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The Anglo-Saxon World

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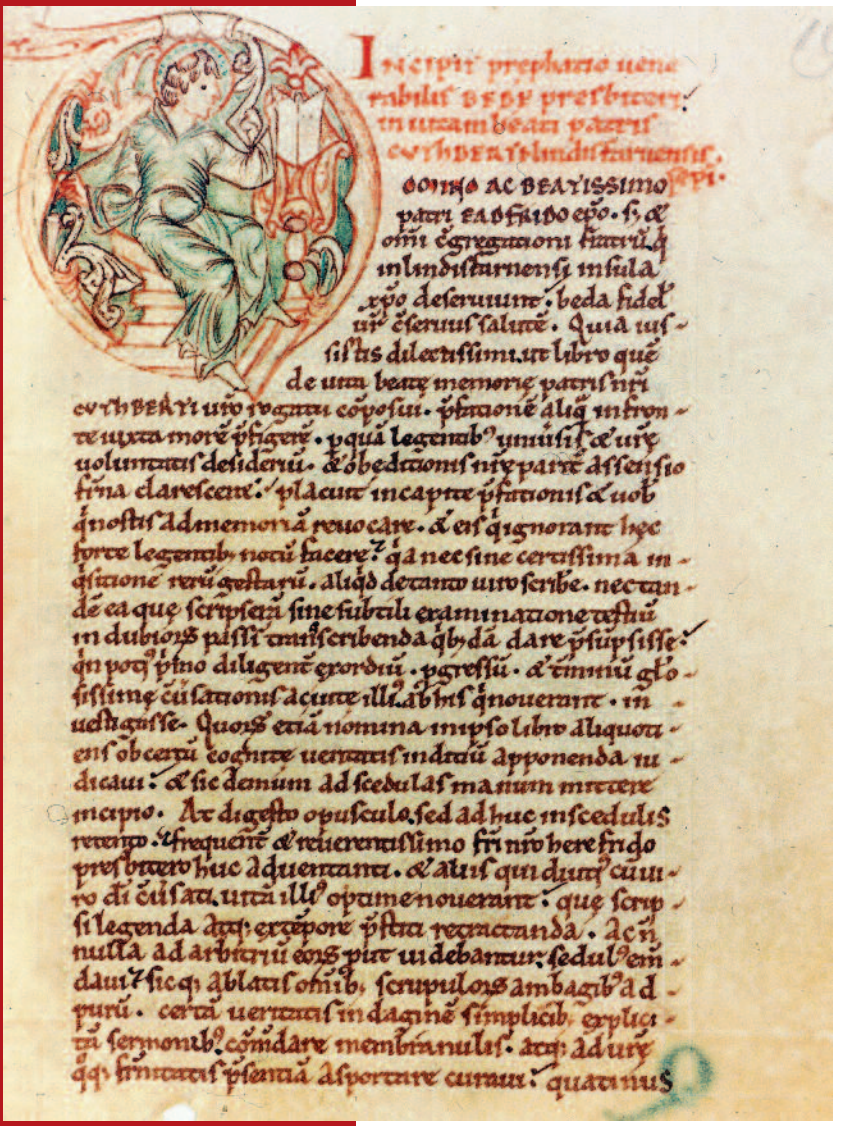

Professor Michael D.C. Drout

WHEATON COLLEGE

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Wheaton College

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Course Syllabus

The Anglo-Saxon World

About Your Professor

Michael D.C. Drout

Michael D.C. Drout is the William and Elsie Prentice Professor of English at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, where he chairs the English department and teaches courses in Old and Middle English, medieval literature, Chaucer, fantasy, and science fiction.

Professor Drout received his Ph.D. in medieval literature from Loyola University Chicago in 1997. He also holds M.A. degrees from Stanford (journalism) and the University of Missouri-Columbia (English literature) and a B.A. from Carnegie Mellon.

In 2006, Professor Drout was chosen as a Millicent C. McIntosh Fellow by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. In 2005, he was awarded the Prentice Professorship for outstanding teaching. The Wheaton College class of 2003 presented him with the Faculty Appreciation Award in that year. He is editor of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Beowulf and the Critics,* which won the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for Inklings Studies for 2003. He is also the author of *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Studies). Drout is one of the founding editors of the journal *Tolkien Studies* and is editor of *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (Routledge).

Drout has published extensively on medieval literature, including articles on William Langland's *Piers Plowman, Beowulf,* the Anglo-Saxon wills, the Old English translation of the *Rule of Chrodegang,* the *Exeter Book* "wisdom poems," and Anglo-Saxon medical texts. He has also published articles on Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* books and Susan Cooper's *Dark Is Rising* series of children's fantasy novels. Drout has written an Old English grammar book, *King Alfred's Grammar,* which is available for free at his website, www.michaeldrout.com. Professor Drout's other websites are www.Beowulfaloud.com and www.anglosaxonaloud.com. He has given lectures in England, Finland, Italy, Canada, Norway, and throughout the United States.

Drout lives in Dedham, Massachusetts, with his wife Raquel D'Oyen, their daughter Rhys, and their son Mitchell.

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The Venerable Bede (ca. 673–735), Anglo-Saxon scholar, theologian, historian, and Doctor of the Church, is illustrated in an initial "D," from an early twelfth-century manuscript of his *Life of Cuthbert* (Digby 20, folio 194r).

Introduction

One of the most fascinating cultures in medieval Europe, the Anglo-Saxons were an unusual blend of Germanic, Latin, and Celtic influence. In addition to the Anglo-Saxons' status as ancestors to people in England, America, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, their language serves as the source for Modern English—thus shedding light on the culture of today.

An expert on medieval literature, Professor Michael D.C. Drout—with a linguistic base in the development of the English language from Old to Middle to Modern English—is eminently qualified to lead this quest to discover the "real" Anglo-Saxons (often far different than those depicted in popular culture).

As the lectures progress, Professor Drout explores such illuminating topics as the Germanic past, the Viking Age, Anglo-Saxon literature, Anglo-Saxon religion, the Norman Conquest, and the influence of the Anglo-Saxons on today's world.

Lecture 1:
The Anglo-Saxons and Their World

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John Blair's *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction*.

> On ussera ealdfædera dagum lifdon mihtige cyningas, bealde rincas. Hie begeaton ðis land and hit gesetton. Fela geara ðæræfter wæron hie gefulwode and gehwurfon Cristnan. Þa wunon hie wið ða hæðnan. Manige boceras brohton wisdom in on land. Swete songas sungon þa scopas on healle. Nu sindon we hiera ierfan. Gif we nyllað dolu beon, uton leornian ða Westseaxna ðeode.
>
> In the days of our ancestors lived mighty kings, bold warriors. They took this land and settled it. Many years afterwards they were baptized and converted to Christianity. Then they fought against heathens. Many scholars brought wisdom into the land. Sweet songs sung the poets in the hall. Now we are their heirs. If we do not wish to be foolish, let us learn the West-Saxon tongue.

The passage above is from a somewhat old-fashioned textbook of Old English. It is pretty oversimplified, but there's nothing in there that is obviously wrong, and it gives us a good idea both of the language of the Anglo-Saxons and their history and culture. And even this short passage shows that there are many good reasons for studying the Anglo-Saxons. They are not just the physical ancestors of many people in England, America, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, but they are the cultural and linguistic ancestors of millions more people throughout the world. Their language was the source of Modern English, and understanding a bit about it explains why English is the way it is. Their culture laid the foundations upon which so much has been built, even though, obviously, the world has changed substantially.

The Anglo-Saxons are also the most fascinating culture in medieval Europe, a remarkable and unique blending of Germanic, Latin, Celtic, and homegrown material. Their art, literature, architecture, and culture are simply intrinsically interesting. But also a deep understanding of the Anglo-Saxons is extremely important for understanding our *current* cultural situation. From the Protestant Reformation polemicists to Thomas Jefferson, who wanted to put the Anglo-Saxon warriors Hengest and Horsa on the Great Seal, to the Victorians who readopted the Anglo-Saxons, to racists and Nazis who appropriated Anglo-Saxons identity, to J.R.R. Tolkien, who changed popular perception, to contemporary struggles over identity, over English language and culture, the Anglo-Saxons are extremely important. In this course, we will be learning who the Anglo-Saxons *actually* were, and then, toward the end of the course, we will see what other people have done with them.

Angles, Saxons and Jutes

In its entry for the year 449, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us:

> Her Mauricius Ualentines onfengon rice ricsodon ⁊ winter. On hiera dagum Hengest ⁊ Horsa from Wyrtgeorne geleaþade Bretta kyninge gesohton Bretene on þam staþe þe is genemned Ypwinesfleot, ærest Brettum to fultume, ac hie eft on hie fuhton. Se cing het hi feohtan agien Pihtas, ⁊ hi swa dydan ⁊ sige hæfdan swa hwar swa hi comon. Hi ða sende to Angle ⁊ heton heom sendan mare fultum ⁊ heom seggan Brytwalana nahtnesse ⁊ ðæs landes cysta. Hy ða sendan heom mare fultum. Þa comon þa menn of þrim mægþum Germanie, of Ealdseaxum, of Anglum, of Iotum. Of Iotum comon Cantware ⁊ Wihtware, þæt ys seo mæið ðe nu eardað on Wiht, ⁊ ðæt cynn on Westsexum þe man gyt hæt Iutna cyn. Of Ealdseaxon comon Eastsexa ⁊ Suðsexa ⁊ WestSexan. Of Angle comon, se a siððan stod westi betwyx Iutum ⁊ Seaxum, Eastengla, Midelangla, Mearca ⁊ ealle Norðhymbra.
>
> This year Martianus and Valentinian received the kingdom and reigned for seven years. In their days the Hengest and Horsa were invited here by King Vortigern, and they came to Britain in three longships, landing at Ebbesfleet. King Vortigern gave them territory in the south-east of this land, on the condition that they fight the Picts. This they did, and had victory wherever they went. They then sent to Angle, commanded more aid, and commanded that they should be told of the Britons' worthlessness and the choice nature of their land. They soon sent hither a greater host to help the others. Then came the men of three Germanic tribes: Old Saxons; Angles; and Jutes. Of the Jutes come the people of Kent and the Isle of Wight; that is the tribe which now lives on Wight, and that race among the West Saxons which men even now call Jutish. Of the Old Saxons come the East Saxons, South Saxons, and West Saxons. Of the Angles—the country they left has since stood empty between Jutes and Saxons—come the East Anglians, Middle Anglians, Mercians, and all the Northumbrians.

This is the "official story" of the arrival in England of three Germanic tribes, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. There may be elements of truth in this story, but it also works very well as a foundation myth of Anglo-Saxon England. But for that myth to make sense, we need to go back to the very beginnings of recorded history in the northwest of Europe. The settlement of the British Isles goes back into very deep time, beyond the scope of this course, but we know that there were Neolithic people living there in very ancient times indeed. Then Celtic peoples arrived and controlled the islands. In 55 B.C., Julius Caesar led invasions of Britain, connecting it to the Roman Empire (though there were no permanent Roman settlements until quite a while later). In 43 and 44 A.D., a true Roman invasion led by Claudius brought about a permanent Roman presence in Britain and the eventual creation of the Romano-British, a blending of the Celtic peoples who had already been in Britain with the Roman occupiers. The Romano-British spoke Latin and were integrated into the Western Roman Empire.

But as that Western Empire weakened, and even before Rome fell (traditionally the Fall of Rome is dated to 476), the Legions were withdrawn from Britain (410). Then, the non-Romanized Celtic people, Scots (the contemporary name for the Irish), Picts (who lived in the north in what is now Scotland), and others began to try to take the wealth and power held by the Romano-British. Then the remnants of Roman Britain led by King Vortigern sent across the sea for help from the Saxons, Germanic tribes in southern Denmark and Northern Germany. Led by two brothers, named Hengest and Horsa (both of whose names mean "horse"), these tribes came to England to help King Vortigern but soon turned on the Romano-British and conquered everything for their own.

There were, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the Venerable Bede tell us, three major groupings: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. The Jutes settled the far east portion of England, Kent, and the Isle of Wight. The Angles took the more north and eastern part, Northumbria and East Anglia, and also Mercia, in the middle. The Saxons took the south and the west of England. This is when Anglo-Saxon history really begins, from just before 500 until the Norman Conquest of 1066.

It will help us throughout the course to keep in mind a time-line of Anglo-Saxon history. My former student, John Walsh, realized that the acronym MCGVR gives us a handy reference for the Anglo-Saxon centuries:

M = Migration of tribes to England, 500–600

C = Conversion to Christianity, 600–700

G = Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon culture, 700-–800

V = Viking Raids and destruction of Anglo-Saxon culture, 800–900

R = Reform and Rebuilding of Anglo-Saxon culture, 900–1000

There is no simple mnemonic device for the last half-century of Anglo-Saxon culture, but from 1000 to 1066 is the period of Anglo-Danish rule and the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Each of these periods will get one or more lectures on its own, but right now we want to build up the big picture of Anglo-Saxon history and culture to give us a guide through the rest of the material.

Migration: During this time, Germanic tribes crossed the sea to England and settled the countryside, which may have been somewhat depopulated due either to plague, economic collapse in the post-Roman period, or conquest.

Conversion: Although Christianity had existed in the British Isles since the Roman period, from the end of the sixth century and throughout the seventh, England was converted by missionaries from both Rome and Ireland and eventually became officially Christian.

Golden Age: For over a century England was one of the intellectual and cultural hot spots of Europe. English monasteries and nunneries were centers of learning and book production. The climate was warm, and England was rich.

Viking Raids: Riches and undefended monasteries were a target for Viking invaders from Denmark and Norway. They raided, pillaged,

and burned England for many summers before sending entire armies to occupy the land and settle it with Danes and Norwegians. All native English kings and kingdoms but one were destroyed in this time period.

Reform: At the end of the Viking period, King Alfred the Great saved England from complete Viking domination and began the rebuilding of the country. Alfred's grandson Athelstan made England among the most powerful nations in Europe and began a process of Church reform that continued for many years. England was unique in having a culture that was now focused on learning in the vernacular (in English) rather than in Latin.

End: King Athelred's inept leadership eventually led to the fall of England, first to Danish kings and then to William the Conqueror, a prince of Normandy.

The larger narrative that you can see in the history of Anglo-Saxon England is the continued mixing and integration of various disparate elements into one people. The Anglo-Saxons are what the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes turned into after they migrated to England, intermarried with the Romano-British, converted to Christianity, were invaded by the Vikings, intermarried with the Danish settlers, reformed themselves, were conquered by Danes, rebuilt their kingdom, and were finally conquered by the French. They were people who spoke the Anglo-Saxon language. They were people who lived in a land of Celtic place-names, with Roman ruins, with Germanic legends and stories and language, with Christian churches and Latin learning. They thought England was specially singled out by Pope Gregory the Great, and by God, but they also were well aware of their inferiority to the Romans who had come before them and of their marginal place at the edge of Europe. And then, after the Norman Conquest, they were the regular people of England and were Anglo-Norman, until 1214, when King John (you know him as the Prince John of Robin Hood fame, the brother of Richard the Lion-Hearted) lost the English hold over Normandy. At that point, the language of Norman French was no longer official and English became again the language of the kingdom, but the Anglo-Saxons were mostly a memory.

There things stood until Henry VIII and the Protestant Reformation. Henry hated Protestants and brutally repressed them, but ended up breaking the Church away from Rome and dissolving the monasteries between 1536 and 1541. There was a massive loss of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and material culture (what had survived the Conquest), but Protestants and others suddenly were interested in Anglo-Saxon because they thought that they could find historical precedent in England for the things they wanted to do. So there was a recovery of Old English language and the development of a new respect for the Anglo-Saxon kings, particularly Alfred.

The English civil war (1643–1651) caused the destruction of even more precious manuscripts and the destruction of the physical remains of most of the great saints and kings of the Anglo-Saxon period, but again, scholars were drawn to understand the language and history of their ancestors. The Anglo-Saxons became important for ideas about England.

Across the Atlantic, a number of years later, Thomas Jefferson thought America should be Anglo-Saxon. Later still "Anglo-Saxon" became a shorthand for separating previous settlers in America from later immigrants (even though a lot of the people who called themselves or were labeled Anglo-Saxon were Scots-Irish), and after the American Civil War, the phrase the "Anglo-Saxon Race" was used for racist purposes.

Back in Europe, Anglo-Saxons and their origin and identity became important in the struggles surrounding Germany, Denmark, and France. The Victorians were also interested in adopting "Anglo-Saxon" for their history. The Victorians approved of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, as it marked England as being different from the continental powers. Ideas of national identity and language were of course tied in to both World Wars, and although the National Socialist Workers Party in Germany did not explicitly use the Anglo-Saxons, they did invoke a Germanic past, linking up this supposed pan-Germanic past with justifications for conquest and racism. Thus, for several decades after the war, the Anglo-Saxons ended up tarred with racist and Nazi associations. However, since the 1990s there has been renewed interest in the real (as opposed to the manufactured) Anglo-Saxon past, and Anglo-Saxons have been portrayed positively in major films, such as Peter Jackson's adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

In summary, the Anglo-Saxons were Germanic people who migrated to England, converted to Christianity, and were in cultural and political control for about five hundred years. During that time, they absorbed Latin culture, clashed with and absorbed other, but Northern, Germanic cultures, developed art and literature and architecture and theology, fell back down almost to collapse, built up again, were conquered but kept their language and culture, were conquered again and lost much, and then had their ideas and culture and language (changed as they were) spread in time and place. They were important in their own day, and they are still very important now.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What does the acronym MCGVR stand for? Use the acronym to draw a time-line of Anglo-Saxon history.
2. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, why did the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes come to England? What alternative explanations are there for their migration?

Suggested Reading

Blair, John. *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Other Books of Interest

Howe, Nicholas. *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2001.

Whitelock, Dorothy. *The Beginnings of English Society*. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Lecture 2:
Language and Culture

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Peter Baker's *Introduction to Old English* and Michael D.C. Drout's *King Alfred's Grammar* and Michael D.C. Drout's *King Alfred's Grammar* (available online at http://acunix.wheatonma.edu/mdrout/GrammarBook2007/title.html).

Sum sceal mid hearpan æt his hlafordes
fotum sittan, feoh þicgan,
ond a snellice snere wræstan,
lætan scralletan sceacol, se þe hleapeð,
nægl neomegende; biþ him neod micel.

One shall sit at his lord's feet with the harp, he will always receive his fee, and always keenly wrest the strings, let the nail pick the strings to ring sweetly, their voices leap forth with great desire.

