

Texts and Tales of Byzantium in Primarily Oral Cultures From the Caucasus to Canterbury

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Abstract This paper considers the unregulated 10th-12th-century outflow northwards of Eastern Christian persons, written texts, oral tales and artefacts via the waterways spanning Rus. Responses to this outflow varied across northwest Europe, helping to consolidate regimes or legitimise rebels, while bolstering individual's status. Comparable dynamics are seen in the Caucasus, with the titles and visible trappings of a God-blessed court enhancing Alan rulers' imperial and dynastic ambitions, while tales of Byzantium helped legitimise regional clans. But intensive engagement was finite and fitful, registering the changing needs of developing polities/cultures.

Keywords Alans. Anglo-Danish. Basileus. Byzantine-awareness. Caucasus. Cnut. Dynasties. Edgar. Edward the Confessor. Elite. Gold. Harald Hardrada. Iceland. Laudes. Mercenaries. Normans. Ragnvald. Stratagem. Tales. Texts. Viking. Weaponry. William the Conqueror. Writing.

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1 Introduction

Texts will here carry the broadest sense: words formatted for repetition or public attention. They may be few or extensive, on any materials (including lead or stone) or even unwritten – what is known as “entextualization” (Barber 2007, 22-4, 28-9). Tales may emanate from the Byzantine and Eastern Christian world, word-of-mouth or written, or they may simply tell of it, without empirical knowledge. The Byzantine phenomenon is complicated by its imperial leadership’s zeal to propagate tales, enshrining the imperial order through its moving picture-show in Constantinople (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio* ch. 13 [ed. and transl. Moravcsik, Jenkins 1967, 66-77]; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis* [ed. and transl. Dagron, Flusin 2020]). Our focus, though, will be on the unregulated outflow north from the Black Sea of persons bearing texts and tales, especially in the tenth to twelfth centuries. The link-up of waterways across Rus unleashed a medley of divines or fortune-seekers from the Byzantine world, Greek- and Armenian-speaking clerics (three ‘Armenian bishops’ among them) reaching the Atlantic (Garipzanov 2012; Shepard 2021a, 77-85). Their fingerprints show in texts like a *Life of Gregory the Illuminator* translated into Icelandic (Ciggaar 1996, 124-5; see also Zalizniak 2003). Responses varied according to Northerners’ fluctuating requirements, whether local ambitions among the *Svear*, sea-empires spanning the North Sea, or hegemonial leaderships among the Rus and Alans. Texts, some illuminated, might serve their purposes, as also writing-implements. These could help consolidate dynasties, yet also legitimise disruptors’ regimes. Counterbalancing the outflow was the inflow of persons from the North – mostly slaves (Shepard 2021b), but also fortune-seeking mercenaries. Few returned. But whatever their home-communities may have made of the tales, texts and artefacts attributable to them (Appadurai 1986), the impact was often in inverse proportion to warriors’ numbers; mercenary service is the connecting thread between the societies surveyed here.

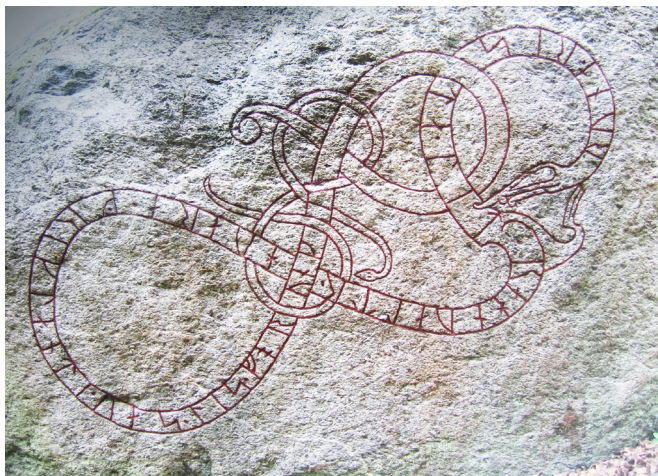
2 Byzantine Things, Terms and Tall Stories in the Nordic World

For our purposes, these Northern societies range from the Alans to the Normans who, despite adopting Western Frankish language and culture, long engaged with the Viking world (Ridel 2007). Although many entering imperial service never went home, this did not necessarily mean their possessions stayed in Byzantium. The 911 Russo-Byzantine treaty provides for returning a deceased warrior’s chattels if no relatives are on hand to inherit (*Повесть временных лет*

[ed. Likhachev, Adrianova-Peretts, Sverdlov 1996, 19]). This presupposes communications with the north, presumably being only worthwhile for valuables such as weaponry. Other types of valuables might merit such care: gold, for instance. This would challenge modern assumptions that the ban on exporting gold held fast for warriors' pay: Byzantine narratives mention gold being sent to rulers in return for military operations (Leo the Deacon, *Historiae* 4.6 [ed. Hase 1828, 63]), while diplomatic gifts of gold are well-documented. Recent metal-detector discoveries reveal the extent of Anglo-Saxon wealth in gold (Kershaw 2019) and it is unlikely that the tendency for earlier chance-finds to go unreported is confined to England. Swedish runestones have warriors taking their "share of gold" (Sö165) or winning "wealth [...], out in Greece, for his heir" (U792) (Källström 2016, 173-4): although few in number they are unlikely to be fantasising.

