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Rome: Capital of Anglo-Saxon England

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Rome:

Capital of Anglo-Saxon England

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The common entry for the year 816 in the Anglo-Saxon *Chronicle* reads in whole, as here from the C Text:

Her Stephanus papa for [redacted] ferde, & æfter him wæs Paschalis to papange halgod. & [redacted] yilcan geare for barn Angelcynnes scole.

[In this year, Pope Stephen died and after him Paschal was ordained as pope. And in that same year the school of the English people burned down.]¹

In its attention to the death of one pope and the ordination of his successor, the opening sentence of this entry is typical of others in the *Chronicle*. Popes died with predictable regularity, and for reasons both religious and political, it was necessary to record the end of one term and the start of the next one. Every iteration of this sequence served as well to remind the English readership of the *Chronicle* that Rome was the center of western Christendom as a spiritual realm subject to the authority of a single leader. The substance of the second sentence in the annal is, however, more unusual within the *Chronicle*: "& [redacted] yilcan geare for barn Angelcynnes scole." *Scolu* can be translated as "school" or "quarter" or "hostelry"; but it here designates the well-known institution for English pilgrims in Rome that was founded originally in the late eighth century.²

The *Vita Paschalis*, found within the *Liber Pontificalis*, records that members of the *gens Anglorum* were in the habit of describing this location as a *burh*: "quae in eorum lingua burgus dicitur."³ Given that *burh* in Old English typically designates a fortified site or stronghold, it may not be too misleading to read the *scolu* of the 816 entry as referring to a hostelry where those of the *Angelcynn* could lodge in safety when in Rome, whether there as students, pilgrims, or visiting ecclesiastical dignitaries. Pope Paschal contributed **[End Page 147]** generously to the rebuilding of the *scolu* after the fire of 816, a further reason perhaps for recording his ordination in the *Chronicle* entry of that year. This *scolu* known also as the Anglo-Saxon *burh* has left its mark on the Roman cityscape to the current day. As Wilhelm Levison asked some years ago, "How many Englishmen who pass the Borgo Santo Spirito walking from the Ponte Sant' Angelo to St. Peter's, are aware that they are crossing a district which was originally an English 'borough'?"⁴ As Levison's enduring book demonstrates, an émigré German scholar lecturing at Oxford in 1943 was the ideal figure to savor the complexities of *burh* becoming *borgo*, and thus to identify the lasting presence of the insular on the Continent. This instance of unlikelihood, of an Old English word becoming Italianized, suggests as well that the relations between Anglo-Saxon England and Rome are well worth exploring further.

The traditional focus of Anglo-Saxonists on the cultural links between the island and the northwestern regions of Europe has been sustained by an overriding concern with literary texts. In this regard, it is *Beowulf* that matters, as well as some of the shorter poems and traditional genealogies that trace the Anglo-Saxons back to continental kings and, sometimes, divinities. There is another argument to be made, however, that this scholarly approach may say at least as much about its adherents as about the Anglo-Saxons themselves, that it may reflect nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century attitudes more than eighth- or eleventh-century realities. For the purposes of inquiry, perhaps even of polemical assertion, I argue in this study that the Anglo-Saxons found an intellectual and spiritual *patria* that had Rome as its capital. This new relation did not lead the Anglo-Saxons to abandon the Germanic tradition, though we would do well to recollect how tenuously it survives: for the one extant manuscript of *Beowulf*, there are dozens of Bede.

The 816 *Chronicle* entry is illuminating for this inquiry because, to begin with the...

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