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Claudia Di Sciacca

As if on soft wax. The reception of the *Apparitio in Monte Gargano* in pre-Conquest England

Contrary to the received notion that the diffusion of St Michael's legend and cult in pre-Conquest England is a comparatively late phenomenon, this paper will argue that the *Apparitio in Monte Gargano* (*BHL* 5948-9) must have crossed the Channel already in the 8th century, as it was demonstrably drawn on in an anonymous Anglo-Latin epyllion, the *Miracula Nyniae Episcopi* (*MNE*). Dated to the 780s and associated with the 'York school' of Anglo-Latin poetry, the *MNE* recount the life and miracles of St Nynia, a tenuous figure traditionally identified with a British bishop and founder of Whithorn. In particular, one of the miracles performed by St Nynia demonstrably adapts and conflates two iconic events of the *Apparitio*, namely the episode of the straying bull and the Archangel's leaving his footprints impressed in the marble of the sanctuary.

[St Michael; *Apparitio in Monte Gargano*; pre-Conquest England; Anglo-Latin; Old English]

The diffusion of St Michael's legend and cult in England seems to be a comparatively late phenomenon, datable from the late Anglo-Saxon[1] period onwards, as earlier evidence – literary and otherwise – is quite meagre[2]. This circumstance may well be put down to a merely statistical factor, namely the actual chronology of the surviving literary and iconographic corpus, which is typically more extensive from the 10th century onwards. However, it can also be said that the establishment and diffusion of the Michaeline cult and legend were arguably fostered, if not triggered, by devotional and liturgical phenomena which can

[1] Although I am aware that 'Anglo-Saxon' has proved rather controversial lately, throughout this essay it will be employed in its strictly historical sense, i.e. to refer to what is now England from the 6th to the 11th century CE.

[2] Johnson (2005: 117-120) concerning the Old English texts on St Michael, and (*ibidem*: 140-148) concerning the medieval English iconography of St Michael; Di Sciacca (2023a: 249-253); and for a survey on St Michael in Old English homiletics, see Cioffi (2023) and Lendinara (2023). It has even been argued – perhaps over pessimistically – that "there is little to suggest that men and women in Anglo-Saxon England ever harboured any special affinity of their own for [St Michael]" (Sowerby 2016: 178).

be best ascribed to the late Anglo-Saxon period, that is the popularity of other dragon-fighting saints, such as St Margaret (Clayton/Magennis 1994; Dresvina 2016; Di Sciacca 2015 and 2019) and St George (Riches 2000); the diffusion of the cult of the Virgin, with whom St Michael was increasingly paired in his[3] intercessionary role[4]; finally, the promotion of the devotion to the Cross, especially on the part of the Benedictine Reformers[5].

The very foundational text of St Michael's legend and cult, the *Apparitio in Monte Gargano* (*BHL* 5948-5949) (henceforth *Apparitio*), has been dated by its most recent editor to the second half of the 7th century[6] and is attested in no fewer than four manuscript witnesses written or circulating in England, all dating to the 11th century[7]. That the *Apparitio* must have crossed the Channel much earlier, however, is demonstrated by the 9th-century *Old English Martyrology* (henceforth *OEM*)[8]. Unlike later martyrologies, the *OEM* devotes two distinct entries to both Michaeline feast-days of the Western tradition, that is 8 May and 29 September[9]. The former is the feast-day introduced by the Lombards of

[3] I will refer to Michael by the masculine pronoun as shorthand for an arguably genderless being. On the vexed question of angels' sexuality in Scholastic debate, see at least Keck (1998: 117-123). Also, even though the scriptural and apocryphal Archangel Michael, on the one hand, and the hagiographic St Michael, on the other, cannot be equated, in the course of this paper I will refer to Michael interchangeably as Archangel and Saint. On the transition from the scriptural to the hagiographic Michael, see Aulisa (2023: 3-28).

[4] On Mary and the angels in their respective roles of intercessors and mediators, see Keck (1998: 170-171). On Marian devotion and literature in pre-Conquest England, see Clayton (1990 and 1998).

[5] On the cross in pre-Conquest England, see the three collections of studies Karkov *et al.* (2006), Jolly *et al.* (2007), and Keefer *et al.* (2010).

[6] The most recent edition with Italian translation is by Lagioia (2017). Johnson (2005) has reprinted the Latin text ed. by Waitz (1878) with a facing page English translation (*ibidem*: 110-115); for a discussion of the *Apparitio*, see also *ibidem*: 36-41, 50-53, and for relevant bibliography on the *Apparitio* and the Gargano cult site, see Arnold (2000: 568-573).