Anglo-Saxon is a language with fundamental continuity with our own, but at the same time it is very different. Anglo-Saxon was spoken from around 500 to 1200, but it is much more difficult to learn than Middle English, which was spoken from 1200 to 1500. We will examine the reasons for this difference in this lecture, and there is much more detailed information in the Recorded Books course *A History of the English Language*. My students are able to master Middle English (Chaucer's language) in about three weeks. It takes a full semester to learn Anglo-Saxon (the term is used interchangeably with "Old English"). If you are interested in learning further, I have an Old English grammar book online that can be accessed at

http://acunix.wheatonma.edu/mdrout/GrammarBook2007/title.html

If you would like to hear more Old English, you can listen to my podcasts of Anglo-Saxon at

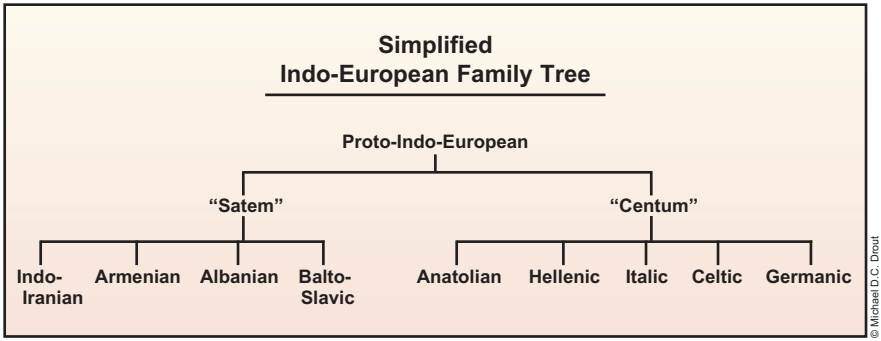
http://anglosaxonaloud.com

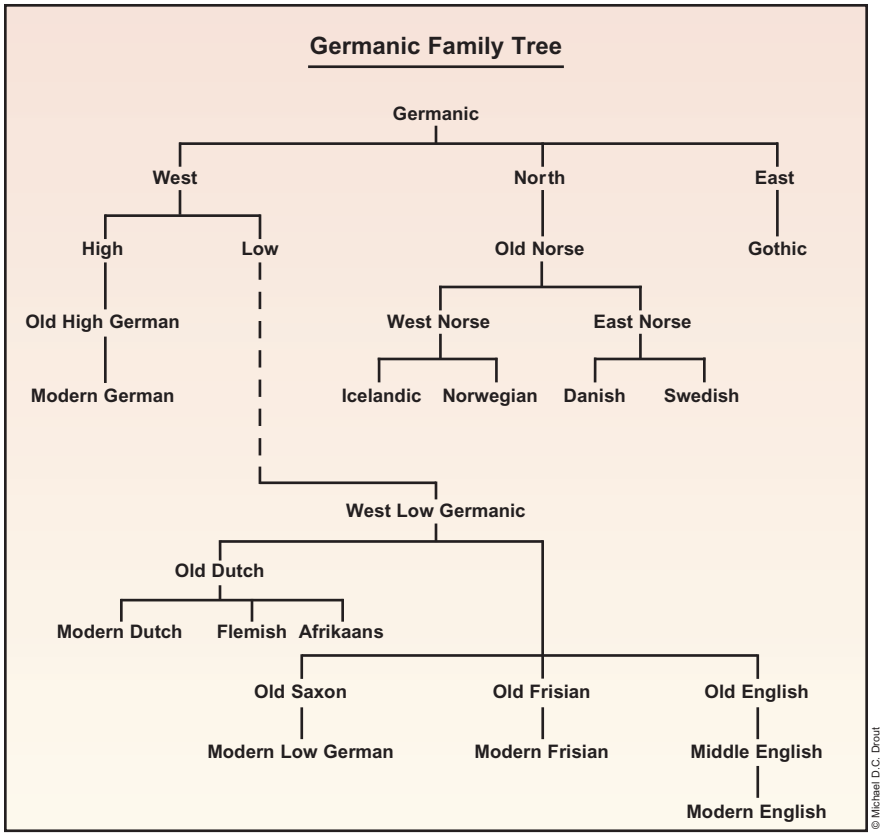
Complete translations of the poems discussed in this course are available online at

http://anglosaxonworld.com

We will begin the history of the Anglo-Saxon language with a short excursion into European linguistic history. Some time in the very distant past, perhaps fifty thousand years ago, there was a group of people living in Russia near the Caspian Sea. The language they spoke is now called Proto-Indo-European because it is the ancestor of not only most modern European languages (Finnish and Hungarian are among the few exceptions) but also many of the languages of India. Indo-Europeans then migrated throughout Europe and India, spreading their language. The language then diversified, mostly along geographic lines, into different language "species." There are many branches of the Indo-European tree, but only three—Celtic languages, Italic languages, and Germanic languages—are particularly relevant to Anglo-Saxon culture, and the Germanic branch is far more important than the others to Anglo-Saxon language.

There were three branches of the Germanic tree, based on geography. East Germanic (the only surviving example of which is the Gothic language) was spoken in the eastern part of the German world. North Germanic was spoken in present-day Scandinavia and the northern part of Europe, and West Germanic was spoken in the west of the German part of Europe, including present-day Germany, France, and eventually England. Anglo-Saxon is a West Germanic language and thus more closely related to Modern German and Frisian than to Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish (which are North Germanic).





Anglo-Saxon was an *inflected* language (as was Proto-Indo-European): you indicated grammatical relationships not by the order of words in a sentence, but by inflections, little tags that you attached to key words. We still use some inflections in Modern English, for instance, apostrophe-*s*, which is a tag we add to the end of words to indicate possession. But Anglo-Saxon used inflections to indicate most grammatical relationships, whereas Modern English uses the order of words in a sentence to indicate, for instance, which noun is the *subject* of a sentence (the doer of the action) and which is the *object* (the receiver of the action). For us there is a big difference between "The dog ate the cat "and "The cat ate the dog."

In Anglo-Saxon, you could say "dog cat ate," "ate cat dog," or "dog ate cat" and still not tell your reader who did the eating and who got eaten. Instead of relying on word order, you would put a tag on who got eaten, so "dog ate cat-ne" and "cat-ne dog ate" and "cat-ne ate dog" would all mean the same thing and would be different from "dog-ne ate cat" or "cat dog-ne ate" (whoever gets the *–ne* is the one who gets eaten). Anglo-Saxon also had what we call "strong verbs," in which, instead of merely putting a tag at the end of a verb to indicate, for example, tense (Modern English *–ed*), the vowel in a verb changes. We still have strong verbs in Modern English, such as *ring, rang, rung* or *fly, flew, flown*.

As I noted above, Anglo-Saxon takes more time to learn than Middle English, but it is still relatively easy to learn (certainly easier than French), and because 80 percent of the one thousand most commonly used words in Modern English are derived from Anglo-Saxon, readers can often puzzle out Anglo-Saxon, particularly when it is written in clear prose, like that of King Alfred:

> Ic ða Ælfred cyning þas togædere gegaderode ⁊ awritan het, monege þara þe ure foregengan heoldon, ða ðe me licodon; ⁊ manege þara þe me ne licodon ic awearp mid minra witena geðeahte, ⁊ on oðre wisan bebead to healdanne. Forðam ic ne dorste geðristlæcan þara minra awuht fela on gewrit settan, forðam me wæs uncuð, hwæt þæs ðam lician wolde ðe æfter us wæren. Ac ða ðe ic gemette awðer oððe on Ines dæge, mines mæges, oððe on Offan Mercna cyninges oððe on æþelbryhtes, þe ærest fulluhte onfeng on Angelcynne, þa ðe me ryhtoste ðuhton, ic þa heron gegaderode, ⁊ þa oðre forlet. Ic ða ælfred Westseaxna cyning eallum minnum witum, þas geeowde, ⁊ hie ða cwædon, þæt him þæt licode eallum to healdanne.
>
> From the Laws of King Alfred
>
> Then I, King Alfred, collected these [laws] together and ordered to be written many of them which our forefathers observed, those which I liked; and many of those which I did not like, I rejected with the advice of my councilors, and ordered them to be differently observed. For I dared not presume to set in writing at all many of my own, because it was unknown to me what would please those who should come after us. But those which I found anywhere, which seemed to me most just, either of the time of my kinsman, King Ine, or of Offa, king of the Mercians, or of Ethelbert, who first among the English received baptism, I collected herein, and omitted the others. (From *English Historical Documents*)

This is the language that the Anglo-Saxons brought with them when they "migrated" to England (though by King Alfred's time the language had changed somewhat, it was still very similar to that of the migrants who had arrived centuries before). And the Anglo-Saxons brought not only their language, but also their culture (though for culture we have to rely mostly on archaeology and the evidence of place names rather than texts, since the Anglo-Saxons were not literate until after the conversion to Christianity in the seventh century).

However, some of what we know from much-later texts does fit the archaeology. For example, before they converted to Christianity, Anglo-Saxons cremated their dead and buried the remains in pots. Archaeologists have found pots made by the same potters in Germany and in England dating from the migration period.

The archaeology is also consistent with the story that when the Anglo-Saxons began to arrive in England, there had been some kind of severe depopulation. There does not seem to be a lot of archaeological evidence for mass slaughter or destruction, but instead a rather steady movement of Anglo-Saxons from the coasts up into England along the rivers (we can track the spread of Anglo-Saxon burial customs). But although the land may have not been very crowded, it was not entirely empty of people or of buildings. And the Anglo-Saxons, both metaphorically and physically, built on top of these, physically, culturally, and linguistically.

For example, place names are exceedingly conservative. Even after you kill off all the people, you often keep the place name, as so many American Indian names in Massachusetts and throughout America show. Likewise in Anglo-Saxon England, they used place names that already existed, slotting them right into their language. So although Celtic words are not particularly common in English, they are visible in a great number of place names. For example, the *Wor* in Worcester, the *Win* in Winchester, the *Ex* in Exeter, and the *Glou* in Gloucester are all Celtic. Rivers in England have a very high proportion of Celtic names, as do hills: *Bryn Mawr* means "great hill" in Welsh, and *Barr* also means "hill." *Comb* at the end of various place names means "deep valley."

A few Celtic words from agriculture and landscape in general (rather than specific places) also entered into Old English. *Binn* is the source for "bin" (originally basket); *crag* is "rock" (and thus the name "Craig," whose consonants show that it is borrowed later from Welsh); *ass* (meaning "donkey") is originally from Latin but passed through Celtic before reaching Old English. *Dun*, meaning "dark colored," is also Celtic, and one of the very few verbs to enter into Old English from Celtic is *cursian* (to curse).

The Anglo-Saxons had also picked up some Latin even back before they came to England, both through the Christian church and through trade. Some words that were borrowed into early West-Germanic include *wine*, *cheap* (the early meaning of it was a more generic "price" or "bargain" rather than current "good price"), *monger*, *mint*, *pound*, *anchor*, *mile*, *kettle, linen*, *cires* (cherry), *popig* (poppy), *cytel* (kettle), *pyle* (which becomes pillow), *gimm* (gem), *butere* (butter), *cealc* (chalk), and *copper*. Also borrowed were words for war, including *camp* (battle, later evolving to place of battle

and then our modern meaning), *weall* (wall, fortification), *pytt* (pit), *stræt* (street), and *segn* (banner, later sign). A few of the remaining words that are most interesting are *draca* (dragon; the native Old English word was *wyrm*), *cirice* (church), *bisceop* (bishop), and even *Sæternesdæg* (Saturn's day, that is, Saturday).

From these words we can even reconstruct some of the culture of the Anglo-Saxon tribes on the continent: they traded with the Romans, fought with the Romans, and were influenced by some Roman customs and institutions. They were Germanic villagers on the edge of a mighty, civilized empire.

The language, the archaeology, and even the much later historical texts are all relatively consistent here. Bede's description of the Angles coming from a land that is now empty is also, surprisingly, supported by archaeology. Modern day Angeln has some archaeological sites where very large complexes of buildings were apparently abandoned. One theory is that the sea levels were rising at this time and harming farms by getting too much salt water on previously fertile soils. This change may have been one of the reasons that people moved across the English channel to fertile land there.

From archaeology we also know that the first migrants to Anglo-Saxon England built in wood, not stone. They probably lived in buildings that were at least in part sunk into the ground, possibly for warmth, and they used thatch for roofing rather than Roman tiles. They were warlike but also farmers, and they did not have a lot of central organization but rather lived in tribal groups. From the historical texts, we conclude that kings did seem to use the advice and possibly consent of the nobles. The *witan* or council could apparently advise the king, although this probably was not a legal restraint on kingly power as much as just a good idea (for the king not to anger his nobles).

Land was organized and traded, sold, and loaned in terms of "hides," often thought to be the minimum amount of land to feed a single family. We think this because when we can figure out specific hides, they are all different sizes, but good, flat, well-drained agricultural land tends to have much smaller hides than bad, difficult-to-farm, sloped or wet land, suggesting that the more you could grow in a spot, the smaller the "hide" needed to be. Nobles and kings owned hundreds or even thousands of hides, probably meaning that they received the surplus off the land when someone else farmed it.

A lot of the physical arrangement of the Anglo-Saxon countryside is still in place, boundaries marking different things now but still, as best we can tell, the original boundaries of fields, paths, and buildings. The Anglo-Saxons tended to build things on top of other things: A pagan burial ground or ceremonial area might get a church or a monastery in the same spot. Roman ruins could sometimes be used for other purposes, particularly church buildings.

Information about the Anglo-Saxons' social customs is harder to extract from archaeological remains or the evidence of language and place-names, but it can be inferred from more distant historical sources. In the first century, a Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote the *Germania*, ostensibly a description of the Germanic tribes. Tacitus never made it to England; he wrote more than three hundred years before the migrations, and a lot of his work was polemical—he was trying to show how weak his contemporary Romans were

when compared to the tough, violent Germans—but historians and archaeologists find some aspects of Tacitus to be valuable.

Tacitus said that the Germans were characterized by tightly bonded kin-groups with a particular emphasis on the bond between the lord and his men. Men were willing to die for the lord and to support their comitatus, their warrior band. We perhaps see some evidence of this behavior (though it may be more a literary ideal than an actual social practice), in the famous Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 755, which gives the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, in which the followers of a defeated king decided to fight to the death rather than be reconciled after the death of their lord.

We also know, from their later laws, that the Anglo-Saxons had the custom of a *wergild*, a "man-price," which was the compensation that was required to be paid to a person's family if that person was killed without just cause. *Wergild* is sometimes interpreted to mean that if you were rich enough, you could go around slaughtering people in early Germanic society, but that gets things somewhat backwards: *wergild* was a means of settling disputes and eliminating the mandatory duty of revenge. A chieftain could force parties to stop feuding by requiring the payment of a *wergild* and thus settling a back-and-forth chain of killings in an honorable fashion. And the practice of *wergild* may be a reason why the Anglo-Saxons were so fascinated by the idea of brother killing brother: you could not pay *wergild* within the family, and you could not kill someone in revenge within the family, so brother killings were inexpiable.

We know much less about the religion, art, and culture of the Anglo-Saxons than we do of their laws, but we can make some reasonable inferences. There were Christians in England, but the majority of Anglo-Saxons were pagan. They worshiped gods who were cognate with the familiar Old Norse deities, but they were not imported from Scandinavia, as they had names in Anglo-Saxon rather than Old Norse. The religion was not centralized and seems to have had a large number of small shrines or temples scattered throughout the landscape.

The early Anglo-Saxons concentrated their artistic endeavors in small, portable objects rather than large temples, churches, or buildings. They produced beautiful ornaments, swords, and small decorative items. They kept their culture alive with oral songs rather than written texts. They were not particularly interested in the Roman tradition of literature and art. They had the culture of a people on the move, not settled, and they were able to bring their culture with them whenever they migrated.

This was the state of the Anglo-Saxons until around 600, when they began to convert to Christianity and became people of the book, the church, and the monastery. But until that time they were migratory Germanic people, illiterate but cultured, at the edge of the remains of the collapsed Roman empire.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. On what branch of the Indo-European language tree is Old English located? Sketch that branch.
2. What does archaeology tell us about the first Anglo-Saxon migrants to England?

Suggested Reading

Baker, Peter. *Introduction to Old English*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

Drout, Michael D.C. *King Alfred's Grammar*. Available online at http://acunix.wheatonma.edu/mdrout/GrammarBook2007/title.html.

Other Books of Interest

Barney, Stephen A. *Word-Hoard: An Introduction to Old English Vocabulary*. 2nd ed. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

Robinson, Orrin W. *Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Recorded Books

Drout, Michael D.C. *The History of the English Language*. Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, LLC, 2006. 7 CDs/7 hours.

Lecture 3:
The Migration and the Germanic Past

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John D. Niles's *Beowulf and Lejre*.

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorl [as], syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden. He þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan. Þæt wæs god cyning!

Lo! We have heard of the valor of the spear danes in the elder days, of the kings of the people, how those noble ones accomplished great deeds. Often Shild Scefing scourged his enemies of many nations, overturned their mead benches, terrified earls. After he had first become found in a powerless state; he overcame that, grew under the heavens and increased in worth until every one of his neighbors across the whale-road had to submit to him and give him gold. That was a good king!

Just as the Mediterranean Sea is the center of the classical world, the North Sea is the center of the Migration-period world. Tribes and peoples conquered and were conquered, moved to seek new land or living space or tribute and plunder. They fought, made alliances and built settlements. And nearly everything they did is lost to history, because they were not literate. We can try to piece together several centuries of lost history through heroic stories, a few chronicles in Latin, and archaeological finds. But these times are what used to be called the Dark Ages, and although we do not use that pejorative terminology any more, much indeed is dark to us, history lost forever or reduced to a few tantalizing hints. Nevertheless we can extract some information from the scraps and hints and try to reconstruct some of the background of the Anglo-Saxons in the Germanic North both before and soon after they came to England.

The Migration period, in our shorthand, from 500 to 600, but really going back to the middle of the fifth century or even further, is the "Heroic Age" for most of the Northern cultures, the time in which myths and legends are set. This era was studied deeply—and in some ways invented—by European scholars interested in creating a past for their own nations. Anglo-Saxon was so important to these scholars, from Germany and Denmark as well as from

England, because it was the *oldest* literature that we had that was not in Latin but was from Europe. That is why the poem *Beowulf*, which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is so important even though the poem was copied in the tenth century and never mentions England or the English. *Beowulf* still gives us more information about the Migration era than just about any text in any language. But it is incredibly difficult to separate historical fact (or at least historical legend) from myth, from magic and from monsters in *Beowulf*. Even those first eleven lines are full of disputed words and passages that are very important for our understanding of the early history of the Germanic north.

Beowulf begins with a great king, Scyld Scefing, whose name *may* mean "Shield, son of Sheaf" (that is, weapon, son of agriculture). This may make him mythological, but the Scyldings (the descendants of Scyld) turn out to be important to a whole variety of peoples and dynasties around the North Sea. There are Scyldings everywhere, always associated in one way or another with Denmark. Likewise, the various peoples mentioned in *Beowulf* seem to be consistent with the actual history we find elsewhere.

The most famous example is Beowulf's uncle, Hygelac. In the nineteenth century, the great scholar N.F.S. Grundtvig noticed that the name Hygelac, in Anglo-Saxon, was the same as the name "Chochilaicus" in a Latin manuscript by Gregory of Tours. Gregory says that Hygelac led a raid in the year 516 into Frisia, that Hygelac was killed, and that his bones were so huge that they were left on an island in the river and people came and stared at them. In *Beowulf*, we learn that Beowulf's uncle Hygelac led a raid into Frisia and gets killed in similar circumstances (though there is nothing about giant bones). It does seem that *Beowulf* is preserving tradition from a very long time back. And the more we investigate, the more it seems that there was a consistent set of stories about the Migration period. Whether these stories are based on fact is harder to determine, but the more we physically dig things up with archaeology, the more we find that are consistent in surprising ways.

Another example from *Beowulf* helps us create a coherent picture of what may have been going on before and during the time the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes got to England. This is the Finnsburg episode. In the poem, after Beowulf kills Grendel, the first monster, there is a large celebration, and a poet sings a song about a failed peace-making attempt in Frisia. Explaining this complicated story sheds a lot of light on the underlying kinship and lordship relationships in Anglo-Saxon England.

Finn is king of the Frisians, who live in the present-day Netherlands. They have been at war with the Danes, from Denmark. To try to settle this war, Hoc, the king of the Danes, marries his daughter, Hildeburh, to Finn. Hildeburh has a son and it seems like the war is over: the two kingdoms are joined in the person of the son, and everything is good.

Hnæf, the son of King Hoc and the next king of the Danes, is Hildeburh's brother. He and his men go to Frisia, from Denmark, to visit Hildeburh and her husband Finn. It may be that the son of Hildeburh and Finn has been along with Hnæf, though this is not entirely clear.

Hnæf's right-hand man is named Hengest, but he is apparently not a Dane, but a Jutish mercenary who is serving Hnæf. At some point, a fight breaks out, and Hildeburh's son, who in his person unified the Danes and the

Frisians, is killed, and so is Hnæf, the leader of the Danes. But the two sides, Danes and Frisians, are evenly matched and neither can overcome the other. So they propose a truce. The Danes, who are now being led by Hengest (even though he is not a Dane), agree to spend the winter in Finn's hall and not kill anyone. Finn agrees to treat them the same as he does his own men, giving treasure to both equally. There is a funeral for Hnæf and the dead son, and Hildeburh—sister of Hnæf and mother of the dead son—mourns, but the truce holds until spring.

But there is a problem. Hengest and his men are now serving the person who is responsible for killing their lord. They have a duty to avenge him, but they have also sworn an oath not to kill any Frisians. This is the kind of damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situation that the Anglo-Saxons loved to think about. Then spring comes and the Danes are going to leave, but some warriors just cannot stand the humiliation of not avenging their lord any more. Fighting breaks out and this time the Danes are completely victorious. They kill all the Frisians, including King Finn, steal all his treasure, and go back to Denmark with Hildeburh.

This is complicated but relatively straightforward. But now we are going to be a little more speculative and link this literary material to the Migration era (the ideas here come from J.R.R. Tolkien, a great scholar of *Beowulf* long before he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*).

Why is Hengest, a Jute, Hnæf's right-hand man and not some Dane? And why do the Danes win in the spring when they were so evenly tied in the early winter? Tolkien proposes that there were Jutish mercenaries serving on both sides, with the Danes and the Frisians. So there are three ethnic groups or tribes, but only two sides: Danes and their Jutes, led by Hengest, and Frisians and their Jutes, led by Finn. Why were the Jutes there at all, and why in two groups rather than representing their own tribe? Because, at this time in the early migration period, the Jutes are being squeezed out of their territory by the expanding Danes to the north and the Franks to the south. The Frisians are also in trouble, but they are trying to protect themselves by allying with the Danes (which is why their king, Finn, marries the daughter of the Danish king). So the Danes have expanded south into the Danish peninsula and pretty much defeated the Jutes, and the surviving warriors of the Jutes are serving as mercenaries both to Danes and Frisians.

