

Church and state in eighth-century Northumbria: Alcuin's York poem

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SUMMARY

*The longest poem written by the eighth- to ninth-century scholar and teacher Alcuin of York is his *Versus de Patribus Regibus et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae*, a metrical history of the ecclesiastical province of York (which stretched from the Humber to the Forth, to Whithorn, and even County Mayo), drawing heavily on the writings of Bede as source material. A study of the elements that Alcuin drew from his sources, and those that he omitted, and consideration of the themes underlying the content, leads to the hypothesis that the poem should be seen as a verse counterpart to the decrees of the legatine councils held in England in 786, showing an ideal world of the past that could exist again if there were reform.*

INTRODUCTION

*Tempora tunc huius fuerant felicia gentis,
quam rex et praesul concordī iure regebant:
hic iura ecclesiae, rex ille negotia regni.*¹

THE SCHOLAR AND TEACHER ALCUIN OF YORK (c. 740–804) was a prolific writer in both prose and poetry. His collected poems cover a wide range of topics and types, from acrostics to laments.² His longest poetic work, the 1658-line poem on the 'Bishops, Kings and Saints of York', *Versus de Patribus Regibus et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae* (the 'York poem'), stands outside the established genres of the time. It is an ecclesiastical history of the archdiocese of York, covering the period from its Roman foundation up to the year 780, and was written — or at least completed — at some time after 780, but before 796.

Much of the poem's content is derived from Bede, and indeed the French scholar Mabillon, who prepared the first printed edition in 1672, excluded the main middle section (lines 99–1204), because he judged it to be entirely dependent on Bede. A complete edition was published by Gale in 1691, and was used without alteration by its nineteenth-century editors, Wattenbach and Dümmler. The only surviving original text today is in the *Bibliothèque Municipale* at Reims (Reims 426), and was used by Godman for a modern edition published in 1982. His edition is extremely thorough, and includes a commentary, an analysis of Alcuin's sources, allusions, and influences, and a full critical apparatus throughout.³

Without attempting to re-do Godman's work, there is still room for discussion of exactly when and why the York poem was written. Various hypotheses have been put forward for the date and possible purpose of the poem, but none is conclusive because of a lack of internal evidence. My approach here is to analyse the poem's contents, and speculate on reasons for the editorial decisions that Alcuin took. This leads me to propose an occasion, the legatine visit of 786, for which the poem might have been written, and a way in which it might have been used, or at least, in which it was intended to be used.

ALCUIN HIMSELF

Alcuin of York was born in the second quarter of the eighth century. The traditional date is *c.* 735, which, Godman points out, 'coincides, perhaps too conveniently' with Bede's death. His own calculations, using evidence from lines 1635–6 of the York poem which refer to a plague during Alcuin's boyhood, give a date of between 737/8 and 745/6. The eminent Alcuin scholar Bullough, however, considers that Godman has miscounted by seven years in this calculation, but that moving the date any further forward would be incompatible with Alcuin's evidence elsewhere. He concludes that 'a date of birth a year or two either side of 740 remains the most probable'.⁴

Alcuin's birthplace, near Spurn Head in Yorkshire, is known from his *Vita Willibrordi* (hereafter *VW*) in which he tells us that St Willibrord's father tended a small family chapel there, which Alcuin has now inherited *per successiones legitimas*, 'in family succession'.⁵ We do not know how close a kinsman Willibrord was, but the fact that he spent many years of his life as a missionary in Francia may mean that travelling and working overseas was something of a family tradition. Nor do we know the family's social or economic status, though Bullough speculates that it was not noble and that this limited Alcuin's opportunities for later preferment in the church.⁶

At a young age Alcuin was sent to live in the cathedral community at York, where he was to spend the majority of his life. He is unlikely, however, to have been a formal child oblate; as de Jong has explained, formal and irrevocable oblation was only provided for in the Rule of St Benedict, not in general use in England at the time, and it was notably absent from the seventh-century monastic rules which excerpted parts of Benedict's rule.⁷ Other rules, such as the Rule of the Master, show that monasteries commonly harboured young children at the time, but without a formal status. There was a belief that an upbringing in the cloister could preserve purity by sheltering the child from evil, thus equipping him or her for a later religious life. Alcuin himself says in *VW* that Willibrord at Ripon 'saw nothing but that which was honourable, heard nothing but that which was holy'.⁸

The ninth-century anonymous *Vita Alcuini* (hereafter *VA*) claims him as *vere monachum monachi sine voto*, 'a true monk without the monk's vow'.⁹ In the sense that this would have been understood at that date, this probably means simply that he was not vowed to follow the Rule of St Benedict, considered *the* definitive monastic rule after the Council of Aachen in 816/7.¹⁰

Alcuin would have reached adulthood during the time of Egbert, bishop and then archbishop, and brother of King Eadberht. He appears to have been more influenced by his successor Ælberht, whom he describes at length in the poem as his teacher and mentor. At some point in the 760s, Alcuin accompanied Ælberht on an extended journey to Italy and Francia.¹¹ After Ælberht's election as archbishop in 767, Alcuin was appointed *magister* to the school, to which was attached one of the most important libraries north of the Alps.¹² Chapter 6 of the *VA* assumes that this was shortly after Ælberht's consecration in 767, but as Bullough points out, Alcuin's own words in the York poem (lines 1533–5 and 1527–8) imply that it did not happen until Ælberht's retirement in 778.¹³ It may be that he was master of the school in all but name until that date. Certainly he was in a position of considerable responsibility, having been entrusted by Ælberht with the building of the new church of *Alma Sophia*.¹⁴ He worked on this alongside Eanbald, who was in due course designated by Ælberht as the next archbishop (lines 1515–18).

The chronology is not certain, but Alcuin was probably sent on a mission to Charlemagne in the late 770s, and then sent again to Rome to fetch the pallium for Eanbald after Ælberht's death in 780. He returned via Parma where he met Charlemagne and was recruited for his court circle.¹⁵ The accepted view has been that Alcuin went home after this meeting, wound up his affairs in York, and set off again for the Frankish court after only a brief delay. However, Bullough considers that Alcuin may have remained at York for some time after that, and may have still been there when the papal legates, Bishop George of Ostia and Theophylact of Todi, arrived in 786. This view is based, firstly, on the report of the legates to Pope Hadrian. This says that at the end of their business, they went on their way taking Alcuin and his colleague Pyttel with them. Bullough feels that this wording is unlikely to mean that Alcuin had previously travelled to Northumbria with Bishop George.¹⁶ However, Story suggests that an advance party was sent to prepare the way.¹⁷ If Alcuin was part of this group, that would explain the wording. Bullough's second argument is that Alcuin is not mentioned in any documents or poems emanating from Charlemagne's court in the early 780s, but Coates suggests that this might be because Alcuin was only a minor character in court circles at that stage.¹⁸

After 786, Alcuin stayed with Charlemagne's peripatetic court for some years, working as teacher, adviser and writer. In 790, he returned to his *patria*, but Northumbria cannot have been a happy place at the time. Faction-fighting between different royal dynasties was in a particularly confused and violent phase, with one king (Osred) forced into exile in 790, and the sons of another former king (Ælfwald) enticed from sanctuary in the minster at York and murdered by the reigning monarch. When Osred returned in 792, he was betrayed and killed by yet another claimant.¹⁹

Alcuin left Northumbria again in 793, not long before the Viking raid on Lindisfarne. Cubitt suggests that in 795, when Eanbald died, he was approached about the possibility of becoming archbishop, but that a sense of duty and the pressure of work from Charlemagne prevented him returning at the right time.²⁰ Bullough, on the other hand, considers that 'some past misconduct, to which he alludes elsewhere, may have proved an insuperable barrier'.²¹ Alcuin remained at Charlemagne's court, now established in Aachen, until 796. He was then appointed abbot of Tours, and settled there until his death in 804.

