



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## **Authors, Narratives, and Audiences in Medieval Saints' Lives**

**How to Cite:** Thomson, S C 2018 Telling the Story: Reshaping Saint Christopher for an Anglo-Saxon Lay Audience. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 29, pp. 1–31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.306>

**Published:** 16 October 2018

---

### **Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

### **Copyright:**

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### **Open Access:**

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### **Digital Preservation:**

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**AUTHORS, NARRATIVES, AND AUDIENCES IN MEDIEVAL SAINTS' LIVES**

# Telling the Story: Reshaping Saint Christopher for an Anglo-Saxon Lay Audience

Simon C. Thomson

Heinrich Heine Universität, DE

[simon.thomson@hhu.de](mailto:simon.thomson@hhu.de)

---

The Old English Saint Christopher has, like much anonymous vernacular hagiography, gone under-studied. This is partly because its manuscript context results in it being mentioned dismissively alongside more famous texts, and partly because no source has been identified or published. Based on a survey of the fifteen extant pre-thirteenth-century versions across about fifty of their manuscript forms, it is possible to show numerous and significant additions and alterations unique to this vernacular retelling. These changes ameliorate Christopher's extreme passivity with some active attributes, make the king he opposes more deranged and cruel, and in particular tighten and clarify the story. The Old English Christopher is no masterpiece, but it is a skilful and creative reimagining of a very widespread text, developed by an authorial translator to meet the interests and needs of an Anglo-Saxon audience.

---

## Background

The production of saints' lives, primarily through translation, reached industrial proportions in Anglo-Saxon England (Lazzari, Lendinara and Di Sciacca, 2014; Gretsich, 2006; Blair, 2005; Blair, 2002; Lees, 1999; Rollason, 1989; Rollason, 1986; Skeat, 1966). By some distance the most prolific author was Ælfric of Eynsham, who sought to ensure that the laypeople of England received clear guidance to holy living through vernacular homilies and hagiography.<sup>1</sup> His work is well-studied, in discussions that often emphasise his interest in clarifying narrative and meaning (e.g. Hall, 2009; Gretsich, 2006; Zettel, 1982). His narratorial role is very clearly didactic and authoritative, to the extent of reserving some stories for clerics alone, on the grounds that they are too difficult for lay understanding (Wilcox, 1994, e.g. 127; Whatley, 2002). Ælfric's interest in control can be seen in his directions to scribes that his *Lives of Saints* should be maintained as a unit and copied precisely (Hill, 2009; Scragg, 2006). And yet the insertion of additional lives into Ælfrician collections is well-attested. Even in his own lifetime, compilers of manuscripts supplemented copies of his work with translations by other, anonymous, translators as can be seen in, for instance, London, British Library, Cotton MS Julius E. vii (Kleist, 2009; Thomson, 2018a, 260–264; 274–275).<sup>2</sup>

One such anonymous hagiography is the *passio* of saint Christopher, once included in the largely Ælfrician collection London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho B. x (Tite, 1984).<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this manuscript was extremely badly damaged in the 1731 Ashburnham House fire and the life of Christopher almost entirely lost (on the fire, see Prescott, 1997; for recovered readings from this text, see McGowan, 1995). However, a contents list was made by Thomas Smith in 1696, during his

---

<sup>1</sup> For an important discussion of the role of the vernacular in this period, counter to some of the assumptions I make in this discussion, see Gittos, 2014 and references.

<sup>2</sup> This body of vernacular saints' lives has received intermittent attention, often focused on questions of gender (e.g. Szarmach, 2013; Szarmach, 1996) or, as with Mary of Egypt, stimulated by the publication of an edition (Magennis, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Strictly London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho B. x (excluding fols. 29, 30, 51, 58, 62, 61, 63, 64, 66). On this manuscript, in addition to Tite, see also Ker, 1957: §177; Gneuss and Lapidge, 2015: §355.

curation of the Cottonian library, so it is possible to know that Christopher was the eleventh item in a homiletic collection.<sup>4</sup> Based on Smith's list, Otho B. x was an essentially Ælfrician manuscript into which four non-Ælfrician hagiographies were inserted: lives, respectively, of Euphrosyne, Christopher, Mary of Egypt, and the Seven Sleepers.<sup>5</sup> Euphrosyne, Mary of Egypt, and the Seven Sleepers are also, along with Eustace, the non-Ælfrician texts inserted into Julius E. vii. In what may be an attempt to claim some status for them, in both instances the anonymous texts are inserted into the middle of a sequence of works by Ælfric. The appeal of this small corpus of anonymous lives is worth considering in further detail, as is perhaps the question of what made them unattractive to Ælfric himself; they could, perhaps, be regarded as 'popular hagiography' as opposed to the authoritative work of the abbot of Eynsham.<sup>6</sup> As Kenneth Sisam showed long ago, this impression of Christopher's popularity is supported by the presence of a prayer to him in the fire-damaged Galba Prayerbook.<sup>7</sup> For now, however, it suffices to note the presence of an English translation of Christopher's life in Otho B. x as part of a larger collection of (primarily) non-English saints.

---

<sup>4</sup> Hagiographical items are 3 – Basil; 4 – Maurus; 5 – Julian and Basilissa; 6 – Sebastian; 7 – Agnes; 8 – John and Paul; 9 – Eugenia; 10 – Euphrosyne [anon.]; 11 – Christopher [anon.]; 12 – Mary of Egypt [anon.]; 13 – Seven Sleepers [anon.]; 14 – Helen's Discovery of the Cross; 20 – Swithun; 21 – Edmund; 22 – George; 23 – Æthelthryth; 24 – John the Baptist. All are by Ælfric unless otherwise noted here, with most surrounding texts Ælfrician homilies or letters.

<sup>5</sup> The dominance of lives of female saints in this group may not be incidental: Christopher was clearly often connected with women; see Thomson, 2019 for full discussion. The only certainly English manuscript of a Latin life of Christopher is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. MS 5574, fols. 1–39 (s. ix/x, Worcester?). Containing BHL 1770 (related to but clearly distinct from the source of the Old English translation), what survives of this manuscript has Christopher followed by Helen's discovery and then exaltation of the Cross, followed by the passions of Margaret and Juliana.

<sup>6</sup> Sisam (1953b: 71) suggests that Ælfric may have not composed a life of Christopher because this translation was already extant. This is entirely plausible, though the slightly unusual nature of each of these saints, and the clear desire here to claim an Ælfrician connection they do not have, may make Ælfric's approval of them less likely.

<sup>7</sup> London, British Library, Cotton MS Galba A. xiv (Leominster? s. xi<sup>2/4</sup>). Christopher's prayer is on fols. 149r–149v. From what I can make out of the text, it seems to be a general invocation for the saint's aid. See also Gneuss and Lapidge, 2015: §333; Ker, 1957: §157; Sisam, 1953b: 71; Bishop, 1918: 390.

A better-known, fuller but still partial, copy is extant in London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv (Part 2).<sup>8</sup> Mostly as a result of the connection with *Beowulf*, the text has been edited a number of times (Fulk, 2010; Pulsiano, 2002; Rypins, 1924; Einkenkel, 1893; Herzfeld, 1888). The linguistic interest of the text is limited, written as it is in standard late West-Saxon dateable to the tenth century.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, literary discussions tend to simply note that the central figure is a giant cynocephalus and therefore accept its inclusion in a manuscript most often read as being interested in the monstrous.<sup>10</sup> This is understandable: there are many prose hagiographies, and this one is missing its first two thirds including (arguably) its key point of interest: the description of the saint's dog head. However, the story of Christopher, and its inclusion in the Nowell Codex, merits further attention. In particular, I hope to show here that the translation is free and creative, developing the narrative into a coherent and dramatically taut story with some adaptation to Anglo-Saxon tastes: evidently produced by a talented writer who was focused on a lay audience.

There has been some minor dispute over the closeness of the two partially surviving English texts, and it is therefore important to briefly clarify the evidence for their relationship (Ker, 1957; Malone, 1963; Pickles, 1971; Orchard, 2003). Of Otho, the incipit survives and the explicit was recorded by Humphrey Wanley.<sup>11</sup> As the opening of Nowell does not survive, only the explicits can be compared. These show

---

<sup>8</sup> Approximately the first two thirds of the text are missing. They were lost before 1563, when Lawrence Nowell, Dean of Lichfield, signed his name to what was then the first side of the manuscript, now fol. 91(93) (BL94)r (on both Nowell and the complex foliation of the manuscript, see Thomson, 2018a: xix–xx; Kiernan, 1996: 91–110). The manuscript is also often called 'the *Beowulf* Manuscript' and 'the Nowell Codex'. I use the second of these names here and elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> The language is discussed in detail by Pickles, 1971 and more briefly by Sisam, 1953a.

