Christ's Letter to Abgar in England and Ireland

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In the late eighth or early ninth century, three scribes writing in Western England copied a book of devotional texts now known as the *Royal Prayerbook*. The first scribe began by copying extracts from each of the gospels; when this was finished, they copied the text of the Lord's Prayer and the creed. Following these pieces, the second scribe entered another text, a letter claiming to have been written by Jesus himself, before continuing on to copy other prayers and devotional pieces. This essay considers this letter attributed to Christ, how it came to be included in this early medieval collection, and what it might have meant to readers in that period.

The earliest known version of this text, sometimes known as the Letter to Abgar or the *Epistola salvatoris*, is found in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, which was finished in the beginning of the fourth century. Eusebius relates the story of Abgar Ukkama ("the black"), who was the king of Edessa, modern day Urfa in eastern Turkey, during the life of Christ. According to Eusebius, Abgar was suffering from a terrible disease "beyond human power to heal," although Eusebius does not identify the ailment by name. When news of Jesus' healing miracles reached him, Abgar himself decided to write to the Galilean, inviting him to come to Edessa. The text of this letter is recorded by Eusebius:

> A copy of the letter written by Abgar the Toparch to Jesus and sent to him to Jerusalem by the courier Ananias.

> Abgar Ukkama, the Toparch, to Jesus the good Saviour who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greeting. I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs. For, as the story goes, you make the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, and you cleanse lepers, and cast out unclean spirits and demons, and you cure those who are tortured by long disease and you raise dead men. And when I heard all these things concerning you I decided that it is one of the two, either that you are God, and came down from heaven to do these things, or are a Son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to hasten to me and to heal the suffering which I have. Moreover I heard that the Jews are mocking you, and wish to ill-treat you. Now I have a city very small and venerable which is enough for both.[1]

Reputedly, Jesus received this letter and sent his own reply, which is also included in Eusebius's account:

> The reply from Jesus to Abgar, the Toparch, by the courier Ananias.
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> Blessed are you who believed in me not having seen me, for it is written concerning me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen me will believe and live. Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all for which I was sent, and after

[1] For the Greek text of both letters, see Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, translated Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), I.13. Translations from this text are Lake's, slightly modernized.

> thus completing it be taken up to him who sent me, and when I have been taken up, I will send to you one of my disciples to heal your suffering, and give life to you and those with you.

Eusebius claims to have seen these letters himself in Edessa and that the text of the letters, which he provides in Greek, is a "word by word" (αὐτοῖς ῥήμασιν) translation made himself from the Syriac originals.[2] Following this account of the letters, he provides a narrative of Abgar's healing by Thaddaeus, whom Eusebius considered to be one of the seventy disciples mentioned in Luke's gospel, and of his preaching to the citizens of Edessa.[3] Eusebius claims that this account as well has been translated from a Syriac text that he found alongside the letters.

This pair of letters was officially declared apocryphal by the Gelasian decree at the end of the fifth century.[4] Even earlier, both Augustine and Jerome denied the existence of any letter by Christ, on the grounds that if such an epistle were genuine it would have been known widely in the church from the earliest times.[5] The authenticity of

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[2] Eusebius relates that he found the texts of these letters in the city archives: "There is also documentary evidence of these things taken from the archives at Edessa which was at that time a capital city. At least, in the public documents there, which contain the things done in antiquity and at the time of Abgar, these things too are found preserved from that time to this".

[3] For a discussion of the identity of "Thaddeus", see J. B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed* City' (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2005), 64–66.

[4] *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, ed. Ernst von Dobschütz (J. C. Hinrichs: Leipzig, 1912), p. 13.

[5] Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 28.4: "For, if some writing were produced that was said to be the personal writing of Christ, with no other narrator, how could it have happened that, if it were really his, it is not read,

the letters provided by Eusebius is also compromised by their direct allusion to passages in John's gospel, a text dating from after the life of Christ. These judgements on their authenticity, however, did not stop these works from being extremely popular, especially in the East but also in the West during the Middle Ages.