Charlemagne's entourage during this period was an international one, including distinguished scholars such as Peter of Pisa, Paul the Deacon, and Theodulf of Orleans. Garrison describes it as animated by feuds and one-upmanship, as well as by a sense of common purpose and an awareness of their status as a new elite. Recreational 'coterie poetry' (her phrase), was composed for passing from hand to hand and reciting in public.²² The court was centred around the overwhelming personality of Charlemagne: 'imperious, self-willed, ambitious, self-confident and forty; his interests were wide, but in the forefront lay politics, war and hunting'.²³ Alcuin, older than most of the coterie, may not have completely fitted in. Orchard suggests that he earned Theodulf's enmity for winning a competition set up by Charlemagne for an epitaph for Pope Hadrian, and that when Theodulf satirised him for liking porridge for breakfast, the implication was that he was a soak, a glutton and a hypocrite. However, Nelson discounts this, suggesting that it is not particularly cruel to accuse someone of liking porridge, especially when he has admitted it himself.²⁴

Alcuin's role at court was that of a teacher, and almost every significant scholar of the next generation was taught by him at some point. It is not clear, however, whether his *schola palatii* was an organised institution, or simply a learned circle holding formal or informal debates. Alcuin was a key figure in the reform movement which had brought all these leading scholars

to court, and his writings show the extent to which learning was directed to serve the interests of reform.²⁵ His formidable *oeuvre* includes biblical commentaries, saints' lives, moral writings, works contesting heretical beliefs, and grammar and rhetorical textbooks.²⁶

Alcuin remained in touch with his *patria* to the end of his life. Kirby suggests that he became an instrument of Frankish policy, sending peremptory and often harshly critical letters to kings, bishops and archbishops.²⁷ However, his criticisms did not prevent him expressing a deep love for his homeland. 'I am yours, whether in life or death', he wrote in a letter of 795 to his York brethren.²⁸ One of his late poems, *O Mea Cella*, is probably about York and is a 'heartfelt lament for the times and songs of bygone days'.²⁹

ALCUIN'S POETRY

Alcuin's versifying began while he was still based in York, but probably not before at least his first visit to the Continent. He would already have known much poetry from classical and early medieval sources in York's well-stocked library and, while abroad, he is likely to have had the opportunity to hear or read poetry from the 'Carolingian renaissance'. Only two dateable poems survive from Alcuin's time in York. One (*Alc. Carm.* no. 4) is a lengthy letter-poem, a sort of elaborate thank-you letter, probably sent after his visit to the Continent in or around 779.

Higham considers that Alcuin's poetic style was shaped by Bede's *Concerning the Art of Metre*, but in the world of Charlemagne's court, Garrison suggests, acquiring the skill of writing verse according to the rules of classical prosody was seen simply as the final phase of a thorough education. However, the form was backward-looking. Vowel length rather than stress determined the metrical pattern, and so it was becoming steadily more removed from the stress-patterns and rhythms of everyday language.³⁰

Alcuin is one of only two Carolingian poets of whose works we have editions collected during their lifetimes, the other being Theodulf of Orleans.³¹ He has not been rated very highly by posterity. Laistner judges that a modern reader of his work 'will feel most of the time that he is looking at a series of unusually competent fair copies'. Real inspiration, he suggests, is rare, and it is hard for him to maintain a consistently high level throughout a poem, without sinking into bathos at some point.³²

As well as some light-hearted court poetry, Alcuin's collected works include inscriptional and epigrammatic verses such as the epitaph composed for Pope Hadrian I (which is still on display in the portico of St Peter's at Rome), didactic and admonitory poems addressed to his pupils, nature poems, ingenious acrostics displaying a complex symbolism, and elegiac poems such as *O Mea Cella* (discussed above). A small number have been reprinted, with translations, by Godman in *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*.³³

In a category of their own are two *opera geminata*, on the life of St Willibrord and on the sack of Lindisfarne. These are 'paired' prose and metrical works on the same topic and issued at the same time. Alcuin set out his views on the different uses of prose and poetry in the preface to his *VW*. The prose version was intended to be read aloud in church, and included a homily for the saint's feast-day, while the metrical version was to be used in private study. Alcuin contrasts the *gradientem* ('stately pace') of prose with the '*currentem*' speed of verse.³⁴

Godman considers that the York poem is also an *opus geminatum*, paired with Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, but this argument does not really stand up. As Thacker points out, while the conventions of that tradition clearly left some mark on the poem, much is left out, and the whole focus is shifted from the *gens Anglorum* to the Northumbrian kingdom alone.³⁵

THE YORK POEM: ITS CONTENT AND SOURCES

The York poem is by far the longest of Alcuin's surviving poetic works, and Laistner considers it his best.³⁶ This section discusses what the poem covers and the sources Alcuin has used.

From the beginning to the 730s

The main sources for the first twelve hundred lines are the works of Bede, mostly his *Historia Ecclesiae* (*HE*), but also his two *Vitae Sancti Cuthberti* (*VSC*). Alcuin has not, however, made a slavish summary but a careful selection, with a considerable amount of re-ordering and changes of emphasis as well as the exclusion of whole topics.³⁷

The poem opens with an invocation of Christ and the saints, a statement of the theme, praise of Alcuin's homeland and a eulogy of York past and present, with a sketch of its early history (lines 1–38). The eulogy owes something to Bede's description of Britain in the first chapter of *HE*, but other sources identified by Godman are the *Carmen Paschale* of the fifth-century poet Caelius Sedulius (well-known to Alcuin) and a mid-eighth century praise-poem of Milan, the *Versum de Mediolano Ciuitate*, which he may have come across on his journeys.³⁸ However, Hyde considers that this Milan poem was little-known, and Bullough has suggested that Alcuin might have come across a lost poetic *laudatio* of a different city.³⁹

Alcuin does not share Bede's general hostility to the Britons, describing York as being built by the Britons and Romans 'as comrades and partners' (line 20). He briefly summarises post-Roman history, turning Bede's twenty-two chapters into forty lines of verse (39–79), and discarding all the material about Hengest and Horsa, Vortigern, the Pelagians, and Germanus. Instead he leaps to Pope Gregory the Great's sending of a mission (*HE* i.23), without naming either Augustine or Canterbury. Bede's lengthy obit for Gregory (*HE* ii.1), is covered in only a few lines by Alcuin (80–89).

Leaving out all Bede's southern material in *HE* ii.2 to ii.9, Alcuin then jumps to King Edwin of Northumbria, telling us that he was born in York (*Euborica genitus*, line 90), information not given by Bede. His story of Edwin's vision in lines 94–109 is a much shortened version of Bede's, although with a clearer narrative structure. In particular, he condenses the tale of Edwin accepting Christianity in his council into lines 168–84, losing in the process Bede's poetic metaphor of the sparrow flying through the hall. Godman notes that: 'In Bede Coifi himself suggests desecrating the pagan altars, partly because his former faith has failed to reveal to him truth, partly through its lack of material advantage. Alcuin has king Edwin urge Coifi to the act, and emphasises the ethical benefit of Christianity through a speech (vv. 173–7) in which the pagan high priest declares his longing for it.'⁴⁰

In describing Edwin's baptism and establishment of a see at York (lines 194–210), Alcuin makes much more of the York connection than Bede's chapter ii. 14. Gregory's letter to Augustine (*HE* i.29), is mentioned only in terms of his decree that York should be the base of an archbishopric (lines 205–9). Alcuin in fact describes Paulinus as York's first archbishop (line 210), where Bede calls him only 'bishop'.

After discussing Edwin's peaceful reign and his church-building, Alcuin moves on to the way in which 'giddy fortune wheels about' (*praeceps Fortuna rotat*, line 229), bringing about Edwin's death at the hands of his enemies at Hatfield Chase. He then goes straight to the story of Oswald and his defeat of Cædwalla (lines 234–64; *HE* iii.2). The miracle attributed to the Heavenfield cross, which follows quickly in Bede, only occurs much later (lines 443–54), after a section praising the cross 'which is entirely Alcuin's' (lines 427–38).⁴¹

Whereas Bede (iii.3) stresses the need for continuing evangelisation, the activities of Aidan, and the Irish dimension, during Oswald's reign, Alcuin instead details Oswald's building of churches and arraying them with treasure (lines 270–83). However, he describes Oswald's piety and his miracles (mentioning Aidan but not that he is from the Irish church) at nearly as much length as Bede, taking up 200 lines on them. He includes additional details about Oswald's hand (308–9), and about the fact that his brother Oswiu ordered it enshrined at Bamburgh in a specially built church.⁴² Alcuin stresses Oswald's posthumous fame, both at home and abroad. He is, as Godman points out, our only eighth-century source for Offa adorning Oswald's tomb (lines 388–91).⁴³

Following Oswald's death, Alcuin turns to his brother Oswiu, mentioning the internal strife in Northumbria but concentrating on his war with the heathen Penda. Part of Bede's earlier description of Penda's and Cædwalla's depredations between Edwin's and Oswald's reigns is transferred here to fill out the picture. Mercia, however, is only named after Penda's defeat and the kingdom's subsequent conversion, which is said to herald a golden age of unity.⁴⁴

There is no mention of Oswine, nor of Oswiu's vow before the battle of Winwaed. Instead we have a set-piece battle scene for Oswiu's victory (lines 520–59), much more vivid than Bede's, and a short eulogy (lines 560–77), compressing Bede's detailed descriptions of Oswiu's conquests and activities into just two lines (567–8). Material about Mercia and the south, the death of Aidan, the succession at Lindisfarne, and the controversy over the date of Easter and its settlement at the Synod of Whitby, is all discarded.

