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Defending the Double Monastery: Gender and Society in Early Medieval Europe

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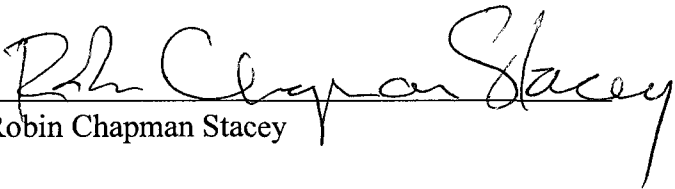
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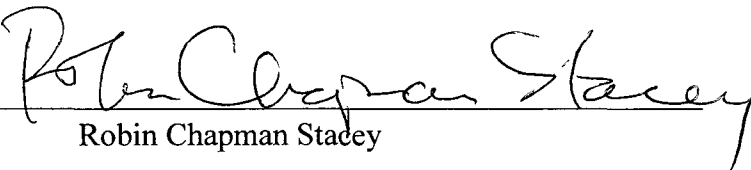
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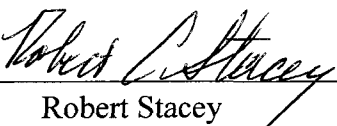


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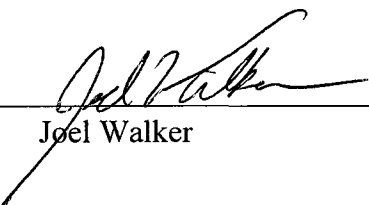
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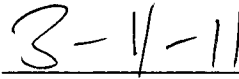
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Abstract

Defending the Double Monastery: Gender and Society in Early Medieval Europe

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This is a study of the relationship between the institution of the double monastery and Aldhelm of Malmesbury's treatise *De Virginitate* ("On Virginity"). Double monasteries, institutions with monks and nuns ruled by an abbess, were important ecclesiastical foundations in early medieval Europe that functioned as centers for administration, scholarship and missionary activity. The abbesses who presided over the double monasteries were often royal widows and were integral to the ruling strategies of the recently converted Christian monarchs.

I argue that the double monasteries were at the heart of a wide-ranging controversy, not merely about the legitimacy of the double monastery itself, but also about the proper limits of female authority and the appropriate relationships between religious men and women in the early medieval church. Scholars have overlooked important evidence for a defense of the double monastery which provides a rationale for female ecclesiastical power and the association of religious men and women.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Table of Abbreviations..... | ii |
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Chapter 1 - Early Medieval Double Monasteries and Mixed-Sex Monasticism in the East..... | 21 |
| Chapter 2 – The Place of Double Monasteries in Anglo-Saxon Society..... | 60 |
| Chapter 3 – Reading a Blank: Reconstructing the Argumentation of the <i>De Virginitate</i> | 92 |
| Chapter 4 – Containing Virginitate: Sex and Society in Early Medieval England..... | 117 |
| Chapter 5 – <i>In Utroque Sexu</i> : The Chaste and Virgin Exemplars..... | 146 |
| Conclusion | 182 |
| Appendix One: The Saintly Exemplars in Aldhelm’s <i>De Virginitate</i> | 195 |
| Appendix Two: The Narrative Structure of the <i>De Virginitate</i> | 197 |
| Bibliography..... | 199 |

Table of Abbreviations

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| <i>CCSL</i> | <i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i> (Turnhout, 1953-) |
| <i>CSEL</i> | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> (Vienna, 1866-) |
| <i>DV</i> | <i>Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa De Virginitate: Cum Glosa Latina Atque Anglosaxonica</i> , ed., Scott Gwara, (Turnhout, 2001) |
| <i>HE</i> | Bede, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i> , ed, Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, |
| <i>HF</i> | <i>Gregory of Tours, Decem Libri Historiarum</i> , ed, B. Krusch, |
| <i>Lapidge and Herren</i> | <i>Aldhelm: The Prose Works</i> , ed. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, |
| <i>MGH</i> | <i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> (Berlin, 1892-) |
| <i>PL</i> | <i>Patrologiæ cursus completes</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-64) |

Introduction

On Sunday, May 27, 670 CE, Theodore of Tarsus arrived in England to assume the role of Archbishop of Canterbury. It had taken the sixty-eight year old Theodore nearly two years to make the journey from Rome as he was waylaid in the Merovingian kingdom on suspicion of being an imperial spy and was only allowed to pass through after the intervention of King Egbert of Kent. Theodore was a particularly unlikely candidate for the position of Archbishop of Canterbury. Born in 602 in Tarsus along the southern coast of the Anatolian peninsula, he was raised and educated in the ancient centers of Christianity in the Eastern Roman Empire.¹ Theodore's prospects for an ecclesiastical career in his homeland were shattered, however, when in the early seventh century the Byzantine military position along the eastern frontier with Persia collapsed. As a result, in 611 his native Cilicia was invaded and occupied by the Sassanid Persian army and again by Arab armies in 638. Theodore became a refugee and traveled first to Constantinople and then later to Rome. There he became involved in the efforts of the western church to oppose the attempts by the imperial authorities to impose a solution concerning the monothelete controversy over the nature of Christ. This conflict had remained unresolved since the sixth century, creating a deep schism between the eastern and western church authorities.² In 649, however, the conflict took a particularly nasty turn when Pope Martin I (649-655) and the western bishops, at the Third Lateran Council, condemned the eastern (and imperial) position as

¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* [HE], IV.1; Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 329.

² Henry Chadwick, 'Theodore, the English Church and the Monothelete Controversy', in M. Lapidge (ed.) *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 88-91; Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 206-19.

heretical. The emperor responded by placing the pope on trial for treason and had Martin and a number of his supporters exiled to the far reaches of the Black Sea.

It was Theodore's participation in the drafting of the *acta* of the Lateran Council that likely caused Pope Vitalian concern when Theodore was suggested as a suitable candidate to assume the duties of the Archbishop of Canterbury. For while tensions between east and west over monotheletism were easing, Vitalian still must have harbored some concern over Theodore's opinions. And while Vitalian did put forward Theodore as the new Archbishop of Canterbury, he also supplied him with an unimpeachably orthodox companion in the North African monk Hadrian so that he might not introduce heterodox opinions "in the manner of the Greeks."³ The two men arrived together in 669 and promptly embarked on an energetic reform of the organization and doctrine of the English church. As archbishop, Theodore created several new bishoprics and deposed those bishops and abbots who did not come into line. Moreover, Theodore instituted an annual synod of bishops that served to both reinforce his authority over the new organization and attempt to ensure a uniform orthodoxy. Theodore and Hadrian also established a school at Canterbury to instruct the British in sacred and secular literature. They taught both Latin and Greek, calendrical methods for calculating the dates of the church holidays (known as *computus*) as well as the art of metre.

Due in no small part to Theodore's impact, seventh-century England became one of the most dynamic areas for cultural and intellectual interaction in all of Europe. Theodore and Hadrian dramatically intensified the cultural interchange between England and the Greek and Latin centers of Mediterranean society that had begun much earlier in the seventh century. In addition, England also was a cultural crossroads for influences from the Romano-British, the

³ *HE*, IV.1, 328.

powerful Merovingians from Gaul, and Irish missionaries and scholars. This amalgam of influences provided fertile ground for the creation of a new, Christian identity for Anglo-Saxon society. The formation of this Christian identity was accomplished in ways that touched upon nearly every aspect of the Anglo-Saxon world. It would find expression as a focal point of religion, culture and economics. The adoption and adaptation of Christianity would also fundamentally transform the political world by altering the ruling strategies utilized by the monarchs of England. This book is an examination of these changes.

One of the most dramatic examples of this change would come in the foundation of a remarkable number of monastic institutions in the latter half of the seventh century. These monasteries, founded with extensive endowments from the rulers of the region, were characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon church. And while monasteries were widespread through much of Europe, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom's reliance on these institutions as political, economic and religious centers distinguishes it from the episcopal systems of the Continent.⁴ The *monasteria* at this time were widely varied in character, size and the activities in which they engaged. It is undoubtably a mistake to read Benedictine regularity into the seventh century evidence.⁵ The monasteries were part and parcel of royal and noble dynastic and land-holding strategies. Monasteries were founded in large part as centers of patronage for the new Christian religion, but also to exploit more secure methods of managing land resources than were otherwise available. These institutions were largely a reflection of the noble society from which they sprang and were affiliated in large family-like confederations of patronage, loyalty, and kinship that mirrored

⁴ John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79-134.

⁵ Sarah Foot, "Anglo-Saxon Minsters: A Review of the Terminology," in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, ed. John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester; New York: Leicester University Press, 1992), 212-225.

those of the 'secular' elite. As this pattern spread through society, more and more individuals participated in the process and monastic foundations proliferated throughout England.

Double monasteries, monastic centers containing both monks and nuns and ruled by an abbess, were a particularly important form of monastic life in Anglo-Saxon England. These dual-sex communities were often closely associated with royal families and generally ruled by a noble or even royal abbess. This form of monasticism, adopted from the Franks through close contacts between the royal families of Northumbria, Kent and East Anglia, was already the predominant form of ascetic community for women in England when Theodore and Hadrian arrived there.⁶

The close association between religious men and women and the role of the abbess as the monastery's leader ran counter to many of the Mediterranean-based patristic tradition that the new Christian religion brought with it. More explicitly, Archbishop Theodore personally disapproved of the double monastery and the close association of religious men and women. This was not simply a reaction against the possible impropriety of ascetics living in a mixed-gender environment. Rather, it was part of Theodore's attempts to reorganize the English pastoral care system centered around monasteries into one that relied on the episcopal system with which he was more familiar. The results of such a restructuring would have been to remove the double monasteries which were linked to the local noble families and replace them with bishops who would be under Theodore's personal supervision.

One might expect that this assault on Anglo-Saxon tradition would have generated a response. Surprisingly, however, scholars have failed to identify any native rejoinder to Theodore's position, following instead, for lack of contrary evidence, the triumphalist line

⁶ James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London ; Ronceverte, W. Va.: Hambledon Press, 1986), 53-9, 65-6; Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe, *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58-61.

exhibited in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* that portrays Theodore's reforms as uniformly welcomed. This dissertation will argue, by contrast, that Aldhelm of Malmesbury's treatise, *De Virginitate*, was written in support of the double monastery and female authority. Through an examination of the *De Virginitate* we can not only come to a better understanding of one of the most important works of the early medieval period, but also bear witness to some of the ways in which Northern European society adapted the religious culture of the Mediterranean into a religious, social and cultural form more well-suited to itself.

Aldhelm (639 - 710) was widely regarded as one of the leading scholars of the seventh century and enjoyed a remarkable career. The contemporary sources for Aldhelm's life and career are relatively sparse, however, and consist mostly of Bede's brief account in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the few details that can be discerned from Aldhelm's own writings. From Bede we hear little more than that Aldhelm was abbot of Malmesbury before he assumed the see of Sherborne in Wessex in 704/5.⁷ Bede also alludes to Aldhelm's composition of the *De Virginitate*, stating that "he wrote a most excellent book on virginity both in hexameter verse and in prose, producing a twofold work after the example of Sedulius."⁸ Unfortunately, this is the sole contemporary account of Aldhelm's life; no *vitae* exist before the eleventh century, some four hundred years later. Two accounts of Aldhelm's life have come down to us. The first, from the Tuscan monk Faricius of Arrezzo, who was present at Malmesbury from 1080-1100, is a rather fanciful work that does not present us with much in the way of historical knowledge about Aldhelm.⁹ The second life was produced by one of the greatest English historians of the twelfth

⁷ *HE*, V.18, 514. Bede gives the date of Aldhelm's ascension to the rank of bishop as 705, but there is some reason to question its accuracy.

⁸ *HE*, V.18, 514.

⁹ *Vita Aldhelmi*, *PL* 89:83-6.

century, William of Malmesbury.¹⁰ William's works included the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*Deeds of the English Kings*), *Historia Novella* (*The Contemporary History*), *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* (*Deeds of the English Bishops*).¹¹ Book 5 of the *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* functions as his *vita* of Aldhelm. It is from William that we possess the only evidence for Aldhelm's dates: he states that Aldhelm died, at the age of "at least 70", in 710, making his birth somewhere in the third decade of the seventh-century.¹² Even so, the gap of four hundred years between Aldhelm and William means that we must treat the assertions in the *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* with the utmost caution. The surest route in the recreation of Aldhelm's biographical details comes from a study of his own work, but here too we are left with only the outlines as Aldhelm did not leave us a description of his life.

However, recent research has shown that Aldhelm was a royal prince of the kingdom of Wessex.¹³ That Aldhelm was of noble birth had long been known; his subsequent career and the extent to which he was able to travel with ease in the highest echelons of Anglo-Saxon society were proof of his connections. Michael Lapidge has recently identified Aldhelm as the son of the West Saxon king Centwine who reigned from (676-85).¹⁴ Centwine was part of the second generation of Christian kings in Wessex, following the baptism of his father Cynegils (611-42) in 635.¹⁵ Centwine ascended to the throne at an advanced age but abdicated only nine years later and entered an unknown monastery. Aldhelm did not, however, succeed to the throne as he was

¹⁰ Rodney M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England ; Dover, N.H.: Boydell Press, 1986).

¹¹ David Preest, *William of Malmesbury: The Deeds of the Bishops of England (Gesta Pontificum Anglorum)* (Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2002).

¹² William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* [GP] 188.3: *non minor decedens septuagenario*. Michael Winterbottom and Rodney M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Pontificum Anglorum (the History of the English Bishops)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 502-3.

¹³ Michael Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007), 15-69 17-22.

¹⁴ Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 18. I am indebted to Lapidge's account of the career of Aldhelm in what follows.

¹⁵ *HE*, III.7, 232.

himself approximately fifty years old at the time of his father's death and already well advanced on his ecclesiastical career. In any case, Aldhelm was a man of books who delighted in poetry and extravagant wordplay and may very well have been relieved that the throne passed to his distant relative Caedwalla (685-688). Caedwalla was described by Bede as an exceptional warrior who had raised an independent army and conquered the neighboring kingdom of Sussex before becoming king of Wessex. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggests that Caedwalla was making efforts to secure the throne as early as 685.¹⁶ It is possible, therefore, that any potential claim to the throne by Aldhelm was resolved by the endowment of funds to found the monastery at Malmesbury where Aldhelm would later be elected abbot in 685.¹⁷

One area of particular scholarly interest has been the source of Aldhelm's early education, which is remarkable for its breadth and depth.¹⁸ Scholars have often focused on the possibility that Aldhelm was educated either in Ireland or by an Irishman residing in England. William of Malmesbury reports that he was educated in Malmesbury by the Irish scholar Maeldub.¹⁹ Despite its late date, this assertion finds some support in Bede's notation that Aldhelm was priest and abbot in the *urbs Maildubi*, from which comes the name Malmesbury.²⁰ Nonetheless, the scholarly consensus currently rests with those inclined to question Aldhelm's

¹⁶ *HE*, IV.15, 380; *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 686. Dorothy Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962). Caedwalla would rule for only three years before himself abdicated the throne in order to enter the religious life and go on a pilgrimage to Rome to be baptized. See *HE*, V.7, 468-72; Clare Stancliffe, 'Kings Who Opted Out', in J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, P. Wormald, D.A. Bullough and R. Collins (eds.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1983).

¹⁷ Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 52.

¹⁸ G. T. Dempsey, 'Aldhelm of Malmesbury and the Irish', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 99C (1999), 1-22; G. T. Dempsey, 'Claviger Aetherius: Aldhelm of Malmesbury between Ireland and Rome', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 131 (2001), 5-18; Michael Winterbottom, 'Aldhelm's Prose Style and Its Origins', *Anglo-Saxon England* (1977), 39-76 42-62.

¹⁹ Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* [Lapidge and Herren] (Cambridge: 1979), 7.

²⁰ *HE*, V.18, 514, 516. For full discussion of this point see Michael Herren, 'Scholarly Contacts between the Irish and the Southern English in the Seventh Century', *Peritia* 12 (1998), 24-53 27-32.

early Irish tutelage, as the inadequacies of this evidence have long been noted.²¹ Lapidge, however, argues on the basis of the structure of Aldhelm's verse and a number of glossary entries in the 'Epinal-Erfurt-Glossary' that Aldhelm very likely spent at least a portion of his early education at the Irish monastic center of Iona.²²

Aldhelm's academic career eventually took him to Canterbury, where he studied at the school founded by Theodore and Hadrian, perhaps drawing on his royal connections to finance his education.²³ Whether or not Aldhelm's early education entailed study under an Irish tutor, it is certain that he was extremely knowledgeable about the Irish forms of education; although he seems to have regarded the course of education he received under Theodore to be far superior. In his letter to Heahfrith, a young student, Aldhelm sought to persuade him to forsake his plans to join the multitude of English students trekking across the ocean to study in Ireland and to remain in England instead to study with Theodore and Hadrian. Aldhelm attacks the state of Irish learning with gusto and mockery and claims that nascent English scholarship was on an equal plane with the much more established Irish schools. He makes his point most forcefully at the end of the letter where he imagines Theodore routing the phalanxes of the Irish scholars who dispute him and criticizes Heahfrith for his suspect loyalties.²⁴ Aldhelm's term of study at Canterbury is unknown, but if we date his election to the abbacy at Malmesbury to the ascension of Caedwalla to the throne of Wessex in 685 as suggested by Lapidge, then we would also have a likely end date for Aldhelm's stay at Canterbury. In 688-89, Aldhelm traveled to Rome in the

²¹ Winterbottom, 'Aldhelm's Prose Style and Its Origins'.

²² Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 22-30.

²³ Rudolf Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera* (Berlin: Weidmar, 1919), 478; Lapidge and Herren, 153-4.

²⁴ The correct translation of the ending of this letter is a matter of longstanding debate. Aldhelm's sardonic attitude towards the Irish, on the other hand, receives almost universal consensus. See Scott Gwara, 'Double Entendres in the Ironic Conclusion to Aldhelm's *Epistola ad Heahfridum*', *Archivum latinitatis medii aevi* 53 (1995), 141-52.

company of Caedwalla following Caedwalla's own abdication of the throne. In 706, he was appointed as the Bishop of Sherborne, dying four years later in late 709 or early 710.²⁵

The *De Virginitate* is very difficult to date precisely.²⁶ There are four points upon which a date might be based. First, Aldhelm mentions that he was going to an episcopal convention – *conciliabulum* – when he first received the request from Barking to write the *De Virginitate*.²⁷ We know that Aldhelm attended at least one such council from his letter to King Geraint.²⁸ The issues described in this letter match most of what we know of the Council of Hertford in 672.²⁹ However, Aldhelm may have attended many councils during the course of his career and so this cannot be used to specifically date the *De Virginitate*. Rudolf Ehwald suggested a date sometime after 685 owing to the presence of Cuthburg at Barking. Cuthburg was married to King Aldfrith of Northumbria (685-705) but later divorced him and founded the monastery at Wimbourne.³⁰ Ehwald argues that since she was present at Barking when Aldhelm wrote the *De Virginitate*, it must be dated sometime after 685. However, Lapidge and Herren have argued that this dating is untenable due to the fact that we do not know either when Cuthburg married Aldfrith or when they divorced.³¹

The final two points for dating the *De Virginitate* come from Aldhelm's correspondence. A letter from Cellanus, abbot of Pèronne in northern France, refers to Aldhelm as an abbot and mentions having read Aldhelm's "books which were painted with the charms of various

²⁵ Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 64.

²⁶ The best discussion of the issues regarding the dating of the *De Virginitate* can be found in Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 66-69.

²⁷ Scott Gwara, *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa De Virginitate: Cum Glosa Latina Atque Anglosaxonica [DV]* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001). This work is translated by Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, 59-132. Unless otherwise noted all quotations from the *De Virginitate* will draw on this translation. *DV*, 1.1, 29; Lapidge and Herren, 59.

²⁸ *Aldhelmi et ad Aldhelmi Epistulae* in Ehwald, *Opera*, 475-503.: *Nuper cum essem in concilio episcoporum*.

²⁹ *HE*, IV, 348-54

³⁰ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 718. Charles Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892), 718.

³¹ Lapidge and Herren, 14.

flowers.”³² This echoes Aldhelm’s own description of the *De Virginitate*, which he describes as “plucking crimson flowers of modesty from the meadows of holy books.”³³ The book mentioned by Cellanus is probably the *De Virginitate* and would suggest that the composition of the *De Virginitate* must have occurred before Aldhelm’s ascendancy to the bishopric of Sherborne in 705.

An even more precise *terminus ante quem* might be shown by the evidence from Aldhelm’s letter to Heahfrith, in which Aldhelm repeats four lines from the *Carmen De Virginitate*.³⁴ This letter also mentions Theodore as being alive and must therefore have been written before Theodore’s death in 690. The problem, however, in associating the lines from this letter with the *De Virginitate* is that it is not certain which was written first. As Lapidge and Herren have argued, “Aldhelm may well have re-cycled in his *De Virginitate* four lines which he had earlier composed for inclusion in his letter to Heahfrith.”³⁵ One last piece of information may help establish the range of dates within which the *De Virginitate* was composed. In the opening lines of the *De Virginitate* Aldhelm describes himself as a ‘worshiper of Christ and the humble servant of the Church.’³⁶ This description of himself as a servant is consistent with the ways in which he refers to himself in works written before his appointment as an abbot.³⁷ Therefore, if we accept this as conclusive, the weight of the evidence would suggest that the *De Virginitate* was composed sometime after Theodore’s arrival in 669 and yet before Aldhelm’s appointment as abbot of Malmesbury in or around 685.

³² Ehwald, *Opera*, 498-99: *archimandritae fastos diversorum deliciis florum depictos*.

³³ *DV*, 19.37-38, 217; Lapidge and Herren, 76: *purpureos pudicitiae flores ex sacorum voluminum prato decerpens*.

³⁴ Ehwald, *Opera*, 487-94, 327-471 respectively.

³⁵ Lapidge and Herren, 15.

³⁶ *DV*, Prologue 1, 27; Lapidge and Herren, 59: *Aldhelmus segnis Christi crucicola et supplex ecclesiae bernaculus*

³⁷ Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 67.

A brief description of the structure and contents of the *De Virginitate* is necessary to begin.³⁸ The treatise can be divided into three parts. Aldhelm begins with a theological discourse on the nature of virginity.³⁹ The core of this section is Aldhelm's tripartite division of female spirituality along the lines of virginity, chastity, and marriage.⁴⁰ Part two of the *De Virginitate* is a collection of male and female saints who exemplify the values put forth in the first section. Aldhelm provides brief sketches of fifty-seven saints in order to exemplify the virtues that he describes in the first section.⁴¹ These brief descriptions are presented in more or less chronological order beginning with the Old Testament and moving forward to New Testament figures, martyrs and later saints. They are also divided according to sex, with the male saints coming first. One curious break in this pattern is Aldhelm's inclusion of the lives of Joseph, David, Samson, Abel and Melchisedech at the end of the section of the female saints. Finally, Aldhelm ends his work with a condemnation of extravagant clothing that relies heavily upon Cyprian's *De Habitu Virginum*.⁴²

The purpose of the *De Virginitate* has been a matter of some dispute. Aldhelm states in the *De Virginitate* that "while proceeding to an episcopal convention"⁴³ he had received letters from the women at Barking and that it was these letters that elicited his work.⁴⁴ Michael Lapidge has argued that Aldhelm's purpose in responding to the nuns at Barking was "a didactic one: from his own vast reading in hagiography and patristic literature he was attempting to compile an

³⁸ See Appendix 1 for a more complete breakdown of the narrative structure employed in the *De Virginitate*.

³⁹ *DV*, 1-19, 27-225; Lapidge and Herren, 59-76.

⁴⁰ *DV*, 19, 217-25; Lapidge and Herren, 75-6.

⁴¹ The *Carmen De Virginitate* omits five of the saints included in the prose version, but includes three others. *DV*, 20-54, 225-715; Lapidge and Herren, 76-124.

⁴² The *Carmen* replaces this section with one describing an allegorical conflict between the virtues and vices. *DV*, 55-60, 715-61; Lapidge and Herren, 124-32.

⁴³ *DV*, 1.1, 29; Lapidge and Herren, 59: *ad pontificale proficiscens conciliabulum*.

⁴⁴ *De Virginitate*, 60.16-17, 755; Lapidge and Herren, 131: *iteratis totidem epistolarum scriptis instigare dignemini, quod praecedentem libelli textum*.

anthology of saintly models for the Barking ladies to peruse at leisure.”⁴⁵ In essence, he says that Aldhelm used the request of the nuns at Barking to write a long and flowery treatise on virginity which, while interesting to the learned nuns, was intended more to showcase Aldhelm’s literary ability than to address any particular problem. This is a reasonable argument; the *De Virginitate* follows in a long tradition of patristic literature concerning virgins and many of the works seem to have been written simply as monuments to their own erudition. Aldhelm was certainly cognizant of his place in the tradition of similarly themed works written by Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. It is likely that he wished to follow in their tradition.

An alternate reading was proposed by Henry Mayr-Harting who argued that Aldhelm’s true purpose in writing the *De Virginitate* was to warn “against pride in these high-born nuns, particularly pride in the kind of clothes they wore.”⁴⁶ The evidence for his approach is also not insubstantial. Aldhelm spends a large portion of the final third of his work quoting from the acerbic condemnation of women’s dress found in Cyprian’s *De Habitu Virginum*.⁴⁷ If read literally, Aldhelm plainly seems to have devoted a large portion of his treatise to criticizing the clothing of the members of the double monastery. It is my contention, however, that this work was specifically tailored to the needs and concerns of the double monastery and can also be read as a practical defense of the double monastery, rather than simply a literary exercise.

A large part of the misunderstanding of these events comes from an over-reliance on Bede’s *Historica Ecclesiastica*. Written almost two generations later in 731, Bede’s narrative is the basis for the traditional understanding of Theodore and Hadrian’s impact and the creation of a Christian Anglo-Saxon identity. Bede describes Theodore in the most glowing terms and

⁴⁵ Lapidge and Herren, 58.

⁴⁶ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to England* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 194.

⁴⁷ *HE*, IV.25, 420-6.

declares that “never had there been such happy times since the English first came to Britain.”⁴⁸

Bede’s history is indispensable to any account of seventh-century Britain, but scholars are increasingly recognizing the limitations inherent in an overreliance upon his history for our understanding of the period.

Past generations of scholars tended to view Bede as an impartial scholar who operated above the fray of local politics and concerns. Scholars such as Henry Mayr-Harting, Peter Hunter Blair, and others characterized Bede as a man of books who practiced a rigorous form of scholarship in an attempt to reconstruct the seventh century as it was. More recently, however, scholars have seen Bede’s history as much more than a simple recounting of events and stressed the political characteristics of his work. Bede’s world is a highly idealized version of society that attempted to create a uniform English identity out of the multi-ethnic and fractious kingdoms of seventh and eighth-century England. As such, he is a flawed, if essential source for the history of period.

One of the key aspects where our reliance on Bede skews our understanding of the period is in his minimization of the Frankish, British, and Irish impact on Anglo-Saxon culture. Bede structures his narrative around the conveyance of Roman legitimacy to Britain as reflected in England’s links to the papacy and the ancient Mediterranean world through the figures of Gregory the Great and Theodore. The story Bede tells becomes one of irrational dissent by the Irish, and is contrasted with the compliance of the English to rightful authority. Theodore’s entry into Britain thus rectified the tragedy that overtook England with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the subsequent failure of the British Christians to effectively missionize their pagan conquerors. In contrast to Bede’s minimization of Frankish, British and

⁴⁸ *HE*, IV.2, 334.

Irish influence, however, scholars have increasingly identified the substantial influence each of these groups had upon Anglo-Saxon society and have greatly expanded our understanding of the period and its complexity.

In matters of ecclesiastical society, Bede is perhaps even more misleading and he repeatedly minimizes any divergence between the English and Theodore. Bede's narrative would lead us to believe that the English were the passive recipients of Theodore's corrective administration and that the only real opposition to his authority came from external sources such as the schismatic Irish or the depredations of pagan barbarian kings. Whatever conflicts that do exist in Bede's narrative revolve around technical issues such as the proper tonsure of monks and the correct method of calculating Easter. These issues were of clear importance for a professional ecclesiastic and intellectual such as Bede, and there is little doubt that they were also of some concern among the scholarly elite. These issues are much less useful, however, as a guide for a broader understanding of the Anglo-Saxon reception of Mediterranean religious culture. Bede wrote about the seventh century at a substantial remove, generating a narrative that emphasized the special connection between Britain and Rome and relied heavily on Roman sanction to establish legitimate authority. Bede would have every reason to minimize any potential areas of conflict which may have existed.

I would argue that, in following Bede, scholars have generally overlooked a clash between competing notions of spiritual authority concerning the role of women in ascetic life during the seventh century. Chapters one and two survey the current state of research on double monasteries considering what we know about the existence of these institutions, the intellectual debates surrounding the mixed-sex monasteries, and the implications for conceptions of gender relations in the areas of Europe where they were predominate. The first chapter focuses on the

double monasteries of the Eastern Mediterranean, and the second introduces the social and political dynamics surrounding the sixth and seventh century conversion to Christianity in Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England. In these chapters specific attention is paid to the ways in which monasteries were utilized by the ruling elites. Particular emphasis is paid to the development of monasteries patterned after similar developments in Gaul and to Aldhelm's role in the Wessex royal family. The purpose of chapter three is to introduce Aldhelm's primary arguments with particular emphasis on his reorientation of the patristic taxonomy of female spirituality. This examination shows both the mechanics of Aldhelm's rhetoric but also the ways in which he drew on themes such as spiritual marriage and male/female partnerships to further support his theological rationales. Chapter four analyzes Aldhelm's interactions with the patristic authors who were his primary sources for the *De Virginitate*. I seek to show that Aldhelm reconfigured the works of Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine for the purposes of promoting interior spirituality over exterior purity, and that he did so for the purpose of legitimizing the authority of abbesses who were not virgins.

In chapter five, I examine the overall patterns that can be found in Aldhelm's treatment of saints and virginal exemplars. I argue that the ways in which Aldhelm organized his collection of 57 exemplars is purposeful and goes beyond the obvious split between male and female. Specifically, Aldhelm seems to have prioritized a series of chaste marriages that form the literal and figurative center of the collection. These transitional figures bridge the gap between the male and female exemplars in a manner that promotes cooperation and equality between religious men and women. A close reading of the lives that break from Aldhelm's established organization and form – most notably Malchus, Judith and a series of five figures from Hebrew Scripture – shows further support for this interpretation of Aldhelm's core themes. My conclusion examines the

later textual traditions surrounding Aldhelm's text and traces the debates concerning chastity and virginity through the manuscript tradition. As the debates over virginity and chastity were increasingly resolved in favor of physical integrity, the reading and understanding of Aldhelm's text changed as well. The real significance and meaning was thus lost, and has remained so until now, when at last we have begun to recover enough about the debates Aldhelm was engaged in to restore an understanding of its intended meaning. These debates were not, of course, limited to Aldhelm and the seventh century and in articulating a better reading of Aldhelm's text I also hope to show that it was part of a much larger conversation over the proper relationship between religious men and women and female religious authority that dated back to the early centuries of the Church.

Chapter One - Early Medieval Double Monasteries and Mixed-Sex Monasticism in the East

“[Monks] would not enjoy such a despicable reputation nor would there be so many scandals, if a violent and tyrannical pleasure were not found in their cohabitation.”¹ – John Chrysostom

“It is not permissible for men to have monastic women, nor women, men.”² – Theodore of Tarsus

Upon arriving in England in 669 to assume the position of Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus must have felt somewhat out of place. As a Greek refugee forced to leave the urban and urbane culture of his native Anatolia, the stark climate and lack of cities in Anglo-Saxon England would surely have caused him some pause. The familiar components of Mediterranean culture that had flourished in Northern Europe before the fifth century had long since retreated beyond the southern banks of the Loire River in Gaul.³ Moreover, he would find as Archbishop of Canterbury that the familiar Mediterranean system of pastoral care presided over by a metropolitan bishop simply could not function in the northern areas of Gaul and England. Here the lack of cities entailed a reliance on rural monastic networks.⁴ In one area at least, Theodore could have found familiarity, though in a way of which he manifestly disapproved: many prominent monastic centers were instituted as double monasteries with both monks and nuns under the direction of an abbess. Theodore would certainly have been familiar

¹ *Adversus eos qui subintroductas habent virginis* 1.2.9 ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca Cursus Complectus: Series Graeca* [PG] 47, 497. Unless otherwise noted all translations of Chrysostom's text are from the work of Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Instruction and Refutation Directed against Those Men Cohabiting with Virgins', *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 164-208.

² *Poenitentiale Theodori*, II.vi.8. Paul Finsterwalder, ed. *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen*. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1929), 285-334. Translated by John McNeil and Helena M. Gamer, eds. *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 204.

³ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 40. Roman influence and “city-based life were bordered by the Alps, the Saone, and the lower Loire.”

⁴ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 41.

with this form of ascetic community as double monasteries had been present in various forms in the Eastern Mediterranean since the time of the early church. But as the quote which begins this chapter indicates, Theodore did not approve of this arrangement, and he would not have seen himself as offering up a novel judgment. To understand Theodore's stance, Aldhelm's response, and the position of double monasteries in general we must trace the history of the double monasteries in the Eastern Mediterranean, Gaul, and Anglo-Saxon England and the official reactions to them.

The growth of mixed-sex monasticism and double monasteries corresponds with the popularity of ascetic practices in general. Various forms of mixed-sex monasticism can be found in nearly all parts of the Christian world, from the Syrian desert to the far reaches of Northwestern Europe. The various practices of ascetic men and women that these terms attempt to aggregate do not lend themselves to easy definition. In what follows I use the term "mixed-sex monasticism" to describe practices such as the so-called *subintroductae* that presuppose an active association between religious men and women which goes beyond a common institutional affiliation.⁵ The term "double monasteries" refers to institutions where religious men and women lived in separate quarters but still functioned as members of a single institutional entity. In the latter case, I follow Stephanus Hilpisch's definition which defines the double monastery as a dual-sex institution that had a spatial and jurisdictional unity.⁶ However, as I will argue below, the underlying logic of the condemnations did little to distinguish between mixed-sex monasticism and double monasteries.⁷

⁵ The *subintroductae* were ascetic women who lived with men in a chaste relationship. See note 20 below.

⁶ Stephanus Hilpisch, *Die Doppelklöster: Entstehung und Organisation* (Münster in Westf: Aschendorff, 1928), 1.

⁷ A number of authors have attempted to assemble a list of double monasteries using a variety of definitions. See Mary Bateson, 'The Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

Although the early medieval double monasteries of Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England have received more scholarly attention, there was a long tradition of double monasteries in the Greek Eastern Mediterranean with attestations as late as the fifteenth century.⁸ Strikingly, however, such practices met with almost universal disapproval from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Both Latin and Greek sources are replete with condemnations of the idea of a close association between ascetic men and women. Church councils, imperial law and the rulings of prominent bishops all repeatedly called for the separation of religious men and women. This attests both to their displeasure and to the fact that ascetic men and women kept forming relationships of which to disapprove. Little or no evidence has been recovered that argues for mixed-sex monasticism as a positive practice, so the perception often remains that these practices were abnormal and peripheral to late antique and early medieval society despite their popularity and wide-spread implementation.

This chapter will examine the authoritative declarations concerning double monasteries including monastic rules, the proceedings of church councils, and imperial statutes. The picture that emerges from this evidence is one of surprising uniformity of opinion concerning double monasteries in both eastern and western sources from the fourth to seventh centuries. With few exceptions, the practitioners were not condemned for sexual immorality. Rather, the monks and nuns were accused of creating a poor public image for Christianity in the larger society. As a result, the condemnations focus almost entirely on the scandalous association of religious men

13 (1899), 137-98, 150-83; Hilpisch, *Die Doppelklöster*, esp. 28-51; David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (London: Longman, 1971); Catherine Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister: Double Monasteries in the Early Medieval West', Princeton University (1991), 226-43; Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges, 1965).

⁸ Jules Pargoire, 'Les monastères doubles chez les Byzantins', *Echos d'Orient* 9 (1906), 21-25, 25; Daniel F. Stramara, 'Double Monasticism in the Greek East, Fourth through Eighth Century', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 269-312, 270.

and women in the eyes of the society at large. Little or no attention is paid to making a theological case as to why double monasteries should be seen as invalid.

The reasons for this uniformity of opinion are two-fold. First, there was a strong predisposition toward conservatism within the church hierarchy: the first rule of any council was to ratify the decisions of its predecessors. Second, and more importantly, these denunciations all can be traced to an idea firmly ensconced in Mediterranean culture that perceived any relationship between men and women as inherently sexual in nature.⁹ Yet this conventional judgment, that non-sexual friendship or partnership between men and women was impossible, stood in stark contrast to the optimism in the newly ascendant monastic culture. In the revolutionary world of the spiritual athletes who inhabited the monasteries, the prosaic notions that might normally govern proper decorum between men and women could be superseded through the taming of the body through ascetic practices.¹⁰ Jerome may have summarized this point best when he declared, in his fourth-century treatise against Jovinian, that:

Virgins begin to be on earth what others will be afterwards in Heaven. If it is promised us that we shall be as the angels (among angels there is no difference of sex) either we shall be without sex, as the angels are, or assuredly, as is plainly attested, we shall be resurrected in our own sex but shall not perform the sexual function.¹¹

⁹ Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1998), 111-54, 230-54; Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Adam's Only Companion: Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage', *Recherches Augustiniennes* 21 (1986), 139-62; Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Friendship between the Sexes: Classical Theory and Christian Practice', *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York: Edgar Mellen Press, 1979).

¹⁰ This ideal of surpassing gender restrictions is first found in the New Testament and is repeated in all of the synoptic gospels. Mark 12:25: "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." See also Matthew 22:30 and Luke 20:35.

¹¹ *Ad Jovinianum*, PL 23:223: *Quod alii postea in coelis futuri sunt, hoc virgines in terra esse coeperunt. Si angelorum nobis similitudo promittitur (inter angelos autem non est sexus diversitas), aut sine sexu erimus, quod angeli sunt; aut certe quod liquido comprobatur, resurgentes in proprio sexu, sexus non fungemur officio.*

Similarly optimistic assessments of virginity's potential can be found in early Greek fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa and Clement of Alexandra and were widespread throughout the Christian world.¹²

The conflict between the normative Mediterranean culture of the fourth century and the transcendent social radicalism of the monastic communities reveals a characteristic of intra-Christian debates throughout the late antique world. Monks and nuns in double monasteries or practicing alone in spiritual marriages could easily run afoul of Mediterranean societies that often prized a rigid form of masculinity, rigorously enforced the separation of the sexes, and saw little or no possibility for friendship between the sexes. On matters of theology, however, double monasteries would have been on much firmer ground. There was a long tradition within Christian and Jewish traditions that argued for a radical universalism promoting an ideal of a unified human essence irrespective of physical difference or cultural status. This trend is perhaps best exemplified in Paul's articulation in his letter to the Galatians of a new Christian reality which minimized social differences¹³ and goes much deeper than his mere inclusion of the

¹² See also Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate*, 2.3. Michel Aubineau, ed. and trans., *Traité de la virginité*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966): "The power of virginity, then, is such that it abides in the heavens with the Father of spirits; it is in the chorus of the celestial powers, it applies itself to human salvation, and by its power it leads God down to share in human life, while it gives humans wings, so that in virginity we have a desire for heavenly things. It is as if virginity were a kind of bond in humans' relationship with God, and by its mediation leads into harmony things that by nature are separated from one another." Translated Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1983), 119.

¹³ See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 180-200; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity', *History of Religions* 13 (1974), 165-208; Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul: A Jew on the Margins* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Paul's own understanding of the body/spirit dichotomy has been a long-standing issue of debate that arises from the fact that his position in Galatians is diametrically contrasted with that in I Corinthians where he argues against an excess of spiritual equality. As a result, Paul has often been read as a defender of cultural conservatism.

famous baptismal credo in Galatians 3:26-29.¹⁴ From the earliest records we have of organized monastic centers, whether they be in Egypt of the third century, Anatolia in the fourth, or Gaul and England in the sixth and seventh centuries, double monasticism was present and often viewed as a uniquely prestigious form of organized ascetic community. This makes the pattern evident in the vast majority of sources, which speak either disapprovingly towards double monasteries or even condemn them outright, something of a puzzle. Understanding the practices and the motivations of those participating in the various forms of double monasteries is exceedingly difficult, as our only lens with which to do so is through hostile sources.

Definition of the Double Monastery

The most problematic issue for historians attempting to interpret the double monastery is how to construe its 'doubleness.' There has recently been a movement towards abandoning the term double monastery as anachronistic, for, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the term *monasterium duplex* was not even used by contemporaries to describe the institution.¹⁵ While this may be so, there is substantial evidence that contemporaries did distinguish mixed sex from single sex foundations.¹⁶ The Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian I (c. 527-565), for example, prohibited monks and nuns to dwell within the same monastery and prohibited "monastères

¹⁴ Gal 3:26-29. "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

¹⁵ Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill; London (England): University of North Carolina Press, 1988), xviii; Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7; Penny Schine Gold, 'Male/Female Cooperation: The Example of Fontevrault', in J. Nichols and M.T. Shank (eds.), *Medieval Religious Women* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 102. See also a summary of the case for and against dismissing the term double monastery in Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 44-47; Stramara, 'Double Monasticism', 271-74.

¹⁶ Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 46.

which are called double.”¹⁷ As for the charge of vagueness, Penelope Johnson has argued that “in reality all women’s houses were ‘double’ insofar as they all had priests attached to them for administering the sacraments and were headed by abbesses or prioresses.”¹⁸ Certainly these objections are useful in that we must be conscious of the varied relations between monastic men and women within such houses, whether in the twelfth century or the seventh. However, the argument that we cannot make a useful distinction between, for example, a nunnery served by a single priest, and communities of co-resident monks and nuns, does not seem helpful for our analysis. We should also take care to maintain the emphasis upon the tension in the gendered relationship that the term ‘double’ forces us to take into account.¹⁹ Medieval debates surrounding double monasteries and mixed-sex monasticism focused relentlessly on the effects such arrangements had on social comity and the impact such close relationships between religious men and women might have on their own salvation. As such concerns were paramount for the late antique and early medieval debates, a definition that highlights the ‘doubleness’ in my view is more useful than one which does not.

Another point regarding the definition of the double monastery is a tendency to minimize the dual sex nature of the institution by understanding the male element as limited to providing labor and administering the sacraments to the nuns. Henry Mayr-Harting described the double monastery as a place where:

high-born women founded nunneries on their own estates and
communities of men became associated with them in order to offer mass,

¹⁷ Rudolf Schoell and Wilhelm Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Zurich: Weidmann, 1959), 619, *Novella* 123.36: *Nullo autem reipublicae nostrae loco in uno monasterio monachos et monachas habitare vel duplicia quae dicuntur monasteria esse permittimus.*

¹⁸ Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, 7.

