

## 2 Remember the Pope

So bleibt das Geschehen in all seiner sinnlichen Kraft doch immer  
Gleichnis, verhüllt und deutungsbedürftig.<sup>1</sup>  
(What happened, with all its concrete force, remains forever  
parabolic, cloaked and needful of interpretation.)<sup>2</sup>  
— ERICH AUERBACH

Common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a  
meaning on the events that comprise its story level by revealing at  
the end a structure that was immanent in the events all along.  
— HAYDEN WHITE<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

In the nineteenth century Protestant historians expunged hagiography. But for Aelred of Rievaulx history was contained by hagiography. His Cistercian version of the popular fable that the infant Alfred was anointed king by the Pope in Rome embedded Alfred in hagiographic time liberated from chronology: Biblical typology bound what the Pope foresaw in Alfred's destiny to what Samuel foresaw in David's. And in 1901 Plummer believed the 853 papal anointing was not, in fact, royal, and that Alfred psychologically misinterpreted it as typologically prefiguring his royal adulthood. By substituting psychological for spiritual understanding, Plummer canonized the Chronicle as prime reliquary for the Protestant cult of the historical Alfred, since its annal for 853 contains this authentic Anglo-Saxon relic of Alfred's psychology.

**Keywords:** Cistercian hagiography, psycho-history, autohagiography, Herbert Thurston, Quipu, childhood memory

1 Auerbach, 'Figura' (2016 [1938]), p. 169.

2 (I have replaced 'History' with 'What happened' and 'a figure' with 'parabolic' in Mannheim's translation.) Auerbach, 'Figura' (1959) p. 58. Auerbach, 'Figura,' (2016 [1938]), p. 100. For an important commentary on *deutungsbedürftig* in this sentence see Porter, 'Disfigurations,' pp. 96, 99.

3 White, 'Narrativity,' p. 20



## Hagiography

A holy city. A high priest. An island kingdom. Its king. His son. Five atoms from the universe of legend. Their interactions form a molecule, the organic nucleus of a fable about a king who sends his son on a long pilgrimage to the holy city to be blessed by the high priest.

By labeling this a fable I intend to be open to the possibility of finding it anywhere on a spectrum from dream to folktale to cosmic myth, whether or not it could ever narrate something that actually happened.

At the low end, let it be a dream that opens a story collected from the folk by the Brothers Grimm: *Es war einmal ein König der träumte er sende seinen Sohn in die heilige Stadt um vom Hohenpriester gesegnet zu werden*. Once upon a time there was a king who dreamt that he would send his son to the holy city to be blessed by the high priest.<sup>4</sup>

Call the son Omar. Tell a brief Sufi parable about what happens when you go on a pilgrimage and how it transforms you when you come back but not the way you thought it would. Expand it into a rollicking good yarn from the *Arabian Nights* with many an entertaining yet edifying incident along the way there and back.

Now call the son Alfred. Elevate the rollicking good yarn to the highest artistic levels of historical imagination: let Thomas Mann write a trilogy, *Alfred and His Brothers*. Book I: deep meditations on the son's experiences *en route* to Rome, interactions between Germanic orality and Romance literacy, bilingual conversations at the court of Charles the Bald, dialogues with Eriugena about predestination and free will, games played with Charles's teenage daughter, Judith.<sup>5</sup> Book II: The holy city. Rome in the middle of the ninth century *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. The many languages, including the *lingua romana*, in which people chat about the weather or the price of a cabbage in the marketplace. What the Pope said to him in Latin when he anointed him king. Book III: Alfred's journey back over the Alps. His father's wedding night with Judith. Mixed feelings upon rejoining his family and his community back home. The grudges, the reconciliations, the blessings.

Then, to reach a cosmic level, let the fable typify Toynbee's two-fold *motif* of Withdrawal-and-Return.<sup>6</sup> A challenge threatens the island kingdom. The son of the king responds: he departs on a pilgrimage. Thanks to his

4 For an example of just such a dream, see below p. 92, n. 73.

5 Whether Alfred was actually about the same age as Judith is the topic of ch. 3, 'Fix the Date.' His experience of crossing language and literacy borders is the topic of ch. 6, 'Cross the Border.'

6 Toynbee, *History*, III, pp. 248–390; Toynbee and Somervell, *History*, pp. 217–240.

mystical transfiguration in the holy city, he returns in glory and power to help his community meet the challenge by growing in wisdom and wealth. This *motif*, Toynbee preached, is ‘evidently of cosmic range; and it is therefore not surprising to find that it has furnished one of the “primordial images” of Mythology, which is an intuitive form of apprehending and expressing universal truths.’<sup>7</sup> Thus elevated, Alfred could join St Paul, St Benedict, St Gregory the Great, not to mention Buddha, Mohammed, and Machiavelli, in Toynbee’s roster of archetypically creative individuals who saved their civilizations by withdrawing and returning transfigured.<sup>8</sup>

The shortest written version of this Alfredian fable was included in the middle of the annal for 853 AD in the Parker Chronicle. It charts the fable’s molecular nucleus in four short clauses linked paratactically by *ond* and *þa*:

Ond þy ilcan geare sende cyning	That same year King Æthelwulf
Eþelwulf his sunu to Rome.	sent his son Alfred to Rome.
þa was domne Leo papa on Rome	At that time Lord Leo was Pope in
	Rome.
ond he hine to cyninge gehalgode	He consecrated him king.
ond hiene him to bisceþsuna nam. <sup>9</sup>	And took him as his godson.’

In this vernacular version the High Priest transforms the Son into a King, and becomes *compadre* to the Son’s father, the King of the Island Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> In Asser’s Latin version this kernel germinated and bore fruit in a medieval legend popular until the Reformation. After the Reformation, English pilgrimages to holy cities and high priests lost their charm. In his *History of England* Hume mocks Alfred’s lamentable Anglo-Saxon submission to Rome:

The Saxons, receiving their religion from Roman monks, were taught at the same time a profound reverence for that see, and were naturally led to regard it as the capital of their religion. Pilgrimages to Rome were represented as the most meritorious acts of devotion. Not only noblemen and ladies of rank undertook this tedious journey; but kings themselves, abdicating their crowns, sought for a secure passport to heaven at the

7 Toynbee, *History*, III, p. 259.

8 Toynbee, *History*, III, p. 263–332.

9 Plummer, *Chronicles*, s.a. 853.

10 On the Pope’s *compaternitas* with Æthelwulf, see Scharer, ‘Salbungsfrage,’ and Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*.



feet of the Roman pontiff. New reliques, perpetually sent from that endless mint of superstition, and magnified by lying miracles, invented in convents, operated on the astonished minds of the multitude. And every prince has attained the eulogies of the monks, the only historians of those ages, not in proportion to his civil and military virtues, but to his devoted attachment towards their order, and his superstitious reverence for Rome.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, to inaugurate his account of Alfred's reign Hume chooses a version of our fable:

871: ALFRED: This prince gave very early marks of those great virtues and shining talents, by which, during the most difficult times, he saved his country from utter ruin and subversion. Ethelwolf, his father, the year after his return with Alfred from Rome, had again sent the young prince thither with a numerous retinue; and a report being spread of the king's death, the pope, Leo III, gave Alfred the royal unction; whether prognosticating his future greatness from the appearances of his pregnant genius, or willing to pretend even in that age, to the right of conferring kingdoms.<sup>12</sup>

