

ART. III. – *St Bega: Cult, Fact and Legend*. By JOHN M. TODD, M.A.

THIS discussion¹ of the cult of St Bega, Cumbria's local saint, starts from the Reformation and works back in time from certainties to uncertainties, thence to improbabilities, finishing more or less with the impossible. Since the shadowy and hypothetical saint will not be encountered until the closing pages, it should be noted now that the cult has to do with an Irish virgin called Bega, reputed in the middle ages to have lived in the time of St Hilda of Whitby, and to have spent part of her life as an anchoress at St Bees. Soon after 1120 a Benedictine priory, dedicated to St Bega, was founded there as a dependency of St Mary's Abbey at York. St Bega's principal relic was a bracelet or ring, kept at St Bees. The legends of her life and miracles are contained in the thirteenth-century *Life of St Bega*, but other evidence of the cult is to be found in the charters of the *St Bees Register* and in unpublished sources.²

The last years of the Priory

When St Bees priory was dissolved on 16 October 1539, it was referred to in Latin as the cell or church of St Bega, or, in English letters of the time, the cell of St Bees.³ This was not the name of the village: in the valuation of 1535, as in earlier times, that is *Kyrkeby Becok*.⁴ St Mary, to whom the church was also dedicated,⁵ seems to have dropped out of the record.

An unpublished account roll of the priory for the year 1516/17 records offerings of 67s. 9d. to the bracelet of St Bega (*ad armillam Sancte Bege*).⁶ This amounts to 1.74% of the total income of the priory in that year. Although it has previously been suggested that the bracelet was stolen by Scots raiders in 1216 or 1315, evidently it did survive to the Reformation as the focus of the cult.⁷ This need not surprise us. Saints' cults remained actively supported right up to the Reformation and indeed beyond. Caxton reprinted Jacob of Voragine's *Golden Legend* in 1483 and added seventy new saints' lives.⁸

St Bega's day

About 1400, the day of St Bega was celebrated at St Mary's, York as one of the lesser festivals, "in albs".⁹ (Greater saints were honoured by copes.) But what day was that? Canon Wilson, editor of the *St Bees Register*, mentions three possible dates – 6 September, 31 October and 17 December. 31 October also occurs in the calendar of saints' days kept at Aberdeen and (as the date of the Saint's death) in the *Life of St Bega*.¹⁰

There could of course have been more than one day: a day to recall St Bega's death and another her translation – the disinterment of her body.¹¹ On the other hand, it seems clear that, at York and at St Bees, only one day was recognised as St Bega's day. Charters in the *St Bees Register* record gifts of a pound of incense and sixpence payable annually on the day of St Bega; and a corn rent payable during the period from eight days before the feast of St Bega up to the Purification (2 February).¹² But none indicates the actual day.

Apart from those already mentioned, there is another possible day, 7 November, which is

almost certainly the one celebrated at St Bees. The premise is that the day would be the same there as at York. The coming and going of monks between mother house and dependency – clearly shown for the thirteenth century by the *St Mary's Chronicle*¹³ – was such that different feasts for the same saint in the two houses were unlikely. The list in the *St Mary's Ordinal* of saints days “in albs” has no dates in it, but St Bega comes after St Denis and his companions (whose day was 9 October) and before St Maclovius (15 November). The modern editors of the *St Mary's Chronicle*, who also print this list, put St Bega's day on 6 September,¹⁴ but the list is clearly chronological. So far, it looks as though 31 October is indicated. But there is a fifteenth-century Book of Hours in the Bodleian Library which certainly belonged to St Mary's, and a Psalter which probably did, and in the calendars of both manuscripts St Bega the virgin appears on 7 November.¹⁵ And that seems conclusive.

A hymn to St Bega

On St Bega's day, if at no other time, a hymn to the saint would be sung. In the same Book of Hours, there is a hymn to St Bega which may not previously have been noticed.¹⁶

This mentions allusively various facts about the saint's life, like her escape through locked doors from her father's house and her lone sail to England. But there is no fact here which could not have been derived from the *Life of St Bega*, and some of the language of the poem is directly reminiscent of the *Life*. Compare the angel's charge to the saint in the *Life* – *surge itaque et armillam qua mihi subarrata es accipe* – with the fourth stanza of the hymn.¹⁷ Her bracelet is mentioned – further evidence perhaps of the continuing regard for that relic in the later middle ages. The word *anulus*, rather than *armilla*, used to describe it, is probably just a poetic variation. The hymn, which is probably not earlier in date than the mid-thirteenth century, is printed in the Appendix.¹⁸

The bracelet

St Bega's feast came once a year. But her relics were on show all the time and would be the main attraction for the pilgrim. About 1225, Thomas of Newton and Johanna his wife made a promise not to enter into litigation against the abbot and convent of St Mary's and the prior and monks of St Bees, “having touched the holy things of St Bega” – *tactis sacrosanctis sancte Bege*.¹⁹ Probably in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, Richard son of John “the rich” of Dearham warranted his bond to the priory with an oath upon the relics of St Bega.²⁰ In point of fact we know of only one relic of the saint herself, namely her bracelet or arm-ring. What the others may have been is uncertain, unless they are the evidences of her miracles kept in the priory, like the fetters of the prisoners freed through her agency.

