BEOWULF AND THE ORIGINS OF THE WRITTEN OLD ENGLISH VERNACULAR

Abstract: This paper seeks to present an overview of the evidence for vernacular literacy in England prior to the Alfredian revival and, in the light of this, to discuss whether, in principle, the *Beowulf* poem—like the *Dream of the Rood*—could have undergone several iterations before assuming its full literary form. **Keywords**: Old English, vernacular literacy, *Beowulf*, *Dream of the Rood*, History, Art History, Mercia, Kent, Northumbria, Wessex, King Alfred, Book of Cerne, Book History.

Resumen: Este artículo busca presentar una panorámica de las pruebas de una alfabetización vernácula en la Inglaterra anterior al renacimiento alfrediano y, en consecuencia, discutir si, en principio, el poema *Beowulf*—como el *Sueño de la Cruz*—podría haber sufrido varias revisiones antes de asumir su forma literaria completa. **Palabras clave**: Inglés antiguo, alfabetización vernácula, *Beowulf, Sueño de la Cruz*, Historia, Historia del arte, Mercia, Kent, Northumbria, Wessex, Rey Alfredo, Libro de Cerne, Historia del libro.

I DO NOT PROPOSE TO ENGAGE HERE IN A SPECIFIC DISCUSSION of the dating or localisation of the sole surviving early manuscript witness to the Old English poem known as *Beowulf*, nor to participate in the complex and contentious debate concerning the generation of the fully-fledged composition that is preserved therein, as there are those far better qualified to do so.[1] Rather, I should like to consider whether the cultural contexts for the composition and transmission of vernacular material of this sort might allow, in principle, for something of a back-story to this epic work, prior to its appearance in the Nowell Codex around the year 1000. This will entail a consideration of the origins of the written English vernacular and of the nature of cumulative composition, as well as of audience reception by what might be termed a "community of reading," by which I mean the widest participative group sharing access, of varying sorts and degrees, to

[1] I should like to thank Leonard Neidorf for his encouragement in writing this paper. For an overview of the debate on the dating of *Beowulf* as it currently stands, see Neidorf 2014.

a common narrative. This may, or may not, take a written form or forms and may, or may not, entail the ability to read writing.

The majority of extant manuscripts containing Old English, including the four poetic codices, were written in the tenth to twelfth centuries. Transcription errors and archaic orthographical forms indicate that some of the texts in these manuscripts were composed at a significant but uncertain remove. Nevertheless, scholars have frequently assumed that the palaeographical dating of our extant manuscripts provides us with more than the *terminus ante quem* of their contents. There is a problematic tendency in recent Old English studies for scholars to equate the date of a particular manuscript's production with the date of its content's composition.[2] Thus, it is often assumed that if a prose text is found in a tenth- or eleventh-century manuscript, it must have been composed then.

However, R. D. Fulk has recently made a persuasive case against this assumption, demonstrating that a substantial number of vernacular prose texts contain archaic and dialectal features that render eighth-century composition far more probable (1992: 60–65). Likewise, the Leiden Riddle, an eighth-century Northumbrian translation of Aldhelm's *Enigma* 33 (Smith 1933: 18, 23–25; Van Kirk Dobbie 1942: cviii–cx, 109, 199–200),[3] survives due to copying by a tenth-century hand (in Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Voss. Lat. Q. 106, f. 25v).[4] A further intriguing case is the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, a miscellaneous assemblage of materials including riddling questions, formerly attributed to Bede and included in the edition of his complete works printed in Basel in 1563,[5] of

[2] In the case of *Beowulf* studies this has escalated since the publication of Chase 1981 and Kiernan 2011.

[3] I am deeply indebted to Mercedes Salvador-Bello for this reference, and those in the following two footnotes.

[4] For a full description of this manuscript and its contents, see Bremmer & Dekker 2006: 107–112 and Parkes 1972: 216–217.

[5] Herwagen 1563: III.647–674. For discussion, see Bayless & Lapidge 1998.

which no manuscript copy survives. Nonetheless, comparison with other literary works led Lapidge to conclude that the florilegium probably originated in the mid-eighth century, "either in Ireland or England, or in an Irish foundation on the Continent" (Bayless & Lapidge 1998: 12).[6] Such admissions of the possibility of an earlier date of initial composition than that of the extant manuscript evidence is not new; Tolkien adopted a similar stance in his seminal paper "The Monsters and the Critics," delivered in 1936, in which he suggested a date for Beowulf closer to that of Bede (Tolkien 2006).

Leonard Neidorf has taken a similar stance in his recent study of the poem *Widsiđ*, of which he writes (2013a: 165):

> Recent work on *Widsiđ* contends that there is little evidence supporting the presumed early date of composition. This essay argues, however, that four categories of evidence can be brought to bear on the dating of *Widsiđ*—orthographic, lexical, onomastic, and cultural—and that all four of these categories agree in support of an early date of composition.

Concerning *Beowulf*, Neidorf (2013b) has also shown that, between the seventh century and the time that the monk "Biuuulf" was commemorated in the Durham *Liber Vitae* (written around 840), parents were naming their children after a legendary hero whose reputation was already well-known, and who was probably later placed at the heart of the famous poem. Neidorf (2013c), and earlier Michael Lapidge, has also cited the occurrence of multiple scribal errors in respect of the name in support of an earlier written circulation prior to the poem being inscribed in the Nowell Codex in the early eleventh century. Lapidge (2000) has related some of these errors, palaeographically, to misunderstandings of eighth-

[6] This compilation shares numerous characteristics with other riddling dialogues, see Bayless & Lapidge 1998: 13. However, the inclusion of five pieces from Symphosius's *Enigmata* and five from Aldhelm's demonstrates that the author of the *Collectanea* was acquainted with major riddle collections, see Bayless & Lapidge 1998: 22.

century Insular set minuscule letter-forms of a sort current before the mid eighth century.

An over-reliance upon the materiality of the evidential base under-estimates the likely low survival rate for the early medieval footprint of memory and identity. The fact that few artefacts and manuscripts bearing written Old English survive does not mean that it did not enjoy wider currency. In fact, the law of probability would suggest that, on the basis of those items that do survive, it would have done. Also, there are a series of references in historical texts of the period and a number of cultural contextual parallels that would likewise indicate that the written vernacular was more widespread during the pre-Alfredian period than has been assumed.

A number of literary-historical assumptions support and inform the assumption that Old English texts are more likely to be late rather than early. One of these beliefs is that the vernacular was rarely used in writing before the reign of King Alfred. The cultural and political agendas of the king and his successors led them to portray him as an innovator in this practice, and modern scholars have generally credited his claims, partly in response to a reaction against an earlier scholarly tendency to assign the origins of major cultural trends to the age of Bede.[7] Dorothy Whitelock (1951: 25) helped to shift such assumptions when she suggested that a later date (before 835), perhaps the reign of Offa of Mercia, might be a more credible context for the origins of the *Beowulf* poem.[8] Roberta Frank (1981, 2007), John D. Niles (1999, 2007), and Craig Davis (1996, 2006) are amongst those who have since argued eloquently that the Alfredian program of *translatio* and *renovatio* would have created new conditions conducive to the

[7] For a summary of the debate on the dating of *Beowulf* as it stood at the end of the twentieth century, see Chase 1981, especially his Introduction (3–8).

