

Chapter Four

DARKNESS AND DAWN

ROMAN BRITAIN was a fragile civilisation on the fringes of a mighty empire. When that empire began to break up, the legions were called back from its frontiers to cope with threats at its heart. Britain had always depended for its existence on the legions to keep at bay the barbarians on the other side of Hadrian's wall, and on the fleet which had patrolled the Channel warding off invaders from the continental mainland. The country looked to Rome also for its system of government, law and order, one which stretched downwards from the emperor through his governor and procurator to the officers who ran the towns scattered across the country. Once the army and the fleet were gone Britain was left unprotected and devoid of any central authority. The inhabitants had not been trained to meet that need when it arose, which made them even more vulnerable when the attacks from outside began.

All of this, however, did not happen at once. In dramatic contrast to the Roman conquest, that by the barbarians was to be a long drawn-out process which dragged on for two hundred years. It was only by the sixth century that a different map of Britain began to emerge, one made up of a series of small independent kingdoms which bore little relation to what the Romans had created. These centuries are known as the Dark Ages, dark because a whole civilisation disintegrated, dark also because our knowledge of what actually took place is very fragmentary. It has to be pieced together from the very few written accounts compiled a long time after the events which they describe, and from what has been discovered through archaeology and research.

The threats from outside were there from the beginning, but from the third century they began to be serious. There would be sudden attacks, but these were often followed by deceptively long periods of peace which lulled the Britons into a false sense of security. By the beginning of the fourth century, however, the raids accelerated and it was clear that this time there was to be no rest. Invaders came from every direction. There were the Scots from Ireland who attacked the west, the Picts from

the far north who crossed Hadrian's wall and penetrated south, and the Anglo-Saxons who landed in the south-east and East Anglia. The Anglo-Saxons were made up of various tribes who came from an area stretching between the mouths of the rivers Rhine and Elbe. In the long run they were to be the dominant force in forging what was to be Anglo-Saxon England. A group of them was called *Engle* and from that came the word England.

When the raids first began the Romans responded by constructing a series of fortresses along what they designated the Saxon Shore, an area of coastline running from Brancaster to Portchester, near Portsmouth. Soon the Romans could no longer maintain a fleet and the country's defences dwindled to what legions remained. In 367 there was an appalling attack, so severe that even London was besieged. The problem was that it was impossible to fight on every frontier. The south-east was defended only at the expense of leaving the north unprotected. Indeed gradually the north was abandoned and a series of small border kingdoms emerged, whose task it was to ward off the Picts. That signalled the opening phase of the disintegration of what had been Roman Britain.

In 410 the Emperor Honorius told the British that they must fend for themselves. The Romans abandoned Britain and the last of the legions departed. The rich towns and gracious villas stood unprotected, easy prey for the barbarians who now arrived annually. Each spring they came from across the seas for a season of plundering and looting, burning and sacking the villas and destroying towns. Each autumn they returned home until gradually they chose instead to settle. The Britons were faced with a cruel choice, either to flee or to come to some kind of agreement with them. Some did leave the country, burying their valuables in the hope of returning in happier times. But most remained. Their solution was to give land to the barbarians in return for military service in their defence.

By the middle of the fifth century there were settlers all over the country. By then the villa life of the Romans had had to be abandoned. Most of the towns carried on within their walls. As the attacks became even more severe, there was sometimes a retreat to more easily defended hilltop sites. All around them the Britons saw the way of life they had taken for granted gradually grind to a halt. Pottery and glass, for example, ceased to be made. Then the coinage stopped which meant the collapse of trade and commerce. While this was happening the Christian religion thrived and the church, in spite of the troubled times, sent representatives to the great councils which took place on the continental mainland. To many it must have seemed that the end of the world was at hand. One such was a British priest, Gildas, who, looking back from the mid-sixth century, gives us an impression of the atmosphere of the age. He

describes how 'loathsome hordes of Scots and Picts eagerly emerged from coracles [a form of boat] that carried them across the gulf of the sea like dark swarms of worms.' Monasteries and churches were pillaged and pitiful appeals were made to Rome for help: 'The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea drives us to the barbarians; between these two means of death we are either killed or drowned.'