The idea is that Hengest, after this whole disaster of diplomacy and the death of the son who is supposed to join the kingdoms of the Danes and Frisians, manages to convince some of the Jutes on the Frisian side to switch to his side and then, when the fight does break out, they help to massacre the remaining Frisians. Then (and here's where Tolkien makes a big leap, but one that makes sense), Hengest brings Hildeburh back to Denmark but is really no longer welcome, having been part of the botched peaceful voyage. So Hengest takes his band of Jutes, and perhaps some Danes, and heads over the sea from Denmark to England and settles there. This reconstruction is, of course, Tolkien linking things up that are just hints and names, but it has the benefit of making more sense than other proposed explanations.

Remember that the leader of the Anglo-Saxon "migration" is named Hengest in the historical sources. Traditionally this Hengest is thought to have nothing

to do with *Beowulf*, but if Tolkien is right, we can then see a possibly more reasonable explanation than the whole "invitation" story of the migration. Peoples were migrating around the North Sea. The Jutes had been displaced. Some of their warriors, led by Hengest, migrated to England to seek greener pastures than they were finding in continental Europe. We can not prove such speculation given the present state of our knowledge, but there are other hints that some consistent body of knowledge (a body or traditional stories or even real history) is behind the poems.

Another example of this consistency may be found in a poem in the Exeter Book called "Widsith," in which a traveler lists, at tedious length, all the places and peoples that he has seen.

Ic wæs mid Hunum ond mid Hreðgotum,
mid Sweom ond mid Geatum ond mid Suþdenum.
Mid Wenlum ic wæs ond mid Wærnum ond mid wicingum.
Mid Gefþum ic wæs ond mid Winedum ond mid Gefflegum.
Mid Englum ic wæs ond mid Swæfum ond mid ænenum.
Mid Seaxum ic wæs ond Sycgum ond mid Sweordwerum.
Mid Hronum ic wæs ond mid Deanum ond mid Heaþoreamum.
Mid þyringum ic wæs ond mid þrowendum,
ond mid Burgendum, þær ic beag geþah;

This is basically a pretty accurate list of the peoples around the North Sea at this time period. Since Widsith was not written down, as far as we know, until the tenth century, and since there are not a lot of good historical sources that the poet could have drawn on, we are inclined to think he knew a lot of stories. Of direct relevance to *Beowulf* is this part:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,
siþþan hy forwræcon wicinga cynn
ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna þrym.

Hrothulf and Hrothgar, uncle and nephew, held for a long time companionship/peace together after they had driven off the kin of the Vikings and crushed the vanguard of Ingeld and defeated the Heathobards at Heorot.

This section of Widsith appears to refer to the part of *Beowulf* where Hrothgar is jointed with his nephew Hrothulf at the hall of Heorot. Other sources, including Saxo Grammaticus, who was a Dane but wrote in Latin, suggest that someone named Hrothulf would end up killing Hrothgar's son and taking over the kingdom. This same Hrothulf is probably Rolf Kraki, the King Arthur of Denmark. Again, it requires some speculation, but it seems possible to make the stories fit together with the fragmentary history.

So around the North Sea in the migration period we find conflict, movement of whole peoples, alliances and their failure, and people packing up from farmland that may have been inundated by the sea (and so at least temporarily too salty to grow regular crops) and moving to England. It is important to

note that Britain, even in 1080, was still not up to even half of its Roman-times population, so there was room for people to settle, and given that the peoples on the continent were growing and expanding, others appear to have been pushed out toward England.

The archaeology supports this hypothesis to some degree. We can track Anglo-Saxon-Jutish burials as they start on the coast and move up the waterways into England over the course of the sixth century, moving along the Thames valley, from East Anglia into the interior, north from Kent and the south. We also get the idea, though from somewhat unreliable sources, like Gildas, a historian, that the remaining British kingdoms were relatively weak, even in Wales, where Roman culture held on longer, and by around 570 there were enough English (Angles, Saxons, Jutes) to form some kind of grouping of tribes to fight against the British. The big question is how much of this was conquest and how much was filling a vacuum, but regardless of the background reasons, we do know that by the end of the sixth century, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were established all throughout England and were thinking of themselves as one ethnic group and one language, though not as one people. The Migration had come to an end.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is *Beowulf*, a literary text, helpful for understanding the history of the Migration period?
2. What happens in the Finnsburg episode of *Beowulf*?

Suggested Reading

Niles, John D. *Beowulf and Lejre*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007.

Other Books of Interest

Chambers, R.W. *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Robinson, Fred C. "History, Religion, Culture: The Background Necessary for Teaching Beowulf." *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, pp. 107–122. Eds. Jess B. Bessinger and Robert F. Yeager. NY: Modern Language Association of America, 1984.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Finn and Hengest*. Ed. Alan Bliss. Eureka, CA: Firebird Distributing, 1998.

Ward-Perkins, Bryan. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Lecture 4:
The Conversion:
The School of Theodore and Hadrian

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and Henry Mayr-Harting's *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*.

In this monastery of Whitby there lived a brother whom God's grace made remarkable. So skilful was he in composing religious and devotional songs, that he could quickly turn whatever passages of Scripture were explained to him into delightful and moving poetry in his own English tongue. These verses of his stirred the hearts of many folk to despise the world and aspire to heavenly things . . . And although he followed a secular occupation until well advanced in years, he had never learned anything about poetry: indeed, whenever all those present at a feast took it in turns to sing and entertain the company, he would get up from table and go home directly when he saw the harp approaching him.

On one such occasion he had left the house in which the entertainment was being held and went out to the stable, where it was his duty to look after the beasts that night. He lay down there at the appointed time and fell asleep, and in a dream he saw a man standing beside him who called him by name. "Cædmon," he said, "sing me a song." "I don't know how to sing," he replied. "It is because I cannot sing that I left the feast and came here." The man who addressed him then said: "But you shall sing to me." "What should I sing about?" he replied. "Sing about the Creation of all things," the other answered. And Cædmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator that he had never heard before, and their theme ran thus: "Let us praise the Maker of the kingdom of heaven, the power and purpose of our Creator, and the acts of the Father of glory. Let us sing how the eternal God, the author of all marvels, first created the heavens for the sons of men as a roof to cover them, and how their almighty Protector gave them the earth for their dwelling place." This is the general sense, but not the actual words that Cædmon sang in his dream; for however excellent the verses, it is impossible to translate them from one language into another without losing much of their beauty and dignity. When Cædmon awoke, he remembered everything that he had sung in his dream, and soon added more verses in the same style to the glory of God.

Early in the morning he went to his superior the reeve, and told him about this gift that he had received. The reeve took him before the abbess, who ordered him to give an account of his dream and repeat the verses in the presence of many learned men, so that they might decide their quality and origin. All of them agreed that Cædmon's gift had been given him by our Lord, and when they had explained to him a passage of scriptural history or doctrine, they asked him to

render it into verse if he could. He promised to do this, and returned next morning with excellent verses as they had ordered him. The abbess was delighted that God had given such grace to the man, and advised him to abandon secular life and adopt the monastic state. And when she had admitted him into the Community as a brother, she ordered him to be instructed in the events of sacred history. So Cædmon stored up in his memory all that he learned, and after meditating on it, turned it into such melodious verse that delightful renderings turned his instructors into his audience. He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole story of Genesis. He sang of Israel's departure from Egypt, their entry into the land of promise, and many other events of scriptural history. He sang of the Lord's Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the teaching of the Apostles. He also made many poems on the terrors of the Last Judgement, the horrible pains of Hell, and the joys of the kingdom of heaven. In addition to these, he composed several others on the blessings and judgements of God, by which he sought to turn his hearers from wickedness into delight, and to inspire them to love and do good. For Cædmon was a deeply religious man, who humbly submitted to regular discipline, and firmly resisted all who tried to do evil, thus winning a happy death.

Above I have given you the story of Cædmon, the cowherd who became the "Father of English Poetry." This story represents, in a nutshell, the real heart of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from paganism to Christianity. But it is a story rather than history, so it shows us more about what the Anglo-Saxons *thought* happened and how they wanted it to have happened than perhaps the more complicated history of the real conversion. Still, it is a great story, and the story of Cædmon illustrates the blending of Christian and Germanic, Latin and oral tradition, monasteries and double monasteries, preexisting customs and new learning, popular and elite, that characterizes the Conversion period of Anglo-Saxon history and culture.

Christianity had possibly come to Britain as early as the third century; Tertullian, right around the year 200, listed Britain as a place where there were Christians, and from grave goods and other archaeological evidence, we can see that there were Christian churches and burials in the third and fourth centuries. St. Alban, the first Christian martyr in England, was beheaded, probably in the fourth century. So when the Roman Legions were withdrawn and the Romano-British society collapsed, there were individual Christians, but no organized system, and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were not Christian either.

But the Irish and the Welsh were, and they were spreading Christianity into English territory from the very beginning. This is important to remember because the legendary treatment of Christianity and conversion in England focuses on one key event, the arrival of the most important missionary to the English, St. Augustine of Canterbury, and although Augustine's mission was enormously influential, Christianity was not entirely absent from England before he arrived.

In 595, Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine (not to be confused with St. Augustine of Hippo, the enormously important Christian theologian) from Rome to the kingdom of Kent to convert King Æthelberht. Augustine arrived in 597, and this year is, in Bede's and other histories, taken as the starting date of Christianity in England. There are two reasons for Augustine's mission, one legendary and the other historical. The historical one is simple: the wife of King Æthelberht of Kent, Bertha, was the daughter of the king of Paris and a Christian. Part of the deal in arranging that marriage was that she could bring a bishop with her to England.

But the legendary reason has been more influential. Supposedly, Pope Gregory, before he was pope, was walking through Rome when he saw some slave boys being sold in a market. These boys were particularly beautiful, with pale skin and light hair. Gregory asked someone which people the boys were a part of.

"The Angli," the person answered.

"That is so appropriate," said Gregory, "for they are as beautiful as Angels. And what is the name of the kingdom from whence they came?"

"Deira."

"That is perfect," said Gregory. "For they have been delivered out of anger [a pun on Latin *de ira*, "from anger"]. And what is the name of their king?"

"King Alla."

"Alleluia!"

Of course both stories could be true (and the historical one almost certainly is), but the value of the story of Gregory and the Slaves is that it shows how England, right from the beginning, was special to Gregory, who was one of the great popes of the Middle Ages (hence "Gregory the Great").

Gregory sent Augustine with about forty companions, some of whom were monks. The missionary converted King Æthelberht and many subjects at a mass baptism, and he set up his bishop's seat in Canterbury, founding the monastery of Saints Peter and Paul. This later became St. Augustine's Abbey. It is worth noting, however, that the Celtic bishops, who reasonably thought that they had been doing a decent job running Christianity in the British Isles, did not acknowledge the supremacy of Augustine or Canterbury.

But Augustine's success in Kent was followed by a rapid spread of Christianization across England, though perhaps not as easily as Gregory had planned (he thought he could also set up an archbishopric in York). The entire country did not convert at once, or without incident. First, the East Saxons converted and built a cathedral in Rochester, but then they changed their minds, gave up Christianity, and expelled their bishop. The East Anglians adopted Christianity, but King Rædwald, perhaps hedging his bets, went to both the pagan shrine and the church.

Similar things happened in Northumbria. In 634, a pagan king, Cadwallon of Gwynneth, had been terrorizing Northumbria, which ended up being divided into two kingdoms, Deira and Bernicia. Oswald the king of Northumbria, who had been in exile, returned to Northumbria from the monastery on Iona and, in one of the great upsets of all time, defeated Cadwallon at the battle of

Heavenfield. Supposedly Oswald set up a large wooden cross before the battle. Oswald was then able to unify Northumbria's two kingdoms and bring St. Aidan from Iona to Lindisfarne to convert the kingdom to Christianity. Eight years later, Oswald was killed in battle with Penda of Mercia at Oswestry in Shropshire.

But Oswald had brought St. Aidan, a monk from the Irish monastic community in Iona, back to Lindisfarne, and there Aidan founded a monastery that was one of the intellectual incubators for the North of England and gave new impetus to the process of conversion (and also started to unify English and Irish Christianity in England). Lindisfarne then sent out missionaries who were very successful: even Penda of Mercia, who was pagan, allowed the missionaries to convert his kingdom. By 660, every kingdom but Sussex and the Isle of Wight was officially converted, and these hold-outs converted soon afterwards. Gregory the Great deserves a lot of credit for this bloodless conversion. He told the Anglo-Saxon missionaries not to tear down or destroy the pagan temples. Instead, they were to remove the idols and consecrate the places to Christ. That way people could continue their spiritual lives in the places they had been used to using with less disruption than happened, for example, on the continent.

So by 660, Christianity is well established, but there were actually two different kinds of Christianity in England: a Roman Christianity that came from Augustine's mission to Canterbury and had spread North and West from Kent, and an Irish Christianity that came through Aidan and Lindisfarne and had spread south. There were not enormous differences between the two types of Christianity, but there were some distinctions in cultural practices. The Irish did things slightly differently than the Romans. They had been Christians much longer than the Anglo-Saxons and followed other customs, particularly about the ways to calculate the date of Easter and how monks should wear their hair (tonsure).

In 664 at Whitby, a synod, a gathering of bishops and church leaders, was held to decide whether England would follow Roman or Irish customs. King Osuiu of Northumbria eventually decided that the Roman customs would be observed. The synod was hosted by Hild, Abbess of Whitby, who is the abbess who plays an important role in the Cædmon story (she says that Cædmon, now that he has the gift of poetry, must enter the monastery).

Cædmon, Hild's discovery, is an important propaganda tool for the Church, and his gift also, because it is set in Whitby, the site of the synod that imposed Roman customs, can be interpreted as a sign of God's pleasure with the decision to adopt Roman practice (which the Venerable Bede, who wrote the story, supported). Cædmon takes the Latin learning and the stories of the Church and turns them into Anglo-Saxon poetry that the regular people can understand. So God is smiling on the Synod and providing some help in converting the pagani, the country people who have not necessarily fully converted (because, in part, they cannot read Latin and understand the stories and rituals of the Church).

Cædmon represents what the Church accomplished during the Conversion era. Because Gregory the Great did not encourage cultural destruction or genocide, and because the pagans in Britain did not seem to be all that upset

over the changes to their religion, the English were building a new culture not on the erasure of the old culture, but on its integration with the new. Cædmon does not destroy or ignore traditional Anglo-Saxon poetry. Instead, he converts it into something that helps the Church. This is one of the key themes of the entire course: Anglo-Saxon England finds ways to synthesize the religion of the Church with the existing "northern" customs and practices. Thus the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was not just their switching from one practice to another, but making something new out of their old inheritance and their new belief and learning.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is represented by the story of Cædmon?
2. What were the two different branches of Christianity in England before 660?

Suggested Reading

Bede. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Rev. ed. Trans. Leo Sherley-Price. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Mayr-Harting, Henry. *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Blair, John. *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Morris, Richard. *Churches in the Landscape*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1990.

Lecture 5:
The "Golden Age" and the Venerable Bede: Double Monasteries, Missionaries, Conversion, and the Making of Beautiful Books

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Peter Hunter-Blair's *The World of Bede*.

> This is the history of the Church in England, as far as I could learn it from the writing of men of old, or from my own knowledge and with the help of the Lord, I Bede, Christ's servant and priest in the monastery of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul that is at Wearmouth and Jarrow. I was born on land that is the property of this monastery. When I was seven winters old, my kindred decided to give me for care and for learning by the abbot Benedict and Ceolfrith after him. And I spent the entire times of my life in this same monastery to which I was given. And with all eagerness I gave myself to learning and thinking about Holy Scripture. And while I was following service according to monastic rules, and with daily singing in church, it was always sweet and pleasant to me to learn or to teach or to write.

The seventh century was the era of conversion, though most of that conversion was complete by 660. By that time, England had become a Christian country, with a shared theology and set of ritual behaviors. Churches and monasteries were spread throughout the country, and priests, monks, deacons, and bishops were significant members of local communities as well as larger administrative regions. England was poised for its first remarkable intellectual and cultural Renaissance.

The "Golden Age" of Anglo-Saxon England ran from about the end of the Conversion to the sack of Lindisfarne by the Vikings in 793. No single figure sums up this "Golden Age" more than the Venerable Bede, a monk from the monastery of Monkwearkmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria (just outside Newcastle), who became the most learned and respected scholar in Europe. But there were other intellectual giants as well, including Archbishop Theodore, sent from Asia Minor at the behest of the Pope in 669 and founder, with the African scholar Hadrian, of what the scholar Michael Lapidge has called "The School of Theodore and Hadrian," at Canterbury, which influenced English culture for centuries. There was also Aldhelm (ca. 639–May 25, 709), Abbot of Malmesbury Abbey and later Bishop of Sherborne, who was the greatest pupil of that school and the greatest Anglo-Saxon writer of Latin poetry (and perhaps of Anglo-Saxon poetry, though all of his poetry is lost). And finally there is Alcuin of York (ca. 735–May 19, 804), who was essentially Charlemagne's Minister of Education, setting up a system in the Carolingian Empire that is still in some ways influential.

Monasticism in England

The word "monk" comes from the Greek word "monos," which means "alone," and monasticism had originally developed as a kind of solitary life. But by the

early Middle Ages, monastic communities were spread all over the Christian world. Monks lived communally and followed a strict rule that programmed much of their daily behavior. Monasteries were storehouses of physical and cultural wealth and centers of book production and learning.

Some of St. Augustine of Canterbury's companions had been monks, and monasticism spread along with the conversion. But Irish monks had been very influential in the north, with St. Aidan being the most important individual and the monastery at Lindisfarne being the heart of Irish-influenced monasticism in England. The Irish tradition was different from the Roman tradition, with more of a focus on remarkable physical feats of asceticism, but in England both traditions blended and created something new: a robust and energetic English monasticism that was to act as an important engine of cultural change and development.

During the Golden Age, England developed the unusual institution of the "double monastery," a house of monks and a house of nuns, living next to each other, sharing a church but never mixing, and living separate lives of celibacy. These double monasteries were presided over by abbesses, some of the most powerful and influential women in Europe. Double monasteries, which were built on strategic sites near rivers and coasts, accumulated immense wealth and power over multiple generations (their inheritances were not divided) and became centers of art and learning.

The School of Theodore and Hadrian

The growth and popularity of monasticism in the Golden Age was not an entirely internal development. Influence from the continent also shaped monastic life in England, as Rome began to send elite scholars to England to teach. The most important of these were Archbishop Theodore and the scholar Hadrian, who arrived in 669. They set up a school to teach Mediterranean Latin culture at Canterbury. The development of the school of Theodore and Hadrian marks the return of elite Latinity to England.

Theodore was particularly concerned with making sure that English theology and religious practice were correct and consistent with Roman custom, and both he and Hadrian were teaching Latin at the highest linguistic level. Their students also learned classical culture, with a focus on the works of the Christian fathers and on theological matters, but with some attention paid to Virgil and other Roman poets.

Theodore and Hadrian's most important pupil was Aldhelm, possibly the greatest Latin scholar and poet in early medieval England. Aldhelm was the leading English writer in the tradition of what we call "hermeneutic Latin," which is exceedingly complex, convoluted, and learned. "Hermeneutic Latin" was characteristic of other highly learned, early medieval writers, but it fell out of favor in the later medieval period. Hermeneutic Latin mixes in many Greek words—though it is not clear that most writers of hermeneutic Latin could read Greek—they got words from glossaries. Aldhelm is most famous for his "De Virginitate," a twinned work, both a prose version and a poetic one, written for the nuns of Barking Abbey.

Aldhelm wrote Latin hexameters better than anyone before in England (and possibly better than anyone since, or at least up until Milton). His work

showed that scholars in England, at the very edge of Europe, could be as learned and sophisticated as any writers in Europe.

Aldhelm also apparently wrote poetry in Anglo-Saxon as well. Supposedly he was King Alfred's favorite poet, though none of his Anglo-Saxon appears to have survived (or, if some of our poems are by Aldhelm, we don't know it). There is a famous story of Aldhelm standing on a bridge where people were accustomed to go. He was concerned that his flock was slow in coming to church, so he would stand on this bridge and recite Anglo-Saxon poetry on sacred subjects to them, enticing them to want to hear more. Aldhelm also wrote and compiled a large collection of Latin riddles, possibly drawing on other riddle collections.

The Venerable Bede

While Aldhelm was doing his work in Malmesbury, far from him, up in the North of England, the greatest scholar of the century was hard at work writing books and books and more books, raising his reputation throughout Europe and showing that the English could write history and theology, and do astronomical computation (for the dates of Easter, among other things), better than anyone else in Europe. This was the man we began with, the Venerable Bede.

