

The Impact of the Norman Conquest

When did the systematic study of Anglo-Saxon England begin? ‘In the sixteenth century’ is the customary answer,¹ for at that time textual records preserved in the Old English language began to be disseminated and to be read again after centuries of almost total neglect. Beyond any doubt, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the starting point for Anglo-Saxon studies as a discipline, founded on the model of classical Greek and Latin studies and developing side by side with research into the other languages and literatures of medieval and modern Europe.

In a less organised way, however, the study of Anglo-Saxon England began much earlier, during the period of consolidation and renewal that ensued after the trauma of the Norman Conquest of 1066. As an aspect of social memory, England before the Conquest continued to have an impact on historical consciousness throughout the Middle Ages. The afterlife of Anglo-Saxon England during the medieval period therefore deserves attention too, and this will be the focus of the present chapter.

A strong argument can be made, moreover, that even before the Conquest, English authors and poets working with various degrees of royal patronage had been taking steps to construct a sense of national identity through self-reflexive reference to an ancestral past. In this sense, ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ is a phenomenon that began with the Anglo-Saxons themselves,² and so that is where I will take up the story first.

Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxonism

The court of King Alfred the Great (r. 871–899) and his immediate successors in the West Saxon royal line is a natural place to look for the initial workings of Anglo-Saxonism, given the unprecedented number and variety of vernacular writings produced in that milieu.³ Clearly the West Saxons cultivated a species of ‘creative historiography’ at this time, one that suited their political purposes, whether or not it was a product of self-conscious design. When, for example, Bede’s Latin *Historia ecclesiastica* was translated into Old English in the late ninth or early tenth century (more than a century and a half after Bede finished writing that work in AD 731), this primary source for the early history of the English people was made subject to subtle but purposeful changes, as the historian Sarah Foot and the literary scholar Nicole Discenza have pointed out from different perspectives.⁴ Although Bede incorporates into his text a number of Latin documentary sources such as papal letters, whoever translated this work into Old English tends either to omit these documents or to offer a mere précis of their contents. The effect of such changes is that the translation ‘dramatically recentres the text’, in Discenza’s words (2002: 77). Bede himself, a native of Britain, becomes the primary authority for the truth of his history, just as the native language of the English people supplants the Latin tongue. In general, Bede’s history is rewritten in accord with a shift of authority from Rome to Britain; it ‘supports the same sense of English history, and English pride,’ that infuses the other translations associated with the court of King Alfred the Great (Discenza 2002: 80).

Something similar, and yet even more striking, occurred at about this same time when the other great contemporary history of Anglo-Saxon England, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, was written out in the vernacular language in its earliest recension, very possibly with the sponsorship of King Alfred. As the palaeographer and librarian Malcolm Parkes has shown, the codex in which this recension of the Chronicle has a prominent place (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173) embodies an even more pronounced West Saxon bias than does the Old English Bede.⁵ This version of English history, which is variously known as the Parker Chronicle, the Winchester Chronicle, or simply the A version of the Chronicle, was written out up to the year 891 by a single scribe working in Winchester, the West Saxon capital. Certain early annals of the Parker Chronicle draw on Bede’s history while retelling the story of the myth of migration (as it is often called today) whereby English-speaking tribes whose homeland was on the Continent emigrated to Britain under the leadership of two chieftains named Hengest and Horsa, winning control

of the land in a series of pitched battles waged against the native Britons.⁶ The most substantial and detailed body of entries in the Parker Chronicle, however, tell of much later events than these: namely, the heroic deeds of King Alfred himself during the years 877–96, when he and his West Saxon forces fought off a Viking army that had been pillaging and conquering much of Britain. When Bede's history was translated into the vernacular, it was thus conjoined with a newer set of historical writings centred on the person and deeds of King Alfred. The result was a continuous mythistory of the English people, one that reached back over a period of five hundred years to a time of continental origins.

Nor is this quite all. The inclusion of a copy of King Alfred's code of laws in this very same codex is by no means fortuitous. On the contrary, this ensemble of texts implies that when Alfred preserved the kingdom of the West Saxons by fighting off the Danes and making peace with them through a legal treaty,⁷ he also re-established the laws of his kingdom in a definitive manner, integrating customary features of Germanic tribal law (such as provisions pertaining to wergild) into a historical frame of reference anchored in the Jewish and Christian traditions, one that was meant to last. The specialist in legal history Mary P. Richards has emphasised this point, remarking that 'there is no question that Alfred's royal successors perceived his laws as definitive for England'. Richards calls attention to 'the self-conscious Anglo-Saxonism embodied in Alfred's selection of the laws, the celebration of his predecessors, and the relation of lawgiving to its religious context' that are confirmed in CCC MS 173 (Richards 1997: 49).

Nor is *this* quite all. Richards's reference to Alfred's 'celebration of his predecessors' alludes to the strategic presence of two impressive royal genealogies in that same codex, each of which traces the kings of the West Saxon royal line (and hence of the English people) back to a founding figure named Cerdic, who is said to have landed in the south of England in the year 495 and to have won the kingdom of the West Saxons from the native Britons. In the first of these genealogies, which is included in the book's prefatory material, the lineage of the founding figure Cerdic is traced back to the shadowy ancestral figures 'Brand, the son of Bældæg, the son of Woden'. In the second of them, which is included in the annal for the year 855,⁸ this same lineage is extended all the way back to Noah and to the first man, Adam. King Alfred and his sons in the West Saxon royal line are thus ascribed a genealogy that in its length and complexity could rival, if not trump, that of any other European monarch of this time. Since CCC MS 173 starts off with one of these genealogies, what the first three items in the codex, taken together, consist of is 'the genealogy, the deeds, and the laws of the house of Wessex'.

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The gist of these remarks is that the tenth-century creation of a politically united kingdom of England required the creation of the *idea* of Anglo-Saxon England, as well. This could only have been done in a definitive way through acts of writing such as we see in CCC MS 173.

While the idea of Anglo-Saxon England has always been a complex one that resists exact definition, by the end of the ninth century the following elements can already be seen to pertain to its core:

- The English were a martial people whose tribal origins could be traced to a northern continental homeland, and who had won control of southern Britain through invasion and military conquest.
- The English had subsequently been converted to the Christian faith through the beneficent efforts of Roman missionaries,⁹ so that holy men and women had lived and preached among them, as Bede relates.
- Their kings and princes were descended from the renowned ancestral figure Woden, in a lineage that extended yet farther back till it converged with the biblical past.
- They had defended their land against Viking depredations through the inspirational leadership of King Alfred of Wessex, from whom the devout kings of a united Christian England were descended.
- They were a people who lived by the rule of law: customary Saxon law, as harmonised with both the law of Moses and Christian teachings.

These, drawn in broad strokes, are the essentials of the complex idea that provided the intellectual foundations for a united kingdom of England. The idea turned out to be a strong and appealing one, so that (leaving Woden and Noah aside) it became accepted far and wide in the modern era. During the years following the Conquest, too, the idea was accepted for a while in some circles, even though it would fall into near-oblivion by the later Middle Ages.

The idea of Anglo-Saxon England whose contours have just been outlined is a radically selective one, of course. It has little use, for example, for peaceful continuities bridging the transition between the Roman period and the period of Anglo-Saxon hegemony; or for contributions made by the ancient British church or by Irish-speaking missionaries to the progress of Christianity in Britain; or for Frankish influence on the early kingdom of Kent and neighbouring regions; or for the greatness of King Offa's Mercia in any way, shape, or form; or for the presence in Britain of Scandinavians who were peaceful traders and farmers (as opposed to being rapacious raiders), and so forth. Women have almost no place in the idea, as might be expected given how strongly masculinist the thinkers of former

centuries were in their assumptions. If the idea of Anglo-Saxon England is therefore based on what might be termed ‘social forgetting’ as well as ‘social memory’, it is probably no different from any other myth of origins.

King Alfred’s England is thus a suitable starting point for investigations into ‘Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxonism’, but still only a starting point. Towards the end of the first millennium AD, as well, the workings of Anglo-Saxonism can be seen in a number of documents that are datable to that time. One of the more interesting of these is a translation into Latin, completed in the late tenth century by an ealdorman named Æthelweard, of a now-lost version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Ealdorman Æthelweard traced his ancestry as far back in the West Saxon royal line as King Alfred’s father, King Æthelwulf. The fact that a vernacular work like the Chronicle was reworked into Latin at this time – and reworked by a layman, no less – is significant, for it suggests that educated persons in the realm were now wanting to ‘write England’ for a potentially wide readership both in England and on the Continent, rather than for an insular audience alone. Naturally, the English past is spruced up for the occasion. In particular, the figure of King Alfred is magnified so as to make him a man for the ages. In Æthelweard’s words, Alfred was a ‘magnanimous king of the Saxons, unshakable pillar of the people of the west, a man replete with justice, active in warfare, learned in speech, steeped in sacred precepts above all things’ (A. Campbell 1962: 50, my translation). Æthelweard’s chronicle thus stands as an important contribution to the incipient cult of King Alfred – a cult that was to grow great in the course of time, becoming arguably the core element in the idea of Anglo-Saxon England itself.¹⁰

Anglo-Saxon laws, charters, homilies, and saints’ lives, too, were subject to a process of sifting and rewriting during this same period. When for example the great Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric of Eynsham (ca. 950–ca. 1010), who happened to enjoy the patronage of that same Ealdorman Æthelweard, translated a number of earlier Latin saints’ lives into a loose form of English alliterative verse, he did so in a manner that suited English identity-formation at about the end of the first millennium. When Ælfric composed an English version of the Latin life of St Edmund, king and martyr, for example, he reshaped that narrative so as to highlight the cruelty of Viking marauders and the sanctity of the king himself. This story pertaining to the *first* Viking age of the late ninth century was written for its inspirational value amidst the chaos of the *second* Viking age of the late tenth century. It promoted the idea of the English as a people who had always been favoured by God’s mercies even while suffering tribulation, as long as their piety remained intact. Although Ælfric’s purpose in this

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reworking of the past was primarily devotional rather than political, his life of St Edmund can be viewed as an exercise in Anglo-Saxonism.¹¹ Interestingly, the processes of English identity-formation can also be seen in the orthography of charters, or land grants, that were written at about this same time. As the historian Julia Crick has pointed out, tenth-century English scribes sometimes wrote out charters in a script that was visually imitative of a more archaic style of writing, thus demonstrating their interest in creating a usable insular past, even if a forged one (Crick 2010).

When the Normans conquered England and settled that land in significant numbers, then, they were dealing with an indigenous people who had already developed a strong sense of their own national and regional identities, having done so in part through their institutional structures and in part through a myth of origins that promoted the shaping of history into ideologically significant forms. As the historian Hugh M. Thomas has written (2003: 20, 31):

Englishness was well in place before the Norman Conquest. ... English identity did not exist from the dawn of time but was forged during the Anglo-Saxon period by a combination of ideas, cultural traits, and historical events. By 1066 English identity, supported by a prestigious origin story and powerful institutions such as the royal government, the English church, and many saints' cults, was very strong indeed.

This firm sense of national identity that was cultivated by the people of pre-Conquest England was made possible through their reworkings of the past, in a process that was enabled by their literacy in both Latin and the vernacular. Their confidence in their twofold modes of literacy is perhaps the chief reason why, during the decades and centuries after 1066, the descendants of those people maintained their sense of 'Englishness' rather than being absorbed into the ethnicity of the colonisers. The same factor goes far to explain why their language survived over that hiatus, to the point that English is now spoken widely on every inhabited continent of the world, whether as a first language or as one of secondary acquisition.

Norman Anglo-Saxonism

Soon after William the Conqueror took possession of England, the Normans undertook systematic surveys of the land and its resources, including both tangible wealth and less tangible cultural property. Without too great a strain being put on the meaning of that term, the great Domesday Book census of

1086, for example, might almost be called a kind of ‘Anglo-Saxon study’ undertaken by new members of England’s ruling class – those who were French-speaking overlords – so as to ascertain just what lands and revenues they had won on the English side of the Channel. Analogous efforts were made to ascertain, through the copying and writing of charters, the estates from which the church was entitled to claim revenues, together with knowledge of the precise boundaries of those properties. An equally important task was to ascertain who the saints of Anglo-Saxon England were, how legitimate the cults of those saints were from a European perspective, and where their shrines and relics were housed (J. Campbell 1986: 219). These too, though with a slight strain on the term, could perhaps be called a species of scarcely disinterested ‘Anglo-Saxon studies’. Their aim was to ensure a general perception that Norman possession of the land of Britain and its wealth was legitimate in every respect, while all taxes went into the proper coffers.

