Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and Germanic oral tradition

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The object of this study is to examine the possibility that, although the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies are in their extant form products of ecclesiastical scholarship, the keeping of royal genealogies in early England was not an innovation brought about by Christian literacy, but was rather a native, originally pre-Christian institution which the Church adopted. The discussion is divided into two parts. The first argues that the genealogical lists derive at least in part from the sort of historical record which the Anglo-Saxons, in common with other early Germanic peoples, maintained in the form of orally transmitted narrative traditions. The second tries to show that these traditions were cultivated by a court poet known to the Anglo-Saxons as the scop. *The conclusion is that the extant royal genealogies are ultimately dependent on orally transmitted royal dynastic histories the keeping of which was an established part of native, originally pre-Christian traditional culture in England.*

The Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies are lists tracing the descent of English kings from legendary and mythical ancestors. The dynasties of Bernicia, Deira, Lindsey, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent and Wessex are represented in the extant record. These lists are to be found mainly in the Anglian collection recently edited by Dumville (1976), which dates from the eighth century, and in the early ninth-century *Historia Britonum*, but individual genealogies also occur in greater or lesser degrees of elaboration in a variety of other texts: Bede's *Ecclesiastical history*, Asser's *Life of Alfred*, a West Saxon regnal table, at various points in the *Anglo-Saxon chronicle* and the *Chronicle* of Æthelweard and, finally, in a manuscript fragment of the ninth century (Sweet 1885:179) which contains a West Saxon and an East Saxon genealogy (catalogue of materials in Sisam 1953).

After Sisam's discussion of them (1953) there can be no doubt that these genealogical lists, as extant, are products of literate and therefore of ecclesiastical scholarship. But was the keeping of such records wholly a consequence of Christian literacy, or do they represent a native, originally pre-Christian genre which the Church adopted? The notion of the *stirps regia* certainly predated the coming of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England: it may be that, in compiling the genealogies, churchmen were articulating Germanic custom which had not been articulated before, but it is at least possible that records of this sort existed as an adjunct to kingship in pre-literate times. This latter idea is an old one. Pointing out that part of the West Saxon genealogy falls into perfect Old English verse, Chambers (1959:316–17) wrote:

Like the mnemonic lists in *Widsith*, these lines are probably very old. . . . The lines must go back to times when lists of royal ancestors, both real and imaginary, had to be arranged in correct verse; times when such things were recorded by memory rather than by writing. They are pre-literary, and were doubtless chanted by retainers of the West Saxon kings in heathen days.

Recent scholarship has been sceptical about the native component of these texts. Sisam had relatively little to say about the matter. He did, however, invalidate Chambers' arguments for the antiquity of the West Saxon genealogy (1953:300–07), and let it be known at the end of his discussion of the Anglo-Saxon genealogies that he thought little of the idea that the pre-Conversion English kept coherent records of this sort (1953:345–6 and 322–3). Dumville (1977:96) has lately written:

If the cultivation of genealogy was a feature of Germanic kingship in the early middle ages – and, given the available witnesses, this seems a reasonable statement – there is nonetheless a lack of evidence for the antiquity of this practice. For all that we may, *a priori*, believe to the contrary, we seem to lack convincing evidence that prehistoric Germanic society was pedigree-conscious. . . . If the suspicion be just, then we must look to the Church as the cultivator of Germanic royal pedigrees. We may relate this to the intense concern shown by the established early medieval western Church for aristocratic descent and breeding. . . . Behind the Church's view of genealogy, apart from biblical precedents we may see Roman practice.

He goes on to say that "we can perhaps believe in the oral cultivation of king-lists at royal courts", and that "the Germanic kings, in England at least, may have employed officials to reckon time, including the lengths of their own reigns" (100 and 102), but though he recognizes that royal genealogies were kept by a native secular learned class in early Ireland, he is unwilling to acknowledge the same for the Germans, or for the Anglo-Saxons more particularly (102–3). In his discussion of the medieval Irish court poet, the *fili*, Caerwyn Williams paralleled the *fili* and his functions with the Welsh *bardd*, the North Germanic *scald* and the West Germanic *scop*, and in so doing suggested that the *scop*, like these others, was a "court genealogist and historian" (1971:92). On the understanding that "alone in western Europe in the early middle ages, the Celtic countries seem to have had professional secular learned men", Dumville challenges this view of the *scop*, wondering "if this is not to say more than the Anglo-Saxon evidence allows" (1977:102).

Neither Sisam nor Dumville was primarily concerned with the question of whether the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies have a native background. The present discussion aims to examine this question in detail. The first part of it will argue that the genealogical lists derive at least in part from the sort of historical record that the Anglo-Saxons, in common with other early Germanic peoples, maintained in the form of orally transmitted narrative traditions. The second tries to show that these traditions were cultivated by a court poet known to the Anglo-Saxons as the *scop*. Because they shed light on the political application of originally pre-Christian Germanic oral culture, I hope that the results will be of interest both to historians and to students of early medieval vernacular literature.

The most obviously pre-Christian aspect of the Anglo-Saxon genealogical lists is the fact that all the dynasties just referred to draw their descent from a heathen god. In all but one case the god is Woden;[2] the

exception is the East Saxon dynasty, whose descent is drawn from Seaxnet (Sweet 1885: 179). Woden is, of course, that most famous of Germanic gods. Seaxnet was one of the gods of the continental Saxons (Turville-Petre 1964:100). The natural assumption that the descent of kings from heathen gods is an originally pagan concept, record of which managed to survive into the post-Conversion centuries, can be confirmed by · showing that it existed as a belief among other early Germanic peoples.

Belief in descent from a god was an important ideological principle in the ordering of society among the early Germans. It gave ethnic coherence to peoples, and royal authority to the dynasties which ruled them. As regards the first of these points, Wenskus' examination of the factors that conditioned the composition of Germanic *gentes* has shown that political considerations were more important than blood relationship, though by a seeming paradox genealogy was a fundamental element in their coherence as ethnic groups (1961). *Gentes* such as the Lombards were composed of a variety of smaller groups, for the most part unrelated by blood and sometimes even of different racial origin, and could change in composition or even cease to exist as recognizable entities as the political circumstances which shaped them altered. Belief in common descent from a god, according to Wenskus, was what gave such a federation its *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* – what changed a group of peoples brought together by common purpose, necessity or conquest into a single *gens*. Karl Hauck has emphasized that belief in common descent from a divine ancestor was part of the national mythology of such a *gens*, and was expressed in religious

cult (1955, 1960 and 1964; also Höfler 1973).

The earliest surviving example of this kind of myth is the following well-known passage from Tacitus' *Germania* (Much 1967: 44):

Celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terra editum. Ei filium Mannum, originem gentis conditoremque, Manno tris filios assignant, e quorum nominibus proximi Oceano Ingaevones, medii Herminones, ceteri Istaevones vocentur. Quidam, ut in licentia vetustatis, pluris deo ortos plurisque gentis appellationes, Marsos Gambrivios Suebos Vandilios affirmant, eaque vera et antiqua nomina.

They celebrate in ancient songs, which is the only sort of memorial and historical record they have, Tuisto, a god born of the earth. To him they attribute a son Mannus, the beginning and founder of the *gens*, and to Mannus three sons, from whose names those near the ocean are called Ingaevones, those in the middle Herminones and the rest Istaevones. Some, using the licence of antiquity, declare for more sons born to the god and more racial names, Marsi, Gambrivii, Suebi and Vandilii, and that these are true and ancient names.

This passage attributes to the Germans – which Germans Tacitus does not say – a belief in the descent of known peoples from a god via a common progenitor Mannus, who in view of his counterpart Manus in Indian tradition (Wenskus 1961:241–2) can be regarded as the primordial Man. Wenskus sees it as a *Beweis für das Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl der Germanen*, "an indication of the consciousness of common identity among the Germans" (1961:234); *Dahinter steht entweder ein politisches Programm, oder das Bild entstand aus der Ethnisierung gegebener politischer Zustände, d.h., es gab einem politischen Verband die ethnische Legitimation, indem es ihn als Abstammungsgemeinschaft fasste und dadurch seine Zusammengehörigkeit ideell begründete*, "Underlying it is either a political

program, or the scheme came into being through the ethnic interpretation of given political circumstances, that is, it gave a political federation an ethnic basis, in that it interpreted it as a community of descent, and through this established its communality ideologically" (240). This political dimension of the Mannus genealogy is illustrated by a ceremony which a people included in it, the Suebi, celebrated in the territory of one of its constituent groups, the Semnones (Much 1967:432). *Vetustissimos se nobilissimosque Sueborum Semnones memorant*, writes Tacitus, adding: *Fides antiquitatis religione firmatur*, "The Semnones traditionally maintain that they are the most ancient and most noble of the Suebi", "This belief in their antiquity is confirmed by their religion". In the ceremony that is then described *omnes eiusdem sanguinis populi*, "all the peoples of the same blood", meet in a forest in the Semnones' territory and offer a human sacrifice. Tacitus explains its significance as follows:

Eoque omnis superstitio respicit, tamquam inde initia gentis, ibi regnator omnium deus, cetera subiecta atque parentia. Adicit auctoritatem fortuna Semnonum: centum pagi iis habitantur, magnoque corpore efficitur ut se Sueborum caput credant.

The whole superstition looks back to this: it is as if the *gens* began there, as if the god who is ruler of all were there, and everything else is subject and obedient to him. The prosperity of the Semnones adds to their authority: a hundred districts are inhabited by them, and because of this great number they believe themselves to be chief of the Suebi.

The cult of the Semnones was an application of the above mythological schema, or one very like it, to the ideology binding the Suebi together as a group (Hauck 1955: 193ff. and Wenskus 1961:246ff.). Tacitus

believed what the myth was designed to affirm: that the Suebi were of one blood. In fact, Wenskus has shown that the Suebi were a conglomeration of diverse and by no means always genealogically related groups (1961:255ff.). The cultic enactment of the myth of common descent from a divine ancestor gave coherence to the federation.

The myth of divine descent also bestowed royal authority on ruling dynasties. This is attested for the Gothic Amali, the Frankish Merowingi and, less clearly, for the Langobardic Gungingi.[3] As with the divine descent of *gentes*, its function was to give ideological justification to existing political circumstances. Tacitus *reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt*, "they take their kings on account of their nobility, and their battle leaders on account of their bravery", is now seen not as an opposition but as a continuum of types of rulership appropriate to the unsettled conditions of the time (Wolfram 1970 and Wallace-Hadrill 1971). Writers like Jordanes (Mommsen 1882:64. 12–14) and Gregory of Tours (Krusch and Levison 1951:57) agree that the *rex* was characterized by *nobilitas*; Procopius' description of the lengths to which the Herules went in replacing their deceased king with a member of what they saw as the legitimate royal line gives an idea of the value placed on this qualification (Dewing 1919:421–3). The *dux*, preferably though not necessarily of royal stock, owed his authority solely to *virtus*, efficacy in war. A *rex* could function as a *dux* when circumstances warranted it, but so could a *dux*—if he was successful enough to establish a territory for himself and his followers—find himself in the position of a *rex*. If his kingdom managed to survive beyond his own lifetime he could emerge as the

founder of a *stirps regia*. In their traditions the Goths, Franks and Lombards recorded that their royal dynasties were descended from great battle leaders who had decisively improved the fortunes of the peoples whom they led. The same traditions record that these leaders established the divine descent or, in the case of the Lombards, the divine patronage which characterized the *nobilitas* of the dynasties in question. The claim to divine descent, in other words, served to legitimize *de facto* political authority. The instance of the Semnones gives an initial indication of what is involved. The Semnones were politically preeminent among the Suebi, and at the same time claimed to be *nobilissimi* by virtue of their special proximity to the god who was regarded ancestor of the Suebi as a whole.

