



*Saint King Oswald of Northumbria:  
Overlord or Imperator? A Very  
Peculiar Ancestor*

**Giovanni Collamati**



## Saint King Oswald of Northumbria: Overlord or *Imperator*? A Very Peculiar Ancestor

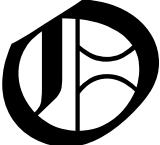
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**Abstract:** In the documentation produced by the English monarchy during the tenth century the Latin title *imperator* surprisingly appears, but it is not the first time that this title has been associated with an insular king. In Adomnán of Iona's *Vita sancti Columbae* (c.700), St. Oswald king of Northumbria appears as *totius Britanniae imperator*. Oswald, one of seven kings—successively called *bretwaldas* in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—who would have enjoyed a certain overlordship above other kingdoms of the island, could be the missing link connecting the use of the title *imperator* in the eighth and in the tenth centuries. Nevertheless, a closer view on the Oswald figure points out how he was remembered and worshipped more as a saint-overlord than as an emperor. Indeed, we can distinguish two different types of representation of the Northumbrian king's authority: the first one proposed by Adomnán (emperor of Britain) and the second proposed by Bede (saint-overlord). In this article I show how the Bedian model had a greater diffusion than the Adomnán model in England in the following centuries, thanks to the cult of Oswald as a saint. This suggests that there was no direct link between the use of *imperator* in Adomnán and that in the tenth-century charters; they were two different manifestations of “imperiality.”

**Keywords:** early medieval England, *imperator*, Hagiography, Oswald of Northumbria, authority representation

### Introduction

ne of the most interesting phenomena in the entire history of early medieval England is surely the appearance of the term *imperator* in a number of royal charters dating back to the tenth century.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that the oldest use of the term *imperator* in reference to an Anglo-Saxon ruler does not come from the documentation, but from a hagiographic source: the *Vita sancti Columbae*. In this work the saint king Oswald of Northumbria is celebrated as *imperator totius Britanniae*, thus anticipating the heirs of Alfred the Great by two centuries. It is difficult to resist the temptation to link the two

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<sup>1</sup> The title *imperator* appears in eighteen royal diplomas from the royal chancery. The kings mentioned as emperors are: Æthelstan (924-939), Eadred (946-955), Eadwig (955-959); Edgar (959-975), and Æthelred II (978-1014 and 1014-1016). Many scholars have debated on this phenomenon: see, for a brief bibliography, Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae, and other studies* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), 1–26; Michael Wood, “The Making of King Athelstan's Empire: An English Charlemagne,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies Presented to John M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick E. Wormald, Donald E. Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1983), 253–275; George Molyneux, “Why were some Tenth-Century English Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 21 (2011): 59–91; Torben R. Gebhardt, “From Bretwalda to Basileus: Imperial Concepts in Late Anglo-Saxon England?,” in *Transcultural Approaches to the Concept of Imperial Rule in the Middle Ages*, ed. Torben R. Gebhardt, Christian Scholl, and Jan Clauß (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang AG, 2017), 157–184; Christoph Mauntel, “Ideas of Empire: A Comparative Study in Anglo-Saxon and Spanish Political Thought (from the Eighth to the Twelfth Century),” *Viator* 48, no. 3 (2017): 1–25; Christoph Mauntel, “Beyond Rome. The Polyvalent Usage and Levels of Meaning of ‘Imperator’ and ‘Imperium’ in Medieval Europe,” in *Renovatio, Inventio, Absentia Imperii: From the Roman Empire to Contemporary Imperialism*, ed. Wouter Bracke, Jan Nelis, and Jan de Maeyer (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 69–92.

phenomena together and see Oswald as an *ante litteram* Æthelstan<sup>2</sup>—and the temptation becomes even stronger if we keep in mind the notoriety the Northumbrian King enjoyed in the mid-tenth century. However, after studying this argument, I cannot help but consider the two cases as separate manifestations of “imperiality,” which, although similar in dynamics, cannot be considered as directly related to each other.

We must consider that the imperial diplomas are not all produced by the same draftsman at the same time but are instead the product of different scribes (some of whom are still unknown today) who took part in the royal chancery during the tenth century.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the title *imperator* appears several times, in different periods, from the hand of different scribes suggests that it is not worth trying to work out whether one of these scribes was inspired by the reading of Adomnán. Instead, it is more useful to ask what image the English court of such a period had of this ruler and his authority, as it may have influenced the royal chancery. Was Oswald seen as an emperor?

In order to be able to answer this question, we must select the sources that reported the story of Oswald in later centuries. One of these must be Adomnán himself, and the *Vita sancti Columbae*. Along with the *Vita*, the source that most recounts Oswald’s life is undoubtedly the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.<sup>4</sup> So that we can say we have two different types of representation of Oswald’s authority, two models. In fact, in this case, we are interested in the Northumbrian king’s authority, but not in the true territorial extension and nature of his dominion, as the image that Bede and Adomnán gave of this and how it was handed down to posterity. The focus of this study is not so much the reality of the facts, but how this reality was seen in the following centuries

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<sup>2</sup> The first charters in which the imperial title appears (S406 and S392) date back to the times of Æthelstan, but their authenticity has not yet been ascertained. Scholars usually consider S406 spurious: Charles Plummer, ed., *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892-1899), II, 138; Joseph Armitage Robinson, *St Oswald and the Church of Worcester*, British Academy Supplementary Papers 5 (London: British Academy, 1919), 32; Richard Drögereit, “Kaiseridee und Kaisertitel bei den Angelsachsen,” *Zeitschrift Der Savigny-Stiftung Für Rechtsgeschichte: Germanistische Abteilung* 69, no. 1 (1952): 60–61; Edmund E. Stengel, “Imperator und Imperium bei den Angelsachsen,” *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 16 (1960): 56, 62. S392 could be a forgery produced after 940: Cyril Hart, *The Danelaw* (London: Hambledon, 1992), 435; Simon Keynes, “Review of Sawyer, Burton,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 21 (1980): 216. Nevertheless, Peter H. Sawyer points out that it could have been drafted in the very last days of Æthelstan’s reign: Peter H. Sawyer, ed., *Charters of Burton Abbey*, Anglo-Saxon Charters, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), xlvii–xlix and 8–9. I tend to accept Sawyer’s thesis and consider Æthelstan the first king to use the imperial title.