In his edifying account of the cult of Alfred, Keynes has shown in detail how medieval chroniclers and historians allowed folklore and hagiography to refine, enhance, and celebrate Alfred's legendary namesake as he journeyed from the Chronicle to Asser, Æthelweard, Ælfric, Byrhtferth of Ramsey, John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, the School of St Albans, John of Wallingford, and Matthew Paris. Within this Latin tradition, the fable of Alfred's papal anointing reached a peak in a late fourteenth-century Westminster text, to which Stevenson drew attention in 1904:

The statements derived from compilations embodying the [Latin] words of [Asser's] Life regarding the ceremony at Rome were eagerly seized upon by later monkish writers who were anxious to magnify the power of the papacy. The monks of Westminster pretended that the very crown with which [Alfred] was crowned at Rome was brought to England by him, and was preserved among the regalia in the abbey. A 'crown of King

11 Hume, *History of England*, I, p. 52.

12 Hume, *History of England*, I, pp. 63–64. (Hume's Alfred was probably all that Comte knew about Alfred.)



Alfred' was found among the regalia at the time of the Commonwealth. There can be little doubt that this was the crown of Edward the Confessor of the earlier records, and its ascription to Alfred is subsequent to the attempt made by William de Sudbury, a fourteenth-century monk of Westminster, to prove that the abbey still preserved the regalia brought by Alfred from Rome.<sup>13</sup>

Stevenson noted that Richard of Cirencester inserted William of Sudbury's tract on the Alfredian regalia into his mediocre late medieval compilation, the *Speculum Historiale de Gestis Regum Angliae*.<sup>14</sup> Its compiler would more rightly be nicknamed Richard the Obscure were it not for his main, indeed his only, claim to fame: namely that he was *not* the author of *De situ Britanniae*, a work mischievously attributed to him by its eighteenth-century forger, Charles Bertram.<sup>15</sup>

The fable of Alfred's papal anointing was transcendently important to Richard of Cirencester. To frame his hagiographic account of Alfred's reign Richard chose the vibrant prose poem which had been composed in the middle of the twelfth-century historiographical reawakening by Aelred of Rievaulx to introduce Aethelwulf's son Alfred in his *Genealogia regum Anglorum*:

Cujus filius fuit illud Anglorum decus, regum gemma, virtutum exemplar  
 Aluredus,  
 cæteris fratribus suis junior ætate, sed animosior virtute,  
 unde et a patre plus cunctis fratribus amabatur,  
 ob morum scilicet suorum *similitudinem*,  
 et spiritalis cujusdam gratiæ privilegium

13 WHS, pp. 182–183. See also Keynes, 'The Cult,' pp. 232–233 and n. 38.

14 Ricardi de Cirencestria, *Speculum Historiale*.

15 'The ingenuity and learning displayed in Bertram's forgery are really extraordinary, and fully account for the unparalleled success which the imposture obtained. At the time when the work appeared, the idiom of mediæval Latin writers had been little studied, and there were in England few, if any, persons capable of perceiving that the Latinity of the pseudo-Richard was not that of a fourteenth-century monk. Bertram's antiquarian information, moreover, was, on the whole, quite on a level with the best knowledge of his time. The spurious treatise, therefore, was eagerly accepted by most of the English antiquaries as an invaluable source of information on the Roman geography of Britain.' Bradley, 'Bertram.' Both the forgery and Richard's authentic work, the *Speculum historiale*, were edited by John E. B. Mayor for the Rolls Series in 1867 with a long introduction devoted primarily to a learned and devastating critique of the forgery, and merely a brief and dismissive comment on the authentic *Speculum*. Stephen Bann begins his incisive study of the representation of history in the nineteenth century with interesting comments on how the effect of Bertram's hoax 'thoroughly permeated the historical study of Roman Britain, with effects that were to take many decades to eradicate.' Bann, *Clothing of Clío*, p. 7.

quæ in eo adhuc puero mirabiliter refulgebat.  
 Unde eum pater cum adhuc puerulus esset,  
 cum multis militibus maximisque donariis Romam misit,  
 ut sanctissimorum apostolorum precibus commendaretur,  
 et a summo pontifice benediceretur;  
 venerabilis autem summus sacerdos Leo  
 qui tunc Ecclesiæ Romanæ præfuit,  
 vultum et statum pueri contemplatus,  
 cum in eo divinæ præsentiam majestatis scintillantium virtutum indiciis  
 persensisset,  
 tempus et ætatem regnandi regiæ unctionis sacramento præveniens,  
 sicut quondam Samuel puerum David,  
 ita eum in regem sanctissimus præsul devotissime consecravit.<sup>16</sup>

(Whose son was that ornament of the English, gem of kings, emblem of  
 virtues, Alfred,  
 junior to his other brothers in age but more spirited in virtue,  
 hence by his father loved more than all his brothers  
 on account of the *similitudo* of his conduct  
 and the privilege of a kind of spiritual grace  
 which shone in him even, miraculously, in boyhood,  
 wherefore when he was still a little boy his father sent him to Rome  
 with many knights and the greatest gifts,  
 that he might be commended to the prayers of the holiest apostles  
 and be blessed by the supreme pontiff.  
 When the venerable high priest Leo,  
 who then ruled the Roman church,  
 having contemplated the boy's countenance and stature,  
 felt the presence of Divine majesty in him through the signs of his brilliant  
 virtues,  
 foreseeing the time and age when he would reign by the sacrament of  
 royal unction,  
 as once Samuel did the boy David,  
 so the holiest prelate most devoutly consecrated him king.)<sup>17</sup>

16 Aelred, *Genealogia*, col. 718. Newly edited by Pezzini, *Aelredi*. Aelred devotes twenty percent of the *Genealogia* to Alfred (and almost twenty percent to Edgar.) The *Genealogia* was very popular. Twenty-two manuscripts survive. Freeman, 'Aelred Historian,' p. 140.

17 No translation can hope to preserve the poetic syntax, prosody, and musical integrity of the Latin *viva voce*. In my translation I have tried to get a little closer to the rhythm of the original by slightly modifying Jane Patricia Freeland's fine translation in Dutton, *Aelred*, pp. 76–77.

I have left *similitudo* untranslated to flag it as a technical term central to the hagiographic discourse of Cistercian affective theology: God created man in his *imago* and *similitudo*.<sup>18</sup> In her penetrating study of Cistercian historical writing 1150–1220, Elizabeth Freeman situates Aelred's *Genealogia* in the context of corporate Cistercian life, English historical writing, and modern historiographical debates. Of particular relevance to Aelred's version of our fable are her reflections on the quest for the *region of similitude*:

Cistercian theology is devoted to the recovery of the divine likeness in humanity; in other words it is the quest for the region of similitude. It is sapiential in emphasis, a theology in which individuals seek the experience of God, particularly via appreciation and contemplation of God's humanity. [...] God is sought through the experiences *of* others and through experiences *with* others. For example, the Cistercians' most influential spiritual writers endorsed the inherent value of the *interim*, the period of earthly pilgrimage and the deeds and events that occur there. Although the soul will not be restored until after it is dissociated from the temporal body, in the meantime (in the *interim*) individuals can and must continue to seek the region of similitude in whatever contexts they happen to be living in. [...] As Columban Heaney argues, 'What primarily interested [Cistercians] was not what constitutes man essentially in this image and likeness, but what is happening to the image and likeness in the various phases of man's historical existence.'<sup>19</sup>

Today many historians still believe a borderline can be drawn separating historiography from hagiography. For Aelred there was no such line. On the contrary, his vocation was to make sure that line would never be drawn. For when it is, you are caught in the *regio dissimilitudinis*.