We encounter the bracelet, for example, in a charter of the early thirteenth century, when Robert de Vipont and Idonea his wife gave “to God and the church of St Mary the Virgin in which the bracelet was kept” a rent of ten shillings a year. In the middle of the century there is record of an oath taken by John of Hale “having touched the sacred things” – a phrase which can mean the gospels or relics – “and upon the bracelet of St Bega”. Again, on 4 August 1279 an oath was taken by Eda daughter of Ivo the smith of Ravenglass “upon the bracelet”.²¹

The bracelet, then, was a relic upon which oaths were taken. This ancient practice,

pagan in origin, is recorded, for instance, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 876, where the peace made between Alfred and the Danes under Guthrum was confirmed by oaths taken by the Viking leaders “on the sacred ring”: *on tham halgan bēage*, translated *super sacrum armillum* in the Latin version in MS. F of the *Chronicle*.²²

The bracelet was also the tangible reminder of the saint’s existence and her continuing spiritual presence and power in St Bees. Of the nine miracles recorded in the *Life of St Bega*, three mention the power of the bracelet. One tells how a certain Adam son of Ailsil gave false evidence, having sworn on the bracelet, regarding due payment of *noutgeid* or cornage to the lord: he was ill for ten years as a result. This Adam may be the same as one whose land is mentioned in a charter of c. 1230.²³ Another, which we shall look at later, tells how the only son of Walter Espec was killed after his father was forsworn on the bracelet.²⁴ Another tells how the covering (*peplum*) of the bracelet was stolen and returned after the saint’s intervention had rendered the thief’s leg numb and paralysed.²⁵

What was the bracelet? The *Life of St Bega* tells that it was given to her while in Ireland by an angel or other heavenly being: it is described as “a bracelet having the sign of the holy cross clearly stamped on the top (*in summitate*) of it”. L. A. S. Butler has considered various types of bracelet, ancient at the time of writing the *Life*: a Bronze Age penannular bracelet, an Iron Age or Roman bracelet, a Saxon bracelet. He rejects them all in favour of a flat ribbon type of bracelet which was often stamped with a St Andrew’s cross, and which has turned up in ninth- and tenth-century contexts in Ireland, in Wales, in a hoard in Lancashire deposited c. 905, and in later hoards in Kircudbright. Of all types, this best fits the description.²⁶

Unless some notional bracelet is meant, the 1516/17 account roll already mentioned is good evidence for survival of the bracelet up to the close of the Middle Ages. Admittedly the last dateable mention of an oath sworn on the bracelet is in 1279, and an oath was sworn on the gospels in 1375,²⁷ but this is not proof that the bracelet had gone out of use as a touchstone of truth, or been lost or stolen, some time between these two dates. There are too few charters all told in the *St Bees Register* for the years after 1300. In 1315, when Lord James Douglas “came to the castle of Egremont in Coupland and there did many evil things with his men” it was “the ecclesiastical vestments of St Bega the virgin” which were looted: the bracelet is not mentioned in the *St Mary’s Chronicle*.²⁸ The *Chronicle* refers to another Scottish raid in the time of Robert, prior of St Bees (otherwise unrecorded and undated) when “the men of Galloway and the Scots came into Copeland and took from there the bracelet at Eaglesfield and killed its knight called *Wymb*’. Afterwards they were all slain by a certain *conversus* of Holmcultram”. Robert must have been prior before the dated series begins in 1258,²⁹ and the most likely dates for Scottish raids are in 1216, 1174 or further back in Stephen’s reign. But although the bracelet was evidently stolen, it appears that the raiders did not make a clean getaway, and people certainly went on swearing on the bracelet after 1216.³⁰

As we have seen, the fullest evidence for the veneration of the bracelet comes from the thirteenth century, but the writer of the *Life of St Bega* believed that oaths were taken on the bracelet in the twelfth century. The fourth miracle relates the punishment of Walter Espec, whose only son was killed when Walter had sworn falsely on the bracelet regarding certain land which he claimed from the monks of St Mary’s, York. He later repented and became the benefactor of St Mary’s and founder of Nostell and Rievaulx, and friend of St Bernard as well. Walter is an historical personage, the lord of Helmsley and a great

northern baron, who died in 1155. He also died without a male heir.³¹ Lack of further detail leaves us wondering whether the bracelet incident ever happened. Walter is not otherwise known to have been connected with St Bees or Cumbria. The writer does not say that he was: it is the mother house of St Mary's which is mentioned. But is it likely that the bracelet would be taken over to York? It is possible that the story became attached in the telling to a well-known baron, whose later good works were so famous that the saint acquired some extra credit from association with them. On the other hand, there is nothing entirely impossible in the events as narrated.

