A HISTORY OF OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION

R. D. FULK AND
CHRISTOPHER M. CAIN

WILEY-BLACKWELL

A History of Old English Literature

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Second Edition

R. D. Fulk
and
Christopher M. Cain

with a chapter on saints' legends by
Rachel S. Anderson

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Preface to the First Edition (2003)

With this study we hope to serve the needs of those students and teachers who feel particularly committed to the changes that have characterized our field in recent years. The renewed emphasis on historicism and the decline of formalist aestheticism in medieval studies have rendered it desirable to have a literary history that attends more singularly to the material and social contexts and uses of Old English texts. Although the need is greater than this volume can really satisfy, we hope that the present study will nonetheless prove useful to those who, like us, see literature's relation to history and culture as our field's area of chief pedagogical interest, and the respect in which it has most to offer literary studies at large.

The Anglo-Latin context is of particular concern. Michael Lapidge has put the matter succinctly: "We should always remember that works in Latin and the vernacular were copied together in Anglo-Saxon scriptoria, and were arguably composed together in Anglo-Saxon schools. What is needed, therefore, is an integrated literary history which treats Latin and vernacular production together as two facets of the one culture, not as isolated phenomena" (1991: 951–2 n. 1). It may be an obstacle to the compilation of such a history that, as he says, "No adequate history of Anglo-Latin literature of the later period has yet been written," but the insights furnished by his own prodigious contributions to Anglo-Latin studies take us close to the goal. Still, it would not have been possible to produce so thoroughly an integrative study in a volume of this size. Although we have attempted throughout to sketch briefly the Latin background against which Old English texts ought to be viewed, we have in no sense aimed for a balanced treatment of Latin and English texts, but we have attended to the former only to the extent that they contribute to our understanding of the

latter. Also, because of length limitations, we have not been able to treat every known text in Old English; yet in our effort to cover a wider range of material than has been usual in Old English literary histories we have been obliged to treat fairly briefly some of the texts, particularly poetic ones, that have, primarily on aesthetic grounds, historically received a disproportional share of critical attention.

Although we have tried to emulate one respect in which prior histories have been most useful – in their bibliographical guidance – we have laid special emphasis on scholarly studies of the past fifteen years, because students may generally find references to earlier works in these and in prior histories. Naturally, many studies of real value are not cited here, since our bibliographical coverage has been highly selective.

It is a pleasant duty to acknowledge the debt of thanks we have incurred in the compilation of this volume. Alfred David very generously read the manuscript and offered countless invaluable suggestions. Michael Lapidge provided timely copies of material in press, and Stefan Jurasinski furnished expert advice on legal literature. The staff of the Indiana University Libraries came to our rescue continually. Leanda Shrimpton oversaw the production of the illustrations, and Anna Oxbury's copyediting improved the manuscript immensely. We are especially indebted to Andrew McNeillie, who conceived this project and guided it from start to finish with care and understanding. To all of these generous souls we wish to express our gratitude.

R.D.F., C.M.C.
Bloomington

Preface to the Second Edition

Given the great volume of scholarship on Anglo-Saxon literature that has appeared in the past decade, it seemed advisable to attempt to keep this history of Old English literature current. Two trends in the field have prompted some particular changes: the ever-increasing centrality of manuscript studies to the study of the literature has persuaded us to include a chapter on Anglo-Saxon books and the scholarship on them, and the continued progress of Anglo-Saxonists in the task of deconstructing the distinction between so-called literary and non-literary texts has made it advisable to add a chapter devoted exclusively to writing in the literal and figurative margins. In addition, legal texts, on the one hand, and scientific and scholastic texts, on the other, are now given separate, expanded chapters.

Janet Moth copyedited the text with consummate skill, correcting numerous errors and making many decided improvements. Ben Thatcher oversaw the production of the images, and Bridget Jennings, Senior Editorial Assistant, managed the project expertly from first to last. To these individuals we owe a debt of gratitude, and to Emma Bennett, Publisher, who saw the wisdom of producing a revised text.

R.D.F., C.M.C.
Bloomington and Baltimore

Abbreviations

The titles of journals and series are abbreviated as follows:

ANQ	*American Notes & Queries*
Archiv	*Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
ASMMF	Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile (see Pulsiano, Doane, and Hussey 1994–)
ASPR	*Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (see Krapp and Dobbie 1931–53)
BL	British Library
CCCC	Cambridge, Corpus Christi College
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
E&S	*Essays and Studies*
EEMF	Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile
EETS	Early English Text Society
EHR	*English Historical Review*
ELN	*English Language Notes*
EME	*Early Medieval Europe*
ES	*English Studies*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
LS	Ælfric, *Lives of Saints*
LSE	*Leeds Studies in English*
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*

MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MP	*Modern Philology*
MS	*Mediaeval Studies*
N&Q	*Notes and Queries*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
OEN	*Old English Newsletter*
PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
PL	Patrologia Latina (see Migne 1879–1974)
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SN	*Studia Neophilologica*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
ZfdA	*Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*

