Chapter 8

A Host of Heroes

The Growth of Unity in Anglo-Saxon England

HOW DID THE NUMEROUS PAGAN Germanic tribes who sailed in open boats across the perilous northern seas in the fifth and sixth centuries to settle in eastern and southern Britain develop into the devoutly Christian people of one nation, England? They came from the peninsula of Jutland, from the Frisian coast of Germany, from the northern Rhineland and the Low Countries, driven by the same urge that sent the Goths, Burgundians, Alemanni, Franks, Vandals and Lombards

Chi-Rho, Lindisfarne Gospels, c 700 AD

westwards from the Euro-Asian heartland as the Roman Empire collapsed. In Britain, the Romans had tried to forestall their advance by building forts along the "Saxon shore" from Brancaster near the Wash to Portchester by the Solent, but Germans had settled on the coastal plains and estuaries, even in the fourth century. Moreover, as elsewhere in the empire, German troops had been recruited to defend the borders and some remained to mingle with the Celtic population. The Venerable Bede described the decisive step in the Germanic penetration of Britain when he recounted the story of Hengist and Horsa. These Jutish warriors were hired, with their war bands, in the mid fifth century, by the British chieftain, Vortigen, to subdue the fierce Picts of the north. He gave them land in the Isle of Thanet as *foederati*. Soon, they rebelled and broke out westwards to the interior. Already, the Roman legions had departed to defend Rome. The Emperor turned a deaf ear to the entreaties of his British subjects.

For over a hundred years settlement continued. The Jutes overran Kent and invaded also the Isle of Wight and the river basin of South Hampshire. Many tribes of Saxons sailed up the estuaries of Essex and crossed over the downlands of Sussex and Berkshire and into the Thames valley. The Angles settled the great river systems of the Ouse and Trent and the sandy flats of East Anglia; further north, they mingled with the British of Northumbria, where the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia would be amongst the first to bear the light of a new civilisation. Unlike the Celts, all these peoples preferred the deep earth of the river valleys to the sparse, wind-swept land of the chalk and limestone ridges, for they brought the instincts of arable farmers from the rich delta soils of north-west Germany. Their villages were named often after their leaders; they were Hroda's people - the Rodings of Essex - or Peothla's people - Peatling in Leicester. Roman British towns were largely ignored, though the invaders probably viewed them with a certain awe, for their ancestors had never lived within the bounds of Roman culture. The following probably describes the Roman city of Bath:

> ". . . . . And so these halls
> Are empty, and this red curved roof now sheds
> Its tiles, decay has bought it to the ground,
> Smashed it to piles of rubble, where long since
> A host of heroes, glorious, gold-adorned,
> Gleaming in splendour, proud and flushed with wine,
> Shone in their armour, gazed on gems and treasure,
> On silver, riches, wealth and jewellery,
> On this bright city with its wide domains.
> Stone buildings stood, and the hot stream cast forth
> Wide sprays of water, which a wall enclosed
> In its bright compass."[1]

As for the Roman British themselves, it is not known how many died, nor how many retreated to the mountainous west and north. Some were enslaved; others lived on as a subdued race. Walworth, near the Tees, means "homestead of the British", the common place-name Walton means a British village and in a Saxon church at Wareham in Dorset a British community is recorded. Certainly, the Anglo-Saxons

did not penetrate into Cornwall, Wales ("Welsh" meant "foreigner" in Anglo-Saxon) and Cumbria. Their victories over the British in 577 at Dyrham in Gloucestershire and at Chester, some time between 613 and 616, split the British into these three permanently separate groups.

Arthur's great victory at Mount Badon had delayed the Germanic advance for fifty years. The Celtic Church was no doubt grateful for this extension of its hold on the western half of Britain, for, at the battle of Chester, the Anglian king, Aethelfrith, had slaughtered two thousand monks from the monastery at Bangor who had come to fast and pray for the victory of their British kinsmen. Fear of the pagan advance from the east probably led to some movement of British priests across the Irish sea to strengthen the Celtic church in Ireland. It was from there, rather than from the western peninsulas of mainland Britain, that the Church would bring the teaching of Christ to the pagan Germans.

Augustine had failed in his efforts to engage the British Church in the work of evangelising the Anglo-Saxons. Even in the south-east of Britain his mission made little progress for a generation. The bishopric of London collapsed when the Saxon king of Essex withdrew his support, and in Kent itself Ethelbert's son for a while refused to accept the new religion. When a Christian daughter of Ethelbert married Edwin, king of a united Northumbria, the leading edge of evangelisation by the Roman Church moved to the north. Bede recalled how the Roman priest, Paulinus, who had accompanied the Kentish princess to Northumbria, attended a council of king Edwin's advisers. One of the latter agreed to accept the faith with these words:

> "Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thegns and counsellors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, a man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, and what follows. Therefore if this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it."[2]

No Anglo-Saxon king had attained such power as Edwin wielded, for all the southern kingdoms acknowledged his supremacy, except Kent, to which he was allied by marriage. For the refreshment of travellers, he had bronze drinking-cups hung on posts wherever there were clear springs near the highway and no man dared removed them. Generations after he died a proverb ran that in his time a woman with a newborn child might walk from sea to sea through the island and take no harm. However, Edwin had made a revengeful enemy in the British king of Gwynedd, the Christian Cadwallon. In 634, in an alliance of convenience with the pagan king, Penda of Mercia, Cadwallon brought Edwin to battle at Hatfield in Northumbria and destroyed the Anglian army, leaving Edwin dead and his kingdom once more divided. Paulinus fled to Kent. Once more the Roman mission had been stopped abruptly in the task assigned to it by Gregory the Great, but help was to come from an unlikely direction, the remote islands of the north-west.

On the rock strewn little island of Iona, separated by a rough strip of sea from the greater island of Mull, a group of Celtic monks had come with their leader, Columba, from the north of Ireland to start the forbidding work of evangelising the fierce tattooed Picts - the painted ones - of the far north and to minister to the Christian Irish settlers of western Scotland. Columba was an Irish nobleman. He was trained in a monastic tradition unlike that of Augustine of Canterbury. Since the time of St Patrick the Irish Church had developed under the leadership of abbots, who ruled over monastic establishments which were more or less tribal groups, in no way subservient to bishops or any kind of parochial or diocesan organisation. A fervent devotion arose in the often remote, exposed monasteries of Ireland, typified by the astonishing corbelled stone cells, clinging to the Great Skellig rock above the Atlantic breakers some miles off the County Kerry coast. The larger monasteries of Ireland - Armagh, Clonmacnois and Glendalough, for example - became centres of learning and calligraphy which surpassed any in western Europe until the eighth century, but Iona was primarily a missionary base. Columba himself was a man of remarkable energy and devotion, who learnt the language of the Picts and tirelessly recrossed the stern hills of the western highlands on a white horse.

King Edwin's nephew, Oswald, had lived in exile at Iona after his father had quarrelled with Edwin. There he absorbed the faith of the Irish monks and resolved to bring the light of their teaching to the kingdom which he inherited when Edwin died. In 635 ,the Irish monk, Aidan, travelled to Lindisfarne, a small island, like Iona, off the coast near Bamburgh, the capital of Bernicia. Like Columba, Aidan never spared himself in the work of preaching to the pagan population of Northumbria. His unswerving toughness in the face of harsh conditions of land and people, combined with great humility and gentleness was an essentially Christian combination, which won converts by its display of the power of those who followed their Master in all things.

In the year of Aidan's arrival Oswald faced a new invasion by Cadwallon of Gwynedd. At the Heavenfield, almost within sight of Hadrian's wall, the new king defeated the Welsh in a desperate battle. For eight years Oswald laboured to strengthen his kingdom, now united once more, but his attempt to eliminate the repeated threat of a British-Mercian alliance, ended with disaster in 643. Near Oswestry, perhaps named as Oswald's Tree, he was killed by Penda, who ordered his head and hands to be severed and hung on stakes. However, Penda's unholy alliance with the British Christians was ended in 656, when Oswald's brother, Oswy, defeated the Mercians and killed Penda at a battle near the modern city of Leeds. Oswy then controlled Mercia and all the southern kingdoms. He followed Ethelbert of Kent, Edwin and Oswald as overlords, or Bretwalda, of the English peoples.

During this period when the Northumbrian kings struggled to establish a Christian monarchy and Aidan spread the Gospel amongst the northern Anglians, three other great men laid foundations upon which a united Christian England would finally be built. Benedict Biscop created, by slow perseverance, a cultural fount of scholarship and art in Northumbria to which generations of Englishmen would go for intellectual nourishment; Bede, the first historian of the age of devotion, studied, taught and wrote at Jarrow for fifty years, making himself the schoolmaster of early England; and the saintly Cuthbert lived out a life of supreme Christian devotion, providing inspiration both as a hermit and as a bishop.

