Theodore's Peace

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Across her career, Barbara Yorke has massively advanced our understanding of early insular kingship, the territorial make-up of the Anglo-Saxon world and the establishment of Christianity in Britain.¹ It is my purpose in this tribute to focus on a short sequence of interactions between kings and senior clerics of a kind which have often been central to her work, focussing particularly on a few months in the autumn 679. Of course, we do not have anything like as much information as we would like and there is of necessity much speculation in what follows, but the bare bones of what happened are plain enough. This essay is intended to compliment my treatment of this episode in my recent volume on King Ecgrith,² where I focus primarily on the battle and its consequences. Here I will concentrate less on the conflict than on the peace negotiations through which Northumbrian/Mercian hostilities were concluded.

The Synod of Hatfield

We begin with the Council of the English Church convened and chaired by Archbishop Theodore at Hatfield on 17 September 679.³ Theodore had by then been in Britain for a little more than a decade, pushing forward major reforms of the Church with an urgency which reflected both the pressing need and his own advancing years (he was already 67 when he arrived).⁴ Bede preserved the

- 1 It is a great pleasure to contribute to a volume honouring Barbara Yorke. My own friendship with her dates back to a Workers' Educational Association residential weekend at Horncastle from which she and I 'escaped' when formal sessions had ended to explore Anglo-Saxon Lindsey, bowling around country lanes with only a somewhat sketchy grasp of where we were at any moment but a shared fascination with the historical evolution of the Wolds landscape. Ever since, I have valued her knowledge and diligent scholarship, her quick wit and gentle humour, her generosity as regards her time and energies and the care which she brings to all she does.
- 2 Nicholas J. Higham, *Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians, High-King of Britain* (Donington, 2015), pp. 180–82.
- 3 Bede, *HE* IV.17(15), pp. 384–87.
- 4 Michael Lapidge, "The Career of Archbishop Theodore," in *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, ed. Michael Lapidge, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 2 (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–29.

record of his first synod, held at Hertford in 672, which provides the skeleton of his programme.⁵ However, the Hatfield meeting was for a very different purpose. Earlier in the same year Pope Agatho had given leave for John, abbot of St. Martin's in Rome, to accompany Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith on their return to Wearmouth to help in spreading up-to-date Roman practices in Northumbria. At Rome the central issue at this date was the Monothelite Controversy—specifically how to respond to a missive from the emperor on that subject and re-unify the Faith. Agatho instructed Abbot John that he should check in Britain for any sign of that “heretical contagion” and report back.⁶ On arrival he communicated this errand to Archbishop Theodore; the Hatfield meeting was his response. Its synodal book recorded the unequivocal commitment to the orthodox Roman stance of the archdiocese and its clergy.⁷

The location of this synod is a matter of debate. The main candidates are the places today named Hatfield in South Yorkshire and Hertfordshire (discounting as improbable others in Hereford and Worcester and Essex).⁸ That Theodore's first council met at Hertford was probably what encouraged the assumption that the Hatfield meeting occurred nearby.⁹ However, Bede had only hitherto named the northern Hatfield, where King Edwin met his death in battle,¹⁰ and he made no effort to distinguish the location of Theodore's synod from the battle site. In addition, the dating clause at the start of the synodal book implies a meeting within the sphere of influence of the Northumbrian king:

Imperantibus dominis piissimis nostris Ecgfrido rege Humbronensium, anno decimo regni eius sub die xv kalendas Octobres indictione octaua, et Aedilredo rege Mercinensium, anno sexto regni eius, et Alduulfo rege Estranglorum, anno septimodecimo regni eius, et Hlothario rege Cantuariorum, regni eius anno septimo...

(Our most pious lords ruling, Ecgfrith king of the *Humbrenses*, in the tenth year of his reign, on the seventeenth of September and the eighth

5 Bede, *HE* IV.5, pp. 348–55.

6 Bede, *HE* IV.18(16), pp. 388–91.

7 Henry Chadwick, “The English Church and the Monothelite Controversy,” in *Archbishop Theodore*, ed. Lapidge, pp. 88–95.

8 For discussion see Higham, *Ecgfrith, King of the Northumbrians*, p. 180–81.

9 Sir Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1971), pp. 137, 749; see editorial comments for Bede, *HE* IV.17(15), pp. 384–87.

10 Bede, *HE* II.20, pp. 202–07.

indiction, and Æthelred king of the Mercians, in the sixth year of his reign, and Aldwulf king of the East Angles, in the seventeenth year of his reign, and Hlothhere king of the Kentings, in the seventh year of his reign...)

That Ecgrith is separated from the other three named kings in a way which seems intended subtly to advertise his superior status is unlikely to have been accidental. The record was written for the eyes of Pope Agatho so was almost certainly drafted by Theodore in person. It is difficult to imagine the archbishop distinguishing Ecgrith in this way if the meeting took place at Hatfield in Middle Anglia, which was almost certainly at this date under Mercian control. This is easiest reconciled, therefore, with the meeting taking place near the Humber.¹¹ The *Tribal Hidage* suggests that the northern Hatfield was the name of a region,¹² as much as a specific place. That the area was favoured as a meeting place is confirmed by the synod held at Austerfield (named by Stephen of Ripon as *Aetswinapathe* and *Ouestræfelda*) by Theodore's successor, Bertwald.¹³ It is, therefore, the more northerly Hatfield that should be preferred.