<sup>3</sup> It is not always possible to identify the author of imperial diplomas. Each individual charter has generated numerous historiographical debates about its authenticity and authorship. However, some of these belong to a group of diplomas that scholars have called “alliterative charters.” Cyril Hart claims that the author of this group was Dunstan of Glastonbury, while, according to Dorothy Whitelock and Simon Keynes, Koenwald of Worcester was the man beyond the chancery at that moment. However, the title appears in the documentation before and after the alliterative charters, which is why it makes more sense to ask what the image of Oswald was in the court and not what each draftman had read. See: Cyril Hart, “Danelaw Charters and the Glastonbury Scriptorium,” *Downside Review* 90 (1972): 125–132; Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 372–373; Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred “the Unready” 978-1016*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 82 n. 165.

<sup>4</sup> These were not the only sources that gave us information about Oswald’s life. As stated by Clare Stancliffe, some annals from Iona fed into *The Annals of Ulster* and the Clonmacnoise group of Irish annals. There are also traces of the Saint King’s life in the *Annales Cambriae*. However, as will be seen below, the weight that Bede’s work had in the English court is significantly greater. See Clare Stancliffe, “Oswald, ‘Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians,’” in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 34. One must also be aware that, from the eleventh century onwards, other works also appear on the continent narrating Oswald’s deeds, such as, for example, the *Latin Life of Oswald*, written by Drogo (c.1050) in Flanders. As Annemiek Jassen points out, this text was also based on Bede. Annemiek Jansen, “The Development of St Oswald Legends on the Continent,” in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 230. Jassen also presents other lives (from the twelfth century) in which, however, the figure of Oswald is influenced by the literary canons of the continent.

by the first English kings. In both models Oswald appears as an overlord, but there is a fundamental difference. In Adomnán's model the title *imperator* is used for Oswald, whereas in the Bedan model this title does not appear, and much space is left for his sainthood.

In this article, I describe what these two models consist of and how widespread they were in Early Medieval England. By analysing the manuscript tradition of Adomnán's work, the cult of this Saint Northumbrian king, and other later sources (such as the *Old English Martyrology*) I demonstrate that the Bedan model was much better known than Adomnán's, and so that Oswald was known more as a saint than as an emperor.

### **The representation of Oswald's authority in the *Historia ecclesiastica***

Oswald of Northumbria (633-642) is one of the most important characters in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Bede, in fact, dedicates half of his third book to him, which describes his life, death, and the miracles that occurred in the places where the king had fought. Oswald makes his appearance at the Battle of Denisesburna (Heavenfield), where he defeated Cedwalla King of the Britons and regained the throne of Northumbria, lost by his uncle Edwin (624-632). Bede tells how, as soon as he ascended the throne, Oswald wanted to call Bishop Aidan from Ireland to convert his people. The young king felt particularly attached to Irish-style Christianity, since his forced exile in the kingdom of Dál Riada, in western Scotland, where he was baptized and received the faith.<sup>5</sup> It was thanks to this faith, rather than to the earthly glory resulting from the victory over Cedwalla, that he obtained, according to Bede, the command of all the peoples and provinces of Britain.

With such a man as bishop to instruct them, King Oswald, together with the people over which he ruled, learned to hope for those heavenly realms which were unknown to their forefathers; and also Oswald gained from the one God who made heaven and earth greater earthly realms than any of his ancestors had possessed. In fact he held under his sway all the peoples and kingdoms of Britain, divided among the speakers of four different languages, British, Pictish, Irish and English.<sup>6</sup>

Oswald's sovereignty therefore goes beyond the geographical borders of Northumbria to extend above all the populations of the island. The formula that Bede uses to describe the king's authority is the same one used at the beginning of the work, when it provides an overview of the populations that inhabit Britain:

At the present time, there are five languages in Britain, just as the Divine Law is written in five books, all devoted to seeking out and setting forth one and the same kind of wisdom, namely the knowledge of sublime truth and of true sublimity. These are the English, British,

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<sup>5</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and Roger A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 3.1: "Siquidem tempore toto, quo regnavit Aeduini, filii praefati regis Aedilfridi, qui ante illum regnaverat, cum magna nobilium iuventute apud Scottos siue Pictos exulabant, ibique ad doctrinam Scottorum cathecizati, et baptismatis sun gratia recreati." Trans.: "During the whole of Edwin's reign the sons of king Æthelfrith his predecessor, together with many young nobles, were living in exile among the Irish or the Picts where they were instructed in the faith as the Irish taught it and were regenerated by the grace of baptism." See Stancliffe, "Oswald," 33.

<sup>6</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.6: "Huius igitur antistitis doctrina rex Oswald cum ea, cui praeerat, gente Anglorum antistitus, non solum incognita progenitoribus suis regna caelorum sperare didicit, sed et regna terrarum plus quam ulli maiorum suorum ab eodem uno Deo, qui fecit caelum et terram, consecutus est, denique omnes nationes et provincias Britanniae, quae in quattuor linguas, id est Brettonum Pictorum Scottorum et Anglorum, divisae sunt, in dictione accepit."

