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Edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

	<i>List of contributors</i>	page vii
	<i>Preface</i>	ix
	<i>Note on the text</i>	xi
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
	<i>Chronological table of the Anglo-Saxon period</i>	xii
	<i>Fig. 1 Map of the Germanic peoples of the Migration Age (c. 400–c. 600 AD)</i>	xiv
	<i>Fig. 2 Map of Anglo-Saxon England</i>	xv
1	Anglo-Saxon society and its literature PATRICK WORMALD	1
2	The Old English language HELMUT GNEUSS	23
3	The nature of Old English verse DONALD G. SCRAGG	55
4	The nature of Old English prose JANET BATELY	71
5	Germanic legend in Old English literature ROBERTA FRANK	88
6	Heroic values and Christian ethics KATHERINE O'BRIEN O'KEEFFE	107
7	Pagan survivals and popular belief JOHN D. NILES	126
8	<i>Beowulf</i> FRED C. ROBINSON	142

Cambridge University Press

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Edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi	Contents	
9	Fatalism and the millennium JOSEPH B. TRAHERN, JR	160
10	Perceptions of transience CHRISTINE FELL	172
11	Perceptions of eternity MILTON MCC. GATCH	190
12	Biblical literature: the Old Testament MALCOLM GODDEN	206
13	Biblical literature: the New Testament BARBARA C. RAW	227
14	The saintly life in Anglo-Saxon England MICHAEL LAPIDGE	243
15	The world of Anglo-Saxon learning PATRIZIA LENDINARA	264
	<i>Further reading</i>	282
	<i>Index</i>	292

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Edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

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

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

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface

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

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

MALCOLM GODDEN
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June 1990

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Note on the text

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

Abbreviations

- ASE *Anglo-Saxon England*
- ASPR The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York, 1931–42)
- EETS Early English Text Society
- EHD *English Historical Documents, I: c. 500–1042*, ed. D. Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London, 1979); cited by page number
- HE Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* or *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969); also trans. L. Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1955)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Chronological table of the Anglo-Saxon period

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

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Chronological table

xiii

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

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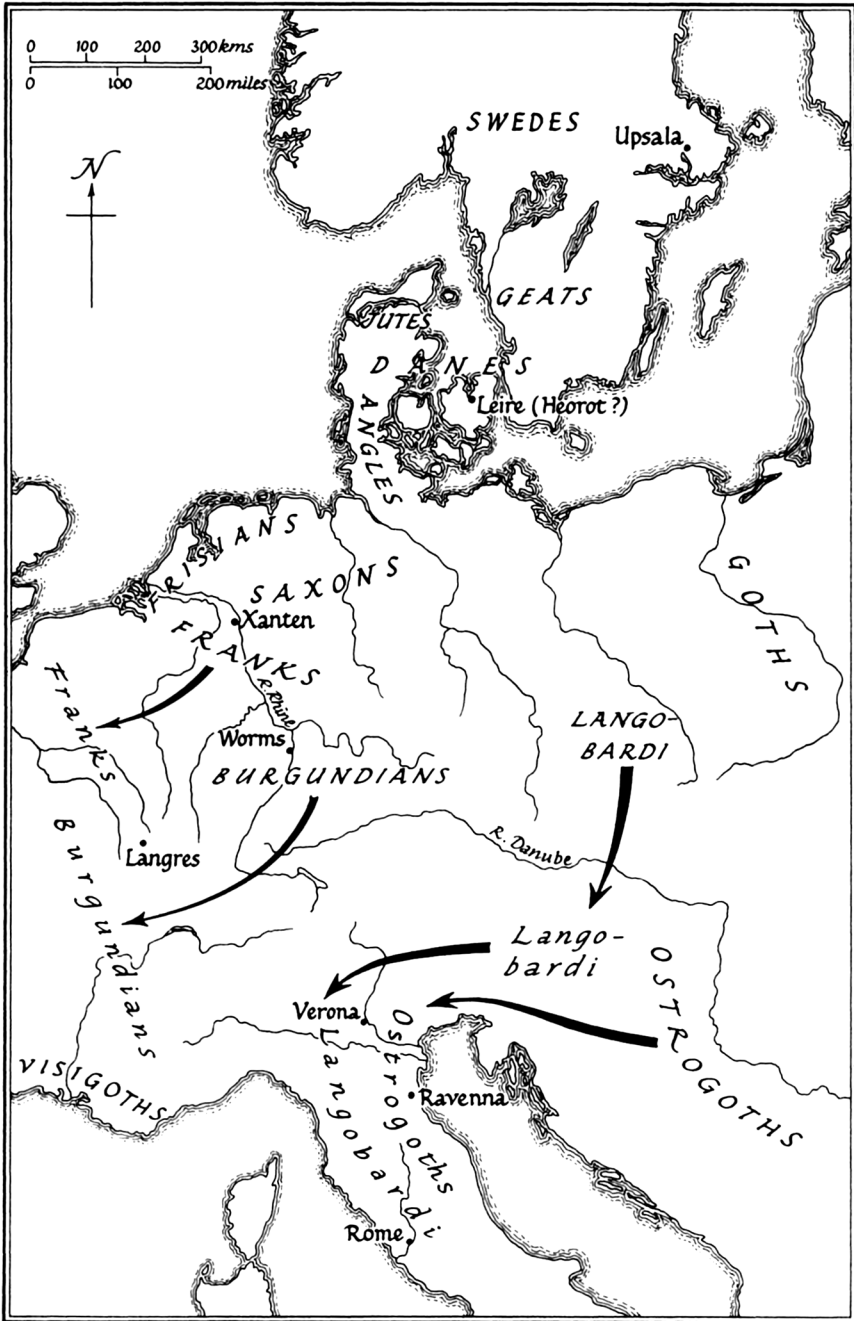


Fig. 1 Germanic peoples of the Migration Age (c. 400–600 AD)



Fig. 2 Anglo-Saxon England