

REGES CHRISTIANISSIMI

*History and Interpretation
in Bede's Account of the
Early Kings of Northumbria*

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Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1. Æthelfrith	13
A. Æthelfrith and the Battle of Chester	17
B. St Germanus and the Orchard of Bangor	83
2. Eadwine	107
A. The Politics of Coifi's Desecration of the Temple	113
B. King Eadwine's Conversion: A Typological Analysis	125
3. Oswald	149
A. Oswald's Victory at Denisesburna	157
B. Oswald's Tree	173
Conclusion	221
References	223
Index of Biblical References	235
General Index	235

Illustrations

1. A view over Heronbridge towards the Dee	35
2. A map of the topography of the Heronbridge area	43
3. Eccleston old churchyard	49
4. A map of the British and English kingdoms	54
5. Goodmanham church	114
6. The Derwent valley	115
7. A map of the Vale of York and surrounding areas	117
8. The River Derwent at Sutton-on-Derwent	119
9. A schematic representation of the realm of Deira	134
10. A map of the routes of Oswald and Cadwallon to battle	161
11. A map of the area of the battle of Denisesburna	162
12. A view of Heavenfield from the south-west	163
13. A view of Heavenfield from the south	163
14. The Rowley Burn	165
15. The Devil's Water	165
16. St Oswald's chapel, Heavenfield	175
17. Old Oswestry hillfort	177
18. St Oswald's Well, Oswestry	180
19. A modern statue of the eagle seizing Oswald's arm	181
20. A view of Heavenfield from Wall	190
21. An eagle and waterfowl (Sutton Hoo purse)	213

Front cover. Bede the Scholar, window by Roy Coomber, 2011

Preface

‘Christ is the Morning Star, who when the night of this world is past brings to his saints the promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day.’ These words, presented in striking graphic form in Durham Cathedral on the Alington memorial, designed by George Pace, derive from Bede’s commentary on the Apocalypse. They may be said to epitomise Bede’s mission: to fill the darkness of error with Christ’s light, an inspiration which fills his whole approach to the world and its history.

Archaeology may tell us much, but the world of early Northumbria remains one that comes to us largely through the words of Bede, who spent his life within the confines of the Northumbrian monasteries of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow but who nonetheless presented us with a picture of the whole realm of the Northumbria, and England more widely, that he lived in. Bede wrote many works, many being concerned with biblical exegesis, but he is best known for his magisterial *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People’), which he completed around 731.¹ Bede had one overriding theme: to show the spiritual development of the English people up to his time, from being pagans to staunch members of the Catholic Church.

The essays in this volume, originally composed at different times for various occasions, are merely case studies: I pick some incidents from the reigns of three (almost) successive early Northumbrian monarchs, Æthelfrith, Eadwine and Oswald,² all of which concern the coming of Christianity or interaction with the British Christianity which already existed among the native Celtic-speaking population before the Anglo-Saxon conversion. I devote two essays to each king: the first is ‘secular’, the aim being

¹ I use the standard edition of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, edited by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, but at times provide my own translations in order to convey more precisely my own readings of the meaning of the text.

² Forms of names cause difficulties: rather than following the semi-latinised versions Bede employs, I have standardised names to their Old English forms (so Eadwine rather than Edwin, for example).

to understand the history from a modern perspective. Yet history was not understood in a modern way in the past; while Bede's spiritual concerns would not have been shared by everyone, it is a truism that the aim of uncovering supposedly objective history reflects a modern epistemology (notwithstanding the subjectively oriented truth that each age surely gets the history it craves): for past ages, history was part of a tradition, shaped to represent what people understood their position in the world to be based on a religious understanding — first pagan within the period under consideration, then Christian — of the cosmos. The second essay of each pair therefore looks at some of the more 'spiritual' (but not always Christian) understanding of history that Bede and his sources, and related traditions, espoused. A certain amount of overlap and repetition has been unavoidable.

I hope that the essays presented here will prove of interest both to historians and to those with a more spiritually inspired interest in the early years of the kingdom of Northumbria. The title is based on Bede's description of Oswald, 'Christianissimus rex'; Eadwine is similarly lauded for his Christian faith, and even the pagan Æthelfrith is regarded as an instrument of God's wrath.

Thinking about Typology

THERE IS LITTLE NEED, I think, to explain the basis of argument in the ‘secular’ chapters of this book, as it will be self-evident. Yet while history may, for most modern readers, be a series of objectifiable events, an interplay of interactions between actors—all human—with different motivations, Bede, of course, did not read the past in this way. History for him is a playing out of divine purpose, and the events that lead up to the conversion of the English act as a sort of *praeparatio evangelica*. He understood history as having a moral purpose: it offered a stage on which to arrange past events and characters to demonstrate the unfolding of a moral or political truth (Ray 1997, 11–13). Bede, however, more than most historians of his era, was above all a biblical exegete: as Markus (1975, 13) observes, ‘Perhaps we fail to do justice to Bede the ecclesiastical historian if we fail to read his historical work as he would have wished it to be read: in the light of his reflections on the “sacred history” contained in his commentaries on the Bible. In the perspective of the scriptures the struggle between the holy and the wicked was endemic.’ This struggle was epitomised most forcefully in the work of one of Bede’s major models, St Augustine of Hippo, who characterised the citizens of heaven in the world as denizens of the City of God. Augustine’s is essentially an eschatological view of history, looking forward to its fulfilment at the Parousia, and this is reflected in Bede’s approach to history, which ‘turns on the belief that the lives and actions of the heavenly citizens on earth could give a foretaste of the future life, and more than that, were the precious evidence of the chord which already joined them to their true homeland’ (Mayr-Harting 1976, 1). Yet for Bede, unlike for earlier Church historians such as Eusebius or Orosius, history was no simple progression, an advance to a goal (such as the triumphant fusion of Church and Empire in the politeia of the fourth century) (Markus 1975, 13).

Most of Bede's works consist of biblical exegesis, and he followed patristic models, his approach deriving ultimately (although indirectly) in particular from Origen, his more immediate inspirations being the works of Gregory the Great and Augustine.¹ Much of this approach is typological—a way of thinking that is largely alien to the modern mind, but commonplace for the patristic and medieval thinker (as pointed out forcefully by Laistner 1957, 160): repeated patterns and symbolic links are found between historical events, which make manifest the divine purpose.² As Holder (1990, 407) points out, Bede was careful not to allegorise away the literal meaning of texts (as Gregory, but not Augustine, had tended to do: Thacker 2005, 15–16), but he saw texts as imbued with a higher sense as well.

How does typology work? In biblical terms, many of the events of the Old Testament act as *types* or prefigurations to the *antitypes* of the New: for example, the sojourn of Jonah in the whale's belly (Jonah 1:17) stands in typical symbolic relationship with the antitype of Christ's sojourn in Hades after the Crucifixion. The key text, often cited by Bede (Holder 1990, 409), upon which typology is based is I Corinthians 10:11, 'Now all these things happened to them in figure, and they are written for our correction'. To delve further into the relationship between type and antitype, and how far that relationship is ontological and how far interpretative, would require a much deeper treatment than can be offered here; patristic interpretations do not all agree in their approach beyond accepting that some relationship existed which manifested divine providence. Origen, for example, did not accept that a historical event could act as a type to another historical event (*Commentary on John* 10.110), and railed

¹ He was fond of saying he followed in the footsteps of the Fathers (see Holder 1990, 401; Thacker 2005, 5 n. 23, notes several instances with references, but also observes that Bede's attitude was distinctly unservile towards them). Bede's chief sources were Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great, along with Cyprian, Hilary of Poitiers, Isidore of Seville and Cassiodorus, with occasional use of Origen, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom; the dominant influence was the Alexandrian tradition of allegorical exegesis stemming from Origen (Holder 1990, 404–5). For a general account of Bede as a Church historian, see Mayr-Harting (1991, ch. 2) and, more penetratingly, Thacker (2010).

