

## ST MILDRITH OR THE MONASTIC LIFE AGAINST ALL ODDS IN GOSCELIN'S *VITA DEO DILECTAE VIRGINIS MILDRETHAE*

*Alenka Divjak*

### Abstract

This paper discusses St Mildrith (*dies natalis*\*, 13 July, †732/733) in Goscelin's *Vita Deo dilectae virginis Mildrethae*, the abbess of the famous monastery Minster-in-Thanel, Kent, and a consecrated virgin descended from the Kentish and Mercian royal families. The emphasis of the paper is on the examination of a limited number of hagiographic elements which stress most pointedly Mildrith's associations with monasticism and which are viewed in the broader perspective of Anglo-Saxon female sanctity.

**Key words:** early Anglo-Saxon Christianity, Anglo-Saxon concept of female sanctity, founding abbesses, consecrated virgins, hagiography

### INTRODUCTION

The successful completion of the process of conversion in Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh and eighth centuries, described alternately as the golden age of Christianity and the golden age of culture and scholarship, is in great measure the result of material, military and moral support given to Christian missionaries by the kings of the so-called Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy.<sup>1</sup> The kings emerged from their cooperation with the Christian Church and the Papacy with enhanced prestige,<sup>2</sup> and the Church even more explicitly expressed its gratitude for the royal support by elevating to sanctity a

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\* Latin: day of birth, in this case the date of the saint's death or birth into heaven, spiritual rebirth.

<sup>1</sup> Heptarchy is a collective name to denote the supposed seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Kent, Essex, Sussex and Wessex, which were believed to have emerged in the early medieval period in the areas settled by Teutonic tribes in the sixth century. The term is attributed to Henry of Huntingdon, who had used it in his *Historia Anglorum* in the 12<sup>th</sup> century: James Campbell, "Some Twelfth-Century Views of the Anglo-Saxon Past", in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*. London: Hamledon P, 1986: 209-228, 213. For the use of the term in the sixteenth century, see Walter Goffart, "The First Venture into 'Medieval Geography': Lambarde's Map of the Saxon Heptarchy (1568)", in Jane Roberts and Janet Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise. Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of Her Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997: 53-60.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer*. London: Longman, 1987, 9-11.

number of royal men and women from this early Anglo-Saxon period. If pagan ancestors of Anglo-Saxon kings traced their origin back to the pagan gods, especially Woden,<sup>3</sup> close familial connections of royal families with Christian saints promoted in various hagiographic accounts served as another, even more effective way of emphasising the sacral nature of their reign.<sup>4</sup>

Hagiography constituted an important literary genre in the early Christian church, providing the accounts of early Christian saints whose fates were recorded in either *passiones* or *vitae*. The *passio* focuses on the saint's suffering and martyr's death, this aspect being particularly emphasised in the period of massive religious persecutions before Constantine I. The *Martyrdom of St Polycarp* is the earliest extant example of the *passio*, written in Greek, and provides an eyewitness account of Polycarp's martyrdom in 155, which was followed over the course of the next century and a half by many other *passiones* of those men and women who suffered execution because of their faith. The *vita*, by contrast, asserted its position later, in the age of Constantine and his successors, when the focus of sanctity shifted from the saints' martyr's death to their renunciation of the world, their fight against evil forces, temptations of all kinds and even their own bodies, the so-called bloodless martyrdom, the best known examples of this kind of sanctity being provided in the fourth century by *Vita sancti Antonii eremitae* (the *Life of St Anthony the Hermit*) and *Vita sancti Martini* (the *Life of St Martin*).<sup>5</sup>

Hagiography, Latin and vernacular, grew increasingly popular in the early Anglo-Saxon period which created a wide variety of native Anglo-Saxon saints, such as abbots who had founded monasteries (Benedict Biscop), missionary bishops (Wildrid and Cuthbert) and hermits (Guthlac). Apart from those saints, the early Anglo-Saxon period abounded in native saints of the royal stock, such as kings who had been murdered by their pagan opponents (Oswald), princes and kings murdered by their rivals for the throne (Æthelred and Æthelberh), queens who had founded monasteries (Etheldreda) and consecrated royal virgins (Mildrith).<sup>6</sup> This paper focuses on St Mildrith, the abbess of the rich and prestigious monastery Minster-in-Thanel, Kent, and a consecrated virgin, related through her father to the kings of Mercia and through her mother to the Kentish royal family.<sup>7</sup> Although Minster-in-Thanel was a monastery with a firmly established

<sup>3</sup> Herman Moisl, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies". *Journal of Medieval History* 7, 1981: 215-248, 215.