Elizabeth Freeman dwells fruitfully on what she calls the 'peculiar timelessness' of Aelred's representations of men and women as 'mechanisms

18 'Cistercian anthropology, especially Aelred's, gives a central place to the concepts of image and likeness from Genesis 1:26: "God created man in his image and likeness." [*Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram*.] Building on Augustine's development of these concepts, Cistercians associate the *image* with humankind, whose essence is divine, and the *likeness* with the human capacity to will to conform to that nature. They explain that because of the Fall, original sin has obscured the image and wiped out the likeness; expulsion from Paradise thrust humankind into the region of unlikeness. [...] Love is therefore at the center of every attempt to restore the image.' Boquet, 'Aelred,' pp. 176–177.

19 Freeman, *Cistercian Historical Writing*, pp. 13–14. (Italics original.) Freeman quotes Heaney, 'Aelred's Theology,' p. 17.



by which the *Genealogia* overall presents an image of English genealogical history that is powerful precisely because of this timelessness.<sup>20</sup> The Chronicle pegs the vernacular fable down to an *Anno Domini* date. Aelred does not. He mentions no dates at all in the *Genealogia*, which is governed not by chronological time but by cosmological thinking. His sacramental understanding of kingship gives shape and meaning to this date-free mode of narration.<sup>21</sup>

By liberating our fable from chronology, Aelred situates it in purely hagiographic time. *Pace* Freeman, there is no need to call this timelessness ‘peculiar,’ for it is a governing principle of sacred biography.<sup>22</sup> To find even a single AD date in a saint’s life is rare and thought-provoking.<sup>23</sup> If for Hume history excludes hagiography, for Aelred hagiography *contains* history. Aelred’s hagiographic imagination animates the traditional motifs woven into the Latin version of our fable by his predecessors, starting with Asser. As a child the son’s *similitudo* to God shines with virtue: a perennial hagiographic motif. It is not in the vernacular Chronicle but in the Latin Life that the king sends his youngest son to the holy city *because* he loves him more than his older brothers: an atom of legend pregnant with destiny, folkloric, yet biblically sanctified, for both Asser and Aelred, by Joseph and David.<sup>24</sup> The king sends his youngest son to Rome for ‘meritorious acts of devotion,’ to be blessed by the prayers of the holiest saints whose relics make Rome such a holy city: an inherently liturgical act, always already a *magna virtus*. Aelred’s biblical typology situates the Pope’s epiphany in hagiographic time: Leo sees in Alfred what he knows Samuel foresaw in David. God tells him ‘I choose this boy. He’s going to be a great king one day. This boy is David. Be Samuel. Anoint him.’ With prophetic insight, Leo experiences this event as an outward

20 See Freeman, ‘The Timeless Nation,’ in *Cistercian Historical Writing*, pp. 55–87, at p. 86. Freeman seeks to explain the power of this timelessness by drawing on the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.

21 ‘[Burton] analyzes each of the seven histories individually while simultaneously identifying a *quasi-sacramental* understanding of history that pervades all seven works.’ Freeman, ‘Aelred historian,’ p. 126, n. 45, citing Burton, *Ælred*. (My italics.)

22 Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*. See also Jones, *Saints’ Lives*.

23 For an illuminating example of a hagiographer using a single *Anno Domini* date to sanctify chronology, see Walter Berschin’s valuable comments (*Biographie*, III, p. 224 ff.) on the initial sentence of Thegan’s Life of Louis. Asser’s intertwining of chronology and hagiography in his Life of Alfred will be the focus of attention in Part II below.

24 Aelred’s *a patre plus cunctis fratribus amabatur* blends Asser’s *rex praefatum filium suum* (WHS c. 8) and *cum communi et ingenti patris sui et matris amore supra omnes fratres suos, immo ab omnibus, nimium diligenteretur* (WHS c. 22).





sign of inward grace. The high priest liturgically celebrates the sacrament of regal anointing because he has contemplated the soul of the son, and has experienced there the Divine Presence that Aelred saw everywhere in history.<sup>25</sup> It is the same Divine Presence that Samuel experienced when he gazed on young David.

This biblical typology binding Alfred to David is no mere rhetorical flourish on Aelred's part, no fanciful analogy or indulgent allusion. It is, in Erich Auerbach's technical sense, *figural*. It is a serious spiritual exegesis of our fable. 'The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but they both also lie within time as real events or figures. Both figures are part of the ongoing flow of historical life. What is spiritual is the act of understanding, the *intellectus spiritualis*.'<sup>26</sup> The Divine Presence is eternal, beyond mere chronology. What for God is simultaneous looks to us like action at a distance. The moment when the Pope anoints Alfred is not separated by millennia of measurable chronology from the moment when Samuel anoints David. Spiritually they are adjacent. From God's point of view they are one. For hagiography is everywhere orthogonal to chronology. It intersects chronology at every point in time. Since all ages are immediate to God, the fact that David's anointing occurs historically in Old Testament times and Alfred's in our times does not weaken the typological identification. On the contrary, it strengthens it and drives it home.<sup>27</sup> By embedding Leo's sacramental anointing in a sacred typological framework, Aelred elevates Alfred's life to the same cosmic level as my tongue-in-cheek elevation *à la* Toynbee. For intelligent medieval hagiographers, biblical typology and action at a distance provide an interpretive frame as lofty, cosmic, mythic as Toynbee's.

25 'Burton has recently noted that, in different but mutually enhancing ways, all the histories emphasize the divine presence among humanity; the political histories show earthly figures cooperating with heaven, while Aelred's other, saintly histories show heaven reaching down to cooperate with earth.' Freeman, 'Aelred Historian,' pp. 133–134, citing Burton, *Aelred*.

26 'Beide Pole der Figur sind zeitlich getrennt, liegen aber beide, als wirkliche Vorgänge oder Gestalten, innerhalb der Zeit; sie sind beide, wie schon mehrhaft betont wurde, in dem fließenden Strom enthalten, welcher das geschichtliche Leben ist, und nur das Verständnis, der *intellectus spiritualis*, ist ein geistiger Akt.' Auerbach, 'Figura' (2016 [1938]), p. 164. I have slightly modified the recent retranslation by Newman: Auerbach, 'Figura' (2014), p. 96.

27 'The affirmation [of literal truth] is not made *in spite of* the fact that the narrative complies with Old Testament texts, for such compliance is clearly held to confirm the veracity of the narrative, to establish the fidelity of the historian to his chronicle. Yet the old texts have, at least in some cases, manifestly generated the new narrative. The more far-fetched and improbable the intertextual relations, the more certainly historical the narrative must be.' Kermode, *Genesis of Secrecy*, pp. 105, 107. (Italics original.)



## Chronology

On the other hand, by redacting the barebones vernacular version of the fable into what looks like the one-way street of a horizontal chronological framework, the Chronicler seems to resemble those modern historians who, like Hume, devoutly believed that everything in the vertical dimension, including mysticism, hagiography, typology, teleology, and action at a distance, must be thoroughly expunged as superstitious supernaturalism. Every tough-minded historical critic was honor-bound to insist that all this folklore, all this hagiographic biblical typological rigmarole was mere romantic embroidery, the luxuriance of a riotous imagination, a wild and frolic fancy that had to be disciplined, had to be flattened out within a single purely horizontal dimension, let the spiritual chips fall where they may.