Turning first to the Goths, Jordanes recounts in his *Getica* that they had won a great victory over the Romans in the time of the emperor Domitian (51–96 AD), and adds (Mommsen 1882:76):

Iam proceres suos, quorum quasi fortuna vincebant, non puros homines, sed semideos id est Ansis vocaverunt. Quorum genealogia ut paucis percurram.... Horum ergo heroum, ut ipsi suis in fabulis referunt, primus fuit Gapt, qui genuit Hulmul. Hulmul vero genuit Augis: at Augis genuit eum, qui dictus est Amal, a quo et origo Amalorum decurrit: qui Amal genuit Hisarna ...

Then they called their leaders, by whose good fortune they seemed to have been victorious, not men only, but demigods, that is, *ansis*. I will briefly run through their genealogy.... Of these heroes, as they themselves relate in their tales, the first was Gapt, who begot Hulmul. Hulmul begot Augis: thereupon Augis begot him who is called Amal, from whom the beginning of the Amali also proceeds; this Amal begot Hisarna....

From Gapt the genealogy is continued through another sixteen generations, ending with Theodoric the Great's grandson Athalaric. It records the line of descent of that branch of the Amali, the Ostrogothic royal dynasty, to which Theodoric (died 526) and Athalaric (died 534) belonged. *Ansis*, which term Jordanes translates as *semideos*, is an item in the religious vocabulary of the early Germans. It corresponds to the *ēsa* (sg. *ōs*) who are named along with elves and witches in an Old English charm (Whitelock 1967:101), and to the *æsir* (sg. *áss*), the gods of North Germanic mythology (Pokorny 1959 for these and other cognates; also Kuhn 1973). The *Getica* is based on the now-lost Gothic history written by the Roman aristocrat Cassiodorus (about 485–580) during the time when he served as a high-ranking civil servant under Theodoric (died 526) and his successor Athalaric (reigned 526–34) (for the sources of the *Getica*, Wagner 1967 and Svennung 1967a; for the Cassiodoran source of the Amal genealogy, Wolfram 1967:99). At that time there were Gothic traditions – *fabuli* – which credited the ruling dynasty of the Ostrogoths with descent from a great battle leader whose particular success in war had elevated him in Gothic eyes to a status which Cassiodorus felt was best rendered in Latin as *semideus*.

The name *Gapt* at the head of the genealogy has led some scholars to conclude that the Amali claimed descent from Woden or from an originally independent god who had been assimilated to him in the course of time (Sisam 1953:314, de Vries 1957:2.37–42 and Turville-Petre 1964:62 and 190–1). This depends on the form *Gapt* being cognate with Langobardic *Gausus*, Old Norse *Gautr* and Old English *Gēat*, all of which go back to a form *Gautaz*. Many scholars have assumed that it is, mainly on the basis of

evidence to be cited shortly, but for others the *þ* in *Gapt* has been a problem (Birkhan 1965:2). In recent times a variety of explanations for the *þ* which would allow *Gapt* to be phonologically reconciled with *Gautaz* have been proposed. Birkhan (1965) suggested that, because the expected Gothic form *Gaut* would have been part not of everyday speech but of a Gothic *Sakralsprache*, it might not have taken part in·the sound change *au* > *ō* occurring among the Ostrogoths *c.* 400 AD, but retained its original form. If so, the retained *u* would by the early sixth century, when Cassiodorus worked, have been pronounced as a semivocalic bilabial fricative which would then have been unvoiced before *t*, giving *Gaft*. This *Gaft* could then appear in Latin orthography as *Gapt*. Wagner (1969) proposed that the similarity of the letters *u* and *þ* in Gothic script could easily have caused *Gaut* to be incorrectly read as *Gapt*. Birkhan's argument for the retention of *au* in place of the expected *ō*, moreover, is in his view unnecessary: following the orthographical practice of Wulfila's time *au* was written for spoken *ō*. Wagner had, however, to assume that Cassiodorus drew on a preexisting Amal genealogy written in Gothic script, an assumption that Birkhan (1970: 559) subsequently questioned. Most recently of all, Wolfram has argued that the form *Gapt* is attributable to a late Latin sound change (1977:91). Whichever explanation one favours – and they are all at least plausible – the *þ* in *Gapt* cannot be regarded as a serious obstacle to the identification of *Gapt* with *Gautaz*.

This identification rests on two considerations. Firstly, *Gautaz* has traditionally been regarded as a doublet of Woden or as an originally independent god who had been assimilated to him. Gautr is one of the names of Odinn in North Germanic mythology (Turville-Petre 1964:61–3), and two Anglo-Saxon sources to all appearances identify him as a god. In his *Life of Alfred* Asser writes: . . . *Geata, quem Getam iamdudum pagani pro Deo venerabantur*, "Geata, which Geta the pagans used long ago to worship instead of God" (Stevenson 1904:3); the *Historia Britonum* says that Geta *fuit, ut aiunt, filius dei. Non ipse est deus deorum, amen, deus exercituum, sed unus est ab idolis eorum, quod ipsi colebant*, "was, as they say, the son of a god. He is not the God of gods, the Amen, the God of hosts, but one of their idols to which they devoted themselves" (Mommsen 1898: 171). Now, Odinn-Gautr was one of the *æsir*, the gods of North Germanic mythology, while in the *Getica* Gapt is said to have been one of the *ansis*, the Gothic equivalent of *æsir* which Cassiodorus or Jordanes translated as *semidei*. All one has to do is invoke that occupational disease of early medieval historiographers, euhemerization, to see Gapt not as a deified hero, but as a god, and thereby arrive at an exact parallel between Gapt and *Gautaz*. Secondly, Gapt and *Gautaz* share a function. Gapt appears as the progenitor of a royal dynasty, the Amali; in the prologue to the mid-seventh century *Edict* of Rothari, Gausus is named as the progenitor of the line to which the famous Langobardic king Alboin belonged (Beyerle 1947:4), and Geat occurs above Woden in several Anglo-Saxon genealogies.[4] The stages above Woden in these texts are literary elaborations of the Christian period (see note 2), but the occurrence of Geat in a genealogical context is, in view of the above considerations, arguably

significant. Here again there is a link with Woden. One might, on the basis of the above evidence, interpret the occurrence of Gausus and Geat in royal genealogies to mean that Langobardic and Anglo-Saxon kings were thought to descend from Woden. The Anglo-Saxon genealogies explicitly confirm this, and as we shall see later Woden appears in connection with another Langobardic dynasty.

*Gautaz, however, is a curious sort of deity. Jordanes describes him, not as a god, but as a man who had been deified: other considerations make it difficult to explain this away as euhemerisation. The *Historia Britonum* rather oddly stipulates that Geat was a *filius dei*. Though well attested in genealogical contexts, *Gautaz never appears as an independent god anywhere else. In addition, Kuhn has noted that an element *gautaz is used in ways uncharacteristic of other divine names in North and West Germanic sources (1954). These points complicate an otherwise very tidy situation. The indications that *Gapt* is cognate with *Gausus*, *Gēat* and *Gautr* stand, however: like the first two Gapt is a *Stammvater*, and like the latter two he is in some sense linked with Germanic mythology.

To go any further with Gapt it will be necessary to look briefly at the etymology of his name. *Gaut-* has applications other than those already cited, occurring also as a second element in names applied to Odinn, in North and West Germanic personal names and in the name of at least one people, the Gautar (Kuhn 1954:417). It is the o-grade of Germanic *geut-, "to pour" (Pokorny 1959:448 and Svennung 1967a:69–72); its meaning in these various applications is a vexed question (Svennung 1967a:69–78).

Some picturesque suggestions have been put forward. To explain its occurrence as a population name, for instance, Much wrote: *Wahrscheinlich hat sich . . . hier aus dem Begriff ". . . Samen ergiessend" der von "Man" oder "männliches Tier" entwickelt*, "Probably the notion of 'man' or 'male animal' developed from the notion 'pouring out sperm'" (quoted by Svennung 1967a: 72). No pretence at a final solution is being made here, but the meaning proposed for *gautaz by Kuhn does offer a satisfying interpretation of all the above applications. Kuhn argued that *geut-, like its cognates in other Indo-European languages, was used not only in the sense of "to pour" but also in the sense of "to offer sacrifice", and that *gautaz was *die Bezeichnung derer gewesen, die man einem Gott zum Opfer brachte oder dazu weihte oder ausersah*, "the term for those who were brought to a god as sacrificial victims, or consecrated or dedicated to him"; Old Norse *gautr* designated anyone dedicated to Odinn, either as an unwilling sacrifice or as a warrior sworn to the service of this preeminent god of war (Kuhn 1954:425 and 429). His interpretation of *gautaz, like its more specific development in *gautr*, depends to a crucial extent on comparatively late North Germanic material. Is it applicable to the descent of the Amali from Gapt several centuries earlier?

From the first century AD attestations *Gotones* and *Gothones* (for these attestations see Krause 1968:4–5) it can be deduced that the Goths called themselves *Gutans*. This is a plural formation from the zero grade of *geut-, with weak declension (Krause 1968: 4–5). Taking Kuhn's meaning for the Old Norse singular, *gautr*, one would expect *Gutans* to mean something like "devotees of

the war god Woden". The *Getica* contains the following passage (Mommsen 1882:64):

Adeo ergo fuere laudati Gaetae, ut dudum Martem, quem poetarum fallacia deum belli pronuntiat, apud eos fuisse dicant exortum . . . Quem Martem Gothi semper asperima placavere cultura (nam victimae eius mortes fuere captorum), opinantes bellorum praesulem apte humani sanguinis effusione placandum. Huic praede primordia vovebantur, huic truncis suspendebantur exubiae, eratque illis religionis preter ceteros insinuatus affectus, cum parenti 'devotio numinis videretur inpendi.

The Getae were so praised that, they say, Mars, whom the fiction of poets calls the god of war, was long ago born among them . . . The Goths have always appeased this Mars with cruel rites (for his victims were slain captives), thinking that the patron of war was suitably to be placated by the shedding of human blood. To him were offered the first fruits of plunder, for him weapons stripped from the enemy were hung from trees, and more than others they had a deeply rooted spirit of religion, since the worship of the god was regarded as being bestowed on their ancestor.

Wolfram (1976:247–51) has shown that Cassiodorus here applied to the Goths a long-standing tradition of antique historiography whereby Mars-Ares was *die Inkarnation seines Volkes und dessen Landes,* "the incarnation of his people and its territory", among the Scythians and Thracians, but he went on to argue – convincingly in my view – that it was an *interpretatio romana* of an aspect of actual Gothic religion. The Goths, in other words, really had at some point been "devotees of the war god", as the above interpretation of their name leads one to expect. These devotees of the war god furthermore called a particularly successful warrior among them *Gapt,* a name already shown to correspond to *Gautr.* The conclusion must be that the meaning which Kuhn assigned to *gautr* mainly on the basis of North Germanic evidence suits Gothic

usage of its cognate in the sixth and previous centuries very well.

According to this interpretation of *Gapt,* therefore, the Goths once believed that their royal dynasty, the Amali, was descended not from a god, but from a great battle leader whose success in war manifested the special favour of the national war god – what the *Getica* calls *fortuna* – and bestowed on him a semi-divine status. A comparable situation can be envisaged for the Anglo-Saxons and the Lombards. The *Chronicle* of Æthelweard says that Hengest and Horsa and their followers sacrificed to Woden for victory (Campbell 1962a:7); the *Historia Britonum's* description of Geat as *filius dei,* otherwise merely curious, becomes significant when seen in conjunction with the Gothic material. The Lombards traced the line of Alboin back to Gausus; as material discussed below shows, another of their royal dynasties, the Gungingi, was in Langobardic tradition thought to have originated in a *dux* who invoked Woden and thereby won a series of great victories. The relationship between dynastic founder and war god to which these three instances point is, of course, appropriate in terms of what has been said about early Germanic rulership: it was by war that a *dux* could establish a kingdom and a royal line.

