

Chapter 2: The Coming of the English

Preparing to Read

Much of what you are about to read in chapter 2 comes from *History of the English Church and People* by Bede (673–735). Written in Latin, this history gives interesting accounts from an early Christian monk’s perspective. Bede’s work includes fascinating narratives, such as those about the Northumbrian King Oswald who was killed by the Mercian King Penda. Note that in the textbook account (based on Bede’s history), Penda is considered the “bad guy,” while Oswald is considered the “good guy.” Modern historians avoid painting historical characters with such a broad brush, as they rightly believe that people, their motives and their actions are complex and cannot always be described in such simple, black and white terms. However, if Penda’s character were judged by modern standards of diplomacy, historians would not hesitate to call his motives and actions cruel and barbaric. Bede writes that the Mercian ruler wanted to completely blot out the Northumbrian kingdom without mercy. Knowing that little bit information, we can feel certain in this instance that the name “bad guy” suits the Merican king very well!

Reading Questions

Multiple Choice Questions

1. According to the text, which of the following is not true regarding the English who came to Britain in A.D. 450?
 - a) They came from some part of Germany.
 - b) Though they later fought the Britons, they were originally invited to the island to fight as allies against the Scottish tribes.
 - c) The English tribes included the Angles, Saxons and Jutes.
 - d) At first the English did not form one kingdom, but set up many, which later became seven in number.
 - e) They repaired the great buildings that the Romans built and used them for religious purposes.
2. Hengist and Horsa were ____.
 - a) Scottish invaders
 - b) Danish kings

- c) Germanic chieftains
 - d) Briton kings
 - e) Roman soldiers
3. The English drove the Britons ____.
- a) to the western part of England
 - b) to the eastern part of England
 - c) to the northern part of England
 - d) to the southern part of England
 - e) out of the country
4. Which of the following best describes or identifies the kings that the English set up in their new land?
- a) skilled soldiers
 - b) pagan priests
 - c) Roman
 - d) Briton
 - e) Christian
5. The blond-haired children Gregory saw being sold at the market place in Rome were ____.
- a) Roman
 - b) Briton
 - c) Germanic
 - d) Italian
 - e) French
6. What monk did Gregory send as a missionary to the English?
- a) Penda
 - b) Paulinus
 - c) Augustine
 - d) Æthelbert
 - e) Edwin
7. Thanet, the island at the mouth of the Thames, was part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom ____.
- a) Northumbria
 - b) Mercia
 - c) Kent
 - d) Wessex

- e) Essex
8. Which of the following is not true of the city Canterbury?
- a) It was located in a land ruled by the King of the Jutes, Aethelbert.
 - b) It is located in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent.
 - c) It became the center place for the English church.
 - d) A Roman monk came to live in it and became its first Bishop.
 - e) At that time Augustine came to the city there were no Christians in England.
9. The story that one of Edwin's men told about the sparrow swiftly flying through a man's house was chiefly meant to ____.
- a) convince the Northumbrian king that there was no time to hesitate in making a decision
 - b) convince Northumbrian king to continue their own religion
 - c) tell the Northumbrian king how short men's lives are
 - d) tell a parable about the monks coming to the island
 - e) convince the Northumbrian king that the pagan life could not provide answers about the after-life
10. The monk Aidan came from ____.
- a) an island located in the south of England
 - b) Canterbury
 - c) Rome
 - d) Northumbria
 - e) a monastery founded by Columba off the coast of Scotland
11. Lindisfame is an island off the coast of ____.
- a) Scotland
 - b) Germany
 - c) eastern part of England
 - d) Denmark
 - e) France
12. Penda died ____.
- a) by drowning
 - b) in a battle against Oswald
 - c) in a castle
 - d) by the sword of a Mercian king
 - e) by a fire started by Aidan

13. Legend says that the poet Caedmon received his poem about creation ____.
- from a lullaby song his mother used to sing when he was a baby
 - from barn animals
 - in a dream
 - from nuns in an abbey
 - none of the above
14. The Church of Durham was built ____.
- over a monk's grave
 - over the body of a martyred soldier
 - on a battle place
 - in Kent
 - in York
15. The most powerful kingdoms in the eighth century were ____.
- Kent and Northumbria
 - Wessex and Northumbria
 - Wessex and East Anglia
 - East Anglia and Essex
 - Mercia and Wessex

Identification

- King of Northumbria who was killed by Penda in battle
- One of the Germanic kingdoms
- Monk of Lindisfarne
- The "first English scholar"
- King who built a dike to keep out the Welsh
- Anglo-Saxon poet

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I run just as swift as a ball down a hill,
But the faster I run, the more I stand still.