How the bracelet reached St Bees is a matter of conjecture. Much depends on whether we allow St Bega an historical existence apart from her bracelet. If we do, then possibly it happened just as the author of the *Life of St Bega* said: the bracelet was left behind, hidden or forgotten, when she left St Bees for Northumbria.³² It is not mentioned again until it turns up as a miracle-working relic in the custody of the priory.³³ It may have been found in the eleventh or twelfth centuries in a Viking hoard at St Bees, and appropriated by the priest of the church already dedicated to St Bega, on the assumption that it must be her relic.³⁴ Or it may even have been brought back from Ireland (where bracelets of the type indicated by Butler have been found in large numbers), conceivably from the daughter house of St Bees established at Nendrum in 1178.³⁵ On the other hand, if we say that *Sancta Bega* simply means "holy bracelet" then we must regard the bracelet as a "ring of power" brought to the area by pagan Saxon or Scandinavian settlers, used for oath-taking, and attributed to a mythical saint at some later date.

The places of the cult in St Bees

There are at least two twelfth century references to the altar of St Bega, and on it, presumably, the bracelet was kept.³⁶ We do not know whether this altar was in the north transept, as it is to-day, with the lady chapel (the third altar) on the south side of the chancel.³⁷ There was also an image of St Bega near the high altar of the church.³⁸

Local tradition also connects St Bega's name with a spring on the north side of the Pow Beck Valley, lying in a thicket of brambles below the place where the modern Whitehaven road reaches the crest of the hill. No medieval source mentions it, but it would be a natural stopping point for pilgrims, whether the ancient road northwards followed the modern road or the trackway along the foot of the slope. Possibly associated with the well, and partly linked to it by a curious modern strip of disused ground, which may be an ancient track, is the traditional site of St Michael's chapel on the other side of the Whitehaven road, mentioned in one medieval charter.³⁹

The miracles

St Bees was a place where miracles were expected. As late as 1313 on Good Friday "a certain Irish boy received his sight in the chapel of St Bega through the merits and prayers of the said virgin, all the community seeing it". In 1310, "God worked many miracles by the prayers and merits of St Bega at the cell of the same in Copeland, *viz.* speech to the dumb, sight to the blind, sanity to the demented, purging to the dropsical – to the edification of all the people with many eye-witnesses."⁴⁰

The second half of the *Life of St Bega* is full of the best kind of miracle story – the actual or probable incident which can be given a miraculous interpretation without distorting the

facts. They are vividly told in stylish Latin with a remarkably wide-ranging vocabulary. The best of all is the first.

There was a man of Galloway – whence the bogey-men of the north of England so often came – who was warned by his mother not to commit theft, rapine, or violence on the land of St Bega. And he jeered “why, what can that little old woman do to me?” and then “moving his hand to the more private parts of his buttocks, he said with a blasphemous mouth, ‘here, here, she will shoot me’.” So he came to St Bega’s land, and stole a horse, and rode off on it. But he was observed and some lads of the village gave chase with their bows. And as the thief lay along his horse’s neck, to present a smaller target, one of the lads drew a bow at a venture . . . and you can guess the rest.⁴¹

The third miracle concerns Godard the knight “who guarded the fortification in Egremont” – evidently Godard de Boivill who held Millom of William le Meschin for the service of one knight, and appears as Godard the Steward in an early charter.⁴² His men are said to have pastured their horses in a field near the priory but these got into the monks’ crops and the men refused to shift them, mocking the saint. But when eventually they came to bridle the horses, they found their hooves almost severed from their legs. Godard forthwith gave the priory the field where the horses had been pastured, and the hooves were kept in the church to the writer’s day.⁴³

The seventh story tells how three men of Workington, who had killed a fourth in a drunken brawl, confessed their sins to the saint, were rescued by her from prison in Egremont castle, and found sanctuary at St Bees, leaving their fetters there as evidence. The eighth records the bad end of a young man called John, who made off with the wife of William *Leporis* (the Hare) – another historical personage who witnesses a charter of William Count of Aumale before 1179. The last tells of two brothers, one a paralytic and the other with an ulcer, sons of a Frenchman, who was directed by a vision at Tynmouth to seek healing in Copeland. He took them to St Bees in a little cart (*redula* – it sounds like a medieval perambulator) where they were duly healed, and departed leaving the cart behind as evidence.⁴⁴

Three of the nine miracles end with mention of the evidence which was left – the hooves, the fetters, the cart. You can picture the altar of Bega in the priory with these treasured objects beside it, and a monk telling the pilgrims the story of how they came to be there.

The miracles are all of a time before the author of the *Life* was writing, but some not many decades before and all said to be vouched by truthful men.⁴⁵ There is more than a grain of historical truth in them, for none is grossly far-fetched, and several deal with men – not all prominent men – whose names appear elsewhere in the record – Adam son of Elsi, Godard, William the Hare.

Date and composition of the *Life*

The manuscript of the *Life of St Bega* is part of a collection of different English saints’ lives which belonged to Holmcultram Abbey.⁴⁶ The works are by various authors: the passion of St Alban and St Amphibalus translated into Latin by William, monk of St Albans, the life of Wulfric of Haselbury by John, abbot of Ford (from 1191 to 1214), a life of St Aldhelm, the life of St John of Beverley by Folcard a monk of Canterbury cathedral.⁴⁷ Even if this collection was assembled at Holmcultram, its component parts came from various Benedictine and Cistercian sources, and there is nothing in this context to show

where the *Life of St Bega* had been compiled. Although a local saint is likely to have had a local biographer, the absence of any references to “our brothers” or “our church” probably tells against St Bees authorship, and any literate visitor to the shrine could have collected the same material.

