswald's father.<sup>2</sup> This apostasy is portrayed as a grave moral failing, which Bede indicates is the reason for the Briton Cadwalla's violent conquest of Bernicia and Deira. Osric and Eanfrid's apostasy doomed their kingdoms. The issue of a king's character determining the fate of their kingdom becomes a recurring theme in Bede's discussion of Oswald's rule. As a saintly king in life, Oswald extended the bounds of what would

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<sup>1</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Trans. Leo Sherley-Price, (New York: Penguin Press, 1990), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144.143-144.

become Northumbrian power farther than would be possible under the rule of his failed pagan predecessors.

The failings of Osric and Eanfrid were almost immediately punished by the invasion of their lands by Cadwalla, a British king of Gwynedd who easily overwhelmed them both. The distance of Gwynedd from the seats of both Bernicia and Deira is particularly notable here, as it possibly indicates further Cadwalla's nature as a foreign intruder able to overpower Osric and Eanfrid due to their failings within Bede's narrative. Cadwalla's reign was depicted as both brief and violent.<sup>3</sup> However, from it arose Oswald's rule over Bernicia and Deira. A reversal when compared to the violent deaths of his pagan predecessors, Oswald's rise to power in Bede's account is thanks in part to the military strength that is granted to him because of his faith. Oswald's victory is attributed to intervention from God, granted after the placement of a cross on the battlefield by the king himself.<sup>4</sup> Whereas before Oswald's predecessors were met with military failure against the Britons, he later arises not only as a symbol of military success but also as a figure of resurgent Christianity. If Cadwalla was representative of chaos and the violent punishment of Osric and Eanfrid for their return to paganism, Oswald's piety marked him as a bringer of order. His ascension not only restored Christianity to the then-ravaged kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira, but also later served to unite them under one ruler.

The description of the start of Oswald's battle with Cadwalla is especially notable in how it portrays the young king. In it, Oswald returned to reclaim his throne and rescue his people from the ravaging Cadwalla. Thus, the punishment which accompanies apostasy within the narrative was relieved by Oswald, the bringer of a resurgent Christian faith. By putting his faith in God and asking that his men do the same, Oswald was able to achieve victory for himself and

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<sup>3</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144.

his men over the numerically superior forces of his Briton foe. Success was granted to the king by god, a reward for piety and possibly the loyalty his predecessors lacked to the Christian god. We see a young Oswald acting as an example for his people and exhibiting great personal strength when the cross is raised before the battle with Cadwalla. We are told that “when the cross had been hurriedly made and a hole dug to receive it, the devout king with ardent faith took the cross and placed it in position, holding it upright with his own hands until the soldiers had thrown in the earth and it stood firm.”<sup>5</sup> While such a menial task done by a king is likely meant to display his piety, it also serves to mark Oswald as personally formidable. Presumably holding up an effigy of large enough size it requires multiple men to cement is a great display of physical strength. Through Oswald, Bede associates great physical strength with faith in God; Oswald was strong, in both the personal sense and as a military ruler, because of his piety and status as a holy warrior. In this we also see a link between Oswald’s sanctity and military might; the cross he raises later serves as a catalyst for a portion of the miracles Bede relates to us.

The next section of the *Ecclesiastical History* to discuss the rule of Oswald is perhaps the only section of Bede’s report on his life that mentions his life before the battle with Cadwalla. It is related to us here that Oswald had been exiled and lived among the peoples of Dal Riata during this time.<sup>6</sup> In fact, we have some potential evidence for Oswald’s time spent outside of what would become of Northumbria thanks to the *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, an Irish poem composed in either the eighth or ninth century, in which he may be the named character of “Osalt,” one of three Saxon princes listed in the work.<sup>7</sup> Oswald’s time as an exile brings with it the possible parallels to other heroes. A young heir driven from his home by pagans, Oswald

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<sup>5</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144.

<sup>6</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 146.

<sup>7</sup> Whitley Stokes, *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga = The Destruction of Dá Derga's hostel*, (Paris: Émile Bouillon, 1902), 112, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112124396067>.

later triumphantly returned to claim his kingdom and put down the pagan usurper. It is worth noting that in his return, Oswald somewhat mirrors Bede's description of Hengist and Horsa, the legendary ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons in the British Isles. The two arrive on the island as leaders of a nigh-invincible army, able to defeat the native Britons despite invading from overseas, presumably making them the numerically inferior force in the story.<sup>8</sup> Oswald, despite having been driven from his lands in what would become Northumbria, came from abroad to lead his people against the numerically superior Britons who had come to rule Bernicia and Deira. This fight against the Britons further serves to present Oswald in a positive light not just as a Christian ruler, but also as a great Anglo-Saxon king and warleader traveling from abroad to overcome great odds.

While this brief discussion of the king's past naturally draws the comparison to the actions of the heroic ancestors of the Germanic peoples in England, it also describes the spread of organized Christianity in Northumbria. While Bede tells us that Oswald was not the first king of what would become Northumbria to be converted, the broader spread of the religion is well-attributed to Oswald, who called for the bishop Aidan and granted him Lindisfarne as his see. Fascinatingly, Oswald is depicted as a ruler who spreads the gospel himself, interpreting Aidan's Irish for his ealdormen and thegns.<sup>9</sup> As king Oswald not only supported Christian practices, but is in fact depicted as personally relaying the teachings of God to the most influential nobles of his realms. Bede portrays Oswald's embrace of Christianity as the advent of a flourishing of the lands that would become Northumbria. "Churches were built in many places, and the people flocked to hear the word of God."<sup>10</sup> Many Irish clergymen are described as entering Oswald's

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<sup>8</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 147.



kingdom to proselytize, with both common folk and the nobility instructed on the living of a Christian life.

