Angels in Early Medieval England

Richard Sowerby

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Acknowledgements

Contents

List of Illustrations

Abbreviations and Short Titles

Adomnán, *VC*	Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. and trans. Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, *Adomnán's 'Life of Columba'* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1991)
Ælfric, *CH*, I	Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies* (first series), ed. Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series* (Oxford, 1997)
Ælfric, *CH*, II	Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies* (second series), ed. Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series* (Oxford, 1979)
Ælfric, *Supp.*	Ælfric, *Supplementary Homilies*, ed. J. C. Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1967–8)
Ælfwine's Prayerbook	London, British Library, Cotton Titus D.xxvi + xxvii (Ælfwine's Prayerbook), ed. Beate Günzel, *Ælfwine's Prayerbook* (London, 1993)
Æthelwulf, *DA*	Æthelwulf, *De abbatibus*, ed. and trans. Alistair Campbell, *Æthelwulf: De abbatibus* (Oxford, 1967)
Alcuin, *Ep.*	Alcuin, *Epistolae*, ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH, Epp. IV.2 (Berlin, 1895), 18–48
Aldhelm, *CdV*	Aldhelm, *Carmen de uirginitate*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald, MGH, Auct. ant. XV (Berlin, 1913–19), 327–471
ASC	*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
A	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 3: MS A*, ed. Janet M. Bately (Cambridge, 1986)
B	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 4: MS B*, ed. Simon Taylor (Cambridge, 1983)
C	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 5: MS C*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge, 2001)
D	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 6: MS D*, ed. G.P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996)
E	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 7: MS E*, ed. Susan Irvine (Cambridge, 2004)
F	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 8: MS F*, ed. Peter S. Baker (Cambridge, 2000)
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*

ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. George P. Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York, 1931–53)
B., *VD*	B., *Vita S. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom and Michael Lapidge, *The Early Lives of St Dunstan* (Oxford, 2012), 1–109
Bazire–Cross	Joyce Bazire and James E. Cross (eds.), *Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies* (2nd edn., London, 1989)
Bede, *HE*	Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969)
Bede, *Hom.*	Bede, *Homeliarum euangelii*, ed. David Hurst, CCSL 122 (Turnhout, 1960), 1–378
Bede, *VCP*	Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life* (Cambridge, 1940)
Blickling	Princeton, Scheide Library, MS 71 (The Blickling Homilies), ed. and trans. Richard J. Kelly, *The Blickling Homilies* (London, 2003)
Brodie Pontifical	London, British Library, Add. 57337 (The Brodie Pontifical), ed. Marie A. Conn, 'The Dunstan and Brodie (Anderson) Pontificals: an edition and study', unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Notre Dame (1993), 172–338
Byrhtferth, *VO*	Byrhtferth, *Vita S. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgwine* (Oxford, 2009), 1–203
CASSS	Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture (Oxford, 1984–)
CCCC	Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
CCCM	Corpus christianorum continuatio mediaeualis
CCSA	Corpus christianorum series apocryphorum
CCSL	Corpus christianorum series latina
Cerne	Cambridge, University Library, Ll.1.10 (The Book of Cerne), ed. A. B. Kuypers, *The Prayer Book of Aedeluald the Bishop, Commonly Called the Book of Cerne* (Cambridge, 1902)
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
Die Briefe	*Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. Michael Tangl, MGH, Epp. sel. I (Berlin, 1955)

Dunstan Pontifical	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 943 (The Dunstan Pontifical), ed. Marie A. Conn, 'The Dunstan and Brodie (Anderson) Pontificals: an edition and study', unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Notre Dame (1993), 24–172
Durham Collectar	Durham, Cathedral Library, A.IV.19 (The Durham Collectar): 1r–61r, ed. Alicia Corrêa, *The Durham Collectar* (London, 1992); 61r–88v, ed. U. Lindelöf, *Rituale ecclesiae Dunelmensis. The Durham Collectar* (London, 1927)
Egbert Pontifical	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 10575 (The Egbert Pontifical), ed. H. M. J. Banting, *Two Anglo-Saxon Pontificals* (London, 1989)
EETS	Early English Text Society
EHR	*English Historical Review*
Eighth-Century Gelasian	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 12048 (The Gellone Sacramentary), ed. A. Dumas, CCSL 159–159A (Turnhout, 1981)
EME	*Early Medieval Europe*
Fadda	A. M. Luiselli Fadda (ed.), *Nuove omelie anglosassoni della rinascenza benedettina* (Florence, 1977)
Felix, *VG*	Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *Felix's Life of St Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956)
H&S	Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs (eds.), *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1869–78)
Harleian Prayerbook	British Library, Harley 7653 (The Harley Fragment), ed. F. E. Warren, *The Antiphonary of Bangor: Part II* (London, 1895), appendix
HBS	Henry Bradshaw Society
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JML	*Journal of Medieval Latin*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
Lantfred, *Translatio*	Lantfred, *Translatio et miracula S. Swithuni*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun* (Oxford, 2003), 252–333
Leofric Missal A, B, C	Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 579 (The Leofric Missal), ed. Nicholas Orchard, *The Leofric Missal*, 2 vols. (London, 2002)
LSE	*Leeds Studies in English*

MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
Auct. ant.	Auctores antiquissimi
Capit.	Capitularia regum Francorum
Capit. episc.	Capitularia episcoporum
Epp.	Epistolae
Epp. sel.	Epistolae selectae
Poetae	Poetae Latini medii aevi
SS	Scriptores (in folio)
SS rer. Germ.	Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi
SS rer. Merov.	Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
Napier	Arthur Napier (ed.), *Wulfstan. Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien* (Berlin, 1883)
Nunnaminster	British Library, Harley 2965 (The Book of Nunnaminster), ed. Walter de Gray Birch, *An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century* (London, 1889)
Old Gelasian	Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, cod. reg. 316 + Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 7193, 41/56 (The Old Gelasian Sacramentary), ed. Leo Cunibert Mohlberg, *Liber sacramentorum Romanae aeclesiae ordinis anni circuli* (Rome, 1960)
OTP	James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (London, 1983–5)
P&P	*Past and Present*
PG	*Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris, 1857–66)
PL	*Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–65)
RegConc	*Regularis concordia*, ed. Lucia Kornexl, *Die 'Regularis Concordia' und ihre altenglische Interlinearversion* (Munich, 1993)
Robert Benedictional	Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, Y.7 (369) (The Benedictional of Archbishop Robert), ed. H. A. Wilson, *The Benedictional of Archbishop Robert* (London, 1903)
Robert Missal	Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, Y.6 (274) (The Missal of Robert of Jumièges), ed. H. A. Wilson, *The Missal of Robert of Jumièges* (London, 1896)
Royal Prayerbook	British Library, Royal 2.A.xx (The Royal Prayerbook), ed. A. B. Kuypers, *The Prayer Book of Aedeluald the Bishop, Commonly Called the Book of Cerne* (Cambridge, 1902), appendix

S	P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968); unless otherwise stated, charters are cited from the Electronic Sawyer, <http://esawyer.org.uk>
Stephen, *VW*	Stephen, *Vita S. Wilfridi*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927)
Supplement	*Supplementum Anianense*, ed. Jean Deshusses, *La sacramentaire grégorien*, 3 vols. (Freiburg, 1971–82), i. 349–605
VCA	*Vita S. Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life* (Cambridge, 1940), 59–139
Vercelli	Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, CXVII (The Vercelli Homilies), ed. D. G. Scragg, *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts* (Oxford, 1992)
Winchcombe Sacramentary	Orléans, Bibliothèque municipale 127 [105] (The Winchcombe Sacramentary), ed. Anselme Davril, *The Winchcombe Sacramentary* (London, 1995)
Wulfstan, *Hom.*	Wulfstan, *Homilies*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford, 1957)
Wulfstan of Winchester, *Narratio*	Wulfstan of Winchester, *Narratio metrica de S. Swithuno*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun* (Oxford, 2003), 372–551
Wulfstan of Winchester, *VÆthel*	Wulfstan of Winchester, *Vita S. Æthelwoldi*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom, *Wulfstan of Winchester: The Life of St Æthelwold* (Oxford, 1991)

Introduction

Searching for an appropriate image to sum up the Anglo-Saxon past in the first decades after the Norman Conquest, an unnamed author sought to conjure a sense of a golden age irrevocably lost. He struggled at first for words—'What shall I say about England? What shall I tell future generations?'—before finally offering his lament for the present age. It went as follows:

> Woe unto you, England, you who once shone forth with holy, angelic offspring, but who now groans mightily with worry for your sins.[1]

Fleeting though this eulogy for pre-Conquest England was, the Anglo-Saxons themselves would have thought its choice of imagery apt. When they had considered their own history, they too had found it studded with angels. They had believed that the occasional visitations of heavenly beings had played a direct role in bringing the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity, and that a steady stream of supernatural messengers had continued to take an interest in the affairs of the English ever since. From the end of the sixth century until the middle of the eleventh, Anglo-Saxon Christians dedicated churches to angels and adorned others with their image, speculated about their nature and their origins, prayed for their assistance, and anticipated a future world in which they would live alongside them in deathless eternity. Early medieval England in fact produced such a volume of material relating to these immaterial spirits that it would be possible, if one were so inclined, to string it together as a narrative, starting with the Northumbrian slave-boys whose faces were allegedly so angelic that a pope determined to convert their countrymen, and ending with the Norman fleet which landed in Sussex just as the churches of England were preparing to offer their annual prayers to the archangel Michael.[2]

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[1] *Vita Ædwardi regis*, II.7, ed. Frank Barlow, *The Life of King Edward who Rests at Westminster, attributed to a Monk of Saint-Bertin* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1992), 108.

