

## **Wars and rumours of wars: England and the Byzantine world in the eighth and ninth centuries\***

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During the first half of the ninth century, the British scholar Nennius recorded that the island of Britain had first been settled by Trojans, led by Brutus, a descendent of Aeneas.<sup>1</sup> No one believes the story now, and it is unlikely that many people believed it then, yet it bears witness to an important point. Between the fifth and twelfth centuries, and perhaps afterwards, the inhabitants of the British Isles, whether British or English, regarded themselves as remote from the centres of their religion and culture. They were living on the very edge of the Christian world, or as Saint Wilfrid had expressed it at the Synod of Whitby, on 'the two uttermost islands of the ocean'.<sup>2</sup> Stories like that of Nennius helped to form a bridge between their remote island and the centres of civilisation in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Christian centre held in greatest respect by the English was, of course, Rome, the seat of the papacy.<sup>3</sup> Yet they also looked to the foremost Christian power of the early Middle Ages, the Byzantine empire, both as an older and more sophisticated civilisation, and as an embodiment of the ideal of the Christian oecumene whose art and ceremonial they were eager to imitate. It was an attitude which they held in common with most of the other Christian peoples of Europe, to judge by the strong Byzantine influence which can be discerned in Italy, in the Merovingian, Carolingian and Ottonian kingdoms, and even in Scandinavia and Spain.<sup>4</sup>

Yet recent scholarship has tended to sound a caveat against sweeping generalisations about Byzantine cultural influence in early medieval Europe. The warning was expressed most clearly by Michael McCormick, who pointed out that it would have been impossible for the level of such influence to have remained constant throughout some five centuries. It was therefore necessary, he concluded, to 'differentiate the Byzantine contribution in time, space, social strata, and content ...'.<sup>5</sup>

Much the same has been noted by Krijnie Ciggaar about the receptivity of westerners to Byzantine influence: it would be unrealistic to expect that everyone in western Europe was constantly open to that influence. On the contrary, there were individuals who regarded the

importation of eastern customs with dismay, condemning luxuries like the wearing of silk, the taking of baths, and the use of forks to pick up food, as unnecessary in this life and likely to lead to perdition in the next.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Anglo-Saxon England, McCormick's observations appear to be particularly apt. There were undoubtedly some periods during which the English kingdoms had little or no contact whatsoever with the Byzantine empire, whether diplomatic, missionary or commercial, and so they were unlikely to have received any of the empire's cultural influence at those times. The eighth and ninth centuries might be cited as just such a period, when contacts were almost non-existent and any influence difficult to discern.

As far as receptivity is concerned, however, this paper will argue that the English present a rather different case. The very limited nature of their contacts with Byzantium, along with their belief in their own remoteness acted, if anything, to enhance their receptivity to influence from that quarter.<sup>7</sup> This openness remained constant, even in periods of no apparent contact, like the eighth and ninth centuries, and even when there was little tangible Byzantine influence of any kind. This conclusion will be based on two points: first, on an investigation of the psychological response to the Viking invasions, a response conditioned by the English perception of their isolation, and one which contrasted sharply with that of the Byzantines, who believed themselves to be at the centre of the Christian world; and secondly, on a close examination of the question of the authenticity and significance of the correspondence between Alfred the Great and the Patriarch Elias of Jerusalem.

Before turning to the question of receptivity, however, it is necessary to discuss previous attempts to give an overview of the contacts which existed between England and the Byzantine empire, and the nature of any resulting cultural influence. The pioneer in the field was R.S. Lopez, who in 1948 published an article discussing the period from the seventh to the tenth century. This was followed by a survey of Byzantine influence on English art by David Talbot Rice, a University of Pennsylvania PhD thesis, and an article by Donald Nicol which traced Anglo-Byzantine contacts up to 1453.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Krijnie Ciggaar has devoted a chapter to England in her book on cultural and political relations between Byzantium and the West.<sup>9</sup>