In addition, some Normans began to learn English so as to facilitate their rule in this new land, much as all native English-speakers who had hopes of upward mobility needed to learn to speak French. The task of learning to converse in English was an on-going ‘Anglo-Saxon study’ for French-speaking people of rank. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that *a few* of the immigrants learned to speak English. Many of them, still tied to their continental homelands, may have been content to see their English-born children and grandchildren make progress in such matters. We will see examples, later in this chapter, of some ‘star pupils’ of this kind.

When the people of Anglo-Norman England looked back to that part of insular history between the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the year 1066 – that is to say, to the time of Saxon dominance – they cultivated an image of that period that was quite original in some ways. Overall it was not an unsympathetic image, and it included some colourful pseudo-historical anecdotes. It was also an image that was amenable to a new myth of national origins. This myth celebrated the Norman and Angevin kings of England as the legitimate successors of Edward the Confessor – a king who was revered as, in a sense, the first Norman king of England, thanks to his mother’s Norman ethnicity and his own upbringing in Normandy. The myth likewise honoured the people of Britain as a whole, extending far back into the past. It tended to belittle the Saxons, however, diminishing their achievements even to the point of characterising them as having been a set of intruders on the land. The same kingdom that had been forged by King Alfred’s descendants in the West Saxon royal line, according to the Anglo-Saxons’ own story of origins, was thereby redefined as an ancient, multi-ethnic, multilingual land that was now ruled in rightful and providential fashion by a French-speaking upper class.

If we leap forward in time to consider this same kingdom in the form that it took at the end of the Middle Ages, ‘the English people’ and ‘the English nation’ had thus come to be far more encompassing concepts than they had been before 1066, while to be King of England, at the head of a ruling class that took pride in its Anglo-French heritage, was a grand thing indeed. One oddity about this situation was that the people who inhabited England during that later period had very little reliable knowledge about the Anglo-Saxon past. As for the Old English language, by the time that Chaucer was writing his major works in the late decades of the fourteenth century virtually no one could read it, for it had been superseded by the hybrid forms of English that had evolved by then in one regional dialect or another. Particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the island of Britain, these dialects involved Scandinavian linguistic features as well as French ones. While manuscripts written in the Old English language were still shelved in monastic and cathedral libraries, their script had become so archaic and their vocabulary and grammar so arcane that for the most part, by this time, these books were literally unreadable. Relics of that kind had no perceived relevance to the dynamic England that was coming into existence at the beginning of the Tudor era.

English Ethnicity in 1066 and Beyond

In order to understand the impact of the Conquest on the English and their sense of national identity, however, we should first ask: How did the English conceive of themselves as a people by the year 1066?

This question does not admit of simple answers. To begin with, no one who lived in England shortly before the Conquest would have thought of themselves as ‘Anglo-Saxon’, a hybrid term that has only gained currency during the modern era.¹² Instead, they were the people of *Angel-peod* ‘the English nation’, a large entity that consisted of many lesser constituencies. Many members of the ruling class of England are likely to have thought of their lineage as extending back to the fifth-century English Conquest, thus aligning their genealogies with the myth of migration that was one of the dominant political ideas of the time. Other leading members of society could have traced their ancestry back to Denmark or Norway. Moreover, some ‘English’ people of the time were of mixed Frisian or Scottish or Irish ancestry, while masses of others, whether or not they were aware of it, are likely to have been descended from British (or Welsh) groups that had occupied the land long before the Angles and Saxons arrived.

In addition, a small but influential French-speaking population was already present in England during the years preceding the Conquest. When King Edward (later to be known as ‘The Confessor’) landed in England in 1041–42 to claim the throne that was his by right of paternal descent, he was accompanied by a number of Norman allies, for Edward had taken asylum in Normandy for the previous twenty-four years, during the reigns of the Danish-born King Cnut and Cnut’s immediate successors. On his mother’s side, King Edward was descended from the Duke of Normandy, and that fact explains his upbringing in that dukedom during the years of his exile from England. Naturally he absorbed many continental influences while abroad, including a taste for Norman-style architecture. Westminster Abbey, which he rebuilt during the years 1048–65, has justly been called the first great example of Norman architecture in England, though its details reflect English taste and workmanship, as well. In short, there are signs here of a small-scale Norman conquest before the Conquest.

As a people, then, by the year 1066 the English were a complex mix of different ethnicities. The French-speaking people who conquered them, too, showed many hybrid features. Since all the incomers owed allegiance to Duke William, they were all Normans in a legalistic sense. By this time, however, Norman identity itself was an amalgam of Scandinavian and French-speaking elements. Moreover, among the many vassals who owed allegiance to Duke William were persons who had entered his service from French-speaking regions outwith Normandy. Among them was a large contingent of Breton knights. After William defeated Harold Godwinson in the momentous battle fought at Hastings in 1066, and after William thereafter tightened his hold over the kingdom, modern historians call these incomers ‘the Anglo-Normans’, but that name is no more than a convenience.

Did the French-speaking conquerors of England immediately begin thinking of themselves as ‘English’? Assuredly not; and yet it does not seem to have taken them long to begin doing so, seeing that there was a general tendency of people during this period ‘to consider settlers in England as “English”, regardless of place of origin or parentage’ (Georgianna 1998: 48). Moreover, King William I was emphatic in affirming that he ruled England not just through conquest, but, more importantly, by virtue of legitimate descent. Perhaps significantly, he adopted the vernacular title *cyning* (‘king’) rather than importing the Anglo-Norman term *rei* (derived from Latin *rex* and also meaning ‘king’). In addition to this, King Edward the Confessor had named Duke William as his heir (or so the Normans liked to claim), and the Pope had confirmed William in that right. The Conqueror therefore conducted himself not as a foreign-born potentate

lording it over a subjugated people, but rather as the latest in a long line of kings who, regardless of their lineage and native tongue (whether Saxon, Danish, or Norman), were defenders of the realm.

As far as the use of French is concerned, it is possible to distort the linguistic situation prevailing in England after the Conquest by speaking of the English and French languages as if their relationship were oppositional. This had not been true of the English and Danish languages during the reign of King Cnut, as far as one can tell. Why should French, a language of increasingly high prestige in Europe at this time, be thought different in this regard? Here is an instance where nineteenth-century writers may have distorted the modern perception of the early medieval past by viewing that early period in a manner influenced by the passions of the era of the Napoleonic wars. Post-Conquest England was a trilingual culture, and the relationships among writers specialising in English, French, or Latin were complex and, at times, mutually cooperative.

It is instructive to take note of a book that illustrates these complex interrelationships through its physical layout. This is the Eadwine Psalter (Cambridge, Trinity College R.17.1, also known as the Canterbury Psalter), a manuscript that the art historian Margaret Gibson has characterised as ‘arguably the most ambitious manuscript produced in England in the twelfth century’.¹³ Now in the possession of Trinity College, Cambridge, it was produced at Canterbury during the 1150s. On each of its main folios, three separate versions of the Latin psalms (namely the Hebraicum, the Romanum, and the Gallicanum) are written out in three parallel columns (see Figure 1.1). The Hebraicum is furnished with an interlinear gloss in Anglo-Norman French, while the Romanum is similarly glossed in English. The Gallicanum, which is written in a larger script and is given larger decorative initials, is accompanied by extensive Latin glosses, some of which are interlinear while most are added to either side of the main text. The book is well illustrated, superbly designed, elegantly inscribed, and lavishly decorated in gold and silver. It includes a full-page portrait of Eadwine, the monk whose work it chiefly was, along with praise for Eadwine as ‘prince of scribes ... alive through the ages’. His name is an English one. Through praise of this gifted scribe, the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, celebrated their community as one that could produce works of stunning beauty for the glory of God, integrating the three main languages of post-Conquest England into a single composite ‘super-psalter’ as they did so. The relative prominence awarded to each language has emblematic significance: Latin takes unquestioned precedence, while the French and English vernaculars are like two handmaidens of equally dependent status.



Figure 1.1 The Eadwine Psalter (also known as the Canterbury Psalter), with its glosses in three languages. Trinity College MS R.17.1, fol. 8 (detail), showing the beginning of psalm 3: ‘Domine quid multiplicati sunt qui tribulant me’ (‘O Lord, how those who afflict me have grown great in number’). Column 4, the most prominent one, consists of the Gallican version of psalm 3 with an interlinear gloss in Latin. Column 1 gives the Hebraicum version of the same psalm with an interlinear gloss in Old French. Column 2 gives the Romanum version with an interlinear gloss in Old English. Photo courtesy of the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge.

The Laws and the Saints

As might be inferred from the foregoing discussion, what chiefly defined one as ‘English’ during this period was not necessarily one’s native language or one’s claims as to personal ancestry, but rather one’s legal status.

If one had property rights under the King of England, then one was *de facto* English and was subject to English law.

In no area were the Normans more assiduous in maintaining continuity with their Anglo-Saxon predecessors than with regard to the corpus of English laws. Upon his accession, King William pledged to maintain the laws of the land. The law codes of Anglo-Saxon kings (including those of Alfred, Cnut, and others) continued to be copied for generations after the Conquest. Codes that had existed hitherto only in the English language were translated into Latin so as to be made available to magistrates regardless of their native tongue. The most comprehensive Anglo-Norman compendium of the laws, the early twelfth-century collection known as *Quadripartitus*, consists largely of laws translated from English into Latin.¹⁴ Continuity and change went together, of course, as the Normans introduced to Britain a mature form of feudalism and as the British Isles became a western outpost of a far-flung Norman empire.

Through the cults of saints, too, the people of Anglo-Norman England maintained continuity with the English past (Ridyard 1987). It was generally not the Normans' practice to introduce the cults of French saints into England. On the contrary, the Normans made every effort to ensure that continuing honour was paid to those English saints whose authenticity they accepted; and the relics of those saints found a prominent place in the handsome new churches and cathedrals that were built all in all parts of the realm in the aftermath of the Conquest.

One noteworthy example of this new architecture was the abbey church of St Augustine's at Canterbury. Norman builders converted that church, which was an Anglo-Saxon foundation, into a great shrine to St Augustine, the sixth-century missionary who had landed in Kent from Rome. Through this link, the long-standing dependency of the English church on Rome was affirmed. Another insular saint whose cult was reinforced through architecture was St Erkenwald, the seventh-century bishop of London. St Erkenwald's remains were preserved in St Paul's Cathedral, which the Normans rebuilt after a fire in 1087. Another saint whose cult was promoted was St Edmund, the martyred East Anglian king whose remains, by 1097, were kept in the newly built abbey church at Bury St Edmunds. Yet another such saint was St Æthelthryth (also known as St Etheldreda or St Audrey), the seventh-century virgin queen who founded the monastery at Ely. Her remains were venerated in the great Anglo-Norman cathedral built at Ely starting in the year 1083. Not least among the Anglo-Saxon saints whose cult the Normans promoted was King Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066), the chaste half-Norman king who embodied dynastic continuity from English past to Anglo-Norman present. The cult of that

king, who was canonised in 1161, greatly enhanced the prestige of his burial place, Westminster Abbey, as a place of pilgrimage and power. Indeed, before St George of dragon-killing fame gained the status of England's patron saint, King Edward the Confessor was so revered as to be viewed in such a light, even though his cult was primarily the product of a political elite closely linked to the monarchy.¹⁵

The cults of native English saints were reinforced through iconography, the liturgy, and pilgrimage, among other means. This was particularly true in the north, where the holy geography of Northumbria was renewed through revival of the cults of saints named in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (R. Davis 1989). While this particular effort of renewal was spearheaded by the monks of Worcester (who were active partisans of 'Englishness' at this time), no progress along such lines could have been made without central Norman guidance and support. One saint who was honoured in this way was St Aidan, the seventh-century Irish monk whom Bede credited with restoring Christianity to Northumbria. Another was St Oswald, St Aidan's royal patron, whose relics were preserved at Durham and in the rebuilt twelfth-century cathedral at Peterborough. Yet another northern saint whose cult was promoted by the Normans was St Cuthbert (Figure 1.2), the Northumbrian bishop and holy recluse whose life Bede had celebrated repeatedly and at length. St Cuthbert's relics were given a place of honour directly behind the altar of Durham Cathedral, which, along with Durham Castle, was the bastion of Norman power in the north.¹⁶ Then there was Bede himself, revered soon after his death as 'the Venerable'.¹⁷ The Normans preserved his remains too at Durham, where they still remain as an object of informal pilgrimage for some.

