

The World of Anglo-Saxon England

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The Anglo-Saxon period is often seen as a distinctive phase in the history of these islands (see in general Stenton 1971; Whitelock 1974; Lapidge et al. 1999). But before the Anglo-Saxons came, in the fifth century, the native Britons had already established an enviable culture that, while assuredly Christian, tried hard to ensure that a proud sub-Roman legacy lived on (Collingwood and Myers 1963; Lapidge and Dumville 1984; Todd 1999). Not for nothing did they despise the Germanic invaders who took their lands, illiterate, un-Latinate, and pagan as they proved to be, requiring a second Mission at the end of the sixth century to complete a second Conversion, several centuries after the first had been wholly achieved. For even though they came from the edge of the known world, the Christian learning of certain Britons was legendary right at the heart of the Christian establishment on the Continent: if Jerome (who died in 420), the irascible and in many ways obnoxious translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, was implacably opposed to what he had condemned as the heresy of the Briton Pelagius (c. 354–420/440) with regard to Free Will, he still paid him the unwitting compliment of calling him ‘the most Latinate of men’ (*homo Latinissimus*), even as Pelagius chose to defend himself in Greek when facing down his opponents in Rome (Rees 1988; Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 2–20).

Another Briton, Faustus (405 × 410–480 × 490), left his homeland to become bishop of Riez in Southern Gaul, and an implacable opponent of the doctrines of his countryman Pelagius (Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 21–24). Likewise, Patrick (who likely died in 493), a Briton who went on to evangelise the Irish after being captured by Irish pirates in his teens, bears in his bitter regret for an education cruelly cut short eloquent witness to the standards of British learning in his day (Bieler 1952; Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 25–26; Dumville 1993; Howlett 1994). More striking still as evidence of the high standards and self-regard of British intellectuals is the highly stylised, deeply learned and pungently affecting (and effective) prose of Gildas (c. 516–570), looking back on the mounting waves of Germanic invasions, when the Anglo-Saxons almost swept the British and Celtic indigenous peoples northwards

and westwards into the sea, and who saw the whole sorry episode as a punishment from God for his people's louché living and lascivious ways (Winterbottom 1978; Lapidge and Dumville 1984; Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 27–28).

Indeed, it was the same splenetic reasoning, attributed explicitly to Gildas, that was to be used by two later Anglo-Saxons, namely Alcuin in the late eighth century and Wulfstan in the early eleventh century (Orchard 2000; Bullough 2004), to explain the later waves of Germanic invasions, this time by the Viking Norse, against back-sliding Anglo-Saxons who had forsaken godly ways. And identical logic was used again in hindsight at the end of the eleventh century to explain how a final wave of invaders, namely the Normans, who could trace their own ancestry back to Norseman who settled in Northern France alongside the Bretons of Brittany who had their own ancient affinity with the Britons of Britain, and were there to witness when six centuries of Anglo-Saxon England ended abruptly on the bloody field of Hastings on 14 October 1066.

The notion of Britain as an island subject to continuous waves of foreign raiders, traders and invaders who eventually settled and assimilated is an ancient one, and can be traced early even in Anglo-Saxon sources. So, from the perspective of the Anglo-Saxon Bede (672/3–735), who used Gildas's work in creating his own *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ('Ecclesiastical History of the English People' [*HE*]) in 731, contemporary Britain was a multilingual melting-pot of competing nations, held together by a common (if not exactly identical) Christian faith (*HE* I.1; Colgrave and Mynors 1969):

Haec in praesenti iuxta numerum librorum quibus lex diuina scripta est, quinque gentium linguis unam eandemque summae ueritatis et uerae sublimitatis scientiam scrutatur et confitetur, Anglorum uidelicet Bretonum Scottorum Pictorum et Latinorum, quae meditatione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est facta communis.

At present, there are five languages in Britain, after the number of books in which divine law is written, all for considering and setting out one and the same wisdom, which is to say the knowledge of deepest truth and true depth, namely English, British, Irish, Pictish, and Latin, which through the study of scripture has become common to all the others.

It is striking how often this theme recurs in later Anglo-Saxon texts, and indeed in the fifth and final book of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede again returns to the theme of multinational, multilingual Britain, in a series of chapters that implicitly assert the superiority of their Christianity over that of their neighbours, noting how the Anglo-Saxons Aldhelm (*HE* V.18), Ceolfrith (*HE* V.21) and Ecgbert (*HE* V.22) respectively battled against the errors of the British in Wessex, the Picts, and the Irish in Iona (the Latin term *Scotti* refers to both Scots and Irish). In an example of what in Old English poetry is called the envelope pattern, and so signalling the importance of the theme to Bede's entire narrative, he again addresses in turn the

current status of each of the constituent nations in the closing chapter of the *Historia ecclesiastica* (HE V.23):

Pictorum quoque natio tempore hoc et foedus pacis cum gente habet Anglorum, et catholicae pacis ac ueritatis cum uniuersali ecclesia particeps existere gaudet. Scotti, qui Britanniam incolunt, suis contenti finibus nil contra gentem Anglorum insidiarum moliuntur aut fraudium. Brettones, quamuis et maxima ex parte domestico sibi odio gentem Anglorum, et totius catholicae ecclesiae statum pascha minus recto, moribusque inprobis inpugnent; tamen et diuina sibi et humana prorsus resistente uirtute, in neutro cupitum possunt obtinere propositum; quippe qui quamuis ex parte sui sint iuris, nonnulla tamen ex parte Anglorum sunt seruitio mancipati.