The principle that horizontal chronology is the antidote to vertical hagiography was attractively explicated in 1865 by Earle in his groundbreaking philological edition of *Two Saxon Chronicles Parallel*. Earle was not a historian. He was an old-style Romantic philologist.<sup>28</sup> He read the Chronicle as literature.<sup>29</sup> He enjoyed treating it as a cabinet of vernacular fossils, specimens geologically stratified by a slow temporal process to be lovingly and patiently reconstructed and mapped out, level by level, age by age.<sup>30</sup> So he began by characterizing the redactorial framework of a chronicle in its primitive most ancient form.<sup>31</sup>

I quote here a representative sampling of Earle's discourse:

History is like a web of cloth; you cannot add to it or take from it without destroying its integrity. The Chronicle is like a set of counters arranged on a recurring mathematical plan that can be continued *ad infinitum* in any direction, and can accommodate insertions in any part. [...] In early times the particulars of past events were much more trusted to the memory than they are now; and only the chronological scaffolding

28 John Earle had been a distinguished member of Giles's network of Alfredophiles — see above ch. 1, p. 48, n. 57.

29 Earle, *Anglo-Saxon Literature*.

30 On antiquarian geology as a ruling metaphor for this kind of nineteenth-century English philology, see Jones, *Fossil Poetry*.

31 In 1899 Plummer successfully carried off the prodigious task of revising Earle's 1865 edition not as a philologist but as a strictly disciplined historical critic. Plummer decided to incorporate 'the whole of this first division [of his 1899 Introduction] with some abridgement from Professor Earle's [1865] Introduction. I do not think it is possible to state better the difference between Histories and Chronicles.' Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, p. xvii, n. 1.



was committed to parchment. [...] The Peruvians had a *memoria technica*, made of knots upon diversely colored strings. A Peruvian woman showed a bundle of knotted strings, and said her whole life *was there*. Each knot was the index to a story, and all the stories were preserved in her memory. Our own early chronicles are something like this series of knots; for in their laconic annals much was implied and little expressed, and therefore they are a series of knots of which the solution died out with their authors. [...] Tradition and experience furnished them with more facts than they had the capacity to accommodate. Where memory failed, fancy promptly entered, as into a forfeited domain. The wild and frolic fancy was ever ready, in the absence of any controlling system of order, to foment confusion and revel in it, and to conjure up out of the chaos new and grotesque combinations. Therefore they wanted, not History, but Chronology. When men had felt the necessity of guarding themselves against mytho-poesy, they found their first guarantee of the security of historical truths in tables of chronology. The Saxon Chronicles exhibit this process more than any (perhaps) in existence.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike later medieval historians the redactor of the Parker Chronicle inaugurates his account of Alfred's reign by inserting our fable not in the annal for 871 AD when the adult king takes the throne but in the earlier annal for 853 AD when the boy goes to Rome. By so doing, he has knotted the papal anointing into a series of knots. Implicitly, his redactional knot is simultaneously a hagiographic prefiguration of Alfred's adult kingship and a fulfilment of knots that precede and prefigure it. To quote the distinguished redaction critic Norman Perrin, 'No interpretation of any pericope can be adequate that does not raise questions about the place and function of that pericope within the structure of the work as a whole.'<sup>33</sup> Alfred's adult reign thus becomes part of the meaning of the fable, the ultimate moral of the fable and of the Chronicle as well. In Aelred's biblical typology a 'type' in the Old Testament finds its 'antitype' in Leo's anointing Alfred. But here, if Alfred's taking the throne in the annal for 871 AD is the 'antitype' then the 'type' it fulfils is to be found not in the Bible but within Alfred's own life cycle, within the Chronicle, in the annal for 853. This sort of typology,

<sup>32</sup> Earle, *Chronicles*, pp. i–v, slightly abridged by Plummer, *Chronicles*, 1899, II, pp. xvii–xxi. (Italics original.) For a contrasting model of the origin of chronicles, see Jones, *Saints' Lives*.

<sup>33</sup> Perrin, 'Evangelist as Author,' p. 61. Or to state this critical principle even more succinctly: 'The position of a pericope in its context is frequently the earliest commentary on it.' Rohde, *Evangelists*, p. 20. I return to this quotation in ch. 5, p. 206, n. 17 below.



in which childhood is to adulthood as type is to antitype, is not, strictly speaking, biblical. It is what Jacques Fontaine labels a *typologie interne*: an interior typology that provides a life with an inner structure, a backbone.<sup>34</sup> Within the Chronicle's narrative what our fable prefigures is the curve of the son's destiny: though he begins as the littlest and the last of his brothers, he is destined to become the greatest and the first.

Redacted thus within the annal for 853, this sliver of hagiographic time challenges the historian's resolve to guard against the vertical lift of mytho-poesy. This is why so many historians have found it a strange puzzle. In 1967 Janet Nelson wrote:

Alfred's royal anointing by Leo IV has long been one of the puzzles of Alfredian scholarship. Despite the ingenuity of the greatest Anglo-Saxon specialists, no really satisfactory explanation has yet been given of the strange story retailed by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 853, and repeated in Latin translation by Asser in his *Vita Alfredi*.<sup>35</sup>

The hagiographer's device of prefiguration and fulfilment to shape an individual's life story was dignified by the doctrine that God sees the future of an infant and reveals his foreknowledge in a sign. That theological doctrine is now as superstitious, as unacceptable, as the astrological doctrine that a constellation of stars acts at a distance to 'influence' the configuration and destiny of your life from the moment of your birth. Northrop Frye articulates the principle concisely:

Causes have to be in the same temporal plane as their effects, or they are not genuine causes. Ascribing a disease to the will of God or to the malice of a witch is not causal thinking. Typology points to future events that are often thought of as transcending time, so that they contain a vertical lift as well as a horizontal move forward.<sup>36</sup>

But the death of God need not entail the death of hagiography, or at least not the extinction of the vertical lift of figural story-telling. This, I believe, is the gist of Auerbach's *Mimesis*. A story-teller can represent the destiny of

34 This idea of a *typologie interne* is a theme of ch. 6, 'Cross the Border,' below.

35 Janet Nelson situates the fable in the history of English royal consecrations and the function of secular power divinely conceded through priestly mediators. Nelson, 'The Problem,' p. 145. On relevant liturgical inauguration rituals see Scharer, 'Die Salbungsfrage.' For a contrasting Roman Catholic interpretation, see below, pp. 86–88.

36 Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 82.



a protagonist through the recurrence of a motif, can shape a gestalt early in the story so as to foreshadow a later gestalt, can achieve poetic closure by finally revealing what was concealed in the initial gesture. By fulfilling the promise of the beginning, the end appears predestined.

This is to read the Chronicle not as history but as literature mingled with myth.<sup>37</sup> Many scholars today have the skills needed to read any text as literature, even a parking ticket, and then deconstruct it as myth-riddled. Still, it is a delicate task to bring such skills to bear on reading the Chronicle as literature, both because of the complexity of its texts and because of the rich repertoire of diverse and sometimes incommensurate discourses that literary historians can now bring, severally and jointly, into play.<sup>38</sup> To wiggle through the resulting tangle of theoretical frameworks and their respective terminologies I here resort to a simple schematic model by elaborating Earle's metaphor of each annal as a knot on a Peruvian *quipu*, on the understanding that many things happen, but few are deemed knot-worthy, some only when the passage of years has revealed, in hindsight, their value. This elementary model of the Chronicle's redactorial framework will prove adequate for my present purpose: the revaluation of the process Plummer went through in 1901 to end up imagining that Alfred was the original author of this fable.

