

Lost Books: Abbess Hildelith and the Literary Culture of Barking Abbeyⁱ

Diane Watt, University of Surrey

Introduction

Women's literary histories seldom pay attention to women's engagement with literary history in the medieval period. Yet recent scholarship by feminist Anglo-Saxonists has illustrated that women were the heart of the emergence of the English literary tradition.ⁱⁱ In this article I explore the literary culture of Barking Abbey, a vital centre of Anglo-Saxon learning, when it was under the rule of its second abbess, Hildelith, in the late seventh and early eighth century.ⁱⁱⁱ Particular attention will be given to the intersection of lived practice at Barking and the literary record, focusing on three pieces of evidence: Bede's account of the early history of Barking in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, completed in 731; Aldhelm's *De virginitate* (c.675-680), which was commissioned by Hildelith and her fellow nuns; and a letter written by Boniface around 716 in which he relates the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock. The article will explore the connections between the monastic and literary communities at Barking that are established within these three texts, which, although very different in form, share some common themes. Bede and Boniface are concerned with visions of the dying and the dead or with visions of the afterlife. Aldhelm too pays attention to death, in so far as *De virginitate* dwells on the sufferings of virgin martyrs. Such preoccupations are not, perhaps surprising: within Christianity death marks not an end but a transition. Intercession for the dead and their memorialization were key responsibilities of women, especially nuns. The idealized dead offered models of piety for the living to follow. Knowledge concerning the fate of the dead (whether their souls went to heaven or hell) endowed power on those who held it. For these early English Christians, death mattered.

The three texts considered here are all, if in different ways, closely linked to the literary or textual community of the nuns at Barking Abbey. Following on from Stephanie Hollis's landmark study, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church* (1992), in which Hollis examined at length the writings of monastic leaders to, for, and about women in the early English church, Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, and Lisa M. C. Weston, have offered readings of two of the texts under discussion here (those by Aldhelm and Bede, respectively), that expand our understanding of the relationship between these texts and the Barking community.^{iv} This article revisits, develops, and in places revises the work of these scholars by drawing connections between the texts by Bede and Aldhelm, and by introducing a full consideration of the Boniface letter. Intriguingly Bede, in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, specifically mentions a lost *liber* or book, which evidently recorded visions experienced by the nuns of Barking concerning the death of their founding abbess, Æthelburh. We cannot know for certain who wrote this book, whether a nun or monk at Barking or someone else, but it is reasonable to surmise it was commissioned by Æthelburh's successor, Hildelith. Boniface, in his epistolary recounting of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock, alludes to a version of the narrative given to him by Abbess Hildelith herself. While it is usually assumed that this was an oral account, it is possible that it existed in written form, for example in another letter, now also lost. What are we to make of the fact that both Bede and Boniface refer to texts or accounts for or by nuns that they have then written into their own surviving work? The passing comment about Hildelith found in Boniface's letter takes on a greater significance when placed in the context of Bede's and Aldhelm's texts. At the very least, the evidence from Bede and Aldhelm suggests that under Hildelith's rule, there was at Barking considerable interest in the commissioning, production, reception and circulation of visionary accounts. That Barking was a centre of a specifically *literary* culture is revealed by Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, which describes in detail the sheer extent of the nuns' engagement in scholarly

activities. Taken together, the three texts reveal that under the rule of the academically minded Abbess Hildelith, Barking Abbey was at the centre of a vibrant network of textual exchange between the abbess and nuns and prominent churchmen and other religious communities.

The Barking Abbey *liber*

Visions about the dying and the dead play a significant role in Bede's account of the early history of Barking Abbey (*HE* 4.6-10).^v In Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* many prophecies and revelations concerning death and the otherworld are experienced by male visionaries, rulers, saints and sinners: Oswald, Fursa, Chad, Cuthbert, Drythelm, and some whose names have not come down to us. Similar visions circulated in female religious communities, and it seems that learned women as well as men were responsible for their transmission. One of these women was Hildelith of Barking.

Bede frankly acknowledges that the main source for his accounts in the *Historia ecclesiastica* of the visions of Barking was a *liber* [book] or *libellus* [pamphlet] (*HE* 4.10: 364-5) that had been compiled in the abbey itself:

In hoc etenim monasterio plura uirtutum sunt signa patrata, quae et ad memoriam aedificationemque sequentium ab his qui nouere descripta habentur a multis; e quibus et nos aliqua historiae nostrae ecclesiasticae inserere curauimus.

[In this monastery many signs and miracles were performed which have been written down by those who were acquainted with them as an edifying memorial for

succeeding generations and copies are in the possession of many people. Some of these we have taken care to insert in this *History*.] (*HE* 4.7: 356-7).

The writing of this *liber* would in all likelihood have been commissioned by Abbess Hildelith, in order to foster the cult of Barking's foundress and thus to ensure the continuity of the monastery. Weston suggests that this *liber* was "most likely a hagiographical narrative transcribed from communal memory" and that it was produced at the time of Hildelith's translation of Æthelburh's body to the Abbey church (*HE* 4.10: 363-5).^{vi} In the preface to the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede names Abbot Albinus of Canterbury as a significant collaborator in the production of his work: Albinus gathered together materials which "he then passed on ... through Nothhelm, a godly priest of the Church in London, either by writing or by word of mouth" (*HE* Preface: 5). As Weston points out, given that Bede states that it was Æthelburh's brother, Bishop Eorcenwold of London, who first established Barking (*HE* 4.6: 355), it seems "most likely" that Nothhelm provided Bede with the Barking *liber* or recounted to him its contents.^{vii}

It is possible that the nuns themselves first recorded the "signs and miracles" that took place in the early history of their Abbey, "signs and miracles" which are explicitly recognized as a form of memorialization in the account by Bede quoted above. According to Bede, they seem to have been widely circulated. Indeed, circulation is surely a condition of the success of memorialization, which means precisely the construction of a more public, widespread memory. The Barking "signs and miracles" recorded by Bede thus represent at least aspects of the lost book that lies behind his version of the abbey's history, and consequently they should be given due consideration. While Weston's interest, in analyzing Bede's account of these events in Barking, is in what they reveal about relationships between women within the

early monastic community, my focus is on what they can tell us about the literary concerns of the Barking nuns.

