Political Origins of Medieval Historical Writing in England: A Case Study of Bede, Henry of Huntingdon, and William of Malmesbury

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Introduction

The Italian humanist Petrarch first defined the Middle Ages. In his mind, this period between the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance was "really the worst of all."[1] Regarding the period's learnedness, he asked, "indeed, what can be lower?"[2] This point of view errs in two significant ways: first, the medieval era was not a monolithic time of stagnation, but rather went through several political and cultural phases; second, it did not have the primitive level of culture Petrarch assigned it. Nowhere are these points more evident than in the renaissances of England during the eighth and twelfth centuries. A large gulf separates these two periods, whose politics, language, and even race of people had changed hands over the centuries; yet a high level of culture distinguished both.

It is tempting to view this great cultural growth through rose-colored lenses. Of the Twelfth-century Renaissance, one historian comments on "the more active life of this age," which had a "certain

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1 Francesco Petrarca, Rerum Familiarium Libri I-VIII, trans. Aldo S. Berinardo (New York: State University of New York Press, 1975), 418.

2 Ibid,, 135.

amount of political advance."[3] Another historian writes that during the eighth-century's renaissance, "[political] stability had been achieved."[4] The assumption that cultural expansion signifies political well-being owes its origins, at least in part, to the evidence that remains from these periods because during times of political instability, historical data is often destroyed. To a certain extent, this is the case: for instance, no cultural flowering existed in early Capetian France, which for a long while was an extremely politically turbulent area.[5] Since the eighth and twelfth centuries left a relatively large corpus of information upon which scholars may draw, modern historians have assumed the political situation during these times was comparatively peaceful. Yet a closer examination of the English renaissances reveals a darker side to these periods.

A more realistic portrayl of eighth and twelfth-century England can be garnered from the histories of the time. An active interest in recording English history is one of the trademarks shared by both renaissances. England possesses the unique claim to have the largest amount, and the greatest quality, of historical writing in the medieval period.[6] At first glance, it might seem that those who recorded English history viewed themselves living in a time of

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3 Charles Homer Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 12, 13.

4 Peter Hunter Blair, The World of Bede (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7.

5 Eleanor Shipley Duckett, Anglo-Saxon Saints and Scholars (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1967), 42.

6 R.W. Southern, Medieval Humanism and Other Studies (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 160.

political stability. The fact that these men had the freedom, ability and resources to write at all suggests this. The authors, however, actually show a deep concern for the political situation in England, and sometimes complain bitterly about the degradation and sinfulness of their age.

Sometimes, modern scholars do not take the opinions of these medieval historians seriously. They think that, since the medieval writers were ecclesiastical men who often dwelt in monasteries away from the rest of society, they were removed from their political environment. In fact, many clerics of the Middle Ages were worldly, politically aware men who took Saint Augustine's advice seriously about the role of churchmen as advisors and regulators of secular rulers. Even when, as in Bede's case, the historians were monks who dwelt in monasteries, they often took an active interest in politics, which can be seen in their writings by how they side for or against a particular ruler, issue, or influential leader. Thus, if they saw some problems in their political situation, their troubles should be considered as serious evidence that there truly might have been a political crisis, and their worries should not be dismissed as the muttering of churchmen merely eager to rail against the state of the world.[7]

If there were so many medieval historians concerned about the political decline of their age, the suggestions made by Haskins and Blair, and the assumptions held by many others, that these periods of cultural flowering that later men called "renaissances" occurred

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7 Nancy F. Partner, Serious Entertainments (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977),1 -- 8.

during times of political good fortune must be questioned. This should not come as a complete surprise; it certainly was not the case with the Italian Renaissance, which happened in the midst of inter-Italian wars, foreign invasions and plague. This paper examines three historians of the Middle Ages -- Bede, Henry of Huntingdon, and William of Malmesbury -- who wrote during either the eighth or the twelfth centuries, and looks at how they viewed their political climate. On an individual level, then, it can be seen that political turbulence was a common attribute of the English medieval renaissances. Actually, it can be argued that the chaos in politics caused the creation of these histories. To qualify this, however, it must be noted that cultural trends played an equally important role in the writings. Without this background, medieval historians would not have had the opportunity, resources, or perhaps even desire to compose their works. For this reason, a brief discussion of the authors' cultural backgrounds will round out the discussion on why histories were created in medieval England.

Historians traditionally have defined a renaissance as a "rebirth" of Roman ideas and culture.[8] This interpretation, however, allows only for a recalling of Roman institutions. The eighth and twelfth centuries' cultural growth was much more original and varied than this strict definition allows. For the purpose of this paper, a "renaissance" means a period of great cultural flowering, not just an attempt to imitate Roman ways. It does, however, suggest and attempt to recapture a past period of greatness. That attempt in

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8 Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, 6.

England led to an interest by the Norman conquerors in the island's Anglo-Saxon past.

Thus, in England, renaissances of the eighth and twelfth centuries held a number of cultural traits in common. Both revered the "classical", that is, Roman use of Latin; medieval historians emulated this grammatical style in their writings.[9] They both had similar expectations of how to construct a historical work: they attempted to follow the Roman style, with its narrative form and attempt at "objectivity."[10] Finally, each renaissance in England during the Middle Ages displayed an interest in proving the nationhood of England by discussing its deep-rooted past.[11]

Historians have given the first medieval renaissance in England the title "the Northumbrian Renaissance," since it occurred in the northwestern kingdom of Northumbria. During the late seventh and early eighth centuries, an influx of new ideas, art, and people entered into Northumbria and created a vivid culture. The Lindisfarne Gospels of the late seventh century constitute some of Europe's most beautiful illuminations,and are representative of trends in literacy and art in Northumbria.[12] The kingdom's reputation as a center for learning was well known a century later, when Charlemagne's Francia imported Alcuin, a scholar from this

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9 Ibid., 136.

10 Ibid.

11 Southern, Medieval Humanism, 162.

12 Carl Nordenfalk, Early Medieval Book Illumination (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Incorporated, 1988), 34.

area to his court.[13] Alcuin's contribution to Carolingian learning fostered what is known as the Carolingian Renaissance. Also during this time, clerks produced a body of writings which, in number and quality, outshone preceding and following eras.[14]

The Northumbrian Renaissance is best known for the historian it produced, the Venerable Bede. In fact, to a large extent Bede defines this renaissance. As James Campbell writes, "Bede's life and work constitute the most important monument, and the most striking symbol, of the highly dramatic cultural changes that followed the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons."[15] Bede's central contribution was his history of England, entitled the Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum (Hereafter the Historia).

Bede probably completed the Historia around 731. Drawn from various written sources as well as oral tradition, it was a narrative of England's past from the time before the Roman occupation of Britain to the date of writing.[16] The Historia was read throughout the Middle Ages as the most reliable and comprehensive source for English history.[17] Although Bede included many miracle stories in

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13 Rodney Thomson, William of Malmesbury (New Hamshire: The Boydell Press, 1987), 145.

14 For examples of this literature, see Bede's Expositio actum apostolorum et retractatio; the Vita sancti Cuthberti; for a more extensive list, see Blair's World of Bede.

15 James Campbell, ed., The Anglo-Saxons (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 70.

16 Bede, A History of the English Church and People, trans. by Leo Sherley-Price, ed., by E.V. Rieu (Middlesex: Penguin Books Limited, 1962), 25.