Likewise the race of Picts in this time both has a treaty of peace with the English people and rejoices to be sharing in catholic peace and truth with the universal Church. The Irish, who inhabit Britain, are happy within their borders, and they do not plot any ambushes or attacks against the English people. The Britons, even though with innate hatred they have for the most part opposed the English and the state of the orthodox universal Church of God, both in maintaining their incorrect Easter and in their wrongful practices, are resisted by the power of both God and man, so that they cannot win or succeed in what they want in either respect. And although they have for the most part self-rule, yet in large measure they are governed by and obliged to English rule.

Note the hierarchy here: the Picts get a clean bill of health, the Irish are damned with faint praise for not plotting just at present and the British are roundly castigated for their flaws.

But then the native Britons never seemed to have fared well at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons who supplanted them from vast swathes of what became Anglo-Saxon England, and who were still battling them even at the end of the period. The Modern English term 'Welsh' is itself testimony to the sense of innate ownership felt by this latest wave of settlers, deriving as it does ultimately from an Anglo-Saxon word for 'foreigners' or 'strangers' (*wealas*). History is littered with examples of later invaders displacing, disinheritng and denigrating previous incumbents, but it took the Anglo-Saxons to designate them, formally, as strangers in their own land. It is striking how far the Anglo-Saxons themselves went on to tread the same path as the Britons they supplanted, but never quite replaced: intermarriage, forced or otherwise, and the adoption and adaptation of native patterns of Latin learning that looked back to the glory days of Rome, with a grandeur that still inspired awe centuries later. Indeed, when several different Anglo-Saxon poets describe Roman remains as 'the works of giants' (*enta geveorc*) we can still sense their wonder at what they had inherited (Frankis 1973; Thornbury 2000).

Moreover, if Bede paints a picture of the Britain of his day as linguistically diverse, he is similarly forthright about the fact that the Anglo-Saxons themselves came from disparate parts of the continent, and even if modern scholars have cast great doubt on his easy tripartite division of Jutes (from Jutland) coming into Kent, Saxons (from

Saxony) coming into what became Wessex, Sussex and Essex in the West, South and East respectively, and Angles (from Angeln) coming into East Anglia and what was to become Mercia and Northumbria, the crude division into Saxons in the South and West and Angles in the North and East holds broadly true in both linguistic and cultural terms (*HE* I.15; cf. Sims-Williams 1983; Higham 1994).

Nonetheless, it is clear that throughout the period the Anglo-Saxons themselves recognised regional distinctions at a deeper level than a simple division into Angles and Saxons; well into the tenth and eleventh centuries, and when national concerns are to the fore in a united battle against Viking depredations, it seems that the best way to demonstrate the concerted nature of the resistance is to designate it in terms of a combination of (for example) West-Saxons, Mercians and Northumbrians, together with the men of Essex and Kent. Yet in broad terms a North–South divide is the most evident in educational and political terms, particularly during the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, and if older histories concentrate on a progressive power-shift southwards from Northumbria to Mercia to Wessex during that period, other factors demonstrate that despite their regional differences, common cultural aspects, particularly (as Bede suggests) in the sphere of Christian Latin learning, combine to present a united front to the outside world (Orchard 2003a).

Like their British predecessors, Anglo-Saxon intellectuals were widely sought abroad for their Christian learning. So, for example, the works of Aldhelm of Malmesbury in Wessex (c. 639/40–709/10) were read and imitated (and even perhaps ridiculed) by Irish scholars, and were, like those of Bede of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria, eagerly imported to the Continent by Anglo-Saxon scholars such as Boniface of Hampshire in Wessex (who died in 755) and Alcuin of York in Northumbria (c. 735–804), who found themselves living and working abroad. A further feature of the Anglo-Saxon world was the way that foreign learning was keenly welcomed and assimilated, even during Bede's own lifetime. One can only imagine what Theodore (602–690), then a Greek monk of Tarsus of advanced years, felt when he was made Archbishop of Canterbury; in insisting on bringing with him Hadrian (who died in 710), a deeply learned Latin scholar from North Africa, he was able to create a school at Canterbury that was to be the envy of the western world (Lapidge 1986; Lapidge 1995). One of the few alumni of the Canterbury school whose works have survived was Aldhelm of Malmesbury, a scion of the West Saxon royal family who went on to boast that he was the first of the Germanic race to compose significant amounts of Latin verse. Not only were Aldhelm's own works extensively exported both to the Continent and to Ireland, as previously mentioned, but also he influenced directly many subsequent generations of Anglo-Saxon, including Boniface, Apostle to the Germans (and many others in his mission), who was killed in his eighties at Dokkum in 755 by Germanic pirates who foreshadowed the Vikings in their attitude towards Anglo-Saxons in their homeland (Orchard 2001b).

Meanwhile, in the north of England and at about the same time as Theodore was active in the south, Benedict Biscop (c. 629–680) brought back vast numbers of books from the Continent and fostered the kind of intellectual environment where Bede

could thrive and later Alcuin, who was born around the time that Bede died, could be nurtured. If Bede, like Aldhelm, died in an England they helped to create (although Aldhelm, unlike Bede, did at least leave the country, visiting Rome), it was left to the next generation to take Anglo-Saxon learning back to the Continent. While Boniface was to die in Dokkum, Alcuin, who had left England in 782, died in Tours in 804, a key member of Charlemagne's imported intellectual elite (Orchard 2000; Bullough 2004). Important cultural icons, such as the elaborate and rightly celebrated Lindisfarne Gospels or the mighty Codex Amiatinus, bear eloquent witness to the influence of the Irish on Anglo-Saxon intellectual endeavours, albeit that some Anglo-Saxons (notably Aldhelm, whose early education had a distinctly Irish flavour) seem to have preferred the Mediterranean traditions imported into England at the end of the seventh century by the so-called Canterbury School (Lapidge 2007).