<sup>10</sup> There are, though, some discussions of it in literary terms: see Thomson, 2018a; Lionarons, 2002; Frederick, 1989. As part of their considerations of the texts of the Nowell Codex, it is also discussed by Howe, 2008: esp. 179–182; Powell, 2006: esp. 12; Orchard, 2003: esp. 12–18.

<sup>11</sup> The incipit reads: 'Menn þa leofestan. On þære tide wæs geworden þe Dagnus se cync rixode on Samon þære ceastre. þæt sum man com on þa ceastre se wæs healf hundiscs manncynnes. ac he ne cude nan þinge to þam lyfiendan gode ne his naman ne cigde. þa wæs him ætywed fram urum drihtne þæt he sceolde fulluhte onfon.' The explicit had: 'Forþam þe þær nu blowað 7 growað ða halgan gebedu 7 þær is drihtnes herung mid eallre sibbe 7 gefean and þær ys geblotsod crist þæs lyfigendes godes sunu se rixað mid fæder 7 mid sunu 7 mid þam halgan gaste a butan ende on ecnysse. AMEN.' See also Ker, 1957: §177; Orchard, 2003: 13–14.

that Otho did not include the concluding sentence of Nowell, which adds a prayer by Christopher for all of those who read or write his text (discussed further below); this has been used and accepted as evidence that the versions were different, with Otho potentially for preaching and Nowell for private use (Sisam, 1953b; Pickles, 1973: 23–24; Orchard, 2003: 12–13). However, it is important to note that Latin manuscripts of the life, whether intended for preaching or not, show considerable variance in including and adapting this prayer.<sup>12</sup> In my view, the more significant evidence of the close relationship between the English copies is how exceptional they both are in contrast to all Latin versions. There is, in fact, no direct equivalent to either of the two sentences in the Otho explicit, as recorded by Wanley, in any copy other than Nowell; Latin texts move directly from the king's conversion to a generic conclusion giving glory to God, some with the insertion of Christopher's additional prayer. None meditate on the spread of Christ's rule. Despite their differences, that both Nowell and Otho include these sentences make it significantly more likely that they originated from the same translation. One of the phrases with no equivalent in the source and shared by these English texts is 'blowað ⁊ growað' ('flourish and grow'), describing the future spread of Christopher's prayers.<sup>13</sup> It is unlikely in the extreme that two different renderings of the narrative chose to use the same phrase where nothing is required by the source. It is not possible to know whether the Nowell version had a translation of Christopher's additional prayer added to it, or if this sentence was excluded from the Otho version; most likely it was dropped from Otho to enhance its suitability for sermon delivery. It is also clear that what can be compared shows considerable orthographical variance, and it is likely that both are somewhat distant from the original production and from one another (Sisam 1953b). But I consider it indisputable that both texts derive from the same translation.

---

<sup>12</sup> The prayer is usually included in BHL 1766, 1768, 1769, and 1773; and usually excluded from BHL 1765, 1767, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1775 (I have not yet seen the sole attested manuscript of BHL 1774, Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, MS 11550–11555 (3233)). But this is not always followed consistently; for instance, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm MS 2552 (BHL 1766) does not include it.

<sup>13</sup> This precise phrase only otherwise occurs in the probably tenth-century metrical translation of Psalm 64.11. The combination of the verbs *blowan* and *growan* is, however, more commonplace and need not have a specific source.

## The Early Medieval Saint Christopher

The story of saint Christopher was widespread in early medieval western Europe, taking two main forms with a large number of derivatives showing more and less significant variations.<sup>14</sup> These were divided by the Bollandists into seventeen versions, numbered 1764–1780 (Société des Bollandistes, 1898–1901, vol 1: 266–268). The two main groups are what I call the ‘Decius group’, after the name given to Christopher’s key adversary, comprising 1764–1765 (likely the earliest Latin version and a sophisticated later adaptation); and the ‘Dagnus group’ 1766–1775.<sup>15</sup> Only 1764, 1766, and 1767 have been printed.<sup>16</sup> Based on the final prayers, Neil Ker (1957: 281), followed by Phillip Pulsiano (2002: 168–169) and Pam Weisweiler (1985–1986: 2–5), noted that 1768 and 1769 are the closest of these to Nowell, with the advantage probably held by 1769. Separately, in unpublished correspondence, James Cross suggested correspondences with 1767 as close enough to be a potential source.<sup>17</sup> While there are some details in 1767 that correspond to the Old English translation, they are

<sup>14</sup> The earlier history of the legend is obscure, but see discussions in Buxton, 2006; Schneider, 2005; White, 1991; Newall, 1980; Loeschcke, 1955; Ameisenowa, 1949; Rosenfeld, 1937. The most comprehensive and scholarly review of the evidence is Biggs et al, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Decius refers to the historical Trajan Decius; Dagnus is otherwise unknown. The historical Decius (r. AD 249–251) was an emperor of Rome with a fearsome reputation for producing Christian martyrs, but had few associations with the place and events of Christopher’s story. It is conceivable that Dagnus is a corruption of Decius, but also that Decius was a rationalisation by a martyrologist, given the association of Christopher with some of Decius’ other martyrs, such as Vitalis (also commemorated on 28 April, one of Christopher’s dates). In all versions where it occurs, Dagnus’ name is given significance as showing his demonic heritage, perhaps by association with Dagon, a Babylonian deity connected with the Philistines in the Bible, or, more likely, based on an attested corruption of *damnare* to *dagnare*. His name awaits much fuller discussion. I am very grateful to Eric Lacey for this last suggestion and for discussing this with me. BHL 1776 and BHL 1777 are respectively verse and prose editions by Walther von Speyer, composed in the late tenth century, edited in Strecker, 1937, 1778 is an unpublished eleventh-century *Passio rhythmica*. Despite (or perhaps due to) their sophistication, neither seems to have had any impact on the wider popular tradition. BHL 1779 is Jacobus de Voragine’s thirteenth-century rewrite for the *Legenda Sanctorum* (later *Legenda Aurea*), which made Christopher’s encounter with the infant Christ an integral element of the legend, and BHL 1780 is a later revision of that version by Giorgio Arbeni.

<sup>16</sup> For BHL 1764, see Bollandus et al, 1891; for BHL 1766, see Bollandus et al, 1868; and for BHL 1767, see Mombritius, 1910. I am working towards the editing of the different versions, focusing on those as yet unpublished.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Jane Roberts for sharing this correspondence with me.

all also shared with 1769 and there are other quite significant differences which, in my view, make it certain that there is no direct relationship between them.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Weisweiller found some corresponding details between a particular copy of BHL 1769 and Nowell.<sup>19</sup> The three most significant correspondences are:

1. in §12 of the Latin text, both have ten vessels of oil poured onto the fire intended to burn the saint, whereas most versions have forty;
2. in §14, the arrows fired at Christopher hang in the air on his right-hand side only (this also occurs in 1768);
3. lastly and perhaps most convincingly, in §17, Nowell has a specific total of 48,115 people converted by Christopher. The same number appears in 1769, whereas 1766 has 48,111 and both 1767 and 1768 round down to 48,000.<sup>20</sup>

While I have not been able to identify a specific source for the Old English text, it seems certain that it was based on a copy of the BHL 1769 tradition, probably one also closely related to the (considerably later) Munich 22242. It is on this basis that comparisons are made below, with reference to other texts and specific manuscripts where productive (contrast Biggs et al, 2001, who must have worked with published

---

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Dagnus is repeatedly referred to as *imperator* rather than *rex*, the arrows hang on both the left- and right-hand sides of Christopher, and the final additional prayer for those who write and those who read the passion is omitted.

<sup>19</sup> Munich, Staatsbibliothek, Clm MS 22242. It is the third volume in the comprehensive collection of saints' lives produced at Windberg 1141–1191, most fully described in Klemm, 1980: §170. The six volumes each cover two months; the process as a whole was carefully managed and the manuscripts were used for many years by the community at Windberg.