[7] The four codices in question are two versions of the augmented recension of Paul the Deacon's Homiliary (Canterbury, Cathedral Library and Archives, Add. 127/1, *s.* xi[1], *ff.* 2va-2vb, and Salisbury, Cathedral Library 179, *s.* xi[ex], Salisbury, *ff.* 91v-92r, and two witnesses of the so-called 'Cotton-Corpus Legendary' (London, BL Cotton Nero E. I, Part 2, *s.* xi[3/4], *ff.* 147r-148v, Worcester, and Salisbury, Cathedral Library 222 [formerly Oxford, Bodleian Library, Fell 1], *s.* xi[ex], Salisbury, *ff.* 179r-180v): see Gneuss/Lapidge (2014: nos. 209, 753, 344, and 754.6). On the circulation of the *Apparitio* in Anglo-Saxon England, see Whatley (2001b), and on the knowledge of the cultic site on Mount Gargano, possibly dating back to *s.* vii[ex]/viii[in], see Lendinara (2023: 172-179).

[8] Rauer (2013); on the dating and context of origin of the *OEM*, see *ibidem*: 1-18.

[9] Rauer (2013: 100-101, 194-195, with commentary at 259 and 296). See also Ruggerini (1999); Johnson (2005: 51-53); and Hall (2019). Interestingly, the Irish *Martyrology of Tallaght* and the *Martyrology of Óengus* (*Félire Óengusso*) also feature two *dies festi* for St Michael, namely 9 May (*sic*) and 29 September (Lendinara 2023: 192-195).

central Italy in the late 8th and early 9th centuries to commemorate the famous appearance of the Archangel on Mount Gargano, as narrated in the eponymous *Apparitio*. The latter is the feast-day originally commemorating the dedication of a church on the Salarian Way, six miles north of Rome, in the 5th century, but eventually associated with the Gargano appearance and established as the main feast day of St Michael in the West[10]. Furthermore, the *Apparitio* was drawn on in two Old English homilies, an anonymous one for Michaelmas (*To sanctae Michaeles Mæssan*), making up item no. xvi of the Blickling Homilies[11], collectively dated to the 10th century (Scragg 2000: 82-84 and 2021: 20), and the homily for the same occasion (*Dedicatio ecclesiae S. Michaelis*) included in the First Series of the Catholic Homilies by Ælfric of Eynsham (*c.* 950 – *c.* 1010)[12].

However, evidence of the knowledge of (some version of) the *Apparitio* in England already by the late 8th century is afforded by an anonymous Anglo-Latin epyllion, the *Miracula Nynie Episcopi* (henceforth *MNE*)[13]. This hagiographic poem recounts the life and, especially, the miracles of St Nynia[14], a tenuous figure traditionally considered to be a British bishop and founder of Whithorn, an ecclesiastical site in the south-western tip of Galloway, itself generally regarded as the cradle of Scottish Christianity (Di Sciacca 2023b: 227-249). Although not dealing with St Michael himself, the *MNE* demonstrably show echoes of the two key episodes recounted in the *Apparitio*. The former concerns a straying bull that is miraculously spared by the poisoned arrow aimed at it by its enraged owner, Garganus, as the arrow turns around and flies back, ultimately striking Garganus instead and killing him. Revealingly, the wondrous event is orchestrated by the Archangel himself, who by

[10] On St Michael's feast days, see Whatley (2001b), Johnson (2000: 56-59), and Keck (1998: 179-180). In England, St Michael's feast day is recorded on 29 September already in the (Latin) *Metrical Calendar of York* (*s.* viii²), see Karasawa (2015: 143, l. 59 with relevant note at 151). Similarly, in the *Old English Metrical Calendar*, traditionally known as the *Menologium*, as well as in the related *Prose Menologium*, both dated to *s.* x/xi, more precisely *ante* 1008, St Michael's feast day falls on 29 September, see *ibidem*: 82, ll. 176-180 with relevant note at 118-119 (*Old English Metrical Calendar*) and 134, l. 28 (*Prose Menologium*).
[11] Morris (1967: 196-210). A more recent edition is in Getz (2008: 266-276), with English translation (*ibidem*: 277-284), and textual notes (*ibidem*: 285-322). See also Wright (2018-) and Cioffi (2023: 226-237).
[12] Clemoes (1997: no. xxxiv, 465-475). For a survey and discussion of Ælfric's sources, see Godden (2000: 281-289).
[13] *CPL* 2152; *BHL* 6240b; S-K 14261; ed. Strecker (1923a). The poem has been translated into English by MacQueen (2005) and Máin (1998).
[14] On the onomastic confusion surrounding St Nynia, see Di Sciacca (2023b). I have here chosen to follow the earliest surviving source on the saint, that is Bede, who uses the form *Nynia* (Beda Venerabilis 1969: III.iv, 220-225).

such a sign wishes to demonstrate his own protection of the cave where the famous Michaeline shrine would eventually be established (Lagioia 2017: §2, 106-109). The latter episode concerns the Archangel's miraculous intervention in favour of the Christian Sepontians and Beneventans in their war against the pagan Neapolitans, leaving as a sign of his decisive presence some footprints impressed in the marble of the sanctuary[15].