[8] An attribution of the poem to Offa's reign was subsequently taken up by Wrenn and Sisam, see Chase 1981: 7.

composition of *Beowulf*. N. F. Blake (1977) has argued that the bulk of Old English poetry, including *Beowulf*, was composed during or after Alfred's educational program, which "provides us with a good reason for the rise and development of the poetry." The biggest support for the myth that the vernacular was born during Alfred's reign, however, is the assumption that manuscript dates provide special insight into composition dates. E. G. Stanley (1981) has expressed this questionable idea in the context of the dating of *Beowulf*: "The greater the distance between the date of the *Beowulf* manuscript—"s. X/XI" by paleographical dating—and the posited date of the poem as we now have it, the heavier the element of hypothesis."

The present essay will not make a specific argument about the date of *Beowulf*. Rather it will reconsider evidence bearing on some of the literary-critical and text-historical assumptions that have informed discussion of the issue. In particular, it will posit powerful cumulative evidence indicating that the vernacular was used in writing during the earlier Anglo-Saxon period. This evidence offers some important methodological reminders: that the extant manuscripts present a skewed and partial image of the vibrant cultural production of Anglo-Saxon England; that the assertions of King Alfred, his heirs and publicists should not always be taken at face value; and that we must take adequate account of probable lacunae in the evidence as well as its extant material manifestations. Glosses, texts, inscriptions, and several crucial passages from Bede indicate that there must have been frequent use of the vernacular in writing before Alfred's reign. This paper is thus intended to encourage us to reconsider how we discuss Old English literary history. We may achieve a more nuanced understanding of the literary culture of Anglo-Saxon England by focusing less on homogenizing manuscript dates and more on evidence indicating probable composition dates and cultural trends.

Discussions of this *Beowulf* poem's origins have entailed a consideration of the text, palaeography and codicology of the Nowell Codex, its dating and localisation (this actual sole surviving manuscript dating to c.1000–1025, place of origin uncertain), and whether it is: (*a*) a copy of an earlier work; (*b*) a representative of authorial input and therefore close to the date of actual composition; or (*c*) part of an ongoing iterative process of textual transmission in which an earlier core text is being amplified or reworked in some way. Amongst the many valuable contributions to this debate has been the invaluable work undertaken by Kevin Kiernan, especially in pursuit of the goal of making Beowulf the first cybernaut, with the appearance of the electronic *Beowulf* in which the manuscript was digitised and given a digital raft of scholarly apparatus and accompanying commentary (Kiernan 2011). Then there has been the ongoing process of examining the cultural context in which the action of the poem is set and the equation of this with material culture as attested by archaeology and art and attempts to match this to historical context—i.e. to render it period specific by locating parallels to features such as the hall in Heorot, ship burial (which has been compared to that excavated at Sutton Hoo), treasure hoards concealed in barrows and the like. Most recently, in this vein, has been the fascinating work by John D. Niles (1999, 2007) on correspondences between the material culture described in the poem and the excavations at the Danish site of Lejre, where halls similar to Heorot have been discovered, and also on the context of oral literature. The question then arises of whether such well-observed evocations of social setting are period specific or whether they represent a literary topos, designed to evoke a past age and, if the latter, to identify a historical context for composition that would make such an evocation of an earlier age desirable. In the case of *Beowulf* and the ideal it presents of Germanic warrior lifestyle, these might include a wish to summon up such heroic associations

for reasons of geneaological and political legitimisation,[9] or a desire to heighten the sense of a shared cultural memory between different peoples of common pagan Germanic root-stock, namely the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians who had followed them in settling in Britain from the ninth century onwards.

Such debates are not exclusive to *Beowulf*, of course. The study of the transmission of Homeric epic and its transition from an oral to a written mode of dissemination and preservation springs to mind as, closer to hand in both time and space, does that of the great Celtic epic, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ("The Cattle Raid of Cooley;" Kinsella 1969). This is thought, on linguistic grounds, first to have been committed to writing in approximately the seventh century, although, like its Anglo-Saxon counterpart *Beowulf*, the detail of the world in which it is set relates to the pre-Christian Iron Age, whereas its earliest extant manuscript version dates to a later period, in this case to around 1100. A sixteenth-century copy is preserved in British Library, Egerton MS 93, and this exhibits a remarkable conservatism, as if highly trained druidic oral mnemonic discipline had been imported into the written environment, safeguarding the smallest details of the material culture and practices of an earlier age across perhaps as much as a millennium and a half by means of careful, disciplined recitation and periodic attempts to capture this orality in written form. As research by Robin Flower, a curator at the British Museum Library, demonstrated, as late as the mid-twentieth century Peig Sayers, an elderly woman living on the Blasket Islands in western Ireland and who was "illiterate" in the conventional sense, was still able to recite much of the tale verbatim

[9] These include the work by Craig Davis in identifying an Alfredian dynastic genealogical interest in asserting a link with the Germanic dynasties of the *Beowulf* poem, tracing his father's line back to Scyld and his mother's to the Geats and Goths (see Davis 1996, 2006). Helen Damico has recently delivered lectures on her work to demonstrate a link between the poem and Queen Emma's dynastic interests.

as it occurred in its medieval written form, purely from memory (Flower 1978; Sayers 1974).

Like *Beowulf,* the *Táin* contains references to things and practices that may have passed out of currency by the time that they were recorded on the manuscript page. For example, the use of the Celtic proto-writing system, ogham/ogam, attributed to the god Ogmios, although it is essentially an exploded version of the Roman alphabet which takes the form of carved lines grouped in families of five. Bede's explication of the decimal system and the use of finger-counting may owe something, ultimately, to druidic use of the digits as a mnemonic aid, which also led them to group the graphic characters of ogam into fives, exhibiting the influence of Pythagorean number symbolism. The practice was still employed, much later, in printing by typesetters. A similar treatment of exploded letter-forms may also be encountered in some of the grafitti at Pompeii. Ogam was used for short inscriptions from the first to the seventh centuries, in Ireland and by Irish emigrants to Scotland and Wales, whose inscriptions reveal that they retained their native tongue. These often commemorate individuals but the talismanic potential of ogam is also indicated by a passage in the *Táin*, in which an army is stopped in its tracks by a stick carved with an ogam taboo (Kinsella 1969: 68, 263). Even if Christian scribes of a later age were familiar with the ogam alphabet in an antiquarian fashion, as *probationes pennae* and other annotations suggest, their earlier significance and use had long since disappeared.[10]

