

UNIT 2

Anglo-Saxon History and Society: The coming of Christianity, Literacy; and the Bonds of Society

Literacy and Learning

Most of the literature written in Old English – Anglo-Saxon literature – survives in the dialect of the region or kingdom of Wessex, what is called the West-Saxon dialect. Many of the surviving texts were undoubtedly composed in other parts of Anglo-Saxon England; scholars can say this because of internal evidence and evidence from language. King Alfred was king of Wessex between **871 and 899**, during the period of Scandinavian invasion and settlement in the region of the north east of Anglo-Saxon England known as the Danelaw. Wessex was the most powerful and cohesive Anglo-Saxon political unit. King Alfred was a great patron of literature and of historical writing. He encouraged the work that made up the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and translations of important Latin works into Old English. The political stability of Wessex allowed for the production and preservation of literature, whereas the political state of the rest of Anglo-Saxon England was probably detrimental to the preservation and survival of texts. So it is to Wessex that we owe the survival of the bulk of writing in Old English. King Alfred took part in the production and dissemination of writing in Old English, and there survives in Old English some original works and translations that are attributed to him. I think we can assume that Alfred was literate, but whether he was able to handle the work of translation without some help is open to question. His preface to one of the translations attributed to him, gives us some insight into the general state of literacy and learning in 9th-century Wessex. He refers to what he perceives as the devastation brought about by the Scandinavian invasion and settlement, and links this to the decline, even the disappearance of literacy and learning:

Document 4: *King Alfred's Preface to his translation of the "Pastoral Care"*

This passage is useful as an indication of the status of Old English: Latin is the high status language of learning, but English is a worthy substitute. We can see

in some of the prose writings from the period that the English language is being stretched to accommodate new concepts of philosophy and science as well as theology, and in this way the language grows and expands its range of discourse. English is being made to do the job of Latin, and by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period it is a serious rival to Latin as a literary language. This passage also indicates the initiative of the royal house in promoting the use of English. The king is assisted by churchmen (the various priests named), but King Alfred is the one who promotes literacy beyond the narrow confines of the literate church hierarchy. We have a glimpse in this document of an important initiative by the king to promote literacy and learning in English.

As we can see, however, the church made the major contribution to the production and survival of texts. This issue should be seen in a wider context, that is, the question of literacy. It was at one time fashionable to say that most, if not all, Anglo-Saxon poetry was the result of oral composition, that is, it had originated and had been transmitted through an oral tradition. In this theory, the manuscripts of Anglo-Saxon poetry that have come down to us are seen as merely records of this type of composition; that is, they do not represent any significant literate compositions in themselves. While I do not want to deny that some poems probably had their roots in an oral tradition – most narrative poetry does, if you trace it back far enough – we must not rule out the importance of the tradition of literacy in preserving these texts by committing them to writing. And I would want to argue that the literature we have – for example *Beowulf* – reflects a literary shaping of raw materials that descended in an oral tradition. In other words, I do not think that the texts we have in manuscript form are innocent of the colouration and shaping of the culture in which they were copied, namely a thoroughly Christian one. The manuscripts are probably not passive witnesses to an oral tradition.

Briefly then, how and when did the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England take place? Our lack of first-hand witnesses for the first century and a half of Anglo-Saxon history can be explained in part by the fact that Anglo-Saxon England was for this period pagan and, for all intents and purposes, was not literate. But, the regions in which the British, that is, the Celtic peoples, were politically dominant

were Christian. It was not until the initiative taken by Pope Gregory the Great in 597 that any attempt was made to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons, even though Christianity survived in Celtic Britain. In 597, an emissary from the Pope, namely Augustine, arrived in Kent and within a few years had converted King Æthelbert and his followers. Incidentally the king's wife was already Christian; she was a Frankish princess and had been allowed by Æthelbert to worship in the church of St Martin outside the city walls of Canterbury. The church is named by Bede and is the oldest place of Anglo-Saxon Christian worship:

Document 3: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 1, chapter 25.

Æthelbert held the position of Bretwalda – the position of overlord –, and following his own conversion, the kings of Essex and East Anglia also received baptism. The mission was spread even further when Æthelbert's daughter married King Edwin of Northumbria and was accompanied on her journey north by the priest Paulinus and other missionaries from Rome. After a fairly lengthy period, Edwin himself submitted to baptism, his example being followed by his 'comitatus' or 'witan':

Document 3: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 2, chapter 13

This triumph of Christianity in Northumbria was shortlived as in 633 Edwin was killed in battle and the kingdom of Northumbria reverted to paganism. On becoming king, Oswald (635) sought a new mission, not from Canterbury, but from the Celtic island of Iona, which was led by bishop Aidan. Aidan and his followers established their base at Lindisfarne or Holy Island off the east coast of Northumbria, and set about the re-conversion of this Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

Within 70 years of the Augustinian mission, the whole of Anglo-Saxon England had been converted, even though in many areas the conversion was only skin deep and paganism lingered until a fairly late date. That this was the case is indicated by surviving texts such as law-codes which, under Christian influence, strove to stamp out heathen practice. Bede provides us with some clues about the survival of paganism:

