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 Provencal, 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 dominated most of England, and some of Scotland and Wales. Documentary evidence shows that the status was claimed by the Mercian king, Æthelbald (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 adoption 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 provincial 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. One was led from Rome by Gregory’s disciple, Augustine. It was at first effective with Æthelberht of Kent (HE 1.25–6), 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
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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
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were no more than deified heroes: Bede thus had no difficulty in giving Woden his traditional place in royal genealogies (HE 1.15). In this connection, there is a possible Irish contribution too. Mainstream theology 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 Caedwalla, 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, Caedmon, 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
Caedmon 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’. 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 infiltration 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 elsewhere 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
enough in burials to imply that it was elite equipment. Older scholars spoke of a ‘heroic code’, prompting a reaction in the later twentieth century, when Wagnerian images have acquired unhappy connotations. The phrase is unhelpful insofar as it turns social ethic into legal prescription. The aristocratic warband’s values were neither more nor less binding than those of a ‘gentleman’ in a later age: they lose reality as soon as they are precisely defined; they were certainly honoured in breach as much as observance; but they did express the behaviour that a socially dominant class thought proper. The fundamental principle was that the warrior owed loyalty (in theory to the point of death) in return for his lord’s generous reward (see also below, pp. 109–11). The ethic is the same as that of ‘feudalism’, which was simply the period in the history of European lordship when landed reward was central to the relationship instead of just one (usually the last) of the lord’s gifts. A recurrent crux of saga is the conflict between loyalties to kindred and lord, memorably epitomized in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard: the former’s warriors ‘said that no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord, and they would never serve his slayer’. Lordship loyalty usually prevails in such tales, but this is not evidence that it was replacing older kinship ties: literature has a predilection for tension that is dramatic because untypical, and a warrior society’s literature naturally favoured the bond that cemented it.

If heroic poetry is a mirror of a warrior aristocracy, society is also to be viewed from other angles. The major alternative source for early social relationships are law-codes: three seventh-century codes were issued by Kentish kings, and that of King Ine of Wessex (c. 690) is preserved as an appendix to the laws of Alfred. These texts show a stratified society, where nobles and slaves both feature prominently, but whose central figure is simply ‘free’. Noble or free status was inherited, and expressed by a ‘wergeld (man-money)’, payable to one’s kin in the event of violent death by the killer(s). Noble blood cost proportionately more than a free man’s: up to six times more in Ine’s Wessex. A slave had no wergeld as such, but his owner was compensated if he was harmed. Æthelberht’s and Alfred’s codes both give elaborate lists of bodily injuries, with the payment appropriate to each: ‘if a big toe is cut off, let one pay 10/20 shillings’. The point of such a stress on compensation is that early Anglo-Saxon ‘law and order’ derived from blood-feud. The prospect of vengeance by victim or kin was what deterred aggressors, and the price of blood allowed it to be bought off. Those unable to pay faced a choice of enslavement by an injured party, or exile out of reach of its revenge. The feuds and exiles that bedeck heroic poetry were to this extent part of everyday life.

Impressions of society drawn from legal sources are not, after all, so
difficult to reconcile with the literature. Lordship was already making its weight felt in Ine’s laws: freemen could be enslaved for working on Sunday, ‘unless at a lord’s command’. Assessment in hides, units of land originally reflecting the annual needs of a free man and his family, was used to provide king or lord with heavy food-renders. Landlordship and aristocracy tend to go together. Overall, it is from the warrior aristocracy revealed in the literature that the dynamic of change in early Anglo-Saxon society and politics seems to come. The emergent kingdoms of c. 600 probably formed around the nucleus of the warrior communities buried in the last phase of pagan cemeteries. The successful seventh-century kings were those whose open frontiers to the north or west gave them access to the loot and lands that would buy the loyalty of warriors, not to mention their specialist wargear. Seventh-century historical narratives offer several examples of young adventurers like Guthlac, their services available to a high bidder, and of exiles who sometimes, like Cædwalla of Wessex, returned to rule. The resentment and rebellion that cut across any putative ‘road to English unity’ are just what the unquenchable feuds of heroic tradition would lead us to expect. In the best account of heroic society, H. M. Chadwick observed that military nobilities are a cosmopolitan crew, without an inherent loyalty to kings or heroes of their own people, and with a propensity to find ‘role-models’ throughout the world where they traded their support. It is a warning not to think in terms of automatic national solidarities. And it is a reminder that, as exponents of a late dating for Beowulf rightly stress, not all Anglo-Saxon noblemen would see the Danish Scyldingas of its opening lines as their natural enemies.