Many manuscripts written in the early Celtic vernacular languages are, like their Old English counterparts, of later date than that of the textual composition—notably the twelfth century in the case of Ireland when the Normans were making their presence felt—perhaps reflecting a perceived need on the part

[10] Interestingly, some 550 medieval rune-sticks have been excavated at Bergen, Norway and, as Kelly has suggested, it is also possible that they were also used for practical communication in Anglo-Saxon England. See Liestøl 1968, 1971 and Kelly 1990: 37.

of scholars, librarians, or other preservers of group memory, to preserve indigenous culture in the wake of conquest and renewed ecclesiastical rapprochement with mainstream Europe. Such a phenomenon is probably also to be observed in the tendency to anthologise knowledge in English around the turn of the first millennium, evinced by works such as the Anglo-Saxon Herbal, the so-called Anglo-Saxon Scientific Miscellany, the Vercelli Codex, the Exeter Book and perhaps the Nowell Codex itself (Brown 2011 & forthcoming (b)). In the case of Ireland, however, rapid changes in linguistic development permit the excavation of underlying composition dates for vernacular texts preserved in later compilations.

A thumbnail sketch of this process in Ireland may serve as a useful comparative case study in linguistic and cultural transmission. To quote Michael Richter, "[a]fter Latin, Irish is the language in western Europe with the longest and best-documented development" (Richter 1988: 11). Its earliest vehicles were the ogam inscriptions (indeed, the term "ogam" was retained in medieval Ireland as a cognomen for the written vernacular), an elegy of *c.* 600 (the *Amra Coluim Chille*), an early "mirror for princes" (the *Audacht Morainn* of *c.* 700) and legal texts. This Archaic Old Irish accompanies the period of the introduction and spread of Christianity and its literate learning throughout Irish territory and travelled with the *peregrini* to Britain and the Continent. Texts are more plentiful from the mid-eighth century onwards and contemporary manuscript witnesses survive, mostly preserved in continental Irish foundations, such as Bobbio and St Gall, such as the *St Gallen Priscian*. Other extant early vernacular texts include a treatise on the mass in the early ninth-century Stowe Missal and texts included in the Patriciana of the Book of Armagh, of 807.[11] There was a permeable interaction between Latin and the vernacular

[11] Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 52 (Alexander 1978: no. 53), Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 52 (Alexander 1978: no. 53).

and patterns of such interaction could vary according to genre. Some texts, such as annals and penitentials, were written initially in Latin but moved into Old Irish from around 800, whilst others, such as the vernacular secular law tracts, seem to have received a stimulus from Latin ecclesiastical collections. For example, *Senchas Már* ("The Great Old Knowledge") was compiled during the eighth century, probably in response to the Latin ecclesiastical *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* (Richter 1988: 88).

In view of the early nature of the origins of the Irish written vernacular, its interaction with latinate literacy, preserved oral tradition and observed patterns of preservation and migration over time and within the extant manuscript corpus, it is generally considered that the *Táin,* as represented in its late medieval manuscript form, preserves at its core an orally composed and transmitted Iron Age epic, which reflects the social and material contexts of the pre-Christian period but which has grown and incorporated textual and linguistic interventions over succeeding centuries, especially during the process of being committed to writing by Christian (probably monastic) scribes.

The alacrity of the English in adopting a written vernacular was probably influenced, at least initially, by the precocity of their Irish neighbours. Like the Celtic peoples and their ogam, the Germanic exposure to romanisation seems to have fostered the adoption of a proto-writing system: runes. Their origins also lie within the pre-Christian, "pre-literate" prehistoric past. "Rune" means "secret," perhaps implying early elitist or cult use. The poet Cynewulf, perhaps writing as early as the late eighth century, would append them to his works as a cryptic signature and the solutions to certain Latin riddles depends upon a knowledge of runes (Page 1973; Sisam 1953: 1–28). The Old German runic *futhark / futhorc*, of twenty-four characters grouped in families of eight, is thought to have been current from AD 200–750. Localised demand led to expansion to thirty-three in England, for phonetic purposes. Some runic characters are clearly indebted to the Roman or Etruscan

alphabet, their angular forms betraying epigraphic origins. This is in effect a proto-literate writing system, born of lengthy liminal contact with the Mediterranean and of limited application. Runes generally occur in short inscriptions (Page 1995; Forsyth, Higgitt & Parsons 2001) on artefacts such as jewellery, weapons and monuments, sometimes occurring alongside Latin, which aided in their initial decipherment, although they are also discussed in a scholarly context in later Christian manuscripts and continue to occur in Christian inscriptions, petering out only after the thirteenth century.

As far as we can tell, the role of the *scop* was not as formalised within early Germanic society as that of the Celtic bard, whose role as a member of the *aes dana*—the professional classes—was protected and celebrated in Irish law and whose training as a preserver of group memory and identity fell within the orbit of the specialised druidic caste, with its schooled tradition (McGrath 1979). Yet, even if we were to accept the premise that Germanic bards were capable of composing, preserving and transmitting a complex epic poem of the nature of *Beowulf* across several centuries before it was written down in the Nowell Codex or any earlier lost manuscript intermediaries, then the scholarly trend to place the origins of written Old English in the Alfredian era has still tended to preclude this hypothesis. But is it really the case that there could have been no substantial literary compositions in Old English prior to the Alfredian revival? Or, as in the case of the *Táin,* might there indeed be the possibility of a back-story to the process of textual development and transmission of *Beowulf* prior to its appearance in the Nowell Codex?

In a recent monograph, *The Book and the Transformation of Britain c.550–1050* (Brown 2011), I have attempted to assess something of the nature of the complex interplay between written and visual literacy and orality in Anglo-Saxon England. In the course of this study I examined some of the evidence for the early use of the written vernacular and suggested that there may be some

value in reappraising the conventional scholarly view, as a cultural model even given the limited nature of the surviving evidence. It may be helpful to summarise here some of the context that I have proposed.

Literacy is more complex than simply the ability to read and to write. One needs to take full account of the reader as viewer and the reader as listener. The ability to "read" has as much to do with the ability to comprehend meaning as with the technical ability to decipher graphic symbols and form them into words. Oral and visual literacy play as essential a part in communicating text as writing has—and often an even greater role for a wider audience. During the early Middle Ages, when the act of writing was essentially the preserve of professional scribes and highly educated scholars and the sustained act of reading generally one of public performance or private meditation and study, we should not judge a people's literacy by the deployment of these skills alone, but also by its response to the book and to the impact of text conveyed across time and space. Oral and written forms of transmission might interact over time, transforming a text in the process.

