

Imagining Nature and Creating Sacred Landscapes in  
Early Medieval England and Francia, *c.* 400-850

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The bells of the churches and cloisters were ringing for vespers as Kristin entered the courtyard of Christ Church. For a moment she ventured to glance up at the west gable—then she lowered her dazzled eyes.

Human beings could not have done this work on their own. God's spirit had been at work in holy Øistein and the men who built the church after them. *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Now she understood those words. A reflection of the splendor of God's kingdom bore witness through the stones that His will was all that was beautiful. Kristin trembled. Yes, God must surely turn away with scorn from all that was vile—from sin and shame and impurity.

Along the galleries of the heavenly palace stood holy men and women, and they were so beautiful that she dared not look at them. The imperishable vines of eternity wound their way upward, calm and lovely, bursting into flower on the spires and towers with stone monstresses. Above the center door hung Christ on the cross . . .

She walked as if through a forest. The pillars were furrowed like ancient trees, and into the woods the light seeped, colorful and clear as song, through the stained-glass windows. High overhead animals and people frolicked in the stone foliage, and angels played their instruments. At an even higher, more dizzying height, the vaults of the ceiling arched upward, lifting the church toward God. In a hall off to the side a service was being held at an altar. Kristin fell to her knees next to a pillar. The song cut through her like a blinding light. Now she saw how deep in the dust she lay.

—Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 1921.

This dissertation explores the range of attitudes towards and perceptions of the natural world in early medieval England and Francia, *c.* 400-850, and the ways in which those interpretations could shape and be made to shape religious life. Building on that diversity, this study argues that textual representations of nature constitute a central but neglected theme in early medieval sources. Textual representations of nature in sources on religious life—history, hagiography, liturgy, poetry and epistolary evidence—offer scholars access to ideas of the Christianization of space and place in this period. Images of nature informed by scriptural, exegetical and hagiographic conventions helped give form to sophisticated textual strategies for making sense of communal Christian life, especially in monastic contexts. These textual networks are crucial components of the ways in which early medieval authors tried to redefine a fundamentally changed Europe in the centuries after Roman rule. Reading nature in the sources illuminates how intellectuals thought about and with the world around them as part of larger projects of defining what it meant to be a Christian in post-Roman Europe.

Current scholarship on early medieval attitudes towards nature tends to organize them into broad “positive” and “negative” categories. This study challenges and revises such analyses, exposing both the diversity of perceptions as well as the functions descriptions of nature could accomplish within the texts in which they appeared. Textual images of nature could reject formerly pagan landscapes, reenact Scripture in local environments and mirror the religious life cultivated by monks, ascetics and religious communities. Natural images also shifted with contexts: for the authors of late antique Gaul (*c.* 350-650), forceful arguments for nature’s ability to shape religious life and its



fitness to harbor holy people often tempered a dominant narrative of the conquest of ii  
nature. For early historians and hagiographers of post-Roman Britain (c. 500-820),  
cultural shifts brought on by the end of Roman rule and rapid conversion to Christianity  
after 597 produced a need for new textual strategies arguing for nature's ability to foster  
religious change in specific landscapes. Anglo-Latin poets of the period deployed diverse  
natural metaphors to express central elements of monastic identity such as craftsmanship,  
building and landscape manipulation. By the period of Frankish missionary activity (c.  
690-900), textual descriptions of nature were crucial for expressing conversion processes  
in missionary *vitae*. Towards the end of the period, that rhetoric had coalesced with  
apocalyptic thought about the physical, non-Christian world "at the ends of the earth." By  
tracing the paths of natural themes through these sources, this study sheds new light on  
the creative ways in which early medieval people thought about religious life and defined  
their faiths in a period of broad cultural change.

For

Dudley Rich Terry  
18 April 1922 – 26 June 2000,

Herman Harrison Ashcraft  
3 November 1924 – 27 March 2011

and

Thomas Lee Ashcraft  
19 August 1926 – 1 November 2011

who took me fishing  
and told me stories.

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I have long thought about, with and in natural places. Their sounds, smells, contours and names—Devil's Den, Shores Lake, Bear Hollow, Hawksbill Crag, White Rock Mountain, the rivers Cossatot, Mulberry, Buffalo—are embedded in my memory and identity. For this reason, I am grateful to Mom and Cindy Ashcraft who took me to these places, but in particular I remember Papa, Uncle June and Gramps. I accompanied them to the woods, ponds and hills of Arkansas and they taught me the importance of place from the "Back Acre" to the "Hickory Nut Farm" and beyond. My best is for them.

John T.R. Terry  
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<i>AA SS</i>	Acta Sanctorum, 68 volumes. Antwerp and Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1643-1940.
<i>Apoc.</i>	Bede, <i>In Apocalypsin sancti Iohannis libros III</i> . In <i>Bedae presbyteri Expositio Apocalypseos</i> , edited by Roger Gryson. CCSL 121A: 3-99. Turnhout: Brepols 2001.
<i>ARF</i>	<i>Annales regni Francorum</i> . In <i>MGH SRG</i> 6, edited by Georg Pertz and Friedrich Kurze. Hanover: Hahn, 1895.
<i>B.A.R.</i>	British Archaeological Reports. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1974–.
Bede, <i>Hom.</i>	<i>Homeliarum evangelii</i> , edited by David Hurst. CCSL 122: 1-378. Turnhout: Brepols, 1955.
Boniface, <i>Ep.</i>	<i>Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus</i> , edited by Michael Tangl. <i>MGH Epp.</i> 1. Berlin: Weidmann, 1916, repr. 1989.
<i>CCCM</i>	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–.
<i>CCSL</i>	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vienna: Tempsky, 1866–.
<i>DA</i>	Æthelwulf, <i>De abbatibus</i> . In <i>De abbatibus</i> , edited by Alistair Campbell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
<i>DCS</i>	Gregory of Tours, <i>De cursu stellarum</i> . In <i>Gregorii Turonensis Opera</i> 2, edited by Bruno Krusch. <i>MGH SRM</i> 1,2: 404-22. Hanover: Hahn, 1885.
<i>De Tab.</i>	Bede, <i>De Tabernaculo</i> . In <i>Bedae Venerabilis Opera Exegetica</i> , edited by David Hurst. CCSL 119A: 5-139. Turnhout: Brepols, 1969.
<i>De Templ.</i>	Bede, <i>De Templo</i> . In <i>Bedae Venerabilis Opera Exegetica</i> , edited by David Hurst. CCSL 119A: 143-234. Turnhout: Brepols, 1969.
<i>DEB</i>	Gildas, <i>De excidio et conquestu Britanniae</i> . In <i>Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII.</i> 3, edited by Theodor Mommsen. <i>MGH AA</i> 13: 15-85. Berlin: Weidmann, 1898.



- DLH* Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*. In *Gregorii Turonensis Opera* 1, edited by Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison. *MGH SRM* 1,1. Hanover: Hahn, 1951.
- DLE* Eucherius, *De laude eremi*. In *Eucherii: De laude eremi. Recensuit, apparatu critico et indicibus instruxit*, edited by Salvatore Pricoco. Catania: Centro di studi sull'antico cristianesimo, 1965.
- Enig.* Aldhelm, *Enigmata*. In *Aldhelmi Opera*, edited by Rudolf Ehwald. *MGH AA* 15: 61-207. Berlin: Weidmann, 1919.
- Etym.* Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum siue originum libri XX*, 2 vols. Edited by Wallace Lindsay. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911.
- GC* Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*. In *Gregorii Turonensis Opera* 2, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 1,2: 294-370. Hanover: Hahn, 1885.
- GM* Gregory of Tours, *Liber in Gloria martyrum*. In *Gregorii Turonensis Opera* 2, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 1,2: 34-111. Hanover: Hahn, 1885.
- Godman, *Poetry* Peter Godman, ed. and trans. *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- HE* Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. In *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited and translated by Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- In Cant.* Bede, *In Cantica Canticorum*. In *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Exegetica*, edited by David Hurst. *CCSL* 119B: 167-375. Turnhout: Brepols, 1983.
- In Ezr.* Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*. In *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Exegetica*, edited by David Hurst. *CCSL* 119A: 237-392. Turnhout: Brepols, 1969.
- In Gen.* Bede, *In Genesim*. In *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Exegetica*, edited by Charles Jones. *CCSL* 118A. Turnhout: Brepols, 1967.

- Inst.* Columbanus, *Instructiones*. Edited by G.S.M. Walker. *Sancti Columbanii Opera*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957.
- Lapidge and Herren, Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, trans. *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979.
- Lapidge and Rosier, Michael Lapidge and James Rosier, trans. *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985.
- MGH AA* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi. 15 vols. Hanover: Hahn, 1877-1919.
- MGH Capit.* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Capitularia, Legum Sectio II, Capitularia Regum Francorum. 2 vols. Hanover: Hahn, 1883, 1897.
- MGH Epp.* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Epistolae. 8 vols. Hanover: Hahn, 1887-1939.
- MGH PLAC* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini. 4 vols. Hanover: Hahn, 1881-99.
- MGH SRG* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi. 78 vols. Hanover: Hahn, 1871-2007.
- MGH SRM* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum. 7 volumes. Hanover: Hahn, 1885-1951.
- MGH SS* Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores. 38 vols. Hanover: Hahn, 1826-2007.
- Miracula* Anonymous, *Miracula Nynie episcopi*, edited by Karl Strecker. *MGH PLAC* 4,3: 943-61. Hanover: Hahn, 1899.
- OEM* Old English Martyrology. In *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary*, edited and translated by Christine Rauer. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013.
- PL* Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844-66.
- Settimane* Settimane di studio del centro italiano sull'alto medioevo. Spoleto: Presso la sede del Centro, 1953–.

- VA* Rimberty, *Vita Anskarii*. In *Vita Anskarii auctore Rimberty* (*Anhang: Vita Rimberty*), edited by Georg Waitz. *MGH SRG* 55: 12-79. Hanover: Hahn, 1884.
- VB* Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*. In *Vitae Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo*, edited by Wilhelm Levison. *MGH SRG* 57. Hanover: Hahn, 1905.
- VC* Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*. In *Vitae Columbani abbatis discipulorum eius libri II*, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRG* 37: 144-294. Hanover: Hahn, 1905.
- V. Cuth.* Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*. In *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, edited and translated by Bertram Colgrave, 141-307. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940, repr. 1985.
- VM* Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*. In *Sulpice Sévère: Vie de Saint Martin*, 3 volumes, edited by Jacques Fontaine. Sources chrétiennes 133-35. Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967.
- VP* Gregory of Tours, *Liber vitae patrum*. In *Gregorii Turonensis Opera* 2, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 1,2: 211-93. Hanover: Hahn, 1885.
- VI* Gregory of Tours, *Liber de passione et virtutibus sancti Iuliani martyris*. In *Gregorii Turonensis Opera* 2, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 1,2: 112-33. Hanover: Hahn, 1885.
- VPI* Anonymous, *Vita patrum iurensium*. In *Vie des peres du Jura*, edited by François Martine. Sources chrétiennes 142. Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1968.
- VR* Alcuin, *Vita Richarii*. In *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici et antiquiorum aliquot*, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 4: 390-401. Hanover: Hahn, 1902.
- V. Rimb.* Anonymous, *Vita Rimberty*. In *Vita Anskarii auctore Rimberty* (*Anhang: Vita Rimberty*), edited by Georg Waitz. *MGH SRG* 55: 80-100. Hanover: Hahn, 1884.
- VS* Eigil, *Vita Sturmi*. In *Scriptores rerum Sangallensium. Annales, chronica et historiae aevi Carolini*, edited by Georg Pertz. *MGH SS* 2: 365-77. Hanover: Hahn, 1879.

- VSM* Gregory of Tours, *Liber de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi*. In *Gregorii Turonensis Opera* 2, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 1,2: 135-210. Hanover: Hahn, 1885.
- VV* Alcuin, *Vita Vedasti*. In *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici et antiquiorum aliquot* 1, edited by Bruno Krusch. *MGH SRM* 3: 414-27. Hanover: Hahn, 1902.
- VW* Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*. In *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici* 5, edited by Wilhelm Levison. *MGH SRM* 7: 113-41. Hanover: Hahn, 1920.
- York* Alcuin, *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Eboracensis ecclesiae*. In *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, edited and translated by Peter Godman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

For all scriptural passages I use the *Nova Vulgata* with the Douay-Rheims translation.

All translations of Latin sources are my own unless otherwise noted. For some texts, excellent modern English translations exist; most notably Bede's exegetical works have received sustained attention in recent years. These are noted, where applicable, in the relevant footnotes and in the Bibliography. Other commonly used translations are employed as well, especially for Gildas' *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*, Aldhelm's poetic works, Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, and Alcuin's *York Poem*. Many of the rest of the texts deployed are either untranslated or exist in unsatisfactory translations.

I have rendered the Latin throughout as it appears in respective editions and have not taken it upon myself to correct editorial erudition. When, for example, an editor has rendered "u" for a "v" consonant (e.g. *fluuius* vs. *fluvius*), I have made no changes in the service of consistency throughout the dissertation. Additionally, all ellipses in Latin texts denote my choice to pass over phrases or small sections, not a gap in the text itself unless otherwise noted.

For proper names of people and places, I have striven to adhere to the most commonly rendered spellings in current scholarship. For Anglo-Saxon names, I follow the spellings used in the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England.

## Introduction

Around 435, a man named Romanus renounced his possessions and became a monk. He hiked into the Jura Mountains not far from his family's estate at Izernore, near the border of modern-day France and Switzerland, seeking a suitable place for a hermitage in hopes of, in time, developing a monastic community.<sup>1</sup> According to his anonymous, early sixth-century biographer, Romanus wandered through a rugged landscape thick with trees, encountering only the odd deer amongst the forests.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Romanus came to a fir tree, a moment his biographer described at length:

[Romanus] repperit tandem ulterius inter saxosa conuallia culturae patulum locum, qui, altrinsecus triiugi montium paululum ardua secedente natura, in planitiem aliquantulum relaxatur. Illic namque bifida fluuiorum in solidum concurrente natura, mox etiam ab unitate elementi iam conditi Condadiscone loco uulguis indidit nomen. Cumque oportunitatem domicilii nouus posceret hospes, repperit ab orientale parte sub radice saxosi montis, porrectis in orbitam ramis, densissimam abietem, quae patulis diffusa comis, uelut quondam palma Paulum, ita texit ista discipulum. Extra cuius arboris orbem fons inriguus gelidissima fluenta praestabat, ex quo etiam hodie terebratis lignis ulterius in monasterium educti latices pro quodam hereditatis . . . Haec ergo ei supradicta, ut diximus, arbor a feruore aestuum uel frigore imbrium, tamquam uere meritorum gratia uernans, praebuit iugiter tecta uirentia.<sup>3</sup>

[Romanus] found beyond [the forests] an open place for cultivation among the rocky valleys, in which, beyond three mountain ridges, the natural steepness gave way and eased into a small plain. Since twin rivers, concurrent by nature, joined together [there], the people soon gave the place the name “Condadisco” [Condat], since the streams had become one.<sup>4</sup> When the traveller [Romanus] was looking

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<sup>1</sup> For a map and a discussion of the region, see Chapter 1, 83-87 and Map 1.3, 85.

<sup>2</sup> *VPI*, 9, 247-48.

<sup>3</sup> *VPI* 5-8, 242-46. For a full discussion of this opening passage, see below, Chapter 1, 96-99.

<sup>4</sup> “Condadisco” is a proper name that only appears in the manuscripts for the *VPI* and once in Gregory of Tours’ as *Condatiscone monasterium* in his *Liber vitae patrum*, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 214. As Martine, *VPI*, 245-46, n. 6, has made clear, “Condat” is actually an

for an appropriate place to live, he found to the east, at the base of a rocky mountain, a dense fir tree whose branches, spread out in a circle, were covered with an abundance [of needles]; just as the palm tree once covered Paul [the Hermit], this tree now covered his disciple. Beyond the ambit of the tree's branches, a flowing spring poured forth the iciest water; and even today its waters, channeled with wooden pipes to the distant monastery, are in this way [provided] for [Romanus'] heirs . . . as I said above, this tree always provided [Romanus with a] green roof against the boiling heat of summer and the freezing rains of winter because, on account of his merits, it enjoyed a truly perpetual spring.

This description appears near the outset of the so-called *Vita patrum iurensium* (the “Life of the Jura Fathers”), which includes the lives of Romanus and his brother Lupicinus, as well as a later abbot, Eugendus. In the description of the community's foundation, the anonymous author employed several distinct registers of thought. At one level, he described Condat's physical contours, its natural features and the benefits they afforded to monastic settlement. The Jura's physical context was crucial to the character of Condat's foundation. In another distinct sense, the author invoked a scene from Jerome's (d. 420) *Vita Pauli*, his biography of Paul (d. c. 343), one of the earliest Egyptian hermits, in which Jerome had described how Paul settled in a cave near the base of a high mountain, protected from the elements by an ancient palm tree.<sup>5</sup> Instead of a palm tree native to arid climates, the *Vita patrum iurensium*'s author used a northern fir as the primary image of Condat's foundation, recasting his hagiographic model to fit the distinctive Jura environment. With the Jura's natural features as reference points, the

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abridged translation (a “traduction inexacte ou abrégée”) of *Condate*, a Celtic word for “confluence.” In Condat's case, the “confluence” refers to the rivers Bienne and Tacon, and the anonymous author linked “Condat” with *condere*, “to put together.” Martine thought the anonymous author was wrong to do so, since that etymology does not explain the suffix Martine found to be “demeure partiellement énigmatique”—still partly a mystery.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 5, *PL* 23: col. 21. See below, Chapter 1, 96-98.

anonymous author overlapped Egyptian and Frankish landscapes to suggest that Condat's topography was worthy to host a monastic community.

In a third register of thought, Romanus' biographer approached his community's foundation with scriptural resonances in mind: the fir tree (*abies*) was mentioned in Hebrew scripture almost exclusively in the context of the construction of Solomon's Temple. Firs, according to II Kings 19.23, were commodities—"choice fir trees (*electas abietes*)"—extracted from high mountains. Fir trees were also proof of God's provision; in the words of Isaiah 41.18-20, firs were metaphors for Israel as God's chosen people in the wilderness where God "will set in the desert the fir tree (*ponam in solitudine abietem*).” For Christian intellectuals like Paulinus of Nola (d. 431) biblical trees such as the fir could symbolize the fathers of the Church, whose great merit mirrored the height of fir trees.<sup>6</sup> These scriptural and patristic resonances of the fir tree gave Condat's natural features an additional role in the account of its foundation: as Condat's central feature the fir tree made scripture manifest in the rugged Jura landscape. The place was naturally prepared to receive a holy community of monks. Firs could be seen as the physical structure of the Temple, suggesting their efficacy as a foundational image of a new holy place.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Romanus' biographer used the image of the fir tree as synecdoche. As a lone tree, it mirrored and represented the solitude of the vast and rugged landscape around it. The Jura was a monastic wilderness well suited for Romanus' purposes and its fir tree was central to shaping the author's interpretation of monastic life. In the text,

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<sup>6</sup> Paulinus, *Epistola* 23.29, *CSEL* 29, 185.

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of these and other resonances, see Chapter 1, 98-100.



decades after Condat's foundation, its abbot Eugendus received a vision of the Apostles Peter, Paul and Andrew while "resting under his usual tree (*sub arbore solito quiescenti*)."<sup>8</sup> Astonished, the abbot asked the Apostles what they were doing in the Jura: did they not belong in the great cities of their martyrdoms? They replied, however, that "now we have come to dwell *here* as well (*hic quoque nunc habitaturi uenimus*)."<sup>9</sup> Eugendus' vision confirmed what the anonymous author had established from the outset: the Jura forests were worthy to receive such distinguished guests, and its trees were major images that shaped religious identity there alongside Condat's own monastic history.

The examples of Romanus' fir tree and Eugendus' "usual tree" in the *Vita patrum iurensium*, as well as the author's treatment of the representative and symbolic values of place and nature, are themselves emblematic of some of the subjects of this dissertation: the diversity of attitudes towards and perceptions of the natural world in early medieval western Europe, c. 400-850, and the many ways in which such interpretations, in turn, could shape (and be made to shape) intellectual life and religious identity. Building upon that diversity, I argue that nature is a major theme in early medieval textual sources—a neglected but significant theme, one that must be understood for the sources on early medieval religious life to be comprehended fully. Reading the theme of nature in the sources is crucial for understanding an intellectual culture that compelled individuals like Romanus to explore, struggle with or live in new landscapes in the decades and centuries after the decline of centralized Roman imperial power in western Europe. These textual representations of nature reveal how early medieval intellectuals imagined their natural

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<sup>8</sup> *VPI* 153-54, 402-4; see Chapter 1 below, 111-12.

<sup>9</sup> *VPI* 154, 404. Emphasis added.

environments and constructed sacred places in their landscapes. Above all, this was a strategy of writing about the Christianization of space and place with common stocks of literary, exegetical and symbolic discourses. With the spread of Christianity beyond the urban centers of the western Roman Empire, perceptions of natural places fragmented from classical deities inhabiting bucolic settings<sup>10</sup> to scriptural and hagiographic interpretations of solitary places in which holy people might meet God and the saints. A reading of nature in the sources illuminates how real people thought about and with the world around them to help articulate what it meant to be a Christian in post-Roman Europe.

### **Complex Nature: Beyond the Binary**

The weight of scholarly consensus holds that early medieval images and interpretations of nature were conventionally either pleasant, beautiful or indicative of God's creative power on the one hand, or threatening and dangerous to human activities on the other. In an influential essay David Herlihy ascribed to early medieval people "a deeply seated fear of the wilderness, a sense that harassed mankind could not readily cope with the mysterious beings and forces that made their abode in the forests and

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<sup>10</sup> On this point see Richard Buxton, "Landscape," in *idem*, *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Mythology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 80-113; Jacques Fontaine, "Valeurs antiques et valeurs chrétiennes dans la spiritualité des grands propriétaires terriens à la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle occidental," in *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Daniélou*, ed. Fontaine, Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), 571-95; Claudia Rapp, "Desert, City, and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination," in *The Encroaching Desert: Egyptian Hagiography and the Medieval West*, ed. Jitse Dijkstra and Mathilde van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 93-112, at 93.

deserts.”<sup>11</sup> Natural places could also be the dwelling place of demons and pagan deities.<sup>12</sup>

“No pagan deity,” Claudia Rapp has observed, “would ever choose to live in the desert or to appear to mortals in the desert.”<sup>13</sup> Christian authors strictly separated humans from their natural surroundings, claiming that the former exercised scripturally mandated authority over the latter, a view set forth forcefully by Lynn White, Jr. in an important

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<sup>11</sup> David Herlihy, “Attitudes toward the Environment in Medieval Society,” in *Historical Ecology: Essays in Environment and Social Change*, ed. Lester K. Born (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1980), 100-16, at 108. And, at 109: “The people of the early Middle Ages . . . nurtured fearful attitudes toward their natural surroundings and expected hostility in return.” Herlihy’s views have informed and influenced a broad selection of scholarship on medieval interpretations of nature. Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 31-32: “Small boys in monastic communities slipped and drowned . . . Worst of all perceived perils of the waters were the monsters lived in rivers, lakes and seas . . . denizens of the wilderness were animals and demons, never fully human when they seemed to take human form. They inhabited the wild for one purpose only: to prey upon those foolish enough to leave the safety of home.” Sarah Foot, “Plenty, Portents, and Plague: Ecclesiastical Readings of the Natural World in Early Medieval Europe,” in *God’s Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, Studies in Church History 46, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 15-41, at 38: “Early medieval ecclesiastical readings of the natural world were, as already suggested, deeply ambivalent. Although the beauty of creation might elicit expressions of joy, wonder and praise, the unpredictability and potential hostility of the natural environment could as often evoke fear, and so encourage in lay minds a return to the potential security offered by more ancient, non-Christian rituals.” Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 26-46 and 71: “The natural world inescapably and overwhelmingly overshadowed the human race and [Old English] poems use it to indicate danger, peril, powerlessness and uncertainty in contrast to the afterlife offered by Christianity.”

<sup>12</sup> On the tradition of villas as spaces of worship from Rome through the early Christian period, see Fontaine, “Valeurs antiques et valeurs chrétiennes,” 571-95.

<sup>13</sup> Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside,” 93: “One of the fundamental differences between pagan religion and the Judeo-Christian tradition lies in the favored abode of their divinities . . . The gods of Classical Antiquity preferred to encounter humans or to amuse themselves in lush landscapes, flowering meadows, shaded groves, near gently gurgling springs, or perhaps in the sea or on mountaintops.” On this background, I am, like Rapp, following Buxton, *Imaginary Greece*, 80-113.

1967 essay now known as the “White Thesis.”<sup>14</sup> According to White, Christian theology and practice c. 400-800 stripped nature of its pre-Christian animism or agency and established Christianity as an aggressive religion of “dominion” over natural resources. As Ellen Arnold has recently pointed out in a local study on the monastic community of Stavelot-Malmedy, the White Thesis has shaped studies of medieval attitudes towards nature for too long:

To construct a richer, multilayered view of medieval religion and nature, it is time to shift focus. White’s thesis encourages a perspective on Western Christianity’s sense of dominion that has been called a “single-visioned” view of an “inherited, unchanging essence” of medieval Christianity. This denies medieval Christianity its vitality, variety, and nuance.<sup>15</sup>

Arnold’s work is an excellent example of how such variety and nuance can be drawn out in intensely local settings. The endurance of the White Thesis, for better or worse, is such that nearly fifty years after its publication Richard Hoffmann’s 2014 *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* used it as a point of departure for his brief section on medieval ideas of nature, aptly characterizing it as “the still-influential, if much criticized, assertion . . . that fundamental Christian doctrines made medieval Europeans approach nature in a new and eventually destructive way” and ascribing it to

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<sup>14</sup> White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207; reprinted in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3-14; the so-called “White Thesis” has since produced a vast body of interdisciplinary criticism. See especially Richard Hoffmann, “Medieval Christendom in God’s Creation: Environmental Continuities, Coevolutions, and Changes,” in *Northern Europe: An Environmental History*, ed. Jens Engels, Mark Stoll, and Tamara White (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 45-72, at 48: “medieval thinkers did assume human use of animals, plants, and inanimate nature as enjoined by God but, insofar as they bothered to engage these issues at all, they dwelt more on the injunction [of Gen. 1.28] to ‘increase and multiply’ than on any implications of ‘dominion’.”

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 4-6.

“the first flush of a self-conscious North American environmentalism during the 1960s.”<sup>16</sup> The present study, mindful of Hoffmann’s assessment, disentangles textual images of the natural world from the binaries encouraged by the White Thesis. Where Arnold’s work has focused on microhistorical, local environments, I take a broader view of the ways in which early medieval intellectuals and hagiographers understood nature in the “vitality, variety, and nuance” of textual images.

Nature is also commonly seen as the stage on which human action took place in the medieval period, and was meant to bend to mortal will, through both human power and divine aid.<sup>17</sup> “Little in medieval culture,” Steven Epstein has recently argued, “encouraged its people to look to Nature [*sic*] for any lessons on morality, happiness, or anything else more complicated than wringing food and resources from it.”<sup>18</sup> The natural world has been variously known as “a sojourner’s way station”<sup>19</sup> or “the alchemy of

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 87.

<sup>17</sup> John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182-83: “societies converted to new and more centralized religions have often shown a strong tendency to assimilate these inherited sites [in the landscape] to the new belief-systems, however different their ideas of cosmology or sacred space may in theory be.” Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21-22: “Previous discussion of the creation of such [sacred] sites has tended to focus on the transformation of their landscape location from *locus horribilis* to *locus amoenus*. This emphasis has obscured the variety of ways in which sacred places were believed by contemporaries to have been created.” For a discussion of Gittos’ approach and its shortcomings for identifying the diversity it seeks, see below, 47, and Chapter 2, 196-97.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Epstein, *The Medieval Discovery of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1. Compare this with John Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2013), 5-9, who argues for a four-part phasing of medieval interpretations of nature, including an “adversarial” one for early medieval Europe; for a fuller treatment of this scholarship, see below, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA:

modernism” in which “Judeo-Christianity both desacralized nature—since only God was divine—and raised humans above it, thinking the world God’s gift to his most favored creation: *man*.”<sup>20</sup> While Hoffmann has pointed out that “the European Middle Ages lacked self-conscious or even coherent tacit discourse on relations of humans to nature or on nature as an entity,”<sup>21</sup> early medieval authors did build upon the ideas of nature they inherited, most notably that nature could influence the way humans perceived the world around them. Current scholars should not deny “self-conscious” or “coherent” discourses to early medieval interpretations of nature.

In early medieval Latin sources—hagiographies, liturgies, exegetical works, sermons, letters and others—the natural world is also currently thought to be “subordinated to the intellectual activity of exploiting interesting connections, wordplay and literary skills.”<sup>22</sup> Early medieval interpretations of nature, however, defied these categorizations and instead operated on diverse registers of thought. The example with which I began clearly defies the traditional binaries historians have assigned for early medieval attitudes towards nature. The account of Romanus’ experience in the Jura is not an exceptional case, but part of a rich and broad tradition of describing natural places in

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University of California Press, 1967), 175: “If a dominant idea existed [about nature in the medieval period], it was that man, blessed with the faculty of work, assisted God and himself in the improvement of an earthly home even if the earth were, in Christian theology, only a sojourner’s way station.”

<sup>20</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 68-96, at 95.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffmann, *Environmental History*, 86. Compare this with Stephen McCluskey, “Natural Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages,” in *The Cambridge History of Science Volume 2: Medieval Science*, ed. David Lindberg and Michael Shank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 286-301, at 292.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193 where Neville applied her readings of Old English poetry to Anglo-Latin poetry.

complex ways. Not only this, but nature is a crucial theme in early medieval intellectual sources precisely because nature had contradictory qualities. The perceptual and textual realities in texts like the *Vita patrum iurensium* were far more complex, and their images of the natural world were charged with exegetical and scriptural potency.

In addition to arguing for the diversity and richness of early medieval depictions of nature, this study not only explores a largely neglected field, but it also does so across a far wider geographic and chronological range than earlier studies have done, drawing evidence from sources from late antique Gaul, as well as Anglo-Saxon England and Merovingian and Carolingian Francia. Current scholarship has failed to identify vibrant and diverse early medieval interpretations of nature as a crucial aspect of early medieval religious life. I contend that focusing on human perceptions of and interactions with the divinely created world illuminates a parallel narrative of early medieval history, one that includes processes of conversion to Christianity, the development of monastic and ascetic culture and exegetical readings of scripture, history and geography.

## Defining Nature

This dissertation focuses primarily on sources dealing with the activities of holy people in natural landscapes as a way of understanding the period. But how ought we to understand their conceptions of the world around them? The “natural world” almost never appeared in the sources as *natura*, a term for “the natural constitution, property or quality of a thing.”<sup>23</sup> There was no one word or phrase in Latin sources that designated the “natural world” as a whole. Instead of terms or brief phrases, early medieval authors more frequently described natural features and landscapes at length.<sup>24</sup>

I use the “natural world” to denote the physical world created by God; it consisted of that which humans could touch, feel, see, smell and sometimes manipulate for their own benefit; it was constituted by stones, soils, trees, animals, streams, rivers, fields and matter in between; nature could be characterized by comfort, beauty and utility on the one hand, but at times tainted by evil, fraught with danger, filth and fear on the other. The sources under consideration are not limited to hagiography by any means, but I nevertheless acknowledge hagiography’s role in defining perceptions of human interactions with natural environments. My focus is on these interactions between humans and the physical earth created by God, and does not include stars, constellations and other heavenly bodies in its definitions of nature; I also do not purport to treat iconographic depictions of nature comprehensively.<sup>25</sup> Instead, this study focuses on the

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<sup>23</sup> *Natura* can also refer to “nature, natural disposition, inclination, bent, temper, character”: Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 1189-90.

<sup>24</sup> For the very few exceptions I have found, see Chapter 1, 167-70.

<sup>25</sup> For a study of the links between textual descriptions of vegetative entanglement and Anglo-Saxon standing stone crosses, see Chapter 2, 288-95.



local and tactile natural features experienced by humans on or beneath the earth's surface—the inhabited natural places and spaces in which the Christian life was pursued, defined or established.

Since early medieval textual representations of the “natural world” were not constricted by terminology, I focus on multiple textual resonances embedded in descriptions of nature. Similarly, early medieval authors did not have a term or phrase to denote “landscape” as I employ it.<sup>26</sup> “Landscape” and “nature” are not interchangeable terms; instead, I use “landscape” as a wide-angled view of both nature and other visible (sometimes human-made) objects or structures such as churches, temples, shrines, stone crosses, ruins, as well as agricultural land. “A landscape,” Christopher Tilley has theorized, “has ontological import because it is *lived in and through*, mediated, worked on and altered, replete with cultural meaning and symbolism.”<sup>27</sup> It is the “lived in and through” element of landscapes that sets them apart from nature as God’s created world, allowing them to include in my analysis what I often refer to as Christian “buildings” or “built space” in which the faith could be practiced. This dissertation does not seek to address architectural evidence in a comprehensive fashion, but instead focuses on textual descriptions of buildings within the context of broader treatments of belief and place.

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<sup>26</sup> The closest term is perhaps the Old English *landscipe*, which denotes a legal conception of “tract of land.” For a full discussion of the term’s relevance to Anglo-Saxon sources, as well as an assessment of British landscape studies, see Chapter 2, 184-88.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 26, emphasis added. A theoretical assessment of how “living in and through” nature contributes to senses of modern identity can be found in: Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 181-85.

The “natural world” and “landscapes,” then, are terms more modern than early medieval, but they are crucial concepts for reading early medieval sources. For, as we shall see, textual images of nature could serve specific functions within a text from reenacting Scripture in the Jura to ascribing Christological features to a landscape in Northumbria. Taken together, descriptions of landscapes and their natural features could constitute what I call a “textual ecology” in constant reference to important natural features. Early medieval people did not have a concept of what modern scientists have meant by “ecology” since the late nineteenth century: the study of the relationships among living organisms and their environments. “It is important to recognize,” Hoffmann has recently pointed out, that early medieval people did not have concepts of “nature as an entity . . . or ecology, both of which are modern, not medieval, ideas. As in classical antiquity, to look for them as such in medieval Europe is to risk wishful self-deception.”<sup>28</sup> It is equally important, however, to think *with* “ecology” as a way of understanding the relationships between texts and natural places.

### **Towards Textual Ecology**

When medieval historians have discussed “ecology,” they have done so in the context of historical ecology, a subfield of environmental history, which seeks to determine “the role and place of nature in human life.”<sup>29</sup> Historical ecology involves the

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<sup>28</sup> Hoffmann, *Environmental History*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Worster, “Doing Environmental History,” in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Worster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 289-308, at 289. More colorfully, Harriet Ritvo described the discipline as “an unevenly spreading blob” in her “Discipline and Indiscipline,” *Environmental History* 10.1 (2005): 75-76, at 75. Ritvo clarified that “[t]his image may

interrogation of written, archaeological and natural records to reconstruct pre-modern environments and landscapes.<sup>30</sup> “Environmental historians,” John McNeill has clarified more generally, “write as if nature *existed*. And they recognize that the natural world is not merely the backdrop to human events but evolves in its own right, both of its own accord and in response to human actions.”<sup>31</sup> Donald Worster and others have identified three core “layers” of environmental history: “understanding nature itself, as organized and functioning in past times . . . the socioeconomic realm as it interacts with the environment . . . [and] the perceptions and values people have held about the nonhuman world.”<sup>32</sup> Scholarly consensus among environmental historians is that perceptions of

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be inelegant, but it is not meant to be unappreciative—or even unflattering. On the contrary, one of the most attractive features of environmental history is its potential for synthesis and inclusion.” While praising the inclusiveness of modern environmental history, her citations of overwhelmingly American subjects reflect the field generally.

<sup>30</sup> Among the best examples of historical ecology for the medieval period is Richard Hoffmann, “Footprint Metaphor and Metabolic Realities: Environmental Impacts of Medieval European Cities,” in *Natures Past: The Environment and Human History*, ed. Paolo Squatriti (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 288-325. For Hoffmann, an “ecological footprint” of historical societies refers to the manipulation, both intentional and unintentional, of environments and landscapes. For an assessment of historical ecology and its attending scholarly issues, see Ellen Arnold, “An Introduction to Medieval Environmental History,” *History Compass* 6.3 (2008): 898-916, much of which is replicated in the introduction to her *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1-30.

<sup>31</sup> John McNeill, “The State of the Field of Environmental History,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 35 (2010): 345-74, at 346. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Donald Worster, “Doing Environmental History,” 293. In his recent assessment of the field, McNeill, “State of the Field,” 347, identified similar clusters of issues, including material, political and cultural environmental histories. This triad of central issues was reiterated by J. Donald Hughes, *What Is Environmental History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 3: “(1) the influence of environmental factors on human history; (2) the environmental changes caused by human actions and the many ways in which human-caused changes in the environmental rebound and affect the course of change in human societies; and (2) the history of human thought about the environment and the ways in

nature are a crucial component of the field, but one currently neglected.<sup>33</sup> Reading early medieval sources for their textual ecologies is an ideal way to understand human interpretations of nature and their bearing on religious life and identity; such readings have not found a place among current environmental historical concerns.

A “textual ecology” refers to the relationships between textual images of nature and human perceptions of them. A textual ecology is related to what Arnold has described as an “environmental exegesis” encouraging “the deliberate inclusion of ideas, goals, stories, and worldview of hagiographers into medieval environmental history.”<sup>34</sup> For Arnold, who used this approach for her microhistory of the monastic community of Stavelot-Malmedy, “Latin, cult-based, hagiographic materials . . . can be treated as constructed, imagined texts, and they can be read with an eye toward the way that the natural world was imagined, constructed, and described.”<sup>35</sup> While “ecology” refers to the relationships among organisms and environments, a textual ecology encompasses the relationships among texts and (often) local environments to produce senses of community or identity. When an early medieval author deployed a textual ecology, he or she engaged with clusters of textual resonances or borrowings of natural images mostly from Scripture, exegesis or hagiographic sources. The *Vita patrum iurensium*’s account of Condat’s

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which patterns of human attitudes have motivated actions that affect the environment.” Hughes, however, had very little to say about cultural perceptions of the natural world.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Unger, “Introduction: Hoffmann in the Historiography of Environmental History,” in *Ecologies and Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Scott Bruce (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1-24, at 18: pre-modern environmental history “is less concerned with ideas about nature [than in the past]. It is more about science and the use of science to inform analysis of the past interactions of people and their environments.”

<sup>34</sup> Arnold, *Negotiating*, 13 and 233. Arnold adapted the concept—which she did not deploy throughout her work—from an academic presentation, “but [it] has not been theorized or defined.”

<sup>35</sup> Arnold, *Negotiating*, 13.

foundation is an ideal example of the functions of a textual ecology.<sup>36</sup> I argue that textual ecologies are constituted both by networks of such references involving natural images, and narratives driven by constant reference to the natural world. Textual ecologies help clarify some early medieval interpretations of the physical world around them. We should see textual ecologies not as disconnected elements but as components of coherent textual strategies with their own resonances and symbolic charges.

### **Nature in Current Scholarship**

This dissertation uses collisions of natural places, ideas of holiness and concepts of community to help define what it meant to be a Christian in the post-Roman world. In a sense, my approach is similar to Philippe Buc's treatment of ritual. For Buc, "ritual"—or activities "twentieth-century historians have identified as ritual"—cannot exist for modern historians independent from "readings of medieval textual practices or perhaps medieval practices that the historian has reconstructed using texts, with full and *constant* sensitivity of their status as texts."<sup>37</sup> For Buc,

In many a political culture, any performance can be the object of divergent interpretations through oral discussion (which, in the medieval case, we have lost) and through writings (which is all that we have). This is especially the case in an early medieval world informed by exegesis.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, in Buc's reading, *textual representations* of ritual informed by exegetical thought were the only "rituals" that survived the period. "Good rituals" were ones that were useful and effective for achieving political ends, while "bad rituals" were ones "that

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<sup>36</sup> For a reading of the *VPI* as a textual ecology, see Appendix, 493-96.

<sup>37</sup> Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 2 and 4.

<sup>38</sup> Buc, *Dangers*, 8-9.

social agents manipulate or rituals that break down.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, my study of textual representations of nature focuses partly on the *goals* of those representations instead of the realities behind them. Natural images could be deployed against pagan nature, as Alcuin of York’s (d. 804) depiction of Willibrord’s (d. 739) purification of a pagan holy spring on Fositeland, an island in the North Sea between Frisia and Jutland, illustrates.<sup>40</sup> Alcuin and several authors also described Frisian wetlands and marshes in such ways that they reflected the morality of their inhabitants and the inherent dangers of doing missionary work there.<sup>41</sup> As we have already seen in the Jura, natural images could also suggest a typological reenactment of Scripture and hagiography. Scholars such as Bede described landscapes and natural features in order to help define a new, Christian people.<sup>42</sup> In these and other ways, images of nature could *do work* in a text, not unlike Buc’s conception of rituals. Natural images can provide an alternative view of religious histories akin to what Paul Dutton has argued in reference to dreams and visions in Carolingian culture, which “supplies us with a more intense” reading of history, “one that runs parallel to the annals of the age.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Buc, *Dangers*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Chapter 3, 404-9.

<sup>41</sup> Chapter 3, 379-96.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Chapter 2, 225-37 and 246-50.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 1.

***Ideal, Place and Commodity: The Desert in the Early Medieval West***

Current scholarship has not embraced the natural world as an effective theme with which to understand religious life in early medieval Europe, although a few key scholarly categories have touched upon nature.<sup>44</sup> Central to early medieval monastic practice was the concept of the “desert,” an inheritance of earlier Christian hagiography from the actual deserts of Egypt and Syria of the eastern Roman Empire. Any discussion of monasticism and nature must begin with the desert, since the concept of solitude in the wilderness so frequently informed monastic life. We have already seen how the anonymous author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* used Paul the Hermit’s Egyptian desert retreat to frame fifth-century monastic practice in the Jura Mountains. As that episode makes clear, the monastic “desert” or wilderness could be both a spiritual concept and a physical place. Even so, a desert’s natural features could reflect its solitude. In Romanus’ case, those natural features were rugged rocks and a lonely fir tree. Alternatively described as (*h*)*eremus*, *desertum*, or sometimes *solitudo* to suggest a “wilderness,” the desert in early Christian hagiography was a place for God to visit his holy people, an idea rooted in Hebrew Scripture.<sup>45</sup> This was a major innovation of hagiography: Greco-Roman deities could often be found in nature, but they favored pleasant groves, springs, meadows and other bucolic settings over desolate, barren places.<sup>46</sup> The Christian “desert,” however, lay on the fringes of the ancient world, where the limits of known geography

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<sup>44</sup> In the following chapters, I directly engage scholarship specifically referring to sources discussed in those respective chapters.

<sup>45</sup> On the scriptural background, I am following Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: Abingdon Press, 1991), especially 37-52; and Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside,” 94-97.

<sup>46</sup> Buxton, *Imaginary Greece*, 80-113; Fontaine, “Valeurs antiques et valeurs chrétiennes,” 571-95; Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside,” 93.

became liminal zones in need of conquest.<sup>47</sup> The Christian ascetic wilderness was ideally devoid of human life in order to foster closeness to God.<sup>48</sup>

Interpretations of the desert in the early medieval West have been thoroughly studied. While the Egyptian desert was visibly divided between fertile and arid zones in the Nile valley,<sup>49</sup> the western Roman Empire included far more varied environmental zones. At the same time, the desert was “packaged and fetishized,” and “subject to commodification. It was never only a literal place, but a source of cultural inspiration.”<sup>50</sup> Physical separation from other humans was more difficult to attain in harsh landscapes.

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<sup>47</sup> James Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 121-71. For J. Donald Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 46: “The people of the ancient Mediterranean felt that nature manifested the activities of the gods, whether they perceived the gods as personifications of natural forces, as the Greeks characteristically did, or as *numina*, mysterious presences in the natural world, as the Romans tended to do before they adopted Greek ideas on these matters. Any natural phenomenon could be seen as a direct result of a god's operation. Therefore any human activity that affected the environment could be seen as attracting the interest of or provoking the reaction of some god or goddess, and ought to be undertaken with caution.”

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Pan's Travail*, 50.

<sup>49</sup> The classic study of the desert fathers is Peter Brown, “The Desert Fathers: Anthony to John Climacus,” in *idem*, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213-40. Chief among the major studies of desert monasticism and the limits or benefits of the landscape in the East is Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966). On the stark division between fertile land and the “death zone” of the desert outside the narrow Nile valley, as well as the Nile in general, see Antoine Guillaumont, “La conception du désert chez les moines d’Egypte,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 188 (1975): 3-21, repr. in *idem*, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien: Pour une phénoménologie du monachisme* (Bégrolles en Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1979), 69-87; and James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 40-41; and William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7-11.

<sup>50</sup> Conrad Leyser, “The Uses of the Desert in the Sixth-Century West,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 86.1 (2006): 113-34, at 119 and 118.



This is in part why, as Peter Brown showed, a holy person lived just on the fringes of society, not totally apart from it.<sup>51</sup> In the West, ascetics began living on and in mountains, river valleys, island archipelagos, and forests,<sup>52</sup> often not far from their family estates or places of origin.<sup>53</sup> While the “myth of the desert” has often been emphasized, literary traditions and representations of the desert are distinct from the realities of dealing with those landscapes, as Ian Wood has shown in a study of monastic foundations before Columbanian reforms and organizational efforts.<sup>54</sup> That said, scholarship on the desert has overwhelmingly emphasized its danger, barrenness, and wildness. Such images are central to Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp’s recent work on the “sauvage” in the Frankish world—a term without a graceful English translation, but roughly equivalent to “wilderness” or “the wild” with an emphasis on its untamed nature. The “sauvage,”

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101, especially 82-83.

<sup>52</sup> On European forests and monastic life in particular, see François Baix, *Etude sur l’abbaye et Principauté de Stavelot-Malmedy* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1924), 25-35; Jacques Le Goff, “Le désert-forêt dans l’Occident médiéval,” in *idem*, *L’Imaginaire médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 59-75.

<sup>53</sup> As we have already seen, Romanus settled in the Jura Mountains not far from his family’s estate. On this phenomenon, I am relying on the assessments of Fabienne Cardot, *L’espace et le pouvoir: Etude sur l’Austrasie mérovingienne* (Paris: Persée, 1987), 201-32; Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside,” 102-9; and Nicolas Schroeder, “*In locis vaste solitudinis*: Représenter l’environnement au haut moyen âge: l’exemple de la Haute Ardenne (Belgique) au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Le Moyen Age* 116.1 (2010): 9-35.

<sup>54</sup> Ian Wood, “A Prelude to Columbanus: The Monastic Achievement in the Burgundian Territories,” in *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, B.A.R. International Series 113, ed. Howard Clarke and Mary Brennan (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), 3-32. This is a monastic reality illuminated by several Francophone case studies on Stavelot-Malmedy in the Ardennes: René Noël, “Moines et nature sauvage: dans l’Ardenne du haut moyen âge (St. Remacle à Cugnun et à Stavelot-Malmedy),” in *Villes et campagnes au moyen âge: mélanges Georges Despy*, ed. Jean-Marie Duvosquel and Alain Dierkens (Liège: Editions du Perron, 1991), 563-97; and Philippe George, “Saint Remacle, évangéliste en Ardenne (ca. 650): Mythe et réalité,” in *La christianisation des campagnes: Actes du colloque du C.I.H.E.C. (25-27 août 1994)*, 2 vols., ed. Pierre Massaut and Marie-Elisabeth Henneau (Brussels: Brepols, 1996) I: 47-70.

however, is a narrow theme. The wilderness was frequently a place characterized by the “sauvage,” but focusing on a fuller range of natural images can complicate and intensify depictions of the wild. “For, it turns out,” Guizard-Duchamp has argued, “that the image of the hermit hidden away in the wilderness in a deep and dangerous forest is the result of a literary *traditio* which eventually obscures the realities of Christian asceticism.”<sup>55</sup>

Guizard-Duchamp’s work has illustrated the difficulties of reconstructing complex representations of the monastic wilderness, but nearly all of his findings divide the natural world into a binary of paradise and hostile landscape, an approach indebted to Ernst Curtius’ assessment of medieval descriptions of nature as *topoi* “not meant to represent reality.”<sup>56</sup> Instead, this study is less concerned with the “réalités” versus “*traditio* littéraire” of desert life than with the ways in which natural features of imagined deserts could influence ideas of religious life. The desert was never *merely* a literary image, but one tempered by the realities of negotiating natural landscapes. For the early ninth-century Anglo-Saxon poet Æthelwulf, for example, the site of his community’s monastic foundation was a dangerous one full of thieves and thorns. In his text, Æthelwulf negotiated the landscape by rendering it as a Christological hill crowned with

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<sup>55</sup> Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres du sauvage dans le monde franc (IV<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 191: “Car, il s’avère que l’image de l’ermite cache dans les solitudes d’une forêt profonde et hostile résulte d’une *traditio* littéraire qui fini par occulter les réalités de l’ascétisme chrétien.”

<sup>56</sup> Guizard-Duchamp, “Topographie et vision du ‘désert’ dans les *vitae* occidentales (VI<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècles),” in *Espace représenté, espace dénommé: géographie, cartographie, toponymie* (Valencia: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2007), 229-42, at 230-31: “La notion de désert oscillait entre une vision paradisiaque et l’idée d’une épreuve terrible.” See also Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 183. In his essay on “The Ideal Landscape” (183-202) however, Curtius was discussing medieval receptions of classical, mostly Virgilian, descriptions of nature.

thorns and subsequently cleared of them. In such ways images of nature could shape religious life.

Studies of the desert ideal have only touched briefly upon natural features and places, and only when holy people might encounter harsh landscapes or wild animals in order to exercise their dominance over them. Bede described this phenomenon aptly in his prose *Vita Cuthberti* in which Cuthbert commanded the obedience of otters who warmed his feet after a night of prayer in the North Sea.<sup>57</sup> Yet early medieval monastic sources framed the desert myth much more dynamically: it was not just “subject to commodification”<sup>58</sup> or a mere literary image,<sup>59</sup> but a tradition described by complex textual images and representations rooted firmly in local, often naturally beneficial landscapes. The desert could take on exegetical, hagiographic and historical layers, as the *Vita patrum iurensium* makes clear. Western desert landscapes could be defined by the holiness of their inhabitants, and real landscapes often in turn shaped the behavior of those inhabitants. Natural places were far more important to ideas of monastic life than scholarship on the desert myth has recognized.

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<sup>57</sup> *V. Cuth.* 10, 188-91. See Chapter 2, 250-52.

<sup>58</sup> Leyser, “The Uses of the Desert,” 119.

<sup>59</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 193.

***The Landscape Strikes Back: Paganism and Superstition in the Post-Roman World***

While crucial for ideas of monastic life, natural environments could at the same time pose dire threats to the unwary Christian. For Caesarius of Arles (d. 542), rural landscapes were places in which pagan superstitious events and rituals, even demonic ones, survived.<sup>60</sup> Since scholars rely on authors such as Caesarius to piece together these survivals, non-Christian religious practices are a notoriously difficult category of early medieval culture to investigate. “Pagans (*paganus*),” the encyclopedist Isidore of Seville (d. 636) wrote, “are named from the districts (*pagus*) of the Athenians, where they originated, for there, in rural places and districts, the pagans established sacred groves and idols, and from such a beginning pagans received their name.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, pagan practice was often tied closely to a particular landscape. Indeed, the term “paganism” is derived from the invented divide between the civilizing forces of urban life versus rural life in the *pagus*, or countryside.<sup>62</sup> Such divides were embedded in Christian perceptions of both rural and urban pagan places, such as shrines and temples.<sup>63</sup> In a

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<sup>60</sup> Chapter 1, 115-21.

<sup>61</sup> Isidore, *Etym.*, 8.10, in William Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum siue originum libri XX*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911): “Pagani ex pagis Atheniensium dicti, ubi exorti sunt. Ibi enim in locis agrestibus et pagis gentiles lucos idolaque statuerunt, et a tali initio vocabulum pagani sortiti sunt.”

Translated by Stephen Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, eds., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 183.

<sup>62</sup> For scholarship on this distinction, see Christine Fell, “Paganism in Beowulf: A Semantic Fairy-tale,” in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Tette Hofstra, Luke Houwen and Alasdair MacDonald (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), 9-34, at 13.

<sup>63</sup> Among the best studies of these attitudes are Dick Harrison, “The Invisible Wall of St. John: On Mental Centrality in Early Medieval Italy,” *Scandia* 58 (1992): 177-203; and S.J.B. Barnish, “Religio in stagno: Nature, Divinity, and the Christianization of the Countryside in Late Antique Italy,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9.3 (2001): 387-402. For comments on these issues, see Chapter 1, 121-23 and 160-64.

more general sense, though, paganism could apply to any non-Christian, especially polytheistic, religion and its set of practices, which often appeared in the sources as *mores paganorum*, the customs of pagans. Likewise, *superstitio* could designate any non-Christian ritual.<sup>64</sup> Frustratingly, Caesarius and other authors subscribed to this notion and its intentional imprecision. As an aristocratic bishop of a major urban center, Caesarius is less than an ideal guide to early medieval pagan practice.<sup>65</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, historians attempted to study “popular religion” based on lay participation<sup>66</sup> and regional variations.<sup>67</sup> Much of this work has cast “popular religion” or “superstition” in a natural compromise between elite and folk cultures.<sup>68</sup> “Popular religion” also involved a constant negotiation of magical solutions between non-

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<sup>64</sup> On the uses of *mores paganorum* and *superstitio* from the period, I have consulted Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1979), 26-32; and Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, A.D. 481-751* (Leiden: Brill 1995), 157-62.

<sup>65</sup> Yitzhak Hen, “Paganism and Superstitions in the Time of Gregory of Tours: *Une question mal posée!*,” in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 229-40, at 230-32.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Raoul Manselli, *La religion populaire au moyen âge: Problèmes de méthode et d'histoire* (Montreal: Institut d'études médiévales Albert-le-Grand, 1975); Jacques Le Goff, “Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques dans la civilisation mérovingienne,” in *idem, Pour un autre moyen âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 223-35; Oronzo Giordano, *Religiostà popolare nell'alto medioevo* (Bari: Adriatica, 1979); Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Les ‘superstitions’,” in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, 4 vols., ed. Jacques Le Goff and René Rémond (Paris: Seuil, 1988), I: 416-551; and Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>67</sup> Many of these studies emerged from the *Annales* preoccupation with *mentalités*; see, for example, Joyce Salisbury, *Iberian Popular Religion, 600 B.C. to 700 A.D.: Celts, Romans and Visigoths* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985); Felice Lifshitz, *The Norman Conquest of Pious Neustria* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1985); Hen, *Culture and Religion*, 154-206; and Karen Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo-Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>68</sup> For one approach and a discussion of literature, see Jolly, *Popular Religion*, 12-13.

sanctioned practices and saints' cults: as Valerie Flint demonstrated, based on the most liberal definition of "magic" possible, Christian clerics introduced rituals to recent converts which resembled non-Christian practice in order to facilitate conversion.<sup>69</sup> Seen in this way, a conversion process was a series of negotiations.

The natural world has been of tangential interest in the study of paganism and superstitions, taking center stage only when authors like Caesarius or Gregory of Tours explicitly pointed to natural phenomena as sources of religious devotion.<sup>70</sup> In recent years, Ken Dowden and Bernadette Filotas have offered the most thorough assessments of "European paganism" in the medieval period.<sup>71</sup> Both studies consist of large sections on early medieval Europe, although as a scholar of Roman religion, Dowden remained

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<sup>69</sup> Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3: magic was "the exercise of supernatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of a force more powerful than they" (see also 59-84 for a fuller discussion of the church's negotiation with magic). In concert with this view is the work of James Russell, who argued that missionaries were willing to accommodate "Germanic culture" for the sake of conversion in his *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistoric Approach to Religious Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a counter-argument, specifically to Flint, see Giselle de Nie, "Caesarius of Arles and Gregory of Tours: Two Sixth-Century Gallic Bishops and 'Christian Magic'," in *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration: Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Doris Edel (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 170-96. In his *Magic and Witchcraft in the Dark Ages* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), Eugene Dukes argued that clerics refused to take part in anything resembling pagan "magic"; for opposing views, see Karen Jolly, "Magic, Miracle, and Popular Practice in the Early Medieval West: Anglo-Saxon England," in *Religion, Science and Magic in Concert and in Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest Frerichs, and Paul Flesher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 166-82; Heide Dienst, "Zur Rolle von Frauen in magischen Vorstellungen und Praktiken—nach ausgewählten Quellen," in *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter: Lebensbedingungen—Lebensnormen—Lebensformen*, ed. Werner Affeldt (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1990), 173-94.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Barnish, "Christianization of the Countryside."

<sup>71</sup> Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005).

primarily interested in Roman paganism and its European legacy. For Dowden, paganism—or at least its recoverable form—was largely about ritual practice, a view based almost exclusively on Greek and Roman texts and their afterlives. Dowden’s survey is organized around a long series of “focus” and “area” categories such as bodies of water, stones and trees, landscape, vegetative growth, as well as pagan and Christian time. As a scholar of rituals, Dowden situated Christian sacrifice, time and cults under the category of “Christian paganism” distinct from “the variety and chaos that always make paganism what it is.”<sup>72</sup> Seen in this way, “Christian paganism” is a peculiar, and deliberately oversimplified, mechanism by which Christian authors described pagan ritual.

Dowden’s work, while a thorough synthesis of sources on European paganism, misses out on a crucial element of Christianization: the multi-layered relationships among humans and their natural surroundings in the context of religious life in the early medieval West. The rigidity of his analysis draws neat parallels between paganism and nature, and equates the rise of Christianity with the overwriting of that nature, an approach that makes little sense of Romanus’ experience in the Jura Mountains.

Such natural surroundings receive considerable attention in a major section of Filotas’ book, which divides early medieval paganism into categories of heavenly bodies and portents, humans and animals, and the “cult of inanimate objects” such as trees, springs and stones. Rather than unifying pagan ritual as Dowden had done, Filotas instead emphasized its plurality based on regional variants. Filotas’ study does not purport to apprehend the “reality” of pagan ritual, but is an assessment of pastoral literature, and consequently of narrow clerical concerns about pagan practice.

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<sup>72</sup> Dowden, *European Paganism*, 149.

Arguments as to how real a threat early medieval paganism posed to church officials are anything but conclusive. For Yitzhak Hen, the pagan practices described by authors like Caesarius, Martin of Braga (d. 580) and Gregory of Tours were largely literary images, often resulting in the depiction of “imaginary pagans.”<sup>73</sup> Additionally, much of what we know of post-Roman pagan practice emerges from later Carolingian councils, which cast their Merovingian predecessors as people in need of reform.<sup>74</sup> Hen questioned the notion that Merovingian Francia was Christian in name and pagan in practice,<sup>75</sup> but all of these authors offered active solutions for what they saw as active problems amongst recently Christianized Franks, suggesting an enduring problem for sixth-century church officials. As the following chapters show, a sustained critical examination of depictions of the natural world and human attitudes towards it can allow us to conceive of a more fruitful interpretative framework than locating the thin, and shifting, line between “pagan” and “Christian.”<sup>76</sup> Nature and its uses, interpretations and roles in monastic life can thus provide a parallel narrative of early medieval European cultures only glimpsed in studies on pagan practice.

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<sup>73</sup> Hen, “Paganism and Superstitions,” 233.

<sup>74</sup> Hen, “Paganism and Superstitions,” 232. For a discussion, see Chapter 1, 115-23.

<sup>75</sup> Hen, *Culture and Religion*, 154-206.

<sup>76</sup> On these definitions, see Hen, *Culture and Religion*, 157-62; on classical definitions of *religio* and *superstitio*, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Les Superstitions,” in *Histoire de la France religieuse* I, ed. Le Goff and Rémond, 425-53.



*Preludes to St. Francis: Animal Studies*

While studies of paganism engage early medieval natural worlds only incidentally, most current scholarly interest focuses on mostly later medieval animal studies. Isidore's seventh-century *Etymologiae* provided the most complete early medieval synthesis of natural features and phenomena, including a full book on animals.<sup>77</sup> By contrast, the rest of the created world emerged piecemeal from the *Etymologiae*.<sup>78</sup> Isidore's synthesis of classical encyclopedic scholarship was an influential expression of early medieval intellectual views of human dominion over nature,<sup>79</sup> as well as a clear distinction between domesticated and wild animals.<sup>80</sup>

In an important study, Joyce Salisbury clarified medieval human relationships with animals, arguing that the twelfth century saw the rigid distinctions between humans and animals established by early Christian authors beginning to dissolve.<sup>81</sup> For Salisbury, (mostly later) medieval portrayals of strange animals served as commentaries on human nature and activity. With a similar literary critical approach, John Aberth has recently

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<sup>77</sup> For an assessment of *Etym.* 12 and its rigid distinctions among animals, see Robert Grant, *Early Christians and Animals* (London: Routledge, 1999), 123-62.

<sup>78</sup> These sections are: "On Earth and Its Parts (*De terra et partibus*)," "On Stones and Metals (*De lapidibus et metallis*)," or "Rural Matters (*De rebus rusticis*)."

<sup>79</sup> This feature of the *Etymologiae* was a repackaging of Eden's order; Isidore assigned Adam the role of first taxonomist in *Etym.* 12.1.1: "Adam was the first to give names to all the animals, attaching a name to each one at the moment of its creation according to the position in nature that it holds (*Omnibus animantibus Adam primum vocabula indidit, appellans unicuique nomen ex praesenti institutione iuxta condicionem naturae cui serviret*)." Translated by Barney *et al.*, *Etymologies*, 247.

<sup>80</sup> *Etym.* 12.1.3-4. Isidore considered the large category of "quadrupeds (*quadrupes*)" to straddle the binary.

<sup>81</sup> Joyce Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1994). Her bifurcated model has drawn criticism on both sides of the twelfth-century divide: see, for example, David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4-6, who argued for far greater complexity than Salisbury allowed.

argued that humans were more emotionally attached to animals in the period following the Black Death.<sup>82</sup> This was part of a larger scheme in which Aberth, following Herlihy,<sup>83</sup> divided the medieval period into four phases of attitudes towards nature: the “eschatological” of late Antiquity; the “adversarial” of the early middle ages; the “collaborative” in the central middle ages; and finally, a more nuanced relationship with nature following the Black Death.<sup>84</sup> Aberth’s “adversarial” reading of early medieval sources is based exclusively on texts that support his scheme. “Save me, omnipotent Lord God,” a prayer attributed to the sixth-century Irish monk Brendan read, “from all dangers of earth, sea, and waters, and . . . all beasts, winged creatures, four-footed animals and serpents. Defend me, God, from fire, from lightning, from thunder, from hail, from snow, from rain, from wind, from dangers of the earth, from whirlwind, from earthquake, from all evils.”<sup>85</sup> Such examples vividly illustrate the natural world as an adversary to human action, but they are by no means universal. An “adversarial” assessment of early

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<sup>82</sup> John Aberth, *Crucible of Nature*, 141-232. This approach fits with Aberth’s wider scholarly output, which is almost exclusively focused on the Black Death: *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2001); and *idem*, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: St. Martin’s, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Herlihy, “Environment,” 100-16, at 100-2.

<sup>84</sup> Similar categories were recently put forth by Hoffmann, *Environmental History*, 87, on medieval thought about nature: “its hostility to humans, its value as a sign, [and] the possibilities of human collaboration with a friendly personified *Natura*.” Hoffmann credited Herlihy’s “Attitudes toward the Environment” with a scheme that “usefully labeled” early medieval attitudes as “eschatological and adversarial. Both negative responses to nature were plainly on the minds of some late antique and early medieval people” (94).

<sup>85</sup> *Oratio S. Brendani* 10, *CCSL* 47.19: “Libera me, Domine Deus omnipotens, ab omnibus periculis terrae et maris et aquis et . . . omnium bestiarum et uolucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium. Defende me, Deus, ab igne, a fulgure, a tonitruo, a grandine, a niue, a pluuia, a uentis, a periculis terrae, a turbine, a terremotu, ab omnibus malis.” For a discussion, see Chapter 2, 317-18.

medieval hagiographic literature, in which authors attempted to control nature through saints' lives, fails to scratch the surface of the pluralistic nuances of the period.<sup>86</sup>

By textual representations of “animals in the middle ages,” scholars have primarily meant “animals in the *later* middle ages” with only a few exceptions.<sup>87</sup> David Salter's recent work on textual representations of animals only devoted a few pages to the period before Francis of Assisi (d. 1226),<sup>88</sup> and Steven Epstein has recently assigned the “medieval discovery of nature” to the later medieval domestication of the mule.<sup>89</sup> Parallel to Epstein's theme of human dominion over animals is an assumption that hagiographic animal stories existed to underscore human holiness, as Jan Ziolkowski's work on the deep history of talking animal fables in the Latin poetry of the central Middle Ages has suggested.<sup>90</sup>

Early medieval animals and animal representations have mostly been discussed in the context of hagiography, the richest corpus of textual sources on the subject. Among the best of these studies—and one of the few following up on a claim to encompass the “middle ages”—is that of Dominic Alexander, which traces the development of saint-

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<sup>86</sup> Aberth's work purports to draw conclusions about human interactions with “nature” itself even though his focus is largely on animals. Not only this, but as Dolly Jørgensen has recently noted, Aberth “fails to engage with the discipline of environmental history” altogether, despite the title of his work. See Jørgensen in *Reviews in History* 1487, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1487>, accessed 23 May 2014.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Grant, *Animals*, who focuses mainly on biblical and mythical animals up to the time of Isidore.

<sup>88</sup> Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, 1-10. A similar but less systematic approach is Laura Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>89</sup> Steven Epstein, *The Medieval Discovery of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 40-77.

<sup>90</sup> Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 1-46.

and-animal stories from Antony of Egypt (d. 356) to Francis.<sup>91</sup> Rather than summarizing the animal stories at his disposal as others have done,<sup>92</sup> Alexander focused on a series of case studies. By utilizing primarily Irish material, Alexander showed that a “hybrid tradition” emerged from a period most scholars consider to have developed two distinct themes: dominance over nature and emotional connection with animals. This hybrid thesis instead attempts to identify “folkloric” elements in saints’ lives, that is, a series of oral features in written sources.<sup>93</sup> Alexander’s approach dispenses with a scholarly tendency to apprehend “attitudes” towards animals in favor of working out the longer, sometimes putatively pre-Christian, traditions that contributed to such stories.<sup>94</sup> Alexander concluded his analysis with Francis, suggesting that earlier sources were in part a prelude to Francis as one of the last major medieval figures in the saint-animal tradition. While Francis’ cult is the fullest medieval expression of saintly encounters with animals, it is not the hinge upon which animal studies either side of the divide depend.<sup>95</sup> Not only this, but textual animal studies often narrowly focus on the relationships

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<sup>91</sup> Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008).

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, the more synthesizing work of Grant, *Animals*; Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), whose approach resembles that of Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, in that Pluskowski synthesized most of the known wolf stories from hagiographic, poetic and historical literature, but his main strength is an analysis of lupine migrations; and Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 1-58, whose strength lies in his summary and synthesis of all instances of the sauvage, or “wildness” in mainly hagiographic literature.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander, *Animals*, 11.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander, *Animals*, 15.

<sup>95</sup> White, “Historical Roots,” also pointed to the cult of Francis as an alternative (and humbler) practice of a faith that had been destructive of pre-Christian animism in the natural world—an indication that scholars are influenced by the White Thesis more than is typically admitted.

between holy people and animals. When Alcuin described Vedast's (d. c. 540) encounter with a bear, for example, he did so in a broader hagiographic and exegetical tradition of describing ruined sacred places inhabited by animals.<sup>96</sup> Such an image can be understood more fully when viewed alongside my definition of "landscape" as a wide-angled assessment of the connections between natural life and human-made structures.

Animals, even when they talk,<sup>97</sup> only tell part of the story of early medieval interpretations of their natural worlds. While Isidore's categorization established clear distinctions among animals in relation to each other, other sources from the period offered little to no distinction between animals and other elements of the natural world. In hagiographic contexts, most natural features had the capacity to threaten, coerce or shape religious life, as well as harbor the relics of saints. Caesarius' and Isidore's classically inherited categories have shaped modern scholarship to a degree not shared by most authors of their times.

### *Imagining Nature*

The long, often pre-Christian animal traditions Alexander identified are closely linked with the history of ideas about nature. The only sustained studies of early medieval perceptions of nature are those of Giselle de Nie in the 1980s, all of which focused primarily on the writings of Gregory of Tours. By categorizing Gregory's interpretation of the natural world, de Nie was a contributor to a broader revisionist movement to recast Gregory as a sophisticated scholar rather than an author of rambling miracle stories as he

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<sup>96</sup> Chapter 3, 418-21.

<sup>97</sup> Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*, 1-3.

had been seen before.<sup>98</sup> For de Nie, Gregory was a scholar of the physical world around him.

De Nie first discussed Gregory's treatment of portents and omens in the *Decem Libri Historiae* ("Ten Books of History") before turning to images of nature in his *De cursu stellarum* ("On the Course of the Stars"), an astronomical guide to nocturnal monastic prayer which included a treatise on the wonders of the ancient and created worlds. By arguing for Gregory's use of allegorical language to explain his contemporary world through natural wonders, events and phenomena, de Nie situated the bishop of Tours in illustrious company with patristic authors in order to rehabilitate his image.

De Nie's assessment of the theme of nature in Gregory's works (especially his hagiography and treatise *De cursu stellarum*) demonstrated that his descriptions of nature were in structure and symbolic content conceived as intentionally reflective of the transformations of spiritual life—hence, Gregory's preoccupation with images of regeneration and renewal in nature. For de Nie, these themes tempered Gregory's

lack of [a sense of] time, interest and training on the one hand, and his conscious preference for chronological order and typology on the other . . . [Gregory's themes of natural phenomena] presented themselves in the course of reading and re-reading Gregory's writings with the suspicion that he had been writing, thinking and perceiving as an unconscious poet even more than has up to now been recognized, and that this could be the most fundamental reason for his discontinuities and imprecision.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Giselle de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), especially parts I and II, 27-132. These sections comprise revised publications of earlier work: "Roses in January: A Neglected Dimension in Gregory of Tours' *Historiae*," *Journal of Medieval History* 5.4 (1979): 259-89, and "The Spring, the Seed and the Tree: Gregory of Tours on the Wonders of Nature," *Journal of Medieval History* 11.2 (1985): 89-135.

<sup>99</sup> De Nie, *Imagination*, 23.

Gregory's hagiographic "imagination," while it often ignored chronological precision, was organized around themes such as the natural world. De Nie considered these images to constitute Gregory's "transtemporal" ideals in the tradition of Mircea Eliade: natural images and metaphors could serve "as vehicle-images of unconscious wishes."<sup>100</sup> For de Nie, such ideas liberated Gregory from incoherence.

Gregory's imaginative acts of representation amounted to an intellectualization of nature. While de Nie's work remains a cornerstone of our understanding of Gregory's intellectual thought and his sense of the natural world, it focused narrowly on Gregory's "imagination" as informed by intellectual and theological traditions, and did not embrace a wide range of hagiographic, pastoral and epistolary literature from the period.

Gregory's view of nature did not exist in a theological vacuum, but rather emerged from his writings in close reference to his hagiographic concerns. Above all, Gregory's voice was just one in a wider Frankish tradition of interpreting the natural world in parallel with the development of Frankish monastic life in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. This dissertation considers Gregory's imagining of natural places alongside his broader hagiographic output as well as the preceding literary production in post-Roman Gaul.

### ***Ecocritical Turns***

Intellectual perceptions of the natural world are relevant to emerging studies in ecocritical theory. Ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism that analyzes attitudes towards nature in literature. As a discipline, its task is "to investigate literature's capacity

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<sup>100</sup> De Nie, *Imagination*, 299; citing Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles: essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 222.

for articulating the non-human environment.”<sup>101</sup> Ecocriticism is also “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” and “takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.”<sup>102</sup> While my cultural-historical approach is indebted to the questions ecocriticism raises, this study is less a systematic ecocritical reading of early medieval Latin texts than an interpretation of textual images as articulations of religious life. My study, to borrow from Arnold’s assessment, focuses on “sources that were theocentric rather than ecocentric,”<sup>103</sup> but which also consistently and intensely engaged natural themes to explain religious life.

Although a literary methodology since the late 1970s when William Rueckert coined the term, ecocriticism has not found widespread adoption by scholars of early medieval Latin literature.<sup>104</sup> Ecocritical thought was borne, like many subfields of environmental history, from an acute sense of global environmental crises; accordingly, its earlier practitioners looked to literature for ways of radically reforming attitudes towards nature in order to help rehabilitate it.<sup>105</sup> It is in the context of global crisis that

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<sup>101</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1995), 10.

<sup>102</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii-xix.

<sup>103</sup> Arnold, *Negotiating*, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Ecocriticism or “literary ecology” was for Rueckert, “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” See his “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” *Iowa Review* 9.1 (1978): 71-86, repr. in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Glotfelty and Fromm, 105-23, at 115.

<sup>105</sup> For Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology,” 115, “ecology, (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything I have studied in recent years.” Indeed, as the methodology matured in the 1980s and ‘90s, Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 21



ecocritics have attempted to bring about a more “ecocentric” interpretation of the world—the only world—in which they live. Given such current preoccupations, it is thus no surprise that ecocritical scholarship focuses almost exclusively on modern, Anglophone literature.<sup>106</sup>

One of the few scholars working on earlier medieval ecocriticism is Alfred Siewers, whose work on Old English and Irish texts highlights the richness of natural interest in the early Christian insular world. Approaching representations of the natural world from a standpoint better equipped to accommodate the range and variety of our sources, Siewers has recently pioneered ecocritical readings of Anglo-Saxon texts including *Beowulf* and poems on the life of the hermit Guthlac (d. 714).<sup>107</sup> In Siewers’ reading, “we can see a distinct (though far from monolithic) emphasis in Anglo-Saxon construction of literary landscape, one supporting the appropriation of nature for nation-building, which is based in the emerging Augustinian theology of western Europe.”<sup>108</sup>

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claimed that ecocriticism’s academic goal should be “to take stock of the resources within our traditions of thought that might help address” modern views of nature.

<sup>106</sup> Some of the most notable recent examples reflect this reality: see, for example, John Parham, ed., *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and the decidedly modern focus of Christine Cusick, ed., *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010). Timothy Wenzell’s recent work, while aware of early Irish tradition, sees its strongest interventions in modern Irish literature as well; see *idem.*, *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>107</sup> Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 5: his approach is informed by “an understanding of landscape as a form of narrative image mediating between the physical environment and human culture and thus crossing conventional boundaries between the biological and the imaginary, the body and the environment, the subjective and the objective.”

<sup>108</sup> Alfred Siewers, “Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac’s Mound and Grendel’s Mere as Expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation-Building,” *Viator* 34 (2003): 1-39, at 2. Siewers’ definition of “Augustinian” (3, n. 8) raises far more questions than it provides a clear explanation of its application to landscapes: “The key elements of Augustine of Hippo’s

Siewers' ecocritical readings of mostly Old English and Old Irish sources do, however, verge on the monolithic, assuming too much of the "Augustinian theological emphases on the corruption of nature, extended to natural landscape and its ancestral associations with indigenous culture."<sup>109</sup>

Building on this approach, Siewers has argued that most of what we see in Anglo-Saxon treatments of nature can be categorized squarely as an

ideological project of superimposing a new cultural landscape on Britain's most fertile land areas, in narrative landscapes based on a sense of Anglo-Saxon culture as God-chosen and hegemonic that erased textually the presence of earlier inhabitants as thoroughly as Old English linguistically replaced Romano-Celtic languages in those areas.<sup>110</sup>

There are two core problems with this approach: first, it heavily favors ecocritical readings of Old English to the extent of neglecting Anglo-Latin sources; and second, it can at times resemble and reaffirm the narrative of dominion espoused by White—precisely the thesis ecocriticism was developed to avoid.<sup>111</sup> Ecocritical approaches rightly

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influence relating to the subject of this study are his emphases on salvation by grace and not works; on individual transmission of Original Sin; on the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son and the Father together (a doctrine that became the *filioque* addition to the Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed); and on signs as having a reality apart from that which they symbolize. The combination of these four related emphases is what is meant here by Augustinian. As amplified by Gregory the Great and others, Augustine's writings on these topics greatly influenced literary views of Creation, and thus the portrayal of landscape."

<sup>109</sup> Siewers, "Landscapes," 3.

<sup>110</sup> Siewers, "Landscapes," 3.

<sup>111</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots"; reprinted in Glotfelty and Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 3-14. For an excellent and succinct overview of the White Thesis and its reception, see Hoffmann, *Environmental History*, 87-91. Siewers' ecocritical readings often deal in absolutes: nature as a reflection of ethnicity in "Landscapes of Conversion"; the otherworld as a clear expression of sets of "overlay landscapes" based on lived experiences in the natural world in *Strange Beauty*, 1-34; see also *idem.*, "Pre-Modern Ecosemiotics: The Green World as Literary Ecology," in *The Space of Culture*—

embrace a wider variety of sources to improve our understanding of earlier Anglo-Saxon interpretations of the natural world, but none coherently address Anglo-Latin literature, or early medieval Latin literature more broadly.

Such conclusions reveal a tendency for historians of early medieval natural places to subordinate nature to categories or binaries not comprehensible to early medieval people. The work of another scholar addressing vernacular literature, Jennifer Neville, also reflects this tendency. For Neville, “the representation of the natural world [in Old English poetry] helps to create the context of helplessness and alienation that motivates the seeking of God. For the Irish poet, the representation of the natural world creates the context of wonder and joy that surrounds the seeking of God.”<sup>112</sup> By extending ecocritical readings to Latin literature from Anglo-Saxon England and the continent, this dissertation recasts ecocritical problems in a new way. Ecocritical readings of early medieval Latin sources can lend themselves well to the articulation of textual ecologies and their interconnected images of natural features. Reading the sources in this way makes better

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*The Place of Nature in Estonia and Beyond*, ed. Tiina Peil (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2011), 39-68, at 41-42.

<sup>112</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 37. As Alfred Siewers has pointed out, though, such distinctions reflect the assessment of Margaret Goldsmith, who argued in *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London: Athlone, 1970), 44: “the Irishman shows a typical interest in the small creatures, the birds and the fish, and the domestic creatures, fire and cattle, whereas the English poet sweeps his gaze across the whole earth and the firmament.” It is unclear how such categories aid our understanding of natural pluralism in early medieval sources. Compare this with the insistence on “positive” (sometimes heavenly) and “negative” (sometimes hellish) natures in Peter Coates, *Nature: Western Attitudes since Ancient Times* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 55-66, at 58: “Natural scenes are usually invoked for their heavenly or hellish qualities” in saints’ *vitae* and, in particular, *Beowulf*. For a more extended discussion of Neville and her application to Anglo-Saxon sources, see Chapter 2 below, 187-90.

sense of early medieval religious life, and the potential of nature to influence ideas of religious life.

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These topics of scholarship touch upon early medieval nature only incidentally. Analyzing textual images of nature in early medieval sources can offer an alternative angle of the period's cultural history, one needed precisely because environmental features such as stones, waterways, trees and fields were the immediate physical contexts for ascetics, holy people and monks. Such features were the first challenges they faced when entering the wilderness or establishing a community. On a more intellectual level, exegetes of scripture charged images of the natural world with symbolic potency, often attributing to nature the power to shape religious life.<sup>113</sup> By way of example, Eigil's eighth-century *Vita Sturm*, which detailed the recent foundation of Fulda's monastic community, described the site's topography and natural features in specific detail. Eigil described how Sturm simultaneously surveyed the mountains, plains and streams with his eyes and sang Psalms with his mouth, in effect linking liturgical activities essential to monastic life with prominent natural features.<sup>114</sup>

It has often been assumed that nature was a passive backdrop upon which this human drama was enacted—indications that the White Thesis is more influential than is typically admitted. Just as Buc has argued against the “putative linear relationship

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<sup>113</sup> For this reason, this dissertation takes on Jeremy Cohen's charge to liberate Lynn White's Christian “exploitation of the environment” from a narrative of “dominion,” by teasing out “the interpretive tradition” of exegetical sources: *“Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 2 and 19.

<sup>114</sup> I discuss this in Chapter 3, 447-49.

between actual performance and actual order” as well as the “implicit functionalism” of ritual studies, I argue that current scholarly views of natural images in early medieval texts remain in the grip of the White Thesis.<sup>115</sup> As Peter Brown observed of scholarly assumptions about the divide between popular and elite religious culture, “some solid and seemingly unmovable furniture has piled up somewhere in that capacious lumber room, the back of our mind. If we can identify and shift some of it, we may find ourselves able to approach the Christian cult of saints from a different direction.”<sup>116</sup> This dissertation will disentangle images, ideas and interpretations of nature from such binaries and will underscore the diversity of interactions between humans and their environments.

### **The Contours of this Study**

“Imagining Nature and Creating Sacred Landscapes” is divided into three chapters with distinct sub-sections. Each chapter’s introduction includes a discussion of its sources, as well as a review of current scholarship specific to those sources. While I do not offer explicit interventions into political history, my findings can be linked with larger cultural and political transformations of late Antiquity and the early middle ages such as the shrinking of urban centers, the reforestation and regrowth of wilderness areas after the end of the western Roman empire, as well as the migrations of peoples throughout western Europe.

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<sup>115</sup> Buc, *Dangers*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12-13. Buc, *Dangers*, 11 also referenced Brown’s colorful observation as justification for using textual representations of ritual as an alternative way into early medieval political culture.

Chapter 1, “The Conquest of Nature in Francia,” covers the period c. 350-650 in late antique Gaul through the seventh-century arrival of Columbanus, the Irish founder of monasteries. Most scholarship on nature in the Merovingian world has focused on Gregory of Tours and Caesarius of Arles’ interpretations of pre-Christian paganism, and I will demonstrate that these represent only two voices amongst a chorus of competing views on the subject.<sup>117</sup> The first major Gallic hagiographic work of the period, Sulpicius Severus’ late fourth-century *Vita Martini*, portrayed Martin of Tours (d. 397) as a conqueror of sacred natural places; sometime in the late fourth century, Martin cut down a pine tree sacred to local pagans near Tours, insisting to them that there was “nothing pious about a tree trunk (*nihil esse religionis in stipite*).”<sup>118</sup> An attitude of conquest towards nature was a common one repeated by Caesarius, Gregory, and several other sources beyond the period.<sup>119</sup> An “adversarial” conquest of nature, however, was only one way to approach the natural world.<sup>120</sup>

Chapter 1, therefore, underscores the fragmentation of human views of nature by analyzing monastic texts like Eucherius of Lyon’s fifth-century *De laude eremi* (“In Praise of the Desert”) and the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium* of the sixth century. Such texts offered competing views of nature, suggesting that natural places had the capacity to shape religious life; nature was not just a stage for human activity. Eucherius, for example, described the wilderness with all its natural features as a “boundless temple

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<sup>117</sup> See my comments above, 27 and 32-34 on de Nie, *Imagination* and Hen, “Paganism and Superstition.” See also Chapter 1, 121-23.

<sup>118</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *VM* 13.2, 280. For a full discussion, see Chapter 1, 69-72.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, my discussion of Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii* in Chapter 3, 349-58.

<sup>120</sup> Aberth, *Crucible of Nature*, 5-9.

of our God (*incircumscriptum dei nostri templum*)” capable of forming a perfect monk.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, the *Vita patrum iurensium*, which forms the centerpiece of Chapter 1, constituted a textual ecology in constant reference to the natural world, organized tightly around three controlling themes: foundation, habitation and environmental manipulation or cultivation.<sup>122</sup> Nature’s ability to shape religious life is a core theme of this dissertation, one first made clear by Eucherius and the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium* author. By the close of the sixth century, Gregory of Tours adopted Sulpicius’ narrative of conquest but reworked it by classifying earthly nature in his astronomical treatise *De cursu stellarum*. Gregory’s classification system, based on what he considered to be the natural wonders of the world, was rooted in his hagiographical and exegetical interpretations of nature. Gregory’s classification of natural phenomena and features can be read alongside his historical assessment of the spread of Christianity in late antique Gaul.<sup>123</sup> By charging nature with exegetical and hagiographic meaning, Gregory attempted to define ideas of landscape and place in a fledgling barbarian Christian kingdom. De Nie’s assessment of Gregory’s “imagination” holds true to an extent in my analysis: Gregory never clearly

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<sup>121</sup> Eucherius of Lyon, *DLE* 3, 48. For a discussion, see Chapter 1 below, 72-79.

<sup>122</sup> Chapter 1, 94-113.

<sup>123</sup> For an overview of this period I am relying on J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 75-94; Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (New York: Longman, 1994), 35-49; Guy Halsall, “Gaul, Clovis and the Triumph of the Merovingians,” in *idem*, *Barbarian Migrations in the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 303-10; and more recently, Jamie Kreiner, *The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7-17, at 7, who takes a more political approach than this study by arguing that “the Merovingian kingdom transformed its standards for justice and order, and its criteria for political legitimacy, in response to Christian ideas about social responsibility and discipline” and that “hagiography played a pivotal role in these transformations by deploying specific rhetorical and cognitive strategies to effect the social order for which it so strenuously argued.”

articulated a comprehensive attitude towards nature, but deployed his ideas about nature unevenly across his hagiographic works. The final section of Chapter 1 argues that the works of Columbanus provided that compromise: “Understand Creation,” Columbanus urged in his *Instructiones*, “if you wish to know the Creator.”<sup>124</sup> Monastic foundations thrived during Columbanus’ career, strengthening the relationships among monastic houses, bishops and the Merovingian throne, and helping to inform ideas of political legitimacy.

In tandem with these developments this thesis argues that it is possible to see that landscapes and natural places were imagined in ways that influenced the shape of religious life during the period. Monks from Columbanus onwards encountered a reforested post-Roman Europe.<sup>125</sup> While J. Donald Hughes has made clear that the Romans had manipulated landscapes beyond recognition,<sup>126</sup> early medieval monastic

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<sup>124</sup> Columbanus, *Inst.* 1.4-5, 64: “Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam.” For a discussion, see Chapter 1 below, 167-69.

<sup>125</sup> For a review of scholarship pertaining to the forest landscapes from the third century onwards, see Paolo Squatriti, *Landscape and Change in Early Medieval Italy: Chestnuts, Economy, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6-8; yet for early medieval Italy, Squatriti, *Landscape*, 14 has argued that if tilled landscapes were gradually reforested, they were done so in a managed way, and “the *totally* overwooded early medieval landscape must remain a metaphorical one” (emphasis added).

<sup>126</sup> J. Donald Hughes, “Deforestation, Overgrazing, and Erosion,” in *idem*, *Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans: Ecology in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 68-87. For the industrial innovations that made it possible, see *ibid*, 129-49. An implicit argument here is that, lacking the technology as well as the central authority to deforest the Mediterranean and Europe, the medieval period saw a significant reforestation. This argument is delivered more explicitly by Ralph Mathisen and Hagith Sivan, eds., *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 50. Squatriti, *Landscape*, 7, has remained skeptical of this scholarly consensus: “This view may have some empirical grounding, but certainly it is an aspect of the trope that sees everywhere in the early Middle Ages a ‘return to nature,’ a version that holds on even as the naturalness of the early medieval wilderness comes into question.”



communities found the physical contexts for their *solitudines* in depopulated and gradually reforested landscapes.<sup>127</sup> While the monastic desert was often metaphorical,<sup>128</sup> the perceptions of these physical contexts could be based in reality: Paolo Squatriti has shown that late antique climate change aided processes of reforestation and depopulation of agricultural landscapes in early medieval Italy.<sup>129</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins further emphasized the discontinuities in the archaeological record of trade goods, quotidian comforts and luxury items both within and on the frontier of late antique Rome; the Mediterranean and Europe were fundamentally changed places in the fifth century and beyond.<sup>130</sup> With this backdrop, Chapter 1 argues that the wildness of the European countryside dotted with ruined buildings was often an apt cultural reflection on life in post-Roman Europe. Taken together, the sources discussed in Chapter 1 establish several key perceptions of natural places central to the dissertation as a whole. Nature was not simply either dangerous or beneficial to humans, but had other functions in texts: natural landmarks could also set holy places apart or reveal scripture in special landscapes.

Building on these treatments of nature, Chapter 2, “Understanding the Natural World in Early Medieval England,” engages sources emerging across the English Channel both from sub-Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon period (c. 500-820), in part

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<sup>127</sup> Chris Wickham, “European Forests in the Early Middle Ages: Landscape and Land Clearance,” *Settimane* 37 (1990), 479-545, at 499-501 and 530-35. For scholarship on the depopulation of Europe after the end of Roman rule, see Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138-46.

<sup>128</sup> Squatriti, *Landscape*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Paolo Squatriti, “The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory,” *Speculum* 85 (2010): 799-826, esp. 799-803 for literature on late antique climate change, reforestation and depopulation of agricultural landscapes.

<sup>130</sup> Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*, 87-122.

to clarify cultural links with the continent, especially in period of missionary activity in Francia. Chapter 2 demonstrates that early medieval Britain shared similar interpretations of the natural world with the continent. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of Gildas, whose work *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (“On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain”) is among the only major textual sources for events in Britain from the departure of the Romans in the first half of the fifth century until the arrival of the papal mission in 597.<sup>131</sup> Gildas insisted on the emptiness of *Britannia*’s landscapes after Rome’s departure, and used landscapes as a way to think about the transformation of his homeland—an approach later intellectuals would adapt and adjust. For Gildas, Britain’s natural beauty and resources were indicative of its special place in the Christian universe. Conversely, Gildas used ruins and images of barren landscapes as indices of Christianity’s failure after the departure of Roman legions. In the first half of the eighth century, the monastic scholar Bede (d. 735) adopted this interpretation of landscapes for his description of Britain, revising it with an exegetical reading of Britain’s natural features and abundant resources at the beginning of his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (“The Ecclesiastical History of the English People”). Throughout the *Historia*, Bede described landscapes exegetically to give them agency in a work generally considered to focus on human roles in Britain’s conversion to Christianity. For Bede, landscapes could influence

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<sup>131</sup> Guy Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur: Facts and Fictions of the Dark Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53. For what we can know despite this, see Edward James, “The Migration Period,” and “Post-Roman Kingdoms,” in *idem*, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2001), 86-115 and 116-46; and Barbara Yorke, “Britain and Ireland, c. 500,” in *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500-1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 41-56. See Chapter 2 below, 195-211.

or mirror religious life.<sup>132</sup> Bede's hagiographic, historical and exegetical works are a major component of Chapter 2; taken together, they constitute plural images of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards natural environments, despite current scholarship's insistence on "positive" and "negative" interpretive modes.<sup>133</sup>

The second half of this chapter deals primarily with Anglo-Latin poetry, beginning with Aldhelm of Malmesbury (d. 709) and leading up to the centerpiece of the chapter, Æthelwulf's early ninth-century poem *De abbatibus* ("On the Abbots") which commemorated the history of an unknown Northumbrian monastic community. Anglo-Latin poets dealt with more diverse natural images than any that had come before, linking them with images crucial for monastic life such as building, craftsmanship and regeneration—themes clarified and intensified by a comparison with the visual motifs of monumental stone crosses.<sup>134</sup> Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* consolidated diverse ways of looking at nature in the early ninth century: the landscape on which Æthelwulf's monastery was founded did not undergo a clear process of clearance and purification from *locus horribilis* to *locus amoenus*—a dreadful place to a pleasant place. Approaches that trace a linear transformation from *locus horribilis* to *locus amoenus*, as Helen Gittos has pointed out, have "obscured the variety of ways in which sacred places were believed by contemporaries to have been created."<sup>135</sup> Æthelwulf played on themes of dangerous

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<sup>132</sup> The best examples of this are Bede's descriptions of the martyrdom of Alban and the monastic foundation of Cedd at Lastingham in Chapter 2, 238-41 and 246-50.

<sup>133</sup> See my comments above on Neville, *Representations*, Foot, "Natural World," and many others above, 38-39. For a full discussion of this scholarship, see also Chapter 2 below, 189-92.

<sup>134</sup> Chapter 2, 288-98.

<sup>135</sup> Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 21. Gittos' analysis, however, of several of the instances discussed below in Chapter 2, 195-97, closely resemble these preoccupations.

nature but described his community's foundation process as the purification of a hill crowned with thorn bushes—a Christological landscape rife with exegetical and hagiographic resonances. Reading *De abbatibus* for its treatment of nature illuminates crucial modes of thought about the role of the environment in shaping a monastic communities.

The third and final chapter, “Images of the Natural World in Frankish Missionary *Vitae*, c. 690-900,” considers the development and proliferation of Carolingian missionary narratives from the arrival of Willibald in Francia around 690 up to the composition of the Scandinavian missionary *vitae* of Anskar and Rimbert between 888 and 909.<sup>136</sup> The corpus of missionary *vitae* from this period of Carolingian *renovatio* (renewal) and *correctio* (correction) offers us narratives of conversion across two centuries and constitutes a window into cultural attitudes towards nature.<sup>137</sup> Taken together, these missionary *vitae* detailed the monastic, episcopal and political efforts to convert barbarian groups both within and on the fringes of the Frankish kingdom before and after its eighth-century transition from Merovingian to Carolingian dynasties. The earlier missionary *vitae* like Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* (composed in Mainz, c. 763-68)

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<sup>136</sup> For a discussion of Carolingian hagiography in modern scholarship, see Chapter 3, 323-31.

<sup>137</sup> For this period of *renovatio* and *correctio*, I am following the assessments of Janet Nelson, “On the Limits of the Carolingian Renaissance,” *Studies in Church History* 14 (1977): 51-69; John Contreni, “The Carolingian Renaissance,” in *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Warren Treadgold (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 59-74; Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 162-389; and Donald Bullough, “*Aula renovata*: The Carolingian Court before the Aachen Palace,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 71 (1985): 267-301, repr. in Bullough, *Carolingian Renewal: Sources and Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 123-60; and Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 80-153, especially 144-46 for terminology.

and Eigil's *Vita Sturmi* (composed in Fulda, c. 794-800) described human interaction with the natural world in a mode that emphasized the sheer emptiness of forested regions, much as we have already seen in the *Vita patrum iurensium*. Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* especially recycled earlier models of nature's conquest set forth by Sulpicius' *Vita Martini*; Boniface, too, chopped down a tree sacred to pagan Saxons, a common "adversarial" attitude, but by no means one universally held.<sup>138</sup>

After Boniface, however, further competing voices emerged. Alcuin of York's missionary *vitae* of Vedast, Richarius (d. 645) and Willibrord (d. 739)—all of which he composed in the closing years of the eighth century—introduced a vivid world of natural metaphors to Carolingian hagiography, cross-referencing his own epistolary output as well as patristic sources. Alcuin used the natural world as a metonym for the Christian history of Frisia, a strategy that comes across most clearly in his description of Willibrord's purification of a pagan holy spring on Fositeland, an island in the North Sea between Frisia and Jutland.<sup>139</sup> Such descriptions meshed with broader interpretations of wetlands in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon culture as dangerous, mysterious natural places.<sup>140</sup> Chapter 3 also situates Eigil's *Vita Sturmi* in the context of this culture of natural description: Eigil described in clear detail the river valleys, soil qualities, place names and forest topographies of the region around the Fulda River, constituting a textual ecology specific to Fulda's local landscapes. This specific register of hagiographic description helped legitimize Fulda's claims to the surrounding countryside, but on a

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<sup>138</sup> Chapter 3, 361-73. Aberth, *Crucible of Nature*, 1-10.

<sup>139</sup> Chapter 3, 401-6.

<sup>140</sup> Chapter 3, 376-93.

textual level, those topographies and natural features shaped the narrative for the community at Fulda.

Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* and the anonymous *Vita Rimberti*, which covered the Christianization of Scandinavia. Most scholars consider these *vitae* to be the among last of the missionary lives.<sup>141</sup> Instead of focusing on the conversion and “challenge of the countryside,”<sup>142</sup> this pair of *vitae* instead described the development of monastic life in Scandinavia, a process that mostly took the form of visible building projects. In the *Vita Anskarii*, Rimbert focused on two core themes: the development of built monastic and ecclesiastical spaces in the mission field, and geographic descriptions of the ends of the earth. If the natural world was to be found in these *vitae*, it was always within broader depictions of the world *ad fines orbis terrae* or at the *extremum terrae*. Such an approach is reflective of the eschatological challenge of Matt. 24.14 that “this gospel of the kingdom, shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations, and then shall the consummation come.” Both Rimbert and the anonymous author of his later life described what the *extremum terrae* was physically like, all in the service of broader eschatological thought.

As this description of the study's structure suggests, this dissertation is not a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of the interactions between humans and their natural environments. Instead it focuses on the ways in which nature could shape, influence or inform religious life, especially in monastic contexts, in order to highlight a

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<sup>141</sup> Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400-1050* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 259-62.

<sup>142</sup> A phrase of Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 34-65, at 34.

range of interpretations inadequately appraised by current scholarship. Early medieval Christian authors deployed textual ecologies, especially in hagiographic works, to express the central roles nature could play in monastic foundation and religious life. As Romanus' experience in the Jura Mountains makes clear, textual ecologies could operate on different registers simultaneously; the period *c.* 400-850 did not see a progression of teleological "phases" of human interpretations of nature. Instead, at any point in the sources nature could be a marker for holy ground, essential to the intellectual life of a monastic community, metaphorically useful, indicative of God's creative power, revealing of scriptural truth in exegesis, intersected with craftsmanship and decoration, pleasant, dangerous, and all points between.

## Chapter 1: The Conquest of Nature in Francia, c. 350-650

During Nero's infamous persecutions in the mid-first century CE, two Christians, Nazarius and Celsus, suffered violent martyrdom in Milan. Such, at least, was the earliest account provided by Paulinus of Nola's *Vita Ambrosii*, written in the 420s. According to Paulinus, Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) had discovered Nazarius' body in a suburban garden around 395. Despite the passage of time, fresh blood still flowed from Nazarius' severed head, miraculous proof of his enduring sanctity. Inspired by his discovery, Ambrose gave thanks to God at the nearby tomb of Celsus. He then ordered Nazarius' body to be carried to and reinterred in the nearby Basilica of the Apostles.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly two centuries later—and several hundred miles northwest in Gaul—Gregory of Tours (d. 594) constructed a different version of the miraculous discovery in his *In gloria martyrum*, “On the Glory of the Martyrs,” a series of brief hagiographic sketches of early Christian martyrs. According to Gregory, Nazarius and Celsus were martyred not in Milan, but nearly two hundred miles due west across the Alps, in Embrun, itself an important Roman city and, by the mid-fourth century, an episcopal seat.<sup>2</sup> Whether intended as an argument for Embrun as a decidedly Frankish alternative to Paulinus' narrative or a misreading of the sources, the reasons for Gregory's transposition of the legend are unclear.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, Gregory was aware of a Milanese tradition of

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<sup>1</sup> Paulinus of Milan, *Vita sancti Ambrosii* 32-33, in the standard edition of Michele Pellegrino, ed., *Vita di S. Ambrogio* (Rome: Editrice Studium, 1961), 98-100.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Embrun as central to the expansion of the Roman *Alpes Maritimae*, see Stéphanie Morabito, “Entre Narbonnaise et Italie: le territoire de la province des Alpes Maritimae pendant l'Antiquité romaine,” *Gallia* 67.2 (2010): 99-124.

<sup>3</sup> May Vielliard-Troiekouroff, for example, argued that Gregory mistakenly located Nazarius and Celsus at Embrun based on a misreading of an account of their martyrdom:



attributing such discoveries to Ambrose, who, according to the “history of their suffering (*passionis historia*),” had discovered the bodies of martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, subsequently erecting a *basilica* to house their relics.<sup>4</sup>

The circumstances of the discovery had also shifted: according to Gregory, the bodies of Nazarius and Celsus had been discovered alongside each other, not separately as Paulinus had it. In this case, Gregory’s interpretation was the result of a common misreading of Paulinus, one shared even by modern scholars.<sup>5</sup> Gregory also elaborated that their burial site had faded into obscurity in the wake of the persecutions, which explains why a miracle was required to find the bodies.<sup>6</sup> To add legitimacy to his Frankish version of the legend, Gregory clarified that his source was a certain *lectio*, or “reading,” perhaps for the saints’ feast day and certainly distinct from Paulinus’ *vita*.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Gregory obtained some of his material from Ennodius of Pavia (d. 521),

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*Les monuments religieux de la Gaule d’après les œuvres de Grégoire de Tours* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1976), 117-18.

<sup>4</sup> According to Gregory, *GM* 46, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 69, the location of the bodies was miraculously revealed to Ambrose who found them and had a church constructed for them.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the interpretations of Jean-Rémy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l’empire romain: Contribution à l’histoire des rapports de l’église et l’état à fin du quatrième siècle* (Paris: de Boccard, 1933), 313; and Frederick Holmes Dudden, *The Life and Times of Saint Ambrose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 318-19. For an explanation of this confusion, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 363.

<sup>6</sup> *GM* 46, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 69.

<sup>7</sup> The nature of this passage has received very little attention. Raymond Van Dam translates *lectio* simply as “text,” in *Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 45, and Michael Roberts refers to a “passion” at Gregory’s disposal in his *The Humblest Sparrow: The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009). On *lectio* and its use in this context, see Adalbert de Vogüé, “Le lecture quotidienne dans les monastères (300-700),” *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 51 (1989): 241-51, repr. and trans., “Daily Readings in Monasteries (300-700 CE),” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 26 (1991): 286-94.

who composed a poem on the discovery of Nazarius' body, but we cannot be certain.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the nature of the differences, Gregory decided that the murky tradition of the martyrs required his own clarification. As an historian, Gregory was careful to acknowledge different sources for the same story, but he repackaged an Embrunese version based on a specific *lectio* at his disposal, as well as a lost *epistola* of Paulinus.<sup>9</sup>

What does emerge clearly from Gregory's account is a detailed episode not extant in any other accounts of Nazarius and Celsus. According to Gregory,

super haec sepulchra pirum arborem, et fecisse quodam pauper hortellum in hoc loco, qui hanc arborem concludebat. Verum cum poma iuxta morem tempore debito ferret, quicumque exinde infirmus, qualibet aegritudine detentus, pomum mordicus decerpsisset, mox ablata infirmitate convalescebat. Unde magnum quaestum pauper ille habebat. Sed cum se revelantes martyres, arborem incidi iussissent, pauper ille in magnis fletibus prorumpens, indici arborem non sinebat. Quo remoto, succisa piro, basilica miro opera aedificata est.<sup>10</sup>

There was a pear tree on top of their tombs, and in that place a poor man made a little garden that surrounded the pear tree. Truly when the tree in time produced pears according to its kind, also whatever sick person who was weakened by some illness, [and who] plucked away from a pear by biting, soon recovered, his sickness departing. Thus the poor man began to make a great profit [from the enterprise]. But when the martyrs revealed themselves, [and] ordered the tree to be felled, the poor man burst into tears and made loud objection. But [with the poor man] away, the pear tree was chopped down, and a basilica of marvelous workmanship was built.

If Paulinus had indeed discussed the pear tree in an *epistola*, it was surely a Milanese one, but Gregory transposed it to fit an Embrunese context. The bishop of Tours carefully crafted the story of the pear tree based on an effective smoke screen of

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<sup>8</sup> See Ennodius' *Carmina* 1.18, the so-called *Hymnus sancti Nazari*, *MGH AA* 7, 254.

<sup>9</sup> *GM* 46, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 69: Gregory referred to an *epistola* of Paulinus, "the man who narrated what I have just written (*referre erat solitus uir ille, qui de supradictis . . . enarrauit*).” It is difficult to tell what *supradictis* refers to in the text—Gervasius and Protasius, or Nazarius and Celsus?—but Gregory seems to apply the *epistola*'s content to the subsequent story of the pear tree. He mentions the *epistola* once more in *DLH* 10.31.

<sup>10</sup> *GM* 46, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 69-70.

trustworthy sources. In Gregory's account, the purification of a holy site in Embrun followed a strict process: a pear tree began to grow from the ground in which the martyrs' bodies were buried; after a local *pauper* realized the supernatural merits of its fruit, he resourcefully benefited from their distribution; once the local ecclesiastical authorities realized, through the man's vision, that the pear tree was actually a marker for the martyrs' tombs, they obeyed the holy dead by chopping it down; finally, a church was constructed, and the poor man was rewarded with an office as *praelatus* there. The story's roots held fast to soil on both sides of the Alps, but Gregory insisted on a specifically Frankish context: in his reckoning, the physical proof for the martyrs' burial in Embrun was, until a better marker could be built, a pear tree. The pear tree at Embrun was not only symbolic of the fruitfulness and generation of the faith there,<sup>11</sup> but was itself a natural landmark performing the function of a shrine.

The surrounding *hortellus* was already a holy place prior to the addition of bricks and mortar. The poor man's custody of the relics was, however, irregular. Gregory's remedy was a process of making the place a focus of official practice: the site was marked by a pear tree; that tree, because of its physical growth from corporeal remains, produced fruit; that fruit contained healing properties as tertiary relics; and once discovered, the *hortellus* gave way to a *basilica* of fine workmanship. A tree could be a holy object if it harbored—or, in this case, grew *from*—the bodies of saints.

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<sup>11</sup> Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres du sauvage dans le monde franc (IV<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 185: "Si tous ne sont pas en relation avec une tombe de saint, ce sont tous des fruitiers (ou en partie comestibles) et entrent en scène à l'occasion de miracles symbolisant la vitalité ou la fertilité."

## The Shape of the Landscape, c. 350-650

The pear tree illuminates a theme of this chapter in particular: the fitness of nature to harbor holiness, and how nature and built structures could intersect to influence local religious life. Most current scholarship that touches on the natural world in late antique Gaul has already been discussed since it is of a very general nature and reflects the rigid bifurcation and categorization of studies on medieval attitudes towards nature.<sup>12</sup> For this period no comprehensive or satisfactory study of human interaction with nature exists.<sup>13</sup> Nature is, however, a theme to pursue in order to clarify religious life during Europe's

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion, see above, Introduction, 18-34; the best example of this approach to early medieval Europe is that of John Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2013), 5-9, who identified the period's interactions with nature as "adversarial," reflecting the danger of close contact with environments.

<sup>13</sup> Scholarly interests have touched upon the natural world in this period, while not treating it as a major analytic category in its own right: namely, desert monasticism, paganism and superstitions, animal studies and Giselle de Nie's studies of Gregory of Tours' natural "imagination. These core issues are discussed fully in the Introduction, 18-34. The classic study of the desert fathers is Peter Brown, "The Desert Fathers: Anthony to John Climacus," in *idem*, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213-40, as well as "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101. For the Latin West in particular, see Conrad Leyser, "The Uses of the Desert in the Sixth-Century West," *Church History and Religious Culture* 86.1 (2006): 113-34. On paganism, see Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005). Among the best, and most recent, works on animal studies is Dominic Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008). On natural "imagination" and Gregory's miracle stores, see Giselle de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), especially parts I and II, 27-132. These sections comprise earlier publications of some earlier work: "Roses in January: A Neglected Dimension in Gregory of Tours' *Historiae*," *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (1979): 259-89, and "The Spring, the Seed and the Tree: Gregory of Tours on the Wonders of Nature," *Journal of Medieval History* 11 (1985): 89-135.

transformational period after the disintegration of central Roman authority. Early Christian monks in post-Roman Gaul frequently went to rural places to establish their communities; authors of their *vitae* insisted on the empty, wild and sometimes beautiful nature of those places. The dominant register of thought in the period was one of conquest and dominion, but this approach to nature and natural places was far from universal. Natural landscapes often played major roles in shaping religious life: for the anonymous author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* with which the Introduction began, a fir tree charged with scriptural, exegetical and hagiographic meanings was a central feature of Condat's history. Even for Gregory of Tours, who often endorsed the conquest of nature in his hagiographic works, pear trees could harbor holiness and shape local belief and devotion. In such ways, nature and natural places are interpretive keys to intellectual monastic sources in post-Roman Gaul.

As we shall see in several sources from the period *c.* 350-650, Gregory's was not the only—or even authoritative—voice on the natural world. Gregory's was but one of many competing views on the subject of nature. The most prolific author of the period under consideration, Gregory's works give rise to several questions and problems on the role of the natural world in the human experience, and vice versa. He usually couched these issues in strict terms of human dominion over nature based on God's charge in Hebrew scripture to "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth."<sup>14</sup> Gregory, however, considered holy buildings to be the ultimate measure of

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<sup>14</sup> Gen. 1.28: "'Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram et subicite eam et dominamini piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et universis animantibus, quae moventur super terram'."

Christian success in late antique Gaul. As we shall see, authors from Sulpicius Severus in the fourth century to Jonas of Bobbio in the seventh did not have a category of the “natural world” at their disposal as modern people conceive of it, but they did understand the clear distinctions between built, human-made spaces and structures on the one hand and the divinely created world on the other.<sup>15</sup> For authors in the period under consideration, the “natural world” most frequently engaged that which humans could see, touch, and otherwise experience; “nature” in this period was a more quotidian concept, one that involved saints interacting with animals, trees, and rocks, or monks harnessing their new environments in the wilderness for both practical and spiritual ends. When Gallic authors discussed nature and natural phenomena, they did so with a clear understanding that the created world—trees, meadows, rock formations, bodies of water, animals—did not exist in clear classifications, but were spokes emanating from the hub of Creation. Over the course of the period, the natural world both as a set of concepts based on human experience developed from competing voices on the subject.

Drawing mostly from hagiographic sources about holy people entering the Gallic wilderness, views of nature ranged from conquest and cultural dominance in Sulpicius’ *Vita Martini*, to mutual harmony in the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium*; and from dovetailing the spiritual life and physical interactions with the environment in Eucherius of Lyon’s (d. 449) *De laude eremi*, to emphasizing the dangers inherent in nature on account of its propensity to harbor pagan practices in Caesarius of Arles’ (d. 542)

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On the exegetical life of this passage, see Jeremy Cohen, “Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> On these terms, see Introduction, 11-13.

*Sermones*. This chapter begins with a discussion of Sulpicius' *vita* of Martin of Tours, whom Sulpicius described as converting pagans by exercising cultural dominance over them. These conversion processes at times played out in the natural world as Martin destroyed rural pagan shrines and sacred trees. After Martin, authors like Eucherius of Lyon and the anonymous author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* had adopted a new mode of thought with which to discuss the natural world—that the nature was both a reflector and shaper of monastic life, not necessarily subservient to the wills of humans. Across the fifth century and into the sixth, Caesarius of Arles argued in his pastoral literature that nature could be shorthand for pagan practice, a concept to which Gregory of Tours would subscribe at the close of that century.

By the end of the sixth century, Gregory—taking cues from Sulpicius, Caesarius, and one of his favorite authors, the poet Venantius Fortunatus (d. c. 600)—considered Christian churches and shrines as collective proof of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Nature was useful for its metaphoric value, but only until shrines and churches could overwrite its insufficiency, as had occurred at Embrun. This chapter will then conclude with a brief examination of the works of Columbanus (d. 615), the eminent Irish founder of several Frankish monastic communities, and his biographer Jonas of Bobbio (d. 659).

Columbanus was one of several insular monastic figures to travel to the continent in the seventh and eighth centuries, which makes his works and works about him ideal starting points for both Anglo-Saxon connections (Chapter 2) and models of Frankish missionary life (Chapter 3). By the seventh century, monastic authors like Columbanus and Jonas were again pushing against the notion of human dominance, tipping the pendulum back towards seeing God *in* his Creation, rather than Creation in human service. “Understand

creation,” Columbanus insisted, “if you want to know the Creator.”<sup>16</sup> Jonas’ *Vita Columbani* especially was a conscious attempt to compromise among these interpretations. This discussion will characterize the period c. 350-650 as a world of contradictions and competing voices, a series of revolutions in the way people thought about and with nature. At times, monastic authors briefly disentangled the narrative from the dominion of Genesis 1.28 with more sensitive and dynamic ways of understanding the natural world. In the final analysis, this chapter will establish the Frankish intellectual legacy in the period leading up to the rise of the Carolingian dynasty and the dissemination of its missionary *vitae*.

### **Martin of Tours and the Conquest of the Wilderness**

Far before Gregory’s time, Sulpicius Severus composed the earliest major hagiographic work on Martin of Tours, which defined a holy man for the Latin west on par with Antony of Egypt in the East, and established effective conversion tactics in the pagan Gallic wilderness.<sup>17</sup> The image of the holy person in the desert was one carefully

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<sup>16</sup> Columbanus, *Inst.* 1.4-5, 64: “Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam.” See below, 167-69, for a discussion.

<sup>17</sup> The standard edition is that of Jacques Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère: Vie de Saint Martin* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967). For overviews on the importance of Martin’s cult to early medieval culture, I have followed Eugen Ewig, “Le culte de saint Martin à l’époque franque,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Eglise de France* 47 (1961): 1-18, repr. in his *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien: Gesammelte Schriften (1952-1973)*, 3 vols. (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1979), II: 355-70; Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 119-40; *idem.*, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 13-27; and Allan McKinley, “The First Two Centuries of Saint Martin of Tours,” *Early Medieval Europe* 14.2 (2006): 173-200. On his cult throughout the medieval period, see Juliet Hewish, “Sulpicius Severus and the



chosen by Athanasius (d. 373), author of the famous *Vita Antonii*, who often described Antony in rural and barren desert places like caves and cemeteries.<sup>18</sup> In fact, urban ecclesiastical officials (like Athanasius himself) were absent from the *Vita Antonii*, as they would be in Sulpicius' *Vita Martini*.<sup>19</sup> Athanasius' myth of desert solitude—Antony continually retreated further into the desert as followers swarmed to him—was a deliberate one: the desert was an ideal place to meet God and to approach monastic perfection.<sup>20</sup> In current scholarship, however, the desert has emerged primarily as an ideal for which to strive or a stage for human activity, not a landscape with an active role in religious life.<sup>21</sup>

By following Athanasius' model, Sulpicius' *Vita Martini* is in many ways the gold standard by which all subsequent hagiography is measured in the early medieval West.<sup>22</sup> Apart from Sulpicius' *vita*, a wealth of sources survive on Martin's life and cult:

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Medieval *Vita Martini*," *Peritia* 20 (2008): 28-58. For a clear assessment of Martin's life and early cult, I am following especially Sharon Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 13-37.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 8-9, *PL* 73: col. 131-33. On the background to this image, see Brown, "Rise and Function"; Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Richard Valantasis, "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism," in Valantasis and Vincent Wimbush, eds., *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 544-52.

<sup>19</sup> James Goehring, "The Dark Side of the Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003): 437-51, at 440. For the relationship between holy people and ecclesiastical authorities more broadly, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 80-141 and 245-65.

<sup>20</sup> For Peter Brown, the desert "was, above all, a myth of liberating precision. It delimited the towering presence of 'the world,' from which the Christian must be set free, by emphasizing a clear ecological frontier." See *idem*, "The Desert Fathers: Anthony to John Climacus," in *idem*, *The Body and Society*, 213-40, at 216.

<sup>21</sup> See above, Introduction, 18-22.

<sup>22</sup> Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), has argued that the western desert image emerged as a continual

he also devoted a section of his *Dialogi* to Martin, and slightly later accounts were composed by Paulinus of Périgueux<sup>23</sup> (d. c. late 400s) and Venantius Fortunatus,<sup>24</sup> both in verse, as well as Gregory of Tours in his *Virtutibus sancti Martini*<sup>25</sup> and numerous references in his *Decem Libri Historiarum*. Sulpicius' *vita*, however, remains the earliest and fullest treatment of Martin as a cult figure.

Martin was born around 336 in Roman Pannonia (modern-day Hungary) to a lower-class non-Christian family.<sup>26</sup> Despite trying to become a catechumen at a young age, he would soon train to become a soldier, eventually rising to the rank of military tribune—a fact his biographer only briefly treated and which Jacques Fontaine argued was an intentional downplaying of Martin's military background.<sup>27</sup> In Sulpicius' hands, Martin was, however, “a man of action throughout his life”<sup>28</sup> even after retiring from the

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struggle to synthesize Augustine's deliberately imprecise vision of monastic communities in non-urban settings with John Cassian's meticulous expertise on how they should function. The Benedictine Rule of c. 540 has often been seen as the realization of compromise, with its careful blend of spiritual morality and vigilant regulatory practices: for Maria-Elisabeth Brunert, *Das Ideal der Wüstenaskese und seine Rezeption in Gallien bis zum Ende des 6. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1994), Benedict's *regula* and Pope Gregory I's (d. 604) espousal of it towards the end of that century rounded off two long centuries of Latin authors' struggles over how to mitigate the tensions between a simple ascetic lifestyle and the philosophical concept of the desert.

<sup>23</sup> Paulinus of Périgueux, *De vita sancti Martini*, CSEL 16.1. See Raymond Van Dam, “Paulinus of Périgueux and Perpetuus of Tours,” *Francia* 14 (1986): 567-73.

<sup>24</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita S. Martini*, MGH AA 4.1.

<sup>25</sup> MGH SRM 1.2, 34-211.

<sup>26</sup> VM 2.1, 258-60: “Igitur Martinus Sabaria Pannoniarum oppido oriundus fuit, sed intra Italiam Ticini altus est, parentibus secundum saeculi dignitatem non infimis, gentilibus tamen.”

<sup>27</sup> Fontaine, “Vérité et fiction dans la chronologie de la Vita Martini,” in *Saint Martin et son temps. Méorial du XVIe centenaire des débuts du monachisme en Gaule*, Studia Anselmia 40, 189-236 (Rome, 1961). For an overview of this debate I have consulted Charles Lelong, *Vie et culte de Saint Martin: état des questions* (Chambray-lès-Tours: C.L.D. 1990), 89-95.

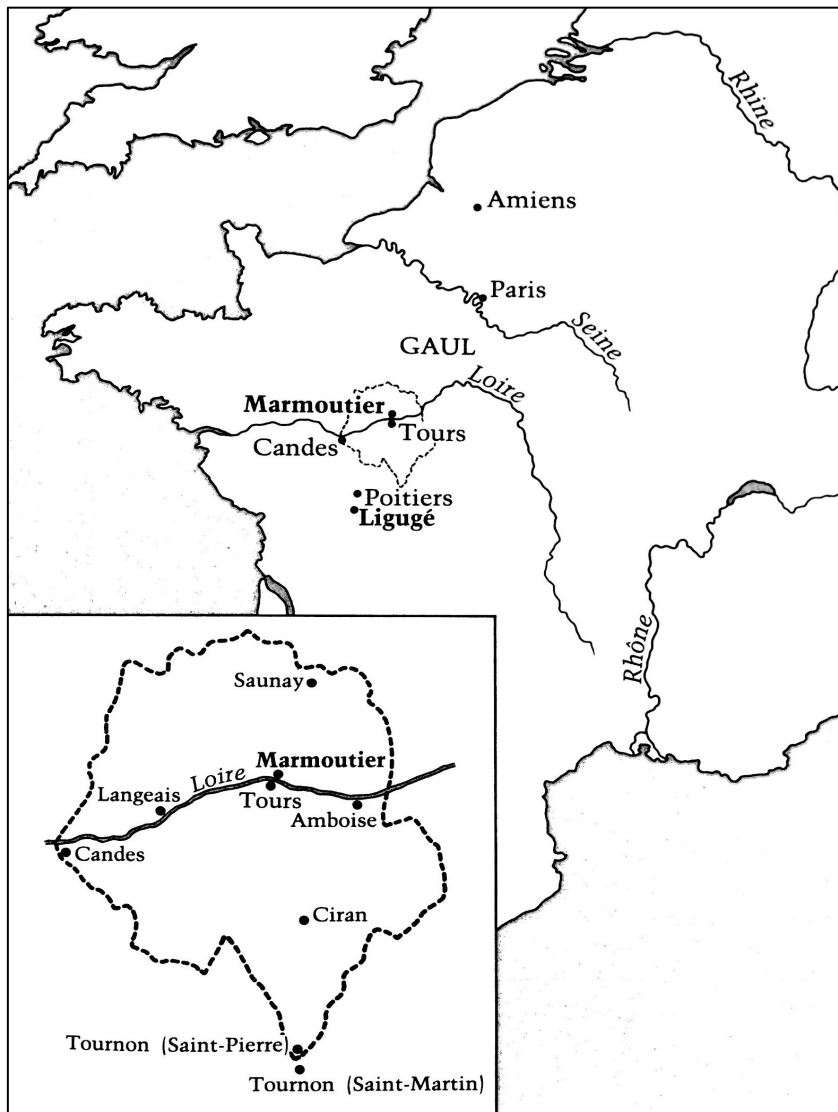
<sup>28</sup> Farmer, *Saint Martin*, 14.

military to meet the requirements of a strict form of Christianity. Sulpicius insisted that Martin was never a willing participant in the Roman military machine, but instead resisted vice and kept his mind (*animus*) “always directed around monasteries and around the church (*aut circa monasteria aut circa ecclesiam semper intentus*),”<sup>29</sup> which soon after his retirement resulted in the foundation of the monastic community at Ligugé. Soon, Martin was summoned to Tours to serve as bishop, and he began his lifelong campaign against pagan practice in that city and its environs mostly by destroying ancient temples and founding churches in their stead.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *VM* 2.4, 254.