Unfortunately, however, while both Boniface and Alcuin were safely ensconced on the Continent, there were ominous stirrings at home, marked if only in strictly chronological terms by the reign of the mighty Mercian King Offa (757–96). Boniface, with the pope's blessing, felt sufficiently outraged (and sufficiently distant) to lambast Offa's powerful predecessor, King Æthelbald of Mercia (who ruled 716–57), for his voracious and pernicious sexual appetites, which extended even to nuns. It was precisely this kind of moral laxity of the Anglo-Saxons, Alcuin observes with hindsight, and drawing on the parallel deductions of Gildas with regard to the Britons, that made them ripe in God's eyes for retribution in the forms of murderous invaders: for the Britons, Anglo-Saxons; for the Anglo-Saxons, Vikings.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides a grim catalogue of what was to prove more than two centuries of Viking depredations that culminated in the division of Anglo-Saxon England in King Alfred's time, and its conquest in the time of King Æthelred. But such portentous events begin with a brief and fatal skirmish, perhaps even a trading mission gone wrong, described in the A-text of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 787, properly 789 (Swanton 1996; Bately 1986):

Her nom Beorhtric cyning Offan dohtor Eadburge. & on his dagum cuomon ærest III scipu, & þa se gerefa þærto rad & hie wolde drifan to þæs cyninges tune þy he nyste hwæt hie wæron, & hiene mon ofslog. Ðæt wæron þa ærestan scipu deniscra monna þe Angelcynnes lond gesohton.

In this year, King Berhtric married Offa's daughter Eadburg. In his time there first came three ships of Norsemen from Hördaland, and the sea-reeve rode there, and wanted to force them to go to the king's dwelling, since he did not know what they were, and he was killed. And they were the first ships of Danish men who sought out the land of the English people.

Within a few years, the explicitly violent intention of the visitors becomes abundantly clear; the watershed entry for 793 marks the beginning of a litany of disaster, introduced in suitably dramatic terms in the F-text of the *Chronicle* (Swanton 1996; Baker 2000):

Her wæron reðe forebycna cumene on Nordhymbraland, & ðæt folc earmlice drehtan,
 ðæt wæran ormete ligræscas, & wæran gesawenæ fyrene dracan on ðan lifte fleogende.
 And sona fylgyde mycel hunger, & æfter ðan ðes ylcan geares earmlice hæðenra hergung
 adyligodan Godes cyrican in Lindisfarenae, ðurh reafiac & manslyht.

In this year, terrible omens of foreboding appeared over the land of Northumbria, and miserably terrified the people. There were enormous lightning flashes and fiery dragons were seen flying in the sky. A great famine immediately followed those signs, and after that in the same year pillaging by heathen men wretchedly destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne through plunder and slaughter.

For Alcuin, this was a deadly blow, struck as it was right at the heart of Northumbrian learning, and one that heralded the slow decline of an early-blooming Anglo-Saxon intellectual revolution that had flowered both at home and on the Continent; for the nation as a whole, it marked the beginning of a series of raids of increasing ferocity and irresistible force that led to ninth-century Anglo-Saxon England being characterised grimly as 'the crucible of defeat' (Brooks 1979; cf. Keynes 1995; Keynes 1997).

The revival of Anglo-Saxon fortunes occurred primarily in the reign of King Alfred of Wessex (who ruled 971–99), not for nothing known later as 'the Great' (Keynes 1996; Keynes 2003; Keynes and Lapidge 1983). Alfred's own estimation of the importance of his achievements can be measured to some extent through the various versions of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the common core of which was compiled during Alfred's reign, early in the 890s. In attempting an assessment of Alfred's own concerns, one might compare, for example, two evidently set-piece genealogies of Anglo-Saxon kings preserved in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

One, for the mighty Offa, king of Mercia (757–96), and given in the *Chronicle's* account of the first year of his reign (actually under 755, due to a counting error), recounts sixteen generations, culminating in Woden, the pagan god of battle, magic and poetry (all aspects of the frenzy with which he is ultimately associated) who gave his name to the weekday Wednesday. But the genealogy has other highlights that link Offa of Mercia to other great figures of the past. By this reckoning, Offa is the great-great-grandson of one Eawa, the bother of the fierce pagan King Penda (c. 632–55) who was such an implacable enemy of Christian rulers, including the saintly King Oswald of Northumbria (who died in battle against him in 642). Offa of Mercia is also importantly a direct descendant of his legendary namesake, Offa of Angeln, a mid-fifth-century ruler (given here as the great-grandson of Woden himself) from precisely the putative time of the great migration to Anglo-Saxon England, and from precisely the area from which the Mercians derived their roots. A further genealogy, by far the most spectacular in the entire *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, is preserved in two slightly different versions. The genealogy in question is that of King Æthelwulf of Wessex (839–58), and, remarkably, it appears neither under the year of his accession, nor of his death; instead, this extraordinarily lengthy and detailed list is given under the year 855, exactly a century after that of Offa, and in a year when the most significant events are given as the first time the Vikings stayed over the winter at Sheppey, and the pious

Æthelwulf both established a tithing system for the church across his whole kingdom and went on a pilgrimage to Rome, returning with a new wife, Judith, the daughter of Charles the Bald of West Francia (ruled 843–77), who later became Holy Roman Emperor (ruled 875–7).

