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1 Introductory Key Concepts

(a) The Anglo-Saxon Period

Before we begin to discuss Old English literature it is essential to have a basic understanding of the historical events of the period, and the nature of Anglo-Saxon culture. This 'context-based' approach is one that is common to medieval literary studies. Linked to the study of the cultural aspects is the need for an understanding of the religion of the period, which, as will become increasingly clear, is essential to the discussions of its poetry and prose. It was, after all, the Christian monks of Anglo-Saxon England that copied, or were actually responsible for the composition of, much of Old English literature and therefore an awareness of the context in which they lived and worked is required.

The term 'Anglo-Saxon' is used generically to describe the period of English history from around the mid-5th century when the Angles and others arrived, to the year 1066, the beginning of the Norman Conquest, at which point the rule of England passed to the new invaders. 'Anglo-Saxon' is also used to refer to the people who occupied and ruled the land for those 600 years (i.e. *the* Anglo-Saxons). This apparently neat bracketing of history, however, belies a more complicated story. Britain was obviously inhabited before the Anglo-Saxons came, and these indigenous people were assimilated into Anglo-Saxon England (see below) or were driven to other lands. Moreover, even after the Norman Conquest the country was still predominantly occupied by Anglo-Saxons,¹ but by then they had become subservient to Norman rule. 'Anglo-Saxon' is also used occasionally to refer to the language and literature of the period (more so by earlier scholars) but the term 'Old English' is favoured now as it conveys the continuity of the language, i.e. from Old

¹ Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, for example, tells of a Saxon noble living in a much later period, and the equally fictional Robin Hood is also, according to some legends, a Saxon nobleman.

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English to Middle English to Modern English. However, even this categorisation by chronological period is misleading, and indeed should perhaps be abandoned (see Frantzen, 1990, p. 19) since it breaks up the real ebb and flow of language across time.

The Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain sometime in the mid-5th century with the collapse of Roman rule. They found there the indigenous Celts (or 'Brittonic') and the remnants of Romano-British society. Their original homeland was in the area of modern-day mainland Denmark and northern Germany. Economic necessity² and military ambitions no doubt sparked the migration. However, the legendary tale of a British chief called Vortigern hiring Saxon mercenaries who in turn rebel against him and seize lands, is one which clearly held an attraction for Anglo-Saxon writers themselves.

The early centuries, known as the 'migration period', involved gradual influxes and military incursions by people from three main tribes (according to Bede) – the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes; but other evidence points to settlements by other races such as the Franks and Frisians. It would appear the early incursions were on the east and south-east coasts of England. The complexity and chaos of the migration period can only be guessed at, but these warrior tribes eventually began to settle, forming dozens of kingdoms, at first either assimilating the locals or pushing them westwards and northwards to the traditional modern-day Celtic lands of Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany, and Ireland. The savagery of this period must also be assumed though archaeology has, as yet, failed to produce evidence of mass graves to imply many major pitched battles or genocide. There clearly was some British resistance to these incursions (it is in this period, for example, that the legendary name of Arthur first appears as a leader combating the invaders), but this seems more akin to a lengthy rearguard action, especially successful in delaying the Saxon advance into Cornwall.

Overall, though, the 'migration period' poses many questions, which may never be answered. Most crucially, as one scholar suggests, we are completely unclear as to whether this was 'a huge influx of settlers over the sea from the east' or 'a total cultural and ethnic shift whereby the descendants of the Roman-period native population became English' (Hines, 2004, p. 39).

As the invading tribes battled the indigenous population and fought among themselves, larger kingdoms began to form, so that by

² Archaeological evidence at places such as Feddersen Wierde in Northern Germany indicates that settlements around that time were abandoned.

the 7th century the famous Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy emerged. This consisted of seven major kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. War between the kingdoms was clearly common, with power bases shifting back and forth; but this was all to change in the 8th century when the first Viking invasions began. The increasing attacks of the Vikings brought many of the kingdoms to their knees and led to a wave of migration from Scandinavia and the subsequent settlement of areas of England by these new invaders (mainly in the north of England). So much so that by the end of the 9th century only the kingdom of Wessex, under King Alfred 'the Great' (871–99),³ remained independent. After a series of near catastrophic setbacks Alfred 'defeated' the Vikings and began the refortification, re-education, and rebuilding of Wessex. Once the truce he had signed was broken (in which Alfred had ceded northern England to Viking control – the so-called 'Danelaw'), the king began the reconquest of England, gradually pushing northwards. This was continued by his sons and grandsons so successfully that by the mid-10th century all of England had been reclaimed and came under the single rule of King Athelstan of Wessex (924–39), who properly deserves the title of the first King of England.

With this reconquest came a sense of national unity, and the notion of the *Angelcynn* ('race of the English') as used by Alfred, and *Engla lond* ('England' – a term which came into existence by 1000). Interestingly both were named after the Angles (the race that settled Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia) but accepted and adopted by the Saxons. Yet this unity would always be tested, and the rise of the power of the Church at the expense of the nobility (thus leading to a lack of loyalty on the latter's part), coupled with the now permanent Danish population in the north, weakened national security. This was most evident under the reign of Æthelred the Unready (979–1016), where renewed Viking invasions (more organised and disciplined this time) brought England to defeat, so much so that by 1016 the throne was handed to the Viking king, Cnut (1016–35), becoming part of his wider Scandinavian empire. Although the English regained the throne under Edward the Confessor (1042–66), Anglo-Saxon rule ended in 1066 in a flurry of political intrigue over the right of succession. The successful claim to the throne by William the Conqueror, backed with military might and papal approval, brought the Normans to power after the defeat of Harold at Hastings.

³ Dates for kings refer to the time they ruled, not their lifespan. Alfred was in fact born in 849.

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In summary then, the history of Anglo-Saxon England is a complicated story. Yet it is important to take away some key observations:

- the Anglo-Saxons started to migrate to an already occupied Britain in the mid-5th century from the area we now term northern Germany and Denmark;
- according to Bede (see Chapter 2(a) and (d)) they consisted of three tribes – the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes – but we know that other races were also represented;
- it is assumed that originally they continued their warrior tribe structure, but gradually these tribes formed into larger kingdoms, eventually becoming the famous seven kingdoms or Heptarchy;
- Viking attacks in the 8th and 9th centuries nearly destroyed Anglo-Saxon rule, but under Alfred the Great the reconquest began and England was unified in the 10th century under Athelstan;
- Anglo-Saxon rule finally came to an end with the Norman Conquest in 1066.

See also Chapter 1(e), Chapter 2(d), (e), (g), and Chapter 4(k).

Further Reading

Throughout this book we refer to many monographs and series that will reinforce the study of Old English from a literary, linguistic, and historical perspective. For a gentle introduction to the events of the period we recommend Blair (2000), John (1996), the Short Oxford Histories of the British Isles (Charles-Edwards, 2003, and Davies, 2003), and Campbell et al. (1991). If you are interested in the cartography and geographical development of Anglo-Saxon England then see Hill (1981). For more information on Anglo-Saxon society, see Chapter 1(b), (e), (f), and (d).

(b) Anglo-Saxon Society

The legacy of the Anglo-Saxon period (outlined in Chapter 1(a)) was remarkable. Not only did the English language rise to a dominant position as the language of court, and to a certain degree the church, but the boundaries of England as a country and its administrative system were also set. We will touch on these issues many times in this book, but for now it is worth capturing a few of the general points.

The period began with the migration of tribes from mainland

Europe to Britain. These small groupings, or war bands, were probably built primarily around family ties and led by war leaders. They survived according to a harsh code, based on violence, feuding, and vengeance. Original settlements in the east and south of the country were basic, with huts made of timber, and wattle and daub, smaller craft huts, and a large – probably communal – hall. This latter building seems to have been a place where the local populace gathered, feasted, and told tales or were told tales by the *scop* ('poet', see Donoghue, 2004a, pp. 24–55). The hall was so important to the people that it became symbolic in their literature of a well-ordered society (for example, various halls, and thus the kingdoms they represent, are contrasted in the heroic poem *Beowulf*).

