

## Introduction

How did the world look to English people of the early Middle Ages, from about 500 to 1100? The answer, of course, would vary from one individual to the next. Yet even 1,000 years later, we can discern key commonalities in the mental pictures of the world that early English writers described. First, they found it fascinating. They wrote about the world right around them and about more distant peoples and places. They described the Earth as spherical, with three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. They knew best the lands closest to them, where they had connections through family, religion, and trade. Their sense of place became less detailed and precise as distance grew, and they did not always distinguish real places from imaginary lands.

Early medieval English people concentrated on peoples rather than places. They named kingdoms and cities, but they often preferred terms that referred to people: *Angelcyn* (English people) to *Englaland* (England), *Francena ric* (kingdom of the Franks) to *Francland* (Francia), *Indisc men* (Indian men) to *Indie* or *India* (India). They also generally focused more on inhabitants of a place, including animals, monsters, and hybrids, than on natural and built landscapes.

Their interest in peoples led them to construct race and ethnicity. They did not categorize peoples precisely as we do now, but their race-making has influenced later thinking to the present day. While English writers sometimes depicted European neighbors as having different customs, even strange ones, they rarely portrayed them as physically different. But they described Jews and some inhabitants of Asia and Africa as culturally and sometimes physically different from other Europeans.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, they preferred to depict the world in words rather than maps. Surviving sources for early medieval English ideas about the rest of the known world include few maps but many documentary and literary sources, including travel accounts. Charters and annals describe very local landscapes. Knowledge of the wider world often came from classical and biblical sources. The historian Bede (fl. ca. 700–35) takes care to document the sources of his information about places from his own monastery to Rome to the outskirts of heaven. Other writers are less concerned to cite authority and to distinguish among fact, fiction, and fantasy. The *Beowulf* manuscript depicts monsters and dragons close to home (and connected with the Hygelac of actual Scandinavian history) in *Beowulf*, and more distant creatures in the *Wonders of the East* and the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, fantastic accounts of strange and monstrous humans and animals to be found beyond the boundaries of the known world.

<sup>1</sup> A forthcoming Element in the Cambridge Elements in England in the Early Medieval World series will deal more directly with race.

Early English views of the world matter partly because they continue to affect contemporary anglophone conceptions of space, place, race, ethnicity, and religious identity. Early ideas that were not carried forward to the present still matter because they are important to understanding the past and its texts, and to denaturalize how we see the world now. Crucially, early medieval English texts and occasionally maps can show us alternative ways to view the world, and with both contemporary and past perspectives in mind, we can find new ways of looking as well.

Early maps that survive offer a useful introduction to early medieval English understandings of the world. So-called T-O maps (for example, MS Royal 6 C I, folio 108 v, 1075–1100; see Figure 1) represent the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile and Don Rivers as a “T” inside an “O” outlining the continents with the east at the top, as was common in the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Asia is at the top, Europe at bottom left, and Africa at bottom right. Outside the first “O,” a second delineates the oceans and, according to contemporary geometry, indicates a sphere. Much more detailed than typical T-O maps, the Cotton World Map (MS Cotton Tiberius B.v, folio 56, 1025–50; see Figure 2) depicts oceans, rivers, mountains, and cities and names peoples, animals, and monsters alongside geographical features. In the original, surrounding oceans and the Mediterranean Sea are in gray, with other bodies of water in red; mountains are green.

The British Isles are near the bottom left corner of the Cotton World Map; only the mythical Thyle lies beyond them.<sup>3</sup> Britannia wraps around Ireland (*Hibernia*) to the east and south. The map names Scotland (*Camri*), Kent (*Cantia*), and the cities of London (*Lundonia*) and Winchester (*Wintonia*). The Orkneys are north of Britannia and the Jutland Peninsula is just to the east. Across the Channel are South Britons (*Suðbryttas*). France or the Franks have no label, and the Iberian Peninsula seems to extend north of France almost to Britain; it is home to the Brigantia, a Celtic people. Like the map of England, the map of Italy contains much detail; cities include Verona, Rome, Pavia, and Ravenna. The map also names Finns (*Scridefinnas*), Slavs (*Sleswic* and *Sclavi*), and Huns (*Hunorum gens*).

