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# THE IDEOLOGY OF MILITARY KINGSHIP IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND: CONVERSION NARRATIVES IN BEDE'S *HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA* AND CYNEWULF'S *ELENE*

Ideologies of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England, whether theorised from ecclesiastical perspectives or perpetuated by the oral/literary practices of Old English vernacular poets, were conducive to the promulgation of Christianity among the aristocratic military classes. This article reads Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* and Cynewulf's *Elene* in an attempt to locate these works in the political and cultural landscape of conversion in early Anglo-Saxon England, on the one hand, and Viking invasion and settlement of the tenth and eleventh century, on the other. While earlier criticism has looked to biblical literary models in order to elucidate Bede's and Cynewulf's portrayals of Edwin and Constantine, the present article argues that the portrayal of military kings therein can be better understood in the context of the secular ethos of kingship and warfare argued by ecclesiastical writers, whose ideas emanated from a shared ideological framework.

KEYWORDS: Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, Cynewulf's *Elene*, kingship, Anglo-Saxon literature, Old English poetry

In Anglo-Saxon England, representations of warfare and military kingship emanated from an ethical framework in which new duties and obligations were defined from ecclesiastical perspective. One dominant theme of kingship comes at the forefront in these representations: the role of military kings in the conversion and the Christianisation of the secular code of conduct inherited from the pre-Christian past. Anglo-Saxon authors depict kings not only in warfare, but also in interactions with important ecclesiastical leaders. Arguably, they advanced a new role for their kings, that of a student of the past. The reformulation of kingship is manifest in two seemingly unrelated Anglo-Saxon texts: Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (henceforth *HE*) (finished in 731 A.D.) and Cynewulf's poem based on Invention of the Cross legend, widely known by its editorial title *Elene*. Both texts represent and ideologise military kingship, laying out rules of conduct regarding the exercise of power in war and peace. The ecclesiastical bias underlying both works is evident when one considers their shared case for an idealised equilibrium that

should tie secular and ecclesiastical authorities. Both works construct an ideology of military kingship and royal power through their underlying critique of heroic ethos and by their imaginative and symbolic reworking of the theme of covenant. In *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Elene*, new alliances between Edwin of Northumbria, Emperor Constantine and supernatural messengers are superimposed on the human and secular obligations. This paper investigates a staggering rewriting of the secular ethos of obligations which is evoked both by Bede in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, in his depiction of Edwine's and Oswald's secular alliances, and Cynewulf in his *Elene* and his evocation of Anglo-Saxon heroic code in the poem.

It must be stated, however, that apart from a teleological vision of how history is to culminate, *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Elene* shares the idea of cultural and ethical origins for Anglo-Saxon England. Bede argue for Rome as the *fons* of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. It is argued in this paper that Cynewulf follows Bede and contests the Germanic conception of the Anglo-Saxon past in favour of Rome as the source of reformed Englishness in especially bold terms.

The second argument put forward here shines a light on the special role that the royalty played in national conversion. Both Constantine in *Elene* and Edwin of Northumbria in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* are royal converts, whose roles and actions are depicted in relation to the themes of origins and legitimacy for power that underlie these two texts. Recent critical work on both these texts has been given to elucidating the ideology of power and kingship as well as postulating that historiographical and poetic presentations of kingship therein reflect Old Testament role-models of military kingship that Anglo-Saxon authors upheld as examples to their royal patrons. The present paper complements earlier critical receptions of both works by locating *HE* and *Elene* in their complex cultural milieus. Neither Bede nor Cynewulf sought to idealise kingship and emperorship. Both works are written from the ecclesiastical perspective and a particular ideological interest may be distilled from them.

It has to be admitted, of course, that both works appear to have addressed audiences inhabiting not the same historical contexts. The historical context of *Historia Ecclesiastica* is easily determined, as Bede completed *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* in 731 A.D. The work was to become well-known in England both in Latin and its Anglian Old English translation during the whole of the Anglo-Saxon period and beyond, to which a significant number of manuscripts preserving both the original and vernacular versions testify. The dating of Cynewulf's poetry, however, has excited much controversy. The present article brings to attention the manuscript context of the poem and locates *Elene* in the cultural and political context of the Viking Age; *Elene* is extant in Vercelli Book, a codex that preserves poetic and homiletic material that slightly predates the Benedectine Reform of the second half of tenth century. It is not known whether Cynewulf read *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the question whether *Historia Ecclesiastica* bears any influence on *Elene* is bracketed in this study. Rather, the aim of the project is to explore

representations of conversion as an important aspect of the Anglo-Saxon culture diachronically to gain understanding of the literary culture in which Old English religious poetry functioned.