17 Antonia Gransden, Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307 (Ithica: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 27.

his text, since he sincerely believed them to be true, in general historians have appreciated his attempt to separate fact from fiction.[18] Medieval scholars were to praise Bede and emulate the astuteness of his Latin, his research, his discerning judgement, and his clear prose.[19]

Part of Bede's talent lay in the fact that he broke away from previous conceptions of history. He had seen other histories from the Ancient period, such as Eusebius's Church History, which might have influenced how he constructed the Historia's narrative form, which was a rare characteristic in early medieval writing.[20] Yet unlike earlier historians, Bede saw English history in terms of Christian events, having a definite plan that followed God's will. This ecclesiastical orientation of the Historia characterizes not only the Bede's work, but the Northumbrian Renaissance as a whole.[21]

Another important aspect of Bede's view of history that the Historia depicts was his recognition of England's nationhood. Despite its distinct kingdoms, the English people were joined by a common history that had its origins in the Christian God. The Christian conversions of Kent, Mercia, Northumbria and other kingdoms; the clerks, such as Paulinus, who crossed from kingdom to kingdom; and the Latin language used in ecclesiastical affairs united the English

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18 Ibid., 21.

19 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 63.

20 Walter Goffart, The narrators of Barbarian History (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 249.

21 See Blair, World of Bede, passim. 282-295.; the chapter entitled, "Secular and Christian Books."

people.[22] The idea of England as a nation had never been expressed so concretely before the Historia, and in this fact lay one of the most notable characteristics of Bede's work.

Unfortunately, (side) Bede is unique. No other histories exist from his time that can be compared to the Historia. Therefore, his opinion of the political situation in Northumbria stands alone. This is not the case with the second renaissance in England. Actually, the second had several remarkable historians, who each had their particular interpretation of the early twelfth-century's political climate. These historians were part and parcel of a movement later scholars dubbed the Twelfth-century Renaissance.[23]

There were important differences between this renaissance and the Northumbrian. The twelfth-century cultural flowering was not confined to a small geographical location or carried out by a limited number of clerks.[24] Rather it encompassed people of various political or religious backgrounds throughout Western Europe. This renaissance also differed in character from the Northumbrian. First, it was more secular. This was the time of the Golliard scholars, for instance, who wrote poetry that dwelt on the power of Venus and Fortuna as often as religious subjects.[25]

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22 Henry Mayer-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 57. also, see Bede, A History, 38., for the unifying influence of Latin.

23 For an overall view of the Twelfth-century Renaissance, see Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century

24 Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, 11.

25 Ibid., 142.

This renaissance also made use of more sources. Classical works rediscovered from the Roman and Greek eras, and an increased movement of ideas led to innovations in theology, art, and many other cultural directions. The birth of the modern university occurred during this time.[26] Gothic architecture also developed, Roman laws were revived and studied, and previously unseen translations of Aristotle were commented on by philosophers.[27]

Another product of the Twelfth-century Renaissance was the renewed interest in recording English history. The twelfth-century historians had much in common with Bede, whom they idolized.[28] They admired his astuteness in Latin and scholarship, and, like him, had an interest in establishing the nationhood of England through its distinguished history.[29] In fact, these newer historians relied upon Bede to prove that England had a past worth remembering. Scholars of the Italian Renaissance had a Roman background that they could admire; continental historians had pasts that were also well integrated into the Roman Empire; England's experience did not lie so much in the Rome as in Anglo-Saxon England, and so the Twelfth-century historians turned to virtually the only source they had of English history, the Historia. The fact that sometimes entire passages of the Historia were copied verbatim into the Twelfth-century

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26 Ibid., 368.

27 Ibid.

28 Gransden, Historical Writing in England, 27.

29 Southern, Medieval Humanism, 162.

histories shows how important Bede was to the later historians' desire to demonstrate English nationhood.[30]

Yet several characteristics distinguished the Twelfth-century historians from their predecessor, and placed them in step with twelfth-century trends rather than eighth. First, in the twelfth century, emphasis on studying and recreating the past led to translations of pagan authors, and therefore pagan aspects of authors who had before been used only to translate Christian ideas came into view. These changes both dismayed and pleased the twelfth-century historians, who alternatively quoted and condemned pagan writers.[31]

Another characteristic of the twelfth-century historians not shared by Bede was their more secular focus. They were more concerned with the politics of English rulers than the doings of monks and bishops. To say that they had no religious slant would be incorrect; Christian morality and the divine presence of God surface throughout the books. Yet even the titles of this period's histories, The Histories of the Kings of England instead of the Ecclesiastical History, for instance, depict a change in focus.

The twelfth-century scholars that this paper uses as a sample of how the historians of the day viewed their political situation are Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury. They represent their environment in a number of ways. Since they were each of mixed heritage, Anglo-Saxon and Norman, they felt a part of both the

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30 See Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon, trans., by Thomas Forester (London: George Bell and Sons, 1909), 1-4.

31 For example, after Henry of Huntingdon discusses the work of Homer, he writes, "But why should I dwell on profane literature?" Henry, The Chronicle, xxvi.

conquerors and the conquered in twelfth-century Britain, and a need to reconcile the two into a common history (the Normans had only entered England in the mid-eleventh century).[32] Like other twelfth-century scholars, they also made use of the new translations of pagan writers and shared the more secular outlook of their day.[33] Finally, William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon shared the same political background as many other twelfth-century historians. The fact that their comments on royal leaders of the day can be compared to the opinions of other authors' is a trait unique to the twelfth-century abundance in historical writing.

This sketch of the eighth and twelfth-century English renaissances demonstrates the cultural foundations of medieval historical writing in England. As literature, the histories are monuments to the intellectual and cultural flowering of their ages. Yet the topics these historians chose to emphasize, and the reasons they chose to write, show that political factors must also have played a significant part in the creation of these histories.

This paper focuses on the political reasons behind the histories' creation by examining the medieval historians' reactions to their political environment. Contrary to modern historical assumption, the historians of the medieval renaissances wrote during what they perceived as a time of political turbulence. Actually, this perceived violence was a major reason for the creation of these histories.

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32 Southern, Medieval Humanism, 162.

33 Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, 360.

Bede

In looking at Bede and how he reacted to his political environment, the events in Northumbria that most affected him must be explored. Several problems that existed there caused this historian much anxiety, which his work, the Historia, reflects. Because he was concerned about the political turbulence in his homeland, Bede commented on his reasons for this upset in the Historia. His hostile reaction to Archbishop Wilfrid, who at times caused tension for the Northumbrian rulers, shows that, contrary to previous historical opinion, Bede did take an interest in his political surroundings. His reaction also shows where his interests lay, in the well-being of the Northumbrian state.

Despite the fact that he wrote about great events in English history, Bede himself led an undramatic life. From the extant sources concerning this most important Anglo-Saxon writer, it is evident that he was a deeply religious, bookish man content to stay within the borders of his own kingdom, and indeed, within the walls of his monastery Jarrow.[34] This picture is culled mostly from autobiographical remarks he made in his Historia and a description of his death written by the abbot Cuthbert, who knew him.

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34 Bede, A History, 18.