Bede appears to have entered the monastery at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow when he was only seven years old. There he was trained by the Abbot Ceolfrith, who had built upon great work by Benedict Biscop, the founder of Monkwearmouth Jarrow, who had traveled back and forth to Rome, importing craftsmen to build a beautiful Church and monastery. Ceolfrith had made quite an impression on the young Bede, especially after the plague came to Jarrow and killed nearly everyone there:

> Further, in the monastery over which Ceolfrith presided, all who could read or preach, or say the antiphons and responses, were carried off, except the abbot himself and one little boy, who had been brought up and taught by him, and who now at this day, being in priest's orders in the same monastery, duly commended the abbot's praiseworthy acts both by his writings and his discourse to all desiring to know them. He—the abbot that is—being very sorrowful by reason of the aforesaid pestilence, ordered that the former use should be suspended, and that they should conduct all the psalm singing without antiphons, except at vespers and matins. When this had been put into practice for the space of a week, with many tears and laments on his part, he could not bear it any longer, and resolved to restore again the course of the psalmody with the antiphons according to custom; and, all exerting themselves, he fulfilled what he had resolved, with no small labor, by himself and the boy whom I mentioned, until he could either himself train, or gather from elsewhere, sufficient associates in the divine work. (Shirley-Price)

It may be that it was Bede's incredibly early exposure to Latin that made him such a great scholar. Certainly he was remarkably learned and produced a stunning number of significant works, including commentaries on and explanations of the Bible, Lives of Saints, and his most famous work, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, a surprisingly accurate (as best

we can tell) history of the Church in England. Bede certainly has an agenda, but he appears to be above simply making things up (although there are plenty of miracle stories about glowing bones, uncorrupted bodies, and miraculous cures, it seems clear that Bede believed that these were true).

In the *Ecclesiastical History* Bede tells the story of how England went from pagan to Christian and then how the Church developed in England. For Bede, England is somehow special to God, but the English keep failing and getting punished for their failures. But then, after a period of suffering, they rise up again and are rewarded, which starts the cycle over. For example, in setting up his description of Vortigern's invitation to the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, he explains that first the Britons had chased off the Irish and Pictish invaders and

> when the depredations of its enemies has ceased, the land enjoyed an abundance of corn without precedent in former years; but with plenty came an increase in luxury, followed by every kind of crime, especially cruelty, hatred of truth, love of falsehood. If anyone happened to be more kindly or truthful than his neighbors, he became a target for all weapons of malice as though he were an enemy of Britain. And not only the laity were guilty of these things, but even the lord's flock and their pastors. Giving themselves up to drunkenness, hatred, quarrels, and violence, they threw off the easy yoke of Christ. Suddenly a terrible plague struck the corrupt people . . . (Shirley-Price)

Eventually they have to call for help from the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, with predictable results.

Bede's Monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow was not the only intellectual center in the north of England. Lindisfarne, close by, was perhaps even more important, particularly as a center of book production. The Lindisfarne Gospels might be the single most beautiful book produced in the Middle Ages. An edition of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in Latin, the book is richly illuminated and decorated in a style that blends not only Irish and Roman themes but, as recent work by Michelle Brown has shown, incorporates Eastern imagery and Coptic Christianity as well. We think that the Lindisfarne Gospels were copied by a monk named Eadfrith, who later become Abbot at Lindisfarne. Later on the manuscript was moved to Chester-le-Street, near Durham, and another monk, Aldred, made an interlinear Old English translation in the manuscript. The scribes and artists of the Lindisfarne Gospels were working to bring together different traditions and make their own forms, ones that could relate to all the different ethnic groups and visual traditions in the British Isles. They wanted to form one unified style, not by excluding everything different, but by building it together.

Also produced in the north of England during the Golden Age was the Codex Amiatinus, which is sometimes considered "the finest book in the world." It is certainly one of the largest, weighing seventy-five pounds. It is a *pandect*, something we take for granted now, but which was rare in the Middle Ages: all the books of the Bible in one volume. The Codex Amiatinus was produced at the Monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow in 692 under the direction of Abbot Ceolfrith. Bede probably had something to do with it. The production of the Codex shows the immense riches of the north of England at

this time. We have records of the monastery needing a new grant of land to raise two thousand more cattle to get the calf skins to make the vellum to make the manuscript. And the book is not just expensive and beautiful; it is amazingly accurate, the very best that anyone could do at the time with the very complicated text of the Bible. The Codex Amiatinus was meant to be a gift to the Pope, and Ceolfrith was taking it to Rome when he died on the way. The copy ended up in Florence, where it still is today. A ninth-century copy of this book is even today the personal Bible of the Pope.

Alcuin

Bede was the most respected scholar in the world during the Golden Age, and we see that Aldhelm, coming from the school of Theodore and Hadrian, was the greatest of Latin poets in Britain. And the reputation of the wealth and power and learning and artistic achievements of England spread throughout Europe. When Charlemagne, the great emperor of France, wanted to improve learning in his empire he brought an Englishman over from York. This is Alcuin, also known as Albinus ("the white one," possibly a reference to his pale skin). The School of Master Albinus was an important part of the middle of the Carolingian Renaissance. Alcuin wrote over three hundred letters, poems, and meditations and was involved in theological disputes. He famously told Charlemagne that it was wrong to force people to be baptized, and at his urging, Charlemagne abolished the death penalty for paganism. Alcuin was probably the most influential Englishman of his time on the Continent.

So why did the Golden Age happen? A confluence of factors, including a long period of warm weather (vines were able to be grown in the north of England), political stability, and the ability of the monasteries to concentrate wealth across multiple generations all worked to increase the wealth and power of the monasteries, and the English were, at this point after the conversion, particularly enthusiastic about monastic life. And so, on the edge of the former Roman Empire, a shining light of wealth and learning shone out. Unfortunately, this beacon attracted predators.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the “double monastery”?
2. What are the remarkable features of the Lindisfarne Gospels?

Suggested Reading

Hunter-Blair, Peter. *The World of Bede*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Other Books of Interest

Bullough, Donald. *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004.

Orchard, Andy. *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Articles of Interest

Lapidge, Michael. “The School of Theodore and Hadrian.” *Anglo-Saxon England*. Vol. 15, pp. 45–72, 1986.

Lecture 6:
The Viking Age:
Destruction and Revival

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* translated by Michael Swanton.

Hwæt ða se flothere ferde eft to scipe, and behyddon þæt heafod þæs halgan Eadmundes on þam þiccum bremelum þæt hit bebyrged ne wurde. Þa æfter fyrste, syððan hi afarene wæron, com þæt landfolc to þe þær to lafe wæs þa, þær heora hlafordes lic læg butan heafde, and wurdon swiðe sarige for his slege on mode, and huru þæt hi næfdon þæt heafod to þam bodige. Þa sæde se sceawere þe hit ær geseah þæt þa flotmen hæfdon þæt heafod mid him, and wæs him geðuht swa swa hit wæs ful soð þæt hi behyddon þæt heafod on þam holte forhwega. Hi eodon þa secende ealle endemes to þam wuda, secende gehwær geond þyfelas and bremelas gif hi ahwær mihton gemeton þæt heafod. Wæs eac micel wundor þæt an wulf wearð asend, þurh Godes wissunge to bewerigenne þæt heafod wið þa oþre deor, ofer dæg and niht.

Hi eodon þa secende, and symle clypigende, swa swa hit gewunelic is þam ðe on wuda gað oft, "Hwær eart þu nu gefera?"

And him andwyrde þæt heafod, "Her, her, her"; and swa gelome clypode andswarigende him eallum, swa oft swa heora ænig clypode, oþþæt hi ealle becomen þurh ða clypunga him to.

Þa læg se græga wulf þe bewiste þæt heafod, and mid his twam fotum hæfde þæt heafod beclypped, grædig and hungrig, and for Gode ne dorste þæs heafdes abyrian, and heold hit wið deor. Þa wurdon hi ofwundrode þæs wulfes hyrdrædenne, and þæt halige heafod ham feredon mid him, þancigende þam ælmihtigan ealra his wundra; ac se wulf folgode forð mid þam heafde oþþæt hi to tune comon, swylce he tam wære, and gewende eft siþþan to wuda ongean.

When Ivar the impious pirate saw that the noble king would not forsake Christ, but with resolute faith called after Him, he ordered Edmund beheaded, and the heathens did so. While Edmund still called out to Christ, the heathen dragged the holy man to his death, and with one stroke struck off his head, and his soul journeyed happily to Christ. There was a man near at hand, kept hidden by God, who heard all this, and told of it afterward, just as we have told it here.

Then the pirates returned to their ships and hid the head of the holy Edmund in the thick brambles so that it could not be buried with the rest of his body. After a time, after the pirates had departed, the local people, those who were left, came there where the remains of their lord's body without a head was. They were very sad in heart because of his killing, and especially because they didn't have the head for

his body. Then the witness who saw the earlier events said that the pirates had the head with them, and that it seemed to him, as it was in truth, that they hid the head in the woods somewhere.

They all went together then to the woods, looking everywhere through the bushes and brambles to see if they could find that head anywhere. It was also a great miracle that a wolf was sent, through the guidance of God, to protect that head both day and night from the other animals. The people went searching and also calling out, just as the custom is among those who often go into the wood: "Where are you now, friend?" And the head answered them: "Here, here, here," and called out the answer to them as often as any of them called out, until they came to it as a result of the calling. There lay the grey wolf who watched over that head, and had the head clasped between his two paws. The wolf was greedy and hungry, but because of God he dared not eat the head, but protected it against animals. The people were astonished at the wolf's guardianship and carried home with them the holy head, thanking almighty God for all His miracles. The wolf followed along with the head as if he was tame, until they came to the settlement, and then the wolf turned back to the woods.

In the Golden Age, England was peaceful, intellectually advanced, and very rich. That was all about to come to an end. In 789, three ships of Norwegians came to England, and when a local reeve went out to ask them why they were there, they killed him. This was the beginning of the Viking attacks on England, which led to the martyrdom of St. Edmund (described in the preceding quote) and, more significantly, to the collapse of Anglo-Saxon culture, a century of misery and bloodshed, and England coming very close to being completely conquered.

What allowed the Vikings to be so successful in their attacks, and the English so inept in defending against them, has long been a matter of dispute. Some of the political developments that allowed for the Golden Age also may have laid the foundations for trouble later on. At the beginning of the Golden Age, the kingdom of Mercia became the most powerful in Anglo-Saxon England. Led by Athelbald (716–751) and then his son Offa (757–796), the Mercians began to increase in power and eventually overwhelmed their neighbors, becoming the strongest and richest kings of England. Offa was so great that Charlemagne addressed him in a letter as an equal and acted as if Offa and the king of Northumbria were the only real kings in England. But Offa's success significantly weakened many of the surrounding kingdoms, and when Offa died, succession problems in Mercia left a leadership vacuum for a while. Of course, the Vikings might have attacked anyway, but the weaker surrounding kingdoms and the lack of leadership made it difficult for the English to defend themselves.

That first raid, in 789, was soon followed up by more attacks by both Norwegians and Danes (the word "Viking" just means pirate and does not distinguish between Norwegians and Danes). Norwegians tended to go North, around England and West to Ireland and down the coast, while the Danes mostly took the south of England. The Vikings sacked the great

monasteries of Lindisfarne in 793, Jarrow in 794, and Iona in 795. This was a huge shock to the English, but the sackings did not substantially damage the rest of the kingdom (though they obviously killed many monks and nuns), but by 835, Viking attacks became more regular and severe and happened every summer.

Then, in 865, the Vikings stopped going back to Scandinavia for the winter and instead stayed and occupied England. Their great army started conquering kingdoms and settling people in the conquered places. This army was led by Halfdan and Ivar the Boneless (whose name may mean that he was born without legs, or that he had a disease in which the cartilage of his legs never turned into bone). Ivar invaded East Anglia, conquered it, and conquered York (called Jórvik in Old Norse). In 869, Ivar was probably responsible for the martyrdom of Saint Edmond. By this point, the kingdoms of East Anglia and of Northumbria, which had been among the most powerful and important kingdoms in England for several centuries, were gone.

In 870, Vikings captured Reading and were getting ready to invade the next important kingdom, Wessex. But Wessex was better organized and managed to defeat the Vikings in one battle. However, in 871, a new army landed and defeated the Wessex army near Basingstoke. Then the king of Wessex, Athelred, died, leaving his younger brother Alfred as king of Wessex in a very bad situation.

King Alfred

King Alfred was one of the giants of English history in a variety of fields, military, political, intellectual, and artistic. Alfred's father Athelwulf must have noticed that so many of the other kingdoms, including the great kingdom of Mercia, were being torn apart by succession struggles, and Athelwulf had four sons, which could have caused significant problems. But, wisely, Athelwulf arranged matters so that the sons were to rule the kingdom in order of age, causing less fighting over succession (it helped that being king of Wessex in this era was not a long-term job, because the kings kept getting killed or dying).

By 871, only Alfred and his older brother Athelred are left of the four brothers. The two brothers engaged the Vikings at the place called Ashdown. The Vikings had the high ground, and Athelred's army was late (one source says that Athelred was having Mass and being so pious that God later smiled on them). So Alfred, fighting like a wild boar, rushed up the hill to a small, solitary thorn tree and led the defeat of the Vikings. But two weeks later the Vikings beat Alfred and Athelred's armies at Basingstoke. After this defeat, Alfred had to pay off the Danes with tribute, but this worked well, at least temporarily. The Danes left Wessex alone and instead invaded Mercia, killing King Burgred. Now Mercia joined East Anglia and Northumbria as a previously great Anglo-Saxon kingdom that was now destroyed.

At this point the large Danish army divided itself in half. One half went north and started building settlements in Yorkshire. The other half headed to Wessex and attacked Alfred, but Wessex managed to put up enough resistance to convince the Danes to instead go to Mercia, which they divided up and started to colonize. This was, from the point of view of Wessex, a good

thing, because the army of Danes kept getting smaller. Nevertheless, this smaller Danish army was able to defeat Wessex at Chippenham in 878, causing Wiltshire and Hampshire to surrender to them. King Alfred had to flee to Athelney in the middle of the marshes in Someset, and according to some accounts he was down to only forty men at one point.

But in May of that year, Alfred gathered his men from all over Wessex and defeated the Danes in a huge battle. To save his own life, the Danish leader Guthrum agreed to be baptized and to accept Alfred as his godfather. They negotiated a settlement whereby the Danes held on to the eastern part of England from near London up into the West Midlands, but they gave up Wessex, and left there and much of Mercia, instead focusing on settling East Anglia. This area became known as the Danelaw. Alfred had saved England. In 886, he recaptured London and in 893 defeated a very large Danish army that was trying to reconquer lost territory.

But by 893, the English were too strong. Alfred had built a network of bridges and fortifications to protect physically against invasions, and he had made a personnel management innovation as well. All able-bodied men were required to serve in the *fyrd*, the army, but Alfred only called up half the available men at any given time and rotated people through the army. This reduced desertion and allowed people to take care of their families, homes, and crops as well as to serve. Alfred also set up a more complex and distributed network of financing his government, leaving more things local rather than collecting everything at a central location. Local landowners liked this, because they could protect from the Vikings and *also* use the works ordered by the king for their own defense, for improving markets, or for storing surplus. Rural lords even built storage facilities in the towns. These were good for storing goods, but also good for storing military equipment and for shelter when Vikings attacked.

Alfred also built a huge navy to fight the Vikings on the sea, before they could land in England, concluding that it was better to stop them from landing altogether. He made an alliance with the Mercians, marrying his daughter Athelflæd to the Mercian King Athelred. Athelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, even ruled after her husband died, so Mercia ended up being annexed without bloodshed. Alfred had not simply defended the kingdom against the Vikings: He was, all of a sudden, the first King of All England. True, the Vikings had killed off his competitors for him, but he still deserves a lot of credit for saving the country.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why was it difficult for the English to defend themselves against the Vikings?
2. How did Alfred save England?

Suggested Reading

Anonymous. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Ed. and trans. Michael Swanton. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

Sheppard, Alice. *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

Lecture 7:
King Alfred and the Rebuilding:
The Rescue and Consolidation of a Kingdom

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge's *Alfred the Great*.

> Ða ic ða ðis eall gemunde, ða gemunde ic eac hu ic geseah, ær ðæm ðe hit eall forhergod wære ond forbærned, hu ða ciricean giond eall Angelcynn stodon maðma ond boca gefylda, ond eac micel menigeo Godes ðiowaond ða swiðe lytle fiorme ðara boca wiston, for ðæm ðe hie hiora nanwuht ongiotan ne meahton [ond þæt wæs] for ðæm ðe hie næron on hiora agen geðiode awritene. Swelce hie cwæden: Ure ieldran, ða ðe ðas stowa ær hioldon, hie lufodon wisdomond ðurh ðone hie begeaton welan ond us læfdon. Her mon mæg giet gesion hiora swæð, ac we him ne cunnon æfter spyrigean. Ond for ðæm we habbað nu ægðer forlæten ge ðone welan ge ðone wisdom, for ðæm ðe we noldon to ðæm spore mid ure mode onlutan.
>
> When I reflected on all this, I recollected how—before everything was ransacked and burned—the churches throughout England stood filled with treasures and books. Similarly, there was a great multitude of those serving God. And they derived very little benefit from those books, because they could understand nothing in them, since they were not written in their own language. It is as if they had said: "Our ancestors, who formerly maintained these places, loved wisdom, and through it they obtained wealth and passed it on to us. Here one can still see the track, but we cannot follow it. Therefore we have now lost the wealth as well as the wisdom, because we did not wish to set our mind to the track." (Keynes and Lapidge, 125)

Even more important to Alfred than his military and political victories were his religion, his love of learning, and his spread of writing throughout England. Alfred's work laid the foundations for what really makes England unique in all of medieval Europe from around 800 until 1066.

Problems with Sources

It is important to begin by noting that much of what we know of King Alfred's childhood and young life depends on sources that are, to one degree or another, problematic. The most important of these is the *Life of King Alfred* by Asser, a Welsh monk of St. David's monastery who wrote the life in 893. The manuscript of the life was so badly burned in the fire in the Cotton Library in 1731 that it is now illegible. Fortunately, it had been transcribed in 1554, 1602, and 1722, so it is not lost, although its manuscript source is now a block of burned and solidified material.

For years, various historians have questioned Asser's *Life* on the grounds that Asser was trying to make over Alfred into a kind of saint. There is a level of skepticism that we need to bring to bear on all biased sources, and Asser

is no different. Some of his claims are likely to be exaggerations. For example, Asser suggests that Alfred was destined for greatness and religious piety even as a child, accompanying his father on a trip to Rome when Alfred was only five years old and being anointed by the Pope. The anointing is almost certainly not true, because at that point Alfred was the youngest of five brothers, but it is possible that he did accompany his father on the trip and meet the Pope. Then there is Alfred's malady. Asser claims that on his wedding night, Alfred was struck with some illness that caused him severe pain and stayed with him between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Asser says that Alfred had "piles" (hemorrhoids), since he was a young man, and the malady might have come from them. There is some circumstantial evidence that this is true, as there are a number of remedies for piles in the medical texts that seem to come from Alfred's time period, and there is also a story that the Patriarch of Jerusalem sent Alfred a white stone that could be used to make medicine. But elements of Asser's treatment are questionable, because Asser has Alfred being grateful for the affliction, thus making the king seem like a Celtic saint who undertook "good" suffering to make him more holy.

Also problematic is the story of Alfred's reading. Supposedly his mother offered a beautiful illuminated book to the first one of her children who could learn it. Alfred, dazzled by the beauty of the first illuminated letter, learned the book fastest and received it. However, later in the *Life*, Asser says that on November 11, 887, Alfred began to read Latin, and there are other statements that he couldn't read English until he was twelve. This all seems confusing, but it can possibly be simplified by interpreting the first instance, with his mother and the book, as Alfred memorizing poems that someone else read to him, and the story of the king's learning to read and translate Latin in the same day being representative of when Alfred decided to do this, and the not reading English until he was twelve just making sense on its own.

But regardless of the specifics of his childhood, we do know that by the time he was an adult, Alfred was a lover of Latin literature and also of Old English poetry. Supposedly he kept an enchiridion, or handbook, into which he had his favorite poems and prayers copied. The medieval historian William of Malmesbury may have seen this handbook, and it seems to have still been around in the twelfth century in Worcester (the monastery with the best-preserved archive). According to William, Aldhelm was Alfred's favorite Anglo-Saxon poet. But William of Malmesbury was from Malmesbury (hence the name) and so was Aldhelm, so it is difficult to know what to make of William's assertion.

Alfred decided that literature and learning, both in English and in Latin, were very important, but the state of learning was not good when Alfred came to the throne, as we can see from the quotation at the beginning of this chapter (although Alfred may be exaggerating somewhat here). Alfred saw himself as King as being a kind of priest or shepherd for his people. One book that was particularly valuable to him was Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*, Pastoral Care, which tells how to be a good priest to a flock, but which Alfred took as telling how to be a good king to his people. And in order to be a good king, he thought he needed to enable them to read.