In the *MNE* the two miraculous episodes of the *Apparitio* are creatively adapted and conflated in the tale of one of the miracles performed by St Nynia during his lifetime[16]. This miracle concerns a bull which effectively thwarts the plans of a gang of thieves attempting to steal St Nynia's herd: while a wondrous dizziness befalls the gang, their leader is killed by the charging bull (though he is subsequently revived by St Nynia), and the bull ultimately leaves its hoofmark on a rock as if in soft wax (Strecker 1923a: §viii, ll. 209-249, 952-953). The 12th-century prose *Vita S. Niniani* (henceforth *VSN*) by Ailred of Rielvaux (ca. 1110-1167)[17] also attests to the detail that from the bull's mark the place of the miraculous event would get the Old English name *Farres Last* '(lit.) bull's hoof-mark' (Aelredus Rievallensis 2017: §viii, l. 29, 125)[18], possibly a spot to be located at the confluence of the rivers Tarf and Bladnoch (MacQueen 2005[2]: 158-159).

Despite the lack of any reference to St Michael in the *MNE* and despite the obvious differences between the two narratives, it is nevertheless striking that in both the *Apparitio* and the *MNE* a recalcitrant bull is singled out from the rest of the herd and invested with some miraculous power, to become the instrument of the saint's chastisement of the respective villain (Garganus in the *Apparitio*, the thieves' leader in the *MNE*). Also, in both narratives, the miracle is ultimately validated by some prints left on a rock or stone. In the *Apparitio*, the prints are similar to human footprints impressed on the marble

[15] Lagioia (2017: §3, 109-112). Given the angelic nature of St Michael, his cult could not count on bodily relics, but on second-class relics, that is objects putatively touched or used by the Archangel (Ruggerini 2001: 35; Keck 1998: 183, 190-191).

[16] The *MNE* neatly distinguishes between the miracles performed during the saint's lifetime (§§v-viii) and the posthumous ones (§§x-xiii). The two sets of miracles are separated by the account of Nynia's passing (§ix), which is wondrous in its own right, as the saint is carried to heaven by angels in a blaze of glory, see Di Sciacca (2023c: 268-270).

[17] *BHL* 6239; Aelredus Rievallensis (2017). The most recent English translation features in Aelred of Rievaulx (2006).

[18] It is impossible to say whether Ailred preserves an otherwise unattested piece of information from earlier sources or, conversely, updates them with more recent additions (by his own contrivance?), see Di Sciacca (2023b: 230-249).

by the north door of the Garganic church as a tangible testimony of St Michael's presence:

> vident mane iuxta ianuam septemtrionalem, […] instar posterulae pusillae, quasi hominis vestigia marmori artius impressa, agnoscuntque beatum Michaelem hoc presentiae suae signum voluisse monstrare[19].

In the *MNE*, the prints are those left by the raging bull after he has attacked and killed the thieves' leader. Thus, through St Nynia's mediation, the bull accomplishes what is ultimately God's will and wondrously leaves the mark of its hooves on the hardest rock as a lasting testimony of the miracle.

> Et (mirum dictu) torvus vestigia taurus / Impremit ‹in› silici velut ‹in› mollissima cera, / Unguibus et teneris cessit firmissima cautes; / Omnia nam Christi poterit patrare creator, / In sanctis suis preclarus omnia patrat[20].

A distinctive detail featured in the *MNE* and unparalleled in the *Apparitio* concerns the imagery employed, that is the bull's hooves leave their marks on the hardest rock as if on the softest wax, with the simile of the wax and the antithesis of the two superlatives (*mollissima* / *firmissima*) effectively emphasising the extraordinary nature of the event. Now, the wax-simile referring to footprints apparently left by the Archangel on marble or stone can be said to be a veritable topos in the hagiographic tradition of St Michael in early medieval England. Indeed, the simile features in Blickling Homily xvi, a composite anonymous homily drawing on the *Apparitio*. Here, with an idiosyncratic variation and expansion of the Latin source-text, it is specified that the Archangel left on the marble-stone before the north-door of the church prints as if a man had stood there and such prints were plainly visible on the stone as if they were impressed on wax:

> Þa gemittan hie eac beforan ðære norðdura þære ciricean on þæm marmanstane swylce mannes swaðu, þon gelicost þe þær sum mon þa gestode; & þa fotlastas wæron swutole & gesyne on þæm stane, swa hie on wexe wæron aðyde[21].

