

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Peter Orton, 'Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 36 (2005), 5-46

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123814&silos_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and *Beowulf*

Peter Orton

This article will re-examine some of the information in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (hereafter *HE*), completed in AD 731,¹ on the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity in the late sixth and seventh centuries. It will concentrate not on the positive promotion and reception of the Christian message, but on the related but (as I shall argue) distinct question of the Anglo-Saxons' detachment from the pagan religion that they had followed for centuries before the missionaries arrived. Bede himself was, of course, far more interested in the embrace of Christianity by the Anglo-Saxons, particularly their kings, than he was in any problems they faced in putting paganism behind them; and although commentators on *HE* are now less willing than they once were to align themselves with Bede's own moral and religious perspective on the conversion,² which clearly had much in common, ideologically speaking, with that of the missionaries whose work he describes, it is bound to be difficult to discover evidence of the counter-attractions of paganism in an ecclesiastical history written by a committed Christian. Bede's lack of interest in the interface between the two religions is not simply a consequence of his personal religious convictions; conversion is supposed, from an orthodox Christian point of view, to entail the recognition that all pagan beliefs and practices are fundamentally misguided. Christian conversion does not afford paganism even the dignity of a serious adversary; it simply reveals its folly. Nevertheless, the information Bede supplies shows that not all Anglo-Saxons saw the adoption of the new religion as automatically cutting off the line of retreat into paganism, or even as necessarily involving its abandonment. Furthermore, if we try to bypass Bede's perspective and look at the conversion, not as the simple enlightenment of benighted heathens, but as a process of social and intellectual interaction between the

missionaries and their 'victims',³ the suspicion soon arises that neither side understood the other's religious position at all well. Part of the reason for this, as we shall see later, is that paganism and Christianity represent two very different kinds of religion, making it difficult for adherents of either to appreciate the attractions of the other. In the final part of this article I shall use the Old English poem *Beowulf* to illustrate some of the difficulties the Anglo-Saxons faced in revising their conception of their own pagan past in the light of their newly-acquired Christian faith.

Conversion and conversion narratives

The recent development of theoretical models of religious conversion has helped to put the analysis of conversion narratives generally on a firm theoretical footing. Lewis R. Rambo's book on conversion draws together much recent work in missiology that has important consequences for current and future missionary activity around the world;⁴ but its value for the study of the conversion of individuals and societies in the past is also considerable. We may begin, in fact, with Rambo's definition of conversion and his identification of its sub-varieties. What all conversions have in common is that they involve a more or less fundamental change in the spiritual orientation of the converted individual or group; but several types of conversion are distinguishable according to the condition of the convert before and after conversion.⁵ The categories defined by Rambo that are most relevant to the present study are 'tradition transition', which involves the exchange of one religion for another, and 'apostasy' (or 'defection'), whereby a convert abandons a religion previously embraced.⁶ It is now increasingly recognized that conversion is rarely a sudden transformation, but more often a protracted process, unpredictable enough in its development to postpone almost indefinitely any certainty about when it has advanced beyond the possibility of defection.⁷ In the case of conversions of the tradition-transition type, with which Bede is mostly concerned, defection to the rejected religion is a potential danger for as long as it is remembered; so if we are to appreciate how, in any given case, one religion succeeded in supplanting another, or why it failed to do so in spite of vigorous missionary efforts, or what factors lay behind apostasies, we need to know as much as possible, not only about the attractions of the new religion for converts, but also about the abandoned one, and the level of conviction and determination with which it was consigned to the past.

The literary legacy of medieval Europe has left us several accounts of the conversion of individuals and groups. Most describe instances of tradition transition: Christianity is embraced in place of paganism. Although few modern readers are able to take such accounts, particularly those in which miracles play a decisive role, as entirely historical, there is no reason to doubt that they contain a kernel of fact. And yet the authors of conversion narratives often omit much information of a kind that the reader requires for a satisfactory sense of how conversion was achieved. For example, there is the problem of the inherently mysterious nature of conversion, and indeed of religious conviction generally: even modern accounts of conversion that concern themselves with this question often struggle to describe the experience with any precision, and their medieval predecessors rarely make the attempt to do so except in the most conventional terms. There are also generic and pragmatic features of conversion narratives that tend to exclude any detailed analysis of the factors that led to the decision to convert, or of the actual process of exchange.⁸ Such narratives, typically written retrospectively by representatives of the adopted religion, are firmly cast as success-stories;⁹ they are not to be expected to dwell on past misconceptions from which the convert has now been freed. Detailed attention, even of a critical kind, to the spiritual orientation that has been replaced is no longer felt to be necessary or appropriate when the time comes for such accounts to be written.

A few of Bede's accounts of conversion are in this mould; but many of them reveal some interest in the circumstances of particular conversions, or even touch on difficulties encountered by the missionaries. According to *HE*, the mission to the Anglo-Saxons began (in 597) with the arrival in Kent of Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory the Great.¹⁰ Augustine converted the Kentish king Æthelberht, and the following century saw the extension of the Roman missionary programme, supported by an independent initiative from Iona in the North, to the rest of Anglo-Saxon England. The Isle of Wight was probably the last kingdom to go Christian in about 686.¹¹ Bede's *HE* is by far our most detailed source of information about this period of Anglo-Saxon history, and it contains, by my count, twenty-six descriptions of the conversion of individuals or groups.¹² Prior to conversion, the Anglo-Saxons were pagan polytheists, so these twenty-six are all descriptions of tradition transition as defined earlier. But Bede does not shrink from recording the struggles of the Anglo-Saxon church to establish itself: in addition to his accounts of conversions, he describes several instances of reversion to paganism, and even a few examples of resistance to what Christianity had to offer. There is, understandably enough, no sign in *HE* of any intellectual or

historical interest on Bede's part in paganism as a religion;¹³ but we are given, in passing, a fair amount of information that contributes to a general idea of how paganism was envisaged by the missionaries. Bede also refers, though much less frequently, to prospective converts' conceptions of themselves as pagans, or to aspects of pagan practice or mentality which have some bearing on our understanding of the conversion process itself as he describes it. These references will be given due attention here, though what we most miss in interpreting them is independent evidence from other sources about Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs and practices. The question of whether or not it is appropriate to use the comparative evidence of Germanic paganism on the continent to compensate for this deficiency in English sources has long been controversial, and it will have to be reopened here.

Apostasies in HE

We may begin with a survey of apostasies in *HE*. These illustrate the rejection of Christianity by people who originally adopted it, and may therefore be expected to give us some idea of the counterattractions of paganism, or the circumstances under which it was able to reassert itself. The instances of reversion described in *HE* vary according to the relative sincerity of the original conversion, or (when kingdoms are involved) of its extent. Some accounts of apostasy in Bede do little more than register its occurrence, without suggesting any explanation for it. Thus the East Angles remained 'in error' (in errore) for three years following the death of their convert-king Eorpwold,¹⁴ but returned to the Christian fold under the influence of Sigeberht, their next Christian king. Earlier, Bede has described Eorpwold as accepting Christianity 'together with his kingdom' (cum sua prouincia);¹⁵ but he also refers to the extensive missionary work that Sigeberht found it necessary to initiate among his subjects when he succeeded, which indicates a high level of national apostasy following Eorpwold's death. We cannot tell if apostasy resulted here from the loss of spiritual leadership invested in the king as an individual, or whether the king's death was itself taken as a symptom of the new God's inadequacies; but Eorpwold's death is clearly regarded by Bede as a significant factor. A second example comes from the north: when King Edwin of Northumbria, a convert, died, his successors, Osric and Eanfrith, ruled Deira and Bernicia respectively. Both had converted, but reverted to paganism when they succeeded.¹⁶ Bede offers no excuse, and does not say anything about whether their subjects followed suit, but his horror at this development is very clearly conveyed.

Bede is seldom explicit about the factors that provoked apostasies, but occasionally we are given a hint of an explanation. When the East Saxon converting Swithhelm died he was succeeded by Sigehere and Sebbi as joint kings.¹⁷ Both were Christian; but Sigehere, along with his subjects in the part of the kingdom he ruled, reverted to paganism, 'as if they could protect themselves by such means from the plague'¹⁸ that was ravaging the kingdom at the time. Both king and kingdom were later reconverted at the instigation of King Wulfhere of Mercia.

Another type of apostasy described by Bede involves the occurrence, following an 'official' conversion of a king and his kingdom, of increased or more open pagan activity by the people under the rule of a new, still-pagan king; and here the extent and depth of the original conversion and subsequent apostasy never emerge very clearly. Perhaps the best-known example is Essex under the successors of King Sæberht, a convert: when Sæberht died, the kingdom was taken over by his three sons, all still pagan, who then felt able to practise their religion more openly than they had when their father was still alive.¹⁹ This is clearly not apostasy: the three brothers had only soft-pedalled their paganism for a time; they had not turned against it. When they succeeded, their subjects followed their example and chose paganism; and although we have been given to understand that the whole kingdom had previously converted under Sæberht,²⁰ the people continued to prefer paganism even after the three brother-kings had been killed in a war against the West Saxons, and Bishop Mellitus, who had converted the kingdom under Sæberht, returned to his London see.²¹ Here we can only conclude that the original conversion of the East Saxons must have been a very superficial affair. A rather different case, in which Bede's version of the story explicitly indicates a somewhat watered-down species of apostasy on the part of the people, is Kent under Eadbald, still unconverted when he succeeded his Christian father Æthelberht: those of his subjects whose previous conversion had been more political than genuine took the opportunity to revert to their traditional practices when Eadbald came to the throne.²²

There are several points of interest among these examples that are relevant to my theme. One is Bede's linking of apostasy to a national crisis in the case of Sigehere of Essex, who reverted to paganism in a time of plague: it is not difficult to understand how national afflictions of this sort might have been blamed on the abandonment of paganism and promoted its revival. The plague here represents one of various types of 'crisis' that Rambo identifies as a trigger of any conversion (including apostasy), whether personal or collective.²³ We should also note Bede's recognition of insincere conversion, as in the case of the people of Kent under

Eadbald: false converts would certainly have been particularly liable to apostatize, though of course having never properly converted in the first place they do not count as true apostates either. A third point may be made on the basis of Bede's accounts of Essex under the three pagan brother-kings and Kent under Eadbald: the conversion of a king did not automatically lead to the conversion of his subjects and followers, even including members of his own immediate family. In Kent, the situation under Eadbald must be viewed in the light of Bede's comment, in his earlier account of the mission to his father Æthelberht, that Augustine had originally emphasised that conversion should be voluntary.²⁴ Later, however, Pope Gregory wrote to Æthelberht urging him to suppress paganism in his kingdom. The insincere converts who reverted under Eadbald may thus have been people put under pressure by Æthelberht to abandon their preferred religion following a period during which they had been encouraged to believe they had a free choice in the matter. In both these cases, Bede's customary emphasis on the spiritual orientation of kings creates the impression that the general apostasy resulted from the new pagan kings' encouragement; but the lifting of the restraint on paganism exercised by the previous Christian king might have been an equally important factor.

In addition to these records of apostasy or semi-apostasy, Bede includes the occasional snippet of information about actual opposition to the Christian faith. In Wessex, Cenwealh, pagan son of the Christian King Cynegisl, was offered conversion, probably on his accession, but refused it.²⁵ We are given no further details. I have already mentioned the case of the convert Swithhelm's successor Sigehere, joint ruler (with Sebbi) of the East Saxons, who apostatized, along with his subjects. Unusually, Bede here adds a brief account of the spiritual orientation of the king and most of his subjects: they 'loved this present life, seeking no other and not even believing in any future existence'.²⁶ This indicates very clearly that the original conversion of the East Saxons had been far from thorough.

