Lux et Fides: A Journal for Undergraduate Christian Scholars

Volume 1 Article 4

May 2023

The Fight Against the Threat of Witchcraft and Paganism in Anglo-Saxon England

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By Russell Knapp

Introduction

In the middle-years of the 10th century AD, an Anglo-Saxon woman living in Ailsworth, England lost her husband. While her name is now lost to time, for the purposes of this paper, she will be called Eawynn, a popular Anglo-Saxon name. Years before her husband died, Eawynn and her husband had a son who they raised together on their land at Ailsworth. They must have been a relatively well-off family based on the substantial amount of land they owned. After her husband's tragic death, Eawynn was left on her own to care for her son and to take care of the land.

Seeing that the land was now run by just a widow and her son, a wealthy man named Ælfsige began pressuring Eawynn. It is unknown whether he wanted her land or something else that created her ill-will, but it must have been something serious. At her wit's end, the grief-stricken woman decided to take things into her own hands. Eawynn had heard of a practice specifically outlawed by the Christian government and condemned by the Church. If she tried it, it could mean death—but what else was she to turn to? With her son's help, Eawynn carefully toiled over and fashioned a wax figure in the likeness of Ælfsige. A figure like this could be used to harm who it represented. When the image was completed, she drove iron pins into the wax, perhaps muttering the sacred words of a charm. Her intent was Ælfsige's death.

Somehow, Eawynn's plan was found out. The townspeople, including a still-alive Ælfsige, seized Eawynn and her son and brought them to London. On the way there, her son escaped, but Eawynn was not so lucky. Eawynn likely pleaded for her life as the townspeople—

her townspeople—dragged her into the River Thames, shoved her head under the water, and drowned her. In her death, perhaps Eawynn felt some sliver of joy in the fact that her son still lived, or maybe she just felt hatred towards the man she wanted dead. Nevertheless, after her execution, the land at Ailsworth was given to Ælfsige, and the memory of Eawynn became the memory of a witch.[1]

The anonymous woman of Ailsworth was killed by people she knew for putting pins in a doll. What kind of atmosphere needed to exist that such fear towards certain practices resulted in the killing of widows? While this is an early and unusually documented example of a witch hunt, the culture and ideas behind this killing were not unusual in Anglo-Saxon England. This paper will use primary source evidence to determine what the Anglo-Saxon views on witchcraft were, what influenced them, how they changed, and how their sources can help determine this information. It will do this by providing a brief historical background on pre-Alfred Christian Anglo-Saxon England (circa 600-870 AD), defining what the Anglo-Saxons meant by and what this paper means by "witchcraft," analyzing Alfred the Great's reign through his education reforms and law code, and examining penitentials and other sources to determine the Church's and laypeople's perspectives on witchcraft.

Unlike the general assumption that England was completely Christianized after Augustine's mission to the island, witchcraft and paganism thrived all throughout the Christian period of Anglo-Saxon history. Sources condemning witchcraft and paganism increased during the Danish raids in the mid-ninth century and beyond due to an increased sense of a *perceived threat of paganism*. King Alfred himself reacted to this threat by doing everything he could to

[1]"Old English deed of exchange in which Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester, obtained an estate forfeited by a woman for practising witchcraft," 963-975, in *English Historical Documents* vol. 1, eds. David C. Douglas, Dorothy Whitelock, George William Greenaway, Harry Rothwell, A. R. Myers, C. H. Williams, Andrew Browning, et al. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1953), 519.

strengthen his people in their Christian beliefs through education reform and his law code. The Church battled against the perceived threat through penitentials—which they used to discourage pagan practices. Laypeople fought against paganism sometimes by the simple act of confessing to their priests, and sometimes by taking protection from the *perceived threat* into their own hands like in the case of the anonymous widow from Ailsworth. While witchcraft prevailed throughout the entire pre-Alfred Anglo-Saxon period (circa 600-870), the Anglo-Saxons' perception of the *threat of paganis*—especially during the Danish raids in the mid-ninth century—caused nearly all aspects of Anglo-Saxon Christendom to fight against paganism and witchcraft in their respective ways.

Historical Context

In 597 a monk by the name of Augustine sailed to England on the Pope's command to spread Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. Bede, writing in the 8th century, called them a "barbarous, fierce, and unbelieving nation."[2] According to Bede, Augustine brought Christianity to England, but that is not entirely true; there were already many Christians in England. The Britons, mainly relegated to Wales but also present everywhere on the island, had been Christians since the Roman occupation. In addition, both Ireland and Frankia nearby were largely Christian as well, and the Irish had even tried to convert Northumbria.[3] Even King Ethelbert of Kent—who Augustine was received by when first arriving on the island—had a Christian wife from Frankia.[4]

[2]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, 731, translator not clear, (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1910; Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1998), book 1, ch. XXIII.
[3]Rob Meens, "A Background to Augustine's Mission to Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994): 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44510234.
[4]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, book 1, ch. XX.

When Augustine arrived by boat on an island off of Kent, Ethelbert was afraid Augustine and his company would use magic on him to take advantage of him. But the King had no reason to be scared. Bede noted that Augustine's group "came furnished with Divine, not with magic virtue, bearing a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board."[5] Already on the "first" contact between Christians and Anglo-Saxon pagans, Bede presented the two belief systems as diametrically opposed—pagan magic as something frightful and dark, and Christianity as good and hopeful. When King Ethelbert saw that Augustine had good intentions, he allowed his company to set up and operate out of Canterbury with no restrictions on preaching.[6] This started what became the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons.

Throughout the next two-and-a-half centuries, Christianity flourished in England as it was spread across the land by its new religious center of Canterbury. The position of Archbishop of England transferred from Augustine to Laurentius, to Mellitus, and onward. During this period, the first Anglo-Saxon penitentials were published, as well as great works like Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England*. In short, Augustine's mission of Christianizing England had succeeded. However, the strong pagan presence never ceased to be active, often counter-culturally to the new Christian majority, but also influencing local Christian practices.

While there was always limited Scandinavian contact with England, Danish invaders and other Scandinavians began attacking, pillaging, and settling in England with far more frequency in the 9th century. This coalesced in every Anglo-Saxon kingdom except for Wessex being overthrown, and a new "Danelaw" being formed under Danish control. The Danes were nearly entirely pagan, which presented a huge religious threat to the Christian Anglo-Saxons. During this time, King Alfred of Wessex (later called Alfred the Great) successfully defended against

[5]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, book 1, ch. XX.
[6]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, book 1, ch. XX.

the Danes and brought back extensive Anglo-Saxon control of the island during his reign (871-899). He and his successors brought back an Anglo-Saxon (and therefore Christian) dominance to the island. Alfred also initiated a great education reform, translating and distributing many texts for the benefit of a Christian society. He then released an incredibly influential law code that explicitly condemned witchcraft and paganism.[7]

The growth in the number of written sources being produced that started with Alfred's education reform continued after his reign. Alfred died in 899, but more texts were being created and reproduced all the way through the Norman conquest in 1066. In addition, many of Alfred's successor kings issued law codes, all of which contained laws regarding witchcraft, while all law codes pre-Alfred did not specifically mention magic or witchcraft.[8] In fact, mentions of witchcraft and magic greatly increased in all forms of writing during Alfred's reign until the conquest. This may suggest an actual increase in Anglo-Saxons practicing witchcraft due to the presence of the Danes. That being said, evidence shows that pagan Anglo-Saxons were practicing witchcraft all throughout their history. Despite this, the presence of the Danes certainly increased the *perceived* threat of paganism.