As to date, if Adam son of Ailsa mentioned in the *Life* is the same as the man whose land is mentioned in a charter of about 1230 in the *St Bees Register*, then the *Life* was written probably about the middle of the thirteenth century.⁴⁸ It has been tentatively suggested that the author was Everard, first abbot of Holmcultram from 1150-1192. According to the *Scotichronicon*, Everard wrote lives of Waltheof of Melrose, Adomnan and Cumen of Iona;⁴⁹ but none of these lives is in the Holmcultram manuscript, which contains several other lives certainly not written at Holmcultram. The other arguments for a date before 1200 – that *noutgeld* was not collected later, and that the bracelet was lost after 1216 – are doubtful.

The snow miracle and the Sandford manuscript

The second miracle, the best-known of all, takes us right back to the early days of the priory’s foundation – and doubtfully beyond. The version in the *Life of St Bega* goes like this. Ranulf le Meschin (*sic*) had endowed the monastery with its lands, but a lawsuit later developed about their extent. The monks feared a miscarriage of justice. The day appointed for a perambulation of the boundaries arrived – and, lo and behold, there was a thick snowfall on all the surrounding lands but not a flake upon the lands of the priory.⁵⁰ Now, there is nothing except the coincidence of lawsuit and snowfall which is inherently improbable. Apart from the substitution of Ranulf for his brother William, the story is about an historical baron and historical monks, a circumstantial lawsuit and a circumstantial method of settling it, namely swearing a jury of local *probi homines* to walk and mark the boundaries. Moreover, it is within the experience of West Cumbrians that a sudden snowstorm may sweep along the coast and miss St Bees Head and the land immediately behind it. It can at least be seen how the story could have started.

But the version usually told is less probable. This is set in the days of Bega herself. She asks the lord of Egremont for some land and he laughingly gives her as much as the snow would cover the next day – which happened to be Midsummer Day. But of course the next day the snow falls, covering only the land within about three miles of the priory. This version is based on an account written after the dissolution, in English, called the Sandford manuscript, formerly in the Dean and Chapter archives at Carlisle.⁵¹ Whilst historical accuracy is not claimed for the story in the *Life*, it is several removes nearer to what actually happened than this apparently garbled and legendary account.

Place-name and personal name evidence of the cult

At the foundation of the priory, the Norman monks were clearly taking over as a going concern a centre of Bega-veneration. The name of the last witness of the foundation charter, *Gillebecoc*, speaks of a priest, possibly hereditary, who was the servant of that cult. It means the devotee of *Beghóc*.⁵² The name of the village, *Kirkby Becok*, indicates an early dedication of the church to Bega. Although the full name does not occur before the time of Richard I, it includes the same personal name *Beghóc*, which according to the place-name experts was Irish and therefore presumably originating in the period of

Scandinavian settlement.⁵³ The ending – *óc* is a diminutive added to personal names in the early Celtic (especially Irish) church to indicate sanctity. Is there a distant echo of this in the “little old woman” derided by the Galloway thief? But the full form *Beg(h)óc* also occurs as a name.

Other early place-names indicate that St Bees was by no means the only place dedicated to the cult. One of the two possible church dedications to St Bega in Cumberland, Ennerdale, is probably late and consequential upon the grant of that territory to the priory. But the other, Bassenthwaite, has no known connection with St Bees priory. The church was given by Waltheof lord of Allerdale to Jedburgh abbey.⁵⁴ The earliest forms of the name, in 1291 and 1302, are *Beokirke* and *Bechokirk*.⁵⁵

Over the border, Kilbucho in Peeblesshire preserves the name of Bega. The earliest form is probably *Kylbeuhoc* in a charter of c. 1200.⁵⁶ That charter is witnessed by Gilbert parson of Kilbucho, and also by Cospatric hermit of that place – possibly Cospatric “Gillebecoc”? Less than ten miles away, at Harehope in Eddleston, we find the *tun* or homestead of the servants of Bega – *Killebeccokestun* in charters of the late twelfth century. It was on land granted by Alan, lord of Galloway, to Melrose, mother-house of Holmcultram.⁵⁷ And Last notes the chapel of St Beg on the island of Little Cumbrae.

St Bega the person

Like every other great and ancient English church, Christ Church Canterbury was rich in relics of native saints, and poor in writings about them . . . Not only did the saints have uncouth names and enjoy an apparently exaggerated local veneration, but for many of them there was nothing beyond vague tradition to testify to their activity or even existence . . . Hence there arose in the great abbeys all over England a school of writers who made it their aim to repair the consequences of neglect as best they could.⁵⁸

This was just the predicament of the monks from York, established at St Bees fairly late in the great northern wave of Benedictine foundations from 1074 onwards. The cult of St Bega which they adopted gave status to the new foundation – but who was St Bega? Lanfranc’s monks at Canterbury started to write the lives of Alphege and Dunstan; the monks of Durham wrote of Cuthbert; Ailred of Rievaulx, reformed Cistercian and son of the last of the hereditary priests of Hexham under the old dispensation, preached in praise of the saints of Hexham.⁵⁹ In the same spirit, someone, in due course, produced the *Life of St Bega*. And if invention supplied what tradition lacked, it would not be altogether surprising.

