

UNIT 3

King Oswald of Northumbria

Oswald was king of Northumbria between **634** and **642**. Before 600 two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been established north of the river Humber. The northerly kingdom of Bernicia was centred around Bamburgh and the southerly kingdom of Deira around York. Together, these two comprised the kingdom of Northumbria. Both Bernicia and Deira were bounded on the west and north by the British (Celtic) kingdoms of Elmet, Rheged, and Gododdin. Elmet lay in the foothills of the Pennines to the west of York. The kingdom of Rheged lay in the area around the Solway Firth and Gododdin around the Firth of Forth. By the mid 7th century both Elmet and Gododdin had been conquered by the Anglo-Saxons; the British or Celtic peoples of these two kingdoms had been brought under the rule of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria.

The first king of Northumbria to rule in the 7th century was Ethelfrith who, according to Bede died in the year 616 after a reign of 24 years. Ethelfrith was king of Bernicia, but for much of his reign he also ruled Deira, having prudently married the daughter of a former king of Deira, Aelle. Of Aelle's two male heirs who might have opposed Ethelfrith, Edwin went into exile in, among other places, East Anglia and Mercia, and Hereric, Edwin's nephew, went into exile in the British kingdom of Elmet, where he was later poisoned. Of Ethelfrith, Bede says:

He ravaged the Britons more than all men of the English ... he conquered more territories from the Britons, either making them tributary or driving the inhabitants clean out, and planting English in their places, than any other king. (*Ecclesiastical History*, book 1, chapter 34)

Bede also records a battle in 603 in which Ethelfrith vanquished Aedan, king of Dalrhiada, a Scottish kingdom in the area of Argyle and including the island of Iona. For this see accompanying map which highlights 'Irish Dalriada' and 'Dalriada' in the south west of present-day Scotland. This battle seems to have led to an alliance with the northern Britons and the Scots, for after Ethelfrith's death his son Oswald spent his exile in Dalrhiada; this is the 'Scotland-on-sea' referred to in the

Life of Oswald, where Oswald was baptized.

In 616 Ethelfrith met his end at the battle on the river Idle, engaged in a trial of strength with Edwin, a Deiran, the son of Aelle, and his protector, Redwald of East Anglia. Edwin, having survived his exile, succeeded Ethelfrith in both Deira and Bernicia, and in their turn, Ethelfrith's sons went into exile, Eanfrith to the nation of the Picts where he married a Pictish princess, and Oswald and Oswy to Dalrhiada.

Edwin's reign (616–633) was seen by Bede as one of marked success. He was the first Northumbrian king to be baptized. Edwin had married the daughter of the king of Kent who had received baptism from St Augustine, the Roman missionary sent by Pope Gregory. When she journeyed to Northumbria, she was accompanied by a Roman missionary, Paulinus, and after considerable delay, Edwin was converted and baptized by Paulinus. This marks the introduction of Roman Christianity into Northumbria.

See again **Document 3**: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 2, chapter 13. Edwin was also the first Northumbrian king to be overlord or *bretwalda*, and his authority extended over all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms except Kent. There is much in Bede's account of Edwin's reign that throws light on kingship and the trappings of kingship in 7th-century Northumbria.

Edwin too met a violent death. Bede records that in 633 Cadwalla, king of Gwynnedd, a British or Celtic kingdom in the region of modern Gwynnedd (north Wales), rebelled against Edwin, and allied with Penda of Mercia, Cadwalla inflicted a crushing defeat on the Northumbrians at Hatfield. These events are referred to in the *Life of Oswald*. The text also records the defeat by Cadwalla of Edwin's two successors. These were Edwin's cousin Osric who succeeded him in Deira, and Eanfrith, son of Ethelfrith who succeeded to Bernicia. After the death of Edwin, the kingdom of Northumbria had split apart and fallen into the two ancient constituent parts under the rule of these two men. Both Osric and Eanfrith had been baptized, but both reverted to paganism. It was Oswald who defeated Cadwalla in 634 and reunited Deira and Bernicia and restored the overlordship to Northumbria. The defeat of Cadwalla is a major episode in *The Life of Oswald*.