The Romans always called anyone who was not Roman a barbarian. However violent the Anglo-Saxons, they were a people with their own rich traditions. They were pagans who worshipped gods such as Woden, Thunor or Frig whose names were to be the origin of our Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. They had no interest in the Roman way of life. Their society was very differently structured. At the top came the nobles who fought, next the *ceorls* who farmed and, at the bottom, slaves. The Anglo-Saxons were not town-dwellers, living instead in wooden villages in clusters of huts around a large central hall. Unlike the Britons their whole existence was war. Fighting bound them together in ties of loyalty to their leaders. Loyalty was seen as the greatest of human virtues and, as a consequence, the most detestable of all crimes was the betrayal of a king. In their own way they were civilised, producing an heroic poetry and a magnificent art summed up in the splendid objects found in an early seventh century king's tomb known as the Sutton Hoo treasure, which is now in the British Museum. Beneath a vast mound of earth the king lay in a huge ship surrounded by weapons and jewels, a helmet, shield and purse, all objects of great beauty and skilful workmanship, rich with the figures of birds, animal heads and dragons. The ship called for forty oarsmen to row this chief to the next world.

Sooner or later these two groups of people with two divergent ways of living were destined to clash. One account of how this happened describes how most of lowland Britain came under the rule of a man called Vortigern who, in 449, invited a group of Anglo-Saxons led by Hengist and Horsa to settle in Kent and fight on his behalf. But not long after they rose in revolt, leading to a long series of battles for the remainder of the century. During this period there emerged a British hero called Ambrosius Aurelianus and there was a great victory over the Anglo-Saxons at a place called *Mons Badonicus*. But nothing is known about this hero beyond his name, not the precise date of the decisive battle. After it there followed half-a-century of peace. Everything is shrouded in mystery, so much so that several centuries later a British hero was invented. He was King Arthur.

Although the British victories delayed the Anglo-Saxons, by the close of the next century Roman Britain had vanished piecemeal, bit by bit eroded as chiefs landed in various parts of the country and carved out small kingdoms for themselves. In the south-east there was the kingdom of Kent and the south Saxon kingdom. In the east

At Sutton Hoo in east Suffolk the grave of a Saxon king from about 625 was uncovered. The vast burial mound concealed a great open rowing ship with space for forty oarsmen and a steersman.



Into the wood cabin amidships had been placed the king's treasure including his helmet made of iron and covered with tinned decorative plates, the features gilded.

Also found were golden shoulder clasps and a purse, all set with garnets and *mille fiori* glass. The king is likely to have been Raedwald, king of East Anglia.