The Venerable Bede was born around 673 to parents of unknown lineage, who put him at age seven under the jurisdiction of Benedict Biscop, abbot and founder of the monastery of Wearmouth.[35] Nothing more is known about his early life until the year 685, when, "as tradition commonly held," although sources do not verify by name, Bede was one of two survivors of the Yellow Plague at the monastery of Jarrow, where he remained for the rest of his life. He advanced rapidly up the clerical ladder, becoming a deacon at age 19 and a priest at thirty.[36]

During this time he wrote copiously, producing numerous tracts on grammar, Biblical commentaries, and saints' lives, as well as writing historical works such as the Historia. Besides his scholarship in the humanities, Bede wrote scientific tracts; he popularized the system of dating *anno domini*, "thereby setting a fashion which has become the universal practice of western Christian civilization."[37] George Hardin Brown questions how Bede was able "to generate so great a corpus . . . on topics of nearly every subject in the monastic curriculum?"[38] His conclusion, that Bede was "a quietly productive worker of genius and assiduity," and a scholarly recluse, is shared by most historians.[39] Exactly how much of a recluse Bede was will be

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35 David Hugh Farmer, The Oxford Dictionary of Saints (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 36.

36 Bede, A History, 17.

37 Blair, World of Bede, 268.

38 George Hardin Brown, Bede the Venerable (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 12.

39 Ibid., 13.

discussed later, but his penchants for researching and learning are undisputed.

Though a recluse and a monk, Bede had influential acquaintances in the political and religious European world. He dedicated the Historia to the Northumbrian King Ceowulf, for instance, and his contact with Albinus, the Abbot of Canterbury both encouraged his work and supplanted it with records from Rome.[40] Bede also was acquainted with the elite in the Northumbrian church who set the groundwork for the supremacy of Roman Catholic church structure in England, men such as Saint Wilfrid, with whom Northumbrian kings constantly quarreled. Wilfrid's disruptive behavior caused Northumbria so many problems that it might have been a factor in the composition of the Historia.[41]

Bede pursued his "chief delight . . . in study, teaching, and writing" until his death in 735.[42] The details of his death are known through a letter written by a friend of his, and they reveal much about the values of this scholar. The letter's author repeatedly remarks on Bede's perseverance in scholarship and teaching until his very end. Bede died "upon the floor of his cell, singing 'Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,' and . . . he breathed his last."[43]

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40 Bede, A History, 34.

41 Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History, 325.

42 Bede, A History, 336.

43 Ibid., 20.

Nechtanesmere and political decline in Northumbria

Historians have often ignored the fact that political turmoil existed in Northumbria both before and during Bede's writing. They point out that Bede composed while his homeland was still the dominating land in England, and presume that this was Bede's attitude when he composed the Historia.[44] However, the rival kingdom of Mercia had been gaining power for some time, while Northumbria itself had taken some harsh blows because of disruption in the royal line.[45] The fact that Bede thought a crisis existed was shown by his deep concern reflected in the Historia.

Eighth-century Northumbria has been described as being an "alter orbis," *another world*, a location both politically and culturally distant from the rest of Western Europe.[46] Yet from another point of view this kingdom was the cultural and political Mecca of England.[47] Illustrative of this is the ruler Edwin (d. 632) whom Bede glorifies. During a violent age, Edwin kept such an orderly rule that "a woman could carry her new-born babe across the island from sea to sea without any fear of harm."[48] The reign of King Edwin marked the

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44 Ibid., 23.

45 Blair, The World of Bede, 36.

46 Peter Hunter Blair, Anglo-Saxon Northumbria (London: Vatiorum Reprints, 1984), 198.

47 Campbell, The Anglo-Saxons, 72.

48 Bede, A History, 132.

gee of Northumbrian political power. Throughout the Historia, vin is constantly portrayed as a powerful Christian king -- for e, these were the golden years of Northumbrian power. By the e he finished the Historia in 731, the political situation had nged to his sadness.

Despite the fact that the twentieth-century historian Peter Blair written that Bede's Historia "ends on a hopeful note," with the es "peaceful and prosperous," in fact the turning point of political remacy in Northumbria had been reached in 684.[49] In that year Northumbrian king Ecgfrith was killed in the Battle of chtanesmere, and from that time on the rival kingdom Mercia ned power.[50] Coupled with this was the disruption of the thumbrian kings' familial lineage. Although Walter Goffart makes point that descent in kingship from father to son was more the eption than the rule, the Northumbrian kings had been successful least in keeping political control within the kings' family.[51] All had changed, and the period between Nechtanesmere and the ting of the Historia saw the continuous overthrow and reinstating the formerly powerful house of Oswiu.[52]

Bede's immediate political situation seemed no better. The gning king of Northumbria, Ceowulf, had been deposed briefly in

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Blair, Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, 239.

D.J.V. Fisher, The Anglo-Saxon Age c. 400 -- 1042. (London: Longman Group ted, 1973), 142.

Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History, 271.

Blair, The World of Bede, 36.

731 (he was forced to "take the tonsure" -- that is, thrown into a monastery).[53] All of this did not escape Bede when he concluded the Historia by writing, "both the outset and the course of Ceowulf's reign were filled with so many grave disturbances that it is quite impossible to know what to write about them or what the outcome will be."[54]

More important than politics for Bede was the state of the church. In church affairs Bede was hesitant to paint as gloomy a picture as he had of the political situation. Half a century earlier the Synod of Whitby had declared that the church in England would follow Rome instead of Ireland. The Synod of Whitby's importance is contested by historians; here it is important not so much in the issues debated council, but rather in the fact that Bede thought they were significant.[55] In any case the debate at the Synod revolved around several points, most importantly whether Northumbria would calculate the date of Easter according to the traditional Celtic manner, or by the Roman Catholic's. Choosing to follow Rome symbolized Northumbria coming more in line with Western Christendom.[56] Most historians agree that Bede was pro-Rome, and therefore took pleasure at the Synod's outcome, giving it a prominent place in the Historia. In contrast, he did not write in the Historia about the

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53 Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History, 242.

54 Bede, A History, 330.

55 Ibid., 23.

56 Sir Frank Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 3rd ed., 124.

corruption he saw in the Northumbrian church of his day. It is known he thought it existed only because of a letter he wrote to a friend in 734.[57] There were other church matters he might have neglected purposely in the Historia. For example, Goffart argues that Bede intentionally played down the role of the bishop Wilfrid because of the scandals surrounding this man.[58]

57 Bede, A History, 347.

58 Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History, 253.

Political Origins of the *Historia*

Bede's political background played an integral role in the writing of the Historia. The historian Peter Hunter Blair states truthfully enough that "Those who ask why Bede wrote the History are likely to reach different answers . . ."[59] Indeed, several opinions regarding this have been argued.

Bede himself gives three reasons for composing the Historia. He writes that "My principal authority and advisor in this work has been the most reverend Abbot Albinus . . ."[60] Albinus gave Bede many of his sources and encouraged him to write.[61] Another factor behind the origin of the Historia is the fact that Bede had a genuine love of learning for its own sake, and needed no pushing to do his research.[62] Finally, Bede makes an important statement that reveals one of his motives for writing in his introduction to the Historia: "For if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good: or if it records evil of wicked men, the devout, religious listener is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful and perverse and to follow what he knows to be good and

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59 Blair, Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, 6.

60 Bede, A History, 33.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 336.

pleasing to God."[63] Thus Bede wrote to present a moral example to his audience.