First and foremost, the lost *liber* of Barking Abbey celebrated the piety of Abbess Æthelburh. According to Bede, the death of Abbess Æthelburh was predicted by a vision, witnessed by the abbess's assistant Torhtgyth, who saw a body ascend to heaven, wrapped in a shroud and drawn upwards by golden cords (*HE* 4.9: 361). Realizing that she was seeing a portent of death, Torhtgyth correctly interpreted the golden cords as representing the virtuous deeds of the deceased. One striking aspect of this vision, and indeed of others that follow in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, is its Marian quality: the ascension of Æthelburh resonates with the tradition of the Assumption of the Mother of God.^{viii} Æthelburh's exceptional piety is thus confirmed at the moment of her passing by the vision God gives to a member of her own convent.

The relationship between visionary and the subject of her vision is a symbiotic one: the visionary testifies to, and thus authorizes the holiness of her subject, but in so doing she herself gains authority and her own piety becomes manifest. Furthermore, Bede anticipates the vision, and the good death of Æthelburh, by explaining that prior to the Abbess's passing, Torhtgyth had experienced nine years of illness, which served to burn away "any traces of sin remaining among her virtues through ignorance or carelessness" (*HE* 4.9: 361). The living Torhtgyth had to be purified to prepare her to receive divine revelation, but at the same time, she had to be prepared for her own good death and ascension to Heaven, which took place three years after that of Æthelburh (*HE* 4.9: 363). This was an equally miraculous event: Torhtgyth was paralyzed for three days and nights (echoing the time between Christ's crucifixion and resurrection) and then suddenly awoke to engage in a conversation with an

invisible person. This person was, as she explained to those around her, Æthelburh herself, who has returned to call her to Heaven.

The events surrounding Torhtgyth's death can be read as supporting evidence of the saintliness of Æthelburh. Yet it is evident that Æthelburh's holiness and the visionary blessings surrounding her death are not simply manifestations of a singular piety. Rather, both piety and revelatory experiences are shared by other members of the community.^{ix} While Torhtgyth, as the abbess's staunch supporter in the convent, is singled out for special attention, less powerful figures also benefit. Another miracle recorded by Bede involves a disabled nun who, immediately following the Abbess's death, asked to be carried to where the Abbess's body lays in the church. Speaking to her "as though she were addressing a living person", the nun hauntingly petitioned the Abbess to intercede with Christ on her behalf to release her from her illness (*HE* 4.9: 361-3). The nun's prayers were answered and twelve days later she died. While Bede tells us that the disabled nun was "of noble family in this world" (*HE* 4.9: 361), others associated with visions of death in the time of plague include those of lesser rank, such as a three year old boy and Edith, one of the nuns responsible for teaching him, and an anonymous nun who was summonsed to God by a vision of a monk or priest (*HE* 4.8: 359). Through such visions, recorded in the *Barking liber*, and based on the nuns' own testimonies, the piety of the *whole* convent is recognized and authorized.

This sequence of visions is framed in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* by what appears implicitly to be a conflict about where the nuns' cemetery at Barking should be placed. As Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has noted, the nuns' cemetery clearly had great significance as the "locus of memory and continuity and an ever-present theatre of events".^x Æthelburh, the

founding Abbess, was uncertain where to locate it, until she received divine guidance that it should be separate from that of the monks (*HE* 4.7: 357-9). However, her successor at Barking, Hildelith, subsequently resolved that due to constraints of space “the bones of the servants and handmaidens of Christ which had been buried there should all be taken up and transferred to the church of the blessed Mother of God and buried there in one place” (*HE* 4.10: 363-5). Hollis contextualizes these events more broadly in terms of theological debates about the validity of double monasteries: significantly Theodore’s *Penitential*, which dates to the mid eighth century, prohibited interring monks and nuns in the same burial ground.^{xi} But it is important to recognize that *both* Æthelburh’s and Hildelith’s decisions receive divine authorization through visions and miracles shared by the community. This is more marked in the case of Æthelburh, because her initial hesitation was answered by a vision of light which Bede recorded was experienced by the nuns of Barking, who at the time were praying by the monks’ graves, and which was also partially witnessed by two of their brethren, an older monk and a younger one, who were inside the oratory (*HE* 4.7: 357-9). It is possible to explain away Bede’s inclusion of the testimony of the two monks in terms of the gendering of authority, clerical male eyewitnesses being perceived to be more reliable than female eyewitnesses, even women religious, and therefore being necessary for the story to be fully convincing.^{xii} But, this is not the whole picture. For, again, what emerges from this miracle is a sense of the shared nature of such revelations. This vision concerning the positioning of the cemetery radiates outwards to all parts of the community like the divine light that identifies the blessed place where the bodies of the deceased nuns are to lie. It connects the living nuns and monks, just as the souls of their companions are chastely united in death.

In summary, it is evident that the lost *liber* of Barking Abbey must have drawn on the testimonies of many of the nuns, as well as monks, and would therefore have been very much

a communal production, aimed at helping secure the future of the foundation as a whole. Hildelith, as the second abbess of Barking, is likely to have commissioned the production of this *liber* to coincide with the translation of her predecessor's body, and we must at least entertain the possibility that she may also have played a role in its writing. Bede does not consider it necessary to acknowledge the authorship of, or to provide any further information about, the *liber* to which he is so indebted. Equally, he makes no mention of Hildelith's engagement with literary culture in his discussion of her in *HE* 4.10, nor does he describe her intellectual prowess.^{xiii} Yet according to later hagiographic accounts, Hildelith had received a monastic education in France and was specifically invited to join Barking in order to set up the school there.^{xiv} While we cannot prove that the lost *liber* of Barking Abbey was written by Hildelith or her nuns, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the nuns were actively engaged in literary activity, in a variety of ways. The primary evidence is of course Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, which reveals that Barking under Hildelith was a centre of literary culture and scholarship.