Defining Anglo-Saxon Witchcraft

There is sometimes an assumption that witchcraft only started being practiced extensively by the Anglo-Saxons when Scandinavian raids on England became more common in the ninth century, or perhaps during Alfred the Great's rule in Wessex when he wrote his law code. Robin Melrose, in her book *Magic in Britain*, even claims that the case of the Ailsworth widow and her son being executed—which she dates between 963-975—is the *first* reference to witchcraft in

[7]James Campbell, et al., *The Anglo-Saxons* (London, UK: Penguin, 1982), 215.
[8]Jane Crawford, "Evidences for Anglo-Saxon Witchcraft," *Medium Ævum* 32, no. 2 (1963): 107.

Anglo-Saxon England.[9] This assumption is made due to a misunderstanding of what the Anglo-Saxons considered to be witchcraft, and through the idea that the Anglo-Saxons had been thoroughly Christianized in the centuries between Augustine's mission and the Scandinavian raids. Certainly, the perceived threat of witchcraft increased due to Scandinavian presence on the island during Alfred's reign, but witchcraft and pagan practice also existed all throughout Anglo-Saxon history. To understand the full extent of witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon society, defining witchcraft in the Anglo-Saxons' eyes is necessary, as well as looking at the abundant primary source evidence for thriving witchcraft during Augustine's mission all the way through Alfred's reign.

The Anglo-Saxons did not view witchcraft, magic, or sorcery in the same way that western cultures do today. Today, there are separate understandings of what is natural and supernatural. For example, a doctor giving medicine to a patient would be seen as a remedy thoroughly within the concept of natural science, but a person who claims to have healing powers putting a spell on someone—if even believed to be possible—would be considered supernatural. This distinction is not present among the Anglo-Saxons. As D. G. Stragg points out, no one in Anglo-Saxon England would have distinguished between magic and medicine.[10] This is not to say that all medicine was seen as witchcraft; rather, what made something witchcraft or not depended on its connection to pagan practices. This is clearly illustrated in one of Ælfric's homilies, where after discussing witchcraft and paganism, he stated that it is not bad to eat a medicinal herb if done so in the name of God. Ælfric wrote, "No man shall enchant a

[9]Robin Melrose, *Magic in Britain: a History of Medieval and Earlier Practices* (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland & Company, 2018), 54.
[10]*Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D. G. Stragg (Manchester, UK: Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, 1989), 7.

herb with magic, but with God's words shall bless it, and so eat it."[11] Clearly in this case, witchcraft was associated with paganism and not a specific medicinal practice. This idea did not extend only to medicine, either. J. S. P. Tatlock notes that this is the case with trickery or performance "magic" as well; Tatlock writes, "indeed any remarkable performance with a secular background might be attributed to magic, just as any with a Christian background might be called a miracle."[12] In other words, certain remarkable things could be considered magic if done in a pagan context, or a miracle if done in a Christian context. Clearly in many cases, magic and witchcraft had a closer connection to whether the act was pagan than the specific action involved.

The link between witchcraft and pagan practices is made even clearer when one considers that the Anglo-Saxons had *Christian* charms and spells that could be seen today as magical or supernatural but were not considered witchcraft. One example is the *Æcerbot Ritual*, known often as the Anglo-Saxon field remedy, written in the late 900s or early 1000s. The field remedy was a ritualistic way to cure a field or crop's bad production. The ritual included dripping holy water on various plants, creating and planting crosses with biblical words written on them, moving these crosses according to the sun, and more, all the while chanting various things in Latin and Old English. This was not a prayer, but a charm much like and clearly influenced by similar pagan charms. However, the field remedy was not considered to be witchcraft, or even magic. The opening line of the remedy says, "Here is the remedy, how you may better your land, if it will not grow well, or if some harmful thing has been done to it by a sorcerer or by a

[11]AElfric, *Homilies of the Catholic Church*, 990-992, trans. Benjamin Thorpe (London, UK, 1844; Project Gutenberg, 2011), 477.
[12]J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain; Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and Its Early Vernacular Versions*, (New York, NY: Gordian Press, 1974), 363.

poisoner."[13] Later on, a section that is to be chanted aloud says, "Now I bid the ruler, who shaped this world, that there be no speaking-woman nor artful man that can overturn these words thus spoken."[14] The "speaking-woman" and "artful man" are those who would use pagan magic (including poisons) to harm the field. These two quotes show that this Christian ritual or charm could be used to combat against pagan magic. It was charm against charm, ritual against ritual—Christian charm or ritual against pagan witchcraft.

The Anglo-Saxons used many words to describe "witchcraft," and did not have clear distinctions between words like witchcraft, magic, sorcery, wizards, enchanters, and even poisoners. In several sources multiple of these words are listed together, correlating them, such as in a homily of Ælfric, as well as Cnut's, Alfred's, and Aethelstan's law codes.[15] Some historians such as Audrey Meaney differentiate between these words,[16] and while there may be some semantic differences, especially between witchcraft that would be considered white or black (which is beyond the scope of this paper), they would still all fit under the same category of "witchcraft" and were considered pagan.

Now that the pagan connections to witchcraft and the multiple words that can be used to describe witchcraft are clear, it is useful to develop a specific definition of witchcraft as it will be understood in this paper. Witchcraft is any action that is explicitly connected to pagan practices and is described in the sources with words such as "magic," "sorcery," "divination," etc., but is not necessarily "supernatural" in the way that modern people understand it.

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[13]*Æcerbot Field Remedy Ritual*, late 9th century or early 10th century, trans. Karen Louise Jolly (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Anglo-Saxon Charms, 2018).
[14]*Æcerbot Field Remedy Ritual*
[15]Ælfric, *Homilies*, 477; Wulfstan, *Cnut's Law Code*, 1018, in "Cnut's Law Code of 1018," A.G. Kenedy, *Anglo-Saxon England* 11, (1983): 57–81; Alfred, *Alfred's Law Code*, 893, in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, ed. Paul Halsall, Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies, 1998; Aethelstan, *Aethelstan's Law Code,* 924-927, in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, ed. Paul Halsall, Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies, 199.
[16]Audrey L. Meaney, "Women, Witchcraft, and Magic in Anglo-Saxon England," 1989, in *Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Scragg, 14-15.