Twelfth-Century Textuality and the Demise of Old English Verse

Despite the persistent impression one gets from modern writers to the effect that the Normans were hostile to the English language or to English culture, it is clear that at least some types of English manuscripts continued to be copied for a number of years after the Conquest.¹⁸ In particular, efforts were made to keep in circulation those aspects of Anglo-Saxon textual culture that were of practical use to the church. Ælfric's homilies fell into this category, as did other homiletic texts. Texts having to do with ecclesiastical organization and discipline, healing, and the liturgy were often copied, as well, with occasional efforts being made to revise them to improve their currency.¹⁹ A significant number of Old English prose



Figure 1.2 The veneration of St Cuthbert, from a late twelfth-century copy of Bede's prose life of St Cuthbert produced at Durham. Saints celebrated by the Venerable Bede continued to be honoured by the ruling class of Anglo-Norman England, particularly during the period when organized monasticism was re-established in many parts of the north. None of these saints was more prominent than St Cuthbert, whose cult was based at Durham Cathedral. The manuscript once included 55 richly coloured illustrations, 46 of which survive. The one shown here, the first in the sequence, depicts a prostrate monk holding and kissing the foot of Cuthbert, who is shown in full splendour in his episcopal robes. Other illustrations show the saint dressed in humble monastic garb and engaged in everyday pursuits. Photo © The British Library Board: Yates Thompson MS 26, p. 1 verso.

writings therefore survive in post-Conquest manuscripts, where one can trace their evolving linguistic forms. Statistics confirm that the year 1066 did not mark a significant division as far as the physical production of manuscripts is concerned. According to the great palaeographer and bibliophile N.R. Ker, of the 189 manuscripts containing Old English that survive from the medieval period, 29 were written before the eleventh century, 133 during the eleventh century or slightly before, and 27 at a later time (Ker 1990: xv–xix). There is no noticeable hiatus in manuscript production at the Conquest, though one can trace a rapid falling off in the copying of Old English by the mid-twelfth century, roughly three generations later.

One is not surprised to see a decline set in by then. By definition, books written in Old English were insular productions. Few of them had value in the great world extending beyond the Channel to France, Italy, and beyond. Since the English language was undergoing rapid change, as well, as was the script in which English texts were written, manuscripts containing Old English would have looked increasingly strange and archaic to twelfth-century eyes. Certain texts of pragmatic value (such as the law codes) were translated into Latin so as to be of continuing use. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was not just translated into Latin but was also paraphrased in French verse of octosyllabic rhymed couplets.²⁰ Increasingly, works of Anglo-Latin literature continued to be copied while vernacular works were let lie. The Latin text of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, in particular, was copied out many times after the Conquest both in England and on the Continent (R. Davis 1989), thus remaining up to the present day the primary source for early Anglo-Saxon history.

In sum, not just because of the Normans' wealth but also because of their respect for English learning, the century after the Conquest was a golden age of manuscript culture. N.R. Ker goes so far as to call the period from ca. 1070 to ca. 1170 'the greatest in the history of English book production'. Ker notes that copying 'at a large scale' took place at Canterbury beginning in the 1080s or so, while forty or so Benedictine and cathedral libraries were stocked with books by about the year 1170. Moreover, these newly made books were of almost uniformly high quality. Ker characterises them as 'accurately copied, competently and often beautifully written and decorated, well spaced, fully punctuated, and neatly corrected', whether written in Latin, French, or English (Ker 1960: 1–2).

Two broad categories of Old English texts, however, were falling into oblivion at this time. First of all, the Normans had little reason to reproduce English prose works that had no obvious practical value. This was especially true if versions of such texts were available in Latin or French. The translations that are associated with the court of King Alfred and his

successors, for example – including translations into Old English of Latin works by Bede, Boethius, Orosius, St Gregory the Great, and St Augustine of Hippo – were rarely copied out after the Conquest. The copying of Old English verse compositions likewise came to an almost complete halt,²¹ while very few attempts were made to compose new verse in a form reminiscent of the traditional Old English metre.

The reasons for the neglect of verse are easy to fathom. As present-day students are aware, the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons was composed in a style that is not easy to understand even if one has a fair command of Old English. Many words in the lexicon are unique to verse, compound nouns and adjectives in particular. Much of the special vocabulary of *Beowulf*, for example, occurs only in that poem as far as our surviving records of Old English are concerned, thus lending that poem an exotic quality even for persons who are competent readers of other Old English verse. Poetry of such a specialised kind depended on an audience of connoisseurs, whose numbers must have fallen off rapidly after the Conquest. Since members of the French-speaking aristocracy had little interest in preserving texts that lacked either prestige or practical value, patronage for English poetry dried up. While five manuscripts containing appreciable amounts of Old English verse survive to the present day thanks to the monastic instinct for conservation – these are the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral MS 3501), the Vercelli Book (Vercelli Cathedral Library MS cxvii), the Junius Manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11), the *Beowulf* manuscript (London, British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv), and the Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS Fonds Latin 8824) – the first four of these were written down by the year 1025 at the latest and the fifth one by 1050. It is possible that no Old English verse manuscripts were produced or copied after the Conquest. Indeed, one wonders if much Old English verse was any longer either composed or copied after the Danish conquests of Swein and Cnut (1013–16).

Rather than troubling themselves with English poetry composed in a verse form of which they had no understanding, the Normans cultivated verse of their own composed in a style that was coming into vogue all over Europe. They seem to have done so quite brilliantly in England as well as on the Continent. The earliest recorded version of the *Chanson de Roland* – a work revered in nineteenth-century France as that country's 'national epic' – is composed in the Anglo-Norman dialect. Since, as well, that version is preserved at Oxford (in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 23), it may well have been written down in England. While no one is likely to argue that this early twelfth-century celebration of Charlemagne and his *douze pers* ('twelve great peers') is an expression of 'English' literature,

there is no need to efface the poem's English connections, as one influential French editor has done.²² Another robust *chanson de geste* that has come down to us in the Anglo-Norman dialect is the *Chanson de Guillaume*, a masterwork of the rough-and-ready style. This poem is preserved in another twelfth-century manuscript of English provenance (London, British Library Additional 38663). Yet another work of this kind is the droll twelfth-century poem known as *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*; this gives an irreverent account of the misadventures of the *douze pers* while they once chanced to be the emperor's court in Constantinople. Moreover, at least one fashionable author who wrote in the Anglo-Norman dialect, Marie de France, is thought to have lived her adult life in late twelfth-century Britain.²³ Like Thomas d'Angleterre, who composed the earliest known courtly version of the story of the star-crossed lovers Tristan and Isolde (dated to ca. 1155–60), Marie was master of the French octosyllabic rhyming verse form that was then coming into vogue. She is thought to have frequented the courts of Henry II and his queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, two of the great literary patrons of the high Middle Ages. In the courtly genres of rhymed lays, fables, romances, and lyric poems, authors writing in the Anglo-Norman dialect offered models for English-speaking poets to absorb and imitate for many years to come.

Very little new literature composed in English can be traced in the two centuries after the Conquest, whether owing to an absence of patronage or a perceived lack of prestige. It is notoriously difficult, however, to specify a point where 'Old English' literature leaves off and 'early Middle English' begins, for this is properly more of a linguistic distinction than a literary one, and the linguistic evidence tends to evade hard dates. Indeed, what are involved initially are no more than visually registered changes in orthography and script, for Norman scribes introduced new types of script based on continental models, ones that eschewed Old English letterforms with just a few exceptions (such as the letters þ 'thorn' and ȝ 'yogh').

One important English-language text that postdates the Conquest is the Peterborough Chronicle (known as the E version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle), whose annals continue in English up to the year 1154. While this can scarcely be called a work of literature in the usual sense, it includes passages of remarkable rhetorical expressiveness (Horvath 1994). Here one can see how, with the progressive loss of Old English grammatical inflections, a stage of the language that we now call Middle English emerged. Also to be traced in the late annals of this manuscript is a progression whereby English-language entries gave way to bilingual entries written in English and French, and eventually to trilingual entries written in English, French, and Latin. Among the poems composed in English

during these decades is *Durham*, an early twelfth-century encomium of the northern cathedral city that was a showpiece of Anglo-Norman sanctity and power. Another example of late Old English verse (or early Middle English verse, depending on who is doing the classification) is *The Grave*, a twelfth- or early thirteenth-century poem composed on the theme of the departed soul's indignant address to the dead body. Different in form is *The Owl and the Nightingale*, a rhymed octosyllabic work of slightly later date than *The Grave* that is composed in the popular French genre of the *débat*. By reading these works in succession, one can perceive a progression whereby the Old English alliterative verse form was gradually displaced by systems featuring metre and rhyme, while the contents of poems, as well, reflect the increasing influence of continental models.²⁴

By the time that *The Owl and the Nightingale* was composed, no one in the realm is likely to have been reading 'classic' Old English verse of the alliterative type. Old English prose remained in use longer, and continuities can readily be traced between pre-Conquest and early modern English prose styles (Chambers 1932). In one important centre of learning, still, Old English devotional texts were being read in their original form at least as late as the mid-thirteenth century, for they remained of potential use as a means of disseminating religious doctrine. At the cathedral library of Worcester, a scribe known as the 'Tremulous Hand' was at work during the period ca. 1190–1250 – a man with such a high regard for these nearly forgotten books that he might well be called 'the first Anglo-Saxonist'.²⁵

Geoffrey's King Arthur and a New Myth of Origins

Importantly, during this same broad period of time, a new sense of 'Englishness' was under construction, based on a new myth of national origins. Anglo-Norman historians, hagiographers, and narrative poets vied with one another to retell the history of Saxon England in their own terms, thereby inventing what has been called 'a culturally useful "English" past' (Georgianna 1998: 49).

The person chiefly responsible for creating and popularising this new myth of origins was Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1100–ca. 1155). A cleric associated with Oxford, Geoffrey had hopes for personal advancement that were destined to remain largely unfulfilled. In part as a showcase for his skills as a rhetorician, in 1136 he completed the *Historia regum Britanniae* ('The history of the kings of Britain'), one of the most original books ever written. Authors from all parts of Europe soon took inspiration from this work. One of them was the English poet *Lazamon* (active 1189–1200),

who reworked Geoffrey's history into the very long English alliterative poem known as the *Brut*.²⁶

According to Geoffrey and those who accepted his fictions, insular history had not begun with the fifth-century English conquest of Britain, nor yet with the Romans. Instead, the true, providential history of Britain began with the arrival of the founding figure 'Brutus', a supposed fugitive from ancient Troy. British history reached its culminating point with the reign of King Arthur, who presided over a magnificent empire from his capital city of Camelot. Saxon invaders subsequently conquered the kingdom of Britain, but their pre-eminence was to be short-lived, for as everyone knew (though Geoffrey's history stops short of telling of these events explicitly), the Normans would win control of Britain at the Battle of Hastings, thereby founding an empire whose parts extended from Ireland as far as the eastern Mediterranean.

While in the popular mind the story of King Arthur and his knights has always been with us, in fact it is largely Geoffrey's invention. Previous to Geoffrey, going back to the fifth century AD, a few scattered allusions had been made in Latin or Welsh sources to a British warlord or chieftain who won fame by fighting off the Saxon invaders of Britain. Working from these wisps of history and venturing into territories unmentioned by the Venerable Bede, Geoffrey developed his fictive King Arthur into a heroic figure of mighty proportions, the victor of numerous pitched battles and, in the course of time, the crowned emperor of all Western Christendom. Geoffrey likewise tells of the beautiful Queen Ganhumara (the Guinevere of later tradition), the prophet Merlinus (Merlin), and the destruction of Arthur's kingdom as the result of a cataclysmic battle fought between Arthur and his treacherous nephew Modredus (Mordred).

Geoffrey's Arthur is a great Christian monarch of unfaltering courage and magnanimity. Similarly, the Britons over whom he rules, though prone to corruption, are in their origins an honourable people who were the primary inhabitants of Britain, for they had occupied the island continuously ever since their ancestors had arrived from Troy after fleeing the destruction of that city. As for the Saxons whom Arthur so staunchly resists, they are cruel and predatory pagans. They are an 'odious race' (*nefandus populus*)²⁷ who scheme for power and delight in treachery.