The Christian confrontation with paganism

These examples of reversion and resistance to Christianity show, in their different ways, that paganism retained enough attraction for some to cause them to reject the Christian message, occasionally at the first point of contact but more commonly at a later stage. We are given no explanatory details except in the case of Essex under Sigehere; but the foundation of this resistance (though it is never

mentioned by Bede) was probably that Christianity did not constitute a satisfactory substitute for paganism. Religions fall into one of two general categories. Anglo-Saxon paganism was an example of a folk religion, Christianity (like Judaism, Buddhism and Islam) of a world religion. Folk religions generally are 'eclectic and open to outsiders';²⁷ they tend to be polytheistic, worldly, agricultural in emphasis (at least in medieval Europe), and practically orientated. Their adherents use sacrifice or other rituals to influence natural or random processes in their favour, for example to control the weather to maximise crop-yields, or to elicit supernatural support in the pursuit of success in warfare, or wealth, or personal health and emotional fulfilment. Bede's comment on the priorities of King Sigehere and his followers in the East Saxon kingdom, quoted above, is a good illustration of the secular emphasis of folk religions generally. World religions, by contrast, are inclined to reject the fleshly and material concerns of this world and concentrate on the life of the spirit and the world to come. It has been suggested that communities following folk religions are especially vulnerable to missionary enterprises on behalf of world religions: folk religions tend to be strictly local concerns, regarded by the tribe as its business and no-one else's; and because they rarely involve any coherent or dogmatic ideology, they lack the kind of institutional and intellectual vigour needed to counter the missionaries' claims.²⁸ On the other hand, adherents of folk-religions, especially agriculturists, will not lightly abandon their cults, partly because they fear the material consequences of doing so (the crops could fail and they could starve, for example), but also because world religions do not necessarily offer anything to replace them.²⁹ As one scholar has put it in connection with the conversion of the Franks, the Christian God 'intervened at specific times in history', but is 'not a God of the annually recurrent seasons which made up the farmer's calendar'.³⁰

These considerations help to explain both the resistance to Christianity and the various reversions to paganism that Bede describes, especially the apostasies of King Sigehere and his East Saxon subjects, and the indifference to the possibility of salvation that Bede attributes to them; but the case of Sigehere raises some difficult questions about the attitude of kings in particular to the prospect of conversion. It has been argued that Anglo-Saxon kings would have been especially receptive to the Christian message because of the enhanced prestige and power which the missionaries assured them would come with conversion: God was presented to them as the mightiest of political allies, willing and able to reward royal converts with assistance in the defeat of their enemies

and the extension of their realms.³¹ There were also social and political implications for kings in accepting baptism and establishing Christianity as the official religion of the kingdom. The succession of kings in the Bretwaldaship (Æthelberht of Kent, Rædwald of the East Angles, Edwin of Northumbria) was probably bound up with the question of when and from whom a king who either was, or was in line to be, Bretwalda would accept conversion. Decisions may have been influenced by the need to assert power over one's predecessor in the position, or over rival kings, or (in Æthelberht's case) by a desire to assert his political independence of the Franks.³² Thus either conversion or the refusal to convert could be used as assertions of political, social and personal independence. The religious divisions identified earlier between members of the same royal families might also be explained partly on this basis. Perhaps the arrival of the missionaries posed special problems for kings and their families.

Another feature which world-religions do not share with paganism is their exclusiveness:³³ to adopt Christianity is to repudiate all other gods who in the Christian view are not gods at all. They may be condemned as mere fantasies, or as demons, or (when, as always in Bede, idolatry is the target) as lifeless, inert blocks of wood or stone. Bede provides us with some evidence that the polytheistic nature of paganism presented the Christian missionaries with a particular difficulty: the Anglo-Saxons were probably predisposed to treat the Christian God as just another god to be added to the range of pagan gods whom they already venerated—a tendency which has been called 'adhesion'.³⁴ Bede describes how Rædwald, king of the East Angles, fell into adhesion: after his conversion in Kent he returned to his kingdom where his wife and others corrupted his faith to the extent that he maintained both Christian and pagan altars in his temple.³⁵ Paganism, naturally pluralistic,³⁶ could accommodate any variety of gods; and as long as the singularity and the omnipotence of the Christian God were not too scrupulously regarded, it could find room for him. But as Bede makes perfectly clear in his account of Rædwald's error, Christianity was not in a position to reach any kind of compromise with paganism; if kings or anyone else were to become true converts, they had to be persuaded to accept Christianity's exclusiveness. The case of Rædwald shows more clearly even than the apostasies considered earlier that it was not enough for missionaries to describe, or even demonstrate, God's power and hope that the worship of other gods would be rejected and forgotten after baptism. A positive attack on the intellectual basis of paganism was necessary.

The Christian conception of paganism

There are some examples in *HE* of reasoned argument against the worship of pagan gods. The target is invariably idolatry.³⁷ An example of such arguments occurs in Bede's account of the Northumbrian King Oswiu's attempts to persuade Sigebert of the East Saxons to convert. Oswiu tells him that

deos esse non posse, qui hominum manibus facti essent; dei creandi materiam lignum uel lapidem esse non posse, quorum recisurae uel igni absumerentur uel in uasa quaelibet humani usus formarentur uel certe dispectui habita foras proicerentur et pedibus conculcata in terram uerterentur.³⁸

[objects made by the hands of men could not be gods. Neither wood nor stone were materials from which gods could be created, the remnants of which were either burned in the fire or made into vessels for men's use or else cast out as refuse, trodden underfoot and reduced to dust.]

God's home, on the other hand, is in heaven rather than in any worldly substance. This argument is an elaboration of Isaiah 44.15-20,³⁹ which dwells on the absurdity of worshipping a god made from a material, wood, that may also be burnt as fuel. Here, then, is an anti-pagan line to which a pagan king was exposed: idols are man-made; and like all man-made artefacts, they are made from perishable materials, so they cannot be gods. The fact that this argument is brought forward by a king rather than a missionary is noteworthy. So is the fact that Oswiu was a nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria, to whom a similar line was put in a letter from Pope Boniface,⁴⁰ written probably between 619 and 625,⁴¹ long before Edwin's conversion. This letter is worth looking at in some detail, for it incorporates most of the standard arguments against idolatry drawn from the Old Testament, as well as some more individual ones.

Boniface is scathing about idols and their worship, alluding to, and sometimes quoting verbatim, most of the biblical passages that formed the foundation of the standard Christian case against idolatry. Edwin's gods, like the 'gods of the nations' of the Psalms, are 'devils';⁴² but at the same time they are the inanimate, insensible idols of the Psalms, whose eyes, ears, noses, hands and feet imply none of the senses and capacities associated with these features in human beings.⁴³ Powerless to assist their worshippers, made as they are from corruptible

materials by Edwin's subjects,⁴⁴ they achieve only the appearance of men; and 'those who put their trust in them therefore become like them'.⁴⁵ Idols possess no independent power, and Boniface cannot understand how the Northumbrians can be so foolish as to worship them.

There are two separate ideas of Edwin's gods here which actually conflict, though both have biblical authority. One animates them as demons capable of deceit; the other sees idols as lifeless replicas of men, in contrast with man himself who has received the breath of life from God. From the evangelical point of view, both these conceptualizations combine constructive with damaging implications. The identification of pagan gods as demons might have seemed a useful way of drawing pagans towards the Christian moral vision of the world as subject to the antagonistic forces of good and evil—a step forward, perhaps, along the road to conversion; but on the other hand it involves an acceptance of the reality of pagan gods as intelligent beings, and so opens the way for debate over the relative power of Christian and pagan gods—a debate which the missionaries would no doubt have been keen to avoid. The second, idol-based conception of pagan gods as inert, powerless material objects steers around this pitfall, but it projects an image of the gods which the pagans themselves might have found unfamiliar. There are, as we shall see later, probable discrepancies between the Christian conception of pagan gods as mere idols and the pagans' own notion of them.

Certainly the idea of demons as the devil's agents is unlikely to have meant very much to a pagan like Edwin; but it is on the charges against idols in particular that Boniface bases his case. Edwin is directing religious feeling in an illogical direction along a chain of creation: downwards to his own, lifeless creations rather than upwards to the God to whom he owes life itself. Appeal is made to a hierarchy of God-like forms constituted of God himself, man his creation and replica, made out of clay, and idols the creation of men. This is an argument that might have been calculated to appeal to royal self-esteem: Edwin, as a man, is superior to his idols in the hierarchy, just as he is superior, as a king, to his subjects, and just as God is superior to all men, whether they be kings or slaves.

Boniface's argument against idols obviously depends heavily on the assumption that Edwin identifies (or can be persuaded to identify) his gods with their representations; but before considering the safety of this assumption, we are faced here with the even more fundamental question of whether the pagan Anglo-Saxons actually worshipped idols. Although it is difficult to know quite what to look for in the absence of contemporary descriptions, nothing definitely

identifiable as an image of a pagan deity has so far been revealed by excavation.⁴⁶ There might be several possible reasons for this gap in the archaeological record. The church would naturally be eager to destroy idols; and if they were made of organic materials, such as wood, they would probably soon decay beyond recognition in the soil, even if they escaped deliberate destruction by fire. Nevertheless, the original existence of idols among the pagan Anglo-Saxons cannot be taken for granted. Bede's references to them in *HE* are not necessarily to be accepted at face value, because by the time of the Anglo-Saxon conversion there already existed within the church a traditional polemic against idolatry based entirely on the Old Testament.⁴⁷ Boniface's letter to Edwin, summarised above, is a good example of this set of standard arguments. Another is Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, one chapter of which consists of a very similar string of Biblical passages on the futility and absurdity of idol manufacture and worship, provoked by Gregory's reminiscences of paganism among the Franks prior to the conversion of Clovis near the beginning of the sixth century.⁴⁸ We know that Gregory's *Historia* was one of Bede's models for *HE*.⁴⁹ The availability of this tradition to Bede means that some of his references to idol-worship may reflect nothing more than a convenient general assumption on the part of missionaries and others involved in the conversion (popes, for instance, such as Gregory the Great, who had no first-hand knowledge of England) that all pagans worshipped idols. Perhaps the missionaries, no doubt as likely as anyone else to see what they fear to find, noticed objects among the paraphernalia of pagan religion which corresponded well enough to the traditional, Biblical conception of idols; but we possess no independent evidence of these things.⁵⁰ Thus although Bede's references to idols and idolatry in *HE* may reflect personal knowledge or information from trusted informants, we cannot be certain that he was not simply making use of this tradition of anti-pagan propaganda, one of the advantages of which was that it avoided any real confrontation with paganism as a religion. If, of course, the Anglo-Saxon pagans did not have idols of their gods, the missionary tactic that reduced all paganism to idolatry will have left the pagans with the impression that the missionaries did not appreciate the true nature of the religion that they were trying to persuade them to abandon.⁵¹

The earliest references in *HE* to idols and their worship are connected with the Roman mission of Augustine to King Æthelberht of Kent, referred to briefly above. Bede's account of Augustine's mission shows Pope Gregory, its instigator, urging first a progressively tougher line on paganism in response to English resistance to the faith, and then adopting what might seem to be a more

conciliatory position. Bede's information was that in the early stages of Augustine's campaign Æthelberht would not force Christianity on his subjects.⁵² Bede attributes the king's scruple on this point to the advice of Augustine and his followers, who had impressed upon him that 'the service of Christ was voluntary and ought not to be compulsory'.⁵³ Augustine came to Kent in 597. Four years later, in June 601, Gregory received news of his progress from messengers who came asking for more missionaries to be sent to England. A party of reinforcements left Rome for England in the same month, carrying letters from Gregory to Augustine, King Æthelberht and others.⁵⁴ The two letters to Augustine suggest that he is thought to be making good progress: they contain a plan for the ecclesiastical organization of the whole of England, and a warning to Augustine to preserve humility in the midst of his spectacular achievements in conversion through miracles.⁵⁵ But the letter to Æthelberht strikes a sterner note,⁵⁶ stressing the need for royal opposition to heathen practices and urging the suppression of idol-worship and the destruction of their shrines.⁵⁷ This contrasts sharply with the spirit of tolerance prevailing in the early days of the Kentish mission, and shows an awareness on Gregory's part of the need to oppose heathenism much more actively than before. But it also contrasts with the advice contained in a letter sent only a month later (in July 601) from Gregory to Mellitus, one of the party already en route for England, the contents of which are to be communicated to Augustine.⁵⁸ This letter paints a vivid picture of English refractoriness, of the 'stubborn minds' ('duris mentibus') in which error was too deeply implanted to be removed at a stroke; and it effectively contradicts Gregory's earlier instruction to Æthelberht to destroy pagan shrines, urging Augustine to consecrate them with holy water and put altars and relics in them. In this way, it is hoped, the temples will be converted to the service of God. The letter draws a new distinction between the shrines and the idols they contain: the shrines are to be preserved; only the idols must be destroyed. The sacrifice of animals may continue, though these sacrifices will not be the same sacrifices as before because now they will be offered to God on the anniversary of the new church's dedication, or on other feast days. Temporary wooden huts are to be constructed to house these feasts outside the buildings that have been converted into churches.