² The standard work on typology is de Lubac (1959–64), but see also Simonetti (1994) for a much briefer and accessible introduction.

against those who thought in this way, so his interpretation of Christ as the fulfilment of the Passover, for example, rejected the idea that the sacrificed Lamb of God was the antitype to the type of the Passover lamb of Exodus 12; rather, the antitype had an allegorical sense, consuming the sacrifice being realised as 'inwardly digesting' the Word of God 'embodied' in Scripture and deriving spiritual sustenance from it (Dawson 2001, 72–4). On Bede's more immediate sources, Gregory the Great and Augustine, Thacker (2005, 18) notes that whereas for Gregory, the Old Testament was an inexhaustible reservoir of moral exemplars (and need not be interpreted literally), 'for Augustine it was a pregnant narrative of the history of the people of God; the theme of the two cities intertwined throughout time invested the text with concurrent literal and figurative significance'; it was Augustine, in Thacker's view, that exercised the more fundamental influence on Bede.

Typology was overwhelmingly applied to the narratives of the Bible, and its application in this context was all but universally accepted. What of non-biblical, and post-incarnation, history? Typology, if applied to history, would enforce an essentially figurative, rather than literal, approach, just as it does in reading the Bible—'a grand exercise in the use of the imagination', as Meyvaert (1976, 45–6) called it—and a 'true' understanding of history would involve grasping the figurative connection between events.

Yet can Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* be read typologically? The obvious answer is no. Bede makes reference to the Bible often enough, but only as a moral exemplar, never figuratively—and in this he differs from Augustine, whose whole *City of God* might be described as a typological history of Rome (Furry 2013, 51–9).³ It seems that Bede 'did not think it appropriate to figurally exegete the signs of history which God can and certainly did use, since they lacked any theological significance apart from God's taking them up into his providential care' (*ibid.*, 88). Scholars often emphasise the need to consider Bede's exegetical work

³ Furry (2013, 54) points out some examples that would easily have lent themselves to a figural interpretation, such as the case of the apostate king Eadwald, son of Æthelberht, who goes mad, to be compared with Saul with his fits of madness under the power of an evil spirit.

alongside his *Historia Ecclesiastica*; Furry (2013) goes further and offers a detailed and extended discussion of the problem of the dichotomy in approach between his exegetical and historical works. The arguments are complex, and can only be touched upon here. One important issue Furry raises is just how far Bede really understood Augustine's elevated theological thought; he takes the example of Augustine's commentaries on the Genesis account of creation to make his point (*ibid.*, 71–86).

For Augustine, as God is eternal, creation cannot take place in time, since that would mean that time and change already existed and there would be no true eternity; God's act of creation is thus not like our acts of making. 'In principio' and creation refer to the eternal utterance of the Word, who is Christ: it is not that God spoke (to create the world) and then ceased speaking; rather, the utterance is eternal, and creation is eternal, all things coming into being at once (with an eternal existence in the Word). The days of creation form a logical, but not temporal, progression, and the temporal form of narrative given in Genesis acts as a story, understood as a historical account only by those who are not able to comprehend that it is essentially a metaphor. The form given to creation through the Father's uttering of the Word comes to abide in creation through the Spirit. Creation thus reflects the nature and relationship of the Trinity. History, then, is creation seen through time, and it forever takes on the form that God assigns it.

Bede, not wishing to abandon the literal sense of biblical texts, envisages a tension between a supposedly 'literal' and an 'allegorical' reading of the creation story, whereas for Augustine no such dichotomy exists, as the literal sense of the story — creation in eternity — is that which can be derived from a metaphorical reading. Bede, in short, interprets creation as if he were beholding it unfold, whereas for Augustine it is a matter of logical discourse.

There are deep implications for what history means in these varying understandings of creation. For Augustine, creation is given form in the primal divine *rationes*, and it is not only creation that has form and structure, but the entire course of human history. All of creation and human history are, through the *rationes*, inchoately present in the act of creation (represented narratively as lasting six days), and all the happenings of history are realisations of these *rationes*. For Bede, creation

is a mechanical act of making, and hence God can intervene in the world, but this is meaningless within Augustine's understanding: God is not externally related to creation, but is in everything in the cosmos, and every action in the world is thus an action of God, not because it is not an action of a creature, but because it is by God's action that the creature is itself and has its own activity. Creation does not need to be given extra revelatory significance through special intervention: it possesses it by virtue of its existence—all creation points to God and Christ the Word. Bede, not comprehending this, simply viewed Scripture as an account of special revelation, beyond which it was not necessary or meaningful to read history exegetically. For Augustine, history rather points beyond itself, educating humanity about its origin and destination; every historical event and person is intrinsically charged with revelatory significance, and is thus capable of figural exegesis. In contrast, for Bede, God must act and take up particular historical events to give them revelatory significance. Furry concludes (*ibid.* 86) that 'Bede attempted to integrate theology and history, but was unable to do so in a coherent way that made theological sense of Genesis 1, and this manifests itself in various ways throughout his *œuvre*'.

Furry makes a strong case (and only a small part of his argumentation has been mentioned here). Yet we may, I think, be allowed to entertain some nagging doubts, at least over whether matters are quite so simple. Perhaps, indeed, Bede's intellect was insufficient to grasp Augustine's meaning; but Bede may also have had in mind his audience, many of whom would not have been so gifted. Another factor that may have made Bede wary of spelling out potential figurations with historical characters, apart from the fact that Origen regarded such a practice as illegitimate, is the pressing heresy of the time, Monothelitism, which saw Christ as having only one will: to present a person as acting figurally in history could be seen to imply a diminution or absence of free will on their part; if a figural reading were offered, it might have been considered wise to do so no more firmly than through hints. Furry also raises, but then dismisses, the idea that Bede may have deliberately not made explicit any figural readings of history, allowing his readers to find the connections; I am not so sure this is at all beyond the bounds of possibility. If Bede did couch his history with implicit

figurations, then they could only be uncovered by a thorough sifting of all his historical works to determine which narratives could reasonably be seen as hinting at such figural readings—I discuss just one in the present volume, the case of Eadwine. It is, at this point, worth at least mentioning a few points which may imply a more figural underlying apprehension of history, or some parts of history, than Furry perhaps allows for.

Furry comments (*ibid.* 125) on how Bede, in his commentary on the Temple, views the Temple as a type for the antitype of Christ and the Church, and in doing so recontextualises the Temple in terms of Christ and the Church, which then become the normative background or context where alone the Temple makes true sense. Surely the same can be said about many Christ-like kings and their actions: do not Eadwine, and his constructing of a church in York, only receive their true sense in terms of their being realisations of Christ and the Temple (the Church) that he constructed? Bede need hardly spell this out, and to him such *imitatio Christi*, incumbent on all Christians, would perhaps have seemed essentially an issue of moral theology rather than figuration, yet this is surely a matter of perspective: once figuration is accepted at all as a principle for reading parts of history, are we limited to seeing it only where Bede makes it explicit? Moreover, it is fairly clear that some of Bede's sources took a different view from Bede on figuration in history (in so far as we accept Furry's conclusions). For example, as Furry notes (*ibid.* 22–3), Bede's hagiographical source for his life of St Germanus presents the saint as onboard a ship when a storm arises, which he calms by sprinkling it with water in order to get to Britain to calm the Pelagian heresy: this is clearly drawn from, and can be said to be in figural relationship with, the account of Christ calming the sea in Matthew 8 and Mark 4, although Bede again makes no explicit connection. Yet we may go further. Lapidge (1993, 14–15) discusses a passage from Bede's own *Vita Metrica S. Cuthberti*, where he employs figurative imagery (lines 252–85); Cuthbert is stranded with two monks in a frozen Pictland, with no food, and says (lines 262–4, trans. Lapidge):

Cernitis, aequoreo canescat ut aggere tellus,
Aer aquas manet, glacies mare, nox tegat aethram;
Corda fame tabent hominumque iuvamina desunt.

