Chapter 10
The literary languages of Old English:
words, styles, voices

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Neque enim possunt carmina, quamuis optime conposita, ex alia in
aliam linguam at uerbum sine detrimento sui decoris ac dignitatis
transferri.

HE, iv. 24

For it is not possible to translate verse, however well composed,
literally from one language to another without some loss of beauty
and dignity.

Along with the Alfredian aphorism ‘hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of
andgiete’ [sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense] and Ælfric’s
comments in the preface to his translation of Genesis, the passage from Bede’s
Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum quoted above is one of the most well-known
Anglo-Saxon meditations on the problems and possibilities of translation.\(^1\)
What is remarkable about Bede’s phrase is not the concern for the integrity of words
that it expresses, but the respect it bestows on the vernacular language.
Although he advocated translating certain Christian works such as the Pater
Noster from Latin into Old English,\(^2\) and according to Cuthbert was working on
his own translation of the Gospel of St John at his deathbed,\(^3\) in the Historia
ecclesiastica, even though he took the trouble to list them, Bede gave the
vernacular languages of early medieval Britain and Ireland short shrift.\(^4\) Here,
however, he indicates that the language we now know as Old English might be
capable of great artistry and power. Bede also makes a wider point, which isn’t
actually about translation at all but about how languages function. The loss of

\(^1\) See Alfred, Pastoral Care, vol. 1, p. 7, and, for Ælfric’s preface to Genesis, Crawford (ed.)
Old English Version of the Heptateuch, pp. 76–80. See also Stanton, Culture of Translation and
Rowley, Old English Bede, pp. 6–7.
\(^2\) Bede, ‘Epistola ad Ecgbertum episcopum’, in Opera historica, pp. 405–23 (p. 409). See
M. Brown, ‘Bede’s Life in Context’.
\(^4\) See A. Hall, ‘Interlinguistic Communication’.
'decoris ac dignitatis' feared by Bede is due to the different ways in which Latin and Old English function as systems of signification. 'Words', as Jeremy Smith has put it, 'are defined by their relationship with other words'. The words of a particular language are defined by their context, discourse and delivery. They play off one another to define one another's semantic fields and create meanings. And, as Bede recognized, these meanings are always in process rather than fixed and stable. Bede’s concern for the manner in which words generate meanings marks one of the major subjects of this chapter. While I will explore the origins and development of the dialects collectively known as Old English, the greater part of this chapter will concentrate on language usage: what culturally and historically specific meanings the words of the language had and what uses Anglo-Saxon authors put these words to.

Roots and branches

The text at the root of Bede’s concern for ‘decoris ac dignitatis’ was Cædmon’s Hymn, the short religious poem that he tells us was composed by a divinely inspired farm worker at St Hild’s monastery in Streanæshalch, now conventionally identified with Whitby. The story Bede tells of Cædmon’s Hymn, like the poem itself, can be read as signalling the transformations that might be initiated by an encounter between the language of a pre-Christian, heathen people and the divine grace of Christian belief. But the narrative can also be read as an acknowledgement by Bede of the sophistication of the vernacular literary tradition. His anxiety can be seen to gesture simultaneously towards both the elevated lexis of poetry and the interconnectedness of language and culture. Not only was Cædmon able to compose beautiful verses in praise of God in his own language, but these praises were sung in a particularly Northumbrian, Anglian or English style, a style that Bede felt unable to replicate in Latin.

The two earliest Old English versions of the Hymn survive as additions to eighth-century Latin manuscripts of the Historia ecclesiastica. One is inscribed at the end of the Historia in Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk. 5. 16. This manuscript is known as ‘The Moore Bede’ and has been dated to 737. The other copy is inscribed below the account of the Cædmon episode in St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS Lat. Q. v. I. 18, which is known as ‘The St Petersburg Bede’ and has been dated to some point shortly before 747. These two poems represent the earliest extant European vernacular

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6 Ker, Catalogue, no. 25, p. 38.
7 Ibid., no. 122, p. 158, named ‘Leningrad, Public Library, MS Lat. Q. v. i. 18’.

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poetry and were read and copied throughout the continent across the Middle Ages. Both are written in a Northumbrian dialect of Old English that is attested by other early northern works such as the earliest manuscript copies of Bede’s *Death Song* and the Leiden Riddle, as well as the runic inscription on the Franks Casket and later works such as the glosses to the Lindisfarne Gospels.\(^8\) In total the *Hymn* is traceable to twenty-one medieval witnesses, dated from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries.\(^9\) The texts can be divided into two dialectal groups, Northumbrian and West Saxon, although copying traditions do not correlate with this division. The tradition is defined by two main recensions, known as the ‘aelda’ and ‘eorða’ recensions, although the two earliest texts each belong to a different branch: the common root no longer exists.\(^10\) So the multiple copies of the *Hymn*, their familial resemblances and unique qualities, remind us that our knowledge of the Old English language, as represented in the surviving corpus of Anglo-Saxon vernacular literature, is partial. Our investigations of the languages of Old English literature are based on fragments of a rich and diverse literary culture, and these fragments themselves maintain only a trace of the language as it might have been spoken.