Irish, Pictish, as well as the Latin languages; through the studies of the scriptures, Latin in general use among them all.<sup>7</sup>

By this double use we can understand how, in the eyes of the monk of Jarrow, Oswald appeared as an ideal leader for the entire island. It is obviously difficult to believe that, even for a short time, Oswald was actually the only lord in all of Britain. If his authority really extended over the other populations, this did not happen by supplanting the other leaders, but, most likely, by overlapping the already existing systems of power—this particular type of superimposed sovereignty has been defined by the English scholars as *overlordship*.<sup>8</sup>

So, according to Bede, Oswald's overlordship seems due more to his conversion than to the simple military victory and does not require a particular title from the author. With or without a title, Oswald is not the only king-overlord of the *Historia ecclesiastica*. He is in fact inserted by Bede among the seven "lords of Britain." In the fifth chapter of the second book, Bede draws up a list of seven Anglo-Saxon kings whose *imperium* also extended beyond the other kingdoms of the island. The first four—Ælle of Sussex, Ceawlin of Wessex, Æthelberth of Kent, and Redwald of East Anglia—dominated the Anglo-Saxon territories south of the Humber Estuary, while the last three—Edwin, Oswald, and Oswiu of Northumbria—extended their overlordship, substantially on all the Anglo-Saxon dominions, both to the south and north of the river (except for Kent).<sup>9</sup> This list later became part of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, drafted during the last years of Alfred's reign. Here the seven overlords are described with the term *bretwalda*,<sup>10</sup> and a new one is also added: Egbert of Wessex (802-839), grandfather of Alfred and progenitor of what will later be the dominant ruling house throughout the tenth century.<sup>11</sup>

As already pointed out by scholars, the resumption and updating of the Bedan passage in the drafting of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seems to testify the House of Wessex's desire to get in line with those who, in the past, had dominated the entire island. Nevertheless, the term *imperator* was not used for these; Bede, in fact, only employs the term *imperium* to describe the power held by these characters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1.1: "Haec in praesenti, iuxta numerum librorum, quibus lex diuina scripta est, quinque gentium linguis, unam eandemque summae ueritatis et uerae sublimitatis scientiam scrutatur, et confitetur, Anglorum uidelicet, Brettonum, Scottorum, Pictorum et Latinorum, quae meditatione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est facta communis."

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Yorke, "The Vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon Overlordship," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 92 (1981): 171–200.

<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.5.

<sup>10</sup> Only two of the seven *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* manuscripts presents the term *Bretwalda* in this particular form: the oldest one, the manuscript A or Parker Chronicle (Parker Library, Corpus Christi College MS173); and manuscript G, dated to the beginning of the twelfth century, which is actually a copy of A (British Library, Cotton Otho B.XI). In B, Abingdon Chronicle I, end of the tenth century, the term appears *Brytenwalda* (British Library, Cotton Tiberius A.VI). In C, Abingdon Chronicle II, eleventh century, the term is *Bretanwealda* (British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.I). In D, Worcester Chronicle, eleventh–twelfth century, the term appears *Brytenwealda* (British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.IV). In E, Peterborough Chronicle, twelfth century, the term is *Brytenwealda* (Bodleian Library, MS Laud 636). In F, Bilingual Canterbury Epitome, beginning of the twelfth century, the term appears *Brytenweald* (British Library, Cotton Domitian A.VIII). See Steven Fanning, "Bede, 'Imperium', and the bretwaldas," *Speculum* 66, no. 1 (1991): 1–26.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, David C. Douglas, and Susie I. Tucker, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 829 (=827).

<sup>12</sup> For the use of *imperium* in Bede see: Judith McClure, "Bede's Old Testament Kings," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick E. Wormald, Donald E. Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1983), 76–98; Patrick Wormald, "Bede, the Bretwaldas and the Origins of Gens Anglorum," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick E. Wormald, Donald E. Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell

### The representation of Oswald's authority in the *Vita sancti Colmbae*

There is something that distinguishes Oswald from all the other *bretwaldas*. The Northumbrian king is actually the only one of the seven lords of Britain to be described in a source with the term *imperator*; I am referring to the *Vita sancti Columbae*. This work, written by Adomnán (627-704), ninth abbot of Iona, deals with the life of the Irish monk Columba, founder of the same monastery. Narrating the story of his illustrious predecessor, Adomnán starts with a series of miracles performed by the saint. The author refers to the *privilegium*, granted by God to Columba after death, of being able to influence the outcome of battles with the power of prayer alone. The example given by Adomnán is precisely that of the battle of Denisesburna. On the eve of the fight, the saint appeared to Oswald in his sleep, promising him victory. Awakened, the sovereign gathered the court and recounted the vision. As expected, Oswald defeated Cedwalla and this military triumph, in addition to his piety, gave him a new status, a new title. In fact, the source reads as follows: “*postea totius Britanniae imperator a Deo ordinatus est.*”<sup>13</sup> Choosing the title *imperator*, Adomnán seems to recognize Oswald as something more than a simple king, an overlord, but Oswald is not the only overlord present in the work.<sup>14</sup> Adomnán also speaks of Diarmait Mac Cerbaill (d. 565), descendant of the dynasty of the Irish High Kings, the Uí Néill, who nevertheless appears as a simple “*totius Scotiae regnatorem,*” “*Deo auctore ordinatum.*”<sup>15</sup> This suggests that being an overlord was not enough to deserve the imperial title, exclusive to the overlords of Britain alone. It could therefore be assumed that the choice of the title is due to the more classical meaning of

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Publishers, 1983), 107–109; Dorine van Espelo, “A Testimony of Carolingian Rule? The *Codex Epistolaris Carolinus*, its Historical Context, and the Meaning of *Imperium*,” *Early Medieval Europe* 21, no. 3 (2013): 275–276.

