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From Vindolanda to Domesday: the book in Britain from the Romans to the Normans

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Covering more than a millennium of the history of the book in Britain, the present volume by itself deals with a longer period than do all the rest of this series put together. Extending from Roman Britain to the first generation of the Anglo-Norman realm, it embraces both of the two 'memorable' dates in English history (55 BC and AD 1066); and stretching in bibliographical terms from the Vindolanda Tablets through the Lindisfarne Gospels to the Domesday Book, it includes some of the most famous and fascinating artefacts of written culture ever produced in these isles.

The first millennium is also notable as the period during which Britain was repeatedly invaded – by Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans – with a consequent ebb, flow and cross-fertilisation of cultural life. A grand narrative of bibliographical history may be constructed around these momentous events. In outline, one sees the arrival of books and Latin literacy with the Romans; their decline in lowland Britain (in contrast to their presumed survival in other regions) following the departure of the legions and the settlement of the Anglo-Saxons; and the reintroduction of (now specifically Christian) literary culture to these areas as an integral part of the missions from Rome and Ireland, leading in turn to masterpieces of book production and decoration from the end of the seventh century into the eighth. Then, during the period of the Viking invasions, there was the demise of book-making and even of clerical literacy. A revival from the end of the ninth century, slow at first, quickened during the second half of the tenth century, and was complemented by a growth in the production of works in Old English, a phenomenon which flourished above all in the eleventh century. The last main development (only the earliest stages of which fall within our period) was a reorientation in perceived library needs in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, and hence a change in the type of books that were sought and copied.

The many individual chapters that follow, fleshing out this skeleton, deal with specific topics, generally within particular sub-periods. To introduce the field as a whole, providing a context for all this material, it will be useful to highlight here some broad points of comparison and contrast between the world of books in the main periods – Roman, pre-Viking, post-Viking, early Norman – that are treated in this volume.

Although no examples have come down to us, we may reasonably assume that most of the books that were available in Roman Britain will have taken the form of *rotuli* (rolls). There is no reason to doubt that the owners of villas in Britain, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Roman Empire, will have had collections of texts on *rotuli*, which were stored in *capsae* (bucket-like cases) or in deep cupboards whose internal spaces may have been subdivided into 'pigeon holes'. The rise of the codex to a predominant position as the vehicle for literary texts, a phenomenon of the fourth century AD, is likely to have touched Britain as much as elsewhere. Another of the key bibliographical changes of late Antiquity, the adoption of parchment instead of papyrus as the support for formal writing, may indeed have been precocious in Britain owing to the abundance of suitable animals (for parchment) on the one hand and the great distance from the Nile (the source of papyrus) on the other. As the codex had a close association with Christianity, one presumes that the earliest Christians in Britain, too, will have had their scriptures in this form, and that after the edict of Milan (AD 313) it, like the religion, will have prospered. Whatever the truth of this point, the future belonged to the codex, and all the extant books considered in the present volume take this form. We may accordingly list the shape and nature of books among the many points of contrast distinguishing the culture of Britain in the fourth century from the seventh: at the end of the fourth century, while new books may have been made as codices (as was the norm for Christian scriptures), older ones in *rotulus* form were doubtless still in circulation. The books that missionaries brought to Anglo-Saxon England from the end of the sixth century onwards and all those that were then made in Britain were of codex form.

Concerning the status of those who manufactured books, one presumes that in Roman Britain (as elsewhere in the Roman Empire), it was principally the responsibility of appropriately qualified slaves, freedmen and 'secretaries'. By contrast, for much of the Anglo-Saxon period – and in the poorly documented British and Celtic realms no less than in the English regions – the production of books was manifestly the prerogative of ecclesiastics, a few of whom may occasionally have been working for important lay folk. Only at the very end of our period do we begin to encounter evidence of paid professional

involvement – and in the context of production that is still firmly linked to ecclesiastical centres.

In terms of their content, the book collections of Roman Britain will have been dominated by the Latin classics – as is implied by the citations that appear on a couple of the writing tablets from Vindolanda and by the subject matter of contemporary mosaics – with, in the fourth century, an increasing number of Christian texts (sufficient, evidently, to educate the infamous late antique heretic, Pelagius (fl. *c.* 380–420)). In early Christian Britain, by contrast, gospel-books and psalters were doubtless the most common and widely distributed texts, along with some liturgica. Pedagogy may have provided some common ground between all our periods – to the extent that the curriculum of Christian schools incorporated texts and grammars of Antiquity and late Antiquity.