The story of the transmission of Cædmon’s *Hymn* is a story of the change and development of the Old English language. Of great linguistic and cultural significance, it reveals some of the fluidity and complexity of the social world of early medieval Britain. Just as Bede felt he was unable to successfully transfer the ‘decoris ac dignitatis’ of Cædmon’s words into Latin, so too many of the differences among the Old English texts of the *Hymn* are impossible to replicate in Modern English translation. This is significant. These variations illustrate not only the reception history of the poem but also the development of and the differences among the dialects collectively known as Old English and the communities involved in the production of the texts. The languages of the different copies of Cædmon’s poem elucidate a series of cultural encounters, first of all between the Insular Anglo-Saxon and Christian cultural traditions, and later between Anglo-Saxons of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries and earlier communities. Metrically, stylistically and linguistically, Cædmon’s *Hymn* purposefully and thoroughly engages with

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8 On dialect, see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, pp. 4–12; and Toon, ‘Old English Dialects’.
9 See O’Donnell (ed.), *Cædmon’s *Hymn*,* pp. 78–98; and Cavill, ‘Bede and Cædmon’s *Hymn*,’ and ‘Manuscripts of Cædmon’s *Hymn*’.
Germanic traditions. However, the Hymn adapts the poetic form and idiom of this culture to suit its Christian material. While the Hymn has often been regarded as an origin of vernacular Anglo-Saxon literary culture, the linguistic, orthographic, critical and palaeographic evidence suggests that it might be better, although more prosaically, understood as a point in an already ongoing process, a nexus between traditions.\textsuperscript{11}

In the nine lines of the Hymn six different synonyms are used for God: ‘hefenræs uard’ [guardian of the kingdom of heaven], ‘uuldurfadur’ [father of glory], ‘ecídrycin’ [eternal lord], ‘halg sceppend’ [holy creator], ‘moncynnæs uard’ [mankind’s guardian] and ‘freaallmehtig’ [lord almighty].\textsuperscript{12}

This last form is of particular importance as it brings together two words of very different provenance. ‘Frea’ is etymologically related to the Germanic goddess Frijjo (who is also at the root of ‘Friday’) but its qualifier, ‘allmehtig’, seems to be a loan formation from Latin that entered the vernacular with the introduction of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon culture.\textsuperscript{13}

The words ‘uard’ (an early form of weard) and ‘dryctin’, like ‘frea’, are drawn from cognate Germanic languages and in Old English were able to signify both earthly and heavenly guardians and lords. Unlike ‘allmehtig’, these are Germanic words turned over to signify a Christian concept.

The Hymn’s use of ‘ecídrycin’ [eternal lord] is the earliest attestation of the form in Old English or any of its related languages.\textsuperscript{14} Later forms of dryctin (dryhtin, dryhten, drihten) were used in both secular and religious texts written in all the dialects of Old English, and this reveals not just the transformation the new religion worked upon the language, but also the composition of the Christian cultures of early England. An alternative form, dryhtnaes, was part of a now lost inscription on the Bewcastle Monument,\textsuperscript{15} while later attestations include the Vespasian Glosses, in which ‘Dominus inluminatio mea’ is glossed as ‘Dryhten inlihtnis mine’ [the Lord is my light].\textsuperscript{16} Both meanings of the word are used in Beowulf, The Battle of Brunanburh and The Wanderer. Dryctin is related to the Old Norse drottin and the Old High German truhtin, and was later used in such canonical texts as Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory’s


\textsuperscript{12} Text taken from transcription of the Moore Bede in O’Donnell (ed.), Cædmon’s ‘Hymn’, p. 222. The poem is not lineated in this edition. All translations from Old English are my own unless stated.


\textsuperscript{14} See Stanley, ‘New Formulas for Old’; also Fulk, ‘English as a Germanic Language’.

\textsuperscript{15} On the lost inscription, see Page, ‘Bewcastle Cross’.

\textsuperscript{16} Kuhn (ed.), Vespasian Psalter, p. 22.
Morte d’Arthur before falling out of use around 1450. Frea is another common word in Old English literature, appearing in ninety texts, but unlike dryhten is used almost exclusively in poetic works.  

These examples demonstrate not only the cultural construction of language and literature, but the linguistic construction of a culture – how language simultaneously describes and makes the world. This is seen most clearly in later usages. The particularly Anglo-Saxon sense of Christian identity and community displayed in Old English texts such as The Seafarer and The Dream of the Rood is conditioned by the weight these and similar words carry. For instance, in Judith, while Holofernes, the monstrous would-be tormentor of the virginal warrior-like heroine, is described as ‘egesful eorla dryhten’ [21; lord of awful warriors], the day is saved for the Hebrews when ‘him feng Dryhten God / fægre on fultum, frea ælmihtig’ [299–300; The Lord God, the almighty Lord, had come swiftly to their aid]. The capitalization is editorial and serves to make explicit a difference in meaning that would have been implicit in the original. These examples justify Bede’s caution. No dignity or beauty is lost, but new meanings are generated with every linguistic expression.

Languages in, of and out of place

Although Bede did not see Old English as an equal to Latin, in the century following the completion of the Historia eclesiastica changes in the social, religious and political cultures of Anglo-Saxon England caused the vernacular language to gain prestige: the vernacular began to be used more commonly for official documents and Latin works began to be translated into Old English (as explored in Chapter 8 above). Sensibly, the translator (or translators) responsible for rendering the Historia into Old English at the end of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century omitted Bede’s fretful proviso. The Old English Bede proceeds smoothly from Caedmon’s vision to his song. This is just one example of the translator’s keenness to reach for the editorial scissors: Bede’s detailed account of the Synod of Whitby on the dating of Easter, many papal letters and various excursions on etymology, geography and theology were also excised. The cuts were clearly not made with only brevity in mind, however, as they narrowed the focus of Bede’s work to

17 See D. H. Green, Carolingian Lord. All information about Old English usage is derived from searches of the University of Toronto’s DOE Corpus.
produce a text particularly relevant to an Anglo-Saxon audience of the ninth and tenth centuries.  

Two copies of the Old English Bede survive from the tenth century and a further three survive from the eleventh. Three extracts are preserved on a single leaf of the late ninth- or early tenth-century manuscript London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian ix. Post-Conquest library catalogues of Burton-on-Trent, Christ Church Canterbury and Durham all list copies of the work that are now lost, and demonstrate that the work was widely copied. Although all the surviving texts of the Old English Bede are West Saxon productions, each contains earlier linguistic elements of Anglian character, and this suggests that the surviving copies share a common root which was itself a West Saxon copy of an earlier Mercian work. It is therefore impossible to locate the composition of the Old English Bede within its original cultural moment, but by the late tenth century its importance was well established. When Ælfric wrote that the Historia ecclesiastica had been ‘of Ledene on Englisc awende’ [translated from Latin into English] by King Alfred, he demonstrated both his own access to the work (although he indicated that it was not widely available) and its cultural esteem. It is tempting to read the Old English Bede, with Ælfric, as practically or at least symbolically attached to the Alfredian programme of educational reforms and therefore a unit in the grander scheme of the development of an Anglo-Saxon nation. The linguistic evidence disrupts this satisfying narrative, however, to reveal a more fluid and complex circumstance.

