Part One
England

Chapter 1

York

Alcuin was probably born around the year 740,[1] in or very near to York in the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria. From a young age he was entrusted to the *familia* of clergy that served the cathedral in the city, perhaps because of the early death of his parents: this became his home and it left an indelible impression. Like Bede and Willibrord before him, he was truly a child of the Church. Throughout his whole life he regarded York as his spiritual home; more than half his adult life was spent there, and he looked back to it with nostalgia and gratitude to the end of his days. He never lost his close connections with the church in York, retaining and fostering many friendships there, which he kept alive in his later years while abroad by his letters. He always hoped to return there to die and to be buried within the precincts of the church that he loved. But it was not to be: he died in Tours in 804. He was probably one of the first Anglo-Saxon Christians to grow up wholly within the confines of a fast growing city and emporium, and this coloured his attitude at times to the peasant society which the Church largely served.[2] His own upbringing brought him into close contact with the aristocracy of Northumbria: the King and the Archbishop of his youth were brothers. For him the Church in York was at the heart of this urban renewal – indeed it was the true *urbs*.[3] In its development he was to play a significant role, intellectually and physically, during the first part of his life as a deacon and teacher.

Family and childhood

In a letter, written probably in 794 from Francia to friends at York, Alcuin spoke warmly of his nurture there.[4] He addressed them as 'beloved and venerable brethren'. Their care of him during the fragility of his childhood was maternal, being patient with his adolescent waywardness, guiding him by learning and discipline. They remained always at the heart of his prayers during his 'exile' and journeying abroad.[5] They might be his sons in terms of their age, but he regarded them as his fathers in their holiness. He implored their prayers, privately and in church, 'for their son Alcuin': 'O most beloved

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fathers and brethren, remember me: I will be yours, whether in life or in death!'[6] He expressed the desire to be buried by them and with them, sensing however that this was unlikely. Then he made an interesting reference to the memory of a common friend, long dead: 'I firmly believe that the souls of our fraternity will be reunited in heaven, as our boy *Seneca* once glimpsed and testified'. This almost certainly refers to the episode with which Alcuin closed his poem on the history of the church of York, which he probably composed somewhat earlier, perhaps in response to a return visit from the continent to his home city in either 786 or 790-3.[7]

Right at the end of the lengthy and eloquent encomium in this famous poem for his former teacher Aelberht, who was like a father to him, Alcuin inserted a more personal and evidently shared reminiscence about this friend of his youth, Seneca, a person 'simple of spirit but energetic in act, who deeply influenced my boyhood with his counsel.'[8] This boy had a vision, while praying in the chapel of 'the Mother of Christ', of an angel, who showed him an open book, with the promise that 'now you know this you will witness even greater things'. Shortly afterwards he fell ill and almost died in Alcuin's arms, but surfaced to recount a vision of heaven. In due time he succumbed, during an epidemic of the plague, and one of the community saw him received into glory. This memory, thus recalled, was included as Alcuin's closing tribute to the place, the 'port of York, which had reared me as its foster-son.'[9] The way Alcuin portrayed this common memory, which had clearly stayed with him as a guiding light for many years, was perhaps modelled on a similar experience recounted in Bede's *History*.[10] In a later poem, *De Abbatibus*, composed by Aethelwulf early in the ninth century in an unknown Northumbrian monastery, the influence of Alcuin's description can clearly be seen in the language describing a similar vision with which that poem ends.[11] The significance of Alcuin's story, however, lies in its distinctive details and corroboration in his letter, and in the light that it sheds on the close atmosphere of friendship and spiritual formation which Alcuin experienced in his childhood and youth as part of the *familia* of the church of York.