The perfidy of the Saxons is evident in an atrocity story that has long been recalled in Wales as 'The Night of the Long Knives'. Under the guise of friendship, the Saxons lure the leading British citizens to a great feast. In the middle of the night a signal is given for each man to draw a knife concealed under his garments. '*Nimet oure saxas!*' they call out, using their native English tongue as a secret language: 'Take up your knives!'²⁸ The Saxons then butcher close to five hundred of their unarmed guests.

Although Geoffrey never names the Normans outright, several scholars have thought that his pseudo-history points unmistakably to the role of that people as the defenders of the legitimate rulers of the realm, the Britons, in opposition to the usurping Saxons (Ingeldejew 1994; Niles 1998). Many details pertaining to Geoffrey's descriptions of King Arthur's court seem to mirror the social life of the Normans; other details recall the Normans' far-flung conquests. Moreover, through the 'Prophecies of Merlin' (a section of the *Historia* that circulated independently), Geoffrey makes it clear that the Saxons' rule over the Britons is destined to come to an end. A White Dragon is seen battling in the sky against a Red Dragon, which repels it after a fearsome struggle. The clairvoyant Merlin perceives that the Red Dragon represents the people of Britain, who will eventually overcome the White Dragon, which represents the Saxons. 'The destruction of foreigners' – that is, of the Saxon interlopers – 'will be clear for all to see' (Thorpe 1966: 173). Many a Welsh patriot has since taken heart from this scene.

Geoffrey has been admired as the author of 'one of the world's most brazen and successful frauds', to quote the great Arthurian scholar Roger Loomis (1963: 35). His fanciful history initiated a vogue for Arthurian literature that has lasted to the present day, extending into the realms of popular literature, painting, and film. It also provided intellectual justification for consigning the Anglo-Saxons to near-oblivion.

Since his *Historia regum Britanniae* has long been recognised as a tissue of inventions, Geoffrey is seldom discussed today as a contributor to the new historiography that was a key ingredient of what has been called 'the twelfth-century renaissance'. Nevertheless, his account of British origins was widely accepted until at least the end of the sixteenth century, when more sceptical modes of historiography came into favour.²⁹ This change came about chiefly through the influence of humanistic scholarship emanating from Italy – not from French-speaking lands, initially, and certainly not from Wales, where the myth of Arthurian origins continued to masquerade as truth well into the nineteenth century, endowing an oft-maligned people with a glorious past, even if a specious one.

The New Historiography: William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon

According to current opinion, 'perhaps the greatest, and certainly the most admired' of Anglo-Norman historians is William of Malmesbury (ca. 1085–ca. 1143), a contemporary of Geoffrey of Monmouth who was

far more scrupulous in his use of written sources.³⁰ William was a monk rather than a cleric. He wrote a pair of great books: the *Gesta regum Anglorum* ('The deeds of the kings of the English'), which surveys English history from the first kings mentioned by Bede to the events of his own day, and the *Gesta pontificum* ('The deeds of the bishops'), an historical account of all the dioceses of England. Between the two of them, these works offer an encyclopaedic account of England's topography, its saints, its bishops and kings, and the course of its history. In the prologue to the *Gesta regum Anglorum* William declares that he is writing this history *propter patriae caritatem* 'for the love of my homeland' (Mynors 1998: 14–15). Since he is thought to have been of mixed Norman and English parentage, it is significant that he so forthrightly announces his English patriotism.

While William respects Bede's authority when dealing with the early period of English history, elsewhere he offers new stories that enliven his narrative through flashes of colour. These additions tend to convert the people of Anglo-Saxon England into the stuff of romance and sometimes of comedy. It is William who first tells the story of how Aldhelm, the seventh-century bishop of Sherborne, used to hasten from church after mass so as to take a stand on a nearby bridge, disguising himself as a minstrel. Intercepting the common people who were on their way home, he would encourage their devotion, smuggling words from Scripture into his entertainments.³¹ William also contributed to the cult of King Alfred the Great by recounting the story whereby Alfred, absorbed by his troubles with the Danes, once took shelter incognito in the cottage of a peasant woman, later receiving her sharp rebuke for having absent-mindedly burnt her cakes.³² Turning a timeworn motif to fresh purposes, William likewise tells how King Alfred once ventured into the camp of his Danish enemies disguised as a minstrel, in a manner reminiscent of the trickster figure well known to folklorists.³³

William also tells the story of the witch of Berkeley. The witch was a practitioner of the black arts who lived in Berkeley, Gloucestershire, during the reign of Edward the Confessor.³⁴ As her dying request, fearing retribution for her wicked life, she prevails upon her two surviving children, who are a monk and a nun, to fasten her body in a stone coffin, binding it round with three great iron chains so as to ward off the assaults of demons wishing to claim her body as their own. Despite these defensive measures, demons break down the door of the church where the witch is lying, snap her chains 'like a piece of string', and whisk her corpse away on a black stallion 'whinnying proudly, with iron barbs set point upwards all down its back'. Thus does the devil get his due, in a hair-raising episode that even Bede, that sober historian, might have admired despite himself.³⁵

Another way that William of Malmesbury had a lasting influence on the English historiographical tradition was through his blackening of the reputation of King Æthelred ‘the Unready’ (r. 978–1016), who ruled over the English during a period of spectacular disasters. Whether through incompetence or ill luck, Æthelred had conspicuously failed to deflect the humiliations inflicted on the English by one Viking army after another, famously choosing instead to pay enormous tribute that still did not buy the peace. Writing about this sorry period of insular history, William drew on his imagination to castigate Æthelred’s morals, ‘accusing him of a range of vices including lethargy, wilful violence and loose living’, as Simon Keynes has observed (1978: 238). This was enough to sink the king’s reputation almost for good, even though Keynes in a number of judicious writings has partially rehabilitated it. The punning name *Æthelred Unræd*, usually (but inaccurately) rendered as ‘Æthelred the Unready’, had become attached to that king by William’s day, probably by the workings of oral tradition in the years after the Conquest. The slur says something about the pleasure the early English took in irony. Since *Unræd* is a negative expression whose meaning is ‘bad plan’ or ‘misrule’, what the nickname amounts to is a wry reversal of the king’s proper name, whose two Old English components *æpel* and *ræd* can be construed to mean ‘noble counsel’ or ‘enlightened rule’.

A different perspective on the Anglo-Saxon past is offered by Henry of Huntingdon (ca. 1080–1160). Henry, who was archdeacon of Huntingdon in East Anglia, completed his *Historia Anglorum* in about 1155, writing it at the instigation of the Bishop of Lincoln, who appears to have wanted a complete account of English history up to his day. What is particularly impressive about the *Historia Anglorum* is the discriminating skill with which it integrates information drawn both from Bede and from other earlier historians into a single master narrative. What is most interesting as regards his treatment of English ethnic groups is the positive light in which Henry characterises the native English vis-à-vis the Normans.

Henry’s patriotism is evident, for example, in the pains he took translating into Latin rhythmic prose the Chronicle poem known as *The Battle of Brunanburh*, an encomium of an English victory over a combined force of Vikings and Scots.³⁶ He also wrote a verse encomium of King Alfred as a person of ‘inborn nobility’ and ‘everlasting name’ whose clothing was ‘always stained with sweat’, just as his dagger was stained with blood.³⁷ At the start of his history, in keeping with the familiar medieval devotional theme of *contemptus mundi* (‘contempt of worldly things’), Henry characterises the Norman Conquest as one of ‘five plagues’ that had afflicted the isle of Britain over the years on account of the people’s sins.³⁸ The four

peoples in addition to the Normans who had scourged the land were the Romans, the Picts and Scots, the English themselves, and the Danes. Among these invaders, however, he grants the English a kind of precedence, for he makes clear that the English conquered the land and still occupy it; the Danes conquered it and died out; while the Normans conquered it 'and have dominion over the English people at the present time', thus opening up the prospect that someday the period of Norman dominion will pass. His sympathy for the native English population becomes clear, as well, when he characterises William the Conqueror as a suitable scourge to have been chosen out by God, for 'the Normans surpassed all other people in their unparalleled savagery'.³⁹

Henry thus presents a narrative of history whereby the island of Britain absorbed the English as its leading population, while the Normans came to rule over the English as cruel overlords, by God's grace. As a result of these traumatic changes, great honours accrued to the English nation (Henry states), particularly during the reign of 'the glorious and invincible' King Henry I, even though in the end all such worldly attainments, when compared with God's enduring grace, 'flow away like water from a broken pitcher, and you have nothing'.⁴⁰ This pessimistic view of the grand course of history struck a sympathetic chord not just among Henry's Christian contemporaries but also among later historians and poets of England until at least the end of the nineteenth century, while there are people who hold to a similar view still today.

'The Matter of England' in Middle English Literature

Historical writing thus flourished during the post-Conquest period in England, offering a range of perspectives on the pre-Norman past (as Galloway 1999 has observed). As for the poets of this period who wrote in the language now known as Middle English, they have less to say about the Anglo-Saxon past, and they never speak of it with precision. One remarkable aspect of how the matter of England figures in Middle English literature, as opposed to the matter of Troy or that of Thebes, is how casually the Anglo-Saxon past is treated. Few persons composing in the vernacular seem to have thought it necessary to communicate much concrete information at all about this earlier period, even though Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and other authoritative Latin sources were available to draw upon.

One type of quasi-historical writing continued strong, all the same. Many saints of the pre-Conquest period were kept in mind through compilations of saints' lives. The most significant of these is the *South English Legendary*,

which survives in whole or in part in forty-five medieval manuscripts. Originating in the West Midlands during the late thirteenth century, this collection was both copied and reworked many times, with new saints being added to the collection at such a rate that it soon doubled in size. Among the two dozen saints pre-dating the Conquest whose lives are recounted here are many names familiar to Anglo-Saxonists, including St Alban, St Gregory the Great, St Augustine of Canterbury, St Cuthbert, St Oswald, St Edmund, St Swithun, St Dunstan, and St Thomas of Canterbury. Poems about St Guthlac, too, are included in relatively late (fourteenth- or fifteenth-century) versions of this compilation. The stirrings of English nationalism have been seen in some of these lives (Frederick 2000). Saints who resisted Viking invaders are honoured, as is St Wulfstan, the eleventh-century bishop of Worcester, whose *vita* alludes to acts of ‘felonye’ perpetrated by the Normans.

In addition, certain Anglo-Saxon saints were celebrated in lives that circulated independently. The poet John Lydgate (ca. 1370–ca. 1451), a monk of Bury St Edmunds in East Anglia, wrote an elaborate life, composed in English rhyme royal stanzas, of his patron saint St Edmund, king and martyr, who was killed by Viking raiders in the year 869. A splendidly illustrated manuscript copy of this work, ‘probably the most important illustrated manuscript of Middle English verse to be produced in the fifteenth century’,⁴¹ was made for presentation to the young King Henry VI (see Figure 1.3). Saints’ legends were scarcely, however, the source of historically accurate information. Since their life blood was miracles, these tales contributed to a vague sense of ‘bliss and blunder’ that had come to be associated with early Britain, whether in devotional literature or in the popular mind.⁴² Odd companions rubbed shoulders with one another in these legendaries, ‘St Arthur’ alongside St Edward the Confessor.

When the anonymous metrical romances of the Middle English period feature the matter of Anglo-Saxon England, they tend to do so in the manner of popular historiography that was meant above all to entertain. These romances sustain interest in the physical landscape where kings and heroes walked in days of yore, just as they promote pride in the English as an honourable people with a long history independent of Rome and France (Rouse 2005). Their action is sometimes set in greenwoods offering shelter to outlaw heroes who call to mind the exiled Saxon hero Hereward the Wake, who was famed, particularly in Latin chronicles of the later Middle Ages, for having mounted organised resistance against the Normans.⁴³ What we see in largely escapist narratives like *King Horn* and *Havelock the Dane* are thus the workings of an ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ that contributed to a sense of a strong English national past. While evoking the



Figure 1.3 Discovery of the head of St Edmund, king and martyr. One of 120 illustrations included in a de luxe edition of a verse life of St Edmund composed in the 1430s by John Lydgate, monk of Bury St Edmunds, East Anglia, where the saint's relics were preserved. This image depicts the moment when monks who have been seeking out the severed head of their king discover it at the place from which it has been miraculously calling out to them. A white wolf stands guard over the head, which shines with a preternatural light. The text tells how the Lord '... gaff hem confort of that they stood in dreed / Only by grace to fynde ther kynges hed' ('assuaged their fears, granting them the grace to find their king's head'). Photo © The British Library Board: Harley MS 2278, fol. 66 (detail).