Who then was St Bega? Local historians in the last century had no doubt about the answer. She was an Irish saint who crossed the sea about 650 to found a nunnery at St Bees, which was destroyed in the Viking invasion.⁶⁰ But there is no evidence in the *Life* or elsewhere that Bega’s life at St Bees was other than solitary.⁶¹

From this confidence, later scholars recoiled to the point of total scepticism:

It would be presumptuous to deny the personal existence (wrote Wilson) of the saint in Coupland, or to cast a slur upon the piety of the age, but it cannot be held other than remarkable that language yields common origin for the saint and the bracelet: *Sancta Bega* is good ecclesiastical Latin for Anglo-Saxon *halgan beage* or its English equivalent holy bracelet.⁶²

T. H. B. Graham and W. G. Collingwood were of the same view and cite the parallel of St Alkelda of Middleham and Giggleswick in Yorkshire, whose name is based on Old Norse

olkelda meaning “holy ale well”.⁶³ The issue is still unresolved to-day. It appears to lie between deriving the name as it first appears in written record in the twelfth century from the Anglo-Saxon word *bēag* meaning a ring (or less probably the Scandinavian equivalent *baugr*) or from a personal name *Bēage* or *Beghóc*. On questions of philology, the present writer claims no competence, and it is to be hoped that a future contributor to these *Transactions* will come forward with a clear answer.

Those who hold that St Bega was a person have to explain the apparent coincidence of the name of the person and the chief object of her cult. They must account for the fact that, if the *Life of St Bega* is taken at face value, there is no especial reason why the cult of St Bega should have survived at all at St Bees, for there is a clean break in tradition after the saint left the area and the *Life* records nothing after her death until the miracles of the Norman period. If on the other hand there was an active pre-Norman cult (as the place-names suggest), then it was not necessarily the cult of the saint recorded in the *Life*.

On the other hand, the sceptics have to reckon with a widely scattered range of instances – mostly noted by Canon Last – of personal names like Bega in the pre-Norman period e.g. Begga in France in 698, a bell called Bega in Ingulf’s *Crowland Chronicle*, and Begu in Bede. Bibury in Gloucestershire is *Beage’s* bury, named after a daughter of earl Leppa.⁶⁴ As we have seen, the place-names of both St Bees and Bassenthwaite preserve dedications apparently based on a personal name. If those place-names were formed, as seems likely, nor later than the tenth century, they leave little time for the ring to be transformed into a virgin.

Quite apart from the *Life*, there is clear evidence that at the time of the foundation of the priory Bega was regarded as a virgin not as a bracelet. And Southern does note the tendency of the Anglo-Saxon church to care lovingly for the relics of other undoubtedly historical native saints and to be indifferent to preserving literary testimony about them, possibly regarding the living evidence of miracles as the only evidence that was needful.⁶⁵

The author of the *Life* believed that Bega was an Irish king’s daughter who valued her virginity. She was promised in marriage to a Viking prince “son of the king of Norway”, and fled across the Irish sea to land in this remote spot on the Cumbrian coast. There she settled for a time, leading a life of exemplary piety. Then, fearing the raids of pirates which were starting along the coast, she moved over to Northumbria.⁶⁶ So far, one suspects, the author of the *Life* is telling the basic legend of St Bega which survived to or grew up in the early Norman period. A visitor to St Bees would see the bracelet, the evidences of the miracles and hear the traditions of the monks, who would not necessarily put a date to these events, but merely believe that they happened in the distant past.

But the author of the *Life*, or someone before him, knew that a nun called *Begu* is mentioned in Bede’s life of St Hilda. Another nun called *Heiu* is mentioned in the same chapter as founder of a nunnery at Hartlepool. So the *Life* identifies Bega with *both* of them and puts the whole story into a seventh-century setting. Bega crosses to Northumbria, meets king Oswald and Saint Aidan, founds Hartlepool. She later hands the nunnery over to St Hilda and retires to *Calcacester*. On a visit to Hackness, she has a vision of Hilda’s death (as recorded by Bede of Begu) and subsequently remains in that house until her death.⁶⁷

No doubt the identification of Bega and Begu was brought home to the author of the *Life* – or his informant – by reports of the discovery of the body of Begu of Hackness and the translation of her remains to Whitby. Led by a vision, monks of Whitby are said to have

found the inscription *Hoc est sepulchrum Beghu* in Hackness graveyard, and so found the saint's incorrupt body. The author admits that he doesn't know a lot about this event. "Because I do not have full information about the translation and the miracles there done, I will leave it to those who saw and were present to write about them all". He does not give the year, the figures after "11 . . ." being missing, but he says it happened about 460 years after the saint's death. Hilda died in 680, which puts the translation in the decade or so after 1140.⁶⁸

