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1   Anglo-Saxon society and its literature

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

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

before then is to give an impression that it was somehow programmed to develop in a way which other European countries took up to a millennium to follow. That in turn devalues the statecraft of its founders.

Little can be known of the period between 407 and 597, when most of what had been Roman 'Britannia' was settled by Germanic-speakers whom it is convenient to call Anglo-Saxons – though the Angles and Saxons, from the neck of the Jutland peninsula in Denmark and the north German coast (see Fig. 1), were certainly accompanied by others from the Low Countries and perhaps Scandinavia. Most of the sources that purport to tell this story were assembled at a much later date from suitably adjusted oral tradition, myth and imaginative fiction. What can be said for sure is that, by the time we have serviceable records, the leading language of lowland Britain was a variety of Germanic most closely resembling that spoken on the opposite side of the North Sea. Archaeology gives some support to the impression of colonization from that general area. It also testifies to a sharp economic decline in the quality of life once sustained by the Roman province; and, by the sixth century, to the emergence of a warrior culture, whose men were buried with weapons of war, and women with rich jewellery that illustrated its profits.[2]

The picture perceptibly clarifies from 597, because Pope Gregory the Great in that year sent a mission to the people that he called the 'Angles'. Christianity, a 'religion of the Book', brought literacy on a wholly different scale from whatever forms of written communication pagans may have used. Before long, it brought written history. The story of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity was told by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, finished in 731, perhaps the most eloquent historical work of the European Middle Ages. The political pattern revealed by Bede comprises a dozen or more kingdoms *c*. 600, varying in size from the Isle of Wight to Deira (roughly modern Yorkshire, between the rivers Tees and Humber: see Fig. 2). The trend of the seventh and eighth centuries was for pike to swallow minnows. The predatory metaphor is apt. King Cædwalla of Wessex, which covered all south-western Britain (except for Cornwall) by the 680s, graciously conceded baptism to two young princes of Wight, so that when he beheaded them as part of a plan to 'exterminate all natives', they could go at once to heaven (*HE* IV.16). The process of elimination left just four kingdoms by *c*. 800: Northumbria (Deira plus Bernicia, the region extending north to the Firth of Forth); East Anglia (modern Norfolk and Suffolk, whose names witness its own bipartite origins); Wessex; and Mercia, occupying the whole Midland area between the other three. In the later eighth century, Mercia was certainly the most powerful of these realms. Its greatest king, Offa (757–96), overran the kingdoms of Sussex, Kent and East Anglia. But there is no clear sign that this process would eventually

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

were no more than deified heroes: Bede thus had no difficulty in giving
Woden his traditional place in royal genealogies (*HE* I.15). In this
connection, there is a possible Irish contribution too. Mainstream the-
ology discouraged speculation about the afterlife of the unbaptized, and
forbade prayers for them. But a persistent theme in Irish Christianity was
a refusal to see good pagans as damned. The problem of the Antipodes
(featuring in a hymn ascribed to Columba) worried Irishmen, because it
raised the issue of those with no chance to hear Christ's word. Ancestors
matter to most aristocracies: an eighth-century continental king preferred
feasting with his forebears in hell to dining alone in heaven. Hence, a
relative optimism about the spiritual fate of ancestors could well explain
why Irish conversions 'stuck', whereas those by continentals wavered. But
perhaps most important of all is that the Old Testament was the story of
another tribal people with a special relationship to the God of Battles.
That the spread of Christianity has not spread 'peace on earth' is a truism.
Some kings went Guthlac's way, among them Cædwalla, the ferocious
conqueror of Wight who abdicated to go on pilgrimage to Rome (*HE*
V.7); but not many. Nor was it demanded of them. The Bible itself gave
Anglo-Saxons a warrant for a sincere change in their faith without a
revolution in their society.

