

Gift-giving and Books in the Letters of St Boniface and Lul¹

We have therefore taken care to indicate to you that we have, through the religious priest Ishard, sent some trifling little gifts to your Blessedness, though they are not small in love – that is, a casket for priestly functions, fashioned out of bone for the sake of greeting as well as blessing – so that you may kindly accept those things which are ours. Likewise we hope to receive goods from you.²

When Archbishop Bregowin of Canterbury wrote the above passage to Bishop Lul of Mainz *c.* 759-765, he was diverging from contemporary conventions of gift-giving rhetoric in two ways. First, he subtly reminded Lul that a bone casket carved in order to be given as a gift was no *munusculum parvum* at all – indeed, this is the only recorded case of such a gift being exchanged by eighth-century missionaries, and we know from such objects as the eighth-century Franks Casket that bone artefacts could be highly elaborate in appearance. Second, rather less subtly, he expressed a hope that the gift be reciprocated.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments offered on earlier drafts of this paper by James Palmer and my anonymous readers. I am also grateful to Mary Garrison for her insightful remarks as well as for generously supplying me with a copy of her forthcoming article.

² Idcirco tibi indicare curavimus nos misisse vestrae beatitudini parva quedam munuscula, non parva siquidem caritate, id est capam unam ad officium quidem sacerdotale ex ossibus fabricatam salutationis tantummodo ac benedictionis causa per Ishardum religiosum presbyterum, ut ea quae nostra sunt benigne suscipiatis. Similiter et nos a vobis bona recipere optamus. M. Tangl, ed., *Die Briefe des Heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Ep. sel. 1 (Munich, 1989), ep. 117, 253 (henceforth Tangl). Tangl's is the standard edition of the letters of Boniface and Lul, originally collected in Mainz in the late eighth century and surviving in three ninth-century manuscripts, and from his edition all citations in this article are taken. For the textual history of the 150 or so surviving letters during and after the ninth century, see *ibid.*, v-xxxix; H. Hahn, 'Die Briefe und Synoden des Bonifaz', *Forschungen zur deutschen Geschichte*, 15 (1875), 97-115; A. Nürnburger, 'Die Bonifatiusliteratur der Magdeburger Centuriatoren', *Neues Archiv*, 7 (1882), 353-381; A. Orchard, 'Old sources, new resources: finding the right formula for Boniface', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 30 (2001), 15-38 (16-17).

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It is difficult to understand why Bregowin chose to present his gift in this unusual way, which threatens to breach the conventional modesty of the gift-giver. The passage is useful, however, precisely because it highlights those very conventions for what they are: performative utterances which found meaning in particular social relations between the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon church and its missionary expatriates in Germania. Such gifts were indeed often more than mere *munuscula parva*; gifts were indeed generally given in the expectation of a counter-gift; and in this sense Bregowin can be accused of saying only what others may have been already thinking. In such social relations, however, the form of the performance – what was said, and how it was said – was just as important as what was thought.

It is certain of these conventions which I shall explore in this article. The gift-giving conventions of Boniface (c. 675-754), his successor Lul (c. 710-786) and their many correspondents is a neglected topic to date, and the study which could do it justice would be too broad in scope to commit to paper here.³ Therefore I shall concentrate on a single issue, namely the role – or lack thereof – which books played in the ritual of gift-giving.

The Anglo-Saxon mission to Germania, which can be dated roughly from Boniface's arrival in Hessa in 721 to the death of Lul in 768, could not have proceeded without books. Boniface appears to have had what Lapidge describes as a 'small, portable working library' during his missionary work, and the range of texts which Boniface owned and used has already attracted considerable attention in the scholarship.⁴ We may thus expect that books were frequently exchanged between

³ Julia Smith has given a coherent overview of gift-giving in early medieval Western Europe, in which she emphasises the strong links between gifts, trade, politics and social bonds: J. M. H. Smith, *Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000* (Oxford, 2005), 183-214.

⁴ M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), 39. For the most comprehensive discussion of the topic, see H. Schüling, 'Die Handbibliothek des Bonifatius: Ein Beitrag zur

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friends and colleagues involved in the mission as gifts. In this we would be right, but only half right. As we shall see, gift-giving and book-giving, though both common, were two worlds rarely brought together. They did not share the same ritual discourse, and depended upon distinct forms of social relations. This demands explanation (or at least exploration), for in a society where social bonds were in part formed and strengthened through the ritualistic exchange of precious gifts, it is curious that books, those most precious objects, should be deliberately and consistently excluded from this system.

Historians interested in gift-giving have tended to approach the topic using models derived from anthropological studies, and my first step will be a brief examination of pertinent aspects of gift-giving modelled by anthropologists.⁵ I shall then explore how scholars have pursued the topic within Anglo-Saxon studies, and move on to a more specific description of the gift-giving conventions shared by Boniface, Lul and their correspondents. Finally I will contrast these conventions with the forms of language and social relations used when giving books, and attempt to explain this contrast.

Geistesgeschichte des ersten Hälfte des 8. Jahrhunderts', *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 4 (1963), 285-348.

⁵ The first historian to directly cite anthropological research with regard to gift-giving was P. Grierson, 'Commerce in the Dark Ages: a critique of the evidence', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 9 (1959), 123-40, where he called for the phenomenon of gift-exchange to be given greater attention by economic historians. The more nuanced studies of gift-giving in medieval society have focused on monastic institutions: in particular see S. White, *Custom, Kinship and Gifts to Saints: The Laudatio Parentum in Western France, 1050-1150* (Chapel Hill, 1988); B. H. Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909-1049* (London, 1989), esp. 125-43; I. F. Silber, 'Gift-giving in the great traditions: the case of donations to monasteries in the medieval West', *Archives européennes de sociologie*, 36 (1995), 209-43. For a broader review of the literature since Grierson, see A.-J. A. Bijsterveld, 'The medieval gift as an agent of social bonding and political power: a comparative approach', in: *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power and Gifts in Context*, ed. E. Cohen and M. de Jong (Leiden, 2001), 123-56. Such studies have concentrated on gift-giving as a broad social phenomenon, emphasising the array of actors and interests involved in each social transaction; for a brief but incisive account of how one particular figure, King Berengar I of Italy, cultivated gift-giving as part of his royal persona, see B. H. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint, and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1999), 137-55.