<sup>20</sup> Weisweiller died while completing an MA thesis on these and other issues. I am very grateful to Jane Roberts for sharing her notes (and much more) with me, and to Justin Weisweiller for encouraging me to continue his mother's work. An exception to this closeness with 1769 is that the Old English has Christopher's face in the fire looking 'swylce rosan blostma' ('like the bloom of a rose'). This lovely detail is paralleled only in BHL 1766 and BHL 1767 which have him looking like 'rosa noua' ('a new rose'); see also note 32, below and on this detail Thomson, 2018b and Frederick, 1989. Section numbers throughout are those used for BHL 1766 in Bollandus, 1891. These are not unproblematic, and are followed by neither BHL 1769 nor the Old English translation in the manuscripts and places where sectional divisions are applied. However, given that they are used in the published copy closest to both, I refer to them throughout for ease of comparison.



sources only). Where there is no parallel to a phrase in any extant Latin texts, I assume it to be an innovation of the translator.<sup>21</sup> While this discussion relies on manuscript copies and hagiographical classification, it is ultimately more about the process of retelling a story in late Anglo-Saxon England; discussion of manuscript variation is therefore mostly confined to notes in an attempt to maximise clarity.

In Anglo-Saxon scholarship, Christopher's narrative is usually summarised from the *narratio* contained in the *Old English Martyrology*, which is itself most closely related to BHL 1765 (Rauer, 2013: 90–91; Leinbaugh, 1985).<sup>22</sup> This has the unfortunate effect of leaving out a major sequence involving two women which must have been present in the Nowell version: I have not seen any other narrative account (including similar martyrological summaries) that excludes them (Thomson, 2019). The account that follows is therefore based on the narrative of BHL 1769 which, as above, is likely the closest to the Old English translation.

During the reign of Dagnus, which the text specifies as taking place in Samos, Syria, a cynocephalus is spoken to by God, baptised by a cloud, and given the gifts of speech and eloquence to convert people.<sup>23</sup> On the outskirts of the city, a woman coming out to pray to the pagan gods sees the monster's face and is so horrified that her own face changes (exactly how is not specified). She calls a crowd, who witness

---

<sup>21</sup> Primarily relying on the records of the Société des Bollandistes, I have identified 116 pre-1200 Latin copies and have prioritised working with those catalogued as versions with a possible relationship to the English traditions. The lives are, however, often mis-catalogued; I have not seen every manuscript on my list and it remains possible that a copy with closer correspondences exists.

<sup>22</sup> Some elements of the *Martyrology* text are not found in BHL 1765 but have some curious similarities to (the otherwise entirely separate) BHL 1766, as well as a vernacular Irish version in the 1765 tradition (printed by Fraser, 1913), and the earliest known Greek text, BHG 310, printed with a translation into Latin by van Hooff, 1891.

<sup>23</sup> The first mention of Christopher's cynocephaly (*canineus*) is often converted to *chananeus*, making him a Canaanite rather than a dog-head; some scribes seem to be convinced by the second and more detailed description (making him a cannibalistic cynocephalus from Canaan), and others keep him human throughout, just one whose appearance terrifies everyone who sees him for unexplained reasons. As above, note 11, the Otho B. x copy calls Christopher one of the 'healf hundiscas manncynnes' ('half-dog people'); the illustration of Christopher in a copy of Usuard's *Martyrology*, fol. 50r in Stuttgart, Württembergischen Landesbibliothek, cod. hist. MS 415, is labelled *chananeus* and still shows him with a bestial head, demonstrating that the ethnic attribution and cynocephalic nature are not mutually exclusive. I am not aware of any evidence for a non-beast-headed Christopher in England before the thirteenth century.

the saint's first miracle: he sets his staff in the ground, prays, and it blooms with leaves and fruit. The crowd converts. Dagnus sends soldiers to bring Christopher to him; they, too, are converted – apparently merely by witnessing Christopher calmly praying. The soldiers and the saint travel together to the king, who – on seeing Christopher's face – faints, recovers, and then interrogates him. More soldiers convert, rejecting all of Dagnus' offers of rewards. The king attempts a different tactic, sending two women – Nicea and Aquilina, who later explain that they are prostitutes – into Christopher's cell to seduce him into submission. They, too, are horrified by his face and faint from seeing it; again, by his calm prayer and kind speech, he converts them.<sup>24</sup> The story shifts focus onto the women, who (like the soldiers before them) reject all of the king's attempts to bribe them into submission, but eventually offer to publicly sacrifice if Dagnus ensures that everyone comes to watch. In the temple, they destroy the statues of Jove and Apollo while, apparently, the king, his priests, and all the citizens look on. Dagnus is upset, perhaps comically so, and has them tortured to death. Aquilina is ripped apart and Nicea burned in a fire which fails to harm her and then beheaded. The oldest martyrologies that include Christopher often record them as independent saints on the day before Christopher's own feast.<sup>25</sup> The story returns to Christopher, and another dialogue between the saint and the king. Christopher is tortured in various ways: with iron bars, a burning helmet, tied to an iron bench in a furnace, and shot at with arrows. Nothing harms him and, as Dagnus mocks him a final time, an arrow turns to blind the king. Christopher tells him how to cure himself and is finally martyred by beheading after a prayer. Dagnus cures his blindness with a poultice made out of Christopher's blood and earth from the site of his execution, and then converts, issuing a new edict that Christianity is to be enforced as harshly as paganism was previously. An appendix gives more information about Christopher's final prayer.

---

<sup>24</sup> On the transformative power of Christopher's face, see further Thomson, 2018b.

<sup>25</sup> This is the case in the *Lyonnaise Martyrology*, the *Parvum Romanum*, and *Ado's Martyrology*, Quentin, 1907: 152, 434, 482. These are based on one another, and each record the women as *Niceta* and *Aquila*. I have found no Kalendars that include them. For a more detailed discussion of the women, see Thomson, 2019.

The base narrative, then, is an interesting but hardly exceptional one, displaying a number of straightforward hagiographical approaches with the saint's nature its most remarkable aspect. Further, as will be clear from the discussion below, despite the attention and revisions it received at various points, the Latin Christopher texts contain a number of unexplained jumps and awkward moments of narration. Even though an original source cannot be identified, and it is therefore not possible to be certain that all changes come from the process of translation, the fact that it is so different from all extant Latin texts shows that the translator worked very freely. I will argue below that particular energy is focused on making Dagnus more hysterical and ridiculous and on developing the agency of the supremely passive Christopher; that events are clarified at a number of points in the narrative; and that it is streamlined to produce a sharper storytelling experience.<sup>26</sup> This shows, I will argue, a skilful and authorial level of adaptation, reshaping the text to bring it into the world of an Anglo-Saxon lay audience (cf. Howe, 2008: 179).

The extant Old English text starts as Christopher insults the king and is then tortured with iron rods and the burning helmet; it is impossible to know what variations there may have been before this point. It is also worth noting that the sole copy we have is evidently corrupt in at least one place. As described above, during the torture of Christopher, Dagnus commands that 'mitti in capite eius cassidem igneam' ('a burning helmet be set on his head'). This straightforward brutality is garbled in the extant Old English copy into 'he het settan on his heafde þry weras' ('he commanded that three men be set on his head'). The three men are not an addition; they appear in the next sentence in all versions of the text, as discussed further below. So, as has been noted elsewhere, it seems certain that the phrase corresponding to 'cassidem igneam' was missing or unreadable in the copy manuscript (McGowan, 1991: 452). The Nowell scribe seems to have noticed the

---

<sup>26</sup> I have avoided assigning the translator a gender. As so often in Anglo-Saxon England, there is little evidence of the genders of those involved in the production and transmission of the Christopher text. As briefly discussed below, and in more detail in Thomson, 2019, there is some evidence to suggest female interest in this narrative. On the other hand, every Latin manuscript containing Christopher that can be sourced comes from a male establishment, and every known translator from Latin to Old English was male. I am grateful to Helen Saunders for bringing this question to my attention.

problem, placing an otherwise unnecessary point at the site of the gap, but done nothing to resolve it (Thomson, 2018a: 156–157). There is no reason to think that the problem originated with the translator rather than a faulty copy; as above, this sits alongside other evidence that the Nowell text is some distance from the original translation (Sisam, 1953b).