<sup>30</sup> Farmer, *Saint Martin*, 16: “In the face of violent opposition, [Martin] earned his reputation as an apostle to the Gauls by destroying temples and erecting churches throughout his diocese—at Langeais, Saunay, Tournon, Amboise, Ciran, and Candes.



**Map 1.1:** Gaul around 400. Inset: Diocese of Tours, with communities founded by Martin according to Gregory of Tours. Taken from Farmer, *Saint Martin*, 15 after Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère III*: 1424.

### *Sulpicius, Martin and Authority over Nature*

While Sulpicius emphasized the extent to which Tours' holy places were built up and renewed during Martin's tenure, a distinct set of interactions with the wilderness or with pagans in the wilderness constitutes a parallel theme in the *Vita Martini*. Sulpicius' conception of nature consisted of the array of created things in the world through which Martin moved—entities and landscapes created by God, not by humans in urban or rural

settings. In Sulpicius' *vita*, Martin's first experience with the natural, explicitly non-urban world comes during a journey through the Alps. After retiring from military service, Martin visited Hilary (d. 368) at Poitiers for ecclesiastical training before traversing the Alps to visit his parents in Pavia in northern Italy. On the way, a gang of brigands overtook him. One of them took him to "a more remote spot (*ad remotiora*)" and began interrogating him.<sup>31</sup> Martin promptly converted the brigands on the spot. Crucially for Martin's first act of evangelism, the event took place deep in the wilderness (*ad remotiora*). The wildness of the brigands reflected the strangeness and ruggedness of the landscape in which they lived and moved. Already, Sulpicius had established a firm division between civilization and wilderness.

Descending the mountains, Martin made his way to Milan to reform the priesthood, according to Sulpicius. In obscure circumstances Martin was soon forced to leave the city and established a hermitage on its outskirts. Sulpicius was not forthcoming on the specific context of Martin's troubles in Milan, but it is possible that these events coincided with the semi-Arian emperor Constantius II's (d. 361) purge of orthodox bishops in the 350s.<sup>32</sup> Martin's suburban hermitage proved ineffective against the wrath of the Arian bishop Auxentius (d. c. 374), and he was forced further still into the wilderness, withdrawing to the island of Gallinaria in the Ligurian Sea, just off the Italian coast around 130 miles south of Milan. At Gallinaria, Martin "lived there for quite some time on roots of plants (*aliquandu radicibus uixit herbarum*)," including the poisonous

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<sup>31</sup> *VM* 5.4, 264.

<sup>32</sup> Such is the speculation of Thomas Noble and Thomas Head, *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 10, n. 15.

hellebore which he survived only through prayer.<sup>33</sup> At Gallinaria, a harsh landscape produced poisonous herbs. Augustine, as a contemporary of Sulpicius', sometimes accused his heretical opponents of suffering from confusion as if they had eaten hellebore themselves.<sup>34</sup> Augustine was also aware of Basil of Caesarea's (d. 379) assessment of useful and poisonous plants. According to Basil, the earth's flora should remind Christians of their Creator, but parts of God's Creation were not meant for human consumption: plants like hellebore could, however, be used sparingly for their purgative properties,<sup>35</sup> as Virgil had noted in his *Georgics*.<sup>36</sup> Martin, almost certainly unaware of these associations, took hellebore for nourishment. Sulpicius himself may have been aware of some of Augustine's works, but was almost certainly familiar with Virgil as part of his education.<sup>37</sup> If he was aware of a tradition that used hellebore to symbolize heresy, Martin's power over it fits with Sulpicius' descriptions of Martin's struggles with Arianism: Martin physically ingested heresy and survived.

In the *Vita Martini*, Gallinaria is among the more remote places Martin lived. Not coincidentally, the solitude Martin found there fulfilled his purported childhood dream of

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<sup>33</sup> *VM* 6.5-6, 266.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *Sermones* 126, *CCSL* 41, 188.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine quoted Basil, *Hexaemeron* 5.2, in his *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 21.13, *CSEL* 25, 584, to express this point. This was also a concept of which Jerome was aware in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians 1, *PL* 26: col. 350.

<sup>36</sup> Virgil, *Georgics* 3.450-51.

<sup>37</sup> On Martin's education, see Stancliffe, *St. Martin*, 56: Sulpicius' education "was virtually unaffected by the rise of Christianity. The teaching of Christian beliefs and morals was the affair of the family, and of the Church; it in no way replaced the standard classical education"; and John Bequette, "Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Saint Martin*: The Saint and His Biographer as Agents of Cultural Transformation," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13.2 (2010): 56-78, at 57.

living in the desert (*eremus*).<sup>38</sup> Sulpicius linked the natural solitude of an island just off the coast with its wilder properties—namely, the abundance of poisonous vegetation. Nothing about Gallinaria’s environment was inviting, but Martin quickly developed a physical resistance to the island’s poison through ascetic rigor. In Sulpicius’ account, Gallinaria’s landscape supported Martin. This would not be the last time he would exercise authority over nature.

### ***Ligugé: Natural Monastic Space***

Even in exile, Martin wielded power over the environment around him. Martin remained at Gallinaria until Constantius II loosened his grip on non-Arian leadership, finally recalling Martin’s colleague Hilary from exile in Phrygia around 360. Hearing this, Martin set out for Rome to intercept Hilary, but the latter had already made his way to Gaul. Martin found him presumably reinstated at Poitiers, and established a hermitage at Ligugé just a few miles south of the city, which would later develop into a major monastic center. So far in the *vita*, Sulpicius had defined Martin’s entire religious career by various degrees of solitude and distance from urban centers. For Sulpicius, solitude in all its forms did not necessarily correspond with a life spent in close reference to the natural world, nor does it indicate a necessarily close relationship between a holy man and natural environments. Sulpicius only brought the natural world into focus when it benefitted Martin’s cult status as a holy man in complete control of his surroundings.

After performing various healing miracles at Ligugé, Martin was suddenly chosen for the position of bishop of Tours in the early 370s. All but a minority of bishops who

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<sup>38</sup> According to Sulpicius, *VM* 2.4, 254, Martin’s zeal struck him around the age of 12.

opposed Martin's filthy appearance approved of the choice.<sup>39</sup> In Sulpicius' estimation,

Martin's elevation to the episcopate did little to alter his simple lifestyle:

Aliquandiu ergo adhaerenti ad ecclesiam cellula usus est; dein, cum inquietudinem se frequentantium ferre non posset, duobus fere extra ciuitatem milibus monasterium sibi statuit. Quo locus tam secretus et remotus erat, ut eremi solitudinem non desideraret. Ex uno enim latere praecisa montis excelsi rupe ambiebatur, reliquam planitiem Liger fluuius reducto paululum sino clauserat; una tantum eademque arcta admodum uia adiri poterat.<sup>40</sup>

For a while therefore he used a cell attached to the *ecclesia*; then, when he was no longer able to bear the disturbances from those visiting him, he established for himself a *monasterium* [which would become Marmoutier] about two miles outside the city. The place was so secluded and remote, that he did not long for the solitude of a desert (*eremus*). On one side it was walled in by the precipitous cliff of a high mountain, and the level ground that remained was closed in by a little bend of the Loire River; there was only one approach to it, and it was a very narrow way.

If the landscape of Gallinaria was subservient to Martin's needs, that of Marmoutier directly shaped his ascetic practice. On the banks of the Loire, Martin established a hermitage that imitated an enclosed monastic community. Sulpicius commonly used *monasterium* to indicate ascetic dwellings from hermitages to monastic complexes: as a child, he had striven for "the *monasterii* and the *ecclesia*."<sup>41</sup> Whatever imprecision Sulpicius exercised in terminology, he provided specific details on the foundation of Marmoutier. Instead of walls and buildings, Marmoutier featured a river and a cliff into which Martin's companions hollowed out cells like their eastern counterparts.<sup>42</sup> At Marmoutier, the only sustained industry was the copying of sacred texts, and the monks never left their cells except for collective worship. Like Martin, they

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<sup>39</sup> *VM* 9.3, 272.

<sup>40</sup> *VM* 10.3-4, 274.

<sup>41</sup> *VM* 2.4, 254: "Animus tamen, aut circa monasteria aut circa ecclesiam semper intentus."

<sup>42</sup> *VM* 10.5, 274.



wore rough clothing, regardless of their social status prior to joining the community.

Sulpicius located an ideal monastic community in the landscape. “What city or church is there,” Sulpicius rhetorically asked, “that did not desire for itself a priest from Martin’s *monasterium*?”<sup>43</sup> The rugged riverine landscape surpassed the benefits of a city, naturally hemming the monks into an isolated place.

### ***The Sacred Pine and the Conquest of Nature***

After establishing the community at Marmoutier, Martin’s career again took a militant turn, involving the destruction of rural pagan culture. First, he exorcised the spirit of a robber from a shrine believed to house the relics of martyrs. According to Sulpicius, Martin absolved the people there of superstition.<sup>44</sup> Next, he encountered some locals whom he thought were engaging in a pagan purification ritual in a field, “because it was the custom of these Gallic rustics, in their wretched madness, to carry through their fields the images of the demons covered with white veils.”<sup>45</sup> The procession, however, was actually a funeral, a far more innocent affair in Martin’s opinion. While still under his misapprehension, Martin made them “as rigid as stones (*uelut saxa riguisse*)” with the sign of the cross, only allowing them to proceed when he realized he had not encountered a pagan ritual of field purification.<sup>46</sup> The sequence of events can be found elsewhere in hagiographic sources, indicating perhaps its importance to local communities in the

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<sup>43</sup> *VM* 10.9, 274: “Quae enim esset ciuitas aut ecclesia, quae non sibi de Martini monasterio cuperet sacerdotem?”

<sup>44</sup> *VM* 11.5, 276.

<sup>45</sup> *VM* 12.2, 278: “quia esset haec Gallorum rusticis consuetudo, simulacra daemonum candido tecta uelamine misera per agros suos circumferre dementia.”

<sup>46</sup> On a similar ritual in Jonas of Bobbio’s *Vita Columbani*, see below, 173-74.

fourth and fifth centuries, as well as Christian intellectual distaste for it. According to Gregory, Simplicius of Autun (d. c. 375) encountered a procession of pagans dragging a statue on a cart to enhance the fertility of their fields and vineyards.<sup>47</sup> At Simplicius' sign of the cross, the statue fell to the ground and shattered. Predictably, the procession quickly transformed into a collective baptism. Even in his error, though, Martin was prepared to exercise full power over the procession as Simplicius had done. At Gallinaria, he had enjoyed dominion over the natural world; in this case, Martin robustly displayed his mastery over what he thought were rituals meant to manipulate the natural world.

Sulpicius' account of the ritual offers tantalizing details of non-Christian ritual practice in an agricultural society. Whatever the nature of the procession, it was a visible presence in the Gallic landscape. Soon after, with the help of two angels, Martin burned a temple to the ground in Levroux, about 60 miles southeast of Tours. According to Sulpicius, the event convinced the pagans to allow their temple to burn and to convert.<sup>48</sup> The iconic moment of Martin's slash-and-burn career against the Touraine's "rustics" occurred in "a certain village (*in uico quodam*).” Sulpicius introduced the event in the middle of the action:

Item, cum in uico quodam templum antiquissimum diruisset et arborem pinum, quae fano erat proxima, esset adgressus excidere, tum uero antistes loci illius ceteraque gentilium turba coepit obsistere. Et cum idem illi, dum templum euertitur, imperante Domino quieuisent, succidi arborem non patiebantur. Ille eos

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<sup>47</sup> GC 76, MGH SRM 1.2, 343. Simplicius was bishop of Autun in the middle of the fourth century, not to be confused with his kinsman (also Simplicius) of the early fifth century; see Louis Duchesne, *Fastes épiscopaux de l'ancienne Gaule*, 3 vols. (Paris: Fontemoing et Cie, 1910), II: 174-78; and Martin Heinzelmann, "Gallische Prosopographie 260-527," *Francia* 10 (1982): 531-718, at 695-96.

<sup>48</sup> VM 14.7, 284.

sedulo commonere nihil esse religionis in stipite; Deum potius, cui seruiret ipse, sequerentur; arborem illam excidi oportere, quia esset daemonei dedicata.<sup>49</sup>

He had demolished an extremely ancient temple and was going forward to cut down a pine tree in the vicinity of the shrine, when the master of the place and all his pagan crowd arrived to stop him. These same ones had been quiet enough while the temple was being destroyed at the Lord's command, [yet] they were not prepared for the tree [to be] cut down. He diligently told to them that there was nothing pious about a tree trunk and that they should be followers of the God he served. As for the tree, it should be cut down because it was dedicated to a demon.

Assured that there was “nothing pious about a tree trunk (*nihil esse religionis in stipite*),”<sup>50</sup> the “rustics” decided to allow Martin to prove his deity's worth: the tree should be cut down, but Martin should stand its path. Trusting in God, Martin allowed the test to proceed:

Itaque, cum unam in partem pinus illa esset adclinis, ut non esset dubium quam in partem succisa corrueret, eo loci uinctus statuitur pro arbitrio rusticorum, quo arborem esse casuram nemo dubitabat . . . Iamque paulatim nutare pinus et ruinam suam casura minitari . . . cum iam fragorem sui pinus concidens edidisset, iam cadenti, iam super se ruenti, eleuata obuiam manu, signum salutis opponit. Tum uero—uelut turbinis modo retro actam putares—diuersam in partem ruit, adeo ut rusticos, qui tuto in loco steterant, paene prostrauerit.<sup>51</sup>

And then, when the pine leaned to one side, so that there was no doubt where it would fall when cut down, [Martin] was bound and made by the decision of the rustics to stand on the spot where no one doubted the tree would fall . . . After a little while the pine [began] swaying and threatened its own destruction as it was about to fall . . . when the falling pine had just made a crack, now as it was falling, now as it was collapsing over him, he raised his hand in its way and countered it with the sign of salvation. And then truly—you would have thought it was being pushed back by a whirlwind—[the pine] fell in the other direction, so that it almost crushed some rustics who had been standing in a safe place.

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<sup>49</sup> *VM* 13.1-2, 280.

<sup>50</sup> *VM* 13.2, 280. For a comparison of this episode with one Gregory recounted in *GC* 2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 300 (“Nulla est enim religio in stagnum”), see below, 151-53.

<sup>51</sup> *VM* 13.5-8, 280-82.

The “rustics” converted as a group, and Sulpicius declared that “wherever [Martin] destroyed a [pagan] shrine, he at once built a church or monastery.”<sup>52</sup> The pine tree episode is the exemplary representation of Martin’s evangelizing strategy: where possible, he destroyed whatever vestiges of pagan religion—Roman or otherwise—remained in the landscape. In this particular case, the non-Christian community tolerated the destruction of their own temple, but evidently could not abide the destruction of a more precious religious commodity, their sacred pine tree. Temples rise and fall, but sacred trees, in the pagan priest’s judgment, were irreplaceable.

With roots in the Egyptian desert, Sulpicius’ image of Martin was an early, powerful expression of what it meant to be a holy man and bishop in late antique Gaul. In the *Vita Martini*, solitude was a measure of spirituality; but at times, as at Gallinaria and at the sacred pine near Levrux, that measure was directly informed by the natural world. The first half of Martin’s career in the *vita* was marked by an aversion to cities and other inhabited places, while during his episcopal career he spent most of his time converting the countryside. As an outsider to the episcopate even while holding the office of bishop, this image came naturally to Martin. On one level, Martin was a wild man with unkempt hair and dirty clothes, a Gallic John the Baptist. For Sulpicius the natural world was most often shorthand for rural superstition, summed up by the powerful phrase, “there is nothing pious about a tree trunk (*nihil esse religionis in stipite*).” Martin’s efficacy as a converter of “rustics” stemmed from his mastery over the natural world and its accompanying superstitious practice. Sulpicius’ treatment of trees offers a dramatically

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<sup>52</sup> *VM* 13.9, 282: “Nam ubi fana destruxerat statim ibi aut ecclesias aut monasteria construebat.” On Martin’s establishments of monastic communities, see Farmer, *Martin*, 15-16.

different image from that of Gregory's. For Sulpicius, trees could shape non-Christian belief, but Gregory later insisted that Embrun's flora could mark a holy place. As products of Tours, Martin and Gregory approached the natural world in ways that resisted simple definitions of a perpetual struggle between humans and nature, but one that clearly gave dominion a privileged place.

### **“A Boundless Temple”: Eucherius of Lyon and the Allure of the Desert**

In the *Vita Martini*, Sulpicius' depictions of the Gallic wilderness suggest a struggle between holy people and pagan nature. As a hagiographer, Sulpicius reinforced adversarial attitudes towards specific features of the natural world while simultaneously retaining the myth of the desert. Sulpicius' vision of the Gallic wilderness found a competing voice in Eucherius of Lyon, the great fifth-century theorist of desert life. Born around 380 to an aristocratic family in Gaul, Eucherius retired to the island monastery of Lérins (just off the coast of modern-day Cannes) after his wife's death along with his sons Veranius and Salonius, sometime between 411 and 423.<sup>53</sup> Before this time, we know little of his life. It is clear, however, that at Lérins he became enamored with the lives of eastern ascetics like Antony, and at least for a brief time planned to emulate John Cassian

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<sup>53</sup> The exact circumstances of Eucherius' retirement to Lérins are unclear. Possible theories include Salvatore Pricoco, *Il rifiuto mondo: de contemptu mundi* (Florence: Nardini Editore, 1990), 9 (an abrupt spiritual awakening); Germain de Montauzan, “Saint Eucher, évêque de Lyon et l'école de Lérins,” *Bulletin historique du diocèse de Lyon* 2 (1923): 81-96, at 85; Philip Rousseau, “Cassian: Monastery and World,” in *The Certainty of Doubt: Tributes to Peter Muntz*, ed. Miles Fairburn and W.H. Oliver (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996), 68-89, at 73 (the sack of Rome); Ralph Mathisen, *Ecclesiastical Factionalism and Religious Controversy in Fifth-Century Gaul* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 81-83 (a combination of both).

by retiring to the Egyptian desert itself. For unknown reasons, Eucherius settled for a more local desert at Lérins; as Martin had demonstrated, islands were a common substitute for the Egyptian desert in the West at this time.<sup>54</sup> At Lérins, Eucherius studied under Honoratus (d. 429), the community's founder, and his kinsman Hilary (d. 449). The monks at Lérins practiced moderate asceticism in their *coenobium*,<sup>55</sup> maintaining the hallmarks of the practice in poverty, separation from the world, and frequent worship under a single abbot.<sup>56</sup>

Eucherius' literary output was thus colored by his aristocratic and ascetic impulses mutually reinforced at Lérins. As a monk there, Eucherius wrote a long letter to his kinsman Valerianus entitled *De contemptu mundi* ("On contempt for the world") as an attempt to reclaim elements of classical literary heritage for aristocratic, Christian purposes. Eucherius also composed works of exegesis for his community, the *Liber formularum spiritualis intelligentiae* ("Book of Formulae for Spiritual Understanding") and *Instructionum libri duo* ("Two Books of Instruction"), both of which stand in contrast with *De contemptu* in their dealing with scriptural sources for monastic practice.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For a discussion specific to Lérins and the western Mediterranean, see Salvatore Pricoco, *L'isola dei santi. Il cenobio di Lerino e le origini del monachesimo gallico* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo e Bizzarri, 1978), 26-28. Martin had retired to the island hermitage at Gallinaria in *VM* 6; see above, 64-66.

<sup>55</sup> This technical term was John Cassian's assessment around 427 (*Collationes* 11, *praef.* 1), indicating a community rather than the more general term *monasterium*, which can denote anything from a singular dwelling to a community. See Eugène Pichery, ed., *Les Conférences*, vol. 2, Sources chrétiennes 54 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958), 22.

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent overview of daily life on Lérins I have consulted John Pepino, "St. Eucherius of Lyons: Rhetorical Adaptation of Message to Intended Audience in Fifth Century Provence" (Ph.D. Dissertation: The Catholic University of America, 2009), 44-56.

<sup>57</sup> On the composition of these works at Lérins as well as their dating, function, and style, I am following Martine Dulaey, "Eucher exégète: l'interprétation de la Bible en Gaule du



**Map 1.2:** Gaul around 400. Lérins is on the Mediterranean coast. Taken from Alexander Murray, ed. and trans., *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000), 663.

Sud dans la première moitié du V<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Mauritius und die thebäische Legion/Saint Maurice et la légion thébaine*, ed. Otto Wermelinger, Philippe Bruggisser, Beat Näf and Jean-Michel Roessli (Freiburg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2005), 67-93, especially 69-73; more generally, Otto Wermelinger, “Les figures des deux Testaments dans les *Formulae intelligentiae spiritalis* d’Eucher de Lyon,” in *Chartae caritatis: Etudes de patristique et d’antiquité tardive en hommage à Yves-Marie Duval*, ed. Benoît Gain, Pierre Jay and Gérard Nauroy (Paris: Institut d’études augustinnes, 2004), 205-24.

It is from this literary context that one of Eucherius' best-known works, *De laude eremi* ("In Praise of the Desert") emerged. *De laude* is a lengthy letter to Hilary praising his return to the wilderness from his see at Arles. In *De laude*, Eucherius deftly navigated scriptural and contemporary monastic authority to affirm the superiority of the "desert (*eremus*)" to the city. Finally, late in life Eucherius composed a brief commemorative work on the *Passio Acaunensium martyrum* ("The Passion of the Martyrs at Agaune") aimed at a decidedly more general audience than the aristocratic treatises that preceded it. Nevertheless, it is from *De laude eremi* that the most comprehensive treatment of monastic retreat emerges from the Gallic fifth century.

*De laude eremi* can be divided into two major sections: first, an assessment of whom Eucherius considered to be the first desert ascetics drawing mostly from scriptural examples, and second, a long panegyric to the monastic desert with its spiritual benefits and natural beauty. *De laude* is a balanced argument for desert life:

**Table 1.1: The narrative structure of Eucherius of Lyon's *De laude eremi***

Introduction.	
1-4	Eucherius congratulates Hilary on his return from Arles to the "desert ( <i>eremus</i> )" of the island monastery at Lérins.
5-6	A brief account of the Creation and Fall.
Eucherius names and discusses the first desert fathers.	
7-16	Moses.
17	David.
18-19	Elijah and Elisha.
20	Their successors.
21	John the Baptist.
22-26	Jesus Christ.
27	More recent, monastic examples in "John and Macarius."
Eucherius praises the desert.	
28	The desert as treasure and treasury.
29	The desert as parallel to Exodus.
30-33	The best monks live in the desert.
34-35	The desert is the best place for a monk to live, despite its barrenness.



36	By hiding in the desert, monks become examples to others.
37	The merits of silence in the desert.
38	The desert is a fortress against the devil.
39-41	The desert is paradoxically fruitful.
42-43	Eucherius applies his praise to Lérins in particular.
Conclusion.	
44	Eucherius reiterates his pleasure in Hilary's return to the desert of Lérins.

As we can see, Eucherius' *De laude* is a scripturally grounded and carefully crafted argument for monastic solitude, a firm resistance to the allure of civic life. In this sense *De laude* drew fifth-century Provençal monks in line with the first desert ascetics of Hebrew Scripture; its exegetical interpretations of desert life are as crucial as its application to contemporary monks, indicated by brief, practical observations on the solitary life.<sup>58</sup> Overall, Eucherius affirmed Hilary's return from Arles to Lérins with the natural superiority of its solitude. To execute this argument, Eucherius consistently invoked rich natural imagery; textual descriptions of buildings are absent from *De laude eremi*. In his reckoning, the metaphorical desert was not just a state of utopian silence and solitude, but an actual landscape of trees, streams and meadows that could produce an ideal monk—not the harsh landscapes of Egypt or Gallinaria, but a pleasing garden reflective of inner stability attained by monks there.<sup>59</sup> With this in mind, the *eremus* takes three distinct forms in *De laude eremi*, all closely informed by the natural world: as educator, physical space where God dwells and place of physical and spiritual cultivation.

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<sup>58</sup> See for example, *DLE* 33 and 37, at 68 and 71-72.

<sup>59</sup> Claudia Rapp, "Desert, City, and Countryside," 109: "In actual appearance, however, [Lérins] resembles a paradisiacal garden rather than a wilderness. Eucherius describes it as a place of brooks, meadows, and flowers, thus integrating into his work the ancient literary tradition of praise of the lush countryside as the ideal location of pleasant retreat of educated friends."

*The eremus as Active Shaper of Monastic Life*

First, Eucherius sharpened the image of the *eremus* as an active force for education by using it as a way to measure Hilary's career: "You show just how strong the love of solitary places is in you, since the strongest [love] must submit to it. What shall I pronounce this love of the desert if it is not the love of God in you?"<sup>60</sup> Put more simply, the *eremus* had educated Hilary as an "inexperienced young man" before rising to the episcopate at Arles. Eucherius then linked Hilary's return to the *eremus* of Lérins directly with the love of God; in other words, the love of the *eremus* equated the love of God.

For Eucherius, the *eremus* was not simply the stage on which cenobitic monasticism was practiced, but a physical space that directly informed religious life at Lérins and beyond. His first and most potent expression of this concept comes early in the work when he argued that

Eremum ergo recte incircumscriptum dei nostri templum dixerim; etenim quem certum est habitare in silentio, credendum est gaudere secreto . . . et quamvis omnia ipse tamquam sua revisitet neque uspiam desit, tamen, ut aestimare licet, peculiarius visitationem dignatur eremi et caeli secretum.<sup>61</sup>

It should therefore rightly be said of the desert [that it is] a boundless temple of our God; since it is certain that [God] lives in silence, we should believe that he delights in solitude . . . Although God is present everywhere, and regards the whole world as his domain, we may believe that his preferred place is the solitudes of heaven and of the desert.

And if the *eremus* was God's temple, Eucherius later clarified that

Hoc igitur eremi habitaculum dicam non immerito quandam fidei sedem, virtutis arcam, caritatis sacrarium, pietatis thesaurum, iustitiae promptuarium. Nam sicut in magna domo pretiosa quaeque claustris obsignata in remotis habentur, ita magnificentia illa sanctorum abditorum eremo, quam difficultatibus suis natura

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<sup>60</sup> *DLE* 1, 45-47: "Ostendisti etiam ille in te secreti amor quam magnus esset, cui etiam maximus cederet. Qui quidem eremi amor, quid in te nisi dei amor appellandus est?"

<sup>61</sup> *DLE* 3, 48-49.

observavit; deponiturque in terra quodam conclavi deserti, ne conversationis humanae usu obsolescat..<sup>62</sup>

Therefore the habitation in the desert should truly be said [to be] the seat of faith, the box of strength, the shrine of charity, the treasury of devotion, the manifestation of justice. For just as in a house, very precious objects and valuables are concealed behind sealed doors, so also those wonderful gifts of desert holiness are put away in a dwelling in some desert protected by natural inaccessibility, lest they deteriorate from frequent human use.

God's physical presence in the desert gave it all the attributes of a sumptuous temple with none of the distractions. Eucherius' desert was where God could be found easily by willing seekers.<sup>63</sup> For Eucherius, the proof of God's dwelling in or preference for solitary places had already been confirmed in Scripture. After liberation from Egypt, the Israelites "sought out the pathless wilderness . . . with its endless vastness" (albeit not by choice). With a pillar of fire, God "provided a light to guide them on their way into the solitary depths of the desert." The Israelites' journey to the promised land was spent exclusively in the desert, and Eucherius put a providential spin on their special status: "Could not the children of Israel have arrived at the promised land without first having lived in the desert? . . . Let him live in an uninhabited land, he who desires 'to see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living,' and whosoever wants to become a

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<sup>62</sup> DLE 28, 64-65.

<sup>63</sup> DLE 4, 49: "It is told that somebody once asked a wise man in what place he might find God; he responded that his questioner should energetically follow him wherever he might lead; then together they went into the solitary places of the desert. 'Here,' he said, 'is where God is.' For God is not unjustly believed to be there, since he is more easily found there (*Ferunt quendam alio quaerenti quali inesse loco deum crederent respondisse, ut, quo se duceret, impiger sequeretur; tunc comitante eodem ad late patentis eremi secreta venisse et ostendens solitudinis vastae recessum: 'En', inquit, 'ubi deus est'. Nec immerito ibi esse promptius creditur, ubi facilius invenitur*)."

citizen [of heaven] should be guests [of the desert].”<sup>64</sup> In this case, Eucherius played on the different meanings of *terra*: “promised land” of Exodus was fulfilled by a transformation of a “uninhabited land” or “wasteland” into “the land of the living.”

God’s interaction with the physical world was further proof of his favor towards solitary places. Eucherius emphasized God’s manipulation of the natural world in Exodus as well. After seeking God in the “pathless wilderness,” Eucherius clarified that the Israelites were guided through the Red Sea under the “hanging waters looming over them” until they crossed safely and “God allowed the water to resume its natural flow.”<sup>65</sup> Once past that obstacle, Moses later brought a spring from the rock.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, God provided bread from heaven during a period of food shortage in the desert.<sup>67</sup> In Eucherius’ hands, the divine miracles in Exodus took on a decidedly monastic theme: in the wilderness, God can manipulate the natural order of the landscape to provide for the faithful.

### ***Eucherius, Natural Metaphors and the Textual Ecology of the eremus***

Eucherius extended the theme of manipulation by interpreting the desert as a space of physical and spiritual cultivation. Through scriptural readings of both local landscapes and a more general conception of the *eremus*, Eucherius’ *De laude* constitutes a textual ecology: Eucherius explained the production of good monastic practice by

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<sup>64</sup> *DLE* 16, 58, citing Ps. 27.13, 116.9: “Quid, quod filii Israhel ad illam desiderabilem terram non nisi habitatione eremi pervenerunt? . . . Habitet inhabitabilem terram, qui vult videre bona domini in regione vivorum, sit hospes huius, qui civis esse contendit illius.”

<sup>65</sup> *DLE* 9-10, 53: “nudata namque rursum refluo aequore operiens iter eorum.”

<sup>66</sup> *DLE* 11, 54.

<sup>67</sup> *DLE* 12, 54-55.

constantly referring to natural features. Early in *De laude*, Eucherius had established the image of God as cultivator of monastic landscapes:

Credo, his illam locupletem in fructibus voluit et pro indulgentioris naturae vice hanc sanctorum dare fecundam, ut sic pinguescerent fines deserti et, cum rigaret *de superioribus suis montes*, abundarent quoque multiplicata fruge convalles, locorumque damna suppleret, cum habitationem sterilem habitatore ditaret.<sup>68</sup>

I believe that [God] made some places fruitful and productive by the gift of nature, and other parts to be fruitful in holy people; thus the edges of the desert grow fruitful, when he ‘watered the hills from the heights above’, the valleys were abundant with rich crops; and he supplied [and] enriched the sterile places with inhabitants, lest any place go to waste.

Seen in this way, God becomes the cultivator of a spiritual topography. The image is one of an inverted environment: shoots and trees are not meant to grow in abundance in an actual desert landscape. Although deserts are known for their “fine sand (*tenuis pulvis*),” they still provide a firm foundation for the monastic life.<sup>69</sup> Eucherius’ interpretation was rooted firmly in a language of the natural world: the desert’s fecundity meant that prayer would reach God more easily than from other places.<sup>70</sup> The desert, Eucherius insisted, was where Christ preferred his monks to pray.<sup>71</sup> The desert landscape actively facilitated prayer and produced monks.

All of these observations were a prelude to Eucherius’ ode to the natural world of the desert towards the end of *De laude*:

Non est infructuosum, ut creditur, non est istud sterile eremi solum nec infecunda arentis saxa deserti. Illic multiplex germen et centenos accola fructus recondit . . . Hic interioris hominis pratum et voluptas, hinc incultum desertum, illic mira amoenitate iocundam est, eademque corporis est eremus, animae paradisos. Nulla iam quamvis fertiliis tellus terrae eremi se comparatione iactaverit. Est terra

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<sup>68</sup> *DLE* 5, 49-50, citing Ps. 103.13.

<sup>69</sup> *DLE* 34, 68.

<sup>70</sup> *DLE* 34, 68.

<sup>71</sup> *DLE* 34, 68.

aliqua frugibus ditis? In hac maxime nascitur frumentum illud, quod esurientes adipe suo satiat. Est alia gravidis laeta vinetis? In hac maxime profertur vinum illud, quod bene *laetificat cor hominis*. Est alia pascuis praestans? In hac saluberrime pascunt oues illae, de quibus dicitur: *Pasce oves meas*. Est alia floribus picta vernantibus? In hac maxime verus ille *flos campi et lilium convallium* refulget. Postremo alia speciosis exultans metallis, alia vero auro suo fulva est? In hac varii lapidum micant vibrante luce fulgores. Ita terra haec singulis terris maior ad singula omnes longe praecedat bonis omnibus.<sup>72</sup>

The soil of the desert is not sterile and unfruitful, as it is believed to be, for the dry, stony [terrain] of the desert is not barren. [A sower] has concealed manifold shoots and hundreds of fruit trees there . . . Here is a pleasant meadow for the inner man; here in the uncultivated desert, it is beautiful with a joyful pleasantness, and the corporeal desert [becomes] a paradise of the soul. No field, however fertile, vaunts itself in comparison with the desert. Is a land known for its grain? Here [in the desert] grain is produced that satisfies the hungry with its richness. Is another place pleased by its heavy vines? Here an abundance of wine is produced that “rejoices the human heart” [Ps. 103.13]. Is another place illustrious for its pastures? Here is a place where those sheep healthily graze, of whom it is said, “Feed my sheep” [Jn 21.17]. Is some country painted with flourishing flowers? Here blossoms the true “flower of the field and lily of the valley” [Sg 2.1]. Is the next place known for its beautiful metals, another for its tawny gold? Here the varied beauty of stones shine with shimmering light. [The desert] compares well with any single land and surpasses all of them in its many benefits.

Eucherius’ description is an exegetical rendering of a physical landscape. In his *Formularae spiritalis intelligentiae*, an encyclopedia of scriptural symbols and images, Eucherius had described the human body as an arid landscape: “The earth is man himself. As the gospel [says]: ‘And some fell on good ground’ [Mark 4.8], likewise on the bad part of the sinner, ‘You will eat earth all the days of your life’ [Gen. 3.14]. And the flesh of man is dry [and] unfruitful; [as it says] in Ecclesiasticus: ‘Cover the dry land with malice and deceit’ [Eccl. 37.3]. The dust [of the earth] is the sinner or carnal vanity; [as it says] in the Psalm: ‘[The wicked are like] dust, which the wind blows away’ [Ps. 1.4].”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> DLE 39-41, 73-75.

<sup>73</sup> *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* 3.228-34, CCSL 66, 13-14: “Terra homo ipse; in euangelio: *Aliud cecidit in terram bonam*; item in malam partem de peccatore: *Terram*

By this reading, desert landscapes could fashion a purer body, one that reflected the fruitfulness of the landscapes Eucherius described in *De laude eremi*. Each element of the natural world Eucherius invoked here was susceptible to or a product of human manipulation: a tilled meadow, grapevines, metal deposits and similar resources.

Despite the clear exegetical benefits of fruitful landscapes, Eucherius insisted that none in reality could compare with the “pleasant meadow for the inner man.” To clarify this concept, Eucherius referred to God as *Agricola Deus*—“God the Farmer”—in his *Formulae*.<sup>74</sup> Eucherius’ *Formulae* is firm evidence for his interest in the scriptural images of natural features, which he applied to real, monastic landscapes in *De laude eremi*.<sup>75</sup> In *De laude*, the desert was a pleasant place because God could dwell there. Unlike the Jura Mountains, cluttered with rocks and dense forests, Eucherius depicted Lérins as naturally beautiful but far more empty; there, in the silence, monks could meet God.

When Eucherius turned his attention to Lérins itself, he described a landscape with all the attributes he invoked in chapters 39-41, submitting a series of rhetorical questions to his audience while revealing the desert’s superiority at every turn. In specific reference to Lérins, Eucherius insisted that “I honor my own Lérins above all” the other monastic landscapes: “Fountains bubble, grasses thrive, flowers gleam, and the joys of sight and smell show those possessing paradise [on earth] what they shall possess [in

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*edes omnibus diebus uitae tuae. Arida infructuosi hominis caro; in Ecclesiastico: Cooperire aridam malitia et dolositate. Pulus peccatoris uel carnis uanitas; in psalmo: Sicut puluis quem proicit uentus.”*

<sup>74</sup> Eucherius, *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* 3.261, CCSL 66, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Eucherius paired biblical passages for many of the earth’s natural features in *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* 3, CCSL 66, 13-24.

heaven].”<sup>76</sup> It is at this moment that Eucherius separated his discussion from the abstract and planted it firmly in the soil of Lérins. On the whole, Eucherius was not concerned the actual Lérinian environment in *De laude*, but depictions of the natural world and language in praise of solitude were interchangeable themes. Eucherius’ discussion of the connections among natural landscapes and scriptural meaning illustrate just how exegetically charged Lérinian attitudes towards the natural world could be in the fifth century. Within the parameters of *De laude*, the natural world was meaningless until weighted with biblical or otherwise spiritual significance. Eucherius, aware of his own and his colleagues’ ostentatious rejection of urban life, used the natural world to express isolation and its inherent benefits. In *De laude*, Eucherius did not substantively engage with the natural world itself as much as he appropriated its meaning for exegetical and monastic purposes. His use of a language of the natural world fits far more comfortably with metaphorical interpretations we will encounter in Chapter 3. In *De laude*, Eucherius also argued for the rehabilitative effects of natural beauty; on a deeper level, beautiful landscapes at Lérins shaped and reflected monastic life there. For Eucherius, the desert was a state of seclusion, a landscape in which one was most likely to meet God.

### **The *Vita patrum iurensium* as a Textual Ecology: Foundation, Habitation and Cultivation**

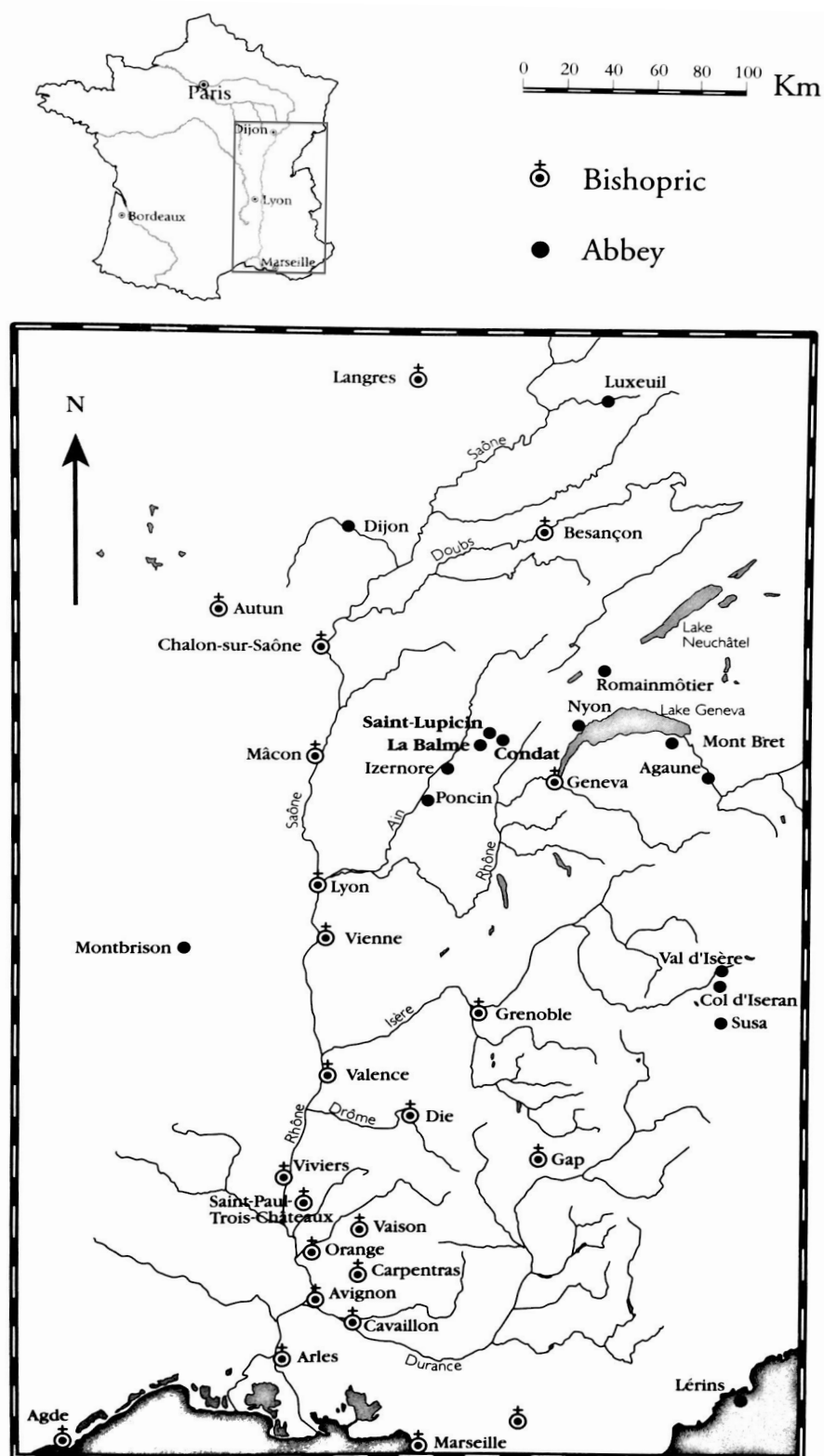
As a theorist of the monastic desert as a concept, practice and place, Eucherius’ expression of the *eremus* as “a boundless temple of our God (*incircumscriptum dei nostri templum*)” emblemizes several problems confronting monastic practice in wilderness

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<sup>76</sup> *DLE* 42, 76: “Aquis scatens, herbis virens, floribus renitens, visibus odoribusque iocunda, paradisum possidentibus se exhibet quam possidebunt.”



places: what might a “boundless temple” look like? What might Eucherius’ image mean in practice, and in reference to the natural environment of a monastic community? An ideal case study of these problems can be found in the *Vita patrum iurensium* (“The Life of the Jura Fathers”), an account written by an unnamed early sixth-century author about a monastic community situated between the Rhône and Ain rivers in the Jura Mountains, near Lake Geneva on the border of modern Switzerland and France (Map 1.3). The community was founded by two brothers, Romanus and Lupicinus, in the 430s, and subsequently developed under a third abbot, Eugendus, whom the unnamed author as a child knew personally.



**Map 1.3:** Condat and the Jura Mountains. Condat is located just west of Lake Geneva. Taken from Vivian *et al.*, *Jura*, i.

Around the year 435, Romanus, at the fairly advanced age of 35, entered the Jura wilderness to become an ascetic. According to his biographer, writing nearly a century after the fact, he came from a well-to-do family with a sizable estate near Isarnodorum (modern Izernore), mere miles southwest of the Jura ridges, about a day's walk.<sup>77</sup> Romanus and his more ardently ascetic brother Lupicinus formed a small monastic community in the wilderness, eventually constituting Condadisco (Saint-Claude in Condat) and Lauconnis (Saint-Lupicin). The former, as we saw in the introduction, was called such because two rivers—the Bienne and the Tacon—met at that place.<sup>78</sup> At the time the community was established, it was positioned on a borderland; the nearby region of Sapaudia (Savoy) would be relinquished to the Burgundian kingdom in 443.<sup>79</sup> It is impossible to know how aware Romanus, Lupicinus and their community were of political realities at the time. The community itself was not as isolated as the anonymous author insisted. Romanus, although styling himself as a hermit, traveled extensively, including a notable visit to Besançon where Hilary ordained him a priest, an office his biographer claimed Romanus resisted.<sup>80</sup> Despite these political contexts, the anonymous author's conception of the desert as a real place emerged clearly from the narrative: the rural Jura communities worked the land, channeled local rivers, and built watermills to

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<sup>77</sup> *VPI* 4, 242.

<sup>78</sup> See Tim Vivian, Kim Vivian and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Lives of the Jura Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 103, n. 24; and Martine, *VPI*, 245-46.

<sup>79</sup> The *Chronica Gallica* of 452, *MGH AA* 9, 660, simply states that "Sapaudia Burgundionum reliquiis datur cum indigenis dividenda."

<sup>80</sup> *VPI* 18-21. On the background for the relationships among local abbots, monastic leaders and the episcopate, I have consulted Mathisen, *Factionalism*, 141-72, especially 147-53.

manipulate and manage wild landscapes. Eventually, they also founded a female house for their sister at Balma (La Balme), where Romanus would be buried in 463. Collectively, their numbers swelled to about 150 by the year 460, attracting monks from all over the region, especially Nyon.<sup>81</sup>

Decades prior to the composition of the anonymous *Vita* of the Jura monks, Sidonius Apollinaris (d. 489) had already confirmed the Jura's special status as "a foretaste of celestial and heavenly habitation."<sup>82</sup> Sidonius' assessment of Jura monasticism meshes well with Eucherius' image of a "boundless temple"—both were natural places that suggested a heavenly life to come. The links between Eucherius and Romanus might have been close as well. As Friedrich Prinz has shown, Eucherius and Romanus likely lived at an unknown monastery near Lyon around the same time.<sup>83</sup> It is possible that Eucherius furnished the community with copies of the *Liber vitae sanctorum patrum* (the "Lives of the Holy Fathers") and the *Institutiones abbatum* (the "Institutes of the Abbots"), which probably included works of Cassian, and that Romanus obtained copies of them for his new community.<sup>84</sup> Not only was Eucherius probably a

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<sup>81</sup> This narrative is constructed from Martine, VPI, 58-66; and Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich: Kultur und gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung (4. bis 8. Jahrhundert)* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965, repr. 1988), 66-69.

<sup>82</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 4.25, *MGH AA* 8, 76-77: "iam caelestibus supernisque praeludis habitaculis."

<sup>83</sup> Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 66-69.

<sup>84</sup> *VPI* 11, 151-53: "librum Vitae sanctorum Patrum eximiasque Institutiones abbatum." On the Cassian connections, see Martine, 252-53, n. 1. Martine clarifies: "Il paraît désigner ici un recueil de Vies des Pères d'Orient, soit traduites en latin (comme la *Vita Antonii*), soit écrites dans cette langue (comme la *Vita Pauli*). Le seconde titre: *eximiae Institutiones Abbatum* pourrait s'entendre d'un recueil de règles orientales traduites en latin (*Regula Pachomii*, etc.), mais il paraît plus normal d'y reconnaître les *Institutions* de

crucial influence on the introduction of monastic practice in the Jura,<sup>85</sup> but the author of the *VPI* was, three quarters of a century later, transfixed by questions raised by Eucherius' evocative description of desert landscapes.

The problems Eucherius presented about fifteen years before Romanus entered the Jura wilderness can be approached through a set of questions: what was the character of the interplay between monastic and non-human environments in the Jura? How did the author of a hagiographic and historical work understand, represent and (perhaps most crucially) use the natural world of the Jura in the service of his broader aims? How did the physical environments in which these holy men participated define the holiness of Romanus, Lupicinus and Eugendus, as well as the changing status of their community? The *VPI* emerges from the early sixth century as a possible answer to Eucherius' assessment of the *eremus*: what might a "boundless temple" look like? As a case study, the place of the natural world and the non-human in the *VPI* will be central, with special emphasis on the interaction among the three holy men and their environments. The *VPI* constitute the author's exercise in a textual ecology in constant reference to the natural world, organized tightly around three controlling themes: foundation, habitation, and environmental manipulation or cultivation.<sup>86</sup>

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Cassien, publiées dès 417-418. Cassien lui même intitule son ouvrage tantôt *Institutiones*, tantôt *Instituta coenobiorum*."

<sup>85</sup> These are points demonstrated by Pepino, "Eucherius," 90.

<sup>86</sup> For a full assessment of the natural allusions, metaphors and images in the *VPI* that constitute a textual ecology, see Appendix, 493-96.

***The Shape of the Vita patrum iurensium: Content, Contexts and Scholarly Uses***

The *VPI* takes a balanced shape around the lives of the three main contributors to Jura monasticism:

**Table 1.2: Narrative structure of the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium***

1-3	Preface. The unnamed author addresses two monks of Agaune, John and Armentarius.
<i>Life of Romanus</i>	
4-11	Romanus' origins and foundation at Condat.
12-17	Romanus' brother Lupicinus and others join him.
18-21	Hilary of Arles ordains Romanus a priest while Romanus resists.
22-26	The community grows and Romanus and Lupicinus establish a female community at Balma for their sister, whom has also joined them.
27-35	Romanus resists the devil's temptations.
36-40	Romanus resists gluttony within the community.
41-51	Romanus' miracles.
52-58	The deacon Sabinianus, who is in charge of the community's mills, resists the devil.
59-61	Conclusions, and the death of Romanus.
<i>Life of Lupicinus</i>	
62-67	Lupicinus' origins and ascetic practices.
68-78	Lupicinus' miracles.
79-81	Two monks escape the community.
82-86	Lupicinus addresses the community.
87-91	The monk Dativus escapes the monastery and is attacked by the devil.
92-95	Lupicinus defends himself and freedmen at court against Chilperic I.
96-110	Lupicinus' prayers aid the count Agrippinus, who goes on pilgrimage to Rome.
111-14	Life at the monastery under Lupicinus.
115-17	Conclusions, and the death of Lupicinus.
<i>Life of Eugendus</i>	
119-20	Eugendus' origins.
121-27	Eugendus' first vision of paradise.
128	Digression on the abbacy of Leunianus.
129-34	Eugendus' way of life, abbacy, and refusal of ordination.
135-37	Eugendus' second vision of darkness and light in the monastery.
138-40	Eugendus becomes abbot and makes enemies.
141-51	Eugendus' healing miracles and pastoral gifts.
152-56	Peter, Andrew, and Paul visit Eugendus in a third vision.
157	Martin visits Eugendus in a fourth vision.
161-64	A fire in the 470s-80s destroys much of the monastic complex.

165-68	Eugendus' gifts of prediction.
169-74	After the fire, Eugendus builds a common <i>xenodochium</i> and leads by example.
175-79	The death of Eugendus, and a general conclusion.

The *VPI* is balanced among the lives of the two founders and subsequent abbot, covering the period from about 435 up to the close of that century (presumably overlapping with the author's lifetime, since he revealed that he had known Eugendus as a younger man). Each biographical section has its own distinct flavor: Romanus, in the tradition of Antony and Paul the Hermit, lived in close concert with his natural surroundings but exhibited very little control or mastery over them as Martin had done. The anonymous author presented Lupicinus as an abbot whose strict style of governance was reflected by his building projects and regulations of monastic boundaries. Finally, the later abbot Eugendus served as the community's conduit to the divine; most of his *vita* takes place in the worlds of dreams and visions. Taken together, Romanus, Lupicinus and Eugendus constitute a complete monastic leader as the anonymous author charted the community's history across both time and landscape.

The role of the natural world in the *VPI* has elicited very little scholarly interest, but since the *VPI* form a major component of this chapter, its place in current scholarship is especially relevant. Earlier interest in the *VPI* primarily focused on dating the text, as well as evidence for pre-Columbanian monastic practice and building. Shortly after Bruno Krusch's publication of the *Monumenta* edition of the lives, most scholars agreed with him on a composition no earlier than around 800.<sup>87</sup> The favored theory, with some exceptions, was that the *VPI* was part of a larger Carolingian program to appropriate

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<sup>87</sup> Krusch, *MGH SRM* 3, 128-29.

Frankish monastic history.<sup>88</sup> More recently, however, François Martine in his unsurpassed study of the *VPI* demonstrated that the composition date was not long before 515, a theory confirmed by François Masai and now widely accepted.<sup>89</sup> Through a careful study of the author's style and references, Masai demonstrated that the composition must have predated the foundation of Saint-Maurice, famously established by the Burgundian king Sigismund (d. 524) in 515. In this view, Condat's foundation constituted the origins of monastic practice in the wilderness around Agaune, a fact Sigismund's community at Saint-Maurice stridently overwrote.<sup>90</sup>

With the date established, scholars after Masai could begin mining specific details of the *VPI* for the fifth- and sixth-century developments of monastic practice around Agaune. The examples are vast and varied: in an important 1981 article, Edward James used the *VPI* as evidence for the division between "old Gallic hagiography"<sup>91</sup> of the sixth century, which emphasized the impoverishment of monastic life, and the seventh and eighth centuries, which saw a surge of "open descriptions of the beauty of the monastery

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<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Louis Duchesne, "La Vie des Pères du Jura," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire publiés par l'Ecole française de Rome* 18 (1898): 1-16, at 16.

<sup>89</sup> See Martine, 14-57; and François Masai, "La *Vita patrum iurensium* et les débuts du monachisme à Saint-Maurice d'Agaune," in *Festschrift Bernhard Bischoff zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Bernard Bischoff, Johanne Autenrieth, and Franz Brunhölzl (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1971), 43-69.

<sup>90</sup> Ian Wood and Masai both discussed the possibility that Agaune ascetics from the Jura region were appropriated as one of the *turmae* at Saint-Maurice's foundation; see Wood, "Prelude" and Masai, "La *Vita patrum iurensium*," 67-68. For a discussion of the local power of Sigismund's cult, see Frederick Paxton, "Power and the Power to Heal: the Cult of St. Sigismund of Burgundy," *Early Medieval Europe* 2.2 (1993): 95-110.

<sup>91</sup> Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 162.



buildings and the cult objects, the richness of the cultivated monastery land.”<sup>92</sup> James highlighted the difficulties of using the archaeological record to mirror shifts in monastic practice, but such examples run parallel with a change in the archaeological record from wooden buildings (*VPI* 161-64) to more sophisticated architecture. The foundation at Balma has provided scholars of female monasticism such as Jean Prou and Lindsay Rudge with fruitful evidence, both for monastic practice and the arrangement of physical space.<sup>93</sup> Other scholars have used the *VPI* to sharpen our understanding of Antony and the desert myth in the Western ascetic tradition.<sup>94</sup> More recently, following Barbara Rosenwein and others, Jesse Keskiaho has used the temptations of Romanus as evidence for the representation of emotions in pre-Carolingian and Anglo-Latin hagiographies.<sup>95</sup> The *VPI* has offered scholars evidence of a political value as well: Patrick Amory demonstrated that the *Vita Lupicini* intentionally reversed ethnic qualities by portraying

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<sup>92</sup> Edward James, “Archaeology and the Merovingian Monastery,” in *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, B.A.R. 113, ed. Howard Clarke and Mary Brennan (Oxford: B.A.R., 1981), 33-55, at 38.

<sup>93</sup> Jean Prou, *La clôture des moniales* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996); Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 224; Lindsay Rudge, “Dedicated Women and Dedicated Spaces: Caesarius of Arles and the Foundation of St. John,” in *Western Monasticism ante litteram: The Spaces of Monastic Observance in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Hendrik Dey and Elizabeth Fentress (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 99-116.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Elisabeth Bertrand, “Die Evagriusübersetzung der *Vita Antonii*: Rezeption - Überlieferung - Edition: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Vitas Patrum-Tradition” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Utrecht, 2006), especially 46-47; Götz Hartmann, *Selbststigmatisierung und Charisma christlicher Heiliger der Spätantike* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 51-94; and Leyser, “The Uses of the Desert.”

<sup>95</sup> Jesse Keskiaho, “The Representations of Emotions Connected to Dreams and Visions in Pre-Carolingian Continental and Anglo-Latin Narratives,” in *Interfaces between Language and Culture in Medieval England: A Festschrift for Matti Kilpiö*, ed. Alaric Hall (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 99-138.

Chilperic (d. 480) as a Roman “patrician.”<sup>96</sup> In a similar vein, Ralph Mathisen and Martin Heinzelmann have noted the *VPI*’s intervention in the conflicts of the 440s between Hilary and Pope Leo I (d. 461).<sup>97</sup> This wide range of studies serves to illustrate just how useful the *VPI* is to modern scholars.

Among the most sustained contributions to the study of the *VPI* is perhaps a 1981 article by Ian Wood. For Wood, the *VPI* was a “blue-print” for the *vita* of an ascetic monastic founder for fledgling communities of the fifth century: “like most pieces of hagiography its main concern was not to describe a wonderworker, but the monastic routine laid down by the founders.”<sup>98</sup> In this reading, the *VPI* constitutes a pattern of ordered, organized monastic life in the Gallic wilderness. For Frederick Paxton, the *VPI* was “in essence a monastic rule,”<sup>99</sup> a view that confirms comparative studies of the *VPI* and the Benedictine Rule.<sup>100</sup> More recently, Conrad Leyser has extended the *VPI*’s ordering tendencies to “taming the desert in the fifth century.” For Leyser, the unnamed author of the *VPI* was most closely influenced by Cassian and Augustine when he worked out “how to retain the magic of the desert while devising workable structures for

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<sup>96</sup> Patrick Amory, “Names, Ethnic Identity, and Community in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Burgundy,” *Viator* 25 (1994): 1-30, at 9-10; see also Herwig Wolfram, “Neglected Evidence on the Accommodation of Barbarians in Gaul,” in *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Walter Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 181-84, at 182.

<sup>97</sup> Martin Heinzelmann, “The ‘Affair’ of Hilary of Arles (445) and Gallo-Roman Identity in the Fifth Century,” in *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?*, ed. John Drinkwater and Hugh Elton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 239-51, at 242; on the conflict more generally, I am following Mathisen, *Factionalism*, 153-54.

<sup>98</sup> Ian Wood, “A Prelude to Columbanus: The Monastic Achievement in the Burgundian Territories,” in *Columbanus*, ed. Clarke and Brennan, 3-32, at 4.

<sup>99</sup> Paxton, “Sigismund of Burgundy,” 100.

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 67-70, 77-79; and François Masai, “Une source insoupçonnée de la Regula Benedicti: la *Vita Patrum Iurensium*,” in *Hommages à André Boutemy*, ed. Guy Cambier (Brussels: Latomus, 1976), 252-63.

community life” in the wilderness.<sup>101</sup> In short, the Jura wilderness, “like Antony’s desert, becomes a city.”<sup>102</sup>

As we have just seen, most modern scholarship on the *VPI* has arrived at a consensus that the lives of Romanus, Lupicinus and Eugendus constituted a treatise both on “desert” life in the West and regular monastic discipline. But keeping the interplay of monasticism and the natural world in mind, the author of the *VPI* was not only interested in these components of monastic life. The natural world was a constant theme to which the author frequently returned, as the Appendix clearly shows.<sup>103</sup> The Jura Mountains were not just a passive desert stage; “desert talk” is simply not a useful enough way to understand the content of the *VPI* fully. The Jura wilderness was brimming with physical and symbolic possibility: the erection of a water mill and an exegetical rendering of fir trees enjoyed equal space. The Jura landscape was, in other words, an active participant in and shaper of monastic life. The author described the community’s history as mutually reinforcing processes of claiming the land, inhabiting it and cultivating or manipulating it. In the Jura, landscape compelled behavior.

### ***Rocks, Firs and Streams: Claiming and Inhabiting Land in the Jura***

Our unnamed author began describing this process with a crucial opening passage addressed to two monks of Agaune, John and Armentarius. In it, he explained the etymology of Agaune: “Your *Acaunus*, in the ancient Gallic speech—thus in the beginning through its nature (*per naturam*) and now also through the church (the truthful

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<sup>101</sup> Leyser, “The Uses of the Desert,” 129.

<sup>102</sup> Leyser, “The Uses of the Desert,” 129.

<sup>103</sup> Appendix, 493-96.

prefiguration of Peter)—is recognized to be ‘rock (*petra*)’; may your *caritas* recognize among the forest of pine and fir of the Jura that very same [rock] of mystical import discovered long ago by the psalmist in the fields of the forest (*in campis siluae*).”<sup>104</sup> From the outset the author argued for the importance of place, linking Rome, Agaune and the Jura in a single phrase. The Jura wilderness was, in other words, a suitable place for God’s “rock” or dwelling place. The author made a bold claim for the Jura landscape by echoing Psalm 131.3-7:

Si intraero in tabernaculum domus meae si adsedero super lectum straminis mei  
 si dederō somnum oculis meis et palpebris dormitationem  
 donec inueniam locum Domino tabernaculo Deo Iacob  
 ecce audiuius illum in Ephrata inuenimus illum in regione saltus  
 intremus in tabernacula eius adoremus scabillum pedum eius.

If I shall enter into the tabernacle of my house: if I shall go up into the bed  
 wherein I lie:  
 If I shall give sleep to my eyes, or slumber to my eyelids, or rest to my temples:  
 until I found out a place for the Lord, a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.  
 Behold we have heard of it in Ephrata: we have found it in the fields of the wood.  
 We will go into his tabernacle: we will adore in the place where his feet stood.

By situating both Agaune and the Jura in the psalmist’s search for a place for God’s dwelling place, the *VPI* author gave meaning to the image of a forest. Unlike Eucherius’ abstractions and metaphors in *De laude eremi*, this figurative speech had immediate and concrete relevance to the local landscape. Much more directly, the author drew a parallel between “your ancient Gallic speech (*uester Gallico priscoque sermone*)” and “the truthful prefiguration of Peter (*ueridica praefiguratione Petri*).” The *natura*—or character of being—of Agaune and its environs made an original claim: it was known as

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<sup>104</sup> *VPI* 3, 240: “Quia ergo Acaunus uester Gallico priscoque sermone tam primitus per natura quam nunc quoque per ecclesiam, ueridica praefiguratione Petri, petra esse dinoscitur, agnoscat tamen caritas uestra et inter pineas abiegnasque Iurensium siluas ipsam quondam a psalmographo in campis siluae mystica significatione repertam.”

God's rock in the wilderness, first through its *natura* (*primitus per naturam*), but also now through the church there (*per ecclesiam*). Gallic language, as much as Hebrew Scripture, was a prophetic sign that could already be read in the landscape. Scripture was reenacted in the Jura's natural places. How else, our author wondered, might a Gallic "rock" have been embedded there? Both, in his reckoning, were signs of future fulfillment.

The prologue to the *VPI* set out a powerful argument for the importance of a place and its landscape. The author implored his audience to discover "that very same [rock]" in the Jura. Invoking the psalmist's search for God *in regione saltus*, rural Gaul was suitable for God's tabernacle, and the natural world of the Jura Mountains was essential to that story. The author imparted solid meaning to a real landscape, claiming it as part of the larger Christian universe. An otherwise innocuous etymological observation was a forceful statement of intent and a bold claim on behalf of the Jura landscape.

Soon enough, Romanus would inhabit that landscape. Directly after the prologue, the author described the foundation and topography at length:

uicinas uille Iurensium siluas intrauit. Quas huc illucque professioni congruas aptasque circumiens, repperit tandem ulterius inter saxosa conuallia culturae patulum locum, qui, altrinsecus triiugi montium paululum ardua secedente natura, in planitiem aliquantulum relaxatur. Illic namque bifida fluuiorum in solidum concurrente natura, mox etiam ab unitate elementi iam conditi Condadiscone loco uulgus indidit nomen. Cumque oportunitatem domicilii nouus posceret hospes, repperit ab orientale parte sub radice saxosi montis, porrectis in orbitam ramis, densissimam abietem, quae patulis diffusa comis, uelut quondam palma Paulum, ita texit ista discipulum. Extra cuius arboris orbem fons inriguus gelidissima fluuenta praestabat, ex quo etiam hodie terebratis lignis ulterius in monasterium educti latices pro quodam hereditatis . . . Haec ergo ei supradicta, ut diximus, arbor a feruore aestuum uel frigore imbrium, tamquam uere meritorum gratia uernans, praebuit iugiter tecta uirentia.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *VPI* 5-8, 242-46.

[Romanus] found beyond [the forests] an open place for cultivation among the rocky valleys, in which, beyond three mountain ridges, the natural steepness gave way and eased into a small plain. Since twin rivers, concurrent by nature, joined together [there], the people soon gave the place the name “Condadisco” [Condat], since the streams had become one.<sup>106</sup> When the traveller [Romanus] was looking for an appropriate place to live, he found to the east, at the base of a rocky mountain, a dense fir tree whose branches, spread out in a circle, were covered with an abundance [of needles]; just as the palm tree once covered Paul [the Hermit], this tree now covered his disciple. Beyond the ambit of the tree’s branches, a flowing spring poured forth the iciest water; and even today its waters, channeled with wooden pipes to the distant monastery, are in this way [provided] for [Romanus’] heirs . . . as I said above, this tree always provided [Romanus with a] green roof against the boiling heat of summer and the freezing rains of winter because, on account of his merits, it enjoyed a truly perpetual spring.

In the author’s account, the fir tree was central to the foundation of Condat, since it stood waiting for Romanus. As an evergreen, the tree provided the shelter of a building; the author described its evergreen nature as owing to Romanus’ consistent merits. Seen in this way, both holy man and tree were in concert, mutually reinforcing the benefits of the other. The fir was also a natural holy place in the landscape prefiguring Romanus’ arrival, compelling him to settle under it as a hermit.

The Paul referred to here is the famous hermit (d. c. 343), not the apostle, credited with being the first major ascetic by his biographer Jerome around 375. Famously, in both the *Vita Pauli* and the *Vita Antonii*, Paul and Antony met each other in the Egyptian

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<sup>106</sup> “Condadisco” is a proper name that only appears in the manuscripts for the *VPI* and once in Gregory of Tours’ as “Condatiscone monasterium” in his *Liber vitae patrum*, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 214. As Martine, *VPI*, 245-46, n. 6, has made clear, “Condat” is actually an abridged translation (a “traduction inexacte ou abrégée”) of *Condade*, a Celtic word for “confluence.” In Condat’s case, the “confluence” refers to the rivers Bienne and Tacon, and the anonymous author linked “Condat” with *condere*, “to put together.” Martine thought the anonymous author was wrong to do so, since that etymology does not explain the suffix Martine found to be “demeure partiellement énigmatique”—still partly a mystery.

desert. The *VPI* author thus claimed legitimacy from the most illustrious of sources, variously invoking the authority of Paul and Antony, as well as Martin in other places. Paul, too, had established himself at the base of a high mountain, in a cave beneath an ancient palm tree. Similarly, a nearby stream sustained him in the desert. As we can see, our author did not just cite Jerome's *Vita Pauli*, but quoted it extensively:

**Table 1.3: Comparison of Jerome's *Vita Pauli* and the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium*.**

<p>Jerome, <i>Vita Pauli</i> 5:          Quod ubi prudentissimus adolescens intellexit, ad montium desertu confugiens, dum persecutionis finem praestolaretur, necessitate in uoluntatem uertit, ac paulatim progrediens, rursusque subsistens, atque hoc idem saepius faciens, tandem reperit <b>saxeum montem</b>, ad cuius <b>radices</b> haud grandis spelunca lapide claudebatur. Quo remote (ut test cupiditas hominum occulta cognoscere), audius explorans, animaduertit intus grande uestibulum, quod aperto desuper coelo, <b>patulis diffusa ramis uetus palma contexerat, fontem lucidissimum</b> ostendens.<sup>107</sup></p>	<p><i>VPI</i> 7:          ...uicinas uille Iurensium siluas intrauit. Quas huc illucque professioni congruas aptasque circumiens, repperit tandem ulterius inter saxosa conuallia culturae patulum locum, qui, altrinsecus triiugi montium paululum ardua secedente natura, in planitiem aliquantulum relaxatur . . . Cumque oportunitatem domicilii nouus posceret hospes, repperit ab orientale parte sub <b>radice saxosi montis</b>, porrectis in orbitam ramis, densissimam abietem, <b>quae patulis diffusa comis</b>, uelut quondam palma Paulum, ita <b>texit</b> ista discipulum. Extra cuius arboris orbem <b>fons</b> inriguus <b>gelidissima fluenta</b> praestabat, ex quo etiam hodie terebratis lignis ulterius in monasterium educti latices pro quodam hereditatis.</p>
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While Paul was the first hermit, Romanus later became the first Jura Father. This was an overt parallel, not a casual deployment of hagiographic motifs. The backgrounds of both men were starkly different: Paul had fled persecution, while Romanus voluntarily left the comforts of a well-born family. Yet the natural features of both *vitae*—a high mountain, sheltering tree and nourishing stream—mirror each other closely, echoing the

<sup>107</sup> Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 5, *PL* 23: col. 21.

statement of intent from the *VPI*'s prologue. Paradoxically, the author of the *VPI* imported features of the Egyptian landscape into a much more verdant and diverse environment in the West, appropriating particular natural features as much as he did a hagiographic model.

Romanus' fir tree fits gracefully with the argument from the prologue. Scriptural references of the fir tree (*abies*) are almost exclusively in the context of Solomon's Temple. For example, Hiram of Tyre delivered firs and cedars to Solomon for the purpose of covering the Temple floor: "With the multitude of my chariots I have gone up to the height of the mountains, to the top of Lebanon, and have cut down its tall cedars, and its choice fir trees. And I have entered into the furthest parts thereof, and the forest of its Carmel."<sup>108</sup> On the same subject, Isaiah elaborated that "the fir trees also have rejoiced over thee, and the cedars of Libanus [i.e. Lebanon], saying: Since thou has slept, there hath none come up to cut us down."<sup>109</sup> Perhaps the most powerful scriptural evocation of the fir tree for our author is also found in Isaiah 41.18-20:

Aperiam in decalvatis collibus flumina et in medio vallium fontes; ponam desertum in stagna aquarum et terram aridam in rivos aquarum. Plantabo in deserto cedrum, acaciam et myrtum et lignum olivae; ponam in solitudine abietem, ulmum et cupressum simul. ut videant et sciant et recogitent et intellegant pariter quia manus Domini fecit hoc, et Sanctus Israel creavit illud.

I will open rivers in the high hills, and fountains in the midst of the plains: I will turn the desert into pools of waters, and the impassable land into streams of waters. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, and the thorn, and the myrtle, and the olive tree: I will set in the desert the fir tree, the elm, and the box together, that

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<sup>108</sup> II Kings 19.23 (echoing Is. 37.24): "in multitudine curruum meorum ascendi excelsa montium in summitate Libani et succidi sublimes cedros eius electas abietes eius et ingressus sum usque ad terminos eius saltum Carmeli eius."

<sup>109</sup> Is. 14.8: "abietes quoque laetatae sunt super te et cedri Libani ex quo dormisti non ascendit qui succidat nos."



they may see and know, and consider, and understand together that the hand of the Lord hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel hath created it.

As contemporaries of Romanus, both Augustine<sup>110</sup> and Paulinus of Nola (d. 431), had understood fir trees as central to the construction of both Noah's Ark and Solomon's Temple, representative of holy men and women: for Paulinus, the fir tree's "limbs are the holy ones who are black and blessed fir trees as well as flowering palms and cedars that multiply, because in the Church, which is the mountain of God, they are tallest in height of merit like the firs on their mountains."<sup>111</sup> Exegetically speaking, fir trees belonged to nature's solitary places. After all, Romanus had to climb mountains and traverse the wilderness to find his fir tree. They should be sought out, discovered and, in Solomon's case, fashioned into something holy. Fir trees sheltered divinely chosen people and objects. For Romanus, the fir tree became, to use Eucherius' evocative phrase, a "boundless temple of our God." The spirit of Eucherius' argument about the desert was matched by its treatment in the specific environment of the Jura.

With these exegetical resonances in mind, the author described the growth of the community in close reference to the fir tree and other natural features:

Cumque illud, ut ita dixerim, natale sanctorum iam paene nequiret auctos ambire, haud procul ab arbore illa in quodam molli colliculo, quo nunc in memoriam

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<sup>110</sup> Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* 95.13.5-7, *CCSL* 39, 1351: "Then shall all the trees of the forest be exalted, because the enormous trees (*ingentes arbores*) of cedar and cypress have been cut down, and the incorruptible wood was carried to the construction of the house [of God] (*Tunc exsultabunt omnia ligna silvarum, quia praecisae ingentes arbores cedrinae et cyparissinae, et imputribilia ligna translata sunt ad aedificationem domus*)."

<sup>111</sup> Paulinus, *Epistulae* 23.29, *CSEL* 29, 185: "Ipsius enim et membra sunt sancti, qui sicut et palmae florentes et cedri multiplicabiles, ita et abietes nigrae et bonae sunt, quia in ecclesia hoc est dei monte uerticibus meritorum eminent, ut abietes in suis montibus."

secretae orationis est locus, dedolatis leuigatisque diligentissime lignis, et sibi construxere habitacula et praeparauere uenturis.<sup>112</sup>

If I might speak of it thus, since that birthplace of saints could now hardly contain their increased numbers, [they settled] not very far from the tree on a small hill with a gentle slope, where the oratory for private [prayer] is now positioned in [their] memory, [and] with the wood hewn and planed with greatest care, they built little dwellings for themselves and prepared others for future residents.

This passage is among the few in the *VPI* in which built structures were briefly described. Even still, the author fixed Romanus' fir tree as the original reference point "not very far (*haud procul*)" from the oratory. Crucially in this description, the monastic settlement, the original tree and an oratory familiar to contemporary monks came together. And on a metaphorical level, the monks' presence in the landscape was minimal in the description, and took on natural imagery: their "sweet fragrance (*fragrans odor*)"<sup>113</sup> spread like flowers, and they grew like "a most fertile crop not yet adulterated with noxious weeds."<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the place of Romanus' burial "blooms with a succession of signs and strong events."<sup>115</sup> Clearly, the Jura provided enough space for a new community to spread like a crop. Such language helps usher in the next phase of development, that of cultivation.

Until then, the author was careful to strike a balance between Condat's natural inaccessibility on the one hand, and its practical approachability for the sake of monastic growth on the other.<sup>116</sup> The author's vivid images of solitude were very much at home

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<sup>112</sup> *VPI* 13, 254.

<sup>113</sup> *VPI* 14, 254.

<sup>114</sup> *VPI* 16, 256: "uelut seges laetissima dominico utique codenda horreo necdum zizamiorum uitio interpolata."

<sup>115</sup> *VPI* 61, 306: "signorum quoque uirtutumque florente successu."

<sup>116</sup> For Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 221, the anonymous author's insistence on isolation was reflected by the landscapes he described: "L'hagiographe anonyme de la

with Eucherius' descriptions of the *eremus* and the silence that accompanied it: "But, if someone with brave daring decided to cut through this trackless wilderness . . . as well as the dense forest and the piles of fallen trees, [he would find] between the steep valleys between the high ridges [filled with] stags and broad-horned deer," but not much else.<sup>117</sup> But the spiritual health in the "that little nest, (*in nidulo illo*)"<sup>118</sup> depended upon careful moderation of practice: "[Romanus] of course never proceeded further [into the wilderness], nor did he retreat nearer [civilization]."<sup>119</sup> It is probable that Condat was not at all far from Romanus' family estate,<sup>120</sup> in contrast with other regions like the Vosges and Ardennes, whose monastic communities developed closer to settled areas.<sup>121</sup> Despite this, the anonymous author stridently argued for its solitude: none of these descriptions

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*Vie des Pères du Jura* décrit avec beaucoup de détails l'isolement du monastère, difficilement accessible, les commodités rustiques du lieu, qui fournit en abondance eau et baies sauvages, et la situation aussi escarpée et retirée du monastère de femmes qui s'élèvera plus tard auprès de Condat." Although Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 35-36, emphasized exegetical influences on interpretations of nature, he did not recognize the biblical significance in the *VPI*.

<sup>117</sup> *VPI* 9, 248: "Ceterum, si quis solitudinem ipsam inuiam . . . ausu temerario secare deliberet, praeter concretionem siluestrem siue congeries arborum caducarum, inter iuga quoque praecelsa ceruorum platocerumque praerupta conuallia."

<sup>118</sup> *VPI* 12, 252.

<sup>119</sup> *VPI* 10, 248-50: "non scilicet ultra promouens gressum, non citra referens pedem."

<sup>120</sup> Wood, "Columbanus," 4-5, at 5: "Despite his origins Romanus, like other ascetics, broke all family ties by setting off for the forest lands beyond his parental estates. It was often to the marginal land, just within or just beyond estate boundaries, that ascetics journeyed; this was their *desertum*." For Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 232-33: "Bien que la *Vie des Pères du Jura* évoque tout d'un coup, une certaine affluence de frères, de pèlerins, de malades, ce qui laisse supposer l'aménagement des accès plus praticables (ou d'accès ayant toujours existés!)."

<sup>121</sup> Eugen Ewig, "Les Ardennes au haut Moyen Age," in *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien: Gesammelte Schriften (1952-1973)*, ed. Eugen Ewig, Hartmut Atsma, and Matthias Becher (Munich: Artemis, 1976), 523-52; and Fabienne Cardot, *L'espace et le pouvoir: Etude sur l'Austrasie mérovingienne* (Paris: Persée), 218.

provided solid reference points beyond the tree. Seen in this way, Romanus was suspended in a completely natural wilderness, tethered only to his fir tree.

### *Cultivating the Land, Manipulating the Rivers*

While Romanus' hermitage under the fir was in concert with the natural world, he was also careful to bring seeds and a hoe with him into the wilderness in direct imitation of Antony.<sup>122</sup> Romanus' discovery of his fir tree was the primary moment of Condat's foundation. Such an image lends itself gracefully to the solitary life, but Condat would not remain a hermitage for very long. Early on in Romanus' *vita*, the next distinct phase in parallel monastic and natural histories, that of cultivation, began. The community grew rapidly, with consequent environmental impact:

Siquidem cultura loci ipsius pendula collibus uel adclinis inter eminentes scopulos uel acruos, crebro salebrarum labefactata conluuio, non solum in spatiis parua ac difficilis, sed etiam in ipsis frugibus, reditu nutante, torpuerat. Nam ut hiemali asperitate loca ipsa non solum sunt niuibus obruta, sed sepulta, ita uerno aestiuoque uel autumnali tempore aut aestas alterno uicinoque saxorum uapore conflagrat, aut intolerabiles imbres non solum euentilatam culturis asportant in torrentibus terram, sed ipsam etiam incultam ac rigidam saepe cum herbis et arboribus ac fructibus . . . Hoc igitur sanctissimi patres aliquatenus uitare cupientes, in uicinis exinde siluis quae et planities et fecunditate minime fallebantur, exsectis excisisque abietibus, aut falce in prata aut uomere in aequora conplanarunt, ut loca oportuna culturis Condatensium inopiam sublearent.<sup>123</sup>

Hanging as this place was in hills and inclines, among jutting crags and harsh ground, and shaken by the frequent flooding of the rugged landscape, the cultivation of crops there was poor and difficult, not only because of this, but also the mediocre harvests and uncertain yields. For the harsh winter not only covers the place with snow but buries it; so, too in the spring and summer and fall either the summer heat, warmed by the nearby rocks, burns everything up, or the intolerable rains carry away in torrents not only the tilled and cultivated land, but often the uncultivated and rocky earth as well, along with grass, trees, and

<sup>122</sup> *VPI* 10; *Vita Antonii* 25, *PL* 73: col. 449.

<sup>123</sup> *VPI* 22-24, 262-64.

shrubs . . . Desiring thus to alleviate this situation [i.e. the harsh weather and its effects] as much as they could, the holiest fathers felled and removed the fir trees in the adjacent forests, which were by no means lacking; they leveled the meadows with the sickle, and the plains with the plow, so that these places, now ready for cultivation, would relieve the poverty of the Condadiscans.

In the prologue in which the author had drawn distinct connections among Agaune, the Jura Mountains and St. Peter, the image of the rock was foundational in every sense of the word. Yet this time, rocks were both natural isolators and obstacles to cultivation. The author explained the development of agriculture in the Jura to sixth-century contemporaries presumably familiar with the terrain and its challenges: on the one hand, he drew a link between topography and *inopia*, or poverty. On the other, the inhospitality of the landscape meant that the plow had to be used to tame it and make it productive. Cultivation seems only to have occurred because the monks there were besieged by hunger, poor weather and rough terrain. In the text, they exploited the land only minimally. For our author, this was the moment of primary cultivation in parallel with foundation and development of the community.

The *VPI* embedded binary morals in the landscape: a little later in Romanus' *vita*, he clearly linked over-cultivation with gluttony: "with the brothers made confident by fruitful fertility, through disrespect and contempt for their abbot, some of them began to fill themselves with [those things] which were not according to the rule or the custom, but with whatever abundance allowed their bellies and gullets."<sup>124</sup> Where the land had once been harsh and unforgiving, it now provided over-abundance, a luxury inappropriate for the ascetic mode the monks of Condat had carved out in the wilderness. Seen together,

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<sup>124</sup> *VPI* 36, 280: "...fratres fertili fecunditate fidentes, dispecto contemptoque abbate, non quod regulae uel canonis suppeteret, sed quod abundantia contulerat studerent uentri uel gutturi cultius infarcire."

these episodes betray a concern over the effects of expanding habitation and cultivation, as well as the inevitable consequences for both soul and environment: over-cultivation was a moral problem.

Just after this description of the landscape in the text, the author discussed the establishment of a house for women when the sister of Romanus and Lupicinus arrived in the Jura. The author's account directly echoes the description he had just provided:

Nam et propter locum ipsum, in rupe ualde edita, superiecto naturali saxo, prominente quoque cingulo quod cauernas spatiosissimas intus abdebat, de affectu parentali instituentes uirginum matrem . . . Locus ipse, ut, praecisa inaccessibili desuper rupe ac sub cingulo proluxus naturaliter peregisa, nullum ulterius cinguli praestabat egressum, ita ab Orientis parte, artatis paulisper angustis, subitum in terrestri atque aequali solo laxabat egressum.<sup>125</sup>

For near that place, on a very high cliff overshadowed by a prominent, natural stone [archway] that concealed the deepest caverns within, [Romanus and Lupicinus] with parental goodwill established an abbess for the virgins . . . This place, cut off from above by an inaccessible cliff, and isolated naturally beneath the wide archway, presented no exit from that side, and from the East, after small and constricting passes, it suddenly broadened to offer an exit towards solid ground and level earth.

This vivid description of Balma's terrain is among the best examples for the notion of natural suitability for monastic practice. But here, the natural isolation of the female house compelled behavior. Proof for this lay in the fact that "the virgins who had entered it for the reason of renouncing [the secular life] were never seen again outside its gates, *unless they were being carried on their last journey to the cemetery*."<sup>126</sup> As in the rest of the *VPI*, the built features of Balma were almost entirely absent from the text.

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<sup>125</sup> *VPI* 25-26, 264-66.

<sup>126</sup> *VPI* 26, 266-68, emphasis added: "Tanta namque illis temporibus inibi districtio seruabatur, ut, quaecumque uirginum illic causa abrenuntiationis intrasset, foris non uideretur ulterius, *nisi extrema transitus causa deportaretur ad cimiterium*."

Balma's topography did the work for the Jura monks, ensuring extreme isolation for a lifetime.

These examples illustrate the degree to which the *VPI* used the natural world to explain, compel or manipulate monastic behavior. At other times, though, members of the community manipulated the natural world for practical purposes. In one illustrative instance, the deacon (*diaconus*) Sabinianus, who was in charge of the monastery's dams and mills, encountered the devil twice in the wilderness: first, the devil took the shape of two young naked girls who tried to seduce the monk. Sabinianus rebuked them and received a painful blow to the face in return. A similar episode occurred in the *Vita Antonii*, from which the account of Sabinianus' experience may have taken its form.<sup>127</sup>

The second episode was one in which Sabinianus and several other monks were trying to channel a nearby river for the operation of a new water mill:

Hinc enim Sabinianus sanctus, cum die quadam, adhibito fraterno solato, alueum torrentis ipsius quo molinaris aduehebatur aqua, geminato ordine defixis stilis eisdemque, ut mos est, implexis uiminibus, palearum quoque ac lapidum admixtione permixta, ad cursum rotalis machinae uellet diligentius inaltare, dumque stramenta densius conprimunt intra saepes, subito euentilatus e paleis ingens coluber, mox ut sese ostentauit, occuluit . . . Tunc diaconus sanctus ad fratres: "Quid," inquit, "tamdiu suspensi atque suspecti follem insidiatoris prisci ueremur?"<sup>128</sup>

The holy Sabinianus [wanted] one day, with the employment of the brothers, to raise carefully the riverbed of the torrent by which water was brought to the mill to activate the machine of the wheel: they fixed twin rows of pilings and (as the custom is) entwined wicker, and filled the spaces between with a mix of straw and stone; as they were diligently pressing the straw between the rows, suddenly a monstrous snake, driven from the straw, showed itself and, just as quickly, disappeared . . . Then the holy deacon said to the brothers, "Why are we in suspense and apprehensive, afraid of our ancient [enemy] enveloped in treachery?"

<sup>127</sup> Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 5, *PL* 73: col. 130.

<sup>128</sup> *VPI* 57-58, 300-2.

Using the sign of the cross, a verbal rebuke and an invocation of Christ's commission to "tread upon serpents,"<sup>129</sup> Sabinianus viciously trampled the snake underfoot. The detail devoted to the process of channeling the river is striking, indicative of the author's keen interest in technical processes. As before, the language of monastic development is enmeshed with that of the natural world. In the act of controlling the course of a local river, Sabinianus found the devil there and mastered both him and the river. The episode forms a compelling, legendary image for a local community of Sabinianus, the deacon and trampler of snakes. The author overtly paired two episodes, one taking the form of sexual temptation typical for saints' lives, and another concerning human taming of the natural world. Sabinianus' experience at the river is emblematic of the *VPI*'s interest in scripture, hagiographic feats and environmental manipulation. His reasons for channeling the river were practical, but the episode also serves to illustrate the Jura monks' identity in reference to the natural world. In other words, the community's identity in part depended upon the ability of its members to shape and be shaped by their natural environment.

A striking, though slightly later, parallel emerges from Cassiodorus' (d. 585) explanation of Psalm 73:

**Table 1.4: Cassiodorus, *Expositio psalmorum* 73.13-15.**

It follows, <i>thou didst crush the heads of the dragons in the waters</i> . . . The crossing of the Red Sea prefigured the waters of holy baptism, in which the heads of dragons (that is, unclean spirits) are brought to nothing when the fountain of salvation cleanses the souls which the spirits stained	Sequitur <i>contriuisti capita draconum super aquas</i> . . . praefiguratio transitus maris rubri aquas sancti baptismatis indicabat, ubi capita draconum, id est spirituum immundorum perducuntur ad nihilum, quando animas quas illi peccatorum sordibus inquinant, fons salutaris
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<sup>129</sup> Luke 10.19, with similar language in *Vita Antonii* 30, *PL* 73: col. 152.



<p>with the filth of sins . . .</p> <p><i>Thou hast broken the head of the dragon . . .</i> he now considers “dragon” in the singular, so that he seems to indicate Satan himself . . . We “blow him out” when any sin has been committed . . .</p> <p><i>Thou hast taken up the fountains and the torrents: thou has dried up the rivers of Ethan.</i> All of this is said in allegory about sinners. He calls “fountains” those whose evil acts were continually rushing out, and “torrents” those suddenly roused and erupting forth with swift sallies.</p>	<p>emundat . . .</p> <p><i>Tu confregisti caput draconis . . .</i> modo singulari numero ponit draconem, ut ipsum satanam indicare uideatur . . . Omnibus enim culpis exsufflatur admissis . . .</p> <p><i>Tu dirupisti fontes et torrentes, tu siccasti fluuios Ethan.</i> Hoc totum per allegoriam de peccatoribus dicit. Fontes illos appellat, quorum mala iugiter influebant; torrentes, qui subito concitati rapidis excursibus irruebant.<sup>130</sup></p>
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For Cassiodorus, the psalmist’s “dragon in the waters” was a manifestation of sin, involving the “torrents” of iniquity and the expulsion (literally, the “blowing out,” or *exsufflans*) of the devil. The author of the *VPI* was well aware of such language when he expressed the relationship between monk and nature. Elsewhere, he employed another episode of *exsufflans*, or a “blowing out” of the devil,<sup>131</sup> a term Sulpicius Severus considered to be “hardly Latin (*parum Latino*).”<sup>132</sup> For both Cassiodorus and the author of the *VPI*, “torrents” were in need of controlling. Similarly, the Red Sea was parted, and safe passage through it prefigured baptism; here we find a rich imitation in Sabinianus

<sup>130</sup> Cassiodorus, *Expositio psalmorum* 73.13-15, *CCSL* 98, 679-80.

<sup>131</sup> For his awareness of *exsufflans* as an image of “blowing out” the devil, see e.g. *VPI* 90, 334: “[Dativus] stood for half an hour in the courtyard, and through the prayers of God’s servant [Lupicinus], he blew out the one inciting him to wander (*restitit interim semihora habefactus in atrio, et per orationem Dei serui incentorem ipsum euagationis exsufflans.*)”

<sup>132</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogi* 3.8, *CSEL* 1, 2.26-28: 205: “‘Blowing him out’ from a distance (as a necessity, if I might use a word that is scarcely Latin), Avitianus, thinking he was blowing at him, said, ‘Why, holy one, do you treat me thus?’ Then Martin said, ‘It is not towards you, but at him who leans over your neck in his hideousness’ (*quem eminus, ut uerbo, quia ita necesse est, parum Latino loquamur, exsufflans, Avitianus se exsufflari existimans, quid me, inquit, sancte, sic accipis? tum Martinus, non te, inquit, sed eum, qui ceruici tuae taeter incumbit.*)”

modification of a local river. Two acts of alteration have been invoked, one scriptural and another local to the Jura. The devil was made manifest in the torrents of the Jura, and Psalm 73 had materialized in those forests as well.

The second of the three lives, that of Lupicinus, further articulated this phase of cultivation and growth. Most of Lupicinus' *vita* is dedicated to his various miracles of healing, foresight and protection of the monastery's boundaries. He also emerges as a defender of freedmen and local aristocrats. Yet among these episodes is one not easily categorized as a typical miracle. For seven years, an extreme ascetic of the community ate only crumbs from the common table until he was near death. Despite their best efforts, nobody could successfully restore his health or convince him to eat. One day, however, Lupicinus approached him with a suggestion: "'Come,' said the abbot to the brother, 'and let me support you with my arms and shoulders, [and] let us go to the common garden; for a long time now, limited by your grave weakness, you have neither felt the sun on your face nor have you seen any growing thing whatsoever.'"<sup>133</sup> Lupicinus then laid the man out on the ground and massaged all his limbs slowly, repeating the routine for three days until the ascetic's strength was restored. On the third day, Lupicinus taught him to garden: "the elder provided him with a curved piece of wood like a light hoe and showed him how to weed the vegetables, sometimes standing, sometimes lying down, either with a rake or with his fingers."<sup>134</sup> Rather than performing a healing miracle, Lupicinus prescribed a natural remedy for the monk's ascetic excess. He diagnosed the ascetic's

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<sup>133</sup> *VPI* 73, 318-20: "Veni, ait abbas ille ad fratrem, et ulnis humerisque inpositus meis, fraternum intremus hortellum; diu est enim quod, grauissimo tabo constrictus, nec sole contingeris nec qualiacumque uirentia."

<sup>134</sup> *VPI* 76, 322: "parat senior uncatum leui pro sarculo lignum et secum docet nunc stantem, nunc quoque iacentem aut rastro aut digitis holeribus arua laxare."

problem as a simple lack of sunshine and contact with vegetation: in short, the ascetic just needed some fresh air. And once restored to health, the former ascetic promptly learned how to tend the community garden. This is yet another instance of the author's abiding interest in environmental manipulation and vivid description of human manipulation of nature (in this case, the use of gardening implements). The episode is less about the dangers of asceticism and more about cultivation as a process central to the identity of Condat. On one level, Lupicinus' explicitly non-miraculous healing reinforces notions of monastic labor, but the ascetic was only healed through sustained, close contact with nature as a devotional practice.

With this in mind, the final of the three lives is that of Eugendus, an early fifth-century abbot of the community credited with both building projects and supernatural visions. The capstone of progress under Eugendus was the erection of a wooden dormitory following a devastating fire, a project that fits neatly with a story of monastic development across the *VPI* as a whole.<sup>135</sup> It is in this specific context that the author claimed eastern inspiration for Eugendus, but at other times argued for a robust "Gallic nature (*natura Gallicana*)" of Jura monasticism:

Sic namque quod non illa omnino quae quondam sanctus ac praecipuus Basilii Cappadociae urbis antistes, uel ea quae sancti Lirinensium patres, sanctus quoque Pachomius Syrorum priscus abba, siue illa quae recentior uenerabilis edidit Cassianus fastidiosa praesumptione calcamus; sed ea cotidie lectitantes, ista pro qualitate loci et instantia laboris inuenta porius quam Orientalium perficere adfectamus, quia procul dubio efficacius haec faciliusque natura uel infirmitas exsequitur Gallicana.<sup>136</sup>

In no way am I belittling, by a disdainful presumptuousness, the institutions of the holy and eminent Basil, overseer [i.e. bishop] of the city of Cappadocia, or those

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<sup>135</sup> *VPI* 162, 414.

<sup>136</sup> *VPI* 174, 426-28.

of the holy fathers of Lérins and of Saint Pachomius, the ancient abbot of the Syrians, or those that the venerable Cassian formulated more recently; but while we read these daily, [the monks of Condat] are more comfortable with our local conditions and with the demands that our work entails than are those in the East. Without a doubt the Gallic nature—or weakness—follows the former more easily and efficaciously.

By comparison, earlier in the *Vita Lupicini*, the author had claimed for Lupicinus a propensity for fasting and keeping prayerful vigils “so strong that Gallic nature defeated even the *virtus* of those of Egypt and the east.”<sup>137</sup> Such claims recall the special status reserved for “Gallic nature” in the prologue. The anonymous author’s modesty over “Gallic nature or weakness (*natura uel infirmitas exsequitur Gallicana*)” should not be taken as genuine. In the *Vita Eugendi*, the special status assigned to Gallic holy people continued to be an audacious claim.

Despite a general emphasis on monastic construction, Eugendus’ *vita* clarified a relationship between monk and the natural world first addressed in the foundational moment from the *Vita Romani*. Keeping in mind the question of a “boundless temple,” the community under Eugendus experienced an expansion of its size; as a monastic complex, it had no shortage of physical boundaries. Eugendus’ abbacy formed an institutionalization of the Jura community, and one of his visions speaks directly to this relationship. The vision occurred while

[Eugendus] sub arbore solito quiescenti subito tres sese per soporem aduentantes offerunt uiri. Quorum cum post orationem et pacem nouitatem ac uultus habitusque contemplaretur adtonitus, interrogat quoque quinam ipsi uenerabiles essent, quorum benedici meruisset aduentu. Tum unus: “Ego, ait, Petrus, ast hic germanus meus Andreas et iste frater noster et Paulus.” At ille confestim in spiritu ad eorum uestigia prouolutus: “Et quid est, inquit, domini, quod uos in haec rura cerno siluestria, quos in magnis urbibus Romae ac Patras post sanctum martyrium

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<sup>137</sup> *VPI* 65, 312: “In ieiuniis uero ac uigiliis tam praepotens fuit ut Orientalium Aegyptiorumque uirtutem natura uinceret Gallicana.”

legimus corpore contineri?” “Verum est, inquiunt, et illic quidem, ut adseris, sumus et hic quoque nunc habitaturi uenimus.”<sup>138</sup>

[Eugendus] was resting under his usual tree, when suddenly three men arrived in his sleep, and presented themselves to him. Then after they had prayed together and given the kiss of peace, [Eugendus], having contemplated with astonishment their appearance and dress, asked who these venerable ones were, from whom he had deserved the blessings of their arrival. Then one said, “I am Peter, and this is my brother Andrew, and that is our brother Paul.” And [Eugendus], at once prostrating at the feet of the spirits, said, “How is it, my lords, that I see you in these rural forests, you whose bodies, we read, are buried in those great cities of Rome and Patras after your holy martyrdoms?” “It is true,” they replied, “as you say, we are indeed in those places, but now we have come to dwell here as well.”

For the author of the *VPI*, there was no reason whatsoever that the apostles should be absent from the Jura forests. By this point in the trilogy of *vitae*, the author had formulated a compelling argument for the fitness of the natural world to harbor and foster holiness. Eucherius’ explanation of the desert as an ideal meeting place with the holy had come to fruition in the Jura.

Even though Eugendus’ *vita* is marked by more practical considerations than the *Vita Romani* had been, it cannot be true that “as Jura monasticism moves from eremitic to coenobitic, both the fir tree and an awed appreciation of nature disappear.”<sup>139</sup> One might sense a tension between eremitism and cenobitism in the *VPI*, but such binaries ignore the image of the apostles wandering in the Jura Mountains. Illustrating this point, when Eugendus awoke, he spied in the distance two monks returning from Rome with the relics of those very apostles. In the author’s account, the holy dead had physically been present in the Jura. Eugendus’ tree was suitable to receive them. Decades earlier, a tree from those same “rural forests” had sheltered Romanus when he arrived in the wilderness.

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<sup>138</sup> *VPI* 153-54, 402-4.

<sup>139</sup> Vivian, *Jura*, 63.

Now, at the conclusion of the *VPI*, another tree provided shelter for Romanus' successor; it was also the place where he would welcome three of the apostles. By that visitation, "rural forests" now ranked with the holiest places in Christendom.

### **Collapsing Concepts: Caesarius of Arles, Pagan Practice and the Natural World**

The author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* had made a powerful argument about the wilderness and its fitness to shape monastic life. Roughly contemporary with the composition of the *Jura lives*, however, a competing voice on the natural world emerged from Arles, the city of Hilary before his second retirement to the Lérinian desert that Eucherius had praised.<sup>140</sup> Caesarius of Arles was born into the Gallo-Roman aristocracy in Chalon-sur-Saône around 470, and first became a cleric before receiving his religious and Latin grammatical education at both Lérins and Arles.<sup>141</sup> After several years of ascetic practice among the aristocratic circles of Lérins, Caesarius was sent to Arles and soon rose to the abbacy of one of that city's monastic communities. By 501 or 502, having completed the *cursus honorum* of southern Gallic church officials, he succeeded Aeonius as bishop of Arles.<sup>142</sup> He held the post until his death in 542.

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<sup>140</sup> On the importance of Arles in this period, see Albert Rivet, *Gallia Narbonensis: Southern Gaul in Roman Times* (London: Batsford, 1988), 190-211; on this context I am also following Mathisen, *Factionalism*, 5-26.

<sup>141</sup> On Caesarius' career and biographic sketch, see William Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18-21; on his time at Lérins, I have consulted Pricoco, *L'isola*, 59-60; and Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 47-58. And on the opportunities Lérins afforded for climbing the church hierarchy in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, the best assessments are Karl Stroheker, *Der senatorische Adel im spätantiken Gallien* (Tübingen: Alma Mater, 1948), 92; Ralph Mathisen, *Factionalism*, 7-9; and Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, 141-56.

<sup>142</sup> For this sequence of events and relative dates, see Klingshirn, *Caesarius*, 72-87.

Caesarius' life and literary output shift our discussion squarely into the world of bishops and their pastoral concerns. 238 of Caesarius' sermons survive, providing crucial context for episcopal concerns distinct from those of rural monks. His sermons also touch upon a subject not seen in earlier Merovingian sources: paganism and popular superstition. In Caesarius' hands, these categories of belief were understood as emerging from rural practice, and almost always existed in close reference to the natural world. Despite this, as we have seen, modern scholars have not yet considered evidence for pagan practice in the period alongside a larger theme of attitudes towards the natural world.<sup>143</sup> Caesarius' sermons anticipated many of the issues of pagan practice in rural environments that would trouble Gregory of Tours later in the sixth century.<sup>144</sup> Caesarius represents a voice competing with those from the monastic wilderness, an authoritarian register of thought that valued a more intellectual consideration of the natural world as a threat to religious stability.

The bishop of Arles did not treat see the natural world as a suitable expression for communal identity as it had been for the monks of Condat. Later Carolingian hagiographers, when deploying models of thought on pagan practice in natural places, looked to Sulpicius for hagiographic attitudes of conquest towards nature despite Caesarius' learned sermons on the subject.<sup>145</sup> In his sermons Caesarius' interpretation of

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<sup>143</sup> See Introduction, 23-27.

<sup>144</sup> See below, 150-51.

<sup>145</sup> See Chapter 3, 363-64. Wider Carolingian intellectual attitudes towards pagan practice, however, ensured that Caesarius' assessments were not obsolete in the eighth and ninth centuries; see Chapter 3, 404-5. The best recent studies of the inheritance of attitudes towards pagan practice in that period are Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1979); Robert Markus, "From

the natural world was linked with a sense of pastoral practicality: the bishop's audience should know what pagan dangers lurked in the wilderness. Such dangers were not very real in Caesarius' aristocratic circles both within and beyond Arles; as a consequence, much of Caesarius' understanding of paganism was derived from classical texts.<sup>146</sup> In his sermons, Caesarius articulated two clear categories of superstition, both linked closely with the natural world or a broad sense of how physical manifestations of belief functioned in the landscape: the veneration of creation and a tension between pagan and Christian holy places.

### *Nature and Pagan Practice*

Caesarius had relatively little to say on both topics, but what he did say was forceful and unequivocal. In one instance, he admonished his audience at Arles "to destroy all the temples wherever you find [them]. Do not repay vows to trees; do not pray to fountains. Flee from soothsayers (*praecantatores*) as if they were the poison of the devil."<sup>147</sup> Later in the sermon he advised that "should anyone know that near their home there are altars or a shrine or profane trees where vows are given, he should be eager to

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Caesarius to Boniface: Christianity and Paganism in Gaul," in *The Seventh Century: Changes and Continuity*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and J.N. Hillgarth (London: The Warburg Institute, 1992), 154-72; James Palmer, "Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 15.4 (2007): 402-25, especially 412-13.

<sup>146</sup> See below, 113-21.

<sup>147</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 14.4.1-3, *CCSL* 103, 71: "Iterum admoneo uos omnia fana destruere, ubicumque inueneritis. Nolite ad arbores vota reddere; nolite ad fontes orare. Praecantatores quasi uenenum diaboli fugite."



break them up by scattering [them] or cutting [them] down.”<sup>148</sup> As in Sulpicius’ *Vita*

*Martini*, failure to adhere to a scorched-earth approach to Christianization would result in unpleasant consequence at the last judgment.<sup>149</sup> In a similar admonition to destroy pagan shrines, Caesarius observed, “some of you give vows to trees, pray to fountains, and observe diabolical augury.”<sup>150</sup> For Caesarius, God as the source behind natural phenomena ought to have been clear, but his directives indicate that he did not trust the laity of Arles to be as sure as he was. At times his sermons suggest mixed traditions among the Christian community:

tamen si adhuc agnoscitis aliquos illam sordidissimam turpitudinem de annicula vel cervulo exercere, ita durissime castigate, ut eos paeniteat rem sacrilegam commisisse. Et si, quando luna obscuratur, adhuc aliquos clamare cognoscitis, et ipsos admonete, denuntiantes eis quod grave sibi peccatum faciunt, quando lunam, quae deo iubente certis temporibus obscuratur, clamoribus suis ac maleficiis sacrilego ausu se defensare posse confidunt. Et si adhuc videtis aliquos aut ad fontes aut ad arbores vota reddere et, sicut iam dictum est, caraios etiam et divinos vel praecantatores inquirere, fylacteria etiam diabolica, characteres aut herbas vel sucinos sibi aut suis adpendere, durissime increpantes dicite, quia quicumque fecerit hoc malum, perdit baptismi sacramentum.<sup>151</sup>

However, if you still know of some who practice that most sordid and morally depraved [ritual] of masquerading as yearlings or stags, you should punish them so severely, that they will repent of having done the sacrilegious thing. And if, when the moon is covered [during an eclipse], you know that there some [who] still shout, and [you should] admonish them, telling them what a severe sin they are committing, since they believe that in their evil by their shouts and profanation they can defend the moon, which is covered at certain times by the command of God. And if you still see people repaying vows to springs or trees, and, just as it was already said, searching for sorcerers, prophets, or soothsayers,

<sup>148</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 14.4.5, *CCSL* 103, 72: “Quicumque iuxta domum suam aras aut fanum aut arbores profanas ubi, uota reddantur, esse cognoverit, studeat confringere, dissipare atque succidere.”

<sup>149</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 14.4, *CCSL* 103, 72.

<sup>150</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 53.1.4, *CCSL* 103, 233: “Audivimus aliquos ex vobis ad arbores uota reddere, ad fontes orare, auguria diabolica observare.”

<sup>151</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 13.5.1-6, *CCSL* 103, 67-68. Caesarius also discussed *characteres* in *Serm.* 65.

hanging up diabolical amulets, talismans, herbs, or amber beads on themselves or their family, rebuke them severely, that whoever does this evil thing loses the sacrament of baptism.

Caesarius' tantalizing but incomplete details on the nature of pagan practice all take the form of active ritual instead of any actual system of belief. In this passage Caesarius included several specific details on the hanging of objects for magical control of fortune or general welfare. According to his early eighth-century biography, Eligius (d. c. 660) prescribed against women wearing amber beads (*sucinos*) around their necks during weaving or dying cloth.<sup>152</sup> Similar, albeit later, prohibitions emerge from Pirmin's *Scarapsus* (c. 724)<sup>153</sup> and Egbert's Anglo-Latin penitential (c. 750).<sup>154</sup> The Council of Auxerre (578),<sup>155</sup> as well as Eligius<sup>156</sup> and Bede,<sup>157</sup> had also warned against the use of *characteres*, or inscribed amulets (whose dispensers were presumably the *caragii*, sometimes referred to as *karagii*). Caesarius generally bundled all of these offenses—the use of *fylacteria*, *characteres* or *sucinos*—together, and laid blame at the feet of unnamed

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<sup>152</sup> *Vita Eligii* 16, *MGH SRM* 4, 706.

<sup>153</sup> Pirmin, *Dicta abbatis Priminii* 22: “Karactires, erbas, sucino nolite uobis uel uestris apendire.” This is from the standard edition of *Kirchenhistorische anecdota nebst neuen Ausgaben patristischer und kirchlich-mittelalterlicher Schriften*, ed. Carl Caspari (Christiania: Mallingsche, 1883), 173.

<sup>154</sup> Arthur Hadden and William Stubbs, eds., *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), III: 424: “Caraios et diuinos precantatores, filecteria etiam diabolica uel erbas uel facino suis uel sibi inpendere uel V. feria in honore Iouis uel Kalendas Ianuarias secundum paganam causam honorare, si non, V annos peniteat clericus, si lacius, III annos peniteat.”

<sup>155</sup> *Synodus Autissiodorensis* 4, *CCSL* 148A, 265, with a similar clause in *Concilium Narbonense* (589) 14, *CCSL* 148A, 256.

<sup>156</sup> *Vita Eligii* 16, *MGH SRM* 4, 706.

<sup>157</sup> Bede, “De auguriis uel diuinationibus” in *De remediis peccatorum* 11, *PL* 94: col. 573: “Caragios et diuinos praecantatores, laici III dies sine cervisia vel vino et carne, alii XII dies.”

*caragii, diuini* or *praecantatores*.<sup>158</sup> While Caesarius' bundling of pagan rituals may indicate that he was dealing with an imaginary problem and not an active threat, his sermons suggest that pagan practice required objective, concrete correctives. If, Caesarius argued, a Christian engaged in any of these rituals, he or she would forfeit the salvation obtained at the Christian baptismal ritual. In similar cases, Caesarius discussed mixed cultures more overtly, such as those in which baptized Christians dressed up as deer, sheep and other wild animals as well as members of the opposite sex.<sup>159</sup> These specific details, combined with his active solutions to pagan problems, suggest that Caesarius was dealing with dynamic problems on the ground.

How much of a threat did Caesarius consider non-Christian practice to be? From these examples, it would appear that pagan practice was a real competitor to the "well-groomed" Christianity he espoused.<sup>160</sup> That said, the examples just set out represent only a very small component of Caesarius' larger homiletic output. In fact, only six of his 238 sermons touch upon the subject of pagan practice.<sup>161</sup> Yitzhak Hen has argued that Caesarius' references to pagan practice were too general and marginal to be treated as anything other than vague didacticism on the bishop's part.<sup>162</sup> Conversely, paganism cannot be thought of as anything other than an imaginary threat to Christianity in order to

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<sup>158</sup> On these obscure occupations, see Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, 233-34, 228-30, and 249-50, respectively.

<sup>159</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 192.2.2, *CCSL* 104, 780.

<sup>160</sup> Such was the description of Caesarius' aristocratic religion in Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997), 152.

<sup>161</sup> These are Caesarius, *Serm.* 1, 13, 14, 19, 33, 184.

<sup>162</sup> Hen, "Paganism," 230-32.

define the faith more sharply for new converts.<sup>163</sup> As we have seen, Caesarius seems to have drawn from a stock of general admonitions; not once did he describe a specific pagan practice occurring in any particular place. Yet the existence of pagan practice as a behavioral or ritual category in Caesarius' sermons serves as a reminder of challenges he perceived.

To illustrate this further, Caesarius complained that pagans or ignorant Christians sometimes directed veneration towards non-sanctioned objects like amulets, shrines, sacred springs or trees.<sup>164</sup> Clarifying his position, Caesarius elaborated in another sermon:

et dominus in evangelio: nemo potest duobus dominis servire. Pro qua re nec ad arbores debent christiani vota reddere, nec ad fontes adorare, si se volunt per dei gratiam de aeterno supplicio liberari. Et ideo quicumque aut in agro suo, aut in villa, aut iuxta villam aliquas arbores aut aras vel quaelibet fana habuerit, ubi miseri homines solent aliqua vota reddere, si eas non destruxerit atque succiderit, in illis sacrilegiis, quae ibi facta fuerint, sine dubio particeps erit. Nam et illud quale est, quod, quando arbores illae ubi vota redduntur ceciderint, nemo sibi ex illis arboribus lignum ad focum adfert? et videte miseriam vel stultitiam generis humani: arbori mortuae honorem inpendunt, et dei viventis praecepta contemnunt; ramos arboris non sunt ausi mittere in focum, et se ipsos per sacrilegium praecipitant in infernum.<sup>165</sup>

And the Lord says in the Gospel: "No man can serve two masters" [Mt 6.24]. Thus Christians should not repay vows to trees or worship fountains, if by the grace of God they want to be freed from eternal punishment. And should a man have any kind of shrines on his land or in his villa, or trees or altars around his estate where miserable men give such vows, if he does not destroy [them] and cut [them] down, he will without a doubt be a participant in those sacrilegious practices which are done there. For how is it that whenever those trees where vows were given are cut down, nobody carries off their wood for his fireplace? And behold the misery and stupidity of the human race: they give out honor to a dead tree, but hate the precepts of a living God; they do not dare to cast the branches of a tree into the fireplace, but by their evil they throw themselves into hell.

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<sup>163</sup> Hen, "Paganism," 231-32.

<sup>164</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 50.1-2, *CCSL* 103, 224-26.

<sup>165</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 54.5.17-30, *CCSL* 103, 239.

Caesarius' sermons indicate a concern over what he perceived as a general apathy over the coexistence of Christianity and paganism. Again, he prescribed an active solution of destroying shrines or chopping down trees. The only exceptions to Caesarius' treatment of trees in his sermons are safely in metaphorical or abstracted language: "you notice a beautiful tree, pleasant, green with foliage, wealthy in fruits, [and] you praise [it] . . . If the root is revealed to you, there is no beauty in it. Do not hate whatever is lowly: from it emerges that which you admire."<sup>166</sup> In such cases, Caesarius' metaphorical language constituted a separate category of the natural world, not grounded in the threats of pagan practice. This metaphorical approach to natural landscapes would appeal to later audiences as well; as Dieter Harmening and James Palmer have shown, eighth-century texts touching paganism such as the anonymous *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* and Charlemagne's *Admonitio generalis* of 789 readily recycled Caesarius' sermons on pagan practice.<sup>167</sup> With some exceptions, Caesarius seldom varied on the theme of distrustful nature: "And how is it that stupid men believe they ought, as it were, to assist the moon in its suffering [eclipse]—whose fiery sphere is covered at certain times by a natural condition of the air, or is suffused with the nearby heat of the setting sun, as if

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<sup>166</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 142.1.10, *CCSL* 103, 583-84: "Adtendis arborem pulchram, amoenam, foliis virentem, fructibus opulentam, laudas . . . Si radix ostendatur tibi, nulla pulchritudo in ea est. Noli contemnere quod abiectum est: inde processit quod miraris."

<sup>167</sup> Harmening, *Superstitio*, 49-53 and Palmer, "Paganism," 412-13. These are *Indiculus superstitionem*, *MGH Leges* 1, 19; and *Admonitio generalis* 65, *MGH Capit.* 1, 58-59, both of which are based on Caesarius, *Serm.* 13, *CCSL* 103, 66-67; and *Serm.* 53, *CCSL* 103, 233-35. For Palmer, "Paganism," 412, these recyclings were "not just a literary in-game, but also part of the way the Frankish authorities viewed paganism in the world." On the connections between the *Indiculus superstitionem* and Boniface's missionary circle, see Alain Dierkens, "Superstitions, christianisme et paganisme à la fin de l'époque mérovingienne – A propos de l'*Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*," in *Magie, sorcellerie, parapsychology*, ed. Hervé Hasquin (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 9-26. For a fuller discussion, see Chapter 3, 405-7.

there are conflicting incantations against heaven?”<sup>168</sup> In Caesarius’ imagination, pagan practice was often bound up in a dubious relationship between human and natural environment: trees, rocks, springs and celestial bodies enabled pagan practice and fostered its perpetuation.

### ***Pagan Practice and Sacred Places***

Caesarius’ treated the natural world in the context of his discussions about pagan practice. The categories of the natural world and pagan practice often collapsed into each other. At other times, Caesarius communicated a clear sense of the sharp divisions between Christian and pagan sacred spaces, often mentioning the worship of pagan deities in those spaces.<sup>169</sup> As part of his urging to destroy pagan shrines and trees, Caesarius revealed a crucial detail on Christian attitudes towards non-Christian spaces, a source of endless frustration for the bishop: “What is even worse [than the veneration of trees and fountains], there are some unfortunate and miserable [people], who not only [refuse] to destroy the shrines of the pagans, but even are unafraid or unashamed to rebuild those which have been destroyed.”<sup>170</sup> In this case, Caesarius objected strenuously to the maintenance of non-Christian spaces or objects of veneration, all visible manifestations of a competing belief system.

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<sup>168</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 52.3.1-2, *CCSL* 103, 231: “Et illud quale est, quando stulti homines quasi lunae laboranti putant se debere succurrere, qui eius ignitum globum naturali aeris ratione certis temporibus obductum aut vicino solis occidui ardore suffusum, quasi aliquem contra caelum carminum credunt esse conflictum.”

<sup>169</sup> See e.g. his discussions in *Serm.* 53 and 54, *CCSL* 103, 233-40.

<sup>170</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 53.1.14-16, *CCSL* 103, 233: “Sunt enim, quod peius est, infelices et miseri, qui paganorum fana non solum destruere nolunt, sed etiam quae destructa fuerant aedificare nec metuunt nec erubescunt.”

Caesarius' main challenges seem to have emerged from the countryside. This is in part why pagan practices appear in his sermons haphazardly: their practitioners were the *rustici* of his congregation and beyond, and they nearly always took place in close reference to the natural world. Seen in this way, the natural world was collectively a dangerous space capable of producing sacred trees harboring profane shrines in its landscapes—a concept perfectly at home with Sulpicius' image of Martin in the previous century. Regardless of whether we can consider Caesarius to be “informative”<sup>171</sup> on the subject, pagan practices and their environments are a threatening force in the sermons. To illustrate this, when Caesarius complained that his congregation often sought out independent soothsayers for physical healing, he provided a clear solution: “They [should] run to the church, and [they should] demand the medicine of Christ's mercy.”<sup>172</sup> In this case it appears that the problem of non-sanctioned soothsayers (*sortilegia*) were anything but marginal. Caesarius' solution hinged entirely upon visiting a physical church space and receiving the Eucharist. In these concerns, Caesarius was in good company: he also complained of laypeople receiving baptism and returning promptly to non-Christian worship,<sup>173</sup> as well as noblemen who allowed or fostered pagan worship on their property.<sup>174</sup> As we have just seen, Caesarius prescribed another active solution to such problems: “Cut down the impious trees even unto their roots, and break the devil's altars

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<sup>171</sup> Hen, “Paganism,” 232.

<sup>172</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 50.1.15, *CCSL* 103, 225: “ad ecclesiam current, et medicinam de Christi misericordia postularent.”

<sup>173</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 53.1.25-27, *CCSL* 103, 233.

<sup>174</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 54.5, *CCSL* 103, 238-39.

into pieces.”<sup>175</sup> If pagan practice had been a passive, marginal problem, Caesarius perhaps would not have offered such active solutions.

Above all, Caesarius’ world was one of temples, shrines and ordered religious practice. He was, after all, an aristocratic bishop who complained about laity leaving church too early or bringing their pigs and dogs to mass.<sup>176</sup> His most developed expressions of the Christian life were architectural ones. For Caesarius, “Although they are holy places as we can see, temples are made of wood and stone by the talents of man, but the temples of our bodies and hearts are made beautiful in the sight of God.”<sup>177</sup> Congregants should purify themselves before even entering the holy space of a church.<sup>178</sup> Caesarius reflected such order in his descriptions of built space.

### **Gregory of Tours: Towards a Hagiographic Classification of Nature**

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Gregory of Tours’ engagement with the natural world was anything but haphazard. The pear tree near the tombs of Nazarius and Celsus bore healing fruit because of its proximity to the holy dead, and the place was carefully managed, first by a local man, then, more appropriately, by the local church. The story of the pear tree is emblematic of Gregory’s treatment of the natural world in his works: trees and other natural, non-human objects never exist in Gregory’s works independent of human action. For example, in his *Libri de uirtutibus sancti Martini*

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<sup>175</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 53.2.31, *CCSL* 103, 234: “Arbores etiam sacrilegas usque ad radicem incidite, aras diaboli comminuite.”

<sup>176</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 73, *CCSL* 103, 306-9; and 229, *CCSL* 104, 866-70.

<sup>177</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 228.1.5-11, *CCSL* 104, 864, citing Ps. 119.73: “quia quamvis sancta sint templa, quae videmus de lignis et lapidibus fabricari, tamen plus apud deum pretiosa sunt templa cordis et corporis nostri.”

<sup>178</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 229.3, *CCSL* 103, 870.