Anthropological models of gift-giving

The most influential anthropological account of gift-giving is Marcel Mauss's 'Essai sur le don' in 1925, in which he formulated a model based on his research into the natives of north-west America, Melanesia and Polynesia, and applied it to ancient Roman and Germanic culture.⁶ Of the three aspects of ritualistic gift-giving identified by Mauss – giving, receiving and reciprocating – it was the third which caught his interest and imagination. Trying to define what it was that compelled gift recipients in certain societies to reciprocate, he concluded that the gifts themselves had a quality which demanded that they circulate and be exchanged for other gifts. It was this inalienable 'spirit' residing within the gift that was the motor for gift-exchange. Any gift is more than a mere token: it is 'imbued with the personality of the partner who gave it,' a quality accentuated and defined by ritual.⁷ Among the Maori of New Zealand the spirit of the gift was called the *hau*; but its equivalent, Mauss suggested, could be found in ancient Roman and Germanic culture. In Roman society, the gift was a manifestation of the *nexum*, the invisible legal bond between two individuals theorised by legal historians. In Germanic society, Mauss adopted the term *wadium*.⁸

Mauss was most criticised, in particular by Lévi-Strauss, for a methodological oversight. In placing undue emphasis on the reciprocative aspect of gift-giving, Mauss implied that it was distinct from, and more worthy of attention than, the other two aspects. It was the 'mystery' of reciprocation which led Mauss to look for the answer in the *hau* of the gift, and, according to Lévi-Strauss, he thus surrendered himself to a

⁶ Published in English as M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. I Cunnison (New York, 1967).

⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸ Ibid.

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set of mystical symbols when he should have sought the underlying reality, the structures of human psychology, which these symbols represented.⁹

Maurice Godelier, although he agrees with these criticisms of Mauss, does not follow them down the path of structuralism. Mauss was heading in the right direction, he says, but did not go far enough. What Mauss called the ‘soul’ of the gift, the cause of reciprocation, Godelier, like Lévi-Strauss, sees as a social construct – but one which can have a huge impact on social relations.¹⁰ A gift, and the act of giving it, draws its identity from either party and combines it with the relationship between them. Much more than a symbol, the gift is the very instrument which allows the bond to be made. But when this social phenomenon is perceived by the giver and receiver as a spirit residing *within* the gift, the giving is no longer a simple matter of social relations. It is the ‘sacred’ aspect of the gift which interests Godelier, an aspect which Mauss largely ignores. The religious permeates the gift and the people who handle it, and ultimately the entire world: as Godelier puts it, ‘the cosmos becomes the anthropomorphic extension of humans and their society,’ and within this cosmos human agency becomes subservient to the agency of the supernatural.¹¹

It would be unwise to apply a notion of the cosmos derived from anthropological fieldwork in Melanesia to Anglo-Saxon missionaries. For a start, one could debate whether a Christian missionary considered the cosmos to be an extension of human society, rather than vice versa; also, the notion of ‘sacredness’ as a quality which could reside in objects was, for early medieval Christians in general, a complex

⁹ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss*, trans. F. Baker (London, 1987), 47.

¹⁰ M. Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. N. Scott (Cambridge, 1999), 104-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

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matter.¹² Nevertheless, what Godelier describes as the distinction between two worlds – the symbolic world and the world of the imaginary – is a useful concept. ‘The world of imaginary representations,’ he says, ‘[is] elaborated by the actors in order to explain the reasons for their actions, their origin and their meaning.’¹³ In this ‘animistic’ world, objects become sacred, and this sacredness has a powerful influence on how such objects are perceived and used. In the world of symbols, objects remain dumb; but the power of the symbol can be great indeed. In the letters of Boniface and Lul, we shall find that gift givers and receivers were sensitive to this division in the nature of things. Gifts were symbols, described and treated as such, albeit symbols of great importance in creating and maintaining social relations. Books, meanwhile – at least books of Scripture – belonged in the world of the sacred.

Gift-giving in Anglo-Saxon Society

Mauss made a great deal of the agonistic nature of gift-giving in Germanic society. His starting point was a study of the potlatch ceremony found amongst Native American tribes of the north-west in the early twentieth century, where tribal members used gift-giving as a highly competitive and intrinsically hostile way of trying to crush their rivals.¹⁴ The potlatch form of gift-giving, he argued, existed in

¹² This was particularly true with regard to political power; also, the nature of sacred relics cannot be divorced from the nature of the sacred spaces they helped create. Holy relics, for instance, were certainly described as sacred by contemporaries, but other objects which frequently changed hands, such as altar cloths or packets of incense, were only sacred, if at all, by association with the holy sacraments – a very different quality indeed. For a concise discussion, see M. de Jong, ‘Religion’, in: *The Early Middle Ages*, ed. R. McKitterick (Oxford, 2001), esp. 148-61; also B. Caseau, ‘Sacred landscapes’, in: *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar (London, 2001), 21-59, esp. 42-5.

¹³ Godelier, *The Enigma*, 106.

¹⁴ Mauss, *The Gift*, 6.

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various forms widely across time and society, and Mauss's work has until recently retained a strong influence in studies of gift-giving in Anglo-Saxon poetry.¹⁵

Historians must adopt caution with the potlatch model, for certain anthropologists have pointed out that the ritual studied by Mauss was the result of a century or more of immense transformation and rupture in American Indian society following the arrival of Europeans, in which context the potlatch 'ran away, went mad.'¹⁶ Mauss never alluded to this historical context. Early medieval historians may also take issue with the lack of context he gives so-called Germanic society, especially since the existence of a past culture that historians and archaeologists can critically label 'Germanic' has been fiercely questioned in recent years.¹⁷

Bearing these caveats in mind, Mauss remains our historiographical starting point. It was a 'mild' form of potlatch which Mauss traced from Tacitus's *Germania* to the poetic Edda. In both societies, according to Mauss, the gift was a thing of danger, a pledge by which both parties stood to lose.¹⁸ It demanded trust but did not necessarily reward it, and we see a surviving trace of this attribute in the meaning of the German and Dutch word *Gift*, 'poison,' compared with its English cognate.¹⁹ The treacherous gift appears in the Eddic *Reginsmal*, where Hreithmar reacts furiously

¹⁵ See in particular J. M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (London, 1995), esp. 92-107, and the works cited below. Most studies into Anglo-Saxon gift-giving have centred on *Beowulf*. For a useful survey of scholarship, see J. M. Hill, 'Social milieu', in: *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (Exeter, 1996), 255-69, esp. 259-60.

¹⁶ Godelier, *The Enigma*, 76-7; H. G. Barnett, 'The nature of the potlatch', *American Anthropologist*, 40 (1938), 349-58. See P. Drucker and R. F. Heizer, *To Make My Name Good: A Reexamination of the Southern Kwakiutl Potlatch* (Berkeley, 1967), for a survey of the often ignored context and nature of anthropological research into the Kwakiutl.

¹⁷ H. Goetz, 'Introduction', in: *Regna et Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. H. Goetz, J. Jarnut and W. Pohl (Leiden, 2003), 7. Many scholars are now careful to define the term when they use it. Patrick Amory, for example, in *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554* (Cambridge, 1997), xv, restricts himself to the linguistic sense; Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, trans. T. Dunlap (Berkeley, 1997), 9, to the geographical.