Some of this complexity is reflected in the occasionally Latinate syntax of the Old English Bede and the tendency of the translator to use two Old English words to translate one Latin word. But at points the translation is not afraid to diverge from Bede’s Latin. To take a brief example from the Cædmon episode, where Bede’s text has the angel reply to Cædmon that ‘At tamen ait mihi cantare...’

20 The manuscripts are Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk 3 18 (Ker, Catalogue, no. 23, pp. 36–7); Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41 (Ker, Catalogue, no. 32, pp. 43–6); London, British Library, MS Cotton Otho B. xi, (Ker, Catalogue, no. 180, pp. 230–4); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 10 (Ker, Catalogue, no. 351, pp. 428–9); Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 279 (Ker, Catalogue, no. 354, pp. 432–3).
21 Ker, Catalogue, no. 157, pp. 188–9.
22 See J. J. Campbell, ‘Dialect Vocabulary’; Miller (ed. and trans.), Old English Bede; and Grant, B Text of the Old English Bede.
23 In his Life of St Gregory the Great; see Ælfric, Catholic Homilies: Second Series, pp. 72–80 (p. 72), lines 7–8.
24 See Discenza, ‘Old English Bede’; and S. Kuhn, ‘Synonyms in the Old English Bede’.
habes’ [But nevertheless you have to sing to me], the Old English has ‘Hwæðre þu meaht singan’ [However, you might sing]. This is a subtle but nevertheless revealing alteration. While Cædmon is instructed in the Latin, he is encouraged in the Old English. Might this, like Bede’s concern over the accuracy of his paraphrase, be an acknowledgement of the cultural significance of vernacular poetry, or possibly evidence of the day-to-day use of English in the monasteries for instruction? This view is perhaps confirmed by another minor yet suggestive alteration made earlier in the scene. Where Bede’s original has ‘Et quidem et alii post illum in gente Anglorum religiosa poemata faceret temptabant, sed nullus eum aequiperare potuit’ [HE, iv.24, pp. 414–15; It is true that after him other Englishmen attempted to compose religious poems, but none could compare with him], the Old English translation has ‘Ond eac swelce monige æfter him in Ongeþeode ongunnon æfeste leo wyrcan: ac nænig hwæðre him þæt gelice don meahte’ [And also many others after him in England began to compose pious songs: none however could do that like him]. Again, there is a shift of meaning from Bede’s dismissal of post-Cædmon Old English poetry to the translation’s sense of a continuing, albeit diminished tradition. While ‘ongunnon’ did carry the sense of ‘temptabant’ (from which Modern English ‘attempted’ is derived), its most common meaning was closer to ‘began’ than ‘attempted’. In this particular context, ‘began’ is clearly the meaning that the translator intended and there is a much clearer sense of an Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition in the translation, right from ‘Ond’ at the beginning of the sentence. ‘Ongunnon’ is used earlier in the translation to convey the sense of ‘temptabant’ as it does here, but the context is very different and the passage is on the whole much closer to the Latin. A more accurate option could have been derived from ‘cunnian’, which the Toronto DOE and Bosworth-Toller dictionary define as ‘to try, to attempt’. An eighth-century Latin copy of Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica in London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius C. ii includes a number of ninth-century Old English glosses and among them ‘temptabant’ is glossed with ‘cunnadan’. To return to my earlier point, what is important is not the dignity

25 Colgrave and Mynors translate as ‘Nevertheless you must sing to me’ (HE, iv.24, pp. 416–17).
27 Ibid.
28 See Bosworth-Toller, s.v. on-ginnan, p. 752.
30 Bosworth-Toller, p. 174.
31 Meritt (ed.), Old English Glosses, p. 8. The manuscript is Ker, Catalogue, no. 198 and CLA, 191. See also Colgrave and Mynors in HE, p. xlii.
or beauty that may have been lost in this act of translation, but the new linguistic, historical and cultural meanings that the translation generates.

Language contacts and contexts

Language use was one of the key indicators of regional, national and social identity in medieval Europe.\(^{32}\) Bede provides one early example of the role language played in establishing class-based identities in Anglo-Saxon England in his story of Imma. Imma was a Northumbrian nobleman taken hostage by Mercians and Bede reports that, while he was held, Imma tried to persuade his captors that he was of low birth but failed because his appearance, bearing and speech revealed his true social position.\(^{33}\) Another example of language contact is provided by the Old English translation of Orosius’ *History against the Pagans*, in which two ‘reports’ from seafarers are incorporated, less than seamlessly, as eye-witness accounts of the northern world in the opening chapter. What is notable about the famous example of Othere and Wulfstan, however, is the ease with which the linguistic differences are navigated.\(^{34}\) As Russell Poole points out in Chapter 23 below, the account suggests familiarity between the linguistic communities of England and Scandinavia. Poole also explores the Scandinavian influence on the Old English *Battle of Maldon*, which records a comprehensive English defeat by a Danish army in 991 and presents a number of powerful examples of the integration of Norse-derived items in Old English dialects.\(^{35}\) Famously, even the location of Hild’s monastery which housed Cædmon, named Streanæshalch by Bede, altered over time to become, by the compilation of Domesday Book, Whitby, a word of Norse origin that signifies the impact and lasting influence of the Scandinavian communities that settled there in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries.\(^{36}\)