Throughout this book, the abbreviation "DOE" is used preceding the short titles used for OE texts in the database of the *Dictionary of Old English* (Cameron, Amos, and Healey 2012). For example, "*The Battle of Brunanburh* (DOE: Brun)" indicates that "Brun" is the *Dictionary of Old English* short title for *The Battle of Brunanburh*. In addition, the following abbreviations are used:

A-S	Anglo-Saxon
OE	Old English

Some places mentioned in the text

Introduction

Anglo-Saxon England and Its Literature: A Social History

1 Cultural Difference and Cultural Change

One of the aims of literary studies in recent years has been to defamiliarize the most natural-seeming aspects of our own culture, to promote awareness of how our way of life is neither natural nor inevitable. The importance of cultural studies in current literary scholarship thus arises in part from the role that an awareness of alterity has come to play, since nothing illuminates the contingencies of contemporary attitudes and ideas as much as the study of cultural difference. Within the field of English, then, Old English studies afford unique opportunities, since no literature in English is as culturally remote as that of the Anglo-Saxons, and the differences expose plainly some of the otherwise invisible assumptions on which modernity, as we perceive it, is based. To cite just one example, the very act of reading a book, such as this one, differs fundamentally from the early medieval experience, and in a variety of ways. Even when reading was a private activity, readers commonly pointed to the words and spoke them aloud;[1] but more often reading was a communal activity in which many "readers" never actually saw the page. In a modern classroom the text is

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a physical object: usually each student has an identical copy, and when instructed to do so, all turn to a particular page. But no two copies of a medieval book were alike, and in any case books were precious objects, the product of weeks of painstaking labor, from the preparation of the animal skins of which they were made to the copying, letter by letter, of the text, and thus they were too valuable for wholesale distribution to students in the early period. Naturally, studying a text is a different and slower process under such circumstances. Reading aloud in groups differs from silent reading in that it is not a method well suited to the study of complex philosophical writing, such as the products of scholasticism that arose only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when silent reading became the norm in academic settings. The method of reading thus affected the very nature of early medieval texts (Saenger 1982: 385–6; 1997: 83–99). Even so fundamental a matter as word division is different: designed for oral delivery, Old English texts of this period organize syllables not into words but into groups arranged around a primary stress. When even so seemingly straightforward a process as reading differs in significant ways, one should expect the literature of the Anglo-Saxons to reflect some enormous material and conceptual differences in regard to matters we take for granted. One purpose of this introduction is to highlight a few of those differences, the ones most necessary to an understanding of Old English literature.

For literary purposes the defining characteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture is its fusion of two contrasting strains, the military culture of the Germanic peoples who invaded Britain in the fifth century and the Mediterranean learning introduced by Christian missionaries from the end of the sixth.[2] With its emphasis on heroic legend, the native literature of the Anglo-Saxon invaders reflected the martial basis of their society. The literate products of Mediterranean learning are of a sort more familiar to us: prose predominates, and genres are diverse, including sacred narratives, homilies, histories, annals, works of philosophy, and many other sorts, some of purely liturgical, legal, or administrative use. In the surviving literature of the Anglo-Saxons these two cultural strands are woven into a single fabric, often in ways that seem startling to us. Nowhere is the tension between the two deployed more effectively than in the preeminent work of Old English literature, *Beowulf*, which tells of plainly ancient heroic deeds from a contemporized perspective, attributing to the hero some of the qualities of a good Christian. This fusion of cultural strains characterizes a variety of texts and artifacts, including saints' lives recast in the terms of heroic poetry; King Alfred's translation

of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, into which Weland the smith of Germanic myth is introduced; the Old English Orosius, in which the Germanic conquerors of the Roman Empire are portrayed more sympathetically than in the Latin original; the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which contains passages in prose and verse that call to mind heroic legend; and the Franks (or Auzon, or Clermont) Casket, a box of carved whalebone on which are depicted scenes from early Germanic legend side by side with the adoration of the magi and the destruction of Jerusalem by the soon to be Emperor Titus in 70 CE (see chapter 1 and figure 3).

A hindrance to a concise description of Anglo-Saxon culture is the length of the historical period, which lasted from the invasions of the fifth century beyond the arrival of the Normans in 1066, as Old English texts continued to be copied for another century and a half. Naturally the society underwent some profound changes over the course of so many centuries; and yet the literature does not always reflect those changes, especially the poetry, since it is steeped in tradition and often seems to reflect a long-outmoded way of life. The culture that the invaders brought with them in the fifth century certainly had much in common with that of the (mostly) Germanic tribes described by Cornelius Tacitus in his *Germania* (ed. Winterbottom 1975, trans. Rives 1999), completed in 98 CE. At times Tacitus is frankly moralizing, chastening his fellow Romans by portraying the admirable qualities and customs of peoples they considered barbaric; at other times he is disapproving of Germanic practices, and so we need not assume that he has distorted the general outline of the societies he describes for the sake of portraying the Germans uniformly as noble savages. Caution is advisable in generalizing about the invaders of Britain from Tacitus' account, as contact with Rome was just beginning to produce in his day important changes among the Germans, particularly in regard to the growth of private property and the rise of new kinds of military organization and technology. But the comparison is nonetheless instructive, especially in regard to *Beowulf*, which depicts a world that has more in common with the military culture described by Tacitus than with Anglo-Saxon society of about 1000, when the manuscript was copied.[3]