A handful of exceptional early Anglo-Saxon centres, such as Wearmouth-Jarrow and York in the north and Canterbury and Malmesbury in the south, accumulated a sufficient quantity and range of books for their holdings to be described as libraries. Very few of the manuscripts in question appear to have survived the period of the Viking invasions, let alone down to the present day. Insight into the nature of these collections is largely dependent on the writings of their most illustrious alumni. Notwithstanding the uncertainties and ambiguities involved in deducing from haphazard citations, allusions and requests what may actually have been in the book cupboards, such libraries would seem to have numbered a couple of hundred volumes at the most. Without placing too much weight on the details of Alcuin's poetic evocation of the holdings of York in the later eighth century, the general impression that he gives of a cross-section of the writings of the Fathers of the church along with some Latin classics and other pedagogical works is likely to be sound.

The collections that were amassed by the major monasteries of late Anglo-Saxon England seem on the whole to have been more restricted in range, with an emphasis on devotional and pastoral texts rather than the writings of the church Fathers, and with multiple copies of the works of a small number of late antique and Anglo-Saxon Christian poets rather than a range of classical ones. On the other hand, this was the period when works in the vernacular, above all homily collections, began to be produced in significant numbers, some destined for wide distribution. While many late Anglo-Saxon volumes continued to see active service in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, there was then a reorientation towards accumulating runs of patristics. A 'snapshot' of one important monastic book collection at the very end of our period is provided by the overview of Ely's holdings that is embedded

within the *Liber Eliensis*: in or around 1093 the foundation possessed some 300 manuscripts, of which nearly 100 were service-books (including twenty-two psalters, nineteen missals and fourteen gospel-books) and just over 200 were other types of texts.

If in Roman Britain books might be used for entertainment as well as for education and religion, the first role was hardly to survive into subsequent centuries. Conversely, in the Anglo-Saxon period (as presumably in poorly documented sub-Roman Britain) books took on enhanced functions as a prerequisite of Christian devotion, some moreover becoming cult objects in their own right. From *c*. 600 the works of Latin classical authors which might previously have been read not only as an essential part of a liberal education but also as a civilised pastime were – if they were used at all – exclusively an adjunct to a more narrowly focused educational curriculum wherein they illustrated good style for students of the language. It was for this purpose, one presumes, that St Dunstan (d. 988) famously had a Celtic copy of Ovid's *Ars amatoria* (Book I) in his so-called 'Classbook', nestling between Eutyches' *Ars de uerbo* on the one hand and computistical and liturgical texts on the other.

Concomitant with their centrality to Christian devotion and ceremony in the early Middle Ages, gospel-books and psalters became foci for calligraphic elaboration and artwork. If there were ornamented copies of classical texts in Roman Britain, their decoration is likely to have taken the form of illustrations to the text, with perhaps a prefatory image of the author shown as a contemplative philosopher-type. Pictorial art in the finest books of Christian Britain (as in early medieval Europe as a whole) was often directed towards stressing the divine inspiration of the authors and hence the sacred status of their texts. Furthermore, some of the lettering of these holy works might be embellished, projecting by means of ornamentation the sacrality of their words and messages. Luxurious treasure bindings completed the transformation of such books from vehicles of written communication to resplendent, sacred objects with great intrinsic as well as symbolic or communicative value. St Boniface (d. 754), the Anglo-Saxon missionary to Germany, advertised the values and purposes of such deluxe volumes when requesting Abbess Eadburh of Minster-in-Thanet to make him a golden copy of the Petrine Epistles, the appearance of which would impress the heathen with its importance; moreover, as he goes on to underline, the making of such a manuscript would itself bring spiritual rewards to those involved.

If the percentage of society that was personally literate will always have been small, it was surely significantly higher in Roman Britain than in early Christian Anglo-Saxon England. A presumed expansion in the numbers of

literate clerics in the later seventh to eighth centuries, as oblates benefited from the educational opportunities provided by newly established religious foundations, was followed by a demonstrable contraction in the ninth century – a phenomenon eloquently lamented by Alfred the Great (d. 899). The subsequent growth in the use of the vernacular as a literary language, decisively promoted by the same king, meant that the content of certain types of books was in principle accessible to all hearers at least. Indeed, certain collections of Old English homilies seem to have been multiplied and distributed precisely in order to reach the widest possible audience in this way. In the generation after the Norman Conquest, as the larger ecclesiastical institutions turned their energies towards amassing runs of patristics, the emphasis was upon books for *lectio divina*, even theological study, but for internal use – i.e. there was a wider range of texts and a greater depth of holdings for just one restricted class of audience. Moreover, the relatively pristine condition of certain of these volumes gives rise to a suspicion that they may sometimes have been copied more to complete 'sets' than for active service: they filled a gap in a collection rather than meeting the urgent needs of readers.