<sup>4</sup> D. W. Rollason, "The cults of murdered royal saints in Anglo-Saxon England". *Anglo-Saxon England* 11, 1983: 1-22, 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> S. H. Wallis, "Understanding and Dealing with Evil and Suffering: A Fourth Century A.D. Pagan Perspective". U of Adelaide. School of European Studies and Languages. The degree of Masters by Research in Classical Studies, 2008, 89. <<http://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/handle/2440/49853/2/01front.pdf>>. Accessed: February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Head, "The Development of Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in Western Christendom to the Year 1000". Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, 1999. <<http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography/survey1.htm>>. Accessed: March 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Mildrith was brought up in the monastic environment of Minster-in-Thanel, founded by her mother Domne Eafe (Lady Eve), the Kentish princess and divorced wife of Merwalh, the sub-king of Mercia, by whom she had three daughters (Milgith, Mildburg and Mildrith) and a son (Merefin), all her children being elevated to sanctity. According to the legend, she and her husband decided to separate "for the love of God". Mildrith seems to have been raised in Kent by her mother and more elaborate accounts provide additional information about Mildrith's education at the abbey of Chelles near Paris, an elite school for future nuns. According to Goscelin, Mildrith prospered as a disciple in this environment, but found herself in mortal danger after having rejected the marital offer of one of the abbess's relatives. The offended abbess, named

learned tradition under Mildrith's successor Eadburga<sup>8</sup> (abbess from 732/733-751),<sup>9</sup> no contemporary or nearly contemporary Minster-in-Thanel version of Mildrith's life has survived. The saint's *dies natalis*, 13 July, is recorded in several calendars from the late ninth to the late eleventh century<sup>10</sup> and various hagiographic sources, Latin and vernacular, from the late Anglo-Saxon age,<sup>11</sup> but it was not until the second half of the eleventh century that she was singled out in a crowd of her saintly relatives by the Flemish monk Goscelin of St Bertin in Flanders. He arrived in England in the early 1060s, became a member of St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, in the late 1080s, and wrote for this religious house a number of hagiographic texts.<sup>12</sup> His *Vita Deo dilectae virginis Mildrethae* (*The Life of the Virgin Mildrith, beloved of God*, BHL 5960)<sup>13</sup> is the first hagiographic account which concentrates primarily on St Mildrith rather than on her prestigious Kentish ancestry, the first Anglo-Saxon family to be converted. Goscelin's text underlines those hagiographic elements which emphasise both her family's proselytising efforts and her own eligibility for sanctity: 1) the family's royal status and its active role in the conversion process, 2) the saint's inclination for monastic life, 3)

rather sarcastically Wilcoma, exposed the rebellious girl to a series of tortures, but Domne Eafe managed to rescue her daughter, whom she had consecrated as a nun, and after giving up her abbatial post in the late 690s, she appointed Mildrith as her successor. Mildrith probably died as an old woman in the early 730s.

<sup>8</sup> According to K. P. Witney, "Kentish Royal Saints: An Enquiry into the Facts behind the Legends". *Archaeologia Cantiana* 101, 1984: 1-21, 15-18, Eadburga/Bugga was the daughter of Eormengyth/Eangyth, Domne Eafe's sister, and Centwine of Wessex. For Eadburga's connections with St Boniface, see Eckenstein, *Women under monasticism*, 120-124.

<sup>9</sup> According to D. W. Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England*. Leicester: Leicester UP, 1982, Mildrith died after 732, 16, while Eadburga, according to Witney, "The Kentish Royal Saints", 16, died in 751. For the possibility that Mildrith's successor Eadburga and her disciple Leobgyth/Leoba belonged to the community at Minster-in-Thanel, see Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 35-36, and Witney, "Kentish Royal Saints", 16.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Wormald (ed.), *English Kalendars before A. D. 1100*. Henry Bradshaw Society, vol. 72. London, 1934.

Dep. 13 July, nos. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14 (14 July), 16, 17, 19, 20.

For a discussion of the lists referring to the resting-places of Anglo-Saxon saints, see D. W. Rollason, "Lists of saints' resting-places in Anglo-Saxon England". *Anglo-Saxon England* 7, 1978: 61-93.

<sup>11</sup> For the most detailed report on the sources and diffusion of Mildrith's legend, see Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 15-40. Witney's article also contains a short summary of sources analysed by Rollason in *The Mildrith Legend*, 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 60-62; D. Rollason, "Goscelin of Canterbury's Account of The Translation and Miracles of St Mildrith (BHL 5961/4). An Edition with Notes". *Medieval Studies* 48, 1986: 139-210; Susan Millinger, "Humility and Power: Anglo-Saxon Nuns in Norman Hagiography", in John A. Nichols and Lilian Thomas Shank (eds.), *Medieval Religious Women: Distant Echoes*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1984: 115-127, 111-116; F. Barlow (ed.), *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1962, xlvi-xlviii; Georges Whalen, "Patronage Engendered: How Goscelin Allayed the Concerns of Nuns' Discriminatory Public", in Lesley Smith and Janet H. M. Taylor (eds.), *Women, the Book and the Godly*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1995: 123-135, 126-127.