The rise of the written vernaculars was intimately interwoven with the introduction and transmission of Scripture (Brown 2005). Centralised authorities tend to promote the use of a single unifying language, whilst those affirming local or group identity often use language as a means of signalling independent traditions and histories. "Vernacular" languages are distinguished by their particularised use, in contrast to "universal" languages. With the growth in the acceptance of Christianity these notional universals became the *linguae sacrae*: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. In the Near East, although Greek became the principal language of the Byzantine Empire, independent local Churches emerged in areas such as Armenia, Syria and Coptic Egypt, each with their own languages and traditions which found graphic expression in their books (Buchtal & Kurz 1942; Déroche & Richard 1997). The same would occur in the British Isles and Ireland.

The *imperium* of Rome and the pattern of post-Roman devolution of power to the urban episcopacy led to Latin retaining a prominence in the West. In the Preface to his *Institutiones* Cassiodorus wrote (Mynors 1937: 5–6):

> And so it appears that the Divine Scriptures of the Old and New Testament from the very beginning to the end have been expanded in the Greek language…But with the Lord's aid we follow rather after Latin writers, that, since we are writing for Italians, we may most fitly seem to have pointed out Roman interpreters as well. For more gladly is that narration undertaken by every man which is told in the language of his fathers.

His portrayal of Latin as the early Italian may be disingenuous, but it does serve as a timely reminder that the primacy of Latin was by no means assured. The shift in perception of its status owed a great deal to Jerome, Popes Damasus and Gregory the Great in their promotion in the West of Latin Scripture and commentary, raising "vulgar' (*vulgata*) Latin to literary heights. Latin and the Roman alphabet thus rose to prominence largely in response to the bureaucratic needs of the amorphous Roman Empire and its heir—the Church. The question was perhaps whether the Church would embrace the idea of a *lingua franca* or would accommodate its multi-lingual, diverse local parts within a latter-day Tower of Babel (Brown 2005). The account of Pentecost (*Acts* 2.4–6) was of particular relevance in this respect:

> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.[12]

Bede was particularly interested in this episode. In his *Commentary on Acts* (*Acts* 2.6) he said that it could be taken as meaning that

[12] Biblical quotations from Palmer *et al*. 1978.

the Apostles went to many different peoples and preached in their many tongues, or that they spoke only once and the Holy Spirit simultaneously translated for their hearers' benefit (Hudson 1983: 3–99; Martin 1989). He was much criticised for this assumed heresy of *innovatio* and in his *Retractatio* justified his statement by emphasizing that he was quoting from Gregory Nazianzen. Yet Bede was not alone in his perception of the value of sharing Scripture in the vernacular, in both oral and written forms. Indeed, some of the earliest examples of written vernaculars come from precisely this evangelising context.

The conversion process for a religion of the Word entails not only the translation problems of preaching in the field, for which interpreters are often required, but also the need to teach the necessary literacy skills for reading and copying texts. Missionaries accordingly often resorted to the use of a written version of the spoken language of the area they were evangelising, as a step on the path to achieving full (Latin) literacy. Phonetics played an important part, for different sounds encountered in local languages often necessitated the creation of entire scripts or modifications of existing systems to suit spoken languages, such as the Miao script developed by Pollard of the Christian Bible Society and Cherokee script invented by the native American Sequoya and his family (Brown 1998).[13]

Gothic was the earliest written vernacular in the late Roman "West," invented by Ulfila (*c.* 311–383) "Apostle to the Goths," who drew upon the Greek and Roman alphabets to produce the written Gothic language in order to translate the Bible. The great monument to the Gothic language is the Codex Uppsalensis (or Codex Argenteus: Uppsala, Universitetsbiblioteket, MS DG I), a splendid volume written in sixth-century Ravenna for the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric (Brown 1998: 43; Webster &

[13] For an outline of biblical transmission in the early Middle Ages see Brown 2006b.

Brown 1997: 242–243).[14] The adaptation of the Greek alphabet to Armenian and Georgian is likewise attributed to the fifth-century missionary St Mesrop and the Greek-based Glagolitic alphabet is ascribed to St Cyril, missionary to the Slavs. Bede's claims in respect of Augustine's mission having likewise begun the process of writing Old English (rather than merely inscribing short runic inscriptions) are not, therefore, without context in the conversion orbit. He tells us that King Ethelberht of Kent "introduced with the consent of his counsellors a code of law inspired by the example of the Romans, which was written in English, and remains in force to this day" (*HE*, II.5).

Influenced by a growing perception of the iconic nature of the book in a religious context, Insular secular rulers were quick to perceive the value of this powerful medium, and of a literate clerical administration, and enlisted the support of church personnel in penning law-codes, charters and genealogies to help establish secure, legitimate states (Cubitt 1995, 2009; Kelly 1990; Wormald 1999). The Roman missionaries may not have translated the Bible into English (although the English Church, along with those of the Irish, would soon display an open mind in translating Scripture), but they were apparently quick to commit Kent's Germanic law-code to the "safe-keeping" of writing, thereby beginning the processes of transliterating Old English into the Roman script and integrating the Church into the social structure.[15] Augustine's role in inventing written Old English is perhaps best viewed in the context of the mission's instructions from Pope Gregory the Great to site Christianity within existing local tradition. The books that accompanied his mission helped shape perceptions of the authority of writing in such a society, revolutionizing its oral literary, learning and administration. Augustine and his followers

[14] Facsimile in Svedberg *et al*. 1927.

[15] For an overview of the conversion period in England, see Mayr-Harting 1977 and Brown 2006a.

had some foundations upon which to build. They supplemented the Roman alphabet with characters representing alien phonetic elements based upon pre-existing Germanic runes. Even though the only extant copy of Ethelberht's code is in the twelfth-century copy (the *Textus Roffensis*, now in Kent Record Office), the script of which preserves earlier palaeographical features, it therefore seems reasonable to accept that Augustine and his circle intervened at an early stage in devising a written form of the language of the people they had come to convert (see Webster & Backhouse 1991: 39–46).

Those areas which appear to have most consciously preserved their own script systems, decoration and the vernacular were those which escaped absorption within the Carolingian Empire and its successors, namely: Britain, Ireland, Visigothic Spain and Benevento. This raises the interesting issue of imperialism and regional identity in book production. The corresponding reluctance of the East and West Franks and the rest of Italy to promote the vernacular has been ascribed to the gradual evolution of the Romance languages from the Latinity of the late Roman Empire and to a conscious Carolingian policy of promoting Latin, and Caroline minuscule, as a means of cultural cohesion and control throughout the Carolingian Empire. Thus German identity would not be unduly distinguished from that of Gaul, with its marked Roman legacy and mixed population (Nelson 1996: 10), and the written culture of the Carolingian Empire did not reflect its daily speech. Meanwhile, free from centralised rule, the newly Christianised Anglo-Saxon and Celtic peoples used everything at their disposal, including language, to share the "Good News" (Old English *gōd spell*), as did some of their counterparts in the former eastern Roman Empire.