<sup>13</sup> Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy, Written by Adamnan*, ed. and trans. William Reeves (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1857), 1.1: “Post haec verba expectatus rex senatui congregato hanc enarrat visionem; qua confortati omnes, totus populus promittit se post reversionem de bello crediturum et baptismum suscepturum: nam usque in id temporis tota illa Saxonia gentilitatis et ignorantiae tenebris obscurata erat, excepto ipso rege Ossualdo, cum duodecim viris, qui cum eo Scotos inter exulante baptizati sunt. Quid plura? eadem subsecuta nocte Ossualdus rex, sicuti in visu edoctus furerat, de castris ad bellum, cum admodum pauciore exercitu, contra millia numerosa progreditur; cui a Domino, sicut ei promissum est, felix et facilis est concessa victoria, et rege trucidato Catlone, victor post bellum reversus, postea totius Britanniae imperator a Deo ordinatus est. Hanc mihi Adamnано narrationem meus decessor, noster abbas Failbeus, indubitanter enarravit, qui se ab ore ipsius Ossualdi regis, Segineo abbati eandem enuntiantis visionem, audisse protestatus est.” Trans.: “Hearing these words, the king awoke and described his vision to the assembled council. All were strengthened by this, and the whole people promised that after their return from battle they would accept the faith and receive baptism. For up to that time the whole of England was darkened by the shadow of heathendom and ignorance, except for King Oswald himself and twelve men who had been baptized with him in exile among the Irish. What say more? That same night, just as he had been told in the vision, he marched out from the camp into battle with a modest force against many thousands. A happy and easy victory was given by him by the Lord according to his promise. King Cadwallon was killed, Oswald returned as victor after battle and was afterwards ordained by God as emperor of all Britain.”

<sup>14</sup> About the different royal status of the kings mentioned in the *Life of Saint Columba*, see: Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), 60–62.

<sup>15</sup> Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba*, 1.29: “Alio in tempore supra memoratus presbyter Findchanus, Christi miles, Aidum cognomento Nigrum, regio genere ortum, Cruthinicum gente, de Scotia ad Britanniam sub clericatus habitu secum adduxit, ut in suo apud se monasterio per aliquot peregrinaretur annos. Qui scilicet Aidus Niger valde sanguinarius homo et multorum fuerat trucidator; qui et Diormitium filium Cerbulis, totius Scotiae regnatorem, Deo auctore ordinatum, interfecerat.” Trans.: “Once, this priest called Findchán, a soldier of Christ, brought with him from Ireland to Britain a man of the race of Ulster and of royal stock yet wearing a cleric’s habit. His name was Áed Dub, and it was intended that he should remain for a number of years as a pilgrim in Findchán’s monastery. This Áed Dub had been a very bloody man and had killed many people, among them Diarmait mac Cerbaill, ordained by God’s will as king of all Ireland.”

“supreme military commander.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the case of Domnall Mac Aebo, another Irish overlord, disproves this hypothesis. Domnall, after a battle, is described by Adomnán only as a *victor*, and not as an *imperator*. So if the imperial terminology is used by the abbot of Iona only to describe Oswald, what is the difference between the Northumbrian ruler and the other kings mentioned in the *Vita*?

It is possible to hypothesize that the word *imperator* was chosen by the author to translate into Latin a title in use at that time in Britain, perhaps the title of *bretwalda*, since Oswald is the only one of the seven kings to be mentioned in the hagiography. On the other hand, it is not possible to say with certainty that the word *bretwalda* existed as such as a title. Historians, in fact, have been divided on this. Patrick Wormald suggested that, more than a formally recognized title, it was a question of status and that the desire to find a sense of unity in England’s past was the basis of the great interest it aroused.<sup>17</sup> Barbara Yorke believes it is possible to argue that the title *bretwalda* never really existed or that, in any case, it had a truly relative weight,<sup>18</sup> while Simon Keynes goes so far as to support what is perhaps the most extremist position within the panorama of studies, namely that there have never been *bretwaldas* in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>19</sup> For his part, Eric John shifted the focus of the discussion by answering doubts about the small number of rulers presented as overlords by Bede: he suggests the possible influence of an insular tradition, already in circulation in the seventh and eighth centuries, which recalled the existence of a list of seven Roman emperors of British origin.<sup>20</sup> Placing himself on the same British track, John Morris hypothesizes that *bretwalda* is nothing more than the Anglo-Saxon transposition of the figure of an “island emperor” typical of the British world.<sup>21</sup> So it could also be that *bretwalda* didn’t exist as a title at all. In this case, Bede would have arbitrarily decided to speak of *imperium*, while reasons unknown to us would have prompted Adomnán to use *imperator* for Oswald.

### **The spread of Adomnán model: manuscript tradition of the *Vita sancti Columbae***

I am going to analyze the diffusion of each of these two models in the following centuries, in order to discover which of the two was best known in tenth-century England. The model proposed by Adomnán does not seem to have been successful, as only a later chronicle echoes the words of the Abbot of Iona. For this reason, the analysis must focus above all on the manuscript tradition of the *Vita sancti Columbae*.