As time progressed these tribes grew, and the settlements grew with them. Mergers and conflict gradually saw some of these gain supremacy over their neighbours and thus small kingdoms began to form. These fought each other, and via conquest and political mergers (we assume) formed larger countries until the formation of the Heptarchy. These seven kingdoms were subdivided into shires (many of which survived until their boundaries were restructured in 1974) and these in turn, into smaller land areas called 'hundreds' (or 'wapentakes' in the Danelaw – an area of northern England controlled by the Danes in the early 10th century).

A kingdom was ruled by a king who was chosen by the group (so not necessarily by succession). Occasionally in this early period kings were recognised as being the dominant power by other kings, hence the term *bretwalda* or 'overlord'. Beneath the king were his *gesithas* or 'companions' made up of thegns and ealdormen. These were divided into the *duguth* – the trusted/proven companions; and the *geoguth* – the young warriors. The relationship between the king and his nobles, the so-called *comitatus*, was key to early Anglo-Saxon society and was based on a system of loyalty and reward. Beneath the nobility were the *ceorls* or freemen, and then finally the slaves. This tightly structured society was based on mutual dependencies and we can detect in their writing a clear fear of exile from the community (see Chapter 2(i), 'Elegies and Transience').

The place of women in society is also noteworthy. Although it would be inaccurate to say they enjoyed equal status to men, they were certainly not as disenfranchised as they were in later medieval society (Fell, 1984). In Anglo-Saxon England, for example, they could hold property, bestow it, run joint religious houses, and lead armies into battle.

Eventually, a single nation was formed: England. However,

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although this was a new nation, often troubled by internal difficulties and external attackers, it was also a country that continually remembered its roots. Bede, for example, called the other Germanic tribes on the Continent *gens nostra* or 'our people', and this is probably linked to the efforts made by Anglo-Saxon missionaries to convert the Germanic tribes on mainland Europe. They were aware also of the mythological beliefs they held in the past, and celebrated many of the ideals that we can assume were prized in their early history, such as heroism, loyalty, the reliance on kinship and family bonds, and the *comitatus* relationship between the warrior and the lord. All of these harken back to the original tribal societies and structures. Even when towns and cities emerged and systems of administration more akin to modern society formed, their understanding and fondness for the past was still evident. This is clear in the famous 'elegies' where the problems of the present are set against a eulogised past.

See also Chapter 1(a), (c), (e), (f), and Chapter 2(c), (i) and (j).

Further Reading

For approachable introductions to life in Anglo-Saxon England one should look to Page (1970), and Lacey and Danziger (1999). Pollington (2003) provides a specific study of the hall in Anglo-Saxon society, to which one should add general books on the history and archaeology of the Anglo-Saxons. For a more detailed study of the development of the role of kings, see Chaney (1970), and for an introductory study of the role of women in the period, see Fell (1984), and the notes on feminist criticism in Chapter 4(k).

(c) The Norman Conquest and the Later Medieval Period

Normandy as a principality was founded c.911 when King Charles the Simple of France granted the province to the Scandinavians who settled there in the 9th and 10th centuries. Norse settlers, who gave Normandy its name (e.g. 'Northmen/Norsemen'), quickly assimilated and became French-speaking. In the 11th century the civilisation in Normandy was essentially French but it had close economic, cultural, and political ties with Anglo-Saxon England. In 1002 King Æthelred the Unready married Emma, daughter of the Duke of Normandy. Throughout Æthelred's reign England was under threat from Viking invaders, and it was natural for Æthelred to seek an alliance with a strong neighbouring state (Norman ports had also

been used safely by the Vikings). Moreover in 1013–14 England was invaded by the Danish king, Swein Forkbeard and his son Cnut, and Æthelred was forced into exile in Normandy. In 1016 Æthelred died, and Cnut led a more successful invasion, becoming the king of all England (after the death of Æthelred's son Edmund Ironside), which he ruled until 1035. However, in 1042, when the Danish line died out, Edward the Confessor (the son of Emma and Æthelred) became king, so restoring Anglo-Saxon rule. After a 24-year reign he died childless in January 1066.

One of the claimants to the English throne before 1066 was William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy. He was Emma's great-nephew and considered himself next in line to the throne after the death of Edward the Confessor. Moreover, Edward was brought up in Normandy where he had lived in exile after Cnut became king, and according to Norman chroniclers promised his throne to William in the event of his childless death.

However, only a few days after Edward's death his brother-in-law, Harold Godwinson, was crowned King of England. He was the Earl of Essex, and brother of Edith who Edward the Confessor had married in 1045 (probably more down to pressure than by choice). Because of Harold's wealth, political influence, and successful campaigns against the Welsh, he was the second most powerful man in England after the king, and by the 1060s was probably responsible for much of its administration. Allegedly Edward nominated him on his deathbed as his successor.⁴ William's supporters, however, claimed that during an earlier visit to Normandy Harold had sworn to uphold Edward's promise of succession to William and was therefore guilty of perjury. Through this, William was also able to gain papal backing for his claim to the throne.

As a result, William invaded England in September 1066, while Harold was away fighting another campaign in the north of England against his own brother – Tostig – and the King of Norway, another claimant to the throne. Harold defeated both at the Battle of Stamford Bridge but was forced to march south to meet William's marauding armies. As is commonly known, Harold was defeated at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066 and killed on the battlefield. William was crowned in London on Christmas Day 1066 and the rule of

⁴ Nearly all the events leading up to the Battle of Hastings are detailed in the Bayeux Tapestry, though how these should be interpreted is open to debate. Nevertheless, the tapestry demonstrates the important interconnection between art and history (and by extension, literature) which we promote throughout this book (see Chapter 4(i)).

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England immediately passed from the Anglo-Saxons, who had been in power for nearly five centuries, to the new invaders.

The effects of the Norman Conquest and how much it changed English history are a matter of scholarly debate. What is clear, however, is that many of the English nobility were killed at Hastings, and many of those who survived were gradually replaced by William's followers. In a similar way Norman clergymen were introduced into all the important positions in the Church (this was a slower process but had actually begun under Edward the Confessor). Many other Normans – soldiers, merchants, and craftsmen – gradually settled in England after the Conquest. Though they were still only a small minority, their influence was considerable because of their position as the ruling class. In the 12th and the first half of the 13th centuries Norman French was thus the language of the nobility and to some extent the clergy and the middle classes. Moreover a considerable body of French literature was produced in England from the beginning of the 12th century onwards.

William the Conqueror's two sons reigned after him – William II ('Rufus') from 1087 to 1100 and then Henry I (1100–35). Then followed the disastrous reign of King Stephen (1135–54), the Conqueror's grandson by his daughter Adela, in which England was plunged into civil war. In 1154, Henry II, son of Matilda (the daughter of Henry I) and Geoffrey Plantagenet, took the throne after Stephen's death. Henry's family came in part from Anjou in France, hence the term given to him and his successors – the 'Angevin' kings – with the Plantagenets being the specific Angevin dynasty that ruled England (so-called after adopting the broom flower – *planta genista* – as their emblem).

Henry II's reign is representative of the Norman and Plantagenet kings (though he is probably best known for his part in the murder of Thomas à Becket). Firstly he spent only a third of his reign in England, the rest of his time was spent in mainland Europe. Secondly, there was the problem of rebellious heirs and the right of succession. Henry had envisaged that on his death his dominions would be divided amongst his three sons Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey – with his fourth son, John, being given the conquered territories of Ireland (a recent acquisition). The fact that Henry and Geoffrey failed to outlive their father should have simplified things, and indeed in 1189 on the death of the king, Richard I (the 'Lionheart' 1189–99) seized the throne. Yet Richard's attention lay elsewhere and he took part in the Third Crusade, being captured on his way back and imprisoned in Germany for over a year. In his absence John ruled England, and on Richard's

death John was chosen by the barons to be King of England and Normandy.

John (1199–1216) has been popularised as a bad king by the legends surrounding Robin Hood, but it is true to say that his reign was not successful. He lost his lands on the Continent and was forced to withdraw to England, raising money for his military campaigns via excessive taxation. He was also excommunicated from the Church. A rebellion in England ensued which sought to implement reform, resulting in the signing of the Magna Carta at Runnymede (1215), which set out to establish certain rights of the king and his subjects. John's son, Henry III (1216–72), also had to contend with dwindling fortunes on the Continent, and the rise of the power of the barons (such as Simon de Montfort), which culminated in turn in the rise of Parliament.