Biscop's contribution was above all in founding libraries: one at Wearmouth at the monastery he built in 674 on land granted by the Northumbrian king; another at Jarrow, built ten years later and the home of Bede from the age of seven. Even before the first foundation, Biscop had collected a large number of books at Vienne in southern France. Later he travelled many times to Rome, collecting not only books but also relics and church ornaments. Most significantly, perhaps, he brought back to Northumberland much of the classical and theological library of Vivarium, the great forerunner of all western monastic learning, established by Cassidorus as the preserve of ancient culture amidst the depredations of the Italian wars of Justianian and the Lombards. To Biscop also, Northumbria owed the introduction of continental stonemastons and glaziers, who made the first English stained glass, and the arch-chanter from St Peter's in Rome. The scriptorium at Jarrow perfected the Italian uncial and the Irish minuscule scripts, and made the perfect environment for the work of Bede.

In his *History of the English Church and People*, Bede's vision embraced the work of the missionaries, bishops and abbots of the Church as one great movement, helped by the Christian kings, towards an English nation rooted in the new culture of European Christendom. By the time he died, in 735, Mercia had superseded Northumbria as the dominant kingdom of the island, as Bede himself had perhaps foreseen in his warning to Egbert, archbishop of York, about "false monasteries". Yet he knew that through the teaching of such men as Birinus in Wessex, Felix in East Anglia and Chad in Mercia the kingdoms south of the Humber would be capable of accepting the brand lit by the monks of Iona and Lindisfarne. Bede was much more than a historian; he wrote lives of the saints, including Cuthbert, works of science and chronology - he popularised the dating system based on the birth of Christ - and highly influential commentaries on the Bible. He had the special gift of making scripture and learned work easily understood by novices. One pupil of Bede, Egbert, who became archbishop of York in 732, made the school of York the finest centre of liberal studies in Europe. Egbert's pupil, Alcuin, was chosen by Charlemagne to preside over the revival of letters at the court in Aachen. From Benedict Biscop, through Bede, Egbert and Alcuin a line of sacred teaching connected the Carolingian renaissance with the golden age of Northumbria.

Cuthbert was a man of a quite different stamp. Like Columba and Aidan he was possessed with the daemon of the true missionary. Physically very strong, he loved the life of the rugged moors and hills of the border country and the stony islands in the North Sea, where the north-east wind brought bitter squalls of rain and snow. For him, Christianity was an arduous physical struggle with the elements of the body, mind and nature, to be won by fasting, solitude and by long treks through the gorse to the isolated farms of Anglian shepherds. Such a life was sustained by the lovely pectoral cross of garnet and gold filigree which he wore beneath his surplice, by the little portable altar of oak and silver sheets and the tiny gospel of St John, bound in red leather, which he carried on his travels, but above all by the faith which finally wore out his tough body in the service of Christ. Cuthbert was trained at the Celtic monastery of Melrose under the monk, Boisil. He spent long periods on one of the Farne Islands, some miles off the coast near Bamburgh. There his home was a dug-out in the rocks and his life-line an occasional visit by monks from Lindisfarne.

His time was spent largely in prayer, in which he had unbounded faith. On one occasion he brought a dying man back to health by his power of prayer. On the Farne Islands he communed with the sea birds. A fellow monk told how once he had seen Cuthbert walk into the sea up to his armpits and spend all night in prayer. When he returned to the beach at dawn, he was followed by two small sea otters, who played at his feet until he blessed them and sent them back into the water. It was on the Farne Islands, Cuthbert once said, that he had fought his battle for the Lord. For the last two years of his life he was, reluctantly, bishop of Lindisfarne.

The life of St Cuthbert inspired amongst those who knew him at Lindisfarne one of the greatest works of art of the early Middle Ages. He died in 687. Within the following thirty years, the scriptorium at Lindisfarne, under the direction of the monk Eadfrith, produced "in honour of God and St Cuthbert" the great *Lindisfarne Gospels*. The text used for these was a pure version of St Jerome's *Vulgate*; the materials were the finest vellum and ink; the dyes were made from about forty different pigments, some of local extraction, others, like lapis lazuli, from as far as the Himalayas. The lections, or readings, were chosen from a south Italian model, probably Vivarium, as were some of the capital letter illuminations. On the superb opening pages of each Gospel a blend of Irish and Anglo-Saxon art created patterns of bewildering detail but simple form - interlace, animal and bird shapes, designs from Anglo-Saxon metalwork - and striking symbols of the four evangelists, Man, Lion, Ox and Eagle. The script is a well-rounded half-uncial. Devotion and persistence comparable to that of Cuthbert himself must have moved the hand of the scribe. Other works of similar beauty were certainly produced at Lindisfarne, including the *Echternach Gospels* and, possibly, the *Book of Durrow* (which may have been the work of the Irish School, which made the great *Book of Kells*).

After Cuthbert's death at the age of about fifty-three, he became the acknowledged protector saint of the northern Church, so that when the Viking raids began with the terrible assault on Lindisfarne in 793 Cuthbert was the symbol of strength in adversity. His body was carried away by the monks through the upland valleys to save it from the heathen invaders. For decades it found no permanent resting place, until at last it was brought to rest at Chester-le-Street and finally at Durham, where Cuthbert's spirit is said to have terrified William the Conqueror. Even in Wessex, the memory of Cuthbert was revered. When King Alfred was hiding from the Danes in the marshes of Somerset, he was asked for alms by a beggar. He gave what he possessed. That night the beggar appeared to Alfred in a dream and revealed himself as St Cuthbert, promising the king victory over his enemies.

Cuthbert, like Bede, fully accepted the need for the Celtic Church to acknowledge the jurisdiction of Rome. The energetic Wilfrid, bishop of York, pressed for a decision on whether the practices of the Celtic Church should be brought into line with those of Rome. The method of calculating the date of Easter, which determined the complete liturgical year, and the type of tonsure worn by monks, were points of difference. The importance of the correct dating of the liturgical year may have derived from the astrology of the ancient world, with its assumption that the heavens exert an influence over human affairs. As for the tonsure, Celtic monks shaved the front part of the head from ear to ear; Roman monks showed a circular area on top of the head, leaving a ring of hair to represent Christ's crown of thorns.

To the abbey of Streoneshalch (later called Whitby) on the Northumbrian coast, representatives of the two parties were called by King Oswy in 664 - Wilfrid led the Roman party, who were strengthened by the support of Oswy's Kentish queen. Colman, bishop of Lindisfarne, led the Celtic contingent. Both sides appealed to tradition and authority, but Wilfrid's argument won over King Oswy when he referred to the authority of St Peter as personally appointed by Christ to be the rock upon which the Church should be built and keeper of the keys of heaven. Both parties seemed to accept that Rome's authority was derived from Peter. Colman and those Celtic priests and monks who would not change their practices left Northumbria and retreated to Iona or Ireland. The great Celtic missionaries in England, such men as Aiden, Cuthbert, Fursa in East Anglia, Chad in Mercia and Maelduib, founder of Malmesbury Abbey had achieved at least as much as the men sent from Rome, even in the south of England, but lack of rational organisation and diversity of practice made the Celtic Church inferior when the time came for consolidation and for stronger links with the unified Church envisaged by Gregory the Great. Celtic monasteries were too secular in their tribal foundation; abuses were too easy, as Bede noted in Northumbria. Bishops had little authority in the Irish Church and the English Church might have drifted into the same pattern.

When the re-organisation consequent upon the Synod of 664 came, under archbishop Theodore, bishops acquired territorial power. The free-ranging, itinerant bishops of Celtic training, intent only upon spreading the word of God far and wide and despising property, gave way to bishops, like Wilfrid of York, who saw the Church as an institution needing land and wealth, enriched by charters and maintaining fine buildings at the centres of episcopal authority. A measure of spiritual enthusiasm, which had shone in the hearts of Celtic missionaries, was lost, but even Cuthbert - according to Bede - was prepared to accept that freedom must be contained by the need for organisation.