Occasionally, additional evidence corroborates the runestones. In the earlier eleventh century, Ragnvald commissioned a stone in Uppland (U112): "commander of the host" in Byzantium, he offered a prayer for his mother Fastvé's soul [figs 1a-1b]. The well-carved inscriptions attest Ragnvald's status, prosperity and pioussness (Mel'nikova 2001, 75; 352-3, appendix 1, no. 22; Runer 2006, 138). The likely founder of one of Uppland's earliest stone churches, at Ed, only a kilometre from the runestone (Runer 2006, 138-9, fig. 77, with thanks to Torun Zachrisson), Ragnvald's career suggests how individuals could make their fortunes in Byzantium and associate this with Christian faith.

The runestones commemorating veterans suggest that Byzantine devotional modes had some impact. Many bear crosses, even if others (including Ragnvald's) do not and crosses also appear on runestones where no voyages to "the Greeks" feature. Thus very many Uppland stones bear crosses, irrespective of any "East-Way" connection (Ruprecht 1958, 169-70; Jansson 1987; Mel'nikova 2001, 319-40). More suggestive is how they style those who died among the Byzantines: *anda/andask* 'pass away' or *deyja/daudr* 'die', rather than the commoner terms for those killed elsewhere - *drepa* 'slay' or *falla* 'fall' (Ingmar Jansson's cautious remarks [2005, 49, 80 fn. 33] complement the data in Mel'nikova [2001, 348-53, appendix 1]). Also noteworthy is widespread recourse to terminology redolent of Byzantine piety: over 300 stones pray "God help the soul of", and many invoke the "Mother of God", too. *Theotokos* was standard among Eastern Christians, as was "Lord, help thy servant" on Byzantine seals (Segelberg 1972, 165-7, 173-4; Jansson 1987, 113-15; Lind 2013, 348-51; Cheynet 2008, 72-6). Admittedly, the runestones' formulation diverges from this and "God help the soul of" occurs (along with "Mother of God") on runestones commemorating persons *without* eastern connections. However, there are no Latin Western formulations bearing close comparison, "Mother of God" being a less common Western appellation



Figures 1a-b
Runestone U112, Ed parish,
Uppland, Sweden: (top)
Ragnvald's prayer for his
mother Fastvé's soul; and
(bottom) "commander of the
host" in Byzantium. Photos:
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for Mary (see Maunder 2019). Here, one seems to see Eastern Christian concepts and terms put to new ends by Northerners and becoming widespread.

Few codices made it north, but seals authenticating documents are found from the ninth century onwards, as are personal seals bearing Greek names as far northwest as Dublin (Androschuk 2016, 95-7; for the name *Philipo[s]* on a seal-matrix, from a grave at Dublin's *long-phort*: Harrison, O'Floinn 2014, 207). Officeholders' and clerics' seals were not uncommon on the Middle Dnieper and points north - hardly surprising given the Russo-Byzantine treaty's provision for returning deceased warriors' chattels. Some were inscribed "*Kyrie boēthei*" or invoked the Mother of God; image-bearing cone-seals ended up in Rus, too (Bulgakova 2004, 49-50, 53-7, 69-70, 173-4; Murasheva, Enisova 2013, 220-2; Shepard 1986). The Byzantines came to assume the Rus' recourse to the written word: a mid-940s treaty stipulates that their vessels arriving at Constantinople present documents instead of simply seals (*Повесть временных лет* [ed. Likhachev, Adrianova-Peretts, Sverdlov 1996, 24]. This should have stimulated recourse to writing, whatever their previous uses of characters, and Byzantium offered a medium for learning. This may be inferred from exercises on waxed wooden tablets found at Novgorod in a stratum datable to the early eleventh century (Franklin 2002, 46-7, 203; Zalziak 2003, 202; Guimon 2021, 20). Taken alone, they could merely attest literacy following Rus' Conversion, but comparable tablets occur at Birka and especially Sigtuna, along with styluses of various materials, used to write vernacular, runic characters and Latin letters (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2010; Zacharopoulos 2021, 23-40). Such use of styluses on waxen tablets was of longstanding in Byzantium (Cutler 1991), without obvious alternative sources of inspiration. Besides, tenth-century Birka's warrior-elite seemingly aspired to ranking orders of vestments evoking imperial ceremonial, albeit with silken kaftans and belts styled after steppe-peoples' gear, rather than Byzantines'. (Some connection with the emperor's court is cautiously suggested by Hedenstierna-Jonson, Holmquist Olausson [2006, 65, 68]; see also Hägg 2016). Given their links with the Rus of the Upper and Middle Dnieper, virtually sharing political culture and practices, their adopting diverse modes and customs from the Byzantines around the same time is understandable.

What is striking are the variegated uses to which Byzantine objects were put. Such eclecticism might indicate merely indirect contact between Northerners and Byzantium, showing how limited was the latter's impact. However, the apparent quirkiness of the borrowings could suggest the attention paid to artefacts and practices from the South and, as with styluses and waxen tablets, adaptation for new purposes. No less importantly, phenomena like ranking orders of vestments may have owed something to observations at Con-

stantinople, rather than artefacts sporadically reaching the North. This is unsurprising, given that “baptised Rus” were on parade at palace receptions by 946, St. Sophia with its mosaic of the Mother of God was on the itinerary of visiting envoys, and certain Northerners chose to carve their names there (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis* 2.15 [ed. and transl. Dagron, Flusin 2020, 3: 118-19]; Drocourt 2015, 2: 589-91; Källström 2016, 185). Indeed, journeying to the Greeks features on the runestones as a distinction in itself. Nordicised place-names are taken to be familiar to readers, notably *Gríkland* and *Langbardaland* (*Langobardia*) (Mel’nikova 2001, 306 [§ 5.10], 318-19 [§ 5.33]).