England of olden days as a terrain where almost any wondrous events could take place, these works also nostalgically call that pre-Conquest past to mind as a Golden Age when good laws were promulgated and observed. King Alfred in particular, to whose sagacity was attributed the early Middle English collection of aphorisms and advice known as *Proverbs of Alfred*, was honoured in popular memory as the founder of English law and the presiding spirit of a well-ordered society – one untroubled by the lawlessness and civil discord of later times.

The poets of late medieval England thus folded Anglo-Saxon England into a discourse of cultural critique, regardless of how little reliable information they were able to communicate about that increasingly remote period of history. Their imagined England has no more than an oblique relation to the historical reality with which modern scholarship has tried to come to grips through archival research and the relatively young science of archaeology. *King Horn*, for example, though it tells of an Anglo-Danish prince, makes no reference to England's geography.⁴⁴ While the romance of *Havelok* calls attention by name to the cities of Lincoln and Grimsby (both located in the former Danelaw), thereby anchoring its narrative in what seems to be an identifiable region, the substance of this tale is a fantasy that only happens to be set in the time of the Danish invasions of England. While the romance of *Athelston* relies on some kind of collective memory of the historical King Athelstan (r. 927–939), the first king of a united England, the plot of that romance has nothing to do with that person as a historical figure. Much the same could be said of the romances *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton*, both of which derive from Anglo-Norman sources and have no recognisable relation to what we know of today as the Anglo-Saxon past, though they are putatively set in that era. Like the tales that were told about the bold Saxon outlaw-hero Hereward, the hero of the *Gesta Herewardi*, or about the mighty King Offa, the ninth-century king of Mercia and reputed founder of St Albans whose imagined deeds are celebrated in the twelfth- or thirteenth-century work the *Vitae duorum Offarum*, these romances are essentially fictions. They contribute to a sense that Anglo-Saxon England was a place 'in some way different, romantic and potentially exciting' that was peopled by 'saints of outstanding holiness and kings of heroic stature' (Frankis 1996: 228, 247). Although referred to as 'England', this country remains a country of the mind almost as fabulous as ancient Troy – a realm that, in turn, medieval authors depicted in anachronistic terms, as if chivalric knights and ladies had peopled it.

If the most eminent English author of this period, Geoffrey Chaucer, was almost totally indifferent to the Anglo-Saxon past, this is in part because his dedication to imitating, if not surpassing, the best French, Latin, and Italian literary models of his day took him in different directions. In only one work by Chaucer, 'The Man of Law's Tale', is Anglo-Saxon England singled out for attention.⁴⁵ Some of the leading action of this tale is localised in the England of the time of a certain King Aelle, who (pursuing a hint from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*) is identified as a king of Northumbria during the period shortly before the conversion. Still, Chaucer tells us nothing specific to the topography of that region other

than that it borders the sea, while his 'King Aelle' has no basis in history other than his name. This tale (to which his contemporary the poet John Gower, too, turned his hand) is an example of the sort of floating romance, beloved of the Middle Ages, that could just as well have been located practically anywhere that pagans and Christians coexisted.

Despite their lack of engagement with the particularities of the Anglo-Saxon period, then, the authors of Chaucer's day cultivated a sense of their separateness from the French and other peoples of the Continent thanks to their linear connection to the kings, saints, and heroes of pre-Conquest England. A remarkable work of visual art that affirms the importance of that same ancestral heritage is the Wilton Diptych (Figure 1.4), a hinged painted panel dating apparently from the period ca. 1395–99. Featured on its front is the figure of King Richard II (r. 1367–1400), who may have used it as a portable altarpiece. The painting's assured style and its lavish use of gold leaf are noteworthy, as is its use of lapis lazuli and vermilion pigments; experts are unsure if it is of English or French workmanship.⁴⁶ The left side of the diptych depicts King Richard, who was born in Aquitaine, on his knees in an act of reverence to the Christ Child and the Virgin, who are depicted on the right-hand side. Flanking the king, close by the figure of St John the Baptist, stand the two most prominent royal saints of Anglo-Saxon England: St Edmund king and martyr and St Edward the Confessor. Religious and political interests are fused in this unique royal icon, whose images not only suggest wealth, beauty, and piety but also embody an ideology of English kingship and, by extension, English national identity. Basic to that ideology is a desire for continuity between the advent of Christ's kingdom and the reign of King Richard. In addition, the panel affirms a direct link between the Anglo-Saxon past and the Plantagenet present, thereby making Richard out to be an *English* king even if one of foreign birth (Bale 2009: 16).

Cataclysm and Recovery at the Close of the Middle Ages

By the late fifteenth century, we may conclude, England was a strong, independent kingdom with a sense of a special insular identity going back beyond Anglo-Saxon times to a period of Trojan foundations. The whole pre-Conquest period was one from which it was far removed, however, in terms of reliable historical information. Despite the turmoil of recent wars, England in about the year 1465 was a prosperous realm, its churches generously furnished with shrines, many of which were of the utmost beauty. The



Figure 1.4 Left panel of the Wilton Diptych (detail). Late fourteenth century. King Richard II is represented on his knees in devotion to the Christ child and the Virgin Mary, with angels. The Virgin and the Christ child are featured on the right panel, not shown here. Immediately to the rear of King Richard is the figure of St John the Baptist, while next to St John are St Edmund the Martyr (to the far left) and St Edward the Confessor. These two Anglo-Saxon royal saints were the patron saints respectively of Bury St Edmunds and Westminster Abbey, which by the fourteenth century were the two richest shrines of the realm. Photo © The National Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.

English language had reasserted itself in nearly all aspects of life. Vernacular literacy was thriving side by side with the active use of Latin, and there was a great market for books, including works of vernacular literature.

In each of these respects, England in about the year 1465 bears a certain resemblance to England as it had been four hundred years earlier, in about the year 1065. What no one could have known at either of these two moments in insular history was that this picture would soon be subject to drastic change. Not long after 1465 the English church would be sundered from Rome, the cults of its saints uprooted. Monks would be driven from their monasteries, with their books either lost or scattered in all directions. The gorgeous shrines of St Edmund at Bury St Edmunds and of St Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey would be demolished, their treasures melted down, amidst countless other acts of appropriation and destruction. This trauma would not result from a seaborne military invasion, as in 1066; rather, it would arise through an internal revolution that took place over several generations, affecting much of continental Europe as well as Britain.

Amidst the ruins of late medieval monasticism, still, genuine knowledge of an earlier heritage would soon be gained. This heritage, to which no one had yet laid claim, was that of the Anglo-Saxons. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on (as we shall see in the next chapters), this people would become widely recognised as the ordinary *gens* ‘tribe, people’ of Germanic origins who had founded the English church and state, had established the English language as the dominant vernacular tongue, and had created a remarkable body of literature composed in both Latin and English. An idea of Anglo-Saxon England similar to what had once been cultivated by the Anglo-Saxons themselves, but with significant differences as well, was soon to rise phoenix-like from a bed of ashes.⁴⁷

Vignette 1 Was that ‘Old English’ you said, or ‘Anglo-Saxon’?

Linguists and literary scholars are accustomed to calling the period that extends from the collapse of Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest, or somewhat later, the ‘Old English’ period (ca. AD 450–1100), in distinction to the ‘Middle English’ period that succeeds it (ca. 1100–1500) and the ‘early modern’ period of Shakespeare and his successors (ca. 1500–1800). Any such periodisation is arbitrary, of

course. As a former teacher of mine used to remark with quasi-Talmudic solemnity, ‘The history of the human race is divided into three stages. The first is that of prehistory. The second stage began with the Sumerians. As for the third stage,’ he would say after a slight pause, ‘it has not yet begun.’

Whatever wisdom may reside in that remark, there have long been pragmatic reasons to make a distinction between the Anglo-Saxon period and subsequent periods of English language and literature, given the rapid rate of change in so many aspects of insular culture in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest of 1066. In the present book, the term ‘Old English’ is used in what is by now a customary manner to refer to the language and literature of Anglo-Saxon England, not just any ‘old’ period of the English past.

Although some writers treat the two terms ‘Old English’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ as synonyms, it can be useful to make a distinction between them. In the present book, ‘Old English’ is used as a nominal phrase to refer to the chief vernacular language spoken and written in Lowland Britain before about the year 1100. As we shall see in due course, this represents a modern practice, one that has only been observed with some regularity since the late nineteenth century. What the people of Anglo-Saxon England called their vernacular language was simply *englisc*, ‘English’. Correspondingly, it is now customary to use the adjectival phrase ‘Old English’ to refer to anything pertaining to or written in that language. We can thus speak of ‘Old English phonology’ or ‘Old English saints’ lives’, for example. When the phrase ‘Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives’ is used instead, it usually refers in a more encompassing manner to works of that same chronological period that are written in either Latin or the vernacular, the two chief languages of literacy in Britain at that time.

The hyphenated term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ too is chiefly a modern convenience, as will be discussed in the next vignette. The popularity of this term when used as an ethnonym, as in ‘the Anglo-Saxons’, may have to do with the ease with which it elides the actual ethnic complexities of the early English period, a time when such groups as ‘the West Saxons’, ‘the Mercians’, ‘the Jutes’, ‘the Hwicce’, ‘the Magonsæte’, and so forth are spoken of alongside ‘Angles’ and ‘Saxons’. The blanket term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ has the potential appeal of effacing the conflicts that sometimes pitted group against group during this period of history. Of course, that same

simplifying factor can be viewed in a negative light. The word is best employed with a consciousness of its possible ideological dimension, especially if it is thought to imply a foundation myth for the present-day United Kingdom.

When the English-speaking people of pre-Conquest Britain spoke of themselves, the general term they used was either *Engle* ('Angles') or *Seaxe* ('Saxons'), depending on whether they lived in the more northerly or the more southerly parts of the island, respectively – assuming, that is, that they did not prefer to use more specific ethnonyms that expressed their chief sense of genealogical or regional identity. Today when we speak of these people as a collective whole, there is no reason for us not to call them 'the English', by analogy with the names we give such other insular peoples as the Irish, the Picts, and the Welsh. In a comparable fashion, it was common parlance in former centuries to refer to the people of Anglo-Saxon England collectively as 'the Saxons', an umbrella term that had the advantage – or else the drawback, depending on one's point of view – of calling to mind their German affinities in a 'greater Saxon' collectivity that spanned the North Sea. None of the ethnonyms just mentioned (Irish, Picts, Welsh, English, or Saxons) should be taken to imply ethnic homogeneity. Each term does imply, however, a shared history and culture, including a native language distinct from the dominant languages spoken by other groups.

The compound adjective 'Anglo-Saxon' has a practical efficiency in that it can refer to any aspect of the pre-Conquest period: thus we speak of 'Anglo-Saxon jewellery', 'Anglo-Saxon burial rites', 'Anglo-Saxon charters', and so forth. The hyphenated adjective readily encompasses both the Latinate culture of the church and the vernacular culture of the rest of society. Both the illiterate poet Cædmon and the learned scholar the Venerable Bede were thus 'Anglo-Saxon' authors, even though Cædmon composed devotional songs in English, his mother tongue, while Bede wrote learned commentaries in Latin, his 'father tongue' – that is, the language of the church fathers.

One drawback of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' is that it can be thought to run into a temporal barrier at the year 1066. This remains true even though many current researchers are interested in tracing continuities in insular culture to either side of the year of the Conquest. With reference to social and cultural history as opposed to political

history, there is good reason to maintain some latitude when speaking of an end date for the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ period.

The term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ is not used in the present book in the sense in which that word was often employed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; namely, to refer to modern-day people of a certain putative ‘race’, or else to summon up the vaguely positive aura that was supposed to pertain to English-speaking people of white skin and good breeding. Such a view is anchored in class-based ethnic stereotypes. An inverted version of that offensive usage entered North American parlance during the 1950s and 1960s in the form of the acronym WASP (‘white Anglo-Saxon Protestant’). This term was often used in a pejorative manner to mock or disparage the group it targeted, conceived of as an Ivy-League-style privileged elite. (‘Redneck’ southern Baptists of British ancestry were somehow not called to mind in this connection.) This offensive usage too, thankfully, has by now become obsolete.