In the year between the death of Edwin and the accession of Oswald,

Northumbria had reverted to paganism. Paulinus, taking with him Edwin's family, returned to Kent and the Roman mission collapsed. As the *Life of Oswald* records, Oswald was responsible for the initiative that led to the reintroduction of Christianity into Northumbria. However, he did not turn to the Roman mission in the south, but rather to the kingdom of the Scots, *Dahrhiada*, where he had been baptized while he was in exile. The leader of the mission was bishop Aidan, a monk of Iona. Aidan's mission introduced Celtic Christianity and Celtic traditions into Northumbria.

Most of Bede's account of Oswald, and indeed a large portion of Ælfric's *Life of Oswald* are devoted to Oswald's invitation to the Scottish mission under Aidan, his establishment of the see of Lindisfarne, and the conversion of Northumbria after the lapse which followed Edwin's death. Oswald was overlord or *bretwalda*, and his wide influence is revealed by Bede and in the *Life*. Oswald's interest was not confined to those kingdoms to the south; as the *Life* records, Oswald was king over four ethnic groups, the Picts, Britons, Scots, and the English. The first three peoples are, of course, Celtic peoples.

Oswald was killed in battle by Penda of Mercia at Maserfelth in 642. He was succeeded by his brother Oswy, and from 642 to the end of the 7th century, the kingdom of Northumbria was ruled by direct descendants of the Bernician line.

Read Ælfric's *Life of King Oswald* and consider the following points. Ælfric's *Life of King Oswald* is of interest for many reasons. For our purposes, consider how the text conceives of military heroism and the way in which it introduces references to the Christian God into heroic action. It is useful to keep this aspect of heroism in mind when you are reading texts such as the *Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*. Do you think that the references to the Christian God diminish our view of the nature of Oswald's heroism? Also, consider how the text balances the roles of Oswald and Aidan. Although the text is about King Oswald, we see that he and his role as king are affected by the presence of Bishop Aidan. What significance does the narrative attach to Aidan and how does his presence affect the narrative and our perceptions of heroism? Does the text seek to redefine heroism in Christian terms? If so, how does it redefine heroism?

