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# The Birth of English Prose

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# Lesson Aims



- Old English Prose - key points
- Historical background
- Authorship / Performance / Audience / Analysis
- The development of prose and prose style
- And, of course, look at some texts



What is prose?



- 1) unstructured form of language, closely connected with the rhythms of everyday speech
- 2) the form of written language that is not organized according to the formal patterns of verse
- 3) matter of fact, commonplace, dull
- 4) don't know!



- 1) unstructured form of language, closely connected with the rhythms of everyday speech
- 2) the form of written language that is not organized according to the formal p<sup>o</sup> 'All which is not prose is verse; and all which is not verse is prose.'
- 3) matter of fact, common
- 4) don't know! 'Good Heavens! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing it.'

Moliere

# Common characteristics

- Factual, so attempt to achieve clarity
- Explain/record
- Standard vocabulary
- Regular syntax/word-order
- Easy to translate (use of articles, prepositions, clause structures, etc)

# Ælfric's *De Temporibus Anni*



Ðunor cymð of hǣtan ond of wǣtan.  
Sēo lyft tȳhð ðone wǣtan tō hire  
neoðan and ðā hǣtan ufon; ond  
ðonne hī ġegaderode bēoð—sēo  
hǣte ond se wǣta—binnan þære  
lyfte, þonne winnað hī him  
betwȳnan mid eġeslicum sweġe,  
ond þæt fȳr āberst ūt ðurh  
līgette.... Swā hǣttre sumor,  
swā mǣre ðunor ond līget on  
ġēare.

Thunder comes from heat and moisture.  
The sky draws the moisture to it  
from below and the heat from above;  
and when they are gathered—the  
heat and the moisture—within the  
cloud (sky), then they contest be-  
tween themselves, with an awful  
noise, and fire bursts out through  
lightning.... The hotter the summer,  
the more thunder and lightning  
(there is) in the year.

# Ælfric's *De Temporibus Anni*



*the*

Renas cumað of ðære lyft . . . Seo lyft  
liccað ond atyhð wætan of ealre eorðan  
ond of ðære sæ, ond gegaderað to  
scurum; ond þonne heo ne mæg mare  
aberan, þonne fealð hit adune

*draws up*

*when*

*she*



# Old English Prose (vs Poetry)

- We have titles
- We have authors
- We have dates
- We have a lot of prose
- In poetry usually only one copy survives
- In prose, numerous copies of the text survive
- But prose still throws up the same questions about authorship, audience, performance, and style



- To fully understand most pieces of literature you need to know the historical and social context of the text and/or author...
- 1) Agree
- 2) Disagree



878 AD



- Arrive in 5th century
- Conquer and expand 6th century
- 597 St Augustine arrives
- Kingdom of Northumbria dominant in 7th century
- Power shifts to Kingdom of Mercia under Offa in 8th century
- And then...







A piece of Human Skin taken from the door of Hadstock Church, Essex 1876, said to be that of a Danish pirate who had pillaged the church probably some 900 years ago. Also part of the ornamental iron work by which the skin was attached thereto; obtained when the door was repaired in 1830. "About the time above mentioned, the kingdom of East-Anglia was harassed by the Danes in an extraordinary manner and when the inhabitants caught any of them, it is said they put them to death with cruel tortures, and tradition of this neighbourhood says that one of them having been taken robbing the church at Hadstock was flayed and his skin nailed on the Church-door of that place."

Hadstock Church door A.D. 1883.



By the end of  
the 9th century

...





the end of  
8th century





Alfred the Great,  
King of Wessex (849-99)  
‘Defeats’ Vikings at Battle  
of Edington in 878 AD





# Alfred's Legacy

- Reconstructs after Viking onslaught - new monasteries, new learning (*Preface to the Pastoral Care*)
- Decides that books need to be written in English not Latin - starts Old English prose
- 'Translates' books himself (Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, *Psalms*)
- Provides history books, notably the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
- Religious and philosophical books
- Plus builds fortifications, remodels army, initiates a Navy...