The first of the changes that distinguish Britain under Anglo-Saxons from Anglo-Saxon England was economic. It began back in the seventh century with a revival, or perhaps an unprecedented growth, of trade across the Channel and the North Sea. This stimulated, and was itself stimulated by, replacement of a monometallic gold currency with lower value silver coins better suited to everyday market business. A result was the reappearance of what can be called towns on the English coast, like Hamwih, planned in an orderly way for dense population, and more than twice the size of its successor, medieval Southampton. Trade was now based not on the local exchange of necessities and long-distance transfer of luxuries that humanity has practised since hunter-gatherer days, but on low-value commodities transported in bulk. A famous letter of Charlemagne to Offa reveals an exchange of English cloth for continental lava used to make querns. It is part of the evidence that kings protected merchants at the price of levying tolls on their transactions. Offa, like Frankish kings, established a monopoly for coins issued in his name, and must have profited from it. In the long run, the economic expansion that
accelerated again from the later ninth century was of course a major determinant of social change. By 1066, one Anglo-Saxon in ten lived in what one can call a town, a ratio that stayed roughly the same until the Industrial Revolution. A law-tract by Archbishop Wulfstan of York (1002–23) looked with significant nostalgia back to times when social ranks were stable, while conceding that a trader who thrice crossed the sea at his own expense earned the rank of ‘thegn’ (the usual late term for nobleman). His famous ‘Sermon to the English’ more hysterically complained that slaves had become their owners’ masters. Social mobility was never excluded in wergeld-based society, but it can only have been boosted by urban and commercial growth. In the shorter term, the enhanced power of a king like Offa may have been based on the ability to cash in on economic change; if so, it foreshadowed that of Alfred and his successors. But, in the short term too, the commercial vortex in the Channel and North Sea sucked in the Scandinavian pirates known to themselves as Vikings.

The ninth-century Viking invasions mark the obvious watershed between the first and second phases of Anglo-Saxon history. English sources perhaps exaggerated the scale and destructiveness of Viking activity, but this should not obscure its impact, especially after 865 when raiding gave way to invasion in considerable force. An undoubted consequence was the elimination of two of the four remaining kingdoms, Northumbria (866–7), then East Anglia (869), whose king, Edmund, was killed in a way which suggests ritual sacrifice to some scholars, and which made him a culted martyr like Oswald. A third kingdom, Mercia, was reduced to a rump ruled by the fourth, Wessex (874–7). Much of north-east England was settled by Scandinavian-speakers; intensively so, to judge from their linguistic effect on English generally, and on the area’s place-names. The same area lacked bishops for seventy-five years or more, and its pre-Viking records have almost all vanished, arguing wide-scale disruption and destruction. The tale of how King Alfred (871–99) burned the cakes because he was distractedly brooding on the low ebb of his political fortunes, shows that Wessex itself very nearly succumbed (878). But Alfred rallied, and kept out later attacks in the 890s by an effective scheme of defensive fortification, planned in an extant administrative document, the Burghal Hidage, and itself a stimulant to urbanization. Alfred could thus pose as the one remaining champion of Angelcynn; he was the first king whose titles claimed rule over all the English (rex Angulsaxonuni/Anglorum Saxonum).13