Having described the meeting and quoted extracts from the synodal book, Bede shifted his focus in his next chapter to Abbot John, who, as the guest of Benedict and Ceolfrith, had been teaching at Wearmouth in the run-up to the synod, passing on his knowledge of the Roman Christian calendar and his expertise in choral music. Having attended the synod, Abbot John then crossed back to the Continent with a copy of the synodal book for Pope Agatho. This copy eventually reached Rome but John did not, having died in Gaul en route.

The Battle Near the River Trent

With his account of John's actions concluded, Bede turned his attention back to events in England. In *HE*, IV.19 (Chapter 17 in the c-text variants) he took the opportunity provided by her death in this year to promote the memory of Æthelthryth, Ecgrith's first queen and the founding abbess of Ely. He lauded her sanctity, promoted her cult and even offered in the following chapter a

11 Nicholas J. Higham, *The Kingdom of Northumbria AD 350–1100* (Stroud, 1993), p. 139; Chadwick, "English Church and the Monothelete Controversy," p. 88, footnote 2; Nicholas J. Higham, *Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians, High-King of Britain* (Donington, 2015), p. 180.

12 David N. Dumville, "The Tribal Hidage: An Introduction to its Texts and their History," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London, 1989), pp. 225–30.

13 *VW*, ch. 46, pp. 92–95.

hymn which he had himself composed in her honour “many years before” (the virgin queen had clearly long been one of Bede’s heroes). Chapter 19 (17) has 110 lines in the modern edition, making it the third longest chapter in the book. Chapter 20 (18), which is focused tightly on the same subject, adds a further 60 lines, meaning that Bede’s account of Æthelthryth takes up almost eight per cent of book 4.¹⁴ There follows a description of the battle near the river Trent which is exceptionally brief; the shortest chapter in the book by far it has a mere 13 lines, only half those of the next shortest (Chapter 8). Bede sandwiched this between his lengthy treatment of Æthelthryth and another group of long passages on similar themes. Chapter 22 (20) describes a miracle which occurred in the aftermath of the battle (73 lines), then 23 (21) celebrates the life of Hild, abbess of *Streanaeshalch*, on the occasion of her death in 680 (at 167 lines the second longest chapter in the book). Finally 24 (22) provides further proof of the Godliness of her monastic regime, providing an account of the poet Cædmon (103 lines). Bede promised in his Preface that he would “tell of good men and their good estate” (*de bonis bona referat*), as well as “the evil ends of wicked men” (*mala commemoret de prauis*). Something that he might have added, but chose to leave unsaid, is that he would allot a much higher proportion of his work to the former than the latter. As a result Bede’s text can leave an impression of “a cast of saints rather than rude warriors,”¹⁵ yet there can be little doubt that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* was a cautionary tale aimed primarily at the secular elite within contemporary Northumbria.¹⁶

In such circumstances the often brief passages which do deal with the affairs of kings deserve our close attention. What follows is a comparatively literal translation of *HE* IV.21 (19):¹⁷

Anno regni Ecgfridi nono, conserto graui proelio inter ipsum et Aedilredum regem Merciorum iuxta fluuium Treanta, occisus est Aelfuini frater regis Ecgfridi, iuuenis circiter x et viii annorum, utrique prouinciae multum amabilis. Nam et sororem eius, quae dicebatur Osthyrd, rex Aedilred habebat uxorem. Cumque materies belli acrioris et inimicitiae longioris inter reges populosque feroces uideretur exorta, Theodorus Deo dilectus antistes, diuino functus auxilio, salutifera exhortatione coeptum tanti

14 Nicholas J. Higham, (*Re-*)*Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London, 2006), pp. 110–12.

15 Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Guildford, 1988), p. 235.

16 James Campbell, “Bede 1,” in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), pp. 1–27; Higham, (*Re-*)*Reading Bede*, p. 56.

17 Higham, *Ecgfrith, King of the Northumbrians*, p. 179.

periculi funditus extinguit incendium; adeo ut, pacatis alterutrum regibus ac populis, nullius anima hominis pro interfecto regis fratre, sed debita solummodo multa pecuniae regi ultori daretur. Cuius foedera pacis multo exinde tempore inter eosdem reges eorumque regna durarunt.

(In the ninth year of Ecgrith's rule, a grievous battle [*grave proelium*] was fought between him and Æthelred king of the Mercians, near the river Trent, [and] Ælfwine the brother of King Ecgrith was killed, a young man of about eighteen years old [who was] much loved in both kingdoms. For King Æthelred had as wife his sister, who was called Osthryth. And although there were reasons for bitter war and lengthier hostilities between the kings and these ferocious peoples, Bishop Theodore the beloved of God, trusting in divine aid, completely extinguished the fire of great danger by his health-bringing encouragement; as a result, peace was restored between the kings and the peoples, no further lives were demanded for the death of the king's brother but only the due sum of money was given to the king who had a duty of vengeance [Ecgrith]. By such means treaties of peace [*foedera pacis*] lasted for a long time between those kings and their realms.)