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<sup>16</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Isidori hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. Wallace M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 9.3: “Imperatorem autem nomen apud Romanos eorum tantum prius fuit, apud quos summa rei militaris consisteret, et ideo imperatores dicti ab imperando exercitui; sed dum diu duces titulis imperatoris fungerentur, Senatus censuit, ut augusti Caesaris hoc tantum nomen esset eoque is distingueretur a ceteris gentium regibus: quod et sequentes caesares hactenus usurpaverunt.” See the translation in Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and O. Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): “For the Romans, the title *imperator* was at first given only to those on whom supremacy in military affairs was settled, and therefore the *imperatores* were so called from ‘commanding’ (*imperare*) the army. But although generals held command for a long time with the title of *imperator*, the senate decreed that this was the name of Augustus Caesar only, and he would be distinguished by this title from other ‘kings’ of nations. To this day the successive Caesars have employed this title.”

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Wormald, “Bede, the Bretwaldas and the Origins of Gens Anglorum,” 118 and 128.

<sup>18</sup> Yorke, “The Vocabulary,” 184.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Keynes, “Raedwald the Bretwalda,” in *Voyage to the Other World*, ed. Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 103–123.

<sup>20</sup> John, *Orbis Britanniae*, 12–13.

<sup>21</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur: A History of the British Isles from 350 to 650* (London: Phoenix, 1998), 329.

We currently know of four manuscripts containing the *Vita sancti Columbae* in its entirety. Three of these are kept in the British Library in London and are the BL Additional 35110, from the twelfth century; the BL Cotton Tiberius D III, from the twelfth-thirteenth centuries; and the BL Royal 8 D IX, dating from the island and in the continent the fifteenth century. The fourth, on the other hand, much older, dates back to the early eighth century and is now preserved in the Schaffhausen city library under the name Generalia 1. The hand is that of Dorbene, Adomnán's successor in Iona. According to Anderson & Anderson, authors of the reference edition of the *Vita*, the manuscript should have reached the continent in the ninth century and then appeared in the thirteenth century in a list of volumes kept in Reichenau, without ever having passed through the West Saxon court.<sup>22</sup>

It is unknown how Schaffhausen Generalia 1 could have arrived on the continent—some speculate that it was after the Viking attack on the monastery in 825<sup>23</sup>—but Jean-Michel Picard has proved with definitive certainty that even before the year 870 some copies were produced starting from this same manuscript in the abbey of St. Gall.<sup>24</sup> We have no evidence that this exemplar of *Vita* passed through the Æthelstan's court on its journey toward the continent, and it is impossible to prove that the information of St. Oswald as emperor was present there in the tenth century.

It should be noted that the other three manuscripts cited before seem to have been copied from a common exemplar, now lost, and plausibly preserved in the north of the island. This allows us to argue—unsurprisingly—that the *Vita sancti Columbae* was known at least in Northumbria. In fact, in the *Vita sancti Oswaldi* by Reginald of Coldingham (or Durham), written in 1165, the battle of Denisesburna is not described following the model set forth by Bede, but rather by Adomnán's: "*Et rege trucidato Cathlone, victor post bellum reversus, postea totius Britanniae imperator est a Deo ordinatus.*"<sup>25</sup>

### **The spread of the Bedan model: the Cult of St Oswald**

Unlike Adomnán's model, Bede's one was enormously successful. This is due not only to the increased resonance of the monk's opera, but also to Oswald's success as a saint on the island and on the continent. In fact, among the seven overlords, as mentioned before, Oswald is undoubtedly the one whose memory remained most alive in the centuries following his death. The same Bede, in addition to occupying entire chapters with the narration of the miracles of the holy king, tells us that his veneration had crossed the Channel and that the relics had performed miracles both in Ireland and in Germany.<sup>26</sup> Willibrord—a monk of Northumbrian origin, ordained a priest in Ireland and then archbishop of Friesland in 690—reports these prodigious events in the *Historia*

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<sup>22</sup> Adomnán, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. Alan O. Anderson and Marjorie O. Anderson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>23</sup> The episode is reported by the Annals of Ulster (*AU* 824=825) and by Walahfrid Strabo's poem on the death of Blathmac. Walahfrid Strabo, *Versus de Beati Blaitbmaic vita et fine*, ed. Ernst Dümmler (Berlin: Weidmanns, 1884), 297–301.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Michel Picard, "Schaffhausen Generalia 1 and the textual transmission of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* on the continent," in *Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung*, ed. Ní Chatáin and Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 95–102.

<sup>25</sup> Reginald of Coldingham, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. Thomas Arnold, 3 vols. (Durham: Society by Andrew & Co, 1868), ch. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.12.: "Nec solum inclity fama uiri Brittaniae fines lustrauit uniuersos, sed etiam trans oceanum longe radios salutiferae lucis spargens, Germaniae simul et Hiberniae partes attigit." Trans: "Not only did the fame of this re[k]nowed king spread through all parts of Britain but the beams of his healing light also spread across the ocean and reached the realms of Germany and Ireland."