### **Passive Saint to (Partly) Active Hero: Christopher's Character**

The drama of the narrative mostly derives from the (comic?) contrast between the calm and eloquent Christian 'monster' and the hysterical and violent pagan king (cf. Lionarons 2002: 178; Powell, 2006: 12). This remains consistent in the Old English, but there are a number of minor ways in which Christopher's character is made stronger and more forceful in the translation. This is in line with the well-documented Anglo-Saxon preference for dynamic heroism, most famously shown in the development of Christ into an active hero during his own execution in *The Dream of the Rood*. So, for instance, those who have been converted by the end of the text are described neutrally in the Latin ('Sunt autem qui crediderunt...' 'So those who believed...'), but in the Old English have been 'Gode astrynde' ('gathered to God'). A sharper lexical shift occurs in the moment when Christopher reveals his death. The Latin has him anticipate receiving his 'corona' ('crown [of martyrdom]'), whereas the Old English has him looking forward to 'minne sigor' ('my victory').<sup>27</sup> A similar gesture to the saint as a more forceful, even military, figure comes in the scene in which he is beaten with iron rods. The translator replaces the idea of Christopher as 'famula Dei' ('servant of God') with 'godes cempan' ('God's soldier'). None of these are radical shifts, to be sure – and in the Latin he is earlier invoked as 'athleta Dei' ('champion of God') by Aquilina – but they indicate a direction of travel.

A more significant addition comes after Dagnus, having seen that the fire has not harmed Christopher, lies in a faint from the first until the ninth hour of the day. In the Latin he eventually just wakes up and moves on, but the Old English makes

---

<sup>27</sup> The martyr's crown, in fact, seems to be deliberately avoided in the translation, with a mention of it in §16 turned into 'gewinna mede' ('reward for works').

an intriguing addition: ‘*ƿa ƿæt geseah se halga Cristoforus, he hyne het up arisan*’ (‘When the holy Christopher saw that, he told him to get up’). There is evidently something absurd about Christopher standing in the fire for eight hours before he notices that Dagnus is lying down; the revision is not entirely smooth. But it is still rather stronger than the Latin, which provides no reason at all for Dagnus to get up (and also has the awkward sense that time stops for all other figures in the narrative while the king lies unconscious). The verb ‘*hatan*’ (translating ‘*iubeo*’) is used relentlessly for Dagnus, who does little himself but orders others around with abandon. This is the only occasion on which Christopher tells anyone to do anything, giving him a sense of command and control which is entirely absent from the Latin.

A final expansion unique to the Old English text comes when Christopher speaks to Dagnus. Not only does he pronounce a curse on the pagan gods, he also vows to ‘*him teonan do*’ (‘do them injury’). This seems sure to be related to the physical destruction of the temple that Nicea and Aquilina undertook and may be another indication that Christopher was more involved in giving the order for this in the Old English translation than in any extant Latin version.<sup>28</sup> Or it may simply be an attempt by the translator to tie the narrative together more tightly. The Latin texts offer no indication that Christopher wants to hurt anything. Indeed, the repeated contrast between his appearance and behaviour – between how the audiences both inside and outside the text would expect a monster like him to behave and what he does – is a quasi-miraculous element of his sanctity (cf. Lionarons, 2002: 179, 182; Frederick, 1989: 139–140). By contrast, the changes made in the Old English seem to suggest that an Anglo-Saxon audience found an inclination to violence less significant as a barrier to sainthood.

---

<sup>28</sup> There is very significant variation in Latin versions and between individual copies regarding the degree of Nicea’s and Aquilina’s (or their equivalents’) agency. Extreme instances at either end are Novara, Archivio Storico Diocesano, MS P. 2 (N. Italy, s. xii, a unique and free revision of BHL 1771), which conflates the women and reduces their story by about a half of its usual length; and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. MS 3789 (Orléans, s. x/xi, BHL 1768), which highlights the women’s role by giving them their own running title and expanding Nicea’s defiant speech.

### **Foolish Tyrant to Psychotic Toddler: Dagnus' Character**

Whereas some of the Latin texts present a conflict between the Christian God and the pagan gods, mediated through their respective champions, the Old English focuses more closely on Dagnus.<sup>29</sup> A minor change illustrates this clearly. All Latin versions set up a contrast between 'diis meis' (§12: 'my gods'), to whom Dagnus wants his people to sacrifice, and the idea that they are instead turning 'ad te' (§12: 'to you'). That is, the contrast in Dagnus' mind is between his gods and Christopher (cf. Lionarons, 2002: 178–179). The giant cynocephalus may, perhaps, have looked rather like some pagan gods,<sup>30</sup> but the point here is that Dagnus does not recognise the true God behind Christopher's actions: like so many pagans in hagiographies, he cannot see beneath the surface (cf. Scheil, 2000). Christopher's response seeks to correct the error: he says that he has led many people 'credere ... per me Deum' (§12: 'to believe in God through me'). In the Old English, though, this subtle negotiation is dropped in favour of making Dagnus' character egotistical. He asks Christopher: 'hu lange dyrstlæcest þu þæt ðu þis folc fram me tytest, swa þæt him nis alyfed þæt hi minum godum onsecgen?' ('how long will you dare to induce this people from me, so that they are not permitted to sacrifice to my gods?'). This development of his character may also be detectable in the fact that the Old English is the only version to not include the bringing of firewood to kindle beneath the iron bench; Dagnus gives orders and things happen, but we do not see the people who perform those actions. Certainly, throughout their interactions, the emphasis is not on Christopher, or even really on the gods, but on Dagnus: he is less the devout pagan and more the autocratic ruler, concerned not about the status of his gods but about the lack of sacrifice as symbolising a loss of authority over his people. It is not his citizens committing their souls 'ad te' that concerns the Old English Dagnus, but that they are withdrawing their subservience 'fram me'.

<sup>29</sup> Powell, 2006, argues for an interest in rulers and rulership throughout the extant texts of the Nowell Codex, and suggests that this was particularly relevant in the Second Viking Age. Given the likely distance in time between the composition of 'Saint Christopher' and its inclusion in the manuscript, this argument could perhaps also be explored in relation to the production of the translation in the first place.

<sup>30</sup> An old theory, sometimes cited in general discussion, connected him with Anubis (Saintyves, 1936; White, 1991: e.g. 37; Williams 1999: 288–290), but the connection is not sustainable (see e.g. Buxton, 2006).

Further, the translator adds in a number of comments that focus on Dagnus' cruelty and bloodthirstiness. In all versions of the Latin, when Christopher is tortured with a burning helmet the men who are present (discussed further below) criticise Dagnus for ordering 'talia tormenta' (§10: 'such tortures'). In the Old English, the men criticise the *manner in which* he calls for the torments, claiming that he 'wælhreowlice hetst' ('orders slaughter-cruelly/bloodthirstily'). The adverb is echoed later in the text in another addition when Christopher calls the king 'wælgrim' ('slaughter-savage/bloodthirsty'), a description with no parallel in the Latin. The quasi-ritualistic manner in which Christopher tells Dagnus 'Tibi dico tyranne et stulte' (§14: 'You I name a tyrant, and stupid') becomes the more economical 'þu wælgrimma ond þu dysega' ('You bloodthirsty fool'), again focusing on the idea of the pagan as vicious and cruel.

Dagnus' own words are also supplemented to demonstrate his bloodthirsty nature. His eagerness to see death is clarified by three conscientious objectors being executed 'þære ylcan tide' ('that very hour') rather than at an unspecified future moment. Apparently enjoying his own nastiness, he describes the arrows threatening Christopher as 'egeslic' ('horrible'), an adjective with no counterpart in the sources. Only the Old English has Dagnus insisting on an 'unmætoste fyr' ('enormous fire') in which to place Christopher and then pouring oil over it until it is 'on þære mæstan hæto' ('at its hottest'). Similarly, every other version (except BHL 1764, which has a different expansion) moves swiftly on from the fire being set to Christopher speaking from within it. The Old English, however, clarifies that the oil was added 'þæt he wolde þæt þæs fyres hæto þe reðre wære ond þe ablæstre on þone halgan man' ('because he [Dagnus] wanted the fire to be fiercer and more furious against the holy man'). This image is emphasised when Christopher speaks from 'þam reðestan ond ðam unmætostan liges bæle' ('the fiercest and most immense burning of fire'). Like Dagnus, the narrator seems to revel in the intensity of the torments.

I have found no Latin version that comments on how the king speaks, though his behaviour is (of course) often criticised or mocked. There is clearly room in the base narrative for assuming that Dagnus takes a sadistic pleasure in the tortures he metes out; Nicea's punishment is particularly brutal, and BHL 1764 has the king explicitly

devising cruel and unusual punishments. But the reason the king gives for the elaborate and imaginative tortures is that the Christians are excessively stubborn and that the threat they pose to his rule is profound. Attributing him with a bloodthirsty lust for the pain of others is exclusive to the Old English translation.