This passage is our principal witness to an outbreak of violence between the Northumbrian and Mercian kings, the peace by which it was resolved and Theodore's role in its negotiation.

We do not know for sure precisely when or where the battle occurred. First, the timing. Bede's dating of the event by reference to Ecgrith's ninth regnal year seems at variance with the dating clause of the synod, in Ecgrith's tenth regnal year, which he included four chapters earlier. Perhaps with that in mind, Bede dated the synod to 680 in his chronological recapitulation, placing Ælfwine's death, so the battle, one year earlier. However, the meeting at Hatfield necessarily occurred prior to the Church Council at Rome chaired by Agatho on 25 March 680, which Abbot John set out to attend (Wilfrid was present). The synod must therefore be dated to September 679.¹⁸ Ecgrith's first regnal year can have begun no earlier than his father's death on 15 February, 670 (and perhaps several months later). His ninth year was therefore 679–80, which is compatible with Bede's date. Stephen remarked that Ælfwine's body was

18 Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 272–73; Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils, c. 650–850* (London, 1995), pp. 254–55; Catherine Cubitt, "Appendix 2: The Chronology of Stephen's Life of Wilfrid," in *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint, Papers from the 1300th Anniversary Conferences*, ed. Nicholas J. Higham (Donington, 2013), pp. 334–46, at p. 344.

carried into York on the first anniversary of Wilfrid's appeal against the loss of his see,¹⁹ an event which Bede dates to 678. We should therefore assign both the synod (on 17 September) and the battle to 679.

When was the battle in relation to the synod? Given Abbot John's passage up to Northumbria earlier that year and the obvious dangers of organising a meeting in the southern borderlands of Northumbria at a time of war between Ecgrith and Æthelred, it seems common sense to follow Bede's ordering of events across these chapters. We should therefore assume that hostilities between the Northumbrian and Mercian kings broke out only once the synod had concluded.

Where did the battle occur? While it has been suggested that the synod's focus on narrowly doctrinal issues might have discouraged Theodore from having kings present,²⁰ dating it by reference to the reigns of four kings, led by Ecgrith, does rather imply their attendance. Otherwise why select these four but omit the king of, for example, the West Saxons? That the battle occurred "*iuxta* the river Trent" is consistent with this reading of events, for a synod at the South Yorkshire Hatfield attended by Ecgrith, Ælfwine and Æthelred could easily have led to confrontation between them and a fight near the Trent, which divided the Hatfield *regio* from Lindsey.²¹ That Bede has Imma expecting to find "friends" (*amici*) to aid him and then, on capture, claiming that he was just a "poor rustic" bringing supplies to the Northumbrian warriors clearly indicates that the battle occurred within Ecgrith's territories. While there can be no certainty, therefore, it seems very likely that the battle near the river Trent occurred soon after 17 September, within Northumbria's southern borders and in the general vicinity of the site at which the synod of Hatfield had occurred.

What sort of battle was it? Colgrave's translation of *gravis proelium* as "a great battle" rather obscures Bede's meaning, for *gravis* means 'grievous' or 'harsh', not 'great'.²² Bede was referring less to the scale of the conflict, therefore, than to Ælfwine's death—he was of course Ecgrith's heir and would have been expected to have taken up the reins of the Northumbrian kingship should Ecgrith die without heirs of his body (as he did in 685). His death was particularly 'grievous' from the perspective of a writer whose most impressionable years coincided with these events: Bede joined Wearmouth as a novice aged seven around the time of the battle and was just entering his teens when Ecgrith was killed. From his perspective, these were emotive events. We should

19 VW, ch. 24.

20 Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils*, p. 55.

21 See David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1981), p. 76.

22 Higham, *Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians*, p. 179.

not necessarily see this *proelium* as a full-scale battle, therefore. In Chapter 22 (20) Bede also termed it *pugna*—‘a fight’ (originally in the Classical period a ‘fist-fight’). If the kings attended a synod in the frontier region of Hatfield it seems reasonable to expect them to have done so with large retinues. The battle near the river Trent was probably nothing larger-scale than a clash between these bands of household warriors, not a set-piece engagement of the full Northumbrian and Mercian armies.

Who won? Bede was careful to avoid being overly explicit on that subject but it is clear from his account of Imma's survival that the Mercians controlled the field of battle following the conflict. In that sense, at least, this was a Mercian victory, but this same passage reveals that losses were heavy on both sides for the Mercian *comes* who took charge of the captured Imma recalled that all his “brothers and kinsmen were killed in that fight.”

Theodore's Peace

No sooner had the flames of war taken hold than Bede has Theodore stamp them out. The archbishop's speed of response is certainly consistent with both the synod and the battle occurring in a very short space of time and in close proximity. We should probably envisage Theodore still nearby when the clash between the kings occurred so able to react swiftly in the immediate aftermath. His behaviour seems exceptional, though, for Bede does not offer comparable situations in which a bishop engineered peace between warring kings. Additionally, earlier wars that he referred to ended with recognition of the superiority of one king over another but this did not. Theodore's peace looks different, therefore.