Do you see that the earth is whitened by a covering of hoar-frost, the air drips water, ice covers the sea and pitch-darkness covers the sky? Our spirits are weak with hunger, and the sustenance which men need is lacking.

They resort to calling on God, who once opened the red portals of the sea for his people, created a residence in a cloud, and brought bread from a cloud and water from a rock. Thus Bede alludes to the dark cloud which protected the Israelites (Exodus 14:20), the cloud raining down manna (Exodus 16:13–14) and Moses striking a rock for water (Exodus 16:6). For the Israelites, manna lay on the ground like hoar frost; the dripping air evokes the water from the rock but also the promised land, dripping with milk and honey: hence

the landscape in which Cuthbert and his companions find themselves is a symbolic one: the very bleakness of the wintry scene, with hoar-frost covering the ground and the air dripping water, carries the symbolic promise of God feeding Cuthbert as he had fed his chosen people. Like Moses, Cuthbert is the prophet who reveals this promise to his followers. None of this is explicit in Bede's compressed diction; the symbolic meaning of the passage can only be recovered by meditation on its biblical resonances.

Questions may arise as to whether the connection between Cuthbert and Moses is truly figural (where there is some form of ontological connection) or merely allegorical, but it is obvious both that some form of powerful connection is present, and that Bede leaves it to the reader to perceive it.

If we do seek to find such typological connections of historical characters and events with biblical analogues—and it should be stressed that doing so in Bede's work is tentative and speculative—it is helpful both to clarify the terminology and consider the theology implicit in doing so (but, in the present context, only to a superficial degree which scarcely begins to do justice to the topic).

When dealing with non-biblical history, and in an effort to keep the approach essentially within the realm of typology rather than some less specific category of allegory,⁴ it is useful

⁴ There is debate about how far it is useful to draw a distinction between allegory and typology in, for example, Origen: Martens (2008) sees the distinction as only partially useful. DeGregorio (2010a, 133) notes that while

to add the nomenclature of what I will term the *metatype* (an after-type or trans-type): we might, for instance, regard Eadwine as a Christ-like king, and while we could say that Christ acts as a type to Eadwine as an antitype, it is clearer to retain Christ as categorically the *antitype*, and Eadwine as the *metatype*, a type occurring after (and dependent upon) rather than before the antitype, and of which it might be described as a figuration.

Traditionally, typological approaches were kept distinct from anagoge, which sees a presaging of the Parousia in events in the mundane world. Yet a similar symbolic interpretation underlies both. In the present context, for the sake of simplicity and to underline the unity in noetic approach, anagogical interpretations are brought within one terminological scheme: hence the fulfilment of a type in the Parousia may be termed an *anatype* ('ana-' corresponding to 're-'). An example would be Jerusalem (a metonym for the Chosen People), acting as a type for Rome (as a metonym for the Church) and for the anatype of the new Jerusalem (a metonym for the kingdom of heaven).

This terminology helps, I think, to maintain Christ at the centre of things, and the understanding implicit in the terms is, as I read it, consistent with Augustine's understanding of history as an unfolding, through the divine *rationes*, of the eternal act of creation. We might regard metatypes as primarily *imitationes Christi*, but if history is viewed from the perspective of eternity, then can there be said to be any essential difference between a type, coming temporally before, and a metatype or anatype, coming temporally after, an antitype? Creation takes place through the utterance of the Word, and here it may be helpful to consider typology in terms, for example, of St Irenaeus's notion of *recapitulatio* (or *anakephalaiosis*). This was a rhetorical term, meaning 'setting out the headings again', in other words 'summing up', whereby Christ 'sums up' all the stages of human life, but without sin, and thus acts as the means of atonement. The

Bede might expound various levels of meaning (literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogical), 'it is the basic twofold distinction between a literal/historical meaning on the one hand and some kind of spiritual meaning on the other—variously termed "allegorical", "figurative", "mystical" or "hidden"—that informs the hermeneutical procedure most often followed in his Old Testament commentaries'. I am defining this 'figurative' approach here largely in typological terms.

implication is also more literally one of 'putting the head back on', Christ being the sinless head of all human endeavour which the Fall removed from mankind's activity, making all things in the fallen world incomplete. Irenaeus may not have been a particular influence on Bede, but I would see a sacramental understanding of history, which could be viewed as essentially Irenaeian, as implicit in his approach: when, for example, Bede stresses, repeatedly, that Eadwine's kingship depends on the kingship of the King of kings, he indicates that human kingship receives its meaning from coinhering in the kingship of Christ, who is *caput*, the head, or wellspring of meaning, for all human endeavours, much as the celebration of each eucharist coinheres in, and in my terminology is a metatype of, the breaking and sharing of the bread and wine at the Last Supper (a breaking and sharing which Christ himself makes into a type of the antitype of his Crucifixion).⁵ The logic of this analysis is that, given the coinherence of Eadwine's kingship in Christ's, 'if we be dead

⁵ The doctrine I am propounding here, implied I believe in Augustine's doctrine of divine *rationes* which are implicit in and direct creation, perhaps finds a closer parallel in the doctrine refined and developed by Maximus the Confessor, who saw creation as filled with *logoi*, meanings or principles (*rationes* in Latin), that inhered in the divine Logos, Christ; when divinised (through atonement), a person would become a portion of God, in so far as he exists through the *logos* of his being, which is in God (Ambiguum 7). It is unlikely that Bede would have known the works of Maximus, but Maximus himself was in the tradition of Gregory of Nazianzus, who had some influence on Bede. Moreover, Greek learning entered Anglo-Saxon England through Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury (668–90), who knew the work of Maximus well, and may well have met him at the Lateran Synod in 649 (see Behr, Louth and Conomos 2003, 144). This synod was called by Pope Martin to refute the Monothelite heresy, espoused by the emperor in Constantinople; the result was that the emperor sent his envoys, arrested Martin, deported him to Constantinople, then exiled him to the Crimea, where he died miserably. Along with Martin, Maximus was arrested and himself subjected to torture: for Maximus was best known for his stout condemnation of Monothelitism. At the very time of the arrests, in 653, Benedict Biscop, the founder of Bede's monastery, along with Wilfrith, the great churchman and founder of Hexham Abbey, were either already in Rome or about to arrive there, and can hardly have been unaware of these momentous events. Pope Vitalian (657–72), who sent Theodore to Canterbury, was instrumental in opposing Monothelitism, and Theodore called the Council of Hatfield in 679, which reaffirmed the canons of the Lateran Synod. Bede certainly knew the outlines of the history of what happened, and the issues involved, as he summarises them in his *Cronica Maiora* (see Ó Carragáin 1994, 15–17).

with him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him' (II Timothy 2:11–12); hence the death in battle of the Christian king Eadwine against a pagan and an apostate acts as a sort of martyrdom into life and reign eternal.