¹⁸ Mauss, *The Gift*, 59-62. Mauss's sources were the Eddic *Havamal* and intensive linguistic studies of the Germanic languages.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

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upon learning that the gold given him by Loki is cursed,²⁰ and also in *Völundarkviða*, in which the hero, Weland, secretly murders the king's sons and fashions their skulls and eyes into macabre gifts for the royal family.²¹ Dronke argues that the story of Weland originated among Germanic-speaking peoples on the continent during the seventh century, and perhaps had older Gothic roots.²² It was certainly known to the Anglo-Saxons, and it is this very scene which decorates one panel of the abovementioned eighth-century Franks Casket.

It would be wrong to assume, though, that the Anglo-Saxons thought of gifts primarily as dangerous, and that all forms of competitive gift-giving resemble the potlatch.²³ Although gifts could be given in an aggressive or competitive manner, Anglo-Saxon poetry does not, on the whole, share the Icelandic preoccupation with the dangerous gift. A greater concern of Anglo-Saxon poets was gift-giving as a necessary quality of rulers, praised in *Maxims I* and *II*, and in *Widsið*,²⁴ while in *Beowulf* the first thing we learn about Heorot is that Hrothgar had it built in order to display his munificence publically.²⁵ Looking at synonyms for 'king' or 'ruler' across the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry, we find many that describe him in terms of gift-giving: *beaggifa*, *goldgiefa*, *goldwine*, *maððumgyfa*, *sincbrytta* and *sincgiefa* are

²⁰ L. M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda* (Austin, TX, 1962), 218.

²¹ U. Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1997), 252.

²² *Ibid.*, 269-70.

²³ The Kwakiutl potlatch was a highly complex ceremony which had more to do with the public assumption of hereditary rank within a tribal group than the lord-retainer relations which dominate gift-giving in Anglo-Saxon literature. Charles Donahue, nevertheless, is quick to fill *Beowulf* with potlatches: 'Potlatch and charity: notes on the heroic in Beowulf', in: *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGilliard*, ed. L. E. Nicholson and D. W. Frese (London, 1975), 23-40. H. Berger and H. M. Leicester, 'Social structure as doom: the limits of heroism in Beowulf', in: *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. R. B. Burlin and E. B. Irving, Jr. (Toronto, 1974), 37-79, 46-50, also use the label 'potlatch' rather too freely.

²⁴ For *Maxims I* and *II*, see T. A. Shippey, ed., *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), 64-79; for *Widsið*, G. P. Krapp and E. K. Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (London, 1936), 152, lines 88-108; see also J. M. Hill, 'Beowulf and the Danish succession: gift giving as an occasion for complex gesture', *Medievalia et Humanistica n.s.*, 11 (1982), 177-97, esp. 178-9.

²⁵ J. Porter, ed. and trans. *Beowulf: Text and Translation* (Hockwald-cum-Wilton, 1991), lines 71-73.

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listed by Jane Roberts and Christian Kay, and there are other terms relating to kingship and rule which use similar vocabulary.²⁶

The poet of *Beowulf* was quite clear that leaders gave gifts in order to ensure the loyalty of their followers, hence to promote stability.²⁷ Giving a gift increased the prestige of both giver and receiver, establishing or strengthening a bond of loyalty. But, as Hill remarks, the practice of gift-giving ‘was more than a bond... [it] underlines an entire system of reciprocal relationships between equals and unequals.’²⁸ The question of inequality is crucial to any model of gift-giving, and Hill stresses further that we ought to understand gift-giving within a larger social picture of marriage, feud, kinship, alliance and oath, in which the giving of gifts was a mechanism to express complex social gestures – competitive, submissive, supportive or aggressive – cannily, if unpredictably, played out through conventions of ritualised behaviour in what Appadurai calls ‘tournaments of value.’²⁹

It is for this reason that a seemingly stable system of gift-giving can break down into open aggression quite suddenly. Expressions of loyalty, the desire for honour and prestige, the uncertainty of reciprocation, carry within themselves the

²⁶ J. Roberts and C. Kay, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols (London, 1995), section 12.01.01; see also E. Tyler, ‘Treasure and convention in Old English verse’, *Notes and Queries*, New Series 43(1) (1996), 2-13, esp. 10-12. W. A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester, 1970), 77, comments on the sacred nature of the *gifstol*, the throne which was the symbol and centrepiece of royal munificence.

²⁷ Porter, *Beowulf*, lines 20-25.

²⁸ Hill, ‘Beowulf and the Danish succession’, 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 264-65. Hill examines in illuminating detail Wealhtheow’s offer of gifts to Beowulf, and Beowulf’s subsequent offer of Hrothgar’s gifts to his own lord Hygelac, arguing that both situations demonstrate the highly dynamic role that gift-giving could play in Anglo-Saxon social relations. *Ibid.*, 185-93. T. Charles-Edwards has observed how food renders to early medieval insular kings, while essentially a form of taxation, could take the form either of enforced tribute or of willing hospitality, depending on the political and social relations involved. T. Charles-Edwards, ‘Early medieval kingships in the British Isles’, in: *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. S. Bassett (Leicester, 1989), 28-39, here 28-33. On the complex social negotiations underlying all forms of gift-exchange, see the articles in A. Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986). A. E. Komte has sought to combine anthropological and sociological theory in her study of gift-giving and the role it plays in social solidarity in the modern Netherlands: *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge, 2005), esp 31-3 on the above point.

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latent seeds of jealousy, pride and treachery – and if these qualities grow too powerful, they will rupture and fragment existing social relations, even while creating and strengthening others. The Anglo-Saxon laws governing feuds were intended to control this necessary aspect of a society that was based on the *comitatus* of lord and retainers.³⁰ Thus while the Anglo-Saxons may not have known the potlatch, they understood very well the competitive and potentially hostile nature of the gift.

The munificence of superiors as a social ideal was not limited to the imagination of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*. Our nearest Anglo-Saxon source in date to the letters of Boniface, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, includes numerous didactic examples of royalty and churchmen who gave away wealth in obedience to the Christian duty of almsgiving,³¹ but there are also traces of what must have been a very deeply ingrained custom of élite gift-giving within both secular and religious circles. Bishop Aidan, Bede writes, incurred King Oswin's anger by giving away a horse which the king had originally given him as a gift.³² Though the story may well be apocryphal, it demonstrates that churchmen were not excluded from customs of gift-giving, even if clerics like Bede argued that they should not be bound by the same rules of conduct as the Anglo-Saxon élite.³³ Indeed, Wilfrid only agreed to accompany King Oswy to Rome when he was promised 'a considerable gift' for his

³⁰ Berger and Leicester, 'Social structure', 43. L. Lockett has noted the closely related processes of gift-exchange and feud in Anglo-Saxon society, and cites Bordieu on the uncertainty of reciprocity which provides the social dynamic in such seemingly 'rigid' mechanisms: 'The role of Grendel's arm in feud, law, and the narrative strategy of *Beowulf*', in: *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe and A. Orchard (Toronto, 2005), 368-88, esp. 369-70.