¹⁹ Peyroux, ‘Abbess and Cloister’, 47.

give the sacraments, and to assist in the administrative and manual tasks which it was difficult for the women to perform alone.²⁰

Similar definitions have also been offered by a number of other scholars. The ‘Columbanian’ double monasteries of Gaul have been described, for example, as “essentially communities of nuns, to which communities of monks were attached in order to provide priests and heavier manual services.”²¹

The suggestion that men were only present in double monasteries for manual labor and the administering of sacraments has a certain practical appeal. It handles the ‘doubleness’ quite neatly and removes the problem of having to account for the apparent supervision of religious women over religious men. If the men were really just manual laborers, or the ‘male element’ consisted simply of a single priest, then there would be no difficulty in imagining medieval society placing religious women in the position of supervising religious men. This, however, does not seem to have been the case either with the double monasteries in the Eastern Mediterranean nor with the examples in Western Europe. The recurring prohibitions and concerns for the scandalous nature of double monasteries are a strong indication that what was at stake was much more than simple and routine contact by members of the opposite sex. Rather, the debates surrounding double monasteries reveal fundamentally different viewpoints on the efficacy of the spiritual life for overcoming traditional divisions between the sexes. The central question became: if one professed a life of virginity and chastity, did that then mean that one could associate with the opposite gender without the underlying assumption of sexual attraction?

²⁰ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to England*, 151.

²¹ Clifford Hugh Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1989), 52. For a reasoned dismissal of the Celtic origins of double monasteries, see Peyroux, ‘Abbess and Cloister’, 4-18.

The critics, as we will see, answered firmly in the negative and viewed any such association between men and women as inherently sexual on its face. In light of the long-term success of double monasteries, however, we are forced to consider the idea that alternative viewpoints must have existed, and take seriously the notion that there appears to be a significant religious movement that reveals a remarkably different perspective from the one that ultimately became normative in Western Europe.

The Double Monasteries of the Eastern Mediterranean

Mixed-sex monasticism and double monasteries were the practical application of a series of ideas latent in Christianity from its inception, which allowed for the radical transcendence of contemporary restrictions on relationships between men and women. For reasons of both social necessity and theological coherence, such transcendence was recognized as being possible only in a monastic environment. Men and women in these environments were not the most extreme practitioners of ascetic behavior. Compared to the heroic feats of St. Anthony in the Egyptian desert or Simeon the Stylite's thirty-seven years perched upon a high pillar, cenobitic monasticism was in general less demanding. Mixed-sex monasticism was more optimistic about the possibility of men and women overcoming sexual temptation than either the radical individualism of the desert hermits or the single-sex monasteries that demanded the maximum possible separation from the opposite sex. Even while overcoming the social restrictions placed on men and women outside of marriage and the family, the members of these monasteries more closely replicated the family structure found in secular society as well.

The earliest records of mixed-sex and double monasteries date to the very beginning of the fourth century and amply witness the widespread nature of the practice. And while caution needs to be exercised in comparing mixed-sex institutions that were founded for disparate reasons and operated in different ways across early medieval Europe, the association of male and female religious elicited similar concerns from ecclesiastical and secular authorities wherever the practice was found.²² Unfortunately, we possess little direct evidence that would express the viewpoint of the members of such foundations themselves. Many more sources survive that condemn the institutions and practices of close relationships between ascetic men and women.

One exception to this pattern is the monastic rule of Basil of Caesarea (329-379) which assumed that monastic communities of men and women would be the norm, not the exception. Basil's rule, utilized from the fourth to the eighth centuries, is the only surviving monastic rule for double monasteries that has survived from the Greek world. And while it should not be taken as a literal description of the practices within these monasteries – it is much more concerned with providing admonitions and advice than laying out the daily routines of the house – it is an invaluable lens for understanding the model adopted for the double monastery. It is also one of the earliest records of double monasticism.²³ Basil's rule shows that even though monastic communities comprising both men and women were widely accepted, the nature of those communities was still very much in doubt. Basil, for example, argued for the need to separate the

²² Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', esp. 52-63. Distinctions have been made between the so-called *agapetes*, ascetic monks and nuns who cohabitated in a type of virginal marriage, and the *subintroductae*, who are described as celibate women who seek a priest's protection. See Hans Achelis, *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII. Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig: J.C.Hinrichs, 1902); Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 25-51; Stramara, 'Double Monasticism', 273-74.

²³ Anna Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Elm, *Virgins of God*, 60-68, 78-91.

men and women within the institution, which was contrary to much established practice at the time.²⁴

Basil was the scion of an aristocratic Christian family from Pontus on the southern shores of the Black Sea. His father, Basil the Elder, was a renowned rhetorician and his mother Emmelia was an important member of the local aristocracy.²⁵ Basil's family was part of a long established Christian tradition that dominated the towns of Cappadocia and Pontus in Eastern Anatolia. His family had a long history of Christian piety and familial religious heroism. Basil began his education in the customary fashion of a student intent on pursuing a civic career and studied first in Cappadocia and later conducted advanced studies, mostly in Athens, between 349-56.²⁶ Basil returned to Caesarea in Cappadocia in 355 at the age of 26 with the intent of taking after his father and pursuing a career in rhetoric. This plan proved to be short lived, however, and under the influence of his sister Macrina, he decided to adopt a life of ascetic renunciation and was baptized by the local bishop. Following his baptism, Basil was attracted to the ascetic teachings of Eustathius of Sebaste, also a native of Anatolia in the nearby province of Pontus, but was unable to secure a meeting with him as Eustathius had undertaken a spiritual pilgrimage to monastic centers in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Basil spent the majority of the year 356 pursuing Eustathius, but was never able to meet with him.²⁷ Upon his return, Basil took up an ascetic lifestyle and began to compose his thoughts on monastic regulations and canons.²⁸

²⁴ Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 23-5.

²⁵ Thomas A. Kopecek, 'The Social Class of the Cappadocian Fathers', *Church History* 42 (1973), 453-66; Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3-5; Raymond Van Dam, *Kingdom of Snow: Roman Rule and Greek Culture in Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 181-88.

²⁶ Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 27-64.

²⁷ Elm, *Virgins of God*, 61-3; Stramara, 'Double Monasticism', 274-77.

²⁸ Basil, *Ep. 2. Saint Basile: Lettres*, ed. Yves Courtonne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957). For the English translation see *Saint Basil: The Letters*, ed. Roy Deferrari, (London: W. Heinemann, 1926), 7-25.

Basil was ordained a priest in 360 and continued adding to his written record on monastic life through his answers to a series of questions posed to him by the ascetic community at his family estate at Annesi. The answers he provided as presbyter between 365 and 369 would become the *Small Asceticon*. Following Basil's election as bishop of Caesarea in 370, he continued to revise and extend his correspondence with the community at Annesi. This work resulted in the body of rules called the *Great Asceticon*, made up of 55 Long Rules (*LR*) and 313 Short Rules (*SR*).²⁹

Basil would be remembered by many as the founder of monasticism in Asia Minor, though it seems clear that his sister Macrina may be more deserving of the honor of creating so-called Basilian monasticism.³⁰ Basil was clearly more of a reformer of organized monasticism than its originator; organized communities of ascetic men and women predated Basil by a generation and possibly had comprised the majority of ascetic communities since the 330s. The communities that preceded Basil were built on what Susanna Elm calls the 'Homoiousian Model', in which men and women lived together in a mixed-sex monastery, were urban based, active in doctrinal disputes and performed charitable works among the poor of the Anatolian cities.³¹ Founded by men such as Macedonius, Basil of Ancyra, and Basil's would-be mentor Eustathius, these monasteries were numerous and influential throughout the region. What Basil's reform attempted to impose on the monasteries was a form modeled on the family monastery at

²⁹ Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 1-149; Stramara, 'Double Monasticism', 279.

³⁰ Elm, *Virgins of God*, 206; Verna E. F. Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1996), 441-71 445. See also Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 69-71.

³¹ Elm, *Virgins of God*, 184-203, 205.

Annesi. The monastery was to be based in rural areas so that contemplation, rather than active engagement in ecclesiastical politics and doctrinal disputes, would be the norm.³²

For our purposes however, the most important stipulation of Basil's reforms was that the men and women of these communities were to be firmly separated within the monastery itself.³³ In the *Longer Responses*, Basil answers a question concerning the proper age at which one should be allowed to dedicate oneself to God with a discussion of the proper organization of a monastery. In discussing the care of children at the monastery, Basil stipulates that:

[The children] should be brought up in all love as the common children of the community. Nevertheless, the houses and regimen of both male and female should be kept separate so that no familiarity or unfettered freedom towards their elders is encouraged while reverence for their guides is maintained due to the scarceness of their meeting.³⁴

This hallmark of Basil's reform was not to separate men from women with rigidity, but to have separation within a united community with a strong concern for the rearing of children. Daniel Stramara has pointed out quite convincingly that Basilian monasticism was: "a double monastery truly formed, in both a literal and figurative sense, one monastic family of men and women."³⁵

This united ascetic community was also evident by Basil's inclusion of both male and female superiors for the monastery. The male leader is superior due to his association with the priesthood, but he is strictly limited in his dealings with the sisters of the monastery and cannot act unilaterally towards them. Basil repeatedly articulated this position with a series of responses

³² The members of these same monasteries were Basil's primary opponents in the contemporaneous Trinitarian debates among the Homoiousian, Homoian, and Nicenian parties. This may have had something to do with his desire to restrict their ability to intervene in theological debates

³³ For the overall characteristics of the Basilian communities in the rules see Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 22-37

³⁴ LR 15.1; Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 201.

³⁵ Stramara, 'Double Monasticism', 286.

to questions in the *Shorter Repones*. “Q: Should he who presides discuss matters concerning the upbuilding of the faith with any sister, apart from her who presides (over the sisters)? R: In that case, how shall he observe the precept of the Apostle who says: ‘Let all you do be done decently and in order?’”³⁶ The reference here is to Paul’s call for unity and orderly behavior in I Cor 14:40. Basil returned to I Corinthians in his answer to the next question, which asks:

Is it suitable for him who presides to converse frequently with her who presides (over the sisters) and particularly if some of the brothers take offense at this? R: Though the Apostle says “why should my liberty be judged by another’s conscience” it is well to remember him who says: “I did not use this right, that I might not provide the least hindrance to the Gospel of Christ” and as far as possible, keep such meetings (and their consultations) rare and quickly broken off.³⁷

Basil also requires that the *presbytera* (female superior) be present whenever a sister is to confess to the *presbyter* (male superior). He states that: “It seems to me that confession to the *presbyter*, who is able to prescribe with knowledge the manner of repentance and amendment, will take place with more seemliness and piety if the *presbytera* is present.”³⁸ Finally, Basil reproaches any *presbyter* who would act unilaterally by reaffirming the *presbytera*’s authority. “Q: If the *presbyter* has ordered something to be done among the sisters without the knowledge

³⁶ SR 108; Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 332-33.

³⁷ SR 109; Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 333.

³⁸ SR 110; Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 333.

of the *presbyteria*, is the *presbyteria* right to be indignant? R: Most certainly!”³⁹ The relationship between the male and female superior is more of a partnership than anything else.⁴⁰

Even so, Basil’s determination to reject the Homoiousian ideal of mixed-sex monasticism and enforce a separation between the sexes would prove both to have lasting consequences and to prefigure much of the later debate concerning monastic men and women. Although Basil’s rule can clearly be seen as supporting the association of ascetic men and women, what would carry through was not his support for female religious authority, but rather his insinuation that any close contact between ascetic men and women was inherently scandalous and by necessity needed to be limited.⁴¹

Another prominent early example of double monasteries comes from the life of Jerome, who was one of the main proponents of ascetic behavior in the West. While at the court of Pope Damasus between 382 and 385, Jerome formed a series of close relationships with circles of aristocratic Roman women who had embarked on a life of ascetic renunciation based loosely on the themes of Egyptian monasticism.⁴² Jerome became a mentor and spiritual guide to these groups of women and formed particularly strong bonds with the wealthy widows Paula and Marcella, and later with Marcella’s third daughter Eustochium. Paula and Marcella followed in a long tradition of wealthy, educated women in Christian circles dating back to the earliest stages of the movement.⁴³ Jerome’s close relationship with these women was one of the primary

³⁹ SR 111; Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 334.

⁴⁰ Silvas, *Asketikon of St Basil*, 24.

⁴¹ See the commentary below on the Second Council of Nicaea, 55-56.

⁴² J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 91-2.

⁴³ The prohibition of women from many Jewish religious activities was based on the belief that they were polluted through menstruation and was not nearly so important for early Christians. Furthermore, the value placed upon female chastity also served to undercut the ritual impurities tied to sexual activity and served to lessen the restrictions on women’s religious participation in general, especially for celibate women. Peter Brown, *The Body*

reasons that he was exiled from Rome in 385 following the death of Pope Damasus. In a letter defending himself from the charge of having improper relationships with unmarried women, Jerome argued that in regards to his relationship with Paula, “my sex is my only crime.”⁴⁴ It was, perhaps, this diminution of the innate sexual difference between ascetic men and women that allowed Jerome to withdraw to the Holy Land to live a monastic life and, with Paula’s funds, to establish a double monastery for himself, Paula and Eustochium in Bethlehem.⁴⁵ Even though he had been run out of Italy for his views, Jerome was still at this stage committed to the idea that sexual identity need not stand in the way of religious friendships.

Jerome’s double monastery at Bethlehem was likely influenced by a similar institution established ten years earlier on the Mount of Olives by Melania the Elder.⁴⁶ Melania was extremely well-educated and was the first woman of her circle to leave Rome to establish monasteries in Palestine.⁴⁷ In this she was later joined by the venerable scholar Rufinus, best known for his translation of Eusebius’ history of the Christian Church into Latin and the later enmity between himself and Jerome in the Origenist Controversy.⁴⁸ While little can be said about the precise arrangements between the men and women in these double monasteries, it is quite

and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 146-47. See also Antoinette Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ Jerome, *Epistulae* 45.2. *PL* 22:481.

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Schuller, *Frauen in der Römischen Geschichte* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1987), 108.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 379-85; Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Melania the Elder and the Origenist Controversy: The Status of the Body in a Late-Ancient Debate’, in J. Petruccione and T.P. Halton (eds.), *Nova and Vetera: Patristic Studies in Honor of Thomas Patrick Halton* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 94; Robert Louis Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 181.

⁴⁷ Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 96-8.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘The Place of Jerome’s Commentary on Ephesians in the Origenist Controversy: The Apokatastasis and Ascetic Ideals’, *Vigiliae christianae* 41 (1987), 154-71; idem., *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 123-24. .

clear that the association between male and female monastics lay at the heart of several early forms of Christian asceticism.

One of the most vigorous opponents of the association of religious men and women was Basil and Jerome's contemporary John Chrysostom (349-407),⁴⁹ who vociferously condemned what he called syneisaktism – the association of religious men and women in a spiritual marriage.⁵⁰ Chrysostom argued that if the hermits of the desert could only triumph over physical desire through heroic efforts of self-abnegation, what possible chance could men and women who lived in the world have of doing so if they shared each others' company?

[M]any who cover their entire bodies with iron chains and are clad in sackcloth, who have climbed the peaks of mountains and live in constant fasting accompanied by vigils and sleeplessness, who demonstrate great hardiness in every way, forbid all women to enter their chambers and cells and in this way discipline themselves --- these men, we are told, scarcely prevail over the frenzy of desire.⁵¹

If these men who wage a continuous war with their 'rebellious' flesh are scarcely able to conquer sexual urges, then how, Chrysostom argues, is one able to accept that men who live and associate

⁴⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: A Story of John Chrysostom - Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ For the long traditions of spiritual marriage within early Christianity and Medieval Europe see Achelis, *Virgines Subintroductae*; Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows*, 75-99; Roland H. A. Seboldt, 'Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church: A Suggested Interpretation of I Cor. 7: 36-38', *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (1959), 176-84.

⁵¹ *Adversus eos qui subintroductas habent virginis*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca Cursus Completus* [PG] 47, 5.3. *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* and *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant*, are twin works directed towards condemning mixed-sex religious relationships in the fourth-century Roman Empire. The first sets out the reasons men should not cohabit with women and the second addresses itself to why women should not do the same with men.

with women in relative ease might do so?⁵² For Chrysostom, the association of ascetic men and women was simply unthinkable, and there could be no possible licit grounds for such an arrangement.

What man, if he were free from the compulsion to have a woman, would choose to put up with the delicacy, wantonness, and all the other faults of the sex? Thus even from the beginning God endowed women with this strength [of alluring men], knowing that she would be totally despicable unless she were provided with this power, that no man would choose to live with her if he were innocent of desire.⁵³

In other words, women's sexuality was part of a God-given design. Even if men and women were able to overcome their inherent sexual attraction – a point Chrysostom was by no means willing to concede – the idea of a mutual relationship based on shared ideals and interests was simply anathema to him. To conceive of the possibility of friendship between men and women was to place them on an equal plane. For Chrysostom, this violated the natural order in which women were to be subservient to men, and seems to have been the primary issue which differentiated Chrysostom from his opponents.⁵⁴ His rhetorical questioning of ascetic women who supported the practice of spiritual marriage is representative of his thought:

[w]hat just and sensible reason will you offer us [for your association with men]?

“The matron will answer ‘marriage,’ and the prostitute, ‘sensuality,’ but you, the

⁵² *Adversus eos*, 5.4.

⁵³ *Adversus eos*, 5.6.

⁵⁴ Chrysostom complains that relationships between ascetic men and women would create womanly men and manly women. He believed it would render such monks “softer, more hot-headed, shameful, mindless, irascible, insolent, importunate, ignoble, crude, servile, niggardly, reckless, nonsensical, and, to sum it up, take all their corrupting feminine customs and stamp them on the souls of these men.” *Adversus eos*, 11.2. For women, it would put them in an authoritative position: “It is a great disgrace when the upper assumes the position of the lower so that the head is below and the body is above.” *Quod regulares*, 7.7.

virgin, what pretext will you set before us which is plausible and wears a fair face?⁵⁵

Clearly, Chrysostom did not view ‘friendship’ as a particularly plausible answer to this question. Thus when Chrysostom moved on to consider marital relationships, he actually found the greatest good in marriages to be their ability to subordinate women.⁵⁶

Chrysostom’s invective against the association of male and female ascetics is strong evidence of the vitality of mixed-sex monasticism in the Eastern Mediterranean during the fourth century. Yet no works supporting the practice have come down to us. Chrysostom’s treatises on syneisaktism provide us with half of the debate on the matter of social positions and order. Nevertheless, Elizabeth Clark has argued that it is possible to partially reconstruct the positive views expressed by these men and women through Chrysostom’s work.⁵⁷ Her case is buttressed by the fact that the *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* and *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* were delivered as public sermons in Antioch sometime between 368 and 371. The public presentation of these arguments in a major Roman civic center and one of the major Christian centers of the Near East ensured that his opinions would not go unnoticed locally, and may well have given them a much wider audience than would otherwise have been the case. He did, it seems, make every effort to frame the syneisaktic position in as unfavorable light as possible. But the outline of his opponents’ arguments is still discernable.

⁵⁵ *Quod regulares*, 4.4.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 162. This is despite his overall view that marital relations were unnecessary in the Christian era. While not condemning marriage per se, Chrysostom views procreation as unnecessary since “the earth and sea and all the world has been inhabited,” (*De Virginitate*, 19.1.5). Marriage is only useful “to those who are still now caught up in their passions” (*De Virginitate*, 19.2.1) and is a relic of a bygone age. *De Virginitate* in Herbert Musurillo and Bernard Grillet eds., *La Virginité*, (Sources Chrétiennes 125) (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 19.1.5, 19.2.1.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘John Chrysostom and the *Subintroductae*’, *Church History* 46 (1977), 171-85, esp. 182-5.

As a member of a large and established ecclesiastical structure, Chrysostom could not view social arrangements as matters of indifference. For him, virginity and marriage were fixed social conditions that had to be maintained. In his sermon, *De non iterando coniugio*, Chrysostom argued that widows and virgins must remain in their stations or risk worse punishments than those who were mere adulterers, “for breaking a promise is much worse than not promising at all.”⁵⁸ Virginity and chastity are not conditions that emanate from divine favor; rather, they come from free choice and contract. Chrysostom asserts that remarriage is a breach of contract with God that arises “not from one’s nature but from one’s deliberate choice.”⁵⁹ By praising the condition of virginity as a matter of will rather than nature, he is making a clear statement about the trustworthiness and character of both virgins and married persons.

Chrysostom’s view of virginity as a free choice was a matter of necessity in the religious environment of fourth-century Antioch. To differentiate his praise of virginity from the practices of the “heretical” Christians, Chrysostom needed to hold marriage up as a positive station.⁶⁰ To achieve this, Chrysostom stressed the traditional view of Greek philosophy that no conduct may be seen as worthy of praise that is not undertaken by free choice.⁶¹ “Just as no one would praise eunuchs for virginity because they do not marry,” no one should praise those who do not freely choose virginity.⁶²

⁵⁸ *De non iterando coniugio*, PG 48:610-20, 3.11. Translated into English by Sally Ann Shore, 'St. John Chrysostom's *De Virginitate* and *De Non Iterando Coniugio*', Catholic University of America (1980).

⁵⁹ *De non iterando coniugio*, 3.15.

⁶⁰ Chrysostom explicitly mentions the teachings of Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani as examples of heretical teachings that condemn marriage. *De Virginitate*, 3.

⁶¹ *De Virginitate*, 1.2.

⁶² *De Virginitate*, 8.5.1.

Chrysostom was forced to craft a more nuanced view of marriage as a blessed condition sanctioned by God.⁶³ Marriage, however, was clearly an institution that has as many problems as potential benefits. According to Chrysostom, marriage originated as a direct result of the fall from Eden. Before the Fall, there was no need for marriage as there was no hint of sexual desire and Adam and Eve lived in a pure virginal state. “Desire for sexual intercourse, conception, labor, childbirth and every form of corruption had been banished from their souls. As a clear river shooting forth from a pure source, so were they in that place adorned by virginity.”⁶⁴ Marriage only developed after the Fall as a way to minimize lust. As such, it had its value, but Chrysostom argued that it was now time to put away these ‘childish’ ways and to embrace perfect virtue.⁶⁵ Marriage arose at the same time as all the other worldly institutions and had the same effect:

Why did marriage not appear before the treachery? Why was there no intercourse in paradise? Why not the pains of childbirth before the curse? Because at that time these things were superfluous. The necessity arose later because of our weakness, as did cities, crafts, the wearing of clothes, and all our other numerous needs. Death introduced them in its wake.⁶⁶

Chrysostom links sexuality to the most fundamental elements of Late Antique society. As the family was the essential building block of society, to challenge the conception of marriage was to

⁶³ A number of early Christian sects including the various Gnostic groups took a radical stance towards the rejection of physical relationships and matter. These sects drew some of the earliest sustained criticism for their rejection of marriage and the eating of certain foods in 1 Timothy 4:1-4. “Now the Spirit explicitly says that in the last times some will turn away from the faith by demonic instructions through the hypocrisy of liars with branded consciences. They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

⁶⁴ *De Virginitate*, 14.3.6.

⁶⁵ *De Virginitate*, 15-17.

⁶⁶ *De Virginitate*, 15.2.

challenge society. Thus, when he advocates virginity, he is calling for radical social change as well.

According to Chrysostom, the only benefits of marriage were procreation and as a salve for lust. Neither, however, was particularly compelling, in Chrysostom's estimation. Procreation is unnecessary since "the earth and sea and all the world has been inhabited."⁶⁷ While marriage was deemed useful for "those who are still now caught up in their passions," it too is a relic of a bygone age.⁶⁸ The emphasis here is on the revolutionary aspects of Christianity. Just as children eventually reach adulthood, Chrysostom sees Christian society as having finally reached the point where it can abandon marriage. This is not merely a reformation of sexual relations, but rather a reconstruction of society as a whole.

The large numbers of virgins and ascetics whom Chrysostom saw around him were evidence for him that this change was taking place. The previous worldly construction of society was being replaced by a spiritual one. Formulating virginity in this way removed virgins' bodies from the traditional cycle of replenishing the population of the ancient city.⁶⁹ Virginity thus represents the triumph of Christianity over paganism and the emergence of Christian society from its 'childhood.'

There will no longer be marriage or birth pains, sexual pleasure or intercourse, an abundance of money or the management of possessions, food or clothing, agriculture or seamanship, crafts or construction, cities or homes, but some other system and way of life. All of these will cease to exist in a little while.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *De Virginitate*, 19.1.5.

⁶⁸ *De Virginitate*, 19.2.1.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Body and Society*, 5-16.

⁷⁰ *De Virginitate*, 73.4.9.

The characteristics of virginity that Chrysostom describes are, predictably, based upon social conduct rather than inner spirituality; although the physical aspects of virginity had little or no meaning without the moral character that should also be present.⁷¹ The need for proper spiritual conduct was matched by the need for social behavior. This argument is by no means unique to Chrysostom and can be traced to Paul.

The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.⁷²

However, Chrysostom places more emphasis on the point. “If you take away ‘decorum and devotion,’ you cut out the very heart of virginity.... But when you possess it along with perfect conduct, you have the roots and foundation for goodness.”⁷³ Proper social behavior was critical for Chrysostom’s understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. Antioch in Chrysostom’s time consisted of many rival groups frequently in competition with one another: including various Christian factions, polytheists, and Jews. Chrysostom’s public arguments for Christian preeminence rested largely upon the social conduct of its most holy members. The appearance of improper conduct was equal to an actual lack of spirituality.

It was within this context that Chrysostom also criticized the cohabitation of virgins. To begin his treatise directed against men cohabitating with virgins, Chrysostom set out the framework within which men and women might have personal contact. For him, two possible

⁷¹ *De Virginitate*, 5.2.

⁷² 1 Cor. 7.32-35.

⁷³ *De Virginitate*, 80.2.1.

states exist within which men and women can interact: marriage and prostitution. He first needed to defend marriage as legitimate to uphold his orthodox position. He reasons that marriage is valid since it is “of ancient origin and God was its legislator.” Continuing along the same lines, prostitution is seen as newer and inspired by demons. Still newer, with a clear association with prostitution, is a third practice, which was syneisaktism.⁷⁴ This progression clearly indicates that Chrysostom perceives the personal association between men and women as inherently based upon sexual relations. He is willing to excuse the problems associated with marriage because God ordained marriage as a method of procreation and of reducing licentious desire; however, prostitution and syneisaktism have no such divine sanction. Chrysostom does not explicitly accuse those practicing syneisaktism of engaging in sexual activity, but his constant sarcasm leaves little doubt of his thoughts. Moreover, he does explicitly argue that there had to be a certain amount of enjoyment for the men and women living together. He postulates that the men involved in syneisaktism “would not enjoy such a despicable reputation nor would there be so many scandals, if a violent and tyrannical pleasure were not found in their cohabitation.”⁷⁵ What possible motivation could there be for men choosing to live with women other than desire, Chrysostom muses.

With this as the basis for his understanding of syneisaktism, Chrysostom can dismiss the “excuses” provided by his opposition. Chrysostom provides a distorted, but nonetheless revealing, summary of his opponents’ position. Defenders of mixed-sex monasticism claim:

[t]he virgin is unprotected, without a husband or in-laws; often she does not have even a father or a brother. She needs someone to lend her a hand, to comfort her

⁷⁴ *C. eos qui subintroductas habent virgins* [*C. eos*], 1.1; Clark, 'Instruction and Refutation', 164.

⁷⁵ *C. eos* 1.2.9; Clark, 'Instruction and Refutation', 165.

solitude, to come to her defense in all occasions, and to establish her in a haven of considerable security.⁷⁶

Chrysostom, of course, does not accept this proposition and declares that syneisaktism has nothing to do with either charity or legal protection, but is based rather upon pleasure. He disregards the notion that cohabitation can be seen as an act of charity by which men help poor, disadvantaged women. He argues that if charity were the true goal, the sick and the impoverished abounding in Antioch are in much greater need. Furthermore, there are many elderly women who also seem to be in greater distress than the young “nubile and pretty” girls who are the usual choice for cohabitation.⁷⁷ Chrysostom concludes that charity clearly cannot be the true goal of men who pick young and healthy women over the aged and infirm.

Chrysostom’s dismissal of legal and social protections as a rationale for cohabitation is particularly telling. While all Romans who were no longer under their father’s power were theoretically independent, children and adult women were required to have a legal guardian.⁷⁸ The rationale for this was that children needed to have a guardian because of their inexperience, while women needed protection because of the weakness of their gender. Ulpian stated that “even women who have attained their majority, on account of their levity of disposition, require to be kept in tutelage.”⁷⁹ The *tutela mulierum* was not originally designed to help women who were ignorant of legal affairs. Rather, it was created in response to the concern that women might alienate property that should rightfully be passed down through the family. In order to regulate the control of family property, *res Mancipi*, the closest agnatic relative was appointed to

⁷⁶ *C. eos*, 6.1.5; Clark, 'Instruction and Refutation', 179.

⁷⁷ *C. eos*, 7.7.2; Clark, 'Instruction and Refutation', 185.

⁷⁸ Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 112.

⁷⁹ *Institutiones* I. 144. Edward Poste, ed and trans. *Gai Institutiones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904). [*U*]eteres enim uoluerunt feminas, etiamsi perfectae aetatis sint, propter animi leuitatem in tutela esse.

be the guardian of a woman upon the father's death in the republic. The woman theoretically needed the approval of the guardian to effect any action that might harm the *res Mancipi*.⁸⁰

By the third century, however, this function was largely ceremonial for adult women. The guardian could not compel the woman to do anything against her will, and he could be forced to give his consent to her wishes in court.⁸¹ The concept that women were intrinsically unsuited to manage their own affairs was being challenged. In his second-century *Institutiones*, Gaius had written against the argument that women were incompetent and "frequently subject to deception," concluding that such ideas were "specious rather than true." He goes on to say:

women of full age administer their own property, and it is a mere formality that in some transactions their guardian interposes his sanction; and in these cases he is frequently compelled against his own will to give his sanction.⁸²

The only point in the system of *tutela mulieris* that seems at that point to have applied was in relation to young women. In the third century, the age of majority for Roman girls was twelve, and very few girls of that age would have been capable of running their own affairs. In this sense, the *tutela* made sense as a safeguard for these women and allowed their estates to be managed without interference.⁸³

Within this context, the persuasiveness of Chrysostom's assault on the protection of young virgins is no longer self-evident. The choice of men to cohabit with young virgins

⁸⁰ Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 112-113.

⁸¹ Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 113.

⁸² *Institutiones* I. 190. *Feminas uero perfectae aetatis in tutela esse fere nulla pretiosa ratio suasisse uidetur; nam quae uulgo creditur, quia leuitate animi plerumque decipiuntur et aequum erat eas tutorum auctoritate regi, magis speciosa uidetur quam uera; mulieres enim, quae perfectae aetatis sunt, ipsae sibi negotia tractant et in quibusdam causis dicis gratia tutor interponit auctoritatem suam, saepe etiam inuitus auctor fieri a praetore cogitur.*

⁸³ Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 115. By the late fourth century, this was officially replaced by the position of *curator minoris* but the essential purpose was much the same.

certainly reverberates with implied sexual tension, but the relationship described is well within the Roman tradition of protecting young women in this manner and need not imply any type of physical relationship. Young female virgins would certainly have as much need for legal advice and protection as a male child of the same age until they reached their majority. Chrysostom's rejoinder to seek old women and the poor does not make sense in the context of *tutela*. If the young women do not have family with which to live, as Chrysostom clearly admits is possible, then sharing a household with their *tutela* is not really so strange.

While Chrysostom would have preferred to keep virgins under the care of the church, there seems to have been a separate faction that tried to incorporate traditional Roman methods to care for and protect the young. In his own way, however, Chrysostom was acting in a very conservative manner as well. He wished to preserve a strong sense of differentiation between Christianity and secular pagan culture. As seen in the above discussion of virginity, he saw Christianity as a radical reformation of society. Taking his cue from Paul's call for a focus upon the spiritual world instead of the physical one (1 Cor. 7), Chrysostom saw the large number of virgins in Antioch as a sign of the coming of a Christian age. Peter Brown has characterized the development of Antioch as a wholly Christian city as "the poignant, tragically unrealized wish of his life."⁸⁴ The relationship between pagan and Christian culture was the same as the relationship between the world and the spirit. Chrysostom believed that as the age of Christianity drew near, as was evidenced through virgins, the worldly characteristics of the traditional society should and would be set aside.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Brown, *Body and Society*, 136.

⁸⁵ *De Virginitate*, 73.

Chrysostom wished to maintain the revolutionary status of Christianity. His objections to the system of *tutela mulieris* can be understood within this framework. This practice, he argued, had no benefit for anyone when it is applied to the cohabitation of men and virgins. Not only are both individuals involved corrupted by the arrangement, the institutional Church suffers great harm as well. Chrysostom's arguments focus on the way that the practical elements of cohabitation affect the participants' spiritual and worldly affairs. He spends a great deal of time showing how the perceived benefits of living together do not actually exist and, even if they did, would cause great harm to the cohabitants or others. Practically speaking, there was thus no benefit for anyone concerned.

Unfortunately, we have very little information as to what the actual practices were in the households that were practicing spiritual marriage. The best source of information here is in the internal evidence of Chrysostom's work, but even this is extremely limited. In his *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant*, which was written in dialogic form, Chrysostom imagines himself responding to the objection of a supporter of syneisaktic practice that the participants are above reproach since they take stern measures to keep themselves separate in the household.

[L]et us first examine what goes on inside the house. Let us grant that they are separated by walls and sleep in separate rooms, for no man, I think, even if he chose to behave in an extremely disgraceful fashion, would go so far in making an example of himself as to sleep in the same room with a virgin. Then let them be separated by walls – so what? That concession is not sufficient to free them from suspicion!⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *Quod regulares*, 10.4.

Chrysostom's exclusion of the possibility that ascetic men and women might share the same room – and even the same bed – should be rejected out of hand. There are numerous attestations to this practice in patristic literature, with perhaps the most famous coming from Jerome's letter to Eustochium.⁸⁷ The tenor of Chrysostom's argument would suggest, however, that he did believe the arrangement described above to be the case and unlike Jerome, did not explicitly accuse the men and women in spiritual marriages of actually having sexual intercourse. Furthermore, his concern seems to be directed more at the appearance of impropriety rather than the suspicion of it actually having occurred. However, what Chrysostom has excluded is the idea that men and women might find these arrangements both spiritually edifying and a limited form of friendship between the sexes at a time when such friendships were exceedingly rare.⁸⁸

Episcopal criticism of the close association of men and women also found expression in conciliar judgments. At least six church councils in the fourth century opposed the association of monks and nuns, most notably the First Council of Nicaea, which banned monks from cohabitating with so-called *mulieres subintroductae* or any women except close relatives.⁸⁹ Immediately preceded by a canon concerned with the suspension of recently baptized clergy found to have committed crimes of the soul (*animae delictum*), this passage seems to follow

⁸⁷ Ep. 22 14.1, in I. Hilberg, ed., *S. Eusebii Hieronymi Opera*, CSEL 54 (Vienna, 1910), 143–211: *Pudet dicere, pro nefas: triste, sed verum est: unde in Ecclesias Agapetarum pestis introiit? unde sine nuptiis aliud nomen uxorum? immo unde novum concubinarum genus? Plus inferam: unde meretrices univirae? Eadem domo, uno cubiculo, saepe uno tenentur et lectulo, et suspiciosos nos vocant, si aliquid existimamus. Frater sororem virginem deserit, coelibem spernit virgo germanum, fratrem quaerit extraneum, et cum in eodem proposito esse se simulent, quaerunt alienorum spiritale solatium, ut domi habeant carnale commercium.* Cyprian also condemned syneisaktism in his letter to the deacon Pomponius who was appealing his excommunication for cohabitating and sharing a bed with consecrated virgins. William Hartel, ed. *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani Opera Omnia*, CSEL3 (Vienna, 1868), 472–8.

⁸⁸ Clark, 'Friendship between the Sexes', 35–106.

⁸⁹ For example, Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 6–7, canon III: *Interdixit per omnia magna synodus, nec episcopo nec presbytero nec alicui prorsus, qui est in clero, licere subintroductam habere mulierem, nisi forte vel eas tantum personas quae suspicionem effugiunt.*

Chrysostom's presumptions about relationships between men and women being essentially sexual in nature. The term *mulieres subintroductae* also carries a distinctly pejorative aspect to it, possibly indicating both the subterfuge and the sexual innuendo that the bishops clearly believed to be at the heart of the practice. That mothers, sisters, aunts and any other "person who is above suspicion" were regarded as exceptions, underscores the idea that the concerns of the council were about sexual impropriety.⁹⁰

A similar provision in the twenty-seventh canon of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 marks an even starker contrast with the spiritual equality expressed by Jerome and his contemporaries. In this canon, the council prohibited the actions of those "who carry off girls under pretext of cohabitation, or who are accomplices or co-operate with those who carry them off."⁹¹ The canon goes on to stipulate that any cleric found guilty of such an offense is to be stripped of his rank. Moreover, if monks or the laity are at fault, they are to be anathematized. In this case, the council took the presumption of the impropriety found in Chrysostom's invective and the First Council of Nicaea and radicalized it to the point of their envisioning outright forcible rape under spiritual pretences.⁹² The rhetorical underpinnings of this canon are implied in that the canon itself acknowledges that its supporters are advancing a logic of cooperation and unity. The sharp rhetoric, harsh penalties and the concern that clerics, monks and laity might be involved all indicate that the practice was widespread. In the end, no less than twenty-three

⁹⁰ Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 6-7.

⁹¹ Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 98-99. *Eos, qui rapiunt mulieres sub nomine simul habitandi cooperantes aut conhibentes raptoribus, decrevit sancta synodus ut, si quidem clerici sint, decidant gradu proprio, si vero laici, anathematizentur.*

⁹² The term *raptor* has a broader range of meaning than simply rape, but the sexualized context of the conciliar decree would seem to support this reading.

councils in both the East and West denounced the practice of syneisakticism between the third and seventh centuries.⁹³

Clerical rulings of the fourth and fifth centuries were also echoed in the Eastern Mediterranean by a series of decrees in Roman imperial law under the Emperor Justinian. Under the direction of Tribonian and a team of legal experts, Justinian directed a reform of the sprawling Theodosian Code compiled a century earlier. The results of their efforts were issued as the Justinianic Code (*Codex*) in 529. This was followed by a compilation (*Digest*) of a thousand years of legal rulings, consultations and rescripts that condensed the contents of 1,528 law-books into a mere 800,000 words and was completed in only three years in 533.⁹⁴ In addition, Justinian and his courts continued to add to the legal rulings until his death in 565. These additions (*Novellas*), appended to the previous parts, came to be known collectively as the *Corpus iuris civilis*, the body of civil laws.

While the description of this compilation as “the body of civil law” was meant to differentiate it from the canon law of the church, the reality of the situation was that Justinian did not refrain from rulings that stipulated proper religious conduct. Ranging from high matters of theology to detailed rulings on the proper conduct of clergy, Justinian felt justified in legislating for all levels of society. Justinian believed himself to be the law incarnate (*nomos empsychos*)⁹⁵ and “wished all the ancient law, in so far as it was now codified, to be regarded as if it had come

⁹³ It is not necessarily the case that every instance of conciliar censure indicates an active case of syneisakticism or double monasteries, but underlies the fact that the issue of the proper levels of interaction between religious men and women was very much of concern.

⁹⁴ A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 1:278-9; Peter Stein, *Roman Law in European History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 32-5. The revisions included in the *Digest* and the accompanying handbook for beginning law-students in the schools at Beirut called the *Institutes*, necessitated further revisions to the *Codex* which were completed the following year in 534.

⁹⁵ Michael Maas, *John Lydus and the Roman Past: Antiquarianism and Politics in the Age of Justinian* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 14-6; idem, 'Roman History and Christian Ideology in Justinianic Reform Legislation', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 40 (1986), 17-31, 28.

out of his imperial – and therefore vicariously divine – mouth itself.”⁹⁶ That Justinian took his Christian religion seriously is beyond doubt. His depiction in the mosaics of Ravenna standing with Abraham and Christ at the center of creation, the justifications of his reconquest of Africa and Italy as wars of religion to overthrow the Arian kingdoms of the Vandals and Goths, and his attempts to reconcile monophysite and Chalcedonian factions within the empire all show Justinian’s presentation of himself in religious terms.

It is within this context that we must understand Justinian’s continued interest in the ongoing debates concerning the proper relationship between male and female religious which spanned the period between 529 and 546.⁹⁷ The initial version of the *Codex*, published in 529, includes a prohibition against mixed-sex monasticism which reads: “We prohibit all men living in monasteries to associate with chaste women or to devise an occasion for communicating with them.”⁹⁸ That this refers to active double monasteries, and not simply relationships between religious men and women, is made clear by the subsequent stipulation that “men shall live in separate monasteries (*singulis monasteriis*) by themselves apart from the holy women who for whatever cause have been joined to it, and the women should live by themselves, not intermingling with the men so that all suspicion of shameful dealings will be entirely removed.”⁹⁹ Much like Chrysostom’s concern with the decorum of religious men and women

⁹⁶ Gerhart B. Ladner, 'Justinian's Theory of Law and the Renewal Ideology of The "Leges Barbarorum"', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 119 (1975), 191-200; Averil Cameron, "Government and Institutions" in A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby, eds. *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600*. Cambridge University Press, 2000, 69.

⁹⁷ Hilpisch, *Die Doppelklöster*, 19-24; Pargoire, 'Les monastères doubles', 21-2; Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 68ff.

⁹⁸ Paul Krüger and Theodor Mommsen, *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Dublin: Apud Weidmannos, 1970), 29-30. *Codex* I, iii, 43: *Interdicimus omnibus qui in monasteriis degunt cum sanctimonialibus mulieribus conversari vel causam comminisci communicandi cum iis.*

⁹⁹ *Codex* I, iii, 43.1-2: *Sed viri per se soli in singulis monasteriis commorentur separati a sanctimonialibus, quae ob quamlibet causam eis adgregatae sunt, et solae per se mulieres, non viris commixtae, ut omnis omnino suspicio indecori commercii tollatur.*

cohabitating, this law also focused on the suspicion of improper conduct while in no way alleging that it was actually taking place.

The wording of this statute could indicate that the authors saw double monasteries as communities of women attached to pre-existing male communities. This perception is reinforced by the subsequent provisions that an aged deacon or priest be appointed to tend to women's spiritual needs; however, under no circumstances was he to remain in their presence longer than necessary.¹⁰⁰ But this impression that the male element in the communities was dominant or even the most numerous may be misleading. The statute stipulates that the men are to remain and the women transferred if they are more numerous, but holds out the equal possibility that the inverse might be the case. Either way, the property of the monastery was to be divided proportionally and no preference is indicated for either the men or the women.¹⁰¹

The importance and resilience of double monasteries within this society is attested by the fact that the imperial court had some concern as to whether the bishops of the empire would actually follow its directives. Following the prohibition against the cohabitation of monastic men and women and the instructions on how this was to be carried out, the author of the statute threatened bishops with extreme punishments should its dictates not be followed. Justinian warned the bishops that should they "suppose our order to be superfluous... fail to investigate these matters carefully, or correct this obvious offense in the manner proscribed," they would be

¹⁰⁰ *Codex I, iii, 43.5: Ad necessaria auterit negotia mulierum per se viventium unus senex a beatissimo civitatis episcopo designetur, ad divina vero ministeria peragenda sanctamque communionem praebeendam presbyter unus et unus diaconus honestae vitae deputentur, qui ea sola quae dicta sunt facere debeant, non tamen commorari et habitare ibidem.*

¹⁰¹ *Codex I, iii, 43.2-5: Et si quidem virorum maior pars est, mulieres provisione religiosissimi uniuscuiusque civitatis episcopi in alium convenientem locum transferri iisque monasterium adsignari convenit, in quo per se ipsas in posterum honeste commorari debebunt. Sin autem mulierum vel maior vel idem numerus invenietur, viri transferantur, mulieres vero in monasterio remaneant. Res autem eius monasterii mobiles immobilesque et se moventes qui exeunt cum iis qui manent pro rata parte dividant.*

subject to the judgment of God, imperial sanction, removal from their position, and even more stringent punishments.¹⁰²

We are on much firmer ground for historical interpretation when we move to the second instance of the regulation of double monasteries in Justinianic law.¹⁰³ In 546, Justinian repeated his desire to separate male and female members of double monasteries. This sanction appears in the thirty-sixth chapter of the work amidst a series of sections that sought to affirm the proper elections and conduct of bishops, abbots and monks.¹⁰⁴ The preface of this particular *novella* indicates that its intention was to pull together a number of issues concerning the administration and privileges of ecclesiastical offices and monastic houses and handle them collectively. As such, it offers insight into the concerns of Justinian's administration about monks and nuns in double monasteries.