Instead, Alcuin turns to Wilfrid during his exile among the South Saxons, his preaching in Frisia and his edifying death (lines 573–645; *HE* v.19). There is nothing about Wilfrid's time at York or Ripon, his political quarrels and exiles, or his appeals to Rome; the closest Alcuin gets is the word *compulsus*, 'driven by compulsion' (line 604). There is also nothing about the appointment of bishops in his absence.

Alcuin then jumps again to Cuthbert (lines 646–750). He makes some use of *HE*, (ii.28 (26) and 27 (29)), but concentrates largely on the miracle-working, for which his main sources in lines 688–741 are the rubrics from the chapter headings in Bede's prose and metrical *Vitae* of St Cuthbert. Oddly, as Godman points out, Alcuin makes a mistake about the order in which Bede wrote the *Vitae*, describing them as being composed 'first in prose, and then in hexameter verse', whereas Bede's own preface to the metrical *Vita* states that it was the other way round.⁴⁵

Alcuin then jumps again to *HE* iv.19–20, to tell us briefly about Ecgrith's wife Æthelthryth (lines 751–85). There is no mention of Wilfrid being asked to persuade her to give up her virginity, and only a short description of miracles after her death. Bede explains about her burial at Ely and reproduces a lengthy hymn of his own composition. Alcuin mentions this without quoting it, and implies that the burial was in Northumbria. He then narrates Bede's miracle story of the thegn Imma (*HE*, iv.22 (20); lines 786–836), because it 'will be of value to many readers'.⁴⁶

Alcuin then leaves out *HE* iv.23 to iv.25, about Hild and Whitby, and jumps again to Ecgrith's life and defeat at the hands of the Irish. Like Bede, he condemns him for unprovoked aggression (*HE*, iv.26 (24); lines 836–43). There is then a very brief review of Aldfrith's reign, and a section on Bishop Bosa. According to Bede, Bosa was bishop of York twice (*HE*, iv.12, iv.23), firstly during the period while Wilfrid is in exile, and then again after Wilfrid's death, but Alcuin does not mention this. His praise of Bosa's work and endowments does not come from Bede.

The long vision of Drythelm is given very much the same treatment as in *HE* v.12, but Alcuin leaves out two further visions reported by Bede. He then moves backwards in *HE*, to v.8–10, and reviews missionary works by Northumbrians, relying on Bede and offering only a sentence or two on Willibrord (lines 1037–43). Alcuin gives the impression of immediate success in proselytising, while Bede makes clear that several attempts were failures. As Godman notes, lines 1026–33 are the only source for Wihthberht's foundation of a monastery and his prophecies. He also includes Wira, who is not mentioned in Bede perhaps because his career was later.⁴⁷

After a very short notice of Aldfrith's death, Alcuin moves to the episcopate of John of Beverley and his miracles (lines 1084–1219; *HE* v.2–6). Alcuin leaves out a number of details, and ignores the fact that John was bishop of Hexham first; indeed, the first miracle that he recounts took place at Hexham. The last bishop of York named by Bede in *HE* is Wilfrid II, who is much more extensively covered by Alcuin (lines 1216–47; *HE* v.6).

From the 730s to 780

Bede runs out as a source for Alcuin in the early 730s, and from here on he has to rely on his own resources. These could have been oral tradition, memory, or whatever documents were held in church records in York at the time. In particular, Alcuin could have made use of local annals. Story suggests that there was a 'strong, independent chronicle-keeping tradition in Northumbria in the decades which followed Bede's death', and that it may well have been based in York.⁴⁸ Those annals that we know about fall into two groups: the Continuations of Bede, and the so-called 'Northern Annals' or 'York Annals' which are lost but whose existence can be deduced from other later histories. The Continuations found in a number of Bede MSS run to 766. Hart has suggested that these were put together in the form of a chronicle, rather than simply being entries in a table, and that Alcuin might well have been responsible for this.⁴⁹

The name 'York Annals' has been given to a hypothetical set of lost annals, running to 802 or 806 in different versions. Harrison, Hart and Lapidge have all separately concluded that these were the source material for Symeon of Durham's *Historia Regum* and his *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*, Roger of Howden's *Chronica*, and the 'Northern Recension' of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, via an intermediate stage of a chronicle put together by the tenth-century scholar Byrhtferth of Ramsey.⁵⁰ Story's detective work has found many links between the distinctive phrases used by Alcuin in the York poem and later 'Byrhtferthian' terminology. However, as she points out, the stylistic influences could go either way: 'it is debatable whether this is a consequence of direct editorial influence or secondary borrowing from his own compositions by a contemporary or later editor of these annals'.⁵¹ Whether or not Alcuin was directly involved, in his position in the York religious community he would surely have known that annals were being compiled. It is odd, therefore, that there is little overlap between the annals and the content of the York poem. One almost wonders if separate but parallel 'church annals' were being kept, which have not survived even in a derivative form.

Alcuin's narrative continues, after the end of Wilfrid II's episcopate, to describe that of Egbert, raised to the rank of archbishop in 735 (lines 1251–87). Egbert ruled alongside his brother Eadberht as King of Northumbria for over twenty years, and Eadberht has the distinction of being the only king mentioned in the post-730 section of the York poem. The period of the brothers' joint rule is depicted as a golden age, and the annalistic entry for 741,

saying that the minster at York was burnt down — or, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* version, York (*Eorforwic*) itself — is ignored.⁵²

We then have a lengthy *obit* of Bede. This includes a reference to the death of abbot Ceolfrith in 716, recorded in Bede's *Historia Abbatum* rather than in *HE*, and also a note about a posthumous miracle for which Alcuin is our only source.⁵³

Alcuin then moves on to the hermit Balthere of the Bass Rock (in the Firth of Forth), narrating his vision at length (lines 1319–87). Balthere's death is noted under 756 in the 'York Annals', with a small amount of extra material in Symeon's *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*, but the sources for the rest of the information here are unknown. He is followed by another hermit, Echa, whose death is similarly reported in the annals, and whose place of death has been identified by Bullough as Crayke, not far from York. Both deaths, as Godman notes, are also recorded in the Durham *Liber Vitae*.⁵⁴

The poem then returns to York, and to Egbert's successor as archbishop, Ælberht, whom Alcuin eulogises in lines 1394–1489. He follows this with descriptions of his building and decorating churches at York, with the assistance of Eanbald and Alcuin himself. All this is clearly from Alcuin's own memory, and indeed he is the only source for the building of the church of *Alma Sophia* (named in line 1520), apart from one calendar entry in a manuscript now held in Berlin.⁵⁵ If indeed Alcuin was concerned with the writing of the York Annals, it does seem strange that the building of this new church is not mentioned there.

Alcuin explains in lines 1531–5 that Ælberht had divided his treasures before retirement, giving Alcuin control of teaching and the library, and he then goes on to list some of the books in it (lines 1536–62). He then describes Ælberht's death and funeral, and moves on to the description of a third vision, this time specifically from his own knowledge (lines 1597–1658). Godman notes that one of Alcuin's letters to the York community, dated 795, appears to refer to this vision as if it is a matter of common local knowledge, and that it also resembles a vision recounted in *HE* iv.14.⁵⁶ The concluding verses bring back the poem to the 'port of York' (*Euboricae ad portum*, line 1651), in a nautical metaphor continued until the last line at 1658.

WHAT MODELS DID ALCUIN FOLLOW?

Alcuin is not generally considered an original thinker; as one of his biographers has put it bluntly: '[h]e created nothing, he originated nothing, he added nothing to what had gone before'.⁵⁷ However, in writing a lengthy verse history of a single Christian bishopric, he does appear to have been genuinely innovating, bringing together a number of different models to create a new one. The most distant one is Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Godman also finds affinities with late antique Biblical epics.⁵⁸ The possible debt of the opening lines to the *Versum de Mediolano Ciuitate*, as a praise-poem for a city, has already been discussed above, and Coates has pointed to affinities with the panegyrics of the sixth-century poet Venantius Fortunatus, for example those on the dedication of the new cathedral at Nantes, or those in celebration of the bishoprics of Verdun, Metz and Nantes.⁵⁹ Coates also suggests the influence of the *Liber Pontificalis*, the long-running papal history which outlines the main events in each pope's period of office, and generally lists that pope's building works and endowments. There is also the developing genre of (prose) *gesta episcoporum*, the first of which was composed by Paul the Deacon celebrating the bishopric of Metz. As Coates puts it: 'Both texts present an account of a single city and its bishops, recording the foundation and development of an episcopal see and the reforms the bishops introduced by which they made the cathedral clergy adopt a

communal regime. Both sees were connected with St Peter, to whom the cathedral church at York was dedicated. Both texts also concern themselves with the relationship between the see and the wider world through their focus upon royal developments and accounts of kingship.⁶⁰

The main insular model is Bede — not only his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, but also his *Historia Abbatum* (*HA*). This treats the lives of the abbots of the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow in a similarly selective manner, but it differs from the York poem in that it often seems more focused on the objects brought to the monastery than on the individuals who brought them.⁶¹

Even taking account of these various models, however, one must give credit to Alcuin for creating a new type of literature, a celebration of an urban church in metrical form. This is not, in fact, his only such innovation, since he is also credited with producing the earliest known medieval debate poem.⁶²

WHEN AND WHY DID HE WRITE IT?