Improving the Latinity of the kingdom was one way to do this, and Alfred imported scholars from the continent, such as Grimbold and John the Old Saxon, to teach his court and improve Latinity. But such an approach was very slow, because it required people to learn a new language (Latin) *and* to read and write. Alfred realized that another way would work: he could provide things written in English, the vernacular language that people already spoke and which a surprising number of them seem to have been able to read (according to the most recent research). Alfred thus began his program of translations, taking key Latin texts and turning them into English. It seems as if a lot of this work was actually done by Alfred, or at least in his presence and with his input. His circle then produced the following translations:

Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* and the *Dialogues*

The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius

The History of the World Against the Pagans by Orosius

Ecclesiastical History of the English People by Bede

The Soliloquies of St. Augustine

A prose version of the first fifty Psalms

Alfred also wrote Old English prefaces to many of these works in which he explained why they were important and how they could be useful. Here is part of his preface to Gregory's Pastoral Care:

> King Alfred bids bishop Wærferth to be greeted with loving and friendly words; and bids you to know that it very often comes to my mind what wise men there formerly were throughout England, both of sacred and secular orders; and how happy the times were then throughout England; and how the kings who then had power over the people obeyed God and his ministers; and they maintained their peace, their morality and their power within their borders, and also increased their kingdom without; and how they prospered both with war and with wisdom; and also how eager the sacred orders were about both teaching and learning, and about all the services that they ought to do for God; and how men from abroad came to this land in search of wisdom and teaching, and how we now must get them from abroad if we shall have them. So completely had wisdom fallen off in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their rituals in English, or indeed could translate a letter from Latin into English; and I believe that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I indeed cannot think of a single one south of the Thames when I became king. . . .
>
> Then when I remembered how knowledge of Latin had formerly decayed throughout England, and yet many knew how to read English writing, then I began among the other various and manifold cares of this kingdom to translate into English the book that is called in Latin Pastoralis, and in English "Shepherd-book," sometimes word for word, and sometimes sense for sense, just as I had learned it from Plegmund my archbishop and from Asser my bishop and from

> Grimbold my masspriest and from John my masspriest. When I had learned it I translated it into English, just as I had understood it, and as I could most meaningfully render it. And I will send one to each bishopric in my kingdom, and in each will be an æstel worth fifty mancuses. And I command in God's name that no man may take the æstel from the book nor the book from the church. It is unknown how long there may be such learned bishops as, thanks to God, are nearly everywhere. Therefore I would have them always remain in place, unless the bishop wishes to have the book with him, or it is loaned out somewhere, or someone is copying it. (Keynes and Lapidge)

Alfred also translated Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a text that was also translated by Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth I. His preface to the *Consolation* explains his translation strategy:

> King Alfred was the translator of this book: he turned it from Latin into English, as it stands before you. Sometimes he translated word for word, sometimes sense for sense, so as to render it as clearly and intelligibly as he could. (Keynes and Lapidge)

Alfred put in place a program of vernacular literacy in England that was unprecedented. Whether he did this because there was no Latin is not really relevant. What was relevant was that Alfred required nobles to read at least in English. This improved administration, but it also built up a base of people who could read in English.

Alfred thus laid the foundation for the great accomplishments of the tenth century and did much to make England the one country in Europe where the vernacular was more important than Latin.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the problems with accepting Asser's story of King Alfred learning to read?
2. Why did Alfred translate books into English?

Suggested Reading

Keynes, Simon, and Michael Lapidge. *Alfred the Great*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

Other Books of Interest

Frantzen, Allen J. *King Alfred*. Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Yorke, Barbara. *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*. London: Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1995.

Lecture 8:
The Years of Reform

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Michael D.C. Drout's *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century*, chapter 3, "The English Benedictine Reform: A Concise Summary," pp. 61–73.

The Battle of Brunahburh

Her æþelstan cyning, / eorla dryhten,
beorna beahgifa, / and his broþor eac,
Eadmund æþeling, / ealdorlangne tir
geslogon æt sæcce / sweorda ecgum
ymbe Brunanburh. / Bordweal clufan,
heowan heaþolinde / hamora lafan,
afaran Eadweardes, / swa him geæþele wæs
from cneomægum, / þæt hi æt campe oft
wiþ laþra gehwæne / land ealgodon,
hord and hamas.

Letan him behindan / hræw bryttian
saluwigpadan, / þone sweartan hræfn,
hyrnednebban, / and þane hasewanpadan,
earn æftan hwit, / æses brucan,
grædigne guðhafoc / and þæt græge deor,
wulf on wealde. / Ne wearð wæl mare
on þis eiglande / æfre gieta
folces gefylled / beforan þissum
sweordes ecgum, / þæs þe us secgað bec,
ealde uðwitan, / siþþan eastan hider
Engle and Seaxe / up becoman,
ofer brad brimu / Brytene sohtan,
wlance wigsmiþas, / Wealas ofercoman,
eorlas arhwate / eard begeatan.

Here King Athelstan, Lord of earls
Ring-giver to warriors and his brother Edmund also
Won life-long glory in battle, by the edges of swords,
around Brunanburh.
Those heirs of Edward split the shield wall
Hewed the war-shields with the leavings of hammers
Because their nobility came to them from their ancestors,
They defended the land against each of enemies,
Protected the treasure, and the homes.

They left behind them, enjoying the corpses, the black-feathered one, the dark raven, hornbeaked, and the gray feathered one, the eagle with the white tail, to enjoy the feast, that greedy war-hawk, and the gray animal, the wolf on the plain.

> There has not been a greater slaughter on this island ever, with the edges of swords, since, books tell us, the Angles and the Saxons came here from the east, over the broad sea, to seek the Britons, proud war-makers, overcame the Welsh, and, eager for glory, seized this land.

After the destruction of the Viking Age and the partial rebuilding by Alfred, Anglo-Saxon England had another small "Golden Age" of intellectual, political, and artistic accomplishment. This is the period of the Benedictine Reform, when the culture of England was re-created around vernacular literacy as well as a renewed focus on elite Latinity, and when there was a push by powerful monks to make more members of the Church (cathedral canons and ordinary priests) behave more like monks. The Reform period was enabled by the rebuilding of English power and security, most significantly by Alfred's grandson, Athelstan, and by King Edgar, whose reign marks the high point of the reform.

When Alfred died in 899, his son, Edward the Elder, took over the kingdom of Wessex. Almost immediately there was the problem of a dynastic split, because Edward's cousin, Athelwold of Wessex, who was the son of one of Alfred's older brothers, thought that he should inherit the throne and allied himself with the Vikings to try to press his claim. But he was killed later that year, solving that problem. Edward the Elder partnered with his sister, Athelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, to strengthen England and reconquer parts of the Danelaw, and when Athelflæd died, Mercia was absorbed by Wessex. From that point on there was no one really to contest for the throne, so the house of Wessex was the ruling house of England.

Edward's oldest son was Athelstan, who in his own time was more likely to have been thought of as "the Great" than Alfred was. We do not know who Athelstan's mother was, so we think that it was one of Edward's mistresses, but no one seems to have objected to Athelstan's taking the throne. He was crowned in 926 and then reeled off a string of enormously important military, political, and financial successes. Athelstan did not just defeat the Vikings and their allies, he absolutely crushed them. First, though, he solidified political relations with Mercia. Athelstan had been raised in Mercia and was even called Athelstan half-king while his father was ruling Wessex. Then he made a few alliances, conquered Northumbria, and also extended his rule toward Wales and into the south and west of England. By 937, Athelstan had extended the rule throughout England proper and had Welsh and Scottish kings paying tribute to him.

This power led Constantine, King of the Scots, Eogan of Strathclyde, and Olaf Guthfrithson, King of Dublin, to make an alliance against Athelstan and invade England. Somewhere in the North—scholars do not agree exactly where—there was a pivotal battle at a place called Brunanburh, and Athelstan completely routed his enemies. The poem with which I began this lecture tells the story of this huge victory for the English. The power of Wessex was now secure throughout almost all of England.

The Origins of the Reform

Athelstan was apparently an extremely pious Christian king, and he was very interested in relics and in beautiful books. He thus sent his agents

throughout Europe to collect relics (sometimes buying them, sometimes stealing them), and he then bestowed these, and beautiful books, on churches throughout England. And although we do not know if Athelstan could read or if he was learned like his grandfather Alfred, we do know that he brought some of the best scholars in Europe, like Israel the Grammarian, to England and supported learned men like Oda, Bishop of Ramsbury and later Archbishop of Canterbury.

Athelstan's court was an intellectual incubator. In that court were two young men named Dunstan and Athelwold who were made priests, supposedly at the insistence of Athelstan, right at the end of his reign in 939. As best we can tell, both young men came from powerful and rich families and were influential at the court of Athelstan's successor, Edmund. But somehow Dunstan got on the wrong side of some powerful people and ended up being bound and thrown into a cesspool and later exiled. But King Edmund then had a near-death experience at Cheddar Gorge, called Dunstan back into his service, and made him abbot of Glastonbury.

Dunstan then brought Athelwold to Glastonbury, where the two of them set up a monastery on Benedictine lines. For a number of years this was the only monastery in England that strictly followed the Benedictine Rule and observed complete monastic discipline. It was also the heart of an intellectual program that has only really been understood in the past twenty years through the remarkable scholarship of Michael Lapidge, Mechthild Gretsch, and a few others.

The key to understanding what was going on at Glastonbury in the middle of the tenth century is a manuscript now in Brussels: Bibliothèque Royale, 1650. This is a copy of *de Virginitate* by Aldhelm, heavily glossed (that is, someone wrote explanatory words in between the lines of the text). This glossed manuscript shows us that some people in the tenth century were trying really hard to understand *de Virginitate*. They thought Aldhelm was really important. We know now that this group was led by Athelwold and Dunstan at Glastonbury during the time those two spent there. What Mechthild Gretsch calls an "Aldhelm Seminar" developed at Glastonbury, and the effects of this seminar on the curriculum of learning and study in Anglo-Saxon England were enormous. The seminar was so interested in Aldhelm because he was learned, complex, and sophisticated, but most of all because he was English. They had found, in their own past, a master of Latin as great as any on the continent, so they studied him and modeled their own Latin after his. Thus the "hermeneutic style" of complicated Latin came back into England.

But at the same time, due to the Alfredian program of spreading vernacular literacy, a parallel development of English writing was going on, often with the Old English being written by the same people who were writing the hermeneutic Latin.

Dunstan and Athelwold spent some years at Glastonbury studying Aldhelm, thinking about how to perfect monasticism and, probably, doing some quiet politics. Then in 946 King Edmund was murdered and his brother Eadred became king. Eadred loved Dunstan and called him back to the court. But something was wrong with Eadred. He often missed the *witan*, the meeting of counselors or wise men, and must have been ill in some way. He did last as king for nine years, though, until 955, when his nephew, Edmund's son

Eadwig (sometimes called “All-Fair” because he was supposedly so handsome) became king.

At Eadwig’s coronation feast he apparently retired to his chamber to “enjoy the caresses of loose women,” supposedly a mother and her daughter at the same time. Dunstan, Archbishop Oda, and Bishop Cynesige went after the king and forced him to return to the banquet. Eadwig appears not to have been pleased, and Dunstan was soon exiled again. He went to the monastery in Ghent, on the continent, and learned more about monastic reform.

Eadwig’s short reign was the low point of the reform, but as a king Eadwig was rather weak, and even as early as 957, Eadwig’s younger brother Edgar was made king of the Mercians and Northumbrians. In 959, Eadwig died and Edgar, who had been taught by Athelwold when he was a child, became king of all the English. Edgar immediately brought back Dunstan and Athelwold (Athelwold had been studying monastic reform at Fleury), and the next year, 960, Dunstan was made Archbishop of Canterbury. In 963, Athelwold was made Bishop of Winchester, and suddenly the monastic reformers were the most powerful churchmen in England.

Edgar put royal power behind the reforming impulses of Dunstan and Athelwold, helping them to enforce their reform ideas. This happened first at the Old Minster in Winchester, which had been traditionally run by clerks, priests who were not monks. Athelwold claimed that these clerks were getting married, giving away church lands, and behaving improperly, and he convinced King Edgar to give the clerks a choice: convert to being monks or leave. On February 19, 964, Wulfstan of Dalham, the king’s Reeve, and a party of armed men chased the clerks from Winchester cathedral and replaced them with Athelwold’s monks. Athelwold survived a poisoning attempt and then expelled the monks from the New Minster at Winchester and also set up a community of nuns at the Nunnaminster, putting Abbess Athelthryth in charge of them.

Then the reformers went on a monastery-founding and rebuilding frenzy. For whatever reason, there was an influx of people into monastic life, leading to new foundations and refoundations at Thorney, Peterborough, and Ely, among other places. Between 970 and 973 a council at Winchester was held under the aegis of King Edgar, but run by Athelwold and Dunstan. They devised a set of rules that would be applicable all through England, putting all the monks and nuns in England under one set of detailed customs. The document that lays these out is the *Regularis Concordia*, the agreement of the monks and nuns of England. In 973, Edgar also received a special second, imperial coronation at Bath, and from this point England was ruled by Edgar under the strong influence of Dunstan, Athelwold, and Oswald, the Bishop of Worcester. Monasticism spread throughout England and took over churches, like those at Winchester, that were not monastic, and the idea spread that monasticism was the way to serve God. Edgar gave land and money to monasteries, which became centers of learning again, run by people trained by Athelwold and Dunstan in Glastonbury and thus with the works of Aldhelm in the center of their curricula but also influenced by the vernacular efforts of Alfred. From this mixture sprung a great flowering of literary production.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did the leaders of the monastic reform impose their vision on England?
2. Why was the work of Aldhelm so important to monastic reformers?

Suggested Reading

Drout, Michael D.C. *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century*. Tempe: Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Dumville, David N. *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Inc., 1992.

Gretsch, Mechthild. *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Lapidge, Michael. *Anglo-Latin Literature, 900–1066*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.

Yorke, Barbara. *Bishop Æthelwold: His Career and Influence*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Inc., 1999.

Lecture 9:
Anglo-Saxon Literature:
Religious

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Michael Alexander's *The Earliest English Poems* and S.A.J. Bradley's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.

Eala earendel, engla beorhtast,
ofer middangeard monnum sended,
ond soðfæsta sunnan leoma,
torht ofer tunglas, þu tida gehwane
of sylfum þe symle inlihtes!

Hail, Earendil, brightest of angels, sent to men over middle-earth and the true light of the sun, brighter than the stars. You by yourself brighten every moment.

The next three lectures are about Anglo-Saxon literature, possibly the biggest contribution that the Anglo-Saxons have made to us. This literature is remarkable for being in the vernacular (Old English) in the early medieval period: almost all other written literature was in Latin at this time. But because of Alfred's program of vernacular literacy, the oral traditions of Anglo-Saxon England ended up being converted into writing (this was not as simple as scribes just copying down oral poems) and preserved. We owe much of this preservation to the monks of the tenth century, who made (at the very least) the copies of most of the literary manuscripts that still exist.

We know that many manuscripts were destroyed in the millennium between the tenth century and the present, but it is also the case that manuscripts were not common items. They were expensive and hard to make. First, cows or sheep had to be slaughtered and their skins tanned. Then people had to decide to use this leather for manuscripts rather than for any of the other things leather can be used for. The leather was then scraped, stretched, and cut into sheets, which were sewn into books. Then inks had to be made from oak galls and other ingredients, and the books had to be hand written by monks using quill pens. Every manuscript is slightly different from every other one, even if they are copies of each other, because every scribe had different handwriting and made different errors. We can actually identify individual scribes from their handwriting, and we can figure out where manuscripts come from because different scriptoria (centers of manuscript production) wrote in different styles.

There are five great poetic codices of Anglo-Saxon poetry (a codex is a manuscript book):

The Junius Manuscript
The Vercelli Book
The Exeter Book
The *Beowulf* Manuscript
The Paris Psalter

These manuscripts are all collections of poetry. Other single poems are found scattered throughout the corpus of Anglo-Saxon texts. A very few poems exist in more than one copy, but most are unique and utterly irreplaceable.

Form

Anglo-Saxon poetry is very different from English poetry alter the Middle English period. Rather than being organized around *rhyme*, the poetic line in Anglo-Saxon is organized around *alliteration*, the repetition of stressed sounds. Although in Modern English alliteration only counts repeated stressed consonants, in Anglo-Saxon any repeated stressed sound, vowel or consonant, could be used.

Anglo-Saxon lines are made up of two half-lines (in old-fashioned scholarship, these are called hemistiches) divided by a *breath-pause* or *caesura*. There must be at least one of the alliterating sounds on each side of the *caesura*.

ofer **m**iddangeard **m**onnum sended

The line above illustrates the principle. Note that there is a natural pause after "middangeard" and that the first stressed syllable after that pause begins with the same sound as a stressed line from the first half-line (the first half-line is called the a-verse and the second is the b-verse).

Anglo-Saxon poetry was not written out as half-lines with space between them, however. It was written like prose, with only a few ambiguous punctuation marks to indicate emphasis. Scholars figure out whether a passage is poetry or prose based on meter and alliteration. Anglo-Saxon poems do not regularly rhyme or have a refrain, but there are a few examples (*The Rhyming Poem* rhymes; the poems *Deor* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* have refrains). Much of the artistry of Anglo-Saxon poetry comes from the interaction of the alliteration and the meter with the content of a line. A good trick, taught to me by Professor Tom Shippey, is to pay much more attention to those words which alliterate: they often give the most important ideas in a line or passage.

There is very strong evidence that Anglo-Saxon poetry has deep roots in oral tradition, but, keeping with the cultural practices we have seen elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon culture, there was a blending between tradition and new learning. Thus while all Old English poetry has common features, we can also identify three strands: religious poetry, which includes poems about specifically Christian topics, such as the cross and the saints; Heroic or epic poetry, such as *Beowulf*, which is about heroes, warfare, monsters, and the Germanic past; and poetry about "smaller" topics, including introspective poems (the so-called elegies), "wisdom" poems (which communicate both traditional and Christian wisdom), and riddles.

Religious Poetry

"Cædmonian" Poems

We have only a few named authors in Old English. Cynewulf, whose poetry we will discuss in a moment, King Alfred, who wrote a few short poems, and Cædmon, who wrote *Cædmon's Hymn*. Although that short poem is the only one that can be definitively attributed to Cædmon, for a long time the cowherd-turned-poet got credit for a whole class of religious poetry. Usually

called the "biblical paraphrase poems," these poems retell important stories from the Bible or Christian tradition in Old English verse. They were attributed to Cædmon because the list of poems that Bede gives includes many of the same subjects as the biblical paraphrase poems, including Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel. These poems are found in one of the great poetic codices, the Junius Manuscript.

Genesis

The Old English Genesis is a verse paraphrase of the biblical story from the Creation to the sacrifice of Isaac. In 1875, the philologist Eduard Sievers noted that lines 235 to 851 of Genesis are significantly different in tone and style from the rest of the poem (lines 1 to 234 and 852 to 2936). He deduced that these lines, now called *Genesis B*, were a translation into Anglo-Saxon of an Old Saxon original, while the other lines of the poem, now called *Genesis A*, were a direct Anglo-Saxon translation of a Latin text. Sievers's deduction was confirmed when a fragment of an Old Saxon poem, which matched some of the lines of *Genesis B*, was found in the Vatican Library in 1894. This key part happens to be the Fall of the Angels, and in the section Lucifer comes across as a rebellious thane, consumed by pride. Whether Milton knew *Genesis B* is an open question, but he certainly knew its editor Francis Junius, so it may be that the Anglo-Saxon poem is an inspiration for the great depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost* by Milton.

Genesis shows how key aspects of Christianity were understood in Anglo-Saxon terms. God and Lucifer have a lord/thane relationship with much of their interaction being understood in terms of pride and the duty of service (and failures at that duty). *Exodus* also uses tropes from Anglo-Saxon warrior poetry, including specific depiction of details like settling metal mail over the body that are not in the biblical source but are implied. Thus we see in the biblical paraphrase poems further development of the process of taking Latin, Christian ideas and converting them into an idiom that was more easily understood by the Anglo-Saxons and, in the process, creating something new and important.

"Cynewulfian" Poems

For a long time all Anglo-Saxon poetry was divided into three groups: Cædmonian (the biblical paraphrase poems), heroic, and "Cynewulfian," named after Cynewulf, one of the only named poets in Anglo-Saxon. We really do not know anything about Cynewulf except that he "signed" his poems by working runes into the text. The Anglo-Saxons used Roman letters, but they also could use Germanic runes, which had both sound values and names, which could be interchanged (we do the same thing when we use the letters R or U to mean whole words in a text message: "R U coming over today?"). Cynewulf used the same strategy, and if you separate out all the runes from the text, they spell his name. There are four "signed" Cynewulfian poems: *Elene* and *The Fates of the Apostles* in the Vercelli Book, and *Christ II* and *Juliana* in the Exeter Book. Here is an example of one of the "signed" passages and the request for prayers for the author that follows:

> Mankind/Cynewulf will pass sorrowing away. The king, the giver of victories, will be wrathful when stained with sins, the sheep

(Cynewulf) await what he wills to decree to them according to their deeds as reward for their life Cynewulf will tremble and temporize, miserably anxious.