One of the recurring topics in this *novella* was Justinian's attempt to draw firm lines between the ecclesiastical world and the secular world, with particular attention to the issue of clerical status and privilege before the courts. Among the subjects taken up were efforts to ensure that bishops could not be compelled to come to court in either a civil or criminal case. Rather, officials must come to them. Harsh penalties were assessed on any magistrate who violated the bishop's privileges in this respect, and the *novella* stipulated that transgressors were to be

¹⁰² *Codex I, iii, 43.10: Verum ne vel ipsi religiosissimi episcopi hoc praeceptum nostrum supervacaneum putent, scire eos volumus se, si quis eorum visus fuerit non cum omni diligentia haec investigasse vel manifestam offensionem non secundum praedictos modos emendasse, domini dei iudicio obnoxios fore et in se iam imperiali motu nostro verso circa ipsum sacerdotium periclitaturos neque alia maiore animadversione vacaturos.*

¹⁰³ The process of codification, however, makes it difficult to draw too many inferences from the Justinianic code as the specific background and context of the law was removed being considered excess verbiage. While such considerations are necessary when one attempts to summarize 3,000,000 lines of writing, historically speaking without knowing the context of its composition and further information on what prompted its implementation, we are left with what Jill Harries called "a net full of holes". Jill Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 123.7-8.

deprived of office and made to pay reparations. Furthermore, the bailiff involved was to be tortured and exiled.¹⁰⁵ The concern was not simply a matter of protecting the bishops, as absenteeism on the part of the bishops was certainly discouraged. Rather, it seems also to reflect a genuine interest in safeguarding the integrity and purity of the bishops' position. Furthermore, bishops were explicitly prohibited from leaving their diocese for over a year's time and living either in another province or in Constantinople on the grounds that their presence was required for the proper functioning of the church.¹⁰⁶ Along similar lines, attention was paid to the proper qualifications of the clergy, and those without letters or education were summarily barred from ordination in chapter 12.¹⁰⁷

This concern with matters of practical administration was equaled, and perhaps exceeded, by demands for moral rectitude and decorum among ecclesiastics, with specific attention to matters of sexual propriety. Significantly, the concern did not seem to be with the actual doings of bishops or deaconesses, monks or nuns. What animates Justinian's *novella* is rather the perception of impropriety. In the same chapter 12 that stipulates the proper qualifications for ordination, the competence of a cleric to perform the sacraments is linked with his having lived a proper life. This was defined as having no concubines and either living chastely or with a wife who was neither a widow or separated from her husband.¹⁰⁸ Chapters 29-30 expand upon this concern for the social perception of the clergy by banning them from being seen with members of the opposite sex who were not immediate members of their family. Chapter 29 forbade

¹⁰⁵ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 601; *Novellae* 123.7-8.

¹⁰⁶ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 601; *Novellae* 123.9.

¹⁰⁷ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 604; *Novellae* 123.12: *rectam fidem vitamque habent*.

¹⁰⁸ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 604; *Novellae* 123.13: *Clericos autera non aliter ordinari permittimus, nisi litteras sciant et rectam fidem vitamque habeant, et neque concubinam aut naturales habuerunt aut babeant filios, sed caste viventis aut uxorem legitimam et ipsara unam et primam habentes neque viduam neque separatam a viro neque aliter legibus aut ad secundas venit nuptias*.

presbyters, deacons, sub-deacons and all other clergy from bringing any woman into their house except their mother, daughters, sisters or any others who would escape all suspicion.¹⁰⁹ Chapter 30 continued the argument by prohibiting deaconesses from living with any man who might arouse suspicions that she was living a dishonorable life.¹¹⁰ The key motivation behind these provisions lay within the outside suspicions directed at the presbyter or the deaconesses. Official representatives of the church needed to be above any suspicion regarding their purity, and cohabitation would run afoul of societal values. These stipulations were paired with a series of provisions that sought to separate the secular world from the religious. Whether it was in the provincial legal courts or in the prohibition against laymen from holding any religious procession without the presence of the holy bishop, the overall thrust of the concerns of Justinian and his quaestor becomes quite clear.¹¹¹

When Justinian's attention turned to the regulation of cenobitic monasteries, it followed that he would take a dim view of mixed-sex monastic practices. Chapter 36 stipulates: "We command, moreover, that in all monasteries, called *coenobia*, following the monastic canons, all shall live and eat in one house and likewise all shall sleep separately so that they may communally attest for one another the testimony of a chaste life...." Exceptions were given to two groups: those whose medical needs dictated their absence, and those who had been active in the monastery for many years and wanted to continue to live separately. The *novella* then

¹⁰⁹ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 615, *Novellae* 123.29 *Presbyteris autem et diaconibus et subdiaconibus et omnibus in clero conscriptis non habentibus uxorem secundum sacros canones interdiximus etiam nos secundum sanctarum regularum virtutem mulierem aliquam in propria domo superinductam habere, tamen citra matrem aut sororem aut filiam et alias personas, quae omnem suspicionem effugiunt*

¹¹⁰ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 615; *Novellae* 123.30 *Diaconissam vero nullo modo cum viro, ex quo potest inhonestae vitae emergere suspicio, habitare permittimus*

¹¹¹ Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 616, *Novellae* 123.32 *Omnibus autem laicis interdiximus letanias facere sine sanctissimis episcopis et qui sub eis sunt reventissimis clericis qualiter enim est letania, in qua sacerdotes non inveniuntur et sollemnes faciunt orationes?*

continued by stipulating that: “In no part of our republic do we permit monks and nuns to dwell in the so-called double monasteries. Therefore, where such monasteries are found, the men should be separated from the women; the women are to remain in the monastery and the men are to found another monastery for themselves.”¹¹² The only rationale mentioned for the presence of the opposite sex was for the men to serve the sacramental needs of the women.

The difference between the laws of 529 and 546 is slight, with the only meaningful difference occurring in the stipulation that the monks were to decamp from the double monastery regardless of which sex was the majority.¹¹³ The concern with proper decorum was understood in terms of physical access between the sexes, as argued by Catherine Peyroux, but perhaps even more important was that such physical access might be understood by the community at large to be proof of the monks’ and nuns’ hypocrisy.¹¹⁴ The earlier chapters, governing individual behavior of clergy and deaconesses, stipulated that the only acceptable association between the sexes was limited to those who were above suspicion (*omnem suspicionem effugiunt*). Precisely whose suspicions are to be measured is left unclear. Whomever the audience, the double monasteries as institutions could never meet this standard. The simple proximity of the monks and the nuns was enough to cause concern and therefore to draw the condemnation of Justinian. But it is also worth noting what is absent. Nowhere is it argued that these monks and nuns were actually engaging in illicit sexual encounters or other unscrupulous behavior. The subject is

¹¹² Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 619; *Novellae* 123.36: *In omnibus autem monasteriis, quae coenobia dicuntur, iubemus secundum monachicos canones in uno habitaculo omnes habitare et communiter ali, et simili modo in uno habitaculo omnes separatim dormire, ut mutuam alterutris testimonium castae conversationis praebeant.... In nullo loco nostrae reipublicae in uno monasterio monachos et monastrias habitare vel dicta ducplicita esse monasteria permittimus. Ubi autem tale monasterium invenitur, omnibus modis iubemus viros a feminis separari, et feminas quidem in quo sunt monasterio remanere, viros autem aliud monasterium sibimet facere.*

¹¹³ Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 73-4.

¹¹⁴ Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 74.

simply not broached in the *novella*; clearly, however, the perception of the community was enough to stipulate the forced separation of the monks and nuns. The perception of sexual impropriety between cohabitating men and women was an inevitable consequence both of the social norms of the Eastern Roman world and of Justinian's attempts to force a permanent religious consensus upon the empire.

If Justinian's disapproval of double monasteries could be expected, the apparent ineffectiveness of the civil and religious authorities in prohibiting them may not be. Condemnations from major ecclesiastical figures, repeated declarations of church councils against the practice, and the dictates and threats of the Justinianic Code all failed to eliminate mixed-sex monasticism from the Eastern Roman Empire.¹¹⁵ Jules Pargoire has shown that Justinian's suppression of double monasteries had limited effect, since foundations of double monasteries continued into the eighth century. Furthermore, those foundations – which were often in very close proximity to one another – continued to share the same land, resources, and incomes and to engender the same moral hazards that Justinian had so strongly condemned.¹¹⁶ When the Second Council of Nicaea took up the issue of double monasteries, in 787, it was forced to restate its opposition to the practice.¹¹⁷ While councils might often restate issues of little practical importance, the twentieth canon of the council condemning double monasteries

¹¹⁵ Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 74-5.

¹¹⁶ Pargoire, 'Les monastères doubles', 22-3: "Il est donc vrai, on le voit que Justinien décréta la suppression des monastères doubles; est-il également vrai qu'il les supprima? N'en croyez rien. Les lois impériales n'étaient pas assez fortes dans l'empire byzantin pour obtenir toujours d'être obéies..... De là, après quelques réparations à la villa et à la ferme du latifonds, après quelques aménagements hâtifs, après quelques bâtisses nouvelles, de là sortait un monastère double. C'étaient deux communautés distinctes dont le personnel provenait en très grande partie de la parente ou de la domesticité du couple fondateur..... Mais les deux communautés logeaient en des constructions parfois adjacentes, souvent très rapprochées. Elles se partageaient la propriété indivise des mêmes biens-fonds, elles vivaient sur les mêmes revenus et disposaient des mêmes ressources, elles suivaient la même impulsion morale, elles entretenaient d'in cessantes relations. Bref, elles avaient bien tous les caractères, non pas d'un monastère mixte, mais d'un monastère double, et tous les dangers moraux s'y rencontraient que Justinien eut voulu en écarter."

¹¹⁷ The Second Council of Nicea would establish a long-enduring standard of orthodoxy in Byzantine life. See Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (New York: Viking, 2009), 270.

seems to refer to an ongoing situation. Not only does the canon specifically prohibit any more double monasteries from being established in the future – from which one can only assume that they were continuing to be founded up until that point – the council stipulates that it was only addressing the issue because it had become a recent cause of complaint. Finally, even while generally condemning the construction of double monasteries, the council was forced to accept those already in existence if they followed the rule of St. Basil. It did, however, echo the rule's general concern for avoiding the appearance of scandal by limiting the opportunities for men and women to have any contact with each other beyond what was absolutely necessary.

The nature of the condemnation in the Second Council of Nicaea makes it abundantly clear that double monasteries had continued to exist in the Eastern Mediterranean. Equally important however, is that the council continued the pattern of criticizing double monasteries as representing potentially scandalous behavior, and not as a matter of theology or belief. This would be a model that continued with respect to the double monasteries of Western Europe.

Chapter Two - The Place of Double Monasteries in Anglo-Saxon Society

In the course of the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxon political elite came to adopt and adapt Christian institutions and practices in order to retain and expand their hold on power. They did not do so in a vacuum, but put into practice the successful models of the neighboring Merovingian and Irish kingdoms. The rapid expansion of religious foundations in early seventh-century Gaul foreshadowed the corresponding enthusiasm for the endowment of monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England in the decades following 660. These monastic institutions brought substantial benefits to the royal dynasties that founded them, including the formation of a sacral underpinning to legitimate their rule, the protection of dynastic landholding, and the creation of major institutions from which to spread the new state religion and administer dynastic lands. The enthusiastic support shown by the nobility and the large land grants they made to the monasteries speak to the value these dynasties placed on the monasteries.

The preferred form of monastic foundation, the double-monastery borrowed from northern Gaul, offered the advantage of better utilizing female members of the dynasties for additional security in an insecure political environment. Concomitantly, a series of practices and ideologies were developed which legitimated an attenuated form of female authority that supported the nobility's approach to political and social control. In this chapter, I will show how these practices, however well-adapted they were to the landscape and political environment of late seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England, were nonetheless challenged by the arrival of Theodore of Tarsus and his Mediterranean Christian teaching.

Furthermore, within this context, it will also become clear why Aldhelm, as the son of the king of Wessex and the most prestigious Anglo-Saxon scholar of his generation, penned a

defense of the double monastery. Just as Theodore of Tarsus' experience was informed by the religious and imperial authorities in the Eastern Mediterranean who regularly showed antipathy towards the double monastery, Aldhelm too was shaped by his environment. But Aldhelm's experience of political and religious culture was quite different from Theodore's background. To appreciate how he came to such a different theological conclusion concerning double monasteries we must first investigate the ways in which Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical culture developed over the course of the seventh century.

To understand the ways in which the Anglo-Saxon kings may have understood the practical benefit of converting to Christianity, we need first to examine the experience of their nearest and most powerful neighbors in Merovingian France. The Merovingian kings became Christian with the conversion of Clovis to Nicene Trinitarian Christianity in 496.¹ This followed his consolidation of Frankish power throughout northern and southern Gaul, inaugurating a new relationship between the recent Germanic ruling class and the Gallo-Roman majority within Gaul. Hitherto, the political situation in late antique western Europe was typified by heavily Romanized 'barbarian' rulers, such as the Ostrogoths in Northern Italy and the Visigoths in Spain and Southern Gaul. One of the primary difficulties faced by both Gothic kingdoms was the religious differences between the Arian Goths and the predominately Trinitarian populations that they ruled.² These differences meant that there would be a certain amount of tension between the

¹ The dating of Clovis' conversion is in some dispute. Ian Wood argues against the traditional dating as a manifestation of Gregory of Tours' attempts to frame Clovis' rule as an exemplar for later kings which had little claims for historical accuracy. Ian Wood, 'Clovis, Gregory of Tours and Pro-Merovingian Propaganda', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 71 (1993), 271-6. A summary of the arguments for retaining the original dating can be found in Mark Spencer, 'Dating the Baptism of Clovis, 1886-1993', *Early Medieval Europe* 3 (1994), 97-116.

² Arianism is a blanket term for Christians who professed a Christology that emphasized the created nature of Christ and an essential separation between God the father and Christ. It was opposed by the Trinitarian view – accepted as orthodox at the Council of Nicea in 325 – that emphasized the coeternity and coequality of God and the Son. The Ostrogoths and Visigoths held to the Arian Christology as it was accepted as orthodox and supported by the

two populations and it provided a constant justification for outside destabilization from Constantinople.³ Clovis' situation was different in that the Salian Franks had been deeply immersed in the political life of Gaul for generations, and his ascension did not bring about the level of dramatic change seen with the Gothic conquests in Italy and southern France. Further, Clovis did not attempt – and indeed, had no need – to create a separate and parallel identity for his armed followers as the Ostrogoths attempted to do.⁴ For while much of the Northern Italian aristocracy was willing to accept and support the Ostrogothic court, the court clearly saw a need to justify its position, as the efforts of Cassiodorus and Jordannes to insert the Goths into Roman historical traditions attest.⁵

Clovis' decision to convert to Trinitarian Christianity was fraught with political implications. On the one hand, by accepting the religious theology of the majority of his population, Clovis was able to integrate the Franks with the Gallo-Romans who made up the majority of the still-intact Roman bureaucracy. Additionally, the bishops of Gaul held important administrative functions and often served as representatives to their populations, which made securing their loyalty all the more important for the Franks.⁶ But perhaps even more important is that Clovis was politically opportunistic in that he was able to garner political support from the Eastern Roman Empire, differentiate himself from the rival Ostrogoths and Visigoths to his

emperors Constantinus II and Valens whom they served in a military capacity. See Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 105.

³ Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400-1000* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 30-1; Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 108-15.

⁴ Geary, *Myth of Nations*, 116-7.

⁵ Cassiodorus' letters were more literary in design than was usual from chancellery epistles and had a great deal in common with the more elaborate letters that we see from contemporaries such as Symmachus. The literary nature of these governmental epistles may have served to further make the Gothic regime more palatable to the Roman aristocracy through Cassiodorus' literary talent.

⁶ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 45-73; Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 110-1; Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86.

south, and win the support of his Gallo-Roman subjects.⁷ The earliest models of rulership adopted by Clovis heavily emphasized late-Roman imperial titles, but this dramatically changed in the course of the seventh century when they began to take on a much more ecclesiastical tone.⁸ According to Gregory of Tours, whereas Clovis was styled as ‘Consul’ and ‘Augustus’, Chlothar II was hailed with the biblical formula *rex et sacerdos* (king and priest) and enjoined by Church leaders to follow the Christian principles of “wisdom in judgement, defence of the church and its representatives, and aid for the poor”.⁹ The description of kings in ecclesiastical terms was a distinct departure from earlier usage and marked a new development in the integration of religious imagery in Northern European rulership. Yet, this image of a Christian king promoted by clerical propagandists both from within and outside of the court, should not disguise the reality that Chlothar was just as much a violent and bloody war-leader as his predecessors. As Yitzhak Hen has shown in his analysis of liturgical texts from Late Merovingian Gaul, the reality of rulership still required a Merovingian king to be a successful war-leader in order to maintain his status, even for those who rarely ventured into battle themselves.¹⁰

The evidence for Clovis’ conversion is fragmented at best, but what is clear is that his conversion was a communal affair, intimately associated with the identity and fortunes of the

⁷ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (London: Methuen, 1962), 169. Clovis’ conversion was part of a propaganda effort in which he associated himself with the larger Roman world by taking Roman imperial titles, wearing imperial clothes and harkening back to Roman triumphal processions. Wood, ‘Clovis, Gregory of Tours and Pro-Merovingian Propaganda’, 271-6.

⁸ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 47.

⁹ Yitzhak Hen, ‘The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul’, *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998), 277-90 284.

¹⁰ As the liturgy was intended for a large public audience it can serve as a particularly useful guide to the expectations and assumptions of rulership that guided the late Merovingian kings. As Yitzhak Hen has noted, “[m]atters of justice and piety were, of course, important to the masses as well, but it seems that they were rather less important than victory and peace.” Hen, ‘Kingship in Merovingian Gaul’, 286.

Franks as a whole.¹¹ Gregory of Tours' report that Clovis declared that he could only convert to Christianity if his people accepted the new religion should therefore not be surprising. And while some skepticism regarding Gregory's claim that three thousand of Clovis' followers converted at his baptism is reasonable, it is clear that Christianity quickly became part and parcel of Merovingian kingship and culture.¹² By Clovis' death in 511, he had succeeded in creating a successor kingdom that rivaled any in Western Europe, was the preferred diplomatic partner of the emperor in Constantinople and the bishop of Rome, and had secured a prominent place in the politics of Northern Europe and the Mediterranean.¹³

The Institutional Church and Aristocratic Ruling Strategies

Following Clovis' reign, Merovingian society became Christianized very rapidly. Christianity infused Merovingian politics, society, and both popular and aristocratic culture.¹⁴ As noted above, one measure of the degree to which Christianity became associated with the Merovingian elite is the large-scale program of building churches and monasteries by both royalty and the aristocracy.¹⁵ In addition to the influence on specific monastic practices, the Anglo-Saxon nobility also would have been presented with a strong model of how to utilize monastic institutions in pursuit of their dynastic strategies.¹⁶ It is not a coincidence that the adoption of a Christian ideal of rulership coincided with the rise of a vigorous Christian aristocracy in Northern Gaul. Susan Wood's comprehensive research into proprietary churches,

¹¹ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 5; Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 212-6.

¹² Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* II.31, eds. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* (Hannover: 1937-51).

¹³ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), 49.

¹⁴ Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, A.D. 481-751* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).

¹⁵ Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 152-63.

¹⁶ Regine Le Jan, 'Convents, Violence, and Competition for Power in Seventh-Century Francia', in F. Theuvs, M. De Jong and C.V. Rhijn (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 243-69.

defined as “small to middle-range churches at [the] grass-roots level,” is of critical importance in understanding the ways in which the adaptation of Christianity opened up new opportunities for the nobility.¹⁷ These churches were founded in large numbers by land-owners and demonstrates the ways in which the Christian religion offered innovative techniques for securing their positions. The rationale for the foundations was probably not immediate monetary gain, since the donations and offerings would outweigh the costs incurred in the foundation. Wood identifies the ability to hold and secure land within the family dynasty as the primary advantage for founding religious institutions such as proprietary churches.¹⁸

By donating land to a church or monastery controlled by relatives, Gallic aristocrats ensured that control over the revenues associated with the land would be retained by the family group. In contrast, ancestral family lands were “subject to powerful norms of natural heirs’ expectation, perhaps rigid rules of partible inheritance.”¹⁹ In contrast, the appeal of such donations was “that it could be used for gifts to the Church and at the same time kept intact for one line, or directed to chosen heirs in each generation.”²⁰ Additional benefits to the family might also include making their new foundation relatively more secure from robbery and often free from the burden of taxation. Furthermore, the fact that leading these institutions conferred a degree of status on both the family and the individual can be presumed by the “flow of men of birth and influence into the clergy”.²¹ These aristocrats could thus sustain their personal wealth by utilizing the wealth of the property-owning churches and help secure their dynasty at the same time.

¹⁷ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 41.

¹⁸ Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101.

¹⁹ Wood, *Proprietary Church*, 154-5.

²⁰ Wood, *Proprietary Church*, 154-5.

²¹ Wood, *Proprietary Church*, 102.

This same pattern of utilizing religious foundations to secure family lands can also be found in Anglo-Saxon England. One of the only surviving original charters for a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon monastic foundation, that of the monastery at Gloucester – founded in the late 670s by Osric and Oswald – describes the purpose of the foundation as creating a family monastery for the Hwiccan royal house. It shows how the founders were able not only to nominate the first abbess in their sister Cyneburh, but also to guarantee her successor in another kinswoman Eadburh.²² In essence the land-owners were “giving land to themselves” on the favorable basis of perpetual possession, with unrestricted rights of alienation.²³

Conversion of Anglo-Saxon England

The conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity, from the first tentative Gregorian mission in 597 to the conversion of Sussex and the Isle of Wight in 690, is one of the most often-described episodes in Anglo-Saxon history.²⁴ This attention is deserved owing both to the important effects the adoption and adaptation of Christianity and the larger implications of the reintegration of Britain into the Christian world. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to undertake a full recounting of the events during this period. It is important, however, to lay out both the context in which Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate* was produced and the society that it addressed; the establishment and operation of monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England was closely connected with the conversion to Christianity. In doing so, it is necessary to highlight the

²² Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003), 33.

²³ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 90.

²⁴ Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 340-47; Nicholas Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 53-119; Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity to England*, 51-77.

intensely political nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and the ways in which the development of the religious institutions occurred along political lines.²⁵

The Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity, like all conversions of this period, was deeply enmeshed within royal politics. This was not happenstance, but the direct result of papal policy and the way in which the conversions themselves took place. Over the course of the sixth century, the church in Rome pursued a strategy by which it attempted to convert the royal dynasties of the western successor states as a means of converting the kingdoms as a whole. Two earlier examples include the territories of Gaul and Spain which were converted to Catholic Christianity. In 496, Clovis, the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, converted to Catholic Christianity following his success at the battle of Tolbiac and the Visigothic King Reccared converted in 587. Pope Gregory's decision to send Augustine, the former prior of the monastery of St. Andrew on the Caelian Hill in Rome, to convert the court of King Æthelberht of Kent is thus the continuation of a long-held strategy.²⁶

The Anglo-Saxons were certainly not ignorant of Christianity before the arrival of the papal missionaries in Kent during the summer of 597. It seems certain that the Romano-British Church and an attendant hierarchy survived the Anglo-Saxon invasions, at least in Wales.

²⁵ This is not to imply that religious motivations were absent from the Anglo-Saxon converts, but rather that the political implications were never far from their consciousness. The state of our evidence demands caution when trying to ascertain what religious motivations might have been present.

²⁶ For the dating of the Battle of Tolbiac see Andre van de Vyver, 'La victoire contre Alamans et la conversion de Clovis', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 15 (1936), 859-914; idem, 'L'unique victoire contre les Alamans et la conversion de Clovis en 506', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 17 (1938), 793-813. See Mark Spencer, 'Dating the Baptism of Clovis, 1886-1993', *Early Medieval Europe* 3 (1994), 97-116 for an overview of the debate surrounding Clovis' conversion. By this I do not mean to argue that either conversion was actually brought about primarily by papal intervention, but merely as an indication of papal strategy. In the case of Reccared, for example, there is every reason to believe that he intentionally distanced his act of conversion from the papacy and is said to only have informed the pope some four years after the fact. For his part, Pope Gregory did not even congratulate Reccared on his conversion until 599 after his rapprochement with the Eastern Roman Emperor. Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, 53-57; Rachel L. Stocking, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus in the Visigothic Kingdom, 589-633* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 59-71; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Barbarian West, A.D. 400-1000: The Early Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 122ff.

Sometime during the fifth century, St. Patrick interacted with a functioning episcopal hierarchy in Britain through what seems to be a synod that brought him up on charges.²⁷ In the early sixth century, Gildas castigated bishops of the British Church for not adhering to proper standards of Christian practice.²⁸ Furthermore, Augustine would later meet with the “bishops and teachers of the neighboring British kingdom” at the famous Augustine’s Oak conferences²⁹ and would even encounter an active cult to the Romano-British martyr Sixtus in Kent.³⁰

The neighboring Frankish kingdoms were also Christian, and the first king to convert, Æthelberht of Kent, was married to a Christian princess of the Merovingian court. However, it is unlikely that Æthelberht converted at the direction of the Frankish rulers. Despite their powerful influence in the Kentish kingdom, Æthelberht’s conversion at the hands of the papal representative Augustine may indicate a deliberate distancing from Merovingian influence.³¹ The Frankish bishop Liudhard had already been in residence at Æthelberht’s court for approximately twenty years as his presence was mandated as part of Bertha’s betrothal to the Kentish king.³² The choice of a bishop, and not merely a confessor, to accompany Bertha indicates that Liudhard also was intended to play a political role between the Merovingian and Kentish courts.³³ It may be significant, therefore that Æthelberht only chose to convert after Liudhard’s death in 596.³⁴

²⁷ *Confessio*, 13; Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 130.

²⁸ Gildas, *De excidio Britanniae* 67. Michael Winterbottom, ed. and trans, *The ruin of Britain, and other works*. (London: Phillimore, 1978).

²⁹ *HE*, II.2, 134-42.

³⁰ Clare Stancliffe, 'The British Church and the Mission of Augustine', in R. Gameson (ed.) *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 121.

³¹ James Campbell, 'The First Century of Christianity in England', *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), 17; Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, 25; Ian Wood, *The Merovingian North Sea* (Alingsås, Sweden: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1983).

³² *HE*, I.25, 72-4.

³³ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 73.

³⁴ Little is known about Liudhard’s career. For arguments concerning the dating of Liudhard’s death see Higham, *Convert Kings*, 75.

A great deal of scholarship has focused on Gregory's choice to send Augustine to convert the English, and Æthelberht's eventual acceptance of the new faith. However, less attention has been paid to the political situation in Kent that allowed Gregory the opportunity to insert Augustine in the first place. Nicholas Higham argued that it "it is unlikely that Augustine would have been dispatched from Rome with a license to be consecrated bishop of the English" if Liudhard had still been alive.³⁵ Gregory had no wish to antagonize the Merovingians, and he went to considerable effort both before and after Augustine's mission to assure good relations between the papacy and Gaul. Furthermore, the Merovingian dynasty was engaged in a series of dynastic conflicts and their influence over Kent was on the wane. Gregory seized upon the opening provided by Liudhard's death and he quickly dispatched Augustine and his party of forty monks north. Æthelberht's choice to convert at the hands of a Roman outsider and to allow Augustine to missionize within his kingdom had as much to do with the regional political concerns of Kent as it did papal initiative.³⁶ By accepting baptism from the direct representative of Pope Gregory, Æthelberht could claim the prestige of being linked to the spiritual center of Christianity and use it as an asset to maintain his leadership both within his kingdom and without.³⁷

Bede's account of the conversion of Edwin (617-33) is narrated in his *Historica Ecclesiastica*. Sometime before 616, Edwin, claimant to the Northumbrian crown, was in exile at the court of Rædwald, having been pursued by the powerful sitting king of Northumbria, Æthelfrith.³⁸ Æthelfrith continued his pursuit of Edwin to Rædwald's kingdom of East Anglia

³⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 75.

³⁶ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 66-89.

³⁷ Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 344.

³⁸ Rædwald was an apostate Christian who may be the king buried at Sutton Hoo. He is said by Bede to have engaged in both Christian and pagan worship. This level of syncretism seems to be characteristic of the early

and engaged in intense diplomatic efforts to convince Rædwald to turn Edwin over to him alternating between large-scale bribes and threats of armed retribution.³⁹ As Bede relates the story, Rædwald initially agreed to turn over Edwin and was only persuaded by the counsel of his wife to honor his obligations to Edwin as his guest and refuse Æthelfrith's demands.⁴⁰ Conflict now being certain, Rædwald quickly raised a large army and surprised Æthelfrith by quickly marching north with Edwin in tow. The resulting battle on the River Idle in present-day Nottinghamshire ended with Æthelfrith's death and Edwin being installed as the king of Northumbria. In order to secure the alliance, Edwin married Æthelburg, a Christian princess from Kent, though he himself did not convert to Christianity for a further nine years.

Bede describes Edwin's eventual conversion as having been preceded by a long-term diplomatic effort by the papacy and miraculous efforts by the Roman missionary Paulinus. His account ends in a dramatic scene in which Edwin convokes a council of his top leaders who unanimously decide to abandon the religion of their ancestors and embrace the new Christian rites. The reasons given for conversion are of some interest. The first speech at the council is given by the head priest Cofi who emphasizes the material gains from conversion:

I have found that the religion which we have hitherto held has no virtue nor profit in it. None of your followers has devoted himself more earnestly than I have to the worship of our gods, but nevertheless there are many who receive greater benefits and greater honour from you than I do and are more successful in their undertakings.⁴¹

converts and should serve as a reminder to that conversion did not entail the wholesale adaptation of the Mediterranean belief system. See *HE*, II.15, 188-90.

³⁹ *HE*, II.12, 176.

⁴⁰ The name of Rædwald's wife is not recorded.

⁴¹ *HE*, II.13, 182.

This speech, described by Bede as *verba prudentia*, or ‘wise words’, reveals as much about Bede as it might about the motivations of Edwin’s council a century before.⁴² Bede’s primary argument in the *Historica Ecclesiastica*, a text written explicitly for a royal audience, is that Christianity is a much more helpful religion for the fortunes of the state than any of the alternatives. Certainly Bede does not present the case for conversion as being one of a purely pragmatic nature, as he follows Cofi’s speech with the famous story of the sparrow in which an unnamed noble advances the argument that Christianity should be adopted if it is shown to contain greater knowledge of the afterlife than did their pagan beliefs.⁴³ However, even this statement of religiosity is bracketed by a return to the figure of Cofi, who recommends the burning of the pagan altars as they were without material benefit.⁴⁴ It is quite remarkable that the retelling of the conversion story by a devout and conscientious monk should focus quite so strongly on materialism at the expense of religious insight. And while Æthelbert’s initial welcoming of Christian missionaries and Edwin’s long reluctance to adopt Christianity after winning his crown may have revolved in part around personal religious and ethical considerations, we simply have no evidence that can guide us in this regard and it is not possible to move beyond speculation. We can, however, construct a much clearer picture regarding the political and social implications of Christianity for these ruling dynasties.

⁴² J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 71.

⁴³ *HE*, II.13, 183-6: *optimas*. “This is how the present life of man on earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdromen and thegns in winter time; the fire burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For a few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moments of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all. If this new doctrine brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it.”

⁴⁴ *HE*, II.13, 183.

Christian rulership and monasteries in early Ireland

Anglo-Saxon rulers clearly were strongly influenced by the example of Merovingian Gaul, but the Irish influence was also important. The shape and function of monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland may have a great deal more in common with each other than either does with Mediterranean monastic traditions. The nature of pastoral care in Ireland has long been a matter of some debate. The general consensus of early twentieth-century scholarship was that the early church in Ireland was ruled by bishops within territorial diocesan boundaries, but that at some point in the sixth century, monastic churches that ruled over non-territorial federations of *paruchia* became dominant.⁴⁵ Kathleen Hughes refined this position by arguing that episcopal systems remained in Ireland into the seventh century as “the ecclesiastical legislation of the period proves that bishops continued to exist outside the monastic system.”⁴⁶ Yet Hughes still held that the monastic system “inevitably” attained greater power and became dominant in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁴⁷ This view was largely overturned by Richard Sharpe’s seminal article “Some Problems Concerning Monastic Organization in Ireland”, which appeared in 1984.⁴⁸ It argues that the conflict between monastic and episcopal systems was largely illusory: “[t]he inconsistencies in the evidence appearing to point simultaneously to a church run by bishops with a well-defined territorial jurisdiction and to a church made up largely of

⁴⁵ For the older consensus see, for example James Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929).

⁴⁶ Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1966), 79.

⁴⁷ Hughes, *Church in Early Irish Society*, 81-82.

⁴⁸ Richard Sharpe, 'Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 230-70.

monasteries ruled by abbots are there because the distinction is a mistaken one.”⁴⁹ A large part of the confusion, Sharpe believes, lies in our misunderstanding of what the terminology relating to monasteries actually implies, specifically that an institution labeled as a “*monasterium* might actually have had far more non-monks than monks.”⁵⁰ This difficulty in separating monastic and episcopal institutions on the basis of the terminology found in Irish law tracts was also observed by Thomas Charles-Edwards, who likewise finds it “extremely difficult, and perhaps wrong in principle, to draw a sharp line between monastic and non-monastic churches.”⁵¹ Sharpe further developed these ideas to show there may have been a great deal of similarity in the ways in which Ireland and England pursued the care of souls. He argued that the evidence suggested a pastoral model in which monastic communities and churches with resident bishops would act as ‘patron’ to a wide community of affiliated churches to which they provided personal and material support.⁵² Furthermore, Sharpe argued that these so-called “mother churches” would have contained a variety of priests and others in a monastic community that most certainly did not bear any necessary resemblance to a regular Benedictine community.⁵³

These advances in scholarship were paralleled by English studies that seek to show the degree to which pastoral care was handled in very similar ways in seventh-century England and elsewhere. John Blair has argued that pastoral care in Anglo-Saxon England depended not only

⁴⁹ Sharpe, 'Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', 261. Sharpe's contention that we have misunderstood the use of the term *paruchia* is supported by Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland, A.D. 650 to 1000* (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 2002).

⁵⁰ Sharpe, 'Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', 261.

⁵¹ Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Church in Early Irish Laws', in J. Blair and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 67.

⁵² Richard Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities in Early Medieval Ireland: Towards a Pastoral Model', *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, 230-70.

⁵³ Sarah Foot, 'Anglo-Saxon Minsters: A Review of the Terminology', in J. Blair and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester; New York: Leicester University Press, 1992), 213; Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities in Early Medieval Ireland', 101.

on the more familiar episcopal system, but also on ascetic communities associated with major churches. Blair summarized the argument as such:

The older and more important churches housed religious communities which, though varying greatly in size, wealth, and religious complexion, were known as ‘minsters’ (*monasteria*); minsters exercised rights over defined territories (the later ‘mother-parishes’) which they came to provide with pastoral care...⁵⁴

Minsters and episcopal authority should not be seen as incompatible, but rather as “overlapping structures.”⁵⁵ The *monasteria* at this time were widely varied in character, size, and the activities in which they engaged; it is a mistake to read Benedictine regularity into the seventh-century evidence.⁵⁶ This is evident in Bede’s description of the pastoral practices of the monks and clerics of Lindisfarne:

The sole concern of these teachers was to serve God and not the world, to satisfy the soul and not the belly. For this reason the religious habit was held in great respect at that time, so that whenever a cleric or a monk went anywhere he was gladly received by all as God’s servant. If they chanced to meet him by the roadside, they ran towards him and, bowing their heads, were eager either to be signed with the cross by his hand or to receive a blessing from his lips. Great attention was also paid to his exhortations, and on Sundays the people flocked eagerly to the church or the monastery, not to get food for the body but to hear the word of God.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ John Blair, ‘Debate: Ecclesiastical Organization and Pastoral Care in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Early Medieval Europe* 4 (1995), 193-212 193.

⁵⁵ Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c. 650-c. 850* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 113.

⁵⁶ John Blair, ‘Anglo-Saxon Minsters: A Topographical Review’, *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, 225. Foot, ‘Anglo-Saxon Minsters’, 212-225.

⁵⁷ *HE*, III.26, 310-1.

The monks described in this passage were engaged in some sort of pastoral care and a monastic institution might contain both monks and priest for whom ministering was a priority.⁵⁸ This passage may be an idealized conception of what Bede thought should happen, but it nevertheless shows that Bede accepted that such a role was possible. However, I would lean towards accepting this depiction of Lindisfarne as accurate. We know that Bede visited Lindisfarne in preparation for his composition of his life of Cuthbert and was in communication with several of its members.⁵⁹

Aldhelm also offers us a glimpse into the administrative and pastoral demands placed upon monasteries. At the end of the *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm apologizes for both the brevity of his work and its delay by saying that he was “weighed down with the burden of pastoral care and overwhelmed with the weight of worldly business, (and) because the demanding responsibilities of ecclesiastical administration did not allow any space of undisturbed peace and a leisured interval for writing, and the noisy bustle of practical matters interrupted it.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, charter evidence shows that as late as 676 minsters were being founded explicitly to meet the pastoral needs of a region.⁶¹ The penitential attributed to Archbishop Theodore deals with the problems of replacing the priests that served an area if the minster has been relocated: “if anyone wishes to set his monastery in another place, he shall do it on the advice of the bishop and of his brethren, and he shall release a presbyter for the ministry of the church in its former place.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Blair, “Ecclesiastical Organization and Pastoral Care,” 208.

⁵⁹ Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne, and Bede's Prose Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 142, 270-88.

⁶⁰ *DV*, 59.8-14; Lapidge and Herren, 130: *pastoralis curae sarcina gravatus negotiorumque terrenorum ponderibus oppressus ita perniciter, ut satagistis, dictarevobisque destinare nequiverim, quia securae quietis spatium et morosam dictandi intercapidinem scrupulosa ecclesiastici regiminis sollicitudo denegabat et tumultuans saecularium strepitus obturbabat.*

⁶¹ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'St. Wilfrid and Two Charters Dated Ad 676 and 680', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39 (1988) 167-74.

⁶² *Poenitential Theodori*, II.vi.7; McNeil and Gamer, 204.

Moreover, Bede mentions that episcopal sees were largely vacant at this time. The bishopric at Rochester is specifically mentioned as having “long been vacant.”⁶³ Considering the evidence for pastoral care being provided by monasteries and the lack of episcopal authority, it seems appropriate to view the monasteries as having fulfilled at least a major portion of the pastoral duties. While the precise nature of the relationship between the monasteries and the episcopal authorities is not fully understood at this time, it seems clear that there were certain similarities throughout the British Isles and Ireland in the ways that the needs of the parish were met and the organization – or lack thereof – of monastic houses.

Gaullic Double Monasteries

Of all the instances of double monasteries in the Christian world, those of Merovingian Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England are some of the best attested and have received the most attention from modern scholars.⁶⁴ In Gaul, the foundation of monastic houses occurred in two main stages. The first phase was marked by houses founded in the wake of Clovis’ conversion in the late fifth century, which were generally urban in nature and were located primarily in the

⁶³ *HE*, IV.2, 336.

⁶⁴ Bateson, 'The Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries'; Christine E. Fell, Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984); John Godfrey, 'The Place of the Double Monastery in the Anglo-Saxon Minster System', in G. Bonner (ed.) *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London: SPCK, 1976); Hilpisch, *Die Doppelklöster*; Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*; Alexander Thompson, 'Double Monasteries and the Male Element in Nunneries', *The Ministry of Women: A Report by a Committee Appointed by His Grace, the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury with Appendices and Fifteen Collotype Illustrations* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919); Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 154-65; Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 17-36.

southern portions of Gaul and along the Mediterranean coast.⁶⁵ By the end of the sixth century it is estimated that there were more than 220 monasteries of all types in Gaul.⁶⁶ The second phase of monastic development would come in the wake of the Irish missionary Columbanus (d. 615) and his successors at the end of the sixth century. The religious reform inspired by Columbanus would carry through the seventh century, which saw the number of monastic houses more than double.⁶⁷ The first double monasteries would not appear in Gaul until the early seventh-century, but the underlying issues that would form contemporary understanding of the relationship between communities of male and female ascetics was present from the beginning. We are fortunate in that monastic rules survive for representative examples of the two phases of monastic development.

The monastic rule of Caesarius of Arles' *Regula ad virgines*, written for his sister Caesaria between 512 and 534, was the first known rule written specifically for a female community.⁶⁸ Earlier rules, such as the third century rule of Pachomius and Augustine of Hippo's *Praeceptum*, were applied to both men and women. However, neither of these rules specifically focused on the issues of religious women, and it cannot be assumed that the rules themselves are an accurate reflection of the author's view of female communities.⁶⁹ Caesarius' overriding concern throughout his rule was for the safety of nuns within an established

⁶⁵ Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 221. Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul*; Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 152-63.

⁶⁶ Hartmut Atsma, 'Les monastères urbains du Nord de la Gaule', *Revue d'histoire de l'église de France* (1950) 168; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 156.

⁶⁷ Atsma, 'Les monastères urbains', 168. Atsma estimates that more than 550 monastic houses existed in Gaul by the end of the seventh century.

⁶⁸ Germanus Morin, *Sancti Caesarii Arelatensis Opera Varia: Epistulae, Concilia, Regulae Monasticae, Opuscula Theologica, Testamentum* (Bruges: Marietti 1942). Translated into English in William E. Klingshirm, *Caesarius of Arles: Life, Testament, Letters* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994).

