

ELEGIAC ASPECTS IN ÆLFRIC'S
LIVES OF ENGLISH SAINTS FACING GOD



Antonio Bravo, University of Oviedo
Pedro Gonzalo Abascal, University of León

This paper explores the elegiac aspects in Ælfric's lives of English saints: Oswald, Edmund, Alban, Swithin and Ætheldryth. When Ælfric wrote these lives of saints the proximity of Doomsday was a widespread belief in England, and the conception of human existence as a wretched pilgrimage from this world to the next was a common topic in Old English literature. Ælfric's lives of English saints from this point of view are here examined taking into account the author's didactic and religious objective.

Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, actually a series of homilies written at the end of the tenth century, are not devoted primarily to English saints, in fact most of them are Roman martyrs or Old Testament figures (Skeat 1966): However, Ælfric introduced in his work five saints born in England, three martyrs: Alban, Edmund and Oswald; one bishop, Swithin; and one abbess, Ætheldrith.

Ælfric is a writer certainly influenced by many Latin sources, but also, as some critics have pointed out (Clemons 1966, Pope 1967, Hurt 1972, Godden 1978), by his Anglo-Saxon heritage. Greenfield says:

Whatever the exact mixture of influences, most scholars now agree that the predominant force behind Ælfric's rhythmical prose was his native English heritage... One can hear faint echoes of classical Old English poetry behind it. (1986, 83)

Ælfric was particularly interested in providing his audience with accounts of British saints, and he drew upon Bede and upon Latin hagiographers of his own day for lives of St. Alban, St. Ætheldryth, St. Edmund and St. Oswald. It has been suggested that all Ælfric's vernacular works were undertaken with one aim in view:

to enable his countrymen to enjoy the spiritual benefits to be derived from a knowledge of the Latin literature of the Church, by making available to them in their own language some of the literature itself, and the means of learning for themselves the language in which it was written. (Needham 1966, 15)

Ælfric lays no claim to originality and in the Preface of his *Lives of Saints* he says:

I say nothing new in this book, for it has stood written in Latin books for a long time, though the unlearned did not know of it, nor will Y falsely pretend to do so, for fathers strong in faith, and holy teachers wrote it in Latin for a lasting memorial, and for the edification of future generations. (Skeat 1966, LS Preface ll. 46-52)

Christian literature at the end of the first millennium in Anglo-Saxon England is mainly focused on announcing the transience of worldly goods and warning of the forth-

coming Last Judgement; actually a strong millenaral sense pervades Old English writings, mainly homilies written in the period of the Benedictine Revival as Gatch (1977), among many others, has studied. *The Blickling Homilies*, *The Vercelly Homilies* and most anonymous sermons and homilies are compendia of texts dealing with the end of the world and the «ubi sunt» motif. (Szarmach 1978) If fatalism is an aspect present in Anglo-Saxon thought, so is the concept of a decaying world nearing its end.

Literary authors and their audiences lived in a world of uncertain harsh reality marked out by Scandinavian invasions, poverty, disease and death. So it can be easily understood that the proximity of Doomsday was a widespread belief and that the conception of human existence as a pilgrimage from this world to the next was a common theme in preaching. As J. B. Trahern, says:

It is a thoroughly Boethian perspective: *Eala*, Alfred translates, *thaet nanwuht nis faeste stonendes weorces a wuniende on worulde* («Alas, that there is nothing of firm standing work ever remaining in this world»). The weakness in the moral sense was the sort which for Augustine in *The City of God* led to the coming of the Goths to punish the Romans, just as for Ælfric and Wulfstan the Danes were sent by God to punish the degenerate English for their sins. In the later eschatological homilies it eventually leads to the coming of Antichrist and the appearance of the signs of Doomsday. (1991, 165-66)

Thus, it was common that the elegiac aspects of Christian literature by the year 1000 insisted on the transience of worldly joys, on the futility of placing any trust in earthly goods and on the end that death puts to everything. The invitation to do penance—in order to be reconciled with God and, thereby, to be able to pass triumphantly from this life to the next—becomes a constant refrain in sermon-like writings. However, there is an essential difference between the fatalism we find in epic poems and this other kind of «Christian fatalism», by which God harmoniously rules the whole creation and it is all subjected to His power for the benefit of man. Those distressing events, which outwardly seem to be contrary to the divine will, are in fact permitted by God and, in some mysterious way, they serve to help man achieve eternal life.