Readers of this book should be clear about two things from the start. First of all, like computer science or philosophy, Anglo-Saxon studies is a field of knowledge and inquiry whose doors are open to each and every person regardless of nationality, class, age, gender, colour, or creed. And second, the term ‘Anglo-Saxonism’, in the present book, is used in a descriptive sense as part of an effort to understand how the idea of Anglo-Saxon England has often been inflected by ideologically driven biases. Part of the purpose of the book is to promote understanding of the period-specific nature of such commitments, which can be seen to be an inescapable part of virtually any discourse about the past.

Vignette 2 Is the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ actually Anglo-Saxon?

The question is sometimes asked: Is the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ native to the Anglo-Saxons? Or is it a modern invention? The answer to both questions is ‘yes’, but that is clearly an answer that calls for some explanation.

Employed as a plural noun, the term ‘Anglo-Saxons’ was occasionally used by the kings of the West Saxon royal line from King

Alfred (r. 871–899) to King Eadred (r. 946–954) to refer to the people over whom they ruled, viewed as a collective whole. A text that illustrates this usage is a grant of lands by King Æthelstan (r. 925–939) to the Old Minster, Winchester, dated to the year 934:¹

Mid Godæs gifæ, ic Æþelstan, **Ongolsaxna cyning** & brytænwalda eallæs ðyses iglandæs þurh Godæs sælene and ealra his halegra

By the grace of God, I, Æthelstan, **king of the Anglo-Saxons** and *brytenwalda* [‘high king?’] of the whole of this island by the favour of God and all his saints²

By using the term *Ongolsaxna cyning*, the king was referring to himself as ruler of the whole English-speaking population of Lowland Britain. This geographical area would roughly correspond to present-day England.

It has been thought that when phrases of this type were first used in an insular context, what they designated is not ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ in this joint sense, but rather ‘the English Saxons’, as opposed to the Saxons still dwelling on the Continent. This is how the *Oxford English Dictionary* construes the term as King Alfred employs it in a Latin charter of ca. AD 885, for example: ‘Ego Ælfrædus gratia Dei **Angulsaxonum rex**’ (I, Alfred, by the grace of God **king of the Anglo-Saxons**).³ The *OED* does not have the final say on this matter, however. The Cambridge historian Simon Keynes has argued that by adopting this title in his royal diplomas, as he did some of the time but not consistently,⁴ King Alfred wished to style himself as ruler over all the English-speaking people of Britain – whether Angles or Saxons – who were not at that time subject to the Danes.⁵

In any event, the term was seldom used. It is of very rare occurrence after the reign of King Eadred, who died in 955. Significantly, when confirming a gift of lands to the monastery of Ely, King Edgar the Peaceable (r. 959–975), speaking in the first person singular, styles himself in a new manner as *cining ... ofer Engla þeode* ‘king ... over the English nation’. He then elaborates upon that title, stating that God ‘has now reduced beneath my sway Scots and Cumbrians and likewise Britons and all that this island contains’.⁶ By this time the term ‘king of the Anglo-Saxons’ had already become obsolete, for – perhaps paradoxically – the kingdom had become too great for it. What had been a term of outreach for King Alfred proved to be too restrictive a term

for King Edgar and his successors, who claimed authority over groups who were integrated into the realm despite having no claim to being either Angles or Saxons. The joint term ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ was therefore shelved in favour of the more encompassing nominal phrase *Engla þeod* ‘the English nation’ or, alternatively, the compound noun *Angelcynn* ‘the English race, English people, England’.⁷

As for the adjective ‘Anglo-Saxon’ that is in widespread use today, it is a modern invention, though that fact should not deprive it of legitimacy. According to the *OED*, the earliest attested instance of this hyphenated adjective is the year 1726, when the historian Nicholas Tindal refers to ‘the Anglo-Saxon kings’.⁸ Previously, antiquarian scholars had sometimes used the adjectival phrase ‘English-Saxon’ as a means of distinguishing the Saxons of Britain from the continental Saxons. This phrase does not denote ethnic hybridity, however.

When people of the present day speak of ‘Anglo-Saxon England’, then, they are using a term first popularised during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to designate a distinct historical period intervening between ‘Roman Britain’ and ‘Anglo-Norman England’. As such, the term remains a convenient one. Anyone who speaks of ‘the Anglo-Saxon race’, however, should take care, for that term is mired in nineteenth-century racist concepts that would not, apparently, have meant much at all to the people living in Britain before the Conquest. It is much less problematic to speak of ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ as a people, for then we are using a term that served an actual political purpose during the period of English national consolidation from 880 to 965. The term was not used before those decades, however, for it did not apply to a politically fragmented Britain. Nor was it used after those decades except very sporadically, for its relevance to the politics of a united England had diminished. Our modern use of that term therefore flattens out the past.

Has the time come to retire that hyphenated term ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ as one that has outlived its usefulness? At least one distinguished specialist in Old English literary studies has entertained such a thought,⁹ though without waxing polemical on this issue either pro or con. My own mind too is open in this regard. Personally, when referring to the dominant population of Lowland Britain between the Roman colonial period and the Norman one, I am inclined to speak of those people as simply ‘the English’, a term that mirrors Bede’s use of *Angli* as a term for the collectivity of his

English-speaking countrymen. As a matter of habit and convenience, all the same, the term ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ will probably still be with us for a long time to come as a way of designating those generations of English-speaking people who lived in Britain between the Romans and the Normans. The same is certainly true of the hyphenated adjective ‘Anglo-Saxon’, which offers a convenient way to refer to the history and culture of this segment of the English past, much as we use such hyphenated terms as ‘Romano-British’, ‘Anglo-Scandinavian’, and ‘Anglo-Norman’ to refer to other hybrid cultures of early Britain. Each of these terms is just as much a modern invention as are the other ones. Such terms remain of value as long as they help us to talk about the past in a manner based on rational distinctions. Like all terms of classification, however, we should feel free to discard them if they are felt to imprison us in habits of thought that have outlived their usefulness.

Vignette 3 The Tremulous Hand of Worcester

What happened to Old English texts during the centuries following the Conquest? Did the manuscripts that contained them remain shelved in libraries unused, since the two main languages of literacy in Lowland Britain were now Latin and French? Or were such texts still being read? If so, then who was reading them, why, and with what degree of comprehension?

Scholars who raise such questions as these have been particularly interested in the writings of a scribe known today only as ‘The Tremulous Hand of Worcester’ (Franzen 1991; Collier 1995, 1997). His script is easy to identify because of its peculiar wavering quality – the effect of a congenital nervous disability rather than old age, it seems, for he wrote in the same hand over a period of many years (ca. 1190–1250). During this time he read and reread a number of English manuscripts that were then housed in the library of Worcester Cathedral, glossing them intermittently as he did so, initially into the English of his own day and then, regularly, into Latin (see Figure 1.5). These manuscripts, all of which are of an ecclesiastical nature, include some homilies (chiefly Ælfric’s), some penitentials, an Old English herbal, the Old English version of

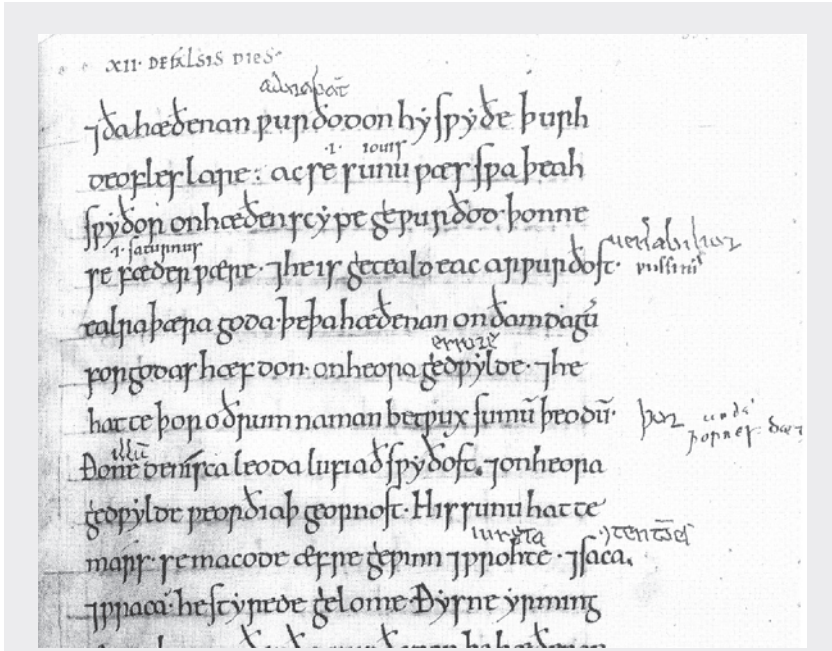


Figure 1.5 Glosses by the Tremulous Hand. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Hatton 113, fol. 60 (detail), featuring Ælfric's sermon 'De falsis diis' ('Concerning false gods') as recorded in an eleventh-century manuscript written out, it is thought, at Worcester. The first clause reads, 'æ ða hædenan wurðodon hy swyðe þurh deofles lare' ('and the heathens earnestly worshipped them, through the devil's instruction'). The first five glosses by the Tremulous Hand are as follows: line 1 *adoraba[n]t* (glossing OE *wurðodon*); line 4 marginal *uen[er]abilior* (glossing, inexactly, OE *arwurðost*); line 6 *errore* (glossing OE *geþwylde*); line 7 marginal *þor* (flagging OE *þor*, that is, Thor); line 8 *illu[m]* (glossing OE *Done*). Not all glosses were made by the Tremulous Hand. Exceptions include *i. iouis* 'Jove' in line 2 (glossing OE *se sunu*) and *i. saturnus* 'Saturn' in line 4 (glossing OE *se fæder*). In addition, yet another scribe (of the early modern period?) has glossed the Hand's marginal gloss *þor*, adding beside it the phrase *unde þornes dæg* 'whence Thursday'. At least four separate hands are thus visible on this page. See further Franzen 1991, plate 1 and *passim*. Photo courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, a bilingual Benedictine Rule, and two books by Gregory the Great, namely his *Dialogues* and his *Pastoral Care* (in both their Latin and their Old English versions). The scribe's glosses are generally linguistic in nature, not exegetical. Some glosses offer

guides to pronunciation, as if the texts were being marked so as to be read aloud by persons who did not know the language well. In addition, the scribe made marginal annotations of the names of authors such as Augustine, Gregory, and Bede, and he added neatly written Latin abstracts of Old English scriptural quotations.

It may be significant that this dedicated programme of reading and glossing took place in the far west of the kingdom, at Worcester, far from the chief focal points of Norman power. Bishop Wulfstan II of Worcester (1062–1095), the last of Edward the Confessor's English-speaking bishops to have remained in power after the Conquest, had made a point of promoting Old English writings, and for some years thereafter Worcester remained unusually hospitable to English textual culture. It is perhaps not a coincidence that, in the preface to the long early Middle English verse chronicle the *Brut* – a poem that shows some curiously antiquarian features – the poet Lazamon identifies himself as a priest at *Ernleye*. This is the modern village of Areley Kings, located about ten miles north of Worcester.