<sup>13</sup> Goscelin's *Vita Deo dilectae virginis Mildrethae* is divided into 28 chapters. Chapters I-III concentrate on Mildrith's Kentish ancestors who were baptized in the early seventh century; chapter IV provides an account of Mildrith's paternal grandfather, Eormenred, her mother, Domne Eafe, and Mercian father, Merwalh; chapters V-VI focus on the old family feud culminating in the deaths of Mildrith's maternal uncles, Æthelred and Æthelberh, and the foundation of Minster-in-Thanel; chapters VII-XX deal in detail with Mildrith's upbringing, monastic education at Chelles, her ordeal at the monastery and her return to Kent; chapters XXI-XXVII are dedicated to her consecration, abbatial position, saintly virtues and death after a long illness, while the final chapter describes the translation of St Mildrith from St Mary's church at Thanet to the church of SS Peter and Paul within the same community organised by her successor Eadburga.

the obstacles on the way to it, 4) the preservation of virginity, 5) monastic life, 6) the translation,<sup>14</sup> and 7) the official recognition of her sanctity. This discussion, however, is limited to the examination of the following three most significant ‘monastic’ elements 1) the foundation of Minster-in-Thanet, 2) Mildrith’s decision to embrace monasticism, and 3) her abbatial position at Minster, all of which are viewed within the wider context of Anglo-Saxon female sanctity.

## HAGIOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS

### The foundation of Minster-in-Thanet

In spite of the vehement protestations consistently repeated in hagiographic accounts about how their women saints mercilessly severed all the ties with their kin, the royal families in Anglo-Saxon England retained a central place in the lives of their monastic womenfolk, saints or non-saints, at all stages of their lives,<sup>15</sup> as confirmed by the cases of several Kentish royal women.<sup>16</sup> They seem to have felt safer in the vicinity of their relatives, and the establishment and endowment of monasteries to which they retreated either as widows or divorcees was regarded as the most convenient and decent way of providing for the bereaved royal women.<sup>17</sup> The kings on the other hand also benefited from the arrangement. Apart from removing unnecessary women relatives from the court, the role of generous protectors of monastic communities enhanced the kings’ prestige and enabled them, by appointing their womenfolk to the top positions in monastic communities, to reinforce royal control over a considerable source of wealth and influence.<sup>18</sup>

By granting a substantial tract of land to his relative Domne Eafe, Mildrith’s mother, for the foundation of Minster-in-Thanet, the Kentish king Ecgbert (664-73) therefore continued the family tradition of removing ‘retired’ female relatives from the court to the relatively comfortable and highly prestigious monastic environment. He, however, had another, even more pressing reason for being rid of Domne Eafe. By having

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<sup>14</sup> The *translatio* as an independent sub-genre of the *saint’s life* and the literary motifs typical of the *translatio* are discussed by Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 6. See also Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, ‘*Saints’ Lives as a Source for the History of Women*’, in Joel T. Rosenthal (ed.), *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*. Athens/London: U of Georgia P, 1990: 285-320, 296-297.

<sup>15</sup> See Witney, ‘*The Kentish Royal Saints*’, *Æthelberg*, 2-3, Eangyth, 14, 17-18, Eormenburg, 14. For the other functions of the monasteries in this early period, see Joan Nicholson, ‘*Feminae Gloriosae: Women in the Age of Bede*’, in Derek Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978: 15-29, 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Æthelburg*, the widow of Edwin of Deira (ca. 586-632/3), *Eormenburg*, the widow of Ecgfrith of Northumbria (ca. 645-685), and *Eangyth*, the widow of the West-Saxon king Centwine (676-685).

<sup>17</sup> Witney, ‘*The Kentish Royal Saints*’, 19. For a suggestion that monasteries often housed ‘difficult’ royal women, see, for example, Pauline Stafford, ‘*Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-century England*’. *Past and Present* 163, 1999: 3-35, 24-25. For a view that the famous abbess Hild of Whitby in Northumbria entered a monastery because, as member of a truncated royal branch of Deira, she could expect no advancement in the reign of the rival branch of Bernicia, see Christine Fell, ‘*Hild, abbess of Streonæshalch*’, in Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. (eds.), *Hagiography and Medieval Literature, A Symposium*. Odense: Odense UP, 1980: 76-99.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*. London: Continuum, 2003, 124.

granted her a substantial plot of land for founding the monastery on the Isle of Thanet, he wanted to settle an old family feud which reached its peak with the murder of his two cousins, Domne Eafe's younger brothers, Æthelred and Æthelberht (Goscelin, *Vita Deo Dilectae Virginis Mildrethae*, Ch. 5, 118-119).<sup>19</sup> The two princes, the sons of Ecgbert's uncle, the prince Eormenred, whose claim to the throne had been ignored in favour of his younger brother, Ecgbert's father Eorcenberht (640-64),<sup>20</sup> were most likely killed at Ecgbert's instigation.<sup>21</sup> He must have suspected them of having designs on the throne, especially as they seem to have been young men at that time, not mere boys as the Mildrith legend depicts them: "Ermenredus . . . filios suos Æthelredum atque Æthelbrihtum . . . fratri Eorconberto regi adhuc infantulos commendavit. . ." (Ch. 5, 116),<sup>22</sup> and nine years later, after Eorcenberht's death, they are still – rather illogically – referred to by Goscelin as 'pueri' (boys).