Wulfstan calls attention to this situation as pointed out with accuracy (D. Whitelock 1963):

Leofan men gecnawað þæt soð is: eos worold is on ofste, and hit nealæcð þam ende, and þy hit is on worolde aa swa leng swa wyrse; and swa hit sceal nyde for folces synnan ær Antecristes tocyne yfelian swiðe, and huru hit wyrþ thænne egeslic and grimlic wide on worolde. (Bethurum 1957, 267) [Beloved men, Know what is true: this world is in haste, and its end approaches, and therefore things go from bad to worse in the world, and so it must of necessity greatly deteriorate because of the people's sins before the coming of Antichrist, and indeed it will then be dreadful and terrible far and wide throughout the world.]

Wulfstan calls attention to treachery and disloyalties, and gives us examples of good behaviour such as Edward the Martyr. These ideas are also present in Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*, as J. Bately points out:

In his discussions of the existence of evil in a world created by God, Ælfric also addresses the questions of fatalism, suffering and disease. Foolish men, he claims, often say they must live according to destiny as if God compels them to evil deeds. However, nothing takes place by destiny, but all things are arranged by the judgement of God. In the case of God's chosen servants, persecution and affliction, permitted by God, will cleanse them from all sins, as gold tried in fire. In the case of the wicked man sickness can be God's vengeance, though patience and prayers for mercy can cause him to be «washed from his sins by that sickness as a foul garment by soap». (1991, 80)

A consequence of such divine providence is that the existence of a ruthless fate may be immediately discarded. Naturally, if everything originates in God's omnipotence, even what causes grief and distress, it is easily understood that the attitude of a Christian who witnesses, for instance, the death of a loved person should be accordingly, and paradoxically, optimistic. This does not necessarily mean, however, that natural sorrow and lamentation for such a loss should be restrained. Thus, in the case of St. Edmund's martyrdom, the countrymen, who await the withdrawal of the Danish pirates to remove the king's body, grieve bitterly at their king's death and, even more so, when they are unable to find his head:

þa æfter fyrste syððan hi afarene wæron com þæt land-folc to þe þær to lafe wæs þa, þær heora hlafordes lic læg butan heafde, and wurdon swiðe sarige for his slege on mode, and huru þæt hi næfdon þæt heafod to þam bodige. (Skeat 1966, II, 324) [Then after a space, after they were gone away, came to the country-folk, who were still left there, to where their lord's body lay without the head and were very sore at heart because of his murder, and chiefly because they had not the head with the body.]

Nevertheless, once they have miraculously found St. Edmund's head, affliction turns into joyful thanksgiving to God:

and þæt halige heafod ham feredon mid him, þancigend þam ælmihtigan ealra his wundra. (Skeat 1966, II, 326) [and carried the holy head home with them thanking the Almighty for all His wonders.]

Parallel joy and thanksgiving arise among the lay brethren sent by Sexburh, Abbess of Ely, when they find a marble sepulchre for St. Ætheldryth:

þa naman þa gebroðra blyðelice þa ðruh and gebrohton to mynstre mycclum ðancigende gode. (Skeat 1966, II, 436) [Then the brethren joyfully took the coffin and brought it to the monastery, greatly thanking God.]

Ælfric points out the reverent care with which St. Oswald's body is handled by those who outlive him. Reverent treatment is similarly given to the epic heroes who die in the defence of their people, as is the case of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth. However, no lament or elegiac discourse is attributed, on St. Oswald's death, either to his brother Oswy or to the soldiers who escort him to remove the king's body; although it is not difficult to suppose some sort of funeral speech in praise of the king:

and genam þæt heafod and his swiðran hand, and mid arwurðnyse ferode to lindisfarnea cyrcan. (Skeat 1966, II, 136) [And took the head and his right hand, and with reverence brought them to Lindisfarne church.]