Tacitus' Germany is a collection of some seventy nations perennially at war with their neighbors and among themselves. Each is ruled by a king, who is supported by his *comitatus*, or war-band of retainers. He provides them with horses, arms, and plentiful feasts; they in turn contribute cattle or grain and serve him in battle. It is the duty of the *comitatus* to glorify their lord by their deeds, and it is lifelong infamy to

survive one's chief and return from battle if he has fallen. So eager for martial exploits are the young men that in times of peace, those of noble family will often seek out other nations in pursuit of opportunities to fight. At their feasts it is not unusual for the men from morning to night to consume a fermented drink made from barley or wheat – Tacitus' Roman audience naturally was unfamiliar with beer and ale – and as a consequence, dangerous quarrels frequently arise, and blood is not uncommonly spilt. The feuds ensuing from such manslaughter are a matter of intense honor to the families of the slain. However, vengeance in like kind is not their only option, as the killer may pay compensation, if that is acceptable to all.

To what extent Tacitus' observations still held true for the Anglo-Saxon invaders of Britain is difficult to say, but certainly the world he describes differs surprisingly little from that of *Beowulf* and the other surviving scraps of heroic verse in Old English, in which most of these same features are evident. Nonetheless, Old English society has already evolved a considerable distance from this model by the time the first manuscript records appear, and long before the time of the Norman invasion the last remnants of a society based on the *comitatus* are a distant recollection. In the early period the English were divided into a number of kingdoms, as often at war with one another as with the Britons. By the end of the period we find instead an English proto-nation under a centralized government, with a complex economy supported by well-regulated trade and taxation. While Tacitus describes a world in which there is no urban life, just villages of scattered wooden structures, by the time of the Venerable Bede, writing in the early eighth century, York was already an urban center, and in the eleventh century its inhabitants numbered probably as many as 10,000.[4] London was no doubt larger, and from an early date. Even the fundamental unit of society, the *comitatus*, grew outmoded early on: the Old English word for such a group, *gedryht*, has fallen out of general use by the time of the earliest records, and it is preserved only as a poetic term.

Yet several aspects of the Germanic society that Tacitus describes continue to be relevant in the Anglo-Saxon world, albeit in altered form. The duty to vengeance remained an imperative to the end of the period, and though the Church discouraged feuds, assigning identical penances for homicides and for killings performed in vengeance, the only method of dealing with homicide in Anglo-Saxon law until the Norman Conquest was through the action of kindred (Whitelock 1951: 13–17). The law codes continued to regulate the degree and

division of compensation (called *wergild*, lit. 'man-payment') till the end of the period. Payment was originally measured in livestock, the native currency (OE *feoh*, becoming ModE *fee*, and cognate with Latin *pecu* 'sheep, flocks; money'), and its acceptance was no doubt viewed not as a mercenary act but both as the killer's admission of wrongdoing and as reaffirmation of the honor of the victim and his family.[5] Yet wergild assumed new functions and forms as the society evolved. It may at first have been simply a device for putting an end to feuds, which might otherwise continue indefinitely, killing following upon killing, as sometimes happens in the Icelandic sagas. In the historical period, though, wergild is a measure of social status, since every man and woman bears a wergild, valued on a scale from monarch to slave. Social rank determines the amount to be paid not just in cases of homicide but in offenses of various kinds, and wergild functions, it seems, less as a means to end feuds than as a deterrent to personal injury. This was particularly important to the Church, since its members could not rely on family to exact vengeance when a churchman was killed. In a society in which there was nothing like a constabulary, the only very reliable source of personal security was the threat of vengeance posed by one's kinsmen or lord. This is why the lone and lordless exile is portrayed as the most pitiful of figures in Old English verse. Wergild payable to the king thus served to protect those without the support of family, such as clergy and foreign merchants. It also, however, came to serve the function of extending the power and wealth of the monarchy, as in the later period the laws provide for the payment of wergilds to the king for all sorts of infractions.