Aldhelm's *De virginitate*

Aldhelm's prose treatise, *De virginitate*, which was written for, and at the request of, Hildelith and her nuns, eulogizes their letter writing abilities.^{xv} Aldhelm (c. 639-709) was abbot of Malmesbury and bishop of Sherborne.^{xvi} His subsequent poetic version of the treatise on virginity was also written in response to the request of the nuns, although it omits the opening and closing material found in the prose text, which addresses the nuns directly, and in this respect is of less interest.^{xvii} Hollis argues that *De virginitate* "is itself evidence of the high standards of learning at Barking".^{xviii} It is generally accepted that such a complex

and difficult text would only have been accessible to highly educated readers. It is vital therefore to give full consideration here to what Aldhelm's work explicitly reveals about the literacy of the nuns of Barking, and also to what it *implies*. In her extended analysis of *De virginitate* and its context, Hollis also argues that the text offers a vigorous defense of the abbey and its practices, concluding that it "offers an image of the transcendental reality of the Barking double monastery".^{xix} Hollis is, nevertheless, sensitive to tensions and disparities within *De virginitate* in relation to the representation of women, and these become the focus of the critique offered by Lees and Overing in *Double Agents* in their speculative reading of how the text may have been received by its female patrons. Lees and Overing argue that in its representation of the female body, *De virginitate* "annihilates those selves which prompt/produce it, possibly actively request it".^{xx} In re-examining the ways in which sexuality and gender interact within the text, I argue here that while Aldhelm's admiration of the literary and scholarly activity of his Barking patrons (to which his treatises on virginity contributed) was authentic, *De virginitate* does indeed betray a level of anxiety about women's monastic life in England and beyond, which sits uncomfortably with its implied, actual and intended readers: the Barking nuns. In *De virginitate* we find compelling evidence of the extent of the literary activity at Barking, which supports the claim that the community of women may have produced the lost *liber*, and also evidence that the representation of women's monastic life was markedly different in a text commissioned but not written by the nuns themselves.

De virginitate opens with an address to Hildelith, "teacher of the regular discipline and of the monastic way of life" (*De virginitate*, 59) and her fellow nuns Justina, Cuthburg, Osburg, Aldgith, Scholastica, Hidburg, Berngith, Eulalia, and Thecla. Aldhelm describes one of these nuns, Osburg, as being "related (to me) by family bonds of kinship" (*De virginitate*, 59).

Michael Lapidge offers the suggestion that Osburg was Aldhelm's sister.^{xxi} Certainly Aldhelm is keen to establish a close connection between himself and his immediate audience. Aldhelm goes on to describe his pleasure at receiving letters from Barking; correspondence which, unfortunately, has not survived.^{xxii} These letters profoundly impressed him:

Quo stilo non solum ecclesiastica promissorum uotorum foedera, quae fida pollicitatione spondistis, ubertim claruerunt, uerum etiam melliflua diuinarum studia scripturarum sagacissima sermonum serie patuerunt. (*Prosa de uirginitate*, 29-31).

[In your writing not only were the ecclesiastical compacts of (your) sworn vows—which you had pledged with a solemn promise—abundantly clear, but also the mellifluous studies of the Holy Scriptures were manifest in the extremely subtle sequence of your discourse.] (*De uirginitate*, 59).

Aldhelm proceeds to praise the “rich verbal eloquence” of the writing of the Barking nuns that, although coupled with an “innocent expression of sophistication” (*De uirginitate*, 59), is nevertheless seen to emerge from intense scholarly activity. In an extended metaphorical discussion, Aldhelm praises the nuns as spiritual athletes, “who, traversing the special race-courses of the Scriptures, are known to exercise the most subtle industry of their minds and the quality of (their) lively intelligence through assiduous perseverance in reading” (*De uirginitate*, 61). Aldhelm records that the Barking sisters read widely and were interested in histories and chronicles as well as Scripture and Biblical commentaries (*De uirginitate*, 61-2). While some notes of warning have been sounded against making too much of Aldhelm's hyperbolic eulogies about the learning of the Barking nuns, going so far as to suggest that, despite its best efforts, the Abbey was not at the intellectual and theological “monastic avant

garde”,^{xxiii} it is manifest that this was a religious house that prided itself on its intellectual achievements.

Aldhelm not only praises the scholarship of the nuns more generally but he also acknowledges that the nuns themselves wrote verse:

Nunc grammaticorum regulas et ortograforum disciplinas tonis temporibus trutinatas,
pedibus poeticis compactas, per cola et commata hoc est pentimemeren et
eptimemeren diremptas, immo centenis metrorum generibus sequestratim discretas
sagaciter inquirendo. (*Prosa de virginitate*, 61).

[Now, sagaciously inquiring into the rules of the grammarians and the teachings of experts on spelling and the rules of metrics (as they are) measured out into accents (and) times, fitted into poetic feet, broken up into cola and commata—that is into pentimemeres and eptimemeres—and indeed, divided into a hundred kinds of metre.]
(*De virginitate*, 62).

While this poetry has not come down to us,^{xxiv} Aldhelm’s reference to the practicalities of repeated sequences and patterns, line length and punctuation, indicate that it was technically accomplished. There is good reason to believe that he was not overstating the literary activities of Anglo-Saxon nuns in England, given that poetry from their later counterparts on the continent has survived.^{xxv} The poetic achievements of the Barking nuns are echoed closely later in the text, in the discussion of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, tutor of Athanasius (296- 373) “who taught him in a kindly manner the written characters which scribes use, as well as the periods of the grammarians, distinguished separately by cola and

commata” (*De virginitate*, 93). The education of the Barking nuns is thus implicitly likened to that received by one of the Church Fathers, or even vice versa—the education of Athanasius is likened to that of the Barking nuns. Aldhelm uses similar language in his elaborate metaphor of the house built of metrical verse which he uses to describe in anticipation the labor of composing the poetic version of his treatise on virginity (*De virginitate*, 130-131). In this highly elaborate ending to the text, Aldhelm explicitly represents himself not as the patron of the nuns, but as one who benefits from their patronage, and waits anxiously to hear whether or not his text pleases them (*De virginitate*, 131).