It seems very likely that Eusebius did rely on a Syriac source for his text of the letters, as a copy of these letters occurs in the Syriac text known as the *Doctrina Addai* or Teaching of Addai. This text in its present form is thought to date from the fifth century. However, it appears to have relied on an earlier Syriac source independent from Eusebius's *History*, which may well have been the original text also used by Eusebius.[6] A second and independent account of these letters from the fourth century exists in the *Itinerarium Egeriae*. Egeria, generally thought to be a woman of Gaulish or Spanish origin, travelled to the Eastern Mediterranean between 381 and 384.[7] As part of this trip she visited the city of Edessa. According to Egeria's account, when she arrived she was

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not accepted, and not held in the highest authority in his Church […]?" (trans. Roland S. J. Teske, *Answer to Faustus, A Manichean*, Works of Saint Augustine 20 (New York: New York City Press, 2007), p. 396); see also Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel*, ed. Francisci Glorie, CCSL 75 (Tournhout: Brepols, 1964), 44: 29–30.

[6] Sebastian P. Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity" in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. H. W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 212–34, at 213.

[7] For a bilingual edition of this text, see *Egeria, Journey to the Holy Land*, ed. and trans. P. F. Bradshaw (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021). Egeria is described in the seventh century as a "native of Ocean's western shore", so it is thought that she must have lived on the Atlantic coast, but a more precise location is still a matter of debate (John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, revised edition (Jerusalem: Ariel Publishing House, 1981), 177).

provided a tour of the city by the bishop, who also related to her the story of the correspondence between Christ and Abgar. The bishop's account included details of the protective power bestowed by letter for the city of Edessa and its proven efficacy during an attempted attack by the Persians. "This letter," he says, "has been brought out and read at the gate, and immediately by the will of God all enemies have been driven back."[8] Most interestingly, when the bishop gifts Egeria copies of these letters to take back with her as a souvenir, Egeria adds the comment that she already had copies of these letters at home but that this new version was "fuller."[9] This statement strongly suggests that by the end of the fourth century, versions of these letters had already begun to circulate in the West in some form. In the early fifth century, however, Rufinus's translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* provided the standard Latin translation of the letters.

The Letter in the Royal Prayerbook

[8] ,*Egeria*, ch.19:13 (trans. Bradshaw): *haec epistola prolata est et lecta est in porta, et statim nutu Dei expulsi sunt omnes hostes*. The idea that the letters would provide protection for the city is not mentioned in Eusebius's account, but does have a parallel in the final sentence of Christ's Letter to Abgar as recorded in the *Doctrina Addai*.

[9] *Et licet in patria exemplaria ipsarum haberem, tamen gratius mihi uisum est, ut et ibi eas de ipso acciperem, ne quid forsitan minus ad nos in patria peruenisset; nam uere amplius est, quod hic accepi*. "And although I had copies of them at home, yet it seemed more gratifying to me that I should also receive them there from him, lest perhaps something less had reached us at home; for what I received here is indeed fuller." *Egeria*, ch.19:19 (trans. Bradshaw).

The earliest record of any version of these letters from the British Isles is found in British Library MS Royal 2.A.xx. This manuscript, generally referred to as the *Royal Prayerbook*, is one of four interrelated collections known together as the early Insular Prayerbooks; this group also includes the *Book of Cerne*, the *Book of Nunnaminster*, and the (fragmentary) *Harleian Prayerbook*. All four of these collections date from the late eighth to the early ninth century; it is generally thought that these texts were created primarily for the purpose of private devotion. The three complete collections all begin with extracts from the gospels which are then followed by prayers and other material.[10]

Although some content is shared between one or more collections in this group, the *Royal Prayerbook* is the only one to contain any part of the Abgar correspondence. The text found in the prayerbook begins with an incipit on folio 12 recto, followed by the main text on the verso. These read:

> Incipit epistola salvatoris Domini nostri iehsu xpisti ad abgarum regem quam dominus manu scripsit et dixit.

[10] For a general background on these collections, see Michelle P. Brown, *The Book of Cerne: prayer, patronage and power in ninth-century England* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and literature in western England: 600–800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michelle P. Brown, "Mercian manuscripts? The 'Tiberius' group and its historical context," in Michelle P. Brown and Carol Farr (eds), *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2001), 281–91; Barbara Raw, "Anglo-Saxon prayerbooks," in Richard Gameson (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the book: volume 1: c. 400–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 460–67.