Blair believes that the latter reason most adequately explains the Historia's composition: "Bede's major purpose in writing this work was to hold up the mirror of the past as a guide to Christian action and morality in the present."[64] He makes a valid point, but the question that arises is, "as a guide for whom?" Bede himself stated that his immediate audience (he was read widely in the Middle Ages) included listeners -- that is, those who could not write, who could have been anyone.[65]

D.J.V. Fisher posits that any moralizing Bede might have made came second to the fact that Bede was primarily interested in scholarship for its own sake. He writes that "his [Bede's] purpose was clearly defined, to describe the conversion of the English and to give an account of the history of the Church in England. . . . If it sometimes appears that he was concerned principally to demonstrate that a good king and a godly people were rewarded by prosperity and that wickedness as visited by dire retribution, it must be conceded that he taught that lesson with considerable skill."[66]

The problem with these arguments is that neither goes beyond the surface to give an analytical look at how political events in Bede's day might have influenced him. They do not address the problems

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63 Ibid., 33.

64 Blair, Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, 7.

65 Bede, A History, 35.

66 Fisher, The Anglo-Saxon Age, 158.

that Bede perceived in Northumbria. To see a direct cause between political events and Bede's writing would be mere conjecture, because of a lack of sources, but an answer can be approached.

One of the only historians to interpret the Historia in a strictly historical context is Walter Goffart. Much of his argument has faults, but he does make some interesting points. His thesis is that "It was the ecclesiastical politics of Bede's contemporary opponents which gave him cause to write. They were the followers of the now dead Bishop Wilfrid of York."[67] Wilfrid, the bishop who was the source of so many problems in Bede's Northumbria, had died in 709. Through his followers, however, his political intentions lived.[68] Wilfrid had been one of the most staunch supporters of the Roman contingent during the Synod of Whitby. Both the Historia and another source, the eighth-century Life of Wilfrid, state that he played a prominent role as the Roman apologist at the Synod. Goffart states that, despite the fact that Wilfrid succeeded in his goal to align the English church with Rome, there remained forces against him a half-century later.[69] Bede, Goffart argues, was an anti-Wilfridian and wrote the Historia as a specific response to the Life of Wilfrid in order to prevent the Wilfrid supporters from their upcoming plan. The supposed plot hinged on the fact that York, an important ecclesiastical center, was made a bishopric during Bede's lifetime. Wilfrid's followers wanted

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67 R.A. Gerberding, book review, Speculum 65 (July 1990): 67.

68 Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History, 326.

69 Ibid.

it to be structured along Roman lines, instead of Celtic. Bede was against this Roman structure, Goffart argues.[70]

Goffart's argument has many problems. His weakest point is that Bede took the opposing side of the Roman supporters, that is, the pro-Celtic side, during the Synod. It fits Goffart's argument that Bede would be anti-Roman, since that would mean that the motive for the Historia could be directly traced to the organizing of the bishopric of York.[71] But it goes against the overwhelming evidence in existence that presents Bede as pro-Roman. In the Historia, Bede constantly refers to the errors of the Celtic Christians.[72] Sources outside the Historia show Bede to be pro-Roman as well. He was, as has been mentioned, friends with Abbot Albinus, a well-known pro-Roman, proven by the fact that he was a comrade of the most staunch Roman proponent of Christianity in Britain. This was Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been sent by the Pope himself.[73]

Goffart, then, does not prove that Bede was writing in order to promote the Celtic interest in organizing the bishopric of York. However, his theory that Bede was opposed to Wilfrid is a firm possibility, and a highly relevant one, since it would establish that Bede was interested in Northumbrian politics. Not only Goffart, but other historians have stated that Bede purposely slighted Wilfrid in

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70 Ibid., 327.

71 Ibid.

72 Blair, The World of Bede, 25.

73 _____, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (trans. and ed. by G.N. Garmonsway [Cincinatti: Guernsey Press Company, Limited, 1953],) 35.

the Historia. Stenton states that "Bede, who was in sympathy with most of Wilfrid's ideals, treats him with a curious detachment . . .,"[74] and Mayr-Harting mentions "The discreet silences of Bede [regarding Wilfrid] . . . ."[75]

Other reasons as well show Bede was prejudiced against Wilfrid besides historians' arguments that Bede played down Wilfrid's importance. First, the epitaph in Bede's Historia shows that Bede did not hesitate to record the strife of Wilfrid's life: "In his long life he weathered many storms,/ Discords at home and perils overseas."[76] Second, if the Life of Wilfrid is compared to Bede's Historia, it is evident that there is a discrepancy in the account's portrayl of Wilfrid's behavior at the Synod. When Wilfrid gave his rebuttal to the proponents of Celtic Christianity, Bede stated that Wilfrid offended the Celtic apologists: "In reply to this statement, Colman [the Celtic speaker] answered: 'It is strange that you call us stupid . . .'"[77] Wilfrid is left to dig himself out of a hole. This does not happen in the Life of Wilfrid. Of Wilfrid's argument, the author instead states that "His speech was, as usual, humble."[78] Whether this is the Life's attempt to glorify its subject or Bede's attempt to humble

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74 Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 145.

75 Mayr-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England, 129.

76 Bede, A History, 313.

77 Ibid., 189.

78 Eddius Stephanus, The Life of Wilfrid (trans. J.F. Webb and ed. by D.H. Farmer in The Age of Bede [London: Penguin Books, 1988]), 115.

Wilfrid's memory, it is clear that Bede presents Wilfrid as a controversial figure who generated much opposition.

Why did Bede not like Wilfrid? Goffart mentions that one reason might have been that Bede harbored a grudge against the bishop for not speaking in defense of Bede when he was accused of heresy.[79] More important than personal biases against the man, however, is the fact that Wilfrid was a social blunderer, a strongly opinionated upstart. In his lifetime he managed to be exiled from his native Northumbria twice, incur the displeasure of several Northumbrian kings (especially King Egfrid, whose wife Wilfrid convinced to preserve her virginity and join a convent!), and quarrel with his alleged Roman-supporting colleague, Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury.[80] It has already been demonstrated how Bede wrote about Wilfrid's penchant for making faux pas during the Synod of Whitby. It is more likely for Wilfrid's unruly disruption to of Northumbrian order, and not any ideological conflict, that Bede disapproved of the bishop.

Bede opposed anyone who threatened Northumbria's political stability, and Wilfrid certainly did this. On top of the internal political problems Wilfrid caused, it is known that he went to Rome to convince the pope of the wrong Northumbrian kings had done to him, and that he spent a long time during his exiles in the kingdom of Mercia, Northumbria's rival.[81] Clearly, Northumbria's political

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79 Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History, 322.

80 Bede, A History, 238. D.P. Kerby, The Earliest English Kings (Cambridge: The University Press, 1991), 144.

81 Farmer, The Oxford Dictionary of Saints, 436.

prosperity was not one of Wilfrid's concerns. Just as clear is the fact that it was one of Bede's. This author was not a political recluse; he knew too many important people and, as the analysis of Bede's dislike of Wilfrid shows, felt too strongly on political issues to be one. Rather, he wrote the Historia, at least in part, in response to the political situation of his day. Dedicated to King Ceowulf, the Historia was designed not just for hermit-like monks, but for important Northumbrian political leaders as well. It showed them what a good Northumbria was like -- the Northumbria under Edwin -- and let them draw their own comparisons between that and the land they governed. Blair was correct then, in stating that Bede wrote the Historia as a moral guide. What he did not realize is that the "moral guidance" Bede preached was a specific reaction against the immediate political problems of the eighth century.