The letter to Mellitus represents a striking *volte-face* when compared with the June letter to King Æthelberht. The consideration that the two letters were sent to different people blunts the sense of inconsistency but does not remove it. The Kentish king, as a convert, would be unlikely to appreciate the nature of Augustine's practical problems as a missionary; and as someone who had himself

only recently put aside paganism, his reaction to the rather devious strategy Gregory proposes in the letter to Mellitus might have been difficult to predict. Perhaps Gregory thought that the most that could be expected of Æthelberht at this stage was that he should bring all his political weight to bear in opposing paganism and promoting Christianity in its place. The letter to Mellitus, on the other hand, seems to imply a recognition that royal opposition to paganism was not enough to defeat it permanently. The theory that the inconsistency between these letters represents a deliberate, two-pronged attack on paganism is naturally attractive,⁵⁹ but the danger of a disintegration of the missionary enterprise is clear: Gregory sets Æthelberht to destroy pagan shrines, and very soon afterwards tells Augustine (via Mellitus) to preserve them—a recipe for confusion, if not conflict.

A possible explanation for Gregory's change of mind is that he belatedly realized the danger of unintentionally encouraging adhesion - a danger that would always be present as long as places perceived as at once holy and non-Christian were tolerated. Perhaps Gregory finally saw the importance of the occupation of the sites of pagan worship in securing the permanent conversion of the English. The destruction of the shrines alone was not enough, because they could be restored and the idols replaced. By minimising the disruption of existing patterns of pagan observance, it was hoped that damaging, open conflict between Christianity and paganism could be avoided, and that the former would absorb and eventually replace the latter. Gregory must have been confident that Christianity would emerge as the dominant strain in this hybridization; but his new policy seems calculated to lead to a syncretistic religion combining Christian and pagan elements,⁶⁰ and we must assume that he did not foresee the particular brand of adhesion that Rædwald fell prey to, whereby facilities for honouring both Christian and pagan gods were made available in the same place. Any other policy, however, would leave pagan cults as an optional alternative or extra to Christianity on separate sites, and it is understandable if this was felt to be the worse evil.⁶¹ In fact, the dangerous consequences of encouraging the mere abandonment of pagan holy places rather than their adaptation is illustrated by Bede's account of what happened among the East Saxons when Sigehere apostatized: he and his subjects 'began to restore the derelict temples and to worship images, as if they could protect themselves by such means from the plague'.⁶² Evidently Gregory's advice was not heeded in Essex.

The letter to Mellitus draws attention to idols as the hard core of paganism, the one cultic element that cannot, in Gregory's view, be assimilated to Christian worship. We have already looked at a sample of the arguments marshalled against

idolatry by the missionaries; but there was also the more practical question of what should be done with idols. One obvious way of dealing with them was simple physical destruction, though there is, as we shall see below, reason to doubt whether this procedure was sufficiently comprehensive to put a stop to paganism. Although Gregory urges Æthelberht in his letter of June 601 to suppress idolatry, Bede's narrative implies that he did not do so as energetically as Eorcenberht, who ruled Kent from 640 to 664 and is identified as the first English king to insist on the destruction of idols throughout his kingdom.⁶³ No doubt the destruction of idols was seen as an important step on the road to permanent conversion. The demonstration of an idol's vulnerability might well have been instructive for those who venerated it;⁶⁴ but it is difficult to gauge the impact of such exercises without understanding what conceptions the pagans had of their idols. Would the destruction of an idol necessarily have put an end to the cult of the god it represented? It might have done if the pagan identified the idol with the god, in which case its destruction would lead to the conclusion either that the god had been killed, or that a god so easily destroyed could never have existed in the first place. If idol and god were not regarded as one and the same, of course, the idol's destruction would have been inconclusive; one image of a god might have been as good as another, as the case of Essex under Sigehehere suggests.⁶⁵

The pagans' conception of their gods

The question therefore arises of what general conceptions the pagan Anglo-Saxons had of their gods. It is unfortunate that direct information on this point is so limited. Comparative evidence from continental Germanic sources has some value as a starting-point, though it does not present a consistent picture. Tacitus, writing in the first century AD, claimed that the Germanic peoples did not confine their gods within buildings nor made images of them, but envisaged them as spiritual presences in the groves and forests held sacred to them.⁶⁶ Later Scandinavian sources, however, contain a number of references to pagan idols and temples, including accounts of gods abandoning or being ejected from the object or idol in which they had taken up residence.⁶⁷ These accounts cannot be accepted without question as reliable evidence of pagan thinking about idols; but they show some consistency in conceiving of the idol as a fetish, a material representation or icon into which the deity may enter, sometimes even animating it as its body, but from which it may withdraw and go elsewhere. An example is a

story told in *Gunnars þáttur helmings*, preserved in the fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript known as *Flateyjarbók*: Gunnarr, a Norwegian adventurer travelling in Sweden, was attacked by an animated wooden effigy of the god Freyr. He wrestled with it and the god, admitting defeat, departed, leaving his wooden form behind for Gunnarr to destroy.⁶⁸

Turning to English evidence, we find one of our fullest sources of information about Anglo-Saxon conceptions of pagan gods in Bede's account of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria by the missionary Paulinus in 627.⁶⁹ When Edwin, after lengthy deliberation, finally decided to convert, he asked for his counsellors' opinion of the new religion. Coifi, his chief priest,⁷⁰ was scornful of the gods whose worship he had presided over: no-one had served these gods as devotedly as he, yet others had received more from Edwin in benefits and honours. Coifi felt that he would have been more fortunate 'if the gods had any power'.⁷¹ Here, then, is a notion of pagan gods as weak and ineffectual in an ordinary, human way; Coifi does not cast doubt on their very existence as gods. His down-to-earth materialism contrasts with the metaphysical reflections of a second, unnamed counsellor who invented the famous allegory of a sparrow flying in an instant through Edwin's hall during a storm in winter: unlike paganism, Christianity makes sense of man's life in time. Coifi asked Paulinus for more information about God. Convinced by what he heard of the worthlessness of their paganism, he then advised Edwin that their pagan altars and temples should be immediately abandoned and burnt.⁷² Edwin formally and publicly declared his faith in Christ and renounced idolatry.

Next, Edwin asked Coifi 'which of them should be the first to profane the altars and the shrines of the idols, together with their precincts'.⁷³ Coifi accepted the job himself, reasoning that his destruction of what he once worshipped would set a good example to everyone. In the event, however, this destruction is by no means as summary as Coifi's earlier advice to Edwin has led us to expect. First, a ritual violation of the shrines was performed. In the knowledge that 'a high priest of their religion was not allowed to carry arms or to ride except on a mare',⁷⁴ Coifi borrowed a sword, a spear and a stallion from Edwin, mounted up and rode off towards the shrines. The common people who witnessed this behaviour thought Coifi had gone mad.⁷⁵ When Coifi arrived at Goodmanham, where the shrine was, 'without any hesitation he profaned it by casting the spear he held into it'.⁷⁶ Then 'he ordered his companions to destroy and set fire to the shrine and all the enclosures'.⁷⁷

Among several interesting aspects of this description is Edwin's continuing deference, after deciding for Christianity, to Coifi.⁷⁸ Neither Edwin nor Coifi

were yet baptised; but by this stage Coifi was, according to one view of the situation, redundant as a pagan priest. One might expect Edwin to have consulted Paulinus, or even that Paulinus would step in and urge the destruction of the idols and their precincts, as indeed he does in Alcuin's later adaptation of Bede's account in Latin verse.⁷⁹ In Bede's version, however, Edwin turned to Coifi; and the fact that the priest still retained some of his authority in the king's eyes tells us something about Edwin's conception of the pagan gods he was turning his back on. There is no sign that he had lost faith in their existence. They still required dealing with, not from a Christian standpoint (which maintains that pagan gods are an illusion), but in their own terms. Coifi was best qualified for this; and in spite of his own explanation of his behaviour, Coifi's seems too elaborate a gesture to be interpreted simply as an expression of a new convert's wish to symbolize in violent action a clean break with past errors. Much suggests that the newly converted Northumbrians did not find it easy to think of these gods as nothing more than inert material objects which could simply be destroyed and forgotten. No doubt the idols were understood to have reverted to that basic condition by the time they were burnt;⁸⁰ but the fact that their ritual defeat had to come first is significant.

In terms of conversion theory, Coifi's actions (including the actual burning of the shrine) are a relatively elaborate example of what has been called 'bridge-burning'—a decisive gesture, made at the 'commitment' stage in the conversion process, of disengagement from the religion which a convert has hitherto followed.⁸¹ The detailed interpretation of his actions, however, involves several uncertainties. For example, what meaning did Coifi attach to his own behaviour? Did he see himself as destroying his old gods, or only as driving them away forever? His attack on them is ostensibly an act of war against an enemy who may, presumably, be killed—perhaps easily killed, if the gods are as weak as Coifi has earlier judged them to be. On the other hand, in the light of his status as a priest whose normal duties would have involved officiating at sacrifices, Coifi's actions might be interpreted less as an actual attack than as a symbolic act of defiance, designed to make it clear to the gods that they should expect nothing further from him in the way of sacrifices or appeals for support, and that there was therefore no point in their remaining. We should also note that the sword Coifi carried, unlike the spear, was not put to any practical use, suggesting that the taking up of weapons was itself just as significant as what he actually did with them. Edwin's stallion does, of course, have the practical function of transporting Coifi to the shrines, but Bede makes it clear that Coifi's mode of transport was just as significant symbolically as the weaponry he carried.