Such apparent familiarity could imply other processes of adapting Byzantine terms and customs. Long ago Stender-Petersen drew attention to parallels between stories and motifs in Old Norse sagas and those known in Byzantium. Picked up by Northerners serving with imperial forces and brought back North, these tales entered the mainstream of storytelling, sometimes appearing in written sagas. Stender-Petersen highlighted ruses credited to the most celebrated of Northern veterans, Harald Hardrada, noting comparable stratagems recounted in the “Counsels and Tales” of a near-contemporary commander, Kekaumenos (Stender-Petersen 1934, 80-1, 84-9, 141-54), and spotting themes and narrative-devices in other Anglo-Norman and Danish literary works drawing on Greco-Roman lore, supposedly mediated through Byzantine texts and diffused by returning mercenaries. His thesis has undergone thoroughgoing critique from Scheel, showing how many stories and elements in writers like Saxo Grammaticus and later sagas draw on Latin or medieval Western vernacular texts (Scheel 2015, 1: 408-23, 737-43, 759-65, 772-3). Other motifs are commonplace, lacking any necessary Byzantino-Nordic intermediation, Scheel argues (2015, 1: 302-3).

Valuable as these corrections are, one risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Firstly, parallels between Norse stories and certain Rus narratives are undeniable (Mel’nikova 2000). Rus literary culture is virtually devoid of texts or motifs from classical antiquity (Franklin 1983) whereas the *Rus Primary Chronicle*, our main narrative, relays tales of Greco-Roman cast alongside word-of-mouth reports (Guimon 2021, 102-4, 170, 263-76, 281-2). Such tales as the luckless birds attached to firebrands by a city’s besiegers are likeliest to have reached Rus chroniclers and Northern saga-writers via returnees from Byzantium (*Повесть временных лет* [ed. Likhachev, Adrianova-Peretts, Sverdlov 1996, 28-9; *Haralds saga* ch. 6, [ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1951, 76-7]; Stender-Petersen 1934, 127-9, 141-52; Step’anos Tarōnec’i, *Universal History* [transl. Greenwood 2016, 246]). Secondly, Rus and Nordic warriors attaining top commands were generally conversant with Greek, as were the Frankish commanders issuing Greek-language seals from the mid-eleventh

century on. In 1057, the commanders of Rus and Frankish units were tricked with forged imperial orders placing them under a rebel general's command, "easily brow-beaten" and bound "with oaths" (Skylitzes, *Synopsis* [ed. Thurn 1973, 491]). This tale stems from the general himself, Katakalon Kekaumenos, whose memoirs also depict him debating tactics with the Georgian potentate Liparit and befriendng a Pecheneg auxiliary-commander's son (Skylitzes, *Synopsis* [ed. Thurn, 452, 469]; Shepard 2018, 190-3). For liaising effectively, knowledge of spoken Greek was indispensable, and one may presuppose the same of other foreign-born commanders.

A third consideration is the military-literary culture which enabled those officers of middling education to debate ethics, tactics and technical matters, adducing facts, cautionary tales and fables from Greco-Roman antiquity (Roueché 2002; Holmes 2010). Katakalon's memoirs exemplify this, involving interplay between spoken and written word, while citing (albeit apologetically) barbarian sayings (Shepard 2018, 189, 193-4, 201-2). One might expect counterflow, with barbarian commanders picking up saws, fables, even tactics, from Byzantine officers. *Haralds Saga* not only tells of homing birds attached to firebrands setting a city ablaze: its tale of tunneling beneath city-walls so that warriors could surprise the defenders recalls a stratagem of Polyainos (*Haralds saga* ch. 7 [ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1951, 77-8]; Polyainos, *Strategika* 7.11.5 [ed. and transl. Brodersen 2017, 522-3]; Stender-Petersen 1934, 86). Sapping is prescribed in Middle Byzantine manuals, drawing on ancient techniques while sometimes rejecting them in favour of modern methods (Nikephoros Ouranos, *Taktika* ch. 65.19-22 [ed. and transl. McGeer 1995, 160-3]); *Parangelmata Polioorketika* chs. 11-19 [ed. and transl. Sullivan 2000, 42-57 (text), 19 (introduction)]; Sullivan 2003, 228-9, 256-7; Holmes 2010, 75-8).

