

Statement of Intended Research

Visions of the Otherworld in Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*

I intend to study how far the otherworldly visions in Æthelwulf's poem, *De abbatibus*, conformed to the conventions of early medieval visions. By comparing this early ninth century source with other visions, I aim to reveal the extent to which Æthelwulf copied from, added to and reimagined the inherited traditions of vision literature. Since Alistair Campbell's 1967 edition and translation of *De abbatibus*, scholars have studied this poem for its architectural interests, ecological insights and transmission of linguistic legacies.¹ There is, however, a tendency in scholarship on early medieval otherworldly visions to overlook the visions in *De abbatibus*.² This project attempts to explore whether inclusion of *De abbatibus* in this scholarship challenges our understanding of the literary conventions of early medieval visions of the otherworld.

Despite the omission of *De abbatibus* from recent studies on otherworldly visions, the task of incorporating this poem in the context of vision literature has been started. Kamphausen included Æthelwulf's poem in his *Traum und Vision in der lateinischen Poesie der Karolingerzeit*, in which he identified some "kömmlichen Klischees" that *De abbatibus* shared with other visions.³ By contrasting the visions of Æthelwulf, Drythelm, Wetti and Barontus, Kamphausen noticed that Æthelwulf deviated from the conventional emphasis on dialogue by silencing his teachers in his vision.⁴ Richard Sowerby has also compared *De abbatibus* with earlier visions, contrasting Æthelwulf's account of Merhtheof's unaided journey through the otherworld with the fundamental role of Drythelm's angelic guide.⁵ These studies set precedents for the comparative methodology that I intend to adopt but their observations only scratch the surface of the peculiarities in the otherworldly visions of *De abbatibus*. There are, for example, mysterious elements in the visions of *De abbatibus*, such as the unknown identity of the "old man" and the uncertain significance of the "wine of wondrous flavour", which have not been problematized and could be illuminated by comparison with other visions.⁶ Moreover, Campbell's claim that it is "impossible to say with certainty whether Æthelwulf imagined a fourfold future life" has not been challenged, even though a comparison with other visions could reveal how Æthelwulf expressed stages of the otherworld through literary choices.⁷

There are unconventional motifs in Æthelwulf's poem that have not been traced back to earlier visions. The choice of "a mountain top" in the landscape of Æthelwulf's account of the vision of Merhtheof, for example, starkly contrasts with the "broad and pleasant meadow" in vision of

¹ A. Campbell, (ed.) (1967) *Æthelwulf: De abbatibus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; H. M. Taylor, (1974) 'The architectural interest of Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3, pp. 163-173; J. T. R. Terry, (2019) 'Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* and the Anglo-Saxon Ecological Imagination', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 49:3, pp. 479-500; A. Orchard, (1992) 'After Aldhelm: The Teaching and Transmission of the Anglo-Latin Hexameter', *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 2, pp. 96-133; M. Lapidge, 'Ædiluulf and the School of York' in (1996) *Anglo-Latin Literature: 600-899*, London: Hambledon Press.

² This source is omitted from the otherwise comprehensive bibliographies of I. Moreira, (2010) *Heaven's Purge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; H. Foxhall Forbes, (2013) *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd; A. J. Kabir, (2001) *Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ H. J. Kamphausen, (1975) *Traum und Vision in der lateinischen Poesie der Karolingerzeit*, Bern: Herbert Lang, p. 101; Translated as "conventional clichés".

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-107.

⁵ R. Sowerby, (2016) *Angels in Early Medieval England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 127-129.

⁶ Campbell, *De abbatibus*, XXII; For an interpretation of the "old man" as God and the "wine" as not related to the Eucharist, see J. McEnerney, (1988) 'The Dream of Ædiluulf', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*, Bd. 23, S. 28-36.

⁷ Campbell, *De abbatibus*, p. xxxiii.

Drythelm.⁸ It could be interesting to consider whether this alternative landscape was derived from another vision or an addition that reflected Æthelwulf's perception of the otherworld. The visions in *De abbatibus* also deviate from convention in their emphasis on the accessibility of the otherworld. Rather than being carried by otherworldly beings, Æthelwulf wrote how he "placed [his] steps on unknown paths".⁹ Similar to this reimagination of the journey to the otherworld, Æthelwulf transformed the motif of abandonment, since Drythelm had been abandoned by his angelic guide in "the midst of the darkness" whereas Æthelwulf was abandoned in the "shining city".¹⁰ It could be valuable to explore whether Æthelwulf's deviation originated in earlier visions, because, if they are unprecedented, they might reveal how Æthelwulf contributed new ideas to vision literature.

There is a wealth of source material for early medieval otherworldly visions to compare with *De abbatibus*. The visions of Fursey, the Monk of Wenlock and Drythelm are established sources for early medieval visions of the otherworld, which have themselves been compared with the earlier *Vision of Paul* and the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.¹¹ The study of Æthelwulf's use of Latin has revealed the range of his reading, from Vergil, to Cyprianus Gallus, to Aldhelm, Bede and Alcuin.¹² The scope of Æthelwulf's knowledge warrants a wide ranging inclusion of visions in order to understand his combination of classical, biblical, patristic and Anglo-Saxon precedents. The central concern of this research project would be to determine how far Æthelwulf communicated unprecedented ideas in his otherworldly visions. A study of the possible traditions, adaptations and additions in the visions in *De abbatibus* could encourage future research into the later reception of Æthelwulf's contributions to the literature of medieval visions of the otherworld.

⁸ Campbell, *De abbatibus*, XI; B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, (eds.) (1969) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, V.12.

⁹ Campbell, *De abbatibus*, XXII; See spirits carrying Guthlac to and from otherworld in B. Colgrave, (ed.) (2007) *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, XXXI.

¹⁰ B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, (eds.) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, V.12; Campbell, *De abbatibus*, XXII.

¹¹ I. Moreira, *Heaven's Purge*, chapters 5 and 6.

¹² A. Orchard, 'After Aldhelm: Teaching and Transmission', p. 116.