In addition to the sort of typological thinking so far discussed, derived from and exemplified already in the Bible, Christians in the classical world were confronted with what to do with their cultural heritage, with its origins in paganism. While attitudes varied, the mythographic approach became commonplace, whereby classical myths and legends were approached allegorically, as symbolising aspects of the Christian story. This approach may be encompassed within a definition of typology that does not demand the types be derived from the Old Testament. Bede lived in the early-medieval world, not the classical, and his access to classical sources (and culture in general) was much more limited; nonetheless, he knew Vergil well, and classical references are scattered throughout his work (Laistner 1935, 242).⁶

An area where both biblical and classical typology appears to be particularly significant in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is what may be termed the *praeparatio evangelica* of the English people. The significance of typological exegesis to Bede's historical understanding is emphasised by McClure (1983, 76): 'Thus his exegesis of the Old Testament is particularly relevant to the study of his historical writing, because here he was dealing with the people of Israel at various stages in their history, in conditions which he readily perceived were analogous to those determining the development of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.'

In book 1 of his history, which covers the history of Britain before and up to the advent of the Anglo-Saxons, Bede presents five migrations to the island of Britain in succession, of the Britons, the Picts, the Irish/Scots, the Romans and the English. Only the last proves successful and final, the reason being that the Germanic tribes win the right to the island because the previous inhabitants, the Britons, fell into moral turpitude and failed to convert the newcomers to Christianity (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.22, pp. 68–9). The coming of the English was, indeed, divinely

⁶ Lapidge (2006, 106) notes that Bede 'had seemingly internalized every aspect of Vergil's poetic technique', which is particularly apparent in his *Vita Metrica S. Cuthberti*.

ordained to inflict evil upon the miscreant Britons (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.14, pp. 48–9); they were not ‘noble savages’, but savages acting as the instrument of God (1.xv ‘the fire kindled by the hands of the heathen executed the just vengeance of God on the nation for its crimes’). It is a *leitmotif* of Bede’s work that the Britons had forfeited their right to rule Britannia through their apostasy and failure to convert the English (interestingly, this only seems to have applied to the British within areas the English were settling: he contemns the Scots, for example, far less).⁷ The crossing of the North Sea to a destined land acts implicitly as a metatype to the crossing of the Red Sea, and subsequent occupation of Canaan, by the Israelites; in typological biblical exegesis, the crossing of the Red Sea and then the Jordan into the Holy Land formed a type to the antitype of the baptism of Christ in the Jordan;⁸ the Holy Land into which the neophyte (the metatype or anatype) crosses in baptism is the realm of heaven. Thus the English are rewarded with the promised land on the island of Britannia through their baptism, which proves them worthy of their possession.⁹ This typology is reinforced

⁷ Quite what Bede meant by the ‘English’ (‘Angli’), and his terminology, are matters of discussion: see in particular Brooks (1999). It seems that a more widespread term for English speakers in Bede’s time was ‘Saxon’, but papal sources referred to the Angli. The continental Saxons were very much in evidence in Bede’s time, but were obdurately pagan, whereas the continental Angli had disappeared; Bede thus settled on a usage whereby ‘Angli’ referred primarily to the English after their conversion, but at the time of their settlement, when they were pagan, Bede tends to call them Saxons. There is, however, some doubt as to how far Bede conceived the inhabitants of specifically named Saxon areas (Essex, Wessex, Sussex) as being included in the overall ‘race of the English’.

⁸ It would be more accurate to say that the crossing of the Red Sea by Moses acted as a type to the antitype of the crossing of the Jordan by Joshua, but elements of both Old Testament events are combined in the understanding of Christ’s baptism as an antitype with a two-fold type behind it.

⁹ It is possible that further nuances underlay the concept: Bede was certainly aware of islands as monastic retreats, focused centres of spiritual power, from which missionary activity sprang (just as the English in general, from the island of Britannia, once converted, were expected to go forth and convert others): the obvious examples are Iona and Lindisfarne. Such an island is a half-way house between earth and heaven, and Britain as a whole might be viewed in a similar light, as the refuge and reward of the English, who had left their pagan ways behind on the Continent, and who were now striving to attain the kingdom of heaven (this, incidentally, is a powerful motif in the

by a mythographic reading of Vergil's *Aeneid* (Howe 1989, 62): the mighty realm of Rome—which to Bede of course acted as a metonym of the Church, of which Jerusalem, the metonym of the Promised Land, was a type—was the result of a destined migration, by ship, from Troy; the English migration was a metatype to this (with the implicit understanding that 'Rome' stands for the *ecclesia anglicana* that is to be built). The spiritual state of the Britons and the English is contrasted through parallelism (not of a specifically typological sort): the mission of St Germanus, before the English advent, succeeded in eradicating the heresy of Pelagianism, but the recidivist Britons then slipped further from the path of truth, and hence were destined to failure in their land, whereas the mission of Augustine to the English was successful, and the English political success was a reflection of their spiritual standing (Howe 1989, 67).

Over all, it might be said that a figural approach to history, in my understanding, is closer to a modern approach to works of fiction than to history, and many of the tools of literary analysis, such as symbolism, parallelism, allegory and *figura* are relevant to an analysis of Bede's writing and that of others of his era.

Bede was keen to maintain the literal meaning of history, and eschewed giving it explicit figural interpretation, fearing, no doubt, this would undermine its reality in a Monothelite sort of way. I would, therefore, by no means venture to suggest that all the readings suggested here would have been in Bede's mind as he wrote, but I do suggest that a careful delving into the text he produced shows that it lends itself to this sort of interpretation, despite Bede's reticence in explicitly acknowledging the legitimacy of figural readings of history.

early writings of the modern Catholic writer, J. R. R. Tolkien). Britain in turn might be seen as a microcosm of the whole world, viewed as an island on which our salvation is worked out, as is clear from later *mappae mundi*, where the world appears as a round collection of islands, an *orbis terrarum*. However, Bede does not, I think, develop this theme.

Dee valley, with Bangor at the southern end as the river came down from the highlands, and Chester at the river mouth to the north, lies on a boundary between the highlands of Wales and the plains of Cheshire and Shropshire, and, in 600, was situated on the edge of areas under Mercian influence and those which were falling under Northumbrian control as Æthelfrith harried the British west of the Pennines. It was a nexus not only of the Roman road system, but also of the political interests of the day. It was at this nexus, possibly guarded already by the fort at Heronbridge, that Æthelfrith was striking.

The battle

The date of the battle

Bede, our primary source, does not date the battle, merely setting it between the death of Augustine in 604 and Æthelfrith's demise at the hands of Rædwald of East Anglia in 616, and indicating it was closer to the latter but without making any link between the battle and Æthelfrith's defeat. A date of 615/616 for the battle is clearly what the now lost source chronicle underlying the *Chronicle of Ireland* and *Annales Cambriae* intended, which implies that such a dating is fairly ancient, but this does not make it historically reliable. The date is more than likely to derive from an over-reading of Bede: the narrative of Æthelfrith's death in 616 follows on immediately after the description of the battle of Chester. Indeed, the *Annals of Tigernach* (and probably the *Chronicle of Ireland* before it) record it as taking place 'immediately' after the battle; this need be no more than an over-zealous reading of Bede. From this, it was inferred that the battle of Chester also took place in 616 (or possibly 615).

Rivet and Smith (1979, 121), who note that Ptolemy's account is full of errors of this sort; they regard Mediolanum as being in Cornovian territory. The notion that the Maelor Saesneg represents the continuation of an obtrusion of Ordovician (Deceanglian) territory across the Dee also stretches the bounds of likelihood, given the turbulent history of the Marches over many centuries, and notably, for the Anglo-Saxon period, the construction of Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke, which include the Maelor Saesneg in Mercia. Nonetheless, the general observation that boundaries between areas of control around 600 could allow for territorial obtrusions of the Maelor Saesneg type remains valid.