The opportunity was seized by his able children, Edward the Elder (899–924) and Æthelflæd ‘Lady of the Mercians’ (d. 918), and his no less gifted grandsons, Athelstan (924–39), Edmund (939–46) and Eadred (946–55). East Anglia and north-east Mercia were overrun (912–19),
then Northumbria (927—54). Athelstan’s great victory over a coalition of Scots, Welsh and Dublin-based descendants of Northumbria’s Viking conquerors at Brunanburh (937), was seen by his family as their finest hour. Scottish and Welsh kings were invited (or obliged) to attend the royal court. The apogee of English kingship (as one can now say) was the reign of Edmund’s son, Edgar (957—75). He was crowned at Bath in imperial style, then was rowed on the Dee at Chester by eight northern or western kings (973). But when he died, things began to go wrong. His son, Æthelred (978—1016), gained his sobriquet ‘the Unready’ (a pun to the effect that ‘noble counsel’, Æthel-ræd, had ‘no counsel’, Un-ræd) from a resurgence of Scandinavian assault in his reign, as described with jaundiced genius in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A highlight in the catalogue of Anglo-Saxon defeats was the Battle of Maldon (991), when Ealdorman Byrhtnoth of Essex and his warriors were defeated and killed. The raids and invasions from Scandinavia culminated in the Danish King Cnut establishing himself as king of the English after Æthelred’s death in 1016. He and his sons ruled until 1042, when the old line was restored by Æthelred’s son, Edward ‘the Confessor’. The latter’s childless death in 1066 led to the succession of his brother-in-law, Harold, and so to catastrophe at Hastings, compared to which the Maldon disaster was a mere skirmish.

The inability of the new kingdom of England to resist conquest raises the possibility that its structure was flawed. The brilliant campaigns of Alfred’s children Edward and Æthelflæd are known as ‘the Reconquest of the Danelaw’, which is a tribute to West Saxon image-building. It was in fact a conquest of land that no southern king had ever ruled before. There is evidence that it was resisted by Englishmen as well as Danes, especially in Northumbria, where the final defeat of the Viking claim with the death of Eric Bloodaxe (954) led to the imprisonment of the English archbishop of York. The north-east of England came to be known as the ‘Danelaw’, reflecting the development of an Anglo-Scandinavian culture on which Viking language and custom left an ineradicable mark (‘law’ is one of innumerable Scandinavian contributions to standard English vocabulary). The conquest of Cnut may have begun as an effort to take control of an overseas colony, like those that Norwegian kings made in the North Atlantic at this time. England in the eleventh century was divided into four earldoms, which corresponded to the kingdoms of the ninth, and must have reflected their lingering political significance. Mercian and West Saxon nobilities tended throughout the period to back different claimants to the throne. The last act of Anglo-Saxon history began with a major Northumbrian revolt (1065), aiming to put a Mercian earl (grandson of Lady Godiva, the second most famous Anglo-Saxon) in place of Tostig, another brother-in-law of King Edward. The kingdom of England did not
fuse spontaneously; it had to be welded by the mixture of force, cajolery and propaganda that is the stuff of statecraft in any age. Nonetheless, the English kingdom was a reality by the eleventh century. There is evidence that speakers of what we call Old English were willing to call themselves ‘English’, when few if any of their eastern neighbours thought themselves ‘German’. The earldoms cannot be seen as heritable or semi-independent principalities, like the French Duchy of Normandy. All successful early medieval hegemonies were founded, like that of the kings of Wessex, on their makers’ ability to pose as a people’s champion against the common enemies of their faith as well as their property. But Alfred and his family began with an asset that Charlemagne’s Carolingians in Francia and Germany’s Ottonian dynasty lacked: they could build on the sense of ideological identity that the English had been given by Bede. Chadwick made the striking point that the two heroic poems that certainly were written after 900, on the Battles of Brunanburh and Maldon, express precisely the note of authentic ‘patriotism’ that is absent in the others.

