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The Royal Nunneries in the Landscape of Anglo-Saxon Wessex 871–1066

Dissertation submitted for the M.A.in Medieval Studies by
Judith Beton 2005762

August 2024

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Front cover – Tenth- or eleventh- century rood in St. Anne's Chapel, Romsey Abbey.
Photo by Judith Beton

Abstract

This dissertation explores the Anglo-Saxon landscape of the six royal nunneries of Wessex, from the reign of King Alfred to the Norman Conquest. By examining the nunneries within their changing physical, political and ecclesiastical settings, it attempts to assess the extent to which the nunneries were inward-looking, insular communities and the extent to which they were products of ideas and events beyond their walls. It asks whether the nunneries were themselves influential in shaping their Anglo-Saxon landscapes.

Chapter 1 examines the physical landscape of the nunneries, looking at their estates, patterns of endowment and how patronage changed through the period. It also assesses their material, economic and cultural wealth, with particular reference to evidence given in Domesday Book, enabling comparison of the wealth held by the nunneries.

The political landscape is explored in Chapter 2. Here the importance of the nunneries as a royal status symbol is explored, as well as the importance of kin group allegiances to particular nunneries. An assessment is made of the role of the nunneries in the disputed succession following King Edgar's death, and of the political impact of the saints' cults which were nurtured within some of the houses, particularly the cults of Saints Edward the Martyr and Edith.

Chapter 3 focuses on ecclesiastical reform within the period and looks for evidence of its impact on the nunneries. It explores whether any changes are discernible following the production of the *Regularis Concordia*, making the nunneries more recognisably 'Benedictine'.

Introduction

By the end of the ninth century the monastic landscape of England, once so vibrant and diverse, had been reduced to very few religious houses, either for men or for women.[1] By 1086, however, Domesday Book records six communities of women, all in the heartlands of Wessex within 45 miles of Winchester, which had emerged as wealthy nunneries patronised by the royal family: Romsey, Winchester Nunnaminster, Shaftesbury, Amesbury, Wilton and Wherwell. Along with the nunnery at Barking, also patronised by the kings of Wessex, the wealth of these nunneries prior to the Conquest was such that at the Dissolution they were still the wealthiest nunneries in England.

The nunnery at Barking has not been included in this study, though it certainly benefitted from royal patronage and became wealthy in the same period. However, it stands apart from the core group of six in several respects: it was not located in central Wessex (indeed not in Wessex at all until the mid-tenth century), there is no record of it having been founded or re-founded by a member of the royal family, and no royal women in the tenth or eleventh centuries are known to have lived in that community.

The greatest challenge to research into the royal nunneries is the dearth of contemporary documentary sources surviving from before the Conquest. Small numbers of charters granting land and privileges exist for all the nunneries except Amesbury, whilst wills begin to appear in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Since most of the charters and wills survived as copies in monastic cartularies, the potential for faking and later editing is a constant challenge. Brief references to the nunneries are made in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the *Liber Vitae* of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey.[2] However, the most detailed and important narrative sources for the internal lives of the nunneries are supplied by hagiographers, all of whom were writing after the Conquest. Goscelin wrote the *vitae* of Edith and Wulfthryth of Wilton (and possibly the *passio* of King Edward the

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[1] Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003) p.85

[2] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans.by Anne Savage, (London: Tiger Books International, 1995); *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester (British Library Stowe 994)* ed. by S. Keynes, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, 26 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1996)

Martyr, connected to Shaftesbury) in the eleventh century, whilst Osbert of Clare wrote the *vita* of Eadburh of Nunnaminster in the twelfth century.[3] The earliest surviving *vitae* of Æthelflaed and Maerwynn of Romsey are even later, dating from the fourteenth century.[4] In the absence of other evidence it is easy to grasp too eagerly at the descriptions of monastic life offered by hagiography, but we need to look at these sources through the filter of hagiographical conventions and to be aware of post-Conquest Benedictine expectations being projected back onto pre-Conquest contexts, telling us more about later Benedictine ideals than about Anglo-Saxon standards. However, there is evidence that the authors had earlier written sources available to them: Goscelin refers to oral testimony from nuns who remembered Edith, as well as having access to written sources at Wilton.[5] A case has also been made that an earlier vita of Eadburh was available to Osbert.[6] The *Gesta* of William of Malmesbury (1095–1143) are important sources, but again questions arise regarding the reliability of William's sources.[7]

The historiography of Anglo-Saxon female religious has shifted in emphasis through time. Until recently the focus has been almost exclusively on male communities, with little interest shown in nunneries; even as late as 1950, when Dom David Knowles wrote 'the Monastic Order in England' the contribution of women religious was barely acknowledged.[8] Through the twentieth century historians such as Stafford, Halpin, Crick and Hollis have focused on gender, perhaps in a feminist effort to redress the balance, often centred on the religious opportunities open to women in earlier Anglo-Saxon

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[3] Goscelin de St.Bertin, 'The *Vita* of Edith and the *Translatio* of Edith' in *Writing the Wilton Women*, ed. by S. Hollis, W.R. Barnes, R. Hayward, K. Loncar and M. Wright (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004) pp.23-62; S. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988), pp.259-308

[4] H. G. D. Liveing, *Records of Romsey Abbey. An Account of the Benedictine House of Nuns with Notes on the Parish Church and Town (AD 907 -1558)* (Winchester: Warren & Son, 1906) pp.19-26

[5] Goscelin de St.Bertin, 'The *Vita* of Edith' in *Writing the Wilton Women*, pp.23-62

[6] S. J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.23

[7] William Of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by R.Mynors, R.Thomson and M. Winterbottom, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1998); William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, trans. David Preest, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002)

[8] Dom David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England – From the times of St.Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council 943 – 1216*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950)

double monasteries rather than the later royal nunneries.[9] More recently Sarah Foote has sought to recognise the diverse manners in which Anglo-Saxon women could live a religious life outside the confines of nunneries, attempting to explain the apparent disappearance from the record of nuns during the ninth century.[10]

However, it was not until 2003 when Barbara Yorke published her work *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* that the late Anglo-Saxon royal nunneries received in-depth, exclusive attention.[11] Yorke's research was broad and wide-reaching, focusing particularly on the relationships between the nunneries and the royal houses that supported them, and 'the consequences of that relationship for their operation as religious communities.'[12]

Rather than focusing on their relationship with the royal family, this study explores the connectedness of the royal nunneries to the physical, political and ecclesiastical landscapes in which they were embedded. It asks whether they existed in isolation from the world beyond their walls, or whether they were moulded and shaped by contemporary issues. Were they themselves in any way catalysts of change in the wider landscape, influencing the direction of landholding, politics and reform?

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[9] P. Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh- Century England', *Past and Present,* 163 (1999) 3-35; P. Halpin, 'Women Religious in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *Haskins Society Journal,* 6 (1994) 97 – 110; J. Crick, 'The wealth, patronage and connections of women's houses in late Anglo-Saxon England', Revue Benedictine, 109(1999), 154-85; S.J. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer,1992);
[10] Sarah Foote, *Veiled Women I*, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2000)
[11] Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, (London: Continuum, 2003)
[12] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.9

Chapter 1: The Physical landscape

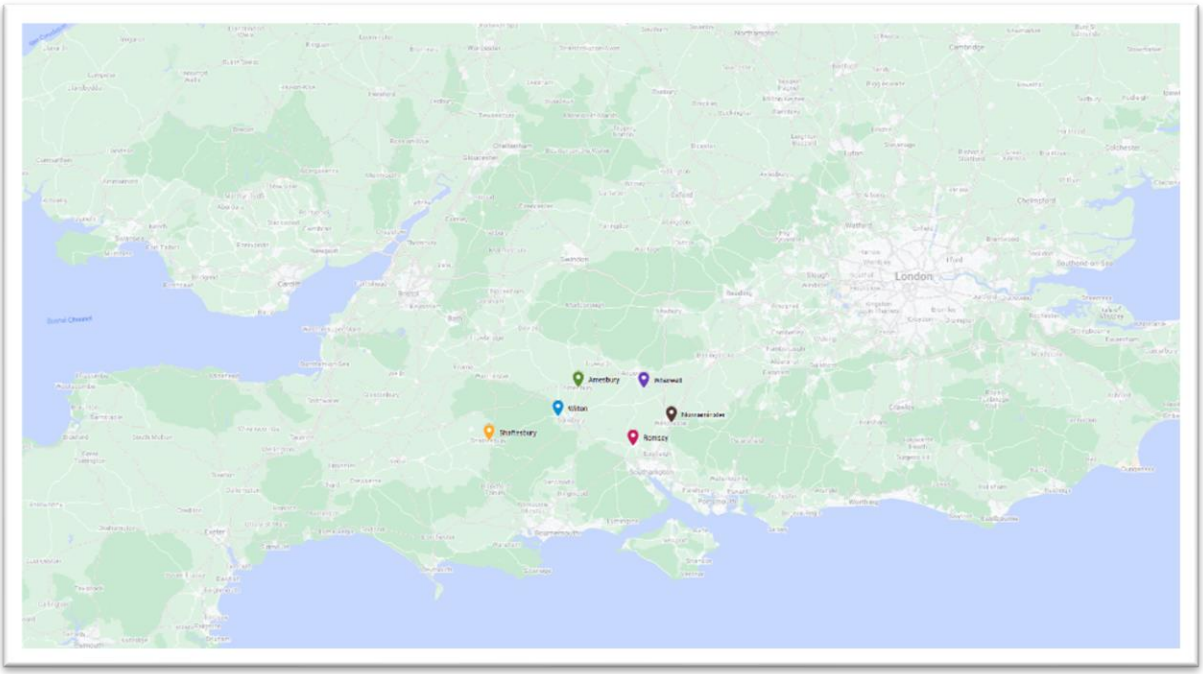

Figure 1: Locations of the Royal Nunneries

The six royal nunneries occupied a very small area in the heartland of the Anglo-Saxon royal dynasty (Figure 1). At only 45 miles away, Shaftesbury was the furthest from the seat of power in Winchester, whilst each nunnery was no more than 17 miles from another. Even before the foundation of nunneries at Amesbury and Wherwell that distance was never more than 27 miles. This proximity enabled the royal family to keep its kinswomen nearby and ensure that valuable land and assets, so close to the seat of royal power, could not fall into the hands of rival kin groups. Wilton, Nunnaminster and Shaftesbury were all founded within burhs, ensuring protection in the event of Danish incursions, whilst Romsey, Wherwell and Amesbury were sited on low-lying land close to major rivers, typical of the sites of earlier minsters. Amesbury was also the site of a royal vill.

By the second half of the tenth century a radical redistribution of landed estates had occurred, largely as a result of royal patronage, which saw almost a quarter of the

kingdom acquired by Benedictine abbeys.[13] Some of this land had previously been acquired by Alfred and his successors as they reconquered parts of the country from Danish control; there may also have been a deliberate policy to redirect estates from the control of rival kinship groups. The patronage of the royal nunneries during this period is part of this wider picture of royal endowment of religious communities as a response to ecclesiastical reform and the desire to revive standards of monastic liturgy and learning. Since the wealth, influence and ultimately the longevity of any religious community was directly related to its possession of land, supplying its needs and providing income, patronage in the form of land was hugely important.[14]

Evidence from Pre-Conquest Sources

Land Ownership

Evidence for the pre-Conquest landholdings of the royal nunneries is strikingly inadequate. Shaftesbury is the only nunnery to have an extant foundation charter, the authenticity of which is dubious. Only thirty-two pre-Conquest charters and wills exist, recording endowments of land or wealth to the nunneries, and most are found in cartularies. Unfortunately all the surviving cartularies from Anglo Saxon Wessex were produced after the Conquest, some as late as the fifteenth century, so questions of authenticity are always present.[15] Finberg suggests that, particularly in Winchester, documents may have been destroyed by Danish invaders and it is also possible that written charters were not always part of the process by which land changed ownership in this period.[16] The most consistently endowed nunneries appear from diplomas to be Wilton and Shaftesbury, which were also the longest established houses. Since they are also the only two to have surviving cartularies, there is an inevitable skewing of the evidence in favour of these two, which were at Domesday the wealthiest of the group.

Male religious communities in Wessex received endowments from nobles as well as from kings, therefore it would seem likely that the same was true of the nunneries. However,

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[13] M. A. Meyer, 'Patronage of the West Saxon Royal Nunneries', *Revue Bénédictine,* 91 (1981) p.344
[14] Ibid, p.334
[15] H.P.R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of Wessex,* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1964) p.13
[16] Ibid, p.13

there are very few records of any gifts of land to the nunneries, by will or charter, from anyone other than the royal family.[17] The only possible exception to this is the will of Wynflaed from the late tenth or early eleventh century, bequeathing land and assets to Wilton and Shaftesbury.[18] However, even this is uncertain as Wynflaed may have been King Edgar's grandmother.[19] Noble families probably contributed to the wealth of the nunneries in other ways, such as providing dowries for family members entering a community, but this is not visible from surviving charters. The royal family's monopoly of land donation to the nunneries gives the impression of tight control by the royal dynasty in a way which is not true of male religious communities.

Charters from Shaftesbury and Wilton name lay and ecclesiastical landholders as previous owners of land which was later owned by those communities, but no record exists of this land being given directly to the nunneries by those landholders.[20] Julia Crick uses the example of land in Dorset to illustrate the process by which this may have happened. In 946 King Eadred gave five hides at Didlington to Wulfric, *minister*. Ten years later King Eadwig appears to have presented the same estate to his thegn, Alfred, whilst Domesday Book records six hides in Didlington as being in the possession of Wilton in the reign of Edward the Confessor.[21] It would appear likely from this and similar examples that some royal estates were only temporarily alienable from royal possession and were being used to reward loyal allies, reverting to royal possession at a later date. Though the land may have passed through the possession of a thegn, it was the king who eventually made the gift to the nunnery.