The eighth-century hagiography of St Guthlac, the Mercian nobleman and warrior who committed to life as a fenland hermit, provides further insight into Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards language, culture and identity and the Christian cultures of early Anglo-Saxon England. The Latin Life of the saint was composed by an otherwise unattested author named Felix and has been dated to c. 740. This text was the basis for four surviving Old English works, a prose translation in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian D. xxi, a

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34 Bately (ed.), *Old English Orosius*, pp. lxxi–lxxii.
35 See Pons-Sanz, ‘Norse-Derived Terms’, p. 444.
Vercelli homily and the two Exeter Book poems, *Guthlac A* and *B*. Jane Roberts has concluded that the vocabulary of both the homily and the Vespasian text suggests that they ultimately derive from an Old English prose Guthlac text, itself based on Felix’s *Life*, that ‘was a non-West-Saxon translation made at a time not late in the tenth century’. But once again, the Guthlac texts shed light on the cultural significance of language in the formation and maintenance of communities, as well as the historical study of them.

Chapter 34 of Felix’s *Life* reports that one night while Guthlac was sleeping, devils approached his dwelling-place determined to torment and corrupt him. Guthlac awoke and realized from their ‘strimulentas loquelas’ [sibilant speech] that they were Britons, the ‘infesti hostes Saxonici generis’ [the implacable enemies of the Saxon race].

Revealingly, in the Old English prose translation the devils’ language is considered to be of such importance that the chapter is titled ‘Hu þa deo flæ on brytisc spræcon’ [How the devils spoke in British]. Guthlac’s own fluency in ‘brytisc’ is explained by Felix to be a result of the time the saint spent in exile among them as a young man, but it is clear that neither the Britons nor their language are shown in a positive light by the association. It is also clear, however, that ‘brytisc’ was understood by Guthlac, and presumably at least recognized if not understood by the readers or listeners of this *Life*. What is also worth remarking upon is the fact that it was socially acceptable, and very common, for members of elite families to spend time in exile with members of different ethnic groups.

Considered in this context, the *Life* can be seen as creating rather than reflecting ethnic tensions. Moreover, while the association of ‘brytisc’ with the devils is clearly important, the unspoken association between Old English (the language that is *not* spoken by the Britons) and Latin is similarly significant. The episodes are not simply concerned with testing the cultural boundaries that separate ‘brytisc’ from Latin and Old English, but with establishing a cultural connection between Old English and Latin.

The power of language to transform and constitute identities, bodies and communities is made clear not just by the emphasis placed on the language of

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38 Colgrave (ed. and trans.), Felix’s *Life of St Guthlac*, pp. 110–11.
42 See Fleming, *Britain After Rome*, pp. 115–17; and Ó Cróinín, *Kings Depart*. 
the devils, but also by Guthlac’s reaction to them. Guthlac disperses the
demons by reciting Psalm 67 (68 in the King James version), Exsurgat Deus.
Felix, in a phrase that echoes the second verse of the psalm, and which is
carefully translated in the Old English, writes that the devils disperse ‘velut
fumus’ [like smoke, which becomes ‘swa swa smic’ in the translation] from his
presence.\(^\text{43}\) The text’s faith in the power of scriptural words re-emerges in
chapter 49 when Guthlac again recites a scriptural passage, this time from
Numbers 10:35 – which is closely related to Psalm 67 – to Æthelbald, the king
of Mercia, who visits him for spiritual guidance. The discovery of the
Staffordshire Hoard in 2009 reveals further significance in these episodes.
Among the six kilograms of gold and silver discovered in what was once the
heart of the Mercian kingdom, Object 550 is a strip of gold alloy measuring
179 mm in length that was once probably attached to a shield, helmet or
sword-hilt but is now loose and folded in half on itself. The object is inscribed
with Latin text on either side of it, and these two inscriptions appear to be
scriptural citations from those texts used by Guthlac to disperse the devils and
reassure Æthelbald.\(^\text{44}\) Object 550 therefore provides important contextual
evidence that these scriptural passages were known in eighth-century
Mercia. It also demonstrates that the language of Scripture had a life, and a
power, outside religious foundations and that it was an essential element in
the construction of Christian Anglo-Saxon identities.

Felix’s faith in the power of words is maintained in the vernacular versions
of his life of Guthlac. As Jane Roberts demonstrates, Guthlac A uses two groups
of specialized vocabulary ‘not general’ in Old English verse, which differ-
entiates it from Guthlac B.\(^\text{45}\) Guthlac A’s vocabulary items concerned with legal
and religious matters are noteworthy not only because of their rarity in verse,
but because of their relevance to the poem’s broader themes and cultural
contexts. The description of the mound that Guthlac made his home contains
two of the words that Roberts identifies as specialized legal terminology:

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\text{Stod seo dygle stow} \quad \text{dryhtne in gemynum} \\
\text{idel 7 amen, eþelrihte feor,} \\
bád bisæce \quad \text{betran hyrdes.}\quad\text{46}
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\(^{43}\) Colgrave (ed. and trans.), Felix’s Life of St Guthlac, pp. 110–11; Gonser, Prosa-Leben des hl.
Guthlac, p. 137.

\(^{44}\) See Geake (ed.), Staffordshire Hoard Symposium, particularly the contributions by
Michelle Brown, David Ganz and Elizabeth Okasha.

\(^{45}\) J. Roberts (ed.), Guthlac Poems, p. 50.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., Guthlac A, lines 215–17.
The undiscovered place stood known to the Lord, but empty and uninhabited, far from ancestral domain, awaited the dispute of better guardians.