Given the close association of the original core of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, apparently composed at some point in the 890s, with the court of Æthelwulf's fourth son and eventual successor Alfred (who ruled 871–99), who as a boy had accompanied his father to Rome in 855, it seems appropriate to view Æthelwulf's genealogy as effectively that of Alfred himself (which of course it was). In that light, the genealogy seems an obvious attempt to outdo Offa's, with which it shares a number of features, although it is important to stress that according to these documents Æthelwulf and Offa share only a single named ancestor: the pagan god Woden himself. But while Offa is given as the great-great-grandson of the brother of a notorious pagan who opposed the spread of Christianity at all costs, Æthelwulf appears as the great-great-grandson of the brother of a deeply Christian king of the West Saxons, Ine (who ruled 688–726), who renounced his throne to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome, where he died; while Offa is linked to his continental namesake at the time of the Anglo-Saxon settlements, Æthelwulf's ancestry is traced to Cerdic, whose role in the conquest of the British is documented in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the years 495–534, notwithstanding his distinctly non-Germanic name, better understood as a version of the (unattested) British form Caraticos that underlies not only the name of the British ruler Ceredig (perhaps born in the 420s), but also that of the pirate Coroticus to whom St Patrick (who died c. 493) directed at an earlier stage of his career some excoriating prose. Like Offa, Æthelwulf can apparently trace his ancestry back to Woden, although unusually, and in a clear spirit of demonstrating that Woden was a man, not a god, Woden's own genealogy is extended backwards, taking in legendary figures who appear (for example) in *Beowulf*, and leading back to an Ark-born son of Noah; the line from Noah back to Adam is biblically sanctioned and presented in the genealogy rather differently from the Germanic style of patronymic ending in *-ing* that precedes it (Sisam 1953; Dumville 1976; Dumville 1986; Anlezark 2002).

From Offa to Woden takes 15 steps; from Alfred to Adam takes three times as long: either 44 or 45 steps, encompassing Woden on the way. Alfred's is in that sense a much more Christian and Judaeo-Christian ancestry than Offa's, but it is particularly interesting that he still does not attempt to side-step Woden, a figure who also features prominently (indeed, as for Offa, ultimately) in the genealogies of the Scandinavian (and specifically Danish) Vikings with whom he was on the one hand brokering a peace, and on the other hand attempting to convert. And that fact alone tells us much about the innate conservatism of the inherited Anglo-Saxon traditions even three centuries after they were supposedly converted. Indeed, it seems striking in this regard that a further genealogy of one of Alfred's West-Saxon royal predecessors (again with a shared ancestry leading back to Woden) should be included in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* juxtaposed with a brief account of the Augustinian mission sanctioned by Pope Gregory

the Great (who died in 604); the A-text of *the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the years 595–7 (properly 597–9; Bately 1986) reads as follows:

595: Her Gregorius papa sende to Brytene Augustinum. mid wel manegum munecum.
þe Godes word Englaðeoda godspelledon.

597: Her ongon Ceolwulf ricsian on Wesseaxum, & simle he feaht. & won, oþþe wiþ
Angelcyn, oþþe uuiþ Walas, oþþe wiþ Peohtas, oþþe wiþ Scottas; Se wæs Cúþaing.
Cúþa Cynricing, Cynric Cerdicing, Cerdic Elesing, Elesa Esling, Esla Gewising, Giwis
Wiging, Wig Freawining, Freawine Friðugaring, Friðugar Bronding, Brond Bældæging,
Bældæg Wodening.

595. In this year, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Britain with very many monks, who
preached the word of God to the English people.

597. In this year, Ceolwulf began to reign over the West-Saxons; and he constantly
fought and struggled against the Angles, or the Welsh, or the Picts, or the Irish. He
was the son of Cutha, Cutha of Cynric, Cynric of Cerdic, Cerdic of Elesa, Elesa of Gewis,
Gewis of Wig, Wig of Freawine, Freawine of Frithugar, Frithugar of Brand, Brand of
Baldæg, and Baldæg of Woden.

What is striking about this genealogy, which directly links King Ceolwulf of the West Saxons both with the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons (though note that here it is characterised as a mission ‘to Britain’, as if the already-converted Britons were in need of further correction), and with the pagan figure of Woden, the god from whom so many of the Anglo-Saxon royal lines (as well as that of the Danes) derive, is on the one hand the proud listing of the foes with which he continually strove (Angles, Welsh, Picts, and Irish), and on the other the fact that Ceolwulf’s genealogy fits very nearly exactly into the traditional pattern of Anglo-Saxon verse, where two-stress phrases are linked by alliterations between one or both of the stressed syllables in the first half-line and alliterate with the first stressed syllable of the second. In other words, the final stressed syllable of each line does *not* alliterate. One might present Ceolwulf’s genealogy as follows, marking stressed syllables with an acute accent, and alliteration in **bold**:

Céolwulf . . . Cúþaing. Cúþa Cýnricing,
Cýnric Cérdicing, Cérdic Élesing,
Élesa Ésling, Ésla Gewísing,
Giwís Wíging, Wíg Fréawining,
Fréawine Friðugaring, Friðugar Brónding,
Brónd Bældæging, Bældæg Wódening.

Granted, the fit is imperfect (there are too many alliterating syllables in the first ‘line’), but the format itself, and the fact that certain sections of the genealogies of both Offa and Æthelwulf (for example) can be made to conform to a similar pattern, have suggested to some that such genealogies ultimately derived from traditional and ultimately oral poems, transmitted down family lines, but of an antiquity that is finally unknowable (Moisl 1981).