³¹ For example, B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), III.5, III.6, III.14, III.26, IV.11.

³² Ibid., III.14.

³³ Contrast this episode with *Beowulf*'s delicacy when he passes on Hrothgar's gifts to Hygelac, 'taking care to undo any obligation [the gifts] might carry,' as Hill observes ('*Beowulf* and the Danish succession,' 192). *Beowulf*, caught in a potentially dangerous web of loyalties, could not discard the gifts of his superior quite as casually as could the saintly Aidan.

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troubles.³⁴ It is the very nature of the Anglo-Saxon élite, in which secular and religious power were never far apart,³⁵ that makes necessary this review of Anglo-Saxon gift-giving as portrayed in poetry: the letters of Boniface provide a glimpse into the gift-giving conventions of eighth-century Anglo-Saxon missionaries which we can consider alongside the conventions of poetic idealism and Christian moral history.

Gift-giving in the letters of Boniface

Within the 150 surviving letters of Boniface and Lul, a total of 20 letter-writers between them make 54 references to gift-giving: 35 offering gifts, fifteen reporting their grateful acceptance, three requesting a particular gift or gifts in return, and one acknowledgement by an envoy that a number of gifts had been delivered to their recipients. Since most of the letters had either Boniface or Lul as sender or recipient, almost all of the gifts were to or from these two figures. We should not assume that these 54 references represent every instance of gift-exchange even in the context of the surviving letters: it may be that gifts were sometimes entrusted to the messenger without being mentioned in the letter, and it is also possible that the recipient did not always mention the received gifts in his or her reply, at least where they were not of great material value.³⁶ Even so, these references offer useful material for examining

³⁴ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, IV.5.

³⁵ H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1991), 248-61. D. Pelteret has described St. Wilfrid as a 'Germanic lord' who used the distribution of gifts to ensure the loyalty of his followers, seeing no contradiction between this 'secular' role and the role of Catholic bishop: 'Saint Wilfrid: tribal bishop, civic bishop or Germanic lord?', in: *The Community of Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. J. Hill and M. Swan, International Medieval Research 4 (Turnhout, 1998), 159-80.

³⁶ In the case of valuable gifts, an acknowledgement of their reception appears to have been expected by the sender. See Tangl, ep. 116, 251, where Abbot Cuthbert of Wearmouth asks Lul if he

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the conventions of gift-giving among what was predominantly (seventeen of the twenty) an Anglo-Saxon group, and one which is notable for its close-knit literary and behavioural conventions.³⁷

With four exceptions – a king of Mercia, a king of Northumbria and two kings of Kent – all those either giving or receiving gifts were members of the church. The first feature of the letters which strikes the reader is the almost complete lack of gifts given from superiors to inferiors, which, as we have seen, was a major aspect of kingship in Anglo-Saxon poetry. We have no record, for example, of Boniface receiving a gift from any of the popes, although he sent Pope Zachary a gift of silver and gold upon his consecration.³⁸ Similarly, neither of the recorded gifts given to Boniface by the nun Bugga was reciprocated, nor was the gift from Lioba, nor the gift from Abbess Eadburg.³⁹ Boniface himself sent a towel of roughened silk to his old mentor, Bishop Daniel of Winchester, which was not reciprocated,⁴⁰ and a young Lul sent gifts to his patron Abbess Cuniburg, and a few years later to Abbess Eadburg.⁴¹

This pattern holds true even for King Æthelbert of Kent's 'several little gifts' (*nonnulla munuscula*) to Boniface, recognising the latter's role as his spiritual

ever received the considerable gift of twenty knives and a gown of otter hide which he had sent six years earlier by the messenger Hunwin, who had died at Benevento before he could return. Hunwin was concerned because Lul had not sent any word of the gift's safe arrival.

³⁷ Andy Orchard has described the letters as belonging to 'a peculiarly tight and idiosyncratic group of essentially isolated correspondents.' Orchard, 'Old sources, new resources', 20. Hans-Werner Goetz has also noted distinct linguistic habits of members of the Anglo-Saxon church compared to their Continental counterparts, particularly the frequent use of *amicus/a*, *amicitia*, *amicalis* etc. in their vocabulary of friendship: "Beatus homo qui invenit amicum." The concept of friendship in early medieval letters of the Anglo-Saxon tradition on the Continent (Boniface, Alcuin)', in: *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, ed. J. Haseldine (Stroud, 1999), 124-36, here 124. Although it is hard to say how 'tight' the group was considering the lack of comparable contemporary material, I would suggest that conventions of gift-giving, being shared by even infrequent correspondents, were spread more generally through the Anglo-Saxon church than the epistolary formulas upon which Orchard concentrates.

³⁸ Tangl, ep. 50, 85.

³⁹ Ibid., ep. 15, 28; 27, 48-49; 29, 53; 35, 60.

⁴⁰ Ibid., ep. 63, 131.

⁴¹ Ibid., ep. 49, 80; 70, 143.

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superior.⁴² In the only surviving instance of Boniface offering a gift to a spiritual subordinate – the priest Herefrid, whom he is charging with the unenviable task of delivering a letter of admonition to King Æthelbald of Mercia – he offers a napkin with incense ‘as a blessing and sign of pure affection’ (*pro benedictione et signo purae caritatis*).⁴³ For a cleric to receive such a gift from an archbishop would have been a rare honour indeed.⁴⁴

This feature of the letters is extremely significant, for Anglo-Saxon poets drew a careful distinction between different types of giving. The superior ‘gives,’ *gyfan*, gifts to his or her subordinates; the subordinate almost always ‘bestows,’ *geywan*, to his or her superior.⁴⁵ As we have seen, superiors gave gifts with the public intention of winning and preserving the loyalty of their followers, and the value of such gifts was often praised by the poet in order to increase the prestige of both parties. Beowulf, on the other hand, when he bestows (*geywan*) upon Hygelac the gifts which Hrothgar originally gave (*geaf*) him, assures his lord that he offers them without condition.⁴⁶

We can also discern the theme of the unconditional or insignificant gift in the letters of Boniface and Lul. There are 22 instances of gifts being offered as *munuscula*, ‘little gifts’, and only one instance of a gift being offered as a *munus*,⁴⁷ conversely, there are eight instances of gifts received being acknowledged as *munera*,

⁴² Ibid., ep. 105.

⁴³ Ibid., ep. 74, 156.