Appropriately, one of the last fruits of the Celtic Church in England was a hymn, which is the oldest religious poem in the Anglo-Saxon language. Hild, a kinswoman of King Oswy, after an arduous training, partly under Aidan, had founded the abbey of Streoneshalch. It became, under her leadership, second only to Lindisfarne and produced many men and women of great influence in the English Church. Hild, herself, suffered greatly from a terrible fever for six years, yet continued in her duties as abbess. One day, a layman, called Caedmon, was taken to her because he had had a dream in which he was told by a man to sing about the creation of all things. Caedmon had previously denied any ability to sing at all. Now he sang spontaneously a hymn about the Creator:

"Now must we praise the Guardian of heaven,
The power and conception of the Lord,
And all his works, as He, eternal Lord,
Father of glory, started every wonder.
First he created heaven as a roof,
The holy Maker, for the sons of men.
Then the eternal Keeper of mankind

Furnished the earth below, the land for men,
Almighty God and everlasting Lord".[3]

Hild recognised the innate devotion of Caedmon and persuaded him to become a monk, insisting also that he made a thorough study of scripture. Whenever the monastery required a hymn upon a particular theme, Caedmon was commissioned to create it. A touch of the spirit of the Irish bards perhaps remained in this last product of a Celtic monastery. Hild, nevertheless, was ready to accept the decision of the Synod.

From one of Benedict Biscop's journeys to Italy he returned in the company of Theodore of Tarsus, appointed archbishop of Canterbury by Pope Vitalian in 669, and the African bishop, Hadrian. At Canterbury, these two men established for the first time an ecclesiastical capital of England. Theodore was a Greek monk, trained at Athens and thoroughly imbued with Byzantine culture. Hadrian was also a scholar and at his monastery of Saints Peter and Paul in Canterbury he attracted students from all over England and even from the continent. One of the most eminent was Aldhelm from the monastery of Malmesbury. Well versed in Irish and continental learning, he became the outstanding Anglo-Saxon scholar of his age, writing, amongst much else, a famous treatise on virginity for the nuns of Berking. He described Theodore, surrounded by a crowd of Irish scholars, as "rending them with the tusk of grammar, like a fierce boar hemmed in by growling hounds of the Molossian breed".

Theodore's major achievement, however, was to reorganise the English Church. Though sixty-six when he was appointed to the primacy, Theodore showed enormous vigour in travelling to every diocese to oversee the changes. At the Council of Hertford in 672, a new ecclesiastical map was laid down. Dioceses were made smaller and, therefore, more numerous. Above all, bishops were forbidden to interfere outside their own diocese. Parishes were similarly defined more clearly, though it took centuries before the whole of England was so divided, since church building depended largely on the piety and wealth of local *thegns*. By these reforms, and others, such as the hearing of confessions in private, Theodore brought the English Church into more systematic order, following through the logic of the decision at Whitby to break with the loosely organised Celtic Church, and linking England in a communion with Rome which was to hold strong for over eight hundred years. The *Lindisfarne Gospels*, which travelled with Cuthbert's body for many decades before coming to rest at Durham, the huge stone Celtic crosses, carved with Biblical scenes and zoomorphic patterns, at Bewcastle and Ruthwell in the remote north-west, the lovely stone bishop's seat at Hexham Abbey: these were to become magnificent relics of the eclipse of the Church which had done probably more than Rome to convert the pagan English.

Even whilst England was still being converted to Christianity, the English Church produced men who felt impelled to spread the Gospel beyond the British Isles. North Germany, especially, was an area to which the English were attracted by ties of blood and tradition. In the early eighth century, two brothers, Black Hewald and White Hewald, were cruelly murdered and their bodies thrown into the Rhine for preaching amongst the Saxons. Wilfrid of York visited the Frisians and was said to have convinced his audience of the truth of his teaching when they caught an unprecedented number of fish after listening to him. The recalcitrance of the Frisians, however, was nicely demonstrated by a story about their king, Radbod. On

approaching the baptismal font, he asked the priest whether his Frisian ancestors were in heaven. The priest replied that they would have received the just sentence of damnation. Whereupon Radbod drew back from the font and declared that he would rather join his own people, wherever they might be, than sit down in heaven with a handful of beggars.

A pupil of Wilfrid's, from Northumbria, called Willibrord, became, nevertheless, the great apostle to the Frisians. Making use of the desire of the Frankish leader, Pepin of Herstal, to dominate them, he eventually won over all the Frisians west of the Zuyder-Zee with Frankish support. The Pope appointed him bishop of Utrecht. East of the Zuyder-Zee; Radbod retained his pagan independence from both the Church and the Franks. Willibrord died in 739, when he was working as far east as Echternach, where the Lindisfarne scribes had deposited a powerful reminder of the connection with the Church in Northumbria.

Perhaps the greatest of all the English missionaries, however, was St Boniface. Born in Crediton in Devon about 675, he acquired a remarkably comprehensive education at the monastery of Mursling in Hampshire and, despite preferment in the Church in Wessex, chose a career as a missionary in Germany. He worked for a while with Willibrord in Utrecht, but after visiting the Pope in Rome he became set upon breaking new ground across the Rhine. With little help from the Frankish rulers, whose Church had largely abandoned its ministry in the east Frankish dominions, Boniface preached in Hesse, Bavaria, Alamannia and Thuringia, renowned for the ferocity of its warriors. In Hesse, he hewed down with his own hands the holy oak of Gaismar, sacred to Thor, before an assembled crowd. With its timber he built a wooden oratory dedicated to St Peter. In each region of Germany, as vicar appointed by the Pope, he established a Church based on Papal authority, defined bishoprics and reformed monasteries to the Roman pattern. In many areas he had to expel heretical and undisciplined clergy, some half pagan in their practices. Always he remained loyal to the Papacy, convinced that the unity of the Church was vital to its future strength. Yet Boniface remained a devoted member of the English Church, corresponding regularly with friends in England, including several nuns who saw him as their spiritual adviser. For example, Leofgyth, related to Boniface through her mother, wrote:

> "I have troubled to send this small gift, not as it were worthy that your Grace should look on it, but in order that you may hold me, insignificant as I am, in your memory, and not through the great distance separating us let me pass into oblivion, but rather that the bond of true love may be knotted firmly forever."[4]

Although Boniface never wavered from putting the ministry of Christ in the forefront of his life's work, his missionary in Germany had political repercussions of great import for Europe. The two successors to Charles Martel as Mayors of the Palace in the Frankish empire, Carloman and Pepin the Short, asked Boniface to re-organise the Church in their territories. As usual he carried out far-reaching reforms, recalling the Church there to full submission to Roman canon law and papal jurisdiction. Accordingly, when Pepin dismissed the titular Merovingian king of the Franks in 751 and made himself king (Carloman had abdicated as Mayor in 747), Boniface was required by the Pope to anoint the new ruler. Thus began the Carolingian

dynasty, under which a renaissance of western culture would begin within a generation.

Boniface had been made archbishop of Mainz in 743, in effect the Primate for Germany. The following year he founded a monastery at Fulda, with 400 monks under the first abbot, Sturmi, whom Boniface sent to study at Monte Cassino and who made Fulda "the Monte Cassino of Germany". At the age of nearly 80, Boniface received permission from the Pope and from Pepin to leave Mainz for a final spell of his beloved missionary work. He passed down the Rhine, crossed the Zuyder-Zee and stopped at Dorkum in Friesland. With about forty companions he waited for the arrival of Frisian candidates for confirmation. Instead, into the camp came a violent throng of pagan Frisians. They butchered every one of the Christian missionaries. Boniface's body was later recovered and buried at Fulda. After a lifetime of arduous journeys through the thick forests of Germany, amongst people in whom he saw the potential for good which was realised amongst his own Saxons of Wessex, he died a martyr for Christ, as perhaps he had hoped.

His friend, Leobgyth, had answered a summons by Boniface for nuns to join in the work of evangelising the Germans. She was a highly cultured woman, trained at abbeys in Thanet and Wimborne, fluent in Latin and interested in chronology and canon law. As abbess of Bischopsheim, she presided over a large community of German women converts. When Boniface set out on his last journey, he sent for Leobgyth and begged her never to desert the land of their pilgrimage. Earlier, he had expressed a wish that they should be buried together. She was indeed buried at Fulda.

The eighth century saw the eclipse of Northumbria and the rise of the kingdom of Mercia, the great central area of England, between the estuaries of the Wash, Thames, Severn and Dee. Ethelbald of Mercia ruled powerfully for forty years (716-756), attracting, however, the censure of the Church, including letters from Boniface, for his immorality. His successor, Offa, completed the ascendancy of Mercia over the other English kingdoms and built the great dyke which ran from sea to sea, cutting off the Welsh peninsula from Mercia. Its construction, involving tens of thousands of men, called forth the power of an Anglo-Saxon king to tax the land directly. From a certain number of hides, perhaps ten, a man would attend with tools and food to work on a prescribed section of the dyke. Offa's authority extended also to the issuing of a new silver penny coinage and to the creation of a third metropolitan bishopric for England at Lichfield, though this only survived eight years after his death in 796. Offa was respected by the Frankish emperor, Charlemagne, who proposed that his son, Charles, should marry one of Offa's daughters. Negotiations, however, broke down when Offa proposed also the marriage of his own son, Ecgfrith, to a daughter of Charlemagne. It was left to Alcuin, the emperor's English adviser, to patch up the quarrel.