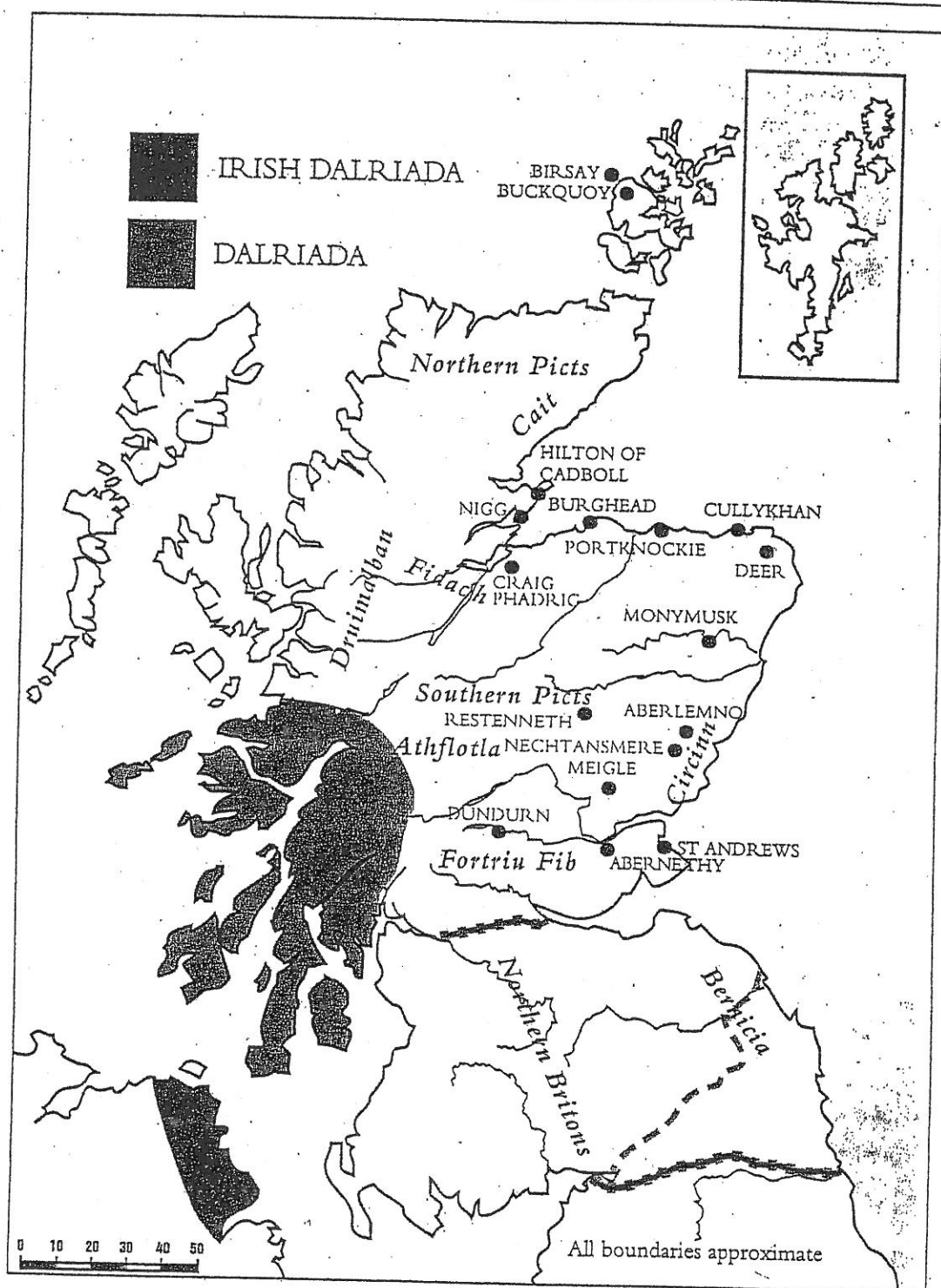


Figure 7 Historical Pictland.
Scale is in miles

ÆLFRIC'S LIFE OF KING OSWALD

Ælfric (955–1020) is one of the most accomplished and authoritative writers of Anglo-Saxon prose. He was born around 955 and grew up at Winchester in the Benedictine monastery there. He spent a brief period around 987 at Cerne Abbey in Dorset but returned to Winchester. He became abbot at Eynsham, Oxfordshire, where he remained until his death. His writings include homilies and saints' lives as well as educational texts and translations from Latin. The following text is from his account of the life and career of the seventh-century king of Northumbria, Oswald (who was king between 634 and 642).

Æfter ðan ðe Augustinus to Engla lande becom, wæs sum æðele cynig, Oswald gehaten, on Norðhymbra lande, gelyfed swyðe on God. Se ferde on his iugode fram his freondum and magum to Scotlande on sæ, and þær sona wearð gefullod, and his geferan samod þe mid him sipedon. Betwux þam wearð ofslagen Eadwine his eam, Norðhymbra cynig, on Crist gelyfed, fram Brytta cyninge, Ceadwalla geciged, and twegen his æftergengan binnan twam gearum. And se Ceadwalla sloh and to sceame tucode þa Norðhymbra leode æfter heora hlaforðes fylle, oð þæt Oswald se eadiga his yfelnysses adwæste. Oswald him com to, and him cenlice wið feaht mid lytlum werode, ac his geleafa hine getrymde, and Crist him gefylste to his feonda slege.