Why did Bede not date the battle himself? Almost certainly he was unable to do so, because his source consisted of an account derived ultimately from Bangor that dealt with the battle from a religious perspective, not a chronological one, and Bede did not venture to supply information he did not have. The annalists appear to have had no such compunction—and there is no reason to believe they had any more information than Bede. In assessing the course of events that actually took place, therefore, we do not need to feel compelled to accept that the battle took place in 615 or 616 if there should be compelling reasons to date it somewhat earlier (though not so much earlier that it would encroach on Augustine's death in 604). As noted, one likely, but not certain, scenario would see Eadwine seeking refuge with Rædwald after the battle, and staying there long enough for several attempts to be made on his life, but briefly enough to escape Rædwald's inclination to yield him up, which would suggest a date of 615 or perhaps 614 for the battle.

Æthelfrith's aims and targets

The chief difficulty in ascertaining Æthelfrith's aims, and hence the targets of his campaign, is that we cannot determine whether he was acting offensively, or responding to an offensive launched against Northumbria. Bede gives no indication of an attack planned against Northumbria in connection with the battle, but his information was extremely limited; even so, it highlights the position of Eadwine as an exiled prince intent on reclaiming his throne at some point.

From Northumbria, Chester is on the route to the realms of north Wales. The most straightforward interpretation of the battle is that it took place where the Welsh forces mustered to oppose an invading army; Æthelfrith was simply extending his conquests of British territories west of the Pennines, without singling out any specific Welsh kingdom as his target. In practice, it was Tegeingl/Powys/the northern Cornovii that he confronted. By placing the fall of Selyf, king of Powys, at the battle, Welsh tradition recognises that defeat of Powys was Æthelfrith's aim, without indicating any wider forces being involved. We may discount Gwynedd as being directly involved (although Teg-eingl could conceivably have been under its protection)—its

heartland was too far from Chester—unless it was part of a wider alliance. As Gwynedd has often appeared in the historiography of the battle, however, a few further remarks are called for. Gwynedd, it is true, was the most powerful realm in north Wales, and within a generation its king, Cadwallon, was able to lead a successful campaign against Northumbria and overthrow its king, Eadwine (Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II.20, pp. 202–5). Mason (2004, 52, following Plummer’s proposal, 1896, II, 93) suggests that part of the reason for attacking Gwynedd was that Æthelfrith’s enemy Eadwine was trying to forge an alliance there; in reality we have no reliable evidence that he was seeking such an alliance:³⁷ it is only much later Welsh sources, and Reginald of Durham’s twelfth-century *Vita Sancti Oswaldi*,³⁸ that indicate Eadwine ever took shelter in Gwynedd—and Reginald puts the exile *after* the battle, which makes better sense.³⁹ If Æthelfrith

³⁷ It may also be to overestimate rather Æthelfrith’s specific concern about Eadwine: Bede makes it clear that Eadwine had no power while in exile, and Æthelfrith’s actions against him appear to have amounted to trying to persuade hosts to poison him, rather than engaging in the perilous endeavour of leading armies against those who sheltered him.

³⁸ See Tudor (1995) on this text; fanciful and unreliable as it is, it nonetheless appears to have made use of some local legends, which, even if scarcely of obvious merit, were at least independent of the mainstream of literary tradition.

³⁹ Moreover, as Colgrave and Mynors note, had Eadwine been reared in Gwynedd, it is surprising that he did not become Christian—although this causes some difficulties of interpretation of Bede: if Eadwine did become Christian there, a mockery is made of the stories of his later conversion in Deira, but if he did not, why did Bede not rail against the perfidious British for not converting him? The truth is probably that even if Eadwine did become familiar with Christianity in Gwynedd, he chose to wait to align himself with the Roman form of the faith with all the political advantages it brought in terms of alliance with Kent and the wider connections with Christian Europe. The simplest, and most likely, reading is, however, that he did not spend time in exile in Gwynedd (other than possibly for a while after the battle), and that this is an invention of later medieval writers (cf. Gelling 1992, 77). As it is presented by Bede, the tale of Eadwine, the righteous heir persecuted in exile, smacks of derivation from a folk epic: the exile and his relationship to his erstwhile lord are a stock theme of much Old English heroic verse, such as *The Wanderer*, and exile combined with contention with a relative or rival also forms a mainstay of this verse, as in the tale of Finn and Hengest (summarised in *Beowulf* and told at greater length in *The Finnsburh Fragment*; we might also compare the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*). This is not to say it is a complete fiction, but the focus reflects the thematic concerns of saga rather than history.

intended to establish a presence in Cheshire, he would at some point have needed to confront Gwynedd, but to aim to push so far on an initial strike seems unconvincing; it would mean penetrating difficult terrain held by a warlike society, far from Northumbria.⁴⁰ Moreover, Heronbridge is situated on the road south, not directly on the route to Gwynedd.

It cannot have been Æthelfrith's intention to defeat Mercia, unless Mercia was in an alliance with northern Welsh realms, since Chester is nowhere near the heart of Mercia on the middle Trent and not on the route to it.⁴¹ Such an alliance would be consistent with later joint Mercian–British attacks on Northumbria, though the first of these we know of was that between Cadwallon and Penda, who defeated Eadwine at Hatfield Chase on 12 October 633 (Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 11.20, pp. 202–3). Bede gives no hint of Mercian involvement at the battle of Chester, but if Mercia took part it would imply the involvement of Cearl's protégé Eadwine with British forces, and in particular with the perfidious British clergy singled out for retribution at the battle: so, even if Bede knew of such supposed involvement, he would avoid mentioning it. If Mercia was indeed involved in the battle, it implies that Æthelfrith was acting in a pre-emptively defensive manner, striking out against a Mercian–British joint force before it reached Northumbria, since it is unlikely that the

⁴⁰ Iago, the king of Gwynedd, is recorded in the *Annales Cambriae* as dying in the year of the battle; it has been suggested this might have acted as an impetus for Æthelfrith to launch an attack (Higham 1995, 132), but this is highly speculative. For Æthelfrith to have come as far west as Chester might suggest he may have been *en route* to Gwynedd, however (although I think not). Yet while Cadwallon's later expedition in reverse, from Gwynedd to Northumbria (indeed, to Bernicia), might suggest such an exploit was feasible also for Æthelfrith, it was quite different, in that Æthelfrith would be very deep into enemy territory, and he would have to have dealt with the difficult terrain of north Wales to reach the heartland of Gwynedd, whereas Cadwallon was moving through areas to the west (and even in some areas to the east) of the Pennines which were British, having been conquered by the English only a matter of years earlier.

⁴¹ Chester is too far west for Mercia, around the middle Trent valley, and probably for the Cornovian territory, centred on Wroxeter, to have been Æthelfrith's likely target—the natural route from west of the Pennines would take Æthelfrith down through Middlewich (Salinae) and Whitchurch (Mediolanum); alternatively, east of the Pennines there is a route from York along direct Roman roads without crossing the uplands.

Welsh and Mercians would have had time to form an alliance and assemble at Chester in response to the swift sort of attack Æthelfrith appears to have been wont to launch.

Whether Æthelfrith's attack was essentially offensive or defensive, his overriding purpose may have been to split Mercia from its Welsh allies, and prevent either from launching incursions on Northumbria, by obtaining control over the northern Marches; Higham (1992, 7; 1995, 78), for example, argues that it may have been Æthelfrith's intention to confront the wider regional powers from the outset. The later engagement (Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.9, pp. 242–3) on 5 August 642 of Æthelfrith's son Oswald at Maserfelth (Oswestry: on the identification as such see Stancliffe 1995), just a few miles from Chester, could be seen as modelled on that of Æthelfrith. The position of Maserfelth between the areas controlled by Mercia and the Welsh kingdoms suggests that an objective for Oswald was to interpose himself between the allied Mercian and Welsh forces; Higham (1993a, 87) suggests a similar reasoning behind the geography of the battle at Chester. Whether Mercia's rule extended very firmly into the Marches, however, is rather less certain for 615 than it is for 642. Oswald was killed in the attempt; Æthelfrith was not, but nonetheless suffered serious losses. Both, therefore, met concerted opposition, which hints at a mighty alliance of regional powers in both cases.