Many of the books used in Roman Britain are likely to have been imported from elsewhere in the Roman Empire, arriving via well-organised routes of communication. The possibility of such distribution lies behind the rueful quip of the classical poet Martial (d. AD 101×4) to the effect that his work was even read in Britain (*Epigrammaton libri XII*: XI, 3). Notwithstanding the subsequent demise of a pan-European political authority, the circulation of books between Britain and her neighbours was to remain a major phenomenon throughout our period; moreover, Ireland was added to the places with which there was bibliographical exchange. The Christian missions from Rome (via Francia) and from Ireland defined the earliest channels for the importation of books to Anglo-Saxon England; by the eighth century England was herself exporting manuscripts (including a few that had come from Italy a century earlier) to the new mission fields in Germany. From the end of the ninth century books started to be imported to England from the Carolingian Empire, with some arriving from the Celtic realms; while from the end of the tenth century Anglo-Saxon books were increasingly reaching the Continent, above all nearby Flanders and Normandy. The Norman Conquest, which fostered bibliographical exchange between England and Normandy in particular, was merely refocusing a very long-established tradition.

The phenomenon continued at more local levels. There is plentiful evidence, direct and indirect, for the circulation of books and texts between different regions of Britain as between individual centres within regions. In the

eighth century Albinus of Canterbury dispatched material to Bede at Jarrow, and Milret of Worcester's copy of Porfyrius was on loan to a Cuthbert who was almost certainly the archbishop of Canterbury of that name; at the end of the ninth century King Alfred envisaged sending a copy of the Old English *Pastoral Care* to all the bishoprics in his kingdom, where they might in turn be copied for further distribution; from the early eleventh century Ælfric's *Sermones catholici* were being disseminated around southern England; and when at the end of the century St Albans was building up its library by copying exemplars that were supplied by Lanfranc at Canterbury, it typified a trend. Such narratives of bibliographical exchange sometimes correspond to broader patterns of intercourse known from other sources, at other times they complement them, but the fact that books and texts were frequently on the move throughout our period is not in doubt.

The survival rate of books from our four broad sub-periods is most uneven. Younger volumes have of course had fewer centuries and hazards to traverse, and hence a stronger survival is to be expected. In addition, the ravages of the Viking age clearly inflicted particularly severe damage on the great book collections of early Anglo-Saxon England, just as the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons themselves had doubtless been highly destructive to the literary remains of Roman and sub-Roman Britain. Moreover, in this last case (the earliest material) there was the additional vulnerability that some, perhaps many, Roman books were made of papyrus, a far less durable material than parchment, particularly in the cool damp climate of Britain. Thus while we have hundreds of manuscripts from late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman times, and barely a hundred (of which many are fragmentary) from pre-Viking England, there is not a single example from Roman Britain.

There are no less significant imbalances within the body of extant material itself. The survival of books from the British and Celtic realms is very poor in comparison with that from England (and the manuscripts from these regions which have come down to us had often migrated to England or elsewhere at some point prior to the sixteenth century). It is inconceivable that the many learned British (*plures uiri doctissimi*) mentioned by Bede (*Historia ecclesiastica*, II, 2) did not have access to books, possibly in significant quantities, but no trace of one now remains. Again, despite fairly plentiful evidence for the early church in Cornwall and Wales, no manuscripts older than the ninth century survive from these regions. Correspondingly, it is difficult to point to manuscripts of Scottish provenance before the tenth-century Book of Deer (demonstrably at Deer in Aberdeenshire in the twelfth century) and the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon gospel-lectionary that belonged to Queen Margaret of Scotland

(d. 1093); yet the traces of parchment-making unearthed at the monastery of Portmahomack in Pictland, and Bede's reference to the ecclesiastical writings (*scripturae ecclesiasticae*) read by the Pictish king Nechtan at the beginning of the eighth century (*Historia ecclesiastica*, v, 21), remind us of the presence and manufacture of books there at a much earlier date. Sadly, but inevitably, however, given the dearth of extant material, these regions and their early bibliographical history are doomed to be under-represented in any discussion: we must remain mindful that this is so.