## I.


In Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, kingship is depicted as instrumental for Christianisation of English kingdoms that formed Bede's eponymous *gentis anglorum*. Bede is especially attentive to the balance of power and responsibility between the secular and ecclesiastical authority under which people are united as *gens*. As early as in the introductory part of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the theme of kingship inaugurated. Throughout *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the relationship between ecclesiastical and royal powers is an underlying theme. The logic according to which a nation is under an obligation to follow their lord's faith and promptly converts as a result of his conversion into a new religion is prominent in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, in which a number of accounts of royal conversions are related. As Bede appears to be fastidious in his commitment to laying down an ethos of Christian kingship and formulating an ideal of a Christian kingdom, it is vital to investigate *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Elene* in a comparative reading as narratives of conversion and reform of the state.

Kings in *Historia Ecclesiastica* are not only agents of historical narrative. *Historia Ecclesiastica* was written for the Northumbrian military and aristocratic class. Bede reconfigures kings as audiences of his work, textualising them as patrons of the textual community that is being constructed throughout the length of the five books of *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Power relations between the church and the state are Bede's concern from the very beginning of *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which is evidenced by the preface to *Historia Ecclesiastica*. In the preface, addressed to King Ceolwulf, Bede commences his narrative in which the theme of kingship and its instrumental role in the salvational history of *gentis anglorum* constitutes a major thematic thread weaved into the texture of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The preface accommodates Ceolwulf within the authorial chain of which Bede is part as a teacher. Bede writes *History* with Ceowulf in mind, exhorting him to "the instruction of yourself and those over whom divine authority has appointed you to rule" (3). As Bede fashions himself into Ceolwulf' teacher, he presents himself as belonging to the chain of authority inaugurated by Abbot Albinus. Analogically, Ceolwulf's Christian authority over Northumbria emanates from Edwin and Oswald, whom Bede depicts as foremost Christian kings of the Northumbrian kingdom.

In the conversion history of Northumbria, two kings are depicted by Bede to have played the most prominent roles, namely Edwin and Oswald. Their parallel narratives give mirrored accounts of their progress to power and authority, the

growth of which is shown to result from their own conversion and their policies to promote Christianity among their subjects. More importantly, however, they unfold a narrative of an alliance that flourished between royal personas and monk-bishops, who play roles of teachers. Bede shows Edwin and bishop Paulinus as well as Oswald and Aidan to be the principal protagonists of Northumbrian history. His treatment of Edwin and Oswald's respective reigns, arguably, elevates Northumbrian kings from the apparently subordinate and instrumental role they played in their service of conversion to an intimate homosocial bond between a secular ruler and his ecclesiastical teacher.

Much as Edwin's narrative sets the model of kingship that is maintained in the presentations of Oswald and Oswine's reigns, Bede makes Oswald overshadow Edwin. It was Oswald that Bede shaped into the principal actor of Northumbria'a unification, depicting him as the most Christian king (quote) and a vernacular saint. As Clare Stancliffe indicates, in the seventh-century Northumbria Edwin and Oswald may well have entertained an equal status as royal saints and it was only as a result of Bede's rhetorical manipulations in *Historia Ecclesiastica* over half a century later that Oswald became known as the paragon of holy kingship in Anglo-Saxon historiography (Stancliffe 1995: 41). In Bede's historical narrative, Oswald culminates the conversion of Northumbria and its people under the guiding hand of Paulinus.

The first English king the portrayal of whom sets the pattern of ideal kingship in *Historia Ecclesiastica* is that of Edwin of Northumbria. Bede emphasises that the territorial expansion that marks Edwin's reign unfolds as part of providential design with a view to uniting the English race under the faith[1]:

> The king's earthly power had increased *as an augury* that he was to become a believer and have a share in the heavenly kingdom. So, like no other English before him, he held under his sway the whole realm of Britain, not only English kingdoms but those ruled over by the Britons as well (*HE*, ii.9).[2]

Most crucially, the pattern that Edwin's rule sets is dependent on the nature of alliances with ecclesiastical authority that are productive of his secular authority. What Bede stresses is the alliance of ecclesiastical and secular authority, impersonated by the Paulinus and Edwin respectively, which effects Northumbria's conversion.

Arguably, Edwin's conversion is, in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, part of a larger master-narrative, designed in keeping with a reformed notion of kingship and a Christianised heroic ethos, that not only results in a reconciliation of secular

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[1] As Higham notes, "[t]he expansion of Edwin's temporal power (II, 9) was depicted as a divinely given 'sign' of his impending conversion, with Paulinus, 'a man beloved God', beside him as a type St Paul. (Higham 2006: 150)

[2] All quotations from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* are taken from Bede. (1999). *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. (Edited and translated by Judith McClure and Roger Collins.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ideologies of kingship with Christian ideology, but also accommodates the ecclesiastical authority into the political realm of military and territorial conquest. In fact, Bede's narrative of Edwin's reign overshadows that of Oswald in that the presentation of Edwin as king rewrites the secular ethos of a warrior king, which Edwin encapsulates when yet unconverted, to legitimise it as well as make it typologically and tropologically compatible with the Christian ethics.