*ecclesiastica*. It would seem that he was responsible for spreading the cult of St. Oswald on the continent.<sup>27</sup>

Following the traces of the saint's body is useful to understand how well known the Bedan model was at the court of the English kings. According to Bede, it was dismembered into three parts immediately after his death: skull, arms, and torso.<sup>28</sup> The skull and arms were recovered by King Oswiu and taken to Lindisfarne, from where they successively left and separated. The arms were taken to Bamburgh and the skull joined the body of St. Cuthbert in Lindisfarne, following the community of monks first to Chester-le-Street then to Durham. After all, we know that between 679 and 697 it was transferred at the behest of Osthryth, daughter of Oswiu and therefore granddaughter of Oswald, to the monastery of Bardney in Lindsey, which she had founded.<sup>29</sup> For more than two centuries the remains rested there, even after the Danish invasion. In the year 909 the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* informs us that, in conjunction with an expedition organized by King Edward to the north, the body of St. Oswald was brought from Bardney to Mercia.<sup>30</sup> A later source, William of Malmesbury, in the twelfth century, tells us that it was Æthelfled, daughter of Alfred, and her husband Æthelred, lord of Mercia, who moved Oswald's remains to Gloucester and

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<sup>27</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.13: "Denique reuerentissimus antistes Acca solet referre, quia, cum Romam uadens, apud sanctissimum Fresonum gentis archiepiscopum Uilbrordum cum suo antistite Uilfrido moraretur, crebro eum audierit de mirandis, quae ad reliquias eiusdem reuerentissimi regis in illa prouincia gesta fuerint, narrare. Sed et in Hibernia cum presbyter adhuc peregrinam pro aeterna patria duceret uitam, rumorem sanctitatis illius in ea quoque insula longe lateque iam percrebuisse ferebat." Trans.: "For example, the most reverend Bishop Acca is accustomed to tell how, when he was on his way to Rome, he and his own Bishop Wilfrid stayed with the saintly Willibrord, archbishop of the Frisians, and often heard the archbishop describe the miracles which happened in that kingdom at the relics of the most reverend king. He also related how, while he was still only a priest, and living a pilgrim's life in Ireland out of love for his eternal father-land, the fame of Oswald's sanctity had spread far and wide in that island too." See: Alan Thacker, "'Membra Disjecta': The Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult," in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 97–128. Further proof of this cultic propagation is the well-known case of Roswitha of Gandersheim. In her *Gesta Ottonis imperatoris*, the nun describes Edith—Athelstan's half-sister, destined to marry Otto of Germany—as follows: "Ipsaque, perfectae radiis fulgens bonitatis, / In patria talis meruit praeconia laudis / Ut fore iudicio plebis decernitur omnis / Optima cunctarum, quae tunc fuerant, mulierum. / Nec mirum meritis si lucebat bene primis, / German sanctorum quam producebat avorum: / Hanc tradunt ergo natam de stirpe beata / Osuualdi regis, laudem cuius canit orbis, / Se quia subdiderat morti pro nomine Christi." Roswitha of Gandersheim, *Gesta ottonis imperatoris: Lotte, drammi e trionfi nel destino di un imperatore*, ed. and trans. Maria P. Pillola (Florence: Sismel, 2003), 89–97. The nun's lines suggest a connection between the English reigning house and the Northumbrian king—even though there were no real blood ties between the two lineages. The question now is whether this idea (of a single Anglo-Saxon royal dynasty) was the plan of the tenth century English monarchy that appropriated the figure of Oswald, or simply a misunderstanding due to the lack of knowledge of the history of the British Isles on the continent. Obviously, we cannot answer this question with certainty, but what we can do is find out what the spread of the cult of Oswald on the island and, in particular, in royal circles was like. For a complete overall view on Æthelstan's foreign policy see: Veronica Ortenberg, "'The King from Overseas': Why did Æthelstan Matter in Tenth-Century Continental Affairs?," in *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century*, ed. David Rollason and Conrad Leyser (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 211–236.

<sup>28</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.12: "Ossa igitur illius translata et condita sunt in monasterio, quo diximus. Porro caput et manus cum brachiis a corpore praecisas iussit rex, qui occiderat, in stipitibus suspendi. Quo post annum deueniens cum exercitu successor regni eius Osuii abstulit ea, et caput quidem in cymiterio Lindisfarnensis ecclesiae, in regia uero ciuitate manus cum brachiis condidit." Trans.: "So Oswald's bones were translated to the monastery we have mentioned and there interred. The king who slew him ordered his head and his hands to be severed from his body and hung on stakes. A year afterwards, his successor Oswiu came thither with an army and took them away. He buried the head in a burial place in the church at Lindisfarne, but the heads and the arms he buried in the royal city of Bamborough."

<sup>29</sup> Thacker, "'Membra Disjecta,'" 104.

<sup>30</sup> Whitelock et al., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 909 (= 910), Mercian Register: In this year St. Oswald's body was brought from Bardney to Mercia.

founded the monastery of St Oswald.<sup>31</sup> The spouses' action reflects a rather common trend for the new English kingdom of the tenth century, that of providing the remains of a saint for each new burh. After the victory of Ethandun (878), Alfred directed a process of fortification, organizing the reborn Wessex into a network of small fortified towns with their own garrison, called *burhs*, which proved to be an excellent response to the continuous Danish attacks.<sup>32</sup> The recovery of these ancient settlements and, in some cases, the foundation of new ones, involved the establishment of new communities, also due to the migration of some groups of populations who preferred to take refuge in the last Anglo-Saxon bulwark rather than remain under Danish rule. These new communities soon manifested the need for reference figures who foster a community identity. It is therefore no coincidence that, in the tenth century, many burhs began to house the remains of saints, often coming from the territories subjected to the Vikings.<sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy that Gloucester, the most important city in Mercia—a frontier area at that time—was able to host the remains of Oswald, a saint and *Bretwalda* and that Æthelstan grew up at the court of Æthelfled and Æthelred, destined to become king and overlord (and maybe the first tenth century monarch to be referred to as *imperator* in a charter). For this reason, I believe there are elements to argue that the young prince knew the Northumbrian Saint since childhood. The sources then suggest that, once king, Æthelstan may also have prayed over the relics of Oswald preserved together with the remains of Cuthbert, on the occasion of the visit that he is thought to have made in 934 to Chester-le-Street.<sup>34</sup> Then consulting the *Old English Martyrology*—composed in the late ninth century, probably in the Mercian area<sup>35</sup>—on 5 August, we find a short text, faithful to the Bedan model, in which the king's overlordship is immediately remembered, and only after his piety and the dispersions of his remains are mentioned.