For Aldhelm then, the Barking nuns are not only patrons, responsible for commissioning his work for their own edification, but they are his literary equals, a vital part of his own textual community. Yet, while Aldhelm praises the literacy and learning of the Barking nuns, Lees and Overing make the case that his text nevertheless presents a complex and somewhat fraught account of the women’s monastic vocation, showing considerable anxiety over their practices.^{xxvi} Many of the nuns for whom Aldhelm was writing would themselves have been widows rather than virgins, and some may well, following a recognized Anglo-Saxon practice but one with which many churchmen felt uncomfortable, have left their marriages in order to follow a monastic life. Hollis suggests that Hildelith may herself have been previously married,^{xxvii} while the Cuthburg or Cuthburh who is cited in Aldhelm’s opening address can be conjecturally identified as the sister of Ine, king of Wessex in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 718: “And Cuthburh founded the monastery at Wimborne. She has been married to Aldfrith, king of the Northumbrians, and they separated during their lifetime.”^{xxviii} Aldhelm follows the established scheme of praising virginity, chastity, and marriage, while recognizing virginity as the ideal, seeing chastity as the secondary state, and acknowledging the virtue and necessity of marriage and procreation, but placing it at the

bottom of the hierarchy (*De virginitate*, 66). Hollis contends that Aldhelm, no doubt fully cognizant of his audience's background, is careful to define chastity in such a way that it includes not only widows, but also women who have separated from their husbands or are divorced, and to emphasize the importance of spirituality in conceptualizing virginity.^{xxix} However, this argument is not supported fully by the text. While for Aldhelm, the virgin is a spiritual warrior, following St Paul (1 Corinthians 7.34), the married woman is still open to attack as worldly:

Ista collum lunulis et lacertos dextralibus ornari ac gemmiferis digitorum anulis comi
concupiscit ... ista tortis cincinnorum crinibus calamistro crispantibus dilicate
componi et rubro coloris stibio genas ac mandibulas suatim fucare satagit ... istat
stolidis ornamentorum pompis indruticans adinstar illius mulieris aureo calice
prostibuli poculum letiferum propinantis, quam Apocalipsis super bestiam sedisse
describit, composita pulchrum pariter et perniciosum cernentibus spectaculum
praestat.... (*Prosa de virginitate*, 199-203).

[The latter strives that her neck be decorated with necklaces and her arms with
bracelets and that she be adorned with gem-studded rings on her fingers... [She] is
busy being alluringly coiffed with the twisted curls of her ringlets curling round the
tongs, and to paint her cheeks and lips after her own fashion with the scarlet rouge of
artificial color ... parading with the senseless pomp of her ornaments—in the likeness
of that woman offering the lethal drink of the brothel in a golden chalice, whom the
Apocalypse describes as having sat on the beast—when turned out offers a sight
which is equally pleasing and harmful to the spectators.] (*De virginitate*, 73).

These lines in particular are damning in their treatment of married women, and thus, implicitly, of the *former* lives of at least some of the women whom Aldhelm is directly addressing. Certainly there is good reason to think that such a description might have resonated uncomfortably with the Barking nuns. According to Lees and Overing in *Double Agents*:

Recent archaeological evidence supports a description of a comfortable if not luxurious physical environment at Barking in the early days of its foundation; along with combs, jewellery, coins, manicure sets, parts of musical instruments and weaving artefacts, traces of gold thread were discovered indicating the production of luxury clothing.^{xxx}

In his later account of the militant widow Judith, who, with the assistance of her handmaiden, overcame Holofernes, the tyrannous leader of the Assyrians—an account which would seem on the surface to offer a much more positive exemplum to many of the nuns of Barking than the virgin saints which are Aldhelm’s main focus—Aldhelm returns to attack violently and at length the practices of adornment, in this case of both women *and* men, which he once again associates with vanity and wantonness (*De virginitate*, 127-8). In his account of Judith’s conquest, Aldhelm falls back on biblical commonplaces about the dangerously seductive nature of women’s beauty, even likening Judith to “the stubborn and insolent woman in Proverbs who ... in the trappings of a harlot and with alluring luxury, is described as having enticed a foolish young man” (*De virginitate*, 127). Heide Estes’s analysis of Aldhelm’s portrayal of Judith in both the prose and poetic version highlights the ambivalence inherent in his depiction of militant chaste widowhood.^{xxxii}

Aldhelm follows one of his principal sources Ambrose's *De virginibus ad Marcellum* ["On Virgins"] in taking the Virgin Mary as the example of holy female virginity *par excellence*, but he goes on to provide his own lengthy catalogue of saintly women who rejected marriage beginning with Cecilia, Agatha, Lucy, Justina, and Eugenia.^{xxxii} Aldhelm's descriptions of the sufferings of these martyrs could not differ more from Bede's descriptions of the visions surrounding the deaths of Æthelburh and her followers. Lees and Overing, in their consideration of how the Barking nuns would have received this text which they had commissioned, observe that in its treatment of the torturous deaths of these saints, *De virginitate* focuses on the "shame, sexuality and defilement" of women.^{xxxiii} Yet, Aldhelm also differs from Ambrose in that he introduces extensive lists of male virgin saints, who are also subjected to temptations and assaults, including, for example, Paul the Hermit, who had to endure being "prostituted from the first immaturity of adolescence" (*De virginitate*, 87) and Babilas and his pupils, who were, respectively, flayed and flogged, before being beheaded (*De virginitate*, 94-5). The prevailing critical explanation for Aldhelm's innovative inclusion of male saints is that even though the nuns of Barking are cited as having commissioned this work and are clearly the implied audience of the text, because Barking itself was a double monastery, Aldhelm's intended audience must have been made up of men as well as women (*De virginitate*, 57).^{xxxiv} These virgin martyrs, then, are to serve as a model of piety to both the nuns and monks of Barking, whatever their background.