There had been many conflicts between Northumbrians and Mercians since the Northumbrian King Edwin was slain at Hatfield (in 633) by an army with a Mercian contingent led by Penda. That same Mercian leader was responsible for Oswald of Northumbria's death in 642 and for at least two invasions of the North during Oswiu's reign, in the second of which, in 655, he was himself killed at the *Winwaed*. Thereafter Oswiu's attempts to rule Mercia were ended by a revolt in 658 in favour of Penda's son, Wulfhere. Oswiu's son, Ecgrith, then defeated Wulfhere in battle c.674. Theodore was in Britain at this point and found himself having to reorganise the English bishoprics in consequence. More recently, he had had to pick up the pieces when Æthelred invaded Kent c.676, a campaign which left Rochester incapable of any longer supporting a bishop.²³ Clearly, in 679 Theodore needed peace to enable him to continue

23 Bede, *HE* IV.12, pp. 368–71.

reforming the Roman Church in Britain. In very general terms, therefore, his purpose is plain.

In Chapter 21 (19) Bede referred explicitly to only one element of the settlement, the payment of compensation so as to mitigate the duty of vengeance, implicitly by Æthelred to Ecgrith. Bede, ever the diplomat, revealed just that part of the agreement that gave something to Northumbria. Otherwise his account is little more than an extended metaphor of Theodore as God's agent extinguishing with water the fire of war, leaving us to reconstruct what else was agreed as best we can.²⁴

Some of this is uncontentious. We can safely conclude that any remaining claims on Ecgrith's part to superiority over Mercia, as established c.674 by victory over Wulfhere, were at an end. So too was any expectation of tribute from Mercia, such as Stephen remarked had been paid by Wulfhere.²⁵ Additionally, Ecgrith conceded territory, relinquishing Lindsey to his rival.²⁶ Henceforth, the boundary between the two kingdoms would lie on the Humber. The dating clause of Hatfield's synodal book termed Ecgrith "king of the *Humbrenses*". For the future that would cease, giving way to the expression 'Northumbrians'.

Apart from his having to pay wergild, therefore, Æthelred clearly gained a great deal: a wealthy and much-fought-over territory, which his father had held and his brother lost, would henceforth be part of Mercia; he now had equality of status with his hitherto-dominant Northumbrian brother-in-law, and his rival's influence south of the Humber had collapsed. Theodore's peace was an important step in the long-term consolidation of Mercian power across the south of Britain, which would be such a feature of the next century and a half, and facilitated the re-organisation and institutionalisation of the Mercian Church which was underway across the remainder of Æthelfrith's reign.²⁷

What, though, beyond monetary recompense for his brother's death, did Ecgrith obtain from this treaty? More specifically, in what sense were its terms sufficiently advantageous from his perspective to deter him from continuing the war? After all, had he beaten Æthelred in 679 there can be little doubt that he would have sought to tighten his grip on the South, taking territory perhaps, and/or tribute, much as he did when he earlier defeated Wulfhere. Peace robbed Ecgrith of that opportunity.

24 For wider discussion of the royal interest in peace, see Paul J.E. Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power and the Early Medieval Imagination* (Oxford, 2011).

25 VW, ch. 20.

26 Bede, *HE* IV.12, pp. 370–71.

27 John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 79–80; Morn Capper, "Prelates and Politics: Wilfrid, Oundle and the 'Middle Angles,'" in *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, ed. Higham, pp. 260–74.

Seeking answers to that question brings us to the nature and purpose of Theodore's involvement. Of course, it was very fitting that a clergyman should take it upon himself to weave peace between kings,²⁸ but his was no UN-style intervention on behalf of the injured or captured, as the Imma miracle recounted by Bede makes clear.²⁹ Imma was incapacitated in the battle and captured in its aftermath, risking execution in vengeance for the deaths in battle of his captor's kinsmen but was eventually sold into slavery instead. There was no attempt by the archbishop to intervene; rather the miraculous element in his story supposedly stemmed from the masses said by Imma's brother, Tunna, a Northumbrian abbot.

To understand both Theodore's case for peace and Ecgfrith's willingness to accept it we need to revisit the difficulties confronting Roman Christianity in Northern Britain, then explore what the king and archbishop actually did in the few years following the peace, assessing the extent to which their actions are likely to reflect matters agreed at this point.

Theodore, Ecgfrith and the North

Penned for decades into southern England, lacking the patronage of the more powerful English kings and with little Continental support, the insular Roman Church was in crisis in the early 660s. King Oswiu's switch to the Roman dating of Easter in 664 brought a genuine big-hitter on board but this coincided with the plague in which both Archbishop Deusdedit and King Eorcenberht of Kent died. Oswiu therefore found himself almost immediately having to oversee re-appointment to Canterbury. Wigheard, despatched to Rome as Deusdedit's successor, died before he could be consecrated.³⁰ With plague raging there too, Pope Vitalian struggled to find a replacement but he clearly recognised that Oswiu's conversion presented an important opportunity, sending a letter of intent, two extracts from which Bede included in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.³¹ In the first Vitalian welcomed Oswiu's conversion to the "true and apostolic faith" (meaning Roman Christianity as opposed to Ionan), and rejoiced that he was labouring day and night to bring "all his subjects to the catholic and apostolic faith". In the second he promised that the man that he would send would have

28 See, for example, the letter of Bishop Wealdhere to Archbishop Brihtwold, c.704–05, in *EHD* 1, no. 164.

29 Bede, *HE* IV.22, pp. 400–05.

30 Bede, *HE* III.29, pp. 318–23.

31 Bede, *HE* III.29, pp. 318–23.

“full instructions” so that “by his preaching and with the help of the word of God, [he would] entirely root out, with His blessing, the tares sown by the enemy throughout your island.”