Bede draws upon folk tradition in his narrative of Edwin's youth, when he was exiled to the Anglian court of king Raedwald and faced with the threat of death from the hands of king Aethelfrtih of Northumbria. The account illustrates Edwin's royal career as progress from pagan to Christian ethics of kingship and warfare in that it contrast between the pagan ethos of honourable conduct, which depicted as tragically ineffective in the fallible pagan world. As he awaits inexorable defeat, he is approached by angel in the middle of the night. The mysterious man asks Edwin what reward he would offer to anyone willing to change the course of the impending doom and save his life, grant him victory over his enemy, make him "a king who surpassed in power not only all your ancestors, but also all who have reigned before [him]" and his eternal salvation.

> Edwin did not hesitate to promise at once that he would follow in every particular the teaching of that one who could rescue him from so many troubles and raise him to the throne. Upon this answer the one who was speaking to him immediately laid his right hand on Edwin's head and said, 'When this sign shall come to you, remember this occasion and your conversation, and do not hesitate to fulfil what you are now promising.' On these words it is related that he suddenly disappeared so that Edwin might realise that it was not a man but a spirit who had appeared to him (*HE*, ii.12).

At the same night, King Raedwald changes his mind and not only does he keep faith with Edwin, but he also extends to him a helping hand in overthrowing Athelfrith and raising Edwin to the Northumbrian throne.

This account of Edwin's rise to power occupies no accidental space in the central part of the second book of *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Placed immediately after a brief historical outline of the Edwin and Paulinus's conversion of Northumbria in chapter 9 and two letters from Pope Boniface addressed to King Edwin and his wife Aethelburh respectively, the account of Edwin's conversation with a divine messenger serves as a prefiguration of the role that Edwin is reported to play and which is bound to be taken over by his ancestors. The two major themes of these epistles, namely, the baptism of the royal consorts, highlighting turning from their former faith portrayed as idolatry and devil-worship, as well as their endorsement of orthodox Roman Christianity, are reflected in the victory over the pagan enemy, related in book 12, that Edwin had been granted.

The alliance with the supernatural messenger not only supersedes Edwin's former alliances that bound him to his pagan allies, but also make for further advance in power as a result of his obligation to ecclesiastical power and the redefinition of

his kingship as overlordship that marks his reign of his predecessors. In book 12 Bede emphasises Edwin and Raedwall's alliance, which turns out to be essential for Edwin's political advancement on the strength of Raedwall honourable treatment of his friend and adamant rejection of Aethelfrith's ensnaring. Although Raedwald, in fact, is on the verge of failing to keep faith for once when approached by Raedwald for the third time, he is persuaded by his royal wife to remain faithful to Edwin and even extends to him a helping hand in overthrowing Aethelfrith. The ultimate victory, however, is shown to be achieved on the strength of Edwin's alliance with the new god, which will become clear to Edwin when Paulinus approaches him and places his right hand on his forehead with a view not only to Edwin's personal conversion but first and foremost to ensuring conversion of Northumbria.


II.


Both Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Cynewulf's *Elene* share the theme of royal conversion as a moment of historical and cultural significance, but their emphases shifted in harmony with their different ideological purposes and the evolving cultural and political landscape. Bede narrates conversions of kings and the royal protagonists of *Historia Ecclesiastica* are paired with bishops, Edwin with Paulinus, Oswald with Aidan. *Elene* was composed in the period from the late ninth to the tenth century and inscribed in Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Bibliotheca Capitolare, CXVII) in the middle of the tenth century. Its textual transmission, therefore, culminates in the tenth century context when the rise of vernacular homily, to which Vercelli Book itself testifies, is coloured by two themes: the need to edify Anglo-Saxon society as a whole and  the need to defend the faith from retreat to paganism at time of the Viking invasion.

*Elene*, like Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, advances a model for a Christian empire that is valid for Anglo-Saxon culture and politics, arguably, in times of Danish invasion and settlement. *Elene* was collected and compiled with a number of other important Old English poems and 23 homilies in Vercelli Book. According to the most recent editor of the homiletic material from the manuscript, the codex antedates Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies* that are dated from 990 to 995 (Scragg 1992: xxxviii). By that Anglo-Saxons had already been politically and culturally converted. With the establishment of the Danelaw at the end of the ninth century, however, a new era of turbulent relations with Viking culture and society had commenced. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Danes are depicted as heathen and represent a territorial threat, but also a threat in broadly cultural terms. The English and the Danes shared the same Germanic descent. The latter were therefore feared to be able cause a revival of paganism in Anglo-Saxon England in case of the assimilation of these two cultures. It is no surprise that the presence of Danish and mixed

Anglo-Danish communities in the tenth century led to a redefinition of the myth of Germanic origins. I argue that *Elene* fits the cultural context of the tenth century, as it supplies a competitive narrative of origins for Anglo-Saxons, a narrative that makes a case for an ethical origin of *Angelcynn* in Rome.

