




# A HISTORY OF OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION

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**R. D. FULK AND  
CHRISTOPHER M. CAIN**

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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General editor: Peter Brown, University of Kent, Canterbury

The books in this series renew and redefine a familiar form by recognizing that to write literary history involves more than placing texts in chronological sequence. Thus the emphasis within each volume falls both on plotting the significant literary developments of a given period and on the wider cultural contexts within which they occurred. "Cultural history" is construed in broad terms, and authors address such issues as politics, society, the arts, ideologies, varieties of literary production and consumption, and dominant genres and modes. The effect of each volume is to give the reader a sense of possessing a crucial sector of literary terrain, of understanding the forces that give a period its distinctive cast, and of seeing how writing of a given period impacts on, and is shaped by, its cultural circumstances.

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# 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

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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*Editorial Offices*

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK  
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19  
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Cover image: A “long cross” type coin of Ethelred the Unready, king of the English 978–1016, minted by the moneyer Wynstan at Bath ca. 997–1003. Photo © Robert Fulk.

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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*

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <i>MÆ</i>      | <i>Medium Ævum</i>   |
| MGH            | Monumenta Germaniae Historica                                    |
| <i>MLN</i>     | <i>Modern Language Notes</i>                                     |
| <i>MLR</i>     | <i>Modern Language Review</i>                                    |
| <i>MP</i>      | <i>Modern Philology</i>  |
| <i>MS</i>      | <i>Mediaeval Studies</i>   |
| <i>N&amp;Q</i> | <i>Notes and Queries</i>   |
| <i>NM</i>      | <i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>                             |
| <i>OEN</i>     | <i>Old English Newsletter</i>                                    |
| <i>PBA</i>     | <i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>                        |
| PL             | Patrologia Latina (see Migne 1879–1974)                          |
| <i>PMLA</i>    | <i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>           |
| <i>PQ</i>      | <i>Philological Quarterly</i>                                    |
| <i>RES</i>     | <i>Review of English Studies</i>                                 |
| <i>SN</i>      | <i>Studia Neophilologica</i>                                     |
| <i>SP</i>      | <i>Studies in Philology</i>                                      |
| <i>ZfdA</i>    | <i>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur</i> |

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;<sup>1</sup> but more often reading was a communal activity in which many “readers” never actually saw the page. In a modern classroom the text is 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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* 182–92). *Beowulf* indeed shows us Wealhtheow, 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 Wealhtheow 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 Wealhtheow 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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*.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

Æthelflæd (d. 918) was *hlæfdige* '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