*episcopi*, a long work on the life and miracles of Martin of Tours, Gregory described a church dedicated to Martin in Galicia based on the oral account of his friend Florentianus:

Ante huius aedis porticum vitium camera extensa per traduces dependentibus uvis quasi picta vernabat. Sub hac enim erat semita, quae ad sacrae aedes valvas peditem deducebat. Cumque rex sub hac praeteriens orationis gratia hoc templum adiret, dixit suis: “Cavete, ne contingatis unum ex his botrionibus, ne forte offensam sancti antistitis incurratis. Omnia enim quae in hoc habentur atrio ipsi sacrata sunt.”<sup>179</sup>

Before the portico of this building there was a long vault [formed] from the branches of vines [and with] clusters of grapes that flourished as if [they were] in a painting. Under this [vault] there was a pathway, which led [people] on foot to the double doors of the holy building. While the king [Miro, king of the Sueves from 570 to 583] was approaching under [the vault] and entering the temple in order to pray, he said to them [i.e. his attendants]: “Beware, lest you touch one of these grape clusters and by chance attack the holy bishop [Martin] with offense. For everything in this courtyard is holy to him.”

Despite Miro’s warning, one of his servants reached out for a grape and his hand immediately withered. After prayers were submitted to Martin and proper contrition expressed, the servant’s hand was healed. Two significant details emerge from this description: first, Gregory made clear the importance of space dedicated to Martin, in this case a natural but carefully managed courtyard. Second, the best metaphor available to Gregory of the vast vine was that of a beautiful painting. The vegetation of Martin’s church at Galicia was safely ensconced in sacred space and artistic simile. Its clergy carefully managed the vines and grapes; they were meant as an outward reminder of the courtyard’s sanctity, not for sustenance.

The natural world is a consistent theme in Gregory’s scientific, hagiographic and historical works.<sup>180</sup> The clearest expression of Gregory’s understanding of nature

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<sup>179</sup> *VSM* 4.7, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 201.

<sup>180</sup> De Nie, *Imagination*, 23. See Introduction, 32-34.

emerges from his treatise *De cursu stellarum*, an astronomical work “On the Course of the Stars” as well as a discussion of the wonders of the world and the superiority of God’s creation. In part, *De cursu stellarum* represents a scientific impulse to impose order on creation in the context of classically transmitted traditions on the wonders of the ancient world.<sup>181</sup>

### ***De cursu stellarum as a Classification of Nature***

Gregory’s treatise *De cursu stellarum* is divided into two main parts: an assessment of the seven wonders of the world (a curious blend of ancient wonders and scriptural ones, as well as Gregory’s own assignment of the seven wonders of Creation), and a section on astronomy tailored to clerical literacy of night offices. The astronomical importance of Gregory’s short work is well known,<sup>182</sup> but in this section we will be more immediately concerned with *De cursu stellarum*’s implications for the physical, tactile world in keeping with the definitions of the “natural world” in the Introduction. In Gregory’s estimation, only the Colossus of Rhodes, the lighthouse of Alexandria, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and the Babylonian walls remained of the original wonders of the ancient world, while Noah’s Ark, Solomon’s Temple and the theater of Heraclea also made his list. To these he appended seven wonders of God’s created world: waters

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<sup>181</sup> Stephen McCluskey, *Astronomies and Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 104-5.

<sup>182</sup> For the content, structure and significance of *De cursu stellarum*, I have consulted Stephen McCluskey, “Gregory of Tours, Monastic Timekeeping, and Early Christian Attitudes to Astronomy,” *Isis* 81.1 (1990): 8-22, at 10-11; *idem*, *Astronomies* 104-10; and Flint, *Magic*, 137-38. McCluskey, “Monastic Timekeeping,” 11, has colorfully called *De cursu stellarum* a work of “barest essentials . . . that would help a monk determine the proper time to rise in the house before dawn for nocturnal prayer” and “little more than an appetizer” to geometry, celestial coordinates, and positions of stars.

and tides, seeds and trees, the phoenix, Mount Etna, the springs of Grenoble, the sun and the moon. Throughout, Gregory fastidiously cited his sources, both Christian and non-Christian. In *De cursu stellarum*, Gregory was as inclusive of natural phenomena as possible: for the phoenix one might substitute land animals and fowl, and for Etna, rock formations and dry land. The seven wonders of the created world in *De cursu stellarum* are a mix of late antique traditions, exegetical interpretations of landscapes and Gregory's own observational material.

After discussing his version of the seven ancient wonders based on classical sources, Gregory clarified one of the purposes of the work:

Sed ista, licet quaequam iussionem Dei, quaequam autem adinventionem humana constructa sint, ab hominibus tamen constat esse fundata, ideoque et quaedam dederunt, quaedam autem ruinae sunt proxima. Nam sunt alia quae ipse omnipotens Deus noster proprio opere in hoc mundo vel per dies singulos renovat, vel post transacto anni curriculum repraesentat, quae et in locupletatione ostenduntur muneris, ut est commotio oceani et fructus terrae; alia vero in ostensione proferuntur virtutis, ut est sol, luna, stellae, Phoenix; et quaedam ex his peccatores arguunt et ignem infernalem figurant, ut est Etna fons Gratianopolitanus. Haec sunt enim miracula, quae nulla aetate senescunt, nullo occasu occidunt, nulla labe minuuntur, nisi cum Dominus mundum dissolvi praeciperit.<sup>183</sup>

But it is true that these [wonders of the world], while some were constructed according to the order of God, and some by human intervention, were nonetheless founded by men, and thus for this reason some have fallen away, and some are very near ruin. For there are other [wonders] which our omnipotent God renews every day in this world with his own labor, or presents again after the course of the year is completed, [and] some are shown as enriching gifts, such as the movement of the ocean and the fruits of the earth; others are brought forth for the demonstration of [God's] excellence, such as the sun, the moon, the stars, the phoenix; and certain of these expose sinners and represent the fires of hell, such as Etna [and] the spring of Grenoble. These are the wonders, which grow old in no age, fall by no chance, are diminished by no loss, except when the Lord should have commanded that the world be destroyed.

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<sup>183</sup> DCS 9, MGH SRM 1.2, 410.

In his treatise *De cursu stellarum* Gregory thus established a clear sense of the universe's processes of order and regeneration, central themes in his hagiographic works. Each of the natural phenomena from Gregory's list of natural wonders perpetuated themselves only through divine aid, not by their own powers. Gregory was not, however, interested in the natural world for its own sake. As Giselle de Nie made clear, the items on Gregory's list of natural wonders are notable for their symbolic properties of fertility, rebirth and purgative qualities,<sup>184</sup> but these themes have not yet been comprehensively applied to Gregory's treatment of nature in his hagiographic works. In this crucial passage Gregory set out distinct categories of natural phenomena. Using Gregory's list of natural wonders as an organizing principle, we will consider the environmental features on or beneath the earth's surface—water, vegetation, animals and rock formations—across his historical and hagiographical works.

### ***Water and "The Movement of the Ocean Sea."***

Gregory framed his discussion of the seven natural wonders of the world with a consideration of water and ocean tides: "first, therefore, is the movement of the ocean sea, which every day is enlarged, so that, approaching, it fills the coastal shores and then receding again it offers dry [land]; then a multitude of fish and differing sorts of seaweed are collected by people walking around on dry [land]."<sup>185</sup> This section of his treatise is therefore buttressed with the image of continuous renewal. Oceanic danger is a common

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<sup>184</sup> De Nie, *Imagination*, 107-10.

<sup>185</sup> DCS 10, MGH SRM 1.2, 410: "Primum est ergo omnium maris oceani commutio, in qua ita per dies singulos dilatatur, ut accedens ora litoris repleat rursumque recedens siccum praebeat iter; tunc populis per humum aridam gradientibus piscium sive diversorum liguminum multitudo copiosa collegitur."

theme in Gregory's works.<sup>186</sup> Across Gregory's works, the image of water takes on different forms. In his account of Helena's recovery of the True Cross and nails from the Holy Land, for example, Helena was able to calm an Adriatic storm by casting one of the nails into the turbulent waters. As a man-made wonder of the world, Noah's Ark represented the church passing through the turbulence and rocks of the ocean.<sup>187</sup> The turbulence of the sea as metaphor for the Christian life predated Gregory. Both the poet Prudentius (d. 413) and Eucherius used the image,<sup>188</sup> and Hilary described worldly disorder as comparable to the ocean's violence due to the devil living in it.<sup>189</sup> As one of Gregory's favorite poets, Prudentius had interpreted the Red Sea with its divinely-altered ebb and flow as a prefiguration of baptism in his *Hymnus Epifaniae*.<sup>190</sup>

At other times, though, water took on a decidedly benevolent nature. In his brief account of the life of Illidius of Clermont (d. c. 385), Gregory described teaching as the "seeds of perpetual life, which the heavenly Sower has from the fountain of his divinity irrigated the field of the uncultured mind with his instructions and fertilized with his doctrine."<sup>191</sup> In another instance, Martin had brought about "a submissive wave (*unda famulans*)" to save some drowning seamen. For Gregory, the eternal power of God in the waters was immediate and local:

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<sup>186</sup> For a general discussion, see Giselle de Nie, "The Spring," 89-136, at 101-11.

<sup>187</sup> *DLH* 1.4, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 6-7.

<sup>188</sup> Prudentius, *Amartigenia* 517-20, *CCSL* 126, 134; and explicitly, Eucherius, *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* 7.887, *CCSL* 66, 55.

<sup>189</sup> Hilary, *Tractatus super psalmos* 51.13, *CCSL* 61, 101.

<sup>190</sup> Prudentius, *Cathemerinon* 12.159-68, *CCSL* 126, 70-71. Gregory touched upon this idea in *DLH* 1.10, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 11-12.

<sup>191</sup> *VP* 2 *pref.*, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 218: "Inter reliqua vitae perpetuae semina, quae caelestis Sator ex illo divinitatis fonte mentes incultae arum vel inrigavit institutione vel dogmate fecundavit."

Non enim defuit illa virtus, quae Iordanen scindens populum sub aquarum molibus margine arente traduxit . . . vel illa quae Petrum pereuntem, piam amplectens dexteram, ne periret, eripuit; vel quae nauitam submersurum, Martini Dominum invocantem, de profundo pelagi ad litus, quod optabat, elicit.<sup>192</sup>

Not only was that same power present, that which separated the Jordan so that the people [of Israel] might be led across on the dry ground . . . and that [same power] which rescued the dying Peter, by embracing with his tender right hand, lest he perish; and [that which] brought out the sailor, calling on the Lord of Martin, up from the depths of the sea to the shore where he wished to be.

The opposite effect had once taken place when the Jordan had once receded from the feet of an adulterous woman who wanted to wash herself in its holy waters.<sup>193</sup> In such cases, as with Caesarius before him, Gregory's understanding of nature consisted of a range of allegories grounded safely in the space of metaphoric expression.

Only rarely did Gregory betray an interest in landscape or natural geography for its own sake. While the image of the Jordan provided symbolic relevance for his hagiographic accounts, at another point Gregory engaged in associative description:

Et quia Iohannis baptistae meminimus, dignum est, ut de Iordane aliqua memoremus. Igitur a monte Phanio duo consurgunt fontes, quorum unus Ior, alter Dan vocitatur; qui ab utraque parte Phaniadae urbis, quae prius Caesarea Philippi vocabatur, descendentes, sub ipsa urba tam fluentis coniuncti quam nomine uno Iordanem efficiunt . . . In eo habetur locus, in quo Dominus baptizatus est.<sup>194</sup>

And as I have recollected John the Baptist, it is fitting, that I should say something else about the Jordan [River]. Two springs emerge from Mount Paneas, one of which is called Jor, the other Dan; they descend on each side of the city of Paneas, which was previously called Caesarea Philippi, [and] below this city their streams and names are joined together, and they make one in the Jordan . . . It is held [that it was] in this place, in which the Lord was baptized.

Gregory insisted that lepers were still healed there during his own time. Similarly, the hot springs of Levida also harbored healing properties for lepers. In this case Gregory

<sup>192</sup> *VSM* 1.2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 138-39.

<sup>193</sup> *GM* 87, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 96-97.

<sup>194</sup> *GM* 16, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 49.

continued his diversion on Levida, where “there are trees that bear wool. They produce fruits similar to gourds, with hard coverings around them, with their insides full of wool.”<sup>195</sup> By filling out this image of the Jordan and nearby aquatic and vegetative phenomena, Gregory linked his geographic knowledge with specific contexts, first establishing the Jordan as existing in a geographic place and then applying the image to a miracle in his hagiographic works.

Most relevant to Gregory’s image of ocean tides and springs, however, were the baptismal properties of springs and pools. He described two, one at Embrun in southeastern Gaul and another at Osset near Seville. At Embrun—the same city in which the holy pear tree once stood—the bishop Marcellinus constructed a baptismal pool whose waters rose at the celebration of Christ’s birth and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>196</sup> Similarly, at Osset, there was a Roman swimming pool made from different kinds of marble in the shape of a cross, above which Christians had later built a shrine.<sup>197</sup> Every Easter, the pool would miraculously fill up and the locals would hope to bring health to their fields and vines by sprinkling the water around.<sup>198</sup> The pool began to recede, however, when locals began using it for baptism.

Gregory’s stories of regenerating water sources resonate with larger traditions of associating the earth’s water with the moment of Christ’s baptism. In an early fifth-century sermon on Epiphany, Maximus of Turin described the baptismal moment as one

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<sup>195</sup> *GM* 17, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 49: “Prope autem Hiericho habentur arbores, quae lanas gignunt. Exhibent enim poma in modum cucurbitarum, testa in circuitu habentes dura, intrinsecus enim plena sunt lanae.”

<sup>196</sup> *GC* 68, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 338.

<sup>197</sup> *GM* 23, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 52.

<sup>198</sup> *GM* 23, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 52.

in which Christ purified all bodies of water through baptism; in this way water is the “mother of the peoples (*mater populorum*).”<sup>199</sup> As a contemporary of Gregory’s, Cassiodorus’ included in his *Variae* an account of a fountain of Arethusa in the heart of “a pleasant place and wonderful for its reedy shade and the excellence of its waters.”<sup>200</sup> If a human approached the fountain or made noise, it would spontaneously respond by boiling up and overflowing. In this case, the fountain “implies a sympathy between men and the natural world,”<sup>201</sup> but was still beholden to human action.

Gregory expressed this clearly in his account of the *passio* of Julian of Brioude, a fourth-century martyr. Reminiscent of other healing springs,<sup>202</sup> Gregory described “the place in which the blessed martyr was beaten, [in which] there is a shining fountain, gentle and full of sweet water, where [Julian’s] head, having been cut off by his persecutors, was cleansed in this water, where much health is given to the ill from its water.”<sup>203</sup> Here, a natural spring was sanctified and set apart through contact with Julian’s severed head. For Gregory, springs could be spontaneous natural features but should be controlled and officially made holy by specific action. In this context, Gregory’s story of the pear tree at Embrun with which this chapter began becomes even clearer.

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<sup>199</sup> Maximus, *Serm.* 13a.16-25, *CCSL* 23, 44.

<sup>200</sup> Cassiodorus, *Variae* 8.32.7-10, *CCSL* 96, 339: “amoenus admodum et harundineis umbris et aquarum ipsarum uirtute mirabilis.”

<sup>201</sup> This is the reading of Barnish, “Christianization of the Countryside,” 396. In Cassiodorus’ case, he continues: “Behind it, however, may well lie an approach to Natural Theology reminiscent of (though probably not directly owed to) the Cappadocian Fathers, for whom natural law and cosmic harmony displayed nature as not in itself divine, but sanctified by and imaging its transcendent creator.”

<sup>202</sup> See, for example, Cassiodorus *Variae* 2.39.5-13 on the hot springs of Aponum.

<sup>203</sup> Gregory, *VI* 3, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 115-16: “In loco autem illo quo beatus martyr percussus est fons habetur splendidus, lenis, dulcibus aquis uberrimus, in quo et a persecutoribus caput amputatum ablatum est, de quibus aquis multae sanitates tribuntur infirmis.”



A final, more local, example clarifies further the relationship between human activity and the movements of water. Near Limoges,

Fons erat inriguus ruri cuidam . . . cuius unda tam hortorum sata quam agrorum culta vel fovebat accessu vel impetu fecundabat. Deducebatur etiam, factis decursibus, per loca necessaria, ut, ubi cum natura non dabat, studium provocaret. Et erat tam dulcibus, vena exuberante, fluentis, ut gaudere cerneret holus siue virgultum, si fuisset ab eodem inrigatum. Opitulabatur etiam in eo gratia maiestatis divinae, ut, in quo fuisset fluentum emissum, velociter germina acciperent incrementum. Cumque cum incolae loci quasi ludum agentes per singula quaeque loca deducerent, insidiatoris, ut credo invidia sub terra dehiscit.<sup>204</sup>

There was an irrigating spring . . . whose waters fostered the plants of gardens with its course [and] fertilized the crops of fields with its force. After canals were constructed the water was maneuvered to the necessary places, so that [the resulting] effort might bring forth [water] where nature had not provided it. The stream's water was so sweet, such a strong flow, that one could see the vegetables and plants rejoice whenever they were irrigated by it. The blessing of divine grandeur was available in it, so that wherever its stream went, shoots swiftly started to sprout. Once the people of the place, just as if they were playing a game, had maneuvered the water every which way, [the spring] disappeared under the earth on account, as I believe, of the envy of the deceiver.

After a three-year drought, a pilgrim visited Limoges with relics of the martyr Clement. The local priest, Aredius, brought the citizens of Limoges together and decided to test the veracity of the pilgrim's claim for the relics. After chanting some psalms, he approached the spring and placed the relics where the spring used to discharge. Invoking Moses' provision of water from the rock in the desert (Num. 20.11), Aredius' prayers brought about so much water that it overflowed.<sup>205</sup> In Gregory's telling, the work of the devil changed the natural course of the water, possibly an acknowledgement of the serpent's corruption of perfect nature in Eden. More importantly, the spring of Limoges

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<sup>204</sup> *GM 36, MGH SRM 1.2, 61.*

<sup>205</sup> *GM 36, MGH SRM 1.2, 61.*

was a play in two acts about relics and their power; the natural world was simply the stage.

### *Vegetation and the Wonders of Regeneration*

In Gregory's scheme of the natural world set forth in *De cursu stellarum*, the next category was closely linked with aquatic phenomena:

Secundum est simile huic, de granis scilicet frugum et de fructibus arborum, cum iacta terrae simina et sulcis operta, adveniente aestate eriguntur in culmina, ornataque comis et spicis lacteo intrinsecus adipe saginantur . . . Aequa est enim et arborum natura, quae, ut puto, ipsam resurrectionem signat, cum in hieme nudatae foliis tamquam mortui habentur, verno vero tempore ornantur foliis, decorantur floribus, pomisque aestate replentur. Quod miraculum quamquam hac utatur similitudinem, ad praesens tamen beneficium populis praestat.<sup>206</sup>

The second is like this, on seeds, grains of wheat, and the fruit of trees, when they are thrown down into the earth and laid open by the plow, with the arrival of summer they arise to the sky, and the they are ornamented with leaves and ears and their insides are crammed with milky filling . . . Equal to this is the nature of trees, which, as I think, signify the resurrection itself, [for] while in winter they are said to be barren of leaves and just like the dead, [and] in springtime they are truly ornamented with foliage, decorated with flowers, and in summer they are full of fruits. Although this wonder uses a likeness [or a metaphor], it also presents an actual benefit at hand.

Germination, growth, decay and rebirth pervaded Gregory's second wonder, providing close links with his understanding of water. Gregory's image was built upon earlier exegetical readings of flora: Augustine<sup>207</sup> and Eucherius<sup>208</sup> utilized it, as did

<sup>206</sup> DCS 11, MGH SRM 1.2, 410.

<sup>207</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 20.20.

<sup>208</sup> Eucherius, *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* 2.197-98, CCSL 66, 11: "Ver uitae renouatio uel per baptismum uel per resurrectionem; in psalmo: Aestatem et uer tu fecisti ea."

Gregory's contemporary Venantius Fortunatus.<sup>209</sup> Trees, grains and fruit-bearing plants were capable of acting as figures of divine truths. They could also take part in the vast world of omens and portents to which Gregory adhered.<sup>210</sup> Vegetation could be a powerful figure for resurrection, as well as the sowing and reaping of good works: "The seeds that are thrown down into the earth also show this: having been committed to the furrows, if they have died they rise anew with much fruit, [John 12.25] just as the apostle Paul says: 'You foolish man, what you sow does not come to life, unless it first dies' [1 Cor. 15.36]. All these things are made manifest to the world to believe in the resurrection."<sup>211</sup> The regeneration of original creation was pivotal to Gregory's understanding of vegetative nature.

To illustrate this, Gregory commonly used vegetative images to frame his brief hagiographic works. The relics of the early fourth-century Iberian martyr Eulalia of Merida, for example, rested in an altar behind three trees. Around her feast day they "are denuded of any decorating foliage, but as the heavens shine on her [festival] day, [the trees] put out sweet blossoms in the form of a swift dove."<sup>212</sup> Not only this, but the blossoming of the tree acted as a index with which to judge agricultural success: if it

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<sup>209</sup> Fortunatus, *Carm.* 11.42, *MGH AA* 4.1, 258: "Therefore man dies just like the grain in the furrow, so that he might be resurrected with the corn and multiplied in fruits, and be like angels (*Ergo moritur homo quasi granum in sulco, ut resurgat cum spico et multiplicetur in fructu, assimiletur et angelo*)." Similar language can be found in *Carm.* 3.9.31-34.

<sup>210</sup> For some of these instances, see *DLH* 4.9, 5.33, 6.14, 6.44, 7.11, 8.8, 8.42, 9.5, and 9.44.

<sup>211</sup> *DLH* 10.13, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 499: "Haec ostendunt et illa quae iaceuntur semina terris; quae commendata sulcis, si fuerint mortua, cum multiplici fructu resurgunt, sicut ait Paulus apostolus: 'Stulte tu, quod seminas non vivificatur, nisi prius moriatur'. Quae omnia ad fidem resurrectionis mundo manifesta sunt."

<sup>212</sup> *GM* 90, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 98: "sint ab omni foliorum decorae nudatae, ea die inlucescente caelo in modum columbae alitis flores proferunt suavitatis."

bloomed quickly, crops would be bountiful, but if the flowers opened very slowly, the countryside around Merida would bear little fruit. In the latter case according to Gregory, unusually pious supplication by the locals could result in a reversal of fortunes. Gregory claimed personal knowledge of contemporary processions honoring the blossoms and their enduring ability to cure the sick.<sup>213</sup> A similar mirror of agricultural health was a fixture at the apostle Andrew's tomb, from which the secretion of fragrant oil indicated good harvests.<sup>214</sup> Like the pear tree at Embrun, the space around Eulalia's altar was appropriate for holy trees; their association with the altar, proximity to the holy remains, inclusion in liturgical processions and healing properties made them appropriate components of a holy place.

In less ideal circumstances, Gregory shared Caesarius' anxieties over pagan practice. After all, Gregory in his *Decem Libri Historiarum* had observed that the pagans of Gaul had traditionally "made figures (*formas*) for themselves out of the creatures of the forests and waters, birds and beasts, and they honored them as if they were gods, and offered sacrifices to them."<sup>215</sup> This observation is followed immediately by a long exposition on craftsmanship, especially in the context of idolatry, from scriptural sources. Gregory's thoughts on pagan practice were informed by the contemporary natural world, craftsmanship and exegetical traditions.

The city of Paneas near the source of the Jordan presents a clearer instance of vegetation in close proximity to a sacred place. Quoting partly from Rufinus' Latin

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<sup>213</sup> *GM* 90, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 98.

<sup>214</sup> *GM* 30, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 55-56.

<sup>215</sup> *DLH* 2.10, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 59: "sibique silvarum atque aquarum, avium bestiarumque et aliorum quoque elementorum finxere formas, ipsasque ut Deum colore eisque sacrificium delibare conseuti."

translation of Eusebius' fourth-century *Historia ecclesiastica*, Gregory included an account of two bronze statues at Paneas, one of a woman on a pedestal on top of a mound in a posture of supplication. Eusebius (and consequently Gregory) surmised that this was a statue of an apparent resident of Paneas, the woman with issue of blood from the Gospels. Next to her statue was another of a robed man hold out his right hand to the woman: "at the foot of this statue on its base a certain plant grows, which is known as a new kind. Whenever this plant blooms, it usually extends to the edge of the bronze garment that clothes the statue, and once this growing plant touches the garment with its tip, it takes on power from the garment which can fight off diseases and illnesses"<sup>216</sup> if ingested as a drink. But, Eusebius clarified, if the plant was cut down before it reached the hem of the robe, it harbored no healing power. Thus the crucial detail of the description is the physical contact between plant and statue, a clear mirroring of the transfer of power from Christ to the woman through the cloak's hem in the Gospels.<sup>217</sup> Curiously, though, at Paneas the strange plant performed an intercessory role for the ill. By its natural growth and proximity to the statue of Christ, it took on healing properties similar to those of the pear tree at Embrun—and that proximity also exonerated the locals from any suspicion of superstition that had so troubled Caesarius. As at Embrun, vegetation took on an active role of intercession, but was still subservient to notions of sacred space based on human activity.

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<sup>216</sup> *GM* 20, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 50: "Huius ad pedem statuae in basi est herba quaedam, nova specie nascitur. Quae cum exorta fuerit, excrescere usque ad stolae illius aeraea indumenti fibriam solet. Quam cum summo vertice crescens herba contigerit, vires inde ad depellendos omnes morbos languoresque conquiret, ita ut, quaecumque fuerit illa infirmitas corporis, haustu exiguo madefacta salutaris graminis depellatur," quoting and paraphrasing Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.18.

<sup>217</sup> Matt. 9.20-22; Mark 5.28-30; Luke 8.43-48.

The tomb of the martyr Julian further illustrates this hierarchical relationship among nature, human activity and the cult of the saints. Inside the shrine of Julian's tomb one night, the deacon Urbanus, who held a custodial office for the sacred site, awoke to find the floor carpeted with red roses "so fresh, one might think that they had been cut at that moment of the hour from green stems."<sup>218</sup> Urbanus gathered them up and distributed them to the sick; one demoniac was cured after drinking a tea made from the roses. Vegetation was not always an aid to the veneration of saints. Brambles and thorn bushes concealed the tomb of one martyr, Amarandus of Albi, before its alleged rediscovery in the sixth century.<sup>219</sup> Even at Embrun, the pear tree had grown over the tombs of Nazarius and Celsus, obscuring the spot until the tree's healing power was discovered. Yet this particular episode involves spontaneously appearing vegetation, distinct from the natural cycles of the plant at Paneas or the pear at Embrun. Collectively these stories underscore a crucial component to the cult of saints and the magical properties of associated plant life. Still, Gregory was careful to emphasize that magical vegetation worked only in the service of human action.

### ***Trees and their Hagiographic Function***

Specific to his hagiographic works, Gregory devoted a great deal of space to the interaction between trees and holy people, a theme that corresponds with his next wonder in *De cursu stellarum*, the regeneration of seeds and trees. We have already seen at the outset of this chapter how managed arboreal places could become appropriately holy. The

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<sup>218</sup> VI 46, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 133: "et haec ita erant virides, acsi easdem ipsius putaris horae momento ramis virentibus esse discerptas."

<sup>219</sup> GM 56. On his crypt, see Vieillard-Troiekouff, *Les Monuments*, 340-41.

pear tree at Embrun is not the only instance of holy wood in Gregory's works. At the spot where Genesius of Arles was decapitated there was a mulberry tree whose bark and branches had healing properties. Over time, pilgrims had stripped the mulberry beyond its ability to sustain itself, and it withered. It continued to be a holy place, though, since its dead trunk is retained the power to heal. Elsewhere in Gregory's works, trees could provide healing properties if they grew from the tombs of saints or were blessed by a holy person.<sup>220</sup> The historical evidence behind Genesius' life is murky,<sup>221</sup> but for Gregory the benefits of the natural marker for the holy spot were clear.

The natural cycles of trees, then, mirrored Gregory's interest in the (re)generative aspects of seeds and vegetation in *De cursu stellarum*. At times, however, natural cycles and processes were subverted. In the vicinity of Tarbes at the foothills of the Pyrenees, a priest and martyr, also called Genesius, "made a chestnut tree that had been dried up for a long time return to freshness."<sup>222</sup> This is a tree miracle distinct from that of Genesius of Arles' mulberry but reminiscent of another Gregory related about a sacred laurel tree growing from the grave of the martyr Baudillius in Nîmes.<sup>223</sup> If holy people could consecrate trees, they could also curse them. After Severus of Béziers was struck in the face by a falling medlar branch, he cursed it in an act of *imitatio Christi* (as well as clear

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<sup>220</sup> See e.g. *GM* 46 and *VP* 7.

<sup>221</sup> Genesius was probably martyred in the late third or early fourth century; see the discussion of Vieillard-Troiekouroff, *Les Monuments*, 37-38.

<sup>222</sup> *GM* 73, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 87: "castaneum diu aridam suis orationibus obtenuit viriditate redire."

<sup>223</sup> *GM* 77, *MGH SRM* 89-90.

frustration).<sup>224</sup> Days later, Severus rode past and, moved by the sight of the withered tree, ordered it to become whole again:

Et statim quasi per aliquam venarum dispositionem humor a terra consurgens, per totos arboris patulae ramos uberi inrigatione diffunditur, laxansque nodos arentes, prorumpentibus foliis, reuixisse ab adstantibus est mirata . . . Solitus erat namque flores liliorum tempore quo nascuntur collegere ac per parietes huius aedis appendere.<sup>225</sup>

And at once just as if [brought up] by some disposition of its vessels, the sap arose from the earth and dispersed as an abundant refreshment through all the branches of the wide-spread tree, loosening the dried-out blossoms and causing leaves to thrust forth . . . [Severus] was accustomed to pick the flowers of lilies in the time of their blooming and affix them to the walls of his sanctuary.

After Severus' death, his relics were put in a tomb, and "he flourishes in heaven like a palm tree."<sup>226</sup> At Tarbes though, the chestnut grew again through the power of a future martyr. A similar miracle in the church dedicated to Genesius of Tarbes was unrelated to the chestnut tree but a major moment in his life, in which "a lily, cut and dried out long before, flowers again during his festival, so that on that day people may admire how what they had previously seen to be withered now blossoms anew."<sup>227</sup> The episode is reminiscent of Gregory's account of the crown of thorns, which "every day

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<sup>224</sup> Mark 11.13-14: "And when he had seen afar off a fig tree having leaves, he came if perhaps he might find any thing on it. And when he was come to it, he found nothing but leaves. For it was not the time for figs. And answering he said to it: 'May no man hereafter eat fruit of thee any more for ever.' And his disciples heard it (*Cumque vidisset a longe ficum habentem folia, venit si quid forte inveniret in ea; et cum venisset ad eam, nihil invenit praeter folia: non enim erat tempus ficorum. Et respondens dixit ei: 'Iam non amplius in aeternum quisquam fructum ex te manducet.'* Et audiebant discipuli eius)."

<sup>225</sup> GC 49, MGH SRM 1.2, 327-28.

<sup>226</sup> GC 50, MGH SRM 1.2, 328: "Et sic beatus confessor profert novos flores e tumulo, qui cum sanctorum reliquis ut palma floret in caelo."

<sup>227</sup> GM 73, MGH SRM 1.2, 87: "quod lilium dudum collectum et siccum in eius solemnitate denuo revirescit, ita ut intueantur illa die populi flores novos, quos pridem viderant arefactos."



become green again because of divine power” despite its age.<sup>228</sup> On the one hand, Gregory’s awareness of natural cycles is evident in his list of wonders, but on the other, nature bent to the will of holy people.

Another example from Gregory’s works defies categorization. In his account of the miracles of Martin, Gregory catalogued several of the holy objects emerging from Martin’s cult. One of these contact relics was a set of wax candles from Martin’s tomb. For Gregory, a full account of the miracles associated with the wax would be “dull (*frigeo*).” The one miracle Gregory included in his account is a curious intersection of relic, tree and weather patterns: “A field in my possession was damaged by a storm every year and it raged so forcefully, that after it came it left nothing behind. Then I chose one tree in the vineyards, which was taller than the rest, and put some of the holy wax over it. After that day up to the present time the storm never attacked in that place, but when it arrived, it passed over that place by as if it was afraid.”<sup>229</sup> A rare glimpse into Gregory’s own life, it is clear that the bishop of Tours was not above subscribing to saints’ cults for his own benefit. Gregory presumably benefitted personally from the cessation of storms at his estate. His methods, however, remain perplexing. Elsewhere, the African bishop Quintianus of Rodez, who earned Gregory’s respect for his support of Clovis during his war with the Visigoths, dealt with famine in the Auvergne liturgically. When “the grass dried up so that there was no pasture for the animals,” Quintianus “piously celebrated the

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<sup>228</sup> *GM* 6, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 42: “Ferunt etiam, ipsas coronae sentes quasi virides apparere; quae tamen si videatur aruisse foliis, cotidie tamen revirescere virtute divina.”

<sup>229</sup> *VM* 1.34, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 154-55: “Agrum quendam possessionis nostrae grando annis singulis vastare consueuerat et tam graviter saeviebat, ut nihil ibidem cum venisset relinqueret. Tunc ego in vineis illis arborem unam, quae erat excelsior ceteris, eligens, de sancta cera super eam posui. Post illam autem diem usque in praesens tempus numquam ibidem tempestas caecidit, sed veniens, locum illum tamquam timens praeteriit.”

Rogations, which are done before the Ascension.” On the third day, he recited an antiphon for “when the heaven is shut up and there is no rain, because of the sin of the people” (II Chron. 6.26), which finally brought the rains to the Auvergne. Quintianus’ solution to bad weather was linked directly with processional liturgy and ritual fasting, a far more conventional method of moderating the weather than Gregory practiced on his estate. For Quintianus’ case, though, Gregory was probably attempting to legitimize the Council of Orleans, which in 511 had mandated the celebration of the “rogations, that is, the litany (*rogationes, id est laetantias*)” leading up to the Ascension.<sup>230</sup> While his own compulsion to smear candle wax on his estate’s tallest tree is a curious detail—one more safely attributed to himself in order to maintain control of an unconventional ritual—Gregory presented the episode as if it were part of a clear, logical process of negotiation with both landscape and weather.

Not only could holy people affect the sacred status of trees, but they might at times also produce new trees, as at Embrun, from their own contact relics. In one striking passage, Gregory included an account of Friardus, a recluse who lived on the island of Vindunitta near Nantes where “he took from the land with his hands only that which was necessary.”<sup>231</sup> Friardus once picked up a tree branch blown down by the wind and used it as his walking stick. “After a long time certainly,” Gregory claimed, “he planted this dry walking stick in the earth, and watered it often, and it brought forth leaves and fruits, and

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<sup>230</sup> *Concilium Aurelianense a. 511*, CCSL 148A, 11.

<sup>231</sup> *VP* 10.1, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 256: “victus necessaria propriis manibus exigebat a terra.”

after two or three years grew up into a tall tree.”<sup>232</sup> Crowds flocked to see the tree to the point that Friardus chopped it down to avoid excessive notoriety. Soon after, Friardus saw that the blossoming tree had been knocked down by a storm—a sight that moved him to compassion (*misericordia*). He then prayed that the tree might not die but instead keep blossoming. After his prayer, Friardus separated the trunk from the roots with his axe, sharpened the end, and planted it as he had the walking stick: “Presently it was planted without roots, [and the tree] returned to its previous condition, [and] the dried-up flowers flourished [as they had] previously; and that very same year the tree produced fruits for [God] its cultivator.”<sup>233</sup> The tree’s “renewed greenness” was proof of the saint’s power.

Friardus’ relationship with trees takes on several layers of meaning. For one, Gregory continued his theme of nature as a site of human interaction and divine participation. In this case, Friardus exercised a degree of control over both trees, sanctifying one and subsequently ending its life, and resurrecting another whose death moved him to compassion (*misericordia*). Thus in Friardus’ brief *vita*, the hermit’s engagement with trees became, in Gregory’s hands, the story of salvation in miniature. Salvation was inscribed and embedded in hagiographic landscapes, especially when natural processes were altered as in Friardus’ case. A similar example arises from the

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<sup>232</sup> *VP* 10.3, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 258: “Post multum uero tempus iam arefactam virgam in terra plantavit, infusaque aqua saepius, baculus ille frondes emisit et poma, atque infra duos aut tres annos in magna arboris proceritate distentus excrevit.”

<sup>233</sup> *VP* 10.3, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 258: “Mox ligatis sine radice radicibus, ad praestinum restituta statum, flores qui arverant viruerunt; ipsoque anno haec arbor fructus cultori suo restituit.” On the tools and implements of holy people, compare this with the rake and axe of Patroclus, the hermit (Gregory, *VP* 9.2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 253-54), and the Romanus’ seeds and hoe (*VPI* 10, Martine 248-50.) Antony’s tools were simple as well: *Vita Antonii* 25, *PL* 73: col. 449.

brief entry on the life of the recluse Johannis,<sup>234</sup> who lived in a cell near the church in

Chinon:

Ibique in viridiariolo, quem manu propria excolebat, arbores lauri plantaverat, quae nunc vastis colomnarum fomitibus iocundorum frondium amoenitate tenduntur. Sub quarum umbraculo uir sanctus consedens, aut legebat aliquid aut scribebat. Cuius post obitum cum arbores illae, ut diximus, patulis diffusae ramis obumbrarent locum viridiarii, una ex his vetustate senescens exarvit. Tunc custus loci, effossam cum radicibus colmnam, incisis ipsis cum ramis suis scamnum adaptat, in quo interdum aut resederet lassus.<sup>235</sup>

There in a little garden, which he tended with his own hands, he had planted some laurel trees, which now extended on large wooden trunks with the pleasantness of their lovely fronds. The holy man, sitting under their shadows, either read or wrote something. After his death these trees, as I said, spread out their wide branches and shaded the place of the little garden, [when] one of these [trees] weakened with old age and dried up. Then the custodian of the place dug out the trunk and roots, cut them up with their branches, and fashioned a bench, on which he sometimes sat when he was tired.

After time, the gardener felt guilty (*dolor cordis*) about using the bench for such quotidian activities and buried it in the garden. When spring came, shoots began to emerge from the bench's grave (*sepulta*), and grew higher with each passing year.<sup>236</sup> Through Johannis' planting—or creative impulse—the tree grew, lived, died and was physically buried. Both Friardus and Johannes' gardener experienced deep emotion in reaction to trees, but Gregory was careful to have them act in the service of hagiography to point towards broader issues of pride, healing and empathy.

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<sup>234</sup> On Johannis and his possible Irish origins ("natione Britto," in Gregory's words), see Vieillard-Troiekouroff, *Les Monuments*, 84.

<sup>235</sup> GC 23, MGH SRM 1.2, 312-13.

<sup>236</sup> GC 23, MGH SRM 1.2, 12-13.

### *The Phoenix and Other Animals*

Gregory's next wonder was the phoenix. For his description, he relied heavily on Lactantius (d. c. 320). According to Gregory's summary of Lactantius' poem *De phoenice*<sup>237</sup>—which, given the inconsistencies, he may have written down from memory—the phoenix had no gender, lived for a thousand years and inhabited the highest places in the world, “in which green foliage endures through spring and winter, in the middle of which is a great spring and [which] flows abundantly and is very clear in its gentleness. A noble tree surpasses the rest of the trees of the grove in height on the banks.”<sup>238</sup> At the tip of that tree, the phoenix would nest and live until its eventual combustion. From there, it would rise from the ashes and live again. In Gregory's words, the phoenix “prefigures and demonstrates the wonder of human resurrection.”<sup>239</sup> Apart from the first wonder of the world, Noah's ark,<sup>240</sup> and the depictions of beasts in the fourth, the mausoleum of the “Persian king (*regis Persici*),”<sup>241</sup> the entry on the phoenix is the only discussion of any animal in the section on wonders in *De cursu stellarum*. Its inclusion introduces a zoomorphic category to Gregory's thought world.

Animals appear relatively rarely in Gregory's works, yet they take on specific categories of interaction with humans. Like the rest of the natural world, Gregory took no interest in animals for their own sake, but cast them either as helpful or demonstrative of

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<sup>237</sup> Lactantius, *De Phoenice*, in *Minor Latin Poets*, ed. and trans. John Duff and Arnold Duff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 643-65.

<sup>238</sup> *MGH SRM* 1.2, 411, *DCS* 12: “in quo habetur locus viridi comam verno hibernoque perdurans, in cuius medium fons est magnus et ubertate profluus et lenitate praeclarus. Huius in litore arbor nobilis reliquas luci abores proceritate praecellens.”

<sup>239</sup> *DCS* 12, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 411: “miraculum resurrectionem humanum valde figurat et ostendit.”

<sup>240</sup> *DCS* 2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 407-8.

<sup>241</sup> *DCS* 5, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 409.

the power of a saint's cult. Benignus, a (probably apocryphal) third-century martyr of Dijon, was laid to rest at a shrine there, but in the early sixth century, locals assumed a pagan was buried in the tomb since locals (*rustici*) made vows there and received their requests.<sup>242</sup> One man noticed the efficacy with which vows were rewarded and brought a votive candle to the shrine. Afterwards, a young boy tried to snuff out the candle and steal it, but a serpent appeared and coiled itself around the candle, preventing him from doing so. The bishop of Dijon at the time was Gregorius, Gregory's great-grandfather, who considered such stories to be fantasies; yet he redoubled his efforts to prevent locals from venerating at the shrine.<sup>243</sup> It was only when Benignus visited Gregorius in a dream that the bishop rebuilt the vaulted shrine with fine workmanship.<sup>244</sup> Generally, snakes in Gregory's hagiographic works were malevolent. The hermit Caluppa (d. 576) built a small oratory for himself where snakes fell on his head during prayers until he prayed them away, calling to mind the role of the serpent in Eden.<sup>245</sup> And as we have seen, the devil could take the form of a serpent as he had done in the river where the Jura monk Sabinianus worked.<sup>246</sup> Here, though, Gregory played on his readers' expectations for the image of the serpent, manipulating the meanings of the natural world in order to complicate them. Even though the snake at Benignus' shrine defied easy categorization,

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<sup>242</sup> *GM* 50, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 72-73. On Benignus and his early sixth-century *passio*, see Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les origines du cultes des martyrs* (Brussels: Bureaux de la Société des Bollandistes, 1933), 354-55; and Elie Griffé, *La Gaule chrétienne à l'époque romaine* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1964), I: 138-48.

<sup>243</sup> On Gregorius and Gregory's family, see Bernard Krusch, "Praefatio," *MGH SRM* 1.1, ix.

<sup>244</sup> *GM* 50, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 73.

<sup>245</sup> *VP* 11.2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 261-62. Gen. 3.1-6. Gregory tells us in *DLH* 5.9, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 204 that Caluppa died in 576; in *VP* 11.3, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 261 he states that he was 50 when he died, making 526 a reasonable year of birth.

<sup>246</sup> See above, 106-9.

Gregory cast it as a revelatory aid for identifying Christian topography to emphasize the inversion of order in the story: a saint, not a pagan, was buried at the shrine.

In a similar episode, Gregory recounted the rediscovery of the tomb of Genesius of Clermont, another possibly apocryphal martyr.<sup>247</sup> According to Gregory, who must have heard the story from Avitus, bishop of Clermont between 571 and 594, a poor man from the hamlet of Thiers in the Auvergne lost his oxen. After searching high and low for them, Genesius appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to take a path into the forest, where he would find the oxen grazing next to a marble tombstone, which he should then use the oxen to position on a nearby burial site.<sup>248</sup> Once the locals realized whose shrine it was, the place was revitalized as a pilgrimage site, and Avitus had a church constructed and dedicated there.<sup>249</sup> By now we can see a clear pattern emerging from Embrun, Dijon and now the region around Clermont: animals (or in Embrun's case, a tree) could reveal holy places to humans so that natural places could be taken over appropriately with constructed churches. Animals were a crucial component in Gregory's idea of Christian sacred geography.

They also played clearer roles in miracle stories, demonstrating the power of a saint's cult. When Gregory was once traveling in the region of Baugy, he asked the boatman at the Loire River about a good place to fish nearby. Pointing one out at a distance, he uttered a blessing invoking Martin's assistance. Gregory's traveling companions were annoyed at the boatman's blessing, and the boatman in turn told them a

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<sup>247</sup> His cult was promoted and may have been devised by Avitus, bishop of Clermont between 571 and 594 (*DLH* 4.35, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 167-68); see Griffe, *Le Gaule chrétienne* I: 140; and Vieillard-Troiekouroff, *Les Monuments*, 293-94.

<sup>248</sup> *GM* 66, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 83.

<sup>249</sup> *GM* 66, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 83.

story about how he had once prayed to Martin and had subsequently drawn out a great catch from the river. Curiously, Gregory's account ends at that point; we are left wondering whether or not he and his companions dined on fish that day. This was not Martin's first successful fishing trip, having once helped a deacon catch a large fish.<sup>250</sup> Similarly, Gregory recalled another time in which a bishop Nicetius' fish traps had been dislodged by the swift current of a river when they were miraculously recovered full of fish.<sup>251</sup> Miraculous provision of food was a common enough occurrence.<sup>252</sup> While such "miracles are in a sense less to do with nature as such than with . . . obedience,"<sup>253</sup> in these cases animals existed purely for the provision of and service to humans. On one level certainly, lack of faith was often met with the unexpected fish, but in another sense, animals acted in obedience to saintly will.

This phenomenon is best illustrated in hermit and hunter legends. Such stories are common in early medieval literature,<sup>254</sup> and Gregory was one of the earliest known recorders of them. In one instance, the hermit Aemilianus lived in solitude where "there were no other inhabitants besides beasts and birds," calling to mind the Jura wilderness whose first inhabitants only had the company of stags.<sup>255</sup> Once, a hunter called Brachio, employed by a local nobleman, was hunting in the forest where Aemilianus lived. He

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<sup>250</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogi* 3.10.16-26, *CSEL* 1, 207.

<sup>251</sup> *VP* 17.4, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 281-82.

<sup>252</sup> For a similar example, see Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 7, below, 171.

<sup>253</sup> Alexander, *Animals*, 38.

<sup>254</sup> On the relationships among holy people, hunters and animals, see Alexander, *Animals*, 113-31; Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 94-109; and Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 165-67.

<sup>255</sup> *VP* 12.1, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 262: "nullum habens, cohabitatores enim bestias auesque illi erant."



chased a boar into Aemilianus' territory near his cell and the hunting dogs were suddenly barred from entering the space. The boar escaped, and Aemilianus—now the hunter?—successfully converted Brachio, who later became an abbot of a small monastic community. Animals in Gregory's hagiographic works could take many forms; even when they were hostile to humans, they almost always operated in service to them or their images.

### ***Mount Etna, Mountains and Rock Formations***

Gregory's fourth wonder, the final one involving the physical earth, was Mount Etna on Sicily, "where it burns with living flames, vomits out powerful blazes, and belches forth sulphur terribly in that region."<sup>256</sup> While Gregory vividly described Etna's fires, the mountain's imposing geologic structure is central to the passage. Rocks and rock formations constitute a minor role in Gregory's works in comparison with vegetation. Nearly all his references to rock formations are in the context of monastic practice. In *De cursu stellarum*, Gregory emphasized Etna's dangerous, unpredictable nature. Elsewhere, Gregory used mountains as images of natural isolation, barrenness, and pagan superstitions.

In Ephesus, for example, the plain, roofless church of John the Evangelist stood on top of a nearby mountain. There were four roofless walls in which John prayed and

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<sup>256</sup> DCS 13, MGH SRM 1.2, 411: "qui vivis ardoribus exaestuat, flammasque euomens validas, ac terribiliter regione sulphur eructuat."

fasted, with the result that the peak was free from storms and even rain.<sup>257</sup> Similarly, the hermit Caluppa fled from his monastery in the Auvergne<sup>258</sup> to a hermitage in a

vallem haud procul a monasterio . . . de cuius medio lapis, natura praebente, consurgens, provehitur in excelsum quasi in quingentis aut eo amplius pedibus, nullam penitus habens cum reliquis montibus circumpositis coniunctionem. Cuius vallis medium fluvis alluit, qui hunc montem placide contingens, dilabatur. In huius ergo lapidis scissuram, quod priscis quondam propter transitum hostium receptaculum fuit, heremita sanctus ingreditur, et exciso lapide, habitacula statuit, in qua nunc per scalam valde difficilem scanditur. Locus etenim ille tam difficilis est ad incedendum, ut etiam feris bestiis illuc accedere sit laboris.<sup>259</sup>

valley not a long way from the monastery . . . in the middle of which was a stone, a natural outcropping, arising about five hundred feet high or more, having utterly no connection with the rest of the surrounding mountains. This valley was supplied by a river, which peacefully touched the mountain, [and] fell away. The holy hermit therefore entered a rocky crevice in the crag, which had previously been a refuge in periods of enemy invasion, and, cutting off some rock, he founded his dwelling there, where it could only be reached by a very difficult path. For that place has such difficult access that even wild beasts can only arrive with considerable work.

As we have seen in the *Vita patrum iurensium*, images of natural isolation served early medieval monastic authors well.<sup>260</sup> In both cases, the landscape did the work for the hermit, isolating him naturally. And just like Romanus in the previous century, Caluppa's hermitage was so isolated—despite its proximity to the monastery—that only wild animals dared to traverse the region. For Romanus and Caluppa, their hermitages consisted of one part hagiographic convention, two parts natural world.

<sup>257</sup> GM 29, MGH SRM 1.2, 55.

<sup>258</sup> As Gregory says, the “monasterium Melatinse.” Gabriel Fournier speculated that this was most likely Méallat, whose nearby valley of the Marlhoux fits Gregory's general description; see Gabriel Fournier, *Le Peuplement rural en Basse-Auvergne dans le Haut Moyen Age* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962), 413-14; and Vieillard-Troiekouroff, *Les Monuments*, 157.

<sup>259</sup> VP 11.1, MGH SRM 1.2, 259.

<sup>260</sup> See above, 105.

Alternatively, mountainous regions could harbor suspicious pagan practice. Such practices could take place even on a mountain named after Hilary. One of the more curious glimpses into early medieval paganism takes place at the crossroads of pagan culture (or at least Gregory's understanding of it) and rocky landscapes:

Mons enim erat in Gabalitano territorio cognomento Helarius, lacum habens magnum. Ad quem certo tempore multitudo rusticorum, quasi libamina lacui illi exhibens, lenteamina proieciebat ac pannos, qui ad usum vestimenti virili praebeantur; nonnulli lanae vellera, plurimi etiam formas casei ac cerae vel panis diversasque species, unusquisque iuxta vires suas.<sup>261</sup>

There was a mountain in Javol territory named for Hilary, having a large lake [in it]. At a certain time a crowd of rustics [would go there and], just as if offering libations to the lake, cast linens and garments [into the lake] that served men as clothing; some [cast] sections of wool, many others [cast] figures of cheese and wax or bread and various [other] things, each one according to himself.

The rustics' sacrifices went on until the fourth day, when a violent storm arose and trapped the crowd on the mountain. According to Gregory, the storm was an annual fixture at the festival. After some years, the new bishop of the Javols<sup>262</sup> came to preach to them, urging them to abandon their practices if they valued their lives. His solution was at once active and physical: he built a church in honor of Hilary some distance from the lake, where the bishop installed Hilary's relics. After preaching for some time, the pagans converted and brought all the objects they used to throw into the lake to the church instead. The storms never returned.

This episode is one of Gregory's exemplary expressions of how to deal with pagan places. The pear tree at Embrun was never pagan, but there was an abiding danger that it could slip into what Gregory would consider "superstitious" veneration. There, a

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<sup>261</sup> GC 2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 299.

<sup>262</sup> This was possibly Hilarius, in the early sixth century, according to Duchesne, *Fastes épiscopaux* II: 54-55.

new church overwrote the inadequacies of a pear tree. At Hilary's mountain, though, Gregory recorded some explicitly non-Christian practices. As we have seen with Sulpicius' descriptions of pagans, Gregory never gave the Javols credit for any intuition on their part: the storm kept coming, yet they adhered to the same practices year after year. The new bishop engaged in pure competition in a struggle between rituals and belief systems. Finally, the bishop offered a clear solution to their problems, introducing a church and relics to the landscape. In the end, instead of casting their possessions into the mountain lake, the Javols brought them into the church, a clear transference of the proper directions of veneration. The Javols faced a choice between lake and church, and the bishop said it best: "Do not [do this], little children, do not sin against God! There is no piety in a pond."<sup>263</sup> We will recall that Martin had assured a crowd of pagans that there was "nothing pious in a tree trunk (*nihil esse religionis in stipite*)"<sup>264</sup> just before chopping down a sacred tree. As in Martin's case, the dangers of the natural world were neutralized by the construction of a church.

Such dangers manifested themselves in rock, which helps explain the forcefulness with which some rural monks carved out their existence in the landscape. Inspired by Christ's exhortation to pray in private (Matt. 6.6), the hermit Martius "began to assault a rocky mountain, in which he might carve out cells, and make for himself a tiny dwelling."<sup>265</sup> Similarly, Gregory cited exhaustion from excavating a rocky mountain in

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<sup>263</sup> GC 2, MGH SRM 1.2, 300: "Nolite, filioli, nolite peccare ante Deum! Nulla est enim religio in stagnum."

<sup>264</sup> Sulpicius, VM 13.1-2. See above, 69-70.

<sup>265</sup> VP 14.1, MGH SRM 1.2, 268: "montem lapideum caedere coepit, in quo cellulas sculpens, habitacula sibi paruula fecit."

the reasons for Leobardus' physical decline.<sup>266</sup> As Martius attacked the rock, mountains could also attack humans with their Etna-like unpredictability, as a disaster at Taurendunum made clear: "After a sort of rumbling had continued for more than sixty days, the mountain was finally torn away and separated from another mountain near it, together with men, churches, property and houses, and fell into the river, and the banks of the river were blocked and the water flowed back."<sup>267</sup> For Gregory's hermits and recluses, rocky terrain could be both an obstacle and aid to ascetic life, and could often symbolize a holy person's dominion over nature.

### ***Nature's Counterpoint: Gregory as aedificator***

It is no coincidence that Gregory's hagiographic works loom so large in a discussion of his engagement with categories of the natural world. They contain the best, and fullest, descriptions of landscapes of any of his other works. In Gregory's hands, nature could signify sin, lust, or the dangers of life. The natural world was often a stage on which hagiographic action took place, constantly in the service of holy people. Unlike the author of the *VPI*, Gregory imparted very little agency to the natural world. His treatment of nature resembled more Sulpicius' depiction of the wilderness through which Martin moved and which he sometimes clashed, not the more sensitive, collaborative approach of the Jura Fathers. While Gregory at times carefully described wild places, he generally kept these descriptions at a distance, in the realm of metaphor.

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<sup>266</sup> *VP* 20.4, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 293-94.

<sup>267</sup> *DLH* 4.31, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 163-66.

While much of Gregory's natural description takes place in his hagiographic work, he vigorously reaffirmed his preference for built space in his *Decem Libri Historiarum*. The natural world, as we have seen, never did much work for Gregory as an author, but was subservient to broader aims. By comparison in his *Historia*, Gregory told the story of Christian success in the land of the Franks through built space: churches, shrines, monumental architecture and the like. Towards the conclusion of the *Historia*, Gregory clarified his position on built space: "Certainly in many locations near Tours and its region, I dedicated churches and oratories and I distinguished these with the relics of saints; there are too many for me to provide a complete account."<sup>268</sup> On a more personal note, Gregory also boasted that he rebuilt Tours' cathedral bigger and higher than it had been before.<sup>269</sup> His pride in built place and space helps explain why Gregory so often moored his miracle stories to physical places his audience might recognize. As we have seen, even when he wanted to describe nature, he often did so in close reference to built places, as with the church at Galicia.<sup>270</sup>

In the *Vita patrum*, Gregory claimed that the church universal was "being built, whenever the acts of the saints are recounted with the greatest devotion."<sup>271</sup> For an author who held built structures in such high esteem, this was a vivid claim for the hagiographic

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<sup>268</sup> *DLH* 10.18, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 534: "In multis vero locis infra Turonicum terminum et ecclesias et oratoria dedicavi sanctorumque reliquiis inlustravi; quae memorare ex ordine prolixum censui." For the context of Gregory's cult regulations, see Paul Fouracre, "The Origins of the Carolingian Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143-65.

<sup>269</sup> *DLH* 10.18, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 535.

<sup>270</sup> See above, 123-25.

<sup>271</sup> *VP* 20, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 291: "aedificatur, quotienscumque sanctorum gesta devotissime repleantur."

enterprise. A similar impulse emerges from the *Historia* in the context of the Temple:

“Thus may he build for himself a temple within us, in which it is worthy [for him] to dwell, in which faith may shine like gold, in which [his] words may gleam like silver, [and] in which the ornaments of that other visible temple may be seen clearly in the excellence of our thoughts.”<sup>272</sup> Here was Gregory’s claim of his own literary contribution to the church, as well as the connection between physical spaces of the faith and its consequent success. By reporting the deeds of saints, Gregory contributed bricks and mortar to the *aedificium* of the church and claimed for himself the role of *aedificator*, the builder. Earlier in the sixth century, Caesarius’ contemporary Avitus of Vienne had shared that lexicon of adornment and construction, a clear counterpoint to locating God (or the devil) in the wilderness. Once, Avitus had to decline an invitation from the *dux* Arigius to attend the dedication of a new church.<sup>273</sup> In a rhetorical flourish, Avitus had expressed his disappointment at his own absence, imagining the various orators who would have “ascribe[d] to its maker the elegance of its fittings, vaunting its expense, the harmonious reason in its dimensions, the expanse of its space, the height of its roof, the firm firmness of its base . . . [they also would have] praise[d] the light gathered and enclosed by labor, living with the light of so many valuable shining metals.”<sup>274</sup> Gregory

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<sup>272</sup> *DLH* 1.15, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 15: “Ipse enim sibi in nobis templum, in quo dignitur habitare, constituat, in quo fides ut aurum luceat, in quo eloquium praedicationes ut argentum splendeat, in quo omnia visibilis templi illius ornamenta in nostrorum sensuum honestate clariscant.”

<sup>273</sup> He is most commonly identified as “Aridius” from Gregory of Tours *DLH* 2.32, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 78-80. See, for example, J.R. Martindale, ed., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume 2: AD 395-527* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and his entry in Heinzelmänn, “Gallische Prosopographie,” 559.

<sup>274</sup> Avitus, *Epistula* 50, *MGH AA* 6.2, 78: “adscribere conditori in dispositionum qualitate elegantiam, in expensarum profusione iacturam, in dimensionum ratione concordiam, in

was working with a long tradition of praising beautiful buildings, thus explaining in part his fascination with the ornate spaces of the world he related in *In gloria martyrum*—places he had never visited, but which used their elaborate adornment as reference points for spiritual worth.<sup>275</sup> For example, the Roman pool at Osset was converted into a shrine.<sup>276</sup> The tomb of St. Peter in Rome boasted colonnades and relics “soaked with divine power.”<sup>277</sup> The relics of Saturninus deserved a better resting place than a hut, so a fine oratory was built for them.<sup>278</sup> And in Carthage, the Church of St. Cyprian featured a pulpit “wonderfully made . . . [and] carved out (*sculptus*) from a single piece of marble.”<sup>279</sup> These were the types of physical structures to which Gregory affixed Francia’s Christian success as well.

Building as a categorical activity very often takes center stage in Gregory’s works. Some of the projects he described are remarkable for their detail. Perpetuus, bishop of Tours from around 460 to 490, was responsible for enlarging and improving the chapel at Martin’s tomb there. Gregory’s pride in place is clear in his *Historia*: the chapel was removed, and a new church was built just outside the city. The church was 160 feet long and 60 feet wide, with 52 windows total, 12 columns, 8 doorways, and the list goes on.<sup>280</sup>

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spatiis diffusionem, in culminibus celsitudinem in humilitate firmitatem . . . quodam modo atque inclusum industria diem emolumento metallorum splendentium luce vegetari.”

<sup>275</sup> On the Christian tradition of praising aesthetic beauty and adorned spaces in exegetical contexts, I have consulted Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), at 63-83, although Janes does not address Gregory of Tours in any sustained way.

<sup>276</sup> *GM* 23, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 51-52.

<sup>277</sup> *GM* 27, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 53-54.

<sup>278</sup> *GM* 47, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 70-71.

<sup>279</sup> In *GM* 93; *MGH SRM* 1.2, 100, the pulpit was “mirabiliter conpositus . . . ex uno lapide marmoris totus sculptus adseritur.”

<sup>280</sup> *DLH* 2.14, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 63-64.



Gregory's vivid and specific description betrays close familiarity with the place, rivaled only by descriptions of sacred spaces in the Holy Land for which he had reliable sources. No natural place receives such attention in Gregory's works. This description of Martin's church marks the beginning of a series of vignettes on building projects throughout Gaul among which were the church of the martyr Symphorian of Autun built by Eufronius, as well as a new church in Clermont-Ferrand built by Namatius, whose wife built the church of Stephen outside that city's walls.<sup>281</sup> In such cases Gregory was careful to include sensory detail—the dimensions, structure shape, aromas of incense, brightness of mosaic or fresco, and the like. Similarly, the church of the “Golden Saints” at Cologne “because [of its] wonderful construction and mosaics, shines as if somehow gilded.”<sup>282</sup> Gregory's preference for church craftsmanship and its sensory delights becomes clearer especially when compared with the famous description of Clovis' baptism: “the squares were decorated with painted cloths, the churches were adorned with white curtains, the baptistery was put in order, incense gave off perfumes, sweet smelling candles glittered, and the holy place of baptism was sprinkled with divine odor; God granted everyone present such grace, that they thought themselves to have been brought to a sweet-smelling paradise.”<sup>283</sup> Such vivid depictions grace Gregory's discussions of built spaces throughout his works.

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<sup>281</sup> *DLH* 2.15-17, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 64-65.

<sup>282</sup> *GM* 61, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 80: “Et quia admirabili opere ex musiuo quodam modo deaurata resplendet.”

<sup>283</sup> *DLH* 2.31, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 77: “Velis depictis adumbrantur plateae, ecclesiae curtinibus albenibus adornantur, baptisterium componitur, balsama difunduntur, micant flagrant odorem cerei, totumque templum baptisterii diuino respergetur ab odore, talemque ibi gratiam adstantibus Deus tribuit, ut aestimarent se paradisi odoribus collocari.”

Gregory's fixation on building is evident in his description of monastic foundations as well. We have already seen how an anonymous author from earlier in the sixth century framed the fifth-century monastic foundations in the Jura and their debt to nearby Agaune, the "rock." In Gregory's rendering, though, Agaune's main reference points were its fine buildings, chapels and living quarters.<sup>284</sup> At Bourges, new monks were taught to chant psalms and build churches.<sup>285</sup> So fine were the monasteries of Gaul that they were easy targets for looting during civil conflicts; while Guntram, Sigibert and Chilperic fought in the 570s, the community at Latte was just one of the monastic victims of civil war. As a contemporary of those conflicts, Gregory emphasized the fine quality of the plunder. (Yet in this particular case, the soldiers' boat capsized and they were impaled on their own weapons.<sup>286</sup>)

Sometimes Gregory's descriptions were remarkable in their specificity. In one such instance, Gregory recorded how a church dedicated to the third-century martyr Laurentius in Poitiers had fallen into such disrepair that the roof had caved in. In an attempt to repair it, the locals "entered the forest, cut and planed wood, fashioned beams, put them on carts and brought them to the place [i.e. the shrine]."<sup>287</sup> Once there, however, the bishop found one of the crucial beams to be too short and, after offering up a prayer to Laurentius himself, the beam miraculously lengthened to allow building to commence properly. In fact, the beam lengthened so much that the end had to be cut off; splinters of this excess, Gregory claimed, were used as healing relics. At this point Gregory

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<sup>284</sup> *DLH* 3.5, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 100-1.

<sup>285</sup> *DLH* 1.31, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 24.

<sup>286</sup> *DLH* 4.48, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 184-85.

<sup>287</sup> *GM* 41, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 65: They "silvas adeunt, incise levigataque ligna, trabes efficient, inpositisque plaustis ad locum exhibent."

employed the words of his friend Fortunatus, itself an interesting blend of architectural detail and concern with natural resources:

Stipite contracto tua se mercede tetendit  
 Quantum parva prius, postea caesa fuit.  
 Crescere plus meruit succisa securibus arbor  
 Et didicit sicca longior esse coma.  
 Unde recisa fuit, populus fert inde salute:  
 Si venit intrepidus, lumina caecus habet.<sup>288</sup>

With the log cut short, it stretched itself out by your reward,  
 So much as it [was] previously short, it was cut after [it grew longer].  
 The tree that was cut by axes was worthy to grow more  
 And the dry foliage learned to become longer.  
 When it had been cut, it gave help to the people:  
 If he approached without fear, a blind man received his sight.

Fortunatus' description of the beam miracle at Poitiers was fundamentally a story about building. Couched in Gregory's larger description, the oak wood continued to grow past its death; natural cycles of the forest surpassed the tree's lifespan and contributed directly to the construction of physical space. It is impossible to say whether or not parishioners at the church of Laurentius were made aware of the miracle, but it should not be surprising if Fortunatus' words or similar ones were inscribed in the church as a *titulus*. The same church boasted a Eucharistic chalice miraculously repaired through the power of the saint which subsequently "hung over the altar (*suspensum super altare calicem*)"; a similar recognition of its miraculous construction is not unlikely.<sup>289</sup> In a broader sense, though, Gregory in this story espoused the concept of nature as commodity. We have already seen how Gregory described nature as consistently in the service of humans, but in his description of built space, trees were tools of the *aedificator*.

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<sup>288</sup> GM 41, MGH SRM 1.2, 66. Here Gregory quoted Fortunatus, *Carm.* 9.14, 1-2 and 11-18, MGH AA 4.1, 218.

<sup>289</sup> GM 45, MGH SRM 1.2, 69.

For Laurentius' church, Fortunatus had poetically described how the wood "learned to become longer," while Gregory emphasized the process of felling, cutting, leveling and erecting. Gregory's was a world apart from the Jura wilderness where the natural world actively shaped monastic behavior.

### ***Wulfolac the Gallic Stylite: Erasing Temples and Creating Ruins***

Among Gregory's fullest expressions of these concepts emerge from his treatment of Roman ruins. Dilapidated villas, monuments, cemeteries and temples, many of which were repurposed, were common features of Gaul's landscape in the late- and post-Roman periods.<sup>290</sup> Physical ruin of built space was a common metric of cultural success and decline, as we shall see in the works of Gildas in the next chapter.<sup>291</sup> More directly relevant to Gregory's own cultural context, Avitus in his biblical epic *De spiritualis*

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<sup>290</sup> Bonnie Effros has discussed these issues in the broader terms of space, landscape and cross-cultural theory throughout her work: see *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), at 177-88 and, 211-17; *idem.*, "Monuments and Memory: Repossessing Ancient Remains in Early Medieval Gaul," in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Age*, ed. Mayke de Jong, Frans Theuws and Carine van Rhijn (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 93-118; and *idem.*, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 49-70. For similar critiques of the modern scholarship of early medieval archaeology, see Bailey Young, "Paganisme, christianisation et rites funéraires mérovingiens," *Archaeologie Médiévale* 7 (1977): 5-81; and Guy Halsall, "Burial, Ritual and Merovingian Society," in *The Community, the Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Joyce Hill and Mary Swan (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 325-38. Cristina La Rocca provides a more specific consideration of the ways in which Roman ruins were repurposed for propagandistic purposes in her "Using the Roman Past: Abandoned Towns and Local Power in the Eleventh-Century Piemonte," *Early Medieval Europe* 5.1 (1996): 45-69.

<sup>291</sup> See below, Chapter 2, 203-5.

*historiae gestis* interpreted the Israelites' exodus from Egypt primarily in terms of the physical ruin they left behind:

Rura vacant, coeptis desistunt oppida muris:  
Non solitum consurgit opus non cultor in agris  
exercet validos adtrito dente ligones.<sup>292</sup>

The countryside is empty, towns stop their work with walls just begun:  
The usual labor makes no progress, no cultivator in the fields  
uses strong hoes with worn-out blades.

Ruins were defined primarily by absence, representative of incompleteness. For Gregory, ruins were part of the larger tableaux of the Gallic landscape: crumbling temples should be repurposed or put out of their misery, and the Roman landscape should be supplanted by a well-articulated, ordered Christian one.

For Gregory, buildings described this process most effectively, especially in one case involving a ruined temple, officious bishops, and an aspiring stylite. The stylite in question was Wulfolac, a native Lombard who told Gregory his story sometime in the 580s about his promotion of Martin's cult outside Trier. He found an ancient temple to Diana and decided to perch on one of its columns, preaching to passersby against the sort of worship that took place within. Then, according to Gregory, Wulfolac convinced the locals to help him take down the statue of Diana:

Verum ubi ad me multitudo vicinarum villarum confluere coepit, praedicabam iugiter, nihil esse Dianam, nihil simulacra nihilque quae eis videbatur exercere cultura; indigna etiam esse ipsa, quae inter pocula luxuriasque profluas cantica proferebant . . . Flexit Domini misericordia mentem rusticam, ut inclinaret aurem suam in verba oris mei . . . iam enim reiue sigillorum, quae facilia fuerant, ipse confringeram.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Avitus, *De spiritalis* 5.477-79, *MGH AA* 6.2, 267.

<sup>293</sup> *DLH* 8.15, *MGH SRM* 1.1, 381.

Indeed crowds started to come to me from the estates of the region, and I would constantly tell them that Diana was nothing, her statues were also nothing, and the rites they exercised were nothing as well; [I also said] that the songs they chanted when amidst their cups and luxuries was humiliating to them . . . God in his mercy moved their rustic minds, so that they were ready to hear with their ears the words of my mouth . . . I had already destroyed idols, which were easier to handle.

Once the statue of Diana was pulled down, the frenzied locals reduced it to dust with hammers. What had begun as a success story quickly turned sour for Wulfoliac:

advenientibus episcopis, qui me magis ad hoc cohortare debuerant, ut coeptum opus sagaciter explicare deberem, dixerunt mihi; ‘Non est aequa, haec via, quam sequeris, nec tu ignobilis Symeoni Anthiochino, qui columnae insedit, poteris comparare. Sed nec cruciatum hoc te sustenere patitur loci posito. Discende potius et cum fratribus, quos adgregasti tecum, inhabita’. Ad quorum verba, quia sacerdotes non obaudire adscribitur crimini, discendebam.<sup>294</sup>

Some bishops came to me, who should have exhorted me to do more of what I had done in order that I explain wisely what I had begun, [but] they said to me: “It is not the right way, what you are doing, for an ignoble person like you is unable to be compare yourself with Simeon [the Stylite] of Antioch. The climate of this place makes torturing yourself like this an impossibility. Rather, come down off your column, and live with the brothers whom you have gathered around you.” At their words, because it is a crime not to obey priests, I came down.

Wulfoliac’s experience has understandably been held as a prime example of the rift between eastern and western modes of desert life—a clash between the charisma of the former and the developing officiousness of the latter<sup>295</sup>—as well as the tension between ascetic activities and excessive pridefulness.<sup>296</sup> More recently, though, others

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<sup>294</sup> DLH 8.15, MGH SRM 1.1, 382-83.

<sup>295</sup> See e.g. Lewis Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks* (London: Penguin, 1974), 447; and Peter Brown, “Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity: A Parting of the Ways,” *Studies in Church History* 13 (1976): 1-24; repr. in *idem., Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 166-95.

<sup>296</sup> On these anxieties of Augustine, Cassian and others, see Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 66-71; and Steven Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), 81-82.

have questioned whether or not this is the best reading; in other words, Gregory retold the story as Wulfoliac's advocate, casting the anxious bishops as the villains.<sup>297</sup> Seen in this way, "the powers of the wilderness were far too valuable a resource simply to suppress."<sup>298</sup> Wulfoliac's charisma was a prized commodity in western ascetic life as well.

That charisma was at the center of Gregory's retelling of Wulfoliac's brief stint as a stylite. Notably, all the action took place in close reference to built space. Yet a closer consideration reveals that Wulfoliac was railing against the culture for which Diana's temple stood, not actual pagan practices: although Gregory did not emphasize it, the temple had clearly been abandoned for some time. That Wulfoliac found a column on *top* of which to stand suggests a semi-ruinous state of the structure.<sup>299</sup> In other instances in Gregory's works, he unintentionally suggested pagan practice's obsolescence: in stark contrast with the resistance Martin often faced in the fourth century, Gregory's uncle Gallus as bishop of Auvergne met no resistance when setting fire to an old pagan shrine near Cologne.<sup>300</sup> Gregory elaborated on the rituals that took place there in general terms: "there was also a certain shrine there full of diverse ornaments, in which nearby barbarians would offer libations, and fill themselves up until vomiting; adoring the images there as if they were gods, they placed wooden models of [human] body parts,

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<sup>297</sup> Conrad Leyser, "'Divine Power Flowed from This Book': Ascetic Language and Episcopal Authority in Gregory of Tours' *Life of the Fathers*," in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 281-94. For Leyser, "the powers of the wilderness were far too valuable a resource simply to suppress."

<sup>298</sup> Leyser, "Desert," 114

<sup>299</sup> Hen, "Paganism," 233.

<sup>300</sup> *VP* 6.2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 231.

whenever a part of their body was touched by pain.”<sup>301</sup> Gregory made very little effort to conceal the fact that such places were obsolete. Wulfolac stood on the column and preached to “his imaginary pagans.”<sup>302</sup>

Among the main points, however, was the building itself. Gregory’s description of buildings—ruins on one hand, and praise of fine craftsmanship on the other—stand as a crucial counterpoint to the natural world within his literary output. As at Embrun, the best way to guarantee a place’s purity was to build a church over it and install relics. At Embrun, nature and building intersected. A pear tree could only accomplish so much until a building could replace it. For Gregory, the natural world was *useful* but did no work for him as it had done for the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium* author: trees, rocks and bodies of water could be shorthand for danger, saintly dominion and the wonder of Creation, but ultimately, fine buildings were the most reliable metric of the faith’s success. This was the case with the temple of Diana outside Trier: the nature of its actual threat to local Christianity is obscure, but its mere existence called for dramatic measures, inspired in this by the best Syrian paradigm in Simeon Stylites. The conquest of natural places in Gaul was nearing its completion, but by the end of the sixth century Gregory of Tours had turned his fullest attention to built spaces.

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<sup>301</sup> *VP* 6.2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 231: “Erat autem ibi fanum quoddam diversis ornamentis refertum, in quo barbaries proxima libamina exhibens, usque ad vomitum cibo potuque replebatur; ibique et simulacra ut deum adorans, membra, secundum quod unumquemque dolor attigisset, sculpebat in ligno.”

<sup>302</sup> Hen, “Paganism,” 233.

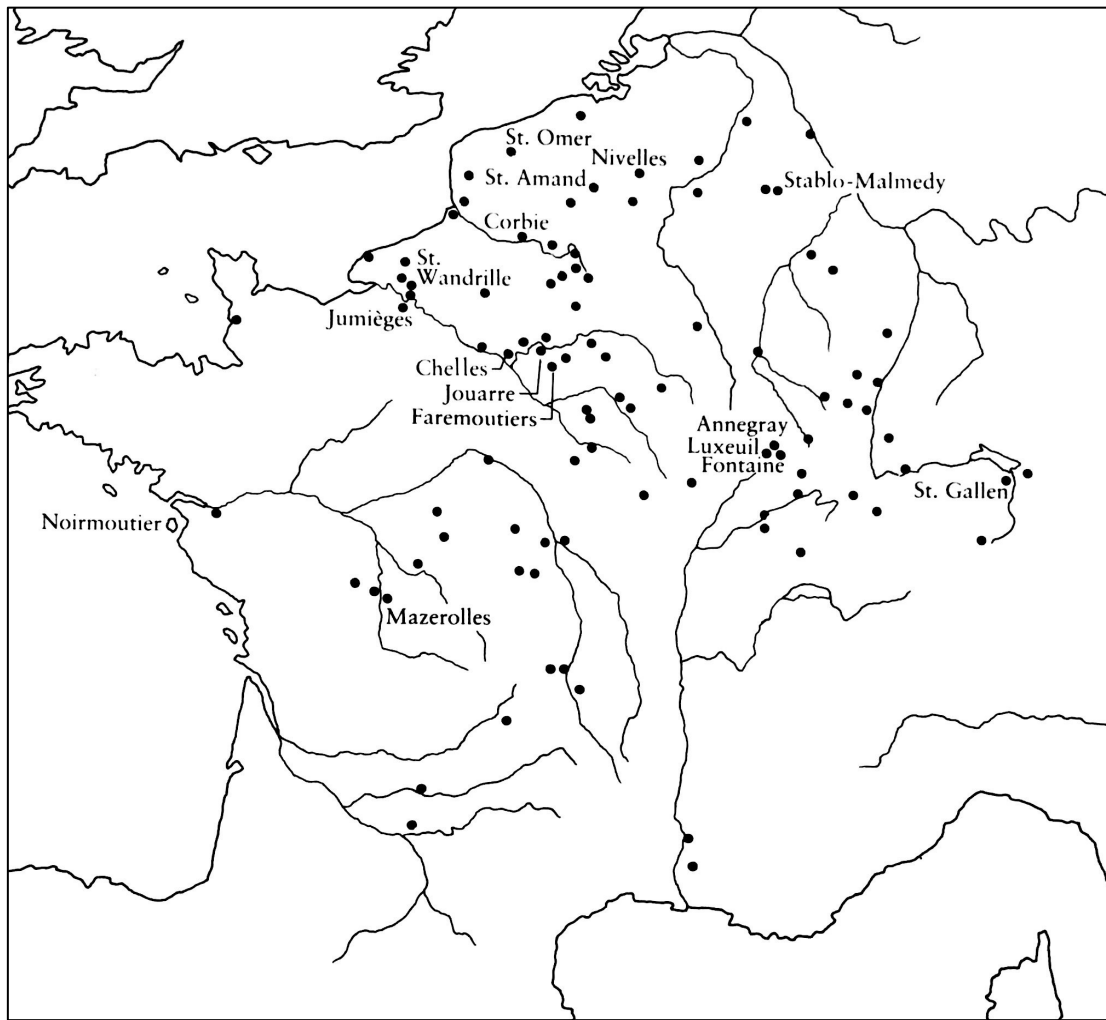


### **“Understand Creation, if you wish to know the Creator”: The Columbanian Compromise**

Gregory was a powerful, but not authoritative, voice on the subject of the natural world amongst the intellectuals of post-Roman Gaul. Our final case study on the treatment of the natural world in early medieval Francia takes us beyond conventional geographic boundaries to the life of Gregory of Tours’ younger contemporary, Columbanus (d. 615). Born in Leinster sometime in the mid-sixth century, Columbanus traveled to Gaul around 591 and, according to his biographer Jonas of Bobbio (d. 659), founded several monastic communities with royal support, including the illustrious house of Luxeuil. After making enemies with the Burgundian king Theuderic II (d. 613) and his grandmother Brunchildis (d. 613), Columbanus was exiled to Nantes, and later sought refuge under Theubert II’s protection in Neustria. For unclear reasons, he then traveled to Italy, eventually founding the famous monastery of Bobbio where he died in 615.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> On Columbanus’ career I have followed the assessment of Donald Bullough, “The Career of Columbanus,” in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1997), 1-28.



**Map 1.4:** The distribution of monastic communities founded from or influenced by Columbanus' foundation at Luxeuil up to c. 730. Taken from Edward James, *The Franks* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 129.

Columbanus' life is remarkably well documented. Letters, sermons (the *Instructiones*), a monastic rule (the *Regula coenobialis*), and a small collection of poems survive. Jonas of Bobbio's (d. 659) *Vita Columbani*, begun in the 620s shortly after Columbanus' death and continued until the 650s, provides crucial detail for his active years as a missionary and monastic founder.<sup>304</sup> Taken together, the image we receive of Columbanus is far more informative on actual monastic life than anything in Gregory's

<sup>304</sup> For the dating of Jonas' *Vita Columbani*, see Bullough, "Columbanus," 1, n. 1.

corpus.<sup>305</sup> As a consequence, Gregory's hagiographic and historical works as we have seen remained far more interested in episcopal centers and their built spaces as opposed to rural monasticism. For Gregory, the natural world outside church walls was rarely more than symbolic, denoting the various dangers in or benefits of God's creation. Columbanus's life and works produce a much sharper image of monastic practice than Gregory's, and frequently used the theme of God's created world to explain or inform monastic life. Columbanus' own writings, especially the *Instructiones*, urged his audience in metaphorical language to understand Creation as a reflection of its Creator; all understandings of God would flow from that precept. The natural world in the *Instructiones* thus never takes on the danger we have encountered in the works of Sulpicius or Gregory: a benevolent God created a verdant and fruitful world to reflect his own nature. A narrative running parallel to monastic growth in Francia also emerges from Jonas' *Vita Columbani*: drawing from Columbanus' works, Jonas forged a compromise among the earlier treatments of the natural world—most of which support binaries of beneficial or dangerous nature—and imparted agency to God's creation for its capacity to shape monastic behavior. Like the *Vita patrum iurensium*, Jonas' *Vita Columbani* most often categorized nature as an image of the wilderness ideal, a source of danger or resources worthy of human manipulation.

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<sup>305</sup> Wood, "Columbanus," 5: by way of contrast, "the only two monastic communities [Gregory] described in detail were communities in revolt—that of Radegund at Poitiers and Ingtrudis at Tours."

**Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam: Columbanus' Definition of rerum natura**

In response to his own fundamental question in the *Instructiones*, “Who then is God (*Quis est ergo Deus*)?,” Columbanus began with a Trinitarian understanding of divine *natura* in keeping with his struggles against Arianism in northern Italy: “He is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God. Do not ask for more about God; for those wanting to understand the profundity of things must first consider their nature.”<sup>306</sup> While it is impossible to consider *natura* in Columbanus’ usage as denoting the “natural world” more generally,<sup>307</sup> the context of *Instructiones* 1 suggests an approximate interpretation:

quia uolentibus altam scire profunditatem rerum ante natura consideranda est. Trinitatis enim scientia profunditati maris merito comparatur, iuxta illud Sapientis, *Et alta profunditas, quis inueniet eam?* Si quis ergo scire uoluerit profundissimum diuinae cognitionis pelagus, istud uisibile ante si possit peruideat, et quanto minus cognoscere se nouerit de his quae intra mare latent, tanto plus intellegat minora se scire posse de auctoris profunditate . . . Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam; si nec illam, tace de Creatore, sed crede in Creatorem.<sup>308</sup>

For those who wish to know the great profundity of things should first consider [their] nature. Knowledge of the Trinity is properly compared with the depths of the sea, according to that Wise One, “And the great deep, who shall find it out?” [Eccl. 7.25] If therefore one wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let them first if able search through that visible [ocean,] and however to a small degree one finds oneself to understand those things that lurk beneath the waves, let one realize that it is possible to know so much the less about the smaller things than of the depths of its author . . . Understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator; if you will not know this, be silent concerning the Creator, but believe in the Creator.

<sup>306</sup> *Inst.* 1.4, 62-65: “Quis est ergo Deus? Pater, Filius et Spiritus Sanctus, Deus unus est. Aplius non requiras de Deo; quia uolentibus altam scire profunditatem rerum ante natura consideranda est.” Columbanus was a firm Trinitarian his whole life; according to Jonas, *VC* 1.30, he composed a (now lost) Trinitarian treatise in Milan. On Trinitarianism in his sermons, see Clare Stancliffe, “The Thirteen Sermons Attributed to Columbanus and the Question of Their Authorship” in *Columbanus*, ed. Lapidge, 93-202.

<sup>307</sup> Stancliffe, “Sermons,” 164-66.

<sup>308</sup> *Inst.* 1.4-5, 64.

In this passage Columbanus made a powerful argument for understanding the natural world itself to approach true knowledge of its Creator, removing much doubt as to his meaning of *natura*. While Columbanus was in no way referring to a concept of the “natural world,”<sup>309</sup> his categories of discussion overlap with familiar conceptions: the deep ocean and its creatures reflect the nature of their Creator. Regardless of whether he meant a concept like “the natural world,” Columbanus immediately discussed natural phenomena to explain the *natura* of God. Columbanus often described God in close reference to familiar natural themes such as the depth of oceans: “He is deeper than ocean, firmer than earth, broader than the world, clearer than air, higher than heaven, brighter than the sun.”<sup>310</sup> Seen in these ways, *rerum natura* in Columbanus’ *Instructiones* 1.4-5 refers less to “the nature of things” than to things created by God in natural environments.

Another distinct register of thought on the natural world in Columbanus’ works was the interpretation of Christian life as agricultural activity. Citing the “most brilliant and refined doctrine (*luculentissimam elegantissimamque doctrinam*)” of Faustus,<sup>311</sup> Columbanus framed the purifying process thus:

Si ruris cultor et terrae agricola, qui agrum suum seminibus praeparat iactandis, non sibi sufficere putat terram ipsam forti uomere proscidisse ac frequenti aratro duras edomuisse glebas, sed insuper studet agrum ipsum infecundis graminibus emundare, noxiis euacuare rudibus, spinarum ac stirpium fomites excussos radice conuellere, nequaquam credens terram suam boni esse germinis futuram,

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<sup>309</sup> Walker, *Inst.*, 63 has translated *rerum natura* as “the natural world.” On this terminology, see above, Introduction, 11-13.

<sup>310</sup> *Inst.* 8.1, 94: “quam mare profundior, terra stabilior, mundo latior, aere purior, caelo altior, sole clarior est.”

<sup>311</sup> According to Walker, *Inst.*, 69, n. 1, Faustus was the Latin name for Comgall, but it would seem that the passage is a paraphrase of “the common stock of sermonic material, being derived ultimately from Cassian [*Collationes* 1.2 and 1.4; *CSEL* 13, 8-10].”

nisi mali graminis uacuam . . . quanto magis nos oportet agrum cordis nostri . . .  
Studeamus ergo in primis uitia eradicare, uirtutesque insinuare.<sup>312</sup>

If the cultivator of the soil and farmer of the land, who is preparing his field for sowing seed, does not think it enough for him to have cleft the earth with sturdy share and softened the hard sods by frequent ploughing, but over and above is anxious to clean that field of useless grass, to free it of harmful rubble, and to pluck up and destroy the growth of thorns by the root, in the belief that his land will never yield good seed unless it is clear of bad grass . . . how much more ought we [to clear] the field of our heart . . . Therefore let us seek above all to root out the vices and plant the virtues.

Columbanus was using the best possible expressions of the Christian life at his disposal—in this case, the agricultural metaphor. Later in the conversion process, proper monastic training could yield “pleasant fruit (*incundum fructum*),”<sup>313</sup> but in this case Columbanus remained focused on the crucial process of landscape clearance and management. Columbanus expressed the clearing process prior to the development of, in Eucherius’ words some century and a half before, “the meadow of the inner man (*interioris hominis pratum*).”<sup>314</sup>

### **Mira in fera oboedientia! *Wildness, Animals, and the Holy Man in Jonas’ Vita Columbani***

Jonas’ *Vita Columbani* developed these ideas in greater detail. In Jonas’ description, Columbanus’ monastic achievement could be explained through his interaction with the natural world. In the account, the natural world took on alternating images of the ascetic ideal, wild dangers and manipulated environment. Despite Columbanus’ reputation for establishing important monastic communities, Jonas

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<sup>312</sup> *Inst.* 2.2, 68.

<sup>313</sup> *Inst.* 4.1, 78.

<sup>314</sup> See above, 81.

emphasized several moments of his career that took place explicitly in the wilderness. Columbanus' wilderness ideal still thrived as it had for Romanus in the Jura Mountains. When Sigibert I (d. 575) recruited him to establish communities in his kingdom of Austrasia, Columbanus decided first to establish a hermitage in the Vosges Mountains. There, Columbanus settled in the ruins of a fortress called Anagrates (Ancgray) with some followers, heeding Sigibert's warning to remain in Austrasia and not venture into the neighboring Burgundian kingdom.<sup>315</sup> Thus Jonas struck an ideal balance for respectable ascetic life: not too far in the wilderness, not too close to civilization, and certainly not in violation of the king's orders.<sup>316</sup>

Wilderness asceticism was still tempered by cautionary tales, however. Soon after, one of the monks developed a fever, probably due to malnutrition. His companions, panicked, were able only to gather dried bark and herbs to feed him until, miraculously, a man appeared to them with horses heavily loaded with provisions.<sup>317</sup> Early on, the monastic experiment in the wilderness had nearly gone wrong. Columbanus retreated a little further into the wilderness to a cave, surviving only on little apples called *bolluca*.<sup>318</sup> A young monk called Domoalis came to visit him but was soon put off by the lack of readily available water in the cave. The ascetic life was clearly not for everyone.

Despite Columbanus' early efforts to remain in the wilderness, he was often drawn into sectarian politics. Having refused to bless the bastard children of the Burgundian king Theuderic II, the king and his grandmother Brunchildis attempted to

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<sup>315</sup> *VC* 6, *MGH SRG* 37, 163.

<sup>316</sup> As we will recall, this was similar to the approach of Romanus in *VPI* 10. See above, 102.

<sup>317</sup> *VC* 7, *MGH SRG* 37, 164.

<sup>318</sup> *VC* 9, *MGH SRG* 37, 167-68.

imprison him. Columbanus escaped to solitude once more, however, climbing a nearby mountain where “the lofty mountains rise upwards into the highest heights, [and] the mountain is cut off all around by the river Dou, which surrounds it, leaves no way for travelers.”<sup>319</sup> By this point in the *vita*, and in the sources we have considered, such natural cloistering was a familiar descriptive tool. Later in the *vita*, Columbanus would see a vision of the outcome of a battle near Zülpich while he was “in the desert (*in heremo*) . . . sitting on the stump of a rotted oak, reading a book” in the wilderness.<sup>320</sup> The Austrasian Theudebert II was defeated, captured, and later murdered in monastic exile at the instigation of Brunchildis—a series of events that led to Columbanus’ flight to Italy. Jonas insisted that the crucial events of Columbanus’ life took place in the wilderness, often with specific detail.

It is not surprising, then, that the natural world in the *Vita Columbani* could be seen as dangerous. In one notable instance, Columbanus “was walking through the dark forest among the remote places and was carrying a book on his shoulder, disputing the holy scriptures with himself, and he suddenly thought in [his] mind, whether he might choose to suffer injuries from men or to be exposed to the rage of wild beasts?”<sup>321</sup> What began as a premonition materialized quickly into real danger: twelve wolves crept out of the forest and surrounded him. With a successful prayer, Columbanus escaped only to be

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<sup>319</sup> *VC* 20, *MGH SRG* 37, 193: “prorumpent ardua in sublimibus cacuminibus, qui undique abscisi, fluminis Douae alueo vallante, nullatenus commeantibus viam pandit.”

<sup>320</sup> *VC* 28, *MGH SRG* 37, 218: “supra querqui putrefactam truncum vir Dei librum legens resedebat.”

<sup>321</sup> *VC* 8, *MGH SRG* 37, 166: “ut per opaca saltus inter devia hisdem uir Dei deambulet, et librum humero ferens, de scripturis sacris secum disputaret, subitoque cogitatio in mentem ruit, quid elegeret melius, in hominum iniurias incedere an ferarum sevitiam sustinere?”



confronted by a band of Suebi wandering along the forest trails. Again, his prayers delivered him, but at this point Columbanus, according to Jonas, was unsure whether or not he had experienced the attack in reality or in a vision. Jonas also blurred the lines between beast (wolves) and human (Suebi),<sup>322</sup> locating the most feral animals imaginable in the Gallic forests.<sup>323</sup> Dangerous visions and experiences happened in dark forests; before Columbanus properly founded Luxeuil, he had to destroy the idols near the Roman baths, where “a thick pack of stone idols crowded in the nearby forest.”<sup>324</sup> With the idols dispatched, Columbanus could then start building the monastic complex and overwriting ancient memory.

Instead of supplanting pagan landscapes with Christian ones, Columbanus could also manipulate the natural world and compel animals to obey him. In one instance, Columbanus instigated a ritual to drive storms away from a field. At the monastery of Fontaines during harvest season, a violent storm arose and buffeted a new field with wind and rain. Columbanus ordered the monks to fetch their sickles and harvest the crops in the tempest. He then “positioned at the four corners of the crop four men full of religion, Comininus, Eunocus and Equanacus, who were of the *Scoti*, and a fourth, Gurganus, of

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<sup>322</sup> For Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 152, such moments of delivery from wild beasts reinforced binary notions of refuge and danger lurking in “les terres sauvage” of West and East: “L’espace sauvage est plus un lieu de refuge, d’asile dans la littérature hagiographique de l’Occident, qu’une terre de pénitence et d’épreuves soumise à la tyrannie de bêtes sauvages comme dans l’hagiographie orientale.”

<sup>323</sup> On wolves as especially dangerous animals to early medieval people, see Pluskowski, *Wolves*, 96-97; and Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 43-44. For Jacques Voisenet, “L’animal et la représentation de l’espace chez les auteurs chrétiens du haut moyen âge,” in *Histoire et animal*, ed. Alain Gallo and Frédéric Ogé (Toulouse: Presses de l’Institut d’études politiques, 1989), 253-80, at 265, such hagiographic techniques were merely speculative.

<sup>324</sup> *VC* 10, *MGH SRG* 37, 169: “ibi imaginum lapidearum densitas vincina saltus densabant.”

the British race. Having set them in place, he himself with the others divided the crop in the middle.”<sup>325</sup> The storm vanished; Columbanus had prayed it away.

The miracle at Fontaines is an instance in which Columbanus was aware of the potent intersection of prayer and strategic positioning of holy people in the landscape. His solution attracts no commentary from Jonas; it is as if Columbanus had needed no time to ponder a solution. In similar instances, Columbanus performed other miracles involving fields. In one, a monk called Theudegisil was cutting crops near Baniaritia (Calmem) when suddenly the south wind caused the hapless monk to loosen his grip on his sickle and cut his finger nearly clean off. With a prayer and some of his own saliva, Columbanus reattached Theudegisil’s finger to the joint.<sup>326</sup> In a similar situation, a wedge flew loose when some monks were chopping wood and lodged in one man’s forehead. Columbanus again prayed and applied saliva to the man’s head, and he was healed. Such miracles involve questions of monastic labor, but each occurred when monks were manipulating, or attempting to manipulate, the natural world around them. When dealing with the natural world, disasters and accidents could happen. Columbanus’ role was to manage both nature and the unintended consequences of interacting with it.

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<sup>325</sup> *VC 13: MGH SRG 37, 173-74* “Ille quattuor plenos religione viros per quattuor angulos messis praeponit, Cominimum et Eunocum ac Equonanium ex Scottorum genere quartumque Gurganum genere Brittonem. His ordinatis, ipse cum reliquis medius messem praecidebat.”

<sup>326</sup> *VC 15, MGH SRG 37, 177.*

The obedience of animals to Columbanus underscores this role. Mischievous ravens responded to his orders to refrain from stealing his gloves.<sup>327</sup> Jonas more generally observed that it was little wonder that Chamnoald, a priest of Lyon, visited Columbanus:

[Columbanus] in heremo vel ieiunio vel oratione uacans deambulet, esse sepe solitum feras, bestias ac aves arcessire, quae ad imperium eius statim veniebant, quas manu blandiens adtrecebat: ita fere auesque gaudentes ac ludentes laetitia uberi, velut catuli solent dominis adolare, exultabant. Et ferusculam, quam vulgo homines exquirium vocant, sepe de arduis arborum culminibus arcessitum manuque receptum suoque collo inpositum sinuque ingredientem ac exeuntem sepe vidisse supradictus vir testabatur.<sup>328</sup>

[Columbanus] wandered around in the wilderness fasting and praying as was his habit, and summoned the wild beasts and birds [to him, and] they came at once at his order and he lovingly stroked them with his hand: the beasts and birds joyfully played and delighted around him, just as kittens are wont to adore their masters. [Chamnoald] said he had often seen him call the little animal, which men commonly call *squiruis*, from the very tops of high trees and receive it in his hand and put it on his neck and let it go onto and come off of his lap.

Columbanus also had a special relationship with bears in episodes with an extensive afterlife in Carolingian missionary *vitae*.<sup>329</sup> As we have already seen, Columbanus commanded the obedience of wolves as well, indicating his power to convert hostile wildernesses into places of refuge.<sup>330</sup> After he had sought shelter from wolves, Suevi, or other apparitions in the wilderness, he found a cave beneath a massive cliff, and thought it might be a suitable hermitage. Entering to explore its hidden recesses

<sup>327</sup> VC 15, MGH SRG 37, 178-79. A similar occurrence is in Bede, *V. Cuth.* 20, in which ravens pick away at the roof of the visitors' lodge at Cuthbert's hermitage on Farne; they are subsequently rebuked and obedient. See Chapter 2, 228.

<sup>328</sup> VC 17, MGH SRG 37, 185-86; see n. b on Columbanus' "exquirius."

<sup>329</sup> For Carolingian hagiographic interest in bear stories, see Chapter 3, 415-24.

<sup>330</sup> Such is the argument of Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 169: "Ainsi, l'homme de Dieu qui vit en parfait accord avec lui-même a tous pouvoirs sur les animaux sauvages." Caves, too, could be an "espace de réconciliation entre l'homme et la nature . . . n'ont pas seulement la réputation de lieux d'épreuves dans la littérature hagiographique; ils apparaissent aussi souvent comme des asiles."

he found in the interior of the cave the home of a bear; unceremoniously, Columbanus ordered the bear out of the cave.<sup>331</sup> Jonas did not leave the matter there: later in the *vita*, Columbanus returned to the same cave as his personal retreat.<sup>332</sup> In a separate instance, Columbanus was walking among dense fruit trees when he encountered a bear preparing to devour a deer carcass. Columbanus ordered it away, since his companions could use the carcass for meat and shoes.<sup>333</sup> The bear immediately became tame, leaving the carcass to Columbanus, who in turn summoned monks to skin the deer. The monks observed that not even the birds circling at a distance would dare to approach the carcass while they took its skin for shoes. Remarkably, Columbanus in this instance established himself as the dominant figure. The bear did not just abandon the body, but “forgetful of his ferocity, [the bear] began to be mild, and contrary to its nature (*contra naturam*), fawning and bending its head left the carcass without a sound,” as if defeated by a superior animal.<sup>334</sup> An additional instance illustrates this point further. Once while fasting under a cliff in the wilderness with nothing to eat but apples,<sup>335</sup> “a fierce bear of great voracity (*voracitatis fera ursus*)” approached and began to steal the apples.<sup>336</sup> When Columbanus ordered his servant Chagnoald to fetch the fruit, he of course found the bear in the thicket devouring them. Columbanus’ solution was to order Chagnoald to set aside a portion for the bear. Chagnoald dutifully used his staff to signal to the bear his half of the fruit trees. Jonas

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<sup>331</sup> *VC* 8, *MGH SRG* 37, 167: “Abiit fera mitis nec prorsus est ausa repetare.”

<sup>332</sup> *VC* 12, *MGH SRG* 37, 172.

<sup>333</sup> *VC* 17, *MGH SRG* 37, 181.

<sup>334</sup> *VC* 17, *MGH SRG* 37, 181: “Tunc bestia, oblita ferocitate, mitis esse coepit, et contra naturam absque murmure blandiens atque colla submittens, cadaver reliquit.”

<sup>335</sup> Compare this with the “little apples” in *VC* 9, *MGH SRG* 37, 167-68. See above, 170.

<sup>336</sup> *VC* 27, *MGH SRG* 37, 216.

himself marveled at the “wonderful obedience in wildness (*mira in fera oboedientia*),” of the bear, which Columbanus had made obedient as a monk.<sup>337</sup>

Columbanus could accomplish the impossible in nature. Jonas concluded his *Vita Columbani* with a vivid description of the foundation of Bobbio in the Apennine wilderness after Columbanus’ flight from Francia. The place was “abundantly fertile, [and] the water (*loca ubertate fecunda, aquis inrigua*)”—the river *Bobium*, after which the house was named—“was full of fishes (*piscium copia*).”<sup>338</sup> According to Jonas, himself aware that Hannibal had once passed through the region, Columbanus found the old church at the site in dire need of repair. Describing the building process at length, Jonas noted that Columbanus and his companions harvested “beams from fir trees (*trabes ex abientibus*)” from rocky areas, inaccessible to beasts of burden. Miraculously, he and his companions were able to extract the huge beams—themselves heavy enough for thirty of forty woodsmen—“through the craggy rocks (*per prerupta saxorum*)” and “dense forest (*inter densa saltus*).”<sup>339</sup> We have already seen, in the Jura, how firs in mountainous regions carried exegetical weight: they were used to build the Ark and the Temple, and could be found in remote, high altitudes.<sup>340</sup> Here, Jonas presented a crucial intersection between nature and construction. Columbanus and his companions had to cross through

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<sup>337</sup> VC 27, MGH SRG 37, 216. This phrase would later be used in the *Vita sancti Magni*; see Chapter 3, 419-20.

<sup>338</sup> VC 29, MGH SRG 37, 221: “*loca ubertate fecunda, aquis inrigua, piscium copia. Quem locum veterum traditio Bobium nuncupabant ob rivum in eo loco hoc nomine fluentem.*”

<sup>339</sup> VC 29, MGH SRG 37, 222.

<sup>340</sup> See above, 96-99, for the description of Romanus’ hermitage and its landscape in *VPI* 5-8. On Bede’s exegetical interpretation of trees as resources, see Chapter 2, 223-25; and for some examples of missionary interactions with trees in the eighth and ninth centuries, see Chapter 3, 373-84.

dangerous landscapes to retrieve natural resources they should not by any measure be able to carry. The natural world—not just its animals—both cooperated with and served the holy man.

## Conclusions

The treatments of the natural world in late antique Gaul *c.* 350-650 were often influenced by an attitude of conquest: the obedience of animals, the acquiescence of threatening nature and the mastery of pagan landscapes all illustrate the sense of dominion church officials, especially Caesarius of Arles and Gregory of Tours, sought to cultivate. Where current scholarly interest has touched upon the natural world in this period, it is done so in a way that over-emphasizes Caesarius and Gregory at the expense of more dynamic treatments of nature in sources like the *Vita patrum iuensium*, Eucherius' *De laude eremi* and others. Even within Gregory's own works, the bishop of Tours allowed for complex readings of nature. The pear tree of Embrun with which this chapter began suggests not only diverse interpretations of nature, but also an interpretive ambivalence about nature within Gregory's own works. Gregory himself at times allotted the natural world a more active role than Sulpicius, Caesarius and others had done.

While the dominant intellectual view of nature was an "adversarial" one of conquest and dominion, it was not universal. The best example of an active natural world emerges from the anonymous *Vita patrum iuensium*. The Jura lives, taking cues from Eucherius' *De laude eremi*, refashioned the metaphorical "desert" into an actual landscape rich in vegetation and natural resources but crucially charged with exegetical meaning. In the Jura, rocks and fir trees were central to the monastic enterprise and

actively shaped monastic life within the text. The *VPI* rejected the common readings of nature—the dangers of life, the wonders of creation or the threats facing monks in the wilderness—in favor of nature’s more active, dynamic role in monastic culture. By the seventh century, the Columbanian compromise on these competing voices certainly argued for the importance of human dominion over nature (especially in Jonas’ *Vita Columbani*), but Columbanus’ own writings indicate that the best answers to the question about the character of God’s creation were located in Creation itself: *Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam*. If the desert was, as Eucherius had it, a “boundless temple of our God (*incircumscriptum dei nostri templum*),” that temple could be given shape with textual ecologies frequently referring to environmental features and natural metaphors.

These case studies illustrate the diversity of attitudes towards the natural world in post-Roman Gaul, while scholarly interest on the natural world has not allowed for a wide range of plurality. Not only this, but reading that plurality of thought on nature in monastic sources provides a clearer interpretation of what it could mean to be an intellectual Christian in post-Roman Gaul. While this period is also crucial for understanding later Frankish attitudes towards nature in Chapter 3, case studies from early medieval England to which we shall now turn offer an array of perspectives from a region with far less cultural continuity after Rome. That said, this was a region whose connections with the continent would help define intellectual culture for the rest of the period under consideration.

## Chapter 2: Understanding the Natural World in Early Medieval England, c. 500-820

Sometime between 803 and 821 in Northumbria, the monk Æthelwulf composed a short poem on the history of his community, commonly known as *De abbatibus* (“On the Abbots”).<sup>1</sup> In 819 lines he recorded the activities of the monastery’s abbots, its notable members, craftsmen and the adornments of its holy spaces. The monastery was founded during the reign of Osred I of Northumbria, who between 705 and 716 forced several of his political enemies into monastic communities.<sup>2</sup> Among these unfortunates may have been one Eanmund, whom Æthelwulf insisted had deserted his military career and set out to establish a monastic community. In Æthelwulf’s reckoning, Eanmund wanted “to bear on his own head the crown, which Christ formerly bore with his beautiful head, when he suffered and took away the thorns of evil from the world.”<sup>3</sup> As a well-connected nobleman, Eanmund visited the bishop Eadfrith<sup>4</sup> (d. 721) at his see in Lindisfarne, “where the waves desire to curl over the shore with blue-green water, yet rush to leave them bare as they go on their backward-flowing course, and the blue [waters] encircle a holy land” at high tide.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Eadfrith’s counsel, Eanmund sent a courier to

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<sup>1</sup> Æthelwulf dedicated *De abbatibus* (*DA*) to bishop Ecgbert of Lindisfarne (r. 803-21), but the location of his community is unknown. The standard edition is that of Alistair Campbell, *De abbatibus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). All translations—provided in prose—are my own unless otherwise noted. Throughout, I provide line numbers and Campbell’s pagination.

<sup>2</sup> *DA* lines 4-7 and 35-51.

<sup>3</sup> *DA* lines 67-69, 6-9: “suo capiti portare coronam,/ uertice quam Christus quondam portabat opimo,/ dum passus mundo dempsit spineta malorum.”

<sup>4</sup> Eadfrith is one of the few figures in *De abbatibus* attested elsewhere; he is mentioned in the anonymous *Vita Cuthberti* 1.1, and Bede’s prose *V. Cuth.* 1.1.

<sup>5</sup> *DA* lines 96-97, 10-11: “unde quo glaucis cupiunt crispere fluentis/ littora, quin refluis satagunt nudare meantes/ cursibus, et terram precingunt cerula sanctam.” Æthelwulf was probably basing his description in part on Bede, *HE* 3.3, 220-21: “As the tide ebbs and



Ecgberht (d. 729), an Irish holy man, in order to obtain an altar and instructions as to where to establish his community. At first, Ecgberht was at a loss since he “never saw with physical sight those lands which the Lord granted [to Eanmund] as a great gift.”<sup>6</sup>

Suddenly inspired, however, he provided specific instructions:

est tamen, ut uisus potuit portendere cordis,  
 collis non magnus decliuo tramite flexus,  
 quo sol consurgens trutinantis timpora Librae  
 peruolat; hunc spinae spissa cum fronde coronant.  
 Falcibus has cisas toto cum germine, frater,  
 aequoris et dorso predicti auferre memento,  
 inque loco pulchrum domino sic conde sacellum . . .<sup>7</sup>

There is, as a vision in my heart can reveal, a hill not large [and] with a sloping, winding path, where the rising sun flies across the face of Libra, the weigher; here thickets of thorns crown [the hill] with leaves. Cut these away with scythes, brother, and take them away with their seed from the top and sides just mentioned, and then establish in that place a beautiful church for the Lord . . .

In this description, Æthelwulf operated within both scriptural and patristic modes of thought. By invoking the phrase *uisus cordis*, or “vision in [my] heart,” Æthelwulf was probably quoting Eccl. 40.7 on the curse of human labor after the Fall: “He is troubled in the vision of his heart, as if he had escaped in the face of war. In the time of his needful

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flows, this place is surrounded twice daily by the waves of the sea like and island and twice, then the shore is left dry, it becomes again attached to the mainland (*locus accedente ac recedente reumate bis cotidie instar insulae maris circumluitur undis, bis renudato litore contiguus terrae redditur*).” Throughout, I use the translation of Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). For a discussion of these images in the poem, see below, 286-88.

<sup>6</sup> *DA* lines 129-30, 13: “Cernere me fateor carnali lumine numquam/ fundos, quos dominus magno tibi munere donat.”

<sup>7</sup> *DA* lines 131-37, 13.

sleep he rose up, and wondereth that there is no fear.”<sup>8</sup> The prophetic undertones of Æthelwulf’s lines are further suggested by the existence of the same phrase in Jer. 23.16, a warning not to listen to false prophets who “speak of a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord (*uisionem cordis sui loquuntur, non de ore Domini*).”<sup>9</sup> Just after this description, Æthelwulf described the liturgical celebrations in the church as fulfilled promises from “vowed breasts (*pectora uota*),” a phrase he borrowed from Paulinus of Nola’s poetic works.<sup>10</sup> Thus Æthelwulf’s description of a local landscape was rooted in language from the highest of authorities.

The place Æthelwulf described was an unlikely one for the purpose of monastic practice, known for its gangs of bandits who, when the fledgling community laid claim to it, “often approached [and] blended into the thickets and thorns, [and] the evil crowd, [like] wild [animals] always trusting in arms, and gathering from every side, just as when hurrying to familiar dwellings, they hastened to disappear in the rough thorns.”<sup>11</sup> In establishing a monastic community there, Eanmund replaced the thickets with “summits of an outstandingly beautiful temple (*prepulchri culmina templi*).”<sup>12</sup> For Æthelwulf’s community, this foundational event was set in a familiar landscape, the features of which the holy man Ecgberht had specifically described. The foundational process was rooted

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<sup>8</sup> Eccl. 40.7: “conturbatus in visu cordis sui tamquam qui evaserit a facie belli; in tempore somni necessarii exsurrexit et admirans ad nullum timorem.”

<sup>9</sup> Gregory the Great used the same passage in his *Homiliae in Hiezechielem prophetam* 1.10.207, *CCSL* 142, 252.

<sup>10</sup> These are Paulinus, *Carm.* 19.425, *CSEL* 30, 133; *Carm.* 26.8, *CSEL* 30, 246; and *Carm.* 27.3, *CSEL* 30, 262.

<sup>11</sup> *DA* lines 161-64, 15: “sepiusque aduoliat, spinisque inmiscuit hirtis,/ turba nefanda, feris semper confisa sub armis,/ undique confluitans ueluti cum culmina nota/ adcurrans, properat spinis inmergier hirtis.”

<sup>12</sup> *DA* line 143, 13.

both in episcopal authority (Eadfrith) and Irish ascetic authority (Ecgberht). In a practical sense, Eanmund had faced the challenge of clearing the place of “rough thorns (*spinis hirtis*).” Æthelwulf briefly and vividly described this early eighth-century event to his community as a crucial moment of their collective past rooted in a specific place well known to them. An Irish holy man, a bishop of Lindisfarne, a Northumbrian founder and a sloping, thorny hill were all components of the community’s foundation.

The foundation also had a specific topography where “thickets of thorns crown this place with leaves (*hunc spinæ spissa cum fronde coronant*).” According to Æthelwulf, the young community received for their efforts “flowery crowns (*florigeras coronas*),” a common description of the rewards of saints and martyrs in the works of Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), Prudentius (d. 413) and Augustine (d. 430).<sup>13</sup> Æthelwulf had already reminded his audience of the monastic emulation of Christ’s crown of thorns: the tonsure encircled their heads, anticipating their reward of “flowery crowns (*florigeras coronas*).” The hill was crowned with thorns like Christ at his crucifixion:

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<sup>13</sup> Ambrose, *Hexameron* 4.2, *CSEL* 32.1, 114; Ambrose, *Expositio psalmi* 18.5 and 20.58, *CSEL* 62, 399 and 474; Augustine, *Serm.* 297, *PL* 38: col. 1360; and Prudentius, *Psychomachia* lines 348-52, *CCSL* 126, 159.

**Table 2.1: Comparison of Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* and Christ's Crucifixion.**

DA l. 135	Matt. 27.29	Mark 15.17	John 19.2
hunc <b>spinae</b> spissa cum fronde <b>coronant</b> .	et plecentes <b>coronam de spinis</b> posuerunt super caput eius.	et inponunt ei plecentes <b>spineam</b> <b>coronam</b> .	Et milites plecentes <b>coronam de spinis</b> inposuerunt capiti eius.
Thickets of thorns crown this place with leaves.	And platting a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head.	And platting a crown of thorns, the put it upon him.	And the soldiers, platting a crown of thorns, put it upon his head.

The poet's use of *corona* implies the symbolic nature of the hill as a head, first crowned with thorns and subsequently cleared of them. According to Æthelwulf's description of the foundation, the hill itself imitated Christ, a quality usually the preserve of holy people and rulers.<sup>14</sup> Æthelwulf's foundational moment included aspects of a Christomimetic scene: thorns, crown and head. Æthelwulf claimed a Christological landscape for his community's foundation. The hill was crowned with thorns, invoking a horrific yet redemptive scriptural image.<sup>15</sup> The Northumbrian landscape was not subservient to the monastic enterprise, but a major component and active participant in it. For Æthelwulf, the Christological landscape of his community was one in which a crown of thorns was supplanted by a physical monastery. The "rough thorns" may suggest a negative interpretation of the dangerous and unpredictable natural world—as well as the

<sup>14</sup> *Imitatio Christi* was one of the four main implicit biblical archetypes isolated by Marc Van Uytenghe in his study of later Merovingian hagiography: *Stylisation biblique et condition humaine dans l'hagiographie mérovingienne (600-750)* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1987), 61-115, at 114. For descriptions of Christomimetic rulership, I am relying on the studies of Karl Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), 75-107; and Timothy Reuter, "Pre-Gregorian Mentalities," in *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 89-99.

<sup>15</sup> For a more thorough discussion of these images, see below, 286-91.

thieves who hid and roamed through the thickets. Æthelwulf's description of the natural world in *De abbatibus* invited conclusions far more complex than that of an image of a hill cleared of its thorns and thus made ready for settled monastic life.

Æthelwulf's depiction of his community's foundation presents an opportunity to explore the ways in which humans interacted with the natural world in sub-Roman Britain and earlier Anglo-Saxon England, c. 500-820. Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* was also part of a broader literary tradition of describing the ways in which built spaces and natural worlds intersected. This chapter will argue that authors of Latin literature in early medieval England discussed nature and natural places as a critical category of intellectual culture; nature was essential to sanctifying landscapes and forging monastic communities during and after the conversion period. Anglo-Saxon authors from this period had far more complex interpretations of nature than previous scholarship has suggested. Attitudes towards the natural world in Anglo-Latin sources from the sixth through ninth centuries reveal a diversity of positions informed by exegetical, hagiographic, geographic and liturgical interpretations of physical environments. Natural places and landscapes, as well as human interaction with them, were central themes of the key texts of early medieval England.

### **Landscape and the Natural World in Anglo-Saxon England: Current Approaches**

As Æthelwulf's poem shows, questions of exegetical, hagiographic and physical nature were inextricably linked with interpretations of monastic life during the period. As I will show, these registers of thought do not fit into scholarly categories of "positive" and "negative" attitudes towards nature, and constitute textual ecologies in reference to

environmental phenomena, places or features.<sup>16</sup> This chapter will also establish the crucial cultural links between Anglo-Saxon England and the continent prior to and during the period of English missionary activity in Europe we will encounter in Chapter 3. In this period, Anglo-Saxon intellectual interests and concerns became Frankish ones; the theme of the natural world was not an exception.<sup>17</sup>

As established in the Introduction, the “natural world” in the sources discussed in this chapter can be defined as anything in God’s Creation not made by humans.<sup>18</sup> Authors from Gildas to Æthelwulf classified nature according to their historical, exegetical or hagiographic modes of thought: categorization of natural features is expressed most clearly, for example, in Bede’s geographic introduction to his *Historia ecclesiastica*.<sup>19</sup> The natural world in Anglo-Latin sources was made up of complex symbolic systems for trees, fields, stones, waterways and other natural features as well as the benefits, dangers and curiosities found in or around them. This definition is intentionally plural to reflect Anglo-Saxon depictions of natural features, and it depends upon themes of clearance, foundation and the ways in which humans moved through and interacted with the landscapes around them. Building upon these concepts, this chapter explores the

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<sup>16</sup> See my comments in the Introduction above, 5-10; and below, 189-92.

<sup>17</sup> On the close links between Anglo-Saxon England and the Frankish world, I am following the excellent assessments of Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750-870* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 1-19; and James Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690-900* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 1-40, especially 1-9.

<sup>18</sup> Introduction, 11-13. As with Merovingian sources in the previous chapter and Carolingian missionary *vitae* in Chapter 3, I use the phrase “the natural world” not as a way of interpreting *natura* or similar terms. The rare deployment of *rerum natura* to indicate “the natural world” in Columbanus’ *Institutiones* does not, to my knowledge, appear in Anglo-Latin sources. On Columbanus, see Chapter 1, 167-69.

<sup>19</sup> See below, 222-34.

relationship between Christianity and the natural world as well as how the natural world could shape the behavior of its inhabitants, especially in monastic communities like Æthelwulf's.

It is important to remember again at this point that the “natural world” is an interpretative category, a way of reading the sources, not a concept fully articulated by any author from the period.<sup>20</sup> A related concept, “landscape,” is not shorthand for the natural world either; in my definition, “landscape” constitutes a wide-angled view of the natural world and other visible (sometimes manmade) objects or structures such as churches, temples, ruins, and agricultural land. Landscapes were made up of multiple visible elements. This is a thematic definition, not one expressed by any one Old English or Latin term. In the former context, *landscape* denotes a “tract of land” with legal connotations.<sup>21</sup> Like the natural world as a set of concepts, a “landscape” is a strategy of reading the ways in which authors understood how places were “lived in and through.”<sup>22</sup> By reading the sources closely for their engagement with natural places, environments and surrounding landscapes, we can apprehend attitudes those sources never explicitly spelled out.

Thus the natural world was often an ideal concept with which to think about religious life: it could alternately indicate the creative power of God, the chaos of

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<sup>20</sup> See Introduction, 11-13.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), 619.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 26: “A landscape has ontological import because it is lived in and through, mediated, worked on and altered, replete with cultural meaning and symbolism—and not just something looked at or thought about, an object merely for contemplation, depiction, representation and aestheticization.” See Introduction, 12.

environmental forces and many states in between; the natural world could be used to talk about particular places, people and cultural processes. As we have just seen, Æthelwulf's approach to Eanmund's foundation reflected both the beauty of its natural places and the threats lurking within them. Simultaneously Æthelwulf in just a few lines did not categorize the natural world neatly: the hill on which his monastery was founded was at once Christological, dangerous, beautiful and controlled by the "lofty walls" of a new built space. More broadly, though, scholarship emerges in two distinct categories relevant to attitudes towards the natural world: direct discussion of descriptions of the natural world (predominantly in Old English poetry) and landscape studies (as well as those of trees and timber).<sup>23</sup>

### ***Descriptions of the Natural World in Old English Poetry***

This chapter's primary focus is Anglo-Latin literature, but it is instructive to remember that Anglo-Saxons did not have a vernacular term for "the natural world" in Old English.<sup>24</sup> As Jennifer Neville has observed, the vernacular conceptualization of what we consider to be "the natural world" was limited to ideas like *cynd* (natural qualities, race or social rank), *æthelo* (nobility), or *gesceaft* (creation, origin).<sup>25</sup> Other related concepts included *hwilcnes* (quality), *sceap* (natural condition), but none of these terms convey what we mean by "natural world" or "environment" collectively. Further

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<sup>23</sup> As noted in the Introduction, 35-39, ecocritical theory has been sparingly applied to the Anglo-Saxon period, but not to Anglo-Latin sources.