It corroborates also some of the stories in the *Life of Alcuin*, written between 821 and 829 at the request of Aldric, Abbot of Ferrières, which drew upon the long memory of Alcuin's close friend and disciple, Sigwulf, who had recently been abbot there since the year of Alcuin's death in 804, as well as of other disciples at Tours.[12] It is heavily weighted with information about his time in York, and in its style and historical preoccupation it stands in a distinct tradition of exemplary hagiography emanating from Northumbria, evident in the earlier *Lives* of Wilfrid and Ceolfrith.[13] One distinctive feature of the *Life of Alcuin* comprises Alcuin's visionary dreams: 'the reminiscences and reports of intensely personal experiences in Alcuin's early life must have come ultimately from his own lips', presumably via Sigwulf.[14]

The earliest of these occurred when he was still quite young, about the age of ten. Sharing a cubicle with a frightened peasant boy who feared the dark,

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Alcuin had a nightmare in which he was reproached for enjoying Virgil more than the psalms! The other youngster slept past the time of divine office and Alcuin had to ward off the devil by chanting psalms and making the sign of the Cross.[15] There is a sharp contrast drawn here between the reaction of the noble boy, Alcuin, and his peasant companion, who almost collapsed. It is a strange tale, but a witness perhaps to Alcuin's early precocity in Latin. It demonstrates also how fundamental to education at that time was the learning of psalms in Latin by chanting them in church. It reflects also the tussle within Alcuin throughout his life between the Latin of the Bible and the Fathers, and the charms of the classical authors, especially the poets. Despite his occasional protests, Virgil was never far from his thoughts and writing.[16]

The *Life of Alcuin* asserts that Alcuin was of noble birth, dedicated to the service of the Church from his childhood. His nobility is not certain, however, and the only evidence about his family circumstances is found in his *Life of Willibrord*, who was a kinsman.[17] This *Life* was a two-fold composition, an *opus geminatum* following the example of Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, written by Alcuin before the year 797, in prose and verse, with a homily attached. In its opening chapter, and also in the prologue dedicating the work to Beornrad, Abbot of Willibrord's monastery at Echternach and later bishop of Sens, who had commissioned it, Alcuin revealed that he was the heir and trustee of a small monastery founded by Willibrord's father, Wilgils.[18] He is described as a *paterfamilias*, a successful landowning *ceorl*, who attracted the generosity of the local aristocracy and of the king in order to create a small monastic cell of St Andrew at the mouth of the river Humber.[19] This would seem to place Alcuin's kin in the southern part of Northumbria called Deira, now Yorkshire. Alcuin's *Life* of his kinsman Willibrord appears to be primarily a personal act of familial piety; but it also addressed the question of how missionary work should be tackled and the due patronage of a king towards it, and so it also had a more topical relevance.[20] It is impossible to know whether Alcuin had any siblings, however: a passing mention in a letter to his friend, Adalhard Abbot of Corbie, written from England in 790, may hint at this possibility; but it is unclear if this is simply a rhetorical device.[21] It seems therefore that Alcuin came 'from a modest landowning family.'[22] If there were any wider kin they are not evident in his letters. The church of York became his *familia* from an early age.

The rebirth of a city

Alcuin's reference at the end of his poem about York to the city as a 'port' was not just a rhetorical metaphor, the longing for home of someone away on a long and uncertain voyage of exile.[23] It precisely alluded to the importance of York as a major centre of trade, whose wealth was vital for the prosperity of the church there and for the rebirth of the city. 'To York from various peoples and realms far away they still come, seeking profit and

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wealth from this rich land.'[24] The ninth century *Life of Liudger* by Altrid tells how this disciple of Alcuin's, who came from Frisia and later became the first bishop of Munster in Germany, had to flee England when the Frisian colony in York was obliged to depart temporarily from the city in order to avoid revenge for the killing of a nobleman by a Frisian merchant.[25] Trade from York to Dorestad and the Rhine trade-route became the city's life-blood in the eighth century, accompanied by missionary activity, in which the church of York played a leading role from the time of Wilfrid.[26] In another poem, written around the year 794 for his *familia* in York, Alcuin bade the young men privileged to live within the noble walls of the city 'to fill the ships of the Frisians with their sacred songs.'[27] As the place where Paulinus had baptised King Edwin in 62728 and where Gregory the Great had intended that a second primatial see should be established,[29] York grew in importance as a church centre as the city grew as an emporium. In 735, its Bishop Egbert was finally granted the *pallium* by Pope Gregory III[30] and York was affirmed as a metropolitan church, whose authority stretched throughout Northumbria and the regions under its political sway.[31] Alcuin knew that the city had been founded by the Romans and that in its day it had rivalled London as 'an emporium by land and sea'.[32] The pattern of its recent gradual revival as a trading centre also mirrored that of London somewhat earlier. But for Alcuin what mattered was that Pope Gregory I's 'immediate command was this city should be the head of its churches, possessing the pinnacle of honour; and that its bishops should be invested with the *pallium* and consecrated there.'[33]