A noticeable feature of the work of Lopez and Ciggaar is that they both adopt a framework similar to that suggested by McCormick. They present Anglo-Byzantine relations in terms of peaks and troughs, some centuries witnessing abundant contact, and consequent cultural influence, and others none at all. The most striking of all the lacunae is the period from about 690 until about 950. While Lopez discussed plentiful evidence for the seventh and tenth centuries, he had little to say on this period in between. Ciggaar confines herself to the period from the tenth century on, leaving earlier centuries outside the scope of her study.<sup>10</sup> It is worth looking at some of this evidence for the seventh and tenth centuries, if only to contrast it with the eighth and ninth.

Turning first to the seventh century, Lopez discussed a number of points to support his claim that there were direct contacts between the English and the eastern Mediterranean. Naturally he stressed that the English were brought into closer contact with the Christian world as a whole from the later sixth century onwards by their conversion to Christianity and particularly by the career of the Greek monk Theodore, who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 668 until his death in 690.<sup>11</sup>

More important for Lopez, however, was the evidence which was still emerging from the Sutton Hoo ship burial. Dating from around 650, the burial was found to contain a hoard of Byzantine silverware, including a large dish bearing the hallmark of the Emperor Anastasius I (491-518).<sup>12</sup> Even though the Anastasius dish was unearthed in a context dating from over a century after the time it was made, Lopez still questioned the assumption that it and other Byzantine artifacts had necessarily reached the British Isles by an indirect route, claiming instead that they were evidence of continued direct trading contacts. In support of his argument he pointed to a contemporary literary source, the Life of Saint John the Almsgiver written in Greek in about 640, which, while cataloguing the many miracles performed by its subject, described how a ship sailed from Alexandria to the British Isles with a cargo of corn which was exchanged for tin. Lopez therefore concluded that the tin trade between Britain and the eastern Mediterranean, which had existed for centuries, was still being carried on, and that it accounted for the presence of the Byzantine artifacts at Sutton Hoo.<sup>13</sup>

Recent scholarship has tended to take a more sceptical approach to the Life of Saint John the Almsgiver, objecting that it may have simply reflected a reworking of a similar story recounted by Herodotus.<sup>14</sup> Yet the story is not necessarily an implausible one at that date. Alexandrian merchants ranged widely in the sixth and early seventh centuries. They had their own corporation in the city of Rome, and their ships are known to have traded with Spain.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, newly available archaeological evidence has tended to confirm that imports from the eastern Mediterranean were still reaching the south-west of Britain until at least the later sixth century, indicating that it was the British, rather than the English who maintained trading contacts with the Byzantine empire.<sup>16</sup> Thus although Lopez's use of one particular source may be questioned, his broad conclusion that the island of Britain was still in direct contact with the eastern Mediterranean appears to have been sustained. The Anastasius dish may well have first found its way to Cornwall or Wales, before ending up in a burial mound in East Anglia.

From the evidence for contacts between the British Isles and Byzantium, Lopez went on to deduce examples of resulting cultural influence. He and others pointed to a number of aspects of East Roman civilisation which Theodore of Tarsus may have been responsible for introducing, such as the school for the teaching of Greek at Canterbury, and his famous Penitential, a collection of penances set for breaches of morality, which reflects many of the usages of the Byzantine church.<sup>17</sup> Lopez further suggested that Theodore's presence might have helped eastern elements to enter English art, citing the example of the eastern vine scroll motif which appears on Anglo-Saxon stone crosses in Northumbria.<sup>18</sup>

Again, there is plenty of room for scepticism about some of Lopez's conclusions. Elements such as the vine scroll motif may have well come not from Theodore himself but secondhand from Italy, with the artists brought back from Rome by Benedict Biscop and Saint Wilfrid, or from Ireland.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, there is some doubt as to whether all the teachings in Theodore's Penitential necessarily originated with him.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, these borrowings were probably still Byzantine in origin, so that the early seventh century does appear to have been a period when cultural influences from the eastern Mediterranean were still able to penetrate the English kingdoms, even if these influences, like the contacts, were not always as direct as Lopez

believed.