Stories illustrating stratagems could circulate among returnees northwards without naming Byzantium, as in the *Rus Primary Chronicle's* tale of the fiery birds Olga despatched against the Derevlans (see above). This prompts a fourth consideration: that tales of doings in Byzantium could carry a social, even political charge. Ragnvald (and others) needed narrative to warrant claims of being "commander of the host". Indeed, possessors of Byzantine-manufactured weaponry needed anecdotal evidence for their acquisition: an owner deemed unworthy of a well-crafted sword was open to challenge, as the farmer Þorvarðr found with *Brynjubitr* 'Mail-Biter' in 1217 (Jakobsson 2020, 117-18). Savoir-faire and stratagems associable with the Greeks would have complemented such possessions in Iceland, and assertions on warriors' runestones. For the most ambitious, such claims might carry political connotations. Thus Ragnvald is probably the "Ragnvald the Old" whose son, Stenkil, became king of the *Svear*, controlling Sigtuna (Sawyer, Sawyer 1991, 34-5; Runer 2006,

138). One cannot dismiss the possibility of Stenkil benefiting from tales of Ragnvald's southern exploits. After all, his near-contemporary Ingvar's expedition spawned stories culminating in an Icelandic saga, along with runestones commemorating losses (*Yngvars saga* [ed. Olson 1912]; Gritton 2020).

3 Praise-Singers of Harald Hardrada and the Anglo-Danish king Cnut

One may, then, envisage interplay between deeds, spoken words, and words inscribed on runestones (especially among the *Svear*). And this is before turning to that hyper-ambitious veteran, Harald Hardrada. He was not unusual amongst Nordic rulers in hosting poets, but his talent for composing and appraising verses seems to stand out. Capable of composition even during the last battle, at Stamford Bridge in 1066 (Turville-Petre 1968, 19), Harald sought celebration of his deeds, beginning with those in the South. The assemblage of strophes mostly composed by Harald's favourite poet apparently relays claims made by Harald himself (Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* [ed. and transl. Whaley 2009a]; Turville-Petre 1968, 13). These include capturing eighty cities in "Africa" and his blinding of the Greek emperor. The latter can only be Michael V: Harald cast himself as star of an event occurring while he was in Byzantium (Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* § 7 [ed. and transl. Whaley 2009a]). Thus verses recounting their exploits could serve Northern power-seekers' agendas, supplementing tales of stratagems with recreational yet also political, even practical purposes. If Stender-Petersen ascribed too many tales to "Varangians", his pinpointing Harald was not utterly misconceived. *Haralds Saga's* strophes and stratagems seem to echo the talk in officers' messes – indeed, both Katakalon and Harald joined Byzantium's last Sicilian expedition (Stender-Petersen 1934, 80-1, 153-4; Shepard 2018, 194).

Others traced Harald's fortune back to Byzantium, as witness the prayers another of his poets addressed after his death "to the wise guardian of the Greeks and Rus" (Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Haraldsdrápa* § 17 [ed. and transl. Whaley 2009a]); Turville-Petre 1968, 10 fn. 1). Arnórr seemingly drew a connection between Harald, the God of his erstwhile patrons along "the East-Way", and his wealth. Despite his "gold-reddened helmet" at Stamford Bridge, Harald was left unprotected by his warriors' "spear-points inlaid with gold" (Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Haraldsdrápa* §§ 3, 13 [ed. and transl. Whaley 2009b]). Such talk of gold receives corroboration from Adam of Bremen, alongside numismatic evidence (Adam, *Gesta* 3.52(51), scholium 83(84) [ed. and transl. Trillmich 1961, 394-5]; Morrisson 1981, 138-40; Scheel 2016, 64). Taken alone, Arnórr's dirge

follows skaldic conventions. Equally, one could argue, Harald needed little prompting to tell Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen's envoys: "he knew of no other archbishop or master in Norway than the king himself". This might pass for bluster during a dispute over ecclesiastical jurisdiction (Adam, *Gesta* 3.17(16) [ed. and transl. Trillmich 1961, 348-9]; Krag 2002, 187-8). Yet Harald would not have been alone in presenting himself as possessing an unmediated relationship with God, reminiscent of the Greek ruler's. A generation earlier, such claims were made of another aspirant to overlordship spanning the North Sea. Poets praised Cnut to the skies, literally. Hallvarðr Háreksblesi's comparison of Cnut, defending "the earth", to "the lord of all [defending] the splendid hall of the mountains [Heaven]", apparently echoed Þórarinn Praise-Tongue's characterisation of Cnut defending the land "as the guardian of *Gríklands* defends the heavenly kingdom" (Þórarinn loftunga, *Höfuðlausn* 1 [ed. and transl. Townend 2012]). While "the guardian of *Gríklands*" may denote God's special care for the empire, it could imply a role for the *basileus* as heaven's gatekeeper.

Scholars have inferred Anglo-Saxon royal ideology from the refrains associating Cnut with God, depicting him "in cosmic high relief" (Frank 1994, 116-17; Lawson 2004, 125-6). One should, however, bear in mind that Cnut and Harald presided over elites whose family-members had been, or were, in Byzantine service. For example, Ragnvald's cousin Ulf had collected geld for Cnut in England, but also for Thorkell the Tall, by turns Cnut's henchman and enemy (for the runestones concerning Ulf [U343, U344]: Syrett 2002, 38-9; Androshchuk 2014, 227-8). In such circles, comparisons with the emperor would resonate. A degree of Byzantine-awareness in Baltic regions is apparent from the imitation of a *miliaresion* found on Gotland. The die-caster crammed in elements from several coin-types, including two emperors' heads (Audy 2018, 190 and fig. 9.5). Such Byzantine-awareness might verge on veneration of the emperor's overarching lordship (Jakobsson 2020, 138-45, 161-4), yet he could be fair game, judging by Harald's claim to have blinded "a Greek-king".