Beatus es qui me non uidisti et credisti in me; scriptum est enim de me quia hi qui uident me non credent in me et qui me non uident ipsi in me credent et uiuent. De eo autem quod scripsisti mihi ut uenirem ad te oportet me omnia propter quae misus sum hic explere; et postea quam conpleuero recipe me ad eum a quo misus sum. Cum ergo fuero adsumtus mittam tibi aliquem ex discipulis meis ut curet egritudinem tuam et uitam tibi at his qui tecum sunt praestet et saluus eris. Sicut scriptum qui credit in me saluus erit.[11]

[Here begins the letter of the Savior, our Lord, Jesus Christ to King Abgar, which the Lord wrote with [his] hand and said./ Blessed are you who did not see me and believed in me. Truly it is written concerning me that those who see me do not believe me and they who do not see, the very ones, will believe in me and will live. Concerning that, however, which you wrote to me, that I come to you, it is necessary for me to fulfill everything for which I was sent here, and afterwards, when I will have completed it to be taken to him by whom I was sent. When therefore I have been taken, I will send to you someone from my disciples in order that he may cure your illness and give life to you and those who are with you, and you will be saved. Thus it is written: who believes in me, will be saved.]

The text of the letter is followed by a rubric on the letter's use. This is marked as separate from the letter proper by a three medial commas and a coloured initial. This reads:

[11] The incipit is written in a separate hand from the main text of the Letter, with no decoration marking its first letter. The text of the Letter and its rubric occurs on folia 12v–13r. Expansions have been rendered silently and punctuation has been normalized throughout this chapter.

> Siue in domu tua siue in ciuitate tua siue in omni loco nemo inimicorum tuorum dominabitur et insidias diabuli ne timeas et carmina inimicorum tuorum distruuntur; et omnes inimici tui expellentur a te siue a grandine siue a tonitrua non noceberis et ab omni periculo liberaueris, siue in mare siue in terra siue in die siue in nocte siue in locis obscuris. Si quis hanc epistolam secum habuerit securis ambulet in pace. Amen.
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> [Be it in your house, be it in your city, be it in any place, none of your enemies will have dominion, and the plots of the devil you will not fear, and the charms of your enemies will be broken, and all of your enemies will be driven away from you; you will not be harmed be it by hail, be it by thunder and you will be free from all danger, be it on the sea, be it on the earth, be it in the day, be it in the night, be it in dark places, if you have this letter with you, you will walk safely in peace. Amen.]

What is initially striking about the appearance of the letter within the *Royal Prayerbook* is that the reply from Christ occurs alone, without the text of Abgar's letter or any reference to details of the legend. This suggests that this text was expected to be familiar to the users of this prayerbook. The location of this "letter of our Savior" within the collection suggests a belief in its legitimacy and prominence as the words of Jesus. As mentioned above, the letter comes very close to the beginning of the prayer portion of the collection, where it occurs as the third text, following only the Pater Noster and the Creed.[12]

[12] The first line of the Letter has been glossed in Old English.

The majority of the text in this letter follows extremely closely the Latin version of the letter found in Rufinus's translation of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Only two sections of the text differ notably from this version, the first and final lines. The first line of Rufinus's text reads: "Beatus es, qui credidisti in me, cum me ipse non videris" [you are blessed who believed in me, since you have not seen me].[13] As seen above, the Royal letter reads instead: "Beatus es qui me non uidisti et credisti in me" [blessed are you who did not see and believed in me]. While the source for Royal's letter seems to be ultimately Rufinus's translation, I would suggest that this particular sentence has been reshaped to further emphasize its relationship with John 20:29: "Dicit ei Iesus 'Quia vidisti me, Thoma, credidisti; beati qui non viderunt et crediderunt'" [Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen me Thomas, you have believed; blessed are they that have not seen and have believed"].[14] While both Eusebius's Greek text and Rufinus's Latin echo this verse, the Royal version makes the relationship with the gospel text more explicit, as it maintains the order of the verbs found in both clauses of the biblical text, and keeps

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[13] The full text of the Letter in Rufinus's translation can be found in *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 2, ed. Theodor Mommsen (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902), I 13, p. 89.

The differences between the Royal text and Rufinus have been remarked upon by Christopher M. Cain, "Sacred Words, Anglo-Saxon Piety, and the Origins of the Epistola salvatoris in Royal 2.A.xx," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009), 168–89, at 177; discussion of Cain's conclusions will follow below.