⁴⁴ These conventions mirror two of the the four different types of social relationship which Alan Page Fiske argues form the fundamental structure of all human social interaction, in this case the relationships of ‘authority ranking’ (between inferior and superior) and ‘equality matching’ (between equals). A. P. Fiske, *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations* (New York, 1991). Komte has applied Fiske’s model particularly to gift-giving: *Social Solidarity and the Gift*, 20-26.

⁴⁵ Hill, ‘Beowulf and the Danish succession,’ 192 and note 16. God, for example, always ‘gives’ grace, and never ‘bestows’ it.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 193. Porter, *Beowulf*, lines 2146-2151.

⁴⁷ Tangl, ep. 92, 211. The gift was sent by Lul to his close colleague Gregory, who had recently been installed as Bishop of Utrecht.

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and only one where a gift is referred to by the recipient using the diminutive *munuscula*.⁴⁸ It was clearly the duty of the giver to belittle the gift, and of the receiver to exalt it.

Other terms apart from *munera* and *munuscula* also appear in the letters, although far less frequently: received gifts were twice referred to using the term *dona* instead of the more common *munera*,⁴⁹ while in the later letters, those dating from Lul's episcopacy at Mainz (754-786), gifts are offered as *parva exenia* or *parva exseniola* three times.⁵⁰ On two occasions Boniface referred to the gifts he was sending to his equals as a 'token of affection' (*indicium caritatis*).⁵¹

Yet if a junior member of the church sent a 'little gift' without expectation of material reward – for in truth, it appears that Boniface never reciprocated the fifty *solidi*, altar cloth and vestments sent him by Bugga – they did not send without hope of any reciprocation at all. Material objects were not the only type of gift, and Boniface offered Bugga recompense in the form of prayers:

⁴⁸ Ibid., ep. 116, 250, a letter from Abbot Cuthbert to Lul. In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon correspondents, the Roman Cardinal-Deacon Gemmulus never offers *munuscula*, simply naming the gifts themselves, and the Greek or Syriac Archdeacon Theophylactus uses *munuscula* only once. Whenever Gemmulus received a gift from Boniface, he called it a *benedictio*, as did the Roman Cardinal-Bishop Benedict. Ibid., ep. 54, 97; 62, 128; 84, 189; 85, 191; 90, 206.

⁴⁹ Ibid., ep. 91, 207, where Boniface acknowledges the reception of gifts from Egbert; ep. 123, 260, where Lul receives gifts from Bishop Cyneheard of Winchester. In ep. 138, 277, Lul's envoy Wigerht reports that he has delivered Lul's gifts to their recipients, using the term *dona* to describe them.

⁵⁰ Ibid., ep. 114, 247; 116, 251; 122, 259. The term *(e)x(s)enia* usually refers specifically to a gift from a host to a guest, but here is used in the more general sense.

⁵¹ Ibid., ep. 75, 158, to Archbishop Egbert of York; ep. 76, 159, to Abbot Huetbert of Wearmouth.

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Concerning the gifts and garments which you sent, we give thanks and ask God Almighty that He grants you the prize of eternal reward with the angels and archangels in the highest heavens.⁵²

The gift was a token of obedient devotion which could be reciprocated by the munificence of prayer rather than of gold, and but for this the conventions of gift-giving among missionaries mirror secular conventions. Reciprocation in kind was more often expected to occur between equals, as Bregowin reminded Lul in the letter quoted at the opening of this paper: thus we find Lul exchanging material gifts with Bishop Cyneheard of Winchester,⁵³ Abbot Cuthbert of Wearmouth⁵⁴ and King Alchred of Northumbria,⁵⁵ and the nun Berthgyth exchanging gifts with her brother Balthard.⁵⁶

The greatest difference to secular custom was the attitude towards material wealth, which poets glorified in the context of the royal hall, and which the clergy belittled to the status of a mere symbol – in a sense, denied the gift its *hau*. Whether or not these professed attempts to make the gift transient and alienable were successful, or were even intended to be, is doubtful. Why else would Abbot Cuthbert have exhibited Lul's gift of a silken garment upon the altar of his church in 764, if the gift did not continue to express the bond between them, to represent the confraternity of Lul, after the act of giving?⁵⁷ An anthropologist such as Godelier would be sceptical that any gift, even a perishable one, is truly alienable – indeed, it is in the

⁵² De muneribus namque et uestimentis, quae misisti, gratias agentes Deum omnipotentem rogamus, ut tibi premium remunerationis aeternae cum angelis et archangelis in alto caelorum culmine reponet. Ibid., ep. 27, 48-9.

⁵³ Ibid., ep. 123, 260.

⁵⁴ Ibid., ep. 116, 250-51; 127, 264.

⁵⁵ Ibid., ep. 121, 257-8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., ep. 148, 258-6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., ep. 116, 250-251.

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nature and context of the gift itself that we find the real matter of the social bond that it helps generate.⁵⁸

This becomes clear when we consider the gifts offered by members of the Anglo-Saxon church: spices, napkins, chaplets, incense and towels, all connected with ecclesiastical or eucharistic ritual; occasionally cloaks, tunics or dyed coverlets of silk or otter hide, typically exchanged between the higher ranks of the church perhaps as a symbol of obedience to Christ's command to clothe the naked.⁵⁹ The gifts were full of meaning, but made mute by the giver. And if the giver was eager to distance him- or herself from the material nature of the gift, then the receiver experienced a similar tension between the custom of gifts and the ideal of monastic poverty. When Abbot Cuthbert of Wearmouth told Lul that he had placed his gift of silk on the church altar of the monastery rather than wear it himself, he was making Lul's munificence and spiritual brotherhood public, but may also have been eager to avoid any accusations of accepting gifts for himself.⁶⁰ As we shall see, Bede, who had died in the same monastery twenty-nine years earlier, would have heartily approved of his pupil's gesture.

Members of the clergy were not blind slaves to the conventions of friendship – in one letter Archbishop Bregowin of Canterbury reminded Lul how they once spoke on precisely this topic (*de amicitiae conventionione*) during a stay in Rome⁶¹ – and were just as capable as Beowulf or Wealhtheow of working within the conventions of gift-giving according to the needs of the situation. Moreover, gift and counter-gift formed

⁵⁸ Barbara Rosenwein has observed this phenomenon with regard to the social complexities of Cluniac land transfers: *To Be the Neighbour of Saint Peter*, 137-42. She was prompted by the work of the anthropologist Annette Weiner, 'Inalienable wealth', *American Ethnologist*, 13 (1985), 210-27, whose research also had a large influence on Godelier.

⁵⁹ Matthew 25:35-36.

⁶⁰ Tangl, ep. 116, 250-251.

⁶¹ Ibid., ep. 117, 252.