Document 3: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 2, chapter 15

The significance for the question of literacy of the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity is that Roman Christianity was a bookish and literate religion. Christianity is based on a book, the Bible; the Bible is one of the central symbols of Christianity. And because the Bible was believed to be the revelation of God, and, because of the Bible, Christians were able to read the word or the message of God, the ability to read was considered something sacred, almost mystical. Through reading one had access to truth. What this means, then, is that literacy, the ability to read and write, had a special place in Christianity, and was promoted. In the *Preface to the Pastoral Care* referred to earlier, King Alfred draws an implicit link between the disasters which have happened to the Anglo-Saxon peoples and the decline in learning. This is not a sentimental respect for learning, but, I think, a deeply held belief that literacy is central to a Christian society. The disasters which have taken place are the results of a decline in the Christian faith, as evidenced by the decline in literacy. We should never minimize the close connections between literacy and Christianity.

We may say that the main vehicle for the conversion by both the Roman and the Celtic missions was the monk, and the foundation of monasteries was an important feature of 7th- and 8th-century England. One might mention St Augustine's monastery at Canterbury, the twin foundations of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, founded by the king of Northumbria and the home of Bede, and the famous double house of Whitby, which hosted the synod of 633. This was an important episode for the cultural history of Northumbria. Northumbria had been served by two missions, the Roman and the Celtic missions, and divergences between practices in the two traditions had led to confusion, for example, over the dating of Easter. The synod of 633 decided to adopt Roman practice as the standard one for the whole of the Anglo-Saxon church. While the spirit of the Celtic church continued to contribute to Anglo-Saxon culture, the dominant influence came to be Roman, and this had significant influence, particularly in the area of visual arts.

The monasteries were important centres of learning and international culture. Canterbury had, in the 7th century, a Greek archbishop and an African abbot, both scholars of repute who established and fostered the monastic school. Bede himself

was an outstanding scholar in fields other than history. He had taught himself Greek – a most rare accomplishment in this period – and at the time of his death was engaged in a translation of the New Testament from Greek. Many abbots, such as Benedict Biscop, abbot of Jarrow, travelled widely on the continent and collected manuscripts to enrich their libraries. There was an important trade in manuscripts which would be lent out to a monastery for copying or copied in one monastic house and given as gifts to another.

There can be little doubt that the monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England provided the most effective medium, probably the only consistent medium, by which texts could be systematically copied. It was not only religious writings in Latin that were copied, but the indications are that the monasteries were centres for the transmission of Anglo-Saxon literature as well. In the 8th century, churchmen are found censuring the monks and priests whom they considered too interested in secular literature. One council [of Clofeshoh] in 747 condemned priests who preached like secular bards and monasteries which had become the haunt of minstrels. At the end of the 8th century the monk Alcuin wrote to the bishop of Lindisfarne condemning monks who invited harpists to entertain them at table; he wrote:

When priests dine together, let the words of God be read. It is fitting on such occasions to listen to a reader, not to a harpist, to the discourses of the fathers, not to the poems of the heathen. What has Ingeld to do with Christ?

This passage makes clear that there was a close contact on the part of some monks and priests with pagan, secular and vernacular literature.

If Alcuin condemned the interest of monks in pagan literature, he did not rule out the use of Anglo-Saxon poetry for a religious purpose. Indeed, as was suggested earlier, much of the obviously religious Anglo-Saxon poetry is probably the product of two traditions, one pagan, the other learned and Christian. It may also be the case that some Anglo-Saxon religious poetry and indeed a text like *Beowulf*, were written in direct competition with pagan writings. The particularly Christian colouring of *Beowulf* may indicate that the original secular poem (which has been lost to us) was appropriated by monks and made to conform to a

Christian outlook.

The story of Caedmon (which is a Celtic name) as told by Bede in the *Ecclesiastical History* illustrates in a number of ways the 'conversion' of a secular art and the vernacular language of Old English to a religious purpose.

Document 5: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 4, chapter 24

This document gives the narrative in a Modern English translation as well as a translation of the hymn itself. The document also includes the original Old English hymn, which is the earliest surviving example of English poetry. This is an account of a visionary experience and a miracle. At its core is the idea that the English language, which at this stage is the language that had developed within a pagan heroic society, can be used to express religious and spiritual themes. The latter part of the narrative shows that Caedmon is taught passages of scripture and is able to turn these into Anglo-Saxon verse narratives. In this way, the Church can be seen effectively to be converting the pagan Anglo-Saxon language into a Christian language.