Whether elites based around the Baltic Rim were equipped to absorb coherently into their own cultures tales and imagery from Byzantium is questionable (Scheel 2016, 58-66), notwithstanding motifs found on Swedish runestones or Kekaumenos' averral that the *basileus* Harald "maintained friendship and love towards the Romans" after returning North (Kekaumenos, *Counsels and Tales* [ed. and transl. Roueché 2013, 97.25-7]). But both Cnut and Harald claimed rulership extending to the British Isles, parts of which had undergone Scandinavian settlement (Wrathmell 2020). Reportedly, Harald "added to his *imperium* the Orkneys" (Adam, *Gesta* 4.33(32) [ed. and transl. Trillmich 1961, 390-1]), whose jarls - besides Harald himself - received praise from Arnórr Þórðarson. And Cnut's "empire" encom-

passed five realms, according his widow's encomium (*Encomium Emmae Reginae* 2.19 [ed. and transl. Campbell 1998, 34-5]). Supra-regional terminology and symbolism was therefore of interest, and England had much to offer. With Roman monuments, an ideology of kingship propounded by prelates and, even, secular elites possessing vernacular literacy (Pratt 2014; McCann 2018), England stands apart from Russo-Scandinavian polities, its political culture dependent upon Latin texts and rites interpreted by Western churchmen. This was not, however, to the exclusion of Easterners or the Eastern embodiment of *imperium*: England itself was open to Eastern arrivals, especially once under Danish rule (on an authority-symbol in England under Cnut, see Abrams 2016, 49-50).

4 **England's Anomalousness: The Canterbury Connection**

Trying to determine whether returnees from imperial service or Anglo-Saxon ideology inspired Cnut's poets to depict him "in cosmic high relief" would be futile. Anglo-Saxons were probably now serving the emperor, alongside Scandinavians (Shepard 2016, 23-4). And England had its own links with Byzantium, some harking back to the opening centuries of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, but others of tenth-century vintage, when journeying between Black Sea and Baltic became feasible. England's anomalousness throws into relief the multifarious ways in which Byzantium could serve other Northern societies' would-be overlords, elite-families, and the well-to-do. It was to outshine such magnates as Ragnvald, "commander of the host", that symbols of supra-regional rulership came in useful. For those - like Cnut - whose imperial dominion encompassed England, titles and visual imagery (if not texts) of Byzantine origin could conjoin with Anglo-Saxon ones. Indeed, England's case may illuminate processes underway in other, less well-documented polities: interplay between the written and spoken word, and fitful recourse to Byzantine exemplars. Often becoming available fortuitously, these might be seized upon.

The generations following the Kentish king Aethelbert's baptism may illustrate the fortuitousness. Pope Vitalian's despatch in 668 to Canterbury of two well-educated Greek-speakers owed little to Constantinopolitan statecraft. But Theodore of Tarsus and the African-born Hadrian, respectively Archbishop of Canterbury and Abbot of Saints-Peter-and-Paul, introduced Eastern texts, translating into Latin and expounding them at the school they founded. From their Biblical commentaries, it seems they favoured literal interpretation of sacred texts, often citing Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, explaining computus alongside astronomi-

cal and astrological know-how. The *Laterculus Malalianus* drew upon Malalas' *Chronicle* to elucidate Jesus' life on earth, and things to come (Lapidge 1996; Stevenson 1995, 15-47; Siemens 2007; Dempsey 2015). Outstanding pupils like Aldhelm knew some Greek, peppering their writings with grecisms, a style reviving in the late Anglo-Saxon period. Clearly, they were helped by being conversant with Latin, highlighting the significance of persons capable of expounding texts. Theodore was *sui generis*, his achievement unrepeatable: by the time he died in 690 the English church possessed written rules that made it self-sustaining. But his case raises the question whether anything comparable occurred once the sea-link between Byzantium and Rus opened up communications with the North.

5 England's Anomalousness: Royal Couples and Imperial Hegemony from Edgar to William the Conqueror

Having already noted the "Armenian bishops" on Iceland, one may turn to "a Greek", known to the *Book of Ely* as "Bishop Sigewold", almost certainly a calque on the name "Nikephoros". Sigewold-Nikephoros' historicity – albeit not his episcopal ranking – is beyond reasonable doubt (Lilie et al. 2013, #27069; Shepard 2016, 25-6). Being a 'magnate' at the court of King Edgar (959-75), Sigewold-Nikephoros would have needed enough erudition to carry conviction with ecclesiastics given to grecisms (Stephenson 2015, 8-11, 14-19, 25-6). He may even have made himself more 'episcopal' through Greek texts: Sigewold-Nikephoros' arrival and concern with a key monastery in the Danelaw was well-timed, coinciding with Edgar's hegemonial aspirations as *rex [totius] Britannia* and styling as *basileus* on charters (Lestremau 2018, 215-18). Wholly unprecedented was the imperial coronation (besides anointing) of Edgar and his queen, Aelfthryth, amidst Bath's Roman monuments. This set the couple apart, privileging their offspring over Edgar's pre-existing children (Stafford 1997, 62-4, 162-8; Pratt 2017, 219-24; Lestremau 2018, 210, 214-18). While Byzantine concepts of *Porphyrogeniti* were probably lacking, one should note how the Benedictional commissioned by Bishop Aethelwold of Winchester effectively formatted such aspirations. Illuminations in this manuscript drew on Eastern iconographic themes, including the Virgin's Birth and Death and the choirs of saints. Deshman suggests a Gospel-Book inspired Aethelwold to concoct an "iconographic counterpart" to the royal couple's coronation in 973 (Deshman 1995, 213, 162-4, 125-38, 147-8, 204-7, 252, 260-1). Although such a text might have reached Wessex from the Ottonian court, a role for Sigewold-Nikephoros is conceivable, as also, perhaps, in Edgar's celebrated coin-reform (Shepard 2016, 26-7). Since Aethelwold re-found-