Given this interest in Dagnus' character, it is noticeable that the Old English does not employ the editorialising tone of all Latin texts, which note that the king responded to Christopher's words from the fire 'tamquam [sometimes *uelut*] stultus' (§12: 'as though stupid'). The stupidity of the pagans is one of the key points of interest for the text; indeed, one of the more entertaining conversations between Christopher and the king, immediately before the extant Old English text in §10 of the Latin, has a childish back-and-forth sequence with each accusing the other of greater stupidity. The note on how Dagnus speaks offers a decisive authorial comment on this issue, and may cause the audience to laugh, particularly given the obviously redundant *tamquam*. Its exclusion from the Old English works with, rather than in contrast to, the increased interest in Dagnus' brutality. He is not a misguided and silly man, failing to perceive what he should. He is a cruel and tyrannical ruler, still contemptible and perhaps absurd in his hysteria, but motivated by anger rather than a lack of knowledge. We can perhaps associate this impression of him with other Anglo-Saxon depictions of poor kingship, as exemplified by figures such as Heremod, Alexander the Great (in some readings), and Holofernes (as presented by the Old English *Judith*).<sup>31</sup> In each of these instances, it is not incompetence that is looked at askance – Alexander and Holofernes are fantastically successful generals – but harshness and tyranny. This idea of what bad leadership looks like may have been calculated to be more appealing and familiar to a lay audience.

A similar aesthetic seems to function after Dagnus' conversion. In the Latin §16, having converted, he sends an order out 'in omni populo et in omni lingua' ('to all peoples and in all languages'). This Pentecostal ambition becomes more realistic – about the proper exercise of royal authority – in the Old English, where his command is simply sent 'geond eall min rice' ('throughout the whole of my kingdom')

---

<sup>31</sup> On these figures see e.g. Thomson, 2018a; Gwara, 2008: esp. 66–68 on Heremod; Powell, 2006; Orchard, 2003: esp. 120–125 on Alexander's cruelty.



and enforced only upon those who are subject to his rule. That sense of the proper relative status of people, king, and God is further developed in the translation in a way that emphasises the totality of Dagnus' conversion. The Latin Dagnus remains psychotic and, in the translator's terms, bloodthirsty: his final command is that everyone should be Christian or 'gladio puniatur' (§16: 'be punished by the sword'). His allegiance has changed, but his character has not. The Old English king recognises that God is beyond all human comprehension, as his final words make clear: 'þæt non eorðlic anweald ne nan gebrosnodlic nys noht, butan his anes' ('that there is no earthly, nor any decayed authority, but His alone'). From an intense focus on the conflict between king and cynocephalus, the translation works to a transcendent conclusion through the development of Dagnus' understanding.

### **Making the Story Work: Clarifications and Streamlining**

A number of minor differences in the description of Christopher's tortures all seem to work towards clarifying precisely what happens to the saint. First, the Old English specifies that the saint's hands and feet are to be tied 'tosomne' ('together'), whereas in the Latin they are both just tied, leaving it unclear whether he is stretched out (as Nicea and Aquilina are earlier on) or compressed, as the Old English implies. More significantly, in BHL 1769 the king orders that iron rods 'cedi' (§10: 'be brought'), with no further mention or use of them as the scene moves on to the burning helmet. The translator adds that Dagnus 'he hyne het swingan' ('commanded that he [Christopher] be beaten') with them. That is, the Old English seeks to clarify what is happening whereas the Latin is more laconic and condensed.<sup>32</sup> Later, in §13, when a tree is brought prior to arrows being fired at the saint, only the Old English observes that Dagnus had Christopher 'gefæstnian' ('fixed') to it. This is, of course, implied in the Latin; the translator is arguably clarifying unnecessarily, given that multiple scribes working on Latin copies over several hundred years saw no need to do so. Whether it is viewed as a positive change or an unnecessary elaboration, it is clear that the Old English version is seeking to make the story clearer, alert to the fact that the audience were lay, and therefore being more precise about what physically happens.

---

<sup>32</sup> A similar clarification should be noted in 1766 where Christopher is to be *tacte* with the rods.

The translator also seems to have aimed to make the narrative tauter, tying events and people together. This is perhaps most apparent in the treatment of the three men who object to Christopher being tortured with the iron helmet and rods. These men are consistently if strangely noted to be 'ex consulibus' (§10: 'former consuls') in almost all Latin versions, in which they appear from nowhere as apparently passive spectators to the torture until they abruptly decide that the brutality has gone too far and condemn the king.<sup>33</sup> They are summarily despatched. As noted above, the omission in Nowell's copy text puts them onto the saint's head (in place of the helmet), and thereby confuses their status further; this corruption aside, the point here is that the original translator made them 'ceman' ('soldiers'). This demotion makes considerable sense, given that Christopher converts large numbers of soldiers (and, early on, was certainly a soldier-saint along the same lines as George: see Thomson, 2019: 69–70; Hill, 1986). Groups of soldiers are converted by him at various other points in the narrative and defy Dagnus in other ways, including throwing their weapons down and rejecting payment. Converting these objectors into soldiers clarifies their connection with the saint. Indeed, they are even given a role in the scene as the men wielding the iron rods which, in the Latin, are called for but never specifically utilised. This is more than translation with opportunistic clarification of detail: it is reimagination, uniting an unutilised set of rods with an obscure set of men and clarifying each through the other.

The translator greatly clarifies the sequence with arrows being fired at Christopher. All Latin versions have an unspecified group of soldiers firing 'ternas sagittas' (§13: 'three [flights of?] arrows', 'three arrows each[?]' ) at him, intending to kill him quickly. Then Dagnus asks if God will rescue him 'de manibus meis' (§13: 'from my hands'), and the soldiers resume firing 'ab hora prima usque ad horam duodecimam' (§13: 'from the first hour until the twelfth hour'). The translator omits Dagnus' barbed comment, presumably finding it redundant as it is repeated on the next day, when (as above) it is adapted to show the king's pleasure in the horrors he

---

<sup>33</sup> There are variations in the Latin. For instance, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B. 55 Inf. (N. Italy, s. xii), a copy of BHL 1766 which seems to have a considerable interest in condemning those who follow and advise Dagnus, calls them broadly 'satellites' ('followers').

inflicts. The retention of this second instance also ensures that the justice meted out to Dagnus is seen to immediately follow his sadistic expression. No sooner has he revelled in how unpleasant and inescapable the arrows are than two turn back and strike him in the eyes. A more radical adaptation is the rationalisation of the shooting scene to have 'ðry cempan' ('three soldiers'), creating a pleasing parallel with the three men who wield the iron rods (who, as above, also do not have this function in the source). These soldiers fire continuously 'from þære ærestan tide þæs dæges oð æfen' ('from the first hour of that day until evening'). Dropping the clerical reference to monastic hours is a sensible adaptation mindful of audience; moving the idea of three from the arrows (or flights thereof) to the soldiers is a thoughtful change focused on coherent storytelling (contrast Sisam, 1953b: 69). The result is a tauter, clearer narrative than any of the Latin manuscripts provide.

Another alteration probably had the same motivation. Miraculously, none of the arrows fired at Christopher hit him: instead, in the Latin tests, when Dagnus comes out to look at the saint, the arrows 'suspendebantur a uento a dextris eius' (§13: 'were hanging in the air on his right-hand side').<sup>34</sup> The translator seems to have rejected the idea that twelve hours' worth of arrows hung suspended at the saint's right-hand side, or perhaps the image of soldiers firing endlessly for twelve hours off-target in the same way without at any point changing approach or observing the strange collection of missiles suspended in mid-air. After noting that none of the arrows touched Christopher, the Old English narrator finds a creative, if still somewhat obscure, solution and explains that 'Godes mægen wæs on þæm winde hangigende æt þæs halgan mannes swyðran healfe' ('God's power was hanging in the wind at the holy man's right side'). The following day, Dagnus comes out to mock Christopher again when, in the Latin, one of the arrows, still hovering in a presumably threatening manner close to the saint, turns and blinds the king in a manner reminiscent of the blinding of Garganus in Blickling Homily xvi (Thomson, 2018a: 16–17). In the Old English, the arrows are no longer hanging in the air, having

---

<sup>34</sup> As noted above, in all versions other than 1769, they hang on both left- and right-hand sides of the bound saint.

been diverted by God's power, so it is unclear where the arrows that attack Dagnus come from. This loss of clarity is, however, rather minor compared with the enhanced role of God and the better sense of the scene.