Jerusalem is near the center of the Cotton World Map, with Bethlehem nearby; several biblical cities and tribes are named. To the east, the map identifies Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and India (“in which there

<sup>2</sup> The British Library’s open-access image of the Royal of the T-O map is at [www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\\_ms\\_6\\_c\\_i\\_f108v](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_6_c_i_f108v) and the Cotton World Map is at [www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\\_ms\\_tiberius\\_b\\_v!1\\_f056v](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v!1_f056v). See also Foys, Crossley, and Wacha, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> The name Thyle would later become associated with Iceland, but to classical and early medieval authors before the Norman Conquest, it signified the ends of the Earth; see Kedwards, 2020, 127–41.



**Figure 1** T-O Map (MS Royal 6 C I, folio 108v)

Source: © British Library Board, MS Royal 6 C I, folio 108v

are 44 peoples [*gens*]).<sup>4</sup> Asia includes mountains, rivers, and the Arabian Desert. A gap in the Red Sea is labeled “transitus Hebreorum” (the crossing of the Hebrews). A drawing of a lion (*hic sunt leones*, here are lions) is near the top left, the only drawing of an animal on the map. Asia is also home to “griphorum gens” (gryphon people, elsewhere identified as animals), as well as Gog and Magog, biblical individuals, tribes, or regions, identified in the Middle Ages with giants. The map extends as far east as Tabrobana (Taprabane in the Old English *Orosius*, later in this section), known today as Sri Lanka.

Africa includes Carthage, Tingis (modern Tangier), Alexandria, and Mauritania. Libya and Ethiopia are both identified with three different places. Africa is labeled “powerful, but also more abundant with beasts and full of serpents.” South of the Nile are “barbarian” Gaetuli, “the peoples of Gaulolum, extending all the way to the ocean,” and “cinocephales” (dog-headed ones): Africa includes people who are not fully human. The Cotton World Map does not offer accurate proportions or even relative directions in many places; England and Europe are both disproportionately large and Africa comparatively

<sup>4</sup> Latham, Howlett, and Ashdowne, 1975–2013, offer “race, nation” as the first definition for *gens*; it may not correspond exactly to modern Western notions of race, but the sense of distinction among peoples comes through. Nicole Lopez-Jantzen, 2019, distinguishes “race,” a hierarchical system based on origins, from “ethnicity,” classification without hierarchy.



**Figure 2** Cotton World Map (MS Cotton Tiberius B.v, folio 56)

**Source:** DEA PICTURE LIBRARY/De Agostini via Getty Images

tiny.<sup>5</sup> Yet it sketches the outlines of the known world and gives a sense of Britain's place: large enough to be significant but near the edge of the known world. Though it is difficult to know how early medieval English writers understood the locations of Africa and Asia, they richly imagined their animal, monster, and human inhabitants, in texts that defined places outside of Europe in problematic ways that resonate into the present. Histories, homilies, saints' lives, and poetry developed these ideas in greater detail.

<sup>5</sup> The commonly used Mercator projection map today makes Western Europe look larger, and Africa smaller, than they really are.

*Writing the World in Early Medieval England*

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A scrap of Latin lore found in two manuscripts characterizes the various peoples of the world with a single word each. As written in British Library manuscript Harley 3271, the passage reads:

Victory belongs to the Egyptians, ill-will to the Jews, wisdom to the Greeks, barbarity (or savagery) to the Picts, cunning and strength to the Romans, liberality to the Langobards, appetite to the Gauls, arrogance and ferocity to the Franks, ire to the Britons, stupidity to the Saxons and Angles, and lust to the Irish. (Estes, 2012, 641)

This passage, a similar version of which survives in British Library manuscript Cotton Caligula A. xv, shows the early medieval English compartmentalizing peoples by supposed dispositions, anticipating racial and ethnic stereotyping that persists to this day. Intriguingly, English writers themselves described Saxons and Angles as “stupid” (or at least copied the description), suggesting disdain for their compatriots based on stereotypes.