[19] Lagioia (2017: 111, ll. 11-12; 112, ll. 1-2). "The next day they see next to the north entrance, […] similar to a tiny back door, the footprints of a man, as it were, firmly impressed in the marble, and they realise that blessed Michael had wished to show this sign of his presence" (translation by C.D.S.).

[20] Strecker (1923a: §viii, ll. 228-232, 952). "[A]nd (wonderful to relate) the wild bull had imprinted his hoof mark on the flint floor as if on the softest wax, and the hardest rock gave way before his tender hooves. For the Creator of Christ is able to bring all things to pass. Glorious in his saints he accomplishes everything" (MacQueen 2005: 94).

[21] Morris (1967: 203, l. 34-205, l. 1). "Then they also found before the north door of the church, in the marblestone, as it were, a man's footprints, just as if a man had stood there; and the foot-

The wax-simile also features in a hagiographic tale recounting the fight undertaken by St Michael in the guise of a bird[22] against a gigantic and fire-spitting dragon, which from its mountainous den had wreaked havoc on an entire population, until the Archangel killed it, splitting its carcass into twelve parts that were eventually disposed of into the sea[23]. This dragon-fight is attested, though not identically, in no fewer than nine witnesses, which "shows that the episode was considered particularly significant and familiar", especially in the Insular world (Ruggerini 2001: 24, n. 3). At least four of the surviving witnesses are English copies of the Carolingian homiletic collection known as the Homiliary of Saint-Père de Chartres (Cross 1987; Hall 2021: 85-136). In particular, the Michaeline dragon-fight was first edited and studied as part of item no. lv of the Pembroke Homiliary (Cross 1986), that is the copy of the Saint-Père Homiliary contained in ms Cambridge, Pembroke College 25, a late 11th- or early 12th-century English codex (Gneuss/Lapidge 2014: no. 131; Hall 2021: 87-88) representing "the fullest and most reliable guide to the original [Saint-Père] collection" out of its eleven surviving witnesses (*ibidem*: 85; Cross 1987: 45-90). Pembroke Homily lv is an anonymous Latin sermon for Michaelmas which is also attested in another three (later) English witnesses of the Saint-Père Homiliary[24]. The 'Pembroke-type' dragon fight is also attested as an independent narrative, the *Apparitio et victoria in Asia* (*BHL Suppl.* 5956b), uniquely attested in a mid-12th-century manuscript from St Stephen's, Caen (Normandy), now Vatican City, BAV, Reg. lat. 703B (*ff.* 100v-101r) (Ruggerini 2001: 26-27). The version of the dragon-fight attested in

prints were plain and visible in the stone, as if they were impressed on wax" (adapted from *ibidem*: 202). Ælfric's adaptation of the *Apparitio* (see above, n. 12) is closer to the Latin text and does not feature the wax simile. "Efne þa hi gesawon an lang portic on þam norðdæle. astreht fornean to þam marmanstane þe se engel on standende his fotlæste æteowde" (Clemoes 1997: 468, ll. 94-96); "Then they saw before the north door [of the church], on the marble stone, as if it were a man's footsteps, firmly impressed on the stone, and they then understood that the archangel Michael would manifest that token of his presence" (adapted from Thorpe 1844-1846: I, 507).

[22] On this distinctively Anglo-Irish iconographic tradition, see at least Ruggerini (2001: 38-43) and Di Sciacca (2022: 238-245).

[23] Ruggerini (2001: 57-58). For a contrastive reading of this dragon fight with the *Beowulf* dragon episode, see *ibidem* and Di Sciacca (2023a: 255-267).

[24] The other three witnesses are mss Cambridge, St John's College 42 (B. 20), *ff.* 13r-62v (*s.* xii, Worcester?); Oxford, Balliol College 240, *ff.* 56r-136r (*s.* xiv, England); and Lincoln, Cathedral Library 199 (C.3.3), *ff.* 213r-345r (*s.* xii^{med}-xii$^{3/4}$, England): see Hall (2021: 88-89 and 102), and Cross (1987: 1). The dragon episode of the Pembroke homily is also reprinted from Cross's edition with a facing-page English translation in Rauer (2000: 158-161); this dragon-fight is item Mi1 in Rauer's catalogue of hagiographic dragon fights: see *ibidem* ("Appendix B: Saints and Destructive Dragons": 174-193, esp. 184).

the four English witnesses of the Saint-Père Homiliary as well as in *Apparitio et victoria in Asia* has been labelled as F, standing for 'full version', by the most recent editor of the tale (*ibidem*: 23-24 and 57-58), as opposed to A, or 'abridged version', attested in two manuscripts, that is Paris, BnF, Lat. 2873 (*s.* x^{med}, Saint-Denis?) and the 12th-century Vatican City, BAV, Reg. lat. 542[25]. Despite differences in length and detail, in both F and A the bird-like Archangel leaves traces of his miraculous appearance by impressing his claws on a stone as if it were wax[26].