Although in the ninth century the power of Mercia was to succumb to that of Wessex, the period of the conversion to Christianity, the consolidation of the Church under Rome and the rise of Christian monarchs, saw the movement of the various Germanic peoples of the island - Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians - towards the unity of an English nation. They awaited the *pater patriae*, who would emerge in the terrible crisis of the Viking invasions of the mid-tenth century. Meanwhile, the English settled the land. In the lowland south and east, they built villages, often where Roman British remains signified a source of water or richer soil. In the higher land of the

north and west settlements remained small and scattered, like those of the earlier British isolated homesteads. Settlements, even on the uplands, clustered round wells or ponds. Between them was the ubiquitous waste of woods, stony moors, scrubby heath or marshland, as in the Fens and north Somerset. Place-names like Barnet and Brentwood indicate how the forest was burned to make a clearing. A law of king Ine of Wessex forbad burning which endangered another man's trees. The axe, mattock and spade did the work when fire was proscribed. Slowly, the forest yielded its precious soil. In the Pennine dales, on the contrary, it was stone that needed clearing, to form dry stone walls for boundaries and sheep enclosures. At Great Wymondley (in Hertfordshire) the open fields still showed the pattern of the centuriation divisions of Roman British farming. Roman villa boundaries became parish boundaries as the Church gradually demarcated its converted territory.

Roman roads were still used, though not to travel between the neglected Roman towns. Water transport was important in the east and south. The Foss Dyke canal linked the Trent with the Witham and Boston on the Wash; Torksey was a transhipment point for Lincoln. Mining benefitted from water traffic. Coal was mined in Somerset and the north, iron in the Forest of Dean and the Weald, lead in the Mendips and Derbyshire, tin in Cornwall, gold in Wales, as they had been under Roman rule. Pigs were bred throughout England, as the place name components 'swin' and 'swine' indicate. Oak and beech forests yielded the acorn and mast for their autumn feedstock; roots of fern supplied them in winter, grass, berries and seed in spring and summer. Sheep yielded the wool for the *saga*, or woollen cloaks and blankets, which were exported to the continent. Shipston-on-Stour and Sheppey are two of many examples of places of sheep-farming. Oxen were used for the great eight-ox plough teams which tilled the open fields and cows were kept mainly to breed replacements. Hence, ewes and she-goats were more often the source of milk and cheese. Arable farming on the open fields and ceorls' land produced wheat, rye, oats and barley. The last of these was the most widespread, since much was converted into malt for brewing. The Anglo-Saxon lords may have drunk mead, but beer was consumed on a far greater scale. Barton and Berwick are place-names connoting the cultivation of barley. Beans, flax, hemp and woad were also grown; many place-names using 'wad' show that woad, for blue dye, was widely used.

The mixed forests and the broad open fields, undulating with the land form, moved to the rhythm of the seasons, from the pale green of spring, when the old pagan festival of Eostre was celebrated alongside the Christian time of resurrection, to the burning gold of high summer, the rusts of autumn and the depths of snow, when Yuletide and the birth of Christ alike marked the winter solstice. Until the Vikings came, the land was secure. Churches could be built, increasingly of stone when prosperity rose, as the great spacious nave of Brixworth bears witness. For a while peace was found in the land and poets could compose riddles about the natural world that lay so abundantly around them:

> "My dress is silent when I tread the ground
> Or stay at home or stir upon the waters.
> Sometimes my trappings and the lofty air
> Raise me above the dwelling-place of men,

And then the power of cloud carries me far
Above the people; and my ornaments
Loudly resound, send forth a melody
And clearly sing, when I am not in touch
With earth or water, but a flying spirit."[5]

Such a land and people were seen later by King Alfred as a kind of golden age, to which he aspired to raise the men of his own time:

"...it has very often come into my mind what wise men there were in former times throughout England, both of spiritual and lay orders; and how happy times there were throughout England; and how the kings who had rule over the people were obedient to God and his messengers; and they both upheld peace and morals and authority at home, and also extended their territory abroad; and how they prospered both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how zealous the spiritual orders were both about teaching and learning and all the services which they should do for God; and how foreigners came hither to this land in search of knowledge and instruction..."[6]

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3. "Caedmon's Hymn", *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, R. Hamer, Faber & Faber, London, 1970, p. 123.
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5. "Swan", *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, R. Hamer, Faber & Faber, London, 1970, p. 97.
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Part 2

The Carolingian Renaissance

Chapter 9

New Athens

The Age of Charlemagne

"Golden Rome renewed is once more reborn to the world."

Modion, Bishop of Autun.[1]

CHRISTMAS DAY, 800AD: ST PETER'S Basilica in Rome, the greatest Church in Christendom, was crowded with people from every part of the huge empire that Charlemagne, king of the Franks and Lombards, had created by the joint power of the sword and the Gospels. Romans, Franks, Lombards, Bavarians, Goths, Anglo-

Karlsthron (Throne of Charlemagne), Aachen Cathedral

Saxons and Greeks filled the broad nave and the double aisles, almost to the altar, on which rested a golden crown, glittering from the light of thousands of candles. Below the great fifth century frescoes of the life of Christ rose massive Corinthian columns of green and yellow marble and red and grey granite. In the apse stood the marble canopy that protected the tomb of St Peter himself, source of the claim to universal dominion of the bishop of Rome. Silken hangings, heavy silver candelabra and gold censers reflected the myriad points of light amidst the fragrance of burning incense rising slowly to the dark timbers of the ceiling.

Before the altar, under the triumphal arch which terminated the nave, knelt Charlemagne, dressed in a long Roman tunic and cloak, with a golden belt and jewel-studded sandals. He was a tall, strongly built man, with the sanguine complexion of a natural athlete fond of outdoor pastimes, like hunting. Though grave on this occasion, his face was lit by large but piercing eyes, and the lines of age - for he was nearly sixty - expressed some kindliness, even humour. His hair, nearly white, showed thick on the back of his head as he bowed in prayer. Pope Leo III, in the full panoply of office, his face strangely scarred, stood by him. As Charlemagne rose to his feet, Leo moved deftly to the altar, lifted the golden crown with both hands and placed it firmly on the head of the king. A great cry rose from the congregation, as the Romans shouted: "*Carolo Augusto, a Deo coronato, magno et pacifico imperatori Romanorum, vita et victoria*!" ("Long life and victory to Charles Augustus, crowned by God the great and pacific Emperor of the Romans"). Three times the acclamation rang round the walls of the basilica. Then Pope Leo fell to his knees and kissed the hem of the emperor's cloak, in the manner of the Byzantine court.

What was the meaning of this glorification of a Frankish king? The last emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus, had been deposed by the mercenaries of Odoacer in 476AD. In Constantinople, the "new Rome", a woman, Irene, now reigned as empress, having blinded her own son, Constantine VI. Had Charlemagne been acclaimed as an emperor of the Romans only, of a mere city, or as a new emperor of the West after three and a quarter centuries, or as a full Roman emperor to supersede the rule of an evil and usurping woman? Charlemagne's biographer, his adviser and friend, Einhard, made this question even harder to answer when he wrote:

> "He (Charlemagne) made it clear that he would not have entered the cathedral that day at all, although it was the greatest of the festivals of the Church, if he had known in advance what the Pope was planning to do".[2]

Violent events had preceded the coronation. Pope Leo III had succeeded Hadrian I in 795, but he was unpopular amongst many Romans, especially those who had looked to a successor from Hadrian's family. In April 799 some of them ambushed Leo in Rome, maltreated him severely - it was said that his eyes and tongue were torn out, and by a miracle were restored - and imprisoned him, whilst they gained control of the city. Leo, however, managed to escape, fled northwards and appealed to Charlemagne at Paderborn in north Germany. Since 774 Charlemagne had been king of the Lombards and the protector of the Papacy in Italy. Influenced strongly by his Anglo-Saxon clerical adviser, Alcuin, who saw the office of Pope as the fulcrum of the Church, Charlemagne agreed to help Leo recover his position. He marched to Rome and appointed a synod to investigate the whole matter. On 23 December 800, Pope Leo, on the advice of the Synod, made a public declaration of his innocence

from the charges of immorality which his violators had brought against him. Two days later, reinstated in office, he placed the crown on Charlemagne's head.