[14] Edgar Swift with Angela M. Kinney (ed.), *The Vulgate Bible*, 6 vols, VI (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), John 20:29 [translation modernized]. The Vulgate reading is given above but these same verbs in the same tense are almost always used in Vetus Latina versions of this verse; see "Vetus Latina Iohannes Electronic Edition 2.0," *Vetus Latina Iohannes: The Verbum Project*, ed. Philip H. Burton et al (2015) < http://www.iohannes.com>.

them both in the perfect tense, the same tense used in the first half of the gospel verse. The second departure from the standard text as preserved by Rufinus is that two additional clauses have been added to the end of the letter, reading "et saluus erit. Sicut scriptum qui credit in me saluus erit" [and you will be saved. Thus it is written: who believes in me, will be saved]; this addition also seems to be inspired by the gospels, perhaps particularly Mark 16:16a, "Qui crediderit et baptizatus fuerit salvus erit" [he who believes and is baptized shall be saved].[15] I would suggest that these variations show a subtle adaptation of the text of the Letter to further emphasize its connection to the words of Christ in the gospels and thus perhaps underline its authenticity as Christ's speech.

The final additional clause of the letter found in the *Royal Prayerbook* also serves to accentuate a healing dimension of the text. While *salvus* in the Vulgate is normally rendered "saved," this word also can also be used to refer to physical health. In the context of King Abgar's request for physical healing, it would be easy to understand this line as "thus it is written, whoever believes in me will be healed." The idea of the healing of physical maladies is not emphasized in particular in the rubric following Royal's letter, which covers a variety of events but seems focused especially on dangers associated with travel; one can perhaps see in this a tradition of devotional books or pamphlets serving as portable travel aids to piety—Royal itself is quite small manuscript, although there is no known evidence of it functioning as a vademecum. More generally, however, the *Royal Prayerbook* has frequently been perceived as being preoccupied with health and

[15] Swift and Kinney, *The Vulgate Bible*, Mark 16:16a [translation modernised].

protection against illness.[16] Many of the gospel extracts included at the beginning of the collection focus on Christ's healing miracles, and the collection also contains a variety of short texts aimed at staunching a flow of blood.[17] This understanding of the letter as a healing text may also be indicated by the texts immediately following in the collection, a series of three petitions under the title *Oratio*. Sims-Williams has suggested that at least two of these petitions have been adapted from liturgical prayers from the visitation of the sick.[18] This personalised reading of the Letter differs notably from Eastern traditions which more frequently emphasize the Letter's protection of the city of Edessa.[19]

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[16] This stress has led to the suggestion that this collection may have been originally compiled for the use of a physician; I am not yet persuaded that there is evidence to support this view but a more general concern with spiritual and physical health is widely accepted: Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, 152; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 285. For the specific suggestion that this book belonged to a female physician, see Michelle Brown, "Female Book-Ownership and Production in Anglo-Saxon England: the Evidence of the Ninth-century Prayerbooks" in *Lexis and Texts in Early English: Papers in Honour of Jane Roberts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 45–68, at 57.

[17] For a discussion of these texts, see Emily Kesling, "The *Royal Prayerbook*'s Blood-Staunching Charms and Early Insular Scribal Communities," *Early Medieval Europe* 29 (2021), 181–200; Emily Kesling, "A Blood-Staunching Charm of Royal 2.A.xx and its Greek Text," *Peritia* 32 [forthcoming].

[18] Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 296

[19] Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Abgar Legend," *New Testament Apocrypha, volume one: Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, revised edition (Westminster John Knox: London, 2003), 493; Segal, *Edessa* "*The Blessed* City," 74–75.

In a recent article, Christopher Cain suggested that the Letter of Christ to Abgar found in Royal 2.A.xx came originally from the milieu of Theodore of Tarsus in Canterbury. This argument was inspired in part by the differences between the text of the letter in the Royal manuscript and those found in Rufinus's translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. Cain saw these differences as signifying some distance between Royal's letter and Rufinus's translation; he suggests that the Royal text could be considered a distinct textual tradition of the letter, independent of any direct knowledge of Rufinus' text. He saw Theodore, sixth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, who spoke Greek and possibly also Syriac, and who had travelled in the East and may have visited Edessa itself, as a potential conduit for the version of the letter found in the Royal manuscript. In keeping with this, he suggests that the rubric following the text can be understood as part of an "Eastern tradition of the Letter's protective powers".[20]

There are good reasons for assuming that some of the material found in the early Insular Prayerbooks derived from the intellectual milieu fostered by Theodore and Hadrian in Canterbury. Two other texts in Royal, a litany occurring on folio 26r-v and the Old Roman creed on folio 12r, likely derive from this milieu.[21] It has also been suggested that three hymns found in the *Book of Cerne* were written by Theodore himself, or by someone else familiar with Greek verse.[22] Nevertheless, these prayer collections bring

[20] Cain, "Sacred Words, Anglo-Saxon Piety," p. 189.