But if the genealogical information encoded in the Alfredian common core to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* offers one kind of clue to Alfred's perspective, it is also evident that as the fourth of four sons of Æthelwulf to inherit his throne, he could look back on the tumultuous and embattled days of his early life and the early deaths of his brothers from the relative tranquillity of the 990s, and consider himself truly blessed. Nor did he downplay the martial achievements of his father and elder brothers, as is clear from the entry for 851 in the A-version of the *Chronicle* (Bately 1986):

Her Ceorl aldormon gefeaht wiþ hæþene men mid Defenascire æt Wicganbeorge, & þær micel wæl geslogon, & sige namon; & þy ilcan geare Æþelstan cyning, & Ealchere dux micelne here ofslogon æt Sondwic on Cent. & ix scipu gefengun, & þa oþre gefliemdon; & hæþne men ærest ofer winter sæton; & þy ilcan geare cuom feorðe healfhund scipa on Temesemuþan, & bræcon Contwaraburg, & Lundenburg, & gefliemdon Beorhtwulf Miercna cyning mid his fierde, & foron þa suþ ofer Temese on Suþrige, & him gefeaht wiþ Æþelwulf cyning & Æþelbald his sunu æt Aclea mid West Seaxna fierde, & þær þæt mæste wæl geslogon on hæþnum herige þe we secgan hierdon oþ þisne ondweardan dæg, & þær sige namon.

In this year, Ealdorman Ceorl, along with the men of Devonshire, fought against heathen men at Wicganbeorg, and inflicted great slaughter there, and won the victory. And in the same year King Æthelstan and lord Ealchere slew the great army at Sandwich in Kent, and they captured nine ships and put the rest to flight; and the heathen men first stayed over the winter; and in the same year there came 350 ships to the mouth of the Thames, and devastated Canterbury and London, and put to flight Beorhtwulf the king of Mercia with his conscript army, and then went south over the Thames to Surrey, and King Æthelwulf and his son Æthelbald fought against them with the conscript army of the West Saxons at Ockley, and there inflicted the greatest slaughter on a heathen army that we have ever heard of up to the present day, and there won the victory.

Several things are apparent here, not the least of which is that Alfred's father and brother, Æthelwulf and Æthelbald, are credited with the greatest slaughter of heathens to date. Likewise, the sheer geographical sweep of engagements in the space of a single year, from (presumably) Devon in the West to Kent in the East, together with the scale of the threat, given that the 350 ships estimated here come in a sense as reinforcement to a heathen army of unspecified size that 'for the first time' overwintered in England, is both stark and striking. The putative traders of the first Anglo-Saxon contact with the Norsemen had swiftly evolved into seasonal raiders; but here they are effectively invaders.

Alfred's role, after recovering from a series of setbacks that almost saw him dispossessed, was to rally his troops, fight back (famously rebuilding his naval forces), succeed in battle against heavy odds and eventually secure a settlement that would see the Danes (as the invaders were collectively identified) themselves settled across a great swathe of what had been Anglo-Saxon England, covering much of the east and north of the country, and which came to be known as the Danelaw. That such

a grave concession could be rightly seen as a victory for the beleaguered Anglo-Saxons is itself ample testimony to the parlous state of the kingdom Alfred inherited. The settlement brought a period of relative peace, during which Alfred was able to devote himself to rebuilding the shattered remnants of Anglo-Saxon learning, once the envy of Europe, but now decayed almost irretrievably. Alfred has traditionally been seen as the king who began to rebuild Anglo-Saxon England's intellectual reputation, mimicking the methods of Charlemagne, who had brought over foreign scholars to his court, including Alcuin, by relying on a small group of non-West Saxon scholars, including a Frank, an Old Saxon, a Welshman and others from Mercia, where learning had lapsed less severely than in Wessex. If doubts have been rightly expressed recently about how much of the educational programme later attributed to Alfred can really be called his (Stanley 1988; Godden 2007), Alfred's own interests (especially apparently in the traditional vernacular poetry now exemplified for modern readers by *Beowulf*, although there is no evidence that Alfred knew it) must surely have lent considerable impetus to a burgeoning body of texts that took Old English, rather than Latin, as their principal point of focus. From that perspective, let alone his other claims to historical significance, Alfred certainly helped to make England, and English, and English poetry what they were throughout the Middle Ages, and what they remain.

But if Alfred is justly famed for bringing England back from the brink, it was his successors Æthelstan (king of the Anglo-Saxons 924/5–927; king of the English 927–39) and Edgar (king of the Mercians and Northumbrians 957–9; king of the English 959–75) who can more properly be credited with creating a unified kingdom of the English. Æthelstan's interests (and indeed those of his court) were truly international, and he retained the deep interest in learning that characterised his grandfather (Keynes 1985).

The poem celebrating Æthelstan's mighty and defining victory at Brunanburh in 937 (presumably in a traditional heroic style which Alfred would have recognised) likewise takes a truly international perspective, naming (in order) Æthelstan, his brother Edmund and their father Edward briskly in the first seven lines, along with the site of their famous victory. Their enemies, first simply designated thus, are then defined as a mixture of Irish and Vikings, led by Constantine (*Constantinus*, line 38) and Olaf (*Anlaf*, lines 26, 31 and 46), in a carefully choreographed set of verses (lines 10b–12a): 'Hettend crungon / Scotta leode and scipflotan, / fæge feollon' ('the enemies perished, the Irish people, the Viking sailors, the doomed fell'), repeated soon after as a combination of Norse (*guma norðerna*, line 18) and Irish (*Scyttisc*, line 19; cf. *flotena and Scotta*, line 32), faced by the combined forces of West Saxons (*West-Seaxe*, line 20) and Mercians (*Mierce*, line 24); the victorious brothers head back to their 'homeland' (*cyppe*, line 58), the 'land of the West Saxons' (*West-Seaxna land*, line 59). The final lines of the poem seem to combine both the native and ultimately oral tradition of Old English poetry as well as written history, embodying as they do the so-called 'Beasts of Battle' motif widely attested elsewhere (Griffith 1993), but also gesturing back to a documented past and the view of Anglo-Saxon England first propounded by Bede at the beginning of his *Historia ecclesiastica*, in the passage cited earlier (*Battle of Brunanburh* 60–73):

Letan him behindan hræw bryttian 60
 saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn,
 hyrnednebban, and þane hasewanpadan,
 earn æftan hwit, æses brucan,
 grædigne guðhafoc and þæt græge deor,
 wulf on wealde. Ne wearð wæl mare 65
 on þis eiglande æfre gieta
 folces gefylled beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
 ealde uðwitan, sibban eastan hider
 Engle and Seaxe up becoman, 70
 ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
 wlance wigsmiþas, Wealas ofercoman,
 eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.