Alongside the king's promotion of Christianity within his kingdom, Bede begins to attest to the strength such choices brought him and his kingdom. As he discusses the king's piety, for instance, Bede describes Oswald's sphere of influence as encompassing a massive swath of peoples. He tells us that Oswald "brought under his scepter all the peoples and provinces of Britain speaking the four languages, British, Pictish, Irish, and English."<sup>11</sup> We see here Oswald's potential status as a Bretwalda, an overlord of the island of Britain. While Bede does not explicitly use this term, he does list the kings which have held imperium over Britain, which the term refers to.<sup>12</sup> Bede's reference to his overlordship is supported by Adamnan's *Life of Saint Columba*, which describes Oswald as achieving the title of Bretwalda after receiving a vision of Saint Columba and defeating Cadwalla in battle.<sup>13</sup> While the full extent of Oswald's overlordship is difficult to ascertain, from his description as a ruler of all Britain's peoples by Bede and a Bretwalda by Adamnan, it is clear that his control was at least more substantial than his predecessors. His sphere of influence extended at least to Lindsey, as Bede describes the peoples there as ones conquered by Oswald later in *Ecclesiastical History*.<sup>14</sup> We also see Oswald exerting some influence on other Saxons as far away as Wessex, when he served as the godfather in the baptism of the West Saxon king Cynegils and took his daughter in marriage.<sup>15</sup>

Oswald as Bretwalda is particularly interesting because it directly connects the figure of Oswald the Christian king and saint with that of Oswald the Anglo-Saxon warrior king. Bede's

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<sup>11</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Adamnan, *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy*, trans. William Reeves. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), Chapter 1, From <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/columba-e.asp>.

<sup>14</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 153.

description of his success attributes it to his piety and faith in God, but with Oswald as an overlord we see him exhibiting what Stancliffe argues is among the most valued traits in a description of a successful Anglo-Saxon king: that they are able to bring others under their influence and demand tribute from them, dominating others to enrich themselves and their people.<sup>16</sup> As Bretwalda, Oswald fulfils this to the greatest degree possible. While his actual territorial control is still in question, to portray him as an overlord of all of the four peoples of Britain is to portray him as the apex of a Germanic warleader. As one able to bring all of the peoples around him into his sphere of influence, Oswald is a remarkably successful king in the non-Christian Germanic mold but also within Bede's discussion of Christian kingship; As Bretwalda he brings the majority of his pagan neighbors under Christian dominion and blends the markers of success for both a saintly and warlike king.

Oswald's prowess as a ruler is not limited to his military conquests or overlordship. As king of what would become Northumbria, Oswald is also credited by Bede with uniting the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira. "Through King Oswald's diplomacy the provinces of Deira and Bernicia, formerly hostile to each other, were peacefully united and became one people," and in this act we see the formation of what would become Northumbria by Bede's day.<sup>17</sup> While the two kingdoms were separate when Bernicia was ruled by Eanfrid and Bernicia by Osric, and presumably continued to be so under Cadwalla, in Bede's description we see Oswald as a force for unity among his people through his kingship. His status as a pious bringer of Christianity allows him to bring these people together within Bede's narrative, with Oswald's sainthood

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<sup>16</sup> Clare Stancliffe, "Oswald, 'Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians,'" in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge, (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 40.

<sup>17</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152-153.

becoming explicitly connected with concepts of overlordship and the unification of Christian peoples.

Just as important as Oswald's overlordship is the way in which Bede describes his personal piety. As he tells it, "Oswald was always wonderfully humble, kindly, and generous to the poor and strangers."<sup>18</sup> The king's intense generosity is shown as he breaks apart a silver platter to give to beggars outside of his residence. Likewise, he is blessed by the bishop Aidan after this, told that his right hand might never wither with age. A physical manifestation of the king's piety is present in this blessing, which Bede claims has allowed the arm to remain uncorrupted even after the king's death and the severing of his arm from his body.<sup>19</sup> Contrast this with the body of saint Cuthbert. Bede relates to us that it those exhuming him "found the body whole and incorrupt as though still living and the limbs flexible, so that he looked as if he were asleep rather than dead."<sup>20</sup> While Cuthbert is also not decayed upon his death, it is notable that the holiness of Oswald's body begins while he is still alive. Through his generosity and piety, Bede presents a king that is saintly before death, not just after his martyrdom on the field of battle.

After his death Bede attributes substantial miracles to Oswald's place of death. While reinforcing the king's saintliness within the narrative of the *Ecclesiastical History*, it also notably ties his sanctity to his position as a warrior king, and a Christian who died in battle at the hands of his pagan neighbors. For instance, Bede relates to use the story of a young girl who is cured of her paralysis after sleeping at the site of Oswald's death for some time. Despite being carried to the site on a cart, she is able to walk back under her own strength after being cured.<sup>21</sup> We see this

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<sup>18</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152.

<sup>20</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 262.

<sup>21</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 158.

accompanied by the healing power of Oswald's saintly remains. The *Ecclesiastical History* discusses the case of a man possessed by evil spirits, who are driven off by just the presence of earth which had once been touched by water used to clean Oswald's bones at Bardney. It is related to us that some time later Oswy, Oswald's successor, recovered his head and arms, bringing them to Lindisfarne and Bamburgh.<sup>22</sup>

This saintliness is particularly notable in that it renders Oswald a saint in life, rather than merely as a martyr for the Christian religion. The Oswald brought to us by Bede is a saint because of how he ruled as an earthly king, rather than how he died. Likewise, while his death was also characteristic of that of a Christian martyr, the continuation of the blessing upon his arm indicates for us that his holiness originated prior to his fall. Oswald's great piety as it is described is what makes him a saint, and in Bede's description his status as a saint seems to be in part what establishes Oswald as a great ruler. In the same way that figures like Hengist and Horsa are described as the origin of the Anglo-Saxons, Oswald is the origin of a Christian Northumbria. Thus, his saintliness allows him the status of a heroic figure alongside legendary forebears discussed in the *Ecclesiastical History*.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about Bede's account of the life of Oswald is the king's death. Ruling only nine years, he was killed in battle with the Mercians under Penda, the pagan king who killed Oswald's only Christian predecessor Edwin, the former king of Bernicia and Deira.<sup>23</sup> Though Oswald died fighting the same pagans that had killed Edwin, his death is not explicitly stated to be martyrdom, though it bears its hallmarks. Manuscript E of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us the following in its entry for 642:

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<sup>22</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 161-163.