[21] Michael Lapidge (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints* (London: Henry Bradshaw, 1991), 13–25.

[22] For discussion of these pieces, as well as an English translation, see Michael Lapidge, "Theodore and Anglo-Latin Octosyllabic Verse" reprinted in his *Anglo-Latin Literature 600-899* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 225–46.

together material from diverse origins, including texts originating in Northumbria, Wales, Ireland, and other locations. In the case of the Abgar correspondence, I do not believe that there is adequate evidence to support the view that these texts were transmitted via Canterbury. In my view, the differences (noted above) from the standard text of the Letter found in Rufinus are not significant enough to require any Eastern source, whether in Greek or Syriac, but instead suggest a monastic readership familiar with the Latin Vulgate.

While I have been unable to identify any Greek copy of the Letter to Abgar that provides any meaningful correspondence to the text found in Royal 2.A.xx, there are three extant Latin versions that offer significant parallels, all of which are found in manuscripts from the British Isles.[23] These are the copy found in British Library MS

[23] Warner and Gilson suggest that the Royal text "can be connected to the Greek text printed by Lipsius and Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorium Apocrypha*, 1891" (George F. Warner and Julius P. Gilson, *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Old Royal and King's Collections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921, I, pp. 33–34). However, the text found in Lipsius and Bonnet bears no notable relationship with Royal; it is instead the *Epistula Abgari*, the title given to a lengthened version of the correspondence found in Vienna MS Vindobonensis bybl. Caesar theol. gr. 315 (s. xii) and New York, Pierpont Morgan MS 499 (s. xiv). For a translation of the Pierpont Morgan version of this text and a discussion of this textual tradition, see Mark Goscin, *The Tradition of the Image of Edessa* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 79–106. Interestingly, the Syriac version of the Letter by Christ found in the *Doctrina Addai*, also inverts the order of the verbs found in the first line of the Greek text, reading "blessed are you who, not having seen me, have believed in me." However, this is likely to be a coincidence, perhaps independently influenced by the gospel text. For an English translation of portions of this text, including the correspondence between Christ and Abgar, alongside Eusebius's text, see Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," 215–21, quoted above at 216. The most recent edition of the Syriac text is found in Alain

Cotton Galba A.xiv, sometimes known as the *Galba Prayerbook*, and the versions found in the two extant copies of the Irish *Liber Hymnorum*. The texts found in these manuscripts share close textual similarities to the version of the letter found in the *Royal Prayerbook* and in each case the letter from Christ appears alone, rather than as a pair with Abgar's letter. None of these manuscripts provide direct parallels to the rubric that follows Christ's letter in Royal, however.

The closest correspondence to the Royal letter is the version found in Galba A.xiv, a manuscript copied in the first half of the eleventh century. The prayerbook was severely damaged during the Cotton fire of 1731, rendering some of its text illegible. Several different centres have been suggested by scholars for the prayerbook. It has been most commonly associated with Nunnaminster abbey in Winchester, but other centres have also been suggested. Most recently, Julia Crick has argued that we might look instead to Western England and the area of Worchester for its origin.[24] Beyond the Letter to Abgar, the *Galba Prayerbook* shares several texts with members of the early Insular Prayerbooks.[25] These early prayer collections seem to have had a direct influence on *Galba*, as the later prayerbook also shares palaeographic features with these earlier works; it has been noted in particular that several distinctive letter forms are shared

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Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus: présentation et trad. du texte syriaque intégral de "La doctrine d'Addaï* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993).

[24] Julia Crick, "An Eleventh-Century Prayer-Book for Women? The Origins and History of the Galba Prayer-Book" in *Writing, Kingship and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Rory Naismith and David Woodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 281–302, at 296.

[25] Muir lists nine texts that are shared between these collections (including the Letter to Abgar): Bernard Muir, *A Pre-Conquest English Prayer Book* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1988), xxvii–xxx.

between Galba and Royal.[26] The copy of the Letter to Abgar found in Galba begins, like Royal, "Beatus es qui non uidisti et credidisti in me" rather than the standard first line found in Rufinus.[27] This text also contains the final additional clause present at the end of the letter in the Royal manuscript and is introduced by an incipit closely mirroring that found in Royal. [28] I would suggest that the version of Christ's Letter found in Galba A.xiv was either copied from Royal itself or from another closely-related but no longer extant Insular prayer compilation.