They let the dark-coloured one break up the carrion, the swarthy raven, with its horned beak, and the dusky-coated one, the eagle white at the rear, enjoy their food, the greedy war-hawk, and the grey beast, the wolf in the wood. There has never been a greater slaughter in this island up till now, of folk felled with the edges of swords before this, according to what books tell us, ancient authorities, since the Angles and Saxons, over the broad seas, proud war-smiths, warriors brisk in glory, to here from the East, came up, sought out the Britons, overcame the Welsh, won a homeland.

These lines also embody elements found earlier in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (into which *The Battle of Brunanburh* is incorporated), and indeed cited above: the animal imagery, and the view of the Vikings and their allies as simply supplying carrion for the traditional 'beasts of battle', offers a fitting conclusion (for the time being) for Viking incursions first presaged by flying dragons over Northumbria reported for the year 793 (presumably a reference to the infamous dragon-headed longships [*drekkar*] of the Vikings), while the description of the battle as surpassing all other previous slaughters in Britain seems to gesture at the account for the year 851 already cited above, where the mighty victory off Æthelwulf and Æthelbald at Ockley is portrayed as 'the greatest slaughter on a heathen army that we have ever heard of up to the present day' ('þæt mæste wæl geslogon on hæþnum herige þe we secgan hierdon oþ þisne ondweardan dæg'). Note that in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, however, the customary and ultimately oral language of heroic verse ('that we have ever heard of' ['þe we secgan hierdon']) has been replaced by a clear reference to books and book-learning ('þæs þe us secgað bec'). If Æthelstan outdoes his great-grandfather Æthelwulf on the battlefield, he is celebrated for doing so in a manner of which his grandfather Alfred would likely have approved, namely in the mixed medium of written history and heroic verse. The final four lines of the poem make of the battle itself almost a reconquest of Britain, with the Anglo-Saxons, those 'proud war-smiths, warriors brisk in glory' ('Engle and Seaxe...wlance wigsmiþas...eorlas arhwate') occupying the a-lines, their conquered enemies, the Britons and the Welsh occupying the b-lines

(‘Brytene . . . Wealas’), and a pounding litany of non-alliterating finite verbs describing the successive phases of the Anglo-Saxon victory: ‘came up, sought out . . . overcame . . . won’ (‘becoman . . . sohtan . . . ofercoman . . . begeatan’).

But if Æthelstan’s victory brought some respite, and the later reign of Edgar (who died in 975) brought enough peace and stability to initiate a further flowering of Anglo-Saxon literature and learning both in Old English and in Latin that was to extend across the millennium, the Danes were far from done, and events came to a head during the lengthy reign of Æthelred, when the first seeds of the Norman Conquest were also sown. It can be a curse to reign for a long time, and certainly the reputation of King Æthelred (who reigned 978–1016, with a period of forced exile in Normandy 1013–14) seems to have declined steadily (Keynes 1978; Keynes 1986); his usual nickname ‘the Unready’ seems a cruel pun on his name: *æþelræd* means ‘noble advice’, while *unræd* means ‘bad advice’. It is striking that in the entry in the C-version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 991, when what was later clearly seen as a devastating policy was first adopted, the theme of ‘advice’ is writ large (O’Brien O’Keeffe 2001):

Her wæs Gypeswic gehergod, & æfter þon swiðe ræðe wæs Brihtnoð ealdorman ofslegen æt Mældune; & on þam geare man gerædde þæt man geald ærest gafol denescum mannum for ðam miclan brogan þe hi worhton be ðam særiman; þæt wæs ærest X ðusend punda; þæne ræd gerædde ærest Syric arcebisceop.

In this year Ipswich was harried, and very soon after that Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was slain at Maldon, and in that year it was advised that tribute should be paid to the Danes on account of the great terror that they wrought along the coast; first it was £10,000; that advice was first advised by Archbishop Sigeric.

It is hard not to associate the repetition of the element (-)ræd(-) here with the name of King Æthelred himself. The litany of payments that begins with this entry shows the utterly disastrous effects of this policy for the coming years: £10,000 in 991, £16,000 in 994, £24,000 in 1002, £36,000 in 1007 and £48,000 in 1012.

Closely connected with this *Chronicle*-entry is the extraordinarily elegiac and retrospective poem *The Battle of Maldon*, which encompasses great swathes of the nation in both geographical and social terms, so transforming a local conflict to a watershed event of national significance. The untimely, brave, noble and (if we are to credit the poem’s account) somewhat foolhardy death of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, who dies fiercely loyal to his king (Æthelred is named three times in the poem, at lines 52, 151 and 203), is matched by the brave, noble and perhaps somewhat foolhardy deaths of many (but not all!) of Byrhtnoth’s men. In the poem, the simplest and clearest expression of the heroic creed for which some Anglo-Saxons at least seem to have been prepared to lay down their lives is put in the mouth of the one lowest in social status, as if to indicate that right behaviour is not restricted to rank (*Battle of Maldon* 255–60; Scragg 1981):

Dunnere þa cwæð, daroð acwehte, 255
 unorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,
 bæd þæt beorna gehwylc Byrhtnoð wræce:
 'Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
 frean on folce, ne for feore murnan.'
 Ða hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton; 260

Then Dunnere spoke, shook his spear, a simple peasant, he shouted over everything, asked that every warrior should avenge Byrhtnoth: 'In no way can he hesitate, who thinks to avenge his lord among the people, nor care for his life.' Then they went forth, did not pay heed to life.

