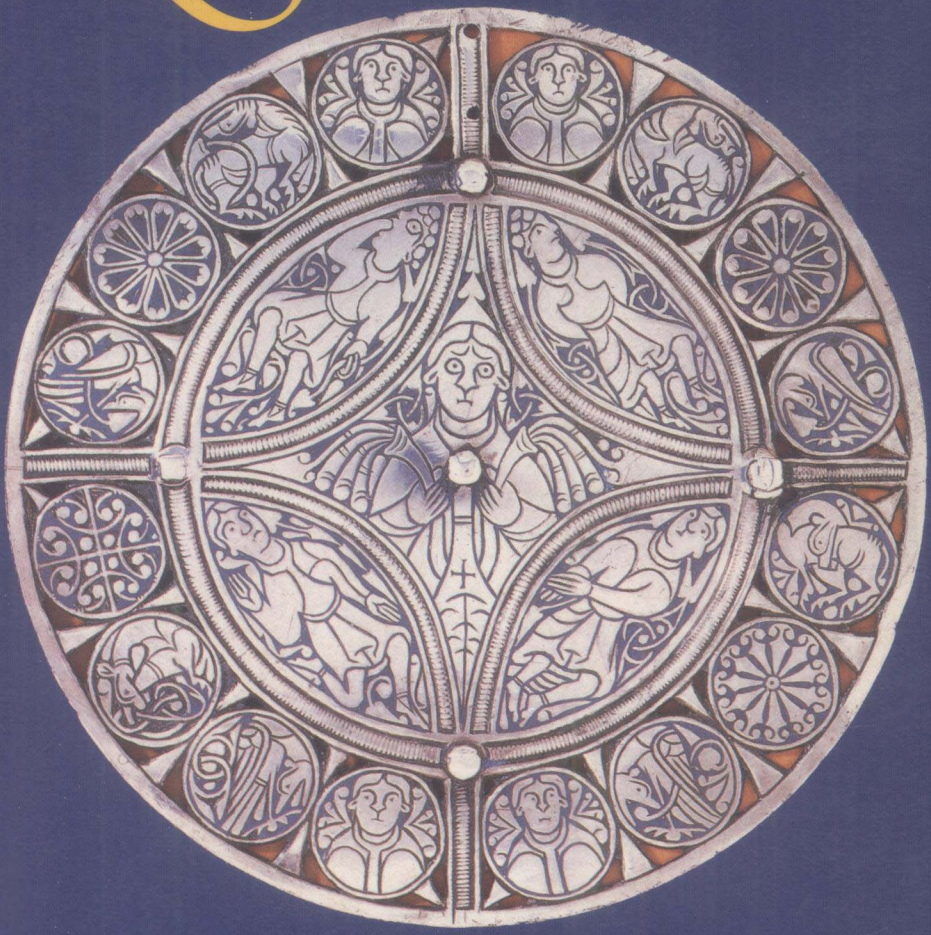
The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature



Edited by

MALCOLM GODDEN AND MICHAEL LAPIDGE

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Preface

ON 26 November 1882 Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote to his fellow-poet and friend Robert Bridges: 'I am learning Anglo-Saxon and it is a vastly superior thing to what we have now.' W. H. Auden too was inspired by his first experience of Old English literature: 'I was spellbound. This poetry, I knew, was going to be my dish . . . I learned enough to read it, and Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences.' The list of modern poets who have been influenced by Old English literature (that term is now generally preferred to 'Anglo-Saxon' when referring to the language and vernacular writings of pre-Conquest England) could be extended to include Pound, Graves, Wilbur and many others. One does not have to agree with Hopkins's belief in the superiority of Old English as a medium for poetry to accept the importance of the writings of the Anglo-Saxons for an understanding of the cultural roots of the English-speaking world. The practice of looking back to their writings and their social organization in order to comprehend the present has continued ever since the sixteenth century, when the Elizabethans turned to them in support of their religious and political polemic.