Similarly, Byzantine cultural influence can once more be discerned in England from the mid-tenth century. This was paralleled by an increase in such influence elsewhere in Europe in the same period, the result of the cultural and military revival of the Byzantine empire from the mid-ninth century onwards.<sup>21</sup> Byzantine religion and culture was often carried abroad by monks, who acted both as ambassadors and missionaries, and who were also the artists who produced the distinctive frescoes and mosaics of Byzantine art.<sup>22</sup> The activities of these monastic ambassadors were particularly marked in the Western empire, especially after the arrival of the Byzantine princess, Theophano, the bride of Otto II, along with a large retinue of monks and artists in 972.<sup>23</sup> This influx had a visible influence on Ottonian art and institutions, and is thought to have influenced the development of local monastic traditions. The court of the emperor Otto III (998-1001), the son of Theophano, was established along Byzantine lines, imitating the titles and ceremonial used in Constantinople.<sup>24</sup>

A pale reflection of this can be seen in England after about 950. Once again, Byzantine monks seem to have been the point of contact, Krijnie Ciggaar listing a number of examples. According to the Liber Eliensis, a Greek bishop, who like most eastern bishops would probably have been a monk, was attached to the court of King Edgar (959-75), and William of Malmesbury tells a charming story of a Greek monk called Constantine who spent a number of years at Malmesbury Abbey in the early eleventh century.<sup>25</sup> Another possible example is Leo, Abbot of the Greek monastery of San Bonifacio ed Alessio in Rome, who was probably papal legate in England in 991.<sup>26</sup>

These renewed contacts appear to have allowed elements of Byzantine civilisation to infiltrate. It became fashionable for English ecclesiastics to adorn their Latin prose with Greek loan words. Illustrations on manuscripts like the Aethelwold Benedictional are thought to display strong Byzantine influence.<sup>27</sup> Snatches of Byzantine liturgy are to be found to English monastic chant books, like the Winchester Troper. English rulers of the tenth and eleventh centuries, like the western emperors, took to adopting Byzantine titles, even the prestigious Basileus.<sup>28</sup> Resident Byzantine monks could easily have been the ultimate source of information

here.

Thus the work of Lopez and Ciggaar has established that some contacts between England and Byzantium did exist in the seventh and tenth centuries, and that as a result the English were on the receiving end of Byzantine cultural influence, even if some of Lopez's conclusions need to be modified in the light of recent scholarship. For the eighth and ninth centuries, on the other hand, it is a different matter. While both Donald Nicol and David Talbot Rice attempted to argue, on the basis of the evidence for contact in the seventh century, that such interaction was maintained unbroken thereafter, it has to be said that there is very little evidence whatsoever for such an assertion.<sup>29</sup> Most of the instances of Anglo-Byzantine contact adduced from the eighth and ninth centuries are unconvincing in the extreme.

Take, for example, the story, occasionally found in secondary works, that the West Saxon king Ine (689-726) invited two Athenian scholars to his kingdom to teach Greek to Saint Aldhelm.<sup>30</sup> The story sounds extremely unlikely. It is possible that there were scholars in Athens in the eighth century, even though it had declined to the status of a small provincial town, isolated in a countryside controlled by hostile Slavs, but it is difficult to believe that they would have set off for Wessex at the behest of an obscure barbarian chief. What really discredits the tale is its source: a biography of Aldhelm written by Faricius Tuscus, Abbot of Abingdon. Not only does this work belong to the early twelfth century, some four hundred years after the death of Aldhelm, but it was even derided as inaccurate and fanciful by Tuscus's contemporary, William of Malmesbury, who was moved to write his own account of Aldhelm by its errors.<sup>31</sup>

