August 2019

“ÆTHELTHRYTH”: SHAPING A RELIGIOUS WOMAN IN TENTH-CENTURY WINCHESTER

Victoria Kent Worth
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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“ÆTHELTHRYTH”: SHAPING A RELIGIOUS WOMAN IN TENTH-CENTURY WINCHESTER

A Dissertation Presented

By

VICTORIA KENT WORTH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2019

Department of English
“AETHELTHRYTH”: SHAPING A RELIGIOUS WOMAN IN TENTH-CENTURY WINCHESTER

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Approved as to style and content by:

_________________________________________________
Joseph Black, Chair

_________________________________________________
Jenny Adams, Member

_________________________________________________
Sonja Drimmer, Member

_______________________________________________
Randall Knoper, Chair
English Department
DEDICATION

To my mother

Iris Burton Kent
1920-2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Steve Harris, who first introduced me to the study of the Middle Ages. His introduction to Anglo-Saxon literature and the manuscripts of the period inspired me to pursue this degree. Our conversations lead me to focus on this particular topic, to explore sources, and to dig deeper into areas that were challenging. Mary Dockray Miller was especially valuable. She pushed me to imagine and re-imagine themes that were especially provocative, and she inspired me be to the kind of scholar that I wished to become. I also want to thank Jenny Adams and Sonja Drimmer, who served on my dissertation committee. Jenny’s generous and incisive feedback has contributed in important ways to this thesis, and has had a major effect on my participation in a scholarly community. Sonja’s inspiring classes on medieval art helped me to a greater understanding of the important relationship between the image and the text.

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ABSTRACT

“ÆTHELTHRÝTH”: SHAPING A RELIGIOUS WOMAN IN TENTH-CENTURY WINCHESTER

MAY 2019

VICTORIA KENT WORTH, B.A., KENYON COLLEGE
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Directed by: Professor Joseph Black

It is well established that Anglo-Saxon writers were concerned with a specific set of principles (chastity, wisdom and piety) articulated in monastic life. However, the representation of women’s religious lives and the exemplification of their values influencing male saint’s Lives and their authors have to date been largely overlooked. To rectify this omission, I focus on Wulfstan’s tenth-century Vita St. Æthelwoldi, in which Æthelthryth’s character plays a far more significant role than we have heretofore noticed. Apart from the traditional figurae the author uses to depict her virtuous devotion, Wulfstan’s account of Æthelthryth is a testimony of a particular approach to monastic identity propagated by the circle of Bishop Æthelwold. I argue that Æthelthryth was elided in Wulfstan’s text in order to support the Benedictine Reformers’ objectives. As a result, Æthelthryth casts light on choices writers like Wulfstan made during this period when representing important Winchester women.

Written for Winchester’s royal and ecclesiastical audience, the Vita of St. Æthelwoldi was concerned with employing inherited female religious models that would
complement the story of Bishop Æthelwold. Texts by Bede and Aldhelm, as well as Classical and Latin patristics, incorporated idealized representations of female monastic life, and Wulfstan drew from these images in order to portray Æthelthryth as being in keeping with the vita’s objectives. While various sources help frame an understanding of this woman—the period, place and circumstances of her life—a depiction points to her figural qualities. Æthelthryth’s representation reflects Wulfstan’s preoccupations with images of the female monastic leader: namely, a virgin dedicated to God who is responsible for the nuns, and spiritual counselor and prudent advisor, one who provides guidance to female members of the larger Winchester Community.

I maintain Wulfstan depicted Æthelthryth’s capabilities as a divinely infused form of knowledge. She is represented as possessing nursing, visionary and motherly skills that enabled her access to both physical and spiritual realms. Æthelthryth’s character was therefore accorded a mediated role in the lives of religious and secular communities in tenth-century Winchester. A motherly virgin dedicated to God, she is a textual symbol of nurse and spiritual counselor. By fulfilling these responsibilities, Æthelthryth also prefigures the role of prudent advisor. Æthelthryth’s character provides the context for Æthelwold’s acquisition of visionary knowledge and Wulfstan’s potential to inscribe his life. The image of a monastic woman modeling divine prescience and miraculous portents, central for the life of a saint, is a rare and venerable asset; her ability to do so for an eminent male authority and his biographer is remarkable.

It is important to investigate how depictions of monastic women promoted spiritually and pragmatic refining effects for the benefit of both their own houses as well as for the larger ecclesiastical populace, demonstrating the significance of female
religious devotion. Thus, Æthelthryth becomes the proper focus of development and an example of female sanctity worthy of imitation by monastics, secular, religious, and lay audiences alike. I show that Æthelthryth is a critical source for understanding the important contributions of monastic women to Anglo-Saxon culture, elucidating a new and valuable understanding of their role in religious texts.

The lives of medieval religious women have been only partially perceived by literary texts. Although ecclesiastics related to the monastic life of the period and place they lived, Wulfstan omits details about Æthelthryth’s background and ignores Nunnaminster’s history, including its founding as well as other important women associated with the house. How and what Wulfstan obscures through his depiction of Æthelthryth relates to the Reformers’ goals for control over the monasteries they were attempting to renew.

Æthelthryth’s story is larger than the Vita St. Æthelwoldi. Not solely dependent on Wulfstan’s account, I investigate Æthelthryth’s description vis-a-vis her community through multiple sources. These sources provide evidence of women’s considerable control of Nunnaminster, as well as their spiritual life and literary achievements. I offer a different perspective of this nunnery, leading up to and including the tenth century, than the male-authored prescriptive to date. Anglo-Saxon women maintained their authority in religious life far beyond their suggested depiction. Through the study of her character, Æthelthryth offers a compelling understanding of how Anglo-Saxon female religious life was portrayed in literature. Moreover, her representation exists within the context of the surrounding royal and ecclesiastical priorities, which invariably includes the priorities of such stake-holders as the bishop, the Queen, and of Wulfstan himself.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When things are to be praised, the virtues are chosen.
—Ernst Robert Curtius

A. Preface

Occasionally even the most interesting characters in texts remain largely overlooked, and so end up in altogether undeserved obscurity. Such is the case with Æthelthryth, a religious woman depicted in Wulfstan’s tenth-century Vita St. Æthelwoldi, written to promote Bishop Æthelwold’s candidacy for canonization. Æthelthryth first appears early in Wulfstan’s text, attending the mother of Æthelwold, the future Bishop of Winchester, as she awaits her son’s birth. Æthelthryth is present on the occasion because Æthelwold’s mother had been unable to interpret a dream and so she travelled to Nunnaminster Abbey to consult Æthelthryth, portrayed as a nurse (Latin nutrix) said to be sagacious and wise (Latin sagaci prudentissima). Later in the story, Æthelthryth is mentioned again, this time as ruling (Latin matrem) over a flock of nuns (Latin mandras sanctimonialium) at Nunnaminster. Paucity of detail notwithstanding, Æthelthryth evidently was an important and well-known figure. Despite the apparently small role


2 Vita Sancti Æthelwoldi, ed. and trans. M. Lapidge and M. Winterbottom, Wulfstan of Winchester, The Life of St. Æthelwold (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), ch. 2, 34. Preserved in five manuscripts of the twelfth century: Alençon, 14, ff. 23r-34v; British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius D. iv, vol. 2, ff. 272v-281v; MS Cotton Caligula A. viii, ff. 125r-128v (fragment); British Library, MS Cotton Nero E.i, vol 2, ff. 209v-216v; MS Arundel 169, ff. 88r-95r. References hereafter to this edition are to Wulfstan’s St. Æthelwoldi and parenthetically with page numbers within the text. First published in Three Lives of English Saints, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972). An earlier version was previously printed in the Patrologia Latina (cxxxvii), which is a reworking of Wulfstan’s text by the historian Ordericus Vitalis. Wulfstan wrote the Life of St. Æthelwold after the translation of St. Æthelwold (10 September 996). See also Ælfric’s Vita S. Æthelwoldi. Lapidge and Winterbottom, Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, xvi, 70-80.
Æthelthryth plays within Wulfstan’s portrayal of male saint’s life, she is characteristic of a model of devotion that positioned her influence strongly within Winchester’s tenth-century preoccupations. Wulfstan’s *vita* was part of the narrative program that promoted the objectives of the Benedictine Reform Movement, and those objectives, I argue, contribute to the specific attention Wulfstan accords her in his narrative. Once the time, place and preoccupations of this movement are herein explored, however, Æthelthryth will be removed from the darkness she has up until now inhabited.

Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth not only possesses revered figural qualities that prefigure Æthelwold’s holiness but she also represents a spiritual leader close to God, as worthy of attention as the sainted Æthelwold himself. Wulfstan portrayed Æthelthryth as an idealized figure, and her character is dedicated toward an aspect of Æthelwold, a larger-than-life human being. She also benefits from the adoption of foundational texts to inform her depiction. Æthelthryth’s inclusion in Bishop Æthelwold’s *vita* must therefore be seen as contributing to his saintly virtue and spiritual patronage, and this association provided Wulfstan with authorial credibility. I hope it will become clear through this discussion of her character how immensely valuable Æthelthryth was to architects of the Reform Movement and to the portrayal of Nunnaminster as an institution presumably adopting prescriptive monastic corrections. Æthelthryth and Nunnaminster are represented as keeping with the idealization of female religious life contributing to the larger female Winchester community, even beyond their role in Æthelwold’s evolution as bishop, and despite Wulfstan’s attempt to elide their origins. It is to the task of evaluating Æthelthryth that this dissertation, *Æthelthryth: Shaping a Religious Woman in Tenth-Century Winchester*, is devoted.
Despite her representation in Wulfstan’s text and her apparent importance to Anglo-Saxon religious life at an auspicious moment in monastic history, Æthelthryth has remained undiscovered as a principle character in Wulfstan’s *vita*. Winchester, the most preeminent royal and ecclesiastical English city, was critical to the Benedictine Reform Movement. Due to its location and ancestry, Nunnaminster sat squarely at the center of Winchester’s royal and ecclesiastical life. Since Æthelthryth was at Nunnaminster during the early tenth century, she would have been its first female religious leader. Æthelthryth has been mentioned in discussions surrounding Wulfstan’s *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* and in relation to larger concerns of religious women’s representation during the period, but her purpose in Wulfstan’s text has remained largely unrecognized. This lack of attention is surprising considering her depiction as a valuable member of the Nunnaminster community.

Perhaps this neglect is due to the difficulty in squaring Æthelthryth’s life as represented in Wulfstan’s text with what historians can construct about her. The nature and organization of Nunnaminster’s community has long puzzled scholars. Medievalists well before our time have attempted to reconstruct religious life at Nunnaminster. During the twelfth century, Osbert of Clair examined the nunnery’s early history, but his results remain unsatisfactory to this day. Osbert’s task was to describe the tenth-century St. Edburga (c.951x953), the only Nunnaminster saint and the granddaughter of Ealhswið.

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Osbert remarked that the manuscripts at his disposal at Nunnaminster were perplexing because “the conversation seemed confused.” One reason for his bewilderment may have been that Osbert, writing two hundred years after the events he was trying to reconstruct, was already missing earlier documents that would have contained important sources for understanding the nunnery’s foundation. Another concern for Osbert was his inability to convey a satisfactory depiction of Æthelthryth, who would have been the abbess at the time of Edburga’s oblation. In order to write *St. Edburga’s Life*, Osbert relied on at least one manuscript that we know with certainty, Wulfstan’s *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*. This text did not present Æthelthryth with assurance because details surrounding her life were inconsistent and incomplete, and Osbert did not attempt to rectify the incompatibility of her tenure at Nunnaminster with her lifespan nor provide her with any background information that would have clarified Wulfstan’s depiction. The effect of *St. Edburga’s Life* was to render the impression of Æthelthryth’s tenure muddled and her life history indefinite, perpetuating Wulfstan’s indeterminate portrayal of her and undoubtedly contributing to the subsequent neglect of Nunnaminster’s tenth-century leader. Similarly, in 1925, E.W. Williamson said that the

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6 According to Ridyard, Osbert wrote his *Vita Eadburge* based on a version which is no longer extant at Nunnaminster since two known contemporary manuscripts include variations of his text: British Library MS Lansdowne 436, inscribed on the flyleaf as the property of Romsey Abbey, and British Library MS Harleian 64, ff. 184-185v. Description of the fourteenth century *vita* is found in “Middle English and Latin Lives,” *Medieval Studies* 33 (1971): 292-333.
Life of St. Edburga, “cannot be commended. The story of the saintly maiden is far too slight to bear the rhetoric and the homilies with which Osbert loaded it.”

Williamson’s reaction to Edburga’s life at Nunnaminster matches the argument about Osbert’s text. Apparently, expectations about the purpose of Edburga’s Life after the fact did not correspond with the writer’s original intention.

Neither Osbert’s twelfth-century investigation of the tenth-century Edburga nor Williamson’s twentieth-century investigation of Osbert’s Edburga were able to resolve confusion: a character’s presumed existence did not conform to Anglo-Saxon notions of representation because tenth-century writers were adopting figural qualities from earlier texts to fit current Benedictine Reform goals, without sufficient real-world information that would increase the clarity of their characters’ impressions to a fact-based future. It was the long-standing interest of these writers to persist in the portrayal of idealized conceptions, rather than actual people, because their characters would become what readers would come to know, a challenge to those who seek a further understanding of the women who existed outside their pages.

B. Thesis

Through the study of her figural attributes, Æthelthryth offers a compelling understanding of how Anglo-Saxon female religious life was depicted in literature; moreover, her representation exists within the context of the royal and ecclesiastical priorities surrounding her. Wulfstan’s representation of Æthelthryth is informed by tropes

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7 Williamson, The Letters of Osbert of Claire, 25. Edburga would have been at Nunnaminster during the time of Æthelthryth’s life. Æthelthryth is mentioned in Edburga’s vita. The Life of St. Edburga is also connected with Nunnaminster in a more direct way, since its subject is another resident of that house: the tenth-century royal oblate and granddaughter of King Alfred and Ealhswith, Edburga (d.951x953). Edburga is not mentioned in Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi.
that served the priorities of Benedictine Reform. An examination of the figural qualities so admired by Wulfstan and his circle sheds light on Æthelthryth: rather than diminishing her impression (because these qualities are figural rather than “real”), my investigation enlarges our sense of Æthelthryth and other portrayals of female religious of the period. Like many such narratives written during the Anglo-Saxon period, Wulfstan’s vita reflects the importance of female portrayal within the context of monastic renewal. The objectives of the moment privileged Wulfstan’s goals for his biography of the Bishop of Winchester. An ideal was upheld for the vita’s benefit, a tradition that met the current needs, but which also elided the depiction of a real woman’s life in pursuit of those ideals. Although the Vita St. Æthelwoldi does not necessarily attempt an accurate portrayal of religious life, but an idealized one, this text should be seen as offering a rare and revealing example of the period’s interest in the representation of female monastic life. Focusing on Æthelthryth’s character in Wulfstan’s text offers significant advantages for the reader of the vita because of the way women were characterized during the tenth century. She appears to support, even complement, the achievements of the text’s protagonist, offering an interesting juxtaposition with the period and place that molded her creation.

With this framework in mind, I look at how extensively Æthelthryth’s depiction fits into the objectives of tenth-century Winchester. In this lies an attempt to understand Wulfstan’s goals. Æthelthryth’s portrayal during the time of Reform reveals how women’s roles in general were employed at this time in monastic literature. In fact, her depiction allows us to witness a member of the Nunnaminster community through the lens of a particularly biased writer. Her role in the text is to facilitate the mandates of
tenth-century reform. By centering the discussion on these mandates, I delve into the reason why Wulfstan chose to depict Æthelthryth as a particular devotional figure in Winchester and how she was portrayed as functioning within her religious community. Examining Æthelthryth’s role in Wulfstan’s *Vita* provides an understanding of her character as a symbol, and her depiction requires interpretation. This interpretation includes an exploration of other manuscripts associated with Anglo-Saxon female monasticism, tenth-century Winchester, and Nunnaminster.

I posit that Wulfstan’s description of Æthelthryth was designed to have a specific effect on his readers. By representing heightened Anglo-Saxon female monastic devotion, Æthelthryth’s character illustrated that of an embodied ideal female ruler, for her depiction recognized an inherited textual knowledge that included the most storied symbols of female authority. In order to approach this inquiry, I explore the narrative choices that informed Wulfstan’s depiction of Æthelthryth and speculate as to the reason Wulfstan may have chosen to represent Æthelthryth, refigured from the past, to speak to his contemporary vision of Anglo-Saxon England. Since Æthelthryth was represented as possessing nursing, visionary, and leadership skills enabling her access to physical and spiritual realms, her character was accorded a mediating role in the lives of religious and secular communities in tenth-century Winchester.

In this light, Æthelthryth’s role becomes a critical lens into an understanding of how late Anglo-Saxon female monastic life was portrayed. Looking at her character through the lens of the Benedictine Reform Movement is especially relevant to our understanding of how she was depicted alongside the history of tenth-century Winchester. The dichotomy between the text in question and evidence external to
Wulfstan’s creation poses several opportunities in this study. Gathering evidence across the archive is important because of the inherent differences between a vita, which records an ideal, and a prayerbook, which reflects behavior.

It is important to investigate how depictions of monastic women promoted spiritually and pragmatically refining effects for the benefit of both their own houses as well as for the larger ecclesiastical and royal populace, because they demonstrate the significance of female religious devotion. Thus Æthelthryth becomes the proper focus of development of and exemplary of female sanctity worthy of imitation by monastics, secular religious and lay audiences alike. Representations of Æthelthryth are consequently a critical source for recovering the important contributions of monastic women to Anglo-Saxon culture.

Certainly, I am not alone in finding the study of religious women’s representation through a hagiographical lens intriguing. How medieval readers read religious texts is a perplexing question, especially as we can never be sure how, if at all, they had a sense of self that differed from our own, or how they perceived what they read or experienced. Evaluating virtues from our perspective as well as from the perspectives of people from so long ago, readers who had to consider conventions inherited from even more ancient models, is undeniably challenging. The question of how the historical role of real women relates to the symbolic use of feminine representation in texts does not necessarily need to be perfectly resolved because the study of hagiography does not necessarily offer a neat image of reality. Given the concern over the lack of records for Nunnaminster during the tenth century, much can be gleaned by searching for the monastic and political
objectives of the period, which themselves reveal noteworthy portrayals of their key female subjects.

Understanding one religious woman’s textual representation during the Anglo-Saxon period requires taking on the question of Wulfstan’s purpose and motivation. Context is critical: how and why were examples and principles of female sanctity utilized during the tenth century, and in what way did they relate to then-current ecclesiastical and royal goals? Wulfstan’s decisions surrounding Æthelthryth’s depiction raise several questions and allow for a few assumptions. What does he accomplish by introducing Æthelthryth’s representation in the text? How is her religious house, Nunnaminster, aligned within the context of her depicted life and within the current expectations of the ideal monastic role promoted during the tenth-century Benedictine Reform Movement? How does the house’s history of royal religious women’s endowment square with the Reformers’ objectives?

As a principal writer during the Reform Movement, Wulfstan needed to carefully establish the credibility of his narrative against the goals of the renewal-minded period. The paradox posed by Æthelthryth’s representation arose out of the relationship between ideals about religious women leaders, Nunnaminster’s political efficacy, and Winchester’s reforming churchmen’s objectives. Wulfstan’s approach suggests Æthelthryth’s character was intended to represent a religious woman. Her fictional existence, however, speaks to the factual Nunnaminster, the community he depicts her ruling over, as well as to the religious house’s tangible connection with the royal Wessex family. Wulfstan prolonged her textual life, eliding any semblance to real life, in favor of
a religious woman’s figural importance and in service of the adoption of monastic regulations already underway.

Æthelthryth’s portrait provides an example of a nun formed from textual history, integral to the reform of monastic life. Her depiction illustrates how Anglo-Saxon writers attempted to adopt meaningful traditions and form them into exemplary and didactic literature relevant for the period. Idealized representations, drawn from earlier models, contributed to the traditional nun ideal that Wulfstan portrayed. His allusions to female hagiographic imagery, Biblical, classical, and early Anglo-Saxon tropes of religious women signaled both Æthelthryth’s sanctity and religious renewal in Winchester. Æthelthryth’s figural qualities were not taken from one saint’s life, but several; not one poem, but many. Scripture as well as Antique images flood through her legacy, mingled and circulated in various ways to correspond with the period and place of its reception. By tracing these qualities we will come closer to understanding the Reformers’ priorities.

Wulfstan wanted to keep the female virgin trope before the eyes of the Winchester community because readers projected their expectations for the representation of religious women on Æthelthryth’s portrayal. Like other pious women, Æthelthryth participates symbolically in the figuration of the Virgin Mary, the most powerful human being in Christian history—for both men and women. Wulfstan’s use of Æthelthryth allowed him symbolic references to another woman of the same name, St. Æthelthryth, the seventh-century abbess of Ely. The depiction of Queen Ælfthryth, Æthelwold’s patron, was consequently influenced by these earlier portrayals. Female names in Anglo-Saxon England had specific connotations, and they shared compounded
elements with one another. It is not surprising that Æpel (Old English, might and noble)\(^8\) was common, since most of the recorded names are those of honorable women.

Wulfstan’s decision to promote Æthelthryth through this name is a nostalgic nod to its connotation and because it was adaptable to his political objectives to appropriate women’s lives at Nunnaminster.

Additional sources, contemporary with Wulfstan’s text, illustrate the specific lives of religious women at Nunnaminster. Women like Ealhswið (842-902),\(^9\) whom we know with certainty were associated with Nunnaminster and its community’s preoccupations, are found in manuscripts such as The Book of Nunnaminster associated with female religious life in tenth-century Winchester.\(^{10}\) These manuscripts tell us a great deal about these women’s practices and what was important to them in their spiritual and practical lives. The women behind the pages of these books take on added significance because they complement the impression we have of Nunnaminster, Æthelthryth’s religious house, in Wulfstan’s text. This study cannot completely smooth out the differences between my

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\(^8\) Elisabeth Okasha, *Women’s Names in Old English* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 62, 64, 90-1, 109.


\(^{10}\) Walter de Gray Birch, *An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, Formerly Belonging to St. Mary's Abbey, or Nunnaminster, Winchester* (London: Simpkin, 1889).
understanding of Wulfstan’s text and others circulating in Winchester with the evidence of female religious behavior during this period. By pointing to what we know about the women of Winchester, there are undoubtedly moments of inevitable disconnect between a modern interpretation and the unknowable past, naturally colored by what is perceived as evident during the time. Matching the pragmatic and idealistic is useful, but there are also challenges in any attempt to align all the relevant sources together.

There are obvious occasions when material pertaining to Wulfstan’s text highlights the merger of historical context and literary conventions. Looking at the past, or at least the kind of information that conveys a productive record of a life, contributes to our understanding of the expectations and conventions that shape narratives by writers of the period. Scholars turn to hagiographic literature not only because they have to. Saints’ Līves are literary productions, and, as such, they present ideal representations that illuminate the contextual life around them. From one perspective, as Thomas D. Hill observed: “Medieval hagiography has been relatively little studied from a literary viewpoint because its aesthetic qualities have failed to be recognized as such.”\textsuperscript{11} While hagiography reveals interesting aspects of literary culture, it also serves, among other things, as historical sources, according to Stephen Wilson.\textsuperscript{12} The hagiographic traditions are not completely detached from other traditions, which illustrates their potential cultural inheritance.


It is especially relevant to search additional sources while investigating hagiographic literature. Anglo-Saxon saints’ *Lives* deserve examination because they record venerable practices and religious belief over time. The writer’s place and period also inform the depiction of characters in saints’ *Lives*. Rosalind Love asserts that,

> In most cases it is beyond recovery to determine hagiographical reality of their lives, but then anybody who deals with hagiography should know full well that it tends to tell us far more about the hagiographer’s times and attitudes than about the saint in question.  

While complete retrieval is impossible, we can nevertheless salvage a great deal beyond information about the saint. The narrative choices made by authors who wrote about religious men and women, whether models of an earlier time or who were approximating traits within the privileged lay arena, are profoundly instructive as to the expectations of the intended tenth-century audience that this study hopes to understand. As is often the case for the study of the early Middle Ages, a relative scarcity of sources outside hagiography is an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. Investigations of literature such as this one must retrieve the period’s ideals of sanctity by examining the explicit and implicit references to female religious life that can be detected within and outside of Wulfstan’s narrative. Anglo-Saxon literature in its greater corpus is a major source for understanding early medieval women. The literary treatment of female devotion in Anglo-Saxon religious life has attracted more focused scholarly attention. Recently, published translations of the Old English lives of the female saints and the status and role of women portrayed in hagiography have been the subject of extensive collections of

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monographs. Susan Wemple and Jo Ann McNamara have rediscovered the relevance of investigating prayerbooks, attempting to consider their significance with respect to illuminating religious women. The individual lives of female religious at distinct monastic houses in these texts reveal their conduct, often displaying a distinctively female sanctity, practical and spiritual behavior.

Nunnaminster manuscripts, in particular, are rewarding informants in relation to Æthelthryth’s depiction, especially when viewed in proximity to Wulfstan’s text. Although Wulfstan omits the Æthelthryth’s character’s backstory as well as the founding of Nunnaminster, his choice to include Æthelthryth as a member of the monastic house points to the legacy secured by a former queen, a woman of noble background by her own right, and her descendants. Considering that this was a period in which many monasteries were founded and ruled by individual royal families, Æthelthryth stands out for not being identified as a noblewoman. Thus, she appears to represent a compelling symbol, illustrating the Reformers’ attempts to detach the monastic family from the loyalties and demands of blood clan and to separate religious and lay communities from one another. Lay control over monasteries was antithetical to the regulations of Reform, but equally Church control could not have been imposed as easily as these rules indicate.


This may well be an example of prescriptive literature’s inability to constrain and define women’s behavior and identity, never fully representing a faithful depiction of governing practice.

Textual exemplarity, whether hagiographic or pragmatic, encouraged women to mimic pious individuals and provided a valuable tool for understanding devotional practice and its depiction. Tradition was fostered in the examples found in books, and women employed these instances to demonstrate their sanctity. Paul E. Szarmach emphasized that the study of women in Anglo-Saxon England should “take into account the real and imagined women who were their holy exemplars.” Conrad Leyser, however, rejected the assumption that women who appear in texts during the Reform period signify real historical figures. Instead he argued that women served a rhetorical function. As of 1996 there was little interest in hagiographic texts as literature, but very likely scholars such as Szarmach and Leyser had read Eileen Power’s very early observation that writing on medieval religious women saw its literature as a blend of life and fiction. Jesse Keshiaho explains the complexity of this genre. Saints’ Lives are complex constructions because they have a circular logic: “Hagiography presents itself as a depiction of historical reality, making an argument about the state of that reality.” Jocelyn Wogan-Browne warns us to be aware of the gaps between authors and their texts,

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authors and their audience and the texts themselves.\textsuperscript{21} Vitae and other hagiographic texts and images, unlike law codes, for example, often alienate the physical from the spiritual. Claire A. Lees asserts that, “Anglo-Saxon writing captures the paradox whereby the passage of the body into writing, into culture, is a passage into signification that renders the material body absent.”\textsuperscript{22} The figure on the page is often distanced from the historical woman it represents, and requires complementary sources, like charters, to broaden our understanding of both tradition and conduct.

The traditions of the Anglo-Saxon nuns and royal female interest in religious patronage are so intertwined that it is difficult to disentangle them. Royal women founded the early English nunneries and were a model for female religious life throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. The life described in texts meant to model female religious behavior appealed strongly to elite Anglo-Saxon women because pious qualities were privileged. So too was the case for prayerbooks read by religious women, who were most often royal, demonstrating conduct most beneficial for her community. In the nineteenth-century edition of The Book of Nunnaminster, Walter Gray De Birch asserted that, starting in the tenth century, Nunnaminster “became the retreat of many West Saxon ladies of the highest rank, who regulated their discipline and carried out their religious observances.”\textsuperscript{23} These women are directly associated with the successful transmission of religious culture throughout Mercia and Wessex, their lives and houses celebrated due to the monastic devotion found in Nunnaminster and read by its community. Inhabitants of


\textsuperscript{23} Birch, An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, 7.
Nunnaminster influenced further dedication to religious life based on this text. The *Nunnaminster* prayerbook was passed down from over the centuries, through the female line, ensuring continuous pious commitment to the communities of religious women who studied its pages. This manuscript is not only a treasured female spiritual guidebook but also a valuable record of female literacy and book ownership over time. Moreover, possession of *Nunnaminster* secured the community’s rights to remain on the land on which the nunnery was built. Some words are especially worn down in these pages, with female entreaties conveying commitment to religious life over the centuries.

We know from scribal evidence that women read *The Book of Nunnaminster* during the period when Wulfstan wrote his *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* because the residents of the nunnery touched the words as they read.\(^{24}\) Both these texts, and others, must serve as complementary sources for understanding female religious life in tenth-century Winchester. When investigated, they are rich treasures that reveal pronounced religious practice. Behavior inspires writers to depict conduct, as in the case of writers of ecclesiastical prescription, but scribes also recorded instances of genuine devotion to a monastic community. This devotion of Anglo-Saxon pious women becomes a prism through which people living with that thought see themselves. Writers often glorify their portraits to include larger than life traits. These traits are passed down through characters portraying still nobler identities, and this idealized behavior becomes embedded into a tradition. It is impossible to separate what has been learned over centuries with what

occurs in everyday life. Tradition comes from a place of learned and lived experience, providing a path to recognition, which erases the obscurities of a character’s past.

C. Scope and Purpose

At the outset, my intent in this project was to examine the religious women’s community of Nunnaminster in its entirety. Nunnaminster has been described as an important monastic house, and I had planned to form a comprehensive study that covered its history: the foundation story, the women who ruled over the house, their activities and spiritual lives. It was my intent also to pay particular attention to the community’s role in royal patronage and the wider political and literary events during its history. Illustrating the interrelation between Nunnaminster and the two male powers of Winchester, Old and New Minsters, along with royal connections, would provide insight into their engagement with the wider religious and lay community. My goal was to use a range of sources to advance the proposition that Nunnaminster indeed constituted a strong presence in Winchester starting in the tenth century.

But I soon encountered some very large roadblocks that made researching Nunnaminster a challenge. An unfortunate lacuna emerges in the attempt to understand Nunnaminster: the house has no surviving archives, and the nunnery’s manuscript

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holdings are incomplete.\textsuperscript{26} Unfortunately, additional manuscripts connected to the house were likely lost, stolen or damaged; these texts would have shed light on Nunnaminster’s history and management as well as on the roles of their abbesses, not to mention the nunnery’s intended institutional course and its first inhabitants. Tenth-century Winchester is often viewed in light of the poverty of its documentation regarding its religious women, which gives them the appearance of an often-fragmented history. The frequent refrain, “We are told nothing of the day-to-day lives of the nuns [of Winchester] or of the relations between the secular and religious communities,” is reminder of the paucity of extant records concerning Nunnaminster and the lack of information about its interaction beyond the cloister.\textsuperscript{27} When Virginia Blanton asserted that, “unfortunately, the Winchester house for women is seriously understudied, considering its association with Old Minster and New Minster,”\textsuperscript{28} I wondered what I could contribute to an understanding of Nunnaminster’s history.

As I searched for examples of other Anglo-Saxon women’s communities, I realized that the problem with Nunnaminster’s documents was not unique: a systemic obstacle prevented an understanding of the larger corpus of the majority of female houses. Records detailing female religious life at this time in general are largely lost or were never written to begin with. In her book on medieval nuns, Pauline Stafford raises

\textsuperscript{26} Compared to Old Minster’s cartularies. The charter through which Edward the Elder acquired the land on which to build the New Minster survives in later manuscripts: P. H. Sawyer, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography} (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968), no. 1143. Less than a quarter of the total number of foundations have extant cartularies or cartulary-like materials. Those few were evidently kept at the monastery itself: David N. Bell, “Appendix: Cartularies and Related Documents,” in idem, \textit{What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries}, “Appendix: Cartularies and Related Documents” (Kalamazoo, Michigan and Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 219-22.


\textsuperscript{28} Blanton, \textit{Signs of Devotion}, 91, no. 63.
the point that may well be taken as a reason not to embark upon an investigation like the one I originally undertook: late Anglo-Saxon religious women and their nunneries lacked written records and thus do not have much chance of being understood.²⁹ For example, there is an overall decline in the number of charters issued for female houses beginning in the second half of the eighth century and a dearth of sources on religious women and their houses in the tenth. The marked difference in documentation is found starting in the ninth century when women’s property holdings for religious houses had fallen off considerably.³⁰ As I searched for answers, however, I discovered that the perceived shortage of information about Nunnaminster is not a reflection of religious women’s lack of interest in monastic establishments in Wessex. At Nunnaminster, we have evidence of an untapped source of female devotion and organization beginning in the late ninth century. The Book of Nunnaminster’s Mercian origins is indicative of the important relationship between its Anglo-Saxon royal women, their spiritual practice, and the transmission of their books, especially by female family members.

As I focused on Nunnaminster, another impediment appeared. Scholars have found that female religious houses were omitted in writings during the tenth century. This comparative absence of women at the time has frequently been referred to as the “invisibility of nuns,” and a few scholars have offered theories to explain it.³¹ The consequences of the loss of shared pasts seem more severe for women and perhaps for

women religious in particular because of the change in the nature of evidence for the communal female religious life in England across the Viking Age,\textsuperscript{32} which had long-term textual consequences. Closer to our period, religious women apparently disappeared from the cultural record during the Benedictine Reform period.\textsuperscript{33} Anglo-Saxon writers seemingly held a bias against documenting women’s houses at this time: female religious are especially poorly represented in comparison with their male counterparts in a wide range of written sources. Because foundation charters or records concerning female properties are not mentioned in narratives of reform in the way that male houses are, a silence of sources surrounds the study of monastic women. Might it be possible to look at religious women at this time in their own right since they were nevertheless present in their own literature?

Even as I approached this issue of a scarcity of data, I also realized that my original goal was beyond the scope of a single dissertation. An investigation of Nunnaminster’s concerns, along with its initiative and authority, needed to be interdisciplinary, drawing on evidence and insights from fields of historical inquiry. It became obvious that investigating Nunnaminster’s history in such a capacity would keep me from focusing specifically on its religious women. Furthermore, my approach needed to be one of textual understanding not historical evaluation: a literary exercise, not a study of ancient lives.

At first, I debated which woman to choose. I decided not to attempt a complete survey of Nunnaminster’s first community. A thorough study of the corpus of religious

\begin{footnotes}
\item[32] Foot, Veiled Women I, ix, 71.
\end{footnotes}
women associated with the house at this time would again take me far beyond the scope of a single dissertation. The question of Nunnaminster’s first religious ruler appealed to me, since she had the potential to offer a compelling area of investigation in Winchester during the tenth century. Although little evidence exists of Nunnaminster’s origins, examining that original leader might allow me as full an understanding of how women monastics were understood as any time in the house’s history. The project therefore offered a compromise solution. It recognized the problems I have just explained and provided groundwork for further examination on the topic.

As I searched for Anglo-Saxon sources for Nunnaminster’s foundation, my reading became focused on one text, Wulfstan’s *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*. This text drew my interest because it presents the only narrative of Nunnaminster during the tenth century. And, of all the texts I surveyed that mention the community, this one definitely contains the most (but far from) comprehensive depiction of a religious woman at the religious house in the character of Æthelthryth. Furthermore, Æthelthryth’s portrayal assumes that she served in a leadership position, one vital to the well-being of the future Bishop of Winchester as well as to laywomen and those in her own religious community. For these reasons, Wulfstan’s *vita* and specifically the character Æthelthryth unified my project. They lent themselves particularly well to a textual understanding of the depiction of female religious at Nunnaminster as well as of the role of the author in crafting their representation.

The character Æthelthryth initially provided the most compelling opportunity to explore religious life at Nunnaminster. However, understanding Æthelthryth in this role proved more elusive than I anticipated. Gaps and inconsistencies in Wulfstan’s text
suggest that Æthelthryth was not written as, nor was even meant to appear as, an actual woman. Since she was depicted as a figural composite, a study of this “Æthelthryth” would not necessarily contribute to a further understanding of the religious house or of religious women at Nunnaminster. What has developed is my quest for the character’s presence beyond the obvious pages of Wulfstan’s text. This pursuit includes the study of depictions of earlier religious women and their monastic houses in a variety of texts, depictions that would have resonated with Wulfstan’s audience as an inherited and practiced tradition. Drawing on these sources, my study then delves into how that tradition was employed for cultural motives that shaped English royal and ecclesiastical late Anglo-Saxon history.

D. Anglo-Saxon Textual History

Anglo-Saxon textual history begins with early writers intent on their role in the emerging Christianization of England. Anglo-Saxon texts indicate that the reception and adaptation of classical antiquity as well as Christian literature was critical to the formation of the Catholic Church in Anglo-Saxon England. Anglo-Saxon writers inherited a legacy that absorbed pagan, biblical, and patristic elements as well as Christian traditions as they had developed in England. This syncretic tradition was particularly important in the genre of saints’ Lives, with their reliance on figural conventions and codes of moral behavior. For Anglo-Saxon writers, the role of Lives in the transmission of female figural qualities, those relating to Æthelthryth in particular,
were important.\textsuperscript{34} From manuscript evidence, we can surmise that readers in the tenth century were engaged in connecting with other communities both within and beyond their own borders. Authors were incorporating sources from Continental texts, as well as native British cultures, and textual connections persisted between the Frankish and English monastic houses.

The extant literature of Anglo-Saxon England is the work of clerics whose writings recorded monastic tales. The main study of these authors followed the \textit{auctores}, Latin writers who enjoyed continuous authority beginning in the early Christian period, and, although not their primary source, this influence could not be independent from the tradition on which it drew. The new Christian cult of England (c.650-x680) began after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons (c.567), and the Latin language’s effect upon the burgeoning Christian culture is palpable. Ernst Robert Curtius argues that Latin’s primacy had the greatest impact on medieval culture: “What the later Roman period had preserved from non-classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages took over and transformed.”\textsuperscript{35} Old English translations of texts during the tenth century also indicate interest in the Classical past. Roman literature was known in written form during the Anglo-Saxon period, and late antique texts reflect the importance of Greco-Roman inheritance upon the English culture that saw itself as inheritors of the people from the Old Testament. Patrick Wormald observed medieval values aptly when he said, “An Old Testament model is likely


\textsuperscript{35} Curtius, \textit{European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages}, 19.
inspirational for an image cultivated.” These inherited virtues influenced literary priorities, their imprints forming the foundation of the Anglo-Saxon textual tradition.

The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons followed in the wake of the Gregorian mission to England in c.597 when monks sent to England from the Gregorian monastery of St. Andrew on the Caelian Hill in Rome brought a number of manuscripts, according to Bede. These manuscripts provide a direct link between libraries of late Antiquity and those of Anglo-Saxon England. Gneuss’s *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, an update of his “Preliminary List of Manuscripts Written or Owned in England up to 1100,” indicates that many classical and ecclesiastical writings are incorporated into Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, including grammarians, poets, dramatists, prose and patristic writers, as well as Biblical and pragmatic history. J.D.A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English 597-1066*, contributes to this understanding by revealing the range of sources available to the Anglo-Saxons. It becomes apparent from this list that the classics formed one part of their libraries, with a number of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts becoming the archetypes of later Carolingian transmission. According to Bernard Bischoff, the Anglo-Saxons were capable of conveying accumulated medieval knowledge because their collections were bursting with ancient, classical, and patristic texts: “It was the Anglo-

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Saxons who transmitted the idea of a library well stocked for instruction and study, and balanced equally between Classical and patristic literature to Carolingian Europe.”

Complex relations and cultural connections existed between the Anglo-Saxons and Christian supremacy, so much so that the term “insular” encompasses a broad reach of early England traditions. E. A. Lowe, M. B. Parks, and Jennifer Morrish, among others, have portrayed the eighth and ninth centuries as a particularly productive period for Anglo-Saxon manuscript production, reflecting the native traditions that merged with those from overseas. The Anglo-Saxons were part of an international Christian culture that extended from the eastern bounds of the Roman Empire, through Syria and Palestine, to Rome, Francia, and Brittany, and west to their immediate neighbors in Cornwall, Wales and Ireland. Irish and Roman along with Graeco sources mingled with British and Anglo-Saxon insular spirituality.

Specific international connections produced Latin Christian culture. Sarah Foot has pointed to the diversity of cultures in early Anglo-Saxon monastic culture. England, Ireland and the Insular World: Textual and Material Connections in the Early Middle Ages, edited by Mary Clayton, Alice Jorgensen, and Juliet Mullins (2017) describes the Anglo-Saxon nascent literary cultural tradition from the perspective of both native and inherited resources. English copyists attempted to impose features, drawn from

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Carolungian traditions, onto a native base that is reflected in a fully formed Anglo-Saxon hand: square minuscule. Christian England’s textual inheritance can be briefly summarized as follows: it comprised Augustine, Prudentius and Orosius, Macrobius, Servius, Martianus Capella, and Sidonius from the fifth century, and from the sixth century, Boethius (d.524), St. Benedict, and Cassiodorus (490-583). Seventh-century influences are found in Fortunatus, Pope Gregory the Great, and Isidore of Seville. From Ireland, Columban (d.615) and from Rome, Augustine: both land in Kent c.597 and begin the conversion of England.

The Synod of Whitby (664) established the hegemony of Roman Christianity over Celtic Christianity. Aldhelm (d.709) and then Bede (d.735), and apostles Boniface (d.754) and Alcuin (d.804), contributed to Anglo-Saxon textual traditions. Patristic writers such as Tertullian and Jerome directly influenced Aldhelm and Bede. Bede and Aldhelm wrote important texts that were foundational for later writers, and their stories about religious women were highly valued by early medieval readers.42 Alcuin of York (740-804) showed how inseparably religious, monastic, and ecclesiastical institutions were intertwined to constitute the culture of the period. Other Anglo-Saxon Latinists influenced by the monastic school were Saint Boniface (d.755) and Lul (d.786).

Lul’s letters to Anglo-Saxon nuns, like those of Saint Boniface, are typical of monastic writings about religious women, who were depicted with those figural qualities characteristic of the period, ones we see later portrayed in Wulfstan’s text. The nun figure repeats and popularizes tropes established by these writers of Latin literature, carrying

over ideals from patristic texts. Although other genres contributed to the figure of the religious woman, she was, for the most part, modeled from these sources. These features of female monastics reflected Continental as well as earlier Anglo-Saxon practices that were adopted by tenth-century ecclesiastical Winchester writers.

The first literary effort regarding nuns during the Anglo-Saxon period was the work of Aldhelm, who produced the first treatise for nuns, De Laudibus Virginitatis. This text was addressed to Hildelith, the Abbess of Barking and mentions works of Athanasius, Evagrius, Hilarion, Jerome, Eusebius, Gregory, Cassian, Rufinus, Ambrose, Basil, Cyprian, and Augustine.\(^{43}\) Aldhelm did not cite all of his sources, and it is clear that Holy Scripture, influenced by Roman and Greek images, especially Vergil and classical expressions, along with Tertillian and Manitus, are presences in his writing. As an example, Aldhelm mentions that “the etymologies of the Latin tradition, called Vergilae” prefigured “the divine gifts of the universal church [i.e. the sacraments]”; the sources for these images are found in Isidore’s Etymology and De Natura Rerum.\(^{44}\)

Aldhelm’s most modeled text, De Laudibus Virginitatis, is renowned for illuminating Barking’s literate community, and the nuns’ remarkable monastic virtues are discussed at length, reinforced by the accounts of miracles performed by them or on their account. Bede, the monk of Wearmoth and Jarrow, produced various and voluminous works, notably the Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, in which nuns are prominently depicted. Bede described in fond terms Aldhelm’s representation of religious

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women: “He also wrote a most excellent book on virginity.”\textsuperscript{45} In Bede’s work, the leaders of monastic houses were celebrated women. Bede portrayed many religious women using figural qualities, qualities he advanced in order to promote monastic traits most admired by reforming churchmen in the early Anglo-Saxon period. These include sexual abstinence, devotion to departed souls, foretelling the future, and serving as an example of religious life by leading other religious women.\textsuperscript{46} The characteristics of these nuns, along with stories of their virtuous achievements, made their mark upon subsequent English literature.

\textbf{E. Rhetorical Approach}

Anglo-Saxon writers were mythmakers: narrative tradition trumped historical accuracy. This approach was common because literary invention was viewed positively. Writers used figural qualities in stock characters. In fact, copying was encouraged and adjustable accommodation accepted. Not only were writers less inclined to view literary invention as a problem, they considered it an asset. Monica Otter describes this rhetorical approach as “flirting with fictionality,” as some Anglo-Saxon authors deliberately inserted erroneous references.\textsuperscript{47} Writers were skilled in the study of legendary figures, which they shaped for their audience. These new representations became relevant, both in their ability to incorporate past myths and because those fables mattered in the moment. Their function was not to depict historical reality, and certainly not, as Keshiaho asserted,

\textsuperscript{45} “Scripsit et de virginitate librum eximium”: Bede, \textit{HE}, XVIII.V.18, 514.
\textsuperscript{46} Bede, \textit{HE}, IV, 1-6, 19; XVII, 514-515; XIX, 18-19, 390-397.
to make “an argument about the state of that reality.” Saints’ lives and their images were thus not static, and medieval readers of hagiography expected that portrayals of saints would shift and be converted into different contexts. The tools used in the portrayal of medieval characters are supple, according to Eric Auerbach, so

the figures are not only tentative; they are also the tentative form of something eternal and timeless; they point not only to the concrete future, but also to something that always has been and always will be; they point to something which is in need of interpretation, which will indeed be fulfilled in the concrete future.

As an historic genre, saints’ Lives function as moral exempla replete with unrealistic features, divorced from the sequence of history. It was the overall intention of any hagiographer to demonstrate that his saintly subject belonged indisputably to the universal community of saints, and thus modeled each Life closely on those of earlier authors. A character’s qualities and pious behavior could be adjusted in order to appeal to a particular audience. Readers knew that as saints’ Lives were holy they transcended realistic characterization. They were concerned with ideal types, which served as models of values that were steadfast.

To Anglo-Saxons the impression of the world was made up of figural qualities (Latin figurae). Figural types offered Anglo-Saxon readers archetypes by which to interpret the meaning behind texts, and authors relied upon classical and earlier Anglo-Saxon figurae—derived from fingere: “to make,” “to fashion,” but also “to devise, feign or represent”—to establish a connection between events or persons, because figurae offer

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48 Keshiaho, Dreams and Visions, 16.
50 Auerbach, Mimesis, 45.
51 Thomas D. Hill, “Imago Dei,” 47.
transitional textual opportunities. This association was accomplished through similitude. Auerbach asserts that, “in figural interpretation one thing stands for another, and since one thing represents and signifies the other, figural interpretation is ‘allegorical’ in the widest sense.”^{52} Through this rhetorical approach specific individuals or events are affiliated with God. The reader is encouraged to understand the importance of the subject’s figural associations because these meanings indicate devotional practices. In c.780, Abbot Baugulf of Fulda wrote that the knowledge of figures is necessary for the study of the Bible: “Since the Holy Scripture is strewn with figures of speech, no one can doubt that every reader will the more quickly understand it spiritually the earlier and the most fully he has been instructed in the art of letters.”^{53} This type of fictional creation, whereby aspects from one life could be reinterpreted and mapped onto another, were familiar ways to associate worthy women (and men) with each other.

One early Anglo-Saxon source, Bede’s *De Arte Metrica et De Schematibus et Tropis*, provides the kind of scaffolding needed to interpret the thinking of the period. This text greatly influenced writing and reading, especially the early medieval approach to figurative language. It used Christian examples, which were disseminated throughout European monasteries over many centuries and provided a means of recognizing and interpreting figurative speech and the theological significances with which Scripture can invest certain kinds of figures.^{54} Bede explains his reason for using these images, with their mix of semantic implications:

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And again one often finds a figurative expression, which comes about when a word is transferred from its own meaning to the likeness of something else, for the sake of necessity or ornament.\(^{55}\)

Invention or discovery is a condition to understanding spiritual reality beyond itself, emphasizing that this use had the meaning of veiled language or speaking through figures.

Anglo-Saxon writers’ accounts used familiar figures about saintly women, providing examples of female goodness that contributed to their later depiction. Women religious in literature were modeled on foundation legends. Origin stories (Latin \emph{origo gentis}) incorporated qualities of motherhood that were characteristically closely connected to the depiction of Mary. This adaptation offered an opportunity for authors to influence their characters’ portrayal. Writers depended on various stylistic devices to represent their female characters, techniques Virginia Blanton calls “multivalent representation.”\(^{56}\) Rhetorical methods offering flexible interpretation were of particular interest to writers during this period because language could be tailored from one text to another and utilized for numerous purposes when describing religious women. These designs provided writers with pliant markers that offered a distinct textual advantage. The process of describing religious women required utilizing labels, but these labels were fluid enough to be manipulated.

Monastic promotions were common. Miscellaneous and contradictory material was reworked and decentered in the monastic tradition. In a similar fashion, early


\(^{56}\) Blanton, \emph{Signs of Devotion}, 46.
medieval literature’s mode of discourse includes, as N. Zeeman notes, “the grammatical notion of deviation…that admits the slipperiness of language, its ambiguity and multiplicity.”

This approach is also evident in the preference for using adaptable names and descriptions for female religious leaders. Writers were drawn to a nostalgic representation of female monasticism, and in pursuit of this representation they combined or fused variant readings of texts into composite characters. They frequently used exemplarity to define a stable female devotional community against the instability of other social formations, such as large-scale transitions between property ownership and religious restructuring. Authors adopted similar forms and conventions in descriptions of nuns to carefully orchestrate and justify their sanctity. It was the common Anglo-Saxon practice to alter individual religious women’s lives to a general biographical and often-abstract didactic nun-figure, with the nun’s edifying life prefacing her abbatial career.