Coifi's activities here fall into two stages and also (though not so neatly) into two categories of behaviour. The first stage, the armed ritual assault on horseback, is distinguished from the second mainly by its explicitly pagan symbolism and perspective. It was probably calculated to affront the gods and so bring about their voluntary departure. As an armed attack, the first stage might alternatively be interpreted as the killing of the gods; but this seems less likely in the light of the second stage, in which the shrines are burnt. This act of destruction makes sense in terms of the first stage as a scorched-earth policy: it ensures that the gods' banishment will be permanent and final by preventing their possible return to their former habitations and embodiments. The second stage, however, is also open to a different interpretation. From a Christian viewpoint, this second stage alone would have sufficed to put an end to the gods and at the same time cut off the line of retreat into paganism—by destroying the idols that the Northumbrians had deluded themselves into treating as deities.⁸²

To sum up: Coifi's bridge-burning may be taken as a comprehensive gesture of rejection which probably incorporates both pagan and Christian perspectives on paganism. The two stages into which it falls certainly suggest two distinct processes. The first stage symbolizes disengagement from paganism by the pointed inversion of acknowledged pagan taboos, while the second stage sets the seal on this disengagement by physical destruction of the gods' material manifestations and possessions. The second stage, however, may also be interpreted as a reflection of the simpler, Christian conception of paganism, according to which destruction of an idol amounts to destruction of the god it represents. The second stage is, perhaps, open to interpretation as an added insurance against the gods' return, a kind of topping-up of the ritual designed to satisfy Paulinus, to whom the first stage will probably have seemed superfluous to requirements. It is worth remarking that this distinctive and complex combination of action and symbolism is most unlikely to have been invented as a whole by Bede, though the second stage, along with some of Coifi's somewhat suspiciously orthodox and polished expressions of his new-found Christian convictions, probably owe something to Bede's shaping of his sources for the Northumbrian conversion.

The character of Edwin's gods and comparative evidence

It has been noted that the two priestly taboos violated by Coifi when he rides Edwin's stallion and carries his weapons have parallels in Tacitus's *Germania* and

in later medieval Icelandic literature.⁸³ These parallels are close enough to encourage us to draw on them to help us identify the character of the gods that the Northumbrians are rejecting. As we shall see below, this latter question has some bearing on our understanding of the significance of Coifi's hurling of Edwin's spear into the Goodmanham shrines. In Norse pagan mythology, Óðinn is head of the Æsir, the principal family of gods and goddesses.⁸⁴ Previously, in a remote period of the world's history, a war was believed to have been fought between the Æsir and a second divine family called the Vanir. A truce was called, peace was made, the Æsir absorbed the Vanir, and in most of the surviving mythological stories we find the two families living together harmoniously in a single society. The chief members of the Vanir are Freyr, his sister Freyja and their father Njörðr. The more numerous Æsir have a complex range of interests and functions; the Vanir are more narrowly associated with peace, material prosperity and fertility.⁸⁵

The taboos mentioned by Bede suggest the cult of a god or gods of Vanir-type at Edwin's court. Chapter 40 of Tacitus's *Germania* describes the veneration of a goddess called Nerthus by a confederacy of German tribes which includes the Anglii, the continental ancestors of the English Angles among whom Edwin and the Northumbrians are numbered.⁸⁶ Nerthus's membership of the Vanir family is suggested partly by the identity of her Latinized name with that of the Scandinavian god Njörðr, Freyr's father, and partly by the character of her cult. According to Tacitus, Nerthus's priest would at certain times perceive the goddess's presence in an island grove regarded as sacred to her. He would then escort her in a special wagon drawn by oxen on a tour of the neighbouring communities where she was welcomed enthusiastically. On her arrival, the people would put aside the weapons and warfare which normally preoccupied them. Although Tacitus does not state that Nerthus's priest was forbidden to carry weapons, one would expect his own code of behaviour to match the respect shown to the goddess by the ordinary people who honoured her during her tour. The prohibition placed on Coifi against the bearing of weapons recalls this account of Nerthus in the *Germania*, and suggests the cult of some similar deity in pagan Northumbria.

The prohibition against riding a stallion also points to the veneration of Vanir-type deities at Goodmanham, for it is strongly reminiscent of what we are told in later Scandinavian sources about the cult of Freyr. Evidence that the horse was an animal sacred to Freyr in the Scandinavian pagan world is plentiful,⁸⁷ two of the most important sources being *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, written in Iceland in the thirteenth century but set in the tenth, and a story, probably of similar date,

in the *Flateyjarbók* version of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, describing the desecration by Ólafr of an idol of Freyr in Norway.⁸⁸ In the first of these texts, Hrafnkell, who bears the title *Freysgoði* ('priest of Freyr'), regards the god as half-owner of all his most valuable possessions, including a stallion called *Freyfaxi* ('Freyr's maned one'). Twelve mares make up Freyfaxi's stud. Hrafnkell swears an oath to kill anyone who rides Freyfaxi without his permission (the restriction, just like the restriction on Coifi's horse-riding mentioned by Bede, explicitly excludes the mares), and so is honour-bound to kill Einarr, a shepherd he has hired, when he mounts Freyfaxi to search for some of the sheep in his care that have strayed. The dynamic of the prohibition is that anyone who breaks it offends against Hrafnkell rather than Freyr, the stallion's other part-owner; but it is noticeable that Hrafnkell does not himself ride Freyfaxi at any point in the saga, and it seems probable that the motif was inspired by the same taboo as the one consciously violated by Coifi in Bede. In the story from *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, the king discovers a pocket of heathenism in Trondheim: some of the inhabitants still maintain an idol of Freyr. On his way to the temple which contains the idol, Ólafr comes upon a stud of horses which are held sacred to Freyr. He mounts the stallion, his followers mount the mares, and all ride to the temple where Ólafr topples various idols including Freyr's, which he carries away with him.⁸⁹ We do not hear of any actual prohibition on riding the horses in this story, but it seems clear from the context that the use to which Ólafr and his men put Freyr's beasts is an affront to the god. Furthermore, the structural feature of the story which has the King mount the stallion and his followers the mares creates an impression that the riding of the stallion is the more significant insult. It must also be admitted that Ólafr's role as an iconoclastic crusader against paganism strongly invites comparison with the story of Coifi in Bede. That the Icelandic author was actually influenced by Bede's story is not impossible, though whether the correspondences are specific enough to support a case for direct influence is a matter of opinion.

Iceland was converted in or about the year 1000 AD. The lateness of both *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* limits their reliability as sources of information about Scandinavian paganism; but it can scarcely be denied that they provide a satisfactory explanatory background to the taboo on stallion-riding that Coifi violates, and that they also support the evidence drawn from Tacitus's account of Nerthus that points to Coifi presiding over the cult of fertility deities resembling the Scandinavian Vanir. But that is perhaps as far as we should go; it would be rash to suggest identifications of the particular continental pagan Germanic gods whose Anglo-Saxon counterparts Coifi has

previously venerated. The Scandinavian parallels and the link with Nerthus in the *Germania* are detailed and specific; but our knowledge of individual Anglo-Saxon pagan deities is far too limited to enable us to discern specific Anglo-Saxon equivalents of Freyr or Nerthus in Bede's narrative.

Similar constraints should probably apply to the interpretation of Coifi's throwing of a spear as a declaration of war against his old gods. This also has a parallel in Old Norse, though in pagan mythology rather than in accounts suggestive of pagan cults. Coifi's gesture has been interpreted (though with greater confidence than the evidence really warrants in my view) as pointing to the veneration in Northumbria of a particular English pagan god, Woden.⁹⁰ We know very little about the mythology of Woden in Anglo-Saxon England,⁹¹ and we have no reliable information about how he was worshipped, or whether he was thought of as belonging to any particular family of gods. The case for Woden as the model for Coifi's spear-throwing depends heavily on the etymological identity of Woden's name with that of the Scandinavian Óðinn. In Norse pagan mythology Óðinn, head of the Æsir, owns a spear called Gungnir, made by dwarfs, which he will carry into battle at Ragnarok.⁹² Old Norse skaldic poets sometimes refer to Óðinn as *geirs drótinn* [lord of the spear], or *Gungnis váfaðr* [Gungnir's shaker].⁹³ These expressions show that the spear was Óðinn's special weapon; but what has convinced many scholars of a link between Coifi and Óðinn (and through Óðinn with the Anglo-Saxon god Woden) is the tenth-century Eddic poem *Völuspá*, strophe 24 of which describes the archetypal war between the Æsir and the Vanir, referred to earlier: Óðinn declares this war by throwing an (unnamed) spear into the Vanir army.⁹⁴ On the basis of this parallel, coupled with the accepted etymological link between Woden and Óðinn, scholars have been attracted to the idea that in throwing Edwin's spear Coifi is acting as Woden's ritual representative; that Woden was therefore included among the gods worshipped in Edwin's Northumbria; and that Coifi was a priest dedicated to his cult.⁹⁵ The potential significance of the parallel with *Völuspá* 24 seems even greater when we note that the mythological context of Óðinn's original gesture was a war against the Vanir, for we have already found other evidence for the cult of Vanir-type deities in Edwin's Northumbria.

There is, however, an awkward problem of consistency here. Óðinn belongs to the Æsir family in Scandinavian myth and behaves like a warrior in the *Völuspá* incident; but there are, as we have seen, rather more convincing reasons for thinking that Coifi presided over the cult of Vanir-type deities, associated with peace and fertility. Are we therefore to conclude that Coifi has changed sides and

become (briefly) the servant of a warrior-god in order to turn on his old fertility gods? This is an attractive solution in some ways, but it creates another difficulty arising from a point I made earlier: Coifi's ritual attack is clearly presented in *HE* as a 'bridge-burning' act in support of the Northumbrian conversion. Coifi has accepted the Christian message by the time he mounts Edwin's stallion and attacks the shrines with the king's weapons, and the whole pattern of his actions is obviously designed to put a formal end to the paganism he has previously adhered to. The problem is that the reactivation of a pagan myth in which a warrior-god—perhaps Woden—played a leading role would have done more to assert the existence and power of pagan gods than to contribute towards a general abandonment of paganism.⁹⁶

One way out of this difficulty would be to assume that Coifi was acting out an adapted version of the spear-throwing myth in which Óðinn (or Woden) as attacker is replaced by the Christian God as a destroyer of false gods.⁹⁷ Such an interpretation would have the advantage of forging a structural link between the disengagement from paganism and the adoption of Christianity in its place; but from other points of view it seems an unsatisfactory solution to the problem. At this stage, Coifi is not convincing as God's ritual representative, in spite of his zeal when it comes to burning the shrines and enclosures. We must also remember that Paulinus stands aloof from the whole business; that Edwin relies on Coifi's judgement in devising a suitable bridge-burning ritual; and that Coifi's profanation of the Goodmanham shrines is achieved by breaking specific pagan religious taboos. All these considerations suggest that Coifi thought of himself as dealing directly with his old gods, and on their terms.

The easiest solution to the problem is to abandon the assumption that in throwing Edwin's spear Coifi is reenacting, or adapting, any kind of divine myth. A conscious link with a myth of Woden in particular cannot be ruled out entirely, but the connection depends, as we have seen, on the assumption of a close match between Woden's and Óðinn's mythology. The trouble with the Woden hypothesis is that the Anglo-Saxon 'Woden' is an almost empty, unstructured category, defenceless against substantiation with the mythology of the god's Scandinavian counterpart. This defencelessness does not inspire confidence in the validity of the link; but what is the alternative? Coifi assumes the role of a warrior, plainly an unfamiliar one from his own point of view, and an inappropriate one from the perspective of the common people used to seeing him in his traditional role as a pagan priest.⁹⁸ There seems to be no pressing reason to regard Coifi as anything more than a renegade pagan priest waging a symbolic war against his old gods.