It was the manner of the imperial inauguration, and not the fact, which appeared to anger Charlemagne. He intended to become Emperor. Alcuin, in particular, had developed the idea of an *imperium Christianum*, a community of Christian people under one head, and had fostered his master's interest in St Augustine's *City of God*, in which the whole Christian people were seen as a heavenly city distinct from the terrestrial kingdom of men. Alcuin himself knew that Augustine's City of God was not of this world, even though men, as Christians, were capable of participating in it through communion with Christ, but if Charlemagne, who was an unlearned man, understood the Church on earth as the holy city, then such an idea would at least advance the unity and faith of Christians. Hence, supported by Alcuin, Charlemagne believed that it was his Christian duty to become the head of an empire of Christian people. What he disliked was the implication that he should receive such a title at the hands of Pope Leo. Nevertheless, the crowning was not, in principle, as significant as the acclamation, the traditional method of inauguration. Amongst the Romans present were those entitled Senators, who claimed this traditional right.

Charlemagne had certainly become emperor of the Romans, but who were the Romans? His title henceforth still contained the descriptions of king of the Franks and king of the Lombards. The idea of a loose hegemony over other dominions, however, was familiar, particularly to Alcuin, who knew of the Anglo-Saxon *bretwaldas*. At what became Charlemagne's main residence in his later years, Aachen, his palace and chapel certainly had imperial trappings, much influenced by Byzantium and the old imperial place at Treves. He did not, however, insist upon his ascendancy over imperial rule in Constantinople. Irene was deposed in 802, and though relations between Charlemagne and the succeeding Byzantine emperors were unfriendly, in 813, after an indecisive war in the Adriatic, the eastern emperor, Michael I, at last acknowledged that Charlemagne was emperor in the West.

In many respects it was Alcuin's high-minded concept of empire which determined in practice how Charlemagne would rule. In 802, for example, he issued, as emperor, a remarkable capitulary (or set of decrees) which greatly extended the long-standing Germanic idea of fidelity between ruler and subject:

> "...every man in his entire realm, whether ecclesiastical or layman, each according to his vow and way of life, who has previously promised fidelity to him in the name of king is now to make that promise in the name of Caesar; and those who have not yet made that promise are now to do likewise, all of twelve years and over. And that it is to be expounded publicly to all, in such a way that every person can understand, how important and how many are the matters which that oath comprehends ... that everybody is personally to strive, to the best of his understanding and ability, to maintain himself fully in God's holy service, according to God's command and his own promise; for the lord emperor cannot himself provide the necessary care and discipline for each man individually."[3]

The capitulary went on to specify how each man must avoid perjury, fraud, and harm to churches, widows, orphans or pilgrims; that the *bannus*, or command, of the

emperor in all matters concerning land-holding and military service must be observed and that the correct procedure must be followed in the courts. It specified further that the Church was to be properly ordered under the authority of bishops and abbots and that all clerics, especially monks, should live "steadfastly and strictly according to the rule". Charlemagne presided at this time over a widespread adoption by monasteries within his realms of the Benedictine Rule, usually in place of Celtic Rules, such as that of St Columbanus. Above all, he emphasised a cardinal principle of his government, that there should at all times be peace and concord between ecclesiastical and secular institutions, between bishops and abbots, on one hand, counts and the royal agents called *missi domenici*, on the other. Such capitularies could not entirely succeed, but they represented a sincere effort by the emperor to care for the welfare of his subjects both physically and spiritually, in accordance with the high ideals of a Christian king as defined by Alcuin.

These ideals had origins in the fusion of Platonic and Christian thought in the later Church fathers, notably Augustine, Ambrose and Gregory the Great. Indeed, in the fifth year of Charlemagne's reign, in 773, Abbot Eanwulf of the Northumbrian Church wrote to Charlemagne echoing the letter which Gregory had sent to king Ethelbert of Kent (see Chapter 5 above). From 781, when Charlemagne met Alcuin for the second time, at Pavia, where Boethius had died, this influence of the Northumbrian Church was to become the strongest factor in turning the king towards what he began to realise was his special vocation, the establishment of a Christian empire amongst the new peoples of Europe, still forming out of the influx of Germans into the old western empire of Rome.

Alcuin was Charlemagne's mentor. Trained in the cathedral school at York under archbishop Egbert, a pupil of Bede, Alcuin became the keenest intellect in the English Church. As Head of the York school he had the finest library in western Europe at his command. Before Alcuin had left on the journey to Rome during which he met Charlemagne at Pavia, Egbert, prophetically, had said to him: "My will is that you go to Rome and on the way back visit France. For I know that you will do much good there. Christ will be the leader of your journey." Charlemagne clearly recognised some unique quality of devotion in Alcuin and asked him to undertake the immense task of raising the standard of education throughout his dominions. A letter written later, when Alcuin was abbot of Tours, to Charlemagne illustrates the care with which he approached his work amongst the Franks:

> "I, your Flaccus, according to your exhortation and encouragement, am occupied in supplying to some under the roof of St Martin the honey of the sacred Scriptures; am eager to inebriate others with the old wine of ancient learning; begin to nourish others on the fruits of grammatical subtlety; long to illumine some with the order of the stars, like the painted ceiling of a great man's house; becoming many things to many men, that I may instruct many to the profit of Holy Church of God and to the adornment of your imperial kingdom, that the grace of the Almighty be not void in me, nor the bestowal of your bounty in vain. But I, your servant, miss to some extent the rarer books of scholastic learning which I had in my own country through the excellent and devoted zeal of my master and also through some toil of my own. I tell these things to your Excellency, in case it may perchance be agreeable

> to your counsel, which is most eager for the whole of knowledge, that I send some of our pupils to choose there what we need, and to bring into France the flowers of Britain..."[4]

Such was Alcuin's conception of the work of creating an *imperium Christianum.*

Charlemagne's earlier life was not entirely conducive to the exalted task which reached its apogee on Christmas Day, 800. He was the son of Pepin III, of the family of Arnulfing, mayors of the Palace to the Merovingian Frankish kings descended from Clovis. For over two centuries after Clovis the dynasty had embroiled itself in fratricidal wars induced by the Frankish tradition of dividing the inheritance. They had treated the kingdom as a personal possession, with little regard to the welfare of their people. Inevitably, they became of little account, increasingly dominated by the efficient family of their own administrators, the Arnulfings. One of these, Charles Martel, "the Hammer", son of Pepin of Herstal, was a powerful soldier - drawing heavily upon Church lands for his resources - who repelled the Moors at the battle of Poitiers in 732. His son, Pepin III, more cultivated than his father, took the decisive step of dismissing the effete Merovingian, Childeric III, in 751, after obtaining the consent of the Papacy to such a move. It was the English missionary bishop, Boniface, who anointed Pepin as founder of a new dynasty, later known as the Carolingians. Pepin's reign saw considerable advances in the administration of the Frankish kingdom. The Frankish Church was put in better order by Boniface, the borders were secured as far south as the Pyrenees; even some foreshadowing of a renaissance of culture was seen in the work of bishop Chrodegang of Metz. Pepin himself had been educated at the abbey of St Denis, near Paris. Even Einhard, however, denied any knowledge of Charlemagne's education.

Charlemagne became the ruler of most of northern France on the death of his father in 768. His brother, Carloman, inherited central and southern France, but after three years of uneasy rule he died; whereupon Charlemagne seized his kingdom. The next twenty years were a time of almost continuous warfare. The bitterest war,which in fact lasted until 804, was against the Saxons of north-west Germany. They were indomitably heathen and the devices of Roman culture had never softened their minds or bodies. They perpetually raided the Frankish borderlands, sometimes reaching far into the Rhineland with their terrible depredations of fire and sword. Charlemagne resolved to end this torment of his Christian subjects. In 772 he attacked one of the centres of Saxon power, the stronghold of Eresburg, guarding an area of strategic importance called by modern scholars *die Weserfestung* (fortress Weser). Penetrating into the forest, he destroyed the great sacred oak tree, the *Irminsul*, believed by the Saxons to support the heavens, just as Boniface had torn down the sacred oak of Gaismar, Nothing could have aroused the fury of the Saxons more than what, to their eyes, was gross sacrilege.

Year after year Charlemagne campaigned deep into the forests of Germany between the Rhine and the Weser and even further on occasion to the Elbe and beyond. The superiority of the Frankish cavalry, with their stirrups, introduced in the 8th century, armoured leather jackets (*brunia*), long swords, lances and shields, brought frequent victories, followed by submission, but as soon as the Franks had departed - for example, in 778 when Charlemagne fought in Spain against the Moors - they as frequently rebelled, slaughtered the Frankish garrisons and avenged their humiliation

on the unfortunate borderlands. Charlemagne knew that the only permanent solution was the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity; yet these were fellow heathens with those who had murdered Boniface at Dorkum. No saintly missionaries could make headway amongst such ferocious unbelievers. And so Charlemagne attached to his military sanctions against the Saxons additional provisions to abandon their heathen practices on pain of severe punishment, including death. The Saxon capitulary of 782, for example, included:

> "…the churches of Christ which are now being built in Saxony and are consecrated to God should enjoy not less but greater and higher honour than the shrines of idols have had . . .if anyone enters a church by force and takes something from it, by violence or stealth, or sets fire to the church, he is to be put to death …
>
> if anyone scorns the holy Lenten fast out of contempt for Christianity and eats meat, he is to be put to death …" (though a priest was to investigate to ascertain whether eating meat was necessary).[5]

The practice of cremation and the avoiding of baptism were similarly capital crimes, though for any such crime, a Saxon, if undetected, could avoid the death penalty by confessing to a priest. What the Saxons particularly hated, also, was the introduction of tithes of one tenth of their wealth payable to the Church.