Every Latin text has just one arrow (§ 14: 'sagitta', 'una de sagittis', or 'una ex eis') leaping to Dagnus' single eye (§ 14: 'oculum regis') which nonetheless 'exc[a]ecavit' (§ 14: 'blinded') him. Over four hundred years of Latin rewritings are perfectly happy with the idea that Dagnus is, in fact, only partially blinded or that one arrow hitting one eye is a metaphor for a complete blinding. Even this minor detail is clarified by the translator, who has two missiles hit the king's two eyes, with the curiously redundant, or perhaps excessively specific, expansion that it was not the arrows themselves but 'twa flana of þam strælum' ('two darts[?] from those arrows').<sup>35</sup>

Given that Christopher is already tied to a tree for his bow-and-arrow execution, it makes no sense that the king had him 'ligatum' (§ 13: 'bound') when the shooting is over for the day. The translator characteristically seeks to combine fidelity to the original story with greater accuracy in telling it, and has Christopher 'swa gebundenne' ('tied up in the same way'), as if those few soldiers left alive and still supporting the king checked the knots for the night. The reason for him being kept bound and guarded overnight is Dagnus' concern that 'Christianis' (§ 13: 'the Christians') are waiting 'excipere corpus eis' (§ 13: 'to receive his body'); this, too, makes little sense as he is – miraculously – not dead. Instead, the translator gives his 'cristene folc' ('Christian people') the more insurrectionary and sensible ambition of wanting 'hyne ... onlysan þy mergenlican dæge' ('to release him the following day').

### Other Omissions and Additions

It is an interesting oddity of the Old English text that it takes so little interest in how people die. Martyrologies tend to record types of death and in this, as in many martyr narratives, beheading seems to be the only sure way to finally kill a Christian.

---

<sup>35</sup> The terms are sometimes used as near synonyms for variation; see for instance *Beowulf* 1432b–1435a; *Judith* 220b–223a. They are also used in Exeter Riddle 3 ('Wind'), at 53–57a, where 'stræle..., farende flān' ('a bolt..., a speeding arrow') is a threat to the foolish man who does not sufficiently fear arrows in the air, given that God can decide to send one at him.

The three objectors are simply 'acwellan' ('killed') in the Old English, rather than more specifically 'decollari' (§10: 'beheaded') as they are in the Latin. In all copies of the Latin life, Christopher is eventually beheaded (with the statement to that effect sometimes earlier and sometimes later). As observed above, this narrative seems to take particular interest in the technology of torture: Dagnus frequently has something new designed or created to hurt or kill the two women or Christopher. This is particularly noticeable in the Nowell Codex, which is full of comment on and interest in technology and other methods of controlling nature (Thomson, 2018a: 56). It is, then, striking that in the Old English, when the time comes for the actual martyrdom, the translator tells us nothing other than 'fram þas cempan he wæs slegen' ('he was killed by the soldiers'). The same movement is present in the Latin, but far less potently. At least in the Latin texts Dagnus gives the order for him to be beheaded, so when Christopher is killed we can assume this is how it happened. The translator disempowers Dagnus to the extent that the order is not given: after all of the dialogue's back and forth, Christ-like Christopher says that he will die and does so, with no further intervention. Despite the interest that martyrologies have in how a martyr was created, and the obvious symbolic interest in the fact that the head which marks Christopher as remarkable is removed, the Old English text ignores how and at whose command the killing takes place. Christopher's death eludes the fascination with the physical that marks his life. This is particularly striking given that relics of Christopher may have been at New Minster, Winchester and were certainly listed as being at Exeter during the Anglo-Saxon period (Sisam 1953b: 71); a later list specifies that the relic is his head.<sup>36</sup> And yet the conclusion to a number of (insular and Continental) versions, including the Old English translation, focus on the idea that the presence or absence of relics is irrelevant: reading, writing, or

---

<sup>36</sup> The relic lists are discussed, edited, and translated in Conner, 1993: 171–209. See also the eloquent summary of their purpose and use in Foot, 2011: 201–203. They supposedly represent relics collected for Athelstan (d. 939) and then donated by him to Exeter, though some at least were collected after his death. Christopher is §53 on the Old English list in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. MS D.2.16 (s. xi<sup>2</sup>), fols. 8–14, and §63 in the Latin list in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 579 (s. xi<sup>es</sup>), fol. 6. The four known Anglo-Saxon versions of Christopher (in Nowell, Otho, the Old English Martyrology, and of BHL 1770 in Paris, lat. 5574) all give him a dog-head, so the relic was presumably the skull of a dog.

praying about Christopher is enough to receive his protection. This movement away from the purely physical is present in the Latin texts but is significantly accentuated by the translator's excision of details about the death (cf. Sisam, 1953b: 70). Such an insistence implies that the translation was probably not composed at New Minster or Exeter. Further, it reads as a sophisticated literary-theological moment, refusing to acknowledge Dagnus' power over Christopher's body; an ultimate rejection of the physical in a story that plays upon our fascination with the embodied monster.

The Old English Dagnus has a curious obsession with being tricked away from what he (wrongly) perceives as his true self. When he tells Christopher that the saint clearly desires to 'me uis in tuis maleficiis adducere' (§12: 'lead me into your wickedness'), the translator adds that Dagnus anticipates an attempt 'beswican' ('to deceive') him and clarifies, pathetically, that conversion would require him to 'þinne god gebidde ond minum widsace' ('pray to your God and abandon mine'). Deception seems to be how Dagnus explains anyone doing something of which he himself disapproves: when converted, he can only anticipate one of his subjects operating against God if he is 'þurh deofles searwa to þon beswican' ('so deceived through the devil's crafts'). I cannot currently account for this interest in deception, but it does seem to be an intentionally introduced theme.

More obviously directed at the lay audience is the expansion of the scene of healing, in which much more is required of Dagnus by the translator. The Latin texts have him taking some soil from the site of martyrdom, mixing it with blood 'in nomine Domini nostri Ihesu Chrii' (§16: 'in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ') and placing it on his (singular) eye. The Old English takes this vague idea of doing something in God's name out of the action and sets it by itself as a change that must take place inside Dagnus – after the setting of the poultice – if it is to succeed: 'Þonne, *gif* þu gelyfest on God of ealra heortan ...' ('Then, *if* you believe in God with all your heart ...' [my emphasis]). The same impulse can be seen in Christopher's final prayer, which asks God to 'bonam mercedem praesta scribentibus et legentibus passionem meam' (§16: 'grant a reward to any who write and read my passion'). This is not specific enough for the translator, who has Christopher ask for the reward only for those who write or read it 'mid tearum' ('with tears'; cf. Sisam, 1953b: 70). The Old

English goes on to show its audience an instance of this combination of symbolic action and heartfelt prayer: when Dagnus follows his instructions in §17, the Latin has the mixture being applied followed immediately by the healing with no speech; in the translation, by contrast, he says ‘On nama Cristoforus godes ic þis don’ (‘In the name of Christopher’s God I do this’). This has the dual effect of reinforcing what we have just been told about the power of praying in Christopher’s name, and of making the point that the power does not reside in the physical mixture but in the use of prayer. This is consistent with the Ælfrician principle of educating through homilies and narratives, and of the Wulfstanian ambition of building a deeper understanding of the faith across the breadth and depth of society. Here it is made clear that physical actions unaccompanied by emotional engagement do not suffice. Generations of Latin-literate clerics had managed with being told what to do; the translator clearly feels that a lay audience needs to be shown.