# Other key events



- England reconquered throughout 10th century by House of Wessex
- Major revival of learning in the 950s under the Benedictine Monastic movement (led by St Dunstan, St Æthelwold, St Oswald) - so called 'Benedictine Revival'
- Produces two great prose writers of the Old English period - Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950-1010), and Wulfstan of York (c. 960?-1023)
- Anglo-Saxons lose control under Æthelræd Unræd and fully to Cnut in 1016
- Regain control with Edward the Confessor until 1066

So, for example



- What would their views on *Beowulf* be under Alfred (late 9th century) or Æthelræd (late 10th/early 11th) or Cnut (1016)?
- Why does language standardise under the dialect of Late West Saxon in the late 10th century?
- Why do we say English literary prose begins with Alfred?



# So, for example



- What would their views on *Beowulf* be under Alfred (late 9th century) or Æthelræd (late  
‘One of the most significant literary achievements of the Anglo-Saxons was the establishment of vernacular prose as an acceptable medium both for the dissemination of knowledge on a wide range of subjects and for the provision of moral instruction and entertainment.’

J. Bately ‘The nature of Old English prose’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English* (CUP, 1986), p. 71.

But before we leave history  
behind ...

- ... welcome to the 6th century - Hollywood style



What prose texts do you know?



# Prose

‘Recording and dissemination of facts’



- Overall only c. 3 million words of Old English survives, of which c. 93% prose, 6% poetry, 1% glosses
- No drama
- Literary and non-literary prose



Some examples

# Sample Text 1: Laws



‘If a servant, contrary to his lord’s command, perform servile Work between sunset on Saturday evening and sunset on Sunday evening, he is to compensate his lord eighty sceattas.

...

If a husband sacrifice to devils without his wife’s knowledge he is to forfeit all his property...If a slave sacrifice to devils, he is to compensate six shillings or be flogged’

King Wihtræd of Kent, AD 695

[illegible]

# Sample Text 2: Charter

King Edgar Charter (S670/S1450)

‘Ærest up of temese ... æfter ðær ealdan dic to cuforde ... upp andlang teoburnan ... to þære wide here stræt ... to ðære ealde stoccene sancte andreas cyricean ... on holeburne ... andlang stremes be lande 7 be strande’

Ærest - first

andlang - along

here - army

stoccene - built of stocks

burne - stream

# Sample Text 2: Charter

King Edgar

‘Ærest up c  
andlang teo  
stoccene sa  
stremes be

Ærest - firs  
andlang - a  
here - army  
stoccene - l  
burne - stre



upp  
ealde  
lang



# Sample text 3: Science



‘The liver is extended on the right side as far as the pit of the belly, it hath five lobes or lappets, it has a hold on the false ribs, it is the material of the blood, and the house and nourishment of the blood; when there is digestion and attenuation of meats, they arrive at the liver, and then they change their hue, and turn into blood; and it casts out the uncleanness which be there, and collects the clean blood, and through four veins principally sends it to the heart...’

Bald's *Leechbook*

on þyſsum beoð acende þam ic lam men ego

olpen ða

**Ð**aer heoð cende men  
hy beoð fiftyne  
foða lange 7 hy habbað  
hæfð hite lic 7 cpa  
neb on anum heafde  
7 cneowu ſpyde



þe ðe 7 lange noða 7 ſpæc feax. þonne hy  
cennan willað þonne fauad hy on ſcipum to  
mdeum. 7 þær hyra ſecynda inporid þurh gaf  
icoma in gallia hæte  
þlað þær beoð men a  
cende on dæſ heowes  
þara heafdu beoð ge  
monu ſpa leona heaf  
du 7 hi beoð .xx. foða  
lange 7 hy habbað  
micelne mūd ſpæcon 7 ſv hpylcne mon  
nan on þæm landū on gitað oððe geſeoþ



oððe h m e

folgan



## Text 5: Science?



‘Here it begins to tell about the nature of a man, how he becomes man in his mother’s inside. First the man’s brain is formed ... then in the sixth week that brain is covered with a membrane on the outside. In the second month the veins are formed - they are separated into 365 shorter and longer; and the blood flows to the feet and into the hands; and he is then articulated in limbs and is altogether developed. In the third month he is a man, except for the soul. In the fourth month he is firm in limbs. In the fifth month he is lively and grows and the mother is at her wit’s end ...In the tenth month the woman will not escape with her life if the child is not born, because it turns to a mortal sickness in the abdomen - most often on a Tuesday night...’