All his actions as described make sense in these terms: as a disillusioned priest of heathen fertility deities, he deliberately and publicly inverts his priestly functions as a way of showing his old gods that he will no longer seek their support in his affairs.⁹⁹

The break with the pagan past

One of the main conclusions to emerge from this study of the Anglo-Saxons' disengagement from paganism is that the missionaries, and the popes who backed up their efforts, did not, generally speaking, meet the challenge of paganism head-on. This was partly a consequence of their faith: they saw their task as the revelation of God's power to people still ignorant of it—a positive demonstration of what seemed to them unarguably true—rather than as any kind of debate with a rival system of beliefs. The evidence for this attitude is clear in the early stages of the mission to Kent, when Augustine imposed a policy of non-coercion in matters of religion: he saw no special need to defeat paganism, no doubt because he did not think of conversion in terms of a conflict of religions. A disregard for any difficulties potential converts might have had in abandoning paganism could be justified logically by appeal to the rejection of pagan polytheistic worship automatically entailed by conversion. This aspect of Christian ideology spared the missionaries from having to grapple with unfamiliar and alien ideas held by the pagan Anglo-Saxons, or to test their own metaphysics against any rival picture paganism might offer. Presumably this way of thinking lay behind Paulinus's willingness to leave the destruction of the Goodmanham sanctuary in the hands of his Northumbrian converts; and it would also help to explain why Gregory, in his letters to Kent, seems to regard the suppression of idolatry as the king's responsibility rather than Augustine's. But we have seen that this attitude had its drawbacks. It may well have contributed to the later difficulties in Kent, where the resilience of paganism seems to have been misjudged; and the several apostasies recorded by Bede might also be put down to a failure on the part of the church to attack the roots of heathenism with vigour. This failure is attributable, not to any lack of evangelical zeal on the missionaries' part, but rather to their very limited idea of the pagans' conception of their gods, and of the power and practical usefulness with which their adherents had traditionally invested them. It is clear that the missionaries underestimated the opposition; they failed to see paganism as a serious challenge to full conversion. One of the things that the

story of Edwin's conversion reveals, however, is that potential converts recognized this challenge clearly enough. There are signs here that the adoption of Christianity and the rejection of paganism were understood by converts as distinct processes.

Insofar as they perceived Anglo-Saxon paganism at all distinctly, the missionaries inevitably saw it from a Christian perspective rather than from that of its own devotees. When a confrontation was unavoidable, it was found strategically useful to define it in terms of Christian concepts and traditions. Pagan gods were identical with the idols of the Old Testament—lifeless, powerless, undeserving of worship. Alternatively, pagan gods might be condemned as devils. By thus casting the objects of pagan worship in a recognizable mould, the church converted them to forms that it could defeat. Perhaps it mattered little to the missionaries whether Anglo-Saxon pagans really did make idols, or whether they understood what a devil was, or even if, as candidates for baptism, they were confused by such conflicting conceptions of the gods they were being encouraged to reject. The new religion offered them these alternative identifications. By fully accepting either, converts would have been regarded as safe from future apostasy.

The break with the past at the conceptual level was, naturally, the real key to a secure conversion. The missionary encourages his converts to look to the future. The past holds nothing but error: idolatry, the worship of false gods, which must be abandoned for ever. For the convert, however, things could not be so clear-cut. A newly converted society faces and must somehow surmount intellectual difficulties in relation to ideas of its own past. Its sense of identity depends on inherited notions of its own origins and history. Such traditions are irreplaceable and so not lightly abandoned. The missionaries expected their converts to make a clean break with the past in the matter of religion; but history (as always, no doubt, with changes of religion) complicated matters. Christianity brought its own tradition of world history into which the Anglo-Saxons would have had to fit themselves. Under paganism, different ideas will undoubtedly have been held about how the world and its contents came into existence. It is unfortunate that our sources offer no information about these ideas; but we do know that the Anglo-Saxons generally had an intense awareness of their ancestry and preserved stories deriving from the continental heroic age which they no doubt regarded as relevant to the history of their own race. One of the most interesting questions about the period is how the converted Anglo-Saxons reconciled the various strands of these native traditions deriving from pagan times

with Christian world history. The medieval church did not, one imagines, concern itself much with this process. The missionaries, foreigners who were generally uninterested in the indigenous traditions of the peoples they converted, would have lacked the knowledge necessary to assist converts in their attempts to harmonize the two traditions. The converts will have been left to do it themselves, just as they were left (at least in Northumbria, and probably in Kent and elsewhere) to devise their own machinery for putting paganism behind them.

Little direct information is available on how they went about it, but we can form some idea of the kind of adjustments that were involved. Royal genealogies and king-lists show how the Anglo-Saxons revised, or rather extended, their own history in such a way as to link it with Christian history: the lists are continued backwards by spurious additions via Woden to Adam.¹⁰⁰ Here two procedures are illustrated: the simple dovetailing of native traditions with the Christian historical continuum, and a closely-connected euhemerization of divinities from whom the Anglo-Saxon kings came to regard themselves as descended. But the continued transmission, under Christianity, of stories deriving from the continental heroic age presented special difficulties which may be illustrated from the Old English poem *Beowulf*.

Christianity and Beowulf

The inconsistencies of religious reference in *Beowulf* are under more or less constant discussion in critical literature on the poem.¹⁰¹ They have been explained in various ways, with no one explanation winning general assent. The poem's story is set in the countries on or near the rim of the Baltic sea and all the main human characters—Danes, Geats and Swedes—are members of societies the historical bases of which were certainly pagan. The fact that supernatural creatures—the giant Grendel, his mother and a dragon—play important roles in the story means that the action stands to some extent outside time, though historical events in the late fifth and early sixth centuries have contributed to the poem's final form, for it contains references to the death, during Beowulf's lifetime, of the Geatish king Hygelac in a battle against the Franks. Hygelac is a historical figure whose fall is datable from other sources to the early years of the sixth century.¹⁰² *Beowulf* cannot have existed in its present form any earlier than the late seventh century, for it contains evidence of being the product of a converted community. The date of the manuscript sets the latest possible date in

the early eleventh century. Scholars disagree widely within these limits over the date of composition.¹⁰³

The poem's religious inconsistencies lie in the poet's presentation of the religion—pagan or Christian—followed by certain individuals and tribes mentioned in the poem, notably Beowulf the Geat, the hero of the poem, and Hroðgar, king of the Danes, whose royal hall Heorot is released by Beowulf's heroism from the persecution of Grendel and his mother. Although *Beowulf* is often called a Christian poem, it contains no references to God the Son, nor to doctrines connected with him in particular. On the other hand, the poet-narrator does often refer to God as having effective control over the fates of the pagan tribes of the poem and some of their individual members, and as actively intervening on occasion in the pattern of their fortunes.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, we are sometimes told in indirect speech that a character or group thanked God for his mercy.¹⁰⁵ Grendel, whose family are descendants of the Biblical Cain,¹⁰⁶ is also spoken of as subject to God's rule,¹⁰⁷ as God's hereditary enemy,¹⁰⁸ and as feuding with him.¹⁰⁹ All the chief characters in the poem are thus presented by the poet as living in a world presided over by the one God and aware (though there is, perhaps, room for doubt in the case of Grendel and his mother) that they are doing so. The same characters (except the monsters, who do not speak) also demonstrate this awareness directly in their own speeches, especially Hroðgar and Beowulf, both of whom refer frequently to God as managing their affairs, or as having the power to do so. Hroðgar is particularly assiduous in acknowledging God's responsibility for any good fortune, in offering prayers of thanks to him for his mercy, and in praying for his blessings on behalf of others.¹¹⁰ Beowulf often recognizes God's power to control events and sometimes his actual intervention,¹¹¹ though in general his relationship with God seems more distant than Hroðgar's.

But this stratum of monotheistic awareness on the part of the characters is inconsistent with an excursus in which the poet describes the Danes as resorting to pagan sacrifice in their search for protection against Grendel's attacks because they did not know God:

Hwilum hie geheton æt hærgtrafum
wigweorþunga, wordum bædon,
þæt him gastbona geoce gefremede
wið þeodþream. Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæpenra hyht; helle gemundon

in modsefan, Metod hie ne cuþon,
dæda Demend, ne wiston hie Drihten God,
ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon,
wuldres Waldend. Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan
in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,
wihte gewendan! Wel bið þæm þe mot
æfter deaðdæge Drihten secean
ond to Fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian! (*Beowulf*, ll. 175-88)

[Sometimes they promised honour to idols at heathen temples, asked that the slayer of souls might help them against these calamities. Such was their custom, the hope of heathens. They thought of Hell in their hearts, they did not know the Ordainer, the Judge of deeds, they knew not of the Lord God, nor indeed did they know how to worship the Protector of the Heavens, the Ruler of Glory. Woe to him who must, in dire distress, thrust his soul into the fire's embrace, not expect comfort or any amelioration! Fortunate is he who after his death-day may seek the Lord and ask for protection in the Father's embrace!]

The poet's compassion here for the benighted Danes, unwittingly worshipping the Devil and condemning their souls to perdition, is remarkable; but the passage is very explicit, and I cannot see any way of reconciling these statements about the Danes' paganism and ignorance of God with the apparent Christian monotheism of the main characters elsewhere in the poem. The poet seems to contradict himself. The problem is widely recognized. Critics attempt to resolve it in two different ways. Some try to undermine the passage just quoted, either by condemning it as unoriginal to the poem or by interpreting it in such a way as to minimize the sense of inconsistency. Thus it has been suggested that all or part of lines 175-88 is interpolated, though no irregularities of versification or unusual features of grammar or style of the kind that might substantiate these suspicions have ever been adduced as far as I know.¹¹² The poet describes the Danes' pagan practices as occasional (175 *Hwilum* [Sometimes]) but not unusual (178 *Swylce wæs þeaw hyra* [Such was their custom]); and the context makes it clear that they were provoked in this instance by the national crisis which Grendel's attacks on Heorot represented. The situation here is in some ways reminiscent of Essex under Sigehera where, as Bede tells us, the ravages of plague provoked an

apostasy. But the conclusion reached by some critics that the passage indicates occasional lapses from a monotheistic religion is in my view unsustainable in the light of what is said about the Danes' ignorance of God in lines 180-3. The idea, sometimes advanced, that Hroðgar, as a monotheist, will have held aloof from these pagan practices is certainly baseless. It is true that he is not mentioned as personally involved in them; but we have been told slightly earlier (170) of his distress at Grendel's attacks, then of meetings of his counsellors to seek a remedy. Pagan sacrifice is a remedy they decide to try. There is no reason to think that this decision was reached and put into practice without the king's knowledge and agreement.¹¹³ The second attempt to resolve the inconsistency belongs to Fred C. Robinson, who argues that terms for the deity in *Beowulf* are always ambiguous when used by the characters: a word like *metod*, when used by, or attributed to, a pagan character like Beowulf would be meant by him to refer to a pagan god such as Woden, but would be understood by the audience as an unwitting reference to the true God on Beowulf's part.¹¹⁴ Robinson presents a closely-argued case for this ingenious solution which, if accepted, removes the offending inconsistency very neatly.¹¹⁵

I prefer to accept the contradiction, however, partly because I find neither of these attempts to remove it wholly convincing, but mainly because the contradiction itself does not seem to me at all surprising against a background of Anglo-Saxon conversion and the reorganization of thinking about the past which conversion required. I find it easier to accept that *Beowulf*, quite possibly a product of this early post-conversion period, contains two mutually incompatible conceptions of a pre-Christian Germanic past. The one represented by lines 175-88 presumably derives from contemporary knowledge of the paganism, past and present, of the Danes, no doubt reinforced by the Anglo-Saxon poet's awareness of his own people's pagan background.¹¹⁶ This picture of the Danes as pagan and ignorant of God is, of course, the one which a modern historian would accept as true. The other conception results from a projection of Christian monotheism back into pre-Christian Danish and Geatish society. This is more difficult to explain. Perhaps the most coherent of existing theories is C. Donahue's, who sees Beowulf, Hroðgar and their followers as 'monotheists who have discovered God, as St. Paul said men could, through His creation'.¹¹⁷ The notion that 'without any assistance from Judaeo-Christian revelation men can and do reach a knowledge of the true God by reasoning from creation to the Creator' is found in the Bible, in Paul's Epistle to the Romans.¹¹⁸ Donahue finds references to natural law in early Irish law-texts and traces the importation of the idea into Ireland to the fifth century. From Ireland, he argues, it spread to Britain and reached the *Beowulf* poet.