As *Historia Ecclesiastica*, *Elene's* narrative is preoccupied with transfer of power, whereby the secular authority compromises its power with the allied ecclesiastical authority. The most distinguishing feature of Cynewulf's narrative is violence and conversion by force. *Elene*, based on *Inventio Crucis* legend, unfolds a narrative of conquest and conversion of Judas/Cyriacus into Christianity by Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine. When Constantine has defended Rome against pagan Germanic invaders he dispatches his mother Elene to Jerusalem with a mission to find the true cross. The success of her mission is being frustrated by a community of Jews, who refuse to lead Elene to the location in which the cross had secretly been buried. The Jews oppose Elene, as the revelation the cross will inevitably bring an end to their dominion. Intimidated and overwhelmed by Helen, Jews are coerced into surrendering the wisest of them, Judas, to the queen, as his forebears have passed on him the knowledge of the location of the hidden cross. Incarcerated in a cistern, where he lingers starving for seven days, Judas is in turn being coerced to disclose the mystery. In the meantime, he converts into Christianity and reveals the secret.

The poem narrates the Jewish conversion in terms of *translatio studii et imperii*. Jews and Christians compete for power and authority and the poem reflects the notion of *translatio studii et imperii* from Jewish culture into Christian culture. The present article reads *Elene* as a political allegory. The contention between the Jews and Christian reflects the contention between Anglo-Saxons and contemporaneous pagan culture represented by the Danish Vikings. Jews in *Elene* collectively represent the other that exists to be contained and subsumed by Christianity, whose ultimate role is to overtake Judaism in the process that resembles and reiterates that final stage of historical *translatio imperii et studii*. This process defines and sanctions the shift of political and cultural dominance from Rome to Christianity.

Patristic readings of *Elene*, which predominated in the twentieth century, took the question of violence exercised by Helen and her Christian companions for granted. In one of the most astute readings that line of criticism, John P. Hermann noted that "allegorical approach [to Elene alongside some other OE poetry, JO] leads to a critical response that mirrors the rhetorical patterns of the work" (Hermann 1989: 102). Hermann finds exegetical criticism of Cynewulf "complicit with allegorical sublation" (Hermann 1989: 102). Much as the allegorical interpretation do elucidate the poem's significance in the context of medieval exegesis, they reflect critics' desire for the poem's artistry at the expense of its cultural significance and put aside the question of the cultural work it performed in Anglo-Saxon England. The literal meaning, which veils the allegory allegedly implicit in the poem's Latin source, makes manifest much of the structural and epistemic violence that underlay the cultural process of conversion so resonant in *Elene*. In contrast to the body of

important and influential readings of the poem, the present article aims to restore the cultural and historical significance of the poem's literal meaning. The stress that *Elene* places on the conversion and construction of communities suggests that vernacular poetic practices had not eclipsed by the time of Benedictine reform. The present article takes up a trail from a recent article written by Heide Estes, who argues for the early tenth century as the date of *Elene's* composition (Estes 2006: 136). She claims that "the clear message in *Elene* is that Christian faith itself is a sole justification for martial conquest and cultural imperialism justifies the conquest of Danish-held areas of England in the tenth century under the children and grandsons of Alfred. Constantine's victory as a Christian king several centuries earlier would give encouragemnt and legitimacy to the Christian kings in England" (Estes 2006: 137) .Most importantly, Estes provides several arguments for the late date of *Elene's* composition: (1) the low educational standards in the ninth century; (2) the fact that Aelfric composed a homily on the legend of *Inventio Crucis*  also in the tenth century*;* (3) formulaic expressions like "beaggifa"[ringg-giver], which make the poem akin to others  composed in the tenth century or later (Estes 2006: 140-143).

Before I advance my own reflections on the historical significance of the poem, I would like to consider some of John D. Niles's arguments for the composition of *Beowulf* at a similarly late date. Attention must especially be drawn to his arguments relating to the ideological work vernacular poetry did at the time of Danish invasion and settlement following the establishment of the Danelaw at the end of the ninth century under King Alfred the Great's reign.

> Far from being a static repertory of songs insensitive to a changing social and intellectual climate, Old English poetry remained culturally meaningful by adapting to the realities of the *hybrid* civilisation, both Germanic and Mediterranean in its origins, that was now ascendant in Britain (Niles 2006: 143).