<sup>23</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 157.

“Here Oswald, king of Northumbria, was killed by Penda the Southumbrian at Maserfeld, on 5 August, and his body was buried at Bardney. His holiness and miracles were afterwards abundantly made manifest throughout this island, and his hands, undecayed, are at Bamburgh.”<sup>24</sup>

It serves to link the king to Bamburgh as a dynastic seat, and reinforces his saintliness through the discussion of an uncorrupted body. As Oswald’s saintliness originates from his kingship, his death is not technically what makes him a martyr, though it does seem to make him holier in Bede’s telling. Oswald’s death was almost immediately followed by veneration, with the earth at the site of his death serving as a source of miracles for all who attained it. Notably, these miracles were not limited to Oswald’s countrymen but also extended to beasts and even a native Briton.<sup>25</sup> This links king Oswald’s sanctity within Bede’s work to the Britons, a people who fought against him at the start of his reign. This may speak to his position as a Bretwalda or overlord of many peoples, that in Bede’s telling of his life his miracles extend to all of the peoples of the island, as all were his subjects.

Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* is the primary source from which the life of the saint and king can be examined. While the work was written well over a century after Oswald’s rule, the veracity of Bede’s claims is less important than how our author portrays the king. Bede notably describes Oswald in such a way as to highlight his piety and sanctity, putting forth an image of a Christian king equally saintly both in life and in death. Oswald’s sainthood becomes directly associated with his military prowess, and the king himself serves as a symbol of the unification of the peoples of England under Christianity. Aside from this, less direct but still present within the narrative is the image of Oswald as the great Germanic warrior king. Bede’s work does not

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<sup>24</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 27.

<sup>25</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 159.

obscure older values of kingship originating in a pagan tradition; rather, it serves to further enshrine them in Oswald alongside his Christian virtues. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* primarily describes Oswald as a saintly king and reinforces his Christian virtues. However, Oswald's position as a traditional Germanic king is not undercut, existing as an almost-equal virtue within Bede's work.

## 2. Oswald as Anglo-Saxon King

Bede's depiction of Oswald is one which shows a king ruling both as a figure of Christian piety and saintliness as well as an overlord in the traditional Germanic model. However, the question remains as to how the veneration of Oswald might have stayed consistent with older Germanic ideas of kingship from the previous pagan traditions. Naturally, this leads to another foundational question: what are the traits of the Germanic warrior king, and how does Oswald's depiction by Bede and later veneration fit within this framework?

In discussing what might define a good king in the Germanic tradition of the Anglo-Saxons we borrow from Clare Stancliffe's discussion of the subject and turn to *Beowulf*. Stancliffe lays out several major themes from the poem which serve to define a good king within the narrative, and which were likely associated with great kingship. Among these are great martial feats, indicative of personal success and strength. A leader capable of such feats is one worthy of being followed, while a king who cannot fight or inadequately rewards his followers is not fit to rule. Just as important as performing such great feats is boasting of them. The ability to take on powerful foes and defeat them is worthy of praise and reward, but these are magnified by boasting and storytelling, inspiring others to great feats. Likewise, a good king richly rewards such feats alongside performing them himself. His gifts foster ability in his subjects by rewarding them for greatness, while building loyalty between himself and his warrior elite, who receive riches in return for their loyalty and strength.<sup>26</sup>

Notably, the king Heremod is castigated for failing to properly reward his warriors. "He slew in anger his table-companions, trustworthy counsellors... a murderous spirit grew in his bosom: he gave them no ring-gems. A wretched failure of a king, to give no jewels to his

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<sup>26</sup> Stancliffe, "Oswald, 'Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians,'" 39.

retainers. To the Danes after custom; endured he unjoyful.”<sup>27</sup> In this we see that loyalty is expected not only from a king’s warriors to the king himself, but also in the other direction. Gifts were an expectation. Additionally, while a good king is one who is able to extract tribute and dominate his foes, excessive or dishonorable violence also seems to be condemned here in the discussion of Heremod’s murderous spirit, which results in the killing of loyal subjects. This goes beyond the accepted warring with foes for the expansion of overlordship or extraction of tribute, which seem to be treated as positive aspects within a king.<sup>28</sup>

From *Beowulf* and Stancliffe’s helpful analysis of it, we can begin to create a rough sketch of the mold of the Anglo-Saxon king. While this figure is later in this paper to be contrasted in Oswald across from the saintliness attributed to him by Bede and the practice of his cult, it is not inherently incompatible with Christianity. Rather, the values associated with it originate from an older pagan context, insofar as such a thing can be constructed from the works of predominantly Christian writers such as Bede, Adamnan, and the recorder of *Beowulf*. Regardless, the Anglo-Saxon king is a ruler who first and foremost shows great personal martial success, and rewards military prowess in others with riches and loyalty. Likewise, a good king in this context is able to exercise their military prowess over others, acquiring territory for themselves and their followers or extracting tribute from other rulers. They boast about their achievements and reward the boasting of their followers alongside great deeds, and while they are warriors, they do not turn violence upon their own followers or people to an excessive degree. In this they demand loyalty from their warriors and people in return.

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<sup>27</sup> *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem*, trans. Lesslie Hall, (Urbana: Project Gutenberg, 2005), 58-59, From <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16328>.

<sup>28</sup> Stancliffe, “Oswald, ‘Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians,’” 33-40.