Before going on to the Franks it has to be pointed out that the Amal genealogy was deliberately constructed by Cassiodorus to provide the Amali with a pedigree sufficiently venerable to reconcile the Roman senate to its new masters, and as a result it has the marks of political propaganda (for what follows, see Wolfram 1967:99–103, 1968:479–88 and 1977). Specifically, there are seventeen generations from Gapt to Athalaric, just as there were seventeen

between Aeneas and Romulus in contemporary Roman tradition, which suggests that Cassiodorus arranged the coincidence to imply that Athalaric was the new Romulus. Historically, moreover, the victory over Domitian's Roman forces in 86/7 was gained not by the Goths but by the Getae, a people with whom the Goths were hopelessly confused in Classical and medieval historiography (Svennung 1967b). These and other points have led some scholars to dismiss the material as outright invention, useless for the study of Gothic mythology, but Wolfram counters with the following argument in regard to the myth of descent from a demigod (Wolfram 1968:487):

Zu Zeiten des Jordanis und Cassiodors wurde sie jedenfalls als aktuelle politische Theorie eingesetzt. Sie kann aber nicht zuletzt darum nicht erst in diesem Zeitpunkt "erfunden" worden sein; auch die primitivste Propaganda muss verbindlichen und vertrauten Vorstellungen und Motivationen zunächst entsprechen, wenn sie wirksam werden soll.

In the times of Jordanes and Cassiodorus it was in any case employed as a current political theory. But not least for this reason it could not have been invented at this point in time; even the most primitive propaganda has to correspond to intimately linked conceptions and motivations if it is to be effective.

Notwithstanding the artificialities which Cassiodorus introduced in creating a genealogy with propaganda value in Roman eyes, in other words, belief in the descent of the Amali from a leader whom victory in battle had transformed into a demigod, must have been current and significant among the Goths themselves if his work was going to be effective, or indeed make any sense at all to anyone. That Cassiodorus took this belief over from Gothic mythology, and did not simply invent it or for reasons of his own adapt the Classical view of the

hero as demigod (Hammond and Scullard 1970:505–6), is in any event certain from his explicit reference to Gothic *fabuli* as a source, and by his use of the vernacular terms *ansis* and *gapt* in a way that, as the foregoing discussion has argued, is consistent with what is known of their application in the mythologies of other Germanic peoples.

The Frankish material provides independent testimony that at least some of the early Germans believed in the divine descent of royal dynasties, and that this was established by dynastic progenitors who had been deified by success in war. Having exhausted his Classical written sources on the early history of the Franks, Gregory of Tours turns to common tradition: *Tradunt enim multi*, he writes, *eosdem de Pannonia fuisse degressus, et primum quidem litora Rheni amnes incoluisse, dehinc, transacto Rheno, Thoringiam transmeasse, ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis critinos super se creavisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia*, "Many relate that they came from Pannonia and first settled the shores of the Rhine and, from there, having crossed the Rhine, that they traversed Thuringia, and set over themselves in the country districts and cities long-haired kings from a foremost and very noble family among them" (Krusch and Levison 1951:57). One of these *reges* was Chlodio: *Ferunt etiam, tunc Chlogionem utilem ac nobilissimum in gente sua regem fuisse Francorum*, "They also say that Chlodio was at that time a useful and most noble king among his people, the Franks" (58). According to Gregory, he was "useful" because of his military success against Rome; the historicity of Chlodio and his campaigns in the mid-fifth century can be independently established (Zöllner 1970:27–9). We are,

therefore, dealing with an actual battle leader whose success increased the fortunes of his people, and consequently his own authority among them, and not with the shadowy *proceres* of the *Getica*. At the end of his account of Chlodio's career, Gregory mentions that *de huius stirpe quidam Merovechum regem fuisse adserunt*, "Some declare that Merowech was a king belonging to his line", and for no apparent reason launches into a tirade against heathenism: *Sed haec generatio fanaticis semper cultibus visa est obsequium praebuisse*, "But this race seems always to have been subject to mad religious practices" (Krusch and Levison 1951:58). The reason for this emerges on turning to the corresponding section in the *Chronicle* of Fredegar.

Having followed Gregory up to the point in question, Fredegar interpolates a story of how Chlodio and his wife were on the seashore one day and, approached by a *bistea Neptuni Quinotauri* [read *Minotauri*] *similis* while she was swimming, how she became pregnant *aut a bistea aut a viro*. The child was Merowech, from whom the Merovingians drew their descent (Krusch 1888:95). In Greek mythology the Minotaur was half-man, half-bull, a creature begotten on a human woman by the divine bull which Poseidon, the Greek equivalent of Neptune, had given to King Minos. The first step in assessing this passage must be to decide whether we have to do with the invention of a *littérateur* who had a knowledge of Classical mythology and reasons of his own for taking an interest in the descent of the Merovingians – which would of course make the material useless for the present discussion – or with an *interpretatio romana* of a Frankish myth.

All the indications are for the latter.

Firstly, literate men during the earliest period of Frankish rule in Gaul were concerned to lure a notoriously recalcitrant people away from pagan beliefs, not to give them new ones. Gregory's reaction to Merowech's name, a clear indication that he was aware of an account something like the one Fredegar has preserved, is symptomatic. Secondly, both Gregory and Fredegar imply a source in oral tradition: in the former's *History* "some declare" that Merowech was in the same line of descent as Chlodio, and Fredegar begins his interpolated account with *fertur*, "it is related". Our hypothetical literate mythologizer is, therefore, doubly unlikely. Thirdly, and most importantly, the genealogical claims of the pagan Merovingian kings had religious observances connected with them. Bishop Avitus wrote a letter to Clovis on the occasion of the latter's baptism (Peiper 1883:75; on this letter see von den Steinen 1932–3:480–94). He began by praising the king for having the good sense to see through the conflicting teachings of the various Christian sects, and to have embraced the Catholic faith. In doing so, Avitus goes on, Clovis has become a model for others who, brought to the brink of Christian conversion, set against it *consuetudinem generis et ritum paternae observationis*, "the customary usage of their race and the ritual of their ancestral practice", and thus *parentibus in incredulitatis custodia futilem reverentiam servant*, "preserve a worthless reverence for their ancestors in the grip of unbelief", giving as their excuse that they do not understand the issues involved in making the right choice. But this excuse, says Avitus, has with the baptism of Clovis ceased to be valid; Clovis, moreover, is *de toto priscae originis stemmate sola nobilitate contentus*, "satis-

fied with a *nobilitas* drawn solely from a lineage of ancient origin", realizing that he has through his baptism restored to his line of descent *quicquid omne potest fastigium generositatis ornare*, "whatever can adorn the whole summit of nobility". In this part of the letter Avitus is concerned to reassure Clovis about the effects of Christian conversion on his *nobilitas*. Some aspect of it was lost: Clovis is now "satisfied with a *nobilitas* drawn solely from a lineage of ancient origin". In other words, his pre-conversion *nobilitas* had consisted of something more than the antiquity of his line. What aspect of it had been lost? By setting Clovis up as an example for those who wavered between paganism and Christianity, Avitus parallels their experience with his. They could, like him, lose a little but gain a great deal; he, like them, had originally resisted Christianity with "the customary usage of his race and the ritual of ancestral practice", and with "a worthless reverence for his ancestors in the grip of unbelief". According to a contemporary witness, therefore, the pagan Merovingian king Clovis had claimed a *nobilitas* based only partly on antiquity of descent, and had had a *reverentia* for his ancestors which involved religious ritual. This cultic *reverentia* presupposes a mythology, and moreover a mythology of native origin; as we have seen, Gregory of Tours associates long-established cult practices with the name of Merowech.

Taking Fredegar's account as an *interpretatio romana* of a Frankish myth, then, what is the significance of the choice of *interpretatio*? Fredegar is apparently unsure who begot Merowech on Chlodio's wife: she conceived *aut a bistea aut a viro*. If Chlodio was responsible the *bistea* is superfluous, and

vice versa. The first alternative yields a perfectly ordinary descent for the Merovingians from Chlodio, but renders the anecdote pointless, and does little to explain Gregory's abhorrence of Merowech. The second restores the account to the level of myth, and explains Gregory's reaction. It also fits in well with evidence that the bull was sacred to the Merovingians. Hauck calls attention to the bull's head with sun-symbol on its forehead which was found in the Merovingian king Childeric's grave (1955:198). Another indication comes from the etymology which Schröder has suggested for the name Merowech. *Mēro-* is equated with Indo-European **mērus*, "ruminant", *die hocharchaische kultische Bezeichnung für den göttlichen "Stier" ... von dem sich die Merowinger herleiteten*, "the highly archaic cultic designation for the divine bull ... from which the Merovingians drew their descent" (Schröder 1974:243). The compound *Mēro-wech* (Gothic *weihs*, etc.) therefore means *der dem Mero Geweihte*, "he who is sacred to Mero", and those who draw their descent from him are *Mēro-w(ech)-ingi*. According to this interpretation of the account it can be said that, in the sixth and seventh centuries, there existed a myth which drew Merowech, the progenitor of the Frankish royal dynasty, from a union between what the *interpretatio romana* of that myth represents as a being which was half-man, half-bull and the wife of a great Frankish king, and that this mythical being is very possibly to be linked with a bull deity revered by the Merovingians at some stage. The Merovingians, in short, were believed to descend from a demigod. The reasons for preferring the second of the possibilities allowed by Fredegar's wording have been

given. One might attempt to do away with Chlodio by regarding him as a later intrusion by someone concerned to obscure the pagan character of the story, but there is no warrant for this: a century before Fredegar wrote, the Merowech tradition which Gregory knew already made Merowech a descendant of Chlodio. As far as it is possible to tell, both Chlodio and the *bistea* are integral to the account.

Hauck proposed an explanation which makes a choice between alternatives unnecessary, and has the merit of rendering the account comprehensible without recourse to emendation. He maintained that *aut a bistea aut a viro* can in Late Latin usage be read not only as "by the beast or by the man", but also as "by the beast and by the man simultaneously" (1955:197–8); one might just as easily argue that Fredegar did not understand the material he was handling. Putting this together with the fact that the *bistea* is represented as half-man, half-bull, he goes on to suggest that it represents an assimilation of Chlodio to the god of the people or family from which the Merovingians sprang, and that Merowech was believed to have been begotten by Chlodio on his wife under these conditions. The Gothic precedent supports this interpretation. The Ostrogoths believed that their royal dynasty was descended from a great battle leader who had been deified by victory. Chlodio was a great leader: there is good reason for interpreting Fredegar's account to mean that Chlodio's victories had transformed him in Frankish eyes into what Jordanes or Cassiodorus would have described as a *semideus*, and placed at the head of the Merovingian dynasty a progenitor who was believed to embody a link between it and a god.