The imbalances continue into the (rather larger) corpus of Anglo-Saxon books. The sample of early Anglo-Saxon manuscripts is misleadingly dominated by fine decorated ones – which doubtless owed their survival to their high grade and treasured status. And even from late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman England, periods when manuscripts are altogether more plentiful, various classes of material are massively under-represented in the sample – school books, for instance, because they were 'used to death', and liturgical books because, if they had not already been superseded and scrapped centuries before, they were outlawed at the Reformation. Furthermore, many individual centres of production and use have misleadingly poor showings. The nature (whether 'secular' or monastic) of a foundation in the sixteenth century and its survival or otherwise at the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536–40) had an enormous impact on the transmission of its books, as did its geographical location and the existence or otherwise of conveniently placed antiquaries and local collectors. Moreover, in the absence of early medieval catalogues and 'library markings', our ability to localise surviving manuscripts to a particular house often depends on individual library practices during the later Middle Ages – the survival and quality of booklists and catalogues, the existence of identifiable shelf-marks and *ex libris* inscriptions. Indeed, there are only three centres – Worcester and the two Canterbury houses, St Augustine's and Christ Church – for which we have sufficient attributable manuscripts to permit a rounded examination of their book culture during the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Yet, as the previous paragraph hinted, our manuscripts are also part of the story that is told in successive volumes of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*: they were used and shelved in different ways in the later Middle Ages, sometimes being listed in catalogues (where their age or language was occasionally noted as distinctive); they were alienated, dismembered and subsequently 'collected' in the sixteenth century; passing thereafter through various hands into institutional *fonds*, coming to be valued, preserved, studied and exhibited as antiquities in modern times.

As the chapters within this volume tend to focus on evolving trends and innovations, it is worth reminding ourselves at the outset that 'new' collections often included 'old' books. A famous and relatively well-documented example of the phenomenon is the Lindisfarne Gospels (British Library, Cotton Nero D.iv). The oldest record concerning its production and function – an undatable Old English poem preserved within a later prose account – notes that the manuscript was written by Bishop Eadfrith (d. 721) 'for all the *halgum* who are on [Lindisfarne]' and that it was bound by Æthilwald, bishop of Lindisfarne, and adorned with a treasure cover by Billfrith the anchorite. Depending upon how one interprets *halgum* in this context, the verse may imply that the gospel-book had been made for all Lindisfarne's saints (that is: specifically dedicated to Aidan, Cuthbert and Oswald) or for all its holy folk (namely for the use and benefit of all the members of the community, present as well as past). Be that as it may, it manifestly was and remained one of the community's key treasures, carried onwards by the brothers when eventually, in 875, they abandoned Lindisfarne. The community and the gospels came to rest at Chester-le-Street in the 880s. Here, in the third quarter of the tenth century the manuscript was supplied with a full interlinear Old English gloss by the priest Aldred; he appended an elaborate colophon, restating the circumstances of the original production of the volume, weaving his own contribution as glossator into the account of its history: 'Eadfrith, Ethilwald, Bilfrith, Aldred made or, as the case may be, embellished this gospel-book for God and Cuthbert'. Artfully expanding the verses that he had inherited (whether in oral or written form is unknown), Aldred also refocused (or articulated a refocusing of) the function of the book: 'Eadfrith bishop of the Lindisfarne Church originally wrote this book for God and for St Cuthbert and – jointly – for all the saints whose relics were in the island.' By the tenth century, then, the manuscript was explicitly seen as made for a celestial company, above all God and St Cuthbert; indeed Ealdred tells us that his own (new) work as glossator was accomplished 'with the help of God and St Cuthbert'.

In 995, within a generation of Aldred's contribution, the community of St Cuthbert (and its gospels) moved on to Durham, which in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest was reformed into a Benedictine priory (1083). The continuing importance of the venerable Anglo-Saxon gospel-book to this new Benedictine community at the northern extremity of the fledgling Anglo-Norman realm is underlined in the 'house history' that was written at the beginning of the twelfth century by its cantor, Symeon. He it was who recorded how the Lindisfarne Gospels had played a decisive role in the history of the community at one of its darkest hours. During its wanderings, the

community had resolved to return to Ireland, and duly set sail; however, when their gospel-book 'ornamented with gold and gems' was washed overboard, they realised the folly of their plan, begged divine forgiveness, and headed back to England. Thanks to a vision of St Cuthbert, who instructed them to search the shoreline, they recovered 'that same holy book of the gospels which retained its enrichment of gems and gold on the outside as on the inside it showed the former beauty of its letters and pages, as if it had not been touched by the water at all'.

Symeon sums up by linking past and present – the creation of the book on Lindisfarne four centuries before and its veneration in Durham in his own day: 'Now the aforementioned book is today preserved in this church which has merited to have the body of that same holy father, and in it … there is no sign that it has been harmed by the water. This circumstance is believed certainly to be due to the merits of St Cuthbert himself and also of those who had been the makers of the book.' After describing the contributions of Eadfrith, Æthilwald and Billfrith in similar, though not identical, terms to those used by Aldred in the tenth century, he concludes: 'these men … left in this work something through which all those who come after them may appreciate their devotion towards the saint'.

In like manner, through the rich material examined in the present volume, may be appreciated the devotion to manuscripts, learning and book-crafts, as well as the spirituality, of early Britain as a whole.