In helping us to further define the Anglo-Saxon king we can look to Bede's description of the failings of Oswald's predecessors, Osric and Eanfrid. Kings of the lands that would come under Oswald's sway, these two leaders are notable only in that they return the people of Bernicia and Deira to the worship of pagan gods and fail to keep a hold upon their lands when they are confronted by the military might of the Briton Cadwalla. Depicted as a "savage tyrant, ravaging them [the Northumbrian provinces] with ghastly slaughter until at length he also destroyed Eanfrid, who had unwisely visited him to negotiate peace," Cadwalla is portrayed as a quasi-divine punishment upon Osric and Eanfrid.<sup>29</sup> Bede tells of how "both these kings apostatized from the faith of the kingdom of heaven which they had accepted, and reverted to the corruption and damnation of their former idolatry. Not long afterwards they were justly punished by meeting their death at the hands of the godless Cadwalla, king of the Britons."<sup>30</sup>

Osric and Eanfrid are notable in their condemnation by Bede not only for their apostasy, but also for the ways in which they fail to act properly as Anglo-Saxon kings. Osric takes unnecessary risks and fails as a war leader in doing so, when "Osric next summer was rashly besieging him in a strong city when Cadwalla, making a sudden sally with his entire force, caught him off his guard and destroyed him with his whole army."<sup>31</sup> As king and warleader it is Osric's responsibility to lead his people to victory. In acting without thought and subsequently falling to Cadwalla, Osric fails in this responsibility and loses both his life and his kingdom. While this would be a substantial personal failing on its own, to lose the kingdom to the Britons, who Bede later condemns as a source of tyranny, is a momentous loss.<sup>32</sup> This military failure serves to compound the spiritual failure already evident in Bede's account of Osric's rule.

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<sup>29</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144.

<sup>30</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 143

<sup>31</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 143-144

<sup>32</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144

Eanfrid's failure is perhaps the inverse of his contemporary. Where Osric was too rash in his military actions, Eanfrid is cowardly. He seeks to make peace with Cadwalla, failing in his expected role as the protector of his people and as a holder of the throne soon to be taken by Oswald. As a king in the Germanic tradition Eanfrid should fight off the invader in his lands, and use that military success to further spread his influence over his neighbors.<sup>33</sup> Within the *Ecclesiastical History* we see his failure to do this condemned, when "at length he [Cadwalla] also destroyed Eanfrid, who had unwisely visited him to negotiate peace accompanied only by twelve picked soldiers."<sup>34</sup> While the number of soldiers Eanfrid took to protect him was insufficient, his attempts to make peace with Cadwalla are also clearly condemned. Within his discussion of the events Bede clearly indicates that military success is what was necessary, rather than any attempt to make peace with a foreign overlord and accept their domination.

Osric and Eanfrid present us with two examples of what not to do as a king. How then, is Oswald as we have come to know him different from his predecessors, and how is he portrayed as a great Germanic king? The pious and reflective figure shown to us by Bede does not necessarily bring to mind a great boastful warrior king in the vein of Beowulf or Hrothgar. However, this account actually serves to reinforce Oswald as fulfilling many of the aspects of the Anglo-Saxon warrior king. Foremost among these is his incredible military success against the Britons. While it can easily be read as an expression of both faith and martial skill, the fact that such military success seems to be indicative of Oswald as a great ruler within the narrative is telling. Oswald's piety helps to make him great in Bede's telling as well as that of Adamnan, but he ultimately is a great king in part because of that military success over his foes.

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<sup>33</sup> Stancliffe, "Oswald, 'Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians,'" 40

<sup>34</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144

The success of Oswald in his battle with Cadwalla not only shows the strength of his piety and faith in God as a saintly king, but also his ability as a war leader and warrior king separate from his Christianity. In Bede's discussion of Oswald's battle with Cadwalla, the young king manages to defeat the Britons despite having a numerically inferior force, indicating substantial martial skill both on the part of the king and his men. Joined to this is the issue of loyalty, as it is a substantial act of devotion for Oswald's warriors to face down great odds alongside their king. In this we see Oswald as a model Anglo-Saxon ruler who commands the loyalty of his soldiers against even an enemy of overwhelming strength. Likewise, while holding up the cross certainly exhibits great piety on Oswald's part and is an impressive physical feat motivated by faith, it also serves as a mark in favor of Oswald in the mold of a traditional warrior king as an impressive display of physical prowess.

Oswald was an incredibly successful king, if defined by his influence and overlordship. While we have addressed Bede's description of Oswald as Brewalda, it is worth revisiting in a slightly different context. Oswald as the overlord of the peoples of Britain within a narrative is indicative of a highly praised ruler in the Anglo-Saxon model we have defined; What greater overlordship is there than to have power over the most important peoples of Britain, having "brought under his scepter all the peoples and provinces of Britain speaking the four languages, British, Pictish, Irish, and English?"<sup>35</sup> Oswald's ascent to Bretwalda is foretold in a way that is remarkable as well. It is implied that his success as an overlord comes in the old way, through martial strength. This can be seen in Adamnan's *Life of Saint Columba* when Oswald is given a vision of himself as the ruler of all of the island before his battle with Cadwalla.<sup>36</sup> While this

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<sup>35</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152

<sup>36</sup> Adamnan, *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy*, Chapter 1.

work describes a vision in prayer, it further reinforces the martial association of overlordship with Oswald. His place as overlord comes from his great success in war.

Oswald as Bretwalda also embodies the aspects of loyalty and tempered violence which are discussed in the condemnation of Heremod. Though Bede never mentions anything which might imply Oswald committed internal violence or had the opportunity to do so unto his followers, it seems that he was considered a respected foe by those who he might have faced in battle or brought under his influence. The epithet given to Oswald by the British was positive in connotation, “Bright Blade” or *Lamnguin* in Welsh. According to Stancliffe this honorific implies a warlord who was to some degree respected by his enemies. This contrasts with the epithet given to his father Æthelfrith *Flesaur*, translating to “Artful Dodger” or the “Twister” and clearly less positive in connotation.<sup>37</sup> The native British would likely have no special reason to portray Oswald in a positive light, unlike Bede, thus lending credence to the image of Oswald as a figure associated with a kingly honor.