The tradition of female tropes associated with Christian spirituality has a long literary history, one that had the benefit of being highly adaptable to suit the needs of the moment. Evidence suggests that female identities were fabricated during the Anglo-Saxon period to enhance the status of monastic houses. For example, the historical record implies that there were two queen Æthelburh at Lyminge, but evidently they are condensed into one, according to the Charter of King Wihtred and his wife Queen Æthelburh, made in 697. Goscelin’s eleventh-century liturgy and vitae contributed to

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59 This connection of Æthelburg with Lyminge is not to be found in the earliest story version of the Mildreth Legend: M. Swanton, “A Fragmentary Life of St Mildred and other Kentish Royal Saints,” Archaeologia Cantiana 91 (1975), 15-27; D.W. Rollason, The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 73-80; Yorke, Nunneries, 23.
the recognition of Seaxhburh as a figure of sanctity. Her presentation suggests that a narrative about maternity was integral to the development of the hagiographical tradition at Ely. Tenth-century and later texts, including the *Liber Vitae* and *Liber Eliensis*, describe one Withburg as St. Æthelthryth’s sister, but Bede did not mention her, raising the possibility that she was a complete fabrication.⁶⁰ *Liber Eliensis*, a twelfth-century compilation of deeds, charters and privileges of Ely’s ancient history, includes a lengthy *vita* that embellishes Bede’s description of St. Æthelthryth’s overall monastic career.⁶¹ Both *vitae* appear to have been carefully orchestrated to justify their subjects’ sainthood and to place the development of their cults firmly within the context of tenth-century monastic reform, with their authors adopting similar forms and conventions.

**F. Conclusion**

Æthelthryth’s depiction offers an opportunity to explore the representation of later Anglo-Saxon female monastic life, most apparently because of the connection between her character’s function and the period and place in which she was written. Æthelthryth is not proved real, endorsed or upheld, because of her character’s feasibility but because of the formal strategies used for her textual representation. Attention to background evidence provides a means of incorporating an understanding of the qualities Wulfstan associated with sanctity. Anglo-Saxon writers were aware of textual variation and their audiences expected them to employ such methods; however, this alone does not support

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⁶¹ Bede, *HE*, XV, 260-1; Blanton, “King Anna’s Daughters,” 133.
the theory that characters depicted during this time were purely fictitious. It certainly does not endorse truth either by providing their existence. Other records, which are mirrored back upon recordings of anecdotal observations, are often a reflection of the real world. Thus, the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* is also not pure fiction. Æthelthryth’s textual identity is tied up with, or at least partially comprised of, facets of an ideal life. The mechanics of Æthelthryth’s literary representation offer a mélange of data, both fluid and fixed: like Russian nesting dolls separated by distinct layers, yet when united, ultimately form a composite impression. The discrepancy surrounding Æthelthryth’s identity outside Wulfstan’s text might be difficult to resolve, indeterminable by its very textual nature. The hagiographical account was not constructed as if it were a piece of modern historical writing, shaped by concerns and conceptions of reality identical to our own.

Helen Scheck’s recent work on female monastic representation during the Anglo-Saxon period seeks to understand how these women were perceived by looking at the presumed real conditions of their existence. The representations of religious women are reflections of the traditions from which they spring. Anglo-Saxon writers intended their compilations of saintly figures to mirror past ideals. Scheck concedes that there is difficulty in using hagiography as biography since *vitae* are typically written well after the lives of the women and the communities themselves that they describe. Also, because *vitae* privilege the portrayed ideals of female sanctity, these texts do not necessarily convey the kind of accurate depictions we associate with real people. That does not mean that women were less valuable to the texts they inhabited.

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Æthelthryth’s character has the ability to shape the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* because she is integral to the development of the bishop’s life. She also increases the perception of Nunnaminster as a vital community of dedicated monastic women who provided a great service to the larger Winchester female public. Æthelthryth’s textual agency provides readers with perceptions of religious women as important protagonists in their own right who engaged with conventions associated with women as well as serving as champions of monastic causes. Nunnaminster’s so-called archival disappearance is not so much a shortfall of religious texts as it is a discrepancy among documents reporting on religious women’s longevity over the course of the tenth century. Conflicting reporting may frustrate an interest in a character, but the evaluation of any historical measurement must be regarded as political testimony, adapting to the objectives of the moment and viewed through that lens.

Æthelthryth requires investigation if only to remove Nunnaminster’s long-standing status as a vaguely understood institution. With the exception of Wulfstan’s *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, Æthelthryth has been missing from the principal documents associated with Winchester and Nunnaminster. She is an important woman, for both those aspects of her life that were omitted in the text as well as her representation of a religious woman living in a tangible monastic house. From this standpoint, Æthelthryth is especially relevant to understanding how Nunnaminster was viewed during the tenth century, and her character helps us focus on manuscript evidence that brings the house closer into view. The period in which Wulfstan was writing is a significant time in Nunnaminster’s history, and the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* is bookended by evidence of its women’s religious lives. Æthelthryth is both symbolic of the Benedictine Reform’s values and a mirror by
which we can view its objectives. She is also a means to illustrate Nunnaminster’s achievements. Reliable figural qualities offered Wulfstan a method of shaping and reframing Æthelthryth in order to precisely portray a particular appearance and convey a specific literary impression. So effective are her *figurae* that they influence the future course of the *vita*. That is not to stay that her qualities stand in the way of understanding her. What they do, instead, is to provide a scaffold from which to launch inquiry into a proposed factual existence. To study Æthelthryth, along with the house she exemplifies, for what she stands for and for what is missing in Wulfstan’s *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, is also a project long overdue.

**G. Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter II is an overview of the tenth-century Benedictine Reform Movement and the Reformers who authorized and codified the Movement’s prescriptions. Included in this discussion is a review of Wulfstan’s life and his relationship with Æthelwold, along with the other architects of the Reform Movement, their goals and influences. The texts used to promote the Movement’s objectives are examined, along with the book collection and scriptorium that disseminated these works. Winchester’s tenth-century libraries and their literary foundations are important to understanding the development of the period and place that gave rise to and made possible this revival of Benedictine principles.

Chapter III considers Æthelthryth as if she were a real person in history, one whose depiction was modified in Wulfstan’s text in order to adopt measures valuable to the Benedictine Reformers and to present the most appealing for their movement to succeed. My approach juxtaposes these priorities, most importantly in the Reformers’
objectives for limiting royal female monastic property ownership in Winchester and beyond its boundaries. Nunnaminster’s literary history, along with its royal origins, is key to understanding this community’s permanence, its place at the center of reform. Women at the house were scribes and actively contributed to identifying themselves as skilled and devoted members of this female religious kinship.

The following three chapters (IV, V, and VI) look at each of the *figurae* Wulfstan uses to describe Æthelthryth. Chapter IV traces how the figural quality of nurse (Latin *nutrix*) would have been understood to Wulfstan’s readers. I investigate how the character of a nurse functions in the text and illustrate how this depiction matches up against the curative measures that were employed by religious women at this time, especially at Nunnaminster. This community was dedicated to healing its greater Winchester female society in a way that included both folk and Christian remedy.

Chapter V takes an approach similar to that employed in Chapter IV. Here, the visionary woman is considered as an important figure of monastic life. Since Æthelthryth’s character exists within the context of the narrative of a male saint’s life whose sanctity is prefigured in his mother’s dreams, the specific function of a wise woman (Latin *sagaci prudentissima*) factors large in Wulfstan’s text, and also for Wulfstan who promotes his own authority as communicator of the *vita*. Chapter VI considers Æthelthryth’s depiction as a religious leader, a “mother superior” (Latin *matrem*). I evaluate the role of the Anglo-Saxon female religious leader by looking at terms that describe this position and consider how Æthelthryth’s depiction functions before and after the Benedictine Reform Movement. Although there is little information regarding the abbess’s precise responsibilities, it is possible to form an understanding of how her position would have
been perceived during the period Wulfstan was writing. His Æthelthryth was undoubtedly portrayed as a leader, but she was not designated as an abbess. This chapter’s Conclusion includes a closing argument about Æthelthryth’s overall function in the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, and how her character was appropriated in ways that serve the greater interests of Æthelwold and the Queen, as well as Wulfstan himself.
CHAPTER II

THE BENEDICTINE REFORM MOVEMENT IN WINCHESTER

A. Introduction

In tenth-century Winchester a group of influential bishops aligned with the King attempted to reform the behavior and ownership structure of monastic communities in England. Winchester was the prominent center for the dissemination of this program of monastic renewal, known as the Benedictine Reform Movement. Our knowledge of the movement’s goals derives chiefly from the writings of Benedictine monks such as Wulfstan (c.960-22 January, early eleventh century). The close connection between politics and religion in Winchester in the period is significant. At this time, Winchester


was the seat of English kings and the site of the greatest complex of ecclesiastical buildings in the country. These buildings included a principal group of monastic houses with well-stocked libraries and a chief scribal center that disseminated texts throughout England; these texts were key to producing Reform documents, informing the precise guidelines for Benedictine religious conduct. Texts produced at this time acknowledged the objectives of Reform: they officially mandated implementation of Reform at both women and men’s religious houses; they ensured strict separation of male and female houses; they directed reorganized monastic foundations to retain wealth and independence from lay control; and they ordered religious communities to be exempt from external influence. They emphasized morals found in earlier English writing and the enlarged the role of the writer to convey these ideals. Qualities associated with sanctity were privileged in these texts because they had appeared in earlier influential works and were believed to spur monastic men and women to renewed religious devotion.

Wulfstan, a prominent Benedictine monk in Winchester, promoted the Reform Movement, and his *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* (c.996) was guided by its priorities, including

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3 The *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* has been positively identified as written by Wulfstan: Wulfstan of Winchester, Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, xv-vi. The text is preserved in five manuscripts of the twelfth century: Alençon 14, ff. 23r-34v; BL Tiberius D.iv, vol. 2, ff. 272v-281v; Cotton Caligula A. viii, ff. 125r-128v (fragment); BL Cotton Nero E.i, vol 2, ff. 209v-216v; and BL Arundel 169, ff. 88r-95r. This edition was first published in *Three Lives of English Saints*, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972). An earlier version was previously printed in the *Patrologia Latina* (cxxxvii), which is a reworking of Wulfstan by the historian Ordericus Vitalis. Wulfstan wrote the *Life of St Æthelwald* after 996: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, 34.
the period’s preoccupation with hagiography. The *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* is primarily a hagiographic text in that it was a principal witness to the life and deeds of a bishop worthy, Wulfstan argued, of sainthood. Wulfstan knew earlier saints’ lives, but he intended to do more than depict his subject as a saint during the time of the tenth-century revival. He was, like those around him, intent on improving current religious morals by reinvigorating older values and customs associated with saints’ Lives.

As with other writers of the period, Wulfstan formed his ideas and beliefs about religious communities from Biblical, Classical, patristic and earlier Anglo-Saxon sources. The ideal and the expression of the tenth-century monastic tradition are directly descended from this textual tradition, and resemblance to earlier Christian heroes is implicit in the portrayal of saints: authenticity lay in patterns of resemblance. In addition, ecclesiastical and royal partnerships were concerned with promoting cults and thus presented the cults as models of Christian life. This genre contributed to English piety and devotional practice and exerted great influence upon monastic attitudes in Winchester during the tenth century.

Texts relevant to the clergy and others vowed to religious life contributed to Wulfstan’s work. Additional earlier Lives, drawn primarily from patristic sources,
factored heavily in Wulfstan’s understanding of bishop saints. Furthermore, textual
treasures written by Bede and Aldhelm were also at Wulfstan’s disposal and exposed him
to the ideals of female monastic life. In terms of structure and substance, the *Vita St.
Æthelwoldi* models the case for Æthelwold’s sainthood on sources familiar to readers in
tenth-century Winchester, since it draws demonstrably on patristic works and earlier
Anglo-Saxon saints’ *Lives* found in the city’s monastic libraries. The arrangement of
Wulfstan’s *vita*, as well as his own role in ecclesiastical scribal tradition, is modeled after
antique Christian authors.

Wulfstan was a suitable choice as hagiographer for the Bishop of Winchester.
Michael Lapidge includes Wulfstan among “the principle authors of Anglo-Saxon
England.” Monasteries were the greatest single agent for transmitting the legacies of the
past, and his work in chronicling Æthelwold’s rise to sainthood would result in
Wulfstan’s renown. As a child oblate at the Old Minster in 971, Wulfstan spent his entire
life within Winchester’s center, appearing in lists of some importance to the city. As a
valuable member of the episcopal family, he was an eyewitness to tenth-century events
relating to Æthelwold. In his elaborate “Preface” to the text, Wulfstan claims that he
describes events “I saw with my own eyes or learned from older men whose account I
could trust.” Wulfstan reported that he had spoken with Æthelwold on several occasions
and that he was present when Dunstan visited Æthelwold at Winchester shortly before the

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8 Wulfstan appears in a list of monks of the Old Minster, compiled in the *Liber Vitae* and the Old English
translation of Chrodengang’s *Regula Canonicorum* (Winchester, c.1000). A.S. Napier, in his *The Old
English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodengang* (London, 1916), 9, mentions various monks of Old
Minster who accompanied Æthelwold, including Wulfstan.

9 “ipsi uidimus et quae fidelium seniorum relatione didicimus in his seculis summatim perstrinximus”: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, 2.
First monk and then priest, Wulfstan was ultimately promoted to cantor, and as a devoted pupil of Æthelwold, he was instrumental in the translation of Æthelwold’s remains on 10 September 996 in Winchester (ch. 43), composing liturgical pieces necessary for his commemoration. Wulfstan followed Bede’s approach and presented himself as the accurate recorder of events. Bede asserts: “for, in accordance with the principles of true history, I have simply sought to commit to writing what I have collected from common report, for the instruction of posterity.” This example provided Wulfstan with authorial legitimacy in recounting his testimony, securing his own skillful role as writer within the narrative.

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13 Wulfstan describes the translation of St. Swithun on 15 July 971 (ch. 26) and the rebuilding of the monastic precincts, including Old Minster itself (ch. 34), consecrated on 20 October 980 (ch. 40). In his dedicatory epistle of his *Narratio Metrica S. Swithuno*, Wulfstan describes Æthelwold’s translation: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, l.

14 Orderic’s twelfth-century copy of Wulfstan’s text is now a lost exemplar (Alençon, Bibl. Mun. 14, fols. 34v-35r): Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, cxiii-cxxiii.

The *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* immediately followed the composition of the *Regularis Concordia (RC)* (c.973),\(^\text{16}\) which Wulfstan may have co-authored with Æthelwold;\(^\text{17}\) Wulfstan’s prose is similar to that of both the English version of the *Regula St. Benedicti* (*Regula*) and the *RC*, and according to Michael Lapidge, both were written in Winchester.\(^\text{18}\) This text describes events in the city and the people who governed it, and so testifies to the tenth-century Reformers’ close ties to the West Saxon royal house, which was linked at this time to ecclesiastical concerns. Wulfstan asserted that he was in Winchester “during the reign of King Edward the Elder, King of Wessex (r. 900-925),”\(^\text{19}\) placing himself at the center of the court and ecclesiastical community of the city, especially the royal and monastic enclave.

**B. Tenth-Century Winchester Libraries**

The ecclesiastical and royal complex in Winchester provided access to what would have been (and still remains) an extensive library as well as a bustling center of manuscript production.\(^\text{20}\) Winchester is listed as one of the major centers in England from which manuscripts were produced: its male Old and New minsters and Nunnaminster are

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\(^\text{17}\) Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, xl.

\(^\text{18}\) 26, no. 3 indicates as such: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, cxi.

\(^\text{19}\) Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, xl.

all important sources of scribal activity. The tenth-century library at Old Minster may well have contained more than one hundred volumes, excluding biblical and liturgical books, with evidence of over two hundred surviving books and fragments through the Norman Conquest, from the ninth through the eleventh centuries. The thriving and influential center of manuscript production reveals a variety of religious and secular objects bearing close stylistic relationships to local manuscript illumination.

Winchester’s texts comprised a hybrid of earlier insular traditions blended with borrowed materials. Evidence indicates that many classical and ecclesiastical writings are incorporated into Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. This Winchester scriptorium pioneered and propagated new standards of manuscripts, with the school of illumination famed for the “Foundation Charter” produced and illuminated for the New Minster in 966, and by the Benedictional of St. Æthelwold. By c.1000 the Winchester style was becoming well known in Wessex in particular and England as a whole, with a notable Winchester manuscript of the later period, the Liber Vitae, produced at the New Minster between

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22 Lapidge, Anglo-Saxon Libraries, 60, 127.


1016 and 1020. In addition, there is the theoretical possibility of a central royal tenth-century chancery at Winchester, added under King Alfred (849-99; ruler of Wessex 871-899), where the largest group of monastic charters was produced at its episcopal scriptorium. At this time, translations appear prominently in Winchester’s court, at the request of Alfred, with Old English texts revealing a desire to investigate antiquity. Alfred’s efforts to revive literacy in England contributed to Winchester’s intellectual tradition. His vision of a revived English literacy was influenced by his visit as a small boy to the monastery of St. Bertin, at St.-Omer in northern France, which was a notable cultural center with an important scriptorium. When he returned to England, Alfred, along with his circle, created a wide range of texts: The Liber Dialogorum and the Regula Pastoralis of Gregory the Great, the De Consolatione Philosophiae of Boethius, the Historiae Adversum Paganos of Orosius, Gregory’s Dialogi, Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica and his Martyrology, along with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Alfred invited Grimbold of Saint-Bertin, John the Old Saxon, and Asser from St. David’s, Wales (who became the king’s biographer), to contribute a number of books to libraries across England, but most particularly to Winchester’s Cathedral holdings. Twenty-seven

27 The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey Winchester (British Library, MS Stowe 944); Walter de Gray Birch, Liber Vitae: Register and Martyrology of New Minster and Hyde Abbey (London: Simpkin, 1892); Simon Keynes, The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester: British Library Stowe 944: Together with leaves from British Library Cotton Vespasian A. Vii and British Library Cotton Titus D. Xxvii (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1996).

28 Alfred was initially buried in the Old Minster, but after the dedication of the New Minster in 903 his remains were translated there, and Ealhswið was buried beside him: Walter de Gray Birch, An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, Formerly Belonging to St. Mary's Abbey, or Nunnamister, Winchester (London: Simpkin, 1889), 6. Their remains were later moved to Hyde Abbey in 1110: Martin Biddle, “Felix Urbs Wintonia: Winchester in the Age of Monastic Reform,” in Parsons, ed., Tenth-Century Studies, 125-32.


31 Cambridge, Corpus Christi 201, New Minster, Winchester.
manuscripts have been identified as belonging to the Cathedral written before c.1100.\textsuperscript{32} This list excludes biblical and liturgical books.\textsuperscript{33}

The architects of the Reform Movement, including Wulfstan, would have had access to these books since they either resided at Old Minster or were within close proximity to the Winchester libraries. Wulfstan’s sources comprise a broad range of classical, patristic and historical texts. From his \textit{Narratio Metrica de St. Swithuno}, we know that Wulfstan had the works of Aldhelm, Arator, Bede, Dracontius, Horace, Juvenal, Jevencus, Lucan, Ovid, Prudentius, Sedulius, Statius, Venantius Fortunatus and Vergil available to him.\textsuperscript{34} Overall, Reform writings drew on a wide and deep textual tradition, although Biblical subjects, major ecclesiastical writers and religious writings such as saints’ \textit{Lives}, were the primary influences.

\textbf{C. The Monk Bishops and King Edgar}

Three monk Bishops collectively undertook the Benedictine Reform Movement, which was supported by King Edgar: Dunstan, Oswald, and Æthelwold.\textsuperscript{35} They are known to have participated in the movement in various capacities, all having close relationships with the king on whom they depended for support. Dunstan (909–19 May 988) was a Bishop of Worcester, Winchester and London, Archbishop of Canterbury and

\textsuperscript{32} Dumville, “English Libraries before 1066,” 203-19.

\textsuperscript{33} There are no pre-Conquest inventories of libraries from Winchester, since Cathedral libraries were not part of the monastic dissolution of the late 1530’s: Lapidge, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Libraries}, 57.


later canonized a saint.\textsuperscript{36} He not only composed texts supporting reform but was also its chief protagonist.\textsuperscript{37} Oswald (d. 29 February 992) was Archbishop of York from 972 until his death. Æthelwold was the Bishop of Winchester from 963-984. All were nobly born and derived decisive influence from the advice of monks from Continental monasteries: Dunstan spent periods of study at Ghent and Oswald at Fleury, centers known for learning. Dunstan, Oswald and Æthelwold received their early intellectual training in King Æthelstan’s (d.939) court at Glastonbury during the 940s and 950s.

When Dunstan was Abbot of Glastonbury, he recreated Benedictine monastic life by introducing reforms. Dunstan and Oswald were considered by their contemporaries to be venerable and outstanding scholars, statesmen and Reformers, as well as contributors to the revival of learning and the arts. They are a few of the most acclaimed of all Anglo-Saxon saints.\textsuperscript{38} Æthelwold had been a monk at Glastonbury with Dunstan, and it was through Dunstan’s influence that he was eventually made Bishop of Winchester.\textsuperscript{39} While Dunstan and Oswald followed Continental practice in maintaining both monks and secular priests in their religious households, Æthelwold is thought to have been more extreme in his opposition to secular clergy and was determined to evict them.\textsuperscript{40} Æthelwold is best known of all the Bishops involved with tenth-century monastic reforms


\textsuperscript{39} Mary Bateson, \textit{Oxford Dictionary of National Biography}, “Æthelwold.”

\textsuperscript{40} J.A. Robinson, \textit{The Times of St. Dunstan} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 104-22.
because of his role as royal counselor to Edgar. Æthelwold’s *Benedictional*, as with other texts instrumental to reform, was the result of religious and royal collaboration.\(^{41}\) He was the first English bishop to institute a monastic cathedral at Winchester’s Old Minster, and in 964, had the clerics at Old and New Minster expelled and replaced by monks from Abingdon.

The decision to expel the clerics required King Edgar’s (1 October 959–8 July 975) approval, granted as a display of gratitude for the Reformers’ backing his ascent to the throne. Edgar was the younger son of King Edmund (921–26 May 946) and Ælethgifu of Shaftesbury (d.944). Those in charge of Edgar’s upbringing were adherents to the Reform Movement, and his education took place at Æthelwold’s royal villa in Abingdon, a reformed Benedictine house. Edgar was influenced by nostalgia for past literary Church glories, celebrated in previous or existing religious communities that looked to the earlier period of English ecclesiastical reform. The ideal of reform from the king’s perspective was to return to the time of Bede when monks dominated the church and the cult of saints was greatly favored. Edgar’s reign (963-975) is illustrated by his support of the Reform Movement, which portrayed him as the principal protector of the monasteries. The program of Reform could not succeed without the king’s authority because the king sanctioned the monastic houses. As “King of the Mercians,”\(^{42}\) Edgar was Dunstan’s supporter, recalling him from exile following King Edmund’s (r. 939-46) death and awarding him the position of Bishop of Worcester, subsequently Bishop of


London and later, Bishop of Canterbury. Siding with Dunstan helped Edgar consolidate his power, which contributed to distinguishing himself from his predecessor.

The affiliation between the Winchester elite and Benedictine Reform is clear. Æthelwold and Edgar were close allies:^43 Æthelwold had been King Edgar's tutor at Abingdon when Edgar became king at 16 in 959. They both exhorted in RC for all religious men and women to agree to promote the precepts of the Regula together,^44 with Æthelwold credited as both texts’ primary author. The RC or “Monastic Agreement” was compiled in the wake of a Synod held in Winchester some time between 970 and 973 by Æthelwold but sanctioned by the king. The codex containing the revised Regula included a preface, “King Edgar’s Establishment of Monasteries (966x970),”^47 recently identified as having been written by Edgar and thus a further expression of royal

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43 Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, chs. 25, 42-3.

44 Symons, RC, 2-3, ch. 4.


ideology. Although the *Regula* and its application are nearly impossible to measure, the text was considered vitally important for the spirituality of the early English church and was endorsed as a royal mandate. During the tenth century both the *RC* and the *Regula* attempted to provide religious houses with the appearance of accommodation of a strict form of religious observance and the prospect of a revitalized monasticism in England.

**D. Precepts of the Reform Movement for Religious Houses**

According to the architects of the Reform Movement, religious standards had ceased to be followed, and these men attempted to implement a number of measures intended to regulate monasteries. The Reformers focused on an appeal to correct religious houses’ governance, which they claimed were caused by a universal state of moral decline. This weakening of principles, they asserted, was due to the presence of secular priests and lay influence. As a result, a prominent part of the revival of monastic discipline involved purifying the Church. Reform was also intended to restore strict monastic seclusion, which was known, but may have not been adhered to, as a principle

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49 Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, 129.
of religious life throughout the Middle Ages. Reformers attempted to prevent contact between religious and secular communities and reduce lay control over monastic property. By employing the regulations found within monastic rules, religious houses would promote the appearance of a disciplined lifestyle.

Reformist measures aimed to limit family ownership of monasteries in England, with monastic leaders seeking to permanently cancel any claims to land that future royal generations might raise against them. Since the goal of the movement was to establish Benedictine foundations upon former lay property, Reformers saw lay control of monastic houses as a principal obstacle and a systemic problem. They found their interests best served by confiscating property from local elites and, as a result, helped to inspire a massive transfer of landed resources from the secular aristocracy to the religious governing elite. With the prospect of renewed control, bishops sought to acquire monastic property as proof of their influence over the ecclesiastic domain.

Æthelwold specifically mandated changes governing the inhabitants at the male monastic houses. Later, in the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, Wulfstan took pains to justify these renewals: according to Æthelwold (in Wulfstan’s opinion), secular clerks at Old Minster had been living sinfully, and therefore they had deserved to be expelled and replaced by monks from Abingdon, who lived in accordance with the *Regula* (ch. 18).

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52 King Edgar wrote to Rome and received permission in 963 giving him the authority to expel the secular clergy and replace them with Benedictine monks. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* documents such expulsions taking place in 964: Whitelock, *Councils and Synods*, i. 109-13, no. 29.
claimed in the *vita* that Æthelwold expelled the clergy from Old Minster because it was a requirement for Benedictine houses:

Now at the time there were in the Old Minster, where the bishop’s throne is situated, cathedral canons involved in wicked and scandalous behavior, victims of pride, insolence, and riotous living to such a degree that some of them did not think fit to celebrate mass in due order. They married wives illicitly, divorced them, and took others; they were constantly given to gourmandizing and drunkenness.\(^{53}\)

The same procedure was followed at New Minster,\(^ {54}\) providing a pattern for other principal Cathedrals,\(^ {55}\) apparently, “everywhere in England.”\(^ {56}\) Secular clerics were evidently evicted and replaced by priests in the male religious houses, but the practice may not have endured. The record of clerics continuing to defend themselves against the Reformers’ efforts indicates that the Benedictine Movement was waning by the end of the tenth century. Evidence suggests that abbots, after the tenth century, were expelled with their monks, clerics were installed with their wives, and the prevalence of error was worse than before, indicative of the ineffectual nature of the mandates.\(^ {57}\)

Also, many opportunities for contact between monastics and nobles continued to exist post Reform mandates, and often these interactions took place at religious houses. Monasticism during the Anglo-Saxon period is described as chiefly directed toward

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\(^{54}\) BL Cotton Vespasian A. viii. This event is recorded and commemorated in the “New Minster Foundation Charter”: Sawyer, *Charters*, no. 745. Æthelwold is the possible author of this document: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, lxxxix.


\(^{56}\) Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, ch. 27.

pastoral work.\textsuperscript{58} English Benedictines were actively engaged in this occupation and teaching the secular clergy,\textsuperscript{59} as religious institutions could not function without priests carrying out parochial duties. Religious communities provided the majority of pastoral care for the village,\textsuperscript{60} suggesting that the religious and lay were less distinct in practice. The RC put strict emphasis on a process of enforcement of the monastic precept of \textit{cloistura}, often associated with religious life,\textsuperscript{61} but this principle was also only partially enforced in Winchester to the degree stipulated.\textsuperscript{62} Swithun was the former Bishop of Winchester (852-862), and his cult was established c.975 at Old Minster. Old Minster monks were essentially also priests or deacons responsible for delivering pastoral care to those visiting the cathedral.\textsuperscript{63} Lantfred’s \textit{Translatio et Miracula S. Swithun} (composed 972/975) illustrates the practice of lay and monastic interaction specifically in Winchester. The text shows contact with lay pilgrims visiting the saint’s tomb.\textsuperscript{64} Laity entered some areas of the monastery, especially the church of St. Swithun. They came into close contact with the monks using healing miracles associated with the saint’s cult.\textsuperscript{65} This collaboration was essential to the saint’s promotion, which further privileged the male house’s reputation in Winchester.


\textsuperscript{59} Blair, \textit{The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society}, 351–54.

\textsuperscript{60} Tinti, “Benedictine Reform and Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” 52-62; 52.

\textsuperscript{61} Symons, \textit{RC}, ch. 2.

\textsuperscript{62} Foot, \textit{Veiled Women I}, 91.

\textsuperscript{63} Helen Foxhall Forbes, \textit{Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith} (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 378.

\textsuperscript{64} Lapidge, \textit{The Cult of St. Swithun}, 217-333.

\textsuperscript{65} Lapidge, \textit{The Cult of St. Swithun}, 286-7.
E. The Effects of the Reform Movement on Nunnaminster

Besides Winchester’s Old and New Minsters, Reformers wanted Nunnaminster to adhere to Benedictine rules, but the female house’s compliance with these laws is difficult to measure. The Benedictine Reform originated in Winchester, but Nunnaminster was not specifically mentioned when King Edgar renewed the monasteries in 966. Neither does documentation on the period state that reforms were made alongside the reformation of Old and New Minsters. The process by which the precepts of the Regula were introduced, namely the RC, does not mention Nunnaminster, nor does any text explain specifically how the nunnery interpreted or adapted to reformist policies. Aspects of land tenure and property-ownership indicate at least a physical shift when Edgar imposed an agreement upon the three monastic communities in Winchester involving the adjustment of their respective boundaries. Apparently, Nunnaminster was the designated community for the vernacular translation of the Rule of St. Benedict. This translation testifies to the concern that female monastic houses adopt a strictly Benedictine constitution, but it is difficult to ascertain whether late Anglo-Saxon nuns were following the known ecclesiastic rules and how congregations of female religious conformed to the standards of Benedictine monasticism. The appeal for reform was more codified than female monastic submission to its rules indicates.

66 Charter 23, Charters Of The New Minster, 101, Chapter XVII, Cotton Vespasian.
67 The establishment of Benedictine monks at New Minster, following the same at Old Minster in 964, is recorded and commemorated in the “New Minster Foundation Charter” (now British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian A. viii): Whitelock, English Historical Documents.
68 Sawyer, Charters, no. 1449 (964x975).
One might assume that a major aspect of the period’s Reform legislation was the edict to strictly follow the Regula or the form of life as detailed in this single, governing regulatory instrument. But, overall, it is doubtful whether any of the female religious communities affected by the Benedictine Reform were so clearly demarcated. The Reformers stressed religious uniformity and thus wanted to enforce a policy of narrow claustration (claustrum) that appeared to apply to all female religious. By employing the regulations found within the Regula, religious houses would be able to promote a disciplined lifestyle, including the division of monastic and lay communities, as well that of the sexes. However, there is no evidence of the name of a single house of nuns founded by Dunstan, Æthelwold or Oswald and no proof of any attempt to impose the Regula edict on English monasteries, including its convents. There are also no contemporaneous accounts of the ejection of religious women from their nunneries and no contemporaneous account mentioning disciplining any religious women or their houses for infractions against any rules. Despite a regulation prohibiting contact with other communities, little is known about any adherence to this regulation. Even before the RC, the eighth-century Rule for Virgins (512) had mandated that religious women’s communities were to observe strict segregation from outsiders, but there is no evidence

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70 Tinti, “Benedictine Reform,” passim.

71 Blair, The Church in Anglo-Saxon England, 80, 92, 346.

pointing to congregations of women religious conforming to the stipulations of enforced segregation between the sexes and strict enclosure. Evidence is found in an earlier Anglo-Saxon effort, raising the issue of textual adherence. The dichotomy of intent and execution had been apparent to King Alfred’s biographer, who alerted readers to the paradox between rule and practice. Asser asserted, “Many monasteries there are, but in none of them is the monastic rule kept properly, ordinabiliter.”

Evidently, Alfred did not reform the Old Minster when he attempted to institute stricter monastic regulations during the ninth century. Instead, he established two new foundations: one at a male house, Athelny, and another at Shaftsbury for women, under his second daughter, Æthelgeofu. Making adjustments at existing institutions was difficult due to deeply entrenched systems of governance.

As a result, monastic rules provide only a partial image of female monastic life under the Reform Movement. Information regarding religious women’s own experiences of reform is incomplete, leaving histories of the period one-sided. It is just as impossible to determine how regulations were applied. Felice Lifshitz insists that the study of regulations represents only a starting point for the study of how authority was in fact constituted and exercised over women in religious communities, with Henry Mayr-Harting casting doubt on the degree to which ecclesiastical regulation was adopted:


74 British Library, MS Harley 61, f. 21b, “Bequest of King Alfred to Shaftesbury.” Æthelgifu is said to have been Shaftesbury’s first abbess: Asser’s Life of King Alfred, ch. 98; William of Malmesbury, Gesta Rerum, Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores: or, Chronicles and memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages (London: Longman, 1858) I, 131; Robertson, Anglo-Saxon Charters, 24-5.

Whether Anglo-Saxon women, who were accorded a high status in society and were often formidable personalities in their own right, always submitted to the male-drafted rules and codes, which constitute our evidence, we cannot say.\textsuperscript{76}

Without documentation about the execution of Reform policies, we are left with an insufficient impression of how female houses in general fared under late tenth-century restructuring. Since monastic rules included an ancient obligation for women in these communities to provide hospitality,\textsuperscript{77} the requirements for segregation were to be allowed only under certain defined circumstances. A fundamental contradiction exists between the Reformers’ mandates of ideal behavior and the spiritual life of the women’s monastic house.

What we do know is that religious women continued to provide pastoral work through the tenth century, and their reputation would have been of equal concern to those preoccupied with reformed monasticism. Monastic habits of female religious included their participation in liturgical practices. The link between the religious and lay female communities is a contentious issue because the connection is so difficult to prove.\textsuperscript{78}

However, much like male houses that mandated clerical duties, women’s houses encouraged women to provide penitential care. A close view of women’s liturgical lives


\textsuperscript{77}Numerous assemblies during the Carolingian reform movement (c.740–900) attempted to institute measures aimed at religious life, but these regulations contradicted their ideals of religious behavior. Council meetings in 813 stipulated interior spaces of both men’s and women’s communities were to be removed from intrusions from outsiders, thus implying that the inhabitants should remain permanently within the cloister, “eorum claustro permaneant, nullusque ex eis foras vadat, nisi per necessitate ab abate mittatur in oboedientiam”: Concilia Aevi Karolini (742—842), ed. Albert Werminghoff, MGH Leges, Concilia 2.1: 742-817, Canon 12 (Hannover and Leipzig, 1906), 264; Felice Lifshiftz, \textit{Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia, A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture} (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 213, no. 91.

\textsuperscript{78}Tinti, “Benedictine Reform,” \textit{passim}.
is found in Nunnaminster’s prayer books. These texts document how prayers of confession functioned within their community. Recording the practice of daily life, they reveal how women ministered to their own and to those who sought out their spiritual care. In early Anglo-Saxon communities there is no known evidence that women were not expected to perform these services as well. Nuns were known to act as spiritual counselors to the laity, making contact with other faithful men and women.

Wulfstan was writing about St. Æthelwold only steps away from Nunnaminster and during the process of enforcement of the monastic precepts as outlined in the \textit{RC}. Yet, these Reforms were only partially enforced in Winchester to the degree stipulated. Monastic lands continued to pass between royal families, and many opportunities for contact between monastics and nobles continued to exist post Reform mandates; often, these interactions took place at religious houses despite efforts to extinguish such behavior. The rules imposed on religious women in late Anglo-Saxon England is especially significant in relation to those houses immediately surrounding the center of monastic reform. The question of which specific spiritual practice shaped female religious life is particularly problematic with regards to Nunnaminster. Nunnaminster’s origins and its place in Winchester slightly pre-date the movement’s measures, indicating that a religious tradition had already been established by the time the Reforms were


\footnotesize{82} Symons, \textit{RC}, ch. 2.

\footnotesize{83} Foot, \textit{Veiled Women I}, 91.
instituted. This posed an additional challenge to Wulfstan’s objective to promote the religious house’s adherence to monastic renewal.

F. Reform’s Embrace of the Cult of Saints in Tenth-Century Winchester

While monasticism was the essence of medieval spirituality, hagiography, a part of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of sacred depiction, represented the most popular source for the narrative presentation of the Christian ideal. Saints’ Lives were one of the most popular forms of Latin literature, as their purpose was to establish a saint’s miraculous power. Moreover, the vita allowed a supplicant to ensure that a saint was a member in good standing of the community of saints and thus in a favorable position to intercede on the community’s behalf. Anglo-Saxon writers were sure of the value of saints’ vitae, as they were in the durability of their textual depiction. The ability to discourse on the spiritually refining effects of a character was one measure of a writer’s credibility, one that audiences recognized. It was important for the hagiographer to demonstrate that his or her subject belonged to the tradition of modeling saintly lives upon earlier ones.

Late tenth-century Winchester writers were reviving a well-established Anglo-Saxon biographical monastic tradition, seeing themselves as successors to seventh-century religious biographers. The Late Anglo-Saxon period saw a surge in the writing of saints’ Lives. For much of the medieval period, chroniclers of religious houses accorded a major role to the development and promotion of the cult of saints. Saints’ achievements were depicted against the backdrop of the tenth-century revival and Continental

influences, yet the continued native tradition was important to the period. The promotion of saints provided Benedictine Reform with spiritual and political stability because monastic recovery relied on inherited models of sanctity. Biographies of saints functioned as “normative texts,” according to Albrecht Diem. English ecclesiastical Reformers were particularly interested in reclaiming the past and intentionally founded cults, especially those connected to the saints who were active in England. The practice of writing saints’ Lives shortly after their deaths began in the Northumbrian reforms, which was well known in Winchester as a royal and ecclesiastical priority.

Wulfstan’s use and understanding of saints’ vitae derived from the tradition of hagiography, which was influenced by Latin patristic authors, and which shared an interest in the period’s preoccupation with this genre of writing. Wulfstan employed the common hagiographical aim of enhancing the prestige of his subject. As with other saints’ Lives, his goal was to depict a single cult within a particular community and a

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specific person who exhibited religious devotion.\textsuperscript{90} A significant measure of Æthelwold’s candidacy for sainthood was his promotion of Benedictine Reforms. In order to illustrate his sanctity, Wulfstan defended the Reformers’ claims of the tenth-century Church and their priorities, for which Æthelwold maintained a principle role. A particular emphasis of Wulfstan’s was to promote Æthelwold’s religious foundations, claiming that the saint shed reflected glory on them. In life, Æthelwold exploited the cult of saints in his monasteries, and as bishop, he promoted the cult of St. Swithun in Winchester’s Old Minster. On behalf of Swithun, Æthelwold had the saint’s body translated to a suitable shrine and dedicated the new cathedral, which celebrated his miracles, as recorded by an eyewitness.\textsuperscript{91} Swithun was also reported to have acquired relics for New Minster.\textsuperscript{92} Wulfstan describes the posthumous miracles taking place at St. Æthelwold’s shrine in the cathedral,\textsuperscript{93} those that demonstrated how Æthelwold was “received from our sins,”\textsuperscript{94} thereby establishing the criteria for his sainthood.

Receptions of patristic texts during this period utilized the tradition of the visionary account that connects the saint’s holy life with working miracles. Wulfstan’s \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi} illustrates how Æthelwold’s miracle-generating good works were predetermined by several visions, and these visions serve to promote the claim that

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Lantfred} Lantfred, \textit{Translatio et Miracula Sancti Swithuni} in E.P. Sauvage, ed., \textit{Analecta Bollandiana} (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1885), 367-410.
\bibitem{St. Æthelwold} St. Æthelwold gained King Edgar’s permission “to move those bodies of saints which lay in desolate, neglected places, where formerly noble churches had stood, to the new monasteries so that they could be venerated by the faithful as was fitting”: Birch, \textit{Liber Vitae}, 286.
\bibitem{Wulfstan1} Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, chs. 28, 62-3.
\bibitem{Wulfstan2} Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, chs. 44-6.
\end{thebibliography}
Æthelwold’s holy purpose was fulfilled through dream imagery. Two texts in particular shape Wulfstan’s approach to the important role of visual images in dreams in religious life during this period: “The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict” in the second book of the Dialogues by Gregory the Great, and Sulpicius Severus’s (316x336-397) Life of St. Martin (c.396). As “The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict” and the Life of St. Martin both covered the birth of a saint, they were also useful for Wulfstan as sources for Æthelwold’s sanctity. Wulfstan turned to these texts because they had long been important to Anglo-Saxon writers. St. Benedict (480-543/547) is considered the father of Western monasticism, regarded as the most influential of the founding fathers or “doctors” of the English Church. Gregory (c.540–12 March 604) served as Pope (590-604) and formed his views on dreams from Augustine and Bede. Gregory, like Augustine and Bede, was particularly concerned with the conversion of England. The Dialogues, a collection of books on miracles, signs and wonders, is focused on healings performed by holy monastic men. St. Martin also elicits interest in tenth-century Winchester. Gregory’s idealized portrait of St. Benedict, along with Severus’ depiction of St. Martin, became part of the inherited tradition of promoting good deeds by example in didactic texts.

Gregory’s Dialogues is concerned with the authority of dreams and represents the Augustinian model of teacher in dialogue with his pupil: “almighty God everywhere


96 Bede, HE, I.30.

97 Stephen F. Krueger, Dreaming in the Middle Ages (New York: City College of New York, 1992), 197.
places before our eyes those whom we ought to imitate.”

In the early Anglo-Saxon version of Gregory’s life, the *Whitby Life of Gregory*, “the word of wisdom is a gift from Christ.”

Gregory’s authority is imbued with wisdom: “God…reveals in the blessed Gregory still greater wonders through the words of the wisdom and knowledge of Jesus Christ.”

These expressions provide a story of spiritual truth: “Among other things, we must not fail to tell this sign of the wisdom and grace of God.”

*Dialogues* became the standard text for dreams popular throughout the Christianizing German world and into Anglo-Saxon literature in Winchester during the time Wulfstan was writing his *vita*.

Gregory’s *Dialogues* were translated into Old English during the ninth century, and proved an influential text in Wessex leading up to the period during which Wulfstan was writing. In a revised version of King Alfred’s translation, two Winchester manuscripts include Gregory’s name in their litanies.

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was one aspect of the king’s objectives to broaden literacy; also included were translations of Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* (*Regularis Pastoralis*). Alfred translated Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* for the benefit of priests. The tenth-century *Benedictional of St. Æthelwold* depicts Gregory, along with Cuthbert and Benedict, together as a group and in a prominent position in the Choir of Confessors. Later, Ælfric based his *Catholic Homilies* on Gregory’s *Dialogi* during the 990s. Ælfric adopts the saint’s view of miracles: “He [Gregory] is rightly called the apostle of the English people, because through his counsel and mission he recued us from the worship of the devil, and converted us to the belief of God.”

The emphasis on the visionary and the religious expertise necessary to convey spiritual truth is also found in Severus’s *Life of St. Martin*. Severus’s depiction of St. Martin and Wulfstan’s depiction of St. Æthelwold both focus on their subject’s qualities as visionaries, and they both represent standards for monastic life. The popularity of their texts indicates the royal circles they inhabit; and the central issue of spiritual authority, embedded within the *Life of St. Martin*, was relevant to Wulfstan. There are several further noteworthy similarities. Both were ardent admirers of their subject: Martin’s


106 Deshman, *Benedictional*, fol. 1v, pl. 1.

107 Ælfric adopted Augustine’s Book II of the *Dialogi* for his “Life of St Benedict”: Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, 142, 188.

Gallo-Roman biographer, Sulpicius, is impressed by his monk-bishop’s life, just as Wulfstan is devoted to Æthelwold’s life. Sulpicius is concerned about seeing his work in relation to the literary tradition of antiquity, as with Wulfstan, who associates himself with other classically trained thinkers who respond to the Church in its duty to lead men to salvation, and he orients his \textit{vita} by directing it toward a Christian goal. Sulpicius’s ideal bishop possesses wisdom and leadership as well as spiritual authority; his story about Martin is similar to other stories of holy men, comparing stories told of the Egyptian monks with those told of Martin. Wulfstan provides the same parallel for Æthelwold’s background and \textit{vita} by depicting his good works and inherited use of hagiography.

Sulpicius is an important character in his own \textit{Life of St. Martin} because he witnessed Martin’s visions firsthand. His text is a valuable source for the \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi} because of the specific episodes that link incidents together. Wulfstan identifies St. Æthelwold, who also did not die for his faith. Following a dream in which

\begin{flushleft}
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109 Martin founded the monastery at Ligugé under the patronage of Hilary of Poitiers. Ligugé was an ascetic community located near Poitiers, an episcopal community, before he was elected as Bishop of Tours (c.371): Moireiva, \textit{Dreams and Visions}, 67.


113 Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, cii, elii, cv.
\end{flushleft}
Martin hands Sulpicius *The Life of St. Martin*, Martin is transported to heaven,\(^{114}\) with Sulpicius then becoming the narrator or teller of the dream. As with Wulfstan, Sulpicius can be relied upon to record the visions’ truths that lead to their saint’s miraculous events. The miracles associated with Æthelwold can be compared with Martin’s, the Bishop of Tours, who also sought a link with Christ’s marvels. Martin sought to imitate Jesus and would have been open to the influence from the examples of the prophets, apostles, martyrs and monks. The account in the *Life* of Martin parallels the actions and teaching of Christ in the course of his public life.\(^{115}\) There are similarities between Martin’s life and that of Jesus (especially in the guise of the beggar with whom Martin shared his cloak). Sulpicius links the miracles of St. Martin, particularly his raising of the dead, with the miracles of Christ, finding a direct correlation between holiness and the ability to work miracles, as Wulfstan provides in writing about Æthelwold’s miracles. Insight and knowledge of these miracles are central to these events, as Sulpicius declares that Martin, and Wulfstan affirms that Æthelwold, is gifted with spiritual sight. Martin needed the power of discernment because his vision followed the accepted depiction of Christ,\(^ {116}\) as did Æthelwold’s.

The power of discernment is used to detect a dream’s spiritual origin. Sulpicius uses references from the Bible and early Church Fathers that paralleled Martin’s


\(^{116}\) Moreira, “Dreams and Divination,” 192
miraculous achievements and likens Martin’s to Solomon’s acumen. He also illustrates Martin’s ability to identify dreams by pointing to the “prudentes,” which Wulfstan uses to describe Æthelthryth (chapter V) as the figura of living like “a Ciceronian and a Christian.” Martin is described as “an agent of cultural transformation.” Sulpicius’ Life also provided a “paradigm for the multitude of saints’ lives that were to follow in the history of the Church”: he poses a direct challenge to pagan culture by contrasting pagan and Christian valor, indicating a period of religious renewal. In the process, Sulpicius intends his Life to reach a wide audience since his text is directed toward contemporary churchmen in Gaul and those loyal to Christianity.

Spiritual authority of the holy could be enhanced by wisdom through writing about Martin’s life, just as the depiction of St. Æthelwold indicates that Wulfstan possesses heightened knowledge.

For both Wulfstan and Sulpicius their theological and ecclesiastical ideas appear to derive from their lived experiences. Like Wulfstan’s Æthelwoldi, Sulpicius’s Martin is concerned with stories illustrating his subject’s remarkable powers; he also had a close relationship with the subject of his vita. Sulpicius’s objective was also to write about a Christian hero who wins eternal life, and Martin’s virtues are at the heart of Sulpicius’s presentation. Sulpicius shared a personal veneration for his subject, who brought him in contact with a powerful court, as Wulfstan’s association with Æthelwold brought him

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117 Life of St. Martin also illustrates Martin’s continued miraculous power: Life of St Martin, 12, 16, pp. 278, 286-8.
118 Life of St. Martin, 25, 6-8; Dialogus, II, 6, 6-7.
121 Stancliffe, St. Martin, 75.
into the Anglo-Saxon court. St. Martin’s popularity may in fact have been due in part to Martin’s identification with the Merovingian influence in the early court, which parallels Winchester’s Continental influence during Alfred’s time. During the tenth century, Ælfric also included St. Martin in his Lives of Saints because of Martin’s portrayal as a model for brave opposition and due to St. Æthelwold’s interests, thereby inheriting the earlier tradition of Winchester writers’ depictions of St. Martin’s life as a source for the examples of their bishop’s sanctity.

G. Wulfstan’s Adoption of Models of Female Religious Life

Wulfstan also wrote about female sanctity as an achievement attained from the past and carried into the present. Since women in religious life were an important part of Anglo-Saxon society, devout women were role models and appeared in saints’ Lives. Wulfstan inherited models from Bede and Aldhelm, and Barking and Ely, which provided a moral frame for perceiving and defining female religious devotion. Æthelwold and Edgar supported the re-foundation of Ely and Barking during this time (964x970), and they incorporated images of virtuous female figures from these houses. The ideals of sanctity emphasized by these writers—a life of piety and humility, the ability to spiritually nourish others, and especially purity—also became identified with specific houses, thus promoting a monastic identity which Wulfstan could utilize for depicting one religious woman who could dedicate her life to spiritual pursuits, namely Æthelthryth.