The Extent of Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England Before Alfred the Great

To discuss the battle the Anglo-Saxons had against their perceived threat of paganism from the invading Danes in the 9th century, it must first be established that pagan practices and witchcraft was thriving all throughout Christian Anglo-Saxon history. Many historians believe that pagan practices were quite thoroughly wiped out by the growth of Christian religion after Augustine's mission, at least until increased Scandinavian invasions. The conclusion Jane Crawford comes to in her "Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England" is that there previously was a strong pagan religion in England, it was mostly extinguished by Christianity, and it then became more prominent again around Alfred's reign. She cites the fact that pre-Alfred law codes do not specifically mention witchcraft, there is a lack of magic in Anglo-Saxon heroic verse, and that post-Alfred sources include many more references to witchcraft.[17] While these are all true, they do not point to witchcraft becoming more prominent in Alfred's time; rather, they point to witchcraft becoming more of an actively *perceived threat*. The difference is this: while there was always a presence of witchcraft and paganism on the island, the conflicts against the Danes brought witchcraft and paganism to the forefront of everyone's minds. Their perceived threat of the spread of pagan culture became much more *active* with the occupying pagan presence of the Danes. Besides, while there *are* fewer sources that mention witchcraft before Alfred, there still are many. And the sources that do exist prove that witchcraft was prominent throughout all of Anglo-Saxon history.

During the end of Augustine's time as archbishop, and shortly after his death, problems began to arise concerning pagan religion in England. Mellitus—one of Augustine's bishops and future archbishop—received a letter from Pope Gregory that said to remove pagan idols in

[17]Crawford, "Evidences for Anglo-Saxon Witchcraft," 99–116.

England but use pagan places of worship as churches. It also said to ban pagan practices like animal sacrifices, except in cases of cultural festivals to provide cheer. The Pope wrote concerning animal sacrifices, "they should offer them to God, and not to idols."[18] This is another example of a practice itself not being pagan, and that the same practice could be done for God and be considered holy. Hunter Blair notes that the idea behind Gregory's advice may have been to let the Anglo-Saxons keep some of their cultural comforts to make them more susceptible to Christianity.[19] This is likely true, but the letter also shows that continued pagan practices were most likely already a problem in Anglo-Saxon England, which is why advice was needed in the first place. Already, pagan practices show their stubborn persistence in England.

What exacerbated these problems even further was the coming to power of multiple pagan rulers in England, even though the royalty was already Christianized. Æthelberht, King of Kent, and Sabert, King of the East-Saxons were both early converts to Christianity. But according to Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History*, upon their deaths (both in 616), their pagan sons began ruling and allowing pagan practices again. The sons of Sabert even quarreled with Melittus's church, causing him to flee the country for a short time.[20] In 627, Redwald, King of East Anglia, a previously strong Christian, was convinced by his wife and "certain perverse teachers" to return to certain pagan practices, like keeping an altar to devils (which were likely pagan gods).[21] If multiple kings that were supposed to be Christian could fall away from the faith into paganism, the likelihood that the common folk—who would not have had much exposure to Christian teachings anyway—stayed good, stalwart Christians is very unlikely. It is also telling that Bede included these accounts at all, because for the most part, he was interested in telling

[18]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, book 1, ch. XXX.
[19]Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1959.), 120.
[20]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, book 2 ch. V.
[21]Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, ch. XV.

the *Christian* history of the island. He had reason to emphasize the Christianness of the Anglo-Saxons, and often over-exaggerated the extent of Christianity and the role Augustine and his successors had in spreading it.[22]

Another documented example of both pagan religion and a specific reference to witchcraft itself was written about by Eddius Stephanus in the early 700s in his *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*. The event occurred in 666 when the bishop was on his way back to England from Gaul and his ship was blown ashore in Southern England by a storm. Upon landing, "a huge army of pagans arrived intending to seize the ship."[23] The fact that there was reportedly that big of a pagan army in the South of England over seventy years after Augustine's mission shows how much paganism still thrived. According to Stephanus, the chief priest of the pagans "attempted to curse the people of God, and to bind their hands by means of his magical arts."[24] Then, one of the bishop's companions took a stone that had been blessed and slung it at the priest, killing him. This is yet another proof of a Christian "magic" charm beating out a pagan one. Afterwards, the opposing groups fought, and despite fewer numbers, the Christians won their battle against the pagans with only five Christians killed.[25] It is likely that this conflict was somewhat exaggerated in order to supply the story with Biblical allusions.[26] Despite its exaggeration, a conflict certainly did occur and is evidence of large groups of people continuing to hold to pagan practices living in southern England long after Augustine's time.

In 747 a church council was held at Clovesho. The council told the English bishops to travel to their dioceses yearly and preach the word of God, including forbidding pagan practices

[22]Meens, "A Background to Augustine's Mission to Anglo-Saxon England," 5.
[23]Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 709-720, trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 27.
[24]Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop WIlfrid*, 29.
[25]Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 29.
[26]Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 27, 29.

such as "soothsayers, sorcerers, auguries, auspices, amulets, spells, or all the filth of the impious and errors of the heathen."[27] If it was necessary to forbid pagan practices yearly, it is clear that they were a problem. Pagan practice was one of the first things addressed by the council, potentially showing its importance. Other textual evidence from this time period that shows the continuation of pagan practices and witchcraft can be found within the Anglo-Saxon penitentials, which will be defined and covered extensively later in the paper.

In addition to all the textual evidence of pagan practices and witchcraft throughout pre-Alfred Anglo-Saxon history, there is also physical evidence. Various pagan objects have been found buried from all throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. This includes crystal balls, boxes with herbs in them, found objects (which were old venerated mundane objects), and more. Audrey Meaney suspects that these objects have origins in magic and witchcraft, and they certainly have pagan origins, but also notes that there is no *direct* evidence that these objects were used in magic or witchcraft.[28] Others, such as in the book *The Anglo-Saxons*, argue using specific artifact types, such as amulets, that Christian amulets were much more frequent than pagan ones.[29] While this is true, and Christians were certainly more populous, it does not fully answer all the textual and physical evidence that paganism was alive and well throughout the period.

By defining witchcraft in the lens of pagan practices and looking at numerous examples of the survival of pagan practices and witchcraft after Augustine's mission, it is evident that witchcraft was prevalent all throughout Anglo-Saxon history. Therefore, the increase in sources mentioning witchcraft in Alfred's time and later is not necessarily due to an increased amount of

[27]*Council of Clovesho* (747), quoted in George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1958), 27.
[28]Meaney, "Women, Witchcraft, and Magic in Anglo-Saxon England," 9-12.
[29]Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 56-57.