Domne Eafe for her part also seemed to be interested in the settlement which offered her the opportunity to settle in Kent after the divorce from her husband. Nowadays it is impossible to check the veracity of Goscelin's explanation that the divorce took place at the wish of both partners, eager to concentrate on heavenly kingdom after having given up their earthly possessions (Ch. 4, 115), but even in the eyes of the Church, the staunch believer in the indissolubility of marital union, this divorce was beyond every reproach.<sup>23</sup> This combination of exemplary piety and unblemished moral reputation additionally enhances the reputation of Mildrith's parentage and invests Domne Eafe with undisputed moral authority. Her saintly reputation enables her to return to Kent not as a destitute divorcee in need of shelter but as a worthy representative of her murdered brothers, soon to be regarded as martyrs and elevated to sanctity.<sup>24</sup> Her acceptance of Ecgbert's offer was additionally motivated by her preference for the intellectually and culturally advanced Kent, over the less sophisticated land of her husband: "...ubi, inter sanctorum luminaria et populos diuina religione florentes, beatius quam inter rudes adhuc Cisticolas Domino seruiat" (Ch. 5, 118).<sup>25</sup> According to the legend, she is far from being a passive recipient of royal favour, as by having used a clever device, she managed to trick the king into granting her more land than he was originally prepared to do.<sup>26</sup> Thus she wished to receive from the king as much land as her pet stag could encompass within one day, and when the king's advisor Thunnor, the murderer of the

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<sup>19</sup> All quotations and chapter references from Goscelin's *Vita Deo Dilectae Virginis Mildrethae* are taken from Rollason's edition in *The Mildrith Legend*, 104-143.

<sup>20</sup> Witney "Kentish Royal Saints", 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> Political consequences of this murder are analysed, for example, by Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 39-40; Witney, "The Kentish Royal Saints", 7-14; D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*. London: Routledge, 1991, 44; B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*. London: Routledge, 1997, 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> Translation: Ermenred . . . . . entrusted his two sons, Ethelred and Ethelbriht, little children at that time, to his brother Ethelred.

All the passages are translated by the author of this article.

<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*. Woodbridge: Boydell P, 1992, 72.

<sup>24</sup> Rollason, "The cults of murdered royal saints", 11-14.

<sup>25</sup> Translation: . . . where, amidst the lights of the saints and the people flourishing in divine religion, may she serve the Lord more devotedly than amidst even now rough worshippers of Christ.

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Hollis, "The Minster-in-Thanet Foundation Story". *Anglo-Saxon England* 27, 1998: 41-64, 50-51.

young princes, angrily opposed the king's consent to her wish, being shocked at the miraculous speed with which the stag was obtaining large tracts of land for Domne Eafe's foundation, the ground opened and swallowed him (Ch. 5, 118).

On the basis of the legend alone it is difficult to penetrate into the true character of Domne Eafe, hidden under several layers of fiction, nevertheless the legend suggests that she was a clever and resourceful woman. Historical evidence also implies that she must have possessed considerable political and diplomatic skills with which she managed to obtain the continual support of Kentish kings for her monastic foundation.<sup>27</sup> Her decision to take her daughter with her to Kent, train her as a nun and have her educated in an elite monastic school in Merovingian Gaul, the most prestigious kingdom in the West, suggests that she had a plan to change Minster-in-Thanet into a first-rate monastic institution. Apart from that, she must have been planning to establish a female royal dynasty within the monastery, and by passing her abbatial position on to her daughter Mildrith some years before her death,<sup>28</sup> she clearly articulated this ambition.

According to the legend, it is Domne Eafe and not Mildrith who founded the monastery. However, even though Mildrith does not play an active part in the foundation story of Minster-in-Thanet, this episode constitutes an integral part of her *Vita*, serving as an impressive introduction to Mildrith's equally impressive monastic career. In addition, this episode implies that being the head of such an institution is a privileged experience reserved for an exceptional personality. The main purpose of Goscelin's *Vita* is therefore to convince its audience that Mildrith deserves her leading position and saintly status for her own sake, and in order to prove the point, the text focuses on these aspects of her monastic life and these personal qualities which make her worthy of being venerated as a saint.