Although France was to occupy English thoughts again in the fourteenth century, Edward I (1272–1307), who succeeded Henry, looked elsewhere to his Celtic neighbours to expand his kingdom. He led the conquest of Wales, turned his attentions to the lowlands of Scotland, and drained Ireland of its resources. His mixed success was not enough for his son Edward II (1307–27) to build on and the latter not only suffered defeat to the Scots at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, but also saw his kingdom in Ireland reduced to a small enclave (the 'pale') around Dublin.

The Plantagenets had not given up on regaining their land in France however (especially as they noted that the French had assisted the Scots in their struggle). In 1337, Edward III (1327–77) claimed the French throne, thus beginning a series of campaigns that were to last until 1453 and have become known as the Hundred Years War. This was even to spread to the Low Countries, and to Spain and Portugal.

The financing of the war, and the outbreak of plague in 1348 (the so-called 'Black Death'), caused unprecedented changes and social disruption in England. The plague reduced the country's population by a third and labourers became especially scarce. The peasants suddenly became an economic power able to demand higher wages and lower rents. Yet this did not tally with the need to divert revenues towards financing the wars. On the death of Edward, his ten-year-old son Richard II (1377–99) took the throne, but the power lay in the governing council that 'supported' Richard. A series of poll taxes and attempts to impose maximum wage levels led to the ultimately unsuccessful Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which brought together a range of grievances against the new taxes, political mismanagement, and dissatisfaction with the Church.

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Richard II's reign ended in tyranny and he was deposed in 1399 (and probably murdered), to be replaced by Henry Bolingbroke of the House of Lancaster, who became Henry IV (1399–1413). The Lancastrian dynasty and Henry's kingdom became established, so much so that his son Henry V (1413–22) could renew the war in France with some vigour, scoring notable successes at Agincourt (1415). Yet the drain on England's finances meant that the continued fighting in France could not be sustained.

Henry VI, a well intentioned king, sought peace and consolidation but in 1453 (the notional end of the Hundred Years War) he lost Gascony, and the English empire in France was reduced to Calais. Faced with this disaster, and Henry VI's own ill-health, the time was ripe for rival dynasties to seek power. None more so than the House of York: in 1460 Richard (previous protector of England) claimed the throne, and in the following year (on Richard's death) his son declared himself king – Edward IV (1461–70). Yet Edward never commanded the support he needed; in 1470 he was forced to flee, and Henry VI was restored – thus giving Henry the claim to fame of two separate reigns (1422–61 and 1470–1). Yet the dynastic warfare (which is now commonly known as the War of the Roses after the flower emblems of the Houses of York and Lancaster) did not end there. Edward IV returned with a military force in 1471, and managed to succeed in battle (and through luck), to secure the throne again. This time the Lancastrian line of succession had been removed, and the Yorkist claim seemed to be unshakeable. The final denouement, however, has led to much debate over the years. When Edward IV died (1483), his son, Edward V (but never crowned), was only 12. The way was open for Richard of Gloucester, Edward IV's brother, to take the throne. After the death of the 'Princes in the Tower' (Edward V and his brother) Richard became King – Richard III (1483–5). Yet it was to be shortlived. In 1485, Henry Tudor, whose claim to the throne was tenuous to say the least, invaded England and defeated and killed Richard at the Battle of Bosworth. The Tudor dynasty thus began, which was to rule throughout the sixteenth century.

Throughout the period England's attention was drawn in multiple directions over the centuries; far more than had been the case under the Anglo-Saxons. There were the Crusades to the Holy Land, which ran through the 11th to 13th centuries; the continued war to protect England's holdings in mainland France; and conflicts with its Celtic neighbours in Wales, Ireland and Scotland. The changes of fortune in France, the impact of the plague, and the continued warfare led to numerous changes in the social order. Moreover the rivalry between

England and France was key, and this led to the growth of nationalistic feeling which helped to raise the prestige of English. The figure who perhaps most represents this new status for the language is, as might be expected, Chaucer.

See also Chapter 1(d) and Chapter 3(b) and (k).

Further Reading

For the accounts of post-Conquest England and later Middle English history, see Chibnall (1987), Clanchy (1998 and 1993), Gillingham and Griffiths (2000), Keats-Rohan (1997, 1999–2002, and 2002), Loyn (1991), McKisack (1959), Morris (1972), Poole (1955), Powicke (1962), and Tuck (1985).

(d) Middle English Society

The social structure of post-Conquest England up until the end of the Middle English period is extremely complicated and went through several changes. We can only present here a basic summary, written purely from the stance of informing literary analysis.

After his success at Hastings William needed to reward the 6,000 or so men who fought for him. The most obvious way to do this was with land taken from the conquered Saxon lords, and thus, at a stroke the ruling class and power shifted to the Normans. This happened so quickly that by the time of the Domesday Book (1086) only a few of the king's leading tenants were English. In return the landowners swore fealty to the king and promised to fight for him and pay dues.

In a sense this is the basic premise of the so-called feudal society. A lord would reward the vassal (or liege) with land (the 'fief') and in return the vassal would perform military service for the lord. This is very much a development of the Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* relationship, but historians often dispute how widely uniform the notion of a feudal society was. Nevertheless, this relationship does appear to be a common factor in post-Conquest society.

At the time of the Conquest, Anglo-Saxon society was made up of a king, who was served by earls, ealdormen, thegns ('thanes' – mainly in Scottish territories), administrative posts, the *ceorls* ('free men'), and then the slaves. With the Normans came the *barones regis*, the 'King's Barons', a new term and class for the landowning rulers. Barons were vassals to the king, but at the same time were given the responsibility for maintaining their lands (which were often spread

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out over the country to avoid concentration of power). Barons, in return, would also have to provide the king with fighting men, trained in cavalry warfare – or as they were known, ‘Knights’. Originally knights were just mercenaries, or hired warriors, but they developed into a class of their own, so much so that by the thirteenth century they had established their own code of conduct – ‘chivalry’ (from the French *chevalier*, i.e. ‘someone who fights on horseback’).⁵

The rights were cascaded so that there were lesser barons, or minor ‘lords’, who might owe fealty to their superiors, and in turn demanded duty from those beneath them. This extended right down to the *ceorls*, a term gradually used for anyone ‘common’ as opposed to noble, who would work the land for their lord (usually grouped under manors), paying their tribute through their labour or produce. They were also occasionally referred to as *rustics* or *villeins* (though not, at the time, as ‘peasants’). A ‘sub-class’ of the *ceorl* were serfs, who were legally bound to their lord in terms of what they could do, but enjoyed more freedom than slaves. It should be remembered also that the landholders were not solely secular, and the abbots and bishops could easily exert manorial control over the local population.

As only a few thousand foreigners were in charge of approximately four million Anglo-Saxons at the time of the Conquest, expressions of power needed to be made evident, the most obvious of these being the building of castles. These were governed by a constable, and held a standing garrison, ready to suppress any problems. The barons and their knights and foot soldiers controlled key areas of the country, and used administrative staff such as the sheriff (from the Anglo-Saxon ‘shire reeve’) to collect taxes, and to maintain the law.

Tensions between the barons and the king often ran high, notably in the disastrous reign of King Stephen (1135–54), the pressure on King John (1199–1216) to recognise the rights of others in the *Magna Carta* (1215), and the barons’ revolt of 1258–65. The most lasting effect of this was the rise of power of the Great Council, to which the barons were summoned to discuss national affairs. It was from the French word for ‘discussion’ that the council came to be known by its more familiar term – Parliament.

As noted above, land was divided into manors (hence the term used to describe the period, ‘manorialism’). Each manor was divided

⁵ It is worth noting that groups of knights, known as the Christian warrior class, are also evident throughout the period – such as the Knights Templar.

into the 'demesne', where the lord's farm was worked, and the remainder, which was leased to tenants. Manors are important also as they form the basis of part of the law, in that manorial courts could be held (a right of the manorial lord). Over the period we see further developments of the legal system, including the tripartite split between common law, customary law, and canon law (this has precedents in the Old English period – see Chapter 2(c)); and the emergence of borough courts, and Justices of the Peace.