Anglo-Saxon Society

I want to turn now to the last theme, Anglo-Saxon society. This is a large subject, but there are two features of Anglo-Saxon society which I want to discuss because they have particular importance for the literature; these come under the general theme of the 'bonds of society', and concern (i) the theme of loyalty to one's lord, and (ii) kinship, and the obligations of kinship. The picture we have of heroic society is one in which the bonds of loyalty were essential to social cohesion. In the 1st century AD the Roman historian Tacitus wrote of the customs of the Germanic peoples, and one feature which impressed him, above all others, was the bond of loyalty which bound a man to his chieftain. Tacitus noted that the loyalty was personal; a successful chieftain attracted followers. These followers would be prepared to die for their lord; indeed, according to Tacitus, it was considered ignominious for a man to survive his lord on the field of battle. In return for this loyalty, a lord provided for his followers horses, weapons, treasure (after a successful expedition), and food and drink in his hall:

Document 6: Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 14

The picture of Anglo-Saxon society which comes to us from vernacular poetry, such as *The Battle of Maldon* and other sources, is not substantially different, even centuries later. Tacitus, we think, was aiming to idealize the values of Germanic heroic society in contrast with the decadence of Rome, and a similar motive may guide Anglo-Saxon poetry. The heroic ethics of loyalty may be better understood as ideals, but nevertheless ideals that are deeply rooted in the society. During the course of your reading of poems such as the *Wanderer* and the *Battle of Maldon* (which was written in the last decade of the 10th century), you might keep this central theme of loyalty in mind. It was an important subject for literature, and this tells us something about the social values or ideals of the society. A text such as the *Wanderer* derives much of its strength and interest from the exploration of the theme of loyalty, and reading it, we have perhaps a clearer indication than a historical source can give of the deeply rooted nature of loyalty as a bond of society.

To illustrate this theme further we can turn again to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Writing about the conversion of Edwin, Bede tells of an assassination attempt on the king:

Document 7: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 2, chapter 9

The second feature of the bonds of society that I want to refer to is kinship. As was the case with the feature of loyalty, so the theme of kinship is an important one in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The obligations imposed by kinship bonds can be illustrated through the laws and customs governing vengeance. It was the expressed duty of the kin to exact vengeance for the murder of one of their family, either by waging a vendetta (or feud) or, in the case of the kin, to force the killer to pay the dead person's kin the blood-price or *wergild*, that is 'man-price'. The amount of *wergild* was carefully set out according social status in successive law codes of the Anglo-Saxons. Thus, we find in the earliest law code, that of Æthelbert of Kent, the clause:

Document 8: 'Laws of Æthelbert of Kent', clauses 22 and 23.

Thus it was the duty of the killer to pay *wergild* in order to escape the vendetta or feud, but if he escaped, it was the duty of his kin to pay a reduced *wergild*.

The duty of the kin is apparent in other ways in the law codes. They had the duty of arranging marriages and paying compensation if there had been any fraud. They also had a duty to protect minors. We read in the 7th-century 'Laws of Ine of Wessex':

If a husband and wife have a child together, and the husband dies, the mother is to have her child and rear it; she is to be given six shillings for its maintenance, a cow in summer, an ox in winter; the kinsmen are to take charge of the paternal home until the child is grown up.

The wergild was the chief distinguishing feature of the various classes of society. The king obviously had the highest wergild. Below him was the class of nobles, in origin the *gesithas* or 'companions' of the king. Already in 7th century Kent he was being called an *earl*, although this word carried none of the connotations of office. It is interesting to note that in Old English the word *eorl* in different contexts could mean 'man', 'warrior', or something approaching our modern sense of 'earl', that is, noble. Outside Kent the nobleman might be known as a *gesith* or *thane*. The thane was distinguished in the laws, not only by his wergild but by higher penalties for misdemeanours. For instance, when referring to the problem of non-Christian marriages, the laws of Wihtred of Kent state:

Document 9: 'Laws of Wihtred', clause 5

The *ceorl* was the name of the ordinary freeman. The great historian of Anglo-Saxon England, Stenton, has called the *ceorl* the basis of Kentish society in Æthelbert's time. He was independent, had many rights, and although he had no claim to nobility, he was subject to no lord below the king. The laws of Kent protected him and his household against breaches of their peace. Although the West-Saxon *ceorl* had a lower *wergild* than his Kentish counterpart, he was nevertheless the independent head of a household whose rights were protected. Finally, below the class of *ceorl*, there existed a class of slaves who enjoyed no wergild, which even the influence of the church could not eradicate completely.

There are many issues about Anglo-Saxon England that could be investigated: the emergence of towns, the development of trade both domestically and overseas, and government in the late Anglo-Saxon period. Anglo-Saxon England should never be regarded as the poor relation of Norman England, and it was anything but a cultural and intellectual backwater that the Normans took over in the 11th century. In terms of the history of the English language and of English writing, late Anglo-Saxon England reached a level of achievement which was not to be reached again until the fourteenth century with the work of Chaucer and his contemporaries.

BEDE, ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY [dated 733]

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 15: *The Angles are invited into Britain. At first they repel the enemy, but soon come to terms with them, and turn their weapons against their own allies. [A.D. 449]*

In the year of our Lord 449, Martian became Emperor with Valentinian, the forty-sixth in succession from Augustus, ruling for seven years. In his time the Angles or Saxons came to Britain at the invitation of King Vortigern in three longships, and were granted lands in the eastern part of the island on condition that they protected the country; nevertheless, their real intention was to subdue it. They engaged the enemy [the Picts] advancing from the north, and having defeated them, sent back news of their success to their homeland, adding that the country was fertile and the Britons cowardly. Whereupon a larger fleet quickly came over with a great body of warriors, which, when joined to the original forces, constituted an invincible army. These also received from the Britons grants of land where they could settle among them on condition that they maintained the peace and security of the island against all enemies in return for regular pay.