Instead, St. Oswald has time before his own death to entrust the souls of his dead warriors to God, as in similar epic episodes in which the chief of the *comitatus* makes a laudatory speech in honour of a dead comrade:

and gebæd for his folc þe þær feallende sweolt, and betæhte heora sawla and hine sylfne gode and þus clypode on his fylle, God gemiltsa urum sawlum. (Skeat 1966, II, 134-36) [And he prayed for his people who died falling, and commended their souls and himself to God, and thus cried in his fall «God, have mercy of our souls.]

As for the burial site of these saints, a shrine is normally built to lodge the saint's body or relics; sometimes his mortal remains are introduced into a church, usually one in a monastery. These religious places used to attract innumerable Christians in search of the saint's intercession to obtain a cure for their illnesses or to assist in their conversion, and in due course they turned into centres of devotion dedicated to the holy man, from which

his life and miracles became known far and wide. The construction of a shrine assisted the spread of the devotion to and the knowledge of the life of the saint who lay there; however, this was not an exclusively Christian practice. In relation to this, it is worth recalling the episode of *Beowulf* in which the Geat hero, on the brink of death, makes known his desire to have a barrow built on the headland so that his memory can be remembered by those sailors who make it out. In a similar way to shrines, this memorial is named after the hero: *Biowulfes biorh*. (Klaeber 1950)

St. Peter's monastery, in the city of Bamborough, is also near the coast. St. Oswald's uncorrupted arm was first laid here in a silver reliquary. His mortal remains were later transferred to the monastery of Bardney in Lindsey, thus fulfilling the wishes of his niece, the Queen of Mercia. In the case of St. Edmund, his remains were hurriedly buried for fear of the Danish invaders, and a makeshift church was built on the spot. St. Alban also had a church built in his honour, once the Roman persecution in England was finished. St. Ætheldryth's body was first placed in a wooden coffin in the graveyard of Ely monastery and, years later, her remains were transferred to the inside of the church and into a marble tomb. Finally, St. Swithun's remains were buried in the monastery of Winchester and, as Ælfric says, the numerous miracles worked in this place helped to spread the fame both of the saint and the monastery itself.

It is particularly interesting to note the funeral ceremonies performed in honour of the saints, which Ælfric describes in detail. In general, not only are they a way of thanking the saint for his miracles and acknowledging his sanctity, but they also show the attitude and state of mind of those who have lived side by side with him and now have to mourn him. As far as funeral ceremonies are concerned, the narration of St. Ætheldryth's translation into the monastery church is the most fully detailed of the five English saints' *Lives* studied here. According to Ælfric, Abbess Sexburh orders a tent to be pitched on the place where the holy woman's body rests and, while the marble tomb is being opened, the whole community intones hymns and psalms in her honour. Once the corpse has been exhumed and its incorruptibility confirmed, Sexburh shows her joy at this supernatural fact:

Sexburh þa hyre swuster swiðe þæs fægnode, and hi thwogon þa syððan þone sawl-leasan lichaman, and mid niwum gewædum bewundon arwurðlice, and bæron into þære cyrcan blyssigende mid sangum, and ledon hi on mycelre arwurðnyse mannum to wundrunge. (Skeat 1966, I, 438) [Her sister Sexburh was very glad, and afterwards they washed the soulless body, and wound it reverently in new garments, and bare it into the church rejoicing with hymns, and laid there in the coffin wherein she lies until now in great honour, for men to marvel at.]

A comparison between the attitude of these nuns in this episode and those faithful comrades present at Beowulf's cremation reveals similar patterns of reverence in the way dead bodies are treated. However, lamentation and fear of an uncertain future frame the epic episode, whereas joy and chanting provide the setting for the hagiographic narration: *blyssigende mid sangum*. In Beowulf we have the following lines in which a Geatish old woman sings the prophetic lament at the cremation:

Swylce giomorgyd sio geomeowle
æfter Biowulfe bundenheorde,
song sorgcearig, sæde geneahhhe,
þæt hio hyre, hearmdagas hearde ondrede,
waelfylla worn, wigendeses egesan,
hynþo ond hæftnyd.