Recent archaeology has gradually confirmed the development of the city at this time. It would appear, like London, to have had several poles of economic and political activity, hardly constituting a continuous city within enclosed walls of the ancient or medieval kind. Some limited settlement occurred within the Roman walls and the ruins of the old basilica, some parts of which were still standing and usable. This was the site of the first church, dedicated to St Peter,[34] created by Paulinus out of wood and later rebuilt as the cathedral by Wilfrid. On the west bank of the river Ouse lay the site of the old Roman *colonia*, resettled in part by the Anglo-Saxons, with perhaps a British enclave nearby as well. Excavations at the Fishergate have revealed a trading zone that was systematically developed in the eighth century and quite distinct from the later Viking port of Jorvik at the Coppergate. It contained evidence of trade with the Rhineland and further afield, and in size it corresponded to contemporary developments at Hamwic (near Southampton), Aldwych in London and at Dorestad itself in Holland.[35] Coins circulated throughout Deira (southern Northumbria) from around the year 740, the time of Alcuin's birth, some inscribed with the figure of Archbishop Egbert.[36] The growth of trade was promoted by royal attention and residence, and in the eighth century York became the virtual capital of Northumbria, with its 'high walls and

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lofty towers'[37] of Roman origin but in places augmented by the Anglo-Saxon rulers.[38] It became a place of burial for kings and nobility, whose disposable wealth must have been derived from the profits of trade as well as extensive land-holding. Some of this surplus wealth was used to enrich and develop the church and its resources, including its books and works of art. Alcuin's poem about York indicates in its title that kings as well as bishops and saints were being celebrated. It is therefore a self-conscious and patriotic monument to a sustained urban and economic development of which Alcuin was a direct beneficiary.

Hagia Sophia

It seems that the enrichment of the church at York started in earnest under Wilfrid, its controversial Bishop, but his impact upon Northumbrian politics and the wider life of the English Church may well have contributed to the delay in granting the *pallium* to the bishops of York. It may also account for the tenacity with which the church at Lindisfarne defended its privileges and promoted the cult of St Cuthbert.[39] It is strange that Alcuin makes no mention of this aspect of Wilfrid's episcopate in York, portraying him rather as an active missionary abroad; for his work on the cathedral was significant, restoring its stone structure and leaking roof as well as glazing its windows around the year 669. He whitewashed its interior, showered it with liturgical gifts and endowed it with lands, though whether these benefactions survived his several exiles is unclear. Unfortunately his building, along with much else in York, was consumed by fire in 741, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.[40] This catastrophe probably provoked an energetic re-building programme, utilising the growing wealth of the city and its surrounding region, and perhaps exacerbating the inherent tension, economic and political, between the two Northumbrian provinces of Bernicia in the north and Deira in the south. The assertion of York as the centre of the Northumbrian church may lie behind signs of tension, leading to the siege of Lindisfarne in the annals for 750 as recorded by Simeon of Durham in the early twelfth century, who incorporated Northumbrian records now lost. Likewise Roger of Wendover, writing in the early thirteenth century and using other unknown northern annals, recounts how 'Egbert, archbishop of York, laudably recovered the *pallium*, which had been neglected by eight bishops since the time of Paulinus, the first archbishop of York'.[41] The account of the obtaining of the *pallium* for Eanbald, placed in the year 783, strikes the similarly assertive note that the king sent to Rome for it and then gave it to his bishop. All this may explain to some extent the way in which Alcuin selects from Bede's *History* and slants his poem about York, extolling the version of its recent ecclesiastical history with which he had grown up.[42] For example, his treatment of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne is of a saint of the whole Northumbrian church and the role of the Irish and of Lindisfarne itself is played down, despite his own personal friendship with that community.