[2] The sources disagree about whether Duke William's forces landed on Michaelmas or Michaelmas Eve: see Marjorie Chibnall, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1968–80), ii. 170–1, n. 2. For Pope Gregory and the Northumbrian slave-boys, see later in this Introduction.

A book which sought to produce that kind of narrative might succeed in drawing attention to a few lesser-known aspects of early medieval storytelling, but would only reinforce old impressions that these ideas occupied some quaint and esoteric corner of a superstitious Middle Ages. It is instead the aim of this book to find a way to use the Anglo-Saxons' apparent fascination with angels to reveal something about their social ideals, their religious culture, and their mental picture of the world.

The notion of taking seemingly arcane ideas about the supernatural, the otherworldly, and the imaginary, and using them as lenses with which to examine the society in which they evolved, is no longer an unusual one. In place of the regret once voiced by scholars, that so many ancient and medieval authors were prevented from commenting fully on the serious matters of their day by their taste for writing about the mysterious and the fantastical, there is now a greater awareness of the potential for using such preoccupations to uncover alternative—but complementary—insights into past societies. Anglo-Saxon England, indeed, has always been a productive focus for this kind of study, due in large part to the draw of the demon-stalked landscape at the heart of the poem *Beowulf*, as well as the variety of legendary material related to the saints and their miracles. It is now possible to turn to the Anglo-Saxons' writings about elves in order to reconstruct their ideas about gender and medicine, to find their ecclesiastical politics buried within accounts of marvels worked at saints' shrines, and to see stories about the wandering dead used in conjunction with the archaeological remains of their society.[3]

Examining the mental picture of the universe which early medieval men and women carried around in their heads has undoubtedly proved rewarding. Where the evidence permits us to come close to seeing the world as they did, it has frequently helped us to make sense of their actions, their outlook, and their societies. All too often, however, their thoughts remained their own. Every now and then, one or two particularly garrulous men and women might leave us some unusually full account of their beliefs, but such individuals are always few in number. Not only does this have the effect of reducing our source material to a handful of potentially unrepresentative opinions, it also inhibits our ability to see early medieval beliefs as dynamic and changeable, subject to

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[3] The literature here is vast, and the following works represent only some of the fullest self-contained discussions. For *Beowulf*, see esp. Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1993). For elves: Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge, 2007). For saints' cults: David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1989); and Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002). For the wandering dead: John Blair, 'The dangerous dead in early medieval England', in Stephen Baxter et al. (eds.), *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, 2009), 539–59. A holistic consideration of many of these separate strands is offered by Helen Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith* (Farnham, 2013).

reinterpretation by successive generations. A single document preserves a single iteration of an idea, suspended as if in amber, but seldom gives any sense of how much it resembled or differed from earlier versions of that same idea. Does a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman ghost story, for instance, express a view of the world which would have been recognizable to, say, a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon Christian? Presumably the answer is: in some ways, but not in others. It can nevertheless be difficult to say more about how and why such ideas might have changed over time if our body of source material is discontinuous. And for the ideas and beliefs of Anglo-Saxon England at least, discontinuous sources are indeed a major problem. They hamper not only our sense of beliefs which lay outside the Christian mainstream, the evidence for which is notoriously fragmentary, but also even our understanding of comparatively well-attested religious phenomena like the cult of saints, since the great majority of our sources about the veneration of the holy dead is confined either to first three decades of the eighth century or to the final quarter of the tenth.

Angels, on the other hand, appear to have received more or less constant attention from the thinkers, writers, and artists of Anglo-Saxon England after *c.*700 CE. Celestial beings reappear time and again in the earliest hagiographies of the eighth century, in the letters of insular writers sending word from the Carolingian empire, in the prayerbooks of the ninth century and the sermons of the tenth, as well as in manuscript decoration completed on the eve of the Norman Conquest. Their recurring presence in almost all the surviving traces of Anglo-Saxon culture means that this is above all a book about change. It traces one particular collection of beliefs as they shifted and developed over time, in ways perhaps barely registered by contemporaries, yet in ways which remodelled their own sense of the world they inhabited. For this was a period which experienced profound changes in other respects: changes of political allegiance, as the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were brought under the control of an overarching 'English kingdom'; of social organization, in tandem with the growth of towns and urban markets; and of ecclesiastical provision, as the character and structure of religious institutions underwent gradual transformation.[4] It is easy to suspect that the mental world experienced similar transformations over this same long period, but often difficult to say more about how and why. This book aims to do just that, and to show how this single strand of early medieval thought connects with and illuminates other aspects of the religious imagination in Anglo-Saxon England.