Much of the discussion related to the *Galba Prayerbook* has focused on its possible origin in a female monastic house. Four prayers in the collection contain feminine endings, with another having feminine endings added interlinearly above masculine endings. The meaning of this evidence has been the subject of debate, with Neil Ker proposing that the book was written first for men and only later adapted for a female audience.[29] However, Crick has recently argued that there was no time lapse in the production of the collection and that the original parts of the compilation were produced at "a single centre within a single biological generation."[30] If these conclusions are correct, it seems extremely likely that the manuscript was created either in a monastic

[26] For a discussion of these features, see Crick, "An Eleventh-Century Prayer-Book for Women?," 287.

[27] British Library, Galba MS A.xiv, f. 27v. A printed edition of this text is available in Muir, *A Pre-Conquest English Prayer Book*.

[28] The incipit in Galba differs only with the insertion of the reflexive adjective *sua*: "Incipit epistola salvatoris domini nostri iehsu xpisti ad abgarum regem quam dominus manu sua scripsit et dixit".

[29] N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), 201. A detailed overview of this question in available in Crick, "An Eleventh-Century Prayer-Book for Women?".

[30] Crick, "An Eleventh-Century Prayer-Book for Women?," 289.

community of women or one closely associated with a female community or congregation. Such an environment provides another parallel with the earlier Insular Prayerbooks, three of which have been associated with a female audience or readership, including the *Royal Prayerbook*.[31] The appearance of closely related versions of the Letter of Abgar within these two prayer collections may then indicate that this text was important devotionally in female monastic communities.

While the text of the Letter found in Cotton Galba A.xiv appears to be a textual descendent of the version found in the *Royal Prayerbook*, the relationship between Royal's text and the other related versions, those found in the Irish *Liber Hymnorum*, is less clear. The compilation of prayers known as the Irish *Liber Hymnorum* exists in two manuscripts, Trinity College Dublin MS 1441 and University College Dublin Franciscan MS A2. While the two manuscripts are closely related, they differ slightly in their contents and include variant readings sometimes within individual texts. TCD 1441 is generally thought to be the earlier of the two manuscripts, with both dating probably to the eleventh century and the Franciscan manuscript to the late eleventh.[32] This collection shares a variety of content with the early Insular Prayerbooks, and among these is the

[31] See Brown, "Female Book-Ownership"; Raw, "Anglo-Saxon prayerbooks." In the case of the *Royal Prayerbook*, this idea is due to the presence of five short texts aimed at staunching a flow of blood, three of which reference Veronica, the name given in apocryphal texts to the bleeding woman of the gospels. It is generally thought that these texts all relate to uterine bleeding and thus indicate that collection was used by women, as there are no entries related to other physical conditions in the collection. For a discussion of these texts, see Kesling, "The *Royal Prayerbook*'s Blood-Staunching Charms."

[32] Ludwig Bieler, "The Irish Book of Hymns: A Palaeographical Study," *Scriptorium* 2 (1948), 177–94, at 177. The Franciscan manuscript is the shorter of the two collections.

Letter to Abgar.[33] As in the case of Cotton Galba A.xiv, the letters found in the *Hymnorum* manuscripts are close variants of the Royal letter. Both manuscripts contain the same reading of the first line found in Royal: "Beatus es qui me non uidisti et credidisti in me." The Franciscan manuscript furthermore contains the final clause: "Sicut scriptum qui credit in me saluus erit."[34] There are other Irish versions of the Letter to Abgar, but no other shares these distinctive readings.[35]

In his argument for looking towards Canterbury, Cain suggested that the Irish tradition of the Letter to Abgar– including the versions within the *Liber Hymnorum*—was fundamentally liturgical, as opposed to the private devotional context of the Letter within Royal.[36] However, I would suggest that the distinction made by Cain risks oversimplifying the nature of the prayer collections at hand. The Letter to Abgar does seem to have served as a lection in some forms of the monastic office in Irish circles.[37]

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[33] The *Liber Hymnorum* shares three texts with the *Book of Cerne*, two with the *Book of Nunnaminster*, one with the (fragmentary) *Harleian Prayerbook*. Additionally, a number of other essential liturgical prayers are shared between *Royal Prayerbook* and *Liber Hymnorum.* While these prayers are widespread throughout the broader Christian tradition, it would be worth examining whether there is any more specific relationship between the text of these prayers found within the two collections.