122 In addition to pastoral work, Martin’s position as bishop brought him into direct contact with the court at Trier: Life of St. Martin, 20; Dialogues, II, 6-7 in Stancliffe, St. Martin, 113.


124 Gretsch, Ælfric and the Cult of Saints, 4.
Wulfstan also adopted Bede’s depictions of female monastics taken from his ecclesiastical history of the English. Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* was well distributed in England during the medieval period, with two extant manuscripts dating to the mid-tenth century in Winchester. According to David Knowles, “It would be hard to exaggerate the strength of its influence.” The text was a valuable vernacular source for reading, preaching and knowledge of local saints and key historical figures. Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*, which was known to Bede, was also available in tenth-century Winchester. Together, these texts provided a source of inspiration for Wulfstan, since the records of the seventh century illustrated a tradition of modeling female monastic life taken from earlier female houses.

Beginning in the seventh century, textual images of female religious models left a lasting influence on hagiographical literature. Nuns were written about in ways that emphasized virginity, humility, piety and self-denial. This coincides with the reporting about women (and men) religious for those who wished to elevate them to the status of saint. The quality of shared *virtus*, or miraculous power, is connected with the ability to promote steadfastness and nourish spirituality. Virtues were crucially emphasized in the


narrative tradition of the “nurse,” “wise woman” and “virgin mother,” those qualities Wulfstan used to describe Æthelthryth. Saints’ Lives shared these stylistic conventions, and religious women were depicted as possessing these similar qualities. One example was the commitment to a monastic ideal. Sanctity was based on the preservation of “virginity” (Latin *uiriginitas*) and diligence, especially in the exercise of responsibility to inherited principles. Qualities such as safeguarding the needy were especially valued. These principles were incorporated into depictions of particularly devout women and were powerful tools for self-improvement because they corresponded with virtuous conduct, which in turn, became models for religious women to incorporate into their spiritual practice. Female devotion required actively adopting the monastic role, but sanctity brought esteem to women of all ranks. Sanctity was not merely associated with monastic women. Women outside the cloister also demonstrated a concern for exemplary behavior. Inherited images of sanctity were, therefore, necessary to Anglo-Saxon female religious and laity alike. Literate women, necessarily the most privileged of women, read *vitae* and aligned themselves with saintly female behavior. Eighth-century documents attest to the vast scale of lay devotional practices,\(^{128}\) illustrating textual affinity between privileged women and religious houses during the tenth century.\(^{129}\) Received literature pointed to secular, noble and religious women rewarded for expressing their generosity to the Church.


H. Conclusion

Wulfstan appealed to the historical record as well as to the monastic ideals of the moment. The abstraction Wulfstan makes of Æthelthryth’s real life is confirmed by the essentials of type, which were determined by the objectives of the Benedictine Reform Movement rather than the needs of biographical accuracy. Hagiographic *imitatio* links Æthelthryth’s sanctity to the devotion of earlier Anglo-Saxon women, thereby constructing a community of female monastic life, which was most instructive to Wulfstan’s audience. It was the stability of Æthelthryth’s devotional practice—her figure—that spoke to the larger tenth-century community. Since figural devices were effective for promoting change, Wulfstan used these devices to promote Æthelwold’s abilities, thereby emphasizing the importance of modeling Christian virtues during the Benedictine Reform Movement. Representations of sanctity in the text mirrored the relationships between ecclesiastical powers, its authors, and the storied monastic communities that lived under them. A female religious character of irrefutable holiness at the Winchester nunnery necessarily channeled these associations.
CHAPTER III

THE REAL AND REIMAGINED ÆTHELTHRYTH

It is the office of the poet to transpose events that really happened, and

turn them with a certain elegance into their appearances, using oblique

figures.

—Lactantius

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A. Introduction

Wulfstan uses his literary portrait of Æthelthryth to express the concerns central
to the Vita St. Æthelwoldi, whose principal subject is Æthelwold, the celebrated Bishop
of Winchester. In Wulfstan’s text, Æthelthryth is depicted as a religious woman at
Nunnaminster, situated in Winchester (“Caestre”), in Wessex, England.2 Nunnaminster
was a religious house founded by Ealhswið (842-902),3 a woman of noble birth, on land
she owned. The relationship between Wessex royal women and Nunnaminster testifies to
the link between women and their property, and also the movement by religious women
into the public sphere in Winchester during the tenth century. Wulfstan lived in the

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1 Lactantius, Divinarum Institutiones, I.II Patrologia Latina 6:171B in Rita Copeland and I. Sluiter,
Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475 (Oxford: Oxford

2 “King Alfred’s Will,” Florence E. Harmer, Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth
Centuries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 34.

3 Ealhswið’s death is listed under “5 December 902” in Whitelock, Anglo-Saxon Wills, 191; Walter de Gray
Birch asserts that Ealhswið’s death was thought earlier than 902 due to Æthelwed’s Chronicle (late 10th
century), but 902 appears to be the standard date, with 903, 905, and 909 also listed in various historical
documents: Chronica Magistri Rogeri De Houedene, Annals of Winchcombe, and Annals of Hyde,
respectively. Walter de Gray Birch, An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, Formerly
Belonging to St. Mary’s Abbey, or Nunnaminster, Winchester (London: Simpkin, 1889), 6. During the tenth
century, Ealhswið’s obituary was recorded (902) in a mutilated Winchester calendar that precedes the
Junius Psalter (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 2, 007v); N. R. Ker, Catalogue of Manuscripts
This obituary is also found in another Winchester manuscript: “The Athelstan Psalter,” Oxford, Cotton
Galba A. Edmund Bishop, Liturgica Historica: Papers on the Liturgy and Religious Life of the Western
of the Chronicle: A Fragment of an Early-Tenth-Century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript and its Significance,”
159.
Bishop’s palace in the city center among ecclesiastical and royal institutions and would have known the women connected with the nunnery, but in his vita he describes Æthelthryth with an indistinct existence. Wulfstan obscures Æthelthryth’s identity in order to fulfill the theological and political needs of the Benedictine Reform Movement, which minimized Wessex royal women’s ownership of monastic property and their ability to pass property down to their female relatives. There is nothing in the text about Æthelthryth’s ancestry, nor any mention that would associate her with her family. Even as a character in Wulfstan’s text, the incompleteness of her depiction throughout the vita marginalizes Æthelthryth, omitting those relationships that connected her to Nunnaminster’s royal origins and its community’s self rule. Her partial depiction notwithstanding, the Æthelthryth in Wulfstan’s text can be linked to the Æthelthryth who existed outside the Vita St. Æthelwold.

In the following discussion, I demonstrate that Wulfstan did more than obscure the real woman, Æthelthryth. Wulfstan is determined that the Æthelthryth he describes in chapter 22 appear to be the same Æthelthryth mentioned in a previous passage (ch. 2): in chapter 22, Wulfstan says that he previously described (“tetigimus”) Æthelthryth. Since the events depicted in chapter 2 (904/5x909), and the later events of chapter 22 (c.964 or later), are separated by a number of years, late in Æthelwold’s life, the implication is that Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth remained at the house for a considerable time. These two Æthelthryths are not, however, the same woman: while the figure in the earlier chapter is drawn from a real person with noble connections, the Æthelthryth of chapter 22 is a fabrication. There is evidence of a real Æthelthryth associated with the Wessex royal

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family who bears many similarities to the one depicted in Wulfstan’s text. During the tenth century, a religious woman of some importance possessed the same name as Wulfstan’s character; they were both connected to religious activities in Winchester. Æthelthryth of Polhampton appears in royal land endowments surrounding Winchester, and she was directly associated with royal activities affecting monastic territory. Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth (ch. 22), in her second appearance in the *vita*, I argue, is a fictional character who fits into his schema. There is no evidence that the historical woman from chapter 2, who aided Æthelwold’s mother, lived long enough to be the leader of nuns he refers to in chapter 22. Æthelthryth in chapter 2 is conflated with Æthelthryth in chapter 22 to distance the real woman from his imagined one.

In addition, Wulfstan completely omitted from his text several other important women who were key players in both Nunnaminster’s history and the city of Winchester. During the tenth century, Nunnaminster’s community and its women leaders were important to Winchester’s ecclesiastical and royal life. Such assessments, however, cannot be made on the basis of Wulfstan’s description. Wulfstan does not explain Nunnaminster’s importance or its foundation’s origins. The other women excluded from the text were connected to the House of Wessex, the family who ruled the kingdom of Wessex in the southwest of England, from the sixth century until the unification of England. Nunnaminster’s founder was Ealhswið (842-902), consort (m. 868) to King Alfred (849–26 October 899); she was also the mother of Edward the Elder (c.874/77-
924), King of the Anglo-Saxons (899-924). Her granddaughter, Edburga (c.921-953), became abbess at Nunnaminster during the tenth century; she is the only royal saint produced by the churches of Winchester. Eadgyth [Edith], St. (961-984), Ealhswið’s great-granddaughter and King Edgar’s (943-975, r. 959-975) daughter,
was Abbess “during the time of her father”⁸; Eadgyth succeeded Edburga. Ealhswið is associated with Nunnaminster’s origins, Edburga with its patronage, and Eadgyth with the restoration of property formerly belonging to the nunnery. But the historical roles of these three women are omitted from Wulfstan’s text, removed from the record in the name of Reform.

Nunnaminster’s female heritage challenged the mission of Benedictine Reform. Reformers needed to restrict royal women and the accomplishments associated with their religious houses because of the mandated requirements of the cloister to live separately from secular society and to limit royal ownership of monastic land. Wulfstan’s insistence on Reform largely concealed this history of control by a female political elite over Nunnaminster’s community. Stephanie Hollis instructs us on how to approach Anglo-Saxon texts when we read about female monasticism:

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Set against the sources of information, the hagiographic records appear to have significantly underrepresented the contribution made by women to the growth of the church because their authors are, to a great or less extent, concerned to bring their accounts into line with orthodox conceptions of the role of women, which included the enclosure of female religious and segregated monasteries.\(^9\)

The political interests within Winchester’s male elite did not intersect with the family ties and female interests at Nunnaminster. Without any association with Nunnaminster’s foundation and its Wessex dynasty, Æthelthryth’s portrait avoids the issue of royal women exercising institutional authority over their religious community. Since references to the community’s royal population would undermine the Reformers’ mission to separate religious from secular lives, Æthelthryth’s singularly religious function and Nunnaminster’s advantageous positions are restricted to a monastic existence.

The Reformers’ monastic narrative of which Æthelthryth was a part held particular interest both within and beyond the cloistered enclave during the period. Reformers aggressively pursued a policy of consolidating church lands through their account of their movement. Their fundamental objective was to avoid the interests in property ownership associated with the Wessex female line. Aristocratic women associated with royal houses were part of the dominant social class, and their connection with nunneries illustrates their ownership of religious foundations. By eliminating the history of Nunnaminster’s origins, its centrality, and Æthalhryth’s background, Wulfstan concealed details of royal and lay influence in order to plan for religious transformation in a direction that benefited the consolidation of monastic authority.

Historical records, especially those connected with the transmission of property around Winchester, suggest that Wulfstan may have clouded the identity of a real person

in order to obscure his audience’s understanding of Æthelthryth and the community she inhabited. Several documents relating to Nunnaminster and its female inhabitants indicate that its community played a fundamental role in tenth-century Winchester. The community greatly benefited from Nunnaminster’s location in the city center, where male and female monasteries co-existed alongside the royal palace, thus providing opportunities for participation in Winchester’s rich cultural life. Wulfstan chose not to mention Nunnaminster’s proximity to the influential male religious houses and the Bishop’s and King’s palaces. He was concerned with eliding women’s royal spheres of influence in order to obscure the appearance of their accumulation of monastic territory, and especially their possession of land already in their control.

Both literary and pragmatic texts are useful sources to help us rediscover Nunnaminster’s heritage. Some scholars shy away from using literary sources as a basis for illustrating the status of early medieval noble women, preferring instead to focus on archival documents such as charters and law codes. These regulations, however, illustrate customs already known. But manuscripts held by the house and presumably used by its community are also informants of the lives of religious women through their portrayals of monastic life. *The Book of Nunnaminster*, as an example, is the first textual evidence of its namesake and holds particular value for the specific knowledge of its female inhabitants because it includes the boundary clause indicating that the land upon which the nunnery was built is owned by a royal woman.

Writing was a material way of conveying possession of property. The written record also implies knowledge of Nunnaminster’s location, its heredity, and its history of

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book ownership. A royal woman ruling Nunnaminster would have had administrative influence over the house’s properties since she was responsible for its management. Her ability to procure land on the house’s behalf was derived to a great extent from the location of the religious house itself and by its association with Winchester’s literate community. By textually removing Nunnaminster’s association with royal society, including its educated and powerful elite, Wulfstan attempted to eliminate the house’s right to secure its own property. Female ownership became null and void in his text. Wulfstan controlled Æthelthryth’s narrative in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi, stressing her piety over her pragmatic achievements. Her character had to fit into the definition of holiness promoted during the Reform, which referred to a standard of monastic life and not to the historical woman’s more complex life. Wulfstan created a narrative that avoided the cultural importance of women’s kinship ties and the benefits that such relationships provided. By limiting Æthelthryth’s history throughout the text Wulfstan removed her from the larger political arena.

The Reformers targeted Wessex religious women. Rosamond McKitterick posits that inadequate references to women and their houses is not random but a deliberate attempt to promote male over female monastic influence during the later Anglo-Saxon period.11 Hollis claims that male writers actively suppressed the history of accomplishments of the royal abbesses that Bede had described in his Historia Ecclesiastica and his Life of Cuthbert.12 According to Schulenburg, Reformers’ strategies were used to limit the representation of royal female religious and their monastic

12 Hollis, Anglo-Saxon Women, 179-207, 234-70.
Reformers were generally less interested in promoting women’s religious life, according to Catherine Cubbitt, than in controlling it. Pauline Stafford likewise claims that the surge in monastic foundation labeled “reform” involved more concern about lay control of nunnerys than anything else. Specifically, H. Foxhall Forbes asserts that nearby male monastics deliberately obliterated most evidence related to Nunnaminster. This leaves Nunnaminster with a “shadowy presence.” Since “the life of their inmates, where recorded at all, has usually been distorted through a reforming lens,” Stafford asks for a greater understanding of these houses and their religious history of the period because “those shadows must be searched.”

By contrasting Wulfstan’s portrait of Æthelthryth with descriptions of Nunnaminster’s women from assorted texts, I illustrate how Wulfstan controls his treatment of Æthelthryth in order fit her into the Benedictine Reform’s mandates. A thorough exploration of this evidence shows that Wulfstan de-emphasizes Æthelthryth’s royal, secular, financial, property-owning power, and prerogative to keep her royal connections mute. Moving beyond Wulfstan’s text is a way of comparing the women in Winchester at the time Wulfstan was writing with his description of Æthelthryth. The objective here is to reveal how Wulfstan attempts to eliminate the triumphs of Nunnaminster, eliding its overall political agency.

Beyond her presence in Wulfstan’s text, Æthelthryth is invisible in other tenth-century primary sources connected with Nunnaminster. Æthelthryth is not mentioned by name in the *Regularis Concordia*, despite the assertion that abbesses were present at the great Benedictine Council of Winchester in 973.18 Neither does Æthelthryth appear in the list of *nomina feminarum illustrium* in the *Liber Vitae*, and *nomina reginarum et abbatissarum*.19 She is also absent in a catalog that documents Nunnaminster’s ruling members, *The Heads of Religious Houses* (940-1216).20 Wulfstan’s *vita* ensures that Æthelthryth will be side-lined in historical documents due to her incomplete representation. It would not be unusual for Wulfstan to have preferred to depict a standard female monastic character in the service of his own purposes. Winchester’s ecclesiastical writers wanted its religious women to serve as models of holiness, formed from ideal qualities. In *vitae*, characters and plots are often borrowed from other *vitae*. As depicted, Æthelthryth is a deliberate blend of characteristics. Mixtures of traits corresponding to religious women were known to have been a cause of and type for literary representation throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

From Winchester’s extensive libraries, Wulfstan would have been familiar with these legendries and would therefore have had access to numerous saints’ lives on which to model his description of Æthelthryth. Her importance in the text is precisely rooted in portraying the virtues linked with female monastic life taken from valued sources.

Wulfstan identifies Æthelthryth as an important member of her female monastic

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18 Lantfred’s *Translatio et Miracula S. Swithuni* in Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, cii, civ-cv.
household. She was placed supervising a “flock of nuns” (ch. 22) after many years of service (starting in ch. 2) and having served as “the nurse of the virgins dedicated to God at Winchester” (ch. 2). In addition, Æthelthryth informs the progress of St. Æthelwold’s life through the application of her virtues. Early in the text, we learn that Æthelthryth provided counsel to the Bishop’s mother who had visited the nunnery when St. Æthelwold was in utero. Wulfstan describes Æthelthryth as “being a sensible and sharp woman, and one to whom God at times revealed knowledge of the future” (ch. 2). She “had many predictions to make of the child who was to be born; and the outcome showed their truth.” Æthelthryth’s care of Æthelwold’s pregnant mother is important because it contributes to both St. Æthelwold’s eminence as a preview of his life and Wulfstan’s prominence as the compiler of the Bishop’s Life at the time of the Benedictine Reform. These specific markers of, possibly a living woman, are generalized into a type by the end of the vita.

B. The Benedictine Reform and Women’s Rule

The English Benedictine leaders, including Æthelwold and Wulfstan, were closely attached to the royal court at Winchester and concerned with issues of religious reform. The Reformers attempted to move the monasteries toward a more spiritually driven life by eliminating control of monasteries by nobles and by limiting the male and

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21 “mandras sanctimonialium”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 36-38.
22 “quae in praefata urbe nutrix erat Deo deuotarum uirginum”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 4-5.
23 Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 4-5.
24 “sagaci prudentissima, et interdum etiam futurorum Domino reuelante praescia”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 4-5.
25 “de nascituro infante multa praedixit, quae uera esse rerum exitus indicauit”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 4-5.
female religious house’s involvement in secular affairs. Royal ownership of monastic property was a well-known issue among Wulfstan’s immediate audience, as direct ownership of monasteries by laywomen (and laymen) was banned in documents written in Winchester. The Church’s aim was to employ literary representation as a means to depict religious houses as church property and to impose the basic priorities of reform.

Secular control of minster lands was standard practice in the early Anglo-Saxon period when monastic endowments had declined following Viking raids of the previous centuries.26 Private ownership (and in some cases management) of churches was the norm by the early- and middle-eighth century, even while efforts were underway by the clergy to lessen the hold of lay lords on their churches. During the seventh century Bede wrote that he was concerned about the practice whereby monasteries had become hereditary. Noblemen had obtained lands from the king in order to found monasteries, in turn, according to Bede, residing like lords therein—ruling men who were unworthy of the monastic vocation.27 In addition to criticizing the founders of these false institutions, Bede also attacked the scribes and signatories of the charters. He appealed to King Ecgbert (771/775–839) to take responsibility for monastic standards,28 commenting on their land’s excessive alienation. Also, the monastic standard practice of effectively separating religious men and women was completely forbidden in 787.29 In 803, the Council of Clofesho passed an Act prohibiting the election of laymen as lords over

**regular monasteries.** Abbot Muca of Glastonbury was one of the signatories of this Act.\(^{30}\) During this council, Archbishop Æthelheard condemned the secular control of monasteries by voicing his disapproval of the customs of monastery endowment and passing down houses through family ties, “Secularium prioratum,” or “according to race” (the lay overlordship of monasteries).\(^{31}\) Evidently, the policy had been in place over an extended period of time, since the *RC* asserted that, “the abuse was long standing.”\(^{32}\) There was also a deliberate attempt to ground Reform in a past that made the mandates necessary and inevitable. The monastic ideal, presented in the *RC*, indicates that Reformist propaganda urged the elimination of lay control over the monasteries. Beyond setting the standard for enforcing a clear demarcation between secular and religious, the *RC* also aimed to limit lay control over female (and male) monastic communities.

A concern to tenth-century Reformers was the practice of daughters inheriting their property after their mother’s death. This custom went back to the early Anglo-Saxon period; it extended the royal female rule.\(^{33}\) Although earlier reformers had argued against this policy, eliminating female secular “tyranny” was no small matter. Æthelwold was averse to the institution of the *Eigenkloster*, a tradition in which the female abbess was descended from the royal family and controlled the monastic property, *secularium*

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\(^{32}\) *RC*, ch. 10, p. 10. See ‘Proem,’ 10, 1.

prioritas. In his treatise on “King Edgar’s Establishment of the Monasteries,” Æthelwold admonishes abbesses not to give “God’s estate to their kinsmen or to great secular persons, neither for money nor flattery.” Female houses were most targeted because the Reformers were eager to turn proprietary monasteries into Benedictine male ones under their own supervision. Many women’s houses were destroyed, and abandoned women’s foundations were re-established by the Reformers as houses for monks or canons. Furthermore, women’s cloistering was also of particular concern to the Reformers. Their aim was strict separation of the sexes. Abbesses and nuns were unable to participate in reform councils that formulated the policies that affected them.

The Reformers attacked a long-established principle based on a separation of monastic and secular that did not exist in reality but which could be easily portrayed as such. No Anglo-Saxon cleric had previously enforced the distinction to such a degree as Æthelwold. The RC asserted that nuns as well as priests could not hold land individually:

The assembly wisely, and under severe censure and anathema, forbade the holy monasteries to acknowledge the overlordship of secular persons, a thing that might lead to utter loss and ruin as it did in past times.

From the statements of reformers it appears that religious communities followed a life in some respects difficult to distinguish from that of the lay nobility, so the distinction between spiritual and secular lives could not be made. The ecclesiastical role upon which

34 Whitelock, Councils and Synods, 153-4.
35 Barbara Yorke, Nunneries and Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 85.
36 There are only a few exceptions of houses of monks or canons replaced by communities of women. References to each of these monasteries with the dates of destruction or abandonment as well as restorations of male foundations appear in David Knowles and Richard Nevill Haddock, Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971), 116-20.
37 “Saecularium uero prioratum, ne ad magni ruinam detrimenti uti olim acciderat miseabiler deueniret, manga animaduersione atque anathemate suspici coenobis sacris sapienter prohibentes.” Also used (7,7) of “spiritual authority”; “means lay dominion over monasteries.” T (gloss) has “ealdoÞscype”: RC “Forward,” 7.
royal religious women’s sanctity was founded could not be separated from, but was rather a direct product of, their connection with their family. Private virtue was equated with public asset.\(^{38}\) As women of royal status, they were simultaneously responsible for the affairs of their nunneries as well as secular magnates who managed property and negotiated favorable conditions with their relations.\(^{39}\) Anglo-Saxon women carried their family obligations with them into church, and their lives were influenced by the histories of their families. Female succession depended on royal assignment. Royal nunneries performed on behalf of their royal families and were rewarded with their patronage.

The connection between royal women and the earliest Anglo-Saxon female monasteries informed Wulfstan’s decision to omit Nunnaminster’s origins. Nunnaminster’s foundation in the tenth century was part of a long tradition of royal women entering religious life, passing down monastic lands through written evidence of property ownership, and engaging with life outside the walls of the nunnery. Royal women played an important part during the early stages of the country’s religious transformation and through periodic reform. They served as intercessors on behalf of their kin as well as their own and extended female community. They could evolve into models for female sanctity capable of representing the spiritual growth from pagan practices toward a Christian ideal and, as such, they were positioned to serve their own female religious house. Anglo-Saxon kings provided their female relatives with a privileged position between church and state. For a woman of royal birth, her power was a product of dynastic inheritance. The few women who were non-royal who achieved


sainthood did so because of their association with miracles, but the majority of female saints were royal women who were founders of monastic houses.\footnote{Linda Eckenstein, *Women Under Monasticism* (New York: 1963), 79-80. Of these, 29 are royal, six possibly, and two are noble or wealthy, two are non-royal but associated with royal foundations, and one is non-royal with no royal associates; eight are non-royal but obscure: David H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 2nd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).}

Anglo-Saxon royal nunneries were institutions based on class, and noble influence, including monastic bequests, was essential to the families who founded these houses. Royal women ruled religious houses; they were both protectors of the faith and patrons of the Church.\footnote{Marc Anthony Meyer, “Patronage of the West Saxon Royal Nunneries in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” *Revue Bénédictine* 91.3-4 (1981): 332-58.} An East Anglian princess seems to have been the first royal Saxon woman to enter religious life. King Ethelberga’s niece, another Ealhswith, daughter of King Eadbald of Kent (616-640), may have founded the first religious house for women in Anglo-Saxon England, built in 630 at Folkestone.\footnote{Elizabeth Judd, “Women Before the Conquest: A Study of Women in Anglo-Saxon England,” *The University of Michigan Papers in Women’s Studies* (Feb. 1974): 127-49; 131.} Eorcengota, daughter of Eorcenberht, King of Kent, became a nun in c.640.\footnote{Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), III.3, 153-54. From here on, Bede, *HE*.} These close links between abbesses and their royal families provided religious women with the ability to negotiate on behalf of their communities, especially providing their houses with extensive endowments. Wilton, for example, has a history of royal association. Eadgyth brought substantial properties to Wilton and was the focus of a major cult there, benefiting the nunnery well after her death.\footnote{Goscelin’s *Uita Editha*, ch. 7, 20, 50-1, 86-7. *The Life of King Edward who Rests at Westminster*, ed. and trans. Frank Barlow, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70-5 in Yorke, *Nunneries and The Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 88, no. 205.} Queen Edith (c.1025-18 December 1075) patronized Wilton, where she was educated and spent her widowhood. She was a noble woman in her own right before
marrying Edward the Confessor (1003-5 January 1066) estimated at the time to be the wealthiest woman in England and more than able to rebuild Wilton’s church.\textsuperscript{45}

Religious women prayed for their royal relatives, especially intercessionary prayers on behalf of kings. King Athelstan (894-27 October 939) made a grant to the nuns of Shaftsbury (founded by Alfred in 888) to sing psalms for his soul,\textsuperscript{46} an indication that the community was under royal control. Since his sister-in-law, Eadgifu [Edith] (c.902/4-c.966/7), was ruling Shaftsbury at the time, the connection between funding the nunnery and family ties are apparent. Royal abbesses also performed a valuable service for their family members in the promotion of relatives who were elevated to sainthood. These women associated with religious houses were considered to have special status among their kin, and those sainted were especially prized. Seaxburh’s (c.640-6 July 699) translation of Wulfthryth of Wilton was promoted because she was the mother of St. Edith at a time when King Æthelred was proud of his saintly sibling whose cult was celebrated at Shaftsbury.\textsuperscript{47} In their lifetime royal women were useful to their families due to their ability to mediate for them at religious houses due to their own sanctity. They provided continuity between generations, thus ensuring that female relatives would succeed as future leaders.

Royal burials also attest to the relationship between nunneries and royal patronage. King Swaefred (746–758) was buried at Nazeingbury, built on founding land


\textsuperscript{47} Ridyard, Royal Saints, 140-75; Yorke, Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal House, 295-6.
he had donated. Abbess Ælfflaed (654–714) was abbess of Whitby Abbey. She used the property for her family mausoleum when she organized the translation of her grandfather Edwin’s body there, joining Oswiu and her mother Eanflaed. In both instances women’s religious houses were important to establishing a family identity in their regions. Abbess Hild (c.614-680) brought Ælfflaed with her when she founded Straeneaeshalch in 657 (Whitby Abbey). Hild was of noble birth, sister to King Ina (688-725). Before Whitby, Hild ruled over Hartlepool in c.646 and later founded the monastery. Hild and Ælfflaed of Whitby attended Northumbrian church councils, with Hild hosting the famous synod of Whitby. Hild’s prudence, Bede wrote, was so esteemed that kings and princes would come to Whitby to ask her advice; five men who studied under her became bishops. She was considered an excellent educator. The tradition of female literacy is often traced to Abbess Hild’s royal lineage and her literary achievements.

Abbesses also had to administer large estates and care for the pastoral needs of the people who lived upon them. Hild and Ælfflaed of Whitby acquired land and were responsible for the spiritual care of those on their estates. Abbesses from royal families maintained simultaneous ties to both religious and worldly arenas; they moved freely in

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49 Bede, HE, III, 24.
50 Bede, HE, III, 3, 153-54.
51 Cubitt, Church Councils, passim.
52 Bede, HE, IV.23, 247.
53 “In quo memorata regis filia, primo discipula vitae regularis, deinde etiam magistra extitit” in which the said king’s daughter “was at the first a learner, afterward also a teacher of monastic life”: Bede, HE, IV, 23, 410-11. Hild encouraged Caedmon who, in 664, wrote the first Christian religious poetry in Old English: Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 84.
society, and they maintained strong links with their families while acting as spiritual leaders. Monastic life offered numerous opportunities for contact between the religious leaders and their royal family since it relied upon aristocratic patronage. Women’s sanctity ensured their family’s continued support. Abbesses also depended on female family members entering religious life to continue their sponsorship of nunneries. There is perhaps no better case for this arrangement than tenth-century Winchester.

C. Nunnaminster’s History

The center of Winchester included a great complex that comprised the most powerful ecclesiastic centers in the country, as well as the principal seat of the English kings: church life and secular life were intertwined. The Bishop’s Palace was located to Nunnaminster’s south and the Royal Palace to its east. Nunnaminster’s association with the two adjacent Winchester male minsters, Old and New Minsters, augmented the female house’s status. In order to distinguish them, Nunnaminster was called “nuns mynster” or Nunna-mynster. All three houses were involved with the secular administration of Winchester due to their association with the royal family.

Male royalty did not reside at monastic houses but royal women did. Old Minster was the Anglo-Saxon cathedral of Wessex, founded in 648 for King Cenwald of Wessex

55 The house is listed in Anglo-Saxon historical documents. The “Charter of King Edgar,” British Library MS Add. 15350, f. 54; Robertson, Charters, 317; ‘Nunnamynstre,’ from “King Eadred’s Will.” This text is preserved in the Liber Monasterii de Hyda, 153. Harmer, Select English Historical Documents, 34; Robertson, Charters, no. 29; P. H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968), no. 1419. Called “nunna minstre”: Robertson, Charters, no. 49; Sawyer, Charters, no. 1449; Dorothy Whitelock, Anglo-Saxon Wills: With Translation and Notes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), no. 20; Sawyer, Charters, no. 1503. Harmer, Select English Historical Documents, no. 21; Sawyer, Charters, no. 1515. The word monasterium does not necessarily refer to a religious house of monks or nuns in the eight or ninth centuries, but pre-conquest religious houses are called its English equivalent, “mynsters” (Old English), which was also the normal term for a church served by a body of clergy. The usage of mynster offers the kind of attractive embrace of any kind of religious community: Blair, The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society, 3.
(reigned c.642-c.645). New Minster was founded in 901 and became a popular pilgrimage center. Old and New Minsters housed the tombs of West Saxon kings, but never served as residences for a royal family. In Nunnaminster by contrast, royal women lived chastely on their own property throughout the convent’s history. As with the other monasteries, Nunnaminster’s location put it in proximity to episcopal and political power. This geographical arrangement afforded all three monastic houses great intellectual, spiritual, and political privileges.

Over the years, Nunnaminster grew to accommodate a larger religious community while maintaining a physical central position in Winchester. It was first and foremost an active religious community of royal Wessex women. Nunnaminster’s foundation is listed as 903, although it is possible that an earlier female estate existed on the site prior to the tenth century. Archeologists describe the property as a small, wealthy estate of high social status. From the eighth through the ninth centuries, some buildings on the pre-Nunnaminster site served secondary purposes. One of the abbey’s edifices, for example, functioned as a “bower” (a woman’s private retreat), the “rarest of Anglo-Saxon structures.” This bower contained another edifice, which Archbishop Plegmund (890-914) consecrated. A “lofty tower” had been attached to one of its buildings, as some


archaeologists suggest, since the Nunnamins ter site held a substantial structure. The tower was erected in honor of the Virgin Mary, indicating the nunnery’s dedication and early importance.  

Nunnaminster’s location at the center of the city afforded it additional intellectual, spiritual and political opportunities. The women of Nunnaminster sat at the epicenter of English power: “nigh the middel of the citye.” Their involvement in the life of the city and in the wider political life of Anglo-Saxon England is implicit in Nunnaminster’s very geography. Moreover, the Church in Winchester can be best described as part of an inherited tradition of West Saxon royal obligation, which became a prerogative of the Crown. From its earlier foundation through its dissolution, Nunnaminster continued to attract women of noble upbringing. Historical records discuss royal Wessex women managing Nunnaminster until well after the Conquest, with elite female religious women living together on the Nunnaminster property until the sixteenth century (1536–

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Royal women continued to be associated with Nunnaminster, and they appear in historical texts throughout the house’s history. Royal Wessex women maintained control over Nunnaminster, having the greatest capacity to administer and advocate on its behalf. They controlled the ground upon which their Winchester nunnery was built, giving them power over the property and the decisions over their own regulations. They also maintained control of additional property throughout Wessex. By 1066, the nunnery held the endowment of nearly 100 hides of land and controlled extensive property in Winchester. This land, donated by royal family members, indicates the close ties between the community and the monarchy. The institution they supervised held a significant presence in Winchester because of their royal connections. Abbesses possessed reciprocal relationships with their own religious communities and their Wessex royal family members, their neighboring religious male houses, and the greater ecclesiastical and royal assembly. The valuable associations with their families contributed to their community’s autonomy and control over their land. From one boundary description we know Ealhswith wanted to secure her family-controlled nunnery, indicating that Nunnaminster would endure through the royal maternal line. This points to her concern for maintaining female ownership of Nunnaminster.

The tradition of royal women at Nunnaminster began with Ealhswith and continued with Edberga. They shared a reputation for sanctity. Ealhswith was descended

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64 Meyer, “Patronage of the West Saxon Royal Nunneries,” 348.
through her mother, Eadburh, from the Mercian royal house. Daughter of an ealdorman of Mercia, Ealhswið was the granddaughter of King Coenwulf of Mercia and consort to Alfred. She was never described as a religious woman, nor as Abbess of Nunnaminster. This decision illustrates her preference for secular power over religious service. As such, Ealhswið was key to Alfred’s objectives of merging the Mercian and Wessex families and producing competent heirs.65

Alfred’s mission, as well as his piety and love of learning, would have been influential in Nunnaminster’s development, encouraging its educational directive through the Anglo-Saxon period. This is a testament to the king’s determination to bring literacy back to England (c.890).66 Even before Nunnaminster was founded, Alfred had implemented a monastic school at Winchester to teach his children, including girls, to read. According to Alfred’s biographer, several ninth-century Old English prose texts are the product of a literacy program directed by Alfred in Old and New Minsters.67 Asser testifies that King Alfred’s mother implemented an educational program at Winchester according to European models for women.68 Asser also indicates that the king’s circles

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65 Ealhswið was daughter to Aethelred of Mucil (the Great), ealdorman of the Gaini. Stevenson says that we have no mention of the district or people, Gaini. She was related to the Mercian dynasty, descended through her mother from King Coenwulf, “a noble Mercian lady.” Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred & Other Contemporary Sources, eds. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth, Middlesex and New York: Penguin, 1983), 77; 240-41.

66 In his preface to Pastoral Care, Alfred wrote that whereas there had formerly been many wise men in England, “both of spiritual and lay order,” learning had now decayed so completely that there were “very few men on this side of the Humber who could apprehend their services in English, or even translate a letter from Latin.” Whitelock, English Historical Documents, 818-19.


included women who were not only literate but owned books.\textsuperscript{69} This description points to female aristocratic literacy\textsuperscript{70} and highly instructive evidence for book-ownership.\textsuperscript{71} Evidence for Ealhswið’s ability to maintain female ownership over her property is seen in documentation attesting to her responsibility for the construction of buildings on Nunnaminster property. She was also accountable for the collection of a group of nuns to serve as its first community and the house’s provisional endowment.\textsuperscript{72} Beyond these accomplishments, Nunnaminster’s reputation as a royal Wessex house was predicated on Ealhswið’s ability to adequately manage the house’s property into the future. She established an enduring connection with Nunnaminster for her female successors. The \textit{Liber Vitae}, for example, records that Nunnaminster is listed as “aedificatrix monasterii,”\textsuperscript{73} and a tenth-century entry penned into \textit{The Book of Nunnaminster} provides a testament to Ealhswið’s efforts since it associates her name with the parameters around which the nunnery was situated: “The hedge-boundaries which Ealhswið has … westernmost mill-wier.”\textsuperscript{74} This property, a royal \textit{Eigenkloster} (proprietary family

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Brown, “Female Book-Ownership,” 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Brown, “Female Book-Ownership,” 47. King Alfred established what appears to have been a West Saxon equivalent of the Carolingian Palace School: Parkes, \textit{A Fragment}, 184.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Osbert of Claire, \textit{Vita St. Eadburga}, fol. 87v.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} “Þæs hagan ge mære þe ealhþið þæfð … þestemestan mylen geare” is described in the late nineteenth century: Birch, \textit{An Ancient Manuscript}, fol. 40b.
\end{itemize}
monastery), could have been Ealhswith’s dower when she married Alfred in 868, since she retired to the property in 899. During the tenth century, Ealhswith was known as Nunnaminster’s founder. 

The boundary clause inserted into Nunnaminster served as a deed for the religious house, designating that Ealhswith held the rights to the land and hence its title. In the description, Ealhswith demonstrates that she owned her own land (folk land), which indicated her high social rank (even without her ‘consort’ status). According to Simon Keynes,

An estate of book land, once created, could be given or sold to another person, or to a religious house, by the handling over of the original charter, or title-deed, in the presence of witnesses, for example at a local assembly.

The preservation of Nunnaminster’s property became a valuable testament to the privileges of a royal woman. Nunnaminster’s sovereign claim included the possession of Nunnaminster since the manuscript was located at the nunnery in the first half of the tenth century and remained there until the Dissolution. The property description was written in Winchester, likely located on Ealhswith’s estate and before 902, the year Ealhswith died. As the account attests, through the present tense, “hæfð,” “has,” Ealhswith

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76 Florence Harmer, English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 102.

77 Malmesbury ascribes the foundation solely to Alfred. William of Malmesbury De Gestis Regum Anglorum, ed. W. Stubbs (London: Rolls Series, 90/2, 1889), Book II, ch. 78. Birch and Biddle agree that Malmesbury’s view that the foundation of Nunnaminster was entirely due to King Alfred is no longer accepted because it was based on a corrupt historical passage. Birch, An Ancient Manuscript, 15; Biddle, “Felix Urbs Winthonia,” 321, no. 9. Ealhswith continued to be associated with the nunnery’s origins: Doubleday, The Victoria History, 126.

78 Simon Keynes, Introduction to paperback edition of Whitelock, Anglo-Saxon Wills, ii.
was still alive when the record was written, a reminder to the Winchester community of her current assertion and status as owner of the land and of the religious endowment.

The boundary entry in Nunnaminster also legitimized Edburga at Nunnaminster\(^79\) while attempting, as any land deed does, to secure the foundation’s boundaries into the future. This record illustrates how royal women documented their own status and ensured the future disposition of monastic property. Nunnaminster continued to prove witness to the nunnery’s preoccupation with their property. The records of numerous land holdings indicate that Nunnaminster still owned properties initially bequeathed by Alfred to his wife and daughters as well as additional land in nearby counties beyond the tenth century.\(^80\) Heredity tenures were part of the prestige of traditional monasticism where inherited property was based on family rank and protocol. Texts such as these enabled a community to perpetuate female dominion and to define a collective identity, which gave their communities legal standing.\(^81\) Although few women held anything more than a lifetime interest in their property,\(^82\) Ealhswið’s land was protected from alienation throughout Nunnaminster’s history by the existence of this document.

\(^79\) Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum, 174.

\(^80\) The nunns at Winchester, “monasterio monialium quod in Wyntonia urbe situm sit.” is mentioned in a 947 land transfer at Leckford (Hants) by King Eadred upon the death of the priest Eadwulf Earl of Macclefield, Liber Abbatiae, 23rv: copy, x. xv Charter 15, Charters of New Minster, 73. By 1086 Nunnaminster owned half as much (two and half hides). “Leckford Abbas” is listed as part of the Nunnaminster’s estates: Henry Moody, Hampshire in 1086: An Extension of the Latin Text, and an English Translation of the Domesday Book As Far As It Relates to Hampshire (Winchester: John T. Doswell, 1862), 42r, 43v.


Ealhswith’s granddaughter, Edburga, also maintained a leadership position at Nunnaminster, continuing the sixth-century tradition of royal daughters oblated to religious houses. Edburga was descended from the royal house of Wessex. The Life of St. Edburga describes her oblation at age three, at King Edward the Elder’s recommendation, in the early tenth century. As The Chartulary of the Abbey of Hyde indicates, she would proceed to spend the rest of her life at Nunnaminster, becoming the abbess during the tenth century. In her honor, Nunnaminster was renamed St. Mary’s or St. Edburga’s Abbey during the twelfth century (1108). According to Osbert of Claire, Edburga carried on the female tradition of being a worthy ally for Nunnaminster. By playing a significant role in royal and aristocratic family politics, she was key to the patronage that allowed its continued existence. Her later canonization (972) signifies her valuable contribution to Nunnaminster’s community. Furthermore, Edburga’s sanctity, a direct product of her birth into the West Saxon royal dynasty, was celebrated throughout Winchester’s religious and secular society. Osbert’s vita of Edburga shows Edburga was a product of special virtue, respected due to her royal status:

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83 Although these women were often sent overseas due to insufficient housing at home, Bede records that Seathryth and Æthelburh, step-daughter and daughter of King Anna (d.654), were sent to the nunnery at Farmoutiers in Brie and were joined by their niece Eorcengota, daughter of their sister Seaxburh and King Eorcenbert of Kent (640-664). Bede, HE, III, 8; O. S. Robertson, “St. Eanswith’s reliquary in Folkestone,” Archaeologica Cantiana (1866): 1-31; 8.
84 Osbert had access to a non-extant tenth-century Latin vita of St. Edburga written at Nunnaminster, presumably by one of the nuns: Ridyard, Royal Saints, 277; Osbert of Claire, Vita St. Eadburge, fols. 85-120.
85 Osbert of Claire, Vita St. Eadburga, fol. 91.
86 “mediatrix ad regem”: Osbert of Claire, Vita St. Eadburga, fol. 90v.
87 Edwards, Liber Monasterii De Hyde, fol. 265.
It is unseemly, they say, for a royal child to humbly bow her neck to such service and to work as a common slave; it is harmful to the dignity of her illustrious birth.  

In one anecdote, Edburga had secretly cleaned the shoes of other nuns in her Nunnaminster community. According to its house rules, she was publicly rebuked by one of the sisters: this act of service was viewed as a betrayal of her royal status. The lowliness of the virgin had far exceeded the expectations of the church. To the relief of the nuns who relied upon royal membership in its community, her father, the king, reacted favorably when he heard news of his daughter’s somewhat unorthodox behavior. Edburga also persuaded her father to endow Nunnaminster with the property “Canaga” in the Abbess’s name. Her half-brother, King Æthelstan (893-939), also granted land at Droxfold in Hampshire to her, which provided additional income for Nunnaminster. Both abbesses and queens were entered into the Liber Vitae (1031), which contained a list of kings and queens, monks and abbesses of the Winchester community. They were shown to have commanded a large familia of nuns, clerici, and servants, as well as the control of a substantial amount of land and all dependent inhabitants.

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89 Osbert of Claire, Vita St. Eadburga, fols. 89v-90.

90 Osbert of Claire, Vita St. Eadburga, fol. 91.


92 Liber Vitae, ed. Birch, fol. 10v.
Hampshire in 1086 does not list the landowner of St. Mary’s at Winchester among the holders. This was because it was assigned to the abbess, as head of household, and secured into the future: “The Abbess of St. Mary’s claims this manor,” and she continued to hold substantial property throughout Wessex. As female holders of the house and their lands, women ensured that a member of the founder’s family always held the abbatial office. The distinction to elect royal abbesses was possibly derived from the crown’s exercise of its right to nominate a nun to an abbey at each coronation. This privilege began during Alfred’s reign when properties were deemed royal estates. In keeping with such an honor, abbesses, not Nunnaminster, were credited with the house’s land possessions. Nunnaminster’s extension of property ownership to royal women appears to have been widespread. Nunnaminster’s longevity was cemented through the earlier documentation of female property ownership and royal ties, which contributed to the stability of its monastic community.

In *The Book of Nunnaminster*, Ealhswith is listed as the owner of the land upon which the house was built, significant documentation for preserving her family’s permanent possession of the property. Since the responsibility for producing a document attesting to female land holding often fell to the owner, it would have been in her interest to testify to her possession. *Nunnaminster* is proof of the ecclesiastical and political

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93 “Hoc M caluniat abbatissa S Mary in Neteham” [Alton and Selbourne; King’s Sombourne], in Hundret, Lyss, and Leckford [Leckford Abbess], in Hampshire [Long Stoke, Timsbury, and Ovington], in Berkshire [Coleshill] and in Wiltshire [Urchfont and All Cannings], along with properties in Winchester, mostly in Colebrook Street. Moody, *The Domesday Book*. In *The Domesday Book*, this land is assessed at “5 hides; now at 3 hides. There is land for 4 ploughs.” According to the text, another three parcels of land appeared to be in the possession of the ‘same abbey.’ Morris, *Domesday*, no. 44, fol. 48b, 449.

94 Juliana de Leygrave, niece of the king’s (foster) mother, Alice de Leygrave, received at the election of Maud de Pecham in 1313 a nun’s corrody for life and a suitable chamber within the nunnery for her residence. See nomination of Agnes Denham in 1418; see nomination of Agnes Denham in 1418: *Victoria History*, II, 122; mandate for the admission of Dyamunda daughter of Richard de Sutton in 1320: *Winton. Épis. Reg.*, *Asserio*, f. 10b in *Victoria History*, II, 122.
alliance that became a necessary means of ensuring Nunnaminster’s survival. The boundary description found in Ealhswið’s passage furthermore indicates a degree of political shrewdness on her behalf. This document specifically illustrates that Ealhswið took measures to secure female ownership of her land, making Nunnaminster’s provenance uncontestable. Legal land rights rested in those possessing the associated record, and therefore attesting to ownership, making future abbesses into “lords” of some significance in their locality. Written records were recognized as knowledge of legal rights. Boundary entries became not only testaments to symbolic ownership but also to the existence of a functioning tool in dispute resolutions.

Ealhswið had a personal understanding of the precariousness of property rights and the importance of preserving family records. Her relative, Cwenthryth (fl. 811-c.826), had been bequeathed Minster-in-Thanet by her father before his death. Cwenthryth was a Mercian princess and daughter of King Coenwulf (r. 796-821) and Abbess of Thanet. Thanet’s ownership was long uncontested because Cwenthryth held the charter. Cwenthryth had, against considerable pressure (including several battles in court), prevented Archbishop Winfred of Canterbury from acquiring the nunnery for many years, but she ultimately resigned it to him. Ealhswið had inherited from Cwenthryth the Thanet prayerbook that would become known as The Book of Nunnaminster, and Nunnaminster’s property description was recorded therein.

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95 “The person who had the charter was closer to having the land than the one who did not have it”: Ely Cathedral’s Liber Eliensis, 2.25, ed. E. O. Blake (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1962), 99; trans. Janet Fairweather, Liber Eliensis (Woodbridge, Suffolk [England]: Boydell Press, 2005), 122.


Cwenhryth’s determination may have prompted Ealhswið to take the necessary steps to scribe her record of land’s rights in a location that was not only secure but also accessible to her and her community.

D. Literacy at Nunnaminster

The entry in Nunnaminster is not only a testament of ownership but it also conveys a pragmatic understanding of charters as well as the means of maintaining records. The New Minster’s foundation charter (966), thirty pages long and written in a lavish book for display on the high altar, still survives.¹⁸ Both New Minster and Nunnaminster’s vernacular inscriptions represent a similar pattern, a habit of writing property documents in books.⁹⁹ Ealhswið’s passage, or notitiae, signals the existence of a more typical document, corresponding to New Minster’s property transfers. The Nunnaminster property passage is an indication of a complementary text at Nunnaminster—source material analogous to the gesta municipalia archives.¹⁰⁰

Inspiration for including the boundary entry must have been formed to a large degree by the importance to which female nunneries were dedicated to books. Although evidence is sparse for the presence of Latin books in nunneries,¹⁰¹ those books that are

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found in nunnery libraries show that abbesses expected their nuns to be able to read Latin
texts and apply their reading materials to their devotional lives in a sophisticated manner.
In addition, the need for administrative and communicating activities, along with
devotional reading, necessitated use of Latin as well as a regional dialect.\(^\text{102}\) Books were
prized possessions, and women (and men) took measures to ensure that the books
remained available to them, especially those that secured their property.