The same year, 782, saw the most terrible event in the whole Saxon war. A Frankish army marching against the Slavs further east was attacked by Saxon rebels. An undisciplined Frankish cavalry charge led to an overwhelming Saxon victory. Virtually all the Franks died, including the king's chamberlain, his constable, four other counts and twenty other nobles. Charlemagne responded with unchristian vengeance. He gathered a new army, advanced into Saxony and demanded from the Saxon leaders - probably counts appointed earlier by himself - the rebels who had annihilated his men. 4500 rebels were handed over. Every one was beheaded in a single day at Verden. It was an act of unique violence by a king who usually knew how to temper military necessity with Christian mercy. Alcuin was no doubt horrified. He consistently presented Charlemagne with the argument that conversion was meaningless when enforced by violence, that the mind and heart must consent before baptism of an adult was valid. Moreover, he pleaded with the king to reduce the hated tithes. Although there was a great deal more warfare in Saxony after 782, by 797 Charlemagne issued a second Saxon capitulary, which heeded Alcuin's advice and adopted a less severe tone. Even so, it took seven more years to subdue the northern Saxons near the border with the Danes and such measures as mass deportation of the most recalcitrant rebels.

Throughout the first twenty years of the Saxon wars, Charlemagne was active, also, in wars on many other fronts. In Italy he quickly defeated the Lombards, following the principle laid down by his father, Pepin, who had made an agreement with the papacy that the Franks would be protectors of the Holy See, whilst the Pope would administer much of central Italy as a secular lord (the Papacy claimed such rights under a document, later proved a forgery, in which the emperor Constantine granted extensive temporal rights to Pope Sylvester - the notorious "Donation of Constantine"). Charlemagne went further and wore the iron crown of the Lombards,

a step which inaugurated centuries of German claims to suzerainty in Italy. Soon after, in 778, he was leading his army into Spain, in response to an appeal by Moorish leaders in rebellion against the Omayyad Caliph in Cordoba. Though he succeeded eventually in creating a border territory, or march, south of the Pyrenees,which the Franks controlled, he failed to take Saragossa by siege and met with one of the most famous disasters in history when re-crossing the Pyrenees.

The main army had already traversed the pass of Roncesvalles when its rearguard was ambushed. An army of hostile Christian Basques, lightly armed for speed, occupied the steep slopes on either side. Measuring their strength out against the might of the Franks, they fell upon the Frankish rearguard and slaughtered it to a man. In this battle, writes Einhard, died Eggihard, the king's provisioner, Anshelm, count of the Palace and Roland, Lord of the Breton Marches. Of Roland, a legend grew up, immortalised in the eleventh century epic, *The Song of Roland*, that he had refrained from blowing his trumpet to recall the main army, for fear that they too would be ambushed, until he was dying of his wounds, when he knew that the Basques no longer had the strength to trouble Charlemagne's forces; but no chronicler mentions that Charlemagne returned to Roncevalles. Somehow, the memory of a courageous last stand lived on to foster the legend.

> "Now Roland feels his time is at an end;
> On the steep hill to Spain he turns his head,
> And with one hand he beats upon his breast;
> And saith 'Mea Culpa, mercy, Lord, I beg
> For all the sins, the greater and the less,
> That e'er I did since first I drew my breath
> Unto this day when I'm struck down by death.'
> His right-hand glove he unto God extends."[6]

In the 780s Charlemagne was campaigning in Bavaria, which, despite Boniface's ecclesiastical reforms, had more or less thrown off its earlier subjection to the Franks and under its Duke, Tassilio, become an independent state. Charlemagne made few demands upon the Duke, until he came to believe that the Bavarians were in collusion with the Saxons, Slavs and Avars, all dangerous enemies on the Frankish borders. Then by a massive show of force he gained the submission of Tassilio, who was forced to give allegiance and finally to be deposed. Conflict with the Avars, occupying territory along the Danube, east of the Bavarians, followed. They were an Asiatic people, who had long plundered far and wide, accumulating treasure, especially from Byzantium, inside their main city, or encampment, called the Ring. Charlemagne's armies were too efficient for them. The Ring itself was invaded and huge quantities of treasure taken to Aachen. Charlemagne distributed much of it to the Church. Some even reached King Offa of Mercia.

To fight so effectively and so often over such a huge area, from the Elbe to Saragossa, from Brittany to the eastern Danube and southern Italy, required a mobile and loyal army. For centuries the Franks had obeyed an annual summons to appear in arms at the Field of May, a spring assembly of Frankish warriors, sometimes associated with the holding of a political assembly to express the views of Frankish

leaders. Charlemagne insisted upon the prompt assembly of his army, rarely more than 5,000 men, by making it a serious offence to ignore the *bannus*, his regal command. Moreover, he developed the incipient system of feudalism amongst the Franks, by creating landed vassals, who held land as a benefice, which meant that their holding was conditional upon services to the king, by far the most important being military service. Vassals were created by an act of commendation, when the vassal placed his hands between those of his lord, and by swearing an oath of fidelity. In return, the vassal received the protection of the lord and, of course, the tenure of land. Charlemagne encouraged his vassals to make lesser men their own vassals, so that when he called out the army, most free men would attend under the bond of vassalage. Only those holding twelve manses of land - a manse was sufficient to support one family, like the English hide - attended the army as fully equipped knights.

Charlemagne was undoubtedly a born warrior, a *kshatriya*, brave, unwearying on campaign, decisive, capable of the kind of sudden move against an enemy, often a pre-emptive strike, that Julius Caesar had demonstrated supremely in Gaul. With the exception of his Spanish campaign, when he faced the forces of the Omayyad caliph in the vast Iberian peninsula at a time when the Saxons were once more in rebellion far to the north, he never abandoned a campaign half-completed. Saxons, Lombards, Bavarians, and Avars were driven back until broken or until they offered all that the Franks demanded. There were other enemies, on the far confines of the empire, Wiltzites or Slavs, Bohemians, Bretons, Byzantines and Danes, but they represented the insoluble problem faced by all conquerors from Alexander the Great to Napoleon that however many peoples are defeated there are always more behind them, who form the ever-troublesome neighbours of an expanding state. Indefatigably, Charlemagne tried to meet the Danish threat by building fleets which patrolled the large estuaries of the Channel, Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of his empire, but in this he met the same reluctance amongst his subjects for naval engagements which bedevilled England and France in the following century. It is possible that by breaking the power of the warlike Saxons, and by destroying the Frisian fleet, he indirectly contributed to the expansion of their northern neighbours, the Danes.

Why did Charlemagne fight so hard and for so long to create such a great territorial empire? The causes for which he fought were partly historical. His father had committed the Franks to Italy and Charlemagne saw that once more the papacy was at the mercy of the barbaric Lombards in the absence of its "legal" protector, the Byzantine emperor. Bavaria was historically a Frankish dependency, with a Church reorganised by Boniface on the lines of his Frankish reformation. Against Saxons, Avars and Moors, Charlemagne was fighting to secure his borders and to protect his own people against actual or potential savagery. Yet these are not sufficient explanations. He was moved, too, by the idea of a Christian in arms. In this he was a precursor of the crusaders of the eleventh century, as indeed he was described for his adventures in Spain. Wherever he fought and conquered he planted the standards of the Church. Subjugation in arms meant conversion in religion, though under the influence of Alcuin he wisely refrained from imposing conversion on the Avars as he had upon the Saxons - only willing converts were baptised. For Charlemagne himself was a devout man, attending church daily, ensuring that the services were carefully conducted, showering wealth upon the Church and patronising its building, clergy

and learning. Somewhere in his upbringing, perhaps from his father Pepin who had been taught by the monks of St Denis - a saint, identified, probably wrongly, with Dionysius the Areopagite - Charlemagne had been confronted with the vision of a Christian society bound together by the law of Christ and protected by the sword of a Christian warrior. Certainly, Alcuin's concept of the *imperium Christianum* fell on fruitful ground.