The new-comers were from the three most formidable races of Germany, the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent and the Isle of Wight and those in the province of the West Saxons opposite the Isle of Wight who are called Jutes to this day. From the Saxons – that is, the country now known as the land of the Old Saxons – came the East, South and West Saxons. And from the Angles – that is, the country known as Angulus, which lies between the provinces of the Jutes and Saxons and is said to remain unpopulated to this day – are descended the East and Middle Angles, the Mercians, all the Northumbrian stock (that is, those peoples living north of the river Humber), and the other English peoples. Their first chieftains are said to have been the brothers Hengist and Horsa. The latter was subsequently killed in battle against the Britons, and was buried in east Kent, where a monument bearing his name still stands. They were the sons of Wictgils, whose father was Witta, whose father was Wecta, son of Woden, from whose stock sprang the royal house of many provinces.

It was not long before such hordes of these alien peoples vied together to crowd into the island that the natives who had invited them began to live in terror. Then all of a sudden the Angles made an alliance with the Picts, whom by this time they had driven some distance away, and began to turn their arms against their allies. They began by demanding a greater supply of provisions;

then, seeking to provoke a quarrel, threatened that unless larger supplies were forthcoming, they would terminate their treaty and ravage the whole island. Nor were they slow to carry out their threats. In short, the fires kindled by the pagans proved to be God's just punishment on the sins of the nation, just as the fires once kindled by the Chaldeans destroyed the walls and buildings of Jerusalem. For, as the just Judge ordained, these heathen conquerors devastated the surrounding cities and countryside, extended the conflagration from the eastern to the western shores without opposition and established a stranglehold over nearly all the doomed island. Public and private buildings were razed; priests were slain at the altar; bishops and people alike, regardless of rank, were destroyed with fire and sword, and none remained to bury those who had suffered a cruel death. A few wretched survivors captured in the hills were butchered wholesale, and others, desperate with hunger, came out and surrendered to the enemy for food, although they were doomed to lifelong slavery even if they escaped instant massacre. Some fled overseas in their misery; others, clinging to their homeland, eked out a wretched and fearful existence among the mountains, forests, and crags, ever on the alert for danger.

GILDAS, THE RUIN OF BRITAIN [dated c. 540]

Chapter 23: Then all the members of the council, together with the proud tyrant [Vortigern], were struck blind; the guard – or rather the method of destruction – they devised for our land was that the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken!), hated by man and God, should be let into the island like wolves into the fold, to beat back the peoples of the north [the Picts]. Nothing more destructive, nothing more bitter has ever befallen the land. How utter the blindness of their minds! How desperate and crass the stupidity! Of their own free will they invited under the same roof a people whom they feared worse than death even in their absence – 'the silly princes of Zoan', as has been said, 'giving foolish advice to Pharaoh'.

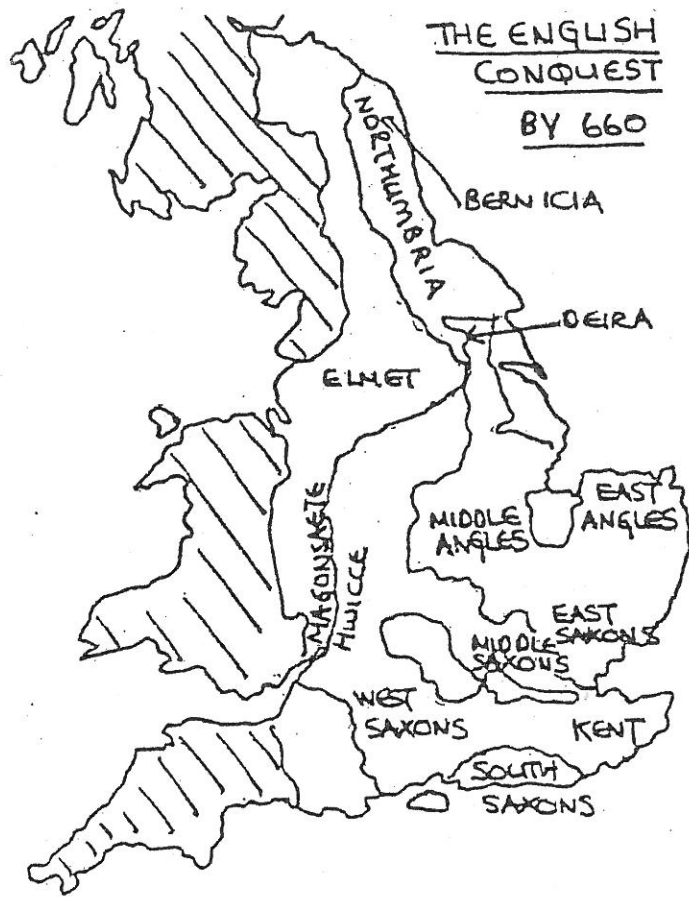
Then a pack of cubs burst forth from the lair of the barbarian lioness, coming in three *keels*, as they call warships in their language. The winds were favourable; favourable too the omens and auguries, which prophesied, according to a sure portent among them, that they would live for three hundred years in the land towards which their prowess were directed, and that for half the time, a hundred and fifty years, they would repeatedly lay it waste.