One reason for this exclusively royal patronage, suggested by Meyer, may have been the growing disparity between the wealth of the provincial nobility and the ruling dynasty through the tenth and eleventh centuries, with the result that only the royal family had

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[17] Julia Crick, 'The Wealth, Patronage and Connections of Women's Houses in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in *Revue Bénédictine*, 109 (1999), 154-85.
[18] British Library, *Wynflaed and the Price of Fashion*, <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2018/09/wynflaed-and-the-price-of-fashion.html> [accessed: 16 January 2023]
[19] The Electronic Sawyer, *Will of Wynflaed, S1539*, <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/1539.html#> (accessed: 16th January 2023)
[20] Crick, *Wealth, Patronage and Connections*, p.166
[21] Ibid, p.167

sufficient resources to found, endow and sustain nunneries, nobles being more likely to patronise pre-existing male houses.[22] Attempts were made by aristocrats to found nunneries at Polesworth, Chatteris and Leominster in the late tenth century, and whilst the latter two were mildly successful they had both become royal possessions by the time of the Conquest.[23] The emergence of the royal nunneries in Wessex during the tenth century was therefore tightly connected to the emergence of the kings of Wessex as the dominant political force in England.[24]

The *Vita* of Edith suggests that the members of the royal communities were largely aristocratic women whose families were able to provide the necessary dowry.[25] Since these dowries frequently comprised estates, the landed wealth of the nunnery very much depended on the status of those who took vows in that community. When Osbert relates the good works of Eadburh which qualified her for sainthood, several incidents present her as having direct access to the king and using this for the benefit of the Nunnaminster community. On one occasion the nuns specifically asked Eadburh to use her royal status to relieve the community's financial difficulties; in response, when her father asked Eadburh to sing for him and promised a gift in return, Eadburh requested the estate of Canaga be given to the nunnery, which it still held in Osbert's time.[26] The initiative for the request had come from the nuns, not from Eadburh or the king. Since this story formed part of a *Vita* written long after Eadburh's life it is difficult to disentangle truth from hagiographical convention, but it suggests that Eadburh's father did not grant an estate to Nunnaminster because he recognised its financial difficulties, but because the nuns themselves persuaded Eadburh to ask for it. This suggests that the royal family's support for the nunneries was essentially pragmatic. They did not consider it a royal responsibility to maintain and support all the nunneries at all times – they provided endowments when the residence of a royal family member required it. Nunnaminster's material decline after the death of Eadburh certainly suggests that her presence had been economically advantageous to the community.

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[22] Meyer, 'Patronage', p.337
[23] Ibid, p.337
[24] See Chapter 2 for discussion of political benefits of the nunneries to the royal dynasty.
[25] Meyer, 'Patronage', p.339; *Nova Legenda Angliae*, ed. C. Horstmann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 379 < https://archive.org/details/novalegendaangli01horsuoft/page/378/mode/2up>[accessed April 2024]
[26] Ridyard, *The Royal saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 100-101

Under the lawcode of Alfred women could inherit bookland, but often these estates were to revert to their kin after their death. This seems to have applied not only to secular women but also to women entering nunneries; the dowry would help support the nun whilst she lived but would not necessarily remain in nunnery possession permanently.[27] Such grants of 'loanland' probably explain some of the instances where land moved in and out of nunnery possession, one example being that of an estate granted to Eadburh at Nunnaminster by her half-brother King Athelstan. After Eadburh's death the land returned to royal possession, before being donated again in 956.[28] This rather ad hoc and temporary pattern of land donation suggests that in the years prior to Edgar's monastic reforms there was no long-term strategy by the royal dynasty to develop the nunneries – they were simply a pragmatic solution to a current need.

Even for nuns there was a temptation to alienate land from the nunnery. In his translation of the Rule of St. Benedict for the nunneries, Bishop Æthelwold enjoined the nunneries to ensure their estates remained under corporate control:

> none of them shall presume to give senselessly God's estates either to their kinsmen or to secular magnates, either for money or for flattery. Let them consider that they are set as shepherds on God's behalf, and not as robbers.[29]

It would appear that individual nuns had held and disposed of land, which they may have brought as a dowry, to benefit their kin or in exchange for other benefits. This suggests that rather than being disconnected from kin groups, family remained hugely important to women in the royal nunneries.

From the late tenth century a shift in the pattern of land donation becomes detectable, as endowment to the nunneries declined whilst male communities attracted greater

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[27] Barbara Yorke, 'Sisters Under the Skin? Anglo-Saxon Nuns and Nunneries in southern England', *Reading Medieval Studies*, XV (1989) 95-114 (p.106)
[28] Ibid p.106
[29] *English Historical Documents Vol. 1,* ed & trans. by D. Whitelock, (New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955) p.849

patronage, particularly from noble women.[30] Meyer points out the increased power of widows in the tenth century to dispose of their own personal wealth; as a result of this there is an increased number of charters and wills, made by both royal and noble women, donating estates and material wealth to monastic communities.[31] However, the vast majority were to benefit male foundations, not female. Even nuns themselves were donating their privately held land to male foundations – William of Malmesbury claims a nun of Wilton, Ælfgyth, donated land in Somerset not to Wilton but to Glastonbury.[32] Halpin identifies several probable reasons for this shift in focus. Through the tenth and eleventh centuries a lay donor would expect spiritual benefits in return for an endowment, of which the celebration of mass was especially desirable. Following the period of monastic reform, when ordination of monks to the priesthood became the norm, the mass could be offered by monks but not by nuns, making gifts to male communities more beneficial to donors.[33] Burial at a nunnery also had narrower appeal – both men and women were buried at male foundations, but generally only women at nunneries.[34] It is also possible that the very localised nature of the royal nunneries and their rather proprietorial connections with the royal family reduced their relevance and appeal to noble women from a wider geographical area.

The eleventh century also saw an increase in patronage of local churches. Many private, manorial churches were being founded by nobles, which to some extent replaced the old minsters as the focus of the local community. Gifts to a local church would have given the donor some control over the church which they would not have gained from a minster.[35] Both male and female foundations may have seen a reduction in endowments as a result of this trend.

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[30] L. Halpin, 'Women Religious in late Anglo-Saxon England', *Haskins Society Journal,* 6 (1994) 97-110 (p.99)
[31] Meyer, 'Women and the Tenth Century English Monastic Reform', *Revue Bénédictine,* 87 (1977) 34-61 (p.44)
[32] Halpin, 'Women Religious' p.104
[33] Ibid, pp.99-100
[34] Ibid, p.104
[35] Ibid, p.101

Given the ephemeral nature of early endowment of the nunneries, and the shift towards patronage of male communities and local churches in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, it seems remarkable that at the Conquest the nunneries were still wealthy, stable communities. In terms of security of land tenure, the pivotal point may well have been the monastic reforms of Edgar's reign, 959 – 975, discussed in Chapter 3. Nowhere in St. Benedict's Rule or the *Concordia Regularis* is any direct mention made of securing corporate land ownership, but the evidence suggests this was an aspiration of the reformers – in his translation of the Rule for the nunneries, Æthelwold's plea that nuns should ensure their estates remained under corporate control indicates that this was of concern to him. Grants to individual nuns in the reigns of kings from Edward the Elder to Eadred seem to have been the norm, whereas after Edgar's reign endowments are more frequently made to the institution, indicating that reform was having a positive impact on security of land tenure.[36]

From the reign of Edgar, we can see attempts by the nunneries to secure permanent possession of lands and assets by royal confirmation. In charters of 968 and 974 Edgar confirmed to the nuns of Wilton their entitlement to estates and mills 'which he formerly granted to Wulfthryth.'[37] In a charter from the 970s he granted to Romsey's nuns 'the right to hold their property freely.'[38] Similarly Æthelred in 1002 confirmed the rights of Amesbury to its estates and Wherwell's entitlement to land and property after the death of his mother, Ælfthryth.'[39] During the period of Danish incursions and reigns of the eleventh century there were occasions when nunnery land was once again alienated from the nunneries by kings, but most were back in nunnery possession by Domesday, suggesting that the rights of nunneries to control their own land had become an accepted norm.

Whilst it seems highly likely that monastic reform was a crucial factor in securing the nunneries' assets in the long term, it is difficult to show how much of the initiative for change came from the nunneries themselves. After all, when Æthelwold, in his translation

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[36] Yorke, 'Sisters Under the Skin?', p.107
[37] Finberg, *The Early Charters of Wessex*, p.96
[38] Ibid, pp.55 & 99
[39] Ibid, p.103 & 61

of The Rule of St. Benedict, made his plea to nuns that they should not give away their land to family members, he was expressing a preference but not enforcing a law. During the reign of Edgar's predecessor, Eadwig, large areas of monastic land had been confiscated from both male and female religious houses and granted to his thegns, and it may well have been the difficulties faced during this time which convinced both abbesses and reformist bishops of the need for protection of assets from rulers. However, the *Regularis Concordia* gave protection of the nunneries to the Queen, presumably including protection of their assets, and therefore nunneries remained vulnerable to acquisitive queens. Ælfthryth certainly appears to have treated Wherwell as private property – Æthelred's charter to Wherwell could only be granted after her death. Pauline Stafford argues that it was the marriage of Æthelred to a new, unknown queen, Emma, in 1002 which prompted the reformers to safeguard Wherwell's land by acquiring the charter which confirmed Wherwell's autonomy over its land.[40] It seems highly likely that at least some of the initiative for this came from the nunneries themselves, even if supported by reformist bishops, marking an important step in the institutional development of nunneries.

Wealth from Saints' Cults

That Shaftesbury and Wilton were the wealthiest of the royal nunneries at Domesday is probably due in large part to the patronage attracted by the cults of their saints: Edward the Martyr at Shaftesbury and Edith at Wilton. Whilst saints Eadburh, Æthelflaed, Maerwynn and Ælfgifu may, by the eleventh century, have been seen as products of a former age, saints Edith and Edward became associated in the royal and aristocratic mind with the danger from the Danes at a time of intense political turmoil. A charter of 1001 records the donation by King Æthelred of a *coenobium*, together with substantial estates, at Bradford-on-Avon. It makes clear that the gift was 'in honour of the martyr Edward and for the salvation of the whole lineage, both past and future.'[41] The anonymous *Vita Ædwardi regis* claims that Edith, the wife of Edward the Confessor, built a new stone

[40] Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen', p.27
[41] The Electronic Sawyer, *S899*,< https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/899.html> [accessed 12 June 2023]; S.E. Kelly, *The Charters of Shaftesbury Abbey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

church at Wilton 'in honour of Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin and St. Edith.'[42] These royal cults may also have attracted patronage from a broader social base than previous endowments. Through the cults, also discussed in Chapter 2, Wilton and Shaftesbury were able to turn political events into economic advantage in a way which shows that their survival depended on their connection and reaction to events beyond their walls.

Cultural Wealth

Despite few material remains surviving from the nunneries, there is sufficient evidence to show that the prestige and wealth of the nunneries made them vibrant cultural centres. Two high quality roods in Romsey Abbey, dating to the late tenth or early eleventh century, appear to have been removed from the Anglo-Saxon nunnery building and incorporated into the twelfth-century rebuilding. Figure 2 shows the small rood, a delicate, full-group composition. Figure 3 shows the large external figure, carved on three slabs, which may have originally been part of a group scene. Both incorporate iconography influenced by Winchester and Carolingian art.[43] The angels at Bradford-on-Avon (Figure 4) are likely to date from the early eleventh century, and therefore may have been carved when the remains of Edward the Martyr were moved there in 1001.[44] Though no longer surviving, from Goscelin's *Vita* of Edith we hear of Edith's tutor, Benno of Trier, executing a cycle of paintings on the walls of a chapel.[45]

[42] Ridyard, *The Royal Saints*, p.154
[43] Elizabeth Coatsworth, 'Late Pre-Conquest Sculptures with the Crucifixion South of the Humber', in *Bishop Æthelwold: His Career and Influence*, ed. by Barbara Yorke (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988), pp.161-193 (p.167)
[44] Ibid, p.177
[45] Goscelin, 'Life of Edith' in *Writing the Wilton Women*, p.53

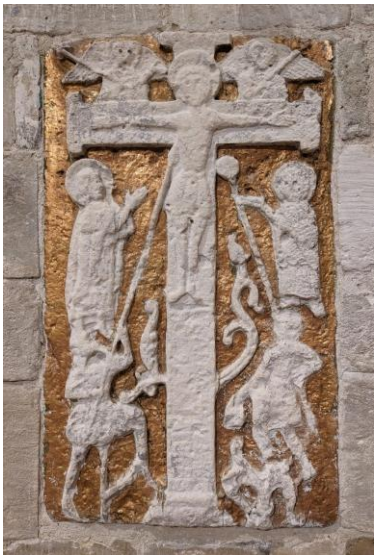

Figure 2 – Small rood, Romsey Abbey

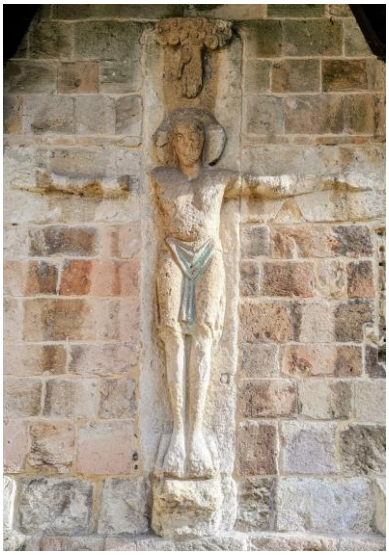

Figure 3 – Large rood, Romsey Abbey

Figure 4 – Angel sculpture, St. Laurence's Church, Bradford-on-Avon

Evidence from Domesday Book

From Domesday we can attain a fuller picture of the extent of nunnery landholding at the time of the Conquest, if not the processes by which land was acquired.[46] Evidence suggests that over twenty nunneries were founded in the late Anglo-Saxon period, but only nine survived the Danish and Norman invasions of the eleventh century with sufficient land to be recorded in Domesday Book.[47] Dom David Knowles' calculation from Domesday of the gross income of each English religious community T.R.E. reveals the impressive wealth of the nunneries. The incomes of Wilton and Shaftesbury even exceeded that of Malmesbury and meant they were expected to supply a quota of knights. The figures below show the gross income of all the English nunneries in existence at the time of the Conquest.