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[4] The best points of entry into each of these issues are now: George Molyneaux, *The Formation of the English Kingdom in the Tenth Century* (Oxford, 2015); D. M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Vol. I: 600–1540* (Cambridge, 2008), 25–270; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005).

The prospect of using Anglo-Saxon beliefs about angels in this way, as a prism through which to study broader changes in contemporary society, might initially seem limited. Faced with images of winged beings carved upon stone monuments from the Anglo-Saxon past, like the extraordinarily well-preserved angel found in excavations at Lichfield in 2003, the modern viewer could be forgiven for seeing little that was distinctive to the early Middle Ages and to early medieval thought. Visitors to the Lichfield Angel's glass case in the city's cathedral might be struck by its similarity to artistic models from Late Antiquity, or note that the arrangement of curled hair derives from still older, Hellenistic traditions; or they might observe that the angel was originally only the left-hand side of a larger panel, and speculate that the lost right-hand piece once contained an image of the Virgin Mary, thereby putting them in mind of other representations of the Annunciation familiar from later medieval and early modern art. Like many other artistic representations of angels, the Lichfield Angel appears caught between two worlds—between the creativity of Christianity's early centuries, which first generated the familiar image of winged angels clad in flowing robes, and the definitive expression of that image during the Renaissance.[5] Any distinctively early medieval contribution to that long tradition seems difficult to discern, or confined to the level of fleeting, ultimately inconsequential, details. A contemporary piece of theological writing might provoke the same response when an ostensibly detailed discussion of angels in an Anglo-Saxon sermon or biblical commentary is revealed, upon closer inspection, to be nothing more than an assemblage of recycled phrases culled from the pages of Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, or Isidore of Seville. This 'slavish adherence to earlier authorities' which has been observed in more than one theological tract from the early Middle Ages might only dissuade us further from trying to find evidence of innovation in such a well-worn part of medieval Christian teaching.[6]

Anglo-Saxon intellectuals would hardly have sought to detract from this impression, either. Looking back through their scriptures, which gave abundant though somewhat disconnected evidence about the nature of angels, and through the writings of the Church Fathers, which attempted to impose order on those biblical hints, medieval Christians saw little that still required original interpretation. They were of the opinion that, although thinking about angels had once involved the careful assembly of enigmatic scriptural statements, this was no longer necessary. Instead, they surveyed the development of Christian

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[5] On the development of a distinctive iconography for angels in Late Antiquity, see Federica Pirani, 'Quando agli angeli spuntarono le ali?', in Serena Ensoli and Eugenio La Rocca (eds.), *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana* (Rome, 2000), 389–94. On the Lichfield Angel itself, see Warwick Rodwell et al., 'The Lichfield Angel: a spectacular Anglo-Saxon painted sculpture', *Antiquaries Journal* 88 (2008), 48–108.

[6] The opinion is that of M. L. W. Laistner, 'A ninth-century commentator on the Gospel according to Matthew', *Harvard Theological Review* 20 (1927), 129–49, at 129.

thought about angels with an air of confidence in a task which was now complete, singling out key figures who had resolved scripture's deepest mysteries. In the Northumbrian monastery of Whitby, one early eighth-century hagiographer emphasized the contribution of Gregory the Great (d. 604), the revered pope who is now remembered chiefly for having launched a mission to convert the early Anglo-Saxons:

> Gregory dealt with their orders—the orders of the [angelic] hosts, that is—with an ingenuity that we have never found in any other saint before or since. Even St Augustine, a man sound in faith and pure of life, from whose belly flow rivers of living water, said about them: 'I confess that I know nothing about these things.' But not only did Gregory divide them up in their hosts, basing everything on holy scriptures, he also drew out the commonalities to our way of life, with that clean heart by which only the blessed shall see God.[7]

This sense of living in an age in which even the invisible organization of the heavens had been laid bare in the pages of patristic theology seems to reject any notion that the Anglo-Saxons—or any other early medieval Christians— could hold their own views, different from both what had come before and what was to follow. The sight of medieval writers expressing their complete indebtedness to past authorities gave cheer to some twentieth-century scholars too, who sought to uphold the sound doctrine of pre-modern believers by pointing to those occasions when they had found the shape of Christian teaching about angels to be at its 'most constant and solid'.[8]