Besides the seven Latin witnesses, an Irish vernacular version (LB hom) is attested twice but with "no relevant variants" (*ibidem*: 24, n. 3) in items nos. xvi and xxxiii[27] of the early 15th-century miscellany *Leabhar Breac*[28]. Notably, however, in LB hom, St Michael leaves the marks of his fingers, rather than claws, and there is no wax simile[29]. Finally, it may be worth mentioning that the Pembroke-type dragon-fight was also included at the end of the St Michael homily in the early 15th-century English homiliary known as the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, making it the only other vernacular version of the tale besides LB hom (Weatherly 1936: 210-215; Johnson 2005: 68-70). In the *Speculum Sacerdotale* homily, St Michael leaves the marks of his claws on a stone as if this had been made of soft earth[30].

[25] The abridged version is printed from the Paris codex with two phrases supplied from the Vatican text in Ruggerini (2001: 58).

[26] Cf. F ("signa ungularum [Michaelis] in petra quasi cera mollissima apparent") and A ("Signa autem ungularum [Michaelis] in petra sicut in cera mollissima apparent expressa habentur") (*ibidem*: 58, l. 7 and 58, ll. 12-13). "The signs of Michael's claws are visible in the rock as if [they were in] the softest wax" and "[i]ndeed the signs of Michael's claws are visible in the rock as if they had been impressed in the softest wax" (translation by C.D.S.).

[27] Atkinson (1887: 213-219 with English trans. at 451-457; 240-244 with English trans. at 477-478); see also Lendinara (2023: 183-192). The two texts basically overlap, the only substantial difference being that the latter adds an unparalleled final section about Antichrist, see Atkinson (1887: 244, ll. 7268-7292, with English trans. at 477-478); this section, in turn, occurs as an independent item in the *Book of Lismore*, a late 15th-century Irish miscellany, see Ó Corráin (2017: no. 833, II, 1101-1104). The dragon-fight in Homily xvi has been itemised as Mi3 in Rauer's catalogue of hagiographic dragon-fights, see Rauer (2000: 184-185; cf. above, n. 24). On the Irish tradition of St Michael, see also Trotta (2012: 169-176).

[28] The *Leabhar Breac* or 'Speckled Book' is ms Dublin, Royal Irish Academy 23 P 16 (1230): see the relevant description and bibliography on the Royal Irish Academy website at <https://www.ria.ie/library/catalogues/special-collections/medieval-and-early-modern-manuscripts/leabhar-breac-speckled> (04.04.2024). See also Ó Corráin (2017: no. 190, I, 223-225, and no. 824, II, 1084-1088).

[29] Atkinson (1887: 218, l. 6353, with English trans. at 455). In LB hom, St Michael is also shaped as a bird, although this detail is not mentioned in the dragon-fight but later on in the narrative, i.e. at the consecration of the church (*ibidem*: 218, ll. 6351-6352, with English trans. at 455).

[30] Weatherly (1936: 215). An echo of the Insular tradition can also be detected in the Old Norse *Mikjáls saga*, where the archangel leaves two footsteps on stone as if on half-thawed snow (Unger 1877: I, 697, ll. 9-10); see also Ruggerini (2023: 417-419).

Despite some (minor) discrepancies, all the extant versions ultimately share what may be taken to be two distinctively Insular features, namely the Archangel's avian traits and his leaving an imprint, whether of his claws or fingers[31]. These two elements, added to the Insular origin of most of the surviving manuscript witnesses of the tale, has led to the conclusion that "the episode of St Michael and the dragon not only circulated in the [I]nsular area but, if it did not originate there, was at least reworked in an original way in the British Isles" (Ruggerini 2001: 38-39).

In particular, the Pembroke-type dragon-fight has been considered "a sort of '[I]nsular analogue'" (*ibidem*: 34) of the *Apparitio in Monte Tancia*[32]. This *Apparitio* pertains to a Michaeline cave sanctuary on Mount Tancia, in the Italian Sabine Mountains, and focuses on the miraculous defeat of a poisonous dragon that used to inhabit the mountain cave by two angels and the subsequent consecration of the same cave to the Archangel Michael by Pope Sylvester († 335)[33]. Notably, Sylvester is also responsible for the dedication of the Mount Garganus cave to St Michael – just one of the many narrative elements which the *Apparitio in Monte Tancia* derives from the Garganic one (Canella 2020: 114-115 and 2022: 57 and 90-91). The *Apparitio in Monte Tancia* has recently been traced to Farfa or one of its dependent monasteries in the late 10th century or beginning of the 11th (*ibidem*: 58-64 and 76-82), with the earliest manuscript witness (Canella's A) dating to the 12th century (Canella 2020: 92). However, the legend underlying it must be much earlier, and its origin could stretch back to the process of Christianization of a previous pagan cult sited in the cave in the 6th and 7th centuries[34].