## Text 5: Science?



‘...you might know which kind of a child a pregnant woman will give birth to. If she walks slowly with hollow eyes, she will give birth to a boy; if she walks quickly and has swollen eyes she will give birth to a girl. Take two plants in hand, that is, a lily and a rose; carry them to the pregnant woman; ask her to take whichever of the plants she wishes; if she takes a lily she will give birth to a boy...if a woman be pregnant for four or five months and then she frequently eats nuts or acorns or any fresh fruits, then sometimes it happens that as a result the child is stupid...another thing about that is: if she eats bull’s flesh or ram’s or buck’s or boar’s or cock’s or gander’s, or any of the animals that can procreate, then sometimes it happens that the child is hump-backed...”

# Text 6: Superstition?



‘If a man dreams that he sees an eagle settle on his head, that means much honour.

If it seems to him he sees many eagles at once, that shall be harm and assaults and plots of men.

If it seems that he sees bees carrying honey, it shall prove to be the earning of money from wealthy persons.

# Text 6: Superstition?



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‘If a r  
mean

If it s  
and a



## Welcome to Dream Moods

You are entering a mysterious and fascinating world of dreams where the rules of reality do not apply. We hope that Dream Moods will help you make sense of your dreams and achieve a better understanding of them. We're dedicated to helping you find the key to unlocking and interpreting the meanings to your dreams.

We realize that your dreams are unique. No other individual can have your background, your emotions, or your experiences.

Every dream is connected with your own "reality". Thus, in interpreting your dreams, it

## September 2007

Dream Moods is ranked the number 1 site in the top search engines. Thanks for all the Dream Mooders who help make our site #1.

We are currently working on fixing the Discussion Forum. Sorry for the inconvenience caused.

arm

If it seems that he sees bees carrying honey, it shall prove to be the earning of money from wealthy persons.

# Authorship

- Prose, in the main, originates from a literate culture
- Therefore authorship is often at a time, and place, by an individual



# Pick of the Prose Pops

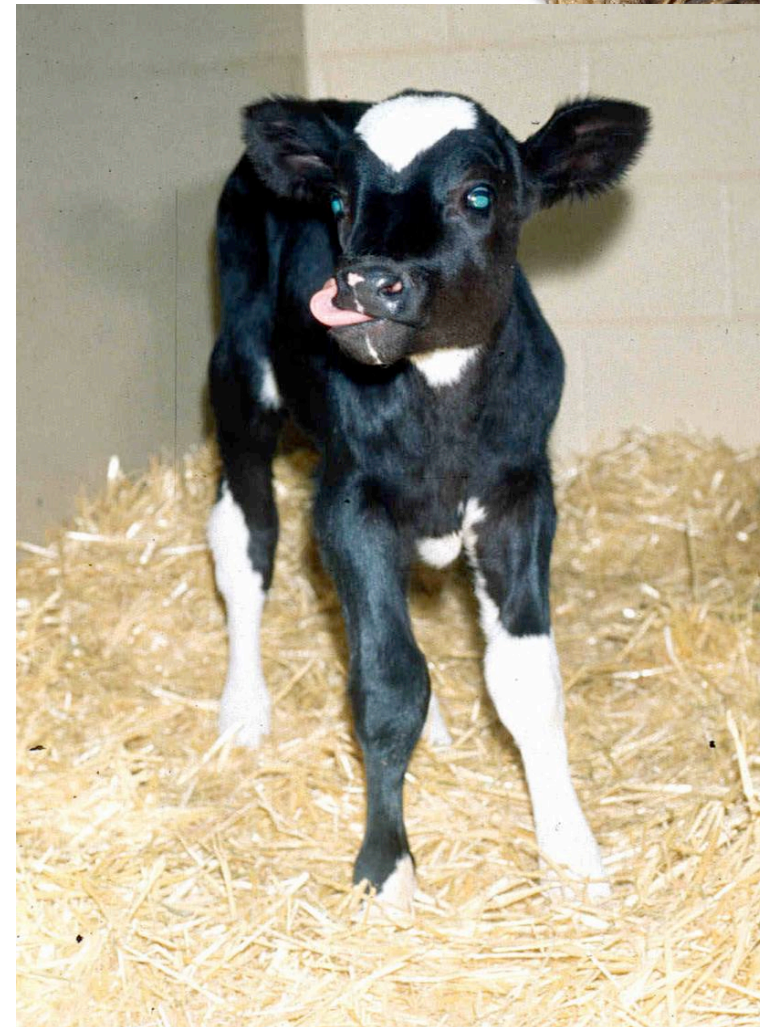
- 5) Byrhtferth of Ramsay 970?-1020?  
*Enchiridion* (Handbook)
- 4) Alfred the Great (871-99)
- 3) Wulfstan of York (?960-1023)
- 2) Ælfric of Eynsham (?950-1010?)
- 1) Anonymous, incl. *Apollonius of Tyre*
- Anglo-Latin writers!