Niles also postulates *Beowulf* as a product of a twofold desire for origin: "(1) for a distinguished ethnic origin of that would serve to merge English and Danish differences into a neutral and dignified pan-Germanism, and (2) for an ethical origin that would ally this unified race with Christian spiritual values" (Niles 2006: 153). Niles's historicist reading of *Beowulf* pus emphasis on the hybrid nature of the poem.

While *Beowulf* looks to Germania in search of the common origin for both Anglo-Saxons and Danes, *Elene* disregards Germania and places emphasis on the cultural importance of Rome and Rome's precedence over other empires and nations. As a political poem, *Elene* not only stands out from other vernacular and heroic poetry. Ideologically, it is close to Alfredian translation of the late ninth and early tenth century. Stephen Harris shows that through the tradition of Alfredian writings, especially Orosius's *World History* in its OE redaction, "adherence to Christian practice and belief, or rather Christendom, offered to Anglo-Saxons not only a Christian identity, born of Latin textual culture, but also Germanic identity which was nonetheless intimately tied to an ancient Christian past" (2003: 87). Harris

argues that the Old English translation of *World History* "may have contributed to the process by which Anglo-Saxon began to understand themselves as a single people constituted both ethnically and religiously" (2003: 91). He goes on to point out that the Kingdom of Ostrogoths ruled by Odoacer and Theodoric, who adopted and Germanised the essentially Christian *Romanitas*, is imagined as Germanic in Anglo-Saxon sources, and further claims that "[t]he Orosian inheritance ... emphasised the foundational role of Alaric the Goth in the perceived Germanic imperial origin of Christendom" (2003: 131).

While it is true that the Old English *Orosius* and the Old English *Boethius* represent Rome's Christian culture as Germanised, this Germanised *Romanitas* does not betray a sense of pride Anglo-Saxons would be likely to have taken in their Germanic forebears who ruled Rome before the Gregorian mission to Kent. In fact, *Old English Boethius* represents Alaric and Theodoric as evil. While Alaric was "Criste geconodon" [committed to Christ] (Meter 1, 32), he nonetheless is derided by the Old English translator for supporting the Arian heresy and for the fact that "wæs þam æþelinge Arrianes gedwola leofre þonne drihtnes æ" [the heresy of Arius was dearer to that prince than God's law] (Meter 1, 40-41). Most emphatically, he is rendered an antagonist to Boethius, who remains adamant in orthodoxy.

While the Alfredian canon downplays and disparages Germanic rulers of Rome, *Elene* goes even further in presenting Germanic people as antagonistic to Rome[3]. Through *translatio imperii* Rome overshadows all other empires and peoples. *Elene* reconfigures the pan-Germanic myth of origin that was persistent in Anglo-Saxon England. The poem is an integral part of the chain of authority that goes down to Bede, the chain of authority that emphasises the Roman origin of Anglo-Saxon Christianity.

*Elene* seems to stands out from the cultural formations represented by the Old English *Orosius* and *Boethius*, as it rejects an opportunity to graft some Germanic element onto the Roman branch of Christianity. On the contrary, it juxtaposes Rome with Germania, pitting Constantine against Germanic aggressors, who threaten the integrity of Roman borders. The battle itself is not historical; in historiography, the vision of the cross is associated with the battle of Mulvian bridge, when Constantine was victorious over his Roman rival Maxentius.[4]

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[3] As Cynthia Witmann Zollinger notices, the legendary and historical accounts of Constantine's life had existed side by side since the fifth century. While Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* identifies the vision of the cross with Constantine's victory over Maxentius in a civil war, the legend of Judas Cyriacus "locates the vision on the banks of Danube and the face of invading barbarians" (2004: 182-183). The change, as Zollinger observes, "offers a dramatic set of associations for the Old English poet" as "Cynewulf's presentation of the encounter on the Danube situates the legend within the remembered Germanic past" (2004: 183). As she astutely observes, "if Anglo-Saxon readers find their ancestral memories on one bank of the Danube, they find their spiritual traditions on the other" (2004: 184).

[4] Pamela Gradon lists a number of Syriac, Greek and Latin redactions that, like Cynewulf's poem, preface the invention of the cross legend with the unhistorical account of the battle that Constantine

Cynewulf shares Bede's concern over emphasising the Roman origin of Anglo-Saxon Christian culture. However, he does little to invoke the biblical ideal of kinship[5]. He works from the well-established tradition of Old English verse and his portrayal of Constantine is a result of ideological negotiations that were more immediate to the cultural background in which Old English alliterative verse originated. Cynewulf's aim was to graft Christian ideals into the alliterative tradition. The introductory part, for example, advances a reformulation of the Germanic tradition of narrating victories. The entire episode of Constantine's victory and conversion provides a new understanding of kingship and royal power, deconstructing a heroic notion of kingship that characterises much of the heroic tradition that Cynewulf calls up. The heroic portion of the legend in Cynewulf' adaption is enhanced through a series of rhetorical manipulations that bring attention to formulaic conventions that Anglo-Saxon audiences were familiar with until the end of Old English period.