[31] Another Insular analogue of wondrous imprints on stone as it were the softest wax is the account of the marks of Christ's knees on a Gethsemane rock in Adomnán's *De locis sanctis* (I.xii.4) (Getz 2008: 307-309). The cult of St Agatha, a Sicilian virgin martyr, includes the veneration of quite a few stones where the saint would have left the imprints of her feet, the most important one being the lava stone slab marking the threshold of the dungeon where Agatha was apparently locked up before her martyrdom and now incorporated in the church of St Agata 'al Carcere', in Catania, see Tempio (2003: 22). St Agatha was certainly known in Anglo-Saxon England and is the subject of one of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, see Whatley (2001a) and Morini (1993). On the motif of footprints in hagiographic literature, see further Powell (2013).

[32] *BHL Suppl.* 5947b-c. *Apparitio in Monte Tancia* is the *BHL* title, but the most recent editor has attributed the title *Revelatio Sancti Angeli de monte Tancia* (Canella 2020: 91-122).

[33] Sylvester was a dragon-slaying saint himself, see Rauer (2000: 189-191). On the association between St Sylvester and St Michael, see Canella (2020: 27-41 and 2022: 55-57 and 64-66).

[34] *Ibidem* (64-76) and Saggioro (2022). One narrative topos of the Michaeline hagiographic tradition is that the place eventually dedicated to the Archangel is Christianised and sanctified by means of some miraculous event, which often consists of Michael's confrontation with and defeat of an earlier pagan deity or supernatural monster, which the Archangel ultimately replaces (Ruggerini 2001: 32-38; Cardini 2022).

The circumstances of the arrival and adaptation of the Mount Tancia dragon-fight within the Insular context inevitably remain elusive. It has been suggested that the tale was first concocted in Ireland "before the tenth century" and eventually circulated in England and then on the Continent (Ruggerini 2001: 55), or that, whatever its origin, it "was demonstrably circulating" in England sometime between the early 9th century and the late 10th century (Rauer 2000: 123-124). At the current state of knowledge, however, I would argue, that the most plausible channel of diffusion of the Michaeline dragon episode in England can be afforded by the early 10th-century Breton exodus and the related importation into England of Breton devotional usages and hagiographic texts[35]. In particular, much of this Breton import consisted of dragon-fighting saints such as St Samson, whose legend has been shown to have "striking" and "extensive" parallels with the *Beowulf* dragon episode (Rauer 2000: 99-116, esp. 111 and 138).

The Pembroke-type dragon-fight certainly circulated in Northern France as one of its versions, the *Apparitio et Victoria in Asia*, is attested in a manuscript (Vatican Reg. Lat. 703B) written in Normandy in the mid-12th century (Ruggerini 2001: 26-27). Also, a retelling of our dragon-fight was included in the *Narratio de scuto et gladio quae uidentur in Monte Tumba* written by Baudri of Bourgueil (1045-1130), archbishop of Dol, Brittany, on the occasion of a visit he paid to Mont Saint-Michel in 1112[36]. Baudri's rewriting of the episode maintains the key feature of the splitting of the dragon's body (which is said to be *frustatim detruncatum*, 'cut into many pieces'), although no mention is made of the disposal of the carrion (Baldricus Burgulianus 2013a: §6.2, 31). A major difference from the Pembroke-type narrative concerns the signs of validation of the Archangel's intervention, which are no longer the claws (or fingers) imprint on a stone, but a little shield and sword allegedly employed by the Archangel during his wondrous fight against the dragon[37] – an innovation to be put down to the context of composition, as the two weapons were indeed part of the rich stock of relics of Mont Saint-Michel (Neveux 2003: 251).

[35] Lapidge (1989-1990 and 2000: 261-265) and Rauer (2000: 95-98). On the relationship between Brittany and England in general in the early Middle Ages, see Brett *et al.* (2023: chaps. 8 and 9).
[36] *BHL* 5953; Baldricus Burgulianus (2013a). In turn, Baudri's Latin prose text was versified in Old French by Guillaume de Saint-Pair around 1155 (Bougy 2009). Baudri was a hagiographer with some expertise in dragon fights, as he also authored a *Life of St Samson* (*BHL* 7486; Baldricus Burgulianus 2013b); see also Rauer (2000: 188-199) and Le Huërou (2002).
[37] Baldricus Burgulianus (2013a: §6.3-5, §7, 31 and 33). On the shield and sword as typical of the Michaeline iconography, see Kirschbaum (1971, s.v. *Michael Erzengel*, coll. 255-265) and Bertelli (2022). On the early English iconography in particular, see Johnson (2005: 140-148).