On the fifth day of the month is the festival of St. Oswald the Christian king, who reigned nine years in Britain, and God gave him greater power than any of his predecessor. Subject to him were the four tribes that are in Britain: these are the British Celts, the Picts, the Scots, and the English. Oswald ended his life with words of prayer when they slew him, and as he fell down upon the ground, he said: 'deus, miserere animabus'. He said: 'God have mercy on the souls'. His hands are undecayed in the royal town called Bamborough, and his head

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<sup>31</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum: The history of the English kings*, ed. and trans. Roger A.B. Mynors, Rodney M. Thomson, and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), IV, 155: "In eadem enim urbe tempore regis Elfredi filia ejus Elfleda cum coniuge suo Ethelredo monasterium edificaverant, nulla parsimonia sumptuum, nulla inopia victualium. Illucque ex Bardanio reliquias regis transulerant, quod omnis Mertia eorum pareret imperio." Trans: "For at Gloucester in the time of King Alfred, his daughter Æthelflæd and her husband Æthelred had built a monastery, sparing no expense in making sure the monks did not go short of anything. They transferred the remains of King Oswald from Bardney, seeing that the whole of Mercia was under their control."

<sup>32</sup> About *burhs* see: Jeremy Haslam, "King Alfred and the Vikings: Strategies and Tactics 876-886 AD," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 13 (2006): 122–154; Martin Biddle and David Hill, "Late Saxon Planned Towns," *Antiquaries Journal* 51 (1971): 70–85; David Hill and Alexander R. Rumble, *The Defence of Wessex: The Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Michael Hare, "The Documentary Evidence for the History of St Oswald's, Gloucester to 1086 AD," in *The Golden Minster: The Anglo-Saxon Minster and Later Medieval Priory of St Oswald at Gloucester*, ed. Carolyn Heighway and Richard Bryant (York: Council for British Archaeology Research Report, 1999), 36.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Saint Werburgh, whose relics were moved from Hanbury to Chester, or Saint Ealhmund from Derby to Shrewsbury. See: Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel, "Edith, Judith, Matilda: The Role of Royal Ladies in the Propagation of the Continental Cult," in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 214–215.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Lapidge, "Acca of Hexham and the Origin of the Old English Martyrology," *Analecta Bollandiana* 123 (2005): 29–78.

was brought to the isle of Lindisfarne, the rest of the body is at Bardney in the district of Lindsey, and his miracles were great on this side as well as beyond the sea.<sup>36</sup>

His overlordship thus becomes the salient feature of the character who, as far as I have been able to see, is the only saint king remembered by the martyrology. So surely Æthelstan knew the cult of Oswald, but probably also knew its history, since in those years the first manuscript copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were already circulating.<sup>37</sup> According to Malcolm B. Parkes and Francis Leneghan, these were produced in Winchester—under the direction of Grimald of St. Bertin—between the death of Alfred (899) and 930, and so were therefore already present at court in Æthelstan's time.<sup>38</sup> The Bedan model had monopolized Æthelstan's court: *Historia ecclesiastica*, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and *Old English Martyrology* all presented the same image of Oswald as saint and overlord. To this list must be added another work, the *Old English Bede*. This is one of the remarkable products of Alfred's court and consists of the translation of only a selection of the *Historia ecclesiastica*. In George Molyneaux's view, the choice of content undermined the political scope of the translation, suggesting a devotional and educational rather than ideological purpose.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, I disagree with this interpretation precisely because all the chapters in which Oswald appears in the *Historia* have been systematically translated into the Old English version, demonstrating *a fortiori* that Northumbrian King was a key figure for the political ideology of the English monarchy and for Æthelstan as well.

## Conclusions

As announced in the introduction, Bede's model was enormously more successful than Adomnán's, but the figure of the saint-king had not only a hagiographic and devotional value. Bede's model is structurally political and presents not only a saint-king—i.e., a spiritual reference—but also (and I would say above all) a saint-overlord, and the official representation of the authority of the rulers of the tenth century was shaped on the model of this saint-overlord. In fact, if we read the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, we can see that both Edward the Elder's (r. 899-924) and Æthelstan's (r. 924-939) authority resembles that of Oswald. Both these monarchs are represented with considerable military and political skills, intervening militarily even outside their borders and assuming the role of mediators among the other lords of the island, who, on several occasions, made a formal act of submission. Britain's highly fragmented political situation, in fact, prevented

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<sup>36</sup> George Herzfeld, ed., *An Old English Martyrology* (London: Early English Text Society, 1900), August 5, St. Oswald: "On þone fiftan dæg þæs monðes bið sancti Oswaldes tid, þæs cristenan kyninges, se ricsode nigon gear in Bretene, ond him sealed god mare rice þonne ænigum his foregengum him wæron underþeodde þa feower þeoda þe synod on Bretene, þæt synod Brytwalas ond Peohtas ond Sceottas ond Ongle. Oswald endade his lif in gebedes wordum þa hinde mon sloh, ond da he feol on eorðan, þa cwæð he: 'deus miserere animabus' he cwæð: 'god, miltsa þu saulum' his handa siondan ungebrosnode in þære cynelican ceastre seo ys nemned Bebbanburh, ond his heafod wæs gelæded to Lindesfarne éa, ond se lichoma ys elles in Lindesse mægðe æt Beardanegge, ond his wundor wæron miclo ge beheonan sæ ge begeondan."