The Lombards traced their identity as a people and the beginning of their first royal dynasty to the patronage of Woden and his spouse Frea, who gave them the victory which put them on the road to becoming a great *gens* as well as their name and *Stammestracht* – the outward signs of their unity and separateness from other peoples (Hauck 1955:211–14 and Wenskus 1961:259ff.). Paul the Deacon in the eighth century (Waitz 1878:52–6), and the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* in the seventh (Waitz 1878: 2–3), both tell how a people called the Winnili, led by two *duces* Ibor and Agio, responded to a Vandal challenge to war. Paulus introduces the account with the words: *Refert hoc loco antiquitas ridiculam fabulam*, "Antiquity here reports a ridiculous tale". It relates how Woden helped the Winnili gain victory after they had invoked the goddess Frea and she had interceded with Woden on their behalf. In the course of the story Woden is said to have given them the name Langobardi because of the long beards which they had affected to gain his support. Under this new name, and wearing their long beards in token of their patronage, the Lombards went from strength to strength under Ibor and Agio, but, when these *duces* died, *nolentes iam ultra Langobardi esse sub ducibus, regem sibi ad ceterarum instar gentium statuerunt. Regnavit igitur super eos primus Agelmund, filius Aionis, ex prosapia ducens originem Gungingorum, quae aput eos generosior habebatur*, "no longer wishing to be under *duces*, the Lombards established a king for themselves like other *gentes*. Therefore Agelmund the son of Agio first reigned over them, drawing from his lineage the beginning of the Gungingi, which among them was con-

sidered very noble". In Langobardic tradition, a royal line was traced back to a *dux* who, by invoking and obtaining the patronage of the war god, achieved the victories which made the Lombards a great *gens*.

There is no indication that Agio was deified like the Gothic *proceres* or Chlodio, but there is reason to think that the element of divine descent appears elsewhere in the Gungingi line. Paulus and the *Origo* say little about Agelmund himself. Instead, they go on to tell about the birth of Agelmund's son and successor as king of the Lombards: a prostitute gave birth to seven boys and threw them into a pond to drown; Agelmund happened to ride by and, out of curiosity, turned them over with his spear; one of the boys grabbed the spear, whereupon Agelmund pulled him out, adopted him as his son, and named him Lamissio (Laiamicho in the *Origo*). Hauck argues that the prostitute was Frea (1955:207ff.; also Malone 1962:177–8); in the account's own terms this would make Lamissio the son of Woden, but the point at which Woden is introduced is puzzling. The Gothic and Frankish precedents lead one to expect deification of Agio and semi-divine birth for Agelmund. It is noteworthy that Paulus' long and detailed account of Lamissio's career shows him to have been brilliantly successful in war. If Hauck is correct in his claim that Frea was the prostitute who bore Lamissio, the material shows that, among a people dedicated to Woden, the royal dynasty thought to have been founded by the *dux* who first gained his patronage was distinguished by subsequent contact with the god, who fathered heroes like Lamissio in later stages of descent. This is, of course, far from certain, but it remains that the story of Lamissio bestows an unmistakable, albeit baffling, mythical character on the early stages of descent in the Gungingi line.

Returning now to the Anglo-Saxons, the presence of Woden, Seaxnet and Geat at the beginning of royal dynasties in the genealogical lists shows that these lists incorporate a pre-Christian myth which the English shared with a variety of Continental Germanic peoples. They also incorporate certain political uses to which the Anglo-Saxons, again like the Continental Germans, put this myth. Gothic, Frankish and, possibly, Langobardic royal dynasties were characterized by descent from divine or divinized progenitors; the *Chronicle* of Æthelweard articulates the clear implication of the Anglo-Saxon genealogical lists that descent from a god was a qualification for royalty when it refers to King Ida, who is accounted progenitor of all the branches of the Bernician line, *cuius prosapia regni et nobilitatis a Vuothen exordium sumit*, "whose line of descent takes the beginning of its royal authority and of its *nobilitas* from Woden" (Campbell 1962a:12). Where belief in common descent from a god unified the Suebi as a *gens* and legitimized the pre-eminence of the Semnones among them, the Northumbrian dynasty – if Dumville (1977: 78–81) is right – used common descent from Woden to express its political relationships with other provincial royal houses in the seventh century. There is even a little evidence to suggest that the English, like the Suebi, Goths and Franks, celebrated the myth of divine descent in religious cult, depending on how far one is prepared to credit the foregoing comments on *Gautaz: according to Asser and the *Historia Britonum* Geat was worshipped as a god by the pagan

English. The myth of divine descent, in short, was an important ideological principle in Anglo-Saxon political life, as it was among the Germans on the Continent, and continued to be politically functional even after its overt link with heathen religion had been broken.

The continental Germans articulated the myth of divine descent in their oral traditions. Tacitus' *carmina antiqua* are the most obvious example. Among the Goths, *horum ergo heroum, ut ipsi suis in fabulis referunt, primus fuit Gapt. . . .* Paul the Deacon calls his account a *ridicula fabula*, and Fredegar begins his Merowech story with *ferunt*; the corresponding material in the *History of the Franks* comes after Gregory has admitted that his written sources are exhausted, and he begins it with the words: *Tradunt enim multi.*

These orally-transmitted accounts are in each case part of a broader range of oral tradition that the Goths, Lombards and Franks maintained. The writers we have looked at had traditions about their subjects' origins, early development and the careers of prominent leaders available to them. This material, too, was drawn from oral tradition. That it is on occasion said to have been in the form of song bears out the observation of Tacitus that, among the early Germans, *carmina antiqua* were *unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus.*

The *Getica* claims to be a consecutive history of the Goths from the earliest times to the sixth century. In composing its archetype, Cassiodorus made extensive use of the work of Classical historians, but he also used Gothic oral tradition. Their story begins with their departure from the north: *Ex hac igitur Scandza insula . . . cum rege suo*

nomine Berig Gothi quondam memorantur egress "From this island of Scandia . . . the Goth are said to have come long ago with their king Berig".[5] They are thereafter said to have settled along the North Sea and to have expanded at the expense of neighboring peoples. But Filimer, the fifth king since Berig, led his people to Scythia where, having defeated a people called the Spali, they made for Pontus *quemadmodum et in priscis eorum carminibus pene storicu ritu in commune recolitur*, "as it is generally rehearsed in their ancient songs in almost historical fashion" (61). Later in the *Getica* Jordanes again has occasion to refer to Filimer when writing of the origin of the Huns: *Nam hos, ut refert antiquitas, ita extitisse conperimus*, "For, as antiquity reports, we have heard that they came into being as follows . . ." (89); we are told that Filimer banished certain witches who, raped by demons, gave birth to the Huns. Given what has just been said about songs concerning Filimer, the meaning of *antiquitas* is clear. After some intervening material about Gothic adventures in the Caucasus comes the Amal genealogy. The text now follows the Goths' career up to the death of Ermanaric, and then develops the history of the two branches, the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths, separately. The Visigoths come first. Nowhere in this section is any source in oral tradition made explicit, but that such tradition was known to Cassiodorus is clear from a stray comment elsewhere in the *Getica* to the effect that *cantu maiorum facta modulationibus citharisque canebant, Eterpamara, Hanale, Fridigerni, Vidigoiae et aliorum, quorum in hac gente magna opinio est*, "They used to sing the deeds of their ancestors in song with melodies and stringed instruments, of Eterpamara,

Hanale, Fridigern, Vidigoia and others who are held in great estimation by this people" (65). Both Fridigern and Vidigoia were *duces* of the Terwingi, the *Getica*'s Visigoths. The first was active towards the end of the fourth century (Wolfram 1979:68–83 and 137–56), and the second fell, probably, in a Gothic attack on the Sarmatians in 332 (Wolfram 1979:64). The existence of such songs is furthermore demonstrated by the fact that Fridigern and Vidigoia, and possibly Eterpamara, appear in later heroic legend. They correspond to Fridla, Wudga and, less certainly, to Emerca, all of whom are mentioned in the Old English poem *Widsith* (Malone 1962:151, 212–13 and 144–6). As for the Ostrogoths, there is as before no direct reference in the *Getica* to native oral sources, but again later heroic legend shows that traditions relating to leaders whom the *Getica* assigns to the Amal line must have existed. Eastgota and his son Unwen, who appear in *Widsith* (Malone 1962:142–3 and 206), correspond to Ostrogotha, sixth in descent from Gapt, and to Ostrogotha's son Hunuil (Wagner 1969). Ermanaric and Theodoric are among the most famous figures of Germanic *Heldensage* (Uecker 1972: 50–74).

The *Historia Langobardorum* also begins in Scandinavia, where *dum in tantam multitudinem pullulassent, ut iam simul habitare non valerent, in tres, ut fertur, omnem catervam partes dividentes, quae ex illis pars patriam relinquere novasque deberet sedes exquirere, sorte perquirunt,* "since they increased into such a multitude that they could not coexist, dividing the company into three parts, *as it is related*, of which one part was to leave home and search out new places, they drew lots" (Waitz 1878:48–9). The early travels of the group under Ibor and Agio are described, in the course of which the Woden episode and the account of the birth of Lamissio appear. The creation of Agelmund as king ends: *Hic, sicut a maioribus traditur, tribus et triginta annis Langobardorum tenuit regnum,* "He, *as is related by our ancestors*, ruled over the Lombards for thirty-three years" (54). In the history which follows, Paul is not as explicit about his sources as Cassiodorus/Jordanes. He makes up for it by describing parts of Langobardic history in such a way as to make his dependence on vernacular oral tradition unmistakable. The accounts of the careers of Lamissio, Audoin and Alboin have features such as extensive plot and character development and the use of direct speech which have long since led students of *Heldensage* to identify them as a body of Langobardic heroic poetry in Latin translation (Schneider 1928–34:3.141–5, von See 1971:74ff., Uecker 1972:129–34 and Gschwantler 1976). For Alboin the narrative is particularly full; at the end of it Paul notes that *Alboin vero ita praeclarum longe lateque nomen percrebuit, ut hactenus etiam tam aput Baioariorum gentem quamque et Saxonum, sed et alios eiusdem linguae homines eius liberalitas et gloria bellorunque felicitas et virtus in eorum carminibus celebretur,* "The glorious name of Alboin was spread far and wide to such an extent that even until now his generosity and glory, his success and strength in battles is celebrated both among the Bavarians and the Saxons, but also among other men speaking the same language, in their songs" (70). Paul the Deacon had enough of this sort of material available to him to allow a detailed reconstruction of the careers of certain figures in Langobardic history prior to the end of the sixth century. The Lombards,

finally, are like the Goths represented in later heroic legend. *Widsith* mentions a king Sceafa, who does not appear in the documents we have been discussing, but Ælfwine (Alboin), Eadwine (Audoin) and Ægelmund, in the same poem, are familiar (Malone 1962:126–7, 139 and 126).