The larger point to be drawn is that if the social conditions described in verse seem to resemble more closely those of Tacitus' *Germania* than the complex society that England had become by the tenth century, this may be taken as a reflection of the way that the ancient traditions of verse archaize and rebuild on a heroic scale every variety of matter they touch. This is true of native traditions like those of *Beowulf*, but also of biblical narrative and saints' lives, in which patriarchs and saints are recast as God's heroic champions, and Christ's apostles play the role of his *comitatus*. This transformative habit is in turn a reflection of the continually fruitful tension, mentioned above as pervading Old English literature, between native and Mediterranean influences. References in the literature show that the Anglo-Saxons were keenly aware of both their past among the Germanic nations of the Continent and their present status as the bulwark of Christian civilization among

the unconverted nations of the north. That they retained a sense of community with the rest of the Germanic world, even as the form of English society grew ever more different from it, is shown in a variety of ways, but most plainly in the fact that even as late as the dawn of the eleventh century, heroic verse dealing with legends set in Scandinavia and on the Continent, like *Beowulf*, with no explicit connection to England, continued to be copied into English manuscripts.

2 Gender and Authority

The world that Tacitus describes is obviously very much a male-centered one, and it might be expected that in a society so dedicated to warfare women would play decidedly secondary roles. Certainly there was nothing like equality of the sexes, and yet Tacitus admiringly portrays Germanic women as both responsible and respected members of the society – though it should be remembered that his aim in doing so is to draw pointed contrasts with Roman women, whose behavior he held in particularly low esteem. Germanic women, he says, are close at hand in warfare, and their presence serves to deter cowardice, making men conscious of their honor. The men are said to seek women's advice and to act upon it, crediting women with prescience – a quality attributed to Germanic women in some other sources, including Caesar's *De bello Gallico*. To ensure peace, young women taken from noble families make the best hostages (hostages being treated not as prisoners – though their primary function was to enforce agreements, since violation of treaties would result in harm to the hostages given in security – but as members of the court, playing a diplomatic role), as the men are more concerned for their women's safety than for their own. The husband brings a dowry to the wife, the opposite of the Roman custom. Tacitus is emphatic about the wife's role as partner in toil and danger, suffering and daring with her husband in peace and war alike; but such remarks must be weighed against his observation that the men, when they are not fighting or hunting, simply sleep and eat and do nothing, relegating care of the house and fields to the women, the old men, and the weakest members of the family.

Certain of these observations resonate in the poetic records of Old English. One poet tells us that a wife should be generous with gifts, kind to those under her care, cheerful, trustworthy with secrets, and courteous in the distribution of mead, and she should advise her

husband well (*Maxims I* 82–92). *Beowulf* indeed shows us Wealhtheo, the queen of Denmark, distributing drink to the *comitatus* at a feast, rewarding Beowulf's valor with rich gifts, and offering her husband advice on affairs of state. A term applied twice to women in verse (and once to an angel) is *freoðu-webbe* 'peace-weaver'. This has been interpreted to refer to noblewomen's role in diplomatic marriages arranged to secure peace between hostile nations, the metaphor alluding to medieval women's chief occupation, the weaving of cloth. It may, however, have wider reference, in accordance with the level-headed and peaceable sorts of qualities attributed above to a good wife. This, in any case, is what is implied by the *Beowulf* poet's remark that the pride and cruelty of a particular princess (of uncertain name: Fremu? Thryth? Mod-Thryth?) were not qualities appropriate to a *freoðu-webbe* (lines 1940–3). Certainly, though, diplomatic marriages were of great strategic importance (despite Beowulf's doubts about their efficacy, lines 2029–31), as, for example, Æthelberht I of Kent's marriage to Bertha, a Christian Frankish princess, no doubt played a significant role in the first Roman missionaries' success in converting him.

It has often been said that women are severely marginalized in *Beowulf* and similar heroic verse. Certainly males are at center stage, as one might expect in poetry about feats of arms. Yet it would be rash to suppose that martial deeds are the sole measure of true worth in the world that Old English heroic poetry portrays; and even if they were, the ferocity and devotion to the duty of vengeance shown by Grendel's mother would serve to challenge the underlying assumption about gender and heroic accomplishments. But the *Beowulf* poet develops the hero's humane qualities and diplomatic skills in some detail (see chapter 11), and so there is no reason to suppose that the portrayal of some of the same qualities in Wealhtheo and the explicit reverence expressed for her are not just what they appear to be – marks of her genuine importance. In actuality, only the character of Beowulf himself is developed extensively, and thus it may be asked whether any of the remaining characters except for Hrothgar and Grendel is accorded more real attention than Wealhtheo and Grendel's mother. So, too, though the two fragments of *Waldere*, another heroic poem, are brief, the speaker of one of them is a woman, Hildegyth – though she is hardly a *freoðu-webbe* but one who incites her male companions to battle. In the related heroic traditions of Scandinavia, both in the poetic edda and in some of the sagas, women are often the central figures, in part because they bring the greatest psychological complexity to

heroic legends: owing loyalty both to their own and to their husband's families, they are often required to choose between courses of action that will produce equally tragic results (see Phillpotts 1928).