Nunnaminster and its literate community were part of a cultural initiative that
extended far back in Anglo-Saxon history. Religious women advocated on their own
behalf by writing appeals. This includes book ownership by nunneries: nunneries were
places of literacy,\(^\text{103}\) and based on library records, nuns were considered equally literate
as monks,\(^\text{104}\) who were expected to read Latin texts and be able to apply the materials to
their devotional lives.\(^\text{105}\) An eighth-century entry on the endleaf of a manuscript now at

\(^{102}\) David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*, Appendix:

\(^{103}\) Over the past 20 years, significant scholarly effort has been devoted to reassessing the literacies and
intellectual activities of communities of women religious in England throughout the Middle Ages. A
comprehensive bibliography detailing this effort can be found in the introduction to Virginia Blanton,
Veronica O’Mara and Patricia Stoop, eds., *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: the Hull Dialogue*
(Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), vii, n. 6. See also the five essays on English women religious in this volume, as
well as the four essays on this topic in *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: the Kansas City Dialogue*, ed.
Virginia Blanton et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015). Also on this topic, see Katie Ann-Marie Bugysis,
*Recovering the Histories of Women Religious in England in the Central Middle Ages: Wilton Abbey and
Goscelin of Saint-Bertin*. For recent work that references earlier research, see Sarah Foot, “Flores ecclesiae:
Women in Early Anglo-Saxon Monasticism,” in *Female Vita Religiosa Between Late Antiquity and the
High Middle Ages: Structures, Developments, and Spatial Contexts*, eds. Gert Melville and Anne Müller
(Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 173–85; essays contributed by Stephanie Hollis and Lisa Weston to *Barking
Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community*, eds. Jennifer N.
Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2012); Diane Watt, “Lost Books:
Abbess Hildelith and the Literary Culture of Barking Abbey,” *Philological Quarterly* 91 (2012): 1–21;
edem, “The Earliest Women’s Writing? Anglo-Saxon Literary Cultures and Communities,” *Women’s
Writing* 20 (2013): 537-54. Past work discussing female engagement in the production of literacy includes,
but is not limited to, Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*; Sims-Williams, *Religious and Literature
in Western England: 600-800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Christine E. Fell, *Women in


Würzburg records female personal ownership by Cuthswith, who likely belonged to the Mercian royal family. She has been identified as a seventh-century abbess of Inkberrow in Worcestershire, and her purchase of properties shows that her monastery was prosperous. Prayers were also recorded in manuscripts owned by nuns in early Anglo-Saxon England, and some houses had extensive libraries and a curriculum. The women religious of Nunnaminster had access to Aldhelm’s (c.639–25 May 709) *De Virginitate*, among other texts, since it was in the library at Old Minster. *De Virginitate* was addressed to Abbess Hildelith and the nuns of Barking (f. 657), who were also of particular interest to readers for their sanctity and literacy. Bishop Eorcenwold (765–


107 One at Thanet: “indignam famulam tuam.” Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 30, a copy of the Acts of the Apostles; *CLA* 2.257; Bernhard Bischoff, review of E.A. Lowe, *English Uncial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 609, under an Edburga (d.751), the second abbess and daughter of King Centwine (d.685) of the West Saxons (c.676-685/6). Thanet is also known for educating Mildred (d.732), daughter of Earcongota, who “wrote a little psalter with her maidenly hand in the face of torment, with a neatness and skill which she was sure would make it pleasing to her mother, Domneva” [Thanet]: Goscelin of St. Bertin, *Vita Deo dilectae virginis Mildrethae*, ch. XIV, in Richard Gameson, *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 114. In eighth-century Kentish script on page 49 of Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 30 [3418], a copy of the Acts of the Apostles: Brown “Female Book-Ownership,” 48. This volume later belonged to St. Augustine Canterbury, which received Thanet’s property in the eleventh century. Convents such as Thanet may have helped to stock Canterbury’s library collection: Brown “Female Book-Ownership,” 48.


of the Kentish royal house, founded Barking for his sister Æthelburh, who ruled as abbess and was trained by St. Hildelith of Brie. Nunnaminster’s community could read about Hildelith and Barking’s achievements, with the Abbess and the female monastic serving as models for Nunnaminster’s female monastic rulers.

Nunnaminster was part of Winchester’s active literate community. Its proximity to the royal and ecclesiastical complex, adjacent to Old and New Minsters, provided access to what would have been an extensive library and a bustling center of manuscript production. Although it is difficult to determine the size of Nunnaminster’s book collections without the advantage of its surviving archives, this female community certainly had access to resources that enabled it to pursue its intellectual needs along with its spiritual vocation. Women were reading, studying and copying texts at this monastic house; some scribes, involved in manuscript production, were women who also worked there. Ealhswið may have started an educational program at Wessex, and we know with certainty that Edburga was capable of reading and writing. At least by the sixteenth century, the nunnery even had a resident librarian: in 1501, Dr. Hede visited St. Mary’s, Winchester and noted that those responsible for the administration of the house

114 Sean Miller, ed., Charters of the New Minster, Winchester, Anglo-Saxon Charters IX (London, 2001), S 1143.
116 Asser, Instruction of “nutritorum et nutricum,” “male and female tutors,” ch. 75.
included Elia Pitte, librarian at Nunnaminster. A list of manuscripts owned by Nunnaminster is provided as textual evidence (see Appendix A) of a continued program of literacy at Nunnaminster.

As evident by handwriting, the religious woman who transcribed the boundary entry into *Nunnaminster* was the same woman copying texts into *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from multiple sources and using various script grades. At the same time, she was correcting a Trinity *Isodore* and adding the lacunae for *Sedulius*. Since *Nunnaminster* remained at the house, a nun here was marking the manuscript using female usage (Latin female endings) and forms of confession, along with copying Isidore’s *Etymologie*. Another Nunnaminster scribe wrote a later section of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and transcribed Tollemache’s *Orosius*.

While Nunnaminster scribes were busy, its community was also determined to be educated. One text was written during the tenth century containing an Old English gloss, a fresh interlinear translation of the entire Psalter. Cotton Galba and Nero were originally bound blank and likely used for a beginner or novice student for her exercises. The Regius Psalter, also written in the tenth century, contains a Latin

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119 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173, fols. 1r-16r, s.x.

120 Cambridge, Trinity College MS 368, s.x.

121 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173, fols. 57-83, s.x.


123 British Library, Add. MS 47967, s.x.


commentary, which runs continuously throughout the Psalms, including double glosses used for translation or for teaching purposes. Winchester’s translation of the Regularis Concordia, adapted for its female religious community, may have been the culmination of work by Nunnaminster scribes during this century. The manuscript includes several substitutions from a masculine to a feminine audience. For example, “abbess,” “abbodysee” is added as an alternative to “abbot.”

The nun responsible for this manuscript may have been the current unnamed abbess at Nunnaminster and may also have corresponded with Anselm. During the twelfth century, the personal prayerbook of Ælfwine, abbot of the New Minster (1031-1057), passed into Nunnaminster’s hands. Several prayers in this work also had feminine endings added to them. In one of them a prayer and interlineation in the feminine gender indicates female ownership. Individual prayers for intercession in the litany of the saints were altered to feminine forms. At

126 Also, “seo abbod”; sisters, “þa geswysterna,” given as an alternative to “brothers,” and “þa gebrodra;” “nuns,” “munecena,” and the direct substitution of “the abbess…with her sisters,” “seo abbodysse,” for the source’s “abbot with the brothers,” “abbas cum fratribus;” “sisters,” “þa geswysterna,” given as an alternative to “brothers,” “þa gebrodra,” and reference to “nuns,” “munecena” and a direct substitution of “the abbess…with her sisters,” “seo abbodysse…mid hyre geswysternum” for the source’s “abbot with the brothers,” “abbas cum fratribus,” at lines 12, 126, 130, 154, 159-60, 164, 168, 176 and 204-5, 188-89, 167, 176, 188, 204-5: Æthelwold and Symons, RC.

127 Ridyard, The Royal Saints, 296, 297.


130 “misera peccatrici,” “miserable sinner”: Günzel, ed., Ælfwine’s Prayerbook; Rushforth, Saints in the English Kalendars before A.D. 1100, 34-5.
the time she was also adding another prayer asking for her guardian angel’s protection, another nun was inscribing on two mortuary rolls.

Spiritual women at Nunnaminster contributed to the center of intellectual life at Winchester. Within the walls of their monastic enclave, women were reading and writing, and at one time possessed an extensive library. The vernacular, as well as Latin, was employed, often together, as a means to access books. Nuns learned to write and were taught by each other. Female religious at Winchester were exchanging, reading and copying books, whenever required, back and forth between their own house and the adjacent buildings that their male counterparts occupied. Surviving books reflect a close cooperation between these readers of mixed gender with some manuscripts indicating use by a man at one time and at another by a woman.

Nunnaminster was also relied on for scribes, as evidenced by several manuscripts that point to women copying books. The existence of the flourishing scriptorium at Nunnaminster is not surprising since female monastics were considered accomplished scribes. Comparing the handwriting of various texts proves a compelling way of identifying manuscripts written by these women. Often these manuscripts produced at Nunnaminster were delivered to the male monasteries, and a particular book may have originated at a male Winchester house, but Nunnaminster frequently possessed it during a


particular time. The three minsters together comprised a close-knit network of monastics dedicated and practiced in manuscript production. Within this ecclesiastical cluster, every group was committed to scribal activity, and although they persevered independently, each was also aware of one another’s pursuits and shared aspirations. These combined ambitions point to men and women religious connected by the dedication of common devotional service, illustrating the inclusion of the Nunnaminster community within the greater Winchester assembly.

E. Property Concerns at Nunnaminster

During the tenth century, Nunnaminster was an emerging and active literate community that allowed its women leaders to effectively advocate on their house’s behalf. One result of this broad literacy at Nunnaminster was the composition of specific prayers that responded to the spiritual needs of the community. Nuns also fended off physical threats to their property by writing appeals. For example, in a charter contemporaneous with Wulfstan’s text, Edgar returned a valuable water mill to Nunnaminster after its previous diversion by Old Minster.\(^\text{133}\) This agreement provided the convent that owned the property “such considerations as should be acceptable.”\(^\text{134}\) Due to Eadgyth’s advocacy, Edgar settled on a toll to be collected and given Nunnaminster on all merchandise passing by water under the city bridge or by land under East Gate.

\(^{133}\) This date is assigned due to the mention of Æthelgar, Abbot of New-minster (965-977).

(Nunnaminster). As further reward for the male house’s redirection of the nunnery’s waterway, Edgar’s will stipulates bequests of land and money a few years later to Nunnaminster.

The tradition of Nunnaminster defending its property continued. One prayer added to a tenth-century manuscript identified with Nunnaminster indicates that the monastery’s land was threatened. The nuns’ reaction is constructed in the form of a prayer fixed to a collection of texts written very soon after the Conquest. Following the Invasion of 1066, Nunnaminster’s land had been forcibly ceded to the Norman sheriff, Son of Baldric. Horae de Beata Maria Virgine makes an appeal for the restoration of the Nunnaminster’s property. Special reference is given to the loss of a building which had been unlawfully taken from them and given to someone they considered an invading enemy. The prayer invokes Mary and St. Edburga as patrons of the house to return Icene (Itchen Abbas, Winchester) manor to them. It was because of this request that King

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135 “Dues of the Eastgate of the City of Winchester, which the Abbess of the Blessed Mary of the said city claims to have: Grain, each cartload, 1/2d.; each horseload, 1/4d.; and if two or three bushels of beans were found in a cart of grain, 2d. Nuts, apples, peas, vetches and cumin, cartload 1d.; horseload, ½. Pears, horseload, 1d.; cartload, 2d. Honey, man’s load, 1/2d. Iron, horseload, 1d., and one little pot. Earthenware, horseload, 1/2d. Cider, a pipe, 1d., a cask, 2d. Wine, a pipe, 2d., a cask, 4d. Pans, corn measures, plates and cups, a man’s load, one of each article at the pleasure of the gatekeeper. Firewood, one good faggot according to the amount of wood in the cart. Cooper’s material, a cartload, one stave, 1/2d.; or 1/2d. at the pleasure of the gate-keeper. Arch boards, cartload, ½., horseload 1/4d. Charcoal, cartload, 1/2d., 2 horseloads, 1/4 d. shingles, 10 shingles for each 1,000. Straw or hay, if for sale, cartload, 1/2d. Laths, cartload, 1/2d. Beams, cartload, 1/4d. Building wood, adzed or sawn, cartload, 1/2d. Wosewoxe”: “Annals of Hyde,” Harley MS 1761, ii, f. 189, in Birch, An Ancient Manuscript, 12.

136 Sawyer, Charters, 554-56, no. 107.


138 “huic sancte ecclesie tue oblate…”, “inimicus qui non timuit tuam invadere possessionem”: Dewick, Facsimiles of Horae de Beata Maria Virgine, xi, fol. 1.
William returned the land to the women’s control. The spiritual aims of the house were pursued alongside devotional practice, and both appear to have been successfully sustained throughout Nunnaminster’s history by this literate community.

F. Æthelthryth in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi

Wulfstan describes Æthelthryth in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi without the background connecting this literate Nunnaminster community with its royal prestige. Her character is only partially described along with the religious house she serves, which speaks to the Reformers’ intentions to delimit royal connection at Nunnaminster. If readers followed Æthelthryth’s background and life leading up to her role at Nunnaminster, they would naturally form an association between the expected status of its female community’s ruler and her ties of kinship. It would have been problematic for Wulfstan to favorably associate Æthelthryth with the Wessex family because this connection to land passed through the female line would have discomforted any Benedictine Reformer. By neglecting such a connection for Æthelthryth, Wulfstan ensured that familiar styles of monastic leadership are also avoided.

Æthelthryth’s image throughout the course of Æthelwold’s life and the text’s narrative offers a decades-long image of unbroken virtue. Wulfstan reports that Æthelwold brought Benedictine monasticism to Nunnaminster: the Bishop, he says, “established nuns at the Nunnaminster” (ch. 22). This suggests Æthelthryth ruled over some kind of religious women according to prescribed regulations only after the reforms

139 marginalia: “Rex W. reddid eid æcctaæ.” “King William returned it to this Church”: The Domesday Book, vol. 4, no. 44, fol. 48b.
140 “Qvod in coenobio nonnarvm sanctionmoniales ordinarvit”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 36.
were presumably enacted. According to Sarah Foot, the term “nunnan” appears to have been used in reference to women religious who had remained in the world, but not necessarily cloistered. Wulfstan appears to indicate that Benedictine religious women were not in residence prior to the movement’s mandates, thus raising the question of Nunnaminster’s composition prior to Æthelwold’s regulations. The consequence of Æthelthryth’s portrayal provides the reader with the impression that she lived an extended life, because her permanence at Nunnaminster is as apparent as her dedication. According to the Regula, fidelity to monastic life requires the promise of stability and perseverance. Wulfstan appears to have elided an existing spiritual community into a rebirth of reform.

The connection between Nunnaminster and Æthelthryth in the text indicates this concern with steadfast dedication. Wulfstan treats Nunnaminster and Æthelthryth twice, in two chapters, much separated. He is referring to the same Nunnaminster both times, and the two Æthelthryths are meant to be the same woman despite the implication of an extended lifetime. Nunnaminster, mentioned in chapter 22, can be identified with the complex of ecclesiastical and royal buildings located in the city of Winchester earlier mentioned, written of in chapter 2. Æthelthryth is represented as capable in part because of her advanced age—“she is already ripe in years” (ch. 2) at the time of Æthelwold’s birth. Wulfstan has given Æthelthryth an overly lengthy tenure, since there is a time span of about sixty years between the two references. If we follow Æthelthryth’s career at

141 Foot, Veiled Women II, 36-38. The noun “myneceny” to describe cloistered women was not in use until the later tenth and eleventh centuries: Dumville, Wessex, 81-2.
142 The Rule of St. Benedict, ch. 58.
143 “aetate maturam”: The Rule of St. Benedict, ch. 58.
Nunnaminster in Wulfstan’s text, she would have been over eighty in the later chapter: unusually old by that period’s standards.

By representing Æthelthryth as living an exceptionally long life, her character expands the effects of sanctity at Nunnaminster beyond just the aims of the Reform Movement. Wulfstan’s portrayal also extends purity onto a house that, according to his history, had no guidelines and existed without nuns before the Reforms were put in place. The porter in the Regula was also described as maintaining a position at the gate of the monastery because he had maturity.¹⁴⁴ Wulfstan’s decision to portray longevity points to his attempt to represent enduring integrity at Nunnaminster, a house functioning with configuration, governance and systems in place, but without association with royal family.

G. Æthelthryth in Pragmatic Records

In addition to the long-lived Æthelthryth of the Vita St. Æthelwoldi, an Æthelthryth of Polhampton and another of Bedwyn appear in tenth-century pragmatic records. Not only is it probable that the two documented nuns named Æthelthryth were the same woman, but it is also likely that Wulfstan used her for his character. Based on several pieces of evidence, Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth and a royal Wessex Æthelthryth of Polhampton is the same woman. This “nun,” “Æthelthryth,” is mentioned in a grant from King Edmund in 940. In it she was awarded the manor of Polhampton (Polhaematun),

which was part of the ancient demesne of the Crown.\textsuperscript{145} Unfortunately, we cannot trace her signature on any charters,\textsuperscript{146} which is very likely the result of the practice at that time where any property assigned to women associated with female monasteries was listed under the “head of the household.”\textsuperscript{147} The term “head of the household” would identify the owner as the Abbess.

The property association with Polhampton was certainly of interest to Æthelwold and Wulfstan as it was listed as part of the Bishop of Winchester’s demesne.\textsuperscript{148} The grant from 940 was in the archives at Old or New Minster at least until 1643 but with certainty during the later tenth century. In it Æthelthryth of Polhampton is described as a “religiose sanctæ feminae,” rather than abbess, but she was given the land on behalf of the royal religious women of Winchester. Polhampton had belonged to the bishopric of Winchester, having been confirmed to Frithstan, Bishop of Winchester, by King Edward

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{145} British Library, Add. MS 15,350 f. 41. “Grant by King Eadmund to the religious woman, Ætheldryth, of land at Polhmæmatunæ, or Polhampton in Overton, co Hants,” Birch, Cartularium Saxonicum, ii, 491. Sawyer, Charters, no. 465; Simon Keynes, The Diplomas of King Æthelred “the Unready” (978-1016): A Study in Their Use As Historical Evidence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 45, no. 82, due to witness-list based on same memorandum as that of Sawyer, Charters, 470; David N. Dumville, Wessex and England From Alfred to Edgar (Boydell, Suffolk, Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 1992), 177-8. Later King Edmund gave it to thegn Byrnric in 956: Dumville, Wessex and England From Alfred to Edgar.
\item \textsuperscript{146} That was not unusual since abbesses who sign most Pre-Conquest charters are unidentified, in that normally their house is not named. Knowles, Heads of Religious Houses, 225.
\item \textsuperscript{147} Domesday does not list the landowner of St. Mary’s among the holders of “Hantescrire,” since it was assigned to the abbess, who also owned several estates: John Morris, Domesday Book (Chichester: Phillimore, 1975), no. 44, fol. 48b; Henry Moody, Hampshire in 1086: An Extension of the Latin Text, and an English Translation of the Domesday Book As Far As It Relates to Hampshire (Winchester: John T. Doswell, 1862), no. 44, fol. 48b.
\item \textsuperscript{148} “Polhampton”: Domesday Book, 3,10,31.
\end{itemize}
the Elder in 899. This was not a unique land grant. Another example of this transfer of property by religious women appears in a charter that stipulated that Edward’s third wife, Eadgifu, donated the estates at Cooling to Christ Church, Canterbury in 960. Eadgifu had inherited the property from her father upon his death in battle in 902. Wulfstan must have been aware of this handover.

The Æthelthryth of Polhampton is also connected with Bedwyn, another royal female estate, and it is highly likely that she is also the nun of Nunnaminster to which Wulfstan refers. There is a logical link connecting the Æthelthryth of Bedwyn with Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth because Æthelthryth of Bedwyn appears in records identifying her with houses owned by the Wessex family. Property records indicate that Bedwyn was once in the possession of the Wessex family, an example of royal land passing into ecclesiastical hands. King Alfred’s will (879x888) refers to Bedwyn as part of his royal estate, and Æthelthryth is listed as a witness in the manumission of a woman connected

149 Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 671. Ker, Catalogue, 4-5; Harmer, Selected Historical Documents, 11; Sawyer, Charters, no. 1507. Text published in Merritt, “Old English Entries”; Sweet, The Oldest English Texts, 427, no. 3. By the early ninth century, Eadmund, Bishop of Winchester, exchanged Bedwyn for land at Farnham in Surrey. King Alfred’s Will (879x888) shows Bedwyn, a royal estate, bequeathed to his son and intended successor, Edward: Sawyer, Charters, no. 1507; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, 173-8, 313-26; Birch, Cartularium Saxonicum, no. 324; Sawyer, no. 1263. The land was still in royal hands in 1066: Morris, Domesday Book, no. 44, fol. 48b. Bedwyn was the site of a minster in the tenth century. Knowles and Hadcock, Medieval Religious Houses, 467; E. Critall and D.A. Crowly, “The Religious Houses of Wiltshire,” Institute of Historical Research (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 150-3; Dumville, Wessex, 83.


151 Bedwyn was the site of a minster in the tenth century: Knowles and Hadcock, Medieval Religious Houses, 467. The community at Bedwyn has been thought to include women only because a “nunne” witnessed the transaction: Dumville, Wessex, 83.


153 Sawyer, Charters, no. 1507.
with this ecclesiastical community.\textsuperscript{154} The testimony, recorded in a Gospel Book from the church of Bedwyn, was made in the presence of all the servants of God at Bedwyn in the early tenth century. That this Æthelthryth of Bedwyn was given oversight of the king’s property suggests that she had a leadership role within the nunnery and substantial prestige as well. Only those of the highest ranks in society presented their own arguments in legal disputes.\textsuperscript{155} Æthelthryth was responsible for the lives of women who lived in the lands they administered. She was a woman of high rank; many people acknowledged her authority, and she possessed solid legal rights and moral rectitude (this charter calls attention to Æthelthryth’s commitment to Christianity). As participant in one woman’s liberation, she displays her advocacy for the freedom of another woman, the welfare of family and household.

The Æthelthryth of Polhampton and Bedwyn appear connected by several coincidences to Nunnaminster. Their depiction in tenth-century historical records offers interesting points of comparison with Wulfstan’s character of the same name. If Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth was connected with the two different communities, her status would have enabled her to document her properties associated with the Wessex royal family and with Winchester. A further connection may provide an additional link between the Æthelthryth in the charters and the Winchester female house. This evidence is provided by the testimony regarding one house, written in a similar script to a

\textsuperscript{154} Bern, Burgerbiliothek, MS 671. The Old English text on 76v: “on…gewitnesse…ÆÐeldryþ þæere nunnan….on ealra þara Godes þeowa aet Bedewindam”: Dumville, Wessex, 79. “Nunnan” appears to have been used in reference to women religious who had remained in the world: Foot, Veiled Women II, 36-38. The noun “myncency” to describe cloistered women was not in use until the later tenth and eleventh centuries: Dumville, Wessex, 81-2.

manuscript associated with Nunnaminster.\textsuperscript{156} The existence of royal women literate and owning land presented a problem for Wulfstan. By omitting references to Nunnaminster and its community, Wulfstan redirected his readers away from the house’s own records. His audience was consequently left unaware of the connection between Æthelthryth and the house’s association with royal life. Compounding this obfuscation, neither Æthelthryth, Ealhswið, Edburga, nor Edith emerges as candidates able to upstage St. Æthelwold.

On the other hand, the existence of Bishop Æthelwold in Wulfstan’s version of events not only justified the goals of Reform but also co-opted the ties that comprised Nunnaminster’s efficacy, making Æthelthryth especially instrumental for those objectives to be pursued in the first place. Wulfstan’s portrayal of Æthelthryth contributed to the representation of women’s experiences as trivial to their character’s objectives within the imperatives of Reform. His attempt to remove any understanding of Æthelthryth as a real person was apparently successful. Although there is no evidence that Wulfstan destroyed any evidence, no record contemporary to Wulfstan’s text attests to a nun named Æthelthryth at Nunnaminster.

\textsuperscript{156} Bedwyn, BL Cotton Charter viii.4, is written in a similar type as the first hand of Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.15.33. This MS is associated with the earliest specimens of Square miniscule, for instance hand 2 of the Parker Chronicle (CCCC 173, fos 1r-16r); H. L. Rogers, “The Oldest West-Saxon Text?” The Review of English Studies 32.127 (1981): 257-66; 265-6; Dumville, Wessex, 82-3. Hand 2 is also scribally linked to BL MS Harley 2965 (The Book of Nunnaminster). Parkes, “The Palaeography of the Parker Manuscript,” 156. Parkes has asserted that the hand which wrote fols. 16v-25v of Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is the same as the hand that wrote the will of thane Wulfgar (931x939), BL, Cotton Charter viii. 16b, who bequeathed land to three different religious houses—New Minster, Kintbury (Berkshire) and the Old Minster, and this scribe also wrote of the estate of Bedwyn. Parkes, “The Paleography,” 154.
H. Conclusion

Nunnaminster prospered during the tenth century despite a climate unfavorable to family ownership of monasteries in the center of the Reform Movement and despite the expectation of monastic reorganization. The rejection of “secularium prioratus” proclaimed in the RC did not undermine female family claims on Nunnaminster as royal women continued to lead the house. Nunnaminster’s secular prowess involved an accepted practice of inherited private property and literary acumen. These two strengths were united, bound together in a single source. The Book of Nunnaminster points directly to female royal organization and, not surprisingly, political shrewdness, essential resources for the property’s management and aptitude for ensuring the house’s continuity among its female family members. Nunnaminster, a not-so-silent testament to spiritual practice, also illustrates the inherited habit of recording such practices. Both the manuscript and the house served the Winchester religious female population and corresponded to the community’s history as a West Saxon royal house.

During the twelfth century, a manuscript written at Nunnaminster attests to the continued status of the religious women at the nunnery. A prayer in The Christmas Sermon, “De natale Domini,” reveals that the Winchester nuns viewed their status according to a royal distinction:

where there is neither honor nor rank nor any outward appearances but disdain for sinners with disgrace in the pit of the abyss in which sinners are ordered to be plunged, where there is punishment without honor, and neither king nor lord over slave, not the recognition of one’s neighbor, nor memory of goodness, nor a show
of respect.157

From this prayer we know that the women of Nunnaminster advocated for their royal autonomy well past the tenth century. These women were unmoving in their family affiliation. They were concerned with the honor and respect associated with an aristocratic afterlife without disgrace, conditioned to think of hell as a place characterized by the loss of honor, reputation and elevated social standing. The religious household maintained its royal head of family.

Nunnaminster also continued its literate tradition. The Christmas Sermon is included in a twelfth-century manuscript along with Diadem monachorum, the only known copy to have come from a nunnery in England or on the Continent. This manuscript is uncharacteristic of the kind of books read by nuns.158 Diadem monachorum stipulates the monastic custom to read the rule at chapter each morning, with prescribed communal readings at collation every evening.159 The Nunnaminster scribe responsible for copying the text is the only English female religious known to have identified herself in a colophon: “May the scriptrix remain forever safe and unharmed.”160 She also rubricated and decorated the manuscript and added a genealogical note about St. Edburga


158 Hall, “Preaching at Winchester in the Early Twelfth Century,” 197.

159 Evidently this book was intended for public reading (fols. 95-96v) since it was written in quarto size (290 x 185mm) and large clear type: Robinson, “A Twelfth-Century Scriptrix from Nunnaminster,” 76-77.

in additional entries.¹⁶¹ This suggests the presence of at least two other Nunnaminster scribes.¹⁶² Evidently, Wulfstan could not prevent the perpetuation of a literate female dynasty at Nunnaminster, who were responsible for the spiritual and physical well being of its house.

Through his position as writer, Wulfstan could avoid issues contradictory to female religious endowment: royal association and literacy. These omissions would, however, restrict her clear connection with Winchester’s abundance. But the reality of Nunnaminster was a threat to his text’s objectives, and Wulfstan was able to delimit the tenth-century women in the place he needed them to hold: holy and silent. But three manuscripts written after Wulfstan’s text preserve a tradition that differs in detail from that recorded by Wulfstan. In the first manuscript, Osbert says that Ealhswið appointed Æthelthryth as abbess.¹⁶³ The second is an account of St. Edburga, written during the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) and dated c.1280. Here, Æthelthryth is described as a royal child, from a royal progeny.¹⁶⁴ An historical introduction precedes the saint’s Life, linking the saint’s father with subsequent ruling Edwards. The third manuscript, the Hyde sanctorale (c.1292), asserts that Æthelthryth is descended from an illustrious royal family.¹⁶⁵ This sanctorale is a history of the abbey (Hyde), which was originally located

¹⁶³ Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 451. Osbert of Claire, Vita St. Eadburga, fol. 87v; Ridyard, The Royal Saints, 97.
¹⁶⁴ “Edeldrida…femina gloriosa ex regali progenie orta.” British Library, MS Egerton 1993, fols. 160-61. The Landsdowne Life of Eadburga. It is listed in Hardy, Descriptive Catalogue, no. 1147 and is printed by Laura Braswell, St. Edburga, 323, 325-9. This royal ancestry is absent from Osbert’s account, cf. Osbert, Vita St. Eadburga, fol. 88.
adjacent to Nunnaminster. All three descriptions are absent from the account in the *Vita St. Æthelwold*, attesting to the attempt by Wulfstan to elide Æthelthryth’s royal associations during the Benedictine Reform movement.

The rhetorical strategies of representation that kept Æthelthryth’s sanctity foremost saw her identity sublimated to accommodate larger ecclesiastical objectives. Æthelthryth’s close relationship with Æthelwold’s mother in the text enables Æthelthryth to exert an influential role on the secular community. This position was apparently privileged over any other consideration because of Æthelthryth’s virginal status. Through figural representation, female piety could be emphasized over the accomplishments associated with royal connections. Controlling women’s behavior effectively manipulated the knowledge surrounding Nunnaminster as a way of addressing the crisis of landholding and worldliness. The measure of Wulfstan’s success is traced to the attention he gave to Æthelthryth’s religious life in place of a portrayal of a woman with real-world concerns at the juncture of court and cloister.
I. Appendix A—The List

Only two Anglo-Saxon manuscripts have been previously traced to Nunnaminster: British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.ii/Cotton Galba A. xiv and British Library, MS Harley 2965.\textsuperscript{166} We now know from scholarship to date that sixteen extant manuscripts, ranging from the late eighth to the eleventh century, were produced or amended at Nunnaminster. The sources are principally N. R. Ker, Andrew G. Watson, Anne Clark Bartlett, David N. Bell, and Helmut Gneuss.\textsuperscript{167} The list is as follows:

1. British Library, MS Harley 2965, s.viii/iix (The Book of Nunnaminster)
2. British Library, MS Royal 2, A. xx, s.viii (The Royal Prayerbook)\textsuperscript{168}
3. British Library, MS Harley 7653, s.viii/iix (The Harley Prayerbook)\textsuperscript{169}
4. Cambridge University Library MS Li. I.10, s.ix (The Book of Cerne)\textsuperscript{170}
5. Cambridge, Corpus Christ College MS 173, fols. 1r-16r, s.x\textsuperscript{1} (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)\textsuperscript{171}
6. Cambridge, Trinity College MS 368, s.x\textsuperscript{1} (Isidore’s Etymologiae)\textsuperscript{172}
7. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 27, s.x\textsuperscript{1} (Junius Psalter)\textsuperscript{173}

\textsuperscript{166} Bell, What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries, 215-16.
\textsuperscript{168} The text of Royal 2.A.xx was published by Warren, Antiphonary, II, 99-102; Kuypers, Prayer Book of Aedeluald, 200-25; Alexander, Insular Manuscripts, no. 35 and ill. 133 (fol. 17r).
\textsuperscript{169} Lowe, Codices Latini Antiquiores A, II, nos. 215, 204; Æthelwald, A. B. Kuypers, and Edmund Bishop. The Prayer Book of Aedelhelm the Bishop. Commonly Called the Book of Cerne (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1972). So named because it is now bound with later materials relating to Cerne Abbas, Dorset, but there is no real evidence that the book was ever there.
\textsuperscript{171} Facsimiles in T.A.M. Bishop, “An Early Example of Square Minusculc,” Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society 4.3 (1966): 246-52, pls. xviii (a) and (b) and xix (b).
\textsuperscript{172} Facsimiles in E. Temple, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900-1066 (London: Harvey Miller, 1976), pls. 1, 20-4 and 25.
8. British Library, MS Add. 47967, s.x (The Tollemache Orosius)\(^{174}\)
9. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173, fols. 57-83, s.x (copy, works of Cælius Sedulius, now bound after The Laws of Alfred)\(^{175}\)
10-11. British Library, Cotton MSS Nero A.ii + Cotton Galba A.xiv, s.xi (prayerbook)\(^{176}\)
12-13. British Library, Cotton MSS Titus D. xxvi + Cotton MS Titus D. xxvii, s.xi (Ælfwine’s Prayerbook)\(^{177}\)
14. Cambridge, Corpus Christ College, MS 201, Part A, pp. 1-7, s.xi in. \(^{178}\)
[Old English translation of portions of the Regularis Concordia (RC) (British Library, MS Faustina B III, f. 159r-198r and British Library, MS Tiberius A III, f. 3-27)]
15. British Library, MS Royal 2.B.V, s.x med. (Gloss to the Regius Psalter)\(^{179}\)

Post Anglo-Saxon Period:

1. Paris Musée des Archives Nationales, MS 138, s.xii (Mortuary roll of Abbot Vitalis of Savigny)\(^{180}\)
2. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 451, 1120\(^{181}\) (A copy of Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel’s Diadema monachorum, two series of extracts from Isidore’s Sententiarum libri tres, eighteen sermons mainly by Caesarius of Arles)


\(^{175}\) Facsimiles in Bishop, “A Early Example,” pl. xix (a) and Parkes, “The Palaeography of the Parker manuscript,” pl. 25.


\(^{180}\) L. Delisle, Rouleau Mortuaire du B. Vital de Savigny (Paris, 1901); N.R. Ker, English MSS. In the Century After the Conquest (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960). Female signature from Nunnaminster was entered sometime between 1167 and 1170, 182, pl. 34.

3. “Sancte Marie Winton” catalogue entry by the English Franciscans in *Registrum Anglie de Libris Doctorum et Auctorum Veterum*, 1331 (39 Latin titles without dates)\(^{182}\)

4. MS Longleat 29; Lincoln Cathedral MS 91; Bodleian MS Eng.Th.c58 (An unnamed anchoress at Nunnaminster recorded a vision about another resident, Margaret in *A Revelation of Purgatory*), xv\(^{183}\)

5. The Romsey Psalter (Harley MS 2904), xv\(^{184}\)

6. The *Ordo consecrationis santimonialium* (Cambridge University Library, MS Mm.3.13)\(^{185}\)

This list of manuscripts associated with Nunnaminster represents a revised impression of the community.\(^{186}\)

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182 The list includes fourteen works by Augustine and ps.-Augustine, the *Registrum* of Gregory the Great, four works by Ambrose, Hilary’s *De Trinitate*, three commentaries by Jerome and ps.-Jerome (on the Psalter, Isaiah, and Matthew), Bede on Luke and the Apocalypse, Isidore’s *De fide catholica contra Judaeos*, the *De cruce* of Rabanus Maurus, the *Contra Arianos, Sabellianos*. Photinius’ dialogues attributed to Athanasius, but actually by Vigilius of Thapsus, Cyrprian’s letters, the *De corpore et sanguine Domini* of Paschasius Radbertus, Eusebius’s *Historia ecclesiastica* translated by Rufinus, a collection of homilies by (probably) Haimo of Auxerre four works by Anselm and ps.-Anselm of Canterbury, the letters of Ivo of Chartres, Alcuin’s *De fide cantae Trinitatis* and a treatise *De officiis divinis* attributed incorrectly to Peter Damian, which might be the work of this title usually attributed (equally incorrectly) to Alcuin. *Registrum Anglie de Libris Doctorum et Auctorum Veterum*, eds. R.H. and M.A. Rouse, *Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogue*, 2 (1991), 264.


186 Few books that pre-date the twelfth century can be shown to have belonged to any female foundation, even the earlier ones. Barking is credited with an eleventh-century Gospel book (Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 155), Shaftesbury with a late-tenth-century psalter (Salisbury Cathedral Library, MS 150). Twelfth-century volumes from female houses have survived from Barking: *Vitae Sanctorum* and a Song of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud lat. 19. Robinson, *A Twelfth-Century Scriptix from Nunnaminster*, 75.
CHAPTER IV

NUTRIX

Just as the body is nourished with food, the spirit is nourished with holy doctrine. Therefore, whoever can, ought to do both: extend to the pauper what he lacks with a generous hand, and refresh the hungry soul with health-giving admonition.

—Alcuin (735-804)

A. Introduction

Alcuin describes the abbess’s responsibility to provide her community with necessary nourishment as an extension of charity. Nourishment is understood as food for the soul as well as for the body, all in the service of delivering pastoral care. In Wulfstan’s Vita St. Æthelwoldi, Æthelthryth is depicted as a nurse (“nutrix”). She becomes the dominant figure in providing care not only for her nunnery but also for the greater Winchester female community, which underscores the wide range of roles that medieval nuns held. As nun and nurse, Æthelthryth was responsible for both the physical and spiritual health of her charges. Since Æthelthryth cares for Bishop Æthelwold’s pregnant mother (chapter 2), Æthelthryth’s healing demonstrates the bond between female communities. Her interaction with the wider female Winchester population is vitally important, as it illustrates her prestige as a care-giving holy woman. The absorption of sanctity by the mother—portrayed in Wulfstan’s text as living outside the cloister—implies that the depiction of Æthelthryth as “nutrix” was a preoccupation of both Wulfstan and Æthelwold. Æthelwold’s mother benefits from the bestowal of holiness because of her interaction with Æthelthryth, holiness that was both contagious

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and captivating. The corresponding picture of Nunnaminster as a broad-ranging curative environment enlarges our understanding of its community that likewise ministered to the female community at large.

In this chapter I trace Æthelthryth’s depiction as “nutrix” and illustrate the term’s treasured quality. The representation of Æthelthryth as administering healthful benefits to the female community resonated for Wulfstan’s readers, who were concerned with the efficacy of female monastic life. The figural meanings of nutrix on which that representation was grounded draw on a rich tradition of ancient sources that treat the character of the female healer. This tradition, with its consistent and effective set of associations for nutrix, was available to Anglo-Saxon writers, as their texts reveal. The figural quality of nutrix is, at its essence, the ability and inclination to nurture. The broad definition of the term nutrix discussed here points to its multiple connotations. “Nutrix” means a “nurse, wet nurse,” “female nurse,” “healing” or “medicine” of God.² In a figural sense, the term describes someone who demonstrates love.³ She is called a “nurse” because she has breasts (“nutrices”) from which infants nurse⁴; she has mammary glands⁵

and breastfeeds and offers milk; she could be a foster nurse. “Nutrix” is associated with spiritual healing, on the one hand, and the body, on the other; the two meanings are intrinsically bound together. The term’s varied implications combine to form an overall impression of religious women who were esteemed for providing wide-ranging care to their communities.

The first section of this chapter presents a close reading of the word “nutrix” and traces its usage in a variety of texts and characters known to the Winchester community at the time Wulfstan was writing his *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*. The goal is to afford a deeper understanding of the term to profile Æthelthryth’s role in the text. The second section demonstrates how we currently understand the medieval female healer and how this healer would have been valued during the tenth century. Overall, how was women’s health attended to female religious communities during the Anglo-Saxon period? Who were these monastic caretakers of women? It is generally assumed that medieval medical knowledge was largely confined either to monasteries with access to written sources or to local people who derived their treatment from folk traditions. These practices are considered discrete realms. In addition, the practice of women caretaking other women during this period is believed to be limited to assistance with pregnancy. As I hope will prove clear, religious women, in fact, used both medical knowledge as well as traditional cures to treat their female patients, and these patients needed medical assistance at many points in their lives: these women’s medical practices were not limited to midwifery.

Medieval texts make clear that practicing medicine was important to Anglo-Saxon

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religious women. Other texts with Greek, Roman, North African and Byzantine origins in England at this time also evince widespread interest in medicine. This history of textual transmission contributed to the understanding of nutrix as corresponding to women’s activities in religious houses.

As mentioned, “nursing” had spiritual as well as medical connotations. That religious women attended to the care of souls as well as bodies leads to the last section, where I point to Nunnaminster’s interest in nursing the larger community. How were medical and spiritual treatment provided at this house and in what way were they considered a civic and spiritual benefit? Therapeutic support was evidently part of a long-standing, valued custom at Nunnaminster. Earlier depictions of the role of nursing in religious communities greatly influenced female religious practice through the late Anglo-Saxon period. These characteristics associated with nursing imply the significance of women tending to women: women’s bodies, children, and the care of their female household. Monastic women also tended to the larger female spiritual family in the outside community, including laywomen who visited them with the intention of receiving a wide-ranging form of care.

The long tradition of female care extends back to Roman times. Caregivers of religious communities inherited these practices and took on the role of nurse by providing lay women with shelter within their homes. The term “nutrix” consequently became attached to the nunneries. The focal point in the community remained of critical importance regardless of shifting periods. Women leaders, called “nutrix,” were

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frequently assigned the responsibility of protecting important members of the female population. The folk practice of honoring Vesta, the goddess of the hearth, specifically referred to Vestal Virgins: young women (virgins) who were caretakers, guardians of the flame.\textsuperscript{10} Women were healed in a home-like environment through spiritual help. From the early Roman period, nursing became a domestic ritual. Dedication to the cure of souls was provided in the form of laying hands on women and praying in a family setting. Although “nutrix” implied spiritual care, the term expanded to include the care of the body in Christian as well as Roman literature, where nurses were represented providing care for the mother and her baby. This role included responsibility for many aspects of neonatal care: the mother’s pregnancy, post-partum periods, as well as the baby’s health.

“Nutrices” suckle and nourish; they are also described as wet-nurses and as caring as a child’s nurse.\textsuperscript{11} Descriptions of an ideal nurse’s physical and moral attributes reveal the common social practice of nursing as standing in for the mother. The nurse had to simulate the mother’s good health,\textsuperscript{12} since she should resemble the mother as best she could,\textsuperscript{13} caring for both mother and child.

The early Church provided a model for dedication to a life of holistic care by which the patient becomes an enlightened teacher, a paradigm that repeats in many

\textsuperscript{10} “uirgines perpetui nutrices et conseroatrices ignis”: Arnobius, \textit{Adversus Nationes} 4, 35 in E. Forcellini, \textit{Lexicon Totius Latinitatis, Database of Latin Dictionaries}, \url{www.lib.umich.edu/database/database-latin-dictionaries}.


\textsuperscript{12} Monica Green, “The Transmission of Ancient Theories of Female Physiology and Disease through the Early Middle Ages” (PhD diss. Princeton University, 1985), ch. 3.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Aldobrandina’s Régime du Corps}, eds. Louis Landaus and Roger Pépin (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1978), 76.
sources. The tradition of monastic care offered by St. Benedict (480-543) is an illustration of this precept. St. Benedict, who contributed more than anyone to monasticism in the West, founded the monastic community in Nursia. The place name, Nursia, indicates the valuable association with nursing the community. Coincidentally, another religious man who helped shape Western Christianity, St. Boniface (c.675-5 June 754), received theological training at the Benedictine monastery and minster of “Nursling” (“Nhutschelle” c.686) who benefited from the “love of spiritual learning.” St. Boniface was a leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon mission to Germany during the eighth century, and Nursling, the earliest Benedictine house in Wessex, was located a few miles south of Winchester. St. Benedict transmitted the archetype of nursing to Anglo-Saxon England. His Benedictine Rule, containing the principles his monks would follow, was the foundational document for religious communities throughout the Middle Ages. Canon 22 states that the soul conditions the health or sickness of the body.\textsuperscript{14} St. Benedict believed that nursing provided both spiritual and physical attention, which was a sacred science grounded in spiritual beliefs, with the caring–healing nurse–patient relationship based on God’s laws of nature. In the Rule, nursing is associated with “senpectae,” which refers to the spiritual physician who cured souls by using poultices to draw out illness (Matthew, IV, 12).\textsuperscript{15} As a further example of nursing and the model behind it, St. Gregory of Nyssa’s (c.335-c.395) Song of Songs depicts the physician assisting a pregnant woman with prayer,\textsuperscript{16} prefiguring St. Benedict’s metaphor of healing.

\textsuperscript{14} Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages, eds. Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler, York Studies in Medieval Theology (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 91-134.


The relationship between the scripture of “doctors” and the language of nursing by caring for mothers is evident in Roman Latin and medieval texts. People labeled with the term “doctor” embraced the responsibilities of clerical care. The term “nurse,” associated with the qualities of healing and nurturing, was hence directly connected with monastic communities. Maternal imagery describing nutrix appears in connection with the authority of religious communities and through the language of parenting and maternal imagery. Piety had the potential for amalgamation with nutrix because holiness was achieved by a nurturing alliance.

Religious supervision by early medieval theologians is depicted through the role of caregiver, often described in terms of fertility, fecundity and nursing. Holy men appear to be both “doctors” and “breasts.” The “doctors” become the conduit through which nourishment can enter the body in the form of milk: religious leaders provide maternal care. The commentary on the Benedictine Rule by Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel (c.760–c.840) notes that an abbot should be both father and mother to his monks, “And those to whom he offers the breasts of the mother to such, he holds under the discipline of a father.”¹⁷ Writers saw leaders of the Church as both recipients and providers of the milk of scripture from the “doctors,” suggesting that the ecclesiastical elite found maternal language compelling as a way to ascribe female qualities to their spiritual healers. The breasts of the Bride are likened with the “doctors” of the church. The “doctors” imitated the function of the breasts of Christ for the sake of consoling the weak and providing

them with sustenance.\textsuperscript{18} The neck of the Bride also signified the mediative role of the “doctors,” linking the head, Christ, with the remaining members of his body in a literal and tangible sense. Bede describes the milk of Christ as sweeter than the old wine in the Old Testament (citing Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and 1 Peter, Gregory the Great’s \textit{Moralia in Job}).\textsuperscript{19} The ministry of the “doctors,” Bede says, is the conduit when the spirit enters the body; for Haimo of Auxerre (d.c.865), the voice of the preacher doctor is like the throat that takes the sustenance of the word and conveys it to nourish the body.\textsuperscript{20} In the \textit{Life of Adalhard}, Paschasius uses maternal language to evoke ministry. For we are mindful, Paschasius writes, “of the breasts with which you nursed us; indeed; how great was the divine word of God we enjoyed in you…and we were nourished by the innards of your charity.”\textsuperscript{21} Paschasius also advances the maternal image of the nurturing figure in his commentary on Lamentations: “When the church observes those advancing on the royal way to the fatherland, pregnant because she nurtures and begets her sons...And this virgin spouse of Christ—the mother of all of us, because she bears and produces,


\textsuperscript{19} “Sed nec ipse sponsus, id est dominus noster, sexus feminei figuram in se transferre refugit cum per Esaiam dicit: Numquid ego qui alios parere facio ipse non pariam, dicit dominus, si ego qui generationem ceteris tribuo sterilis ero? et iterum: Quo modo si cui mater blanditur ita ego consolabor uos; et in euangelio ad ciuitatem incredulam: Quoties uolui congregare filios tuos quemadmodum gallina congregat pullos suos sub alat et noluisti”: Bede, \textit{In Cantica} 1.1, lines 47-135.


\textsuperscript{21} “Recordamur enim quibus nos lactabas uberibus, vel quanto in te Dei fruebamur oraculo, quantisque ferebamur alarum remigiis, et nutriebamur charitatis visceribus”: Paschasius Radbertus, \textit{Vita Adalhardi} 71, in J.-P Migne, \textit{Patrologia Latina} (1884), 120:1543D-01544A.
nourishes and gives milk.”

Holy men draw on their teachings to nourish “outside,” or for the lay community. These “doctors” are also gatekeepers of the monastery, supporting the house of the Bride and Bridegroom. Early medieval interpretation of the “Song of Songs” contained within itself the model of the maternal “doctor” or “teacher” of the church. The comparison of “doctors,” or saints of importance, to female attributes of Christ indicates their valued skills to nurture their flock.

Bede applied the term “doctors” (Latin “doctores”) to the spiritual elite. In the *Ecclesiastical History*, monks and bishops were understood to reside under this category, but the term was broad enough to include all those responsible for pastoral care. Bede asserts that the abbess was responsible for medical treatment, and describes her as leaving the monastery at night when a visitor is sick. The “nutrix” and the “doctor” both enrich the religious community. An early Anglo-Saxon monastic house, Whitby, was described as “the nursery of Bishops” because Abbess Hild (657-680) was devoted to teaching and dedicated to the performance of good works. St. Hild’s portrayal followed the example of nourishing sanctity, which became associated with Anglo-Saxon monastic life.


26 Bede, *HE*, III.xi, 149.

27 Bede, *HE*, IV.iii, 23.
The representation of Æthelthryth as pious nurturer drew from these accounts of nursing to ensure women’s comprehensive well-being. The role of “nutrix” in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi emphasizes the nutritive aspects of Æthelthryth’s ministry at Nunnaminster. Æthelthryth’s care of Æthelwold’s mother is important for her house’s standing in Winchester. Æthelwold’s mother was a person of status, a prominent member of her community, and her visit to Nunnaminster enriched the monastic house’s reputation. The mother carries within her womb the future Bishop of Winchester and is herself of noble parentage.²⁸ The esteem which Æthelthryth is accorded through the value of her care is thus elevated throughout the city. Æthelthryth’s skills were considered of great worth since the mother went directly to Æthelthryth in search of comfort.

Wulfstan is not alone in depicting Nunnaminster as providing nourishing care for both lay and monastic alike. Texts used by the Nunnaminster community also indicate the community was caring for the larger Winchester’s female population, and a combination of therapies was available to them. Nurturing women were modeled after divine or saintly figures, especially Christ, in providing care to their communities.²⁹ Religious women mirrored and were marked by the language of nursing in responsibly discharging their role by word and moral example, using bodily points of reference in order to effect remedy. The Church, in female form, dispensed treatment for her community, which in turn provided women and their charges with nurturing communities.