… I pray each person of humankind who recites this poem that, diligent and magnanimous, he will remember me by name and pray the ordaining lord that he, the Protector of the heavens, will afford me help, the Wielder of powers, upon that great day, the Father and Spirit of consolation, in that perilous hour, the Judge of deeds, and the beloved Son, when the Trinity, majestically enthroned in oneness, throughout the radiant universe shall adjudge to humankind, to each man his rewards according to his works. (S.A.J. Bradley)

Similar in style to Cynewulf's poetry, but not "signed," is perhaps the greatest Anglo-Saxon religious poem, *The Dream of the Rood*. (The entire poem is available online at http://anglosaxonworld.com.)

The Dream of the Rood (excerpt)

It was years ago, I still remember, that I was hewn down at the edge of a forest, removed from my stem. Strong enemies took me, made me, for themselves, a spectacle and forced me to raise up their criminals. The warriors bore me on their shoulders, set me upon a hill. Many enemies fixed me there.

Then I saw the Lord of mankind rush with great zeal because he wished to mount up upon me. I did not dare, against the word of the Lord, to bow or burst, though I saw the surfaces of the earth begin to shake. I might have felled all of my enemies, but I stood fast.

Then that young hero, who was God Almighty, stripped himself, strong and firm-minded. He mounted upon the loathsome gallows, mighty in the sight of many, when he chose to save mankind.

The Dream of the Rood uses the trope of prosopopeia, when an inanimate object speaks. The genius of the poem is the way it recasts a key moment in Christianity as a problem in Germanic warrior culture. The cross is the thane and Christ is its lord. The thane is then put into one of the double-bind situations that the Anglo-Saxons found so fascinating. Its two duties are to protect the lord and obey the lord, but the lord has ordered it to assist in killing him. Christ himself is envisioned as a warrior, not a sacrificial victim, mounting up onto the cross and embracing his death. And the imagery of the poem is also original and striking: the cross alternates between being a jeweled, glorious vision and a blood-soaked instrument of torture. Thus a central idea of Christianity is reshaped in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Prose

There are about 30,000 lines of Old English poetry and about ten times that much prose, and the majority of the prose is religious. We focus on the poetry, often, because it is so beautiful, but we should not forget the prose, which was influential and obviously very important to the Anglo-Saxons (and, it turns out, the prose was more important than the poetry to those who came after the Anglo-Saxons).

Homilies are sermons, lessons to be given on moral and doctrinal matters, and the two most prolific and respected writers of Anglo-Saxon prose, Ælfric and Wulfstan, were both homilists. Ælfric, the Abbot of Eynsham in Oxfordshire, was Bishop Athelwold's greatest pupil; he lived from about 955 to 1010, and so was in the second phase of the Benedictine Reform of the tenth century. Ælfric was sent from the school of Winchester, where he had studied with Athelwold, to Cerne in Dorsett when Athelmær, the lay patron of Eynsham, asked for someone to teach the Benedictine monks there. Athelmær wanted to learn more about Christianity, but he could not read Latin (though he could read English), so he commissioned Ælfric to write homilies. Ælfric wrote many homilies, expounding on Christian doctrine and important rites, traditions, and ideas of the church.

He also wrote the *Lives of Saints* and started an Old English prose paraphrase of the Old Testament. But Ælfric was always worried that he would be misunderstood and that people would get the wrong ideas from his homilies and translations. For example, he did not want anyone to think that the biblical book of Kings was a guide to behavior. Perhaps this concern for not being misunderstood is why the style of his Old English prose is as different as it is possible to be from the convoluted, hermeneutic Latin that was so important to his teacher and the previous generation.

But although religious writing was the most popular kind of writing in Anglo-Saxon England, there was also a great deal of important writing on other matters, writings which have often gotten more attention (and they will get that additional attention from us, also). But we should never forget that for the Anglo-Saxon who did the writing—the monks and perhaps nuns—the major purpose of writing was to communicate what were to them religious truths.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the characteristic form of Anglo-Saxon poetry?
2. How is Christ's depiction in *The Dream of the Rood* uniquely Anglo-Saxon?

Suggested Reading

Alexander, Michael. *The Earliest English Poems*. 3rd rev. ed. New York: Penguin Classics, 1992.

Bradley, S.A.J. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. New York: Everyman Paperbacks, 1995.

Other Books of Interest

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Godden, Malcolm, and Michael Lapidge, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Lecture 10:
Anglo-Saxon Literature:
Personal, Wisdom, and Riddles

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Michael Alexander's *The Earliest English Poems* and S.A.J. Bradley's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.

Mæg ic be me sylfum
siþas secgan,
earfoðhwile
bitre breostceare
gecunnad in ceole
atol yþa gewealc,
nearo nihtwaco
þonne he be clifum cnossað.
wæron mine fet,
caldum clommum,
hat ymb heortan;
merewerges mod.
þe him on foldan
hu ic earmcearig
winter wunade
winemægum bidroren,
bihongen hrimgicelum;
Þær ic ne gehyrde
iscaldne wæg.
dyde ic me to gomene,
ond huilpan sweg
mæw singende
soðgied wrecan,
hu ic geswincdagum
oft þrowade,
gebiden hæbbe,
cearselda fela,
þær mec oft bigeat
æt nacan stefnan,
Calde geþrungen
forste gebunden,
þær þa ceare seofedun
hungor innan slat
Þæt se mon ne wat
fægrost limpeð,
iscealdne sæ
wræccan lastum,

hægl scurum fleag.
butan hlimman sæ,
Hwilum ylfete song
ganetes hleoþor
fore hleahtor wera,
fore medodrince.

I can tell a true song about myself, speak about my times, how I, in days of suffering, often experienced hardship, had to abide bitter breast-cares while on the sea, amidst the terrible tossing of waves. There, the narrow night-watch has held me at the prow of the ship, when it tossed by the cliffs. My feet were bound thonged with cold, bound with frost, chained with cold, while the sorrow surged hot around my heart. Hunger slit from within the sea-farer's spirit.

A man who is happy on the land will not understand how I, wretched and miserably sad, have for years followed the exile path on the ice-cold sea, deprived of my kin, hung all about with rime-ice. Hail fell in showers.

At times I only heard the roaring sea, the ice-cold wave. At times the song of the swan came to me instead of people's laughter, the gannet's cry and the curlew's song in place of the mead-drinking.

Anglo-Saxon literature is unusual in the early medieval period not only for being in the vernacular rather than in Latin, but also because it includes poems in so many different genres. In the previous lecture we examined religious poems, and in the next we will discuss heroic and warrior poetry, but

between these extremes there were other poems that do not fit either category well. These include "personal" poems about loss or suffering (often called "elegies") as well as poems that seem to preserve traditional wisdom ("wisdom poems") and another genre the Anglo-Saxons seemed to love, riddles. The poems in this catch-all group often have religious content, but they also contain material that seems to be non-Christian or pre-Christian.

Most of the poems in these categories are found in one incredibly important manuscript, Exeter, Cathedral Library 3501, known as The Exeter Book. The Exeter Book was copied toward the end of the tenth century, and there is some debate over where it was copied (though the best and most well-argued research, by Patrick Conner, places it at Exeter). The book almost certainly was copied at a monastic center, so it is remarkable how much seemingly secular material it contains. The most celebrated poems, the so-called elegies ("The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "The Wife's Lament," "The Husband's Message," and "The Ruin") certainly contain Christian elements, but they also seem to illustrate the experiences of people who were not monks, warriors, and even women who experience suffering and discuss it in a personal style that is unique in early medieval literature.

At the beginning of the lecture I quoted a passage from "The Seafarer," a poem which suggests that people must be "seafarers" in the world, willing to sacrifice home and comfort for the love of God. Another similar poem is "The Wanderer," which also depicts exile. But while "The Seafarer" suggests that exile can be good for the soul and can and should be entered into voluntarily, "The Wanderer" is the lament of someone who has been involuntarily exiled:

The Wanderer (excerpt)

> Often the exile waits for honor, the mercy of the Measurer, even though he, heart-troubled, has to row with his hands along the sea way, across the rime-cold sea, to follow the paths of exile. Fate is fully determined.
>
> So spoke the wanderer, remembering misery, the deadly slaughter by enemies, the ruin of kin:
>
> "Often I must lament my cares, every morning. No one lives now to whom I dare to open my heart, to speak clearly. In truth, I know, it is right for a man to keep the spirit locked in the breast, hold close his thoughts, think what he wishes.
>
> Nor may the weary-hearted withstand fate, nor can troubled thought help much.
>
> So those who seek respect bind their sorrows fast in their chests.
>
> I, wretched, far from my home, away from my kin, have fettered my heart ever since, long ago, my gold-friend was wrapped in the dark of the earth. I, miserable, passed away, suffering in the winter, over the waves. Near and far I sought the hall of a new treasure-giver, a lord who would love me in return for my loyalty in the mead-hall, who would comfort me after my loss of friends, provide joys to me.

The Ruin (which, ironically, is burned and damaged in the manuscript) is a lament for a city that has been destroyed by time. It appears to refer to the

city of Bath, the only natural hot springs in England (though it is possible that it simply refers to a set of Roman baths somewhere else in England):

The Ruin (excerpt)

> The place is broken to piles of stone, where once happy men bright with gold, adorned with treasures, proud and filled with wine, shone in their war gear. They looked upon silver, on gems, on wealth, on possessions, on precious stones—and on this bright city over the broad kingdom. The stone walls stood high, and the stream flowed hot in wide channels. The wall surrounded where the baths were in its bright enclosure. That was clever, they let then flow the hot streams over the gray stone until the round pool where the baths were. . . . That is a fitting thing, how that city . . .

The Wife's Lament tells the story of a woman who has been separated from her love by the machinations of evil kinsfolk. It is one of two poems in Anglo-Saxon from the point of view of a woman:

The Wife's Lament (excerpt)

> I force out this song, tell about my sorrowing self. I can tell what miseries, new and old, I have endured since I grew up—never more than now. Always I have suffered torment in my exile-paths.
>
> First my lord departed away from his people, over the play of the waves. I had sorrow at dawn about where my lord was, and so I went wandering, to seek a following, and my man's kin schemed secretly to separate us so that we two must be miserably apart in the world. And I longed for him.

Wulf and Eadwacer is probably the most enigmatic poem in Old English. It appears to be from the point of view of a woman who has become pregnant by a man who is not her husband and whose husband is separating her from her lover, but there are so many ways to read this ambiguous poem that no critical interpretation is agreed on by a majority of critics.

Wulf and Eadwacer

> It is as if my people have been given prey: they will destroy him if he comes with a troop.
>
> We are unlike.
>
> Wulf is on an island, I am on another.
>
> Fast is that island, wrapped by fens.
>
> There are slaughter-hungry men on that island. They will destroy him if he comes with a troop.
>
> We are unlike.
>
> I have waited for the steps of my Wulf. When it was rainy weather, and I sat, weeping, when the warrior laid his arms around me.
>
> That was to me a joy, and was to me also a horror.

Wulf, my Wulf, it is my hopes for you that have made me sick, and your seldom-coming, and my mourning mind—not at all a lack of food.

Do you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf will bear our whelp to the woods.

One may easily slit apart that which was never truly joined: our song together.

Another genre much less respected by modern critics, but apparently popular among the Anglo-Saxons is the "wisdom poem." These poems seem to codify traditional wisdom and mix together Christian and Germanic wisdom and ideology. An example of the style is this passage from *Maxims I*:

Frost must freeze, fire melt wood, the earth grow, ice bridge, water wear a covering, wondrously lock the shoots in the earth. The many-powered God alone must unbind the frost's fetter. Winter shall depart, water come after, summer heated by the sun. The unstill waves, the deep paths of the dead, will be hidden longest.

Holly must be burned, the inheritance of a dead man shared. Judgment is best.

Riddles

The Anglo-Saxons also appear to have loved riddles, as there are nearly one hundred of them in the Exeter Book and a few more scattered in other manuscripts. Traditionally the riddles were thought to be a Germanic genre, but more recent work by scholars like Mercedes Salvador has shown that they are probably just as much linked to Latin collections. Aldhelm, the greatest of Anglo-Latin poets, assembled a collection of Latin riddles, at least one and perhaps more of which were translated for the riddle collection in the Exeter Book. The riddles often teach a bit of doctrine or Christian morality while at the same time proposing logical puzzles or depicting the natural world.

The Book Moth Riddle

A moth ate a word. This seemed to me a marvelous fate, when I heard of that wonder, that the worm swallowed up the sayings of a man, the thief in the dark seized his brilliant writings and their strong foundation. The stealing-guest was not a bit the wiser even though he had swallowed those words.

The metaphor works in a variety of ways, and we must hope that we are not like the moth, who takes in the words but does not benefit from them. The Anglo-Saxons, it must be said, were not like the moth: they took in many words from many books and traditions, digested them, and turned them into new and beautiful works.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the difference between *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* in terms of the poems' depiction of exile?
2. What is particularly significant about *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*?

Suggested Reading

Alexander, Michael. *The Earliest English Poems*. 3rd rev. ed. New York: Penguin Classics, 1992.

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Lecture 11:
Anglo-Saxon Literature:
Epic and Heroic

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, translated by Seamus Heaney.

Religious poetry and prose was certainly the most popular type of Anglo-Saxon writing among the monks, who did most of the writing and reading, but what was popular among the people who did the listening to Old English poetry is another question. We have some evidence that the subject of this chapter, epic and heroic poetry, was very popular. Alcuin, one of the great intellectuals of the Golden Age, once wrote a letter criticizing the reading of heroic poetry in monastic environments, suggesting that monks were in fact listening to heroic stories. And if we cannot know for certain what genres were most popular among secular Anglo-Saxons, we can easily see that the epic and heroic poems are by far the most popular poems among later scholars, teachers, and readers.

Heroic and epic poems seem to draw from a common Germanic background remembered or passed along as oral tradition for many years (there are some scholars who argue that the tradition was constructed from reading various books, chronicles in Latin, and other texts, but these arguments are no longer very convincing). A deep consistency across many different pieces of evidence supports the idea of some kind of continuous oral tradition behind this material, a tradition that would have been preserved and transmitted among the Germanic peoples surrounding the North Sea during the Migration period and even from centuries before that time. By the time the poems get written down, however, we are in a much later time period, perhaps as late as the tenth century, when the manuscripts were copied. But the poems themselves assume that their audience is familiar with a wide variety of myths, legends, and even history. For example, the poem *Deor*, which is found in the Exeter Book, begins with this passage:

Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade,
anhydig eorl earfoþa dreag,
hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longaþ,
wintercealde wræce; wean oft onfond,
siþþan hine Niðhad on nede legde,
swoncre seonobende on syllan monn.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

Weland, by means of worms/twisted things, knew suffering, the unhappy earl, endured much misery, had as a companion sorrow and longing, winter-cold suffering; often he found misfortune after Nithad laid bonds on him, gave supple sinew-bonds to the better man. That passed away, so may this.

Weland is the name of a supernatural smith figure, cognate with Roman Vulcan and Greek Hephaistos, but the poem never explains this. In fact, if not for sources preserved in other cultures, sources there is no way for the Anglo-Saxon poet ever to have seen, we would be unable to make any sense of this scene. But with a lot of sleuthing around in the fragments of Germanic culture we can figure out the basics. In the Old Norse *Völundarkviða*, Weland is captured by his enemy Nithhad, then hamstrung (the tendons behind his knees are cut, crippling him and thus stopping him from escaping) and forced to work as a smith. In revenge, Weland kills Nithhad's sons, makes bowls out of their skulls (from which their father drinks), and rapes and impregnates Nithhad's daughter. This story is consistent with the enigmatic passage, but no audience could have figured that out if they did not already know much of the story and thus were able to be reminded of it by the hints and fragments in *Deor*.

Deor also gives us in miniature a lot of the interesting problems raised by epic poetry. What are we to do with figures from history who are mixed into poems that include magic or monsters or superhuman feats? *Deor*, for example, mentions Eormenric and Theodoric, but it does not differentiate them from Weland the Smith, who has quasi-magical powers. Likewise in *Beowulf* we have references to historical tribes, peoples, and kings, but we also have dragons, monsters, and a hero who can, at least under some interpretations, hold his breath for hours at a time. We do not quite understand the "rules" of the heroic world and what the balance is between history and fantasy.

Beowulf

Nowhere is this a larger problem than in the most important, beautiful, and powerful poem in Anglo-Saxon, *Beowulf*. But there are many fascinating problems with *Beowulf*, and they are all intertwined, so we need to start with basics and then build things up from there.

Beowulf is found in the manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv. The labeling system means that the manuscript belonged to Sir Robert Cotton in the eighteenth century, that it was stored in a bookcase on top of which was a bust of the Roman emperor Vitellius, and that it was on the first shelf (A), the fifteenth manuscript over from the left (xv). Before Sir Robert Cotton got the manuscript, it was owned by Laurence Nowell, who scribbled his name on the front, but beyond that, we have no idea of where *Beowulf* was or who had it between the Anglo-Saxon period and the sixteenth century. After Sir Robert Cotton acquired the manuscript, it was stored in his library in the aptly named Ashburnham House, which caught fire in 1731. *Beowulf* was saved, but it sustained some burn damage around the edges, and subsequent study by various scholars caused bits of the edges to break away, causing the loss of more letters. The manuscript was copied in the late eighteenth century by the scholar Grim Jonsson Thorkelin, who also employed a professional scribe to make an additional copy, and these copies (called Thorkelin A and Thorkelin B) preserve information about letters that have since been lost (the British Library put a paper frame around each page of the manuscript, stopping this kind of deterioration). Unfortunately, the Thorkelin transcripts do not always agree with each other, or with the manuscript (where it is not damaged), so we have multiple levels of uncertainty in our readings of *Beowulf*.

Things get even more complicated when we try to figure out where the *Beowulf* manuscript came from, and when it was copied. The handwriting, which dates from around the year 1000, does not fit with any particular known monastic house, and the poem was copied by two scribes: A, who began the poem and copied about two-thirds of it, and B, who finished the poem and then went back and corrected A's work. By analysis of the handwriting, we have an idea that B is about twenty years older than A, but we have no idea why he finished up the poem and then went back and corrected A. Kevin Kiernan, the greatest living expert on the *Beowulf* manuscript, argues that the B scribe is in fact the poet, basing this argument on a *palimpsest* page, one on which the text has been scraped off and then redone. Kiernan thinks this is evidence of the scribe blending together two previous separate poems, writing a transition passage. However, most scholars do not agree with Kiernan and date the poem as being earlier. Some would pick a date close to that of the manuscript, others would put the composition of the poem (as distinct from its copying), much earlier, even as far back as the early eighth century. Some eminent scholars would connect *Beowulf* to Malmesbury and Aldhelm (because Malmesbury library is known to have had a Liber Monstrorum, a book of monsters, and the majority—but not all—of the texts in the *Beowulf* manuscript are about monsters). J.R.R. Tolkien, perhaps the greatest scholar of *Beowulf* in the twentieth century, thought that the poem had been composed around 750. *Beowulf* could not have been written before 516, because, as noted in the chapter on the Migration period, the poem mentions Chochilaicus, who died then. But no scholars date the poem that early, especially because there are elements of Christianity (including references to Cain and Abel) in the poem. Thus because of the conflicting nature of the evidence, the date of *Beowulf* is probably the single most contentious question in the humanities—and there seems little hope of the problem being resolved any time soon.

The plot of *Beowulf* is relatively straightforward if we leave out all the interesting politics and history and ignore the beautiful poetry. Hrothgar, the king of Danes, has built a great hall called Heorot. From the moor, a monster, Grendel, hears the sound of the Danes celebrating in their halls and attacks. He eats Danes, and they are unable to defend against him. Eventually Heorot stands empty (though Grendel does not pursue people who are not in the hall). Across the sea, in Geatland, Beowulf hears of Grendel's depredations. Because Hrothgar had once helped Beowulf's father, the hero sails across the ocean to Denmark and asks if he can fight the monster. Hrothgar agrees, and Beowulf and his men sleep in the hall. Grendel attacks. He eats one of Beowulf's men, but then the hero seizes Grendel by the arm, which is wrenched away when Grendel tries to flee. There is great rejoicing the next day, and the Danes reoccupy their hall and hang Grendel's arm from the rafters.