In sum, it can be argued that, whatever its ultimate origin, the narrative core of the Pembroke-type dragon-fight was elaborated in an area such as Northern France – both a veritable hub of hagiographic dragon-fights and the seat of a major centre of the Archangel's cult, Mont Saint-Michel (Bouet 2003; Le Boulc'h/Bouet 2022) – and eventually (re-)imported into the Insular world[38]. In England, in particular, the dragon tale acquired what seem like three distinctively English features, namely the number of pieces into which the dragon's carrion is split into, that is twelve (LB hom has nine) (Ruggerini 2001: 25); the fact that they are ultimately disposed of by being plunged into the sea (in LB hom they are burnt) (*ibidem*); and, last but not least, the imprint of the Archangel's claws on a stone as if the latter was of soft wax (in LB hom there is no wax simile).

Returning to the *MNE*, the above-quoted lines show that the wax-simile had already been adapted and adopted into a hagiographic motif in late 8th-century Northumbria, as the *MNE* have now been confidently dated to the 780s and associated with the 'York school' of Anglo-Latin poetry (Di Sciacca 2023b: 251-252). The latter is so-called because it was active in and around York between ca. 780 and ca. 820 and had Alcuin as its figurehead (Orchard 2020: 295-324). Indeed, Alcuin was the primary intended audience of the *MNE*, as they were sent to him, together with a twin poem, the *Hymnus S. Nynie Episcopi* (*HNE*)[39], on the Continent as a tribute to the now far-away master[40] or possibly also as a school exercise requiring his correction (Lapidge 1996: 24-25).

The origin and development of Nynia's hagiographic tradition has proved rather controversial, with different models of transmission being proposed, often implying multiple intervening texts between what we might call St Nynia's *Ur-uita* and the earliest extant documents on the saint, namely Bede's brief account in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Beda Venerabilis 1969: III.iv, 220-225), the *MNE*, and the *VSN* (Di Sciacca 2023b: 227-249). However, a synoptic reading of these three texts strongly suggests that they could ultimately be traced to the same base-text, namely a (lost) Anglo-Latin *uita* put together under or by Pehthelm, the first Northumbrian bishop of Whithorn (ca. 731-735) (Bateson 2004; Keynes 2014; Yorke 2010: 178), itself presumably derived from

[38] Cf. Ruggerini (2001: 38-39 and 55). The sparse and late vernacular attestations of the Pembroke-type dragon-fight in both Ireland and England, consisting of LB hom and the homily in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, might also support this line of argument, cf. Johnson (2005: 70 n. 100).
[39] *CPL* 2153; *BHL* 6240c; S-K 963; Strecker (1923b). Two English translations were both published in 1998 by Márkus (1998) and Wakeford (1998: 332-334).
[40] See the letter of thanks sent by Alcuin to the Whithorn community (Alcuinus 1895: no. 273, 431-432).

a (lost) British-Latin *uita* (Di Sciacca 2023b: 227-238). Of such a lost *uita* with the accompanying inventory of miracles – the whole lot most likely in prose –, the *MNE* explicitly provide just a selection[41] and in a succinct style (*tenui sermone*) (Strecker 1923a: §xiv, l. 453, 960). Such a selection was then versified in the *MNE* themselves, according to the tradition of the *opus geminatum*, which proved distinctively popular in pre-Conquest England, especially within the hagiographic genre (Godman 1981; Wieland 1981; Friesen 2011).

While miracles are altogether lacking from Bede's brief account of St Nynia[42], both the *MNE* and the *VSN* feature, amongst others, the miracle of the charging bull and its leaving the hoof-mark on a stone as if on soft wax. Thus, it can be suggested that this miracle was already included in the lost Anglo-Latin *uita* underlying both the *MNE* and the *VSN*, which, in turn, has tantalising implications for the dating of the arrival in England of what can reasonably be considered the ultimate source of this miraculous tale, namely the *Apparitio* or, at any rate, a version of it featuring the key episodes of the straying bull and of the Archangel leaving his marks on a stone or rock. That is the *Apparitio* must have reached England (or at least Northumbria) by the *terminus* represented by the *MNE*, i.e. ca. 780, or even earlier, as will be argued below.