⁶⁹ Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 87-105. Neither Augustine nor his biographer Possidius ever mention that Augustine wrote a monastic rule, but a convincing case has been made by Gerald Bonner that the *Praeceptum* should be regarded as authentic. See Gerald Bonner, Mary Agatha and Boniface Ramsey, *Augustine of Hippo: The Monastic Rules* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2004), 54-70, 110-22.

community who were confronted with an ever-present fear of attacks by men. Caesarius' solution to this was to produce a rule that manifested the same general concerns that were seen in relation to the double monasteries of the eastern Mediterranean, and that took as its primary objective the seclusion of the abbess and her community from contact with religious men.⁷⁰ The rule even went so far as to exclude the abbess from being supervised by her bishop. While a certain amount of independence was certainly an attractive proposition for an abbess in conflict with her bishop, the rule combined this freedom with a requirement for strict active enclosure, which prohibited even the abbess from contact with the world outside the walls of the convent.⁷¹ The thoroughgoing enclosure of religious women advocated by Caesarius may come as something of a surprise from a figure who was often quite sympathetic to women, and who condemned the sexual double-standard of his society that required virginity and chastity from its women, but allowed men to have concubines and extramarital affairs as a way of displaying their manhood.⁷² But while criticizing the contradictory standards of sexual behavior, Caesarius still assumed the rational portion of humanity to be male and flesh to be feminine, and thus reinforced the fundamental division between them.⁷³

Caesarius' nuanced view of gender is further explored in Felice Lifshitz's study of the authority and office of female monastic superiors within the *Regula ad virgines*. Lifshitz

⁷⁰ Caesarius also seems to have been concerned about possible infringements upon the integrity of the monastery by future bishops or their own family members, and went so far as to sell lands under episcopal control for the sake of endowing the monastery and ensuring its independence and seclusion. Furthermore, Caesarius dictated in his testament that the nuns be allowed to appoint their own steward to watch over their affairs and their own priest to administer their sacral needs, all with an eye to preventing latter meddling. See discussion in William E. Klingshörn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122-4, 33-4, 252-3; Wood, *Proprietary Church*, 112.

⁷¹ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 140, idem, 'Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effect on the Female Monastic Experience', in J.A. Nichols and L.T. Shank (eds.), *Medieval Religious Women I: Distant Echoes* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1984).

⁷² Morin, *Caesarii Arelatensis Opera*, 141-2, 84-94. See Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 24-5.

⁷³ Morin, *Caesarii Arelatensis Opera*, 501, 120.1.

analyzed Caesarius' rhetorical strategies and the effects of the way in which the position of the abbess was structured.⁷⁴ Caesarius employs a variety of titles for female ascetics, naming them varyingly *soror* (sister), *virgo* (virgin), and *filia* (daughter) – but never *monacha* (monk). He eventually settled on the title *abbatissa* to describe the head of the community. Lifshitz argues that: “An *abbatissa*, or abbess, is *not* a mother; an *abbatissa* is a female father. The etymology of the title is the masculine title of paternal authority *abba* (father); there is not even the slightest resonance either of *amma* or *mater* (mother).”⁷⁵ By making the abbess an honorary male, Caesarius no doubt sought to bolster the authority of the abbess over her charges. However, this also served to underline the need to keep her away from all contact with members of the opposite sex, as the basis of her exalted position lay in her removal from normal social interactions. The outcomes of claustration were two-fold. On the one hand, if Caesaria's community's proximate difficulty was the depredations of men, strict claustration was one possible solution. However, removing the abbess from the supervision of the bishop also had a secondary, if perhaps unintentional, outcome. It removed the abbess from the traditional hierarchy of the church. It may have had the potential of improving her immediate position with the bishop, but it dramatically undercut her authority with the members of her own community and left her susceptible to internal rebellions.⁷⁶

The two sides of this issue can be seen in the circumstances surrounding the Caesarian rule's adaptation by Radegund of Poitiers (520-587) and the subsequent outcomes for later abbesses. Radegund was a Christian woman from Thuringia who was brought in 532 to the royal court of Clothar as a captive after her native kingdom had been destroyed in a war against the

⁷⁴ Felice Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior? Towards a History of Feminine Amtscharisma', in B.W. Parsons and C. John (eds.), *Medieval Mothering* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), esp. 122-25.

⁷⁵ Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?', 122.

⁷⁶ Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?', 124-5.

Franks. As Clothar's unwilling wife, Radegund immersed herself in the religious life around his court as a means of compensation, reportedly cleaning the chapel in the villa with such love that she refused to sweep away the dust that fell on the altar and instead gathered it up and placed it by the door.⁷⁷ After many years of strict religious observance, she was allowed to depart to found a monastery in Poitiers in 561. Radegund's ties to the royal court were used to obtain a relic of the Holy Cross from the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian. Having obtained it, she wished to have it placed in the convent with full honors and the participation of the local bishop.⁷⁸ However, the bishop of Poitiers refused her request, perhaps out of envy, and fled the city to his country estate in order to avoid further such requests from the former queen. Radegund once again utilized her connections to the royal court and, through the intervention of King Sigibert, compelled Eufronius, the bishop of Tours, to perform the ceremony for her. The disputes with the bishop of Poitiers continued however, and it was in this context that Radegund adopted the Caesarian Rule and placed herself under the direct protection of the king.⁷⁹

While the Caesarian Rule might allow a former queen such as Radegund to exercise authority within her own convent and supersede her bishop, this was certainly an option available only to the most prestigious of abbesses. A less compelling and personally powerful figure would not have had access to the same manner of authority, and the seclusion and claustration characteristic of the rule would inevitably have led to weakening her position rather than allowing her freedom.⁸⁰ Shortly following Radegund's death in 587, her successor Leubovera famously faced a large-scale revolt among the nuns of the monastery. Forty nuns led

⁷⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* [HF] III.8.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Tours, HF IX.40.

⁷⁹ Gregory of Tours, HF IX.40.

⁸⁰ Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?' 123-4.

by Clothild, the daughter of a Merovingian king, walked out of the monastery.⁸¹ The precise nature of the dispute as narrated by Gregory of Tours is unclear, but Clothild's complaint seems to have revolved around issues of status and authority within the convent, as she complains of being treated "as though we were not king's daughters but the offsprings of low serving-women."⁸² Gregory, for his part, seems mostly concerned with the fact that the women had left the cloister at all and repeatedly links their departure from the monastery precinct with debauchery and adultery. Gregory's association of nuns living outside the monastery with all manner of sexual sins followed the similar logic established by church councils which had seen the separation of religious men and women as necessary for the avoidance of public approbation.

The situation deteriorated to the point where the rebellious nuns, after failing in their intention to remove Leubovera from her office by means of royal influence, procured armed retainers to discourage attempts to return them to the monastery by force. We need not accept Gregory's characterization of these men as "a gang of thieves, slayers of men, adulterers, and criminals of all kinds" to recognize the continued social and economic capital that these Merovingian royal princesses must have had at their disposal. The crisis continued to worsen and armed bands from either side began clashing within the walls of the monastery itself and while Clothild did not, in the end, succeed in her goal of overthrowing Abbess Leubovera, the weakness of the latter's authority over her charges was apparent to all. As Lifshitz concluded, the Caesarian rule's model of female abbatial authority of "a female father independent of the male hierarchy but subjected to the physical cloister, was a failure."⁸³

⁸¹ Gregory of Tours, *HF* IX.39-43. See also discussion of this incident in Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?' 124-5; Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 103-08.

⁸² Gregory of Tours, *HF* IX.39.

⁸³ Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?' 125. See also Schulenburg, 'Strict Active Enclosure'.

The only other extant Merovingian rules are those of Aurelian, a successor of Caesarius at Arles, whose rule was written only a few years after Caesarius' rule, upon which it is closely modeled; and the rule of Donatus of Besançon, composed sometime around 650 and consisting of a combination of the Benedictine Rule with that of Caesarius. In addition to adopting the enclosure favored by Caesarius, the *Regula Donati* is notable for its strongly gendered language and attenuation of female abbatial control. Under Donatus' rule the abbess was enclosed, had no control over discipline, and her community was admonished to resist and rebel against the abbess should she attempt to either alienate property or do anything against the rule. Donatus, when borrowing from Benedict, converted *abbas* to *mater*. By giving the abbess a female title, Donatus made a clear statement about her authority. Even more so, the fact that the *Regula Donati* does not charge the community to obey its father but instead to "love its mother" is clearly an indication of the lower social position set for the abbess. This arrangement drastically reduced the authority of the abbess within the monastery, and in fact, did much to curtail it. She was not to be the father figure for the community, but rather its mother. By calling the abbess a "mother" Donatus was not merely giving her the obvious feminine parental name, he was locking her into a definitively subordinate social position.⁸⁴

The second phase of monastic foundations in Gaul began with the Irish missionary Columbanus.⁸⁵ Columbanus founded a monastery of 200 monks in northeastern Burgundy at Luxeuil in 590, which became the center of an ascetic movement sparked by Columbanus and continued by his Frankish disciples. Included among these new foundations were double monasteries such as Faremountiers-en-Brie, Chelles, and Jouarre located in Northern Gaul, and

⁸⁴ Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?' 126-8, Peyroux, 'Abbess and Cloister', 98.

⁸⁵ Columbanus is the name given to him by his biographers and is typical usage among modern scholars, but he referred to himself as Columba. See Donald Bullough, 'The Career of Columbanus', in M. Lapidus (ed.) *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1997), 2.

Remiremont located along the Moselle River in Lorraine. These monasteries were not the only type of female foundations; they existed alongside monasteries for women that had developed in all the major urban centers of Gaul. By the end of the sixth century Amiens, Auxerre, Chartres, Poitiers, Sens, Tours, Autun, Lyons and probably Le Mans all possessed at least one convent.⁸⁶

The first double monastery in Gaul was most likely Faremountiers, founded by Burgundofara, daughter of Changeric, who was a high-ranking member of the Austrasian court.⁸⁷ Burgundofara was assisted in her endeavors by Columbanus' successor Abbot Eustachius of Luxeuil, who helped her resist her parents' attempt to force her to marry against her wishes and who veiled and consecrated her as a virgin under his care. With support from the monks of Luxeuil, Burgundofara founded Faremountiers on the grounds of one of her father's estates and ruled over a mixed community of monks and nuns.⁸⁸ A second example of a double monastery is that of Remiremont, founded around 620 in the Moselle Valley through the donations of Romarich, an Austrasian noble.⁸⁹ Planned as a joint community from its inception, it housed large numbers of both men and women with an initial complement of 84 nuns. Remiremont was one of the rare examples of Frankish double monasteries that were not exclusively under the authority of an abbess. Instead it began its existence in a system of joint supervision under an abbot for the male religious and an abbess for the women. Over time however, the system of

⁸⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 168.

⁸⁷ Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 76-84, 141-51.

⁸⁸ Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 142-3; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 160-1. Faremountiers, according to Bede, would influence later English foundations through the acceptance of English women who were forced to pursue monastic vocations on the continent before founding double monasteries of their own. Bede specifically mentions Saethryth and Æthelburh's residence at Faremountiers in the 640s. *HE*, III.8, 238.

⁸⁹ Hilpisch, *Die Doppelklöster*, 31; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 161.

cooperative rule collapsed, and the abbess of the monastery took full control following the death of the fourth abbot.⁹⁰

We can gain a certain amount of insight into gender relations at these institutions from a rule most likely authored for the double monastery at Faremountiers by Waldebert, one of the monks sent by Eustachius to assist Burgundofara.⁹¹ This rule, the *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines*, offers us not only a view of the day to day inner-workings of religious life in these monasteries, but a radically different underlying rationale for the relationship between men and women than that proposed by Caesarius.⁹² If Caesarius' *Regula ad virgines* enjoined the complete separation of religious women as a necessity for their own safety and general social propriety, the *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines*, by contrast, adhered to an altogether more practical view that placed the female abbess on a more equal level and adopted a much less paternalistic tone. The rule clearly defines the authority of the abbess, whom the author of the rule describes as an *abbatissa*. The rule stipulates that she is to be of noble birth, must set a moral and spiritual example, and that she is entitled to enforce her rule by means of corporeal punishment at her discretion.⁹³ In addition to this, the abbess had the authority to hear the

⁹⁰ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 161. In addition to Remiremont, Wemple also notes that there are only two other examples of double monasteries being ruled by men in the Frankish kingdoms: Jumièges, which was only a double monastery for a brief period of time before the nuns of the house relocated to a separate monastery; and Bèze, located just outside of Dijon, which only became a double monastery when Abbot Waldelen of Dijon admitted a community of nuns led by his sister Adalsind who were fleeing the depredations of some unnamed men. See also Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 281; Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 277.

⁹¹ Hope Mayo, 'The Sources of Female Monasticism in Merovingian Gaul', *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985), 32-37, 33.

⁹² Arguments have also been made to attribute female authorship to this rule in place of Waldebert. For the authorship see Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 81, 286. See also Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?' 126; Rosamond McKitterick, 'Frauen und Schriftlichkeit im Frühmittelalter', in H.-W. Goetz (ed.) *Weibliche Lebensgestaltung im Frühen Mittelalter* (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1991); Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 160.

⁹³ *Regula Cuisdam Patris ad Virgines*, PL 88:1053-4: *Abbatissa monasterii non tam genere quam sapientia et sanctitate nobilis esse debet: ut quae sermonem ad erudiendas animas justa eruditione lucubrat, propriis actibus non contradicat: plus etenim subjugatae praelatorum actuum formam imitantur, quam doctrinae illatae aurem*

confessions of her community and also to grant absolution and benediction.⁹⁴ These “quasi-sacerdotal” duties also brought her closer to being functionally akin to the priest, another form of medieval father. The *monahae*, as the “female religious” were called, relied entirely on the judgment and discretion of the abbess.⁹⁵ The very act of hearing confession and giving absolution strengthened the abbesses’ power and these repeated rites of submission and dispensation created a powerful psychological and emotional bond between an abbess and her *monahae*. Furthermore, the abbess’ hearing of confession was not restricted to women. We have at least one example of an abbess at Faremoutiers who heard the confessions of both men and women alike.⁹⁶

The use of *abbatissa* also highlights the way in which the author of the rule dealt with the gender issues surrounding a double monastery of male and female ascetics ruled by an abbess. Aside from attempts to bolster the authority of the abbess that would have been necessary in any single-sex monastery as well, the author simply chose to treat the association between men and women as normative. By feminizing the masculine noun *abbas*, the author of this rule was able to place the women into a view of authority that saw the ability to command as essentially a masculine characteristic.⁹⁷ There are a number of examples in the wider culture that would seem to support such a reading. Janet Nelson has shown that the Merovingian queens Brunhild and Balthild were quite powerful and were able to function as effective leaders in their own right.⁹⁸ Significantly, they are both presented with masculine traits. “Brunhild defied a posse of armed

accommodant. Debet enim sacris eloquiis opera nectere sacra: ut quae ejus imitatur doctrinam ex voce, imitetur cultum ex opere: ne si in aliquo voci opus contradixerit, fructus vocis non obtinere valeat effectum.

⁹⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 160.

⁹⁵ *Regula Cuisdam Patris ad Virgines*, PL 88:1053-4.

⁹⁶ Bateson, 'The Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries', 151.

⁹⁷ Lifshitz, 'Is Mother Superior?', 127-31.

⁹⁸ Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels', 31-77.

enemies *viriliter* – ‘like a man’ – while to Balthild was attributed that most manly of virtues – *strenuitas*.⁹⁹ This schema would also correspond with the ascetic ideal of personal transformation that allowed men and women to form social bonds not usually allowed.

The association of the *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines* with the specific needs of the double monastery is further reinforced by one additional element of the rule’s composition. While almost all early medieval monastic rules derive from patristic sources or earlier rules, the *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines* contains a much greater degree of original material in comparison, and was written with an eye towards existing monastic practices and hard-won experience.¹⁰⁰ The treatment in the *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines* of such varied topics as the offering of confession, authority within the monastery and the care of children were handled in a highly pragmatic fashion. Hope Mayo has shown that:

the emphasis is not so much on the principle set forth by the Fathers as on its practical application in circumstances determined by the writer of the rule. Even where the specific instructions given bear some resemblance to those found in the rule of St. Benedict, the provisions of the latter – if it is the source – have been modified and restated by the anonymous author.¹⁰¹

This specificity and practical purpose led to a much different picture from that presented and championed by Caesarius and his successors. On one level, this is unsurprising as the requirements of a rural double monastery would be very different from those of an urban, enclosed nunnery. However, this distinction also should indicate to us that we need to be sensitive to the fact that the overtly hostile rhetoric displayed towards the association of men and women in the monastic context is not our only evidence, and the rules written for the double

⁹⁹ Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels’, 76.

¹⁰⁰ Mayo, ‘Female Monasticism in Merovingian Gaul’, 34-5.

¹⁰¹ Mayo, ‘Female Monasticism in Merovingian Gaul’, 35.

monasteries of Neustria and later Anglo-Saxon England reflect a much different sensibility from the rule championed by Caesarius.¹⁰² In this context, to treat efforts to enclose religious women and separate them from contact with men as a universal imperative would be a mistake.

Concerning the social structure of medieval Europe, Georges Duby famously remarked that there were ‘those who worked, those who fought, and those who prayed.’¹⁰³ But in the seventh and eighth centuries, those who prayed certainly worked as well. One of the central occupations of the prototypical Benedictine monk was that of manual labor, and those living under the Benedictine rule were enjoined to toil for the sake of their souls. Similarly, in chapter twelve of the *Regula Cuisdam Patris ad Virgines* the nuns were strongly encouraged to perform manual labor.¹⁰⁴ In addition to the customary work of spinning, sewing and weaving within the monastery, the nuns performed manual labor outside the monastery by working in teams of two or three. There was, of course, a far more mundane reason for work than the cure of souls. Even though many institutions enjoyed large grants of land and wealth from the nobility, most monks had to work for a living in order to support a community that could consist of several hundred members. The same need to work pertained to nuns. When looking at the religious communities of women it becomes clear that as, Suzanne Wemple has argued, “women did not live as parasites on men in the double monasteries.”¹⁰⁵ The *Regula Cuisdam Patris ad Virgines* evokes

¹⁰² Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, Suffolk [UK]; Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell Press, 1992), 298; Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 112; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 169.

¹⁰³ Georges Duby, *Les trois ordres: ou, l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

¹⁰⁴ *Regula Cuisdam Patris ad Virgines*, PL 88:1063. The nuns are enjoined to work every day except feast days and that manual labor is specifically linked to their salvation.

¹⁰⁵ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 160. And yet historians have consistently reasoned that men and women were placed together so that men could do the manual labor. One of the earliest examples of this theory of weak and incapable woman in the double monasteries, and the source most frequently cited by more recent historians, comes from the work of A. Hamilton Thompson. Thompson argued that monks who served under an abbess must have been there only for manual labor and for ministering the sacerdotal rites. The supporting evidence that Thompson gives is fragmentary at best. His first argument is based on his conjecture that the double monasteries needed men

such a different mindset towards the relationship. It not only offered a more workable form of authority, but may better reflect a sense of religious idealism that is present in the double monasteries which would otherwise be inexplicable. The connections between the double monasteries of Northern Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England are undeniable and certainly the attitudes expressed in the rule are more in keeping with a mind-set that was more accepting of dual-sex monasticism.

As the monasteries were often founded by the high nobility and endowed with very substantial grants of land, it is not surprising that they would be led by a notable member of the society. An example of the size that monastic institutions could reach can be seen from the grant made by King Aethelwath of Sussex to Wilfrid for a monastery at Selsey. Wilfrid was granted eighty-seven hides of land at a time when the entire kingdom of Sussex contained only seven thousand hides.¹⁰⁶ The royal family, in particular, was often closely affiliated with the larger monastic foundations. One example of this pattern is that King Wulfhere of Mercia's three sisters were all placed as the first abbess of a double monastery as part of systematic monastic

for major construction projects. However, Thompson does not account for the presence of men in the double monasteries after the construction had been completed. As for the second argument, only one priest is needed to perform the sacraments. Thompson's rationalizations for the presence of men in double monasteries thus seem unlikely. These men were present in the monastery even after the construction projects were complete and that the monks were not only there for the service of manual labor. There is some secondary evidence to support this claim. As Bede notes, five future bishops received their training at the great double monastery of Whitby, under the guidance of the abbess Hilde. Whitby, at this time, was a major administrative, religious and cultural center. It is hard to imagine those five future bishops staying in Whitby because the nuns could not do their own work. The division within the monastery seems much more likely to have focused upon class rather than gender. The evidence compels us to dispense with the notion that women did not work at the monasteries in this time period. Thompson, 'The Ministry of Women'.

¹⁰⁶See, for example, *HE*, I.25, 72; II.9, 162; III.24, 292. A hide is, in Bede's words, *terra unus familiae*, the amount of land that could support one household. Bede uses the term several times and describes it as the normal unit of land measurement. Frederic William Matland, *Domesday Book and Beyond: Three Essays in the Early History of England* (Cambridge: 1897), 357-520. For the use of the hide in Ireland see Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Kinship, Status and the Origins of the Hide', *Past and Present* (1972), 3-33. Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 148.

expansion in the late seventh century.¹⁰⁷ The Mercian kings also seem to have pursued a pattern of patronizing monasteries in an attempt to expand their influence. Monasteries at Chertsey, Barking, Abingdon, and Malmesbury, outside of the traditional boundaries of Mercia, were all given sizeable grants during the seventh century.¹⁰⁸ Chertsey, for example, was granted over two hundred hides by a sub-king of Mercia while Barking received forty hides from a relative of Sebbi, king of the East Saxons.¹⁰⁹

Monastic institutions, double or otherwise, were important landholders and the land used to found double monasteries often seems to have derived from royal grants. However, this was not always the case. There are at least two examples of abbesses purchasing large tracts of land on which to found their monasteries. Bede's description of the monastic career of Hild of Whitby illustrates how monastic institutions were endowed. Hild was a member of the Northumbrian royal family and did not enter monastic life until she was thirty-three.¹¹⁰ While she first considered joining a monastery in Gaul, Bishop Aidan convinced her to stay in Northumbria, where she was given "a hide of land on the north side of the river Wear."¹¹¹ After a year she took over as abbess of Hartlepool, where she ruled for more than two years. She then bought ten hides of land to found her own double monastery at Whitby.¹¹² Hild's position of influence was a direct result of her membership in the Northumbrian royal family; her wealth and connections enabled her to purchase her own land well into her monastic career. In a parallel case, the Kentish queen Seaxburg is known to have bought the land for her monastery at Sheppey.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ John Blair, "Minster Churches in the Landscape," 39.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Routledge, 1997), 110.

¹⁰⁹ Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents C. 500-1042* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), 440-1, 447-8.

¹¹⁰ *HE*, IV.23, 406.

¹¹¹ *HE*, IV.23, 406.

¹¹² *HE*, III.24, 408.

¹¹³ Stephanie Hollis, 'The Minster-in-Thamet Foundation Story', *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998), 41-64, 47.

These examples illustrate how often the abbesses who ruled in the double monasteries were royal and noble women who maintained their positions in society after taking on the position of abbess.

The organization and structure of monasteries could also follow along familial lines. Sarah Foot has argued that Anglo-Saxon monasteries can best be understood as religious families. She contends that they were “so well integrated into early Germanic kinship structures that they appear markedly similar to contemporary secular social groupings, most notably to aristocratic households.”¹¹⁴ This affinity is not at all surprising considering the noble lineage of the abbesses. In theory, the religious family replaced the secular family that was being abandoned. However, it seems clear that the social hierarchies of the world outside the monastery were still quite powerful even after one entered a religious community.¹¹⁵ In fact, Patricia Coulstock has argued that the monasteries were simply an extension of the royal family’s political power.¹¹⁶ She goes on to say that the double monastery functioned as a power base for the royal women. While this is certainly true, the close association between the familial organization of the double monastery and the position of women can be problematic.

The most often cited passage regarding the role of abbess in the double monastery is from Joan Nicholson. She states that the double monastery “provided the female element of the ruling class with something to rule.”¹¹⁷ Certainly, royal women did occupy these positions of power, but her inclination to view the double monastery as merely an outlet for these assertive women is

¹¹⁴ Sarah Foot, 'The Role of the Minster in Earlier Anglo-Saxon Society', in B. Thompson (ed.) *Monasteries and Society in Medieval Britain: Proceedings of the 1994 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1999), 39; idem, *Veiled Women I: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 49-56.

¹¹⁵ Foot, 'Role of the Minster', 42-3.

¹¹⁶ Patricia Coulstock, *The Collegiate Church of Wimborne Minster* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1993), 43-49.

¹¹⁷ Joan Nicholson, 'Feminae Gloriosae: Women in the Age of Bede', in D. Baker (ed.) *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 18.

problematic. Envisioning the double monastery as an “occupation for meddlesome women” obscures the powerful positions held by these royal women before they entered the monastery and also imagines these monasteries as being of secondary importance to other institutions.¹¹⁸ Such an important institution needed to be managed by capable individuals and could not simply be a token field of authority to placate royal women. These royal women did not need to be given something to rule as they already had this authority in secular affairs.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Nicholson, 'Feminae Gloriosae', 29.

¹¹⁹ Christine E. Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984), Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*.

Chapter Three - Reading a Blank Page: The Reconstruction of the Argumentation of the *De Virginitate*

Aldhelm of Malmesbury (639-710/1) is widely regarded as one of the leading scholars of the seventh century.¹ His treatise *De Virginitate* has increasingly been recognized as one of the most influential works in early medieval Northern Europe, second only perhaps to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Growing attention to this work in recent years has rectified a long period of neglect for a man who had such an immense influence. And yet, the vast majority of modern historical consideration has focused almost exclusively on the literary influence of Aldhelm's style and form. Indeed, traditional readings of Aldhelm have tended to claim that he scarcely had any purpose at all in writing the *De Virginitate*, beyond showing off his prodigious Latinity.² To be sure, Aldhelm's stylistic artistry cannot be doubted.³ Furthermore, the numerous surviving manuscripts of the *De Virginitate* and the accompanying *Carmen de Virginitate* are heavily glossed, which speaks both to the difficulty of Aldhelm's text for later readers and to the great interest later readers had in utilizing and attempting to understand Aldhelm's work.⁴ Nonetheless, many challenges remain and deciphering the argument of his most famous work has proven even more difficult than construing his enormously complex syntax.

¹ An indispensable guide to Aldhelm's career and his relationships with the royal houses of Wessex and Northumbria is Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm'.

² Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, 58, Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Winterbottom, 'Aldhelm's Prose Style and Its Origins', 44 Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 239. Exceptions include more recent works such as G. T. Dempsey, 'Aldhelm of Malmesbury's Social Theology. The Barbaric Heroic Ideal Christianised', *Peritia* 15 (2001), 58-80; Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*; Felice Lifshitz, 'Priestly Women, Virginal Men: Litanies and Their Discontents', in L. Bitel and F. Lifshitz (eds.), *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

³ Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 239-40.

⁴ Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, 187-90; Michael Lapidge, 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975), 67-111, 74-5.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the content and purpose of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*. This is a more difficult task than one might expect. There are twin problems which are both related to Aldhelm's uniquely verbose and intricate style. First, Aldhelm's exceedingly difficult prose often makes it a challenge to disentangle what he actually is saying. An example from the beginning of the *De Virginitate* will make the point:

And when, reading aloud the individual texts of your letter, I had scanned (them) with the keen gaze of (my) eyes and had thought them over with a certain natural curiosity about hidden things – as, it is said, is innate in me- and had very much admired the extremely rich verbal eloquence and the innocent expression of sophistication, then, I say, the governor of lofty Olympus and the ruler of heaven rejoices with an inexpressible exultation on seeing, thus, the catholic maidservants of Christ –or rather adoptive daughters of regenerative grace brought forth from the fecund womb of ecclesiastical conception through the seed of the spiritual Word –growing learned in divine doctrine through (the Church's) maternal care, and like talented athletes under some experienced instructor training in the gymnasium through wrestling routines and gymnastic exercises, who eagerly win the crown of laborious contest and the prize of the Olympic struggle by the strenuous energies of their own exertions⁵

Aldhelm continues on to provide more athletic analogies to describe the women's academic prowess, comparing them first to a runner who outlasts his competition for the palm of victory. He then quotes Virgil's *Aeneid* to equate their efforts to that of a horse race and, finally, praises

⁵ *DV*, 2.1, 31-2; Lapidge and Herren, 5. *Cumque singulos epistolarum textus recitans pernicibus pupillarum obtutibus specularer atque naturali quadam, ut mihi insitum fertur, latentium rerum curiositate contemplerer uberrimamque uerborum facundiam ac virginalem urbanitatis disertitudinem magnopere admirarer, en, inquam, ineffabili grantulatur trepudio ille superi regnator Olympi et rector caeli, cum taliter catholicas Christi bernaculas, immo adoptiuas regenerantis gratiae filias ex fecund ecclesiasticae conceptionis utero spiritalis uerbi semine progenitas per maternam uiderit sollicitudinem diuinis dogmatibus erudiri ac uelut sagaces gimnosofistas sub peritissimo quodam agonitheta palestricis disciplinis et gimnicis artibus in gimnasio exerceri, qui laboriosi certaminis coronam et olimpiaci agonis triumphum difficillimis propriae exercitationis uiribus nauiter nanciscuntur....*

the authority of the abbess overseeing it all through a nautical allusion to her as the “steersman urgently inciting (the rowers) and master rower beating time with his truncheon” forging on “with foamy and sea-weedy strokes of the oars.”⁶

Some have wondered if the unfortunate nuns to whom the *De Virginitate* was addressed could have possibly comprehended the text that Aldhelm delivered to them, despite his extraordinary praise for their abilities. And while we cannot know precisely how Hildelith and the other recipients of the treatise reacted, we do know that Aldhelm’s torturous style was not only tolerated, but celebrated. For well over 200 hundred years after Aldhelm’s death, his writings and stylistic influences were a staple of Anglo-Latin literature and education. Andy Orchard has argued that “practically every Anglo-Latin hexameter composition penned within a century of his death is heavy with his influence; indeed much extant Latin metrical verse from Anglo-Saxon England written before the tenth century is little more than Aldhelmian pastiche.”⁷ Aldhelm’s garrulous approach may offend modern sensibilities, and the widespread preference for the clearer classical style of Bede is understandable. It is also true, however, that his contemporaries preferred Aldhelm on stylistic grounds; he is without a doubt the more influential of the two in that regard.

It has been a literary tradition since at least the twelfth century for students of Aldhelm to bemoan the neglect that he suffers in comparison to his contemporaries.⁸ Future authors, however, may no longer be able to make this claim. Several recent studies have traced the

⁶ Lapidge and Herren, 60.

⁷ Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 239-40.

⁸ For example, William of Malmesbury lamented in his *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* [GP] that: “Recognition of Aldhelm has always fallen below the level of his deserts; he has always lain hidden and without honour, thanks to the sloth of his own people.” GP 5.prologue.2. Winterbottom and Thomson, *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Pontificum Anglorum (the History of the English Bishops)*, 499. See also Dempsey, ‘Aldhelm of Malmesbury and the Irish’, 1.

literary influence of Aldhelm's 'hermeneutic' Latin style which has been contrasted with the 'classical' Latin style of Bede.⁹ Michael Lapidge defined the hermeneutic style as one "whose most striking feature is the parade of unusual, often very arcane and apparently learned vocabulary," and that was characterized by words from classical Latin authors, neologisms, and loan-words, particularly of Greek origin.¹⁰ The most recent editor of Aldhelm's prose describes the syntactical elements of his style as "deliberately mannered, often displaying varieties of syntactical symmetry, hyperbaton, parallel desinence (rhyme), assonance and rhythm (the *cursus* only infrequently)."¹¹

The impact and importance of Aldhelm's stylistic influence, however, shaped the development of the modern historiography on his work in ways that were not always helpful for understanding the content and purpose of the work. Aldhelm's prose style is indeed remarkable and merits the high degree of attention it has so far received. Before the 1990s, however, the scholarly consensus was that there is simply no firm purpose to the document.¹² Frank Stenton argued that while Aldhelm's "curiously involved and artificial Latin style" was often imitated, it obfuscated the content to make it largely incomprehensible and therefore of negligible impact on his society.¹³ More recent treatments of Aldhelm's work have also focused primarily upon the stylistic elements of Aldhelm's text at the expense of the specific content of his work. Indeed,

⁹ This distinction was first proposed by Alistair Campbell. Campbell described Aldhelm's vocabulary as largely derived from "rare words from glossaries" and his fondness "to use words which are good and real enough, but very rare in classical authors." Alistair Campbell, 'Some Linguistic Features of Early Anglo-Latin Verse and Its Use of Classical Models', *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1953), 1-20 11. This argument was expanded in his later work *The Chronicle of Æthelweard* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962).

¹⁰ Lapidge, 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', 67.

¹¹ Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, 63.

¹² Though more prominent, this assessment is not universal. The works of Stephanie Hollis, Sinead O'Sullivan, G.T. Dempsey and Gwara have contributed towards understanding the *De Virginitate* as a work of content and not simply style and will be discussed later in the chapter.

¹³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 178. Lapidge and Herren, 58.

Aldhelm's verbosity has convinced the vast majority of scholars that stylistic excess was the entire point of the exercise. Michael Winterbottom dismisses the structure of the *De Virginitate* as "no more than a series of instances of virginity, polished up by Aldhelm to make a row of always different beads, strung, highly coloured and clinking on a long necklace."¹⁴ Michael Lapidge concludes his introduction to his translation of the *De Virginitate* with the notion that:

In the end, it may be futile to seek a clearly designed structural principle in Aldhelm's prose *De Virginitate*. His purpose may simply have been a didactic one: from his own vast reading in hagiography and patristic literature he was attempting to compile an anthology of saintly models for the Barking ladies to peruse at leisure, 'plucking', as he says, 'crimson flowers of purity from the meadow of holy books'. Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* is therefore an 'anthology' or *florilegium* in the proper sense of these words. We will do best to approach it with no demands for coherent structure or concise expression, but with a preparedness to be transported by Aldhelm's *verba garrulitas*.¹⁵

Perhaps Andy Orchard summed up this sentiment best by stating that "by his frequent use of stylistic devices Aldhelm makes it clear that his interest lies in the telling and not in the tale" and that "Aldhelm's prose style can be described as a triumph of form over content."¹⁶ This chapter will suggest that there is much more to Aldhelm's prose than rhetoric and that a logical and coherent structure does exist. The argument that emerges from Aldhelm's convoluted prose is that chastity is superior to virginity on several grounds. And while this argument is delivered in a manner that is both confusing and seemingly self-contradictory, the *De Virginitate* is a treatise

¹⁴ Winterbottom, 'Aldhelm's Prose Style and Its Origins', 44.

¹⁵ Lapidge and Herren, 58.

¹⁶ Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 239.

that is quite clear in its intent. Rather than viewing Aldhelm's stylizing as a matter of form over function, Aldhelm's argument is in fact reinforced by both the structural and stylistic elements.¹⁷

The Changing Face of Orthodoxy

From the very first sentence of the work, Aldhelm structured his argument in the *De Virginitate* around the idea of prioritizing inner purity over corporeal virginity. Aldhelm addresses his work to "virgins of Christ", who are to be praised not only for their "bodily purity," which is achieved by many, but also for their "spiritual chastity," which is less common.¹⁸ This idea of spiritual chastity, in most instances, seems to have been defined by Aldhelm as a holiness based not on the physical integrity of the virgin, but rather as the exercising of holy will in an Augustinian sense.¹⁹ Likewise, bodily purity is seen by Aldhelm as representing practices

¹⁷ Aldhelm's stylistic choice of the *opus geminatum* – a work of two paired parts, one prose and the other metrical – is derived from the example of the fifth-century poet Caelius Sedulius and the earlier Latin tradition of paraphrase as a rhetorical exercise. In essence, the metrical *De Virginitate* continues Aldhelm's diminution of the importance of physical virginity by disregarding the importance of the fact that any of his subjects are virgins at all. Just as it is of little importance to Aldhelm that David and Samson would not qualify under almost any literal definition of what it meant to be a virgin, the exploits of the subjects in the *Carmen de Virginitate* – and in particular his replacement of the section on exterior ornamentation with one on the eight vices – has bearing on any assessment of his overall argument. The poetic work was, in theory, to follow the same line of reasoning as the prose while substituting the prosaic vocabulary with poetic, yet retain the original meaning. As such, Aldhelm's rhetorical choices in the *Carmen de Virginitate* should offer clues to the overall argument employed by Aldhelm. The difficulty in this line of argumentation, however, is that Aldhelm does not seem to have fully embraced the classical rules for paraphrastic discourse and, in many respects simply ignored the fixed rules of the genre. As Peter Godman has argued: "Aldhelm implied that the poetry and the prose formed a unified whole, but his practice does not conform to this implication." This being the case, any such comparison is problematic and should be approached with a great deal of caution. Peter Godman, 'The Anglo-Saxon *Opus Geminatum*: From Aldhelm to Alcuin', *Medium Aevum* 50 (1981), 215-29 221.

¹⁸ *DV*, Prologue.1-3, 27; Lapidge and Herren, 59. *Reverendissimis Christi virginibus omniue devotae germanitatis affectu venerandis, et non solum corporalis pudicitiae praeconio celebrandis, quod plurimorum est, verum etiam spiritualis castimoniae gratia glorificandis, quod paucorum est.*

¹⁹ Aldhelm uses two sets of quotations from Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and *Enarrationes in psalmos* on which he apparently based his understanding of Augustinian doctrine. The first comes from *De civ. Dei* 1.18: "Thus the sanctity of the body is not lost provided that the sanctity of the soul remains, even if the body is overcome, just as the sanctity of the body is lost if the purity of the soul is violated, even if the body is intact." *ita non amittitur corporis sanctitas manente animi sanctitate etiam corpora oppresso, sicut amittitur sanctitas corporis violata animi puritate etiam corpora intacto.* The second from *Enarrationes in psalmos* 148.19 reads: "virginity of the flesh is an intact body; virginity of the mind is an uncorrupted faith." *virginitas carnis corpus intactum, virginitas animae fides*

relating to holiness gained through physical integrity. While these categories certainly did not originate with Aldhelm, arguing that one should prefer the holiness of the spirit over that of the body was remarkable in a period that put such importance on the cult of virginity.²⁰ Aldhelm's argument sharply diverges from much of the received orthodox tradition that identified physical virginity as the highest good. It certainly would have not been approved by Theodore, as everything we understand about his thought leads to the conclusion that he prized physical purity above all else. For example, in the penitential attributed to Theodore, we find a special concern for the corrupting effects of menstruating women and they are prohibited from entering church.²¹ Likewise, in Theodore's biblical commentaries he declares that any physical contact with a menstruating woman is strictly prohibited.²² Aldhelm was in the difficult spot of needing to accommodate his own position to a traditional view that exalted virginity above all else.

Aldhelm begins to navigate his way through this dilemma by asserting his orthodoxy. Virginity is obviously preferable to marriage, Aldhelm asserts, as Jesus decided to enter the world through an uncontaminated virgin rather than through the corrupted body of or a married woman.²³ However, even in this obvious statement of preference, Aldhelm is quick to apologize to all those saints who were once married. Further, Aldhelm, while in the course of praising John the disciple for his virginity, also stresses that Christ was very enthusiastic about his love for

incorrupta. It is highly unlikely that either quotation comes from Aldhelm's reading of Augustine himself; rather they are both derived from Prosper of Aquitaine's *Epigrammata*.

²⁰ Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Aethelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 19-64.

²¹ *Poenitentiale Theodori* Paul Finsterwalder, *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und Ihre Überlieferungsformen* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1929). Translated by John McNeil and Helena M. Gamer, eds. *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A translation of the principal libri poenitentiales and selections from related documents*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

²² Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 334-5.

²³ *DV*, 7.1, 77.

chastity as well.²⁴ Aldhelm also emphasizes the dichotomy between the *interioris* and *exterioris hominis* through metaphor. His use of a metaphor comparing the nuns' scholarly activity to athletes is one such example.²⁵ Aldhelm uses a very physical description of athletes to describe the women's academic pursuits of knowledge. He imagines them:

Growing learned in divine doctrine through the Church's maternal care,
and like talented athletes under some experienced instructor training in the
gymnasium through wrestling routines and gymnastic exercises . . .
sweating with the sinuous writhings of the flanks in the burning center of
the wrestling pit.²⁶

By highlighting the public role of Olympic athletes and soldiers, and then expressly linking this to the role of those who study, Aldhelm casts the nuns as active participants in their studies and capable of mastering a difficult scholarly regimen. This characterization also figuratively relates to the role of the monks and nuns at Barking. Rather than seeing them as enclosed members of a segregated group, Aldhelm positions them as active and celebrated scholar athletes, which was in contrast to the monastic life envisioned for women by such men as Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Caesarius of Arles. Aldhelm's description that equates the scholarly activity of

²⁴ *DV*, 7, 77-89; Lapidge and Herren, 63-4.

²⁵ This imagery is common in late antique martyr literature even for female martyrs. The most prominent example is *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*. *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. and trans. H. Mursurillio, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 106-131.

²⁶ *DV*, 2.11-18; Lapidge and Herren, 60: *velut sagaces gimnosofistas sub pertissimo quodam agonotheta palaestricis disciplines et gymnics artibus in gymnasio exerceri. Qui laboriosi certaminis coronam et Olympiaci agonis triumphum, difficilliminis propriae exercitationis viribus naviter nanciscuntur. Ita duntaxat, ut alius strenua athletarum luctamina cum aemulo sinuosis laterum flexibus desudans, in meditullio scammatis fragrante delibutus lubrici liquoris nardo, solerter exercere studeat.*

the nuns with the active life of athletes and soldiers thus rejects any notion that scholarly activity might be codified as a masculine undertaking.²⁷

By stressing the physical and outward nature of his subjects, Aldhelm is recognizing their inherent ability and right to function as their own society. However, the textual evidence would seem to indicate that the women at Barking were considered neither honorary nor defective males. Aldhelm utilizes neither masculinized versions of feminine nouns nor explicitly refers to these actions as masculine behavior.²⁸ Furthermore, Aldhelm also seems to refrain from overtly maternal descriptions of female vocation and does not go out of his way to provide a masculine language to support the institutional position of the hierarchy at the monastery. While Aldhelm does warn of the dangers of physical ostentation at the end of his work, this should not be treated as a particularly female problem. Rather, the discussion of the dangers of excessive ornamentation fits into the larger question of inner versus outer spirituality. By emphasizing inner purity over external manifestations, the discussion of clothing changes from a restrictive tirade against the vanity of women to a logical extension of his central argument.

The next goal of Aldhelm's text was to show the supremacy of chastity over virginity in practical terms. To do this, he modifies the Augustinian and Hieronymian tripartite division of

²⁷ There are also similarities in Aldhelm's description of athletic prowess and combat that are reminiscent of the matron martyr Perpetua. In her fourth vision while in prison she is led to the arena as a gladiator, where the pregnant woman transforms into a male and is rubbed with oil in the manner of a gladiator and athlete: Sara Maitland, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua* (Evesham: Arthur James, 1996), 26. See also Giselle De Nie, "'Consciousness Fecund through God:' From Male Fighter to Spiritual Bride-Mother in Late Antique Female Sanctity", in A. Mulder-Bakker (ed.) *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 116-23; Joyce Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106-09. This passion is also the subject of a sermon by Augustine in which he argues that the spirit is neither male nor female. The omission of Perpetua from Aldhelm's work is striking in light of the obvious parallels to Aldhelm's argument. Lapidge's suggestion that Aldhelm must not have had access to her vita seems likely. Lapidge and Herren, 57.

²⁸ This goes beyond the attempts of the author of the *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines* to make the nuns of the double monastery into honorary males. See chapter two page 39-41.

virgins, widows, and the married by replacing the widows with the chaste. This change is essential with respect to the members of his audience who were previously married and had left their husbands to pursue a monastic vocation. These women are clearly not widows, and yet he does not wish to categorize them according to their former state of marriage. To make this distinction, Aldhelm relies upon the Augustinian tradition of the will being more important than the physical condition. Aldhelm illustrates his argument quite clearly when he quotes the famous passage from *De Civitate Dei* in which Augustine discusses Christian virgins raped by the invading Visigoths: “Thus the sanctity of the body is not lost provided that the sanctity of the soul remains, even if the body is overcome, just as the sanctity of the body is lost if the purity of the soul is violated, even if the body is intact.”²⁹

Aldhelm does hold that physical virginity uncorrupted by other sins is still superior to chastity. However, virginity’s inherent link to the external matter of the flesh, even if only by separation, puts its spiritual status in constant jeopardy. Focusing on the physical nature of the virgin state stresses the importance of the corporeal world over that of the spirit. Conversely, the internal focus of chastity and spiritual marriage places a higher value on the functioning of the soul. Taken in this context, Aldhelm’s implication is that there can be little doubt as to which state should be preferred. Even though chastity holds an inferior rank to virginity in theory, its essentially spiritual nature makes it practically superior. There are a number of examples where Aldhelm returns to this point throughout the *De Virginitate*.