The real political weakness of the English kingdom was a dynastic instability such as was fatal to many early medieval monarchies. The Norman Conquest was the climax in a series of disputed successions, whose drastic consequences arose from the determination of William the Conqueror’s followers to share the spoils of his victory. In that context, it is arguable that an efficiently run kingdom was easier to conquer. The evidence is that late Anglo-Saxon government was highly efficient. Its main instrument, the shire under its ‘sheriff (shire-reeve)’, stayed largely intact for a millennium, the envy of the Ancien Régime. Coinage was controlled to a degree that is credible only because proven by coin-finds. Vast sums were raised in Danegeld, monies used to buy off the Danes, for Kipling the badge of Anglo-Saxon shame, but a resource that Norman kings would labour in vain to levy so profitably. Anglo-Saxon society still consisted of a military nobility, like ‘feudal’ Normandy or most of the rest of eleventh-century northern Europe. It even had its own badge: the significance of the moustaches worn by most heavily-armed English in the ‘Bayeux Tapestry’, is shown by the fact that Harold’s martial chaplain ‘wore his moustaches during his priesthood’, and though he shaved on becoming bishop of Hereford, he still contrived to be killed fighting the Welsh in 1056 (the virtue of moustaches was of course that they were emblems of virility but did not, like beards, give useful leverage to an enemy in close combat). As elsewhere, this nobility was sustained by the labour of peasants, and the social trend was for free status to be eroded by the spread of rural serfdom. Yet if the warrior aristocracy sounds the leitmotif of the earlier period, the keynote of the later has become the making of an English state.  

The charter of the new state was King Alfred’s law-code. The preface
began by quoting three and a half chapters of the Mosaic Law from the
biblical Exodus, then went on to put the codes of Æthelberht, Ine and
Offa into the tradition of Christian law-giving beginning with the Council
may once have reconciled Anglo-Saxon warriors to a new faith, now
imposed radical obligations. Old Testament logic, for example as
deployed in the psalms, was incisive and unmissable. God's justice
rewarded a virtuous people and punished one that sinned. Englishmen
could see that they had very nearly lost their island, like the Britons before,
so naturally thought that they had sinned as, according to Bede, the
Britons had. Their exhilarating success as nation builders proved that
virtue was indeed rewarded. Subsequent defeats merely showed that it
was insufficient. As in ancient Israel, God's favour was to be won only by
a holy society. A king's business was to ensure that society was indeed
holy. Alfred's first law may have initiated the oath that was certainly
enforced by Cnut's time (and indeed far into the Middle Ages, when its
significance had long been forgotten). It was taken at the age of twelve,
and covered not just political loyalty but also all law-worthy behaviour.
Theft was a breach of this oath, punished as what was later called 'felony'
(i.e. breach of faith), by death, forfeiture of property and denial of
Christian burial. Law and order, clearly, was now a responsibility of the
'state'. And bloodfeud, which had once underpinned it, was now so far as
possible restricted in the name of 'promoting Christianity'.

One of the state-building models of the first kings of England was the
'Christian Empire' of the Carolingians. (The choice of Bath for Edgar's
imperial coronation is explained if its hot springs were meant to recall
those which induced Charlemagne to found his palace at Aachen.)
Carolingian influence is probably also behind the monastic 'Reformation'
of Edgar's reign, led by Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester (d. 984), with
Archbishops Dunstan (d. 988) and Oswald (d. 992). Part of the aim
was to stop 'secular encroachment' on monasteries, in effect the aristocratic
values that angered eighth-century reformers: when Æthelwold
replaced 'gluttonous and lascivious clerks' at Winchester by true monks,
he may have been inspired by one of Bede's own proposals. Another
objective was an enforcement of the Rule of St Benedict over all the abbeys
of 'one country'. Though the Rule was well-known to early Anglo-Saxon
churchmen, it had no monopoly of monastic observance; Bede, who never
mentioned any other by name, says that Biscop's Rule was blended from a
total of seventeen known to him. Pursuit of monastic uniformity was a
Carolingian theme, and expressed the ideology that a 'Christian Empire'
could only have 'one law'. Half a dozen manuscripts of the edict
establishing uniform customs in Francia are extant from later Anglo-
Saxon England. It is very likely that the reformers were consciously
Anglo-Saxon society and its literature

imitating an aspect of Carolingian ideology. Yet, if the English pursuit of a holy society was the same as the Carolingian, some of their means to this end were different. The ‘Carolingian Renaissance’, as its name implies, sought to re-establish sound Latinity as the vehicle of religious reform; the vernacular had its place, but it was limited. By contrast, the Anglo-Saxons set out the awesome obligations of a holy society in vernacular literature and legislation which at this time has no European parallel.