The power of landholding began to shift noticeably, over the period, to the power of finance. Taxes were imposed and collected by the sheriffs, and twice a year accounted for to the king's ministers (e.g. the Treasurer) at an office known as the Exchequer (because counting was literally conducted in the early days on an oblong exchequer table). Overseeing this was the office of the Chancellor and his clerks, who worked in the Chancery. They had responsibility also for drawing up various royal documents. This shift to commerce also saw a rise in towns, and centres of population. Cities were small: the population of London and Westminster was around 40,000, whereas the population of most other towns was between 1,000 and 5,000. However, throughout the period the towns continued to grow. They were independent self-governing communities that elected their own administration. Most of their population were merchants and artisans, who established professional fraternities or guilds for their protection, regulation, organization, and expansion of trade. Some guilds became very wealthy and powerful in the 14th century and, being a source of income for the government, could influence royal policies (as noted earlier). The growth of trade and the decline of the feudal order (feudal communities were self-sufficient and did not depend on trade) resulted in the rise of the middle class: merchants, craftsmen, and professionals who were becoming wealthier, more educated, emancipated, and politically influential. These provided many of the characters that form the background to Chaucer's pilgrims, for example.

The political and economic climate in the 14th century was also influenced by the Black Death (1348–50), which killed around one-third of the population in England. This resulted in a shortage of labour, followed by a rise in wages and greater social mobility. Agricultural workers discovered that they could bargain with landlords and travel to wherever the wages were highest. In response Parliament passed a number of measures, including the Statute of Labourers in 1351, which aimed to stop workers breaking their contracts and to freeze the wages at their pre-plague level.

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Resentment against such laws and unprecedented levels of taxation demanded by the government resulted in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. During this uprising armed bands of peasants and townsmen attacked manors and religious houses. They stormed London, burned the palace of John of Gaunt (the uncle of Richard II), opened prisons, destroyed legal records, and executed the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chancellor. The decline of the feudal order and serfdom, the growth of towns and trade, and the effects of the Black Death, all led to an increase in the importance of the middle and labouring classes and consequently the importance of the language they spoke. The use of English as the language of writing continued to expand therefore.

The 13th century also saw the development of commercial book production. If earlier books were copied mostly in the monasteries, in the 13th century secular scribes started to form their own guilds and workshops. Such workshops were required because of the development of trade and the emergence of the merchant class, who required documents to be written and copied for personal and business use. In addition to this, secular books increased in number and the demand for all kinds of books grew with the growth of literacy (particularly among the laity and the middle class). Throughout the Middle English period the importance of the laity in education and as patrons and audience for literature in English continued to increase, and their role in the production and dissemination of texts became more prominent.

A major cultural concern of the Middle English period was translation and making historical, religious, philosophical, and scientific texts available in the vernacular. This coincided with the development of literature in English, which involved adaptation of European literary models and forms, and expansion of the use of English into new areas, especially as a language of different kinds of literary discourse.

Throughout the period, then, we can observe the following key points:

- William the Conqueror rewarded his followers (the barons) with landholdings, and in return they would provide him with knights;
- the rights of the lord cascaded down in the so-called 'feudal' system;
- tensions between the barons and the king eventually led to the rise of the power of Parliament;

- during the Middle Ages, England was a largely agricultural society, but the late medieval period saw the development of trade, the rise of guilds (professional fraternities of merchants and artisans), and the growth of towns and the middle classes;
- the importance of English as a written language grew as the middle classes and laity became more educated, and politically and economically influential.

Further Reading

A standard account of the feudal society is Bloch (1961); see also Stenton (1961). Various aspects of Middle English society are described in Given-Wilson (1987), Goldberg (2004), McFarlane (1972 and 1973), Keen (1973 and 1984), Thrupp (1948), Pantin (1955), Scattergood and Sherbourne (1983), and Ziegler (1969). The cultural role of institutions and social groups is explored in Barr (2001), Cannon (1999), and Leclercq (1982). See also the 'Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England' project (www.pase.ac.uk).

(e) Religion: Pagan and Christian

In this section we will attempt to summarise the development and supremacy of the Christian religion in the Middle Ages. However, before concentrating on the changes in the practices and organisation of Christian worship in England, we should begin with a recognition that this was not the only set of beliefs evident during the period.

Germanic paganism vs Christianity

To the Anglo-Saxons (in keeping with the general belief at the time) the world was flat, and surrounded by *garsecg* or 'spear man', a clearly defined barrier at the edge of the sea (*garsecg* was also used as a poetic word for the oceans – see the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, ll. 27–38). The world, or *middangeard* ('middle-earth/enclosure') as they called it, was suspended between heaven and hell in the Christian model, but again this may have close links to the pagan concept of *miðgarðr* mostly known from Scandinavian mythology.

This simple opening illustrates two key issues we need to face if we are to understand the beliefs and practices of the Anglo-Saxons. This can prove to be fascinating as we begin to discover a range of new legends, deities, and codes of practice. Secondly, we can

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observe two perspectives – that of Christianity,⁶ and that of the Germanic pagan world. This is fundamental to the study of Old English and is a running thread throughout the following chapters – namely the continued tension between the old beliefs and legends and the new religion of the Christians, or the ‘endless project of identifying the precise blend of Christian and Germanic’ (Lees, 1999, p. 4). Indeed as one book remarks:

Perhaps the study of Old English literature still finds that its primary question is the same one Alcuin asked nearly twelve hundred years ago: *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?* ‘What has Ingeld⁷ to do with Christ?’ . . . the encounter between an unlettered Germanic tribal aesthetic and the remnants of the classical tradition, itself transformed by the Christian religion. (Greenfield and Calder, 1986, p. 3)

In this section we will begin to explore this.

Even taking into account the military conflicts and nation building by the Anglo-Saxons, perhaps the most important event of the period was the conversion of the English to Christianity that took place with the arrival of St Augustine in 597. The key word to note here is ‘conversion’, i.e. changing from one state to another. If the Anglo-Saxons *became* Christian what can we say they were before this? In short, we do not know exactly as the evidence for their earlier beliefs is minimal, but the generic term ‘pagan’ is often used. Many scholars have attempted to re-create the beliefs of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons but this is all regarded as incredibly tenuous (see Wilson, 1992, and Stanley, 2000). At best we can only pick up glimpses. As they were closely associated with other Germanic tribes, one could conclude that the Anglo-Saxons that arrived in the migration period brought with them something akin to the Norse mythology with its pantheon of gods and goddesses. These probably included Odin (also called Woden), Tiw, Thor, Freya and many others; and there is evidence pointing to the fact that these gods were worshipped at

⁶ Christianity is the only organised religion we know of. Although the Anglo-Saxons knew of Judaism no Jews are recorded as living in England during the period, and in the entire vernacular Old English corpus there is not a single reference to Islam (though ‘pagan Saracens’, i.e. Muslims, are mentioned in Huneberc’s 8th-century Latin *Vita Willibaldi – or Life of Willibald*). This was to change in the Middle English period as Jews began to settle in England, and the impact of the Crusades against the Muslims was felt.

⁷ Ingeld is a figure of Germanic history/legend, mentioned in *Beowulf*, l. 2064.

some point by the English. We have the survival of the names of these deities in our weekdays (Tuesday – Tiw’s day, Wednesday – Woden’s/Odin’s day, Thursday – Thor’s day, and Friday – Freya’s day). There are also pagan elements in some place names, and names which appear in genealogies of English kings (who traced their roots back to Woden and beyond to such Old Testament figures as Noah). Finally there is the direct condemnation of these ‘gods’ in texts by the later Old English writers Ælfric and Wulfstan, who both wrote a version of a text entitled *De falsiis diis* – ‘On false gods’. Furthermore, the influx of the Vikings from the 8th century onwards must also have led to a resurgence in pagan worship.

Loosely coupled with this are the Norse legends, though it has to be remembered that these may not necessarily reflect religious beliefs. Old English literature, often allusively, refers to such legendary characters as Weland the Smith for example, or characters from pseudo-history, attesting to the survival of these legends after the migration period. The interest in these stories, moreover, did not seem to abate with the establishment of Christianity, as Alcuin noted with his ‘Quid Hinieldus’ question. Therefore the survival of these stories, however brief the reference to them is, goes some way to providing evidence for pre-Christian beliefs.