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an ongoing cycle of developing relations and intentions.⁶² Unfortunately, in most cases the fragmentary survival of the correspondence makes it impossible to reconstruct the precise context of a gift. An exception are the *munuscula* of lances, shields, falcons and a hawk which Boniface sent to King Æthelbald of Mercia as ‘a token of true love and devoted friendship’ (*pro signo veri amoris et devote amicitiae*), adding:

We also beg that, if words of ours in writing come to your presence through another messenger, you deign to give them your attention and listen with care.⁶³

By adopting the conventions of ‘secular’ gift-giving in his choice of gift, Boniface was placing himself in the role of a loyal retainer offering advice to his lord. No doubt Æthelbald understood as well as Boniface that such a gesture was the prelude to some heavy criticism of his immoral behaviour. The power of the gesture, however, required him at least to receive the coming admonition with a performance of good grace, if not pay it heed.⁶⁴

Ritualised expressions of humility between members of the church helped paint the secular custom of gift-giving in Christian colours, but also served to insulate

⁶² Bijsterveld, ‘The medieval gift’, 124.

⁶³ *Petimus quoque, ut, si per alterum nuntium verba nostra ad presentiam tuam scripta pervenerint, auditum tuum adcommodare digneris et sollicite audire cures.* Tangl., ep. 69, 142.

⁶⁴ There is a series of Bonifatian letters which gives the context for this gift: Ibid., ep. 69; 73; 74; 75. For further discussions of the political context, see P. Stafford, ‘Political women in Mercia, eighth to early tenth centuries’, in: *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, ed. M. P. Brown and C. A. Farr (London, 2001), 35-49, esp. 36-8; B. Yorke, ‘Æthelbald, Offa and the patronage of nunneries’, in: *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia*, ed. D. Hill and M. Worthington, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 383 (Oxford, 2005), 43-8; J. Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750-870* (Aldershot, 2003), 180. On the giving of weapons as gifts in Old English poetry, see Tyler, ‘Treasure and convention.’

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the clergy from the dangers of competitive gift-giving discussed above, with which they must have been all too familiar through their close association with secular politics. Such ritualised discourse carries an implicit refusal to play the game of competitive gift-giving. This is not to say that competition did not occur, but among Boniface's Anglo-Saxon correspondents a strict hierarchy of authority, organised tightly around an episcopal model of church governance, worked powerfully against the development of any kind of situation resembling a secular feud.

Book-giving in the letters of Boniface

Once we recognise the distinct nature of the ritual discourse that surrounds gifts in the letters of Boniface, the exclusion of books from the custom of gift-giving begins to make sense. Gifts and books were given simultaneously, sometimes via the same letter, but were almost never conflated. In the surviving letters of Boniface and Lul, there are 25 references to pieces of writing being transmitted (either offered, received or requested): thirteen to Boniface; three from Boniface; eight to Lul; one from Lul. The types of writing transmitted varied greatly, from the works (*aliqua opuscula*) of Aldhelm requested by Lul,⁶⁵ to florilegia composed by Boniface for Bugga (*congregationes aliquas sanctarum scripturarum* and *conscriptione sententiarum*),⁶⁶ to letters of Gregory the Great,⁶⁷ the Epistles of St Peter written in gold,⁶⁸ a treatise on St Paul,⁶⁹ a particular copy of the Book of the Prophets in large script,⁷⁰ the Sufferings of the Martyrs,⁷¹ and, in later years, numerous works of Bede.⁷²

⁶⁵ Tangl, ep. 71, 144.

⁶⁶ Ibid., ep. 15, 27; 27, 48.

⁶⁷ Ibid., ep. 33, 57; 54, 96; 75, 158.

⁶⁸ Ibid., ep. 35, 60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., ep. 34, 59.

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A notable feature of such requests is that Boniface and Lul typically made them through very particular channels – indeed, the frequency of correspondence seems to have rested in some cases on the access it allowed to a good library and scriptorium. When Boniface needed a particular letter which Pope Gregory had supposedly written to Augustine near the start of the Augustinian mission, he wrote directly to Archbishop Nothelm of Canterbury with the request.⁷³ Gemmulus, meanwhile, was a useful contact in Rome who promised to send Boniface letters of Gregory which were not to be found in England – so many, in fact, that Boniface sent some of his surplus to Archbishop Egbert of York.⁷⁴

The chief reason Boniface wrote to Egbert in the first place was that the latter, like Abbot Huetbert of Wearmouth, had access to the works of Bede, whose fame was beginning to spread to the continent.⁷⁵ After Boniface's death, Lul appears to have attempted to expand his collection of Bede's works through the same channels.⁷⁶ 'The Bonifatian mission', as Orchard has remarked, 'at least for the first three decades, was effectively starved of books.'⁷⁷ This was perhaps the case, but eventually the traffic of book requests also began to flow in the opposite direction: Bishop Cyneheard of Winchester, in a letter written between 754 and 780, was able to

⁷⁰ Ibid., ep. 63, 131.

⁷¹ Ibid., ep. 15, 27.

⁷² Ibid., ep. 75, 158; 76, 159; 91, 207; 116, 251-52; 125, 263; 126, 264; 127, 265.

⁷³ Ibid., ep. 33, 57.

⁷⁴ Ibid., ep. 54, 96; 75, 158.

⁷⁵ Ibid., ep. 75, 158; 76, 159; 91, 207.

⁷⁶ Ibid., ep. 116, 251-52; 125, 263; 126, 264; 127, 265. For a discussion of Boniface's and Lul's book requests from the point of view of the library at York, see M. Garrison, 'The library of Alcuin's York', in: *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. 1, ed. R. Gameson (Cambridge, forthcoming), where she remarks: 'Since there is no further correspondence extant between Lul and [Archbishop of York] Ælberht (and no books of secure York origin with the relevant later provenance), it is not possible to say whether any gift-books from York found their way to Mainz or Fulda in the eighth century.' She notes the single exception of the *libelli* sent by Egbert to Boniface. Tangl, ep. 91, 207.

⁷⁷ Orchard, 'Old sources', 36.

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assume that Lul had better access to a wide variety of religious and secular texts that he did,⁷⁸ much as Boniface had assumed of Duddo in Rome in 735.⁷⁹

Bede, however, was a special case. For older and more widely available texts, Boniface made his requests through channels of closer friendship. Consider the first of Boniface's two requests to Archbishop Egbert, with whom (as far as we know) he shared no close ties from his pre-mission years:

Moreover, I beg that you deign to write up and direct to me some works of the teacher Bede, whom, we hear, divine grace recently enriched with spiritual intellect and allowed to shine in your province, so that we also may enjoy that candle which the Lord has bestowed upon you.⁸⁰

The pious formality of this request contrasts with Boniface's request to his former pupil, Abbot Duddo:

Similarly, anything you find in your sacred library you think would be useful to me, which I am not aware of, or which you reckon I do not have in writing, let me know about as a faithful son to an ignorant father, and do send me a reply from your own blessed self.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Tangl, ep. 114, 246-47. For a list of surviving eighth-century manuscripts from the area of the Anglo-Saxon mission on the continent which may give some impression of the range of texts available to Lul, see Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, 155-66.