Anglo-Saxon paganism, but more likely due to an increased sense of a religious and cultural threat of paganism from the influence of invading Danes.

King Alfred's Struggle Against the Threat of Paganism

King Alfred's reign, and really his life, was defined by conflict against the threat of paganism. This manifested itself physically in warfare against the ever-invading Danish, who were pagan, as well as intellectually and spiritually against the pagan cultural influences from the Danes. Even before he was king, Alfred was fighting alongside his brother, King Ethered, against the Danish storm that was sweeping the island. During Alfred's reign, which lasted from 871 to 899, the enemy had taken control of nearly all of England, including the kingdom of Wessex, relegating Alfred and a small band of supporters to hide in a swamp. To Alfred, the Danes were the catalyst and the embodiment of his perceived threat of paganism. The Danes were pagan, and they were often *winning*. Through both great luck and skill (or perhaps providence), Alfred later saw great success against the Danes, both in warfare and through his intellectual fight against paganism—which utilized an education reform and a new law code. Nevertheless, when the chronicler wrote of Alfred's success in creating and ruling over all of England, he still had to clarify: "except that part that was under the power of the Danes."[30]

Alfred's lifelong struggle with the pagan Danes was not solely accomplished through military exploits, but also through something Alfred saw as just as vital—the strengthening of the Christian religion through education. According to David Daniell, who wrote about how Anglo-Saxons viewed and interpreted the Bible and other religious texts, Alfred saw himself in the light of an Old Testament king,[31] and therefore needed to make sure God was on the side of

[30]*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, various years (New Haven, CT: Yale Law School; The Avalon Project, 2008), AD 901.
[31]David Daniell, "THE ANGLO-SAXON BIBLE, 850–1066," in Davil Daniell, *The Bible in English*: *Its History and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 45.

the English nation to defeat the pagans. To Alfred, religious revival of the nation could only be done through education,[32] so he instituted a great period of education reform and intellectual growth in Anglo-Saxon England. He also fought the pagan influence from the Danes by instituting a strong and specific law code that specifically dealt with witchcraft.

The Anglo-Saxons already had problems with consistent pagan practices all throughout their history, but now with even more pagan influence on the island, Alfred needed to win a war of the mind as well as a war of the battlefield. Whether the Saxons or the Danes controlled certain territories could go back and forth, but if the Anglo-Saxons reverted back to the pagan practices of their ancestors, God would certainly allow the pagan Danes to destroy the Saxons. After all, this had already happened. Asser, in his *Life of Alfred,* wrote an account of the fall of the kingdom of Northumbria to a pagan force in the north of England which occurred in 678. Asser wrote that through the devil, the Northumbrians had "incurred the wrath of God" and that because of this, the heathen army approached and defeated the Northumbrians by divine providence.[33] Asser was a mentor of Alfred's, and he finished his *Life of Alfred* while the king was still alive. Alfred even mentioned Asser by name in his Preface to *Pastoral Care*.[34] It is safe to assume that Alfred shared very similar beliefs in this regard to his friend and mentor. To Alfred, God would allow the pagan Danes to destroy Wessex and the Anglo-Saxons just like he did with the Northumbrians if they did not reform and become a kingdom of God. This was the *perceived threat* of paganism that led Alfred to include witchcraft punishments in his law code.

[32]Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 215.
[33]Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 893, trans. Alfred S. Cook (Boston, MA: Athenaeum Press, 1901; Project Gutenberg, 2020), 27.
[34]Alfred, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care, with an English Translation, the Latin Text, Notes, and an Introduction*, 890, ed. Henry Sweet (London, UK: Early English Text Society, 1871; Bible-Researcher, n.d.).

This perceived threat (from both the Danes and from God) was the context for Alfred's education program. The people needed to be strongly educated in Christian values if they were to withstand the temptations of paganism from the Danes. Whether the perceived threat was justified or not is subject to debate. F. M. Stenton argues that Christianity was much more of an influence on the Danes than the other way around, and notes that the Danes were not even particularly antagonistic to Christianity. Stenton cites Guthrum and his followers' baptisms (that were required in their treaty with Alfred) as evidence that the Danes were not largely opposed to Christianity.[35] Certainly Christianity "won" on the island in the end, and perhaps due to this the perceived threat was unfounded, but it may also be the case that Alfred's efforts to strengthen Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons through learning and his law code may have nullified what would have been a larger pagan influence, and thus the perceived threat *was* justified. But whether Alfred successfully combated the perceived threat or not is beyond the scope of this paper.

While Alfred's educational renaissance was another component of the battle against the paganism of the Danes, it may be difficult to see where witchcraft and pagan practice comes in. In Alfred's preface to his own translation of Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, he wrote, "Consider what punishments would come upon us on account of this world, if we neither loved [wisdom] ourselves nor suffered other men to obtain it: we should love the name only of Christian, and very few of the virtues."[36] If Alfred saw himself as an Old Testament king, the pagan invasions must have been seen as punishment from God on account of the world.[37] As we have previously seen, paganism and witchcraft were already prevalent in England and had been for centuries,

[35]Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 427.
[36]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care*.
[37]Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 44-45.

which certainly was a punishable offense. In addition, as argued by Daniell (and clear in Alfred's preface), the church was experiencing decay in England.[38] Just like Old Testament Israel, Alfred was highly concerned with the punishment God might place upon England if he himself (as God's appointed ruler) did not turn things around. He attempted to do so both through education and law.

Alfred's decision to focus specifically on education rather than other ways of restoring the church probably came from his disappointment in his own lack of education as a boy. In Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, Asser notes that Alfred's biggest disappointment was that he was never able to receive a proper education as a child due to the lack of teachers.[39] This lack of education in Alfred's own childhood likely strengthened his stance on teaching reading to children. In Alfred's preface to *Pastoral Care*, Alfred wrote that his goal was that all youth (who could afford it) could one day be taught to read English.[40] Reading in the English language was important to Alfred. Previously, most reading in England and on the continent was done only in Latin. Alfred lamented that before the Scandinavian raids destroyed the churches of England, there used to be multitudes of books stored in the churches—but no one could read them.[41] This was why Alfred focused heavily on translating popular works into English; he wanted to create a literate, godly society that was fair and wise. Alfred was so convinced of this that he demanded his judges to study wisdom (meaning to read relevant works) or else give up their positions.[42]

As part of Alfred's translation program, he had five great works translated into English. These were: Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, St.

[38]Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 45.
[39]Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 25.
[40]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care.*
[41]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care.*
[42]Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 106.

Augustine's *Soliloquies,* Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, and Orosius's *Histories against the Pagans*. According to linguistic studies, Alfred himself likely translated Boethius's *Consolation* and Augustine's *Soliloquies*.[43] It is even clearer that Alfred translated *Pastoral Care* based on the preface he wrote for it.[44] Since Alfred found these works important enough to have translated into English, it is safe to assume they were important parts of Anglo-Saxon intellectual and religious belief. Because they were translated into English and thereafter widely distributed,[45] they made up an important part of the *Anglo-Saxon cultural canon.* It is helpful to analyze what some of the works in the cultural canon had to say about witchcraft and paganism, and how they applied to Alfred's England.