The direct evidence within the York poem only allows us to make very broad deductions about the date of its composition. It cannot have been completed before 780, the date of Ælberht's death, nor after 796, the date of death of his successor Eanbald to whom the poem also refers. As Godman explains, the nineteenth-century editor Wattenbach assigned the poem to the years 780–82 on the grounds that nothing indicated that the author was separated from the clergy of the church at York. In particular, at one point the poet addresses the 'young men of York' (line 1408). However, use of this phrase does not show that the poem was itself written in York, even if it was intended for an audience there. Ganz has noted that over time Alcuin was joined on the continent by several of his York pupils. His letters and other poems also show that Alcuin remained in close contact with the York community throughout his life.⁶³ Godman's view is that the poem was not composed or finally revised until 786, or even 792–3 when Alcuin was visiting York. He bases this argument mainly on similarities with the metrical *Vita Willibrordi*, which he dates to between 785 and 797, and on the praise of Offa of Mercia (line 388), since he was a rising power in the 780s and married a daughter of Æthelred of Northumbria in 792.⁶⁴

These arguments have not convinced other commentators. Contrary views are that an affinity with the *VW* does not itself show that this was composed first. Indeed, the fact that Alcuin treats Willibrord at such minimal length, and does not mention or quote his own poem, could suggest that the York poem was the earlier. It has been questioned why there is no sign of any influence from Alcuin's continental reading, if the poem was composed after he had been at Charlemagne's court for a while. Bullough considers that the poem was probably written as early as the late 770s, with later revisions and additions. The affinity with the *Gesta Episcoporum Mettensium*, put forward by Coates, would push the date to 784, the date of the *Gesta's* composition, unless of course the influence went the other way, from Alcuin to Paul.⁶⁵

With no consensus among scholars, and the direct evidence inconclusive, a different approach to the question of dating is needed. This is to start by examining the contents — and just as important, the omissions — for what they can show of the poem's underlying message and hence its purpose. As a poem, it appears to be too long, detailed, and earnest to be composed simply for relaxation or to satisfy poetic urges, as some of Alcuin's other poems, such as *O Mea Cella*, and *The Nightingale*, seem to have been.⁶⁶ Though it is clear he was a great teacher, it is also improbable that he wrote it as a pedagogical exercise, not only because of its

length but also because there are no signs that the poetic technique is being varied or elaborated to demonstrate different points. Laistner has called his known teaching material 'mediocre'.⁶⁷ The poem might well have been linked to Alcuin's departure from York, at least in part as a farewell gesture. Godman suggests that it was 'addressed to and commemorated the Minster school in which he had been educated and had taught', and that Alcuin was 'naturally impelled to commemorative poetry'.⁶⁸

It might also have been impelled by the state of Northumbrian politics, with raging feuds and disputes among the royal and noble dynasties. Godman (1982, lx), Bullough and Coates all take the view that it is a plea for reform and unity, but without suggesting a specific occasion during which the plea could have been launched.⁶⁹ However, Alcuin himself commented, rather later, that he needed a specific reason for writing down what he had in mind.⁷⁰ If one can establish the message and the purpose, one may then be able to relate that to events, or to a specific event, in the period.

ALCUIN'S EDITORIAL DECISIONS

Alcuin's sources, especially *HE*, were voluminous. Even though the York poem is long, he had to do was what anyone turning a book into a play or film today has to do: slim it down considerably, which usually means cutting out whole sub-plots and storylines. Decisions about what to take out are usually a combination of what can be excised easily, and what might cause other difficulties. What drove Alcuin's decisions?

Firstly, Alcuin, like Bede, is writing an *ecclesiastical* history, broadly following the guidance set out by Eusebius (whose *Church History* both Alcuin and Bede knew through the Latin edition prepared by Rufinus of Aquileia). 'It is my purpose to write an account of the successions of the holy apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Saviour to our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church; and to mention those who have governed and presided over the Church in the most prominent parishes, and those who in each generation have proclaimed the divine word either orally or in writing.'⁷¹

Indeed, Alcuin is complying more closely than Bede, who strays frequently into discussing secular affairs.⁷² The focus of Alcuin's history is York, but York as the centre of an ecclesiastical province which stretched from the Humber to the Forth, across the Pennines and north of the Solway to include the bishopric of Whithorn, and over the Irish Sea to Mayo.⁷³ He brings in events and personalities from different parts of the province as it suits him, displaying it as a single unified area. Thus Cuthbert from Melrose and Lindisfarne is included; elsewhere Alcuin describes the church of St Cuthbert on Lindisfarne as 'a place more sacred than any in Britain'.⁷⁴ Bede from Wearmouth/Jarrow, and Drythelm and Balthere from the north of the province — Cunningham, in Ayrshire (*HE* v. 12), and the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth respectively — are also there. On the other hand, Edwin's activities outside York, including his construction of a basilica at *Campodonum* and his work with Paulinus at Yeavering (*HE* ii. 14), are left out. York is conspicuous by its absence in Bede's treatment, as Coates points out, so Alcuin is effectively manufacturing a picture of supremacy acquired by York in the eighth century which is not there in his source.⁷⁵ Bullough feels that Alcuin's aim was to build up York at the expense of Bamburgh, the ancient royal seat in Bernicia, but Bamburgh was no rival to York in ecclesiastical terms.⁷⁶ If there was a potential threat to York, it was from Lichfield in Mercia, as discussed below.

Within this framework, Alcuin is concerned to suggest continuous progress and show the church as a whole, and most especially that of York, in a good light wherever he can. This means, for example, that he does not mention any bishops of Canterbury, even Augustine or Theodore. He includes details about Edwin that are not in Bede, such as his birth at York and his adornment of the church there, but omits Paulinus' flight south with Edwin's wife and children after Edwin's death, the resulting gap in the episcopal succession at York, and the fact that Paulinus only received the *pallium* when he was already in the south (*HE*, ii.20, iii.1, iii.2). Similarly, when it comes to the translation of Oswald's corpse to Bardney, Alcuin's story differs subtly from Bede's. 'Half a century after Oswald's death the monks at Bardney refused to accept his relics [...]. Alcuin makes no mention of the monks. Instead it is the *saevi coloni* who refuse to bear Oswald's bones into the monastery'.⁷⁷ James Campbell considers that this incident shows Alcuin as displaying a 'marked capacity for distortion'.⁷⁸

Rather more evident is the near-erasure of Wilfrid from Alcuin's record. Godman describes him as 'whitewashing' Wilfrid's career, but Wilfrid was going to present a problem for any narrator. As Campbell points out, Bede had had similar difficulties: 'Wilfrid's contentious life presented incidents which it was difficult to make edifying, disputes between bishops, two worthy kings, Ecgfrith, '*venerabilis et piissimus*' and Aldfrith, '*vir [...] doctissimus*' flouting papal decisions, perhaps even two archbishops doing so'.⁷⁹ Bede dealt with the problem by mentioning Wilfrid only where he had to in the course of his narrative, and then giving him an extended obituary in *HE* v.19. Alcuin's solution to the same problem is to remove any mention of his activities in Northumbria — even as bishop of York — from his narrative, and to refer only to his undoubtedly saintly record in far-away places.

The removal of Wilfrid could then lead naturally to other wholesale excisions. It would hardly have been possible to cover the Easter question without Wilfrid, or the Irish contribution to Northumbria's conversion without the Easter question. Dropping those topics allowed (or even required) Abbess Hild to be dropped altogether, and Aidan except for a single reference (line 291). Godman argues that this means that the standpoint of the poem is strictly Romanist, and that Alcuin held 'unstated but firm anti-Irish sentiments'.⁸⁰ It may be rather more that controversy about such issues was dead, or at least not to be stirred up unnecessarily.