Before his death, Christopher prays for his body to be a powerful ward against evil. The answering voice from heaven promises that his protection will function ‘ubi est corpus tuum et ubi non est’ (§15: ‘where your body is and where it is not’), presumably part of ensuring that the cult could be followed as widely as possible (cf. Sisam, 1953b: 70), but perhaps also part of the narrative’s interest in showing that physicality is less significant than spiritual experience. This is faithfully followed in the Old English, but it is interesting that the number of protections is considerably diminished. In every Latin text, Christopher wants the place of his burial to never be plagued by ‘grando, non ira flammæ, non mortalitas mala, none fames ... languidi aut dæmoniosi’ (§15: ‘hail, nor the fury of flames, nor evil plague, nor famine ... illness or demons’). The translator cuts this list down, allowing the saint to request simply ‘ne sy þær ne wædl ne fyres broga’ (‘let there be no want there, nor fear of fire’) and asking for the power to heal. This reduction is perhaps best read as streamlining an excessive text: ‘wædl’ may have been intended to cover the spectrum of plague and famine, and the healing power may have been expected to extend to demonic possession as well as simpler physical ailments; as Sisam suggested, it is possible that hail was not a particularly threatening force in England (1953b: 70). But it is worth noting that the Latin heavenly voice’s generosity is muted by the

Old English. The Latin texts promise: 'Christofare, ubi corpus tuum fuerit ibi omnes qui commemorant in orationibus suis nomen tuum quidquid petierint accipient et saluifient' (§15: 'Christopher, wherever your body is, all in that place who remember your name in their prayers will receive whatever they ask for and be saved'). The God of Anglo-Saxon laypeople is more circumspect, promising only that supplicants will receive 'swa hwæs swa hie rithlice biddað for þinum naman' ('whatever they reasonably ask for in your name'). The vernacular text was, of course, being produced for lay people: conceivably, the translator sought to control expectations and ensure that this strange, subversive, and foreign saint did not become too Christ-like and all-encompassing in his cult; 'rihtlice' is a pointed addition.

### Suggestions

The Old English Christopher becomes more than just the account of a martyr: it is about a ruler developing his understanding of how the spiritual and physical worlds relate to one another and renouncing his egotism and obsession with surface meanings (iron is powerful; fire hurts; people are defined by their faces). Above all, it is about Dagnus the arrogant sinner changing his ways and not (as is the Latin) about Christopher the cynocephalus and his marvellous martyrdom. This is emphasised by the storytelling tone adopted by the narrator in yet another significant addition: 'Ond swa þa wæs geworden þurh godes miht ond þurh gearnunga þæs eadigan Cristoforus þætte se cyningc gelyfde se wæs ær deofles willan full' ('And so it was that through God's might and through the good work of the blessed Christopher that the king believed who was before full of the Devil's will').<sup>37</sup> The rhetorical skill of the translator is still more clear in the expression that the saint's prayers 'nu blowað ond growað' ('now bloom and grow'). This addition, which is, as noted above, unparalleled in any of the Latin versions, must echo the blossoming of Christopher's staff, his first miracle. It ties the start and end of his apostolic mission together and marks the transition from physical miracle to spiritual impact which Christopher attained, and to which all Christians should aspire.

---

<sup>37</sup> Fulk's translation brings out this tone very effectively: 'And so it came to pass...'



Despite such displays of control or finesse, this discussion is not so ambitious as to suggest that the Old English *Christopher* is a masterpiece or an unacknowledged work by some great unknown writer (cf. Lionarons 2002: 182). But, first, while the exact source remains unknown and possibly unknowable, it is certainly of the BHL 1769 branch and relatively closely related to the recension represented by Clm 22242. Second, it should be clear that this version is remarkable within the rich and varied retellings of the Christopher narrative. Third, the changes that have been made work towards one end: making the story and the saint more relevant, potent, and immediate for the audience who would receive this telling. And fourth – perhaps most importantly – there is much to be gained from engaging seriously with vernacular prose in terms of appreciating how stories were understood and retold by new authors for new audiences. There are many anonymous saints' lives from late Anglo-Saxon England, and study of their interactions with sources has the potential to tell us a great deal. The monumental achievement of the publication of the *Acta Sanctorum* section of the *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* (Biggs et al, 2001) should continue to stimulate such investigations; the case study of a partial life of Christopher as presented here makes it abundantly clear that the production of vernacular versions of hagiography was not a simple or mindless process. Such translation is more likely to show a subtle process of negotiation between original text and target audience, an approach which demonstrates significant storytelling skill as well as careful theological engagement.

### **Acknowledgements**

For sharing documents and advice, I am extremely grateful to Jane Roberts, the late Pam Weisweiler, and her son Justin Weisweiler. The production of this discussion and the work that lies behind it would not have been possible without the support of Luuk Houwen at Ruhr Universität Bochum and the Deutsches Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). None of the arguments here could have been made without the generous support of a number of libraries and monasteries who have allowed me to visit and work with their manuscripts. For much-needed encouragement and productive lines of questioning, I am grateful to Thijs Porck and the other organisers and participants of the Thirty-Ninth Symposium on Old

English, Middle English, and Historical Linguistics in Leiden. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Katharine Handel, Helen Saunders, and two anonymous reviewers for *OLH*, whose comments, criticisms, and pointers have significantly improved this paper.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### References

#### *Manuscripts*

- Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, MS 11550–11555 (3233).  
 London, British Library, Cotton MS Galba A. xiv [the Galba Prayerbook].  
 London, British Library, Cotton MS Julius E. vii.  
 London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho B. × (excluding fols. 29, 30, 51, 58, 62, 61, 63, 64, 66).  
 London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv (part 2) [the Nowell Codex].  
 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B. 55 Inf.  
 Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm MS 2552.  
 Munich, Staatsbibliothek, Clm MS 22242.  
 Novara, Archivio Storico Diocesano, MS P. 2.  
 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. MS D.2.16.  
 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 579.  
 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. MS 3789.  
 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. MS 5574, fols. 1–39.  
 Stuttgart, Württembergischen Landesbibliothek, cod. hist. MS 415.

#### *Editions*

- Bollandus, J**, et al. (Eds.) 1868 De S. Christophoro Martyre Forte in Lycia. *Iulii VI*, pp. 125–149. Acta Sanctorum 33. Paris and Rome: Victorem Palmé.  
**Bollandus, J**, et al. (Eds.) 1891 Passio Sancti Christophori martyris ex cod. Paris. signato num. 2179 inter noviter acquisitos. *Analecta Bollandiana*, 10: 393–405.  
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.ABOL.4.00311>  
**Einenkel, E** (Ed.) 1893 Das altenglische Christoforus-Fragment. *Anglia*, 17: 110–122.  
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/angl.1895.1895.17.110>

- Fraser, J** (Ed.) 1913 The Passion of St. Christopher. *Revue Celtique*, 34: 307–325.
- Fulk, R D** (Ed. and Trans.) 2010 *The 'Beowulf' Manuscript: Complete Texts and 'The Fight at Finnsburg'*. *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library* 3. London: Harvard University Press.
- Herzfeld, G** (Ed.) 1888 Bruchstück einer altenglischen Legende. *Englische Studien*, 13: 142–145.
- Magennis, H** (Ed.) 2002 *The Old English Life of St Mary of Egypt: An Edition of the Old English Text with Modern English Parallel-Text Translation*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Mombritius, B** (Ed.) 1910 *Sanctuarium seu vitæ Sanctorum. Novam editionem cur. monachi Solesmenses*, 2. Paris: A. Fontemoing [first printed ca. 1480].
- Pulsiano, P** (Ed.) 2002 The Passion of Saint Christopher. In: Treharne, E and Rosser, S (Eds.), *Early Medieval Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg*, pp. 167–199. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.
- Quentin, H** 1907 *Les Martyrologes Historiques du Moyen Âge*. Paris: G. Lefebvre.
- Rauer, C** (Ed. and Trans.) 2013 *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation, and Commentary*. *Anglo-Saxon Texts* 10. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Rypins, S** (Ed.) 1924 *Three Old English Prose Texts in MS. Cotton Vitellius A xv: 'Letter of Alexander the Great', 'Wonders of the East', 'Life of St. Christopher'*. *Early English Text Society* os 161. London: Oxford University Press.
- Skeat, W W** (Ed. and Trans.) 1966 *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [first printed 1881–1900].
- Strecker, K** (Ed.) 1937 *Die lateinischen Dichter des deutschen Mittelalters. Fünfter Band: Die Ottonenzeit. Erster Teil*. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetarum Latinorum Medii Aevi* 5.1. Leipzig: Karl W. Hiersemann.
- van Hooff, G** (Ed. and Trans.) 1891 *S. Christophori Martyris Acta Graeca Antiqua. Analecta Bollandiana*, 10: 394–405. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.ABOL.4.03355>
- Wilcox, J** (Ed. and Trans.) 1994 *Ælfric's Prefaces*. Durham: Durham Medieval Texts.