Most sources address geography and peoples with more nuance. In the sections that follow, we analyze texts from several different genres with different purposes and expectations. Histories often advanced overarching narratives and, along with chronicles, claimed authority to represent the past accurately. Paulus Orosius, an Iberian priest, wrote *Historiarum adversum paganos libri vii* (*Seven Books of History against the Pagans*) in Latin shortly before 420 to argue that Christianity brought peace, not devastation, to Rome. It influenced Bede, Alfred, and anonymous English homilists and was adapted into Old English around 900 with abridgements and other changes (Bately, 1980). The translator retained much of the opening detailed geography of the known world, but made some updates and other changes, some accurate, some erroneous. The Northumbrian monk Bede in 731 completed his Latin *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), centered on the conversion of peoples in England to Roman Christianity.<sup>6</sup> This text, invaluable for our knowledge of early medieval England, shows the perspective of a learned writer informed by classical, patristic, and earlier Insular writers who himself influenced later writers; more than 160 medieval manuscripts of the text still exist, and an Old English version was written around 900. Bede opens with a short geography of the British Isles. A set of texts called the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was probably initially produced at the West Saxon court to give an account culminating with Alfred the Great, King of Wessex.<sup>7</sup> As copies

<sup>6</sup> We follow a common translation of the title here, but note that Harris, 2003, demonstrates that Bede frequently uses Angli for “Anglians” rather than the English as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> We avoid the term “Anglo-Saxon” (see later in this section) and so after this call the text the *Old English Chronicle* or simply the *Chronicle*.

were continued in different places, later entries sometimes diverged according to the interests of different communities or scribes.

Poetic and prose saints' lives and biblical adaptations often took considerable license with their sources in service to religious or literary agendas.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of early English poems survive in just four manuscripts. The Junius manuscript (Krapp, 1931) comprises poetic adaptations of parts of Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel, followed by *Christ and Satan*, which narrates Satan's temptation of Jesus and Jesus' victory over Satan in hell. The Exeter Book (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936) contains both secular and religious poems, many quite short. The Vercelli Book (Krapp, 1932) contains poems, including *Elene* and *Andreas*, alongside prose homilies. Finally, the Beowulf manuscript includes the poems *Beowulf* and *Judith* (Dobbie, 1953), and the prose *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Wonders of the East*, and *The Passion of Saint Christopher* (Fulk, 2010). Dates of composition for Old English poems are disputed, but these four poetic codices were all written down in about a fifty-year period around the end of the tenth century. Biblical poems draw upon the Bible for authority, but the poets select portions, add and omit details, and give their own emphases, making different kinds of truth claims than the histories.

The Bible known to the English was a Latin translation of a third-century Christian redaction of the Hebrew scriptures, appropriated as the "Old Testament," in combination with gospels, letters, and other materials called the "New Testament." The Hebrew Scriptures, written by Jews living in Israel, codified the Israelites' laws alongside histories of kings and prophets. Some Jews living in the last century before the Common Era believed that certain passages presaged a savior and that Jesus (Hebrew "Joshua") filled that role.<sup>9</sup> But to the extent that Jews believe that the Bible predicts a redeemer, they envision a human political leader still to come. Christians believed that their interpretation of what they called the Old and New Testaments constituted the only truth. As Christianity grew in power, adopted by Constantine and subsequent Roman emperors, the presence of Jews who disputed the basic premise of their religion became increasingly problematic for Christians.

Jews may have been in early medieval England as individual slaves or traders; communities are attested in archaeological and documentary sources only after the Norman Conquest. The strong presence of Jews in Old English poetry and prose "is solely a textual phenomenon, a matter of stereotypes embedded in long-standing Christian cultural traditions" (Scheil, 2004, 7).

<sup>8</sup> For biblical books, we use roman type, and for the poems based on them, we use italic.

<sup>9</sup> We use "Common Era" (CE) and "Before the Common Era" (BCE) rather than language drawn from Christianity – that is, "Before Christ" (BC) and "Anno Domini" (AD, "the year of our Lord").

English travelers to Aachen, Rome, and Jerusalem likely encountered Jews as well as Muslims. Christian writing about Muslims in the early medieval period expressed antipathy based on religious difference, but often with less antagonism than that expressed toward Jews, and chiefly in documentary texts. The many homilies and poems describing Jewish perfidy in terms stronger even than the language of the Gospels may owe something to the religious situation of early medieval England. Though Christianity had become the religion of England's kings, there were backsliders, and the survival of place-names with pagan elements in areas more remote from towns suggests the persistence of pagan beliefs and practices quite a bit later than written records from the period would admit (Estes, 2007). Insistence on the alterity of the Jews allows the English to express a sense of identity: if their ancestors had been pagans, as remembered in *Beowulf*, and if some among them still held to older customs, at least they could be unified as *not* Jews.