On the orders of the ill-fated tyrant [Vortigern], they first of all fixed their dreadful claws on the east side of the island, ostensibly to fight for our country,

in fact to fight against it. The mother lioness learnt that her first contingent had prospered, and she sent a second and larger troop of satellite dogs. It arrived by ship, and joined up with the false units. Hence the sprig of iniquity, the root of bitterness, the virulent plant that our merits so well deserved, sprouted in our soil with savage shoots and tendrils. The barbarians who had been admitted to the island asked to be given supplies, falsely representing themselves as soldiers ready to undergo extreme dangers for their excellent hosts. The supplies were granted, and for a long time 'shut the dog's mouth'. Then they again complained that their monthly allowance was insufficient, purposely giving a false colour to individual incidents, and swore that they would break their agreement and plunder the whole island unless more lavish payment were heaped on them. There was no delay: they put their threats into immediate effect.

In just punishment for the crimes that had gone before, a fire heaped up and nurtured by the hand of the impious easterner spread from sea to sea. It devastated town and country round about, and, once it was alight, it did not die down until it had burned almost the whole surface of the island and was licking the western ocean with its fierce red tongue. So it was that in this assault, comparable with that of the Assyrians of old on Judaea, there was fulfilled according to history for us also what the prophet said in his lament: 'They have burned with fire your sanctuary on the ground, they have polluted the dwelling-place of your name'. And again: 'God, the heathen have come into your inheritance; they have desecrated your holy temple'; and the rest.

All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants – church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press. There was no burial to be had except in the ruins of houses or the bellies of beasts and birds – saving the reverence due to their holy spirits, if indeed many were found at that time to be carried by holy angels to the heights of heaven. For by then the vineyard that had once been good had degenerated into sourness, so that (as the prophet puts it) there was rarely to be seen grape-cluster or corn-ear behind the backs of the vintagers and reapers.



BEDE, ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 25: *Augustine reaches Britain, and first preaches in the Isle of Thanet before King Ethelbert, who grants permission to preach in Kent [A.D. 596]*

Reassured by the encouragement of the blessed father Gregory, Augustine and his fellow-servants of Christ resumed their work in the word of God, and arrived in Britain. At this time the most powerful king there was Ethelbert, who reigned in Kent and whose domains extended northwards to the river Humber, which forms the boundary between the north and the south Angles. To the east of Kent lies the large island of Thanet, which by English reckoning is six hundred hides in extent; it is separated from the mainland by a waterway about three furlongs broad called the Wantsum, which joins the sea at either end and is fordable only in two places. It was here that God's servant Augustine landed with companions, who are said to have been forty in number. At the direction of blessed Pope Gregory, they had brought interpreters from among the Franks, and they sent these to Ethelbert, saying that they came from Rome bearing very glad news, which infallibly assured all who would receive it of eternal joy in heaven and an everlasting kingdom with the living and true God. On receiving this message, the king ordered them to remain in the island where they had landed, and gave directions that they were to be provided with all necessities until he should decide what action to take. For he had already heard of the Christian religion, having a Christian wife of the Frankish royal house named Bertha, whom he had received from her parents on condition that she should have freedom to hold and practise her faith unhindered with Bishop Liudhard, whom they had sent as her helper in the faith.

After some days, the king came to the island and, sitting down in the open air, summoned Augustine and his companions to an audience. But he took precautions that they should not approach him in a house; for he held an ancient superstition that, if they were practisers of magical arts, they might have opportunity to deceive and master him. But the monks were endowed with power from God, not from the Devil, and approached the king carrying a silver cross as their standard and the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board. First of all they offered prayer to God, singing a litany for the eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom and for whose sake they had come. And when, at the king's command, they had sat down and preached the word of life to the king and his court, the king said: 'Your words and promises

are fair indeed; but they are new and uncertain, and I cannot accept them and abandon the age-old beliefs that I have held together with the whole English nation. But since you have travelled far, and I can see that you are sincere in your desire to impart to us what you believe to be true and excellent, we will not harm you. We will receive you hospitably and take care to supply you with all that you need; nor will we forbid you to preach and win any people you can to your religion.' The king then granted them a dwelling in the city of Canterbury, which was the chief city of all his realm, and in accordance with his promise he allowed them provisions and did not withdraw their freedom to preach. Tradition says that as they approached the city, bearing the holy cross and the likeness of our great King and Lord Jesus Christ as was their custom, they sang in unison this litany: 'We pray Thee, O Lord, in all Thy mercy, that Thy wrath and anger may be turned away from this city and from Thy holy house, for we are sinners. Alleluia.'