To read the Chronicle as literature is to bracket off as a red herring the historian's otherwise pressing question of whether the papal anointing could or could not have actually taken place, so as to understand the trip to Rome not as an annal among the annals, not as a reign among the reigns, but as a fable among the fables, a knot among the knots. Imagine knots on five colored threads, one for each of the atoms of legend that form the nucleus of the fable: the Holy City, the High Priest, the Island Kingdom, its King, and his Son. Every time the Chronicle mentions Rome, a Pope, a King, or a Son, tie a knot on the appropriately colored thread. If it mentions two or more of these, knit their threads together. You thus arrive at a dynamic colored network of permutations and combinations of the five interacting

37 'It remains remarkable that we can locate the migration myth in the Anglo-Saxon historical work which, because it is most constrained by chronological exactitude, seems most resistant to myth. [...] Perhaps the most obvious and certainly the most frequent allusions to the migration myth in this work are the royal genealogies that trace a given Anglo-Saxon ruler to the two men who led the Saxons across the North Sea. Each king who claimed descent from Hengest and Horsa [or, like Alfred, from Cerdic and Cynric] was advancing a claim to political legitimacy, but such a claim could have no force unless the migration had acquired mythic status in the culture.' Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking*, p. 29. On the 'mingling of history and myth' in the Chronicle, see Foot, 'Finding the Meaning,' p. 100.

38 Comprehensively surveyed in Partner and Foot, *Historical Theory*.



'atoms of legend,' from Cerdic and Cynric in the opening sentences of the prefatory King List, to the annal for 896, a hip-pocket map of the myth of the Island Kingdom and the curve of its destiny as explicated in detail by Nicholas Howe, Sarah Foot, and others.<sup>39</sup>

At 853 AD our fable knits all five threads together into a single molecular knot for the first and only time in the Chronicle. Tug on that knot and feel the vibrations in the five threads acting at a distance all the way back to the very first King and his Son; throbbing wherever a King takes a throne, goes to the Holy City, or dies; and reverberating when a High Priest in the Holy City takes the initiative to convert the Island Kingdom. Vibrations also travel forward to tug at every 'future' knot that mentions Alfred. The interconnection of threads and knots thus models the Chronicle's *typologie interne*, the logic of its intertwined prefigurations and fulfilments, and lets us see that in its original context the fable could already function as crypto-hagiography, as a node central, not marginal, to the narrative structure of the Chronicle. Snip it in half and much unravels.

## Psychology

What makes the fable embedded in the annal strangely challenging to historians is that it is a shadow cast backwards in time by the climax of the Chronicle's narrative, truth mingled with myth. It is an effect of action at a distance whose cause is to be sought not in the past but in the future. It is, in a word, prophetic.<sup>40</sup> Plummer met this challenge in 1901. At the beginning of the third of his Ford Lectures he initiated his own narrative of Alfred's life with a bold psychological conjecture. In what I have nicknamed his Victorian Quest for the Historical Alfred,<sup>41</sup> Plummer's goal was, as

39 Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking*. See also Foot, 'The Making of *Anglecynn*,' conveniently condensed by Foot in 'Finding the Meaning': 'There is a continual tension between the syntactical parataxis of the record of each separate year and the rhetorical unity of intention that characterizes the whole, a tension which the reader must transcend before the wider meaning will become clear. [...] The distinct strands have been deliberately selected by their compilers to construct a meaningful plot, a dynamic sequential skeleton of which chronological sequence is a significant organizing principle but not the sole determinant of the selection of material for inclusion' (p. 97).

40 'There is an important sense in which the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle can be shown to function as a specifically Christian history, because it was necessarily concerned with working out God's intentions for the English; it is prophetic in both its structure and its goals.' Foot, 'Finding the Meaning,' p. 101.

41 Kalmar, 'No Mere Arthur.'



Richard Abels phrases it, 'to prune away the many myths that had gathered around Alfred and to restore the historical person and celebrate his real accomplishments.'<sup>42</sup> Not to debunk the Victorian cult of Alfred but to purify it in the spirit of Erasmus by expelling the apocrypha from the canon, castigating its received texts, and expunging its legendary fictions.<sup>43</sup>

However, the line between fact and fiction, between the historical Alfred and his legendary namesake, runs right through the middle of our fable. Plummer was certain that Popes did not go about consecrating infant kings while their older brothers were still alive and while their fathers were still reigning. That can happen only in the forfeited domain of legend. Plummer, in accord with the Chronicle, begins his account of Alfred's life with the fabled trip to Rome. He has to. The 'silly story' of the burnt cakes and the 'wandering folk-tales which get attached to more than one historical character'<sup>44</sup> — stories about a king passing for a minstrel *incognito* — can be easily pruned away as later accretions. The legend of the papal anointing cannot. Its original written source is not some later Latin writer, not even Asser, but the veridical vernacular Chronicle:

The earliest event recorded in the life of Alfred is his being sent to Rome in 853, when he would be, according to [my theory], five years old.<sup>45</sup> Of the fact [that he went to Rome] there can be no possible doubt. It is not only mentioned by the Chronicle and Asser, but we have the actual letter which Leo IV wrote to Æthelwulf announcing Alfred's safe arrival.<sup>46</sup> [...] The passion for pilgrimages and relics was indeed at its height in the ninth century. So far there is no difficulty. The difficulty is as to what took place at Rome.<sup>47</sup>

Hume lamented that the Pope anointed Alfred king. Plummer denies that he did so. His difficulty is that the line between hard fact and legendary fiction divides the short vernacular version in half: the first two clauses tell you something that did happen, the third one something that didn't. When

42 Abels, 'Alfred and his Biographers,' p. 66. Richard Abels's vignette of Plummer is packed with vision and precision.

43 On Erasmus see above, ch. 1, pp. 38–39.

44 Plummer, *Alfred*, pp. 24, 62.

45 The flaws in Plummer's theory of Alfred's age in 853 are the focus of attention in ch. 3, 'Fix the Date,' below.

46 This is the letter which in 1967 Janet Nelson cogently proved was a late forgery, see above, p. 80, n. 35. But by 1991 she had changed her mind: see n. 51 below.

47 Plummer, *Alfred*, pp. 70–71.



the Pope anoints him king, the historical Alfred turns into his legendary counterpart right in front of your eyes.

It was this anomaly that persuaded Felix Liebermann to deny that the Chronicle was an authentically Alfredian reliquary. Patrick Wormald characterised Liebermann as 'a *bona fide* member of the academic circles that had transformed the study of Germanic law since the 1820s.'<sup>48</sup> Liebermann, like Grimm, saw *urgermanisch* law as a system inherent in society's soul. When he read Plummer's 1899 edition of the Chronicle, he balked at Plummer's confession of faith: 'that the idea of a national Chronicle as opposed to merely local annals was [Alfred's], that the idea was carried out under his direction and supervision, this I do most firmly believe.'<sup>49</sup> From Liebermann's perspective 'the gross improbability' of the papal anointing proved that, on the contrary, the Chronicle *cannot* have been drawn up under Alfred's influence.<sup>50</sup>

To salvage as much as possible for historical truth, Plummer elucidates what the Pope actually did do. He confirmed Alfred as his godson. That need not be doubted. Unreported by the Chronicle, on the other hand, but written, independently, in a letter by Pope Leo, was that he actually made Alfred a Roman 'consul' by putting something on his head, in some solemn ritual. Not a crown. Not a royal crown, anyway. Maybe 'a diadem of some kind.' Still, whatever anointing the Pope may or may not have actually done, his letter could not and did not say he made Alfred king. Who, then, misreported what had happened? Rudely put, who is lying? Liebermann is sure the story is a lie, but he is also sure Alfred was not the sort of person who could tell, or even who could believe, such a lie.<sup>51</sup> In response, Plummer says 'I am inclined to turn the argument round the other way. I think that

48 Wormald, *English Law*, pp. 21, 23.

49 Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, p. civ — see above, ch. 1, p. 68, n. 120.