²⁹ *De Virginitate* 58.57-59, *Epigrammata* 88 PL 51:513C, quoting *De civ. Dei* I.18; Lapidge and Herren, 128: *ita non amittitur corporis sanctitas manente animi sanctitate etiam corpora oppresso, sicut amittitur sanctitas corporis violata animi puritate etiam corpora intacto.*

Aldhelm's interpretation of Basil of Caesarea's life is a concise statement of this principle. He quotes Basil's maxim, "I do not know a woman, and yet I am not a virgin," which is delivered to an audience of both sexes, as clear evidence for his argument.³⁰ Aldhelm goes on to elucidate the point:

stainlessness of bodily virginity – which is only external - was in no way suitable for acquiring the distinction of a vigorous integrity, unless chastity of the spirit, by whose command the untamed impulses of bodily wantonness are restrained – just as a servant-girl (*bernacula*), lest she become stubbornly insolent, is subjected to the control of a mistress (*matrona*)- inwardly cleaves to it harmoniously with comradely solidarity.³¹

Aldhelm is restating his case concerning his call for spiritual purity instead of merely incorrupt flesh, which is insufficient for true merit.³²

However, the central problem still exists for Aldhelm's audience in the double monastery, as virginity is nonetheless to be held superior to their post-marital chastity.

Aldhelm's solution revolves around the practical spiritual implications of virginity. Aldhelm argues that while the external purity of virginity is preferable, this state is spiritually susceptible

³⁰ DV, 27.34, 343; Lapidge and Herren, 86: *et feminam non cognosco et virgo non sum*. There is no evidence that Aldhelm was familiar with Basil's rule.

³¹ DV, 27.42-48, 345-6; Lapidge and Herren, 87: *qui nequaquam extrinsecus carnalis tantum pudicitiae immunitatem ad promerendas strenuae integritatis infulas idoneam fore ratus est, nisi spiritus quoque castimonia, cuius imperio indomita corporalis lasciviae petulantia refrenatur, sicut bernacula, ne contumaciter insolescat, matronae nutibus mancipatur, intrinsecus contubernali soliditate concorditer adhaerescat*. Lapidge translates *pudicitiae* in this instance as 'chastity'. I prefer to render it as 'virginity' as it is in keeping with the clear distinction made by Aldhelm between *pudicitia* as bodily purity and *castimonia* as spiritual purity in the opening lines of the DV, Prologue.1, 27; Lapidge and Herren, 59: *Reverendissimis Christi virginibus omnique devotae germanitatis affectu venerandis, et non solum corporalis pudicitiae praeconio celebrandis, quod plurimorum est, verum etiam spiritualis castimoniae gratia glorificandis, quod paucorum est*.

³² The reference to the *bernacula* (servant) and the *matrona* (matron) are also of interest. Considering the repeated references to authority and control mentioned above, this passage would seem to represent a further statement reaffirming the control of the abbess. It is possible that this *bernacula* represents an unruly virgin nun who has been defying the authority of the abbess on the grounds that she is not a virgin, and that she is put in her place by a strong *matrona* backed by the weight of Aldhelm's prose.

to the contamination of pride. After a long section that spells out the hierarchies of virginity, chastity, and marriage, he laments that virginity often fails to fulfill its initial promise.

And yet --- unfortunately --- it usually occurs the other way around with the hierarchal positions reversed, so that the station of the inferior life, advancing on all fronts little by little, takes the place of the superior life as it languishes tepidly.³³

Virginity's superior hierarchal position, attained by physical integrity, can be lost through sloth and inaction caused by pride. The pride of virgins is contrasted to the action of one previously married, whose ignoble beginning is overcome through constant striving spurred on by bitter remorse. Aldhelm condemns "those of either sex who, inflated with the puffed-up arrogance of pride, exult in the integrity of flesh alone."³⁴ He further reinforces this construction with the analogy of boats passing Scylla and Charybdis. While the secure and untarnished ship of virginity does not attempt the passage, those who are chaste make the channel with their shaking vessel.³⁵ Because of its humble beginnings, not in spite of them, chastity is able to overtake the formally superior rank of virginity.

Aldhelm goes further in arguing that physical purity is insufficient by utilizing the example of Lucifer. Aldhelm holds that if even the angels, the most pure of God's creations, can be brought down by the sin of pride, what chance does one who is merely human virgin have to resist?

³³ *DV*, 10.1-4, 111; Lapidge and Herren, 66: *Et tamen plerumque, pro dolor, immutatis ordinibus versa vice contingere solet, ut inferioris vitae gradus usquequaque paulatim proficiens superiorem tepide torpentem praeoccepet.*

³⁴ *De Virginitate*, 10.15-19, 115; Lapidge and Herren, 67: *in utroque sexu....qui tumido elationis supercilio inflati de sola carnis integritate gloriantur.*

³⁵ *De Virginitate*, 10.18-24, 115-6; Lapidge and Herren, 67.

Now if the angelic loftiness of the heavenly citizens, swelling so greatly with the arrogance of pride, was deprived of the blessed companionship of the other angels and its share in contemplating the godhead, how much the more will the frail weakness of mortals be unhappily defrauded of the wedding-feat of the celestial bride-groom, if it has swelled up like an inflated bladder with the merit of its own attainments, and has taken on the notoriety of vainglory because of its virginal chastity – as if it were some special sanctity.³⁶

Aldhelm is very careful throughout this argument to ensure that he maintains his orthodox position. Even though Aldhelm is advancing this new radical hierarchy, he did not wish to deny categorically that there are virgins who are able to overcome pride. But even this admission is couched in such a way as to reinforce the pre-eminence of chastity within the social context of the Anglo-Saxon double monastery. Aldhelm states that there are those who “from the very commencement of first infancy never cease from persevering indefatigably in the high pursuit of virginity” and are also able, through constant self-recriminations, to overcome the danger of pride.³⁷ These individuals are only able to do this, however, by removing themselves from society and engaging in a life of contemplation and sacrifice. Those living an active life cannot match this sort of extraordinary holiness.³⁸ In this framework, the members of Barking were engaged in the active life of the minster and did not have the ability to live as recluses. Aldhelm thus asserts that the only virgins who are of superior rank to the holy chaste are those who remove themselves from society completely. As this would not apply to members of

³⁶ *DV*, 11.13-20, 125-29; Lapidge and Herren, 67-8: *Quodsi angelica supernorum ciuium celsitudo elationis tantum supercilio turgescens beato ceterorum contubernio et deificae contemplationis participio priuabatur, quanto magis gracillima mortalium fragilitas, si de propriis meritorum emulamentis ut inflata uesica intumuerit et de uirginali castimonia quasi speciali sanctimonia rumusculos cendodoxiae ceperit, a caelestis sponsi triclinio infeliciter fraudabitur.*

³⁷ *DV*, 14.2-3, 165; Lapidge and Herren, 71: *ab ipso nacentis infantiae rudimento in summo virginitatis proposito infatigabiliter perseuare non desistunt.*

³⁸ *DV*, 14.6-18, 168-9; Lapidge and Herren, 71.

Barking, any internal hierarchal issues between the virginal and the chaste would not be affected by this admission.

Virgins who do live the active life must therefore guard their souls against the evil of pride. Using the Gospel parable of the ten virgins from Matthew 25 and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Aldhelm reinforces the point that bodily purity is not sufficient to obtain spiritual chastity.³⁹ Not only is the body insufficient as a means for salvation, but it is actually a detriment that must be restrained. Citing Paul's struggle with his corporeal being – "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection" – Aldhelm speaks of the need to scorn the freedom of the body by subjecting it to the yoke of legitimate servitude.⁴⁰ By adapting Paul's body and spirit dichotomy, Aldhelm is able to apply it to the problematic nature of virginity.

Augustinian and Pauline thought were thus used to construct Aldhelm's own distinctive view of the relationship between marriage and sexuality. Combining Paul's separation of the exterior (body) and interior (spirit) with Augustine's division of sex and marriage, Aldhelm advances a syneisaktic formulation that imbued chaste individuals with the spiritual authority of virgins. His valorization of chastity is necessary in the context of a social situation that accepted the ability of members to leave marriage and enter holy life after beginning as active and influential members of society. Moreover, as their role within the minster system was anything but secluded and enclosed, these chaste members of the double monastery must be accounted for theologically. Within this context, Aldhelm's insertion of chastity into the tripartite division between virgins, widows and those married thus served a distinct need. Aldhelm elegantly

³⁹ Matthew 25:1-13 and 1 Cor 9.

⁴⁰ *DV*, 16.31, 193, citing 1 Cor 9:27; Lapidge and Herren, 73: *Macero corpus meum, et servitatem redigo*.

incorporates the nuns at Barking into this framework by placing them into the context of the traditional system.⁴¹

Furthermore, at this point in his dialogue, Aldhelm further undercut the status of virginity as the highest rank by suggesting that the virgins' position, according to certain authorities, might be better taken by martyrs:

To these three levels of rank, therefore, into which the flourishing multitude of believers in the catholic Church is divided, the gospel parable has promised hundred-fold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold fruit according to the outlay of their merits, even though certain (authorities) are accustomed to allot the sheaves of the hundred-fold harvest, sprouting abundantly in the fallow lands of the gospel and putting forth grain-bearing ears of corn, to the martyrs who pour out their holy blood in the manner of a stream for the Christian faith.⁴²

Aldhelm here refers to the well-established transition from actual martyrdom to the spiritual sacrifice of virginity.⁴³ However, there is nothing absolutely physical about the ritual offering up of one's sexuality that would separate chastity from virginity. Furthermore, if Aldhelm's suggestion is that martyrs may actually deserve the highest rank, then this would seem to indicate a reordering of the hierarchy which delegitimated virginity's position as superior to chastity. The best interpretation of these rhetorical positions is that Aldhelm sought to move the hierarchy of spiritual worth away from one's bodily state and towards that of inner spirituality.

⁴¹ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 84.

⁴² *DV*, 19.26-34, 223; Lapidge and Herren, 76: *His igitur tribus gradum ordinibus, quibus credentium multitudo in catholica florens ecclesia discernitur, evangelium paradigma centesimum, sexagesimum et tricesimum fructum iuxta meritorum mercimonium spocondit, licet quidam centesimi fructus manipulos evangelicis novalibus ubertim pululantes et granigera spicarum glumula germinantes martiribus sacrum pro Christianae professionis titulo cruorem ritu rivi rorantibus deputare soleant.*

⁴³ See for instance, Gregory the Great. *Homilae in Ezechielem* ed. M. Adriaen, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1971), II.8.16. 348-9; Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 72.

While the first section focuses on making the case that chastity should be held superior to virginity, the final section is similarly devoted to attacking personal vanity among monastic men and women. This section begins with a long diatribe against ostentatious dress.⁴⁴ This section draws primarily from Cyprian's *De Habitu Virginum*; Aldhelm adopts Cyprian's language regarding the dress of women, directly quoting him in an address to virgins:

[I]f you dress yourself sumptuously and go out in public so as to attract notice, if you rivet the eyes of young men to you and draw the sighs of adolescents after you, and nourish the fires of sexual anticipation so that, even if you yourself do not perish, you nonetheless destroy others and present yourself to your onlookers as if you were poison or the sword, you cannot be excused as if you were of a chaste and modest mind.⁴⁵

Aldhelm furthermore describes Judith as luring the “dreadful leader of the Assyrians” to his death through her “innate beauty” and “bodily adornment.”⁴⁶ He then emphasizes this by declaring, “You see, it is not by my assertion but by the statement of Scripture that the adornment of women is called the depredation of men!”⁴⁷ These statements may seem out of character for the narrative that I have described above. Stephanie Hollis sees these comments as representative of Aldhelm's view that women were a “morally dangerous force needing to be contained and marginalized.”⁴⁸ She sees in them evidence of Aldhelm succumbing to the misogyny of the ecclesiastical environment. Scott Gwara contributes to this line of interpretation,

⁴⁴ Chapters 55-58

⁴⁵ *DV*, 56 13-18, Lapidge and Herren, 125-6. *si tu te sumptuosius comas et per publicam notabiliter incedas, oculos in te iuvenum illicias, suspiria adolescentum post te trahas, concupiscendi lumidinem nutrias, sperandi fomenta succendas, ut, etsi ipsa non pereas, alios tamen perdas et velut gladium te et venenum videntibus exhibeas, excusari non potes, quasi mente casta sis et pudica*

⁴⁶ *DV*, 57.11-12, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127 *nativa vultus venustate ornanmetis etiam corporalibus.*

⁴⁷ *DV*, 57 15-17, 731, Lapidge and Herren, 127 *En, non nostris assertionibus sed scripturae a stipulationibus ornatus feminarum rapina virorum vocatur!*

⁴⁸ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 104.

making the offhand comment that “[s]ome nuns it seems, were given to dressing lavishly and to filing their nails.”⁴⁹

However, I would suggest that Aldhelm’s statements can be reconciled to the broader purpose of the narrative in a more satisfactory manner. A better interpretation of this passage may be proposed if we examine the full rhetorical context of these statements. Immediately following his attack on ostentatious clothing, Aldhelm pulls back from the harsh nature of his stance by chastising himself for unnecessarily haranguing about garments, proclaiming that this tirade was directed at no one in particular, and that purity can only be found in the mind anyway.⁵⁰ As Hollis has noted, Aldhelm has effectively argued away any substantial significance to the criticism against clothing.⁵¹ Our options seem to be that we can either view Aldhelm as a particularly poor misogynist, or we need to explore alternative interpretations.

I would suggest that the section only makes sense if it is not viewed as a particular condemnation of practice, but rather as further evidence of the preference for the state of the interior soul over that of the exterior body. First, after extensive quotation of Cyprian, which serves to solidify his orthodoxy, he immediately states that he is not just referring to women in his condemnation of provocative clothing. The beginning of chapter 58 in *De Virginitate* states that vanity is a concern for both sexes.

⁴⁹ Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, 56.

⁵⁰ *DV*, 58.40-53, 741-3; Lapidge and Herren, 128-9: “Accordingly I think that in general the indulgence of mercy should be obtained from everyone without difficulty, since the harshness of my words in reproof has not distressed anyone in particular. For the common generality of the many out not rightly to be censured where the particular characteristics of individuals cannot be blamed; for indeed, genus and species, that is to say, the general and the particular, differ a good deal from each other.... For every privilege of pure virginity is preserved only in the fortress of the free mind rather than being contained in the restricted confines of the flesh.” *Quamobrem ab omnibus generaliter indulgentiae ueniam non difficulter impetrandam reor, quia neminem specialiter sermonum seueritas castigando exacerbauit. Nam passiuia plurimorum generalitas nequaquam iure lacerari debet, ubi specialis singulorum proprietas culpari non ualet; multum quipped genus et species hoc est generalitas et specialitas abinuicem differunt.... Omne etenim purae uirginitatis priuilegium potius in solo liberae mentis praesidio seruatur, quam in arto carnis clustello continetur.*

⁵¹ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 105-07.

It is a disgrace to mention the shameless impudence of vanity and the sleek insolence of stupidity which [vanity and insolence] are to be discerned in those of both sexes, not only those living cloistered under the discipline of the monastery but even the ecclesiastics whose clerical sphere of duty is under the control of a bishop, contrary to the decrees of canon law and the norm of the regular life...⁵²

He goes on to make a detailed list of the sartorial excesses of both men and women that includes fine linen shirts, silk sleeves, the curling of hair, the wearing of intricate ribbons that fall to the feet, and sharpened fingernails suitable for an owl.⁵³ Excessive ornamentation, then, is not a strictly feminine concern.

The choice to utilize the story of Judith employs a narrative in which a heroine performs a noble act in spite of her use of excessive ornamentation. Aldhelm continues his pattern of presenting orthodox positions and then immediately critiquing them. Judith is presented as having committed this act while retaining her chastity and, “for that reason, having kept the honour of her modesty intact, she brought back a renowned trophy to her fearful fellow-citizens.”⁵⁴ This section simply does not make sense when viewed as a misogynistic diatribe. However, understood in light of Aldhelm’s broader theme of comparing the interior world favorably to the external, the overall structure becomes apparent.

⁵² *De Virginitate*, 58.1-6, 735; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *Pudet referre quorundam frontosam elationis impudentiam et comptam stoliditatis insolentiam, quae in utroque sexu non solum sanctimonialium sub reinmine coenubii conuersantium, uerum etiam ecclesiasticorum sub dicione pontificali in clero degentium contra canonum decreta et regularis uitae normam deprehenduntur usurpatae.*

⁵³ *De Virginitate*, 58.9-15, 735-37; Lapidge and Herren, 128.

⁵⁴ *De Virginitate*, 57.19-22, 731-33; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *non casitatis defectu... idcirco, salva pudoris reverentia celebre meticolosis municipibus tropeum... reportavit.*

Chaste and Virgin Exemplars

While a full discussion of the collection of fifty-seven saints and exemplars Aldhelm mentions in the *De Virginitate* will be undertaken in chapter five, it is appropriate to make brief mention here of how the collection fits into his larger arguments. Aldhelm himself describes his compilation as an attempt at weaving together a crown of virginity favorable to Christ.⁵⁵ The members of Aldhelm's list are divided between male and female. Each section is presented in roughly chronological order, with pre-Christian figures such as Elijah and David being followed first by the Apostles and then by the martyrs. Yet his representation of the saintly exemplars is not merely a random listing of his sources, as it has sometimes been characterized.⁵⁶ Rather, both the way in which the exemplars are presented and the overall structure of this section contribute to his argument.

Certain themes throughout his collection of saintly exemplars seem to support Aldhelm's overall view of a spiritual companionship between men and women based on inner spirituality. The use of male and female exemplars furthers this argument in several ways. The mere inclusion of both male and female saints within the same collection figuratively embodies the reality of the double monastery. The double monastery is also represented through an emphasis on the scholarly nature of the saints. In light of Aldhelm's previous praise of the scholarly work at Barking and the intelligence of their correspondence, it is not surprising that this would be a central issue.

Aldhelm also takes to great pains to emphasize the internal spirituality of his exemplars and seeks to remove obstacles constructed by patristic tradition for an understanding of spiritual

⁵⁵ *De Virginitate*, 19.39, 225; Lapidge and Herren, 76.

⁵⁶ Lapidge and Herren, 57-58.

companionship. The predominance of internal spirituality is continued from his earlier theological construction of virginity and chastity to his collection of saintly exemplars. Aldhelm's sequencing of the development of chastity within his anthology is of critical importance.⁵⁷ The figure of Jesus represents a turning point in the collection. Those who appear occur before Jesus in the collection are generally referred to as virginal, while those who came after are generally chaste. The only exception to this pattern among those who preceded Christ is in the case of Daniel, who is described as both virginal and chaste.⁵⁸ However, this need not be seen as breaking the trend, as Daniel is well established as prefiguring Christ. In any case, it would be stretching matters to claim straight out that Daniel was a virgin as the Book of Daniel makes no mention of his marital state either way.⁵⁹ Jesus himself is described as being the "author of all chastity" (*totius castitatis auctorem*) and as a virgin.⁶⁰ The coming of Jesus thus brings about a renewed emphasis on inner spirituality over external forms. There are those who are described as virgins following Jesus, but their virginity is characterized as a gift of grace, in Pauline fashion, instead of as a human accomplishment. Ambrose's virginity is described as a *praerogativam*; literally, one who is asked first. The meaning here is clearly something that is apart from the person. This type of language is consistent with Aldhelm's earlier treatment of virginity. While virginity certainly has great value, it should be seen as something external to the individual and therefore of lesser importance relative to their spiritual state than chastity.

Similarly relevant for his audience at Barking is the case of Constantina. As a daughter of the Emperor Constantine who devoted herself to a religious life, she would have been a

⁵⁷ See appendix 2 for an outline of the *De Virginitate*.

⁵⁸ *DV*, 21.4, 235; *DV*, 21.9, 237; Lapidge and Herren, 77.

⁵⁹ Scott Gwara interprets Daniel's inclusion to be part of a theme of resistance to idolatry within Aldhelm's collection of saints. Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, 56-7.

⁶⁰ *DV*, 23.7, 269; Lapidge and Herren, 80: *totius castitatis auctorem*.

particularly resonant figure with the royal widows at Barking. Her exemplary appeal is still greater because she is presented as converting large numbers of women to leave their marriage beds for the glories of chastity.⁶¹ The significance of a strong royal woman who served as a missionary to her people would clearly not have been lost on Barking. A final theme which should be noted is that of false accusations of misconduct, especially of a sexual nature, for which the saints are eventually exonerated after intense persecution. For example, Narcissus, Athanasius, and Eugenia are all falsely accused of sexual misconduct and only later vindicated. Here too, the significance of such accusations would not have been lost on the monks and nuns of Barking. The specific evidence for the living arrangements in double monasteries are rather sparse but it seems clear that actual practice varied a great deal.⁶² However, it seems that extreme segregation of men and women was not the norm. As Joan Nicholson put it: "It was no use entering a monastery to get away from men and doubtful whether anyone really wanted to."⁶³ Yet the close contact of men and women in a monastic setting was a concern for some and occasioned charges of scandal.

There is very little evidence that sexual improprieties at double monasteries were ever a serious concern. The most infamous example of scandal at a double monastery comes from Bede's condemnation of Coldingham where he blames the destruction of the double monastery by fire upon the wickedness of its members.⁶⁴ This example is occasionally cited as showing

⁶¹ *DV*, 48, 653-57; Lapidge and Herren, 115. For the historical Constantina, see Noel Emmanuel Lenski, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96-101, 290.

⁶² Archaeological evidence that is site specific to Barking would help to unravel the actual living arrangements of the women to whom Aldhelm is writing but unfortunately none is available. The site was excavated in 1910 by Alfred Clapham but there was apparently little or no evidence that survived from the Anglo-Saxon period. See Clapham. "The Benedictine Abbey of Barking: A Sketch of its Architectural History and an Account of Recent Excavations on its Site" *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, 12 (1913), 69-89.

⁶³ Nicholson, 'Feminae Gloriosae', 19.

⁶⁴ *HE*, IV.25, 420-6.

Bede's view that close contact between monastic men and women was improper.⁶⁵ Yet what appears to have worried Bede about Coldingham was not the physical danger of "casual association between its male and female members," but rather the spiritual offense of neglecting their duties for feasting and slothful slumber.⁶⁶ This is further emphasized by the contrast Bede draws between the dutiful Adamnan and the neglectful monks and nuns of Coldingham. Adamnan is not praised for his virginity and purity, as we might expect he would be if Bede intended to condemn the association of male and female. Rather, he is praised for keeping his vigils and his earnest prayers. Similarly, Bede does not inform us of sexual transgressions between the monks and nuns. Instead the "men and women alike" are castigated for their "feasting, drinking, gossip."⁶⁷ This passage may be evidence that there was some contact between monks and nuns at Coldingham, but not that the problems there were of a sexual nature.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Evidence that men and women in the past were able to find a working relationship within a common monastery is often easy to dismiss. No where is this more clear than in attempts to explain away the institution of the double monastery.⁶⁹ Much of the motivation for these

⁶⁵ Robert Hayward, 'Shem, Melchizedek, and Concern with Christianity in the Pentateuchal Targumim', in K.J. Cathcart, M. Maher and M. McNamara (eds.), *Targumic and Cognate Studies, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 145.

⁶⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 145.

⁶⁷ *HE*, IV.25, 424.

⁶⁸ See also Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 245. This passage might best be understood as fitting into his greater didactic purpose of denigrating 'lesser' monastic foundations and his desire to see the lands of such institutions be transferred for the endowment of additional bishoprics. D. P. Kirby, 'Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*: Its Contemporary Setting', *Bede and His World* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992).

⁶⁹ Thompson, 'The Ministry of Women', 145-54.

interpretations rests, quite reasonably, on the relative paucity of evidence for friendship or working relationships between the sexes. Where evidence of such collaboration survives, it is often dismissed as merely anomalous or exceptional. Yet, provided with enough exceptions, we need to begin to question the rule altogether. Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* provides important insight into this alternative dimension of the late antique and early medieval traditions of Christian asceticism.

It is not enough to demonstrate that Aldhelm and others approvingly quote misogynistic texts and argue forcefully against the travails of marriage. Even the most authoritative texts could be manipulated by individuals for different ends; texts such as the treatises of Augustine required a large degree of latitude of interpretation in order to maintain their relevancy.⁷⁰ Aldhelm's constructions were based upon these sources but utilized them to construct a model of cooperative relationships between men and women centered upon internal values instead of a figurative biological determinism.

Aldhelm was certainly not the only early medieval writer to argue for the prioritization of spirituality over physicality. One of the most likely inspirations for Aldhelm was Pope Gregory's writings concerning the acceptance of diversity within the church. Aldhelm particularly admired Gregory, whom he described as "the watchful shepherd and our teacher--- 'our' I say (because it was he) who took away from our forbearers the error of abominable paganism and granted them the rule of regenerative grace".⁷¹ Aldhelm was apparently quite

⁷⁰ Robert Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 9.

⁷¹ *DV*, 55.28-31, 719; Lapidge and Herren, 125: *Unde Gregorius, pervigil pastor et pedagogus noster, --- noster inquam, qui nostris parentibus errorem tetrae gentilitatis abstulit et regenerantis gratiae normam tradidit.*

familiar with Gregory's work, for he is often cited by name in the *De Virginitate*.⁷² It is also worth noting that the extent to which the dangers of pride figure in Aldhelm's work is also reflected in Gregory's *Homiliarum in Evangelia*.⁷³ It is unclear to what extent Aldhelm may have been familiar with other examples of Gregory's writings. However, it seems likely, judging by the diffusion of Gregorian texts in Anglo-Saxon England and their influence personally on Aldhelm, it seems likely that whatever of his works were available would have been known by Aldhelm.⁷⁴ Even without a specific identification of texts known to Aldhelm, it may therefore be worthwhile to point out that precedents can be found in Gregory's homilies for understanding gender differences in an egalitarian manner.

The complex gender ideology characteristic of Gregorian writings is an important example of how this egalitarian understanding could function. Gregory might minimize the position of the women at Christ's tomb in one homily, only to highlight the position of an intellectual woman during the celebration of a male martyr. Gregory's use of gender models served to construct an intellectual framework that utilized both men and women as practical exemplars without relying upon the expected tropes of 'rational men' and 'emotional women'.⁷⁵ In doing so he "opened up the possibility of a radically egalitarian approach to gender and Christian practice."⁷⁶ These examples show that Aldhelm's construction of an egalitarian framework was not an isolated case.

⁷² Ehwald, *Opera*, 191, 242, 293.

⁷³ Gregory the Great, *Homiliarum in Evangelia*, PL 40:4076-4314.

⁷⁴ J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to Anglo-Saxon Writers from Aldhelm to Alcuin (670-804)* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1970), 40-43.

⁷⁵ Felice Lifshitz, 'Gender and the Exemplarity East of the Middle Rhine: Jesus, Mary and the Saints in Manuscript Context', *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000), 1-19 8.

⁷⁶ Lifshitz, 'Gender and the Exemplarity East of the Middle Rhine', 10.

The efficacy of the personal model of a spiritual marriage that Aldhelm underscores was a very small step away from its application to the institution of the double monastery. The emphasis on the scholarly nature of both the male and the female, combined with their active and successful evangelizing, is too similar to the practice of the double monastery to be dismissed as coincidence. It seems clear that again Aldhelm has his audience firmly in view and was attempting to address their needs through the model of spiritual companionship. The focus upon the advantages that such an arrangement brings lends further credence to the institution which was under theological attack. By emphasizing the capabilities and equality of the women within the institution, he was fortifying it from both external assault and internal division.

Chapter Four - Containing Virginity: Sex and Society in Early Medieval England

[I]t is evident that in the same woman a good Christian loves the being that God has created, and that he wishes her to be transformed and renewed, while he hates the corruptible and mortal relationship and marital intercourse. In other words, it is evident that he loves her insofar as she is a human being, but that he hates her under the aspect of wifehood. – Augustine of Hippo¹

The patristic inheritance passed on to early medieval writers on matters of gender and female authority was largely limiting in character and tone, with little evidence available to support a more expansive reading of women's role in society. The quotation above, taken from Augustine's commentary on Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, represents one of the more positive treatments of the status of women in the patristic canon.² While Augustine could argue that women as divine creations were good and deserving of perfection through salvation, he simply could not bring himself to see women as potential equals worthy of friendship with men in this world.³ Similarly, figures such as Jerome and John Chrysostom could experience what we would describe as long friendships with women and yet still write about the immense spiritual danger men placed themselves in by fraternizing with women too closely.⁴

Many medieval authors utilized misogynistic elements in the canon to great effect. However, this was by no means uniform, and we have some reason to believe that in early Anglo-Saxon society in particular the possibility of relatively egalitarian relationships between religious men and women, however limited, did exist. The popularity of the double monastery

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *PL* 34:1250; Denis Kavanagh, trans., *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount with Seventeen Related Sermons*, (New York: 1951), 61-2. *Sic invenitur bonus christianus diligere in una femina creaturam Dei, quam reformari et renovari desiderat; odisse autem conjunctionem copulationemque corruptibilem atque mortalem: hoc est, diligere in ea quod homo est, odisse quod uxor est.*

² Matt. 5.

³ Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 49.

⁴ Clark, 'Friendship between the Sexes', 48-71.

and its powerful abbesses itself seems to suggest something quite different from the patriarchal principles espoused by figures such as Jerome and Cyprian. Yet until recently there has been little evidence to show that such institutions were anything more than “the survival of indigenous custom” in the face of a newly ascendant approach by ecclesiastical authorities that reinforced patriarchal norms.⁵ Stephanie Hollis has argued that the high position of women in post-conversion Anglo-Saxon England was only the result of this cultural holdover and that the church, guided by the misogynistic elements inherited from patristic sources, significantly advanced the marginalization of women in society.⁶ This view assumes both that those who received these ecclesiastical traditions supported them, and that patristic writings left recipients with little or no room to adapt their work to different circumstances. Yet, without evidence of a theological justification of a more egalitarian mindset towards gender relations, it can be difficult for modern historians to support interpretations more favorable to Anglo-Saxon religious women. Individual studies have argued that gender may not have been the most significant aspect of relationships between men and women in Anglo-Saxon society, but a comprehensive challenge to the notion that the coming of Christianity had a negative effect on women’s status still remains to be made.⁷ It is a mistake to read selected examples of misogynistic patristic texts into the medieval time period without regard to evidence of their acceptance in a particular historical context. We are beginning to accumulate enough evidence to be able to move the discussion away from seeing cooperative relationships as exceptions. I would argue that

⁵ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 2.

⁶ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 2-3.

⁷ Felice Lifshitz, 'Demonstrating Gun(T)Za: Women, Manuscripts, and the Question of Historical Proof', in W.P. Reinitz and Helmut (eds.), *Vom Nutzen Des Schreibens* (Vienna: 2002); Mcnamara, *Sisters in Arms*; Nicholson, 'Feminae Gloriosae'; Alain Renoir, 'Eve's I.Q. Rating: Two Sexist Views of Genesis B', in H. Damico and A.H. Olsen (eds.), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 262-72.

Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* can provide a strong example of the possibilities of cooperative relationships between religious men and women in the early medieval period.

This chapter will speak to the content of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* by locating its discourse concerning male and female sexuality and spiritual value within a specific historical context. Following an analysis of the circumstances of the composition of the *De Virginitate*, this chapter will examine Aldhelm's interpretive strategies within the *De Virginitate* and his creative restructuring of the writings of Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Cyprian. I will argue these interpretations were crafted to create a workable authority for the double monastery. As the treatise was composed at a time of heightened concern for orthodoxy, it follows that Aldhelm's discourse relied on texts that bore the unmistakable imprimatur of church authority. As we have seen, one of the primary strategies of Aldhelm's treatise was to oppose chastity to virginity and identify them with internal spirituality and external carnality respectively. In so doing, Aldhelm systematically restructured the patristic norms that saw virginity as being the singular most praiseworthy characteristic.

That Aldhelm put forward these arguments in a highly circuitous fashion is likely no accident. Rather it seems his choice of style most likely was influenced by his realization that he was not only rewriting much of the received orthodox material with respect to matters of gender, but also was in opposition to Theodore's own ideas of ritual physical purity. Aldhelm's reliance upon and manipulation of works by Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose and Cyprian helps us to better understand the function of the *De Virginitate*. The following three sections will parse Aldhelm's deployment of these patristic texts, each of which arose out of its own doctrinal struggles.

Augustine through a Prosper Lens

Evaluating Aldhelm's use of Augustine presents a unique set of problems. Aldhelm quotes Augustine only twice, both in single sentences. When compared to the long, detailed analysis Aldhelm gives to the works of Jerome, Ambrose, and Cyprian, the relative paucity of Augustinian citations might suggest that Augustine had only a limited influence on Aldhelm's thinking. Moreover, both of Aldhelm's citations come from Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (*City of God*); almost certainly he did not quote them from the original but drew them from Prosper of Aquitaine's *Epigrammata*. Prosper (390-463) was a fierce partisan in the battles over Augustinian interpretations of doctrine in the years following the death of Augustine in 430. He is also famous for his polemical attacks on John Cassian, Vincent of Lérins and the so-called 'Semipelagians'.⁸ The *Epigrammata* itself contains 105 short selections from Augustine's works, each of which is then followed by a brief elegiac verse from Prosper that seeks to explicate the Augustinian excerpt. Both of Aldhelm's quotations of Augustine are immediately followed by the corresponding selection from Prosper's *Epigrammata*, making it almost certain that Aldhelm's only citations of Augustine were filtered through Prosper. That Aldhelm would resort to quoting Augustine in this manner is all the more interesting as Aldhelm does seem to have had direct access to the *De Civitate Dei* independent of Prosper. Earlier in the *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm refers to the famous story of the incorruptibility of the flesh of a peacock from the *De Civitate Dei*, specifically citing Augustine's work as his source, and later repeats it in the *Carmen de Virginitate*.⁹ Furthermore, while Aldhelm references a number of other works by Augustine in his other writings, including *De Haeresibus*, *Soliloquies*, *De Libero Arbitrio*

⁸ Augustine Casiday, 'Rehabilitating John Cassian: An Evaluation of Prosper of Aquitaine's Polemic against the "Semipelagians"', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005), 270-84 272; Steven Muhlberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers Prosper, Hydatius, and the Gallic Chronicler of 452* (Leeds: F. Cairns, 1990), 48-55.

⁹ *DV*, 9.33-35, 105; *De civ. Dei*, 21.4.13, 525.

Voluntatis, *De Magistro*, and *De Musica*, the two passages in *De Virginitate* are the only times in Aldhelm's entire oeuvre in which Augustine is expressly quoted. It is impossible to know whether Aldhelm chose to quote Augustine through Prosper simply out of convenience or for some other purpose. However, Aldhelm's reliance on Prosper's distillation of Augustinian thought freed him to construct his argument regarding chastity and virginity in a manner that would have been impossible had he engaged with the full complexity of Augustine's corpus on this subject.

Aldhelm made extensive use of Prosper throughout his career. Aldhelm cited Prosper nineteen separate times by name in his two metrical treatises, the *De Virginitate* and the *Prosa de Virginitate*.¹⁰ Furthermore, seven additional examples of parallel verses from Aldhelm's work have been identified by Andy Orchard as almost certainly originating with Prosper.¹¹ Prosper's impact on Aldhelm should come as no surprise considering the wide-spread use of his *Epigrammata* throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Michael Lapidge has shown that no fewer than four Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of Prosper survive, each showing hallmarks of being used for classroom instruction through the study of the accompanying glosses.¹² Bede also made extensive use of Prosper in his *De Arte Metrica*, citing the author no less than twenty times.¹³ All in all, it is difficult to overestimate Prosper's impact on the wider Anglo-Saxon literary

¹⁰ Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 184. See also Max Manitius, *Zu Aldhelm und Baeda* (Wien: Carl Gerold, 1886).

¹¹ Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 184.

¹² Michael Lapidge, 'The Study of Latin Texts: The Evidence of Latin Glosses', in N. Brooks (ed.) *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 104-06. e.g. Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.2.31, London British Library, MS Harley 110, Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.5.35.

¹³ Charles Williams Jones, Calvin B. Kendall and M. H. King, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Pars 1, Opera Didascalica* (Turnholt: Brepols, 2003).; Ruby Davis, 'Bede's Early Reading', *Speculum* 8 (1933), 179-95 184-94.

world: Lapidge has concluded that “every literate Anglo-Saxon appears to have studied Prosper’s epigrams.”¹⁴

Aldhelm’s reliance on Prosper for his interpretation of Augustinian thought had a crucial impact on the shape of his argument within the *De Virginitate*. Instead of delving into the complexities of Augustinian theology on the subject of the body and the spirit, Aldhelm used Prosper’s simplified and condensed passages as a basis for deconstructing the positions of Jerome and Cyprian. In the fifty-eighth chapter of the *De Virginitate* Aldhelm quotes the following lines of Augustine from *De Civitate Dei*: “Thus the sanctity of the body is not lost provided that the sanctity of the soul remains, even if the body is overcome, just as the sanctity of the body is lost if the purity of the soul is violated, even if the body is intact.”¹⁵ This is immediately followed by the accompanying elegiac verse composed by Prosper:

The unimpaired mind loses nothing in a violated body,
The wounds of flesh do not stain it, if it’s unwilling;
Nor does the unengaged will take on the guilt of the deed:
It is a greater sin to will a crime than to suffer it;
Thus all (sins) revert to the depths of the heart
So that often the soul is guilty without the flesh,
Since it alone conceives and inwardly performs with invisible movements
That which is withheld from the untouched body.¹⁶

¹⁴ Lapidge, 'The Study of Latin Texts: The Evidence of Latin Glosses', 105.

¹⁵ *DV*, 58.57-59, 743; *Epigrammata* 88 *PL* 51:513C, quoting *De civ. Dei*, I.18; Lapidge and Herren, 129: *ita non amittitur corporis sanctitas manente animi sanctitate etiam corpora oppresso, sicut amittitur sanctitas corporis uiolata animi puritate etiam corpora intacto.*

¹⁶ *DV*, 58.59-68, 743; Lapidge and Herren, 129: *Mens illaesa nihil violato in corpora perdit/ Inuitam carnis uulnera non maculant;/ Nec crimen facti recipit non mixta uoluntas:/ Velle magis facinus quam tolerare nocet./ Sic autem ad cordis penetralia cuncta recurrunt,/ Vt plerumque animus sit sine carne reus,/ Cum, quod ab intact submotum est corpora, solus / Concipit et tectis motibus intus agit.*

The importance of these two passages for Aldhelm is quite clear, in that they lay down a clear and simple rationale for prioritizing the spirit over the body. In case the point was lost on his readers, Aldhelm amplifies his argument with a second quotation of Augustine from Prosper's *Epigrammata* that is even more to the point: "Virginity of the flesh is an intact body; virginity of the mind is an uncorrupted faith."¹⁷ Prosper accompanies the quotation with the lines:

Virginity of the flesh exists when the body is intact,
 Virginity of the soul is inviolate faith.
 Without this, no concern for corporeal purity is of avail;
 But devoutness of mind increases either boon.¹⁸

A clear dichotomy between the body and the spirit is emblematic of Prosper's interpretations of the Augustinian corpus. However, Augustinian thought was much more complex than Prosper's brief excerpts might suggest. In order to understand the impact of Aldhelm's use of Prosper and to show Aldhelm's interpretation of the relative merits of physical and spiritual purity, a further understanding of Augustine's approach must be developed.

Augustine's *De Bono Coniugali*, most likely written around 401 AD,¹⁹ listed three beneficial aspects of marriage: *proles*, *fides*, and *sacramentum*.²⁰ In defending marriage against the attacks of the Manicheans, Augustine argues that marriage was first created to ensure the propagation of mankind and that Adam and Eve were the first married couple. The necessity of marriage, for Augustine, was particularly felt in the time of the patriarchs: he explains the presence of polygamy among the *antiquos patres* as simply a practical method of populating the

¹⁷ *DV*, 58.69-70, 745, quoting *Enarrationes in psalmos* 148.19 from *Epigrammata* 76 PL 51:521B; Lapidge and Herren, 129: *virginitas carnis corpus intactum, virginitas animae fides incorrupta*.

¹⁸ *DV*, 58.71-4, 745; Lapidge and Herren, 129: *Carnis, inquit, uirginitas intacta corpora habetur, / Virginitas animi est intermerata fides, / Qua sine corporei nil prodest cura pudoris; / Sed mentis pietas auget utrumque bonum*.

¹⁹ *Augustine: De Bono Coniugali and De Sancta Virginitate* P.G. Walsh, ed. (Oxford, 2001), ix.

²⁰ *De Bono Coniugali*, 2-4. Augustine further expands his position in *De Genesi ad litteram*, 9.7.

world and creating the community that would bring about Christ.²¹ Augustine believed that virginity was superior to marriage, and while he wished to uphold the marital state as holy, he believed virginity to be higher.²² Thus far, Augustine's attitudes towards marriage would not have come as much of a surprise to many of his contemporaries. Yet he also introduced several more innovative notions.

The most revolutionary aspect of Augustine's construction of marriage was that it weakened the notion that sex was fundamental to marriage. While procreation was the prime function of marriage before Christ, it was Augustine's view that in the current age the essential nature of marriage was a matter of the will. Marriage was not formed through consummation, nor was it ended by impotence. This doctrine, formed in specific response to the debate between Jerome and Jovinian on virginity,²³ is akin to Augustine's conception that the victim of a rape has not sinned because she did not consent.²⁴ Since virtue resides in the soul, as long as the will remains committed to holiness the chastity of the sufferer is never in question. Another may harm the body of a virgin but cannot touch her soul, which remains pure.²⁵

Furthermore, Augustine potentially rehabilitated sex itself. He postulated that Adam and Eve would have had "rational" sex in Eden according to their will if they had been able to remain there.²⁶ Sex itself was not the problem; rather it was a separation from the will of God that contaminated the soul. For Augustine, the primary function of marriage resided in the stability and purity of the union. Marriage is beneficial, not just for the procreation of sons and

²¹ *De Bono Coniugali*, 15.5, 30-1; 19.6, 36-7. For Augustine's treatment of the polygamy of the patriarchs, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 271.

²² *De Bono Coniugali*, 10.3-7, 22-3.

²³ Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 43.

²⁴ *De civ. Dei*, 16.18, 30.

²⁵ *De civ. Dei*, 1.16, 21.

²⁶ *De Bono Coniugali*, 2. Elliott, 45.

daughters, but also for social benefits as well.²⁷ For if marriage was merely about sex or procreation, he argues, how could we speak of marriage between an elderly couple who had either lost their children or had none?²⁸ The greatest good in marriage came from the diminution of sexual relations in favor of companionship and fruitful union.