The use of ‘eþelriehte’ here to designate ‘ancestral domain’ is mirrored by the Exodus poet’s use of ‘eðelrihtes’ (at line 211) to refer to the Promised Land.47 The other significant word is ‘bisæce’ which Roberts identified as related to the adjective bisæc [disputed, contested], used by Wulfstan in the Canons of Edgar, and unbesacen [unmolested by litigation, uncontested], which appears in six laws and charters.48 These word choices reveal a concern with the possession and occupation of land but also illustrate the interconnections in this poem between land, identity, authority and language. This reading chimes with Alfred Siewers’ suggestion that the Guthlac texts should be understood within a Mercian political context defined by the political elite’s attempt to establish Anglo-Saxon hegemony against native British citizens.49 This preoccupation infuses the poem’s language, and what is particularly noteworthy about this passage is the manner in which the past and future of Guthlac’s mound are conjured by the phrase that explains the saint’s arrival: the comparative adjective ‘betran’ undercuts the poem’s earlier claim that the place was uninhabited. It is significant, too, that ‘stow’ is used – a word that not only designated a domestic dwelling but also a religious foundation – to again rewrite the place’s past from the perspective of the future. The language transforms the landscape as Guthlac himself is transformed by his commitment to the language of Scripture.

Defining words, identifying communities

A number of specialized vocabularies existed in Old English in the areas of law, religion, poetry, science, astronomy and medicine, but perhaps the most significant is that group of words known as the ‘Winchester vocabulary’. This designates a group of words used in preference to their synonyms by writers with some connection to the New Minster at Winchester in the late tenth or early eleventh century and hence to what is often referred to as the Benedictine Reforms. Winchester vocabulary is used by Ælfric, in the continuous interlinear gloss to the Lambeth Psalter, in the anonymous English prose translation of the Regularis concordia and in the continuous interlinear

49 Siewers, ‘Landscapes of Conversion’.
gloss to the *Regula S. Benedicti*. Walter Hofstetter has identified thirteen semantic fields in which Winchester vocabulary operated, and their cultural import is clear. For instance, within the semantic field of the adjectival concept ‘foreign’, Winchester works were likely to prefer ‘(ge)alfremed’, ‘geælfremod’ or ‘ælfremedung’ over alternatives such as ‘fremde’, ‘uta(n)cund’, ‘afremdan’, ‘fremdian’, ‘fremedlacan’ or ‘afremdung’. With regard to the concepts expressed by the Latin term *ecclesia*, that is, ‘the Catholic Church’, Winchester works were likely to prefer ‘(ge)laðung’ over alternatives such as ‘cirice’ (which is used in Winchester texts solely to designate the physical structure of a church), ‘gesamning’, ‘(ge)samnung’ or ‘halig sammung’. Each time writers chose one of these words they were extending a new tradition of Christian community, a community that was founded and perpetuated in part through linguistic usage.

Alongside the Winchester vocabulary, the development of Standard Old English stands as a testament to the intellectual climate of late tenth-century England. Standard Old English designates the regularized spelling used in manuscripts produced in England between the late tenth and early twelfth centuries. This *Schriftsprache*, or written standard, was based on late West Saxon but was used in manuscripts produced across England. Together, Winchester vocabulary and Standard Old English signify not only the presence of a highly organized and successful education system, but also a concern for unity and shared identity within this culture. Although initiated and implemented by a rarefied, scholarly and monastic milieu, these cultural phenomena should not be seen as divorced from the reality outside the monastic walls. Instead, they can be seen as an extension of the standardizing aims of Benedictine Reform initiated in the tenth century and implemented by, among others, Dunstan, Æthelwold and Oswald, and should be considered alongside other changes in Anglo-Saxon society that made the tenth and eleventh centuries periods of great prosperity as well as crisis, as Danish raiders mounted another series of invasions.

The work of Ælfric, the monk of Eynsham who was educated at Æthelwold’s New Minster at Winchester, demonstrates the rigour and vision of the intellectual training he received. George Hickes, the English churchman

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and scholar who published the first Anglo-Saxon grammar in the early eighteenth century, famously described Ælfric’s prose as ‘purus, suavis et regularis’ [clear, charming and well ordered].54 Ælfric’s clarity was a rhetorical tool, however. Obscurity did not interest him as it did not suit his instructional purpose in producing homilies, saints’ Lives and a grammar. In his Old English preface to his second series of Catholic Homilies, Ælfric noted that he strived to make the works ‘læsse æðryht to gehyrenne’ [less tedious to hear]55 than other religious material, but if there is pleasure to be found in his use of language, then this is because Ælfric used his language to draw his auditors closer to the lessons he sought to impart.

Ælfric’s language, although artful and engaged with the literary cultures of Anglo-Saxon England, was thoroughly Christian. His commitment to the Winchester vocabulary is matched by his consistent avoidance of words associated with Germanic heroic culture and a restrained narrative style. There are clear divisions between Ælfric’s work and the worlds of the Guthlac texts discussed above, for instance. And although Ælfric employed some poetic words, such as ‘metod’, ‘heolstor’ and ‘brim’, in his earlier homilies, he did not use them in his later Lives of Saints.56 The world of Ælfric’s saints is not that of the Germanic heroic world of much vernacular poetry, but instead an ahistorical otherworld of Christian heroism. It is a world created by his use of Old English. This is demonstrated well by Ælfric’s Life of St Edmund. Edmund had been king of East Anglia from 855 until his death at the hands of the Danes in 870. His death was recorded in a plain entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Asser made a note of it in his Life of King Alfred of 893 that is evidently based on the Chronicle entry, and, in the decades immediately following Edmund’s death, coins were struck in his honour naming him as St Edmund.57 The earliest Latin Life of Edmund was written by Abbo of Fleury between 985 and 987 and Ælfric acknowledges the importance of Abbo’s work in the expositionary preface that begins his English version.58 Following the preface, Ælfric provides the briefest of descriptions of the character at the centre of the narrative:

57 See Asser, Alfred the Great, ed. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 78; and Blunt, ‘St Edmund Memorial Coinage’.

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Eadmund se eadiga eastengla cyning
waes snotor and wurðfull and wurðode symble
mid æþelum þeawum þone ælmihtigan god . . .