It is not just the lifting of incidents from Bede relating to the nun *Heiu* which makes this piece of hagiography suspect. If you look at the story from the Irish end, the seventh-century date seems less than likely. The Viking raids did not start until *c.* 795 in Ireland, and until 836 were mainly hit-and-run strikes on the coastal areas. But then the Vikings did start to winter in Ireland, and a permanent settlement was established at Dublin between 840 and 845. In 853 Olaf the White, son of a Norse king, arrived in Dublin, set himself up as king of all the Vikings and married the daughter of the king of the Uí Néill. The thirty years after 850, when the Vikings were establishing themselves in Ireland, provide a very appropriate setting for St Bega's flight to Cumbria.⁶⁹ She would go to an area possibly still controlled by a native Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. Then, about the turn of the century, heathen Vikings from Man and the Isles start to raid the north-west coast of England. Tilred abbot of Heversham buys land in Northumbria, perhaps as a retreat; and a nobleman Elfred *Birihulfing*, fleeing from pirates, comes over the western mountains to become the vassal of St Cuthbert.⁷⁰ Bega could have made her second flight at the same time. And if she went anywhere from Northumbria after that, it was possibly to Bassenthwaite, Cumbrae, or the Tweed valley, but not Hackness.

This is not to claim historical truth for the first part of the life of St Bega; but, with Canon Last, one can say simply that most of what is recorded *could* have happened towards the end of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth. We must search for the historical St Bega, not in the glorious years of the Northumbrian kingdom, but the dark years of its fall. But our search may well be disappointed.

Appendix

ORACIO AD SANCTAM BEGAM

Virgo bega speciosa
 stirpe regis generosa
 sed plus fide preciosa
 quam carnis progenie.

O Bega, fair virgin; you were the noble offspring of a king, but you are more precious to us on account of your faith than of your fleshly descent.

Iam peccata fac exosa
 nobis parce graciosa
 vt cantemus christo prosa
 carmina leticie.

Now make our sins hateful; spare us, gracious one, so that we shall sing joyful songs to Christ in this prose (sequence).

Salue bega virgo bona
 que spreuisti patris dona
 regnum tedas regias.

Hail, Bega, good virgin, who rejected your father's gifts, a kingdom and a royal marriage.

Salve <i>christo</i> subarataꝛ anulo suo signataꝛ deuitans spurcitasꝛ	Hail to you, dedicated to Christ, marked out by receipt of his ring, casting aside earthly things.
Salve <i>pergens</i> de conclauꝛ clausis seris sine clauꝛ respuens hyberniam.	Hail to you, leaving the chamber without a key, by way of the locked doors, rejecting Ireland.
Salve mare que transistiꝛ sine nautis peruenistiꝛ sola in britanniam.	Hail to you who crossed the sea without sailors and reached Britain alone.
Salve velo vite rataꝛ post laborem coronataꝛ plaudans grandi gloria.	Hail to you honoured with the veil of (everlasting) life, crowned after your labour, praising in sublime glory.
Cuius fide roboraturꝛ in erumpnis consolaturꝛ tota nunc conplaudia.	By your faith all our worship is now strengthened and finds comfort in our tribulations.
Hauri nos de celi sedeꝛ vbi clares sine tedeꝛ fauendo fragilibus. Egris hedis in hac edeꝛ bega te rogamus edeꝛ patrem placans precibus.	Draw us to yourself from your seat in heaven where you shine without (the aid of) torchlight, by showing favour to the weak. Bega, we beseech you to show forth the Father to your frail flock in this church, appeasing him with your prayers.
℞. Ora . pro . nobis . beata . bega ✠. Vt . digni . efficiamur . promissionibus . christi .	℞. Pray for us, blessed Bega ✠ That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

OREMUS
Omnipotens sempiterne deusꝛ
misericordiam tuam ostende
supplicibus: vt qui demeritorum
qualitate diffidimusꝛ intercedente
beata bega virgine tuaꝛ non iudicium
tuum sed indulgenciam senciamus; per
christum . dominum . nostrum .
amen⁷¹

Almighty and everlasting God, show thy mercy to thy suppliants; that we who are in despair by reason of the nature of our faults may by the intercession of thy blessed Virgin Bega know not thy judgement but thy mercy, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes and References

¹ Whilst all errors which remain are my responsibility alone, I am most grateful to Prof G. W. S. Barrow, the Revd J. C. Dickinson, Dr Alfred Smyth, Mr Paul Wilson, Mr A. A. Cotes and Dr Alan Harris for their comments on this article. The staffs of the Cumbria County Record Office at Carlisle and the Bodleian Library have been helpful beyond the call of duty. Mrs L. Taylor ably typed a difficult manuscript. Finally I would also record a deep general debt to Sir Richard Southern whose teaching 25 years ago gave me a love of medieval studies which other concerns have never wholly driven out of my life; and to my wife Mary for her continuing help and encouragement.

² *Vita et Miracula S. Bege Virginis in Provincia Northanhimbrorum* ed. James Wilson in *Register of the Priory of St Bees* (Surtees Society, 126, 1915), 497-520; charters in same volume (cited as *St B. Reg.*).