The Twelfth-Century

Histories of England were not composed for four hundred years after the Historia; there were chronicles, saints' biographies, and other written records, but nothing of the style and caliber of Bede's work. Then, in the early twelfth century, a deluge began. Amidst the growing culture of the Twelfth-century Renaissance, English medieval scholars composed works that were consciously styled upon Bede's Historia, though with a more secular focus. Bede's work provided the new writers not only with material, but also with an identity. Both Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury were Anglo-Norman authors, as were many of the twelfth-century historians. They lived in a land of two peoples, governed as one. Their new place in society might have made them interested in establishing a past to which they belonged and could take pride. For this reason they turned to Bede as their main source of information through the year 731, and tied the Historia to events leading through the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 up to their own day. Henry and William focused on different issues, but both had characteristics common to the twelfth century.[82]

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82 For the last years of Anglo-Saxon rule in England, see Frank Barlow, Edward the Confessor (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 288.

Hastings 1066

Several major events had shaken the world of these twelfth-century scholars, events that created a unique situation in England on which they could comment. Before this paper looks at how the twelfth-century historians expressed their judgment about the political situation in England, it is necessary to summarize the issues which most influenced them.

Just as the Battle of Nechtanesmere had an indirect but important effect on Bede's writing, so too was the writing of the twelfth-century scholars shaped by the Battle of Hastings. In 1066 the Norman king, William the Conqueror, successfully defeated the last Anglo-Saxon monarch. While the confrontation itself was not of immediate concern to the twelfth-century historians, it profoundly influenced their outlook.[83] Yet it did so in a different way than one might expect. Because the most obvious consequence of Hastings was that the Normans now held the political power in England, it would seem likely that medieval writers of the early next century would take sides with either the conquerors or the defeated. The Anglo-Saxons, after all, did respond negatively to having their political status decreased in the early decades after the Conquest.[84] Saxon-Norman rivalry took a long while before it was fully diminished.

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83 See R. Allen Brown, ed., The Norman Conquest: Documents of Medieval History Five (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Limited, 1984).

84 _____, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 200.

By the time the twelfth-century historians wrote, however, they were able to keep an objective eye of the Conquest not only because they were of both Anglo-Saxon and Norman heritage, but also because time had distanced them from the issue. Therefore Henry of Huntingdon never disputed the legitimacy of the Conqueror's invasion in 1066, and saved his criticism for specific kings rather than Norman rule in general.[85] William of Malmesbury expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote in his preface to Book III of the Gesta Regum Anglorum, "For my part, as the blood of either people flows in my veins, I shall steer a middle course [when talking about the Norman rule in England]."[86] Therefore, while Anglo-Norman conflict still prevailed in England, the historians just a few decades later were surprisingly able to disassociate themselves from it. For them, the Norman Conquest had significance because it provided them with their Anglo-Norman heritage, which has already been mentioned as a reason for the histories' composition.[87] The Conquest also marked the beginning of a long line of Norman rulers, which constituted the main subject of the histories.

Three Norman kings that followed the Conqueror were William Rufus, Henry I, and Stephen. The twelfth-century histories, describing the policies and personalities of these three rulers, depict a chaotic political situation. William Rufus governed England after

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85 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 26.

86 William of Malmesbury, History of the Kings of England, trans. by Rev. John Sharpe (London: Longman, 1815), 493.

87 Gransden, Historical Writing in England, 151, 167.

his father's death in 1087 until he was killed during a hunting accident in 1100. Although Frank Barlow writes that Rufus was less violent than the Conqueror, and equally good at administration, most sources from William II's reign disapprove of him.[88] Henry and William also disliked Rufus. The most important fault these medieval historians found with this king was his troubled relations with the church. Barlow calls Rufus "irreligious" and even "anti-clerical" since the monarch took money from the tithes paid to empty bishoprics and royal abbeys.[89] Naturally, Henry and William as clerks could not forgive this poor treatment of the church and therefore have few kind words to say about his reign.[90]

The estimation of Henry I's rule was higher than his predecessor Rufus' in the eyes of the twelfth-century historians. During Henry I's reign a wave of church reform was instituted in England. This Gregorian reform, as it was called, did not always benefit the medieval historians. Nevertheless, their opinion of Henry I was high, mainly because his reign marked a time of relative peace and political stability in England, especially compared to his successor, King Stephen's reign.[91]

Nearly everything about King Stephen irked the twelfth-century historians. Despite the fact that he had the support of many

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88 Frank Barlow, The Feudal Kingdom of England: 1042 - 1216, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1988), 147.

89 Ibid., 149.

90 Ibid., 155.

91 See below, 41.

English nobles and the church (at the start of his reign), he could not prevent his kingdom from falling into a violent civil war which was a dominating event on the medieval writers. It is still debated whether Stephen's rule was a failure because of his personal leadership flaws or the haphazard political situation he inherited.[92] There was not complete chaos in England during his rule, (1135 to 1153); Stephen tried to carry on royal administration (this however was difficult considering that in 1139 he had forced Henry I's justiciar, the person in charge of all bureaucratic organization, to resign), and there was relatively little fighting in the south of England, but the disruption in royal legal administration and the violence of the civil war were felt by all.[93] Therefore the twelfth-century historians held an unforgiving attitude towards Stephen, which was readily apparent in their books.[94]

Henry and William's evaluations of the kings depended on how much they benefited or disadvantaged the writers. This is impossible to understand from their histories alone, without an understanding of the authors' personal biases. As this paper did with Bede, it will examine some "behind the scenes" perspectives of Henry and William to more fully understand their reasons for writing.

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92 For the most recent status on the debate, see W.L. Warren, The Governance of Norman and Angevin England (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987)

93 H.W.C. Davis, ed., Regesta Regum Anglo-Normanorum: 1066 - 1154, v. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1830), ix.

94 For Henry, see below, 42. For William, see below, 47.

Henry of Huntingdon

Henry of Huntingdon was born between 1080 and 1090, most likely a native of Lincolnshire. His father was an ecclesiastical man, and probably held the office of archdeacon in Lincolnshire that his son eventually inherited.[95] Technically, Henry was illegitimate, since the Roman Catholic church forbade clergymen from marrying, but as ecclesiastical marriages were a common practice in England at the time, Henry suffered no harmful ramifications from it.[96] Yet later he had to defend his parentage, as a church reform movement in England put pressure of clerks to refrain from marriage.[97] This spelled out Henry's illegitimacy, which he of course did not appreciate.

Like Bede, Henry was sent away to study at a young age. He lived with the bishop of Lincoln Robert Bloet, whom Henry thought "excelled other men in grace of person, in serenity of temper, and in courtesy of speech."[98] Under Robert's supervision, Henry was able to pursue his studies, enjoy the opulence of the bishop's household, and eventually receive an ecclesiastical position. Robert died in 1123, but the next bishop of Lincoln, Alexander of Blois, took his place as

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95 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 1.

96 Ibid., editor's notes, viii.

97 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 41.

98 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 224.

Henry's patron. It was to Bishop Alexander that Henry dedicated his Historia Anglorum, probably starting this work after 1124.[99] He originally wrote it as a narrative in seven books, "from the time of Julius Caesar down to the year 1129," but Henry continued adding onto, and changing, it until his death.[100] There were actually five points at which he might have intended to end the historical narrative: the years 1129, 1138, 1147, 1148, and 1154.[101] Each time Henry resumed his work, the changing political situation in England altered his viewpoint.