We must also consider the small corpus of what one could call ‘magical’ writings (although the boundary between religion, science, and magic is contentious). The series of charms (or spells perhaps) presented to us in collections such as those edited by Storms (1948) and Griffiths (1996) place before us an array of fantastical creatures and beliefs. We have mentions of elves and demons (to supplement mentions elsewhere in the literature of dragons, trolls, giants, and orcs), references to ‘Erce, mother of earth’ (Storms, charm number 8) and emphasis placed on moonlight, plants, earth, and water. With the latter we must also remember that the indigenous Celtic people had their own beliefs, and their worship of natural places (such as springs, wells, etc.) may have influenced the English. Many of the charms, though occasionally infused with Christian elements, also make mention of a single figure responsible for enacting the spell, possibly a shaman or wizard (a *wicca*), a practitioner of *wiccecræft* or ‘witchcraft’.

A problematic issue which often appears when discussing pagan beliefs centres around the Old English concept of *wyrd*, meaning ‘fate’ or ‘providence’. This is mentioned often in Old English literature as some form of guiding force which directs the lives of men, but its true meaning has caused problems for scholars. Whereas it is

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tempting to ascribe to *wyrd* some form of personification, i.e. another entity that the pagan Anglo-Saxons worshipped (and there is some evidence for this in the poetry), its appearance in many late texts seems to imply it had simply entered the realm of common expression (such as 'count your lucky stars') and was not symbolic of any religious practices. Furthermore, in poetry more than half the references to *wyrd* occur in verse devoted to the Old Testament so it was clearly acceptable to Christian poets.

This battle between the old religious beliefs of the Germanic tribes and the new Christianity is a fundamental one to the study of Old English literature, as noted at the outset (see also Chapter 3). Evidence for the conflict seems to underpin many of the texts that survive, if not explicitly, then implicitly. The Anglo-Saxons undoubtedly held a strong interest in the history of Christianity and the Church, and even felt an affinity between the oppression of the Israelites in the Old Testament and their own fate at the hands of the heathen Vikings. Yet they also sought to bring this in line with their own beliefs, notably the high esteem they attached to heroism and loyalty. Christian scholars did not attempt to dismiss these earlier practices, but as we will see they often incorporated them. This is a very complicated, but fascinating aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture.

The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from their old beliefs to Christianity was a slow process, beset by problems. We should remember that when St Augustine arrived in 597, he was in fact bringing Christianity back to England (that is to say, the later Roman Empire, of which Britain was a part, was Christianised under Constantine). Faced with the warlike Anglo-Saxons, St Augustine and his followers adopted a traditional tactic of the Church when attempting conversion: namely appropriation of existing beliefs and modifying them to fit the new religion. Thus the date for Christmas was fixed as the old Roman winter solstice, and Easter itself is named after the feast of *Eostre* (seemingly a pagan goddess worshipped by the Germanic tribes, and alluded to by Bede).

The importance of the arrival of Christianity cannot be overstated. Not only did it bring new beliefs, it also brought a new wave of literacy based originally around Latin. It had an impact on architecture, art, education, scholarship, the law, the structure of society, the balance of power, landholdings, and much more. Anglo-Saxon England also, as a consequence, became part of the wider fold of the Church, which led to increased ties with the Continent. As Fulk states (1991, p. 10):

Conversion represents a fundamental shift in the society, something far greater than simply a change in faith. It created a new class of citizens, churchmen who stood outside any family structure.

As well as facing competition from the pagan beliefs of the resident Saxon tribes, the mission of St Augustine and his subsequent followers also had to accommodate the Celtic Christian Church. With the collapse of Roman rule and the arrival of the Germanic tribes, Christianity was pushed westwards to Wales and Cornwall, and most notably Ireland. Somewhat cut off from mainland Europe the practices of the Celtic Church understandably diverged from Roman Christianity, and although this was never on a par with the violence of later theological clashes (such as Protestantism versus Catholicism), it did lead to differences of opinion and practice. These were not settled (in terms of which would be the dominant force in English Christianity) until the famous Synod of Whitby in 664. Here, the argument centred primarily over the dating of Easter (the two Churches differed in their practice), but the debate was more important than that as it was about which practice – that of Ireland or Rome – would hold sway. Understandably the Roman school won.

The Anglo-Saxon Church

The administration and support of Christianity needs further explanation, though, as it has direct relevance for students of the literature. To begin with there was an early split in the structure of the Church between those we may call 'secular' clergy (dealing primarily with pastoral duties) and the monks or 'regular' clergy (i.e. living according to a rule). The secular clergy were allowed to marry, and were divided into major roles such as bishops, priests, and deacons; and minor roles such as doorkeepers, readers, exorcists, and acolytes. Monks, on the other hand, led a much stricter and more insulated life. They were either 'eremitic', i.e. living as hermits (such as St Guthlac), or 'cenobitic', which implied living as part of a community, or order, under an abbot or abbess. The dominant order in the later Anglo-Saxon period was the Benedictines.

Monks were originally not defined as clergy, but over time they started to receive ordination (i.e. they could become a priest, usually at the age of 30), partook in pastoral duties, and took up major clerical positions. The major repositioning of power with a shift away from the secular clergy to the monasteries came during the so-called Benedictine Revival of the mid-10th century. This was led by Saints

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Oswald, Dunstan, and Æthelwold and saw a re-establishment of the Benedictine order (so-called because it lived according to the rules defined by St Benedict of Nursia) in the vacuum left by the Viking wars of the ninth and early tenth centuries. We know that St Benedict's ideas were first studied in the late seventh century in England, but it is from 950 onwards that we see the true rise to power of the Benedictine order. So much so that in 970 a revision of the *Rule of St Benedict* called the *Regularis Concordia* was drawn up by St Æthelwold as a version specifically for English monks.

The influence of this on literature was profound. Notably monasteries needed scriptoriums, scribes, and libraries; and in those libraries they collected together key patristic and biblical texts, which acted as source material for much of their own writing. A fundamental part of monastic life was the Divine Office, a series of timed periods throughout the day set aside for prayer and study (such as Matins, Lauds, Prime, etc.). During these, when Mass was said, the monks would listen to a set text (called the 'pericope'), which would then be explained and interpreted (a practice known as 'exegesis'). There would also be an opportunity for other liturgical readings, notices, and other prayers. But why is this key? In short, these offices required texts for the monks to use – not just the original set texts, but also guides on how to interpret them. It is not surprising therefore that the bulk of religious prose that survives to us from the period were aimed at satisfying these monastic needs.

Post-Conquest Christianity

After the Norman Conquest the Church continued to play a major role in society and education, and remained an important patron of literature. Monasteries preserved their position as cultural centres and powerful landowners, directly involved in the social and economic lives of all strata of society. This was partly due to the fact that they were economically stable institutions: their lands were never broken up, reorganised or confiscated, and unlike lay properties they remained intact after the Conquest (Cannon, 1999, pp. 320–3). This was important for the preservation of texts and literacy. A direct outcome of such economic and institutional stability was the continuation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* until 1070 at Christ Church Cathedral priory, until 1080 at Worcester Cathedral priory, and until 1154 at Peterborough. Post-Conquest monastic libraries held a variety of religious and secular works in English, Latin, and French, and were centres of education, research, and literary activity. Monasteries also

formed part of an international network which supported cultural, political, and ideological exchanges. Medieval English monasteries had close links with monasteries on the Continent since the 8th century and certainly since the Benedictine Revival in the 10th century.

During the Middle English period a variety of new religious orders established themselves in England. We have already noted the Benedictine order, which was dominant during the Anglo-Saxon period and continued to be influential after the Conquest. Benedictine monasticism, introduced to England by Augustine of Canterbury, was the main form of monastic life in western Europe until the 11th century. In the 11th century, however, new orders were formed, partly out of a desire for reform caused by successive relaxation of Benedictine discipline and the lack of centralised policy and control (Benedictine abbeys were entirely autonomous).