When we turn to religious verse, in their agency the female characters contrast markedly with those of later literature. Cynewulf's Elene, as the emperor's viceroy in Jerusalem, is that poem's central figure of authority and heroic action against God's enemies; in his poem on St. Juliana, the martyr converts the seemingly passive virtue of chastity into a literal wrestling match in which she overpowers the devil; and Judith in the poem by that name is, like Beowulf, the beheader of her enemy.[6] When we consider how infrequently, in the period from the Norman Conquest until the rise of the novel, narratives were again to center on such prominent female protagonists in English literature, the portrayal of women in Old English heroic literature seems quite remarkable.

The poetry, which is an amalgam of artificial conventions, represents an idealized view. Yet history records the memory of Anglo-Saxon women who did hold positions of authority and public esteem, doing the same work as men. Three about whom we know something are Hild, Hygeburg, and Æthelflæd. Hild (614–80) was a grandniece of Edwin, the first Christian king of Northumbria, and she converted with him in 627. She presided as abbess first at Hartlepool and then at Whitby, which she founded; she also organized a monastery at Hackness. So successful was her foundation at Whitby, the Venerable Bede tells us, writing in 731, that by his day the house had produced five bishops. In her own day, too, her success can be measured by the fact that Whitby was chosen as the site of the great synod of 664, at which it was decided that the Anglo-Saxon Church would follow Roman rather than Celtic practice in determining the date of Easter – a seemingly trivial question, but one which masked larger issues, particularly those of the subjection of insular Christianity to Roman authority and its integration with the Church on the Continent.[7] It was at Whitby also that Cædmon lived (see chapter 7). Behr (2000: 51–2) finds in the archaeological record evidence that the authority of noblewomen like Hild in religion and politics in the Conversion Age was a tradition inherited from pre-Christian times.

In the two centuries after the Conversion, about a dozen pioneering English abbots and missionaries were memorialized in Latin accounts of their lives, some of them produced by the leading scholars of the day, including Bede and Alcuin (see below). Two brothers from

Waltham (now Bishop's Waltham) in Hampshire who participated in the Bonifatian mission, Willibald and Wynnebald, were thus memorialized by Hygeburg, an English nun at Heidenheim on the Brenz in what is now Baden-Württemberg, Germany, in highly wrought Latin prose (ed. Holder-Egger 1887: 80–117; partial trans. Talbot 1954: 153–77; see also Head 2002). That Hygeburg is not an unusual case in her Latinity is shown by the number of women who corresponded with Aldhelm and the missionary Boniface (see below), and by Aldhelm's description of the wide reading of the nuns at Barking for whom he composed his prose *De virginitate*.[8] Hygeburg's lives of Willibald and Wynnebald illustrate that at least in the pre-viking period there was women's scholarship to rival men's. Work such as this hints at a remarkable set of conditions in the education of the day, conditions to which there was no parallel in England in the following centuries until the Early Modern period. The usual assumption has been that women's literacy in Latin was confined to the earlier Anglo-Saxon period, though some recent work has questioned this view and proposed both women's authorship of Latin texts after the tenth century and the importance of women's roles in literary patronage.[9]

Æthelflæd (d. 918) was *hlǣfdige* 'lady' of the Mercians, a status roughly equivalent to the earlier status of queen, except that Mercia was in the process of permanently losing its independence, and she was thus ultimately subject to the rule of her younger brother, Edward the Elder, king of Wessex. She rallied the Mercians against the vikings of the Danelaw, the area of viking control that included all of England east of Watling Street, and perfecting a policy devised by her father, King Alfred the Great, she built and garrisoned fortifications that proved highly effective at ending Danish depredations in Mercia. Then, in 917–18, she and Edward, acting in close concert, launched an offensive that led ultimately to the recapture of the Danelaw and the end of all Danish control of England south of the Humber. There are indications, as well, that her military strategies were effective at securing Mercia against renewed viking attacks from the north (see Wainwright 1959). In her day she dominated the political scene in the midlands and the north, and her military accomplishments enabled the unification of England for the first time under a single king of the royal house of Wessex.

Such case histories suggest that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed opportunities of an extraordinary nature by comparison with later eras. There is in fact evidence that their institutional rights were not inconsiderable,

as documented by Fell (1984: 56–9). The payment of a dowry to the wife, observed by Tacitus among the Germans, is a fact of Anglo-Saxon society. Called in Old English the *morgen-gifu* 'morning-conveyance', it was usually a substantial amount, in some known cases amounting to 500 or more acres of land, and it became the possession of the woman herself, not of her male kin, to dispose of as she pleased. Over and above this dowry a wife had other rights to property, as a married couple's estate was held jointly, and in the earliest laws, at least, a woman might leave her husband and still retain half the property if the children remained with her, much as in later Icelandic law. Women's wills testify to the amount of wealth they could accumulate and to their right to leave it to whichever inheritors they pleased. Conditions naturally varied from place to place over such a lengthy period, and it seems that women's authority and their opportunities, especially in the Church, declined at a rate inverse to that of the growth in the Church's power in England (see Dietrich 1979: 38, and Lees 1999: 133–7). Most of these rights were abrogated by the Normans, since the feudal system they brought with them was predicated on land tenure in exchange for military service, a system that disfavored women's control of land. There is thus justice in the conclusion of Doris Stenton that English women were in the Anglo-Saxon period "more nearly the equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any other period before the modern age" (1957: 348). Such a conclusion challenges certain preconceptions of mainstream gender theory, which, as Lees (1997: 152) remarks, are often founded on presentist assumptions. Thus, as she observes, the study of Old English texts potentially has a singular contribution to make to the larger realm of feminist studies.