One aspect of Bede's *History* was certainly at odds with reality, but
nonetheless had the most momentous consequences. In hindsight, it is
easy to forget how strange it is that he wrote the history of the English as if
they were a single people (*gens*). The unique power of Bede's historical
vision did more than anything else to establish a united 'England' as an
ideal invoked by ambitious kings in later ages. But there was no such thing
in Bede's time, politically speaking. The conundrum is dissolved by
appreciating that this is an *ecclesiastical* history. From his Canterbury
contacts (he acknowledged that much of his information came from there,
and even implied that it had inspired the whole enterprise), Bede inherited
the notion of 'the Angles' as a single people before God, which had
inspired Gregory to send his mission, and Augustine to found 'the Church
of the English' at Canterbury. Gregory had envisaged two archbishoprics
in England and the second was ultimately established at York in 735. But
Canterbury never forgot that for two generations after Theodore's arrival
in 669, it ruled the whole English church, and it habitually saw its
responsibility in such terms. Theodore's first Council, at Hertford (672),
was clearly wider-ranging and better-attended than Whitby (though
recorded by Bede as a set of minutes (*HE* IV.5–6), whereas he made
Whitby an impassioned debate). Among its canons was a proposal for all
the bishops of the province to meet annually. By the end of the eighth
century, if not before, something like this regularity was achieved, and
frequent synods must have fostered a sense of ecclesiastical unity. A

council of 747 ordered celebration of the feasts of Gregory 'our father' and Augustine his emissary. By the early eighth century, Bishop Aldhelm at Sherborne and Bishop John of York (d. 721) had been pupils at Canterbury and had doubtless absorbed its way of thinking about church and people (*HE* IV.23 and V.3). Thus, although Bede's was the most powerful voice to speak of the English as a single *gens*, it was not alone. The same note is sounded by the biographer of Gregory the Great writing at Whitby (where Bishop John had been an *alumnus*); by the West Saxon, Boniface (d. 754), who sought to carry the faith over to his people's 'blood and bone' in continental Saxony, and who did so in the closest contact with Rome; and by Alcuin.[7] Much more than grandiloquent claims to *imperium* or 'rule of Britain', the self-styled 'Church of the English' laid ideological foundations for what would come later. It is worth adding that, because councils of the church in the later eighth and early ninth centuries were usually attended by the king and magnates of the dominant Mercian kingdom, they may have furthered notions of some common destiny between secular and ecclesiastical establishments.

The special circumstances of Anglo-Saxon conversion had important implications for the development of a vernacular literature. The role of Canterbury in fostering a sense of English unity may be paralleled by the particular interest of Archbishop Theodore in the possibilities of the English language. Granted the vernacular's early debut in the laws of Æthelberht, it is still necessary to explain how Anglo-Saxons, almost alone among heirs to Christian Latin culture, used their poetry and prose to celebrate its wonders. Theodore was a Greek (from St Paul's home town of Tarsus, a point not lost on grateful English disciples). The eastern church always approved the use of native vernaculars more than the aggressively Latin west, from the days of Ulfila, apostle of the Goths and author of the Gothic Bible, to those of the Eskimos in nineteenth-century Kamchatka. It is thus interesting that Bede should go out of his way to describe how a pupil of Theodore was proficient in *his own language* as well as Latin and Greek (*HE* V.8); hardly a remarkable fact if he merely spoke it. And Theodore's school at Canterbury has recently been shown to have spawned a family of glosses which have frequent recourse to vernacular translation, and which are the oldest glosses of this type in Europe.[8] It may therefore be no coincidence that, according to Bede, the first Anglo-Saxon to compose Christian poetry in his own language, Cædmon, was a cowherd at the abbey of Whitby (*HE* IV.24): Whitby's links with Theodore, through Bishop John and others, were noted above. Nor is it likely to be accident that the bulk of vernacular literature from ninth-century Germany, the only real continental counterpart to Anglo-Saxon output, was variously connected with the abbey of Fulda, founded by the English Boniface; or that the Old Saxon *Heliand* clearly refers to the

Cædmon story in its preface: what marked out English Christian culture as exceptional was also to be found where Anglo-Saxons could pass it on.