In the same fashion an old woman
her hair bound up, wove a grief song
the lament for Beowulf; she said over and again
that she feared the attacks of the raiders,
many slaughters, the terror of troops,
humiliation and captivity.

(Klaeber 1950, LL.3150-55a)

Finally, in the case both of Beowulf and of St. Ætheldryth, the erection of a funeral barrow and the transferral of the tomb into the church, respectively, allow the propagation of their fame. We must keep in mind that the tomb of Beowulf was erected to preserve the hero's fame in succeeding ages as the poet sang at the very end of the poem.

| | |
|---|--|
| Geworhton þa Wedra leode hlæw on hli le, se wæs heah on brad, wegliendum wide gesyne, ond betimbredon on tyn dagum beadurofes becn. | Then the Weder people built on that headland a memorial barrow that was high and broad, to be seen far off by the travellers of the ocean, and it took ten days to build that monument to the famous man bold in battle. |
|---|--|

(Klaeber 1950, Ll. 3156-60a)

In a similar way, St. Swithun's name, nearly unknown until then, begins to be widely known as a result of the miracles worked through his posthumous intercession. Once these miracles confirm the bishop's sanctity, the solemn translation of his mortal remains into the monastery church of Winchester takes place. This is carried out by order of Bishop Æthelwold, who thereby satisfies King Eadgar's desire to celebrate this ceremony *mid arwurðnyse*. Ælfric describes the event in these words:

þa se biseop Ælhwold mid abbodum and munecum dyde up þone sanct mid sange wurðlice, and bæron into cyrcan sancte Petres huse; þær he stend mid wurthmynte and wundra gefremað. (Skeat 1966, I, 450) [Then the bishop Æthelwold, with abbots and monks, solemnly took up the saint with chanting, and bre him into the church, St. Peter's house. There he abides in honour and works miracles.]

Similarities between St. Swithun's and St. Ætheldryth's translations of their mortal remains may, therefore, be easily seen. In both cases, their corpses are reverently handled, the funeral cortege sings psalms and hymns, and emphasis is given to the idea that the saint now rests in his new tomb with great honour, working miracles that fill people with admiration.

The translation of St. Oswald's remains took place only after some difficulties had been overcome. His niece, the Queen of Mercia, wanted them to be transferred from St. Peter's monastery in Bamborough to the monastery of Bardney in Lindsey. However, when the king's body reached its destination, the monks did not want to take the coffin into the church, *for menniscum gedwylde* (*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 136). A supernatural sign solves the misunderstanding and St. Oswald is carried, again *arwurðlice*, into a shrine within the church:

þa ðwoh man þa halgan ban and bær into þære cyrcan arwurðlice on scrine and gelogodon hi upp. (Skeat 1966, II, 136) [Then they washed the holy bones, and bare them reverently to a shrine in the church, and laid them up.]

Perhaps it is in the narration of St. Edmund's *Life* that we can most clearly find elegiac elements. The beginning of the story shows a flourishing kingdom ruled by a Christian king, fair and benign to his people and charitable to the needy. An elegiac atmosphere is at once introduced when we are told of the invasion of cruel enemies, Hubba and Hingwar, who *hergiende and sleande* will devastate the land and murder men, women and children: *and aweston thaet land and tha leoda ofslogon*. The pirates' cruelty will only be satiated with the persecution of innocent people: *and to bysmore tuode tha bilewitan cristenan*, and finally, with the king's murder. The fact that Ælfric presents Hingwar as a stalking wolf: *swa swa wulf on lande bestalcode*, reminds us of those elegiac passages of the epic in which the appearance of these animals indicated the proximity of death and deso-

lation. Moreover, to depict a leader as a wolf means to discredit him as a good ruler. C. Fell, commenting on the elegiac poem *Deor*, says:

The standard half-line of praise for a good ruler —*þæt wæs god cyning* «he was a good king»— is rewritten for the villain as *þæt wæs grim cyning*, the adjective «savage» replacing «good». Instead of suitable ideas of government he had *wylfen gebōht* «wolfish thought», the wolf, associated with outlawry, being the opposite of social order. (1991, 175)