[Edmund the blessed king of the East Angles was wise and honourable and ever glorified by his excellent conduct, Almighty God . . .] 59

These lines provide a good example of the qualities Ælfric was particularly keen to promote: wisdom, honour and good conduct. They also, however, provide a good example of Ælfric’s ‘rhythmical prose’, that is, his prose style that some have suggested to be more closely related to the traditional form of Old English verse than prose. 60 His language undercuts the formal echoes, however. Although the alliteration and wordplay may echo the Germanic poetic tradition, the language, the voice, is resolutely Christian. The description of Edmund as a king is brief. He is no ‘dryhtnes cempa’ [soldier of the lord] 61 as Guthlac is, for instance. In Ælfric’s work there is no talk of ‘beaducræft’ [battle-craft], 62 either, as there is in Andreas. Instead, Edmund is ‘eadiga’ [blessed].

The manner in which Ælfric purposefully avoided associations with Germanic heroic culture is demonstrated well in these lines from Edmund’s speech:

Næs me næfre gewunelic þæt ic worhte fleames
ac ic wolde swiðor swiðelgan gif ic þorfte
for minum agenum earde and se ælmihtiga god wat
þæt ic nelle abugan fram his biggengum æfre
ne fram his soðan lufe swelte ic lybbe ic.

[It was never my custom to take flight but I would rather die, if I must, for my own land, and almighty God knows that I will never turn aside from his worship nor from his true love, should I die or live.] 63

There is no talk of heroism, loyalty or kinship here. The vocabulary is cleansed of heroic connotation. Instead, to describe Edmund’s loyalty to God, Ælfric employs ‘biggengum’, a word that is used in this sense of ‘worship’ exclusively in religious works, and which is derived from ‘bigeng’, which Ælfric uses to gloss the Latin cultus in his grammar. 64 ‘Bigeng’ also, however, carried the

62 Used, e.g., at line 219 of Andreas, in Krapp (ed.), Vercelli Book, pp. 3–51 (p. 9).
64 Zupitza (ed.), Ælfrics Grammatik, p. 79, line 12.
senses of cultivation, observation and service, so it is possible to see Ælfric both describing and instructing. Ælfric’s language in these works contains an inherent method of interpretation: it disciplines. It establishes and cultivates ideal behaviour in the service of a particular ideology that is, in turn, established as natural. Like his saints, Ælfric’s language cultivates and worships.  

These aspects of Ælfric’s verbal world are particularly evident in his depiction of Edmund’s death:

They shot at him with arrows as if for their amusement until he was all beset with their shots, just like a porcupine’s bristles as Sebastian was. When Hingwar the wicked pirate saw that the noble king would not deny Christ but with steadfast faith continued to call upon him, he then commanded men to behead him and the heathen did so. While he was still calling upon Christ, the heathen drew away the saint to kill him and with one blow struck off his head and his soul departed joyfully to Christ.

What is striking about these lines is their clarity. The power of the scene is not derived from emotive language, and the measured tone is reflected in the opposing descriptions of Hingwar and Edmund, as ‘arlease’ [wicked] and ‘æþela’ [noble]. Instead, the emotional weight is provided by the reference to Sebastian that removes the incident from the social to the spiritual world and provides an interpretive frame for the scene. Paul Cavill has drawn attention to Ælfric’s use of the words ‘saglum’ [rods] elsewhere in the Life and ‘gefelucas’ [arrows] in this passage. Both these words, as Cavill notes, were exclusively used in religious contexts and, as Old English had no lack of alternative terms, their use ‘has the effect of locating Edmund’s torment in the sphere of the biblical and Roman martyrs and distancing it from anything the

65 See, e.g., Lees, ‘In Ælfric’s Words’.
Anglo-Saxons might be familiar with’. Through his linguistic choices, Ælfric creates a world apparently distanced from the historical moment. His sophisticated language defines the boundaries of his discourse, expressing and concealing in equal measure. What Ælfric demonstrates so clearly is that the language of a clear and charming style is ideologically shaded, too.

Language, culture, history

For Ælfric, the clarity of prose stood in contrast to the complexity of poetry. In his Grammar, he suggested that while prose was ‘forðriht’ [direct], verse was ‘gelencged and gelogod’ [lengthy and stylized]. Similarly, in his homily on Cuthbert, he noted that Bede had written two lives of the saint, ‘ægðer ge æfter anfealdre gereccednysse ge æfter leodlicere gyddunge awrat’ [both in the manner of a simple narrative and in the manner of poetical singing]. The quality of Old English verse that Ælfric called ‘gelencged and gelogod’ might be aligned with that which Bernard O’Donoghue has described as ‘wit and verbal ingenuity’. As well as the fundamental differences between the vocabularies of Old English prose and verse, the poems’ use of synonyms, archaisms and compounds mean that the differences between prose and verse are not solely the result of formal divisions, but created and sustained through language.

One of the many words used often in verse and very rarely in prose is the adjective wrætlic [wondrous, impressive]. Wrætlic and words derived from it are used by the Exodus poet to describe the path through the Red Sea and by the Andreas poet to describe the voice of God and later also the questions that God asks. In Beowulf, it is used to describe, among other things, Grendel’s mother’s underwater home and the shield Beowulf has made to fight the dragon. These uses suggest that the word denotes impressive workmanship or scale, audacious technical skill or great age but also carries overtones of wonder and mystery. Wrætlic speaks, therefore, of more than the objective qualities of the thing described and reveals cultural values and emotional and intellectual responses. It connotes an aesthetic experience.