Recent work on religious women in the late Old English and early Middle English periods has altered the generally accepted picture of the roles of women in late Anglo-Saxon society. It is undeniable that religious women are few in the records of the later period, though certainly there were nunneries in the Alfredian age and later, most notably Wilton, as documented by Yorke (2003), who focuses on their connections to Anglo-Saxon royalty. This "disappearance" of religious women, as Foot (2000) terms it, is explained by her as a kind of shifting demographic: women were no longer commonly cloistered in official nunneries, but many lived a religious life on private estates, so that their lives went undocumented. Similar points about the distinction between formal and informal reclusion are made by Halpin (1994) and

Jayatilaka (2003). One sign of this is the evidence, often in the form of marginalia, for women's readership in the later period (for references, see Dockray-Miller 2007: 1056, and see Lees and Overing 2001: 107). Female readership is also implied by the way standards of feminine conduct are constructed in Old English texts, as studied by Horner (2001) and S. Klein (2006b); see also Blanton 2007.

3 Effects of Conversion

It is inevitable that Anglo-Saxon society as we encounter it in the earliest records should have differed markedly from the world that Tacitus describes, if for no better reason than that more than half a millennium elapsed between them. But doubtless the chief impetus for change in early English society was the conversion to Christianity. We know very little about the religious beliefs of the invaders. The names of some of their gods, preserved in the names of the days of the week, in royal pedigrees tracing the descent of monarchs from Woden and other gods, and in some other glancing contexts, are known to us, but what form worship of the gods took, and whether there was a systematic mythology about them, as there was much later in Scandinavia for some of the same gods, is not known (see Niles 1991a). The English were nonetheless slow to give them up. The work of conversion began in 597 with the arrival of Augustine, prior of St. Andrews in Rome, along with nearly forty Roman monks, sent by Pope Gregory the Great; and yet the early successes of these Roman missionaries were largely obliterated by the deaths of the first converted kings, after which paganism returned to most areas. As a consequence, the last of the Anglo-Saxon areas to be converted, the Isle of Wight, did not adopt Christianity until 686, during Bede's lifetime.

Conversion represents a fundamental shift in the society, something far greater than simply a change of faith. It created a new class of citizens, churchmen who stood outside any family structure, under the direct protection of the king. Conversion of the king was all-important, as his consent enabled the imposition of tithes and fasts, which were voluntary at first, but which grew to be compulsory by the tenth century. The king's conversion also entailed the granting of authority to ecclesiastical law. To be sure, ecclesiastical authority was not immediately or wholly effective at obliterating Germanic customs disapproved by the Church, such as divorce, concubinage, and marriage within

prohibited degrees of relation. But it should be plain that royal conversion amounted to the ceding of considerable power to the Church: conversion established an authority that would grow in time to challenge that of the monarchs themselves as the Church accumulated wealth and prestige through tithes and through bequests from the rich and powerful for the repose of their souls. Conversion also had the less tangible effect of producing a sense of community with Christian Europe, promoting the imitation of certain Continental practices. The most salient of these for the economy was the introduction of a system of coinage in Kent and East Anglia before the end of the seventh century, and in the other major kingdoms soon afterward.

The most important consequence of the Conversion, however, was the foundation of a literate culture on the Latin model. The early Germanic peoples had an alphabet (or *futhorc*, a name derived from the first six letters) consisting of runes, ultimately based on Mediterranean alphabets (see Elliott 1989, Page 1999). Shaped for carving on wood and other materials, runes were employed for short inscriptions, such as those on surviving Old English coins, weapons, and other implements,[10] but the recording of texts of any substantial length had to await the introduction of writing on parchment. This innovation had consequences that were immediate and far-reaching for the society. It contributed immensely to the development of a uniform code of law by enabling laws to be recorded in a fixed state, and indeed, Æthelberht I of Kent, the first Anglo-Saxon king to be converted, recorded laws "after the models of the Romans," as Bede says – laws that are now known to be based, in part, on literate Continental models.[11] More important, churches and monasteries produced charters as an effective means of securing their land against seizure by competing claimants. The use of charters, writs, and wills subsequently spread to the laity, and they came to assume the first degree of importance in an economy based on land ownership, in which social status, as expressed in wergild, was measured by the extent of one's acreage.