Indeed, the evidence afforded by the *MNE* ties in with the earliest literary attestations of St Michael in pre-Conquest England, which point to early 8th-century Northumbria. Such attestations consist of the late 8th-century *Metrical Calendar of York* (see above, n. 10) and, more relevantly, the *Vita Wilfridi episcopi Eboracensis* (*BHL* 8889), "one of the most vivid biographies to survive from the early medieval west" (Thacker 2014: 496), authored likely within a decade of St Winfrid's death, i.e. 710×720, by Stephen of Ripon (Lapidge 2014b), at the behest of Tatberht, abbot of Ripon, and Acca, bishop of Hexham (Lapidge 2014a) – both Ripon and Hexham being two major Northumbrian foundations within Wilfrid's extended 'family' of monasteries (Bailey 2014a and 2014b). In the *Vita Wilfridi* St Michael is mentioned five times, especially in connection with his role

[41] "Ex quibus innumera scribendo linquere quondam / Predixi, obsequio sed sancti pauca relatu / Incipiam pandens cellaria pauperis horti" (Strecker 1923a: §xiv, ll. 465-467, 960). "I said before that I would omit innumerable of his acts in my writing, but I shall outline a few of them in my narrative out of reverence for the saint, setting forth the produce of a miserable garden" (MacQueen 2005: 100-101).

[42] Bede probably preferred to omit miraculous events which allegedly occurred in a remote past and therefore could hardly be verified (MacQueen 1991: 19-20). Notably, Bede also omitted all of Wilfrid's miracles and most of Cuthbert's (Laynesmith 2019: 211). On Bede's attitude to miracles, in general, see the recent reassessment by Ahern (2018).

as psychopomp for the dying saint (*§§lvi, lxii, lxiii, lxvi, and lxvii*)[43]. Around the same time, Bede († 735) apparently composed some verse for church dedications to Mary and Michael, which are, however, now lost (Lapidge 2019: 96-97 and 323). Also, Bede's own monastery, Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, demonstrably had direct contacts with Rome and southern Italy since its very foundation (Lapidge 2005). Together with Aldhelm, Bede is by far the author on whom both the *MNE* and *HNE* are most heavily dependent: while the *HNE* is closely modelled on Bede's hymn to St Æthelthryth (Beda Venerabilis 2019b; Di Sciacca 2023b: 255-256), the *MNE* show familiarity with his metrical *Vita S. Cudbercti* (Beda Venerabilis 2019a). It has also been suggested that the original *uita* of St Nynia was modelled on the *Vita Wilfridi* and that the input for putting it together could have come from a Wilfridian foundation such as Hexham, especially under the episcopate of Acca, a devoted follower of Wilfrid and his successor as bishop of Hexham after Wilfrid's death in 710, as well as a correspondent of Bede and a dedicatee of several of his exegetical works (Fraser 2002: 54-56). Besides commissioning the *Vita Wilfridi*, Acca built up a large library at Hexham, collecting passions of martyrs as well as other ecclesiastical books (Beda Venerabilis 1969: V.xx, 530-533; Lapidge 2005), and, last but definitely not least, Acca probably played a strategic role in the intricate politics of Northumbrian church in the first three decades of the 8th century (Stancliffe 2012). Against the backdrop of the competition between eligible new suffragan bishoprics of York and related saints' cults (*ibidem*: 31-39), Acca may have favoured Whithorn as an episcopal see with jurisdiction over the farthest west regions of his own see, Hexham, and with Nynia as a founding saint whose legend would be subtly concocted in order to bestow upon him the same orthodox and missionary pedigree as St Wilfrid's (Fraser 2002: 55-59 and 2009: 68-93).

Be that as it may, Northumbria of the first half of the 8th century seems to have been an area where hagiographic literature was eagerly fostered, both as devotional reading and as an effective means of promoting native saints and steering church politics. Thus, 8th-century Northumbrian monasticism would have provided a fitting milieu for the first reception of the *Apparitio* and for the creative adaptation of some of its most iconic episodes into hagiological motifs of the incipient native hagiographic production, such as the bull miracle

[43] Eddius Stephanus (1927: 120-123, 134-139, 142-147). In fact, in §lxvii Michael is not explicitly named, but reference is made to "the angel of the Lord", by which, however, Michael often came to be understood as the pre-incarnated Christ; see Prinzvalli/Simonetti (2012: 35-36 and 41); Daniélou (1977: 118-124); Barker (1992: 206-207).

with the wax-simile of the *MNE*. Indeed, this late 8th-century Anglo-Latin poem on an elusive British saint not only provides a *terminus ante quem* for the arrival of the Garganic *Apparitio* in England, thereby contributing significantly to the knowledge of St Michael's legend in the early Anglo-Saxon period. It also represents an exemplary case study of the intertextuality typical of the hagiographic genre, showing how from its very start, English hagiography developed at the intersection of derivation and innovation, syncretically combining received models and native elaborations (Lapidge 2013[2]). The re-deploying, re-purposing, and re-adapting of themes and imagery which are typical of hagiography turn full circle with the inclusion of the motif of the prints left on a stone as if on soft wax in the much later Pembroke-type dragon fight. Indeed, such a dragon-fight featuring St Michael obviously provided the perfect context for the incorporation of a motif demonstrably originated from a distinctively English adaptation of an iconic episode of the earliest and most paradigmatic Michaeline *Apparitio*[44].

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