If the fact that the English church was put in order by a Greek archbishop may help to explain a development of religious verse with no real parallel in Germanic Europe, it cannot account for the corpus of secular 'heroic' poetry; poetry which deals primarily with the ideals and exploits of a warrior society, poetry whose major representative is *Beowulf*. (Current *Beowulf* scholarship has gone far to discredit previous belief in the poem's early date, but has not yet proved that it was late; and it is appropriate to discuss problems of heroic poetry here, because even a late *Beowulf* must have drawn on earlier tradition.) Although the *Beowulf*-poet knew only the Judaeo-Christian God, he also knew that his heroes were pagan: they cremated their dead, a rite never acceptable to the church. The western church officially disapproved of celebrating pagan heroes, for the reason already given: they were (probably) damned. 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?', demanded Alcuin (referring to a hero who does appear in *Beowulf*) in a famous letter to an English audience: 'the eternal king reigns in Heaven, the lost pagan laments in hell'.[9] Suspicion of the Latin classics did not of course prevent the intensive study without which few of them would have come through the 'Dark Ages'. But that point actually exposes the basic contrast between the two literatures. Nearly all Old English poems survive only in single manuscripts, but heroic verse is extant in mere fragments, apart from *Beowulf* itself, preserved (it seems) because it is about outlandish monsters, like most of the other texts in the manuscript. The sole continental example of heroic verse, the *Hildebrandslied*, may also be a fragment; and, in view of what has just been said, it is perhaps significant that this single truncated specimen comes from Fulda. There must have been something dubious about such material to explain its tenuous survival. However, the Irish did not share the pessimistic view of ancestral prospects; their learned elite ensured that Ireland's was the one early medieval culture, other than England's, with rich vernacular ingredients, including a large body of secular literature about a pre-Christian heroic past. Anglo-Saxons had no learned caste of the Irish type, but many of them were converted by Irishmen, who had found a place for pagans in a Christian cosmos. There is a strong temptation to connect the major Irish role in Anglo-Saxon evangelization with the fact that Ireland and England were the only two parts of the West to celebrate ancestral heroes in their own tongue.

On another view, it might be argued that there is no need to invoke the Anglo-Saxon church in order to explain the existence of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. Substantial written composition must be the work of Christians, because the runes used by pagans were not (so far as is known) deployed at length. But why should *Beowulf* not have been written by a

layman? There is very little evidence for Anglo-Saxon lay literacy in the
early period, and in any case nothing had much chance to survive unless it
was eventually copied and kept in a church library. Title-deeds of
property or privilege, for example, called 'charters' by Anglo-Saxon
historians, were often given to laymen, but all those that are extant had
found their way at some point to ecclesiastical archives. Writings intended
for entertainment presumably had less chance of survival than legal
documents. But if we must conclude that *Beowulf* was ultimately copied
by clerical scribes, then clerical hostility to it had clearly to that extent
been suspended; so that the main reason to argue its original composition
by a layman vanishes. Besides, the ample evidence that churchmen *should
not* have bothered with such texts is often evidence that in fact they *did*,
and it shows why. Alcuin's letter is mainly an attack on an extravagantly
worldly clerical way of life. The council of 747 mentioned above, and a
letter of Boniface that partly prompted it, likewise condemn the drinking,
feasting, hunting and dragon-decked clothes of the clergy; and these
upper-class habits are significantly linked with the patronage of harpists,
and liturgical chanting 'in the manner of secular poets'. As the English
church became 'established', it tended, as church establishments have (to
the anger of Christian enthusiasts, from Christianity's founder onwards),
to be identified with society's ruling class. The personnel of the early
medieval western church was dominated by the aristocracy. To sing, or to
write, of its warrior prototypes came as naturally to them as to live in the
style to which, as noblemen, they were accustomed.

The aristocratic ambience of Anglo-Saxon Christianity is crucial.
External inspiration may be a necessary condition for the existence of
vernacular literature, but it is by no means sufficient. Aristocratic infil-
tration of the church meant that the idioms of heroic poetry passed into
the medium of religious verse. That is not to say that all poems in this style
were written by or for noblemen, merely that aristocratic literature set its
tone. The cowherd, Cædmon, was obviously not an aristocrat, but the few
lines ascribed to him exploit epic vocabulary. 'Dryhten', here and else-
where the poetic word for the Lord God, meant 'lord of a warband' in
Beowulf and the early Kentish laws. Nor does it deny the real theological
sophistication of some poetry to say that its images of warfare, endurance
or 'lordlessness' often come from the young warrior's world. Much of the
creative impulse in early English Christianity derives from an aristocratic
ethos, whether in literature or in the artistic achievement made possible by
aristocratic wealth, and inspired by the love of display that was wealth's
normal outlet.

Secular heroic poetry seems to reflect the lifestyle and values of warriors
themselves. Protagonists are called *eorl*, the term for 'nobleman' in
Kentish law. Their normal weaponry (mailcoat, helmet, sword) is rare