²⁹ Eleanor Irwin, “The Invention of Virginity on Olympus,” in Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body, eds. Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Kate Cooper, “‘Only Virgins Can Give Birth to Christ’: The Virgin Mary and the Problem of Female Authority in Late Antiquity,” eds. Bonnie MacLaghlan and Judith Fletcher, Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 107).
Nuns opened their monasteries to the female sick and needy; they maintained health-care ties to women in the outside community. Visiting a nunnery was potentially the equivalent of calling a midwife. Pregnant women from the lay community might visit nuns, because women often died in childbirth during this time and the monastery might seem a safer alternative to giving birth at home. Religious women would also have been a source of comfort for a pregnant visitor, as Æthelthryth was in addressing Æthelwold’s mother’s concerns. Nuns healed women through the practice of prayer. Also, as the care for the soul was believed to have bodily effects, physical infirmity may have induced a pregnant woman to visit a monastic house.

What Æthelthryth illustrates in her role in Wulfstan’s text dovetails with female religious life in general at this time, but she was not an isolated character, and people from the lay and religious communities respected and admired the abilities of a nutrix. They may have been perceived as healing specialists, a practice documented in sources associated with specific nunneries. Medical care and skills came largely from clerical environments. Religious women acted as physicians, serving as midwives in their monasteries. The treatment of women for a variety of concerns was evidently part of Anglo-Saxon monastic life because remedy included both spiritual and physical consolation.

32 Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 19-20, 22.
B. Tracing *Nutrix* to Mary

The figural quality of nutrix was important to Anglo-Saxon writers who wanted to depict Mary as nourishing mother, virgin, and saint. As the most important figure in sacred history, Mary was an example for all to follow. The significance of Mary in Christian tradition from the second century cannot be overestimated. Mary had a specialized knowledge of divine power, and men as well as women were influenced by her depiction. Writers incorporated portrayals of Mary’s life into their works from the time of her Son’s miraculous birth to subsequent female saints who were inspired by her. Mary’s depiction as the ideal mother was an appealing quality for portraying religious women who were involved with female nurturing. Curative devotion is attributed to Mary’s social and religious roles as well as her physical role as bearer of humanity. She remains the privileged protector and a fitting healer helping women during birth. These roles contribute to the impression of her nobler duties. Healing, specifically nursing, was adopted from Mary’s image as an appealing role of Anglo-Saxon female monastic life.

The divine family is associated with Mary as healer. Mary’s healing abilities benefit her spiritual family because she is employed as proof of holiness. She is thus a model to be emulated. Holy women in saints’ lives were drawn from the depiction of Mary, and the healing monastic woman further extended her association with the mother of God. Religious women frequently figured themselves as nurses to the child Christ, thereby linking to Mary. They healed others by a ritual sequence of prayer, laying on of hands, and the sign of the Cross and blessing, which were practical and symbolic.

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emblems of nourishment. The spiritual nourishment that Christ provides was also available for the worshipper through those ministrations. In canonical accounts of Christ’s birth, midwives often appear in Nativity scenes testifying to Mary’s virginity. The identification with Mary provides religious women with a vital connection to intercessory powers emanating from Mary’s womb. As spouse, Mary represents the marriage of the divine and human in relation to Christ and the Church.

During the fourth and fifth centuries, the cult of Mary developed into a source of Christian devotion. The images of the early Church constructed an order of nourishing intercession, in which Mary held a primary role. The New Testament describes St. Luke, one of the evangelists, as a physician. St. Luke’s role was a nurturer, influenced by the Mother of God. He recounted the story of Christmas Day in “The Song of Simeon.” As the founder of the Greek monastery, Hosios Loukas, Luke was the miraculous doctor at the center of a healing cult. His relics worked many miraculous cures. The prayers of Luke were deemed beneficial because of his special closeness to God; he found a chosen devotion won by asceticism. At the shrine of the saint, Luke and the Virgin interceded with Christ on behalf of the supplicant, which rendered their intervention effective. An exemplum of virginity, Mary was important for Anglo-Saxon religious women to emulate.


C. Anglo-Saxon Depictions of Nutrix

During the Anglo-Saxon period, Mary was venerated. Brigid of Kildare, Abbess c.443-525, has been called “another Mary” or “Mary of the Hibernians” (Irish). Brigid founded the monastery of Kildare in Ireland, where she continued the evangelized activity of St. Patrick. Like Mary, Brigid was a compassionate woman. Her miracle of producing three times the amount of milk from one cow was interpreted and hailed as protecting women in childbirth.\(^37\) In the *Vita St. Balthildis* (c.679), written as a guide for her fellow community by a nun at the monastery Chelles (f. 658), the author stressed the motherly aspects of Queen Balthild (d.680),\(^38\) an Anglo-Saxon aristocrat and wife of King Clovis (639–657/658).\(^39\) The queen was celebrated as a peacemaker and monastic founder, depicted as “optima nutrix.” Balthild capably looked after the young men in her court and as a pious nurse, “pia nutrix”, treated the poor.\(^40\) She was depicted with royal and religious importance as a “queen-saint.”\(^41\) In this case, “nutrix” is peacemaker, monastic founder and caretaker.

St. Boniface (672x675-764), a leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon mission to Francia, also depicted “nutrix” as an expression of the ideal virgin: St. Boniface described how Abbess Edburga’s (d.751) fellow nun, Withburga, “was nursed at the

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\(^{40}\) *Vita S. Balthildis 4*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Script. 2, 486 in *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister*, 22, no. 69.

same mother’s breast.” Aldhelm (c.639–25 May 709) also employed the term “nutrix” to correspond with a larger sense of monastic obligation. When Aldhelm wrote to the abbots about their leader, he portrayed the saint and bishop, Wilfred, as a spiritual mother. In Aldhelm’s letter, Wilfred is depicted metaphorically nursing his spiritual community with his breast, thereby nourishing his flock as a wet nurse would her children. Expanding the metaphor for religious houses, Aldhelm quotes Gregory’s Dialogues, recounting Benedict’s story of two religious women who are forgiven the sin of slanderous words. Following their deaths, the women’s old nurse, or “nutrix,” regularly made an offering for them. By depicting the role of nurse as spiritual mother, Aldhelm encouraged dedication to religious life.

The association between Mary and religious women continued through the late tenth century with Mary seen as a principle patron of monastic renewal: her growing popularity coincided with the height of the Benedictine Reform Movement. At the time Wulfstan was writing about Æthelthryth, a cult dedicated to Mary was emerging in Winchester. Writers were praising Mary: Ælfric (c.955–c.1010) wrote five Marian homilies focusing on Mary’s virginity and her role in the Church. Under “de Sancta

45 In Ælfric’s version, however, the nurse is excised; instead, the woman emerges from their graves “on manna gesihum”, “in the sight of the men/people”: Ælfric, Catholic Homilies II, 11, 102, 1. 360.
Virginitate,” Ælfric profiled the merits of chastity alongside Mary’s role as intercessor.47 As an illustration of perpetual significance, Anselm of Lucca’s (1036-86) prayers depict Mary as nurturer of Christ.

The Anglo-Saxon intellectual framework of the study of “nutrix” thus far illustrates how the term’s understanding slowly accumulated meaning. The period’s story of the female nurse draws from the term’s origins, based on the union of meaning: the analogical identification of nursing a group of women religious with a mother nursing her young was conflated with and informed by the powerful virgin figure of Mary. The image of St. Æthelthryth, the seventh-century abbess, drew from these references, with Wulfstan’s character Æthelthryth thus benefiting from the collected reminiscences of the earlier female saint. Nutrix’s literary progression is seen in the representation of the highly valued symbol of fruitfulness, St. Æthelthryth, who models her qualities for Æthelthryth’s depiction in Wulfstan’s text.

D. St. Æthelthryth: Spirituality and Nutrix

Wulfstan’s character Æthelthryth is associated with St. Æthelthryth (d.679),48 the latter figure having been already prominently portrayed both in writings known to St. Æthelwold’s biographer and the wider Reform community. According to Virginia

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47 “Uton biddan nu þæt eadige and þæt gesælige mãden Marian, þæt heo us geðingige to hyre agenum Suna and to hire Scyppende, Hælende Christe, seðe gewylt ealra ðinga mid Fæder and mid þam Halgum Gaste á on ecnysse.” “Let us now pray the blessed and happy Virgin Mary, that she intercede for us to her own Son and Creator, Jesus Christ, who governs all things with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever to eternity”: ed. and trans. Benjamin Thorpe, Ælfric’s The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part Containing the Sermones Catholici, or Homilies of Aelfric in the Original Anglo-Saxon, with an English Version (1844; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1983), 204-5.

48 Æthelthryth had been Queen of Northumbria previously as the first wife of King Ecgfrith (670-685): Bede, HE, IV, 19-20; Barbara Yorke, “‘Sisters under the Skin?’ Anglo-Saxon Nuns and Nunneries in Southern England,” in Medieval Women in Southern England (Reading: Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Reading, 1989).18.
Blanton and Mechtild Gretsch, St. Æthelthryth was a symbol of holiness throughout the Middle Ages. Wulfstan’s depiction of Æthelthryth utilizes St. Æthelthryth of Ely’s portrait from numerous texts read during the Anglo-Saxon period: the saint was a model for Æthelthryth’s depiction as “nutrix.” Æthelthryth was written into Reform propaganda, which also enhanced St. Æthelthryth’s cult status. St. Æthelthryth as a source for Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth has not been documented heretofore, yet the association between Nunnaminster’s female character and the early female abbess is a significant one because it illustrates how the portrayal of one religious woman was adapted from that of another. The connection between these two religious women offers an understanding of the female devout in Winchester and the link between Ely and Nunnaminster. The Benedictine Reforms enlisted St. Æthelthryth’s virtues, which were drawn from her earlier portraits. St. Æthelthryth was undoubtedly suitable for the Reformers’ objectives because the cult of St. Æthelthryth persisted in Winchester due to the saint’s importance as a model of sanctity in female religious life. By laying claim to her, writers illustrated that the Church was concerned with similar spiritual concerns such as those during an earlier period in Anglo-Saxon history.

St. Æthelthryth was an instrument in the Reformers’ plans for female monastic virtue in Winchester’s only female religious house. Her depiction and Nunnaminster were both central to ecclesiastical Reforms as models of strict adherence to a devout way of life. Ely was originally a double house (male and female houses ruled over by an abbess), subsequently female only, and finally renewed as male during the tenth century. Ely,

however, needed its association with its foundress in order to maintain its long-standing significance and to bolster its reputation and replenish its community. It had been destroyed by Viking raiders in late 900s and was in the process of being re-founded by Edgar and Æthelwold as part of their monastic rebuilding program. While St. Æthelthryth’s enduring fame produced a faithful Benedictine foundation at Ely, Winchester’s Æthelthryth promoted a new Benedictine purity at Nunnaminster. The strength of ties between the two figures is illustrated in their relationship with Bishop Æthelwold. Referring to Æthelwold’s visual depiction of Ely and St. Æthelthryth, Robert Deshman asserts: “[Æthelwold] sought to place his pious restoration of the famed old monastery [Ely] with its relics of the illustrious sainted abbess [St. Æthelthryth] in the same light as his renewal of the Nunnaminster.”

This relationship between St. Æthelthryth and Ely is symbiotic and essentially female since sexual abstinence and sanctity itself were equivalent during the Anglo-Saxon period. Ely’s reputation was a consequence of St. Æthelthryth’s virginal status, her representation connected to the concern for the house’s monastic sovereignty. The connection between chastity and Christianity was central to reform objectives because the female body was a symbol of the inviolability of monastic space. By celebrating Æthelthryth’s sanctity, and by reference, St. Æthelthryth’s, Wulfstan brought glory to the renewed Ely and Nunnaminster.


St. Æthelthryth’s appeal captured the interest of religious women because she occupied various important roles, such as royal wife and then abbess. These roles associated St. Æthelthryth with the royal East Anglian family; she was a princess who maintained her virginity through two marriages; her phenomenal rejuvenation after death was a testament to her purity; and not least importantly, she was founder of the religious house at Ely (672/3). To Elaine Treharne, St. Æthelthryth’s portrait resulted in the narrowing definition of holy women to holy virgins. Based on inherited lore, while Abbess at Ely until her death, St. Æthelthryth was responsible for several miracles, attesting to her holiness. The story of a queen preserving her chastity as a sign of her devotion to God as well as establishing an important monastery propelled her to cult status, renowned as the only native female virgin saint in England. St. Æthelthryth’s model of virtue was applied throughout the Anglo-Saxon period to nuns like Æthelthryth and to religious houses like Nunnaminster. The two women’s affinities are due not only to their shared name but also to their figurative partnership. St. Æthelthryth, in particular, was a suitable model because she was esteemed in monastic communities due to her fiercely protected virginity. Like many saints, St. Æthelthryth’s high status was associated with her religious devotion, which extended her role as a model worthy of emulation into the tenth century.

54 Little information exists about the spiritual life at Ely during the period between St. Æthelthryth’s translation in 695 and the re-founding of the monastery by Æthelwold c.970. There is also scant evidence for St. Æthelthryth while she was the abbess at Ely: Gretsch, Ælfric and the Cult of Saints, 197-8, 200.
Those dedicated to Benedictine renewal incorporated St. Æthelthryth’s depiction as queen, virgin, abbess, saint and founder of a prominent monastic house to advance their causes. Reformers were committed to principles of monastic restructuring, and the early saint offered an ideal vehicle for revival because she embodied courage, inviolability, and regeneration. Robert Deshman calls St. Æthelthryth the ideal symbol of the movement because she embodies renewal; she was, according to Michael Lapidge, an emerging figure for Winchester’s tenth-century monastic efforts. St. Æthelthryth, John Black says, is the “locus of transformative power,” valuable for depicting the enduring faith of the English people and necessary for the promotion of renewed religious life in Winchester. In Cynthia Turner Camp’s estimation, St. Æthelthryth “grafts” onto the objectives of other writers and audiences because her descriptions attest to an actual life. Of significance is Wulfstan’s use of St. Æthelthryth vis-à-vis Nunnaminster: Wulfstan employs St. Æthelthryth to highlight the spiritual history of England during the seventh century, making Nunnaminster the new promoter of the Church’s efforts during the tenth. Retrieving St. Æthelthryth’s earlier portrait reshapes her legacy to suit his present objective. Æthelthryth, in her tenth-century devotion to monastic life, mirrors St. Æthelthryth’s seventh-century virtues.

Anglo-Saxon nuns were written about in ways that emphasized virginity, humility, piety and self-denial, and St. Æthelthryth’s depiction implied a concern with

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58 Camp uses the term “graft” to describe the use of Edith in the “Wilton Chronicle” in her Anglo-Saxon Lives, ch. 1.
sanctity: her quality of “miraculous power” is connected with her steadfastness and nourishing spirituality. These virtues were emphasized in the narrative tradition of the “virgin mother.”\(^{59}\) St. Æthelthryth’s holiness was drawn from beliefs about Mary, her curative powers situating her within a virgin/mother-figure context. This association demonstrates their shared association with “nutrix,” whereby chastity links St. Æthelthryth with Mary’s image through the depiction of fruitfulness. Aldhelm made this association with Mary when he wrote to the nuns at Barking.\(^{60}\) He connected the religious women’s noble promise to be chaste with Christ’s mother and praised their sanctity through these good works. Aldhelm’s appeal was a model for Bede, who profiled St. Æthelthryth’s association with the Virgin. It is no wonder that St. Æthelthryth became a compelling image of motherhood throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.\(^{61}\)

St. Æthelthryth was associated directly with the mother of Jesus, and her image was often paired with the Virgin and Child. The “Hymn” in Bede’s Book of the Abbess links St. Æthelthryth with Mary by illustrating their alliance as the “perfect female” singing in the choir of virgins.\(^{62}\) St. Æthelthryth’s qualities, modeled after Mary’s image, contributed to her rebirth as a Winchester Reformist icon. In the Benedictional of Æthelwold’s “Nativity,” the Christ child, held by his mother, is represented with the nurse, who is witness to the scene.\(^{63}\) The crib symbolizes the altar and the ecclesiastical

\(^{59}\) John Black, “‘Nutria Pia,’” in Szarmach, ed., Writing Women, 169.

\(^{60}\) Aldhelm Malmesbiriensis Prosa de Virginitate Cum Glosa Latina Qtque Anglo-Aaxonica, ed. Scott Gwara, CCSL 124 (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2001), 163, 175, 223; Aldhelm Prose Works, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, 70-1, 76.

\(^{61}\) Blanton, Signs of Devotion, 245.

\(^{62}\) Black, “Nutrix pia,” 175.

\(^{63}\) Deshman, The Benedictional of St. Æthelwoldi, fol. 34v, 20.
The “Choir of Virgins” sings God’s praises, and the lush border of stylized acanthus, surrounding the page, is a representation of regeneration. Here, St. Æthelthryth and Mary are the only virgins identified by name and distinguished by their position in the foreground. One image features St. Æthelthryth facing Christ. The Benedictional illustrates how monastic reforms enlisted the efficacious virtues of Mary to promote St. Æthelthryth.

Tenth-century interest in St. Æthelthryth contributed to a sustained and ardent Anglo-Saxon hagiographical tradition. Despite Mechtilde Gretsch’s assertion that no previous knowledge of medieval hagiography about St. Æthelthryth was available in the mid-990s, numerous texts glorified her and point to a tenth-century interest in her. St. Æthelthryth’s seventh-century portrayal from earlier Anglo-Saxon texts and images reveal how her cult was contemporary and useful to Wulfstan. Writers such as Bede and Aldhelm were widely studied in Winchester during the tenth century, and Wulfstan had access to Winchester’s extensive libraries where these texts were held. St. Æthelthryth was described in Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica (HE c.731) and De Temporum Ratione

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64 Deshman, The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold, 21.
65 Fol. 2r, itself reminiscent of her image on previous pages, fols. 2r and 90v: Deshman, The Benedictional of St Æthelwold, 4, fols. 170, 252.
66 Gretsch, Ælfric and the Cult of Saints, 17; Deshman, The Benedictional of Æthelwold, 151.
67 Deshman, The Benedictional of Æthelwold, fol. 90v.
68 Deshman, The Benedictional of Æthelwold, 195.
which were Wulfstan’s principal sources for St. Æthelthryth. Bede’s account of the life of St. Æthelthryth was one of Winchester’s greatest inspirations, as this saint was an important figure of conversion and veneration in the Anglo-Saxon church: while at Ely, St. Æthelthryth developed an enclosed space of meditation and ecclesiastical service that drew other virgins. St. Æthelthryth, an East Anglian princess, was the first royal Saxon woman to enter the religious life, and she served as a textual prototype for Anglo-Saxon female religious. St. Æthelthryth’s portrayal was translated in the Old English Bede (OEHE c.890x930). Aldhelm also described St. Æthelthryth in glowing terms. Bede drew from these earlier depictions of monastic life, and he used these portraits as models for his work. He also obtained his information of St. Æthelthryth from Stephanus’ Vita St. Wilfrithi (c.720). The saint was again promoted in the court of Alfred in Winchester during the ninth century. At this time, the Old English Martyrology (OEM ix), portraying St. Æthelthryth, was written. Tenth-century interest in St.

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72 Bede’s HE and Chronica Maiora. Also, the “Legendary” is an enormous collection of some 165 saints’ vitae. It was apparently compiled in Northern France or Flanders in the late ninth century but preserved uniquely in English manuscripts of the tenth century (British Library, MS Cotton Nero E.i and Cambridge, MS Corpus Christi College 9); Michael Lapidge, “The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England,” in Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, eds., The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 255-6 and 263, no. 17; Blanton, Signs of Devotion, 71.

73 Bede, HE, 390-401.


75 Bede, HE, IV. 19.
Æthelthryth includes contemporary depictions. She was also commemorated in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which recorded her death,\(^{76}\) and Elfhelm’s *Book of Miracles* and *The Resting Places of Saints*.\(^{77}\) Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints* (c.995) includes an account of her life, as does his *Catholic Homilies*. Wulfstan was influenced by St. Æthelthryth’s appeal in these texts.

Evidence for the ecclesiastical community’s preoccupation with St. Æthelthryth is found in Winchester’s texts. Ælfric, along with Wulfstan, was shaped by monastic reform, and his dedication to his teacher, Æthelwold, illustrates the importance of being associated with Winchester. The manuscripts from the period ranked saints according to their sanctity, illustrating the interest such a hierarchy held for the contemporary religious community. Following the refoundation of Ely in 970, St. Æthelthryth appears in seven early martyrologies\(^{78}\) and twenty-seven Anglo-Saxon calendars,\(^{79}\) far more than any other female Anglo-Saxon and even more than most male saints. She holds an important position next to St. Cuthbert and even dominates the depictions of Saints Gregory and Benedict. Her listing next to St. Swithun, who was promoted by Æthelwold and associated with the Old Minster at Winchester, indicates, representationally, that Saints

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\(^{77}\) The *Kentish Royal Legend* (MSS. London, BL, Stowe 944 and Cambridge, Corpus Christi 201).


Swithun and Æthelthryth were of the same standing. When we compare St. Æthelthryth in *The Lives of Saints and Catholic Homilies* (996-997), along with other saints from Ely, her importance is demonstrated due to her high position in this illustrious documentation of religious sanctity.

St. Æthelthryth’s renown was useful for Wulfstan’s depiction of Æthelthryth as a “nutrix.” Æthelthryth’s importance as a “nutrix” joins with St. Æthelthryth’s longstanding reputation as “nutrix pia,” stemming from the age-old nourishing skills associated with sanctity. This inspiring power, as illustrated in St. Æthelthryth’s depiction, held long-standing importance in Anglo-Saxon religious life. Aldhelm’s *Carmen de Virginitate*, Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and the *Vita St. Wilfridi*, for instance, portrayed St. Æthelthryth and other saintly women as possessing nourishing skills. St. Æthelthryth was the treasured protector of Ely as the house had blossomed under her direction; her barren womb enabled a monastic community to “flower.” As Aldhelm had previously declared, Christ “gave birth to the flowering of the holy race,” so St. Æthelthryth “caused the flowering of the house at Ely.” Bede’s “Hymn on Chastity” demonstrates that St. Æthelthryth “begat virginal flowers” much as an abbess “births” a community. For Bede, the flowering of religious life was of parallel concern with England’s greatness because the country was premised on its spiritual foundation. Bede

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employed St. Æthelthryth in relation to the larger world\textsuperscript{83} as part of his patriotic groundwork for depicting the scope of England’s spiritual history. She was placed alongside Cuthbert, Bishop Ecgbert of Iona, and Abbot Ceolfrid,\textsuperscript{84} all of whom share the trait of steadfastness.\textsuperscript{85} Steadfastness was tied to the idea of England’s dedication to religious standards, which was adopted from Eddius Stephanus’s \textit{Life of Bishop Wilfrid} (c.715).\textsuperscript{86} The term “frugiferi” meaning “fruit-bearing, fruitful, and fertile” was used to evoke spiritual resoluteness.\textsuperscript{87} The dedicated and productive religious life at Ely was valuable because it contributed to England’s greatness. Bede referred to the religious of Ely because the house was associated with the female saint’s devotion to monastic life. Bede said St. Æthelthryth’s incorrupt corpse, apparently un-decayed, proved her virginity and signaled the eternal resurrection of her body:

\begin{quote}
The holy and perpetual virgin of Christ, Æthelthryth, daughter of Anna, king of the Angles, was given as wife firstly to one great man and then to King Egfrid. After she has preserved the marriage bed uncorrupted for twelve years, having taken the holy veil she was transformed from a queen into a consecrated virgin. Without delay she also became a member of mother of virgins and the pious
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{84} Black, “Nutria pia,” 169.

\textsuperscript{85} Black, “Nutria pia,” 169.

\textsuperscript{86} “In diebus, autem illis Ecfrithus rex religiosus cum beatissima regina Æthelthrythae, cuius corpus vivens ante impollutum post mortem incorruptum manens adhuc demonstrat, simul in unum Wilfritho episcopo in omnibus oboedientes facti, pax et gaudium in populis et anni frugiferi victoriaeque in hostes, Deo adivuante, subsecutae sunt.” “Now in those days, the pious King Ecgfrith, and his most blessed Queen Æthelthryth (whose body, still remaining uncorrupted after death, shows that it was unstained before, while alive), were both obedient to Bishop Wilfrid in all things, and there ensued, by the aid of God, peace and joy among the people, fruitful years and victory over their foes”: \textit{The Life of Bishop Wilfrid}, trans. and ed. Bertram Colgrave, \textit{The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 40-1. This text is presumed to have been available to Bede, \textit{The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus}, xii. Bede’s depiction of St. Æthelthryth first appears not in \textit{HE} but in his \textit{Chronica maiora} (c.725): Black, “Nutrix pia,” 170-172. According to Colgrave, Bede uses but does not acknowledge Stephanus as a source for St. Æthelthryth: \textit{Life of Bishop Wilfrid}, xii.

nourisher of holy women, and received the place called Ely in order to build a monastery. Her merits while living were also testified to when her body and the clothes in which it had been wrapped were found uncorrupted sixteen years after her burial.\textsuperscript{88} St. Æthelthryth’s steadfastness and generative qualities also became equated with “nutrix pia” because of the emphasis on miracles. The anonymous ninth-century \textit{Old English Martyrology} (OEM), a vernacular source for women saints’ lives, focused primarily on the virtues of St. Æthelthryth’s monastic life.\textsuperscript{89} Here, St. Æthelthryth was manifest in her resolution of faithfulness.\textsuperscript{90} Her representation therefore reiterated the importance of a spirituality that emphasized the results of chastity. During the tenth century, this interest in purity grew into an association with the monastic family and the nourishing of offspring. The connotation of progeny was, according to Black, linked to later Anglo-Saxon sanctity, which emerged as a result of St. Æthelthryth’s relationship to “generative spirituality.”\textsuperscript{91} Ælfric repeats Bede’s sentiment using alliterative prose by honoring St. Æthelthryth “works” as a product of sexual steadfastness. For her Glory, we will now write, wonderful though it be, concerning the holy Æthelthryth, the English maiden, who had two husbands and nevertheless remained a virgin, as the miracles show which she often worketh.\textsuperscript{92}


\textsuperscript{89} The entry for St. Æthelthryth (October 11). British Library, Add. MS 23211; British Library, MS Cotton Julius A.x; Corpus Christi College MS 196; British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius D. vii; Corpus Christi College MS 41; British Library, Add. MS 40165; British Library, Harley MS 3271: George Herzfeld, \textit{An Old English Martyrology} (London, 1900), 103.


\textsuperscript{91} Black, “Nutrix pia,” 173.

St. Æthelthryth’s figure, according to Ælfric, illustrates her power to effect spiritual affiliation in monastic life: “And she was then again instituted as abbess in the monastery of Ely and over many nuns, whom she trained as a mother by her good example.”93 The depiction of religious kinship as a product of leading and training rightly a group of nuns continued into the eleventh century to emphasize the commitment to and reward of sexual purity.

The subsequent refoundation of Ely as a house for monks continued its attachment with the cult of St. Æthelthryth and her chaste body. The Liber Eliensis (Book of Ely)94 also remade the image of St. Æthelthryth’s virginity and related to the ideals of female religious life. In this text, St. Æthelthryth is contained within the architectural enclosure of the sarcophagus, re-imagining her body as a personification of the enclosure of the monastic house on the island of its name.95 The body legitimizes the monastic institution; both are dedicated aspects of devotion to God. Body and holy place are united within the narrative. Promoting the cult of St. Æthelthryth led to Ely’s greater standing, which benefited those involved with its prestige. A principle record for Ely, the Libellus Æthelwoldi Episcopi, describes the political patronage of the reformed house; moreover, the text presents a compelling image of a figure championing the needs and claims of his


95 Blanton, Signs of Devotion, 136.
community.\textsuperscript{96} The \textit{Libellus} became a supplement to Wulfstan’s \textit{Vita of St. Æthelwoldi}\textsuperscript{97} when it was compiled for the Bishop of Ely (1109-31). These two twelfth-century texts, when viewed in connection with Wulfstan’s \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, offer a more detailed source for Æthelwold’s life. Evidently, Ely was an attractive addition to St. Æthelwold’s plan for its refoundation because it contributed to a greater monastic territory.\textsuperscript{98} Wulfstan describes Æthelwold’s interest in the land in East Anglia in order to remake monastic life, including the renewal of St. Æthelthryth’s cult, in parts of England. After the Benedictine Reforms, Ely became the cult center for visiting pilgrimages, which contributed to its greater renown. Ely was the subject of public land transactions that would have benefited Æthelwold. The charters that describe these trades illustrate a series


\textsuperscript{98} “Nec solum in finibus Occidentalium Saxonum uerum etiam in remotis Britanniae partibus sanctus antistes Ætheluoldus ad Dei omnipotentis seruitium monachus adgregare curauit. Est enim quadam regio famose in prouincia Orientalium Anglorum sita, paludibus et aquis in modum insulae circumdata, unde et a copia accepit. In qua regione locus omni ueneratione dingus habetur, magnificatus nimium reliquis et miraculis sanctae Æthelthrythae reginae et perpetuae uirginis ac sororum eius; sed in ipso tempore erat destitutus et regali fisco deditus. Hunc ergo locum famulus Christi pro dilectione tantarum uirginum magnopere uererari coeptit, datoque precio non modicae gregem pecunae emit eum a rege Eagaro, contituens in eo monachorum gregem non minimum. Quibus ordinavit abbatem Byrhtnodum praepositum suum, et eisusden loci situm monasterialibus aedificiis decentissime renouauit, eumque terrarium possessionibus affluentissime loculementatum et aeternae liberae priuilegio confirmatum omnipotenti Domino commendauit.” “The holy bishop Æthelwold was concerned to bring monks together in the service of the Almighty God not only within Wessex, but also in remote part of Britain. There is a well-known spot in East Anglia, surrounded like an island by swamps and water. From the quantity of eels taken in these marshes it has been given the name Ely. Here there is a place held to deserve all reverence, for it is made glorious by the relics and miracles of St Æthelthryth, queen and perpetual virgin, and her sisters. But at this time it was abandoned and pertained to the royal fisc. The servant of Christ [Æthelwold] began to reverence this place greatly, out of this love for the distinguished virgins, and he paid a large sum of money to buy it from King Edgar. In it he established a large group of monks, ordaining his prior Byrhtnoth as abbot. He confirmed this grant with a privilege conferring perpetual liberty; and dedicated it to the Almighty Lord”: Wulfstan, \textit{Life of St. Æthelwold}, 38-41.
of litigations involving the bishop’s interests in the fortunes of Ely, his first re-foundation of a monastery outside Wessex.  

Ely’s renewed status also improved the status of houses associated with it, including Nunnaminster’s community. Wulfstan promoted the younger female Winchester institution with the help of Ely’s history. As a result, Nunnaminster gained access to Ely’s sanctity and its devoted religious community. Since Æthelwold supported and benefited from the Ely shrine as a consequence of this rejuvenation, Nunnaminster’s community became a de facto instrument for Wulfstan’s objectives. Nunnaminster’s association with St. Æthelthryth was part of Wulfstan’s plan. Two manuscripts prove an uninterrupted interest in St. Æthelthryth at Nunnaminster. The first, a pre-Conquest Prayerbook, written during the end of eleventh century, lists her name in two litanies. The second, Ælfwine’s Prayerbook, includes “Santa Æthelthytha,” in one litany, her death on 23 June 679 and her translation on 17 October. These prayerbooks attest to the saint’s important place for female religious life in Winchester. 

Wulfstan’s link between St. Æthelthryth and Æthelthryth illustrates representations of holy nurturing women directly affecting the church’s development through the leadership of monasteries. Aligning the character of Æthelthryth with St.


101 British Library, MS Cotton Titus D. xxvi-xxvii. “ut me famulum tuam Ælfwine benignus respicias,” fol. 61b, connects this manuscript with Abbot Ælfwine of New Minster or Hyde, Winchester. Prayers indicate where masculine forms have been overlined with feminine terminations at a later date, which indicates that this book fell into the hands of an abbess at Nunnaminster after the date of its production by Abbot Ælfwine in the early years of the eleventh century: Walter Grey de Birch, “On Two Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in the British Library” (Read 22nd November, 1876), 33; Ælfwine’s Prayerbook, ed. Beate Günzel (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1993), fol. 53r, pp. 47-8, 181.
Æthelthryth contributed to the image of supreme dedication to monastic life. St. Æthelthryth was primarily a symbol of chastity, while her sexual status was emphasized as a model of virginity and reform. Æthelthryth was written into Benedictine Reform propaganda, which, by its placement, also enhanced St. Æthelthryth’s cult status and Ely’s fortunes during the succeeding decades. Because of the Benedictine Reform’s emphasis on monastic renewal, Ely, by association, benefited from St. Æthelthryth’s increased renown, all illustrating how a female religious character depicted as “nutrix” healed women in the context of the Bishop’s sainthood.

The use of “nutrix” expanded over the centuries. First associated with the care of midwives and wet nurses who provided literal nourishment for their charges, the associations with “nutrix” grew to encompass spiritual caregiving and devotion for a monastic family. Mary dovetails with St. Æthelthryth and with Æthelthryth herself. Those in Winchester’s ecclesiastical and royal milieu would have well understood how the Virgin Mary’s representation contributed to religious women’s role as female healers in the monastic family. Wulfstan’s decision to highlight the vocation of “nutrix” assumes that he welcomed particular female religious customs drawn from depictions of Mary and St. Æthelthryth’s practices along with other representations of female religious life. Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth sat squarely in the middle of these meanings: through her name she inherited the virgin’s nurturing power; through her position she provided care to her flock; and through her support of Æthelwold’s mother she provided care to a pregnant woman. Æthelthryth’s character thus points backward, giving shape to an imagined Anglo-Saxon past.
E. Medieval Religious Women as Healers

Æthelthryth’s ability to nurse also relates to the real preoccupation of religious women as healers. Religious women were considered valuable members of religious communities because of the myriad roles they played in providing care. Women in monastic houses have not always been regarded as associated with nursing in this diverse way. To adopt Monica Green’s appraisal, nursing is seen as conflating female identity; the modern, medical connotations of “nurse” have “no place in the middle ages.”102 The basic idea of what physical care constituted at this time has been disputed. Scholars during the twentieth century were of two minds about Anglo-Saxon medicine. J. H. G. Grattan, C. Singer, P. H. Blair, and S. B. Greenfield approached medicine in this period as more superstition than science,103 with J. F. Payne and J. R. Riddle viewing it as worthy of investigation since it is difficult to determine exactly its role.104 M. L. Cameron asks that we “examine the whole corpus of their medicine” for this very reason.105 Investigations of Anglo-Saxon medical texts omit manuscripts held in nunneries. If men had a high level of medical “expertise,”106 then it is worth inspecting women’s houses for corresponding evidence. Although much reporting on the period claims that male physicians practiced medicine, nursing the body was apparently affiliated with female religious as well. There are, however, several obstacles when approaching this topic.

105 Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, passim.
106 Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 19-24.
Overall, studies present few women as health practitioners in early England with religious women in particular often absent. The term “nutrix” was omitted among tables composed by archivists C.H. Talbott and E.A. Hammond, who were intent on covering a wide range of medieval medical practitioners. Nurses appear in written accounts but are not depicted as nuns. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber believes the term “nursing” should be restricted to lay women, usually wet or dry nurses of children, so designated in medieval documents. Muriel Joy Hughes’s description of “nursing” is equated with healing and charitable care. The impression of women only functioning in discrete positions, however, also obscures the multiple responsibilities of female monastic communities.

An abundance of information relates to Anglo-Saxon women as healers. Scholars assert, however, that documenting women’s work in medicine during this time is harder to discover than during other periods. Green and William L. Minkowski believe women are largely absent from early English records because women’s work in the public sphere is unrecorded. Roman-British excavations have revealed evidence of how the “nutrix” once functioned. One De Nutrix figurine, identified as a fruitful goddess, was found in a fourth-century child’s coffin. It was taken from its domestic shrine for burial on the

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110 Green, Women’s Healthcare, 162, 328; William L. Minkowski, “Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of Their History,” Public Health Then and Now 82.2 (February 1992), 288.
occasion of a very special death. Her presence in the grave signifies that she was
treasured in the household and a symbolic parent in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{111} A later sixth-century
burial of a female indicates her healing skills because of medical implements found in the
grave, emphasizing the role of women in popular medical practice.\textsuperscript{112} According to
Gregory of Tours, St. Monegund was famous as a healer and Radegund ran a hospital.\textsuperscript{113}

*The Domesday Book* includes Anglo-Saxon religious women among those who were
attending to the sick among travelers, pilgrims, and recipients of alms.\textsuperscript{114} Additionally,
the registers of medical practitioners in England, Scotland, and Wales during the Anglo-
Saxon period mentions eight women, with six identified as physicians, or more literally,
healers, “medica or leche,” one as a surgeon, “la surgienne,” and one as a mid-wife,
“obstetric.”\textsuperscript{115} Even outside of nunneries some English women were considered “nursing
saints,”\textsuperscript{116} learning crucial skills such as “obstetric” passed down in their families.\textsuperscript{117} The

\textsuperscript{111}Gilbert R. Burleigh, Keith J. Fitzpatrick-Matthews and Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green, “A Dea Nutris”

\textsuperscript{112}Tania Dickinson, “Anglo-Saxon ‘Cunning Woman’ from Bidford-on-Avon,” in Martin Carver, ed., *In
Search of Cult* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993), 53. Another burial reveals a woman’s association with
healing: P.J. Huggins, “Excavation of Belgic and Romano-British Farm with Middle Saxon Cemetery and
Churches at Nazeingbury, Essex, 1975-6,” *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society, 3*\textsuperscript{rd}

\textsuperscript{113}“About the Blessed Monegundis,” *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, ed. and trans. Edward James
Radegund*, in Jo. A. McNamara, John E. Halborg and E. G. Whatley, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark
Ages* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 77-9; “Lul’s Letter to an Unnamed Abbess and
Nun in England Praises Their Nursing Skills,” Letter 98 (Monumenta Germaniae Historica), *Epistolae
Selectae I*, 218-5.

\textsuperscript{114}Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, 194-6, no. 154; A.N. Doane, *Anglo-Saxon
Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile*, 15, Grammars (Tempe: University of Arizona, 2007), no. 193; D.
Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of its Development from the Time of St Dunstan to the

\textsuperscript{115}Talbot and Hammond, *The Medical Practitioners*, 211.

\textsuperscript{116}Hughes, *Women Healers*, 114.

\textsuperscript{117}Edward J. Kealey, “England’s Earliest Women Doctors,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and the
Allied Sciences* 40.4 (October 1985), 473-7.
skills necessary to “nurse” were derived from specialized medical knowledge, allowing Anglo-Saxon women, religious included, to secure status in their communities as healers.

These traditions of women healers were inherited in Anglo-Saxon England from earlier periods where midwifery and the role of women as providing spiritual consolation are well documented. The role of “nutrix” is, in origin, connected to the concept of the goddess herself, the Divine Mother, and this links her firmly with women. The early pagan mother figure was frequently invoked in times of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, when an adequate supply of milk ensured a healthy beginning for the new child; she would also have been called upon to help in instances of infertility. Her role went beyond the household to influence the larger community since she brought fertility to people, livestock and crops. Stone images depict mother-goddesses sometimes as triads, as couples or alone with babies, older children, wine, bread, and other symbols of fecundity and well-being. F. Jenkins called the Gaulish version of the mother-goddess Dea Nutrix because she possessed a function more complex than simply the promotion of fertility.\(^{118}\) She was the Roman concept of Juno Lucina, concerned with healing, often invoked from therapeutic spring-sanctuaries and associated with renewal, rebirth and the afterlife.\(^{119}\) This “nutrix” presided over childbirth, seeing to it that the newborn child opened its eyes to the light of the day. Artemis is also associated with the nurturing aspect of divinity, serving as a midwife at the birth of her brother Apollo.\(^{120}\) Beginning with the time of Hyginus, the legend of the first Athenian midwife, Agnodike, was


\(^{120}\) Irwin, “The Invention of Virginity on Olympus,” 19.
influential for writers.\textsuperscript{121} The power of the virgin midwife ensuring safe delivery is also reflected in the early Christian period. Gregory of Nyssa’s biography of Macrina and the virgin Thecla describes Thecla assisting Gregory’s mother until her labor pangs were relieved.\textsuperscript{122} Nursing was connected with helping women, deities and mortals, anticipating or experiencing childbirth and contributing to the livelihood of the greater community.

Women’s spiritual counsel and their use of physical remedies were instrumental during the nascent Anglo-Saxon period. This particular skill produced an expertise, carrying with it a degree of influence within a community. Evidence in manuscripts held at female religious houses indicates that curative measures for healing women involved practices that combined pagan magic and Christianity.\textsuperscript{123} Tacitus found first-century German women fulfilling duties related to “nursing” since he said (which Caesar confirms) and the Germans believed: “women were healers.”\textsuperscript{124} This healing was thus associated with certain female ability.\textsuperscript{125} Theodore acknowledged that women performed incantations or diabolical divinations.\textsuperscript{126} Religious grave-goods were associated almost

\textsuperscript{121} Hyginus, \textit{Fabula}, 274 in Helen King, ed., \textit{Hippocrates’ Women: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece} (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 181-5.


\textsuperscript{125} “It has been suggested that the rock-crystal ball in particular was used in healing rituals and may have symbolized the woman’s role as guardian of her family’s health. Some wealthy women’s graves contain a considerable number of objects of this kind, and it is not impossible that these represent the graves of women who were thought to have, or claimed to have healing…powers”: Fell, \textit{Women in Anglo-Saxon England}, 32.

\textsuperscript{126} Blair, \textit{The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society}, 171.
exclusively with women in the late pagan and early Christian periods;\textsuperscript{127} archaeological evidence indicates some women had symbolic “first-aid kits”—amulets in waist-bags\textsuperscript{128}—made and used under Christian influence and focused on the body. Women were apparently appreciated and claimed authority through mediation, counsel and cures.\textsuperscript{129} Various Germanic tribes included women possessing prophetic powers, and they were especially valued for their advice.\textsuperscript{130} Monastic communities held texts written during pre-and post-Christian conversion, demonstrating they employed incantations and charms. This mixture of magic art, Christian devotion, and practical remedies suggests these women administered to the spiritual and physical needs of their community.

Other well-known examples survive of religious women serving their communities by physically and spiritually nursing others. In later medieval sources on the Continent, Hildegard of Bingen (b.1098), perhaps the most famous medieval nun, provided both bodily and psychological health advice. Hildegard’s biographer, Theodric, states that she possessed miraculous powers of healing, with people flocking to her to be cured.\textsuperscript{131} Hildegard’s writings, especially the \textit{Causae et curate}, demonstrate her knowledge of herbs and medicine, and her religious consolation was greatly sought after.\textsuperscript{132} Trotula also enjoyed great fame due to her accomplishments in the medical community. In \textit{De passionibus mulierum}, she reveals an understanding of medicine and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Blair, \textit{The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society}, 174-5.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Robinson, “The Prescient Woman,” 155-6.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Hughes, \textit{Women Healers}, 4.
\end{itemize}
expertise in surgery. The extensive evidence for both women’s involvement with curative solutions indicates their communities’ embrace of this treatment.

After the twelfth century, evidence points to English convents and monasteries serving as medieval clinics by providing medical services to their residents. Some nunneries even performed duties associated with infirmaries, giving special care to the sick. In one case, Abbess Euphemia (d.1257) of Wherwell Abbey “provides worship of God and the welfare for the sisters.” Documents from Cistercian women’s communities during the thirteenth century indicate that many nuns cared for the sick generally and acted as midwives in particular. Religious custom encouraged these women to maintain their dedication to care. At this time, as another example, Barking Abbey was integrated into its neighboring community, which operated as a hospital. This tradition of comprehensive healing practiced before, during, and after the Anglo-Saxon period indicates that women were well-suited to play an important part in their country’s religious transformations, since nurturing abilities were valued by their communities and contributed to their positions as healers.

F. Healing at Nunnaminster

A testament to nuns’ healings skills is found at the very religious community where Æthelthryth is depicted as providing both physical and spiritual care. Even before Nunnaminster was established as an Anglo-Saxon female monastic house, the site indicates the community’s connection with healing and miraculous powers, with the old, ritual and curative landscape assimilated into a monastic configuration. The house was identified with the first stage of religious buildings that were erected in the beginning in the early tenth century, with one building, the infirmary of the house, “domo infirmorum,” associated with the hospital of poor sisters. Later known as the Sisterne House, the hospital was located within the precincts of and belonged to Nunnaminster’s named house. Archeological evidence points to Nunnaminster’s connection with a centuries-old religious site, its buildings monumentalizing local pagan traditions. Winchester’s earliest ecclesiastical buildings and their positions on the Nunnaminster property were established by people attempting to appropriate these local, pagan, early Roman traditions by promoting female deities, who were important to native beliefs.


139 Biddle, “‘Felix Urbs Winthonia,’” 126.
Ealhswið, King Alfred’s consort, may have understood the symbolic significance of her foundation’s location and chosen the site due to its earlier sacred connection. A statue of the goddess Epona, *Dea Regina*, the Queen Goddess of a priestess cult, dated c.100, was found on (Lower Brook Street) the Nunnaminster land. It showed the deity holding a key, symbolizing her power to unlock the doors of a temple, *kimappa*. This site was located within the property’s boundaries and indicates a physical connection with female pagan practices. Water also serves as a bridge between female pagan and Christian spiritual identification in a curative setting. The perception of healing or miraculous powers associated with water, which in turn became an important source of nourishment, was often appropriated into a more explicitly Christian landscape. Nunnaminster’s promotion as a religious site was also due to its proximity to a vital water source.

St. Edburga, Ealhswið’s granddaughter, was associated with Nunnaminster’s ability to heal the community. Here, the nuns promoted Edburga’s cult by providing healing miracles. The story was told of a blind woman who had a vision in which she was informed Edburga would heal her. By bathing her eyes in the water in which Edburga had washed her hands next to the woman and adjacent to Edburga’s nightly vigils, the woman recovered her sight. Later, a group of nuns, blinded by their unfounded accusations against Edburga, miraculously received their sight back, “miraculorum claritate,” through

140 Biddle and Quirk, “Excavations,” 299, 305.
her care. These cures relate specifically to the water source on Nunnaminster’s property. This vitally important site is mentioned several times in *The Book of Nunnaminster*. Waterways were associated with holy springs and sacred wells, and Nunnaminster’s mill was powered from the River Itchen to stone-grind flour; it also provided a source for fish, which fed the female community. As a supply of nourishment, the waterway provided Nunnaminster with the additional benefit to its female community through its curative powers.

Another way of looking at Nunnaminster’s association with healing is to refer to its community’s interest in both St. Æthelthryth and Mary. As we have seen, St. Æthelthryth’s cult implied identification with a “nutrix.” St. Æthelthryth was written into a prayerbook owned by Nunnaminster. In addition, one eleventh-century calendar includes two feasts of Mary: the Conception of Mary (December 8) and her Presentation

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133 Lourdes and the Irish St. Brigid (451-525), as well as the Danaids and perpetual virgins.

in the Temple (November 21), along with the Saturday Office, indicating that St. Æthelthryth and Mary were both models of religious life for Nunnaminster.

Nunnaminster’s community, its Abbess and her nuns, presents a similar authority with St. Æthelthryth and Mary through healing service. Charms and prayers listing lengthy enumeration of the various parts of the body to heal illustrate that the speaker associated herself with Christ or Mary or some saintly mediator. This physical and spiritual association with healing further demonstrates religious women’s association with nursing their community.

Ministry at Nunnaminster included the recitation of prayers for the purpose of driving out evil spirits, along with those of confession, indicating that healing those who sought out care involved a variety of methods. Manuscripts linked with Nunnaminster attest to the role of exorcism as well as confession and penance by the community. In The Book of Nunnaminster, prayers confirm that women acted as the confessor and were concerned with the process of healing the spirit. We know that Nunnaminster remained in female hands during the tenth century at Nunnaminster, but the Royal prayerbook did so as well. A. Louth asserts these texts illustrate religious women at this time using

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146 “Cum iocunditate memoriam sancte Marie celebremus ut ipsa pro nobis intercedat ad dominum Deum nostrum,” Bodley 451, col. 22: ed. E.S. Dewick, “The Christmas Sermon,” fol. 96v, Facsimiles of Horae de Beata Maria Virgine (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1902); New Minster’s calendar, Conception S’ce Dei Genetricis Mari (Le Havre: Bibliothéque municipal, 1945), 330, a missal from New Minster, Winchester, s. xi<med>; Hall, “Preaching at Winchester,” Appendix II, at fols. 95r-96v, De Natalie Domini, 214-16.


techniques derived from the healing practice through prayer.\textsuperscript{149} Lapidge emphasizes that these prayers were used for the visitation of the sick or dying,\textsuperscript{150} and Barbara Raw views the therapeutic passages focusing on Christ’s suffering and curing with some devoted to the cycle of Christ’s life, along with Christ’s Passion and Death.\textsuperscript{151} Cures within these pages point to the conditions under which those bound to sin or physical infirmity could be set free by the power of spells and absolution. The cleansing of sin, by means of charms, corresponds to a further aspect of spiritual remedy. In the “Introduction” to the first edition of \textit{Nunnaminster}, Birch describes how the combination of science and the practice of medicine in Anglo-Saxon England incorporated magic, incantation and charms; illness of any kind was believed to be the work of evil powers, removed by exorcisms and prayers.\textsuperscript{152} The “Lorica of Laidcenn,” included in \textit{Nunnaminster}, indicates that the nuns were applying a combination of magical and Christian recipes for healing its community. Healing formulas offer various remedies, which work by the application of worded cures to cure evil infection. The poisonous creatures are the “draco” (dragon), “uiera” (viper), “rupeta” (frog), “scorpius” (scorpion), “regulus” (basilisk), “spalagius” (venomous fly). The power of the command exercised against evil is pointed out specifically, “loricam ad demones expellendos,” indicating the powers of the sinful are


\textsuperscript{150} Lapidge, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints}, 45.