A theory depending more directly on the text of *Beowulf* itself may, however, be offered as an alternative to Donahue's relatively involved explanation. A key to a better understanding of the professed monotheism of the main characters in *Beowulf* may lie in a statement which the poem's narrator makes three times: 'Soð is gecyþed, þæt mihtig God manna cynnes weold wideferhð' [it is well known that God has always ruled over the race of men];¹¹⁹ 'Metod eallum weold gumena cynnes, swa he nu git deð' [the Ordainer ruled over all of mankind, just as he still does now];¹²⁰ and 'wolde dom Godes dædum rædan gumena gehwylcum, swa he nu gen deð' [God's decree would control every man's deeds, just as it still does].¹²¹ These three utterances are not identical; but all make the same point that God has always controlled men's actions, and two of them add that he still does. The poet's repetitions might be explained by reference to the fact that, for a recently converted people, these are not obvious truths. The omnipotence of God is still, for the poet and his audience, a source of amazement. So is the fact that this power has always existed and been exercised even on the lives of individuals and communities who had yet to learn of his existence, like the Danes. The notion of a deity who was at once omnipotent and unworshipped would have been an unfamiliar one for the Anglo-Saxons, whose experience of paganism will presumably have led them to conceive of divine power as something released by ritual. It cannot have been easy for adherents of a polytheistic folk religion to take in the idea that every aspect of their lives and the lives of their ancestors had been governed, contrary to all contemporary assumptions, not by the gods to whom they had customarily offered sacrifices but by an invisible God who simply exists, whether he is recognized and worshipped or not. And so it seems to me that the anachronistic monotheism of the characters of *Beowulf* might be explained by supposing that the poet was unequal to the task of depicting a world presided over by a God who, though omnipotent and eternal, was also unworshipped and unknown. In lines 175-88, the poet asserts rather strenuously that the Danes did not know God. The positive implication of this is what is stated explicitly in the three passages I have just cited: God was nonetheless there all the time. In order to understand the difficulty faced by the poet, we have only to imagine the compassion and pathos of lines 175-88 extended over the whole action of the poem. If the pagan characters of *Beowulf* were shown as ever subject to God's will but entirely ignorant of Him, they would lose any claim to dignity and nobility, appearing instead as puppets struggling in the dark against enemies and forces dimly perceived and improperly understood, and foolishly misinterpreting any manifestation of God's benevolent influence.

Some scholars, notably Tolkien, have interpreted the poem rather in this way; but this view of *Beowulf* seems to me to result from putting too much emphasis on lines 175-88 and not enough on all the other references to God as an ally and a stay to Geats and Danes alike. I suggest that what the poet found impossible to depict was a hidden but supportive power the manifestations of which could only be misinterpreted by those it sustained. The poet might, as Donahue thought, have known the Biblical argument of St. Paul that an awareness of God's existence and power has always been within the grasp of all men purely through reason; but whether or not he knew of this idea, the religious inconsistencies of *Beowulf* need not be interpreted as any kind of compromise. They are, I suggest, simply what they appear to be at first sight: a reflection of the distinction between two historical channels which merged at the moment of conversion but had not yet done so in the world of the poem. Conversion could not be made retroactive; but the qualities and achievements for which heroes were remembered had to be aligned somehow with the Christian moral framework if the positive values they represented were not to end up on the wrong side of the dividing line between good and evil. The narrower historical realities of Germanic ignorance and heathenism are faced up to in lines 175-88; but for the poet, the Christian mainstream had an irresistible claim to recognition. Once it was realized that God is all-powerful and has always existed everywhere, it was no longer possible to present Beowulf's fortunes as governed by forces beyond his sphere of influence.¹²²

NOTES

¹ See *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. xvii. Here I make reference (by book and chapter) to *HE* in this edition, and quote its modern English translation throughout.

² See, for example, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Bede and Plummer', in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. by Gerald Bonner (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 366-85; Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, "Beowulf" and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in honour of the 1300th anniversary of the birth of Bede, given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974*, ed. by Robert T. Farrell (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), pp. 32-95; J. Davidse, 'Bede as Christian Historian', in *Beda Venerabilis: Historian, Monk & Northumbrian*, ed. by L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1996), pp. 1-15.

³ See S. C. Neill, 'The History of Missions: An Academic Discipline', in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. by G. J. Cuming (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 149-70 (p. 160): 'Our Christian history has been written far too much from the side of the operators and far too little from that of the victims.'

⁴ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (London: Yale University Press, 1993). On some of the problems involved in the interpretation of earlier accounts of missions in various parts of the world, see Neill, 'The History of Missions'.

⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 12-14.

⁶ The other categories are 'affiliation', which is the conversion of a person or group lacking any prior spiritual orientation; 'intensification', involving an increased commitment to a religion already followed; and 'institutional transition', whereby a member of some major religious tradition switches from one sub-group to another, as for example when a Christian exchanges Anglicanism for Roman Catholicism. Rambo's initial definition of apostasy (*Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 13) stresses its repudiative aspect, though later, when considering apostasy as one of various factors that lead to religious conversion, he states that 'all conversions implicitly require a leaving-behind or a reinterpretation of some past way of life and set of beliefs' (p. 53), which ties apostasy in with tradition transition. To avoid confusion, I shall reserve the terms 'apostasy' and 'apostatize' here for reversions to paganism following a conversion to Christianity.

⁷ See Alan R. Tippett, 'Conversion as a Dynamic Process in Christian Mission', *Missiology*, 2 (1977), 203-21 (pp. 217-20).

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf

⁸ See, for example, Richard E. Sullivan, 'The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan', *Speculum*, 28 (1953), 705-40 (p. 715): 'A lack of valid sources complicates any attempt to discuss the content of missionary preaching designed to win converts'.

⁹ See note 4 above.

¹⁰ *HE* 1.25.

¹¹ *HE* 4.16.

¹² Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles in "The Ecclesiastical History"', *Traditio*, 31 (1975), 328-35 (p. 333), reaches a similar figure (twenty-four) but provides no list. In my list below, which excludes the Frisian conversions mentioned in *HE* 5.10 and 19, the convert or converts are named first, the converter second: King Æthelberht of Kent, preceded by some of his subjects and followed by many more, by Augustine (*HE* 1.26); King Sæberht of the East Saxons and his people, by Mellitus (*HE* 2.3); King Eadbald of Kent, still pagan after the death of his father Æthelberht, but who banned idolatry in his kingdom following his own conversion by Archbishop Laurence (*HE* 2.6); eleven followers of King Edwin of Northumbria, baptized by Bishop Paulinus at the same time as Edwin's infant daughter Eanflæd (*HE* 2.9); King Edwin himself, his nobles and many of his subjects, by Paulinus at York (*HE* 2.14); Edwin's sons Osfrith and Eadfrith, with many more Northumbrians, by Paulinus during the following six years (*HE* 2.14); King Eorpwold of the East Angles and his subjects, through King Edwin's persuasion (*HE* 2.15; the earlier, incomplete conversion of Eorpwold's father, King Rædwald, is also described here); the East Angles under King Sigebert, Eorpwold's brother, who had been converted in Gaul, with the help of Bishop Felix (*HE* 2.15); the kingdom of Lindsey by Paulinus (*HE* 2.16); many Northumbrians by James the Deacon at York (*HE* 2.20); King Oswald of Northumbria and his followers, by Irish clerics (*HE* 3.3); numerous Northumbrians under Oswald, by Bishop Aidan and other Irish monks (*HE* 3.3); the West Saxon King Cynegisl and his subjects by Birinus (*HE* 3.7); Peada, son of Penda and chief of the Middle Angles, with many of his followers, by Bishop Finan (*HE* 3.21); many of Peada's people by the four priests Cedd, Adda, Betti and Diuma (*HE* 3.21); many Mercians and Middle Angles by Bishop Diuma (*HE* 3.21); King Sigebert of the East Saxons and his followers, by Finan at the instigation of King Oswiu of Northumbria (*HE* 3.22); more East Saxons, by Cedd and an unnamed priest, again through Oswiu's agency (*HE* 3.22); yet more East Saxons, by Cedd, now Bishop of the East Saxons, at Bradwell-on-Sea and Tilbury (*HE* 3.22); King Swithelm of the East Angles, Sigebert's successor, by Cedd at Rendlesham (*HE* 3.22); Mercia and neighbouring kingdoms following the death of Penda, by King Oswiu (*HE* 3.24); King Sigehere of the East Saxons and his people, reconverted by Bishop Jaruman (*HE* 3.30); the South Saxons, whose king Æthelwealh was already Christian, by Wilfrid (*HE* 4.13); the people of the Isle of Wight, converted on Wilfrid's initiative by Beornwine and Hiddila (*HE* 4.16); and numerous Northumbrians, reconverted by Cuthbert (*HE* 4.27).

¹³ See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xxi: 'Speaking generally, the ecclesiastical historian conceived of the content of paganism [. . .] unseriously. There was no need to define its objectives, still less to distinguish its facets'.

¹⁴ *HE* 2.15.

¹⁵ *HE* 2.15.

¹⁶ *HE* 3.1.

¹⁷ *HE* 3.30.

¹⁸ *HE* 3.30: 'quasi per haec possent a mortalitate defendi'. Bede also mentions later on (*HE* 4.27) that Cuthbert reconverted many in the Northumbrian countryside who had reverted to paganism (see note 12 above).

¹⁹ *HE* 2.5.

²⁰ *HE* 2.3: 'Vbi uero et haec prouincia uerbum ueritatis praedicante Mellito accepit' (After this race had accepted the word of truth through the preaching of Mellitus).

²¹ *HE* 2.6.

²² *HE* 2.5.

²³ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 49-50.

²⁴ *HE* 1.26. On the conversion of Kent, see further below, pp. 15-18.

²⁵ *HE* 3.7.

²⁶ *HE* 3.30: 'Nam et ipse rex et plurimi de plebe siue optimatibus, diligentes hanc uitam et futuram non quaerentes, siue etiam non esse credentes'.

²⁷ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 34.

²⁸ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p. 47: 'The most "fertile" field of conversion in the missionary setting has tended to be among the so-called animists, such as the various tribal groups in Africa, South America, and India. Folk religion is less resilient in the face of the world religions—especially Christianity and Islam. Animists rarely have extensive organizations and ideologies that are linked with anyone beyond their village. Lacking these internal structures and external resources, they are more easily disconnected from indigenous modes of thought and action'.

²⁹ See C. E. Stancliffe, 'From Town to Country: The Christianisation of the Touraine 370-600', in *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. by Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), pp. 43-59 (pp. 52-3); and Sullivan, 'The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan', p. 712.

³⁰ Stancliffe, 'From Town to Country', p. 53. See also David K. Jordan, 'The Glyphomancy Factor: Observations on Chinese Conversion', in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 285-303 (p. 294): 'there is almost certainly a continuum

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf

in the extent to which converts do or do not abandon old beliefs, particularly if they are not seen as significantly competing with "equivalent" new ones'.

³¹ James Campbell, 'Observations on the Conversion of England', *Ampleforth Journal*, 78 (1973), 12-26; repr. in James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Hambledon, 1986), pp. 69-84.

³² Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Batsford, 1972), pp. 63-7.

³³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 34-5.

³⁴ On adhesion, see E. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 15-16, and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 28, n. 33. Indirect evidence of Anglo-Saxon polytheism before Christianity is found in the letter written between 722 and 732 by Daniel, Bishop of Winchester, to the continental missionary Boniface (Wynfrith); see *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. by M. Tangl, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Epist. select., 1 (Berlin, 1916), pp. 38-41 (no. 23), and *English Historical Documents I: c. 500-1042*, ed. and trans. by Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd edn (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), pp. 795-7 (no. 167). The letter reads like the product of Daniel's personal experience in opposing heathenism among the Anglo-Saxons of his day, and contains frequent references to a plurality of pagan deities.