[46] *Domesday Book, a Complete Translation,* ed. by A. Williams and G.H. Martin, (London: Penguin, 1992)
[47] Meyer, 'Patronage of the West Saxon Royal Nunneries', p.336

Gross income of English nunneries recorded in Domesday, as calculated by David Knowles.[48]

Wilton	£246 15s
Shaftesbury	£234 5s
Barking	£162 19s 8d
Romsey	£136 8s
Leominster	£66 5s
Winchester	£65
Amesbury	£54 15s
Wherwell	£52 4s
Chatteris	£20 10s 4d

Here we see clear inequalities between the incomes of the royal nunneries. By 1086 Wilton and Shaftesbury were markedly wealthier than the other houses and the income of Barking had risen above that of the other remaining royal nunneries. Romsey could be counted amongst this elite group of four, but there existed a pronounced gap between their incomes and those of the remaining nunneries; Wherwell, Amesbury and the Nunnaminster had all fallen significantly behind in terms of income, with incomes similar to that of the non-royal foundation at Leominster. Since Amesbury and Wherwell were later foundations they may not have gained reputations or accumulated endowments of land to equal those of the older, longer-established nunneries. Neither had they developed saints' cults which would have attracted donations. To Nunnaminster financial struggles were nothing new – it had been struggling financially when it was refounded in the time of King Edgar, possibly as a result of competition for endowment from the male communities it existed alongside. It is also possible that, owing to its site in a densely populated urban environment, Nunnaminster could not claim manorial taxes from the local community.

[48] Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England,* pp.702-703

Nunnery estates as recorded in Domesday Book

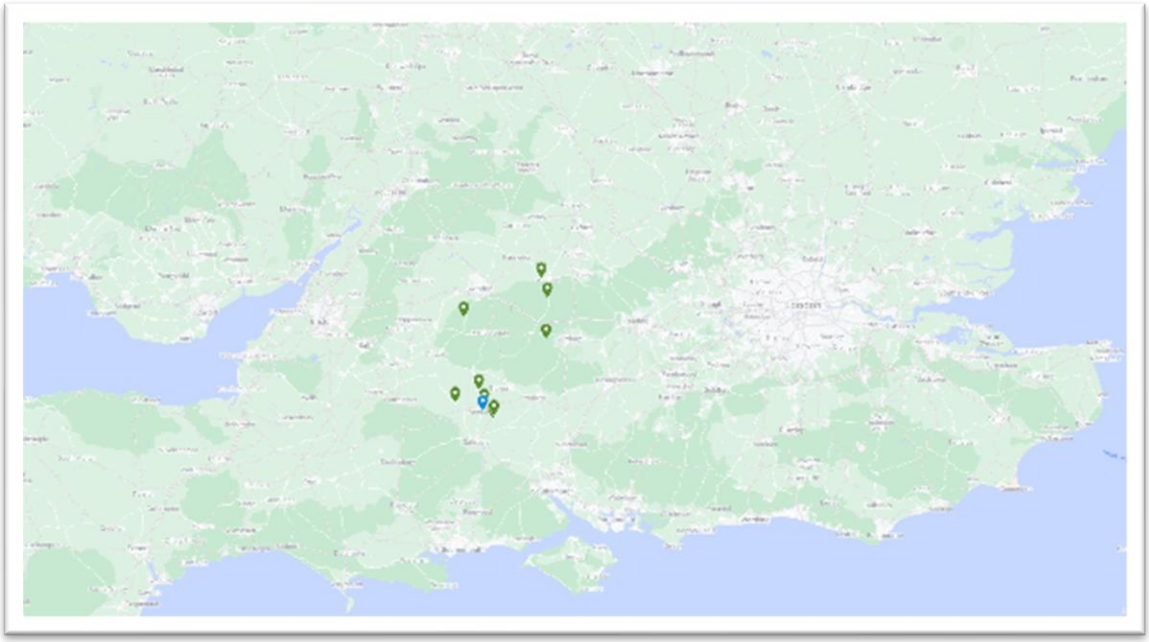

Figure 5: Amesbury Domesday landholdings

Figure 6: Nunnaminster Domesday landholdings

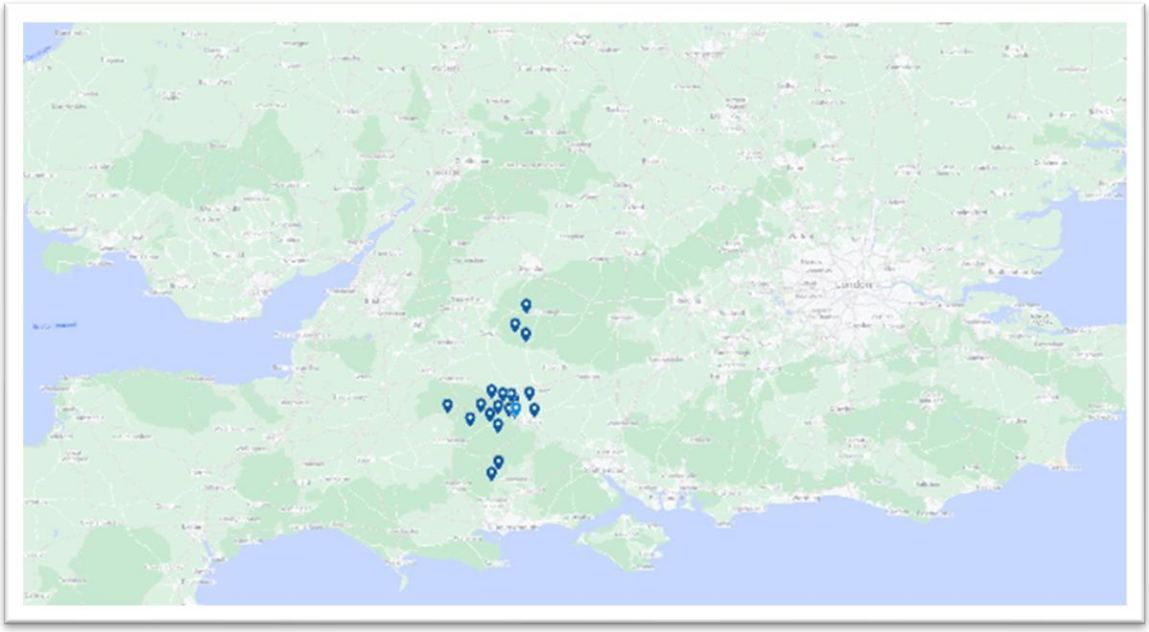

Figure 7: Wilton Domesday landholdings

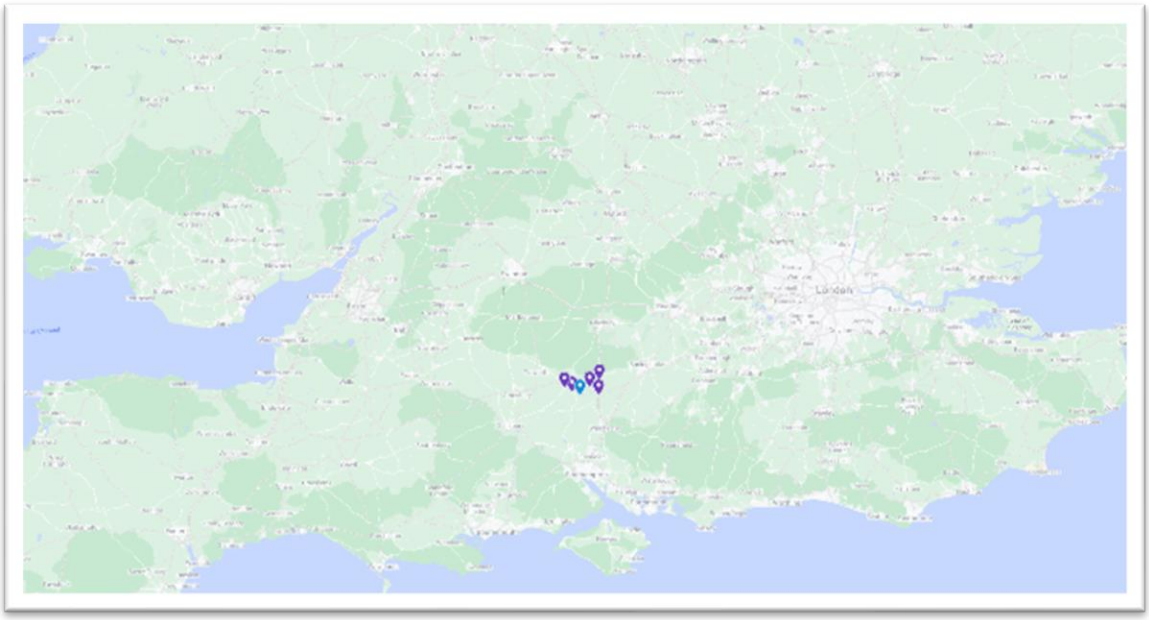

Figure 8: Wherwell Domesday landholdings

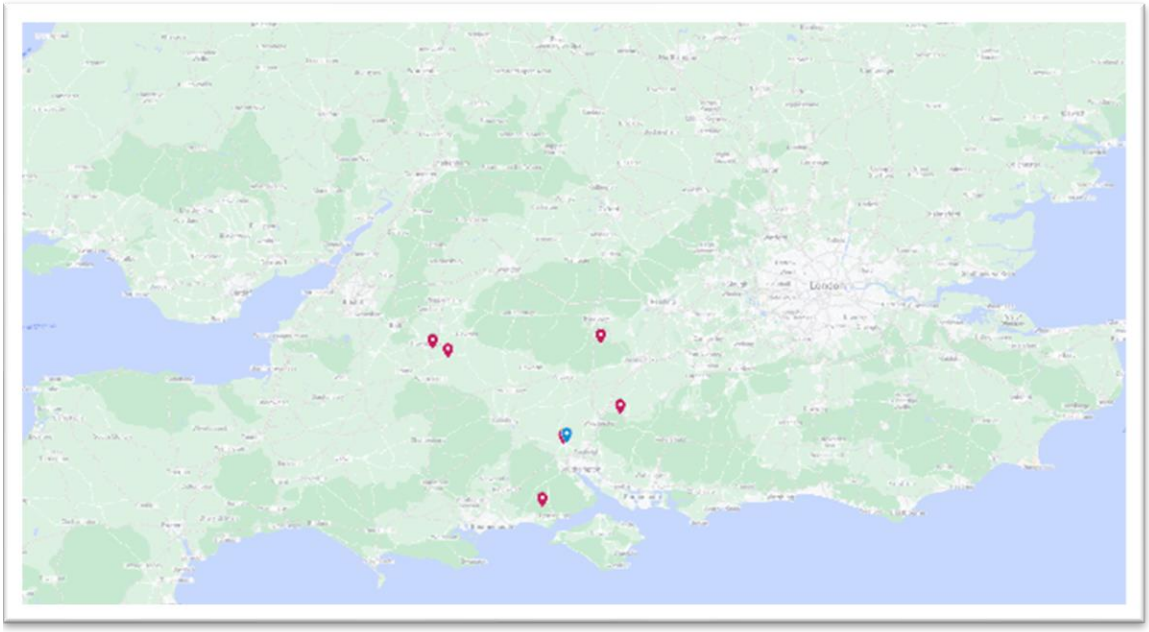

Figure 9: Romsey Domesday landholdings

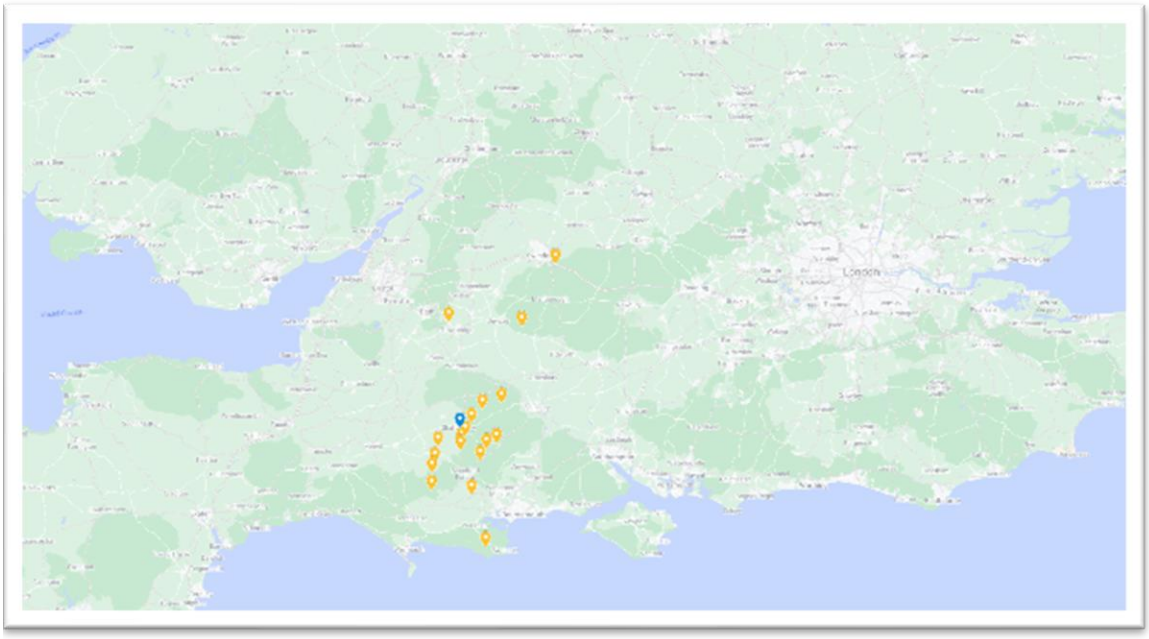

Figure 10: Shaftesbury Domesday landholdings

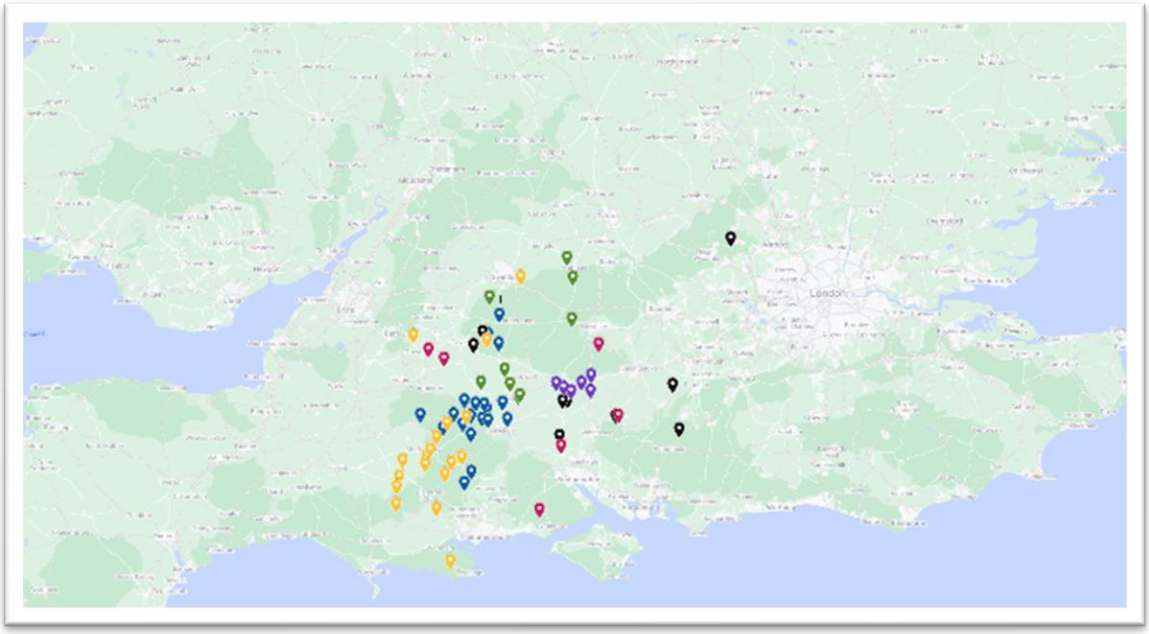

Figure 11: All Royal Nunnery Domesday Landholdings

Figures 5-11 show the location of each estate recorded in Domesday as being held by the nunneries. Again, the inequality between the nunneries is striking. Shaftesbury and Wilton hold 19 and 20 estates respectively, whereas Amesbury and Nunnaminster hold 9 and Romsey and Wherwell only 6. The low number of estates held by Romsey is surprising, but Domesday records that whilst between T.R.E. and 1086 the number of hides held by the nunnery had fallen from 14 to 10, its wealth had increased. Phoebe Berrow suggests that the abbey had traded land for tax exemptions.[49] It would be interesting to analyse how many of the estates held by Wilton and Shaftesbury were acquired during the eleventh century, as this may show the extent to which the cults of the royal saints affected the wealth of these communities.