As previously noted, oral tradition was one of the sources that Gregory of Tors used for the early history of the Franks (see also Wagner 1977). The passage in question has already been quoted, and though the account it gives is very brief enough survives to show that here, too, the myth of royal descent from a god coexisted with a Frankish national origin legend. Further evidence for the existence of oral traditions about Frankish kings is difficult but not impossible to come by. We do know that songs about the deeds of past kings were current in Frankish courts from the sixth to the ninth centuries. In the mid-sixth century Venantius Fortunatus noted the singing of *leudos*, songs in the vernacular, in contemporary Frankish courts, and that such *leudos* were sung by a court poet one of whose functions, as we know from other sources, was the recitation of legends about famous kings of the Germanic heroic age (Leo 1881:2 and 163, lines 63–72; on this material see Moisl 1981; on the poet see further below). Centuries later, in a famous passage, Einhard says that Charlemagne *barbara et antiquissima carmina, quibus veterum regum actus et bella canebantur, scripsit memoriaeque mandavit,* "wrote down and committed to memory barbarous and most ancient songs in which were sung the deeds and wars of past kings" (Waitz 1911: 33). But Charlemagne's son Louis *poetica carmina gentilia quae in iuventute didicerat, respuit, nec legere, nec audire, nec docere voluit,*

"rejected the heathen poetical songs which he had learned in his youth, wishing neither to read, nor hear, nor teach them" (Pertz 1829:594). The trouble with these references is that they do not make clear whether the songs were about specifically Frankish kings. Medieval *Heldensage* is not much use here. The Hugdietrich and Wolfdietrich of heroic legend have traditionally been identified with Theodoric, the son of Clovis who died in 534, and with Theodoric's son Theodebert (died 548), but these identifications are disputed (Uecker 1972:103–5). The Walter legend incorporates ostensibly Frankish characters, but whether they originally were or not cannot be determined (Uecker 1972: 88–93). There is, however, just enough evidence to confirm that at least some of the songs referred to by Venantius, Einhard and Theganus were about Frankish rulers. Towards the end of the ninth century an anonymous poet usually referred to as Poeta Saxo (see Manitius 1911:583–4 and Brunhölzl 1975:389–90) wrote a versified *Life of Charlemagne*. He depended for the most part on the work of Einhard and on various annals, but occasionally he comes out with information not found in his sources, and this passage is one such occasion (de Winterfeld 1899:58):

De claris genitus fulsit praeclarior atque
patribus invictis fortior enituit;
est quoque iam notum: vulgaria carmina magnis
laudibus eius avos et proavos celebrant,
Pippinos, Carolos, Hludowicos et Theodricos,
et Carlomannos Hlothariosque canunt.

Begotten of famous men, he gleamed more brilliantly and shone forth more strongly than his invincible forebears; it is furthermore known that popular songs celebrate his fathers and ancestors with great praises, singing of Pippinus, Carolus, Hludowicus and Theodoricus, Carlomannus and Hlotharius.

The kings celebrated in the *vulgaria carmina*

are Carolingian and Merovingian. Carolus must be Charles Martel (died 741), Carlomannus a son of Charles' (died 754), and Pippinus, another of Charles' sons (died 768), is Charlemagne's father (see the genealogical table in Braunfels 1966:73–82). The names Hludowicus and Hlotharius do not appear in the Carolingian family tree before Charlemagne's time, while the two Theodorics that do belong to a distant collateral branch. Saxo clearly had Clovis (Chlodowech) and his sons Theodoric and Chlothar in mind. That he should make Merovingians ancestors of Charlemagne's does not compromise the historical credibility of his information: since the time of Charlemagne's father Pippin the Carollingians had been concerned to link themselves genealogically with the Merovingians, whom they had supplanted (Wenskus 1976). Independent support for the existence of songs about Clovis, at least, comes from Gregory of Tours, in whose account of Clovis' reign there are, as Zöllner (1970:71) has observed, *sagenhafte Elemente*. This is significant in the work of a writer already observed using oral tradition.

A corpus of oral tradition relating to aspects of national history and mythology can, in view of what has been said, be attributed to each of the Continental peoples with which the discussion has so far dealt. There are no English accounts of the descent of peoples or dynasties from heathen gods to set alongside the Continental ones, but the Anglo-Saxons did cultivate orally transmitted historical records like those just discussed. These, like their Continental counterparts, could be and probably always were in the form of song.

The earliest *Life* of the East Anglian king Ethelbert, which survives in a twelfth-century manuscript, tells how that king made his way to the court of Offa of Mercia, and how he was slain there, in 794. The following passage is part of the account of Ethelbert's journey to Mercia (James 1917: 238):

Tunc hilaris effectus sanctus rex Æðelbertus ait: "Sit nomen domini benedictum ex hoc nunc et usque in seculum". Et subintulit: "Itinerantibus non modica crebro leticia, dum illic diva poemata modulando recitantur. Ergo nobis qui ediderit carmina regia armilla donabitur". Nec mora, duo canendi prediti scientia in cordis leticia psallere ceperunt. Erant carmina de regis eiusdem regia prosapia. Quibus ille delectatus abstracta brachio protinus armilla modulantes carmina donat, dum repatriat plurima spondet.

Then, having been made cheerful, the holy king Ethelbert said: "May the name of the Lord be blessed now and forever". And he added: "Often it is no little joy for travellers when divine poems are recited with musical accompaniment. Therefore an arm-ring will be bestowed by me on whomever can recite royal songs". Immediately two skilled in the art of song began to make music in gladness of heart. They were songs about the royal line of that same king. Delighted by them, he took an arm-ring from his arm and bestowed it on those who had performed the songs, and promised more on returning home.

According to this, songs bearing on the history of the East Anglian royal dynasty were current at the end of the eighth century. The late date of the *Life*, however, is an obvious point of difficulty. M. R. James (1917:219) suggested tentatively that "the text represents a homily or a poem in the vernacular", and Wright (1939:96) that it is based "on vernacular traditions current in Hereford and its neighborhood in Anglo-Saxon times", a view shared by Wilson (1971:98–9). As far as I am aware, nothing more definite is known about the sources of the *Life*. How valid is the account for the time it pretends to describe? The early

eighth-century *Life of Guthlac* solves the problem. At the beginning of the *Life*, the saint's father is described as a man *de egregia stirpe Merciorum*, "from a distinguished line of the Mercians": *huius etiam viri progenies per nobilissima inlustrium regum nomina antiqua ab origine Icles digesto ordine cucurrit*, "the descent of this man ran in set order through the most noble and ancient names of illustrious kings from the beginning in Icel" (Colgrave 1956: 72–4). Reference to the Mercian royal genealogy shows that Icel was reckoned in direct line of descent from Woden: Guthlac was a member of the Mercian royal dynasty. The *Life* goes on to say that Guthlac was inspired to take up the warrior's life appropriate to a young man of his descent *valida pristinorum heroum facta reminiscens*, "remembering the mighty deeds of ancient heroes", but after a time, *cum antiquorum regum stirpis suae per transacta retro saecula miserabiles exitus flagitioso vitae termino contemplaretur*, "when he contemplated the miserable deaths by shameful end of life *of the ancient kings of his race* in past ages" (80–2), he gave it up. Guthlac was not inspired to action and remorse by the bare list of the names of his ancestors which constitutes the genealogy of the Mercian royal house, but by tales of the deeds of *pristinorum heroum* in that line. Colgrave dates Guthlac's martial career to the late seventh century, and the *Life* to about 730–40 (2–4 and 15–19). One can, therefore, be certain that a body of narrative tradition relating to the Mercian royal dynasty, or at least to a branch of it, existed at the turn of the seventh century. This makes the claim in the *Life of Ethelbert* that a similar body of tradition was attached to the East Anglian royal house about a century later entirely plausible.

A narrative account of the origin of the Kentish royal dynasty is actually extant. The well-known story of the invasion of Britain by Hengest and his brother Horsa is simultaneously an account of the establishment of the first Saxon kingdom in Britain, and of the foundation of its royal dynasty, the Oiscingas, named after Hengest's son Oisc. The account appears in a wide variety of pre- and post-Conquest texts. Of the pre-Conquest versions – found in Gildas' *De excidio Britonum*, Bede's *Ecclesiastical history*, the *Historia Britonum*, the *Anglo-Saxon chronicle* and the *Chronicle* of Æthelweard – the most fully developed is that of the *Historia Britonum* (Mommsen 1898:170–2, 176–80, 186–90 and 199). It relates that Hengest and Horsa were exiled from Germany and that, arriving in Britain, they were given an island and the promise of maintenance by the British king Vortigern in return for their help in combating his people's enemies. The Saxons agree, but after a time they grow burdensome to their hosts and are asked to leave. Hengest responds by sending home for reinforcements; with them comes his daughter. A feast is prepared and Vortigern is invited. When Vortigern sees Hengest's daughter there he is so taken with her that he offers half his kingdom to Hengest in exchange for her. The latter settles for Kent, and assuring Vortigern that he will be ever more zealous in defending the British against their enemies, he continues to gather Saxon reinforcements in Kent. When the account resumes after some intervening unrelated material, we find Vortigern's son Vortimer engaged in a series of battles against the Saxons. At first he succeeds in driving them back and even manages to kill Horsa, but then Vortimer himself dies. Vortigern now

invites the Saxons back, and a peace conference is arranged. Both sides agree to come unarmed, but the Saxons devise a plot to hide knives in their boots, and at the signal *nimmath tha saxas* – the Old English words actually appear in the text – to kill everyone but Vortigern. This happens as planned; Vortigern is ransomed for Essex and Sussex. Hengest is succeeded by his son, from whom the kings of Kent are descended.[6]

The occurrence of the clause *nimmath tha saxas* is one of several criteria that Chadwick, whose discussion of this material remains fundamental (1907:35–53), used to demonstrate that the *Historia Britonum* version of the account is ultimately based on an English source. His further conclusion, that the source was Kentish, follows naturally. The clause in question also indicates that the original account was in the vernacular: this, combined with the fact that in the manner and degree of its elaboration it resembles the Langobardic material discussed earlier suggests that, like Paul the Deacon, the compiler of the *Historia Britonum* was ultimately dependent on vernacular heroic poetry. As before, extensive plot development and use of direct speech are significant factors. So is Hengest's betrayal of a kinsman by marriage, a motif strongly reminiscent of the conflicts of loyalty so often found as themes in Germanic *Heldensage*. The East Anglian dynastic traditions were in the form of song. Given the above considerations, there is every reason to think that those of Kent were as well. This material can now be added to the Mercian and East Anglian evidence for the existence of narrative dynastic histories in Anglo-Saxon England. When the West Saxon dynasty's origin legend, comparable to the Kentish one in type if not in degree of development, is added to the group,[7] it is difficult to resist the conclusion that most, probably all, the Anglo-Saxon royal houses possessed such traditions.

We have seen that a politically functional myth of descent from heathen gods existed among the Anglo-Saxons as well as among a variety of Continental Germanic peoples. It has furthermore been shown that at least some of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, again like these Germans, maintained orally transmitted traditions relating to their histories. On the Continent the myth of divine descent was articulated in such oral traditions: this leads one to expect that the same was true in England. One additional point has to be kept in mind. The Anglo-Saxons regarded their oral traditions not as a loose body of disparate legends, but as the histories of particular dynasties. In the view of the author of the *Life of Ethelbert*, the *carmina* sung to the king were *carmina de regis eiusdem regia prosapia*, and Felix describes Guthlac listening to traditions about the ancient deeds of *antiquorum regum stirpis suae*. Both writers display an awareness that oral tradition could and did function as royal dynastic history; Felix is a contemporary witness for such an awareness in the first part of the eighth century. Given, in addition to the preliminary conclusion already drawn, on the one hand that the myth of divine descent was in England applied specifically to royal dynasties, and on the other that orally transmitted dynastic histories actually existed among the Anglo-Saxons, little doubt can remain that, in beginning their lists with Woden and Seaxnet, the ecclesiastical compilers of the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies were following pre-existing, orally trans-

mitted dynastic origin legends comparable to those attested on the Continent, in which descent from heathen gods was featured.