A number of stylistic traits made Henry's Historia Anglorum uniquely his own, even though Bishop Alexander instructed him to imitate Bede as much as possible, at least up to the year 731.[102] Bede's Historia has a broken narrative, interrupting his story to relay accounts of miracles. Yet Henry's rendition of the work flows more smoothly, and since he removed most of Bede's miracle stories. This editing job was intentionally done, and provides an interesting statement of what Henry regarded historically accurate. Saint's lives, which contained miraculous tales of divine intervention, fell into a different genre. Their purpose was different from that of a history. This distinction of the various genres was new to the twelfth century, and a typical characteristic of this period's renaissance.[103]

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99 Diana E. Greenway, "Henry of Huntingdon and the Manuscripts of his Historia Anglorum," Anglo-Norman Studies IX (New Hamshire: the Boydell Press, 1987), 107.

100 Ibid., 106.

101 Ibid.

102 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 22.

103 Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, 275.

Two other characteristics of Henry's writing that depict both his style as well the twelfth century are his love of classics and his penchant for complaining.[104] The first surfaces in Henry's rendition of the Historia, which quotes more Roman, and even Greek, authors than Bede did. Henry's prologue begins with a statement of the importance of history. "For where is exhibited on a more lively manner the grandeur of heroic men . . . than in the series of actions which history records?"[105] He then goes on to describe a long list of characters from the Odyssey. This reference to such a secular work might not have been made in early medieval Europe, and again shows the more worldly outlook of the Twelfth-century Renaissance. The second characteristic is Henry's tendency to bemoan the state of the world. In many instances of the Historia Anglorum Henry remarks on the ephemeral nature of temporal pleasures. While Henry was unusual in the extent to which he protested the sinfulness of his surroundings, he was not the only historian displeased with the state of politics in England.[106] In fact, none of the twelfth-century historians were entirely pleased with their political situation, a fact that surfaces in their books.

Political Origins of the *Historia Anglorum*

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104 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 30.

105 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, xxvi.

106 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 30.

Henry of Huntingdon had many motives for writing his Historia Anglorum. The general trend of composing histories during the Twelfth-century Renaissance no doubt had some influence on him, just as did the fact that there were a few Anglo-Normans conducting research out of an interest in understanding their new place in society. Yet cultural trends did not make up the whole picture; the political situation in England also heavily contributed to Henry's writing. As with Bede, a government undergoing turbulence exercised a large influence on the creation of this history.

For all his efforts to tell an "unbiased" story of English history, as demonstrated by his refusal to take sides on the issue of the Norman conquest, Henry still made judgements on the quality of the Norman kings' rule.[107] By closely examining some of Henry's biases, the political reasons for the writing of his history can be seen. Henry's prejudices are easily appertained in the Historia Anglorum. For example, his dislike of William Rufus is obvious throughout the book. After the Conqueror's son took the throne in 1087, "the Almighty alienated both favor and rank from the English nation."[108] Henry also blames Rufus for burdening "his English [that is, Anglo-Saxon] subjects [with] . . . "the most infamous taxes and exactions," to satisfy "the rapacity which the king's household exercised in the royal progresses, like an invading army."[109] These taxes truthfully

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107 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 26.

108 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 222.

109 Ibid., 237, 238.

might have been excessive. However, the charged language Henry uses, and his blanket statement that explains the expenses of war as unnecessary, without even an attempt to qualify his thoughts, illustrates his bias against the ruler. After all, Rufus did have to prepare himself for a possible war with his brother Robert, who appeared all too eager to claim the English throne.[110]

Some of the reasons behind Henry's contempt of Rufus cannot be found by reading his history straight through. It is not until one realizes that Rufus destroyed the finances of Henry's esteemed patron, Robert Bloet, that the full picture of the scholar's antipathy towards Rufus comes into view. In a scandalous affair, Rufus stated that his chancellor Bloet was guilty of simony, or illegally purchasing a church office: in this case the bishopric of Lincoln. The king made this charge after he himself had given the bishopric to Bloet. The chancellor had to pay "5,000l. to secure the liberties of his church."[111] Obviously, after the man who had raised Henry in his own family, suffered such a blow from William II, Henry of Huntingdon would not have taken a kind view of this monarch.[112]

This illustration exemplifies well how Henry's personal biases are apparent only from a close examination of his Historia Anglorum. Henry's most significant political opinion, one that also needs digging to fully understand, is the extent to which he deplored the reign of

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110 Frank Barlow, William Rufus (California: University of California Press, 1983), 282.

111 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 225.

112 Ibid., 224.

King Stephen. Stephen was one of the least liked kings of medieval England, and Henry's estimation of him fell in line with the majority of medieval writers.[113] Henry depicts Stephen as a cunning backstabber who claimed to English throne illegitimately, writing, "for in all haste came Stephen, a resolute and audacious man, who, disregarding his oath of feality to King Henry's daughter, tempted God by seizing the crown of England with all the boldness and effrontry belonging to his character."[114] There are many more examples of Henry's work that overtly show his animosity towards Stephen, yet one demonstrates the fact.

Of course, Stephen was not an archetypical ruler. Yet, Henry's dislike of the king extended deeper than some of his contemporaries. If it were not for an anonymous writer's Acts of King Stephen, the monarch might well seem to be as evil as Henry claims.[115] Yet the unknown author portrays Stephen so differently that it must be recognized that views other than Henry's existed. For instance, Henry gives a polemic about how illegal the accession of Stephen to the throne was. He is silent, however, about "the debates which took place among the great ecclesiastics respecting the validity of Stephen's pretensions and the propriety of crowning him," which the Acts of King Stephen records.[116]

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113 M.T. Clanchy, England and Its Rulers: 1066 - 1272 (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), 119.

114 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 262.

115 Gransden, Historical Writing in Medieval England, 189.

116 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 262.

In the Historia Anglorum, Stephen's irascibility exists, as it did with Rufus, in part because of Henry's personal biases. Nancy Partner points out that, "Stephen had, after all, been violently harsh to Henry's bishop and patron, Alexander of Lincoln, and to Alexander's uncle, Roger of Salisbury. Their arrest is described as an unprovoked act of shameless profession . . . ."[117] The maltreatment of Henry's supporters goes far to explain the reason that Henry's antipathy towards Stephen was rooted so deeply. Yet the drastic methods that Henry took in order to portray this "nefarious king" suggest a more penetrating reason for Henry's dislike of Stephen: the historian's opinion of Stephen was actually so low that, after this ruler made such a wretched impression on the historian, Henry returned to earlier editions of his book and altered his opinion of King Henry I, to make the old king seem a better ruler in comparison.[118]

Henry of Huntingdon had viewed King Henry as a violent man, unrestrained in his greed for money. In his summation of the monarch's character, the historian wrote in an early edition of his book, that:

> Others, however, taking a different view, attributed to him three gross vices: avarice, as though his wealth was great, in imitation of his progenitors he impoverished the people by taxes and exactions . . . cruelty, in that he plucked out the eyes of his kinsman, the Earl of Morton, in his captivity . . .

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117 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 27; Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 265, 266.

118 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 113 (however, this idea runs throughout her article).

> and wontonness, for, like Solomon, he was perpetually enslaved by female seductions.[119]

Henry of Huntingdon's main quibble with this king had been that under his auspices, the Gregorian reform councils were held. Their decrees "were specifically aimed at abolishing clerical benefices."[120] As the son of a clergyman who had inherited the archdeaconry of Lincoln, the historian from Huntingdon was against this reform.