50 As reported by Plummer himself in a footnote to his 1901 lectures: 'In a review of vol. ii of my [*viz* Plummer's] *Saxon Chron.*, in Brandl und Tobler, *Archiv für's Studium der neueren Sprachen*, [1900] civ. pp. 188 ff [at 193],' Plummer, *Alfred*, p. 72, n. 2.

51 Janet Nelson comments: 'So far as I know, Liebermann was the only scholar to admit the possibility that the anointing was a deliberate fabrication and not just the result of error — but the further possibility that Alfred was its author was clearly too much for him. Perhaps this was at the back of Stenton's mind when he so vehemently denied Alfred's authorship of the 853 entry. It may be significant too, that Liebermann's point has never been revived in more recent literature.' Nelson, 'Royal Anointing,' p. 159. She wrote this in 1967 when she was convinced Alfred consciously fabricated the lie. When, twenty-four years later, she modified her conclusion, she wrote: 'While Leo did not (strictly speaking) make Alfred a king, he set the seal of throne-worthiness on him: Alfred was not a prospective, a potential heir. The claim that Alfred was "consecrated king" in 853 simply drew out the implication of papally invented rituals that were probably intended anyway to be ambiguous. Whoever, c. 890, entered this statement in



Alfred must have understood the ceremony to mean something more than confirmation.<sup>52</sup> The story is not an outright lie. It is Alfred's way of making sense of his own life. Alfred was indeed the sort of person who could believe such a story, who could believe that his childhood prefigured his adulthood, that he was destined to win the crown.

In his heart Plummer yearned for intimate glimpses into Alfred's soul as lovingly as Martin Tupper did.<sup>53</sup> When studying the Old English Alfredian translations, Plummer trusted that Alfred's additions to the Latin original 'give us the clearest insight into his own character and modes of thought.' And again: 'When all deductions have been made, there remain enough [vernacular additions] that we may safely take as evidence of Alfred's thought and feeling.'<sup>54</sup> It is as if Plummer, a year after Liebermann's challenge to his faith, treats Alfred as having revealingly misunderstood an oral Latin ritual, and then construes this as comparable to Alfred's mistranslations of written Latin prose: as a potential glimpse into Alfred's interior life. Even more to the point, it is as if the addition of *to cýninge gehalgode* to whatever it was the Pope actually said in his ninth century *lingua romana* is, for Plummer, like those additions in the Old English translations which 'are due entirely to Alfred's imagination and are intended to make clear to us how, in his view, the event narrated came about.'<sup>55</sup>

Liebermann notwithstanding, if the fable does epitomize Alfred's understanding of his own life, then its retroactive insertion in the Chronicle can strengthen, not weaken, our faith that ÆLFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN. For in that case this is not just the legendary Alfred speaking to us. This is the historical Alfred we quest. Alfred believes his own fable. Plummer cannot help hearing Alfred's voice in the later 893–897 annals.<sup>56</sup> He hears that same voice narrating this fable — speaking not in 853 but in the 890s.

If the original source of this fable is indeed the historical Alfred then its typology, rightly understood, does offer us a true glimpse into his interior life. By substituting psychological for spiritual understanding, Plummer frees the fable from rigid chronology and redeems typology's vertical lift. In Plummer's

the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle had no intention of being controversial. The question of Alfred's truthfulness or otherwise seems to me a red herring.' Nelson, 'Franks and English,' pp. 143–144.

52 Plummer, *Alfred*, p. 72.

53 On Martin Tupper's devotion to Alfred see ch. 1 above.

54 Plummer, *Alfred*, pp. 161, 177, 181. See ch. 7, p. 273, n. 38 below. It must be admitted that Plummer's list of eight 'very Alfredian' passages (pp. 181–182) are actually very Tupperian nuggets of proverbial philosophy.

55 Plummer, *Alfred*, p. 161.

56 'I never can read the annals of 893–897 without seeming to hear the voice of King Alfred.' Plummer, *Alfred*, p. 11. See above, ch. 1, p. 68, n. 121.



imagination, what converts a childhood experience of an actual ritual into an adult story of an imagined royal anointing is its passage through Alfred's memory, his mind, his heart, his Geist, his psyche — his Ego, his Superego, and his Id. In short, through his Unconscious. Dreamwork does not turn the spiritual *figura* into a hard fact, it converts it into a psychological *figura*.

And so, although Plummer begins by confining the vertical lift of hagiography to a single clause, indeed to the single word *cyninge*, he ends up inviting us to situate *cyninge* in a psychological domain rather than in a purely horizontal dimension, to entertain the possibility that the young protagonist of the fable did foresee his own destiny, did vow to make his romantic fable come true, did see himself as King. This, to my way of thought, is what Plummer really means when he repeatedly predicates that Alfred holds in real history the place which romance assigns to Arthur.<sup>57</sup>

Plummer did not convince everyone. At the peak of the 1901 Millenary the learned Jesuit Herbert Thurston spoke up for the Roman Catholic branch of the cult of Alfred, especially for those who believe Popes do indeed confer kingdoms. In October 1901, while Plummer was delivering his Ford Lectures denying the papal anointing, the Jesuit journal *The Month* published Thurston's meaty and well-timed article affirming it.<sup>58</sup> His erudite essay is worth rescuing from oblivion, and not only for the delicacy of its casuistry.<sup>59</sup> Consider, for example, the rhetoric of this opening move:

57 He says this first in the 1889 preliminary printing of Earle and Plummer, *Chronicles*, p. xiii, then again in 1899 in Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, p. 114 and again in Plummer, 'Subjection to the Higher Powers,' p. 210. In 1900 Conybeare began his *Alfred in the Chronicles* with this contrast: 'Through the mist of long-past ages, two heroic names shine out as the special glory of our island, each the peculiar possession of one of the two branches of the Aryan family whose fusion has made Britain what it is. The Celtic ideal has embodied itself in the character of Arthur, the Teutonic in that of Alfred. And it is characteristic of the genius of the two races, that while the individuality of Arthur, as expressed in Cymric legend, is almost wholly mythical, that of Alfred, as handed down by Anglo-Saxon story, is almost entirely historical. "He is a singular instance," says Mr. Freeman, "of a prince who has become a hero of romance; who, as a hero of romance, has had countless imaginary exploits and imaginary institutions attributed to him, but to whose character romance has done no more than justice, and who appears in exactly the same light in history and in fable."' Conybeare, *Alfred*, p. 1. More generally, on Arthur as Alfred's rival, see Keynes, 'The Cult.'

58 Thurston, 'Roman Sacring.' Thurston was the latest of a series of Catholic scholars who studied the historical continuity between English Catholicism and the early Anglo-Saxon church. He was a prolific historian, liturgical scholar, and hagiographer, whose life stretched from the lifetime of Charles Dickens to the Blitz. His long and paradoxical career made him appear 'almost an *advocatus diaboli* to many Catholics, and yet at the same time, an indomitable *defenso fidei* to many an incautious anti-Catholic writer.' McMullin, 'Thurston,' p. 207. For more see Crehan, *Thurston*, and Heimann, 'Thurston.'