In *Elene*, conversion is the domain of Ecclesia, while conquest and defence of territory are the domain of kingship. The first section of the poem depicts Constantine as a warrior-king. Like Scyld Scefing and Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, he is a benevolent ruler over his own subjects, but a scourge to foreign nations: "he manegum wearth /geond middan-geard mannum to hrother, /wertheodum to wraece" [became comfort to many people across the world, but a bale to nations, when he raised his weapons against enemies] (*Elene* ll 15-18).[6]

In *Elene*, both the heroic ideals of kingship and the audience's expectations are undermined. Unlike militant Germanic kings, Constantine is weak and gains victory solely on the strength of his alliance with a new god. 'He wæs riht cyning, guðweard gumena. Hine god trymede mærðum ond mihtum' [He was the rightful king, a militant defender of [his] people. God strengthened him with his might and power] (*Elene* ll. 14-15). The verb "tryman" occurs in both heroic and religious Old English poetry and its choice here is significant. In the formulaic approach-

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waged against barbarian, pointing out that none of these versions features the barbarian tribes that attack Constantine in Cynewulf's poem (1947: 162-163). As she notes, "the passage from *Elene* is not taken from any of the legendary sources nor can it well be taken from an historical source since, although we have records of a campaign of Constantine against the Franks, we have no record of the presence of the Huns in Europe until after 370" (1947: 163). Gradon admits that the list may be the effect "the exigencies of alliteration" (1947: 164). Gradon also remarks that "the poet may not be thinking historically at all" (1947: 170).

   [5] Anderson offers a complex reading of Constantine's Christian kingship, claiming that "[t]hree ideals of kingship, not found in the Latin source but generally available in the ninth century, are detectable in *Elene*: first, the ideal of the learned; second, the ideal of *potestas*; third, the ideal of the Christian ruler as a *minister Dei*. The first two ideals are present but of minor importance; the third, Constantine's relationship to the *populus*, is a major contribution to the thematic development in the poem" (1983: 127). Anderson calls up "the Pauline admonition that Christians must be subject to the divinely intentioned authorities (Rom. 13:1-4), whence comes the idea of kingship as *ministerium*)" (1983: 129).

   [6] All quotations from Cynewulf's *Elene* are taken from Robert E. Bjork. 2013. *The Old English Poems by Cynewulf*. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

to-battle scene recurrent in Old English poetry, the lord or general of the army is frequently described as boosting his troop's morale. The word is employed in a rather patronising tone in *The Battle of Maldon*, when Byrhtnoth "ongan beornas trymian/ rad and rædde, rincum tæhte /hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan" 'began to exhort his warriors, advising them of how they should keep their lines and maintain their position' (17-19). In religious poetry, the word signifies the transference of divine power onto the saint. In *Guthac A*, God "hluttre mod in þæs gæstes god georne *trymede*" '*supported* [Guthlac's] pure heart in spiritual goodness' (*Guthlac A* 106-107). The verb also appears in descriptions of spiritual warfare with sin. In *Guthlac B*, this word appears in the context of the theme of *Miles Christi*: "He his modsefan wið þam færhagan fæste *trymede* feonda gewinna" 'he [St. Guthlac] he firmly *strengthened* his mind in defence against the attack of the fiend' (*Guthlac B* 959-962). Although Constantine, unlike Guthlac, is not a *miles Christi* (he is not called *cempa* and, in fact, he is yet to become a convert), his royal authority and military power obtain their validity from the same spiritual source that reinforces saints' spiritual prowess. The transfer of the role of the thane to the emperor is appropriate, since as the Christian rule he plays a role subordinate to *Ecclesia*.

The new role that Constantine is to play in Christian history is emphasised by chiastic repetitions within a ring composition that narrates his education and conversion.

> þa se æðeling fand,
> leodgebyrga,   þurh (a) *larsmiðas*,
> guðheard, garþrist,   (b) *on godes bocum*
> hwær ahangen wæs   heriges beorhtme
> on rode treo   (c) *rodora waldend*
> æfstum þurh inwit,   swa se (c) *ealda feond*
> forlærde (b) *ligesearwum*,   leode fortyhte,
> (a) *Iudea cyn*,   þæt hie god sylfne
> ahengon, herga fruman.