It was Vitalian's intention, therefore, to seize this opportunity to complete the conversion of Britain to Roman Christianity. His representative would be charged not just with consolidation of the true faith amongst the English but with eradication of heresy among all Britain's inhabitants. Circumstances were particularly advantageous, for Oswiu was a foster-son of the monastery of St. Columba on Iona and its principal protector in the 660s. He was also a friend of the Scottish royal family, members of which were ruling the northern Picts under his overall *imperium*. As the direct ruler of numerous British and Pictish communities and the superior king of all northern Britain,³² Oswiu was in a strong position to encourage the spread of Roman practices. That he shared Vitalian's ambition seems likely, for Wigheard had supposedly sought authority to “ordain bishops throughout the whole of Britain to the churches of the English.”³³

With Wigheard dead, it fell to his replacement to push through this ambitious program in northern Britain. It was one of the most learned men available, the Greek expatriate Theodore, who Vitalian eventually appointed. En route to Canterbury, he stayed at Paris with Bishop Agilbert,³⁴ who had attended the synod of Whitby so will have been well-primed on the religious situation in Northumbria. Theodore needed to rebuild the English Church pretty much from the top down. In 669 there was a shortage of suitable candidates even to fill the existing bishoprics, only one of which currently had a canonically-appointed incumbent (Wine at London), and even he had allegedly bought his post.³⁵ However, there was a very well-qualified individual available in the person of Wilfrid, who had already been consecrated as bishop of York by Agilbert.³⁶ One of Theodore's first actions as archbishop was therefore to journey north, unseat Oswiu's uncanonically-ordained bishop, Chad, and enthrone Wilfrid. Bede reported that, already before Oswiu's death in February 670, “Wilfrid was administering the see of the church of York not only of all the Northumbrians but also of the Picts, as far as King Oswiu's power extended.”³⁷ Theodore deputed the expansion of Roman Christianity in the North to Wilfrid,

32 Bede, *HE* II.5, pp. 148–55; James Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 186–99; Higham, *Ecgrifith, King of the Northumbrians*, pp. 105–08.

33 Bede, *HE* III.29, pp. 318–23.

34 Bede, *HE* IV.1, pp. 328–33.

35 Bede, *HE* III.7, pp. 232–37.

36 *VW*, ch. 12.

37 Bede, *HE* IV.3, pp. 336–47.

therefore, while he focused on the many problems of the South.³⁸ As far as we know he did not cross the Humber again for nine years.

In Northumbria, Oswiu's death brought his son, Ecgfrith, to power. Ecgfrith's East Anglian wife was Wilfrid's committed supporter, gifting him the rich estates on which he founded his second great monastery at Hexham.³⁹ Ecgfrith's early years were crowned with military successes from which Wilfrid also benefited. The king's suppression of a Pictish revolt provided new opportunities to promote the Roman Church among the Picts, Scots and Britons. Victory over Wulfhere and the Mercians c.674 allowed the king to secure Lindsey, which was then detached from the Mercian bishopric and added to Wilfrid's.⁴⁰ When the bishop completed his magnificent new church at Ripon, Ecgfrith and Ælfwine attended its consecration and enriched it with new estates.⁴¹ Many of the abbots of Northumbria's existing monasteries either gifted him their lands or willed them to him, Stephen tells us, and his household was becoming a magnet for the sons of the nobility.⁴²

Wilfrid was therefore growing ever more rich and influential, but the queen withdrew to the religious life c.672 and Wilfrid's opposition to clergy who had accepted the Roman dating of Easter only in 664 was making him powerful enemies.⁴³ These included the prominent community at *Streanaeshalch*, led by Ecgfrith's maternal relative, Abbess Hild, his widowed mother, Eanflæd, and his sister, Ælfflæd,⁴⁴ who were investing there in the memory of Pope Gregory's mission to the English and Northumbria's first 'Roman' king, Edwin, Eanflæd's father and Hild's great-uncle.

Wilfrid's confrontational attitude towards heresy comes over strongly in Stephen's description of his treatment of British communities inside Northumbria.⁴⁵ While this was arguably in-line with Theodore's views early in his career as archbishop, the elderly archbishop seems to have moderated his views while in Britain and adopted a more pragmatic stance.⁴⁶ In contrast, Wilfrid did not. His authoritarian approach will arguably have alarmed large

38 Bede, *HE* IV.2. pp. 332–37.

39 *VW*, ch. 22.

40 *VW*, ch. 21.

41 *VW*, ch. 17.

42 *VW*, ch. 21.

43 *VW*, ch. 12.