These inequalities in wealth demonstrate that each nunnery was affected differently by a complex range of external factors – the status of their inhabitants, the political situation in Wessex, trends in patronage, when they were founded, the extent to which they were able to take corporate control of land. It seems likely that some nunneries were in a better position than others to exploit these factors to their own advantage, particularly in the case of the cults of royal saints.

[49] Phoebe Berrow, *When the Nuns Ruled Romsey*, (Romsey: LTVAS Group, 1978) p.6

The dispersed nature of the landholdings implies a piecemeal accumulation of land over time rather than planned patterns of landholding. Shaftesbury's landholdings in Liddington, for example, were almost 60 miles away. The systems of administration required to make optimum use of such scattered resources must have been complex and have involved interaction with an extensive network of lay workers. There are, however, marked differences between the nunneries in terms of the distribution of their land – estates owned by Wilton and Shaftesbury were widely dispersed but still clearly centred on the community geographically, whereas those of Romsey and Nunnaminster were scattered with no clear nucleus around the nunnery responsible for them. It is possible that Shaftesbury and Wilton, as older communities, became closely associated with particular local landowning kin groups which donated land as dowries when their female members entered the nunnery. Dowries may also explain how more distant manors were acquired; Romsey's manor at Sidmonton, over 30 miles away from Romsey, is one such example. The fifteenth-century *Vita Æthelflaeda* records that Æthelflaeda's father, Æthelwold, gave Sidmonton 'to the church of Romsey,' presumably as a dowry to provide for his daughter.[50] Romsey and Nunnaminster, as slightly later foundations, may have faced more competition for land in the Winchester diocese due to competition with pre-existing male communities. The very marked concentration of Wherwell's estates around the nunnery site is interesting. We know that Ælfthryth used both her own family estates and land which had previously been owned by New Minster when founding Amesbury and Wherwell and there are suggestions from the Wherwell Cartulary that her brother may have previously established a religious house at Wherwell.[51] Perhaps this tight concentration of land around Wherwell suggests that most of the land held by that community was given at the time of foundation from Ælfthryth's own family estates, rather than being donated over long periods of time by a wider group of patrons.

Between the early eleventh century and the Conquest there is a virtual silence in the nunneries' documentary record of around fifty years, coinciding with the Danish invasions under Svein Forkbeard and his son Cnut. However, from Domesday Meyer

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[50] Liveing, *Records of Romsey Abbey*, p.18
[51] Coldicott, *Hampshire Nunneries*, (Chichester: Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 1989) p.18

identified a large number of estates which had been lost to the nunneries during this period.[52] It may be a symptom of political upheaval that most of these were actually confiscated by Anglo-Saxon nobles, particularly by Earl Godwin, rather than by Danes. Domesday identifies many such estates, for example that at Ugford in Wiltshire, stating that 'Earl Godwine took away this land from [the church of] ST MARY of Wilton, and then Eadnoth recovered it.'[53] The wealth of the nunneries was evidently affected by the political instability of this period, when less prosperous nunneries disappeared from record completely. A concern of tenth- century monastic reform (see Chapter 3) had been to protect religious houses from land confiscation by lay nobles, but political instability had clearly made the nunneries vulnerable once more.

However, most royal nunnery estates retained or increased their value between Edward the Confessor's reign and 1086, and the majority of estates confiscated by the Danes, Anglo Saxon nobles and Normans were restored to the nunneries by King William. Estates which had been confiscated by Harold Godwinson were often returned, the language used in Domesday Book implying a deliberate policy by William to denigrate his Anglo-Saxon predecessor in the eyes of the church and present himself as the true spiritual successor of Edward the Confessor. This can be seen in the entry for Cheselbourne, previously owned by Shaftesbury. The entry records:

> Earl Harold had taken this manor and STOUR from ST. MARY TRE, but King William caused her to be reseised of them because a writ with the seal of King Edward was found in the church itself ordering that they should be returned to the church with MELCOMBE, which the king still holds. [54]

Nunnery land had become a political tool with which to build support; it would appear that approval from the nunneries, and the church in general, was more important to

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[52] Meyer, 'Patronage of the West Saxon Royal Nunneries', p.355
[53] *Domesday Book*, p.189; Meyer, 'Patronage', p.355
[54] *Domesday Book*, p.209

William than retention of all confiscated lands. There is certainly no evidence that the landed wealth of the nunneries was substantially diminished by the Conquest.

Conclusion

The royal nunneries were undoubtedly wealthy and, largely due to pre-Conquest patronage, remained the richest female houses until the Dissolution. However, it is important to place them in the context of religious communities generally, male and female. Though their ownership of land would have had a profound impact on the local people living and working on nunnery estates, in national terms they occupied a far smaller geographical area than monasteries. By Domesday Wilton's income was less than one-third of that of the wealthiest male community at Glastonbury. The monastery redeveloped by Æthelwold at Abingdon received large numbers of estates from Edgar in the tenth century and had almost twice the income of Wilton by 1086. The combined incomes of the male communities in Winchester, the Old and New Minsters, are over fifteen times greater than that of the Nunnaminster.

Despite the inadequacies of the sources, it is clear that the wealth of the nunneries was dependent on a wide range of factors, not on royal patronage alone. The ad hoc, temporary nature of royal patronage and the huge inequality in wealth between nunneries all suggest that there was no planned strategy for their long-term development. They were not viewed as a homogeneous federation which the royal family had a duty to maintain – endowments were made as a pragmatic response to a current need, and as such patronage was dependent upon whether there was a family member in residence or a former consort to be rehoused, when prayers were needed in times of turmoil or when a royal saint's cult required political or spiritual nurture. Whilst closely bound up with the political fortunes of the royal family, nunneries were not immune from wider trends in patterns of endowment. Monastic reform encouraged more secure institutional control over land, but ultimately the survival of each nunnery was not guaranteed either by royal patronage or the Church. Inequalities in the wealth of the nunneries suggest that the economic circumstances of each community were unique, and some were in a better position to

exploit their advantages than others. Development of saints' cults appear to be one area in which nunneries could, to some extent, direct their own financial future.

Chapter 2: The Political Landscape

The foundation of the royal nunneries in Wessex was an inherently political statement, asserting and enhancing the power and status of the ruling house. This was not a new concept – patronage of royal nunneries was an established part of Ottonian, Carolingian and Lombardic court culture.[55] Alfred visited the nunnery of San Salvatore in Brescia in the 850s and so would certainly have been aware of this.[56] It would seem to have become an established model of royal behaviour throughout Christian Europe by the time of Alfred. His wife Ealhswith came from Mercia, where royal patronage of nunneries had been a well-established practice, and it may be that some of the initiative for founding new nunneries in Wessex originated from her familiarity with the Mercian nunneries. As the number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms diminished in the years leading up to the eleventh century, so did the number of royal nunneries and their geographical spread. Generally, when a new ruling house took power it established new nunneries rather than supporting those of its rivals, and these new houses were founded in the familial heartlands of the new dynasty.

Royal nunneries were the family minsters of the royal houses in the sense that women did not enter them to withdraw from their royal kin group but to support it by prayer from within.[57] The late Anglo-Saxon nunneries of Wessex were therefore always intended to have a close familial connection to the royal dynasty which meant that separation from politics of the era was never likely. There were, however, three other factors which drew the nunneries more deeply into political involvement and which will be explored in this chapter. These were the connections of kin groups to particular nunneries, the nurturing of royal saints' cults in the nunneries and the ambiguities of Anglo-Saxon marriage law. It was the intertwining of these three factors which drew the nunneries into the succession dispute following the death of King Edgar in 975.

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[55] Foot, *Veiled Women I*, p.105
[56] Ibid, p.80
[57] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.106-112

Royal and Noble Kin Groups

Julia Crick argues that as the *Eigenklöster* of the royal house, the nunneries were 'intensely private and exclusive' and describes them as 'inward-looking establishments' with 'little openness to the outside.'[58] She claims that they attracted royal patronage, royal abbesses and royal burials, and that there is very little evidence of wider nobility being involved in them. However, we know of surprisingly few royal abbesses and there is evidence to show that noble as well as royal families of Wessex in the tenth and eleventh centuries maintained familial connections with particular nunneries.[59] Kin groups loyalties were central to the framework of Anglo-Saxon society, and the nunneries housed both royal and noble women who retained family ties with their kin. Indeed, when Æthelwold, in his translation of the Rule, enjoined nuns not to give away nunnery land to kin he was acknowledging that family loyalties were maintained after a woman entered a nunnery.[60]

Evidence for family connections to specific nunneries is particularly strong from Shaftesbury and Wilton, perhaps due to their longer continuous history. The family of Ælfgifu, the first wife of King Edmund, may have had a connection with Shaftesbury; her mother, Wynflaed, was a major benefactress and may have been a secular vowess there.[61] Ælfgifu herself retired to Shaftesbury and was after her death revered there as a saint. The development of her cult in Shaftesbury may in part have been inspired by recognition of her family's patronage, but it also promoted the status and interests of that family, particularly as an expression of support for the claims of her sons, Eadwig and Edgar, to the throne.[62] As king, Ælfgifu's elder son, Eadwig, granted to the nuns at Shaftesbury a large manor at Donhead in Wiltshire and three estates in Dorset. Meyer believes that his aim was political, hoping to bolster support for himself in that part of Wessex against the

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[58] Crick, 'The Wealth, Patronage and Connections', p.180

[59] Only the daughter of King Alfred (Æthelgifu of Shaftesbury) and the sister of Edward the Confessor (abbess of Wherwell) are known to have been abbesses, unless one also includes Aethelflaed (the step-daughter of Edgar) and Wulfthryth (Edgar's ex-consort).

[60] *English Historical Documents*, ed & trans. D. Whitelock, p.849

[61] *The Electronic Sawyer*, https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/1539.html [accessed 1 July 2024]

[62] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses, p.83*

power of his brother, Edgar, north of the Thames.[63] In the context of family connections with Shaftesbury on his mother's side, his need to make such an expensive gesture to secure support may well be understood, family allegiances drawing the nunnery into the world of political allegiances.

The ealdormanries of Wiltshire may have been involved in the foundation of the nunnery at Wilton and maintained close connections with that house.[64] According to the *Chronicron Vilodunense* the first religious house was founded there by Ealdorman Weohstan.[65] Wulfthryth, the future wife of King Edgar, and her sister Wulfhild were both members of the Wilton community as young women and are likely to have been members of a Wiltshire noble family. The generous recompense granted to both women as a result of King Edgar's dubious behaviour towards them certainly implies the need to pacify a powerful family with close connections to the community at Wilton – Wulfthryth was installed as abbess of Wilton and Wulfhild as abbess of Barking.

The Godwin family also appears to have had a connection with Wilton. Edith, the wife of Edward the Confessor had been educated there and returned for part of her widowhood, joined by Gunnhild, the daughter of Harold Godwinson. In the aftermath of the Conquest, when many women from aristocratic Anglo-Saxon families fled to the royal nunneries for refuge, Wilton seems to have been favoured by members of the Godwin family. It may be through Edith's influence that when the Anglo-Saxon abbess died, probably in 1067, she was succeeded by her sister, Godgifu, rather than by a Norman candidate. Romsey, however, was chosen for sanctuary by Christina, the sister of Edgar Ætheling, the heir of the West Saxon royal line. That Romsey still identified itself with the kin group of the old regime is confirmed by the attempt to develop a cult there to Earl Waltheof, who had been executed in 1086 for rebellion against the Norman regime.[66]

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[63] Meyer, 'Patronage of the West Saxon Royal Nunneries', p.350
[64] Yorke, 'The Women in Edgar's Life', in *Edgar, King of the* English, 959-975, ed. by Donald Scragg, (Martlesham: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p.149
[65] *S.Editha sive Chronicon Vilodunense,* ed. by C. Horstmann (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1883), p.4 <https://archive.org/details/sedithsivechroni00edituoft/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed: 5 July 2024]
[66] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.90

The history of the nunneries was therefore intertwined with that of both royal and aristocratic family groups, not removed and isolated from them. This is important because it could be argued that it was the strength of these family connections with Shaftesbury and Wilton particularly which led them to be involved in the succession disputes following the murder of Edward the Martyr.