<sup>37</sup> The oldest surviving manuscript is manuscript A, dated 891: see Whitelock et al., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, XI.

<sup>38</sup> Malcolm B. Parkes, "The Paleography of the Parker Manuscript of the Chronicle, Laws and Sedulius and Historiography at Winchester in the Late Ninth and Tenth Centuries," in *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts*, ed. Malcolm B. Parkes (London: Hambledon Press, 1991): 157–163; Francis Leneghan, "Translatio Imperii: The Old English Orosius and the Rise of Wessex," *Anglia* 133, no. 4 (2015): 664–665.

<sup>39</sup> George Molyneaux, "The Old English Bede: English Ideology or Christian Instruction?," *English Historical Review* 124 (2009): 1291–1292.

direct control over the other ethnic groups on the island, (Danes, Britons, or Anglo-resistances) and the hegemony of these rulers was therefore not direct, but superimposed.

The manuscript A of the *Chronicle* reports that, in the year 920, Edward went to Nottingham where he ordered a bridge to be built over the River Trent and from there he moved north into the Peak district at Bakewell. On this occasion the local rulers recognized the king's superiority, and the *Chronicle* describes the episode in these words:

Then he went from there into the Peak district to Bakewell, and ordered a borough to be built in the neighbourhood and manned. And the king of the Scots and all the people of the Scots, and Ragnald, and the sons of Eadwulf [of Bamburgh] and all who live in Northumbria, both English and Danish, Norsmen and others, and also the king of the Strathclyde Welsh and all the Strathclyde Welsh, chose him as father and lord.<sup>40</sup>

Once again, no specific title is ascribed to Edward, but he is presented as an overlord, emphasizing the subjugation of the different ethnic groups (Scots, Welsh, English, and Danes), as happened with Oswald in the Bedan model; with the difference that the Picts are no longer mentioned, but the Vikings ([...] *Danish, Norsmen* [...]) appear instead.

This pattern did not disappear even with the continuation of the *Chronicle*, in manuscript D, in fact, in the year 927 the conquest of York by Æthelstan is described as follows:

In this year appeared fiery lights in the northern quarter of the sky, and Sihtric died, and King Athelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians; and he brought under his rule all the kings who were in this island: first Hywel, king of the West Welsh, and Constantine, king of the Scots, and Owain, king of the people of Gwent, and Aldred, son of Eadwulf from Bamburgh.<sup>41</sup>

Again, no title is ascribed to the king, but the subjugation of the various ethnic groups is specified. In this case the Danish component is left out but, since it was the conquest of the capital of Northumbria, we can imagine that it was taken for granted. However, we cannot overlook the fact that manuscript D dates from the middle of the eleventh century, and thus it presents a different point of view from that of Æthelstan himself. In any case, this choice of words demonstrates the interest of the eleventh-century chronicler in linking the figure of Æthelstan to that of Edward and, in so doing, perpetuating the model of Oswald.

We can therefore say that the Bedan model not only survived but was very successful and widespread in the first half of the tenth century, while the model expressed by Adomnán remained unknown until the *Vita sancti Oswaldi* by Reginald of Coldingham in the late twelfth century. It is

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<sup>40</sup> David Dumville and Simon Keynes, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Simon Taylor, 1986-2004), 920 (=923): "Her on þysum gere foran to middum sumera for Eadweard cyning mid fierde to Snotingaham, 7 het gewyrcaþ þa burg on suþhealde þære eas, ongean þa oþre, 7 þa brycge ofer Treontan betwix þam twam burgum; 7 for þa þonan on Peaclond to Badecanwiellon, 7 het gewyrcaþ ane burg þær on neaweste, 7 gemannian; 7 hine geceas þa to fæder 7 to hlaforde Scotta cyning 7 eall Scotta þeod; 7 Ragnald, 7 Eadulfes suna, 7 ealle þa þe on Norþhymburum bugeaþ, ægþer ge Englice, ge Denisce, ge Norþmen, ge oþre; 7 eac Stræclédweala cyning, 7 ealle Stræclédwealas."

<sup>41</sup> Dumville and Keynes, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 927 (=926): "Her oðeowdon fyrena leoman on norðdæle þære lyfte. 7 Sihtric acwæl, 7 Æþelstan cyning feng to Norðhymbra rice. 7 ealle þa cyngas þe on þyssum iglande wæron he gewylde, ærest Huwal Westwala cyning, 7 Cosstantin Scotta cyning, 7 Uwen Wentla cyning, 7 Ealdred Ealdulfing from Bebbanbyrig, 7 mid wedde 7 mid aþum fryþ gefæstnodon on þære stowe þe genemned is æt Eamotum on .iiii. Idus Iulii, 7 ælc deofolgeld tocwædon, 7 syþþam mid sibbe tocyrdon."

also evident that there are no elements that directly connect the use of the term *imperator* in the *Vita sancti Columbae* and in the Anglo-Saxon royal charters of the tenth century.

In any case, we can affirm that the true legacy of the Northumbrian saint-king did not consist so much in the title of emperor, as in the idea of overlordship. What survived of Oswald in the following centuries thanks to his cult—and more for the words of Bede than for those of Adomnán—was the idea of a king whose authority extended over the other populations of the island: surely an indirect dominion, temporary and fragile, but which was a model to aspire to in the tenth century. In the eyes of the rulers of that time, Oswald must have appeared as the “saint overlord” and not as the “saint emperor of Britain.”