\textsuperscript{152} Walter de Gray Birch, \textit{An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, Formerly Belonging to St. Mary’s Abbey, or Nunnaminster, Winchester} (London: Simkin, 1889), 22-3.
defeated and made harmless. A prayer in *Nunnaminster* asks for the kind of help a nurse
would make by attending a woman’s illness, a check-up for the soul as well as the body.
The prayer appeals to God for assurance and against a host of evils from the top of the
head to the soles of the feet. One prayer asks for the protection of eyes, confessing to
their sinning through them; it is offered as an expression of recovery. Other examples
illustrate women participating in healing remedies. *Royal* belonged to an unknown female
physician at a nunnery, and was read by the Nunnaminster community. A woman’s
community provided the application of medicinal blood cures, since some prayers were
couched in feminine form.

The cleansing of sin corresponds to a further aspect of spiritual remedy, whereas
those bound to sin or physical infirmity could be set free by the power of penance. Nuns
were saying intercessory prayers on behalf of the living and the dead in the churches of
their convents; as abbesses, they administered penance on their convent and led the
community’s liturgy. Many abbesses during the later Anglo-Saxon period offered
confession not only to nuns but also to lay women, despite the Benedictine Reformers’
attempt to suppress such behavior. *Nunnaminster* describes women practicing
miraculous healing along with depictions of sacramental rites of penance and


\[154\] “Pro beata cruce custody caput meum; pro benedicta cruce custody oculos meos”: Birch, *An Ancient
Manuscript*, f. 30v.


\[156\] Felice Lifshitz, *Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission
and Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 192; Teresa Berger, *Gender
Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy’s Past* (Farnham; Burlington,

\[157\] Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Rochester, New
York: The Boydell Press, 1992), 136; Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, “Penance in Communities of Benedictine
absolution,\textsuperscript{158} connected with the identification of the nunnery with Christ’s passion. Two 
\textit{Nunnaminster} prayers indicate that the community was involved with penance: “Formula 
of Confession” and “Formula of Absolution.”\textsuperscript{159} The compiler of these prayers, an abbess 
herself, imagined the origins of these rituals, as Christ would have experienced them. The 
confessor recited an absolution.\textsuperscript{160} These prayers were exchanged between two people,\textsuperscript{161} 
as doctor and patient. Texts identifying with saints’ lives and their pastoral offices are 
found in additional prayers from \textit{Nunnaminster}, offering an expanded view of healing 
along with the role of the healer. These prayers indicate concern for the care of the souls 
of the nuns and lay women who visited them. “Oratio Sancti Gregorii Papae Urbis 
Romae” (“Prayer of Saint Gregory, the Pope of the City of Rome”) asks forgiveness for 
the sinner, “peccatrice,”\textsuperscript{162} and “peccatrix” is found in another Nunnaminster 
manuscript.\textsuperscript{163} Given Gregory’s reputation of providing bishops’ counsel, the inclusion of 
this dedication indicates the degree to which some religious women’s healing activities 
were identified with religious authority, along with the rite of sacrament. Purification of 
self as well as the larger community was part of the dependency upon monastic life.

Another prayer in \textit{Nunnaminster}, “Oratio Ad Sanctuc Michaelem,” points to the 
community’s preoccupation with powers of ceremonial salvation and thus with healing 
through care and intercession. Like St. Martin, St. Michael uses healing miracles by

\textsuperscript{158} De Circumcisione (64), De Baptismo (65), De Congregatione apostolorum (67), Oratio de lacrimis 
domini (67), Item oratio in caena domini (68), De diueresis passionibus domini (70), De latrone (74), De 
paenitentiae Petri (79): Book of Nunnaminster in Birch, \textit{An Ancient Manuscript}.

\textsuperscript{159} Book of Nunnaminster in Birch, \textit{An Ancient Manuscript}, fol. 40b.

\textsuperscript{160} “Misereatur tui omnipotens Deus et dimittat tibi Dominus omnia peccata tua. Liberet te ab omni malo et 
conservet te in omni opera bono et per Deus parter ad vitam aeternam”: Book of Nunnaminster, line 6 in 
Birch, \textit{An Ancient Manuscript}, fol. 41r.

\textsuperscript{161} Bugyis, “The Practice of Penance,” 51.

\textsuperscript{162} Book of Nunnaminster in Birch, \textit{An Ancient Manuscript}, fols. 17a and b, 18a and b, 58-60.

\textsuperscript{163} British Library, MS Cotton Galba A, xiv, fol. 6v.
touching the affected part of the body and commanding it to be gone. Michael was an exceedingly popular saint in the Anglo-Saxon period. F. Bond attests to the fact that the saint occupies a principle number of ancient dedications in his honor, exceeded only by those in honor of Mary or St. Peter. St. Michael was depicted as the conqueror of sin and guardian of the souls of the dead, as well as intercessor for those in the balance between good and evil. The following Nunnaminster prayer beseeches the Archangel to intercede with the Lord to cleanse the sinner of her transgressions:

Saint Michael, archangel who has come to help God’s people, assist me before the Highest Judge so that He grants me remission for all my transgressions, by the great mercy of your compassion. Hear me St. Michael as I invoke you, assist me adorning your majesty, intercede for me bewailing and make me clean from all sins. Moreover [I] beseech and entreat very earnestly, servant of the divinity, so that in the last day kindly take my soul in your most holy breast and conduct it to that refreshing peace and quiet where all the souls of the saints await future judgment and glorious resurrection with joy and indescribably joy, through Him who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

The female desire to save her own soul is manifest in this appeal to St. Michael. Prayers were perceived as a course of action for any number of concerns having to do with female care, shared by reading them out loud to one another. These prayers are a valuable


167 “Sancte Michael archangel qui uenisti in adiutorium populo Dei, Sebueni mihi apud altissimum iudicen ut mihi peccatorii donet remisionem delictorum meorum propter magnam miseratuonum tuarum clementiam, Exaudí me sancte Michael inuocantem te, Adiuna me maiestatem tuam adorantem, Interpelle pro me gemescente, Et fac me castum ab omnibus peccatis insuper obsecro te preclarum atque decorum summae diuinitatis ministrum, Ut in nouissimo die benigne susce[n]as animam meam in sinu tuo sanctissimi, Et per[dul]case eam in locum refrigerii pacis et lucis et quietis, [U]bi sanctorum animae cum laetitia et innumerabile [ga]udio futurum iudicium et gloriæ beatæ resurrectionis expectant, Per eum qui uiuit et regnat [in] secula seculorum amen”: Book of Nunnaminster in Birch, An Ancient Manuscript, fol. 36a; Johnson, “Feasts of Saint Michael,” 77.
illustration of the tradition of religious women engaged in healing practices administered to a female community.

Nunnaminster’s prayers are connected with the regulation and obligation to nurture in a monastic context. The *Regula cuiusdam ad Virgines* provides an example of the connection between sacred space and providing care. The text mandated an area used for caring for sick people as well as entertaining guests and visitors (ch. 3). One of the key expressions in the *Regula cuiusdam* is its use of a “cura” (no less than three times).\(^{168}\) Cura refers to the spontaneous willingness to do one’s duty with care, and thus is consistent with our understanding of nutrix. The emphasis on care is in close connection with the undivided cura for the monastery’s objects and the “amor” for fellow nuns as dual aspects of monastic discipline.\(^{169}\) Cura refers to a dedication for providing nourishing practices that aligns with accepted forms of religious life. The sanctity of the mediator once again expands our view of religious obedience to include a greater responsibility for those who hold a position of authority to the community. A deepening meaning of healing points to a remedial dialogue between the female community, one that involves a responsibility for others as well as for self. The very profession of the monastic life was the penitential act of healing correction.

**G. Conclusion**

In the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, Æthelthryth’s representation as “nutrix” demonstrates female devotion requiring active dependence upon the nourishing process. Intimately

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\(^{169}\) “amor,” “caritas” and “dilecto”: Diem, “Rewriting Benedict,” 322.
related to Æthelthryth’s role as “nutrix” is her power of intercession incumbent upon the monastic life at Nunnaminster. Her representation provides a model of sanctity that enriches the monastic as well as the secular world: care for self and for others, not just individual and private, but communal and shared. Pastoral care at Nunnaminster was synonymous with nurturing dedication. Women participated in the Christian liturgy as a form of spiritual nursing. What is also apparent is that Nunnaminster’s curative solutions were a blend of folk magic and Christian religion, illustrating their combined powers to heal both physically and spiritually using various devices that were part of Anglo-Saxon religious life.

Æthelthryth’s representation as “nutrix” assumes a continuity between the physical and non-physical elements of healing. “Nutrix” is associated with Æthelthryth only once (ch. 2), but the figural quality is also employed later in the story (ch. 5). “Nutrix” number one and two were possibly assigned to different characters, but they were linked in their depiction of healing correction. Three chapters after we first encounter Æthelthryth, a woman also portrayed as Æthelwold’s “nutrix” takes the baby Æthelwold to church to pray “in ecclesia.” She holds him in her lap; she has “piae intentionis,” bringing him “in templo est praesentatus” (ch. 5). Æthelwold as the child, and Æthelthryth as nurse, imply that female monastic life originated with the Virgin Mary. The baby, in Æthelthryth’s hands, also points to the monastically reformed Church. The figural quality of “nutrix” achieves the dual representational practice of nourishing the body and the spirit. Æthelthryth’s portrayal as “nutrix” also points to Nunnaminster’s explicit ties to the care of women and their charges from outside its community, and signals Wulfstan and Æthelwold’s endorsement of such activities. The
role of “nutrix” promotes the reformers’ vision of monastic renewal by communicating the efficacy of female religious life throughout the city, a lived example of St. Benedict’s caritas that extended divine cures along with the power of earthly medicine.
CHAPTER V

SAGACI PRUDENTISSIMA

I, Wisdom, dwell in prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion.

... I have counsel and sound wisdom, I am insight and I have strength,
By me kings reign and rulers decree what is just,
By me princes rule and nobles govern the earth (Prov. 8.12, 14-16).

A. Introduction

Early in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi, Æthelwold’s pregnant mother asks Æthelthryth for advice about her dreams because, as Wulfstan explains, Æthelthryth is a wise woman. Æthelthryth’s portrayal as a wise woman is crucial to her position in the text, in which divinely inspired visions play an essential role. Wulfstan’s use of “sagaci” and “prudentissima” to describe Æthelthryth tells us that religious women’s wise qualities were important to the tenth-century Benedictine monastic Reform Movement. The meanings behind the terms “sagaci” and “prudentissima” are closely related;¹ combined, they relate to one who offers counseling and mediation.

The presentation of Æthelthryth as a wise woman in this chapter offers a further lens through which to understand Wulfstan’s motivation for writing the Vita St. Æthelwoldi. With that in mind, I trace the aspect of wisdom in Æthelthryth’s character within the context of Wulfstan’s text in order to determine the way in which she was employed for specific effect. My objective is to evaluate how the text points to the importance of dreams in predicting future behavior, with Æthelthryth’s portrayal as intermediary a vital conduit. The representation of women as counselors and mediators is pertinent to understanding the traditions behind Wulfstan’s approach. Visionary literature

describing conception and pregnancy dreams—those that anticipate the birth of a child and relate to the mother’s allies, along with the depictions of Mary—are important interconnected traditions worth exploring here. Æthelthryth’s depiction was drawn from the images of women in ways that recall the prophets of the Old Testament and characters from early centuries of Christianity, as well as farsighted early Anglo-Saxon women. Consequently, late examples of visionary women draw on the same tradition. Æthelthryth’s portrayal was part of a tradition that highlighted the qualities and doctrines associated with female wisdom, with prophetic interpretation a key quality in determining a dream’s value for predicting the future. Visions that previewed the sanctity of an individual conferred added respectability upon the saint and the author, as well upon the witness of the vision, because they provided all three with credibility to predict the future.

Æthelthryth’s portrayal as mediator to Æthelwold’s mother’s dream is an indication of her important role in tenth-century Winchester’s depiction of female monastic life. Her character is especially salient because she is indispensable to the dream’s reception as well as to the prospect of its outcome. As witness, Æthelthryth has the ability not only to perceive spiritual truth but also to be the voice of the dreamer as well. This predictive quality is a marker for the ability to counsel, and Æthelthryth serves as a prophetic channel. She possesses the most important quality for dream interpretation, that of intellectual vision. Because she knows what the dreams mean, she does not have to analyze them: Æthelthryth is thus elevated in stature in the vita because she has the wisdom to know that the dreams hold importance.

Spiritually, Anglo-Saxon women were connected with ancient models of female wisdom, viewed as mediators, channels, or bridges connecting this world with the
supernatural one. Women intermediaries or interpreters of dreams often sought an active role as visionary guides, revealing themselves as prophets or witnesses to the religious experiences of others. These religious experiences directed the visionary toward the soul’s union with God. As represented in this role, Æthelthryth is enhanced in the Church’s monastic hierarchy, her worth elevated due to her authority within that order. Æthelthryth’s character would have been of great interest to Winchester’s tenth-century ecclesiastical elite because during the Reform period her portrayal as a wise woman mirrors an accepted pattern of female religious inviolability. In addition, she draws considerable attention to St. Æthelwold’s sanctity, and Wulfstan’s own role as author is reinforced by Æthelthryth’s character, placing him in a position of authority.

Because Æthelthryth is Wulfstan’s creation, she highlights the author’s expertise in Church doctrine. Æthelthryth’s position is dispensable to foretelling Æthelwold’s life. First, Wulfstan lays out why Æthelwold is, after Christ and his disciples, God’s elect:

He burst out his time brilliant as the morning stars among the other stars; the founder of many monasteries and teacher of the Church’s doctrines, he shone along and unique among all the English bishops.²

Wulfstan then describes Æthelwold’s mother’s two dreams. In the first one:

She dreamed that she was sitting at the door of her house, and that she was presented with the sight of a banner on high. Its top seemed to touch heaven. It lowered itself with due honour to the ground, and veiled the pregnant woman in its fringes; then, straightening itself up to its former height and regaining its old strength and firmness, it returned to the sky from which it had come.³

The mother wakes and falls asleep again at which point she has another dream:

² “uelut lucifer inter astra coruscans, suis temporibus apparuit, multorumque coenobiorum fundator et ecclesiasticorum dogmatum institutor inter omnes Anglorum pontifices solus singulariter effulsit”: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, “Preface,” 2-3.

³ “Visum namque sibi est se prae foribus suae domus sedere, et obtutibus suis adesse quoddam sublime uexillum, cuius summitas caelum tangere uidebatur: quod se inclinando honeste ad terram fimbriatum suarum uelamine circumcussit inpraegnatam, rursurnque procerca altitudine erectum et inflexibili stabilitate robustum ipsum unde inclinabatur repetiti caelum”: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
She all at once saw what looked like an eagle of gold, leaping from her mouth and flying away. It was wonderfully large, and in its flight it shaded all the buildings of the city of Winchester with its gilded wings that carried it along. It rose high in the air, and then disappeared.4

Upon rising, the mother could not articulate the meaning of her dreams: she wakes “without uttering a word.”5 Seeking the answers to the mysteries behind the dreams, she looks to Æthelthryth for answers: “because she [Æthelwold’s mother] could not imagine by herself what they might portend, she went along immediately to a servant of Christ called Æthelthryth.”6 Consequently, Æthelthryth is the first to hear about the mother’s dreams: “To her [Æthelthryth] she [Æthelwold’s mother] told the full story of what had been shown her in the vision by night.”7 Therefore, Æthelthryth becomes an essential intercessor.

In order to qualify Æthelthryth with the divine powers necessary to reflect upon the mother’s dreams, Wulfstan next endows Æthelthryth with the capacity of knowing that they contain true vision. Since Æthelthryth is portrayed as possessing a keenness of the senses, she is co-communicator of the certainty of what is to come:

Æthelthryth, being a sensible and sharp woman, and one to whom God at times revealed knowledge of the future, had many predictions to make of the child who was to be born; and the outcome showed their truth.8

4 “et ecce repente uidit ex ore suo prosilire et auolare quasi auream mirae magnitudinis aquilam quae uolando cuncta Wentenae ciuitatis aedificia auratis pennarum remigiis obumbrauit, et in alta caelorum se eleuando disparuit”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
5 “mente uolueret tacita”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
6 “Cumque mulier euigilans secum miraretur attonita et somniorum uisionem mente uolueret tacita nec per semet ipsam conicere posset eorum interpretationem, perrexit ad quandam Christi famulam, nomine Æthelthrytham”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
7 “Cui narraruit ex ordine quod sibi ostensum fuerat in nocturna uisione”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
8 “At illa, sicut erat animo sagaci prudentissima, et interdum etiam futurrorum Domino reuelante praecia, de nascituro infant multa praedixit, quae uera esse rerum exitus indicavit”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
Æthelthryth is thus accorded the ability to understand what the dreams imply and is able to relate their meaning. Wulfstan re-states what Æthelthryth must have said, at which point the explanation is provided for the first banner:

on high we can see that the holy man, then in his mother’s womb, was one day to be standard-bearer in the army of God; as he indeed, was, for we saw him putting up a versatile struggle in defense of Holy Mother Church against her ancient enemy, the devil; thanks to his warfare—or rather God’s victory through him—we saw the machinations of the wicked brought to nought.9

The second dream points to the qualities necessary for Æthelwold’s sainthood, especially the ability of clear sight. The bird’s emblem links with vision, “because the word ‘eagle’ is derived from the sharpness10 of an eagle’s eyes”:11

and because, to cite Holy Writ, ‘there is treasure to be desired,12 resting in the mouth of the wise man, it is proper that a great man, marked out by the treasure of all wisdom, should be designated by the gold eagle whose overshadowing wings seemed to cover the whole city.13

The eagle designates the Bishop, whose mind, like the eagle’s, is also acute. As Christ reaches up to heaven, so too will Æthelwold reach great heights:

For Æthelwold, who thought on divine things with a mind whose acute sight could not be averted, always flew in contemplation to the heavenly. He spread far and wide the shade of his fatherly protection over the church, the ‘city of the great king,’ which was under attack from hostile powers. And when he had completed the race of his good struggle, he came to the sight of God in the company of the saints; as the Lord says in the gospels: ‘wheresoever the body is, thither will the

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9 “in sublimi uexillo intelligentes sanctum uirum, qui tunc in utero portabatur, quandoque futurum militiae Dei signiferum, sicut et erat, quem multimoda relunctatione contra antiquum hostem pro defensione sanctae matris ecclesiae congreidentem uidimus, ipsoque bellante, immo per ipsum Deo uncente, prauorum machinamenta ad nichilum redacta conspeximus”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
10 “acumen”: “aquila ab acumine oculorum uocata”. Etymology is from Isodore, Etymologia xii.7.10 in Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 6-7, no. 2.
11 “Et quia aquila ab acumine oculorum uocatur”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 2, pp. 4-5.
12 Prov. 21.20; cf. also 14.33 in Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 6-7, no. 1.
13 “et testante sacro eloquio thesaurus desiderabilis requiescat in ore sapientis, recte per auream aquillam, quae totam urbem alaram uelamento obumbrare usa est, idem praecelus uir totius sapentiae thesauro decorates exprimitur”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 3, pp. 6-7.
eagles be gathered together,"\textsuperscript{14} because where our Redeemer is in the body, there beyond question are now assembled the souls of the elect, and there too, at the glorious resurrection to come, their bodies will be assembled also.\textsuperscript{15}

Both dream interpretations illustrate the Bishop’s future greatness: “It is clear from this that he [St. Æthelwold] was the elect of God, even before his birth.”\textsuperscript{16} Æthelthryth accepts Æthelwold’s mothers’ dreams as reliably promoting the future sanctity of the Bishop.

The function of the dreams in the text is further emphasized through the association of Æthelwold’s miracles with his translation and cult to follow. Following Æthelwold’s death marvels are attributed to his good work during his lifetime, thereby fulfilling the destiny explained in his mother’s dreams. Wulfstan asserts that after a conversation with Æthelwold, “what I have noted down seemed to be mere dreams. But from this time till today they have never ceased to be fulfilled.”\textsuperscript{17} The first miracle describes a blind man whose vision is recovered upon visiting St. Æthelwold’s tomb; in the second, a clear vision appears to Wulfstan asking him to move St. Æthelwold from his grave to a proper burial in the Church; the third describes a girl who, after a lifelong visual illness, is made well because she sleeps at Æthelwold’s tomb; in the fourth, a blind boy is restored of his sight also at Æthelwold’s tomb; and the last miracle describes a


\textsuperscript{15} “Qui perspicaci et inreuerberata cordis acie diuina meditando, semper ad caelestia per contemplationem uolauit, et super ecclesiam magni regis ciuitatem, quam contariae potestates inpugnare nitebantur, umbraculum paternae protectionis longe lateque expandit, et, consummato boni certaminis cursu, ad uisionem Dei in sanctorum comitatu peruenit; sicut in euangelio uoce dominca dicitur, ‘Vbicumque fuerit corpus, illuc congregabuntur aquilae,’ quia ubi ipse redemptor noster est corpore, illuc procul dubio nunc colliguntur electorum animae, et in futurae resurrectionis gloria illuc quoque eorum colligentur et corpora”: Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, ch. 3, pp. 6-7.


\textsuperscript{17} “Haec quae notauimus somnia tunc quidem uisa sunt”: Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, ch. 39, pp. 60-61.
thief who is transformed by a vision of the saint encouraging his conversion.\textsuperscript{18} These extraordinary cures rewarding the faithful with sight are equated with Æthelwold’s sainthood as an intermediary to God: Æthelwold is endowed with the spirit of God because “the vital spirit is quickened by our Creator and none other, and is given individually to each man.”\textsuperscript{19}

The textual relationship between Æthelwold and Æthelthryth indicates Æthelthryth as a marker for the future bishop. Wulfstan describes Æthelwold’s studious nature as “providential.”\textsuperscript{20} Being marked out by the treasure of all wisdom is a characteristic of both Æthelwold’s and Æthelthryth’s insight, and the term “sapentiae,” referring to a kind of acumen, is similar to one used to describe her. The remark “For Æthelwold, who thought on divine things with a mind whose acute sight could not be averted,” also prefigures Æthelthryth’s perceptive abilities. The passage links the sign of Æthelwold’s “treasure” with “his [Æthelwold’s] mother’s womb,” thereby ensuring Æthelthryth’s position as an intermediary for Æthelwold’s own miraculous intercessory powers. Æthelwold’s mother’s visions appear to qualify Æthelwold for sainthood, with Æthelthryth’s role especially critical to the process whereby he is awarded an esteemed role in life and death.

Also prefiguring the role of insight to confer virtue, Wulfstan describes how Æthelwold is consecrated as a priest by Ælfheah, the current Bishop (934-51), who is also “strong in the spirit of prophecy” and thus able to predict who will succeed him.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, ch. 42, pp. 64-5; ch. 43, pp. 66-7; ch. 44, pp. 68-69.
\textsuperscript{19} “a solo creatore uitalem spiritum uiuificari et singillatim unicuique dari”: Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, ch. 4, pp. 6-9.
\textsuperscript{20} “prudentissimae”: Wulfstan, \textit{Vita St. Æthelwoldi}, ch. 9, pp. 14-15.
Later in the *vita*, Queen Eadgifu remarks how Æthelwold “was so filled with the wisdom given by God.”22 At the end of the *vita*, “a clear vision” appears to Wulfstan, signaling him to effect Æthelwold’s translation. Æthelwold’s successor, another Bishop Ælfheah (984-1005), who is described as having a “sage mind,” ensures that Æthelwold’s remains are moved to the choir of the Church, upon which Wulfstan attests to his “own sight….to add weight to my own assertion.” Wulfstan establishes Æthelthryth’s close connection with Æthelwold’s mother and employs parallel language between Æthelthryth and Æthelwold, as well as adding further endorsements of the role of wisdom, including his own, to describe the importance of sight to confer knowledge.

These important relationships in the text point to the significance of Æthelthryth’s character as carrying the responsibilities of others. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff asserts that texts written about religious women frequently represent them as occupying a middle space between the humble women and the exalted Godhead to equalize the two voices, the human and divine.23 Athalya Brenner argues that women visionaries’ contributions to the public as well as the private domain improve the social roles of women.24 Women usually served other women, according to R. Harris.25 They appear empowered by their faith and their visions to assist others. According to Katherine Wilson,

Mystics considered orthodox and belonging to a monastic order…were respected and highly acclaimed; their gifts of prophecy and clairvoyance were generously acknowledged; and the church made abundant use of their visions...[The female visionary] is depicted (and frequently describes herself) as a vessel of divine

22 “sapientiam”: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, ch. 10, pp. 18-19.


inspiration, not as a creative genius, and the scriptural injunction that God often elects the weak to confound the strong is frequently invoked to explain this phenomenon of lay and female mystical inspiration…the belief in women’s mystical, prophetic, and oracular powers as well as in the female predilection for religious enthusiasm are as old as the record of human history.\textsuperscript{26}

In terms of literary inheritance, women’s wisdom consists of certain goddess characteristics from the Old Testament. Claudia Camp and Shulamit Valler assert that the literary tradition of counseling wisdom is especially personified in feminine images.\textsuperscript{27}

Wise women, according to Schröer, are portrayed in decisive situations, diplomatically interfering in politics and authoritatively influencing the ways of the world through their counsel.\textsuperscript{28} In the lives of saints, stories about especially devout women offer a vital record of their mystical experiences. Petroff describes female visionaries’ activities as “socially sanctioned,” for which the “vision is a response to, not a rejection of, that outer world.”\textsuperscript{29}

Visionary religious women, since most often celibate, through their virginal status were accorded a privileged position in monastic life, which was acceptable to the outside world. Their visions were considered legitimate. Visionary status provided these women with a voice, the confidence as being chosen to speak, and the experience and vehicle for transformation. They often sought a setting where they had the authority to voice their foresight and are often portrayed as spiritual and monastic messengers because dreams provided access to information confirming the Church’s teachings.

\textsuperscript{26} Medieval Women Writers, ed. Katherine M. Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xvii.


\textsuperscript{28} Schröer, “Wise and Counselling Women,” 71.

\textsuperscript{29} Petroff, Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature, 6, 46.
The Middle Ages is an important time for wise female characters. During this period women contributed to spiritual creativity in the sphere of Christian mysticism. Several scholars claim that the rise of Christian visionary literature was a product of the seventh century because of women’s roles in the nascent Christian religion. Since women were already integral to their culture and influential in their communities, they easily adapted to Christian roles. Little is written about women between the seventh and twelfth centuries, leading up to an especially vital and better documented period: a high point for women visionaries. Starting in the twelfth century, religious women were often depicted as possessing qualities necessary for divine knowledge, with female mystics accorded status and respect mainly by the dint of their revelations. The position of Æthelthryth asserts the continuity of female devotion in the relationship between the ancient visionary model and this tenth-century Winchester nun that was necessary to the evolution of the twelfth-century female mystic.


32 Such as the late 12th- and early 13th-century visionaries who are identified with affective spirituality, such as Margery Kempe, Marie d’Oignies and Julian of Norwich: A.C. Spearing, Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love (London: Penguin Books, 1998), xviii. Scholarship dedicated to this period is lengthy, but notable work is found in Rachel Fulton, From Judgment to Passion, which tracks devotion to Christ especially and argues that there is a shift towards compassionate identification with Christ (and Mary) after 1000; Denise Despres, Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature, discusses the broader devotional context in the later Middle Ages; Catherine Sanok and Patricia Cox Miller have worked on asceticism and imagination: see Catherine Sanok, Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
By modeling Æthelthryth’s character on elements of the female visionary, Wulfstan shows how the exemplarity of the hagiographic narrative could prompt the reader to consider the status and stability of religious communities even as they are in the process of being reformed. His depiction of Æthelthryth and her monastic community asserts the control of the visionary experience in which the religious office contains the dream’s reliable interpretation, an example of a cultural norm in which people were encouraged to relate their striking visions directly to their spiritual confessors. Virtues of monastic obedience, along with insight and prophetic understanding, reinforce the message of clerical consultation as an ideal. In regard to the mother’s visions, Wulfstan says that, “we too may act as interpreters of these dreams,”33 meaning that divine vision is permissible to a certain class whose higher knowledge and intellect is necessary to explain a dream’s significance. Æthelthryth’s character illustrates how spiritual authority is mediated through the text’s dream account. Wulfstan portrays Æthelthryth with profound responsibility, on par with other ecclesiastical leaders, and her ability to receive the dreams of others is recognized through a Christian evaluation of its message. The mother’s dreams are central to Wulfstan’s text, and thus Æthelthryth’s role, as the nun to whom she confesses, are key to how they are accepted. Dreams, according to Wulfstan, should be a beneficent prefiguring of future glory and not a future hazard.34 As witness to the mother’s dream, Æthelthryth shares the miraculous moment with her. This is made

33 “Nos quoque eorundem somniorum coniectores esse possumus”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, ch. 3, pp. 5-6.

34 In Bede, HE V.9 Egbert doubts a dream because the message may have been deceptive; in Whitby’s Life of St. Gregory the Great, a priest dismisses a dream: The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 102. In Ælfric’s Lives of Saints, a smith is afraid of a dream of a saint unknown to him (St. Swithun) because he believes the report will be thought untruthful, and the priest Eadsige does not pass the message on: Lives of Saints, ed. W.W. Skeat, Early English Text Society, 76 (London: Trübner, 1881-1900, repr. 2 vols, London: Oxford University Press, 1966), I, 466.
possible because of Æthelthryth’s worthy participation in monastic life and because Æthelthryth readily recognized the value of Æthelwold’s mother’s dreams within the containment of monastic space.

Æthelthryth’s position in this text also provides an understanding of the Reformers’ attitudes toward depictions of prophetic dreams. Because Æthelthryth is the one to whom the mother relates the dreams, and the visions announce the miracle of Æthelwold’s birth and his good works during the period of renewal to come, Æthelthryth has the ability to forecast the Bishop’s virtuous life. She is important to the portrayal of monastic reform. On the one hand, her position at Nunnaminster asserts the importance of church structure and beliefs, and on the other, she is central to the importance of women’s roles in spreading the renewal of the Christian religion. By advancing tenth-century ecclesiastical and political objectives, Wulfstan utilizes the powerful association of age-old prophetic testimony to defend his argument about monastic reorganization at the center of ecclesiastical life in Winchester.

B. Benedictine Reform and the Spirit of Prophecy

Predictions having to do with visions were part of the Benedictine Reformers’ objective for advancing renewal in Winchester. At this time Archbishop Dunstan urged the people of England to be “moved by the spirit of prophecy.” Dreams were no longer needed to bring unbelievers to Christianity in the tenth century because the religion was firmly established throughout England. However, during the tenth century, the Reformers portrayed the Church’s authority in a new position in society, one that required renewing

earlier values and effecting new regulations. As such, dreams were put to new uses, even as the action of interpreting dreams was inherited over time. Writers depicted Reform as commencing upon the interpretation of a dream, in which the vision is used as a learning or correcting device. The skill necessary to interpret a dream was a useful one because religious change required social stability.

Learned and aristocratic audiences during the tenth century in Winchester were also reading the dream interpretation handbook *Somniale Danielis.*

*Somniale Danielis* was based on astronomical observation and includes an alphabetical listing of objects appearing in dreams that aid in determining the future. Helmut Gneuss refers to this guide as “a compendium of the Benedictine Reform Movement,” “laden with meaning.” One passage advises readers to “Seek you wisdom still,” the expression repeated as a sibyl moves to the culmination of her visions. In Greek and Roman legends, Sybil was a prophetess who practiced at different holy sites in the ancient world. In the Graeco-Roman version, she recounts the history of the world from Creation, all the while

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36 British Library MS Cotton Tiberius A.iii (xi) includes *Benedictine Rule* and the *Regularis Concordia,* along with eighteen prognostic texts at the end of the MS. The MS includes a full-page illustration of a seated king (presumably Edgar) flanked by two ecclesiastics, presumably Dunstan and Æthelwold. Another version, Cambridge CCC 391, may have been written in Winchester due to its similarity with another MS (BL Cotton Galba A. ix). It may have a tenth-century English provenance: Wolfgang Butt, “Zur Herkunft der Völuspsá,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literature Tübingen* 91 (1965): 82-103 in Edward L. Risden, “Old English Heroic Poet-Prophets and Their (Un)stable Histories,” *Prophet Margins* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 187, no. 30.


promoting the regeneration of a new and better world thereafter following her dream.\textsuperscript{39}

The *Somniale Danielis* directs the reader to consider visions as forewarning, drawing their attention to the prospect of change.

Similarly, in Wulfstan’s text, visions point to Æthelwold’s future pious life as the Bishop of Winchester, marking his debut during the Benedictine Reform Movement. Because much of the information about Æthelwold’s early life is included in Wulfstan’s *vita*, Æthelwold likely supplied the details used to construct the text, which implies that, as intercessor, he had foreseen his own canonization and furnished Wulfstan with the sacred task of advancing his candidacy.\textsuperscript{40} Æthelwold’s entitlement to religious authority is initially established through his birth portent, the story of which Æthelwold likely crafted for Wulfstan’s use. The dreams’ interpretations proved that Æthelwold was a vessel of divinity who could be appealed to through prayer as an intermediary of God. These marvels function within the *vita* to establish Æthelwold’s sagacity and authority, and further confirmation of divine favor is provided through the miracles connected to his cult, a familiar and ancient model used by Anglo-Saxon writers.

\textsuperscript{39} This sibyl recounts the history of the world from Creation through Ragnarök all the while promoting the regeneration of a new and better world thereafter: *Poems of the Elder Edda*, trans. Patricia Terry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

\textsuperscript{40} Wulfstan, *Life of St. Æthelwold*, ci.
C. Dream Theory in Anglo-Saxon England

Dreams and visions in hagiographical works were read during the Anglo-Saxon period, but the value placed on understanding dreams stretches back to antiquity. Anglo-Saxon writers used similar tropes and accessed stylistic choices from patristic and ecclesiastical texts as a means of following the convention of a visionary’s importance, especially the patterns of sanctity derived from visions. Prognostics were useful measures at this time, indications that visions in dreams were valued sources of knowledge.

Within the monastic environment the control of lay dreams appears to be a clerical prerogative during the Anglo-Saxon period, with the ability to envision the value of a dream representing a character’s sacred prowess. In pregnancy dreams, visionary imagery is a critical factor in the prediction of a child’s future life, which is often associated with pious lives. Anglo-Saxon writers inherited the tradition of ecclesiastical texts promoting pregnant women as having prophetic dreams within religious environments, suggesting the message of priestly consultation as an ideal: religious

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41 In the large majority of texts used here it is impossible to distinguish between dreams and visions as they both consist of mental images in need of explanation. As such, the two experiences will be discussed as a single phenomenon. “Dreams” and “visions” are terms best used interchangeably because their similarity was found in antiquity. Although dreams were sometimes distinguished from visions during the Middle Ages (Kruger, Dreaming in the Middle Ages, 20, 59), monastic texts were not interested in arguing such a distinction. With regard to authority, dreams and visions in Saints’ Lives were not separated in the narratives texts influencing Wulfstan, nor were their differences of concern to him.


43 Kruger, Dreaming in the Middle Ages, passim.
dreams of laywomen required authoritative interpretation. Those associated with religious centers who took care of the souls of noble birth possessed the qualities necessary to understand dreams. These interpreters held intermediary positions valuable to the community.

In the *Vita Columbani* (639/642), Jonas of Bobbio explains why the saint’s mother could not interpret her own dream. Prior to Columban’s birth, his mother had visions of bearing a child. After the mother dreams of the sun rising from inside her, illuminating the entire world, she consulted her monastic neighbors in the morning so she could learn the dream’s meaning, after which they were able to relate that the boy would become a “remarkable genius.” Gregory’s *Dialogues* include a parable about darkness, involving a pregnant woman requiring knowledge about her unborn child. Gregory discusses how the early morning prophecy uses the metaphor of night and day as one of access into the pregnant mother’s dreams: “For the Lord ‘visits us at dawn’ and illuminates our darkness with the light of knowledge of himself.” Visionaries and their dream-interpreters must collaborate for the dream’s full meaning to be revealed at the correct time.

If the nighttime represents the lack of knowledge, then the morning illustrates the dreamer’s access to the knowledge necessary for its interpretation. Churchmen believed pregnant women were in need of wise guidance in advance of giving birth. In the *Vita St. Willibrordi*, Alcuin Bishop of Tours (d.804) narrates Willibrord’s mother’s vision, the

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interpretation of which is provided by a pious priest.\textsuperscript{48} The mother dreams of the new moon growing full and plunging down into her gullet, which is explained as the conception (the growing moon) of her son who would eventually shine (like the celestial body)\textsuperscript{49} growing inside her.\textsuperscript{50} Upon waking she seeks Alcuin to allay her concerns. The mother fails to understand the real significance of her symbolic dream without the aid of counsel. These examples attest to reports of pregnant mothers’ dreams leading to the perpetuation of monastic visions because they signify the expectation of productive religious fruitfulness. The merit of a woman’s dream is often connected with a religious community’s legitimacy; so, too, is the prefiguring of a saint’s birth integral to the promotion of piety.

In the Church, piety was associated with wisdom, and divine knowledge was a source of wisdom that could be accessed through dreams. People believed a dream’s value lay in making predictions that were morally instructive and enlightening, with prophetic skills conveying a character’s qualities and potential. During this period, the Church had particular ideas about how dreams should be interpreted and by whom: those with clerical authority provided the faithful with an understanding of the meaning behind signs, and thus show “forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations” (Is. 11:12).

Some Anglo-Saxon writers viewed dreams as conveying potentially dangerous messages and expressed anxiety about diabolic illusion, and the association between


\textsuperscript{49} Alcuinus, \textit{Vita Willibrordi}, c. 2: \textit{Medieval Sourcebook}, www.sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/Alcuin-willbrord.asp.

untruthful dreams and lax morals circulates between various texts. But others did not aim
to distinguish between types of dreams, avoiding the differentiation between beneficent
dreams and those holding negative worth. Those writers who wanted dreams to be
immediately accepted by their reader directed their audience toward the reception of the
vision because the dream is self-evidently true: holy, factual and acknowledged.
According to Lucian, the divine dream “deserves a very receptive audience.”51 Those
trying to reach a broader audience avoided problematizing dreams by avoiding pointing
to one interpretation and by justifying the dream-stories against critical attitudes that
questioned a dream’s efficacy of revealing truth.52 The dream’s acceptance is presented
as the way of setting the narrative on its correct course to an accurate prediction of the
future.

The appeal of visionary figures and their visions’ abilities to forecast miraculous
events corresponds with Anglo-Saxon writers’ own devices that placed access to dreams
alongside the promotion of the cult of saints. A saint’s miracles are recognized by their
actions, and signs are a measure of these actions. Anglo-Saxon hagiographers tended to
represent the state of the soul through visionary experiences that were often described in
terms of internally expressed sensory effects.53 Visions formed from dreams are informed
by iconography, transferring visual clues to dreamers that portend future events.
Augustine of Hippo (13 November 354–28 August 430) and Gregory the Great (c.540–12
March 604) analyzed how dreams were interpreted through their images, which allows

52 Kruger, Dreaming in the Middle Ages, 76.
53 Amy Hollywood, The Soul as Virgin Wife (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press,
1995), 35.
man to obtain a vision of the divine. According to Augustine, visions can be interpreted on three levels: the surface, the figural and the intellectual. For the latter, it is the spirit, not the mind that shows the soul. Augustine explains that man possesses corporeal sight, which turns mental images into visual imagination. Intellectual sight interprets these images, which is equated with wisdom. Prophecy is the spiritual vision of the images of things and the intellectual comprehension of their meaning. The ability to interpret dreams, which constitutes visionary experience, presents the ideal model of wisdom.

Gregory the Great, who incorporated Augustine’s work, was key to the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity and influenced the period’s depiction of dreams. In *Moralia in Iob*, Gregory specifically connects visionary dreams or night visions (*visiones nocturnae*) with contemplation of the divine. In the *Liber Dialogorum*, Gregory is concerned about the immortality of the soul and the joys of heaven. He recounts how angels conduct the vision of the soul through a brilliant light away from the earth. Sight is both critical in the depiction of sanctity and a powerful sign of wisdom. Wisdom becomes linked to knowledge, which became associated with the symbol of the eagle. This image is taken from the classical myth of Ganymede, who was abducted by Zeus in the form of an eagle, which becomes an important icon of wisdom because the eagle was

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believed to have acute vision. This association lasted until the later Middle Ages. As an example, Hadewijch, a Dutch thirteenth-century mystic, had a vision in which she recounted her dialogue with Christ. In response to her desire for connection with the divine, an eagle appeared telling her: “If you wish to attain oneness make yourself ready!” The eagle is a sign of power, primarily fortitude, and used especially to describe God: “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, beating them on its pinions” (Ex 19:14). Eagles can also soar above hazards, indicating that God and his disciples can overcome great obstacles: “for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). The eagle is essentially symbolic of sovereignty:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, “my refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.” (Psalm 91:1–4).

The eagle is also symbolic of transformation and, therefore, the perfect metaphor for change: for it was God “who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like an eagle’s” (Psalm 103:5). In the Visio Pauli (3rd-century text of the New Testament Apocrypha) the mother of a future saint envisions a mighty eagle perched atop the cross, symbolizing rebirth, and Walfrid Strabo’s (b. c.808-849) De quodam somnio ad Erluinu

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illustrates how Jesus performs the same as an impressive eagle. In this way, visions of eagles were an especially appropriate vehicle for Winchester’s objectives since the course of events leading up to and continuing through the tenth-century Reform Movement could be anticipated as a divine necessity, prophesying that Æthelwold would become an asset to its cause and Wulfstan the conveyer of the Bishop’s narrative.

D. Wulfstan’s Authorial Account

Wulfstan wrote in the tradition in which dreams were a channel of communication between God and man, and in which saints were afforded a privileged position because of the prognostication contained within their dreams. According to Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “faith acts as the guarantee that the community of subject and object is really possible.” The concept of the authorial intermediary in dreams is taken from the Platonic doctrine of Calcidius (4th century) who claimed that divine mediators are always positioned between God and man.

The author’s reception and transcription of visions were proof of accepted sanctity. Hagiography and its visionary dream depictions were inherited from an ancient tradition in which the writer’s observation was inserted overtly into the texts. Writing about dreams, Macrobius (370-430) considered that as authors, “we are gifted with the


powers of divination." Although the dream emphasizes the process by which the vision’s meaning is spread, it is left to the writer to determine its context and significance and therefore place emphasis on the importance of the vision’s transmission.

Wulfstan was determined to draw the reader’s attention to St. Æthelwold, as well as to his pregnant mother, because by tying his authorial role to foretelling Æthelwold’s future, he elevated his own prognostic worth by producing a holy object. In his deployment of sanctity, Wulfstan endorses himself as writer with as much visionary vigor as Æthelwold’s miracles, claiming a privileged association with the saintly bishop. After recounting the mother’s dream, Wulfstan interrupts the vision: “After these brief remarks on the interpretation of the dreams, let us now return to our narrative.” This authorial intrusion reminds his audience that it is the writer who ultimately delivers the message.

The text says a great deal about his ambitions:

What I have noted down seemed then to be mere dreams. But from that time till today they have never ceased to be fulfilled: everyone ablaze with the love of God is hurrying to leave the world and lead a monastic life.

Wulfstan’s writing implies that he considers his part a sanctioned divine opportunity during Winchester’s monastic renewal. His description of the visionary experience not only raises the caliber of the dreams but also emphasizes his own contribution to reformed religious life, asserting that the reliable interpretation of the dream was available to the audience providing it was done with his own clerical interpretation.

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65 “Haec de somniorum interpretatione breuiter diximus; nunc ad narrationis ordinem redeamus”: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, ch. 3, pp. 6-7.

Wulfstan thereby acknowledges his role in conveying the importance of wisdom as central to the text:

For those who desire to hear of his birth, career, and death, I have thought it worthwhile to compose a narrative. Determined that the memory of so great a father should not be consigned to complete oblivion, I have in these pages touched summarily on things that I saw with my own eyes or learned from older men whose account I could trust. My firm hope is that, thanks to Æthelwold’s holy intercessory prayers, my book will be of use to its writer and to those who read it or hear it read.”

By portraying himself as an ideal bishop’s biographer, Wulfstan claims wisdom along with Æthelthryth, as well as the leadership and spiritual authority exemplified by the models he used to depict her.

Saints’ Lives and their authors’ declarations of self-importance were an especially convincing influence for Wulfstan. Ancient sages are represented as good thinkers because of their association with this practice of relating visions, and they were respected within their elite communities for their education and diplomacy, as well as for their ability to interpret dreams. Paulinus of Nola’s (c.354–June 22, 431) friend, Sulpicius Severus (c.363–c.425), known for his biography of St. Martin of Tours, used “prudentes” to refer to the quality needed to live a Christian life. As a model for Sulpicius, Paulinus took “prudentes” from the Old Testament’s account of Lamech, who discerns a future mystery, to emphasize the close relationship between a writer and his subject.

67 “De cuius ortu, gestis et obitu scire cupientibus aliqua narrare dignum duximus, et ne tanti patris memoria penitus obliuioni traderetur ea quae praesentes ipsi uidimus et quae fidelis seniorum relatione didicimus in his scedulis summam perstriximus, illius sanctis confisi suffragiis hoc et nobis qui scripsimus et eis qui lecturi uel audituri sunt profuturum”: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, “Preface,” 2-3.


69 Account of Lamech, who discerns a future mystery: see Stancliffe, St. Martin, 43.
Prophecy reinforces the proper behavior for prediction, incorporated as a form of ecclesiastical literature that also required authorial account. As examples, two Anglo-Saxon tales employ aspects of prophesy. In the *Dream of the Rood*, the Cross recounts the story of a heroic Christ, urging the dreamer to declare this vision to the people. The prophetic message is delivered from the Cross to the audience. *Beowulf*’s anonymous author forecasts the future in the prediction of the fall of the Geats. According to Robert Burlin, the story portrays a “deep-rooted connection between story-telling and wise counsel.”

Bede’s purpose also might be called prophetic since he, asserts C. Warren Hollister, “narrate[s] the miraculous rise of Christianity in Britain and its crucial role in imposing coherence and purpose on the chaos of human events.” Wulfstan’s reputation was also burnished because he was the conduit of the story, revealing it to his public in his capacity as author. The description of the mother’s dreams was effective in advancing Wulfstan’s sense of legitimacy, which is akin to the portrayal of Gregory by Aldhelm who, as the author, was the communicator of divinely revealed wisdom. Aldhelm elevated himself as a pupil, emphasizing his own role in directing the reader’s attention to Gregory’s good works. In his prose *De Virginitate* Aldhelm wrote: “Whence Gregory, the watchful shepherd and our teacher—‘our’, I say [because it was he] who took away from

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our forbears the error of abominable paganism and granted the rule of regenerative
grace.” 73 Wulfstan accomplished as much in his role as Æthelwold’s biographer.

E. Wulfstan’s Use of Tracing the Terms Sagaci and Prudentissima

Like the terms used to describe Æthelwold and those writers whom Wulfstan
models himself after, Wulfstan uses images of positive action to describe Æthelthryth,
ones possessing a particular and consistent moral association. The practical nuances
associated with “sagaci” are joined with the intellectual concept of wisdom connected
with “prudentissima.” These assets imbue Æthelthryth’s character with the ability to
perceive and speak with truth; the terms function together in the text, not only due to their
proximity to one another, but also because when united they form a greater impression of
those qualities related to wisdom. The sage is associated with the terms “sagaci” and
“prudentissima,” which are Æthelthryth’s figurae. Her role as a sage is joined with the
scribe, 74 providing authorship, counseling, teaching and healing. 75 The prudent sage
image went back thousands of years, with “sagax” meaning “prophetic” or
“perceptive,” 76 whose senses are acute. 77 The other term, “prudens,” means “knowing,”

73 “Gregorius, pervigil pastor et pedagogus noster—noster, inquam, qui nostris parentibus errorem tertrae
genitilitatis abstulit et regnerationis normam tradidit”: Aldhlemi opera, ed. R. Ehwald, Monumenta
74 Gammie and Perdue, The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East, x.
75 Carole R. Fontaine, “The Social Role of Women in the World of Wisdom,” in A Feminist Companion to
76 Michiel de Vaan, Etymological Dictionary of Latin and other Italic Language (Leiden and Boston:
Brill, 2008), 534.
77 The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources, ed. R.E. Latham, D.R. Howlett, and R. K.
“skillful,” “experienced,” versed and practiced;\textsuperscript{78} also, “discreet,” “sensible,”
“intelligent,” “clever,” and “judicious.”\textsuperscript{79} These abilities we associate with law: “juris
prudens.”\textsuperscript{80} “Prudens” is the wisest.\textsuperscript{81} Cicero (3 January 106–7 December 43 BCE)
describes the sage at length:

what we mean by an acute mind, they have been given by nature and vigor and
dispatch much time deriving and, so to speak, wise, these things, and see the
causes of things and the consequences of and transfer images and contrasted with
present and future join together all…\textsuperscript{82}

The qualities attached to the sage, according to Cicero, are “far-sighted,” “shrewd,”
“versatile,” and “sharp” with “memory, full of reason and of the council”,\textsuperscript{83} one who
“wisely investigates.”\textsuperscript{84}

Wulfstan applied the archetypal concept of the wise woman to Æthelthryth. In the
Bible, we find “Woman Wisdom” (Prov. 1-9) and “Woman of Worth” (Prov. 31.10-31).
The sage is a female poet and scholar.\textsuperscript{85} In the Book of Proverbs, women are portrayed in
this light: seeking active roles as visionary guides, revealing themselves as prophets by
“opening her mouth with wisdom” (Prov. 31.26). Solomon reports: “I therefore
determined to take her [wisdom] to share my life, knowing she would be my counselor in

\textsuperscript{82} “quod rationem habent a natura datam mentemque acrem et vigentem celerrimeque multa simul
agitatem et, ut ita dicam, sagacem, quae et causas rerum et consecutiones videat et similitudines
transferat et disiuncta coniungat et cum praesentibus futura copulet omnemque”: Cicero, \textit{De Finibus
\textsuperscript{83} “sagaciter odorantur”: Cicero, \textit{De Legibus}. 1.7.22; \textit{De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum}, 2.14.45;
\textsuperscript{85} Harris, “The Female ‘Sage’ in Mesopotamian Literature,” in \textit{The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near
prosperity, my comfort in care and sorrow” (Prov. 8.9). Æthelthryth’s role in providing counsel was drawn from these ideal depictions of women and from the figure of wisdom herself, as well as those female leaders who are depicted establishing and ruling English monasteries, responsible for communities dedicated to religious life. Æthelthryth’s connection with Æthelwold’s pregnant mother and her dreams attests to the dedication of Anglo-Saxon writers to the role of the female prophet in the delivery and acceptance of the visionary message, along with the inherited and interrelated significance of its use.