44 Higham, *Ecgfrith, King of the Northumbrians*, pp. 130–33.

45 *VW*, ch. 17.

46 Clare Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish* (Jarrow, 2003), pp. 12–15; Thomas Charles-Edwards "Wilfrid and the Celts," in *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint*, ed. Higham, pp. 243–59, at p. 247.

numbers of Northumbria's clergy and alienated Ecgrith's Scottish, Pictish and British tributaries. On this reasoning it seems likely that Wilfrid was now proving to be an obstacle to Ecgrith's over-lordship of the North, and the spread there of Roman practices.

Nor had Wilfrid endeared himself to Theodore, who at Hertford had made known his desire to reduce the size of the English dioceses only to see Wilfrid's expand both northwards and southwards. Additionally, there were issues around York's status. Wilfrid's sending proctors to represent him at the synod of Hertford, rather than attend in person,⁴⁷ may reflect his knowledge (which Wilfrid will have come across in 664) that York had briefly been a metropolitan see in the 630s.⁴⁸ That this mattered to the Wilfridians is revealed by Stephen's reference to Colman as once having been metropolitan bishop of York.⁴⁹ This misrepresents the Irishman but demonstrates awareness of York's earlier status, and reveals a degree of interest in projecting that forward in time from the days of Paulinus towards Wilfrid's appointment.⁵⁰ Although Wilfrid is not known to have challenged Theodore's authority directly, the issue of York's status vis-à-vis Canterbury necessarily mattered at a time when the see's partitioning was on the agenda.

By 678 Wilfrid had a new enemy in Ecgrith's second queen, Iurminburh.⁵¹ The king had his own reasons,⁵² of course, but it was explicitly with her encouragement that he invited Theodore north that autumn to rid him of his bishop. The archbishop's willingness to co-operate reflects his desire to divide the see, obviously, but he was probably also motivated by a wish to keep Ecgrith on side, to defuse tensions between different adherents to Roman practices in Northumbria and re-invigorate the expansion of Roman Christianity northwards under his own supervision.

Theodore sub-divided the Northumbrian Church immediately after he had ejected Wilfrid, appointing separate bishops for Bernicia, Deira and Lindsey. The new appointees were all northerners and likely to have been Ecgrith's choices as much as Theodore's. Bosa, appointed to York, was one of Hild's graduates,⁵³ so a candidate likely to have been favoured by Ecgrith's sister and

47 Bede, *HE* IV.5, pp. 348–55.

48 James Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 195–99; Nicholas J. Higham, "Bede and the Early English Church," in *Leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church, from Bede to Stigand*, ed. Alexander Rumble (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 25–40, at 32–36.

49 *VW*, ch. 10.

50 Bede, *HE* II.17; pp. 194–97.

51 *VW*, ch. 24.

52 Higham, *Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians*, pp. 171–73.

53 Bede, *HE* IV.23, pp. 404–15.

mother, who were gradually taking control of *Streanaeshalch* during the elderly abbess's final illness (she died in 680). Eata, appointed to Hexham, had been one of Aidan's English pupils recruited in the 630s who had risen first to the abbacy of Melrose then of Lindisfarne (the latter in 664 at the urging of Oswiu's third and last Irish bishop, Colman). He was therefore a leader of the Northumbrian monks and clergy who had come over to Rome with King Oswiu, making him exceptionally well placed to appreciate how best to persuade others to follow in his footsteps. Eadhæd, in Lindsey, had been King Oswiu's personal priest in the mid-660s.⁵⁴ Theodore and Ecgrith were therefore promoting ex-Ionans to head up the Northumbrian Church, with the most 'Iona-friendly' candidate appointed to the most northerly see. This reveals their dissatisfaction with Wilfrid and willingness to trust instead to the so-called 'middle' group of clergy, who had themselves undergone the transition from Ionan to Roman Christianity.⁵⁵

This re-configuration of the Northumbrian Church was, however, still fragile in the autumn of 679, and faced a particular threat from Wilfrid's appeal to the papacy against his expulsion. At this point Wilfrid's supporters still retained control of several wealthy Northumbrian monasteries, giving him a platform from which to relaunch his career should he carry the day at Rome. Both Theodore and Abbess Hild sent letters seeking to sway the papal court against Wilfrid but the matter was only settled in October. The result was not therefore known in England when Theodore was negotiating peace between Ecgrith and Æthelred. That Ecgrith and Theodore were already co-operating closely is likely to have been an important influence on these discussions. Their co-operation clearly continued, for when Wilfrid did eventually return (late in 680 or in 681), his papal letters were dismissed as forgeries, Wilfrid was imprisoned, then exiled and his followers dispersed by the king.⁵⁶ Such would have been unthinkable without the archbishop's support. Discussion and reaffirmation of their joint position by king and archbishop vis-à-vis Wilfrid is therefore likely to have formed part of their meetings late in 679.