Hughes points out that clergy seem to have been moving freely between England and Ireland at this time, and settling permanently and happily in each other's lands.⁸¹ If there was potential for stirring up trouble by mentioning the date of Easter, it lay not in Ireland but among the British bishops in Wales, and possibly also in Strathclyde and on the fringes of Mercia. The Welsh Annals record that 'Elfoddw' converted the churches under his authority to the Roman Easter in 768, well within Alcuin's lifetime. It is not known exactly which churches this refers to, or even where Elfoddw was bishop, but Davies has suggested that he may have overseen a council to determine the correct date of Easter.⁸² Though Alcuin may well have been aware that the change had happened, he may have seen no reason to stir up difficulties about it.

Alcuin is also following Bede in providing a set of exemplars, though not necessarily the same ones, and fewer of them. Gunn has shown the way in which Bede constructed a series of images within his narrative, using what he knew of the Northumbrian kings, to leave the observer with a composite image of the virtues of kingship: Edwin's discernment and inner focus concerning religious matters; Oswald's faith and devotion; and Oswine's humility. In the York poem, however, Alcuin covers Edwin and Oswald at length, but does not mention

Oswine at all, substituting Oswiu as his third 'exemplary' king.⁸³ This might be because after reading Bede, Alcuin was not convinced of Oswine's sanctity. It is perhaps more likely to be because, even though Bede managed to portray Oswine's death as edifying, there was no disguising that it came about as part of an internecine struggle for the throne, all too similar to those going on in Alcuin's own day.

Wallace-Hadrill has pointed out that in portraying his kings, Bede picked personal virtues corresponding to the requirements of the church: protection, endowment, largesse, prosecution of Christian warfare and, above all, obedience to its teaching.⁸⁴ The kingly virtues are still there in Alcuin's three exemplars. He sees Edwin as '*rex pius*' (line 166), '*largus [...] in omnes*', '*patriae pater*' (lines 115–21). '*Sanctissimus*' Oswald is also '*patriae tutor*', is '*moribus egregius*', '*pauperibus largus*', '*iudiciis verax*', '*hostibus horribilis*', benefactor of churches, worker of miracles (lines 165–74). Oswiu is '*invictus bellis*', also '*pius, omnibus aequus*' (lines 565–72).

Only three other Northumbrian kings — Ecgfrith, Aldfrith, and Eadberht — are mentioned at all, with very short comments, and none later than Eadberht. There is only one queen, Æthelthryth, Ecgfrith's wife (lines 733–85), given more of a Northumbrian focus than in Bede by omission of the fact that the miracles attributed to her happened in far-away Ely. Wallace-Hadrill considers that in Bede's day the Church lacked any definition of the role of queens beyond what was required of all Christian wives, and this may well have remained true up to Alcuin's day and beyond.⁸⁵

Alcuin's material on the five bishops or archbishops of York mentioned in detail — Bosa, John of Beverley, Wilfrid II, Egbert, and Ælberht — has some overlaps and repetition, but continues the theme of providing exemplars of different virtues. Coates points to the repetition of 'leadership' words, and the creation of 'an image of the ideal bishop as the first citizen of an urban community'.⁸⁶ Bosa is noted for putting the clergy of York under a Rule and creating a system of continuous liturgical observance (lines 847–70).⁸⁷ John's chief role is as a miracle-worker (lines 1084–1206), whilst Wilfrid II is noted chiefly for his endowment of churches with treasure. Egbert's royal ancestry and close co-operation with the king his brother is stressed (lines 1250–88). Finally, Ælberht, in the longest note, is credited with numerous virtues; being learned, being a teacher, protecting the church and the poor, meting out justice, endowing the church while living moderately himself (lines 1396–1489).

In his treatment of the life and work of Bede (lines 1291–1318), Alcuin creates another exemplar, 'an ornament of Northumbrian Christianity' in Higham's words, fitting his vision of a 'cultural golden age out of which the school of York had emerged', in contrast to the current ecclesiastical decline.⁸⁸

A third element in Alcuin's selection of material is what one might call 'internationalism'. He gives considerable attention to missionaries who can be linked to York — not only Wilfrid, but the others who are listed and praised in lines 1008–76. More importantly, the two saints with more than a local, Northumbrian, reputation at the time were Oswald and Cuthbert. Clemoes has shown how the cult of St Oswald was spread first by Willibrord and then by Wilfrid. As for Cuthbert, Colgrave has shown that both the Anonymous Life and Bede's two *Vitae* were in demand in England and on the continent from the eighth century onwards.⁸⁹ Bullough, while accepting Cuthbert's international reputation, considers that his inclusion at such length shows Alcuin's 'literary dependence' on Bede, but this seems unlikely given that Alcuin has deliberately moved away from the *HE* at this point. Nor do we need as justification Norton's surmise that Cuthbert was made bishop of both York and Lindisfarne in 685.⁹⁰ If there was such a York connection, Alcuin makes no mention of it, and his brief

reference to Cuthbert as a bishop in lines 666–73 is considerably outweighed by the space given to his miracles (lines 688–741). Bede was widely known on the Continent for his learning, and there had been a steady demand for copies of his books from Anglo-Saxon missionaries there since the 740s. Higham has suggested that *HE* was appreciated particularly because it 'laid out a virtuous tradition of monastic and eremitic endeavour stretching back to Gregory the Great, via a host of exemplary figures whose deeds they could emulate'.⁹¹

A final, but very important, element in Alcuin's selection of material is the space he gives to visions of heaven and hell. There are three of these: Drythelm's, in lines 876–1007, in which Drythelm visits both heaven and hell; Balthere's, in lines 1333–62, where the main vision is about a pursuit by demons; and the unnamed young man's in lines 1607–32, where the vision is of the joys of heaven. A substantial group of such visions was known to Bede and other writers, and they had a long history by Alcuin's time, going back to those in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.⁹² As Hen has pointed out, Gregory gave a particular role to such visions, as a warning: 'In his unbounded mercy, the good God allows some souls to return to their bodies shortly after death, so that the sight of hell might at least teach them to fear the eternal punishments in which words alone could not make them believe.'⁹³

The purpose of such visions, Hen suggests, was to promote the idea of private penance and the forgiveness of sins. Peter Brown has coined a French term, *peccatisation*, for the concept being developed at the time, a reduction of human experience to the two universal principles of sin and penitence.⁹⁴ In Alcuin's poem, the three visions carry three complementary messages. Drythelm is entreated to reform his character, words and deeds ('*corrige, quaeso, tuos mores et verba vel actus*', line 1004); the holy man Balthere acts as a kindly mediator ('*pious interventor*', line 1368), to save an errant deacon from the demons, begging God for forgiveness with tears; and the unnamed young man is carried off by angels after a good life. The lesson of the three combined seems to be, 'do not sin or if you do, seek the intercession of the church that you may escape the pains of hell'. As Cubitt has shown, a concern for confession and penance runs through much of Alcuin's writings, including his admonitions to pupils and lay magnates. Meens has discussed an incident late in Alcuin's life when he insisted on the importance of repentance and mercy, as against the views of Charlemagne and Theodulf of Orleans that justice should prevail against a recalcitrant cleric.⁹⁵

AN OCCASION? THE LEGATINE COUNCILS OF 786

Putting all these points together, we have a poem which is maximising the glories of York as an ecclesiastical province; playing down disunity, and creating images of ideal kings and bishops; giving a considerable amount of space to saintly figures with an international reputation; and calling for repentance and reform. To some extent these messages are universally applicable, but is there a particular occasion for which such themes would be especially suitable, during the possible time-period for the York poem's completion?

An occasion which they seem to fit very well is the 786 series of legatine councils in England, rather neglected by historians in the past but recently analysed thoroughly by Cubitt and to a lesser extent by Story.⁹⁶ They are reported on briefly in *HR*, while the much fuller report of the legates themselves survived in a manuscript in Germany, and was printed by Dümmler as Alcuin's *Ep. 3*.⁹⁷ *HR* states that papal legates were despatched to renew English friendship with Rome and strengthen the faith of the Anglo-Saxons, whilst the report of the legation itself says that the legates were sent to root out abuses in the Anglo-Saxon

church. There is much to suggest Charlemagne's involvement in setting up the visit and manipulating the agenda. What may have particularly concerned both him and the Pope was the rising tension between Offa of Mercia and Archbishop Jænberht of Canterbury, which led in 787 to the loss of part of Jænberht's province to a new archbishopric at Lichfield. Brooks suggests that the meetings 'must have provided the legates with plenty of opportunities for formal and informal discussions on Offa's disputes with the archbishop. It is therefore likely that the scheme to divide the southern province and thus to provide Offa with a more controllable metropolitan was already mooted at this time.'⁹⁸ The archdiocese of York does not appear to have been under any direct threat, but the looming power of Offa must have been felt, and Higham has suggested that within a few years, Northumbria was paying tribute to Mercia.⁹⁹

As noted above, Story suggests that an advance party may have been sent early in 786 to act as a precursor to the main mission, which arrived in September, and that Alcuin may have been a part of it.¹⁰⁰ The two papal legates were Bishop George of Ostia (an Italian but with long experience at the Frankish court) and Theophylact of Todi. They reported back to the Pope that they had visited Jænberht first at Canterbury, and then went to the court of Offa, where they held their first council. George and his Frankish assistant, Abbot Wigbod, then went on to Northumbria where they were welcomed by Archbishop Eanbald I, while messengers were sent off to King Ælfwald, then in the northern part of the kingdom. A northern legatine council was then held, at which a report was made to Bishop George of all the abuses requiring correction in Northumbria, and a set of legatine decrees issued. George then travelled south, accompanied now by Alcuin, for a further southern council.