Use of the vernacular was seen as the only way to bring home their spiritual responsibilities to people at large. To this end King Alfred launched his educational programme in the famous preface to his Pastoral Care. He intended that his people should gain ‘wisdom’ through access to ‘what is most necessary for all men to know’. It was lack of wisdom that had brought down ‘punishments in this world’, by which he must have meant pagan attack. ‘Wealth and wisdom’ had both been lost through neglect of the latter, so revived wisdom would logically result in renewed wealth. According to Asser’s Life of Alfred, the king identified with Solomon, and it was Solomonic ‘wisdom’ (sapientia) that he expected from his churchmen and judges. An insertion in Alfred’s translation of Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy could be straight from the Book of Kings: ‘Therefore learn wisdom . . . without any doubt, you may thus achieve power, though you do not desire it.’ Wisdom was a spiritual virtue, yet not other-worldly: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not an other-worldly deity.

The same concern with using the vernacular is evident a century later in the work of Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham (died c. 1010). In range of learning and grasp of theological niceties, Ælfric was on a par with all but the top Carolingian scholars. Yet his life’s work was homiletic exposition of scripture and of saintly life written in English, and at a level intelligible to all. Latin remained the appropriate medium for the truly learned; if too much were made accessible, ‘the pearls of Christ [might] be held in disrespect’. But there is no reason, for once, to see protestations of ‘simple style’ as a rhetorical device. Ælfric sought to address the simple, because in his own youth he had been confronted by a priest unable to account for the fact that Jacob had four wives; such things, he felt, must never recur. Archbishop Wulfstan (1002–23), Ælfric’s contemporary, directed vernacular homily yet more explicitly at promoting holiness for a society in crisis. His denunciations of sin, crime and social dislocation spilled over into the legal texts he wrote for Æthelred, Cnut and his own clergy at York and Worcester. Those laws have earned the contempt of legal historians because they are often indistinguishable from homily; the two are indeed mixed together in Wulfstan manuscripts.

Alfred’s Pastoral Care had been predicated on the fact that ‘learning of Latin had declined . . . yet many could read English writing (arædan
Englisc gewrit'. This ought to mean that the Anglo-Saxons were the first, and for several centuries the only, medieval Europeans to find a way of teaching people to read their own language without at the same time teaching them Latin. It is an attractive possibility that a function of one or more of the codices of Anglo-Saxon poetry was to teach reading in English: Asser says that Alfred in his youth pored over 'English poems', and ensured that Edward and Æthelflæd 'learned the psalms, and books in English, and especially English poems'. This prized part of the Old English literary heritage may owe its survival to the vernacular's special importance for England's creators. In any event, the availability of vernacular education once more raises the question of lay literacy. Alfred's preface to his Pastoral Care expressed the intention that 'all the youth that are English freemen, those that have the means . . . should be committed to learning . . . until they can read English writing well; one can then teach Latin speech to those who wish to learn further and to go on to higher orders'. He set an example in his court school, with his own children being taught along with those of 'nobles and the basely born'. By early medieval standards, it was an amazingly ambitious project. The effects remain difficult to assess, because the evidence is sparse, as before, and as before, it is also blurred. Kings, even members of the royal family, may have been special cases, so that one should not make too much of Ealdorman Æthelweard, who was Ælfric's patron and translated the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle into Latin. On the other hand, clerics could be as hard to distinguish from laity as in earlier times. A 'mass-priest', Ælfwine, who could conceivably be the same as a 'scribe' granted land thirty years before, was given an inlaid sword and a harnessed horse in the will of Athelstan, son of Æthelred the 'Unready'.