- ³ *St B. Reg.*, 595, 590. For the date of dissolution, not hitherto published, see note 7 below.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 595, 215.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 40 (twice).
- ⁶ C.R.O. D/Lons./W/St Bees 1/1.
- ⁷ C. E. Last, "St Bega and her bracelet", CW2, lii, 65; L. A. S. Butler, "A bracelet for St Bega", CW2, lxvi, 104: my debt to these two articles, together with Wilson's edition of the *Register*, is great. A search among the Augmentation Office records (and related classes) at the Public Record Office has not so far shown any reference to the bracelet at the dissolution. The first minister's account for the period 10 Feb. 1539 (when the goods of the house were sequestered) to 16 Oct. 1539 (when it was dissolved) includes the disposal of some church furnishings and unspecified relics (P.R.O. S.C. 6 Henry VIII 7382 m 1).
- ⁸ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London 1967), 22-3, 14.
- ⁹ The Abbess of Stanbrook and J. B. L. Tolhurst (eds.), *Ordinal and Customary of St Mary's Abbey, York* (Henry Bradshaw Society, 73, 75, 84, 1936-51), i, 11.
- ¹⁰ *St B. Reg.*, vi, 252 note, 497, 508: Cosmo Innes (ed.), *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis* (Spalding Club, 1845), ii, 21.
- ¹¹ As suggested by G. C. Tomlinson (trans.), *Life and Miracles of Sancta Bega* (Carlisle 1842), p. x.
- ¹² *St B. Reg.*, 143, 354, 252.
- ¹³ e.g. Richard of Eversley was professed at York in 1283, was at St Bees in 1293, and died at York in 1298; H. H. E. Craster and M. E. Thornton (eds.), *The Chronicle of St Mary's Abbey, York* (Surtees Society, 148, 1934), 22, 24, 30 (cited as *St M. Chron.*).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110, 142.
- ¹⁵ Bodleian Library, Oxford: MS Rawlinson C553 fo. 7r and MS Latin Liturg. G.1. fo. 16r. The name of St Bega was erased in MS Rawlinson C553 presumably after the MS left the ownership of St Mary's Abbey. In the list of saints on fo. 124r of the latter MS, St Bega's name appears right at the end. This led S. J. P. Van Dijk (whose typescript *Handlist of Latin Liturgical Manuscripts* in the Bodleian Library Oxford (1957-1960) proved very helpful in my search) to conclude that the MS belonged to St Mary's rather than St Bees, where it would surely have appeared more prominently (ii, 27). Cf. N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (London 2nd ed. 1964), 169, 217, who does not include Rawlinson C553 at all.
- ¹⁶ MS. Rawlinson C553 fos. 111v/112v.
- ¹⁷ *St B. Reg.*, 503.
- ¹⁸ On the date of the *Life* see pp. 27-28 above.
- ¹⁹ *St B. Reg.*, 346.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 403.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 96, 314, 480. For the phrase *tactis sacrosanctis* see E. L. G. Stones (ed.), *Anglo-Scottish Relations 1174-1328* (Oxford 1970), 25.
- ²² C. Plummer (ed.), *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (Oxford 1892), i, 74-5 and note 7. In his translation of these passages G. N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London 1953), 74-5 quotes *Eyrbyggja Saga's* description of the sacred ring which was used for oath-taking, and lay in the temple or was worn by the priest at assemblies. The Revd Trevor Park kindly mentions that in *Draumkvaedet*, a Norwegian visionary poem of the early thirteenth century, a gold finger-ring is almost certainly associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary as a symbol of God's mercy.
- ²³ *St B. Reg.*, 514, 105.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 513.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 515.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 500; Butler *art. cit.* 93 f. Dr A. P. Smyth, whose forthcoming vol. 2 of *Scandinavian York and Dublin* will deal with this point in some detail, tells me that Mr Graham-Campbell has shown that the majority of these rings do in fact come from Ireland (*Seventh Viking Conference* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin 1976)).
- ²⁷ *St B. Reg.*, 480, 240.
- ²⁸ *St M. Chron.*, 68; Butler, *art. cit.* 94.
- ²⁹ *St M. Chron.*, 76; David Knowles, C. N. L. Brooke, and Vera C. M. London, *The Heads of Religious Houses in England and Wales, 940-1216* (Cambridge 1972), 95 note Robert occ. 1202 between Deodatus oc. 1178 x 84 and J. occ. 1207.
- ³⁰ Last, *art. cit.* 65; Butler, *art. cit.* 103-104.
- ³¹ *St B. Reg.*, 513; I. J. Sandars, *English Baronies* (Oxford 1960), 52.
- ³² *St B. Reg.*, 504.