We need also to consider the local target of the campaign, which can be defined as the lower Dee, from Chester through Heronbridge to Bangor. The ruinous Roman city of Chester itself would have been of little interest, and Æthelfrith appears to have passed through or round it, suggesting it was of great interest in itself neither to him nor to the British, but control of Chester at the hub of the Roman road network, and its port, would give access to the Irish Sea and trade there; it would also prevent Mercian expansion northwards, and incursions from Gwynedd towards Northumbria. Taking control of the local area of Chester, rather than the city *per se*, was thus almost certainly among Æthelfrith's aims. The battle took place at Heronbridge, however. While this may be more or less coincidental, as the place where Northumbrians coming from the north-east met British forces coming from the south-west, a different picture emerges if the fort was already in

existence: Heronbridge itself may have represented a focus of local power, which Æthelfrith stormed. However, the local power that Bede represents Æthelfrith as confronting is specified only as the monks of Bangor (the presence of local secular powers being touched upon only lightly). If the monks were embroiled in the politics of the region, as their presence at the battle suggests, then Bangor emerges as a focus of power to be defeated. The battle took place at Heronbridge as this was an outlier of the monastery. The words placed in Æthelfrith's mouth in Bede's account, exhorting his men to put effort first into destroying the monks of Bangor, may, surprisingly, conceal a real objective of his, although of course he would scarcely have been motivated by religious persecution in the way the account intimates.

The battle strategy

Depending on Æthelfrith's aims, the strategy would have been either to defeat local or regional forces at one of their centres of power (such as a fort) and take control of the surrounding area, or to strike out to meet half-way a large opposing force moving against him.

In the latter case, it may be illuminating to compare what happened at the battle on the Idle, close to Bawtry, in which Æthelfrith was slain:

- a. Æthelfrith attempted to subject Rædwald to his will in yielding up Eadwine, and was willing to contemplate military action;
- b. Rædwald, however, struck out directly along the main Roman road from East Anglia into Northumbria, and surprised Æthelfrith;
- c. Æthelfrith nonetheless managed to muster an army and set off towards East Anglia;
- d. Battle was joined along the route between East Anglia and Northumbria at a major junction of Roman roads at a crossing of the Idle, in a debatable border district between areas controlled by Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia;
- e. The attacking army of Rædwald was victorious, and Æthelfrith was slain;
- f. Rædwald nonetheless suffered serious losses.

This may be reduced to the following elements:

- a. King A threatens king B [to yield up prince C/to desist from encroaching on his sphere of influence];
- b. King B [with prince C] launches surprise attack on king A;
- c. King A musters his army but is ill-prepared;
- d. Battle takes place at place D, on the border between spheres of influence of king A and king B, on a Roman road near a river crossing;
- e. King A is defeated [and prince C takes king A's throne];
- f. King B suffers heavy losses.

It may at first appear that at Bawtry Æthelfrith was attempting (and failing) to reprise his role at Chester, striking out swiftly against an enemy who threatened him, but the parallel is more illuminating if at Chester Æthelfrith is thought of as king B, with Cearl (probably along with Selyf or other Welsh kings) as king A. We do not have a precise parallel to prince C, who at Bawtry was Eadwine, but this role was filled in retrospect by the shadowy Pybba or his son Eowa, one of whom succeeded Cearl and appears to have been subject to Æthelfrith. Place D is clearly Heronbridge, with its similarities to Bawtry. Thus Cearl, almost certainly strengthened by an alliance with the British, threatened Æthelfrith (or was perceived by Æthelfrith as a threat), who was encroaching on the spheres of influence of Mercia and the Welsh realms through his constant raids, probably with the prospect of replacing him with Eadwine. Æthelfrith responded by launching a surprise attack, and reached as far as Heronbridge, where, although the British and Mercians were preparing for battle, he essentially surprised them and defeated them, albeit with heavy losses, killing Selyf (and possibly Cearl). He then went on to replace Cearl with a vassal prince, Pybba/Eowa.

No two campaigns would have been identical, of course. Nonetheless, the arenas of action were necessarily of a limited scope within the sorts of society of the time, and such similarities in overall strategy appear unsurprising. Of course, if we were to push matters and take the postulated similarity as evidence of what took place, we would end up with a circular argument. Yet the suggested course of events offers a meaningful interpretation in its own terms of the few facts we have.

The element of surprise implies speed. Although Chester is a good distance from the Northumbria of the time, Æthelfrith

would have been on his own territory (including the vassal realm of Elmet) well up into the Pennines, and after his descent from the hills above Manchester, it could take him as little as a couple of days to reach Chester, while news might precede him only if there were fast horsemen to take it.

Æthelfrith's route

Being able to move quickly, as Æthelfrith almost certainly did, suggests keeping to good routes, and it is notable that this battle took place on a Roman road (as did many battles of the time: Æthelfrith's subsequent defeat at Bawtry, for example, took place where the Roman road from the south-east, followed by Rædwald from East Anglia, crosses the Idle close to the boundary of Elmet).

If Æthelfrith came directly from Northumbria, as is most likely, the Bernician centre of Bamburgh is an improbable point of departure (*pace* Davies 2010, 148); the much closer southern realm of Northumbria, Deira, which Æthelfrith had ruled since 604, is far more likely, although he could have come down into Deira from Bernicia shortly beforehand. York itself, which was probably only seriously occupied later, by Eadwine, is less likely to have acted as a point of departure than somewhere in the Derwent valley, the centre of Deira, where Eadwine is said to have had a hall later (Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 11.9, pp. 164–5). This would have brought him across the Pennines through Mamucium (Manchester, a minor settlement in Roman times) and westwards across to Chester. This route would have involved crossing the British kingdom of Elmet, east of the Pennines and abutting Deira (Higham 1993b, 84–7), but Elmet was probably little more than a client kingdom by this stage.⁴² If he came from campaigns further north on the western side of the Pennines, then the postulated Roman route into Chester from Warrington would be a possibility.⁴³ It is unlikely that he approached from further south, and then up through Mediolanum (Whitchurch):

⁴² The likelihood that Æthelfrith arranged the assassination of Hereric there indicates this, though harbouring Hereric also shows Elmet maintained a degree of independence still.

⁴³ This approximately follows the Hoole Road into Chester, or more precisely the earlier, pre-turnpike, route marked by Newton Hollows.

this would imply his crossing vast swathes of territory to the south of the Pennines that were not in Northumbrian hands, and would also imply an encounter with the British or Mercian forces to the south or east, not north, of Bangor.

At Chester itself, Mason (2007, 51) suggests Æthelfrith may have avoided the city and diverted on a minor Roman road which appears to have forded the Dee just north of Heron-bridge, though, as Mason admits, the ford has not actually been uncovered. This is possible, but there is no reason to suppose that anything other than the main Roman road through Chester was used; taking a large body of armed men over a substantial river would, moreover, scarcely be the option of choice when a functioning Roman bridge almost certainly existed at Chester itself. Æthelfrith would also need to have gained knowledge of the ford, which required local informants—an unlikely scenario on this strike deep into enemy territory. If Æthelfrith went through the town itself, it implies that there was little resistance; alternatively, he may simply have skirted the walls and proceeded over the bridge. There is nothing to suggest that the fabric of the city itself was anything of significance to him.