⁷⁹ Tangl, ep. 34, 59.

⁸⁰ Praeterea obsecro, ut mihi de opusculis Bedan lectoris aliquos tractatus conscribere et dirigere digneris, quem nuper, ut audivimus, divina gratia spiritali intellectu ditavit et in vestra prouincia fulgere concessit, et ut candela, quam uobis Dominus largitus est, nos quoque fruamur. Ibid., ep. 75, 158.

⁸¹ Similiter, ut quicquid in sacro scrinio inveneris et mihi utile esse arbitreris et me latere vel scriptum non habere estimes, insinuare, sicut fidelis filius licet rusticus patri, et rescripta beatitudinis tuae dirigere dignare. Ibid., ep. 34, 59.

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The relationship between a *rusticus pater* and his *fidelis filius* allowed for a form of book request based on trust and mutual affection. Such friendship was important when the request involved considerable effort or outlay, as did Boniface's request to his old friend Eadburg for a copy of St Peter's letters written in gold.⁸² Even the closest friendship had limits, however, which is why Boniface sent Eadburg some materials to aid in the book's creation. Eadburg, indeed, seems to have been a major supplier of books to Boniface, for he twice offers her extravagant thanks for sending sacred works, on one occasion referring to the books as *munera*.⁸³

Boniface's use of the word *munera* in this case need not mean that these books were either given or received as gifts in the conventional sense. It is probable that Eadburg sent them in response to a particular request, and the florid gratitude expressed by Boniface on this occasion is quite foreign to the sober thanks offered for ordinary gifts:

May the eternal rewarder of all good deeds praise the dearest sister in the heavenly court of angels, for by sending gifts of sacred books she has consoled with spiritual light a Germanic exile; for he who is bound to enlighten the dark corners of the Germanic peoples will fall into the snare of death if he has not the Word of the Lord as a lamp to his feet and a light to his path.⁸⁴

Although books were on this occasion called *munera*, in only one case were pieces of writing actually bundled with other more conventional gifts. These were the letters of

⁸² Ibid., ep. 35, 60.

⁸³ Ibid., ep. 30, 54.

⁸⁴ Carissimam sororem remunerator aeternus iustorum operum in superna laetificet curia angelorum, quae sanctorum librorum munera transmittendo exulem Germanicum spiritali lumine consolata est, quia, qui tenebrosos angulos Germanicarum gentium lustrare debet, nisi habeat lucernam pedibus et lumen semitis suis verbum Domini, in laqueum mortis incidet. Ibid.

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Gregory the Great mentioned above, which Boniface thought would be of interest to Egbert.⁸⁵ He offered them ‘as a token of affection’ (*ad indicium caritatis*) along with a cloak and a towel in the final passage of his letter, treating them as a gift in the absolutely conventional sense. He was careful to point out, however, that he had received many (*multas*) such letters from Rome, and offered to send more if Egbert so desired. It is this surplus which decreases the value of the letters to the point where they can be offered unrequested alongside more mundane gifts, and perhaps Boniface also thought that they would help balance his own request in the same letter for some works of Bede. That gifts and books were not normally conflated is suggested in the first line of this letter, when Boniface gives thanks to God for the ‘gifts *and* books’ (*muneribus et libris*) which Egbert had sent him.

The gift as token and the sacred book

Was economic value, then, the only reason that books and other forms of writing were kept outside the conventions of gift-giving? This would appear to be the most obvious answer. Books were laborious and expensive to produce, cumbersome to transport in large numbers, and were often requested to fulfill the specific needs of missionary work.⁸⁶ They were essential to the mission in a way that garments and incense were not, particularly in a frontier region with no tradition of manuscript production, and it would be difficult for the sender of a requested book to describe the volume – as opposed to the cost involved in making it – as a *munusculum* without belittling its

⁸⁵ Ibid., ep. 75, 158.

⁸⁶ Boniface appears to have had what Lapidge describes as a ‘small, portable working library’ consisting primarily of works that would have been invaluable both for evangelisation and in the maintenance of ecclesiastical regularity within the mission church. See Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, 39; H. Schüling, ‘Die Handbibliothek des Bonifatius: Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte des ersten Hälfte des 8. Jahrhunderts’, *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 4 (1961-3), 285-348.

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value. Indeed, we can gain some idea of the relative value of very rare books from a letter of Abbot Cuthbert of Wearmouth to Lul of 764, where he quite strongly implied that appropriate remuneration for the works of Bede he had copied and sent would consist of a skilled glassmaker and a lyre player.⁸⁷

Yet, as Richard Gameson has observed, even the production of such extravagant books as the Codex Amiatinus, written in the late-seventh century at Wearmouth-Jarrow along with two companion volumes, need not have strained the material resources of a large, well-endowed monastery; just as great a challenge would have been the long-term organisation of these resources, and the economic and administrative competence that this demanded.⁸⁸ Furthermore, when we look at more conventional gifts, we see that even *munuscula* could be extremely costly – the three-and-a-half pound gilded silver cup sent by King Æthelbert to Boniface, for example, or the silver and gold which Boniface sent to Pope Zacharias, or the fifty *solidi* donated by Bugga, or the towel of roughened silk sent to Daniel of Winchester – and, of course, we cannot be sure that the numerous decorated vestments referred to were quite as humble as the giver tended to profess.⁸⁹ Between them, members of the church élite had access to immense material wealth, fragments of which we see circulating in the letters of Boniface.⁹⁰ Hence while books were certainly rare and valuable, the same could be said of many other items which were included within the discourse of ritualised gift-giving. Even the most finely carved whalebone casket,

⁸⁷ Tangl, ep. 116, 250-51.

⁸⁸ R. Gameson, 'The cost of the Codex Amiatinus', *Notes and Queries*, New Series 39(1) (1992), 2-9 (here 8-9).

⁸⁹ Good-quality garments could represent an enormous investment of material and labour – see B. Effros, *Caring For Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, PA, 2002), 19-20.

⁹⁰ Tangl., ep. 110, 237-38 offers a glimpse of the startling wealth which a church in the missionary region could eventually acquire – gold, silver, livestock, unfree labourers, even weaponry – all offered by pious laypeople, and in this case unlawfully appropriated by the two rebellious (Anglo-Saxon) priests of the parish.

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however, would have been of limited use to missionaries attempting to instruct recent converts in orthodox belief, or hoping to obtain spiritual nourishment from Scripture during times of difficulty.