Cults of Female Royal Saints

The female saints created and venerated within the royal nunneries perhaps emphasise more than anything else the symbiotic relationship between the nunneries and the royal house of Wessex, and the political implications this could have. Susan Ridyard in her study of Anglo-Saxon royal saints divides them into two traditions: martyred kings and royal ladies.[67] She argues that none of the royal saints naturally arose from an outpouring of popular devotion but were created deliberately as a political means to an end – the cults of martyred kings by those seeking to promote their political agenda in the lay world, and the cults of royal women by the religious houses in which the women had lived, patronised or were buried. The cult of Edward the Martyr belongs to the former category and will be examined below. However, the cults of five women who had royal connections were created and promoted in Wessex in the tenth century: St. Ælfgifu of Shaftesbury, St.Eadburh of Nunnaminster, St.Æthelfaed of Romsey and Saints Wulfthryth and Edith of Wilton. A sixth woman, St. Maerwynn of Romsey, was installed by Edgar as abbess at Romsey. She may have had been connected to Edgar by kinship, but we have no information as to her background.

By the tenth century the concept of sacral kingship had long been abandoned by Christian kings; sanctity had to be earned. The church therefore had within its power the ability to bestow sanctity, and in doing so it could reward and shape the political attributes of royal power which were of most benefit to itself.[68] St. Ælfgifu was the only saint not to have lived in a community as a nun, but she shared with the others the common virtue that they had all brought significant patronage and prestige to the benefit of their communities;

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[67] Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, p.236
[68] Ibid, p.235

their sanctity was exclusively a product of their role within the nunnery. However unreliable their hagiographical biographies, that much is not in doubt.

The importance of royal status to the nunneries can be seen in the *vita* of St.Eadburh. As the youngest daughter of Edward the Elder and having showed an early predilection for the religious life she entered Nunnaminster as a young child. Since her grandmother, Ealhswith, had founded that community, her arrival as a *virgo regia* must have been a potent symbol of a continuing close bond with the royal dynasty.[69] The *Vita Edburge* was written in the mid-eleventh century by Osbert of Clare and begins with genealogical passages establishing Eadburh's credentials within the royal line.[70] Despite Eadburh's sanctity depending on her renunciation of her royal status, it was clearly important to the hagiographer to place her within the context of her birth; her role within the church was portrayed as a direct consequence of her birth into the royal house of Wessex.[71]

Saint Edith enjoyed continued support from her father King Edgar as she grew up at Wilton, bringing both prestige, access to the king and wealth to that house. Goscelin's *Vita* and *Translatio* of Edith, based on the oral traditions of the Wilton community, described how Edgar personally provided teachers for Edith and claims that ambassadors and other dignitaries visiting the king also made contact with her.[72] Stephanie Hollis calls her a 'transitional figure', in that she was able to exercise power in the royal court whilst being a member of a religious community.[73]

Clearly then, the presence of a nun with royal connections in a community was seen as a valuable asset, with benefits which could be sustained long after the death of the nun by the establishment of her cult. It would be easy to assume that these cults were deliberately

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[69] Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England,* p.98

[70] Osbert of Clair, 'The Life of St. Edburga of Winchester', in S. J. Ridyard, ed., *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp.259-308

[71] Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* p.97

[72] Goscelin, '*Vita* of Edith', in *Writing the Wilton Women,* p.39

[73] Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women,* p.39

promoted by the royal dynasty to establish the *stirps regia* of their line. However, Ridyard argues that the cult of Eadburh was conceived and sustained solely by the nuns of Winchester, with support from bishop Æthelwold.[74] Osbert makes no mention of any royal involvement in Eadburh's translation and there is no evidence that her shrine ever became a place of pilgrimage for those with political interests close to the king. Indeed, since one of the female saints, Wulfthryth, was a discarded wife or mistress of the king and another, Æthelflaed, was probably the Queen's stepdaughter, one can see why the royal family would not create these cults. It seems to have been the mothers of Ælfgifu and Edith who were the initial managers and promoters of their cults, though as Edith's cult grew in popularity, and therefore in prestige, it was later to be manipulated to political ends, as discussed below on pages 33 - 34.

Although the cults of royal women were the creation of the nunneries, who by doing so could demonstrate to their patrons their usefulness and encourage future patronage, a political side effect of this must have been to strengthen the royal family.[75] The *stirps regia,* or sanctity of the royal line can only have enhanced its prestige and its authority, particularly in its relations with the church. It was in the interests of the nunneries, and the church generally, to have strong, stable government and to avoid civil strife – the female saints' cults which connected the royal line, noble families and the church in a symbiotic relationship could certainly contribute to maintaining the political status quo. The *vitae* of the female royal saints were themselves a result of a changed political regime – written after the Conquest, Goscelin's Lives of Edith and Wulfhild and Osbert of Clare's Life of Eadburh were probably commissioned by the nuns, demonstrating to their new overlords their religious credentials.

Royal Marriages and Succession

Whilst the royal nunneries, especially Wilton, played an important role as the educators and guardians of royal and aristocratic women, they were also places to which divorced or separated royal wives could be sent to remove them from court. According to the

[74] Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England,* p.119
[75] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.122

earlier Anglo-Saxon Rulings of Theodore, withdrawal of one party to a religious community was sufficient grounds for dissolution of a marriage.[76] This rule seems to have persisted into the tenth century, for example when Edward the Elder's second wife, Æfflæd, withdrew to Wilton, leaving him free to marry Eadgifu.[77] We can only guess whether or not her withdrawal was voluntary. The exact nature of Edgar's relationship with Wulfthryth, whether concubine or wife, is unclear. However, he had first met her at Wilton, and when he wished to end this relationship both Wulfthryth and their daughter Edith were returned to Wilton, Wulfthryth to serve as abbess. Similarly, her cousin Wulfhild was made abbess of Barking by Edgar in compensation for his treatment of her, whilst Edward the Confessor's wife, Edith, was sent first to Wherwell, then to Wilton, when Edward wished to remove her from the political sphere. Royal nunneries suited this purpose well as discarded royal consorts could retain positions of privilege and social status but were removed from the court. However, as long as this was possible, the church was in effect sanctioning short-term, multiple marriages and making the legitimacy of these marriages more ambiguous.

This had a profound political impact on succession. By the tenth century succession had become restricted to æthelings who were the sons of kings, therefore succession disputes tended to centre upon the rival claims of different sons by different queens, rather than rival branches of the royal line. The legitimacy of royal marriages and their offspring had become a matter which could seriously affect the fortunes of candidates for the throne. Edward the Elder and Edgar were both able to marry three times and produce multiple sons by different wives. After their deaths the status of their marriages was called into question, leaving the legitimacy of their sons' rival claims to the throne open to interpretation. If withdrawal to a nunnery was not accepted as a legal end to a marriage, the claims of the offspring of any subsequent wives would be invalidated since they could be regarded as illegitimate. Whether one accepted the Rulings of Theodore on marriage, or not, could simply depend upon which rival claim to the throne one wished to support.

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[76] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.161
[77] Yorke, 'Sisters Under the Skin?', p.102

When King Edgar died in 975 he left two sons, Edward and Æthelred, both with debatably valid claims to the throne. His elder son, Edward, was the child of his first wife Æthelflæd Aneda, who had probably died shortly after the birth. His second wife or mistress, Wulfthryth, had been discarded and installed as Abbess of Wilton, taking with her their daughter Edith and leaving Edgar free to marry his third wife, Ælfthryth, who was the mother of Æthelred. The marriage of Edgar and Ælfthryth whilst Wulfthryth was still alive had Anglo-Saxon precedent but was highly irregular and would have been considered unacceptable in other areas of the Western church.[78] Awareness of the shaky canonical ground upon which their marriage stood may explain in part why Edgar wished Aelfthryth to be consecrated as Queen, giving their marriage a divine seal of approval.

The ambiguities surrounding these marriages made it easy for supporters of either of Edgar's heirs to find reasons to validate their claims. Gaimar, writing in the twelfth century, reported that Archbishop Dunstan refused to recognise the legitimacy of the marriage of Ælfthryth and Edgar and therefore supported the accession of Edward.[79] Supporters of Æthelred were able to argue that Wulfthryth was either a vowed nun when she married Edgar or was a concubine, making Edgar's marriage to Ælfthryth valid. Goscelin, writing the post-Conquest *Vita* of Edith was keen to stress that Wulfthryth's marriage was legal and that Edith was acknowledged as a legitimate daughter by Edgar.[80] Yorke considers it unlikely that Goscelin invented this, as he had difficulty presenting this information within hagiographical norms.[81] Bishop Æthelwold had long supported and advised Ælfthryth and seems to have backed the claim of her son, Æthelred. When Æthelwold drew up a grant of privileges to be presented to the New Minster in 966, both Edward and Edmund (Edgar and Ælfthryth's first son, who died as a child) were on the list of witnesses, but Edmund is given precedence over his elder half-brother. Only

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[78] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.168

[79] Goeffrey Gaimar, *L'Estorie des Engles*, ed. and trans. by Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy and Charles Trice Martin, (London: H.M. Treasury, 1889) pp. 125-6 <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Translation/SPcKAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1> [accessed 6th August '24]

[80] Goscelin, '*Vita* of Edith', in *Writing the Wilton Women*, p.26

[81] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.168

Edmund is described as *legitimus*, whilst Ælfthryth was Edgar's *legitima coniunx*.[82] It would seem that long before Edgar's death the way was being prepared for Ælfthryth's sons to have precedence, yet the issue was not cut and dried and was able to divide even bishops in opinion. With the Abbess of Wilton at the centre of this controversy and the Queen the 'protectress of the nunneries', it was inevitable that the nunneries should be drawn into political involvement in the succession crisis.

The Succession Crisis

Edward, backed by Archbishop Dunstan, was successful in acceding to the throne, but in March 978 he was murdered at Corfe Castle whilst en route to visit Ælfthryth and Æthelred.[83] According to Byrhtferth, the author of the earliest source, the *Vita Oswaldi* (written between 995 and 1005), Æthelred's retainers came out to meet him, but before Edward had dismounted he was surrounded, seized and stabbed by them. A year after being buried unceremoniously at Wareham in Dorset, the *Vita Oswaldi* relates that Ealdorman Ælfhere of Mercia ordered his body to be exhumed, and being found to be incorrupt it was carried to the nunnery at Shaftesbury, where 'Masses and holy offerings were celebrated for the redemption of his soul.'[84] The final stage in the creation of the cult came in June 1001 when, according to the *Passio Edwardi*, Edward appeared to a male religious and told him that he was ready for translation.[85] Shortly after this Æthelred granted land at Bradford-on-Avon to Shaftesbury, to provide a safe place for Edward's relics should Viking attacks again threaten Shaftesbury.[86]

Anglo-Saxon England had a long tradition of cults of murdered kings and princes, such as St.Kinelm of Winchcombe and the cult of St.Wigstan at Repton. However, such cults were usually associated with male communities. Shaftesbury may have been chosen for a

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[82] Barbara Yorke, 'Æthelwold and the Politics of the Tenth Century' in *Bishop Aethelwold – His Career and Influence*, ed, by Barbara Yorke, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988) pp.65 – 88
[83] Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971) p.373
[84] Byrhtferth of Ramsey, 'Vita Sancti Oswaldi', in Michael Lapidge (trans.) *The Lives of Saint Oswald and Saint Ecgwine*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), pp.450-451, < https://archive.org/details/livesofstoswalds0000byrh/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 5 July 2024]

[85] Goscelin of Saint -Bertin, *The Passion of St.Edward, King and Martyr*, trans. by Ryan Grant, (Zaragoza: Saragossa Press, 2020)
[86] Finberg, *Early Charters of Wessex*, p.103

number of reasons. Translation to Shaftesbury occurred only three months before Æthelred's coronation; it is likely that it was necessary to effect closure of the events surrounding Edward's murder in preparation for the new king's reign, and Shaftesbury may simply have been the community closest to Wareham which had the prestige and means necessary for the role. Alternatively, the choice of a female religious house for burial could been seen as a comment on the validity of Edward's claim to kingship, implying that his reign did not qualify him for the 'normal' treatment of kings. The political aims of the noble families with connections to Shaftesbury may have played a part. It has also been suggested that if Ælfthryth had a hand in the decision, she may have felt she could control affairs better if centred on a royal nunnery.[87]

No such cult had been founded in the 130 years before Edward, and his was the first to be located in Wessex, therefore it seems unlikely that its inception was an inevitable result of the circumstances of his death or a wave of popular sentiment. Indeed, Byrhtferth's *Vita Sancti Oswaldi* describes him as an aggressive bully, not someone likely to inspire a personal following.[88] Rather, the cult was deliberately created to serve a political purpose, but whether it was promoted to support Æthelred's position or to undermine it has long been a matter of debate between historians, as has the involvement of the Shaftesbury nuns themselves.

It is important to analyse how the cult of Edward the Martyr developed, because understanding the forces at work in promoting it can help shed light on the political pressures exerted on or by the nunnery. D.W. Rollason and Sir Frank Stenton agree that the cult of Edward the Martyr was promoted by opponents to Æthelred as a means of focusing opposition to his reign.[89] The fact that no one was punished for the murder meant that Æthelred began his reign under a cloud of suspicion which undermined the prestige of the crown.[90] A poem from the E-version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 979 presents the cult as a form of celestial vengeance on those who would wish to erase

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[87] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.171
[88] Lapidge (trans.) *The Lives of Saint Oswald and Saint Ecgwine*, p.137
[89] D.W.Rollason, 'The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 11, (1982),18; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England, p.373*
[90] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p.373

Edward's memory without seeking justice for his murder.[91] However, on several occasions Æthelred's support for the cult is evident; in the 1001 charter for Shaftesbury, granting land in Bradford-on-Avon for the relics of Edward, Æthelred clearly acknowledges Edward's sanctity. Rollason and Stenton argue that Æthelred promoted the cult as a matter of political expedience, undermining the effectiveness of his opponents' strategy by styling himself as a benefactor.[92]

Simon Keynes went further, however, arguing that Æthelred himself was likely to have been the instigator of the cult.[93] As a leading ealdorman, it seems unlikely that Ælfhere could have translated the remains to Shaftesbury without the king's knowledge and blessing, and in an atmosphere of political unease following Edward's murder the cult could serve both as closure to the issue of punishment for the crime and as a demonstration of Æthelred's innocence. To have had two sanctified siblings can only have brought prestige to Æthelred and confirmation of his divine authority to hold power.[94] Evidence that Æthelred promoted Edward's cult to assuage God's wrath comes from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 1008, when a royal assembly reportedly convened at Enham in Wiltshire soon after the departure of a Viking army; legislation was drawn up which made celebration of the feast of St. Edward on 18th March compulsory throughout England.[95]

Support for the cult came from the highest ecclesiastical levels. Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 990–994 reportedly encouraged Æthelred to found a monastery at Cholsey in honour of Edward, whilst Aelfric, Archbishop from 995–1005, allegedly witnessed miracles at Edward's tomb.[96] It was probably Ælfric who ordered a dossier on St. Cuthbert to be assembled; a poem concerning Edward's translation was added to the

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[91] Rollason, 'The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints', p.14
[92] Rollason,'The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints' p.21
[93] Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of King Edward the Martyr During the Reign of King Æthelred the Unready', in *Gender and Historiography: Studies in the early Middle ages in Honour of Pauline Stafford,* ed. by J. Nelson, S. Reynolds & S. Johns, (London: University of London Press, 2012), p.116
[94] Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England,* p.165
[95] Keynes, 'The Cult of King Edward the Martyr', p.122
[96] Lapidge, *The Lives of Saint Oswald and Saint Ecgwine,* p.145

front of this, thus linking Edward to one of the most venerated English saints.[97] The church could be seen as using the cult of St. Edward as a spiritual rallying call to the English in the face of hostile invaders, one which united factions behind the church and monarch. Whoever the chief architects of the cult, the involvement of the archbishops thrust Shaftesbury into the political and spiritual forefront of both the succession crisis and resistance to the Danes.