It scarcely needs emphasizing that literature is the record of a particular culture; what Old English literature offers us is not only a mode of poetic expression which startled Hopkins and Auden but a window into a different world of beliefs, myths, anxieties, perspectives. The Anglo-Saxons were at the meeting-point of two major cultural traditions. From their barbarian origins, continually enriched by renewed contact with Scandinavian invaders and continental trade and political relations, they brought a Germanic inheritance of legend, poetic technique, law, pagan beliefs and tribal sympathies. From their contact with the representatives and books of Christianity, they absorbed much of the Latin, and a little of the Greek, tradition of history, religion, science and rhetoric. They were also at a chronological meeting-place. Late Anglo-Saxon England was a sophisticated and advanced country in politics, economic organization and vernacular literature; her peoples looked back, sometimes critically, often nostalgically, to a past when they were barbarians and Rome was

dominant. Looking forward, they saw themselves approaching a time of crisis, the imminent end of the world that they knew, and as that anticipated end drew near, they were increasingly inclined to see the Viking raids as signs of apocalypse. Their writings reflect at times the nostalgic brooding on the past, at times the excitement of newly acquired knowledge or the sophisticated possibilities of writing, and at times the urgency of a period of crisis.

In choosing the subjects to be considered in this book, we have been particularly concerned to show the range of writing in Old English and the ways in which that writing draws on the cultural and social preoccupations of the time. The small group of poems which have come to be recognized as the heart of the literary canon are discussed fairly extensively in the relevant chapters: *The Dream of the Rood* in ch. 13, *The Battle of Maldon* in ch. 6, the so-called elegies including *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* in ch. 10, and *Beowulf* has a chapter to itself (ch. 8). The collection aims to provide orientation and guidance for those approaching the study of Old English literature for the first time. The contributors have thus been asked by the editors to emphasize established understandings rather than new and more speculative ideas; but, perhaps fortunately, not all have followed the editors' request, and some indication of the many areas of uncertainty, the problems still to be resolved or the traditional views that need to be challenged will emerge, we hope, from the book as a whole.

MALCOLM GODDEN
MICHAEL LAPIDGE

June 1990

Note on the text

Old English poetry, including *Beowulf*, is quoted throughout from ASPR. Prose texts are quoted from the relevant standard editions, and are signalled by editor's name (e.g. *Pastoral Care*, ed. Sweet, p. 10); full bibliographical details of the editions in question are to be found in 'Further reading', below, pp. 282–91.

Abbreviations

ASE *Anglo-Saxon England*

ASPR The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York, 1931–42)

EETS Early English Text Society

EHD *English Historical Documents, I: c. 500–1042*, ed. D. Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London, 1979); cited by page number

HE Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* or *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969); also trans. L. Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1955)

Chronological table of the Anglo-Saxon period

from *c.* 400	Germanic peoples settle in Britain
c. 540	Gildas in *De excidio Britanniae* laments the effects of the Germanic settlements on the supine Britons
597	St Augustine arrives in Kent to convert the English
616	death of Æthelberht, king of Kent
c. 625	ship-burial at Sutton Hoo (mound 1)
633	death of Edwin, king of Northumbria
635	Bishop Aidan established in Lindisfarne
642	death of Oswald, king of Northumbria
664	Synod of Whitby
669	Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian arrive in Canterbury
674	monastery of Monkwearmouth founded
682	monastery of Jarrow founded
687	death of St Cuthbert
689	death of Cædwalla, king of Wessex
690	death of Archbishop Theodore
c. 700	'Lindisfarne Gospels' written and decorated
709	deaths of Bishops Wilfrid and Aldhelm
716–57	Æthelbald king of Mercia
731	Bede completes his *Ecclesiastical History*
735	death of Bede
754	death of St Boniface, Anglo-Saxon missionary in Germany
757–96	Offa king of Mercia
781	Alcuin of York meets Charlemagne in Parma and thereafter leaves York for the Continent
793	Vikings attack Lindisfarne
802–39	Ecgberht king of Wessex
804	death of Alcuin
839–56	Æthelwulf king of Wessex
869	Vikings defeat and kill Edmund, king of East Anglia
871–99	Alfred the Great king of Wessex