<sup>24</sup> Aron Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture* (London: Routledge, 1985), 6-9; Karen Jolly, "Father God and Mother Earth: Nature-Mysticism in the Anglo-Saxon World," in *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1993), 221-52; Neville, *Representations*, 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 1-2.



confounding a clear picture of the natural world, it is difficult to separate natural phenomena from supernatural ones in both vernacular and Latin literature of the period.<sup>26</sup>

The absence of an Old English designation for the natural world does not necessarily reflect “the absence of the concept itself.”<sup>27</sup> The natural world is indeed richly represented in Anglo-Latin literature. For Neville, “while it may be true that the Anglo-Saxons drew upon more than fear and paranoia when representing natural phenomena in their poetry, it is equally true that they drew upon less than their complete experience of the physical environment. The physical reality of ‘the natural world’ could play a very small role in determining what of it was represented and how it was represented.”<sup>28</sup> As we shall see, any serious reading of Anglo-Latin literature reveals the opposite to be true. If we move beyond vernacular poetry, it is difficult to maintain that

Anglo-Saxons appear not to have been concerned to develop a consistent cosmological scheme or approach to the “natural world” . . . It acts as a literary device, used to define what were apparently more important issues: the state of humanity and its position in the universe, the establishment and maintenance of society, the power of extraordinary individuals, the proximity of the deity to creation and the ability of writing to control and limit information.<sup>29</sup>

Yet if representations of the natural world are not ends in themselves, why must they by default be relegated to the status of a “literary device”? This approach leads to an

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<sup>26</sup> Foot, “Natural World,” 16: “In the earlier Middle Ages, it was not possible to separate natural phenomena, governed by physical and natural laws, from mystical or supernatural phenomena which defied rational explanation; all was governed by the hand and the will of the Almighty.” Compare this with Richard Hoffman, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 86: “As professional churchmen, most medieval writers were far more interested in the supernatural than in the natural.” See Introduction, 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 17.

oversimplification and essentialization of sources: “For the Old English poet, the representation of the natural world helps to create the context of helplessness and alienation that motivates the seeking of God. For the Irish poet, the representation of the natural world creates the context of wonder and joy that surrounds the seeking of God.”<sup>30</sup> This “ambivalence” has understandably informed more recent discussions of the natural world in early medieval Latin literature.<sup>31</sup>

As Neville has shown, the surviving corpus of Old English poetry is a fertile source for depictions of nature. Sarah Foot, using examples from Old English and Hiberno-Latin poetry, has recently argued that early medieval authors understood the natural world through three interpretative categories: the abundance of creation, omens or catastrophes and plague as emblematic of natural disaster. “Although the beauty of creation might elicit expressions of joy, wonder and praise,” Foot argues, “the unpredictability and potential hostility of the natural environment could as often invoke fear.”<sup>32</sup> In this model, ecclesiastical authorities focused on a binary of sin and redemption.

### ***Landscape Studies***

Landscape studies offer an alternative picture of the relationship between humans and their environment. Landscape studies can take many forms: W.G. Hoskins’ seminal

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<sup>30</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Foot, “Natural World,” 15: “Early medieval attitudes to the natural world were distinctly ambivalent. At one level the natural world represented the marvel of God’s creative power; filled with beauty, it supplied everything necessary for human existence, meriting praise . . . On the other hand, the natural world was a dangerous, frightening and erratic place, the violence of whose forces could bring unforeseen devastation, destruction and death to people and beasts at will” Foot uses many of the Old English poems discussed in Neville, *Representations*, to support these points in Latin contexts.

<sup>32</sup> Foot, “Natural World,” 38.

work, a sweeping survey of English history through its topography, was the first to historicize the landscape, treating land as text rather than over-valuing texts about the land.<sup>33</sup> Hoskins was the first to introduce the vivid image of English landscape as a readable “palimpsest” continually changing both naturally and through human influence and manipulation. Following Hoskins, topographical surveys piecing together the common features of monastic landscapes began in earnest in the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, trees have often served as ways of defining Anglo-Saxon landscapes, as well as strategies for tracking environmental change over time. Beginning in the 1970s, Oliver Rackham dispensed with the myth of England’s heavily wooded medieval landscape in his now standard work on woodlands.<sup>35</sup> Margaret Gelling’s place-name studies from the 1950s onwards have clarified the relationship between the physical landscape and the values and attitudes of its inhabitants.<sup>36</sup> Della Hooke has thoroughly investigated Anglo-

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<sup>33</sup> W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955), 13-14: “It is important to show the logic behind the changing face of the English landscape . . . The English landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright, is the richest historical record we possess. There are no discoveries to be made in it for which no written documents exist, or have ever existed.”

<sup>34</sup> For an assessment of Hoskins’ literary output and its effects on topographical studies, I have consulted in Alan Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 115-17. See, for example, John Blair, “Minster Churches in the Landscape,” in *Anglo-Saxon Settlements*, ed. Della Hooke (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 35-58; Richard Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London: Phoenix, 1989); Blair, “Anglo-Saxon Minsters: A Topographical Review,” in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, ed. Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 226-66; Tim Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation: The Establishment of Religious Houses in Easy Anglia c. 650-1200* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 21-64; and Blair, *The Church*, 182-245.

<sup>35</sup> Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: J.M. Dent, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> See, most comprehensively, Margaret Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape: The Geographical Roots of Britain’s Place-Names* (London: J.M. Dent, 1984), 188-229; and *idem.*, *Signposts to the Past: English Place Names* (London: J.M. Dent, 1997).

Saxon attitudes towards trees and vegetation with similar conclusions. “The natural world,” Hooke has argued, “inescapably and overwhelmingly overshadowed the human race and the poems use it to indicate danger, peril, powerlessness and uncertainty in contrast to the afterlife offered by Christianity. The natural world was unmastered and threatening.”<sup>37</sup> Seen in this way, Christian tree symbolism was a convenient method of combating non-Christian tendencies—a positive set of images to overwrite a negative culture.<sup>38</sup> Hooke’s analysis of the natural world in textual sources does not take into account multiple scriptural, exegetical or hagiographic levels, but her earlier assessment of the role of charters in the contexts of landscapes and place-names remains unmatched.<sup>39</sup> A more recent collective study of Anglo-Saxon trees and timber edited by Michael Bintley and Michael Shapland has, however, attempted to offer readings “enriched by a heightened awareness of the complex interrelationships between practical application and religious belief, architectural utility and literary conceit, or functionality and symbolism. None of these categories is mutually exclusive, of course; human experience inevitably lies somewhere between.”<sup>40</sup> These “complex interrelationships” provide what Hooke’s textual analysis lacked and contribute to, as we have just seen, a multi-layered interpretation of Æthelwulf’s poem as well as other sources.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hooke, *Trees*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> Hooke, *Trees*, 26-46.

<sup>39</sup> Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Michael Bintley and Michael Shapland, “Introduction,” in *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Bintley and Shapland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>41</sup> For an example of how Michael Bintley’s study of the multiple textual resonances of wooden rods (Old English *þuf* and Latin *virga*) has influenced my reading of the image in Carolingian hagiography, see Chapter 3, 424-30.

Recent scholarship has also established a division between the natural world and buildings and the human-made environment. John Blair has emphasized the links between these categories in making sense of the Church's visible, physical, economic and pastoral roles in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>42</sup> Blair's study is unsurpassed in the clarity with which it expresses the central and visible position of the English church in the landscape based not just on the major written sources but also archaeological and topographical evidence. Early English church officials understood and took up the challenge of converting the landscape. Blair isolated three recurrent points to which Christian officials returned in the seventh through the ninth centuries:

The first is that sacred topography often resides in memory and tradition rather than in physical monumentalization, and extends well beyond modern western definitions of "ritual monuments" to include, for instance, routeways, mountain-ranges, or the frontiers between different land-zones. Secondly (and by extension), whole categories of sacred sites are independent of any human modification: "unaltered places" such as distinctively shaped rocks, caves, streams, or springs can be long-term sites of supernatural power, and recipients of offerings, without the patronage, investment, or control of any king, priesthood, or other central authority. The third point is that societies converted to new and more centralized religions have often shown a strong tendency to assimilate these inherited sites to the new belief-systems, however different their ideas of cosmology or sacred space may in theory be.<sup>43</sup>

The sum of these efforts was the active "re-working" of "inherited ritual landscapes" by clergy, a model that makes clear sense in Eanmund's case.<sup>44</sup> Blair's approach downplays hagiographic images of saints in favor of their shrines and roles in pastoral care. For Blair "the externals of Christian culture rather than its spirituality"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 1-7.

<sup>43</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 182-83.

<sup>44</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 183.

<sup>45</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 1.

reached their apex in the spread of local churches in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the visible results of strong networks of pastoral care. Eanmund's Northumbrian monastery was part of that network, although Æthelwulf omitted any mention of events or activities outside the community's walls. What Blair's approach does not explain is the extent to which natural features in the landscape could be active shapers of monastic life and behavior in addition to their less dynamic role as the stage on which Christianization took place.

Anglo-Saxon hagiography depicted the processes by which holy men and women purified natural, wild and untamed places; we have just seen an instance of this process in miniature. These places were often situated on coastlines, along rivers and near major highways.<sup>46</sup> But as Thomas Pickles has recently observed, "[c]omparatively little attention has been focused on how knowledge of sacred texts prompted founders and their communities to experience such locations as sacred places."<sup>47</sup> Most of this, Pickles has shown, is due to an exclusive focus on foundation narratives to understand the links between sacred text and place. As Antonio Sennis has reminded us, foundation narratives were rhetorical devices to meet specific historical needs.<sup>48</sup> This need not prevent us from understanding how authors like Æthelwulf understood landscapes and the natural world. Relevant to this impulse, Helen Gittos has recently pointed out the scholarly

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Pickles, "Anglo-Saxon Monasteries as Sacred Places: Topography, Exegesis and Vocation," in *Sacred Text—Sacred Space: Architectural, Spiritual and Literary Convergences in England and Wales*, ed. Joseph Sterrett and Peter Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 35-56.

<sup>47</sup> Pickles, "Sacred Places," 37.

<sup>48</sup> Antonio Sennis, "Narrating Places: Memory and Spaces in Medieval Monasteries," in *People and Space in the Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy Davies, Guy Halsall and Andrew Reynolds (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 275-94.

preoccupation with the transformation of a *locus horribilis* to a *locus amoenus* which has “obscured the variety of ways in which sacred places were believed by contemporaries to have been created.”<sup>49</sup> Gittos’ discussion of the scene with which this chapter begins is a clear example of the categorization of creating sacred places in the landscape:

Æthelwulf’s foundational moment was merely an act of clearance, reflective of Eanmund’s need to “prepare his own inner, spiritual landscape.”<sup>50</sup> Such an interpretation of sacred landscapes encourages a scholarly view that those landscapes were passive: their holiness could only be activated by “proximity to relics, the prayers of the community” and similar methods.<sup>51</sup>

Little attention has been given to descriptions of and attitudes towards the natural world in Anglo-Saxon England as a subject for reflection, at least for the Latin sources. Positive and negative attitudes towards nature are prominent in these sources; we have encountered and will encounter them in abundance. As Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert

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<sup>49</sup> Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21; the approaches Gittos identified with such a “preoccupation” are, among others: John Howe, “Creating Symbolic Landscapes: Medieval Development of Sacred Space,” in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, ed. Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002), 208-23. More specific to local studies in Anglo-Saxon England are: Richard Morris, “*Calami et iunci*: Lastingham in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries,” *Bulletin of International Medieval Research* 11 (2005): 3-21; and Kelley Wickham-Crowley, “Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts,” in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare Lees and Gillian Overing (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 85-110.

<sup>50</sup> Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 39.

Márkus have observed of early Irish monks, we ought instead to permit the sources “to speak to us in their own voices, rather than simply projecting our needs unto them.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Gildas’ Landscapes: The Natural and Built Worlds**

The first voice to which we will listen is that of Gildas, whose principal surviving work was the quasi-historical jeremiad *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (“On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain”).<sup>53</sup> We know very little about the author and the historical circumstances behind his work. As Guy Halsall has put it, *De excidio* “was certainly composed in Britain during our period (c. 480-550) but that is about all that can be said with absolute confidence about its date and provenance.”<sup>54</sup> The exact date of composition is far from certain.<sup>55</sup> Based on the year of Maelgwn of Gwynedd’s death in the *Annales Cambriae*, one of the kings whom Gildas castigated, a date of 540 may seem appropriate. David Dumville demonstrated, however, that 540 was probably too late a date of composition.<sup>56</sup> In support of that view, Gildas’ style resonates with those of other fifth-century Gallic authors.<sup>57</sup> Scholars have thus pushed for a date of 500, based on Gildas’

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, eds., *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 89.

<sup>53</sup> Throughout, I use the translation of Michael Winterbottom, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works* (London: Phillimore, 1978), hereafter “Winterbottom.” For the text I use the *Monumenta* edition: *De Excidio Britanniae* 3.1-4, *MGH AA* 13, 15-85.

<sup>54</sup> Guy Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53.

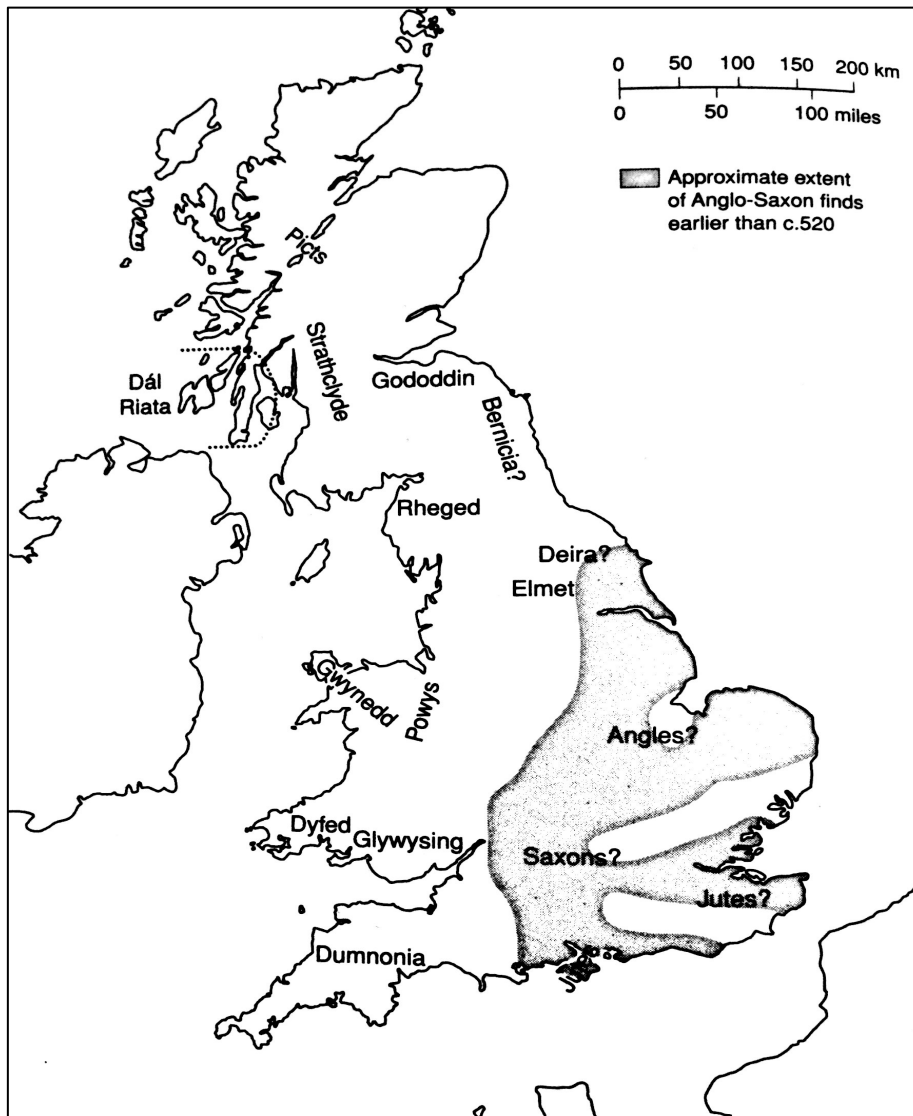
<sup>55</sup> For discussions of scholarly attempts to date *De excidio*, see Karen George, *Gildas’s De Excidio Britonum and the Early British Church* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 1-3; and more succinctly, Halsall, *Arthur*, 53-54.

<sup>56</sup> David Dumville, “Gildas and Maelgwn,” in *Gildas: New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1984), 51-59.

<sup>57</sup> Clare Stancliffe, “The Thirteen Sermons Attributed to Columbanus and the Question of their Authorship,” in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 93-202, at 178-79.



references to the paucity of monks in Britain.<sup>58</sup> The problem is that Gildas provided precisely no dates and very few proper names in *De excidio*, making it extraordinarily difficult to situate both geographically and chronologically. This is perhaps because dates simply did not interest Gildas: all of the events he described occurred within the framework of British moral turpitude.



**Map 2.1:** Britain in the time of Gildas, c. 500. Taken from James, *Britain*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Herren, "Gildas and Early British Monasticism," in *Britain 400-600: Language and History*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger and Alfred Wollman (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1990), 65-78.

*De excidio* has two parts: the *Historia* (ch. 2-26) and the *Epistola* (ch. 27-110).

The *Historia* can be broken down into thematic sections:

**Table 2.2: Narrative Structure of the *Historia* of Gildas' *De excidio*.**

1-2	Preface.
3	Description of Britain, its topography and agriculture.
4-13	Roman Britain.
14-21	Britain after Rome's departure.
22-26	The <i>adventus Saxonum</i> of the mid-fifth century.

This all anticipates the *Epistola*, in which Gildas castigated British kings, clergy, and monks, frequently citing prophetic books of Hebrew Scripture:

**Table 2.3: Narrative Structure of the *Epistola* of Gildas' *De excidio*.**

27-36	Complaints against the “five tyrants” of Britain and their sins against the Britons and God.
37-65	A long section recycling relevant excerpts of the Old Testament prophets.
66-68	Complaints against British clergy.
69-75	Gildas offers his template for producing better priests drawing from scriptural examples.
76-109	Denunciation of corrupt priests, with excerpts from the Old Testament prophets and the Pauline epistles.
110	Gildas offers a prayer for good pastors.

### ***Gildas: Scholarship and Approaches***

As we can see from this sketch, the long scriptural section after the *Historia* and discussion of Britain's five tyrants constitute about 70 percent of the whole. It is strikingly long for a section “which almost no one ever looks at, in spite of the fact that, as far as Gildas and his immediate audience were concerned, that was the important bit.”<sup>59</sup> Seen in this way, Gildas was not writing history, “but a sermon in the late antique

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<sup>59</sup> Halsall, *Arthur*, 54.

tradition of ‘speaking truth to power’, or *parrhesia*.<sup>60</sup> The Britons’ immorality explained God’s punishment of the *adventus Saxonum* of the mid-fifth century during which Saxons, Angles and Jutes migrated from northern Europe ostensibly to fend off the Picts in response to a British invitation, but ultimately displaced the Britons.

Gildas’ approach should not prevent us from taking him seriously as a scholar. In a controversial study Nicholas Higham insisted that Gildas’ account was historically accurate but dismissed his account of post-Roman Britain (*De excidio* 14-19) as “clearly retrospective and fundamentally false.”<sup>61</sup> Too often scholars have looked for the scholar they want to find in Gildas, instead of taking him on his own terms. Such an approach is unnecessarily constricting. Scholars are better off with a more flexible reading, one that takes a theme in Gildas—the landscapes of Britain—to make sense of his broader approach.

Gildas’ recycling of often lengthy scriptural passages has also caused modern scholars to dismiss him as eccentric.<sup>62</sup> François Kerlouégan’s 1968 study of Gildas’ linguistic style began to remove doubt about Gildas’ sophisticated Latin and the unity of the work as a whole.<sup>63</sup> As Michael Lapidge later argued, Gildas was classically trained as

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<sup>60</sup> Halsall, *Arthur*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> Nicholas Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 22.

<sup>62</sup> For this discussion, see Michael Lapidge, “Gildas’ Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain,” in *Gildas*, ed. Lapidge, 27-50.

<sup>63</sup> François Kerlouégan, “Le latin du *De Excidio Britanniae* de Gildas,” in *Christianity in Britain 300-700*, ed. Maurice Barley and Richard Hanson (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968), 151-76, at 173: “Il n’existe aucune différence notable” between the *Historia* and *Epistola* of Gildas’ work. Kerlouégan reiterated these findings in *Le De Excidio Britanniae de Gildas: les Destinées de la culture latine dans l’Isle de Bretagne du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1987). Michael Winterbottom confirmed Gildas’ familiarity with the conventions of late antique Latin prose in the preface to *De*

a *rhetor* and *grammaticus*, suggesting a formal education around the year 500, probably in southwest Britain.<sup>64</sup> David Howlett has further suggested that Gildas was trained in the “biblical style” of poetic construction most prominently seen in Psalms, Isaiah and Lamentations.<sup>65</sup> These revisionist views of Gildas fit well with important studies by Ken Dark and Christopher Snyder on the continuities between Roman and sub-Roman Britain in the political and archaeological records.<sup>66</sup>

Frustratingly, *De excidio* is the only substantial written source for Britain between the departure of Roman legions in the early fifth century up to the arrival of a papal mission in the late sixth. Gildas’ work is marked by sometimes specific geographic descriptions and natural details, especially in the early sections of the *Historia*. Higham has demonstrated the high degree of originality in Gildas’ geographic description at the beginning of *De excidio*, including material not found in his classical sources.<sup>67</sup> “In many ways,” Andy Merrills has observed, [late Antiquity] are as varied as the historical works in which they appear, and often display their idiosyncratic authors at their finest. Gildas’ evocation of a bucolic Britain, for example, displays a dexterity of scriptural allusion that

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*excidio* in his “The Preface of Gildas’ *De Excidio*,” *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1974-75): 277-87.

<sup>64</sup> Lapidge, “Gildas’ Education,” 27-50. On Gildas’ Romano-Christian audience, see Herren, “Gildas,” 65-78.

<sup>65</sup> David Howlett, *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 72-81.

<sup>66</sup> Ken Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity, 300-800* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993); and Christopher Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, 400-600* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 131-224.

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas Higham, “Old Light on the Dark Age Landscape: the Description of Britain in *De Excidio Britanniae* of Gildas,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 17.4 (1991): 363-72. On his debts to Orosius and others, see Neil Wright, “Gildas’ Geographical Perspective: Some Problems,” in *Gildas*, ed. Lapidge, 85-105; and Kerlouégan, *Gildas*, 81-82.

is quite breathtaking in its sophistication.”<sup>68</sup> On one level these descriptions were a tribute to Britain’s unique beauty: its cities, arable pastures and landscapes affirmed Britain’s place in universal sacred history. Gildas repeatedly returned to the concept of landscape and space as a measure of British history: the Britons’ plight was directly reflected in the landscape and the ruins of its churches.

### ***Gildas’ Landscapes: The Natural and the Built World***

What Gildas lacked in historical precision he made up for in rich geographical description. Scholarship on this issue has generally focused on Gildas’ geographic contradictions<sup>69</sup> as well as his original contributions to ideas of Britain.<sup>70</sup> To construct this image, Gildas followed Orosius, the early fifth-century author of the *Historiae adversus paganos*.<sup>71</sup> Beyond this, though, Gildas’ geographic description has received little sustained attention. In fact, the most recent major study of *De excidio* devotes only half a page to Gildas’ geographic description in the third chapter.<sup>72</sup> A fuller consideration of Gildas’ engagement with the natural world and Britain’s landscapes clarifies his descriptions beyond these borrowings. First, he described the geography of his island:

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<sup>68</sup> Andy Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2-3.

<sup>69</sup> Wright, “Some Problems,” 185-205.

<sup>70</sup> Higham, “Description,” 363-72.

<sup>71</sup> Orosius, I.2.76-82; on this point see Patrick Sims-Williams, “Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 6 (1983): 1-30, at 5; and Diarmuid Scully, “Bede, Orosius and Gildas on the Early History of Britain,” in *Bède le Vénérable entre tradition et postérité*, ed. Michel Perrin and Olivier Szerwiniak (Lille: Université Charles de Gaulle, 2005), 31-42, especially 31-33.

<sup>72</sup> George, *Gildas*, 54-55. Andy Merrills devotes some space to Gildas in *History and Geography*, but only in the service of Bede’s sources for his geographic description in *HE* 1.1.

Brittannia insula in extremo ferme orbis limite circium occidentemque versus divina, ut dicitur, statera terrae totius ponderatrice librata ab africo boreali propensius tensa axi, octingentorum in longo milium, ducentorum in latio spatium, exceptis diversorum prolixioribus promonteriorum tractibus, quae arcuatis oceani sinibus ambiuntur, tenens, cuius diffusiore et, ut ita dicam, intransmeabili undique circulo absque meridianae freto plagae, quo ad galliam belgicam navigatur, vallata, duorum ostiis nobilium fluminum tamesis ac sabrinae veluti brachiis, per quae olim transmarinae deliciae ratibus vehebantur, aliorumque minorum meliorata, bis denis bisque quaternis civitatibus ac nonnullis castellis, murorum turrium serratarum portarum domorum, quarum culmina minaci proceritate porrecta in edito forti compage pangebantur, molitionibus non improbabiler instructis decorata; campis late pansis collibusque amoeno situ locatis, praepollenti culturae aptis, montibus alternandis animalium pastibus maxime convenientibus, quorum diversorum colorum flores humanis gressibus pulsati non indecentem ceu picturam eisdem imprimebant, electa veluti sponsa monilibus diversis ornata, fontibus lucidis crebris undis niveas veluti glareas pellentibus, prenitidisque rivis leni murmure serpentibus ipsorumque in ripis accubantibus suavis soporis pignus praetendentibus, et lacubus frigidum aquae torrentem vivae exundantibus irrigua.<sup>73</sup>

The island of Britain lies virtually at the end of the world, towards the west and north-west. Poised in the divine scales that (we are told) weigh the whole earth, it stretches from the south-west towards the northern pole. It has a length of eight hundred miles, a width of two hundred: leaving out of account the various large headlands that jut out between the curving ocean bays. It is fortified on all sides by a vast and more or less uncrossable ring of sea, apart from the straits on the south where one can cross to Belgic Gaul; but it has the benefit of the estuaries of a number of streams, and especially two splendid rivers, the Thames and the Severn, arms of the sea along which luxuries from overseas used to be brought by ship. It is ornamented with twenty eight cities and a number of castles, and well equipped with fortifications—walls, castellated towers, gates and houses, whose sturdily built roofs reared menacingly skyward. Like a chosen bride arrayed in a variety of jewellery, the island is decorated with wide plains and agreeably set hills, excellent for vigorous agriculture, and mountains especially suited for varying the pasture for animals. Flowers of different hues underfoot made them a delightful picture. To water it, the island has clear fountains, whose constant flow drives before it pebbles white as snow, and brilliant rivers that glide with gentle

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<sup>73</sup> *DEB* 3, *MGH AA* 13, 28-29.

murmur, guaranteeing sweet sleep for those who lie on their banks, and lakes flowing over with a cold rush of living water.<sup>74</sup>

For Gildas, Britain's brilliant landscape, here composed of natural features and buildings, reflected its high status in the known world. It was a land worth conquering, since Gildas highlighted the contrast between the "stiff-necked and haughty" nature of Britons and the "superior prestige" of the Roman Empire.<sup>75</sup> Gildas emphasized the chaotic nature of the indigenous Britons in comparison with the order of the Romans. To express this, Gildas described British paganism as embedded in the landscape: "I shall not name the mountains and hills and rivers, once so pernicious, now useful to human needs, on which, in those days, a blind people heaped divine honours."<sup>76</sup> Crucially, Gildas drew a distinction between the natural world as a dwelling place for pagan gods on the one hand, and as a resource to humans on the other: the Britons used to worship in the rugged places which "are now useful to human needs." By situating Britain *in extremo ferme orbis*, Gildas invoked "the implied terrors of the Ocean beyond . . . [and] effectively retains the sense of over-worldly space within which his polemic operates."<sup>77</sup> Roman order on that "other-worldly" landscape eventually gave way to Roman persecution under Diocletian, however, when "churches were razed throughout the

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<sup>74</sup> Trans. Winterbottom, 16-17.

<sup>75</sup> *DEB* 4, *MGH AA* 13, 29: "Haec erecta cervice et mente, ex quo inhabitata est, nunc deo, interdum divibus." *DEB* 5, *MGH AA* 13, 29-30: "Etenim reges Romanorum cum orbis imperium obtinuissent subiugatisque finitimis quibusque regionibus vel insulis orientem versus primam Parthorum pacem Indorum confinium, qua peracta in omni paene terra tum cessavere bella, potioris famae viribus firmassent."

<sup>76</sup> *DEB* 4, *MGH AA* 13, 29, trans. Winterbottom, 17: "neque nominatim inclamitans montes ipsos aut colles vel fluvios olim exitiabiles, nunc vero humanis usibus utiles, quibus divinus honor a caeco tunc populo cumulabatur."

<sup>77</sup> Merrills, *History and Geography*, 278.

world”<sup>78</sup> and British “survivors hid in woods, desert places and secret caves.”<sup>79</sup> The Britons had faded back into the landscape.

Built spaces (and their ruin) were Gildas’ measures of British history. After the persecutions ended, Gildas noted that the faithful “rebuilt churches that had been razed to the ground; the founded, built and completed chapels to the holy martyrs, displaying them everywhere like victorious banners. They celebrated feasts days. With pure heart and mouth they carried out the holy ceremonies.”<sup>80</sup> The beginning and end of persecution were marked by visible manifestations of the faith in the landscape, themselves the result of a heightened faith in the martyrs.

Gildas consistently returned to the British landscape (both the natural world and its built structures) as an index of morality and cultural welfare. Seen in this way, Gildas’ *Historia* (chapters 1-26) is a set of ebbs and flows: the Britons were a depraved people who worshipped in forests and on mountains; Roman *imperium* imposed order upon them, until the persecutions of the late third and early fourth centuries, at which point Britain’s churches fell into ruin; eventually, the faithful came out of their hiding places and rebuilt the churches. Gildas’ descriptions of the British landscape, its resources and buildings

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<sup>78</sup> *DEB* 9, *MGH AA* 13, 31, trans. Winterbottom, 19: “in qua subversae per totum mundum sunt ecclesiae.”

<sup>79</sup> *DEB* 11, *MGH AA* 13, 32, trans. Winterbottom, 20: “Nam qui superfuerant silvis ac desertis abditisque speluncis se occultavere.”

<sup>80</sup> *DEB* 12, *MGH AA* 13, 32, trans. Winterbottom, 20: “renovant ecclesias ad solum usque destructas; basilicas sanctorum martyrum fundant construunt perficiunt ac velut victricia signa passim propalant. dies festos celebrant, sacra mundo corde oreque conficiunt.” Gildas may have known the phrase “victricia signa” from the first-century poet Silius Italicus who employed it several times in his *Punica* 6.595, 12.286, 14.178, 15.481 and 15.809.



reveal that he thought *with* those spaces, seeing them as indices of the Christianizing process. Ruins and the return to nature indicated the reversal of Christianization.

Gildas did not discuss the period *c.* 300-450 in any great depth. The next scourge came in the following century with the arrival of the Saxons. Gildas famously attributed the troubles of the mid-fifth century to British immorality. Like the Assyrians' assaults on Judaea, the Saxons brought swift justice to the Britons. Here, again, the built environment was a powerful index of events:

ita ut cunctae coloniae crebris arietibus omnesque colonis cum praepositis ecclesiae, cum sacerdotibus ac populo, mucronibus undique micantibus ac flammis crepitantibus, simul solo sternerentur, et miserabili uisu in medio platearum ima turrium edito cardine euulsarum murorumque celsorum saxa, sacra altaria, cadauerum frustra, crustis ac si gelantibus purpurei cruoris tecta, uelut in quodam horrendo torculari mixta uiderentur, et nulla esset omnimodis praeter domorum ruinas, bestiarum uolucrumque uentres in medio sepultura.<sup>81</sup>

All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants—church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press.<sup>82</sup>

In the aftermath, even British priests would “hang around the altars swearing oaths—then shortly afterwards scorn them as though they were dirty stones.”<sup>83</sup> Again, Gildas described a cultural disaster manifest in the British landscape: disorderly heaps of stones were metaphoric milestones for the loss of civilization. Stones were markers both

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<sup>81</sup> *DEB* 24, *MGH AA* 13, 39.

<sup>82</sup> Winterbottom, 27.

<sup>83</sup> *DEB* 27 *MGH AA* 13, 41; Winterbottom, 29: “inter altaria iurando demorantes et haed eadem ac si lutulenta paulo post saxa despicientes.”

in a landscape and in Gildas' text. As Nicholas Howe has put it, this image marks "an irreparable break with the past: the Roman civilization of towns has been reduced to rubble."<sup>84</sup> Britain's landscape and its physical structures were central to that narrative; they marked not just a break from the past, but routinely acted as a metonym for Britain's troubled history. For Gildas, Britain had taken part in the same sacred history as the Israelites had. The tragedy in both cases was the defilement of God's houses:

Assyrio olim in Iudaeam comparando completur quoque in nobis secundum historiam, quod propheta deplorans ait: "incenderunt igni sanctuarium tuum in terra, polluerunt tabernaculum nominis tui," et iterum: "deus, venerunt gentes in hereditatem tuam; coinquinarunt templum sanctum tuum."<sup>85</sup>

So it was that in this assault, comparable with that of the Assyrians of old on Judaea, there was fulfilled according to history for us also what the prophet said in his lament: "They have burned with fire your sanctuary on the ground, they have polluted the dwelling-place of your name" [Ps. 73.7]. And again: "God, the heathen have come into your inheritance; they have desecrated your holy temple" [Ps. 78.1].<sup>86</sup>

Gildas' image of ruins stands in stark contrast with the third chapter's idyllic geography. Suddenly, in chapters 27-36, Gildas returned to the theme of the natural world in his complaint against the five tyrants of Britain. In the *Historia*, Gildas had established an image of British wildness after the departure of Roman legions. The Irish and Picts descended from the mountains "like dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock."<sup>87</sup> Gildas elaborated: "Our citizens abandoned towns and the high

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<sup>84</sup> Nicholas Howe, *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 82.

<sup>85</sup> *DEB* 24, *MGH AA* 13, 39.

<sup>86</sup> Winterbottom, 27.

<sup>87</sup> *DEB* 19.1 *MGH AA* 13, 35, trans. Winterbottom, 23: "quasi in alto Titane incalescente caumate de artissimis foraminum caverniculis fusci vermiculorum cunei, tetri Scottorum Pictorumque greges."

wall. Once again they had to flee; once again they were scattered, more irretrievably than usual . . . The pitiable citizens were torn apart by their foe like lambs by the butcher; their life became like that of beasts of the field.”<sup>88</sup> A few decades later, the five tyrants emerged from the chaos, all with beastly attributes:

- I. Constantine of Dumnonia, “the tyrant whelp of the filthy lioness of Dumnonia (*inmundae leaenae Damnoniae tyrannicus catulus*)” (28.1).
- II. Aurelius Caninus, a “lion whelp (*catule leonine*)” (30.1).
- III. Vortipor of the Demetae, “like a leopard in your behavior, and spotted with wickedness (*pardo similis moribus et nequitiis discolor*)” (31.1).
- IV. Cuneglasus, the “red butcher (*lanio fulve*)” and “bear (*urse*)” (32.1).
- V. Maglocunus, “dragon of the island (*insularis draco*)” (33.1).

In these crucial sections Gildas extended his model of chaos and order to individuals. Gildas hinted that Maglocunus—which translates as “Big Dog”—had once attempted to become a monk but his nature prohibited him from succeeding; he was like a fat bull that had broken through the nets meant to ensnare him, and like a dove trying to avoid the talons of a hawk.<sup>89</sup> The devil, in the end, claimed Maglocunus, “pouncing on (him) like an eagle vast in wing and talon.”<sup>90</sup> Gildas was condescending to Maglocunus, considering him “like a lively foal to whom everything unknown seems attractive.”<sup>91</sup> Here, Gildas’ index for individual crimes could be found in the natural world.

Similarly, the immorality of Aurelius Caninus (Aurelius “The Dog”) was “a slime like sea-waves rushing fatally upon you . . . You are left like a solitary tree, withering in

<sup>88</sup> *DEB* 19.3, *MGH AA* 13, 35, trans. Winterbottom, 23: “relictis civitatibus murosque celso iterum civibus fugae, iterum dispersiones solito desperabiliores, iterum ab hoste insectationes . . . et sicut agni a lanionibus, ita deflendi cives ab inimicis discerpuntur ut commoratio eorum ferarum assimilaretur agrestium.”

<sup>89</sup> *DEB* 34.2, *MGH AA* 13, 45, trans. Winterbottom, 33.

<sup>90</sup> *DEB* 34.4, *MGH AA* 13, 46, trans. Winterbottom, 33: “veluti magnarum aquila alarum unguiumque, daemon infelici filiorum suorum agmini contra ius fasque rapuisset.”

<sup>91</sup> *DEB* 35.1, *MGH AA* 13, 46, trans. Winterbottom, 34: “sed fervidus ac si pullus, amoena quaeque inperagrata putans.”

the middle of the field.”<sup>92</sup> The image of the solitary tree echoes Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream.<sup>93</sup> In it, Nebuchadnezzar saw a tree cut down in its prime, which Daniel revealed to represent him and his kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar’s fate mirrored the wildness of the five tyrants: “thy dwelling shall be with cattle and with wild beasts, and thou shalt eat grass as an ox.”<sup>94</sup> As A.C. Sutherland has observed, beastly behavior was not limited to a few named individuals: Gildas compared entire peoples—the Saxons, Picts, Irish and Britons—to wild beasts.<sup>95</sup> While it is true that “the main purpose of the animal-similes is nevertheless simultaneously to describe and condemn the moral condition of the Britons,”<sup>96</sup> the degeneration of built landscapes and comparisons with the natural and animal worlds were related themes for Gildas.

The remainder of *De excidio*—the so-called *Epistola*—consists mostly of long excerpts from the Old Testament. Yet Gildas’ discussion of Britain’s strongmen and priests are significant, and is in keeping with the *Historia*’s theme of landscape. After his complaint against the tyrants, Gildas applied a sustained treatment of Hebrew prophecy to contemporary issues. The tyrants reminded him of Jeroboam and Baasha, kings of Israel whose descendants “shall be eaten by dogs, and their dead bodies shall be eaten on

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<sup>92</sup> *DEB* 30.1-2, *MGH AA* 13, 43, trans. Winterbottom, 30-31: “velut quibusdam marinis irruentibus tibi voraris feraliter undis . . . Relictus, quaeso, iam solus ac si arbor in medio campo arescens.”

<sup>93</sup> For a discussion, see below, 263-65.

<sup>94</sup> Dan. 4.25: “et cum bestiis feris erit habitatio tua, et fenum ut boves comedes.”

<sup>95</sup> A.C. Sutherland, “The Imagery of Gildas’ *De Excidio Britanniae*,” in *Gildas*, ed. Lapidge, 157-68, at 160-62.

<sup>96</sup> Sutherland, “Imagery,” 162.

the plains by the birds of the sky.”<sup>97</sup> The powerful image extended to Gildas’ conclusion of the section: hell awaited those Britons who “do not swiftly flee these rapacious wolves of Arabia, like Lot fleeing to the hills from the fiery rain that fell on Sodom.”<sup>98</sup> Gildas had earlier described the Britons as a “treacherous lioness (*leana dolosa*)” and “tricky foxes (*vulpeculas subdolas*),”<sup>99</sup> thus depicting them as beasts at war with themselves. For Gildas, animal metaphors represented bestial behavior.

Gildas largely abandoned animal metaphors in his polemic against Britain’s priests (chapters 66-109), preferring other naturalistic similes with comparable functions. Not only were the Britons like wild animals, but they were also like the Israelites who, in the words of Isaiah, “shall be left abandoned like a shed in a vineyard or a hut in a cucumber-patch.”<sup>100</sup> Like the image of Maglocunus as a tree in an empty field, Gildas drew from Malachi to describe the bareness of the British kingdoms: “All the proud and the wicked shall be as stubble . . . and [Judgment Day will] leave of them neither root nor shoot.”<sup>101</sup> A further example emerges from Job, who insisted that “every wicked man be crushed like a rotten tree.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *DEB* 40.1, *MGH AA* 13, 50, citing I Kings 16.2-4, trans. Winterbottom, 38: “Qui mortuus fuerit de suis in civitate comedent eum canes, et mortuum corpus illius in campo comedent volatilia caeli.”

<sup>98</sup> *DEB* 68.2, *MGH AA* 13, 64, trans. Winterbottom, 54: “Vel certe secundum salvatoris dictum, si non istos rapacissimos ut Arabiae lupis, ac si Loth ad montem igneum Sodomorum imbrem praepropere fugeritis.”

<sup>99</sup> *DEB* 6.1-2, *MGH AA* 13, 30, trans. Winterbottom, 18.

<sup>100</sup> *DEB* 42.2, *MGH AA* 13, 51, referencing Is. 1.8, trans. Winterbottom, 39: “filia Sion ut tabernaculum in vinea et sicut tugurium in cucumerario.”

<sup>101</sup> *DEB* 58.1, *MGH AA* 13, 58 (referencing Mal. 4.1), trans. Winterbottom, 47-48: “et erunt omnes superbi et omnes facientes iniquitatem ut stipula et inflammabit eos dies adveniens, dicit dominus exercituum, quae non relinquet ex eis radicem et germen.”

<sup>102</sup> *DEB* 59.4, *MGH AA* 13, 59, trans. Winterbottom, 48: “omnis iniquus sicut lignum sine sanitate.”

Barrenness and abandonment were not the only themes Gildas deployed.

Throughout the *Epistola*, Gildas deployed images of unwelcome and unruly growth. The tyrant Constantine nurtured “a slip of unbelieving folly in the soil of his heart.”<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, “a sprig of its own bitter planting” grew up among the Britons under Roman occupation.<sup>104</sup> When the Saxons arrived in the middle of the fifth century, they were “the sprig of iniquity, the root of bitterness, the virulent plant that our merits so well deserved, sprouted in our soil with savage shoots and tendrils.”<sup>105</sup> As a result, Gildas (invoking Joel 1.5, 9-12) elaborated upon the image:

Lugete, sacerdotes, qui deseruitis altario, quia miseri facti sunt campi. Lugeat terra, quia miserum factum est frumentum et siccatum est vinum, diminutum est oleum, arverunt agricolae. Lugete, possessiones, pro tritico et hordeo, qui periit vindemia ex agro, vitis arefacta est, ficus diminutae sunt: granata et palma et malum et omnia ligna agri arefacta sunt, quoniam confuderunt gaudium filii hominum.<sup>106</sup>

Wail, priests who serve at the altar, for the fields have become sad. Let the earth lament, for the corn is become sad, and the wine is dried up, the oil is diminished and the farmers are grown dry. Wail, estates, for the wheat and the barley, because the vintage has perished from the field, the vine is withered, the figs are diminished; the pomegranates and palms and apples and all the trees of the field are dried up.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *DEB* 28.4, *MGH AA* 13, 42, trans. Winterbottom, 30: “in cordis sui infructuosa bono semini gleba surculamen incredulitatis et insipientiae plantaverat.”

<sup>104</sup> *DEB* 13.1, *MGH AA* 13, 32, trans. Winterbottom, 20: “potius adiciens germen suae plantationis amarissimae.”

<sup>105</sup> *DEB* 23.4; *MGH AA* 13, 39, trans. Winterbottom, 26: “germen iniquitatis, radix amaritudinis, virulentis plantatio nostris condigna meritis, in nostro cespite, ferocibus palmitibus pampinisque pullulat.”

<sup>106</sup> *DEB* 83.1, *MGH AA* 13, 72-73.

<sup>107</sup> Trans. Winterbottom, 64.

These descriptions call to mind one of Gildas' most powerful images on the rise of tyrants in Britain from the *Historia*: "At length the tyrant thickets increased and were all but bursting into a savage forest."<sup>108</sup>

Of all the elements of Britain's landscape Gildas offered in the third chapter, none were completely beyond human control or manipulation: the Ocean was impassible except for the channel between Britain and Gaul, the rivers are useful for trade amongst the twenty-eight cities and beyond, the plains and hills are suitable for agriculture and pasturage, and even the flowers exist to constitute a beautiful picture. Gildas provided little opportunity for uncontrolled vegetative growth in his description of Britain; this he reserved for his metaphors of tyranny. Gildas not only betrayed a "distrust of untamed nature,"<sup>109</sup> but he consistently filtered his view of history and the present through the imagery of nature and landscape: growth and infertility, construction and destruction. These physical images shaped his conception of post-Roman Britain.

### **Bede, Nature and Natural Places**

Around two centuries later, the Northumbrian monk and scholar Bede drew from Gildas' geographic description in his famous *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, the "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" (composed c. 731). By his own admission Bede was a monk for nearly all his life, entering the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow in either 680 or 681:

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<sup>108</sup> *DEB* 13.1, *MGH AA* 13, 32, trans. Winterbottom, 20: "Itemque tandem tyrannorum virgultis crescentibus et in immanem silvam iam iamque erumpentibus insula."

<sup>109</sup> Sutherland, "Imagery," 160.

Qui natus in territorio eiusdem monasterii, cum essem annorum VII, cura propinquorum datus sum educandus reuerentissimo abbati Benedicto, ac deinde Ceolfrido, cunctumque ex eo tempus uitae in eiusdem monasterii habitatione peragens, omnem meditandis scripturis operam dedi, atque inter obseruantiam disciplinae regularis, et cotidianam catandi in ecclesia curam, semper aut discere aut docere aut scribere dulce habui.

I was born in the territory of this monastery. When I was seven years of age I was, by the care of my kinsmen, put into the charge of the reverend Abbot Benedict and then Ceolfrith, to be educated. From then on I have spent all my life in this monastery, applying myself entirely to the study of the Scriptures; and, amid the observance of the discipline of the Rule and the daily task of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write.<sup>110</sup>

Bede seems to have left the confines of Wearmouth-Jarrow rarely, if at all,<sup>111</sup> but we should be wary of the self-images authors like Bede provided.<sup>112</sup> As his *Epistola ad Ecgbertum* (the “Letter to Ecgbert,” composed c. 734) indicates, Bede was well aware of the state of the Northumbrian church outside his walls.<sup>113</sup>

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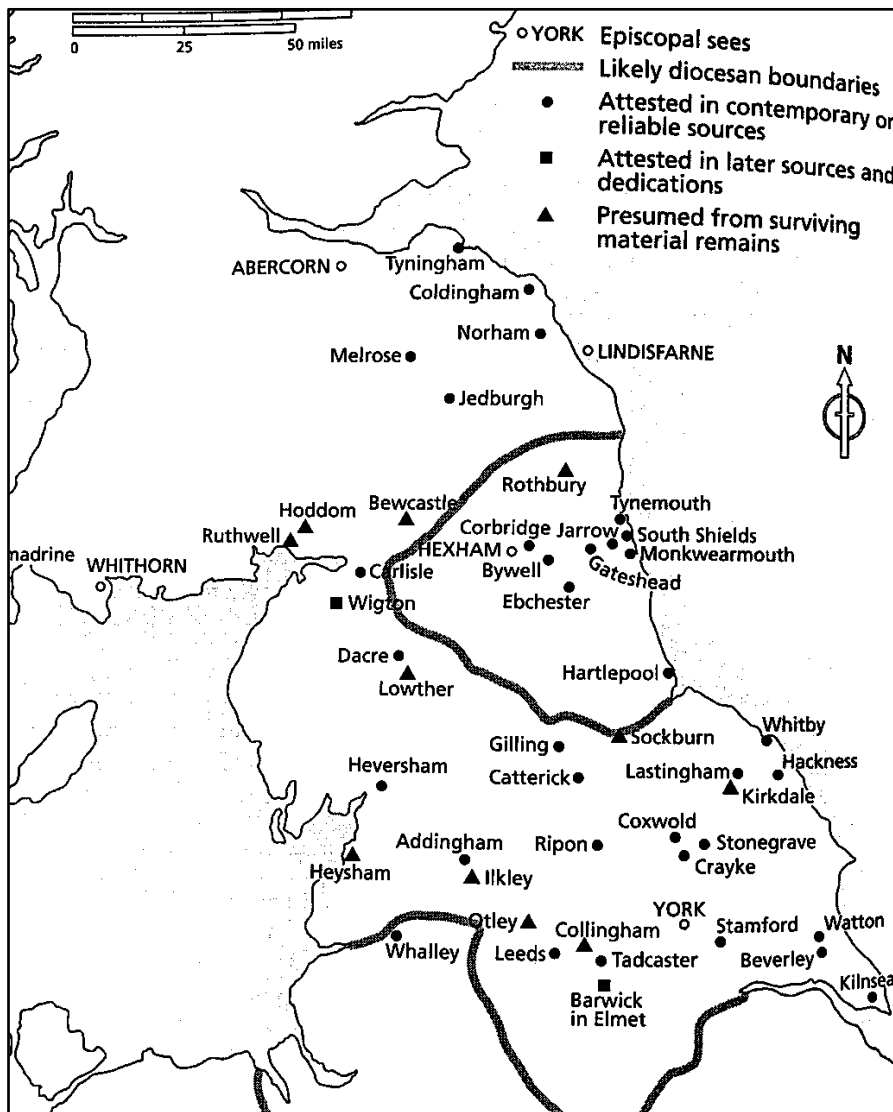
<sup>110</sup> HE 5.24, 566-67. For succinct accounts of Bede’s life, I am following George Hardin Brown, *Bede the Venerable* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 1-23; and Benedicta Ward, *The Venerable Bede* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 1-18.

<sup>111</sup> In her study of monastic memory, Janet Coleman took Bede at his word: *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 129-36.

<sup>112</sup> Catherine Cubitt, “Monastic Memory and Identity in Early Anglo-Saxon England,” in *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. William Frazier and Andrew Tyrell (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 253-76, at 256: “the image . . . of the early medieval monastery as a placid collection of individuals, striving in unison for spiritual perfection, absorbed in the study of books, fits ill with what other texts tell us about it.”

<sup>113</sup> Alan Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 130-53.





**Map 2.2:** Northumbrian religious centers in the time of Bede. Taken from DeGregorio, ed., *Bede*, xxiv.

Bede's scholarly output was vast, comprising works on grammar and rhetoric, chronology and the reckoning of time, scriptural commentaries, hagiography, homilies and history. Despite recent interest in Bede's exegetical output, "undeniably his life's work,"<sup>114</sup> Bede is still best known for his *Historia*. Put simply, the *Historia* was the

<sup>114</sup> Scott DeGregorio, "The New Bede," in *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*, ed. DeGregorio (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 1-10, at 2.

account of the expansion and organization of the church in Anglo-Saxon England.

Following the example of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 339), Bede in his *Historia* explained the inexorable success of Christianity in England.<sup>115</sup> Like Eusebius, Bede included selections of historical documents in order to substantiate his claims that the *gens Anglorum* were a chosen people of God.<sup>116</sup> As Patrick Wormald has observed, Bede “came to the writing of his own people’s history after a lifetime of studying that of Israel as told in the Old Testament. The pattern of God’s dealings with his original Chosen People remains Bede’s underlying theme.”<sup>117</sup> For the *Angli*, Bede crafted that story on the basis of the island’s holy men and women, bishops and kings.<sup>118</sup>

The *Historia* covers the period from Roman Britain up to his own time, but the vast majority of the narrative covers the period after Gregory’s mission of 597 as the following breakdown makes clear:

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<sup>115</sup> On Eusebius, see Arnaldo Momigliano, “Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century AD,” in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 79-99; and Robert Markus, “Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical Historiography,” *Jarrow Lecture* (1975).

<sup>116</sup> On Bede’s understanding and use of the phrase *gens Anglorum* and his ethnic terminology, see Michael Richter, “Bede’s *Angli*: Angles or English?” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 99-114. For Bede’s sources, see Wilhelm Levison, “Bede as Historian,” in *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings*, ed. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 111-51, at 134-37, reprinted in Wilhelm Levison, *Aus rheinischer und fränkischer Frühzeit* (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1948), 347-82; and James Campbell, “Bede I,” in *Latin Historians*, ed. Thomas Dorey (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 159-90, at 163-64, reprinted in James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), 1-27.

<sup>117</sup> Patrick Wormald, “*Engla Lond*: The Making of an Allegiance,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 7 (1994): 1-24, at 14.

<sup>118</sup> On the prevalence of Christian kings and martyrs in the *HE*, see Donald Bullough, “Hagiography as Patriotism: Alcuin’s ‘York Poem’ and the Early Northumbrian *vitae sanctorum*,” in *Hagiographie, cultures et sociétés IV<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1981), 339-59, at 340-43.

**Table 2.4. Narrative Structure of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.**

Book I	
1-12	The geography and history of Roman Britain, following Gildas, <i>c.</i> 50 BC-AD 400.
13-22	Britain after Rome, the <i>adventus Saxonum</i> , and the spread of Pelagian heresy, <i>c.</i> 400-597.
23-34	The Gregorian mission, the conversion of Æthelberht of Kent, and the initial spread of Christianity, <i>c.</i> 597-603.
Book II	
1-14	Augustine and his bishops Mellitus and Justus work to spread orthodox practice, the spread of Christianity to Northumbria, and the conversion of Edwin of Northumbria, <i>c.</i> 604-627.
15-20	The spread of Christianity to Essex and Lindsey and the death of Edwin, <i>c.</i> 624-632/33.
Book III	
1-14	The conversion of Oswald of Northumbria, the foundation of Lindisfarne by the Irish bishop Aidan, the conversion of the Picts, and the death of Oswald at Heavenfield, <i>c.</i> 633-642/43.
15-24	The life of bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne, the spread of monastic practice in East Anglia, the reign of Peada over the Middle Angles, the spread of monasticism in Essex by Cedd, the death of Penda and conversion of the Mercians, <i>c.</i> 643-655.
25-30	The Synod of Whitby concerning the correct date of Easter and other orthodox practices, and episcopal activities in Wessex, Northumbria and Wessex, <i>c.</i> 664-669.
Book IV	
1-20	The consecration of Theodore and Hadrian, and their activities in England, <i>c.</i> 669-680.
21-30	Accounts of the lives of Hild (d. 680) and Cuthbert (d. 687)
Book V	
1-14	The lives of Æthelwald, bishop John, Cædwalla of the West Saxons, the death of Theodore (d. 690), Egbert, Willibrord's mission in Frisia, and the vision of Drythelm, <i>c.</i> 680-700.
15-22	The acceptance of the Roman Easter by the Irish churches, the lives of Adomnan, Cenred of Mercia, Offa of the East Saxons, Albinus (successor to Hadrian), <i>c.</i> 675-731.
23-24	Bede's assessment of the present state of the English church, a chronological recapitulation of the <i>Historia</i> , and an autobiographical entry on his life and works.

As we can see, Bede's narrative depended upon the lives of the best of the *Angli*, as well as the development of a distinctly orthodox monastic network, one in keeping

with Roman Christian practice—monastic network. The debate over orthodoxy manifested itself in outward, visible practices: the monastic tonsure and the correct dating of Easter. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of and relationship between the natural world and built space in the *Historia*. Did Bede share Gildas' distrust of nature and confidence in visible architecture as an index of Christianity's success? How did he describe the natural world and its intersection with human-made environments, and how did these treatments relate to his exegetical scholarship? Gildas had described the collapse of the familiar structures of cultural and religious order in his country. Bede recorded their rebuilding.



**Map 2.3:** Anglo-Saxon England, c. 731, with Place Names from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. Taken from David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 30.

***Bede's Landscapes: Britain in the "Limitless Ocean" and the Limits of Models***

Current scholarship has touched only tangentially on these questions. As we have discussed, by basing the first chapters of his *HE* on Gildas' *De excidio*, Bede identified himself as one of Gildas' earliest known readers. Like Gildas, the extension of Christianity to peoples at the edge of the earth was one of Bede's central historical subjects: the conversion of the English peoples (*gentes*) at the world's end bore eschatological weight.<sup>119</sup> Isidore transmitted much of that classical inheritance: the Britons were a "people situated within Ocean, with the sea flowing between us and them, as if they were outside the world. Concerning them, Virgil said: 'The Britons, separated from the whole world'."<sup>120</sup> When Bede described Cuthbert's hermitage on the isle of Farne in the North Sea, he situated it in the "boundless ocean (*infinito oceano*)."<sup>121</sup> As for Ireland, it lay "beyond the island, where it lies open to the boundless Ocean are the Orkney Islands."<sup>122</sup> The Orkneys then were the last stop on Bede's map of the world; they accented Britain's liminality in the "limitless ocean." Diarmuid Scully has recently

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<sup>119</sup> For this inherited idea, see e.g. Isidore, *Etym.* 9. 2103, quoting Virgil's *Eclogues* 1. 67. For classical and patristic representations of Britain and its archipelago, see Jan Davidse, "The Sense of History in the Works of the Venerable Bede," *Studi Medievali* 23 (1982): 647-95; Verio Santoro, "Sul concetto di *Britannia* tra Antichità e Medioevo," *Romanobarbarica* 11 (1992): 321-34; P.C.N. Stewart, "Inventing Britain: The Roman Adaptation and Creation of an Image," *Britannia* 26 (1995): 1-10; Katherine Clarke, "An Island Nation: Re-Reading Tacitus' *Agricola*," *Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001): 94-112; and Diarmuid Scully, "At World's End: Scotland and Ireland in the Graeco-Roman Imagination," in *Ireland (Ulster), Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons*, ed. Edna Longley, Eamonn Hughes, and Des O'Riordan (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2003), 164-70.

<sup>120</sup> Isidore, *Etym.* 9.2.102, I: 9.102: "gens intra Oceanum interfuso mari quasi extra orbem posita. De quibus Virgilius: 'toto diuisos orbe Britannos'" (quoting Virgil, *Ecl.* 1.66). Translated by Stephen Barney, W.J. Lewis, Oliver Berghof, J.A. Beach, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 198.

<sup>121</sup> *V. Cuth.* 17, 214-15.

<sup>122</sup> *HE* 1.1, 12-13: "A tergo autem, unde Oceano infinito patet, Orcadas insulas habet."

underscored the importance of descriptions of the “ends of the earth” to the *Historia*: both Gildas and Bede drew from classical sources, which insisted that life was unsustainable beyond the Atlantic archipelago. Thus, bearing in mind Christ’s prophecy that “this gospel of the kingdom, shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations, and then shall the consummation come,”<sup>123</sup> the extension of salvation to those far reaches was among the final stages of sacred history.<sup>124</sup> This assessment is in concert with Bede’s preoccupation with measuring time, a study that led him to the conclusion that he was living in the sixth and final age of the earth.<sup>125</sup> Bede’s description of Britain’s position as “an island in the Ocean (*Oceani insula*)” emphasized its isolation. Bede established Britain as resting on the edge of the world in part to underscore the significance of its inclusion in sacred history. It is for this reason that the climax of the *Historia* comes in his description of the Synod of Whitby of 664, which consolidated Irish and English religious practices under a universal Roman model. Seen in this way, Britain was an island in the “boundless Ocean” whose landscapes as well as its people bore the evidence for Christianization. Britain was at the world’s edge but central to sacred history.

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<sup>123</sup> Matt. 24.14: “Et praedicabitur hoc evangelium regni in universo orbe in testimonium omnibus gentibus; et tunc veniet consummatio.”

<sup>124</sup> Scully, “Early History of Britain,” 31-42. Jennifer O’Reilly, “Islands and Idols at the Ends of the Earth: Exegesis and Convesion in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*,” in *Bède le Vénérable*, ed. Lebecq, Perrin and Szerwiniak, 119-45, has clarified the relationship between geography and exegesis in Bede’s *HE* to underscore Britain’s role in universal conversion. For a discussion of eschatological thought in Carolingian missionary *vitae*, see Chapter 3, 464-67.

<sup>125</sup> This view can be found in Bede’s *De temporibus* 17, and *De temporum ratione* 16-22. On this subject, I am following Hildegard Tristram, *Sex aetates mundi: Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren: Untersuchungen und Texte* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1985), 23-24; and Faith Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 353-66.

How did Bede understand the process by which landscapes could become sacred?

And how was that process informed by his conception of the natural world and built spaces? Helen Gittos has recently explored these questions, concluding that such processes had four components: they were “*revealed* by God through providential intervention; *made* through association with a saint by the laity and/or an ecclesiastical elite; *transformed* by the church through a ritual process and meditation on its significance; (and) *consecrated* permanently through a liturgical rite.”<sup>126</sup> This linear process, however, did not apply at all times and in all places. In Æthelwulf’s case, “transformation” and “consecration” were accomplished through textual borrowings and the revelation of scriptural truths in a specific landscape.<sup>127</sup> Bede’s description of Alban’s martyrdom at Verulamium, as we shall soon see, only partially accomplished these stages.

Bede did indeed describe many transitions from *locus horribilis* to *locus amoenus*. Such transitions were crucial for moments of monastic foundation or clearance of dangerous places such as the one with which this chapter began. Recent scholarship on Bede’s descriptions of monastic foundation suggests, however, that linear conversions of landscapes—from polluted, dangerous, or demonic to pure, benevolent, or sacred—were primary ways of understanding the foundations of monastic communities and churches.<sup>128</sup> While this is often the case, linear models of sanctification too readily

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<sup>126</sup> Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 22.

<sup>127</sup> For a full discussion of *De abbatibus*, see below, 281-313.

<sup>128</sup> These transitions are central to the discussions of Richard Morris, “‘Calami et iunci’: Lastingham in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries,” *Bulletin of International Medieval Research* 11 (2005): 3-21; Kelly Wickham-Crowley, “Living on the *Ecg*: the Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts,” in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare Lees and Gillian Overing (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 85-110; and Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 19-55.



embrace Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards “positive” and “negative” nature.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Pickles has argued that the coastal, riverine, woodland and old Roman sites of Anglo-Saxon monasteries reflect the “tradition of *locus amoenus* with biblical landscapes of exile facilitated the image of the monastery as a sacred place for transformation from earthly to heavenly city, embodied in foundation narratives.”<sup>130</sup> Relying on linear models of transformation misses crucial components of the transformation of landscapes: in Bede’s hagiographic sections of the *HE* as well as Æthelwulf’s *De abbatibus*, images of martyrdom, of baptism, of miraculous ascension and annunciation were embedded in depictions of the ways in which landscapes could be transformed.

### ***Bede, Exegesis and History***

For Bede, the depiction and meaning of the construction of Christian buildings and landscapes were crucial components of both exegesis and history. Bede’s attitude towards landscape and the natural world is apparent in two distinct fields: first, a direct engagement with geography and the natural world in his commentary *In Genesim*, the *Historia ecclesiastica*, and in his prose *Vita Cuthberti*; and second, in his articulation of the relationship between humans and the role of the sacred buildings they constructed. This latter theme is primarily found in his exegetical works *De Tabernaculo* and *De Templum*. Bede’s narrative of Christianization in the *HE* depended upon the intersection of the natural world and construction of churches, monasteries, shrines and hermitages.

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<sup>129</sup> See, for example, Thomas Charles-Edwards, “The Foundation of Lastingham,” *Ryedale Historian* 7 (1974): 13-21; and Richard Morris, “Lastingham,” 3-5; Neville, *Representations*, 9 and 59-61; Foot, “Natural World,” 38.

<sup>130</sup> Pickles, “Topography,” 55.

This section shall first situate Bede's exegetical works in their context appropriate to this discussion in order to determine Bede's understanding of both artificial and natural places in his exegesis, and how it shaped his historical narrative.

Bede saw himself sharing in and building upon patristic *auctoritas*, or authority.<sup>131</sup> When he insisted that he was "following in the footsteps of the fathers (*sequens uestigia patrum*)," Bede was not being modest, but making a claim to his continuance of that authority.<sup>132</sup> Exegetical associations also informed Bede's understanding of nature and built spaces, especially in those commentaries that dealt with both themes: the commentaries on Genesis, the Tabernacle, the Temple, Ezra and Nehemiah, and the Song of Songs. The premise of Bede's exegetical approach was to find meaning behind virtually every word of scripture: "The whole course of sacred Scripture is full of mystical figures, and not only in words and deeds, but also in those places and times in which it is enacted."<sup>133</sup> Those "mystical figures (*mystica figura*)" manifested themselves in Bede's *Historia* as well, especially in his geographic and naturalistic descriptions of *HE* 1.1.

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<sup>131</sup> Bernice Kaczynski, "Bede's Commentaries on Luke and Mark and the Formation of the Patristic Canon," in *Anglo-Latin and its Heritage: Essays in Honour of A.G. Rigg*, ed. Siân Echard and Gernot Wieland (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 17-26; and Roger Ray, "Who Did Bede Think He Was?" in *Innovation and Tradition*, ed. DeGregorio, 11-36.

<sup>132</sup> On the meaning of this recurring phrase in Bede's works, see DeGregorio, "The New Bede," and Ray, "Who Did Bede Think He Was?" in *Innovation and Tradition*, ed. DeGregorio, 1-10 and 11-36.

<sup>133</sup> *In Genesim* 3.14.1611-13, *CCSL* 118A, 188: "Cuncta sacri eloquii series mysticis et plena figuris, nec tantum fictis et factis, sed ipsis in quibus agitur locis ac temporibus congruit illud apostolicum, quia omnia in figura contingebant illis, scripta sunt autem propter nos." For *In Gen.*, I am using the translation of Calvin Kendall, *On Genesis* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 265. Hereafter "Kendall."

### ***Bede's Exegetical Description of Britain in HE 1.1***

Britain's remoteness was a crucial component of universal salvation: by converting to Christianity, northern peoples could play a role in bringing on the second coming of Christ. This is in part why, when Bede discussed the conversion of the Picts, he emphasized their physical removal from the rest of Britain: their kingdoms "are separated from the southern part of their land by steep and rugged mountains."<sup>134</sup> Seen in this way, when Bede described British geography in *HE* 1.1, he was introducing his audience to one of the final stages of salvation history.<sup>135</sup> Bede described Britain's topography, resources and geography before turning to his historical narrative. *HE* 1.1 is an ideal entry point to Bede's exegetical thought world. A careful consideration of *HE* 1.1 can serve as a window into Bede's exegetical categories of the natural world. Geography, too, is not only central to the rest of the *Historia*,<sup>136</sup> but also provided a crucial reference point for Bede's later subject of Christianizing both people and landscape. First, Bede presented an exegetical reading of Britain's geography; he then discussed the prominent figures of Britain's conversion to Christianity such as Alban, Cedd and Cuthbert. To understand how Bede thought about—and with—the natural world it is illuminating to read his description of Britain in *HE* 1.1 alongside his

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<sup>134</sup> *HE* 3.4, 222-23: "Brittaniā praedictaturus uerbum Dei prouinciis septentrionalium Pictorum, hoc est eis quae aeduis atque horrentibus montium iugis australes Picti."

<sup>135</sup> Studies of the *HE* as salvation history have not embraced Bede's descriptions of geography and the natural world as indices of that process: see for example Calvin Kendall, "Imitation and the Venerable Bede's *HE*," in *Saints, Scholars, and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Charles W. Jones*, 2 vols., ed. Margot King and Wesley Stevens (Collegeville, MN: St. John's Abbey and University Press, 1979), I: 145-59; and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, "Bede and Plummer," in Gerald Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London: S.P.C.K., 1976), 366-85.

<sup>136</sup> Merrills, *History and Geography*, 233.

exegetical works. This reading will revise a common view that Bede had very little interest in the natural world in the *HE*<sup>137</sup> and that for him, specific places were “the bare platforms on which the human drama takes place.”<sup>138</sup>

The opening section begins with a description of Britain’s position relative to the rest of the known world. Here, Bede followed the examples of Pliny (d. 79), Orosius and Gildas, but soon shifted to his own voice to describe Britain’s flora and fauna. For these features Bede relied on Solinus’ third-century *De mirabilibus mundi* and Gildas’ *De excidio* to describe Britain’s springs, ores, and cities, and finished the section by recycling Pliny, Solinus and Isidore on Britain’s latitudinal position.<sup>139</sup> Despite earlier scholarly consensus that Bede was making no real interventions in *HE* 1.1, Merrills has pointed out that “verbatim citation accounts for little more than one-tenth of the chapter as a whole.”<sup>140</sup>

**1. Crops and Trees.** Bede introduced Britain as an “island [which] is rich in crops and in trees, and has good pasturage for cattle and beasts of burden.”<sup>141</sup> This echoes

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<sup>137</sup> Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 129: “In the narrative of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, however, Bede shows little interest in the world of nature, in setting, topography or weather. . . . [as in his hagiographic works] the *Historia Ecclesiastica* focuses on the action of the narrative, not on setting.”

<sup>138</sup> Calvin Kendall, “Imitation,” 178. For Kendall, “spatial connections between places are lacking” in Bede’s *HE* as well.

<sup>139</sup> For a full assessment of these sources, I am following Merrills, *History and Geography*, 234-39 and 249-60.

<sup>140</sup> Merrills, *History and Geography*, 250.

<sup>141</sup> *HE* 1.1, 14-15: “Opima frugibus atque arboribus insule, et alendis apta pecoribus ac iumentis.”

Tacitus description of *Germania* as a land “rich in fruit-bearing trees, fertile for grain.”<sup>142</sup>

Jerome also used similar phrasing in his commentary on Ecclesiastes as imagery for the church’s saints and scholars, who were like different fruits from the tree of wisdom.<sup>143</sup>

From the outset of the *HE*, Britain’s landscape was given a clear shape—not just isolated island at the ends of the earth. Trees and woodlands repeatedly appear in Bede’s exegetical works. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Bede described the apple tree as “pleasing in its appearance, smell, and taste is accustomed to excel among the trees of the woods, so is the God-man justly deemed superior to all the saints who are pure human beings.”<sup>144</sup> God himself was like a tree, “because as a shady tree he shelters us from the heat of a persecuting world, and as an unfading apple tree he refreshes us with heavenly sweetness.”<sup>145</sup> An audience attuned to Bede’s exegetical associations might also think of the merits of setim or acacia wood, the incorruptible material with which the Ark of the Covenant was fashioned.<sup>146</sup> Both in his commentary *In Ezram* and his homilies, Bede distinguished between good and bad fruits as an index of the religious life.<sup>147</sup> Bede was encouraging his audience in these cases to think of God and his chosen people as trees

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<sup>142</sup> Tacitus, *Germania* 5.1 in *De origine et situ Germanorum liber*, ed. Alf Önnersfors (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1983), 4: “satis ferax, frugiferarum arborum impatiens, pecorum fecunda.”

<sup>143</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten* 2.5, *CCSL* 72, 261.

<sup>144</sup> *In Cant.* 1.2.65-69, *CCSL* 119B, 316: “Sicut ergo malum quod et uisu et odore et gustu gratum est lignis solet antecellere siluestribus sic homo Deus omnibus qui puri homines sunt sanctis iure praecellit meritum que eorum qui per gratiam filii Dei sunt potentia eius qui per naturam est filius transcendit.” I am using the translation of Arthur Holder, *On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 66. Hereafter “Holder.”

<sup>145</sup> *In Cant.* 1.2.105-9, *CCSL* 119B, 316; Holder, 66: “Iure enim omnibus Dei filiis filius praefertur unicus qui nos sicut arbor umbrosa ab aestu mundi persequentis protegit sicut malum immarcescibile caelesti suauitate reficit.”

<sup>146</sup> *De Tab.* 1.230-63, *CCSL* 119A, 11; *De Templ.* 1.831-48, *CCSL* 199A, 167-68.

<sup>147</sup> *Hom.* 2.25.53, *CCSL* 122, 323.

with specific qualities of fruitfulness and incorruptibility (like Christ's body). Trees and their products were major images in Bede's descriptive lexicon. Bede described Britain's trees, a consistent image of God's design and choice for the faithful.

Bede sharpened the image of fruitful trees in his assessment of the Creation in his commentary *In Genesim*:

Patet ex his Dei uerbis quod uerno tempore mundi est perfectus ornatus, in hoc enim solent herbae uirentes apparere in terra et ligna pomis onustari. Simulque notandum quod non prima herbarum arborumque germina de semine, sed prodire de terra; nam ad unam conditoris iussionem terra, quae arida apparebat, repente herbis compta et nemoribus est uestita florentibus, atque haec continuo sui quaeque generis poma ex sese ac semina produxerunt.<sup>148</sup>

It is clear from these words of God that the adornment of the world was accomplished in springtime, for that is the time when green plants usually appear on the earth and trees are usually loaded with fruits. Likewise, it should be noted that the first shoots of the plants and the trees did not appear from seed, but from the earth. For at the one command of the Creator, the earth, which appeared as dry land, was suddenly adorned with plants and clothed with blossoming groves, and each of these immediately produced fruits and seeds of its own kind from itself.<sup>149</sup>

The overriding theme of *HE* 1.1 was a description of Britain's origins. While Bede was not describing the "adornment of the world (*ornatus mundi*)" in the *Historia*, this example from his commentary *In Genesim* indicated Bede's sensitivity to describing the natural world and its origins. In *In Genesim*, Bede explained the spontaneity of Creation, while in *HE* 1.1 he described the ways in which Britain's flora perpetuated themselves.

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<sup>148</sup> *In Gen.* 1.1.11-13.386-94, *CCSL* 118A, 14.

<sup>149</sup> Trans. Kendall, 79-80.

**2. Pastures and Vines.** Next, Bede described “vines [springing forth] in certain districts, and plenty of both land- and waterfowl of various kinds.”<sup>150</sup> Bede was perhaps echoing Zech. 9.17: “For what is the good thing of him, and what is his beautiful thing, but the corn of the elect, and wine springing forth virgins (*vinum germinans virgines*)?”<sup>151</sup> In his commentary *In Ezram*, Bede had described the architects of Jerusalem’s new walls as the sowers of “crops, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive.”<sup>152</sup> Vines required more specialized maintenance than most woodland, so it made sense for Bede to link them with the construction of walls. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Bede likewise compared the vine with natural strength: the bridegroom is like a vine that “first thrusts down a living root, and then, since it is of a nature to be easily bent and frail, it touches whatever it takes hold of with its tendrils” and becomes stronger in growth.<sup>153</sup> Vines’ role in the natural world was to produce fruit

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<sup>150</sup> *HE* 1.1, 14-15: “uineas etiam quibusdam in locis germinans, sed et auium ferax terra marique generis diuersi.”

<sup>151</sup> The *Nova Vulgata* reads, “Quid enim bonum eius est, et quid pulchrum eius! Frumentum succrescere facit iuvenes, et mustum virgines,” while the *Vulgata Clementina* contains the translation Bede may have used: “Quid enim bonum ejus est, et quid pulchrum ejus, nisi frumentum electorum, et vinum germinans virgines?” Jerome quoted the passage in his exegetical *Commentarius in Zachariam* 2.9, *CCSL* 76A, 469: “quid enim bonum eius est, et quid pulchrum eius, nisi frumentum electorum, et uinum germinans uirgines? . . . ceterum nos frumentum electorum, siue iuuenum, et uinum germinans uirgines, siue uinum boni odoris ad uirgines, intellegimus dominum saluatorem, qui loquitur in euangelio: nisi granum tritici cadens in terram, mortuum fuerit, ipsum solum permanet; sin autem moriatur, maiores fructus affert.”

<sup>152</sup> *In Ezr.* 2.385-86, *CCSL* 119A, 297: “aduenit architectis eisdem benedictio frugum uineae fici malogranati et oliuae.” I am using the translation of Scott DeGregorio, *On Ezra and Nehemiah* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 92. Hereafter “DeGregorio.”

<sup>153</sup> *In Cant.* 5.8.11.590-93, referencing *Cant.* 8.11, trans. Holder, 242: “primum uiuam defigit radicem deinde quia naturae flexibilis et caducae est quasi brachiis quibusdam ita clauiculis quicquid comprehenderit stringit his que se erigit et attollit.” Here Bede cited Ambrose, *Hexameron*, *CSEL* 32, 1.92-94.

through intense human labor and thereby gradually gain strength, an ideal metaphor for England's conversion.

**3. Birds and Waterfowl.** Birds were the first fauna Bede mentioned. They were also among the first animals generated on the fifth day of Creation along with fish. These categories are well represented in Bede's exegetical works. When man was created on the sixth day, Bede reminded his audience that "now it appears more clearly why it was said of the created green plants and trees, fish and birds, and terrestrial animals that they were made separately according to their classes and kinds. For the future creation was foreseen of him who would not only be suited to his own kind in likeness and appearance, but would also be made in the image and likeness of his Creator."<sup>154</sup> Here Bede mentioned birds as part of Creation's classification system to impose order on disorder. As further evidence of man's dominion over creation, Bede also noted that in hagiographic works, birds often obey the commands of saints.<sup>155</sup> Of that dominion, Bede clarified that "we read not only that birds have rendered obedience to saints humbly serving God, but also that they have been spared from the yawning jaws of wild beasts, and that the poison of serpents has been unable to harm them."<sup>156</sup> Ready examples emerge from Bede's own *Vita Cuthberti*, in which an eagle provided Cuthbert and his companions with food, and

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<sup>154</sup> *In Gen.* 1.1.721-26, trans. Kendall, 89: "Nunc apparet euidentius quare de creatis herbis et arboribus, piscibus et uolatilibus, terrestribus quoque animantibus dictum sit, ut fierent singula iuxta genus et species suas. Praeuidebatur enim futura eius creatio qui non solum suo generi similitudine congrueret et specie sed etiam ad imaginem sui creatoris ac similitudinem fieret."

<sup>155</sup> *In Gen.* 1.1.879-92.

<sup>156</sup> *In Gen.* 1.1.888-92, trans. Kendall, 94: "Denique testimonium primae creationis legimus uiris sanctis atque humiliter deo seruientibus et aues obsequium praeuisse, et rictus cessisse bestiarum et uenenum nocere non potuisse serpentium."



later the saint rebuked ravens pilfering straw from the roof of his hut.<sup>157</sup> The story makes Cuthbert's saintly "companionship of animals" clear.<sup>158</sup> The power of the saint could regain the dominion over creation that humankind lost in Eden. Bede thus understood birds to be a measure of God's creative power, and Britain boasted plenty of them.

Later in the *Historia*, the sparrow would be a metaphor for the instability of human life. Debating with his court on the merits of converting to Christianity, a thegn of Edwin of Northumbria (d. c. 633) described human uncertainty in vivid terms:

Talis . . . mihi uidetur, rex, uita hominum praesens in terris, ad conparationem eius quod nobis incertum est temporis, quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio et calido effecto cenaculo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus hiemalium pluuiarum uel niuium, adueniens unus passerum domum citissime peruolauerit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens mox per aliud exierit, ipso quidem tempore quo intus est hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed tamen peruissimo spatio serenitatis ad momentum excurso, mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens tuis oculis elabatur. Ita hae uita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus.

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 ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is 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 the few moments it is inside,

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<sup>157</sup> *V. Cuth.* 12, 194-97.

<sup>158</sup> Dominic Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), 44-46, who has demonstrated the Gregorian influence on both the anonymous and Bede's *vitae* of Cuthbert, at 45: "Gregory's model of the saint and animal story thus bequeathed a strict structure for the genre to later centuries. Firstly, Gregory defined saint and animal topoi around the notion of control of nature, as had Sulpicius Severus. Secondly, for example with Benedict's crow, Gregory forced the anchoritic legends of the 'companionship of animals' topos into the model of sanctity for the western abbot. An ambivalent role for the theme can also be found in Bede's account of Saint Cuthbert, and it is very likely that the English hagiographer was working with Gregory's models in mind."

the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment 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.<sup>159</sup>

While not an exegetical explanation, Bede's audience here will have been reminded of alternate themes of Britain's bounty and life's inevitable tenuousness. "The threatening image" of the storm, Kendall has noted, "is drawn from the natural world; the comforting image from the social."<sup>160</sup> The sparrow bridged those worlds. The sparrow image recalled Bede's assessment of Britain in *HE* 1.1 as a measure of Britain's beauty and abundance. The conversion of Northumbria was a crucial moment in the *Historia*; to express this, Bede was careful to invoke an explanation engaging the natural world and human defenses against it. Birds in *HE* 1.1 were indicative of Britain's favor with God. They were also a reminder of human need for that favor.

**4. Rivers and Fish.** Britain was also "remarkable too for its rivers, which abound in fish, particularly salmon and eels, and for copious springs. Seals as well as dolphins are frequently captured and even whales; besides these there are various kinds of shellfish, among which are mussels, and enclosed in these there are often found excellent pearls of every colour, red and purple, violet and green, but mostly white. There is also a great abundance of whelks, from which a scarlet-coloured dye is made."<sup>161</sup> Rivers in Bede's

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<sup>159</sup> *HE* 2.13, 182-85.

<sup>160</sup> Kendall, "Imitation," 179.

<sup>161</sup> *HE* 1.1, 14-15: "fluuiis quoque multum priscos ac fontibus praeclara copiosis; et quidem praecipue issicio abundant et anguilla. Capiuntur autem saepissime et uituli marini et delfines nec non et ballenae, exceptis uariorum generibus concyliorum, in quibus sunt et musculae, quibus inclusam saepe margaritam omnis quidem coloris optimam inueniunt, id est et rubicundi et purpurei et hyacinthine et prasini sed maxime candidi. Sunt et cochleae satis superque abundantes, quibus tincture coccinei coloris conficitur."

exegetical explanations also teemed with creatures. For example, the sorting of good and bad fish at the Fish Gate in Jerusalem's new walls represented the saved and the damned.<sup>162</sup> Britain's mussels produce pearls; likewise, Bede had called Christ the *margarita singularis* in his commentary on Apocalypse.<sup>163</sup> Scarlet dye likewise turns up a significant number of exegetical references in the context of curtains for the Temple.<sup>164</sup> Rivers, too, have a dense patristic tradition: as a metaphor for the journey from birth to death, the torrents of temptation,<sup>165</sup> the fountains of wisdom<sup>166</sup> and the irrigation of the world by the Holy Spirit.<sup>167</sup> Readers of Bede's exegesis and history would have recognized the distinctly monastic context of Britain's rivers as well. In the *HE* Bede consistently described the topography of monastic foundations, many of which featured

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<sup>162</sup> See *In Ezr.* 3.270-98, *CCSL* 119A, 345-46, referencing Neh. 3.3. Compare this with Matt. 13.47-49: "Again the kingdom of heaven is like to a net cast into the sea, and gathering together of all kind of fishes. Which, when it was filled, they drew out, and sitting by the shore, they chose out the good into vessels, but the bad they cast forth. So shall it be at the end of the world . . . (*Iterum simile est regnum caelorum sagenae missae in mare et ex omni genere congreganti; quam, cum impleta esset, educentes secus litus et sedentes collegerunt bonos in vasa, malos autem foras miserunt. Sic erit in consummatione saeculi . . .*)"

<sup>163</sup> *Apoc.* 3.37.381, *CCSL* 121A, 559, referencing Apoc. 21.21.

<sup>164</sup> Bede, *De locis sanctis* 9.1-24, *CCSL* 175, 251-52; *De Tab.* 3.214-80, *CCSL* 119A, 98-100. Compare this with II Reg. 2.21: "He went out to the spring of the waters, and cast the salt into it, and said: Thus saith the Lord: I have healed these waters, and there shall be no more in them death or barrenness (*egressus ad fontem aquarum misit in eum sal et ait: "Haec dicit Dominus: Sanavi aquas has, et non erit ultra in eis mors neque abortium*)."

<sup>165</sup> Jerome, *Tractatus de Psalmo CVIII*, *CCSL* 78, 2: 227-230; and *Tractatus de Psalmo CXLIII* 2, *CCSL* 78, 316; Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV*, 10.6, *CCSL* 36, 103-4; Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, *In Psalmum LXXIII* 18, *CCSL* 39, 1016-17; and *In Psalmum LVII* 16, *CCSL* 39, 721-722; Bede, *In canticum Abacuc* 19, *CCSL* 119B, 393.

<sup>166</sup> Jerome, *Tractatus de Psalmo LXXVII* 2, *CCSL* 78, 2: 73; Ambrose, *De Paradiso* 3.13-18, *CSEL* 32, 1: 272, especially line 14; *idem.*, *Explanatio Psalmorum XII*, Ps. 35:21, *CSEL* 64, 64-65; and Ps. 45:12, *CSEL* 64, 337-38, at line 4; Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, 2.49.76, *CCSL* 143, 105; *ibid.*, 15.16.20, *CCSL* 143A, 760-61.

<sup>167</sup> Jerome, *Tractatus de Psalmo I*, 3.132-82, *CCSL* 78, 7-9.

riverine locations.<sup>168</sup> Those environments were not only practical for trade and travel, but they also had exegetical implications for the unity of the church. Such natural features were the reference points by which Bede explained both Britain and Scripture.

This unity was evident in Bede's exegetical readings of springs: "the land possesses salt springs and warm springs and from them flow rivers which supply hot baths, suitable for all ages and both sexes, in separate places and adapted to the needs of each."<sup>169</sup> Here Bede appears to have derived his material from no known textual model, but was writing from his own knowledge of the island: salt springs were indeed in use from Roman times up to his own lifetime.<sup>170</sup> This is one clear case in which Bede contrived a relationship between his own conception of Britain's physical landscape and an exegetical interpretation of it. In both his treatise *De locis sanctis* ("On the Holy Places" of the Holy Land) and his commentary on Nehemiah, Bede referred to the Gate of the Spring in Jerusalem's walls through which the spring of Siloam flowed.<sup>171</sup> Springs also prompted Bede to observe that "waters are said to be 'living' when they flow eternally from an underground spring, doubtless in distinction from those that are either

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<sup>168</sup> See e.g. *HE* 3.22, 4.6, 4.27, 4.32, and 5.21.

<sup>169</sup> *HE* 1.1, 14-15: "cuius rubor pulcherrimus nullo umquam solis ardore, nulla ualet pluuiarum iniuria salinarum, habet et fontes calidos, et ex eis fluuios balnearum calidarum omni aetati et sexui per distincta loca iuxta suum cuique modum accommodos."

<sup>170</sup> On the exploitation of these springs, see Elizabeth Berry, "Medieval Droitwich and the Salt Trade," in *Salt: The Study of an Ancient Industry*, ed. Kay de Brisay and K.A. Evans (Colchester: Colchester Archaeological Group, 1975), 76-80; Della Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 122-24; Beatrice Hopkinson, *Salt and the Domesday Salinae at Droitwich, AD 674 to 1690: A Quantitative Analysis* (Stroud: Droitwich Brine Springs and Archaeological Trust, 1994); and Merrills, *History and Geography*, 252.

<sup>171</sup> *In Ezr.* 3.419-29, *CCSL* 119A, 349, referencing Neh. 3.15; compare this with Bede, *De locis sanctis* 2.62-63.

collected in cisterns or pools.”<sup>172</sup> The idea of a subterranean network of waterways parallels with Bede’s theory on the four rivers of Paradise (Phison, Gehon, Tigris and Euphrates) as connected with the rest of the earth.<sup>173</sup> This concept is found in Augustine’s works, who believed that the four rivers originating in Paradise were interconnected underground.<sup>174</sup> Bede’s own interpretation was that God “wished to have some likeness in our world of that fatherland for the possession of which we were created in our first parent, in order to urge us through a nearby example to deserve its restoration—and chiefly through that river which is known to emanate from paradise.”<sup>175</sup> In Bede’s hands, rivers were constant reminders of correct behavior. Such speculation also connected Britain with the rest of the known world.

**5. Minerals.** Bede concluded his general description of Britain’s resources with an observation that “the land also has rich veins of metal, copper, iron, lead, and silver. It produces a great deal of excellent jet, which is glossy black and burns when put into the fire and, when kindled, it drives away serpents; when it is warmed by rubbing it attracts whatever is applied to it, just as amber does.”<sup>176</sup> Precious metals receive substantial

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<sup>172</sup> *In Cant.* 3.4.15.942-44, referencing *Cant.* 4.12-15, trans. Holder, 136: “Aquae etenim uiuentes solent appellari quae de uena fontana aeternaliter manant ad distinctionem nomirum illarum quae uel copia pluuiarum in cisternis colliguntur aut stagnis.”

<sup>173</sup> *In Gen.* I: 1.2.1520-91, *CCSL* 118A, 48-50.

<sup>174</sup> Augustine *De Genesi ad litteram* 8.7, *CSEL* 28.1.242. Compare this with Augustine’s view that the spring in Eden provided the source for the world’s waters in *De Genesi ad litteram* 5.10, *CSEL* 28.1.153-54.

<sup>175</sup> *In Gen.* 1.2.1508, trans. Kendall, 113-14: “Et prouida dispositione dominus ac conditor rerum in nostro orbe uoluit habere similitudinem nonnullam patriae illius ad quam possidendam in primo parente creati sumus, ut ad promerendum eius reditum de uicino nos admoneret exemplo—maxime et flumine illo quod de paradiso constat emanare.”

<sup>176</sup> *HE* 1.1, 15-17: “Quae etiam uenis metallorum, aeris ferri plumbi et argenti, fecunda gignit et lapidem gagatem plurimum optimumque; est autem nigrogemmeus, et ardens

attention in Bede's exegetical works unsurprisingly, given their centrality to the construction of both the Tabernacle and the Temple.<sup>177</sup> With the exception of jet's power over snakes,<sup>178</sup> the description is borrowed from Solinus.<sup>179</sup> Bede's fixation on jet (*nigrogemmeus*) is peculiar, however, given his tendency merely to list resources.<sup>180</sup> As Merrills has pointed out, the stag (*cervus*) and roe deer (*caprea*) are the only animals specifically mentioned in the geographic section, and they are also identified as natural enemies of serpents by commentators including Pliny, Solinus and Isidore.<sup>181</sup> The overarching point seems to be that the islands were in a natural balance from the outset of known history. Their landscapes were inherently holy, a state Bede noted when he described how Gregory the Great punned that the Angles of Britain must be angels (*Non Angli sed Angeli*) even before their conversion.<sup>182</sup> By emphasizing Britain's natural resources Bede demonstrated both an awareness of Britain's environment and special status. It may be true that "the historian here engaged in some harmless exaggeration in an effort to lend colour to his account . . . (and) as a simple, if inaccurate refutation of a common classical denigration of his homeland."<sup>183</sup> In his own voice, he argued for

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igni admotus, incensus serpentes fugat adtritu calefactus adplicita detinet aequae ut sucinum."

<sup>177</sup> See *De Templ.* 1.1064-1161, CCSL 119A, 172-74; *De Templ.* 1.1181-1267, CCSL 119A, 176-78; and *De Tab.* 2.1015-79, CCSL 119A, 67-69.

<sup>178</sup> Isidore, *Etym.* 16.4.4.

<sup>179</sup> Solinus, *De mirabilibus mundi* 22.11.

<sup>180</sup> Anglo-Saxons mined jet around Whitby, an activity of which Bede must have been aware: see David Hinton, "Raw Materials: Sources and Demand," in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. Helena Hamerow, David Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 423-39, at 423 and 434.

<sup>181</sup> Merrills, *History and Geography*, 265.

<sup>182</sup> *HE* 2.1.

<sup>183</sup> Merrills, *History and Geography*, 265.

Britain's crucial role relative to the rest of the world in the history of salvation. Britain's natural resources were a measure of that role.

### **Hagiography and Landscapes of Conversion: Bede on Alban, Cedd and Cuthbert**

Bede manipulated and intensified the meanings of Britain's natural resources to establish a strident claim in the *Historia*: through a specific description of the natural world susceptible to exegetical associations, Bede made the periphery of the known world central and argued for its importance to sacred history. Britain's holy men and women, however, made that history. This discussion will focus on the activities of two key figures in the *HE*, Alban (d. c. 300), Roman Britain's first martyr, and Cedd (d. 664), bishop of the East Saxons, before shifting focus to one of Bede's major hagiographic works, the prose *Vita Cuthberti* or "Life of Cuthbert" of Lindisfarne (d. 687). Through their interactions with the natural world, the holiness of martyrs and monks such as Alban and Cedd were shaped. In such ways, the story of Britain's conversion was embedded in specific localities.

### ***Bede, Alban and a Lexicon of Holiness***

Conversion was the subject of the main narrative in Bede's *HE*.<sup>184</sup> "Notoriously," Donald Bullough observed, "the evangelization of the English was accomplished without martyrs."<sup>185</sup> Bede, however, had "the desire or attempt to give the cachet of martyrdom to

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<sup>184</sup> For the importance of education to conversion processes, I am following Alan Thacker, "Bede and the Ordering of Understanding," in *Innovation and Tradition*, ed. DeGregorio, 37-64.

<sup>185</sup> Bullough, "Hagiography as Patriotism," 341.

kings who died fighting in the name of the faith.”<sup>186</sup> Bede’s account of the death of Alban was one exception to the rule of evangelism without martyrs. As a third-century martyr of Roman Britain, Alban’s case serves as an ideal example of an early stage of the conversion process. Alban was brought before the local judge (*iudex*), to whom he declared that he had become a Christian. He was sentenced to death. On the way to the execution site,

peruenit ad flumen quod muro et harena, ubi feriendus erat, meatu rapidissimo diuidebatur . . . laetus gratia decentissima quingentis fere passibus ab harena situs est, uariis herbarum floribus depictus, immo usquequaque uestitus; in quo nihil repente arduum, nihil praeceps, nihil abruptum, quem lateribus longe lateque deductum in modum aequoris Natura conplanat, dignum uidelicet eum pro insita sibi specie uenustatis iam olim reddins, qui beati martyris cruore dicaretur.

He came to a rapid river whose stream ran between the town wall and the arena where he was to suffer . . . This hill (chosen for the execution) lay about five hundred paces from the arena, and, as was fitting, it was fair, shining and beautiful, adorned, indeed clothed on all sides with wild flowers of every kind; nowhere was it steep and precipitous or sheer because Nature had provided it with wide, long-sloping sides stretching smoothly down to the level of the plain. In fact its natural beauty had long fitted it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr.<sup>187</sup>

Bede’s description of Verulamium’s outskirts was central to the narrative. The pleasantness of the place immediately calls to mind Bede’s opening description of Britain’s natural features and resources. Its beauty and beneficial aspects mirrored the holiness revealed in it once Alban died. Alban’s hill was a *locus amoenus*<sup>188</sup> anticipating his departure for heaven: “In fact,” Bede insisted, “its natural beauty *had long fitted it as*

<sup>186</sup> Bullough, “Hagiography as Patriotism,” 341.

<sup>187</sup> *HE* 1.7, 30-33.

<sup>188</sup> The classic description of this phenomenon is that of Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 183-202. See Introduction, 8 and 47.



*a place to be hallowed* by the blood of a blessed martyr.” Later in the *HE*, Bede’s description of the vision of Drythelm helps contextualize his images of Alban’s pleasant place of martyrdom. According to Bede, Drythelm was an ordinary man who died and was led through heavenly and hellish landscapes by a shining figure. In the heavenly place, Drythelm was brought through “a very broad and pleasant plain, full of such a fragrance of growing flowers.”<sup>189</sup> For both Alban and Drythelm, pleasant sensory stimulation indicated the special qualities of the places they visited. In Alban’s case the place of martyrdom was paradisiacal, following a long tradition of linking Paradise with flowers.<sup>190</sup> Not only this, but as Dominic Janes has noted, the “late Antique enthusiasm for flowers and bright colours was for the massed effect of coruscating brilliance that dazzled the eye as it did the mind with associations of power, abundance and goodness.”<sup>191</sup> Patricia Miller has added a late antique ekphrastic tradition to images such as these, one that combined images of flowers and blood to express death and regeneration.<sup>192</sup> As Drythelm’s vision makes clear, flowers and fragrance in particular had intensified Bede’s description; Bede vividly depicted the flower-decked hill at Verulamium before describing the spilling of Alban’s “hallowed blood” on it.

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<sup>189</sup> *HE* 5.12, 488-89: “Et ecce ibi campus erat latissimus ac laetissimus, tantaque flagrantia uernantium flosculorum plenus.”

<sup>190</sup> See Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, translated by Matthew O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), 11-14. For the image of flowery crowns, see above, 183.

<sup>191</sup> Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 151.

<sup>192</sup> Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 73-77, at 73-74: “The Christian addition of blood to the flower aesthetic just described was itself indebted to a rich cultural tradition in which flowers with a ‘bloody’ hue were associated with death and rebirth.

Anticipating paradise, the natural world near Verulamium also indicated that the hill was a place fit for Alban's martyrdom.

Bede's description of the hill outside Verulamium takes on the qualities of a *locus amoenus*, but by applying his own lexicon of holiness to it, he argued for the hill's holiness beyond pleasantness. Æthelwulf, as we have seen, gave his landscapes a diversity of meaning beyond mere *amoenitas*: likewise, in Bede's text the hill was actively "adorned (*depictus*)" and "clothed (*vestitus*)" with vegetation. Bede generally preferred *orno* or *adorno* to express decoration in his other works, but *depictus*—which can variously mean "painted," "decorated" or "depicted"—has resonances elsewhere in his oeuvre. In *De tabernaculo*, Bede had described the curtains of the Tabernacle as "embroidered (*erant depictae*) with one and the same handiwork and colours . . . because all the worshipers in both testaments believed in one and the same God."<sup>193</sup> And later in the *HE* Bede describes the *tabula depicta* with images of Christ during Augustine's initial meeting with Æthelberht.<sup>194</sup> *Depictus* was a decorative term in Bede's lexicon of holiness. He thus gave decorative treatment to the hill on which Alban died similar to that of the Tabernacle and the sacred objects of conversion. In Bede's description, the cult of martyrs collapsed time and revealed scripture in the landscape.

Bede's use of *vestis* ("clothing") or *vestitus* ("clothed") is much more prolific. It occurs six times in his commentary on Genesis alone, nearly always in the context of

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<sup>193</sup> *De Tab.* 2.243-49, *CCSL* 119A, 48, trans. Holder, 52: "Et quidem omnes cortinae unius operis eisdem que erant depictae coloribus sed quinae sibimet mutuo coniunctae quia omnes utriusque testamenti cultores in unum eundem que deum credebant unius eiusdem que pietatis et caritatis operibus seruiebant sed in celebratione sacramentorum suas uterque populus discretim partes agebat."

<sup>194</sup> *HE* 1.25, 74-75.

vegetation.<sup>195</sup> In *De Tabernaculo*, *De Templum* and *In primam partem Samuelis*, Bede deployed the term equally for being clothed in virtues and the physical decoration of structures.<sup>196</sup> The bride of Christ in the commentary on the Song of Songs is consistently *vestita* in finery to match her virtue.<sup>197</sup> By employing a specific vocabulary of creation and ornamentation, Bede made claims of holiness for Alban's place of martyrdom and revealed a crucial method of claiming a place as well as a distinct conception of the natural world within that scheme.

### ***Gregory the Great's Conversion Strategies in the Epistola ad Mellitum***

Bede's depiction of Alban was shaped by his descriptions of the landscape around Verulamium, as well as its symbolic intensity. To understand how Bede thought with a landscape, it is illuminating to read Gregory the Great's *Epistola ad Mellitum* (the "Letter to Mellitus") alongside Bede's landscape descriptions. The *Epistola*, whose full form Bede included in *HE* 1.30, was addressed to the abbot Mellitus, one of the second wave of missionaries sent to Kent by Gregory around 601. In it, Gregory set out his strategy for the conversion of the *gens Anglorum* in practical terms to the missionary Mellitus (d. 624), who arrived in Kent in the second wave of missionary activity just a few years after initial contact in 597.

Gregory advised Mellitus in the summer of 601 not to destroy pagan temples but only the idols within them. It is clear from the letter that Gregory thought of Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>195</sup> See e.g. *In Gen.* 1.1.389, 1.1.413, 1.2.1124, 1.2.1317; and 2.8.1895.

<sup>196</sup> See, for just a few examples, *De Tab.* 2.1177, 2.1720, 2.1895, and 3.666, 3.1350; *De Templ.* 1.899, 1.1067, 1.1103; *In Sam.* 3.18.1153, 3.22.3069, 4.25.1236.

<sup>197</sup> See e.g. *In Cant.* 3.4.843, 4.5.780, 5.7.458.

England around the year 600 in terms of its built spaces and temples. As Robert Markus has shown, Gregory's sense of "scriptural spirituality"<sup>198</sup> led him to remain flexible in his conversion strategies.<sup>199</sup> Instead of demolishing pagan temples and shrines, Gregory advised Mellitus to sprinkle them with consecrated water, build new altars with relics in the well-built shrines, since "(w)hen this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with."<sup>200</sup> The order to sprinkle the temples with water resonates with later church dedication rites, and is one of the few actions Gregory prescribed for such an

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<sup>198</sup> Robert Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39: "The value of the secular disciplines is upheld, but in unambiguous subordination to scriptural learning, and as a means of deepening it; and only to the extent that they promote scriptural understanding . . . [Gregory's] way of representing the relevance of secular learning to a scriptural spirituality had much in common with the sacred pragmatism" of Cassiodorus and Augustine.

<sup>199</sup> Robert Markus, "Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy," *Studies in Church History* 6 (1970): 29-38; *idem*, *Gregory the Great*, 183-84: "All his assumptions and a long tradition of thought about the duties of Christian rulers had combined to suggest Gregory's first response to the situation in England as he understood it: coercion by a Christian ruler . . . That he did so is powerful testimony to Gregory's pastoral flexibility, and constitutes a dramatic change of direction in papal missionary strategy." The same "qualities of mind" of rejecting strict scriptural legal interpretations of, for example, sexual morality emerge from Gregory's *Liber responsionum* to Augustine in *HE* 1.27: "In his answers Gregory rejects a literal and legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament sexual taboos in favour of a more liberal, spiritual, interpretation." See also *idem*, "Gregory the Great's Pagans," in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23-34; and the similar findings of Adalbert de Vogüé, "Les vues de Grégoire le Grande sur l'action missionnaire en Angleterre," in *L'Eglise et la mission au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle: La mission d'Augustin de Cantorbéry et les églises de Gaule sous l'impulsion de Grégoire le Grand*, ed. Christophe de Dreuille (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2001), 55-64.

<sup>200</sup> *HE* 1.30, 106-7: "dum gens ipsa eadem fana sua non uidet destrui, de corde errorem deponat, et Deum uerum cognoscens ac adorans, ad loca quae consueuit familiarius concurrat."

event.<sup>201</sup> Not much, but some, evidence exists for the use of church dedication rites in earlier Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>202</sup> In Gregory's description of consecration, however, the installation of relics was absent, perhaps because it was a secondary concern in so early a phase of missionary activity.<sup>203</sup> Gregory was describing basic strategies<sup>204</sup> of claiming places, rather than of blessing them. To illustrate this, Gregory also provided Mellitus with strategies for recalibrating pagan feast days. When a Christian feast day arrives, Gregory advised, let the recently-converted people continue slaughtering animals in their customary way, but "let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines, and let them celebrate the

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<sup>201</sup> See, for example, the findings of Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 212-56, especially 215-19. More generally I have consulted Brian Repsher, *The Rite of Church Dedication in the Early Medieval Era* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 44-64 for several examples of aspersion and purification of new churches in Carolingian Francia, which I discuss below in Chapter 3, 449-50.

<sup>202</sup> For one, Henry Mayr-Harting argued that a Gallican rite was used by Wilfrid for the dedication of the church at Ripon in the 670s: *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 180-81. Michel Andrieu showed that two main types of dedication ritual survive from the early medieval period: the "Roman" rite, generally focused on the installation of relics; and the "Gallican" rite, which could be a far more elaborate affair: *idem, Les Ordines romani du haut Moyen Age*, 5 vols. (Louvain: Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense, 1956), IV: 311-94. For a discussion of the few instances of church dedication rites being used in early Anglo-Saxon England, I am following Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 216-18, who showed that only incomplete depictions for dedication rituals were used and thus the conventional division between "Roman" and "Gallican" rites cannot be made to apply.

<sup>203</sup> The deposition of relics was only a small component of the surviving *Ordines* for church dedication, however: Louis Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution. A Study of the Latin Liturgy up to the Time of Charlemagne*, translated by M.L. McClure (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1903), 403-18.

<sup>204</sup> Gittos has recently shown that Gregory's advice may have been a selective deployment of more elaborate Roman rites: *Sacred Places*, 216-17.

solemnity with religious feasts. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God.”<sup>205</sup>

From Gregory’s perspective, pagan shrines and temples were part of the larger landscape with which Mellitus dealt. In the *Epistola*, the natural world (the branches from which they made huts) intersected with the built one (converted temples). By referring to them as *tabernacula*, Gregory (and Bede, by including the *Epistola*) argued for the huts’ special status as mirrors of the Hebrew Tabernacle.<sup>206</sup> Instead of cedar carefully chosen to their construction, however, Gregory advised Mellitus to harvest local materials—specifically, the “branches of trees (*ramis arborum*),” a phrase with a rich patristic tradition. Although the scriptural sources do not use the phrase *ramis arborum*, Augustine deployed it in a sermon describing God’s provision of a ram for Abraham to prevent him sacrificing his son Isaac: he found the ram in a thicket, amongst the “branches of trees (*ramis arborum*).”<sup>207</sup> Commenting on Christ’s parable from Matt. 13 of seed sown on fertile and barren ground, Hilary of Poitiers described the saints in heaven as birds in the “branches of a tree (*ramis arboris*).”<sup>208</sup> In his *Vita Pauli*, Jerome described how Paul settled “among the branches of a tree (*in ramo arboris*)” and was, like Elijah, brought food by a raven.<sup>209</sup> For Cassiodorus the image and similar ones drawn from nature were

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<sup>205</sup> *HE* 1.30, 108-9: “tabernacula sibi circa easdem ecclesias, quae ex fanis commutatae sunt, de ramis arborum faciant, et religiosis conuiuiis sollemnitatem celebrent, nec diabolo iam animalia immolent, et ad laudens Dei in esu suo animalia occidant et donatori omnium de satietate sua gratias referant.”

<sup>206</sup> On the exegetical language Bede used to describe the Tabernacle’s holiness, see above, 236 and 240-41.

<sup>207</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 111.22, *CCSL* 41, 113.

<sup>208</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentarius in Matthaeum* 13.4, in the standard edition of Jean Doignon, *Sources chrétiennes* 254 (Paris: Editions du Cerf 1978), 298.

<sup>209</sup> Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 10, *PL* 23: col. 25.

useful to think with: the interpretations of the Psalms “are found clearly in the excellence of sense, not in the pronunciation of words: in this way we understand [that there is] wine in vines, harvest in the seed, foliage in roots, fruit in branches, and trees in a sense in nuts.”<sup>210</sup> Bede himself used the phrase in his exegetical interpretation of Christ’s *adventus* into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; the people laid down “branches of trees (*rami arborum*)” in the road to greet Christ, which symbolized the martyrs and fathers of the Church.<sup>211</sup> The phrase thus had rich, diverse meanings by the time Bede included it in the *HE* to describe Gregory’s conversion strategies.

On a practical level in the *HE*, Bede also implied that the erection of *tabernacula* was a festival custom before the arrival of Christianity. To the recently converted, this was a move that might not have produced cognitive dissonance. In Bede’s presentation, the *tabernacula* were physically manufactured from the woodlands he had described in *HE* 1.1. Gregory’s strategy for Mellitus represents just one instance in a longer process of landscape conversion. That process did not fit a neat model, but simultaneously reflected Bede’s historical and exegetical concerns as well as practical ones.

### ***Clearing the Landscape: Cedd’s Monastic Foundation at Lastingham***

Bede shared similar concerns in his description of Cedd’s monastic foundation at Lastingham. Cedd was consecrated at Lindisfarne around 654 and traveled with other missionaries to Christianize the Middle Angles. Sometime in the 660s, he returned to

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<sup>210</sup> Cassiodorus, *Expositio psalmorum praef.* 15.94-97, *CCSL* 97, 20: “Inueniuntur plane in uirtute sensuum, non in effatione uerborum: sic enim uina in uitibus, messem in semine, frondes in radicibus, fructus in ramis, arbores ipsas sensu contemplamur in nucleis.”

<sup>211</sup> Bede, *Homeliarum euangelii* 2.3.127-28, *CCSL* 122, 203.

Northumbria to establish a monastic community at Lastingham on land donated by Æthelwald, a sub-king of Deira, the southern kingdom of Northumbria. Even though Cedd played a crucial role at the Synod of Whitby in 664 as an *interpre*s or “negotiator,” Bede described his foundation at Lastingham at length:

[Cedd] eligit sibi locum monasterii construendi in montibus arduis ac remotis, in quibus latronum magis latibula ac lustra ferarum quam habitacula fuisse uidebantur hominum; ut, iuxta prophetiam Isaiae ‘in cubilibus, in quibus prius dracones habitabant, oriretur uiror calami et iunci’, id est fructus bonorum operum ibi nascerentur, ubi prius uel bestiae commorari uel homines bestialiter uiuere consuerant. Studens autem uir Domini acceptum monasterii locum primo precibus ac ieiuniis a pristina flagitorum sorde purgare, et sic in eo monasterii fundamenta iacere.

[Cedd] chose for himself a site for building the monastery amid some steep and remote hills which seemed better fitted for the haunts of robbers and the dens of wild beasts than for human habitation; so that, as Isaiah says, “In the habitations where once dragons lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes” [Is. 35.7], that is, the fruit of good works shall spring up where once beasts dwelt or where men lived after the manner of beasts. The man of God was anxious first of all to cleanse the site which he had received for the monastery from the stain of former crimes by praying and fasting, before laying the foundations [of the monastery].<sup>212</sup>

In Bede’s description, itself based on themes of wilderness and exile in Isaiah,<sup>213</sup> the place was entirely wild.<sup>214</sup> In fact, the place-names of \**Læstingaēg* and

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<sup>212</sup> *HE* 3.23, 286-87.

<sup>213</sup> Gittos, *Sacred Places*, 35; and Sarah Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England: Religion, Ritual, and Rulership in the Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 153-54, who connects the images of both Bede’s *HE* and the later Old English translation with themes in Old English poetry.

<sup>214</sup> The clefts and valleys Bede describes might also be read as portals to hell. See Semple, *Perceptions*, 154, 206-9, at 154: “Such interweaving motifs, topoi, and allusions are hard to untangle, but . . . rocky clefts, hollows, and fissures, as well as barrows, were conceived of and imagined by late Anglo-Saxon populations as openings into the eternal torment and damnation of hell” This is an argument Semple reiterated from her earlier



\**Læstingahamm* suggest an island surrounded on all sides by wet moorland.<sup>215</sup> Bede described Lastingham as if Cedd deliberately sought the most remote area of the moorland, even though the tract was donated by Æthelwald. Bede described Cedd as an ascetic rather more than a monastic founder: he took only a hen's egg and some milk every Sunday night since "this was a custom of those from whom he had learned the discipline of a Rule that, when they had received a site for building a monastery or a church, they should first consecrate it to the Lord with prayer and fasting."<sup>216</sup> Cedd's ascetic career was only to be a short-lived experiment, however. Soon, Æthelwald recalled him from the wilderness and Cedd left "his own brother Cynebill, who was a priest (*presbyterum suum Cynibilum, qui etiam frater germanus erat ipsius*)" to finish the job and build the monastery of Lastingham.

As in Æthelwulf's poem *De abbatibus* with which this chapter began, a palpable sense of evil lurked in the landscape. Bede elsewhere insisted that there was a clear relationship between the ruggedness of northern landscapes and innate Pictish ferocity when he described how Columba came to preach the word of God to the northern Picts separated from the known world by "steep and rugged mountains (*aeduis atque*

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work: "Illustrations of Damnation in Late Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts," *Anglo-Saxon England* 32 (2003): 31-45.

<sup>215</sup> Margaret Gelling, although she did not discuss Lastingham in particular, identified its *ēg* suffix as suggesting several possibilities: *Place-Names*, 34-40. Victor Watts, "The Place-Name Hexham: A Mainly Philological Approach," *Nomina* 17 (1994): 119-36, at 134-35, building on Gelling's work, identified Lastingham as indicating a "patch of good ground in moor-land." For Watts, such names "seem to reflect the conditions of the original settlements in the seventh century. Subsequently, reflecting their development as religious centres, both were reformed as names in *hām*, one of whose meanings seems to have been 'monastery', as specialised sense evolved from the more general sense 'dwelling-place, house, house-hold'."

<sup>216</sup> *HE* 3.23, 286-87.

*horrentibus montium*).<sup>217</sup> Sometimes a landscape could reflect the disposition of its inhabitants, or vice versa. Mindful of this, in his description of Cedd's hermitage Bede was elaborating upon Is. 35.5-7 and relying on its rich images:

Tunc aperientur oculi caecorum, et aures surdorum patebunt. Tunc saliet sicut cervus claudus, et exsultabit lingua mutorum, quia erumpent in deserto aquae, et torrentes in solitudine. Et terra arida erit in stagnum, et sitiens in fontes aquarum; in cubilibus, in quibus dracones habitabant, erit locus calami et iunci.

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall be free: for waters are broken out in the desert, and streams in the wilderness. And that which was dry land, shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water. In the dens where dragons dwell before, shall rise up the verdure of the reed and bulrush.

In Isaiah, reeds and rushes were the vegetation of pleasant places. Bede's description of Lastingham makes more sense if read alongside his exegetical interpretations of plants and trees. In his exegetical works, Bede frequently compared holy people and teachers with flora. The bride of Christ, for example, is like an apple tree, superior to all the trees of the forest.<sup>218</sup> In his commentary *In Ezram*, he had argued that "our works are compared to trees, good works to fruit-bearing ones, but evil works to ones that are barren and worthy of fire."<sup>219</sup> The major scriptural reference in Bede's description of Lastingham is Is. 35.7, a passage with a broader exegetical tradition.<sup>220</sup> In his *Moralia in Iob*, Gregory the Great explained the passage thus:

<sup>217</sup> *HE* 3.4, 222-23: "Brittaniā praeclaturus uerbum Dei prouinciis septentrionalium Pictorum, hoc est eis quae aeduis atque horrentibus montium iugis australes Picti."

<sup>218</sup> *In Cant.* 1.2.3.80-110, trans. Holder, 213.

<sup>219</sup> *In Ezr.* 2.324-27, *CCSL* 119A, 296, trans. DeGregorio, 91: "Sed et spiritualis patet intellectus quia opera nostra lignis omnia comparantur bone quidem fructiferis praua autem sterilibus atque incendio dignis."

<sup>220</sup> Pickles, "Sacred Places," 50.

Ista uiriditas uoce prophetica desertae terrae pollicetur, cum dicitur: “in cubilibus in quibus prius dracones habitabant orietur uiror calami et iunci.” Quid enim per calamum nisi scriptores, quid per iuncum qui iuxta aquae semper humorem nascitur nisi pusilli, ac teneri auditors sacri eloquii designantur? In draconum ergo cubilibus uiror calami et iunci oritur, quia in eis populis quos antike hostis militia possidebat, et doctorum scientia, et auditorium oboedientia coaceruatur.

This verdure is promised to the desert by the voice of the prophet [Is. 35.7], when it is said: “In the dens where dragons dwell before, shall rise up the verdure of the reed and bulrush.” What indeed is meant by the “reeds,” unless [they mean] scribes, what by the “rush,” which always grows up near liquid of water, unless [it means] tiny and delicate hearers of the sacred word? “In the dens,” therefore, “where dragons dwell before shall rise,” because in those peoples whom the belligerence of the old enemy possessed, both the wisdom of teachers, and the obedience of hearers is brought together.<sup>221</sup>

Taken together, Cedd’s foundation was as much about conversion as it was about the establishment of a community.<sup>222</sup> Not only this, but Bede charged the natural world with scriptural meaning revealed in a landscape; nature had an active role to play in Lastingham’s foundation. In describing the foundational moment of a significant monastic community in the Deiran wilderness, Bede relied upon natural images from Isaiah which Gregory the Great had explained as vivid images of growth and regeneration. Lastingham’s landscape was not just a passive backdrop for human activity, but an active generator of monastic practice.

<sup>221</sup> *Moralia in Iob* 29.26.53, CCSL 143B, 1470.

<sup>222</sup> Pickles, “Sacred Places,” 50: “Like patristic commentators, Bede seems therefore to have envisaged the steep and remote hills chosen for Lastingham not just as an island in the wilderness, but as a place suited to learning, writing, teaching and preaching. Hence the monastery in its location and activity was transforming its members and those around from the mountain of pride to the mountain and the house of the Lord.”

### *Cuthbert and Dominion over Nature*

Bede interpreted the natural world in different registers for different contexts. In the *HE*, Bede described a conversion process that nearly always began with king and court. In his depiction of Cedd's foundation at Lastingham, Bede presented a landscape that gave shape to his idea of monastic life there. Bede's *vitae* of Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne, did not describe such active landscapes, but instead emphasized the saint's dominion over nature. In twin *vitae*, one verse and one prose written between 705 and 721, as well as six chapters in the *Historia*, Bede recorded the activities of Cuthbert. Bede's *opus geminatum* was a revision of an anonymous prose *vita* by a monk of Lindisfarne, written in the early eighth century.<sup>223</sup> Around 651 Cuthbert entered the monastery of Melrose and joined his abbot Eata to establish a short-lived community at Ripon. Later Cuthbert became abbot at Melrose until he was called to Lindisfarne to be prior, sometime in the 670s. By 685 he was bishop of Lindisfarne and had developed a practice of retreating to the small island of Inner Farne to practice a brand of asceticism unavailable to him in the larger monastery. He died there in March of 687.

Bede's prose life details Cuthbert's upbringing briefly, including his childhood vision of the soul of Aidan ascending to heaven (chapters 1-5), his entry into the monastic life and subsequent activities as preacher, ascetic and miracle worker (chapters 6-15), his career at Lindisfarne and establishment of a hermitage on the isle of Inner Farne (chapters

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<sup>223</sup> *HE* prologue, 6-7. On the *opus geminatum*, see Peter Godman, "Introduction," in *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), lxxviii-lxxxviii. On these revisions see Carole Newlands, "Bede and Images of Saint Cuthbert," *Traditio* 52 (1997): 73-109; and Alan Thacker, "Bede and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 170-90, at 181-83.

16-24), his eventual return to Lindisfarne, activities and miracles as bishop (chapters 25-38), and eventual death, burial and posthumous miracles (chapters 39-46).

The foundational moment of Cuthbert's hermitage on Inner Farne resembles the isolation Cedd encountered at Lastingham. Weary of his monastic career, Cuthbert departed to a more remote place:

Farne dicitur insula medio in mari posita, quae non sicut Lindisfarnensium incolarum regio, bis cotidie accedente *aestu* oceani, quem *reuma uocant* Greci, fit insula, bis renudatis abeunte reumate litoribus contigua terrae redditur, sed aliquot milibus passuum ab hac semiinsula ad eorum secreta, et hinc altissimo, et inde infinito clauditur oceano. Nullus hanc facile ante famulum Domini Cuthbertum solus ualebat inhabitare colonus, propter uidelicet demorantium ibi phantasias demonum . . . Qui uidelicet miles Christi ut deuicta tyrannorum acie monarcha terrae quam adierat factus est, condidit ciuitatem suo aptam imperio, et domos in hac aeque ciuitati congruas erexit. Est autem aedificium situ pene rotundum, a muro usque ad murum mensura quattuor ferme siue quinque perticarum distentum, murus ipse de foris altior longitudine stantis hominis. Nam intrinsecus uiuam cedendo rupem, multi illum fecit altiozem, quatinus ad cohibendam oculorum siue cogitationum lasciuiam, ad erigendam in superna desideria totam mentis intentionem, pius incola nil de sua mansione praeter coelum posset intueri.