By the time of the coronation at Rome in 800, Charlemagne's understanding of the task of government had grown well beyond that of mere protector of the people against external enemies. His capitularies showed a determination also to clarify and supplement the ancient body of Germanic folkright. Particularly in view of the diversity of law amongst the various Germanic people under his rule, he laid down general laws to which all were subject. The essence of these was to meet the needs of the time, not to draw up an ideal or abstract scheme. Hence all the capitularies contain laws on pressing matters - land holding, religion, warfare, prices, family law and so on. In principle, the Christian religion had priority:

> "To all. Before all else, the catholic faith is to be diligently taught and preached to all the people by the bishops and priests, because this is the first commandment of the lord God Almighty in the law: 'Hear O Israel, that the Lord your God is one God. And that he is to be loved with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength'."[7]

Frequently the Christian duty to protect widows, orphans and the poor was reiterated. In the same spirit, Charlemagne, like Alfred in England later, made a serious effort to reduce the extent to which *faida*, or vengeance, was used to settle private disputes. These were a source of much violence, when families followed the old folkright practice of avenging a crime upon the criminal or his kin. Charlemagne legislated that both parties must come before the law and accept its judgments in lieu of vengeance. The capitularies acknowledge the use of trial by ordeal and also trial by duel; a third method, proof of the cross, was introduced to reduce the violence of these. The two parties in a case had to stand before a cross and to raise their arms sideways to form a cross with the body. The first to lower his arms was found guilty. This method of trial, however, was discontinued after Charlemagne's reign.

A fundamental administrative reform was to extend greatly the authority of the *missi domenici.* Trusted advisers of the king were chosen for this work. Every year they travelled to designated counties to investigate the administration of the counts and bishops, to hear important judicial cases and to report back to the king. Their high office was expected to preclude their corruption by local officials or magnates. An example of their work was the reorganisation of the royal domain in Aquitaine in the year 794. It had fallen into decay, despite the need for it to support Charlemagne's son, the young king, Louis. Willibert, a clerk of the chapel, and Count Richard were sent as *missi.* They guaranteed four winter residences for the young king, with land attached to each to provide food and other resources. A circuit was established, making each residence liable for support every three years. This reorganisation was based upon that already in use for Charlemagne himself on his domains throughout France, though for the later years of his life he remained much of the time at Aachen. The system of *missi domenici* was highly effective, but it declined rapidly after Charlemagne's death, largely because it depended upon his personal drive and interest

as the recipient of the *missi*'s reports. Also, in the reign of his son, *missi* came to be appointed from amongst local officers of the area to be investigated, making them liable to self-interest and corruption.

Increasingly during his reign, Charlemagne had regard to the fabric of the empire. He built a great wooden bridge over the Rhine at Mainz, 500 feet long, which, unfortunately, was burnt down shortly before he died. A canal was begun to link the Rhine and the Danube, an over-ambitious project. Palaces were built at many centres, notably at Herstal, Worms, Ingelheim and Aachen. Roads and aqueducts were improved largely by enforcing Germanic services attached to land-holding. Churches and monasteries, especially, benefited from the king's generosity. The movement by which the early basilica form developed into the great Romanesque churches of Burgundy began at this time, with the introduction of transepts, the huge westworks so typical of Rhineland churches and the construction of towers, often with conical tops, which made the church for the first time a landmark for miles around. The beautiful marble-diapered gateway with its steep northern-type roof at the monastery of Lorsch exemplifies the originality of Carolingian church architects.

The spirit of this work, undertaken in a troubled time, was expressed by Alcuin when he wrote, in words which echoed the thought of Boethius:

> "Today the tempest threatens, but tomorrow fair weather smiles. Let the anchor of hope be fixed in Christ. He who rejoices in prosperity, let him fear adversity; and he who is fatigued with adversity, let him hope that prosperity will come quickly. Gold will not be of perfect beauty until it is tried in the furnace of the fire".[8]

For in a period of considerable unrest, when men like Alcuin could foresee greater trials to come, with Christendom assaulted by barbarians on every flank, it was "the anchor of hope fixed in Christ" which sustained those who were rebuilding the western empire in the image of the City of God.

The leaders of this Christian movement were a small group of scholars in the royal court. Charlemagne realised that amongst the Franks there were few, if any, who were sufficiently educated to contribute to the cultural development of his empire. Undaunted, he looked abroad and found Alcuin from Northumbria, Einhard from Germany, Theodulf, a Visigoth from Spain, Peter of Pisa and Paul the Deacon from Italy, Dungal from Ireland, Beornred, from England, and others. They became a circle of friends, of which the king was a member, acknowledging the intellectual leadership of Alcuin and meeting regularly in the palace at Aachen to discuss philosophy, religion, grammar and related matters. They were seeking "the prior way of life". A few snippets of their conversations are recorded: Alcuin helping the king to distinguish between *aeternum* and *sempiternum*, between *perpetuum* and *immortale* - the difference that Boethius expressed so clearly between non-temporal eternity and the infinite passing of time; Theodulf describing the diminutive Einhard as "a great guest dwells in that small house" and Alcuin as "father Albinus, ever on the point of uttering pious words". A dialogue illustrated Alcuin's method of teaching the young prince, Pepin:

> P. "What is life?
>
> A. The joy of the blessed, the sorrow of sinners, the expectation of death

P. What is death?

A. An unavoidable occurrence, an uncertain journey, the tears of the living, the confirmation of the testament, the thief of man.

P. What is man?

A. The slave of death, a passing wayfarer, the guest of a place."[9]

Playfully, they gave each other classical or Biblical names: Charlemagne was David, the first anointed king of the house of Jesse; Alcuin was Flaccus (Horace); Theodulf was Pindar, Angilbert Homer and Modoin Nasó (Ovid), for they wrote verse; Arno was Aquila; Maganfred, lord of the bedchamber and the seneschal, Andulf were the Virgilian characters, Thyrsis and Menalcas. Ignoring the advice of St Jerome, who believed that classical pagan authors were a distraction from the Christian life, these men read deeply of whatever classical writers were available to them, though they knew little Greek. Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Horace and Seneca were studied for the purity of their Latin and in order to master language - figures of speech, for example - which was an aid to understanding the Bible. Alcuin, especially, greatly valued the allegorical interpretation of the Bible. The words of the Gospels contained the final truth that he sought, as he exclaimed to Charlemagne:

"If many are infected by your aims, a new Athens will be created in France, nay, an Athens finer than the old, for ours ennobled by the teachings of Christ, will surpass all the wisdom of the Academy. The old had only the disciplines of Plato for teacher and yet inspired by the seven liberal arts it still shone with splendour; but ours will be endowed besides with the sevenfold plenitude of the Holy Ghost and will outshine all the dignity of secular wisdom."[10]

When Alcuin became abbot of St Martin of Tours in 796, he took with him what he had learnt from presiding over this exemplary school at Aachen; just so did many others spread their learning to many corners of the empire: Angilbert to Abbeville, Arno to Salzburg, Ebo to Rheims, Ricbod to Lorsch, Beornred to Sens, Fardulf to St Denis, Magulf to Fleury, Adalhard - Charlemagne's cousin - to Corbie. The monasteries, especially, became centres of learning. Now that the Rule of Benedict was becoming almost universal, the time that monks could spend in study greatly increased. This required the provision of books. Manuel work of six or seven hours a day was interpreted to include writing in the scriptorium; hence monasteries like Fulda, Rheims, St Gall, Fleury and Tours became centres for the production of scriptures, using parchment, as papyrus was no longer available with the closing of the Mediterranean by Saracen pirates from north Africa and Islamic control of the eastern ports. The work of Cassiodorus at Vivarium in the sixth century came to full fruition in these monasteries of Charlemagne's empire. In the Irish monasteries, like Clonmacnois and Glendalough, and at Jarrow, Wearmouth, Malmesbury and Canterbury, for example, the ground had also been prepared, but now it flourished on a continental scale, when the Christian scriptures, the surviving works of Rome and the writings of the Church Fathers were copied and exchanged, until the basis of learning for the Middle Ages and beyond was laid down by monastic scribes.

Education became a major aspect of the emperor's programme to raise up the life of his subjects. A capitulary on cultivating letters showed that the monasteries were not to become introverted in their love of learning:

> ". . . . . in addition to a way of life based on a rule and the practice of holy piety, the cathedral clergy and monastic communities entrusted, with Christ's favour, to us for governing ought also to devote themselves zealously to teaching the study of letters to those who by the Lord's gift are able to learn . . . that those who seek to please God by right living may not neglect to please him by right speaking. For it is written: 'Either by your words shall you be justified or by your words shall you be condemned' (Matthew 12,37). For although it is better to do what is good than to know it, yet knowing comes before doing."[11]

Schools were ordered to be set up at cathedrals and abbeys. Educated laymen appeared; those who excelled entered the royal service. Even in villages, parish priests were encouraged to teach. A curriculum was drawn up by Alcuin, based on the seven liberal arts, rudimentary in some respects - for example, arithmetic was handicapped by Roman numerals - but grammar, on the other hand, extended to literary forms including metre and history. Charlemagne himself had learnt that a king was the model in all things for his subjects, and though not a natural scholar, he learnt to speak Latin fluently, to understand some Greek and to take an interest in grammar, rhetoric, dialectic and astronomy. Writing, however, defeated him, despite his keeping writing tablets under his pillow to practice in spare moments.