But it's not that simple







# Manuscripts



- Parchment - usually animal skin treated with lime and pumice; 'vellum' strictly only calf skin
- Codicology - the study of the book and its construction
- Palaeography - the study of handwriting
- c.90 manuscripts in total (prose and poetry)

# A riddle (extract)

An enemy ended my life, deprived me  
of my physical strength; then he dipped me  
in water and drew me out again,  
and put me in the sun where I soon shed  
all my hair. After that, the knife's edge  
bit into me and all my blemishes were scraped away;  
fingers folded me and the bird's feather  
often moved over my brown surface,  
sprinkling meaningful marks; it swallowed more wood-dye  
(part of the stream) and again travelled over me  
leaving black tracks. Then a man bound me,  
he stretched skin over me and adorned me,  
with gold ....



(Crossley-Holland, OUP, 1984, p. 241)



harpn felon  
 & gynnors

8. Item p̄m̄dum b̄az mod̄ mo





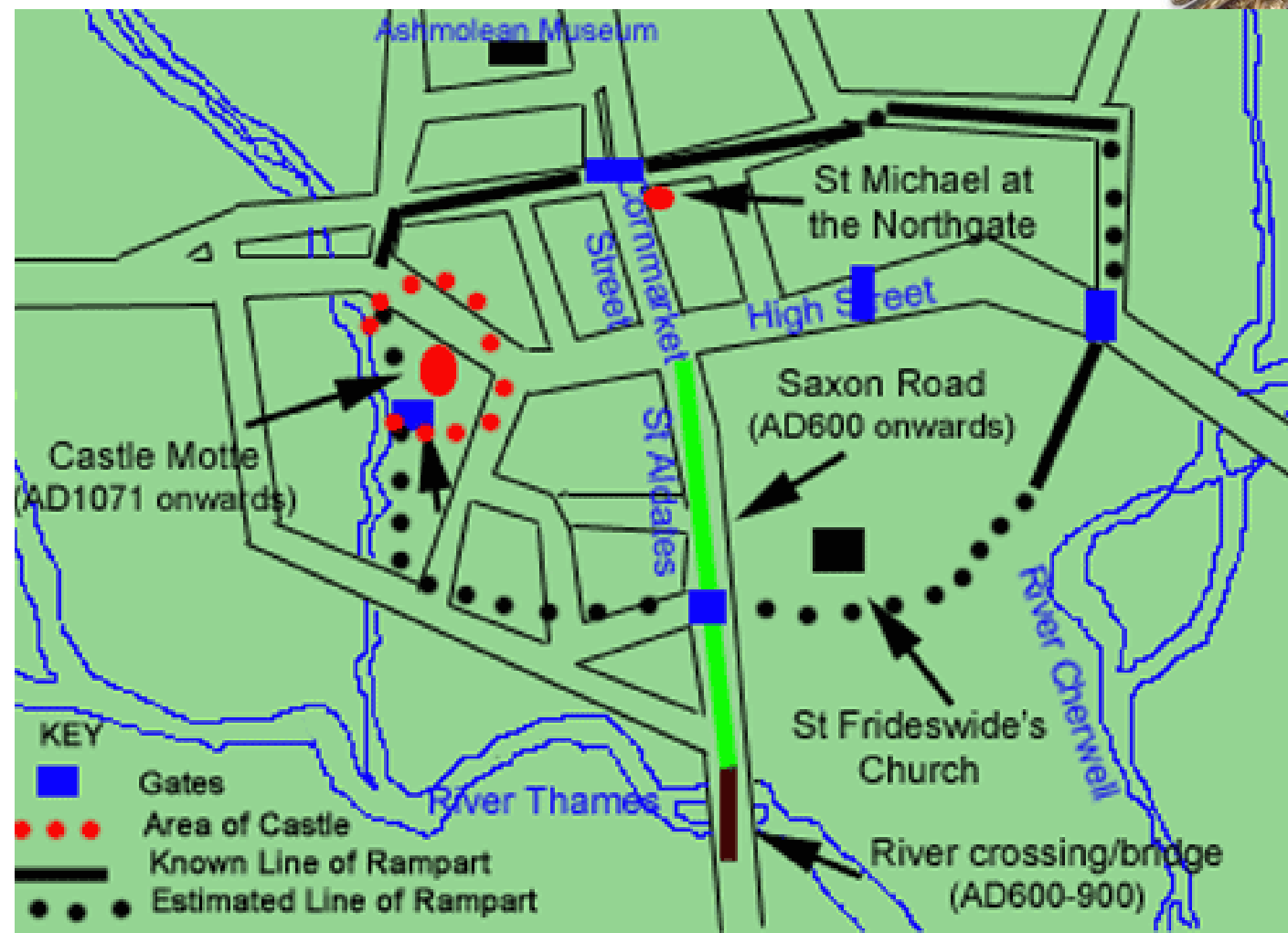
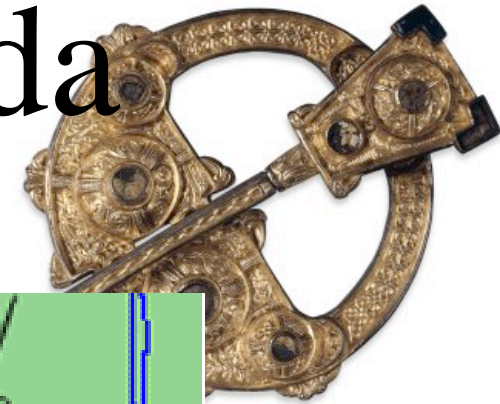
ƿeungar hƿie geſattra ƿume on ƿeðde geſcald. ƿume mid aƿum  
geaſt nod þu on hyre ƿaðenne beon ƿoldon. Ac ƿiðe hƿaðlice  
þaſ de hƿaſ geƿorðen hƿaſde heo geƿor. xii. nihtum ær middan  
ƿuturna binnan ta maſeoſihte dyt hƿaſan geaſe þaſ de hƿo  
myrena anƿeald mid ſihte hlafoſdome healdende ƿaſ. 7 hyre  
liclið binnan gleaſ ceſſe on þam eaſte ƿoſtice ſe e ƿeſeſ  
ceſſean.