Another answer – and these answers need not be mutually exclusive – is to be found in the nature of the gift as a symbol. The very wealth of the church helped intensify the severe aversion of certain of its members to material goods. The seventh-century Irish monk and monastic founder Fursey, according to Bede's citation of his lost *vita*, endured a vision in which the world was consumed by four fires, one of which was the fire of covetousness. Angels protected Fursey from the fires which he did not kindle, but he was scorched when a devil threw upon him a burning man from whom he had once accepted a gift of clothes. The angel who saved him rebuked him thus:

‘You lit this fire,’ he said, ‘so you were burned. Had you not accepted property from this man who died in his sins, you would not have shared in his punishment.’⁹¹

This conceptualisation of the gift reminds us of Mauss's argument that the gift is ‘imbued with the personality of the partner who gave it’: as the man was tainted, so was his gift. It is not hard to see why it is this particular episode of Fursey's *vita* which Bede recounted, for it offers a profound warning against accepting the gifts of those with corrupt souls, and, by extension, condemns the increasing worldliness of

⁹¹ ‘Quod incendisti,’ inquit, ‘hoc arsit in te. Si enim huius viri in peccatis suis mortui pecuniam non accepisses, nec poena eius in te arderet.’ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, III.19.

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the Northumbrian church, sentiments further expressed by Bede in his letter to Archbishop Egbert of York.

It was not the beauty of gold or silver, of purple-died garments or necklaces of pearls, which Bede despised, for all these things were the Lord's creations, gifted to humanity, and could function to symbolise the majesty of Heaven as easily as the corruption of the human soul.⁹² But there was the very real danger that, through the wiles of the Devil, the untrained and ignorant mind would fail to see beyond the glitter, and would idolise the deceptive beauty of the treasure itself. Thus Bede was one member of the church who retained a very deep suspicion of material wealth, and Boniface, to a lesser extent, was another: he is almost apologetic when he asks Eadburg for the gold-scripted copy of St. Peter's letters 'in order to inspire honour and reverence for Holy Scripture in the eyes of the carnally minded' (*ad honorem et reuerentiam sanctarum scripturarum ante oculos carnalium*).⁹³ On this point, too, Bede had something to say, when, in justifying the use during the Easter Sunday responses of David's curse upon the death of the wicked Saul, he argued that one should never be distracted by the literal appearance of what was meant to be symbolic:

Otherwise, if good could not be signified through bad, and bad through good, it would never be permitted to write in black ink, but always in shining gold, for 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5); nor, on the other hand, would the names of Absalom and Doeg, those reprobates, be

⁹² In particular regarding Bede's comments on purple dye and pearls in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, see G. Henderson, *Bede and the Visual Arts* (Jarrow, 1980), 3-4.

⁹³ Tangl, ep. 35, 60.

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allowed to be written in the Psalms with the slightest brightness, but only with dark colour.⁹⁴

It is on the pages of sacred books that the two worlds of Godelier, the world of the symbolic and the world of the imaginary, collide. The custom of gift-giving resided in the world of the symbol, the *indicium*. According to the conventions of gift-giving which formed such an important part of religious as well as secular social relations, gifts had to be exchanged as expressions of loyalty, and, although each situation did allow for some negotiation, the forms of both giving and receiving were guided by those conventions. Boniface's correspondents reconciled the material, competitive nature of gift-giving with the monastic ideal of poverty by reducing the gift utterly to a symbol, continually begging the receiver to regard only the dutiful affection that lay behind it, and divorcing the gift from any other part of themselves.

Sacred books, on the other hand, were no mere symbols. Like relics, they were holy in themselves – not so much the pages, as what the pages contained, raised the books from the world of the symbol to the world of the imaginary. Godelier's term 'imaginary representations' is slightly misleading in that it removes us from the concrete form such representations hold in the mind of the beholder, but it retains its power once we realise that all aspects of human experience are in some sense constructions of the imagination. The sacredness of Scripture was as solid as a rock or tree in the minds of Boniface and his circle. This is why Boniface found the idea of writing out the letters of St. Peter in gold distasteful, and was quick to distance

⁹⁴ Alioquin si non et per mala bonum, et malum significari per bonum posset, nunquam liceret nigro atramento, sed semper lucido auro deberet scribi: quia *Deus lux est, et tenebrae in eo non sunt ullae*, nec rursum in titulis psalmorum nomen Absalon et Doeg hominum reproborum minio fulgente, sed solo atro colore deberet ascribi. Bede, *Aliquot Quaestionum Liber* in *Opera Omnia V. Beda*, Patrologia Latina 93, Col. 0459A.

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himself from the *carnales* who would find such an object inspiring for its own sake. But he was far too practical a man to ignore the power of the symbolic.

Further study of material beyond the scope of this article may help nuance these observations: the letters of Alcuin, for example, could provide contrasting evidence for secular and ecclesiastical gift-giving conventions towards the end of the eighth century, while a wider survey of the symbolic and practical status of books in contemporary letters, prose and poetry would also be useful. Garrison, for instance, has already observed the uniquely high status which Alcuin accorded virtually all books, going so far as to describe works of the secular liberal arts as ‘holy volumes’. Yet, as she notes, ‘Alcuin’s acute sense of the extraordinary preciousness of books because of the wisdom they transmitted remains ideosyncratic, unparalleled, and... distinctive’.⁹⁵

With regard to the letters of Boniface and Lul, then, it seems that one reason why we almost never find sacred books included in the conventional forms of gift-giving and -receiving was that they did not belong to that conceptual world. Aside from their expense and their practical usefulness, holy texts were far more than handbooks for conversion or educational tools.⁹⁶ It was through the contemplation of sacred script, after all, that one came closer to God: it offered solace and aid, *solamen* or *consolatio*,⁹⁷ of a type infinitely superior to that offered by the worldly comfort of an embroidered cloak. Books were, as Michelle Brown puts it, ‘portals of prayer’ and ‘gateways to revelation’, tabernacles of the Word, and the Word was, of course, God

⁹⁵ Garrison, ‘The library of Alcuin’s York’.

⁹⁶ Notwithstanding Alcuin’s views on the holiness of books and learning in general, it could be debated whether or not the letters of Gregory the Great offered as a gift were in fact regarded by Boniface or Egbert as sacred in the same sense as biblical, patristic or exegetical literature.

⁹⁷ Tangl., ep. 35, 60; 125, 263; 126, 264; 127, 265; 145, 283.

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Himself.⁹⁸ It would have been inappropriate, if not impious, for clerics to have offered one another pieces of Holy Scripture as *munuscula*, thus to reduce the Word of God to a mere token of affection, when it was through the Word that the Christian – indeed, the whole world – had received the only gift which truly mattered.

⁹⁸ M. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (London, 2003), 398-400. She argues that for the monks involved, the creation of a sacred text was as much a spiritual as a physical and economic investment; see also Gameson, 'The cost of the Codex Amiatinus.'