Alcuin himself created one pre-condition for this work of education. By the mid eighth century existing Bibles were exceedingly corrupt. Careless copyists and rough handling had led to many mistakes and discrepancies. Alcuin undertook the immense task of producing a new accurate version of the Bible. He completed it, perhaps by design, at the time of Charlemagne's coronation, Christmas Day, 800. It was the perfect gift to an emperor who intended, above all, to revive the teaching of Christ in his dominions. The scriptoria needed, also, a new script. Many varieties of script were in use, all of them either cumbersome or untidy. At the palace school in Aachen a completely new one was created, called Caroline miniscule, neat, rounded and highly legible. It became the basis of lower case letters until the present day, surviving even the introduction of printing in the fifteenth century.

The illumination of manuscripts became a major art form. Henceforth spiritual inspiration would be provided by magnificent copies of the Bible in monasteries and churches. In some northern scriptoria, the Anglo-Irish School of illumination, which had produced the *Book of Kells* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, remained the chief influence, but elsewhere in the empire there were new developments based on late Roman and Byzantine models. For example, Charlemagne commissioned manuscripts of gold lettering on purple parchment, as Justinian had done, whilst figures of the evangelists and others were often similar to those of Roman wall painting. One vital difference, however, was that the art of writing was exalted above the menial task which the Romans took it to be. Evangelists, like St Matthew in the great *Coronation Gospels* from the palace school at Aachen were shown writing as though inspired by the Word of God. This portrait also demonstrated classical Byzantine influence, with its flowing white robes, carefully moulded to the body and a background landscape of rich colour. A generation later a portrayal of St Matthew in the *Ebbo Gospels* from Rheims showed him in a state of divine fury, his drapery shaking with movement and eyes bulging with concentration. Book covers of ivory, like those of the *Lorsch Gospels*, were also classical in form, with carefully balanced figures set in acanthus or

in Corinthian architecture, but these too gave way by the mid ninth century to splendid richly jewelled covers, like the astonishing front of the *Lindau Gospels*, on which a golden figure of Christ on the cross is framed in a deep border of precious stones.

The decision by Gregory the Great that Christian art should represent real forms, in order that pictures could supplement the written word in teaching the scriptures was followed through in this Carolingian *renovatio*, as it was called at the time, of art and literature. In his *Caroline Code* of 787, probably drafted by Theodulf, Charlemagne re-iterated this view, attacking the Byzantine iconoclasts, whom he thought - wrongly - had once more taken control of imperial policy towards the arts. Theodulf himself designed a beautiful oratory at Germigny-des-Pres on the Byzantine style with mosaic ceiling decorations of angels flanking the Ark of the Covenant. Charlemagne's palace-chapel complex at Aachen, designed by Odo of Metz, however, was the centrepiece that showed Byzantine influence devoid of iconoclasm. The hall of the palace was modelled on the imperial basilica at Treves, but the adjacent octagonal chapel was derived from St Vitale at Ravenna, a church of Justinian, though Odo also made use of the dimensions of Solomon's Temple. Roman arches on the second and third levels of the octagon were "supported" by Corinthian columns of Italian coloured marble and granite. Though the general effect was Germanic, with an entrance flanked by a heavy westwork and twin towers. Charlemagne in fact had made a symbolic change when he borrowed this idea of a palace-chapel complex from the Chrysotriclinion of Justin II in Constantinople. The eastern emperor placed his throne in an apse above the altar. Charlemagne moved his to the west side of the octagon above the entrance, facing the altar and beneath the central mosaic showing Christ enthroned among the four symbols of the Evangelists and the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse, a mark of his recognition that supreme power on earth is always subject to the power of God. As a worldly ruler, Charlemagne was well satisfied with the statue of Theodoric the Great which he brought from Italy to stand in the palace courtyard to symbolise the strength of an enlightened Germanic king.

Charlemagne was a man of greatness of mind. He had the good sense to realise early in life that he needed intelligence finer than his own to create the kind of kingdom to which his religious devotion aspired. In one respect, his character was defective: his five wives and several concubines are evidence of a gross sexual appetite - later medieval imagery portrayed him as tormented in the after-life for this weakness. Yet he was a kindly father to his large family and was insistent on a high standard of continence in the churchmen of the empire. Perhaps dearest to his heart were the traditions of the old Germanic warriors, for he made a collection of the narrative poems of their exploits. The qualities of a *kshatriya* he provided in full; those of a *brahmin* he left to Alcuin and his circle. Both were needed at such a time.

The Germanic peoples of western Europe had not yet developed a culture truly their own, except perhaps in distant Northumbria. Their tribal organisation was breaking down; they had abandoned their ancient nordic gods, though occasional rites lingered on; and their languages - except for Anglo-Saxon - were succumbing before the superior form and literary power of Latin and its derivatives. Yet Christianity by the eighth century had not nourished the institutions of society sufficiently to create a new culture for the Germans. At last, under the aegis of Charlemagne it did so. Christian teaching, intermediately through Boethius, Benedict of Nursia and

Gregory the Great, flowed into the Carolingian reforms of law, education, the monasteries, the secular Church, art and architecture, and much else. Their chief minister was the scholar of York, Alcuin, a man who, in the portrait made within fifty years of his death, looked naively monkish, long and sombre in face with Roman tonsure and the halo of a saint. There can be little doubt that he preferred the monastic peace at York or life amidst "the smoky roofs of Tours" to that of a busy court, but he fulfilled the task assigned to him peremptorily at Parma in 781 with the highest skill and perseverance worthy of his order. He truly brought into France "the flowers of Britain". He improved the education, and moderated the severity, of his mighty master. He recreated a Bible upon which all later revisions have been based and saw to the development of the miniscule script. At the synod of Frankfurt in 794, he had led the repudiation of the heretical doctrine, held by two bishops of Spain. that Christ was the adopted son of the Father.

To the study of scripture Alcuin brought a knowledge of the Platonic cardinal virtues of courage, prudence, temperance and justice, gleaned from the scant classical philosophy available. For him "the object of adhering to these virtues is to love God and our neighbour". His letters, written to kings, Popes, prelates of the Church and friends, reveal him best; as when he wrote to the monks of Lindisfarne consoling them for the terrible sack of their monastery by the Danes in 793, which he regarded as a sign of the current degeneracy of the English:

> "It is better to adorn with good habits the soul which will live for ever, than to deck in choice garments the body which will soon decay in the dust. Let Christ be clothed and fed in the person of the poor man, that doing this you may reign with Christ. The redemption of man is true riches. If we love gold, let us send it before us to heaven, where it will be kept for us, and we have that which we love. Let us love what is eternal, and not what is perishable. Let us esteem true riches, not fleeting ones, eternal, not transitory. Let us acquire praise from God, and not from men".[12]
>
> (Letter of Alcuin to Higbald, bishop of Lindisfarne and his monks 793)

Once, after reading aloud to his master Egbert from the Gospel of St John, Alcuin had seen a vision of the whole world collected, as it were, in an enclosure and surrounded by a circle of blood. For him, the unity of the world was contained in the self-sacrifice of Christ.

By its nature and timing the Carolingian *renovatio* did not produce highly original ideas or works. The basis of western medieval culture, of the age of devotion, had been established of great men of the early sixth century AD to give to the civilisation that Christ had established new forms to replace those of Hellenism. Their work had been consolidated by generations of holy men - St Cuthbert, Biscop and Bede in Northumbria, Theodore and Hadrian at Canterbury, the Irish monks, St Columba and St Columbinus, the missionary English saints, Willibrord and Boniface, the Frankish saints, Martin of Tours, Remigius and Vedast, and many more. Upon these foundations the great men of the Carolingian age were building a house of culture, where mingled peoples of the west could live as a secure family, sheltered from the cold blasts of barbarism. The nine hundred year cycle of that age would experience a second impulse before its final decline, for in the twelfth century a spiritual movement in northern France would crown the house with a golden roof. Minds more apparently

creative than those of Alcuin and his circle would produce the glories of Gothic architecture and the music of the Archpoet. The house was not yet new Athens, but it met squarely the needs of the time.

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