Oswald þa aræde ane rode sona Gode to wurðmynte, ær þan þe he to ðam gewinne come, and clypode to his geferum: 'Uton feallan to ðære rode, and þone Ælmihtigan biddan þæt he us alreðde wið þone modigan feond þe us afyllan wile: God sylf wat geara þæt we winnað rihtlice wið þysne reðan cynig to alreðdenne ure leode.' Hi feollon þa ealle mid Oswolde cyninge on gebedum; and syðþan on ærne mergen eodon to þam gefeohte, and gewunnon þær sige, swa swa se Eallwealdend heom ufe for Oswoldes geleafan; and aledon heora fynd, þone modigan Ceadwallan mid his micclan werode, þe wende þæt him ne mihte nan werod wiðstandan.

Seo ylce rod sippan, ðe Oswald þær aræde, on wurðmynte þær stod. Seo stow is gehaten 'Heofonfeld' on Englisc, wið ðone langan weall þe þa Romaniscan worhtan, þær þær Oswald oferwann þone wælhreowan cynig. And þær wearð sippan aræred swiðe mære cyrce Gode to wurðmynte, þe wunuð a on ecnysses.

Hwæt ða Oswald ongann embe Godes willan to smeagenne, sona swa he rices gewewold, and wolde gebigan his leode to geleafan and to þam lifigendan Gode.

ÆLFRIC'S LIFE OF KING OSWALD

(translation)

After Augustine came to the land of the Angles [*Engla lande*], there was a certain noble king named Oswald in the land of the Northumbrians [*Norðhymbra lande*], who believed very firmly in God. He had travelled in his youth from his friends and kinsmen to Scotland-on-sea [*Dalrhiada*], and there he was immediately baptised along with his companions who had travelled together with him. In the meantime, Edwin, his uncle, king of the Northumbrians, who believed in Christ, was slain by the British king, named Cadwalla, who also slew his two successors within two years. And this Cadwalla slew and shamefully ill-treated the Northumbrian people after their lord's death, until the blessed Oswald put an end to his wickedness. Oswald confronted him, and bravely fought against him with a small army, but his belief sustained him, and Christ helped him in the slaying of his enemies. [1–10]

Oswald had immediately raised up a cross in honour of God before he advanced to the battle, and called out to his companions: 'Let us fall down before this cross and pray to the Almighty that he should save us from the proud enemy who intends to destroy us: God himself well knows that we fight justly against this fierce king to save our people'. They all fell down with King Oswald in prayer, and after, in the morning, they advanced to the battle and achieved a victory there just as the Almighty granted them because of Oswald's faith. And they destroyed their enemy, the proud Cadwalla with his great army, who believed that no army might be able to withstand him. [11–19]

That same cross which Oswald raised up there in the honour of God, stood in that place afterwards. The place is called 'Heofonfeld' in English, (and it is) beside the long wall that the Romans built in the place where Oswald defeated the fierce king. And afterwards was built there a very famous church in honour of God who lives forever in eternity. [20–24]

Indeed, then Oswald began to consider God's will as soon as he ruled the kingdom, and wished to convert his people to the belief and to the living God.

Sende ða to Scotlande, þær se geleafa wæs ða, and bæd ða heafdomenn þæt hi his benum getipodon, and him sumne lareow sendon, þe his leode mihte to Gode gewerman; and him wearð þæs getipod. Hi sendon þa sona þam gesælgan cyninge sumne arwurðne bisceop, Aidan gehāten. Se wæs mæres lifes man on munuclice drohtnunge, and he ealle woruldcaras awareap from his heortan, nanes þinges winnigende butan Godes willan. Swa hwæt swa him becom of þæs cyniges gifum oððe ricra manna, þæt he hraðe dælde þearfum and wæðlum mid welwillendum mode.