But the next night, Grendel's mother attacks, taking the arm and killing Hrothgar's most beloved counselor. Beowulf then goes to Grendel's mother's watery lair, swims down to her cave, and fights her. He is almost defeated, but finds a huge sword hanging on the wall of the cave and uses it to kill Grendel's mother. He then decapitates Grendel's dead body and brings the head back to Hrothgar's hall. Hrothgar rewards him with rich gifts, and Beowulf returns to Geatland where his uncle, King Hygelac, also rewards him.

Years later, Hygelac, and after him his sons, have died and Beowulf is now king. A fiery dragon, disturbed by a slave who has stolen a cup from the barrow it occupies, destroys Beowulf's castle. The hero resolves to kill the dragon and goes to fight it with a specially constructed iron shield. He commands his men to stay in the woods and not help him. The battle is not going well when one of Beowulf's retainers, a young man named Wiglaf, decides that he cannot let his lord die alone. He goes to Beowulf's aid, and the two of them kill the dragon. But Beowulf is mortally wounded and soon dies. His people lament, and one prophesizes that once the neighboring tribes learn of the death of Beowulf, they will attack and destroy his people.

This seems like a pretty conventional fantastic story, with monster- and dragon-killing at the heart of it. But *Beowulf*, like *Deor*, uses the names of real tribes, kings, and peoples. For example, at one point we learn that the favor of "the Merovingian" has been denied to Beowulf's people. Why does this matter? Because in the 700s, the king of the Franks was indeed "the Merovingian." Does a later poet know this and supply "Merovingian" as a bit of historical detail, or is the poem being written in the 700s? Even more interesting, it seems pretty clear that the scribe has no idea what to do with the word "Merovingian," because he botches it fairly extremely in his copying. This would make sense if the scribe is copying in the tenth century and has no idea who a Merovingian would be, but then why is he copying the poem in the tenth century at all? We have only partial answers, and the manuscript raises as many questions as it answers. For example, at one point the dead king Hrethel is called *dryhten wereda*, which means "Lord of Hosts," and is a translation of a Latin commonplace for God. But Hrethel is actually *dryhten wedera*, "The lord of the Weders" (the name of his people). So the scribe has made a simple error, and one that indicates that he was a Christian and knew the commonplace. Then why, in all 3,182 lines of *Beowulf* do we never hear of Jesus, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the Saints, or the Prophets? Instead, the only explicit Christian references are to Cain and Abel (giving us, perhaps, more evidence of the Anglo-Saxons' interest in brother-killing), but both times "Cain" appears, it is spelled wrong. How could a Christian scribe make such an elementary mistake (and he spells Cain differently each time he spells it wrong)? Due to such problems, figuring out how seriously people took *Beowulf* is very difficult.

The Battle of Maldon

The same cannot be said for *The Battle of Maldon*, which describes an actual battle and never mentions monsters or magic. We know that *Maldon* had to be written after the date of the battle in 991, so we can see heroic traditions operating in the late Anglo-Saxon period, and we can also see how depictions of extreme heroism did not have to be reserved for legendary ancestors in the Migration period.

The Battle of Maldon describes an attack by the Vikings upon Essex. Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, the leader of the Anglo-Saxons, finds himself in a very good position. The superior Viking army is on an island just off shore. The only way they can reach the mainland is to traverse a narrow causeway that is only passable at low tide. As the Vikings try to come across, the Anglo-Saxons kill them one by one. But then the Vikings challenge Byrhtnoth to let

them all come ashore so that they can have a more even battle. Byrhtnoth, perhaps influenced by his previous reading of heroic poetry, allows the Vikings to cross so that his victory over them will be even greater. But Byrhtnoth is almost immediately killed and Vikings go on to win the battle. However, the poem focuses less on this loss than on the heroic last stand of some of the men. Even after it is clear that they will lose, they refuse to move from the side of their dead lord.

Leofsunu gemælde and his linde ahof,
bord to gebeorge; he þam beorne oncwæð:
"Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonon nelle
fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan,
wrecan on gewinne minne winedrihten.

Leofsunu spoke and lifted linden shield, his shield as a protection, he then spoke to the warrior: "I promise that I will not step back from here the length of one foot, but I will go further in battle to avenge my lord and friend."

Byrhtwold maþelode bord hafenode
(se wæs eald geneat), æsc acwehte;
he ful baldlice beornas lærde:
"Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.
Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,
god on greote. A mæg gnornian
se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.
Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men, licgan þence."

Byrhtwold spoke, heaved up his shield (he was an old retainer), waved his ash spear, he boldly informed the warriors:

Spirit must be the harder, heart the keener, mind must be firmer, while our strength weakens. Here lies our leader, all hewn, the good one on the ground. Always must he remember in shame he who thinks to turn from this battle-play. I am old in life. I will not go from here, but I think to lie at the side of my lord, the beloved man.

These two quotations sum up Germanic heroic ethos and show that it was still in place even as late as 991. Whether people actually behaved this way is not clear, but certainly the ideal was there. And that idea of "northern courage," as Tolkien called it, makes the poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period extremely appealing. We see heroes who are willing to sacrifice for their people and retainers who keep their loyalty to their lords. For these reasons, and because the actual lines of poetry are so beautiful, the heroic poetry of Anglo-Saxon England is still being read over one thousand years after it was written.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What problems are raised by epic poetry?
2. Why is it so difficult to date the authorship of *Beowulf*?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 12:
The Norman Conquest and the End of Anglo-Saxon England

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is H.R. Loyn's *The Norman Conquest*.

> Leofan men gecnawað þæt soð is: ðeos worolde is on ofste, ⁊ hit nealæcð þam ende. ⁊ þy hit is on worolde aa swa leng swa wyrse, ⁊ swa hit sceal nyde for folces synnan fram dæge to dæge, ær antecristes tocyme, yfelian swyþe. ⁊ huru hit wyrð þænne egeslic ⁊ grimlic wide on worolde. Understandað eac georne þæt deofol þas þeode nu fela geara dwelode to swyþe, ⁊ þæt lytle getreowþa wæran mid mannum, þeah hy wel spræcan. ⁊ unrihta to fela ricsode on lande, ⁊ næs a fela manna þe smeade ymbe þa bote swa georne swa man scolde, ac dæghwamlice man ihte yfel æfter oðrum, ⁊ unriht rærde ⁊ unlaga manege ealles to wide gynd ealle þas þeode.
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> Beloved men: know that this is the truth: this world is in haste and it nears the end, and because it is with everything of the world, as long as it lasts, the worse it will be, so it must always worsen before the coming of the antichrist because of the evils of the people, and indeed it will be then even more terrible and grim throughout the world.
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> Understand also that the devil has deceived this nation too many times over many years, and that there is little faith among men, though they speak well, and many crimes have gone unpunished in this land, and there are no men who think about what remedy they should take, as one should do, but daily people add evil to evil, and crime and lawlessness to all men are spread all around this nation.

The previous chapter ended with *The Battle of Maldon*, which we considered as a great heroic poem. But it also documents an event that is characteristic of the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, an end that took nearly half a century, but which was set in motion as early as the Battle of Maldon in 991.

King Edgar, the great king of the Reform, had done a lot to build up his kingdom and support intellectual life. But he had one great flaw: his son was inept. Even in his own time, Athelred had a derogatory nickname: traditionally, he is known as "Athelred the Unready," but the pun in Anglo-Saxon was even worse, because Athelred means "noble-counsel" and "un-ræd" means "not-counseled" or "stupid." The bulk of this chapter is going to be spent on how Athelred and his successors ended up losing England for the English, but first I want to talk about two remarkable men who lived during his reign, Ælfric (whom we have already met in our discussion of religious literature) and Wulfstan.

Wulfstan was Bishop of London, Bishop of Worcester, and Archbishop of York. We are not exactly sure when he was born, but he died in 1023. Wulfstan was trusted and respected by Athelred but kept on by the Danish

king Cnut, who came afterwards. He was one of the most politically powerful men in England; he drafted law codes and he wrote homilies and sermons.

Wulfstan believed that the key to a stable and good society was the adherence of the population to the basic Christian principles. He therefore wrote homilies that taught people the fundamental tenets of Christian faith. Wulfstan wrote for preaching and was known in his own time as a great preacher—his homilies were copied and distributed throughout England. His most famous is the *The Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, the Sermon of the Wolf (that is, Wulfstan) to the English, which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. In this remarkable rant, Wulfstan asserts that the English are being punished for their terrible behavior, including selling other Englishmen into slavery, buying women as a joint purchase and in general not being good Christians. It is not clear if anyone followed Wulfstan's teachings, but he was certainly in a position of power to try to put his ideas into action.

The Slow-motion Fall of Anglo-Saxon England

Wulfstan bridges the gap between Athelred and the Danish kings who would succeed him, and shows that the failures at the level of the English monarchy did not completely disrupt all life throughout the kingdom. Nevertheless, the fall of English kings, their replacement by Danes, and the eventual conquest by the Normans radically changed Anglo-Saxon England at first and destroyed it in the end.

The basic story behind the fall of England and the Norman Conquest is a multi-generational, multi-family succession problem caused in great part by Athelred's incompetence. It begins with the English losing the Battle of Maldon in 991. Athelred then paid off the Vikings with the infamous *Danegeld* (Dane-payment). Alfred had done something similar, but Alfred used his payment to buy time in which to build up his defenses; Athelred did not. Instead of raising a strong army, he just kept collecting taxes and paying Danegeld. In 994, 997, and 1002, there were major raids and subsequently huge payments, so obviously the Danegeld was not working. Athelred then decided to make a treaty with Normandy, on the French side of the English channel, in which both sides agreed not to help the other's enemies. This was a good idea in the short run, but it would have long-term consequences when the English monarchy became entangled with Normandy, beginning with Athelred marrying the Duke of Normandy's daughter.

And then comes the incident which I think is the most shameful in Anglo-Saxon history and is the major reason I have so much loathing for Athelred. In 1002, Athelred and his council decided it would be a good idea to murder all of the Danes living in England. Remember, many of these people had been living side by side with their English neighbors, intermarrying and influencing each other's language, culture, and literature. But Athelred, in 1002, ordered the St. Brice's Day Massacre. Danes were rounded up and slaughtered, and when some took refuge in St. Frideswide's minster church in Oxford, people burned down the church with the Danes inside it. Even if this one shameful episode had worked to shore up English rule, Athelred would *still* deserve all the opprobrium heaped on him, but in fact the St. Brice's Day Massacre *weakened* Athelred's position because it infuriated King Swein Forkbeard of Denmark (who was also de facto ruler of Norway and the son of

Harald Bluetooth). He invaded England in 1003 and sacked Norwich. He then suffered military defeats and so left to go back to Denmark in 1005, but he came back soon after and, of course, was paid off by Athelred.

Athelred, perhaps learning a lesson from Alfred, built a new English fleet to repel the Danes the next time they invaded, but an English captain turned traitor and burned eighty of the ships, so the English were not able to repel Thorkil the Tall and Hemming, who invaded in 1009, burned Oxford, attacked East Anglia, and moved into Kent. This Danish army captured Archbishop Alfheah of Canterbury, tied him to a post, and pelted him with ox bones and horns until he was nearly dead. Then one of the Danes bashed in the back of his head with the back of a hatchet and killed him. Thorkil the Tall was disgusted by this and switched sides, going over to Athelred. So now Athelred had forty-five ships, and the rest of the raiders left England for the time being. But Swein Forkbeard came back in 1013, and he was more prepared this time. He easily conquered England and Athelred ran away to exile in Normandy. But Swein fell off his horse and died in 1014. His son Harald took over his empire in Denmark and Norway, and his son Cnut became king of England.

While Cnut was ruler of England, Athelred came back from exile and attacked him. Cnut then fled to Denmark, but he returned in 1015 with a larger army. Meanwhile, Athelred's son Edmund Ironside took control over the northern Danelaw. Edmund was Althelred's son by his first wife, a Northumbrian princess. But now Athelred was married to Emma, a Norman princess. Edmund thus was not Athelred's rightful heir; his brother Athelstan was. But Athelstan died in 1015 and Edmund then came into conflict with Athelred, his own father. Athelred had Edmund's two biggest allies, Sigeferth and Morcar, executed. Edmund then rescued Sigeferth's widow, Ealdgyth, from Malmesbury, where she was imprisoned, and he married her against his father's orders. So this is the bizarre situation: Edmund Ironside, the son of the king, was defending England against the Vikings, but was also defying his father, who was still king. Then one of Edmund's major supporters deserted him, so Edmund went back to supporting his father Athelred, who died soon after, in 1016.

Edmund then headed to Wessex and gathered an army, which had success against Cnut and defeated his army badly in Essex. Edmund and Cnut then made an agreement that Edmund would rule Wessex and Cnut would get everything else, and when one of the two died, the other would get everything. It is perhaps not surprising that Edmund died soon after, possibly assassinated. Now Cnut was king of all England, and he took Athelred's widow, the Norman princess Emma, as his wife. This is important, because Emma was the daughter of Richard the Fearless of Normandy and the Normans noticed that any children from her and Cnut would be half Norman. Note also that Emma already had two sons from Athelred (that is, from before she married Cnut). These are Edward the Confessor and Alfred the Atheling, both of whom were in exile in Hungary.

Cnut was a good king and helped keep England safe and prosperous for a number of years, but he also had the bad idea of dividing England into four separate earldoms, roughly corresponding with the old kingdoms of England that had not existed since the time of Alfred more than two centuries before.

Thus Cnut created earldoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, Mercia, and Wessex, and each of the earls became very powerful. There was Leofric, earl of Mercia (whose wife was Lady Godiva), Siward of Northumbria, and Godwin of Wessex, who would play a large part in the endgame of the Norman Conquest.

Cnut had a son with Emma, Harthacnut, who, although the son of the current king (surely a point in his favor), was also only related tangentially to the original house of Wessex. Cnut sent him to grow up in Denmark, where Cnut's brother Harald was ruling. Cnut also had a son Harald, who became known as Harald Harefoot.

Harald, the king of Denmark (so *not* Cnut's son Harald Harefoot), died in 1018, making Cnut king of both Denmark and England. Cnut went to Denmark, consolidated power there, put his brother-in-law on the throne, and came back to England in 1020. His son Harthacnut was still in Denmark under the care of the brother-in-law. By 1028, Cnut was king of England and of Denmark and of Norway. He died in 1035. At this point, Harthacnut was king of Denmark. Harold Harefoot, the son of Cnut and an unknown woman, claimed the throne of England and held it until 1040, when he died, leaving Harthacnut king of both England and Denmark. But Harthacnut died in 1042.

Athelred and Emma (who, you will remember, was first married to Athelred and then married to Cnut), had a son, Edward, who had spent years in exile. But for some reason, Harthacnut brought him back to England, and when Harthacnut died, Edward became king of England. This is Edward the Confessor, the royal saint of England. He was a good king, but he had no children and the earls in the earldoms that Cnut had created had now become very powerful. Godwin, the earl of Wessex, had married his daughter to Edward, but there were no children. Godwin had actually murdered Edward's brother, and by 1051 Edward and Godwin had a falling out: Edward ordered Godwin to sack Dover; Godwin refused and went into exile but then came back with a large fleet in 1052. Edward and Godwin made some kind of settlement, so there was no battle and Godwin was, after that point, the most powerful man in England. So Edward, to balance Godwin's power, brought in support from Normandy, becoming friendly with Duke William. But the Godwin family's power continued to increase.

Godwin's son Harald, Harald Godwinson, took over his father's earldom in Wessex. His brother, Tostig Godwinson, took the earldom of Northumbria. The two brothers defeated King Gruffydd of Wales in 1063 and were loved throughout the kingdom. It seems clear that Harald Godwinson was going to be the successor to Edward, even though he had no royal blood, but in 1064 Harald went to Normandy. According to the stories put out by the Normans, he was Edward's ambassador and supposedly swore to William, Duke of Normandy, that William would be the next king of England. The true story might be that Harald was in Normandy for some other reason and was captured by William. To save his life, he was forced to swear that William would be the next king.

In 1065, a rebellion in Northumbria caused Tostig Godwinson to go into exile. Harald Godwinson actually came down on the side of the Northumbrian people, and this caused his brother Tostig to hate him. When Edward the

Confessor died in 1066, all these problems came to a head. Harald Godwinson was Edward's appointed heir, but Duke William of Normandy claimed that Edward the Confessor had promised him the kingdom, and he further claimed that Harald Godwinson, now king, had sworn to agree to this promise (he may even have been telling the truth).

And, as if we did not have enough complexity, another Harald thinks he should be king. Harald Hardrada, King of Norway, traced his claim back to his predecessor, Magnus the I of Norway, who supposedly had an agreement with Harthacnut that after either one of them died, the other would get all the other's kingdoms. (Remember that Harthacnut was the legitimate heir of Cnut.) Harald Hardrada of Norway allied himself with Tostig, the estranged brother of Harald Godwinson, against Harald Godwinson. Tostig and the Norwegian Harald invaded the north of England. Harald Godwinson rushed north and defeated the Norwegian forces at the Battle of Stamford Bridge near York. He killed Norwegian Harald and Tostig and took back Northumbria, thus saving England from an attack from the north. But William, from Normandy, sensing an opportunity, landed his invading force in the south. Harald rushed back to the south, but his army was exhausted.

On October 14, 1066, the English Army and William's Norman (not Norwegian) army met at the Battle of Hastings. The English seemed to be winning, and they had the better position, but William's army kept luring them away from the high ground and killing large numbers of them. Supposedly Harald got shot through the eye, and that was the end of the Haralds. William won the day and went on to conquer the rest of England. It took him a little while, but eventually William mopped up all resistance, accepted the submission of the English lords, and was crowned king on Christmas Day in Westminster Abbey in 1066. That was the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

> Ða com Wyllelm eorl of Normandige into Pefnesea on Sancte Michæles mæsseæfen, ⁊ sona þæs hi fere wæron, worhton castel æt Hæstingaport. Þis wearð þa Harolde cynge gecydd, ⁊ he gaderade þa mycelne here, ⁊ com him togenes æt þære haran apuldran, ⁊ Wyllelm him com ongean on unwær, ær þis folc gefylced wære. Ac se kyng þeah him swiðe heardlice wið feaht mid þam mannum þe him gelæstan woldon, ⁊ þær wearð micel wæl geslægen on ægðre healfe. Ðær wearð ofslægen Harold kyng, ⁊ Leofwine eorl his broðor, ⁊ Gyrð eorl his broðor, ⁊ fela godra manna, ⁊ þa Frencyscan ahton wælstowe geweald.
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> Then came William, the Earl of Normandy, into Pevensey on the evening of St. Michael's mass, and soon as his men were ready, they built a fortress at Hasting's port. This was told to King Harold, and he gathered then a great army and come towards them at the Hoary Apple Tree, and William came upon him unawares before his folk were ready. But the king nevertheless withstood him very strongly with fighting with those men who would follow him, and there was a great slaughter on either side. Then Harald the King was slain, and Leofwine the Earl, his brother, and Gyrth, and many good men, and the Frenchmen held the place of slaughter.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Athelred's ineptitude eventually lead to the Conquest?
2. Why was William able to make a claim on the English throne?

Suggested Reading

Loyn, Henry R. *The Norman Conquest*. 3rd ed. Hutchinson, KS: Hutchinson Educational, 1982.

Other Books of Interest

Campbell, James, Eric John, and Patrick Wormald. *The Anglo-Saxons*. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Walker, Ian W. *Harold: The Last Anglo-Saxon King*. Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2004.

Lecture 13:
From the Norman Conquest to the Reformation:
The Use of Anglo-Saxon

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Allen J. Frantzen's *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*.

William's conquest of England in 1066 was indeed a cataclysm that forever changed the country. The existing nobility were killed or exiled, Norman French was made the official language, and a new ruling family was put in place. But although students (and some scholars) often act as if 1066 changes everything, there is continuity between the Anglo-Saxon and the Anglo-Norman periods. For one thing, and this is to the credit of William, though he did some devastation of the English countryside and killed many nobles, he did not commit genocide, nor did he try to stamp out Anglo-Saxon speech or culture among the common people. They needed to learn Norman French to communicate with their rulers, but it is clear that among themselves they kept speaking Anglo-Saxon, which meant that England was in an interesting trilingual situation: Anglo-Saxon for the common people, Latin for the Church, and Norman French for the administrators, the nobility, and the law courts.

In this time, and due to the cultural shock of the Conquest, Anglo-Saxon began to change very rapidly, and by 1200 or so, it was no longer Anglo-Saxon, but what scholars call early Middle English. But this language had deep roots in Anglo-Saxon, which was being spoken a lot later than 1066. Research in the early twentieth century, and still continuing today, has shown that a form of Anglo-Saxon was still being spoken, and not merely among uneducated peasants, into the thirteenth century in the West Midlands. This was, in fact, J.R.R. Tolkien's major scholarly discovery.