We can guess that they travelled in some state. *HR* says that the legates were 'received with honour by kings and by bishops, and by the nobles and magnates of this country, and returned home in peace with great gifts, as was fitting'.¹⁰¹ The large number of leading churchmen and laymen who attested to the decrees of the councils were presumably present throughout their deliberations. In addition, Mercian dignitaries would probably have escorted Bishop George and his entourage north, and stayed in order to escort him back. There must have been much work for the Archbishop's entourage in escorting and entertaining all the distinguished visitors — local, Southumbrian, and continental — even though the legatine council itself was not held in York.

Cubitt's view is that Alcuin was heavily involved in the activities of the northern council, and she thinks it likely that Alcuin was influential in framing the canons of the council, which look 'very like an Alcuinian prescription for the evils of Northumbria'. Noting Bullough's suggestion that the York poem was a plea for the reformation of the kingdom, she suggests that '[i]n c. 785–6 Alcuin seems to have gained an opportunity to frame this plea more forcefully and with greater authority'.¹⁰²

Following on from this, I would suggest that it is a strong possibility that the York poem was composed, or perhaps finished, in time for the arrival of the papal legates in 786. Its audience, as Bullough suggests, was primarily York clergy in a position to influence contemporary Northumbrian kings and their advisers. However, whereas he proposes that there was a secondary audience of clergy and monks 'in more distant parts of the kingdom', my proposition is that the secondary audience was much closer to him, the religious and lay magnates assembled for the council and its related meetings.¹⁰³

If this is correct, the York poem is a verse counterpart not so much to Bede's *HE* as to the legatine decrees to which the 786 council assented. Those decrees deal with the abuses; the

poem shows the ideal world that existed in the past and could exist again were there to be reform. The three visions, with their messages of reward, punishment, and repentance, are important and integral to the whole structure and aim of the poem.

CONCLUSION

Alcuin cannot be considered a great poet, and the York poem, even if it is his best, cannot be considered a great piece of literature. What this paper has sought to show, however, is that it is a very interesting one. Alcuin has appropriated material from several sources — Bede, possibly the 'York Annals', and his own information — in order to create a lengthy epic of the history of a single ecclesiastical province centred on a city of which he is proud. He has taken royal and episcopal exemplars to show how a kingdom at peace with itself and with its church can have a golden age, and has woven into it a series of visions with a message of repentance and of heavenly forgiveness.

The occasion for this, I have argued, was the visit of the Papal legates in 786, for a series of councils which he may himself have had a role in arranging and whose conclusions he may have drafted. Its upbeat message should be seen against the background of the decrees of the Synod, which were, as Cubitt suggests, 'as much an attack on the behaviour of kings and princes and the power politics of the nobility as on ecclesiastical abuses'.¹⁰⁴ Like Alcuin's metrical *Vita St Willibrordi*, it may have been intended for private study — in this case, by the York community, to give them a positive message that could be passed on by them to the visiting dignitaries, or it might have been intended for public recitation.

However, neither the poem nor the decrees seem to have had much effect on the magnates in the coming years, and Alcuin's view of Northumbria steadily darkened as time went on. His continuing love for his *patria*, and his hatred of what he saw as the kingdom's sinfulness, comes out clearly in what may have been his next major poem, on the Viking sack of Lindisfarne — a lament for the bad times as much as the York poem is a cry for the lost good times:

*Omnibus, heu, quam sit illa dolenda dies
Qua pagana manus, veniens a finibus orbis
Navigio subito litora nostra petit
Expoliansque patrum veneranda sepulca decore.*¹⁰⁵

NOTES

Abbreviations

- Alc. Carm.* Alcuin, *Carmina*, E. Dümmler (ed.), *MGH PLAC*, 1, 113, 160–351.
Allott Allott, S., *Alcuin of York: His Life and Letters*, York (1987).
BKSY Godman, P., *Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, Oxford (1982).
EHD D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents*, 1, 500–1042, London (1979).
Ep. Alcuin, *Epistolae*, E. Dümmler (ed.), *MGH Epp.* 4, 1–481: 5, 643–5.
HA Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, in *Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols, Oxford (1896), i, 364–87; D. H. Farmer (trans.), in *The Age of Bede*, rev. edn, Harmondsworth (1998), 185–210.
HE Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (ed. and trans.): *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford (1969).

- HR Symeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, in *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera Omnia*, T. Arnold (ed.), 2 vols, London (1882–85), vol. 2, 3–283.
- MGH *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Berlin (1881–1923)
 AA *Auctores*
 Epp. *Epistolae Antiquissimi*
 PLAC *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*
- SRM *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*
- VA *Vita Alcuini abb. Turonensis*, W. Arndt (ed.), MGH *Scriptores* 15, Hanover, (1887), 182–97.
- VSC *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, B. Colgrave (ed. and trans.), in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, Cambridge (1940, repr. 1985), 142–306.
- VW Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, W. Levison (ed.), MGH SRM, 7, 693–724.
- 'York poem' Alcuin, *Versus de Patribus, Regibus et Sanctis Eboricensis Ecclesiae*, P. Godman (ed. and trans.), in *Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, Oxford (1982).

¹ 'These were fortunate times for the people of Northumbria, / ruled over in harmony by king and bishop: / the one ruling the church, the other the business of the realm', BKS^Y, lines 1277–79. Translations are taken from this edition throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted. I have adopted the same spellings of proper names as Godman in his translation.

² For Alcuin's other poems, see *Alc. Carm.*, 1, 113, 160–351; 2, 691–3. A number have been reprinted, with translations, by P. Godman in *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, London (1985).

³ Godman, BKS^Y, cxiii–cxxix, gives full details of this manuscript history, listing the editions at cxxxi–ii and (for Gale) cxiv n. 4. Those referred to here are J. Mabillon, '*Fragmentum Historiae de Pontificibus et Sanctis Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, *Scriptae à Poeta anonymo, Ælberti Episcopi discipulo, circiter annum DCCLXXXV, Acta Sanctorum Ordinis Sancti Benedicti, Saeculum III, Pars I*, Paris (1672), 558–69; T. Gale, *Historiae Britannicae, Saxonicae, Anglo-Danicae Scriptores XV*, Oxford (1691); W. Wattenbach, '*Alcuini de Pontificibus et Sanctis Ecclesiae Eboracensis Carmen*', *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, P. Jaffé, W. Wattenbach and E. Dümmler (eds.), *Bibliotheca Rerum Germanicarum*, 6, Berlin (1973), 80–131. Godman also notes (cxvii) that M. L. Hargrove collated Reims 426 for an unpublished dissertation, 'Alcuin's Poem on York', Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University (1937).

⁴ Godman, BKS^Y, 133, n. 1635–6; D. A. Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation: being Part of the Ford Lectures Delivered in Oxford in Hilary Term 1980*, Leiden and Boston (2004), 34–5, n. 76. S. Allott gives a date of 732, in his *Alcuin of York: his Life and Letters*, York (1987), without explanation.

⁵ *Vita Willibrordi*, W. Levison (ed.), MGH SRM, 7.1, 693–724 (col. 695), hereafter VW. The translation is from C. H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, London (1954), 3.

⁶ Bullough, *Alcuin*, 306.

⁷ M. de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West*, Leiden and New York (1996), 24–5, 31.

⁸ '*ubi nihil videret nisi honesta, nihil audiret nisi sancta*', Alcuin, VW, col. 696, translation by de Jong, 50.

⁹ '*vere monachum monachi sine voto*', VA, 182–97, at 187.

¹⁰ A. Diem, 'The emergence of monastic schools: the role of Alcuin', in L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald (eds.), *Alcuin of York: Scholar at the Carolingian Court: Proceedings of the Third Germania Latina Conference held at the University of Groningen, May 95*, Groningen (1998), 27–44, at 44.

¹¹ Bullough, *Alcuin*, 243–5.

¹² Diem, 44.

¹³ Bullough, *Alcuin*, 305, citing lines 1533–5 and 1527–8 of the York poem, and chapter 6 of VA.