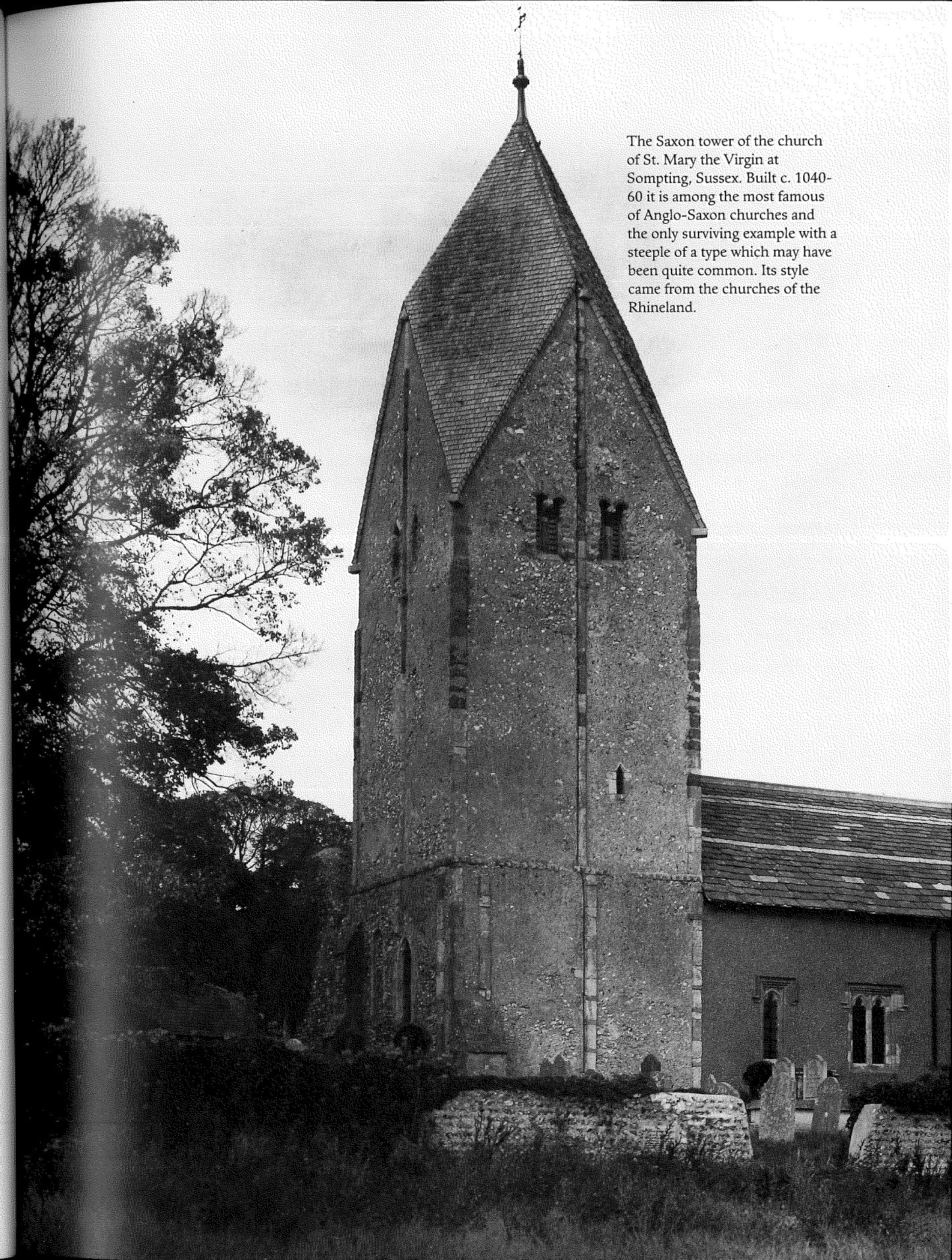


there was the kingdom of the East Saxons, the East Angles and that of Lindsey. In the midlands there was the kingdom of Mercia and in the north that of Northumbria. Finally in the south-west there was that of Wessex. It took a hundred years for all these gradually to take shape. Their relationship with one another was in the main one of war. In 577 the Anglo-Saxons took the three great Roman towns of Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester. Those who could fled into outlying areas or into the south-west peninsula called the kingdom of Dumnonia.

England was now made up of a series of small warring kingdoms. All that held them together was a tradition whereby one of those kings was recognised as having some kind of supremacy over the others expressed in the title, *bretwalda*. This was a turbulent age during which first one kingdom was dominant and then another. Early in the seventh century it was Northumbria under Edwin until he was killed in battle by the British. Then it was the turn of Mercia under Offa. What is so striking is that with these barbarian kings the memory and tradition of the Roman Empire still lingered. Offa's coinage imitates that of a Roman emperor and even more startling he built his own version of Hadrian's wall, a great earthwork or dyke of a hundred and fifty miles along the Welsh border. Finally in 825 Mercia was defeated by Wessex.

Amidst all this confusion and seemingly unending destruction there emerged a remarkable civilisation. By the eighth century, men whose grandfathers had been heathen barbarians had not only been converted to Christianity but gone on to found churches and monasteries which were to be centres of art and learning of a kind which was to act as a beacon shining out across the rest of Western Europe. This revolution came about by the action of the head of the church, the pope, Gregory the Great, in sending in 597 a mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons. That had been inspired many years before in Rome when he had seen a group of fair-haired youths and asked who they were and their country of origin. He was told that they were *Engles* or *Angles*, in Latin *Angli*. The pope is said to have remarked that he saw them not as *Angli* but *Angeli*, that is, angels.

What is so surprising about the old British church is that it made no attempt to convert the invaders. In the fifth century St. Patrick had set about converting the Irish and establishing the Celtic church. In the following century it was to be the Celtic church which was to send missionaries to evangelise the north of England. St. Columba set up a base on the tiny island of Iona from which to preach to the Picts. The real turning point, however, was the papal mission to the south-east led by St. Augustine. The king of Kent, Ethelbert, was married to a Christian Frankish princess who practised her faith within the royal household. When Augustine landed the king, fearing magic, insisted that his meeting with the missionaries take place beneath an



The Saxon tower of the church of St. Mary the Virgin at Sompington, Sussex. Built c. 1040-60 it is among the most famous of Anglo-Saxon churches and the only surviving example with a steeple of a type which may have been quite common. Its style came from the churches of the Rhineland.



open sky. Out of this came the grant of a place in Canterbury in which they could live and had permission to preach. Soon there were many converts and old churches began to be restored and new ones built. After a year Ethelbert himself became Christian. Augustine was consecrated Bishop and later Archbishop of Canterbury. He began to construct on the ruins of the old Roman Christian church a new one whose descendant is our present cathedral.