Much the same can be said of the Byzantine copper coins found at Exeter and Caerwent during the nineteenth century. As these included examples from later than the seventh century, they appear at first sight to offer evidence that trading contacts between the west of Britain and the Byzantine empire, attested in the sixth and early seventh century, may have continued for longer than has been supposed.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately when these finds were examined in greater detail, it soon emerged that they could not support any such interpretation. Unlike the artifacts unearthed in the Sutton Hoo ship burial, the Exeter coins were almost certainly not genuine archaeological finds at all but much more recent imports, passed off on a gullible antiquary who

was willing to pay for them. In the case of the Caerwent coins, there is not even any surviving record of the archaeological context in which they were found.<sup>33</sup>

Another example is the appearance of shards of lead glazed pottery found in English archaeological sites dating from the ninth century onwards. In 1949 T.C. Lethbridge suggested that this type of pottery was unexampled in western Europe at so early a date, so that the technique of making it must have reached England directly from Byzantium where it had been manufactured for centuries. Further research proved Lethbridge to have been mistaken. Glazed pottery was, in fact, common in Italy in the eighth and ninth centuries. It is therefore likely that the technique reached England from there, via France, even if Constantinople had been the original starting point.<sup>34</sup>

It would appear, then, that contacts between Anglo-Saxon England and Byzantium became much less frequent after about 690. Consequently there is much less sign of Byzantine cultural influence. The many examples presented by Talbot Rice of supposed Byzantine elements in English art for this period are very unconvincing. For instance, there seems no good reason why the Alfred Jewel in the Ashmolean Museum or a stone relief of the Virgin in Leicestershire must derive from Byzantine prototypes, as he suggested.<sup>35</sup> Given the apparent lack of contacts, it is difficult to see how an English craftsman would have had access to any such prototype. It is not without significance that a gold coin issued in the reign of Offa of Mercia (757-96) imitates an Arab dinar, rather than a Byzantine coin type.<sup>36</sup>

Thus in spite of the efforts of Nicol and Talbot Rice, there appears to be no alternative to accepting that there was a withering away of contact in the eighth and ninth centuries. This break was probably the result of the series of crises which faced the Byzantine empire from the early seventh century, as its borders were overwhelmed by successive waves of Avar, Slav, Persian and Arab invaders, and its internal unity was disrupted by the rise of iconoclasm. These events undoubtedly had an effect on the empire's links with its Christian neighbours. Most famously, as Henri Pirenne pointed out, the Arab invasions finally destroyed the old unity of the Mediterranean world and made the sea route between Constantinople and the West much more dangerous.<sup>37</sup> Byzantine contacts with, and their ability to influence, the peoples beyond their

borders did not disappear entirely during these centuries. Diplomatic contact with the Franks was particularly active in the ninth century, largely as a response to Charlemagne's coronation as emperor in 800, and these exchanges had their impact on Frankish art and ceremonial.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the influx of refugees from Greece and the eastern provinces into Italy undoubtedly had its effect on styles of ecclesiastical art there.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, as far as England was concerned, it seems likely that the Arab invasions put an end to many of the contacts which had existed in the early seventh century. Any trading contacts with Alexandria would probably have cut off by its capture by the Arabs in 642, and there are no further examples of Greek monks like Theodore of Tarsus playing a role in the development of the English church.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, from the later eighth century, the English faced troubles of their own in the shape of the Viking invasions which must have had as traumatic an impact as the loss of the eastern provinces had on the Byzantines.

However, although direct contacts between the English and Byzantium and any resulting cultural influence were almost non-existent during the eighth and ninth centuries, the openness of the English to that influence was not. This continuing receptivity is suggested by the way in which the English, faced with disaster and foreign invasion, reacted in a completely different way from the Byzantines. The contrast is most visible in Byzantine and English literature of the period.