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When Alcuin wrote about the York bishops after Wilfrid, he was on surer ground in terms of the ideal that he was seeking to commend. He described Bosa as a 'good and sincere person', a true spiritual father who endowed the church of York, and began to create a distinctive clerical *familia* that was separated from the life of the city. He insisted on a life of unceasing prayer within the community, alternating holy reading with holy prayer; all property was to be shared.[43] Bishop John of Beverley similarly merited high praise: 'an outstanding bishop in the mould of the Fathers, from whose pure heart flowed rivers of learning'[44] He was a true pastor, working miracles of compassion according to Bede, to whose authority Alcuin deferred, and who retired to a monastery at the end of his days. Likewise, his successor Wilfrid II is portrayed as the ideal bishop of a fast growing city and its churches, a generous benefactor who could command the lavish patronage of wealthy people. Alcuin describes vessels of precious metals, altars covered with silver and gilded crosses.[45] He describes also the Bishop's generosity to the poor and his retreat into contemplative life.[46] As Bishop John's auxiliary he was also 'abbot of York' though of which monastery is unclear.

All this was a sign of the emerging role of the bishop as the protector not only of the cathedral *familia,* but also of some kind of monastic institution within the city and its emerging school. Ecclesiastically, York was developing along lines already well established in the south at Canterbury.[47] With the accession of Egbert, the brother of the king of Northumbria, the Archbishop became patron of the renewed *civitas* and capital of the Kingdom. Concerning Egbert, the Archbishop of his youth, and his beloved successor, Aelberht, Alcuin had much to say. But central to it all was the assertion that these were happy years for the Northumbrians and their church, ruled by a harmonious partnership between king and archbishop, which he had witnessed at close quarters and which contrasted sharply with the tensions there that troubled Alcuin's later years. This harmony remained his ideal for the rest of his life and it explains much of his work and teaching, and the vision that underlay it, both in England and in Francia.[48] His experience of relative political stability and economic prosperity was matched by his experience under Charlemagne. His was an unusual formation and experience, therefore, but it gave scope for the development of a theology that would underpin his whole Christian political ideology. For Egbert ruled the church of York as Bishop for 34 years and his brother, Eadberht, was King for 21 years: it was upon this political stability, as well as upon the growing wealth of a trading city, that developments within the church of York were built.

In his description of the episcopacy of his mentor, Archbishop Aelberht, whom he described as committed by temperament to the *via media* as a bishop, Alcuin gave a vivid description of the decoration of the cathedral church of St Peter,[49] with its great altar over the site of Edwin's

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baptism, covered in gold, silver and jewels and dedicated to St Paul, above which hung an elaborate chandelier. On the high altar the Archbishop raised a large cross of solid silver, and elsewhere he created an ornate altar to the martyrs of the Church. The altar cruet was of solid gold and of great weight. All this reflected the pride and wealth of the city, its traders and aristocracy – the hallowing of their profits and the products of their journeys. There remain in Charlemagne's chapel at Aachen today examples of such glittering liturgical provision from a later age. England was rich in mineral wealth and Anglo-Saxons were renowned metal-workers, at home and abroad, with an unquenchable appetite for such lavish creations.[50]