In addition to his activity as a glossator, the Tremulous Hand wrote out one entire manuscript, namely Worcester, Cathedral Library MS F174. Among the texts included in this now fragmentary codex, which is written in early Middle English of about the year 1200, is an encomium of the saints and scholars of Anglo-Saxon England. The loosely alliterative rhythm of this text, which is known as *The First Worcester Fragment*, resembles the rhythmic, loosely alliterative prose in which Ælfric composed his saints' lives. Among the early English scholars singled out for praise in this text are the Venerable Bede (referred to as 'St Bede'), Ælfric (here conflated with the scholar-poet Alcuin of York), and the seventh-century author Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne. Among the saints who are explicitly named are St Cuthbert, St Oswald, St Swithun, St Æthelwold, St Aidan, and St Dunstan. 'These men taught our people in English', the author states, adding with admiration and regret: 'Their light was not dark, but rather it shone forth in beauty. Now that lore is abandoned and the people are ruined. Now there is another nation who teach our folk, and many of those teachers are straying, and the people too are getting lost'.¹

This 'lament for the teachers' on the part of a Worcester author might be taken as a conventional complaint for the world's decline were it not that all the saints and scholars named, in this

post-Conquest text, are Anglo-Saxons. Moreover, the point is registered that when these people taught ‘our folk’, they did so *in English*. Might one therefore infer that the ‘other’ teachers who are said to be ‘straying’ from the beautiful light of this former learning are ones working in the service of French-speaking overlords?² While for obvious reasons this subversive message, if it is indeed implied, is never stated outright, clearly the Tremulous Hand was copying out a text that came very close to articulating a rationale for his lifelong efforts to maintain access to manuscripts containing Old English. This scribe’s work was not disinterested. Rather, he seems to have been motivated by a desire – one might almost call it an obsession – to restore Christian learning in his community to the level it once had when English was one of the two chief languages of literacy in the realm.

Since the Tremulous Hand was clearly a native speaker of English, it is interesting that he did not always have an accurate understanding of the works he was glossing (Franzen 1991: 173–82). The impression one gains from an analysis of his work is of a patient scholar working his way through texts that presented him with frequent difficulties. Their script, with its antique lettering, must have looked strange to him at first, though he makes few errors on that account. He had a lot of trouble with the word *þā*, which can mean so many things – but what student of Old English grammar does not?³ He struggled with certain lexical items, for many English words that had been current during the lifetimes of the great homilists Ælfric and Wulfstan had since fallen out of use.

What is to be made of these observations? Taking account of what is known about the Tremulous Hand and his work, the medievalist Seth Lerer concludes that this scribe was motivated by nostalgia for the past. Moreover, he finds that ‘Worcester culture is ... not so much nostalgic as it is metanostalgic’, for it is preoccupied with evoking a past that already, in the time of King Alfred the Great, was lamenting ‘a past golden age of English learning’.⁴ On the other hand, Wendy Collier concludes on the basis of her own close and systematic study of these glosses that the scribe was forward-looking. She notes that he shows a particular interest in Christian theology, in the sacraments, and in the use of the English language in the liturgy and in sermons. She sees him as working ‘with a practical and definite purpose in mind’ (Collier 1997: 158):

namely, to reinstitute English as a primary language of the church, particularly through the training of those who were to receive holy orders.⁵

Is it necessary to choose between these two divergent views? Readers may weigh this question for themselves. The first explanation offers us the image of a scribe lamenting the end of an era in a manner consistent with the elegiac mood often associated with Old English literature. The alternative explanation would have us see the scribe as pushing forward with a pragmatic plan for the revival of the English language – a plan that in the course of time, in fact, was to be achieved, as French lost its status as a primary language of literacy in the realm. The particular manuscripts over which the Tremulous Hand had pored, however, proved to be largely irrelevant to that process.

Vignette 4 Henry of Huntingdon's bad day

Living at a time when fabulous accounts of Arthur's Britain were beginning to capture the imagination of Europe, Henry of Huntingdon, in his twelfth-century work the *Historia Anglorum* ('The history of the English people'), set out to give a reliable account of the history of Britain from the advent of the Romans to his own day. The initial parts of his great history rely on the authority of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, while subsequent parts draw on a variety of documentary sources. For the period up to the Conquest and somewhat beyond, these include the annals of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Since Henry was both an expert Latinist and, evidently, a bilingual speaker of French (which he knew from his father's side of the family) and English (which he seems to have known from his mother's), none of his textual sources presented him with serious linguistic difficulties. He stumbled, however, when he came across the entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937. What this annal consists of, in versions A, B, C, and D of the Chronicle, is an entry known in modern editions as the poem *The Battle of Brunanburh*. Composed in celebration of a great victory for the English over a

combined force of Vikings and Scots, this poem has often been admired for its flamboyant display of the Old English poetic idiom.¹

Henry took pride in his skills not just as a historian and rhetorician but also as a poet. Worked into books 1–10 of his history are no fewer than twenty-four Latin poems of his own composition, while books 11 and 12 consist entirely of verse epigrams.² Coming upon the Chronicle annal for 937, Henry recognised that it was written *quasi carminis modo* ‘in a kind of poetic measure’. When translating that annal into Latin, he attempted to achieve similar poetic effects in his own work through the use of stress-patterns, alliteration, and rhyme (Rigg 1991). What is evident, however, is that he had only passing acquaintance with the poetics of Anglo-Saxon verse, including its word-hoard of special diction. He therefore repeatedly misreads his source text.

As an illustration of the problems Henry encountered, reproduced below are lines 1–7a of the Old English poem as they appear in a reputable modern edition that takes as its base text the A version of the Chronicle (representing the Winchester recension).³ Following after is my own literal translation of those lines into modern English:

Her Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
 beorna beahgifa, ond his broþor eac,
 Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir
 geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
 5 ymbe Brunanburh. Bordweal clufan,
 heowan heaþolinde hamora lafan
 afaran Eadweardes....

Here [in this year] King Æthelstan, lord of men, ring-giver of warriors, and his brother also, Eadmund the Ætheling, won everlasting glory with the edges of swords in battle at Brunanburh. They split the shield wall, cut through linden-wood shields with their swords [the remnants of hammers] – they, the sons of Edward

Henry translates this passage into Latin prose as follows. (My own prose translation of his version of the passage follows.)⁴

Rex Adelstan, decus ducum, nobilibus torquium dator, et frater eius Edmundus, longa stirpis serie splendentes, percusserunt in bello acie gladii apud Brunebirih. Scutorum muros fiderunt, nobiles ceciderunt, domestice reliquie defuncti Edwardi.

King Athelstan, flower of commanders, ring-giver to nobles, and Edmund his brother, the splendid products of a long unbroken lineage, struck with the sword's edge in battle at *Brunanburh*. Those who were left of the family of the departed Edward split the shield-walls, slaughtered the nobles.

Henry gets the gist of the passage right. King Athelstan and his brother Edmund won a battle at Brunanburh, striking with the sword's edge and splitting shield-walls. Moreover, Athelstan is correctly called 'ring-giver to nobles', in an accurate rendition of the honorific Old English epithet *beorna beahgifa*.

If one reads the passage closely, however, there are some danger signs as well. To begin with, Henry mistranslates the phrase *ealdorlangne tir* 'everlasting glory' (3b). The OE noun *tir*, which occurs only in verse texts, gives him understandable difficulty; he seems to think that the word means 'lineage' rather than 'glory' and does not recognise that it functions as the object of the verb (*ge*)*slican*, which here means 'to gain [glory] by striking'. Nor can he make sense of *beapolinde*, a compound noun that is comprised of the two simplexes *beaþo* 'battle' and *lind* (a poetic synonym for 'shield'). Henry apparently takes that word to mean 'noblemen'. Moreover, the kenning *hamora lafan* leaves him baffled, as well it might. What it actually represents, as present-day readers of Old English will know, is the dative plural phrase *hamora lafum*, meaning 'with the remnants of hammers' [that is, hammer blows]', i.e. 'with swords'. He mistakes that phrase to mean 'those who were left of the family' of Edward the Elder. What has apparently happened is that he has taken the morpheme *ham* (the first syllable of the noun *hamora* 'of hammers') to be the OE noun *hām* (with a long vowel) meaning 'home'. As for the word *afaran*, which is actually a variant spelling of the nominative plural form of the weak noun *easfora* 'descendant', 'son', Henry mistakes it for the past participle *gefaren* (which becomes Middle English *ifaren*), from the verb (*ge*)*faran*, which means either 'to go, travel' or 'to pass away, die'. He thus comes up with the sense 'those who were left of the family of the departed Edward' (*defuncti Edwardi*).

Analysis of the rest of the poem confirms the gist of the preceding discussion. Henry succeeds in communicating the general sense of the Chronicle text. He has serious trouble with poetic diction, however, and this blind spot leads him into one blunder after another, as can be seen from some select examples.⁵

- The OE phrase *glad ofer grundas* (15a) ‘glided over the earth’, referring to the sun’s movement in the sky and with *grundas* here meaning ‘ground’ or ‘regions of earth’, is mistranslated *letificans profunda* ‘rejoicing the depths’. Henry apparently confused the OE verb *glād*, which is the preterite singular of *glādan* ‘to glide’, with the OE adjective *glæd* ‘happy’, while at the same time misconstruing *grundas* to mean ‘depths of the sea’.
- Henry introduces to the poem a ‘ghost’ personage named Froda when he fails to recognise that OE *se froda* (37a) is a nominal phrase meaning ‘the old man’, used here with reference to Constantine, King of the Scots. Moreover, he introduces another new character in the form of *Gude Dacus* ‘Gude the Dane’ when he mistakes the common OE noun *guð* (in the phrase *at guðe* ‘at battle’, 44a) for a proper noun.
- The unusual OE poetic compound *blandenfeax* (45a), which the DOE glosses as an adjective meaning ‘having hair which is mingled with grey’, hence ‘old’, is likewise misconstrued. What Henry arrives at, apparently by a process of aural association based on the simplex *blanden*, is the Latin mistranslation *verbis blandus* ‘smooth in words’, or ‘well-spoken’.
- The traditional Old English poetic theme of the ‘beasts of battle’ gives Henry particular trouble, as is understandable if the poetic conventions of Old English verse had fallen out of use by his day.⁶ He translates the OE phrase *earn æftan hwit* ‘the white-tailed eagle’ (63a) by Latin *aquila cum milvo* ‘the eagle and the kite’, while also introducing a dog (of uncertain textual pedigree) alongside the wolf of the Old English poem. The big surprise here, though, is that a livid toad (*buffo livens*) joins the dinner party as one of the scavengers. This anomaly offers us an entry point to Henry’s methods, for I suspect that what has happened is this. Coming up blank when encountering the OE compound noun *hasewan-pada* (62b), which denotes ‘the dusky-coated one’ (with reference to the white-tailed eagle of 63a), Henry instead has taken the simplex *pada* as a separate word meaning ‘toad’. This is not as bizarre an error as might at first seem, since he could have been misled by his knowledge of the English word *pad*, with its variant form *paddock* (now obsolete except in Scottish and northern dialects), which means either ‘toad’ or ‘frog’.⁷ During the classical and medieval periods, frogs or toads, along with

worms and maggots, were often associated with the degeneration of flesh in the grave, and Henry may thus have been misled into thinking that toads as well as fierce predators were on the scene.

In sum, Henry had a bad day when translating *The Battle of Brunanburh*. To make this observation is by no means to diminish one's regard for Henry as a first-rate Latinist, a keen rhetorician, and one of the foremost historians of his day. He succeeded in communicating the general sense of a difficult Old English text, one that still today presents readers with many challenges. By attention to those points at which his Latin translation misses its mark, we can infer how fully a knowledge of Old English poetry and poetics had fallen off, among English intellectuals, by the early years of the twelfth century.

Notes to Chapter 1

- 1 In a seminal study, for example, Michael Murphy (1968: 345) refers to the 'well known fact' that the study of Old English began in the sixteenth century.
- 2 The noted historian Simon Keynes defines Anglo-Saxonism as 'the perception of the history and culture of Anglo-Saxon England at different times ... in response to contemporary purposes or fashions, and the representation of these perceptions in word and image' (*Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, 36). In the present book I use the term in a broader chronological sense than Keynes, who speaks of Anglo-Saxonism with reference to the period from the sixteenth century to the present. My more inclusive use of the term is in accord with the concept of Anglo-Saxonism advanced in Frantzen & Niles 1997.
- 3 See Nicole Guenther Discenza's article on 'Alfredian Texts' in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, 29–30, with references.
- 4 Foot 1996, esp. pp. 38–41; Discenza 2002. For a more extended analysis of the Old English translation of Bede's history, see Rowley 2011. Note also Rowley 2010 on the popularity and influence of Bede's corpus of writings in the later Anglo-Saxon period. Moreover, although I will not do so here, one could approach Bede's eighth-century Latin history itself as a foundational contribution to Anglo-Saxonism. Such an approach would take account of the manner in which Bede draws on the power of narrative history so as to create a central people, called by him the *gens Anglorum*, out of the multiple ethnic groups who spoke varieties of English in his day and who shared other aspects of a common culture (Wormald 1983). An approach of this kind would incidentally take note of the 'thoroughly "English" voice' with which Bede undermines the status of the Britons who coexisted with the *gens Anglorum* in southern Britain (Foley and Higham 2009: 181).