There is a group of texts written in early Middle English called the Katherine Group, because they include the *Life of St. Katherine* (also, the *Life of St. Margaret*, the *Life and the Passion of St. Juliana*, *Ancrene Wisse*, and *Hali Meithhad*—these last two teaching how to be a good anchoress and arguing for the goodness of virginity). Tolkien noticed that a subtle distinction preserved in these texts indicated that Old English had continued to be spoken far longer than anyone had supposed. In Old English there is a distinction between two different kinds of verbs. One kind has an extra *i* in the ending of the third-person plural.

Here I will use the examples Tom Shippey uses in his *The Road to Middle-earth*. One kind of verb is illustrated by *he hiere*, he hears; *hie hiera*, they hear. The other kind of verb would have an extra *i* in the plural, so it would be *he loca*, he looks, but *hie locia*. This is a pretty fine distinction, and almost immediately after 1066 it was dropped from almost every other bit of Old English or early Middle English that we can find. But in the Katherine Group texts, the authors actual *build* on this old, obsolete distinction, now making a distinction between verbs like *ha þolieþ*, they endure, which comes from Old English *hie þolia*, and verbs like *ha fondi*, they inquire, which comes from Old English *hie fondia*. In other words, that intrusive *i* had had an effect on the

following vowel, which became an *e* rather than *i*. This extremely subtle change shows that Old English was being spoken in the West Midlands of England long enough for that kind of a sound change to take effect. And that means that it had hung around for much longer, because these texts were written after 1200, and possibly after 1221, making the afterlife of Old English much longer than anyone would have guessed. And the Katherine Group texts were written by educated people who knew Latin and understood some complex matters about theology. History just got a lot more complicated than the simple idea that the Norman Conquest came and Anglo-Saxon culture ended.

So Anglo-Saxon stayed alive, but the language did change, and although some people (like the famous scribe known as The Tremulous Hand of Worcester) could read Old English in the thirteenth century, it was soon difficult and soon after impossible for people to read Old English, and the texts became useless. The precious Exeter Book, for example, seems to have been used to press gold leaf and at one point had a pot of fish-based glue sitting on top of it.

We assume that many manuscripts were lost due to lack of interest—there was no reason to preserve them. Then the process of loss was greatly accelerated by Henry VIII, who was king from 1509 to 1547. Between 1536 and 1541, Henry dissolved the English monasteries and distributed their property and possessions to his supporters. And between Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, there was some dispute over what to do with the things that the Church had owned, who controlled them, and what doctrine England was going to follow. Anglo-Saxon got caught up in these disputes in various ways. For example, some of the texts that documented church lands included Anglo-Saxon boundary clauses. A boundary clause is the portion of a charter (which grants land) that describes the boundaries of the land. So, in order to find out exactly what could be confiscated from the dissolved monasteries, people had to figure out how to read and interpret the Anglo-Saxon texts.

Soon others realized that they could use Anglo-Saxon materials to help support their sides in various arguments about the Church. Anglo-Saxon could give evidence for the earlier form of the Church, which was assumed to be English. Likewise, Anglo-Saxon could provide evidence about doctrines that in the past had been more like what the powerful wanted in the sixteenth century. Sixteenth-century scholars who looked at Anglo-Saxon wanted to prove four things:

- Royal supremacy over the Church.
- Rejection of transubstantiation (that the Roman Catholic doctrine that the bread and wine actually changed in substance during communion was not something the early Church had believed).
- The Bible could be read in the vernacular.
- The original Church was “pure” (noncelibate clergy, for example).

There were two groups of people working with Anglo-Saxon to try to prove these things about the early Church. One group was made up of scholars, the other of angry propagandists. The best and greatest of the scholars were Matthew Parker and his secretary, John Joscelyn. Parker collected manuscripts from all over England, but in particular from Christchurch, Canterbury, and assembled a huge collection. He was a Protestant before

that was a good thing to be in England (even when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and created the Church of England, the king was anti-Protestant). Parker married while it was possible for clergy to do so, and this caused him some problems later on. But he was very powerful and important and used that influence among other things to build up his huge collection of over four hundred eighty manuscripts. That collection is now the foundation of the Parker Library in Cambridge and one of the three best collections of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the world (Oxford's Bodleian Library and the British Library are the other two).

Parker was particularly interested in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts for his political project to show that in the past, England had been Protestant. In particular, he was interested in the idea of an English-speaking church that was somewhat independent of Rome and had its own Apostolic succession. The works of Ælfric, for example, seemed helpful for Parker's projects, because some of Ælfric's writings on transubstantiation and the immaculate conception seemed Protestant in ideology. Likewise, Ælfric's translations of some of the Old Testament, and the translation of the Gospels into Old English, the West Saxon Gospels (possibly by someone named Ælfric, but not our Ælfric), gave Parker support for the Protestant idea that the Bible should be translated into English.

John Bale, John Foxe, and Bishop John Jewel were the angry polemicists. They wanted to use their reconstructed history of the Anglo-Saxon Church as a club to beat up on Catholic theology and the Roman Catholic church. Bale's big crackpot theory was that there were two Christian churches. One had been corrupted by the Roman Emperor Constantine and was the visible, powerful church of Rome. The other was a secret, somewhat underground Church. He believed that he belonged to the secret, pure underground Church, and that some of the Anglo-Saxons had as well. Bale took the story of Gregory and the Slaves and used it to argue that Gregory was interested in the slave boys because he, Pope Gregory the Great, was a pedophile because the Roman church forbade clerical marriage.

People did fight back against Bale, including Thomas Stapleton, who called him "a venomous spider being filthy and unclean himself," but Bale's ideas were picked up by John Foxe, who brought them to a wider audience because he translated his book, *Acts and Monuments*, from its original Latin into English in 1570. Foxe also drew on the work of Matthew Parker and published excerpts from Anglo-Saxon texts. He developed a historically inaccurate history: That there was a "true church" in England before Gregory sent Saint Augustine (Foxe did not have the Irish monks in mind here), but then Augustine made things "Romish." This is fairly standard polemic, but the bizarre part comes when Foxe asserted that Ælfric, who, remember, was writing at the end of the tenth century and died in 1010, somehow had access to the original documents (which would have somehow been written before 593 and secretly preserved but never actually used or quoted by anyone else in more than four hundred years), and that the original documents were then destroyed by Lanfranc, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury after the Norman Conquest. You almost cannot make this stuff up (although Foxe did). So Ælfric, a writer in the "true" tradition that had somehow been preserved for five hundred years underground, but then was distributed all over

England in Ælfric's sermons (about which no one in the Church seemed to object), agreed with all the things that Foxe cared about as a Protestant.

Foxe may seem like a nut, and historians did not exactly follow him, but he was in a strange way influential. The idea of Post-Conquest meddling, that somebody from the later period *must* have interfered with a good, pure, native Anglo-Saxon practice, survived on in various other guises, and therefore the Anglo-Saxon church ended up being transmuted into what later people wanted it to be. That meant, bizarrely, "not Catholic," when, as we have seen, the Anglo-Saxons, since the Synod at Whitby in the seventh century, had been very concerned to be connected to Rome and in particular to Gregory the Great.

Fortunately, as we move a little later into the Renaissance, we start to get the development of scholarly standards and approaches that were somewhat more interested in what was actually in the sources than in bending the sources one way or the other, and scholars began to be able to read Old English well enough that they could read the poetry, which up to that point had been just too difficult for them. For example, Sharon Turner, one of the early historians of Anglo-Saxon, got so bollixed up with *Beowulf* that he thought it was about pirates (though he did eventually, as Tolkien said, "learn sense" and improve his interpretations). Anglo-Saxon was also getting ready to break out from squabbles about the eucharist and priestly marriage into other areas, and the influence became wider.

The greatest scholar of the Renaissance was Francis Junius from Leiden in the Netherlands. Between 1620 and 1640 he was in England and studied old manuscripts. In 1651, Archbishop James Ussher of Armagh gave him the manuscript that is now known as Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, also known as the "Cædmonian Genesis." Junius was able to understand and edit the text, and, as I noted before, he may have given some information about the text to Milton, thus, perhaps, inspiring *Paradise Lost*. Milton himself was interested in the Anglo-Saxon period, also for political reasons. He thought that he should write an epic about England, perhaps about Athelstan or Alfred or Edward the Confessor (his notebooks also show that he was interested in Eadwig, "All-Fair," the most "beautiful" of the kings).

The Anglo-Saxon past was useful for Parker, Bale, and Foxe because they could argue that there was an old, original source for the things they wanted in the present. The Anglo-Saxon past was useful to Milton because he could search for an English greatness in the past (although he ended up writing his epic differently). We reconstruct the past to support what we want in the present. Anglo-Saxon was a vessel into which people poured their own desires.

But as we learned more and more, and as the discipline of History became more rigorous, there was less flexibility to interpret the sources in bizarre or contradictory ways. But still a mythology had begun to grow up, mostly around the laws and the ideas of the Anglo-Saxon past, that Anglo-Saxon England had been stronger, "purer," and more Protestant than what came after, and that the Conquest had interfered with English culture. This mythology was, after the Reformation and the wars of religion, transferred from religious arguments to political ones, and it came to influence people throughout the world, not only in England.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What subtle distinction in verb formation made Tolkien realize that Old English was being spoken long after the Norman Conquest of 1066?
2. How did English Protestants use the Anglo-Saxon past to support their religious and political agendas?

Suggested Reading

Frantzen, Allen J. *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Frantzen, Allen J., and John D. Niles. *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.

Graham, Timothy. *The Recovery of Old English: Anglo-Saxon Studies in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Lecture 14:
From Thomas Jefferson to Angelina Jolie:
The Long Life of Anglo-Saxon

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Allen J. Frantzen's *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*.

In the previous lecture we traced the afterlife of Anglo-Saxon England from the Conquest up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, noting that the idea of Anglo-Saxon England was very important in different ways to different people and that, when not a lot of facts were known about the Anglo-Saxon past, people were able to fill that void with whatever was convenient for their present religious endeavors. Anglo-Saxon England was also of great interest to people who were more involved in political matters as well (and of course in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, politics and religion were not at all separate). The most important and powerful Anglo-Saxonist of all time was particularly interested in the political history of the Anglo-Saxons.

That Anglo-Saxonist was Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States and drafter of the Declaration of Independence. We will spend some time on Jefferson's Anglo-Saxonism, but in some respects we need only to look at a design he proposed for the Great Seal of the United States. Jefferson thought that the front of the Seal should depict Hengest and Horsa, from whom America had "descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed," and that the back of the Seal should show "Pharaoh, sitting in an open chariot, a crown on his head and a sword in his hand, passing through the divided waters of the Red Sea in pursuit of the Israelites" who were following the pillar of fire that led them to the promised land. Around the edge of this side of the Seal was to be written: "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God."

The design for the Seal and Jefferson's words of description illustrate many of his ideas about Anglo-Saxon England. Jefferson, though he had learned the Anglo-Saxon language and had done research of his own, had still been infected just a bit by John Foxe's idea that the Norman Conquest had somehow corrupted a previously democratic and "pure" Anglo-Saxon England. Even though Jefferson knew that Anglo-Saxon England had had kings, nobles, slavery, and a strict social hierarchy, he nevertheless projected onto Hengest and Horsa (who, remember, were at least to some degree mercenaries), the kind of small-government, democratic virtue he wanted to nourish in America. Some scholars have suggested that the depiction of the Israelites and the pillar of fire on the reverse of the Seal is evidence of Jefferson's expansionist ideas for America, but I think this interpretation is mistaken, or at least mistaken in emphasis, and that this error comes from not paying enough attention to the writing that surrounds the Seal: "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God." The reverse of the Seal depicts, it seems to me, the idea that America will be protected from the "Pharaoh" of the English monarchy.

Jefferson was particularly interested in Anglo-Saxon law, which he correctly saw as the foundation of the English Common Law and thus the foundation for the laws and customs that had grown up in America. His *Treatise to Reform Virginia Law* of 1778 contains footnoted quotations from Old English laws that Jefferson hand-copied in original script.

Jefferson proposed marking off the West in ten-square-mile chunks to create "Hundreds" on the model of the Anglo-Saxon hundred, and he attributed to the Anglo-Saxons elective monarchy, trial by jury, meeting of the *witan* and common law, as though "feudalism" was a Norman imposition that destroyed an original, quasi-democratic society.

Not only Anglo-Saxon law was of interest to Jefferson, but language also. He owned a copy of the very first edition of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* in Anglo-Saxon, and many other major prose texts and grammars (the only poem he owned a copy of was *Judith*, and it is not clear he could read Old English well enough to understand it). Jefferson loved Anglo-Saxon language and tried to institute a professorship of ancient Northern languages at William and Mary. When he founded the University of Virginia, he argued that German was becoming a more important language in Europe and that Anglo-Saxon could help students learn German. Jefferson therefore placed Anglo-Saxon among the "Modern" languages, because, he thought, it could easily be learned in a few weeks (perhaps if you were as smart as Thomas Jefferson). In 1819, Jefferson added Old English into the Virginia College curriculum, making it a central part of the course of study, as a tool for training lawyers and for understanding Modern English. He loved Old English especially because it was "copious," and could create new words easily by the process of compounding:

> We may safely repeat the affirmation, therefore, that the pure Anglo-Saxon constitutes at this day the basis of our language. That it was sufficiently copious for the purposes of society in the existing condition of arts and manners, reason alone would satisfy us from the necessity of the case. Its copiousness, too, was much favored by the latitude it allowed of combining primitive words so as to produce any modification of idea desired. In this characteristic it was equal to the Greek, but it is more especially proved by the actual fact of the books they have left us in the various branches of history, geography, religion, law, and poetry." (Bergh, 1905)

Jefferson thought that America would need new words; he loved neologisms and coined many words himself (such as "electioneering"), because he believed that language would have to grow to fit a world that was growing rapidly in complexity.

> Certainly so great growing a population, spread over such an extent of country, with such a variety of climates, of production, of arts, must enlarge their language, to make it answer its purpose of expressing all ideas, the new as well as the old . . . An American dialect will therefore be formed." (Jefferson, August 15, 1813)

Jefferson had no interest in the Germanic, scientific philology that was developing in Europe, so he did not know that all Germanic languages compound

easily. He just noted that Anglo-Saxon created new compounds far more frequently than Latin. And instead of following the later tradition of seeing a conflict between words with Anglo-Saxon roots and those derived from Greek or Latin, Jefferson saw Anglo-Saxon as fundamentally similar to Greek, because once you had a word root, it was a simple matter in both Greek and Anglo-Saxon to create new words (Jefferson also thought it would be a good idea for modern Greeks to go back to speaking Ancient Greek).

Needless to say, the Greeks did not go back to speaking like Homer and Anglo-Saxon did not become very well-studied in America outside of a few universities. But the idea of the Anglo-Saxon did remain important, although it was yet again transmuted and reshaped by the interests of people in different time periods. For example, the Victorians loved the idea of Anglo-Saxon, and were particularly enamored with King Alfred, who received the title "The Great" and was also called "England's Darling." In part this interest in the Anglo-Saxons arose because Queen Victoria and her family were actually German, and so the Germanic (rather than French) background of England began to be emphasized in English culture. Also, Alfred was a perfect fit for the Victorians because he was the father of the English navy and a founder of the British Empire (though that title, perhaps, should go to Athelstan). The love of things Germanic and hence Anglo-Saxon continued until England had two wars with Germany in the twentieth century. From that point on, the Germans were configured as "Huns" and connected to barbarism, and Germanic (and hence Anglo-Saxon things) were attacked from various directions and for various reasons.

Part of the attack was derived from the struggle between international socialism (with its Russian headquarters) versus the defeated national socialism (with its German roots); part was shame at what the German National Socialists had done in World War II and their use of "Germanic" imagery and legend to support their racist, totalitarian ideology. When in the postwar period people were trying to purge the culture of Nazi elements, Anglo-Saxon, which of course was a thousand years old and had nothing to do with pseudo-scientific racism or pan-Germanic nationalism, was often purged as well.

In the United States, Anglo-Saxon fell out of favor due to the adoption by racists of the idea of a "pure Anglo-Saxon race." As we have seen from our studies, such a thing never existed in England or America (and probably did not exist in the Migration period, either). The Angles and Saxons were themselves separate peoples, and in England they mixed with Celts, Romans, Danes, and Normans centuries before anyone immigrated to America. But the adoption of the term "Anglo-Saxon" by racists enabled an attack on all things seen to be Anglo-Saxon, and in the 1950s the word "WASP," an acronym for "White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant," was adopted as a pejorative term to contrast individuals whose families had immigrated to American in the eighteenth century versus those whose families had come in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Attacks on "Anglo-Saxons" have just as little substance as the adoption of "Anglo-Saxon" as a racial term but have nevertheless been and continue to be influential. Again we see the Anglo-Saxons being used not for what they were, but for what people would like them to be.

But as memories of World War II have faded, there has been some rehabilitation of the Anglo-Saxons, in great part not for their political or religious associations, but because they were part of a "heroic age" culture that contributes significantly to the background of fantasy literature. The works of J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, have brought Anglo-Saxon to millions (even if they do not know it). Tolkien's Riders of Rohan speak Anglo-Saxon (actually, the Mercian dialect of Anglo-Saxon) and have many of the characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons (except that the Anglo-Saxons did not fight on horseback). Tolkien's description of the Rohirrim, "they are proud and wilful, but they are true-hearted, generous in thought and deed; bold but not cruel; wise but unlearned; writing no books but singing many songs, after the matter of the children of Men before the Dark Years," has thus become, at least unconsciously, a description of the Anglo-Saxons. But even here, in the hands of a great scholar of Anglo-Saxon, there are some changes from the real history, for the Anglo-Saxons did indeed write books as well as sing songs, and they were learned. But Tolkien was not writing a scholarly treatise in *The Lord of the Rings*, and he brought the sorrow and poignancy of Anglo-Saxon poetry to a mass audience:

> Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?
> Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?
> Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?
> Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?
> They have passed like rain on the mountain, like the wind in the meadow;
> The days have gone down in the West beyond the hills into shadow.
> Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning?
> Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?

These lines, from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, may seem familiar to readers well-versed in Anglo-Saxon literature. They are a rather loose adaptation of the famous *ubi sunt* passage from the Old English poem "The Wanderer":

> **Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?**
> **Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?**
> **Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!**
> **Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat,**
> **genap under nihthelm, swa heo no wære.**
>
> **(Where is the horse? Where is the rider? Where is the giver**
> **of treasure?**
> **Where is the seat of the feast? Where are the joys of the hall?**
> **Alas, the bright cup! Alas, the mailed warrior!**
> **Alas, the might of the prince! How the time has departed,**
> **grown dark under the night-helm, as if it had never been.)**

Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films take the Anglo-Saxonification of the Rohirrim one step further and dress them in Anglo-Saxon armor and replicas of the helmet found in the excavated ship at Sutton Hoo (the helmet is Anglo-Saxon from the seventh century). Now the Rohirrim *look* Anglo-Saxon (or, more likely, people who have seen *The Lord of the Rings* films and then

see actual Anglo-Saxon artifacts will find them familiar). And popular actress Angelina Jolie even played in a movie of *Beowulf*, though perhaps the author of that poem never anticipated Grendel's mother looking like her. The Anglo-Saxons, it seems, have become interesting, even trendy, in the new millennium, loved for their bravery and prowess in battle, however, rather than for their religiosity, politics, or learning.

Who were the Anglo-Saxons? This course has shown us that they were a complex people with a fascinating history and culture. They were one of the tribes around the North Sea, on the edge of an empire, the survivors of a fall, alternately blessed and punished, Germanic warriors and pious monks, literary geniuses with darkness and fear and violence inside. They were our cultural and linguistic ancestors, but incredibly different from us. They are what we admire and what we fear. They are interesting simply because they were human beings, but also because our language and our culture, though wildly different, came from them. If you speak English today, you own the Anglo-Saxons in a sense, and since they are invoked so much, it is better to know, as best we can, what they were really like. There is much to praise and much to blame, because, like us, they were human beings in a complex world. I will conclude this book with a quote from the Venerable Bede, who provides a metaphor about Christian life, but which can also be interpreted to be about the Anglo-Saxons:

> The present life of man . . . seems . . . in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter amid your officers and ministers, with a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow . . . flying at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather he immediately vanishes out of your sight into the dark winter from which he has emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before or of what is to follow we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.

So too what we know of the real history of the Anglo-Saxons is a quick passage through a bright hall, with all the rest dark and cold and lost, but through our scholarly efforts, we can at least hope to see clearly what is in that hall, and perhaps peer out through the door just a bit and see what might be illuminated in the darkness. And then, as King Alfred said, we will know a little more of

> Þa ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne.
>
> Those things that are most needful for all people to know.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture were of greatest interest to Thomas Jefferson?
2. How has the "image" of the Anglo-Saxons changed from pre-World War II to the postwar period to the present?

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