³⁵ *HE* 2.15.

³⁶ See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. by Naomi Goldblum (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 8: 'Monotheism, in its war against polytheism, is an attempt to impose unity of opinions and beliefs by force, as a result of an uncompromising attitude towards the unity of God. Polytheism, by contrast, by its very nature includes an abundance of gods and modes of ritual worship, and so it has room for different viewpoints and beliefs and therefore is pluralistic. This pluralism is not just the product of compromise but is in fact an ontological pluralism that constitutes a deeper basis for tolerance'.

³⁷ Campbell, 'Observations on the Conversion of England', p. 74, identifies 'the inanities of idol-worship' as a missionary line in Bede. References to idols and idolatry in *HE* are listed in *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, 2 vols, ed. by C. Plummer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1896), II 59: in Kent, *HE* 1.30, 1.32, 2.6, 3.8; in Essex, 2.5, 3.22, 3.30; in Northumbria, 2.10, 2.11, 2.13, 3.1; in East Anglia, 2.15; in Mercia, 2.20; in Sussex, 4.13, 5.19; and among the Anglo-Saxons generally, 2.1.

³⁸ *HE* 3.22.

³⁹ The Bible is cited here by book, chapter and verse from *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. by R. Weber et al., 2 vols., 4th edn (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1994). The Psalms are cited in the Gallican version.

⁴⁰ *HE* 2.10.

⁴¹ See Wallace-Hadrill, *Commentary*, p. 68.

⁴² *HE* 2.10: 'Omnes dii gentium daemona, Dominus autem caelos fecit' (All the gods of the nations are devils; but the Lord made the heavens). Cf. Ps. 95.5: 'Quoniam omnes dii gentium daemona, at vero Dominus caelos fecit' (since all the gods of the nations are devils, but indeed the Lord made the heavens).

⁴³ *HE* 2.10: 'Oculos habent et non uident, aures habent et non audient, nares habent et non odorabunt, manus habent et non palpabunt, pedes habent et non ambulabunt' (eyes have they but they see not; they have ears but they hear not; noses have they but they smell not; they have hands but they handle not; feet have they but they walk not). Cf. Ps. 113.13-15: 'oculos habent et non uidebunt, aures habent et non audient, nares habent et non odorabuntur, manus habent et non palpabunt, pedes habent et non ambulabunt' (they have eyes but they will not see, they have ears but they will not hear, they have noses but they will not smell, they have hands but they will not touch, they have feet but they will not walk).

⁴⁴ Cf. Ps. 113.12: 'simulacra gentium argentum et aurum, opera manuum hominum' (the idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men's hands).

⁴⁵ *HE* 2.10: 'similes ergo efficiuntur his, qui spem suae confidentiae ponunt in eis' (and those who put their trust in them therefore become like them). Cf. Ps. 113.16: 'similes illis fiant qui faciunt ea et omnes qui confidunt in eis' (may those who make them and all who put their trust in them become like them).

⁴⁶ It has been suggested that some of the non-structural post-holes in building D2 at Yeavinger in Northumbria may have held totemic idols. There is no definite evidence of this, though the presence of a pit within the building containing the bones and skulls of oxen suggests sacrificial activity, and there are signs of the posts' removal at about the time when the missionary Paulinus visited Yeavinger after securing the conversion of King Edwin in 627: the removal of the posts may mark the conversion of the building for the purpose of Christian worship. See Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (London: HMSO, 1977), pp. 244-66, 277-80; and David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 45-8.

⁴⁷ *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, ed. by Plummer, II 59, takes the references in *HE* to Anglo-Saxon idols as straightforward evidence for the existence of these things, though Plummer notes the contrast with Tacitus's remark in the *Germania*, chapter 9, that the continental Germanic tribes did not make images of their gods.

⁴⁸ Book 2, chapter 10: see *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Historia Francorum*, ed. by W. Arndt, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, SS rer. Merov., 1 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 77-9. A modern English translation is Lewis Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 125-7. The Biblical passages in question are Exodus 20.3-5, Deuteronomy 6.13, Exodus 32.4, Psalms 105.30, 95.5, 134.15, 134.18, 96.7, Habakkuk 2.18-20, Jeremiah 10.11, Isaiah 45.18, 42.8, Jeremiah 14.22, and Isaiah 44.6-20.

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf

⁴⁹ See *HE*, p. xxx.

⁵⁰ Literary evidence from later sources does not, generally speaking, contribute to a clearer idea of what an Anglo-Saxon pagan god was like or what an Anglo-Saxon idol might have looked like. In Anglo-Saxon sermons and laws of the late tenth century or later we find repeated condemnations of worship of (or at) certain natural features, namely stones, trees and wells, sometimes accompanied by, or combined with, prohibitions against idol-veneration. A few earlier examples of the same sort presumably indicate continuity of pagan observance from pre-Christian times. For references, see *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, ed. by Plummer, II 59-60; K. P. Wentersdorf, 'The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife's Lament*', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 492-516 (p. 505). Such prohibitions in later texts are open to interpretation as responses to a late Anglo-Saxon revival of paganism resulting either from the direct influence of pagan Viking settlers in England or from a willingness to try anything, even an appeal to pagan deities long discarded, to ward off Viking attacks.

⁵¹ On the Biblical presentation of pagan idolatry, see Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, p. 39: 'In their polemics the prophets taunted the idol worshipers with the idiocy of worshiping wood and stone; the image is not a sign or symbol of god, the prophets flatly state, it is god. This view of the function of the image as a fetish was clearly influenced by the biblical polemics that attempted to portray the idolaters as identifying their god with wood and stone.' For the alternative view that this identification of idol and god resulted from a genuine misunderstanding of paganism, see Halbertal and Margalit, p. 259, n. 6, referring to Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 7-20, 133-47.

⁵² *HE* 1.26: 'rex perhibetur, ut nullum tamen cogeret ad Christianismum' (it is related that the king [. . .] compelled no one to accept Christianity). Wallace-Hadrill doubted the accuracy of Bede's information on this point: 'Certainly it was unusual that Germanic kings should exercise no compulsion to conversion [. . .] the passage sounds more in conformity with Bede's own thinking [. . .] than with what may actually have occurred' (*Commentary*, p. 37); but the fact that Bede reports Æthelberht's attitude as something he has heard about rather than as established fact may suggest scholarly caution just as well as a surreptitious introduction of the author's own ideas into the narrative.

⁵³ *HE* 1.26: 'Didicerat [. . .] seruitium Christi uoluntarium, non coacticum esse debere'.

⁵⁴ The chronology of the letters to Augustine and Æthelberht seems confused in Bede. I rely here on the reconstruction by R. A. Markus, 'Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy', in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. by Cuming, pp. 29-38.

⁵⁵ *HE* 1.29, 31.

⁵⁶ *HE* 1.32.

⁵⁷ *HE* 1.32: 'idolorum cultus insequere; fanorum aedificia euerte' (suppress the worship of idols; overthrow their buildings and shrines).

⁵⁸ HE 1.30.

⁵⁹ See *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, ed. by Plummer, II 58: 'Gregory might well urge on Ethelbert the desirability of destruction, and on Augustine the need for caution and compromise'; and C. Stancliffe, 'Kings and Conversion', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 14 (1980), 59-94 (p. 61, n. 12): 'Gregory loved emphasizing the necessity of combining two apparently contradictory approaches [. . .] I see the Mellitus letter as an example of promoting Christianity by "coaxing", whereas in the letter to Aethelberht the emphasis goes on "correcting"'. The references to coaxing and correcting are from the letter to Æthelberht (HE 1.32).

⁶⁰ On the extent to which Anglo-Saxon Christianity was syncretistic, see James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶¹ Archaeological excavations at Yeavinger have produced evidence that Gregory's suggestions in the letter to Mellitus were actually followed there under King Edwin. The D2 building also provides evidence consistent with the relapse into paganism after Edwin's death recorded by Bede (HE 3.1); see Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*, pp. 277-81.

⁶² HE 3.30: 'coeperunt fana, quae derelicta erant, restaurare, et adorare simulacra, quasi per haec possent a mortalitate defendi'.

⁶³ HE 3.8.

⁶⁴ See Sullivan, 'The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan', p. 721, for the use of similar tactics by Willibrord in Frisia.

⁶⁵ On the pagan conception of the relationship between god and idol or other representation, see Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, p. 40: 'Not mere transparent signs, icons have independent power; they heal and perform miracles and therefore are addressed and worshiped. Their unique power is due not to the identity between God and the material makeup of the icon, but to the special relationship between the two. The relationship is only partly based on the similarity between the symbol and the thing symbolized. The icon also shares some of the features of the thing it represents. This special relationship is described in a variety of forms. The idol is one of the manifestations of the god—sometimes his place of residence (like the soul in the body) and sometimes a direct concentration of his powers. Moreover, in certain ritual contexts there are special causal connections between the god and its icons. By means of these causal connections an act performed on the icon becomes an act upon the god itself.'

⁶⁶ See *Die Germania des Tacitus*, ed. by Rudolf Much, rev. by Herbert Jankuhn and Wolfgang Lange (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1967), p. 171 (chapter 9). In chapter 40 of the *Germania* (p. 441), the goddess Nerthus is said to be returned to a temple ('templum') by her priest after her periodic tours of the tribes who venerated her (see E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 236); but in the context the word 'templum' need not be taken to imply an actual building.

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf

⁶⁷ See Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 247-50.

⁶⁸ *Flateyjarbok*, ed. by C. R. Unger, 3 vols. (Oslo: Mallings, 1860-8), I 338/19-26: 'Freyr ræis þa ór uagninum ok takazst þeir fangbrøgdum ok uerdr Gunnarr miog afluani. hann serr þa at honum mun æigi sua buit duga. hugsar hann þa med ser ef hann getr yfirkomit þenna fianda ok verdr honum audit at koma aftr til Noregs at hann skal huerfa aftr til rettra(r truar) ok sættazst vid Olaf konung ef hann uill uit honum taka. ok þegar eftir þessa hugsan tekr Freyr at hrata firir honum ok þui næst fellr hann. hleypr þa ór likneskinu sa feande sem þar hafde leynzst ok uar þa skrokkrinn æinn tomr eftir'. [Freyr then rose from the wagon and they wrestled and Gunnarr was very nearly overpowered. He then realized that there was nothing he could do in these circumstances. Then he thought to himself that if he managed to overcome this devil and it was granted to him to get back to Norway, he would return to the true faith and become reconciled with King Óláfr if he was prepared to receive him. And immediately after he had this thought, Freyr started to stagger under pressure from him, and next he fell. Then the demon leapt out from the image where it had been hidden, and nothing but the shell remained].

⁶⁹ *HE* 2.13.

⁷⁰ Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 333, regards Coifi's status as a high priest as an invention of Bede's because there are no pagan priests mentioned elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon sources, apart from the Sussex magician who tries to work his power on Wilfrid in the Latin *Vita*. However, East Saxon pagan priests are also mentioned in *HE* 2.6: when Mellitus is recalled from Gaul to London by Eadbald of Kent, the people of London reject him, 'preferring to serve idolatrous high priests' (*idolatrix magis pontificibus seruire gaudentes*).

⁷¹ *HE* 2.13: 'Si autem dii aliquid ualerent'.

⁷² *HE* 2.13: 'Vnde suggero, rex, ut templa et altaria, quae sine fructu utilitatis sacrauimus, ocuis anathemati et igni contradamus' [therefore I advise your Majesty that we should promptly abandon and commit to the flames the temples and the altars which we have held sacred without reaping any benefit].

⁷³ *HE* 2.13: 'quis aras et fana idolorum cum septis quibus erant circumdata primus profanare deberet'.