In his letter to Archbishop Ecgberht of York, dated 734, Bede—who presumably also incorporated runic characters into the Latin alphabet in his writing of the vernacular—wrote that he had found it useful to translate the *Pater Noster* and Creed into Old English for use by priests lacking sufficient Latinity to conduct services

(Plummer 1892–1896: II. 405–423; Farmer, Latham & Sherley-Price 1990: 337–351). This passage is often cited as evidence of the "illiterate" nature of much of the priesthood in England at this period, but upon closer scrutiny it can be interpreted differently:

> In preaching to the people, this message more than any other should be proclaimed: that the Catholic faith, as contained in the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, which the reading of the Gospel teaches us, should be deeply memorized by all who are under your rule. All who have already learnt the Latin tongue by constant reading have quite certainly learnt these texts as well; but as for the unlearned, that is, those who know their own language only, make these learn the texts in their own tongue and accurately sing them. This should be done not only by the laity still settled in secular life but also by clerics and monks who are already expert in the Latin language. For thus it will come about that the whole congregation of believers learns how to be full of faith and how it must protect and arm itself against the attacks of unclean spirits by firm belief: thus it comes about that the whole chorus of those who are praying to God learns what should be specially sought from God's mercy. That is why I have frequently offered translations of both the Creed and the Lord's Prayer into English to many unlearned priests. For St Ambrose the Bishop, speaking of faith, admonishes believers to sing the words of the Creed each morning: thus they fortify themselves with a spiritual antidote against the devil's poison, which he can wickedly instill by day and by night. Moreover the custom of repeated prayer and genuflexions has taught us to sing the Lord's Prayer more often.

Bede's primary intention here was to foster the creation of a community of prayer—the embodiment of the Church militant, the present manifestation of the Communion of Saints, which is fused with the Church triumphant (those in paradise) and expectant (those in purgatory) through collective prayer. This is to be sung, in the tradition of both the Temple and of the Germanic and Celtic cultures, and in the vernacular, based upon written translations. The assumption is that there are those who will be able to read text

in this form—priests and perhaps some laity—who will instruct others in its recitation. Those clerics who are already fully latinate and therefore "literate," are also expected to participate in collective vernacular performative prayer. Thus the oft misinterpreted passage presents us with a picture not of lamentable illiteracy amongst the priesthood, but a more nuanced situation of clergy who were expert in reading both written Latin and the vernacular, some clergy who could only read the vernacular—indicating that there was already a measure of vernacular literacy in the pre-Alfredian era—and laity who participated in the enactment of written text, by committing what intermediaries taught them to heart and singing it verbatim, or perhaps in some cases by first reading the words written in their own tongue (Farmer, Latham & Sherley-Price 1990: 340).

In a similar vein Bede also relates that Cædmon, using the divine gift of song, turned Scripture into English verse to make it more accessible:

> There was in the Monastery of this Abbess a certain brother particularly remarkable for the Grace of God, who was wont to make religious verses, so that whatever was interpreted to him out of scripture, he soon after put the same into poetical expressions of much sweetness and humility in English, which was his native language. By his verse the minds of many were often excited to despise the world, and to aspire to heaven. (*HE* IV.24)

Only the short piece known as Caedmon's Hymn is actually quoted by Bede, but his account reveals that Caedmon was responsible for many other vernacular poems. To test his new-found gift, Abbess Hild asked him to compose verse based upon "a passage of sacred history or doctrine"—the first of the many which followed after he took the cowl.

Bede's interest in the vernacular relates to his recognition of the generosity of the Jews in sharing their faith with the gentiles, pointing to passages in his commentary on Tobit (3.12 and 2.6) and their sharing the Word with the gentiles through the Greek

Septuagint, an impulse shared by the gentile races of Britain and Ireland who sought to share their faith with others (Connolly 1997: 24–25). On his deathbed Bede was still sharing—translating extracts from Isidore's *On the Nature of Things* and the Gospel of St John—fusing the revelations of science and mystic vision in the quest to know God. As the letter of his pupil Cuthbert to Cuthwin relates concerning Bede's final illness in 735 (Farmer, Latham & Sherley-Price 1990: 358–359):

> In these days, besides our lessons and the chanting of psalms, he was much busied with two short works which are specially worthy of memory: the translation into our own language for the Church's benefit of the Gospel of St John from the beginning until the passage where it says: "But what are these among so many?" [John 6.9], and also certain excerpts from the Book of Cycles by Bishop Isidore, about which he said: "I do not wish my students to read lies, or to work at this task in vain after my death."

Bede's translations have not survived, but some of his work may be recollected in the interlinear gloss added *c.* 950–960 to the Lindisfarne Gospels by the monk Aldred—the oldest surviving translation of the Gospels into English, wherein the gloss to John's Gospel is executed in two inks; might that honoured by the use of red ink preserve something of Bede's translation? (Brown 2003, 2006b). Aldred opened his accompanying colophon with a synopsis of the Monarchian prologues outlining the process of transmission (Brown forthcoming (a)). He associated himself in the colophon with those to whom original production was ascribed (the scribe, Bishop Eadfrith of Lindisfarne; the binder, his successor, Bishop Æthilwald; and the metalworker who adorned it, Billfrith the Anchorite); in so doing, Aldred presented himself by analogy as the fourth evangelist (Brown 2003: 96), John, beloved of Christ, placing himself, and the English language, in direct line of transmission from the divine to humankind.

Of similar date is the interlinear gloss supplied by the priests Owun and Farmon to the early ninth-century Irish MacRegol (or Rushworth) Gospels (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. D. 2. 19). The West-Saxon Gospels (London, British Library, Royal MS 1.A.xiv), preserved in a manuscript of twelfth-century date, are written in single columns of continuous prose text with simple coloured initials. However, the earliest English translation of a biblical text to survive physically is the interlinear gloss to the Vespasian Psalter added during the mid-ninth century in Canterbury to a Kentish volume made a century earlier. Both these and Aldred's glosses are inserted with care and sensitivity to the original layout of two extremely formal tomes. The signs are that, left to its own devices, Anglo-Saxon England would not have had to await Wycliffe and Tyndale to have produced an English vernacular Bible.