There is an island called Farne in the middle of the sea which is not like the Lindisfarne region—for that owing to the flow of the ocean tide, called in Greek “rheuma,” twice a day becomes an island and twice a day, when the tide ebbs from the uncovered shores, becomes again contiguous to the land; but it [Farne] is some miles away to the south-east of this half-island, and is shut in on the landward side by very deep water and on the seaward side by the boundless ocean. No one had been able to dwell alone undisturbed upon this island before Cuthbert the servant of the Lord, on account of the phantoms of demons who dwelt there . . . This soldier of Christ, as soon as he had become monarch of the land he had entered and had overcome the army of the usurpers, built a city fitted for his rule, and in it houses equally suited to the city. It is a structure almost round in plan, measuring about four or five poles from wall to wall; the wall itself on the outside is higher than a man standing upright; but inside he made it much higher by cutting away the living rock, so that the pious inhabitant could see nothing

except the sky from his dwelling, thus restraining both the lust of the eyes and of the thoughts and lifting the whole bent of his mind to higher things.<sup>224</sup>

In this depiction, Bede betrayed an interest in the sea and waterways.<sup>225</sup> Cuthbert had anticipated his eventual departure for Inner Farne earlier in the *Life* when he opined that “Even if I could possibly hide myself in a tiny dwelling on a rock, where the waves of the swelling ocean surrounded me on all sides, and shut me in equally from the sight and knowledge of men,” he would still not be free from worldly cares.<sup>226</sup> Maritime miracles abound in the *Vita Cuthberti*: otters warmed him after he prayed, neck-deep, in the North Sea<sup>227</sup>; soon after, he saved sailors by calming a storm<sup>228</sup>; and later in the *Life*, some monks who disobeyed him were caught in a storm near Inner Farne.<sup>229</sup> As we have already noted, rivers and their creatures were major images in Bede’s description of Britain in *HE* 1.1, and the ocean served as a constant reminder of Britain’s remoteness. Likewise in Bede’s *Vita Cuthberti*, Cuthbert was aware of the vastness of Britain’s geographic position. When pressed by the abbess Ælfflaed on the identity of the successor to Ecgrifh of Northumbria, Cuthbert responded, “You see how this great and

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<sup>224</sup> *V. Cuth.* 17, 214-17.

<sup>225</sup> A comprehensive evaluation of Bede’s interpretation of rivers and waterways does not exist to my knowledge, but some studies touch upon aquatic themes in Bede’s works: Thomas Eckenrode, “Venerable Bede’s Theory of Ocean Tides,” *The American Benedictine Review* 25 (1974): 456-74; David Petts, “Coastal Landscapes and Early Christianity in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria,” *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* 13 (2009): 79-95, especially 85-86; and Pickles, “Sacred Places,” 40-46 on coastal and riverine monastic foundations.

<sup>226</sup> *V. Cuth.* 8, 184-85: “Etiam si fieri possit ut in caute permodicam domunculam habens deliteam, ubi circumferentes me undique fluctus oceani tumescentis a cunctorum mortalium uisu pariter et cognitione secludant . . .”

<sup>227</sup> *V. Cuth.* 10, 188-91.

<sup>228</sup> *V. Cuth.* 11 and 21, 192-95 and 224-27; compare this with *V. Cuth.* 3, 160-65 in which Cuthbert does the same for sailors trapped in a storm on the River Tyne.

<sup>229</sup> *V. Cuth.* 36, 266-71.

spacious sea abounds in islands? It is easy for God to provide from any of these a man to place over the kingdom of the English.”<sup>230</sup> While the ocean isolated Britain, it also framed Cuthbert’s career.

Animal miracles are just as common in the *Vita Cuthberti*, and they confirmed Cuthbert’s role of dominance over nature. Early in his career, Cuthbert and his traveling companions were out of food until one of their horses revealed a bundle of provisions in the roof of an abandoned shepherd’s hut.<sup>231</sup> In an instance more clearly comparing Cuthbert to Elijah, Cuthbert predicted that an eagle would bring them food, and it later arrived with a fish.<sup>232</sup> In both cases, Cuthbert was careful to make sure the hospitable animals were given half of the spoils.<sup>233</sup> Bede clarified this compatible relationship in which Cuthbert clearly exercised dominance:

Non sola autem aeris sed et maris animalia, immo et ipsum mare sicut et aer et ignis iuxta quod in superioribus exposuimus, uiro uenerabili praebuere obsequium. Qui enim auctori omnium creaturarum fideliter et integro corde famulatur, non est mirandum si eius imperiis ac uotis omnis creatura deseruiat. At nos plerunque iccirco subiectae nobis creaturae dominium perdimus, quia Domino et creatori omnium ipsi eruire negligimus.

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<sup>230</sup> *V. Cuth.* 24, 236-37: “Cernis hoc mare magnum et spaciosum quot abundet insulis? Facile est Deo de aliqua harum sibi prouidere quem regno praeficiat Anglorum.”

<sup>231</sup> *V. Cuth.* 5, 168-71.

<sup>232</sup> *V. Cuth.* 12, 194-97.

<sup>233</sup> Dominic Alexander has described the Elijah topos and noted that such stories are exceptions to the rule that holy people exercised complete dominance over animals in *Saints and Animals*, 25-26, at 26: “The animals in the Elijah topos are purely ciphers for God’s providence, with the partial exception of Cuthbert’s eagle, whose animal needs are recognised and satisfied.” That said, “[r]eciprocity with animals does not have a place within the Elijah topos, nor is it part of Bede’s general attitude towards animal studies. Cuthbert’s reciprocity may suggest the existence of some other layer of story or symbolism at work in seventh- or eighth-century Northumbria, but on its own the clue cannot be deciphered.”

Moreover not only the creatures of the air but also of the sea, yes, and even the sea itself, as well as air and fire as we have shown above, did honour to the venerable man. For if a man faithfully and wholeheartedly serves the maker of all created things, it is no wonder though all creation should minister to his commands and wishes. But for the most part we lose dominion over the creation which was made subject to us, because we ourselves neglect to serve the Lord and Creator of all things.<sup>234</sup>

It is in these contexts that Cuthbert's hermitage on Inner Farne takes on an identity sometimes missed by its modern readers. In a hagiographic mode, Bede amplified the themes of the natural world and built space only intermittently evident in the *Historia*. Cuthbert's constant interaction with the natural world underscores the importance of building a controlled space on a "rock in the ocean." In the *Historia* monastic communities and the courts of kings were the nodes of power, but in the *Vita Cuthberti*, the source of Cuthbert's authority remained in the natural world.

### **Imagining Natural Places in Anglo-Latin Poetry**

Bede provided his readers with several distinct registers of thought about the role of nature in history, exegesis and hagiography. Much of the rest of this chapter will explore the shared hagiographic and exegetical elements in Anglo-Latin poetry, beginning with one of Bede's contemporaries, Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury (d. c. 709). Most of this section, however, will deal with northern poets influenced by Aldhelm, especially the anonymous composer of the *Miracula Nynie episcopi* (the "Miracles of Bishop Nynian"), Alcuin's *York Poem* and Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*. In poetic thought worlds, images of the natural world, human-made sacred places and their decoration

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<sup>234</sup> *V. Cuth.* 21, 224-25.



interested the poets most clearly and often. Anglo-Latin poets introduced themes only hinted at in the sources so far; for Aldhelm, complex images of growth and regeneration were the best ways to describe God's Creation as well as the benefits of monastic life. Northern clusters of poetic sources such as the *Miracula* and *De abbatibus* emphasized that the languages of nature and building were crucial for describing Christianization processes, which themselves were just as much about the conversion of a landscape as with the conversion of a people.

### Aldhelm's Poetic Ecologies

Natural themes were common in Aldhelm's poems, and in particular his *enigmata* and *tituli* or dedications to and often inscriptions upon new churches and their altars. Aldhelm's origins and education are obscure, but it is clear from one of his letters that he was initially trained in an Irish context.<sup>235</sup> Aldhelm's literary output is especially relevant to this discussion since he was educated at the school of Canterbury for two years or so between 670 and 675 under the supervision of Theodore and Hadrian whose pastoral and missionary work Bede recorded in the *Historia*.<sup>236</sup> His works included a collection of *tituli* known collectively as the *carmina ecclesiastica*, 100 *enigmata* or mysteries,<sup>237</sup> a long poem commemorating the lives of scriptural, foreign and English saints known as the *Carmen de virginitate* (of which he also fashioned a prose version). Additionally,

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<sup>235</sup> *Epistula* 6, *MGH AA* 15, 494. I am using the translation of Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 164, hereafter "Lapidge and Herren, *Prose*."

<sup>236</sup> *Epistulae* 2 and 5, *MGH AA* 15, 478, 488-94, trans. Lapidge and Herren, *Prose*, 153 and 163. Bede also mentions Aldhelm's teaching of meter in *HE* 4.2.

<sup>237</sup> Lapidge has explained that *enigmata* is best rendered as "mysteries," not "riddles." See his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600-899*, 9.

Aldhelm was probably well versed in Old English poetry.<sup>238</sup> Natural imagery and topics are common across Aldhelm's works, especially in the *enigmata* and poetic and prose *Carmen de virginitate*. Like Bede, though, Aldhelm maintained an abiding interest in human-made sacred places and their decoration, especially in the collection of *carmina ecclesiastica*, some of which were almost certainly inscribed on interior or exterior church spaces.<sup>239</sup> Aldhelm's most comprehensive treatment of the natural world occurs in his poetry and prose treatises *De virginitate*, as well as the *enigmata*, many of which explore natural phenomena and objects. When describing the natural world, Aldhelm's constant images involved growth, regeneration and renewal—complex images that transcended the binaries of current scholarly readings.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Michael Lapidge, "Aldhelm's Latin Poetry and Old English Verse," in *idem*, *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600-899*, 231-33.

<sup>239</sup> Lapidge and Herren, *Prose*, 10-18.

<sup>240</sup> See especially Neville, *Representations*, 59-61; Foot, "Natural World."

*Aldhelm's Enigmata on the Natural World*

Aldhelm's treatment of the natural world has received only sparse attention in current scholarly literature.<sup>241</sup> Michael Lapidge has noted Aldhelm's treatment of the "natural world in its normal manifestations,"<sup>242</sup> since Aldhelm devoted nearly half of his 100 *enigmata* to flora and fauna, many of which he described with first-hand observational knowledge.<sup>243</sup> As a general characteristic, about a third of the naturalistic *enigmata* refer to birth and generation (*genero*, *gigno* or *nascor*). "Aldhelm's universe," Lapidge and Rosier have observed, "is in a continual process of gestation, birth and growth. Birth in the *enigmata* is a dynamic process in which the whole of creation—animate and inanimate—participates."<sup>244</sup> Aldhelm's intellectual world was a dynamic one, alive with potential for change and growth. Aldhelm's observational and rhetorical skills helped weave together the various components of the universe, culminating in the last *enigma* on Creation. In their commentary on Aldhelm's poetic works, Lapidge and Rosier noted that Aldhelm's *enigmata* reveal a preoccupation with "classification and the

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<sup>241</sup> Some cursory comments appear in Peter Scott, "Rhetorical and Symbolic Ambiguity: the Riddles of Symphosius and Aldhelm," in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes*, I: 117-44; Nicholas Howe, "Aldhelm's *Aenigmata* and Isidorian Etymology," *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985): 37-59; Čelica Milovanović-Barham, "Aldhelm's *Aenigmata* and Byzantine Riddles," *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 51-64. A more thorough analysis of natural imagery in Aldhelm's works is Michael Cameron, "Aldhelm as Naturalist: a Re-Examination of Some of His *Aenigmata*," *Peritia* 4 (1985): 117-33, who argues that Aldhelm must have based some of his descriptions on observation as opposed to book learning.

<sup>242</sup> Michael Lapidge, "Introduction: Anglo-Latin Literature," in *idem.*, *Anglo-Latin Literature 600-899*, 1-36, at 10.

<sup>243</sup> Cameron, "Aldhelm," 117-18. Compare this with Neville, *Representations*, 193: in the *Enigmata* especially "the natural world is presented as fully subordinated to the intellectual activity of exploiting interesting connections, wordplay and literary skills"

<sup>244</sup> Michael Lapidge and James Rosier, *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 64. This is also the translation I use for Aldhelm's poetic works; hereafter "Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*."

intelligible ordering of experience.”<sup>245</sup> Aldhelm might also be said to “ban violence and danger from his surroundings by relegating them onto the page and into clearly designated compartments of verse.”<sup>246</sup> Such an approach arguing for “literary enclosure of the natural world”<sup>247</sup> suggests opposing poles of threatening nature and tamed nature, when in fact Aldhelm’s interpretation of nature was far more diverse.

Aldhelm’s interest in the natural world is evident from the very first *enigma* on the earth. Content simply to give away the answer,<sup>248</sup> Aldhelm’s approach was direct: “In summer I am verdant with offspring; in winter-time I languish.”<sup>249</sup> Aldhelm’s earth *enigma* illustrates his tendency to emphasize regeneration and birth in the *enigmata* more generally. With this first *enigma*, Aldhelm from the outset used the natural world as framing device. The next few entries emphasized the earth’s balance outside of human control: winds are “able to shatter oaks (*viribus horrisonis valeo confringere quercus*)”; clouds “make the world grow green with my moist (rain)drops (*sed madidis mundum faciam frondescere guttis*)”; and nature boasts that “believe me, nothing exists without my controlling force (*crede mihi, res nulla manet sine me moderante*).”<sup>250</sup> Nature’s control over human activity is most thoroughly expressed in the *enigma* on water:

Dum virtute fero silvarum robora mille,  
Ast acus exilis mox tanta gestamina rumpit?  
Nam volucres caeli nantesque per aequora pisces  
Olim sumpserunt ex me primordia vitae:

<sup>245</sup> Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 61.

<sup>246</sup> Zoja Pavlovskis, “The Riddler’s Microcosm: From Symphosius to Boniface,” *Classica et Medievalia* 39 (1988): 219-51, at 242.

<sup>247</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 195.

<sup>248</sup> On this tendency in Aldhelm’s *enigmata*, see Howe, “Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*.”

<sup>249</sup> *Enig.* 1, *MGH AA* 15, 99, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 71: “Prole virens aestate, tabescens tempore brumae.”

<sup>250</sup> *Enig.* 2-4, *MGH AA* 15, 99-100, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 71.

Tertia pars mundi mihi constat iure tenenda.

With my strength I support (the weight of) a thousand trees, but a slender point is soon able to shatter these mighty efforts! The birds of the sky and the fish swimming in the sea once drew from me the beginnings of their life. It is well known that a third part of the world is under my control.<sup>251</sup>

Like Bede's treatment of the natural world in *HE* 1.1, Aldhelm's natural features were overwhelmingly those available for human harvest, manipulation or enjoyment. For Aldhelm, the world was alive with its productive qualities: a bee plunders flowers and "through my craft the food of kings grows golden with honey . . . I surpass the metal-work of smiths"<sup>252</sup>; a file grinds down shapeless metal<sup>253</sup>; a whetstone emerges from the frozen depths of the earth<sup>254</sup>; counter-intuitively, both a breastplate and a loaf of bread emerge from the earth as well<sup>255</sup>; a spindle is "born in the forest, green on a leafy bough (*in saltu nascor ramosa fronde virescens*)"<sup>256</sup>; a shield comes from the bark of the willow.<sup>257</sup>

### ***Virginity, Craftsmanship and the Natural World***

These themes appear frequently in Aldhelm's other works. Aldhelm from the outset of the poetic *De virginitate* expressed virginity through a lexicon of blooming and growth. This generative language of the natural world paradoxically befits a *non-*

<sup>251</sup> *Enig.* 29, *MGH AA* 15, 109, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 75-76.

<sup>252</sup> *Enig.* 20, *MGH AA* 15, 106, lines 3-5, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 74: "Arte mea crocea flauescunt fercula regum . . . Atque carens minibus fabrorum vinco metalla."

<sup>253</sup> *Enig.* 21, *MGH AA* 15, 106.

<sup>254</sup> *Enig.* 27, *MGH AA* 15, 108.

<sup>255</sup> *Enig.* 33 and 70, *MGH AA* 15, 111, 129.

<sup>256</sup> *Enig.* 45, *MGH AA* 15, 117.

<sup>257</sup> *Enig.* 87, *MGH AA* 15, 137.

generative subject. Lapidge's assessment captures Aldhelm's poetic strategy: in the poetic *De virginitate* Aldhelm "heightened the diction so that virginity itself is pictured as a vigorously aggressive virtue."<sup>258</sup> This holds true in Aldhelm's assessment of the Virgin Mary's purity:

Beata Maria, virgo perpetua, *hortus conclusus, fons signatus, virgula radice,*  
*gerula floris, aurora solis, nurus patris, genetrix et germana filii simulque sponsa*  
*ac felix bernacula, sanctorum socrus animarum, supernotum regina civium,*  
*columba inter .LX. reginas et bis quadragenas pelices.*

The blessed Mary, the perpetual virgin, "a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up," "the rod out of the root of Jesse bearing a flower," the dawn of the sun, the daughter-in-law of her father, the mother and sister of the Son and at the same time his bride and blessed handmaid, the mother-in-law of holy souls, the queen of heavenly citizens, "a dove among threescore queens and fourscore concubines."<sup>259</sup>

Aldhelm's chosen scriptural epithets for Mary fittingly invoked the natural world. Additionally, he recalled the traditional view of Mary as *Dei genetrix* and reminding his audience of the generative properties of the natural world set out in the *enigmata*.<sup>260</sup> Virginity denies the divine mandate to go forth and multiply, but its nature is bound up in verdure and productivity.

Mary generated God who generated the world: by emphasizing Mary's fertility and making Creation the capstone of his *enigmata*, Aldhelm deployed this concept throughout his poetic works. A passage near the outset of the *Carmen de virginitate*—itself a worthy rival of Bede's so-called "ode to spring and creation" in his *In*

<sup>258</sup> Michael Lapidge, "Aldhelm," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), 26.

<sup>259</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 292, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 106-7.

<sup>260</sup> For a discussion of this tradition, see Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-24.

*Genesim*<sup>261</sup>—helps to clarify and consolidate Aldhelm’s treatment of nature across his works.

Omnipotens genitor mundum ditione gubernans,  
 Lucida stelligeri qui conditis culmina caeli,  
 Necnon telluris formans fundamina verbo,  
 Pallida purpureo pingis qui flore virecta;  
 Sic quoque fluctivagi refrenans caerula ponti,  
 Mergere ne valeant terrarium litora limphis;  
 Sed tumidos fragant fluctus obstacula rupis;  
 Arvorum gelido qui cultus fonte rigabis;  
 Et segetum glumas nombosis imbribus auges;  
 Qui latebras mundi geminato sidere demis:  
 Nempe diem Titan et noctem Cynthia comit;  
 Piscibus aequoreos qui campos pinguibus ornas  
 Squamigeras formans in glauco gurgite turmas;  
 Limpida praepetibus sic complens aera cateruis,  
 Garrula quae rostris resonantes cantica popant  
 Atque creatorem diversa voce fatentur:  
 Da pius auxilium Clemens, ut carmine possim  
 Inclita sanctorum modulari gesta priorum,  
 Ut prius ex prosa laudabat littera castos;  
 Sic modo heroica stipulentur carmina laudem,  
 Ut fasti seriem memini dixisse priorem  
 Et dudum prompsit voto spondente libellus!

Almighty progenitor, guiding the world by Your rule, Who are the Creator of the shining heights of the star-filled heaven, [Who] also formed the foundations of the earth by Your Word; You Who paint the pale greensward with purple blossom, and restrain the azure surface of the wave-wandering sea so that the shores of the lands are not submerged by water, but rather that obstacles of rocks may break the swollen waves; Who water the crops of the ploughed fields with a cool spring and swell the husks of corn by rain from cloud-bursts, Who remove the hiding places of the earth by a two-fold radiance—namely, Titan [i.e. the sun] that adorns the day and Cynthia [i.e. the moon that adorns] the night; Who ornament the expanses of ocean with plump fish, forming scaly squadrons in the greyish waters; Who

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<sup>261</sup> So Charles Jones, “Some Introductory Remarks on Bede’s Commentary on Genesis,” *Sacris Erudiri* 19 (1969): 115-98, at 117, referring to Bede’s description of nature in his exegesis on Gen. 1.11-13.

similarly fill the clear air with swift-flying flocks of birds which, chirping with their beaks, pipe chattering songs and proclaim the Creator with their diverse voices: kind and merciful God, grant aid to me that by my verse I may be able to sing of the renowned work of saints of earlier days.<sup>262</sup>

Aldhelm's lyric description of *Deus creator* followed directly on the heels of his insistence that virgins in history "flourished in perennial bloom (*vernabant flore perenni*)."<sup>263</sup> In Aldhelm's imagination, virginity was like a natural resource, flourishing along with the creatures, vegetation and waters with which God adorned the world. Aldhelm provided a guided tour of creation, linking a language of the natural world with one of virginity. To clarify the connection, Aldhelm compared virginity with the earth's production of precious metals: "From the bosom of the earth, base gravel produces the substance of tawny gold and burnished metal, with which the contrivance of the present world is adorned."<sup>264</sup> Virginity was also a red rose more vibrant than dyes, the golden blossoms emerging from the bark of cherry trees in springtime, the dates which sprout from palms, and the pearls from the mouths of oysters.<sup>265</sup> Aldhelm often combined images of craftsmanship with those of natural processes, linking both with notions of virginity. For Aldhelm, virginity was similar to and could be thought of as a natural resource.

<sup>262</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 352-53, lines 1-22, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 103.

<sup>263</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 351, line 34, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 103.

<sup>264</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 359, lines 157-79, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 106: "Auri materiem fulvi obrizumque metallum,/ Ex quibus ornatur praesentis machine mundi,/ Glarea de gremio producit sordida terrae."

<sup>265</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 359-60.



*Nebuchadnezzar's Tree and the De virginitate*

In the course of narrating the lives of virgin saints, Aldhelm paused to describe Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in which "he saw a sturdy tree with leafy branches growing in the earth, whose lofty crest touched the clouds, while beneath, throngs of birds and every kind of wild beast pluck the sweet nourishment of food from the branches."<sup>266</sup> Daniel interpreted the high tree as a tyrant (Nebuchadnezzar himself) doomed to live for seven years like a wild beast "in the bushy woodlands . . . squalid and shaggy he would seek the myrtle-groves inhabited by wolves—the tyrant, demented, having become a companion of four-footed beasts."<sup>267</sup> In Aldhelm's hands, a chaotic environment both symbolized and reflected the character of a tyrant.

In his prose *De virginitate*, however, Aldhelm adjusted the image. Almost lamenting the loss of the great tree, Aldhelm explained that it was:

sub cono sublimi verticis pennigeras volucrum turmas praepeti volatu nimborum  
obstacula penetrantes simulque multimodas ferarum naturas quadripedante cursu  
per orbem bunda crudeliter corrueret et supernae potestatis instrumento lugubriter  
succisa procumberet ac per septem annorum circulos luxuriante foliorum  
viriditate et maliferis surculorum frondibus fraudaretur.

bountifully fed with lush nourishment of food feathered flocks of birds  
penetrating the obstacles of the clouds with swift flight, and at the same time the  
multifarious kinds of beast ranging through the world with four-footed motion,  
until, shaken by celestial power it collapsed cruelly, and, sadly cut down by the  
agency of heavenly power, it toppled and was deprived of luxuriating verdure of  
leaves and apple-bearing fronds of shoots.<sup>268</sup>

<sup>266</sup> *MGH AA* 15, p. 367, lines 339-40, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 110: "Denique frondoso regnator stipite robor/ Imperio fretus vidit de cespite crescens,/ Cuius tangebant praecelsa cacumina nimbos/ Et sub qua volucrum turbae et genus omne ferarum/ Dulcia de ramis carpunt alimenta ciborum."

<sup>267</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 367, lines 349-50, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 110: "Squalidus hirsutus peteret myrteta luporum/ Quadripedum socius factus sine mente tyrannus."

<sup>268</sup> *MGH AA* 15, p. 251, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 77-8.

Instead of describing a dangerous wilderness to reflect Nebuchadnezzar's character, Aldhelm depicted a scene in which animals and tree coexisted in an ordered system. In his description, natural and scriptural worlds collided. In his prose and verse *De virginitate*, Aldhelm presented conflicting views of a natural image: in prose, Nebuchadnezzar's tree was part of a tangled, chaotic woodland through which he roamed on all fours; in verse, the tree "collapsed cruelly, and, [was] sadly cut down." Aldhelm's descriptions are among the first from Anglo-Latin literature to deploy a language of entanglement so central to Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* and contemporary artistic motifs on stone crosses as we shall soon see.<sup>269</sup> For Aldhelm, vegetative entanglement was a useful way to think about immorality, danger and life's complexities.

A few lines later in the poetic *De virginitate*, Aldhelm returned to the image of the natural world's wildness. Not unlike Nebuchadnezzar but for dramatically different effect, John the Baptist "dwelled in the forests, eating the wild food of honey and the bodies of locusts for sustenance."<sup>270</sup> Similarly, Antony later lived in "uncultivated fields in woodland pastures (*squalida per saltus peterent ut rura locorum*)"<sup>271</sup> and Amos was "an inhabitant of Nitria with its leafy brambles (*frondosis dumis*), attending to the uncultivated lands of that waste country."<sup>272</sup> The poetic contrast between Nebuchadnezzar and John could scarcely be sharper. In both cases the wildness of nature

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<sup>269</sup> See below, 288-95, and Figs. 2.1-2.12.

<sup>270</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 369, lines 399-400, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 111-12: "Hic erat in saltu silvestria pabula mellis/ Atque locustarum mandens corpuscula frugi."

<sup>271</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 385, line 757, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 119.

<sup>272</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 413, lines 1455-57, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 135: "Plurima hic gessit virtutum signa sacerdos;/ Qui fuit in Nitriae frondosis accola dumis/ Squalida deserti procurans iugera ruris."

mirrored the character of the subject; Nebuchadnezzar was an immoral tyrant, and John the Baptist was a wild ascetic. Aldhelm further complicated the tree image in his commemoration of Martin, who “destroyed the unholy holies of the pagans, casting down the sanctuaries of guilty despots . . . [he also] destroyed a pine tree with green-sprouting trunk to which the senseless chiefs were wont to offer incense—what a crime this was!—burning the entrails of sheep in the beginnings of spring.”<sup>273</sup> While Aldhelm presented ambivalent views of Nebuchadnezzar’s tree between his prose and verse *De virginitate*, his depiction of Martin felling the sacred pine was unambiguous. Aldhelm framed all of these virgin lives with the natural world. Mindful of the generative and fruitful properties of virginity in the *enigmata*, Aldhelm flexibly integrated virginity, its practitioners and natural landscapes in his *De virginitate*.

### ***Aldhelm’s tituli, Decoration and the Natural World***

In addition to his other poetic works, Aldhelm composed several *tituli* in which he often returned to familiar natural themes. These so-called *Carmina ecclesiastica* also afforded him the opportunity to highlight another of his interests: the formal praise for the sumptuous decoration of sacred buildings. Aldhelm used *tituli* as a medium to engage subjects of the natural world, material beauty and demarcation of sacred space. Taking inspiration from the earliest Latin *tituli* from late Antiquity, Aldhelm composed his

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<sup>273</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 382, lines 690-97, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 118: “Nam paganorum destruxit fana profana/ . . . Sic quoque famosam frondenti stipite pinum,/ Qua procures stolidi tunc turificare solebant—/ Hen scelus!—in ueribus torrentes exta bidentum,/ Diruit, ut populum non fallat cultibus error.” On the event, see Chapter 1, 68-72.

*carmina ecclesiastica* for specific contexts and places.<sup>274</sup> During the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England and beyond “it was an important function of the literate ecclesiastic to compose metric *tituli* to be inscribed in these churches.”<sup>275</sup> Through his *tituli*, Aldhelm suggested that the human-made and non-human worlds were important forces in conversion processes. The *tituli* provide an opportunity to understand how Aldhelm conceived of the relationship between the natural world and buildings.

The *carmina* suggest an interest in that interplay. Aldhelm began his poem for the church of Peter and Paul with a powerful natural image: “Here flowers (*florescit*) the renowned glory of a new church.”<sup>276</sup> His poem on a church of an unknown location dedicated to Mary echoes the themes of growth and regeneration in the prose and poetic *De virginitate*: the bride of Christ is “a garden closed up (*hortus conclusus*), verdant on the flowering summit, a fountain sealed up, welling from the heavenly pool.”<sup>277</sup> Aldhelm employed the words of Cant. 4.12 to describe the church as a “garden closed up (*hortus conclusus*)”: “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up (*Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*).” From Aldhelm’s perspective, the church should resemble a garden because it brings forth diverse buds, and it ought to be like a fountain because it overflows with doctrine to irrigate the faithful. Its walls protect those inside from intrusion, and the fountain is

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<sup>274</sup> See Lapidge and Herren, *Poetic*, 6; and Orchard, *Aldhelm*, 204-5.

<sup>275</sup> Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 35.

<sup>276</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 11, line 1, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 46: “Hic celebranda rudis florescit gloria templi.”

<sup>277</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 13, lines 20-21, referencing Cant. 4.12, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 47: “Hortus conclusus florenti vertice vernans/ Fons quoque signatus caelesti gurgite pollens.”

sealed for the same reason.<sup>278</sup> The images from Cant. 4.12 provided Aldhelm with a framework for describing a church building. His application of Cant. 4.12 to a sacred building established a link between the adornment of the church's interior space<sup>279</sup> and the vegetation of a *hortus conclusus*. Unlike his *enigmata* however, Aldhelm's *tituli* suggest a degree of human control over nature. Nearly all of the references to the natural world are scriptural, referring to images of maintained gardens. Aldhelm embedded these multiple meanings of nature in across his poetic works.

### **Adornment and Nature in the Anonymous *Miracula Nynie episcopi***

Decades after Aldhelm and Bede articulated the relationships between the natural world and sacred buildings, an anonymous author set out to record the life and miracles of Ninian, the missionary to the southern Picts. Traditionally thought of as an obscure fifth- or sixth-century saint, it has been suggested that Ninian was actually Uinniau, a British monk and scholar who died around 579.<sup>280</sup> All we know about Ninian comes from three sources which appear to share a common source not extant, perhaps a *vita*: an entry from Bede's *Historia*, the eighth-century anonymous *Miracula Nynie episcopi*, and a

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<sup>278</sup> See Bede, *In Cant.* 3.4.12-15, *CCSL* 119B, 263-70, trans. Holder, 130-38, especially 130-31.

<sup>279</sup> Aldhelm praised the decorations and liturgical accoutrements of Bugga's church in *MGH AA* 15, 18, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 49: "The new church has many ornaments: a golden cloth glistens with its twisted threads and forms a beautiful covering for the sacred altar. And a golden chalice covered with jewels gleams so that it seems to reflect the heavens with their bright stars; and there is a large paten made from silver (*Plurima basilicae sunt ornamenta recentis:/ Aurea contortis flavestunt pallia filis,/ Quae sunt altaris sacri velamina pulchra,/ Aureus atque calix gemmis fulgescit opertus,/ Ut caelum rutilat stellis ardentibus aptum,/ Ac lata argento constat fabricata patena.*)"

<sup>280</sup> Thomas Owen Clancy, "The Real St Ninian," *The Innes Review* 52 (2001): 1-28.

later *vita* by Ailred of Rievaulx (d. 1167).<sup>281</sup> This common source probably emerged from Whithorn or *Candida Casa*, the monastic community Ninian founded near the Irish Sea coast probably after the departure of Roman legions from Britain (Map 2.2).<sup>282</sup> If so, it may have been disseminated during the bishopric of Pehthelm (c. 731-35), an English bishop who was a colleague and correspondent of Bede's.<sup>283</sup>

Bede's treatment of Ninian's life is brief. According to him, in the mid-sixth century Ninian's successor, Columba, came:

praedicaturus uerbum Dei prouinciis septentrionalium Pictorum, hoc est eis quae arduis et horrentibus montium iugis ab australibus eorum sunt regionibus sequestratae. Namque ipsi australes Picti, qui intra eosdem montes habent sedes, multo ante tempore, ut perhibent, relicto errore idolatriae, fidem ueritatis acceperant, praedicante eis uerbum Ninian episcopo reuerentissimo et sanctissimo uiro de natione Brettonum, qui erat Romae regulariter fidem et mysteria ueritatis edoctus; cuius sedem episcopatus, sancti Martini episcopi nomine et ecclesia insignem, ubi ipse etiam corpore una cum pluribus sanctis requiescat, iam nunc Anglorum gens obtinet. Qui locus, ad prouinciam Berniciorum pertinens, uulgo uocatur Ad Candidam Casam, eo quod ibi ecclesiam de lapide, insolito Brettonibus more, fecerit.

<sup>281</sup> John MacQueen has argued that Bede's account includes excerpts from the lost source: *St. Nynia and The Miracles of Bishop Nynia* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), 11.

<sup>282</sup> Peter Hill, *Whithorn and St. Ninian: The Excavation of a Monastic Town, 1984-1991* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), 11-14; see 67-182 for the phases of building, including the early wooden structures of a trading settlement prior to the foundation and construction of a stone church. Despite the sense of Whithorn's isolation in the *Miracula*, excavations there have revealed Mediterranean drinking vessels suggesting trade with those regions as early as the fifth or sixth centuries: Hill, *Whithorn*, 315-16. On the late Roman and early sub-Roman geography of the region more generally, see Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 278.

<sup>283</sup> *HE* 5.13 and 5.18. For this theory, see Nora Chadwick, "St Ninian: A Preliminary Study of Sources," *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History & Antiquarian Society* 27 (1950): 9-53, at 18; and John MacQueen, "The Literary Sources for the Life of St Ninian," in *Galloway: Land and Lordship*, ed. Richard Oram and Geoffrey Stell (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1991), 17-25.

to preach the word of God to the kingdoms of the northern Picts which are separated from their southern part of their land by steep and rugged mountains. The southern Picts who live on this side of the mountains had, so it is said, long ago given up the errors of idolatry and received the true faith through the preaching of the Word by that reverent and holy man Bishop Ninian, a Briton who had received orthodox instruction at Rome in the faith and mysteries of the truth. His episcopal see is celebrated for its church, dedicated to St. Martin where his body rests, together with those of many other saints. The see is now under English rule. This place which is in the kingdom of Bernicia (i.e. northern Northumbria) is commonly called Whithorn (*Ad Candidam Casam*), the White House, because Ninian built a church of stone there, using a method unusual among the Britons.<sup>284</sup>

For Bede, then, Ninian was worth mentioning as part of a larger process of conversion in the northern territories of the *gens Anglorum*. Yet his brief account is framed, crucially, by landscape and construction. In a framing device resembling that of Gildas, Pictish idolatry was defined by their topography: first, the southern Picts, closer to Northumbria, were converted, and only then could Columba traverse the “steep and rugged mountain ridges” to take on the idolatry of the isolated northern Picts. Moving on from topography, Bede described how Ninian’s foundation was known primarily for its fine stone construction, not unlike his description of Benedict Biscop’s stone church at Wearmouth-Jarrow.<sup>285</sup> Ninian fits within Bede’s historical vision since he helped convert a native *gens*, separated them from the hindrances of their wild topography and embedded a conspicuous “White House” in the landscape.

The other major eighth-century source on which we shall focus most attention is the anonymous *Miracula*, a poetic account of Ninian’s life. While it has been argued that the *Miracula* may have been composed at York based on its dependence on sources held

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<sup>284</sup> *HE* 3.4, 222-23.

<sup>285</sup> In *Historia abbatum* 6, Plummer, *Operae*, 368-70, Bede described how Benedict Biscop systematically imported holy objects, building styles and books from Rome.

in the library there, this only means that the anonymous author was probably trained at York.<sup>286</sup> As Wilhelm Levison suggested, the *Miracula* probably emerged as an epyllion, or shortened version, of a longer Latin prose source now no longer extant.<sup>287</sup> It is thus a crucial source for the life of an important missionary in context of northern monastic growth, despite being “heavily derivative”<sup>288</sup> in its borrowings from late antique poets, indicating a wide availability of those sources.<sup>289</sup> The *Miracula* also appears to have emerged independent of Bede as an expression of local interests in Ninian’s life and cult. Questions of the nature of Ninian’s foundation, his active dates, and the identity of Bede’s southern Picts have most frequently occupied current scholars.<sup>290</sup> The reasons for considering the literary evidence for Ninian’s mission here are central to the questions of this chapter: first, as Clancy has pointed out, Ninian must be considered in the context of Bede’s historical vision, since Bede wrote his account soon after the establishment of a Northumbrian see at Whithorn.<sup>291</sup> And second, no scholarship exists interrogating the textual relationships between the natural world and sacred buildings in the *Miracula*, and

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<sup>286</sup> Michael Lapidge, “Aediluulf and the School of York,” in *Lateinische Kultur im VIII. Jahrhundert: Traube-Gedenkschrift*, ed. Albert Lehrner and Walter Berschin (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1990), 161-78, at 166-68; reprinted in Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 600-900*, 380-97.

<sup>287</sup> Wilhelm Levison, “An Eighth Century Poem on St Ninian,” *Antiquity* 14 (1940): 280-91.

<sup>288</sup> Orchard, *Aldhelm*, 162.

<sup>289</sup> Lapidge, “Anglo-Latin Studies,” 75; see also Strecker, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 943.

<sup>290</sup> See, for example, Alan Macquarrie, “The Date of Saint Ninian’s Mission: A Reappraisal,” *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 23 (1987): 1-25; Dauvit Broun, “The Literary Record of St. Ninian: Fact and Fiction?,” *Innes Review* 42 (1991): 143-50; Daphne Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places: St Ninian, Whithorn and the Medieval Realm of Galloway* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1994), 23-33; and the short introductory chapters of MacQueen, *St. Nynia*.

<sup>291</sup> *HE* 5.23; Thomas Owen Clancy, “Scottish Saints and National Identities,” in *Local Saints and Local Churches*, ed. Sharpe, 400.



how that relationship helped to shape the anonymous author's presentation of monastic foundation. Finally, a consideration of those relationships in the *Miracula* will clarify the images in Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* with which we began and help give form to northern modes of thought about nature and monastic life.<sup>292</sup>

### ***The Natural World, Built Space and Christianization in the Miracula***

Three main events punctuate the narrative of the *Miracula*: a brief description of the saint's journey through multiple landscapes on pilgrimage to Rome, his return to Pictland and construction of *Candida Casa*, and a miracle of spontaneous crop growth.<sup>293</sup> The text itself is brief:

**Table 2.5: Narrative Structure of the Anonymous *Miracula Nynie episcopi***

1-4	Brief introduction to Ninian, his pilgrimage to Rome and subsequent return to convert the southern Picts and establish <i>Candida Casa</i> .
5-9	The anonymous author records a series of miracles of healing, dominion over nature, and Ninian's eventual death.
10-14	Posthumous miracles involving the healing of a paralytic, leper, blind woman, and others.

The *Miracula* is thin on historical detail but brimming with hagiographic description of the holy man's life, foundation and miracles. Of the fourteen chapters in the *Miracula*, eight contain miracles. Of these, there is one vision, four healing miracles (three posthumous) and three in which Ninian manipulated a natural phenomenon or place. These last episodes are varied: in one, a miraculously speaking infant attests to the

<sup>292</sup> See below, 278-310.

<sup>293</sup> The standard edition is Karl Strecker, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 943-61. I use the translation of MacQueen, *Nynia*, hereafter "MacQueen."

innocence of a priest regarding charges of parenthood.<sup>294</sup> In another, Ninian brought back to life a ringleader of bandits who had been trampled by a bull they had tried to steal.<sup>295</sup> And in a third, Ninian brought about the growth of crops planted earlier the same day.<sup>296</sup> These miracles form the backbone of the narrative, and that of spontaneous crop growth falls in the very center of the text. In the *Miracula*, nature and miracles relating to it were indices of a landscape's conversion.

The first event of Ninian's life described by the anonymous author was his pilgrimage to Rome. The author organized this description, like Bede, with a seascape, topography and buildings. First,

Exin fluctuagi conscendit litora ponti  
 Atque sacer pande captabat viscera cymbe  
 Extensaue avidis volitabant carbasa flabris,  
 Donec barcha rudi transvecto robore pontum  
 Liquerat et fulvis proram defixit harenis.  
 Inde pedem referens conscendit passibus Alpes,  
 Lactea qua tacito labuntur vellera celo,  
 Aggeribus niveis cumulantur germina montis.

[Ninian] came to the shore of the wave-wandering sea and went aboard a ship with broad hull. The sails filled out by eager breezes flew on, until the rough timbers completed the journey and the bark quit the sea and fastened its prow in the yellow sands. Then on foot he crossed the Alps, where milky fleeces glide over the silent sky and the mountain peaks are piled high with snowy drifts.<sup>297</sup>

In Rome, the anonymous author prefigured Ninian's construction of *Candida Casa* by living inside "the shining white walls (*candentia menia*)" of Rome, visiting all

<sup>294</sup> *Miracula* 6, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 950-51.

<sup>295</sup> *Miracula* 8, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 952-53.

<sup>296</sup> *Miracula* 7, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 951-52.

<sup>297</sup> *Miracula* 2, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 946, lines 30-37, trans. MacQueen, 89.

the shrines until he returned to his “lovely native land (*patriam amenam*).”<sup>298</sup> The phrase *candentia menia* sees no parallels in earlier texts, but the anonymous author was drawing close links between the monumental architecture of Rome and Ninian’s new foundation at *Candida Casa*. From the outset of the *Miracula*, the anonymous author established a spectrum of poetic renderings for the natural world and well-constructed buildings.

Unlike descriptions of foundational moments we have discussed, the anonymous author did not describe an event of clearance but instead vividly described Ninian’s construction of *Candida Casa*: “He was the first to lay the white foundations of the shining house and raise the venerable roof of the lofty temple, where the father for all time sparkling in the brilliance of his mind shone forth, a perfect splendor like a star.”<sup>299</sup> With the exception of its early intersecting of nature and buildings, the natural world is not a recurring image in the first half of the *Miracula*. Not only the stone construction but also the conspicuous whiteness of the structure made it visible evidence of Christianization in a northern landscape.<sup>300</sup> Throughout much of the *Miracula*, the physical world was mostly composed of stone.

One crucial miracle stands out among those of healing. At the common table one evening, Ninian remarked on the absence of green vegetables. He commanded a monk to

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<sup>298</sup> *Miracula* 3, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 947, line 56, trans. MacQueen, 89.

<sup>299</sup> *Miracula* 4, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 948, lines 83-87, trans. MacQueen, 90: “Entuit clarus cunctis habitantibus istic,/ Candida qui primus nitide fundamina Casae/ Fecerat et celsi veneranda cacumina templi,/ Quo pater omni euo mentis splendore coruscans/ Sideris ad speciem perfecta nitentia fulsit.”

<sup>300</sup> According to the anonymous author, it attracted the ill as well in *Miracula* 4, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 948, lines 92-94, trans. MacQueen, 90: “This is the house of the Lord which many are eager to visit, for many who have been afflicted with a disease of long-standing hurry there (*Haec domus est domini, quam plures visere certant;/ Ardua murifici fulgent insignia templi,/ Nam curant multi morbo contracti vetusto.*)”

run to “the well-watered garden plots, and bring us back the vegetables that are springing from the earth.”<sup>301</sup> He responded that he had only just planted the seeds that day. Ninian insisted, and the man “visited the heart of the garden and saw in spite of his unbelief all kinds of plants sprouting from the seed in the earth, springing up and growing to the full verdure they would reach there in the whole period of summer.”<sup>302</sup> The scene, reminiscent of one in which Cuthbert brought about spontaneous growth in Bede’s *Historia*<sup>303</sup> also resembles the concept of spontaneous creation Bede discussed in his commentary on Genesis:<sup>304</sup>

Simulque notandum quod non prima herbarum arborumque germina de semine, sed prodire de terra; nam ad unam conditoris iussionem terra, quae arida apparebat, repente herbis compta et nemoribus est uestita florentibus, atque haec continuo sui quaeque generis poma ex sese ac semina prodixerunt.<sup>305</sup>

Likewise, it should be noted that the first shoots of the plants and the trees did not appear from seed, but from the earth. For at the one command of the Creator, the earth, which appeared as dry land, was suddenly adorned with plants and clothed with blossoming groves, and each of these immediately produced fruits and seeds of its own kind from itself.<sup>306</sup>

Aldhelm like Bede had praised the “Almighty progenitor (*Omnipotens genitor*)” who “formed the foundations of the earth by your Word (*telluris formans fundamina*

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<sup>301</sup> *Miracula* 7, *MGH PLAC* 4, 951, lines 191-93, trans. MacQueen, 93: “Geminis discurrere plantis,/ Irriguas horti glebas uisitare memento,/ Nobis de terries grassantia gramina defer.”

<sup>302</sup> *Miracula* 7, *MGH PLAC* 4, 951, lines 202-5, trans. MacQueen, 93: “Tum dicto cicius horti penetralia visit/ Ac dubius cernens cunctos de germine terre/ Herbarum flores surgendo crescere tantum, Quantum illic vernent estatis tempore toto.”

<sup>303</sup> *HE* 4.28, 436-37.

<sup>304</sup> For a discussion, see above, 261-62.

<sup>305</sup> *In Gen.* 1.1.11-13.386-94, *CCSL* 118A, 14.

<sup>306</sup> Kendall, 79-80.

verbo).”<sup>307</sup> By the time of the *Miracula*’s composition, Ninian’s miracle invoked the power of creation itself. Shoots did not appear from thin air of course, but Ninian’s feat depended upon the response of seeds to his power. With his own holiness and power over nature at stake, Ninian brought forth vegetation spontaneously from seeds. Conversely, the miracle was not part of the “companionship of animals” topos in which saints compelled animals to obey them.<sup>308</sup> The miracle accelerated a process already in motion. It depended on human manipulation of a landscape to begin with: the planting of seeds. Read metonymically, this crucial miracle was a microcosm of Pictland’s conversion.

### **The Written Landscape in Alcuin’s *York Poem***

These themes help clarify one of the major poetic sources from the period by Alcuin of York (d. 804). It has been noted that the anonymous author of the *Miracula* of Ninian was probably a pupil of Alcuin’s, and both poems share similar sources but never borrow directly from one another<sup>309</sup> even though Alcuin was clearly aware of the *Miracula*.<sup>310</sup> Both poems share an impulse to commemorate local interests and origins. Born around 740 in Northumbria and educated in York, Alcuin’s origins are otherwise obscure apart from the details provided by his student Sigwulf in the *Life* he composed in the 820s. His adult life and career, however, are well documented.<sup>311</sup> Returning from Rome in 781, he was recruited by Charlemagne to join his court of scholars soon after.

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<sup>307</sup> *MGH AA* 15, 352-53, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 103. See above, 258-59.

<sup>308</sup> Alexander, *Animals*, 44-46; see above, 231.

<sup>309</sup> Karl Strecker, who edited Alcuin’s works for *MGH*, first pointed this out in his “Zu Quellen für das Leben des heiligen Ninian,” *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde* 43 (1922): 1-26; see also Godman, *York*, xlv. This last is the text and translation I use for Alcuin’s *York Poem*, hereafter “Godman.”

<sup>310</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 273, *MGH Ep.* 4, 431-32.

<sup>311</sup> For a concise assessment, see Godman, *York*, xxxv-xxxix.

Alcuin spent the rest of his fruitful career as the master of Charlemagne's court school at Aachen and as abbot of St. Martin's in Tours with the exception of a brief visit to York in 786 and three-year return from 790 to 793.<sup>312</sup> By the time of the first major Viking attacks at Lindisfarne in June of 793, Alcuin was back at Aachen, evidenced from his letters to that unfortunate community.<sup>313</sup> The tone of these letters in particular reflects the frustration Alcuin must have felt at the violence and immorality endemic to the Northumbrian monarchy and monastic networks. Alcuin would never return to Northumbria on a permanent basis; his letters towards the close of the century indicate continued frustration with current and former kings of Northumbria.<sup>314</sup> One of Alcuin's crowning achievements, the long poem on the history, saints and kings of York written sometime in the early 780s, casts this dim view of his homeland in sharp relief. In it, Alcuin often relied on topography and York's natural landscapes to frame its history.

Alcuin's *York Poem* was perhaps the only of his works he composed in England.<sup>315</sup> As Bullough has shown, the *York Poem* drew on literary conventions of *patria* to demonstrate that "sanctity was an objective fact, demonstrated by the manner of life and the earthly achievements or by the posthumous miracles of the chosen vessels of God's grace."<sup>316</sup> Cuthbert, for example, emerges from the *York Poem* as a figure whose

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<sup>312</sup> This assessment is taken from Michael Lapidge, "Anglo-Latin Literature," in *idem*, *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600-899*, 1-36, at 21-22; and Donald Bullough, "Alcuin (c. 740-804)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), online edition May 2010 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.its.virginia.edu/view/article/298>), accessed 26 February 2014.

<sup>313</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 17, *MGH Ep.* 4, 45-49.

<sup>314</sup> Bullough, "Alcuin (c. 740-804)."

<sup>315</sup> Bullough, "Hagiography as Patriotism," 339-41; and Lapidge, "Anglo-Latin Literature," 22.

<sup>316</sup> Bullough, "Hagiography as Patriotism," 339.

cult was comparable to that of Martin of Tours.<sup>317</sup> In its surviving form the *York Poem* is

1658 lines total and can be broken down into several distinct sections:

**Table 2.6: Narrative Structure of Alcuin's *York Poem***<sup>318</sup>

lines 1-18	Preface, statement of purpose.
19-45	The Roman foundation of York, its landscape, the Roman departure and subsequent conflict between the Britons and Picts.
46-78	The <i>adventus Saxonum</i> and subsequent conflict.
79-89	Gregory the Great sends a papal mission to the English.
90-133	The kingdom of Northumbria under Edwin.
134-233	The mission of Paulinus to Northumbria, the conversion of Edwin and his high priest Coifi, and the rise of Christian York.
234-506	The reign of Oswald, his life, death, and posthumous miracles.
	The reign of Oswiu, victory over Penda.
575-645	The reign of Ecgrith and bishopric of Wilfrid I.
646-750	The life of Cuthbert with excerpts from Bede's poetic <i>Vita Cuthberti</i> .
751-846	The reign of Ecgrith, life and miracles of Æthelthryth, and the reign of Aldfrith.
847-875	Church reform in York under Bosa.
876-1007	The vision of Dryhthelm, adapted from Bede's <i>Historia</i> .
1008-1077	Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the continent and Ireland.
1077-1215	A summary of Northumbrian kings and bishops, as well as the life of John of Beverley.
1215-1250	The development of the church in York under Wilfrid II's bishopric.
1251-1287	The bishopric of Egbert and rise to archbishop.
1288-1318	The death of Bede and an assessment of his life and works.
1319-1393	The Northumbrian hermits Balthere and Echa.
1394-1596	The life of archbishop Ælberht and his development of the churches of York.
1597-1648	Alcuin's account of a vision he had of York earlier in life.
1649-1658	Final salutation.

<sup>317</sup> Bullough, "Hagiography as Patriotism," 344-48; Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," in *Ideal and Reality*, ed. Wormald, 130-53, at 148-49; *idem*, "Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St Cuthbert," in *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1989), 103-24, at 121-22; David Rollason, "Hagiography and Politics in Early Northumbria," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 95-114, at 107.

<sup>318</sup> For this outline, I have relied on that of Godman, *York*, xl-xli.

As we can see, Alcuin was continually indebted to Bede's chronology and content in the *Historia*. The narrative is moored firmly to human activity: foundation, development and decoration of churches, the lives of bishops and kings. How did Alcuin define and describe landscapes in his *York Poem*, and what role did it play? In general, Alcuin did not engage much with the natural world as a category; Alcuin's history of York was tied to the city's fine buildings and the habits of its bishops and kings to improve or decorate them. In keeping with the definition of landscapes set out at the beginning of this chapter and in the Introduction, Alcuin's depiction of York's landscapes included the physical description of the natural world near the outset of the poem and extended to the city's built spaces. Alcuin very clearly and strictly separated the natural world with the built one.

Like Bede, Alcuin framed his narrative near the outset with a description of York's surrounding landscape, centering on the Ouse, the river by which York was connected to the wider world:

Hanc piscosa suis undis interluit Usa  
 florigeros ripis praetendens undique campos;  
 collibus et siluis tellus hinc inde decora:  
 nobilibusque locis habitatio pulchra, salubris  
 fertilitate sui multos habitura colonos.

Through York flows the Ouse, its waters teeming with fish,  
 along its banks stretch fields laden with flowers,  
 all about the countryside is lovely with hills and woods,  
 and this beautiful, healthy place of noble setting  
 was destined to attract many settlers by its richness.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> *York* lines 30-34, trans. Godman, 6-7.



Alcuin deployed a similar idea to Bede's, in that the "natural beauty [of Alban's hill] had long fitted it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr."<sup>320</sup> In the *York Poem*, natural landscapes could anticipate or be naturally suited to significant events. In York's case, the Ouse's fertility predetermined the city's success. Yet from there, Alcuin largely abandoned description of the natural world in favor of commemorating York as an urban center. The few other instances in which Alcuin returned to natural images occur when, for example, he described the irresistible, flood-like power of Penda,<sup>321</sup> or when he assessed Oswald's military prowess: "Just as the cruel lion and its cubs ravage the sheepfolds, killing in its fury, devouring and tearing at the flock, so king Oswald laid low the barbarian hosts on every side."<sup>322</sup> In Oswald's case, of course, Alcuin employed a language of ferocity to indicate his effectiveness in killing pagan enemies. For Gregory the Great, Alcuin reserved gentler language:

agrorum Christi cultor deuotus unique  
 plurima perpetuae dispersit semina uitae.  
 Vomere nec solum Latios confregerat agros,  
 sed bonus atque pius peregrine cultor agelli  
 oceani tumidos ultra sulcauit aratro  
 pectora diuini fluctus gentilia uerbi  
 arida mellifluis perfundens arua fluentis,  
 de quibus aequorei potus hausere Britanni.

[Gregory was an] ardent tiller of the fields of Christ,  
 [and] he scattered abroad manifold seeds of everlasting life.  
 Not only did he plough the fields of Latium,  
 but, a kindly and pious tiller of foreign fields, far beyond the  
 reaches of the swelling ocean, with the plough of God's word

<sup>320</sup> *HE* 1.7; see above, 238-41.

<sup>321</sup> *York* lines 523-27, trans. Godman, 44-45.

<sup>322</sup> *York* lines 255-58, trans. Godman, 24-25: "Ut leo cum catulis crudelis ouilia uastat/ et pecus omne ferus mactat manditque roditque,/ haud secus Osuualdus rex strauit ubique phalanges/ barbaricas."

he furrowed too the hearts of pagans,  
on those dry fields pouring honey-sweet waters, from  
which the Britons, dwellers by the sea, quenched their thirst.<sup>323</sup>

Similarly, Cuthbert “became a teacher of the Gospel and a holy priest, filling the wastelands with flowering greenness, watering the dry meadows with eternal fountains.”<sup>324</sup> If those responsible for the conversion of Northumbria were tillers and manipulators of the landscape, hermits inhabited barren landscapes to make them fruitful. For example, Cuthbert’s hermitage on Inner Farne was “an island with little water, barren of crops and trees.”<sup>325</sup> And the hermit Balthere (d. 756) took up residence in a place “completely encircled by the ocean waves, hemmed by terrible crags and steep cliffs,” where he fought off demons.<sup>326</sup> By making holy places resemble nature, hermits turned natural places into managed Christian landscapes. Alcuin firmly distinguished between kings and bishops and their respective roles in Northumbria. To express this, he turned to images in the natural world, neatly categorized as wild and barren versus fruitful and verdant.

The real focus of Alcuin’s *York Poem* rests upon his description of sumptuously decorated churches. Within York’s “high walls and lofty towers,” kings like Edwin constructed churches with strong columns<sup>327</sup> and his successor Oswald “built churches and endowed them with fine gifts, providing precious vessels for the office of worship.

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<sup>323</sup> *York* lines 81-88, trans. Godman, 10-11.

<sup>324</sup> *York* lines 651-53, trans. Godman, 54-55: “doctor apostolicus fuit hinc et presbyter almus,/ et loca fructiferis implens inculta uirectis/ fontibus aeternis sitientia prata rigabat.”

<sup>325</sup> *York* line 657, trans. Godman, 54-55: “insula fontis inops et frugis et arboris experts.”

<sup>326</sup> *York* lines 1325-26, trans. Godman, 104-5: “Est locus undoso circumdatus undique ponto,/ rupibus horeendis praerupto et margine saeptus.”

<sup>327</sup> *York* lines 19-20, trans. Godman, 4-5: “Hanc Romana manus muris et turribus altam/ fundauit primo”; and *York* lines 216-23, trans. Godman, 22-23.

He arrayed the altars with silver, gold, and jewels, hanging on the hallowed walls silken tapestries beautifully picked out with gold leaf; chandeliers and lanterns he placed throughout the holy buildings, there to represent the starry heaven.”<sup>328</sup> Similarly, Wilfrid as bishop “added many ornaments with fine inscriptions to the holy church; having vessels of shining lustre and silver made for the holy services, covering the altar and crosses with layers of gilded silver.”<sup>329</sup> Bullough has written convincingly on the cult of Christian kings and Alcuin’s sense of loyalty to Northumbria as *patria* in the *York Poem*. Alcuin also emphasized the role of landscape in shaping York’s Christian success.<sup>330</sup> He divided the tasks evenly among its elite and monks: decoration and adornment were the preserves of kings and bishops, and to anchorites Alcuin allotted the task of manipulating the natural world.

### **Æthelwulf’s *De abbatibus* and the Making of a Christological Landscape**

By the time of Alcuin’s death in 804, a fellow Northumbrian, Æthelwulf, had also become a practitioner of crafting these interlocking languages of the natural world, buildings, and craftsmanship. Æthelwulf emulated Alcuin’s *York Poem*, but he softened Alcuin’s strict separation of natural and built worlds to produce a coherent idea of Christological landscapes. By applying similar languages to both the natural world and

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<sup>328</sup> *York* lines 275-81, trans. Godman, 26-29: “Argento, gemmis aras uestiuit et auro,/ serica parietibus tendens uelamina sacris/ auri brateolis pulchre distincta coronis/ sanctaque suspendit uarias per tecta lucernas,/ esset ut in templis caeli stellantis imago.”

<sup>329</sup> *York* lines 1222-26, trans. Godman, 96-97: “Plurima nam titulis sanctae ornamenta uenustis/ addidit ecclesiae, rutilo qui uasa decore/ apta ministeriis argentea iure sacratis/ fecit et argenti lamnis altare crucesque/ texerat auratis.”

<sup>330</sup> Bullough, “Hagiography as Patriotism,” 339-59.

the built spaces of his monastic community, Æthelwulf collapsed those categories into an image of the ideal monastic life.

Æthelwulf's 819-line poem on the foundation, succession of abbots and achievements of an unknown Northumbrian monastic community was the first known Anglo-Latin poem directly modeled on Alcuin's *York Poem*.<sup>331</sup> Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* also illuminates literary preoccupations of the natural world, holy buildings and craftsmanship. We know almost nothing about Æthelwulf's life, and certainly nothing beyond what he allowed in the poem itself: he never identified himself as having a formal role or office in his community. Æthelwulf dedicated the work to Ecgbert, bishop of Lindisfarne from 803 to 821. The monastery was founded during the reign of Osred I, between 705 and 716.<sup>332</sup> Æthelwulf identified his educators as Hyglac and Eadfrith, both only known from the poem. This is all we can know with certainty about the poem and its author.

*De abbatibus* is a window into a recurring theme in many of the sources under discussion: the meeting points of nature and craftsmanship or adornment, and the ways in which both could influence ideas of religious life. Æthelwulf's clearest debt was to Bede's *Historia abbatum* which recorded the foundations and successions of abbots at

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<sup>331</sup> Ludwig Traube first elaborated on Æthelwulf's debts to Alcuin in his *Karolingische Dichtungen* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1888), 24-25, borrowings David Howlett more recently discussed in his, "The Provenance, Date, and Structure of *de Abbatibus*," *Archæologia Æliana* 3 (1975): 121-30.

<sup>332</sup> Osred is one of the only figures in the poem about whom anything is known. Bede mentioned him in *HE* 5.18 and 5.22, 512 and 552 and identified him as a boy king, a rare occurrence in early Anglo-Saxon England: Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Routledge, 1990), 86-87. In his poetic *Vita Cuthberti*, lines 552-55, Bede enthusiastically referred to Osred as a new Josiah (himself a child-king), quoting II Reg. 22.1: "Utque nouus Iosia fideque animoque magis quam / Annis matus, nostrum regit inclitus orbem."

Wearmouth-Jarrow, but Bede's prose work had been far more concerned with historical context than Æthelwulf's was.<sup>333</sup> Æthelwulf, by contrast, provided no detail on events outside the walls of his monastery other than the dedication to Ecgberht and the reference to Osred.

*De abbatibus* can be broken down into five thematic sections:

**Table 2.7: Narrative Structure of Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*.**

lines 1-12	Introduction and short preface.
13-34	Salutation and dedication to Bishop Ecgberht of Lindisfarne (r. 705-16).
35-51	Persecution of Osred I of Northumbria (r. 705-16).
Foundation	
52-64	Introduction to Eanmund, founder of the monastery.
65-92	Eanmund takes up the monastic vocation.
93-112	Eanmund obtains a monastic teacher for the "rule."
113-182	Eanmund sends a courier to a "monk of Christ" in Ireland, for advice and a holy altar.
183-205	The courier returns to Eanmund.
Lives of the Monks	
206-269	Ultán the scribe.
270-277	Frithugils, a priest.
278-320	Cwicwine, an ironsmith.
321-394	Merhteof, a brother who died and came back to life.
395-402	The death of Eanmund.
Lives of the Abbots and Other Leaders	
403-430	Abbot Eorpwine, Eanmund's successor; his brother and successor Aldwine.
431-472	Abbot Sigbald, successor of Aldwine.
473-506	Abbot Sigwine, Sigbald's brother and successor.
507-526	Hyglac, a priest and <i>lector</i> to Æthelwulf.
527-539	Death of Abbot Sigwine.
540-578	Abbot Wulfsig, successor to Sigwine and friend of Æthelwulf.
579-596	Wynfrith, a priest in charge of vestments, and his death.
The Complete Monastery and Æthelwulf's Dream	
597-655	Æthelwulf lyrically reflects on the gifts of abbots and vows of brothers.
656-691	Æthelwulf describes the songs sung in the chapel.
692-795	Æthelwulf's dream in which he visits a heavenly space and ideal monastic community.
796-819	Final salutation.

<sup>333</sup> Catherine Cubitt, "Monastic Memory," 259.

After the salutation, the poem begins with Eanmund's foundation of the community in the early eighth century. With the house established, Æthelwulf discussed the lives of individual monks as well as the succession of abbots and their activities. The final section of the poem concerns the otherworldly in the form of a postmortem experience of one of the monks, as well as the poet's own account of his dream of an otherworldly monastic space.

### ***Scholarly Approaches towards De abbatibus***

After the 1967 publication of Alistair Campbell's critical edition and translation, few scholars took up *De abbatibus* as a subject of scholarship in itself. H.M. Taylor explored the architectural clues in Æthelwulf's description of both physical and otherworldly monastic spaces,<sup>334</sup> and more recently David Howlett provided structural analysis of *De abbatibus*, additionally speculating that the minster's location was at St. Peter's in Bywell based on the rectangular church's situation on a hill and its high walls (Map 2.2).<sup>335</sup> The scholarly consensus, however, is that Æthelwulf's community was in Crayke, just a dozen miles from York.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> H.M. Taylor, "The Architectural Interest of Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974): 163-74; David Parsons followed Taylor's analysis in a discussion of cruciform architecture in his "Architectural Description before and after Bede," *Jarrow Lecture* (1984).

<sup>335</sup> Howlett, "Structure of *De abbatibus*."

<sup>336</sup> Lapidge, "Aediluulf," 172-73; Kevin Ward agreed with this assessment and followed Howlett in his "The Monastery of the *De abbatibus*: A Reconsideration of Its Location," *Durham Archaeological Journal* 7 (1991): 123-27.

Æthelwulf was familiar with both Alcuin's *York Poem* and the anonymous *Miracula Nynie Episcopi*.<sup>337</sup> Lapidge has described *De abbatibus* as "a miniature version of Alcuin's longer poem on York" and having "Alcuinian diction" based closely on the *York Poem*.<sup>338</sup> Andy Orchard has added to this, stating boldly that Æthelwulf employed a "cut-and-paste technique" of Alcuinian diction.<sup>339</sup> As with the *Miracula* of Ninian, none of this need deter us from understanding the ways in which Æthelwulf expressed local concerns and themes in his poem. Almost a quarter century ago Lapidge observed that, "it cannot be said that much progress has been made since [Ludwig] Traube [who edited the poem in 1888] in understanding the poem itself."<sup>340</sup> This assessment is still true: where most scholars have been preoccupied with the poem's structure and quixotic attempts at locating the monastery, Æthelwulf almost never mentioned activities outside the monastery walls. Instead, he intensely engaged with the natural world and built space in order to express an idealized view of monastic life.

### ***Making a Christological Landscape***

Æthelwulf's engagements with his institutional past involved, from the moment of foundation, languages of spatial clearance, construction and adornment. Through this process, Æthelwulf described the institution of an ideal monastic community. This

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<sup>337</sup> For Æthelwulf's debts to Aldhelm, see Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 263-68; on the school of York and links with the *Miracula*, see Lapidge, "Aediluulf," especially 387-89; and Orchard, *Aldhelm*, 26.

<sup>338</sup> Lapidge, "Aediluulf," 387, 390.

<sup>339</sup> Andy Orchard, "After Aldhelm: The Teaching and Transmission of the Anglo-Latin Hexameter," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 2 (1992): 96-133, at 117.

<sup>340</sup> Lapidge, "Aediluulf," 163.

chapter opened with Æthelwulf's poetic description of his monastery's moment of clearance. The founder, Eanmund, cleared a small hill of its brambles and built a church where thieves once took refuge.<sup>341</sup> Shortly before this episode, Æthelwulf described how Eanmund had become a monk in the first place: "[Eanmund] rejoiced to bear on his own head the crown, which Christ formerly bore with his beautiful head, when he suffered and took away the thorns of evil from the world."<sup>342</sup> In the lines leading up to the moment of clearance, Eanmund approached Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne from 698 to 721, to request permission to seek a *doctor* or teacher for the fledgling community.

Æthelwulf described the unique physical setting of Lindisfarne, like Bede had, in vivid terms: "the waves desire to curl over the shore with blue-green water, yet rush to leave them bare as they go on their backward-flowing course, and the blue [waters] encircle a sacred land" at high tide."<sup>343</sup> Where Bede focused on a physical depiction of Lindisfarne, Æthelwulf embellished his description with color and ascribed action to the waves—"the waves desire (*unde cupiunt*)" to meet the shore. Once there, Eanmund "seized (*arripit*)" the "mystical words (*mystica uerba*)" of the bishop and "enclosed (*conplecit*)" them all in the "core of his heart (*penetralia cordis*)."<sup>344</sup> Æthelwulf's phrasing in this section supports viewing his larger description as Christological:

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<sup>341</sup> *DA* lines 131-38, 13.

<sup>342</sup> *DA* lines 67-69, 7-9: "gaudebatque suo capiti portare coronam,/ uertice quam Christus quondam portabat opimo,/ dum passus mundo dempsit spinet malorum."

<sup>343</sup> *DA* line 97, 12: "unde quo glaucis cupiunt crispere fluentis/ littora, quin refluis satagunt nudare meantes/ cursibus, et terram precingunt cerula sanctam." Compare this with Bede *HE* 3.3, 220-21: "As the tide ebbs and flows, this place is surrounded twice daily by the waves of the sea like and island and twice, then the shore is left dry, it becomes again attached to the mainland (*locus accedente ac recedente reumate bis cotidie instar insulae maris circumluitur undis, bis renudato litore contiguus terrae redditur*)."

<sup>344</sup> *DA* lines 101-108, 11.



Augustine had used the phrase *mystica verba* to describe the words of Christ at the Last Supper,<sup>345</sup> an instance Alcuin quoted in his commentary on John.<sup>346</sup> The phrase also had currency in the context of England's conversion. Gregory the Great's epitaph as recorded by Bede extolled the pope's *mystica verba* which led him to convert the English.<sup>347</sup> The dual meanings of *mystica verba* of which Æthelwulf was probably aware—eucharistic and evangelistic—were central to Æthelwulf's foundational scene: for Eanmund, the *mystica verba* were commodities to be obtained and enclosed. These images of enclosing and encircling were fresh for the audience when Æthelwulf described the moment of foundation in which Eanmund was to clear the hill of thorns, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter: "thickets of thorns crown this place with leaves (*hunc spinæ spissa cum fronde coronant*)."<sup>348</sup>

On the surface level, Æthelwulf identified some environmental challenges inherent in establishing a physical monastic community.<sup>349</sup> On a symbolic level, Bede had described the monastic tonsure in the *Historia ecclesiastica* as the "image of the unending crown (*figura coronæ perpetis*)."<sup>350</sup> This image also recalls Bede's description of Alban's hill outside Verulamium which was "adorned, indeed clothed, on all sides

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<sup>345</sup> Augustine, *In Iohannis euanvelium tractatus* 27.1.10-11, *CCSL* 36, 270: "This therefore he teaches and admonishes us with mystical words, so that we might be in his body [and] in his members under his head, eating his flesh, [and] not abandoning his unity (*Hoc ergo nos docuit et admonuit mysticis uerbis, ut simus in eius corpore sub ipso capite in membris eius, edentes carnem eius, non relinquentes unitatem eius*)."

<sup>346</sup> Alcuin, *Commentaria in sancti Iohannis Euangelium*, *PL* 100: col. 836: "Hoc ergo nos docuit, et admonuit mysticis verbis, ut simus in eius corpore, sub ipso capite in membris eius, edentes carnem eius, non relinquentes unitatem eius."

<sup>347</sup> Bede, *HE* 2.1.

<sup>348</sup> *DA* line 134, 13.

<sup>349</sup> These difficulties were a common theme in Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture from the period, as we shall see below, 291-98.

<sup>350</sup> *HE* 5.22, 552.

with wild flowers.”<sup>351</sup> Bede intensified the image on an exegetical level as well: in his commentaries *De Tabernaculo* and *De Templum*, setim or acacia wood was incorruptible and could only be used once its thorns had been stripped—or “when the thorn-thickets of sin have been cleared away.”<sup>352</sup> The Ark of the Covenant too was made with setim because Christ’s body was free of impurities (that is, thorns).<sup>353</sup> In all these cases, products of the natural world were fashioned into something sacred. Most importantly, as we have seen, Æthelwulf’s image of the thorny hill directly invoked the crown of thorns—the *corona spinis*—of Christ’s passion.<sup>354</sup> Thus Æthelwulf suggested links among the tonsure (as Christ’s crown of thorns), the enclosing of Lindisfarne by the North Sea and the literal crowning of his community’s hill with thorns.

Later in the poem when discussing the community’s abbots, Æthelwulf returned to the image of a crowned place, applying similar language to his description of the improvements made under Sigbald’s abbacy: “and the holy men crown [the altar] with foliage, whenever they enclose within the *buxus* the precious gift of life.”<sup>355</sup> In Æthelwulf’s poem, the *buxus* was a container for the host presumably named for its material, the box tree (*buxus*), mentioned in Is. 60.13: “The glory of Libanus shall come to thee, the Ar tree, and the box tree, and the pine tree together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary: and I will glorify the place of my feet (*Gloria Libani ad te veniet*,

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<sup>351</sup> *HE* 1.7, 32-33: “Herbarum floribus depictus, immo usquequaque uestutus.”

<sup>352</sup> *De Tab.* 1.254-56, *CSEL* 119A, 11; trans. Holder, 9: “cum expurgatis peccatorum spinetis.”

<sup>353</sup> *De Tab.* 1.320-31, *CCSL* 199A, 13. Compare this with Jerome (*In Ezech.* 12.31.13-22), whom Bede knew to have theorized that setim wood could not be burnt (*CCSL* 75, 601).

<sup>354</sup> See above, Table 2.1, 183.

<sup>355</sup> *DA* lines 437-38, 35: “sanctique fronde coronant,/ dum buxis claudent pretiose munera uitae.”

*cupressus, ulmus et abies simul, ad ornandum locum sanctuarii mei; et locum pedum meorum glorificabo.)*” Jerome had understood the *buxus* along with the pine and the other trees of Is. 60.13 as gifts of spiritual grace.<sup>356</sup> Gregory the Great allegorically described the box tree of Isaiah as one of the evergreens symbolizing eternal truths, trees that “hold onto the faith of perpetual verdure (*fidem perpetuae uiriditatis tenent*).”<sup>357</sup> Isidore identified boxwood as a possible material for oil vessels.<sup>358</sup> In Anglo-Saxon England, the box, along with yew and other evergreens, could be substituted for palms in Palm Sunday rituals.<sup>359</sup> Later Anglo-Saxon evidence points to a tradition claiming that the placard reading *Hic est rex Iudeorum* on Christ’s cross was made out of boxwood.<sup>360</sup> In earlier

<sup>356</sup> Jerome, *Commentarii in Isaiam* 12, CCSL 73, 459: “iuxta hebraicum et ceteros interpretes, cedrus setta et myrtus, et lignum oliuae et abies et ulmus et buxus simul. quae uarietates arborum, diuersitatem significant gratiae spiritualis.” Box trees and shrubs were also mentioned in charters as boundaries; see Hooke, *Trees*, 176-77, 202, as well as in place-names: *ibid*, 264-65.

<sup>357</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in euangelia* 1.20.13, CCSL 141, 166.

<sup>358</sup> Isidore, *Etym.* 20.7, clarified that what people in Latin called the *buxus*, Greeks called the πύξος. Campbell, *De abbatibus*, 34 for this reason probably translated *buxus* as “pyx,” a liturgical term for the eucharistic container.

<sup>359</sup> Hooke, *Trees*, 102: “Palm Sunday itself might be known as ‘Branch’, ‘Sallow’, ‘Willow’ or ‘Yew’ Sunday. The earliest record of the hallowing of fronds was in the mid-eighth century, enjoined in a pontifical of Archbishop Egbert of York.” Hooke does not cite Isidore, who in *Etym.* 17.53 identifies the boxwood thus: “The box tree has a Greek name partly corrupted in Latin, for in the Greek it is called πύξος. It is an evergreen tree and useful for receiving the shapes of letters because of the smoothness of the wood. Whence also Scripture [Is. 30.8]: ‘Write upon the box’ (*Buxus Graecum nomen est, ex parte a Latinis corruptum; πύξος enim appellatur apud eos. Arbor semper uiuens et leuitate materiae elementorum apicibus apta. Unde et Scriptura: ‘Scribe buxo’*).” Translated by Barney, *Isidore*, 347.

<sup>360</sup> Karen Jolly, “Tapping the Power of the Cross: Who and for Whom?” in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Catherine Karkov, Sarah Keefer, and Karen Jolly (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 58-79, at 62: the eleventh-century *Ælfwine’s Prayerbook* includes “devotions to the cross and items some modern readers might consider more remedies than prayers.” One such remedy can be found in Beate Günzel, ed., *Ælfwine’s Prayerbook* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1993), no. 55, 144:

“[1] De mensium [mensura?] saluatoris

Anglo-Saxon England, boxwood was prized for sophisticated carving—not surprising, given Æthelwulf’s praise for his church’s *buxus*.<sup>361</sup> For Æthelwulf, though, it was part of the material makeup of his monastic church, enclosing the body of Christ much like Eanmund enclosed *mystica verba* in his heart.

The context of this observation is a vivid description of the church built under Sigbald’s abbacy, who “gave several gifts to God: that golden chalice glitters, which he gave in his piety to the church of the great mother, all covered with gems, shining, made with markings of silver.”<sup>362</sup> The eucharistic accoutrements and material components of Sigbald’s church provided reference points for Æthelwulf’s description. By crowning the altar with vegetation, Æthelwulf deliberately invoked the foundational moment for the community when they had cleared the hill of thorns and crowned it with a monastery.

In *De abbatibus*, Æthelwulf described the Northumbrian landscape with an overlay of eucharistic and Christological meaning. Eanmund encountered a impure space and cleansed it, but Æthelwulf did not leave it there: he described a process of landscape conversion by presenting it in the context of a tonsured head. That monastic image had its

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Haec figura sedecies multiplicata perficit mensuram Domini nostri Iesu Christi corporis et est assumpta a ligno pretioso dominice.

[2] Crux Christi de .iiii. lignis facta est, qui uocantur cipressus et cedrus et pinus et buxus. Sed buxus non fuit in cruce, nisi tabula de illo ligno super frontem Christi fuerat, in qua conscriptum Iudei illud titulum habuerunt: ‘Hic est rex Iudeorum’.”

<sup>361</sup> Hooke, *Trees*, 264. No examples from the period survive. One survival from the later Anglo-Saxon period, however, is the Uttoxeter Casket, an eleventh-century boxwood casket—“most likely a reliquary”—carved with scenes from the life of Christ: Catherine Karkov, *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), 85-86, at 86. We cannot rule out that the Uttoxeter Casket could have been a container for the Eucharist, since Æthelwulf is the only author to my knowledge to use *buxus* as a stand-alone term for a eucharistic vessel.

<sup>362</sup> *DA* lines 448-51, 37: “presbyter iste deo concessit plurima dona:/ aureus ille calix gemmis splendescit opertus,/ argentine nitens constat fabricatus maclis,/ quem dedit ille pius magnae genetricis ad aulam.”

own set of complications: thorns and entanglements were far from straightforward images in the contexts of exegesis and visual culture. To clarify the image, the poet explained that God would “place crowns of flowers on [the monks’] heads,”<sup>363</sup> much like Alban’s reward for martyrdom.<sup>364</sup> As noted at the outset of this chapter, Æthelwulf’s use of *corona* suggests the symbolic nature of the hill as a head crowned with thorns and then cleared of them. Æthelwulf crowned it with a monastic community—the “summits of a beautiful temple (*prepulchri culmina templi*).”<sup>365</sup>

### ***Thinking with Entanglement: Æthelwulf, Vegetation and the Rothbury Cross***

Æthelwulf’s image of a hill crowned with thorns is thus central to this chapter. Thick vegetation is also among the most common motifs of Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture. As “perhaps the last literary achievement of the so-called Northumbrian Renaissance” which began around the time of Benedict Biscop’s foundation of Wearmouth-Jarrow in the late seventh century, *De abbatibus* was composed in a time of widespread artistic activity as well.<sup>366</sup> Recent scholarship has suggested that non-figural sculpture in this context deserves more attention.<sup>367</sup> Vegetation and vine-scrolls, both inhabited and uninhabited by animals or humans, form a major component of these non-figural

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<sup>363</sup> *DA* line 182, 17: “florigerasque leuant capiti sine fine coronas.”

<sup>364</sup> See above, 236.

<sup>365</sup> *DA* line 143, 13.

<sup>366</sup> Fred Orton, Ian Wood and Clare Lees, *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 121.

<sup>367</sup> See e.g. Jane Hawkes, “Design and Decoration: Re-visualizing Rome in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture,” in *Rome across Time and Space: Cultural Transmission and the Exchange of Ideas*, c. 500-1400, ed. Claudia Bolgia and Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 203-22.

themes.<sup>368</sup> Many, like the so-called Acca's Cross at Hexham, which dates from the second quarter of the eighth century, contain uninhabited vines of fine quality (Fig. 2.1). Others, however, contain fauna and human figures. Among the surviving stones, animals were often depicted in the thickets of vines, but an early eighth-century frieze fragment from Jarrow includes a miniature version of the entanglement seen on the crosses at Rothbury and Bewcastle, but with a human figure entrapped in the thickets, suggestive of bodily danger (Fig. 2.2).<sup>369</sup> A similar scene of the entrapment of a boar can be found on the decorative hanging bowl deposited with the St. Ninian's Isle treasure from the late eighth or early ninth centuries.<sup>370</sup> Strikingly, Æthelwulf deployed a comparable scene with a different meaning when he advised his audience to "submerge yourself in the waves full of seaweed (*sitiens se algosis mergat in undis*)" as a metaphor for intellectual immersion.<sup>371</sup> Such themes were common on Anglo-Saxon stone cross shafts, and scholarly consensus is that free-standing stone crosses were first introduced in Northumbria, replacing wooden types like that of Oswald at Heavenfield.<sup>372</sup> Given these

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<sup>368</sup> For a discussion, see Karkov, *Art*, 61-66.

<sup>369</sup> See Jarrow 20, in Rosemary Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) I.1: 115. For a brief discussion, see Karkov, *Art*, 56-57, 63. The scene may depict the Hebrew scriptural story of Absalom, David's third son who rebelled against his father and, on the eve of battle, rode under an oak tree which caught him by the hair; he was entangled and killed by David's nephew Joab: I Sam. 18.9-15.

<sup>370</sup> David Wilson, "The Art and Archaeology of Bedan Northumbria," in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Robert Farrell, B.A.R. 46 (London: B.A.R. British Series, 1978), 1-22, plate II; and Roberta Frank, "The Boar on the Helmet," in *Aedificia Nova: Studies in Honor of Rosemary Cramp*, ed. Catherine Karkov and Helen Damico (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), 76-88.

<sup>371</sup> *DA* line 513, 441: "*sitiens se algosis mergat in undis*."

<sup>372</sup> This is the scholarly consensus: William Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1927), 5; Nancy Edwards, "The Origins of the Free-Standing Stone Cross in Ireland: Imitation or Innovation?," *Bulletin of the Board*

shared motifs, Æthelwulf's poem can and should be seen in the context of Northumbria's eighth- and ninth-century artistic production.



**Fig. 2.2** (above): Jarrow Fragment.

**Fig. 2.1** (left): Acca's Cross, Hexham shaft, D (narrow).

Among the earliest known surviving stone shafts is the Rothbury Cross from the second quarter of the eighth century, itself evocative of the encirclement and entanglement so prominent in Æthelwulf's poem.<sup>373</sup> Three fragments of the cross still survive: the base of the cross, the top of the cross shaft and part of the cross head. The cross head depicts a Crucifixion scene (Figs. 2.3-4); below it, on a broad side (A) of the cross shaft, is a depiction of Christ in Majesty above an Ascension scene on the base (Figs. 2.5 and 2.9). The narrow sides (B and D) of the shaft feature vines and tendrils

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of *Celtic Studies* 32 (1985): 393-410, at 399; and Douglas MacLean, "King Oswald's Wooden Cross at Heavenfield in Context," in *Insular Tradition*, ed. Karkov, 79-97.

<sup>373</sup> For the dating of the Rothbury Cross, see Cramp, *Corpus* I, 176-77; and *idem.*, "Early Northumbrian Sculpture," *Jarrow Lecture* (1965), where she argues for the cross' production from a Jarrow workshop (like the Ruthwell Cross).

with berry bunches in which animals are tangled,<sup>374</sup> as well as a crowd of eighteen people facing the viewer (Figs. 2.6 and 2.8). On the other side (C), opposite the Christ in Majesty, are two scenes from Christ's life, possibly the healing of the blind man and the woman with issue of blood (Fig. 2.7), although some scholars disagree with Cramp's initial analysis.<sup>375</sup> The base, which now serves as the pedestal for the baptismal font at Rothbury, depicts the Ascension scene just mentioned, a continuation of side B's depiction of animals struggling in vegetation (Fig. 2.10), and a vivid hell scene in which animals and humans struggle with thick coils of reptiles (Fig. 2.12). Themes of entanglement are intensified by the interlacing prevalent on non-figural sides of the Rothbury Cross (Fig. 2.11). As a theme, entanglement was ubiquitous in cross shaft decoration, suggesting an interplay between nature and stone central to Æthelwulf's description of his community's moment of foundation.

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<sup>374</sup> Compare this with similar scenes on the Bewcastle Cross, *Corpus* I.ii, 61-72.

<sup>375</sup> For alternative interpretations, see Jane Hawkes, "The Miracle Scene on the Rothbury Cross," *Archæologia Æliana* 5 (1989): 207-10; *idem*, "Sacraments in Stone: The Mysteries of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), 351-70; and *idem*, "The Rothbury Cross: An Iconographic Bricolage," *Gesta* 35 (1996): 77-94, especially 85-87. Additionally, Brendan Cassidy has interpreted the Raising of Lazarus as a depiction of the Dream of St. Joseph in his "The Dream of St. Joseph on the Anglo-Saxon Cross from Rothbury," *Gesta* 35 (1996): 149-55. On the possible depiction of the woman with issue of blood in the wider context of gender studies, see Carol Farr, "Questioning the Monuments: Approaches to Anglo-Saxon Sculpture through Gender Studies," in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. Catherine Karkov (London: Garland, 1999), 375-402.

<sup>375</sup> These themes were often conflated in eighth-century insular art. See Hawkes, "Bricolage," 89.





**Fig. 2.3:** Rothbury Cross head, A (broad).



**Fig. 2.4:** Rothbury Cross head, C (broad).



**Fig. 2.5:** Rothbury Cross shaft, A (broad).



**Fig. 2.6:** Rothbury Cross shaft, B (narrow).



**Fig. 2.7:** Rothbury Cross shaft, C (broad).



**Fig. 2.8:** Rothbury Cross shaft, D (narrow).



**Fig. 2.9:** Rothbury Cross base, A (broad).



**Fig. 2.10:** Rothbury Cross base, B (narrow).



**Fig. 2.11:** Rothbury Cross, C (broad).



**Fig. 2.12:** Rothbury Cross, D (narrow).

The Rothbury Cross is an ideal expression of the sort of ambiguity Æthelwulf deployed in his description of thorny vegetation. Depending on the viewer's perspective, tendrils alternatively suggested entanglement, eternal punishment or simple verdure. For example, the base depicts both the damned in hell (Fig. 2.12) and a vine scroll inhabited by fauna, some of which, while entrapped, nuzzle berry bunches (Fig. 2.10), a common theme in Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture.<sup>376</sup> Since the cross is fragmentary, missing a large middle section of the central shaft, one can only guess what the lost scenes would have been. But the extant fragments suggest a full side of vine scrolls inhabited by animals for most or all of side B (Figs. 2.6 and 2.10), much like the complete east face of the

<sup>376</sup> Compare this, most notably, with the Tree of Life with birds on the east side of the Bewcastle Cross (*Cramp* I.2, 61-74). See also Auckland St Andrew 1 (Durham, late eighth, early ninth century; *Corpus* I.1, 37-41); Escomb 1 (Durham, early ninth century; *Corpus* I.1, 77); Hart 7 (Durham, c. 825-50; *Corpus* I.1 95); Nunnykirk (Newcastle, early ninth century; *Corpus* I.1, 214-15).

Ruthwell Cross or Acca's Cross at Hexham (Fig. 2.1).<sup>377</sup> Although fragmentary, the surviving pieces suggest a Christological sequence, with side D taking on universal Christian cosmology with souls in heaven towards the top (Fig. 2.8) and the damned in hell at the base (Fig. 2.12).

Entanglement is the driving theme of side B. On side B, though, both extant scenes (Figs. 2.6 and 2.10) echo the design of the hell scene on side D (Fig. 2.12). All three panels are artistic studies in entanglement and mirror each other in shape and design; both reptiles and vines are similarly ribbed to suggest their texture and movement. On the whole, these competing images play upon the themes of entanglement and vegetation: on the one hand, mortals struggle in the snares of judgment (side D), and on the other, animals peacefully inhabit their environments (side B). Vegetation even invades the scene of Christ in Majesty, as stalks and buds flank Christ's head (Fig. 2.5). Natural and scriptural worlds collided with one another. Taken together, these scenes of healing, ascension and judgment constitute a bricolage of biblical history, Christology and the natural world. All of these elements operate in Æthelwulf's expression of a Christological landscape in his foundation story.

### *Æthelwulf's Hill as a Topography of Holiness*

The monastery's location on a hill is the other major topographical component of Æthelwulf's foundational scene. It is possible that Æthelwulf was aware of Bede's transmission of exegetical traditions. For Bede, topographical heights could indicate proximity to God. In his commentary on Samuel, Bede described Mount Ephraim (whose

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<sup>377</sup> For an illustration, see Cramp I.1, 218, fig. 20.

etymology he explained as “growing”) as the “heights . . . on the fruitful and crop-yielding mountain.”<sup>378</sup> Of the Ascension, Bede observed that “the place also was appropriate, for he who was born as a man in a humble little town returned to heaven from a high mountain.”<sup>379</sup> The construction of the Temple on a mountain also mirrored the soul’s journey up God’s mountain, an idea Bede borrowed from Ambrose and Gregory the Great.<sup>380</sup> Elsewhere in his homilies, Bede made an overt connection between topographical heights and holiness.<sup>381</sup> In Bede’s view, Mount Sinai, as the meeting place between divine and mortal, anticipated the Ascension. For Bede, “the height of the place” directly informed “how lofty is the law which he is receiving, and how far removed from human teaching.”<sup>382</sup> Similarly, the Mosaic Law revealed there represented the “height of perfection” along with the cloud that covered the mountain: “Just as the mountain upon which Moses received the law designates the height of the perfection that was written down in that law, so does the cloud which covered the mountain suggest the grace of divine protection, which is enjoyed more and more the higher one ascends in order to

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<sup>378</sup> Bede, *In Samuelis* 1.16-17, *CCSL* 119, 11: “excelsa . . . de monte frugifero et crescente.”

<sup>379</sup> Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum* 1.97, *CCSL* 121, 27: “Nam et locus congruit, dum is qui in humili ciuitatila natus est homo de monte sublimi regressus est ad caelum.” I am using the translation of Lawrence Martin, *The Venerable Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 13. Hereafter “Martin.”

<sup>380</sup> Bede, *De Templ.* 1.218-27, *CCSL* 119A, 152. Compare this with Ambrose, *Expositio Euangelii Secundum Lucum* 5.41, *CCSL* 14, 149-50 and Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* 30.19.64, *CCSL* 143B, 1534-35, in which ascending a mountain symbolized prayer and study of the scriptures. In 5.46, Ambrose reminded his readers that one should then descend the mountain to teach, an idea also found in Augustine, *Serm.* 78.6, *PL* 38: cols. 492-93.

<sup>381</sup> See *Hom.* 2.8 and 2.15.135, in which Bede asserts that the universal church is constructed on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.

<sup>382</sup> *De Tab.* 1.15-16, *CCSL* 119A, 5, trans. Holder, 1: “ex altitudine loci colligat quam celsa quantumue ab humanis secreta doctrinis sit lex quam accipit.”

search out the wonders of God's law, as the eyes of one's heart are opened."<sup>383</sup> God staged the scene at Sinai "so that it might be evident *even from the topography of the place* that he was giving them lofty things, whether commandments to live by or rewards by way of recompense."<sup>384</sup>

Topography, then, could be a crucial component of divine communication. In close proximity to this discussion, Bede compared Sinai's altitude with the offerings that ascended to God in the Tabernacle; rites of purification resembled setim wood cleared of its thorns—a further parallel with Æthelwulf's treatment of the hill.<sup>385</sup> Similar resonances abound in the *Miracula* of Ninian and the later *Hymnus Sancti Nynie Episcopi*, possibly by the same poet. In the *Miracula*, the poet described *Candida Casa* as "the place where the lofty walls of the sacred temple shine brightly (*praecelsa nitent sacрати menia templi*)."<sup>386</sup> Similarly, in the *Hymnus*, God is "sweet in heaven's citadel (*blandus in arce poli*)."<sup>387</sup> The vocabulary resonates clearly with Æthelwulf's descriptions of built space, especially in the context of Eanmund's construction of "lofty walls."<sup>387</sup> Æthelwulf's monastery was a "shining city" whose "walls seemed to touch the dewy clouds."<sup>388</sup> For

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<sup>383</sup> *De Tab.* 1.102-7, *CCSL* 119A, 7, trans. Holder, 4: "Sicut mons in quo accepit legem Moyses altitudinem perfectionis quae in eadem lege erat conscribenda designat, ita nubes qua mons tectus est gratiam diuinae insinuat protectionis qua tanto amplius quisque fruitur quanto altius ad scrutanda mirabilia de lege Dei reuelatis oculis cordis ascendit."

<sup>384</sup> *De Tab.* 1.26-28, *CCSL* 119A, 5, trans. Holder, 2: "ut ex loci etiam situ patesceret quia sublimia illis uel mandate uiuendi uel praemia daret, remunerandi iuxta illud psalmistae, 'Iustitia tua sicut montes Dei'." Emphasis added.

<sup>385</sup> *De Tab.* 1. 254-56, *CCSL* 119A, 11.

<sup>386</sup> *Miracula* 12, *MGH PLAC* 4, 956, line 347, trans. MacQueen, 121.

<sup>387</sup> *DA* line 143, 13: "pious [Eanmund] perfected the heights of a most beautiful temple (*perficit inde pius prepulchri culmina templi*)."

<sup>388</sup> *DA* lines 706-7, 57: "subito nimium conspeximus urbem./ rorifluas muri cernuntur lambere nubes."

Æthelwulf, the hill on which the monastery was founded anticipated the loftiness of the structure's walls. Landscape and structure harmonized.

### *Crafting the Holy*

In light of these traditions, Æthelwulf depicted his community's hill as a meeting point between God and monk. Not only this, but he charged the landscape with scriptural weight: the hill's height, thorns and natural beauty indicated its fitness for monastic life. From the outset, the community flourished. Æthelwulf briefly described the lives of some of its notable abbots and inmates, consistently preoccupied with craftsmanship and decoration of the community's spaces. Where the beginning of the poem had emphasized the role of the landscape in the monastery's foundation, craftsmanship and adornment of built space occupies much of the rest. Altogether, descriptions of sacred space and decorative arts (of chalices, silver patens, decorations and the like) occupy about 35 percent of Æthelwulf's 819 lines.<sup>389</sup> For example, Æthelwulf devoted 63 lines to Ultán, a decorator of manuscripts (206-69) and 42 to Cwicwine, an ironsmith (278-320). These makers of holy objects were the heroes of Æthelwulf's narrative.

Æthelwulf's section on Ultán is a hagiographic work in miniature. His life can be divided into three equal parts: his career as a scribe and decorator of books, a death fitting for a holy man, and a posthumous miracle of healing. Pivotal to Ultán's life, though was his ornamentation of books: "He was a blessed priest of the Irish people, and he was able to ornament books with fair marking, and with this art he rendered (*reddit*) the sight of

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<sup>389</sup> That is, roughly 280 lines out of 819, leaving incidental mentions of these subjects aside. See e.g. lines 143-50, 206-69, 278-320, 431-54, 605-55, 700-95.

the letters beautiful individually, so that no modern scribe would be able to match him.”<sup>390</sup> It is difficult to understand from Æthelwulf’s wording whether he means Ultán was an “illuminator” of books as we understand it or if he was simply an accomplished scribe. The verb *reddo* could indicate “render,” “translate,” or simply “reproduce.” Lawrence Nees has suggested that any interpretation of Ultán’s role be kept flexible.<sup>391</sup> It is clear in any case that Ultán’s expertise was the production and ornamenting (*orno*) of holy books.

Æthelwulf described the life of a less exceptional monk, Cwicwine the ironsmith (*ferrarius*). Cwicwine was instrumental to the quotidian existence of the community. His craft was closely linked with daily liturgy: “when the psalms of Matins had been well completed, then the hammer rang on the anvil as the metal was struck, and as it reverberated and smote the empty air, it adorned the table of the brothers by beating out vessels.”<sup>392</sup> Again we return to that charged verb, *orno*: both Aldhelm and Æthelwulf described church space as having “many ornaments (*plurima ornamenta*).”<sup>393</sup> Bede encouraged the church to “imitate the material ornamentation of the tabernacle or temple by the devout and pure adornment of heart and body” in his commentary *De*

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<sup>390</sup> *DA* lines 209-13, 19: “Presbiter iste fuit Scottorum gente beatus,/ comptis qui potuit notis ornare libellos,/ atque apicum speciem uiritim sic reddit amoenam/ hac arte, ut nullus posit se aequare modernus scriptor.”

<sup>391</sup> Lawrence Nees, “Ultán the Scribe,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 127-46, especially 127-34.

<sup>392</sup> *DA* lines 302-5, 25-27: “Hinc matutinis completes quam bene psalmis,/ continuo insonuit percussis cudo metallis/ malleus, et uacuas uolitans cum uerberat auras/ iam coenam fratrum peditans culdarios ornat.”

<sup>393</sup> Aldhelm, *Carm. eccl.* 3, *MGH AA* 15, 18, line 69; and *DA* line 623, 51.



*Tabernaculo*.<sup>394</sup> More immediately relevant, Benedict Biscop had “adorned (*ornat*)” the church at Jarrow with icons and virtues alike according to Bede.<sup>395</sup> In the context of creation, Bede had described vegetation as “the adornment of the world (*ornatus mundi*),” and creatures in similar terms: “After the face of heaven was adorned with lights on the fourth day, portions of the lower world, namely, the waters and the air, were fittingly adorned on the fifth day with these creatures that move with the breath of life, because these elements are connected with each other and with heaven by a certain family relationship, as it were.”<sup>396</sup> Æthelwulf adapted this language of adornment in his description of the various decorations of the monastic church in the final third of the poem. The abbots and inmates were

multisque bonis ornare parabant.  
 haec est illa domus, porrectis edita muris,  
 quam sol per uitreas illustrans candidus oras  
 limpida prenitido diffundit lumina templo,  
 plurima cum sancti sunt ornamenta delubri,  
 hic tamen haec paucis liceat memorare canendo.  
 ut celum rutilat stellis fulgentibus omnes,  
 sic tremulas uibrant subter testudine templi  
 ordinibus uariis funalia pendula flammis . . .  
 atque hos conspicui preuelat ductilis auri  
 lamina, sic sancti comunt altaria templi.  
 ast quidam domine mensam, que nobilis ortu,  
 gemmarum flammis et fuluo uestit in auro.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> *De Tab.* 2.68-69, *CCSL* 119A, 43, trans. Holder, 46: “si ornatum tabernaculi siue templi materialem religioso mundi cordis et corporis cultu imitemur.”

<sup>395</sup> Bede, *Historia abbatum* 10 in Plummer, *Opera*, 374.

<sup>396</sup> *In Gen.* 1.1.11-13, line 387, trans. Kendall, 85: “Post ornatam quarta die caeli faciem luminaribus, ornantur consequenter quinta inferioris mundi partes, aeuae uidelicet et aer, his quae spiritu uitae mouentur, quia et haec elementa quadam quasi cognatione et sibi ad inuicem et caelo copulantur.”

<sup>397</sup> *DA* lines 619-44, 49-51.

active to adorn [the church] with gifts and many good things. This is the house lofty and with long walls, which the shining sun illuminates through glass windows [and] diffuses soft light in the bright temple, [and] since the ornaments of the holy shrine are many, it should be allowed for me as I sing to mention the following briefly. As all the sky shines with gleaming stars, so beneath the roof of the church hanging torches dangle their tremulous flames in a number of rows . . . And these [books] are covered by plate of bright and ductile gold, [and] similarly men adorned the altars of the holy temple. And somebody dressed the altar of our lady, who is noble by origin, in the flames of gems and in yellow gold.

Æthelwulf commemorated the work of a craftsman in keeping with his theme of creation and production of materials and morality. As the sun filtered through the glass windows, nature intersected with craft. A cluster of texts already discussed help illuminate a shared preoccupation with craftsmanship. When, for example, Ninian was near death he comforted himself that “the potter’s kiln shakes the pots with the force of the flame, but cruel burdens are the trials of just men.”<sup>398</sup> While Ninian’s suffering invoked the metaphor of God as potter (Jer. 18.1-6), an image more clearly combining nature and craft emerges from Aldhelm’s *enigma* on the bee, whose hive and combs “surpass the metalwork of smiths.”<sup>399</sup> Such images were linked with scriptural resonances of purification and process: “Take away the dross from the silver, and there comes out a vessel for the smith.”<sup>400</sup> For Æthelwulf, the activities of the inmates constituted a typology of holiness that included abbots but was not exclusive to them. The links between Ultán the scribe and Cwicwine the smith were firm: both engaged in acts of creation at a fundamental level. By employing the verb *orno* in each case, Æthelwulf

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<sup>398</sup> *Miracula* 9, *MGH PLAC* 4, 953, lines 262-3, trans. MacQueen, 95: “Vasa quatit figuli fornax vi feruida flamme,/ Ac homines iustos seruissima pondera coquent.”

<sup>399</sup> *Enig.* 20, *MGH AA* 15, 106, line 5, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic*, 74: “Atque carens manibus fabrorum vinco metalla.”

<sup>400</sup> Prov. 25.4: “Aufer scorias de argento, et egredietur uas pro argentario.”

argued that they had a common goal. “This is the house,” Æthelwulf insisted, “which the shining sun illuminates through glass windows.” The cooperation of nature and human-made craft constituted his idea of a monastery.

Æthelwulf’s account of the *ferrarius* Cwicwine becomes clearer when we consider the parallels between his death and that of Ninian. The latter, immediately after the description of a potter’s kiln, “departed from his pure body and passed through the clear heights of the star-studded heavens . . . he was immediately surrounded by the shining host, and now blazing bright in snow-white vestment, like Phosphorus in the sky, he was carried in angel arms beyond the stars of heaven.”<sup>401</sup> In *De abbatibus*, Cwicwine’s spirit was carried away by an resplendent angelic band, “exceeding even the light of the sun, and soaring with the chorus it entered the heights above. A monk, Æthwine, saw these things . . . and commended the soul in the Lord to the stars. Therefore, when the angelic bands singing songs ascended above the light of the sun on high, the heavens were closed.”<sup>402</sup> These examples see precedents in Bede’s treatment of the deaths of Eorcengota and Hild in the *Historia* as well.<sup>403</sup> By imparting such a death scene to a monk in his community, Æthelwulf argued for the importance of craftsmanship as an extraordinary vocation.

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<sup>401</sup> *Miracula* 9, *MGH PLAC* 4, 953-54, lines 267-72, trans. MacQueen, 95: “Spiritus atque sacer casto de corpore tractus/ Limpida stelligeri penetrabat culmina celi./ Ergo ubi in vitalis orientes liquerat artus/ Spiritus, extimplo praecinctus agmine claro/ Tegmine iam niveo fulgens ceu fosforus axe/ Angelicis vectus ulnis super astra polorum.”

<sup>402</sup> *DA* lines 313-19, 27: “superans iam lumina solis,/ cumque choro uolitans superas penetrauit in arces./ Aethuinus haec monachus dum cernit dicere grates/ incipit, atque animam domino commendat in astra./ ergo ubi trans celsi conscendunt lumina solis/ angelici cunei modulantes carmina, caelum/ clauditur extimplo . . .”

<sup>403</sup> *HE* 3.8 and 4.23, respectively.

As a maker of fine books, one of Ultán's posthumous miracles involved multicolored birds setting upon his skull during his disinterment. The earth

ossa sacrata pii promuntur corpora patris  
 uisceribus terrae, fundo rapiuntur opimo.  
 ossibus hinc lotis portabant lintea munda  
 solis in aspectu exuuias' cum luce repente  
 adueniunt uolucres gemine, quae lintea plantis  
 contingunt pariter; uario permixta colore  
 terga ueranda nitent; modulantes carmina rostris,  
 concinnunt pulchre miranda ad gaudia cunctis,  
 insper atque alis sancti caluaria uelant.

The body of the pious father yielded his sacred bones from the depths of the earth, [and] they were taken from the rich ground. Then the bones were washed, and the remains were carried in clean cloths in the light of the sun. Suddenly two birds came in sunbeams and settled on the cloths; the backs of both these amazing creatures shone, with various colors mixed in them; modulating songs with their beaks, they sang beautifully to the wondrous joy of all, and they also covered the head of the holy man with their wings.<sup>404</sup>

They remained there all day singing, until a dying monk requested the hand of the scribe—literally, the *pictor*. Once he was healed, the birds disappeared into the sky.

Where once the *pictor* had decorated books, now it healed the dying; the *pictor* still created holy things. Ultán manufactured sacred objects and Cwicwine of vessels, and each earned a departure to shining troops of angels above the stars. In *De abbatibus*, Æthelwulf most vividly commemorated those inmates who made holy objects. In the same way Eanmund had “ornamented (*ornare*)” the monastery with holiness and Cwicwine “ornamented (*ornare*)” the tables with vessels, so Ultán “ornamented (*ornare*)” books with decorative arts. In *De abbatibus*, the verb *orno* and its associations carried

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<sup>404</sup> *DA* lines 231-39, 21.

significant weight. Æthelwulf was drawing upon a vast lexicon of ornamentation, one that interchangeably invoked craftsmanship, virtues and the natural world.

### *Dreaming Monastic Space*

Towards the end of *De abbatibus* Æthelwulf related a dream he had on a Sunday night. It bears close resemblance to the otherworldly vision of Dryhthelm inasmuch as Æthelwulf toured an otherworldly landscape.<sup>405</sup> In three roughly equal parts, Æthelwulf's dream (*somnium*) consisted of an idealized church in a heavenly city, a summary of the great men of the community's history, and a rendering of a heavenly Eucharistic feast. First, a *ductor* or leader brought him through a "broad plain, which afforded a sweet scent from lovely flowers."<sup>406</sup> Æthelwulf's dream closely resembles that of Dryhthelm as told by Bede:

uidi ante nos murum permaximum, cuius neque longitudini hinc uel inde, neque altitudini ullus esse terminus uideretur . . . Cum ergo peruenissemus ad murum, statim nescio quo ordine fuimus in summitate eius. Et ecce ibi campus erat latissimus ac laetissimus, tantaque flagrantia uernantium flosculorum plenus, ut omnes mox fetorem tenebrosi fornacis.

I saw a very great wall in front of us which seemed to be endlessly long and endlessly high everywhere . . . When we had reached the wall we suddenly found ourselves on top of it, by what means I know not. There was a very broad and pleasant plain, full of such a fragrance of growing flowers that the marvelous sweetness of the scent quickly dispelled the foul stench of the gloomy furnace.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> See *HE* 5.12, 491-92.

<sup>406</sup> *DA* lines 699-700, 55: "Campus erat latus, pulchris qui floribus offert/ olfactum dulcem miranda ad gaudia cunctis."

<sup>407</sup> *HE* 5.12, 492-93.

Dryhthelm's vision has rightly been situated in the same tradition of similar dreams, such as that of Fursa and Boniface's monk of Wenlock.<sup>408</sup> Æthelwulf's dream, however, included neither hellish landscapes nor foul stench. In the *campus* lay a shining city with high walls. Æthelwulf's guide, now revealed to be Hyglac (a former priest and lector discussed in lines 507-26), led him to a cruciform church supported by four porticoes facing the four corners of the earth. In the center of the *templum* was an altar on which "a venerable cross rose up shining upon a very long stem from the top of the table, and upon it emeralds shone full bright. Golden plating blazed there with dark-hued gems."<sup>409</sup> To his right Æthelwulf saw an old man in front of an altar "crowned (*coronis*) with garlands of golden flowers" who commanded him to turn towards Ireland to see (a vision within a vision) Eadfrith, a teacher in his early life, venerating the tomb of Cuthbert. Eadfrith then continued Æthelwulf's tour through the various porticoes of

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<sup>408</sup> Current scholarship has emphasized the range of interpretations of visions of the afterlife. The best recent studies on visions of the afterlife are: Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 259-65; Ananya Kabir, *Paradise, Death, and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 77-110, especially at 102 in which she argues for Dryhthelm's vision as evidence of Bede's "theological consistency." Compare this with Sharon Rowley, "The Role and Function of Otherworldly Visions in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*," in *The World of Travellers: Exploration and Imagination*, ed. Kees Dekker, Karin Olsen and Tette Hofstra (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 165-83, at 166, who has argued that "Bede includes and interprets otherworldly visions in his history to represent the potential opacity of signs—whether divine or historical—and the corresponding limits of human knowledge." In agreement is Andrew Rabin, "Bede, Dryhthelm, and the Witness to the Other World: Testimony and Conversion in the *Historia ecclesiastica*," *Modern Philology* 106 (2009): 375-98, at 376: "a transparency between the author and his narrative voice obscures the extent to which Bede's narrator serves as a fictional persona designed to implicate the reader in his narrative of penance and conversion." See also Paul Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 60 and 73, who situates the Dryhthelm tradition as the first in a later Frankish tradition.

<sup>409</sup> *DA* lines 723-25, 57: "Crux ueneranda nitens precelso stipite surget/ uertice de mense nimium candente smaragdo./ aurea cum gemmis flammescit lamina fuluis."

the church, each with a golden censer, candles and other accouterments. In a western portico they encountered the abbot Wulfsig sitting in a chair before an altar encrusted with sapphire and beryl. Like Drythelm, Æthelwulf suddenly found himself at a high point in the church looking out over the landscape to the north: “There many vessels gleamed with wondrous gems. And other ones of gold flashed with changing light, and being made from a precious vein, they could indeed surpass by their comeliness all the metals of the world.”<sup>410</sup> Æthelwulf partook of the Eucharistic feast, awoke and immediately set to write his poem in praise of sacred adornment.

Æthelwulf’s dream sequence on the whole has parallels with the *Miracula* of Ninian and deepens the links among the cluster of northern texts discussed so far. The description in the *Miracula* is full of echoes also found in *De abbatibus*:

Entuit clarus cunctis habitantibus istic,  
andida qui primus nitide fundamina Case  
Fecerat et celsi veneranda cacumina templi,  
Quo pater omni evo mentis splendore coruscans  
Sideris ad speciem perfecta nitentia fulsit . . .  
Hec domus est domini, quam plures visere certant;  
Ardua murifici fulgent insignia templi.

He was the first to lay the white foundations of the shining house and raise the venerable roof of the lofty temple, where the father for all time sparkling in the brilliance of his mind shone forth, a perfect splendour like a star . . . High above blaze out the glories of the miraculous temple. This is the house of the Lord which many are eager to visit.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> *DA* lines 777-80, 61: “plurima qua miris micuerunt uascula gemmis./ ast alia ex auro uariato lumine uibrant,/ ornatuque suo mundi superare metalla/ Omnia iam poterant, pretioso germine facta.”

<sup>411</sup> *Miracula* 4, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 92-93, lines 83-88, trans. MacQueen, 90.

Both foundation events in the *Miracula* and *De abbatibus* improved a previously hostile landscape and adorned them with fine construction. Eanmund had “completed the lofty walls of a very beautiful temple (*perficit inde pius prepulchri culmina templi*)” and Ninian raised “the venerable roof of the lofty temple (*fecerat et celsi ueneranda cacumina templi*).”<sup>412</sup> Both were influenced by Alcuin’s *York Poem* in which the poet began with the beautiful construction of that city with “high walls and lofty towers.”<sup>413</sup> All three narratives on the whole preferred *templum* or *aula* to *ecclesia* to denote sacred church space. And both the anonymous author of the *Miracula* and Æthelwulf betrayed a preference for the language of adornment and material beauty. *Candida Casa* shone out from a high place like a star; its decorations glittered. To express these images, the author alternated between *niteo* and *fulgeo*. Furthermore, the anonymous author’s description of *Candida Casa* as a house that “shone brightly (*nitentia fulsit*),” echoes Aldhelm’s *titulus* for Bugga’s church, where “a golden chalice covered with jewels gleams (*aureus atque calyx gemmis fulgescit opertus*).”<sup>414</sup> And later in the York poem, Alcuin described a church the bishop Ælbert built as a “lofty building, supported by strong columns, themselves bolstering curving arches, gleams inside with fine inlaid ceilings and windows. It shines (*fulsit*) in its beauty.”<sup>415</sup> Indeed, Æthelwulf’s description of the altar

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<sup>412</sup> *DA* line 143, 13; compare this with *Miracula* 4, *MGH PLAC* 4.3, 948, line 85.

<sup>413</sup> *York* lines 19-20, trans. Godman, 4-5: “Hanc Romana manus muris et turribus altam/ fundauit primo . . .”

<sup>414</sup> Aldhelm *Carm. eccl.* 3, *MGH AA* 15, 18, lines 69-74, at 72.

<sup>415</sup> *York* 1509-12, trans. Godman, 118-21: “Haec nimis alta domus solidis suffulta columnis,/ suppositae quae stant curuatis arcubus, intus/ emicat egregiis laquearibus atque fenestris./ Pulchraque porticibus fulget . . .”



cross calls to mind the long shafts of monumental stone crosses in northern England.<sup>416</sup>

Æthelwulf had adapted this descriptive language to describe the Eucharistic vessels of his own church: “that golden chalice covered with gems gleams (*aureus ille calix gemmis splendescit opertus*).”<sup>417</sup> Perhaps Æthelwulf was aware of Josephus’ treatment (transmitted by Bede in his exegesis *De Tabernaculo*) of the turban worn by the high priest in the Tabernacle: “Encircled around it there is a golden crown made with three tiers, upon which there sprouts in the middle of the forehead something like a certain small golden *calyx*, similar to that of the plant that among us is called ‘thistle’.”<sup>418</sup> At any rate these textual images help to explain Æthelwulf’s conflation of natural and crafted worlds to describe the physical *ecclesia*.

Æthelwulf’s reminds us of the importance of what the archaeological record continually indicates was a common purpose of monastic culture: the creation and crafting of material objects, and the aesthetics of ornamentation and adornment.

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<sup>416</sup> Eamonn Ó Carragáin briefly pointed this out in his *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>417</sup> *DA* lines 446-51 (at 449), 37.

<sup>418</sup> *De Tab.* 3.961-63, trans. Holder, 136: “aurea corona tribus uicibus facta supra quam surgit in media fronte quasi caliculus quidam aureus similis herbae quae apud nos achanon nuncupatur quam Graeci hyas cyamos dicunt,” referencing Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 3.7.3, ed. Franz Blatt, *The Latin Josephus: Introduction and Text* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1958), 238, lines 9-12. Bede relies on Jerome to elaborate (trans. Holder, 137): “The girdle was woven all around, after the manner of a snake’s skin which it casts off when it has grown old, in such a way that you might even consider it a pouch. Now it was woven with a scarlet, purple, and blue woof and a fine linen warp, for beauty and for strength; it was so artfully decorated with waving that you might think the diverse flowers and gems had not been woven by the hand of an artisan, but rather affixed onto it (*in similitudinem pellis colubri quam exuit in senectute sic in rotundo textum est ut marsupium longius putes textum autem subtegmine cocci purpureae hyacinthi et stamine byssino ob decorem et fortitudinem atque ita polimita arte distinctum ut diuersos flores et gemmas artificii manu non contextas sed additas arbitreris*),” citing Jerome, *Ep.* 64.12.1-2; *CSEL* 54, 598.19-599.8.

Compared with Aldhelm, for example, Æthelwulf spent remarkably little time discussing those landscapes and their natural features. Æthelwulf's dream clarifies the author's preference for built spaces and craftsmanship, reminiscent of Benedict Biscop's importation of Roman and continental commodities to Northumbria. Yet later in the poem, pressed to describe the result of a century of monastic life in his community, Æthelwulf observed that the monks had "scattered the fine seed of a celestial gift in the hearts of the brothers, and crops sprang up through the confines of the monastery right gladly in the sweetness of the dew of heaven. Now the place smiles, monks flourish through the cell to the joy of Christ, the order is happy within the city."<sup>419</sup> Like Alcuin's description of Gregory the Great as an "ardent tiller of the fields of Christ, (who) scattered abroad manifold seeds of everlasting life,"<sup>420</sup> Æthelwulf rounded out his vision of the natural world: the natural threat of vegetation to entangle humans (as seen in the moment of foundation) shifted towards the growth of metaphorical plants *per limina celle* of the monastery. Where the sites of foundation used to be wild, Æthelwulf manipulated the meanings of natural growth to make sense of monastic life.

The Christological landscape of a thorny hill was crucial to the foundation and history of the community, but the poet devoted all his energy to language in praise of materiality towards the end of *De abbatibus*. Æthelwulf's dream gives shape to an overarching theme: creation, whether of landscapes or of holy objects, was fundamental to the poet's vision of monastic life, as it had been for Aldhelm. After Eanmund's initial

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<sup>419</sup> *DA* lines 605-9, 49: "Optima siderei spargebant semina doni/ cordibus in fratrum; segetes per limina celle/ quam laete surgunt superi dulcedine roris./ iam campus ridet, florent ad gaudia Christi/ per cellam monachi, letatur clerus in urbe."

<sup>420</sup> *York* lines 81-82, trans. Godman, 10-11: "arorum Christi cultor deuotus ubique/ plurima perpetuae dispersit demina uitae."

contact with Northumbrian wildness, Æthelwulf appears to have rejected the natural world as an active force in the life of a monastery. Yet Æthelwulf carefully applied his lexicon of adornment and his understanding of sacred space to each phase of monastic life in his community—including, and perhaps most crucially, the foundational event in the Northumbrian wilderness.

### **The *Old English Martyrology*: The Limits of Nature?**

Æthelwulf's depiction of nature and craftsmanship encouraged a diversity of interpretations, despite the scholarly consensus that the natural world solidified into binaries of threatening uncertainty and manifestations of God's creative power.<sup>421</sup> As we have seen, that distinction cannot be projected onto Latin literature from early medieval Britain, *c.* 500-820. It is far beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss such themes in Old English literature, but a brief consideration of the *Old English Martyrology (OEM)*, probably composed in the late ninth century, can make sense of the afterlife of the substantial variety for which I have argued.<sup>422</sup> The *OEM* commemorated the cults of saints from Anglo-Saxon England to Persia, the days of creation, the seasons, as well as scriptural events. Despite the richness of interpretations available from Anglo-Latin literature we have encountered in this period, the compiler of the *OEM* did not take full advantage of the natural world's interpretive diversity in Anglo-Latin sources.

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<sup>421</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 1-18; and Foot, "Natural World," 15-17. See Introduction, 5-10 and above, 189-92.

<sup>422</sup> On the dating of the *OEM*, see Christine Rauer, *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 1-4. All references are to this standard edition and translation.

The *Martyrology* does, however, contain a great deal of interest in the natural world. Its first entry, for 25 December, described a series of portents relating to the birth of Christ when Mary “gave birth to him during that night in a rocky cave outside the town of Bethlehem . . . In that year men saw three suns, and on another occasion three moons; and the Romans saw a fiery ball fall from the sky, and another time a golden ball. And in that year people saw ears of wheat growing on trees; and . . . blood flowed from the loaf.”<sup>423</sup> More bizarre events accompanied the birth of Christ: milk fell from the sky and an ox rebuked his prodding master, a clear invocation of Balaam’s ass in Numbers 22. In the year of Christ’s birth, the natural world functioned in the *OEM* as a measure of a world radically changed: natural phenomena, vegetation, and animals acted against their natures.

From that point, the author(s) of the *OEM* settled into a series of vignettes. The natural world was at times a menacing force against holy people. For example, for 10 January, in the desert Paul the Hermit (d. c. 343) “never saw anything or heard anything apart from the roaring of the lions and the howling of the wolves, and he ate the fruit of the desert and drank water from his hollow hand.”<sup>424</sup> Later in the entry, however, lions dug Paul’s grave in the sand, where his body still lay “covered with vile dust (*yfelice duste bewrigen*).” On 13 August, the faithful were to commemorate Hippolytus (d. c.

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<sup>423</sup> *OEM* 1, trans. Rauer, 34-35: “Sancta Maria hine acende on þære nihte on anum holum stanscræfe beforan Beth<l>em ðære ceastre . . . <Ð>y geare men sesawon þreo sunnan and opre siðe þrie monan, and Romanan gesawon firen cleowen feallan of heofnum, and opre siþe gilden cleowen. And þi geare man geseah hwætes <ear> weaxan on treowum; and . . . þonne fleow þæt blod of þam hlafe . . .”

<sup>424</sup> *OEM* 16, trans. Rauer, 46-47: “Þær he næfre naht opres ne geseah ne ne gehyrde butan leona grymetunge ond wulfa gerar, ond æt þæs westenes æppla ond ðæt wæter dranc of his holre hand.”

235), who was sentenced to death by Valerianus, the prefect under Decius. He was bound to wild horses, “so that they would drag him through the shrubs and thorny bushes.”<sup>425</sup>

Throughout the *OEM*, the author deployed a clear theme of the natural world’s threat to humans, linking sacred history with the dangers inherent in nature in vernacular poems such as *Fortunes of Men* and *The Wanderer*,<sup>426</sup> as well as life’s uncertainties suggested by early Anglo-Saxon law codes.<sup>427</sup>

As Cedd had done at Lastingham and Cuthbert at Inner Farne, though, wildness and the unpredictability of nature could be tamed. For example, Eleutharius (18 April) was condemned to the same fate as Hippolytus in the early second century, but an angel calmed the horses and the holy man lived for some time on a “high hill, where many wild animals joined him and lived with him” and even worshiped God with him.<sup>428</sup> Similarly, Mamas (d. c. 275) entered the “thickest forests” of Cappadocia outside Caesarea, and “innumerable wild animals came to him there and adored him, and he lived off the milk of the wild animals.” When he studied scripture, the animals encircled him, and one of the lions even slaughtered the pagans and Jews who tried to take him back to the city.<sup>429</sup> For 23 September, the martyr Thecla was given similar power over the wild animals to

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<sup>425</sup> *OEM* 154, trans. Rauer, 160-61: “þæt hyne drogon on gorstas ond on þornas.”