The cause of this radical change in St. Edmund's previously thriving reign is not explicitly pointed out in the narrative but can be inferred from Ælfric's introduction of Hingwar and Hubba as *geanlæhte þurh deofol*. It seems improbable that Ælfric interpreted all these violent events as a fair punishment for the depravation of the Northumbrians, since St. Edmund's reign can be considered exemplary from the point of view of Christian ethics. Perhaps all these calamities should be understood as a divine trial to make St. Edmund and his subjects show their faith in the presence of the heathen hordes. The dialogue in which St. Edmund asks the bishop for advice on the best way of facing Hingwar can also be regarded as a passage where the elegiac element is present inasmuch as the king grieves for his murdered comrades and the final disaster is anticipated: St. Edmund's death and the continuation of raids. It is in St. Edmund's words that those elegiac aspects are revealed. On the one hand, St. Edmund's lament is caused by the humiliation of his people, the murder of his vassals and the possible loss of the nation's treasures:

Eala þu bisceop to bysmore synd getawode þas earman land-leoda and me nu leofre wære þæt ic on feohte feolle wið þam þe min folc moste heora eardes brucan. (Skeat 1966, II, 318.) [Behold, you bishop, the poor people of this land are brought to shame, and it were now dearer to me that I should fall in fight against him who would possess my people's inheritance.]

On the other hand, St. Edmund's sadness seems to become intenser when he recalls his closest comrades, who have been murdered together with their wives and children in their own beds. He also foresees his own death and accepts it as a sign of the divine will:

þæs ic gewilnige and gewisce mid mode, þæt ic ana ne belife æfter minum leofum þegnum þe on heora bedde wurdon mid bearnum and wifum færlice ofslægene fram þysum flot-man-num. Næs me næfre gewunelic þæt ic worhte fleames ac ic wolde swiðor sweltan gif ic þorft for minum agenum earde. (Skeat 1966, II, 318-20.) [This I desire and wish in my mind, that I should not be left alone after my dear thanes, who even in their beds, with their children and their wives have by these seamen been suddenly slain. It was never my custom to take to flight, but I Would rather die, if I wish, for my own land.]

The dramatic vigour of these words of a king faced with disaster and death allows an analogy to be drawn between this episode and the elegiac passages of the epic, mainly in *Beowulf*, an heroic poem which contains such a large number of elegiac passages that some critics consider it an elegy, as Tolkien who says:

Beowulf is not an epic, not even a magnified lay. No terms borrowed from Greek or other literature exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather «elegy». It is an heroic elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3136 lines are the prelude to a dirge. *Him þa gegiredan Geata leode ad ofer eorðan unwaclicne*. (1963, 85)

However, St. Edmund's state of mind at this moment is a further example of the hopeful optimism of the saint, which contrasts with the hero's fatalistic pessimism, as discussed. In other words, St. Edmund accepts death blissfully, *bli þelice*, and when he dies, his soul joyfully makes its way to Christ: *his sawl siðode gesælig to Criste*.

The construction of St. Edmund's church follows several phases. Firstly, due to the threat of Danish raids, a makeshift church is quickly built on the king's grave. St. Edmund's fame begins to spread as a result of the miracles that take place there. Once the danger is over, a worthier church is built and his incorrupt body is transferred into it, escorted by a crowd of his subjects, *mid folclicum wurthmynte*. Bishop Theodred enriched the church with gold and silver, thus enhancing the importance of the saint worshipped in it. In the same way as Beowulf's barrow on the headland was a memorial that reminded sailors of the hero and his heroic deeds, now St. Edmund's church, in which his relics are kept and worshipped, attracts the people's devotion and in it many miraculous cures take place, thus contributing to spread the Christian example of the king's life:

þa wurðode þæt land-folc mid geleafan þone sanct. Wyrðe is seo stow for þam wurðfullan halgan þæt hi man wurðige, and wel gelogige mid clænum godes þeowum to Cristes þeowdome for-þan-þe se halga is mærra þonne men magon asmeagan. (Skeat 1966, II, 328-32)
[So the people of the land faithfully venerated the saint. Worthy is the place for the sake of the venerable saint that men should venerate it, and well provide it with God's pure servants, to Christ's service because the saint is greater than men may imagine.]