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 26: *The life and doctrine of the primitive Church are followed in Kent: Augustine establishes his episcopal see in the king's city*

As soon as they had occupied the house given to them they began to emulate the life of the apostles and the primitive Church. They were constantly at prayer; they fasted and kept vigils; they preached the word of life to whomsoever they could. They regarded worldly things as of little importance, and accepted only the necessities of life from those they taught. They practised what they preached, and were willing to endure any hardship, and even to die for the truth which they proclaimed. Before long a number of heathen, admiring the simplicity of their holy lives and the comfort of their heavenly message, believed and were baptized. On the east side of the city stood an old church, built in honour of Saint Martin during the Roman occupation of Britain, where the Christian queen of whom I have spoken went to pray. Here they first assembled to sing the psalms, to pray, to say mass, to preach, and to baptize, until the king's own conversion to the Faith gave them greater freedom to preach and to build and restore churches everywhere.

At length the king himself, among others, edified by the pure lives of these holy men and their gladdening promises, the truth of which they confirmed by many miracles, believed and was baptized. Thenceforward great numbers gathered each day to hear the word of God, forsaking their heathen rites and entering the unity of Christ's holy Church as believers. While the king was pleased at their faith and conversion, it is said that he would not compel anyone

to accept Christianity; for he had learned from his instructors and guides to salvation that the service of Christ must be accepted freely and not under compulsion. Nevertheless, he showed greater favour to believers, because they were fellow-citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And it was not long before he granted his teachers in his capital of Canterbury a place of residence appropriate to their station, and gave them possessions of various kinds to supply their wants.

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 13: *Edwin holds a council with his chief men about accepting the Faith of Christ. The high priest destroys his own altars* [A. D. 627]

When he heard this, the king answered that it was his will as well as his duty to accept the Faith that Paulinus taught, but said that he must still discuss the matter with his principal advisers and friends, so that, if they were in agreement with him, they might all be cleansed together in Christ the Fount of Life. Paulinus agreed, and the king kept his promise. He summoned a council of the wise men, and asked each in turn his opinion of this strange doctrine and this new way of worshipping the godhead that was being proclaimed to them.

Coifi, the Chief Priest, replied without hesitation: 'Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching; for I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects has been more devoted to the service of our gods than myself; yet there are many to whom you show greater favour, who receive greater honours, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now if the gods had any power, they would surely have favoured myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them.'

Another of the king's chief men signified his agreement with this prudent argument, and went on to say: 'Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banquet hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world

from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.' The other elders and counsellors of the king, under God's guidance, gave similar advice.

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 15: *The Province of the East Angles accepts the Christian Faith* [A. D. 627]

So great was Edwin's zeal for the true Faith that he persuaded King Eorpwald, son of Redwald, King of the East Angles, to abandon his superstitious idolatry and accept the Faith and Sacraments of Christ with his whole province. His father Redwald had in fact long before this received Christian Baptism in Kent, but to no good purpose; for on his return home his wife and certain perverse advisers persuaded him to apostatize from the true Faith. So his last state was worse than the first: for, like the ancient Samaritans, he tried to serve both Christ and the ancient gods, and he had in the same temple an altar for the holy Sacrifice of Christ side by side with an altar on which victims were offered to devils. Aldwulf, king of that province, who lived into our own times, testifies that this temple was still standing in his day and that he had seen it when a boy. This King Redwald was a man of noble descent but ignoble in his actions: he was son of Tytila, and grandson of Wuffa, after whom all kings of the East Angles are called Wuffings.

KING ALFRED'S PREFACE TO HIS TRANSLATION OF THE "PASTORAL CARE"

King Alfred sends greeting to ----- in loving and friendly words.

And I would have you informed that it has very often come into my mind what wise men there were in former times throughout England, both of spiritual and lay orders; and how happy times then were throughout England; and how the kings who had rule over the people were obedient to God and his messengers; and how they both upheld peace and morals and authority at home, and also extended their territory abroad; and how they prospered both in warfare and in wisdom; and how zealous the spiritual orders were both about teaching and learning and all the services which they should do for God; and how foreigners came hither to this land in search of knowledge and instruction, and we now would have to get them from abroad, if we were to have them. So completely had learning decayed in England that there were very few men on this side the Humber who could apprehend their services in English or even translate a letter from Latin into English, and I think that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot even recollect a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom. Thanks be to God Almighty that we now have any provision of teachers. And therefore I charge you to do, as I believe you are willing, detach yourself as often as you can from the affairs of this world, to the end that you may apply that wisdom which God has granted you wherever you may be able to apply it. Remember what temporal punishments came upon us, when we neither loved wisdom ourselves nor allowed it to other men; we possessed only the name of Christians, and very few possessed the virtues.

When I remembered all this, I also remembered how, before everything was ravaged and burnt, the churches throughout all England stood filled with treasures and books, and likewise there was a great multitude of the servants of God. And they had very little benefit from those books, for they could not understand anything in them, because they were not written in their own language. As if they had said: "Our forefathers who formerly held these monasteries loved wisdom, and through it they obtained wealth and left it to us. Their track can still be seen, but we cannot follow it up, and now we have lost both the wealth and the wisdom, because we were unwilling to incline our mind to that track."

When I remembered all this, I wondered exceedingly at those good and wise men who were in former times throughout England, and had fully studied all those books, that they would not turn any part of them into their own language.

But then at once I answered myself, and said: "They did not think that men would ever become so careless and learning so decayed; they abstained intentionally, wishing that here in the land there should be the greater wisdom, the more languages we knew."