That mission was only the beginning of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, a task which took most of the seventh century to achieve. It was accomplished by the Roman missionaries from the south going north and the Celtic missionaries from the north moving south. There were huge set-backs. On the death of Ethelbert the mission was almost extinguished but somehow it survived. When Ethelbert's daughter had married Edwin, king of Northumbria, he too converted but Christianity foundered when he was killed. A later Northumbrian king, Oswald, turned to Celtic monks to re-Christianise the country. In 635 St. Aidan settled on the island of Lindisfarne and began his work of conversion. At about the same time Wessex became Christian and then, later, Mercia.

Everywhere churches and monasteries sprang up as the Celtic and Roman missionaries triumphed, but they also clashed. The problem was that the Celtic church followed the old British church which in its isolation had developed traditions which were different from those of the Roman missionaries. They celebrated Easter on a different day, for instance. Their bishops, too, were free-roaming whereas the Roman bishops each had a diocese, a fixed area of the country over which they presided. Their monasteries were also different, for the Celts could have ones for both sexes together. In 664 a meeting was held to resolve these differences, the Synod of Whitby, in which the Roman case representing universal practice elsewhere carried the day. Six years later the pope sent a great archbishop, Theodore of Tarsus, whose arrival signalled the golden age of the Anglo-Saxon church.

For a century the church was the focus of huge enthusiasm attracting members of royal and noble families to enter the monastic life. Anglo-Saxon kings often went on pilgrimage to Rome. Monks crossed from England to convert those who still lived in the lands their ancestors had come from. Along with the Christian faith they carried also the fruits of a great cultural renaissance which had taken place in England, stemming from Rome and the Celtic church. And Theodore brought the learning embod-

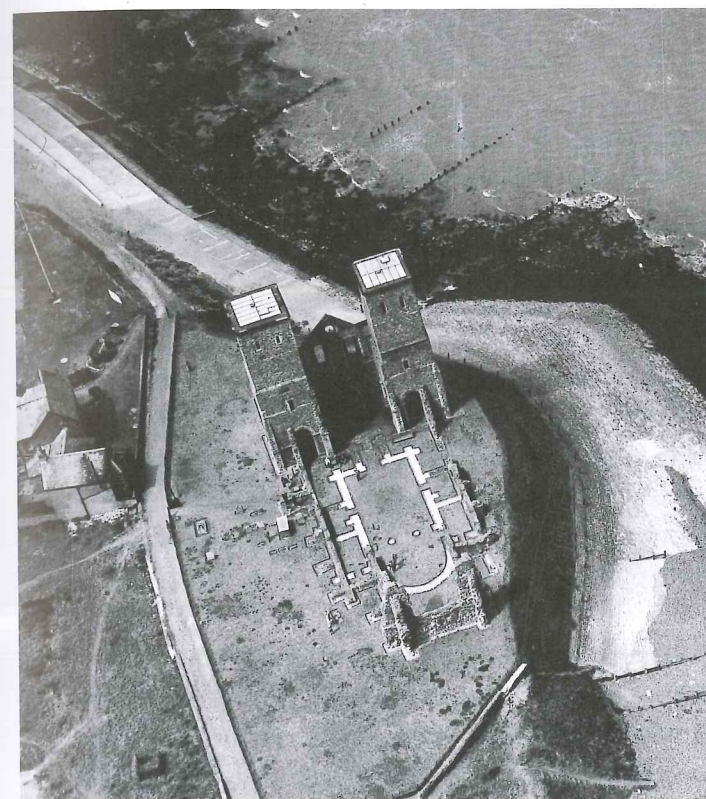
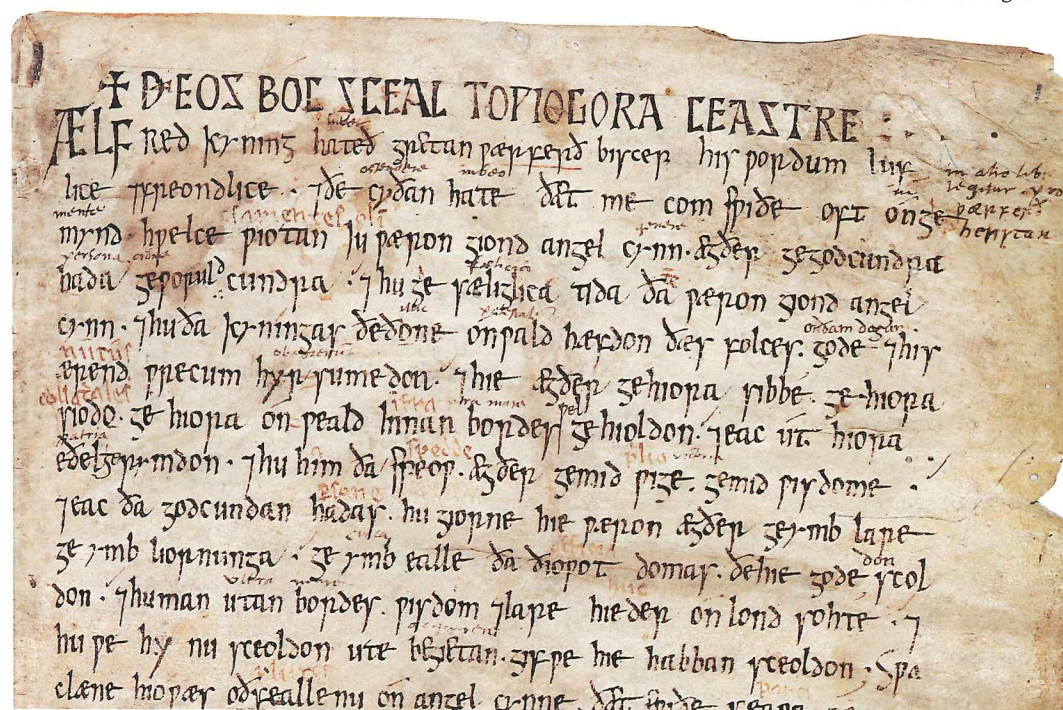
Page from the Lindisfarne Gospels which were written and illuminated about the year 698 at the island monastery of Lindisfarne by a monk called Eadfrith who later became its bishop. Each of the four gospels is prefaced by what is known as a 'carpet' page, an elaborate abstract pattern incorporating a cross. The manuscript is among the world's greatest works of art, one in which Roman, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon influences are fused.