But in truth, patristic footsteps only led so far. Even those who followed the trail left by Pope Gregory the Great, whose contribution had been applauded in eighth-century Northumbria, would soon find that the opinions of the Church Fathers did not provide comprehensive guidance for every aspect of this invisible world of spirits. Someone who was interested in other theological questions could often rely upon enormous and influential works of sustained exegesis: the nine homilies on Creation penned by Ambrose of Milan, the twenty-two books written by Augustine about the City of God, or the massive exegetical project undertaken in Gregory's own thirty-two-volume *Moralia in Iob*. On the subject of angels, however, the professional religious in the Latin West relied first and foremost on a single sermon, first delivered by Gregory to a congregation in Rome in the year 591.[9] There, in the course of an exposition

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[7] *Liber beatae Gregorii papae*, ch. 25, ed. Bertram Colgrave, *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby* (Cambridge, 1968), 118–20. The words attributed to Augustine echo the sentiments of *De ciuitate Dei* (XV.1), *Enchiridion* (ch. 58), and *De trinitate* (III.iii.5), but are not an exact quotation.

[8] Jean Daniélou, *Les Anges et leur mission d'après les Pères de l'Église* (Paris, 1951), 93. Cf. also Erik Peterson, *Das Buch von den Engeln. Stellung und Bedeutung der heiligen Engel im Kultus* (Leipzig, 1935).

[9] Gregory, *Homeliae in euangelia*, XXXIV, ed. Raymond Étaix, *Gregorius Magnus: Homiliae in evangelia*, CCSL 141 (Turnhout, 1999), 299–319.

on two parables from the gospel of Luke, the pope sketched for his audience the intricate workings of an unseen world. He described an ascending sequence of angelic orders, spanning the divide between humankind and the Creator. The names of these orders could be found scattered through the Old and New Testaments, and there were nine in total: angels, archangels, virtues, powers, principalities, dominations, thrones, cherubim, and seraphim. The titles indicated that each rank fulfilled its own distinct function, and implied that the nine hosts were arranged hierarchically, from the lower angels and archangels who brought messages to humanity, to the higher cherubim and seraphim who offered incomparable worship to God by virtue of their eternal closeness to him. Although Gregory noted apologetically that, 'in unveiling the secrets of the heavenly citizens, I have digressed far from my proper subject', his digression swiftly became embedded in the intellectual fabric of early medieval Christendom. The literate studied his words, or made use of the encyclopedic summary of them in the widely read *Etymologiae* ('Etymologies') written by Isidore, bishop of Seville (d. 636).[10] What they found they pressed into service in their own sermons and liturgies.[11] Passing references to 'nine orders of angels' were soon to be found in everything from private prayers to judicial formulae—so much so that when one monk from Ramsey sat down to list the exegetical significance of numbers at the turn of the eleventh century, the number nine suggested to him only angelic meanings.[12]

Gregory's explanation of the angelic hosts had clearly proved revelatory. His Northumbrian devotee from early eighth-century Whitby (either a monk or a nun of that institution, given that the monastery housed both male and female inmates) in fact held up Gregory's exposition as proof that the pope had gained his knowledge *by* revelation, thereby showing him to be the equal of St Peter and of the prophet Ezekiel before him.[13] In reality, Gregory had drawn

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[10] Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VII.5, ed. W. M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911).

[11] A litany in a Breton psalter of *c*.900 does contain an additional rank of 'seats' (*sedes*) alongside the usual nine, but this in fact only confirms a general dependency on the *Etymologiae*. It derives from a misreading of Isidore's statement that 'throni sunt agmina angelorum, qui Latino eloquio sedes dicuntur', by a compiler who was intent on listing as many heavenly intercessors as possible: Salisbury, Cathedral Library 180, 170r, ed. Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints* (London, 1991), 288 [no. 44].

[12] Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, IV.1, ed. Peter S. Baker and Michael Lapidge, *Byrhtferth's 'Enchiridion'* (Oxford, 1995), 212–14. A rare invocation of 'XX ordines angelorum', found in an adjuration against toothache in an Anglo-Saxon medical manuscript, is a simple scribal error, for later versions of the same formula give the more usual nine: see *Lacnunga*, 183v–184r, ed. Edward Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacnunga*, 2 vols. (Lewiston, NY, 2001), i. 108 [no. 158].