an. dccc. xix. He ƿaſ ƿeaſd æſeſeðeſ dohtor myrena hlafoſdeſ ælce  
anƿealdeſ on myſicum be numen 7 on ƿeſe ſe te aleded. ƿum  
ƿicum ær middan ƿintſa. 7 eoſaſ haren ælſƿyn. an. dccc. xx.

an. dccc. xxi. He ƿaſ ƿeaſd eint geambſeðe þa buſh at clede muſan.  
an. dccc. xxii. an. dccc. xxiii.

an. dccc. xxiiii. He ƿaſ ƿeaſd eint geƿor on myſicum æt ƿeaſdune. 7 ælſ  
ƿeſd hƿiſſum ƿiðe hƿaðe þaſ geƿor. æt oena ƿoſda. 7 hƿiſa  
liclið æt ƿintan ceſſe. 7 ælſ tan ƿaſ on myſicum geoſen

# Map of Oxenaforda





# Manuscript vs Print

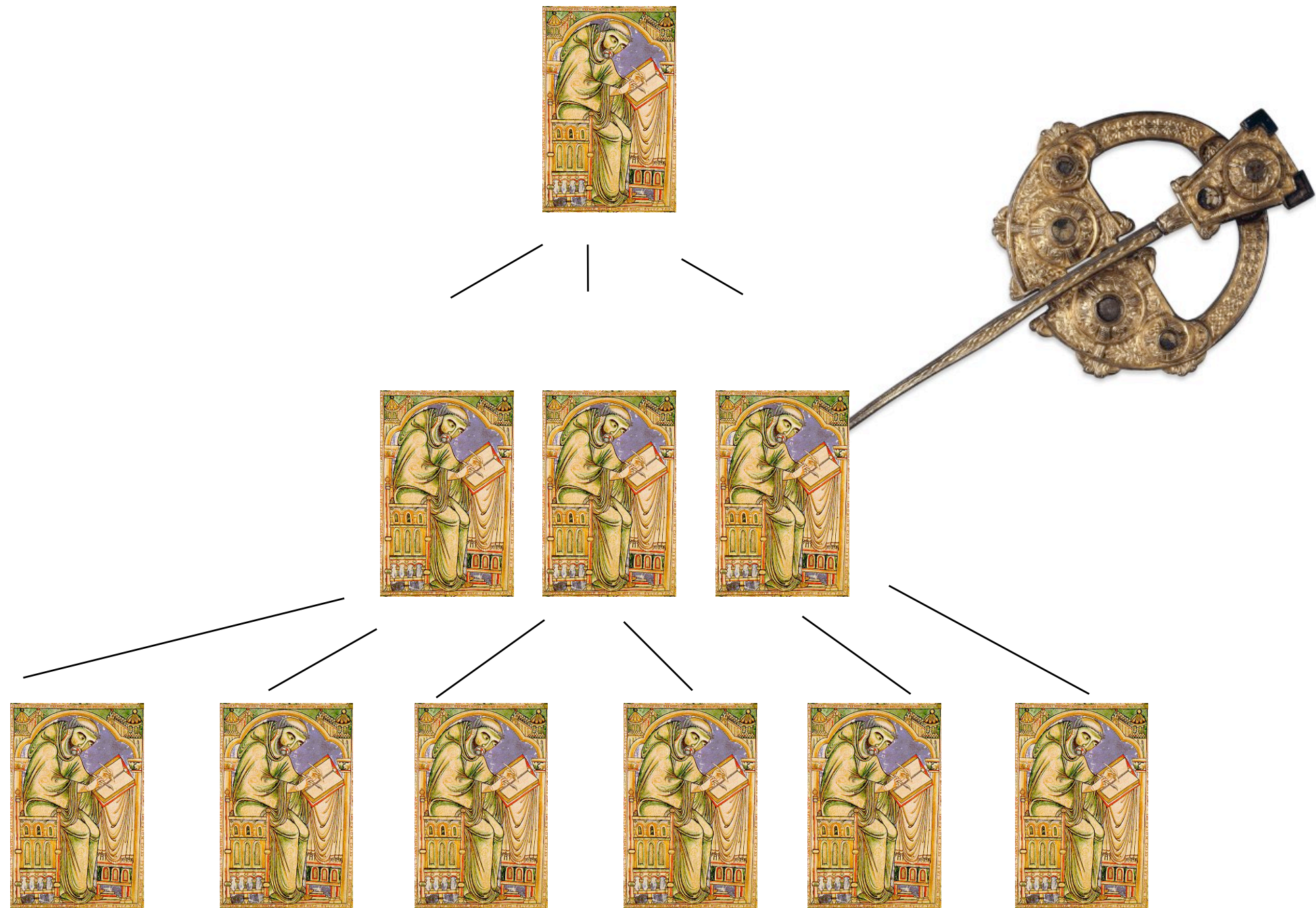
## Manuscripts

- no copy is the same but copying is prized as is the authority of the source texts
- text has fluidity - scribes and readers can change at will
- a manuscript copy is a snapshot