In Byzantium, there appears to have been a certain contraction in mental horizons in the face of defeat. Byzantine historians turned inwards to the affairs of Constantinople, so that information about distant places like the British Isles tended to disappear from their works. In the sixth century, the historian Procopius had written a detailed description of Britain which, even if it included many fantastic and apocryphal elements, also contained much genuine information.<sup>41</sup> Writers of the following centuries, on the other hand, appear to have been extraordinarily ignorant even about the people and geography of Italy, let alone further afield.<sup>42</sup> For centuries afterwards, Byzantine literature retained a curious opacity and vagueness when describing foreign countries and their inhabitants, reflecting a certain self-sufficiency and a conscious superiority over outsiders.<sup>43</sup>



The attitude of English writers of the same period was completely the opposite. Rather than becoming exclusively interested in their own troubles, they carefully detailed the information and rumours which filtered through to them about the wars and upheavals taking place in the eastern Mediterranean. The historian Bede, for example, recorded distant events like an attack on Byzantine Sicily by Saracen raiders in 688, the fall of Carthage to the Arabs in 697, and the siege of Constantinople in 717-18.<sup>44</sup> It would have been unthinkable for a Byzantine writer to have described an event like the Viking sack of Lindisfarne.

Apart from history, travel literature, a genre almost unknown in Byzantium, continued to be produced by English writers, bearing witness both to their awareness of the Christian world beyond their borders, and to their realisation that other Christians were under threat from infidel attack. Pilgrims to Jerusalem like Arculf described how the city was no longer ruled by Christians, and the account of a pilgrimage made to Palestine in about 723 by Saint Willibald makes frequent references to the deep encroachments made by pagans and infidels. His biographer described the port of Monemvasia in the Peloponnese as being 'in Slawinia terrae', recognising that the entire hinterland of the town had been settled by Slav invaders, and recounted the constant harassment received by Willibald from the Arab governors of Palestine.<sup>45</sup>

This international dimension displayed by English writers, but completely lacking in Byzantine ones, seems to indicate something very important: a conscious desire on the part of the English to associate themselves with Christendom as a whole. This attitude would, if anything, have been strengthened by the experience of the Viking invasions, which must have highlighted the position of the English kingdoms as isolated bastions of Christianity under attack from powerful pagan forces. More significant still, this willingness to look outward, rather than inward is evident not only in literature, but also in the policies of the most significant English ruler of the ninth century, Alfred the Great.

One noticeable feature of the later years of Alfred's reign, even when he was beset, as his biographer claimed, 'by the relentless attacks of foreign peoples',<sup>46</sup> is a number of his actions which, like those of his Carolingian contemporaries, seem to bear witness to his anxiety to

affirm his membership of the family of Christian rulers, and to associate himself with the tradition of the universal Christian empire. One example is his adoption of a late Roman motif on his coinage, two emperors holding an orb surmounted by a winged victory. Another is his code of laws, whose assertive language seems to claim for him the right to legislate in the Roman tradition rather than just to restate custom as a Germanic chief.<sup>47</sup>

Even what might be considered as Alfred's purely scholarly activities, in particular his patronage of translations into Old English, had much the same end in view. It was no accident that works of geography were translated. Books like the so-called Wonders of the East and the geography of Orosius, seem to have been valued because they gave an account of the wider world, including Constantinople and the Holy Places.<sup>48</sup> Even the possibly apocryphal story of Alfred's attempt to raise the standard of English scholarship by inviting the Irish Greek scholar, John Scottus Eriugena, to teach at Malmesbury may have some significance. If it were true it would be in keeping with Alfred's willingness to look outside his own kingdom to the wider Christian oecumene.<sup>49</sup>

It is this attitude which lies behind the readiness of Alfred and his countrymen to seek out and receive the cultural influence of the Christian east, even in this period of little direct contact. The episode which suggests this is Alfred's contact with the patriarch of Jerusalem, described in the biography supposedly written by his contemporary, Asser, Bishop of Sherborne. In a passage extolling Alfred's international influence, Asser wrote:

What shall I say of his frequent expeditions and battles against the Vikings and of the unceasing responsibilities of government? What of his daily involvement with the nations which lie from the Mediterranean to the farthest limit of Ireland? - for I have seen and read letters sent to him with gifts from Jerusalem by the Patriarch Elias.<sup>50</sup>

The passage is an intriguing one, suggesting that Alfred was in direct touch with an area which, until the mid-seventh century, had been part of the Byzantine empire, and which still looked upon the emperor in Constantinople as the leader of Christendom and as a possible liberator from Arab rule.<sup>51</sup>

Yet it has to be asked whether Asser's remarks fall into the same category as the

Athenian scholars of Tuscus, late and unreliable evidence, unworthy of credence. Recently, a new biography of Alfred by A.P. Smyth, has suggested exactly that. Smyth bases his scepticism on two points. In the first place he casts doubt on the claim of Asser's Life of Alfred to be the work of a contemporary. Rather, he argues, it was a tenth century forgery.<sup>52</sup> Secondly, he queries whether the name of the patriarch as given was the correct one. The name 'Elias', which appears in the version of the text edited in 1904, was reconstructed by the editor, from a sentence which read that Alfred had received letters 'de Hierosolyma ab El patriarcha'. Smyth points out that the name could just as easily have read 'Abel', and there was no patriarch of Jerusalem called Abel in the later ninth century.<sup>53</sup>

The first point is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that Smyth's conclusions have by no means been universally accepted by historians of Anglo-Saxon England and that Asser was a contemporary biographer of Alfred, who completed his work around the year 893, remains the prevalent view.<sup>54</sup>

As regards Smyth's second point, however, there are good grounds for believing that the reading of 'Elias' for 'El' is perfectly reasonable. The text clearly states that the letters were from the patriarch of Jerusalem, and Elias was the name of a contemporary patriarch, who held the office between about 879 and 907.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, there is other evidence that this same Elias was sending emissaries to the West during Alfred's reign. In 881 the monks Gispertus and Reynardus had been dispatched to the Frankish emperor, Charles the Fat, with a letter soliciting alms for the rebuilding of churches in Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup> In all probability, this was the same letter which reached Alfred.

A final point in support of the authenticity of Asser's text is that there is nothing far fetched about the idea of an eastern patriarch making contact with an English ruler. The letter received by Alfred and Charles the Fat was probably a circular, brought back by Frankish pilgrims, which was no doubt read out at a number of European courts. It was probably part of the concerted campaign by the church in Jerusalem to solicit the help and support of the rest of Christendom that went on throughout the ninth century. In about 813, for example, the patriarch had appointed Michael the Synkellos to head a delegation to Constantinople and Rome to ask

for financial assistance in paying a heavy fine imposed by the Arabs.<sup>57</sup> Around the year 900 envoys from Jerusalem had toured western Europe seeking to raise the ransom of a bishop and thirty other Christians.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the letter described by Asser may not be the only example of such an appeal reaching England. The discovery of a leaden seal of the Patriarch Sophronius II of Jerusalem (c.1076-86) at Winchester may indicate a similar occurrence during the later eleventh century.<sup>59</sup> Asser's assertion that King Alfred received an appeal from the patriarch of Jerusalem, therefore, has a good claim to credence and should not be dismissed out of hand.

What is more significant, however, is not Alfred's receipt of the letter but the way in which he responded to it. According to some versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in the year 883 Alfred sent out Sigehelm and Athelstan with alms for the churches of 'India', and the story is repeated by the later chroniclers Florence of Worcester and William of Malmsbury. India seems an unlikely destination for two English thanes, but the difficulty has generally been resolved by reading 'India' as a manuscript corruption of 'Judaea'. Seen in this light, Alfred's alms were, in fact, destined for Jerusalem, and probably represent a favourable response to Elias's appeal.<sup>60</sup>