68 See Lees, Tradition and Belief, pp. 78–105.
70 Ælfric, Homilies: Second Series, p. 81, lines 5–6.
71 O’Donoghue, ‘Old English Poetry’, p. 16.
72 Godden, Literary Language’, p. 494. See also Dance, ‘Old English Language’.
74 Andreas, lines 90, 628. Wrætlic, or words derived from it, are also used at lines 712, 740 and 1190 in the poem: Krapp (ed.), Vercelli Book, pp. 3–51.
75 Beowulf, lines 1489, 2339, in Fulk et al. (eds.), Klaeber’s Beowulf, pp. 51, 80.
Only once does a word related to \textit{wraetlic} appear in prose, when, in the \textit{Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium}, a visit from an angel aids Anne in her interpretation of the Psalms.\footnote{Pseudo-Matthaei evangelium', in Assmann (ed.), \textit{Angelsächsische Homilien}, pp. 117–38 (p. 127).} What is particularly striking about this usage, as Sarah Elliott Novacich has noted, is that the word is used to suggest ‘that interpretation itself is a creative or artistic act’.\footnote{Novacich, ‘Old English Exodus’, p. 59.} This is fitting, as the most frequent use of \textit{wraetlic} is in the Exeter Book riddles – it is used in fifteen – and the word seems to perfectly complement their investigation of the space between description and perception. \textit{Wraetlic} denotes a way of looking as much as it describes what is seen. It is a word that focuses attention on the processes of thought, the construction of the poetic imagination. Like Ælfric’s language, \textit{wraetlic} marks a perceptual experience that is weighted with cultural significance.

Only three poems use \textit{wraetlic} as their first word. Two of these texts are riddles, the other is \textit{The Ruin}, a poem that demonstrates the cultural work Old English poetics could be put to and provides a fine example of the rich complexities of traditional Old English verse. It begins with a description of what many have suggested is a ruined Roman building:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Wraetlic is þes wealstan – wyrde gebræcon, burgstede burston; brosnað enta geweorc.}
\end{quote}

[Wondrous is this wall-stone – events broke it, battlements burst; the work of giants decays.]

Two things are clear in this quotation: first of all, that the destruction of the building took place in the past but is being observed in the present; and second, that this ‘wealstan’ is ‘wraetlic’, despite being broken. What the wall is as an object is unclear: these lines are an exposition of responses, not a detailed description of material facts. Throughout \textit{The Ruin}, although description takes precedence over narration, responses are woven through descriptions. To take another example from this same quotation, ‘enta geweorc’ [work of giants] is a formulaic phrase also used in \textit{Andreas}, \textit{The Wanderer}, \textit{Beowulf} and \textit{Maxims II}, but never in prose.\footnote{Andreas, line 1495, in Krapp (ed.), \textit{Vercelli Book}, p. 44; \textit{The Wanderer}, line 87, in Muir (ed.), \textit{Exeter Anthology}, vol. 1, p. 218; \textit{Beowulf}, lines 2717 and 2774, in Fulk et al. (eds.), \textit{Klaeber’s Beowulf}, pp. 93, 98; \textit{Maxims II}, line 2, in Dobbie (ed.), \textit{Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems}, p. 55. On ‘enta geweorc’, see Thornbury, ‘Eald enta geweorc’; Frankis, ‘Thematic Significance’; Liuzza, ‘Tower of Babel’; and Hunter, ‘Germanic and Roman Antiquity’.} Like \textit{wraetlic} it is more emotive...
than descriptive. Aside from a possible suggestion of size, it reveals very little about the object but evokes awe, inspiration and fear. As a formula, one of the ways it generates its meanings is through intertextual association. What is signified, therefore, is a textual object and a mood of literary and historical contemplation. The materiality of the ruin remains elusive.

The ambiguity is fitting as this text is as interested in the processes of perception as the destruction wrought by time. The investigation of these two themes serves to make The Ruin a sophisticated and rich meditation on the relationship between the past, present and future. Throughout the poem, there is an intricate and delicate weaving of tenses as the passage of time is registered and interrogated. Following the opening half-line, once the wondrousness of the cornerstone is acknowledged, the passage of time is suggested by the introduction of alliteration that begins with ‘gebræcon’ [1; broken] and continues through ‘burgstede burston; brosnaþ enta geweorc’ [2; battlements burst; the work of giants decays]. The poem is concerned not only with elucidating the creation of an idea of the ruins, but also with examining the history that is represented by the ruins.

This concern with the processes by which the present is produced is reflected by the extensive use of past-participle adjectives in the description of the scene:

Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras, 
hrungeat berofen hrim on lime, 
scearde scurbeorge scorene, gedrorene, aeldo undereotone . . .

[Roofs are fallen, towers wrecked, doorways destroyed, rime on the lime, roofs gaping stripped, perished, eaten away by age . . .]

The sense that the past is being brought into contact with the present is confirmed by the very sound of the words as they roll into one another. Alliteration on hr draws connections across lines and half-lines and the echoes and rhymes between ‘gehrorene’, ‘hreorge’, ‘scorene’, ‘gedrorene’ and ‘undereotone’ give the passage a sense of repetition, of circling back on itself. 80

In contrast, in the passage which describes the life of the town, the alliteration is used to create a sense of regularity, comfort and sophistication. The unique compounds ‘burgræced’, ‘horngestreon’ and ‘heresweg’ indicate a heightened linguistic experience and evoke a heady scene. The moment is fleeting, however, as all that is swiftly ended with the abrupt ‘oþþæt þæt onwende’:

80 See Trilling, Aesthetics of Nostalgia, p. 52.
Beorht wæron burgræced, burnsele monige,
heah horn gestreon, heresweg micel,
meodoheall monig mondreama full,
opæt þæt onwende wyrd seo swiþe. (21–4)

[Bright were the buildings, with many bath houses, high arched, great martial sounds in many mead halls full of men’s joys, until that was changed by mighty fate.]