### Monastic life against all odds

According to the legend, Mildrith is raised by her mother as a nun, which was in line with the tendency of Anglo-Saxon royal families to oblate some of their daughters in their infancy or early childhood.<sup>29</sup> Mildrith's position of a monastic child in the *Vita* is depicted as a source of enormous prestige, as she is, according to Goscelin, encouraged in her vocation by the leading ecclesiastical authorities of her time, the archbishop Theodore of Canterbury and the abbot Hadrian of St Peter's, Canterbury (Ch. 6, 119-120). The pious Domne Eafe is also depicted as having reared her daughter in an atmosphere of piety. Her habit of dressing Mildrith soberly, and her endeavours to raise in the girl an interest in spiritual matters are indeed in line with St Jerome's

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<sup>27</sup> For example, there are several charters, all dating from 690, and all record grants of land to a certain abbess Aebba, who must be identified with Domne Eafe: Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 34. For a list of charters associated with Minster-in-Thanet, see S. E. Kelly (ed.), *Charters of St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, and Minster-in-Thanet*. Anglo-Saxon Charters 4. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. <<http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/kemble/pelteret/Csa/Csalist.htm>>. Accessed: October 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Hollis, "The Minster-in-Thanet Foundation Story", 56.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholson, "*Feminae Gloriosae*", 16-17, where she discusses the fate of Abbess Ælfled, daughter of Oswy of Bernicia, as the most obvious example of an oblate child. See also Yorke, *Nunneries*, 110-111.

suggestions about the proper upbringing of the girls destined for monastic life:<sup>30</sup> “... hanc preclara genitrix non aurotextis uel gemmatis purpuris, sed uirtutum monilibus et diuinis dotibus adornare atque ad ardentem lampadem ipsius oleum indeficiens amministrare satagebat” (Ch. 6, 119).<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, Goscelin is eager to depict Mildrith as cherishing monasticism and yearning for the life of piety, renunciation and humility entirely of her own accord, which links Goscelin’s account with *vitae* of other consecrated Anglo-Saxon royal virgins who, even though being sent into monasteries as infants and children, reveal unmistakable signs of future saintliness at an early age. Thus according to the *Vita*, Mildrith displays from her childhood onwards all necessary signs of a pious nun, feeling contempt for secular matters and preference for the spiritual life: “Hec enim non ut terrigena sed ut celigena id est non quasi in terris sed in celo nata, ita a tenera etatula spernebat infima et anhelabat ad superna” (Ch. 6, 119).<sup>32</sup> The marriage offer, which she receives at the abbey of Chelles from a high-born suitor and which she rejects, serves as an additional opportunity to highlight her determination (Ch. 10, 123). Mildrith’s action, however, has parallels in the broader hagiographic tradition where the oblate girls are depicted as being firm in their determination to remain consecrated virgins in spite of tempting marriage proposals from powerful suitors. As a result of her refusal, Mildrith has to undergo a series of tortures which link her to a certain degree with well known women martyrs from the early age of Christianity, such as St Agatha, St Catherine, St Eulalia, St Agnes, St Lucia etc., who also refuse the marriage offer of an influential suitor and pay for their determination first by a series of tortures and then by a martyr’s death, their fates being the topic of an influential hagiographic genre, the *passio*.<sup>33</sup> The enraged abbess, the relative of a rejected suitor, puts Mildrith into a lighted oven, but Mildrith remains unhurt by the fire, being even safer among the flames than among human furies: “Tutior hic erat innocentia inter flammicomos uigores quam inter humanos furores” (Ch. 11, 124).<sup>34</sup> Having realised the futility of her attempts to burn Mildrith, the abbess resorts to various forms of physical violence: “... teneram puellam allidit in terram, calcat pedibus, terit calcibus, tundit pugnibus acsi plumbatis et cestibus, lacerat et

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<sup>30</sup> Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997, 37-38.

<sup>31</sup> Translation: ...the illustrious mother endeavoured to adorn her not with gold-woven textiles and the purple ornamented with precious stones, but with the necklaces of virtues and with spiritual jewellery, and she also endeavoured to administer unailing oil to her burning lamp.

<sup>32</sup> Translation: This one just as if she was not earth- but heaven-born, that is not as on land but in heaven, so she from the tender age spurned the lowest and aspired to the highest.

<sup>33</sup> The pattern of the virgin martyr and the stages in her *passio* are presented, for example, by Raymon S. Farrar, “Structure and function in representative Old English saints’ lives”. *Neophilologus* 57, 1973: 83-93, 84: ‘The following constitutes the *topoi* for a virgin-martyr: her good character is briefly mentioned at the outset; her chastity is in some wise challenged, but her virginity is never lost, a figure of authority, but not necessarily a judge, tries to sway her, often in a trial-like setting, the saint delivers a series of set speeches either praising Christ, expounding some point of doctrine or rebuking the foolishness of the pagans and the impotence of their gods; she undergoes various torments, in some of which God intervenes to prevent her being harmed; she is killed by a sword blow; miracles occur after her death; a church is built on a site associated with the martyr.’ For further discussion on the life of a virgin martyr, see Joscelyn Wogan-Browne, “The Virgin’s Tale”, in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds.), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1994: 165-194, 173-174.