But the dependence of the genealogical lists on oral tradition goes further than this. The Continental Germanic traditions we have looked at comprised not only origin legends, but also accounts of legendary rulers whom the native chronologies of the peoples in question assigned to times subsequent to national or dynastic foundation, and even of demonstrably historical leaders. The same range of tradition can at least be postulated for England; in fact, there is evidence that Anglo-Saxon dynastic histories extended beyond the stage of divine descent. The *Life of Ethelbert* says that the king's singers recited *carmina* (pl.) about his royal line, which suggests a more or less extensive body of material, and the *Life of Guthlac* speaks, also in the plural, about *valida pristinorum heroum facta* and the deaths of *antiquorum regum stirpis suae*, which shows that Mercian dynastic history encompassed a sequence of kings. Furthermore, both Hengest in the Kentish history and Cerdic in the West Saxon are several generations removed from Woden in the corresponding genealogical lists, which would appear further to support what has just been said. We shall, however, see later that though there is nothing obviously mythical about Hengest or the events in which he takes part, he may after all represent the stage of the divine progenitor in Kentish dynastic history, which would put his son and successor into a position comparable to Merowech's. The same, by analogy, could easily be true of Cerdic and Cynric. The view that Anglo-Saxon dynastic history extended beyond origin legends recounting divine descent

depends on the evidence provided by the *Lives* of Ethelbert and Guthlac, which, though slight, is nevertheless quite explicit. Now, considering what has already been said about the cultivation of orally transmitted historical tradition among various Germanic peoples in England and on the Continent, such dynastic histories have to be regarded as a prehistoric genre which, in England, continued to exist at least until the end of the eighth century. The genealogical lists, on the other hand, are products of post-Conversion literacy. It is difficult to see how the lists, whether compiled for antiquarian reasons or as propaganda, would have fulfilled their purpose if they bore no recognizable relationship to the contemporary dynastic histories which, as the Mercian and East Anglian examples show, were familiar to members of the dynasties concerned. One therefore expects to find that the lists are based on the corresponding histories. This is precisely what one does find. That the lists took over the myth of divine descent from oral tradition has already been observed; in the only two cases where anything is known of the content of the histories there is a direct correspondence with the appropriate lists. Hengest and Oisc/Octha appear both in the Kentish history and the Kentish genealogical list, and the same holds true for Cerdic, Cynric and Ceawlin in the relevant West Saxon texts.

Having suggested this degree of relationship between the histories and the lists, it is only a small step to conclude from the fact that the lists bind the names they contain in genealogical succession that this succession was itself taken from the histories rather than imposed on the oral source material by ecclesiastical compilers. A dynastic his-

tory, after all, by its very nature presupposes a genealogical element. Admittedly, though, the direct evidence is very limited: Kentish tradition reports the succession of Hengest's son Oisc/Octha, and the West Saxon one follows succession for three generations, from Cerdic through Cynric to Ceawlin. The overall conclusion, therefore, is that the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies are ultimately dependent on orally transmitted dynastic histories which began with an account of the dynasties' descent from a god and proceeded to record the careers of subsequent kings, very possibly in a genealogically coherent way.

Some qualifications have to be made about the conclusion just drawn. The intention was not to suggest that the lists necessarily mirror the corresponding narratives exactly. The process of compilation and literary transmission of the lists could, and demonstrably did, lead to innovations on the oral record. Some of the factors involved are self-evident. If the Anglian collection, for example, was made for northern consumption, it is conceivable that the compiler would not have felt the need to be as true to the traditions of, say, Kent as to those of the royal houses nearer home, even assuming that accurate information about the traditions of more distant dynasties was available. Also, once compiled, the lists would at least to some degree have tended to live a life of their own. Thus antiquarians can be observed at work adding names above Woden, in one case as far back as Adam. Again, dynastic trunk lines were regularized in number of generations without regard to chronology or historical consistency (Sisam 1953:326–9), and it is safe to assume that in achieving this, names

were added or deleted as necessary. The origin of other features of the genealogies – whether taken over from the oral record or innovated by the ecclesiastical compilers – is less easily determined.

All the dynasties for which genealogies are extant, with the exception of the East Saxon one, are derived from Woden. Mercia, Lindsey and East Anglia descend independently from different sons of the god, but Wessex and Bernicia, and Kent and Deira, are jointly descended from two more sons, Bældæg and Wægdæg respectively. Dumville makes a good case for thinking that descent from Woden was not original to Kent and Wessex, but was an innovation reflecting dynastic relationships between them and the northern kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia – "that the inclusion of Kent and Wessex in the Anglian collection expresses their inclusion in the eighth century within the Anglian world. In other words, I suggest that descent from Woden expresses an Anglian origin, or perhaps – more cautiously – belief in an Anglian origin" (Dumville 1977:79). Support comes from Sisam's observation that names taken from the Bernician line of descent make up the generations between Woden and Cerdic in the West Saxon genealogy (1953:301–5). All this begs the question of how many other royal houses may have been incorporated into the scheme for similar reasons. The occurrence of Seaxnet at the head of the East Saxon line indicates that there was once a variety of founder-gods; one may with de Vries (1959) and Turville-Petre (1956–7) choose to see the names Hengest and Horsa as cult names, and significance in the fact that the name of Hengest's son Oisc, from whom the Kentish dynasty claimed descent,

represents *ans-k-iz, a nominative singular i-stem formation from the root ans- (Gothic ansis, etc.) with a -k- suffix. Generalization of Woden may have taken place at the literary level, but descent from a god was politically functional among the Germans long before the lists were compiled, and it is equally possible that Woden was generalized not by the compilers or redactors of the lists, but on the level of oral tradition – that, like the Semnones, a dominant English dynasty used descent from a god to legitimize its position.

Another area of uncertainty is the detail in which the descent of Anglo-Saxon dynasties is developed by the genealogical lists. There was a 'standard' length of fourteen generations reckoned from Woden (Sisam 1953:326–8); the genealogy of the West Saxon king Æthelwulf, what Sisam has called "this culmination of the genealogist's art" (1953:298), has twenty-three. The descent of the various dynasties extends to kings of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, and in some cases collateral lines are included. Now, we know that the Anglo-Saxon dynastic histories continued beyond the stage of dynastic foundation, but not how far or in what detail. Dumville (1977) attributes the degree of elaboration found in the lists to Roman and biblical models, and it is certainly possible that churchmen developed the native genre of dynastic history in the direction of greater complexity, but because we have no clear evidence as to when kings stopped being incorporated into the oral record, there appears to be no way of demonstrating this. But even if, as seems very probable, the historically more recent names in the lists owe their presence to ecclesiastical maintenance of genealogical records rather than to oral models, the principle that the lists are ultimately dependent on pre-existing dynastic histories is not compromised.

It remains to consider the means by which narrative historical tradition was transmitted among the early Germans. In medieval Ireland, royal history and genealogy was maintained by a class of professional court poets, the *filid* (sg. *fili*). As already noted, Caerwyn Williams proposed the West Germanic court poet, the *scop*, as the corresponding functionary among the Germans. Dumville, on the other hand, doubted that Williams' view of the *scop* as "court genealogist and historian" could be supported by the available evidence. This part of the discussion will endorse Williams' position on the *scop*.

The *scop*'s origins are obscure (on the *scop* see Wissmann 1954, von See 1964, Werlich 1967 and Hollowell 1978). He first appears as a figure of the heroic age, the era of Germanic national migrations which preceded the establishment of the early medieval European kingdoms. Most of our information about the *scop* is contained in three Old English poems, *Beowulf*, *Deor* and *Widsith*; in *Widsith* he is called *gleoman*, a synonym for *scop* (Klaeber 1950: lines 1063ff. and 1159–60). The first locates him in Hrothgar's heroic-age Danish court, and the second in the royal court of the Heodeningas, apparently a people of northern Continental Germany (Malone 1966:39). The third shows him wandering the length and breadth of heroic-age Germania, though his home is said to have been among the Myrgingas, another northern Continental people (Malone 1962:183–6). The three poems are mutually consistent in describing a poet who was expected publicly

to sing the praises of the ruler who patronized him and to entertain the court with his repertoire of heroic tales. In return he received generous gifts of treasure. Though he might travel from court to court, he could also establish a more permanent relationship with his patron, entering the latter's service and receiving land from him.

Both in terms of his position in the royal court and of his function as custodian of heroic legend, the *scop* was ideally suited to maintain royal dynastic history. His position, first of all, resembles that of the warriors in the royal retinue in the sense that, like them, he could receive not only gifts of treasure but also of land from the king whom he served (on early English land tenure, John 1960:39–63 and 1966:64–127, and Charles-Edwards 1976). Widsith claims to have served many patrons, and while it has long been recognized that his "journey" is a metaphor for his broad competence in heroic legend, the metaphor would only have been significant to an Anglo-Saxon audience if *scopas* actually did travel, or were thought to have travelled, from court to court. In the end, however, Widsith returned to his own people, the Myrgingas, and rendering the treasure he had been given by earlier patrons to Eadgils, the lord of the Myrgingas, he received from Eadgils the land which his father had previously held (Malone 1962:25, lines 93–6; on the significance of this exchange of gifts, see Charles-Edwards 1976). *Deor* shows that, like the land grants made to other members of the royal court, the sort made to the *scop* could be withdrawn by the king if he was dissatisfied with the service he received in exchange (Malone 1966:27, lines 35–41), but the fact that a land grant was involved

indicates that the relationship between poet and patron must by and large have been a permanent one. Because the *scop* could be a permanent member of the royal court, he would have been in a position to maintain national and dynastic tradition on a coherent, long-term basis.

Secondly, the *scop*'s poetry represents a medium for the transmission of historical tradition. Common to Scandinavia, England, and those parts of the continent settled by German-speaking peoples was a large body of heroic legend which incorporated myth, folklore and fiction, but which in essence represents an – albeit garbled – record of peoples, characters and events of the Germanic heroic age, many of which are known from independent sources to have been historical (see for example Gschwantler 1976; Schneider 1928 for a catalogue of materials; von See 1971 for recent work on the subject). This material survives in vernacular and Latin texts whose dates span virtually the whole of the middle ages, and consequently shows to varying degrees the effects of development over the centuries that separate it from the times with which it deals; but it derives ultimately from oral tradition originating in the migration period itself. In the first century AD, Tacitus noted that the Germans celebrated the deeds of the great hero Arminius in song (Koestermann 1965:87); the Old English *Finnsburg fragment* is commonly thought to typify such poetry (on 'lays', see Campbell 1962b and 1971). The *scop*, himself a figure of the heroic age, was the custodian of this oral tradition. Widsith, for example, claims to be able *singan ond secgan spell*, "to sing and relate tales" (Malone 1962:24, line 54) about numerous kings and peoples of heroic-age

Germania, and the *scop* Deor is credited with knowledge of a number of heroic legends (Malone 1966:4–14). Now, there is no significant way in which the Gothic and Langobardic traditions discussed earlier can be differentiated from the corpus of heroic legend which the *scop* cultivated. Both were transmitted in the form of song and deal with the same Germanic world; the *scop*'s repertoire encompassed them both. Deor knew legends about Geat, Eormenric and Theodoric (Malone 1966:8–14). In Widsith's repertoire, the Goths Wudga (Vidigoia) and Fridla (Fridigern), and the Lombards Ælfwine (Alboin) and Ægelmund, are familiar (Malone 1962:212–13, 151, 126–7 and 126). The *scop*, in short, preserved traditions relating to a variety of migration-age Germanic peoples. There is, in principle, no reason why he should not have arranged these traditions to yield what the king whom he served would have perceived as the history of the people whom he ruled, or of the dynasty to which he belonged.

Beowulf shows the *scop* doing something very like this. *Hroþgares scop* (Klaeber 1950: line 1066), the poet who can at several points in the poem be observed singing to the harp in the royal hall Heorot (lines 86–90 and 491–8), on one occasion told of a conflict between a group of Danes and the Frisian king Finn (see Fry 1974 for a reconstruction of events). The Danes are called Scyldingas (Klaeber 1950: line 1154) and Here-Scyldingas (line 1108), and they are led by *hæleð Healf-Dena, Hnæf Scyldinga*, "a hero of the Half-Danes, Hnæf of the Scyldingas" (line 1069).[8] Hrothgar was himself a Scylding: the *scop* was not reciting just any heroic legend on this occasion, but one

bearing on the history of Hrothgar's dynasty. This may, of course, be a coincidence, and in isolation it would be unwise to make too much of it, but it will emerge shortly that the *scop* was here discharging his function as dynastic historian.