What the English called themselves is complicated. Scholars studying the early Middle Ages in England have long called the period and its people “Anglo-Saxon.” The term, along with “Anglo-Saxonists” for the people who study it, has been rightly critiqued, and scholars substituted “Old English” for “Anglo-Saxon” as the name of the language decades ago. “Anglo-Saxon” was little used by people of the period. Some mainland European writers used Latin forms of the term, leaving a score of surviving appearances from the fourth through sixteenth centuries, but almost none of them were English; Alcuin, who hailed from York but spent much of his adult life among the Franks, was exceptional in using the term.<sup>10</sup> It appears in just over three dozen Latin texts from early medieval England, virtually all charters, to refer to the king of the united kingdom of Anglians and West Saxons – not to all of what is now England. It occurs only three times in Old English, and two of those are in texts that also contain Latin. No form of “Anglo-Saxon” was ever in wide use by the English people during the early Middle Ages. The term became widespread only much later, among people looking back at the period.

Many of the name's original enthusiasts were men such as Thomas Jefferson, whose love for the people and language he called Anglo-Saxon was bound to his conception of them as uniquely suited for rational self-rule, from which he excluded Native Americans and Black people (Vernon, 2018, 3–5). That tradition neither began nor ended with Jefferson, and the terms “Anglo-Saxon” and “Anglo-Saxonist” have been and continue to be used by white supremacists as self-designations (Rambaran-Olm, 2018 and 2019; Wilton, 2020). Therefore, we do not use this term; instead, we call the people the early medieval English,

<sup>10</sup> Wilton, 2020, identified the occurrences in this paragraph.

the language Old English, and the aforementioned *Chronicle* the Old English *Chronicle*.

*The Dictionary of Old English* cites about 225 occurrences of “English” as an adjective and 350 as a noun. *Englisc* (with many spelling variations) referred to the language, to people living in England who claimed kinship with Germanic-speaking tribes, and to such people with Germanic kin who had moved elsewhere. Bede tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History* that “Anglorum siue Saxonum gens” (the race of the Angles or Saxons, Colgrave and Mynors, 1969) came from three powerful Germanic tribes: the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (I.15). Bede’s Latin *Angli* usually refers to Anglians, the descendants of the mainland Angles (Harris, 2003, 45–82); the Old English *Bede* translates this as *Ongol* or *Ongolpeod* (Rowley, 2011, 57–70).<sup>11</sup> Early English people also identified as Saxon, often combined with a direction such as *Eastseaxe* (East Saxon) or *Subseaxe* (South Saxon).<sup>12</sup> Another name for the English is *Angelcyn*, which Sarah Foot argues King Alfred the Great (ruled 871–99) promoted in translations associated with his court to unite his original West Saxon subjects with Kentish people and Mercians who came under his rule; more than half of its more than 200 occurrences in the surviving Old English corpus appear in the *Chronicle* and more than a quarter in the Old English *Bede*. Foot comments that rhetoric did not mean full unity: “Those who might at times have defined themselves as English would simultaneously recognise other loyalties: to their king, to their lord, to a village, to a region” (1996). Crucially, the “English” were never a single race or ethnicity. The “Angli” who gave the people their name had migrated from mainland Europe and joined numerous other linguistic and ethnic groups and individuals from across Europe as well as Africa and the Middle East (Karkov, 2020, chapter 4).

This Element begins with England and moves outward, from the places most familiar to the English to those least known. Section 1 treats England and Scandinavia, whose inhabitants spoke languages similar to English, and some of whom raided England starting in the late eighth century and then settled there. England had close but fraught ties with Scandinavian neighbors and immigrants. Section 2 explores England’s views of the rest of mainland Europe. Many English nobles and churchmen and -women had close ties to Franks in what are now France, Germany, and the Low Countries. Rome was a religious and political center in Europe. The English had contact with Eastern Europe and with Spain; some writers show hostility to Muslims living there.

<sup>11</sup> Old English spelling was not as fixed as Modern English, so “Angle” appears variously as *angel-*, *angl-*, *ongel*, *ongl-*, and occasionally in other forms.

<sup>12</sup> Surviving today in the place-names Essex and Sussex.