<sup>34</sup> Translation: Innocence was safer among the vigorous flames than human fury.

laniat uenantis unguibus, discerpit et extirpat crines furiosis tractibus” (Ch. 13, 126).<sup>35</sup> However, unlike early virgin martyrs, the heroines of the *passio*, Mildrith, the heroine of the *vita*, is not destined to die a violent death. She is rescued first by divine intervention, which prevents the abbess from murdering her: “Iam denique hanc suffocasset, extinxisset, enecasset, nisi alioquo forte interveniente diuina manus succurrisset” (Ch., 126),<sup>36</sup> and then by her mother, who sends ships to Gaul to rescue her daughter.

The fact that Mildrith’s chastity was threatened in the nunnery, which she had entered with the express purpose of preparing herself for the life of chastity and renunciation and on the assumption that in this elite monastic institution she would be safe from the intrusions of the secular world, only to experience there the ordeal of her life in the shape of an aggressive suitor, is not without a historical nucleus. The need for eligible brides was strong in the early medieval period which experienced the lack of marriageable women and witnessed their high mortality due to the harsh conditions of the age, malnutrition, and the risks of childbirth and pregnancies.<sup>37</sup> As a result, female monasticism was less safe in terms of renunciation and irreversibility than men’s monastic communities, and monastic women could be reclaimed by their families in case they were needed as brides and heiresses.<sup>38</sup> Nunneries, housing so many high-born and influential women with first-rate dynastic connections, were therefore in need of efficient political protectors. In Merovingian Gaul, for example, women monasteries tended to be located within city walls in order to discourage aggressive magnates from abducting nuns.<sup>39</sup> In early Anglo-Saxon England, aggression towards consecrated women increased in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, after the extinction of the majority of those Anglo-Saxon royal families which had been responsible for the foundation of several wealthy nunneries in the conversion period. The extinct royal families were replaced by other rulers who felt far less attachment towards the monastic institutions with which they had no familial ties. As a result, the new kings were hardly motivated to fund and support expensive monastic institutions,<sup>40</sup> always in need of additional material resources and privileges and always desirous of being exempted from taxation, road repairs and military service.<sup>41</sup> In this position, the new kings and their magnates did not hesitate to molest and abduct the nuns belonging to unprotected and vulnerable monasteries, even though such action incurred the wrath of monks, churchmen and saints alike.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Translation: ...she throws the tender girl to the ground, kicks her with feet, tramples her with heels, thrashes her with fists as if with lead balls and gauntlets, tortures and tears her with predatory nails, grabs and plucks her hair with furious motions.

<sup>36</sup> Translation: ...Undoubtedly and eventually, she would have strangled, destroyed, murdered her if by some chance the divine hand hadn’t intervened.

<sup>37</sup> David Herlihy, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?: A Reconsideration?”. *Medievalia et Humanistica* 13, 1985: 1-22.

<sup>38</sup> Stafford, “Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen”, 16-17.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Die Merowinger. Europa vor Karl dem Großen*, trans. Ursula Scholz. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Brooks, “Development of military obligations in the eighth and ninth-century England”, in Kathleen Hughes and Peter Clemoes (eds.), *England before the Conquest. Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971: 69-84.

<sup>42</sup> Lina Eckenstein, *Women under Monasticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1896, 123, 125-126.



The fact that virgin martyrs and consecrated virgins always manage to preserve their purity against all odds confirms a prestigious position of virginity as a vital element of female sanctity from the very beginnings of the Christian Church.<sup>43</sup> In fact, female sexuality was an object of contempt and suspicion within the early and medieval Church, and by medieval standards only the state of virginity, i.e. the rejection of sexuality, enabled a woman to be spiritually and intellectually equal to a man.<sup>44</sup> As a result, even though the Church in early Anglo-Saxon England elevated to sanctity many widowed or divorced royal women, who often acted as founding abbesses,<sup>45</sup> and carefully handled the rhetoric of virginity in order not to offend and degrade this influential social group, it was the category of virgin saints who were held in the highest esteem by the Church.<sup>46</sup>

Mildrith's purity is again on the agenda later, after her death, when her chastity is confirmed in the presence of Mildrith's successor Eadburga and the archbishop Cuthbert (Ch. 28, 143), ca. 748, when the incorruptibility of Mildrith's body, her similarity to a sleeping, not a dead person, and the cleanness of her clothes are regarded as a visible sign of her spiritual and physical purity: "Tum miracula miraculis occurrunt. Inueniunt virginem vestibus mundissimis et toto corpore post tot scilicet annos integram et incorruptam, ita ut uideretur magis dormire in thalamo quam putrescere in sepulchro. Hac quippe incorruptione et odoris suauitate diuina benignitas dignata est propalare, quanta sibi seruerit mentis et corporis puritate" (Ibid., 143).<sup>47</sup> To sum up, the preservation of virginity against all odds is the topic which occupies the most prominent position in the *Vita*, being explored in greater detail and with more emphasis than any other aspect of Mildrith's *vita* before and after her nightmare in Gaul.<sup>48</sup> The episode must therefore be regarded as a central point of the narrative and seen as an ordeal from which she must emerge with unblemished reputation in order to earn her position at Minster-in-Thanel, first as a nun and later as an abbess.