4 Latinity of the Pre-Viking Age

The uses of writing in Anglo-Saxon England are in fact surprisingly varied when one considers that literacy in the modern sense of the word was for the better part of the period limited effectively to ecclesiastics, and thus its products should be expected to pertain to matters

of religion and church governance. Indeed, few vernacular texts survive from the early period, when, as King Alfred observes, the language of written texts was normally Latin (see below). It is natural that Latin should have been the usual language of ecclesiastical written discourse in the early period because the Anglo-Saxon Church during the first centuries after the Conversion sought contact with the greater Christian community of Europe and inspiration in the patrology, both of which depended upon using the international language of the Church. As the faith became established in England and Christian scholarship flourished, the cultivation of Latin literacy enabled the English to produce native Latin literature modeled on what had been gathered from the Mediterranean world, and thus to assert England's inheritance of the mantle worn by the Church Fathers. Reading this literature, one imagines a feeling of wonder on the part of its creators as they contemplated their role as pioneers of the faith, living at a great moment in history, and given by God the responsibility of making themselves the new Fathers on the northern frontier. Their conception of their role as inheritors is evident even in the mechanics of early English book production: the Codex Amiatinus, for example, an important bible made at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow during Bede's lifetime, is so faithfully patterned after its Italian exemplars that it was not recognized until the 1880s as English (see figure 1 and chapter 2).

One of the chief occupations of early English ecclesiastics was thus the intensive study of Latin.[12] Indeed, knowledge of Latin was essential to understanding Scripture and to the proper functioning of monasteries, as monks were expected to participate in the Divine Office, the daily cycle of prayers around which monastic activities were structured. From the age of 7, oblates learned by heart the prayers included in the Divine Office (such as the Pater Noster and the Creed), the entire Latin Psalter, and significant portions of the Latin hymnal. Although beginners were given a general explanation of the meaning of such texts, only later, as they began to acquire the rudiments of Latin grammar, would they understand fully what they were reciting. Since monks were expected to speak Latin among themselves, in the later Anglo-Saxon period some of the first texts that the learner would have encountered were *colloquia*, Latin conversations generally among fictitious tradesmen, which imparted the vocabulary necessary for everyday transactions (see Lendinara 1991: 275). The linguistic fundamentals were learned from Latin grammars, and several Anglo-Saxon scholars produced these for their students; others produced elementary treatises