Two of the works in the *cultural canon* were histories; Bede's was a history of the English (an obvious choice), and Orosius's a history of pagan peoples (perhaps a more curious choice). *Histories Against the Pagans* was written nearly five-hundred years before Alfred—after the city of Rome was captured by the Goths, a pagan Germanic tribe. Orosius's great work consisted of seven books spanning from the traditional foundation of Rome (752 BC) until its "fall" to the Goths (417 AD). The books were written to address the widespread idea that Rome fell due to its official conversion to Christianity.[46] It did this by detailing various histories of pagan groups, stressing their losses and depravity, and emphasizing the centrality of the Christian faith. Orosius's thesis in his own words was, "My investigation has shown, as was proper it should, that death and a thirst for bloodshed prevailed during the time in which the religion that forbids bloodshed (Christianity) was unknown; that as the new faith dawned, the old

[43]Campbell, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 217.
[44]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care.*
[45]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care.*
[46]Mary Kate Hurley, "Alfredian Temporalities: Time and Translation in the Old English Orosius," in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112, no. 4 (2013): 407.

grew faint; that while the old neared its end, the new was already victorious."[47] With the context of Orosius's goal for his *Histories,* it makes more sense why Alfred would find this work important. In Alfred's time and before, Danish forces had consistently competed with—if not overwhelmed—the Christian Anglo-Saxons. Churches were burned, cities sacked, and for a short time nearly the entire island was controlled by the Danes. How could a pagan force so utterly humiliate a Christian one? The middle to late 800s in England must have felt very similar to how Roman Christians felt in the early 400s. Providing confidence in Christianity's centrality in history was key to comforting Anglo-Saxons when it seemed that a pagan threat was everywhere. It was also key to fighting the perceived threat of paganism and preventing conversions to paganism by showing its terrible faults. Oriosus's *Histories* made the important claim: *no matter what it looks like now, the Christian God is still in power.*

Bede's 731 work *Ecclesiastical History* makes even more intrinsic sense for Alfred to have translated than Orosius's *Histories*. After all, a comprehensive history of England was a logical choice for an English translation and distribution, and it had only existed in Latin up until that point. It is even more important that Bede's history was an *Ecclesiastical* history. It focused on the Church and the Christianization of England. It heroized bishops, and villainized pagans. One might think that due to Bede's biases, he might have deemphasized and left out instances of heresies, paganism, or departures from Christianity to pagan religion; but instead, Bede actively tried to include these things in his *History*. Hunter Blair notes that generally speaking, Anglo-Saxons suppressed accounts of heathenism in their writings so knowledge of pagan practices would not be passed on,[48] but Bede wrote, regarding his own histories,, "if it mentions evil things

[47]Orosius, *Histories Against the Pagans*, 418, trans. I. W. Raymond (1936), in A. T. Fear, *Translated Texts for Historians* 54 (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010), book 1, ch. 1, p. 14.
[48]Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England,* 121.

of wicked persons…[the reader], shunning that which is hurtful and perverse, is the more earnestly excited to perform those things which he knows to be good, and worthy of God."[49] In other words, Bede used his presentation of pagan practices to highlight what was wrong and point his audience towards godliness. This is exactly what Alfred wanted during his reign—a condemnation (but acknowledgement) of evil, and a reassurance of the Christian history of the Anglo-Saxons, all to combat Alfred's perceived threat of increased pagan influence from the Danish invaders.

In addition to Alfred's education reform and translations of multiple popular works, he also fought against the threat of paganism through the law. At no previous time in Anglo-Saxon history before Alfred was witchcraft mentioned in a law code, but after Alfred's law code, many kings explicitly mentioned it in their law codes. At first glance, this seems to indicate that witchcraft was not as common before Alfred, but as has been shown, witchcraft was prevalent throughout Christian Anglo-Saxon history from Augustine's mission onward. Even the extensive law code of Æthelberht, King of Kent, did not include witchcraft or any pagan practices, despite it being written "in the days of Augustine"[50] when witchcraft would have been the most prevalent. While more people were pagans and likely practicing witchcraft in Æthelberht's times than in Alfred's, Alfred felt more need to include witchcraft in his own law code. This is because of the perceived threat of paganism from the ever-present Danes. It had to be clear-cut and written in law that these practices were not allowed, lest they spread, and paganism gain even more hold on the culture and the people, straying the Anglo-Saxons even further from God.

[49] Bede, preface to *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*.
[50] *The Laws of Æthelberht, King of Kent*, 560-616, in *The Library of Original Sources Vol. IV: The Early Medieval World*, ed. Oliver J. Thatcher (Milwaukee, WI: University Research Extension, 1901; Internet Medieval Sourcebook, 1998) 211-239.

Alfred, striving to be the Christian king, fought against this potential spread of paganism by specifically outlawing witchcraft in his revolutionary law code. The Domboc (law code) included three parts: an introduction (which also outlawed practices), a set of laws, and an earlier law code by Ine written sometime in the early eighth century. In the introduction section, Alfred mentioned paganism four times, and witchcraft explicitly once. In fact, the very first law Alfred includes is, "You will not love false gods over [God]."[51] This is the first of the ten commandments, which are the first ten laws of the Domboc. Later in the law code, witchcraft and paganism were more specifically addressed. One law says, "The women who are wont to receive wizards and magicians and witches, do not let them live."[52] This is interesting because it does not address wizards, magicians, and witches themselves, but the people who welcome them. Alfred's abhorrence of witchcraft and duty to protect his people from the threat of paganism was so deeply ingrained that even people who *associated* with witches were to be put to death. Later in the law code, sacrificing to pagan idols is given the death penalty, and swearing by pagan gods is warned against, but not given an explicit punishment.[53] This type of strict and harsh punishment given to paganism and witchcraft that extended even to people who associated with witches had never been seen previously.

