Reflection Form: Visit to a Site

Student Name J. R. Sample Historical Era Anglo-Saxon

Institution Represented church Date of Visit 23/1/04

Site Whitby Abbey Time Spent at Actual Site 1.8 hours

1. What did you actually see at this site that reflected life in this era?

The ruins of the Whitby Abbey Church that was built in the Middle Ages lies on a high promontory overlooking the town of Whitby and the expanse of the North Sea. The foundations of the Anglo-Saxon church and the other buildings of the Medieval monastery are also on the grounds. An exhibit in a small outbuilding provides additional information about the site and its history.

2. What was the nature of this institution (part of society) based on what you saw?

The Christian church in general and the site at Whitby in particular have been most important in Britain for over 1500 years. Focusing on the Anglo-Saxon era, Whitby Abbey was founded in 657 by Abbess Hilda as a double community of both monks and nuns. The Abbey was the site of the Synod (Council) of Whitby in 664, where Roman rather than Celtic traditions were adopted by the developing English church. Monasteries emerged as institutions which promoted the work of God by producing and copying religious works, acquired wealth and resources from patrons seeking salvation, and provided for some of the needs of the poor in the area and travelers.

3. What did you learn about the nature of society during this era in visiting this site?

Christianity was an important force in Anglo-Saxon times. Many of the kings of England and the regional barons adopted Christianity, thereby influencing their own lives and the lives of those whom they ruled. People believed that life in the hereafter was determined by the type of life they lived during their time on earth, and they therefore tried to live in accordance with Christian teachings and customs, including giving a portion of their wealth to the abbeys.

4. What did you learn about the lives of individuals during this era in visiting this site?

Monks lived their life in accordance of the Rule of St. Benedict, which prescribed a pattern of daily life. They rose for Matins at 2:00 am, slept briefly, were awakened again at about 5:00 for Lauds and then attended Prime at dawn, Terce at 8:00 am, Sext at noon, None before 2:00 pm Vespers in the late afternoon, and Compline at 6:00 pm (or sunset). In the intervals they would read, perform chores and eat simple fare, with the main meal usually taken after None.

5. How were specific groups of people affected differently and/or unequally in this institution or society? (e.g. Were males and females treated differently? Were class differences evident?)

The monks and nuns led somewhat separated lives, although the information available at the site emphasized the routine for the monks and said little about the nuns. St. Hilda was a very
prominent person, and is given status above all others in the history of the Abbey. As Abbess she provided leadership to both the nuns and the monks. A hierarchy existed in the abbeys, with the abbot or abbess clearly on top, the monks in the middle and the lay brothers being accorded less status and privilege.

6. Share any other reflections you may have based on viewing this site (use the back of this sheet if necessary).

I was struck by how wealthy and powerful the abbeys grew, in part because of continuing patronage by the wealthy over hundreds of years. The centers of different orders were abroad, often in France, leading to a drain of wealth and power to that country. Henry VIII took possession of that wealth when he dissolved the monasteries in the late 1530's.