The final, and arguably most important, aspect of the generalized portrait of Anglo-Saxon kingship which has been laid out for us to better examine Oswald is that of the ring-giver, or king as bestower of wealth upon his followers. Surprisingly, this aspect of Anglo-Saxon kingship is also directly presented to us in Bede’s writing on Oswald, perhaps even more directly than his great overlordship or strength in battle. Where we see a king like Hrothgar grant material wealth to his greatest warriors, Oswald as described by Bede distributes wealth among even the poorest of his followers but brings spiritual wealth to his closest warriors and subjects.<sup>38</sup> Oswald directly bestows the metaphorical wealth of Christianity upon his nobles. “It was most delightful to see the king himself interpreting the word of God to his ealdorman and thegns; for he himself had

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<sup>37</sup> Stancliffe, “Oswald, ‘Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians,’” 61.

<sup>38</sup> *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem*, 34.

obtained perfect command of the Irish tongue during his long exile.”<sup>39</sup> Bede’s work associates Christianity with the greatest treasure of all, a place in heaven and salvation from damnation. Thus to give the gift of Christianity to his men is to be incredibly generous, with Oswald serving as a ring-giver that grants his warriors halos in the next life alongside armbands in the current one.

While particular generosity to lesser subjects is not a trait we see directly associated with the examples of Anglo-Saxon kingship used above, it is worth noting the generosity Bede ascribes to Oswald in his interactions with his common folk. He breaks apart a valuable silver platter to give them wealth and does so despite the interruption to his own activities. While this is more useful to us if read in the Christian context, it may also shed some insight on Bede’s opinion of Oswald as a traditional king. The generosity of the good Germanic king seems primarily aimed at his followers. However, generosity is still treated as a substantial virtue. It is the thing for which Hrothgar is most praised despite his increasing age, when he offers Beowulf the greatest gifts he can provide, “No lack shall befall thee of earth-joys any I ever can give thee. Full often for lesser service I’ve given.”<sup>40</sup> While the act of generosity to the poor rather than his warriors is likely one indicative of Oswald as a saintly ruler rather than a Germanic warleader, the praise for gifts of treasure may also stem from the Germanic tradition as well.

There are certainly substantial similarities between what Bede praises Oswald for in his *Ecclesiastical History* and what the behavior the heroic kings in *Beowulf* engage in. Chief among these are generosity to one’s subjects and gift-giving, traits clearly seen in our depiction of Oswald. Likewise, Oswald is shown as a great warrior and battlefield commander, whose martial mastery allowed for an unlikely rise to power and likely his overlordship over substantial

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<sup>39</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem*, 33-34

swathes of Britain as Bretwalda. These traits are consistent with the image of kingship granted us by *Beowulf* as well, in which successfully conquering others to demand tribute and exhibiting great skill-at-arms are highly praised. These traits reveal to us an image of Oswald as a successful king in the old ways, despite his nature as a Christian.

#### 4. The Divine Ancestor and Cult of Oswald

Any study of Anglo-Saxon kingship will eventually return to Woden. A chief deity of the prechristian Anglo-Saxons, Woden may be closely connected to Odin, the greatest deity of the Norse pantheon. While we lack much substantial information on Woden, there is one type of source in which he appears consistently, one which is exceedingly relevant to Saint Oswald of Northumbria: the regnal list or royal genealogy. Woden is almost ubiquitous as a claimed ancestor among the ruling lines of the Heptarchy but is not the only legendary ancestor. Anglo-Saxon kings invoked both heroic and divine figures, most often as ancestors, to add legitimacy and prestige to their rule. This practice originated with pagan religious figures.

The relationship between the divine ancestor and kingship among the Anglo-Saxon peoples of Britain both before and after conversion to Christianity is one of remarkable complexity. As Burch argues in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, the presence of a divine ancestor as the terminal figure of a royal genealogy served to grant authority to a ruler in the same fashion as being the heir and successor of the previous king.<sup>41</sup> Figures such as Woden and Seaxneat indicate that this fascination with genealogy and the association of kingship with the divine originated in a pre-Christian environment, as later post-Augustinian recorders are unlikely to have seen such figures as divine. Likewise, the continued presence of these pagan deities in genealogies past the time of the Augustinian mission and subsequent conversions of the Anglo-Saxons indicates that the practice of claiming divine or heroic ancestry continued even absent the pagan religious beliefs which likely spawned it.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Peter James Winter Burch, "The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingship" (PhD thesis, The University of Manchester, 2016), 200–201.

<sup>42</sup> Burch, "The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingship," 202.

The Anglian Collection lists Woden as the originating ancestor for the royal lines of virtually every major Anglo-Saxon kingdom, further indicating the widespread nature of the practice of claiming the divine ancestor among Anglo-Saxon kings both before and after the introduction of Christianity to many of the kingdoms of the Heptarchy.<sup>43</sup> Fascinatingly, the concept of Woden as the divine ancestor may have transitioned into a link to Christian ancestor figures for some Anglo-Saxon kings post-conversion. As North indicates in *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, during the reign of Alfred the West Saxons may have extended Woden's ancestry to that of Noah, thus linking their origin to Adam and through him the Christian God. In fact.<sup>44</sup> In this we see the continuation of the pagan practice of claiming legitimacy through a divine ancestor, such as Woden, continue into a Christian context. By linking their genealogy to a biblical figure in Noah, and by extension God, the West Saxons forged greater legitimacy using a pagan tradition in a Christian context.

In the same practice of divine ancestry we see the origin of the cult of Saint Oswald. While the veneration of particularly great or martyred kings was not entirely unusual among the Christian Anglo-Saxons, Oswald's cult seems to have had some notably pagan influences upon its formation and structure, as indicated by Cubitt, who argues for the lay origins of the cult and subsequent pagan or pre-Christian influences upon it.<sup>45</sup> Of course, lay devotion in and of itself is not entirely indicative of pagan associations even during Oswald's day, when Christianity was still relatively new to the people of what would become Northumbria. Thaker lays out several of the most important arguments for pagan practices continuing in the cult of Saint Oswald. Most

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<sup>43</sup> David N. Dumville, "The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists," *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976): 23-50. From <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510666>.