Again, the authenticity of this evidence has been questioned by Smyth on the grounds that this version of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle is merely a borrowing from contemporary Frankish annals.<sup>61</sup> Yet the story is by no means an unlikely one. We know from another source, the Chronicon of Aethelweard, that pilgrims did set out from Alfred's court for Jerusalem, so that they could have taken with them alms on the king's behalf.<sup>62</sup>

It therefore seems likely that Alfred did respond to the patriarch's appeal, a gesture underlining his feelings of solidarity with distant fellow-Christians. Yet his contact with Jerusalem was by no means one-sided, for Alfred appears to have sought something in return.

An Anglo-Saxon 'Leechbook' or collection of medical lore, possibly compiled during Alfred's reign, but written down in the following century, contains a passage outlining a number of medicinal recipes involving the use of petroleum and what it calls the 'white stone'. These are distinguished from the other recipes in the book by the claim that 'All this Dominus Helias, patriarch at Jerusalem, ordered one to say to King Alfred'.<sup>63</sup>

Again, this is not as unlikely as it may sound. After all, if messages were being sent by the patriarch to Alfred, via pilgrims returning from Jerusalem, there is no reason why he should not have sent medical advice. More importantly, however, Elias's advice should be seen in the wider context of the Byzantine medical tradition and its transmission to the West.

Byzantium had inherited from the ancient world the works of the Greek medical writers, largely lost to the West by the eighth century. These included the writings of Hippocrates, Galen, Paul of Aegina and Alexander of Tralles, but most importantly those of Dioscorides with their emphasis on the healing properties of herbs and minerals. Not only were the works of these writers copied, but they were also studied both by students in secular higher education and in monastic circles.<sup>64</sup> As a result, knowledge of the Greek medical tradition was diffused much more widely than merely among practising physicians, with laymen, monks, and secular clergy often possessing similar skills. The giving of medical advice was part of the role of holy men in Byzantine society. Saint Theodore of Sykeon, who lived in Asia Minor at the end of the sixth century, was described by his hagiographer as an experienced doctor, given to advising about which herbal remedy to employ and when to have recourse to surgery.<sup>65</sup>

It was only to be expected, therefore, that those Byzantine monks who reached western Europe would pass on their medical knowledge in the same way, and Theodore of Tarsus is a good example. While Archbishop of Canterbury and for a long time after his death, he was regarded as an authority on medicine. His Penitential contains a recipe against dysentery, and Bede records how his opinions on the best time to bleed a patient were quoted with great respect.<sup>66</sup> Similarly in the tenth century, aspects of Byzantine medicine, possibly passed on by the Greek monks who resided in England, found their way into compilations of medical lore.<sup>67</sup> Seen in this context, Elias's medical advice to Alfred is not in the least implausible. Elias was only doing for the distant Christians of Wessex what Theodore of Sykeon had done for his flock in Asia Minor.

Alfred's role in the exchange of letters is also deeply significant. Although by the ninth century Jerusalem no longer formed part of the Byzantine empire, and was a goal of pilgrimage in its own right, the episode is clear evidence of the willingness of the Anglo-Saxons, even in a

period when Anglo-Byzantine contacts were in virtual abeyance, to look beyond their own borders, to receive and even actively to seek out what they considered to be the superior knowledge and culture of an older Christian civilisation, of which Byzantium was the most obvious and powerful guardian.

To conclude, it goes without saying that the English were never as deeply influenced by Byzantine art, religion and ceremonial as were the Russians or Bulgarians, nor even as were their neighbours, the Franks. Sheer distance ensured that their contacts with Byzantium were far fewer, and the resulting influence much less. For some periods, such as the eighth and ninth centuries, there was very little contact at all. Yet although Michael McCormick sounded a timely warning of against generalisations about Byzantine influence on early medieval Europe, the evidence discussed here suggests that the receptivity of the Anglo-Saxons to that influence was something which remained constant over many centuries.

## Footnotes

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