[34] The Trinity College Dublin manuscript also spells *missus*, which occurs twice in the letter, with a single s; this is the spelling used in the main text of Royal, although a different hand has later corrected this.

[35] Considine lists the known Irish versions of the Letter and provides editions of several texts including that found in the *Leabhar Breac*: Patrick Considine, "Irish Versions of the Abgar Legend," *Celtica* 10 (1973), 237–57.

[36] Cain does not provide the text of the *Liber Hymnorum*'s Letters.

[37] The Letter to Abgar is listed in what seems to be an order of service for a special office written in an Irish hand in the ninth-century Basel Psalter (Basel MS A. vii. 3). The prayer to St John, which occurs

However, while it is clear that many of the texts found within the *Liber Hymnorum* had some sort of liturgical use in the early Middle Ages, the *Liber Hymnorum* itself does not have any clear liturgical function.[38] Similarly, while it is generally thought that the early Insular Prayerbooks were compiled for private devotional use, they contain prayers also used in liturgical rites. This liturgical aspect is particularly pronounced in the *Royal Prayerbook*, which contains the *Pater noster*, the Apostle's creed, several canticles, and the gloria, as well as gospel readings sometimes used as lections.[39] It thus would not be out of keeping with the contents of Royal if the text of the Letter to Abgar included therein originated in a liturgical context; such an origin may perhaps even be signaled by its position immediately following the *Pater noster* and the Creed.

In both copies of the *Liber Hymnorum*, the Letter to Abgar is followed by a series of three petitions. These read:

Domine domine defende nos a malis et custodi nos in bonis ut simus filii tui hic et

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immediately preceding the Letter in the *Liber Hymnorum* is also included in this list. See Bernard's discussion, *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, pp. xxi–xxxi.

[38]Máire Herbert has suggested that the prayers collected in the *Hymnorum* required informative prefaces because they were long out of use when the collection was created: "Crossing Historical and Literary Boundaries: Irish Written Culture Around the Year 1000," in *Crossing Boundaries:Croesi Ffiniau*, ed. Patrick Sims-Williams and Gruffydd Aled Williams CMCS 53/54 (2007), 87–101, at 90. Similarly, Michael Clarke remarks that "the scholarly apparatus of our *Liber Hymnorum* manuscripts makes it hard to see them as service-books: in plan and in presentation, the compilation was clearly designed for the study of a literary canon, not for saving one's soul": "The Irish *Liber Hymnorum*: A Bilingual Anthology of Sacred Verse," [forthcoming]

[39] For discussion of this, see Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, 152.

in futuro, amen./ Saluator omnium Christe respice in nos Iesu, et miserere nobis. /Euangelium domini nostri Iesu Christi liberet nos protegat nos custodiat nos defendat nos ab omni malo ab omni periculo ab omni langore ab omni dolore ab omni plaga ab omni inuidia ab omnibus insidiis diabuli et malorum hominum hic et in futuro, amen

[O Lord, Lord, defend us from evils and protect us in goodness that we will be your sons here and in the future, amen. O Christ, savior of all, keep watch over us, O Jesus, and have mercy on us. May the gospel (*euangelium*) of our Lord Jesus Christ free us, protect us, watch over us, defend us from every evil, from every danger, from every weakness, from every pain, from every misfortune, from all ill will, from all plots of the devil and evil men here and in the future, amen.][40]

These prayers could perhaps be compared to the series of three short petitionary prayers that follows the Letter and rubric in the Royal manuscript.[41] Unlike the *Liber Hymnorum*'s texts, which are in the plural, these three texts are all in the singular, perhaps indicating a more private or personal use.[42] As is noted by Cain, the third of the

[40] TCD 1441, f. 15r (text from *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, p. 94; translation mine).

[41] f. 13r–v. These are titled simply *oratio* within the manuscript. A text and translation of these texts can be found in Sims-Wiliams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 296.