Yet, as Henry himself states, in lieu of hindsight, King Henry was a much more preferable ruler than Stephen. "But in the troublesome times which succeeded from the atrocities of the Normans, whatever King Henry had done, either despotically, or in the regular exercise of his royal authority, appeared in comparison most excellent."[121] For this reason, the scholar returned to the earlier editions of his book to upgrade his account of King Henry. For instance, Henry altered the above quote that commented on the monarch's vices to read the following:

> For their poisoned minds led them to humiliate him, [and they alleged that his extreme avarice induced him to oppress the people with taxes and exactions, entangling them in the toils of informers.] But those who asserted . . . that although his character was such that it struck terror into all his neighbors, yet this very affluence contributed, in no small degree, to make him formidable to his enemies . . ."[122]

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119 Ibid., 262.

120 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 41.

121 Henry of Huntingdon, The Chronicle, 262.

122 Ibid., 261; The brackets are not mine, but the editor's, who includes this altered translation in his notes.

Instead of Henry being insinuated as a flawed monarch, the new quote blames his critics for having "poisoned minds."

What qualities did King Henry possesses that made him a better leader than Stephen? In Henry of Huntingdon's mind, it was because the reign of King Henry heralded a time of political stability in England. The rule might have been harsh, but it kept the overall level of violence minimal. Compared with the long period of anarchy in Stephen's reign, it was a golden age.

It is evident that Henry of Huntingdon thought along these lines because political stability is one of the highest virtues within the Historia Anglorum. This can be seen, for example, in Henry's discussion of early medieval England, which he intended to have been a rendition of Bede's Historia. Instead, he introduces a long section about various Roman kings that was not in Bede's work. Henry evaluates whether they were "good" monarches by examining how peacefully they ruled, and sometimes arrives at some interesting conclusions. For instance, he gives a panegyric on Emperor Hadrian, calling him "a great prince of moderation," and praises other Romans in the same manner, so that Caesar Augustus, Trajan, Constantine, and even Theodosius are admired for their temperance in war, even though in actuality they were some of the most bellicose Roman rulers to have ever existed.[123]

Henry of Huntingdon's preface is revealing. In addressing his audience, he writes, "History brings the past into view, as if it were

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[123] Ibid., 22, 17, 21, 29, 31.

present, and enables us to judge of the future by picturing to ourselves the past."[124] This statement illustrates what he viewed as one of the purposes for writing his history: a guide to judging one's present political situation. By telling the history of England, Henry was able to point to problems that he considered important. Thus, it is possible to understand his troubles with King William Rufus, and even his distaste for the Gregorian reforms. The most important comment that Henry presents, however, has to do with the troublesome reign of King Stephen. He found it horrible because it was so chaotic. Why else would he take such strong measures as performing a massive editing job to make King Henry I, a stern but orderly monarch, appear better in comparison? Henry of Huntingdon's worries about a violent regime surface both in how he praises rulers who avoid a violent situation, and condemns those who do not. Reaction against a political turbulence was thus one of the driving forces behind the composition of the Historia Anglorum.

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124 Ibid., xxvii.

William of Malmesbury

William of Malmesbury, a contemporary of Henry of Huntingdon, was another twelfth-century historian who drew heavily upon Bede in his writings. Although he was one of the most prolific writers of his day, modern historians know almost nothing about the details of his life.[125] Yet enough is known about him to argue that his writings still reflect his political and cultural environment. His attempts to write an "objective" history, his careful recording of as many sources as possible, and even his use of pagan and other classical works are trademarks of the Twelfth-century Renaissance.[126] Like Henry, William also had many worried opinions about England's political situation.

Also similar to Henry, William drew heavily upon Bede, not only for information to use in his Gesta Regum Anglorum (the History of the Kings of England), but also for his style. As Rodney Thomson remarks, William's "career, intellectual interests and writings were consciously modeled upon the examples of Bede and Aldhelm [an Anglo-Saxon clerk who founded the monastery of Malmesbury]."[127] Born in Wiltshire (southwest England) about 1095, William of

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125 Thomson, William of Malmesbury, vii.

126 Ibid., 10.

127 Ibid., 94.

Malmesbury was the son of mixed lineage. Thomson postulates that his father was the one of Norman stock, and his mother of Anglo-Saxon, but there is no way of verifying this.[128] His career is typical of the men we have so far studied. At adolescence William was placed in the monastery of Malmesbury.

There he pursued interests such as logic, ethics, and history. He states that he attempted to read anything he could get hold of: "I carried out my researches as long as I could find anything to read."[129] This search was not limited to William's own monastery, but entailed extensive research all over the kingdom. Cambridge and Glastonbury were his most important sources for information.[130] Apparently William's ambitions ended in the realm of scholarly activity, for while he did gain the office of precentor at his abbey (which probably included library duties, a good reason in his eyes to accept the position), he refused an offer for the abbacy of Malmesbury in 1140.[131] Thomson sums up William's outlook on life aptly when he states that "William was, like Bede before him, a man without career-ambition or achievement."[132]

Despite the fact that William was a pedagogue, he still took an interest in his political surroundings. Like Henry, he recorded his

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128 Thomson, 2.

129 Joseph Stephenson, trans. and ed., Contemporary Chronicles of the Middle Ages (Dyfed: Llanerch Enterprises, 1988), 7.

130 Thomson, William of Malmesbury, 3.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

opinions in two of his histories. The Gesta Regum, which was completed about 1120, was most famous for William's treatment of the period in English history from the death of Bede to the Norman Conquest, a time hitherto fairly unexplored by English historians.[133] In the Historia Novella, William also included the politics of his own day, and like Henry he found them far from ideal.

Political Origins of the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and the *Historia Novella*

As with the other medieval histories, William of Malmesbury's writings were not created for any one cause. Influences from the Twelfth-century Renaissance appear more clearly in his work than in any other's in England. His admiration for Classical culture was joined with a live of research and his conscious attempt to model himself after Bede.[134] Yet as with the other histories written during the English Renaissances, the Gesta Regum Anglorum, and its sequel, the Historia Novella, were partly inspired by the political situation of the day.

In his introduction to the Gesta Regum, William himself establishes one of his reasons for writing. He states, "history, which, by a certain example, excites its readers, by example, to frame their

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133 Ibid., 15.

134 William of Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, Rolls Series 52 (Wiesbaden: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1964), 330.

lives to the pursuit of good, or to aversion from evil . . . ."[135] As Bede had, William described his work as a moral guideline. Rodney Thomson, however, argues that most of William's readers were fellow clergymen and many of his works did not spread much farther than his abbey. In his opinion, the William's idea of history as a moral guideline was only inserted to imitate other histories, such as Bede's. Therefore, William probably did not have the welfare of the English peoples' morality as a reason for writing his histories.[136] What Thomson neglects to consider is the fact that at least one very important non-clergyman, William's patron, Robert earl of Gloucester, read his histories. To some extent, then, the historian did gear his work towards a political audience. A further examination of William's contempt towards Stephen and attribution to this monarch the chaos in England during his rule will demonstrate that, just as Bede had, William wrote his paradigm as a response to his immediate political situation. In William's case, the circumstance was the disorganized reign of King Stephen.