The role of the nuns of Shaftesbury themselves is even more difficult to ascertain. Certainly, much of the early validation of the cult came from miracles reportedly witnessed at Edward's tomb at Shaftesbury. The author of the *Passio Edwardi* claimed to use the oral testimonies of the nuns for some of the miracles which took place after translation of Edward's body in 1001.[98] Byrhtferth, writing within twenty years of the event, reported that 'so many miracles took place at his tomb that no one could write them down as quickly as they were taking place', but his named witness was Archbishop Aelfric, not the nuns themselves.[99] The success of the cults of both Edward and Edith certainly brought long term financial benefits to the communities, probably accounting for their enormous wealth at Domesday. If the cult was conceived by those in opposition to Æthelred, it is hard to imagine the community at Shaftesbury allowing themselves to be placed at the centre of such a rebellion, potentially cutting off their source of patronage.

However, eleventh-century sources emanating from nunneries are overwhelmingly negative in their depiction of Ælfthryth. The *Passio Edwardi,* probably written by Gaimar in the twelfth century and coming from Shaftesbury, presents a damning picture of a murderous step-mother.[100] The *Vita* of Edith, written by Goscelin and representing Wilton tradition, is the first to accuse Ælfthryth outright of Edward's murder.[101] Since Ælfthryth had expelled Wulfhild from Barking it is not surprising that her portrait in Goscelin's Life of Wulfhild was also less than complimentary, but even in Ælfthryth's

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[97] Keynes, 'The Cult of King Edward the Martyr', p.119
[98] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.73
[99] Lapidge (trans.) *The Lives of Saint Oswald and Saint Ecgwine,* p.145
[100] Pauline Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England', *Past and Present,* 163 (1999), 3-35, (p.25)
[101] Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen', p.25

own foundation at Wherwell a fourteenth century entry in the Wherwell cartulary reports that Aelfthryth founded the nunnery as penance for murdering Edward.[102] Even though none of these are contemporary sources, the consistency with which they present Ælfthryth in a negative light does imply that relations between Queen and nunneries were strained. The explanation may lie in the stage of reform reached by the larger nunneries – they were moving towards autonomy and trying to separate themselves from the Queen's control.[103] In this context, perhaps Shaftesbury's promotion of the cult as an act of defiance against Ælfthryth is conceivable.

Danish Rule

It was during the reign of Cnut that the political usefulness of the cult of Saint Edith came to the fore. When Cnut divided England into four districts he kept Wessex under his direct control, probably because loyalty to the old regime was likely to have been strongest here.[104] By venerating the saints most closely connected to the Anglo-Saxon dynasty Cnut presented himself as the legitimate successor to the West Saxon royal house, easing the transition to his new regime. Goscelin describes a storm at sea when Cnut feared he would drown – in despair he called on Saint Edith and ascribed his subsequent safety to her help.[105] Cnut appears in this incident to be demonstrating Saint Edith's approval of his reign and presenting his connection with the old regime as familial, in a spiritual sense if not biological. From that point on Cnut was 'as devoted to her in affection and reverence as if he had been her brother Æthelred or her nephew Edmund', and had a golden shrine made to house her remains at Wilton.[106] In a similar way by marrying Æthelred's widow, Emma, he found a way to present his rule as a continuation of that by the Anglo-Saxon royal family. Legislation making mandatory the celebration of the feast day of St. Edward the Martyr was certainly upheld in Cnut's reign and may have been produced then. It could be argued that Shaftesbury and Wilton, by nurturing the cults of Edward and Edith, were spiritually endorsing Danish rule in a way

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[102] Coldicott, *Hampshire Nunneries,* p.18
[103] Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen', p.24
[104] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England,* p.396
[105] Goscelin, 'Legend of Edith', in *Writing the Wilton Women*, ed.by Hollis, p.78
[106] Ibid, p.77

which may have been out of their control. However, through these cults they gave both Æthelred and Cnut the tools to create and sculpt the particular image of kingship they wished to project, and in the process Wilton and Shaftesbury exerted some level of influence over the type of kingship they hoped to see.

Conclusion

The connections between the royal dynasty, the aristocratic families of Wessex and the royal nunneries were so embedded that it would never have been possible to disconnect politics entirely from the nunneries. By enhancing the prestige of the regime and its *stirps regia*, their impact over all was politically beneficial not only to the royal regime in Wessex but even to the Danish rulers of the eleventh century. The degree of involvement in politics by the nunneries was, however, far from uniform; Shaftesbury and Wilton were far more directly embroiled in politics after the death of Edgar in 975 than any of the other nunneries, particularly through the cults of Edward and Edith. There are several possible reasons for this. Wilton and Shaftesbury may already have been larger and richer communities at this time due to being founded earlier, and therefore more likely to have established connections with noble and royal families. This, combined with their location further away from the episcopal seat of Winchester, may have caused episcopal control over reformed standards to be looser there than at the other nunneries, leaving them with greater freedom to engage with politics.

Perhaps the most difficult question to answer is what role the nuns themselves played in politics. The post-Conquest hagiography of Eadburh, Edith and Edward certainly suggests that some of the initiative came from the nuns, encouraging a symbiotic relationship with the royal family – patronage in return for prestige. The wealth of Wilton and Shaftesbury at Domesday suggests they derived huge financial benefit from the cults of their saints, but whether their motivations were in any way political, driven by kin loyalties, or whether political manipulation of the cults came only from outside their walls, remains obscure.

Chapter 3: The Ecclesiastical Landscape

It could be argued that the foundation for reform was laid by King Alfred when he recognised with regret the shortage of monastic personnel and the almost complete disappearance of monastic education. Asser observed that:

> no one kept the rule of that kind of life in an orderly way, whether because of the invasions of foreigners, which took place so frequently both by sea and land, or because that people abounded in wealth of every kind, and so looked with contempt on the monastic life. On this account it was that King Alfred sought to gather monks of different kinds in the same monastery.[107]

Alfred founded a monastery at Athelney and a nunnery at Shaftesbury, in which he installed his daughter Æthelgifu as abbess. His widow, Ealhswith, founded Nunnaminster early in the tenth century, but may have died before it was fully operational.[108] Her son Edward the Elder probably completed the foundation, his daughter Eadburh taking vows there.

Whilst some efforts were made in the intervening years to raise standards, it was not until the reign of Edgar (959 – 975) that ecclesiastical reform gathered pace, brought about by the shared aims of three particularly charismatic and talented bishops: Dunstan, Oswald and Æthelwold. Dunstan became Archbishop of Canterbury in 959, Oswald the Bishop of Worcester from 961, whilst Æthelwold was brought by Edgar from his monastery at Abingdon to serve as Bishop of Winchester from 963. Æthelwold's priorities became clear in 964, when he expelled the secular clerks from the New Minster and replaced them with monks from Abingdon.[109] Influenced heavily by the work of the continental reformers Louis the Pious and Benedict of Aniane at the Synod of Aachen in 817, the three bishops convened a meeting in Winchester, probably in the mid-960s.[110] This

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[107] Asser, *Life of King Alfred,* trans. Albert S. Cook, (Ginn & Co.: Boston, New York, 1906) chap. 93, p.55
[108] Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women II,* p.243
[109] Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England,* p.41
[110] Julia Barrow, 'The Chronology of Benedictine Reform', in *Edgar, King of the English, 959–975,* ed. Donald Scragg (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2014), p.222

resulted in the production of the *Regularis Concordia Anglicae nationis monachorum sanctimonialiumque.*[111]

The *Regularis Concordia* aimed to set out a uniform rule for observance by all monks and nuns in England. Communities were to follow the Rule of St. Benedict and abbots and abbesses were to be elected freely from within their communities, subject to royal prerogative. In an effort to raise standards of observance, strict instructions were given for the daily Office, including daily prayers for the king and queen. The text assumes that the communities addressed are fully monastic, not houses of secular clerks. Most strikingly, Edgar was made the guardian of monasteries and Queen Ælfthryth the protectress and guardian of nuns.[112] The oldest text of the *Concordia,* from the late tenth century, refers largely to male communities led by abbots, but the provisions of the *Concordia* were to apply equally to monks and nuns, and abbesses were included amongst the signatories to the agreement.[113]

The precise extent to which the royal nunneries adhered to its provisions, however, is debateable. Nunnaminster is the only nunnery to be explicitly mentioned in any contemporary accounts of the reform process.[114] Speaking of Æthelwold, Wulfstan writes in the late tenth century:

> He had plans too for the third monastery at Winchester, known in English as the Nunnaminster, and dedicated to God in honour of ever-virgin Mary. Here he established flocks of nuns, placing over them Æthelthryth, whom I briefly mentioned above. Here the procedures of life according to the Rule are followed to this day.[115]

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[111] Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, p.42
[112] Dom Thomas Symons, *The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation, p.2* < *https://archive.org/details/monasticagreemen0000unse/page/n9/mode/2up*> [accessed 5 April 2024]
[113] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement,* p.liii
[114] Foot, *Veiled Women I,* p.91
[115] Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Æthelwold,* ed. and trans.by Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.37

Otherwise, reform of nunneries is only mentioned in the blanket statement 'monasteries were established everywhere, some for monks, some for nuns, governed by abbots and abbesses who lived according to the Rule.'[116] According to Wulfstan, Æthelwold:

> toured the individual houses, laying down standards of conduct;
> the obedient he encouraged by words to advance in good, the
> foolish he corrected with lashes to make them depart from evil.[117]

In one sense it could be argued that all the royal nunneries were products of reform since all were founded, or re-founded, after Alfred expressed his wish to see a revival of monastic standards. Barbara Yorke states that none of the reforming bishops attempted to found a nunnery, but there are indications that Æthelwold had some level of involvement with the foundation of the community at Romsey, within his own diocese.[118] Edgar's royal charter, granted to the nunnery c.967, suggests the influence of Æthelwold as it appears to belong to the *Orthodoxum* group of charters; these were documents dealing with monastic foundation, of a standardised form and style, based on charters drawn up at Abingdon where Æthelwold had been abbot.[119] Æthelwold himself may well have been the author. Meyer points to evidence that estates owned by the community at Wherwell had previously been in the possession of Winchester Cathedral and monasteries, suggesting collaboration with the Bishop of Winchester in the founding of Wherwell, whether Æthelwold or his successor.[120] It seems likely that any involvement of a bishop would have required assurance of reformed standards in the new foundations.

According to the late twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, Æthelwold was commissioned to produce a translation of The Rule into Old English for use in the monasteries. Feminised versions of this exist from the late tenth and eleventh centuries, suggesting it was being used in the nunneries soon after the Æthelwold's original translation was disseminated. Jayatilaki believes it unlikely that Æthelwold himself sanctioned the feminised versions,

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[116] Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Æthelwold* , p.43
[117] Ibid, p.45
[118] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.89
[119] *The Electronic Sawyer* 812, <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/812.html>[accessed 4 May 2024]
[120] Meyer, 'Women and the Tenth-Century Benedictine Reform', p.59

but nevertheless the fact that they exist argues for the same level of adherence, or at least concern for adherence, to The Rule in the nunneries.[121]

This chapter will assess the impact of reform on the royal nunneries.

Liturgy and Learning

The fundamental aim of reform was to raise and disseminate standards of liturgical observance and learning in religious communities, and much of the *Regularis Concordia* is concerned with instructions for the liturgy. Though the proem states that the Rule applies equally to monks and nuns, the chapters concerning liturgy are very gender-specific, referring only to monks and monasteries, perhaps revealing the real focus of the reformers' interest. It seems likely that the royal nunneries followed these instructions in their daily observance, particularly those within Æthelwold's own diocese, but we have very little evidence to support this.