⁷⁴ *HE* 2.13: 'Non enim licuerat pontificem sacrorum uel arma ferre uel praeter in equa equitare'.

⁷⁵ *HE* 2.13: 'Quod aspiciens uulgus aestimabat eum insanire' [the common people who saw him thought he was mad].

⁷⁶ *HE* 2.13: 'Nec distulit ille [. . .] profanare illud, iniecta in eo lancea quam tenebat'.

⁷⁷ *HE* 2.13: 'iussit sociis destruere ac succedere fanum cum omnibus septis suis'.

⁷⁸ See William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), p. 63: 'The

dominance of King Edwin at the seventh-century council which determined his kingdom's religious future and the advisory role of Coifi, on the contrary, suggest a priesthood subordinate to the monarch.' Coifi's role is more instrumental than Chaney's 'advisory' might suggest.

⁷⁹ Alcuin, *Versus de Patribus Regibus et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae*, pp. 158-62; see *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. by P. Godman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 17. Godman places the poem's composition between 781/2 and 792/3 (p. xlvii). Another important difference of content is that whereas in Bede's version Coifi devises his own ritual for defiling the shrines, in Alcuin's version Edwin tells Coifi what he must do (see Godman, note to lines 168ff, p. 19). These modifications serve to draw attention to the relative importance of Coifi's role in Bede's version.

⁸⁰ The fact that no reference is made to the burning of the idols in particular is probably not significant.

⁸¹ See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp. 116-17, and 128. The concept of bridge-burning derives from Virginia H. Hine, 'Bridge Burners; Commitment and Participation in a Religious Movement', *Sociological Analysis*, 31 (1970), 61-6, among whose examples is the ritual burning of Voodoo objects when Haitians convert to Pentecostalism (p. 65).

⁸² *HE* 3.1. See also Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, p. 17: 'missionaries in early medieval Europe often denigrated the indigenous gods, myths, and cultic practices of the Germanic peoples, sometimes characterizing them as satanic. Such an approach may result in the secret continued adherence by an indigenous population to their pre-Christian religiosity'.

⁸³ On these connections between Bede's account of Edwin's conversion, Tacitus's *Germania* and Old Icelandic saga literature, see North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, pp. 330-1.

⁸⁴ The chief source of the Old Norse myths alluded to here and below is the *Prose Edda* of the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241); see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and 'Gylfaginning'*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 21 and 23-4, and for a modern English translation, *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Dent, 1987), pp. 21 and 23-4.

⁸⁵ See C. Scott Littleton, 'Introduction, Part I', in Georges Dumèzil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. by Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. ix-xviii.

⁸⁶ *Die Germania des Tacitus*, ed. by Much, p. 441.

⁸⁷ See Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 167-8.

⁸⁸ For *Hrafnkels saga*, see *Hrafnkels saga Freysgöða*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavik, 1950), 100-5; and for *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, see *Flateyjarbok*, ed. by Unger, I 400-1.

⁸⁹ See *Flateyjarbok*, ed. by Unger, I 401/25-30: 'En er hann kom a land þa sa hans menn stodhross nokkur vid ueginn er þeir sogdu at Freyr oetti. konungr staeg a bak hestinum ok let

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf

taka rossin ok ridu þeir nu fram til hofsins. konungr stæig af hestinum ok gek inn j hofit ok hio nidr godin af stöllum. sidan tok hann Frey undir hond ser ok bar hann vt til hestz en byrgde sidan hofit' (And when he came to land his men saw some stud-horses by the wayside which they said Freyr owned. The king mounted the stallion and had the mares caught and they then rode on to the temple. The king alighted from the stallion, entered the temple, and struck down the gods from the pedestals. Then he took Freyr under his arm, carried him out to the stallion, and then closed up the temple).

⁹⁰ Evidence for Woden as the god of Coifi's cult is assembled in Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, pp. 50-4. Davidson regards the identification as 'likely'. Henry Mayr-Harting (*The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 26) accepts it without qualification ('The action of the pagan priest Coifi in flinging his spear into the temple [. . .] is a small but highly significant pointer to the cult of Woden and the knowledge of his mythology at that time'). J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (*Commentary*, p. 72) questions whether Bede would have seen the connection between Coifi's gesture and Woden. Davidson regards Coifi's burning of the shrines and idols as part of the total pattern of ritualistic behaviour, Óðinn having a particular association with cremation in Norse sources.

⁹¹ A brief allusion to a myth of Woden occurs in the Old English *Nine Herbs Charm* (*Metrical Charm 2*) 31-3: Woden destroys a serpent by striking it with inscribed twigs: 'ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas, sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah' [then Woden took nine glory-twigs and struck the snake, so that it flew into nine pieces]; see *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. by E. V. K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 6 (New York, 1946), p. 120. The 'glory-twigs' are understood by most scholars to refer to runically inscribed twigs used for magical purposes. The association of Óðinn with runic expertise and magic is well established in Old Norse sources; see Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. by Angela Hall (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), pp. 268-9, s.v. *Runes*.

⁹² See *Edda: Prologue and 'Gylfaginning'*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 50 (trans. in Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson, Edda*, p. 54); and *Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 2 vols., ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), I 42 (trans. in Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson, Edda*, pp. 96-7).

⁹³ See Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 124, s.v. *Gungnir*.

⁹⁴ *Völuspá*, str. 24, 1-4: 'Fleygði Óðinn / oc í fólc um scaut, / þat var enn fólcvíg / fyrst í heimi' (Óðinn cast his spear, hurled it into the host; this was still the war first in the world). *Völuspá* is cited from *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by G. Neckel, rev. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), p. 6. The translation is Turville-Petre's (*Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 158). This myth presumably underlies the ritual, to which reference is sometimes made in the sagas, whereby the warriors of an opposing army

were dedicated to Óðinn by throwing a spear over them; see Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, p. 53.

⁹⁵ See Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, p. 50: 'It seems likely that Coifi the priest was the servant of the God of Battle, since his method of destroying and repudiating the temple of the gods was to hurl a spear at it and then to commit it to the flames.'

⁹⁶ We should also remember that in the Norse myth the outcome of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir was a truce resulting in the cohabitation of the two divine tribes—a development which would imply, in the context of conversion, a syncretistic combination of pagan and Christian religious elements. Paulinus would certainly have disapproved of these implications if he had known of them.

⁹⁷ Cf. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: from Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 123, who describes Coifi as 'the classic case of the poacher turned gamekeeper'.

⁹⁸ *HE* 2.13.

⁹⁹ Cf. North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, pp. 330-40, who sees a very different set of historical realities underlying Bede's account of Edwin's conversion. Coifi is a shadow, Bede's invention (though see note 70 above). The name *Coifi* is derived (via *i*-umlaut) from Latin *cofia*, 'hood', and is a nickname conferred by the Northumbrians on Paulinus after they had seen him wearing a hood. It was thus Paulinus who attacked the Goodmanham shrines and burnt them; but both Edwin and his subjects have, by this point, already been confused by this same hood into identifying Paulinus with the god Woden. In support of this hypothesis, North cites the epithet 'Long-hood' (*Síðhöttur*), used of Óðinn in str. 48 of the Norse Eddic poem *Grimnismál*. See also the reviews of North's book by T. A. Shippey, *Modern Language Review*, 95 (2000), 170-1, and J. Gerritsen, *English Studies*, 81 (2000), 143-4.

¹⁰⁰ See Kenneth Sisam, 'Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 39 (1953), 287-348. One of Bishop Daniel's suggestions to the English missionary Boniface is that he should show pagans (by arguments based on their beliefs about procreation among their gods and goddesses) that their supposed deities must really have been men and women.

¹⁰¹ For a recent review of the evidence, see Paul Cavill, 'Christianity and Theology in *Beowulf*', in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. by Paul Cavill (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), pp. 15-39. *Beowulf* is cited here from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edn (Boston: Heath, 1950).

¹⁰² *Beowulf*, ll. 1202-14, 2354-66, 2501-8, 2912-19; and see pp. xxxix, 268.

¹⁰³ The question of the date of a poem which draws, as *Beowulf* almost certainly does, on oral traditions deriving from the settlement period, and may have gone through many redactions in either oral or written form (or both), is a difficult one to formulate in any very

Burning Idols, Burning Bridges: Bede, Conversion and Beowulf

useful or precise way. With only a single manuscript at our disposal, there seems to be no way of judging at what stage the poem assumed the general form it now has. Attempts to date *Beowulf* have too often ignored this theoretical difficulty; see *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Colin Chase (London: University of Toronto Press, 1981; repr. 1997). The arguments of H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), pp. 41-56 (chap. IV, 'The origins and history of the heroic poems') for a relatively early date (late seventh or eighth century) remain compelling.

¹⁰⁴ The terms for God employed in the poem are, in descending order of preference, 'God' [God], 'Dryhten' [Lord], 'Metod' [Ordainer], 'W(e)aldend' [Ruler], 'Alw(e)alda' [All-powerful one], and 'Fæder' [Father], in addition to about a dozen other words each used once or twice. There is no significant difference between the terms preferred by the narrator and those favoured by his characters. For a list of terms and line-references, see F. C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 94, n. 48. Robinson's list is complete and correct except in the following respects: ll. 227 and 625 'Gode', actually attributed respectively to the Geats and Wealhþeow by the poet (not by Beowulf or Hroðgar) via indirect speech, are both listed twice, each of them both correctly and incorrectly; l. 1397 'Gode' and l. 1398 'Drihtne' (attributed by the poet to Hroðgar via indirect speech), and l. 2741 'Waldend' (used by Beowulf) are omitted from the list; and l. 2330 'Dryhtne' is misidentified as in an indirect speech attributed by the poet to Hroðgar (it is in fact attributed to Beowulf).

¹⁰⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 227, 625, 1397, 1626.

¹⁰⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 107, 1261.

¹⁰⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 168-9, 705-7, 1056-7.

¹⁰⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 786, 1682: 'Godes andsaca(n)' [God's enemy].

¹⁰⁹ *Beowulf*, l. 811: 'he [wæs] fag wið God' [he was in a feud with God].

¹¹⁰ For example *Beowulf*, ll. 381-4, 928-31, 944-6, 955-6, 1778.

¹¹¹ For example *Beowulf*, ll. 440-1, 685-7, 967-8, 1658-64.

¹¹² See J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), 245-95, repr. in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 51-103, Appendix (c), 'Lines 175-88'. Tolkien thought that lines 181-88 'have a ring and measure unlike their context, and indeed unlike that of the poem as a whole'; but cf. K. Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 73, n. 1: 'I see nothing in this passage (175 ff.) to establish the view that any part of it has been added to a text essentially the same as that which has come down to us'.

Peter Orton

¹¹³ Cf. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics'; C. Donahue, 'Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good', *Traditio*, 7 (1949-51), 263-77, at p. 275, n. 70; and 'Beowulf and Christian Tradition: a Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance', *Traditio*, 21 (1965), 55-116, at p. 76.

¹¹⁴ Robinson, 'Beowulf' and the Appositive Style, pp. 29-59.

¹¹⁵ See Edward B. Irving Jr., 'Christian and Pagan Elements', in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1996), pp. 175-92 (pp. 187-88), for a critical response to Robinson's theory.

¹¹⁶ See Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf*, p. 72.

¹¹⁷ Donahue, 'Beowulf and Christian Tradition', pp. 60-71.

¹¹⁸ Rom. 1.19-23.

¹¹⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 700-2.

¹²⁰ *Beowulf*, ll. 1057-8.

¹²¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2858-9.

¹²² This article has benefited from criticisms of an earlier version by Dr R. W. McTurk, Dr Felicity Rash and Mr R. M. Orton, and from comments on a later version by the *LSE* editors and two anonymous readers, though of course the author is alone responsible for the views it contains, and for any remaining errors.