Wyrd, like wrætlic, is a difficult word to define. Other poetic usages, such as The Wanderer’s ‘Wyrd bið ful ared’ [fate is fully fixed] and The Seafarer’s ‘Wyrd biþ swiþre’ [fate is greater], demonstrate the significance of the concept within Anglo-Saxon literary culture and perhaps justify the fact that it has been read as an example of, in Tom Shippey’s phrase, ‘the Anglo-Saxon disposition to fatalism’. The noun is derived, however, from the verb weorþan [to happen], and while some usages do match the meaning of Modern English fate, such as its uses in the Old English Boethius, others do not. One of these usages is found in the opening line of The Ruin, where I have translated the plural form, ‘wyrde’, as ‘events’.

Later in the text, phonoaesthesia is again employed to evoke the passage of time, and the sense of lines 31–4 is confirmed by the laborious oral delivery of the words. These words are difficult to speak quickly. The slowness of their delivery is a significant element of the style and the technique here connects back to the introduction of the b sound in the opening lines. There is a unity between the imagined passage of time that created the ruins and the oral delivery of the poem. There is, however, a step change and a surge of energy from the phrase ‘seah on sinc’ at line 35 that rises to a crescendo with the description of the riches of the town:

Hryre wong gecrong
gebrocen to beorgum, þær iu beorn monig
glædmod ond goldbeorht gleoma gefrætwed,
wlonc ond wingal wighyrstum scan;
seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmagas,
on ead, on æht, on eorcanstan,
on þas beorhtan burg bradan rices. (31–7)

82 The Seafarer, line 115, in ibid., vol. 1, p. 236.
84 The glossary to Godden and Irvine (eds. and trans.), Old English Boethius, defines wyrd as ‘fate, destiny’, p. 629. See also Timmer, ‘Wyrd in Anglo-Saxon Prose and Poetry’.
85 This translation was first suggested to me by Marijane Osborn.
[The place has fallen to ruin, shattered into heaps, where once many a man, glad of mind and goldbright, gleaming adorned, proud and merry with wine shone in war-gear, gazed on treasure, on silver, on curious gems, on wealth, on property, on the precious stone, on this bright city, this glorious place.]

In these lines, the poem builds the city from the description of the wealth held by its occupants. Those beornas enjoying their wealth and wine dominate the scene. The treasure is not significant in and of itself; instead it is the enjoyment of the treasure by the beornas that defines the meaning of the scene.87 Importantly, the noun beorn [man] carries overt military overtones and conveys a very particular sense of masculinity. It is used by the Dream of the Rood poet to refer to the warrior-like Christ,88 and beorn or words derived from it are used fifteen times in The Battle of Maldon.89 In the poem commonly known as The Gifts of Men it is written that ‘sum bið wiges heard / beadocræftig beorn, þær bord stunað’ [one is resolute in warfare, a man skilled in fighting, when shields resound’].90 It is a word Ælfric never used.

These idealized Anglo-Saxon warriors stand in contrast to the people responsible for constructing the buildings the poem celebrates, who are briefly noted earlier in the poem:

Eorðgrap hafað
   Waldendwyrhtan  forweorone, geleorene,
   heardgripe hrusan . . . (6–8)

[The earth’s grasp holds the ruling builders, perished, passed away, grip of the ground . . .]

The term used to denote those who raised the buildings, ‘waldendwyrhtan’, is formed by compounding wealdend [ruler], the root of which, weald, is related to the Modern English wield, and wyrhta [maker(s)]. The sense of this compound is not celebratory, however. There is a subtle bathos to it and it creates another image of the inevitably transitory nature of power. The grandeur of their architecture remains, but it is these people who are held in an ‘eorðgrap’ [earthgrip] and it is their passing that allowed the beornas to occupy the town.

87 On treasure and Old English verse, see ibid., pp. 9–101.

\[\text{Joshua Davies}\]

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Considered in these terms, *The Ruin* commits an act of appropriation: it claims the Roman ruins for the Anglo-Saxons. The poem writes the Anglo-Saxons into place. This place is found through the contemplation of the material remains of a distant historical culture expressed in a language that is similarly archaic and culturally loaded. A scene is created in which the Anglo-Saxons are able to dwell, a scene that seems to naturalize the processes of history. As James Doubleday has suggested, ‘implicit in *The Ruin* is a philosophy of history, a way of looking at historical events’.91 This philosophy is both a product of the historical circumstances of the Anglo-Saxons and a cultivated cultural phenomenon. In *The Ruin* the presence of the past is marked not just by the ruined Roman buildings, but by the manner in which the contemplation of those buildings is expressed and interrogated.

*The Ruin*’s philosophy of history is constructed by its language and in its deployment of what Elizabeth Tyler has termed the ‘aesthetics of the familiar’.92 *The Ruin* is deeply engaged with the traditions of Old English poetic expression. The compounds – such as ‘waldendwyrhtan’ [7; ruling builders], ‘horngestreon’ [22; horn-treasure] and ‘teaforgeapa’ (30; formed from *teafor* [red] and *geap* [lofty, steep]), which are all unique; ‘searogimmas’ [35; curious gems], which is shared only with *Beowulf* (at 2749);93 and the formulaic phrase ‘wlonec ond wingal’ [34; proud and merry with wine],94 which is used ruefully in *The Seafarer* to describe thanes unaware of a world without the security and comfort provided by their lord – all serve to situate the poem within the Germanic poetic tradition. *The Ruin* also demonstrates another striking difference between prose and verse – the omission of the demonstrative ‘the’, which is perhaps a result of the metrical structure requiring as few unstressed syllables as possible.95 The language of this text is determined by both formal requirements and cultural perceptions of correct expression. Implicit within this aesthetic scheme, in a similar manner to Ælfrician prose, is a system of interpretation. The style of traditional Old English poetic language invites a certain reading, a reading that emphasizes the long traditions of Anglo-Saxon culture, the centrality of the warrior ethos to that culture, and the sophistication of the vernacular literary tradition.

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91 Doubleday, ‘*The Ruin*’, p. 370.
92 Tyler, *Old English Poetics*.
93 On compounding, see Orchard, ‘Reconstructing *The Ruin*’, p. 53.
95 See Godden, ‘Literary Language’, p. 505.