Todd Preston, the author of *King Alfred's Book of Laws*, notes the utter importance of Alfred's law code. He says that scholars have consistently underutilized the law code as a source of cultural insight into the time. "Even as it codifies law, the text encodes culture."[54] This is absolutely true. Alfred's law code can point to exactly what the Anglo-Saxons cared about at the

[51]Alfred, *Alfred's Law Code,* 887-893, in Todd Preston, *King Alfred's Book of Laws: A Study of the Domboc and Its Influence on English Identity, with a Complete Translation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 110.
[52] Alfred, *Alfred's Law Code*, 114.
[53]Alfred, *Alfred's Law Code*, 114, 116.
[54]Preston, *King Alfred's Book of Laws*, 101, 104.

time through what was outlawed. In this case, it is very clear that witchcraft and paganism was deemed important enough a threat to apply the death penalty to. Preston also explicitly addresses the issue of the Danish threat during Alfred's time, writing, "The menace of the Danish invaders is a source of both political and cultural anxiety for Alfred and his people. These invaders would subjugate his kingdom to both Danish rule and culture. In the face of possible invasion and conquest, the Domboc (law code) carries a soothing message: we are a unified and ordered people." While Preston's conclusion is mostly apt, Alfred's law code was not just about unity and order. It was about saying: this is a *Christian* kingdom, and it will remain that way. That is why the law code opens with the ten commandments and why Alfred stresses the continuation of his law code from Biblical laws.[55]

Alfred also helped create a lesser-known law code that was more of an agreement between Alfred and Guthrum—a Danish leader defeated by Alfred who agreed to convert to Christianity. This code was even more explicitly against paganism and witchcraft than Alfred's previous one, probably because of the large Danish population of East Anglia, where Guthrum ruled. The code, overall, was harsher, but also allowed for crime forgiveness if a certain price was paid. [56] This is likely because it would have been impractical to put to death *everyone* who was still practicing pagan beliefs that they only recently were told to stop—especially in an area that had a large Danish population.

Future law codes after Alfred's tended to follow a very similar outline in regard to witchcraft but seemed to get at least somewhat less harsh as time went on. Æthelstan's law code, written between 924-939, goes into further detail with different punishments for how well-

[55]Alfred, *Alfred's Law Code*, 110, 116-117.
[56]*The Laws of Alfred, Guthrum, and Edward the Elder*, 871-901, in *The Library of Original Sources Vol. IV*, 211-239.

proven the case of witchcraft was. If there was certain proof, the witch was to be killed. If there was no proof and they denied the accusation, they would go through various tests to see if they were truly a witch. But even if they were found guilty, they then only had to be in prison for four months, pay the allotted price, and then desist from further practice.[57] Edmund I's law code, written just a few years after Æthelstan's was even less harsh, with no death punishments, just the punishment of being cast out.[58] This general theme of the law codes getting less harsh also implies that Alfred's code was part of a specific effort to stamp down upon witchcraft and pagan practices in his time, and a fear that the Danes would influence the Anglo-Saxon Christians. But over time as the Danes became less of an active threat, paganism and witchcraft became less of a cultural threat as well, leading the law codes to be less harsh.

Todd Preston notes that texts like Alfred's preface in *Pastoral Care* show what he believes, while his law codes show the application of his beliefs.[59] This is certainly true. In the preface, Alfred detailed his thoughts on the sorry state of England, which he calls "ravaged and burnt."[60] He laid out his plan in the preface to make England better, to properly Christianize his nation and to defend his country against the pagan threat.[61] He did this through his educational reform and translations of popular works, improving the Christian wisdom and knowledge of the country. He also did this through his law code, which affected the everyday lives of the Anglo-Saxons in a very practical sense.

The Fight Against the Threat Witchcraft Among the Clergy and Commoners

[57]*The Laws of Athelstan*, 924-939, in *The Library of Original Sources Vol. IV*, 211-239.
[58]*The Laws of King Edmund I*, 939-946, in *The Library of Original Sources Vol. IV*, 211-239.
[59]Preston, *King Alfred's Book of Laws*, 101.
[60]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care*.
[61]Alfred, preface to *Pastoral Care*.

So far, this paper has explored witchcraft and the fight against the perceived threat of paganism somewhat in timeline order. First, witchcraft in the Anglo-Saxon context was defined as explicitly pagan and described in the sources as "magic," "sorcery," "witchcraft," etc., but was not necessarily "supernatural" (a modern designation). Then, evidence was provided for the—perhaps not thriving, but still prevalent—survival of pagan belief and witchcraft throughout the period of roughly 600 to the late 800s. Finally, Alfred's spiritual and intellectual battle against the perceived threat of paganism was examined, especially in regard to his revolutionary translation and education program, as well as his law code. Now in this final section, the penitentials, along with a few other sources, will be used to reveal the cultural understandings and attitudes that the clergy and everyday Anglo-Saxons had regarding witchcraft, and how the conflict against the perceived threat of paganism was present extensively in the penitentials and other textual sources.

Penitentials were written documents that were used by priests to help determine self-punishments, or penances, for their parishioners during confession. They normally included lists of sins and correlated penances. The original penitentials were written mainly in Ireland, but they eventually became popular on the continent and in England.[62] The first known Anglo-Saxon penitential is the *Penitential of Theodore,* which was written in the early 8th century. There are multiple later penitentials of equal importance, and they tend to build off each other. The importance of the information provided about witchcraft and paganism within the penitentials cannot be overstated. Much detail was often provided with the goal of the suppression of these practices. McNeill and Gamer, in their collection of penances, put it excellently when they wrote, "Writers of penitential books took up [the] crusade for the suppression of these ancestral

[62]*Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, ed. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York, NY: Octagon Books, 1965.), 26.

superstitions. Their anxious attention to the subject often led them to enlarge upon it in such a way as to supply historically priceless material on medieval pagan survivals."[63] In other words, the Anglo-Saxons' fear of witchcraft led them to include a lot of information about it in the penitentials with the purpose of trying to quell it. This anxiety about witchcraft was the same as Alfred's fear of the threat of paganism. While Alfred fought against this threat through education and law, the authors of the penitentials fought against the threat through confession and penance. In a way, the method of providing plentiful detail in the penitentials is similar to Bede's idea of providing lots of information about paganism so people will turn away from it, but in the case of the penitentials, this may simply have been done to provide the priest with as much detail as possible to help with confession. Nevertheless, the penitentials provide crucial information for modern scholars.

Penitentials are similar to law codes in both format and goal in regard to witchcraft. Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle note in their "Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon and Early Modern England" that both types of sources, among others, exhibit a hostility towards witchcraft that aimed at extinguishing the continued practice of paganism.[64] In other words, the penitentials were just as concerned with the perceived threat of paganism that Alfred and later kings were in their law codes. It is helpful to look at the law codes as the state's answer to the threat of paganism, and the penitentials as the local church's answer to the threat. The major difference between the two is that through the law, the offender could be killed (thus removing the pagan problem), but through the penitentials, the only real goal could be convincing the parishioner to stop.

[63]*Medieval Handbooks of Penance,* 39.
[64]Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle, "Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon and Early Modern England: Continuity and Evolution in Social Context," *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 750.