Difficulties arise when one comes to assess the role of the *scop* described by *Beowulf*, *Deor* and *Widsith* in the transmission of Anglo-Saxon dynastic history. One is whether a poet having the characteristics attributed to him ever existed. All three Old English poems, as extant, date from the post-Conversion period and survive in manuscripts of the later tenth century, but their subject matter is the Germanic heroic age. They are, therefore, far removed in time from the world they describe. It is generally accepted that traditional material of the sort our poems incorporate can and does preserve accurate information about the earlier times to which it relates even after long periods of oral and/or literary transmission. The difficulty lies in distinguishing historically accurate tradition from the varieties of corruption to which any non-contemporary record is subject. This uncertainty must apply to the *scop* of Old English poetic tradition. A second difficulty is that even if the *scop* of the poetic record could be shown to be historical, the question of whether or not such a poet ever existed among the Anglo-Saxons would remain open. The poems, after all, locate the *scop* in Denmark and northern Germany. There is no suggestion that he was ever active in England.

The *Life of Ethelbert* appears to settle both difficulties at once, and moreover to prove that the Anglo-Saxon *scop* cultivated dynastic history. In the *Life* the king promises an

armilla to whomever *ediderit carmina regia : duo canandi prediti scientia in cordis leticia psallere ceperunt*, singing *carmina de regis eiusdem regia prosapia*. Thereupon, *abstracta brachio protinus armilla modulantes carmina donat*. These two singers were *scopas*. They first of all sing to the accompaniment of some sort of stringed instrument; Widsith and the *scop* in *Beowulf* sing to the harp. That two singers performed before Ethelbert has an exact parallel in *Widsith*, where the *gleoman* sang accompanied by a certain Scilling (on Scilling see Malone 1962:194). Ethelbert's singers took earlier kings of his dynasty as their subject matter; as we have just seen, the *scop* in *Beowulf* sang to his patron Hrothgar about an earlier member or members of the Scylding dynasty. The singers were rewarded for their songs by the gift of an arm-ring from Ethelbert, and the promise of more treasure once they all returned home to East Anglia. Both in type and scale this reward resembles that claimed for Widsith in the poem of that name. The parallel between Ethelbert's singers and the *scop* appears to be inexact in only one detail: whereas the former performed on the road, Widsith, Deor and the *scop* in *Beowulf* performed in the courts of their patrons. But it is clear from Ethelbert's promise of further reward *dum repatriat* that his singers were court poets as well. The *Life of Ethelbert*, therefore, appears to corroborate most of the *scop*'s characteristics as set out in the poetic record, to establish that the *scop* was active in England at least until the later eighth century, and to show the *scop* functioning as custodian of Anglo-Saxon royal dynastic history.

As before, the late date of the *Life* is a problem. It is centuries removed from the time to which it refers, and its historical reliability is consequently suspect. The accuracy of the passage in one respect – the cultivation of royal dynastic history in the eighth century – has already been established, which at least in general terms speaks for its reliability in others, but before the conclusions just drawn from it can be accepted, its claim that *scopas* were active in post-Conversion England has to be substantiated. Supporting evidence comes from three separate quarters.

The first item of evidence is *Widsith*. The poem falls into three basic parts. In the first nine lines, an anonymous narrator introduces Widsith, the *gleoman* or *scop* whose experiences are described in the second part. He is (Malone 1962:23 lines 2–4)[9]

se þe [monna] mæst mægþa ofer eorþan,
folca, geondferde. Oft he [on] flette geþah
mynelicne maþþum.

he who travelled about most of the nations of men,
of peoples, in the world. He often received splendid
treasure on the floor of the hall.

The second part, lines 10–134, goes on to develop the two themes implicit in this passage. Widsith, whose very name marks him as an abstraction, an archetypal *scop*, is caused to tell how he had travelled widely in time and space, visiting the many famous rulers of heroic-age Germania. At the same time, he repeatedly stresses that the rulers had generously rewarded him for singing their praises. In the final lines of the poem (135–43), the narrator returns to speak of *gleomen* more generally, and in the present tense, on the basis of the exemplum he has constructed in part two: like Widsith, *gleomen* continue to travel about looking for rulers who will patronize their songs of praise. A clear equation is made between Widsith and the *gleomen* in part three. Because

Widsith is an Anglo-Saxon poem dating from the post-Conversion period, and because the anonymous poet speaks of the activity of *gleomen* in the present tense, the obvious conclusion is that *scopas* like Widsith were active in post-Conversion Anglo-Saxon England, and that *Widsith* provides contemporary evidence about them; examination of *Beowulf* and *Deor* will reveal that there is little in them about the *scop* which is not also in *Widsith*, so that the conclusion just drawn in effect means that the *scop* described at the outset of this second part of the discussion existed in post-Conversion England. Since the date of *Widsith* cannot be determined with any reliability, it is impossible to set closer chronological limits.

Widsith is an anonymous poem, but inevitably there are theories regarding authorship, and these have a bearing on the historical reliability attributable to the poem. W. H. French argued that it was composed by an actual *scop* as an appeal for patronage (1945). Eliason accepted this, but suggested that the *scop* falsified his account of his order so as to make himself more attractive to a patron (1966). Other scholars favour clerical composition. Malone, the editor of the standard edition of *Widsith*, thought that the author was "a cleric, at home in vernacular poetry sacred and profane.... His interest in the Germanic heroic age was that of an antiquary and a historian, not that of a professional scop", who "in creating a mouthpiece, the Widsith of the poem ... entered imaginatively into the career open to such a scop as his" (1962: 112). The first of these views obviously gives the poem great authority as evidence for the post-Conversion Anglo-Saxon *scop*, while the second leaves it little, if any; if the

poem was composed by a churchman with antiquarian tastes, there is no guarantee that the third part of it, though written in the present tense, referred to contemporary conditions. Eliason's arguments can be dismissed out of hand. He merely assumed that the gifts and social status accorded the *gleoman* in *Widsith* are incredible, and proceeded to build on this assumption without attempting to substantiate it. A case built on an unsupported personal opinion is insufficient to compromise the *a priori* authority of the text. It will, however, be necessary to look briefly at the relative merits of literate composition by a churchman and oral composition by a *scop* as alternatives for the authorship of *Widsith* as it is presently extant.

Widsith is not obviously an ecclesiastical product. It deals almost entirely with legendary material deriving from pre-Christian Germania, material that was originally the preserve of the *scop*, as we have seen. Christian elements are few. In the epilogue on kingship the *Widsith*-poet notes that God bestows royal authority on kings (Malone 1962: lines 132–4), but this tells us only that the poem as it is presently extant was composed in Christian times by a Christian. It does not mean that the author was a churchman. Nor does it disqualify the *scop*, who would presumably have gone over to Christianity as readily as everyone else. There are also references in *Widsith* to Alexander the Great (line 15) and Caesar (20, 76), to the Greeks (20, 69, 76), Romans (78), Israelites, Assyrians, Hebrews, Hindus and Egyptians (82–3). All these names must come from the Romano-Christian tradition of learning, and their inclusion in the poem might be used to argue for ecclesiastical

composition. One way out of the difficulty is to regard them as interpolations made when the poem was committed to writing. In fact, lines 14–17 and 82–3 have in the past been treated as such, and for good reason (Malone 1962:37–8 and 45–7, and Howlett 1974:509–10). But even if one decides not to opt for the risky expedient of emendation, and allows the names to stand as an original and integral part of the poem, they do not compel the conclusion that a churchman composed *Widsith*. They are only evidence for ecclesiastical composition if the *scop* is regarded as irremediably barbaric, forever excluded from any access to the learning of the Church – another example of the great divide between "Christian" and "pagan" so dear to Old English scholarship. But as we shall be seeing in a moment, secular poets who resembled the *scop* of the Old English poetic record in significant ways were, in spite of official censure, regularly to be found in English monasteries of the seventh and eighth centuries. Who is to say that these poets were wholly cut off from the learning cultivated there? In seventh- and eighth-century Ireland the secular court poet, the *fili*, readily adopted ecclesiastical learning and amalgamated it with the traditional learning of which he was the custodian (Thurneysen 1932, MacCana 1972 and 1974). D. R. Howlett saw the poem's great regularity of structure as evidence for literate composition, concluding that *Widsith* "is probably the work of a single literate man", and that "the structure of *Widsith* as we have it is so literary as to imply the author's familiarity with the rigid shapes of Latin hymns and pattern poems" (1974:510–11). This argument holds only if one assumes that Anglo-Saxon oral poetry was necessarily cruder in structure than contemporary Latin verse. But does one really know enough about the oral vernacular tradition of poetry to be able to maintain that the Anglo-Saxons could not have produced a poem like *Widsith* outside the scriptorium? If there is no way to prove that *Widsith* is an example of the structural sophistication possible in Anglo-Saxon oral verse, neither is there any way to disprove it. Howlett's argument is consequently inconclusive. In any case, pre- or non-literary verse is not inevitably shapeless. The poetry of the *fili*, for example, was composed in the mind and recited orally in the first instance, and only then, sometimes, committed to writing; it is characterized by an often extreme complexity of structure (for instance Bergin 1970). There is, in short, no pressing reason to prefer ecclesiastical over secular authorship for *Widsith*.[10] French's view of the poem, on the other hand, has the advantage of economy. Who but a *scop* would first construct an archetype of his order whose poetry is lavishly rewarded by the greatest kings of the heroic past, and then use it as the basis of an overt appeal for patronage in the present tense? As French points out, a cleric would have lacked the motive; Malone had to reduce the theme of payment to one of the "realistic touches" that his antiquarian cleric gave his imaginary *scop*.

In discussing the authorship of *Widsith*, one deals in possibilities, not certainties. My own feeling is that French was right, though I cannot demonstrate this conclusively. What does emerge, however, is that the possibility of ecclesiastical authorship is not a serious obstacle to accepting what *Widsith* says about the Anglo-Saxon

scop at face value. Nor can I think of any other reason to doubt its historical reliability. This does not, of course, positively guarantee its reliability, but it does allow it to be used as one of a group of mutually-supporting sources of evidence relating to the *scop* of the Old English period.

The second source of corroborative evidence is a series of references to secular entertainers in ecclesiastical documents relating to Anglo-Saxon England. The earliest of these comes from the enactments of a council held at Rome in 679, which concerned itself with the English church. It cautions *ut episcopi vel quicunque ecclesiastici ordinis religiosam vitam professi sunt, armis non utantur, nec citharoedas habeant, vel quaecunque symphonica, nec quoscunque jocos vel ludos ante se permittant,* "that bishops or those who have professed the religious life of ecclesiastical orders should not use weapons, nor should they have singers who accompany themselves to the harp, nor should they allow before themselves any jests or games" (Haddan and Stubbs 1871:133). The document in which this passage occurs is very probably but not certainly genuine (Haddan and Stubbs 1871:135–6 and Stenton 1971: 136–7), but this is not crucial to my argument, since one of the canons of the synod held at Clofesho in 746 again found it necessary to stipulate *ut sint monasteria juxta vocabulum nominis sui, id est, honesta silentium, quietorum, atque pro Deo laborantium habitacula, et non sint ludicrarum artium receptacula, hoc est, poetarum, citharistarum, musicorum, scurrorum,* "that monasteries be what their name implies, that is, virtuous dwellings of the silent, the peaceful, and workers for God, and not receptacles of the mirthful arts, that is, of poets, harpers, musicians and low entertainers" (Haddan and Stubbs 1871:369). Another of the canons in the same collection specifies *ut presbyteri saecularium poetarum modo in ecclesia non garriant, ne tragico sono sacrorum verborum compositionem ac distinctionem corrumpant vel confundant,* "that priests should not chatter in church like secular poets, nor corrupt and confuse the arrangement and distinctiveness of the holy words with a tragic sound" (366), which suggests that the trend in vernacular religious poetry begun in the seventh century by men like Aldhelm and Caedmon had got out of hand. The main thing to note, however, is that secular poets continued to exist in the eighth century, and to serve as models for churchmen interested in vernacular poetry of whatever sort. At the end of the eighth century, finally, comes the famous letter which Alcuin wrote to the abbot of Lindisfarne in 797. Alcuin complained about *citharistae* who sang *carmina gentilium* – songs about the legendary Heathobard ruler Ingeld are cited – to the monks in their refectory, denouncing the community's preference for *ridentium turbam in plateis,* "the crowd of revellers in the streets", over the voices of its lectors (Dümmler 1895:183).