59 It can be accessed online at [https://www.google.com.au/books/edition/The\\_Month/K\\_ZAAQAAMAAJ](https://www.google.com.au/books/edition/The_Month/K_ZAAQAAMAAJ).



It is natural that on such an occasion [viz. the 1901 Millenary] those features in the life of a hero which seem less popular or less conspicuously patriotic, should be kept rather in the background. We need not accuse our Protestant friends of any malicious intent because they have dwelt but little upon Alfred's Catholicism or upon his attitude towards Rome and the Papacy. But it may surely be pardoned in a [Jesuit] journal like *The Month*, if we do not here observe the same reticence. [...] It may not be amiss to remind ourselves that he, who is by common consent the greatest and noblest monarch in our annals, was after all a Catholic prince of conspicuous piety, a man who heard daily Mass and burned candles uninterruptedly before his favorite relics. He it was who alone among our sovereigns received sacred unction in Rome at the hands of the Pope.<sup>60</sup>

A turning point in Thurston's argument hinges on identifying a *non sequitur* which under other circumstances might have seemed obvious, namely the syllogism 'A Pope says he did X, therefore he didn't do Y.' Yes, as Stubbs had established, we do have a letter from Pope Leo saying he invested Alfred as his godson 'with the girdle [*cingulum*] and vestments of consulship, whatever that may mean.'<sup>61</sup> But no, it does not follow that therefore he did not also anoint him king.<sup>62</sup> It isn't one or the other. He may have done both.

Thurston's expertise authorized him to compare the consecration of a king or bishop to the consecration of the eucharistic elements in the mass. He was a keen connoisseur of the exquisite *minutiae* of early medieval papal rituals, robes, and garbs. He devotes a third of his essay to the *cingulum* with which the Pope invested Alfred, proving that

the festal garb of the consuls in the fifth century became the festal garb of kings and emperors from the ninth to the fifteenth. Therefore the Pope, in investing the boy Alfred with what he called a consul's robes,

60 Thurston, 'Roman Sacring,' pp. 337–338.

61 'Whatever that may mean' is Stubbs' turn of phrase, *Gesta Regum*, II, p. 42.

62 'Supposing even that Pope Leo's letter to Ethelwulf proves that no royal consecration in the ordinary sense had taken place before the time it was despatched, it is not in any way inconsistent with the possibility that such an *unctio regalis* was imparted at a later date. The passage quoted [...] is but an extract. We have no right to draw inferences not only from what it says, but from what it omits to say. For anything we know about the matter the Pope may have gone on to declare in the very next sentence that it was his intention to crown the child and to anoint him when he had resided for a somewhat longer period at the Papal Court.' Thurston, 'Roman Sacring,' p. 341. This is the letter Janet Nelson first proved a forgery, then changed her mind; see above nn. 46 and 51.

was very probably attiring him as the Emperor himself was attired on state occasions.<sup>63</sup>

For his punchline he quotes these lines from *England's Darling*, by Alfred Austin, the Poet Laureate: 'Nay sign a cross upon your brow and sleep; | Since by Pope Leo he was hallowed king, | Heaven keeps a watch upon his chosen head.'

I will let Thurston take the floor again at the end of the next chapter, 'Fix the Date.'<sup>64</sup>

In 1904, without naming Plummer, Stevenson accepted the thrust of his psychological conjecture, He allowed for typological prefiguration and fulfilment in Alfred's mind:

It would seem that it was the ceremony of creation as consul that was misunderstood by Alfred or by the writer of this entry in the Chron. as a coronation as king. This entry cannot well have been written until after Alfred's accession to the throne in 871, and it is possible that he regarded his coronation in England as the consummation of the ceremony at Rome. In any case it is difficult to reject the theory that we can detect his influence in this strange entry.<sup>65</sup>

But on the other hand, in 1967 Janet Nelson wrote:

Alfred could not have confused another ceremony with royal anointing; but he could deliberately have transformed the one into the other. [...] [A mere blessing] could have been quietly converted forty years later into a consecration and publicized as such. [...] This amounts, admittedly, to crediting Alfred and his circle of advisers with the deliberate falsification of events; but this seems the most plausible explanation of the *Chronicle* entry for 853, and so of Asser's account too.<sup>66</sup>

In 1983 the attitude of professional historians who treat the papal anointing as marginal to our understanding of the Chronicle was summed up by Keynes and Lapidge:

63 Thurston, 'Roman Sacring,' p. 348.

64 Ch. 3, p. 154, n. 158.

65 WHS, p. 181.

66 Nelson, 'The Problem,' p. 158. But (as noted above, nn. 46, 51, 62) by 1991 she had changed her mind: 'The question of Alfred's truthfulness or otherwise seems to me a red herring.'



In the belief that only someone outside the king's circle would have misunderstood the nature of the ceremony, or conversely, that only someone within the king's circle would have misrepresented it, this claim that Alfred was anointed king in 853 is regularly cited in the discussion about the authorship of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; but whether the error is deliberate or not, the chronicler probably intended merely to convey that Alfred had been marked out for kingship when still a young boy, in much the same way as heavenly signs attended the birth of those who were to become saints (and therefore the claim signifies no more than that this annal in its received form was written when Alfred was king).<sup>67</sup>

In other words, what is represented as foresight, prefiguration, prediction, was actually hindsight, postfiguration, retrodiction. The hagiographic touch merely proves that someone tied the chronological knot not proleptically in 853 but retroactively some time after Alfred had taken the throne in 871. The crude question *whose lie is this?* is thus refined into *whose foresight? whose hindsight?* At bottom, *whose insight?*

Plummer answers this question when he winds up his account of the fable by invoking Aelred's figural Cistercian exegesis, which endows the Pope with the gift of prophesy. Although 'humanly speaking, it was of course impossible that Alfred's succession to the West Saxon throne should have been foreseen in 853' — even by a Pope — Plummer nevertheless ends up conjecturing that what in hindsight was retroactively represented as foresight may have been Alfred's own spiritual, or call it, if you prefer, psychological, insight:

When in the course of years Alfred inherited his father's throne, he, and others, may well have seen in the action of him who was 'high priest that same year,' a prophetic significance; just as St. John traces a higher inspiration in words, which, in the intention of the speaker, simply laid down the doctrine of political expediency in its most brutal form.<sup>68</sup>

By alluding to the 'high priest that same year,' Plummer thus hints at the possibility that Alfred's self-understanding may be the origin of the inner

67 Keynes and Lapidge, *Asser*, p. 232, n. 19. (My italics.)

68 Plummer cites John 11.49–52: 'But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.' Plummer, *Alfred*, p. 74.



typology which structures the Chronicle's narrative of his life. In 1998, in his well-regarded biography of Alfred, Richard Abels carefully spelled out this possibility in greater detail:

Youthful 'memories' can be deceptive. [...] Alfred seems to have misremembered or misrepresented the most extraordinary event in his early life: his reception by Pope Leo IV during the first of his childhood pilgrimages to Rome. [...] Enough scholarly ink has been spilled on the subject to drown a colloquium of graduate students. [...] The problem has so disturbed historians that some have rejected the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as a private compilation originating far from the king's court<sup>69</sup> and Asser's Life as a forgery. Others have taken the opposite tack and seen the error as Alfred's clever use of 'propaganda'. The truth of the matter is, of course, impossible to establish. But it seems to me that Alfred, looking back from the vantage point of the early 890's, may have come to believe that he had, indeed, been anointed king as a boy. Experts on early medieval liturgy and inauguration rituals are sceptical that anyone could mistake the rite of confirmation for a royal consecration. But an aging man recalling an event from his early childhood, forty years before, might well have done so. One can easily imagine Alfred reshaping the memories of his youth to conform to the realities of his adult life.<sup>70</sup>