Then I remembered also how the divine law was first composed in the Hebrew language, and afterwards, when the Greeks learnt it, they turned it all into their own language, and also all other books. And the Romans likewise, when they had learnt them, turned them all through learned interpreters into their own language. And also all other Christian nations turned some part of them into their own language. Therefore it seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we also should turn into the language that we can all understand some books, which may be most necessary for all men to know; and bring it to pass, as we can very easily with God's help, if we have the peace, that all the youth now in England, born of free men who have the means that they can apply to it, may be devoted to learning as long as they cannot be of use in any other employment, until such time as they can read well what is written in English. One may then teach further in the Latin language those whom one wishes to teach further and to bring to holy orders.

When I remembered how the knowledge of the Latin language had previously decayed throughout England, and yet many could read things written in English, I began in the midst of the other various and manifold cares of this kingdom to turn into English the book which is called in Latin *Pastoralis* and in English 'Shepherd-book', sometimes word for word, sometimes by a paraphrase; as I had learnt it from my Archbishop Plegmund, and my bishop Asser, and my priest Grimbald and my priest John. When I had learnt it, I turned it into English according as I understood it and as I could render it most intelligibly; and I will send one to every see in my kingdom; and in each will be a book-marker worth 50 mancuses.

And I command in God's name, that no one take that book-marker from the book, nor the book from the church. It is unknown how long there may be such learned bishops, as now, thanks be to God, are almost everywhere; therefore I would like them always to be at that place, unless the bishop wish to have it with him, or it is anywhere on loan, or someone is copying it.

BEDE, ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

BOOK FOUR, CHAPTER 24: A brother of the monastery is found to possess God's gift of poetry

In this monastery of Streanaeshalch [Whitby] lived a brother singularly gifted by God's grace. So skilful was he in composing religious and devotional songs that, when any passage of Scripture was explained to him by interpreters, he could quickly turn it into delightful and moving poetry in his own English tongue. These verses of his have stirred the hearts of many folk to despise the world and aspire to heavenly things. Others after him tried to compose religious poems in English, but none could compare with him. For he did not acquire the art of poetry from men or from any human teacher but received it as a free gift from God. For this reason he could never compose any frivolous or profane verses; but only such as had a religious theme fell fittingly from his devout lips. He had followed a secular occupation until well advanced in years without ever learning anything about poetry. Indeed it sometimes happened at a feast that all the guests in turn would be invited to sing and entertain the company; then, when he saw the harp coming his way he would get up from table and go home.

On one such occasion he had left the house in which the entertainment was being held and went out to the stable where it was his duty that night to look after the beasts. There when the time came he settled down to sleep. Suddenly in a dream he saw a man standing beside him who called him by name: 'Caedmon,' he said, 'sing me a song.' I do not know how to sing', he replied. 'It is because I cannot sing that I left the feast and came here'. The man who addressed him then said: 'But you shall sing to me'. 'What should I sing about?' he replied. 'Sing about the Creation of all things'; the other answered. And Caedmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator that he had never heard before, and their theme ran thus:

[Bede gives the text in a Latin paraphrase, a translation of which is given below. We have added the original Anglo-Saxon text of the hymn]

Praise we the Fashioner now of Heaven's fabric,
The majesty of his might and his mind's wisdom,
Work of the world-warden, worker of all wonders,
How he the Lord of Glory everlasting,
Wrought first for the race of men Heaven as a roof-tree,
Then made he Middle Earth to be their mansion.

Nu we sculon herigean heofonrices Weard,
Meotodes meahhte ond his modgeþanc
weorc Wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs
ece Drihten, or onstealde.
He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum
heofon to hrofe, halig Scyppend.
Pa middangeard monncynnes Weard,
ece Drihten, æfter teode
frum foldan, Frea ælmihtig.

This is the general sense but not the actual words that Caedmon sang in his dream; for verses, however masterly, cannot be translated literally from one language into another without losing much of their beauty and dignity. When Caedmon awoke, he remembered everything that he had sung in his dream, and soon added more verses in the same style to a song truly worthy of God.

Early in the morning he went to his superior the reeve, and told him about this gift that he had received. The reeve took him before the abbees, who ordered him to give an account of his dream, and repeat the verses in the presence of many learned men, so that a decision might be reached by common consent as to their quality and origin. All of them agreed that Caedmon's gift had been given him by our lord. And they explained to him a passage of scriptural history or doctrine and asked him to render it into verse if he could. He promised to do this, and returned next morning with excellent verses as they had ordered him. The abbees was delighted that God had given such grace to the man, and advised him to abandon secular life, and adopt the monastic state. And when she had admitted him to the community as a brother, she ordered him to be instructed in the events of sacred history. So Caedmon stored up in his memory all that he learned, and like one of the clean animals chewing the cud, turned it into such melodious verse that his delightful renderings turned his instructors to auditors. He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole story of Genesis. He sang of Israel's exodus from Egypt, the entry into the Promised Land, and many other events of scriptural history. He sang of the Lord's Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension into Heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the teaching of the Apostles. He also made many poems on the terrors of the Last Judgement, the horrible pains of Hell, and the joys of the Kingdom of Heaven. In addition to these, he composed several others on the blessings and judgements of God, by which he sought to turn his hearers from delight in wickedness and to inspire them to love and do good.