These *poetae* and *citharistae* resemble the *scop* of the Old English poetic record in significant ways. *Poeta* is the standard Latin equivalent for *scop* in Anglo-Saxons texts (Bosworth and Toller 1882:838–9). But *scop* and its cognates *scopf* and *scof* are themselves widely applied in Old English and Old High German documents in the sense of 'poet' or 'author' designating figures as various as Homer, King David and Aldhelm (Bosworth and Toller 1882, and Wissmann 1954:11–12 and 16–17). The references to *poetae* in the Clofesho canons, therefore,

establish that secular poets of some sort were active in the mid-eighth century, but not necessarily that they were identical to the *scopas* depicted in *Beowulf*, *Deor* and *Widsith*. More significant is the fact that Alcuin's *citharistae* presented their heroic legends in the form of song to the accompaniment of the harp, just like the *scop* of the Old English poetic record. A slight difficulty arises here. Clofesho names *poetae* and *citharistae* separately, which naturally implies that they were distinct functionaries. Widsith is at one point said to have performed jointly with Scilling, about whom nothing is known: because the *scop* is consistently associated with harp accompaniment, the indication is that the juxtaposition of *poeta* and *citharista* by Clofesho corresponds to a situation in which *scop* and *hearpere*, "harper", performed in conjunction. On the other hand, *poeta* and *citharista* may simply have been alternative names for the same functionary. Alcuin credits the *citharista* with *carmina gentilium*: the *citharista*, not the *poeta*, in this case corresponds to the *scop*. The passage from the Roman council of 679 quoted earlier, furthermore, speaks of *citharoedae*, "those who play on the *cithara*, accompanying it with the voice", rather than of *citharistae*, "harp-players". The precise functional differentiation of the large variety of terms for secular entertainers in the early middle ages, of which *poeta* and *citharista* are but two, raises problems discussion of which would take us very far afield (Wareman 1951:109ff. and Ogilvy 1963). Nor is this necessary. What is important for present purposes is that secular entertainers who resembled the *scop* in that they sang originally pagan heroic legends to the accompaniment of the harp, still existed in England at the end of the eighth century. The references under discussion, finally, allow one to show that these entertainers, like the *scop*, performed in royal and aristocratic courts. Admittedly, they are only directly attested in ecclesiastical contexts, but as Wormald has recently stressed (1978:49–58), the English church had from the outset assimilated the norms of the secular aristocracy which endowed, administered and to a large extent owned it: the hall of a seventh- or eighth-century monastery would often have differed little from that of a secular aristocratic or of a royal court. If poets and harpists sang in eighth-century monastic halls, and if these halls are a fair reflection of contemporary court life, the conclusion must be that such performers were active in the secular courts of the period.

A difficulty with the above material is that the *poetae* and *citharistae* are consistently associated with low entertainment, whereas the *scop* of the Old English poetic record has certain of the privileges of a royal retainer. It also has to be noted that there are Old English and Old High German glosses of the tenth and later centuries linking *scop* and *scopf/scof* with *comicus*, *ioculator* and related expressions (Wissmann 1954 and Werlich 1967:361–2). These glosses in particular have occasioned a good deal of discussion about the relationship between the *scop* of the Old English poems – the *Hofsänger* – and the tradition of common entertainment that extended from the Roman *mimus* and *ioculator* to the *jongleur* and *spiliman* of the central and later middle ages (Ogilvy 1963). Heusler thought that the Germans had, in the course of their centuries-long contact with the Empire,

evolved an entertainer patterned on the *mimus*, who then developed into the aristocratic *Hofsänger*, only to return by the time of the glosses just mentioned to the mire (1911:445 and 460–2, and 1941:113–23). To Baesecke, the *Hofsänger* stems from Germanic antiquity, but is in a state of decline by the time of our earliest records about him. When the *scop = comicus* glosses appear, he has degenerated into a common entertainer and merged with the early medieval successors of the Roman *mimus* and *ioculator* (1940:484–7). Wareman showed how tenuous the evidence for these reconstructions is, and argued convincingly that it is insufficient to allow one to reconstruct a chronological development for the Germanic court poet. In his view, the common entertainer and the *Hofsänger* always had co-existed among the Germans, and terms like *gleoman* and *scop* encompassed them both (1951:109–20). But it remains that our ecclesiastical references and the *scop = comicus* glosses appear to attest only the common entertainer. Are these references, therefore, of any use in demonstrating the existence of the *Hofsänger* in post-Conversion England?

More recent scholarship has shown that they are. In his study of the West Germanic *scop*, Werlich observed that *All diese Stellen, an denen der Skop mit dem Bereich des Komischen oder Lächerlichen verknüpft wird, spiegeln lediglich die Verachtung einzelner kirchlicher Glossatoren und Autoren für diese Art weltlicher Unterhaltung*, "All these places in which the *scop* is linked with the sphere of the comic or the ridiculous simply reflect the contempt of individual ecclesiastical glossators and authors for this sort of secular entertainment" (1967:365). In other words, the connection drawn between *poeta*, *citharista* and *scop* on the one

hand, and low entertainment on the other, cannot, as in earlier scholarship, simply be taken at face value, but has rather to be interpreted in the light of ecclesiastical prejudice. This is fully supported by Wormald's recent examination of ecclesiastical attitudes to secular literature and entertainment in the early middle ages.[11] The fact that *poeta* and *citharista* are in our passages bracketed with popular entertainers and entertainment does not, therefore, necessarily reflect a status lower than that of the *Hofsänger*.

The final item of corroborative evidence is in the Old English poem *The fortunes of men*, one of the "poems of wisdom and learning" (Shippey 1976) which, as a group, make gnomic observations on life, and on contemporary Anglo-Saxon life in particular. *The fortunes of men* first describes the various sorts of death that unlucky men die, and then lists a variety of skills possessed by men who have had good fortune in life – the warrior, the scholar, the goldsmith and so on. Another of these skilled and fortunate occupations is that of the harper (Krapp and Dobbie 1936:156):

Sum sceal mid hearpan æt his hlafordes
fotum sittan, feoh þicgan,
ond a snellice snere wræstan,
lætan scralletan sceacol, se þe hleapeð,
nægl neomegende.

One must sit at his lord's feet with the harp, receive payment, and always rapidly pluck the strings, let the plectrum that darts about produce sounds, the resounding nail.

Like the *scop*, this man plays the harp in the court of a secular lord, a *hlaford*, and receives *feoh*, "payment", for it. The poem is not dateable with any sort of precision, but it does show that entertainers of this sort

existed at some point in the Old English period.

The ecclesiastical references and *The fortunes of men* corroborate one another. They establish the existence of entertainers who sang heroic legends in secular courts to the accompaniment of the harp and who were rewarded for doing this by their patrons in the Old English period, and more specifically in the seventh and eighth centuries. These entertainers at least partially coincide with the *scop* depicted in *Beowulf, Deor* and *Widsith*. But *Widsith* claims that this *scop* was active in Anglo-Saxon England: given the corroborative evidence provided by the ecclesiastical references and *The fortunes of men*, and the fact that there is no reason to disbelieve the claim, the testimony of *Widsith* can be accepted as historically reliable, whatever one may choose to think about its authorship. Having shown that the *scop* of the Old English poetic record existed in eighth-century England, and keeping in mind the evidence of *Beowulf* that he could function as a dynastic historian, the claim by the *Life of Ethelbert* that it was *scopas* who maintained East Anglian dynastic history during the reign of Offa of Mercia can readily be accepted in spite of the late date of the *Life*. And, of course, East Anglia is not likely to have been isolated in this.

The object of this study has been to examine the possibility that, although the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies are in their extant form products of ecclesiastical scholarship, the keeping of royal genealogies in early England was not an innovation brought about by Christian literacy, but was rather a native, originally pre-Christian institution which the Church adopted. The following points emerge from the discussion as a whole. The Anglo-Saxons shared with various other Germanic peoples a traditional culture in which elements of national history and mythology were orally preserved, often, perhaps always, in poetic form. In England the keeping of dynastic histories was an aspect of this traditional culture, and it continued as an institution at least until the end of the eighth century. These histories began with accounts of the various dynasties' descent from heathen gods and went on to record the careers of kings in subsequent generations, very possibly in a genealogically coherent way. In the *scop*, the professional court poet, the Anglo-Saxons had a medium for the maintenance and transmission of dynastic history. And, finally, the extant royal genealogies are ultimately dependent on such orally transmitted dynastic histories, though allowance has to be made for the effects of literary redaction and transmission on the lists themselves, and, probably, for ecclesiastical elaboration of the native dynastic record. Since, therefore, the keeping of royal dynastic histories was an established part of native, originally pre-Christian traditional culture in early England, and since the extant lists are ultimately dependent on such histories, it is fair to conclude that the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies are not a wholly innovated genre, but, rather, that they have a basis in Germanic oral tradition.

Notes

[2] Some versions of the genealogies extend the lines of descent upwards beyond Woden with names drawn from Germanic myth and legend. In one version the West Saxon genealogy goes back to Adam. Sisam (1953:308–21) and Chambers (1959:311–22) agree that the ancestors of Woden are additions made in Christian times, and that the lists originally began with Woden.

[3] A traditional example has been the descent of the Swedish royal dynasty, the Ynglingar, from a god *Ingwaz (Old English Ing), as recounted by Snorri Sturluson in his *Heimskringla*. Baetke (1964) has called the validity of the material into question, and though Wolfram (1968) points out basic methodological flaws in Baetke's work, the material will be unusable until the issues are resolved by specialists in North Germanic literature and mythology.

[4] For *Hathugautaz in the continental Saxon origin legend see Hauck 1970.

[5] Mommsen 1882:60. It has been suggested, though unconvincingly, that the Gothic migration account was invented by Classical historiography: see Wagner 1967:140–55 and Schwarz 1972.

[6] On whether this son was originally Oisc or Octha, see Kirby 1970:46–8.

[7] It is found in the *Anglo-Saxon chronicle*, beginning with the entry for the year 495.

[8] I can see no reason for thinking with Klaeber (1950:232) that the name Scyldingas is used "loosely" when applied to Hnæf and his men; see Malone 1962: 172–3.

[9] For a different reading of these lines, see Creed 1975.

[10] For citiques of the prevalent tendency to overstate the ecclesiastical aspect of Old English verse, see Sisam 1965, John 1973–4, and Wormald 1978:39–42 and 92–4.

[11] Wormald 1978:42–9. The reconstruction by Bolton (1978) of the attitude which Alcuin might have taken to *Beowulf* or a poem like it is – in my view irretrievably – undermined by Wormald (1978:46–7).

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