¹⁴ The site of Alma Sophia is unknown. One possibility, put forward by K. Harrison in 'The pre-Conquest churches of York, with an appendix on eighth century Northumbrian Annals', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 40 (1959–62), 232–49, is that it was centrally-planned and stood on the site of the Minster's polygonal chapter-house. An alternative suggestion from Richard Morris,

in 'Alcuin, York, and the Alma Sophia,' (*The Anglo-Saxon Church*, L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (eds.), 80–89) is that it lay across the river Ouse to the south-west, in the area of St Mary Bishophill Junior, adjacent to the precinct of the later Holy Trinity Priory, the site of the pre-conquest Christ Church.

¹⁵ Bullough, 'Charlemagne's Men of God', in J. E. Story (ed.) *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, Manchester (2005), 136–150, at 137–8.

¹⁶ 'perreximus, assumptis nobiscum viris illustribus', A. W. Haddan, and W. Stubbs (eds.), *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 vols, Oxford (1871), 3, 447–62 at 460; trans. in *EHD*, 770–73 at 773; Bullough, *Alcuin*, 336–46.

¹⁷ J. E. Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750–870*, Aldershot (2003), 68.

¹⁸ S. Coates, 'The bishop as benefactor and civic patron: Alcuin, York, and episcopal authority in Anglo-Saxon England', *Speculum*, 71 (1996), 529–58, at 548–9.

¹⁹ P. Wormald, 'The age of Offa and Alcuin', in J. Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, London (1991) 101–31, at 114.

²⁰ C. Cubitt, 'Wilfrid's usurping bishops: episcopal elections in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600–c. 800', *Northern History*, 25 (1989), 18–38, at 33).

²¹ Bullough, 'Charlemagne's Men of God', 140. Bullough argues in *Alcuin*, 110–117 and 454, that this 'barrier' could have been Alcuin's sexual orientation.

²² M. D. Garrison, 'The emergence of Carolingian Latin literature and the Court of Charlemagne (780–814)', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, Cambridge (1994), 111–40, at 119.

²³ C. N. L. Brooke, 'Alcuin', *Friends of York Minster Annual Report*, 49 (1978), 13–24, at 13.

²⁴ *Theodulfi Carmina*, MGH PLAC 1, 437–581, no. 25 (483–9); A. Orchard, 'Wish You Were Here', in S. Rees Jones, R. Marks and A. J. Minnis (eds.), *Courts and Regions in Medieval Europe*, York (2000), 21–43 (at 37–8); J. L. Nelson, 'Was Charlemagne's court a courtly society?' in C. Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: the Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference*, Turnhout (2002), 39–57, at 52 n. 67, referring to *Alc. Carm.* no. 26 (245–6), trans. in Godman, 118–21.

²⁵ G. Brown, 'Introduction: the Carolingian Renaissance', in McKitterick, *Carolingian Culture*, 1–51, at 30–31.

²⁶ Collected and published in *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, P. Jaffé, W. Wattenbach and E. Dümmler (eds.), *Bibliotheca Rerum Germanicarum*, 6, Berlin (1973).

²⁷ D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, London (1991), 153. The selection of letters translated by Allott in *Alcuin of York* gives a good flavour of Alcuin's tone.

²⁸ *Ep.* no. 42, trans. Allott, letter 1, 3.

²⁹ Orchard, 'Wish You Were Here', 43.

³⁰ N. J. Higham, (*Re-)reading Bede: the Ecclesiastical History in context*, London (2006), 21; Garrison, 112–14.

³¹ Garrison, 114. As she points out, in each case a single manuscript survived, was transcribed by a seventeenth-century editor, and was subsequently lost.

³² M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe AD 500 to 900*, rev. edn. London (1957), 280–81.

³³ Godman, *Poetry*, 17–22.

³⁴ 'unum prosaico sermone gradientem, qui puplice fratribus in ecclesia, si dignum tuae videatur sapientiae, legi potuisset; alterum Piereo pede currentem, qui in secreto cubilii inter scolasticos tuos tantummodo ruminari debuisset', VW, col. 693; Godman, BKS, lxxxvi.

³⁵ Review of *Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, in *Archives*, 16 (1984), 290–92.

³⁶ Laistner, 281.

³⁷ Alcuin's selection from Bede is as follows; lines 19–37, description of York (loosely based on Bede's description of Britain in *HE* i.1); 38–78, history between the end of Roman rule and the start of the Conversion period (*HE* 1.2–22); 79–89, Gregory the Great's sending of mission (*HE* i.23); 90–222, Edwin's conversion and reign (*HE* ii.9–14, ii.16); 223–33, Edwin's death at Hatfield Chase

(*HE* ii.20); 234–64, Oswald's victory over Cædwalla (*HE* iii.1–2); 265–309, Oswald's reign and piety, Aidan's prophecy and the fate of Oswald's arm (*HE* iii.6); 310–36, miracles of sick horse and girl (*HE* iii.9); 337–57, relics untouched by fire (*HE* iii.10); 358–74, translation of Oswald's bones to Bardney (*HE* iii.11); 375–87, miracle of sick boy (*HE* iii.12); 392–427, miracle of man possessed by demon (*HE* iii.11); 438–54, cure of Bothelm's arm (*HE* iii.2); 455–98, cure of Irish scholar (*HE* iii.13); 499–505, summary of Oswald's reign (*HE* iii.9); 506–76, Oswiu's succession, victory, and reign (*HE* ii.20, iii.14, iii.24); 577–605, Wilfrid's mission among the South Saxons (*HE* iv.13); 606–13, Wilfrid in Frisia (*HE* v.19); 614–45, Wilfrid's premonitions and death (*HE* v.19); 646–87, eulogy of Cuthbert (*HE* iv. 27 (25)–30); 688–741, miracles of Cuthbert (prose and metrical *Vitae* of Cuthbert); 751–86, Æthelthryth's life and sanctity (*HE* iv.19); 787–835, Imma (*HE* iv.22 (20)); 836–46, Ecgfrith's war against the Irish, his death and Aldfrith's succession (*HE* iv.26 (24)); 847–75, Bishop Bosa (*HE* iv. 12, iv.23 (21)); 876–1007 Dryhthelm's vision (*HE* v.12); 1008–76 Northumbrian missionaries (*HE* v.8–10); 1077–83 Aldfrith and his successors (*HE* v.18); 1084–1216 John of Beverley; episcopate, miracles, retirement (*HE* v.2–6).

³⁸ Godman, *BKSY*, lxxviii–lxxii; *Versum de Mediolano Ciuitate*, *MGH PLAC* 1, 24–6.

³⁹ J. K. Hyde 'Medieval Descriptions of Cities', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 48 (1965–6), 308–40; Bullough ('Hagiography as patriotism: Alcuin's York poem and the Early Northumbrian *Vitae Sanctorum*'), *Hagiographie, Cultures et Sociétés IVe–XIIIe siècles*, Paris (1981), 339–59, at 340.

⁴⁰ *BKSY*, 19, n. 168 ff.

⁴¹ F. Orton and I. Wood, with C. A. Lees, *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments*, Manchester (2007), 172.

⁴² A. Thacker, 'Membra disjecta: the division of the body and the diffusion of the cult', in C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, Stamford (1995), 97–127, at 100.

⁴³ *BKSY*, 35 n. 388–91.

⁴⁴ *BKSY*, xlii–xlvii; lines 223–33 and *HE* ii.20; lines 499–505 and *HE* iii.9; lines 506–560 and *HE* iii.14; *BKSY* lines 553–65.

⁴⁵ 'prosaico primum scripsit sermone magister / et post heroico cecinit miracula versu', lines 686–7; *BKSY*, 57, n. 685–7; *Vita Metrica Sancti Cuthberti Episcopi Lindisfarniensis*, *MPL* 94, 575–96 (col. 575).

Godman, *BKSY*, includes a detailed analysis of where each element in this section has come from and what changes have been made (58–63).

⁴⁶ 'aestimo quod multis prodesse legentibus ista', line 788.

⁴⁷ *BKSY*, 83, n. 1026–33. Godman also notes that Wira was possibly the bishop of Utrecht, and died c. 753 (87, n. 1074).

⁴⁸ *Carolingian Connections*, 127.

⁴⁹ C. Hart, 'Byrhtferth's Northumbrian Chronicle', *English Historical Review*, 97 (1982), 558–82, at 560.

⁵⁰ Harrison, 244–9; Hart, 577–8; M. Lapidge, 'Byrhtferth of Ramsey and the sections of the *Historia Regum* attributed to Symeon of Durham', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 10 (1981), 97–122, at 118. The primary sources are: Symeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, (hereafter *HR*) in *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera Omnia*, T. Arnold (ed.), 2 vols London (1882–85), translation in Whitelock, *EHD*, 1979, no. 3, and *Libellus de Exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie*, D. W. Rollason (ed. and trans.), Oxford (2000); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition: vol. 7, Ms. E*, S. Irvine (ed.), Cambridge (2004).