Figure 2 *Liber Vitae*. Winchester, c. 1031. King Cnut and Queen Emma receive a crown and a veil from the angels respectively. British Library, ms. Stowe MS 944, fol. 6r. Public domain

ed Ely in 970, he will have been acquainted with “the Greek bishop”: whether or not Sigewold-Nikephoros provided the text inspiring the Benedictional’s imagery, he could have expounded its meaning. Here, as with Theodore and Hadrian, word-of-mouth exposition could amplify texts and imagery reaching the North. Not that Sigewold-Nikephoros’ capability was so extraordinary. It was probably from oral informants, perhaps imperial service veterans, that Aethelweard, the Latin translator of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, picked up contemporary Byzantine terminology for ships (Shepard 2016, 24, 28).

The “cosmic high relief” in which Cnut’s poets depict him fits this background. Icelanders like Þórarinn Praise-Tongue could have heard tales of Byzantium from returning veterans, and cross-fertilisation with conceptions of imperial dominion in England might be presumed. Besides the use of *basileus* and such terms as “God-crowned” on Cnut’s charters, one should note the illumination in the *Liber Vitae*, executed at Winchester’s New Minster in 1031. Its Byzantinesque depiction of Cnut and his wife Emma receiving respectively a crown and veil from angels under Christ’s direction may reflect German designs, themselves imbued with Byzantine iconography (*Liber Vitae* [ed. Keynes 1996, 38-9, 79-80, pl. V]); Ott 1998, 200-9; Breay, Story 2018, no. 147) [fig. 2]. Yet there seems no reason why an illuminated text, arriving directly from the east, should not lie behind the picture. Around this time Winchester, a royal city, was host to Byzantine envoys bearing seals and silks, while New Minster housed a Greek monk (Lilie et al. 2013, #20400; *Liber Vitae* [ed. Keynes 1996, 90]). Indeed, Emma gave a “Greek shrine” to New Minster (*Liber Vitae* [ed. Keynes 1996, 105-6]; Jones 2009). If Eastern illuminations of the Mother of God offered scope for projecting Edgar and his queen in Aethelwold’s Benedictional, the need to represent Cnut and Emma as jointly crowned beneath Christ was the more urgent. Cnut was, after all, a conqueror who had taken to wife the defeated King Aethelred’s widow: Aethelred was born of the very marriage the Benedictional’s illumination was meant to sanctify. Thus Cnut sought imperial dominion over a realm already acquainted with collating earthly with heavenly hierarchies.

To infer this from manuscript-illuminations alone would be rash. But their meaningfulness to members of the politico-ecclesiastical elite should not be underestimated. The importance of enrollment into the New Minster’s *Liber Vitae*, thereby joining its confraternity and benefitting from its monks’ prayers, was such that some thirty years after Cnut and Emma, proponents of Edgar *Aetheling* as “heir apparent” entered after Edward (1042-66) and his queen the name of Aethelred’s great-grandson (Licence 2017, 122-3; *Liber Vitae* fol. 29r [ed. Keynes 1996, 96-7]). Coming towards the end of a reign characterisable as “one long power-struggle” (Tyler 2017, 137), this belongs to a series of demarches to enshrine the childless couple’s imperial stature, along with Edgar’s, amidst sundry successor candidates.



Figure 3
Adewardi Anglorum Basilei: two-sided seal.
 After Wyon 1887, pl. I, nos 5-6

Given such circumstances, Byzantium's imperial order had its charms for the throne's incumbents and contenders alike. Several aspects deserve highlighting, starting with Edward's elaboration upon the title *basileus*. On a seal whose double-sidedness recalls Byzantine gold bulls, *Adewardi Anglorum Basilei* sits enthroned (Jones [2002] 2003, 103-5; Mureşan 2019, 144-5) [fig. 3]. The styling presupposes acquaintance with its implication: God-given entitlement to oversee earthly affairs. Secondly, Edward consulted the Eastern *basileus* after a vision of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, sending envoys with sealed letters to Constantinople. Such communications are also implied by the enamelled encolpion and Byzantine silk found in Edward's tomb, and one cannot dismiss this tale told by his hagiographer soon after Edward's death (*Life* [ed. and transl. Barlow 1992, 106-7]; Ciggaar 1996, 136; Licence 2016). The *Life of Edward* sought to honour his widow Edith, and its representation of their joint 'imperial' authority offers a third intimation of Byzantium. Edith is extolled beyond the heights already attained by the *consors imperii* since Aelfthryth's coronation at Bath. Rather than hagiographical rhetoric, this echoes *laudes* sung for Edith, perhaps at her coronation in 1045 (*Life* [ed. and transl. Barlow 1992, 6-7, 22-7, 36-9, 64-5]; Cowdrey 1981, 72-3 (text); Mureşan 2019, 141-2; Stafford 1997, 183 fn. 106). The likelihood of Byzantine inspiration is reinforced by a set of *laudes* datable to Edward's reign: styled *basileum*, Edward is filled with Solomonic wisdom; the *basilea* "bears the pitcher of doctrine" (Cowdrey 1981, 71-2 (text); Mureşan 2019, 114, 119-20). Such terms and conceptions complement the imagery already noted. Probably chanted outdoors for William I's coronation at Westminster on 25 December 1066, these *laudes* formerly acclaiming Edward now greeted the Conqueror, bonding him with his new subjects (Guy, *Carmen* [ed. and transl. Barlow 1999, 46-8]; Mureşan 2019, 119-20, 122-6).