[13] *Liber beatae Gregorii*, ch. 27 (ed. Colgrave, p. 122). For the text's creation and audience within a double monastic context, see esp. Diane Watt, 'The earliest women's writing? Anglo-Saxon literary cultures and communities', *Women's Writing* 20 (2013), 537–54, at 545–50.

heavily upon the writings of a man whom he took to be Dionysius the Areopagite (a convert of St Paul's briefly mentioned in the book of Acts), but who is now known to have been a Neoplatonic writer based, in all likelihood, in Syria around 500 CE.[14] One of the treatises written by this pseudo-Dionysius was entitled *The Celestial Hierarchy*, an audacious piece of mystical theology based around an explanation of the angelic society, and it was from this that Gregory had derived much of his understanding of the nine orders of angels.[15] Quite how Gregory came to know the works of pseudo-Dionysius is unclear, given that he had elsewhere professed his ignorance of Greek.[16] But since pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* would remain unknown in the West until the ninth century, when it was made more widely available in Latin translations, Pope Gregory's homily was for many centuries the only sustained treatment of angels available in early medieval Europe.[17]

Early medieval Europe produced nothing to rival pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*, nor even anything to rival Gregory's much-simplified reworking of pseudo-Dionysus's theology in his sermon on Luke. Only after the thirteenth century would medieval theologians begin to write their own sustained discourses about angels, and it has often seemed, as a result, that there is nothing more to say about the place of angels in the religious imagination of the early Middle Ages. But it would be a mistake to take that as a sign of an inactive age, populated by intellectuals who were content simply to repeat the judgements of previous thinkers. To do so is to ignore indications from other quarters that early medieval imaginations were still actively grappling with the subject of invisible beings.

Take, for instance, the basic issue of what an angel was and how one might recognize it if it appeared before one's eyes. A good grounding in patristic theology would equip an early medieval intellectual with the knowledge that it was technically incorrect to talk about 'angels' as if they were a particular kind of being. The Latin word *angelus* (like the Greek *angelos* from which it derived) meant simply 'messenger', and so denoted their function rather than their

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[14] On the author and his works, see variously: see Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London, 1989); Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (Oxford, 1993); Rosemary A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria* (Aldershot, 2008).

[15] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, ed. Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum II* (Berlin, 1991).

[16] For Gregory's knowledge of Greek, with particular reference to the *Celestial Hierarchy*, see Joan M. Petersen, '*Homo omnino Latinus*? The theological and cultural background of Pope Gregory the Great', *Speculum* 62 (1987), 529–51, esp. at 530–42.

[17] P. G. Théry, *Études dionysiennes. Hilduin, traducteur de Denys*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1932–7); *Iohannis Scoti Eriugenae Expositiones in ierarchiam coelestem*, ed. J. Barbet, CCCM 31 (Turnhout, 1975). See further Paul Rorem, *Eriugena's Commentary on the Dionysian Celestial Hierarchy* (Toronto, 2005).

nature.[18] They themselves were spirits, and therefore immaterial, adopting a visible form only when they had to appear before humans, who were otherwise unable to see them in their natural state. The learned were in broad agreement on this point, and observations along similar lines would issue easily from the pens of sermon-writers and biblical commentators for centuries to come.[19]

Alongside this consensus about the general theory, however, could be found a quite considerable range of opinion about the details of precisely how the spirits chose to manifest themselves. There were stories of angels attending the dead and the dying in the guise of beautiful robed men in one place, or in the form of brightly coloured songbirds in another.[20] There were storytellers convinced that, no matter what shape a spirit took, its heavenly origin and nature would be clearly revealed by the unnatural light which encased its body; while still others not only supposed that angels could hide such obvious signs if they chose, but even held that they could adopt the faces and manners of living human beings, so that one might never be quite sure if one were speaking with the person themselves or only with a spirit who had briefly taken their shape.[21] While some of these ideas might strike us as more novel or interesting than others, it is their contemporaneity which I wish to emphasize here. My preceding examples have all been drawn from a single early medieval polity—from the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria—and from documents separated by no more than a few decades of each other. While one could certainly widen the net to find still more disparate ideas from across medieval Christendom, to do so would be to miss the significance of this variety of opinion. The surprising fact is not that such variety existed, but that early medieval Northumbrians appear not to have recognized it. They spoke of things being 'angelic' in appearance and assumed that their meaning would be transparent, as if the word called to mind a specific set of characteristics which all Christians might share. There was, for instance, a story told in the north

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[18] The eventually commonplace observation seems to have begun with Augustine: *Enarrationes in psalmos*, CIII.i.15, ed. Franco Gori, CSEL 95, 5 vols. (Vienna, 2001–11), i. 131–2; *Sermones de uetere testamento*, VII.3, ed. Cyrille Lambot, CCSL 41 (Turnhout, 1961), 72. Cf. also Gregory, *Hom. in euang.*, XXXIV (ed. Adriaen, p. 306); Isidore, *Etym.*, VII.5 (ed. Lindsay); Isidore, *Sententiae*, I.10, ed. Pierre Cazier, CCSL 111 (Turnhout, 1998), 29–38.