From the beginning of the 12th century the new orders started to arrive in England from the Continent. The order of the Augustinian Canons, governed by the Rule of St Augustine (the second of the two major medieval monastic rules, based on the writings of Augustine of Hippo), originated in Italy in the 11th century and established itself in England early in the 12th century. Its rule was quite flexible and allowed members of the order to have responsibilities outside their monastic house in parishes, hospitals, schools, and almshouses. The Cistercian order was founded c.1100 in France and established its first monastery in England in the first quarter of the 12th century. The Cistercians wanted to return to a stricter and more 'authentic' form of Benedictine monasticism. They insisted on a literal observance of St Benedict's rule, including a return to strict asceticism, manual labour (particularly agricultural work), and using a purer version of the Divine Office stripped of later accretions. Another highly austere new order, the Carthusians, was founded at the end of the 11th century in France. It was a strictly contemplative order where monks were vowed to silence and practised contemplation and mental prayer. It combined the eremitic and cenobitic forms of monasticism because its members lived as a community of hermits. They spent most of their life in solitude in individual cells, but came together for some services and meals on Sundays and feast days.

The 13th century saw the coming of the fraternal orders to England: the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Carmelites, and the Augustinian friars (the latter was a separate order, different from Augustinian Canons). The Dominicans, the Franciscans, and the Carmelites were also known respectively as the Black Friars, the Grey Friars, and the White Friars, distinguished by the colour of their

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mantles. The two largest orders, the Dominican and Franciscan friars, arrived correspondingly in 1221 and 1224, and became well established by the middle of the 13th century. Whereas monastic religious orders avoided contact with secular society, and had their foundations in remote regions away from towns, the friars saw their mission as bringing the teachings of the Church to 'the world'. In contrast to monks who lived a cloistered life in a specific community, friars lived as individuals in the secular world, travelled, and engaged in preaching and pastoral work among the laity chiefly in towns. Fraternal orders were also known as 'mendicant' (from Latin *mendicare* – 'to beg') because they were required to live in absolute poverty, begging for food and being dependent on the charity of their listeners. Unlike monastic orders they applied the requirements of poverty and not owning any property both to individual friars and corporately to the whole order. The Franciscans, also known as Friars Minor, emphasised poverty, helping the poor, and providing a ministry among ordinary people. The Dominicans, also known as the Order of Preachers, emphasised preaching and theological study, which was seen as a necessary preparation for ministry. As a result of this the Dominicans played an active role in universities and schools, and during the Middle Ages established their foundations in most university towns.

Fraternal orders spread rapidly in England and their piety initially won them a strong following. Friars produced many famous scholars and teachers, and because of their mission among the laity contributed to the development of penitential literature, sermons, and lyrical poetry in English. As fraternal orders grew, however, the ideal of poverty proved to be impossible to sustain if taken literally. In the 14th and 15th centuries the orders became large and wealthy, which in many cases led to a considerable relaxation of discipline. After the Black Death particular resentment arose against the practice of using 'limites' as a source of income to support the life of luxury. These were districts licensed to individual friars by their order where they had exclusive rights of preaching and hearing confessions. Thus Chaucer's Friar, one of the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*, is a 'lymytour' characterised as 'wantowne' ('pleasure-loving') and 'merye'. In the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer described the Friar's lifestyle and 'ministry' in some detail, focusing his satire on life among the laity and its temptations, confessions and absolutions, and begging and preaching. His description reflects a view widely held in the 14th century that the friars were failing in their pastoral duty to laity. Referring to the four fraternal orders described above, Chaucer says about his Friar that:

In alle the ordres foure is noon that kan
So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage. (ll. 210–11).

(‘In all the four orders [of friars] there is no one who knows
As much about socialising and fair language’.)

Friars roused hostility among secular clergy and bishops because of their privileges, such as exemption from episcopal jurisdiction, and their role as preachers and confessors to the laity. The relationship between friars and monks also often involved rivalry and mutual suspicion. Thus *The Land of Cokaygn*, a 13th-century satire of monastic life, is preserved in a single manuscript believed by some scholars to have been put together by a Franciscan friar.

In addition to the monastic communities and the mendicant orders, there were the ‘solitaries’ – those who left the secular world and lived a life of seclusion in order to practise asceticism, silence, prayer, and contemplation. Anchorites and anchoresses are especially notable (see the *Ancrene Wisse* or ‘Guide for Anchoresses’ in Chapter 3(d)) as they were literally walled up in a small cell, frequently attached to a parish church. The practice was recognised and supported by the Church and an anchorite was often ‘enclosed’ by a bishop.

A major event of religious life in the 13th century was the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215. This was one of a series of important councils which took place in the Lateran Palace at Rome from the 7th to the 18th centuries. The Fourth Lateran Council sought to reduce the proliferation of religious orders and to consolidate the church’s teaching on various matters. Among other things it forbade the foundation of new religious orders, gave an official definition of the doctrine of the Eucharist, and made annual confession compulsory for all Christians. It encouraged religious education of the laity and because of this had an important impact on the development of vernacular literature.

The late medieval period was also the time of a great flourishing of scholarship and theology, and saw many developments in religious thinking, including the emergence and development of theories relating to purgatory, confession, and transubstantiation; and of a celebration of the Corpus Christi (‘the Body of Christ’). Shrines and pilgrimages maintained their popularity, and with the increase in overall wealth the latter in particular were in vogue in the fourteenth century (hence Chaucer’s basis for *The Canterbury Tales*).

The 12th and 13th centuries were the time when universities

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appeared and established themselves in Europe and England. They became rivals to the monasteries in terms of religious thought and education, and indeed some of the great critics of the Church emerged from such surroundings. Hand in hand with this we witness the emergence of grammar schools (ostensibly to teach Latin grammar) and parochial schooling by local clergy.

Finally, the 14th century saw the rise of the Lollard movement. The Lollards attacked many doctrines and practices of the Church and emphasised personal faith and the role of lay believers. Their programme of reform and the belief that people should have access to the Bible in their own language anticipated the ideas of the Reformation. The movement was largely academic until the end of the 14th century, but became increasingly popular in the 15th century and its social teaching became more pronounced.

In summary then, the history of religion in medieval England is complicated:

- although illiterate, when the Anglo-Saxons arrived they brought with them their myths, legends, and religious beliefs;
- Britain had been Christian under the Romans, but the Anglo-Saxon settlers were pagan; this all began to change, however, with the arrival of St Augustine in 597;
- the conversion utilised the common approach of appropriation, and evidence for earlier pagan beliefs is scant but still remains;
- with Christianity came a rise in literacy and education;
- two Christian practices emerge – the secular clergy, and the monastic clergy – with the latter eventually gaining dominance under the Benedictines in the 10th century;
- the requirements of the Divine Office adhered to by the monks necessitated a series of texts such as homilies and sermons;
- the Benedictines were the dominant order in Anglo-Saxon England and contemporary Europe but after the Conquest new orders emerged, including Augustinians, Cistercians, Carthusians, fraternal orders, and others;
- the Church was an important patron of literature throughout the Middle Ages;
- the importance of monasteries as cultural centres diminished during the late medieval period with the establishment of universities, fraternal orders and commercial book production.

See also Chapter 1(d), Chapter 2(d), (f), (g), (j), Chapter 3(d), (i), and (k).

Further Reading

Concise explanations of institutions, concepts, and practices of the Christian Church can be found in Livingstone (2005). Historical surveys by Lynch (1992) and Oakley (1979) offer a good introduction to the medieval Christian Church. For information on Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs see Frank (1991), Griffiths (1996), Niles (1991), North (1997), Stanley (2000), Storms (1948), and Wilson (1992). The history of Anglo-Saxon Christianity is covered in most general history books of the period but see especially Blair (2005); for information on the Divine Office see Gatch (1985). For information on monasticism and religious orders see Burton (1994), Knowles (1963 and 1969), Lawrence (2003), and Leclercq (1982); for fraternal orders see Brooke (1975) and Lawrence (1994). See also Sumption (2002) for an account of pilgrimages in the Middle Ages.

(f) Philosophy and Political Thought

What follows is an indicator of some of the main philosophical discussions that students encounter when studying the literature of the period.