In studying the penitentials, it must also be remembered that in any actual use of a penitential book, the sinner *voluntarily* made known their sin to the priest. This means that the witchcraft practices found in penitentials were most often being done by people who considered themselves to be Christian. The importance of Christians confessing their sins involving witchcraft is demonstrated in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, where he makes clear that those who practice witchcraft are separated from God forever, "unless he offer alms and much penance."[65]

In a way, the lay people who confessed their pagan actions to a priest were also doing their part in combating the threat of paganism. Often, parishioners may not have even known what practices were pagan or not due the extensive interweaving of pagan and Christian belief that was occurring. This was seen previously in this paper in the discussion of the Anglo-Saxon field remedy. Using Christian texts for charms or medicinal purposes was not uncommon at all, showing significant overlap of pagan and Christian ideas. Kittredge notes in his *Witchcraft in Old and New England* that, "So intertwisted were Christianity and paganism that even the *Pater Noster* [Lord's Prayer] itself was treated by learned and pious men in a manner that approaches witchcraft."[66] In addition, there were popular medicinal sources called leechbooks that were, according to Kittredge, incredibly popular in Anglo-Saxon England. These leechbooks had remedies for all sorts of ailments from eye sores, to bug bites, to warding off witches—and these books were not necessarily considered pagan.[67] With this significant intermixing and overlap between pagan and Christian belief, it only makes sense that the average person may not have immediately known the difference between pagan rituals and Christian ones.

[65]Ælfric, *Lives of the Saints*, 990s, ed. Walter Skeat (London, UK: N. Trübner, 1881; Wikisource, 2022), 371.
[66]Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, 31.
[67] Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, 32.

In the late 10th century, Ælfric wrote in his *Catholic Homilies* that if any Christian man sought medical help from any unallowed practices, including witchcraft, he was "like to those heathen men."[68] Ælfric then said to not seek health from a stone or tree, a clear reference to pagan naturalism, but from holy relics. He later confirmed that some herbs were okay to use medicinally, but only if it was not enchanted with magic, and that it was understood that its healing properties came from God.[69] Still, actual pagan rituals remained popular forms of treatment, as evidenced by the penitentials. In the *Penitentials of Theodore*, it says, "If a woman places her child upon a roof or in an oven in order to cure a fever, she shall do penance for five years."[70] *The Scriftboc Penitential* also provides a penance for this same ritual, and includes another that says, "Whoever burns grain in a place where a man died in order to give health to living men and to the house, he is to fast five years."[71] In the *OE Penitential*, a penance is given for "if she cures her child with any witchcraft or at a crossroads lets it be drawn through the earth, for that is a very heathen practice."[72] These are all examples of practices that were to be used for healing, but were considered to be witchcraft because of their pagan connections. The punishments for these healings in both the *Penitentials of Theodore* and *the Scriftboc Penitential* were fasting for long periods of time.

In the *Scriftboc Penitential*, the penance for putting a child on the roof to cure them is harsher than the penance for murdering someone with witchcraft.[73] There are two reasons why this could be the case. One is that the law consequences for killing someone was already death, so a harsh penance from the church didn't really make sense. The other, and more likely, reason

[68]Ælfric, *Homilies*, 477.
[69]Ælfric, *Homilies*, 477.
[70]*Penitentials of Theodore*, early 8th century, in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 198.
[71]*Scirftboc Penitential*, in Allen J. Franzen, *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: A Cultural Database* (2003-2022), X16.03.01.
[72]*OE Penitential*, in Allen J. Franzen, *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: A Cultural Database* (2003-2022), Y44.16.01.
[73]*Scirftboc Penitential*, X14.06.01.

is that it seems the Anglo-Saxons had a very high regard for children, and would therefore be more offended by the child's exposure to witchcraft. This higher regard for children and fear of their exposure to paganism is evidenced throughout the penitentials in correlating similar penances for sins against children and adults. For example, in the *Scriftboc Penitential*, using pagan cures on children results in the parent having to fast for five to seven years. But if a woman used a pagan cure on herself—such as drinking her husband's blood, or using a love-magic concoction to make herself more attractive to a man—she only had to fast for forty days or three years respectively.[74] The only noticeable difference here between these different pagan cures is whether they were used on children or on adults. Another example of the concern for children's faith is evidenced by the penances for if a child died as a heathen. In the *Scriftboc Penitential*, if a parent's heathen child died, they were to fast for three years, and in the *OE Handbook*, the priest who was taking care of a sick child who died a heathen had to forfeit their position and fast for three years.[75] This concern for pagan influences on children shows that the perceived threat of paganism extended to the minds of parents. If the children of the realm were influenced by paganism—potentially through their parents trying to cure them—there was little hope for the next generation, and the threat of paganism won. The penitentials sought to act against that outcome by enacting harsher penances when children were exposed to witchcraft.

One specific component of pagan religion and witchcraft the penitentials and other sources mention often are auguries. The practice of auguries generally involved looking at the natural world such as the stars, the behaviors of birds and other animals, or people's dreams in order to ascertain something—generally about the future. The *Penitential Ascribed by Albers to*

[74] *Scirftboc Penitential*, X14.08.01. X15.11.01.
[75] *Scriftboc Penitential*, X07.01.01; *OE Handbook*, in Allen J. Franzen, *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: A Cultural Database* (2003-2022), Y44.16.01.

Bede (which was not actually written by Bede) includes uttering prophesies from "some sort of writings" as part of practicing auguries.[76]

The *OE Penitential* contains the most content about auguries. It says twice that practicing auguries "as heathen men do" is not allowed and it gives two different penances for it. The first penance gives another definition of what the author meant by practicing auguries: "that is that they believe in the sun and the moon and the stars' course and seek time-auguries to begin their events."[77] The first penance says to fast for forty days on the first infraction, but three years on the second. The second penance simply says to fast for three years. Unlike most penances in the penitentials, this second penance for practicing auguries gives specific instructions for how specifically to fast: "1 [year] on bread and water and for 2 years on Wednesdays and Fridays [he is to fast] on bread and water and on the other days partake of his meals except for meat only."[78] The *Penitential of Theodore*—the oldest penitential—also provides penance for the practice of auguries. It gives the same penance—five years—to both practicing auguries yourself and for inviting someone into your home who practices auguries. This extensive coverage of auguries in many different penitentials shows how common these practices were, and the penances themselves show how seriously the practice of auguries was taken. Being able to tell the future without the help of God went directly against Christian belief and was a dangerous part of the threat of paganism—especially if it worked.

One aspect of the fight against the threat of paganism not yet detailed in this paper is the belief about the harm witchcraft itself could do. Not cultural or religious harm in the spread of pagan religion, but actual physical harm that could come from witchcraft. This issue comes down

[76]*Penitential Ascribed by Albers to Bede*, early 8th century, in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 228-229.
[77]*OE Penitential*, Y42.23.01.
[78]*OE Penitential*, Y42.23.02, Y44.15.01.

to whether Christian Anglo-Saxons believed that witchcraft practices, auguries, cures, charms, and more *actually* worked. The answer to this question is somewhat mixed and not perfectly clear, though overall it seems that at least the commonfolk did believe that witchcraft worked in some form.