Theodore demonstrated his commitment to this agreement in the immediate aftermath of peace, shifting Bishop Eadhæd, who he had appointed to Lindsey late in 678, to Ripon, where he was presumably tasked with cancelling out Wilfridian influence but at the same time spreading Roman practices among the still largely British communities of the Pennines. This was, though,

54 Bede, *HE* 111.28, pp. 314–17.

55 For the divisions of the Northumbrian Church, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 320–21; 336–37.

56 *VW*, chs. 34–40.

far from the end of Theodore's engagement, for his frequent visits to the North and his actions there imply that a detailed program was agreed by king and archbishop in the aftermath of the battle by the Trent. That Bede referred not to a *foedus pacis*, but *foedera pacis* in the plural, suggests that there were agreements not just between the two kings but between the archbishop and each king as well.

Theodore committed himself to pushing forward Roman Christianity in the North. In 681 he returned to partition the Bernician diocese, dividing Bernicia between Hexham and Lindisfarne and creating a new see for the Picts at Abercorn, based on the safer, southern shore of the Firth of Forth.⁵⁷ This provided the missionary effort with a new forward base. Again, the appointees were northerners. One had been the abbot of Gilling, the other a man with strong links to Whitby, so once more both probably men who had 'come-over' to Rome with Oswiu. Theodore subsequently deposed Tunberht from Hexham (the reason is unknown) but, at the synod of *Adtuifyrði*, near the river Aln (Northumberland), in the autumn of 684 he oversaw the election of yet another ex-Ionan priest, Cuthbert, once an in-mate of Melrose but now the prior of Lindisfarne, who was ordained by the archbishop at York the following Easter.⁵⁸ Theodore's input to the northern Roman Church was very considerable, therefore, between 678 and 685 (when Ecgrith was killed). For such an old man (he was about 77 years old in 679), the frequency of his journeys northwards is remarkable. It seems reasonable to see his input as fulfilment of commitments made to the king in the aftermath of the fight near the river Trent.

Ecgrith seems likewise to have seen his own success bound up with strengthening the Roman Church in the North. Bede claimed that towards the end of his life Oswiu had wielded *imperium* over both the Scots and the Picts,⁵⁹ later specifying that he had "subjected the greater part of the Pictish people to the rule of the English".⁶⁰ He had certainly established English rule in Fife, perhaps beyond. Ecgrith suppressed a Pictish revolt early in his reign (c.671), so on the face of it held a position comparable to that of his father. There were important differences, though, for Oswiu had had the active co-operation of the Scottish royal family and promoted Dál Riata princes to rule the northern Picts. With Wilfrid in post, though, Ecgrith seems to have been unable to count on the active support of Iona's associates in Dál Riata, turning instead to

57 Bede, *HE* IV.12, pp. 368–71.

58 Bede, *HE* IV.28 (26), pp. 434–35.

59 Bede, *HE* II.5, pp. 148–55.

60 Bede, *HE* III.24, pp. 288–95.

a distant cousin, Bruide,⁶¹ a scion of the British dynasty of Dumbarton Rock, to serve as tributary king of the northern Picts. While his victory was still fresh, Ecgrith's power was unchallenged but Wilfrid's aggressive approach to mission had the potential, at least, to stir up hostility not just to the Roman Church but to English domination as well.

It was against that backdrop that Ecgrith engineered Wilfrid's removal and the appointment of bishops likely to take a less confrontational approach towards the Scottish and Pictish Churches. But alongside that initiative the Northumbrian king invested heavily in a new, ostentatiously 'Roman' church at Jarrow (founded c.681).⁶² This new venture reveals much about Ecgrith's thinking. It was Benedict Biscop to whom he granted the necessary estates, the man who had guided Theodore to Britain and served as his abbot at Canterbury until Hadrian's arrival.⁶³ Given the closeness of his connection to the archbishop, it seems very likely that the new foundation was discussed by Ecgrith and Theodore late in 679. The site was later described as Ecgrith's port,⁶⁴ referring to the open water below (once called the Slake). This choice of location implies strong links between the king's foundation and his military and political ambitions. There were two strands to the policies agreed by Ecgrith and Theodore, therefore. On the one hand they were promoting as bishops men who had themselves experienced the transition to Rome, in expectation of their greater success in encouraging others to follow suit. Alongside, the king bank-rolled a major new centre of Catholic orthodoxy and was preparing to take on the role of God's champion in imposing His will on the North.

That this would be necessary was becoming ever more apparent, for Ecgrith's defeat by the Mercians coincided with signs that northern British and Pictish leaders were flexing their military muscles, encouraged perhaps in addition by the emergence in the late 670s of a powerful new High-King in Ireland.⁶⁵ Ecgrith's ambitions in this theatre are hinted at, at least, by a claim made by Wilfrid, relevant to the period after he had been reinstated by the

61 *Historia Brittonum*, 57, in *British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (Chichester, 1980), p. 77.

62 Ian Wood, *The Origins of Jarrow: The Monastery, the Slake and Ecgrith's Minster* (Jarrow, 2008), p. 18; Rosemary Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites*, vol. 1 (Swindon, 2005), pp. 8–12; Higham, *Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians*, pp. 192–93.

63 Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, chs. 3, 7, ed. Christopher Grocock and Ian N. Wood (Oxford, 2013), pp. 28–29, 36–39.

64 Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu Istius, Hoc Est Dunhelmensis Ecclesie*, 2.5, ed. David Rollason (Oxford, 2000), pp. 36–39.