878	Alfred defeats the Viking army at the battle of Edington, and the Vikings settle in East Anglia (879–80)
899–924	Edward the Elder king of Wessex
924–39	Athelstan king of Wessex and first king of all England
937	battle of *Brunanburh*: Athelstan defeats an alliance of Scots and Scandinavians
957–75	Edgar king of England
959–88	Dunstan archbishop at Canterbury
963–84	Æthelwold bishop at Winchester
964	secular clerics expelled from the Old Minster, Winchester, and replaced by monks
971–92	Oswald archbishop at York
973	King Edgar crowned at Bath
978–1016	Æthelred 'the Unready' king of England
985–7	Abbo of Fleury at Ramsey
991	battle of Maldon: the Vikings defeat an English army led by Byrhtnoth
c. 1010	death of Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham
1011	Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*
1013	the English submit to Swein, king of Denmark
1016–35	Cnut king of England
1023	death of Wulfstan, archbishop of York
1042–66	Edward the Confessor king of England
1066	battle of Hastings: the English army led by Harold is defeated by the Norman army led by William the Conqueror

Contents

1 Anglo-Saxon society and its literature

THE country in which this book was conceived, and the literary language in which it is written, are both more than a thousand years old. The 'kingdom of England' was created by Anglo-Saxon politicians, soldiers and churchmen in the ninth and tenth centuries. They and their subjects have left us a significant literature in their own language. Readers may be tempted to take both facts for granted. Yet each is not only exceptional but also extraordinary. No other European state has existed within approximately its modern boundaries for anything like so long. Few other current European literatures have specimens anything like so old. France, Spain and Italy reached roughly today's political shape before England, Germany at much the same time. But all were to be broken up by external conquest or internal collapse. Their 'resurrection' belongs to later-medieval, early-modern or nineteenth-century history. England itself, notoriously, was overrun by the Normans in 1066, but it did not break up. Among sub-Roman successor-states, at least one other had a vernacular literature for a time. The great Frankish king and western emperor, Charlemagne (768–814), had a collection made of 'barbarian and most ancient songs, in which . . . wars of kings of old were sung'. Little or none of it is extant. What does survive on the Continent is, by English standards, limited in quantity and restricted in theme. Literary vernaculars, whether Romance or Germanic, Icelandic or Provençal, flowered only from the twelfth century. Conditions in England after its conquest by French-speakers were in no way conducive to the preservation of native literature. The fact that relatively so much survives is probably because relatively more was written. The first priority of a historical introduction to Old English literature must be to describe the politically precocious society from which it emerged. But a second, hardly less pressing priority, is to explain how it came to be.[1]

Most textbooks on Anglo-Saxon England treat its long history, from the fifth to the eleventh century, as one period. It ought to be divided into two (at least). The best of many reasons is that a single kingdom of England came to exist only after, and up to a point as a result of, the Viking invasions in the ninth century. Even to think of England as a unit

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have left just one monster in the pond. East Anglia and Kent regained independence when Offa died. Both were again engulfed by his successor, but East Anglia had its own kings once more for the forty years before its conquest by the Vikings in 869.

Historians have nonetheless been encouraged to see a foreshadowed unity in a famous passage of Bede's *History*. He says that all kingdoms south of the Humber submitted periodically to the 'empire' (*imperium*) of one ruler (*HE* II.5). For much of the seventh century, when the alleged overlord was one of the three Northumbrian kings, Edwin (617–33), Oswald (634–42) and Oswiu (642–70), this 'empire' would have dominated most of England, and some of Scotland and Wales. Documentary evidence shows that the status was claimed by the Mercian king, Æthelbald (716–57). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a source compiled in Wessex in the reign of King Alfred (871–99), enrols his grandfather, Ecgberht (802–39), in the series. Both sources imply that those who held this status were hailed as rulers of Britain (Latin: *rex Britanniae*, OE: *Bretwalda*). Yet it is equally clear that, whatever the origins or meaning of such overlordship, it was resented and resisted by subject peoples. The bones of Oswald, whom Bede saw as a saint, were at first denied burial in a monastery of the kingdom of Lindsey (Lincolnshire), because its people 'pursued him even when dead with their ancient hatred, since he had once conquered them' (*HE* III.11). There was no foundation here for an emerging sense of common identity.