ied in the writings of the ancient world of Greece and Rome as they had survived through the Dark Ages along with the great works of early Christian scholars and theologians. Monasteries such as Canterbury and Malmesbury became centres of teaching where both Greek and Latin were taught, together with what were called the Seven Liberal Arts, subjects which for over a thousand years were regarded as embracing the sum of human knowledge: the *trivium*: grammar or the art of writing, rhetoric or the art of speaking, and dialectic, that of reasoned argument; and the *quadrivium*, which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Combined, these seven topics were all seen as essential for expounding the mysteries of the scriptures.

The most famous of all these scholars was the monk Bede (c.673–735) who celebrated this age in the following way:

'And certainly there were never happier times since the English sought Britain; for, having very powerful and Christian kings, they were a terror to all barbarous nations, and the desires of all were bent on the joys of the heavenly kingdom of which they had recently heard, and whoever wished to be instructed in sacred studies had masters at hand to teach them.'

Opening page of King Alfred's translation into Anglo-Saxon of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule* in which the attributes and duties of the clergy are described. This is the copy sent by him to the Bishop of Worcester, Waerferth, vivid evidence of the king's policies in action. Such translations were among the very first steps in the creation of a vernacular literature in English.



Ruins of the monastic church at Reculver, Kent. The church was built in 669 by Bassam, a follower of St. Augustine. The aerial view delineates the first church and the eighth century enlargements to it. The altar was in the curved chancel at the east end and the nave had small rooms off it which often housed tombs. The two west front towers are later, Norman, c.1170.

It was in Northumbria that this civilisation reached its greatest flowering. We can still see the monumental stone crosses adorned with vine-leaf decoration and figures of Christ and the saints which were set up to proclaim the faith. Nothing comparable with these was being produced in Western Europe at the time. Even more remarkable are the Lindisfarne Gospels written about the year 700 in the great monastery on Holy Island off the coast of Northumbria. This is what is called an 'illuminated manuscript', one in which the pages are of vellum, that is prepared animal skin, painted with pigments whose effects could be enriched with burnished gold. It was the work of the bishop and in it we see complex inter-laced ornament woven into a many-coloured network of astounding freshness and delicacy of colour.

So it was that by the eighth century a new society, deeply Christian, had come into being. One of the ironies of history is that this had emerged from the destruction of Roman Britain. Now it too was to face the same fate when new invaders from beyond the seas, the Vikings, began to attack. In 793 Lindisfarne, where this miraculous Gospel-book was compiled, was sacked and once more a civilisation was faced with the possibility of extinction.