It is similarly difficult to show any change in standards of learning. Letters, chronicles and saints' lives witness to the presence of schools at Romsey, Wilton, Shaftesbury and Nunnaminster and to the high levels of literacy of those educated there, but whether standards changed during the period of reform is difficult to demonstrate.[122] A psalter associated with Shaftesbury or Wilton, dated to c.975, shows divisions marked in the longer psalms, following the recommendations of the Rule, and this has been seen by some as evidence for reform.[123] However, Whitelock argues that the lack of Latin scholarship shown by the gloss of the Creed in this manuscript indicates that the high standards to which the reformers aspired had not by that time reached the nunnery.[124]

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[121] Rohini Jayatilaki, 'The Old English Benedictine Rule: writing for women and men', *Anglo-Saxon England,* 32 (2003), 183-185
[122] Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, 'Recovering the histories of women religious in England in the central Middle Ages: Wilton Abbey and Goscelin of Saint-Bertin', *Journal of Medieval History,* 42, 3 (2016) 285-303, (p.286)
[123] Foot, *Veiled Women II,* p.174
[124] D. Whitelock, 'Review of the Salisbury Psalter', *Review of English Studies*, no.11 (1960), p.419

Conversely, Edith's seal from Wilton suggests a high level of learning. The seal, used at Wilton throughout the Middle Ages, is believed to have been an imprint of Saint Edith's own tenth-century seal.[125] The Greek word *adelpha,* meaning 'sister,' is inscribed on the seal rather than the Latin *soror.* Since Greek vocabulary was promoted at reformed male communities, the use of the Greek word on the seal may indicate an aspiration at Wilton to the standards of the reformed elite. We know Edith was provided with personal tutors from Trier and Rheims by her father, but whether the community in general attained high standards of learning is difficult to discern. Through analysis of the early fifteenth-century Wilton Chronicles, Bugyis has found evidence that its authors depended on a collection of Wilton miracles which was probably maintained by Wilton nuns in the late tenth and eleventh centuries independently of Goscelin's *Vita.* If so, the Wilton nuns possessed levels of literacy necessary for them to preserve their own histories, which were later over-written by male writers.[126]

Evidence of Building Enhancement

Archaeological evidence for building work or enhancement to the nunneries during the period of reform is quite scarce, largely because the Anglo-Saxon nunneries have not been extensively excavated. However, the best evidence comes from Nunnaminster. William of Malmesbury reports that Æthelwold 'built a convent for nuns in Winchester' because the Nunnaminster completed under Edward the Elder was 'almost in ruins.'[127] This programme of rebuilding was corroborated in the 1980s when excavations on the site of Nunnaminster at Abbey View Gardens revealed two Anglo-Saxon churches. The older church appeared to have had two lateral apses built as extensions to its west end, probably dating to the 970s during Æthelwold's episcopacy.[128] The second church was dated to the late tenth century, whilst south of this building a 'claustral building', made of flint and reused Roman tiles, also dated to this period. Evidence was also found that at the time of Æthelwold's reforms an earlier boundary wall was abandoned and the nunnery

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[125] Alison Hudson, British Library Blog, *Making a Good Impression* (2017) https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2017/06/index.html [accessed 12 May 2024]
[126] Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, 'Recovering the histories of women religious', p.301
[127] William of Malmesbury, *The Deeds of the Bishops of England*, p.115
[128] Patrick Ottaway, *Winchester: An Archaeological Assessment,* (Barnsley: Oxbow Books, 2017), p.227

precinct was enlarged.[129] This evidence for mid to late tenth-century development of the Nunnaminster buildings demonstrates that during the massive thirty-year long monastic building project in Winchester, initiated by Æthelwold, attention was not confined to the male communities of the Old and New Minsters - the nunnery received substantial, if not equal, attention.[130]

The nunnery of Romsey may also have benefitted from rebuilding work during Æthelwold's episcopacy. Foundations which probably date to the late tenth century are visible within the Abbey, but a recent Ground Penetrating Radar survey has revealed an older building, probably cruciform, beneath that building.[131] This may indicate an older minster church on the site, and if so the tenth-century structures at Romsey would appear to have been a re-foundation and rebuilding of a pre-existing establishment with the installation of a new abbess, similar to the situation at Nunnaminster.

Large-scale building projects funded by the Church are not in evidence at any of the other royal nunneries. The new chapel and enclosure wall built at Wilton were, according to Goscelin, built from the private wealth of Edith and Wulfthryth, rather than being part of any broader church strategy of development.[132]

Evidence of Claustration

The Proem to the *Concordia* makes two statements relating to claustration of nuns.

> ……no monk, nor indeed any man whatever his rank, should dare to enter and frequent the places set apart for nuns.
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> …. let the brethren take care so to arrange their going into the dwelling places of nuns that they in no way hinder their regular observance.[133]

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[129] Ottaway, *Winchester*: *An Archaeological Assessment*, p.227
[130] Coldicott, *Hampshire Nunneries,* p.11
[131] Romsey Local History Society < https://saxonromsey.wixsite.com/website/recent-developments > [accessed 10 July 2024]
[132] Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women,* p.53 and p.75
[133] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement*, pp.4-5

These instructions were an addition to the main body of the *Concordia* made specifically by Dunstan, 'moved by the spirit of prophecy.'[134] It was clearly an issue which had caused problems in the past, and one about which he felt so strongly that he needed to address it specifically. On the surface the two statements appear contradictory as the first seems to forbid any man from entering a nunnery whilst the second simply warns that the observance of the nuns should not be disrupted by monks or priests. It seems most likely that these statements were meant to discourage men from habitual and disruptive presence in nunneries, rather than forbidding their entrance – the emphasis being on 'frequent' rather than 'enter'. After all, the presence of priests within nunneries was a constant necessity.

The clearest evidence that claustration in any form was attempted comes from Winchester in the 960s, where each of the three monasteries was granted the land immediately surrounding them, cleared of housing. The entire area was then surrounded by ditches and walls, separating church from town.[135] However, a wall around Nunnaminster dating to c.900 has been excavated, showing that the idea of separation was nothing new.[136] Goscelin claims that Wulfthryth 'built a stone wall around sun-blessed Wilton.'[137] It seems likely that these walls were a symbolism of separation rather than a reality as the cult of Saint Eadburh attracted pilgrims whose presence in the nunnery was an economic necessity, as did saints Edith and Edward the Martyr in Wilton and Shaftesbury.

There are clear limitations to the reliability of using *vitae* when assessing the degree to which nuns lived cloistered lives, particularly since we do not know the extent to which, in their hagiographic rhetoric, the authors were projecting back onto their subjects the expectations of the Norman church. However, the *vita* of Edith is particularly revealing. Written about a hundred years after Edith's death, Goscelin claimed to have recorded the oral traditions extant at that time within Wilton, and the events he describes took place within ten years of the production of the *Concordia*. Goscelin attempts to reassure his

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[134] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement*, p.4
[135] Coldicott, *Hampshire Nunneries*, p.11
[136] Ottaway, *Winchester: An Archaeological Assessment*, p.227
[137] Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, p.75

readers of complete propriety when he describes the presence in Wilton of Edith's tutors, Benno of Trier and Radbodo of Rheims, claiming they taught her through a window so they could be heard but not seen.[138] However, other sections in the *vita* describe how:

> Foreign kingdoms and principalities also gave her respect with greetings, letters and gifts; religious leaders begged her to act as a saving intercessor

whilst ambassadors who were visiting Edgar 'took pride in recommending themselves to her holy kindness.'[139] It is clear that Edith was by no means cut off from the world – she interacted with people of importance from throughout Europe, both secular and ecclesiastical, and as a result her influence extended far beyond the nunnery walls into political and court circles.

Other events described by Goscelin add to the impression that claustration was not strict. The visit of the 'epileptic dancers of Colbeck' is not regarded as unusual, whilst Wulfthryth and Edith are both described nursing the sick outside the nunnery. Access did not seem a problem for the men who ran into the church at Wilton for sanctuary and Cnut was able to visit Edith's tomb.[140]

Halpin refers to the 'claustral spirit of tenth-century reform,' and the 'call for segregated communal enclosure' in the *Concordia*, whilst Yorke describes this as a period in which strict claustration was imposed.[141] However, we really do not have sufficient evidence to know whether, in practice, reform affected all the nunneries equally in terms of their interactions with the world outside. It seems likely that claustration at the re-founded Nunnaminster was stricter than that at Wilton and Shaftesbury due to its location, which may have been a factor in that house's relative poverty at Domesday. The same may have been true of Romsey, since it lay in the Winchester diocese and was re-founded under the auspices of Æthelwold. The dearth of evidence from Nunnaminster and Romsey may corroborate their more cloistered nature – we are only given documentary glimpses into

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[138] Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, p.32
[139] Goscelin, '*Vita* of Edith', in *Writing the Wilton Women*, p.39
[140] Goscelin, '*Translatio* of Edith', in *Writing the Wilton Women*, pp.82-85, 73, 177
[141] Patricia Halpin, 'Women Religious in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *Haskins Society Journal*, 6 (1994) 97-110 (p.99); Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.5

the internal life of the nunneries when a royal nun or royal saint is resident, both of whom may have avoided the more strictly cloistered communities. Evidence from the saints' Lives, however flawed, suggests that strict claustration of the type demanded by later ideals of female monasticism was not at that time universally imposed on the nunneries. When assessing the evidence, today's historians may be projecting onto it their own expectations of strict claustration, but Dunstan, in the Proem quoted above, never makes complete enclosure his aspiration.

Evidence of Secular Personnel in the Nunneries.

On the Continent, resistance to stringent application of the Benedictine Rule in the years following the Councils of Aachen (816–819) had resulted in the division of women religious into houses of Benedictine nuns and houses of secular canonesses.[142] As late as 1059, Hildebrand complained that most nunneries were communities of 'secular' religious, not truly Benedictine.[143] In late Anglo-Saxon England no clear distinction between nuns and canonesses is known to have existed, but accounts given in saints' lives which describe Eadburh, Edith and Wulfthryth holding personal possessions suggest that the English nunneries may have been more akin to these Ottonian houses of canonesses than to the ideal of reformed monasteries.[144] However, there is very little evidence to support this or to show the effects of reform.

The Proem to the *Concordia* claims that Edgar:

> drove out the negligent clerks with their abominations, placing in their stead for the service of God…… not only monks but also nuns, under abbots and abbesses.[145]

This statement implies that at some point early in Edgar's reign non-vowed nuns had been removed from nunneries, just as Æthelwold had evicted clerks from the Old and

[142] Steven Vanderputten, 'Reform, Change and Renewal: Women Religious in the Central Middle Ages, 800-1050', in *Medieval Women Religious, c.800-c.1500,* ed. by Janet Burton and Kimm Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) pp. 22 – 42 (p.26)
[143] Ibid, p.29
[144] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.86
[145] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement*, p.2

New Minsters. After describing Æthelwold's ejection of these clerks, Wulfstan of Winchester, in his *Vita* of Æthelwold, goes on to say that Æthelwold 'had plans too for the third monastery of Winchester, known in English as the Nunnaminster…….here he established flocks of nuns, placing over them Æthelthryth.'[146] This may have meant ejection of nuns or the former abbess, but that is nowhere explicitly stated. Similarly, if John of Worcester's claim is accepted, that Edgar introduced nuns to the house founded in Romsey by Edward the Elder, this could mean ejection of the previous occupants or reintroduction of nuns following decline. The choice of the otherwise unknown Maerwynn as its first abbess may well have been Æthelwold's, since her Welsh or Cornish name suggests she was not a local woman; it seems unlikely that he would have accepted anyone without proven Benedictine credentials as Romsey's first abbess, within his own diocese.

One of the principle aims of the reformists was to make clearer the distinction between monastic and lay personnel. There are several examples of women whose monastic status was ambiguous, who appear to have taken vows without living the full monastic life, but all these pre-date Æthelwold's episcopacy. Edward the Elder's two daughters are described by William of Malmesbury as both being 'vowed to God, Eadflaed taking the veil and Æthelhild in lay attire.'[147] Both were buried with their mother at Wilton, so it is possible that both were associated with that community but only Eadflaed lived the communal life.[148] The will of Wynflaed was made by a wealthy widow, probably in the mid-tenth century. She appears to have a connection with Shaftesbury, leaving several estates to that community, but also bequeathed 'to Ceolthryth whichever she prefers of her black tunics and her best holy veil and her best headband.''[149] It is possible that Wynflaed was living a secular life as a vowed widow in association with Shaftesbury.

A third example of ambiguous monastic status comes from Wilton when Edgar made advances to the cousins Wulfhild and Wulfthryth. In the *Vita Wulfhildi* Goscelin at first

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[146] Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women I*, p.91
[147] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, ch.126, p.201
[148] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, p.86
[149] *The Electronic Sawyer* – S1538 <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/1539.html > [accessed 4 March 2024]

says she was being educated at Wilton, but when describing the attempted seduction by Edgar she is referred to as *virgo Christi* and so would appear to have taken vows.[150] Goscelin is clear that Wulfthryth was educated *in seculari habitu*, but later writers believed the marriage to have been invalid as it had been contracted with a 'religious woman.'[151]

Following Æthelwold's episcopacy there are certainly many examples of high-status lay women living in the nunneries who did not intend to take vows, but there is no ambiguity about their status. Daughters of aristocratic families were educated at Wilton, and the practice of royal widows retiring to a nunnery was well attested in Wessex.[152] When Edward the Confessor wished to remove his wife Edith from court, she was initially sent to Wherwell, and after the Conquest many aristocratic young women took temporary refuge in the nunneries. Although there appear to have been many more lay women living in the nunneries than lay men in monasteries, the women's status is unambiguously lay. It seems highly likely that reform brought about the demise of the secular 'vowess' in favour of a more binary division between 'lay' and 'vowed,' in line with Benedictine ideals. However, unlike the Ottonian nunneries, lay and vowed nuns appear to have lived within the same communities, rather than in separate houses.