However, the assumption that Aldhelm was writing for a mixed audience may offer too easy an explanation for his inclusion of male as well as female saints. Aldhelm finds himself continually drawn to ornate, if highly conventional, masculine metaphors of athletes or warriors.^{xxxv} Thus, for example, in his opening praise of "the catholic maidservants of Christ" he moves from exalting them as the "adoptive daughters of regenerative grace brought forth

from the fecund womb of ecclesiastical conception” to comparing them with admiration to the Olympian who “smeared with the ointment of (some) slippery liquid, strives dexterously with his partner to work out the strenuous routines of wrestlers, sweating with the sinuous writhings of their flanks in the burning centre of the wrestling-pit” (*De virginitate*, 59-60). The pleasure Aldhelm takes from developing what is an extended and highly homoerotic description of male sporting activities can be contrasted to his damning condemnation of female same-sex sexual desire. In relating the story of the learned cross-dressing saint Eugenia, who disguised herself as a man in order to escape marriage and enter a monastery, he viciously attacks Melanthia “who, forgetful of her own matronly modesty, deceitfully tried to force upon the same Eugenia the false debauchery of the bawdy-house and the wickedness of the polluted brothel” (*De virginitate*, 111). While Aldhelm feels able to celebrate sporting contests between men, physical relations between women are condemned in an angry tirade.

In another, particularly elaborate, metaphor, Aldhelm compares the nuns to bees, which are seen to reproduce “innocent of the lascivious coupling of marriage” (*De virginitate*, 62). Yet while this comparison of the Barking women to worker bees (gendered female) seems entirely conventional, even here there is blurring of gender roles as the bees are also described as carrying “their fertile booty in numerous loadings of their thighs and hips” (*De virginitate*, 61). Once again, Aldhelm struggles to accommodate the masculine authority of the Barking nuns within his text about virginity. More specifically he also struggles to contain the active roles that these nuns play, as is illustrated in the following passage:

Quamdiu enim antiquas inhabitare sedes et exigua fouere tuguria gracillimis contexta
uiminibus seu cauatis consuta codicibus ille, qui inter ceteras magistratus officio

fungitur, decreuerit, nulla ex immense multitudine fugitiuis discursibus et passiuis uolatibus per aethera uagatur. (*Prosa de uirginitate*, 67-9).

[For as long as that bee who among the others discharges the office of magistrate, shall decree that they should inhabit their ancient dwellings and care for their little cottages woven with slender cane or kitted together with hollow stems, no bee from the immense multitude roams through the air on wandering routes or with undirected flights.] (*De uirginitate*, 62-3).^{xxxvi}

In going on to praise those who nevertheless, when required by necessity “set out for foreign parts (in search) of a residence more willingly than they would remain at home in their cells (where they are) used to domestic comforts and content with subservient tranquility” (*De uirginitate*, 62-3), Aldhelm appears to be alluding, in entirely positive terms, to the Anglo-Saxon nuns who travelled to the continent as early missionaries (and whose later writing survives in the correspondence of St Boniface), and who put the care for others above their own ease and security. At the same time, however, by simply evoking the idea of “wandering routes” and “undirected flights”, Aldhelm warns against unjustified and pointless journeys, and implies that the proper place for nuns is an enclosed community under the authority of a suitable spiritual leader.

In *De uirginitate*, Aldhelm expresses disquiet about the conduct of women, especially widows, and in contrast to the lost Barking *liber*, as transmitted by Bede, he does not offer an empowering account of the lived religious practices of the Barking community. Indeed Aldhelm’s portrayals of the spiritual endeavors of Barking nuns repeatedly draw upon masculine metaphors of warfare and sport. Even the missionary activities of English

churchwomen cause him some discomfort. But Aldhelm does present a very positive picture of Barking as a scholarly community. For Aldhelm, in *De virginitate*, the most acceptable relationships for women are either chaste marriages or close spiritual friendships between holy men and women. The latter in particular are based on patronage and scholarship. Aldhelm provides a variety of examples of such bonds, such as the celibate partnerships of Chrysanthus and Daria, and Julian and Basilissa (*De virginitate*, 96-9, and 99-102) or the alliance between St Jerome, Paula and Eustochium (*De virginitate*, 115-16). This last example provides a model for Aldhelm's own relationship with Hildelith and her nuns, and indeed he breaks off his account of them to comment, "I think that these (commentaries) are in no way unknown to the wisdom of your intelligence, racing curiously through the wide-open fields of books" (*De virginitate*, 116). The spiritual friendship is, in a sense, a metaphor for the textual network that centered on Barking under Hildelith's leadership, but which radiated throughout the early English church more generally, that brought together churchmen and women with a shared love of scholarship and books, and that fostered women's active engagement with literary culture.

Hildelith and the Vision of the Monk of Much Wenlock

Further contexts for the Barking Abbey *liber* are the visions of the dead found in other Anglo-Saxon sources, which have not hitherto been explored in the context of discussions of the nuns' engagement with literary culture. While the Barking Abbey *liber* functioned specifically to authorize the entire monastery, rather than simply to testify to the piety of exceptional individuals, it was nevertheless in many ways typical of the sort of revelatory

texts in circulation in the seventh and eighth centuries. Around 716 Boniface wrote to one of his female followers, the Abbess Eadburg:

Rogabas me, soror carissima, ut admirandas visiones de illo redivivo, qui nuper in monasterio Milburge abbatisse, mortuus est et revixit, quae ei ostense sunt, scribendo intimare et transmittere curarem, quamadmodum istas veneranda abbatissa Hildelida referenti didici.