Surprisingly enough, in the case of St. Alban, those who make the panegyric in praise of the saint are the pagan magistrate who condemned him and the executioners who beheaded him:

Eft þa þa cwelleras comon to heora hlaforde and hi sædon þa syllican tacna þe Albanus worhte and hu se wearð ablend þe hine beheafdode, þa het he geswican þære ehtnyse and arwurðlice spræc be þam halgum martyrum þe he ne mihte gebigan fram godes geleafan þurh þa gramlican witu. (Skeat 1966, I, 422) [Afterward, when the executioners came to their lord, and related the wonderful signs which Alban had wrought and how he was blinded who had beheaded him, then he bade them stay the persecution, and spoke reverently of the holy martyrs, whom he could not turn from God's faith by the terrible torments.]

It is, therefore, St. Alban's pagan enemies who first wonder at the miraculous deeds performed by the martyr and who proclaim the strength of his faith in Christ. Later on, once the persecution has ended, St. Alban's memory and devotion will be spread far and wide thanks to the construction of a church in his honour.

To sum up, we can say that, on the one hand, certain elegiac aspects in Ælfric's *Lives of English Saints* are analogous to those present in Anglo-Saxon epic. As we have seen, earthly goods are transient and their loss causes grief, which becomes greater if it is a saint's or a hero's life that has been lost. Once dead, the memories of both are spread either orally by those who outlive them or by means of a memorial, barrow or church, that brings to mind the hero's exploits, or becomes a focus of devotion and miraculous healings. On the other hand, some significant differences can be noticed. The holy man dies joyfully because he knows that his soul goes to God. He gives his life in the defence of his people and, above all, because he is loyal to God and trusts in Him. This joyful attitude is also shared by those who outlive him, in spite of their initial natural affliction, and this joy increases as miracles take place. On the contrary, the epic hero dies according to the dictates of fate. No spiritual reasons seem to account for the fact that he risks his life: the desire of fame and the protection of his people are his main goals. Consequently, when he dies, his comrades' state of mind becomes gloomily burdened with ill-fated omens of future disasters.

WORKS CITED

- Bately, J. 1991: The Nature of Old English Prose. eds. M. Godden and M. Lapidge. 1991: 71-87.
- Bethurum, D. ed. 1957: *The Homilies of Wulfstan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Clemons, P. 1966: Ælfric ed. E.G. Stanley. *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*. London: Nelson and Sons. 176-209.
- Fell, C. 1991: Perceptions of Transience. eds. M. Godden & M. Lapidge. 1991.
- Gatch, M. 1977: *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulfstan*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.
- Godden, M. & M. Lapidge. eds. 1991: *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Godden, M. 1978: Ælfric and the Vernacular Prose Tradition eds. P. E. Szarmach and B. H. Huppé. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Greenfield, S. B. and D. Calder. 1986: *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hurt, J. 1972: *Ælfric*. New York: Twaine.
- Klaeber, Fr. ed. 1950: *Beowulf and The Fight of Finnsburg*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Co.
- Lapidge, M. 1991: The Sainly Life in Anglo-Saxon England. eds. M. Godden and M. Lapidge. Cambridge: CUP. 243-63.
- Needham, G. I. 1966: *Ælfric: Lives of Three English Saints*. London: Methuen.
- Pope, J. ed. 1967-68: *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*. London: OUP. - EETS. 259-260.
- Robinson, F. 1993: *The Tomb of Beowulf*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Skeat, W. W. 1966: *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*. London: OUP. - EETS.
- Szarmach, P. E. & B. H. Huppé eds. 1978: *The Old English Homily and its Backgrounds*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1963: The Monsters and the Critics. ed. L. E. Nicholson. *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*. Notre Dame: Ind. Univ. Of Notre Dame Press. 51-103.
- Trahern, B. Jr. 1991: Fatalism and the Millennium. eds. M. Godden and M. Lapidge. Cambridge: CUP. 160-171.
- Whitelock, D. ed. 1963: *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. London: Methuen.