> Then the nobleman,
> The people's prince, battle-hard, bold
> Found through (a) *scholars* in (b) *the books of God*
> Where (c) *the ruler of the firmament* had been hanged
> With hatred on the cross to the acclaim of the army
> Through guile, as (c) *the old enemy*
> Through (b) *wiles* seduced them, misled the people,
> (a) *The Jewish race*, so that they hanged God himself
> The creator of armies.
> (*Elene* ll. 202–210).

Ring composition is an oral technique common in Old English poetry in which a set of elements is repeated in reverse order. It parallels a rhetorical figure called

chiasm, a device well-known in ancient rhetoric. The fragment is designed to focus the audience's attention on a series of juxtapositions that reinforce the poem's message: (a) Constantine's Christian teachers are paired with the Jews; (b) the Scripture is paired with the distorted vision of the past that emerges from the lies the Jews perpetuate; (c) God/Christ is paired with Satan/the old enemy. Constantine seeks teachers whose literacy and knowledge of scripture will enlighten him with wisdom and enable him to oppose the Jews, who, beguiled by the ancient enemy's lies, put God to death. The central place in this ring structure is occupied by a paronomastic pairing of "rode treo" [the tree of the cross] and "rodora waldend" [the lord of heaven] which reiterates in a number of episodes of the poem. In this structure, the military aspects of Constantine's authority are also emphasised, as, being "guð-heard, gar-þrist," he serves under "herga fruman" [the creator of armies, accusative case]. The tree of the rood is a twofold sign of Christ suffering and his victory over the old enemy.

As Gordon Whatley points out, "Cynewulf rounds off his account of Constantine's conversion by implicitly contrasting the emperor's joyful acceptance of the cross and its theology with the Jews' malevolent rejection of it" (Whatley 1985: 168-169). Constantine's conversion implies larger political ramifications in that Church is elevated over Synagogue, gaining authority over biblical interpretation as a result of *translatio imperii*. In recent scholarship, Cynewulf's *Elene* is often noted as the supreme example of Anglo-Saxon anti-Semitism. *Elene* furthers an idea of the Hermeneutic Jew, a construction of Jew as the other. As Andrew P. Sheil observes, central to the representations of Jews in medieval literature were two premises: one that their recalcitrance in recognising Christ as messiah was grounded on "their conscious choice... and evil decision made of their own will" (Sheil 2004: 33-34);" the other that they are unable to do so because of their intellectual opacity that makes the literal meaning of Scripture impenetrable (Sheil 2004: 35-36).

The theme of transfer of knowledge and power, *tranlatio imperii et studii*, is contingent upon violence that happens in the poem. Elene's accusation of Deicide directed at the Jews questions their time-honoured position of interpreters of the Word, which is Christ's figural body.

Ic þæt gearolice ongiten hæbbe
þurg witgena wordgeryno
on godes bocum þæt ge geardagum
wyrðe wæron wuldorcyninge,
dryhtne dyre ond dædhwæte.
Hwæt, ge ealle snyttro unwislice,
wraðe wiðweorpon, þa ge wergdon þane
þe eow of wergðe þurh his wuldres miht,
fram ligcwale, lysan þohte,
of hæftnede. Ge mid horu speowdon
on þæs ondwlitan þe eow eagena leoht,
fram blindnesse bote gefremede

edniowunga þurh þæt æðele spald,
ond fram unclænum oft generede
deofla gastum.
(288-302)


I have completely understood
Through the word-secrets of the prophets
In God's books that in formers days
You were precious to the king glory,
Dear to the Lord and bold.
How foolishly you fiercely
Cast away wisdom when you cursed the one
Who through his glorious might thought
To release you from damnation.
From bondage. With your filth you spat
On the face of the one who, with that noble spittle,
Worked remedy afresh from blindness
For the light of your eyes
And often saved you from the unclean
Spirits of the devil.
(288-302)


Jews' inability to interpret Jesus as the Word incarnated, their textual blindness to the Word, is a reiteration of the violence wrought upon Christ, of Deicide. The poem establishes a set of conceptual metaphors that equate the sanctioned and unsanctioned ways of reading scripture with, respectively, killing and giving life. It is Thomas Hill's argument that the sapiential theme of the poem is informed by "the contrast between the letter that kills and the spirit that gives life" and that "the whole narrative of the 'inventio crucis' is a metaphor of conversion" (2001: 212). The killing of Christ is depicted as analogical to textual violence whereby the spirit is killed by the letter. The metaphor of light and darkness that Elene employs with reference to the Jews refers to their inability to unveil the spiritual mystery hidden in the litter text of the Scripture. *Elene* not only reinforces the idea that Jews are no longer able to continue the hermeneutic tradition that it was their role to cultivate. It advances a notion that any cultural practice that distorts the Christian truth must be put to an equally violent end. The figural reading of the Scripture (and the poem) on the part of the audience is an re-enactment of the Pauline idea of reading; it also offers pleasure that the audience is to adduce from their figurative involvement in spiritual warfare with the devil, spiritual violence that is the opposite of the violence that brought about Christ's death.