The origins of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of glossing may be observed in the Latin / Old English glossaries used in the schoolroom from the reforms of learning implemented by Theodore and Hadrian at Canterbury during the seventh century (Lindsay 1921). In such handbooks the glosses provide explanations and perhaps a translation of terms, often drawn from specific texts or subject-based. Such teaching aids were probably indebted to late Antique and Merovingian Graeco-Latin glossaries. The eighth-century Irish use of such glosses is also likely to have been of relevance here. The impact of the missionary conversion experience and of the "new learning" promoted by Theodore reverbertated throughout secular society, as well as the Church. Early English kings soon came to take pride in tracing their newly Christianised, integrated ancestry back through historical figures to pagan deities such as Woden and thence back to the biblical Adam and tracing their antecedents not only through the songs of bards and *scops*, but through the columns of a book, just as Christ's genealogy opened the holy Gospelbook. As the deeds of the heroes of generations past were lauded in song, so the biblical forefathers were celebrated

in the feasting hall. The account of Bede's death, written by his pupil Cuthbert, bears witness to his love of song, "for he knew our poems well," and indeed the earliest recorded Old English verses (even if only of 9 lines in length) are Caedmon's hymn (*HE* IV.24) and Bede's death song recounted by Cuthbert (Farmer, Latham & Sherley-Price 1990: 248–249 and 358, respectively). Yet before the eighth century was done such cross-cultural synthesis was becoming unacceptable, at least in cultivated circles, and another of Northumbria's scholar sons, Alcuin, would demand affrontedly of an Anglian religious community, which permitted such songs / poems / lays to be sung at table, "what has Ingeld to do with Christ?"[16]

Another English verse of this era was carved in Roman capitals and runes on the Ruthwell Cross in the ancient British kingdom of Rheged in Southwest Scotland during the eighth century. This monument, a visual meditation in stone on the Passion of Christ and the religious life, reflects Northumbrian influence in a recently annexed region, emphasised by its display of runic script (Ó Carragáin 1994, 2005). In the late tenth-century this verse was copied in a fuller form in the Vercelli book as *The Dream of the Rood*, in which the cross laments its role in the crucifixion of the young warrior, Christ, but is subsequently honoured by being covered in precious metals and jewels, becoming the honoured *crux gemmata*—symbol of Resurrection. Processional crosses, such as the early eleventh-century Brussels Cross, which carries passages similar to the *Dream of the Rood* poem inscribed upon it, recalled such eloquent splendour, as would the stone and wooden crosses that sprouted across the land. Such crosses also often bore scenes from Scripture, serving as teaching aids and being imbued with subtle exegetical meaning and typological analogies which would be apparent to the initiated and which might be expounded to the

[16] Alcuin raised this question in a letter dated 797 which has traditionally been thought to be addressed to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne; see Bullough 1993.

faithful. Bede's aspirations for reframing heroic northern culture in Christian guise were being fulfilled.

The Bewcastle Cross, of similar date to Ruthwell, likewise bears an eroded inscription in runes, proclaiming in Old English the fame of Northumbria's royal house—in the heart of British Rheged which they had annexed (Karkov & Orton 2003). The use of particular scripts could be a powerful statement of both harmonious integration and unity, as in the Lindisfarne Gospels where Roman capitals, Greek letters and stylised forms recalling runes and ogam are carefully synthesised in its display script, or of cultural and political supremacy (Alexander 1978: nos. 35, 20; Brown 2003: 55–56, fig. 25; Lowe 1934–1971: ii.215, ii.213; Webster and Brown 1997: 245–246). It is therefore most unlikely that the Chad Gospels, whose artist copied the incipit pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels, was Welsh (as its ninth-century provenance might suggest), for it goes a step further and features actual runic letter forms in some of its display script—a thing that no self-respecting Welsh person would do at a time of resistance to English expansionism (Brown 2003, 2007, 2008). R. I. Page has suggested that the epigraphic runes on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses and the Cuthbert coffin are indebted to the approach of manuscript scribes, and the context of public display of these monuments is such that we are likely to be witnessing positive cultural statements of "Englishness" and its relationships to Graeco-Roman past and international Christian present—with runes already serving as a signifier of Anglo-Saxon identity. Such semiotics remained important, for most people's knowledge of Scripture, as of other texts, would continue to be oral and visual.

Runes and Roman script also rubricate the Northumbrian eighth-century whalebone box known as the Franks Casket, which has been proposed as a book reliquary, Leslie Webster (2010) suggesting that it contained a Northumbrian royal genealogy. Such books were penned by clerics and helped to legitimise the rule of their owners as Christian princes whose ancestors, traditions

and beliefs were presented as world history within the context of a Christian eternity, just as their descent from historical and semi-mythical figures was traced to Germanic gods and Old Testament patriarchs. Thus the iconography of the casket related scenes from Jewish, perhaps Greek, Roman, Germanic and Christian traditions, captioned in runes and roman capitals, juxtaposing and synthesising them to provide a visual genealogy of power and redemption for a contemporary English audience. Thus the bird whose feathers enabled the vengeful Weland the Smith to escape his enemy, Nithhad, becomes the Holy Spirit, guiding the Magi to salvation in the form of the Christ-child, on one face of the Franks Casket. Not only letter forms and iconographies and myths, but whole mindsets and socio-ethical codes are juxtaposed and mutually accommodated. Similarly, at another point during the eighth century an English reader would gloss the word *thalaria*, the winged sandals of Mercury, as "fether homa," Weland's garment of feathers, in a copy of Servius's commentary on Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book IV, attesting to the level of assimilation and association attained by Insular readers.[17]

Stressing a shared, participative world history with their biblical and Roman counterparts was a preoccupation of Insular ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The hagiography of native saints, such as Cuthbert and Guthlac, would soon rival the tales of the heroes of Germanic and Celtic mythology and those of the Christian martyrs of Rome—although as Bede laments, in his letter to Ecgberht, some teachers preferred to fill their minds with secular tales than the word of God and Alcuin, in his Epistle 124, urged that a reader rather than a harpist, patristic discourse, not pagan song, be heard at table (Bullough 1993).

These worthies would therefore doubtless approve that the earliest extant manuscript of a primary prose text in Old English

[17] Spangenberg, Pfarrbibliothek, s.n. (Lowe 1934–1971: xii, no. 1806); see Parkes 1997: 11.

should occur in a devotional context—in the Book of Cerne, a western Mercian prayerbook which was probably made for Bishop Æthelwald of Lichfield (818–830). My identification of the hand of its Old English prefatory Exhortation to prayer as that of the main artist/scribe and my discussion of it as guide for the performative use of this devotional manual, make it the earliest extant example of an English vernacular text written as part of an original project, rather than added to an existing work (Brown 1996). One of the prayers in Cerne, the Lorica of Laidcenn—considered so efficacious that it was recited thrice daily—also carries a planned interlinear Old English gloss. It is telling that the Exhortation, an early example of a vernacular text planned as part of a Latin book compiled from numerous earlier sources, should be essentially an *explicatio* and *instructio* for its use, which also provides for the possibility of performance—before God and the communion of saints—with its exhortations to the user to prostrate himself and engage in other ritual acts during the text's use.