[Thou didst ask me, dear sister, to send you an account as the venerable Abbess Hildelida [Hildelith] gave it to me [Boniface] of the wonderful vision seen by the man who recently, in the convent of Abbess Milburga [Milburg, abbess of Much Wenlock], died and came back to life.]^{xxxvii}

While historians and critics usually assume that Boniface is alluding to an oral account, this albeit fleeting reference may indicate that Hildelith had written down a now lost text of the vision, which she then passed on to others.^{xxxviii} Whether written or oral, Hildelith had certainly provided her own version of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock, which would no doubt have differed from Boniface's, and which may have been based on one given to her by Milburg, abbess of Much Wenlock. Furthermore the reference confirms that Hildelith was part of Boniface's textual community, a community in which knowledge as well as books was exchanged and shared. Unfortunately, Boniface did not record Hildelith's account of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock, preferring the testimony of the visionary himself: "but lately I spoke with this brother myself, when he came back here from abroad; he set forth to me in his own words the marvelous spectacle which he beheld when rapt in spirit beyond the body" (Boniface, *Letters*, 78). Boniface prefers to draw on the first-hand eyewitness account

by the male visionary, rejecting the second-hand account by a woman (albeit an abbess). At the end of the letter, Boniface emphasizes further that the authenticity of his own version can be testified to by male authorities: “At his request I have written these things carefully as he told them to me in the presence of my holy and venerable brethren, who also heard the story; and they can be taken as witnesses to this letter” (Boniface, *Letters*, 89).

Yet, once again, despite Boniface’s rejection of Hildelith’s version of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock, something of the literary interests of the abbess of Barking and her sisters can be derived from the surviving evidence. The narrative is highly conventional.^{xxxix} The anonymous visionary monk of Much Wenlock had fallen seriously ill when suddenly he was released from his suffering body and raised high into the sky by angels. From there the monk could look down at the world encircled with flames, and could see evil spirits and demons arguing over the souls of the dead and the dying. He heard his own sins speak of his ill deeds, and the testimony of a man he had once physically wounded, and then he heard the defense offered by his virtues. He saw the torments of hell and the beauty of paradise, and the heavenly Jerusalem. He was able to see the victory of the angels in winning the soul of a former abbot, and the suffering of a brother whose kinsman did not carry out his dying wishes, but he also gained insight into the secrets of individuals still living, including a girl who had stolen a distaff, and a woman who had yet to make satisfaction for her sins. As testimony to the accuracy of his vision he was also required to confess his own sins to a priest, Begga, and Begga’s own undisclosed act of ascetic piety—the wearing of an iron girdle—was revealed to him. But most strikingly of all, within the vision the “horrible and unspeakable crimes” of Ceolred, king of Mercia, were revealed to the monk of Much Wenlock (Boniface, *Letters*, 87). Although Ceolred was at the time of the vision still alive, the monk saw Ceolred attacked by demons and torn apart “with infinite tortures” (Boniface,

Letters, 87). This vision is itself conventional and echoes in part a revelation recorded about the fate of King Coenred of Mercia (*fl.* 675-709), Ceolred's predecessor.^{x1} Nevertheless, for Boniface, the authority of the vision was demonstrated by the testimony of the priest Begga, to whom the monk of Much Wenlock confessed. However the ultimate proof of the vision lay in the "death of the wicked king, which soon followed" and which "showed beyond doubt that what he had seen concerning him was true" (Boniface, *Letters*, 88-9). Ceolred died in 716, so Boniface's letter describing this vision must have been written immediately after his death, and also that of Abbess Milburg (d.715).

Ceolred's surviving reputation is overwhelmingly a negative one: he is seen as a king who wrongly appropriated monastic resources and cruelly persecuted Æthelbald (d. 757).

According to Felix's *Life of St Guthlac* (730-740), Guthlac not only prophesied to Æthelbald that he would succeed to the throne, but also predicted Ceolred's death:

Cervices inimicorum tuorum subtus calcaneum tuum rediget, et possessiones eorum possidebis, et fugient a facie tua qui te oderunt, et terga eorum videbis, et gladius tuus vincet adversarios tuos Non in praeda nec in rapina regnum tibi dabitur, sed de manu Domini obtinebis; exspecta eum, cuius dies defecerunt, quia manus Domini opprimit illum, cuius spes in maligno posita est, et dies illius velut umbra pertransibunt.

[He will bow down the necks of your enemies beneath your heel and you shall own their possessions; those who hate you shall flee from your face and you shall see their backs; and your sword shall overcome your foes Not as booty nor as spoil shall the kingdom be granted you, but you shall obtain it from the hand of God; wait for

him whose life has been shortened, because the hand of the Lord oppresses him whose hope lies in wickedness, and whose days shall pass away like a shadow.]^{xli}

Boniface clearly shared Guthlac's view of Ceolred. Writing a joint letter in 746-747 to King Æthelbald, Boniface and his fellow bishops expressed concern about rumors of ill-conduct, and reminded Æthelbald of the fate of Ceolred, who along with Osred I of Northumbria (d.716) was guilty of the “two deadliest of sins ... namely lust and adultery with nuns and the destruction of monasteries” and who consequently was “surprised by an early and terrible death... [and] plunged into the depths of hell and the bottom of the abyss” (Boniface, *Letters*, 169). The letter went on to describe in more detail the events surrounding Ceolred's death:

Nam Ceolredum, precessorem venerande celsitudinis tuae, ut testate sunt qui presentes fuerant apud comites suos splendide epulantem malignus spiritus, qui eum ad fiduciam dampnande legis Dei suadendo pellexit, peccantem subito in insaniam mentis convertit, ut sine penitentia et confessione furibundus et amens et cum diabolis sermocinans et Dei sacerdotes abhominans de hac luce sine dubio ad tormenta inferni migravit. (Boniface, *Die Briefe*, vol. 1, 152-3)

[For while Ceolred, your worthy highness' predecessor — as those who were present testify — was feasting splendidly among his nobles, an evil spirit, which by its persuasions had seduced him into the audacious course of breaking the law of God, suddenly turned him in his sin to madness; so that without penitence and confession, insane and distraught, conversing with the devils and cursing the priests of God, he departed from this light assuredly to the torments of hell.] (Boniface, *Letters*, 169).