Old English philosophy

As previously stated, the literature of the period was (almost without exception) written in monasteries, and thus enveloped in the Christian world (we must remember that there were no universities in England before the foundation of Oxford in the 12th century). It is not surprising, therefore, to see a summary of medieval philosophy as being aimed primarily at 'the understanding of Christian faith and its defence against those who attacked it' (Gracia, 2003, p. 3).

However, as we have also observed, the period is noted for the clash of religions and ideologies – pagan Germanic and Christian – and the appropriation of the former by the latter. Evidence that survives therefore of Germanic philosophy is negligible. Perhaps the most striking concept is that of *wyrd* ('fate'), which appears consistently in Old English literature. This has been discussed earlier, and cannot be taken as any proof of a pagan belief in a deified Fate, but clearly has links with discussions of predestination and free will: e.g. did God control all fate (as Alfred seemed to think), was it some unknown force termed *wyrd*; or did man have an entirely free choice in how he behaved (as Ælfric argues)?

The Anglo-Saxons also displayed a clear interest in eschatology (from the Greek ἔσχατος 'last' and λόγος 'discourse'), which was mirrored in their fixation on transience and as the millennium

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approached, the possible impending apocalypse. Although this tone decreases in the mid-11th century it is clearly noticeable in the early writings of Ælfric and the sermons of Wulfstan. They saw the world as being one in decline (no doubt influenced by the backdrop of continued Viking aggression), as witnessed in Ælfric's homily *De die iudicii*. With this impending doom (hence *domesdæg* or 'judgement day') they viewed their worldly surroundings as temporary, and their primary concern was salvation (Gatch, 1991, p. 187).

It should also be remembered that the Anglo-Saxons did not write in isolation. We know that they drew on others (notably the Carolingians) as inspiration for their literature, art, science and so on; and thus it is not surprising that influential figures emerge from the past as shaping their philosophy. A key group is that of the patristic writers, or the Fathers of the Church, who provided spiritual guidance for medieval scholars replacing the guidance of the pagan philosophers. The patristic period is often dated as being from the time of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) to the death of St Isidore of Seville in AD 636; but it extends earlier than that. The works of such important patristic authors as St Jerome and others were used again and again by Anglo-Saxon writers in shaping their own views – most notably their exegesis of biblical texts. Ælfric, for example, notes his indebtedness to Augustine, Jerome, Bede, Gregory, and Smaragdus in the preface to his *First Series of Catholic Homilies*.

St Augustine of Hippo

Of these the most dominant figure is that of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD).⁸ Indeed along with Boethius (below) he could be described as one of the cornerstones of Old English philosophy. Augustine was a prolific writer and his works were widely copied, distributed, and read by early medieval authors (his reflection on the soul, for example, the *Soliloquia*, was 'translated' by King Alfred – see Chapter 2(e)). His impact on medieval Christianity cannot be underestimated, but more important for the purposes of this discussion is his influence on writers from the Old English period. Scholars have for some time now discerned strong links (occasionally attributed directly) between the writings of Augustine and homilists such as Ælfric and Wulfstan, including similarities in style and the use of rhetorical devices. In addition, casting such poems as *Beowulf*

⁸ Not to be confused with St Augustine who led Gregory's mission to England in 597 to begin the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.

against a patristic Augustinian background has also been a focus of academic attention.

Augustinian philosophy proposes several arguments of interest evident in key texts such as the *Confessiones*, *De doctrina Christiana*, and *De civitate dei*. These include:

- That sin is evident in *the choice* made by the individual to commit a certain action, and therefore not in the action itself or the object of the action. This ties in with the choices presented to individual Christians in Old English prose and poetry, and also possibly in the choices made by heroes.
- That evil is a corruption of good, and not a substance in itself. It stems from sin or is a result of a sin, and in this we have free choice (and thus must take responsibility for our action). This was to change in St Augustine's later writings, however, when he emphasised much more the power of predestination.
- That there is a distinction between what we do, and what is done to us that is beyond our control. In the former we have control, and must take responsibility; with the latter we are innocent but must live through it in a Christian manner.
- That we must recognise the flaws of worldly life and joys (linking to the Old English notion of transience in the elegies – Chapter 2(i)) and the permanence of heavenly glory.
- That sinners will be damned and salvation is reserved for the righteous few who will enter the City of God (*De civitate dei*).
- That a clear path to understanding is the study of scriptural exegesis.

Boethius

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c.480–c.525), who lived slightly after Augustine, was a lay person, and not a patristic writer. Yet his influence on medieval philosophy is undeniable. He was a Roman consul and a leading counsellor to the Ostrogothic king Theoderic, the then ruler of Italy. At the height of his career he was accused of treason, sent into exile and possibly imprisonment in Pavia, and executed a year later. While in Pavia he wrote the famous treatise *De consolazione philosophiae* or *The Consolation of Philosophy*,⁹ in which he explores the nature of fortune and happiness, and the problems of

⁹ Boethius wrote many other works including treatises on logic, astronomy, geometry, maths, and music; plus a range of philosophical translations and commentaries.

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evil and free will. It is written in Latin prose, interspersed with passages of verse, and presents the philosophical argument in the form of a discussion with 'Lady Philosophy'. She attempts to answer the main issue facing Boethius of why evil is allowed sway in the world. In her argument she points to two key concepts – fortune and providence – the former being that of the human world and the latter, of the divine. Fortune is likened to a wheel that turns bringing good and ill to humans, demonstrating the transient nature of worldly joy. Yet within men, they can always find solace in their mind; true happiness comes from within the person but not from external pleasures and is something which fortune cannot take away. In the discussion of providence, Boethius questions aspects of fate and predestination, wondering openly whether men really have free will or whether everything is predestined. He concludes that there is freedom of choice, and that evil only happens when men choose to allow it. The book is not overtly Christian but obviously deals with key issues of Christian debate.

The impact of the *Consolation* on medieval thought cannot be underestimated. It was one of the most widely translated books of the period and in Old English was one of the four texts translated by King Alfred. The attraction of Boethian philosophy to the Anglo-Saxon mind can be seen in three key areas:

- the discussion of fortune, which in turn may link to the Old English concept of *wyrd* or fate;
- following on from this is the discussion of free will – a tenet of the heroic ideal in that heroes are free to choose their course of action but must be seen to adhere to it steadfastly (see also above, under the discussion of Augustine);
- insistence on the transience of worldly goods and glory, which is also clearly evident in many Old English poems, especially the so-called 'elegies' (see Chapter 2(i), 'Elegies and Transience').

Old English political thought

In Chapter 1 (b) we discussed the basic format of Anglo-Saxon society in that it hinged on a hierarchical structure, starting with the king, and moving down through the thegns/ealdormen, civil servants such as the Reeve, to the *ceorls* (free men), and eventually to the slaves. Although this only presents a snapshot of society at one point, we can assume that throughout the period there would always have been some form of stratification of the rights and privileges of people and their obligations and 'worth' to society (as witnessed in the law codes – see Chapter 2(c)).

Although much can be gleaned from historical and legal texts from the period, the views presented to us on political structures and the obligations of those in power are sparse in comparison. The key texts one should look to are:

- King Alfred the Great's translations – notably his version of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*;
- the *Regularis Concordia* – a reworking of the Rule of St Benedict in 973, outlining the duties and responsibilities of monks;
- Ælfric's *Colloquy*, which outlines the roles and responsibilities of various 'professions';
- Wulfstan's *Institutes of Polity* – a detailed analysis of the roles and duties of secular and clergy.

This is far from complete but what this indicates collectively is:

- an understanding of the complicated structure of society and the interdependence of its members;
- an attempt to define, in an ordered manner, the duties and responsibilities of each;
- an almost equal weighting between the duties and profile (possibly even the power) of Church and State;
- a split between the spiritual world and the physical world with each requiring actions by different members of society (but with an element of interdependence).

The latter point is clearly identifiable in the repeated discussion of the 'three orders of society' or 'estates'. This appears in Alfred's translation of Boethius, Ælfric's *Homily on the Books of the Maccabees*, and Wulfstan's *Institutes of Polity*. In short, this states that there are three key roles that need to be filled, in any society – people who work to bring in food (*laboratores*), people who fight to protect society (*bellatores*), and people who pray to protect spiritual matters (*oratores*). Any king or kingdom needs all three to stand, and by implication without any one of them a kingdom will fall. At first this may seem to suggest a separation of Church and State but instead it presents the opposite. Without the Church fighting the spiritual fight the people would be damned, and without the State fighting the military fight or engaging in the fight against hunger, the Church could not continue. Both, then, were interdependent, or more importantly this placed the Church and its well-being at the heart of the body politic.