<sup>426</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 53-88.

<sup>427</sup> James Campbell, “Early Anglo-Saxon Society according to Written Sources,” in *idem.*, *Essays*, 131-38.

<sup>428</sup> *OEM* 65, trans. Rauer, 82-83: “ond hi gelæddon þæt scrid on hea dune, þær him coman to monigra cynna wilddeor ond wunedon mid hine.”

<sup>429</sup> *OEM* 157, trans. Rauer, 162-63: “Ða he þær geseah deofolgild begangan, þa gewat he in þone þiccestan wudu; ond him com unrim wildeora þær to ond hine weorþodon, ond he lifde be þara wildeora meolcum. Ond þonne he his boc rædde, ðonne sæton þa wildeor ymutan hine.”

which she was thrown in Iconium sometime in the late first century.<sup>430</sup> These examples echo the physical status of Adam and Eve on the sixth day of creation, commemorated on 23 March: “They were made in such a way that fire could not burn them, nor water drown them, nor any wild animal tear them to pieces, nor any thorn pierce them.”<sup>431</sup> The natural world was mentioned here only to highlight the absence of its threats. The ease of Adam and Eve’s prelapsarian state was illustrated by the absence of fire, wild animals, and thorns.<sup>432</sup> By including it, the *OEM* author cast the mastery of nature on the part of holy people into sharp relief. Audiences familiar with Bede’s *Vita Cuthberti*, for example, might understand that animals’ service to the holy man echoed a prelapsarian natural world.

Birds, too, were conscripted into special service: at times they drove scavengers away from holy bodies, and at others they fed hermits.<sup>433</sup> The fifth day of creation, celebrated on 22 March, provided birds a special harmony with the rest of the natural world: “every bird lives in the place from which it was created: those which were created from the salty waves now always float on them, and those which were created from fresh water live on lakes and streams, and those which were created from the dew of the grass

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<sup>430</sup> *OEM* 193, trans. Rauer, 188-89.

<sup>431</sup> *OEM* 53, trans. Rauer, 72-73: “Hi wæron swa gescæpene ðæt hi ne mihte fyr bænan, ne wæter dræncean, ne wildeor slitan, ne þorn stician.”

<sup>432</sup> *De locis sanctis* 2.9.3-31. On the interpretation of creation as inherently good, see Marina Smyth, *Understanding the Universe in Seventh-Century Ireland* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1996), 38, n. 6; J.E. Cross, “*De ordine creaturarum* in Old English Prose,” *Anglia* 90 (1972): 132-40, at 137-38; Christine Rauer, “Usage of the *Old English Martyrology*,” in *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Rolf Bremmer and Kees Dekker (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 125-46, at 132 and 136; and John Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2011), 49-64.

<sup>433</sup> See 22 January for Vincent (*OEM* 31, trans. Rauer, 56-57) and 2 June for Erasmus (*OEM* 97, trans. Rauer, 110-13).

sit in the fields and cannot swim, and those which were shaped from the drops from the trees live in the woods, and those which were made from the moisture of the fen now live in the fen.”<sup>434</sup> These observations also occur in the seventh-century anonymous Irish *Liber de ordine creaturarum* and are based loosely on Genesis 1.20, in which God created birds and fish in the same day.<sup>435</sup> It is very possible that this concept arose from a combination of observational and exegetical traditions. The *OEM* compiler(s) seem to have adapted the theory in keeping with their preoccupation with the binary between natural threat and harmony.

A clear distinction between threatening and wondrous nature thrive in the *Old English Martyrology*, whose author seems to have stripped historical and hagiographic material of all the naturalistic complexity to which Anglo-Latin literature had become accustomed. As a comparison, the Old English translation of Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*, produced around the same time as the *OEM*, omitted several crucial sections of the original Latin *Historia*: it abbreviated the descriptions of Britain and Ireland, dramatically cut the sections of Romano-British history and the Easter controversy, eliminated Bede’s account on the Pelagian heresy and Germanus’ mission,

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<sup>434</sup> *OEM* 52, trans. Rauer, 70-71: “Ond hwæðre æghwælc fugal wunað ðæt ðæt he of gesceapen wæs: Ðu swimmaþ nu <a on> sealtum ypum ða þe of ðæm gesceapen wæron, ond ða wuniað on merum ond on flodum þa þe of ðæm ferscum wætre gescæpene wæron, ond þa sittað on feldum ond ne magon swimman ða þe of þæs græses deawe geworht wæron, ond þa wuniað on wudum ða þe of þara treowa dropum gehiwode wæron, ond þa wuniaðon fænne þa þe gewurdon of þæs fænnas wætan.”

<sup>435</sup> See *Liber de ordine creaturarum* 9.9-11, translated by Marina Smyth, “The Seventh-Century Hiberno-Latin Treatise *Liber de ordine creaturarum*: A Translation,” *Journal of Medieval Latin* 21 (2011): 137-222, at 190-91. I am unaware of this theory elsewhere apart from early Christian exegesis.

and completely omitted materials from Adomnan's *De locis sanctis*.<sup>436</sup> As we have seen, these sections contain the bulk of Bede's exegetical interpretations of nature in the *Historia*.<sup>437</sup>

A final example intensifies this point. The translator(s) of the *HE* were careful not to omit details from the miniature hagiography of Alban's martyrdom at Verulamium; the Old English version is largely "a full, detailed and accurate translation of Bede's account of St. Alban" that "casts British Christianity in a strikingly positive light."<sup>438</sup> There is, however, one small but notable difference regarding the topography of Alban's hill: here I include both Latin and Old English texts in sequence with the differences in bold. We will recall that in the original *HE*, Bede described how,

**Oportune laetus gratia** decentissima quingentis fere passibus ab harena situs est, uariis herbarum floribus depictus, immo usquequaque uestitus; **in quo nihil repente arduum, nihil praeceps, nihil abruptum, quem lateribus longe lateque deductum in modum aequoris Natura conplanat**, dignum uidelicet eum pro insita sibi specie uenustatis iam olim reddins, qui beati martyris cruore dicaretur.<sup>439</sup>

[The hill] lay about five hundred paces from the arena, and, **as was fitting**, it was fair, shining and beautiful, adorned, indeed clothed, on all sides with wild flowers of every kind; **nowhere was it steep or precipitous or sheer but Nature had provided it with wide, long-sloping sides stretching smoothly down to the level of the plain**. In fact its natural beauty had long fitted it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr.

According to the Old English version:

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<sup>436</sup> For a much more detailed outline of the differences between the Latin and Old English *Historia*, see Sharon Rowley, *The Old English Version of Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), 199-205.

<sup>437</sup> See above, 222-34.

<sup>438</sup> Rowley, *Bede*, 79.

<sup>439</sup> *HE* 1.7, 32-33.



And þa astah se arwurðesta Godes andettere mid þa menigeo on þa dune upp, seo wæs ða **tidlice grene** 7 fæger 7 mid misenlicum blostmum wyrta afed 7 gegyred æghwyder ymbutan. Wæs þæt þæs wyrðe, þæt seo stow swa wlitig 7 swa fæger wære, þe eft sceolde mid þy blode ðæs eadigan martyres gewurðad 7 gehalgod weorþan.<sup>440</sup>

Then went up the venerated confessor of God on the hill with the crowd, which was then **green with the season**, and fair and painted and adorned on all sides with flowers of various plants. And this was meet, that the place should be so comely and so fair, which afterwards was to be glorified and sanctified with the blood of this blessed martyr.

Two fundamental shifts have taken place: first, where Bede had attributed natural, fitting fertility to the hill, the Old English translation specified that it was simply “green with the season (*tidlice grene*),” that is, in spring or summer. Second, the Old English version omitted Bede’s explanation of the topography’s wide, gentle slopes. At first innocuous, these differences underscore the fundamental shifts between Bede’s attitude of nature in the 720s and ‘30s and that of his Old English translator of *c.* 900. For Bede, the topography of Alban’s hill actively shaped and contributed to the event that took place there. Its natural beauty also reflected holy action. In the later Old English translation, however, the landscape was pleasant but static, merely the result of the season—the stage on which human action took place.

## Conclusions

In light of this chapter’s discussion, it cannot be claimed that authors of Anglo-Latin literature had no categories of the “natural world” because they resisted any “entity

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<sup>440</sup> Thomas Miller, ed. and trans., *The Old English Version of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Early English Text Society, 1890, repr. 1959), 38-39.

defined by the exclusion of the supernatural.”<sup>441</sup> Yet as we have just seen, Neville’s categorizations of Old English poetry do appear to apply to the *Old English Martyrology* and the Old English *Historia ecclesiastica*. Neville’s is the only full-length study of natural images in Anglo-Saxon England, and although it focuses on Old English poetry her findings have been applied with little attention to Anglo-Latin literature.<sup>442</sup> Much of this is perhaps due to an over-reading of “nature poetry” written by “cultivated and scholarly men writing to meet the needs and the taste of a cultural élite.”<sup>443</sup> Thus a binary based on literary ideals emerges from poems such as a prayer attributed to Brendan, pleading with God to protect him from natural threats and phenomena.<sup>444</sup> Such examples have led scholars to accept a “negative” versus “positive” interpretation of the natural world in virtually all Insular contexts.<sup>445</sup> For Lisa Bitel, the inherent danger of living in the early medieval period was the most substantial contributor to this phenomenon: “Small boys in monastic communities slipped and drowned . . . Worst of all perceived

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<sup>441</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 2-3.

<sup>442</sup> Foot, “Natural World.”

<sup>443</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “Early Irish Hermit Poetry?” in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, Maynooth Monographs 2, ed. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 251-67, at 264.

<sup>444</sup> *Oratio S. Brendani* 10, CCSL 47, 19: “Save me, omnipotent Lord God, from all dangers of earth, sea, and waters, and . . . all beasts, winged creatures, four-footed animals and serpents. Defend me, God, from fire, from lightning, from thunder, from hail, from snow, from rain, from wind, from dangers of the earth, from whirlwind, from earthquake, from all evils (*Libera me, Domine Deus omnipotens, ab omnibus periculis terrae et maris et aquis et . . . omnium bestiarum et uolucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium. Defende me, Deus, ab igne, a fulgure, a tonitruo, a grandine, a niue, a pluuiā, a uentis, a periculis terrae, a turbine, a terremotu, ab omnibus malis*).” See Introduction, 29-30.

<sup>445</sup> For one example, see Clancy, *Iona*, 90: “the view of nature which [the poems] reflect is ambivalent. Sometimes, of course, nature is enjoyed and celebrated for its own sake . . . But at other times nature’s dangers and discomforts are equally apparent.” See also Introduction, 5-10, and above, 187-90.

perils of the waters were the monsters lived in rivers, lakes and seas . . . denizens of the wilderness were animals and demons, never fully human when they seemed to take human form. They inhabited the wild for one purpose only: to prey upon those foolish enough to leave the safety of home.”<sup>446</sup> This is true enough in a handful of poetic and hagiographic examples. Yet as we have seen, such rigid distinctions between danger and grace do not translate gracefully to larger Anglo-Latin exegetical, hagiographic and historical traditions.

Early Anglo-Saxon authors informed their interpretations of the natural world around them with history, hagiography, exegesis and poetry—sometimes with textual ecologies, and almost always with more complex results than have been formally recognized. This chapter has considered some of the most prolific and foundational sources of that period in Gildas, Bede, Aldhelm and Alcuin with others in between. I have chosen to end my discussion of Anglo-Latin literature with Æthelwulf’s *De abbatibus* because it is a genuinely under-studied text just before Old English texts emerged in a serious way in the written record. Not only this, but Æthelwulf proved himself more than capable of transmitting literary traditions of the natural world while inventively manipulating them to describe the monastic life and how it was shaped by the landscapes around him. His textual ecology—a reading of a local landscape and its environmental features—was shaped by his emphasis on craftsmanship and decoration. The natural world in *De abbatibus* was neither simply dangerous nor reflective of God’s creative power. Æthelwulf crowned the monastic hill with thorns, stripped them away,

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<sup>446</sup> Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 31-32.

and replaced them with a monastic complex where inmates physically and spiritually *made* holiness. The poet thus tapped into interpretive pluralities with the image of thorns: if a crown of thorns, was it the paradoxical symbol of Christ's majesty? Did it call to an exegetical mind the thorns of setim wood used to construct the Tabernacle and Temple? Perhaps for many intellectuals, images of entanglement and verdure from stone monuments were real reference points in the landscape. Or did a monastic audience vividly imagine a thicket as a home for evildoers whose sins should be wiped away before constructing sacred spaces? All of these choices were available to Æthelwulf and his audience, as they had been for Bede in his exegetical rendering of Britain's geography or Aldhelm for his tendency to collapse the natural world and the decorations of built space. Just as we have already seen in Chapter 1, Æthelwulf used nature as an interpretive key to articulate religious identity in his community. Where some authors like Gildas and, at times, Bede may have shared a distrust of the natural world, others like Aldhelm and Æthelwulf recognized its potential to shape religious life. Seen in this way, interactions among humans, nature, and built space offered up dynamic interpretations of the world—and offer us new ways of reading both familiar and less familiar texts. The natural world in this period was neither simply threatening nor pleasant, and above all was not subservient to neat categorizations.

### Chapter 3: Images of the Natural World in Frankish Missionary Vitae, c. 690-900

In 723, the Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface cut down an enormous oak tree near Geismar in Hessa.<sup>1</sup> According to his hagiographer Willibald of Eichstätt (d. c. 787), the tree was dedicated to Jupiter and was a focus of pagan devotion in the region. For these reasons, Boniface took strong exception to the faithlessness of Hessians who continued to worship pagan deities and demons.<sup>2</sup> Boniface, who had done missionary work in this region sporadically since the 710s, may have seen similar patterns of belief and practice elsewhere. According to Willibald, pagan practices at Geismar were rooted firmly in the Hessian landscape—particularly in the wood of this so-called *robor Iobis*, the “Oak of Jupiter.”<sup>3</sup> Thus Boniface, after praying and receiving advice from his monastic companions, approached the great tree in a procession to the astonishment of the pagan onlookers. Taking an axe, he had only cut a single notch in the oak when a wind from heaven shook the entire trunk and split it into four parts of equal length. Boniface took the pieces and constructed an oratory where the oak used to stand, dedicating it to the Apostle Peter.

Boniface’s destruction of the “Oak of Jupiter” at Geismar draws out a number of issues regarding missionary interactions with the natural world. In a hagiographic context, Willibald was intentionally echoing a scene from Chapter 1, Martin of Tours’ destruction

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<sup>1</sup> For a map of the region, see Map 3.2, 345; and for a detailed discussion of the event, see below, 365-77.

<sup>2</sup> According to Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 31, the Hessians Boniface encountered practiced divination, spoke incantations and read entrails both secretly and openly. For a discussion of this language see Chapter 1, 115-23 and below, 367-69.

<sup>3</sup> *VB* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 31. For a full discussion of the event in the context of the *Vita Bonifatii* and Boniface’s correspondence, see below, 365-77.

of a sacred pagan pine tree in the Touraine.<sup>4</sup> By invoking Martin's aggressive missionary strategy, Willibald was describing a missionary action with historical and symbolic weight—and one with a natural feature as its focus. On a deeper level, the destruction of the *robor Iobis*, one of the most famous scenes from literature pertaining to Boniface, shows one way in which authors of missionary *vitae* thought about and with nature: when associated with pagan practice, the natural world was to be conquered and overwritten thoroughly.

On the face of it, Boniface's actions in 723 support familiar binaries, especially those in modern scholarship on Anglo-Saxon depictions of nature: at worst, evil spirits, demons and pagan gods lurked in the natural world, and at best, nature was subservient to human will and manipulation.<sup>5</sup> The *robor Iobis* incident, however, was just one small component of a broader set of perceptions about nature. In reference to the missionary *vitae* in this chapter, I will refer to the "natural world" as hagiographers appear to have understood it, along the lines set forth in the Introduction: nature was the physical world created by God, made up of that which humans could apprehend with the senses and sometimes manipulate, cultivate or otherwise effect change upon. Among the major elements of conversion strategies in the eighth and ninth centuries was an insistence on clarifying the origins of the natural world. Missionaries attempted to convince pagans of the existence and power of a Creator of all created things superior to their own deities. Boniface's attempt to convert the pagans of Geismar was as much about a physical place

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 1, 68-72.

<sup>5</sup> For my analysis of these arguments and comments on them, see above, Introduction, 5-10; and Chapter 2, 187-90.

as a people.<sup>6</sup> While the pagan practice Boniface encountered in 723 “involved belief and behaviour . . . fundamentally integrated into the landscape,” the specific natural components of that landscape have yet to receive much attention in modern scholarship.<sup>7</sup> “Understand creation,” Columbanus had written in his seventh-century *Instructiones*, “if you want to know the creator.”<sup>8</sup> The distinction between Creator and Creation—and the physical or symbolic nature of Creation itself—was central to a Christian missionary faced with pagan sacred places in nature.

Geismar’s drama was but one depiction of nature among many from the period of missionary activity and production of missionary *vitae* in the eighth and ninth centuries. As with earlier and contemporary literature emerging from Francia and England, the interactions with nature in Frankish hagiography from this period are not as simple as this scene might suggest. While missionary contexts shifted, so too did conversion strategies and perceptions of the natural world. As we have seen in earlier Merovingian literature, the eighth and ninth centuries in Francia saw shifts in attitudes towards the natural world. Missionary and monastic views of and contact with nature were plural and diverse, but were consistently central interpretive categories with which authors of *vitae* made sense

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<sup>6</sup> John Clay, *In the Shadow of Death: Saint Boniface and the Conversion of Hesse, 721-54* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 5: in his assessment of the reception of Geismar’s drama, “[t]he demolished Donareiche, the ‘Oak of Thunaer’, has lain at the foot of Boniface’s reputation since his martyrdom in 754. It symbolizes the achievement which posterity has granted Boniface the label ‘Apostle of Germany’: namely, the overthrow of the pre-Christian gods in what is now Germany, and their replacement by Christ.” Boniface’s actions at Geismar were not just “a symbolic event . . . one lesson we can learn from Geismar is that, for Boniface and his missionary companions, paganism and Christianity were as much about places as people.”

<sup>7</sup> Clay, *Boniface*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Columbanus, *Inst.* 1.5, 64: “Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam.” See Chapter 1 above, 167-69.

of the missionary life and its goals. Over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, hagiographic language of the natural world shifted from one of conquest (most aptly expressed by Willibald) to one possessed of a more balanced relationship between humans and nature especially in local monastic settings (as we shall see in Sturm's foundation of Fulda in Eigil's *Vita Sturmi*). In such cases, nature could actively shape monastic life. Exegetical readings of local environments—trees, stones, rivers, animals and natural resources—could also sharpen senses of monastic identity. By the close of the period in discussion, the language used to describe the natural world intersected with geographic description and apocalyptic thought in *vitae* on the Christian of Scandinavia at the “ends of the earth (*extremum terrae*).” The natural world was a flexible and durable theme with plural uses in the missionary *vitae*.

### **Carolingian Hagiography in Modern Scholarship**

No comprehensive treatment of the natural world in Carolingian missionary *vitae* exists to date, nor has this topic found a place with scholarship on Carolingian hagiography. Until the 1970s, Carolingian reformers were seen as admirable compilers of earlier historical, scientific, artistic and exegetical works.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis has since shifted to the innovations for which they were responsible, and hagiography is a major literary category that has undergone rigorous reassessment. Baudouin de Gaiffier was among the first to show convincingly that hagiographies could reflect the changes in societies that

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<sup>9</sup> On this point, I am following the discussion of Janet Nelson, “On the Limits of the Carolingian Renaissance,” in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Nelson (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), 49-68, at 51.



valued them as texts.<sup>10</sup> This view helps subordinate a saint to his or her hagiographer: in a hagiographic text, the literary world of the author is far clearer than the realities faced by the saint. In practical terms, for example, Willibald's story about the oak at Geismar says far more about him as a hagiographer than it provides insights into Boniface's real actions or perceptions. A significant shrine surely existed at Geismar,<sup>11</sup> but what little we can know about it depends upon Willibald's presentation of it as a metonym for Germanic paganism.<sup>12</sup> The gap between historical narratives in Frankish hagiography and literary interests or conventions of the hagiographer is often vast.

De Gaiffier also showed how hagiographic texts functioned in local variations of the liturgy,<sup>13</sup> although this practice is not clear in Francia until the early ninth century.<sup>14</sup> Such questions are closely linked with the nature of hagiographic audiences. Marc van Uytenghe and Katrien Heene have shown that Merovingian hagiographers tailored some

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<sup>10</sup> Baudouin de Gaiffier, "Hagiographie et historiographie: examen de quelques problèmes," in *La storiografia altomedievale, 10-16 aprile 1969*, 2 vols. (Spoleto: Presso la sede del Centro, 1970), I: 139-66.

<sup>11</sup> On pre-Christian pagan activity in the region, see below, 365-66, and especially Norbert Wand, *Die Büraburg bei Fritzlar. Burg – 'Oppidum' – Bischofssitz in karolingischer Zeit* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1974), 42-43; and David Parsons, "Sites and Monuments of the Anglo-Saxon Mission in Central Germany," *Archaeological Journal* 140 (1983): 280-321, at 286.

<sup>12</sup> James Palmer, "Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007): 402-25, at 412.

<sup>13</sup> Baudouin de Gaiffier, "La lecture des actes des martyrs en occident dans la prière liturgique en Occident," *Analecta Bollandiana* 72 (1954): 134-66; and *idem*, "La lecture des passions des martyrs à Rome avant le IX<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Analecta Bollandiana* 82 (1969): 341-53.

<sup>14</sup> Guy Philippart, *Les légendiers latins et autres manuscrits hagiographiques* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 113-15. For liturgical and monastic readings of hagiographic texts, I am following the assessment of Wolfert van Egmond, "The Audience of Early Medieval Hagiographical Texts: Some Questions Revisited," in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 41-68, at 49-50.

of their works for lay audiences.<sup>15</sup> Wolfert van Egmond has recently pointed out that Carolingian hagiographers scarcely mentioned lay audiences in their prologues or main texts, which instead suggest predominantly small, monastic audiences.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, however, lack of explicit evidence in the texts for a wider audience does not make lay reception impossible. As van Egmond has shown, evidence does exist that hagiographic texts could target both lay and uneducated audiences.<sup>17</sup> This chapter's approach to hagiography shares van Egmond's concern with the paucity of "concrete information about the performance of the [hagiographic] texts,"<sup>18</sup> and thus focuses primarily on their textual echoes, influences and borrowings.

While earlier scholars had emphasized hagiographic edification and historical narrative,<sup>19</sup> a fundamental shift of focus has since taken place. In the last four decades,

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<sup>15</sup> Marc van Uytvanghe, "L'hagiographie et son public à l'époque mérovingienne," *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985): 54-62; and Katrien Heene, "Merovingian and Carolingian Hagiography: Continuity of Change in Public Aims?," *Analecta Bollandiana* 107 (1989): 415-28.

<sup>16</sup> Van Egmond, "The Audience," 51: "Furthermore, in Carolingian hagiography we find a preference for references to reading (such as *legere* and *lector*) over terms alluding to hearing (such as *audire* and *auditor*)."

<sup>17</sup> Van Egmond, "The Audience," 48-49 and 54.

<sup>18</sup> Van Egmond, "The Audience," 57. It is more productive "to consider every single text individually" based on their own peculiar circumstances (66). There is much better evidence for hagiographic preaching, or the transmission of anecdotes, sections, or paraphrases of hagiographic texts in homilies; on this see van *ibid.*, 57-64.

<sup>19</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, trans. Virginia Crawford (London: Longmans, Green, 1907), 60 and 68: "There are among them some who have simply recorded what they have seen with their eyes and touched with their hands. Their narratives constitute authentic historical memoirs no less than works of edification . . . The hagiographer, then, is inspired by the ideas of history current in his day. Nevertheless he writes with a special and clearly defined object, not without influence on the character of his work. For he does not relate simply in order to interest, but above all else to edify." For Richard Sullivan, *Aix-la-Chapelle in the Age of Charlemagne* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 166, saints' lives in this period were primarily "biography for edification."

scholars have studied hagiography to reconstruct images of sanctity and power as well as literary styles.<sup>20</sup> Hagiographic texts can be mined less for their historical detail than for their use alongside other historical sources for illuminating daily life, educational values, spiritual ideals and other modes of early medieval thought.<sup>21</sup> As Max Laistner noted long ago, hagiographic texts were primarily meant to edify, but “other motives also sometimes influence the writer . . . [such as] claims of a monastic house to independence of episcopal control, or to certain lands or other material possessions.”<sup>22</sup>

In the last 30 years, Ian Wood’s work has clarified the functions of hagiography for their specific audiences, communities and contexts.<sup>23</sup> De Gaiffier, I Deug-Su and Joseph-Claude Poulin were instrumental in identifying typological patterns early medieval hagiographers often followed.<sup>24</sup> More recently Christiane Veyrard-Cosme has confirmed the readings of Deug-Su in her exploration of Alcuin’s strict typological

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<sup>20</sup> For examples of the possibilities of both regional scholarship and ideas of sainthood, see Joseph-Claude Poulin, *L’idéal de sainteté dans l’Aquitaine carolingienne d’après les sources hagiographiques (750-950)* (Québec City: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1975), 28; and Anne-Marie Helvétius, “Les modèles de sainteté dans les monastères de l’espace belge du VIII<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Revue bénédictine* 103 (1993): 51-67, at 53.

<sup>21</sup> Excellent assessments of these uses are: Marc van Uytendaele, “Die Vita im Spannungsfeld von Legende, Biographik und Geschichte (mit Anwendung auf einen Abschnitt aus der *Vita Amandi prima*),” in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1994), 194-221; and Amy Bosworth, “Learning from the Saints: Ninth-Century Hagiography and the Carolingian Renaissance,” *History Compass* 8.9 (2010): 1055-66.

<sup>22</sup> Max Laistner, *Thoughts and Letters in Western Europe, 500-900* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 280.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Ian Wood, “The Use and Abuse of Latin Hagiography in the Early Medieval West,” in *East and West: Modes of Communication*, ed. Evangelos Chrysos and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 93-109.

<sup>24</sup> Baudouin de Gaiffier, “Hagiographie et historiographie,” 179-96; I Deug-Su, *L’eloquenza del silenzio nelle fonti mediolatine: Il caso di Leoba, dilecta di Bonifacio Vinfrido* (Florence: SISMEL edizioni del Galluzzo, 2004), 67; Joseph-Claude Poulin, *L’idéal de sainteté*, 23-24. I discuss Deug-Su’s contributions to our understanding of Alcuin’s hagiographic works in greater detail below, 339-40.

thought in basing saints' lives on scriptural exemplars.<sup>25</sup> As Paul Fouracre has shown, establishing and updating hagiographic typologies such as there were among the achievements of Carolingian revisions of Merovingian *vitae*.<sup>26</sup> These could include, but were not limited to, "a forecast of greatness in the saint's earliest days (often whilst he or she was still in the womb); a promising childhood; adult excellence which was tested, a conscious approach to heaven at death; and finally, and most importantly, signs from heaven in the form of miracles to show that the saint had found favour in the community above."<sup>27</sup> Carolingian hagiographers, armed with such typologies, could reflect the values of their cultures and audiences.

More specific images of sanctity ran parallel with these larger trends. Localized assessments have also been central to understanding the uneven receptions of saints' *vitae* and cults. Martin Heinzelmann, for example, has argued that the dossier of St. Genovefa suggests that ecclesiastical communities amended the *vitae* of Genovefa to reflect their

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<sup>25</sup> Veyrard-Cosme, "Typologie et hagiographie en prose carolingienne: mode de pensée et réécriture. Etude des trois œuvres d'Alcuin: *Vita Willibrordi*, *Vita Vedasti* et *Vita Richarii*," in *Ecriture et modes de pensée au Moyen Âge (VIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. Dominique Boutet and Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Presses de l'Ecole normale supérieure, 1993), 154-86, at 157-59. For a more general assessment of hagiographic typology, I have consulted Régis Boyer, "An Attempt to Define the Typology of Medieval Hagiography," in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1982), 27-36.

<sup>26</sup> Fouracre, "Merovingian History and Merovingian Hagiography," *Past and Present* 127 (1990): 3-38, especially 10-12, and at 37: "Before form became entirely fixed, there was in northern Europe an experimental phase in the writing of saints' lives . . . Such variety would subsequently be reduced as the most successful works circulated and became in effect templates for future writers. But, as importantly, that variety would be reduced as the hagiographers of this period succeeded in their primary aim of satisfying the demand for new saints." For the ways in which the *Vita Columbani* became a template *vita*, see Ian Wood, "The 'Vita Columbani' and Merovingian Hagiography," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 63-80.

<sup>27</sup> Fouracre, "Merovingian Hagiography," 11.

own needs across a 40-year period.<sup>28</sup> Heinzelmann's work points to the uses of hagiography to produce alternative readings of a particular historical period. Alternative narratives were the subjects of Paul Dutton's work on dreams and visions in Carolingian hagiography. "This bumpy oneiric record," Dutton has observed, "though dark with disturbing conviction and partisan interests, supplies us with a more intense, almost nightmarish, reading of ninth-century history, one that runs parallel to the annals of the age."<sup>29</sup> By focusing on the theme of dreams and visions, Dutton illuminated an entire alternative political discourse. Such assessments of Carolingian hagiographic sources rightly interrogate texts for their broader cultural value, especially given the difficulty of dating most of them precisely.<sup>30</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, it is far more important

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Heinzelmann, "Manuscripts hagiographiques et travail des hagiographes: l'exemple de la tradition manuscrite des Vies anciennes de sainte Geneviève de Paris," in *Manuscripts hagiographiques et travail des hagiographes*, ed. Heinzelmann (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1992), 9-16, at 15: "D'un côté, l'établissement ou les établissements ecclésiastiques concernés ont suscité l'élaboration de versions mieux adaptées à leurs besoins, spécifiques du moment; de l'autre, les contextes social, politique, spirituel et littéraire ont conditionné la création ou la reproduction de tel ou tel état du texte."

<sup>29</sup> Paul Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>30</sup> On these difficulties, see Helvétius, "Les modèles de sainteté," 53; Guy Philippart and Michel Trigalet, "L'hagiographie latine du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle dans la longue durée: données statistiques sur la production littéraire et sur l'édition médiévale," in *Latin Culture in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Medieval Latin Studies, Cambridge, 9-12 September 1998*, 2 vols., ed. Michael Herren, Christopher McDonough, and Ross Arthur (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), II: 281-301. The first scholars to attempt to date *vitae* and hagiographic legends on a large scale were the Bollandists in the seventeenth century, an enterprise continued by the editors of the *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, principally Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison. On this period of historical scholarship, see František Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1965), 26-27; and Monique Goullet, "Introduction," in *L'hagiographie mérovingienne à travers ses réécritures*, ed. Goullet, Martin Heinzelmann, and Christiane Veyrard-Cosme (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2010), 11-26.

to trace textual ecologies with all their resonances, echoes and borrowings, and by so doing to apprehend ideas about the natural world as they shifted for different contexts.

Perhaps the most important work on these and related questions has recently been done by James Palmer. Palmer's earlier work on Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* will inform the later pages of this chapter.<sup>31</sup> Questions emerging from Rimbert's *vita* of Anskar, "the apostle of the North,"<sup>32</sup> have since informed Palmer's scholarship on Carolingian depictions of Germanic paganism,<sup>33</sup> Anglo-Saxon missionaries and missions<sup>34</sup> and, more recently, apocalyptic thought.<sup>35</sup> *Vitae* like that of Anskar contain geographic descriptions and scriptural resonances that can suggest an eschatological imperative to convert peoples at the "ends of the earth" to bring about Christ's second coming.<sup>36</sup> Palmer's research on Anglo-Saxon missionaries in Francia sensitively teases out missionary motivations from the literary constructions. Palmer has said of Boniface at Geismar: "For modern historians, the implications of such rhetoric should be that the 'real' paganisms are more obscured in some sources than often we would like to admit. For missionaries and hagiographers, such rhetoric meant that it was possible to become the author of an idealized clash between two cultures which culminated in the triumph of Christianity."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See below, 467-70.

<sup>32</sup> Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* and Scandinavian Mission in the Ninth Century," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55.2 (2004): 235-56.

<sup>33</sup> Palmer, "Defining Paganism," 402-25.

<sup>34</sup> Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690-900* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Palmer, "Calculating Time and the End of Time in the Carolingian World, c. 740-820," *English Historical Review* 126 (2011): 1308-31. This constitutes the early phases of Palmer's work on early medieval apocalyptic thought; unfortunately this dissertation has not benefitted from his forthcoming *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> For a full discussion, see below, 468-79.

<sup>37</sup> Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons*, 144.

This view also informs Palmer's analysis of hagiographic depictions of wilderness: as at Geismar, hagiographers often exaggerated their saints' abilities to transform marginal, desolate and dangerous environments.<sup>38</sup>

In this chapter, I will reassess those textual worlds in order to understand hagiographic attitudes towards nature beyond their own binaries of wild versus cultivated or pagan versus converted. While eighth- and ninth-century hagiographers did often imagine the non-Christian world in such terms, they also borrowed from rich stocks of scriptural allusion, exegesis and other intellectual works known to them. Complex descriptions of the natural world in hagiographic sources thus take many forms and have not yet taken a prominent place at the scholarly table alongside perceptions of the monastic wilderness, paganism or apocalyptic thought.

### **Overview of the Missionary *Vitae* in this Chapter**

Early missionary *vitae* such as Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* (composed in Mainz, c. 763-68) and Eigil's *Vita Sturm* (composed in Fulda, c. 794-800) emphasized the sheer emptiness of the Frankish wilderness, much as we have seen in the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium*.<sup>39</sup> The image of a "broad-horned deer" in the Jura would not have been out of place on the banks of Sturm's Fulda River in the mid-eighth century.<sup>40</sup> Christianizers and monastic founders like Sturm were presented as figures who understood the importance of nature for helping shape religious life. Competing voices on the subject of nature emerged: taking cues from Boniface's actions at Geismar, other

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<sup>38</sup> Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons*, 145-53.

<sup>39</sup> Chapter 1, 101-2.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 1 above, 102.

missionaries and founders aggressively cleared natural places for human habitation, suggesting the supremacy of ordered, built spaces to illustrate the success of Christianity in the frontiers. As we have already seen, such an “adversarial” view of nature was common, but nowhere near universal.<sup>41</sup> For this period, there was no such thing as a “normative” interaction between humans and their natural worlds in the *vitae*. Over the course of the period, however, the natural world’s value as a way of understanding, explaining and articulating Christian success was steadily devalued as eschatological approaches to geographic description were increasingly favored in the later *vitae*.

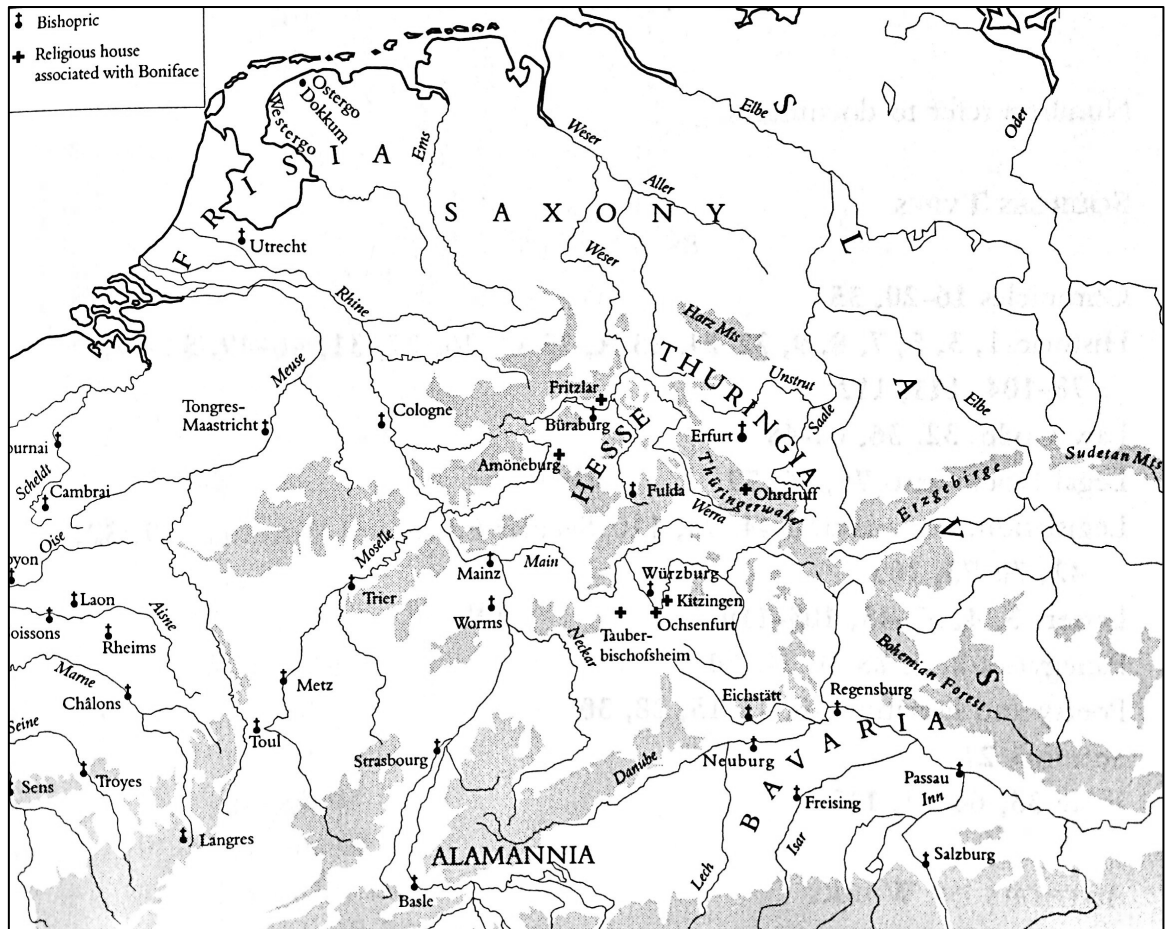
To illuminate these interactions and shifts, this chapter focuses on the missionary *vitae* of the mid-eighth through the late ninth centuries, covering the period from about 690—Willibrord’s arrival on the continent—up to c. 888-909, when Rimbart’s *Vita Anskarii* and the anonymous *Vita Rimbarti*, the last of the missionary *vitae*, were composed. On the whole, the missionary *vitae* described monastic, episcopal and political efforts to convert barbarians both within and on the frontiers of the Frankish kingdom before and after its eighth-century transition from Merovingian to Carolingian dynasties. An exhaustive treatment of each of the missionary *vitae* is not possible here: the missionary *vitae* chosen for discussion are those that most fully and frequently address the subject of nature. Their authors often echoed scriptural, patristic and earlier hagiographic words and phrases to describe the landscapes through which Anglo-Saxon and Frankish missionaries moved. These are also *vitae* emerging from both royal court circles as well as some of the most significant monastic and episcopal centers of the

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<sup>41</sup> David Herlihy, “Attitudes toward the Environment in Medieval Society,” in *Historical Ecology: Essays in Environment and Social Change*, ed. Lester K. Born (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1980), 100-16. For a discussion, see above, Introduction, 5-10.



period such as Mainz, Tours, Fulda and Hamburg-Bremen. *Vitae* like those of Willibrord, Richarius, Vedast and Anskar were also written in part for audiences at Echternach, Saint-Riquier, Saint-Vaast and Corbie, respectively. Thus the *vitae* under discussion reflect a broad chronological and geographical scope.



**Map 3.1.** Major Monastic Centers in the Eighth Century. Taken from Alexander Murray, ed., *From Roman To Merovingian Gaul: A Reader* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000), 677.

### *Willibald, Vita Bonifatii*

Boniface was not the first Anglo-Saxon missionary to work on the continent.

Among the first organized missions was that of Willibrord (d. 739), the so-called “apostle

of the Frisians.”<sup>42</sup> Like his biographer Alcuin, Willibrord was Northumbrian. He inherited his colleague Ecgberht’s (d. 716) plans to minister to the pagan Frisians.<sup>43</sup> This discussion will, however, focus on the *Vita Willibrordi* together with Alcuin’s other hagiographic works since it was written later than Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii*. Boniface (born Wynfrith; d. 754), who joined Willibrord in Frisia, perhaps looms largest of the earlier missionaries.<sup>44</sup> His hagiographer Willibald, later bishop of Eichstätt, composed the *Vita Bonifatii* between 763 and 768. Boniface’s missionary work would become perhaps the best known and among the earliest of the period.<sup>45</sup> As Deug-Su observed of the *Vita*

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<sup>42</sup> Much of the best scholarship on Willibrord is not in English; on what can be known about Willibrord’s career, I have consulted Camillus Wampach, *Willibrord: Sein Leben und Lebenswerk* (Luxembourg: Sankt-Paulus-Druckerei, 1953).

<sup>43</sup> Bede, *HE* 5.9.

<sup>44</sup> On this period in particular, see Lutz von Padberg, *Bonifatius: Missionar und Reformer* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2004); Michael Imhof and Gregor Stasch, eds., *Bonifatius: Vom angelsächsischen Missionar zum Apostel der Deutschen* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2004). John Clay, *Boniface*, 19-54, synthesizes a huge volume of non-Anglophone literature on Boniface.

<sup>45</sup> Boniface was also responsible for attracting his own kinsmen from England to the continent, whose *vitae* for the sake of space are not discussed substantially in this chapter—most notably the nun Leoba (d. 782), Boniface’s brothers Willibald (d. 787), Wynnebald (d. 761), and his sister Waldburga (d. 779) to Hesse and Bavaria. On Leoba and Waldburga in particular, see Janet Nelson, “Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages,” in *Women in the Church: Papers Read at the 1989 Summer Meeting and the 1990 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. William Shiels and Diana Wood (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 53-78. For the early waves of missionary activity, I have consulted especially: Heinz Löwe, “Pirmin, Willibrord und Bonifatius: Ihre Bedeutung für die Missionsgeschichte ihrer Zeit,” in *La conversione al cristianesimo dell’alto medioevo: 14-19 aprile 1966*, *Settimane* 14 (1967): 217-61; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, “A Background to St. Boniface’s Mission,” in *England before the Conquest: Studies Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 35-48; Timothy Reuter, “Saint Boniface in Europe,” *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on Saint Boniface and the church at Crediton*, ed. Reuter (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 69-94; James Palmer, “Saxon or European? Interpreting and Reinterpreting St Boniface,” *History Compass* 4.5 (2006): 852-69.

*Bonifatii*, Willibald consciously modeled Boniface on Martin of Tours,<sup>46</sup> himself a missionary and destroyer of pagan shrines in the natural world. For example, early in the *Vita Bonifatii*, Willibald used “pagans” to stand for “Frisians,” and thus political enemies of the Frankish kingdom, whose marshy landscapes—themselves on the liminal zones between land and water—reflected their existence firmly outside of Frankish society. As Ian Wood has pointed out of the *vita*, Willibald presented Boniface as primarily a bishop and monastic founder, not a full-time missionary.<sup>47</sup> This feature of the *vita* need not make his role as missionary ancillary, however; Boniface’s major Christianizing activities involved the destruction of pagan shrines and the building of monastic and ecclesiastical centers in their places, rendering any definition of “missionary activity” flexible. While his *vita* does not engage nature as frequently as later missionary *vitae*, a wider view of literature pertaining to Boniface (especially correspondence) reveals a preoccupation with nature as a source for metaphors of missionary activity—a category distinct from the episode with which this chapter began, but one that informed its presentation.

### ***Alcuin’s Missionary Vitae of Vedast, Richarius and Willibrord***

From there we will consider Alcuin’s missionary *vitae* of Vedast (d. 540), Richarius (d. 645) and Willibrord (d. 739), and all of which he composed at the close of

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<sup>46</sup> Deug-Su, *L’eloquenza del silenzio*, 67. On images of sanctity based on earlier ones, see de Gaiffier, “Hagiographie et historiographie,” especially 179-96; Poulin, *L’idéal de sainteté*, 23-24.

<sup>47</sup> Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400-1050* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 61-64.

the eighth century (c. 794-800).<sup>48</sup> In Chapter 2, we encountered Alcuin in York on the banks of Ouse River in his *York Poem*. By the late eighth century, Alcuin had developed his own hagiographic interest in Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the continent, since he arrived from Northumbria at Charlemagne's school of Aachen in the 780s.<sup>49</sup> Since Deug-Su's studies of Alcuin's *vitae* and his sources, it is not impossible to separate his hagiography from his wider output—nor can Carolingian hagiographic revisions during the reform period be seen as derivative as they had been before.<sup>50</sup> Following Deug-Su, Veyrard-Cosme has more recently studied the narrative, influences and style of Alcuin's hagiography.<sup>51</sup> Both Deug-Su and Veyrard-Cosme interpreted Alcuin's use of royal figures and bishops like Vedast as expressions of an ideal relationship between *potestas*, or secular power, and *auctoritas*, ecclesiastical power, ideas reinforced in Alcuin's wider literary output.<sup>52</sup> While Alcuin's descriptions of nature require intense focus on the *vitae* themselves, they cannot be viewed in a vacuum.

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<sup>48</sup> The *vitae* of Vedast and Richarius were revisions from earlier works, while that of Willibrord was original to Alcuin. While this chapter does not focus on the nature of Alcuin's revisions of earlier Merovingian *vitae*, I have benefitted from the comments and interventions of Kelly Gibson, "Rewriting History: Carolingian Reform and Controversy in Biographies of Saints" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> While the conventional dating for Alcuin's arrival in Aachen is soon after 781, when he met Charlemagne at Parma, Donald Bullough argued for a later arrival in 786: *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 336-46.

<sup>50</sup> Deug-Su, *L'opera agiografica di Alcuino* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo, 1983); and *idem*, *Cultura e ideologia nella prima età carolingia* (Rome: Nella sede dell'Istituto, 1984), 14.

<sup>51</sup> Veyrard-Cosme, ed. and trans. *L'œuvre hagiographique en prose d'Alcuin: Vitae Willibrordi, Vedasti, Richarii. Edition, traduction, études narratologiques*, Testi Mediolatini con traduzione 21 (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2003), some of which was based on her earlier "La constitution des figures royales dans l'œuvre hagiographique en prose d'Alcuin," *Lalies* 14 (1994): 263-89.

<sup>52</sup> Deug-Su, *L'opera*, 70-71: "L'agiografia di Alcuino—nel caso di Willibrordo—è significativa. Egli non è guidato semplicemente dal diletto del «meraviglioso», ma ha

For these reasons my analysis of Alcuin's hagiographic works will cross-reference the contents of those *vitae* with Alcuin's letters as well as earlier sources.<sup>53</sup> Alcuin's *vitae* focused on Frankish missionary and monastic foundation efforts in Frisia and northern Gaul—efforts which, in Alcuin's telling, presaged Carolingian expansion under Charlemagne's reign (768-814)—instead of the lives of more recent saints. This was a fundamental difference between Merovingian and Carolingian hagiographers: where the former were more likely to have encountered the saint in person, the latter seem actively to have preferred saints of the distant past.<sup>54</sup> More recent saints' involvement in royal politics could have been a source of concern for hagiographers.<sup>55</sup>

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cercato di costruire un concetto di santità e di *auctoritas* della santità, scegliendo o riordinando a tale scopo i fatti storici non importa se egli entrerà talvolta in contraddizione con se stesso"; Veyrard-Cosme, "La constitution des figures royales," 263-89, especially 273, where she argued that Alcuin portrayed Dagobert as a successful Christian king because he followed the *auctoritas* of Richarius; *idem*, "Réflexion politique et pratique du pouvoir dans l'œuvre d'Alcuin," in *Penser le pouvoir au moyen âge (VIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, ed. Dominique Boutet and Jacques Verger (Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 2000), 401-25. In her doctoral dissertation, Kelly Gibson has recently shown that Alcuin revised Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita Vedasti* to reflect the virtues of an ideal bishop for his—and Alcuin's—time: Gibson, "Rewriting History," 73-76. Much of Vedast's *auctoritas* stemmed from his being "portrayed as a model preacher": Ian Wood, *Missionary Life*, 83.

<sup>53</sup> Deug-Su demonstrated that Alcuin's *vitae* of Vedast and Richarius and his brief *vita* of Martin reinforced the theological concepts in his letters and treatises in his *Cultura e ideologia*, 12-14.

<sup>54</sup> In "Merovingian Hagiography," 10, 13, Paul Fouracre characterized Merovingian hagiography by its "frequent admission of unflattering details of what appears to be contemporary reality . . . [these works] remain embarrassing, and the whole fails to convince as hagiography precisely because it looks more convincing as history."

<sup>55</sup> Paul Fouracre, "The Origins of the Carolingian Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints," in *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143-55, at 163-64. For a breakdown of the percentage of saints who died in earlier versus later periods in the period (the subjects of saints' lives are overwhelmingly earlier), see Martin Heinzelmann, "L'hagiographie mérovingienne: panorama des documents potentiels," in *L'hagiographie mérovingienne à travers ses*

Alcuin's saints—and the natural environments with which they interacted—were firmly in the distant past.

The bulk of this section shall focus on Alcuin's prose *Vita Willibrordi* for a number of reasons. For one, Willibrord was the first known Anglo-Saxon missionary to arrive in Europe around 690. Additionally, he was the missionary figure who had the most direct influence on the career of Boniface, as the latter arrived in Frisia from Wessex around 716 and worked under Willibrord early in his career. Finally, of Alcuin's three missionary *vitae*, the *Vita Willibrordi* is by far the most complete depiction of missionary life in eighth-century Francia. Willibrord was a missionary figure for whose life Alcuin had the firmest footing in comparison with the earlier Merovingian *vitae* of Vedast and Richarius. The *Vita Willibrordi* was also the *vita* for which Alcuin did not have a Merovingian version to revise.<sup>56</sup> In the *Vita Willibrordi*, Alcuin described what he thought it meant to be a missionary in the Frankish frontier nearly a century before. Unlike the earlier *Vita Bonifatii*, Alcuin placed higher value on natural metaphors in keeping with the rhetorical style of the *York Poem*.<sup>57</sup> By contrast, Alcuin's portrayals of monastic building projects in the *Vita Vedasti* clarify the importance of constructed spaces in a hagiographic narrative framework. In the tradition of Martin and Boniface, Willibrord purified a pagan holy spring at Fositeland by baptizing catechumens in it and slaughtering the sacred cattle for provisions. In a rare glimpse into the realities of pagan

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*réécritures*, Beihefte der Francia 71, ed. Monique Goullet, Martin Heinzelmann and Christiane Veyrard-Cosme, (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2010), 27-82, at 31.

<sup>56</sup> As Philippe Depreux has argued, one of Alcuin's main goals in his revised *Vita Richarii* was to rescue the earlier one from bad grammar; his revised version was written in a more classical style: "Ambitions et limites des réformes culturelles à l'époque carolingienne," *Revue historique* 307 (2002): 721-53, at 745-46.

<sup>57</sup> On the *York Poem*, see Chapter 2 above, 272-78.

religious practice, Alcuin used the natural world as a metonym for the Christian history of Francia, a set of places in need of appropriation and sanctification. For Alcuin, monastic development and the Christianization of Frankish borderlands to be mutually exclusive activities.

### ***Egil's Vita Sturmi***

Efforts to convert pagans and develop a missionary culture could sprout up alongside monastic foundations. From Alcuin's hagiographic school of thought straddling Northumbria and Tours, the next major missionary life was Egil's *Vita Sturmi* (also composed c. 794-800), the major *vita* the Fulda school of hagiography. The *Vita Sturmi* detailed the peregrinations of Sturm (d. 779), founder of the illustrious monastic community of Fulda. Of the *vitae* considered in this chapter, Egil's *Vita Sturmi* contains by far the richest accounts and discussions of the natural world. In it, Sturm, with Boniface's help, went on a series of journeys into the Frankish wilderness looking for a suitable place to establish what would become the monastic community of Fulda. In the process, Egil included specific details on river valleys, soil quality, place names and forest topography in order to underscore the legitimacy of Fulda's foundation and its claims to surrounding territory belonging to Carloman (d. 754), mayor of the Merovingian palace—claims that were significantly backed by Carloman himself. These vivid descriptions also constituted a textual ecology that helped shape the early history of Fulda's community. The *Vita Sturmi* was a remarkable hagiographic feat that acknowledged a Merovingian inheritance of textual ecology, as well as the

preoccupations of clearance, foundation and construction most relevant to a contemporary monastic audience at Fulda.

### ***Rimbert's Vita Anskarii and the Anonymous Vita Rimberti***

After the composition of the *vitae* of Willibrord and Sturm towards the close of the eighth century, missionary activity and the production of *vitae* cooled in northern Europe with some notable exceptions. These include a pair of lives describing the Christianization of Scandinavia which most scholars consider to mark the end of the missionary *vitae* period: Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* and the anonymous *Vita Rimberti*. For Anskar and Rimbert, the North's "challenge of the countryside,"<sup>58</sup> was overcome by visible building projects. Rimbert did not employ long or specific accounts of the natural world as a means for understanding Christian success in Scandinavia. He instead focused on two core themes: the building of Christian churches and sacred places, and geographic descriptions of the ends of the earth. Nowhere in these two *vitae* did the titular bishops engage in a rural, pagan topography or dramatically convert its inhabitants in ways to which we have become accustomed. Instead, by around 900, successful monastic practice was reflected by impressive buildings and architectural metaphors, which much more overtly shaped monastic practice. The natural world always appeared in broader depictions of the world *ad fines orbis terrae* or at the *extremum terrae*, reflecting the eschatological charge of Matt. 24.14 that "this gospel of the kingdom, shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations, and then shall the consummation come."

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<sup>58</sup> This is a phrase from Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 34-65, at 34.



This is not to say that hagiographers were describing a process in which buildings directly replaced unruly nature—even though the presence of the language of nature dwindled in the ninth century, descriptions of the built environment remained frequent. Depictions of the physical world had shifted from Sturm’s close interactions with the wilderness to eschatological expectation. Rimbert and the anonymous author of the *Vita Rimberti* understood the natural world as subordinate to more general geographic information. They were describing what the *extremum terrae* was physically like in the context of eschatological thought.

### **Pagans, the Oak of Geismar and Other Enemies in Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii***

Boniface arrived in Frisia later than Willibrord, but his hagiographer Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii* predates Alcuin’s *Vita Willibrordi* by about 30 years. Arriving in Mainz from Wessex sometime after Boniface’s death in 754, Willibald himself is a shadowy figure.<sup>59</sup> We know much more about the subject of his hagiographic work. Boniface’s influence on missionary practice east of the Rhine—in Hesse, Thuringia and parts of Bavaria (Map 3.2)—should not be understated, since it paved the way for later missionaries like Sturm of Fulda (d. 779) and Gregory of Utrecht (d. c. 780). Born Wynfrith between 672 and 675 in Wessex, Boniface entered a monastery near Exeter as a child oblate, but completed his education and rose to the post of school *magister* at Nursling, where he composed a treatise on grammar.<sup>60</sup> According to Willibald, Wynfrith

<sup>59</sup> For a biographic sketch of Willibald, I have consulted Franz Brunhölzl, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, 2 vols (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1975), I: 239.

<sup>60</sup> Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii* (hereafter *VB*) 1, *MGH SRG* 57, 4-7; Boniface, *Ars grammatica*, *CCSL* 133B, 13-99. For the career of Boniface, I am following the

had long aspired to be a missionary and was drawn towards the Saxons as ethnic relatives of the English.<sup>61</sup> Besides, since the late seventh century his countryman Willibrord had been working sporadically in Frisia and Saxony. Despite Willibald's insistence, Boniface was working in an at least partially Christianized region.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Boniface's Career and Vita***

In 716, Wynfrith—not yet called Boniface—arrived in Frisia during a period of conflict between the Frisian king Radbod (d. 719) and the new mayor of the Merovingian palace, Charles Martel (d. 741). Wynfrith's attempts to convert Radbod failed, so he returned to Nursling to plan a pilgrimage to Rome so that he might obtain papal approval for further efforts.<sup>63</sup> By 719, Pope Gregory II offered support for a Frisian mission under the supervision of Willibrord,<sup>64</sup> and gave Wynfrith the name "Bonifatius."<sup>65</sup> In 722 Gregory II granted Boniface an episcopate in Frisia without a fixed diocese. By the

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assessments of Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 71-93, especially 71-78; and Wood, *Missionary Life*, 58-61.

<sup>61</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 46, *MGH Epp.* 3, 294-95. Boniface's teacher Ecgbert was a well-known proponent of this view (Bede, *HE* 5.9).

<sup>62</sup> Mainz, for example, had been an episcopal see under the later Roman Empire; on this see Franz Staab, "Heidentum und Christentum in der *Germania Prima* zwischen Antike und Mittelalter," in *Zur Kontinuität zwischen Antike und Mittelalter am Oberrhein*, ed. Staab (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1994), 117-52; and *idem*, "Die Mainzer Kirche im Frühmittelalter," in *Handbuch der Mainzer Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Freidhelm Jürgensmeier (Würzburg: Echter, 2000), 86-194. There is also archaeological evidence for Christianity in the region before Boniface's arrival: on the excavation of seventh- and eighth-century churches in the region, see Helmut Roth and Egon Wamers, *Hessen im Frühmittelalter: Archäologie und Kunst* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1982).

<sup>63</sup> *VB* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 13-18, at 16.

<sup>64</sup> *VB* 5, *MGH SRG* 57, 18-26, at 18-19.

<sup>65</sup> See Boniface, *Epp.* 11-12, *MGH Epp.* 3, 257-58.

autumn of the same year, Boniface had the support of both papacy and Charles Martel.<sup>66</sup>

These events form the context in which Boniface felled the great oak at Geismar around 723.<sup>67</sup> Most of his subsequent work focused on missionary efforts in Bavaria, as well as church reform and monastic foundations within the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom.<sup>68</sup> The most successful result of these efforts was the foundation of the monastic community of Fulda in 744 under the abbacy of Sturm.<sup>69</sup> By the 750s, Boniface was ready to return to the mission field; naming Lull of Mainz (d. 786) as his successor in 753, Boniface returned to Dokkum in Frisia and was martyred in June 754 there during a baptismal gathering.<sup>70</sup>

Willibald organized the *Vita Bonifatii* around these key events in a series of long sections:

**Table 3.1: The Structure of Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii*, composed c. 763-68.**

Parts 1-3	Preface; as a child, Boniface enters a monastery near Exeter.
4-6	Boniface departs for Frisia for the first time, and subsequently makes a pilgrimage to Rome.
7	Boniface returns to Germany, and organizes churches in Bavaria.
8	Boniface returns to Frisia and is martyred there.
9	Willibald recounts Boniface's posthumous miracles, including the appearance of a fountain at the site of his church.

<sup>66</sup> VB 6, MGH SRG 57, 26-36, at 27; see also Boniface, *Epp.* 16-19, 21-22, MGH *Epp.* 3, 265-68 and 269-71.

<sup>67</sup> VB 6, MGH SRG 57, 31.

<sup>68</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 45, MGH *Epp.* 3, 293-94.

<sup>69</sup> Boniface, *Epp.* 86 and 89, MGH *Epp.* 3, 367-69 and 374-75; VB 8, MGH SRG 57, 41-42; Eigil, *Vita Sturmi* 12-13, MGH SRM 2, 368-69. On these events, see below, 437-40.

<sup>70</sup> VB 8, MGH SRG 57, 54-56; Boniface, *Ep.* 111, MGH *Epp.* 3, 397-400. Willibald actually never identified the place as Dokkum. That claim belonged to a later life (composed before 849), the anonymous so-called *Vita altera Bonifatii* 16, MGH SRG 57, 62-78, at 73-74, cited by Altfrid in his *Vita Liudgeri* 1.5, in the edition of Wilhelm Diekamp, *Die Vita Sancti Liudgeri* (Münster: Theissing, 1881), 9-10.

A second *vita* of Boniface was composed anonymously in the ninth century. I shall refer to the *Vita altera Bonifatii* throughout this discussion for shifts in Boniface's perception in the eighth and ninth centuries. The *Vita altera* was once attributed to bishop Radbod of Utrecht (fl. 899-917), but we now know that it was written in Utrecht for a Frisian audience before 849.<sup>71</sup> At times the *Vita altera*'s content is radically different from that of Willibrord's *vita*: the anonymous author preferred chronological narrative to Willibrord's expansions on significant moments in Boniface's career, dispensed with figurative language in favor of classical portrayals of supernatural beings like demons (*larvae*), apparitions (*lemures*) or nymphs (*napae*),<sup>72</sup> and kept his account far briefer than Willibald had done. While we will discuss Willibrord's *vita* primarily, I nevertheless include a summary of the contents of the *Vita altera*, which shall serve as a later comparison for the hagiographic values of Boniface's cult, as well as the reception of his image after Willibrord's *vita*:

**Table 3.2: The Structure of the Anonymous *Vita altera Bonifatii*, composed before c. 849.**

1-5	Introduction: the author emphasizes the role of spiritual medicine from earlier saints like Martin, and outlines the work.
6-7	Boniface's birth in Britain, his journey to Frisia before his pilgrimage to Rome.
8-9	Boniface returns to Frisia to work with Willibrord.
10-11	Boniface makes a second pilgrimage to Rome and is made a bishop by Gregory II with the charge to convert the pagans of Frisia; soon after he journeys to Rome again and returns to Mainz, where he becomes bishop.
12-15	Boniface returns to Frisia and is martyred there.
16-23	The anonymous author defends his <i>vita</i> against unnamed and unknown critics.

<sup>71</sup> Wilhelm Levison, *MGH SRG* 57, xlix-liv; see also Wood, *Missionary Life*, 61-64. Petra Kehl claimed that Radbod revised the *vita* for the monks at Fulda: *Kult und Nachleben des heiligen Bonifatius im Mittelalter (754-1200)* (Fulda: Parzellar, 1993), 140.

<sup>72</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 67-68.

In the much longer *Vita Bonifatii*, Willibald had spent far less time on Boniface's monastic practice than he did on the ecclesiastical organization on Frankish borderlands, especially north and east of the Rhine.<sup>73</sup> This is in part why, with the notable exception of the oak of Geismar, Willibald scarcely recorded any actual miracles in the *vita*. Instead, he emphasized the papal and political authority for Boniface's missionary activity, especially that of Charles Martel at the dawn of Carolingian ascendancy. Writing during the early years of Carolingian dynastic authority, Willibald took the Carolingian position of denigrating Merovingians who refused to lend support to Charles Martel.<sup>74</sup> In Willibald's telling, Boniface anachronistically carried Carolingian authority to the borderlands. To explain these events, Willibald deployed an abundance of natural metaphors, rooted in scriptural and papal language.

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<sup>73</sup> For example, see *VB* 7-8, *MGH SRG* 57, 36-56.

<sup>74</sup> For one, Willibald tacitly blamed Merovingian *duces* for pagan lapses in Thuringia in *VB* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 26-27. On the subject of denigrating Merovingian predecessors, see Hubert Mordek, "Die Hedenen als politische Kraft im austrasischen Frankenreich," in *Karl Martell in seiner Zeit*, ed. Jörg Jarnut, Ulrich Nonn and Michael Richter (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1994), 345-66, at 346-48. More broadly on Carolingian depictions of Merovingian saints, as well as the former's over-emphasis of paganism in the latter's mission fields, see Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul AD 481-751* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), especially 197-206.



**Map 3.2:** Mainz, Fulda and Related Religious Centers. Taken from Wood, *Missionary Life*, 292.

### *Natural Metaphors in Willibald's Vita Bonifatii*

It may seem strange to begin a discussion about missionaries and the natural world with a *vita* that concerned itself so infrequently with the subject. Despite the infrequency with which Willibald discussed the natural world, two of the main events in Boniface's cult legacy—the felling of the oak at Geismar and the posthumous construction of a church for him on in the swamps of Frisia at Aelmere—directly

engaged natural features.<sup>75</sup> When Willibald described a landscape in which Boniface moved and worked, he did so with special attention to Christian buildings, not natural beauty or resources we will encounter later in, for example, Eigil's *Vita Sturmi*.

Willibald's engagement with the subject of nature or the created world was mostly limited to figurative speech informed by scriptural, hagiographic or exegetical allusion. When Willibald did discuss natural features (as at Geismar and Aelmere), he described a process in which Christian buildings actively supplanted natural places. First, however, I will establish Willibald's strategy of deploying natural metaphors to describe Boniface's missionary work.

Willibald's natural metaphors often stood in contrast with his depictions of Christian buildings. In 716, Boniface had attended a council in Kent in response to a rebellion against Ine (r. 688-725) when Charles Martel recalled him to Frisia. For Willibald, what Boniface found there was a physical representation of Christianity's failure thus far:

Sed quoniam, gravi ingruente paganorum impetu, hostilis exorta dissensio inter Carlum principem gloriosumque ducem Franchorum et Redbodem regem Fresonum populos ex utraque parte perturbabat maximaque iam pars ecclesiarum Christi, quae Franchorum prius in Fresia subiectae errant imperio, Redbodi incumbente persecutione ac servorum Dei facta expulsione, vastata erat ac destructa, idulorum quoque cultura exstructis dilobrorum fanis lugubriter renovata.<sup>76</sup>

But then, on account of a serious [and] threatening attack by the pagans [i.e. the Frisians], a violent uprising came about between Charles [Martel], the *princeps*

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<sup>75</sup> See below, 361-73 and 388-90. John Clay, *Boniface*, 248-57, catalogues several of the metaphors employed to describe Boniface's mission, particularly light and darkness and (briefly) harvest language; he does not discuss natural metaphors as a distinct set of mechanisms by which the missions could be explained.

<sup>76</sup> *VB* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 16.

and glorious leader of the Franks, and Radbod, the king of the Frisian people; it caused great disturbances among the people of both sides, and soon the greater part of the Christian churches which before had been under Frankish control—through the persecution of Radbod and the expulsion of God’s servants [i.e. the clergy]—were destroyed and ruined; the worship of idols was restored and, alas, shrines of demons were reconstructed.

This was one distinct level on which Willibald operated: Christian buildings or structures should replace unacceptable ones. Not only this, but the former’s ruin was a direct indication of Christianity’s early failures in Frisia—a concept we have already encountered in Gildas’ *De excidio* in Chapter 2.<sup>77</sup> Construction was a central theme in the *Vita Bonifatii*: buildings could be highly visible structures, both in the narrative and in landscapes themselves. In Willibald’s *vita*, the worlds of nature and buildings seldom intersected. Boniface, as we shall soon see, was a “wise architect (*sapiens architectus*)” according to the anonymous author of the *Vita altera*, but Willibald most often described his work in agricultural terms.

To illustrate this, after Boniface spent the summer in Frisia “and fall was approaching completion, he left the fields that lay dry without heavenly and fruitful dew” and returned to his home monastery until the spring of 717.<sup>78</sup> Frisia was a place devoid of “spiritual fruit (*fructus sanctitatis*),” unprepared for a “harvest of souls (*messis animarum*).”<sup>79</sup> These were strictly metaphorical ways of discussing missionary activity, not real interactions with nature as we have seen with the *robor Iobis* near Geismar at the

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<sup>77</sup> Chapter 2, 203-8.

<sup>78</sup> *VB* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 17-18: “et estatis autumnique aliquantulum tempus praeteriret, iam arida caelestis rore fecunditatis relinquerat arva.”

<sup>79</sup> *VB* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 17. John Clay, *Boniface*, Appendix 2.3, has identified eleven letters pertaining to Boniface’s missions in which “harvest of souls” was used, mostly in the context of Christ’s parables of the sower of good and bad seed.



beginning of this chapter. At the same time, these modes of expression help to simplify Boniface's political and ecclesiastical tasks in Frisia: Willibald consolidated Boniface's roles as bishop, priest, monastic founder and missionary into the image of a farmer toiling in a barren landscape. In doing so, Willibald also departed from the more diverse approaches of Merovingian hagiographers we encountered in Chapter 1 by situating nature safely in the realm of metaphor. Willibald used natural metaphors to describe processes of conversion.

### ***Boniface, Bees and the Architecture of Monastic Life***

This metaphoric language is of course distinct from physical interactions between human and nature in the *Vita Bonifatii* and comes across most clearly in Willibald's account of Boniface's journeys to Rome where he collected books, relics and other accoutrements. In Willibald's account, Boniface was "like the wisest bee (*prudentissimae apis*) which, carried along by its softly beating wings, goes around fields and pastures, working its way among a thousand types of sweet-smelling flowers, testing with its discerning nose the secret supplies of honied nectar—ignoring all bitter and deadly juices inside—and then returns to its hive with nectar."<sup>80</sup> On a general level, classical traditions

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<sup>80</sup> *VB 5, MGH SRG 57, 22*: "ad instar videlicet prudentissimae apis, quae suotim camporum circumvolat arva et numerosam redolentium herbarum copiam, pennigeris molliter perstrepens alis, circumvallat carpentique rostro pertemptat, melliflue ubi nectaris lateat dulcedo, et suis eam, omni penitus mortiferi sucus amaritudine contempta, albeariis invehit."

ascribed images of fertility to Artemis or Diana, often depicting her with bees.<sup>81</sup> Bees' honey was used as a sweetener, and the wax of their hives illuminated churches.<sup>82</sup>

Willibald's description of Boniface shares a number of more direct resonances with both earlier and contemporary texts. We have encountered bee metaphors to describe monastic activity with the author of the sixth-century *Vita patrum iurensium*, who called the Jura monks "venerable swarms of fathers (*uenerabilia patrum examina*)" who "spread out from there as from a beehive filled with bees (*uelut ex referto apul alueario . . . diffundi*)."<sup>83</sup> Caesarius of Arles, too, had described Christian communities as bees in a hive,<sup>84</sup> taking part in a long tradition of describing a monk or holy person as *prudens apis* or *prudentissima apis*.<sup>85</sup> In the Eusebius Gallicanus sermon collection, the author described church teachings as "honey to the woodland (*mel siluestre*)" from the "beehive of the law (*intra aluearium legis*)," which teachers "scatter through the forests in the depths of pagan ignorance (*in profundis ignorantiae siluis manebat et in campis*

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<sup>81</sup> J. Donald Hughes, "Artemis: Goddess of Conservation," *Forest and Conservation History* 34 (1990): 191-97, at 192: "The archetype was a mother goddess, displaying attributes of fecundity and reproductive sexuality. Similar features are displayed in some forms of Artemis that persisted into the classical Greek period, such as the many-breasted *Artemis of the Ephesians*. This image is covered with animals in high relief, including lions, deer, oxen, and bees, to emphasize Artemis's fecundity as mother of living creatures."

<sup>82</sup> Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: California Press, 1967), 322.

<sup>83</sup> *VPI* 16, Martine, 256.

<sup>84</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 207.2.20 and 207.4.1, *CCSL* 104, 830.

<sup>85</sup> See for example John Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum* 5.4, *CSEL* 17, 283, lines 23-24; Alcuin, *Ep.* 272, *MGH Epp.* 4, 431. To my knowledge there is no full assessment of bee imagery, industry, and production for the early medieval period. For later development of bee imagery, see Anna Taylor, "Just Like A Mother Bee: Reading and Writing *Vitae Metricae* around the Year 1000," *Viator* 36 (2005): 119-48.

*diffusae*).<sup>86</sup> Alcuin described the activity of book collecting as a process of gathering honey from flowers and “different fields of holy books (*diversos sacrorum librorum campos*).”<sup>87</sup> In the early ninth-century *Vita Galli*, Wetti of Reichenau, whom we shall discuss below, described Gall as the “smallest mother bee (*parvissimae matris apis*).”<sup>88</sup> In the context of this tradition, Willibrord was just like “the most prudent bee (*prudentissima apis*),” in receiving his education.<sup>89</sup>

Such images would have resonated with monastic audiences familiar with the challenges and benefits of beekeeping, an industry essential for producing wax to make candles—themselves fundamental to liturgical services. Gregory of Tours had described how a beekeeper offered his whole supply of wax to Martin if he would help return his bees.<sup>90</sup> The importance of wax production to the practice of lighting votive candles for the ill goes back at least as far as Gregory as well.<sup>91</sup> There is also evidence in Isidore’s *Regula monachorum* for beekeeping along with gardening tasks.<sup>92</sup> All three *vitae* of Gall from the late seventh to the mid-eighth centuries included a story about a poor man who stole a beehive from a rich man to offer its wax to the monastery at Luxeuil after Gall’s

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<sup>86</sup> Eusebius Gallicanus, Hom. 30.5.75-86, *CCSL* 101, 352. The most recent study of the collection is Lisa Bailey, *Christianity’s Quiet Success: The Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon Collection and the Power of the Church in Late Antique Gaul* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), but she does not comment on Hom. 30’s natural metaphor.

<sup>87</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 272, *MGH Epp.* 4, 431.

<sup>88</sup> Wetti, *Vita Galli* 6, *MGH SRM* 4, 260. For Wetti, see below, 422-26.

<sup>89</sup> *Vita Willibrordi* 4, *MGH SRM* 7, 119.

<sup>90</sup> Gregory of Tours, *VSM* 4.15, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 203-04.

<sup>91</sup> Gregory of Tours, *VSM* 1.18, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 148-49; and *In gloria confessorum* 21, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 310-11. See also Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita S. Radegundis* 32, *PL* 88: 509.

<sup>92</sup> Isidore, *Regula monachorum* 21, *PL* 1868: 121. For brief remarks on the beekeeping industry in early medieval Ireland based mostly on legal evidence, see Dáibhí Ó Crónín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200* (New York: Longman, 1995), 106-7.

death.<sup>93</sup> In liturgical contexts, there is evidence for widespread use of hymns of *Laus cerei*, or “Praise of the [Paschal] Candle,” some of which included hymns in praise of the industriousness and virginity of bees.<sup>94</sup> The compiler(s) of the so-called Pontifical of Poitiers in the first half of the ninth century were at least aware of the tradition, which they thought began with Augustine and was transmitted through Jerome.<sup>95</sup> By the eighth and ninth centuries, hagiographers were well aware of a broader tradition of bee imagery and its application to religious life in monastic, hagiographic and liturgical contexts.

While direct textual connections cannot be made, some of the *Laus cerei* hymns praised precisely what interested Willibald in his description of bees: the process of gathering sweet-smelling nectar and returning to the hive.<sup>96</sup> The anonymous author of the ninth-century *Vita altera Bonifatii*, however, did not deploy figurative language for bees and their hives. Instead, that author spent very little time on figurative speech, clearly preferring narrative to metaphor. In one striking instance, though, the anonymous author described missionary work as construction, with Boniface as a “most wise architect . . . who began to decorate the aforementioned abodes [i.e. shrines to Martin] with another

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<sup>93</sup> Anon., *Vita Galli vetustissima* 11, *MGH SRM* 4, 256; Wetti, *Vita Galli* 41, *MGH SRM* 4, 280-81; and Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli* 2.8, *MGH SRM* 4, 317-18. For a discussion of these *vitae* in reference to Alcuin’s description of monastic foundational landscapes, see below, 418-28.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Kelly, *The Exultet in Southern Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 65-69. Brian Repsher has discussed the Carolingian liturgical exposition *Quid significant duodecim candelae* as a text “developed to teach proper comprehension of the rite of church dedication” by scripturally explaining what the candles could represent: *Church Dedication*, 69.

<sup>95</sup> For this point I am following Kelly, *Exultet*, 50, 65 and 190. As Kelly argues, some features of the *Exultet* were eliminated based on changing liturgical needs; the inclusion of bees in the Paschal hymn troubled critics from Jerome onwards, and was largely eliminated by the thirteenth century.

<sup>96</sup> For examples, see Kelly, *Exultet*, 32-40.

kind of ornamentation (*sapientissimus architectus . . . qui prefatas sedes alio ornamentorum genere decorare aggressus est*).” But “unlike many architects of our time (*et non sicut plerique nostri temporis architecti*)” who “make weak and ruinous buildings (*infirmas et ruinosas faciunt structuras*),” Boniface instead built with faith.<sup>97</sup> In addition, Boniface was not like a farmer who sleeps while others take over the plow.<sup>98</sup> In the *Vita altera*, Boniface was a builder, not a farmer.

William Diebold has recently shown that the image of *sapiens architectus* was a relatively rare one in Carolingian texts on art and architecture with only ten known occurrences, half of which are quotations of 1 Cor. 3.10: “According to the grace of God that is given to me, as a wise architect, I have laid the foundation; and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.”<sup>99</sup> All of these usages referred to the *architectus*, not the craftsman.<sup>100</sup> “For the Carolingians,” Diebold found,

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<sup>97</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 65: “Taliter ergo vir iste edificabat et coessentibus sibi taliter edificare suadebat, et non sicut plerique nostri temporis architecti, qui, vacantes in hac parte ocio, alieno autem insistentes negocio, infirmas et ruinosas faciunt structuras, satis imperiose iubentes, sed nimis delicate viventes, morem videlicet pigri et inutilis agricolae imitantes, qui dormiens et dissolutus alteri committit aratrum.” In “Visual Arts,” 149, Diebold has observed of this passage that “[t]his criticism of architects is remarkable (and remarkably modern) in its condemnation of the architect who is constantly looking for his next job while neglecting the current project.”

<sup>98</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 65.

<sup>99</sup> “Secundum gratiam Dei, quae data est mihi, ut sapiens architectus fundamentum posui; alius autem superaedificat. Unusquisque autem videat quomodo superaedificet.”

<sup>100</sup> William Diebold, “The New Testament and the Visual Arts in the Carolingian Era, with Special Reference to the *sapiens architectus* (I Cor. 3.10),” in *The Study of the Bible in the Carolingian Era*, ed. Celia Chazelle and Burton van Name Edwards (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 141-53, at 145-46, n. 15 for the texts. Despite Diebold’s conviction that the *Vita altera Bonifatii* was written by Radbod (d. 917) in the early tenth century, it is still the earliest use of the phrase. The next known usage comes from Hucbald of St-Amand’s *Vita Lebuini*, composed in the 920s.

“architects could be wise; not so for craftsmen.”<sup>101</sup> If Diebold’s assessment of the phrase’s usage is correct—that it “gave Carolingian writers a different model for talking about art, a model which ascribed the highest possible spiritual value to the visual arts”<sup>102</sup>—the *Vita altera*’s use of it is clear evidence for a shift of values between two *vitae*. The *Vita altera* author preferred an impressive architectural metaphor to describe missionary life. To intensify the shift, a rare agricultural metaphor emerges from the *Vita altera* only to serve as an image against which Boniface’s missionary work could be contrasted: Boniface was not at all like a farmer “of our times (*nostri temporis*).” The *Vita altera* author could have made use of the figurative speech found in the verses leading up to 1 Cor. 3.10, in 3.7-9:

itaque neque qui plantat, est aliquid, neque qui rigat, sed qui incrementum dat, Deus. Qui plantat autem et qui rigat unum sunt; unusquisque autem propriam mercedem accipiet secundum suum laborem. Dei enim sumus adiutores: Dei agri cultura estis, Dei aedificatio estis.

Therefore, neither he that planteth is any thing, nor he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth, and he that watereth, are one. And every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labour. For we are God's coadjutors: you are God's husbandry; you are God's building.

Instead, the *Vita altera* made use of an architectural metaphor—one, as Diebold has shown, meant to impress. In the earlier *Vita Bonifatii*, however, Willibald was figuratively describing an environment in which relics and holy objects from Rome were the food for organisms brought by Boniface. Boniface, like an industrious bee, fed his communities with books, relics, and liturgical implements. In Willibald’s figurative

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<sup>101</sup> Diebold, “Visual Arts,” 146.

<sup>102</sup> Diebold, “Visual Arts,” 152-53.

language, missionary activity took place in natural environments with all their interdependent relationships.

### **Natural Metaphors in Correspondence to Boniface: An Influence on Missionary Accounts?**

In the *Vita Bonifatii*, Willibald's language of nature most often operated on these metaphoric registers and was also shared by correspondents who composed letters to Boniface. Correspondence from contemporary popes, as well as bishop Daniel of Winchester (d. 745), used natural images related to Willibald's language of nature in the *Vita*. In December 722, Pope Gregory II (d. 731) commended Boniface to all the Christians in *Germania*, with special attention for people

quia "in umbra mortis" aliquas gentes in Germaniae partibus vel plaga orientali Reni fluminis, antiquo hoste suadente, errare: quasi sub religione christiana idolorum culturae eos servire cognovimus; aliquos vero, qui decdum cognitionem Dei habentes nec baptismatis sacri unda sunt loti, sed conparatione brutorum animalium pagani factorem non recognoscunt.<sup>103</sup>

in the regions of Germany who wander "in the shadow of death" on the eastern banks of the Rhine, by the persuasion of the ancient enemy: we understand that there are others who are still in servitude to the worship of idols, who do not yet have understanding of God and have not been purified by the water of holy baptism, but are pagans comparable to unreasoning animals, [who] do not recognize their Creator.

Here, Gregory II touched upon two themes: first, he invoked the image of pagan places of worship, which he had described elsewhere in his correspondence as the place "where demons are known to dwell (*demonēs habitare noscuntur*)" which housed images

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<sup>103</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 17, *MGH Epp.* 3, 266.

made from “gold, silver, brass [or] stone (*aurea, argentea, aerea, lapidea*).”<sup>104</sup> The *Vita altera Bonifatii* appears to have borrowed such characterizations of pagan Saxony, invoking classically-inspired demons, apparitions, nymphs and other entities, as we have just seen.<sup>105</sup> Such changes to Willibald’s original *Vita Bonifatii* possibly reflect a heightened interest in classical compositional styles in the ninth century, as several scholars have noted.<sup>106</sup> Wood has called these and similar classical descriptions “literary construct[s],”<sup>107</sup> but they were powerful strategies in both papal and hagiographic lexicons for describing pagan practice. As we shall see, such literary constructs informed Willibald’s account of the *robor Iobis* at Geismar. Second, Gregory II’s portrayal of the Germans as “unreasoning animals” also has a rich genealogy. In the Eusebius Gallicanus sermon collection, the phrase was employed to shame those who denied the existence of the Christian God: “behold, even unreasoning animals understand what is owed their author.”<sup>108</sup> If God would even hear the groans of those beasts, he surely would listen to the prayers of the faithful.<sup>109</sup> Around the time of Gregory II’s writing, Bede was making

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<sup>104</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 21, *MGH Epp.* 3, 269: “ut in quocumque metallo salutem vestram quaeratis, adorantes idola manu facta, aurea, argentea, aerea, lapidea vel de quacumque materia facta. Qui falsidica numina a paganis antiquitus quasi dii vocati sunt, in quibus demones habitare noscuntur.”

<sup>105</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 67-68.

<sup>106</sup> An excellent catalogue of classical revisions can be found in Martin Heinzelmänn, “*Vita sanctae Genovefae*: Recherches sur les critères de datation d’un texte hagiographique,” in *Les Vies anciennes de sainte Geneviève de Paris: Etudes critiques*, ed. Heinzelmänn and Joseph-Claude Poulin (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1986), 1-111, at 16-17.

<sup>107</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 105.

<sup>108</sup> Eusebius Gallicanus, *Hom.* 19.2.17-18, *CCSL* 101, 223-24: “ecce etiam bruta animalia cognoscunt quid proprium debeatur auctori.”

<sup>109</sup> Eusebius Gallicanus, *Hom.* 26.3.35-40, *CCSL* 101, 304.



use of the phrase to describe sacrifices at the Temple.<sup>110</sup> But the fullest treatment of the phrase comes from *Moralia in Iob* of Gregory I “the Great,” in which he expounded on the “mystical” interpretation of the advice of Job’s friend Eliphaz in Job 4 and 15. For Gregory I, just as God “gives rain upon the earth (*terrae pluuiam tribuit*),” he also waters hearts. This observation led Gregory to discuss the nature of created things in the universe: “For stones exist [but] do not live. Trees exist and live [but] they do not sense. For their life is known as the greenness of plants and trees, just as it is said by Paul about [the nature of] seeds, ‘Senseless man, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die first’ [1 Cor. 15.36]. Unreasoning animals (*bruta animalia*) exist, live and sense [but] they do not understand.”<sup>111</sup> For Gregory I, humans, as well as natural features like rocks and trees, constituted the “universe” inasmuch as they overlapped with categories of “existence” that he spelled out in *Moralia in Iob*. The larger point for Gregory the Great was an eschatological one, however: Gregory connected these realities with Christ’s charge to the disciples to “Go ye into the whole world, and preach the Gospel to every creature” [Mark 16.15]. [God] would prefer for all creatures to be understood as man alone, in whom he created something in common with everything.”<sup>112</sup> In this context, when Gregory II cast the Germans as “unreasoning animals,” he situated his language at the head of a long exegetical tradition. The Germans were central to God’s eschatological

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<sup>110</sup> Bede, *Homeliarum euangelii libri ii*, 2.24.13, *CCSL* 122, 364.

<sup>111</sup> Gregory, *Moralia in Iob* 6.16.15-20, *PL* 75: col. 740: “Sunt namque lapides nec tamen uiuunt. Sunt arbusta uiuunt quidem nec tamen sentiunt. Herbarum namque atque arborum uita uiriditas uocatur, sicut per paulum de seminibus dicitur: ‘insipiens, tu quod seminas, non uiuificatur nisi prius moriatur.’ Sunt bruta animalia, uiuunt et sentiunt nec tamen intellegunt.”

<sup>112</sup> Gregory, *Moralia in Iob* 6.16.25-28, *PL* 75: col. 741: “Unde et discipulis ueritas dicit: euntes in mundum uniuersum, praedicate euangelium omni creaturae. Omnem uidelicet creaturam solum intellegi hominem uoluit, cui commune aliquid cum omnibus creauit.”

designs, and Gregory II employed a natural metaphor to express that idea. Apocalyptic thought, as we shall see, informed Rimbert's interpretation of nature and geography in his ninth-century *Vita Anskarii*, but already by the seventh and eighth centuries, it was inextricably linked with the missionary strategies of both Gregory I and II.

These were just some of the literary ideas that informed papal correspondence to Boniface. In Boniface's early Frisian years, letters also deployed languages of fruitfulness and cultivation. As Boniface tried to cultivate a "harvest of souls," Pope Gregory II in the autumn of 726 observed to him that "the field of the Lord which had been lying uncultivated and bristled with spiny thorns from faithlessness, has received plowshare of your doctrine, plowing the seeds of words, and is producing a rich harvest of faith."<sup>113</sup> The "harvest" metaphor, derived from Christ's parable of the seeds falling on barren and fertile ground,<sup>114</sup> is among the most frequently found in papal correspondence for this period, especially in reference to frontiers untitled by missionary work.<sup>115</sup> The metaphor's strength "was that it could be used to describe both success and adversity in vivid terms," just like Christ's parable, and it was often employed "[w]hen Boniface wished to dramatize his conflicts with the Frankish church, which he generally regarded as being morally corrupt and hostile to his mission."<sup>116</sup>

A letter from Daniel of Winchester (d. 745) to Boniface concerning methods of conversion *c.* 723-24 supports this view. The stubbornness of non-Christians, however,

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<sup>113</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 26, *MGH Epp.* 3, 275: "Detulit etiam a te missas litteras, ubi indicasti, quod ager dominicus, qui incultus iacebat et spinarum aculeis ex infidelitate riguerat, vomerem tuae doctrinae exarantem semen verbi suscepit et fertilem messem protulit fidelitatis."

<sup>114</sup> Matt. 13.18-23 and Luke 4.5-8.

<sup>115</sup> See e.g. Boniface, *Ep.* 23, *MGH Epp.* 3, 38; and *Ep.* 26, *MGH Epp.* 3, 44.

<sup>116</sup> Clay, *Boniface*, 253.

called for an appeal to the source of Creation. In the letter, Daniel offered Boniface a six-step approach for reasoning with non-Christians on the frontier. The purpose of this interrogation for Daniel was to transform the “stony and sterile hearts of gentiles (*saxea stiriliaque . . . gentilim corda*)” with his preaching into fertile fields.<sup>117</sup>

- 1) Boniface should not start by arguing with them over the origins of deities.
- 2) If they think their deities have origins, he should ask them if the universe—that is, the “visible earth and sky [and also] the vast extent of space”—had a beginning or creative moment.
- 3) If they retort that the universe has no beginning, Boniface should press them on their gods’ origins.
- 4) Boniface should then ascertain whether or not the pagans think their gods require veneration on account of temporal or eternal blessing.
- 5) Boniface should be careful not to offend, but should work through these questions gradually. He should then compare pagan superstitions with Christian doctrines to produce “shame in their absurd ideas.”
- 6) Finally, Boniface should ask them the ultimate question: if Christians are the enemies of their gods, why are they spared?<sup>118</sup>

Daniel thus advised Boniface to start with Creation when conversing with pagans, an approach Robert Markus has identified as part of Gregory the Great’s strategy of accommodation.<sup>119</sup> Richard Sullivan saw Daniel’s advice as the “most explicit example” of persuasive missionary strategies to appear in the period.<sup>120</sup> For James Russell, Daniel’s strategy reflects an effort “to present Christianity in terms familiar to his Germanic audience, appealing to their temporal concerns.”<sup>121</sup> Russell’s model divides the “world-accepting” ideologies of Germanic peoples from “world-rejecting” ones of Christians, but

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<sup>117</sup> Boniface, *Ep. 23*, *MGH Epp.* 3, 271.

<sup>118</sup> Boniface, *Ep. 23*, *MGH Epp.* 3, 271-73.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Markus, “Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy,” *Studies in Church History* 6 (1970): 29-38, at 37.

<sup>120</sup> Richard Sullivan, “Carolingian Missionary Theories,” *Catholic Historical Review* 42 (1956): 273-95, at 276.

<sup>121</sup> James Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 194.

such an approach assumes far too much knowledge of an “Indo-European ideological heritage.”<sup>122</sup> Although modern scholars have tried to reconstruct Germanic religious practice in close reference to springs, trees, groves and other natural features,<sup>123</sup> such categories of “heritage” are not recoverable.

What we can say, however, is what Daniel of Winchester saw as the most important ways for Boniface to persuade and convert. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the final crucial question gets directly to the core of Martin’s argument with the rustics in Sulpicius’ *Vita Martini*.<sup>124</sup> As Ruth Mazo Karras has observed, Daniel’s main concern was arguing against the eternal nature of pagan deities: “[m]issionaries did not *deny* the existence of the pagan gods, though they called them demons and stressed that the Christian God was more powerful.”<sup>125</sup> Additional proof for the Christian God’s superiority was, for Daniel (and probably for Boniface, the recipient of his advice), located in real topography: while “Christians hold lands wealthy in wine and oil and abundant in all other resources, they have left to those people, that is, the pagans, lands always frozen with cold where their gods, driven out of the world, are falsely meant to rule.”<sup>126</sup> A similar assessment of the Saxons, “the most stupid of all the peoples to the

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<sup>122</sup> Russell, *Germanization*, 102.

<sup>123</sup> The efforts to which I am referring mostly reconstruct pagan practice from the evidence of Christian sources like sermons or penitentials, many of which, as we have already seen in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, classicized their own interpretations of paganism. See, for example, Joyce Salisbury, *Iberian Popular Religion 600 B.C. to 700 A.D.: Celts, Romans and Visigoths* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 236-38. For a fuller discussion of these approaches, see Introduction, 23-27, and Chapter 1, 115-23.

<sup>124</sup> Sulpicius, *VM* 13.1-2, 280. See Chapter 1, 69-70.

<sup>125</sup> Karras, “Pagan Survivals,” 566, emphasis mine.

<sup>126</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 23, *MGH Epp.* 3, 272: “christiani fertiles terras vinique et olei feraces ceterisque opibus habundantes possident provincias, ipsis autem, id est paganis, frigore

North (*Gentes stultissimas . . . inter alias gentes ad aquilonem*)” appears in the anonymous eighth-century *Cosmographia*: “they are enveloped on all sides by the terrible cold between Ocean and the Don . . . That region produces no useful crop.”<sup>127</sup> By denigrating the scant natural resources of northern Europe, Daniel presented a reasoned argument for the inefficacy of pagan deities. The natural resources Daniel chose to highlight also resonated with religious life, since wine and olive oil were central to liturgical celebrations.<sup>128</sup> The absence of such natural resources in the north was proof of their religion’s cultural failure.

With the exception of such rare instances, the “fields” and “harvests” to which Daniel, Gregory II and Willibald frequently referred had little to do with actual interactions between missionaries and nature. Willibald’s actual definition of Christian success in the *Vita Bonifatii* depended more upon the construction of churches, as we have already seen. Boniface’s trips to Rome were often bookended by building projects. On his third pilgrimage in 737-38, Boniface could only break free from his responsibilities in the North when enough churches had been built in Hesse and Thuringia and administration provided for them.<sup>129</sup> This was a task with which Boniface had been concerned for at least 15 years, when Gregory II had urged him in a letter of

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semper rigentes terras cum eorum diis reliquerunt, in quibus iam tamen toto orbe pulsi falso regnare putantur.”

<sup>127</sup> Aethicus Ister, *Cosmographia* 31. I use the translation of Michael Herren, *The Cosmography of Aethicus Ister: Edition, Translation, and Commentary*, Publications of the Journal of Medieval Latin 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 30-31: “nimio frigore undique circumuallata inter oceanum et Tanaim . . . Ea region nulla fruge utile gignit.”

<sup>128</sup> For the importance of the olive and its oil as commodities to liturgical celebrations, I am indebted to Benjamin Graham for sharing his work in progress with me: “Profile of a Plant: The Olive in early Medieval Italy, 400-900 CE” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2014).

<sup>129</sup> *VB* 7, *MGH SRG* 57, 36.

advice for converting pagans to increase the physical presence of the church in Germany:

“The offices and decoration of the churches, and whatever patronage they have, he will work not to diminish but to increase.”<sup>130</sup> In Willibald’s assessment, the conquest of pagan landscapes was linked with the building of visible, physical churches in those landscapes. Depictions of building projects and natural metaphors were the constant animators of Willibald’s narrative, while language of the natural world remained firmly in figurative speech.

### **Redefining a Natural Place at the *robor Iobis***

With all this in mind, Boniface’s destruction of the *robor Iobis* near Geismar, the moment with which I opened this chapter, contrasts dramatically with Willibald’s overarching themes just discussed. According to Willibald, Boniface arrived in Geismar around 723 in the region around Fritzlar.<sup>131</sup> By the time of Boniface’s arrival, pre-Christian communities had possibly inhabited the larger region for well over a

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<sup>130</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 18, *MGH Epp.* 3, 267: “Ministeria atque ornatum ecclesiae, vel quicquid illud est in patrimonio eiusdem, non minuere studeat sed augere.” Similar advice can be found in Gregory I’s letter to Augustine in the so-called *Liber responsionum* for conversion strategies in Kent c. 600 (Bede, *HE* 1.27), as well as his *Epistola ad Mellitum* (Bede, *HE* 1.30).

<sup>131</sup> While the location of Geismar is known, that of the oak is not. Possible sites in the region were excavated in the 1970s, indicating sites of non-Christian settlement from Roman occupation through the eighth century at Holzheim and Obervorschütz. For Holzheim, see Norbert Wand, “Archäologische Untersuchungen des Kirchhofbereiches St Thomas in der Dorfwüstung Holzheim bei Fritzlar (Schwalm-Eder-Kreis) im Jahre 1980,” in *Beiträge zur Archäologie mittelalterlicher Kirchen in Hessen, Band 1*, Materialien zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte von Hessen 7, ed. Klaus Sippel (Weisbaden: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Hessen, 1989), 47-75, especially 48; Norbert Wand and Klaus Donat, *Holzheim bei Fritzlar: Archäologie einesmittelalterlichen Dorfes*, Kasseler Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte 6 (Rahden: Leidorf, 2002), 58-61. For Obervorschütz, see Gerhard Mildenerberger, *Römerzeitliche Siedlungen in Nordhessen* (Marburg: Elwert, 1972), 109.

millennium, as evidenced from archaeological evidence for bronzeworking<sup>132</sup> and ceramics,<sup>133</sup> as well as various ritual animal burials<sup>134</sup> and even prehistoric cremations.<sup>135</sup> Even the etymology of “Geismar” (or *Gaesmere*) suggests close ties with the landscape: the name possibly derives from a proto-Indo-European root *\*ghei-s*, “to hurry, to move quickly,” (a meaning akin to the Latin *curro*, *currere*), and the Old High German *\*mari*, or “pond, pool.”<sup>136</sup> At first glance a contradiction in terms, Werner Guth has interpreted the name as a spring-fed pool.<sup>137</sup> In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the stream in the region was referred to as *Heligenborn*, indicating a source of holiness.<sup>138</sup> Together, this evidence points towards a region with longstanding cult sites prior to the arrival of Christianity.

The oak at Geismar presents a number of problems. Willibald’s identification of the tree as the *robor Iobis* linked it with the Roman deity Jupiter, a detail that has not

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<sup>132</sup> Helmut Roth, “Bronzherstellung und –verarbeitung während der späten römischen Kaiserzeit in Geismar bei Fritzlar, Schwalm-Eder-Kreis, und Altendorf bei Bamberg (Oberfranken),” *Fundberichte aus Hessen* 20 (1980): 795-806, especially 804.

<sup>133</sup> Robert Heiner, *Studien an Siedlungskeramik: Ausgewählte Merkmale und Fundkomplexe der Latène- und Römischen Kaiserzeit aus der Siedlung Fritzlar-Geismar, Schwalm-Eder-Kreis* (Weisbaden: Selbstverlag des Landesamtes für Denkmalpflege Hessen, 1994).

<sup>134</sup> Rolf Gensen, *Die chattische Großsiedlung von Fritzlar-Geismar, Schwalm-Eder-Kreis: Ausgrabungsnotizen aus Nordhessen* (Weisbaden: Selbstverlag des Landesamtes für Denkmalpflege Hessen, 1978), 11.

<sup>135</sup> That is, purported prehistoric cremation urns: Oskar Vug, “Die Schanzen in Hessen,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hessische Geschichte und Landeskunde* 25 (1890): 55-137, at 120.

<sup>136</sup> On these possibilities, see Werner Guth, “Ortswüstungen und andere wüste Siedelstellen bei Niedenstein-Kirchberg,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hessische Geschichte und Landeskunde* 109 (2004): 51-70, at 67-68.

<sup>137</sup> Guth, “Ortswüstungen,” 68: it possibly denotes a “Teich mit lebhaft bewegtem Wasser, Teich mit Sprudel.”

<sup>138</sup> Guth, “Ortswüstungen,” 66-70; and Waldemar Küther, *Historisches Ortslexikon des Landes Hessen*, 2 vols. (Marburg: Elwert, 1980) II: 221 and 263. Incidentally, the modern name for the spring is *Donarquelle*, or “Thunaer’s/Thor’s Spring.”

troubled many scholars who have Germanicized the shrine as the “Oak of Donar” or “Thor’s Oak.”<sup>139</sup> It was common enough to equate gods like Mercury and Jupiter with Woden and Donar<sup>140</sup> but, as Palmer has pointed out, “we must be careful about jumping from an apparently literary phrase (‘robor Iobis’) to an imagined reality (a Germanic shrine).”<sup>141</sup> The main problem is that Willibald, as I have already shown, had a parallel in Sulpicius Severus’ account of a similar event in his *Vita Martini*.<sup>142</sup> A pagan temple accompanied the sacred pine in Martin’s case, and other stories of shrine destruction from the period variously Romanized them.<sup>143</sup> As Palmer has noted, Boniface “conformed to the models of sanctity current in the literary arsenal of the Bonifatian circles.”<sup>144</sup> That said, such hagiographic moments—despite their resemblance to a “literary construct”—occurred in nature and were undeniably about nature. In Boniface’s case, the natural world was first controlled and then transformed into a Christian sacred place.

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<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Levison, *England and the Continent*, 75-76; Theodor Schieffer, *Wilfried-Bonifatius und die christliche Grundlegung Europas* (Freiburg: Herder, 1954), 149; von Padberg, *Mission und Christianisierung*, 98; and Wallace-Hadrill, *Frankish Church*, 152, who speculated that the oak was dedicated to Woden.

<sup>140</sup> Karras, “Pagan Survivals,” 562-63.

<sup>141</sup> Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons*, 126.

<sup>142</sup> For a discussion of this event, see Chapter 1, 68-72.

<sup>143</sup> The concept was well known through the ninth century: the so-called Fulda *Musterpredigt*, a pseudo-Bonifatian sermon, referred to veneration of “arbores dei Iouis uel Mercurii.” For this text see Graziano Maioli di S. Teresa, “Ramenta Patristica 1: Il florilegio Pseudoagostiniano Palatino,” *Ephemerides Carmeliticae* 14 (1963): 195-241; text at 238-41, and quote at 239. On the text, see especially Harmening, *Superstitio*, 157-63; and Lutz von Padberg, *Die Inszenierung religiöser Konfrontationen: Theorie und Praxis der Missionspredigt im frühen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2003), 195-202. The origin of the text is contested; di S. Teresa placed it at Fulda, but Bischoff more safely claimed it to be “deutsch-angelsächsisches Gebiet,” possibly Fulda or Lorsch in his “Lorsch im Spiegel seiner Handschriften,” in *Die Reichsabtei Lorsch*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Hessische Historische Kommission, 1977), II: 7-128, at 112.

<sup>144</sup> Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons*, 127.



When Boniface arrived at Geismar in the 710s, Willibald claimed that the region was either still pagan or had lapsed after being nominally converted during Willibrord's earlier missions. In this context, Willibald presented a rare account of the felling of the *robor Iobis*.<sup>145</sup> The author of the ninth-century *Vita altera Bonifatii* was entirely silent on the episode. Of this part of the earliest phase of Boniface's missionary work Willibald observed that:

Sicque sanctae rumor praedicationis eius diffamatus est in tantumque inolevit, ut per maximam iam Europae partem fama eius perstreperet. Et ex Britanniae partibus servorum Dei plurima ad eum tam lectorum quam etiam scriptorum alarumque artium eruditorum virorum congregationis convenerat multitudo . . . Et alii quidem in provincia Hessorum, alii etiam in Thyringea dispersi late per populum, pagos ac vicos verbum Dei praedicabant.<sup>146</sup>

By these means the rumor of his sacred preaching reached such a great area, that in no time his reputation resounded through the greater part of Europe. And from the British region a great number of God's servants came to help him, among them readers and writers and other erudite men trained in other arts . . . And dispersed widely among the provinces of Hesse and also in Thuringia, they preached the word of God in the rural districts and villages.

To what "reputation (*fama*)" was Willibald referring? The clues do not lie far from this excerpt, since it comes directly on the heels of Willibald's long discussion of Boniface's destruction of the oak. To Willibald, the felling of the oak indicated a moment

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<sup>145</sup> Rare, because a brief mention of the incident is in the so-called Herford Letter from Gregory III to Boniface, which only exists as an interpolation in the fourteenth-century *Vita* of the ninth-century saint Waltger, by the Saxon monk Wigand. The excerpt reads, "Further, most choice of men, we order you to cut down those trees which the inhabitants [of Frisia] worship, in the same way you destroyed the tree dedicated to Jupiter, the one venerated by those inhabitants (*Ceterum, dilectissime, arbores illas, quas incole colunt, monemus ut succidantur, sicut subuertisti arborem, que Iouis appellabatur, qui ab incolis uernerabatur*)." This text is from the standard edition of Roger Wilmans, *Die Kaiserurkunden der Provinz Westfalen, 777-1313*, 2 vols. (Münster: Regensburg, 1867-81), I: 491.

<sup>146</sup> *VB* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 34.

of missionary success in Hesse. It was also an impressive, persuasive spectacle. First, though, he adapted a register of thought on pagan practice we have encountered before with Caesarius' sermons; some among the baptized Hessians continued to sacrifice to trees (*lignis . . . sacrificabant*), read entrails and practice divination.<sup>147</sup> Correspondence to Boniface also indicates papal concern over similar practices. In a letter from around 737, Pope Gregory III exhorted the nobility of Hesse and Thuringia to "reject absolutely all divination, fortune-telling, sacrifices to the dead, auguries using groves or fountains, amulets, incantations and poisons (that is, spells), and all those sacrilegious practices which used to happen within your borders."<sup>148</sup> Such language was derived from Caesarius' homiletic images.<sup>149</sup> Similar borrowings appear in penitentials of the period, which often used Caesarius and Martin of Braga (d. c. 580) to list and prescribe penance for pagan practices.<sup>150</sup> Anti-pagan language was aimed not only against vague "sacrifices to the dead (*sacrificia mortuorum*)" which might cause confusion over saints' cults, but

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<sup>147</sup> VB 6, MGH SRG 57, 31.

<sup>148</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 43, MGH *Epp.* 3, 291: "Diuiuos vel sortilegos, sacrificia mortuorum, seu lucorum vel fontium auguria vel filacteria et incantatores et veneficos, id est maleficos, et observationes sacrilegas, quae in vestris finibus fieri solebant, omnio respuentes atque abicientes, tota mentis intentione ad Deum convertimini."

<sup>149</sup> Compare this with Caesarius, *Serm.* 13.5.1-6, CCSL 103, 67-68: "tamen si adhuc agnoscitis aliquos illam sordidissimam turpitudinem de annicula uel ceruulo exercere, ita durissime castigate, ut eos paeniteat rem sacrilegam commisisse. Et si, quando luna obscuratur, adhuc aliquos clamare cognoscitis, et ipsos admonete, denuntiantes eis quod graue sibi peccatum faciunt, quando lunam, quae deo iubente certis temporibus obscuratur, clamoribus suis ac maleficiis sacrilego ausu se defensare posse confidunt. Et si adhuc videtis aliquos aut ad fontes aut ad arbores vota reddere et, sicut iam dictum est, caraios etiam et diuiuos uel praecantatores inquirere, fylacteria etiam diabolica, characteres aut herbas uel sucinos sibi aut suis adpendere, durissime increpantes dicite, quia quicumque fecerit hoc malum, perdit baptismi sacramentum"; and *Serm.* 54.1.20-21, CCSL 103, 393: "Similiter et auguria observare nolite, nec in itinere positi aliquas aviculas cantantes adtendite, nec ex illarum cantatu diabolicas divinationes adnuntiare praesumite." For a discussion, see Chapter 1, 115-21.

<sup>150</sup> Karras, "Pagan Survivals," 561.

correspondence between Boniface and Pope Zacharias suggests a continuing tension between ancient pagan and Christian festivals and processions in Rome.<sup>151</sup> Boniface, like Martin long before him, focused his efforts on a highly visible and natural center of pagan religious practice:

Quorum consultu atque consilio roborem quendam mirae magnitudinis, qui prisco paganorum vocabulo appellatur robor Iobis, in loco qui dicitur Gaesmere, servis Dei secum adstantibus, succidere temptavit. Cumque, mentis constantia confortatus, arborem succidisset—magna quippe aderat copia paganorum, qui et inimicum deorum suorum intra se diligentissime devotabant—sed ad modicum quidem arbore praeciso, confestim immensa roboris moles, divino desuper flatu exagitata, palmitum confracto culmine, corrui et quasi superni nutus solatio in quattuor etiam partes disrupta est, et quattuor ingentis magnitudinis aequali longitudine trunci absque fratrum labore adstantium apparverunt.<sup>152</sup>

With the consultation and counsel of [locals who had not lapsed], with the servants of God standing around with him, he attempted to cut down a certain oak of massive size, called in the old language of the pagans the oak of Jupiter, at a place called Geismar. And when, strengthened by his firmness of mind, he had cut at the tree—for a great crowd of pagans stood by and among themselves bitterly cursed the enemy of their gods—although he cut the tree just slightly, suddenly the great body of the oak, shaken by a God-sent wind from above, collapsed with its top branches broken. And just as if by the will of God—and it appeared to have happened because of the labor of the brothers standing around—the oak actually broke into four parts, each part having a trunk of equal length.

This description uses the great tree as its centerpiece at a moment in which the pagan universe was emptied of non-Christian meaning in “a battle for the imaginative control of the *mundus*.”<sup>153</sup> As Hilda Ellis Davidson, Della Hooke and others have amply demonstrated, trees were probably a major component of Germanic pagan cosmologies,

<sup>151</sup> Boniface, *Epp.* 50-51, *MGH Epp.* 3, 298-305.

<sup>152</sup> *VB* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 31.

<sup>153</sup> A phrase of Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 146.

and the archaeological record indicates that Geismar was a pagan center of both worship and local power.<sup>154</sup> Caesarius had tried to ban offerings at trees, a measure recycled in later penitentials.<sup>155</sup> In light of this evidence, the episode Willibald described was a specifically missionary moment. According to Willibald, the oak at Geismar was reformed from a venerated shrine of Frisian pagans to a tool of conversion, whose sight convinced the pagans to convert.<sup>156</sup> The entire scene hinges upon the oak, a natural setting for pre-Christian paganism. In Willibald's account, a local place (Geismar) harbored a natural feature (the oak), which in turn reflected and manifested local belief systems. According to the *Vita Bonifatii*, local pagans there had consolidated their beliefs in the *robor Iobis*. Without the great oak, that natural representation of their faith, the Frisians converted on the spot.

Russell saw Boniface's actions at Geismar as a way of expressing "the superior intercessory power of the Christian God in earthly affairs . . . [which] appears to have contributed towards a perception of Christianity as a powerful magicoreligious cult, and

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<sup>154</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 21-27; Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore, and Landscape* (Aldershot: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 3-20; Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2008), 72; and Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 2005), 36-37 and 138-40. On the archaeological record around Fritzlar, see above, notes 365-66, notes 131-34.

<sup>155</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 14.4, CCSL 103, 71-72; and *Poenitentiale Egberti* 8.1, in *Die Bussordnungen der abendländischen Kirche*, ed. Freidrich Wasserschleben (Halle: Graeger, 1851), 231-47, at 239, which quotes Caesarius liberally without naming him: "Auguria vel sortes qui dicuntur false sanctorum vel divinationibus observare vel quarumcumque scripturarum inspectione futura promittunt, vel votum voverit in arbore vel in qualibet re excepto aeclesiam, si clerici vel laici, excommunicantur ab ecclesia vel tres annis clerici peniteant, laicus II annos vel unum et dimedium."

<sup>156</sup> VB 6, MGH SRG 57, 31.

thus advanced the Germanization of Christianity.”<sup>157</sup> By staging the conflict in the natural world, Boniface’s mission had to accommodate Germanic “temporal concerns”<sup>158</sup> rather than preach and teach in schools, churches or monasteries. This reading of Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii* is wholly unconvincing since, as we will recall from the introduction to this chapter, we are beholden to a hagiographer’s text for this specific detail of Boniface’s mission.<sup>159</sup> We know little beyond his brief account about what happened at Geismar, and even less about the “world-accepting Germanic world-view”<sup>160</sup> with which Boniface struggled. We do know, however, what Willibald gave his audience: a version of what happened at Geismar charged with hagiographic, scriptural and exegetical meaning.

The destruction of a pagan shrine and the construction of a Christian one is but one angle from which to view Boniface’s activities at Geismar. Ronald Murphy has drawn connections between Willibald’s account and the phrasing of the early ninth-century Old Saxon poem *Heliand*, an epic, heroic retelling of the Gospel story. In it, Christ echoed Matt. 5.17 (“I did not come to abolish the law . . .”) by clarifying that “I

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<sup>157</sup> Russell, *Germanization*, 7.

<sup>158</sup> Russell, *Germanization*, 194.

<sup>159</sup> Russell’s thesis has attracted a number of critics. For Carole Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell 1998), 21, Russell’s central assumption about the natures of “two specific cultures (Christian Roman and pre-Christian Germanic)” renders *Germanization*, at best, “an interesting experiment which opens up avenues for further research.”

<sup>160</sup> Russell, *Germanization*, 7: “Given the substantial inherent disparity between Germanic and Christian world-views, a missionary policy that encouraged the temporary accommodation of Christianity to a heroic, religiopolitical, magicoreligious, world-accepting Germanic world-view appears to have been developed as a more effective approach than straightforward preaching or coercion.”

did not come to *chop down* the old law.”<sup>161</sup> Elsewhere, the poet suggested a “less military weapon”<sup>162</sup> for “chopping down” evil: “they should lift up the good Word of God with their holy voices . . . so that it might chop down every perverse thing, every work of evil.”<sup>163</sup> In the *Heliand*, the image of the tree is central: instead of a cross, Christ was physically nailed to a tree whose branches murdered him. For Murphy, this phrasing was a direct reference to Boniface’s destruction of the *robor Iobis*: “[d]isapproval of Boniface and his axe-handled approach to the sacred tree at Geismar is more than hinted at.”<sup>164</sup> If this is true, the *Heliand* helps complicate the image of the sacred tree and its destruction, suggesting that competing Christian voices emerged in the aftermath of Boniface’s activities. Part of the *Heliand*’s inspiration might be rooted in Ezekiel 6.13, which closely associated trees with the evils of pagan practice:

Et scietis quia ego Dominus, cum fuerint interfecti eorum in medio idolorum suorum, in circuitu ararum suarum, in omni colle excelso, in cunctis summitatibus montium et subtus omne lignum nemorosum et subtus universam quercum frondosam, locum ubi obtulerunt tura redolentia universis idolis suis.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when your slain shall be amongst your idols, round about your altars, in every high hill, and on all the tops of mountains,

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<sup>161</sup> *Heliand* 17.1428-29, trans. Ronald Murphy, *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 49: “Ni quam ic an thesa uuerald te thiū,/that ic feldi thero forasagano uuord, ac ic siu fullien scal.” Emphasis added.

<sup>162</sup> Ronald Murphy, *The Saxon Savior: The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Ninth-Century Heliand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15.

<sup>163</sup> *Heliand* 1.24-25 and 27-28, trans. Murphy: “that sea scoldin ahebbean hêlagaro stemnun godspell that gouda/ . . . efto derbi thing, firnin werk fellie.”

<sup>164</sup> Ronald Murphy, *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102-03. As Murphy has also noted in his earlier *The Saxon Savior*, 15: “The unusual image of ‘felling’ evil is one that no doubt was not lost on Saxon listeners. The allusion manages both to concede that it may be necessary that certain evil things be chopped down, but to imply as well that the four evangelists’ Gospel has sufficient power itself, if spoken and understood, to accomplish the defeat of evil—without the help of Frankish axes.”

and under every woody tree, and under every thick oak, the place where they burnt sweet smelling frankincense to all their idols.

Later in Ezek. 20.28, the prophet described a landscape in which natural features were cleansed by the Hebrews' burnt offerings: "they saw every high hill, and every shady tree, and there they sacrificed their victims: and there they presented the provocation of their offerings, and there they set their sweet odours, and poured forth their libations."<sup>165</sup> In Ezekiel, trees and surrounding natural features could sustain multiple interpretations depending on the religious events that took place there. Ezekiel's close association of trees, hills and religious practice resonates with topics relevant to eighth- and ninth-century hagiographers. Seen in this way, trees could be active players in sacred events and could reveal prophetic truths in real landscapes. Above all, the symbol of a tree could hold multiple meanings among different audiences.

Boniface's felling of the oak had hagiographic precedent as well. The key moment in the aftermath of the oak's collapse is one in which Willibald departed from the pattern set forth by Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*. Where Martin's pine had become a weapon, nearly killing several pagan onlookers, the oak at Geismar had a practical and symbolically powerful afterlife: "Then the holiest bishop, having taken council beforehand with his brothers, built an oratory [adorned] with metal from the aforementioned oak's wood and dedicated it in honor of Saint Peter the Apostle."<sup>166</sup> The *robor Iobis* was not destroyed, but reformed as a Christian holy space. Here, Willibald

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<sup>165</sup> "Viderunt omnem collem excelsum et omne lignum nemorosum et immolaverunt ibi victimas suas et dederunt ibi irritationem oblationis suae et posuerunt ibi odorem suavitatis suae et libaverunt libationes suas."

<sup>166</sup> *VB* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 31-32: "Tunc autem summae sanctitatis antistes, consilio initio cum fratribus, ligneum ex supradictae arboris metallo oratorium construxit eamque in honore sancti Petri apostoli dedicavit."

was relying on papal modes of expression. Just as Boniface “cut at the tree (*arborem succidisset*),” so too had Gregory the Great described the deceased “[church] fathers of antiquity (*antiquorum patrum*)” as “aged trees felled (*annosa arbusta succiduntur*).” But “delicate shoots rise up in the place of their strength (*in eorum robur tenera uirgulta succrescunt*).”<sup>167</sup> The parallel of images is not exact—German pagans cannot be made to resemble church fathers—but Willibald’s language suggests the complicating of possibilities. First, he used the same verb (*succidere*) as Gregory to describe the act of chopping down a tree. Next, he employed the image of a great oak (a *robor*), which can also denote “strength” or “vigor” similar to Gregory I’s *robur*. To intensify the image, Willibald described Boniface as cutting down a natural monument to German paganism, and deployed a parallel between Gregory I’s “delicate shoots (*tenera uirgulta*)” and the new chapel dedicated to Peter. When compared with papal depictions of pagan borderlands as fields in need of cultivation and harvest, the image of new shoots takes on special significance at Geismar.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Gregory, *Moralia* 26.41.22-26, *CCSL* 143B, 1322: “*Pro patribus tuis nati sunt tibi filii, constitues eos principes super omnem terram. In uirtem quippe antiquorum partum, hi qui postmodum praelati sunt subrugantur, quia et cum annosa arbusta succiduntur, in eorum robur renera uirgulta succrescunt.*”

<sup>168</sup> Another use of the phrase *arbusta succiduntur* in Gregory the Great’s correspondence helps support the view that Willibald employed Gregorian language to explain what happened at Geismar. In a letter to Virgilius of August 595, *Ep.* 5.58.63-67, *CCSL* 140, 354-55, Gregory metaphorically described the formation of a monastic preacher in terms of building a structure: “And when we cut down trees for a building, we must wait first for the moisture of their greenness to dry, lest, if the heaviness of the fabric is put on them while recently [cut], they are bent over from their own newness, [and are] quickly broken down and fall on account of being raised up too soon (*Et cum ad aedificium arbusta succidimus, ut prius uiriditatis humor exsiccari debeat, exspectamus, ne, si eis adhuc recentibus fabricae pondus imponitur, ex ipsa nouitate curuentur et confracta citius corruant, quae immature in altum leuata uidebantur*).”



The oratory of Peter that Boniface built from the oak at Geismar probably preceded Boniface's foundation of a stone church and monastic community at Fritzlar around 732, even though Willibald never said so explicitly in the *Vita*.<sup>169</sup> It is entirely possible that the oratory was instead built on the very site of the pagan grove, whose center had previously been the oak.<sup>170</sup> It would have made a powerful statement in that forest, a constant reminder to local Christians and pagans alike of the former's cultural superiority to the latter. The construction of the oratory was a graceful transition from pagan natural shrine to sacred place. Significantly, Boniface and his followers dedicated the chapel to Peter, giving entirely new meaning to the sacred place. As we will recall from Chapter 2, Gregory the Great had practically advised Mellitus not to destroy pagan sites in Kent at the end of the sixth century, but to reuse them as places for churches.<sup>171</sup> Boniface's oratory was dedicated to Peter—a universal saint, the rock upon which the church was built. In the *Vita Bonifatii*, Willibald located Peter in the Frisian wilderness, much like the Jura Fathers had done at Condat in Chapter 1. As in the Jura, Willibald

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<sup>169</sup> *VB* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 35. For David Parsons, it is unlikely that Boniface “would have dissipated the psychological impact of the symbolic conquest of pagandom by building the chapel on another site” removed from the original wooden oratory where the oak and shrine used to stand. See his “Sites and Monuments of the Anglo-Saxon Mission in Central Germany,” *The Archaeological Journal* 140 (1983): 280-321, at 292. It is, however, possible that by “Gaesmere,” Willibald was referring to a much larger region than Parsons imagined, even though Willibald referred to “Frideslar” as the site of the church; on this see Volker Brendow and Jens Kulick, *Die Johanneskirche bei Züschen: Führungsblatt zu der Wüstung auf dem Johanneskirchenkopf bei Züschen, Stadt Fritzlar, Schwalm-Eder-Kreis* (Wiesbaden: Frühgeschichte im Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Hessen, 1982), 2-3.