The fragmentation of *Britannia* relates in an important way to the emergence of a literary vernacular. The Anglo-Saxon settlements were only one of many 'Barbarian Invasions' of the Roman Empire. Elsewhere, there was surprisingly little violence, and notably few signs of antipathy to *Romanitas*, or Roman civilization. 'Barbarian' culture in fact succumbed to the indigenous cultures of the West, as witnessed by the rapid conversion of most barbarians to Christianity, and their ultimate adoption of Romance speech. Decisive in this respect was the survival of a provincial aristocracy, in government service and more obviously in the church, that was prepared to accommodate its new masters. This provincial aristocracy's collective memory of Roman arrangements was a crucial reason why Gaul, Spain and Italy became unitary kingdoms soon after the empire's fall. But in Britain, the Celtic aristocracy lost what Latin veneer it once had: Welsh, unlike French, is not a Romance language, but a Celtic one. The largely retrospective traditions of both the native Britons and the Anglo-Saxons bespoke intense mutual hostility. They are borne out by the paucity of Celtic loanwords in English. Bede was sure that Britons had done nothing to convert his people. Christianity, undeniably, made much less progress in the sixth century among Anglo-Saxons than elsewhere. Vigorous competition for Britain between the military aristocracies of

Celt and Saxon destroyed the *Romanitas* that each might otherwise have absorbed. The balkanization of *Britannia* was a function of the degree of discontinuity between its Roman and post-Roman experience. By the same token, however, Germanic culture in Britain was spared the sort of pressure that today induces ex-colonies, however proud of their own traditions, to write European poetry, wear European suits, erect European buildings and aspire to European constitutions. Liturgical books on the Continent were decorated with designs from the Romano-Christian repertoire, as probably encountered on the wall-hangings of churches and the vestments of churchmen. When gospelbooks appear in England (most famously, the Lindisfarne Gospels of *c.* 700), their decoration reproduces the motifs hitherto used by smiths to adorn the weapons and jewellery of a warrior elite. It is a useful metaphor of what happened to literary language. The Laws of Æthelberht of Kent (d. 616) and the Frankish law code, the *Lex Salica*, both date from the immediate post-conversion period. Each is almost wholly 'Germanic' in content. But *Lex Salica* is in Latin whereas Æthelberht's laws are in English. Barbarian culture on the Continent was suffocated by the civilization it tried to emulate. In Britain it had room to breathe.

As told by Bede, the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was a tale of two missions.[3] One was led from Rome by Gregory's disciple, Augustine. It was at first effective with Æthelberht of Kent (*HE* I.25–6), with other south-eastern kings and also with Edwin of Northumbria (*HE* II.9–14). But when its royal patrons died (or were killed, like Edwin), it nearly lost its base at Canterbury and became quiescent. The initiative passed to Iona, the abbey founded by the Irish prince Columba (d. 597). Oswald, Edwin's Northumbrian successor, had been baptized when exiled among the Irish, who had adopted Christianity in the fifth century. To re-establish Christianity among his people, he invited missionaries from Iona, and Aidan founded the abbey and bishopric of Lindisfarne in 635 (*HE* III.2–6). Partly because of the political power wielded by Oswald and Oswiu, the Irish mission made a more pronounced impact than the Roman. Its converts included lapsed kingdoms like Northumbria, and those like Mercia as yet pagan. And whereas those evangelized by other missions invariably lapsed at least once, apostasy was almost unknown among the disciples of Irishmen. However, Roman and Irish churchmen differed on several issues, above all the way to calculate the date of the movable feast of Easter. At the Synod of Whitby (664), the matter was decided in favour of Roman methods (*HE* III.25–6). Some Irishmen based at Lindisfarne withdrew. The way lay clear for organization of the English church by Archbishop Theodore (669–90), the papal nominee for Canterbury (*HE* IV.1–3).

In reading Bede's compelling account of the origin of the English

church, we must remember that he is not only an excellent source but also a superb historian who, like any other master of the craft, used his own perspective and intelligence to give events a pattern. That pattern has certain idiosyncrasies, and needs modification from other viewpoints. Thus, Bede was an expert on Christian chronology in general, and Easter reckoning in particular. He very probably gave the Easter controversy more significance for contemporaries than it really had. This left an impression of conflict between 'Roman' and 'Celtic' churches that was of course amplified by the confessional bias of later ages, and which is quite false: the Irishmen who were Aidan's counterparts on the Continent showed unusual devotion to Rome. Again, Bede was a Northumbrian. He might be expected to place special emphasis on Iona's mission. He was also a monk from the twin monasteries of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, which had been founded by Benedict Biscop (d. 690). Biscop had escorted Theodore from Rome, had been briefly abbot at Canterbury, and had used contacts made on his continental travels to build monasteries 'in Roman style' (Bede's proud claim has been fully borne out by site excavation of, among much else, window-glass unparalleled at that time in quantity and quality). Thus, it may also be anticipated that Bede would put still more stress on Rome. Yet his own work implies a key role for Frankish Gaul in the conversion of East Anglia and Wessex (*HE* II.15, III.7 and 18–19), while Biscop's glaziers and masons, as well as some of his books, came from Gaul. The likelihood is that Christianity's advent among the Anglo-Saxons was altogether less neat than pre-supposed by Bede's pattern or any other. Early English Christian culture was startlingly eclectic. Its liturgy and art reveal a range of influences extending beyond Rome, Ireland and Gaul to the Levant, southern Italy, North Africa, Spain and Pictland.[4]