Yet this relationship was still conditioned by the social context from which Augustine came. Augustine, despite his apparent compassion and insistence on friendship in marriage, could not see his way clear to a formulation of true spiritual companionship between men and women.²⁹ His theory also had the effect of undermining the female ascetic's ability to match the male in sexual renunciation. If the fundamental spiritual problem does not reside in the body, then equal ascetic practice meant to tame the body could not lead to equal holiness. Indeed, female ascetics were often accorded even greater admiration than their male counterparts because they were seen as having so much more to overcome. In so doing, Augustine retained the fundamental differentiation of the sexes, and thereby preserved the traditional gradation of relative worth between male and female virgins.

Furthermore, Augustine also located the danger of sexual temptation within the female gender. Augustine's sexual past is well documented by his own hand. To a certain extent, this past may have given him a more compassionate view regarding sexual sins than was typical of other more radical thinkers such as Origen. Yet this relatively more relaxed view towards sexual behaviors does not indicate a positive view of sexuality in general. Augustine argued that male

²⁷ *De Sancta Virginitate*, 12, 78-9: *Habeant conjugia bonum suum, non quia filios procreant, sed quia honeste, quia licite, quia pudice, quia socialiter, procreant, et procreatos pariter, salubriter, instanter educant, quia thori fidem invicem servant, quia sacramentum connubii non violent.*

²⁸ *De Bono Coniugali*, 3.4, 6: *Quod mihi non uidetur propter solam filorum procreationem, sed propter ipsam etiam naturalem in diuerso sexu societatem ; alioquin non iam diceretur coniugium in senibus, praesertim si uel amisissent filios uel minime genuissent.*

²⁹ Clark, 'Adam's Only Companion: Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage', 139.

sexuality was a function of lust or libido which came about as a result of Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden; Augustine therefore accepted it as part of the human condition after the Fall. Women's sexuality, however, was both more dangerous and corrupting of men. "Whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve (the temptress) that we must beware of in any woman."³⁰ It is clear that despite the implications of Augustine's location of sin within the will instead of the body, he still wished to keep traditional divisions between the status of men and women. Augustine also stated that while women would experience the holy resurrection, there was no reason for men to desire their presence in heaven.³¹

This negative view of women's sexuality led Augustine to accept Jerome's formulation that associated the virgin, widow and married woman with the hundred-fold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold rewards.³² Despite Augustine's view that the physical body did not determine the holiness of an individual, there was a distinct hierarchy among the various states of female virginity and chastity. In this context, the woman who has willed herself to remain inviolate in body is the most holy. The widow whose will and body were at one time stained but whose will is now pure and who is living chastely now occupies the middle rank. Finally, the married woman, who must embrace sexual activity by scriptural fiat, occupies the lowest tier. As there were strict scriptural prohibitions against divorce within Christianity, there was little need to account for the woman who had chosen to be free of her husband.

Augustine's conception of the will as the defining characteristic of marriage opened up new avenues for the interpretation of sexuality and purity. However, the potential of this conception was limited by his need to respond to his Manichean opponents. By being unable to

³⁰ *Ep.* 243, 10.

³¹ Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 49.

³² *De Sancta Virginitate*, 46-9, 130-8.

see his way clear to envision a place for the competency and friendship of women with men, Augustine could not apply his theory of the will either towards a understanding of marriage, or towards virginity and chastity. We may perhaps conclude that his favorable statements towards marriage were driven more by his desire to refute the charges of the dualist Manicheans, who condemned marriage altogether, rather than a true belief in the good of marriage. Perhaps Peter Brown put it best when he wrote that Augustine preached to his audiences as “a Neo-Platonist who lived among monks, and who could seriously expect them to love the sexuality of their wives and the physical bonds of their families only as a Christian must love his enemies”.³³

This pessimism concerning the ability of men and women to overcome their sexual urges was further strengthened in Augustine’s famous conflict with Pelagius. Pelagius was a Roman provincial from Britain who moved to Rome sometime around the year 400 and undertook the life of a religious layman at a time when such men exerted a great deal of influence on the Roman church.³⁴ Pelagius’ views were summed up in a statement made in his letter of advice to Demetrias, a wealthy daughter from the highest levels of Roman society, concerning the proper behavior of a woman in ascetic life. Pelagius, who adopted the role of religious patron to the wealthy daughters of the Roman elite much as had Jerome and Augustine, wrote to Demetrias saying that “since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory”.³⁵ This statement is a radical ratification of the potentiality of the human body that was implicit in ascetic practice. Just as Jerome earlier had seen the possibility that women such as Paula and Eustochium could overcome inherent human weakness through ascetic training, so did Pelagius, except on a grander scale. Pelagius rejected the difference between ascetics and lay people, not by arguing

³³ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 248.

³⁴ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 341.

³⁵ *Pelagii ad Demetriadem*, PL 30, 15-45.

that there was no value in ascetic behavior, but rather by exhorting everyone in society to live up to the demands of the monastery. If there was no inherent excuse for sinful behavior, then all sin must be an affront to God. Perfection was not only possible, but mandatory. That this idea is quite similar in many regards to Jerome's early conceptions concerning human potentiality should not be surprising, as both were influenced by Origen.³⁶

Pelagius' views proved to be extremely popular in many segments of society, and he may have had particular success among those disaffected by the turbulent years of the early fifth century. His work was part of a reform movement in the Church formed in response to the catastrophic failures of Roman society that saw Rome sacked and burned in 410.³⁷ Pelagius' views took root in a society that was devastated by the invasions and by the destruction, famine and social upheaval that spread in their wake. It is no accident, therefore, that Pelagius received his greatest support in those areas of the empire that were hit hardest by the devastation, and was rejected in areas such as Augustine's North Africa which had as yet been spared.³⁸

Augustine and his fellow North African bishops undertook an extended campaign against Pelagius and repeatedly attempted to have his ideas declared heretical. However, for a time it seemed as though the Pelagian reform movement might very well carry the day. It received support from Pope Innocent and, at least initially, from his successor Zosimus. Furthermore, in 415, a synod of fourteen bishops at Lydda in the Holy Land accepted his teachings as orthodox, and his support among the Italian bishops continued to grow.³⁹ It was only the intervention of the Imperial court that turned the tide against Pelagius. An Imperial edict was issued throughout the empire in 418 that condemned Pelagius' views and ordered him expelled from Rome. Zosimus

³⁶ Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 38.

³⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 342.

³⁸ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 351.

³⁹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 356-7.

reluctantly issued a similar denunciation of Pelagius and his supporters; afterwards our sources fall silent about Pelagius' fate.

This was a tremendous victory for Augustine, and no less a figure than Jerome celebrated his triumph with a letter of congratulations.⁴⁰ The debates over Pelagian conceptions of body and spirit helped further shape Augustine's thought and hardened his stance on the physical nature of sexuality. In Augustine's view, it was simply not possible for a defective humanity to reach the Pelagian state of perfection. Sin itself, and in particular the sexual urge, was generated by a "permanent flaw in the soul that tilted it irrevocably towards *the flesh*".⁴¹ Augustine goes further than most as he identified the flesh not simply with those things to do with the body, but rather with all things that bring a person to prefer his or her own will over God's.

This argument, while certainly effective as a rebuttal to the Pelagian stance on grace, also reduced optimism in the effectiveness of the ascetic life. If indeed, humanity suffered from a 'permanent flaw of the soul', then one could have no confidence that ascetic training and deprivation had the potential to overcome the sexual urge or the concomitant distance from the divine will. Augustine essentially linked concerns over sexuality to the very essence of humanity, by presenting sexuality as a sign of humankind's flaws. On the other hand, by linking the flesh and the will, Augustine's thought also served to sever the immutable relationship between corrupted and pure flesh. If the problems of the flesh were actually manifested in the will, then the flesh itself was potentially not of true importance, except as an indication of inner spirituality. Thus, Augustine was able to make the judgment noted above that a rape victim has not sinned because she did not consent to her violation.⁴²

⁴⁰ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 363.

⁴¹ Brown, *Body and Society*, 418, emphasis in the original.

⁴² *De civ. Dei*, 16-18; *PL*, 41.13-804, 30.

It was this point of Augustinian doctrine that Aldhelm exploited to great effect in the *De Virginitate*. Throughout his treatise, Aldhelm prioritized the interior, spiritual aspects of the Christian experience over corporeal integrity. Similarly, it is clear that Aldhelm structured the *De Virginitate* with a strong preference for chiasmic constructions, where the broad ordering of topics in the first half of the text would be mirrored in the second half. Thus, just as the first section of the treatise is devoted to a theological treatment of virginity and chastity, the last section returns to the topic. Likewise these sections bracket the center section of the saints' lives, which are themselves arranged as pairs of male and female lives. By reading the text backwards, as it were, we can make sense of what might strike us as a rather curious way to begin a text devoted to virginity:

To the most reverend virgins of Christ, (who are) to be venerated with every affection of devoted brotherhood, and to be celebrated not only for the distinction of (their) corporeal chastity, which is (the achievement) of many, but also to be glorified on account of (their) spiritual purity, which is (the achievement) of few.⁴³

Aldhelm commends the “most reverend virgins of Christ” not so much for the common achievement of “corporeal integrity,” but rather for their “spiritual purity”. On its face, praising virginity by declaring corporeal integrity to be a lesser good seems to be a peculiar starting point. However, we now can understand that the source of Aldhelm’s theological outlook resides in his interpretation of Augustine through Prosper’s lens. Aldhelm concludes: “Thus the sanctity of the body is not lost provided that the sanctity of the soul remains, even if the body is overcome, just

⁴³ *DV*, Prologue.1, 27; Lapidge and Herren, 59: *Reuerentissimis Christi uirginibus omnique deuotae germanitatis affectu uenerandis et non solum corporalis pudicitiae praeconio celebrandis, quod plurimorum est, uerum etiam spiritalis castimoniae gratia glorificandis, quod paucorum est.*

as the sanctity of the body is lost if the purity of the soul is violated, even if the body is intact.”⁴⁴

This theme reasserts itself repeatedly and is a reliable guide to understanding Aldhelm’s interpretation of patristic literature throughout the treatise. As will be shown in the following sections, this reading of Aldhelm’s interpretive strategies explains his transformation of the patristic material hostile to the double monasteries from Jerome, Ambrose, and Cyprian into something more amenable to Aldhelm’s own, very different views.

However, it may be asked why Aldhelm should put such argumentative weight on Augustine and yet devote so little of his treatise to his work. The answer again may lie in the circumstances of its composition. If the *De Virginitate* was conceived as a defense against viewpoints unfavorable to male and female cooperation, it follows that Aldhelm would devote the majority of the text towards challenging those who wished to argue for the strict separation of religious men and women. Augustine – at least as he was filtered by Prosper – was not the theological problem that Aldhelm and the nuns were forced to confront. Rather, the works of Jerome, Ambrose and Cyprian posed the greatest theological challenge for Aldhelm; the greater portion of his theological analysis was therefore devoted to reinterpreting their conclusions.

Jerome and Ambrose

In 393 CE, Siricius, the bishop of Rome, warned against a ‘new heresy’ sweeping through Italy that was said to pervert the Gospel and threatened to destroy Christianity.⁴⁵ In that

⁴⁴ *DV*, 58.57-59, 743; *Epigrammata* 88, *PL* 51:513C ; *De civ. Dei*, 1.18, 19, 39-42; Lapidge and Herren, 129: *ita non amittitur corporis sanctitas manente animi sanctitate etiam corpora oppresso, sicut amittitur sanctitas coporis uiolata animi puritate etiam corpora intacto*. These lines are from the famous section at the beginning of the *De Civitate Dei* where Augustine is contrasting the Christian ethic of prioritizing the spirit against the foundational story of the Roman Republic where Lucretia commits suicide after being raped by the sons of the tyranny Tarquin.

⁴⁵ Bernhard Jussen, “‘Virgins-Widows-Spouses’: On the Language of Moral Distinction as Applied to Women and Men in the Middle Ages”, *History of the Family* 7 (2002), 13-32, 14.

same year, Jerome, the brilliant and irascible champion of Eastern asceticism—and the man whom Siricius had put on trial and expelled from Rome just seven years earlier—also rallied to the defense of Roman morality, imploring its citizens to repent and “beware the name Jovinian.”⁴⁶ Jovinian’s great offense, which united such disparate men as Siricius, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine to such passionate denunciations, was his contention that virgins, widows and married women were equal in merit and that ascetic behavior would not meet with greater rewards in heaven.⁴⁷ These positions flew in the face of the notions of ascetic piety that were becoming increasingly popular in Italy during the late fourth-century and also served to undercut Siricius’ efforts to mandate clerical celibacy.⁴⁸ Most importantly, Jovinian’s protestations against giving virgins the place of privilege resonated with his community in Rome. Siricius and others were alarmed less by the arguments presented than by their popularity.⁴⁹ Christian society in the Mediterranean world of the fourth century was undergoing a social crisis brought about by factions within the Church that sought to make sexual contact—or its absence—the primary benchmark for assessing spiritual worth. Jovinian rose to oppose this movement out of anti-heretical concerns, leveling accusations of Manichaeism against Ambrose and others.⁵⁰ From the viewpoint of the succeeding modes of medieval piety, the outcome of this debate in favor of virginity may seem all too obvious and Jovinian’s protestations a mere anomaly. Such a view, however, can lead to serious misunderstanding. For while the levels of distinction implicit in the

⁴⁶ *Adversus Jovinianum*, PL 23.384: *Cave Joviniani nomen!*

⁴⁷ *Adversus Jovinianum*, PL 23.241: *[V]irgines, viduas, et maritatas, quae semel in Christo lotae sunt, si non discrepent caeteris operibus, eiusdem esse merit. [E]sse omnium qui suum baptismum servaverint, unam in regno caelorum remunerationem.*

⁴⁸ In discussing the Jovinianist controversy I follow David Hunter, ‘Rereading the Jovinianist Controversy: Asceticism and Clerical Authority in Late Ancient Christianity’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003), 453–70 454–7; David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 17–8.

⁵⁰ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 29–30, 171–204.

theory and practice of ascetic behavior would eventually become the standard method of measuring moral worth, reading this debate in triumphalist fashion is to miss the profound interest in Christian circles for promoting the unity of the community over an emphasis on imposing a sexual hierarchy.⁵¹

Aldhelm manipulated and refigured sources of unquestionable orthodoxy to meet goals very different from those of the original authors. On three separate occasions Aldhelm focused his attention on Jerome's writings. The two most prominent works which attracted Aldhelm's attention were: *Adversus Jovinianum*, a virulent attack pamphlet against Jovinian, and his Letter 22 to Eustochium, a pastoral epistle advising Eustochium on the proper conduct for a virgin.⁵² It is critical to understand these events from the fourth-century perspective in order to interpret Aldhelm's construction of virginity property, for it was to the texts produced by this debate that he turned to compose his treatise. The writings produced by Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose in the midst of the fervent debates concerning sexual hierarchy firmly established orthodox belief. These were also the works a serious theologian would have to confront when handling this topic.

The first example touches on the core innovation of the *De Virginitate*. Aldhelm's argument concerning virgins is centered on a rhetorical formula pioneered by Jerome. In Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, "Virgins-Widows-Spouses" were to be associated with the 100-, 60-, and 30-fold rewards from the Gospel of Mark's Parable of the Sower.⁵³ Jerome uses these varied rewards spoken of by Mark to counter Jovinian's claim of equality between virgins and the married. Jerome's argument, which quickly became the standard typology for women, ranked

⁵¹ Brown, *Body and Society*, 360-61; Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 263.

⁵² *Adversus Iovinianum*, PL 23.237-384 and Ep. 22, CSEL 54:143-211.

⁵³ Mark 4:1-9.

them according to the degree to which they were removed from the sexual act. This classification had the additional effect of delegitimizing all non-ascetic women in the moral order. “[F]or the first time in the history of Christianity” the “superiority of celibacy over marriage was officially defined as doctrine” and “its denial was labeled heresy”.⁵⁴

Aldhelm, too, uses this classification but modifies it significantly. His version replaces the category of widows with the ‘chaste’ which he defines as those who “having been assigned to marital contracts, [have] scorned the commerce of matrimony for the sake of the heavenly kingdom”.⁵⁵ As Michael Lapidge notes, this alteration reflects Aldhelm’s awareness of his audience: many of the nuns of the double monastery were previously married and had left their husbands to pursue a monastic vocation.⁵⁶ As such, they clearly could not qualify as widows, and Aldhelm’s categorization creates space for his new theme of spiritual chastity. However, neither his awareness of his audience in the double monastery nor his desire to flatter it explains why Aldhelm would hazard altering the normative understanding of female sexual virtue in a period of heightened concern for orthodox belief.

Rather, I would argue that Aldhelm altered Jerome’s classification system in order to emphasize ‘spiritual chastity’ over physical virginity. The inclusion of chastity undermines the prevailing rationale of Jerome’s system and creates space for the “chaste abbesses” of the double monastery to exercise an authority that would have been impossible under the old schema. Yet,

⁵⁴ Jussen, ‘Virgins-Widows-Spouses’, 15. See also Hunter, ‘Rereading the Jovinianist Controversy’, 453.

⁵⁵ *DV*, 19.4, 217; Lapidge and Herren, 75: *virginitas, castitas, iugalitas*. This division was not unique to Aldhelm and was likely adapted from a series of *passiones* used by Aldhelm later in the *De Virginitate* and possibly imported to Britain by Theodore himself. See Carmela Virgilio Franklin, ‘Theodore and the *Passio S Anastasi*’, in M. Lapidge (ed.) *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 184-91.

⁵⁶ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 121.

the mere inclusion of chastity alone does not solve the abbesses' problems of authority, as they are still clearly subordinate to virgins even under Aldhelm's altered formulation.

Indeed, the inferior position of the chaste seems to be confirmed in another long passage that Aldhelm borrows from both Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* and Letter 22 to Eustochium. Aldhelm quotes a series of similes from *Adversus Jovinianum* in which Jerome tries to defend himself against the accusation that his prioritization of virginity in effect serves as a denunciation of the married state – which would have been a clearly heretical position. Jerome asks: “Is it possible silver will cease to be silver, if gold is more precious than silver? Or is insult done to tree and grain if we prefer the fruit to the roots and the leaves, or the grain to the beard and the stalk?”⁵⁷ Aldhelm combines these similes with a direct quote from Letter 22 in which Jerome claims “I select gold from the earth, the rose from the thorn, the pearl from the shell.”⁵⁸ In addition, and in typical Aldhelmian fashion, Aldhelm decides if four similes are good, sixteen must be better, adding, for example, comparisons of yarn to silk, marble to jewels, cisterns to aqueducts, and crows to peacocks. Jerome's point is simply to argue that to praise the greater value of virginity is not to denigrate marriage. And, on the surface Aldhelm appears to hold exactly the same position, and thus far in the treatise he is indeed doing so. If we stopped here, however, we would miss Aldhelm's agenda.

In the chapter immediately following this series of similes, after devoting three entire chapters to showing why virginity is theoretically better than chastity, Aldhelm dramatically

⁵⁷ *Ad Jovinianum*, PL 23:223: *Nunquid argentums non erit argentums, si aurum argeato pretiosius est? Aut arboris et segetis contumelia est, si radici et foliis, culmo et aristis, poma praeferantur et fructus?*

⁵⁸ *DV*, 8.20-1, 93; Lapidge and Herren, 65. *Ep.* 22, *CSEL*, 54:170. Jerome's text reads “*lego de spinis rosas, de terra aurum, de conca margaritum.*” Aldhelm's reads “*lego de terra aurum, de spina rosam, de conca margaritam.*”

undercuts the preceding rationale offered by Jerome and shifts the debate by arguing that chastity, in practice, actually surpasses virginity.

And yet—unfortunately— it usually occurs the other way around with the hierarchal positions reversed, so that the station of the inferior life, advancing on all fronts little by little, takes the place of the superior grade as it languishes tepidly; and urged on by the goad of most bitter remorse obtains its wish and overtakes the once superior victor: and he who was counted last through the negligence of his past life, henceforth, kindled by the flame of divine love, is in the first place, reminding (us) of the maxim in the Gospels, ‘Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved so much.’⁵⁹

Aldhelm’s contention here, in his usual florid style, is that chastity – the second rank – actually surpasses virginity in practice.

The story that Aldhelm quotes at the end of the passage is of particular importance. The last line is part of the parable of the sinful woman from the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus and Simon, a local religious leader, are interrupted by a prostitute who breaks in on their dinner and anoints Jesus’ feet with oil. Simon declares that Jesus must not be a prophet because if he was, he would know who the woman was and refuse her. Jesus, however, declares that the woman’s faith has saved her and that “Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved so much.”

By adducing this parable here, Aldhelm equates the sexual sins of the prostitute with the sexual past of the previously married abbesses. Virgins, or those who hold themselves superior to

⁵⁹ *DV*, 10.1-9, 111-13; Lapidge and Herren, 66: *Et tamen plerumque, pro dolor, immutatis ordinibus uersa uice contingere solet, ut inferioris uitae gradus usquequaque paulatim proficiens superiorem tepide torpentem praeoccupet et acerrimae stimulo compunctiononis instigatus dudum superiorem uoti compos uictorem anticipet et, qui existimabatur praeteritatae conuersationis neglegentia posterior, deinceps diuinae caritatis flamma succensus existat anterior euangelicae reminiscens sententiae: cui multum dimittitur, multum diligit.*

the chaste, then become the haughty Pharisee Simon. Interestingly, however, Aldhelm chooses to withhold a blow against Jerome's prioritization of physical virginity by omitting the final line of the parable from Luke. Following "Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved so much" Jesus asserts the parallel "But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."⁶⁰ Why then does Aldhelm moderate his argument against Jerome in this fashion? The simplest answer may be that while Aldhelm wished to make room for chastity, he also wished to avoid a simple, and insulting, equation between virgins and Pharisees. That Aldhelm saw a need to temper his argument reveals that he is aware of the danger that his argument posed to his own orthodoxy. Yet, the importance of the position for his purpose –and that of his audience in the double monastery– is indicated by the fact that he uses this line of argumentation in the first place.

Although Aldhelm was attempting to strike a moderate position, he certainly did not cease to attack Jerome's formulation of female sexuality. Indeed, Aldhelm used Jerome's own warnings against excessive pride to complete his argument. Both Jerome and Aldhelm comment on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which the apostle claims: "the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things".⁶¹ In Jerome's letter to Eustochium, he uses this passage to warn Eustochium of the dangers of pride. He counsels her against envying the fashionable noble women who surrounded her in her former life in Rome and who took great pride in their physical beauty, adorning themselves with sumptuous clothing and jewels. He further harangues her about the travails of marriage, and about how lucky she is to live in

⁶⁰ Luke, 7:47.

⁶¹ 1 Corinthians, 7:34.

poverty while other women are burdened with housework even while living in luxury and splendor.

Aldhelm too stresses the need for humility among virgins, but he deploys this example in a remarkably different manner. For Jerome, the lesson of Paul's passage was that virgins naturally concerned themselves with God instead of Man. In contrast, relying on the same passage, Aldhelm declares: "Clearly, it is shown by the apostle's statements that the stainlessness of bodily purity by itself cannot unlock the gates of the heavenly kingdom, and on its own can in no way serve to reopen the door of Paradise." Aldhelm asserts the primacy of the spiritual state over the physical: "therefore, carnal integrity is in no way approved of, unless spiritual purity is associated with it as [a] companion".⁶² In effect, he undermines the innate value of physical virginity by coupling it with pride, the greater sin. While Aldhelm is clearly at great pains to let his readers know that he explicitly holds to the orthodox belief concerning virginity's preeminence, his argumentation and rearrangement of Jerome's concepts leaves little doubt that his goal was to elevate the 'chaste' abbesses of the double monastery at the expense of physical virgins.

The influence of Ambrose on Aldhelm is not so immediately apparent as it is with Jerome's writings and may at first glance seem to have more to do with superficial aspects than matters of substance. There is evidence, however, that Aldhelm was particularly influenced by Ambrose's *De Virginibus*. Michael Lapidge has suggested that *De Virginibus* served as something of a model for Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*. The structural similarities are rather telling. Ambrose's work begins with a theoretical discussion of virginity which is exemplified by "a

⁶² *DV*, 16.22-4; Lapidge and Herren, 72-3: *Ergo nequaquam carnalis integritas comprobatur, nisi consors spiritalis castimonia comitetur.*

simile of the chaste bee which gathers honey but does not undergo intercourse.”⁶³ Ambrose then continues his treatise with a series of short *passiones* of female virgins, starting with Mary, Thecla and Antionchena.

In addition to the parallels noted by Lapidge, I would also offer an additional point regarding similarities between Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate* and the *De Virginibus* that may help solidify the influence of Ambrose’s work as an exemplar for Aldhelm. In *De Virginibus*, Ambrose appeals to the innate self-worth of his female audience by arguing that the inevitable necessity of attempting to please their husbands through the painting of their faces and exterior adornment undermines their own position in the relationship: “What madness is this, to change the form of nature and to seek a painting, and while fearing a husband’s judgment they abandon their own. For she who desires to change the manner in which she was born is the first to speak against herself.”⁶⁴ Here Ambrose not only links exterior adornment to marriage, but also implies that resorting to such artificial means only replicates the true inner beauty of the individual woman in an illusory manner.

Aldhelm also makes similar uses of exterior adornment as a symbol of physical marriage which was the antithesis of his concept of spiritual chastity. One typical quote from Aldhelm comes in his discussion of the martyr Eugenia. Eugenia is praised for scorning the idea of

⁶³ Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, 56. For a detailed discussion of the nature of the bees simile in Aldhelm see Augustine Casiday, ‘St Aldhelm’s Bees (De Virginitate Prosa, Cc. Iv-Vi): Some Observations on a Literary Tradition’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 33 (2004), 1-22; O’Sullivan, ‘Patristic Pastiche or Innovative Exposition’, 291-93.

⁶⁴ *De Virginibus*, 28; *PL*, 16:187-223: *Quanta hic amentia, effigiem mutare naturae, picturam quaerere; et dum verentur maritalis iudicium, prodere suum! Prior enim de se pronuntiat, quae cupit mutare quod nata est. Ita dum aliis studet placere, prius sibi ipsa displicet. Quem iudicem, mulier, veriore requirimus deformitatis tuae, quam te ipsam, quae videri times! Si pulchra es, quid absconderis? Si deformis, cur te formosam esse mentiris, nec tuae conscientiae, nec alieni gratiam erroris habitura? Ille enim alteram diligit, tu alteri vis placere. Et irascere si amet aliam, qui adulterare in te docetur? Mala magistra es injuriae tuae. Lenocinari enim refugit, etiam quae passa lenonem est; ac licet vilis mulier, non alteri tamen, sed sibi peccat: tolerabilioraque propemodum in altero crimina sunt; ibi enim pudicitia, hic natura adulteratur.*

matrimony in favor of virginity: “like tossed-out garbage... as from the swarthy blackness of dusky soot she recoiled from [marriage]”.⁶⁵ More telling, if less artful, is Aldhelm’s language in the condemnation of physical marriage in the following martyrology of Agnes. Here Aldhelm launches on a sequence in which the proper bits of clothing are critical symbols for purity and corruption. Agnes is portrayed as having “scorned like the yellow-brown scum of a reeking sewer all the array of ornaments which were offered by her suitor”⁶⁶ as she had already betrothed herself to Christ who betrothed her with a “ring of his good faith”, presented her with “glowing and glistening gems” and “dressed [her] with a robe woven from gold”.⁶⁷ Thus the spiritual adornment of Christ is arrayed against the corrupt ornamentation of this world.

The importance of clothing to this tale is further reinforced by the punishment inflicted upon Agnes for her refusal. She was summarily stripped of her clothes and condemned to a brothel. The clothes she lacked, however, were not the spiritual clothes of Christ, as she was then saved from immodesty by a miracle. Having been “walled about by the shining splendor of a mighty light, she gazed on angelic faces and was covered with her Lord’s robes”.⁶⁸ The significance of this story in drawing a distinct symbolic connection between clothing, exterior adornment and the spiritual corruption inherent to the marital bed is clear. What is even more important perhaps, and what might be missed if one simply took the condemnation of marriage at face value, is that clothing itself is not condemned, since the “Lord’s robes” are clearly identified as a positive value. While Aldhelm’s language derides physical marriage, we cannot simply look

⁶⁵ *DV*, 44.8-10; 621-3; Lapidge and Herren, 110: *ob portiozem uirginitas gloriam ut spurca sterquilinia spreuit, ut proiecta peripsema contempsit, ut caccabatum furae fuliginis atramentum exhorruit.*

⁶⁶ *DV*, 45.5-9, 631-3; Lapidge and Herren, 112: *fetentis cloacae uolutabra contempnens huiscemodi responsa reddidisse fertur.*

⁶⁷ *DV*, 45.10-12, 633; Lapidge and Herren, 112: *qui me anulo fidei suae subarrauit, circumdedit me uernantibus atque coruscantibus gemmis, induit me ciclade auro texta.*

⁶⁸ *DV*, 45.13-19, 633-5; Lapidge and Herren, 112: *ad infame dedecus natalium propriis exuta uestibus truderetur.*

at his evocative statements that declare marriage to be like “foul excrement” or “tossed-out garbage” and proclaim that Aldhelm is deviating from the patristic norms which sanctified marriage.⁶⁹ Instead, a closer examination of the relationship between adornment and marriage in Aldhelm’s treatise leads to a more accurate understanding of the points being made in this context.

The linkage between exterior adornment and marriage was a standard *topos* of patristic writers due to the influence of Paul’s famous commentary on marriage in his first letter to the Corinthians.⁷⁰ As we have seen, the overall framework of Aldhelm’s treatise was indeed influenced by Ambrose’s work. However, the work to which Aldhelm is most obviously indebted in regard to ornamentation is Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum*, which he cites at great length. It very well may be that Aldhelm followed Ambrose’s arguments here regarding ornamentation while utilizing the more detailed discussion included in Cyprian’s work to make his point. Aldhelm’s treatise also includes numerous references to the self-worth of the chaste female as a reason to reject ostentatious dress. Furthermore, immediately following Aldhelm’s quotation of Cyprian, he launches into an approving discussion of Judith’s heroic defense of Israel, when she lured the Assyrian general Holofernes to his death “by means of the innate beauty of her face and also by her bodily adornment”.⁷¹

In addition to these structural parallels, the theological content of Ambrose’s *De Virginibus* serves as an even more important model for Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*. One point emphasizing this connection comes from this very same story of Judith. While earlier in the *De*

⁶⁹ Dempsey, 'Aldhelm of Malmesbury's Social Theology', 63.

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians, 7.32-35

⁷¹ *DV*, 57.11-12, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *natiua uultus uenestate ornamentis etiam coporalibus caperetur*.

Virginibus Ambrose stated that virginity is essentially a physical affair, he moderated the importance of physical virginity in the story of Judith. Aldhelm's justification of Judith precisely mirrors that of Ambrose who used Judith to argue for the relative unimportance of physical intactness.⁷² Even after glossing Judith's plot to seduce Holofernes with the exclamation, "You see, it is not by my assertion but by the statement of Scripture that the adornment of women is called the depredation of men,"⁷³ Aldhelm exonerated the actions of Judith by arguing that because she did this "not through any disaffection with chastity" she was able to keep "the honour of her modesty intact" while taking the head of Holofernes.⁷⁴ In making this argument, Aldhelm follows Ambrose's point explicitly. According to Ambrose, it was preferable to have a virginal mind rather than a virginal body: "[b]oth are good if possible; if it is not possible, let me be chaste not to man but to God.... And Judith dressed herself to please an adulterer, but because she did this for religion, not for love, no one judged her an adulteress".⁷⁵ If one of Aldhelm's most pressing concerns was to find a way to justify the authority of the chaste nuns of Barking, he could hardly have done better than Ambrose's prioritization of the virginal mind and the minimization of bodily purity in the case of the biblical Judith.

Aldhelm's use of clothing as a metaphor for thinking about both the physical purity and the actions of virgins has also been noted by Sinead O'Sullivan.⁷⁶ O'Sullivan argues that within

⁷² *De Virginibus*, 21.1: *Quid autem est castitas virginalis, nisi expers contagionis integritas? Atque ejus auctorem quem possumus aestimare, nisi immaculatum Dei Filium, cujus caro non vidit corruptionem, divinitas non est experta contagionem?*

⁷³ *DV*, 57.15-17, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *En, non nostris assertionibus sed scripturae astipulationibus ornatus feminarum rapina uirorum uocatur!*

⁷⁴ *DV*, 56.19-21, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *non castitatis defectu fecisse memoratur, idcirco salua pudoris reuerentia.*

⁷⁵ *De Virginibus*, 24.5, 7: *Tolerabilius est mentem virginem quam carnem habere. Utrumque bonum, si liceat: si non liceat, saltem non homini castae, sed Deo simus.... Et Judith se, ut adultero placeret, ornavit quae tamen quia hoc religione, non amore faciebat, nemo eam adulteram judicavit. Bene successit exemplum.*

⁷⁶ O'Sullivan, 'Image of Adornment', 48-57.

the *De Virginitate* “image of adornment appears as a complex and multivalent image, having both an outer and inner state. The former is linked with sin, temptation and the desires of this world. The latter mirrors the inner purity of the soul.”⁷⁷ O’Sullivan, however, attributes this feature of Aldhelm’s arguments to the influence of Cyprian’s *De Habitu Virginum*, arguing that “Aldhelm, drawing on Cyprian, transforms adornment from a purely physical idea (as it is in Tertullian) to an indicator of spiritual purity, a symbol of Christian perfection and an image of inner virginity.”⁷⁸ O’Sullivan’s arguments have a great deal of merit, and Cyprian’s influence on Aldhelm should not be discounted. Yet the mere inclusion in Cyprian’s *De Habitu Virginum* of a concern for both the behavior and the actions of virgins is unlikely to be the decisive factor for Aldhelm’s theology. While such concerns are certainly present in Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*, this approach does not do justice to the precise nature of Aldhelm’s argumentation.

Aldhelm’s arguments that exterior purity was not enough to win a person heaven could derive from Jerome or Cyprian. As noted above, Jerome also argued for the importance of proper behavior by virgins, and Aldhelm’s use of Jerome was much more sustained and varied than the large single block quote from Cyprian. While Aldhelm’s language of inner spirituality versus exterior purity most likely derives from both Cyprian and Jerome, I believe that this debate misses the larger point. The issue for both Cyprian and Jerome was to ensure that virgins did not use their physical status as an excuse for improper behavior. However, the critical hurdle for Aldhelm, in justifying his chaste nuns, was not to condemn misbehaving virgins, but rather to find a way to justify the non-virginal authority and status of chaste, but not virginal, religious women. In this, it is Ambrose’s argumentation that most likely provided the breakthrough that

⁷⁷ O’Sullivan, ‘Image of Adornment’, 57.

⁷⁸ O’Sullivan, ‘Image of Adornment’, 57.

the other two authors did not. It was Ambrose's model that prioritized the virginal mind over the virginal body and Aldhelm followed it closely. This, combined with the structural affinities previously noted, would seem to indicate a conscious modeling by Aldhelm on Ambrose's work. More importantly, Ambrose's prioritization of the virginal mind and minimization of bodily purity did much more to further Aldhelm's goal of legitimizing the authority of the chaste abbesses than did the hectoring rhetoric found in Cyprian and Jerome.

One should not be surprised, considering the complexity and variety of the patristic material, that early medieval theorists might give new expression to the ideas contained in even the most authoritative of sources to solve practical problems in their own context. Aldhelm fits very well within the tradition of early medieval writers who used these authors as inspiration, not dogma. Aldhelm's use of Augustinian thought to undermine the less favorable elements of the patristic tradition on behalf of the members of the double monastery is very much in line with that of his contemporaries and later medieval tradition.

Scholars such as Janet Nelson and Felice Lifshitz have argued that scholars need to be more open to evidence of egalitarian – rather than hierarchal– discourses of gender and power in the Early Middle Ages.⁷⁹ To my mind, they are surely correct. Aldhelm's re-interpretation of classical patristic norms shows the degree to which even the most cherished of theological principles could be altered to fit individual social circumstances. The fact that he risked doing this despite strong pressures to conform to the very different views of Archbishop Theodore suggests the value such egalitarian discourse must have had for Anglo-Saxon society. Aldhelm,

⁷⁹ Felice Lifshitz, 'Demonstrating Gun(T)Za: Women, Manuscripts, and the Question of Historical "Proof"', in W.P.A.P. Herold (ed.) *Vom Nutzen des Schreibens: Soziales Gedächtnis, Herrschaft und Besitz im Mittelalter* (Wien: Verlag der Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002), 94.

like Jovinian three centuries earlier, was faced with the potential disruption of his society by a theology that valued virginity above all else. And like Jovinian, Aldhelm seems to have attempted to recast this belief into something that was more in line with the social environment in which he found himself. Unlike Jovinian, however, Aldhelm was able to escape being labeled as heretical – in part, perhaps because of the veil created by his impenetrable prose and circuitous rhetoric. Even more remarkably, the *De Virginitate* achieved a lasting popularity, quickly spreading throughout Northern Europe and retaining its influence well into the tenth century. Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* thus offers the possibility of contributing significantly to our understanding of Anglo-Saxon society, and that of Northern Europe as a whole.

Chapter Five - *In Utroque Sexu*: The Chaste and Virgin Exemplars in Aldhelm of Malmesbury's
De Virginitate

“For you shall take a wife who will not separate you from me by fleshly pollution.”¹
Aldhelm of Malmesbury

The collection of fifty-seven saints' lives at the center of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* is the most accessible and commented upon element of the treatise. The dramatic tales of noble virgins – both male and female – heroically subjecting themselves to physical torment and violent death makes for compelling reading and offers fruitful ground for literary analysis. In this portion of the *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm illustrated his themes of interior spirituality and of male/female collaboration with concrete examples drawn from largely Mediterranean sources. Much like the rest of the text, however, the collection of saints' lives has often been seen as lacking a coherent purpose. Lapidge described Aldhelm's choice of saints as “capricious” and concluded that “it may be futile to seek a clearly designed structural principle in Aldhelm's prose *De Virginitate*.”² In fact, the collection of saints' lives is a vital part of his argument and was attuned to the situation faced by the nuns at Barking and to the issue of the double monasteries in particular.

The organization and selection of the various lives used in this collection reveal that the saints are divided between male and female and presented in roughly chronological order. Pre-Christian saints such as Elijah and David are followed by Apostles, who are followed by bishops, monks, and martyrs. This structure is straight-forward, and Aldhelm follows it with only a few exceptions. One interesting feature of his selection of saints is that there is not a single Anglo-

¹ *DV*, 36.32-4, 501; Lapidge and Herren, 100: *Accipies enim coniugem, quae te non polluendo a me separcet, sed per te virgo perseveret.*

² Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, 58.

Saxon, Irish or even Gallic saint among the fifty-seven mentioned. This is altogether remarkable for an Anglo-Saxon abbot and bishop trained in Ireland and writing to a group of Anglo-Saxon nuns.³ There are numerous examples of Eastern bishops, such as Gregory Nazianzus and Basil, along with Eastern hermits such as Anthony and Hilarion of Palestine. Patrick, however, is nowhere to be found. The one exception to this pattern is Martin of Tours, and yet even he is much more clearly associated with the Roman domains of southern Gaul than with Northern Europe, as was one of his primary biographers, Gregory of Tours.⁴ Similarly, the sources from which Aldhelm seems to have drawn his saints are also largely of Mediterranean origin, including Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius, Rufinus and Gregory. Aldhelm's choice of saints and sources is no accident: he is purposely grounding his defense of the double monastery in Mediterranean sources that would have been familiar and incontestably orthodox to Theodore and Hadrian.

Aldhelm also specifically tailored his work to the nuns at Barking. First, the mere inclusion of both male and female saints in the same collection figuratively embodies the reality of the double monastery. Second, the scholarly activities of Barking – which Aldhelm highly praises at the beginning of the treatise – are also represented through an emphasis on the intellectual and rhetorical skills demonstrated in the context of the stories. Moreover, a number of the examples Aldhelm chose to include would have had a particular relevance for his audience at Barking. One such instance is the case of Constantina, the daughter of the emperor Constantine. Aldhelm portrayed Constantina as a noble woman who had spurned marriage and

³ Ehwald, *Opera*, 475-80; Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, 152-55.

⁴ Gregory of Tours was a member of a Roman senatorial family and proudly associated himself with Roman civilization and society. See Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*, 112-19; Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7-36.

devoted herself to a religious life. This image would have been a particularly resonant figure with the royal widows at Barking. Her exemplary appeal is still greater because she is presented as persuading a large numbers of other noble women to leave their marriage beds for the glories of chastity.⁵ The image of a royal female missionary may also have resonated with the audience at Barking due to the long history of Anglo-Saxon women's involvement in missionary efforts from Bertha to Leoba.⁶ While we cannot know if Aldhelm's efforts were met with approval by its recipients, it is clear that Aldhelm took great care in crafting his descriptions of the saints to compose a portrait of piety and practice that accorded with the organizational principles of the double monastery. A final theme in Aldhelm's collection of saints that would have had special meaning to the double monastery concerned false accusations of sexual impropriety. Saints Narcissus, Athanasius, and Eugenia were all falsely accused of sexual misconduct and only later vindicated.⁷ Accusations of this type were frequently deployed in patristic works to condemn the association of religious men and women and must have been a concern for Anglo-Saxon double monasteries as well.⁸

The most important element of Aldhelm's collection of saints is his highlighting of cooperation between male and female saints functioning cooperatively within the framework of a chaste marriage. These form the very center of his collection. Within the *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm presents a decidedly mixed view of marriage in which he harshly criticizes the depravity of the conjugal state, at one point even praising Caecilia for rejecting marriage as if it

⁵ *DV*, 48, 653-7.

⁶ For Anglo-Saxon missionary efforts see Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050*, (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

⁷ *DV*, 32: (Narcissus and Athanasius), 44 (Eugenia).

⁸ *HE*, IV.25, 420-6. The closest contemporary Anglo-Saxon evidence we have for scandal at a double monastery comes from Bede's condemnation of Coldingham, where he blames the destruction of the house by fire upon the wickedness of its members in engaging in feasting and, particularly, on its nuns for having adorned themselves as brides. See above page 111-2.

were the “foul excrement of the latrine.”⁹ Yet at the same time, Aldhelm extols the virtues of marriage and refers to the belittlement of marriage as the “ravings of heretics” (*schismaticorum deleramenta*).¹⁰

Aldhelm is not equivocating here concerning marriage. Rather, he is attempting to create a defense for the nuns in double monasteries by presenting an alternative model of holiness that does not fit easily within the dichotomy between virginity and marriage. As summarized in the third chapter of this work, Aldhelm held to the position that the value of virginity lay not in its external physical integrity, but rather in its internal purity of spirit. He made this point by employing a ‘back and forth’ rhetorical strategy that sought both to reassure potential critics of his orthodoxy while still advancing his own objectives. When Aldhelm criticizes marriage, his criticism is directed at its physical nature rather than at the association of men and women per se. Indeed, the beneficial result of such cooperation - in the form of large numbers of converts - is repeatedly emphasized by Aldhelm. The marriage condemned is the sexual marriage that can be held in opposition to virginity. If marriage is to be seen as a positive element, and the sexual necessity of it is removed, then what remains is a spiritual union.