Section 3 moves beyond Europe. Like Rome, Jerusalem was a religious center; unlike Rome, it had significant Jewish and Muslim populations. English writers were intrigued by what they considered holy lands around Jerusalem. They admired some men and women of the Hebrew Bible whom they considered exemplary, while presenting most Jews after the coming of Christianity as wicked. Most sources ignore contemporary Muslims, a few treat them pragmatically, and a few demonize them. Section 4 moves into Asia and Africa, lands even fewer English people would know directly. Historians show some sense of different peoples on these continents and their connections to better-known places such as Greece and Rome, but poems and wonder texts often depict inhabitants of these distant places as monstrous. Section 5 discusses imagined lands, places that depart even further from reality with marvelous creatures, people, and animal-human hybrids. Section 6 examines hell, purgatory, and heaven, which are sometimes treated more soberly than the imagined lands of Section 5: early English writers expected everyone to go to at least one of the three destinations. Our Conclusion briefly looks ahead to the later effects of early medieval English ways of seeing the world.

## 1 England and Scandinavia

Though twenty-first-century novels, films, and video games often imagine the people of the British Isles as ethnically and religiously homogeneous, and these imagined versions of the medieval sometimes influence political movements, the English were never a single ethnicity. Those who would become English combined Celtic and Germanic roots with many other influences, including from Eastern Europe and North Africa. The nation as a political entity occupying stable geographical territory did not yet exist. The fluid alliances and conflicts among the peoples in the British Isles partly reflected the fact that the English themselves lacked a unified identity for much of the pre-Conquest period. They had different relationships of alliance, coexistence, and enmity with their Welsh, Irish and Scottish, and Scandinavian neighbors, and with peoples of mainland Europe.

The British Isles had been a place of immigrants for millennia. Cheddar Man, found in Somerset, lived more than 9,000 years ago. He was a hunter-gatherer with darker skin than was later typical among Northern Europeans. Other waves of immigration likely occurred before Celts from mainland Europe moved into the British Isles by 1000 BCE. All these peoples maintained ties to the mainland, and Romans came repeatedly; Julius Caesar attempted to conquer Britain in 55–54 BCE, and Claudius succeeded in 43 CE. Roman troops occupied England from 43 until around 410; Celts served in the army alongside soldiers

from elsewhere in the empire, and Jews were likely present as slaves and/or traders. Bede's geographical introduction to his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* recalls a more urban, Roman past: Britain enjoyed fame for its twenty-eight cities and many other fortified settlements (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, I.1). Immigration from a wide area continued even after the Roman withdrawal. Oxygen isotopes in drinking water vary by place and are absorbed in children's teeth, making it possible to identify where a person grew up. They indicate that people buried in British cemeteries from the late Roman era through the Middle Ages originated in many different parts of Europe and around the Mediterranean, including North Africa. Grave goods support these findings (Green, 2016a and 2016b). Ethnicity and cultural identity fluctuated, and peoples intermarried. Different groups within England drew on both internal and mainland European influences to create their own fashions and societies starting in the late fifth century (Fleming, 2010).

Modern people seek linguistic and geographical precision, terms that include every member of a group and no one from outside. We want maps that delineate borders and coordinates to show where land meets water and where polities begin and end. Medieval people knew that affiliations and lands change. People moved, aligned with other cultures, spoke new languages and dialects. Shorelines altered, rivers changed course (Wickham-Crowley, 2006). Those now called "English" did not have a unique name for themselves in the early Middle Ages, nor did they always identify as one people. The English also had complex relationships with Celts, who shared the British Isles with them; and Scandinavians, who sent attackers, settlers, and even kings of England. Thus, "England" and "English" in the early Middle Ages are surprisingly difficult to define.

### Early Medieval England

Early medieval English language and culture were shaped by the migration of Germanic peoples in the fifth century. The Old English version of Orosius' *History of the World* describes world geography at length but mentions "Brettannia" only sparingly, and mostly in relation to other places; the text omits some details about the British Isles found in the Latin. There are a few scattered references. Writers more frequently describe smaller areas: fens, ruins, or battlefields; in charters, they list local landmarks, both natural and human-made. The Old English *Chronicle* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* are the most extensive sources for information about early medieval England. Both have limitations.

Under King Alfred, manuscripts of the known *Chronicle* up to about 890 were created, copied, and distributed to several different monasteries for continuation; in *Peterborough*, the longest-running version, scribes added material