## Print

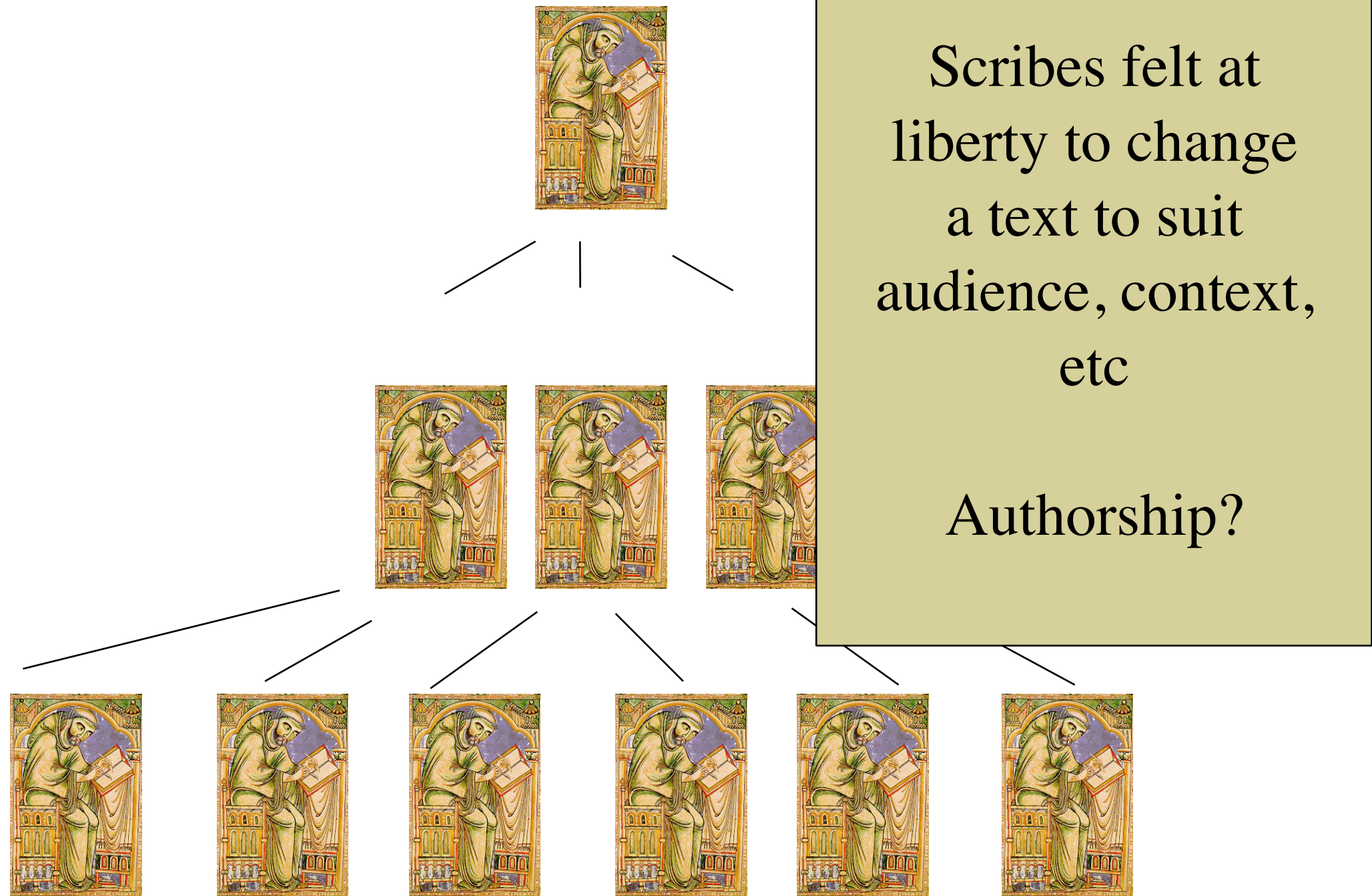
- textual fixity
- authorial fixity
- prize originality and invention

M. Swan 'Authorship and Anonymity' in Pulsiano and Treharne  
*A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*



Scribes make copies of copies.....

Leads to a) scribal errors; b) scribal alterations/additions



Scribes make copies of copies.....

Leads to a) scribal errors; b) scribal alterations/additions



Scribes felt at liberty to change a text to suit audience, context, etc

Authorship?

‘the author is a modern character, no doubt produced by our society as it emerged from the Middle Ages ... the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions’

Barthes ‘The Death of the Author’

Scribes make copies of copies

Leads to a) scribal errors; b) scribal alterations/additions





# Audience, Performance, Style

# Possible Answers

Texts	Audience	Performance
Laws, charters	Noblemen, administrators, clergy, freemen	Oral? > Reading
Medical texts	Noblemen, administrators, clergy, freemen	Oral? > Reading
Philosophy, history, grammatical texts, some science treatises	Noblemen, clergy	Reading (schools?)
Saints' Lives	Noblemen, clergy	Private reading
Homilies	Clergy	Oral - Monastic Office
Sermons	Clergy and freemen	Oral - mass
Biblical translations	Clergy and noblemen	Private reading?

# Prose Development



\* Oldest survivor - Law codes of Æthelberht of Kent (560-616)

‘In this year there occurred a great slaughter at Woden’s barrow ’ ASC 592  
(written down in 9th century)

‘All those disasters befell us through bad policy, in that they [the Vikings] were never offered tribute in time nor fought against; but when they had done most to our injury, [only then] were peace and truce made with them...’ ASC 1011

‘The holy mother Mary fed that child and it grew, just as other children do without any sins’ Ælfric *De initio creaturæ* (CH I)