Equally striking is the sheer depth of religious scholarship in parts of the early English church. The Monkwearmouth/Jarrow library collected on Biscop's European travels enabled Bede to read almost all there was to read of the Christian learning of Latin late Antiquity (he also knew some Greek). His experience was not unique. His older West Saxon contemporary, Aldhelm (d. 709), was hardly less learned. Later, the Northumbrian Alcuin (d. 804) described journeys by his own teacher, and listed the books available to York that made him a scholar sought out by Charlemagne himself. Yet if not unique, it must again be stressed that Bede was not typical. Welcome as is the modern quest for *recherché* learning in Anglo-Saxon religious poetry, few monastic libraries can have been as rich as Monkwearmouth/Jarrow's. Bede excused his scissors-and-paste approach to scriptural commentary precisely on the grounds that the major Church Fathers were beyond the material, and indeed intellectual, means of his fellow-countrymen.[5]

Another feature of Bede's account of Anglo-Saxon conversion that raises doubts is the impression given of its smooth, almost automatic, progress. He notes, typically, 'At this time, the [. . .] people received the Faith from the holy Bishop [. . .] under the rule of King [. . .].' Bede wrote with an urgent didactic purpose. A letter of the last year of his life shows that he was seriously worried by the state of the church. He aimed to recall contemporaries to the example of their Christian evangelists. It was no part of his plan to describe the paganism from which they had been rescued. There is thus a temptation to quarry the evidence for traces of 'pagan survival'. But it is much better to stress how very scarce they are (cf. below, pp. 126–41). Compared to Irish, still more to Norse, literature, the Anglo-Saxon corpus is without clear evidence of pagan belief (just as early Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture has a resolutely Romano-Christian iconography, where later Viking crosses are unashamedly syncretist). Archaeology shows pagan cemeteries and burial customs being replaced during the seventh and eighth centuries by near-unfurnished inhumation, first in east-west rows, then in churchyards. Religious change *en masse* is as difficult a thing as historians ever have to explain. No progress is made by denying that there was any real change at all.

All the same, it is reasonable, assessing the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, to reckon with what was not lost, as well as with what was gained. Inasmuch as Bede does offer a solution, he hints at the appeal of a system of consolation to a world far from sure of its destiny after death. His famous story of the debate on conversion held at Edwin's court has a nobleman compare human life with a sparrow's flight through a warm and well-lit hall in the depths of winter, where king and warriors feast, like those in the heroic poem, *Beowulf*: 'what follows or what went before, we do not know at all; if this new doctrine brings any more certainty, it seems right to follow it' (*HE* II.13). The story has an interesting echo in the *Life of St Guthlac*: this late seventh-century Mercian prince left a warrior's life of rapine for a hermit's spiritual warfare, after contemplating 'the miserable deaths . . . of the ancient kings of his line'.[6] That 'the wages of heroism is death' was just the impression that *Beowulf* itself made on J. R. R. Tolkien. Bede, by contrast, stressed the immortal fame won by Oswald as a Christian martyr (*HE* III.9–13), when his victorious reign ended in defeat and brutal dismemberment by the pagan Penda in 642. Positive considerations apart, the Church had by 597 acquired some expertise in mission techniques. As is well known, Gregory proposed the conversion of pagan shrines into churches (a policy adopted by his papal relative in Rome itself a century before), and that Christian feasts coincide with pagan festivals, as Christmas had been fixed at the Roman Winter Solstice on 25th December (*HE* I.30). Another old move put to new use in England was to accept that pagan gods existed, but to assert that they