65 Higham, *Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians*, pp. 201–07.

pope as bishop of York.⁶⁶ Wilfrid was present at the synod of Rome in March 680 and added his signature to its proceedings, as “legate of the venerable synod for Britain”,⁶⁷ but when Stephen came to report on this he represented Wilfrid confessing “the true and catholic faith for all the northern part of Britain and Ireland and the islands which are inhabited by peoples of the Angles and Britons as well as the Scots and Picts.”⁶⁸ Obviously, this far exceeded the practical limits of the jurisdiction of York’s bishop in 680, but it probably did reflect Wilfrid’s aspirations. This was the authority, therefore, and these the responsibilities that Wilfrid thought were rightfully his, in line both with Vitalian’s letter and current thinking at Rome. As we have seen, the York diocese was dependent in the 670s on the influence of the Northumbrian king. Wilfrid’s grandiose conception of his diocese probably therefore mirrors Ecgrith’s ambitions as Northumbria’s ruler. When in June 684 he set about re-imposing himself militarily, he first attacked the High-King of Ireland, Fínsnechtae Flédach of Brega, then marched on the Picts the following year.⁶⁹

Conclusions

Beyond the fact that Æthelred paid wergild for the killing of Ecgrith’s brother Ælfwine, Bede offered little detail of the agreements by which Theodore negotiated an end to Northumbrian/Mercian hostilities in the autumn of 679. It is easy to see what Æthelred gained from the deal, effectively recovering the dominant position in southern Britain that had been enjoyed by family members in the past, plus Theodore’s co-operation in reforming the Mercian Church. That the Mercian king agreed to peace, therefore, is unsurprising.

Likewise, that Theodore required peace and stability in order to make headway in his reform and re-organisation of the English Church is obvious. However, his close involvement in the far North stemmed only from Wilfrid’s ejection in the previous year. This required a hands-on role in a region which he had formerly barely even visited. War risked disrupting his oversight, leaving the North in the hands of only-recently-appointed bishops whose commitment to and knowledge of Roman practices Theodore may well have doubted. The archbishop stepped in to negotiate peace in order to safeguard his work of

66 VW, ch. 32,

67 Chadwick, “The English Church and the Monothelete Controversy,” p. 92.

68 VW, ch. 53.

69 Bede, *HE* IV.26(24), pp. 426–31; *The Irish Chronicles*, 686, ed. and trans. Thomas Charles-Edwards, 1 (Liverpool, 2006) p. 166. See David A.E. Pelteret, “The Northumbrian Attack on Brega in A.D. 684,” below.

reform more generally but particularly his newly expanded engagement with the conversion of the North. Theodore's peace late in 679 should therefore be understood in the context of Wilfrid's exclusion in 678, his appeal to Rome and the efforts of both archbishop and king to push forward the missionary effort northwards. The archbishop had co-operated closely with Ecgfrith across the previous year and there is every reason to think that their joint enterprise featured heavily at this point. It would continue thereafter up to Ecgfrith's death.

In 679 Ecgfrith lost his brother, the province of Lindsey, and the last vestiges of his admittedly short-lived supremacy over the South. That he agreed to peace suggests that he was persuaded by Theodore that the North was the theatre in which God wished him to concentrate his efforts. While the new bishops appointed by the archbishop sought to steer the Northumbrians and their British, Scottish and Pictish neighbours towards Roman practices by persuasion, Ecgfrith himself set about resourcing a new, very 'Roman' foundation at Jarrow. Benedict Biscop, to whom he granted the new lands, was the king's counsellor, the Northumbrian closest to Theodore and the individual within Northumbria with the greatest knowledge of Continental Christianity. Jarrow represents, therefore, Ecgfrith's renewed commitment to Rome's leadership of the Church at a moment of personal crisis. Again, this is likely to have been a matter of close discussion with Theodore.

Once Jarrow was well underway, the king put into effect his plan to impose orthodoxy on the North by force of arms. A successful expedition against Brega in eastern Ireland in the summer of 684 effectively neutralised the Irish High-King, removing any potential for his interfering in the North. This left the Picts and Britons of the Clyde valley exposed. Once his new 'Roman' church had been consecrated on 23 April 685, Ecgfrith marched against the Picts, confident of divine support. What Ecgfrith lost in southern Britain by Theodore's peace he was therefore expecting to make up in this northern world as God's lieutenant, assured of divine support in bringing "all his subjects to the catholic and apostolic faith," and so weeding out "the tares sown by the enemy," as Vitalian had put it. Ecgfrith died in battle less than a month later, on 20 May, but his failure should not blind us to the plans that will have been drawn up in discussion with Theodore in 678 and 679, then pushed through energetically in the intervening years. Although Ecgfrith's death ended attempts to impose Roman Christianity on the North by force, Ecgfrith's successor, Aldfrith, and Abbot Ceolfrith at Jarrow both continued the broad thrust of these policies, persuading Abbot Adamnán, the Ionan community and the Pictish king Nechtan all to convert to Rome, as Bede recounted triumphantly in 731.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Bede, *HE* v.15,21–22, pp. 504–09, 532–55.