Most significant, however, is Alcuin's description of the basilica of *Hagia Sophia* that he helped to build in collaboration with Aelberht's other distinguished pupil, Alcuin's friend Eanbald, who in due time became Archbishop of York.[51] No remains of this church have ever been found but it is described as lofty, supported by many columns and arches, with inlaid ceilings and glazed windows, surrounded by chapels and galleries and thirty altars in all, some of which were probably in the galleries. It was dedicated by Aelberht to Holy Wisdom – *Hagia Sophia* – on the eve of All Saints' Day in 780, nine days before his own death. It may have been round in its shape like the royal chapel in Aachen was to be, modelled perhaps on the rotunda of San Vitale in Ravenna, but this is not certain. With so many altars, it presupposes proximity to a significant clerical community, probably the community and school within which Alcuin worked.[52] The circumstances of its dedication appear to be recorded in a calendar from Prum in Germany: this has many English commemorations, with the unique commemoration of the *titulus Agiae Sophiae* in close proximity to a commemoration of the death of Archbishop Aelberht on 8 November 780.[53] Whether the origin of this unique dedication in England was derived from the cult of St Sophia in Rome, newly affirmed by Pope Paul I, or from reports of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is unclear: the latter may be more likely as this was in Greek *he polis* – 'the city' par excellence.[54] Its location may have been close to the cathedral itself or in some other part of the city, perhaps across the river Ouse at Bishopshill, alongside an existing religious community for whose existence at this time there is some evidence.[55] A close association with the school is most likely, however, for in Alcuin's mind the basilica and the library that he goes on to describe were the twin benefactions of Aelberht, and fitting monuments to his wisdom and generosity. There is no doubt also that Holy Wisdom as a particular way of envisaging Christ lay at the heart of much of Alcuin's own theology and writing.[56] Indeed the creation of a church specifically to embody a particular vision of Christian theology and learning remains a distinct possibility, emulated later perhaps by Alcuin's friend Angilbert in his recreation of St Riquier in Francia at the end of the eighth century,[57] and possibly by Charlemagne himself in the creation of his royal chapel at Aachen.[58]

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Northumbrian kingship

How was Alcuin able to address Charlemagne and the rulers of the English Kingdoms, even the Pope himself, with such clarity and confidence as he set before them their duties as Christian rulers? In his many letters, and elsewhere in his writings from the second part of his life in Francia, he articulated a dynamic political ideology which had deep roots, not only in the thought of the later Latin Fathers, but also in the traditions surrounding Christian monarchy that had grown up in England during the century before he was born. These found their most eloquent expression in Bede's *History*, which has been aptly described as 'a mirror of princes of unexampled power.'[59] Like Bede, Alcuin grew up in a relatively stable environment; but unlike Bede he was closer to the seat of power and had an appetite for participation in it. He lived in an *urbs* within an *urbs*: the Church at the heart of the royal city of York. In his poem about this environment, his *patria*, he looked back to the time when the King and Archbishop were brothers as a model period in the recent history of Northumbria, as well as an example of partnership to be emulated and if need be restored.

Anglo-Saxon kingship was the key to the story of the conversion to Christianity in the seventh century; and in the process kingship itself was metamorphosed.[60] The king retained his position as the father of his people, the guarantor of their prosperity in peace and of victory in war. His person was sacred, enhanced by his role as law-giver. He was also a mediator with God, His deputy among His people. In this task he was guided by his bishops as well as the nobility, and to some extent the Christian aspects of his office became construed in the light of episcopacy. This is one of the most consistent themes of Anglo-Saxon history throughout more than four hundred years. By the time of Alcuin, its implications had been spelled out in written law-codes to which he alluded, although none from Northumbria at his time now remain.[61] Behind this process lay a rich theological tradition with its roots in the genius of Isidore of Seville (died 636), who brought the thought of Augustine of Hippo in his *De Civitate Dei* to bear upon the Visigothic monarchy.[62] The cardinal principles of a Christian ruler were *iustitia* and *pietas:* if these were cultivated, a king's rule over his kingdom would be effective, and he would serve as the protector of the Church. Isidore injected a powerful moral direction into both aspects of ruling, and his thinking became normative for all subsequent development of Christian political thought in the Western Europe in the early Middle ages.