<sup>44</sup> Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Cubitt. "Sites and Sanctity: Revisiting the Cult of Murdered and Martyred Anglo-Saxon Royal Saints." *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0254.00059>.



notable of these is perhaps the cult's fascination with holy sites ordinarily associated with earlier pagan traditions, most notably holy wells and the unique structure of holy battlefield sites associated with Oswald.<sup>46</sup>

The worship of Oswald was frequently associated with holy sites sacred to pre-Christian traditions. Notably, Oswald's cult had a particular association with holy wells. While the veneration of holy wells likely stems more from Celtic traditions rather than the Germanic paganism of the early Anglo-Saxons, the fact that such practices were uniquely part of Oswald's cult indicates a blending of older pagan beliefs with the Christian nature of the cult of saints. Notably, wells were associated with reverence for the human head in pagan traditions, and Oswald's head had been severed after his defeat by Penda.<sup>47</sup> Alongside the presence of holy wells in his cult's veneration is the placement of the cross at Heavenfield, where Oswald defeated the British. A central wooden pole was likely a common component of pagan shrines for the period, and the cross may have served as a similar central post, providing an analogy for earlier pagan shrines to those worshipping Oswald at the site.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Bede's account of the apparent death and subsequent healing of a horse at the place of Oswald's death might lend further credence to the idea of pagan beliefs influencing the saint's early cult.<sup>49</sup> Horses likely held a strong association with the afterlife in pre-Christian Germanic traditions, and as a result for one to be healed at the site of Oswald's death is significant.<sup>50</sup>

The existence of a saintly cult for Oswald is in and of itself unusual in the context of seventh century England. Thacker argues that while the veneration of royal kin was not

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge, (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 104.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 102.

<sup>48</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 98.

<sup>49</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 158.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 100.

uncommon in the seventh century, the direct veneration of former kings was almost nonexistent in the Christian traditions of the Latin west.<sup>51</sup> The cult of Oswald or that of his father may have been the first English saint cult to venerate directly a fallen king, as such veneration was often met with distrust by church leaders due to its association with the sacral nature of Germanic kingship. The origin of the cult of Oswald can likely be attributed in part to lay worshippers as a reason for its unusual focus on the king.<sup>52</sup> This can be taken also to indicate a continuation of previous traditional belief. The sacral nature of descent from Woden or another heroic figure as a defining factor of kingship in the Germanic tradition is entirely consistent with the cult of Oswald; Through his cult Oswald becomes the Christian divine ancestor, a continuation of a practice deeply associated with pagan beliefs neatly repackaged into a more Christian form.

We know that the cult of Oswald was also supported by his descendants, and thus Oswald's sanctity may have been used in the same way as Woden or other heroic ancestors. We see some example of support for Oswald's veneration in the *Ecclesiastical History* when Bede writes of "The devout interest of queen Osthryd of the Mercians, daughter of his brother Oswy who succeeded him on the throne," regarding the holy remains of Oswald.<sup>53</sup> Though her efforts to have the bones of Oswald reinterred in Lindsey, the queen notably supports the spread of her ancestor's veneration. Through this Bede shows us a royal consideration of descent from Oswald relatively shortly after his death, indicating that Oswald as ancestor must have had some importance beyond just that of being a previous king and uncle of the queen.

Be it from Woden, Noah, or Oswald, claims of divine descent almost universally characterized Anglo-Saxon kingship. This practice originated in the pre-Christian practices of the

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<sup>51</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 104.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 104-105.

<sup>53</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 160.

Anglo-Saxons, and transitioned into a Christian context as those peoples converted to the new religion. Likewise, Oswald's cult and veneration shows a similar process. Though a Christian saint, Oswald's veneration bears several hallmarks of earlier pagan worship. Not only is his cult possibly the first of a king in the British Isles, his holy sites are also those which may have earlier been associated with pagan worship. Likewise, we see here also the earliest use of Oswald as a divine ancestor and possibly as an ancestral source of authority.

## 5. Invocations of Oswald

We have established that Oswald, as he is depicted by Bede and others, can and should be viewed simultaneously through the lenses of the pagan world of his forebears and the Christian Britain he helped to create. Though Oswald was venerated by Christians, his cult maintained many practices of possible pagan origin. Oswald's veneration by his successors fits into the Germanic practice of invoking venerated figures of myth and legend, and our greatest depiction of Oswald in the *Ecclesiastical History* shows him not only in Christian terms, but also describes him as a great ruler in the vein of pagan Germanic kings as well. However, invocation by Bede and the ruling line of the Northumbrians was not the end of Oswald's worship on the British Isles during the early Middle Ages. Rather, Oswald was to be venerated by many of the Anglo-Saxon peoples of Britain in the centuries following his death, coming to serve as almost a Christian divine ancestor among peoples not of Northumbria.

Perhaps the most notable of Oswald's invocations during the Viking Age is that of Æthelred the ealdorman of Mercia, and his wife Æthelflæd, daughter of Alfred. The pair recovered the remains of Oswald, had been interred at Bardney for well over a century before being taken further into Mercia. Notably, Bardney was in Danish territory at the time of this, recovered in an assault by Mercian and West Saxon forces. Manuscript C of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us that, in the year 909 AD, "the body of Saint Oswald was translated from Bardney into Mercia."<sup>54</sup> Where they were taken is important as well. While the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not tell us this, Oswald would be laid to rest in the minster at Gloucester, one founded by Æthelflæd and Æthelred some years prior.<sup>55</sup> The bringing of Oswald to a new and

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<sup>54</sup> "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Tenth Century" *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, The Lillian Goldman Law Library at Yale Law School, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/ang10.asp>.

<sup>55</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 120.

important minster is also telling because of its close association with the rulers of Mercia; the church there was likely very important to them, well-built and heavily ornamented.

Oswald was, somewhat ironically for a king who had likely presented a threat to or even exerted overlordship over the Mercians to his south during his reign, highly venerated in Mercia since roughly the mid-eighth century. By this time the cult of Oswald was likely the dominant royal cult in Northumbria, Lindsey, and Mercia.<sup>56</sup> In fact, while the actions of the early tenth century Mercian royals may have increased the influence of the cult of Oswald in their lands, it was more likely an appeal to a saint who was already venerated locally. We know that Offa, the king of Mercia who came to rule over much of southern England during his reign, venerated Oswald and gave greatly to his cult centers. At his shrine at Bardney, for instance, he made gifts of gems and precious metals.<sup>57</sup> This speaks directly to the saint's popularity well before the tenth century.