The type of encounter

Æthelfrith was a warrior king who harried widely, following an expansionist policy that had already been established by his predecessors; in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* (1.34, pp. 116–17) Bede compares Æthelfrith to Saul, and notes that he ravaged the British more widely than any other ruler. Æthelfrith's attacks were probably comparable with the initial Viking raids of later centuries, fairly random and followed by swift withdrawal, rather than aimed at immediate subduing and settlement of the land. To caricature in a nutshell, a Germanic warlord's aims would have been in the first place to gain glory and booty by defeating his foes, and only thereafter to grant land to his followers. The objective of the campaign, then, would have been to secure a decisive victory over the local lords, with a possible view to subjugation.

Yet the Chester campaign may not merely have been one of Æthelfrith's raids against the British. The conflict was no mere skirmish, but a confrontation between major powers, as

is shown by the level of casualties, and by the general geopolitical situation outlined above. Æthelfrith would then either have been making a defensive strike against other kingdoms rising up against him, or himself launching an offensive against other kingdoms.

The size of the forces

Mason (2004, 42) estimates there must be at least 112 warriors buried on the site, and probably rather more than this; these probably represent Northumbrian casualties. Bede states that Æthelfrith had a *grandis exercitus* and suffered heavy losses, but while this indicates its strength relative to the norms of the time, it says little about its actual size, and must, in any case, be based on oral memory. He also states that twelve hundred monks of Bangor fell on the opposing side, but his figures are unreliable here too; they are most probably motivated by biblical numerological concerns. Nonetheless, the fundamental fact of substantial forces being involved is probably true. Davies (2010, 153) presents a useful survey of information about troop numbers in this period: other attempts at taking whole realms sometimes involved forces of under a hundred, and a couple of hundred warriors could be reckoned as substantial. However, as the Heronbridge battle cemetery is unique we have nothing to compare it with directly: it may not be specially exceptional, as the numbers of troops given in written sources are not necessarily reliable. Balancing the size of force needed to achieve decisive victories deep in enemy territory with the problems of maintaining such a force, somewhere between five hundred and a thousand men seems the best estimate.

How did Æthelfrith muster such a powerful army? The basis of his power would certainly have been the *comitatus*, his personal band of warriors, which would have consisted of more experienced, landed lords, and younger, unlanded fighters, who were seeking glory in battle and the reward of land and wealth (see Evans 1997 for a detailed discussion of the *comitatus*). The members of his warband would themselves presumably have had their own followers. The whole system relied not on the notion of an army raised to defend the land (the *fyrð* of later centuries), but on personal loyalty and patronage (Abels 1988,

185; Davies 2010, 152)—the lordless exile is a standard figure of misery in Old English poetry—and the main source of wealth was victory in war, so the *comitatus* system was essentially expansionist by definition. There was a limit to the numbers of followers that could be kept in check in such a system, and the size of Æthelfrith's forces is likely to have been at the upper limit in these terms. Loyalty depended on success, and the size of Æthelfrith's forces is a function of their success, which we may surmise them to have enjoyed in previous campaigns: Æthelfrith was a king who commanded loyalty because he defeated so many foes and overran their lands.

A limit, particularly in terms of loyalty, would also be set by the rapid expansion of the Northumbrian realm (which itself was a result of loyalty): those who regarded themselves as 'truly' English would rapidly be spread thin on the ground, ruling over large numbers of the native population, who may not have been so willing to serve their new masters. This would limit both the number of loyal followers a lord could muster to follow him into battle, and incline him not to depart from estates that might not be under full control. Æthelfrith appears to have been exceptional in how far he was able to go with a system that at a certain point was bound to implode.

The site and course of the battle

Within the Chester area, several sites might have been chosen for the battle. During the Civil War, a great battle took place in 1645 on Rowton Moor to the east of Chester. The British might be expected to have made a stand against Æthelfrith in this area before he could reach Chester. The fact that the battle did not take place here is revealing. The city itself was presumably unable to raise forces for its defence, suggesting it was relatively unimportant; and other local lords did not regard it as sufficiently significant to try to defend it either. The force which did confront Æthelfrith had at least in part come up from, and been heavily supported by, the monastery of Bangor-is-Coed, some miles to the south, and evidently they did not envisage proceeding too far from their base. The Dee may have formed some sort of boundary which the forces of Powys/Tegeingl did not wish to cross, at least initially.

The British forces could have swept down on Æthelfrith as he crossed the Dee at Chester, or indeed tried to prevent him crossing. Yet the site is not really suited to battle: the space of a few hundred yards between the slope and the river was (and still is) strewn with the remains of Roman quarries, and in places is almost precipitous. Faced with an opposing force, the English are unlikely to have risked crossing over here at all, and neither would the British be likely to want to risk battle here.

The battle in fact took place at Heronbridge. Why? If the fort was in existence, the British would have taken up position in it, with the aim of preventing English advance into Powys/Tegeingl, and the English would have attacked, sweeping down from the plateau just to the north of Heronbridge, with each side calculating they had an equal advantage. The specific site of battle thus makes best sense if the fort was in existence, but in more general terms, Heronbridge, with its gentle slopes, is the first site on the Roman road south of the Dee to offer a potentially good field for combat. The English would want to stop on the plateau just north of Heronbridge and urge the British to attack them uphill; the British would try to do the same in reverse, stopping at Eccleston. The skeletons are buried much closer to Heronbridge, suggesting, if this overall scenario is correct, that the English lured the British on, or that the British were so intent upon attack as to ignore their disadvantage; the apparent site of the battle is quite a distance on foot from Eccleston.

The distance from Bangor, and the fact that many of the monks from there decided to go to the battle site, fasting for three days beforehand, indicates either that the community must have received news of the English force some days in advance, and were thus not precisely surprised, or that these preparations marked the launch of an intended campaign against Northumbria, which was indeed surprised and thwarted by Æthelfrith's sudden arrival. Bede's account relates that the contingent of monks from Bangor joined others who seem already to have been on site, which fits with the idea of the *eglēs* of Eccleston having been a daughter-house to Bangor itself, with its topography thus familiar to the Bangor community. This implies that the choice of where to make their stand lay in the hands of the British, who knew the area, even if the decision to launch into battle there was taken by Æthelfrith.

The monks would have been in an ecclesiastical compound whose existence is commemorated in the name Eccleston. This could have been in the fort, which may indeed have been constructed as an ecclesiastical compound, or somewhere in the area of present-day Eccleston. However, in the latter case they would not have been visible to Æthelfrith, if he stopped on the plateau just north of Heronbridge, as is likely, so the presence of the fort at the time of battle again makes better sense, assuming we accept Æthelfrith's glimpse of the monks as having some factual basis.

If Æthelfrith's foes were stormed within their fort at Heronbridge, it might be inferred that they were at a disadvantage and were adopting a defensive position. However, the fort would have been reckoned both strong enough to resist attack and able to contain considerable numbers of troops who could easily sally forth to lead an attack, so occupying it may not have seemed markedly defensive to its garrison. Nonetheless, viewed over a shorter time-span of a couple of days or so, Æthelfrith may still have surprised his enemy, even though they were possibly expecting him imminently.

Consequences of the battle

In the longer term, the battle may have had little impact from a Northumbrian perspective. Cadwallon, the king of Gwynedd, was able to overrun Northumbria in 633/634, and it was not until his defeat in 634/635 by Æthelfrith's son Oswald that Northumbrian, as opposed to Welsh, control of much of northern England can be described as secure. From the mid-seventh century, it is clear that the Chester area fell under Mercian control, and was never again ruled by Northumbria.

The shorter-term consequences are less clear. Æthelfrith must have stayed long enough to perform obsequies for the fallen warriors, but he may then have departed in view of his heavy losses. Alternatively, he may have left a Northumbrian presence, possibly constructing the Heronbridge fort on the site of the battle for this purpose. How great the Northumbrian control was cannot be ascertained, but it is probable that the battle at least destabilised the region: Cearl, Eadwine's patron, seems to have died at the battle or at about the same time, and Mercia

was unable to exert any influence for some decades, either on the Chester area or against Northumbria, and may have had a king friendly to Æthelfrith forced upon it. It is probable that the region's instability forced Eadwine to flee to Rædwald, who, after the death of Æthelberht, helped him onto the throne of Northumbria (Higham 1995, 78–9).