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<sup>43</sup> McNamara and F. Wemple, "Sanctity and Power: The Dual Pursuit of Medieval Women", in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (eds.), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977: 90-118, 94-96; Jo Ann McNamarra, "Muffled Voices: The Lives of Consecrated Women in the Fourth Century", in John A. Nichols and Lilian Thomas Shank (eds.), *Medieval Religious Women: Distant Echoes*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984: 11-29, 11-18; Jane Tibbett Schulenburg, "Sexism and the celestial gynaeceum – from 500 to 1200". *Journal of Medieval History* 4, 1978: 117-133, 117-118.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "The Heroics of Virginity. Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation", in Mary Bath Rose (ed.), *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Literary and Historical Perspectives*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986: 29-73, 32-33.

<sup>45</sup> J. T. Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100", in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalesky (eds.), *Women in Power in the Middle Ages*. Athens/London: U of Georgia P, 1988: 102-125, 105, 112; Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne F. Wemple, "Sanctity and Power", 98-99.

<sup>46</sup> Janemarie Luecke, "The unique experience of Anglo-Saxon nuns", in Lilian Thomas Shanks and John A. Nichols (eds.), *Medieval Religious Women: Distant Echoes*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984: 55-65, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Translation: Then the wonders of the wonders occur. They discover the virgin in the cleanest clothes and of the undecayed body, untouched and uncorrupted after so many years, so that she seemed to be sleeping in her bed rather than to be rotting in a sepulchre. By means of this incurrption and the sweetness of the odour, the divine benevolence decided to announce how well she had preserved the purity of her mind and body.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Hollis, "The Minster-in-Thanel Foundation Story", 56.

## MILDRITH'S ABBATIAL POSITION AT MINSTER-IN-THANET

There is some historical evidence about Mildrith's function as abbess. Her name appears in charters from the late seventh and early eighth centuries, referring to her abbatial position at Thanet from ca. 696 to ca. 732/733<sup>49</sup> and recording her attendance at the *witenagemot* at Baccancelde in Kent about 696-716.<sup>50</sup> In one of the preserved charters, ca. 716/7 A.D., Aethelbald (716-757), the king of Mercia, grants Mildrith a toll remission for one ship at the port of London.<sup>51</sup> This transaction suggests that Mildrith was a shrewd politician who recognised the growing influence of Mercia in the early eighth century. Even though her maternal Kentish dynasty was still in control in Kent, Mildrith must have found it wise to secure the good will of the kings of Mercia,<sup>52</sup> the policy which was even more energetically embraced by her successors at Minster.<sup>53</sup>

Goscelin's *Vita*, however, never praises the saint's political talents which were vital for the survival and prosperity of Minster-in-Thanet, focusing instead, in rather great detail, on her personal qualities. An ideal nun is humble and does not yearn for secular functions,<sup>54</sup> but if she is compelled to accept a leading position within her monastery, she does so with perfect modesty and humility. Mildrith was designated by her mother to succeed her as abbess, the hereditary abbatial status being a characteristic feature of early Anglo-Saxon royal nunneries,<sup>55</sup> and even Goscelin who tends to minimize the secular aspects of Mildrith's abbatial position, is not trying to conceal the fact. However, he words the situation in such a way that Mildrith, in spite of accepting this position from her mother, emerges even from this unmistakably secular situation as a model of humility. Goscelin argues that, by having accepted this function, she did a favour to her ailing mother who wanted to be relieved of her abbatial duties and who eventually resigned with the archbishop's consent: "Venerabili autem Domneua supplicante et pre diuturna egritudine se excusante, adhuc sacratissimus archipontifex superaddidit benedictionem dignissime Mildrithae, et pro ipsa matre tamquam spiritualem Saram prole innouandam ordinat in principem domus ac familie diuine, et abbatissam consecrate sanctimonialis choree" (Ch. 21, 135).<sup>56</sup>

Mildrith's authority as abbess is not based on fear, punishments and threats, but she endeavours to set a good example to the others by her own behaviour, wishing to be loved, not feared: *Ire uirtutis uia non tam imperat quam monstrat, non tam documentis quam exemplis comites prouocat. Ut omnibus precellentior, ita apparebat humilior. Ministra esse malebat quam magistra, prodesse quam preesse, famulatu quam precepto*

<sup>49</sup> Witney, "The Kentish Royal Saints", 15-16.

<sup>50</sup> Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity", 111, 124, fn. 36.