Questions for Class Discussion

Many of the stories told in this chapter are taken from Bede's *History of the English Church and People*. Although Bede's writing is generally accurate, many modern scholars have expressed their doubt concerning certain elements of his narratives. What elements do you believe that modern scholars are suspicious of?

Primary Source Document

Vocabulary

Choose the best definition of the word in italics. The answers appear in the appendix.

1. During the war, America and France made an *alliance*.
 - a) an agreement of friendship or cooperation
 - b) weapons
 - c) declaration of war
2. To protect himself, the traveler grabbed the *dagger* from his belt and waved it in front of the thief.
 - a) blunt club
 - b) gun
 - c) a pointed knife
3. The holy vessels of the temple were *consecrated*.
 - a) stored in a special place
 - b) dedicated for a special religious purpose; blessed
 - c) ruined
4. During the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jewish Temple was *desecrated* by bringing in pagan worship.
 - a) polluted something holy
 - b) mocked
 - c) spoken against

5. The stranger's harsh words seemed to *profane* the calm and tranquil conversation of the happy family.
- a) influence
 - b) inspire
 - c) treat something holy or good with a lack of respect

King Edwin's Conversion¹ **by Bede**

From *The History of the Church and People*

At this time the Northumbrians² received the Word of faith through the preaching of Paulinus. As a downpayment of his conversion and his share in the heavenly kingdom, this king saw an increase in his worldly kingdom. He put all the parts of Britain under his power, which belonged either to the English or the Britons—something which no English king had ever done before. He even made the Welsh islands³ part of his kingdom. The more important of these islands in the south is bigger and more fruitful and has nine hundred and sixty families. The other has more than three hundred.

Northumbria's conversion happened this way. An alliance was made between King Edwin with the kings of Kent through Edwin's marriage to Ethelberg.⁴ When Edwin first sent ambassadors to her brother Eadbald, who then ruled Kent, to ask for her hand in marriage, a message was sent saying that it was not lawful for a Christian woman to marry a pagan husband. Such an action would show a disrespect for the mysteries of the Christian faith. Edwin, however, promised that he would in no way work against Ethelberg's religion. Instead, he would give her and all the men and women, bishops and clergy that came with her permission to practice their faith and worship as Christians. He himself also showed a willingness to convert, if the wise men found the Christian faith more holy and more worthy of God. So the agreement was made, and Ethelberg was sent to Edwin. As they had agreed, Paulinus, who was made a bishop, went with

¹ Translated by A. M. Sellar and adapted by William D. Walter. Notes are by A. M. Sellar unless otherwise indicated.

² that is, the English tribe living on the north side of the Humber River with their king, Edwin (Bede)

³ Bede calls them the Mevanian Islands (Walter)

⁴ Called Tata, Ethelberg was a daughter of the king of Kent Ethelbert. (Bede) Tata is an endearment, much like "sweetie" (Walter)

her, and by his daily preaching and celebrating the heavenly Mysteries, spiritually guarded her and her company from the pagans.

The next year the king of the West Saxons, Cuichelm⁵, sent a man named Eumer to Northumbria to ambush King Edwin, intending to kill him and take over his kingdom. He had a two-edged dagger, which had been dipped in poison, so that if the wound alone didn't kill the king, the deadly venom would. He came to the king on the first day of the Easter festival⁶ at the River Derwent. Pretending to deliver a message from his master, he was admitted, and while he was delivering his pretended diplomatic message, he suddenly started up, unsheathed the dagger under his clothes, and attacked the king. The king's most devoted servant, Lilla, saw what was happening, but he had no shield at hand to protect the king from the death-blow. In an instant, though, he shielded the king with his own body. However, Eumer thrust the dagger so hard that he wounded the king through the body of the slaughtered servant. The enemy was then attacked on all sides with swords, and in the confusion Eumer stabbed another of the servants with his dagger, named Forthhere.

On that same holy Easter night, the queen gave birth to a daughter, named Eanfled. With Bishop Paulinus present, the king thanked his gods for the birth of his daughter. The bishop, on his part, thanked Christ, and told the king, that it was by his prayers to Him that the queen safely gave birth to the child, and without a very painful labor. The king was delighted with his words and promised that if God would give him life and victory over the Wessex king who had sent the murderer who wounded him, he would leave his idols and serve Christ. As a pledge that he would do what he had said, he gave his daughter to Bishop Paulinus to be consecrated to Christ. She was the first to be baptized in Northumbria. Along with eleven other members of her household, she was baptized on the holy day of Pentecost.⁷

When the king recovered from his wound, he raised an army and marched against the West Saxons. All those who were involved with the murder attempt surrendered to him or were killed. So Edwin returned to

⁵ Apparently he ruled with his father, Cynegils.

⁶ The Easter festival would have been celebrated on Easter Eve, April 19th, 626.