My work on this and other Mercian manuscripts of the first half of the ninth century, and my appraisal of the nature of the palaeographical and stylistic relationships of the regional components of what I have termed the "Mercian Schriftprovinz" (Greater Mercia, including the Fens, Kent and Wessex), coupled with the arguments adduced by Jennifer Morrish, point to West-Saxon attempts to downplay the cultural achievements of Mercia as their prominent political forebear. As part of the construction of a unified England, the rules of Wessex fostered forgetfulness of the extent of earlier learning and suppressed the Mercian historical record represented by annals and other documents (Brown 2001: 279–291, 2006: 164–172; Morrish 1982, 1986, 1988; for a more pro-Wessex view, see Gneuss 1986). Greater Mercia was actively promoting texts in the vernacular during this period, as the prose "Exhortation" and glossed lorica in the Book of Cerne, the interlinear translation / gloss of the Psalms in the Vespasian Psalter (the earliest extant example of a biblical text in English, following in

Bede's footsteps) and perhaps the Old English Martyrology and the poetry of Cynewulf (who may have been a Mercian writing around 800) suggest.[18] Nicholas Brooks's picture of the decline of standards of handwriting and Latinity in the Christ Church Canterbury scriptorium during the second half of the ninth century, which is based upon the extant output of one ageing monastic charter scribe, needs to be balanced against the evidence I have rehearsed of the continuing presence and influence of Mercian manuscript exemplars and scholars, such as Wærferth, Plegmund, Æthelstan and Werwulf, in unoccupied western Mercia and Wessex in the late ninth century (Brooks 1984; Brown 1996: 16–18, 162–164, 173–177). Couple this with a wish to recall (or better) Charlemagne's imperial achievement in establishing a court-focused scholarly equipe, a publishing programme in the form of the Tours Bibles,[19] and a cultural *renovatio*,[20] and we have receptive soil for the legend of Alfred's literary prowess. This grew over the course of the tenth century from the seeds of renewal sewn in his own circle—and probably with his own imprimatur—which were cultivated by his immediate heirs and eulogised by later authors.

When the preface to the *Pastoral Care* states that there was nobody in Alfred's kingdom who could read Latin by Alfred's day, and few elsewhere in England, it may accurately reflect the situation in Wessex and Kent, but there were evidently those who could in Mercia, at least. There are indeed indications that the

[18] See Bjork 1998; Brown 2006, 2001; Pulsiano 1996; Zacher 2002. We know Cynewulf's name from his runic signatures, woven into the four poems which comprise his acknowledged corpus: *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Juliana*, *Elene*, and *Christ II* (also referred to as *The Ascension*), which survive in later collections in the Vercelli and Exeter Books.

[19] Alcuin's programme was probably influenced by Wearmouth / Jarrow's earlier "publication" of the works of Bede and of reliable editions of Scripture, in turn indebted to Cassiodorus's example.

[20] The Carolingian court culture was one that Alfred had visited as a child and which his Carolingian princess / stepmother had inhabited.

decline in Latinity had begun prior to the Viking incursions, in the early ninth century, but that this was patchy and occasioned not so much by cultural degeneration as by the growth of an active written vernacular literacy—English was coming of age in its own right and freeing itself from its Mediterranean masters. It would be ironic indeed if the edifice of West-Saxon *renovatio* had its foundations laid by a largely Mercian team, drawing also upon Continental precedents and expertise and with a large dash of Welsh hyperbole, courtesy of "Asser."

Notwithstanding ongoing scholarly debate concerning the extent of his personal scholarly role, Alfred's contribution should not be devalued, for even if many of the Old English translations associated with his reforms were penned in the subsequent generation, he initiated such enterprise by his distribution—by means of a Wearmouth / Jarrow and Touronian style publishing drive—to key centres of the *Pastoral Care*, a work designed to foster social cohesion—and by choosing the vernacular as its voice. He also ensured a measure of continuity in traditions of script and other aspects of book production and consolidated what remained of local scholarship. He also ensured a growing rapprochement with the cultural ideals and strategies of the Carolingian Empire, probably reintroduced schooling, extending it beyond the orbit of earlier monastic schoolrooms, for a substantial sector of the male population and began the process of reviving the ecclesiastical publishing houses and beacons of faith.

These were considerable achievements indeed, but nonetheless Alfred did not pioneer the use of written Old English. He and his heirs transplanted and strengthened a vigorous root stock that had already sprung from the seeds of conversion and the accompanying reception of full literacy, as was also the case with so many other of the European and Middle Eastern vernaculars. What Alfred did do was to escalate a trend to reverse the polarity. Whereas Insular authors such as Aldhelm and Bede composed in Latin—even if Bede for one recognised the pragmatic efficacy of vernacular

translation—post-Alfredian writers, such as Ælfric, Wulfstan and Byrthferth, would write predominantly in their native tongue. Ælfric's homilies were designed for circulation to a literate English-reading clergy, whilst Bede lamented the lack of Latinate priests and began the process of equipping them with written vernacular tools which they could share orally with their wider communities. Whereas the churchman Bede translated into English in order to inform his people of an international Christian literary tradition, 250 years later the layman Ealdorman Æthelweard translated into Latin in order to integrate his nation's historical experience back into that tradition.

The English and Irish escalation in the use of their written vernaculars during the ninth century can perhaps best be viewed, in some respects, as an ethnic response to Viking invasion, settlement and the establishment of a "state within a state." Ninth-century Wales (and to a lesser extent Cornwall) witnessed a similar phenomenon in reaction to English expansionism. For such threats spurred a desire to preserve national cultural identity. In England, they also stimulated the translation of appropriate classics, such as Orosius's *History Against the Pagans*, and the production of custom-written vernacular texts, including rousing sermons by Ælfric and Wulfstan—the Wolf, designed to hearten and to mobilize English resistance to Scandinavian incursion, penned largely in his own hand.

The anthologising trends apparent in British and English literature, from the work of the Welsh cleric Nennius in the ninth century (Dumville 1985), who tells of his collecting of historical sources and oral anecdotes to form the *Historia Brittonum*, to that of the compilers of the Vercelli book (whom Ó Carragáin (2005) suggests may have been a canon; see also Scragg 1992) and of the Anglo-Saxon Scientific Miscellany (BL. Cotton MS Tiberius B.v, pt 1; McGurk *et al.* 1983), speak of a desire to capture existing knowledge—both written and, as Nennius puts it, the "tales of old men"—within binding boards for posterity, perhaps in response to

the threat of loss of identity and to the challenge of establishing a perceived shared identity amongst established and incoming populations. There are also signs of attempts to assert traditional ties to ancient and imperial worlds, and to a northern Scandinavian trading empire with shared Germanic folk roots and vernacular orality. Such was the climate that cultivated the production of the *Beowulf* manuscript, the Old English compendia of poetry, and sculptural monuments such as the Nunburnholme Cross and the Gosforth Cross with their juxtaposed images of Crucifixion and Scandinavian saga.