<sup>51</sup> S. E. Kelly (ed.), *Charters of St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, and Minster-in-Thanet*. Anglo-Saxon Charters 4. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995, 168-169 (no. 49). <<http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/kemble/pelletter/Csa/Csa%2049.htm>>. Accessed: October 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries*, 165; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 38; Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 16, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Millinger, "Humility and Power", 119-120.

<sup>55</sup> Luecke, "The Unique Experience", 58.

<sup>56</sup> Translation: When the venerable Domneua begged to be dismissed for the sake of a long-lasting illness, the most sacred archpriest bestowed his blessing on the most virtuous Mildrith, and on behalf of the mother herself, like the spiritual Sarah, rejuvenated by the offspring, he ordained her to be the chief of the house and the saintly family, and consecrated her as abbess of the pious saintly choir.

caritatis obsequium docere. Mansuetudine magis quam rigore, patientia quam terrore uincere curabat, diligere potius quam timere satagebat” (Ch. 23, 136).<sup>57</sup> She is a charismatic woman who is imitated and admired by all her nuns who compete to imitate their abbess as eagerly as possible in piety, humility and vigilance: “Una erat in eis contentio, que humilior, que obedientior, que vigilantior, que in omni probitatis emulatione sanctissime matri esset proximior” (Ibid., 136).<sup>58</sup> Apart from all these qualities, humility and piety on one hand and patience and personal gentleness on the other, Mildrith is praised by Goscelin for her ability to learn and study,<sup>59</sup> being depicted as reading in her cell. In her youth, she was given a good education, and at Chelles, she is depicted as surpassing other disciples and equalling her teachers: “Tradita ergo litterali discipline, docentes se precurrebat diuina capacitate. Vix audierat et docta erat. Thesaurizata memorie nec uolucres celi nec fures poterant auferre. Condiscipulas superabat, magistras equiparabat uel preueniebat” (Ch. 8, 121).<sup>60</sup>

On the basis of preserved information it is nowadays difficult to explain the posterity’s partiality towards Mildrith which enabled her to eclipse two well-articulated and energetic abbesses, the shrewd Domne Eafe, and the intellectually active Eadburga. It is also impossible to determine to what degree the popularity of Mildrith’s cult was the result of Eadburga’s energetic promotional activity and to what extent it was the result of Mildrith’s own actions. It can be argued, however, that Goscelin’s *Vita*, which depicts her as a gentle and spiritual woman, at least suggests which qualities might have attracted people around her.

## CONCLUSION

Goscelin’s *Vita*, the Latin text from the late eleventh century, is the first fully preserved hagiographic account which focuses primarily on St Mildrith, a royal virgin saint and an abbess, rather than on her illustrious maternal ancestors, the kings of Kent. The paper focuses on the following hagiographic elements in Goscelin’s *Vita* which are most closely associated with Mildrith and Minster-in-Thanel: 1) the foundation of the monastery, 2) the saint’s predilection for monasticism, and 3) her abbatial position. All of them are heavily influenced by the Anglo-Saxon concept of female sanctity, which,

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<sup>57</sup> Translation: To follow the path of virtue she did not require but demonstrated, not so much with admonitions rather than with examples did she encourage her companions. She preferred to be a servant rather than a teacher, to be of use rather than in charge, to teach the principles of charity by serving rather than by prescribing. More with gentleness rather than with severity, with patience rather than with terror she strove to be victorious, she endeavoured to be loved rather than feared.

<sup>58</sup> Translation: There was one competition between them, which of them would be humbler, more obedient, more vigilant, which one would most resemble the holiest mother in the imitation of every virtue.

<sup>59</sup> For a cliché of a saint as a precocious child and talented student and the use of this motif in other medieval genres, see R. Boyer, “An attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography”, in Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. (eds.), *Hagiography and Medieval Literature, A Symposium*. Odense: Odense UP, 1980: 27-36. For the motif of a precocious child with an adult mind, see G. Kreutzer, “Der puer-senex-topos in der altnordischen Literatur”. *Skandinavistik* 16, 1986: 134-145.

<sup>60</sup> Translation: Having been committed to the study of letters, she surpassed disciples in divine ability. As soon as heard, she was taught. The stored treasures of memory neither the birds of heaven nor the thieves could carry away. She surpassed her female school-fellows and either equalled or overtook her teachers.

in common with the broader ecclesiastical tradition, favoured in particular two types of saintly women: the founding abbess and the consecrated virgin, both of the two being praised as devoted nuns, excelling in the virtues of piety, humility and renunciation. On the other hand, Goscelin's *Vita*, in spite of its ecclesiastical vision of female sanctity, cannot completely ignore secular concerns and factors which influenced the actions of St Mildrith and her family in relation to the monastic community at Thanet. It is this continual intrusion of the secular world into Mildrith's monastic life at all stages of her life which directs the reader back to the study of historical and social circumstances fostering the foundation of women's monasteries, the most important recruitment base for early Anglo-Saxon royal women saints.

*Novo mesto, Slovenia*

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