35 Hwæt ða, Oswold cyning his cymes fægnode, and hine arwurðlice underfeng his folce to ðearfe, þæt heora geleafa wurde awend eft to Gode fram þam wipersæce þe hi to gewende wæron. Hit gelamp þa swa þæt se geleaffula cyning gerehte his witan on heora agenum gereorde þæs bisceopes bodunge mid bliþum mode, and wæs his wealhstod; for þan þe he wel cuþe Scyttisc, and se bisceop Aidan ne mihte gebigan his spræce to Norðhymbriscum gereorde swa hraþe þa git. Se biscop þa ferde bodigende, geond eall Norðhymbra land, geleafan and fulluht, and þa leode gebigde to Godes geleafan, and him wel gebysnode mid weorcum symle, and sylf swa leofode swa swa he lærde oðre. He lufode forhæfednysse and halige rædunge, and iunge men teah georne mid lare, swa þæt ealle his geferan þe him mid eodon sceoldon sealmas leornian oððe sume rædunge, swa hwider swa hi ferdon þam folce bodigende. Seldon he wolde ridan, ac siððe on his foton, and munuclice leofode betwux ðam læwedan folce mid mycelre gesceadwisnysse and soþum mægnum.

Oswoldes cynerice wearð gerymed þa swyðe, swa þæt feower þeoda hine underfengon to hlaforde, Peohhtas, and Bryttas, Scottas, and Angles, swa swa se ælmihtiga God hi geanlæhte to-ðam for Oswoldes gearnungum þe hine æfre wurðode. He fulworhte on Eferwic þæt ænlice mynster þe his mæg Eadwine ær begunnen hæfde; and he swanc for heofonan rice mid singalum gebedum swiðor þonne he hogode hu he geheolde on worulde þa hwilwendlican gebincou, þe he hwonlice lufode. He wolde æfter uhtsange oftost hine gebiddan, and on cyrcan standa on syndrigum gebedum of sunnan upgange mid swylicre onbryrdnysse; and swa hwær swa he wæs he wurðode æfre God, upawendum handbædum wið, þæs heofones weard.

He sent then to Scotland where the faith was then, and asked the leaders to grant his requests. And they sent to him a certain teacher who might lead his people to God; and this was granted to him. They sent then immediately to the blessed king a certain worthy bishop called Aidan. He was a man well known in the monastic life, and he cast aside from his heart all worldly cares, desiring nothing except God's will. Whatsoever came to him in the way of gifts from the king or powerful men, those things he quickly gave away to the needy and poor with a generous spirit. [25-34]

Indeed, then King Oswald rejoiced at his coming, and honourably received him to his people in their time of need, so that their belief might turn again to God from the apostasy to which they had turned. It happened then that the believing king, with a glad heart, instructed the members of his council in their own language, and was Aidan's interpreter, because he knew Scottish well, and the bishop Aidan was not able to convert his speech into the Northumbrian language so quickly as yet. The bishop then travelled throughout all of the land of the Northumbrians preaching the belief and baptism, and converted the people to belief in God, and at all times set an example through his works, and he himself lived just as he taught others. He loved self-discipline and holy reading, and he eagerly instructed young men with his teaching so that all his companions who travelled with him had to learn psalms or some holy reading wheresoever he travelled preaching to the people. Seldom would he ride, but travelled on foot and lived the life of a monk among the unlearned people with great wisdom and true virtue. [35-48]

Oswald's kingdom became greatly enlarged, so that four peoples received him as their lord, namely the Picts, the British, the Scots, and the Angles, just as the Almighty God united them to that extent because of Oswald's merits who always honoured him. He completed in York that spendid minster that his kinsman Edwin had begun, and he laboured for the kingdom of heaven with continuous prayers more than he thought how he maintain in the world the transitory dignity which he loved very little. After morning prayer he would pray with intense fervour, and wherever he was, with his hands turned upward, he always honoured God, the guardian of heaven. [49-58]