The accepted presence of lay women in the nunneries can perhaps be explained by the difference in the functions of nunneries and monasteries: unlike royal women, royal men did not at this time retire to monasteries and princes were not given as child oblates. The presence in the nunneries of royal and aristocratic widows, and of young women receiving education, seems to have been an accepted function of the royal nunneries, and so the presence of non-vowed women in the nunneries does not appear to have been challenged. Perhaps this should not be surprising, since in male houses the ejection of lay clerks was not reported from anywhere but Winchester. Elsewhere, progress towards purely monastic houses was much slower. Canterbury did not become purely monastic

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[150] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses,* p.157
[151] Goscelin, *Vita sanctae Wulfhilae,* ed. M. Esposito, 'La Vie de Sainte Vulfhilde par Goscelin de Cantorbéry', *Analecta Bollandiana, 32 (1913), 10 – 26;* Yorke, *Nunneries,* p.157
[152] Ælfgifu, the widow of Edmund, probably retired to Shaftesbury, whilst the Wherwell cartulary records that Ælfthryth spent her last years in the Wherwell community, with no indication that she took vows.

until after Dunstan's death, whilst secular signatories still appear on witness lists at Worcester under Oswald for many years.[153]

Nuns Holding Personal Wealth

> Let no one presume to give or receive anything without the abbot's leave, or to have anything as his own, anything whatever, whether book or tablets or pen or whatever it may be; for monks should not have even their own bodies and wills at their own disposal.[154]

That the royal saints Eadburh, Edith and Wulfthryth all held personal wealth is difficult to dispute, as their hagiographers are unable to deny this aspect of their subjects' Lives and seek ways to justify it. Sitting uncomfortably with post-Conquest expectations of sanctity, personal possessions were not part of the standard hagiographic *topoi* and so are unlikely to have been an invention of the author. Osbert writes that during the time of Eadburh at Nunnaminster in the early tenth century 'the nuns of that house were allowed to have an abundance of personal riches……..The law of the stricter Rule by which God is now served in the monasteries was still at that time completely unknown and the teachings of the holy father Benedict were not yet observed.'[155]

Goscelin could not use that argument as he struggled to justify possessions held by Edith during the episcopacy of Æthelwold. Even assuming that her possessions were permitted by the abbess, her mother Wulfthryth, her extravagances were clearly out of line with the spirit if not the letter of the Rule. She is reported to have worn purple clothing, 'although observance of the rule would have required black.' and he justifies this by claiming that she wore a hair shirt beneath so that 'visible frivolities might conceal hidden martyrdom.'[156] Edith used gold and precious stones in her embroidery, built a new church

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[153] David Parsons, 'Introduction', in *Tenth Century Studies: Essays in Commemoration of the Millennium of the Council of Winchester and Regularis Concordia*, ed. by David Parsons, (London & Chichester: Phillimore, 1975) p.3

[154] Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St.Benedict,* ed. and trans.by Abbott Justin McCann, (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1952), Chap. 33, p.85

[155] Osbert of Clare, 'The Life of St. Edburga of Winchester', in Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp.253-308 (p.281); Ridyard, *The Royal Saints,* p.102

[156] Goscelin, 'The *Vita* of Edith', in *Writing the Wilton Women,* p.38

and commissioned artwork for its walls, as well as possessing a private menagerie, stocked by foreign diplomats visiting her father, Edgar.[157] Wulfthryth appears to have used personal wealth to build the boundary wall and purchase relics.[158] So long as wealth was used to benefit the community it seems to have been tolerated.

The behaviour of Eadburh, Edith and Wulfthryth resembles that of canonesses in the great Ottonian nunneries such as Gandersheim and Quedlinburg, where personal possessions were permitted. What is unclear is the extent to which Edith and other royal women in the nunneries received special treatment and whether the Rule was applied more rigorously to non-royal nuns, despite Chapter 34 of the Rule forbidding 'respect of persons.'[159] Neither can we detect whether standards in this area changed through the eleventh century, for after Edith there are no more royal female saints and no more *vitae* coming from the nunneries to allow comparison.

Election of Abbesses

The *Regularis Concordia* advises that:

> …the elections of abbots and abbesses should be carried out with the consent and advice of the King and according to the teaching of the Holy Rule.[160]

The Rule states that abbots should be

> chosen unanimously in the fear of God by the whole community, on the basis of merit rather than status.[161]

Charters from Romsey, Wherwell and Amesbury indicate that serious attempts were made to secure free, internal election of abbesses. Charter S812 is a confirmation of Romsey's privileges, in which Edgar gave the nuns the right to elect a new abbess after

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[157] Ibid, pp.48, 53, 41-42.
[158] Ibid, p.44; Goscelin 'The *Translatio* of Edith', p.75
[159]Benedict, *The Rule of St.Benedict,* Chap. 34, p.87
[160] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement*, p.6
[161] Benedict, *The Rule of St.Benedict,* Chap. 64, p.145. Benedict states the abbot must be chosen 'for the merit of his life and his enlightened wisdom, even though he be the last in order of the community.'

the death of Maerwynn.[162] A charter of King Æthelred II in 1002 granted the nuns of Wherwell the right to elect their abbess following the death of the present incumbent, on the advice of the bishop.[163] Interestingly, this privilege was granted after the death of Ælfthryth, who appears to have exercised proprietorial control over much of Wherwell, having 'held Wherwell while alive.'[164] A similar charter was granted by Æthelred to Amesbury, probably also in 1002.[165]

In Goscelin's Lives of Edith and Wulfhild, both women are said to foretell the appointments of nuns who had previously been members of their communities to the abbacies of Wilton and Barking. Yorke sees this as evidence that election within the nunneries was becoming the norm but was sufficiently novel as to require saintly endorsement.[166]

Relationship with the Royal Family

The *Regularis Concordia* sought explicitly to strengthen connections between monasteries and the royal family, whilst weakening ties with lay nobility. Communities were not to 'acknowledge the overlordship of secular persons' and only the 'sovereign power of the King and Queen 'should ever be sought in matters of security or 'for the increase of the goods of the house.'[167] Prayers were to be said daily for the King and Queen. In addition, the King and Queen were to become the protectors and guardians of the monasteries and nunneries respectively, 'so that he himself helping the men and his consort helping the women there should be no cause for any breath of scandal.'[168] This

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[162] *The Electronic Sawyer* <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/812.html#> [accessed 1/5/24] and Living, *Records of Romsey Abbey*, p.14
[163]*The Electronic Sawyer* <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/browse/archive/Wherwell.html> [accessed 1/5/24]
[164] Wherwell Cartulary (London, British Library, MS Egerton 2104a, fos 43 & 45) reference taken from Foot, *Veiled Women II*, p.216
[165] Finberg, *Early Charters of Wessex*, p.103
[166] Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, pp. 87-88
[167] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement*, p.7
[168] Symons, *The Monastic Agreement*, p.2

innovation certainly enhanced the prestige of the Queen as royal consort and mother of kings and marked an important point in the developing concept of queenship.[169]

Its impact on the nunneries was quickly made clear when Ælfthryth, soon after Edgar's death, ejected Wulfhild as abbess of Barking and confiscated many of its assets. The overwhelmingly negative image of Ælfthryth contained in saints' Lives and nunnery cartularies (particularly from Shaftesbury and Wherwell) may be founded in this seemingly high-handed behaviour, but may also highlight the inadequacies of the *Concordia* – the role of the Queen in overseeing the nunneries is not clearly defined, its ambiguity leaving it open to interpretations which could cause resentment amongst the nunneries. In presenting a negative image of Ælfthryth, the nunneries were rejecting common gender and royal status in favour of asserting their ecclesiastical identity, which in itself represented a move towards institutional autonomy.[170] The actions of Ælfthryth highlight the conflict of interests inherent in the *Concordia* – on one hand the *Concordia* gave the nunneries freedom from secular noble interference, and on the other it tied them to the royal dynasty by an ill-defined authority, producing inevitable tensions. Certainly, no future queens were to take such a direct role in the affairs of a nunnery.

Despite the disruption to the royal line brought about by years of Danish rule in the tenth century, the idea of the queen as protector of the nunneries was not one which faded. In the eleventh-century Life of St. Edward, Queen Edith is depicted as the co-protectress of the monasteries, labouring over renovations to the nunnery at Wilton.[171] In reality, Edith's family, the Godwins, had long-running links with Wilton and her patronage may well have sprung from this history, rather than from any ill-defined obligation recorded in the *Concordia* almost a century before. As with every aspect of the nunneries, disentangling family loyalties from reformist or political interests is difficult.

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[169] D. A. Bullough, 'The Continental Background of the Reform', in *Tenth Century Studies*, ed.by Parsons, pp.20-36, (p.35)
[170] P. Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh- Century England', *Past and Present,* 163 (1999) 3-35 (p.32)
[171] Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church,* p.118

Landholding

No direct reference is made to communal landholding in either the Rule or the *Concordia*. However, the statement in the *Concordia* that the King and Queen were to guard and protect communities from scandal may relate to land and estates. Our modern understanding of 'scandal' is generally linked to sexual misconduct and brings to mind Edgar's predatory behaviour towards Wulfhild, but it seems possible that the 'scandal' referred to in the *Concordia* was actually the predatory behaviour of lay noblemen in seizing land from religious communities for their own benefit. If so, this pushes landholding into central position on the reformists' agenda.

The evidence for the impact of reform on nunnery landholding has been discussed in Chapter 1, showing greater security of tenure following the reign of Edgar. The survival of the nunneries following the Conquest depended in large part on their ability to retain control of their estates, therefore if autonomous control of property is seen as a reformist concern, it was possibly the policy which brought about the greatest long-term benefits to the nunneries.

Conclusion

Blair claims that there is 'no real evidence that even the nunneries at Winchester, Romsey and Wilton … matched the Benedictine image later projected back on them.'[172] It is certainly true that immediate and universal change did not occur when the *Regularis Concordia* was produced, but the evidence is far too patchy and incomplete to be able to assess any impact of reform with confidence. In particular, the spiritual life and observance of the nunneries is almost impossible to discern. We only see life within the nunneries through the prism of saints' Lives, particularly that of Edith. Goscelin's *Vita* of Edith paints a picture somewhat antithetical to Benedictine norms, but her experience of monastic life may not typify that of most non-royal nuns or of communities other than Wilton.

[172] Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p.348

However, we should not be surprised that immediate transformation is not evident, since progress towards reform in most male houses was slow if discernible at all, Æthelwold's eviction of clerks from Winchester being the obvious exception. It has been suggested that by the turn of the tenth century the high point of revival was over and decline then set in, in which case evidence of reform would be difficult to find.[173] However, charters granting to the nunneries confirmation of tenure and free election of abbesses show that reform had at the very least set in motion crucial steps towards autonomy which were ultimately to secure their long-term future.

It seems likely that the effects of reform were not uniform throughout the nunneries – those newly founded or re-founded during the episcopacy of Æthelwold and in his diocese, such as Nunnaminster and Romsey, may have had higher expectations of Benedictine standards than the communities at Wilton and Shaftesbury which had already amassed great wealth and had close ties to royal and noble families. For those founded by Ælfthryth, opportunities for reform may have had to wait until her death released them from her control. It may be precisely because of this lack of uniformity in the impact of reform that the saints' Lives and the incursions into politics following Edgar's death all come from Wilton and Shaftesbury: they may have been the only nunneries at that time not bound by stricter standards of Benedictine enclosure and observance. As a result, they are also the communities producing most documentary evidence.

It is still a matter of debate how far-reaching monastic reform was intended to be, but the primary focus of reform appears to have been male communities; by 1066 thirty-five houses of monks had been founded, but only nine of women.[174] Æthelwold's main interest lay in founding new monasteries and eliminating secular clerks, not in overseeing communities of women.[175] A lack of episcopal interest in women's houses, coupled with the nunneries' wealth and their royal and noble connections, may have opened up opportunities for nunneries to pick and choose aspects of reform which were advantageous to each particular house in its particular context. Therefore, although

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[173] D.H. Farmer, 'The Progress of the Monastic Revival' in *Tenth Century Studies*, ed. by Parsons, pp. 10-19 (p.15)
[174] Ibid, p.16
[175] Yorke, 'Sisters Under the Skin?', p.109

reform may have changed the trajectory of all the nunneries in terms of autonomy and observance, the rate at which change occurred and the processes they went through were probably different for each community.

The truth may be that the nunneries were so closely entwined with the royal dynasty, harbouring its widows, unmarried daughters and discarded wives, they would always be more permeable to the lay world than male communities, and complete adherence to The Rule for them would never have been the aspiration of even the earnest Æthelwold.[176] In terms of the institutional development of the nunneries, it is therefore impossible to separate the influence of reform from the context of family politics in which they were embroiled.

[176] Stafford, 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen', p.17

Conclusion

Closely connected to the royal family, the royal nunneries could never be communities living in complete isolation from the landscape in which they were set. Kin group loyalties were central to Anglo-Saxon society, and the royal nunneries were populated by women carrying those loyalties within their communities and patronised by kin outside their walls. However, perhaps too much emphasis has been given by historians in the past to the dependence of the nunneries on their royal patrons. Undoubtedly royal patronage ensured the economic viability of the nunneries, but it is very easy to be dazzled by the 'royal' affiliations of royal nunneries and become blind to the complex web of connections between these nunneries and the wider landscape in which they existed. The number of royal women actually resident in the nunneries before the Conquest is not impressive, indeed Romsey only had tenuous royal connections through the Queen's stepdaughter, and we do not know of any royal resident at Amesbury. It may be that more royal women populated the nunneries than we are aware of, but nevertheless close connection to the royal family at any given time was probably not guaranteed. Male communities founded during the period of reform, though not populated by royal men, were nevertheless all supported by royal patronage at their foundation as were the nunneries, yet they are not referred to as 'royal.'

Most importantly, the six royal nunneries should not be seen as a homogeneous group or a federation in any sense. They were fundamentally different to one another in terms of wealth, kin-group affiliations, royal personnel and function. Patronage seemed to serve short-term purposes depending on whether a member of the family was resident or whether spiritual or political benefit could be gained. Therefore, it is impossible to generalise about the impact of external influences on the nunneries as each one would have experienced them very differently. Life within Nunnaminster under the watchful eye of Æthelwold, for example, may have been very different to that at Wilton, with its larger population of noble, marriageable girls receiving education there. It could be argued that Wilton was the female equivalent of Glastonbury in terms of its prestige and its role in educating the daughters of noble families, for which there seems to be less evidence from the other nunneries. The effects of reform were probably felt more profoundly at

Nunnaminster than at Shaftesbury, which was located further from Æthelwold's diocesan seat and already had a long-established tradition. Indeed, it seems doubtful that the royal dynasty itself would have recognised the nunneries as a distinct group or that they felt any responsibility to maintain them all as permanent institutions.

Although the nunneries were wealthy institutions, the opportunities open to them to shape their own Anglo-Saxon landscapes were in practice quite limited. They occupied a small area in the south of England, were completely dependent on royal and aristocratic patronage and were not the primary focus of Church interest, which lay in male religious communities. However, it was the nunneries' ability to bestow sanctity which gave them a tool with which they could exert some level of control, rewarding and shaping favourable characteristics of kingship and even, in the case of Cnut, validating a monarch's reign. Nowhere was this more evident than in the period following the death of Edgar, when the cults of Edward the Martyr and Edith became linked to resistance to the Danes and were sufficiently powerful to demand the attention of kings. However, even here the extent to which the initiative came from the nuns themselves and the extent to which they were manipulated by external agencies is impossible to ascertain.

Prior to the monastic reforms of Æthelwold, Dunstan and Oswald, the institutional aspirations of patrons for the nunneries appear to have been very short-term and limited. Reform appears to have set the royal nunneries on a trajectory towards independent governance and security of land tenure which was to ensure their survival through the political upheaval of the Danes, the Conquest and beyond. Ironically, perhaps the greatest contribution made by the royal nunneries in the longer term was to demonstrate that female religious houses could be viable institutions without royal oversight.

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