[42] Sims-Williams has observed that the second and third of these petitions are drawn from the liturgical rites for the visitation of the sick, and notes that the second seems to have been purposefully altered to use first person pronouns: Sims-Wiliams, *Religion and Literature*, 296..

petitions in the *Hymnorum* also shares some points of similarity to the rubric for the letter found in Royal. There is no direct overlap between these pieces but both share an enumerative quality—attempting to protect their user against a wide array of potential dangers, both physical and spiritual. In the Royal rubric, this protection comes as result of carrying the letter with you, while in the *Hymnorum* text this protection is conferred by the *evangelium*, a word that can convey both the spiritual truth of Christ's victory as well as the physical book containing the four gospels. While not being exclusive to a single tradition, extended enumeration is a feature often seen in Hiberno-Latin compositions. This trait can be seen for instance in the *lorica* prayers, which have frequent enumerative passages and often list in detail parts of the body and dangers against which the user needs to be protected.[43] Examples of this Irish style of prayer can be seen in the *Liber Hymnorum* but also in the early Insular Prayerbooks, clearly demonstrating that this style of prayer was familiar both to the compilers of these collections and to the early medieval authors responsible for many of the hymns included.[44] It seems likely that both the rubric

[43] *Lorica* is the Latin term for breastplate used in Ephesians 6:17. Godel defines a *lorica* thus: "litany form of prayer, usually fairly long, in a Latin or Celtic language, in which earnest expressions are used to invoke the protection of the three Divine Persons, the angels and the saints, in times of material or spiritual danger. The dangers are minutely detailed, mentioning various organs of the body for which protection is specifically asked. The petitioner asks God or the saints to shield him as a defensive wall against all hostile attack: hence the name *lorica* ('breastplate')": W. Godel, "Irish Prayer in the Early Middle Ages," Milltown Studies 4 (1979), 60–99, at vol. 5, p. 85.

[44] Both the *Book of Cerne* and the *Book of Nunnaminster* contain the *Lorica of Laidcenn*. In the *Book of Cerne* the text has been glossed in Old English. The Trinity College Dublin manuscript of the *Liber Hymnorum* contains another famous Irish-language *lorica* known as *St Patrick's Breastplate*.

accompanying Royal's text and the third petition following the Letter in the *Liber Hymnorum* may have arisen in an intellectual milieu influenced by this style of prayer.

Conclusions

The incipit found in the Royal 2.A.xx introduces its copy of the Letter to Abgar as a text which *dominus manu scripsit et dixit* ('the Lord wrote with his hand and said'). This heading emphasizes the Letter as the result of a physical act: it was made with the Lord's hand—the Galba manuscript's text even adds the reflexive pronoun, *sua manu* ("his own hand"). Yet while this Letter is the work of the Lord's hand, it is also his speech. This fact would have been underscored for its readers by its clear relationship to Jesus' words in the gospels. The version of the text found within the *Royal Prayerbook* subtly alters the first phrases of the Letter to make its relationship to John 20:29 even more explicit and adds as a conclusion the promise made by Christ in Mark 16:16 "he who believes in me will be saved." These subtle changes work to transform the text of Rufinus's letter into an echo of Christ's own words in the gospel texts.

Exactly what type of milieu produced the text first recorded in Royal is unknown. The pronounced focus on the gospel text may suggest it originated within a monastic community, perhaps as a lection used in the divine office. The occurrence of the Letter in Royal and Galba, alone, without reference to Eusebius or the text of Abgar's letter, suggests an audience already familiar with the tradition associated with the text; this presentation also suggests that within these collections it was valued primarily as a

prayer, or meditation, rather than for any historical purpose.[45] All direct parallels to this text originate within the British Isles, so I would suggest that it is to that region, rather than to the East, to which we should turn for its origin. While this text could surely have arisen in an early English monastic community, evidence for the use of this Letter as a lection in the early Irish church may suggest that it is more likely to be ultimately of Irish origin, as is a variety of other content included within the early Insular Prayerbooks. Ireland may also be the origin for the rubric found following the text in Royal, even if no Irish versions are extant.

Wherever this version of the text may have originated, it is clear that in the eighth to eleventh centuries the Letter of Christ to Abgar was used as a private devotional prayer in England. It is possible that it was particularly popular among women's communities, as both extant copies exist in manuscripts showing signs of being designed for female use. For these readers, a Late Antique composition from Edessa that was translated from Syriac into Greek by Eusebius and from Greek into Latin by Rufinus had become the words of Christ.

[45] The presentation within these manuscripts differs from the *Liber Hymnorum*, where the text is prefaced by introductory material in Irish and Latin, which provides a historical background to the text; a practice also used in presenting the other prayers in that collection. This perhaps demonstrates a shift in the understanding or usage of this text between the ninth and eleventh centuries.