Jews in Elene share a number of characteristic with the Danes as depicted in late Anglo-Saxon homilies by Aelfric and Wulfstan. In *False Gods*, Wulfstan explores the cult of Germanic gods followed by the (Anglo-)Danish settlers of his time. The Danes earn their reputation of "hæðenan" on account of their worship of Mars and Mercury, whom Wulfstan euhemerizes as outstanding historical individuals who

posthumously came to be divinized in human memory. While Jews, in contrast to Danes, could not be derided as heathen by Anglo-Saxons ecclesiasts, they nonetheless were disparaged for sharing the Danes's theological error, as the Danes are reported by Wulftatn to exist "on heora gedwylde" [in their error/heresy] (Wufstan: 223). Most importantly, those who adhere to pagan worship have lapsed at the devil's instigation, as Wulfstan tries to make clear at the very beginning of the homily: "Eala, gefyrn is þæt ðurh deofol fela þinga misfor, and þæt mancynn to swyðe Gode mishyrde, and þæt hæðenscype ealles to wide swyðe gederede" [Alas! Long time ago everything went astray through the devil and mankind disobeyed God greatly; paganism harmed all all over the world] (Wulfstan: 221).

In Wulfstan's sermon on *The False Gods*, Danish paganism is depicted as one of the ramifications of the confusion of tongues after building the tower of Babel. Wulfstan claims that the confusion of tongues not only brought about the dispersal of humanity around the world, but also a growth of pagan worship. Non-Christian worship, as Wulfstan notices in his homily on *The False Gods*, has been spread over the world since that event and that is still spreading until now: ["þæt hæðenscype ealles to wide swyðe gederede and gyt dereð wide"] (Wulfstan: 221). The centrifugal migration of peoples from the shared centre of civilisation resulted in dissolving the human understanding of God as the creator of the world and people.

From Wulfstan's condemnation of Danish cults seems to emerge his anxiety that the shared cultural memory enhanced by Anglo-Danish contacts would ineluctably occasion an outburst of heathen worship. At heart of both *Elene* and Wulfstan's homiletic writings, accordingly, lies a rhetorical strategy that helps legitimize the Christian cult by contesting the ancient status and traditionality of Jewish and pagan cults respectively. As Christina M. Heckman (2009: 451) points out,

> Within Cynewulf's poem, Jewish conversion becomes a means of through which to eradicate the threat of thousands of years of Jewish learning in order to assert the primacy of both Christian learning and a Christian empire.... In doing this, however, Cynewulf reveals the power of Jews as the epistemological limit of Christian imagination and the significance of the Jews as the epistemological limit of Christian learning. Christian learning cannot pass beyond this point, which consequently necessitates the incorporation of the Jews into Christianity through conversion.

If Judaism in *Elene* is to be read as an epistemological limit beyond which Christianity cannot reach, so too is the ancient Germanic culture shared by Anglo-Saxons and Danes. Analogically, as late as in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the enduring memory of Germanic roots imposed a similar epistemological limit on Anglo-Saxons. The cultural memory of Germanic gods was perpetuated in regnal lists the euhemerised Woden is one of King Alfred's ancestors. In *Elene*, the Jewish community represents a set of cultural paradigms from which the audience is supposed to convert. The anti-semitic discourse in which the poem is engaged marginalises forms of representation that undermine Christian modes of representation.

When Danish King Cnut ascended the English throne in 1016, Wulfstan became legislator of a king who, like West-Saxon kings who had preceded him, tenaciously adhered to Germanic roots, while remaining Christian. At that period, Wulfstan's writings were inscribed in a politically significant discourse that defined Englishness against pagan Germanic roots; a discourse in which *Elene*, as has been argued here, had been engaged since the time of compilation of Vercelli Book. Both *Elene* and *Historia Ecclesiastica* unfold a narrative of conversion that articulates the theme of cultural origins as a highly contentious issue. In *Historia Ecclesiastica* conversion was a political act that involved a redefinition of identity and alliances and the reinterpretation of a shared idea of origin that stood in the way of accepting Christianity as culturally valid. With the advent of the Vikings and the Danelaw, the cultural identity of Anglo-Saxons underwent another redefinition in the face of an enemy from a shared cultural and historical background. At that time, the memory of Germanic origin could no longer offer a straightforward trajectory for conveying the notion of Anglo-Saxons as a Christian people. The redefinition of Germanic history that resounds in *Elene* reflects a conception of the Vikings as the heathen who evoke the pagan past of Anglo-Saxons.

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