TACITUS, *GERMANIA*

Chapter 14

On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of the chief. And to leave a battle after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief. Many noble youths, if the land of their birth is stagnating in a long period of peace and inactivity, deliberately seek out other tribes which have some war in hand. For the Germans have no taste for peace; renown is more easily won among perils, and a large body of retainers cannot be kept together except by means of violence and war. They are always making demands on the generosity of their chief, asking for a coveted war-horse or a spear stained with the blood of a defeated enemy. Their meals, for which plentiful if homely fare is provided, count in lieu of pay. The wherewithal for this openhandedness comes from war and plunder.

BEDE, *ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY*

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 9: *An attempt on Edwin's life*

During the following year, an assassin named Eumer was sent into the province by Cuichelm, King of the West Saxons, in order to rob Edwin both of his kingdom and his life. This man had a double-edged, poisoned dagger, to ensure that if the wound itself were not mortal, the poison would complete its work. On Easter Day Eumer arrived at the royal residence by the Derwent, and was admitted into the king's presence on the pretext of delivering a message from his master. And while he was artfully delivering his pretended message, he suddenly sprang up, and drawing the dagger from beneath his clothes, attacked the king. Swift to see the king's peril, Lilla, his counsellor and best friend, having no shield to protect the king, interposed his own body to receive the blow; but even so, it was delivered with such force that it wounded the king through the body of his warrior. The assassin was immediately attacked on all sides, but killed yet another of the king's men named Fordhere in the ensuing struggle.

LAWS OF ETHELBERT

13. If anyone kills a man in a nobleman's estate, he is to pay 12 shillings compensation.
14. If anyone lies with a nobleman's serving-woman, he is to pay 20 shillings compensation.
15. The [breach of a] *ceorl's* protection: six shillings.
16. If anyone lie with a *ceorl's* serving-woman, he is to pay six shillings compensation; [if] with a slave-woman of the second [class], 50 *sceattas*; [if with one of] the [third] class, 30 *sceattas*.
17. If a man is the first to force his way into a man's homestead, he is to pay six shillings compensation; he who enters next, three shillings; afterwards each [is to pay] a shilling.
18. If anyone provides a man with weapons, when a quarrel has arisen, and [yet] no injury results, he is to pay six shillings compensation.
19. If highway-robbery is committed, he is to pay six shillings compensation.
20. If, however, a man is killed, he is to pay 20 shillings compensation.
21. If anyone kills a man, he is to pay as an ordinary wergild 100 shillings.
22. If anyone kills a man, he is to pay 20 shillings at the open grave, and within 40 days the whole wergild.
23. If the slayer departs from the land, his kinsmen are to pay half the wergild.
24. If anyone binds a free man, he is to pay 20 shillings compensation.
25. If anyone kills a *ceorl's* dependant, he is to pay six shillings compensation.
26. If [anyone] kills a *laet* [a half-free slave or a indentured slave], he is to pay for one of the highest class 80 shillings; if he kills one of the second class, he is to pay 60 shillings; if one of the third class, he is to pay 40 shillings.
27. If a freeman breaks an enclosure, he is to pay six shillings compensation.
28. If anyone seizes property inside, the man is to pay three-fold compensation.
29. If a freeman enters the enclosure, he is to pay four shillings compensation.
30. If anyone kill a man, he is to pay with his own money and unblemished goods, whatever their kind.
31. If a freeman lies with the wife of a freeman, he is to atone with his wergild, and to obtain another wife with his own money, and bring her to the other's home.
32. If anyone thrusts through a true *hamscyld* [enclosure to a dwelling], he is to pay for it with its value.

LAWS OF WHTRED

1. The Church [is to be] free from taxation.
- 1.1 And the king is to be prayed for, and they are to honour him of their own free-will without compulsion.
2. The [breach of] the Church's protection is to be 50 shillings like the king's.
3. Men living in illicit cohabitation are to turn to a right life with repentance of sins, or to be excluded from the fellowship of the Church.
4. Foreigners, if they will not regularize their marriages, are to depart from the land with their goods and their sins.
- 4.1 Our own men, in this people, are to forfeit the fellowship of the Church, without confiscating their goods.
5. If after this meeting, any *gesith-born* [thane, noble] man chooses to enter into an illicit union in spite of the command of the king and the bishop and the decree of the books, he is to pay to his lord 100 shillings according to ancient law.
- 5.1 If it is a *ceorl*, he is to pay 50 shillings; and both of them are to abandon the union, with repentance.
6. If a priest permits an illicit union, or neglects the baptism of a sick person, or is so drunk that he cannot [perform it], he is to abstain from his ministrations until the bishop's sentence.
7. If a tonsured man, who is under no [ecclesiastical] authority seeks hospitality, he is to be given it once, and it is not to happen that he is harboured longer, unless he has permission.
8. If anyone gives his man freedom at the altar, he is to have the rights of a freeman of that people; his manumitter is to have his inheritance and his wergild and protection over his household, even if he live beyond the boundary, wherever he wishes.