Another strand within the tradition in which Alcuin was formed, and to which he gave voice, was derived from Ireland. Irish influence during the conversion of Northumbria in particular had been profound. Irish Christian kingship in the sixth and seventh centuries was tribal and traditional in its form. One of its most potent written expressions was

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created at the same time as Isidore was writing: it is called *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, which among other things described the *rex iniquus* and the dire consequences of his misrule.[63] This tract had a long influence, as did the writings of the British priest, Gildas, whom both Bede and Alcuin cite as an awful warning of how a Christian people could betray themselves by apostasy and infidelity.[64] Behind this minatory approach lay the Old Testament, the exemplar by which the politics of the day was continually interpreted by Christian theologians and bishops.

Well before Alcuin ever met Charlemagne, the Franks had come to regard themselves, at the prompting of various churchmen including the pope, as the new Israel, re-enacting the history enshrined in the Bible, their success being a sign of God's favour. In this sentiment, Bede through Boniface had partly led the way by his perception of the Anglo-Saxons as the chosen conquerors of Britain, with a manifest destiny and a single religious and racial identity. The hapless Britons, even though they were Christians, were to be swept aside as unworthy, like the Canaanites of old.[65] Alcuin inherited this racial prejudice, considering that 'God in His goodness had deemed that this corrupt people should forfeit the kingdoms of its ancestors on account of its crimes, and that a more blessed people should occupy their cities' – including York itself.[66] Part of this lack of sympathy and Christian charity may have its root in suppressed insecurity and anxiety, perhaps even guilt too: for Northumbria, especially its northern part Bernicia was by virtue of its geography seldom free from serious British raids and reprisals during the lifetime of Bede and probably during Alcuin's childhood too. In 793 it was the first to bear the brunt of Viking attacks from the sea with the sack of Lindisfarne, an event which clearly shook Alcuin. In writing about Frankish affairs, Alcuin transferred this rationale of justified Christian supremacy to those whom Charlemagne and his forebears conquered. Thus his poem about the kings and saints of the church of York was partly a justification for a received tradition of Northumbrian history that was acceptable, like the great and probably contemporary poem *Beowulf*, to the aristocratic elite, royal, lay and clerical, whom he was addressing.

In his advocacy of the partnership between king and holy men Alcuin was preceded by other early English hagiographies, notably the anonymous *Life of St Cuthbert* and Felix's *Life of Guthlac*.[67] In his poem about the church of York, Alcuin followed Bede's theological lead closely, even if his own selection of material revealed a specifically pan-Northumbrian 'patriotic' bias.[68] Bede's approach to kingship was heavily influenced by Gregory's *Pastoral Rule*, which although written for bishops and abbots, quickly became applicable to Christian kings as well.[69] The moral duty of a ruler was paramount and for this he had to be prepared by the wisdom of the Church and particularly the teaching of the Bible. So the qualities of a king were the cardinal virtues of prudence, courage,

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justice and temperance: he was called to embody them and to disseminate them among his people. Saul, David, Solomon and Josiah became role-models, but also cautionary tales. For over all human kingship stood the kingship and judgement of Christ: in this faith and fear lay the unity and identity of a Christian people; and the king with the Church was the focus of that unity and identity. Bede's *History* was of course a theological interpretation of the process of conversion and its necessary political support, a chapter of 'salvation history' closely modelled on the history books of the Bible; it probably served the interests of the Kentish as well as the Northumbrian church at that time to appropriate and articulate its own history in this way.[70] Alcuin's poem about York was a similarly motivated encomium. For him Bede's *History* and Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* were fundamental texts for his own thought, and were to be commended to others far and wide, including bishops and kings.