Boniface would have recognized the value of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock as further propaganda against a king, whom he stridently opposed.

For Patrick Sims-Williams, the visionary content alone is sufficient to explain Hildelith of Barking's interest in the monk of Much Wenlock, but this is over simplistic.^{xlii} The inclusion of the specific revelation concerning Ceolred may explain Boniface's decision to cross-examine the monk himself, and to produce his own account. While Boniface was forthright in his condemnation of Ceolred, it is far from clear that Hildelith, or Milburg as abbess of Much Wenlock, would have shared Boniface's views on the Mercian king. Indeed Milburg clearly benefited from Ceolred's patronage, having received from him a grant of four "manentes" or hides (a unit of land) at Wyre Piddle in Worcestershire.^{xliii} Sims-Williams notes that Much Wenlock is in fact the only monastic house recorded to have been granted a royal charter by Ceolred.^{xliv} It would hardly have been in Milburg's interest, then, to publicize a vision that damned Ceolred. Hildelith's version of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock, oral or written, may well have been rather more circumspect than that of Boniface. Intriguingly, the subsequent Old English translation of Boniface's letter completely omits the attack on Ceolred.^{xlv} Without the condemnation of Ceolred, the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock is not less political than that recorded by Boniface, but its political import is quite different, serving to reinforce rather than potentially to undermine the status of Milburg's monastic house in the fragile early decades after its foundation in around 680.

That such a vision of hell could be used as powerful propaganda is illustrated by another vision of hell, dated to after 757, which exists in the Bonifatian correspondence, in which an anonymous monk sees the suffering of a number of individuals, such as Æthelbald, as well as a number of other men, women, and even anabaptized children:

Et in ipsis poenalibus puteis Cuthburgam simulque Uuialan quondam reginali potestate fruentes demersas. Alteram usque ad ascellas, id est Cuthburg, capite autem humeroque preclaram ceteris membris maculis consparsam, alteriusque, id est Uuialan, supra caput flammam extendere totamque animam simul cremari intuebatur. Ipsos autem poenarum ministros in facies illarum proprias carnales voluptates quasi lutum ferventem inicere. Et horribilem ululatum, quem quasi per totum mundum resonasse miserabiliter vocibus earum audiebat. (Boniface, *Die Briefe*, vol. 1, 248-9).

[And [he saw] Cuthberga [Cuthburg], and Wialan with her, who once enjoyed queenly power, sunk in the pits of torment: the one, namely Cuthberga, [sunk] as far as the armpits, but with her head and shoulders projecting and her other limbs scattered with spots; and he observed a flame rising above the head of the other, namely Wialan, and her whole soul being burned at the same time, and the ministers of punishment flinging each one's carnal pleasures into their faces like boiling mud. And he heard a hideous howling, which seemed to echo pitifully in their voices throughout the whole world.]

Is this the same Cuthburg of Barking Abbey mentioned in the opening of Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, the Cuthburg who was earlier tentatively identified as the future Abbess of Wimborne? If so, then Cuthburg must have made powerful enemies, who set out to destroy her reputation, and the reputations of the houses with which she was associated, through the dissemination of such visions. These sorts of visions of the dead are quite different from those that Bede records that he found in the Barking Abbey *liber*, discussed in the opening section of this article. Whereas the visions of the good deaths of the holy abbess and of her closest supporter serve to validate an entire community, and could be utilized to secure the

future of the abbey, revelations of a female religious leader and her associate suffering in hell were potentially powerful weapons that could be used to undermine the status of an entire religious house. Yet if one aim of circulating the vision of Cuthburg was indeed to undermine the houses at Barking or Wimborne, it does not seem to have succeeded. Bede's appropriation of the Barking *liber* did secure the preservation and dissemination of the visions and the reputation of the Barking nuns.

Conclusion

This exploration of the literary culture of Barking Abbey in the seventh and early eighth centuries illustrates the extent to which women were actively involved in the production of texts. It has shown that in his account of the miracles at Barking Abbey, Bede drew on pre-existing literary accounts of the visions of the nuns, accounts written for and quite plausibly by the nuns themselves which were then circulated more widely, in order to secure the future of their house, and to secure the continuing female governance of the abbey. Hildelith, as successor to the founding abbess, Æthelburh, played a key role in the production of these accounts, collected together in the Barking *liber*, either as commissioner or even as author. The evidence of Aldhelm's *De virginitate* indicates the extent to which the nuns of Barking were fully engaged in literary culture, as producers as well as consumers. The important point to remember is that there exists a real relationship between Aldhelm's implied and his actual audience, that monks and nuns were part of the same intellectual and interpretative communities and literary networks, that books were lent and borrowed, and that the exchange of letters and other forms of literary composition, including poetry, was not one way, but was very much reciprocal. As Hollis explains the "interaction between the male and female *literati* of the early church was not as one-sided as the existence of didactic work written by a

male ecclesiastic for female religious inherently suggests”.^{xlvi} Yet at the same time, Aldhelm’s *De virginitate* illustrates how, even within a text written at their behest, and addressing them directly, the Barking nuns’ religious practices might be critiqued, and potentially undermined. With the example of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock we find a further example of the appropriation of a woman’s narrative, in this case an account, oral or written, provided by Abbess Hildelith herself. Boniface’s version of the vision of the monk of Much Wenlock clearly had its own political agenda, which Hildelith may not have shared, and one not dissimilar to that of those writers who circulated the vision of Cuthburg in order to undermine the women’s houses at Barking or Wimborne. Taken as a whole, the surviving evidence suggests that even in the first decades after the foundation of their abbey, the Barking nuns were highly literate, that they valued and cultivated scholarship and learning, and that they fully understood the political as well as religious power of visionary writings.

ⁱ I am grateful to Robert Ireland for his extremely generous assistance with the Latin texts not available in translation.

ⁱⁱ For an overview and introduction, see Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing “Women and the Origins of English Literature” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700-1500*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (London: Palgrave, 2012), 31-40.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also the forthcoming volume, *Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press).