<sup>170</sup> This was a tentative possibility suggested by Norbert Wand, *Die Büraburg bei Fritzlar*, 43-44.

<sup>171</sup> Bede, *HE* 1.30. See Chapter 2 above, 238-42.

drew Frisia into the orbit of Rome's urban and universalizing landscape, arguing for the fitness of newly-claimed Christian territory to take on Peter's name.

### **Interpretations of Trees and their Parts in the Hagiographic Works of Arbeo of Freising and Alcuin**

Among Willibald's first readers was Arbeo of Freising (d. 784), who borrowed from the *Vita Bonifatii* for his *vitae* of the bishops Emmeram and Corbinian.<sup>172</sup> Arbeo offered in his *Vita Haimhrammi* a tree miracle from another angle. According to Arbeo, Emmeram as bishop of Poitiers decided to travel to Pannonia to evangelize to the Avars.<sup>173</sup> On the way there he was detained by the Bavarian *dux* Theoto, who requested that he work among the pagan Bavarians instead of the Avars, with whom he was inconveniently at war.<sup>174</sup> Arbeo suggested that part of Emmeram's decision to stay was based on Bavaria's beauty, and for this reason the thought of martyrdom in a beautiful country occurred to him.<sup>175</sup> Emmeram fell foul of Theoto's son Landperht, who objected to the bishop's advice to his sister Ota on her illegitimate pregnancy. At that point, Emmeram chose a place for his martyrdom and waited there for Landperht, cut off his arms, legs, ears, nose, eyes, testicles and tongue.<sup>176</sup> Emmeram's remains were buried

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<sup>172</sup> For the *Monumenta* edition, Krusch outlined some of Arbeo's borrowings from Willibald: *MGH SRG* 13, 139-40.

<sup>173</sup> Arbeo, *Vita Haimhrammi* 3, *MGH SRG* 13, 30-31.

<sup>174</sup> Arbeo, *Vita Haimhrammi* 7, *MGH SRG* 13, 36-37.

<sup>175</sup> Arbeo, *Vita Haimhrammi* 8, *MGH SRG* 13, 37-39.

<sup>176</sup> Arbeo, *Vita Haimhrammi* 13-18, *MGH SRG* 13, 44-53.

under the hawthorn tree where he died, only to disappear suspiciously.<sup>177</sup> The site, Arbeo insisted, remained green throughout the year.<sup>178</sup>

As Wood and others have noted, Arbeo's *vitae*, which were written between 769 and 772, offered an alternative view of Christianity in Bavaria, that it was mostly Christianized by the time Boniface arrived.<sup>179</sup> Arbeo's *vitae* were thus "intended as a deliberate refutation of Willibald's work," offering a different view from Willibrord's that focused on the contributions of Freising and Regensburg.<sup>180</sup> If Arbeo was composing *vitae* as a counterpoint to Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii*, his tree miracle in his *Vita Haimhrammi* may be an instance of "subversion."<sup>181</sup> Instead of destroying a natural feature, Emmeram waited quietly for death under a beautiful tree. The tree did not become a natural resource as it had for Boniface, but retained a perpetually springlike state: *in vernalis decore et amoenitate totum permansit annum*. In Arbeo's *vitae*, shifting tree images helped to serve his hagiographic and political purposes.

A later example, but one best discussed here because of its similarity to the one just sketched, can be found in Alcuin's *Vita Richarii*. According to Alcuin, Richarius (d. 645) was born in rural northwest Gaul, in Centula. He was an extreme ascetic, following

<sup>177</sup> Arbeo, *Vita Haimhrammi* 22, *MGH SRG* 13, 57.

<sup>178</sup> Arbeo, *Vita Haimhrammi* 25, *MGH SRG* 13, 62-63.

<sup>179</sup> Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 307. On the dating of the *vitae* I am following the conventional view of Hubert Glaser, "Bischof Arbeo von Freising als Gegenstand der neueren Forschung," in *Vita Corbiniani: Bischof Arbeo von Freising und die Lebensgeschichte des hl. Korbinian*, ed. Glaser, Franz Brunhölzl and Sigmund Benker (Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1983), 11-76, at 50.

<sup>180</sup> Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 308.

<sup>181</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 158: "If Arbeo's general portrayal of the Churches of Regensburg and Freising was intended as a reply to Willibald's account of the Bavarian church, it is possible that certain details in Arbeo's text have a similar critical function . . . One might even see in the extremes of Arbeo's writing a deliberate sense of subversion."

a “form of monasticism praised most highly by Benedict in his Rule.”<sup>182</sup> The turning point of his *vita* came when he sheltered two Irish missionaries, Cadoc and Frichor, who in turn converted Richarius. For Alcuin, Richarius habitually traveled the countryside on a donkey<sup>183</sup> just as Christ had done during his *adventus* into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Unlike Christ, however, Richarius’ journeys did not bring him to great cities, but into the Frankish wilderness. Like the Jura fathers had done at Condat, Richarius established monastic communities around 638 at Centula (later Saint-Riquier) near Amiens and Forest-Montiers near Abbeville in northern Francia with as little change to their environments as possible. From there, Richarius retired to a hermitage in the forest of Crécy. After delivering parting words to his monastic followers, Richarius ordered a coffin to be made for him from a nearby tree: “with tears flowing, they nevertheless followed these instructions, that they should find a tree and [inside it] place the body of their father . . . and they filled the chamber first with bitter tears, then with the limbs of the father; and they did it as they were able, and placed the sarcophagus in the place chosen by the father [Richarius].”<sup>184</sup> Like Willibald, Alcuin described the transformation of a tree into a house for the sacred. Not only this, but we know that Alcuin personally

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<sup>182</sup> Mary Alberi, “Alcuin the Latin Grammarian and the Shaping of the Standard Language of Charlemagne’s Empire,” in *Acta selecta octavi conventus academiae latinitati fovendae (Lovanni et Antverpiae, 2-6 Augusti MCMXCIII)*, 2 vols., ed. Josef Ijsewijn, Thierre Sacré, Anton Van Houdt, and Lina Ijsewijn-Jacobs (Rome: Herder, 1995) I: 225-37, at 237. For Lynda Coon, such comparisons helped to balance monastic practice’s “improvisational nature . . . to the seemingly stable authority of the written word”: *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 55.

<sup>183</sup> Alcuin, *VR* 10, *MGH SRM* 4, 395.

<sup>184</sup> *V. Rimb.* 14, *MGH SRM* 4, 398: “lacrimis perfusus, tantum praecepta secutus, lignum inveniens fidit, cavavit et corpori patris coaptavit . . . et pene prius lacrimis implens amaris, quam paternis membris; aptatumque, ut potuit, sarcophagum in loco praefinito a patre composuit.”

sent his *Vita Richarii* to Charlemagne himself<sup>185</sup> as a model for the ideal relationships between bishops and kings.<sup>186</sup> Alcuin's inclusion of this event underscores the importance of the transformation of natural places in his *vitae*, as well as the presumed royal interest in that topic.

### **Frisian Wetlands as an Ecclesiastical Landscape**

The *robor Iobis* was also a metonym for Germany's ecclesiastical organization: in the 730s and '40s, Boniface reformed the Bavarian church under the *dux* Odilo (d. 748), establishing four episcopal sees, just as the great oak had produced four sections of equal length. During the reign of Carloman Boniface presided over four synodal councils with the authority of popes Gregory II and III.<sup>187</sup> The oak's splitting into four equal planks made it easy material with which to build, and in Willibald's account it anticipated fourfold themes throughout Boniface's career. Even though Boniface was only "occasionally a missionary,"<sup>188</sup> Willibald in this way repeatedly reminded his readers of the central act of his missionary career. It is in this context that Boniface carefully chose the bishop Lull (d. 786) as his successor at the see of Mainz in the early 750s—or, in Willibald's words, "for the construction of churches and for the indoctrination of the people."<sup>189</sup> By 752, this was indeed a pressing need, since Saxon belligerents had

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<sup>185</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 306, *MGH Epp.* 4, 465.

<sup>186</sup> Veyrard-Cosme, "Littérature latine," 198. On this point see above, 339.

<sup>187</sup> *VB* 7-8, *MGH SRG* 57, 36-56.

<sup>188</sup> Ian Wood, *Missionary Life*, 58.

<sup>189</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 46: "de ecclesiarum structura et populi doctrina proposuit." Such descriptions call into question Ian Wood's characterization of Boniface as not the "great missionary figure of his dreams, nor was he represented as one by Willibald" (*Missionary Life*, 64). James Palmer has argued for the central role of Lull in shaping Boniface's cult

destroyed some thirty of the churches founded by Boniface.<sup>190</sup> Predictably, Pippin the Short (r. 752-68) responded with greater force in 753.<sup>191</sup> The last years of Boniface's life were marked by upheaval on the Saxon frontiers unmatched until Charlemagne's initial incursions in the early 770s.<sup>192</sup> In these ways, Willibald consistently emphasized the buildings Boniface's missions left behind, consigning his language nature largely to metaphor as we have already. Boniface provided his final instructions to Lull along these very lines: "But you, my dearest son, should bring the construction of the churches begun by myself in Thuringia to their completion."<sup>193</sup>

This tendency is consistent in the *vita* until Willibald described Boniface's death. According to Willibald, Boniface, sensing his life's end, decided to make a final trip to Frisia.<sup>194</sup> In Hessia, the great oak of Jupiter had been a focal point for both religion and mission; similarly for Frisia, Willibald deployed images of marshes and wetlands to capture both the physical realities and dangers of the region. In Willibald's description of Boniface's death, the challenges and dangers presented by these watery landscapes intersected with the construction of his shrine.

Marshes, wetlands and the dangers of the sea could collectively function as metaphors for the Christian life from Augustine<sup>195</sup> to Bede.<sup>196</sup> The depiction of barbarians

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status in his "The 'Vigorous Rule' of Bishop Lull: Between Bonifatian Mission and Carolingian Church Control," *Early Medieval Europe* 13.3 (2005): 249-76.

<sup>190</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 108, *MGH Epp.* 3, 394. On the rebellion in general, see Pope Zacharias' observations to Boniface in November 751, *Ep.* 86, *MGH Epp.* 3, 368.

<sup>191</sup> Fredegar, *Chronica* 31, *MGH SRM* 2, 181-82; and *ARF* 753.

<sup>192</sup> See below, 389.

<sup>193</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 46: "Sed tu, fili karissime, structuram in Thyringea a me ceptam ecclesiarum ad perfectionis terminum deduc."

<sup>194</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 46.

<sup>195</sup> See for example Augustine, *Serm.* 53.14, *PL* 38: col. 371.

living on the fringes of societies, sometimes in swamps and groves impenetrable by sunlight, had an ancient pedigree stretching back to Tacitus' *Germania*.<sup>197</sup> It also informed Hygeburg of Heidenheim's account of Willibald's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 720s, the so-called *Hodæporicon* composed in the 770s. Hygeburg's account of sea travel stands as one among many examples of eighth- and ninth-century concerns about bodies of water: "After [Willibald and his companions] had bravely crossed over the perils of the sea and the depths of the dangerous waves, a rapid course brought them, with sails full, and following winds safely to dry land."<sup>198</sup> Hygeburg herself was a figure intimately connected to Boniface's missions: born in England, she traveled to the continent after Boniface and eventually became abbess of the Thuringian double monastery at Heidenheim.<sup>199</sup> There, she composed *vitae* of the house's first abbot Wynnebald (d. 761) and his brother Willibald. Given her hagiographic output and links with Boniface's missions, it is unsurprising that she would have shared themes similar to those in Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii*. According to Willibald, Boniface took his leave of Lull at Mainz and sailed down the Rhine on a barge into the Frisian wilderness. Finally, they arrived at a lake near Dokkum that the Romans had called Flevo but was, in

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<sup>196</sup> See for example Bede's interpretation of Noah's Ark in his *Hexaemeron* 1.2 PL 91: cols. 114-15.

<sup>197</sup> Yves Dagué, *Le barbare: Recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilisation* (Brussels: Latomus, 1981), 482-83.

<sup>198</sup> Hygeburg, *Hodæporicon* 3, MGH SS 15.1, 91: "Cumque, transmeatis maritimis fluctuum formidinibus periculosisque pelagii pressuris, vastum per aequorum citato celocis cursu, prosperis ventris, velata nave, titu aridam viderunt terram."

<sup>199</sup> Bernard Bischoff identified her as the author of these *vitae* in his "Wer ist die Nonne von Heidenheim?" *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktiner-Ordens* 49 (1931): 387-78.

Boniface's time, known as "Aelmere," or "Eel Lake." In Willibald's account, a brief sketch of Frisian wetlands was closely linked with building projects there:

. . . aquosa Fresonum arva ingrediens trans stagnum, quod lingua eorum dicitur Aelmere, sospis pervenit infecundaque divino germine litora inspiciendo circuit. Cumque periculosum fluminum marisque et ingentium aquarum evassit discrimen, in periculum iam sine periculo incedit, gentemque paganam Fresonum visitaret, quae interiacentibus aquis in multos agrorum dividitur pagos, ita ut, diuresis appellati nominibus, unius tamen gentis proprietatem portendunt . . . Per omnem igitur Fresiam pergens, verbum Domini, paganico repulse ritu et erraneo gentilitatis more destructo, instanter praedicabant ecclesiasque, numine confracto dilubrorum, ingenti studio fabricavit.<sup>200</sup>

[Boniface], entering the watery fields of Frisia, and went through the swamp, which in their language is called Aelmere, and went safely through it and circumnavigated it, inspecting the shores there, [which were] unfruitful. And when he had avoided the dangers of the river, the sea and the vast waters, he now passed into danger without [fearing] danger, and visited the pagan people of the Frisians, whose land is divided into many territories by intersecting waterways . . . Therefore he crossed all of Frisia, and after expelling pagan rites and destroying their erroneous gentile way of living he vehemently preached the word of God; and with the power of temples broken, he built churches with great zeal.

In this description of the Frisian coast, Willibald developed a clear link between its marshy landscapes and the "errors" they hosted. These lands were as inherently "dangerous" as they were pagan, as if the strange swamps directly shaped false religion there. Willibald had already established the "dangers of the sea" as a symptom of travel through frontier zones.<sup>201</sup> This theme served as a context for Boniface's last trip to Frisia in the spring of 754. Knowing that his death was near after "the faith had been planted strongly in Frisia," Boniface chose a small number of followers camped on the shores of

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<sup>200</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 47.

<sup>201</sup> For example, in *VB* 5, *MGH SRG* 57, 18, Willibald described Boniface's return from Rome in the spring of 717 as an escape from the dangers of the sea.



the Boorne River.<sup>202</sup> Approaching the moment of martyrdom, Willibald made his readers aware of the place's specific topography. There, Boniface and his followers waited for the enemy to come, instructing the monks to lay down their arms. After the massacre, the Frisians plundered the camp, but to their disappointment they found the chests full of relics and books instead of treasure.<sup>203</sup> They then "scattered the books they found through the fields, casting some into reedy marshes, hiding others in various places."<sup>204</sup> According to Willibald, the Frisians themselves seeded the marshy landscape with physical books.

Frisia's swamps played as central a role in Boniface's martyrdom as the oak at Geismar had in his missionary conquest. The later *Vita altera Bonifatii* built upon earlier accounts of the Frisian landscape, observing that the Frisians "are wild and, just like fish, dwell among waters, by which they are surrounded on all sides, so that they rarely have access to the outside world, unless they travel by ship. The heavenly word-sower approached these [peoples] remote from all other nations and are therefore brutish and barbarous."<sup>205</sup> Even though the *Vita altera* departed from Willibald's narrative by emphasizing the strangeness of Frisia's "demons and ghosts (*larvas lemuresque*),"<sup>206</sup> it retained these core details about the landscape and its inhabitants. The *Vita altera*'s

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<sup>202</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 49.

<sup>203</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 50-51.

<sup>204</sup> *VB* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 51: "codices quos invenerunt alios per campi planitiem disparserunt, alios siquidem paludum arundineti inferentes, alios etiam in diuresis quibusque locis abscondentes proiecerunt."

<sup>205</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 9, *MGH SRG* 57, 68: "qui fere, quemadmodum et pisces, morantur in aquis, quibus ita undique concluduntur, ut raro ad exterarum regionum accessum habeant, nisi navibus subuehantur. Hos remotos a ceteris nationibus ideoque brutos ac barbaros celestis seminiveribus adiit."

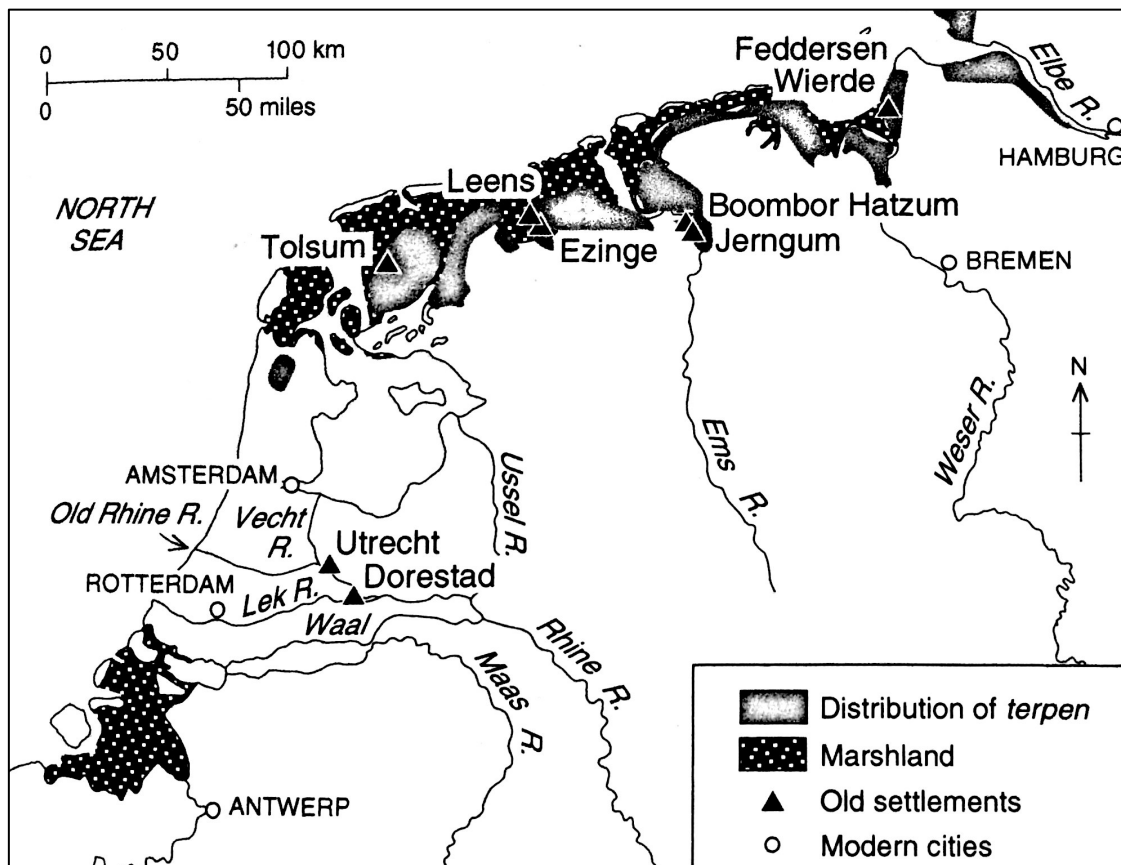
<sup>206</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 8, *MGH SRG* 57, 68.

author portrayed the Frisians as “fish,” an image that fits into his casting of them as a completely foreign people: they were subhuman, a reflection of their landscape that was neither water nor land. This description is a striking contrast with what Chris Wickham has described as a relatively sophisticated “chequerboard of farmsteads that was normal in Denmark” for Frisian locations in the fifth to tenth centuries.<sup>207</sup> Yet many areas, as Richard Hoffmann has pointed out, were true marshes—navigable for a few hours a day, but intractable at other times.<sup>208</sup> Frankish uncertainty of or mistrust in the landscape was thus rooted in environmental realities.

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<sup>207</sup> Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 499.

<sup>208</sup> Richard Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 72: “Frisians did live in a treeless salt marsh, albeit with a firm clay bottom. Towards the sea a row of barrier dunes protected their settlements from storm waves on one side and landwards their salt marsh graded off into freshwater bogs that bound off their territory. These distinct bands of habitat zones were all drained by tidal creeks where relatively salty and relatively fresh water alternated twice a day. Some plants tolerate this environment, but others do not. At one time of day a man or a cow could stand on damp but firm ground, and six or so hours later by belly-deep or more in water. No surprise, then, that land-based cereal eaters from Pliny to the bishop [Boniface] simply could not comprehend people whose cultural adaptation and relation to the world about them so differed from that of proper civilized landlubbers.”



**Map 3.3.** Early Medieval Frisia, with urban centers, villages, marshlands and *terpen*—artificial mounds constructed in the marshlands.<sup>209</sup> Taken from Hoffmann, *Environmental History*, 71.

Despite the realities behind the Boniface tradition, hagiographic insistence on Frisia's distinct strangeness remained the focus in both Willibald's account and that of the anonymous *Vita altera* author. This watery landscape served the author of the *Vita altera* well in describing the effects of Boniface's martyrdom in Frisia: "Moreover in all these things [Boniface] was neither puffed up, exasperated, nor thinking evil things; but he was meditating day and night on the law of the Lord, and was like 'a tree which is

<sup>209</sup> Hoffmann, *Environmental History*, 72-73: "By [Boniface's time in the] eighth century some *terpen* were as much as 150 metres in diameter and stood 2 metres above normal sea level, so safely high and dry. Whole villages, houses, livestock, gardens, and freshwater catchment devices rose above the daily inundations of brackish water." *Terpen* were fertilized and could produce barley, oats, vegetables and flax.

planted near the running waters' [Ps. 1.3], for which reason he gave the fruit of [his] martyrdom in its own season."<sup>210</sup> For this last phrase, the author adjusted the words of Psalm 1.3: "And he shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth its fruit, in due season (*Et erit tamquam lignum planatum secus decursus aquarum, quod fructum suum dabit in tempore suo*).” Boniface, as we have just seen, was a “word-sower (*seminiveribus*),” who reaped the “fruit of martyrdom” in Frisia.

### ***Swamps and Wetlands: Anglo-Saxon Connections***

Willibald's use of water in the *Vita Bonifatii* plays upon a number of themes. The dangers of waterborne travel were well known in the period; in a letter to Boniface, the Anglo-Saxon abbess Eangyth (fl. c. 719-22) described the turmoil of life as a frothing seascape full of whirlpools and waves like mountains.<sup>211</sup> Not surprisingly, the theme of dangerous sea was a preoccupation of Anglo-Saxon poetry,<sup>212</sup> and such themes pervaded episcopal correspondence as well. Borrowing extensively from Aldhelm,<sup>213</sup> Lull

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<sup>210</sup> *Vita altera Bonifatii* 6, *MGH SRG* 57, 67: “Porro in hiis omnibus non inflabatur, non irritabatur, non cogitabat malum; sed in lege Domini meditabatur die ac nocte eratque ‘tamquam lignum, quod plantatum est secus decursus aquarum,’ ideoque fructum martyrii dedit in tempore suo.”

<sup>211</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 14, *MGH Epp.* 3, 261.

<sup>212</sup> For examples of how sea imagery and exile functioned in *The Seafarer* and other poems, see Stanley Greenfield, “The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of Exile in Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” *Speculum* 30.2 (1955): 200-6; and Arnold Angenendt, *Monachi Peregrini: Studien zu Pirmin und den monastischen Vorstellung des frühen Mittelalters* (Munich: Fink, 1972), 152-53. More recently Nicholas Howe discussed the theme of human loneliness in Anglo-Saxon sea imagery in his *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 70-72.

<sup>213</sup> The description in *Ep.* 5 is based in part on Aldhelm's of his journey back to the mainland from Ireland, *MGH AA* 15, 489.

described his journey from Wessex to Rome in 738 through metaphorical mountains employed to describe an actual sea voyage:

Fateor caritati vestrae, postquam Britanice telluris inclita sceptrā divine pietatis ammonitione ut reor salubri tactus fugiens deserui relictāque fecundissima natalis patriae insula—quam glauca spumantis maris cerula infligentia scoposis marginibus undique vallant . . . ingruentibus pelagio molibus transvectus huius regionis marginem applicuisse gratulas votorum compos tripudiabam.<sup>214</sup>

I confess to your charity, that after I left the illustrious kingdom of British land, touched (as I think) by the health of divine piety, having deserted the most fruitful island of my native land—which is protected on all sides by the wavy blue-green of the frothing sea . . . [I traveled] across the crashing mountains of the seething sea, grateful to have reached the edge of this region.

This was a homeland Lull shared with both Boniface and Willibald, one that produced observations on the dangers and fears of marshes. In the first half of the eighth century, Felix composed a *vita* on the Mercian hermit Guthlac (d. 715), who entered the fens of East Anglia near Cambridge around 700, a landscape “consisting of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog, sometimes studded with wooded islands and traversed by the windings of tortuous streams.”<sup>215</sup> Guided into the “hidden parts of that desert,” Guthlac established his hermitage in the middle of the marshes:

Ipse enim imperiis viri annuens, arrepta piscatoria scafula, per invia lustra inter atrae paludis margines Christo viatore ad praedictum locum usque pervenit; Crugland dicitur, insula media in palude posita quae ante paucis propter remotioris heremi solitudinem inculta vix nota habebatur. Nullus hanc ante famulum Christi Guthlacum solus habitare colonus valebat, propter videlicet illic

<sup>214</sup> *Ep.* 98, *MGH Epp.* 3, 384.

<sup>215</sup> Felix, *Vita Guthlaci* 24, ed. and trans. Bernard Colgrave, *Felix's Life of St. Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 86-87: “nunc stagnis, nunc flactris, interdum nigris fusi vaporis laticibus, necnon et crebris insularum nemorumque intervenientibus flexuosis rivigarum anfractibus, ab austro in aquilonem mare tenus longissimo tractu protenditur.”

demorantium fantasias demonum, in qua vir Dei Guthlac, contempto hoste, caelesti auxilio adiutus, inter umbrosa solitudinis nemora solus habitare coepit.

Tatwine accordingly assented to the commands of the man and, taking a fisherman's skiff, made his way, traveling with Christ, through trackless bogs within the confines of the dismal marsh till he came to the said spot; it is called Crowland, an island in the middle of the marsh which on account of the wildness of this very remote desert had hitherto remained untilled and known to a very few. No settler had been able to dwell alone in this place before Guthlac the servant of Christ, on account of the phantoms of demons which haunted it. Here Guthlac, the man of God, despising the enemy, began by divine aid to dwell alone among the shady groves of this solitude.<sup>216</sup>

In the *Vita Guthlaci*, swamps—and the threats they harbored—were landscapes of fear. Hooke has clearly demonstrated the evidence for wide stretches of wetlands in southeast England during the period, confirming Felix's assessments.<sup>217</sup> Crowland disquieted the locals to the extent that, according to Felix, no solitary dweller had successfully settled anywhere near it before. Guthlac made his home in a *tumulus*, or a looted and subsequently abandoned burial mound.<sup>218</sup> During Guthlac's stay there, he experienced temptations and attacks similar to those Antony had endured in the *Vita Antonii*: one night, demons took the forms of lions, bears, wolves and bulls and besieged

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<sup>216</sup> Felix, *Vita Guthlaci* 25, trans. Colgrave, 88-89.

<sup>217</sup> Della Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988), 170-95, at 175: "Throughout the later Anglo-Saxon and medieval period there were attempts to improve the economic potential [of the Cambridgeshire fens] . . . To the north, Crowland Abbey also sought to improve the surrounding marshland. Today the landscape is far removed from the 'obscure island' chosen by Guthlac in the 'loneliness of the broad wilderness' with its 'swampy thickets'."

<sup>218</sup> Felix, *Vita Guthlaci* 28, trans. Colgrave, 92-95: it was "a mound built of clods of earth which greedy comers to the waste had dug open, in the hope of finding treasure there; in the side of this there seemed to be a sort of cistern, and in this Guthlac the man of blessed memory began to dwell, after building a hut over it (*insula tumulus agrestibus glaebis coacervatus, quem olim avari solitudinis frequentatores lucri ergo illic adquirendi defodientes scindebant, in cuius latere velut cisterna inesse videbatur; in qua vir beatae memoriae Guthlac desuper inposito tugurio habitare coepit.*)"

him from all sides.<sup>219</sup> Wetlands were inherently frightful places; near the time Felix wrote, Aethicus Ister claimed of the cynocephali—or dog-headed humans, whom we shall encounter later in this chapter—that “their settlements are in wooded and remote locations, swamps and marshy places (*siluestria loca et deuia, paludes et arundinosa*).”<sup>220</sup> Although the precise dating of its composition in written form cannot be proved, *Beowulf* also suggests that images of dark swamps had a firm grip on literary imaginations. In *Beowulf*, Grendel’s mere was described as an “unknown (*uncuð*)” landscape, a “dangerous fen-tract (*frence fengelad*).”<sup>221</sup> Grendel himself was a “boundary-walker (*mearcstapa*)” on the fringes of known civilization, whose “lurking there establishes those boundaries.”<sup>222</sup> Sarah Semple has drawn comparisons between Beowulf’s character and Guthlac’s heroic behavior at Crowland, which was, like Grendel’s mere, “a theater of adversities, evoked through the use of a topos that described the most remote, inaccessible, fearful, dreadful, and haunted place that [Felix] could conceive.”<sup>223</sup> Although Semple did not discuss Felix’s Latin *Vita Guthlaci* directly, Fabienne Michelet’s fundamental themes of creation, migration and conquest can apply to both Willibald’s and Felix’s descriptions of swamps. For Michelet, hagiographic texts

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<sup>219</sup> Felix, *Vita Guthlaci* 36, trans. Colgrave, 114-17.

<sup>220</sup> Aethicus Ister, *Cosmographia* 28, trans. Herren, *Cosmography*, 28-29.

<sup>221</sup> *Beowulf*, 1359. For these points I rely on Neville, *Representations*, 135.

<sup>222</sup> Neville, *Representations*, 74.

<sup>223</sup> Sarah Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England: Religion, Ritual, and Rulership in the Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151. Her argument about Felix’s Latin *Vita Guthlaci* is based in part on Alaric Hall’s study of the Old English *Guthlac A* and *B* poems: “Constructing Anglo-Saxon Sanctity: Tradition, Innovation and Saint Guthlac,” in *Images of Sanctity: Essays in Honour of Gary Dickson*, ed. Debra Strickland (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 207-35, at 215-18; Christine Rauer has drawn connections between *Beowulf* and hagiographic battles with demons and monsters: *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71.

as well as Bede's *Historia* contributed to a sense of Britain as a "centre" rather than a classical periphery.<sup>224</sup> By appropriating dismal places like Frisia or Crowland, saints generated a holy place through conquest of a fearsome one. The danger of that "theater of adversities," as Semple has described Crowland and similar landscapes, relied heavily on its own natural state: swamps were different by definition, and their dangers made them appropriate places for heroic activities. Although sparsely populated, in the *Vita Guthlaci* the Fens became a landscape of conversion: Guthlac exorcised it of its demons, and after his life a cult developed there, centered on the site of his hermitage.

The connections between Anglo-Saxon perceptions of wetlands and Frankish hagiographic views of them are crucial, especially since Anglo-Saxons largely constituted the first wave of missionary activity in the Frankish eighth century. As we saw in Chapter 2, the danger of waterborne travel was a common theme in Anglo-Latin and Old English literature. In the long Old English poem *Andreas*, the apostle Andrew associated the landscape of the cannibalistic, pagan (and fictional) Mermedonians with the danger and uncertainty manifest in wetlands: "From the heavens [God] knows the ambit of the oceans, the salt sea-streams and the vast expanse. They are no friends to me, those foreign men, nor do I know anything of the mentality of the people there, nor are the highways across the cold water familiar to me."<sup>225</sup> Aquatic danger was a persistent

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<sup>224</sup> Fabienne Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and a Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9. Anglo-Saxons' view of themselves in relation to the land around them constituted, in the words of Nicholas Howe, a "mental map of Christendom" in *Writing the Map*, 133. For a discussion of geography in Gildas and Bede, see Chapter 2 above, 200-2 and 222-24.

<sup>225</sup> *Andreas* 2.195-99, trans. S.A.J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman, 1982; repr. 1995), 116: "halig of heofenum con him holma begang,/ sealte sæstrema ond swanrade,/ waroðfaruða gewinn ond wæterbrogan,/ wegas ofer widland. Ne synt me



theme in *Andreas*.<sup>226</sup> Even God's charge to Andrew adapted the similar language: "Go now throughout all the earth's surfaces even as widely as the water surrounds it or the plains extend a highway."<sup>227</sup> Water was the great divide between the civilized world as Andrew knew it and the man-eating Mermedonians. In *Andreas*, the anonymous poet applied the language of aquatic danger to an evangelizing mission.

### ***Marsh and Shrine Meet at Aelmere***

In the *Vita Bonifatii*, Willibald drew a direct connection between the marshes of Aelmere and cult ambitions after his death. In the final section of the *Vita Bonifatii*, Willibald described efforts to raise an earthen mound in the spot of Boniface's martyrdom and to construct a church on top. The importance of marking the spot in the landscape outweighed the difficulty of doing so in the middle of a swamp. As Willibald explained, the mound was necessary because of tide patterns.<sup>228</sup> Boniface's followers marked the spot by creating a new topography in an inhospitable landscape. When Boniface's followers completed the mound and were planning the church, its inherent problems became apparent: fresh water was scarcely to be found in the vicinity, "as much

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winas cuðe./ eorlas elþeodige, ne þær æniges wat." For Jennifer Neville, *Andreas*' struggles against nature was a reflection of the postlapsarian human condition in *Representations*, 45-46, at 46: "This depiction of human helplessness in the natural world is, of course, an extension of the depiction of *Andreas*'s confinement, and *Andreas* fulfills the 'ideal' of heroic endurance to its fullest extent, remaining cheerfully steadfast despite nature's cold grip and his other bonds and wounds."

<sup>226</sup> *Andreas* 3.235-37, 3.307-14, 4.369-468, 5.471-509, 8.822-35, and 14.1522-1606.

<sup>227</sup> *Andreas* 3.332-34, trans. Bradley, 120: "Farað nu geond ealle eorðan sceatas/ emne swa wide swa wæter bebugeð, oððe stedewangas stræte gelicgaþ."

<sup>228</sup> *VB* 9, *MGH SRG* 57, 56.

difficulty for men as for animals.”<sup>229</sup> When one Abba, an administrator (*officium praefecturae*) under Pippin mounted his horse to survey the land with his attendants, a sinkhole suddenly started forming near the mound, and they extracted the horse with great effort. At that moment a fresh spring of “a fountain, clearer than was usual in that land, wonderfully sweet and nice to taste, erupted and came up through unknown ways so that it formed the largest stream.”<sup>230</sup> The miracle confirmed the locals’ efforts to perpetuate Boniface’s cult in the previously uncooperative landscape, as well as their manipulation of the marshes at Aelmere. Such an event had a scriptural precedent in Moses’ drawing of water from the rock in the wilderness, a similarly uncooperative environment. In 772, just a few years after Willibald’s writing, Charlemagne would penetrate into Saxon territory, destroying the Irminsul—a pagan shrine near Eresburg—before his army was beset by drought there. Miraculously, though, a fresh spring appeared at their encampment.<sup>231</sup> In Charlemagne’s case, fresh water issued from the land where the Frankish king had just removed pagan monument. The event was a compressed version of key moments in Boniface’s career: in 722, he destroyed the *robor Iobis* at Geismar; in 754, his cult site at Aelmere produced fresh, flowing water—in the missionary context, living water. To intensify the meaning of the place, Boniface’s martyrdom at Aelmere initially required that his shrine be built there despite its inaccessibility. The marshes of Aelmere both received and surrendered the books and

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<sup>229</sup> VB 9, MGH SRG 57, 57: “tam hominibus quam etiam animantibus difficultatem gignit.”

<sup>230</sup> VB 9, MGH SRG 57, 57: “et limpidissimus extra consuetudinem illius terrae fons, mirae suavitatis gustu indulcatus, prorumpibat et per incognitos penetrans meatus profluebat, ut rivus iam maximus esse videretur.”

<sup>231</sup> ARF 772, MGH SRG 6, 33.

relics of Boniface's entourage, and locals later honored the place with a visible mound.

Where Gregory of Tours had doubted the existence of "piety in a pond (*religio in stagno*),"<sup>232</sup> Boniface ensured the existence of holiness in the *stagnum* at Aelmere.

### ***Wetlands Redeemed: Ermoldus Nigellus on the Baptism of Harald Klak***

The final episode of the *Vita Bonifatii* underscores the importance of nature and its manipulation to Frankish conversion processes. Situated on the Rhine delta, Frisia was a naturally swampy landscape (Map 3.3). It was also a landscape exploited by Carolingian authors to make ideological claims on behalf of Christian missions. Willibald associated paganism closely with the vast Frisian swamp, or *stagnum*. In Willibald's imagining, landscapes could reflect their inhabitants. Writing not long after Willibald, Alcuin described how Vedast's chosen burial site caused some anxiety for his cult followers, since the swampy area around the stream Criento (the Crinchon, just south of Arras) was generally inaccessible and unworthy to keep his remains.<sup>233</sup> Eigil in his *Vita Sturmi* included a brief section on Boniface's martyrdom and had equated the Frisians' pagan superstitions with the "watery lands of Frisia (*ad aquosa Fresonum arva*)."<sup>234</sup> The Rhine valley was itself an important site of conversion. In his long poem *Carmen in honorem Hlodouici Christianissimi caesarius augusti* (or *In honorem*, composed c. 827/28), Ermoldus Nigellus combined "elements of biography, ethnography, and

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<sup>232</sup> See Chapter 1, 70-71.

<sup>233</sup> Alcuin, *Vita Vedasti* 4, *MGH SRM* 3, 419. For a fuller discussion, see below, 428-29.

<sup>234</sup> *VS* 15, *MGH SS* 2, 372. On Eigil and Sturm, see above, 383-84.

providential history” in four books detailing Louis the Pious’ life and achievements.<sup>235</sup> In Book IV, Ermoldus described the conversion of Harald Klak (d. 852) under Louis after a hunt at Petersau, an island in the Rhine near Ingelheim.<sup>236</sup> At Petersau, “plants and shady bushes are verdant [and] many types of animals were in this place, and lay about lazily widely throughout the forests.”<sup>237</sup> Echoing Virgil’s *Aeneid* 4.129, Ermoldus vividly described how animals crashed through brambles looking for refuge until “the crowd of men killed animals of all shapes and sizes throughout the field.”<sup>238</sup> A great feast followed. Although Harald had pledged fealty to Louis in 814,<sup>239</sup> the impressiveness of the hunt and subsequent banquet had their intended effects on him. There, on the banks of the Rhine, Harald took on the Christian faith:

Omnia virtutum video tibi credita, Caesar,  
 Flumina, sidereo pectora rore madent:  
 Colla iugo Christi en monitans mea vestra subegit  
 Suasio, et aeternis traxit ab usque focis,  
 Deque errore malo memetque domumque subactam  
 Abstulit, et vero pectora fonte replet.<sup>240</sup>

I see all the rivers of virtue given to you, Caesar,

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<sup>235</sup> Paul Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power, and the Early Medieval Political Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 185.

<sup>236</sup> For Ermoldus’ background and status in the Carolingian intellectual scene of the 820s, I have consulted Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, 183-86, at 185-86: “Across all four books Ermold framed Louis as an emperor who both widened and deepened Christianity. *In honorem* reveals, through the treatment of this very theme, Ermold’s fascination with the imagery and symbolism of baptism as purification, as exorcism, as creation of community, and as an act of peacemaking, as Harald accepts Christianity, joining the *pax Christiana* overseen by Louis, heir of Constantine and Charlemagne.”

<sup>237</sup> Ermoldus, *In honorem* 4.486-88, *MGH PLAC* 2, 71: “Quo uiret herba recens et nemus umbriferum/ Illuc quippe ferae multae uariaeque fuerunt/ Et late siluis turba iacebat iners.”

<sup>238</sup> Ermoldus, *In honorem* 4.511-12, *MGH PLAC* 2, 72: “Caetera turba uirum passim per prata trucidat/ Diuersi generis multimodasque feras.”

<sup>239</sup> Astronomer, *Vita Hludowici imperatoris* 24, *MGH SRG* 54, 356-57.

<sup>240</sup> Ermoldus, *In honorem* 4.581-86, *MGH PLAC* 2, 74.

with your heart soaked in starry dew:  
 following your command, I am persuaded to put  
 myself in the yoke of Christ, and it will drag me from  
 the eternal fires, and remove me and my home away from  
 evil error, and truly again fill my heart in the [baptismal] font.

Physically enclosed on all sides by the Rhine's waters, Harald was baptized.

Apart from being a moment of salvation, Harald's baptism was a political one: by sponsoring him, Louis strengthened ties between kingdoms and exercised power over a political rival: peace, as Paul Kershaw has pointed out, "was fostered through physical purification."<sup>241</sup> As Rimbert in the *Vita Anskarii* would later put it, Harald became Louis' son when he was raised from the baptismal font.<sup>242</sup> Ermoldus' description leans heavily upon sacramental reference points as well.<sup>243</sup> Some of Ermoldus' textual images, however, were distinct from these political and liturgical contexts. For Ermoldus, Louis' "rivers of virtue (*virtutum flumina*)" were a direct parallel both to his territory on the Rhine and the baptismal waters with which Harald was preparing to be baptized. Eric Goldberg has argued that this long passage is the culmination of Ermoldus' hunt imagery and "was a showcase, not only for the prowess of the emperor, but also for his sons and nobles."<sup>244</sup> Ermoldus, speaking through Harald, designated Louis as a *Dei cultor*,

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<sup>241</sup> Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, 185-86. Harald's baptism is an excellent example of Ermoldus' central themes, namely "the transformative triumph of Christianity and, with it, peace—an image of a world gradually improving."

<sup>242</sup> Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 7, *MGH SRG* 55, 26.

<sup>243</sup> Janet Nelson, "The Lord's Anointed and the People's Choice: Carolingian Royal Ritual," in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 137-80, at 169: "And, as Ermold shows, liturgical and other forms of ritual were intimately interwoven. As with the procedures of king-making, these rituals were designed to incorporate, not exclude. Kingship, the clerical and lay orders, and hierarchies of ranks within those orders, all existed within the one Frankish realm."

<sup>244</sup> Eric Goldberg, "Louis the Pious and the Hunt," *Speculum* 88.3 (2013): 613-43, at 629.

suggesting a double meaning of “worshipper of God” and “cultivator of God.” The phrase is common in the works of Augustine,<sup>245</sup> Sulpicius Severus<sup>246</sup> and Bede<sup>247</sup> to refer to a servant of Christ. Ermoldus employed it to describe the Rhine valley as a fertile landscape of conversion and royal power. Where Willibald and many others had described dangerous landscapes, Ermoldus’s descriptions of the Rhine valley redeemed watery places as baptismal sites. Marshland topographies could shape perceptions of and attitudes towards them.

### **Alcuin’s Missionary Vitae: Negotiating Natural and Built Worlds**

As royal advisor and a key figure in Carolingian court, Alcuin of York is an ideal bridge between Anglo-Saxon and continental cultural questions.<sup>248</sup> We have already encountered Alcuin through his poetic commemoration of York in Chapter 2. Each of Alcuin’s missionary *vitae*—those of Willibrord, Richarius and Vedast—were written in the final years of his life, between about 796 and 804. This is also the period, bracketed by the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 and his death in 804, from which a proliferation of letters both to and from Alcuin survives. In these years, Alcuin’s anxieties ranged from the conduct of Northumbrian monks in his homeland to the Adoptionist crisis in Iberia,

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<sup>245</sup> The phrase is most common in Augustine, which he employed in reference to figures such as Noah (*De civ.* 16.1) and Job (*De natura et gratia* 62.73.19-20; and *Contra litteras Petilianus* 2.49).

<sup>246</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Chronica* 1.42.2.

<sup>247</sup> In *HE* 3.29, Bede included a letter from Bishop Vitalian to King Oswiu of Northumbria which referred to him as a *cultor Dei*.

<sup>248</sup> The following assessment of Alcuin’s life, as in Chapter 2, 275-76, relies on Donald Bullough, “Alcuin (c. 740-804),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), online edition May 2010 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.its.virginia.edu/view/article/298>), accessed 26 February 2014.

which held that Christ was merely chosen by God, not his son incarnate. For this latter subject in particular, Alcuin relied on the *auctoritas* of the church fathers, a characteristic that surfaced most clearly in his Christological struggles with the Spanish Adoptionists.<sup>249</sup> Alcuin's *Vita Vedasti* in particular betrays an interest in heresy.<sup>250</sup> As Donald Bullough and others have noted, Alcuin's correspondence of the late 790s also reveals an interest in Christianizing the Avars, a task carried out by his associates Paulinus of Aquileia (d. c. 802) and Arn of Salzburg (d. 821).<sup>251</sup> As Bullough has pointed out,

in the aftermath of the Frankish defeat of the Avars, Alcuin had addressed a letter jointly to the king of the several (named) 'provinces' and to 'the holy preachers of God's word'. In it, he hailed their success in 'extending the *Christianitatis regnum* and the knowledge of the true God and bringing many peoples far and wide from the errors of irreligion to the way of truth' . . . A linking of the *imperium* of the first Carolingian kings over other *gentes* and their own—a chosen people, the 'people of God'—with the extension of the Christian religion is one of the themes of Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi*, which was completed in the same period.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> For Alcuin's reliance upon the church fathers, I am following Donald Bullough, *Alcuin*, 260-74. For his conflict with Elipand of Toledo and Felix of Urgel, see Alcuin's letters between 797 and 800, especially *Epp.* 23, 182, 199-202, 208, *MGH Epp.* 4, 60-65, 300, 329-36, 345-46. The largest and most complete of Alcuin's treatises against the Adoptionists is the *Contra Felicem Urgellitanum libri septem*, or "Seven Books against Felix of Urgel" (*PL* 101: cols. 119-231). On the background of these conflicts, see Donald Bullough, "Alcuin, Arn and the Creed in the Mass," in *Erzbischof Arn von Salzburg*, ed. Meta Niederkorn-Bruck and Anton Scharer (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 2004), 128-36.

<sup>250</sup> Kelly Gibson has also demonstrated the degree to which Alcuin's *Vita Vedasti* reflected his concerns over Adoptionist heresy: "Rewriting History," 87-95. For an example of his concerns, see *VV* 2, *MGH SRM* 3, 415: "Sunt tempora periculosa, ut apostoli praedixerunt, quia multi pseudodoctores surgent, novas introducentes sectas, qui catholicae fidei puritatem impus adsertionibus maculare nituntur."

<sup>251</sup> Bullough, *Alcuin*, 390-91: examples are in Alcuin, *Epp.* 107 and 184, *MGH Epp.* 4, 153-54 and 308-10.

<sup>252</sup> Bullough, "Empire and Emperordom from Late Antiquity to 799," *Early Medieval Europe* 12.4 (2003): 377-87, at 386.

The connections between Alcuin's letters and his *Vita Willibrordi* are crucial, since in the *vita* Alcuin emphasized the links between conversion and royal influence. As a respected member of Charlemagne's court, Alcuin was aware of the missionary inheritance that had helped legitimize the Charlemagne's kingdom, a legacy that applied equally to his understanding of Northumbrian history.<sup>253</sup> Alcuin's hagiographic works were grounded both in historical interest and contemporary concerns. On a deeper, textual level, Alcuin made frequent use of natural metaphors in the *Vita Willibrordi* to describe the conversion process, a literary strategy not found in the vast majority of his letters.

### ***The Vita Willibrordi: Natural Metaphor and Conversion***

Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi* was requested by and dedicated to Beornrad, bishop of Sens between 792 and 798. Willibrord, born around 658 and educated at Ripon in Northumbria, enjoyed close ties with the Pippinids, the family that produced mayors of the palace under the Merovingians. Under obscure circumstances, he became a missionary in pagan Frisia around 690 and was made bishop there around 695. It was between this time and 698, when Echternach was founded, that Pippin of Herstal (d. 714), father of Charles Martel, bequeathed land near Utrecht for Willibrord's episcopal cathedral. Willibrord's episcopal see was not fixed, a reflection of the tenuousness with which he held ecclesiastical authority in the early years of Christianization in the region.

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<sup>253</sup> On this subject, see Kate Rambridge, "Alcuin's Narratives of Evangelism: The *Life of St Willibrord* and the Northumbrian Hagiographical Tradition," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 371-82.



Alcuin composed a short verse and much longer prose *vita* of Willibrord. In the prose life, Alcuin spent far more time describing the landscapes through which Willibrord moved and with which he dealt on his missionary travels. The prose *Vita Willibrordi*, simply put, expands on what in the verse *vita* are brief, economic assessments of Willibrord's career. Even these expansions have not impressed modern historians for their narrative usefulness: as Wood and others have observed, the *Vita Willibrordi* is "notoriously unsatisfactory text for the historian . . . [which must] be the result of a deliberate choice."<sup>254</sup> For Wood, Alcuin decided to compose the *vita* as a family history, which helps explain his preference for describing Willibrord's habits (*mores*) instead of a narrative. This content was probably aimed at a liturgical audience at Echternach, its primary audience: "one should remember that because Echternach was a family monastery, the founder's family were of considerable interest to the community."<sup>255</sup> The very narrative features in Alcuin's *vita* are consistently overshadowed by Willibrord's miracles and preaching:

**Table 3.3: Structure of Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi* (composed c. 794-800).**

1-4	Alcuin describes Willibrord's Anglo-Saxon origins, his entry into the monastery at Ripon, and his early career there.
5-8	Willibrord becomes a missionary around 690 at age 33, rises to the episcopate and begins preaching in Germany.
9-12	Willibrord preaches and establishes Christian communities among the Frisians and Danes; Alcuin describes his efforts in Fositeland.
13-23	Charles Martel rises to power in 714; Willibrord's episcopate is fixed at Utrecht; Alcuin describes his preaching and ecclesiastical organization amongst the Frisians.
24-25	Alcuin provides a physical description of Willibrord, followed by an account of his death.
26-31	Alcuin details Willibrord's posthumous miracles.

<sup>254</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 81.

<sup>255</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 82.

As in Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii*, the natural world remained a central theme for explaining the benefits and challenges of the missionary life in the *Vita Willibrordi*. More specifically, Willibrord exercised control over both sacred and legal landscapes in the *vita*: at one point in his career, he converted a pagan sacred spring on an island called Fositeland into a baptismal font.<sup>256</sup> Apart from this instance, the natural world most often appears in the *Vita Willibrordi* as a metaphor for missionary life. While for Alcuin in his missionary *vitae*, especially those of Willibrord and Richarius, preaching and deeds (*gesta*) trumped miracles and signs (*miracula et signi*), the theme of the natural world permeated both. Both Wood and Veyrard-Cosme have noted this tendency. For Wood, Alcuin favored “the elevation of preaching over the miraculous” in his *vitae*,<sup>257</sup> and Veyrard-Cosme observed that Alcuin emphasized God himself, not the saint, as the source for all miracles.<sup>258</sup> Early in the *vita*, natural metaphors framed the narrative: a vision in which Willibrord's mother swallowed the moon presaged his birth,<sup>259</sup> and as a young man, Willibrord aspired to join the school at Ripon “much as a bee sucks up nectar

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<sup>256</sup> See below, 401-6.

<sup>257</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 82.

<sup>258</sup> Veyrard-Cosme, *L'œuvre*, 142-49. See, for example, Alcuin, *VW* 14, *MGH SRM* 7, 128: “Although the ministry of evangelical preaching is preferable to all the working of miracles and demonstrating of signs, I think deeds which are narrated should not be silent for the glory of God the giver, but they should all the more be written, lest what is known to have happened in earlier periods should be lost to later times (*Licet omni miraculorum operatione et signorum ostensione ministerium evangelicae praedicationis praeferendum sit, tamen quod gesta narrantur, ad gloriam donantis Dei non tacenda esse censo, sed magis stilo alliganda, ne pereant posteris saeculis, quae priscis temporibus acta esse noscuntur*).” Compare this with the language of Alcuin, *VR* 9, *MGH SRM* 4, 394: “Nam officium praedicationis omni signorum ostensione maius esse non dubium est, licet non deesset pro temporum oportunitate vel rerum convenientia signorum perpetratio, quae per eum divina peregit clementia.”

<sup>259</sup> *VW* 2, *MGH SRM* 7, 117.

from the flowers into its breast and stores it in a hive it has constructed with the sweet favor of virtue.”<sup>260</sup> In this case Alcuin echoed both his countryman Aldhelm and, as we have seen earlier, Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii* and a cluster of other hagiographic and liturgical texts.<sup>261</sup>

Like Willibald, Alcuin also deployed harvest language liberally, invoking Matt. 9.37 and Luke 10.2: “He had heard that in the northern parts of the world the harvest was indeed great but the laborers few.”<sup>262</sup> Alcuin made a bold claim on behalf of missionary work if Mary Alberi is correct that he employed harvest language to describe *christianitatis regnum* or *imperium christianum*.<sup>263</sup> For the *Vita Willibrordi* itself, Kate Rambridge has argued that the concept of harvest held special symbolic value for Alcuin, who, “in writing hagiography, participates as an author in the labour of the harvest,”<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> *VW* 4, *MGH SRM* 7, 119: “quatenus ceu prudentissima apis ex eorum propinquitate mellifluos pietatis carperet flores et in sui pectoris albeareo dulcissimos virtutum favos construeret.” As we encountered above, 352-53, Willibald deployed the same images to describe the monastic life in *VB* 5.

<sup>261</sup> Aldhelm, *Enig.* 20, *MGH AA* 15, 106, Chapter 2, 259; and Willibald, *VB* 5 above, 352-53.

<sup>262</sup> *VW* 5, *MGH SRM* 7, 119: “Audivit in borealibus mundi partibus messem quidem multam esse, sed operarios paucos.” Matt 9.37: “Tunc dicit discipulis suis: ‘Mensis quidem multa, operarii autem pauci’”; Luke 10.2: “Et dicebat illis: ‘Mensis quidem multa, operarii autem pauci; rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam’.” Willibald had invoked these passages in *VB* 4, *MGH SRG* 57, 17, as had Gregory II in a letter to Boniface of 726, in *Ep.* 26, *MGH Epp.* 3, 275.

<sup>263</sup> Mary Alberi, “The Evolution of Alcuin’s Concept of *Imperium Christianum*,” in *The Community, the Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Joyce Hill and Mary Swan (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 3-17, at 15-16: “Alcuin’s letters on the Avar mission reveal his perception of a gap between the king’s idealistic claims and the reality of Carolingian imperialism. Holding up an ideal image of a Christ-like king who is ‘lord of the harvest’, Alcuin corrected Charlemagne, reminding him through allusions to New Testament parables that he was obliged as *rector* to serve the church’s eschatological mission through the proper administration of his talent, wisdom.”

<sup>264</sup> Rambridge, “Alcuin’s Narrative of Evangelism,” 377.

which in turn contributed to his self-image as a hagiographer.<sup>265</sup> This concept squares with a recurring theme in the missionary lives: after Willibrord's consecration by Pope Sergius (fl. 687-701), Alcuin observed that Willibrord was charged to preach "more greatly in the northern parts of the kingdom, where on account of the rarity of teachers and the stubbornness of the inhabitants, the flame of faith shone forth less."<sup>266</sup> Alcuin considered northern zones to be less fertile for the faith until Willibrord went to Frisia to "uproot the thorns of idolatry (*idolatriae spinas exstirpare*),"<sup>267</sup> mindful of the prophetic charge of Jer. 4.3 to "break up your fallow ground and sow not among the thorns (*spinas*)."<sup>268</sup> In the text, the Frisian mission was closely bound to metaphors of cultivation: its work was a long, difficult process in which "the seed of life [had been] irrigated by the dew of grace from above."<sup>269</sup> Such metaphors were descriptive strategies not lost on Carolingian poets of the period. In a poem dedicated to Paul the Deacon (d. 799), for example, Peter of Pisa described Paul's intellectual assets as an abundant crop in an isolated region: "[Christ] sent you, Paul, most learned of poets and bards, to our

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<sup>265</sup> Rambridge, "Alcuin, Willibrord, and the Cultivation of Faith," *The Haskins Society Journal* 14 (2005): 15-32, at 16: "The metaphorical theme of [*Ep.* 121 and Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi*] is not merely an example of stylistic elegance, appropriate to the correspondence between two cultured and authoritative men. It is . . . indicative of Alcuin's self-conception in the terms of a typological narrative of the work of Christian educator within society . . . Alcuin's deployment of a complex of imagery associated with the themes of nurture is indicative of his astute and conscientious approach to hagiographical writing, and also informs his self-stylisation in his own roles of author and educator."

<sup>266</sup> *VW* 8, *MGH SRM* 7, 123: "maxime tamen in borealibus regni sui partibus, quo eatenus ob raritatem doctorum vel duritiam habitatorum fidei flamma minus relucebat."

<sup>267</sup> *VW* 5, *MGH SRM* 7, 121. Talbot translated this passage as "uproot idolatrous practice," but the Latin indicates a much more naturally aware sense of what it meant to go into pagan territory and convert people; it was a long process akin to laborious gardening.

<sup>268</sup> *VW* 5, *MGH SRM* 7, 121: "Novate vobis novalia et nolite serere super spinas."

<sup>269</sup> *VB* 6, *MGH SRM* 7, 121: "semina vitae, supernae gratiae rore inrigante."

back-water, as a shining light with the various languages you know, to quicken the sluggish to life by sowing fine seeds.”<sup>270</sup> Agricultural language was among the most effective ways for authors to explain missionary work.

The language of fertility permeates Alcuin’s other works, nearly always in the context of monastic or missionary activity. In a letter to Charlemagne in 796, Alcuin described the contemporary book trade among all points between Rome and Northumbria as a thriving garden, requesting that Charlemagne employ young men to “get everything that is necessary for us from there and bring the flowers of Britain back to Francia, so that not unlike the garden closed up (*hortus conclusus*) in York, there might be bursts of paradise bearing fruit in Tours, and the south wind might come through and blow over the gardens of the Loire.”<sup>271</sup> Alcuin’s use of the phrase *hortus conclusus* directly echoes Cant. 4.12 in which the bride was described as “a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up (*hortus conclusus, fons signatus*).” In such cases, Alcuin’s language of nature intersected with geographic specificity. We have already seen such descriptions in the case of Alcuin’s own *York Poem*, which praised that city’s rich riverine landscape:

Hanc piscosa suis undis interluit Usa  
 florigeros ripis praetendens undique campos;  
 collibus et siluis tellus hinc inde decora:  
 nobilibusque locis habitatio pulchra, salubris  
 fertilitate sui multos habitura colonos.

Through York flows the Ouse, its waters teeming with fish,

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<sup>270</sup> Trans. Godman, *Poetry* no. 2, 84-5 “Qui te, Paule, poetarum vatūque doctissime,/ linguīs variis ad nostram lampantem provinciam/ misit, ut inertes aptis fecundes seminibus.”

<sup>271</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 121, *MGH Epp.* 4, 177: “qui excipiant inde nobis necessaria quaeque et revehant in Frantiā flores Britanniae; ut non sit tantummodo in Euborica hortus conclusus, sed in Turonica emissiones paradisi cum pomorum fructibus, ut veniens Auster perflaret hortos Ligeri fluminis.”

along its banks stretch fields laden with flowers,  
all about the countryside is lovely with hills and woods,  
and this beautiful, healthy place of noble setting  
was destined to attract many settlers by its richness.<sup>272</sup>

Alcuin attached images of natural beauty to places where important hagiographic events took place, as Bede had done for the hill on which Alban was martyred.<sup>273</sup> He also employed such language to express the importance of place more generally. These landscapes—a Frisia “cultivated” by missionaries and a fertile Ouse valley—were naturally suited to accommodate Christian success; their natural beauty reflected their fitness to be sites of conversion. This was a descriptive strategy of which Bede before him had been well aware in his panorama of Britain at the outset of the *Historia ecclesiastica*.<sup>274</sup> Alcuin was also relying on a broader tradition of ascribing natural beauty to holy places. As we saw in Chapter 2, Bede described the hill on which Alban was martyred as “clothed on all sides with wild flowers of every kind (*uariis herbarum floribus depictus, immo usquequaque uestitus*).”<sup>275</sup> In these instances, natural beauty preceded the holiness of a place and shaped later interpretations of those places.

### ***Fositeland: Conversion of a Landscape***

Soon after meeting with Sergius, Willibrord departed for the northern regions, “beyond the borders of the Frankish kingdom (*ultra Francorum regni fines*).”<sup>276</sup> His target was Radbod, whom we have already encountered in Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii*.

<sup>272</sup> *York* 30-34, trans. Godman, 6-7. For a discussion, see Chapter 2, 275-76.

<sup>273</sup> For a discussion of this passage, see Chapter 2, 235-38.

<sup>274</sup> On the geography of Britain, see Chapter 2, 217-18.

<sup>275</sup> *HE* 1.7. Chapter 2, 235.

<sup>276</sup> *VW* 9, *MGH SRM* 7, 123.

Here, Alcuin described Radbod as “king of the Frisians and [who] with his people, was pagan.”<sup>277</sup> Willibrord was following a familiar pattern of converting kings and nobles already set out by Augustine in Kent from 597 onwards and Paulinus of York in Northumbria in the 620s and ‘30s.<sup>278</sup> Willibrord’s first attempt to convert Radbod would fail, and he promptly gave up, focusing his attentions elsewhere.<sup>279</sup> Willibrord would be more successful with Ongendus, a leader of the Danes who was “a man more cruel than any savage beast and harder than any stone.”<sup>280</sup> Willibrord emerges from Alcuin’s *vita* as a persistent missionary who strategically targeted the power players among the Frisians and Danes for conversion.

It is in the context of Willibrord’s attempts to convert northern political leaders that he arrived at Fositeland (modern Heligoland), an island in the North Sea on the extreme edge of the Frisian archipelago—in Alcuin’s words, “a certain island (*ad quondam insulam*)” in the waters between Frisian and Danish territories.<sup>281</sup> For Fositeland, Alcuin turned his attention to the actual, physical landscapes with which Willibrord engaged as a missionary. Like Willibald had done for Boniface, Alcuin quarantined metaphor from reality when describing nature. At Fositeland, the natural world had an active role in the conversion of local pagans. As we have already seen, such watery landscapes could be natural sites of conversion in missionary *vitae*. In the *Vita Willibrordi*, Alcuin argued for the Frisian archipelago’s fitness for conversion: “But on that journey having catechized the young men in the faith he washed them in the fountain

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<sup>277</sup> *VW* 9, *MGH SRM* 7, 123: “regem Fresonum Rabbodum cum sua gente paganum.”

<sup>278</sup> Bede, *HE* 1.23-24.

<sup>279</sup> *VW* 9, *MGH SRM* 7, 123.

<sup>280</sup> *VW* 9, *MGH SRM* 7, 123: “homo omni fera crudelior et omni lapide durior.”

<sup>281</sup> *VW* 10, *MGH SRM* 7, 124.

[i.e. baptized them], so that should they die during the longest sea journey or through the machinations of the very fierce dwellers of that land, he should suffer no loss among them.”<sup>282</sup> Alcuin charged baptism with a significance specific to that landscape: it not only claimed souls, but it did so in the midst of dangerous waters. Baptism, as Martin Heinzelmann has shown, was fundamental to Alcuin’s hagiographic vision.<sup>283</sup> By baptizing pagans, Willibrord both converted pagans and dispelled the fears lurking in such marginal landscapes.

Fositeland was one such landscape. Alcuin’s account of what took place there expands dramatically on the succinct, six-line assessment in his verse *Vita Willibrordi*.<sup>284</sup>

The prose version is worth quoting at length:

Et dum pius verbi Dei praedicator iter agebat, pervenit in confino Fresonum et Daenorum ad quondam insulam, quae a quodam deo suo Fositae ab accolis terrae Fositesland appellabatur, quia in ea eiusdem dei fana fuere constructa. Qui locus a paganis in tanta veneratione habebatur, ut nihil in ea vel animalium ibi pascentium vel aliarum quarumlibet rerum quisquam gentilium tangere audebat nec etiam a fonte, qui ibi ebulliebat, aquam haurire nisi tacens praesummebat. Quo cum uir Dei tempestate iactatus est, mansit ibidem aliquot dies, quousque, sepositis tempestatibus, oportunitatem navigandi tempus adveniret. Sed parvi pendens stultam loci illius relegendam vel ferocissimum regis animum, qui violatores sacrorum illius atrocissima morte damnare solebat, igitur tres homines in eo fonte cum invocatione sanctae Trinitatis baptizavit, sed et animalia in ea terra pascentia in cibaria suis mactare praecepit. Quod pagani intuentes, arbitrabantur, eos vel in furorem verti vel etiam veloci morte perire.<sup>285</sup>

<sup>282</sup> *VW* 9, *MGH SRM* 7, 124: “Sed in eo ipso itinere catechizatos eosdem pueros vitae fonte abluit, ne aliquod propter pericula longissimi navigii vel ex insidiis ferocissimorum terrae illius habitatorum damnum pateretur in illis.”

<sup>283</sup> Martin Heinzelmann, “Clovis dans le discours hagiographique du VI<sup>e</sup> au IX<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des chartes* 154 (1996): 87-112, at 104: Alcuin frequently focused on baptism in his hagiographic works, especially the *Vita Vedasti*.

<sup>284</sup> Alcuin, verse *Vita Willibrordi* 7, *MGH PLAC* 1, 210-11.

<sup>285</sup> *VW* 10, *MGH SRM* 7, 124-5.



And while this pious preacher of the word of God was going about his travels, he came to a certain island on the boundary between the Frisians and the Danes, which [people] in that place call Fositeland for a god named Fosite, because his shrines are constructed there. This place was held in such great veneration by the pagans, that none of them would presume to meddle with any of the animals that grazed there nor with anything else, nor draw from the spring which bubbled there, unless it was done in silence. When the man of God was cast [on this island] by a storm, he remained for several days until the storm subsided, giving them the opportunity to sail [once again]. But he had little time for the stupid religion of that place or by the ferocious spirit of the king, who was accustomed to condemn violators of the sacred things to the cruelest death; thus [Willibrord] baptized three people in the fountain in the name of the Holy Trinity, and ordered that some of the [sacred] animals grazing in that place should be slaughtered to provide for them. When the pagans saw this, they expected that the strangers would go insane or be struck with swift death.

Far from the measured advice of Daniel of Winchester to Boniface, Willibrord's tactics at Fositeland resemble more closely the aggressive missionary work for which Martin and Boniface had been known. Whereas Boniface had transformed the oak at Geismar into a Christian sacred place, Willibrord used the holy spring at Fositeland as a baptismal font. Fositeland was a landscape of conversion whose natural features—animals and spring—had been the focus of pagan veneration. As at Geismar, Fositeland's sacredness manifested itself in natural features. For Alcuin, Willibrord was known for manipulating natural landscapes. During a drought on the “coastal places (*loca maritima*)” of Frisia, Willibrord miraculously brought forth fresh water from the ground for his followers.<sup>286</sup> Quoting Is. 48.21, Alcuin described how Willibrord like Moses had “produced water from the rock [while they were] in the desert.”<sup>287</sup> In this case, the landscape was fundamentally changed on a tangible level, but scripture was also revealed

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<sup>286</sup> *VW* 16, *MGH SRM* 7, 129.

<sup>287</sup> *VW* 16, *MGH SRM* 7, 129: “in desertis aquam produxit de petra.”

in the Frisian coastal landscape. In the *Vita Willibrordi*, holy power over the natural world could operate on several distinct registers of thought, from sacramental transformation in Fositeland to drought relief on the Frisian coast.

Alcuin's description of Fositeland was also tethered to his own understanding of pagan practice. The division between sacred spring and baptismal font at Fositeland may have seemed as different as night and day to Alcuin and his readers, but the line between pagan superstition and saints' cults was not always so sharp. In a letter to Æthelheard (d. 805), archbishop of Canterbury, Alcuin expressed concern over pagan practice both in Francia and in the borderlands between the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and Offa's Mercia. Borrowing from Caesarius, Alcuin observed that "they carry amulets, as if they think they were sacred. But it is better to imitate the examples of the holy people in [one's] heart, than to carry bones in bags; [and it is better to] to hold the scriptures written in [one's] mind, than carrying them around [one's] neck carved on tiny tablets. This is superstition of the Pharisees, whom [Christ] rebuked for their phylacteries."<sup>288</sup> In a more specific instance, Alcuin wrote against "augury also by the song of birds, and sneezing and all other things which are not allowed,"<sup>289</sup> a prohibition he borrowed from

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<sup>288</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 290, *MGH Epp.* 4, 448: "ligaturas portant, quasi sanctum quid estimantes. Sed melius est in corde sanctorum imitare exempla, quam in sacculis portare ossa; evangelicas habere scriptas ammonitiones in mente magis, quam pittaciolis exaratas in collo circumferre. Haec est pharisaica superstitio; quibus ipsa veritas impropertavit philacteria sua." Compare this with *Ep.* 291, *MGH Epp.* 4, 449, which contains similar language: "Ligaturas uero, quas plurimi homines illis in partibus habere solent et sancta quaeque in collo portare, non in corde desiderant." For the language upon which Alcuin's assessments were based, see Caesarius, *Serm.* 13.5.1-6, *CCSL* 103, 67-68; Chapter 1, 115-23

<sup>289</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 267, *MGH Epp.* 4, 426: "Auguria quoque et avium cantus, et sternutationes et talia plurima omnino vetanda sunt, quae nil valent."

Caesarius.<sup>290</sup> Alcuin identified two distinct strains of ritual: the first involved the dangerous side effects of saints' cults, specifically that their adherents might replace Scripture with the veneration of relics. The second, however, is a non-Christian practice partly rooted in avian observation. Together, they help give shape to Alcuin's literary understanding of pagan practice. While he recounted an historical event at Fositeland, Alcuin also described a shift from pagan spring to baptismal font, both rooted firmly in the island's environment.

### ***Controlling Landscapes in the Vita Willibrordi***

In the end, Willibrord earned the Danish king Ongendus' respect, but did not save his soul. Back in Francia, Pippin of Herstal urged Willibrord to return to the North. For this next iteration of his missionary work in Frisia, Alcuin instead emphasized the construction of churches, as well as the fixing of Willibrord's see at Utrecht.<sup>291</sup> Where Willibrord had reformed a sacred, natural landscape at Fositeland, some of his other activities see a shift in emphasis from natural places to built ones. A clear display of this shift is an incident in which

venit ad quondam villam Walichrum nomine, in qua antiqui erroris idolum remansit. Quod cum uir Dei zelo feruens confringeret praesente eiusdem idoli custode, qui nimio furore succensus, quasi dei sui iniuriam vindicaret, in impetus animi insanientis gladio caput sacerdotis Christi percussit.<sup>292</sup>

[Willibrord] came to a village named Walichrum [Walcheren], where an idol of the ancient error remained. When moreover the man of God, moved by zeal,

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<sup>290</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 54.1.20-21, *CCSL* 103, 393: "Similiter et auguria observare nolite, nec in itinere positi aliquas auiculas cantantes adtendite, nec ex illarum cantatu diabolicas diuinationes adnuntiare praesumite."

<sup>291</sup> *VW* 12-13, *MGH SRM* 7, 126-27.

<sup>292</sup> *VW* 14, *MGH SRM* 7, 128.

shattered it in front of the idol's custodian, the latter, shaking with rage and as if to vindicate the injury given to his god, in a sudden fit of passion struck the priest of Christ on his head with a sword.

Instead, the attack left Willibrord unharmed, quite unlike the idol. Both incidents at Fositeland and Walichrum reconfirmed the importance to conversion processes of a physical landscape and its visible religious markers. In this case, the specific religious marker at Walichrum was an "idol of the ancient error." Diebold has recently identified two trends in Carolingian representation of idols and idolatry: first, an abiding influence of scriptural texts "written in contexts where idol worship was a real concern," and second, discussions of idols as "a kind of mirror of the Carolingian conception of images."<sup>293</sup> In hagiographic contexts under consideration, idols most frequently appeared in the former circumstance. For Alcuin, the destruction of idols was part of a larger process of clearance. He articulated two distinct phases of Christianization at Fositeland and Walichrum: the appropriation of natural places and the replacement of pagan landmarks with Christian ones.

Willibrord's emphasis on Creator rather than creation in his advice to Ongendus was not just a passing observation in the saint's *vita*, but a main theme reminiscent of Columbanus' charge in the seventh century: "understand creation, if you want to know the Creator (*Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam*)."<sup>294</sup> This distinction between Creator and creation was crucial for a Christian mission faced with sacred places in nature. As we saw earlier, Daniel of Winchester made a similar appeal in his advice to

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<sup>293</sup> William Diebold, "The Carolingian Idol: Exegetes and Idols," in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Giselle de Nie, Karl Morrison and Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 445-61, at 446.

<sup>294</sup> Columbanus, *Inst.* 1.5, Walker, 64. See Chapter 1 above, 167-69.

Boniface, but it was also essential to Alcuin's understanding of the missionary's tasks.

Pope Gregory II, as we have seen, had a similar complaint about German pagans in a letter to Boniface of December 722: they were unbaptized "pagans comparable with unreasoning animals [and] do not acknowledge the one who made them."<sup>295</sup> In Gregory's assessment of Germanic paganism, pagans across the Rhine were like wild animals. For Alcuin, Willibrord tamed nature at places like Fositeland.

Elsewhere in Alcuin's works, however, he emphasized the importance of "understanding creation" in the service of education. In a letter from the spring of 798 to Charlemagne on the lunar cycles and the sun's movements, Alcuin gave the following advice from his teacher Ælberht of York (d. 779/80):

Solebat magister meus mihi saepius dicere: "Sapientissimi hominum fuerunt, qui has artes in naturis rerum invenerunt. Obproprium est grande, ut dimittamus eas perire diebus nostris." Sed nunc posillanimitas multorum non curat scire rationes rerum, quas creator condidit in naturis. Scis optime, quam dulcis est in rationibus arithmetica, quam necessaria ad cognoscendas scripturas divinas; quam iucunda est cognition caelestium astrorum et cursus illorum. Et tamen rarus est, qui talia scire curet."<sup>296</sup>

As my teacher [Ælberht] used to tell me often: "The wisest men have been those who found these arts in the natural world (*artes in naturis rerum*). It is a great disgrace, that we should allow them to die off in our time." But now many people are so small-minded that they do not care to understand the reasons for these things, which the Creator built in nature. You know well, how lovely arithmetic reason is, and how necessary they are for the understanding of divine scriptures, and how pleasant is the understanding of the stars and their courses. And yet the person who cares to know such things is rare.

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<sup>295</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 17, *MGH Epp.* 4, 266: "conparatione brutorum animalium pagani factorem non recognoscunt."

<sup>296</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 148, *MGH Epp.* 4, 239.

In this letter, Alcuin was describing the movements of celestial bodies through the course of the year to Charlemagne, as well as explaining the crucial role of the *artes in naturis rerum* to understanding scripture itself.<sup>297</sup> Such questions were essential for calculating Easter and were thus liturgical problems. The very basics, like the lunar cycles and their relationships with human activities and perceptions, were clearly essential for calculating the correct annual date for Easter.<sup>298</sup> Alcuin's own deep interest in astronomy surely influenced Charlemagne himself, as correspondence between them suggests.<sup>299</sup> Astronomy figured as one of the key components of a royal education for which Alcuin lent Charlemagne his support in a letter of 796.<sup>300</sup> Mary Alberi has observed that Alcuin was trying to model his new school at Tours on that of York, where

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<sup>297</sup> Kerstin Springsfeld, *Alkuins Einfluß auf die Komputistik zur Zeit Karls des Großen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 48: "Karl selbst wisse, wie süß die Berechnungen der Arithmetik seien und wie notwendig zur Kenntnis der Heiligen Schrift; außerdem sei das Kennenlernen der himmlischen Sterne und ihres Laufes eine angenehme Beschäftigung . . . Eine Unwissenheit in den Dingen der Natur sei unentschuldig für diejenigen, die Bibelexegese betreiben und den katholischen Glauben verteidigen wollten." I am grateful to Eric Ramírez-Weaver for directing me to this and other resources below, and for our conversations to that effect.

<sup>298</sup> See Alcuin's discussion in the same letter, *MGH Epp.* 4, 238-39. On Carolingian computus, I am following Stephen McCluskey, *Astronomies and Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77-96 and 149-64.

<sup>299</sup> On this point I am following the discussion of Kerstin Springsfeld, "Karl der Große, Alcuin und die Zeitrechnung," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 27 (2004): 53-66, especially 56-58 for a catalog and discussion of relevant letters, which is a more brief version of her summary of *Ep.* 148's contents in *Alkuins Einfluß*, 47-53.

<sup>300</sup> *Ep.* 121, *MGH Epp.* 4, 176. Alcuin also wrote to Charlemagne in 798 that Mars had been invisible for a year before reappearing, betraying a high interest in astronomical matters, in *Ep.* 149, *MGH Epp.* 4, 243 and 251-52. Charlemagne's own interest in astronomy is well known from Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* 25, *MGH SRG* 25, a point discussed by Paul Dutton, "Of Carolingian Kings and Their Stars," in *idem.*, *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 93-127. For a fuller discussion of Alcuin's references to astronomy, see Springsfeld, "Zeitrechnung," 56-58; and "Alcuin," in *Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers*, 4 vols., ed. Virginia Tremble and Thomas Hockey (New York: Springer, 2007), I: 25-26.

young boys could learn the liberal arts in the *hortus conclusus* of the monastery to produce the ideal “true philosophy.”<sup>301</sup> The liberal arts could and should lead the student to understand the Creator through a study of his Creation.<sup>302</sup> Was it possible, though, that Alcuin was making a broader point about Carolingian education? While astronomical knowledge was fundamental to a Carolingian liberal arts education, Alcuin complicated Carolingian scientific knowledge by introducing one of his own definitions of nature—that which humans can see and touch around them, as opposed to the more abstract science of astronomy. Elsewhere in his correspondence from the same year, Alcuin complained that Carolingian education encouraged students “to study the erratic wanderings of stars in the sky, when one is unable to understand the nature of the plants that grow in the ground.”<sup>303</sup> Alcuin’s call to understand “the nature of the plants that grow in the ground” resembles Columbanus’ urging for students to understand creation as a way to know its Creator. Seen this way, Alcuin suggested that plants and stars were at the most fundamental level animated by a supreme Creator.

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<sup>301</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 121, *MGH Epp.* 4, 177. Mary Alberi, “‘The Better Paths of Wisdom’: Alcuin’s Monastic ‘True Philosophy’ and the Worldly Court,” *Speculum* 76.4 (2001): 896-910, at 905. Alcuin’s urging for students of philosophy to understand natural objects like plants fits well with what Åslaug Omundsen has shown was a “philosophical ladder of Alcuin [which] leads from grammar to step by step theology,” a scheme in which astronomy held the highest place: see *idem*, “The Liberal Arts and the Polemic Strategy of the *Opus Caroli Regis contra Synodum (Libri Carolini)*,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 77 (2002): 175-200, at 178-79.

<sup>302</sup> Mary Alberi, “The ‘Mystery of the Incarnation’ and Wisdom’s House (Prov. 9:1) in Alcuin’s *Disputatio de vera philosophia*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 48.2 (1997): 505-16, at 509: “the ‘rationes’ are the principles God established at creation to govern the movement of the heavenly bodies. Contemplation of these ‘rationes’ through the study of astronomy gives pleasure to all who understand them, as do all the ‘other arts of philosophy’, by revealing the creator’s wisdom.”

<sup>303</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 155, *MGH Epp.* 4, 250 (c. 798): “stellarum in caelo errantium vagabundos exponere cursus, qui herbarum in terra nascentium naturas nequaquam agnoscere valet.”

It is important to see Alcuin's observation on plants in conjunction with his interpretation of missionary interactions with the physical landscapes with which they dealt far from a Carolingian classroom. No early medieval author would provide systematic details on plants common to a Carolingian garden (as well as some unknown to him) until Walahfrid Strabo's poem *De cultura horticorum* (more commonly known as *Hortulus*, or "Little Garden"), which he composed in the early 840s and based heavily on Virgil's *Georgics*.<sup>304</sup> Walahfrid's depiction of a monastic garden was an intensely ordered one, identifying twenty-nine plants separately: the poem begins with Walahfrid's clearing of the plot of its unruly and poisonous nettles in order to build his rectangular beds.<sup>305</sup> One of Walahfrid's themes was the gardener's perpetual struggle with nature and that struggle's fruitful consequences. While some modern scholars have used Walahfrid's poem as evidence for early medieval interpretations of nature as a constant enemy of human efforts,<sup>306</sup> the *Hortulus* added to an ongoing interrogation of the relationships between humans and nature. Walahfrid's plants were expressly not in the wilderness and existed for the service of humans. Although the contexts of Willibrord's mission field and

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<sup>304</sup> Walahfrid Strabo, *Hortulus*, *MGH PLAC* 2, 335-50. For Walahfrid's sources, I am following the assessment of Giuseppina Barabino, "Le Fonti classiche dell'*Hortulus*, di Valafrido Strabone," *I classici nel Medioevo e nell'Umanesimo: miscellanea filologica* (Genoa: Istituto di filologia classica e medievale, 1975), 175-260.

<sup>305</sup> Walahfrid Strabo, *Hortulus*, lines 19-52, *MGH PLAC* 2, 336-37.

<sup>306</sup> Robin Oggins, "Falconry and Medieval Views of Nature," in *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1993), 47-60, at 47; and Peter Dendle, "Plants in the Early Medieval Cosmos: Herbs, Divine Potency, and the *Scala natura*," in *Health and Healing from the Medieval Garden*, ed. Dendle and Alain Touwaide (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), 47-59, at 48: "If an early medieval thinker ever wished to romanticize Nature as a beautiful, harmonious entity—a garden in which we are but guests—[Walahfrid's *Hortulus*] would have been the place to do it. But the fact is, for the early Middle Ages, Nature was largely an enemy, an obstacle to be surmounted."



Walahfrid's monastic garden were distinct, both Alcuin and Walahfrid primarily understood flora for their capacity to serve humans. While Alcuin deployed *natura* to approximate the "natural world" in *Ep.* 148, Walahfrid interpreted *natura* as "character," a far more common usage.<sup>307</sup> Alcuin and Walahfrid approached the "plants that grow in the ground" from different theoretical angles. Alcuin's definition of plants *in naturis rerum* informed his view of a missionary's task to redefine nature as subservient to Christian ends, not the focus of pagan veneration.

### ***Orthopraxis, Ruins and the Appropriation of Nature: Alcuin and Einhard***

In the *Vita Willibrordi*, Alcuin emphasized that baptism was the goal of Willibrord's manipulation of nature at Fositeland. The cultivation of orthopraxis in formerly pagan places was key to Alcuin's hagiographic approach. Successful conversion depended on clear, outward sacramental demonstrations. This goal is also clear in correspondences with Charlemagne, where Alcuin congratulated him on trying to cultivate universal practice and belief throughout the kingdom: "I have not perceived people anywhere worshipping more perfectly or praying more diligently for your preservation and the security of the Christian empire."<sup>308</sup> Elsewhere he linked Charlemagne's defense of churches with his military strength over the pagans.<sup>309</sup> Such acclaim for orthopraxis took the form of praise for fine architecture and successful

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<sup>307</sup> On this terminology, see Introduction, 11-13.

<sup>308</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 249, *MGH Epp.* 4, 402: "perfectius non uidi alios in quolibet loco celebrantes nec diligentius consuetudine cotidiana pro uestra incolomitate et christiani imperii stabilitate intercedere."

<sup>309</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 178, *MGH Epp.* 4, 294: "Parce populo tuo christiano, et ecclesias Christi defende, ut benedictio superni regis te fortem efficiat super paganos."

completion of building projects of churches and monasteries, especially in ninth-century missionary *vitae*.<sup>310</sup> Einhard would later describe how Charlemagne built a

ac propter hoc plurimae pulchritudinis basilicam Aquisgrani extruxit auroque et argento et luminaribus atque ex aere solido cancellis et ianuis adornavit. Ad cuius structuram cum columnas et marmora aliunde habere non posset, Roma atque Ravenna devehenda curavit . . . Ecclesiam et mane et vespere, item nocturnis horis et sacrificii tempore, quoad eum valitudo permiserat, inpigre frequentabat, curabatque magnopere, ut omnia quae in ea gerebantur cum qua maxima fierent honestate, adrituos creberrime commenens, ne quid indecens aut sordidum aut inferri aut in ea remanere permitterent. Sacrorum vasorum ex auro et argento vestimentorumque sacerdotalium tantam in ea copiam procuravit, ut in sacrificiis celebrandis ne ianitoribus quidem, qui ultimi ecclesiastici ordinis sunt, privato habitu ministrare necesse fuisset.<sup>311</sup>

church of stunning beauty at Aachen and [he] adorned it with gold and silver and lamps, and with railings and portals made of solid bronze. Since he could not procure columns and marble from anywhere else he took the trouble to have them brought from Rome and Ravenna . . . [Charlemagne] was particularly concerned that everything done in the church should be done with the greatest dignity and he frequently warned the sacristans that nothing foul or unclean should be brought into the church or left there. He supplied the church with such an abundance of sacred vessels made of gold and silver and with such a great number of clerical vestments that in the celebration of the Mass not even the janitors, who hold the lowest of all the ecclesiastical orders, found it necessary to serve in their ordinary clothes.<sup>312</sup>

This passage comes from the concluding sections of Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, all of which focus on a particular component of Charlemagne's life or character such as his daily habits, piety, generosity, and intellectual interests. Einhard presented Charlemagne's construction of the church at Aachen as a key accomplishment, a

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<sup>310</sup> For building monastic complexes and churches as saintly virtues, see Eigil, *Vita Sturmii*, 20, 22, *MGH SS* 2, 375; Wetti, *Vita Galli* 36, *MGH SRM* 4, 277-78; Rudolf, *Vita Leobae* 10, *MGH SS* 15.1, 125-26.

<sup>311</sup> Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni* 26, *MGH SRG* 25, 30-31.

<sup>312</sup> I am using the translation of David Ganz, *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London: Penguin, 2008), 36-37.

capstone to a fruitful career. On a deeper level, Einhard brought two key components together: the beauty of the physical building and the formation of correct practice. Although a firm textual link cannot be demonstrated, Einhard was expressing an exegetical idea present in Isidore's *Quaestiones* on the Old Testament in which he straddled two meanings of *ecclesia*, those of physical church and universal congregation: "In this way the many things [which] are in the Tabernacle, namely the table, and the candelabrum, the altar, columns, bases, planks, drinking vessels, bowls, saucers, mortars, snuffers, pegs, tents, the whole of that which [are] the diversities of the Tabernacle, that is, are distinguished by the beauty of the Church."<sup>313</sup> In his discussion of the Tabernacle's sacred vessels and implements, Isidore located an Old Testament link between materiality and correct practice, and applied it to the universal *ecclesia*. On a more concrete level, Einhard's description symbolized the kingdom's order in miniature, rooting the idea of material as praxis firmly in Aachen. Charlemagne imported both columns and correct practice from Rome and Ravenna. The church space and its beauty represented correct liturgical practice.

As Einhard made clear, beautiful church space could and should reflect the correct practice it hosted. This idea appears in missionary *vitae* in contexts relevant to the theme of nature. The intersection between metaphors of holy space and nature is evident in Alcuin's *Vita Vedasti*, in which he described Vedast and his predecessor Remigius of

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<sup>313</sup> Isidore, *Quaestiones in Exodum* 49.2, *PL* 83: col. 316: "Sic que fiunt multa in tabernaculo, mensa scilicet, et candelabrum, altare, columnae, bases, tabulae, crateres, scyphi, thuribula, phialae, mortariola, emunctoria, paxilli, tentoria, quibus diversitatibus tota illa tabernaculi, id est, Ecclesiae pulchritudo distinguitur."

Rheims (d. c. 533) as “a pair of olive trees and bright candelabra.”<sup>314</sup> Olive oil would have had both practical value for illuminating church spaces as well as liturgical significance for candelabra and the administration of the chrism.<sup>315</sup> Hrabanus Maurus (d. 856), in a passage not derived from Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, included candelabra under his category “vessels for illumination,” as a vessel that “signifies the body of the Lord or the holy church or divine Scripture—as in Zechariah [4.2] it is read, ‘I saw to the right of the altar, two silver candelabra’. For the seven lamps on the candelabra, as read in Exodus [37.23], signify the sacrament of the seven-formed church and the seven gifts of the holy spirit.”<sup>316</sup> Similarly, the olive tree for Hrabanus was a symbol of the church to which pagans, “unable to bear fruit (*fructum . . . gignere non poterant*),” could be grafted.<sup>317</sup> Based on contemporary encyclopedic knowledge, such images intersected built space and nature and invoked the physical church with its liturgical implements.

***Ruins, Animals and the Reception of a Tradition: Alcuin’s Vita Vedasti and the Vitae of Gall by Wettī of Reichenau and Walahfrid Strabo***

For Alcuin’s purposes, his *Vita Willibrordi* had emphasized Willibrord’s success in the wilderness while in the *Vita Vedasti* he argued more clearly for the importance of

<sup>314</sup> Alcuin, *VV* 2, *MGH SRM* 3, 418: “Hii sunt duo olivae, candelabra lucentia.”

<sup>315</sup> Peter Maier has shown this in his *Die Feier der Missa chrismatis: die Reform der Ölweien des Pontificale Romanum vor dem Hintergrund der Ritusgeschichte* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1990). I am grateful to Benjamin Graham for directing me to this resource.

<sup>316</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo* 22.10, *PL* 111: col. 295: “Candelabrum autem mystice corpus domini uel sanctam aeclesiam aut diuinam scripturam significat, unde in Zacharia legitur: Vidi a dextris altaris, candelabra duo argentea. Nam septem lucernae candelabro superpositae ut in Exodo legitur septiformis ecclesiae sacramentum et septem dona spiritus sancti significant.”

<sup>317</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo* 19.6, *PL* 111: cols. 216-17.

building and construction of sacred spaces to the Christianizing process. For this process, Alcuin emphasized the cultural significance of building projects. Alcuin's own hagiographic oeuvre contains subtle shifts from an emphasis of the natural world to built sacred space as crucible and animator of Christianization. His *Vita Vedasti* contains a clear expression of this shift. Thinking that Vedast's talents would be a waste if he remained in one place, Remigius consecrated him as bishop with the charge to travel widely on conversion missions. In Alcuin's assessment, Remigius in a vision saw "that it would be better to put such a brilliant light of Christ upon a candelabrum" rather than to be hidden in one place.<sup>318</sup> Newly ordained, Vedast went to Arras to preach the gospel. Alcuin indicated Vedast's awareness of the region's longer history of "ancient errors and evil customs (*in antiquis malae consuetudinis erroribus*)"<sup>319</sup> brought about by the overlordship of the Attila, the "pagan and perfidious king of the Huns (*pagano et perfido Hunorum regi Attilo*)."<sup>320</sup> In Alcuin's telling, "wandering through the deserted places of the city [of Arras, Vedast] looked among the ruins of the buildings [to determine] if he could find any sign of a church. For he knew that in old times the religion of the holy faith had flourished in these parts; but on account of the sins of the inhabitants of that land," they were given over to Attila.<sup>321</sup> At Arras, Vedast found a ruined landscape full of wild animals similar to those of lowland Britain described by the sixth-century scholar

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<sup>318</sup> *VV* 6, *MGH SRM* 3, 420: "praeclaram Christi lucernam melius esse supra candelabrum ponere."

<sup>319</sup> *VV* 6, *MGH SRM* 3, 420.

<sup>320</sup> *VV* 7, *MGH SRM* 3, 421.

<sup>321</sup> *VV* 7, *MGH SRM* 3, 421: "singula civitatis loca peragrans, quaesivit inter ruinas aedificiorum, si quodlibet ecclesiae signum invenire valuisset. Nam antiquis ferme temporibus sacrae in illis locis fidei floruisse reregionem agnovit; sed propter peccata habitatorum terrae illius . . ."

Gildas nearly three centuries prior.<sup>322</sup> According to Alcuin, the destruction of Arras and its local Christian population represented a return to a wild, pre-Christian existence:

Invenit vero famulus Christi antiquae ruinas ecclesiae, inter murorumque fragmenta vaprium crescere densitates. Ubi quondam psallentium chori, ibi lustra et latibula ferarum visa sunt, stercoribus et inmunditiis omnia plena, ita ut uix vestigium aliquod remansisset murorum. Haec cernens, intimo cordis dolore ingemuit, dicens: “O Domine, haec Omnia venerunt super nos, quia *peccarimus cum patribus nostris, iniuste egimus, iniquitatem fecimus*” . . . Dum haec itaque lacrimosis murmuraret quaerelis, ecce! subito ex ruinoso speluncis ursus prosilvit. Cui vir Dei cum indignatione praecepit, ut in deserta secederet loca et sibi commoda inter condensa silvarum quaereret habitacula, nec ultra illius fluminis ripas transiret.<sup>323</sup>

Indeed, the servant of Christ found the ruins of an ancient church, among which swarms of vipers swelled between the fragments of walls. Where there were once choirs for [the singing of] psalms, there could be seen the lairs and hideouts of wild animals, all of them full of dung and filth so that barely any part of its walls remained. Perceiving these things, [Vedast] groaned for pain in his inner heart, saying: “O Lord, all this came upon us because we sinned with our fathers, we acted unjustly, we did evil things” [Ps. 105.6] . . . While he was murmuring these tearful lamentations, behold! Suddenly a bear came forth from a cave in the ruins. The man of God with indignation ordered that he should leave into the wilderness and seek himself a suitable den among the thickness of the forest, nor should he should cross over the banks of the river.

This passage appears to have drawn some of its descriptions from Virgil’s

*Georgics* and Isidore’s *Etymologiae*.<sup>324</sup> The first part of Alcuin’s account also finds parallels in the work of Paulinus of Aquileia (d. 804), who employed similar images to depict Attila’s destruction of that city in the fifth century: “The temples of the saints that used to be packed with throngs of noblemen are now filled with thorns; alas, they have

<sup>322</sup> Chapter 2, 203-8.

<sup>323</sup> *VV* 7, *MGH SRM* 3, 421-22.

<sup>324</sup> Jacques Fontaine, “La culture carolingienne dans les abbayes normandes: l’exemple de Saint-Wandrille,” in *Aspects du monachisme en Normandie (IV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. Lucien Musset (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 31-54, at 45.

become a refuge for foxes and serpents.”<sup>325</sup> The action of Alcuin’s depiction of Arras, however, centered on a conflict between Vedast and a bear. In the ninth century, the exegete Hrabanus Maurus followed Isidore’s definition of a bear as a creature that formed its offspring in its “own mouth (*ore suo*).” But Hrabanus offered a supplement to Isidore’s details: “The bear therefore sometimes allegorically signifies the devil who ambushes the flock of God, [and] at other times [it signifies] savage and cruel leaders.”<sup>326</sup> Hrabanus’ encyclopedic definition of a bear fits closely with Alcuin’s hagiographic deployment of the image.

Although Alcuin does not appear to draw directly from it, the scene is reminiscent of one in Jonas’ *Vita Columbani* in which Columbanus encountered bears on multiple occasions and exercised authority over them.<sup>327</sup> A similar episode occurs in the eighth- and ninth-century hagiographic tradition of Gall, who was one of Columbanus’ Irish companions and was in part responsible for founding the monastic community of Luxeuil. Two *vitae* of Gall were composed in the ninth century, one by Wetti of Reichenau (d. 824) and a second based on it in the 840s by Walahfrid Strabo, a student of Hrabanus Maurus.<sup>328</sup> Both these *vitae* were based on an earlier *Vita Galli vetustissima*,<sup>329</sup> whose

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<sup>325</sup> Trans. Godman, *Poetry*, no. 5, 10-11: “Sanctorum aedes solite nobelium/ turmis impleri nunc replentur vepribus,/ pro dolor, facte vulpium confugium/ siue serpentum.”

<sup>326</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo* 8, *PL* 111: col. 221: “Ursus ergo aliquando iuxta allegoriam significat diabolum insidiatorem gregis Dei, aliquando autem duces saevos et crudeles.” On Hrabanus as a teacher, abbot, builder of churches, and scholar, I have benefitted from the recent work of Lynda Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 13-41.

<sup>327</sup> Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 8 and 17, *MGH SRG* 37, 167 and 181. See Chapter 1, 169-77.

<sup>328</sup> Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 32-33.

<sup>329</sup> This is the case despite Walahfrid’s insistence that he only used one source, the *Vita Galli vetustissima*. Martin Brooke has argued that Walahfrid Strabo tried not to demonstrate use of Wetti’s *vita*, but instead insisted that he used only the *vita vetustissima*: “The Prose and Verse Hagiography of Walahfrid Strabo,” in

oldest surviving fragments were probably composed in the 680s and continued into the eighth century.<sup>330</sup> Although Alcuin composed his *Vita Vedasti* prior to these revisions of the 820s and 840s, later parallels help to clarify the reception of the bear image and to intensify it by its later use. While the episode does not appear in the fragmentary *Vita Galli vetustissima*, its inclusion in Jonas' seventh-century *Vita Columbani* may suggest its presence in the lost sections.<sup>331</sup>

Wetti's *Vita Galli* included a similar story in which Gall encountered a bear in the forest and ordered it to help build a campfire for him and his companions. After the bear obliged, Gall urged it to "turn away from this valley in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ. [Let us hold] mountains and hills in common, and thus let no harm [come to] flocks or

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*Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814-840)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 551-64, at 552, a view supported by Walter Berschin, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1991), III: p. 293.

<sup>330</sup> On the dating, see the introduction to the edition by Bruno Krusch, *MGH SRM* 4, 229-51. This is a basic dating scheme agreed upon by Walter Berschin, "Die Angänge der lateinischen Literatur unter den Alemannen," in *Die Alemannen in der Frühzeit*, ed. Wolfgang Hübener (Bühl: Konkordia, 1974), 121-33, at 128-33; *idem*, *Biographie und Epochenstil* II: 272-73; Theodor Klüppel, "Germania, (750-950)," *Hagiographies: Histoire internationale de la littérature hagiographique latine et vernaculaire en Occident des origines à 1500*, 5 vols., ed. Guy Philipp (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), II: 161-209, at 164-65; Christian Rohr, "Columban-Vita versus Gallus Viten? Überlegungen zu Entstehung, Funktion und Historizität hagiographischer Literatur des Frühmittelalters," in *Tradition und Wandel: Beiträge zur Kirchen-, Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte: Festschrift für Heinz Dopsch*, ed. Gerhard Ammerer, Christian Rohr and Alfred Weiss (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 2001), 27-45, at 30-31. For an assessment of the revisions of the St. Gall tradition, I have consulted Gibson, "Rewriting History," 157-67, who contextualizes the three versions' concern with monastic behavior based on the *Regula Benedicti* and Carolingian legislation on monastic life: "Walafrid's *Life of Saint Gall* concentrates on the abbot's governance according to Carolingian norms. Once we look beyond the construction of sanctity to the other, non-saint monks and their activities, we see that hagiography provided even more models that could be imitated" (162).

<sup>331</sup> Jonas, *VC* 27, *MGH SRG* 37, 216.



humans.”<sup>332</sup> Walahfrid Strabo’s revision of the *Vita Galli* included the same episode.<sup>333</sup>

In the anonymous *vita* of Magnus, an obscure missionary who either served with Columbanus or Boniface, Magnus prevented a bear from eating fruit from a nearby grove. For this anonymous hagiographer, the bear’s sudden change in nature demonstrated Magnus’ power over it: “What wonderful obedience in wildness (*Mira in fera obedientia*)!”<sup>334</sup> Such acts of clearance also accompanied Walahfrid Strabo’s description of Luxeuil’s foundation in which both Gall and Columbanus cleared the “beautiful forest [and] mountains in the middle of a small plain (*silvam speciosam, montes per girum, planitiem in medio*)” of its snakes, fundamentally changing the nature of the place.<sup>335</sup> In Walahfrid’s telling, Luxeuil closely resembled the ruins of Arras, but instead of a ruined church it was founded on the site of ancient baths:

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<sup>332</sup> Wetli, *Vita Galli* 11, *MGH SRM* 4, 268: “In nomine domini mei Iesu Christi recede ab hac valle. Sint tibi montes et colles communes, nec tamen hic pecus ledas aut homines.”

<sup>333</sup> Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli* 1.11, *MGH SRM* 4, 293. The bear story’s inclusion in both *vitae* of Wetli and Walahfrid but not the *vita vetustissima* would seem to support the view of Monique Goullet, who argued that despite Walahfrid’s insistence to the contrary, he used Wetli’s *vita* more than he admitted: *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques: Essai sur les réécritures de Vies de saints dans l’Occident latin médiéval (VIII<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> s.)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 36-37. That said, we do not know what has been lost from the fragmentary *vita vetustissima*.

<sup>334</sup> *Vita sancti Magni* 5, *Acta Sanctorum* Sept. 6, 736.

<sup>335</sup> Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli* 1.13, *MGH SRM* 4, 294.

**Table 3.4: Comparison of Alcuin, *Vita Vedasti* 7 and Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli* 1.2.**

Alcuin, <i>Vita Vedasti</i> 7	Walahfrid Strabo, <i>Vita Galli</i> 1.2
<b>Invenit</b> vero famulus Christi <b>antiquae ruinas</b> ecclesiae, inter <b>murorumque</b> fragmenta vaprium crescere densitates.	<b>Invenerunt</b> autem locum <b>muris antiquitus</b> septum, calidis aquis irriguum, sed iam <b>vetustate collapsum</b> , qui vulgo Luxovium vocabatur.
Indeed, the servant of Christ found the ruins of an ancient church, among which swarms of vipers swelled between the fragments of walls.	They found the walls of an ancient enclosure, [which had once been] springs of hot water, but had now collapsed into decay, which is commonly called <i>Luxovium</i> [Luxeuil].

Ruined structures were central to both accounts. For Alcuin, Arras' ruined state was intensified by the existence of vipers "where there were once choirs (*ubi quondam psallentium chori*).” In the Gall tradition, as well as Alcuin's *Vita Vedasti*, animals retreated from holy men. The theme of the bear was one that extended far beyond Jonas' *Vita Columbani*; in Carolingian hagiography, it continued to surface as an indicator of saintly control over natural surroundings.

A closer look at Wetti's *Vita Galli* will help explain hagiographic reception of the bear image. For Wetti, demonic activity took place entirely in the wilderness. Gall constantly found demons in nature. In one instance, Wetti was fishing in a lake at night when he heard a demon shout from the top of a mountain behind him to a fellow demon in the lake itself. The demons had been ejected from their temples and now lived in the wild. For Wetti, deities were expelled from physical, built places to natural ones: "For they crushed the gods, whom the inhabitants there worshiped (*Nam deos conterebant, quos incolae isti colebant*)."<sup>336</sup> In another instance involving fishing, Gall ordered the demons of a lake to "go away from this place into the wilderness (*de hoc loco in deserta*

<sup>336</sup> Wetti, *Vita Galli* 7, *MGH SRM* 4, 261.

*recedatis*).”<sup>337</sup> According to Wetli, Gall encountered both threatening animals and demons in nature regularly: at Luxeuil’s founding, both Wetli and Walahfrid claimed that Gall cleared the pleasant place of its serpents. Both beast and demon lived in the wild and obeyed Gall.

For Alcuin, the place in which the bear appeared hovered between wilderness and sacred space: a ruined church taken over by wild animals. Seen in this way, the bear was not unlike Grendel as a “boundary-walker” between civilization and wilderness.<sup>338</sup> The bear image could also have represented divine punishment<sup>339</sup> as well a possible metaphor for latent paganism in the region. Alcuin’s depiction of polar opposites at Arras—wild and tame, built and ruined—also parallels his interpretations of divine punishment elsewhere: Vikings, for example, were simply *pagani* as opposed to *christiani*.<sup>340</sup> At Arras, Vedast’s task was to reclaim and rebuild the faith, and in Alcuin’s imagining the existence of wild animals within the bounds of holy space was a vivid allegory for the failure and destruction of Christianity there.<sup>341</sup> In Alcuin’s presentation, though, Vedast’s

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<sup>337</sup> Wetli, *Vita Galli* 7, *MGH SRM* 4, 268.

<sup>338</sup> See above, 386-87.

<sup>339</sup> On Alcuin’s perceptions of divine punishment, see Veyrard-Cosme, *L’œuvre*, 144-45 (Attila); Albert D’Haenens, *Les invasions normandes en Belgique au IX<sup>e</sup> siècle: le phénomène et sa répercussion dans l’historiographie médiévale* (Louvain: Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1967), 144-45 (Attila and the Vikings); Simon Coupland, “Rod of God’s Wrath or the People of God’s Wrath? The Carolingian Theology of the Viking Invasions,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 (1991): 535-54, at 537 (Vikings); Mary Garrison, “The Bible and Alcuin’s Interpretation of Current Events,” *Peritia* 16 (2002): 68-84, at 74 (Israel’s punishment).

<sup>340</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 16 (c. 793), *MGH Epp.* 4, 42-43; and *Ep.* 18, *MGH Epp.* 4, 52. This has been noted by several scholars: Bullough, *Alcuin*, p. 414; Coupland, “Rod of God’s Wrath,” 540-41: clerical sources by default cast the conflicts in “religious terms and set within a religious framework.”

<sup>341</sup> Conversely, Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres du sauvage dans le monde franc (IV<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 156 has argued that

solution focused not only on the eradication of wild animals, but also on the rebuilding of the places they had inhabited. This is one clear instance in which buildings actively replaced the hazards of nature:

Dum vero comperisset vir Dei ecclesias Christi desertas . . . ecclesias ad culmen summi decoris erexit, praesbiteros et diaconos sibi in adiutorium per diversa ecclesiarum disposuit loca. Et ubi prius speluncae fuerunt latronum, ibi orationum domos construxerat . . . eas divinas ornare laudibus, quam pompaticis saeculi divitiis comere.<sup>342</sup>

Indeed, while the man of God had found the deserted churches of Christ . . . he reconstructed the churches to the highest elegance, [and] situated priests and deacons in various offices of the churches as his aides. And where before there had been caves of thieves, there he constructed houses of prayer . . . [and preferred] to decorate them with divine praises, rather than than to adorn them with the pompous wealth of the world.

In context, Alcuin's aversion to "showy riches (*pompaticis divitiis*)" is peculiar, given the presumed need for Vedast to make an impressive show for lapsed locals in order to attract them to fill those spaces. Yet in numerous letters—and despite his high praises for York in his commemorative poem on that episcopal center—Alcuin demonstrated ambivalence over richness in decoration, dress and lifestyle.<sup>343</sup> When critical of the adornment of churches, Alcuin was possibly commemorating the simplicity of Boniface's early missions in Frisia. In a letter from 716-17 partly quoting Ps. 101.12,

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similar stories involving the defeat of snakes by holy men are metaphors for the successful conversion of wilderness places: "L'élimination (par mise à mort ou non) de quelques dragons et serpents revêt souvent un caractère fondateur, permettant à la communauté humaine d'occuper un espace voué jusque là à la sauvagerie. Dans les premiers siècles du christianisme, en pleine mission d'évangélisation de l'Occident, cette élimination est perçue comme une victoire sur le mal et le paganisme, et les forces démoniaques."

<sup>342</sup> *VV* 8, *MGH SRM* 3, 422.

<sup>343</sup> See e.g. Alcuin, *Epp.* 15, 20, 42, 114, 116 and 230 (*MGH Epp.* 4, 40-42, 56-58, 85-87, 166-70, 171, and 374-75). Specifically on the destruction of Lindisfarne, see *Ep.* 16 (*MGH Epp.* 4, 42-44), and Chapter 2 above, 275-81.

Boniface advised his younger companion Nithard that “all the beautiful things of this world like gold and silver, or jewels in shining variety, or the luxury of food, or fine garments . . . all dissolve like a shadow, disappear like vapor, vanish like froth.”<sup>344</sup>

Alcuin’s portrayal of Vedast’s rebuilding activities eschewed praise for adornment evident in his York poem or in Einhard’s *Vita Karoli*. Instead, he described how Vedast emptied the ruined churches of Arras of their wild animals and restored with “divine praises.” Alcuin’s contradictory views on adornment notwithstanding, the Christianization process was not just about the conversion of people but also about that of places.

### ***Vedast and the virga***

In the *Vita Vedasti*, Alcuin described points at which buildings and wild nature intersected. This intersection is even clearer towards the end of the *vita*, when Vedast had been buried and Autbert succeeded him. The matter of Vedast’s final resting place was a point of contention in the community, but a vision of Autbert finally put the matter to rest. According to Alcuin, “on a certain day after the hymns of Matins, standing on the walls, with dawn breaking, turning to the east [Autbert] saw at a distance across the river called Criento a shining man bearing a rod (*virga*) in his hands, to measure out the place of a

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<sup>344</sup> Boniface, *Ep.* 9, *MGH Epp.* 3, 249-50: “Et universa mundi huius pretiosa sive in specimine auri et argenti sive instellantium varietate gemmarum vel in luxoriosorum ciborum aut comptorum vestimentorum . . . ut umbra praetereunt, ut fumus fatiscunt, ut spuma marcescunt.” Ps. 101.12: “My days have declined like a shadow, and I am withered like grass (*Dies mei sicut umbra declinaverunt, et ego sicut fenum arui*).”

*basilica*.”<sup>345</sup> The “shining man” held a *virga*, or measuring rod, and acted as an *agrimensor*, or a land surveyor for the future church. The place was also specific to the topography in the Criento river valley. The *virga*—variously defined as a “slender green branch, a twig, sprout, switch, rod”<sup>346</sup>—could have multiple connotations. On one level, the *virga* was a punitive tool; in describing the disciplinary responsibilities of the abbot Benedict quoted Prov. 23.14: “Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from hell (*tu virga percuties eum et animam eius de inferno liberabis*).”<sup>347</sup> The *virga* emerges most clearly from scriptural contexts: Aaron’s *virga* budded before Pharaoh, and Bede interpreted its presence in the Ark of the Covenant as a symbol of the priesthood, quoting Paul in Heb. 1.8: “a sceptre of justice is the sceptre of thy kingdom (*uirga aequitatis uirga regni tui*),”<sup>348</sup> itself a paraphrase of Ps. 44:7: “the sceptre of thy kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness (*sceptrum aequitatis sceptrum regni tui*).” Elsewhere in *De Tabernaculo* Bede interpreted the blossoming *virga* of Aaron as a symbol of Christ’s incarnation,<sup>349</sup> an image supported by Is. 11.1: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root (*et egredietur virga de radice Iesse et flos de radice eius ascendet*).” Michael Bintley has recently pointed out that in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede may have associated King Oswald’s standard (*tufa* or in

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<sup>345</sup> *VV* 9, *MGH SRM* 3, 426: “dum quadam die post ymnos matutinos in menianis consistens, rubente aurora, orientem versus intenderet, vidit eminus trans fluuiolum qui Crientio vocatur virum praeifulgidum, virgam manu tenentem, basilicae locum metiri.”

<sup>346</sup> Here I am following Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879), 1995.

<sup>347</sup> *RB* 26. In *RB* 28, Benedict elaborated on the use of the *virga* as a tool of punishment for unruly monks.

<sup>348</sup> Bede, *De Tabernaculo* 1.474-75.

<sup>349</sup> Bede, *De Tabernaculo* 1.610-24.

the Old English, *þuf*) with the *virga* carried by Sigebert into battle.<sup>350</sup> The interchangeable nature<sup>351</sup> of the terms in the *Historia* may point to a rod with foliage,<sup>352</sup> possibly invoking both Aaron's staff and the rod of Jesse. Hrabanus Maurus in his later *In honorem sanctae crucis* would describe the flowers of Jesse's *virga* as Christ himself, "whose most brilliant human nature emerged from [its] bark (*qui de cortice humanae naturae splendissimus erupit*)."<sup>353</sup> Thus Alcuin's image of Vedast bearing a *virga* existed alongside a firm exegetical tradition.

A later visual example helps clarify the image's reception in the so-called "St. Dunstan's Classbook," a collection of ninth-century Breton and Welsh educational booklets. In it, a frontispiece was added to the front of the manuscript in the second half of the tenth century depicting the archbishop and scholar Dunstan (d. 988) prostrating himself before a large image of Christ (Figure 3.1). In his left hand, Christ holds a book bearing the inscription from Ps. 33.12, "Come children, listen to me, I will teach you to fear the Lord (*Venite filii audite me, timorem domini docebo vos*)."<sup>354</sup> Dunstan cowers,

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<sup>350</sup> Michael Bintley, "Recasting the Role of Sacred Trees in Anglo-Saxon Spiritual History: The South Sanbach Cross 'Ancestors of Christ' Panel in its Cultural Contexts," in *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Bintley and Michael Shapland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 211-27, at 222. Bede in *HE* 3.18 tells us that Sigebert refused to carry anything but a *virga* into battle despite being "surrounded by an excellent army (*dum opimo esset uallatus exercitu*)."

<sup>351</sup> As J.M. Wallace-Hadrill pointed out of Bede's use of *tufa*, he was following his "usual practice" for Latin equivalences of Old English words: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 80-81.

<sup>352</sup> Bintley, "Sacred Trees," 223. Others have gone even farther, claiming that Sigebert's *virga* was a pagan standard: William Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 212; or evocative of the pagan "world-tree": Clive Tolley, "What is a 'World Tree', and Should We Expect to Find One Growing in Anglo-Saxon England?" in Bintley and Shapland, *Trees and Timber*, 177-85.

<sup>353</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, *In honorem* 1.16.14, CCCM 100A.

begging Christ for protection: “I ask you merciful Christ, that you should protect me, Dunstan, that you do not let Taenarian storms to drown me (*Dunstanum memet Clemens rogo, Christe, ruere Tenarias me non sinas sorbsisse procellas*).”<sup>354</sup> In his right hand, Christ bears a long rod with the inscription, *Virga recta est* on the high end, facing Christ’s visage, and *virga regni tui* towards the bottom closest to Dunstan’s crouching figure. Given the educational contents of the manuscript, the *virga* in the image points to an instrument of educational and religious reform: Christ physically measures out the intellectual gifts Dunstan receives.

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<sup>354</sup> In Statius, *Thebaid* 2.32-35, the *Taenarum* was a storm that stood between the world and the underworld.





construction of an appropriate church. To express these ideas, Alcuin appended a hymn to Vedast at the end of the *vita*:

Hic est beatus Vedastus, cui templum fieri ab angelis iussum est hominibus. Est autem locus ipse non longe ab eadem urbe, qui pro nobilitate sui Nobiliacus primo est appellatus, sed procedente tempore tam insignis effectus, ut Urbis nomine, quae iam ruinis crebrioribus paene obsoluerat, vocitetur. Est namque et largitione fidelium sublimatus et agmine monachorum et aliorum Deo devotorum grege refertus, ubi incessanter cotidiae divina celebrantur praeconia et frequenter caelestia facta sunt, et fiunt miraculorum signa, quae iam magis cernentium ore narrantur, quam dicantis stilo scribantur. Amen.<sup>355</sup>

Here is blessed Vedast, whose temple was made by men at the order of angels. This very place is not a long way from that city, which on account of its nobility was first called *Nobiliacus*, but with time proceeding [Vedast's tomb] was made so distinguished, that the city is named [after him], which now has increasingly decayed nearly into ruins. It is both made bountiful by the holiness of the faithful and filled with a band of the monks and of others devoted to God—where divine offices are celebrated without cessation, and where heavenly acts and signs of miracles frequently happened, and are now are better told from the mouths of witnesses, [and] written by pen from dictation. Amen.

This brief antiphon celebrates the rehabilitative qualities of construction: rebuilt ruins and perpetual divine offices are a far cry from images of bears and snakes roaming the ruins of Arras' churches. The presence of Vedast, both during and after his life, transformed the place to such a degree that city walls were unnecessary: "Truly, happy is the city of Arras, fortified by such an excellent patron! Even if dishonored by the ruins of walls, it is still illustrious through the nobility of [Vedast's] merits."<sup>356</sup> Vedast found the

<sup>355</sup> *VV* 9, *MGH SRM* 3, 426-27.

<sup>356</sup> *VV* 9, *MGH SRM* 3, 424: "Felix equidem Atrouata ciuitas, tam excellenti munita patrono! Etsi murorum ruinis vilescat, illius tamen meritorum nobilitate clarescit." Such descriptions fit with the findings of Dick Harrison, "The Invisible Wall of St. John: On Mental Centrality in Early Medieval Italy," *Scandia* 58 (1992): 177-203, at 196 and 200: "The most important aspects of the centres, however, revealed themselves at *the border* between centre and non-centre (*intra, extra, foris*, walls gates, entrances, invisible walls).

urban center at Arras in a state of ruin and wildness. He rebuilt the faith at Arras, and his successors rebuilt the city to reflect that transformation.

### *Separating Human from Animal*

For Arras, Alcuin had described an urban landscape where Vedast separated wildlife from sacred places. Christian success depended upon building structures to reflect it, as Autbert's vision made clear. An anonymous poem known as *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* in which Charlemagne measured out the dimensions and organization of "future Rome" at Aachen intensifies the image of an ideal world in which holy places and wildlife were strictly separated:

Stat pius arce procul Karolus loca singular signans  
 Altaque disponens venturae moenia Romae.  
 His iubet esse forum sanctum quoque iure senatum,  
 Ius populi et leges ubi sacraque iussa capessant.  
 Insistitque operose cohors; pars apta columnis  
 Saxa secant rigidis, arcem molitur in altum;  
 Ast alii rupes minimis subvolvere certant,  
 Effodiunt portus, statuuntque profunda theatra  
 Fundamenta, tholis includunt atria celsis . . .  
 Non procul excelsa nemus est et amoena virecta  
 Lucus ab urbe virens et prata recentia rivis  
 Obtinet in medio, multis circumscita muris.  
 Hic amnem circumvolitat genus omne volucrum;  
 In ripis resident rimantes Pascua rostris . . .

Pious Charles stands on the high palace, from afar pointing out  
 each site, overseeing the construction of the high walls of future Rome.

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These boundaries were filled with sacral and material space . . . The concept I would like to use to describe this is *mental centrality*. A mental centre is the focal point of spatial thinking. A mental centre is during the Middle Ages permeated with the supernatural . . . The idea of the city as a unit of both people and buildings, of mental centrality and sacrality attached to churches and walls, continuously interacted with practice."