⁵¹ *Carolingian Connections*, 132. She also points to the considerable amount of Frankish material included in them.

⁵² *HR*, entry for 741, translated in *EHD*, 240; *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ed. Irvine), 37.

⁵³ lines 1288–1318, n. 1288 ff., 101; n.1297–1300 and n. 1315–18, 103; *HA* chap. 17.

⁵⁴ Godman, *BKSY*, lvi–ii; Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism', 349–50.

⁵⁵ Bullough, *Alcuin*, 322–4. See note 14 on the question of where this church might have been located.

⁵⁶ *BKSY*, 130–31n. 1600 ff.; *Ep.* 42.

- ⁵⁷ C. J. B. Gaskoin, *Alcuin: His Life and His Work*, London (1904), 246.
- ⁵⁸ BKS_Y, lxxxix.
- ⁵⁹ Coates, 548–9; *Carmina*, F. Leo (ed.), MGH AA, IV.1 (Berlin, 1881), 3.6, 3.7, 3.23, 3.13, 1.15; J. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Poet in Merovingian Gaul*, Oxford (1992), chap. 5, discusses these poems in detail. Godman (lxxiv) includes Venantius Fortunatus's *Carmina* in his listing of the literature well-known to Alcuin; see also M. Lapidge, 'Knowledge of the Poems of Venantius Fortunatus in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Latin Literature 600–899*, M. Lapidge (ed.), London (1996), 399–407, repr. from *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 287–95.
- ⁶⁰ For the *Liber Pontificalis*, see R. Davis (ed. and trans.), *The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes*, rev. edn, Liverpool (2007); for Paul the Deacon, *Gesta Episcoporum Mettensium*, G. Pertz (ed.), MGH *Scriptores*. II, 260–8. W. A. Goffart has analysed the content of this *Gesta* in detail in *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*, Princeton (1988), 374–77.
- ⁶¹ V. Gunn, *Bede's Historia: Genre, Rhetoric, and the Construction of Anglo-Saxon Church History*, Woodbridge (2009), 116–19.
- ⁶² Godman, *Poetry*, 20.
- ⁶³ Review of *Alcuin: the Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, in *Speculum*, 60 (1985), 115–17 at 115.
- ⁶⁴ BKS_Y, xlii–xlvi.
- ⁶⁵ Reviews of *Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, by A. K. Bate, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 35 (1984), 254–5, and R. McKitterick, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), 621–2, at 622; Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism' 339; Coates, 530, n. 2, and 548.
- ⁶⁶ *Alc. Carm.* no. 23 (243–4), and no. 61 (270–72), trans. in Godman, *Poetry*, 124–5 and 144–5.
- ⁶⁷ Laistner, 158.
- ⁶⁸ BKS_Y, lxii–iii.
- ⁶⁹ Godman, BKS_Y, lx; Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism' 352; Coates, 539.
- ⁷⁰ 'I had a desire to write this work about thirty years ago, but my pen did not stir as there was no-one to arouse it' (*Ep.* 214, trans. Allott, 105, letter 94). Alcuin is referring here to delays in producing his *Commentary on the Gospel of St John*, as noted in Bullough, *Carolingian Renewal: Sources and Heritage*, Manchester (1991), 171, and 215, n. 37.
- ⁷¹ *Church History*, i.1. Trans. by A. C. McGiffert in *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by P. Schaff and H. Wace, 2nd series, 14 vols, Buffalo, NY (1890), Rev. and ed. for New Advent by K. Knight, at <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm>>, accessed 9 July 2010, vol. 1; Orton and Wood, 173 and 243 n. 21.
- ⁷² R. A. Markus, *Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical History* (Jarrow Lecture 1975), Jarrow, 8.
- ⁷³ Orton and Wood, 127–29; the bishopric of Mayo, founded originally by monks who left Lindisfarne after the Synod of Whitby, was part of the ecclesiastical province of York by 786, as pointed out by K. Hughes in her 'Evidence for contacts between the churches of the Irish and the English from the Synod of Whitby to the Viking Age', in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (eds.), *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources, Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, Cambridge (1971), 49–67, at 51.
- ⁷⁴ '*locis cunctis in Britannia venerabilior*', Alcuin, *Ep.* 16, trans. Allott, letter 12, 18; Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism', 347–48.
- ⁷⁵ Coates, 531.
- ⁷⁶ Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism', 346; Godman, lix–lx; Wood, pers. comm.
- ⁷⁷ Godman, BKS_Y, 35, n. 367–9.
- ⁷⁸ 'Elements in the background to the Life of St Cuthbert and his early cult', in G. Bonner, D. Rollason, and C. Stancliffe (eds.), *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, Woodbridge (1989), 1–19, at 18–19.
- ⁷⁹ BKS_Y, pp, li–ii; J. Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, London (1984), 21, quoting *HE*, iv.16 (14) and iv.26 (24).
- ⁸⁰ BKS_Y, li–ii.
- ⁸¹ Hughes, 'Evidence', 51, 67.

- ⁸² C. Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church*, New York (2006), 165; W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester (1982), 161.
- ⁸³ Gunn, 170–73.
- ⁸⁴ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, Oxford (1971), 87.
- ⁸⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, 92–93; P. Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*, London (1983), xi.
- ⁸⁶ Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism' 352; Coates, 539 and 549.
- ⁸⁷ Wood points out in 'The Anglo-Saxons, Their Religion and Their Buildings', *Northern History*, 20 (1984), 233–6, at 235, that Godman has mistranslated 'cultum' in line 857 as 'fabric' when it means 'liturgy'.
- ⁸⁸ Higham, (Re-)reading Bede, 22.
- ⁸⁹ P. Clemoes, *The Cult of St Oswald on the Continent* (Jarrow Lecture 1983), Jarrow (1984); B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, Cambridge (1940, repr. 1985), 1–2.
- ⁹⁰ Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism', 347; C. Norton, 'The Anglo-Saxon cathedral at York and the topography of the Anglian city', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 151 (1998), 1–42, at 28–35.
- ⁹¹ Higham, (Re-)reading Bede, 21.
- ⁹² *Dialogi* IV.37, in MPL 77, 381–88; E. Gardiner has listed and analysed a large number of such visions in *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell: A Sourcebook*, New York (1993).
- ⁹³ *Dialogi* IV.37.2; translation from O. J. Zimmerman, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 39, Washington DC (1959), 237, cited in Y. Hen, 'The structure and aims of the *Visio Baronti*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 47 (1996), 477–97, at 487–8.
- ⁹⁴ Hen, 492; P. Brown, 'Vers la Naissance du Purgatoire: Amnistie et Pénitence dans le Christianisme Occidental de l'Antiquité Tardive au Haut Moyen Age', *Annales. Histoire. Sciences Sociales* (1997), 1247–61, at 1260.
- ⁹⁵ Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c. 650–c. 850*, London (1995), 177–8; R. Meens, 'Sanctuary, penance, and dispute settlement under Charlemagne: The conflict between Alcuin and Theodulf of Orléans over a sinful cleric', *Speculum* 82 (2007), 285–6.
- ⁹⁶ Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils*, chapter 6, 153–90; Story, *Carolingian Connections*, chapter 3, 55–92.
- ⁹⁷ Whitelock in *EHD* gives a textual history of each, and translates them, at 246 and 770 respectively.
- ⁹⁸ N. Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597 to 1066*, Leicester (1984), 118.
- ⁹⁹ N. J. Higham *The Kingdom of Northumbria: AD 350–1100*, Dover, NH (1993), 167. His view is that a collapse of Northumbria's silver currency in the 790s may be associated with a net outflow of silver in tribute payments to Offa.
- ¹⁰⁰ Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils*, 157–8.
- ¹⁰¹ 'honorifice suscepti sunt a regibus et a præsulibus vel primatibus hujus patriæ, et in pace domum reversi sunt cum magnis donis, ut justum erat', HR, entry for 786, trans. *EHD*, 245–6.
- ¹⁰² Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils*, 184 and 187.
- ¹⁰³ Bullough, 'Hagiography as Patriotism', 352.
- ¹⁰⁴ Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils*, 190.
- ¹⁰⁵ 'how painful to everyone was that day when, alas,/ a pagan warband arrived from the ends of the earth,/ descended suddenly by ship and came to our land,/ despoiling our fathers' venerable tombs of their finery', *Alc. Carm.*, no. 9, 229–35 (at 235) lines 194–97, trans. Godman, *Poetry*, 137.

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