Two years later, another set of acclamations celebrated the coronation of William's queen Mathilda, "crowned-by-God", invoking Mary, Archangels Michael and Raphael, and a host of other saints to help them, and the clerical and secular leaderships. Their focus "upon the king and queen in the glory of a regality that [...] reflected Christ's heavenly reign" and the "balance, order, and relationship between the hierarchies of heaven and earth" is unparalleled in other *laudes regiae* (Cowdrey 1981, 52-3, 70-1). To regard such interlinking of hierarchies vested in an imperial couple as intimating Eastern ceremonies is not overbold. Nor should one discount Byzantine-awareness on the English politico-ecclesiastical elite's part: William would scarcely have favoured chants that failed to resonate with them barely two months after Hastings. Bishop Guy's *Song of Hastings* climaxes with the imperial symbolism, minutely described, of the golden crown commissioned from a craftsman from "Greece" (Guy, *Carmen* [ed. and transl. Barlow 1999, 44]; Mureşan 2019, 134-6). A degree of Byzantine-awareness on William's and his Norman household's part is anyway clear. Before 1066 William received requests for mercenaries and, perhaps consequently, his steward's son spent a while at the imperial court (William of Poitiers, *Gesta* 1.59 [eds and transl. Davis, Chibnall 1998, 96-7]; *Chronique* [ed. Sauvage 1906, 57-8]; Ciggaar 1987, 48-51). Odo Stigand's studies there included horse-medicine, useful for cavalrymen, and he could have brought home notes taken, if not texts. The same goes for Bishop Ealdred of Worcester's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, probably via Constantinople. The court's acclamations and doings could have featured in this traveller's tales (Mureşan 2019, 146-51).

6 Mercenaries as Kulturträger

However, the principal vector of tales northwards was probably returning mercenaries. For all the turns their accounts might take, those performing palace duties – the Rus on parade in 946, for instance (see above) – will have been exposed to the year-round *taxis* reflecting the cosmic order Constantine Porphyrogenitus envisaged (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis* 1 (preface) [ed. and transl. Dagron, Flusin 2020, 1: 4-5]). Birka's warrior-elite seemingly essayed to evoke this sartorially, if not ceremonially. On an earthier plane, *Haralds Saga's* account of his affairs at court reflects awareness of women's centrality to court-life, whether *Augustae* or *Porphyrogenitae* like Zoe (*Haralds saga* chs 13, 15 [ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1951, 85, 88-9]; Jakobsson 2020, 140-1; for the *Augustae* see, e.g. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis* [ed. and transl. Dagron, Flusin 2020, 5: 29]; Herrin 2021, 311). Oral tales, reminiscences and imagery would have sufficed to convey notions of courts attuned to heavenly rhythms, women's role as intercessors, even the

gist of acclamations. That some such ‘package’ was known to Anglo-Danish elites, blending with pre-existing idea of queenship, emerges just after 1066. William the Conqueror’s charters’ ‘imperial’ formulations are in harmony with the acclamations for his crowning with a Greek-made *stemma* at Westminster, and Mathilda’s coronation (Mureşan 2019, 120-5, 131-2).

This phase was short-lived. After rebellions and Danish invasion, William abandoned a *modus operandi* akin to Cnut’s overlordship, resorting instead to tighter supervision of the conquered lands (Crouch 2017, 21-2). William’s initial adaptation of a political culture evoking the Eastern empire is nonetheless noteworthy. Such elements could consolidate dynasties intent on imperial overlordship, like Edgar’s. But they were of particular value to conquerors like Cnut and William. These bouts of Byzantine-awareness owed much to the spoken word, invigorating available texts or images. A handful of Greek-speakers sufficed to translate and expound Eastern religious texts, as witness Theodore of Tarsus. But it was probably mercenaries’ toing-and-froing that spread word of the imperial order furthest amongst external elites.

7 Byzantine Texts, Tales and Royal Couples Among the Alans

Rus offers plentiful points of comparison with Northwest Europe, sending Byzantium mercenaries and receiving miscellaneous Eastern Christian texts from the Conversion era onwards (Franklin 2002; Zalizniak 2003; Griffin 2019; Guimon 2021). But another provider of military manpower will – like Rus – have received texts when a Constantinopolitan-appointed metropolitan was installed in the mid-tenth century: the Alans. Lack of autochthonous writings makes information even scarcer and more ambiguous than for Rus or Northwest Europe, and their geopolitical situation was markedly different. But there are hints from texts (in the broadest sense) and tales of comparable dynamics – not least the divergent uses that external political elites could make of associations with Eastern imperial order. The titles and visible trappings of a God-blessed court served to enhance Alan rulers’ ‘imperial’ ambitions. Yet tales of Byzantium could legitimise clans holding only regional sway. In Northwest Europe such stances were struck amidst the toing-and-froing of mercenaries, with veterans ranging from Harald Hardrada to Ragnvald displaying wealth and weaponry. Þorvardr, in contrast, overstepped the mark in acquiring ‘Mail-Biter’, rather than by naming his farm *Miklagarðr* after Constantinople (Jakobsson 2020, 117-18). Returnees acquainted with the imperial court could make a receptive audience for would-be monarchs with tales to tell (like Harald).