In one place he orders a forum to be built, in another a holy senate,  
 where the people receive judgements and laws and God's commands,  
 The throng of workers press on: some hew stones in readiness  
 for the straight columns, and labour to build the citadel on high.  
 Others eagerly roll up the blocks of stone with their hands,  
 Digging out warehouses, making the theatre's foundations firm and deep,  
 And covering the palace with lofty cupolas . . .  
 Not far from the peerless town are a wood and a pleasant lawn,  
 holding in their midst a verdant glade, its meadows fresh  
 from the streams, and encircled by many walls.  
 Here all kinds of birds fly about the river,  
 sitting on the banks and pecking for food . . .<sup>357</sup>

At Aachen, construction was linked with lawgiving and, as Dutton has demonstrated, the *Karolus Magnus* author ascribed ultimate authority over wild animals like wolves.<sup>358</sup> The *Karolus Magnus* author gave equal weight to Aachen's surrounding countryside, praising the wide spaces for deer to flock and feed, where "here and there in the woods all kinds of wild beasts make their lairs (*passim genus omne ferarum/ His latet in silvis*)."<sup>359</sup> Both poets were ultimately indebted to Virgil,<sup>360</sup> and this poem served as a model for the hunting scene we have already encountered in Ermoldus' *In honorem*.<sup>361</sup>

For the *Karolus Magnus* poet's purposes, natural life was distinct from urban life at Aachen; at the same time, Charlemagne planned the city itself to reflect Rome's order,

<sup>357</sup> *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* lines 97-105 and 137-41, *MGH PLAC* 1, 368 and 369, trans. Godman, *Poetry* no. 25, 202-05.

<sup>358</sup> Dutton, "Charlemagne, King of Beasts," in *idem.*, *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 43-68, at 63-66.

<sup>359</sup> *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* lines 147-48, *MGH PLAC* 1, 369, trans. Godman, *Poetry* no. 25, 204-05.

<sup>360</sup> Virgil, *Georgic* 4.169; for this usage I am following Dieter Schaller, "Interpretationsprobleme im aachener Karlsepos," *Reinische Vierteljahrsblätter* 41 (1977), 160-79, at 168-69; and Karl Hauck, *Deutsche Königspfalzen, Beiträge zu ihrer historischen und archäologischen Erforschung*, 4 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), I: 40.

<sup>361</sup> Peter Godman, "Louis 'the Pious' and His Poets," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 19 (1985): 239-89, at 258-59.

acting as Aachen's *agrimensor*. As Alcuin observed in a long letter to Charlemagne of 798, "In certain places we have seen the altars of God negligently left without roofs, and soiled with the dung of birds and the urine of dogs."<sup>362</sup> As Vedast had seen at Arras, nature and sacred space should not mix. Alcuin's contemporary Theodulf captured the reverence with which one should treat a church, asserting that

Non debere ad ecclesiam ob aliam causam convenire nisis ad laudandum deum et eius servitium faciendum. Disceptationes vero et tumultus et vaniloquia et ceteras actiones ab eodem sancto loco penitus prohibenda sunt. Ubi enim dei nomen invocatur, deo sacrificium offertur, angelorum frequentia inesse non dubitatur. Periculosum est tale aliquid dicere vel agere, quod loco non convenit.<sup>363</sup>

[People] should not convene at the church for any cause except for the praise of God and for doing service to him. Truly deception and distraction, vain speech and other actions should be prohibited thoroughly from that sacred place. For wherever the name of God is invoked, and sacrifice is offered to God, it should not be doubted that angels are frequently present. It is a dangerous thing to do or say anything that is not appropriate to the place.

While Alcuin and Theodulf sparred over the correct interpretation of sacred space based on a disagreement over legal definitions of sanctuary, they agreed on the holiness inherent in a church building. The designation of a place as *ecclesia* could bring its local community in line with a universal communion of Christians. Theodulf's interpretation of sanctuary designated an *ecclesia* as an heir of the Tabernacle and Temple, but his beliefs were not widely accepted.<sup>364</sup> Alcuin did not subscribe to this view, but more practically considered a church to be "the place in which a sinner is most likely to find his necessary

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<sup>362</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 136, *MGH Epp.* 4, 210: "Vidimus quoque aliquibus in locis neglegenter altaria Dei absque tecto, auium stercoribus vel canum mictu fedata."

<sup>363</sup> Theodulf, *Cap.* 1.10, *MGH Capit.* 1, 110.

<sup>364</sup> In this section I follow the analysis of Theodulf in Samuel Collins, *The Carolingian Debate over Sacred Space* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 102-13.

medicine.”<sup>365</sup> Alcuin’s view more closely resembled that of Augustine, commenting on Ps. 25.8: “I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house; and the place where thy glory dwelleth (*Domine, dilexi habitaculum domus tuae et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*).” In Augustine’s assessment, “whoever loves the beauty of God’s house, there is no doubt that they love the church, neither for the craftsmanship of its walls and roofs, nor for its shining marble and paneled ceilings, but for its faithful and holy people.”<sup>366</sup> The debate over sanctuary did not carry over into Alcuin’s hagiography. Instead in these contexts, churches and sacred spaces were evidence for Christianity’s success in Francia. When they fell into disrepair, wild animals wandered through them. The image of the natural world and its animals contrasted sharply with the order suggested by stone buildings. The process of degeneration Alcuin described in the *Vita Vedasti* was the reverse of that in Willibald’s *Vita Bonifatii*: Boniface had taken a sacred natural feature and converted it into a holy building. Boniface had converted such spaces, a process carried on by missionaries like Vedast. While in these *vitae* changes to nature were important for conversion processes, the *Vita Sturm* by Alcuin’s contemporary Eigil presented a different process in which nature was central to monastic foundation and conversion.

### **Eigil’s *Vita Sturm*, Nature and Monastic Foundation**

Whereas Alcuin at times separated nature and the religious life rigidly, they were not distinct categories in Eigil’s *Vita Sturm*. Sturm’s career is closely related to that of

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<sup>365</sup> Collins, *Sacred Space*, 115.

<sup>366</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 15.1.13-17, *PL* 38: col. 116: “qui enim diligit decorem domus dei, non est dubium quia ecclesiam diligit, non in fabrefactis parietibus et tectis, non in nitore marmorum et laqueariis aureis, sed in hominibus fidelibus, sanctis.”

Boniface. Born in Bavaria around 705 to a noble family, Boniface established him at Fritzlar under Wigbert in the 730s.<sup>367</sup> Fritzlar, as we have already seen, had its possible origins at the oratory built from wood of the oak at Geismar.<sup>368</sup> In the *Vita Sturmi*, Eigil detailed Sturm's journeys into the wilderness of northern Hesse to establish a hermitage that would later become the monastic community of Hersfeld on the borderlands with Saxony.<sup>369</sup> Eventually, concerned with the safety and viability of the location, Boniface sent Sturm out again into the wilderness to find a place for a community in 744, which would become the illustrious house of Fulda. Eigil also detailed the conflicts between Sturm and Lull in procuring Boniface's remains after his martyrdom at Dokkum in 754; Sturm insisted on a burial at Fulda, while Lull resisted all efforts to move Boniface's relics from Mainz.<sup>370</sup> Boniface's martyrdom receives far less attention in the *Vita Sturmi* than does the subsequent struggle over his relics. The conflict resulted in Sturm's exile in

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<sup>367</sup> Eigil, *VS* 2, *MGH SS* 2, 366. Sturm has been identified plausibly with one "Styrmi," a cook in Boniface's retinue at Fritzlar. See Boniface, *Ep.* 40, *MGH Epp.* 3, 64-65, and Karl Schmid, "Die Frage nach den Anfängen der Mönchsgemeinschaft in Fulda," in *Die Klostergemeinschaft von Fulda im früheren Mittelalter*, 3 vols., ed. Schmid, Gerd Althoff and Dieter Geuenich (Munich: Fink, 1978), I: 108-35. On Sturm's family, see Wilhelm Störmer, "Eine Adelsgruppe um die Fuldaer äbte Sturmi und Eigil und den holzkirchener klostergründer Troand: Beobachtungen zum bayerisch-alemannisch-ostfränkischen Adel des 8. / 9. Jahrhunderts," in *Gesellschaft und Herrschaft, Forschungen zu sozial- und landesgeschichtlichen Problemen vornehmlich in Bayern. Eine Festgabe für Karl Bosl zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Bosl and Richard van Dülmen (Munich: Beck, 1969), 1-34. On his career in relation to Boniface and history of Fulda, see Franz Brunhölzl, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur* I: 324-25; and Janneke Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c. 744-c. 900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19-40.

<sup>368</sup> For the main points in Wigbert's career I am using Schmid, "Die Frage nach den Anfängen," 108-35.

<sup>369</sup> *VS* 4, *MGH SS* 2, 367.

<sup>370</sup> *VS* 15, *MGH SS* 2, 372-73.

Jumièges for treason charges in the mid-760s.<sup>371</sup> In these ways, the *Vita Sturmi* was a pro-Fulda treatise that appropriated Boniface's missions for its own institutional history.

The main focus of the *Vita Sturmi* was Sturm's role in the development of monastic life at Fulda. Composed between 794 and 800,<sup>372</sup> contemporaneously with the production of Alcuin's missionary *vitae*, Eigil's account emphasized Sturm's official capacity in cultivating Christianity around Fulda:

**Table 3.5: Narrative Structure of Eigil's *Vita Sturmi* (composed c. 794-800).**

1-4	Sturm receives religious education in the 730s, ordination as priest around 740, and enters the wilderness around Buchonia as a hermit.
5-7	Sturm begins to look for a suitable place to establish a monastic community, with Boniface's help, in the wilderness vividly described by Eigil.
8-9	With the help of a local man, Sturm surveys the area around Eihloh.
10-11	Sturm reports his findings to Boniface.
12-13	Boniface approaches Carloman around 744 for permission to establish the community at Fulda; clearance of the site begins.
14-15	The monks establish a <i>regula</i> ; a brief description of Boniface's martyrdom in 754 follows.
16-17	Eigil details the conflicts between Sturm and Lull over Boniface's relics and burial site; Sturm is exiled between 763 and 765.
18-20	Under influence of the abbot Prezzold, Pippin the Short recalls Sturm from exile; Sturm returns to Fulda and continues his monastic organization and building there, including a grand tomb for Boniface.
21-23	Charlemagne succeeds his father Pippin and Sturm gains his favor; he enlists Sturm to oversee annexed Saxon territory and the conversion of its people in the 770s.
24-25	Sturm dies and is buried in 779.

After Charlemagne's succession in 768, Sturm was given an official role in the Christianization of Saxony, an experiment that would eventually fall apart in the two

<sup>371</sup> *VS* 17-20, *MGH SS* 2, 374-75. On the possible realities behind the conflict, see the measured assessment of Wood, *Missionary Life*, 71-73.

<sup>372</sup> I am following the dating and discussion of Berschin, *Biographie und Epochenstil* III: 27, 33-41, and 62.



decades after his death.<sup>373</sup> In the *Vita Sturmi*, Eigil included several descriptions of Fulda's surrounding landscapes, which he may have emphasized in order to legitimize Fulda's legal claims. In Ian Wood's assessment, "[t]he concern for land and possession may also explain the very careful naming of places throughout [the *Vita Sturmi*] . . . The identification of Sturm's route is precise, not to say legalistic, and the description of the countryside is apparently exact. The geographical precision of Eigil is very vivid, and thus adds an air of verisimilitude to his account."<sup>374</sup> Eigil recorded Sturm's routes through the wilderness with precision. He also described the landscapes through which Sturm traveled as virginal and largely empty of settlement. For Wood, Eigil was not simply describing a monastic desert, but his central claim was that of Fulda's property rights and spiritual authority over competing institutions.<sup>375</sup> While the rarity of Eigil's specificity has been noted,<sup>376</sup> his descriptions of Fulda's topography are clearly not without precedent in this discussion. These assessments help contextualize the *Vita Sturmi*, but on a deeper level, nature had a more active role in Fulda's foundation by shaping the interests and identity of its founders.

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<sup>373</sup> *VS* 22-23, *MGH SS* 2, 376. For this reading and what follows, I am relying on Wood, *Missionary Life*, 68-72.

<sup>374</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 70.

<sup>375</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 70. This is a view shared by Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp, "Topographie et vision du 'désert' dans les *vitae* occidentales (VI<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècles)," in *Espace représenté, espace dénommé: géographie, cartographie, toponymie* (Valencia: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2007), 229-42, at 238-39.

<sup>376</sup> Guizard-Duchamp, "Topographie et vision," 230: "on trouve de rares *vitae* proposant à la fois une description topographique relativement précise et des appellatifs nombreux, comme c'est le cas dans la *Vita Sturmi* écrite vers 800 par le moine Eigil de Fulda."

***Buchonia and the Monastic eremus***

In the early sections of Eigil's *vita*, Sturm wandered in the region of Buchonia, the early medieval name for the dense beech forests in the valley between the Vogelsberg Mountains and the Rhone.<sup>377</sup> There, Sturm was to look for a suitable spot for his monastic foundation, following the advice of Boniface to "proceed into the solitude that is called Buchonia, and determine whether the place is habitable for the servants of God; God is able to prepare a place for his followers even in the desert."<sup>378</sup> First, though, Sturm founded a hermitage for himself there, probably around 736.<sup>379</sup> Eigil claimed that the wilderness there was empty of human habitation—a claim similar to that made by the anonymous author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* in the sixth century.<sup>380</sup> By describing the suitability of completely wild places for monastic foundation and practice, Eigil echoed Eucherius of Lyon's interpretation of the metaphorical desert, or *eremus*. For Eucherius, "the solitudes of the desert and heaven are worthy [of God] (*dignatur eremi et caeli secretum*)."<sup>381</sup> Likewise, Eigil described how God gave Sturm and his companions a "suitable dwelling place in the desert (*in eremo tribuere dignatus est habitationem*)."<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> In modern scholarship, the region is variously spelled "Bochum," "Bochonia," or "Buchonia," but I am following the modern German spelling for the region in Hesse, not to be confused with the city of Bochum. For the geographic definitions of the region, see Edmund Stengel, *Urkundenbuch des Klosters Fulda*, 3 vols. (Marburg: Elwert, 1913; repr. in 1958) I: 1, n. 1.

<sup>378</sup> *VS* 4, *MGH SS* 2, p. 367: "Pergite . . . in hanc solitudinem quae Bochonia nuncupatur, aptumque servis Dei ad inhabitandum exquirite locum; potens est enim Deus parare servis suis locum in deserto."

<sup>379</sup> This would later become known as the monastic community at Hersfeld founded by Lull in the 760s; on the sequence of events leading to foundation I have consulted Schmid, "Die Frage nach den Anfängen," 131.

<sup>380</sup> Chapter 1, 101-2.

<sup>381</sup> Eucherius, *DLE* 28, 64-65. For a full discussion, see Chapter 1 above, 77-79.

<sup>382</sup> *VS* 13, *MGH SS* 2, 371.

For both Eucherius and Eigil, the wilderness was naturally worthy or suitable (*dignatus est*) for monastic practice. By echoing an older language of monastic foundation, Eigil claimed a natural fitness for Buchonia to host holy people. With this argument as a starting point, Eigil began his vivid description of the landscape and its receptiveness towards Sturm and his companions:

Perrexere itaque illi tres ad eremum; ingressique solitudinis agrestia loca, praeter caelum ac terram et ingentes arbores paene nihil cernentes, devote Christum poscebant, ut pedes illorum in viam pacis dirigeret. Die tertio pervenerunt ad locum qui usque hodie Hersfelt dicitur; visis exploratisque ibidem locis circumquaque positis, Christum sibi locum illum ad inhabitandum benedici poposcerunt, atque in loco illo ubi nunc monasterium situm est, parva arborum corticibus tecta instruunt habitacula.<sup>383</sup>

Thus the three of them went out into the desert; and when they came into a deserted [and] uncultivated place, they could see nothing besides earth, sky and enormous trees [and] they devoutly prayed to Christ, that he might direct their feet towards the way of peace. After three days they came to a place that is today called Hersfeld; once they had explored all the region around it, they requested Christ to bless it for their habitation, and this is the spot where the monastery is now situated, where they made little dwellings roofed with the bark of trees.

The “enormous trees (*ingentes arbores*)” dwarfed the monks and their “little dwellings (*habitacula*).” For this passage Eigil was possibly relying upon Augustine’s commentary on Ps. 95.12, “Then shall all the trees of the woods rejoice (*Tunc exsultabunt omnia ligna silvarum*).” For Augustine, the created world could rejoice, “because the enormous trees (*ingentes arbores*) of cedar and cypress have been cut down, and the incorruptible wood was carried to the construction of the house [of God].”<sup>384</sup> In

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<sup>383</sup> *VS* 4, *MGH SS* 2, 367.

<sup>384</sup> Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 95.13.5-7, *CCSL* 39, 1351: “quia praecisae ingentes arbores cedrinae et cyparissinae, et imputribilia ligna translata sunt ad aedificationem domus.”

Chapter 1, we have already seen how the anonymous author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* employed a rich tradition of tree symbolism to describe the Jura wilderness: there, cedars and firs could be seen to represent the church fathers, following both Augustine and Paulinus.<sup>385</sup> In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine's link between the felling of enormous trees and construction of holy places is a crucial one in the context of monastic foundation. The "enormous trees (*ingentes arbores*)" were both spiritual and natural resources. If Eigil was echoing Augustine—as well as the Psalms with which a monastic community would be familiar—he was also locating those "enormous trees" of Ps. 95.12 in the wilderness around Buchonia. That wilderness was fit for monastic habitation because its trees contributed to a sense of holy place.

Natural resources were crucial images in Eigil's account of foundation. For Lynda Coon, Sturm's group was acting primarily in "imitation of Egyptian anchorites who fashion primitive dwellings using local materials. The structure of the hermitage symbolically links its inhabitants to the natural world, for the ascetics are but feral beings on the fringes of society."<sup>386</sup> In Jerome's fourth-century *Vita Malchi*, the hermit Malchus, too, could only see the sky and the earth around him in his dwelling.<sup>387</sup> More specifically, the "bark of trees (*arborum cortices*)" also has a rich exegetical tradition. In Job 30.4, Job utters a long lament on his tormentors, likening them to beasts who "ate grass, and the barks of trees, and the root of junipers was their food (*et mandebant herbas et arborum*

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<sup>385</sup> See Chapter 1, 99-100, and Appendix, 491-94.

<sup>386</sup> Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 57-58.

<sup>387</sup> Jerome, *Vita Malchi* 7, *PL* 23: col. 59-60. Maria-Elisabeth Brunert has demonstrated how Jerome's descriptions of desert landscapes influenced Carolingian hagiography in her "Fulda als Kloster in eremo: Zentrale Quellen über die Gründung im Spiegel der hagiographischen Tradition," in *Kloster Fulda in der Welt der Karolinger und Ottonen*, ed. Gangolf Schrimpf (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1996), 59-78, at 63.

*frutices, et radix iuniperorum erat cibus eorum).*” Eigil may have had Jerome’s translation of the Vulgate at his disposal, which employed *arborum cortices* instead of *arborum frutices* to designate the “bark of trees.” In his *Moralia in Iob*, Gregory the Great interpreted this passage as a metaphor for heretics who do not comprehend the inner parts of Scripture but instead struggled with its tough exterior.<sup>388</sup> The bark of trees could also denote exterior works as opposed to the tenderness of the inner wood, or even “herbs . . . close to the ground (*herbas . . . ac terra proxima*).”<sup>389</sup> With these interpretations, Eigil’s interpretation of the wilderness around Fulda was charged with exegetical weight: the tough exteriors of Scripture could be seen as physical shelter for Sturm and his companions. Figuratively, they were the tender vegetation surrounded by the “bark of trees.”

A later missionary *vita*, Altfrid’s *Vita Liudgeri*, composed in the second quarter of the ninth century, revised its reception of the “bark of trees” image. Around the time of Fulda’s foundation, Liudger (d. 809), according to his nephew and biographer Altfrid, exhibited typological saintly behavior at an early age.

Qui statim ut ambulare et loqui poterat, coepit colligere pelliculas et cortices arborum, quibus ad liminaria uti solemus, et quicquid tale invenire poterat, ludentibus pueris aliis ipse consuit sibi de illis collectionibus quasi libellos. Comque invenisset sibi liquorem cum fistucis imitabatur scribentes et afferebat nutrici suae quasi utiles libros custodiendos. Et com ei quis dicerat: “Quid fecisti hodie?” dixit se per totum diem aut componere libros aut scriber aut etiam legere. Cumque iterum interrogaretur: “Quis te docuit?” respondens ait: “Deus me docuit.”<sup>390</sup>

<sup>388</sup> Gregory, *Moralia* 20.9.16-19, *CCSL* 143A, 1018.

<sup>389</sup> Gregory, *Moralia* 20.14.128-32, *CCSL* 143A, 1026: “Quid enim per harbas nisi tenera ac terrae proxima bene incohantium uita, et quid per arborum cortices nisi exteriora opera eorum qui iam sublimia appetunt designantur?”

<sup>390</sup> Altfrid, *Vita Liudgeri* 8, in Diekamp, *Geschichtsquellen* (1881) IV: 12-13.

As soon as [Liudger] could walk and talk, he began to collect hides and the bark of trees, with which we are accustomed [to fashion] lamps, and with whatever of such as these he was able to get, he stitched them together for himself as if they were little books, while the other children were playing games. And when he had gotten some liquid, he imitated the scribes with stalks of grain and brought them to his caretaker, just as if they were useful books. And when it was asked of him, “What have you done today?”, he said that he had made books or written them or read them. And when he was questioned again, “Who has taught you?”, he responded: “God taught me.”

Rolf Bremmer has identified this as the first use of the hagiographic topos of saints exhibiting “precocious bibliophilia.”<sup>391</sup> Its use underscores the importance of books, encyclopedic knowledge and education to a future missionary.<sup>392</sup> Altfred’s imagining of Liudger’s proto-saintly childhood closely referenced the natural world and its raw materials.

For Eigil, the wilderness of Buchonia—even though it would not be suitable for larger monastic habitation until Lull’s foundation of Hersfeld over thirty years later<sup>393</sup>—became an ideal setting for monastic practice. Sturm and his companions fashioned a simple, non-intrusive existence in a virgin forest, like Romanus had done in the Jura three centuries earlier. The earth, sky and trees are the only physical reference points in Eigil’s depictions of Fulda’s early days. A later example helps to clarify the reception of Buchonia’s forest solitude: Rudolf of Fulda was well aware of this inheritance when he

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<sup>391</sup> Rolf Bremmer, “The Anglo-Saxon Continental Mission and the Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge,” in *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Bremmer, Rolf Hendrik and Krees Dekker (Paris: Peeters, 2007), 19-50, at 24.

<sup>392</sup> Bremmer, “Encyclopaedic Knowledge,” 23-32, especially 23-24.

<sup>393</sup> Probably because of the hostile Saxon presence near there, as Eigil noted in *VS* 5, *MGH SS* 2, 367-68. On this context, see Ulrich Hussong, “Studien zur Geschichte der Reichsabtei Fulda bis zur Jahrtausendwende. Teil 1,” *Archiv für Diplomatik* 32 (1985): 1-225, at 37.

composed his *Vite Leobae* around 836. Born around 710 in Wimbourne, Leoba was a relative of Boniface's, and one of the Anglo-Saxon monastic figures directly recruited by her more famous kinsman. Eventually she would become the abbess of Tauberbischofsheim in modern-day northeast Baden-Württemberg in central Germany. Leoba governed the community under the authority of her home house of Wimbourne, ruled by Tetta. As Wood has noted, Tauberbischofsheim was "scarcely on any pagan frontier," but was instead a choice destination for the daughters of local, recently converted noblemen.<sup>394</sup> Early in the *vita*, Rudolf described Leoba's native Wimbourne as "a place which in ancient times was known by the language of that people, 'Wine Fountain' . . . It received this name on account of the clarity and sweetness of the water there, which was better than any other in those lands."<sup>395</sup> Compared with Eigil, however, Rudolf eschewed long accounts of landscapes; by the time Leoba had reached Buchonia, he simply noted how Fulda was founded amongst a "people given to pagan rites and laid low by the disease of lack of faith . . . in the most vast forest solitude of Buchonia."<sup>396</sup> Unlike Eigil, Rudolf did not emphasize Fulda's original claim to a virgin forest. For Eigil, topographic and natural depictions were a narrative structure upon which Fulda's foundation depended on both practical and exegetical levels.

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<sup>394</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 67.

<sup>395</sup> Rudolf, *Vita Leobae* 2, *MGH SS* 15.1, 123: "locus quidam antiquo gentis illius vocabulo Winbrunno vocatur . . . Qui propter nimiam claritatem et saporem eximium, quo ceteris terrae illius aquis praestare videbatur, hoc nomen accepit."

<sup>396</sup> Rudolf, *Vita Leobae* 17, *MGH SS* 15.1, 129: "gentemque paganis ritibus deditam atque infidelitatis morbo decubantem . . . in vastissima solitudine saltus Boconiae."

**Per vastissima deserti loca: *Practicality, Beauty and Natural Fitness in the Frankish terra***

After some time in the wilderness, Sturm returned to Boniface and gave him a full report on “the quality of the earth, the running water, the springs and valleys, and all other things pertaining to the place.”<sup>397</sup> In this and similar descriptions, Eigil coupled spiritual and practical concerns for a potential monastic environment. In his *Vita Sturmi*, these two categories of foundational interests were inextricably linked—not separate concepts, as we have seen in earlier *vitae* from the period. Boniface’s answer to Sturm spoke to these dual concerns: “You have indeed found a place for habitation, but I fear your living there there because of the barbarous people in the vicinity; for as you know, there are Saxons, a ferocious people, close to that place. For that reason look for a more remote place, further into the wilderness, where you can worship without danger to yourselves.”<sup>398</sup> Ideological and practical concerns were embedded simultaneously in Boniface’s response: degrees of solitude were not only based upon distance from civilization, as they had been for early Merovingian monks,<sup>399</sup> but proximity to the Saxons, a hostile people in a dangerous landscape. As human players in the *Vita Sturmi*, the Saxons directly mirrored a forbidding terrain.

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<sup>397</sup> *VS 5, MGH SS 2*, 367: “terrae qualitatem, et aquae decursum, et fontes et valles, et omnia quae ad locum pertinebant.”

<sup>398</sup> *VS 5, MGH SS 2*, 367: “Locum quidem quem repertum habetis, habitare vos propter viciniam barbaricae gentis pertimesco; sunt enim, ut nosti, illic in proximo feroces Saxones. Quapropter vobis remotiorem et inferiorem in solitudine requirite habitationem, quam sine periculo vestri colere queatis.”

<sup>399</sup> Merovingian monastic foundations were seldom as far removed from civilization as hagiographers claimed: Ian Wood, “A Prelude to Columbanus: The Monastic Achievement in the Burgundian Territories,” in *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, ed. Howard Clarke and Mary Brennan (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), 3-32. See Chapter 1, 102.



Sturm and his companions went further into the Bavarian forest, boarding a boat down the river Fulda, and looking closely “for all the streams and springs. They left the boat, walking around all the land and examining at the earth, mountains, hills, heights and valleys, where the Lord might show them a place in the wilderness for them to dwell in.”<sup>400</sup> But the final site of foundation, Boniface realized, was not yet revealed (*demonstrare*) in the landscape.<sup>401</sup> Again, Eigil emphasized the proximity to barbarous peoples despite Sturm’s charge to convert them and establish monastic life in the region. Chancing upon a group of Slavs bathing in the Fulda River, Sturm was struck by their bad odor; even the donkey on which he was riding “through the most vast wilderness (*per vastissima deserti loca*)” trembled in disgust and dread.<sup>402</sup> For Eigil, the Slavs were even more bestial and embedded in the natural world than the animal on which Sturm rode. In this context, Eigil described in detail the physical process of traveling through the Bavarian landscape:

Tunc avidus locorum explorator ubique sagaci obtutu montuosa atque plana perlustrans loca, montes quoque et colles vallesque adspiciens, fontes et torrentes atque fluvios considerans, pergebat. Psalmos vero in ore retinens, Deum gemitibus animo ad caelum levato orabat, ibi tantummodo quiescens, ubi eum nox compulit habitare. Et tunc quando alicubi noctabat, cum ferro quod manu gestabat, sepe caedendo lingo in gyro composuit, ad tutamen animalis sui, ne ferae, quarum perplura ibi multitudo erat, illud devorarent.<sup>403</sup>

Then the explorer, eager for the [new] places, studying on all sides with his wise gaze the mountainous places and the flatlands, looking also upon the mountains

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<sup>400</sup> *VS 5, MGH SS 2*, 367: “ad omnium torrentium vel fontium ora. Navim egressi, perambulantes circumquaque et considerantes terram, montes, colles, superiora et inferiora explorantes, ubi Dominus servis suis in solitudine ad inhabitandum aptum demonstraret locum.”

<sup>401</sup> *VS 6, MGH SS 2*, 368.

<sup>402</sup> *VS 7, MGH SS 2*, 368-69.

<sup>403</sup> *VS 7, MGH SS 2*, 368-69.

and the hills and valleys, considering the fountains and streams and rivers, proceeded forth. Singing psalms with his mouth, he prayed raising his mind to God, resting nowhere except wherever night forced him to settle. And when he spent the night anywhere, by cutting down trees with a tool he carried in his hand, he made a ring fence for the protection of his animal, lest the wild beasts, of which there was a very great multitude there, should devour it.

This passage also contains echoes of Jerome's *Vita Pauli*, which we encountered in Chapter 1 in the context of the *Vita patrum iurensium*.<sup>404</sup> In it, Paul found a cave at the base of a mountain with a stone in front of it: "When [the stone was] removed (since there is a desire for men to understand the unknown), he, eagerly exploring (*avidus explorans*), entered into a large courtyard, which was open to the sky above, roofed over by the wide spreading branches of an ancient palm, with a fountain of the clearest water."<sup>405</sup> Eigil quoted Jerome's *vita* to describe the eagerness of holy men to explore the wilderness. Whereas Jerome had claimed for Paul the status of first Christian hermit, Eigil was making similar claims for originality in the Fulda river valley.

The links among monk, God and nature are tight in Eigil's account. For Eigil, Sturm's "looking (*adspiciens*)" at the hills, plains, mountains and valleys was an activity inseparable from his "singing Psalms with his mouth (*Psalmos vero in ore retinens*)."<sup>406</sup> Sturm's eyes mapped the region's contours and his mouth sanctified it. Although we cannot be certain which Psalms Sturm chanted, the singing of Psalms suggests an association with rites to dedicate a church. Brian Repsher has brought to light the extensive chanting of Psalms in the *Ordo ad benedicendam ecclesiam* ("Order for the

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<sup>404</sup> Chapter 1, 98-100.

<sup>405</sup> Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 5, *PL* 23: col. 21: "quo remoto (ut est cupiditas hominum occulta cognoscere), avidius explorans, animaduertit intus grande uestibulum, quod aperto desuper coelo, patulis diffusa ramis uetus palma contexerat, fontem lucidissimum ostendens."

blessing of a church,” composed c. 840s), “perhaps the most elaborate rite of church dedication developed by Carolingian liturgists.”<sup>406</sup> During the *Ordo*, congregants and clergy would sing Psalms while circumambulating the interior of the new church.<sup>407</sup> Crucially, this step in the rite was meant to prepare the church for the bishop’s entry, who will have just recited Ps. 23.1: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof: the world, and all they that dwell therein (*Domini est terra, et plenitudo eius, orbis terrarum, et qui habitant in eo*).”<sup>408</sup> Repsher has also noted that “in Carolingian liturgy, it was stressed that the Carolingian people were, in fact, a new Israel and its leaders were a new David and Solomon.”<sup>409</sup> Thus the *Ordo* emphasized the importance of the Tabernacle and Temple to contemporary church dedication.<sup>410</sup> If Eigil meant to invoke a liturgical rite in Fulda’s wilderness, he was perhaps pointing towards a parallel with Moses in the desert. Sturm’s chanting of the Psalms also anticipates Fulda’s transition from beautiful wilderness to royal monastic house.

On the institutional level, Eigil was anticipating what would become one of Fulda’s primary activities as a royally patronized monastic community: prayer for the living and the dead.<sup>411</sup> On the physical level, Sturm was surveying the pleasant land

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<sup>406</sup> Brian Repsher, *The Rite of Church Dedication in the Early Medieval Era* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 41.

<sup>407</sup> Repsher, *Church Dedication*, 48. For a full translation of the *Ordo*, see Repsher, “Appendix A” in *ibid.*, 139-69, based on the critical edition of Cyrille Vogel and Reinhard Elza, *Le Pontifical Romano-Germanique du dixième siècle* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1963), 124-73.

<sup>408</sup> Repsher, *Church Dedication*, 47-48.

<sup>409</sup> Repsher, *Church Dedication*, 42.

<sup>410</sup> Repsher, *Church Dedication*, 43.

<sup>411</sup> As Janneke Raaijmakers has illustrated from manuscripts pertaining to Fulda (in this case the *Supplex Libellus monachorum Fuldensium Carolo imperatori porrectus* of 816/17), prayer and the chanting of Psalms contributed to Fulda’s early sense of

around him for monastic foundation, suggesting the role of *agrimensor* like Vedast. As Romanus had done in the *Vita patrum iurensium* Sturm manipulated his environment as little as possible and only for practical reasons.<sup>412</sup> In the *VPI*, the founder-monk Romanus had seen nothing but the occasional broad-horned deer and hunter. Similarly, Sturm in the “wilderness (*desertum*)” Sturm saw nothing “besides wild beasts, of which there was a great abundance, and flying birds, massive trees, in addition to uncultivated places of solitude.”<sup>413</sup> It was not simply that the emptiness of the “horrible wilderness (*per horendum desertum*)” contributed to Eigil’s sense of Fulda’s ownership over the landscape; its founding member was a figure whose behavior was directly shaped by that landscape.

### ***Foundational Places in Eigil’s Vita Sturmi and Walahfrid Strabo’s Vita Galli***

Eigil’s account of Fulda’s foundation also resonated in Walahfrid Strabo’s later *Vita Galli*. In the section just before Gall encountered the bear,<sup>414</sup> the saint was told about the wilderness he was about to enter by one Hiltibod, who “knew all the footpaths,

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collectivity in *Fulda*, 70: “Early-ninth-century liturgical sources indeed confirm that the monks of Fulda remembered their brethren as a group and not individually. Each day at morning service and after vespers, the monks commemorated the deceased *fratres* with an antiphon and psalm. The first day of each month, they said a vigil and fifty psalms for their brethren.” For Fulda’s responsibility as a royal abbey to say prayers and Psalms for the nobility, see Raaijmakers, *Fulda*, 120-21.

<sup>412</sup> See Chapter 1, 105-6.

<sup>413</sup> *VS* 8, *MGH SS* 2, 369: “praeter bestias, quarum ingens in eo fuit abundantia, et avium volatum et ingentes arbores, et praeter agrestia solitudinis loca.”

<sup>414</sup> For a discussion, see above, 423-24.

markings and recesses of the wilderness (*omnes heremi semitas notas habebat et secessus*).<sup>415</sup> Hiltibod described Luxeuil thus:

Haec, o pater, solitudo aquis est infusa frequentibus, asperitate terribilis, montibus plena praecelsis, angustis vallibus flexuosa, bestiis possessa saevissimis; nam praeter cervos et innocuorum greges animalium ursis gignit plurimos, apros innumerabiles, lupos numerum excedentes, rabie singulares. Timeo igitur, ne si te illuc induxero, ab huiusmodi hostibus devoreris.<sup>416</sup>

This wilderness, O father, is full of many rivers, [but is] a rough, terrible place, full of high mountains, full of crooked, narrow valleys, [and] occupied by savage beasts; for besides deer and other flocks of safe animals it produces bears in such huge number, and wolves of beyond counting, extraordinarily wild. Thus I fear, if I led you there, that you would be devoured by enemies of this sort.

Walahfrid employed the same visual cues as Eigil had done to describe a landscape, but turned it savage. Comparing the landscape depictions of Eigil and Walahfrid suggests a common language of describing monastic foundations based on shared natural reference points (mountain or stone, valleys, waterways):

**Table 3.6: Comparison of Eigil's *Vita Sturmi* and Walahfrid Strabo's *Vita Galli***

Eigil, <i>Vita Sturmi</i> 7	Walahfrid, <i>Vita Galli</i> 1.5	Walahfrid, <i>Vita Galli</i> 1.10
Tunc avidus <b>locorum</b> explorator ubique sagaci obtutu <b>montuosa</b> atque plana perlustrans loca, <b>montes</b> quoque et colles <b>vallesque</b> adspiciens, fontes et torrentes atque fluvios considerans, pergebat.	In hac <b>solitudine</b> locus quidam est antiquae structurae, servans inter ruinas vestigia, ubi terra pinguis et fructariis proventibus apta, <b>montes</b> per girum excelsi, heremus vasta et imminens oppido, planities copiosa victum quaerentibus fructum laboris non negat.	Haec, o pater, <b>solitudo</b> aquis est infusa frequentibus, asperitate terribilis, <b>montibus</b> plena praecelsis, angustis <b>vallibus</b> flexuosa, bestiis possessa saevissimis.

<sup>415</sup> Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli* 1.10, *MGH SRM* 4, 291.

<sup>416</sup> Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli* 1.10, *MGH SRM* 4, 292.

While Eigil had described the natural beauty of Fulda, Walahfrid emphasized ruins of ancient structures and the dangers of the *solitudo*. These accounts are crucial since they narrated the foundational moments in an institution's history. Taken together, they suggest an intensification of natural images across the ninth century. Walahfrid's interventions on natural themes can be seen as part of a development running parallel to educational reforms under the Carolingians.<sup>417</sup> Walahfrid took natural reference points—waterways, animals and rock formations—from earlier hagiographic accounts and overemphasized their innate dangers. Seen in this way, one of Walahfrid's goals was to tame hagiographic nature: with more danger lurking in the wilderness, there was perhaps more sin to overcome for the mid-ninth-century monk.

### ***The Power of a Placename***

Placenames were also central to Eigil's narrative. Soon after his failed attempt to found a monastic community in Buchonia, Eigil observed that at Sturm heard the sounds of water trickling near where the Gysilaha River (modern Geisel, possibly from the Old High German "geiz," or "goat") flowed into the Fulda. Unsure whether or not it was a natural sound or one made by another human in the forest, he struck a hollow tree trunk with a stick until a man came out of the forest. The man belonged to the lord Ortis and was traveling from Wetterau to Grapfelt. He told Sturm where the best streams and

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<sup>417</sup> Depreux, "Ambitions et limites," 737-40; Rosamond McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 151-66, at 156. For the specific echoes of and references to the *Regula Benedicti* in the *vitae* of Gall, see Gibson, "Rewriting History," 165-66.

waterways were located in “Eihloh in the old speech (*antiquo vocabulo Aihloh*).”<sup>418</sup>

Eihloh was so called possibly on account of its oaks (in Old High German, “Eih,” and modern German, “Eiche,”) among the larger beech forests of Buchonia.<sup>419</sup> Eigil’s interest in terrain and place names notwithstanding, Sturm found Eihloh unsuitable due to the poor quality of its soil. He wandered a little further to another site Ortis’ man had recommended, “towards the torrent that is even today called Grezzibach.”<sup>420</sup> For Eigil, the place was preordained, but Sturm still inspected it closely: “As he walked around and looked at every aspect of the place, he gave thanks to God . . . He was so pleased with the beauty of the place, that he spent nearly an entire day wandering around it,” considering its potential.<sup>421</sup> Notably, Sturm was not struck by a vision or sign, but convinced of the place’s divine selection by its utility and beauty, even though Eigil downplayed the practical benefits of fine soil and running water. Instead, he emphasized its wildness, and according to Eigil, Boniface himself overtly described it as a *solitudo*.<sup>422</sup> Eigil combined practical concerns with divine selection and natural beauty as necessary components of rural monastic foundation. To sharpen his picture of the landscape around Fulda, Eigil

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<sup>418</sup> VS 8, *MGH SS* 2, 369.

<sup>419</sup> Raaijmakers, *Fulda*, 27.

<sup>420</sup> VS 9, *MGH SS* 2, 369: “ad torrentem qui usque hodie Grezzibach dicitur.”

<sup>421</sup> VS 9, *MGH SS* 2, 369: “Tunc circumquaque iens, per singula quae adspiciebat, Domino gratias referebat . . . Cumque ibi loci pulcritudine delectatus, non modicum diei spatium gyrando et explorando exegisset.”

<sup>422</sup> In all likelihood, eighth-century Bochonia was a sparsely inhabited region; see the comments of Ulrich Weidinger, *Untersuchungen zur Wirtschaftsstruktur des Klosters Fulda in der Karolingerzeit* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1991), 156-58. Yet it was not as far into the wilderness as Eigil might have claimed it was, as Raaijmakers notes in *Fulda*, 28-29. On the possibility that Sturm founded Fulda on the site of or near a ruined villa I have consulted the work of Heinrich Hahn: “Eihloha—Sturm und das Kloster Fulda: Mit Abbildungen über Ausgrabungsfunde,” *Fuldaer Geschichtsblätter* 56 (1980): 50-82, at 55-62; and *idem*, “Die drei Vorgängerbauten des Fulder Domes,” *Fuldaer Geschichtsblätter* 61 (1985): 180-202, at 182-83.

included place names whose etymologies evoked the region's fauna and flora. By doing so, Eigil linked places, etymologies and historical events in the narrative.

### ***Finding Fulda: From Natural Foundation to Royal Expansion***

The next distinct phase of monastic foundation involved official royal authority. Once Sturm had located his site, Boniface petitioned Carloman (d. 754), mayor of the Merovingian palace in eastern Frankish territory, for permission to use the land in question. In Boniface's assessment, "We have found a place in the wilderness that is called *Buchonia*, near the river called Fulda, for the dwelling of God's servants, which belongs to your property."<sup>423</sup> Eigil's concerns here reflect what Wood characterized as Eigil's constant worry over place names and land ownership in the *Vita Sturmi*.<sup>424</sup> Carloman knew the eastern territory well, responding with the specific name of the property (Eihloh). This part of the process involved acts of clearance, claiming and changing of land from its original state: the monks spent the next weeks "fasting in vigil and prayer day and night, [and] they worked, as much as they could, to cut through the forest and to clear the site by their own labor."<sup>425</sup> In Eigil's telling, clearing the forest was a component of foundation as important as prayer and legal permission.

Eigil reinforced this approach to the landscape when he described how Boniface and the founding monks agreed that a church should be constructed; thus Boniface

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<sup>423</sup> *VS* 12, *MGH SS* 2, 370: "Habemus enim in solitudine quae Bochonia nuncupatur, iuxta fluvium qui dicitur Fulda locum aptum servis Dei inhabitandum repertum, qui ad vestram pertinent ditionem."

<sup>424</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 69.

<sup>425</sup> *VS* 13, *MGH SS* 2, 371: "vigiliisque et orationibus die noctuque famulantes, silvas caedere et locum mundare proprio labore, in quantum praevaluerunt, studebant."



“ordered them to cut down the forest and clear out the thickets; meanwhile he climbed up the hill which is today called the Bishop’s Mountain, and constantly prayed to the Lord.”<sup>426</sup> Earlier in the *Vita Sturmi* Eigil had used existing place names like Buchonia and Eihloh to describe the landscape, but now he ascribed a new one, “Bishop’s Mountain (*Mons-episcopi*),” to the area because “for this reason the hill is called by this name (*et propter hoc monti vocabulum indidit*).”<sup>427</sup> A similar triangulation of local history, place names, and natural features accompanied the actual naming of a feature near Fulda. According to Eigil, “after seven days of cutting down trees and clearing off the brush, the turf was in heaps for the making of lime, and then with the bishop having blessed the brethren, he commended the place to the Lord, and went back with the workmen he had brought. Then the next year the holy bishop returned so he could visit his new monastery; it had begun to be called Fulda, from the river that flowed nearby.”<sup>428</sup> While Dana Polanichka has pointed out the similarities between the descriptions of Fulda’s foundation and Charlemagne’s building projects at Aachen,<sup>429</sup> the language of clearance in the natural world sets Eigil’s account apart. Eigil clearly set out a proper process of foundation as well as the treatment of the surrounding landscape. He also

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<sup>426</sup> *VS* 13, *MGH SS* 2, 371: “silvam extirpare et fructecta quaeque caedere imperavit; ipse se in montem qui usque hodie Mons-episcopi appellatur contulit, ubi iugiter Dominum orabat.”

<sup>427</sup> *VS* 13, *MGH SS* 2, 371.

<sup>428</sup> *VS* 13, *MGH SS* 2, 371: “Post unius septimanae impletionem, dirutis innumeris silvis et arboribus, et rase ad calcem faciendam composite, episcopus benedictis fratribus et loco Domino commendato, cum operariis cum quibus venerat inde migravit. Altero autem anno sanctus episcopus iterum illuc properans, ad novellum coenobium pervenit suum; quod iam tunc propter meatum fluminis Fulda vocari inchoaverat.”

<sup>429</sup> Dana Polanichka, “Precious Stones, Living Temples: Sacred Space in Carolingian Churches, 751-877 C.E.” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 2009), 265-67.

emphasized that the young community's legitimacy was partly derived from the specificity of its toponymies, both old and new. Eigil described a landscape divinely appointed for monastic practice.

Eigil consistently emphasized Fulda's solitude, employing terms like *desertum*, *eremus* or *solitudo*. After Boniface's death, however, Fulda's presumed solitude exacerbated tensions between Sturm and Lull, who sparred over the proper placement of his relics.<sup>430</sup> According to Eigil, Lull insisted that Boniface's body remain at Mainz where it had gone immediately after the disaster at Dokkum and forbade "the body of the blessed martyr to be brought into the solitude (*ne beati martyrus corpus ad solitudinem perveniret*).” To drive the point home, Eigil referred to Fulda as an *eremus* or a *solitudo* throughout the passage.<sup>431</sup> In a dream, Boniface spelled out his wishes to a deacon: “Rise up, quickly, and carry me into the solitude (*solitudo*) where God has predetermined a place for me [to rest].”<sup>432</sup> Boniface's relics went into the wilderness at Fulda, and the number of monks predictably increased, much to Lull's chagrin—no doubt a conflict that would eventually contribute to Sturm's exile at Lull's instigation.<sup>433</sup> Eigil's account of the struggle over Boniface's relics probably exaggerates the tensions between bishop and monastery.<sup>434</sup> On a deeper level in the text, the idea of solitude, and the natural landscape

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<sup>430</sup> I am following Ian Wood's interpretation of the events Eigil described in *VS* 16-20, in *Missionary Life*, 68-72.

<sup>431</sup> Where Talbot translated it is “monastery,” Eigil had clearly indicated that Fulda was a wilderness solitude (*eremus*), *MGH SS* 2, 372: “Sturmi vero et qui cum eo de eremo convenerunt.”

<sup>432</sup> *VS* 16, *MGH SS* 2, 373: “Surgite, cito, et propere me in solitudinem at locum quem mihi praedsetinauit Deus, perducite.”

<sup>433</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 70-73.

<sup>434</sup> This is the consensus of modern scholars on the subject: Kehl, *Kult und Nachleben*, 19-26; Wood, *Missionary Life*, 70-72; and Raaijmakers, *Fulda*, 44-45.

that accompanied it, shaped the conflict between Sturm and Lull. The theme of the natural landscape around Fulda was both participant in and productive of monastic culture there.

The final stage of Fulda's foundation was the construction and maintenance of buildings. Once returned from exile, Sturm "decorated the temple, that is the church, which that they had then, and repaired the monastic buildings by adding newer columns, large wood beams, and new roofs."<sup>435</sup> His post-exile activities were as symbolic as they were practical: by repairing the buildings and constructing new ones, Sturm was attempting to complete a process of monastic foundation whose origins were in the wilderness. By establishing a firm division between the wilderness and buildings, however, Eigil articulated the meaning of monastic life in rural Francia, one shaped the surrounding natural world. In an act similar to those of the Jura monks manipulating local rivers, Sturm also "explored the course of the river Fulda, and led away a stream from it not a small distance from the monastery, and made it flow through large canals under the monastery, so that the stream made glad the community (*cenobium*) of God."<sup>436</sup> Sturm's innovations were practical but also ensured physical cleanliness in the monastery. In Eigil's account, Sturm was consistently interested in the exploration of landscapes and waterways, a feature resembling the activities of the sixth-century *Vita patrum*

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<sup>435</sup> *VS 20, MGH SS 2, 375*: "Sturmi . . . templum, id est ecclesiam, quod tunc habebant, ornare, et domos omnes monasterii recentibus columnis et grandibus trabibus novisque tectorum structuris corroboravit."

<sup>436</sup> *VS 20, MGH SS 2, 375*: "explorato passim cursu fluminis Fuldae, non parvo spatio a monasterio ipsius amnis fluenta a proprio abduxit cursu, et per non modica fossata monasterium influere fecit, ita ut fluminis impetus laetificaret coenobium Dei."

*iurensium*.<sup>437</sup> As we saw in Chapter 1 as well as above, both the *VPI* and Eigil's *Vita Sturmi* drew from Jerome's *Vita Pauli*. They shared from a common stock of textual echoes, specifically one in which the hermit Paul established himself under the sprawling branches of an ancient palm and beside "a fountain of the clearest water."<sup>438</sup> Following Jerome, Eigil described Sturm as an *avidus explorator*, a keen explorer of landscapes around the Fulda River. Natural features actively shaped monastic identity in the early years of Fulda's foundation. The canals "made happy the assembly of God (*laetificaret coenobium Dei*)" and were essential to Fulda's day-to-day operation.

The final and most monumental act of ornamentation at Fulda took place at Boniface's tomb: "Over the sepulcher of the blessed martyr Boniface he set up an arch made of silver and gold, which we are wont to call a *requiem*; [and] which—as the custom was then—was of beautiful workmanship."<sup>439</sup> Eigil explained the importance of craftsmanship and aesthetic beauty to the new community. Canals brought purity to the buildings and water to their craftsmen, and the well-made archway above Boniface's tomb also marked it as a place set apart from its surroundings. The link between salvation and built space was as close as Sturm's singing of psalms while he surveyed Bavarian territory for possible monastic sites.

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<sup>437</sup> See, for example, *VPI* 5-8; for a discussion, see Chapter 1, 105-8.

<sup>438</sup> Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 5, *PL* 23: col. 21: "patulis diffusa ramis vetus palma contexerat, fontem lucidissimum ostendens."

<sup>439</sup> *VS* 20, *MGH SS* 2, 375: "Super sepulcrum vero beati martyris Bonifacii auro argentoque compositam statuit arcam, quam nos solemus *requiem* appellare; quam—ut tunc moris erat—pulcro opere condidit."

Nowhere does this entire process receive a clearer expression than in Eigil's account of Charlemagne's Christianizing conquests in Saxony towards the end of the *Vita*

*Sturmi*:

Regnante feliciter domino rege Karolo annos quatuor, Saxonum gens saeva et infestissima cunctis fuit, et paganis ritibus nimis dedita. Rex uero Karolus, Domino semper devotus . . . cogitare coepit, qualiter gentem hanc Christo adquirere quivisset. . . . Quo cum rex pervenisset, partim bellis, partim suasionibus, partim etiam muneribus, maxima ex parte gentem illam ad fidem Christi convertit; et post non longum tempus tota provinciam illam in parochias episcopales divisit, et seruis Domini ad docendum et baptizandum potestatem dedit. Tunc pars maxima beato Sturmi populi et terrae illius ad procurandum committitur. Suscepto igitur praedicationis officio, curam modis omnibus impendit, qualiter non parvum Domino populum acquireret. Sed temporibus instabat opportunis, sacris eos sermonibus docens, ut idola et simulacra derelinquerent, Christi fidem susciperent, deorum suorum templa destruerent, lucos succiderent, sanctas quoque basilicas aedificarent.<sup>440</sup>

During the reign of king Charles through four successful years, the people of the Saxons were a savage and most bitter enemy to everyone, and dedicated to the rites of pagans. Thus king Charles, always devoted to the Lord . . . began to think about how he might acquire these peoples for Christ . . . So when the king arrived there, he converted most of the people partly by war, partly by persuasion, partly even by gifts [and] he converted the greater part of that people to the faith of Christ; and not a long time later he divided the whole of the province into episcopal districts, and gave the Saxons to the servants of the Lord to teach and baptize. Then he committed to the blessed Sturm the larger part of that territory and its people to care for. [Sturm] thus took on the office of preaching, exercising his charge in every way, and acquired not a few people for the Lord. But he pressed forward at opportune times to teach them in sermons, that they should neglect idols and images, take on the faith of Christ, destroy the temples of their gods, cut down the groves, and build up sacred basilicas in their stead.

For Eigil, Charlemagne's Saxon conquests of the 770s were nothing short of a Christianizing mission. The conquest of the natural world was at the heart of the conflicts,

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<sup>440</sup> *VS* 22, *MGH SS* 2, 376.

representative of both their challenges and successes. Charlemagne's activities in Saxony resembled those of Sturm in the Fulda valley. Eigil's description also mixed people with sacred and natural places. Seen in this way, the *Vita Sturmi*, with its insistence on royal approval of monastic foundation, is a hagiographic treatise in support of early Carolingian expansion, with nature and conquest as inextricably bound themes.

Eigil's treatment of the Fulda's landscapes moves us beyond legal and spiritual interpretations of "geographical precision."<sup>441</sup> In the *Vita Sturmi*, the Christianizing process began with a precise sense of what it meant to be a missionary in the natural world. Eigil presented distinct phases of missionary work: appropriating the wilderness, receiving official, royal approval, and physically building Christian places in the landscape. These distinct phases of missionary work reflected an awareness of the natural world's deeper powers of persuasion: in the *Vita Sturmi*, the natural world directly informed and compelled monastic behavior, resembling more the interpretations we have already seen in the anonymous *Vita patrum iurensium*. Seen in this way, the struggle over Boniface's remains was tied to efforts to control the landscape around Fulda, a legacy first transmitted in Gaul by Martin and his destruction of the sacred pine. These phases in turn constituted for Eigil a clear expression of royal authority and expansion in the natural world. In the *Vita Sturmi*, Carolingian expansion was intricately bound to monastic and missionary interpretations of nature.

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<sup>441</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 69.

### Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* and the End of the World *ad fines orbis terrae*

As Eigil's *Vita Sturmi* makes clear, monastic foundation and missionary work were often linked enterprises. Episcopal foundations like those at Bremen and Münster under Charlemagne gave shape to the Christianization process in Saxony, a trend that continued under Louis the Pious.<sup>442</sup> While we cannot know from surviving sources whether Charlemagne saw Scandinavia as a potential mission field,<sup>443</sup> Louis tried to forge political and religious bonds with the pagans to the North: the baptism of Harald Klak under Louis' patronage which Ermoldus commemorated in verse, carried with it numerous political advantages.<sup>444</sup> Despite these efforts, hagiographic sources from the period after the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis suggest unease over the existence of pagans in the North and consolidation of their political powers.<sup>445</sup> Missionary activity in Scandinavia was infrequent in the first half of the ninth century with the exception of a mission by the archbishop Ebbo of Rheims (d. 851) in 823.<sup>446</sup> Ebbo himself was partially

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<sup>442</sup> For this phase, I am following the assessment of Peter Johanek, "Der Ausbau der sächsischen Kirchenorganisation," in 799—*Kunst und Kultur der Karolingerzeit*, 3 vols., ed. Christoph Stiegemann and Matthias Wemhoff (Mainz: von Zabern, 1999), II: 494-506, at 502-03.

<sup>443</sup> For the lack of interest in Scandinavia in favor of efforts in Saxony, see Ian Wood, "An Absence of Saints? The Evidence for the Christianisation of Saxony," in *Am vorabend der Kaiser Krönung*, ed. Peter Godman, Jörg Jarnut and Peter Johanek (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 335-40; and Eric Knibbs, *Ansgar, Rimbert and the Forged Foundations of Hamburg-Bremen* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 53-59.

<sup>444</sup> On these points I am following Karl Hauck, "Der Missionauftrag Christi und das Kaisertum Ludwigs des Frommen," in *Charlemagne's Heir*, ed. Godman and Collins, 275-96, at 289-95; and Ian Wood, "Ideas of Mission in the Carolingian World," in *Le monde carolingien: bilan, perspectives, champs de recherches*, ed. Wojciech Fałkowski and Yves Sassier (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 183-98.

<sup>445</sup> See e.g. *Vita Liutburgae* 12, *MGH Deutsches Mittelalter* 3, 17-18.

<sup>446</sup> Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* (hereafter "VA") 13, *MGH SRG* 55, 34-35. According to *ARF* 823, *MGH SRG* 6, 162-63, Ebbo returned in this year from a year with the Danes; *Annales Xantenses* 823, *MGH SRG* 7, 6 says the same.

responsible for the baptism of Harald Klak around 826 under Louis' authority.<sup>447</sup> It was under these circumstances that Anskar (d. 865) arrived in Denmark from *Nova Corbeia* (or Corvey, a house founded by Louis), the events of which were recorded by his student Rimbert (d. 888) in the *Vita Anskarii*. While Wood and others have noted that historical details in the *Vita Anskarii* are sparse,<sup>448</sup> such concerns are not central to our questions of the functions of nature and geography in its pages. As Palmer has noted, the *Vita Anskarii*'s main concern was to support and perpetuate northern missionary work.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Several sources attest to this: Ermoldus Nigellus, *In honorem* 4.25-292, *MGH PLAC* 2, 59-66; *ARF* 826, *MGH SRG* 6, 168-72; *Annales Xantenses* 826, *MGH SRG* 12, 6-7; Astronomer, *Vita Hludouici* 40, *MGH SRG* 64, 431-37; and Thegan, *Vita Hludowici* 33, *MGH SRG* 64, 220-21. For Ermoldus, see above, 394-97.

<sup>448</sup> See Ian Wood's assessment of Rimbert's sense of history in "Christians and Pagans in Ninth-Century Scandinavia," in *The Christianization of Scandinavia: Report of a Symposium Held at Kungälv, Sweden, 4-9 August 1985*, ed. Peter Sawyer, Birgit Sawyer and Ian Wood (Alingås: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987), 36-67.

<sup>449</sup> Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*," 240.





**Map 3.4:** Hamburg, Bremen and Related Religious Centers Mentioned in Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*. Taken from Wood, *Missionary Life*, 275.

Born around 801, Anskar entered the monastic community at Corbie at an early age, possibly around the time of Charlemagne's death in 814.<sup>450</sup> At Corbie he rose in the monastic ranks to become a founding member of Louis' new community at Corvey.<sup>451</sup> From Corvey he staged an evangelizing mission to the kingdom of the Danes in the 820s. The mission was a short-lived one, however. Under circumstances Rimbert did not spell out—probably the exile of Harald Klak from his own kingdom—Anskar was forced to

<sup>450</sup> VA 2-3, *MGH SRG* 55, 20-24. For biographic details on Anskar's and his relationship to Hamburg-Bremen, I am following Ian Wood, "Christians and Pagans," 36-67; Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*," 235-56; David Faersdorff, *Ansgar: Apostel des Nordens* (Kevelaer: Topos, 2009); and Eric Knibbs, *Forged Foundations*, whose work focuses less on Anskar's life in favor of a critical reading of the forged diplomatic sources which shaped the history of Hamburg-Bremen.

<sup>451</sup> VA 6-8, *MGH SRG* 55, 25-30.

return to Corvey around 827.<sup>452</sup> After these events, Louis sponsored another mission whose brevity was no doubt due to the loss of books, sacred vessels and other accoutrements to pirates in the North Sea.<sup>453</sup> So far unsuccessful in Scandinavia, Louis invested Anskar with the archbishopric of the northern seat of Hamburg, from which (they hoped) he could exercise episcopal influence over the kingdoms of the North Sea.<sup>454</sup> A number of brief missions to Sweden followed under the guidance of Ebbo and his kinsmen Gauzbert and Nithard, who were soon driven out and killed in a skirmish, respectively.<sup>455</sup> Their failure was soon to become Anskar's: by 845, the Vikings had sacked Hamburg itself, along with Anskar's church, relics and other treasures.<sup>456</sup> As a result, Anskar was next stationed at Bremen, from which he staged new missions to the Danish king Horic I as well as to Sweden in the 850s.<sup>457</sup> Missions were only as strong as the monarchs who endorsed them: after Horic was killed in 854, the mission in Denmark crumbled under the pressure of internal conflict. Horic's eventual successor Horic II was even more receptive to Anskar's overtures, but similar unsteady circumstances dogged missionary efforts until Anskar's death in 865.<sup>458</sup>

This brief sketch generally derives from Rimbert's chronological organization of the long text across 42 chapters:

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<sup>452</sup> On this period, see *VA* 8, *MGH SRG* 55, 29-30; and more specifically on the political context, *ARF* 827, *MGH SRG* 6, 172-74.

<sup>453</sup> *VA* 9-10, *MGH SRG* 55, 31-32; on their return to Louis, see *VA* 11-12, *MGH SRG* 55, 32-34.

<sup>454</sup> *VA* 13-15, *MGH SRG* 55, 34-37.

<sup>455</sup> *VA* 17-18, *MGH SRG* 55, 38-39.

<sup>456</sup> *VA* 16-17, *MGH SRG* 55, 37-38; see also *Annales Bertiniani* 845, *MGH SRG* 5, 32-33.

<sup>457</sup> *VA* 24, 25-26, *MGH SRG* 55, 51-57.

<sup>458</sup> *VA* 32-33, 41, *MGH SRG* 55, 63-65, 75-77. See also *Annales xantenses* 866 (*recte* 865), *MGH SRG* 7, 22; *Annales corbeiensis* 865, *MGH SS* 3, 3; and *Annales quedlinburgenses* 985, *MGH SS* 3, 48.

**Table 3.7: Structure of Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*.**

1-11: Hagiographical narrative of Anskar's early life and career, c. 801-29	
1-5	Rimbert narrates Anskar's early life and entry into the monastery at Corbie around 812-13; Anskar receives a vision of St. Peter and John the Baptist telling him to "depart, and return to me a crowned martyr ( <i>Vade, et martyrio coronatus ad me reverteris</i> )" <sup>459</sup> ; other visions follow, and Anskar's sanctity is revealed through a healing miracle of a schoolmate.
6-8	Anskar joins the monastery at <i>Nova Corbeia</i> (Corvey), and Rimbert sketches Carolingian and Scandinavian political situations before Anskar's departure there.
9-11	Anskar receives <i>missi</i> from the Swedes and goes there to preach with the permission of Bjorn II.
12-23: Institutional narrative of Anskar's ecclesiastical organization and development of the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen, c. 832-64	
12-15	Anskar continues his missionary work among the Danes, Slavs, and Swedes, leaving bishop Gautbert to work in Sweden.
16-20	Danish raids on Hamburg (c. 845) are followed by Gauzbert's persecution in Sweden and the absence of priests there.
21-23	Rimbert sketches out political events in Francia.
24-42: Return to the hagiographical narrative, c. 852-65	
24-29	After Anskar becomes bishop of Bremen, he redoubles his efforts in Denmark and Sweden during the reign of Horic I.
30-34	War between the Danes and Swedes halts progress, followed by the death of Horic I in 854, which complicates progress further.
35-39	Rimbert reflects on Anskar's ascetic practices, visions, pastoral care and miracles.
40-41	Rimbert emphasizes that Anskar's life was "like a martyrdom"; in 864, Anskar falls ill of dysentery, and begins to set ecclesiastical affairs in order before his death.
42	Rimbert's comments on martyrdom and Anskar's burial.

As Anskar's successor at the combined archbishopric of Hamburg and Bremen, Rimbert was operating under pressures from the North unparalleled by those of other hagiographers we have met so far.<sup>460</sup> In fact, Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* is a rare

<sup>459</sup> *VA* 3, *MGH SRG* 55, 23.

<sup>460</sup> On the unification of Hamburg and Bremen, I have consulted the work of Wolfgang Seegrün, *Das Erzbistum Hamburg in seinen älteren Papsturkunden* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1976); and Brigitte Wavra, *Salzburg und Hamburg: Erzbistumsgründung und Missionspolitik in karolingischer Zeit* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1991).

hagiographic example narrating the challenges and failures of missionary work. Not even the promise of martyrdom in Anskar's first vision came true.<sup>461</sup> In the tradition of Boniface, Anskar's authority stemmed directly from the papacy as well as Frankish royalty.<sup>462</sup> Rimbert wrote the *vita* soon after 865 as well, so the wounds of those failures combined with the loss of Anskar himself were still fresh.<sup>463</sup> These circumstances support the idea that Rimbert's work was part of a desperate plea to continue missionary work in the North.<sup>464</sup> Rimbert's work emerges from the ninth century as a prime example of missionary propaganda resting on the authority of Boniface, the papacy, and Frankish imperial ambitions.<sup>465</sup> For Wood, "the factual basis of Rimbert's account of Anskar's legation is likely to be largely accurate,"<sup>466</sup> but Eric Knibbs has more recently argued that the *vita* was not a text with straightforward narrative qualities, but was part of a broader campaign to fabricate diplomatic evidence to support the mission.<sup>467</sup> To demonstrate his legitimacy, Rimbert's depiction of Anskar emphasized his propensity to have dreams

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<sup>461</sup> A discrepancy Rimbert tried to clarify by insisting in *VA* 40, *MGH SRG* 55, 75 that: "his recent grave illness was more than enough to make him a martyr by God's grace (*ipsa infirmitas novissima gravis nimium et diutina satis superque ipsi pro martyrio cum Dei gratia reputari potuisset*)."

<sup>462</sup> For these details I follow Wood, *Missionary Life*, 259-62; and James Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*," 249. See, for example, *VA* 13, *MGH SRG* 55, 35, for a claim to Frankish authority.

<sup>463</sup> This was an emotional reality Rimbert emphasized in *VA* 1. He also notes that Louis the German was still living at the time of composition, so the text could have been written no later than 876. On this point, see Theodor Klüppel, "Die Germania (750-950)," in *Hagiographies*, ed. Philippart, 161-209, at 200.

<sup>464</sup> Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*," 240.

<sup>465</sup> The context of which has been reconstructed by Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*," 237-50.

<sup>466</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 126. More specifically, this is true "despite the fact that there are certain crucial events, like the expulsion of Harald Klak from Denmark, and the deposition of Louis the Pious [in which Ebo was involved] and the removal of Ebo of Rheims from his see, which are left unmentioned" (*ibid.*).

<sup>467</sup> Knibbs, *Forged Foundations*, 7-8.

whose “visual force”<sup>468</sup> were only matched by the regularity with which he received them.<sup>469</sup> Rimbert’s primary task was to legitimize the missions’ continued support after Anskar’s death, as Palmer has argued.<sup>470</sup> Rimbert’s portrayal of the North at the “ends of the earth”—his favorite phrases were *extremum terrae* or *ad fines orbis terrae*<sup>471</sup>—not only fulfilled the apocalyptic prophecies of Is. 49.5-7,<sup>472</sup> but also connected them with descriptions of the natural world in the *Vita Anskarii*. Scripture could be inscribed onto the missionary wilderness.

### **Monstrous Images of the Scandinavian *extremum terrae*: Aethicus Ister, Ratramnus and Rimbert**

For these reasons, Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii* was concerned with converting pagans at the ends of the earth in the service of apocalyptic expectations. Rimbert deployed both natural and geographic language to describe the ends of the earth around the North Sea. As Palmer has clearly shown, the early Carolingian world saw a lively series of debates

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<sup>468</sup> Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming*, 52.

<sup>469</sup> Walther Lammers observed that Rimbert’s hagiographic style contrasted with that of Alcuin in that the latter emphasized deeds (*gesta*) over signs and miracles in his “Ansgar, visionäre Erlebnisformen und Missionsauftrag,” in *Speculum Historiale: Geschichte im Spiegel von Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsdeutung*, ed. Clemens Bauer, Laetitia Böhm and Max Müller (Munich: Alber, 1965), 541-58.

<sup>470</sup> Palmer, “Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii*,” 237-42.

<sup>471</sup> Rimbert employed these phrases in *VA* 25 and 34, *MGH SRG* 55, 65, quoting Matt. 28.20 in *VA* 38, *MGH SRG* 55, 73: “Ecce ego uobiscum sum omnibus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi.”

<sup>472</sup> Ian Wood demonstrated this in “Christians and Pagans,” 36-67. In *Missionary Life*, 251, he elaborated: “Mission to the world’s end automatically carried apocalyptic overtones, for Matthew 24, 15 announces: ‘And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come’.”

about the theological background of the apocalypse and computus,<sup>473</sup> some of whose questions entered into hagiographic works.<sup>474</sup> For Palmer, Rimbart “mixed practical experience, literary motifs, and an educated imagination to create a lively image of the pagan edges of the known world,”<sup>475</sup> including discussions of the cynocephali, or dog-headed humans, whom we shall discuss shortly. Whereas Carolingian theologians computed time to determine the dating of Easter, Alberi has demonstrated that even before Charlemagne’s kingdom was referred to as an *imperium*, it was often designated the *castra Dei*, or “camp of God” against pagan enemies.<sup>476</sup> Such designations contributed to a sense of the “Other” against which the *castra Dei* could be compared.<sup>477</sup> As Palmer noted, “[m]ost traces of apocalyptic thought in the eighth and early ninth century tie into a relatively narrow cluster of reforming agendas . . . what these [computistical] handbooks reveal is the openness of debates about time, and the complex interactions of intellectual networks” in the early Carolingian world.<sup>478</sup> By the time of Rimbart’s writing, that debate had opened widely enough to embrace hagiographic thought. A clear sense of Frankish territorial cohesiveness thus predated Rimbart’s *Vita Anskarii* by at least a century. Rimbart used this concept to his advantage by describing Scandinavia as the land *ad fines orbis terrae* in need of conversion to fulfill the prophecy

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<sup>473</sup> Palmer, “End of Time,” 1308: “Debates about apocalypticism and chronological tradition in the early Carolingian world are debates which are not usually well-integrated because the approaches used can be so different. Studies of the apocalyptic have either focussed closely on the development of theological ideas.”

<sup>474</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 422-25.

<sup>475</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 422.

<sup>476</sup> Mary Alberi, “‘Like the Army of God’s Camp’:” Political Theology and Apocalyptic Warfare at Charlemagne’s Court,” *Viator* 41 (2010): 1-20.

<sup>477</sup> Wood, *Missionary Life*, 250-53; Palmer, *Anglo-Saxons*, 113-16.

<sup>478</sup> Palmer, “End of Time,” 1308.

that “this gospel of the kingdom, shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations, *and then shall the consummation come.*”<sup>479</sup> In the *Vita Anskarii*, Rimbart intersected nature, geography and apocalyptic thought in a hagiographic work.

According to Rimbart, from an early age Anskar wanted to travel abroad to one region amongst “all the world” and “all nations.” This impulse astounded Anskar’s colleagues, who according to Rimbart saw Anskar as an outsider:

Denique, cum haec publice protestarentur, essetque cognitum omnibus qui in domo conversabantur abbatis, coeperunt multi tantam eius admirari immutationem; quod scilicet, relicta patria et propinquis suis, fratrum quoque, cum quibus educatus fuerat, dulcissima affectione, alienas expetere vellet nationes et cum ignotis ac barbaris conversari . . . Denique cum abbas per dies singulos ad palatium iret, ipse domi residens consortia onnium fugiebat, et in quadam vinea iuxta posita solitarium sibi locum eligens, orationi et lectioni vacabat.<sup>480</sup>

Finally, when this was publicly announced, and it became understood by everyone who gathered in the abbot’s house, many of them began to express wonder at his stubbornness of will; that is, that he was willing to leave his homeland and relatives and the love of the brethren with whom he had been educated, and to visit foreign nations and talk with unknown and barbarous peoples . . . Finally when the abbot went every day to the palace, [Anskar] stayed home and fled from contact with everyone and, choosing for himself a solitary place in a nearby vineyard, he gave himself to prayer and to reading.

Early in the *vita*, Rimbart established the North Sea zone as a place beyond Francia’s fringes. Even Anskar’s habits of removing himself to a vineyard to meditate attracted the bewilderment of other monks. On a deeper level, the vineyard stands as a microcosm as the larger mission field, echoing the parable of the workers in the vineyard from Matt. 20: “the kingdom of heaven is like to a householder, who went out early in the

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<sup>479</sup> Matt 24.14: “Et praedicabitur hoc evangelium regni in universo orbe in testimonium omnibus gentibus; *et tunc veniet consummatio.*” Emphasis added.

<sup>480</sup> VA 7, MGH SRG 55, 28.

morning to hire labourers into his vineyard (*Simile est enim regnum caelorum homini patri familias, qui exiit primo mane conducere operarios in vineam suam*).” If the kingdom of heaven was like a vineyard with laborers, Anskar entered that vineyard at an early age.

For Rimbert, the Scandinavian mission field was by definition at the ends of the known world. Later in his career, when Anskar was facing the difficult decision of returning to Sweden under the endorsement of both Louis the German and Horic II, he received a vision in which he saw a cityscape full of large buildings and smaller dwellings. There, a man told him to seek out the abbot Adalhard in Sweden, but only God would reveal the circumstances of their meeting. Rimbert emphasized the “Otherness” of the Scandinavian archipelago by quoting Isaiah 49.1: “Hear, O islands, and give ear ye peoples from afar.” In an aside, Rimbert explained the significance of the words in the vision: Anskar was comforted by the words “‘Hear, O islands (*Audite, insulae*),’ because nearly all that country is made up of islands; and to that had been added, ‘Thou shalt be unto them for salvation, even unto the end of the earth,’ since in the north the end of the earth lay in Swedish regions.”<sup>481</sup> Sweden was described primarily as being at the *extremum terrae*, the end of the world. The vision anticipated Ebbo’s words of advice to Anskar later in the *vita*:

“Certus sis,” inquit, “quia, quod nos pro Christi nomine elaborare coepimus, fructificare habet in Domino. Nam ita est fides mea, et sic firmiter credo, immo veraciter scio, quia, etsi aliquando propter peccata quodammodo impeditum fuerit, quod [nos] in illis coepimus gentibus, non tamen umquam penitus extinguetur, sed fructificabit in Dei gratia et prosperabitur, usquequo perveniat nomen Domini

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<sup>481</sup> *VA 25, MGH SRG 55, 55*: “‘Audite, insulae,’ quia omnis fere patria illa in insulis est constituta, et quod subiunctum est: ‘Eris illis in salutem usque ad extremum terrae,’ quia finis mundi in aquilonis partibus in Sueonum coniacet regionibus.”



ad fines orbis terrae.”<sup>482</sup>

“Be sure,” he said, “that what we have begun to undertake in the name of Christ, will have fruit in the Lord. For it is my faith, and as I firmly believe [and] I know to be true, that, even though for now on account of our sins might be an impediment, the work that we have started among these peoples will never be entirely extinguished, but will bear fruit by the grace of God and prosper, until the name of the Lord reaches unto the ends of the earth.”

The eschatological dimension of the *Vita Anskarii* is clear in this passage. Anskar was taking the gospel *ad fines orbis terrae*, to the ends of the earth, to hasten the return of Christ. Palmer has observed that one of the few scriptural allusions in the *Vita Anskarii* is to Apoc. 4.4, which Rimbert employed to describe a boyhood vision of Anskar’s in which he saw the panoply of saints in heaven.<sup>483</sup> “Rimbert’s hagiographical, eschatological and missionary interests,” Palmer has argued, “intersected to create another northern missionfield pregnant with allegory, this time more pressingly prophetic.”<sup>484</sup> Carolingian attitudes built upon earlier Anglo-Saxon ones as well: Alcuin’s *Vita Vedasti* echoed the language of Charlemagne’s *Admonitio generalis* of 789,<sup>485</sup> emphasizing that the future *tempora novissima* would replace the current *tempora periculosa* from which *pseudo doctores* (“false teachers”) would arise.<sup>486</sup> Such language

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<sup>482</sup> *VA* 34, *MGH SRG* 55, 65.

<sup>483</sup> *VA* 3. Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 424-25. For Dutton, this vision was meant as a political comment on Charlemagne’s death whose descriptive features he compares with Charlemagne’s mosaics in the palace chapel at Aachen, in *The Politics of Dreaming*, 51-54.

<sup>484</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 425.

<sup>485</sup> *Admonitio generalis* 82, *MGH Capit.* 1, 62.

<sup>486</sup> Palmer, “End of Time,” p. 1317, quoting Alcuin, *VV* 3, *MGH SRM* 3, 415. For scholarly approaches to Carolingian eschatological attitudes, Palmer’s references are indispensable; see especially Wolfram Brandes, “‘Tempora periculosa sunt’: Eschatologisches im Vorfeld der Kaiserkrönung Karls des Großen,” in *Das Frankfurter Konzil von 794: Kristallisationspunkt karolingischer Kultur*, 2 vols., ed. Rainer Berndt

was evident in Bede's typological exegesis, but did not necessarily indicate a real expectation of the end times.<sup>487</sup> Alcuin employed similar phrasing in his correspondence; but as such it underscores his more immediate concerns about failed conversions of the Saxons and Avars, as well as the Viking sack of Lindisfarne in 793,<sup>488</sup> rather than a genuine expectation of the apocalypse.<sup>489</sup>

Although such views were dominant in the period, apocalyptic rhetoric had "varied uses"<sup>490</sup> based mostly on biblical prophetic sources. "In prophecy," however, "despair and hope run close, and in a number of the prophetic books peace was framed eschatologically, as the hope of the world to come."<sup>491</sup> Rimbart gave shape to one distinct use of apocalyptic rhetoric in his depictions of the ends of the earth; his prophetic hope was derived from and inscribed upon the region's geography. Rimbart's was not a rhetorical assessment of the apocalypse, but a measured geographic description of what

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(Mainz: Selbstverlag der Gesellschaft für Mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte, 1997), I: 49-79.

<sup>487</sup> Palmer, "End of Time," 1317-18. See Bede, *In Apocalypsin, pref.*, CCSL 121A, 223-25. On the implications of apocalyptic thought for early medieval ideas of peace and its contemporary cultivation based on biblical tradition, see Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, 51-55, at 51: "Old and New Testament alike, however, share strong elements of peace as an eschatological concept, with the notion of the Messiah as a bringer of peace or its creator, and the defining notion of heavenly peace, the reward of the just and faithful."

<sup>488</sup> These motifs have been presented in Brandes, "Eschatologisches im Vorgeld," 66-71: Brandes argued for apocalyptic fears of the year 800 on this basis, which Palmer has refuted in "End of Time," 1317-18.

<sup>489</sup> Palmer, "End of Time," 1318: "To read isolated phrases [like *tempora periculosa*] in these letters as straightforward proofs that Alcuin thought the end was coming, and maybe even that his view was influential, is to prioritise a narrow reading of texts which contain many changes of tone and mood, as Alcuin moved from lamenting the instability of his 'perilous times' to arranging happily to meet friends at court the following Spring. Apocalyptic rhetoric had varied uses but a distinct logic."

<sup>490</sup> Palmer, "End of Time," 1318. For Palmer's views on these dominant strands of apocalyptic thought in this period, see *ibid.*, 1330-31.

<sup>491</sup> Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, 53.

the edges of the known world were physically like. That mission field was so close to the ends of the earth that the efforts of Ebbo and Anskar there were historically without precedent.<sup>492</sup> Like the Saxons during Charlemagne's reign, towards the end of the ninth century images of Scandinavians emphasized their wildness.<sup>493</sup> As we have seen in this chapter, the concepts of saving souls and eschatology have seldom operated together in missionary *vitae*. Rimbert was the first hagiographer to argue for the connection explicitly many times in the same work. He also connected it with observations on geography and nature. In the *Vita Anskarii*, mission and Christianity were linked to a specific geographic place, not just with peoples. The edge of the earth was a place full of strange creatures.

One of those creatures was the cynocephalus, a dog-headed human. As Wood<sup>494</sup> and others have pointed out, a letter of Ratramnus of Corbie (d. c. 870) on the nature of cynocephali<sup>495</sup> represents what some Carolingians thought they might find on the kingdom's fringes.<sup>496</sup> This particular tradition stretches back to Herodotus<sup>497</sup> and Pliny,

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<sup>492</sup> Although Willibrord had made forays into Denmark according to Alcuin, *VW* 9, and Liudger's aspirations to do the same were curtailed by Charlemagne himself, in Altfrid, *Vita Liudgeri* 1.30.

<sup>493</sup> For a clear expression of this cultural assumption, see *VA* 12, *MGH SRG* 55, 34.

<sup>494</sup> Wood, "Christians and Pagans," 64-66; and *idem*, "Missionary Hagiography in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries," in *Ethnogenese und Überlieferung: Angewandte Methoden der Frühmittelalterforschung*, ed. Karl Brunner and Birgitte Merta (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1994), 189-99.

<sup>495</sup> This is Ratramnus, *Ep.* 12, *MGH Epp.* 6, 155-57.

<sup>496</sup> The following paragraphs on Ratramnus and Aethicus Ister are indebted to the comments of James Palmer, "Defining Paganism," 423-25. On the ancient sources for cynocephali, see Claude Lecouteux, "Les Cynocéphales: Etude d'une tradition tératologique de l'Antiquité au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 24 (1981): 117-28; and James Romm, "Belief and Other Worlds: Ktesias and the Founding of the 'Indian Wonders'," in *Mindscapes: The Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, ed. George

but was transmitted into Christian intellectual culture by Augustine, who thought the cynocephali were subhuman for their inability to speak.<sup>498</sup> Early medieval authors like Isidore and the anonymous author of *The Wonders of the East* agreed that the cynocephali were beasts beyond salvation.<sup>499</sup> By the early eighth century, the cynocephali appeared in Aethicus Ister's satirical *Cosmographia*, which claimed that dog-headed people, hitherto thought to have lived only in Africa or India,<sup>500</sup> lived in the lands around the North Sea.<sup>501</sup> According to the *Cosmographia*,

Munitiam insolam septentrionalem scribit. Homines cenocephalus nimis famosa indagatione scrutans capite canino habere similitudinem, reliqua membra humana specie, manus et pedes sicut reliqui hominum genus. Procere statura, truculenta specie . . . Idem gentiles nudatis cruribus incedunt, crines nutriunt oleo inlitas aut adipe fetore nimium reddentes, spurcissimam uitam ducentes. Inmundarum quatrupediarum inlicita comedent, mus et talpas et reliqua. Aedificia nulla condigna, trauis cum tentoriis filteratis utentes; siluestria loca et deuia, paludes et arundinosa; pecora nimium et auium copia ouiumque plurimarum. Ignorantes deum, demonia et auguria colentes, regem non habent.

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Slusser and Eric Rabkin (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 121-35.

<sup>497</sup> Leconteux, "Les cynocéphales," 117-19; Romm, "Belief and Other Worlds," 121-35; and Herren, *Cosmography*, 81, n. 251; Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 134.

<sup>498</sup> For this assessment, I am following Scott Bruce, "Hagiography as Monstrous Ethnography: A Note on Ratramnus of Corbie's Letter Concerning the Conversion of the Cynocephali," in *Insignis Sophiae Arcator: Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Michael Herren on His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. Michael Herren, Gernot Wieland, Carin Ruff and Ross Arthur (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 45-56, at 48-49: "Ancient commentators from Ctesias to Pliny were unanimous in their opinion that the Cynocephali communicated by means of barking and were otherwise incapable of speaking human languages.

<sup>499</sup> Bruce, "Monstrous Ethnography," 50.

<sup>500</sup> Leconteux, "Les cynocéphales," 117-29, at 119; Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 135 has called Aethicus Ister's situating of the cynocephali in northern Europe "innovant d'après la tradition qui les situait plutôt en Inde ou en Ethiopie."

<sup>501</sup> Ian Wood, "Aethicus Ister: An Exercise in Difference," in *Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen der Wissenschaften, 2000), 197-208, at 199 has suggested that *Monabiam* (the Isle of Man) should be read for *Munitiam*.

[Aethicus] describes the northern isle of Munitia. Examining the Dog-headed men there according to his well-known investigative method, [Aethicus claims that] their heads resemble canine heads, but the rest of their members—hands, feet—were of the human species [and] like other race[s] of men. They are tall in stature, savage in appearance . . . These same heathens go about bare-legged, and they treat their hair by smearing it in oil or fat, which gives off a terrible stench; they lead a most filthy life. They eat the forbidden meat of unclean quadrupeds—mice, moles, and the like. They have no proper buildings, but make use of poles with felt tent-coverings; their settlements are in wooded and remote locations, swamps and marshy places; cattle are abundant, and there is a good supply of game birds as well as numerous sheep. Ignorant of God, worshipping demons and omens, they have no king.<sup>502</sup>

The anonymous author, calling himself “Jerome” and claiming that he was recording the account of an otherwise unknown philosopher Aethicus Ister,<sup>503</sup> argued that the cynocephali were utterly different from civilized people in both appearance and practice. While Aethicus Ister relied on Tacitus’ *Germania* and Isidore’s *Etymologiae* to construct images of monsters on the edges of the known world,<sup>504</sup> dog masks found at Hedeby in Denmark suggest that such perceptions were perhaps based on perceived

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<sup>502</sup> Trans. Herren, *Cosmography*, 26-29.

<sup>503</sup> On the impossibility of Jerome’s composition of the *Cosmographia*, see the established findings of Heinz Löwe, “Die ‘Vacetae insolae’ und die Entstehungszeit der Kosmographie des Aethicus Ister,” *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 31 (1975): 1-16; and Michael Herren, “Wozu diente die Fälschung der Kosmographie des Aethicus?” in *Lateinische Kultur im VIII. Jahrhundert: Traube-Gedenkschrift*, ed. Albert Lehner and Walter Berschin (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1989), 145-59. For an assessment of these views and their application to the text itself, see Natalia Lozovsky, “*The Earth is Our Book*”: *Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West, ca. 400-1000* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 31-33.

<sup>504</sup> For example, in this passage Aethicus Ister relied on *Etym.* 11.3.15 for his description of “canine heads (*capite canino . . . similitudinem*).” For Isidore, “Cynocephali appellantur eo quod canina capita habeant.” And for his description of the worship of demons and reliance on omens, he was possibly relying on Tacitus, *Germania* 9-10. For these and other references I have relied on Herren, *Cosmography*, 82, n. 261-62.

realities.<sup>505</sup> For Palmer, such evidence points to a “continuum of constructions elaborately erected to make sense of that which did not lend itself to the Christian ‘centre’. For Ratramnus and probably Rimbert, encyclopedic and literary traditions were an integral part of their understanding of the practical world around them.”<sup>506</sup> Ratramnus linked these descriptions closely with those of nature and agriculture. By doing so, he connected eschatology to a particular place at the edge of the earth.

So there was good reason for Rimbert himself to ask Ratramnus whether or not he might encounter cynocephali on his own northern missions. The fundamental question was whether or not the monsters were to be evangelized or if they harbored any capacity to reason or receive grace by baptism. Ratramnus’ explanation was based primarily on Isidore’s *Etymologiae* on monsters. By deploying authoritative encyclopedic knowledge, Ratramnus was trying to make practical sense of the world into which Rimbert was preparing to travel.<sup>507</sup> Ratramnus essentially provided Rimbert a checklist for diagnosing the cynocephali’s human capacities, including their habit of covering their genitals and living in organized, governed villages. Above all, though, they had the capacity to manipulate the natural world, a point upon which Ratramnus focused more than any other:

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<sup>505</sup> This is a point Palmer has flagged as evidence for early medieval perceptions of dog-headed people in “Defining Paganism,” 423. On the masks, see Inge Hägg, *Die Textilfunden aus dem Hefen von Haithabu* (Neumünster: Wachholtz, 1984), 69-72. This is a point for which I am indebted to John Clay in recent conversations. Geneviève Bührer-Thierry has argued that dogs were exegetically considered to be common symbols for paganism in “Des païens comme chiens dans le monde germanique et slave du haut Moyen Age,” in *Impies et païens entre Antiquité et Moyen Age*, ed. Michel Sot and Lionel Mary (Paris: Picard, 2002), 175-87.

<sup>506</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 423-24. Compare this with Guizard-Duchamp, *Les terres*, 135: “La localisation errante des cynocéphales montre à quel point l’altérité peut être associée à des terres non encore touchées par le christianisme.”

<sup>507</sup> Isidore, *Etym.* 11.3.12-28.

Iam vero agros colere, terram proscindere, sementem rurali fenori concredere, artis demonstrat peritiam. Quae res nisi ratione praeditis hautquaquam favere cognoscitur. Etenim rationis est causam requirere singularum actionum, verbi causa, quae res pingues efficiat terras, quae causa sementis ubertatem producat; quarum sine scientia agricultura numquam digne poterit exerceri.<sup>508</sup>

Now indeed to cultivate fields, to plow the earth, and to sow seeds for agricultural profit, demonstrates the knowledge of an art. And arts are known to belong only to those given reason. In fact reason is required in order to search for the causes for singular actions like which things render the earth fruitful, [and] which way of sowing seeds produces an abundant harvest; without understanding of these things it would never be possible for agriculture to be worthily exercised.

Cynocephali were subversive creatures in the text because, surprisingly, their appearance mattered far less than their behavior and ability to organize their society.

“Lacking the capacity for human speech,” Scott Bruce has remarked on an earlier tradition, “the Cynocephali [according to Augustine] were no more than beasts and were therefore not included in God’s plan for human salvation.”<sup>509</sup> Ratramnus, rejecting this tradition, considered them to be creatures of reason, capable of receiving salvation. In part, Ratramnus used the early Christian legend of the dog-headed saint Christopher as evidence for the humanity of cynocephali: God, after all, had granted Christopher speech.<sup>510</sup> We can detect in this explanation a hope simmering beneath the surface that Rimbert might actually encounter dog-headed humans: if found, and they possessed the capacity to reason, they should be claimed for the faith and baptized.<sup>511</sup> If this was

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<sup>508</sup> Ratramnus, *Ep. 12, MGH Epp. 6*, 155-56.

<sup>509</sup> Bruce, “Monstrous Ethnography,” 49.

<sup>510</sup> Ratramnus, *Ep. 12, MGH Epp. 6*, 156, claimed to have read a “little book” on Christopher’s life. On the background for this point, I am relying Bruce, “Monstrous Ethnography,” 55.

<sup>511</sup> For Philippe Depreux, *Sociétés occidentales du milieu du VI<sup>e</sup> à la fin du IX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002), 15-16, at 16, Ratramnus was describing a social group of people who could “observer les règles de la via sociale (*iura societatis*)”

accomplished, their conversion may be crucial in an eschatological vision of northern Christianization. By defining the fringes of the known world *ad fines orbis terrae* or at the *extremum terrae*, Ratramnus was turning the mirror back on Frankish audiences in an effort to articulate what it meant first to be human, and second to be Christian. For Ratramnus, describing agricultural practice, the natural world and oddities that appeared in it was central to that expression.

### ***Imagining the extremum terrae in the Anonymous Vita Rimberti***

Discussions of Scandinavia at the *extremum terrae* extended to the ends of missionary *vitae* production as well. Rimbart's *Vita Anskari*, along with the anonymous *Vita Rimberti* (composed between c. 888 and 909), while they by no means mark the end of the Christianization process in Scandinavia, are the last voices from the cluster of missionary *vitae* that had begun with Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii*. Together with the *Vita Anskari*, these texts are our best early sources for the Christianization of Scandinavia, its Carolingian context and the early history of the diocese of Hamburg-Bremen.<sup>512</sup> Pressed to finish his eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*—the “History of the Bishops of the Church of Hamburg”—Adam of Bremen's (d. c. 1085) hagiographic trail ran cold after the *vitae* of Anskar and Rimbart.<sup>513</sup> Although it is far

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and should be considered as capable of all the activities and observations of a normative medieval village.

<sup>512</sup> On the special circumstances of Hamburg-Bremen's unification, see Richard Drögereit, “Hamburg-Bremen, Bardowick-Verden Frühgeschichte und Wendenmission,” *Jahrbuch des Vereins für westfälische Kirchengeschichte* 51 (1969): 193-20; and Knibbs, *Forged Foundations*, 69-70.

<sup>513</sup> A fact admitted by Adam himself in *Gesta* 1.47. On the text and its sources, see Klüppel, “Die Germania (750-950),” 202; and Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of*



from certain, there are reasons to think that the *Vita Rimberti* was written quite soon after Rimbert's death in 888.<sup>514</sup> In the *Vita Rimberti*, the anonymous author was at pains to emphasize the close spiritual ties between Anskar as master and Rimbert as student, on earth as well as heaven.<sup>515</sup> In order to demonstrate this, the anonymous author retained Rimbert's own interpretations of the "ends of the earth." Eschatology remained a primary concern: at the outset of the *vita*, the anonymous author described the mission field in the specific historical context of Charlemagne's Saxon missions. Near the close of the ninth century, though, the faith had spread northward, "to the extremity of the northern area of that province (*extremam ad plagam aquilonalem eiusdem provinciae partem*)."<sup>516</sup> The anonymous author of the *Vita Rimberti* shared none of Rimbert's deeper interest in the natural world beyond geographic description. His enduring interest was consolidated in a language of construction at the ends of the earth, emphasizing the "ornamentation (*ornare*)" and "building up (*aedificare*)" of monks in the northern frontier by the development of monasticism there.<sup>517</sup> Vivid accounts of the landscape in the *Vita Rimberti* were nowhere to be seen; in the *vitae* detailing the early Christianization of Scandinavia, natural metaphors or descriptions were far less useful than apocalyptic thought and geographic description.

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*Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 110-16.

<sup>514</sup> See e.g. Klüppel, "Die Germania (750-950)," 201, who argues for a near-contemporary authorship from Corvey. In *Missionary Life*, 135, Wood, however, argued that the text emerged from the female monastery at Nienheerse based on its inclusion of a treatise on female virginity addressed to an inmate there.

<sup>515</sup> See e.g. *V. Rimb.* 6, 22, and 24, *MGH SS* 55, 84-85, 97-98 and 99-100.

<sup>516</sup> *V. Rimb.* 1, *MGH SRG* 55, 6.

<sup>517</sup> See e.g. *V. Rimb.* 15, 22 and 24, *MGH SRG* 55, 92, 98 and 99.

In Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*, a deep engagement with the natural world does not thrive on the same level as we have seen with, for example, Eigil's *Vita Sturmii*. The narrative's driving force was arguing for the support of an official mission rather than the conversion of the landscape. As Levison showed long ago, Rimbert relied on the *Vita Adalhardi* of Paschasius Radbertus, abbot of Corbie in the 840s, for parts of his own *Vita Anskarii*.<sup>518</sup> There is every reason to think Anskar was also aware of Radbertus' exegetical claim that the building of churches in the North would bring about the end of the world.<sup>519</sup> This emphasis on building was key to Rimbert's depiction of mission in the *Vita Anskarii*. Despite some of their failures, Rimbert was always careful to explain Anskar's missions in the most official way possible. His was not a destructive strategy like Boniface's had been: "[Anskar] took up the mission ordered to him by the emperor, so that he could go to the Swedes and discover, whether those people were ready to accept the faith, just as their messengers had said earlier."<sup>520</sup> Instead of destroying pagan shrines and defying kings, Anskar targeted the souls of kings and their court.<sup>521</sup> Rimbert dispensed with the vague process of clearing land, conquering nature and building over it as we have seen in earlier missionary *vitae*. Instead, Rimbert shifted focus towards clearly articulated ecclesiastical structures and modest building projects on the

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<sup>518</sup> Levison, "Zur Würdigung von Rimberts vita Anskarii," in *idem, Aus rheinischer und frankischer Frühzeit* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1948), 610-30, at 619. These parts were early in the *vita*, in *VA* 3-6.

<sup>519</sup> Paschasius Radbertus, *Expositio in Matthaeum* 11.24, 24.6-7 and 14, in *PL* 120: 306-7, 801, and 805. For this point I follow James Palmer, "Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*," 244.

<sup>520</sup> *VA* 10, *MGH SRG* 55, 31: "Suscepit itaque legationem sibi a caesare iniunctam, ut in partes iret Sueonum et probaret, utrum populus ille ad credendum paratus esset, sicut missi supradicti innotuerant."

<sup>521</sup> See e.g. *VA* 10, *MGH SRG* 55, 32, in which Anskar converts Herigar, counselor to the king.

borderlands.<sup>522</sup> Indeed, one of Anskar's most successful coups of his later career was permission from Horic II to lift the ban on Christian church bells at Ribe.<sup>523</sup> In the *Vita Anskarii*, nature was no longer the most useful category for thinking about conversion. The focus instead was on the conversion of urban centers, not the foundation of wilderness monasticism. When nature appeared in the *Vita Anskarii*, it was nearly always in the service of apocalyptic thought.

## Conclusions

This chapter began with a conflict among a missionary, a tree and its pagan devotees. The textual image of the great oak at Geismar has raised several questions about the nature of interactions between humans and their environments, especially when the former approached the latter with contempt or distrust. The *robor Iobis* was the focus of Boniface's aggression because it posed a threat to the spread of Christianity in that region. The great oak was charged with powers and threats that Boniface did not understand—and, according to his biographer Willibald, did not aim to understand. For this reason, Boniface harvested the “Oak of Jupiter” for the physical construction of the church in Hessia. As Chapters 1 and 2 have shown, the binaries suggested by such a story are by no means representative of early medieval attitudes towards nature, nor do they explain everything about Boniface's actions at Geismar. Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* was only one among a range of missionary approaches to the natural world during the eighth and ninth centuries in Francia. At a fundamental level, Anglo-Saxon and Frankish

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<sup>522</sup> See e.g. *VA* 13, 28, 31, *MGH SRG* 55, 3 4, 59 and 61-62.

<sup>523</sup> *VA* 32, *MGH SRG* 55, 63-64.

missionaries during this period had to contend with the basic elements in their environments to have a successful mission: a demonic tree, an inauspicious storm, an aggressive bear, poor soil, a foreboding swamp and many other naturally occurring confrontations. In the capable hands of educated hagiographers, components of the natural world could take on complex theological, scriptural, exegetical and liturgical meanings. By the end of the period in which missionary *vitae* were produced, the language of the natural world meshed tightly with new cultural realities: conversion, geographic description and eschatological thought at the very “ends of the earth.”

## “Understand Creation”: Conclusions

Columbanus’ assessment of the relationship between the natural world and devotion to God was brief and unequivocal: “Understand Creation, if you wish to know the Creator.”<sup>1</sup> This dissertation has explored the ways in which early medieval intellectuals could “understand Creation,” and how those interpretations could in turn shape ideas of monastic life and what it meant to be a Christian in early medieval England and Francia. As the previous chapters have shown, early medieval attitudes towards nature—the physical world created by God and perceived by the senses—were highly diverse, far more so than much scholarship allows. Part of the explanation for that diversity lies in the rich range of early medieval Latin texts that engage with the natural world from a broad spectrum of perspectives and purposes. Disentangling natural images from the commonplace but, I would argue, ultimately unsustainable scholarly binaries of “positive” and “negative” views of nature helps us to understand the complexities of individual texts, as well as the conceptual frameworks within which early medieval authors thought about—and with—the intersection of the holy and the natural world.<sup>2</sup>

For, as we have seen, such binaries do not explain Romanus’ monastic establishment in the wilderness of the Jura Mountains, Eigil’s depiction of Fulda’s foundation in close reference to natural features or Æthelwulf’s Christological landscapes in Northumbria. We will recall that Eugendus, the third abbot of Condat in the Jura, had received a vision of the Apostles Peter and Paul under his “usual tree” some distance from the monastery. Dumbfounded, Eugendus asked the holy men what they were doing

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<sup>1</sup> Columbanus, *Instructiones* 1.4-5, 64: “Intellege, si uis scire Creatorem, creaturam.” For a discussion, see Chapter 1, 167-69.

<sup>2</sup> See Introduction, 5-10.

in the Jura wilderness. Peter and Paul answered that “now we have come to dwell *here* as well.”<sup>3</sup> This thesis has explored some of the crucial ways in which concepts of the natural world could be presented as shaping—and being made to shape—aspects of early medieval religious life. This study has uncovered not only how Columbanus’ injunction to “understand Creation” was pursued but also how Eugendus’ question could be answered. These chapters have shown how notions of place and nature worked together with the processes through which religious communities could be created and sustained, and how the wilderness could become holy, a fitting place for the Apostles and those who would emulate their achievements.

These were textual strategies of writing about the Christianization of space and place using a common stock of literary discourses rooted in Scripture, exegesis and hagiography. Writing about nature in early medieval England and Francia in part involved the articulation of what being a Christian could mean in an age of seismic cultural shifts: as Christianity spread in patterns no longer limited by the form of the western Roman Empire, perceptions of natural places were fragmented. Where once Greco-Roman deities were believed to dwell in beautiful, rural landscapes,<sup>4</sup> late antique holy men and women inhabited the empty wildernesses of Egypt, Gaul and Britain.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> *VPI* 153-54, 402-4: “hic quoque nunc habitaturi uenimus.” Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Buxton, *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Mythology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 80-113; and Jacques Fontaine, “Valeurs antiques et valeurs chrétiennes dans la spiritualité des grands propriétaires terriens à la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle occidental,” in *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offert au Cardinal Daniélou*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), 571-95. See Introduction, 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Claudia Rapp, “Desert, City, and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination,” in *The Encroaching Desert: Egyptian Hagiography and the Medieval West*, ed. Jitse Dijkstra and Mathilde van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 93-112, at 93. See Introduction, 5-6.

wilderness landscapes with which monastic communities and ascetics dealt contained natural features through which they often mediated their ideas of holiness. The broader physical contexts for these activities were made possible by widespread reforestation of parts of western Europe in the wake of the disintegration of Roman rule,<sup>6</sup> whose industry had systematically cleared forests.<sup>7</sup> The marshes of Anglo-Saxon England and Frisia, for example, were representative of the untamed *solitudines* with which early medieval monks, missionaries and intellectuals grappled. Early medieval authors used the natural world in their texts to make broader points about their places in the world. In the Jura, textual images of nature became a discourse about the centrality of place and the exegetical and hagiographic modes of thought that defined it. In such ways, textual images of nature were never fully limited by the page, but did real work in a world in need of re-articulation.

Sulpicius Severus was among the first to define the life and career of a holy man in late antique Gaul. In his *Vita Martini*, he described how Martin conquered natural

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Wickham, "European Forests in the Early Middle Ages: Landscape and Land Clearance," *Settimane* 37 (1990), 479-545, at 499-501 and 530-35. For scholarship on the depopulation of Europe after the end of Roman rule, see Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138-46. On processes of reforestation and depopulation as a function of climate change, see Paolo Squatriti, "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 799-826, esp. 799-803. See Introduction, 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> J. Donald Hughes, "Deforestation, Overgrazing, and Erosion," in *idem*, *Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans: Ecology in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 68-87. For the industrial innovations that made it possible, see *ibid*, 129-49. An implicit argument here is that, lacking the technology as well as the central authority to deforest the Mediterranean and Europe, the medieval period saw a significant reforestation. This argument is delivered more explicitly by Ralph Mathisen and Hagith Sivan, eds., *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 50. See Introduction, 44-45.

places like the island of Gallinaria where poisonous hellebore had no effect on the holy man. The central missionary act of the *Vita Martini* was Martin's felling of the sacred pine near Tours, where he assured the pagans that there was "nothing pious about a tree trunk (*nihil esse religionis in stipite*)."<sup>8</sup> According to Sulpicius, Martin's attitude towards nature was one of conquest and dominion; he located non-Christian religion in the natural world and exterminated it. Sulpicius' models would influence Caesarius of Arles' and Gregory of Tours' approaches to natural images, but not before Eucherius of Lyon constructed an alternative register of thought. For Eucherius, the monastic desert with all its natural features had the power to shape the perfect monk. The desert was in its own way "a boundless temple of our God" without need of physical, human-made adornment.<sup>9</sup> "Here," Eucherius insisted of the wilderness, was "a pleasant meadow for the inner man."<sup>10</sup> There, he observed, "fountains bubble, grasses thrive, flowers gleam and the joys of sight and smell show those possessing paradise what they shall possess [in Heaven]."<sup>11</sup> By combining metaphors of nature and holiness with those of the built and the human-made, Eucherius constructed a powerful argument for the nourishing effects of the natural beauty of the monastic "desert."<sup>12</sup> It was in these competing contexts—between Sulpicius' themes of conquest and Eucherius' argument for natural fitness—that the author of the *Vita patrum iurensium* projected Eucherius' metaphors upon the actual

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<sup>8</sup> *VM* 13.2, 280. For a comparison of this episode with one Gregory recounted in *GC* 2, *MGH SRM* 1.2, 300 ("Nulla est enim religio in stagnum"), see Chapter 1, 68-72.

<sup>9</sup> Eucherius of Lyon, *DLE* 3, 48: "incircumscriptionem dei nostri templum." For a discussion, see Chapter 1, 77-78.

<sup>10</sup> *DLE* 39-41, 73: "Hic interioris hominis pratum." Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> *DLE* 42, 76: "Aquis scatens, herbis virens, floribus renitens, visibus odoribusque iocunda, paradisum possidentibus se exhibet quam possidebunt."

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of this argument, see Chapter 1, 72-82.



landscapes in the Jura in his sequential *vitae*. In the *Vita patrum iurensium*, monastic history ran parallel with local environmental change: the author used the themes of claiming land, inhabiting it and manipulating environments in order to underscore the importance of nature to the community's identity and purpose. The anonymous sixth-century author also claimed that the holy men of Gaul were equals of the Desert Fathers—a quality the author clearly linked with the Jura's natural environment.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably the most dominant attitude found in our sources from this period was one that privileged nature's subordination to human control—a position adopted with little critical self-reflection by many recent studies of medieval textual images of nature.<sup>14</sup> Such a position is, perhaps, explicable in large part as the result of an over-reading of such commanding, if not necessarily representative, authors such as Caesarius and Gregory. For Caesarius, natural places conventionally served as metonyms for pagan practices, with natural features and places serving in his works as the subjects and sites of pagan veneration. "Behold the misery and stupidity of the human race," Caesarius complained, "[who] give out honor to a dead tree, but hate the precepts of a living God."<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, Gregory adhered to this view but adjusted it in light of his classification of nature in *De cursu stellarum*. For Gregory, textual representations of nature were constantly filtered through scriptural and hagiographic convention in order to rehabilitate nature by charging and investing it with new, sacred meanings. By doing so,

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<sup>13</sup> *VPI* 174, 426-28. Chapter 1, 110-11.

<sup>14</sup> See Introduction, 5-10.

<sup>15</sup> Caesarius, *Serm.* 54.5.17-30, *CCSL* 103, 239: "et videte miseriam vel stultitiam generis humani . . . arbori mortuae honorem inpendunt, et dei viventis praecepta contemnunt."

Gregory hinted at a compromise between Sulpicius' conquest of nature and the natural world's capacity to intersect with ideas of holiness. That compromise is glimpsed most clearly in the works of Columbanus, during whose lifetime monastic foundations flourished in Francia, and was formalized in Jonas of Bobbio's *vita* of him. For Columbanus, the best answers to questions about the relationship of (fallen) humanity to nature also answered fundamental questions of faith and belief: "Understand Creation, if you wish to know the Creator."

Building on these treatments of nature, Chapter 2 demonstrated that similar questions interested authors from sub-Roman Britain and early Anglo-Saxon England. Prior to the papal mission of 597, Gildas provided the only sustained textual evidence for events in Britain. To make sense of Britain after Rome, Gildas emphasized the profound emptiness of the British landscape and its reversion to a wilderness, both real and imagined—a political wilderness of bestial tyrants with feral names like *Maglocunus* or "Big Dog."<sup>16</sup> Gildas also used landscapes strewn with ruins as literary images that served as condensed indicators of the transformations his homeland had experienced. In Gildas' Britain, wild animals roamed among "the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, [which] looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press."<sup>17</sup> Wild animals of a different sort—immoral and acquisitive warlords—also roamed the land.

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<sup>16</sup> Chapter 2, 208-13, at 209.

<sup>17</sup> *DEB* 24, *MGH AA* 13, 39, trans. Winterbottom, 27: "in medio platearum ima turrium edito cardine euulsarum murorumque celsorum saxa, sacra altaria, cadauerum frustra, crustis ac si gelantibus purpurei cruoris tecta, uelut in quodam horrendo torculari mixta

Bede reworked this interpretation of landscapes for his description of Britain in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, but revised it with a crucial exegetical reading of the island's natural features and resources. In the *Historia*, Bede infused his descriptions of landscapes with exegetical interpretations of natural features. Scripture, in the fourth-century martyr Alban's case, was reenacted in the landscape at the Romano-British town of Verulamium: the hill on which Alban was martyred was one whose "natural beauty *had long fitted* it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr."<sup>18</sup> Natural places could also mirror or speak about religious life, foretelling and confirming complex relationships to history, as Bede's description of Cedd's monastic foundation at Lastingham makes clear.<sup>19</sup>

Anglo-Latin poets illuminated new categories of natural metaphors, as Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* demonstrates. In *De abbatibus*, as in other poetic works commemorating religious communities such as Aldhelm's *tituli* and the anonymous *Miracula Nynie episcopi*, Æthelwulf linked natural metaphors with images essential to monastic life such as the regenerative activities of clearing landscapes, constructing monastic buildings and crafting holy objects. Simple binary interpretations of nature are absent from the writings of Æthelwulf and other Anglo-Latin poets; while Æthelwulf dealt with themes of dangerous nature, he described the place of his community's foundation as a physical, natural manifestation of Christ's body—a Christological landscape charged with exegetical and hagiographic meaning. To describe the foundation

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uiderentur, et nulla esset omnimodis praeter domorum ruinas, bestiarum uolucrumque uentres in medio sepultura."

<sup>18</sup> *HE* 1.7, 30-33. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Chapter 2, 246-50.

of his Northumbrian monastic community, Æthelwulf crowned a hill with thorns in the text and, having removed them, crowned the hill with a sumptuously adorned monastic complex. Major poetic themes like vegetative entanglement were reinforced both visually and physically in the scenes and scriptural narratives carved on stone crosses.

When new religious communities were formed, questions about the roles of nature shifted. During the period of Frankish missionary activity (c. 690-900), hagiographers crafted narratives of conversion across two centuries, offering windows into cultural attitudes towards nature and missionary activity. These missionary *vitae* detailed efforts to convert barbarian groups on the fringes of the Frankish kingdom. Earlier *vitae* like Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* deployed approaches to nature similar to Sulpicius' models of conquest. When Boniface felled the great "Oak of Jupiter" at Geismar, he imitated Martin of Tours' militant approach to pagan devotion in a way informed by textual models, but instead of erasing the oak from the landscape he recycled its material, building a new holy place. To reform the act of chopping down a tree, Willibald embedded exegetical sources like Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob* in the narrative. Trees, as we have seen, were not just sources of anxiety for missionaries to pagan areas, but could bear diverse meanings in the minds and texts of early medieval intellectuals.

In Alcuin, we encountered an author whose hagiographic works offered a coherent and competing view of nature. For Alcuin, nature could be a metonym for the Christian history of the Frankish territory, as his treatment of marginal landscapes beyond

its borders (*ultra fines*)<sup>20</sup> such as Fositeland—which themselves should be read alongside Frankish and Anglo-Saxon interpretations of wetlands—makes clear. Other early Carolingian *vitae* such as Eigil’s *Vita Sturm* linked real natural places and features far more closely with monastic foundation. “Singing psalms with his mouth (*Psalmos vero in ore retinens*),” Eigil said of Sturm, the “explorer keenly (*avidus explorator*)” surveyed the mountains, hills, valleys and streams for a suitable place to establish the community of Fulda.<sup>21</sup> Eigil’s own textual ecology connected exegetically-derived images of nature, real landscapes and monastic foundation, and helped to legitimize Fulda’s claims to surrounding lands as well as give shape to the foundational narrative for his community.

Textual treatments of nature across the ninth century coalesced with apocalyptic thought on the fringes of the mission field. Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii* and the anonymous *Vita Rimberti* narrated the Christianization of Scandinavia in the eighth and early ninth centuries, but instead of making nature a central theme of those processes, these *vitae* emphasized the importance of visible building projects as indices of Christian success. Natural places and features did, however, appear in broader descriptions of the ends of the earth. Based on the eschatological challenge of Matt. 24.14 to convert all peoples to bring about the kingdom of God, both Rimbert and his anonymous biographer considered Scandinavia’s conversion as crucial for eschatological hopes. They described what the *extremum terrae* was physically like in the service of eschatological thought. Imagining nature “at the ends of the earth” is a fitting capstone to a discussion highlighting the range and richness of Carolingian treatments of the natural world.

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<sup>20</sup> *VW* 9, *MGH SRM* 7, 123.

<sup>21</sup> *VS* 7, *MGH SS* 2, 368-69. Chapter 3, 448-49.

Reading the natural world in sources from early medieval England and Francia reveals new aspects of religious life and ideas of community in the period. The natural world could perform multiple functions within texts: descriptions of nature might reject pagan devotion in landscapes, reenact or embed Scripture in natural features or shape ideas of religious life for a community. From Sulpicius Severus' models of conquest in late antique Gaul and working through the redefining of natural images in monastic and other communal settings, this thesis has above all demonstrated how central concepts of the natural world and the process of conceptualizing it were to early medieval intellectuals. Equipped with these readings of nature, it is possible for scholars to ask similar questions of sources dealing with the aftermath of the disintegration of Carolingian rule in medieval Europe and the cultural shifts that faced monastic communities as a result. Not only this, but reading the natural world in the sources illuminates cultural notions of place that may prove central to understanding political and ideological reforms in Alfred the Great's England and beyond. The importance of the natural world to ideas of place and sacred space can also help scholars better understand these shifting concepts during periods of cultural interaction such as the Christian reconquest of Islamic territories in Spain and the eastern Mediterranean in a period of growing Christian interest in the Holy Land prior to and resulting in the crusades. These are just a few of the areas of historical interest that stand to benefit from a sustained consideration of textual representations of nature.

The diversity of natural images in early medieval texts, as we have seen, supports a robust argument in favor of listening to those texts in new ways. Textual images of nature do not constitute an isolated topic, but one crucial to notions of devotion, place

and community. This study has offered ways of reading early medieval texts that ought to be fruitful for understanding concepts of place during a period of Christian expansion in the Latin west and beyond. Such readings have, as I have argued, made sense of complex texts such as the *Vita patrum iurensium*, whose foundational scene involved a monk, a wilderness landscape and a fir tree.

## Appendix: The *Vita patrum iurensium* as a Study in Textual Ecology

### *Outline of the Vita Patrum Iurensium*

I follow the chapter numbering of Martine, who continuously numbered the chapters (1-179) through all three lives: the *Vita Romani*, the *Vita Lupicini* and the *Vita Eugendi*. To the general structure I have added episodes, metaphors and mentions of the natural world (**in bold**).

### *Preface (1-3)*

The anonymous author explains to two monks of Agaune, John and Armentarius, the etymology of “Acaunus.” Acaunus means “**rock (*petra*)**” in “**ancient Gallic speech . . . found among the fields of the forest (*uester Gallico priscoque sermone . . . in campis siluae . . . repertam*).**”

### *The Life of Romanus (4-61)*

- 4-11 Romanus’ origins and foundation at Condadisco in the “**solitudes of the desert (*secretis heremi*)**” He wanders in the **dense Jura forests** until he founds his hermitage under a **fir tree at the base of a mountain and near a spring**. Here he is **like a honeybee pollinating flowers**. Only the odd hunter or **broad-horned deer** passed by.
- 12-17 Romanus’ brother Lupicinus and others join him. Romanus’ retreat is **like a nest**. The small community resides where there “is now” an oratory near the **original fir tree**. The community is like an **abundant crop without weeds**; like a **beehive full of bees**; and like **small rivers** with a single source.
- 18-21 Hilary of Arles ordains Romanus a priest while Romanus resists the illustriousness of the office.
- 22-26 The community expands and Romanus and Lupicinus establish a female community at Balma for their sister, which is **isolated under a “natural stone archway (*superiecto naturali saxo*)**.” The place is “**cut off by an inaccessible cliff isolated naturally under a wide arch (*praecisa inaccessibili desuper rupe ac sub cingulo prolixius naturaliter perexcisa*)**.” The problem of **food** for the growing monastery is addressed, and Condat’s **topography and seasons** are described—**clearance** begins.
- 27-35 Romanus resists the devil’s temptations, threatening the crowded **sheepfold**. Against the devil Romanus invokes the example of Ananias and Sapphira **choked by weeds**.
- 36-40 Romanus resists gluttony amongst the community; it is discussed in tandem with **harvest and cultivation of land**. Some monks leave the monastery, compared



with **jackdaws and ravens** distinct from **doves**.

- 41-51 Romanus performs various miracles. His enemies are compared with **venomous serpents** menacing the Lord's **flock**.
- 52-58 The deacon Sabinianus, in charge of the "**mills and weirs on a nearby river below the monastery of Condat** (*causa utilitatis strenue in uicino flumine sub ipso Condatescensi coenobio molinas pisasque*)" resists the devil's temptations. The devil comes disguised as an **enormous snake** while he and some brothers are **channeling the river**.
- 59-61 Conclusions, and the death of Romanus. His body is buried on **top of the hill near the fir tree**; the place "**blooms** (*florente*)" with miracles.

### **The Life of Lupicinus (62-117)**

- 62-67 Lupicinus' origins and way of life: he dresses in **animal skins**; as an ascetic he fashions a body warmer from **oak bark**, pieced together in the shape of a cradle (65).
- 68-78 Lupicinus' miracles, including the multiplication of **wheat stores** and the healing of the severe ascetic with the remedy of **sunlight and greenery**, reviving his body, that is, his "**brother's ass** (*fraternal asellum*)"; he teaches him to tend the **community garden**.
- 79-81 Two brothers try to escape "outside the bounds of Paradise," bringing with them a **hoe and ax**.
- 82-86 Lupicinus addresses the community.
- 87-91 The monk Dativus is attacked by the devil and leaves the monastery; later, he encounters the devil disguised as a possessed man in the **atrium** of Martin's basilica at Tours. The devil torments and seeks to own him, calling Dativus **my horse** (*te uehiculum nostrum*).<sup>\*</sup> Once he returns, the author calls Dativus a "**little sheep** (*oviculam*)."<sup>\*</sup> Lupicinus' prayers keep him from leaving a second time.
- 92-95 Lupicinus defends himself and freedmen at court against Chilperic I.
- 96-110 Lupicinus' prayers aid the count Agrippinus, who goes on pilgrimage to Rome; during these prayers, Lupicinus lives only on **raw cabbage hearts and turnips**.

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<sup>\*</sup> As Martine, 355 observed, a *uehiculum* is a late antique euphemism for a horse—further suggested at the beginning of the next paragraph when the "old rider returned (*redit ad hominem sessor antiquus*)" to torment Dativus.

111-14 Life at the monastery; the author boasts that during this time no monk owned a **horse**, and monetary gifts are compared with merchants selling **pigeons** in the Temple.

115-17 The death of Lupicinus.

**The Life of Eugendus (118-79)**

118-20 Eugendus is from *Isarnodorum*, which in “Gallic language (*Gallica lingua*)” means “Iron Gate (*ferrei ostii*).” There, Christian shrines are built on the site of a Roman temple.

121-27 Eugendus’ first vision of paradise, after which he is given to Romanus and Lupicinus as an oblate. In the vision **stars** surround Eugendus “just as an **enormous swarm of bees** crowds together, like a bunch of **grapes**, to make **honey** (*tamquam enormitas apum in modum mellificantis uuae quadam constipatione saepserunt*).” Eugendus wears **animal skins** and a **goathair** shirt in summer.

128 Digression on the abbot Leunianus.

129-34 Eugendus’ way of life, abbacy, and refusal of ordination; he dresses primitively in “ancient” style country shoes which withstand **freezing rains**.

135-37 Eugendus’ second vision of darkness and light in the monastery.

138-40 Eugendus becomes abbot and makes enemies.

141-48 Eugendus’ healing miracles.

149-51 Eugendus’ pastoral gifts.

152-56 Peter, Andrew and Paul visit Eugendus in his third vision which takes place “**under his usual tree** (*sub arbore solito*)” in “**these rural forests** (*in haec rura siluestria*).”

157-60 Martin visits Eugendus in a fourth vision; the author compares the Alemanni with **wild animals**.

161-64 A fire in the 470s-80s destroys much of the complex; a bottle of Martin’s oil is miraculously preserved. The author discusses the old wooden monastery before the fire.

165-68 Eugendus’ gifts of prediction.

- 169-74     After the fire, Eugendus builds a common *xenodochium* and leads by example.
- 175-79     The death of Eugendus and conclusion.

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