Middle English philosophy

After the early Christian writers and Boethius there was a period of dormancy in European philosophy until it re-emerged in the later Middle Ages in the monastic milieu (see McGrade, 2003, pp. 10–50). Between the years 900 and 1200 Europe experienced economic growth which led to an increase in population, the emergence of towns and commerce, and the revival in education. Monasteries were centres of literary activity, teaching, and scholarship crossing international boundaries. Thus Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), an outstanding Christian philosopher and theologian, received his education and spent much of his career at the monastic school at the Benedictine abbey at Bec in Normandy. He is most famous for proposing what later became known as ‘ontological argument’, a reason-based proof of the existence of God. Anselm insisted that the use of reason did not undermine faith, but was entirely compatible with it, and in his works theology started to develop into a systematic discipline.

Anselm’s work gave impulse to the development of the academic and educational tradition known as ‘scholasticism’. This was a method of philosophical and theological speculation aimed at achieving a better understanding of Christian doctrine through the application of intellectual, reason-based inquiry. Scholasticism relied on the earlier work of Boethius and St Augustine, who introduced medieval scholars to Greek philosophy, logic and dialectic, and demonstrated how methods and ideas of philosophy can be applied to theological study. Scholasticism also had foundations in the work of medieval scholars such as John Scotus Erigena (c.800–c.877), an Irishman who may have lived and taught for part of his life in England, though this is uncertain. His important contributions, among others, were his translations of writings of Greek philosophers and commentaries on the works of Boethius.

The development of scholastic philosophy and theology continued in the works of the 12th-century thinkers, such as Peter Abelard (1079–1142). They saw the universe as rationally ordered and accessible to analysis, and increased the use of reasoning and argumentation in theology and philosophy. If early medieval philosophical writings, as witnessed in the works by Boethius and St Augustine, were addressed to, and could be understood by, any educated person, the 12th-century philosophy became a highly specialised academic discipline. It developed sophisticated methods of investigation and complex technical jargon which could be difficult for a

non-specialist reader. Late medieval philosophy already included all the main areas which it has today as an academic discipline.

In the 12th and 13th centuries new translations of major philosophical works by Greek and Arabic thinkers were also produced. In the 13th century most of Aristotle's works which are known today were translated and integrated into the academic curriculum. The 12th and 13th centuries also marked the foundation of the major European universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, which became centres of teaching and research. Paris was also the site of a pre-eminent university in the 13th century which brought together an international community of scholars. Many of the best known late medieval thinkers studied or taught there.

Influential philosophers who spent some part of their career in England (mostly at Oxford) included John Duns Scotus (1265/66–1308), William of Ockham (c.1287–1347), Walter Burley (c.1275–1344), Robert Grosseteste (c.1175–1253), Roger Bacon (c.1214–94), John Wyclif (c.1330–84), and Johannes Sharpe (c.1360–after 1415). Their greatest achievements were in logic, ontology, metaphysics, natural philosophy and philosophy of science, and epistemology. William of Ockham, a Franciscan and a native of Ockham in Surrey, is best known for formulating the principle of economy in explanation and theory-building known as 'Ockham's razor' (i.e. reducing any hypothesis or theory to its key assumptions).

There are only a few texts of philosophical instruction in Middle English. These include translations of Cicero's *De amicitia* ('On friendship') and *De senectute* ('On old age') dating from the second half of the 15th century (see Raymo, 1986, pp. 2372–3). *De amicitia* was translated by John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, and *De senectute* by William Worcester, who used an early 15th-century French version as the basis for his translation. Both works were published by Caxton in 1481. *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius was translated by Chaucer, and c.1410 by John Walton, an Augustinian Canon of Oseney (see Science, 1999). Walton worked from the Latin original, but also made extensive use of Chaucer's translation. A unique commentary on Book 1 of the *Consolation*, based on Chaucer's translation, survives in a 15th-century manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Auct. F. 3. 5). *The Consolation of Philosophy* also influenced literary works of many Middle English authors, including Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Henryson, and King James I.

A range of philosophical ideas is discussed in Middle English literary texts. The following, by no means a complete list, offers some examples:

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- The problems of free will, predestination, and fortune are very prominent in several of Chaucer's works, including *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*. Their characters debate the existence of predestination, and they have a structure of astrological references to the state of the heavens and the positions and movements of planets which may imply that these influence human actions.
- The problem of evil and its nature is prominent in *A Revelation of Love* by Julian of Norwich.
- The limitations of human reason are explored in *Pearl* (see Chapter 3(p));
- The problems of eschatology and the meaning of human history are present in Langland's *Piers Plowman*.
- The problems of authority, experience, and language are discussed in Chaucer's *The House of Fame*.

Middle English political thought

Late medieval thinkers were interested in the analysis and rationalisation of society. The themes of the ideal society and of the failings of contemporary society are common in Middle English literature. Several poets, including Chaucer, Langland, and Gower, used the model of the 'three estates' (see above) in their description and criticism of social structure. Other political and social ideas explored by Middle English authors included the following:

- Good kingship and the qualities and responsibilities of a ruler. This was a very widely discussed subject, and the main theme of works within the tradition of the 'mirror for princes', such as Hoccleve's *The Regement of Princes*, or John of Trevisa's translation of *De regimine principum* of Aegidius Romanus.¹⁰
- Corruption in society and the need for its moral reform. This was again an immensely popular subject. Langland gives it the form of an internal and external quest in *Piers Plowman*, and explores the possibility of the reform of society side-by-side with the problems of the reform of the individual. It was also a running theme in Wulfstan's sermons.

¹⁰ This was also a concern of King Alfred in his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* – which was used by the Carolingian rulers as a manual for kingship. Ælfric also discusses and presents 'model kings' in his writings (notably St Edmund).

- The proper use of wealth. This question is debated by allegorical characters in the alliterative poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*. Langland's *Piers Plowman* portrays a complex allegorical character Lady Meed, who embodies the morally ambiguous nature of 'treasure'. The question of 'evangelical poverty' and disendowment of the Church was debated throughout the 14th century, and received a particularly radical expression in the teachings of John Wyclif.
- Responsibilities of different classes of society. This question is present in all works influenced by the three-estates model. A number of authors also discuss it with reference to the 14th-century Peasants' Revolt and the Statutes of Labourers (see, for example, Helen Barr's discussion of the use of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard in *Pearl* (2001, pp. 40–62)).
- Personal responsibility of the members of society. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer linked the idea of harmonious society to the need for moderate and responsible behaviour by its members.
- Criticism of the way of life and moral standards among the clergy and the need to reform the Church. This was a very widely discussed subject particularly prominent in *Piers Plowman* and the Lollard texts.
- Greater lay participation in religion. In the 13th century, concrete steps were made towards involving the laity in the life of the Church. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, assembled by Pope Innocent III, authorised the statement of faith for all Christians, and made a call for personal confession and the reception of the Eucharist at least once a year by all members of the Church. The early 13th century marked the foundation of the first two orders of mendicant friars, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, who emphasised the pastoral mission among the laity. There was also an ongoing debate about lay access to theological knowledge and lay authority in matters of religion. These issues are explored in *Piers Plowman* and were central to the Lollard movement.

See also Chapter 1(d) and (e), Chapter 2(c)–(f), (i), (j), (n), and Chapter 3(d), (e), (g), (k), (m), and (o)–(u).

Further Reading

On eschatology, see Old English poems such as *Judgement Day II*, *Christ III*, and *Domesday*. The core collections of patristic source material are J.-P. Migne's *Patrologia*

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Latina (1844–65), commonly referenced as *PL*, followed by the volume number, and Brepols's *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts* (both available on CD, and the latter at www.brepolis.net/ by subscription). Gracia and Noone (2003) and McGrade (2003) offer a good introduction to medieval philosophy. See also Bolton (1986), Gatch (1991), and J. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine of Hippo* (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine.html>).

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