Eadwine's subjugation of the area around the Irish Sea may not have been a direct result of Æthelfrith's campaign—Bede after all seems to regard Eadwine's success as his own. Yet it would at the least have built on Æthelfrith's victory indirectly, as a response to the instability that followed the battle.

The context of the battle: a summary

The summary that follows sets out the most likely-seeming interpretations of the battle and its context. Yet, in reality, there is too little firm evidence to be able to draw satisfactory conclusions on any aspect of the events and their causes, so every interpretation is contentious. Some of the chief issues that have a major bearing on our interpretations, but which cannot be answered as yet, are:

- a.* Was the fort at Heronbridge in existence at the time of the battle? This alters both our interpretation of what the battle itself involved, and the reason for it taking place precisely at Heronbridge.
- b.* Was Æthelfrith's victory the result of a spontaneous attack aimed at securing Northumbrian control of the area, or was he responding to forces already ranged against him?
- c.* Were Æthelfrith's opponents local British forces (Tegeingl/Powys/Cornovii), or did they represent a wider Mercian–British alliance, which was intent on toppling him (and perhaps placing Eadwine on the throne)?
- d.* Did the battle achieve anything more than a temporary victory for the Northumbrians; in particular, was Eadwine's later subjugation of the area, including the Irish Sea, the result of a sustained (if superficial) Northumbrian presence in the region?

The date of the battle. The battle took place between c. 610 and 615, with 614 or 615 being perhaps the most probable date.

The fort. The fort could have been a fairly recent construction by the British, and it could equally well have been an ecclesiastical enclosure under the control of Bangor. It would have represented a centre of power, and possibly a mustering ground for warriors, which would have made it a direct focus of Æthelfrith's campaign. Almost as likely is that it was a later construction undertaken by Eadwine in his subjugation of the region. Less likely is that it was constructed by Æthelfrith, unless we assume he occupied the area for some time after the battle.

The aims. Æthelfrith's objective was to establish a Northumbrian bridge-head in the Chester area by defeating local chieftains (though not, initially, more distant powers such as Gwynedd and Mercia). The purpose was similar to that of his son Oswald a few decades later: to defeat Powys/Tegeingl and thus undermine the Mercian–British alliance that could threaten Northumbria; this would be achieved by extending Northumbrian power into the Marches. A secondary aim was to control the port and access to the Irish Sea, an objective that Æthelfrith's successor Eadwine achieved. Possibly, a more direct aim may have been to defeat an already existing Mercian–British allied force that was intent on overthrowing Æthelfrith, and perhaps putting Eadwine on the throne.

Æthelfrith's route and destination. Æthelfrith set out from Deira (Yorkshire), taking the shortest route to Chester through Elmet, over the Pennines to Manchester and then on to Chester. At Chester, he passed through the city (the Roman fortress), or else skirted it, then crossed the Dee over the extant Roman bridge, and proceeded down the Roman road towards Wroxeter. His destination was Powys/Tegeingl, perhaps crystallised as the fort at Heronbridge itself, a local centre of power which may in some way also have been closely connected with the monastery of Bangor.

The foes. Æthelfrith was intent on destroying the local bases of power, and his opponents need not have been drawn from a wider area than Tegeingl and Powys, including the monastery of Bangor and its holdings. They may well have been drawn from a wider field, however, including Mercia under Cearl; this would be consistent with later joint Mercian–British attacks on Northumbria.

The type of encounter. Æthelfrith led a swift but nonetheless mighty army by the standards of the time, with upwards of five hundred troops. The opponents must have had similar numbers. The battle therefore represented a conflict between major powers.

The site of the battle. There is nothing to indicate that any defence was made of Chester itself. The choice of Heronbridge at the monks' behest indicates a desire to stop the pagan forces proceeding any further towards Bangor or into Powys/Tegeingl. If it was in existence, the fort would have controlled access to these along the Dee valley, and it would have acted as a focus both for local forces to put up a stand at and for Æthelfrith to vanquish. Yet the site of battle may perhaps reflect a mustering point for British (and perhaps Mercian) armies, whence they intended to march on Northumbria, but where their progress was stymied by the sudden incursion of Æthelfrith.

The strategy and course of the battle. The battle site either represents the storming of the fort by English forces sweeping down on it from the Heronbridge ridge, or else it marks the site of the clash between English warriors descending from the north (the plateau north of Heronbridge), and British opponents from the south (the rise of Eccleston). The three-day fast of the monks implies that the British forces were expecting Æthelfrith, or else that they were preparing to set out for Northumbria with the expectation of meeting Æthelfrith on the way. The battle strategy may have been broadly similar to that of Rædwald's attack against Æthelfrith in 616: the attacker makes a swift incursion into enemy territory, his opponents rally and move to counter the attack, but are rather unprepared, and essentially they are surprised, leading to their defeat, but not without their inflicting heavy losses on the attacking forces.

The aftermath. Æthelfrith probably stayed long enough to perform obsequies for the fallen warriors, but his heavy losses, and the lack of evidence for immediate Northumbrian subjugation of the region, suggest that he soon withdrew; in this case, Eadwine's subjugation of the area and the Irish Sea reflects a separate campaign, but it is just possible that Æthelfrith established a presence sufficient to continue into Eadwine's reign.

Political consequences. Cearl of Mercia, Eadwine's patron, died at the battle or at about this time, and Æthelfrith's incursion enabled him to place a friendly leader on the throne of Mercia, forcing Eadwine to flee to Rædwald, who eventually (after the death of Æthelberht) supported his venture to depose Æthelfrith. The whole region was destabilised by Æthelfrith's incursion (Higham 1995, 78–9) and placed under the threat of Northumbrian domination, which in itself would have induced Eadwine to move elsewhere. Mercian overlordship of regions close to the Irish Sea must have been prevented long enough for Eadwine to exercise control over them, though in the long run Cheshire fell under Mercian suzerainty.

Conclusion

I have had three chief aims. The first has been to pursue a more nuanced approach to evaluating the written medieval sources on the battle of Chester. We have one account, by Bede, that could be termed 'reliable' – though even this is biased to serve his particular ecclesiastical purposes, and highly selective in what it tells; all other mentions or descriptions of the battle are, to varying degrees, untrustworthy as sources of historical fact, and could go back to Bede, along with a peppering of inference from Welsh heroic tradition. The second aim has been to consider the historical background and likely motivations behind Æthelfrith's expedition to Chester. While a general picture can be drawn, there are huge uncertainties, given our lack of information about the balances of power at the time. I have tried to outline some alternatives, but many possibilities remain. The third aim has been to highlight a few areas where there is still scope for further archaeological investigation. We await the final report on the most recent Heronbridge excavations, but it is already clear that this will open as many questions as it will answer. In particular, the rampart and its enclosure will need further excavation in the future: in principle, it should be possible to assign a more precise date to it, and to distinguish between its possible origins and uses, which include a protected seasonal trading-emporium site, a British 'hillfort', a British ecclesiastical compound, a fort built by Æthelfrith (a pagan) or one built

by Eadwine (a Christian)—none of these can reasonably be excluded on the basis of current research or the archaeological investigation so far carried out. The skeletons also need further research at some point: a radio-isotope analysis of just two of them does not lead to conclusive proof of where the army came from; as reported at present, a non-local origin is indicated, but this might include Mercian as well as Northumbrian areas, which would put a very different light on the interpretation of the battle.