Here, the poet has carefully emphasised the key notions of vengeance and (not caring about one's own) life through repetition of the key elements (*wræce... urecan; feore... feores*) in successive lines; in each repetition, one element is given in the voice of the narrator, and one in the voice of Dunnere the peasant.

In this highly choreographed epitaph for Anglo-Saxon valour, Dunnere's shaking of his spear has a significance of its own, matching as it does the actions of his fallen lord, Byrhtnoth, who had likewise waved his spear (and brandished his shield) before uttering his own first words of defiance to the Danish foe (*Battle of Maldon* 42–44: Byrhtnoð maþelode, bord hafenode, / wand wacne æsc, wordum mælde' ['Byrhtnoth made a speech, brandished his shield, waved his slender ash-spear, uttered in words']). As if to emphasise that such defiant (albeit doomed) resistance belongs to an ancient ethic, the poet puts a further (and presumably proverbial) rallying speech into the mouth of the aged Byrhtwold, who brandishes shield and spear in a manner reminiscent of both Dunnere and Byrhtnoth before he speaks (*Battle of Maldon* 312–16; Scragg 1981):

Byrhtwold maþelode bord hafenode
 (se wæs eald geneat), æsc acwehte; 310
 he ful baldlice beornas lærde:
 'Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
 mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.
 Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,
 god on greote. A mæg gnornian 315
 se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.'

Byrhtwold made a speech, brandished his shield (he was an ancient retainer), shook his ash-spear; he encouraged the warriors very boldly: 'Courage must be the harder, heart the keener, mind must be the greater, as our strength wanes. Here lies our leader, entirely cut to pieces, a good man in the dirt. Ever may he mourn who thinks to turn now from this warplay.'

If the first two lines of Byrhtwold's speech represent heroic generalities of a kind that can be replicated the world over, it is the following lines, with their emphasis on the 'here', and the 'now' and the 'this' that make it plain that he is not simply dealing

in Anglo-Saxon platitudes; if the wages of heroism is death, then at Maldon that debt fell due.

The quixotic actions of Byrhtnoth and at least some of his men showed that not all Anglo-Saxons were content to cave in to Danish threats, despite the later and bitter complaints of Archbishop Wulfstan (who died in 1023) in his trenchant 'Sermon of the Wolf to the English' (*Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*), a stock speech, to judge by its survival in full in three different versions in five separate manuscripts and the evident recycling of part of it elsewhere in Wulfstan's work, as was his wont (Orchard 1992; Orchard 2003b; Orchard 2004; Orchard 2007). The *Sermo Lupi* paints a grim picture of cowardly and cowed Anglo-Saxons who repeatedly refuse to stand up to the Viking threats, and in the longest version of the speech that survives, Wulfstan, quoting from a letter of Alcuin's, cites the same reasoning as Gildas (whom he names): just as the Britons received divine retribution for their sinful lives at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons, so too now do the Anglo-Saxons at the hands of the Vikings.

Wulfstan, a wily law-maker and politician, maintained a prominent position not just during Æthelred's reign, but also that of Cnut, the Dane who replaced him; indeed, he wrote law-codes for both. But if the pernicious policy of paying off the Danes (so-called 'Danegeld'), begun in 991, signalled the beginning of the slow decline of Anglo-Saxon moral standards that Wulfstan was to castigate so comprehensively two decades later, still more disastrous was the so-called 'St Brice's Day Massacre', when Æthelred ordered the killing of 'all the Danes who were among the English people' on 13 November, 1002 (ASC C: O'Brien O'Keeffe 2001):

& on þam geare se cyng het ofslean ealle þa deniscan men þe on Angelcynne wæron;
ðis wæs gedon on Britius mæssedæg, forðam þam cyninge wæs gecyð þæt hi woldan
hine besyrwan æt his life & siððan ealle his witan & habban siþþan þis rice.

And in that year the king ordered all the Danes who were among the English people to be slain on St Brice's Day, because the king had been told that they planned to kill him treacherously, and then all his councillors, and then take control of his kingdom.

Wulfstan's own role in this extraordinarily provocative pogrom is unclear (Wilcox 2000), although presumably as a senior member of the *witan* (the king's councillors, apparently threatened in the putative Danish plot) he would have played some part. What is certain is that not all the Danes in England were destroyed, though the loss of some very senior figures, most notably the sister of King Svein Forkbeard of Denmark, seems to have led directly to a dramatic increase in Danish attacks, so much so that the C-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1011 could make a bold connection with the name of the ill-advised king 'noble-advice' and state baldly that 'all these misfortunes befell us through bad advice' ('Ealle þas ungesældā us gelumpon þuruh unrædas'; O'Brien O'Keeffe 2001).