- 5 Parkes 1976. Parkes's conclusions are based on a meticulous study of the manuscript's codicology. Here I am more concerned with the content of the Chronicle entries.
- 6 The prominence of this originary myth in the historical consciousness of the Anglo-Saxons is emphasised and explored by Howe 1989.
- 7 The treaty between Alfred and Guthrum (ca. 886–90) exists in two Old English versions and one later Latin version. Unusually, it seems to have been respected for a while, at least to some degree.
- 8 The annal for 855, which covers the events of several years, reports the death of King Alfred's father, King Æthelwulf. At this point the genealogy is introduced. It is thought to be of somewhat later manufacture, like the Chronicle as a whole. The topic of the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies is a complex one that rewards close study; for discussion of its ideological dimensions see C. Davis 1992, with references.
- 9 This is the outstanding bias of Bede, the great advocate of Rome, whose account of the conversion of the English effaces the positive contributions of the ancient Britons to the early English church while at the same time minimising the impact of St Columba's missionary efforts emanating from Iona, in the Inner Hebrides.
- 10 The cult of Alfred is discussed particularly in chapter 9, 'Anglo-Saxon England and the Empire', and in Vignettes 14 and 15.
- 11 This is a topic explored in a preliminary fashion by Sklar 2003 in terms of Ælfric's promotion of English national identity.
- 12 See Vignette 2, 'Is the term 'Anglo-Saxon' actually Anglo-Saxon?'
- 13 For a capsule account of this book, see Catherine Karkov's article 'Eadwine and Canterbury/Paris Psalters' in Szarmach, Tavormina, and Rosenthal 1998: 259–60. For full discussion see the various parts of Gibson, Heslop, and Pfaff 1992 (a facsimile edition, with analysis and commentary). My quotation is from the back cover of Gibson's book. Elaine Treharne has recently argued that this work was 'designed and used as a politically and culturally charged witness to Christ Church's expansive learning, expertise, and wealth' (2012: 172). She makes this psalter the focal point of a provocative argument for the presence of a 'cloistered multilingualism' in mid-twelfth-century England (2012: 186). The more traditional view is that the English language was declining in importance throughout this period, as far as the literary records are concerned, when compared with Latin and French.
- 14 See Liebermann 1903–16, 1: 529–44, with cross-references to other parts of this edition where the constituents of this composite code are presented. See Wormald 1999: 236–44 for discussion.
- 15 King Henry III (1207–1272), in particular, 'greatly favoured images of St Edward in his royal residences and ecclesiastical foundations, not least at Westminster, where the saint lay enshrined', while a richly illustrated Anglo-Norman life of St Edmund (preserved in Cambridge University Library MS

- Ee.3.59) dedicated to Queen Eleanor of Provence, whom Henry III married in 1236 (Binsky and Panayotova 2005: 248–49).
- 16 See Marner 2000. This book includes reproductions of the splendid Anglo-Norman illuminations illustrating the life of St Cuthbert that are included in London, British Library MS Add. 39943.
 - 17 Venerable: the title is used in the Western church for persons acknowledged to have lived a life that was ‘heroic in virtue’, hence who are eligible for beatification or canonisation as a saint. Anglican archdeacons also have the title ‘Venerable’.
 - 18 Stereotypes pertaining to this aspect of Norman rule are corrected by Georgianna 1998.
 - 19 See Swan and Treharne 2000; Treharne 2009, 2012; and Swan 2012.
 - 20 This work of rewriting was done by the cleric Geoffrey Gaimar, author of the *L’Estoire des Engles*, completed ca. 1136–37.
 - 21 Exceptions are the versified psalms and the poems embedded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. These poems continued to be copied because of their prestigious codicological setting and, in the former instance, their possible liturgical use.
 - 22 Léon Gautier, ed., *La Chanson de Roland* (Tours: A. Marne et fils, 1872).
 - 23 Marie’s cognomen ‘de France’ carries the implication that she was a native of the Isle de France, though no longer living there.
 - 24 For discussion of a few poets’ continuing use of something resembling the standard form of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse during the century and a half after the Conquest, see Lerer 1999.
 - 25 See Vignette 3, ‘The Tremulous Hand of Worcester’.
 - 26 Lazamon’s chief source was an intermediary French text, the *Roman de Brut*, a translation of Geoffrey’s *Historia* into rhymed octosyllabic couplets by the poet named Wace. On Lazamon’s attitude toward the Anglo-Saxon past see Weinberg 2000.
 - 27 Book 11, § 204; Reeve 2007: 279.
 - 28 Book 6, § 104; Reeve 2007: 135.
 - 29 The story of the rise and fall of Geoffrey’s influence is told by Kendrick 1950.
 - 30 J. Campbell 1986: 214. Campbell praises William of Malmesbury’s role in countering ‘a rising tide of nonsense’ that was coming into circulation along the lines of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history (1986: 221).
 - 31 *Gesta pontificum*, ch. 190; Winterbottom 2007: 506–07.
 - 32 See Vignette 15, ‘Why did King Alfred burn the cakes?’.
 - 33 *Gesta regum* 2:121; Mynors 1998: 182–85.
 - 34 *Gesta regum* 2:204; Mynors 1998: 376–79. William solemnly avers that ‘the truth of my narrative shall remain unshaken, let my hearers doubt it if they will’.
 - 35 On Bede as a storyteller with a taste for the marvellous, see Niles 2006a.
 - 36 See Vignette 4, ‘Henry of Huntingdon’s bad day’.
 - 37 *Historia Anglorum* 5:13; Greenway 1996: 296–99.

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- 38 *Historia Anglorum* 1:4; Greenway 1996: 14–15.
- 39 *Historia Anglorum* 6:38; Greenway 1996: 402–03.
- 40 *Historia Anglorum* 8:1 and 8:6; Greenway 1996: 494–95 and 500–01, respectively.
- 41 Edwards 2004, preface. On the cult of St Edmund, see Bale 2009, a book whose purpose is ‘to show the openness and dynamism of a medieval saint’s cult, to demonstrate how the saint’s image could be used in many and changing contexts’, for ‘Edmund’s image was bent to various political and propagandistic ends, negotiating identity, politics and belief’ (p. vii).
- 42 Cf. lines 18–19 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967): ‘... And oft bope blysse and blunder / Ful skete hatz skyfted synne’.
- 43 This is an argument made by Dominique Battles in ch. 4 of his 2013 study of the Middle English romances. Battles may be suspected of stretching a point, still, when he speaks of the ‘central priority of Anglo-Saxon cultural identity’ in certain of these romances while also suggesting that they ‘embody a great deal of historical fact within their fictions’ (2013: 145).
- 44 A later version of the same story, *Horn Childe*, however, is set in Northumbria.
- 45 The oft-quoted lines from the prologue to Chaucer’s ‘Parson’s Tale’, where the Parson offers the disclaimer that ‘I am a Southren man, I kan nat geeste “rum, ram, ruf,” by letter’, require no attention here since Chaucer’s allusion is to English alliterative poetry of his own day, not to the Old English alliterative poetry from which verse of this later type was ultimately derived.
- 46 The panel is featured on the website of the National Gallery, London: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/english-or-french-the-wilton-diptych>.
- 47 Readers of the present chapter may wish to consult the following additional references with a bearing on its themes: Keynes 1986, Crane 1999, Gameson 1999, Johnson & Wogan-Browne 1999, Treharne 2001, P. Hill 2006, and Mortimer 2009.

Notes to Vignette 2

- 1 Sawyer 1968 no. 427; text from Robertson 1939: 48–49 (my punctuation, my translation).
- 2 The meaning of the disputed term ‘brytenwalda’ need not detain us here; see the *DOE*, s.v. It is thought to mean either ‘king or lord over a spacious realm’ or ‘ruler of Britain’.
- 3 Sawyer 352; text from Birch 1885–93, vol. 2, no. 565; cf. the *OED*, s.v. ‘Anglo-Saxon’, sense I.A. *sb*.
- 4 Other royal titles used by King Alfred are *rex Saxonum*, *rex West Saxonum*, *rex Anglorum et Saxonum*, and simply *rex*.

- 5 See Keynes's article on 'Anglo-Saxons, Kingdom of the', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, 37–38. On this use of the term see also Reynolds 1985.
- 6 Sawyer 779; Robertson 1939: 98–99. The Old English text as given by Robertson (with punctuation and abbreviations normalised) reads 'He hæfð nu gewyld to minum anwealde Scottas & Cumbras & eac swylce Bryttas & eall þæt ðis igland him on innan hæfð'.
- 7 On the somewhat paradoxical use of the term *Angelcynn* to refer to a people whose political capital was Winchester, at the heart of Saxon (not Anglian) territory, see Foot 1996.
- 8 The *OED*, s.v. 'Anglo-Saxon', sense II.B. *adj.*
- 9 I refer to Thomas Shippey, whose judgements are always to be respected: 'With hindsight, one may feel that it was a mistake for English historians ever to use the term "Anglo-Saxon" at all' (2000: 232). In this regard, Shippey echoes the views of the Victorian-era historian Edward A. Freeman (as will be discussed in chapter 9).

Notes to Vignette 3

- 1 'Peos lærden ure leodan on Englisc. Næs deorc heore liht, ac hit fære glod. Nu is þeo leore forleten, and þet folc is forloren. Nu beoþ oþre leoden þeo læreþ ure folc, and feole of þen lorþeines losiaþ, and þet folc forþ mid'. Text from Brehe 1990: 530–31, lines 16–19, repunctuated and set as prose. The translation is my own. There are at least three points of difficulty in the last sentence. First, are the *oþre leoden* a different nation (i.e. French-speakers), or just different people? Second, who are the *lorþeines* 'teachers' mentioned here: the new teachers or the old? And third, are those teachers 'straying', as I take *losiaþ* to mean, or 'perishing', as other translators of this passage have thought?
- 2 The term 'anti-French' might be more apt than 'anti-Norman' to use with reference to the political climate in this day (Collier 1995: 41). Henry III surrounded himself with many Poitevins who were evidently thought of as 'aliens' (in contrast to resident Anglo-Normans).
- 3 This word serves variously as the adverb 'then' or 'when', as the plural demonstrative pronoun 'the' or 'those', as the feminine singular demonstrative pronoun 'the' or 'that', and as the relative pronoun 'which'.
- 4 Lerer 1999: 25–26. Lerer's allusion is to King Alfred's preface to Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*. This book was among the ones preserved at Worcester Cathedral library. It was well known to the Tremulous Hand, who read and glossed it.
- 5 Writing in a similar vein, Chris Jones sees the author of *The First Worcester Fragment* as 'not merely backward-looking or antiquarian' in his perspective, but forward-looking in his effort to 'begin a renewed tradition of vernacular literary making' (Jones 2013: 317).

Notes to Vignette 4

- 1 A casebook has recently been published highlighting many historical documents with a bearing on this battle, presented alongside texts that pertain to this poem and its afterlife (Livingston 2011). See pp. 60–64 and 195–200 for the entry pertaining to Henry of Huntingdon, with notes.
- 2 See Greenway 1996: cvii–cxii for discussion.
- 3 Cassidy and Ringler 1971: 163, diacritics omitted.
- 4 Greenway 1996: 310. The inset translation of Henry’s text is from Greenway p. 311; subsequent quotations and translations of Henry’s Latin text are from the same source. It should be noted that Henry did not have the advantage of working from a modern edition like the one quoted here. His source text would not have been lineated; moreover, he would have had no access to a glossary or a commentary. Word divisions may have been set out differently than in modern editions. Moreover, the particular text (or texts) from which he worked may have included corruptions.
- 5 For discussion of Henry’s translation from a historiographical perspective rather than from the philological one adopted here, see Tiller 2012.
- 6 The theme of the birds and beasts of battle (involving the idea of eagles and wolves feasting on the slain) is one of the most familiar ones in the thematic vocabulary of Germanic heroic poetry. For discussion of it in the Old English context, see Griffith 1993.
- 7 See the *OED*, s.v. ‘pad’, sb.¹, and ‘paddock’, sb.¹. The usual Scottish spelling of the latter word is *puddock*. The earliest attestation of the first of these nouns is 1154 (in an entry from the Peterborough Chronicle); the noun ‘paddock’, however, is not recorded before 1350.