Oswald's move to Mercia likely speaks to the aspirations of Æthelflæd and Æthelred in their rule of the kingdom. For instance, take what we know about Offa's veneration of the saint. While gifts in the name of a saint are not necessarily the same as invoking them as a divine ancestor, it is worth considering what Oswald may have represented to Offa. As a king who successfully extended his overlordship to much of Britain, to invoke and revere Oswald makes sense given how Offa would, like any conqueror, have needed to solidify his overlordship. To associate Oswald, a previous Bretwalda and holy figure through his conquests, with Offa's rule might naturally lend the same sort of holy authority to it as claiming divine ancestry and invoking heroic figures. The intent of his reinterment at Gloucester was likely towards a similar purpose; Oswald was a figure of kingly power and overlordship, as well as unity thanks to his

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<sup>56</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 113.

<sup>57</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 113.

status as an overlord of much of Britain. Already well-loved in Mercia, his invocation and association with Æthelflæd and Æthelred could help to reinforce their position in trying times.

Oswald likely presents the perfect divine figure to have associated with the royal house of Mercia in 909. This was shortly before the invasion of Mercia by their northern neighbors, Norse-controlled Northumbria. Likewise, the invocation comes at a time not long before the joint wars waged by Mercia and Wessex against the other Dane-held territories of Southern England. Oswald was not just a figure associated with overlordship; It is sometimes easy to forget that the Oswald presented to us by Bede, and likely the one known to the Anglo-Saxons of the tenth century, was also a warrior king who died in battle against his pagan neighbors. Thus it is natural to invoke such a saint when war with pagan invaders is imminent, though perhaps somewhat ironic to do so in battle against a Northumbrian army. Under the Mercians we see Oswald invoked as a unifying figure, as well as perhaps a symbol of strength in the face of further war against their Norse neighbors. As Thacker points out, there is some poetry in Æthelred and Æthelflæd reinterring a dismembered king at a time of strife for their kingdom.<sup>58</sup> To put Oswald back together and invoke the great ruler speaks to an aspiration towards pulling Mercia back together from the disparate pieces taken back from the Danelaw.

Mercia's special relationship with Oswald and his cult would continue well after the reign of Æthelflæd and Æthelred. Æthelstan, son of Edward the Elder and nephew to Æthelflæd, likely spent many of his formative years with his aunt and uncle in Mercia. It is here that he might have developed what would come to be a strong fascination with the cult of Oswald. The first instance of this visible to us is a charter from Æthelstan's coronation in 925. On it, he grants special privileges to Saint Oswald's monastery at Gloucester.<sup>59</sup> Not only is this a clear

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<sup>58</sup> Alan Thacker, "Membra Disjecta," 113.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, (London: Yale University Press, 2011), 34.

display of his closeness to his aunt and uncle, having granted rights to the place of their internment, it may also speak to a particular fascination with the cult of Oswald. It is entirely possible that Æthelstan may have been present for such a dedication. He was certainly old enough in 909 and spent much of his childhood living with his aunt and uncle in Mercia.<sup>60</sup> It is entirely plausible that the reinternment of Oswald at Gloucester could have made an impression on the young aetheling.

Æthelstan's association with Oswald did not end with invocation, as was apparently the case for his aunt and uncle. Rather, he claimed descent from the Northumbrian saint. However, Oswald's royal line had long since died out. Additionally, the only line of the West Saxon dynasty which might have had any association with the saint was that of Cynegils, a king of the West Saxons who ruled during the first half of the seventh century. In the early tenth century a list of West Saxon kings was made which listed Cynegils in line with Edward and Æthelstan, claiming him as an ancestor and through him a genealogical connection to Oswald. This is despite the fact that Cynegils was part of a different line of the house of Wessex.<sup>61</sup> Æthelstan's actual line was descended from Ceawlin, the brother of Cynegil's grandfather Cuthwulf.<sup>62</sup> Thus, it is apparent that Æthelstan had no direct ancestral association with Oswald's Northumbrian dynasty. Æthelstan's claim of descent from Oswald was about as accurate as his descent from Woden.<sup>63</sup> However, during Æthelstan's reign we see a concerted effort to associate his line with that of Oswald. Cynegils was the West Saxon king most closely associated with the line of Oswald, having been converted to Christianity under Oswald who served as his godfather. While

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<sup>60</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, 207-208.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997). From ProQuest Ebook Central, 134

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, 207-208.

Cynegils had his daughter married to Oswald to form a marriage alliance, their line died after the death without direct heirs of Oswald's son Oethelwald.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Æthelstan's claim of divine ancestry comes through his distant predecessor's position as the godson of saint Oswald and was likely entirely fabricated.

Æthelstan's purported descent from Oswald served to grant him increased prestige as a ruler. The second source from which we can see Æthelstan's supposed divine ancestry is in the claimed lineage of his sister, Eadgyth. Married off to Otto, the king of Saxony in either 929 or 930, Eadgyth's marriage formed an important continental alliance for Aethlestand and brought him much prestige. Notably, Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim writes that Eadgyth was a descendent of Oswald, holding a divine pedigree sourced from the greatest of past kings.<sup>65</sup> In the context of a marriage alliance, the claim of divine ancestry served to benefit both parties. Descent from Oswald likely made Æthelstan's sister a more attractive marriage partner for Otto, the king of a people only relatively recently Christianized. As the Saxons had only converted fully a little over a century before this marriage, to join their royal line with one descended from a saint venerated now both in England and on the European continent was a great political prospect for Otto. Likewise, Æthelstan received in return a powerful continental ally to benefit his own influence, as well as another source to repeat his dynastic claims of ancestry.<sup>66</sup>

Æthelstan serves as perhaps the best example of an invocation of Saint Oswald to increase a ruler's prestige and political authority. It is worth noting the context in which he was invoking Oswald; Æthelstan was crowned king of Mercia upon the death of his father, Edward the Elder. However, he only came to rule the throne of a combined Wessex and Mercia after the

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<sup>64</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 153.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, 207.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, 208.



death of his brother Ælfweard, who had been initially granted the throne of Wessex. The Ingram translation of Manuscript C of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us that Ælfweard passed only sixteen days after the death of Edward, allowing Æthelstan to take the throne of Wessex.<sup>67</sup> Sarah Foot argues that Æthelstan's early reign in Wessex may have been characterized by some political difficulties.<sup>68</sup> He may have been at first seen as an outsider when he became king of Wessex, given his initial place as the ruler of Mercia.