During the early eleventh century, such intersections of identities also reached new levels of visual narrative expression in the Old English Hexateuch (London, British Library, MS Cotton Claudius B.iv) and the Old English Genesis (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11) manuscripts. These conflated vernacular paraphrases of Old Testament texts with picture cycles of largely Early Christian origin, adapted to reflect the interests of contemporary "communities of reading," including women, and emphasizing the Anglo-Saxon people's own sense of exile and journey from their original Germanic homelands to England as the new "children of Israel." The English thereby asserted their own cultural and linguistic identity and set themselves within the biblical landscape.[21]

Such works stressed the shared inheritance of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian parallel cultures, sprung from a common Germanic, and ultimately biblical, stock. Such a trend can be detected as early as the Alfredian revival, with the inclusion of Othere's Voyage alongside the Old English Orosius, which survives in an early tenth-century copy (the Helmingham / Tollemache Orosius). It culminated in the Anglo-Saxon world map, the first of the medieval *mappae mundi*. This forms part of the Anglo-Saxon Scientific

[21] See Barnhouse & Withers 2000; Dodwell & Clemoes 1974 ; Karkov 2006; Muir 2004; Withers 2007.

Miscellany (McGurk *et al*. 1983), which links material such as Priscian's *Periegesis*, Archbishop Sigebert of Canterbury's pilgrimage route, Cicero's *Aratea*, the *Marvels of the East* and computistic materials, also features a remarkable, precocious world map. Based upon Roman cartography supplemented by the experience gained on Scandinavian voyages, this is the first surviving attempt to depict a world view in diagrammatic form, other than the simple Isidoran "T maps" in which a globe is divided into three continents. It depicts Britain and Ireland, with their outlying archipelagos, as part of a Scandinavian empire linked via trading and pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land, with Jerusalem as the umbilical centre-point of the world, and with the outlying lands of legend, as recounted by the *Marvels of the East*. The monstrous races that it describes are not conflated onto the map here, but they are depicted elsewhere in the volume, and in the *Beowulf* manuscript where they complement the theme of Grendel and his Mother in a poem that retains a recollection of the culture of Germanic prehistory. By the time of the more famous thirteenth-century Hereford *mappa mundi*, which may once have functioned as an altarpiece, the monstrous races and other aspects of the information in the Miscellany had been mapped onto the surface of a world which English scholars such as Bede and Byrthferth had played significant roles in seeking to understand at a scientific level of revelation. Such was the sophistication of the rapprochement of learning, text and image that had been achieved towards the conclusion of our period.

The orality interface remained highly significant. Patrick Conner's recent work on Anglo-Saxon guilds has shown that the song of the Germanic warriors' mead-hall was giving way, by the eleventh century, to other sorts of secular fellowship of like-minded folk, linked by trading interests in a developing urban environment. Books figured in guild feasts, and in the development of dramatic performances—forerunners of medieval mystery plays—and Conner suggests such a context for the performance of at least some of the poetry and riddles in the Exeter Book (Exeter, Dean

and Chapter, MS 3501).[22] The inappropriate participation in such social rituals by monkish ale-poets caused Wulfstan to lament, recalling Alcuin's demand "what has Ingeld to do with Christ?" (Cherniss 1972).

We might ask, in return, "what has *Beowulf* to do with monks?" Yet retention of a Germanic way of life, or poetic and visual allusions to it, did not equate to the perpetuation of paganism, for as Patrick Wormald observed, the Church was not separate from the world, and *Beowulf* was not exclusively secular or antipathetic to a monastic audience (Wormald 1978).

The interplay between the oral and visual imagination and their commital to long-term graphic retention by means of the written word and images, which occurred in Anglo-Saxon England, was a complex one. This, coupled with the models of transmission provided by works such as the *Táin*, the works of Cynewulf (which are preserved in the anthologies in the Vercelli and Exeter Books) and the *Dream of the Rood*, would suggest that it is possible that there was a back-story to the transmission of the *Beowulf* poem before it was copied, reworked or expanded, in the form that it assumes in the Nowell Codex. It is conceivable that, like the *Dream of the Rood*, *Beowulf* first took the form of a written poem in the Insular age (probably the eighth century). This would accord with the arcane archaeological, palaeographical and linguistic features of the poem, the mixed West Saxon and Anglian dialect of which suggests that an East Anglian, Mercian or Northumbrian intermediary dwells at the heart of its West-Saxon body. It may, previously and/or subsequently, have been recited in the mead hall and extracts from it may also have been inscribed

[22] Conner (2009) proposes "to examine the proposition that four poems preceding the Riddles 1 to 59 in Booklet III of that manuscript beg, by their sequencing as well as thematic content, to be read together in a performance context, perhaps appropriate to a banquet with both men and women in attendance, such as those we know were held by the parish guilds which are documented in southern Anglo-Saxon England." See also Conner 2008.

onto stone, bone and wooden monuments and de luxe metalwork before its full literary form was incorporated by a monastic scribe into a manuscript anthology, with a focus upon the relationship between mankind and the monstrous races, sometime around the year 1000, perhaps stimulated by a rapprochement between English and Scandinavian society and celebrating their shared roots in the Germanic past.

Further support for the contention that the *Beowulf* poem was an early composition comes from the arguments based upon linguistic similarities between *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* advanced by Dennis Cronan, who favoured an eighth-century date for both (Cronan 2004: 49):

> The words examined here confirm the presence of the chronological connection between *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* seen in this list, and to a lesser extent they also confirm the connection between these poems and *Exodus*, and perhaps *Daniel*, although in this latter case the evidence is not as reliable. The distribution of *suhtriga*, *heoru*, *eodor*, *engel* and *missere* indicate that these poems are probably early; the restriction of *suhtriga* to *Genesis A* and *Beowulf* (as well as *Widsith*) and to glossaries derived from a seventh- or eighth-century collection indicates an eighth-century date for *Genesis A*, and, by implication, for *Beowulf*, *Maxims I*, *Exodus* and perhaps *Widsith*. In the case of *Maxims I* it is uncertain whether the evidence points toward an eighth-century date for some of the materials in the poem, for the editorial work of an anthologist, or for the poem itself.

This supported the chronology of Old English poetry proposed by R. D. Fulk (1992: 60–65), which in turn confirmed that advanced by T. Cable (1981: 80). This in turn lends support to Lapidge's contention that errors in the *Beowulf* poem, as it appears in the Nowell Codex, were the result of scribal misunderstanding of certain letters such as would suggest that he was copying an exemplar in "Anglo-Saxon set minuscule script, written before c. 750" (Lapidge 2000: 34).

The vernacular, it is clear, moved from the purely oral and inscriptional to a fully written form during the seventh, and eighth centuries. The fact that the four compendia of Old English poetry were penned during the tenth and eleventh centuries should not lead us to imagine that poetry was not written down in previous centuries. These compendia contain transcription errors and archaic orthographical forms, moreover, which would suggest that they contain poems first committed to writing during the earliest periods of Anglo-Saxon literacy. A variety of lexical and metrical evidence supports the possibility that *Beowulf* was composed in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period; this essay has simply contributed a context, in light of which there is no literary-historical reason why it should not have been.

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