The Alan rulers' diplomatic exchanges with Byzantium were closer and livelier than any Northwestern potentate's from the mid-tenth to the twelfth century. A few texts and tales may illustrate developments. A seal styling Gabriel *exousiokratōr* shows the Alan ruler associating his rulership with Byzantium. Dating from the 1030s-40s, it echoes the formula for addressing Gabriel's predecessor a century earlier (Seibt 2004, 54; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis* 2.48 [ed. and transl. Dagron, Flusin 2020, 3: 364-5]). Adherence to the *basileus'* order is likewise suggested by an inscription on the *Theotokos'* church at Senty in 965, renovated "in the reign (*basileia*) of Nikephoros" and the *Augusta*, and "the *exousiokratōr* David and the *exousiokratōrissa* Maria"; the carver was an *apokrisiarios*, probably part of the mission sent to build the church (Beletskii, Vinogradov 2011, 241-3; Latham-Sprinkle 2018, 146-8; Evans forthcoming). David and Maria are effectively accompanying the imperial pair in exercise of *basileia*, albeit occupying a lowlier plane. Seemingly this was a diplomatic compliment which David and his entourage would presumably have understood: Senty abounds in Greek graffiti (Beletskii, Vinogradov 2011, 243-54). Such coupling of male and female rulers foreshadows the eleventh-century joint-acclamations for rulers over England. One doubts whether fostering this sense of a dynasty, exercising quasi-imperial overlordship under divine benediction, came within Byzantine calculations. Yet this is what texts, tales and imagery involving the imperial court seem to have imparted to would-be monarchs. It is perhaps no coincidence that, without sweepingly coercive power across the Northern Caucasus, the Alan ruler's regime stabilised and became dynastic (Latham-Sprinkle 2018, 150-3, 183-7). This was, after all, the era of the dynastic imagery of Aethelwold's *Benedictional* and, indeed, Cnut's praise-singers.

Liturgical texts solemnising notions of the imperial court's proximity to God will have circulated and been chanted among the Alans, as they were in Rus following the Conversion. Without expressly sacralising the imperial order, these texts commemorate and celebrate God's salvation of the City on the Bosphorus from successive perils (Griffin 2019, 30, 82-90, 181-2). Tenth- or eleventh-century texts are lacking from Northern Caucasia. But their likely availability is indicated by the survival of a lectionary dating from 1275, in Greek but with glosses by an Alanic-speaking cleric, explaining matters of interest to him and his congregation. For example, he seemingly rendered into Alanic as "Day of Punishment" the Greek title for the feast-day commemorating "the Avar surprise" (Constantinople, 5 June 617) (Lubotsky 2015, 7-8, 35-6; Latham-Sprinkle 2018, 307-8). Thus the idea of the City as exemplary for mankind, whose conduct could incur God's wrath or reprieve, was enshrined in the liturgies of polities whose ecclesiastical leadership hailed from there.

Such liturgies will have been chanted – and expounded – from the time metropolitans took up residence in Alania. The eleventh century saw Alan rulers launching attacks on Muslim powers in the Caucasus, in step with imperial policy, while units served with Byzantine forces (Shepard 1984-85, 247-53; Latham-Sprinkle 2018, 214-15, 221-2). Their commanders presumably picked up tales in the manner of Rus and other Northerners, sometimes retelling and recasting them back home. These two currents of cultural intercourse were enlivened by exchanges between courts: the Alan princess arriving as a ‘hostage’ only to become Constantine IX’s mistress and have shiploads of deluxe goods despatched home is perhaps the most spectacular episode (Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 6.151-4 [ed. Reinsch 2014, 175-7]). Alania was especially close-engaged with Byzantium, but the interplay between mercenaries, court ideals and realities and, indeed, storytelling bears comparison with more northerly societies’. As on Iceland (Jakobsson 2020, 124-33; Scheel 2015), stories involving the emperor or St. Sophia were told, regardless of whether mercenaries still served him. Echoes may be found in the tale told of three brothers gaining ascendancy over Dvaleti in the central Caucasus. This culminates with the foremost brother visiting the God-crowned emperor “Justinian the Builder”, a connoisseur of monuments. Perceiving his worthiness, “Justinian” invests Rostom with his own costume, weapons and banner. Rostom then establishes dynastic rule over the mountain communities (*Памятник Эриставов* [transl. Kakabadze 1979, 12, 21-4 (text)]; Latham-Sprinkle 2018, 260, 269). In this foundation-myth – concocted for a local clan and transmitted in an early fifteenth-century text, the *Dzegli Eristavta* – one may find aspirations and world-pictures not so far removed from those of the Viking-Age Baltic, or even from Þorvarðr’s thirteenth-century Icelandic farm. But here, too, periods of intensive engagement were finite and fitful, registering an external polity’s changing needs and pattern of development. Texts and tales were malleable instruments, though of potential use to local elites as well as hegemon.

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