The account of William of Malmesbury originates nearly two centuries after Æthelstan's coronation, in the 1120s, and must therefore be treated with substantial caution. Its evidential value is generally suspect, but is also possible that Malmesbury worked from some preconquest sources in his account of the life Æthelstan, and his work is also our only source on the king's youth.<sup>69</sup> Thus, while it may be apocryphal, he relates to us a story on how Æthelstan's rule was opposed by an ealdorman. The ealdorman in question, Elfred, is said to have attempted to have the king blinded.<sup>70</sup> Even if Malmesbury's account is entirely lacking in veracity, we are still presented with a ruler whose kingdom was likely desperately in need of stability following the deaths of two kings in quick succession. To claim descent from Oswald was to give himself an additional source of sorely-needed political influence. The saint seems to have carried an association with unification of Christian peoples, as can be seen in both Offa and Æthelflæd's invocations of the saint during their attempts to unify their own lands. Likewise, this claim also helped Æthelstan garner influence for himself through alliances with continental rulers.

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<sup>67</sup> "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Tenth Century," *The Avalon Project*.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Foot, "Æthelstan, (893/4-939) King of England," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), from <https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-833>.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Foot, "Æthelstan, (893/4-939) King of England."

<sup>70</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, trans. J. A. Giles, (Urbana: Project Gutenberg, 2015), Chapter 6, From <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/50778>.

While it is predominantly among Mercian rulers that we see the later invocations of Oswald as a sort of Christianized divine ancestor, the phenomena remains a fascinating continuation of earlier pagan practices. Originating with political machinations around his bones at Lindsay and continuing with his invocation by Offa, time and again we see Oswald used as a symbol of unification and perhaps an example by other conquerors and would-be Bretwaldas. In the establishment of his monastery at Gloucester we are given a clear view of the importance of Oswald's legacy to Æthelflæd and Æthelred, where bringing the saint's body back together in a shattered Mercia likely served as a powerful association of their rule with Oswald's achievements. Finally we arrive at Æthelstan, who in a centuries-old tradition invoked Oswald as an ancestor, just as some of his predecessors might have invoked Woden. This claim of descent may have brought him the political prestige he needed to form an important marriage alliance to continental powers, bringing tangible benefits from his line's newfound association with Oswald.

## 6. Conclusion

From his depiction by Bede and Adamnan to his invocation by his successors and later rulers, Oswald remained a perennial figure of Christian Anglo-Saxon kingship. But Oswald's veneration was rooted in older traditions, in the pagan practices of his forefathers. The sites we see related to his cult seem to be clearly associated with both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon paganism, blending the line between pre-Christian religious practices and the cult of saints. Likewise, Oswald's depictions by period writers portray him not only as a Christian king, but also as a ruler filling the expectations of an older Germanic ideal of kingship. Oswald is pious and spreads the faith, but he is also a generous ring-giver and powerful warleader. Christianity is his noted gift to his most loyal followers, granting them salvation as their riches. Oswald is also discussed as a great ruler and overlord, presumably achieving unprecedented success in his wars and diplomacy. His status as the Bretwalda, a overlord of much of Britain, speaks to the ultimate success of a Germanic king; to expand dominion over others and extract tribute.

As a figure bringing forward old beliefs into a Christian context, Oswald is a fantastic example of the continuing tradition of claiming divine or heroic ancestors among the royal lineages of Anglo-Saxon kings. Where his predecessors might have claimed Woden as a source of legitimacy and strength, to Æthelstan Oswald served a similar purpose, as we can see in his invocation of the saint through his family's tenuous connection to Oswald's then-defunct Northumbrian dynasty via Cynegils. Just as descent from Woden increased the prestige of a royal line, so too in Æthelstan's case do we see his claimed descent from Oswald the saint bringing him prestige and political benefit. His marriage alliance to Otto and his kingdom was formed in part through the prestige associated with a saintly pedigree. Æthelstan's case, though the most significant, is not the only one of Oswald's use as a divine figure associated with a ruler

for political prestige. We also see him used similarly to ancestral claims to Woden or other heroes by Offa in his reign over Mercia and most of southern England, as well as by Æthelflæd and her husband Æthelred in their bid to establish a strong Mercia from a shattered and disparate kingdom.

Saint Oswald, a prince who spent much of his youth in exile, eventually rose not only to be likely the most successful ruler of his day, but also to stand among the most powerful of kings in Britain for centuries. This would not be the end of his legacy, however. Oswald's veneration began shortly after his death, with his cult associating his worship with older traditionally pagan practices, blending the old traditions with the relatively new Christian beliefs of his day. This holy status and blending of traditions would continue. Bede, whose life of Oswald in the *Ecclesiastical History* is our greatest source for the life of the saint, portrayed him not just as a saintly king in life, but also as a ruler who fulfilled all that was expected of a powerful Anglo-Saxon warleader in the pagan tradition as well. Oswald's veneration continued, and as his cult spread he began to fill the same role as previous pagan figures such as Woden: that of an invoked heroic figure and divine ancestor. In this way Oswald's veneration continued to mesh what might ordinarily be considered entirely pagan beliefs and the Christian traditions that followed them. The veneration of Saint Oswald was a blending of the two, his worship an example of non-Christian practices surviving into a Christian era.

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