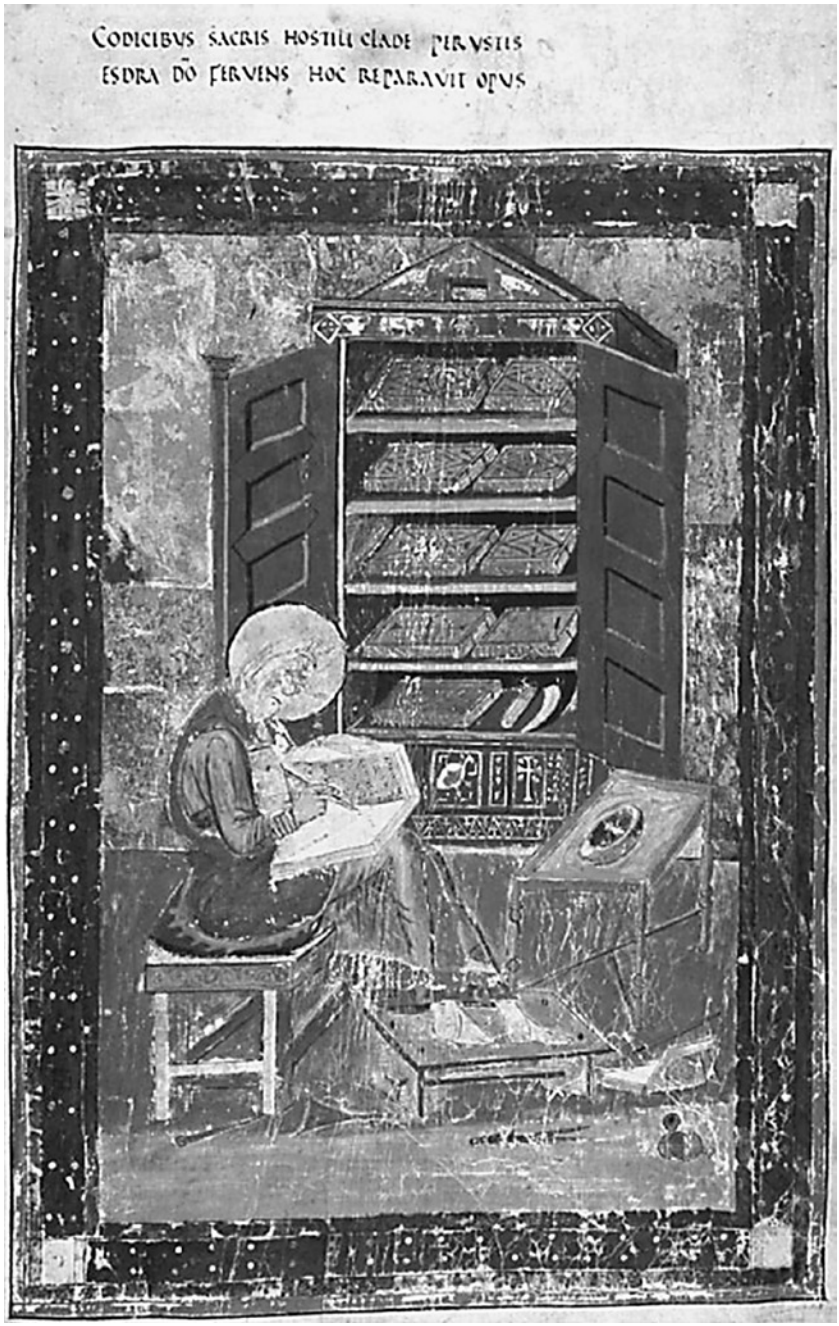

Figure 1 The Codex Amiatinus (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Amiatino 1), fol. v, showing Ezra in the library/scriptorium, with a fine classicizing majuscule inscription in the margin. The manuscript, the oldest extant complete Latin bible, is one of the three pandects that Bede tells us were made under the direction of Ceolfrith, abbot of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, who died in 716. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Amiatino 1, fol. v. © Photos 12 / Alamy.

on Latin meter and orthography (chapter 9), since these subjects were also taken up at this early stage in the novice's training. It would be difficult to improve upon Michael Lapidge's account of what came next (1996a: 2–3):

> After the novice had learned the rudiments of Latin grammar and metre, he proceeded to those Latin texts which constituted the medieval curriculum, a course lasting some ten years. The novices read the texts with minute attention: word for word, line for line. Probably the master dictated a passage and the students transcribed it onto wax tablets [see figure 2]; by class on the following day they had to learn the text thoroughly. They then erased the passage and replaced it with the next.

Lapidge further points out that the contents of the curriculum exerted an influence on the kinds of vernacular literature preserved in Old English manuscripts. The chief variety of text studied was a series of versifications of Scripture (such as Alcimus Avitus' *Poema de Mosaicae historiae gestis* and Juvencus' *Evangelia*), and indeed one of the four Old English poetic manuscripts, the Junius or "Cædmon" Manuscript, is a collection of vernacular works of this kind, including *Genesis*,

Figure 2 Tablet from Suffolk and styli found at Whitby, made ca. 800. A recessed area on the reverse of the tablet is designed to hold wax, on which students would write with a stylus. The lesson could then be erased by heating the tablet. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Exodus, and *Daniel*. Another component of the curriculum made students familiar with poetic works of allegorical and typological significance, including Caelius Sedulus' *Carmen paschale* and Prudentius' *Psychomachia*; correspondingly, there are some Old English poetic allegories, chief of which is *The Phoenix* (chapter 7), a translation of the *De ave phoenice* attributed to Lactantius (itself a poem studied in some versions of the curriculum) that appends to the story of the phoenix's death and rebirth a versified allegorical explication. Early in the curriculum, learners also studied the moral maxims of the *Disticha Catonis* – another text that was translated into Old English – and although this text can hardly have given rise to the Anglo-Saxon predilection for the gnomic mode in verse (see chapter 10, section 1), certainly it fed a deep-rooted tradition in early Germanic poetry. It may even have inspired collections like the Old English *Precepts* and *Maxims I* and *II* – though these do have parallels in Old Icelandic verse. In some versions of the curriculum, learners studied the collections of *enigmata* 'mysteries' of the Late Latin poet Symphosius and of the Anglo-Saxons Aldhelm, Tatwine, Eusebius, and Boniface. These were doubtless the inspiration for the Old English riddles preserved in the Exeter Book (chapter 1), and indeed two of those riddles are translations from the curricular texts. Knowledge of the curriculum is in fact fundamental to an understanding of the composition of the Old English poetic corpus, a point that will be taken up again below (chapter 10). For now it is sufficient to note that Old English literature is preserved solely in manuscripts compiled by ecclesiastics, and the literary tastes of those compilers were formed by intensive and protracted study of Latin texts like these.

Within a century of the Conversion, English schools were producing scholars in the first rank of Latin learning. The chief cause of this was the guidance furnished by Theodore of Tarsus as archbishop of Canterbury (668–90).[13] A Cilician (*ergo* Greek-speaking) monk in Rome when Pope Vitalian appointed him, Theodore, together with the African Hadrian, abbot of a monastery near Naples, was sent to bring order to an Anglo-Saxon Church in disarray when plague had carried off much of its administrative hierarchy, including Theodore's predecessor Wigheard, who, with nearly all his companions, died of the pestilence in Rome, where he had gone to receive the pallium. The school that Theodore and Hadrian established in Canterbury attracted students from everywhere in England (and even some from Ireland) and thus served as a model for monastic schools across the island.