In the circumstances, the important point regarding use of the vernacular is perhaps that one person with the ability to read from parchment could then read aloud to many. Charters of Æthelwold's foundations at Ely and Winchester, one almost certainly written by Ælfric, say that 'our speech' 'resounds in the ears of the populace', and leaves the layman unable to plead ignorance 'when it is read in his presence'. Ælfric actually addressed more of his works to laymen (mere 'gentry', apart from Æthelweard and his son) than to clergy. They may not, in the modern sense, have read them. Equally, it splits hairs to insist that they could not: they still wished to own his books. Again, a passage in one of Ælfric's homilies talks of the way that one 'hears' and 'looks at' the king's writ. From Edward the Confessor's time, probably from before, government was articulated by writs, short vernacular documents whose authenticity was proved by a royal seal. Laymen may not, in the light of Ælfric's remarks, have read them physically. But it is futile to labour the point: the fact remains that a king's written word could get through to his subjects as...
Latinate administration could not. It is surely arguable that the English kingdom was ultimately the most successful ‘Dark Age’ state, because it alone effectively harnessed native speech.

The Norman Conquest was the most drastic political upheaval in Europe’s post-Roman history. The entire ruling elite was displaced by men that, literally, spoke another language: an ironic symbol of the transformation is that the home of Beowulf also produced the oldest manuscript of the great Old French epic, the Song of Roland. Eadmer of Canterbury, who greatly admired Lanfranc (1070–89), the first post-Conquest archbishop, and was the devoted biographer of the second, Anselm (1093–1109), professed himself unable to write about what had happened to his class. History has few more poignant spectacles than the men found in Cambridgeshire giving sworn evidence to the Domesday Survey (1086) as to their ownership twenty years earlier of lands which they had now lost. Against this background of cataclysm, the bookishness of the Old English gentry, and its familiarity with administrative documentation, was of immense historical importance.

The extraordinary thing is that English survived the Conquest at all. For two and a half centuries after 1066, the cultural trend was wholly in favour of French: almost the entire vocabulary of English Common Law is French, from ‘crime’ and ‘court’ onwards (with ‘gallows’ an interesting exception). Yet it seems as certain as anything unprovable can be that the knightly Rogers and Godfreys of medieval England spoke English in their off-duty hours. A good indication is that Scotland’s language is a species of English, when the ‘Normans’ invited by Scottish kings to give their kingdom the desired European gloss should have been importing French. One would not think ‘Master Nicholas of Guildford’ English, if there were not a case that he wrote The Owl and the Nightingale. The persistence of English speech and literature is more than a metaphor of Anglo-Saxon law and institutions that Norman and Angevin kings made their own. As is shown by the 1086 jurors of Cambridgeshire, it is a crucial reason why local structures continued to operate. ‘Anglo-Saxon’ had been anchored by the literate vernacular’s role in society and culture. The gentlemen and businessmen who ran medieval shires and boroughs were the figurative, in many cases presumably the actual, descendants of Ælfric’s patrons and Edward’s sheriffs. Like the Latin speakers of the Roman Empire on the Continent, but unlike the Britons, the Anglo-Saxons transmitted their language to their conquerors. This is very probably because English had itself become a language of literature and government. There is an indirect, yet also a real, connection between the two facts that England is the world’s oldest continuously functioning state, and that English is now its most widely spoken language.
1 For Charlemagne's collection of songs, see L. Thorpe, *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 82. In what follows, historical references are given (where possible) to *EHD*. For general orientation in Anglo-Saxon history, see the bibliography listed below, pp. 282–3. I should like to express my gratitude to Dr Jenny Wormald for sensitive supervision during the preparation of this essay.


9 Alcuin’s letter is partially trans. S. Allott, *Alcuin of York* (York, 1974), pp. 165–6; it should be noted that D. Bullough, in a study forthcoming in ASE, will show that this letter was addressed not to Bishop Hygebald of Lindisfarne but to an unidentified clerical community, probably in Mercia.


18 See Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*, ed. and trans. W. W. Skeat, EETS os 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London, 1881–1900) I, 2–3 (Christ’s pearls) and *The Old English