William detested this ruler as much as his peer, Henry of Huntingdon, did. He denounced the monarch throughout his work in several different manners. For instance, he indicated how terrible the reign of Stephen would be by emphasizing the bishop of Salisbury's trepidation at attending an ecclesiastical council that discussed the legitimacy of Stephen's monarchy, "thus did his mind

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135 William of Malmesbury, History of the Kings of England, 498.

136 Thomson, William of Malmesbury, 27.

[the bishop's] forbode future evils."[137] William described Stephen's accession to the throne in colorful and negative language, "in the year, 1139, the venom of malice, which had long been nurtured in the breast of Stephen, at last openly burst forth."[138] Finally, the author attributes a thunderstorm to divine providence when Stephen arrived in England, an evil omen of the reign to follow. "Moreover, it is well known, that, on the day which Stephen disembarked in England, there was very early in the morning, contrary to the nature of winter in these countries, a terrible peal of thunder, with most dreadful lightning, so that the world seemed well-nigh about to be dissolved."[139]

In William's opinion, Stephen bore the responsibility for the anarchy in England during his reign. The author describes this lawlessness, blaming Stephen for causing the English Church problems:

> Under him, therefore, the treasures of several churches were pillaged, their landed possessions given to laymen; the churches of the clergy were sold to foreigners; the bishops made captive, or forced to alienate their property; the abbeys given to improper persons, either through the influence of friendship, or for the discharge of debts.[140]

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137 William of Malmesbury, History of the Kings of England, 569.

138 Ibid., 568.

139 Ibid., 559.

140 Ibid., 564.

William relates the disruptions that Stephen's rule prompted, discussing how power-hungry individuals rushed to take advantage of the king. "For many persons," he writes, "emboldened to illegal acts, either by nobility of descent or by ambition, or rather, by unbridled heat of youth, were not ashamed, some to demand castles, others estates, and indeed whatever came into their fancy, from the king."[141]

Although it is rare to find sources that approved of Stephen's character, the malice William directs at the ruler is beyond that of an impartial bystander. William's writings, like Henry's show that the author had personal reasons for disdaining the monarch. William's patron and the man to whom he dedicated both the Gesta Regum and the Historia Novella was Robert earl of Gloucester, one of Henry I's illegitimate sons and Stephen's most virulent opponents.[142] Before Henry I died, he demanded that his nobles pledge their allegiance to his daughter Matilda. Stephen made this oath, yet, as William describes in great detail, broke it upon Henry's demise and proclaimed himself king. Within a few years, Robert, assumed his sister's cause and renounced his fealty to the ruler. William recounts how Stephen "deprived him [Robert], as far as he was able, of all his possessions in England, and leveled some of his castles to the ground."[143] In a heroic light William depicts his patron's struggle

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141 Ibid., 565.

142 Ibid., 1, 547.

143 Ibid., 567.

against the evil monarch, during which time England "was embittered by the horrors of war."[144]

It would be simplistic to suggest that William's disparaging comments about Stephen were only made because Robert was William's overseer. William himself was aware that some might assume that his writings were determined by Robert's patronage, writing in his conclusion to the Gesta Regum:

> Let no one, therefore, suspect me of adulation, if I relate these matters [Robert's heroism]: for I shall make no sacrifice to favour; but pure historical truth, without any stain of falsehood, shall be handed down to the knowledge of posterity.[145]

A claim can just as equally be made that William put himself under Robert's patronage because he agreed with the earl's stance against Stephen, and not *vice versa*. In any case, if William had not been predisposed against the man before he was commissioned to write the histories, after Stephen caused Robert so much trouble it was virtually inevitable that the author would feel a personal contempt towards Stephen.

William prefaces the Historia Novella by suggesting to his patron that the greatest purpose of recording history is "to recognize the Divine favor towards good men, and his vengeance upon the wicked."[146] This statement most appropriately demonstrates that in

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144 Ibid., 576, 586; the quote is from 581.

145 Ibid., 600.

146 Ibid., 547.

William's opinion, King Stephen was responsible for the political chaos of his reign. There is little doubt that the "good" man he refers to is Robert and the "bad" Stephen. William was both emotionally and financially bound to his patron. Because of this, when Stephen angered Robert, the historian found good reason to condemn the king, and blamed him for the political disorder in England. Thus, Thomson was incorrect, not only in his assumption that William's histories were read only by detached clerks, but also in his suggestion that William did not really intend his history to be interpreted as a "moral paradigm." It truly was an example for upright behavior, a guide for "Princes," as he put it. The model clearly depicted what side of the civil war in Stephen's reign was evil and which was good, and wise readers would realize the difference and make their allegiance to Earl Robert.

Conclusion

Renaissances in medieval England have been characterized in many ways. The great cathedrals, vernacular literature, and extensive amount of historical writing have all been pointed to by historians as "proofs" of a renaissance's existence. The awesomeness of the medieval remains truly do reveal a highly sophisticated culture. It is often easy, however, to idealize these periods, and ignore the fact that amidst the grandeur of the medieval renaissances, there could also be distress. Nowhere is this more evident than in the historical writings of England during the cultural flowering of the eighth and twelfth centuries. The characteristic of recording a nation's past is one of the most telling examples of a renaissance. Yet ironically these histories also depict the problems of their age: Bede and his worries over the ecclesiastical situation in Northumbria, Henry and his "contempt of the world" (as he named one of his writings), and William's outrage at the injustice of Stephen's rule, do not indicate a perfectly harmonious era.[147] Of course, political turmoil has always existed; no one could successfully challenge that. What is important about the medieval historians' problems, however, is that the turbulence of their environment very often played a significant role in the creation of their writings.

The political origins of Bede's Historia are the most difficult to interpret: at first appearance it does not even seem as though Bede

147 Partner, Serious Entertainments, 18.

was interested in his political situation at all. It is only after careful searching that his distaste for Wilfrid can be discerned. Yet more important than the fact that Bede did not like Wilfrid is the reason why this was so; one suggestion is that Bede disapproved of the archbishop's disruptive behavior in Northumbria. Bede relating his Historia with the intention of toning down Wilfrid's importance was one way Bede was influenced to write by political turbulence in England.

Henry of Huntingdon also had concerns about his political situation. In his case the problem was the haphazard reign of King Stephen. While Henry did not undertake the writing of the Historia Anglorum solely because of political reasons, the fact that he emphasized his hatred of violent rulers so much -- so that he even altered his opinion of one ruler in order to point out Stephen's flaws -- shows that political turbulence was a potent factor behind the writing of his history.

William of Malmesbury shared the same source of troubles with Henry, Stephen's anarchical regime. William was commissioned to write his histories by Stephen's arch-enemy Robert. Whether the scholar's contempt for Stephen was sincere or not, the creation of the Gesta Regum and the Historia Novella owe their composition to the civil war brought on by Stephen's accession to the throne. For without this disturbance, William might not have been commissioned to compose a book that would paint Robert a hero and Stephen a villain.

While the cultural influences upon historical writing in medieval England should not be de-emphasized, it is important to

recognize other sources of inspiration for the creation of histories. On an individual level, it is readily apparent that each scholar in this paper had political influences behind his writings, and that each of these stemmed out of what the historians perceived as a worrisome political situation. What needs to be done is a larger, more extensive comparison of not only English medieval historians, but also historians throughout medieval renaissances in Europe. By a thorough study of the political origins of medieval histories, a better understanding of medieval historical writing can be gained.

This paper demonstrates much work, thought, and talent. Work, however, on Malmesbury.

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