The traditional attack against spiritual companionship between men and women came on the grounds that it was a dangerous and unnatural arrangement that could only lead to temptation and scandal.¹¹ Aldhelm seems to have countered the assumption that men and women should be physically separated by repeatedly mentioning that the audiences to whom the saints were

⁹ *DV*, 40.15, 585; Lapidge and Herren, 107: *velut spurca latrinarum purgamenta*.

¹⁰ *DV*, 8.5, 89; Lapidge and Herren, 64. This argument shows Augustinian parallels from the *De Bono Conjugali* in which Augustine defended marriage in refutation of Jerome’s opposition. Aldhelm certainly had knowledge of this text as he also alludes to it on at least two occasions. Ehwald, *Opera*, 236 fn. 1, 46 fn 2, and 47 fn. 5.

¹¹ For example, see John Chrysostom’s treatise against spiritual marriage *Adversus eos qui subintroductas habent virgines*, above, pp. 35-47.

preaching were composed of both sexes. Examples are evident throughout the anthology of saints.¹² By emphasizing the successful collaboration between men and women, Aldhelm is making a clear statement about the correct functioning of society. Aldhelm's model of a spiritual institution where men and women were working together was that of the spiritual marriage. Such an approach provided his audience within the double monastery with a model that conferred upon them the spiritual benefits of interior holiness, and yet allowed them also to continue living within a dual-sex environment.

Of the fifty-seven saints whom Aldhelm mentions, only ten functioned within categories that could be described as a chaste marriage. However, these ten lives are quite literally central to Aldhelm's argument. The section presenting the lives of the holy men ends with six of the last seven operating within the framework of a spiritual union. Similarly, Aldhelm begins with Mary, the ultimate exemplar of chaste marriage, and then continues on with a series of female saints who lived in chaste marriages.¹³ By centering chaste marriages within the design of his treatise, Aldhelm underlines their importance. One other structural point to note here is the length of the stories about chaste marriages. On the whole, they are significantly longer than the average life in Aldhelm's text. The successive examples of Chrysanthus and Daria followed by Julian and Basilissa are among the longest selections in the entire work.¹⁴ The space accorded to these lives is a further indication of their importance to the narrative.

The very first mention of a chaste marriage in *De Virginitate* occurs in the life of the apostle Thomas. He is said to have evangelized the eastern provinces of India and to have taught

¹² e.g. *DV*, 36.40, 503.

¹³ The only interruption to this pattern is the life of Apollonius.

¹⁴ *DV*, 35. See Appendix 1 for a complete listing of the saints included.

the practice of chaste partners in marriage. Even where Aldhelm presents Thomas as praising virginity, he has him consistently refer to the *integritas* of the chaste marriage.

[W]hen [Thomas]spoke for the instruction of chaste partners in marriage in the praises of virginity, said: ‘You have integrity, which is the queen of all virtues and the fruit of perpetual virginity. Virginity is the sister of the angels and the possession of all good things; virginity is victory over desires, the trophy of faith, a triumph over enemies and the surety of eternal life.’ See how the blast of the apostolic trumpet, blaring as if with the roar of thunder, urges the devout minds of virgins to the veneration of integrity, when it honors (integrity) with the mighty commendation of renown!¹⁵

The legitimacy of this teaching is reinforced through this link to apostolic tradition. Further, it is interesting to note that the particular source for this passage on Thomas’ preaching of chaste marriage in India has not been able to be located by either of Aldhelm’s modern editors.¹⁶ While it is not evidence that Aldhelm fabricated the source, its inclusion is surely convenient for his argument.¹⁷

The strongest examples for Aldhelm’s advocacy of an institutional form of the chaste marriage can be shown through two examples from the text. The spiritual marriage of Chrysanthus and Daria is particularly relevant. Chrysanthus was a scholarly nobleman who had mastered all seven areas of classical education. Yet, once he had encountered the Gospel he

¹⁵ *DV*, 23.57-65, 285-87; Lapidge and Herren, 81: *cum pudicos thalami consortes intruens de virginitatis laudibus loqueretur, Habetis, inquit, integri tatem, quae est omnium regina virtutum et fructus perpetuae virginitatis. Virginitas soror est, angelorum et omnium bonorum possessio, virginitas victoria libidinum, tropeum fideim victoria de imicis et vitae aeternae securitas. En, apostolicae clangor bucinæ velut tonitruali fragore concrepans devotas virginum mentes ad integritatis cultum cohortatur, dum eam immensis rumorū laudibus prosequitur.*

¹⁶ Ehwald, *Opera*, 255; Lapidge and Herren, 81.

¹⁷ Virginity and integrity were also a central theme of the apochryphal Gospel of Thomas, though there is no evidence Aldhelm had access to this text. See Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 50-69.

rejected all earthly philosophy and refused his father's demands that he marry. After the father failed to change his son's mind through torture and imprisonment, he then tried to entice him back with the temptations of wine, feasts and willing virgins. Once again, however, this *vir Deo deditus* refused to succumb to the requirements and pleasures of the world. Finally, the father sent in the highly educated and beautiful vestal virgin Daria. Chrysanthus promptly converted Daria through reasoned debate, and they lived together thereafter in a chaste marriage – what Aldhelm describes as “the simulated intercourse of marriage”.¹⁸ Once together, they went out into the world preaching and converted a “great multitude of either sex.”¹⁹

This story has several elements that clearly support Aldhelm's narrative and have clear relevance to the situation in the double monastery. First of all, Daria is portrayed as being every bit the equal of Chrysanthus, with very similar language being used for both figures. The description of Chrysanthus' intellect is balanced by Daria being described as having been “so well trained in the dialectical arts and . . . the sophisticated procedures of the syllogism” that the “most eloquent orators” of her time feared to debate her.²⁰ The conversion of Daria is then not a matter of superiority or command, but rather a prolonged “verbal debate and a reciprocal exchange of ideas” between relative equals.²¹ The length of the debate provides a further indication of Daria's character and capability. All this would have resonated well with the highly educated women of Barking who worked with men in their monastic pursuits. One of the other primary functions of the double monastery is also exemplified by this description. After

¹⁸ *DV*, 35.59, 473.

¹⁹ *DV*, 35.64, 475; Lapidge and Herren, 98: *quanta multitudo promiscui sexus*.

²⁰ *DV*, 35.51-5, 471; Lapidge and Herren, 97: *quod Daria dialecticis artibus imbuta et captionis syllogismi conclusionibus instructa fuisse ferebatur ita dumtaxat, ut disertissimi oratores tam sagax virginis instructa ingenium alterno experire conflictu vererentur*.

²¹ *DV*, 35.50-1, 469; Lapidge and Herren, 97: *Oritur namque inter eos satis prolixa sermonum concertatio et reciproca sententiarum disputatio*.

creating this mixed-sex partnership, both begin preaching. The active and public nature of Chrysanthus and Daria's preaching tour is emphasized by the fact that their audience is specifically pointed out as being of both sexes. The ability of women and men to work together was not only seen as possible, but, in light of their prodigious number of converts, highly desirable.

The lives of Julian and Basilissa show similar characteristics that support the application of the tradition of chaste marriages to the double monastery. Aldhelm depicts Julian, much as he did Chrysanthus, as being pressured to marry by his family but resisting out of fear for his personal sanctity. Julian is, however, reassured by Christ in a vision that he should not fear marriage. Jesus tells him: "For you shall take a wife who will not separate you from me by fleshly pollution."²² He then marries Basilissa, whom Aldhelm presents as "lovely . . . in her physical features but more beautiful inwardly through the adornment of her spiritual robes."²³ Again, the couple goes out into the world and converts many "of either sex" and founds numerous monastic institutions. Once more their spiritual union, characterized by companionship and shared labor, is seen to be both advantageous and profitable. This time even Christ himself supports the arrangement. This phrase is also present in the subsequent account of the chaste marriage of Amos and his companion. The discussion of a marriage that is in fact enhanced by the lack of physicality fits well with the themes that Aldhelm is developing in this section of the *De Virginitate*.

²² *DV*, 36.32-4, 501; Lapidge and Herren, 100: *Accipies enim coniugem, quae te non polluendo a me separcet, sed per te virgo perseveret.*

²³ *De Virginitate*, 36.38-9, 503; Lapidge and Herren, 100: *liniamentis membratim corporalibus, sed plus uenusta suatim cicladibus compta spritalibus.*

Malchus

Malchus is unique among Aldhelm's martyrs in that his is the only life for which Aldhelm pens an extensive introduction.²⁴ For the vast majority of the martyrs, Aldhelm simply provides an introductory literary flourish or a brief historical introduction. In the case of Ambrose he begins "I shall not indeed allow Ambrose, redolent with the ambrosia of heavenly nectar, to lie hidden behind a veil of silence" while Clement is introduced as "the first successor of the celestial key-bearer and the second steward of the Roman Church."²⁵ Malchus, however, receives 20 lines of introductory prose, which is nearly as long as the space Aldhelm devotes to the entire recounting of Malchus' life. The reason for Aldhelm's concern highlights one of the central tensions in the *De Virginitate* and helps to reveal his attempt to grapple with the inherent tension between his dichotomy between the exterior and interior and his model of the chaste marriage as a guide for gender relations. In order to understand Aldhelm's narrative choices, we must first examine the source from which he condensed and altered his own version of Malchus' life, Jerome's *Vita Malchi monachi*.

Jerome's version of the biography of Malchus begins with the author meeting an aged Malchus in a small Syrian village outside of Antioch. Malchus attracts the attention of Jerome in the story by the zealous religiosity that he and his female companion display. Malchus recounts to Jerome how he spurned his parents' wish to marry and instead undertook to join the monastic life. After a number of years, Malchus resolved to return to his family's home following his

²⁴ There are only two passages that are at all similar. The first is where Aldhelm's marks the break between Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego and John the Baptist as delineating between the male martyrs of the Old Testament with that New Testament and the second is where he transitions between the male and female saints. These interludes, however, are best seen as chronological breaks in his collection rather than a problematic theological issue as will be shown is the case with Malchus.

²⁵ *DV*, 25.1-2, 297; Lapidge and Herren, 82: *Clemens, caelestis clauicularii primus successor et secundus Romanae ecclesiae dispensator*. *DV*, 26.1-2, 321; Lapidge and Herren, 84: *Ambrosium uero superno nectaris ambrosia redolentem sub taciturnitatis uelamento delitescere non patiar*.

father's death to console his mother and dispose of the family estate. While Malchus' choice may seem eminently practical, it was not in keeping with the expected devotion required of Syrian holy men, and his abbot treated his return to the outside world as one would a funeral. On his way home, a band of marauding Saracens captured Malchus and he was forced to watch over the flocks of his new master. Malchus, invoking the New Testament admonition for all slaves to give proper service to their masters and the examples of Jacob and Moses' as shepherds,²⁶ began to enjoy his new life and concluded that, thanks to God's intervention, he had "found in the desert that life as a monk which I would have lost in my own land."²⁷

Life suddenly became more complicated for Malchus when his master sought to reward him with the presentation of an enslaved Christian woman to take as his wife. Malchus' protestations that his Christian religion prohibited him from taking a wife whose husband still lived so angered his benefactor that he threatened to "shed [his] blood on the spot."²⁸ Malchus was only able to avert the danger by adopting an action entirely uncharacteristic of saint's lives; he refused the opportunity for martyrdom, clasped the woman in his arms and took her home. However, upon arriving there Malchus bemoaned his fate and decided that suicide was the only option to preserve both his rediscovered profession as a monk and his chastity. His new-found companion – unnamed in the story – interrupted Malchus' attempt to become both "persecutor and martyr" by his own hand, and convinced him to join her in a chaste marriage: "Take me,

²⁶ Ephesians, 6:5-9. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."

²⁷ Charles Christopher Mierow, 'Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Vita Malchi Monachi Captivi', in R.E. Arnold (ed.) *Classical Essays Presented to James A. Kleist, S.J.* (St. Louis: The Classical Bulletin, St. Louis University, 1946), 44.

²⁸ Mierow, 'Vita Malchi', 45: *ilico fudisset sanguine meum*.

then, as your partner in chastity, and love the bond of the spirit more than the flesh. Our masters may expect you to be a husband. Christ will know you for a brother.”²⁹ Over time, Malchus and his wife were able to allay the fears of their master and plan an escape across the desert. During their flight, the master and another slave pursued them until Malchus and his wife were forced to take refuge in a lion’s den filled with scorpions and snakes. First the slave and then the master were devoured by the lion, but miraculously Malchus and his wife were left alone to complete their escape. After returning Malchus rejoined the monks and placed his wife with a group of nuns explaining that: “This woman I entrust to the nuns, loving her as a sister, yet not trusting myself to her as to a sister.”³⁰ This ending underscored for Jerome the importance of separation and enclosure even for the most heroic of chaste relationships.

The most notable aspect of Jerome’s *Vita Malchi* is the sheer humanity of Malchus’ actions within the text as compared to other Syrian saints’ lives. Malchus is less the “holy man” of the Syrian desert than a dramatic solitary figure isolated from the society for which he mediated supernatural power.³¹ Holy men such as Jacob of Nisibis and Symeon the Stylite cursed armies and exorcized demons.³² These holy men – they were invariably male – functioned as living relics that served as the intersection between heaven and earth. They became holy patrons for the people of Syria and mediated between them and a threatening God. These men served as power icons where “the *locus* of the supernatural was thought of as resting on

²⁹ Mierow, 'Vita Malchi', 48.

³⁰ Mierow, 'Vita Malchi', 60: *Hanc trado virginibus, diligens eam ut sororem, non tamen me ei credens ut sorori.*

³¹ This type of figure is described in Peter Brown’s seminal analysis on Late Antique holy men. Peter Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 6 (1971), 80-101.

³² Brown, 'Holy Man in Late Antiquity', 88.

individual men.”³³ When compared with these larger-than-life figures, the humble and flawed character of Malchus stands in stark contrast.

The story of Malchus in Jerome’s version is one that explores the temptations and tribulations of the ascetic life. Malchus is in no way a powerful icon of superhuman endurance. Rather, Malchus is tempted, successfully, to renounce the ascetic life and return to the world at the outset of the story.³⁴ Malchus’ holiness does not rest upon extraordinary powers but, rather, upon the fact that his struggles would have been eminently relatable to those pursuing an ascetic life. Malchus’ initial naïve idealism fades as the temptations of the world prevailed over the cautions of his abbot. Jerome here penned a story that exemplified the persistence that would have been necessary for even the committed religious athletes pursuing monastic life in the Syrian desert.³⁵ Malchus is a figure who begins at the heights of holiness and then falls away before beginning a slow arduous climb back to the monastery where he began.³⁶ This change in the character of Malchus stands in stark contrast to Anthony and Simon Stylites who, after undergoing their initial ascetic training, are consistently praised for their unending ascetic heroism and resistance to temptation.³⁷ It is also striking that Malchus does not seem to take a particularly active role in his own eventual salvation. In fact, Malchus is repeatedly rescued

³³ Brown, 'Holy Man in Late Antiquity', 100

³⁴ Compare this to the *Vita Antonii* where Anthony is praised for his resolve “not to think about his parents, nor was he mindful of his neighbors” G J M Bartelink, *Vie D'antoine* (Paris Editions du Cerf, 1994) Translated by T Vivian, A Athanassakis, and R Greer, *The Life of Antony* (Kalamazoo, MI. Cistercian Publications, 2003)

³⁵ The desert itself, as the antithesis of civilization, was an integral character in the lives of the Desert Fathers. The “traditional desert story” is the narrative of a holy man who left civilization to live in the wilderness of the desert inhabited by dangerous beasts, who was dependent on the native plants for food, and subdues nature until he transforms it into the divine. Nancy Ševčenko, 'The Hermit as Stranger in the Desert', in D Smythe (ed.) *Strangers to Themselves The Byzantine Outsider* (Aldershot Ashgate, 2000), 75

³⁶ The overall plot of the *Vita Malchi* can be seen as an inversion of the traditional life of the desert fathers in that Malchus renounces his claim to his worldly possessions and puts away his wife at the end of the story, rather than at the beginning as is found in Antony’s life

³⁷ See also Brian Brennan, 'Athanasius' Vita Antonii A Sociological Interpretation', *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985), 209-27, Brown, *Body and Society*, 214-35; Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1978), Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St Antony Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis, MN Fortress Press, 1995)

from grave spiritual error by external forces: first by the intervention of the enslaving Arabs when he was about to renounce the monastic life, later by the woman who saved him from hastily committing suicide, and finally by the lion who intervened to save him and his spiritual wife from re-enslavement.

These elements are surprising both in the narrative of the life, and because they invert the standard *topoi* of Late Antique saints' lives. The marauding Arab slavers of Malchus' *vita* are a common enough feature of these lives, but their role in helping Malchus maintain his religious virtue certainly is not. Likewise, Malchus' spiritual wife saves him from an ignominious death at his own hand and helps him escape both physically and spiritually from captivity.

If the desert was marked by its separation from the world, it was not imagined as uninhabited. Rather, the desert was a place where these exceptional religious figures were understood as doing daily battle against spirits, demons and the wild beasts that plagued civilized Christian communities. The relationship between the holy man and wild animals is particularly relevant for understanding the *Vita Malchi*. While the wild beasts were often initially hostile to the holy man, through prayer and superior willpower he was able to triumph over the animals so that they would do his bidding. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, for example, shows Anthony tormented by a host of animals, including lions, bears, leopards, bulls and a variety of poisonous snakes.³⁸ Here too, the traditional pattern is inverted. Malchus is not tormented by wild animals, but saved.

In contrast to Malchus' passive nature, his spiritual wife is a much more active figure. In fact, Jerome's desire to include the woman drives the most poignant narrative moments of the tale, when Malchus turns down his opportunity for martyrdom at the hands of the Arabs and then

³⁸ Bartelink, *Vie D'antoine*, 9.6.

opts for suicide. From the point of view of a passion story, it makes little narrative sense that Malchus would be willing to take on a wife at sword-point only to later decide that falling on his sword is preferable to fulfilling his matrimonial obligations. Something very different from the standard passion narrative must be going on in this story.

The narrative choices make clear that the inclusion of the woman was of paramount importance to Jerome, who went to great lengths to include her in a manner that would be acceptable to an ascetic audience. For her to be included in this manner, however, Malchus could neither seek a bride nor could he actively seek sexual relations with her. The first element is taken care of by his Arab master forcing her upon him on the threat of death, and the second by his commitment to suicide. But these problems are only introduced by the inclusion of the woman into the story. The salvation of Malchus and the concomitant glorification of male/female spiritual partnerships is central to the story. This point is all the more clear when compared with Athanasius' depiction of women as the source of temptation and corruption of would-be ascetics. Having taken the form of a woman and imitating all of a woman's ways," the devil boasts that: "I am the friend of fornication. I am the one who has undertaken to trap young people into fornication and entice them with its blandishments.... How many have desired to live chastely, and I led them astray! How many professed such a desire, and I enticed them to change their minds!"³⁹

The overall structure of the *Vita Malchi* also bears many of the elements of classical Greek romance literature, which was highly influential on early Christian literature. As

³⁹ Bartelink, *Vie D'antoine*, 6.2. A similar incident takes place in the *Life of Pachomius* where the devil takes the form of a woman. Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 19. For a study of divine combat between saints and the devil, see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 23-47, 78-96, and 182-212.

Christianity became integrated into the Roman Empire, it was only natural that the forms and narrative structures prevalent in the Empire would be adopted by early Christian writers.⁴⁰ The narrative style of the Greek romance is one in which:

the world is construed as a playground of unruly, unpredictable forces that disrupt any strongly teleological purpose. It also dramatizes a premise about characterological identity: as the protagonists are defenselessly subjected to unforeseen misfortunes, they know no grounds for responsible agency or personal wholeness other than passive endurance and the maintenance of fidelity. Consequently, the pattern of biographical representation standardly entails a plot that begins with a "descent" into a state of imperiled misadventure, which is followed, only after much delay, by a final "ascent" to a state of restored stability.⁴¹

The story of Malchus as Jerome recounts it, with his initial fall from grace followed by a long return to the monastery characterized by substantial adversity, seems best understood as a Christian romance.⁴²

Aldhelm's rendition of Malchus' *vita* is markedly different in style and content from Jerome's version. As the life is only 21 lines in the edited text, it can be included here as a whole.

⁴⁰ Richard Pervo, 'The Ancient Novel Becomes Christian', in G. Schmeling (ed.) *The Novel in the Ancient World* (1996), esp 689-90; idem, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁴¹ William Robins, 'Romance and Renunciation at the Turn of the Fifth Century', *Journal of early Christian studies*. 8 (2000), 531-58 532-3.

⁴² The influence of Greek literature on Christian literature was not confined to apocryphal sources, but was also represented in the gospel literature as well. All of the Gospels adopted Greek biographical forms to some degree and Luke/Acts devotes more space to recounting adventure stories than it does to its self-described intent of telling the story of early Christian leaders. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); Robins, 'Romance and Renunciation at the Turn of the Fifth Century'.

Hence Malchus, when he was being forced into a carnal union [i.e., marriage] by the violence of paternal severity and at the same time by maternal pressure – they being concerned about the offspring that were to result – he decided to scorn (the marriage) on the pretext of chastity and for the sake of the heavenly kingdom. But when, from the fervor he entertained for the monastic way of life, he began little by little to decrease in ardour, and was slowly cooling off from the torrid intensity of cenobitic life, and, at the prompting of the deceitful Enemy, he was ready to leave, out of concern for his family ties, he was captured by Saracen pirates and Ishmaelite robbers (who were) ravaging violently whatsoever was in their way, so that he was commanded to serve (as) a submissive slave, by a very appropriate turn of events, seeing that he who was seeking a forbidden journey homeward, was in bondage as a base slave, (and) he who in no way feared that loss of the woman perishing at Sodom, suffered painfully the handicap of protracted slavery and the loathsome servitude of a master. And while, glancing backwards, he was guiding the handle of the plough without care, the harrow pointlessly shattered among the sods of furrowed earth; and when, in the same place, he was forced at the point of a sword into abandoning the glories of the chastity he longed for – which he had preserved in his native land – he preferred to die transfixed cruelly by the sword rather than to defend his life by profaning the laws of chastity; fearing in no way the danger to his soul if the status of his virginity were preserved intact.⁴³

⁴³ *DV*, 31.20-41; Lapidge and Herren, 91: *Vnde Malchus, cum paternae seueritatis uiolentia simulque maternal grauitate, qui successurae posteritati consulebant, ad carnale consortium cogeretur, castitatis obtentu et regni caelestis causa contempnere decreuit; sed cum ob cognatae propinquitatis curam accepto conuersationis feruore paulatim tepesceret et torrid coenubialis uitae rigore, instinctu strofosi hostis discessurus, sensim refrigesceret, a Saracenis praedonibus et Ismaelitis grassatoribus obuia quaeque atrociter uastantibus captus ut seruilis berna famulari iubetur, iusto ualde iudicio, ut, qui interdictum repetebat postliminium, seruiret ut uile mancipium, quatenus, qui Sodomitanum pereuntis feminae dispendium minime pertimesceret, prolixae seruitutis detrimentum et inuisum heri famulatum atrociter sentiret et, dum aratri stibam postergum respiciens negligenter regeret, ruptis sulcorum glebulis iugerum occa nugaciter deperiret, cumque ibidem optatae castitatis insignibus, quae in genital solo seruauerat, career stricta machera extorqueretur, malluit mucrone transfossus crudeliter occumbere quam pudicitiae iura profanando uitam defendere, nequaquam animae periculum pertimescens, si integer uirginitatis status effusione sanguinis seruaretur.*

Aldhelm has altered Jerome's story in a number of important ways. Firstly, he has fundamentally shifted the focus of the story away from the romantic elements of Malchus' descent into spiritual peril followed by his gradual return to the sanctity of the monastery. Instead, Aldhelm removed the figure of the wife and the subsequent adventures in the desert from the story entirely. For Aldhelm, the story becomes one of Malchus' heroic resistance to a threat to his chastity and his willingness to die in its defense. In large part, Aldhelm's changes may simply reveal his attempt to change the narrative from a Christian romance to that of a martyr story to coincide with the vast majority of his other lives in the *De Virginitate*. As Katharine Scarfe Beckett has noted: "It is impossible not to suspect that, otherwise, Malchus would have seemed somewhat incongruous among the unrelentingly heroic virgins that Aldhelm had catalogued for his audience of Barking nuns."⁴⁴ Aldhelm's difficulty in accommodating a martyr who failed to die a martyr's death is understandable, but the veneration of Malchus fits quite seamlessly with the virgin Thecla who was the most popular "martyr" of the fourth century and even rivaled the virgin Mary in popularity.⁴⁵ Like Malchus, Thecla was venerated precisely because of her survival against impossible odds. The most popular image of her placed her "among the beasts" (*ad bestias*), flanked by the lions who failed to kill her when given the chance.⁴⁶

There was, however, a much more pressing problem for Aldhelm in dealing with Malchus than simple incongruity. In the received tradition, Malchus was a complex figure who

⁴⁴ Katharine Scarfe Beckett, 'Worcester Sauce: Malchus in Anglo-Saxon England', in K.O.B. O'keefe and A. Orchard (eds.), *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 216.

⁴⁵ Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

⁴⁶ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 117. Felice Lifshitz, 'The Martyr, the Tomb, and the Matron: Constructing the (Masculine) "Past" As a Female Power Base', in G. Althoff, J. Fried and P.J. Geary (eds.), *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography* (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, UK: German Historical Institute; Cambridge University Press, 2002), 314.

exemplified the best attributes of the chaste marriage. One might have expected that Aldhelm would emphasize this aspect, as Malchus and the unnamed female figure join together in a chaste marriage. This would be in keeping with the series of chaste marriages Aldhelm includes later on in his collection and would further buttress his themes of male and female partnerships.

However, the inclusion of the wife in Jerome's Malchus was only possible by the sequence of events detailed above, where Malchus was forced at sword point into accepting her but was then willing to commit suicide rather than consummate the relationship. In short, Malchus did not seek any association with a woman and went to great lengths to prove he had no desire for one by his willingness to destroy his physical being to protect his spiritual purity. For Aldhelm, however, the literary evidence points to the conflict between Malchus' apparent rejection of martyrdom and his subsequent threats at suicide. As so many of the saintly exemplars collected by Aldhelm were martyrs, this discrepancy needed to be explained.

For the *Vita Malchi* to turn from a romance into a martyrdom, Aldhelm was forced to explain Malchus' refusal to become a martyr at the hands of the Arabs. Simultaneously, Aldhelm also needed to explain Malchus' threats of suicide, which were theologically dubious.⁴⁷ The defense of suicide with which Aldhelm introduces Malchus' *vita* can help provide insight into Aldhelm's approach to resolving the issue.

Great, therefore, is the privilege of purity: and if anyone who is compelled by force to relinquish it shall for that reason, contemptuous of human society,

⁴⁷ The fact that Christians who chose to die for their faith were later remembered and venerated as especially holy individuals was by no means a given. The factors that led to the development of these cults is too often treated as a natural outcome of the early Christian persecutions. For critical examinations of the development of martyr cults in the later Roman period, see Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 123-58; Lifshitz, 'The Martyr, the Tomb, and the Matron'; Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 86-100. For parallels in Judaism see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

voluntarily separate himself from this life shared by all, he shall rejoice triumphantly in the celestial society among the 144,000 singing the virginal song.⁴⁸ As Eusebius, the historian of the Greeks, records some virgins devoted to God to have done, who, in order to preserve the purity of their integrity, immersed themselves headlong in the swift channel of the cataract- whence one of the Church Fathers [i.e. St Jerome] says, 'It is not allowable to die by one's own hand except in cases where chastity is endangered' [*in Ionam* I.12]. Oh matter of wonder! – and an almost unfathomable pronouncement. When anyone forced unwillingly to be subject to other outrageous sins – which grievously disturb the state of the world – and, his freedom of will having been ignored, is compelled to commit a criminal offense, if, under the pretext of avoiding sin and shunning transgression, he shall by any manner of death inflict violence on his life, he is considered, among (other) suicides, an outcast from the society of the Church! From this one may infer how precious to the heavenly citizens is the nobility of chastity, which cannot by any means be destroyed or obliterated by that which is able to make mock of the merits of the perfect and to make void every kind of virtue.⁴⁹

Aldhelm here relies both on Eusebius' accounts of Roman women who committed suicide during the persecutions undertaken by Diocletian and his successors, and on Jerome's commentary on the book of Jonah for religious support for Malchus' willingness to commit suicide. In the case of Eusebius, it is unclear to which passion story Aldhelm refers. The most likely example is that

⁴⁸ See Rev, 14.1.

⁴⁹ *DV*, 31.1-20, 387-93; Lapidge and Herren, 90-1: *Magna est igitur puritatis praerogatiua, quam qui ammittere per uim compellitur, si ob hoc humanum exosus consortium communi uita sponte caruerit, apud. CXLIV. Milia uirginale Carmen canentia in caelesti contubernio gloriosus gratulabitur, quod Eusebius, Graecorum historiografus, uirgines Deo deuotas fecisse testator, quae se pro integritatis pudicitia conseruanda rapaci gurgitis alueo per praeceps immerserunt; unde quidam partum propria, inquit, manu perire non licet absque eo, ubi castitas periclitatur. O mirandum negotium et propemodum inuestigabile decretum: ceteris facinorum flagitiis, quae mundi statum lugubriter conturbant, cum quispiam mancipari inuitus cogitur et spreto libertatis arbitrio reatum sceleris perpetrare compellitur, si sub praetextu cauendi noxam et declinandi delicta quolibet exitii genere uim uitae crudeliter intulerit, extraneus ab ecclesiae societate inter biothanatas reputabitur! Qua de re conici datur, quam pretiosa sit supernis municipibus pudicitiae generositas, quam nec illud abolere et obliterare quolibet pacto potest, quod perfectorum merita ludificare et cuncta uirtutum genera euacuare ualet.*

of Domnina and her two daughters, who chose to drown themselves rather than risk rape at the hands of the soldiers sent to bring them to trial.⁵⁰ More concretely, Aldhelm quotes Jerome as saying: “It is not allowable to die by one’s own hand except in cases where chastity is endangered”.⁵¹ Aldhelm here seems to be advocating the qualified permissibility of suicide, but the question is, why would he do so?⁵²

G.T. Dempsey has argued that Aldhelm’s defense of Malchus’ intention to commit suicide shows that Aldhelm, “conditioned as he was by his barbaric environment, seized on another abiding ideal among patristic writers – the physicality of integral virginity – and made it, rather than intent, the keystone of his theology.”⁵³ Dempsey’s argument cites as further evidence the numerous points in the text where Aldhelm offers distinct praise for physical integrity, which is particularly evident in his collection of passion stories.⁵⁴ Dempsey is certainly correct that Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate* frequently evokes the glories of physical virginity and expresses distaste for the physical corruption of marriage. He is, however, incorrect in his identification of the prelude to Malchus as the critical juncture in the entire treatise and the key to unlocking the true point to Aldhelm’s “stop-go” rhetorical style. The qualified tolerance of suicide is not repeated elsewhere in the text and it should not be considered a core element of Aldhelm’s overall argument.

⁵⁰ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.12. Aldhelm likely did not include the names of Domina and her daughters as Eusebius does not chose to name them but they are included in John Chrysostom’s account. See Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Eusebius on Women in Early Church History’, in H.W. Attridge and G. Hata (eds.), *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1992), 259.

⁵¹ Jerome, *In Ionam*, CCL, 76 378-419, 1.12: *Unde et in persecutionibus non licet propria perire manu, absque eo ubi castitas periclitatur, sed percutienti colla submittere.*

⁵² Compare the relative celebration of suicide in Malchus’ *vita* with the more typical denunciation found in Simon Stylite’s life. When Simon expresses his desire to endure 40 days without eating, he is chastised for attempting “make suicide out to be a virtue – for it is the greatest and foremost of crimes.” Robert Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 73.

⁵³ Dempsey, ‘Aldhelm of Malmesbury’s Social Theology’, 74, n. 87.

⁵⁴ Dempsey, ‘Aldhelm of Malmesbury’s Social Theology’, 66-77.

What is critical for Aldhelm is the degradation of the body as relative to the spirit. As was shown above, Aldhelm alters the story of Malchus in ways that emphasize physical integrity, and the deaths of the saints in Aldhelm's work are portrayed with an eye to the corporeality of their demise. Clare Lees and Gillian Overing have noted that Aldhelm frequently makes use of highly stylized metaphors which make commonplace the image of "a body in pain."⁵⁵ And this metaphor, they argue, was particularly evident in regard to the female virgins:

Aldhelm's list of female virgins... present the reader with a series of tortured, exposed women's bodies. Male virgins certainly experience a wide variety of tortures – burning, boiling, drowning, flogging, racking, immersion in a cauldron of tallow and pitch, for example. Female virgins share these experiences, but their bodies are exposed, via narrative technique, rather more and rather longer than male ones.⁵⁶

Aldhelm's praise of the physical manifestations of purity are most prominent, however, in the very moment of their destruction. The female body was seen as inherently more corrupt and therefore, by this logic, more glorified in its destruction. This annihilation of the body, whether manifested in his approval of Malchus' suicide or in the depictions of the martyrdoms of the *exemplars*, is a key element for understanding his entire approach.

Aldhelm's recognized the legitimacy of Malchus' suicide because it was the only way that Malchus could preserve his inner purity. Thus, Malchus is praised for his willingness to destroy his own exterior body in defense of his interior purity and in so doing sacrifice his body in defense of his purity.

⁵⁵ Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 118-19. See also Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, 'Before History, before Difference: Bodies, Metaphor, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon England', *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11 (1998), 315-34 323. "Aldhelm's text is excessively long, excessively violent, excessively rhetorical, excessively repetitious, and excessively difficult to read. In a contemporary classroom, the excess of sexualized violence spills over into the realm of the erotic and/or pornographic; students find it shocking, 'voyeuristic.'"

⁵⁶ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 119.

Great, therefore, is the privilege of purity: and if anyone who is compelled by force to relinquish it shall for that reason, contemptuous of human society, voluntarily separate himself from this life shared by all, he shall rejoice triumphantly in the celestial society among the 144,000 singing the virginal song.⁵⁷

Praise of violent martyrdom and suicide are not rebuttals of his previous statements regarding the superiority of chastity over virginity, but rather their natural outcome. It cannot be said that Aldhelm necessarily resolved the problem presented by the figure of Malchus. What is key, however, is not Aldhelm's rhetorical success, but rather that he made the attempt to do so and the manner in which he went about it. Malchus is still a problem, but Aldhelm's acceptance of suicide in defense of chastity reaffirms his thematic emphasis on a dichotomy between the inner and outer selves.⁵⁸

Five Figures from Hebrew Scripture

To conclude his catalogue of saints, Aldhelm turns to five figures from Hebrew scripture offering portraits of Joseph, David, Samson, Melchisedech and Abel.⁵⁹ This grouping and Aldhelm's recounting of story of Judith in *De Virginitate* 57 are the only examples that deviate from Aldhelm's otherwise strict classification system of ordering his exemplars by gender and time period. Aldhelm's handling of these narratives deserves special attention, as they mark the conscious insertion of the author into his subject.⁶⁰ We can understand their placement better,

⁵⁷ *DV*, 31.1-5, 387-9; Lapidge and Herren, 90: *Magna est igitur puritatis praerogatiua, quam qui ammittere per uim compellitur, si ob hoc humanum exosus consortium communi uita sponte caruerit, apud. CXLIV. Milia uirginale Carmen canentia in caelesti contubernio gloriosus gratulabitur.*

⁵⁸ See Chapter 1.

⁵⁹ *De Virginitate*, 53-54.

⁶⁰ Lapidge views this inclusion as having occurred "for no apparent reason" and finds no obvious connection between them other than all can be seen to prefigure Christ in some manner. Lapidge and Herren, 57.

perhaps, when they are seen as the beginning of his final section, a long argument relating to symbols of external bodily purity, including clothing and ostentatious dress. By linking these five patriarchs with the subsequent discourse on clothing and adornment highlighted by his use of Cyprian's *De Habitu Virginum*, Aldhelm's rationale becomes clear.

Aldhelm's source for the narratives and interpretation of Joseph, David, Samson, Abel, and Melchisedech is not entirely apparent. However, Aldhelm's account of Melchisedech bears such a close relationship to the Hieronymian source that it seems to be the only plausible source of Aldhelm's version.⁶¹ Aldhelm begins his account of Melchisedech by repeating the common Christian interpretation that Melchisedech prefigured Christ as an eternal high priest, and that his offerings to Abraham in Genesis 14.18 were a type of eucharistic sacrifice.⁶² While this interpretation was common in early Christian literature,⁶³ Aldhelm's dismissal of the idea that Melchisedech was descended from Shem, son of Noah as recorded in "the popular tradition of the Hebrews" – the *targumim* – is almost certainly borrowed directly from Jerome's *Epistola* 73.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ehwald, *Opera*, 312-13. *Epistola* 73.4-6 PL 22:680. Ehwald noted the similarities between Aldhelm's discussion of Melchisedech and Jerome's *Epistola* 73 where Christian and Jewish conflicts over Melchisedech's heritage are discussed. See also A. M. Casiday, 'St Aldhelm on Apocrypha', *Journal of Theological Studies* 55 (2004), 147-57 153-5.

⁶² See for example, Cyprian, *Epistola*, 63.4 PL 387-88. Further discussion in Hayward, 'Shem, Melchizedek, and Concern with Christianity in the Pentateuchal Targumim', 67-8.

⁶³ Hebrews, 7.3. This section is critical to the Christian position that held Melchisedech as prefiguring Christ. The letter to the Hebrews reads "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, thus made to resemble the Son of God, he remains a priest forever." The Hebrew position, developed independently, argued for the decent from Shem and was a direct threat. Hayward, 'Shem, Melchizedek, and Concern with Christianity in the Pentateuchal Targumim'.

⁶⁴ Jeromoe, *Epistola*, 73.4, PL 22:676-81: *Affirmat autem Apostolus, quod Aaron sacerdotium, id est, populi Iudaeorum, et principium habuerit et finem: Melchisedech autem, id est, Christi et Ecclesiae, et in praeteritum et in futurum aeternum sit, nullumque habuerit auctorem....* 73.6 *Traduntque hunc esse Sem primum filium Noe, et eo tempore quo ortus est Abram.*

The sources for the other four accounts are more difficult to determine, but Aldhelm's utilization of patristic interpretation is a key element to understanding these passages, from wherever he derived them. For example, Jerome's *Epistola* 22 to Eustochium, which Aldhelm utilizes elsewhere in the *De Virginitate*, cites both Samson and David as examples of holy figures who succumbed to temptation and, as a result, fell from grace.⁶⁵ Similarly, Joseph is highlighted by Jerome in his correspondence on three occasions: in *Epistola* 71 to Lucinius, *Epistola* 79 to Salvina and *Epistola* 118 to Julian.⁶⁶ In each of these letters, Jerome adopts the position that the story of Joseph is a useful warning to preserve one's chastity; for Julian and Salvina, Jerome promoted their continued chastity following the death of their spouses, and in the case of Lucinius, Jerome encouraged his attempt to live in a chaste marriage.

The patristic interpretation of Joseph's seduction supports Aldhelm's reading which contrasts chastity and the material world. The confrontation between Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Genesis was widely interpreted by commentators as symbolizing the ascetic renunciation of the material world. In Genesis 37-41, Joseph was sold into bondage and put in charge of the household of Potiphar, the captain of the pharaoh's guard. Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph but failed. In the end, Joseph was accosted by the wife and was forced to abandon his cloak in order to escape her advances.

And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie with her or to be with her. But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by

⁶⁵ Jerome, *Epistola* 22, PL 22 :394-425, 401. *Samson leone fortior et saxo durior, qui et unus et nudus mille persecutus est armatos, in Dalilae mollescit amplexibus. David secundum cor Domini electus, et qui venturum Christum sanctum saepe ore cantaverat, postquam deambulans super tectum domus suae, Bethsabée captus est nuditate, adulterio junxit homicidium.*

⁶⁶ Jerome, *Epistola* 71, PL 22:670; idem., *Epistola* 79, PL 22:727-8; idem., *Epistola* 118 PL 22:963.

his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and got out of the house.⁶⁷

John Chrysostom argued that Joseph left the house "divested of his clothes without his garments, but garbed in the vesture of chastity."⁶⁸ Ambrose made similar arguments in *De Ioseph*, where he also contrasted Joseph's exterior clothing with the interior soul and argued that Joseph prized the chastity of his soul above the clothing of the body.⁶⁹ Jerome puts the case even more bluntly in his letter to Julian, in which he exhorted the widower to enter the ascetic life: "In order to escape the Egyptian lady you must discard the cloak of this world. Even Elijah, in his hasty ascension to heaven could go with his mantle, but in the world he abandoned the garments of the world."⁷⁰ Jerome similarly equated Joseph's cloak with the material world in letters to Lucinius and Salvina where both were encouraged to follow through on their vows of chastity and leave behind their former lives as Joseph left his cloak.⁷¹

In his interpretation of this incident, Aldhelm contrasts the "exquisite beauty" of Joseph, and "his yet more beautiful virginity" with the wanton behavior of Potiphar's wife. Aldhelm reserves some of his most vicious language for the attempted seduction, and praises Joseph for his chastity. Picking up his recurring theme of praising humility, Aldhelm explains the wife's

⁶⁷ Gen , 39 10-12.

⁶⁸ John Chrysostom, *In Genesim*, PG 54 385-580 Translated Robert C Hill, *Homilies on Genesis* (Washington, D C. Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 208

⁶⁹ Ambrose, *De Ioseph*, CSEL 32 2, 101.

⁷⁰ Jerome, *Epistola*, 118 4, PL 22 963 *et ut evadas Aegyptiam dominam, saeculi pallium derelinquas Unde et Elias ad coelorum regna festinans, non potest ire cum pallio, sed mundi in mundo vestimenta dimittit*

⁷¹ Jerome, *Epistola*, 71, PL 22 670 *Habes tecum prius in carne, nunc in spiritu sociam, de conjugis germanam, de femina virum, de subjecta parem quae sub eodem iugo ad coelestia simul regna festinat Cauta rei familiaris dispensatio, et ad calculos rediens, non cito deponitur Joseph cum tunica Aegyptiam effugere non potuit Adolescens ille, qui opertus sindone sequebatur Jesum quia tentus fuerat a ministris, terrenum abjiciens operimentum, nudus evasit* Jerome then uses a long series of analogies to show that his exemplar Nebridius was uncorrupted by the things of this world. *Epistola*, 79 PL 727-8. *Quis fornacem regis Babylonu sine adustione ingressus est? Cujus adolescentis Aegyptia domina pallum non tenuit? Quae uxor Eunuchi nullos creat liberos voluptate transacta?*

actions as due to the fact that she “had forgotten the modesty (befitting) a matron.”⁷² Joseph is praised in that he:

spurned, overcame and scorned the fraudulent allurements of feminine provocativeness and the seductive inducements of its prattle (which) – as if with the sticky nectar of wine or the saccharine delight of honeyed mead – pours out the black virulence of its poison and viciously hurls to hell those who are unprepared and who are caught without the breast-plate of faith or any other military armament.⁷³

This analogy is continued by contrasting the squalor of the dungeon with the purity of Joseph’s chastity.⁷⁴ While Aldhelm does not directly quote any specific patristic interpretation, the interpretations of Joseph clearly fit within Aldhelm’s larger discursive strategy of comparing interior to exterior and his subsequent diatribe against clothing and ostentatious dress.