[19] See Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (Berkeley, 2001), esp. 1–4, 107–8.

[20] Compare, for instance, Bede, *HE*, IV.11 and V.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 366 and 488–96), with Æthelwulf, *DA*, chs. 8 and 18 (ed. Campbell, pp. 20–2 and 46). Although angelic birds have sometimes been taken to reflect distinctively Irish influence, inspiration may also have come from Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes, which refers to 'angels in the likeness of birds which bear our words and our thoughts of heaven': *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, X.20, ed. Marcus Adriaen, CCSL 72 (Turnhout, 1959), 344.

[21] For shining light: Alcuin, *VdP*, ll. 1607–48 (ed. Godman, pp. 130–2). For angels taking the shape of specific individuals, see later in this Introduction; and cf. also Einhard, *Translatio et miracula sanctorum Marcellini et Petri*, III.13, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH, SS XV.1 (Hanover, 1887), 252–3.

about a group of young pagan Northumbrians who had ended up in the city of Rome, where they were seen by the soon-to-be Pope Gregory the Great. The tale explained that Gregory had become transfixed by these youths, struck by the exceptional whiteness and beauty of their faces and hair, and that he had found it highly significant that these men called themselves 'Angles', for they were, he said, like the angels of God. These words were said to have prefigured future events, for in 597 papal missionaries would land in Kent, bearing instructions from Gregory to convert the English kingdoms to Christianity. It was a convenient and flattering story, and attempts have occasionally been made to find a kernel of historical truth within it.[22] Yet there was one detail which marred the tale, and which the Northumbrians who told it were hardly in a position to notice. They saw nothing strange about the fact that Gregory should associate young men with pale faces and paler hair with the angels of God, and these were indeed attributes frequently given to angels by many seventh- and eighth-century English and Irish Christians. Italian artists from Gregory's own day, however, supposed instead that God's messengers would naturally carry Mediterranean features if they took human form, and consistently presented them with darker hair and complexions. This was a trivial discrepancy, but a revealing one. The Anglo-Saxons who told the tale remained utterly unaware that their own sense of the angelic might not be shared by all.

It is curious that this should be so, given the real diversity of opinion about angels and angelic bodies which could exist, as we just have seen, within the borders of even a single early medieval kingdom. Yet when faced with ideas that ran counter to their own, our early Anglo-Saxon writers gave every impression that they sought to reject the beliefs of others rather than to rethink their own. The anonymous hagiographer from Whitby whose Life in praise of Pope Gregory we have already met, was one such individual whose understanding of angels came to be rejected in this way. Appended to the Whitby Life's account of Gregory's meeting with the Northumbrian youths are a series of stories about the pope's missionary Paulinus, and his role in the conversion of the north. One was a strange tale about an encounter between Edwin, the exiled pagan king of Northumbria, and a mysterious visitor who forewarned the king about the approaching missionary and the powerful god to whom Paulinus was devoted. This the visitor did by taking on Paulinus' physical appearance, and instructing the king 'to obey the man who first appears to you in this form (*cum hac specie*)'.[23] Among the first readers of the Whitby Life of Gregory was the monastic scholar Bede (d. 735), who retold the story in his own *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ('The Ecclesiastical

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[22] For such efforts, see Michael Richter, 'Bede's *Angli*: Angles or English?', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 99–114.
[23] *Liber beatae Gregorii*, ch. 16 (ed. Colgrave, p. 100). It is the hagiographer who supplies the information that 'it is said to have been Bishop Paulinus who first appeared to him in that form'.

History of the English People').[24] Bede was happy to accept that the sudden appearance of strange men offering instructions about the service of 'the one true living God who created all things' surely identified them as God's spiritual messengers rather than earthly creatures of flesh and blood, and his retelling did not hesitate to observe that 'this was not a man but a spirit who had appeared before the king'. But all references to the ability of spirits to clothe themselves in the bodily forms of particular, living individuals were quietly put aside. Something about that notion had evidently troubled Bede, although an Ecclesiastical History was clearly no place to deal with these concerns at length. Dismissing what he considered to be the story's problematic features, Bede reassembled the rest into a form that seemed to him 'much more probable' (*ut uerisimile uidetur*), until there was little that remained to distinguish King Edwin's mysterious visitor from any of the other divine messengers who appeared now and then in the pages of his historical works.