Alcuin extolled three Northumbrian kings in particular in his poem about the kings and saints of York. As in the anonymous *Life of St Gregory*,[71] his initial focus was upon Edwin, the first Northumbrian King to accept Christianity at the hand of Paulinus, the first Roman bishop of York. Alcuin portrayed him as a model king: 'he sought the best interests of his people, being generous to all, not wielding the sceptre fiercely but kind in his piety; he became the love of his people, the father of his *patria* and the adornment of his court. He was triumphant over the strongholds of his enemies, adding many people to his 'imperial' rule. . . . Having first established peace he ruled as a strong-armed judge.'[72] His laws were 'ordered in justice and equity' and he encouraged conversion to Christianity both by gifts and threats, building the first cathedral in York near the site of his baptism.[73] To Alcuin's mind, no subsequent king had wielded such effective power. Oswald, the next King in his encomium, was portrayed as a Christian warrior – 'a man of military prowess, the guardian and lover of his *patria*' who followed the example of Christ in his care of the poor, his kindness and his piety, in which connection Aidan is briefly mentioned. Oswald too was a benefactor and builder of churches, who died as a martyr in battle against 'the pagans.' His sanctity was marked by miracles and by his subsequent fame in Ireland and in Germany.[74] Alcuin then gave a rather edited version of the reign of Oswy, whose victory over the Mercians led to their conversion to Christianity.[75] He was 'a paragon of justice, issuing equitable laws, being invincible in battle and faithful in peace, generous to those in need, even-handed to all and pious.'[76] His description of the dual rule of King Eadberht and his brother Archbishop Egbert was irenic: 'one was brave, the other devout; one was energetic; the other was kind.'[77] Writing against the background of deterioration in Northumbrian political affairs, which Alcuin traced back to the reign of Aelfwald who died in 788,[78] Alcuin was subtly challenging his fellow-country men, in his poem and also in his letters, to new efforts to reform their affairs.

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> Whoever reads the Holy Scriptures and considers ancient histories and the fortunes of the world will find that for their sins kings of old lost their kingdoms and peoples their country: the strong and the unjust seized the possessions of others and they justly lost their own.'[79]

From the time that King Eadberht retired from office to enter a monastery in 758 until 792, the eve of the sack of Lindisfarne, there were six kings of Northumbria and much bloodshed along the way.[80] It appears that it was the turbulence at home after the murder of King Ethelred in 796 that deterred Alcuin from ever returning there towards the end of his life.

One king receives a brief but potent mention by Alcuin in his poem about the church of York: after Ecgfrith's disastrous defeat in 685 by the Picts at the battle of Nechtanesmere, he was succeeded by an illegitimate brother called Aldfrith who died in 704. Following the judgement of Bede, who described him in his *History* as *vir in scripturis doctissimus*,[81] Alcuin extolled him as someone who from his youth had been nurtured in 'the love of holy learning, endowed as a scholar with great eloquence and a sharp mind: a king who was also a teacher.'[82] He gave great support to the Northumbrian church and it was during his relatively peaceful reign that the first *Life of St Cuthbert* was written. He was a friend of Aldhelm of Malmesbury with whom he had studied as a youth under Irish teachers and to whom later Aldhelm wrote a famous letter about learning.[83] Aldfrith circulated copies of a book about the Holy Land composed by Adamnan, Abbot of Iona, and he was an active patron of Bede's monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow.[84] From them he acquired a magnificent copy of the *Cosmographers* which the Abbot Benedict Biscop had brought back from a visit to Rome. Bede himself was a beneficiary of Aldfrith's sympathy for Christian learning and for its Irish practitioners in particular.[85] The link between Iona and Monkwearmouth-Jarrow was strong: Adamnan and Abbot Ceolfrith were friends, as Bede reported.[86] Stenton observed that Aldfrith 'is the most interesting member of the remarkable dynasty to which he belonged, and he stands beside Alfred of Wessex among the few Old English kings who combined skill in warfare with desire for knowledge.'[87] The fact that a Christian king could be both learned and politically effective was axiomatic to Alcuin's political theology. This conviction appealed directly to Charlemagne, who aspired to be both, as it did later to King Alfred the Great. The reality of its possibility had been established in Northumbria, amidst all the political vicissitudes of the period, in the older generation that nurtured Alcuin within the church of York.

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