As a second point of emphasis in these narratives, Aldhelm stresses the tangible rewards offered through chaste behavior. Joseph’s reward from God for his purity was the “government of the Egyptian people.”⁷⁵ Likewise, David is introduced as “the most illustrious of kings, endowed with a stainless virginity in the boyhood of his youth before he was tied by the bond of matrimony and the shackle of marriage.”⁷⁶ Given David’s subsequent sexual history with Bathsheba and his eight wives, his inclusion within a catalogue of meritorious virgins is somewhat surprising on its face; it seems the faintest of praise to laud David for maintaining his

⁷² *DV*, 53.10, 699; Lapidge and Herren, 121: *matronalis pudicitiae oblita*.

⁷³ *DV*, 53.22-27, 701-3; Lapidge and Herren, 122: *fraudulenta feminae titulationis lenocinia ac blandae sermoncinationis incitamenta uelut lentescence nectaris defruto seu mulso mellitae potationis oblectamento atrum ueneni uirus infundentia et incautos quosque sine lorica fidei armaturaque militari repertos truculenter ad Tartarum trudentia spreuit, uicit, contempsit et cum palma uirginitatis aufugit*.

⁷⁴ *De Virginitate*, 53.28-30, 703.

⁷⁵ *De Virginitate*, 53.33, 703; Lapidge and Herren, 122: *Memfiticae gentis gubernacula tradit*.

⁷⁶ *De Virginitate*, 53.35-7, 703; Lapidge and Herren, 122: *David quoque opinatissimus regum sub ipso pubertatis tirocinio illibata uirginitate praeditus antequam copula matrimonii et conubii nexu nodaretur*.

virginity right up until he was married. Aldhelm's point, however, is to show that while in a state of purity David was the great king who defeated the Philistines, but he lost divine favor after he "abandoned the state of virginity." Similarly, Aldhelm ignored Samson's less than pure sexual conduct in favor of the "miraculous signs never experienced in any age up to that time" which occurred in the period "before he was caught in the fraudulent embraces" of Delilah and "weakly deceived by the debauchery of this treacherous concubinage."⁷⁷ Aldhelm sums up the point of his discussion of Joseph, David and Samson quite clearly: "Although, I say, each of these patriarchs was most pleasing to the heavenly majesty for as long as he consumed the air of the atmosphere and the breath of life, nonetheless, after joining in carnal union, the glory of their virtues slackened and became less."⁷⁸

Aldhelm's emphasis on the rewards for warriors and kings from following a life of spiritual purity would have resonated well beyond his immediate audience for the *De Virginitate*. Even within the ecclesiastical sphere, the warrior ethos of Anglo-Saxon culture was highly influential.⁷⁹ In his letter to the abbots who supported the exiled bishop Wilfrid, Aldhelm famously evoked the warrior ideal of the *comitatus* and implored the abbots to stand by their bishop to the last and follow him into exile.

⁷⁷ *De Virginitate*, 53.54-60, 707; Lapidge and Herren, 123: *Samson ille Nazareus ab ipsa gracillima cunabulorum aetatula Domino septenis crinibus sacer, antequam fraudulentis Dalilae complexibus caperetur et perfidi pelicatus stupor eneruiter deceptus inlecebrosis lenocinii nexibus nodaretur, nondum ferro dempta cincinnorum caesarie quantis miraculorum signis et uirtutum rumoribus omni saeculo usque ad idem tempus inexpertis effulisse deuulgatur!* Aldhelm includes a small joke at Samson's credulity with his phrasing of *eneruiter deceptus*. c.f. Judges 16.6-22.

⁷⁸ *De Virginitate*, 53.61-4, 709; Lapidge and Herren, 123: *Licet, inquam, uterque patriarcha, quamdiu aura aetherea et uitali flamine uesceretur, supernae maiestati gratissimus extiterit, ast tamen post carnalis consortia copulam de utroque minora uirtutum praeconia crebrescent.*

⁷⁹ It has been argued that there is a connection between Aldhelm's Malmesbury and the composition of *Beowulf*, but this must remain hypothetical due to the state of the evidence. Michael Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the Liber Monstrorum and Wessex', *Studi Medievali* 23 (1982), 151-92.

If worldly men, exiles from divine teaching, were to desert a devoted master, whom they embraced in prosperity, but once the opulence of the good times began to diminish and the adversity of bad fortune began its onslaught, they preferred the secure peace of their dear country to the burdens of a banished master, are they not deemed worthy of the scorn of scathing laughter and the noise of mockery from all?⁸⁰

This equation of religious members with warrior society should not be surprising as Aldhelm's own upbringing in the royal court of Wessex would have made him quite familiar with the duties of a thegn.⁸¹ Wilfrid, the combative bishop of York, himself was portrayed in his early eighth-century *vita* as needing to acquire "arms and horses and garments for himself and his servants in which he could fitly stand before the royal presence" even though he had come with the intention of only fulfilling ecclesiastical service.⁸² Likewise, Wilfrid is said to have exhorted his band of warriors in battle to a heroic victory against the pagan South Saxons after being washed ashore in a storm. "[T]hese companions of [Wilfrid] being well-armed and brave in heart though but few in number... formed a plan and made a compact that none should turn their back upon another in flight, but that they would either win death with honour or life with victory."⁸³

The final two narratives of Abel and Melchisedech seem to have been included primarily for their role in prefiguring Christ.⁸⁴ This interpretation is further underlined by the fact that

⁸⁰ Lapidge and Herren, 169-70. This letter only survives as an excerpt from William of Malmesbury. In the preceding passage Aldhelm also invokes the loyalty of bees which was a common metaphor for monastic orders and one that he also used in the *De Virginitate*. See *DV*, 4 and Casiday, 'St Aldhelm's Bees (De Virginitate Prosa, Cc. Iv-Vi): Some Observations on a Literary Tradition'.

⁸¹ Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', 17-22.

⁸² Bertram Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6-7: *arma et equos vestimentaue sibi et pueris eius adeptus est, in quibus ante regalibus conspectibus apte stare posset*.

⁸³ Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 28-9: *ita et isti sodales sancti pontificis nostril bene armati, virile animo, pauci numero... inito consilio et pacto, ut nullus ab alio in fugam terga verteret, sed aut mortem cum laude aut vitam cum triumpho* See also Rosemary Woolf, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord in the Germania and in the Battle of Maldon', *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), 63-81.

⁸⁴ Lapidge and Herren, 57.

neither Abel nor Melchisedech are praised in any way for their virginity or their chastity.

Aldhelm introduces this section by stating this directly: “so through the guiltless Abel gentle innocence and suffering, and through Melchisedech the Episcopal authority of heavenly power and the sacerdotal office of the divine priesthood, are prefigured.”⁸⁵ Abel is specifically praised for his submissiveness and his murder is lavishly recounted by Aldhelm as “his blood was savagely spilt by his treacherous and wicked brother.”⁸⁶ Aldhelm credits Melchisedech as typologically prefiguring the priesthood of Christ following the interpretation of the letter of Hebrews.

The question remains, however, as to why Aldhelm included Abel and Melchisedech in his treatise on virginity when there is no obvious reason why he would need to take up typological representations of Christ. One possible suggestion is that Aldhelm was seeking to reaffirm his orthodoxy within an argument that clearly sought to reinterpret patristic norms. This reading would fit with Aldhelm’s back and forth rhetorical style, and there is some evidence that Abel and Melchisedech were seen by Aldhelm as a tangential aside. Aldhelm ends his section on Melchisedech with the exclamation: “Let me return to the point!”⁸⁷ This has generally been associated with the preceding discussion of Melchisedech’s heritage. However, it may also apply to the entire discussion of Abel and Melchisedech. Excepting the intrusion of Abel and Melchisedech, the entire discussion follows the lines of patriarchal figures who exemplify the dangers of exterior physicality before moving to Aldhelm’s introduction of his arguments concerning exterior adornment. Aldhelm’s rejoinder to his own desire to return to the point is his

⁸⁵ *DV*, 54.4-6, 709; Lapidge and Herren, 123: *ita per Abel insontem mitis innocentia et passio, per Melchisedech uero supernae potestatis pontificium et caelestis infulae flaminium praesignabatur.*

⁸⁶ *De Virginitate*, 54.9-14, 711; Lapidge and Herren, 123: *perfidio et nefando fratre.*

⁸⁷ *De Virginitate*, 54.35, 715; Lapidge and Herren, 124: *Sed ad propositum reuertar!*

statement: "Let the perfection of blessed virginity be adorned, I say, not with the comely beauty of the exterior person, but by the pious chastity of the interior."⁸⁸ In sum, the narrative break presented by Abel and Melchisedech further reinforces the contention that Aldhelm's primary concern was to advance his argument concerning exterior ornamentation. This reading is also supported by the following treatment of clothing and Judith.

Judith

Nowhere is the distinction between inner and outer spirituality more clear than in two linked references to Judith and the unnamed "insolent woman" in Psalm VII. These two accounts come after Aldhelm's extended quotation from chapter 9 from Cyprian's *De habitu virginum* that contained the long diatribe against excessive ornamentation. We can therefore understand these sections as topically linked. Aldhelm's account of Judith follows a long line of biblical exegesis on the Book of Judith which included discussions by Jerome, Ambrose, and Isidore among others but was most influenced by Ambrose.⁸⁹

The scriptural account of Judith portrays her as a pious widow who uses her great beauty to defend Israel from destruction at the hands of the general Holofernes.⁹⁰ The book of Judith is divided into two sections: the first seven chapters are devoted to historical background and the following nine recount the story of how Judith saves Israel from invasion.⁹¹ The book opens by

⁸⁸ *DV*, 55.1-3, 715; Lapidge and Herren, 124: *Ornetur, inquam, beatae uirginitatis integritas non exterioris hominis formosa uenustate, sed interioris religiosa castitate!*

⁸⁹ Mark Griffith, *Judith* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 71-2, n. 240; Robert Earl Kaske, 'Sapientia et Fortitudo in the Old English *Judith*', in L.D.B.A.S. Wenzel (ed.) *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 18-21.

⁹⁰ Aldhelm seems to have used a variant of the *Vetus Latina* for his source of Judith rather than the *Vulgate*. Lapidge and Herren, 197, fn. 32. However, it is impossible to ascertain the precise text Aldhelm utilized as Anglo-Saxon writers were often known to borrow from both translations of the bible within the same source and many early medieval bibles contain mixtures of readings from both texts. H. H. Glunz, *History of the Vulgate in England from Alcuin to Roger Bacon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 13-17; Griffith, *Judith*, 47-8.

⁹¹ The story of Judith is a historical fiction and does not recount any known events in the ancient world.

explaining the context for the assault. The Assyrian general Holofernes is sent to wage a punitive campaign against Israel and other nations for refusing to assist King Nebuchadnezzar in his war against the Medes. The focal point of the narrative is the siege of Bethulia, which is presented as a key strategic position in the attempted invasion of Israel. The siege progressed to the point where the Jewish defenders were contemplating surrender. Then the widow Judith summoned the elders of the city to chastise them for their weakness and assumed the responsibility of saving the city, whereupon she left Bethulia and went with her maid into the Assyrian camp. The last nine chapters of the *Book of Judith* are devoted to describing the events that followed as she meets Holofernes and ensnares him with her beauty. Following four days in his camp, Holofernes invited her to a banquet in his personal tent, and Judith “proceeded to put on her festive garments and all her feminine adornments” which so enraptured Holofernes that he “drank more than he had ever drunk on one single day in his life.”⁹² Judith took advantage of the situation, seized his sword and beheaded Holofernes with two strikes. She then fled the camp and in the ensuing chaos the Jewish army was able to rout the Assyrians and save Israel. Judith was given a share of the spoils of victory, including the tent of Holofernes, his silver, furniture, and his dishes.⁹³ She led the women of Bethulia in a dance and then returned to her life as a dutiful widow.

The scriptural figure of Judith is marked by a striking contrast in gender roles. Judith is a model of gender mobility. She begins and ends the story as a widow removed from public society, but also takes on the roles of warrior and war-leader at the critical moments of the narrative. The tension at the heart of Judith’s story is a series of polarized oppositions between the internal aspects of the characters that are highlighted by external reversals of form. Judith

⁹² Judith, 13.15, 19.

⁹³ Judith, 15.11.

moves from being a secluded widow to functioning as the public leader of Bethulia. Her sexuality, which was removed from society during her widowhood, is returned to the public forum for the benefit of all. That the narrative is careful to couch this liberation as nothing less than the result of a divine command, by which the destruction of the nation can be averted, only heightens the importance of the gender roles being transgressed. Furthermore, once the crisis is passed, Judith returns to both her seclusion within her household and to traditional female gender roles, as is shown by her acceptance of the spoils associated with Holofernes' tent and her leading the women in a dance at the end of the battle. Externally, similar dynamics apply within the narrative, as her battle against Holofernes pits woman against man, widow against warrior, and chastity – though deceptively clothed – against lust. The changing gender roles are symbolically reflected in the sexualized descriptions of her clothing, whether it be through its absence in her widow's garb or through its overt presentation in the descriptions of her preparations for sexual combat. Jerome picks up on both of these elements in his comments on Judith in his letter to Furia:

[I see Judith's] hand armed with the sword and stained with blood. I recognize the head of Holofernes which she has carried away from the camp of the enemy. Here a woman vanquishes men, and chastity beheads lust. Quickly changing her garb, she puts on once more in the hour of victory her own mean dress finer than all the splendors of the world.⁹⁴

Jerome's argument that Judith prefigured the Christian church and its ability to slay the devil, Holofernes, is typical of the typological analyses concerning Judith.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Jerome, *Ad Salpinum* PL 22:732; trans. Mace, *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, 108.

⁹⁵ Jerome, *Ad Salpinum*, PL 22:732: *Unde et altera in typo Ecclesiae, diabolum capite truncavit.*

In some respects, Aldhelm's account of Judith adheres closely to the scriptural source. Judith is introduced as a pious widow who rejects suitors in favor of maintaining her life as a widow removed from public gaze. Aldhelm also provides the context of the Assyrian assault on Bethulia as the rationale for Judith's beheading of Holofernes. Aldhelm's narrative emphasizes Judith as an emblem of heroic female chastity and the effect of her physical adornments and innate beauty. Judith, as a wealthy widow who performs heroic deeds in defense of her community, would have been a particularly appealing model for the women in the double monastery who lived in a society that was infused with the Germanic warrior ideal. This is reinforced all the more as her killing of Holofernes is done in a particularly 'masculine' fashion – beheading.

But Aldhelm differs from the scriptural account in his praise of Judith and in his perception of her righteousness. While the Vulgate praises Judith for her conformance to societal norms for widows' behavior, Aldhelm instead emphasizes her chastity. Both the Vulgate account and Aldhelm describe Judith as a widow who shuts herself away following her husband's death, but the Vulgate's concluding praise of Judith is that she feared God and no one in her community spoke ill of her.⁹⁶ Aldhelm instead describes her as “[f]lowering like a bright lily in her devout chastity and hiding from public gaze she lived a pure life in an upstairs solar.”⁹⁷ Aldhelm's addition here, praising Judith's chastity as a widow, reinforces his adaptation of the married-widow-virgin topology with the married-chaste-virgin and further emphasizes the superiority of

⁹⁶ *Judith*, 8.8: *et erat haec in eo omnibus famosissima quoniam timebat Dominum valde nec erat qui loqueretur de illa verbum malum.*

⁹⁷ *DV*, 57.5-7, 729-31; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *quasi candens lilium pia castitate florens atque a publicis conspectibus delitescens in cenaculi solariorum pudica conuersabatur.*

inner spirituality in comparison to exterior purity. Furthermore, the removal of Judith from the public gaze also reflects the cloistered women of the monastery.

There is a second level of Aldhelm's story of Judith that may be of even greater importance. If the elements of Judith's character reflect the positive elements of chastity, power and gender mobility, the manner in which Judith was able to overcome Holofernes is clearly marked by Aldhelm as essentially negative. One is able to trace the locus of Aldhelm's approbation by tracing his descriptions of Judith's clothing. In essence, Judith's exterior garb acts as a spiritual marker for Aldhelm throughout the passage. Aldhelm's initial praise of Judith's chastity is presaged by his descriptions of her taking on the "weeds of widowhood" and her rejection of a wedding dress.⁹⁸ Aldhelm also emphasizes her clothing in his descriptions of Judith's seduction of Holofernes. Aldhelm quotes from the scriptural story of Judith, that "she clothed herself with the garments of her gladness, and put sandals on her feet, and took her bracelets, and lilies, and earlets, and rings, and adorned herself with all her ornaments, and tricked herself out to prey on men."⁹⁹ The final phrase "and tricked herself out to prey on men" is not included in the Vulgate account of Judith and is only found in a Vetus Latina version.¹⁰⁰ While it is impossible to know whether Aldhelm deliberately chose a version of the scriptural text that emphasized the dangers of exterior adornment or if this was simply the version he had on hand, Aldhelm highlights the sumptuary aspect by declaring that "You see, it is not by my assertion but the statement of Scripture that the adornment of women is called the depredation of

⁹⁸ *DV*, 57.1-2, 729; Lapidge and Herren, 126: *uiduitatis theristro*.

⁹⁹ Judith, 13.19; *DV*, 57.13-15, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *induit se uestem iocuditatis suae et imposuit periscelides et dextralia et anulos et omnia ornamenta sua et composuit se nimis in rapinam uirorum*.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier, *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire; Dover, N.H.: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 197, n. 3.

men!”¹⁰¹ Aldhelm’s point here is not to excoriate Judith’s duplicity or to generalize the sexual danger of women. Rather, he lays the blame squarely on the clothing itself which is in keeping with his theme of prioritizing the interior over the exterior. Furthermore, Aldhelm immediately exempts Judith from this criticism by a series of rationales that explain her innocence.¹⁰² He explains that Judith believed there was no other means of deceiving Holofernes and since she did this “during the close siege of Bethulia, grieving for her kinfolk with the affection of compassion and not through any disaffection from chastity” she was able to triumph over Holofernes.¹⁰³ The key feature here is again Aldhelm’s emphasis on the heroic potential of chastity. Aldhelm clearly is sensitive to the deception and seduction of Holofernes and takes great pains to excuse Judith from his criticism that she would otherwise have warranted. Likewise though, he is effusive in his praise for the chastity of a widow and credits this with her success.

Aldhelm’s collection of fifty-seven saints, martyrs and exemplars can appear at first glance as a *floregeium* with little or no rationale. As was shown above, however, both the general themes and specific rhetorical choices made by Aldhelm suggest that this collection of saints lives was carefully selected and arranged in order to reinforce his earlier theological arguments. We are presented with a text that, for all its difficulty, should be read as having a unified purpose which was carried through by Aldhelm in nearly every aspect of his treatise.

¹⁰¹ DV, 57.15-17, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *En, non nostris assertionibus sed scripturae astipulationibus ornatus feminarum rapina uirorum uovatur!*

¹⁰² Aldhelm follows Ambrose here in his justification of Judith. Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, 24.5, 7: “Both are good if possible; if it is not possible, let me be chaste.... And Judith dressed herself to please an adulterer, but because she did this for religion, not for love, no one judged her an adulteress.” *Tolerabilius est mentem virginem quam carnem habere. Utrumque bonum, si liceat: si non liceat, saltem non homini castae, sed Deo simus.... Et Judith se, ut adultero placeret, ornavit quae tamen quia hoc religione, non amore faciebat, nemo eam adulteram iudicavit.*

¹⁰³ DV, 57.17-19, 731; Lapidge and Herren, 127: *Verum quia hoc in arcta Betuliae obsidione pro contribulibus dlitura compatiens affect, non castitatis defectu fecisse memoratur.*

Considering Aldhelm's immense pride in his mastery of Latin rhetoric and attention to detail, anything less than this would be surprising.

Conclusion

In terms of establishing orthodox belief, the fourth-century debates in Latin Christendom over virginity and chastity between Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome on one side and Jovinian, Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum on the other resulted in the complete triumph of those favoring physical purity. The disagreements surrounding the proper relationship between religious men and women and the limits of female religious authority, however, still continued within the Church, though fought through different means. This can be seen in the various, and contrasting, monastic rules propounded in both Latin and Greek Christendom, and the extent to which the benefits of ascetic practices were seen to have superseded the traditional social limits on contact between men and women. However, following the fourth century debates, writers on all sides of the debate were constrained by the limits of orthodoxy imposed by the acceptance of the position put forward by Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome and others. Thus, while Aldhelm took a theological position that borrowed in many ways from the traditions critical of the cult of virginity, he worked entirely with source material of unquestionable orthodoxy.

As we have seen, Aldhelm systematically restructured the patristic norms that saw virginity as being the singular most praiseworthy characteristic of holiness and instead promoted chastity to the highest rank. In so doing, he carved out a space within the theological discourse to support the authority of the abbesses of the double monastery who were often not virgins. In doing so, he was able to create a version of Christian thought that more closely reflected the needs and values of Northern European society, particularly in the acceptance of a greater role for women in society. Aldhelm did not, of course, have the last word on the subject and some scholars have seen the introduction of Christianity into Northern Europe as having had a

decidedly negative impact on the possibilities for Northern European women. One of the most important works concerning the social effects of the introduction of Christianity into Anglo-Saxon England is Stephanie Hollis' *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*. Hollis argues that it was this 'Roman-Christianity' that led to the assimilation of "a number of new conceptions of relationships and identity, and among these was a gender-specific identity for women." She holds that "the alterization of women" can be seen as a virtual index of the degree to which Roman-Christianity was adopted.¹ However, it need not be the case that an acceptance of Mediterranean scholarship and traditions would necessarily lead to viewing women as 'other.' To do so is to imagine the early medieval church as much more unified and focused in intent than is reasonable to assume.

However, there was certainly a rapid decline in the foundation of monasteries during the eighth and ninth centuries in both England and France.² This decline disproportionately affected houses for women, including double monasteries. The seventh century had witnessed one hundred and twenty three religious foundations in Britain alone, including ninety-four between 650-699.³ In the latter half of the seventh century a remarkable thirty-eight women's houses were founded – over forty percent of the total – and most can be identified as double monasteries. These numbers would drop precipitously in the eighth and ninth centuries. In the period between 700-799, a total of only forty-two institutions were founded and 800-899 saw only twenty-three. Even more significant perhaps, is the decline in the percentages for female houses. During the entire eighth century, only eight houses were established for women, with the same number

¹ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 10-11.

² Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, 'Women's Monastic Communities, 500-1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline', *Signs* 14 (1989), 261-92.

³ The statistics for British houses are drawn from Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 78-9. She bases her numbers on Knowles and Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales*. and the Ordnance Survey, *Monastic Britain* (Southampton, 1978).

founded in the ninth. Thus female houses account for less than fifteen percent of the foundations in the eighth and ninth centuries. A very similar pattern is evident in the Gallic houses where the percentage of women's houses drop precipitously in the eighth and ninth centuries following a dramatic rise in the seventh.⁴ By the year 1066, only nine female houses would remain in England.⁵

A full accounting of the causes for this decline is an extremely complex phenomenon and goes beyond the scope of this work, but the primary causes seem to have resulted from a combination of economic and social factors. Most obviously, the lack of physical security for monastic houses during the ninth century and the resultant economic decline proved devastating. In England alone over forty houses for women, mostly double monasteries, were destroyed by Viking attacks.⁶ Recent scholarship has pointed out that some of the most extravagant claims for the devastation wrought by the Vikings were exaggerated. St. Æbbe of Coldingham was said by over-exuberant chroniclers to have been murdered by Vikings. However, in fact, Æbbe was born in the seventh century, almost two hundred years earlier.⁷ And yet, the overwhelming impact of the Viking attacks cannot be doubted; by the end of the ninth century they had effectively removed the royal dynasties in Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia that had supported so many of the early double monasteries. The decline in the material wealth of these institutions through the degradation of the resources of the monasteries themselves and was exacerbated by less secure wealth from potential patrons and severely weakened the institutions.⁸ It should be noted,

⁴ Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 78.

⁵ David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of Its Development from the Times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940-1216* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 101.

⁶ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 292-95; Schulenburg, 'Women's Monastic Communities, 500-1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline', 272.

⁷ Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 58-9.

⁸ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 165-74.

however, that the destruction was by no means uniform, and that the monasteries of south-west England fared much better than their contemporaries in areas more hard hit by invasion.⁹ Many of the wealthiest monasteries, and in particular female institutions, also began to lose their connections to the royal houses that had done so much to promote their earlier success.¹⁰ Many of the monastic foundations that had survived direct attack became prime targets for royal and lay appropriation of monastic lands in a time of crisis.¹¹

These economic factors were also supported by a series of social changes that changed the established patterns of support for the monasteries and may have influenced the move away from female institutions. One of these factors was the increasing concern of Church councils for the need to impose strict claustration on female ascetic communities.¹² As we have seen, this was not a new concern of ecclesiastical authorities, but it was new to Northern Europe. These changes can be traced through the manuscript traditions relating to issues of ritual and spiritual purity. Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* is only one part of a larger tradition that dealt with such issues that was developed over the course of the seventh and eighth centuries. One of the most prominent series of texts that can be used to track the changes in this discourse are the competing traditions represented by Gregory the Great's *Libellus Responsionum* and Theodore's *Penitential*.¹³ In many ways, these two documents represent the poles of Northern European responses to questions of physical and spiritual purity. Much can be gained by an understanding of the reception and later alteration of these two works.

⁹ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 295-323.

¹⁰ Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 58-63.

¹¹ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, 323-29; Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 59-60.

¹² Schulenburg, 'Strict Active Enclosure'; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 171.

¹³ *Poenitentie Theodori*, Finsterwalder, *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und Ihre Überlieferungsformen*. Translated by John McNeil and Helena M. Gamer, eds. *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A translation of the principal libri poenitentiales and selections from related documents*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

Gregory's *Libellus Responsionum* is the name given to the famous answers provided by Gregory to Augustine of Canterbury during his mission to Kent at the beginning of the seventh century. These answers, as they are collected within the first book of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* demonstrate a pragmatic view towards issues of purity; emphasizing a spiritual understanding which deemphasized more literal approaches to physical purity that were based on literal readings of Leviticus. For example, the eighth question posed by Augustine concerned a variety of issues relating to issues of ritual purity including topics such as whether pregnant women could be baptized, the length of time a woman who had given birth should avoid entering a church, and if it was lawful for a menstruating woman to receive communion.¹⁴ To which Gregory replied:

Why indeed should a pregnant woman not be baptized, since the fruitfulness of the body is no sin in the eyes of the Almighty God? For when our first parents had sinned in Paradise they forfeited by God's just judgment that immortality which they had received. And so because Almighty God had no desire to wipe out the human race entirely on account of his sin.... He preserved man's power of propagating the race after him. For what reason then is that which has been preserved for human nature by the gift of Almighty God a cause for debarring anyone from the grace of holy baptism?"¹⁵

In answering Augustine's question concerning the proper length of time a woman who has given birth should be prohibited from entering a Church, Gregory directly undermined the Levitical texts that underlay Augustine's concern:

When a woman has been delivered, after how many day ought she to enter the church? You know by the teaching of the Old Testament that she should keep away for thirty-three days if the child is a boy and sixty-six days if it is a girl. This, however, must be understood figuratively. For if she enters the church at the very hour of her delivery, for the purpose of giving thanks, she is not guilty of any sin: it is the pleasure of the flesh, not its pain, which is at fault.¹⁶

¹⁴ *HE*, I.27, 90.

¹⁵ *HE*, I.27, 90.

¹⁶ *HE*, I.27, 92.

Gregory uses a figurative reading of Leviticus to argue for a spiritual understanding of purity that prioritizes one's actions and intent in much the same way as Aldhelm would later argue that chastity was in fact superior to bodily purity. If there was any doubt about Gregory's intent, his answer to Augustine's question regarding menstruation effectively removes it. Gregory argues that:

A woman must not be prohibited from entering a church during her usual periods, for this natural outflowing cannot be reckoned a crime: and so it is not fair that she should be deprived from entering the church for that which she suffers unwillingly. For we know that the woman who was suffering from the issue of blood humbly came behind the Lord's back and touched the hem of his garment and immediately her infirmity left her. So if she, when she had an issue of blood, could touch the Lord's garment and win commendation, why is it not lawful for a woman in her periods to enter the Lord's church?

The underlying principle behind all of these judgments for Gregory is revealed as follows: "For as in the Old Testament it is the outward deeds that are observed, so in the New Testament careful heed is paid not so much to what is done outwardly as to what is thought inwardly..."¹⁷ This distinction between inward and outward, the flesh and the spirit, is also characteristic of Aldhelm's arguments.

Theodore's position on on these same issues of interior and exterior purity reveal the extent to which these two works, though joined, took fundamentally different positions. The penitentials attributed to Theodore, contrary to Gregory, adopted a literal view of the Levitical purity laws, and so upheld the restrictions prohibiting menstruating women from many activities. The most popular example of Theodore's *iudicia* consisted of answers to questions from an Irish priest, Eoda, that was later edited by an anonymous

¹⁷ *HE*, I.27, 94.

discipulus Umbrensius.¹⁸ Part of the popularity of the work may stem from the fact that it was oriented much more towards the perspective of pastoral care, rather than monastic discipline.¹⁹ As such, it contained more expansive social provisions than the other versions of his penitential. The work itself is composed of two books. The first book is a penitential proper and contains fifteen chapters of proscriptions for dealing with various sins. The second book contains fourteen chapters of canons that describe Theodore's rulings on a variety of issues. The work is not directly from Theodore but the ideas contained within the text have been held to be generally representative of Theodore's thought.²⁰ Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge state that: "it is clear that one must exercise caution before accepting any statement in the *Iudicia* as Theodore's own. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that it is principally Theodore's thought and learning which have shaped the collection."²¹ A general survey of the issues in this work reveal Theodore was highly interested in both orthodox practice amongst the clergy and in ritual physical purity.

One such example of the concern for heresy acknowledges the presence of a large and active group of unorthodox congregations. This chapter contains fourteen proscriptions against communion with heretics, the need to rebaptize heretics, and a prohibition against ordaining a heretic who has returned to the fold, except in great

¹⁸ *Poenitentie Theodori* II.4.8; Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Penitential of Theodore and the *Iudicia Theodori*', in M. Lapidge (ed.) *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 154.

¹⁹ Allen J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 63-5.

²⁰ Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 147-55; John McNeill Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 180; Michael Lapidge, 'The Career of Archbishop Theodore', in M. Lapidge (ed.) *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17, 28.

²¹ Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 151.

necessity.²² This would seem to suggest that orthodox practice was a primary concern. Furthermore, the penitential shows a high degree of concern for incompetent or misinformed clergy.²³ There are frequent references to pagan practices such as the drinking of blood and semen and prohibitions against incantations that include the clergy.²⁴

What is perhaps more interesting is the importance Theodore's penitential places upon physical purity. Immediately following the canon against consumption of blood, it is stated that "women shall not in the time of impurity enter into a church, or communicate---neither nuns nor laywomen."²⁵ Similarly, the biblical commentary attributed to Theodore shows a distinct concern for the purity of the flesh. In a commentary on the book of Genesis, it is stated that at the time of menstruation it is not "permissible for anyone to touch her, but that someone may place food – and nothing else – before her, which she may accept until the blood ceases."²⁶

The implication of this point might best be illustrated by contrast to Gregory's position on issues of purity regarding menstruation. Gregory answered Augustine of Canterbury's questions regarding menstruating women by saying that they should not be barred from church as "this natural overflowing cannot be considered a crime" since they did not willfully choose to menstruate.²⁷ The distinction between these two positions is

²² *Poenitentiale Theodori*, I.5.2, 6, and 7.

²³ *Poenitentiale Theodori*, I.5 6, 2.2.10.

²⁴ *Poenitentiale Theodori*, I.7.3, 1.14.16, 2.10.5, 1.15.4.

²⁵ *Poenitentiale Theodori*, I.14.17.

²⁶ Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 334-5. *Iuxta consuetudinem mulierum* [XXXI.35]: .i. menstruaem. *Tunc / enim non est facilis cuilibet surgere uel ambulare; nec licet eam tangere alicui nisi ut cibum tantum quis ponat ante ipsam quae accipiat usque dum sanguis resistat.*

²⁷ *HE*, 1.27, 92. The Gregorian theme of "diversity within unity" is the subject of his *Regula pastoralis* and is developed there at length. See Robert Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 72-75.

that Theodore's ruling is based upon physical nature while Gregory's prioritized the spirit and the will. Theodore's ruling that baptism by a polluted presbyter was invalid also shows the degree to which Theodore emphasized physicality in his penitential.²⁸ This emphasis upon the physical is particularly relevant for the association of the sexes in mixed monasteries, a topic we know concerned Theodore directly and which presumably led Theodore to speak against the cohabitation of monastic men and women.²⁹

The fact that Theodore's *Penitential* and Gregory's *Libellus Responsionum* took such different positions on matters obviously would have been apparent to their readers, and yet they were frequently placed together.³⁰ Theodore's *Penitential* comes down to us in a variety of forms, but all are linked in some way to Gregory's *Libellus Responsionum*. Of the two manuscripts containing the *Capitula Dacheriana*, one of them also includes Gregory's text as well.³¹ Of the seventeen manuscripts of Theodorian text described as the *Canones Gregorii*, five contain the *Libellus Responsionum*; one of which knits them together by first presenting the table of contents followed by the texts. Finally, the most prominent of the texts of Theodore's *Penitential*, the *Discipulus Umbrensi* comes down to us in twenty-five medieval manuscripts. Of these, twelve are paired with Gregory's *Libellus Responsionum*.³² Rob Meens explained this juxtaposition by suggesting that the *Libellus Responsionum* "provided a counterweight to the legalistic

²⁸ *Poenitentie Theodori*, II.2.12.

²⁹ *Poenitentie Theodori*, II.7.8.

³⁰ The following discussion on the textual tradition is drawn from Rob Meens, 'Ritual Purity and the Influence of Gregory the Great in the Early Middle Ages', *Studies in Church History* 32 (1996), 31-43 37-8.

³¹ Finsterwalder, *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und Ihre Überlieferungsformen*, 92.

³² Meens, 'Ritual Purity and the Influence of Gregory the Great', 38. For the manuscript traditions see Rob Meens, *Het tripartite boeteboek: overlevering en betekenis van vroegmiddeleeuwse biechtvoorschriften (met editie en vertaling van vier tripartita)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), 34, n. 49.

view adopted by Theodore” and surely this must be correct.³³ Alan Frantzen noted that a number of codices contain not only the *Libellus Responsionum* and Theodore’s penitential, but also the penitential of Cummean, another highly respected work from seventh-century Ireland.³⁴ The inclusion of these conflicting texts in the same codices does not indicate a settled answer about how to balance the issues of spiritual and physical purity, but rather an open debate on the issue. Frantzen’s contention that the circulation of these documents as a collection is a demonstration of the essential conservatism of the genre therefore needs to be questioned.³⁵ Indeed, the efforts of later penitential writers of the eighth and ninth century to resolve the discrepancies between Theodore and Gregory by editing or changing one or the other, speaks to the realization that these two traditions were not in line and that the debate begun in the fourth century was continuing.

The same pattern of persistent debate can also be seen by tracing the transmission and reception of Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*. As the treatise spread through intellectual and monastic centers in Britain and on the Continent, we can partially reconstruct the ways in which Aldhelm’s work was understood and received by his contemporaries and by successive generations in Northern Europe. One region of particular interest is the area of the lower-middle Rhine to which the Bonifatian missionaries carried Aldhelm’s ideas.³⁶ The Anglo-Saxon missionaries established numerous monasteries here in the ninth

³³ Meens, 'Ritual Purity and the Influence of Gregory the Great', 39.

³⁴ Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 114-36; Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England*, 68.

³⁵ Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England*, 68.

³⁶ The *Libellus Responsionum* was also a fundamental text for Boniface and his colleagues. Bill Friesen, 'Answers and Echoes: The *Libellus Responsionum* and the Hagiography of North-Western European Mission', *Early Medieval Europe* 14 (2006), 153-72 esp. 164-68.

century, including double monasteries on the Anglo-Saxon model. And just as in seventh-century England, the Germanic areas also experienced conflicts surrounding issues of gender and the proper relationships between religious men and women. We know that Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* was one of the foundational texts of the early libraries founded in this region. It is one of the original books listed on an early ninth century booklist of the episcopal library of Wurzburg which was founded in 743. The manuscript containing the booklist, Bodleian M.S. Laud. Misc. 126, lists thirty-six separate items.³⁷ The vast majority of these works were pastoral or liturgical in nature, including Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* and *Pastoral Care* [*Liber Regulae Pastoralis*] as well as commentaries by Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose and Jerome. Among these, however, is listed *liber Althelmi*, which has been traditionally identified as the *De Virginitate*.

That Aldhelm's text was being utilized and commented upon in this environment is unlikely to be a coincidence. From a possible 20,000 headwords in the texts, over 8,500 are glossed in Latin and a further 5,500 in Old English.³⁸ Further research on the glosses on the *De Virginitate* may help reveal the ways in which his treatise was being understood and utilized in Germanic areas debating similar issues having to do with double monasteries. What is clear, however, is that the glosses are not indicative of individual responses to the text. Scott Gwara has noted that many of the glosses bear a close relationship and the various manuscripts include a common core where later

³⁷ A facsimile of the manuscript is available within Elias Avery Lowe, 'An Eighth-Century List of Books in a Bodleian Ms. From Wurzburg and Its Probable Relation to the Laudian Acts', *Speculum* 3 (1928), 3-15 plate 1.

³⁸ Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, 71-2.

manuscripts would copy the earlier manuscript's glosses, or provide their own entry at precisely the same location.³⁹

Yet while we cannot know how individual readers understood the arguments in the *De Virginitate*, we can attribute the extant copies almost entirely to male houses. The interest of the male houses in a document that was originally written for the needs of the women of a double monastery speaks to the lasting importance of Aldhelm's work. Felice Lifshitz has linked the male interest in the *De Virginitate* with a rising concern among male ascetics to reclaim the authority of virginity.⁴⁰ Male claims to the status provided by virginity was particularly important in the midst of ecclesiastical or monastic reform movements.⁴¹ Ironically, it appears therefore that Aldhelm's efforts to decouple physical integrity from religious authority on behalf of female authority were later used as a means for monks to claim the prestige of virginity for themselves and, eventually, to supersede female claims to the same.

The ninth and tenth century readings of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* reveal a fundamentally different context than that of its original production. As the debate was resolved increasingly in favor of virginity over chastity, Aldhelm's text itself was read in light of this new consensus. The significance of Aldhelm's text though and the importance of debates concerning virginity and chastity to the opportunities is only underlined by these developments. When double monasteries reappeared in England in

³⁹ Gwara, *Prosa De Virginitate*, 274-308.

⁴⁰ Lifshitz, 'Priestly Women, Virginal Men', 98-101. For the importance of male virginity in issues of early medieval authority see Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser, 'The Gender of Grace: Impotence, Servitude and Maliness in the Fifth-Century West', in P. Stafford and A.B. Mulder-Bakker (eds.), *Gendering the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Conrad Leyser, 'Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages', in D.M. Hadley (ed.) *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 1999).

⁴¹ Lifshitz, 'Priestly Women, Virginal Men', 99.

the high medieval period, they would look nothing like their Anglo-Saxon counterparts and were predicated upon the belief that women needed to be supervised and controlled by their male counterparts. We have only begun to recover the outlines of a wide-ranging conversation concerning the proper limits of female authority and the appropriate relationships between religious men and women in the early medieval church. These debates had a natural focus around the double monasteries, but the implications for medieval society were much greater. Aldhelm's enduring influence is a testament to the richness and depth of his text. That Aldhelm's stylistic genius was influential is beyond doubt, but a greater appreciation for the significance of his theology is needed as well.

Appendix 1: The Saintly Exemplars in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*

Male

Elijah
 Elisha
 Jeremiah
 Daniel
 Three Youths (Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego)
 John the Baptist
 John
 Didymus
 Paul
 Luke
 Clemet
 Silvester
 Ambrose
 Martin
 Gregory Nazianzus
 Basil
 Felix
 Anthony
 Paul the Hermit
 Hilarion of Palestine
 John (Egyptian Hermit)
 Benedict
 Malchus
 Narcissus
 Athansius
 Babilas
 Cosmas and Damianus

Chaste Marriages

Chrysanthus and Daria
 Julian and Basilissa
 Amos and unnamed virgin

Apollonius (exception to chaste marriage theme)

Female

Chaste Marriages, cont

Mary
 Caecilla
 Agatha – (exception) possibly from Fortunatus' poem *De Virginitate*

Justinia

Female Exemplars

Eugenia

Agnes

Thecla

Eulalia

Scholastica

Christina

Dorpthea

Constantia

Eustochium

Demetrias

Chionia, Irene, Agape

Secunda, Rufina

Anatolia, Victoria

Anatolia

Old Testament Figures

Joseph

David

Samson

Abel

Melchisedech

Appendix 2: Narrative Structure of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*

Part I – Discourse on Chastity and Virginity

1. Salutation and Prologue - Chapter 1
2. Series of similes extolling scholarship and learning of nuns – Chapters 2-6
 - a. Athletes – Chapter 2-3
 - b. Bees – Chapter 4-6
3. Concerning Virginity and Marriage – Chapters 7-9
 - a. Praise of Virginity – Chapter 7
 - b. Praise of Marriage – Chapter 8
 - c. Arguments for Preferring Virginity to Marriage (following Jerome) – Chapter 9
4. Chastity Superior to Virginity – Chapters 10-15
 - a. Chaste Must Struggle to Overcome Difficulties - Chapter 10
 - b. Virgins Susceptible to Pride – Chapter 11-12
 - c. Virgins Must Respect the Chaste (comparing chaste to Mary) – Chapter 13
 - d. Possibility of Virgins Avoiding Pride Through Seclusion – Chapter 14
 - e. Need for Proper Social Conduct By Chaste and Virgins – Chapter 15-16
5. Marriage, Chastity and Virginity – Chapters 17-18
 - a. Virgins Focus on the Lord, while the married focus on adornment – Chapter 17
 - b. Virginity and Chastity superior Because Obtained by Virtue – Chapter 18
 - c. Tripartite Division of Human Race (Virginity, Chastity, Conjugalit) – Chapter 19

Part II - Exemplars

6. Male Exemplars – Chapters 20-38
 - a. Hebrew Scripture – Chapters 20-22
 - b. New Testament – Chapters 23-24
 - c. Early Popes/Western Bishops – Chapters 25-27
 - d. Eastern Bishops – Chapter 27
 - e. Hermits and Monks – Chapters 28-30
 - f. Martyrs – Chapters 30-34

7. Chaste Marriages – Chapters 35-43
 - a. Chaste Marriages among Males – Chapters 35-37
 - b. Apollonius – Chapter 38 (exception to pattern)
 - c. Chaste Marriages among Females – Chapters 39-43
 - d. So-called Transvestite Saints – Chapters 44-46
 - e. Female Martyrs - Chapter 47-52
 - f. Five Authority Figures from Hebrew Scripture - Chapters 53-54

Part III – Discourse on Clothing and Ornamentation

8. Diatribe against excessive Ornamentation – Chapters 55-57
 - a. Denunciation of Ornamental Dress – Chapter 55
 - b. Long Quotation from Cyprian's *De Habitu Virginum* - Chapter 56
 - c. Judith and Holofernes – Chapter 57
9. Augustine and Prosper – Chapter 58
10. Apology for Delay in Writing and Conclusion– Chapters 59-60

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