Seeing Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics disagreeing about the mechanics of heavenly apparitions puts the modern reader in mind of the old joke about medieval intellectuals arguing over the number of angels which could dance on the head of a pin.[25] Nothing could seem further from the concerns of the 'real world' in which such people lived. And yet, in the way that these seemingly inconsequential beliefs were presented, we *can* see something of that real world. They give us a glimpse of a landscape made up of somewhat unconnected communities of thought, each holding beliefs which they took to be universal, and yet which were often quite distinct from those of their neighbours. The degree to which our individual writers seem unaware of the real variety of contemporary opinion, seen in the ease with which they could dismiss divergent views as erroneous rather than endemic, is perhaps suggestive of a period of time in which local communities still remained in indirect and occasional contact with others. If so, it was not to last. Before long, Anglo-Saxon writers began to speak with a more consistent voice and draw from a shared religious imagination. By at least the middle of the tenth century, stories about angels taking physical form to intervene in human affairs spoke only about anonymous men of radiant whiteness, with little of the variety which once characterized such tales.[26] It was perhaps the mark of an

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[24] Bede, *HE*, II.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 174–83). While it has not always been accepted that Bede knew the Whitby Life directly, I follow Alan Thacker's reasons for thinking it likely that he did: 'Memorializing Gregory the Great: the origin and transmission of a papal cult in the seventh and early eighth centuries', *EME* 8 (1998), 59–84, at 69–70.

[25] For the joke, see Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2008), 73–5.

[26] Cf. Lantfred, *Translatio*, chs. 2 and 35 (ed. Lapidge, pp. 266–70); B., *VD*, chs. 29–30 (ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, pp. 86–90). Ælfric tended to remark that angels appeared 'shining with light' even when it jarred with the story he was telling, as it often did when he was paraphrasing biblical tales about angels being mistaken for ordinary mortal men: see e.g. *Supp.*, XIII (ed. Pope, p. 593).

increasingly homogenized religious culture, a sign that certain sets of ideas were managing to achieve a monopoly over others. Caught within this outwardly esoteric matter of angels and their bodies, in short, are small indications of the way that one particular society was undergoing change.

Observations of a similar kind could easily be made for other clusters of beliefs held in any part of early medieval Christendom, and my brief sketch of changing ideas in a changing world may stand for a more general process in which the religious inheritance of Christian antiquity underwent gradual evolution during the early Middle Ages. By drawing attention to a particular bundle of ideas about angels in the way that I have just done, I do not wish to imply that these alone proved ripe for reconceptualization in ways that other parts of the Christian tradition were not; and nor is my focus on only a single part of the early medieval West intended to suggest that the Anglo-Saxons were unique in the way that they handled their beliefs about angels and the supernatural. This book in fact joins a small collection of other historical studies which have begun to use angels as a way to talk about topics as various as religious diversity in the late Roman world, the emergence of Christian asceticism, the issues of representation and veneration contested in Byzantium during the iconoclast era, and the new confessional identities forged in Europe during the Reformation.[27] Each has found it productive to pursue these quite distinct enquiries by paying close attention to the ways in which particular societies thought about angels, because of the way that the subject raised fundamental questions about issues like free will, goodness, divine foreknowledge, and life and death. This was as true in the medieval West as it was elsewhere, but here scholars have been rather less interested in exploring how ideas about angels responded to the intellectual currents of particular times and places. It is perhaps the discontinuous nature of the historical record which has encouraged scholars to write more impressionistically about the ways that angels were understood during the Middle Ages, and which has led them to give particular emphasis to the works of major patristic and scholastic theologians, who gave the subject the most systematic discussion.[28] But to skip

[27] Peers, *Subtle Bodies*; Conrad Leyser, 'Angels, monks, and demons in the early medieval West', in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2001), 9–22; Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2006); Feisal G. Mohamed, *In the Anteroom of Divinity: The Reformation of the Angels from Colet to Milton* (Toronto, 2008); Joad Raymond, *Milton's Angels: The Early Modern Imagination* (Oxford, 2010); Alexandra Walsham, 'Invisible helpers: angelic intervention in post-Reformation England', *P&P* 208 (2010), 77–130; Rangar Cline, *Ancient Angels: Conceptualizing Angeloi in the Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2011); Joad Raymond (ed.), *Conversations with Angels: Essays towards a History of Spiritual Communication, 1100–1700* (Basingstoke, 2011); Laura Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England, 1480–1700* (London, 2012); Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford, 2013).
[28] David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1998); Richard F. Johnson, *Saint Michael the Archangel in Medieval English Legend* (Woodbridge, 2005); Meredith J. Gill,