In the case of auguries about the future, some Christian sources suggest that they did work, while others suggest it is ridiculous to believe in them. For example, the *OE Penitential*, in addition to listing punishments for practicing auguries, describes auguries as "useless" and "vain things."[79] These words suggest that the writer(s) of the penitential did not believe the auguries could actually be of use. On the other hand, Ælfric wrote a sermon entitled "On Auguries" in his *Lives of Saints* in the late 10th century in which he says that the devil may reveal truths to a witch in order to tempt others into destroying their Christianity.[80] In other words, auguries could work, but only through the devil trying to get people to forsake their faith. If there was a general belief that auguries actually worked, the perceived threat of paganism not only had to do with pagan religion winning over Christianity, but also actual physical consequences.

As for whether pagan ritual-cures for ailments worked, it is even less clear. The penitentials do not offer any insight, they just provide penance for when those cures are attempted. Ælfric in his *Lives of Saints* called women "witless"[81] who tried the "drawing through the earth at a crossroads" cure mentioned earlier in the *OE Penitential*. But this witlessness may be in regard to the fact that the woman had "commit[ed] themselves and their children to the devil,"[82] not that the ritual itself was useless. As was discussed earlier in the paper, oftentimes medicinal cures that did work were considered pagan unless they were used in a Christian

[79]*OE Penitential*, Y42.23.01, Y42.23.02.
[80]Ælfric, *Lives of the Saints*, 273.
[81]Ælfric, *Lives of the Saints*, 275.
[82]Ælfric, *Lives of the Saints*, 275.

context.[83] In these cases, the medicine—although considered pagan if used in correlation with a pagan charm—must have been thought to work. It is also important to note that the mere mentioning of ritual-cures in the penitentials meant that they were attempted often enough to warrant inclusion. This suggests that there would have been at least some belief in them by the commonfolk.

The form of witchcraft that has the most evidence for the general belief in its working is charms and rituals to harm others. In the penitentials, it is shocking how matter of fact it is stated. In the *Scriftboc Penitential*, it simply states, "If a woman kills someone with her sorcery, she is to fast six years."[84] Likewise, the *OE Penitential* says, "If any one kill another with witchcraft, he is to fast 7 years."[85] As discussed in the definition of witchcraft, these murders could have been done with poison, which was still in the realm of witchcraft—but it is very clear that however the Anglo-Saxons would have understood this penance, they would have believed that witchcraft was capable of killing. Ælfric also makes it clear he believed witches could hurt people in his "On Auguries" sermon, but he also explains that any harm a witch could do was through God's permission, and that nothing was out of his control.[86] He meant this in the sense that God could test the faithful through others using witchcraft.

There is one specific instance of witchcraft, of which quite few are known, where from every perspective, it is obvious that the Anglo-Saxons did believe in witchcraft. This was the case of the anonymous woman from Ailsworth who used pins on an effigy. This case also shows the difference between the average person's response to the threat of paganism, and the local church's response.

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[83] Ælfric, *Homilies*, 477.
[84] *Scirftboc Penitential,* X14.06.01.
[85] *OE Penitential,* Y44.12.01.
[86] Ælfric, *Lives of Saints*, 277.

In both the *OE Penitential* and the *OE Handbook*, the penance for using pins on an effigy of a person in order to harm them was to fast for three years. If the person died, they were to fast for seven years.[87] Already in the penitentials, there is proof that the Anglo-Saxons believed this type of witchcraft worked. If they believed it did not, they would not have included separate penances for if it worked or if it did not. Unfortunately, there is no law code from the time this event took place (971), but it is clear from every other law code available that the punishment for murderous witchcraft was death. For example, Aethelstan, who ruled between 924 and 939 AD, wrote in his law that if someone used witchcraft to kill another, the murderer was to be killed in punishment.[88] What is interesting about this incident is that the man the woman had an effigy of, Ælfsige, did not die, yet the woman was still killed.[89] The fact that Ælfsige was not harmed, yet the woman was still drowned shows how deeply the Anglo-Saxons believed that this practice *could* kill. All she did was put a few iron pins into a small figure that represented Ælfsige, and when "the murderous instrument"[90] was found, the perceived threat of this pagan practice was ended by her death. If the anonymous woman would have confessed to a priest, perhaps she would only have had to fast for a few years to make her penance. But instead, the Saxons took their protection against the threat of paganism into their own hands and killed the woman.

The perceived threat of paganism was ever-present to all sorts of Anglo-Saxons. While Alfred and later kings fought against the threat from the top-level using education and law, church priests fought against the threat in everyday confession using penitentials, and the commonfolk—while sometimes not knowing exactly what was pagan and what was not—did

[87]*OE Penitential*, Y44.13.01; *OE Handbook*, D54.36.01.
[88]Aethelstan, *Aethelstan's Law Code*, 199.
[89]"Old English deed of exchange," 519.
[90]"Old English deed of exchange," 519.

their part by doing their penances, and in some rare instances, extinguishing the threat on their own by killing a witch.

Conclusion

Relatively widespread paganism and witchcraft was occurring through the entire Christian Anglo-Saxon period from Augustine's mission in 597 to Alfred's rise to power in 871 and beyond. But due to invasions by staunch pagans—namely, the Danish—an increased threatening sense of paganism was felt by all Christian Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons did not let this threat fly by without regard. Anthony Davies in his case studies on Anglo-Saxon witchcraft says, "The Anglo-Saxons took witchcraft seriously. They legislated against it in secular and ecclesiastical law codes, they preached against it in homilies and saints' lives, they condemned it in penitentials and in pastoral letters."[91] In other words, every aspect of Saxon society felt and was involved in this fight against witchcraft and paganism. In addition to what Davies listed, even the commonfolk felt the threat and confessed their sins when they themselves performed pagan practices, and sometimes even made their fight against paganism physical, as in the case of the Ailsworth widow.

Though these groups all shared the same sense of the threat of paganism, they were unaware of each other—unaware that they were all part of this same cultural wave. The townsfolk who killed Ailsworth were not concerned with cultural trends or how posterity would view them, they simply did what they thought the Lord wanted them to do and executed who they saw as a would-be murderer. The writers of the penitentials did not know they would give future historians greater insight into what witchcraft was like in their times, they were simply addressing through confession what they saw was a growing problem among the commonfolk.

[91]Anthony Davies, "Witches in Anglo-Saxon England: Five Case Histories," in *Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England*, 41.

Even Alfred, while perhaps the most aware of the fight against paganism, was likely trying to do what he thought would please God and spare his people from the pagan threat. This is important to remember in the study of history. These are real people, and individually, they were more than just a cultural trend. They were all influenced by the perception of a pagan threat, especially during a time when it seemed that their world was not ensured—the Danes were right next door. They did what they could in their fight against the threat of paganism to protect their religion and lifestyle.

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