# ‘Clumsiness?’



- Parataxis (clauses are not subordinated)
- ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’ (asyndetic - ‘without’) or ‘I came and I saw and I conquered’ (syndetic - ‘with conjunctions’)
- ‘and then King Æthered and his brother Alfred fought against the army at Meretown and they were in two armies and there was great slaughter on either side and there Bishop Heahmund was killed’ ASC 871
- Struggle with conveying action (e.g. *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*)
- Struggle with translating Latin



# Rhetoric



# Rhetoric



‘...Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from *every* hill and molehill in Mississippi, from *every* mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, when **we** allow freedom to ring, when **we** let it ring from *every* village and *every* hamlet, from *every* state and *every* city ...’ Martin Luther King, 1963

Underline = repetition

Italics = intensifiers

Bold = audience

Note also the rhythm

(See A. Orchard ‘Oral Tradition’ in K. O’Brien O’Keefe, *Reading Old English Texts* (CUP, 1997), pp. 101-23.

# Rhetoric



‘...Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from *every* hill and molehill in Mississippi, from *every* mountainside. Let freedom ring

An When there was despair in the dust bowl and  
vill depression across the land, she saw a nation  
conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a  
Un new sense of common purpose. Yes we can  
Ital

m *every*  
g, 1963

Bo ...  
No America, we have come so far. We have seen so  
much. But there is so much more to do

(S ...  
Ol This is our chance to answer that call. This is our  
moment. This is our time to put our people back to  
work and open doors of opportunity for our kids

*ading*

# Rhetoric



Ðær is ece bryne grimme gemenced, and ðær is ece gryre;  
ðær is ece æce, and ðær is sorgung and sargung, and a  
singal heof; þær is wanung and granung; ðær is yrmða  
gehwylc...

There is eternal burning grimly mingled, and there is eternal terror; there  
is eternal pain, and there is trial and tribulation, and always continual  
misery; there is moaning and groaning; there is every kind of  
humiliation....

Wulfstan (Bethurum, pp. 230-1)

Repetition

Intensifiers

Rhythm BUT ALSO alliteration AND rhyme

> 'Rhythmical Prose' of Ælfric and Wulfstan

work and open doors of opportunity for our kids





Eadmund se eadiga eastenglan cyning wæs snotor and  
*Edmund the blessed, king of the East Angles, was wise and*  
wurðfull and wurðode symble mid æþelum þeawum þone  
*honourable and always worshipped with excellent conduct the*  
æelmihtigan God. He wæs eadmod and gepungen and swa anræde  
*almighty God. He was humble and devout and so steadfast*  
þurhwunode þæt he nolde abugan to bysmorfullum leahtrum...  
*he continued, that he would not bow to shameful sins...*



**E**admund se **e**adiga **e**astenglan cyning **w**æs snotor and  
*Edmund the blessed, king of the East Angles, was wise and*  
**w**urðfull and **w**urðode symble mid **æ**pelum þeawum þone  
*honourable and always worshipped with excellent conduct the*  
**æ**lmihtigan God. He wæs **e**admod and ge**p**ungen and swa **a**nræde  
*almighty God. He was humble and devout and so steadfast*  
**p**urhwunode þæt he nolde a**b**ugan to **b**ysmorfullum leahtrum...  
*he continued, that he would not bow to shameful sins...*

# How do you analyse prose?

- Think like an Anglo-Saxon:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas, allegoria,*

*Moralia, quid agas, quo tendas, anagogia*

(The letter teaches the deed, the allegory what you believe,

the moral what you should do, the anologue what you should strive for)

- Four levels - literal, allegorical, tropological (moral), anagogical (spiritual)
- What is the source text (if any)? How has the author changed the source?
- What devices does the writer use? How 'advanced' is the prose?



‘Ælfric's biblical ‘translations’ are like a pool of water that people have dipped into from time to time as has suited their needs ...’





‘[Old English prose is] like a pool of water that people have dipped into from time to time as has suited their needs ...’

# Summary



- Old English prose begins with Alfred who was seeking to re-establish learning in England after the Vikings
- Most Old English is prose covering factual documents but it is varied, some nonsensical, some literary
- We know more about authors, audience, and performance
- We still face issues of authorship
- Style was well developed
- It is easy to read ... but is it any good?
- YES!!!!

# Next Week



- Welcome to Medieval-land!
- Reuse of Old English by later writers
- Portrayals of the Anglo-Saxons
- Contributions to Old English by Alfred Hitchcock, Stephen Spielberg, and Leonard Bernstein.



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