⁷ The baptism was on the Eve of Whitsunday. The Eves of Easter and Whitsunday were usual days for baptisms. The Roman Church tried to limit them to these seasons, but Christmas and Epiphany were also favorite times.

his own country victorious. When he had made the promise that he would serve Christ, he no longer worshipped idols, but he still would not accept the mysteries of the Christian faith without considering the matter. He first made a serious effort to be instructed by Paulinus in the knowledge of faith. He also asked the advice of those he considered the wisest of his chief men, inquiring what they thought was the best thing to do. As he was a thoughtful man by nature, he often sat silently by himself for long periods, pondering what religion he should follow.

He asked each man in the council of wise men⁸ what he thought of Paulinus's new teaching. The chief of his own priests, Coifi, immediately answered him, "King, consider what is now preached to us. I tell you that I have no doubt now that the religion which we followed before was useless. Not one of your people has been more busy in his worship of our gods than I have. Yet there are many who get better favors from you, are more preferred than I am, and are more successful in everything that they try to do or to get. Now if the gods were good for anything, they would have put me forward—I, who have been more careful than others to serve them. If, then, you look into these new doctrines and you find them better and more useful, it makes sense that we immediately receive them."

Another of the king's chief men, who approved of his wise words and advice, added: "King, in comparison to the afterlife, man's life here on earth seems to me like the swift flight of a sparrow through the house where you sit at supper in winter, with your aldermen⁹ and servants, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, and the wintry storms of rain or snow outside are raging. The sparrow flies in at one door and immediately out another. While he is inside he is safe from the wintry storm. But after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while. But we don't know anything at all about what comes after it or what went before it. If, then, this new teaching tells us something more certain, it seems that we should follow it." The other elders and king's counsellors, by God's working in them, spoke to the same effect.

But Coifi added that he wanted to hear Paulinus talk more about the God that he preached. Edwin asked Paulinus to do so, and he did. After listening to Paulinus's words, Coifi cried out: "For a long time I knew that

⁸ The group of wisemen was called the Witenagemot. (Walter)

⁹ the chief men who helped the king govern the kingdom (Walter)

what we worshipped was nothing because the more I looked for truth in our worship, the less I found it. But now I freely confess that the truth I had been looking for appears in this preaching, which can give us the gifts of life, of salvation, and of eternal happiness. For this reason, King, my advice is that we instantly ban and burn up those temples and altars which we have uselessly consecrated.”

In short, the king openly agreed to the preaching of the Gospel by Paulinus. He turned away from idolatry and declared that he had received the faith of Christ. And when he asked Coifi who should first desecrate the altars and temples of their idols, the chief priest answered, “I should. Who can more fittingly than myself destroy those things which I worshipped in my foolishness?”

Then immediately, in contempt of his useless superstitions, he asked the king to provide him with weapons and a stallion so that he could mount it and go out to destroy the idols. (In their former religion it was not lawful for the high priest to carry weapons or ride on anything except a mare.) With a sword on his belt and a spear in his hand, Coifi then mounted the king’s stallion and went his way to the idols. The crowd who watched him thought that he was crazy. But as soon as he drew near the temple he desecrated the temple by casting his spear into it. He rejoiced in the knowledge of the worship of the true God, and commanded his companions to tear the temple down and set it on fire. The place where the idols once stood is not far from York, to the east beyond the river Derwent. It is now called Godmundingaham.¹⁰ It was there that by the inspiration of the true God, the high priest profaned and destroyed the altars which he had himself consecrated.

Questions for Class Discussion

Be able to answer the following questions in class.

1. What religious reason were given for refusing Edwin’s marriage proposal to Ethelberg (Tata)? What reasons do you think that Edwin had for marrying a royal princess from another kingdom? How was a compromise made?
2. What reasons were given at the meeting of the Witangemot for turning away from idolatry and accepting the Christian faith? Were these reasons practical, spiritual or both?

¹⁰ The place is now called Goodmanham, which today is a small village (Walter)

3. Bede (673–735) was a Benedictine monk who spent his entire life at Jarrow and Weremouth monasteries. How do the details of this account of a Northumbrian king reflect the historian's background? How might the account have been different if a pagan prince, a farmer, or merchant had written the account?
4. Bede makes many assumptions which both modern Christians and secular historians would hold into question. For example, in the first paragraph of your excerpt, Bede concludes that the Northumbrian king's success in war was a result of Edwin's converting to the rites of Christianity. In other sections of his history not included in the passage that you read, Bede gives approval of the slaughter of Celtic Christians by the pagans because they did not agree with the Roman Christians' view on when Easter should be celebrated. He says that their slaughter was just punishment from God as predicted by the missionary Augustine. Give at least one other assumption from the passage the you read that shows Bede's Roman Christian bias.