- ³³ *Ibid.*, 509.
- ³⁴ Butler, *art. cit.* 102-3.
- ³⁵ Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses – Ireland* (London 1970), 107.
- ³⁶ *St B. Reg.*, 62 (where Gospatric son of Orm refers to Bega as *advocatrix mea*), 119; cf. also 384.
- ³⁷ The altar of the B.V.M. is mentioned several times e.g. *ibid.*, 185.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 417.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 420. The O.S. references for the well and the chapel are, respectively, NX 97511309 and NX 97251311. E. C. Waight, Ordnance Survey Inspector, found no dressed masonry in the field bank surrounding the presumed chapel site (Archaeological index cards at Tullie House, Carlisle). See CW2, ix, 113-4, xxi, 270.
- ⁴⁰ *St M. Chron.*, 55, 47.
- ⁴¹ *St B. Reg.*, 509-510.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 33, F. Grainger and W. G. Collingwood, *Register of the Abbey of Holmcultram* (CW Record Series VIII 1929), 31.
- ⁴³ *St B. Reg.*, 512-3.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 516-7, 517-8, 518-9; 383 for the charter.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 509.
- ⁴⁶ British Library Cotton MS Faustina B iv: N. R. Ker, *op. cit.* 102.
- ⁴⁷ *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library* (London 1802).
- ⁴⁸ *St B. Reg.*, 514, 105. The widest dates for the charter are 1211 x 1247 – after prior Daniel who occurs in 1211 (ib. 435) and before John who became prior at the latest in 1247, on the basis of *St M. Chron.*, 76.
- ⁴⁹ *Register of the Abbey of Holmcultram*, 120; Last, *art. cit.* 64.
- ⁵⁰ *St B. Reg.*, 510-2.
- ⁵¹ Chancellor Ferguson (ed.), *A cursory relation . . . by Edmund Sandford* (CW Tract Series IV 1890), 9-10.
- ⁵² G. W. S. Barrow, “Northern English Society in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries”, *Northern History* (1969), iv. 8; *St B. Reg.*, 28. Prof Barrow takes the full name to be *Coremac Gillebecoc*, reading as one the last two names in the witness list.
- ⁵³ A. M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F. M. Stenton, Bruce Dickins. *The Place Names of Cumberland* (English Place-Name Society XXI, Cambridge 1971), 430-1 (cited as *PNCu*).
- ⁵⁴ *VCH Cumberland*, ii, 15.
- ⁵⁵ T. H. B. Graham and W. G. Collingwood, “Patron Saints of the Diocese of Carlisle”, CW2, xxv, 16-17. The name also occurs in the personal name of Richard *de Bechockirke* in *St B. Reg.*, 571 (an Embleton charter) here showing precisely the same form of the personal name – *Beghóc*. *PNCu* 430 is almost certainly in error in giving this charter and several others under St Bees rather than Bassenthwaite.
- ⁵⁶ Cosmo Innes (ed.), *Registrum episcopatus Glasguensis* (Maitland Club 1843), i, 89.
- ⁵⁷ G. W. S. Barrow (ed.), *Regesta Regum Scottorum* (Edinburgh 1971), ii, 417-8, Last, *art. cit.* mentions other possible Scottish dedications at Kilbagie and Kilbegie. Prof Barrow (in correspondence) comments that the Kilbucho/Eddleston area was very “Cumbrian” in its saints and names, although no direct link in early land ownership has been traced.
- ⁵⁸ R. W. Southern, *St Anselm and his biographer* (Cambridge 1963), 249-50.
- ⁵⁹ F. M. Powicke (ed.), *The Life of Ailred of Rievaulx* (London 1950), xxxviii-xxxix.
- ⁶⁰ e.g. Whellan, 425.
- ⁶¹ The nunnery lives on in N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cumberland and Westmorland* (Harmondsworth 1967), 183, transferred to the Norman priory.
- ⁶² *St B. Reg.*, xxxiii-xxxiv. Wilson quotes the word in its dative form, as in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Plummer gives the nominative as *beah* (*op. cit.* i, 309).
- ⁶³ T. H. B. Graham and W. G. Collingwood, *art. cit.* 15. The most intriguing view, however, is that of Rendel Harris in his essay *St Bees* (Cambridge 1928) who weaves a spider’s web of conjecture to produce the conclusion: “We were clearly justified in saying that Begha was an Egyptian star. Whether the star was presided over by Isis may require further investigation”. I owe this reference to the kindness of Mr Michael Moon of Beckermet.
- ⁶⁴ Last, *art. cit.* 57-59; F. M. Stenton, “The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society” in D. M. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford 1970), 320; E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford 1960), 41.
- ⁶⁵ R. W. Southern, *op. cit.*, 249-50.

⁶⁶ *St B. Reg.*, 498-504.

⁶⁷ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book IV c. 23, *St B. Reg.*, 504-8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 508-9.

⁶⁹ Donncha ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin 1972), 80-2, 90-6.

⁷⁰ Thomas Arnold (ed.), *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia* (Rolls Series 1882), i, 208-9, F. M. Stenton, "Pre-Conquest Westmorland", *op. cit.* 215-6, reprinted from RCHM Westmorland xlvi-iv.

⁷¹ Edited from M. S. Rawlinson, C553, by kind permission of the Librarian of the Bodleian Library Oxford. In the MS the lines of each stanza are not set out on separate lines of the page. Expansion of abbreviations in the original is shown by italics for the letters supplied. The initial letter of the first line of each stanza is decorated alternately in red and blue. A number of points in the translation are not free from doubt.