### **Secondary works**

- Ameisenowa, Z** 1949 Animal-Headed Gods, Evangelists, Saints and Righteous Men. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 12: 21–45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/750254>
- Biggs, F M, Hill, T D, Szarmach, P E** and **Gordon Whatley, E** (Eds.) 2001 *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture 1: Abbo of Fleury, Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Acta Sanctorum*. Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University.
- Bishop, E** 1918 About an Old Prayer Book. In: Bishop, E (Ed), *Liturgica Historica: Papers on the Liturgy and Religious Life of the Western Church*, pp. 384–391. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blair, J** 2002 A Saint for Every Minster? Local Cults in Anglo-Saxon England. In: Thacker, A and Sharpe, R (Eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, pp. 455–565. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blair, J** 2005 *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buxton, S V** 2006 Saint Christopher in Medieval Spanish Literature. Unpublished thesis (MA), University of Durham.
- Conner, P** 1993 *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell.
- Foot, S** 2011 *Athelstan. The First King of England*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Frederick, J** 1989 “His ansyn wæs swylce rosan blostma”: A reading of the Old English Life of St. Christopher. *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Conference*, 12(13): 13–148.
- Gittos, H** 2014 The Audience for Old English Texts: Ælfric, Rhetoric and ‘The Edification of the Simple’. *Anglo-Saxon England*, 43: 231–266. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675114000106>
- Gneuss, H** and **Lapidge, M** 2015 *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*. London: University of Toronto Press.
- Gretsch, M** 2006 *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511483349>

- Gwara, S** 2008 *Heroic Identity in the World of 'Beowulf'*. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004171701.i-420>
- Hall, T N** 2009 Ælfric as Pedagogue. In: Magennis, H and Swan, M (Eds.), *A Companion to Ælfric*, pp. 193–216. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004176812.i-468.42>
- Hill, J** 2009 Ælfric: His Life and Works. In: Magennis, H and Swan, M (Eds.), *A Companion to Ælfric*, pp. 35–66. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004176812.i-468.14>
- Hill, S** 1986 Matronianus, “Comes Isauriae”: An Inscription From an Early Byzantine Basilica at Yanikhan, Rough Cilicia. *Anatolian Studies*, 35: 93–97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3642874>
- Howe, N** 2008 *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Cultural Geography*. London: Yale University Press.
- Ker, N R** 1957 *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kiernan, K** 1996 *'Beowulf' and the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. [first edition printed 1981] DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.8599>
- Kleist, A** 2009 Assembling Ælfric: Reconstructing the Rationale behind Eleventh- and Twelfth-century Compilations. In: Magennis, H and Swan, M (Eds.), *A Companion to Ælfric*, pp. 369–398. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004176812.i-468.85>
- Klemm, E** 1980 *Die romanischen Handschriften der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek: Teil 1. Die Bistümer Regensburg, Passau und Salzburg*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Lazzari, L, Lendinara, P and Di Sciacca, C** (Eds.) 2014 *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: Adopting and Adapting Saints' Lives into Old English Prose (c. 950–1150)*. Turnhout: Brepols. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.TEMA-EB.5.107199>
- Lees, C A** 1999 *Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England*. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Leinbaugh, T H** 1985 St. Christopher and the *Old English Martyrology*: Latin Sources and the Phrase *hwæð gneaðes*. *Notes and Queries*, 230: 434–437. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/nq/32-4-434>

- Lionarons, J T** 2002 From Monster to Martyr: The Old English Legend of Saint Christopher. In: Jones, T and Sprunger, D A (Eds.), *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, pp. 167–182. Studies in Medieval Culture 42. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications.
- Loeschcke, W** 1955 Sanctus Christophorus canineus. In: Rohde, G, et al. (Eds.), *Edwin Redslob zum 70 Geburtstag. Eine Festgabe*, pp. 33–82. Berlin: Erich Blaschker.
- Magennis, H** and **Swan, M** (Eds.) 2009 *A Companion to Ælfric*. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004176812.i-468>
- McGowan, J** 1991 Notes on the Old English Version of the Vita Sancti Christophori. *Neophilologus*, 75: 451–455. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00406710>
- McGowan, J** 1995 Readings from the *Beowulf* Manuscript, ff. 94r–98r (the St. Christopher Folios). *Manuscripta*, 39: 26–29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.MSS.3.1467>
- Newall, V** 1980 The Dog-Headed Saint Christopher. In: Burlakoff, N, Lindahl, C, et al. (Eds.), *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*, pp. 242–249. Bloomington, IN.: Trickster Press.
- Orchard, A** 2003 *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf' Manuscript*. London: University of Toronto Press. [first published Cambridge, 1985].
- Pickles, J** 1971 Studies in the Prose Texts of the *Beowulf* Manuscript. Unpublished thesis (PhD), University of Cambridge.
- Powell, K** 2006 Meditating on Men and Monsters: A reconsideration of the thematic unity of the *Beowulf* manuscript. *The Review of English Studies*, 57: 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgl019>
- Prescott, A** 1997 “Their Present Miserable State of Cremation”: The Restoration of the Cotton Library. In: Wright, C J (Ed.), *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy*, pp. 391–454. London: British Library.
- Rollason, D** 1986 The Shrines of Saints in Later Anglo-Saxon England: Distribution and Significance. In: Butler, L A S and Morris, R K (Eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Church. Papers on History, Architecture, and Archaeology in Honour of Dr H. M. Taylor*, pp. 32–43. Council for British Archaeology Research Report 60. London: Council for British Archaeology.

- Rollason, D** 1989 *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rosenfeld, H-F** 1937 *Der hl. Christophorus, seine Verehrung und seine Legende. Eine Unteruchung zur Kultgeographie und Legendenbildung des Mittelalters*. Acta Academiae Aboensis Humanoria X: 3. Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Saintyves, P** 1936 *Saint Christophe: Successeur d'Anubis, d'Hermès et d'Héraclès*. Paris: Émile Nourry.
- Scheil, A** 2000 Bodies and Boundaries in the Old English. *Life of St Mary of Egypt*. *Neophilologus*, 84: 137–156. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004628602435>
- Schneider, M** 2005 *Die Christophorus-Legende in Ost und West: Das Leben aus dem Glauben und seine bildhafte Darstellung in der frühchristlichen und abendländischer Tradition*. Studien des Patristischen Zentrums 127. Köln: Koinonia – Oriens.
- Scragg, D G** 2006 Ælfric's Scribes. In: Swan, M (Ed.), *Essays for Joyce Hill on her Sixtieth Birthday*, pp. 179–189. Leeds Studies in English n.s. 37. Leeds: University of Leeds.
- Sisam, K** 1953a The *Beowulf* Manuscript. In: Sisam, K (Ed.), *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, pp. 61–64. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [first printed 1916 in *Modern Language Review*, 11: 335–337].
- Sisam, K** 1953b The Compilation of the *Beowulf* Manuscript. In: Sisam, K (Ed.), *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, pp. 65–96. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [first printed 1916 in *Modern Language Review*, 11: 335–337].
- Société des Bollandistes** 1898–1901 *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina: Antiquae et Mediae Aetatis*, 2. Brussels: Société des Bollandistes.
- Szarmach, P E** (Ed.) 2013 *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*. London: University of Toronto Press.
- Thomson, S** 2018a *Communal Creativity in the Making of the 'Beowulf' Manuscript: Towards a history of reception for the Nowell Codex*. Library of the Written Word 67 – The Manuscript World 10. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004360860>
- Thomson, S** 2018b forthcoming Grotesque, Fascinating, Transformative: The Power of a Strange Face in the Story of Saint Christopher. *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 34.

- Thomson, S** 2019 forthcoming, The Overlooked Women of the Old English "Passion of Saint Christopher". *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 44: 61–80. n.s.
- Tite, C G C** (Ed.) 1984 *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library, 1696*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Weisweiler, P** 1985–1986 The Old English Christopher Manuscript: Cotton Vitellius A. xv, The Nowell Codex. Unpublished thesis (MA), King's College London.
- Whatley, E G** 2002 Pearls Before Swine: Ælfric, Vernacular Hagiography, and the Lay Reader. In: Hall, T N with Hill, T D and Wright, C D (Eds.), *Via Crucis: Essays on Early Medieval Sources and Ideas in Memory of J. E. Cross*, pp. 158–184. Medieval European Studies 1. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
- White, D G** 1991 *Myths of the Dog-Man*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, D** 1999 *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. [first printed 1996].
- Zettel, P H** 1982 Saints' Lives in Old English: Latin Manuscripts and Vernacular Accounts: Ælfric. *Peritia*, 1: 17–37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.Peri.3.593>

**How to cite this article:** Thomson, S C 2018 Telling the Story: Reshaping Saint Christopher for an Anglo-Saxon Lay Audience. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 29, pp. 1–31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.306>

**Published:** 16 October 2018

**Copyright:** © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access logo, which consists of a stylized 'A' inside a circle.