F. Wulfstan’s Sources for Æthelthryth’s Visionary Qualities

In addition to Old Testament tropes, stories from the New Testament, especially Mary’s role in Jesus’s birth, form important models for Æthelthryth’s sagacious qualities, qualities that we associate with the ancient ability of women to offer good advice. This imagery grows more detailed in the case of Anglo-Saxon female visionaries, whose descriptions were adopted from Mary’s portrayal. The cult of the Virgin was enjoyed during the early Christian and medieval periods, with the representation of the earliest female saints drawn from Mary and the miracles associated with her pregnancy. Apocryphal gospels of Mary relate to her birth, childhood, Annunciation, death and Assumption. The attention to Mary indicates the degree to which her body is understood to be perfectly pure. Apocrypha were popular throughout the Middle Ages, read in Old English translations of Latin texts, dating at least from the time of Bede.86 Margaret Barker and Barbara Newman assert that wisdom literature during the Middle Ages is taken from the story of Mary, and Laura Saetveit Miles asserts that Mary at the

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Annunciation provides a connection with wisdom. The interaction with the divine had immense consequences, as Christ was the result of Mary’s mystical pregnancy. Mary was deeply embedded in Western culture, and representations of medieval women connected with prophecy and pregnancy became associated with this image. The Annunciation (Luke 3:1, 26-38) describes Mary holding a book at the moment of the news of Christ’s conception: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isaiah 7:14). As Mary reads the word of God, Christ comes alive in her womb. Mary is ideally positioned to act as a representative of wisdom.

Ecclesiastical writers during the Anglo-Saxon period inherited Mary as a subject for and model of visionary power, which dominated medieval devotion. This tradition was important to the Anglo-Saxons’ ideal of a Mary-centric Christian approach to female monastic representation. After all, Mary was said to divide her day in the style of monastic hours (6.2). Byzantine sermons from the eighth to the tenth centuries described her as possessing the wisdom of Athena. With the concomitant growth of Mary’s cult, the idea developed that because she was the mother of Christ, she was both spiritually and intellectually gifted. Her wisdom is seen through holy texts that constitute part of her unparalleled suitability for bearing the Son of God, reflecting the emerging monastic habits that placed the Psalms at the center of both solitary devotion and communal liturgy. An early intimation of Mary’s reading is found in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which served as a further veneration of Mary and was received in the

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West. Pseudo-Matthew claims: “No one could be found who was better instructed than she (Mary) in wisdom and in the law of God, who was more skilled in singing the songs of David (Psalms).” Wisdom was associated with Mary because she was the embodiment of knowledge. Among all the virgins of the temple where she was presented in her youth, there was no one more learned in the wisdom of the law of God than the young Mary. This knowledge is applicable to the medieval period when female sanctity was an important aspect of religious representation.

In the English tenth-century Vercelli Book, the author likens the Cross to Mary as a tangible living being chosen by God for the unfolding of His plan. As a further example of the importance of Mary at the time and place Wulfstan was writing his Vita St. Æthelwoldi, Æthelwold’s Benedictional, one of the earliest insular artistic depictions of the Annunciation, demonstrated the bishop’s personal dedication to this female saint. The Benedictional is considered a central source of the image of the Virgin connected to the Winchester school of illumination. For the blessing of the first Sunday in Advent, the

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manuscript features Mary sitting with a spindle in her hand.\textsuperscript{92} Anglo-Saxon readers could follow the model of Mary in an active contemplation that engenders the divine.

Anglo-Saxon writers depicted visionary religious women as associated with religious houses where gifts of prophecy provided evidence of spiritual authority. The earliest Anglo-Saxon nun portrayed as having visions is Eorcengota, granddaughter of King Eadbald of Kent (d.640, r.616-640). Bede describes Eorcengota as a nun under the Abbess Fara at a monastery in the Frankish region of Brie. Eorcengota is a “virgin to God, and many wonders and miraculous signs were associated with this place.”\textsuperscript{93}

Eorcengota is capable of intelligently relating visions from dreams: “She explains that the revelation she had received was in this form.”\textsuperscript{94} Eorcengota’s aunt, St. Æthelburh (c.606-647), the daughter of King Æthelberht of Kent (c.550-24 February 616; r.589-616), first English king to convert to Christianity, established one of the earliest Benedictine nunneries in England at Lyminge, reflecting the Christian conquest of England and the role of monasteries in shaping English identity. Bede also emphasized the miracles and visions of Barking Abbey nuns (f. c.692), offering examples of women who promoted the worth of their own religious communities through visionary accomplishment. Bede says that Æthelburh’s lost \textit{Life} is a source of his chapters on Barking Abbey.\textsuperscript{95} On Æthelburh’s deathbed, another nun, Torctgyd, experienced a marvelous vision of Æthelburh, which


\textsuperscript{93} “huius autem virginis Deo dictatae multa quidem abincolis loci illius solent opera uirtutum et signa miraculorum”. The editors tell us Bede used a lost Life of St. Æthelburh as he wrote the chapters on Barking Abbey: Bede, \textit{HE}, III.8, p. 356.


\textsuperscript{95} Bede, \textit{HE}, III., 8, p. 356, no. 2.
recounted the miracles during Barking’s foundation.96 Spiritual guidance was also important for Bede, so much so that an abbess could guide both spiritual and lay communities. Bede refers to St. Hildilith (d. c.725), an early abbess of Barking, her long rule, and her association with the miraculous cure of a blind man:97 “So great was her prudence that not only ordinary people, but also kings and princes, sometimes sought out and received her recommendation when in difficulties.”98 St. Hildilith’s first pupil at Barking was Earconwald’s sister, Æthelburg, the first Abbess of Barking.99 As another example, Aldhelm’s Prosa de Virginitate is dedicated to Hild (c.614-d. c.717), the founding Abbess of Whitby Abbey, who was recognized for her sagacity. Hild was known as the local wise-woman who offers practical advice. Aldhelm recognizes her because of her role as a visionary at the great female monastic house.100 So great was Bede and Aldhelm’s influence that Barking and Whitby continued to serve as a models for Anglo-Saxon female religious life into the later Middle Ages.

Leoba also served as a model for female religious women pursuing a monastic vocation, with her *vita* signaling the importance of astute consultation during

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99 Earconwald was the Bishop of London (675-693) during which time he contributed to King Ine of Wessex’s law code: Barbara Yorke, *Conversion of Britain, 600-800* (Harlow: Pierson Longman, 2006), 235.

100 The holy virginity of Elijah (20.1.2), Daniel (21.39.40) and John the Baptist (23.4.5) as well as *Visio Santi Pauli* are insinuated by Aldhelm: *Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2012), 66, no. 38.
pregnancy. In Rudolph of Fulda’s (c.837) biography, the miracles describing Leoba and her mother relate to certain prophecies about Leoba’s future life. One prophecy reveals Leoba’s mother receiving a dream vision that is explained by an important member of her community. Rudolph describes Leoba’s mother as infertile, but she later dreams of her future daughter, Leoba, who gathers a purple cord coming out of her mouth. The purple cord signifies wisdom and good speech springing from the heart, and the ball of yarn in her hand indicates that Leoba would also implement this wisdom in her good works. Leoba’s mother decides to ask a nun to decipher her dream. This aged religious nurse, an acknowledged prophetess who also exercises her gifts as a seer on a frequent basis, is summoned. The dream indicates that Leoba’s mother will bear a virtuous daughter due to the prediction about the purple cord: “Thus the interpretation of the dream which she had previously received was fulfilled.”

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prophetic because she helps Leoba’s mother understand her visions.105 “And because the nurse foretold she should have such happiness,”106 the dream that the “nutrix” interprets guarantees Leoba’s standing in the Church. The depiction of Leoba’s wisdom can be traced to Mary’s Annunciation scene. In this scene, Mary spins purple thread assigned to her by one of the priests as part of the veil for the temple.107 Several later medieval women visionaries, most prominently among them Elizabeth of Töss, Bridget of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich, focus on Mary’s role in the Incarnation as a way of validating the prophetic vocation.108 The Virgin Mary’s body and book offer these religious women a discourse on knowledge that sanctions their own female authorship, an indication that Mary served as a model for religious women throughout the Middle Ages.

G. Female Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages

During the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, texts attested to the abilities of prophetic women like Æthelthryth who were depicted as having direct involvement in the religious sphere. The importance of visions in the life of Æthelthryth’s character, given her relationship with the pregnant mother, prefigures later medieval religious writers’


108 In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), Revelations of Divine Love and Margary Kempe (1373-1441) emerge to continue the tradition in England, previously represented by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Scrivas; Elizabeth of Schonau (d.1164) and Methilde of Hackeborn (1241-98), The Book of Special Grace; and St Gertrude the Great (1256-1302). In the fourteenth century there are two outstanding visionaries: St. Bridget of Sweden (1307-73), Revelations; and St. Catherine of Siena (1347-80), Dialogue.
fascination with bodily processes. In the High Middle Ages there was a shift toward Christ’s Humanity, associated with His suffering human body. At this time, medieval thought associated spirit and femininity with the physical, and women could feel a connection with Jesus in his Passion, for according to Elizabeth Spearing, “they could hope to have special access to the sacredness associated with the body.”\(^{109}\) This was the first time in the history of Christianity that women were thought able to influence and stage piety:\(^{110}\) “bodiliness provides access to the sacred.”\(^{111}\) Carolyn Walker Bynum points out that this period saw the person as a “psychosomatic unity,” as body and soul forged together in union with God.\(^{112}\) Female visionaries emphasized a “mystical” union with God, which is portrayed as a direct communication produced by human effort, between the believer and God. Holy women were therefore customarily portrayed as conduits of knowledge, described as making calls to action because of their roles in visionary experiences.

Miracles, including visionary reports, were given special attention during this time and became associated with female spirituality. The twelfth-century anchorite Christina of Markyte’s inner life was comprised of visions of Mary. Following Christina’s description of the Queen of heaven, the Virgin Mary responds to her rapt attention by declaring, “Ask Christina what she wants, because I [Mary] will give her

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whatever she asks.” Birgitta of Sweden (b. 1303) also used Mary as a model for her life. Birgitta was a mystic who is described as filled with the wisdom of God. She has the gift of prophecy and the knowledge about things that are otherwise secret. In her *Liber Celestis Revelationes*, she recounts: “I received such great wisdom through him [Jesus Christ] that I not only could understand that learning of scholars, I could even discover whether other hearts were true.”

Birgitta’s visions are ones in which God states that her role was as a “bride and channel” of Christ. She experiences a “mystical pregnancy,” which the Virgin must help her understand as part of her prophetic visions. Mary acts as Birgitta’s instructor, intercessor and guide, and the Virgin’s reception of the Incarnation functions as the model for Birgitta’s own reception of the visionary gift. In Birgitta’s first “revelation,” Mary discusses the moment when Gabriel visited her (Book I, ch. 10).

Much like Mary, Birgitta has unique access to divine truth, which is acquired by divine vision. Another extraordinary woman, Christine de Pizan (1364-c.1430), saw women’s natural wisdom and moral qualities as ones to be recognized, providing women with education to make such virtues flourish into knowledge. Christine’s *Book of the City of Ladies* creates an allegorical picture in which Reason, Justice and Rectitude are conceptualized as sagacious women.

**H. Later Medieval Nunnaminster Visionaries**

Further evidence of Æthelthryth as a model for the female visionary intermediary

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can be found in a manuscript associated with Æthelthryth’s monastery, Nunnaminster. The 1422 vivid devotional prose work “Revelations of Purgatory”\textsuperscript{115} was written during a later Benedictine Reform Movement. In the text, an anonymous female monastic author at the female Winchester house is described with the figural quality of “sapientia.” As a response to her sister Margaret’s torments, the nun offers deliverance in the form of prayer. Our writer begins her text with an appeal to her readers to understand Margaret’s progress through the pains of purgatory because of Margaret’s harrowing dream experience.\textsuperscript{116}

This female author and intermediary relates how her sister’s prayers were dedicated to Mary, invoking the Virgin mother as her protector and requesting that prayers be dedicated to Her [Mary] for support: “Dear Lady, help me.”\textsuperscript{117} Mary is the best guide of all the saints.\textsuperscript{118} Her sister asks Margaret, “Why she had cried more on Our Lady than on God Almighty or on any other saint?” To which Margaret replies: “Indeed, because she [Mary] is the head of all other saints, except God alone, and because Mary is the well of mercy.”\textsuperscript{119} The text’s objective is to make the visionary known to her sisters by pointing to another nun as an example of larger Church’s aim to reform monastic life.

This member of the intellectual Winchester community, sanctioned by the visionary experience, begins: “all who read this narrative, listen hear... how she


\textsuperscript{116} For Nunnaminster: four priests are found in Winchester; John Perry was a monk of St. Swithun’s, since the priory and abbey had a history of contact with the nunnery; Richard Bone’s position as priest at Nunnaminster supplies even more convincing support; Margaret’s named at Nunnaminster.

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Revelations of Purgatory}, ed. Hartley, 336.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Revelations of Purgatory}, ed. Hartley, 605.

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Revelations of Purgatory}, ed. Hartley, 597-602.
recounted her suffering to her confessor.” (2-5) She describes all that has happened in her “religious house” (45), not only all that has happened to her sister, but that she has the essential tools to provide the intercession necessary to help her community become redeemed (saved). This female holy speaker alerts her own monastic house by relating the vision to her confessor, that “she do write” (8), indicating that these women religious considered their dreams to contain important messages and the important role of the spiritual confessor at Nunnaminster.

Nothing in The Revelations of Purgatory suggests that this later medieval woman thought herself intellectually inferior to the larger monastic community. On the contrary, she confidently distinguishes herself as legitimate in her role as a writer in addition to providing knowledgeable spiritual relief for her fellow monastic community. This intermediary nun is therefore able to relate Margaret’s dream vividly and clearly while interceding on her behalf with understanding and concern, thereby impressing upon Church officials that she could inform her targeted mixed community which claims her as a visionary.

While there is no textual evidence that this nun was thinking of Æthelthryth in particular, the same pattern of the vision’s importance occurs in both cases. Æthelthryth stands as a model upon which this later depiction rests. Æthelthryth distinguishes herself as a reformer by renewing her own dedication to the power of visionary thinking, and later female visionaries and intermediaries at the same monastic house serve in a position of influence. Æthelthryth’s particular sanctity corresponded to illustrious presentations of prominent characters in later saints’ Lives as well as at least one important visionary text from the nunnery she is depicted as ruling over.
I. Conclusion

Wulfstan distinguishes Æthelthryth as qualified to witness Æthelwold’s mother’s dreams, with her figural quality as a wise woman illustrating her propensity for wisdom. After serving as “nutrix,” Æthelthryth displays another symbolic quality of comfort and guidance as “sagaci prudentissima.” This time, she is the prophetic interpreter of the dream’s imagery. Her character effectively advances religious women’s contribution to accepted ideals of female sanctity, her portrayal in line with other saintly women who possess similar gifts from God. It was one thing to witness visions that bolstered the reputation of an established male saint; it was quite another for an intercessory female figure other than a saint to assume divine knowledge on matters of ecclesiastical importance because it would be cause for male sainthood.

“Nutrix” and “sagaci prudentissima” are united together in Æthelthryth’s depiction. The terms themselves are deliberately connected; their textual proximity offers a particular understanding of Æthelthryth’s character. Her representation as “nutrix” and “sagaci prudentissima” closely associate together in the role of protector and intercessor of her community. These unified terms also signal an inherited tradition of combining the qualities of nurse and wise woman, with the joining of these two images implying a further concordance between the body and spirit. Æthelthryth serves a female population, providing comprehensive comfort and insight. Gregory describes an “old nurse,” which serves as a possible model for Æthelthryth in this role. It is the “old nurse” who notices a miracle that everyone else had missed. Because the “nurse” had previously seen nuns rise from their tombs and leave the church in a dream, the nurse is able to make the offering to the souls of two deceased nuns in order to free them from the “sentence of
excommunication.”120 The community benefits from the nurse’s wisdom; she affords impetus for kinship, with her combined figural qualities depicted as providing needed leadership. As with the above case, Leoba’s *Life* too provides a valuable source about monastic life, thought and ideals. Leoba, a religious leader, took the advice of her nurse, who related the meaning of Leoba’s mother’s pregnancy dream. The predictions and prophecies associated with Leoba established her as a model for religious conversion since she was part of the early English missionary effort in Germany; she is herself portrayed as a symbol of authority and as intercessor in monastic leadership, with her most courageous act consisting of her belief that a mystery was hidden in her dreams. For Leoba and Æthelwold’s *Lives* to be miraculous, a spirit of prophecy had to be located within a female monastic environment. This particular kind of agency infuses religious women with authority. The fact that the vision portends great things for Leoba is not surprising. The meaning of the thread and of the ball which Leoba made by rolling it round and round provides a specific statement of the type of leadership Leoba will display, one that is inherited from Mary’s spinning at the temple.

Mary, Leoba and Æthelthryth’s depictions as wise women, or *sapientia*, are derived from ancient Wisdom (Sofia) directly connected with female spiritual ideals. Æthelthryth as a healing visionary provides a model for female monastic leadership because she is seen as able to guide her community. In her monastic context the learning associated with visionary performance is seen as restoring a distinctive and specialized aptitude. Wulfstan promoted Æthelthryth as an authority on visions, which expressed the

duties of ecclesiastical leadership, one that granted sharp-minded power. She is Wisdom again.

*The Life of St. Æthelwold* was also constituted through the act of wisdom, with Æthelthryth portrayed as a wise woman, witness to the cause for its creation. As a visionary intermediary, Æthelthryth’s abilities propel her character toward greater significance in the text not only because she is key to a dream’s judiciousness, but because she contributes to asserting St. Æthelwold’s and Wulfstan’s importance. The added quality of wisdom places Æthelthryth as central to Æthelwold’s mother’s visions, visions discernible due to this religious woman’s sight. Æthelthryth’s insight also prefigures the bishop’s sanctity and qualifies the author’s motive for writing *St. Æthelwold’s Life*, providing the basis from which St. Æthelwold’s and Wulfstan’s own valuable role arise. These three textual participants convey the perception of dependable forms of religious behavior, which would have been appreciated by an audience qualified to understand venerable visionary symbols as well as the method and purpose of hagiography. According to the reading of Æthelthryth’s wise character, St. Æthelwold was endowed with divine visions, provided that Æthelthryth was the conduit between the lay and the religious community’s ability to forecast them. Although Wulfstan asserts the Bishop’s centrality in the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, Æthelthryth is depicted as also having a special link with God. She is a necessary intermediary to the dreams’ prophecies and to Wulfstan’s own greatness as author. Since Æthelthryth channels the role of the pregnant mother to understand the dream’s value, she also acquires a mystical connection with the bishop, a spiritual parental bond with Æthelwold, like that of a mother.
CHAPTER VI

MATREM

The mother is one who cannot fail to love her child (Song of Songs)\(^1\)

A. Introduction

In Wulfstan’s *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, Bishop Æthelwold “established flocks of nuns,” placing Æthelthryth in a guiding position over them. Æthelthryth is also portrayed as “matrem” (English *mother*).\(^2\) She is protector of her religious community, as well as of Æthelwold’s mother, in a role associated with the Benedictine Reform movement’s definition of motherhood. This “motherhood” represents the Virgin Mary’s purity within the Catholic Church. While “motherhood” is a symbolic reference to the quality necessary to parent a community, “abbess” (Latin *abattissa*) includes the authority to rule. Wulfstan does not use the title “abattissa” to describe Æthelthryth, and that refusal is deliberate, an indication of the Reformers’ mission to promote monastic reorganization and to redefine ruling positions at Nunnaminster.

Scholars who study early English nuns understand that Anglo-Saxon writers reserved “matrem” or, more commonly “mater” for the female leader of a spiritual family because she was a female nurturer. She held a filial affection that associated her with the mother of her nuns: “mater” means “a mother.”\(^3\) “Mater,” however, does not include the supremacy to command associated with “abbess” because it possesses few of the qualities of the Benedictine male superior “abbot” (Latin *abbas*). Religious male leaders are

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\(^1\) Sermon 12 on the Song of Songs, par. 4, OB 1:62-63; sermon 23, par. 2, pp. 139-40; sermon 26, par 6, p. 173; letter 258, *Patrologia Latina* 192: cols 466A-67A; letter 300, col. 502A-C.


\(^3\) Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, www.perseus.tufts.edu/.
described in a position of authority based on their office; women described as “mater” have an analogous ability but are never equal. Female religious rulers had never been thought equivalent to male rulers since the earliest religious regulation, *The Benedictine Rule*, was written to facilitate masculine religious leadership. The *Rule* states that “an abbot [who]…is worthy to rule a monastery should always remember what he is called and realize in his actions the name of a superior…therefore, when anyone has received the name of abbot, he ought to rule.”\(^4\) The abbot commands authority; the mother is lovingly kind. The role of mother is but one facet of the leader, drawing upon the loving Benedictine male abbot from Chapter 64 of the *Rule*, who is described as the parent who bears the heavy burden of caring for children. In both the spiritual and material sense, the abbess merits the description “mother” because the abbess’s responsibilities include a parental role. The *Rule of Donatus* uses “matrem,” not “abbatissa,” to describe the affection that the religious community held for a parent, indicating how the term was meant to convey motherhood. Donatus replaced the Benedictine obligation to obey the community with the pronouncement to love the mother because the term avoids the association with the male authority linked to abbot. However, the *Rule of the Abbess*, written for the sole purpose of female religious rule, does not include “mater” because it is inherent in the abbess’s title, and this title is applied in conjunction with ability to command.\(^5\) When she is described as “mater,” she is the mother who protects; when she is “abbess,” the life of the community depends on her judgment.\(^6\) The reason for the distinction between “abbess” and “mater” is central to understanding Æthelthryth’s


particular depiction as leading the female religious community, Nunnaminster, in Wulfstan’s text.

It is in the role of mother that the use of maternal language associated with female religious life becomes acute. This is because writers promoted the Church’s organization as central to religious life. In this structure “the celebration of the lower principle upholds the high principle,” which is, according to Dinah Wouters, a commemoration of the hierarchy itself. During the early Anglo-Saxon period, the “office of the abbess” (Latin *officium abbatissae*) was respectful of the role of spiritual maternity as inherent in the leadership position she held. Claire A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing focus on Abbess Hild of Whitby to illustrate spiritual motherhood, for they see Bede’s use of “mother” to convey both affection and reverence. There is good reason for them to think so. Hild, according to Bede, is “mother” not only to her own community but also to the larger public: “She is called ‘Mother’ by all who knew her.” Citing her devotion and concern, nuns call the abbess “My most dear mother” and “A careful mother.” Hild is also called abbess because early Anglo-Saxon writers promoted Christian ideals that would induce the early conversion of the English people to adopt an ordered community, one in which controlled religion subordinated monastic leaders within a chain of command. When the tenth-century Reformers selected the *Benedictine Rule* for renewing monastic life, they

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10 Bede, *HE*, IV, xxi, 255; iv, 23.
11 Bede, *HE*, IV, xxi, 255; ix, 223.
were signaling a secondary role, as well as male definitions of religious authority; when Wulfstan used “matrem” he was also pointing to the reduction of female religious agency.

The image of the powerful Church as maternal figure was not new to the early medieval period. It is found in the Latin West, in the writings of the apostle Paul as well as in Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Augustine frequently described the Church as mother.12 Within this context, the role of the mother became linked with monastic women who devote themselves to their religious communities, represented by the monastic familia.13 According to Carolyn Bynum, the role of motherhood is a means to convey monastic organization and was used as a model for religious women in the cloister.14 Laura Saetveit Miles, John C. Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler explain that the mother of a religious community was linked to the responsibility for kinship amongst her nuns, representing the cohesion of the religious family by promoting the idea of the monastic offspring.15 Monastic life was promoted as a better and closer household than the outside world could provide, and adopting novices, as Luke Demaitre points out, was essential to the continuation of the monastic family

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14 Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

order. Maintaining the delicate balance between kinship loyalties and the unity of monastic family was crucial, particularly during times of secular political turmoil and regime change. Through the conscious construction of a new monastic parentage, the monastery reinforced the renewal of the spiritual family. Delineating the parent/child relationship of the monastic family was also essential to minimizing conflicts arising from loyalties to consanguineous kin. The preoccupation with molding the strength and unity of the spiritual family mattered not only to the harmony of the new monastic community, but was also of critical significance to the monastery’s economic prosperity, especially during periods of religious reform when control of monastic property was of particular concern.

Wulfstan’s focus on promoting Æthelthryth as a mother was beneficial for the Reformers’ goals. Æthelthryth’s depiction in the early chapter of the Vita St. Æthelwoldi (ch. 2) does not mention Æthelthryth’s specific leadership over Nunnaminster, while her later description (ch. 22) does. Since over 60 years ensue between the two chapters, Æthelthryth appears to be endorsed by Wulfstan in the final section of the text during the time when reform measures, namely the renewal of Benedictine precepts, were being promoted as already underway. Subsequent versions of Wulfstan’s text reflect this hypothesis: Æthelthryth’s description as ruling over a “flock of nuns” was changed to “monastery,” the term suggesting textual adherence to regulation, in another manuscript of the same title copied after the tenth century, referring to the presumed success of the

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earlier Reform’s measures. Once Reform had apparently taken hold, the view that “monastery” was equated with religious renewal prompted a change in language.

Why did some contemporaneous documents include the term abbess but the *Vita St. Æthelwoldi* did not? Wulfstan describes Æthelthryth’s succession as “matrem” rather than “abbatissa,” and we should ask if he would have expected his readers to note this exchange of terms. One of the contemporaneous documents to include “abbess” is *RC*, which mentions “abbess” in a context that evokes royal agreement:

[King Edgar] drove out the negligent clerics with their abominations, placing in their stead for the service of God, throughout the length and breadth of his dominions, not only monks but also nuns, under abbots and abbesses; and these, out of gratitude to God, he enriched with all good things.  

Another example, Æthelwold’s adaption of the *Rule*, replaces the masculine grammatical forms with feminine ones, asserting that the abbess performs functions similar to that of an abbot. The abbot is described here as possessing those qualities that Wulfstan uses to describe Æthelthryth: “let the abbot follow the procedure of a prudent physician” (ch. 28), indicating his knowledge of the necessary qualities for a religious leader. Furthermore, the abbot “undertakes the government of the soul” (ch. 2), which privileges this monastic ruler over all others within the ecclesiastical space. These earlier texts empower the abbess, authorizing her essential role in her community. But Wulfstan shuns this kind of identification to make a point. “The abbot should always remember what he

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18 “mandras” to “monasterium,” Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek I. 81, fols. 94’-101r (unknown English center); Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, “Sigla of Manuscripts Cited,” clxxxiv, 36.


20 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 201.
is and what he is called” (ch. 2), Wulfstan emphasizes. What then is the identity of the abbess, if she cannot be called one?

I propose that Wulfstan’s reason for avoiding the term “abbess” to describe Æthelthryth’s position in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi was strategic: by depriving her of this title he was able to remove the specific association between Nunnaminster and royal ruling female religious, particularly women who exercised primary control over their communities, including those that were double monasteries. Given Wulfstan’s split with the RC’s earlier description of a female religious leader, both Winchester products, how do we place a woman’s rank thus described by Wulfstan? Several scholars have weighed in on the question of Æthelthryth’s status, offering different interpretations of her title. In light of what Wulfstan says about her, “Æthelthryth’s position is equivalent to a nun,” according to David Dumville.21 Michael Lapidge determines that Æthelthryth’s function closely aligns with an abbess at Nunnaminster,22 indicating that she behaves in the text as if she were one, even without this title. Barbara York agrees that she is an abbess rather than a nun,23 but this is conjecture, without any textual evidence.

We may conclude that Æthelthryth’s description suggests that her category of religious woman was depicted as specifically and definitively not an abbess as part of an agenda of monastic reform to suppress a woman’s affiliation with royalty and control. Offering an interesting supposition, Sarah Foot claims that, given Æthelthryth’s

21 David N. Dumville, Wessex and England From Alfred to Edgar (Boydell and Rochester: Boydell Press, 1992), 82, no. 120.

22 British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius D.iv, Winchester: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 4, no. 3. There is no witness to Wulfstan’s text earlier than the twelfth century. Since the text can be traced to c.1100, s.xi/xii, more than a century elapsed between the time Wulfstan wrote the text and the earliest surviving manuscript: Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, clxxviii-clxxxii.

description, she could have been a single vowess living next to the male community.\textsuperscript{24}

Although Wulfstan is mute on the connection between Æthelthryth’s residence and another of a different gender next door, Foot’s explanation harkens back to an early Anglo-Saxon monastic tradition. The Winchester arrangement mirrors this religious organization: Old (male), New (male) and Nunna- (female) mynsters’ buildings were in close proximity to one another. However, no writer, medieval or otherwise, has referenced this type of monastic organization in Winchester. Why were these male and female tenth-century religious houses built in juxtaposition with one another but not once discussed under this coordinated relationship?

One reason may point to how female religious leaders were consistently described as abbes, pointing to a woman’s right to own monastic property and the matrilineal nature of their monastery. In the double monastery tradition, royal female family members led religious communities. The term “double houses” describes the earliest female monasteries in England where the abbes ruled over adjacent male and female houses.\textsuperscript{25} Female monasteries functioned as religious homes for women, and abbeses ran their communities as households. In the early Anglo-Saxon period any new female religious house was a double monastery in which a mother consecrated a royal daughter into the maternal community.\textsuperscript{26} This institutional transmission invested daughters with power, especially power associated with monastic property ownership. Abbeses maintained control of their land through the maternal line. Examples of these maternal


genealogies are found at the royal religious houses Whitby, Ely, Sheppey and Minster-in-Thanet during the seventh and eighth centuries. Mary Dockray-Miller assigns these houses a “biological maternity,” where female family relationships were “a major force in the community of the minster.” Æbbe and Mildrið had dual leadership over Thanet, “a joint mother-daughter abbacy.”

According to charters written during this period, “Æbbe of Thanet” is described in various ways: “Æbbe abbatissae de menstre,” “Eabbe abbatissae,” with other references such as “Mildrithae religiousae abbatissae” and “Mildrithae abbatissae de Menstre,” illustrating that the title abbess was an often-used term when monastic houses were first established in England and associated with this position of governance.

During the later Anglo-Saxon period, abbesses were not allowed to alienate by sale or gift any property of the monastery or to institute anything contrary to the Rule, but the title was associated with this practice nevertheless.

Any reference to abbess would undoubtedly also allude to women and men religious living in close proximity to one another. Even as early as 964, Nunnaminster’s proposed refounding by Æthelwold, at about the same time at the reformation of New Minster, suggests anxiety about this behavior. The action taken by Edgar during this time to secure the privacy of the three minsters shows that they were already in the midst

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of urban life: “a civicum tumultu remote.” Nunnaminster’s inclusion in this reconfiguration in order to ensure a strict segregation between the male and female mynsters also indicates further concern regarding the role of the abbess in Winchester’s political life. It may have been Edgar’s concern that life in Nunnaminster was not any stricter post reforms, and he thus wanted to avert the city’s eyes away from observing unwanted behavior. Since Reformers were clear about eliminating any trace of gender mixing, removing the title would conform to their objectives.

Starting in the ninth century, female titles associated with power in the Wessex family were not as well described as they had been, which indicates an ongoing effort to elide powerful female titles in Winchester. Although maternal practice was the goal of the queens of Wessex (and Mercia), a lack of appropriate rank is apparent in descriptions penned, for example, in Winchester for Æðelflæd (c.870–12 June 918), King Alfred’s and Ealhswið’s oldest daughter. Ealhswið herself is never called “queen,” but “wife of the king,” despite being the daughter of a Mercian princess and King Coenwulf (796–821). Æðelflæd, instrumental in defending Mercia against Viking attack during the 890s, was married (c.886) to Æðelred (d.911), an ealdorman of Mercia. After Æðelred’s death, Æðelflæd continued to rule Mercia with her brother, the future King Edward the Elder, and was instrumental in the destruction of the Danish armies. Æðelred was

33 Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, 41.
routinely described as leader of the Mercians, or “Edwardus Rex.” Despite their joint rulership, Æðelflæd was rarely given such credit, sometimes described as “consort” (Latin *conjunx*) or “royal sister” (Latin *regia soror*), or without any title in textual sources. Roughly two hundred years after her death, William of Malmesbury portrayed Æðelflæd as “a woman with an enlarged soul,” an indication of the preference for male writers of English history to describe highly successful Wessex royal women in spiritually effective terms. When we look at Nunnaminster’s founder Ealhswið and her daughter Æðelflæd in the context of ruling titles, it is apparent that Æthelthryth’s lack of abbess designation was part of an overall and longstanding textual suppression of illustrating female control starting in Winchester during the late ninth century and extending through the Benedictine Movement in the center of ecclesiastical reform.

This chapter investigates the role of the Anglo-Saxon religious leader in order to ascertain how Æthelthryth’s status was employed in tenth-century Winchester. Tracing the history of the term abbess proves useful in such a study, as does the ways in which her figural qualities, such as virginity, were emphasized over her authority to rule. Besides looking at examples of abbess’s descriptions, I investigate what we know about the abbess’s election, duties, and regulations under which she governed, as well as the concern over her ability to hold responsibilities essential to monastic leadership. Earlier Anglo-Saxon portraits of female religious leaders, themselves drawn from images of Mary, are particularly robust models for understanding the role of abbesses since they


served as sources in later texts. Overall, the terminology used for women rulers of religious houses, even those of regal status, provides some insight into the ambiguity of established categories and the ways in which these designations proved useful to writers like Wulfstan.

While a former queen was recognized and thus understood as still holding a royal role, the role of abbess was not so easily explained. Royal abbesses occupied a particular category, as these women brought with them added rank and responsibility. The regulations for an abbess’s investiture were similar to a queen’s with the terms for both successions remarkably alike. But defining power and agency in the late Anglo-Saxon period was not straightforward. There was a dialectic between the status of royal women and female monastic leaders, between the queen’s power versus the abbess’s authority and her link with the role of the virgin mother. Abbesses were, in theory, considered equal in stature to the queen: they both ruled households and were called mothers of their communities.

Of particular interest here is the depiction of the abbess role vis-à-vis Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth, St. Æthelthryth, and Queen Ælfthryth (c.945-1000x1) in three tenth-century Winchester texts: Wulfstan’s Vita St. Æthelwoldi (c.1000), Bishop Æthelwold’s Regularis Concordia (c.973) (RC), and the bishop’s Benedictional (c.974).39 These texts all offer insight into the role of leadership during the tenth century. As we know,
Æthelthryth was a religious woman at Nunnaminster during this time. St. Æthelthryth (d.679), an early Anglo-Saxon princess and virtuous female religious figure, was founder of Ely in 673; Ely was refounded in 970 as a male house and because of Æthelwold’s interest in St. Æthelthryth’s sanctity. St. Æthelthryth is singled out by name in Æthelwold’s *Benedictional* depiction of the Choir of Virgins.\textsuperscript{40} Ælfthryth, the third wife of King Edgar (m. 964x5), was the first consecrated Queen of England. She was Æthelwold’s benefactor, anointed and crowned with her husband in 973 and depicted ruling over female religious houses.\textsuperscript{41} How do these women’s roles as leaders compare with one another? More specifically, I ask whether Æthelthryth’s ruling a “flock of nuns” equates with the responsibility of Queen Ælfthryth’s “protecting her nuns,” described in the *RC*. In addition, how are these distinctions, or lack thereof, in texts written during the tenth century, associated with the sanctified maternal abbess, St. Æthelthryth, who was revered again in Winchester at this time? This seventh-century saint/abbess appears prominently and entwined with other later ruling women, modeled after the Virgin Mary, when Wulfstan was writing his *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*.

The examination of female religious rulers that follows is limited by the paucity of information available about abbesses during the tenth century. Very little evidence relates to the effects of the Reformers’ mandates on women’s religious lives other than assigning Ælfthryth the role of overseeing all female religious houses. Beside this designation, we have no idea how the queen’s new rank contributed to any changes within female religious communities. The *RC* was written for both monks and nuns, but it

\textsuperscript{40} “Choir of Virgins,” Deschman, *The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold*, fol. 2, plate 3.

is vague on the stipulations for female religious life. There is no mention of the queen’s impact on Æthelthryth’s role at Nunnaminster in Wulfstan’s text or in the RC. An indication of the close connection between consecrations for queen and abbess at this time, the royal ordo, which follows the religious ordo, is prefaced by a new rubric during the tenth century that pins down its usage at Winchester and was most likely written for Queen Ælfthryth.\(^42\) The Anglo-Saxon version of the royal ordo belonged to the Leofric Missal, written c.900\(^43\) and preserving the West Saxon language of pre-856.\(^44\) The West Saxon royal house used the Leofric Ordo during the first half of the ninth century,\(^45\) emulating the regulations of Mercian kings who were following religious prescriptions for ordination.\(^46\)

Ælfthryth’s position as overseer complicates Æthelthryth’s rank, as they are both described ruling the same religious house, one as its leader and presumably the other as her overseer. Although picturing Ælfthryth as mother superior promotes the image of secular power associated with the Winchester complex, details about her relationship with Æthelthryth are left out. If their responsibilities converged in any way during the

\(^{42}\) Stafford, “The King’s Wife in Wessex,” 23-4.


\(^{45}\) The Benedictio Chrismatis, which forms the basis of “Deus electorum,” is Gelasian and could have been available in England as early as the seventh century: H. Mayr-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), 168-82, 272-5.

Reformers’ mandates we are left to wonder how. The seventh-century St. Æthelthryth is also an important character in tenth-century ecclesiastical maneuvering since this female monastic saint was re-employed to bolster the queen’s political objectives. Consequently, multiple narratives surround these three women all associated with the so-called renewal of life at Nunnaminster, forming a character convergence and pointing to the dynamic of female representation at this time. This convergence relates to the consequence of Æthelthryth’s depiction as religious leader.

Overall, no study has been made of the authority of the female superior of monastic communities made up of women. We have little documentation for ruling women, monastic or lay. Generally, we know more about individual monastic houses than the women who governed them with few overall descriptions of the abbess’s role at this time.\textsuperscript{47} There is no documentary evidence of what would have been considered typical for female superiors at religious institutions. Some specific qualities of an abbess are explained in the \textit{Benedictine Rule}, where the stipulation for a nominee for monastic leader was determined on the basis of personal wisdom and quality of life.\textsuperscript{48} This indicates the long-standing importance of such a position even if it omits the abbess’s specific responsibilities.

Monastic rules varied from house to house, thus leaving such administrative duties to the communities to decide. A comprehensive description for an abbess and her responsibilities would be impossible to produce, but an alternative, a canoness, offers customs for female religious leaders. The evidence indicates that the role of the canoness

\textsuperscript{47} There is no section for “Abbess” in the index to Barbara Yorke, \textit{Nunneries and Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses} (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 221.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Benedictine Rule}, trans. McCann, chs. 64, 145.
offered a religious woman more control over her life. Leaders of nunneries did not necessarily conform to strict identification. Throughout the Middle Ages, canonesses followed less rigorous regimens than those performed under the Benedictine Rule. Since the role of canoness provided a woman with fewer restrictions and more freedom, this category of leadership was preferred since it was associated with independence from regulations. Canonesses adopted forms of religious life less conventional than those proposed by reforming mandates, continuing the practices with which they were most familiar and forgoing the need for increased regulations defining their spiritual practices. Each female founder was able to establish her priorities within the house as long as her principles were consistent with tenets of monastic life and had a degree of consistency. Their constitution, as such, was tailored to the specific needs and concerns of its inhabitants. A canoness and her community could, in theory, adopt any number of guidelines, indicating her autonomy over her religious house.

Women who ruled royal monasteries are often described more like canonesses than abbesses as they followed less rigorous regimes. Canonesses are often associated with nobility and control because of the advantages associated with governance offered under its rubric. Eric John concludes that female supremacy alone accounted for the so-called lax observance that was reported by male writers of monastic regulations in religious communities during the Anglo-Saxon period.49 The ability to create a governing rule of their own choosing was particularly ideal for them,50 with freedom of movement among these various communities appealing to royal women who valued such relative

independence. On the Continent, canoness’s houses and their nuns did not live according to the *Benedictine Rule* and until the eleventh century it was not in general use. The guideline, *Institutio Sanctimonialium*, described in Frankish prelate Amalarius of Metz’s (c.775-c.850) rules, allowed canonesses to maintain secular status and religious dedication. Amalarius, a student of Alcuin at the monastic school in Tours, influenced the perception of the monastic home in the ninth century; he was among the most widely read authors of the Carolingian era. The *Institutio Sanctimonialium* permitted religious women to have their own possessions, servants, and houses, which departed from the *Benedictine Rule*, indicating that the role of canoness may be similar to or a better choice for the royal abbess because she could maintain her former way of life.

Although the term canoness was used on the Continent, it is not usually applied to Anglo-Saxon religious houses and, therefore, it is difficult to trace its usage in England. However, there is evidence that religious women were adopting this role in England during the tenth century. The heads of tenth-century Wessex nunneries may indeed have been overseeing non-Benedictine houses. According to Dagmar Schneider, groups of religious women were living within communities of canonesses in this region of England.

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during the late Anglo-Saxon period. A vernacular version of “King Edgar’s Establishment of Monasteries” (966x970), directed toward a distinct group of female houses principally located in Wessex with close ties to the family dynasty, uses an obscure late-Anglo-Saxon term for a female religious leader, derived primarily from the Carolingian rule for canonesses, to designate a woman who was not strictly a nun living in a religious household. Female religious rulers in England could have maintained their status as abbesses without the appellation of religious leader well into the eleventh century, concurrently with the Benedictine Reform movement, not finding it necessary or even desirous to adapt the Reformers’ prescriptions for renewed monastic life.

**B. Titles/Terminology**

We may not be able to definitively distinguish the roles Anglo-Saxon religious women held at this time based on their titles. The label abbess evokes authority over a  

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nunnery;\textsuperscript{59} other titles, or terminology for religious women, in general, offer a loose understanding at best. As we know, some religious women were living together in their homes, and they could have adopted less conventional, not easily defined forms of religious life. Lisa Bitel describes female religious behavior, especially the leadership kind, as a profession.\textsuperscript{60} The nature and extent of personal involvement by individual women in convents are not usually discussed along with their activities, with the exception of their sanctity, according to Valerie Spear.\textsuperscript{61} It is difficult to identify religious women with strictly monastic distinctions since titles describing congregations of professed nuns and other groups of women religious are especially unclear. Foot, who has chronicled how religious women were described in Anglo-Saxon texts, asserts that writers designated female religious in numerous ways, but collective adoption of a spiritual existence was evidently popular.\textsuperscript{62} There may have been good reason for fluid titles since, as Patricia Halpin points out, monastic women were described as leading religious lives according to their own rules.\textsuperscript{63} It may have not been necessary to describe distinct categories of religious women because the exact nature of congregations of professed nuns and other groups of women religious was hard to pin down.

A particular appellation may have been employed because it had associations that were amenable to the author’s goals. There is no gender-specific noun in Latin or Old English that refers to a convent of devout women. They only sometimes qualified as


\textsuperscript{61} Valerie G. Spear, \textit{Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries} (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), xv.


“sanctimoniales,” a name given to nuns on account of their profession of sacredness, whose lives were grouped under uniform principles drawing on both canonical practice and monastic custom. A variety of flexible nouns were used to describe Anglo-Saxon religious women. Caesarius of Arles (470-542), who wrote the first rule for female religious, called a monastic woman “sister” (Latin soror); “virgo,” (Latin virgin); or “fília” (Latin daughter), quite different from what he called the head of the community of female religious: “abbatissa.”64 The terms “mynecenas” (modern English cloistered woman) and “nunne” living under vows in the world, lack the exactness necessary for us to now describe them.65 The indistinct Old England word “mynecen,” used to describe these women in their religious settings, is interesting because it refers to their adoption of a masculine term and is translated as follows: “female monk nun” living in full-scale communities,66 already possessing an “ordered” (Old English endebyrd) kinship.67 The term “mynecen” was used up until Ethelred’s reign (978-1013) to distinguish a woman living outside a nunnery under religious vows.68 The term “nunna,” or “nonna” was used to denote any sort of religious woman. The customary medieval designation of a religious woman as an “ancilla Dei,” or maid servant of God, is modeled after the description of

65 There is no Latin or Old English noun that is gender-specific for a convent of devout women: Foot, Veiled Women I, xiii, 104.
Mary at the Incarnation as the “ancilla Domini” (usually “handmaid of the Lord”). She was sometimes described as a “soldier of Christ,” a term adapted from models of warriors who chose to leave military life to devote themselves to monasticism. Often these “soldiers” left the monastery to seek a solitary spiritual life.

The role of an abbess implies a degree of leadership, one more in line with a male leader than merely ruling over a female house. The abbess’s responsibilities were greater than only a matter of maternal cares or piety. Monastic custom may have created a more universal understanding of ruling a religious house, but nuns’ roles, especially those in leadership positions, cannot simply be expressed as holding a maternal office. Male terminology was used in monastic rules more often to define the male institution because, according to Felice Lifshitz, they were often not meant to apply to women: rules were expressed “as a male experience.”

The term abbess is often thought to refer to a kind of female authority, but the title abbatiss, or abbess does not define her as “mother” because she is, as Lifshitz calls her, a “female father.” The office of Benedictine monasticism required that Amtscharisma, or the charisma necessary to rule, was associated with the abbot, with the abbesses’ status closely aligned with male authority. Because of this association, male writers may have preferred to use the term “matrem” over “abbatissa,” as the latter was evocative of a more powerful role. Although Amtscharisma was a

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70 Several rules are gendered through the masculine, such as Benedict of Nursia’s rule, Benedicti Regula: Rudolf Hanslik on abbatial directorship; Benedict of Aniane’s Concordia Regularum, Augustine of Hippo, Caesarius of Arles, and Aurelian of Arles since they were used by both male and female communities, and Benedict’s Codex regularum preserved female rules in the female gender: Felice Lifshitz, “Is Mother Superior? Toward a History of Feminine Amtscharisma,” Medieval Mothering, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 118-9, nos. 6,7,8,9 on p. 133.

necessary prerequisite for male religious communities to acquire permanence, descriptions of female authority, especially in cases where “abbess” is avoided, cannot be assumed to be identical to representations of male authority.

C. Æthelthryth’s Title At Nunnaminster

Titles are slippery devices, especially in times of reform when rules were being adopted to control monastic life. It is necessary to interpret the portrayal of “matrem” within the context of the above definitions and also with the tenth-century Benedictine Movement in mind. Although Æthelthryth’s depiction later in the Vita St. Æthelwoldi adds a considerable degree of authority to her role, her title and the one she lacks complicate the reader’s impression of her in the text. For his text Wulfstan borrowed the description “ruling over a flock of nuns” from the RC, which was also used to describe the queen’s new role.72 The RC said that Edgar performed his royal office like a “Shepherd of shepherds” who rewarded bishops who had been “a model for the flock,”73 an indication that Wulfstan was copying terms he thought were useful to him in a manner that suggests he considered them interchangeable. In light of the passage in the RC, Æthelthryth is viewed as abbatial, but without the association of authoritative leadership that links directly with the title abbess.

As we know, Æthelthryth is an amalgamation of real and fictitious women, but we can surmise the events which would have led up to her prominent position at the nascent female religious house and her apparent reputation for leadership throughout the Winchester community. As discussed in Chapter III, Wulfstan omits Æthelthryth’s

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72 Æthelwold, Regularis Concordia, edit. and trans. Symons, 2.
73 “pastorum pastor”: Æthelwold, Regularis Concordia, edit. and trans. Symons, 1, 8: 2, 709; 1 Peter 5:2-4.
relationship with the female side of the West Saxon royal house, eliding the house’s monastic matrilineal genealogy central to its foundation. Outside of Wulfstan’s text, we know some details and we must construct the rest: Ealhswið was the first leader of Nunnaminster, as she held the property; she lived on the grounds of her buildings immediately following the death of her husband, Alfred; Ealhswið also lived on her property in first decade of the tenth century and before Nunnaminster was established, since the boundary record in *The Book of Nunnaminster* does not mention Nunnaminster.  