The writing was on the wall for Æthelred, who saw his kingdom conquered by Svein, who went into exile in Normandy with the ducal family into which he had married through the redoubtable Emma during the years 1013–14, and who was

allowed to return to reclaim his kingdom on the sudden death of Svein, 'if he were willing to govern more properly than he had before', according to the C-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* ('gif he hi rihtlicor healdan wolde þonne he ær dyde'; O'Brien O'Keeffe 2001). Cnut had other thoughts, however, and returned to England with overwhelming force, taking Æthelred's kingdom, his life and (eventually) his wife. These extraordinary events, told extremely sympathetically from Emma's own point of view, are detailed in a Latin text composed while Emma was still alive, namely the intriguing *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, composed by an anonymous monk of Flanders, which can be closely dated (at least in its final version) to the period 1041–42 (Campbell 1998; Orchard 2001a). Cnut's marriage to Emma (the precise circumstances of which are somewhat sketchy) in 1017, set the seal on the next and final phase of Anglo-Saxon England, as the new (and still) Queen Emma had to come to terms with the fact that her two children by Æthelred, Edward and Alfred, were safe in exile with her family in Normandy. Emma herself, wife of two kings of England (Æthelred and Cnut) and mother to two more (Harthacnut, son of Cnut, and Edward the Confessor, son of Æthelred), embodies the complex and explosive mix of Norman, Norse and Anglo-Saxon interests that was to shatter Anglo-Saxon England in 1066 when King Harold Godwinsson, brother-in-law to Edward the Confessor and son of one of Cnut's most prominent earls (Keynes 1994), had to face in battle first King Harald Hardrada of Norway, who regarded himself as Cnut's heir, at Stamford Bridge, then Duke William of Normandy, Emma's nephew and one who had spent much time with his cousin Edward while the latter was in exile in Normandy (Keynes 1991), at Hastings. In effect Æthelred's marriage to Emma of Normandy marked the beginning of the end for Anglo-Saxon England.

After Cnut's death and a brief shared reign between two of Emma's sons, each the offspring of a different king, it was Edward, Æthelred's son, who gained sole control, following the sudden (and, to some, suspicious) death of Harthacnut in 1042. The twenty-four years of Edward's reign were marked by the king's piety, patience, and prudence, a period of relative stability before Anglo-Saxon England disappeared in the bruising confusion that the quiet and childless Confessor bequeathed to a kingdom that for most of his life he likely never thought he would control. The C-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 1065 inserts a striking poem, again in traditional style, to mark the death of Edward the Confessor (O'Brien O'Keeffe 2001):

And Eadward kingc com to Westmynstre to þam middan wintre, and þæt mynster
þar let halgian þe he sylf getimbrode Gode to lofe and Sancte Petre and eallum Godes
halgum, and seo circhalgun g wæs on Cildamæssedæg, and he forðferde on Twelftan
æfen, and hyne man bebyrigde on Twelftan Dæg on þam ylcan mynstre swa hyt
heræfter seigð.

Her Eadward kingc, Engla hlaforð,
sende soþfæste sawle to Criste
on godes wæra, gast haligne.

ruled the dear kingdom of England for a tally of twenty-eight years, doled out wealth. Thereafter there came forth, splendid in array, a king fine in virtues, pure and mild, the noble Edward defended his homeland, country and people, until suddenly there came bitter death, and snatched that noble so dear from the earth; angels carried his righteous soul into the light of heaven. Nonetheless, the wise man entrusted the kingdom to a high-ranking man, Harold himself, the noble earl, who had always obeyed loyally his lord, and in no way held back what was the due of that great king.

The shadow of Æthelred, and the trauma of his later years, lies heavy over these verses. In detailing the peoples over whom Edward ruled, this 'son of Æthelred' (*byre Æðelredes*, line 10) is carefully positioned between 'the Welsh and the Irish and the Britons' ('Walum and Scottum and Bryttum', lines 9–10), on the one hand, and 'the Angles and the Saxons' on the other (line 11); the phrase 'mighty champions' (*oretmægum*, line 11) could grammatically refer to all five of the peoples Edward ruled, but most easily applies only to the Anglo-Saxons themselves. It is notable that the word 'king', in various manifestations (*kingc*, line 1; *kinge*, line 13; *kyng*, line 15; *kyningc*, line 23; *þeodkyninges*, line 34), refers only to Edward, although Æthelred (lines 10 and 18), Cnut (line 18), and even the hapless Harold (line 30) are all named. Unlike his badly advised father, Edward is designated explicitly as 'skilful in advice' (*cræftig ræda*, line 5), and as if to make amends for the obvious if derogatory pun on Æthelred's name, the poet makes the etymological connection between the second element of Edward's name and the Old English verb *werian* ('to defend'), as well as between the adjective *æðel* ('noble') and the noun *eðel* ('homeland'), in a single line that described how 'the noble Edward defended his homeland' ('Eadward se æðela eðel bewerode', line 24). The nobility of Edward is a constant theme (it appears in lines 6, 14, 24 and 26), and the fact that of the other named characters in the poem only Harold is similarly described as 'the noble earl' ('æpelum eorle', line 31) connects both of them to the 'homeland' (*eðel*, line 24) of Anglo-Saxon England far more closely than either Æthelred or Cnut. That Edward was half-Norman and Harold half-Danish seems to have mattered little to this Anglo-Saxon poet, who finds time to praise them both, at a time when Anglo-Saxon England itself would be dead, politically at least, before a year was out.

In our modern age, when even the term 'Anglo-Saxon' can summon up images of WASP-y, insular, bigoted, aggressive and ignorant types of racist or white supremacist dogma, it is as well to bear in mind that the Anglo-Saxons (as their name suggests, a designation initially bestowed upon them by Continental authors keen to mark a sharp break with their Insular brethren) were themselves a mongrel race of immigrants who assimilated more or less happily, but at least easily, both with those they conquered and with those (notably the Norsemen and the related Normans) who later conquered them. Many kindreds and cultures contributed to the multilingual mixture that Anglo-Saxon England always was, from the earliest periods we can trace; and it is that ability of the Anglo-Saxons to adopt and adapt to other cultures that has ensured that, even now, there is something both strange and familiar about the legacy that they left.

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