^{iv} Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992). On Bede’s account of the Barking visions, see also Lisa

M. C. Weston, “*Sanctimoniales cum sanctimoniales*: Particular Friendships and Female Community in Anglo-Saxon England” in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, ed. Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 35-62. The current article also builds on and develops material and arguments outlined in part of the second section of my entry entitled “Authorizing female piety” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker with the assistance of William Green (Oxford U. Press, 2010), 240-59. On Aldhelm’s *De virginitate*, see Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, new edition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 150-64.

^v Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds. and trans., *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). All in-text references to the *Historia ecclesiastica* (hereafter *HE*) are to this edition.

^{vi} Weston, “*Sanctimoniales cum sanctimoniales*,” 41.

^{vii} Weston, “*Sanctimoniales cum sanctimoniales*,” 41.

^{viii} Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge U. Press, 1990); Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (Columbia U. Press, 2002); and Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1990). Stephanie Hollis points out that one model for such “visions of ascending souls” is also the Life of Benedict in Gregory’s *Dialogues: Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 260. See P.W. [sic] trans. and Edmund G. Gardner, ed., *The Dialogues of Saint Gregory* (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1911), Book 2, 51-101. Of

particular interest here is Benedict's vision of his sister's soul rising in the form of a dove to Heaven (96).

^{ix} On the sharing of visions within a community, see Richard Kieckhefer, "Mystical Communities in the Late Medieval West," Annual Medieval Academy Lecture, International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, 10 July 2007. Kieckhefer does not however address visions in early medieval religious communities.

^x Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Dead to the World? Death and the Maiden Revisited in Medieval Women's Convent Culture" in *Guidance for Women in 12th-Century Convents*, trans. Vera Morton with an Interpretative Essay by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 179.

^{xi} Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 111.

^{xii} For an extended analysis, see Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 19-39 and 41-62.

^{xiii} For a discussion of Bede's treatment of Hild of Whitby and Æthelthryth of Barking, see my forthcoming article, "The Earliest Women's Writing? Anglo-Saxon Literary Cultures and Communities".

^{xiv} Carl Horstmann, ed., *Nova Legenda Anglie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), vol.2, 34-5.

^{xv} All in-text references to the Latin text of *De virginitate* are to Scott Gwara, ed., *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis prosa de virginitate* (Turnhout: Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, 2001). All in-text references to the translation are to Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, trans., *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 51-132.

^{xvi} See Michael Lapidge, "The Career of Aldhelm" *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007): 15-69.

^{xvii} Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier, trans., with an appendix by Neil Wright *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985).

^{xviii} Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 79.

^{xix} Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 110.

^{xx} Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 163.

^{xxi} Lapidge, "Career of Aldhelm," 19.

^{xxii} Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: Prose Works*, 194 n.3.

^{xxiii} Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 154; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 79; Benedicta Ward, "'To My Dearest Sister': Bede and the Educated Woman," in *Women, the Book and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 1995), 107.

^{xxiv} Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford U. Press, 2005), 92.

^{xxv} See Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets*, 92-6, esp. 92 n.47.

^{xxvi} Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 150-64. See also Carol Braun Pasternack, "The Sexual Practices of Virginitate and Chastity in Aldhelm's *De virginitate*" in *Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Pasternack and Weston, 93-120. For an excellent account of the impact of the Benedictine reforms on later representations of sexuality and gender, see Catherine Cubitt, "Virginitate and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England," *Gender and History* 12 (2000): 1-32.

^{xxvii} Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 81.

^{xxviii} Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker, trans. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, revised edition 1965), 27; see Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: Prose Works*, 52.

^{xxix} Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 84; see also Lees and Overing, “Women and the Origins of English Literature,” 34.

^{xxx} Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 151; for the opposite view that Aldhelm is not directing his comments specifically at Barking, see Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 99-100.

^{xxxi} Heide Estes, “Feasting with Holofernes: Digesting Judith in Anglo-Saxon England” *Exemplaria* 15 (2003), 327-30.

^{xxxii} Ambrose, “On Virgins” translated in Boniface Ramsay, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), 71-116. For the original text, see Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., *Ambrosius: De virginibus ad Marcellinam sororem suam* in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina* (Paris: Apud Garnier Fratres, 1800-1876), vol. 16, columns 137-232.

^{xxxiii} Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 160.

^{xxxiv} Cf. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 93, who however acknowledges that the text is principally addressed to women.

^{xxxv} See Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 82-97, for an extended discussion of Aldhelm’s metaphor of the spiritual warrior.

^{xxxvi} See also Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 157-8, for a further discussion of the bee metaphor.

^{xxxvii} Michael Tangl, ed., *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, reprinted edition (Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1989), vol.I, 8; and Edward Kylie, trans., *The English Correspondence of Saint Boniface: Being for the Most Part Letters Exchanged between the Apostle of the Germans and his English Friends* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1911), 78. In text references to Boniface’s correspondence in Latin are to Tangl’s edition and,

and in translation to Kylie's text. See Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England 600-800* (Cambridge U. Press, 1990), 243-72.

^{xxxviii} Lees and Overing, "Women and the Origins of English Literature," 35, suggest that Hildelith commissioned the account of the vision of the monk, but I see no reason to assume that she did not write the text herself.

^{xxxix} See: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 243-72, for comparisons with the visions of Drythelm and Fursa and the apocryphal *Vision of St. Paul*. See also Patrick Sims-Williams, "A Recension of Boniface's Letter to Eadburg about the Monk of Much Wenlock's Vision" in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe and Andy Orchard, 2 vols. (U. of Toronto Press, 2005), vol. 1, 197-8.

^{xl} Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 270.

^{xli} Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge U. Press, 1956), 149-151.

^{xlii} Sims-Williams, "Boniface's Letter," 197.

^{xliii} Charter S1800: "Ceolred 1," Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England, <http://www.pase.ac.uk>, accessed 13 January 2012.

^{xliv} Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 270.

^{xlv} Sims-Williams, "Boniface's Letter," 200-201.

^{xlvi} Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 79.