As future founder of Nunnaminster, Ealhswið would consequently have had choices about the nature of her monastic community, along with vested aristocratic interests. She may not have been affiliated with a specific religious order, since Nunnaminster may have been functioning as a female domestic house without Benedictine rules prior to the tenth century. As royal widow and dowager mother, Ealhswið may not have required or even wanted another female ruler of her house, but she most likely looked to a female family member to continue the Anglo-Saxon tradition of matrilineal rule. It could also have been acceptable for Ealhswið herself to serve as leader without being assigned the title of abbess. On the other hand, she may have welcomed another woman to complement the residents’ talents, providing future Winchester female rulers a model for monastic life. If so, Ealhswið would have narrowed her scope and appointed this woman either from her own household or from one that was closely associated with her family. She would have known that these elite members nearby maintained the greatest capacity to administer and advocate on behalf of the

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74 Walter de Gray Birch, *An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, Formerly Belonging to St. Mary’s Abbey, or Nunnaminster, Winchester* (London: Simpkin, 1889), fol. 40b, p. 96.
house. If Æthelthryth was indeed this vitally important woman who maintained power as a comprehensive role between her secular and religious life, we are without any details from Wulfstan to confirm the connection, especially considering the lack of abbess status to illuminate this aspect of her life.

Later documents connected with Winchester are inconsistent in applying “abbess” to Æthelthryth. She was sometimes assigned this title and at other times she was not. Texts written about Nunnaminster cast an uncertain light on the identity of Nunnaminster’s abbess during the tenth century.⁷⁵ In the Vita St. Edburga, Osbert uses the same terms in the twelfth century as Wulfstan does in the tenth,⁷⁶ but in Osbert’s text Æthelthryth is also described as the first abbess of Nunnaminster, appointed because she provided the endowment for the community.⁷⁷ Osbert was apparently working from manuscripts other than those Wulfstan was using,⁷⁸ or was he drawing a conclusion based on Wulfstan’s text alone? Osbert asserts that Æthelthryth was appointed by Ealhswið to lead the nunnery, serving at the time of her granddaughter St. Edburga’s consecration,⁷⁹ and responsible for her upbringing: “holiness prefect Æthelthryth”—an important association, since this female saint is the only one associated with Nunnaminster. Later on in his text, however, Osbert makes no reference to either Æthelthryth or Eadburga,

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⁷⁵ In 1336: Compotus Rolls of Froyle Manor in Hampshire, in British Library, Add. MS 17457.
⁷⁸ Osbert, Vita St. Eadburga, 55.
⁸⁰ “sanctitatis prefect Edeldridam”: Osbert, Vita St. Eadburga, fols. 87v, 88.
and names Alfgiua as abbess in the time of Æthelwold, with Eadgyfu as abbess c.975 and c.990. However, the name of the abbess at the Winchester nunnery in “the time of Edgar” was also given as “St. Edith [Eadgyfu].” Malmesbury also followed Wulfstan’s account, assigning Æthelthryth in charge of the nunnery from its very beginning:

“Æthelwold constructed in Winchester a house for nuns, and put in charge of it an old virgin lady Æthelthryth.” During the fourteenth century, “Etheldreda” or “Ethelritha” is listed in historical documents or modern introductions to them as “abbess” in 963. The author of the modern edition of the RC says, “Etheldreda was made abbess.” Symons is likely following Wulfstan’s and perhaps Osbert’s texts but not the RC, since the RC does not mention Æthelthryth. Yorke’s catalogue lists the abbesses of all the Anglo-Saxon

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81 These are lections for the saint’s translation: Osbert, Vita St. Eadburga, fol. 89, 35.

82 Dumville has suggested that the Nunnaminster Eadgifu might be an otherwise unknown daughter of King Edmund: Dumville, “The Will of King Eadred.” This would make Eadgifu sister to King Edgar, instead of daughter of the king as the charter states. An “Eadgifu” lived with her mother at Wilton and was after her death in 984 culted as a saint: Goscelin (of Saint-Bertin c.1040-1114), Vita Sancte Edithe, ed. A. Wilmart, “La Légend de Ste Edithe en Prose et Vers par le Moine Goscelin,” Analecta Bollandiana 56 (1938), 5-101 and 265-307 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C 938 XIII, fols 1-29). Translation of the Legend of Edith by Michael Wright and Kathleen Loncar based on Cardiff version in Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin’s Legend of Edith and “Liber confortatorius,” ed. Stephanie Hollis (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 23-100. Birch, An Ancient Manuscript of the Eighth or Ninth Century, 7, may be confusing Eadgifu and Edith since he is quoting from “The Comptus Rolls of Froyle Manor in Hampshire, now in the British Museum,” who followed Dugdale’s records, Monasticon: Sarah Foot, Veiled Women II: Female Religious Communities, 871-1066 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 250. Saint Edith of Wilton (b. 961 d. 15 September 984) is also known as Eadgyth, who took the veil as a child like Eadburg. She is daughter of King Edgar, which would make her sister to Eadburg. Edith became a nun at Wilton like her mother, Wulfryth. She and her sister, Elfledam, never married, but remained “uirginis” according to Malmesbury, Gesta pontificum Anglorum, 188-189. Edith was offered but refused the position of abbess of three monasteries, Barking, Nunnaminster and another not named: Goscelin, Vita sancte Edithe, 77; Ridleyard, Royal Saints, 41-42. She died 16 September 984, age 23: Goscelin, Vita sancte Edithe, 40n, 76-7, 94; Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, 188-191. Edith (Eadgyth) and Eadgifu cannot be the same name, yet could easily have been confused by Goscelin, especially if there was a tradition representing Eadgifu as Edgar’s daughter. 12th-century Codex Wintoniensis, British Library, Add. MS 15350: Robertson, Charters, no, 49; cf Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, no. 49. Knowles et al rejected the notion that St. Edith was ever head of Nunnaminster because Eadgifu of Wilton was known to have been twenty-three at her death, so in 975, the last year of Edgar’s reign, she would have been only fourteen. Knowles does accept her tenure of the abbacy of Barking: Robertson, Charters, 208.

83 “Quibus preposuit Etheldridam uirginem anum”: Malmesbury, Gesta Pontificum Anglorum, 275-5.

84 Æthelwold, Regularis Concordia, edit. and trans. Symons, xxii.
royal houses, but Æthelthryth is not included among them.\textsuperscript{85} Apparent inconsistencies remain to this day as to whether Æthelthryth was understood during the tenth century as abbess. It may have been Wulfstan’s objective to assign Æthelthryth with a title that intentionally depicted a lack of authority while asserting her pious and virtuous nature as a model for female religious life.

\textbf{D. Tracing the Abbess with Mary During the Anglo-Saxon Period}

Æthelthryth comforts Æthelwold’s mother at the time of her pregnancy, which validated her role as mother and was modeled after the Virgin Mary. The image of the Virgin Mary as mother and her conception of Christ are considered supreme examples for consecrated nuns in Anglo-Saxon England (and throughout the world).\textsuperscript{86} Religious women saw Mary as an image of female authority. Mary therefore became an intercessor before God for these women. The nun in her chaste monastic marriage to Christ emulates the Virgin Mary in her matrimonial relationship to him; the female body is the symbol by which nuns communicate their meaning.\textsuperscript{87} For the representation of spiritual female kinship, the position of the Virgin is key to the identification with the monastic community. Mary plays an essential role in the dynastic and sacred family. According to Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, “[Mary] is a pivot, the hinge around which is effected the passage from one form of parentage to the other.”\textsuperscript{88} As a central figure, her status as “genetrix” makes her the Mother of all-faithful. Jesus was the doctor to mankind and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{85} Yorke, \textit{Nunneries}, 77, 82.
\end{footnotesize}
Mary was the nourishing mother. The definition of “mother” expands beyond biology to describe nurturing abilities, with the universal figure of Mary promoted through her sanctity. This association with motherhood, in turn, becomes a model for religious women in their dedication to comforting their communities, a tradition that had its roots in the early Church.

Female virgins enjoyed a special status since they saw Mary as their protector. The virtues corresponding with Mary were associated with professed virgins who aspired metaphorically to become mothers of Christ. Literally, nuns remained virgins since they could not be mothers. Religious women were mostly depicted as virgins; even those who were once married were considered pure. According to Cynthia Turner Camp, “the virgin abbess was a potent figure of institutional cohesion and longstanding purity, the inviolable female body representing the integrity of the religious community formed around her relics.”

Virginity and sexual abstinence were standards for nuns (and monks), also for secular clergy and women living under vows. These standards occupied a central place in monastic theology as an aspect of Christian morality. The order of chastity was the basis for Christian doctrine, originating with Christ himself, initiated by his chosen conception through a virgin mother.

The sanctity of the nunnery was largely legislated by the abbess or another important member of the house. Religious and laywomen understood the Virgin through her metaphorical meaning, which influences the extent of her spiritual power.

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adopting the figure of Mary, the mother of her community becomes, according to Bede, “the virgin Mother of many nuns.” The *Benedictional of Æthelwold* suggests that Mary was portrayed there as the ideal of the abbess during the tenth century because “The Choir of Virgins,” which includes the Virgin Mary, occupies a prominent place in the manuscript, second in order only to the “Choir of Confessors.” The eleventh-century Old English translation of the *Regularis Concordia* was likely produced (copied or even translated) by a brother at the New Minster (or the Old) for his sisters next door and hence perhaps a Nunnaminster product. The manuscript was adapted for female religious. It demonstrates a focus on the activity of prayer, that is, contemplative life, reserved for several forms of monastic experience, as well as active practice of virtues: “professed virgins” in mind, “who aspire to become mothers of Christ” (Latin, *cum premiis centuplis*). In “The Winchester Rite,” the consecration of a nun implies that God is involved in the selection of the novice: “According to the likeness of holy Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ,” she should preserve her virginity, so that she might be worthy to receive the Crown, an indication of her privileged status as Queen of heaven and earth. Indeed, nowhere in these representations of the “Mother of God,”

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92 Bede, *HE*, IV.xvii, 244.
93 Corpus Christ College, MS 201. At the end of the manuscript a hand wrote a missal, which seems to have belonged to the New Minster: Ker, *Catalogue*, 90, 336-7.
writes Carolyn Walker Bynum, can we find the “consistent stereotypes of femaleness as compassionate and soft, either weak or tender,” that marked medieval monks’ idealization of the mothering role.\textsuperscript{97} Like all ideal mothers, Mary is the model for future female religious leaders to follow, and like Mary, the abbess is also a model of strength, fervently dedicated to her religious community. However, a shift occurs in England during the early Middle Ages. Even the powerful role of abbess becomes discretely associated with virginity instead of the powerful image of Christ’s mother in Anglo-Saxon texts, indicating male anxiety with female authority. When early Anglo-Saxon religious women leaders, very often from royal families, modeled their lives after Mary, they maintained the title abbess, but in the later period, male writers in favor of less well-connected titles elided this representation of power.

The concept of placing royal daughters in religious houses as abbesses is identified with certainty starting in East Anglia during the sixth century. Abbesses were drawn from largely noble families, but equally significant is the fact that they were self-determined nominees because royal abbesses passed down the role of abbess to their female kin. They were the daughters of kings and wielded great influence over religious houses. At this time, few female monasteries existed in England, and several Anglo-Saxon royal women went to the Continent to practice monastic life, benefiting from those monastic models. Bede records how Seathryth and Æthelburh, respectively step-daughter and daughter of King Anna (d.654), were sent to the nunnery at Farmoutiers-in-Brie, where they were joined by their niece Eorcengota, daughter of their sister Seaxburh and

\textsuperscript{97} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 167.
King Eorcenbert of Kent (640-664). In England, royal abbesses were known to run several double houses at once. Selethryth ran Lyminge and Minster-in-Thanet; Werburh (d.700), Threkingham (Lincs.) and Hanbury; Eadburh, Adderbury and Bicester; Osyth, Aylesbury and Chichester. Hild was asked to join her sister, Hereswith, at the nunnery in Chelles but at Bishop Aiden’s request took control of the religious house at Hartlepool, and in 657 she founded Whitby. The status and fortunes of women associated with royal families determined their role as abbesses as they carried their family obligations with them into religious life.

At this time, royal abbesses appeared to reign over their monastic houses as well as exercising political influence through their domains/regions. They enjoyed independent authority and honor as the foundresses and directors of monasteries; their generosity with money and goods was enhanced by the further power to work miracles. For royal women, blending their secular and religious opportunities offered a variety of options for influential and spiritual lives. Royal widows also often founded houses, which were useful as centers of learning. Nunneries were retreats for royal widows following

100 Bede, *HE*, IV, 23.
the deaths of their husbands; they could rule without threat of remarrying. In the political structure of early Germanic kingdoms, royal widows often sought monastic life since this contributed to a transition of wealth and power from a deceased king to his successor. Widows could continue to reside within their religious communities; they could fund monastic houses through their marriage gifts, while protecting their inheritances.

The continuity of English kinship and the closely aligned liturgical tradition of the English church created a parallel system of governance, providing some clues to the position of abbess. Jerome is described as acting as spiritual advisor to noble ladies in Rome, counseling them to adopt a religious regime in their own homes. Augustine set up his own Christian household where he and his companions lived their own version of life dedicated to Christianity. In Pope Gregory’s “Life of St Benedict,” two women of noble birth are described as “leading the religious life in their own home.” Correlating the title of queen with abbess is, however, not always a clear path to uncovering the religious woman’s role, and we cannot be certain if and which religious regulations were employed for which religious woman. The queen’s ordo was evidently based on the rite

102 For the pattern of widowed queens seeking nunneries in which to reside, but not until after c.630: Yorke, *Nunneries*, 23. Queen Æthelburgh choses to retreat to Folkstone after the death of her husband, King Edwin of Deira, in 633. Folkstone was founded by Eanswith, daughter of King Eadbald (616-640). The eighth-century Mildred legend indicates that Lyminge was founded by Queen Æthelburh, but Bede says nothing about her entering religious life: Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend*, 75, 80-6; Bede, *HE*, II, 20.


for the consecration of an abbess. This enabled queens to claim a particular authority, and they were often positioned in a variety of contexts. Since the position of the abbess was similar to that of a secular lord, mapping an abbess’s coronation ceremony onto the rituals used for appointment of a queen would reinforce her potential to inspire spiritual religious conversion, considered a powerful position of cultural transformation and therefore authority.

Overall, life as an abbess was seen as offering a fortunate few careers as administrators, scribes, artists and authors, as well as spiritual devotees; indeed, only certain kinds of women could choose this privileged life. Monastic life offered women advantages over the secular: education as well as teaching others; and power within the church and local governments, as well as access to estates owned by the monastic community. The role of abbess would also arguably have provided a woman with wealth and independence of action. The life surrounding the mynster was often considered attractive—especially to those already holding a household leadership position—since a combination of new and traditional attitudes may underlie a woman’s choice to rule a group of like-minded women. It is, nevertheless, important to note that

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107 The rite for the consecration of an abbess can be found in Frankish Gelasian sacramentaries, such as Liber Sacramentorum Gellonensis, ed. A. Dumas, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina CLIX (Turhholdt, 1982), no 2578, 400; cf. Pontificale Romano-Germanicum, ed. C. Vogel and R. Elze, 2 vols. (Vatican City, 1963), vol. I, 80-1.


109 Lees and Overing, “Birthing Bishops and Fathering Poets, passim.


even as these female religious exercised relative control, their land and resources were threatened by encroaching male houses, and they were bodily vulnerable. In addition, sometimes the source of danger was from monastic brothers siphoning resources; other times the threat was foreign control in the case of the invading Vikings. Provocation may have only substantiated the need for royal abbesses’ advocacy and motivated acute judgment and effective negotiation in order to secure necessary family support.

The perception of threat was also palpable in the male ecclesiastical anxiety caused by religious women’s power, signaling the attempt by male religious authorities to restrain female religious behavior and limit their autonomy. Throughout the early Anglo-Saxon period, abbesses were ordained, vested in the sacristy, wore miters, carried staffs, heard confessions, administered penance and reconciliation, absolved sins and excommunicated sinners.\footnote{Gary Macy, \textit{The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West} (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 80-6; Gisela Muschiol, \textit{Famula Dei}, in \textit{Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages}, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 182-4, 210-11, and 217; Lifshitz, \textit{Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia}, 186.}

In the sixth century, Abbess Fara at Brie heard the confession of both men and women at her double monastery, and she had the power to excommunicate.\footnote{Jona’s \textit{Life of Columban}, II.19 in Bateson, \textit{Double Monasteries}, 155.} One Merovingian abbess was reported performing a public and liturgical office in her own right, for directing penance and as leader of the Liturgy of the Hours.\footnote{\textit{Admonitio Generalis}, c. 76, \textit{Monumenta Germaniae Historica} (Hanover: 1892), Cap. I, in Gisela Muschiol, “Men, Women and Liturgical Practice,” in \textit{Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900}, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60.} In England, Theodore of Tarsus (602-690), Archbishop of Canterbury (668-690), best known for reforming the English Church and establishing a school in
Canterbury, was well aware of the various roles of religious women.\textsuperscript{115} Theodore’s *Penitential* (c.700) reveals that early Anglo-Saxon religious women took part in liturgical celebration and the administration of the mass. This text reports that it was permissible for women to “read the lection to and to perform the ministries which pertain to the sacred altar, except those which are the special function of priests and deacons.” According to the canons, it is the function of bishops and priests to assign penance, but that does not preclude that women were also practicing confession, since “we shall not overthrow that which is the custom in the region.”\textsuperscript{116} English women served as preachers, however unofficially, and much like their male counterparts, were serving as English missionaries in Germany.\textsuperscript{117} Under Boniface (c.675-754), one religious woman was an apparent proselytizer and entrusted to rule according to her ideals. In her *vita*, Leoba’s (c.710-782) biographer, Rudolph, says (c.837) that Boniface:

\begin{quote}
gave her [Leoba] the monastery at a place called Bishofsheim, where there was a large community of nuns. These were trained according to her principles in the discipline of monastic life and made such progress in her teaching that many of
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them afterward became superiors of others, so that there was hardly a convent of nuns in that part that had not one of her disciples as abbess.  

It is likely Leoba, rather than Boniface, initiated the authority with which she is remembered. Regardless, this account is a testament to her efficacious command.

Starting in the eighth century women were warned of exceeding their positions as spiritual leaders because their status was not sufficient to warrant the performance of religious duties. Distrust grew of female religious rule and a desire to restrict autonomy. At the accession of Pope Zacharius in 742, the pastoral role of abbesses was regarded with antagonism: “Women shall not cover the altar with the corporal nor place on the altar the offerings, nor the cup, nor stand among the ordained men in the church, nor sit at a feast among priests.” Charlemagne’s *Admonitio Generalis* (789) and the Synod of Paris (829) also took steps to contain female liturgical activity. Charlemagne restricted the role of religious women by forbidding abbesses from performing any sacerdotal functions, suggesting women leaders were still assuming these roles and even flouting them despite earlier mandates. Item 75 of Charlemagne’s 789 General Capitulary reads:

> It is heard that some abbesses, against the custom of the holy church of God, give benedictions with the laying of a hand and with the sign of the holy cross over the

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heads of men, and also that they veil virgins with sacerdotal blessing. Know that this must be utterly forgiven by you, holy fathers, in your parishes.\textsuperscript{121}

In 829, the Council of Paris put the final seal on earlier legislation limiting the function of abbesses in the lighting of candles and the ringing of church bells. The status of these women, the council declared, was not different from that ordinary laywomen.\textsuperscript{122} Evidence is also found of male anxiety over the lack of monastic isolation in Charlemagne’s General Capitulary:

About small monasteries where nuns dwell without a rule, we wish there to be held a regular congregation in one place, and let the bishop provide where that can be; and we wish that no abbess presume to leave the monastery without our command, nor permit those subject to her to do so; and let their cloister be well locked, and by no means let [anyone] there presume to write or to send love letters.\textsuperscript{123}

Charlemagne restated the need for enclosure in a synodal decree issued in 799:

That abbesses should absolutely not leave their monasteries except through the consent and license of their bishops, and the same bishops should beware lest they refuse them when they must go out of their monasteries for their own benefit. And let the abbesses take with them such nuns, about which things, upon their return, they should not the other nuns, because that is very destructive, as is written in the holy rule.\textsuperscript{124}


\textsuperscript{122} “Ut sanctimoniales non induantur virilia indumenta, id est rocho vel fanoes, nisi tantum feminea vestimenta,” \textit{Statute Rhispacensis et Frisiagensia, A.} 799, Aug. 20, ed. I. I. Leges (Stuttgart: George Heinrich Pertz, rpt. A. Hiersemann; Vaduz: Kraus, 1965), Item 27, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{123} “De monasteriis minitis, ubi nonnanes sine regula sedent, volumus ut in unum locum congregatio fiat regularis, et episcopus praevideat ubi fieri possint; et ut nulla abbatissa foras monasterio exire non praesumat sine nostra iussione, nec sibi subditas facere permittat; et earum claustra sit bene firmata, et nullatenus ibi winileudos scribere vel mittere praesumat”: \textit{Capitulare Generalis, A.} 789, \textit{MGH}, ed. I Leges I (Hanover: George Heinrich Pertz, rpt. 1965), Item 3, 68.

\textsuperscript{124} “Ut abbatissae nullatenus exeant de monasteriis suis nisi per consensum atque licentiam episcoporum suorum, ipsique episcopi prevideantur eis non negentur quando egredi debent de monasteriis pro utilitate sua. Talesque ipse abbatissae secum assumant, de quibus nullatenus reedundes recitare praesumant ceteris sanctimonialibus, quia plurima destruction est, sicut in sancta regula continetur”: \textit{Statute Rhispacensis et Frisiagensia, A.} 799, Aug. 20, \textit{MGH}, ed. I. Leges I (Stuttgart: George Heinrich Pertz rpt. A. Hiersemann; Vaduz: Kraus, 1965), Item 26, p. 79.
Later statutes also concern themselves with gender-appropriate dress, “that nuns not dress in men’s garments, that is rocho and fanoes, but also such as are women’s clothes.” The above decrees indicate the extent to which women religious leaders were not only thought of as powerful but also dangerous to the established monastic order. Although monastic women on the Continent were told to avoid participating in the liturgy, they were still involved.\textsuperscript{125} Transmission of these ordinances occurred between Frankish and English convents,\textsuperscript{126} but there is little evidence that Anglo-Saxon nunneries complied swiftly. Although conditions were being put in place to limit the abbesses’ authority, there is evidence that they had always performed the powerful rights associated with all ecclesiastical leaders.

The ordination rite is also evidence of early medieval female religious authority. The mid-ninth-century Freiburg Pontifical from the Upper Rhine/Northwest Germany provides a dual ordination rite for an abbess: she was ordained using the identical rite used for an abbot, “materna in cathedra.”\textsuperscript{127} The election of the abbess is considered, according to the authors of the \textit{RC}, a “very important matter,” “that should be carried out with the consent of the King and according to the teaching of the Holy Rule.”\textsuperscript{128} Assuming the role of abbess, a woman could take on, in theory, a role identical to that of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[125]{Leo Mattei-Cerasoli, “Una Littera unedita di Alciuni,” \textit{Benedictina} 2 (1948): 227-30.}
\footnotetext[127]{Freiburg UB 363, fols. 30v-32r, quote from fol. 32.4: Lifshitz, \textit{Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia}, 191.}
\footnotetext[128]{“hoc attendendum magnopere cuncti decreuerunt, ut abbatum ac abbatissarum election”; “cum regis consensu et consilio sanctae regulae ageretur document”: Æthelwold’s \textit{Regularis Concordia}, edit. and trans. Symons, “Forward,” ch. 9, p. 6; the ruling on the election of abbots and abbesses given in 787 by the legates George and Theophilact: Hadden and Stubbs, \textit{Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents}, iii. 450, c. 5 and the passage in Bede, \textit{Letter to Egbert}, I, 413.}
\end{footnotes}
her male counterpart. Hilda’s seventh-century rule at Hartlepool and Whitby determined that women’s houses should be ordered by “righteousness, mercy, purity, and other virtues, but especially of peace and charity,” which is identical to the description of male religious houses. Female (and male) religious leaders also maintained the responsibility of confession. Early Anglo-Saxon abbesses were never wholly barred from religious gatherings, obstructed from political proceedings, or restricted from performing the sacraments of the Church. In Aldhelm’s De Virginitate, Abbess Hildelith provides spiritual authority at Barking because she is mother superior, proving that at this time a nun could be both “abbess” and “matrem.”

Bede was a major influence on Wulfstan’s portrayal of Æthelthryth, especially in the representation of chastity and monastic fruitfulness. Regular monastic discipline is a virtue close to that of chastity. Much of the reputation of early Anglo-Saxon abbesses is derived from Bede, who distinguishes the abbess mostly by her virtue, stressing the qualities that ensured her position. Personal marvels and visions accompany several abbesses, but it is her innocence, according to Bede, that ultimately defines the abbess. Leoba, a seventh-century English nun, serves as an example of the ideal abbess, because, according to her biographer, she was a successful Benedictine abbess and an extraordinary spiritual leader for the nascent German Church. According to Rudolph, Leoba had a distinguished career as leader of the Benedictine house at Bishoffsheim as

131 The holy virginity of Elijah (20.1.2), Daniel (21,39.40) and John the Baptist (23.4.5) as well as Visio Santi Pauli are insinuated by Aldhelm: Brown and Bussell, Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture, 66, no. 38.
132 Bede, HE, III, viii, 142-3, 144; IV, vii, 219, 222, x, 224, IV, xvii, 244-45; IV, xxi, 254; xxiii, 265.
133 Bede, HE, IV, vii, 219-20; xxi, 264.
part of England’s missionary work. Her role as abbess is completely in accord with the 
*Benedictine Rule*, insuring that the liturgy of the monastery remains the central focus 
of community life. Following monastic regulation while pursuing the glory of virginity 
determined that an abbess receive especially high praise.

**E. Later Anglo-Saxon Representation of Female Religious Leaders: St. Æthelthryth, 
the Queen and Æthelthryth**

In the tenth century, the representation of the female religious leader continued to 
emphasize the role of the virgin. Those who maintain their virginity throughout their lives 
occupy the highest place, according to male ecclesiastical writers. Throughout the Anglo-
Saxon period, religious women appeared transformed into this image of motherhood. To 
Æthelberga of Flædenbyrg, Alcuin writes:

> It is pleasing to me quite frequently, if only with a few letters, to fulfill my not 
insignificant duties of salvation to you as my countrywoman and to bring before 
your thoughts the salvation-bringing offerings of my admonition and your 
promise: that you attempt to preserve the most noble ornament of virginity in an 
intact body, remembering the glorious reward of the chastity of those who follow 
the lamb in heaven through the great places of the eternal King wherever he will 
go. What is more blessed than this glory, or more glorious than this blessedness, in 
which the conqueror of nature will associate with the author of all creatures.

At the same time that virginity was the privileged virtue, we can see a shift whereby 
Church and royal powers attempted to control female nunneries in order to consolidate 

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power. In exchange for monastic autonomy, ecclesiastical leaders provided royal leaders with privileged roles that complemented their existing authority. At this time, kings used nunneries as places where they could leave their daughters, preventing them from marrying and producing rival claimants to the throne.\(^{136}\) Care for nuns was also one of the clear duties associated with the sacral queenship, with the title “Queen” indicating the degree to which she held ultimate female authority. Mandates associated with monastic reform attempted to create networks of houses under the same rule empowered to protect the queen’s interests. The queen became an authority over religious women as a kind of confessor and advocate. Abbesses were given unlimited access to the queen whenever the good of the house required it, according to the RC.\(^{137}\) Abbesses were also required to petition their families for endowment, but reform measures advocated severing ties from this protectorate.

Wulfstan was aware of St. Æthelthryth’s representation, depicted as a monastic figure, an abbess, virgin and mother throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. The idea of continued virginity was important to her representation as a figure of enduring chastity. St. Æthelthryth held powerful leadership, but she is mostly renowned because of her many virtues, a model for Wulfstan’s depiction of the Nunnaminster Æthelthryth as “perpetual virgin.”\(^{138}\) As I have discussed in Chapter IV (“Nutrix”), St. Æthelthryth’s miracles and marvels relate to her body preserved intact after her death and burial, attributed to the steadfastness of her virginity.\(^{139}\) For purposes of this chapter, it is


\(^{138}\) “reginae et perpetuae virginis ac sororum eius”: Wulfstan, *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, ch. 23, 38-9.

\(^{139}\) Bede, *HE*, IV, xviii, 247-248; xvii, 243.
important to remember that St. Æthelthryth’s abbatial career at Ely figures second to her personal sanctity of virtue in depictions of her life, and Wulfstan was interested in representing the qualities of a pious religious leader rather than the leadership role of the abbess. Bede describes St. Æthelthryth as the Blessed Virgin, spouse of Christ;\(^{140}\) she is nobler through her Heavenly Father. In a hymn to St. Æthelthryth, Bede calls her exemplar of all virgins,\(^ {141}\) emphasizing that the saint’s purity is connected to her life of physical restraint. She is here shown in roles of mother and virgin:

A year afterwards she was appointed abbess in the district called Ely, where she built a monastery and became, by the example of her heavenly life and teaching, the virgin mother of many virgins dedicated to God. It is related of her that from the time she entered the monastery, she would never wear linen but only woolen garments and would seldom take a hot bath except just before the greater feasts, such as Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany, and then last of all, after the other handmaidens of Christ who were present had washed themselves, assisted by herself and her attendants. She rarely ate more than once per day except at the greater festivals or because of urgent necessity; she always remained in the church at prayer from the time of the office of matins until dawn, unless prevented by serious illness.\(^ {142}\)

Bede does more than describe the female saint’s promotion to abbess and her dedication to the other virgins who hope to follow her in her ecclesiastical role as virgin bride of Christ. He conflates St. Æthelthryth’s actions as a consecrated nun with that of her status as an overseeing abbess.

\(^{140}\) Bede, *HE*, IV, xvii, 247.

\(^{141}\) Bede, *HE*, 398.

\(^{142}\) Post annum uero ipsa facta est abbatissa in regione quae vocatur Elge, ubi constructo monasterio virgine. Deo deuotarum perplurium mater urgo et exemplis utae caelestis esse coepit et monitis. De qua ferunt quia, ex quo monasterium petit, nunquam lineis sed solum laneis uestimentis uti uoluerit, raroque in calidis balneis praeter inminentibus sollemniis maioribus, uerbi gratia paschae penecostes epiphaniae, lauari uoluerit, et tunc nouissuma omnium, lotis prius suo suarumque ministramus obsequio ceteris quae ibi essent famulis Christi; raro praeter maiora sollemnia uel artiorem necessitatem plus quam semel per diem manducauerit; semper, si non infirmatas grauior prohibuisset, ex tempore matutinæ synaxeos usque ad ortum diei in ecclesia precibus intenta persteterit*: Bede, *EH*, 392-93.
In the tenth century, St. Æthelthryth appears in Æthelwold’s *Benedictional of St. Æthelwold* as an enduring visual depiction of mother superior. As we know, St. Æthelthryth points to the bishop’s investment as the premier female saint of the Benedictine Reform. In the *Benediction*, the monastic feast picture labels St. Æthelthryth as “abbess,”\(^{143}\) but the emphasis is on her womb as a reference to her chastity.\(^{144}\) In her portrait St. Æthelthryth turns toward Christ on the facing page. Her depiction is accompanied by a benediction for her feast day, circumscribed by a background inscription: “The image of the holy Abbess and perpetual virgin Æthelthryth.”\(^{145}\) St. Æthelthryth was given a place of prominence in the choir of virgins, and her feast picture has a special opulence as the only one coupled with a historiated initial. She occupies a rank second only to Mary Magdalene in the manuscript, with her feast and name in the choirs, imitating Mary’s role as the virginal bride of Christ in heaven and her celestial marriage to Christ through the imitation of the queen of all virgins.\(^{146}\) The position of abbess has become stripped of anything particularly abbatial in this depiction, almost as if her authority and status is diminished through her comparison with Mary—only Mary seems maternal here. St. Æthelthryth is transformed, identified not merely as saint, royal sovereign, and virgin, and linked not just with Ely but also with a larger Winchester community, with her re-envisioning in the *Benedictional* readily explaining this period’s preoccupation with conflated female identities.

\(^{143}\) Deshman, *The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold*, 173.


\(^{146}\) Deshman, *The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold*, fols. 28, 29.
The Virgin Mary’s depiction in the *Benedictional* is especially indicative of how the period’s political intentions intersected with ecclesiastical ones. St. Æthelthryth, modeled after Mary, serves as a model for Queen Ælfthryth’s position as supervisor of all nunneries, with the regal depictions of Mary connected to the queen’s prominence. Ælfthryth was the third wife of Edgar and the first King’s wife to be crowned Queen, around the same date as the composition of the *RC*. In the *RC*, Queen Ælfthryth is likened to the status of queen of heaven. Ælfthryth was not another laywoman; she was depicted as part of a lordship together with the King, taking an especial interest in monastic reforms and holding a powerful position in the city. She attended the synodal council at Winchester (c.970) and served as a frequent witness to royal charters. As such, Ælfthryth is listed with the “nomina reginarum et abbatissarum” (English *The Names of the Queens and Abbesses*) indicating her importance during this time. The emphasis on Mary as “Queen of Heaven” had strong connections to the imperial iconography of Christ and King Edgar in tenth-century reform texts. The *RC* describes the Queen’s duties in a

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Christian nature, modeled on normative Christian writings, and the *Benedictional’s* royal iconography for Christ and Mary was associated with the project to endow Edgar and Ælfthryth with Christological symbolism. Ælfthryth is thus noteworthy because of her ability to bridge otherwise disparate categories, to move between roles and acquire titles that are associated with motherhood.

This navigational ability appears to extend Queen Ælfthryth’s role even further into the monastic domain with her installation as ruler over the nuns. This was most likely due to Ælfthryth’s alliance with Æthelwold, who linked her to his efforts at monastic reform. Ælfthryth held an intimate association with the monastic reformers who were patronized by herself and her husband, Edgar. She was portrayed as a female subject and royal authority, monastic guardian and court functionary. Janet Nelson employs the term “maneuver” to express her capacity “in shaping the future for herself, her property and other persons in her social network.”

Andrew Rabin acknowledges Ælfthryth’s ability to extend her role from queen to courtroom because her title, “forespeca” (“sponsor,” “advocate,” “patron”), provided her with unique status.

Ælfthryth’s ordination had recently been established by a new *ordo* rubric for her consecration alongside her husband in 973, with her, as well as Edgar, reported as commissioning Æthelwold for the translation of *The Benedictine Rule.* The queen’s

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involvement in this text suggests her duties to govern included a greater role than just as a secular leader.

Æthelwold assigned Queen Ælfthryth an important role in the RC, positioning her as ruler over all female religious houses. The RC describes how the queen was appointed special patroness of the nuns and nunneries throughout the realm.\(^{157}\) The description of Queen Ælfthryth’s responsibility uses the exact words, “mandras sanctimonialium,” in the RC.\(^{158}\) The queen, according to the primary reform text at the time, is understood as an honorary abbess. She is centered in Winchester and serves as guardian of the nunneries in England, which would have included caring for the nuns at Nunnaminster. In contrast to the early Christian period in Anglo-Saxon England, the queen was now not only formally but also abstractly responsible for all female communities as well as the patron of all nuns.

Ælfthryth was aligned artistically with St. Æthelthryth (hence Mary) and symbolically with Wulfstan’s Æthelthryth. Around 964, Æthelthryth was appointed ruler of Nunnaminster,\(^{159}\) very close in time, 965/975, to Ælfthryth’s appointment as the defender and guardian of the nuns.\(^{160}\) Æthelthryth was apparently residing in the center of Winchester at the same time as Ælfthryth, when the queen returned there with her husband, subsequent to his coronation. In the RC, Æthelwold specifically entrusted English nunneries to the queen as their protector and patron. Ælfthryth held no specific role at Nunnaminster, but her title described her care for all the female communities of


\(^{158}\) Æthelwold, Regularis Concordia, edit. and trans. Symons, ch. 3, p. 2.

\(^{159}\) Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, Chronology of Æthelwold’s Life, xli.

\(^{160}\) Æthelwold, Regularis Concordia, edit. and trans. Symons, xxiv.
the realm, which proves, therefore, that a queen still had certain religious duties, at least in theory. The events of the tenth century provided Ælfthryth with a larger profile since she was able to exercise considerable influence in both royal and monastic affairs. Ælfthryth’s physical witness to this fundamental religious reform positioned the queen in a position of great political authority. St. Æthelthryth is above and beyond any connection with any specific monastery, even for any abbess; the queen holds the role of monastic ruler; Æthelthryth of Winchester is without the necessary title to hold authority in her own religious community. The Reformers were accommodating the queen’s desire for ultimate control over an important aspect of religious life, an indication of the strong connection between them and Ælfthryth and the necessary connection to female religious life they were making in the name of reform.

F. Conclusion

While the specific title abbess conveyed supremacy, “matrem” described “motherhood” within the religious community. The first title was an appointment to lead, the latter a tool of virtue. Wulfstan describes Æthelthryth as engaging in activities that would be typical of a nun in a leadership position, one that corresponds to the role of abbess at Nunnaminster, but not one equal to that of a male religious leader. Without the title abbess, a monastic woman represented as leading her religious house did not convey the same degree of authority during the tenth century as she would have earlier. If she is assigned “matrem,” Æthelthryth’s source of strength in the text is one of divinity, not power. The effects of her depiction provided Æthelthryth with an identity that was overly yielding and never elevated her to an abbess.
Wulfstan’s portrayal of Æthelthryth’s life includes those features we expect from descriptions of women’s leaders at Nunnaminster, and, indeed, her monastic office appears to be based on particular qualities and talents. It may not be possible to firmly fix specific identities to her at this time since titles were not regularized; however, female religious leaders shared representative values, with virginity appearing a constant. Flexible identities for religious women provided writers with the potential to depict characters over a long, even an unnaturally long, period of time. Titles and names have a great deal in common because they are particularly adaptable, sometimes to other characters. These titles often result in an intentional misinterpretation. Such are the consequences to elastic language: it can be supple enough to illustrate a character’s profound influence, but also too elastic to survive with clear impression centuries later.

With St. Æthelthryth’s centuries-long representation, her expanded role could provide her with the potential as an archetypical supreme female ruler figure that dovetails with the tenth-century queen’s ruling model. This undoubtedly reflects St. Æthelthryth’s importance in Nunnaminster’s history: it was because of the queen’s interest in St. Æthelthryth, a pious and popular woman, that Æthelwold was able to restore the monastery at Ely. Queen Ælfthryth apparently wielded sufficient agency with Æthelwold to encourage the way she was depicted. She thus becomes elevated to the role of paramount female leader, associated with a successful female cult and an important monastic house and overseer to a nunnery already linked to the prestigious royal Wessex family. While the early royally connected nunneries were able to attain institutional autonomy because they were identified with their religious status, during the late Anglo-Saxon period, it is the queen—not the monastic leader—who is partner with the bishop in
reforming Christian society. By representing Æthelthryth as taking a secondary role in her own community’s agency, the Reformers were signaling that a female religious leader could experience redundancy; a queen could become as important as any woman short of the Virgin Mary because of her profound influence over Æthelwold and his objectives during the Benedictine Reform Movement.

Queen Ælfthryth’s merged status of queen and religious leader is important when considering her relationship to Æthelthryth’s status at Nunnaminster. The queen’s control of the nunneries is particularly relevant to Æthelthryth’s leadership position. There are layers of resemblance between the two women. Both women appear to rule Nunnaminster during the same time. Æthelthryth and Ælfthryth could not be the same person; however, their identities are seemingly intertwined. This link is mirrored by the texts created together under Æthelwold’s reform, which are thereby inexorably related to one another. Despite one being an abbess and the other queen, the stories of Æthelthryth and Ælfthryth both originate in centers of ecclesiastical life. While Æthelthryth is portrayed within a network of domestic affiliations, so too is Ælfthryth, the latter’s dominance as much about mobility as the former. However, Æthelthryth’s culminating representation appears subsumed by the importance of the movement, which provided the queen with a greater role. The renewal of regulation was undoubtedly connected to the period’s efforts to diminish lay control over the monasteries except in the case exercised by the queen (and king). According to Hollis: “Under the stricter segregation and enclosure in the English monasteries envisaged by the Regularis Concordia, restrictions on abbess’s dealings with the world at large produced an enhancement in the role of the
queen at the further expanse of the abbess’s autonomous rule.” Reform increased the power of the queen over female communities,” according to Stafford. The queen’s authority over nuns illustrated an empowered woman during this period. Æthelthryth in Wulfstan’s vita is not mentioned in the Regularis Concordia, but she is implicitly present as a consequence of Ælfhryth’s escalating leadership. This signifies the appropriation of female religious authority even as it points to the strength of monastic life. While Ælfhryth’s function appears an abstraction of monastic rule, Æthelthryth’s genuine management serves those with definite spiritual concerns. Despite the queen’s position as a secular abbess, however, the convent community continued to nurture the solidarity of the nuns.

The Regularis Concordia, like many contemporary Continental sources, includes the daily chapter meeting prescribed in the rule, which consolidated communal life through readings and prayers followed by public confession and penance for offenses against monastic discipline. The chapter functions to balance the power of the abbess. However, Nunnaminster’s new supreme commander appropriates Æthelthryth’s role. Tacitly, Ælfhryth overwhelms the former abbess’ function, and Æthelthryth is essentially disregarded as a consequence of the queen’s position as royal monastic ambassador. Æthelthryth’s character emerges more politically charged than before because she becomes enmeshed in the machinations of Winchester’s literary devices, extending her metaphorical significance and real life potential beyond the previous chapters’ discussion as a vehicle of annexation.

Queen Ælfhryth’s role was characterized as a face of the state. Royal identity

161 Hollis, Anglo-Saxon Women, 298.
placed powerful women in religious status for their convenience. Although potentially heretical for the Orthodox Church, Christianity at this time was positioning powerful women rulers in religious status for the Church’s convenience. Since Ælfthryth was designated the ruler of all nunneries, her own status appropriates the qualities of the woman who had already been assigned this role. The need for women supporting her qualities was also important to its audience since it allowed her character to be a vessel for appropriation. Creative fabrication was apparently useful to Wulfstan because it kept Æthelthryth unidentified outside the Vita St. Æthelwoldi. Once again, Wulfstan was able to skirt the issue of female royal succession by describing Æthelthryth as “matrem” instead of “abbess.” Because “abbess” was associated with female royal succession and religious life, removing the term eliminates the connection with the maternal Wessex family.

Historians and literary scholars sometimes recast Æthelthryth as abbess of Nunnaminster, but I have argued that her standing is due to her representational qualities of virtue and dedication, since Wulfstan’s vita appears more concerned with motherly kinship and less about status. This depiction appears to prevail in historic records as well, as Nunnaminster’s religious leaders were apparently dedicated to supporting the entire Winchester female community throughout its long history.¹⁶³ This program continued until Nunnaminster’s dissolution in the mid-sixteenth century, when the last abbess of Nunnaminster was portrayed with humble service to the city, as “Elizabeth Shelley of

¹⁶³ "In 1539, the commissioners stated that the nuns had not only maintained a good record throughout the history of the house, but were valued by the people of Winchester to the extent that the people were urging that the abbey be separated from suppression": Victoria County History, “Hampshire,” II, 125.
Winchester.” Elizabeth, a religious woman, was from a Wessex aristocratic family. In 1536, Elizabeth temporarily averted Nunnaminster’s dissolution for four years after the grand Priory of St. Swithun and Hyde Abbey had fallen. Evidently, these religious women were able to maintain control over their own dominion despite the chaos that unfolded around them. During the time of the surrender of so many monasteries, Elizabeth obtained royal letters of patent under the Privy Seal, dated 27 August 1536. Certainly she appears far from intimidated by powerful ecclesiastics, either in Rome or next door. Even after they were forced to leave Nunnaminster, Elizabeth and some of her fellow nuns stayed together at another location nearby. They were the only known women to have done so in England. Ironically, the dissolution may have returned Nunnaminster to its former, pre-Reformation order, where the nuns carried on their monastic lives of prayer and power in their own household community.

Ultimately, Wulfstan wanted his reader to consider his own role as one of mother to the Winchester monastic community through the inherited model of Mary. Wulfstan left out the “Book of the Annunciation” in his depiction of Æthelthryth and Æthelthryth’s mother, even as he employed images of Mary and her pregnancy in his vita. In order for his own role as author to be singularly associated with textual creator and enforcer of the Benedictine Reforms, Wulfstan shows his readers his maternal leadership, conceiving

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166 Paul, “Dame Elizabeth Shelley, Last Abbess of St. Mary’s Abbey, Winchester,” 63.

167 “Comptus Rolls of Froyle Manor in Hampshire,” Add. ch. 17457,-17478, 17462, and Add. ch. 13338-9; ch. 17519.
and birthing his literary achievement within a cloistered setting. In the Old Testament, God frequently speaks of himself as mother, bearing the Israelites in his bosom, conceiving them in his womb (Isaiah 49:1, 49:15, and 66:11-13). The scriptural example provides insight into the ways Wulfstan considered his maternal authority to birth his *Vita St. Æthelwoldi*, even as he used the metaphor of motherhood to represent the ties within the female religious community, Nunnaminster, ruled over by Æthelthryth, but subsumed by the moment.
Chapter 2

The woman woke up, thunderstruck with wonder, and pondered her dreams, without uttering a word. Then, because she could not imagine by herself what they might portend, she went along to a servant of Christ called Æthelthryth, a woman ripe in years and experience, and the nurse of the virgins dedicated to God at Winchester. To her she told the full story of what had been shown her in her vision by night. Æthelthryth, being a sensible and sharp woman, and one to whom God at times revealed knowledge of the future, had many predictions to make of the child who was to be born; and the outcome showed their truth.

Cumque mulier euigilans secum miraretur attonita et somniorum uisioinem mente uolueret tacita nec per semet ipsam conicere posset eorum interpretationem, perrexit ad quandam Christi famulam, nomine Æthelthrytham, moribus et aetate maturam, quae in praefata urbe nutrix erat Deo devotei virginum, cui narravit ex ordine quod sibi ostensum fuerat in nocturna uisione. At illa, sicut erate animo sagaci prudentissima, et interdum etiam futurorum Domino reuelante praescia, de nascituro infante multa praedixit, quae uera esse rerum exitus indicauit.1

Chapter 5

HOW THE BOY, BORN AND THEN REBORN IN CHRIST, WAS SUDDENLY FOUND ONE DAY WITH HIS NURSE IN CHURCH. One feast-day, when his nurse had, as was her custom, decided to go to church and pray, it chanced that so violent a downpour or rain broke forth that she could not set foot outside the door of the house where she sat with the baby in her lap. She was upset, and wept bitter tears because she could not fulfill the vow of her pious intent. She bowed her head in humble prayer to the Almighty Lord, and deservedly found speedy consolation from God’s mercy. For, having felt no discomfort from the storm, she suddenly found herself with the baby, sitting in the church she had planned to visit, with the priest celebrating solemn mass. She was frightened out of her wits at an event so inexplicable, and all who learnt of the miracle were struck by wonder and astonishment. For just as once the prophet was suddenly taken up out of Judæa and set down with his dinner in Chaldaea, so was the blessed child Æthelwold brought in a trice into the church with his nurse. Just as the prophet gave refreshment to a man of God in the lions’ den, so Æthelwold was, when the time was ripe, to feed thousands of people in the church of the saints.

1 Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 4-5.
QVOMODO PVER NATVS [ET] IN CHRISTO REGENERATVS QVADAM DIE SVBITO IN ECCLESIA CVM NVTRICE SVA INVENTVS EST. Accidit enim quadam sollemni die, cum more solito nutrix illius ad ecclesiam pergere et orationi incumbere decreuisset, tam ualidam inundantis pluiae tempestatem erumpere ut extra loci limen, ubi in gremio tenens eundem infanatem sederate, pedem mouere non posset. Quae dum maerens amarissime fletet eo quod uotum piae intentionis solvere nequiret, caput humiliter omnipotentem Dominum rogatura declinauit et confestim diuina miseratione solvere promeruit. Nam nullo molestiam procellosae tempestatis sentiens subito inuenta est cum infantulo sedens in ecclesia quam adire disponenbat, ubi sollemnia missarum presbiter celebrabat; et quod nulla ratione credere potuisset ut fieret, factum vehementer expauit, et omnes huius rei cognoscentes miraculum magne admirationis stupor inuasit. Sicut enim propheta quondam ex Iudaea reprente sublatus et in Chaldaea cum prandio est depositus, sic beatus puer Ætheluwoldus sub momento cum nutrice in templo est præsentatus, ut sicut ille refecit unum Dei hominem in lacu leonum, ita iste congruro tempore milia populorum praceret in ecclesia sanctorum.  

Chapter 22

THAT HE ESTABLISHED NUNS AT THE NUNNAMINSTER. He had plans too for the third monastery at Winchester, known in English as the Nunnaminster and dedicated to God in honour of ever-virgin Mary. Here he established a flock of nuns, placing over them Æthelthryth, whom I briefly mentioned above. Here the procedures of life according to the Rule are followed to this day.

QVOD IN COENOBIO NONNARVM SANTIMONIALES ORDINAVERIT. In tercio quoque Wintoniensi coenobio, quond Anglice Nunnamenster appelatur, in honore semper uirginis Mariae Deo consecratum, mandras santimonialium ordinavit, quibus matrem de qua superius paululum tetigimus Æthelhrytham praefecit, ubi regularis uitae norma hactenus observatur.

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2 Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 8-9.  
3 Wulfstan, Vita St. Æthelwoldi, 36-7.
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