And then he explores in greater depth Plummer's hint that biblical typology shaped Alfred's personal private *typologie interne*, his psychological understanding of his own life:

For Alfred it could have been hardly coincidental that his life bore striking parallels to that of King David, in whose Psalms he found special solace and meaning. Like David, he had soared above his older brothers and achieved greatness as king after being driven into the wastelands. And like the Hebrew king, he had smashed his heathen enemies and restored the worship of God in his kingdom. Alfred knew from Holy Scripture that David had been marked out in his youth by the prophet Samuel, who had selected him out of all his brothers to be anointed king, years before he actually ascended the throne. Possibly Alfred 'remembered' the ceremony in Rome decades before as similarly prefiguring his unexpected and divinely ordained kingship. Alfred, like Bede, understood the 'true law

69 Abels is alluding to Sir Frank Stenton and Dorothy Whitelock.

70 Abels, *Alfred*, p. 61



of history' as revealing the underlying spiritual truth in human actions. This, of course, is speculation, but it fits well with Alfred's vision of himself and his life as revealed through his writings.<sup>71</sup>

A consensus is now emerging among Alfredian scholars that Alfred in effect authored his own hagiography, that the cult of the legendary Alfred which has lasted over a thousand years was founded by the historical Alfred himself, that he, so to speak, believed in his legendary namesake. The hypothesis that Alfred was, as it were, the meta-redactor of all his works — the Chronicle, the Laws, the Works, even the Life — is now being once again seriously debated.

Like Aelred, and unlike Plummer, I do not find it hard to imagine the Pope himself prognosticating young Alfred's future greatness from, as Hume puts it, the appearances of Alfred's pregnant genius. I appreciate Hume's verb *prognosticate*. It can bear the sense of biblical prophesy, and yet in its medical sense it can secularize the rhetorical representation of insight as if it were foresight. It can help flatten the vertical lift of typology and teleology. Just as a doctor can deliver a professional judgment about the expected development of a disease, so Leo can contemplate the boy and be vouchsafed a certain kind of secular insight, call it professional insight, to prognosticate the development of virtue and predict that this youth will go far and be a great man some day.

I am inclined to let my wild and frolic fancy fly further off the chronological axis, to redeem a little more of the forfeited domain. Why, I wonder, does Alfred have to wait till his old age before retroactively shaping his memories? Maybe he shapes them in advance. Maybe he jumps the gun. Maybe he too prognosticates. Maybe before he even takes the throne he already believes the fable. When he encounters all those people on the way to Rome and back, when he experiences the Pope and others in Rome, maybe that's when he foresees his own future greatness and vows, 'One day I too will be a great king.' Even, I dare say, 'One day I will be Pope.'

Such a vow has doubtless been made in vain by many others. But history is written by the winners, those who remember their youthful vows and fulfil them. In his intriguing 2006 essay on what serious biographers of Alfred have to go through to discipline their imagination, Richard Abels ends up with the following penetrating insight:

71 Abels, *Alfred*, p. 62.



The narratives told by these very different historians [Asser, Plummer, Smyth, and Abels himself] are, when all is said and done, remarkably similar. This, I believe, is because the narrative is common to the sources that underlie all three historical accounts, sources that ultimately derive from Alfred's court. These are the stories that Alfred himself wanted told to preserve his 'memory in good works'. In other words, the underlying narrative which has seduced so many historians, including me, is Alfred's own narrative — the story and image that he and his courtiers shaped to make sense of his life. This, of course, is not to say that this story and image are historical truth, only that it is the closest to historical truth that the surviving sources will permit us to get — and the closest, I believe, that Alfred wanted us to get.<sup>72</sup>

To which I add: what if this is as close as Alfred himself could get to the meaning of his life? If Alfred already believed his own fable when young, I take pleasure in wondering whether he, like Joseph, told his parents and his brothers. How did they respond? Did he, like Joseph, *dream* his future? Was it dreamwork that turned fact into fiction, converted the memory of an experience into a *figura*? Did he say 'Lo! I dreamt the Pope anointed me King and you all bowed down to me'?<sup>73</sup>

Such pleasant flights of the imagination can make Plummer's psychological conjecture more and more attractive. If we are content to say, with Martin Tupper, that it is far more sensible to believe than to doubt, then we can rejoice that what we have here, in this fable, in this memory, in this typology, is an authentic relic of Alfred's psychological reality, a relic which can contain the meaning of his life and of the reliquary in which he himself chose to enshrine it, the Parker Chronicle which, quite rightly, thrilled the Dean of Ely.

But since it is still, after all, more learned to suspect the allure of mythopoesy, we will want a justification firmer than faith alone. We want proof that

72 Abels, 'Imagination,' p. 75.

73 Sir John Spelman: 'Yet I find in the Apology for Oxford [lib. II. §. 197], (for the MS. itself I have not seen,) that an incertain Author in his Marginal Notes upon *Ranulph Higden* affirms, that *Æthelwolf* had such Direction from an Angel in a Dream, in these words: *Atulphe Rex dilecte Dei, quid moraris? mitte filium post-genitum ad Rom. Pontificem, ut ab ipso inungatur in Regem Anglorum, et sic ab ipso procedat unctio regalis ad ceteros Reges ipsius regni in perpetuum duratura. Omnipotens Dominus filium tuum elegit in principem super Anglos, quia regnum Angliæ est regnum Dei in illo, et dic Swithuno quod ipse vadat cum filio tuo ad Rom. Pont. quod ipse homo Justus est in conspectu Domini, &c.* And this saith that Note is in the life of St. *Alfred* writt by St. *Neotus*.' Spelman, *Ælfred*, p. 18. Cf. p. 70, n. 4 above.





we are on the right track here, that we are coming closer to understanding Alfred's psychology. To test Plummer's conjecture I want to open the *Life and the Works* and look for independent evidence that Alfred's youthful memories did nourish his faith in the curve of his own destiny, or even vice versa that his faith in the curve of his own destiny nourished his memories. I take on that challenge in Parts II and III below.

But first there remains, alas! one last legendary accretion to be expunged, one final cobweb to remove. Plummer and Stevenson were prodigious pioneers in strict historical criticism of the primary sources of the Alfred legend, but their work was not impeccable. They left unpruned the romantic image of Alfred as a mere infant in Rome. They failed to free the historical Alfred from this romantic motif, and instead lodged it deep into the current foundations of Alfredian scholarship not as romance but as hard fact. Their mistaken conviction that they could discover and use Alfred's true birthdate as a guard against mytho-poesy has had uncorrected consequences. One, as we shall see in Part II below, is our tendency to misunderstand the innovative game Asser plays by pivoting back and forth from the horizontal to the vertical dimensions, from chronology to hagiography and back. Another is that they taught us to believe more firmly than ever that Æthelwulf sent to Rome a mere *puerulus* no more than five years old. This skews how we imagine Alfred's adult memories of Rome, as well as how we reconstruct both the purpose of his childhood pilgrimage and the chronology of his subsequent career — how, in the end, we make sense of Alfred's life as a whole. Why Plummer and Stevenson refrained from expunging this romantic motif, and at what cost, is the topic of the next chapter.

