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ABSTRACT

This article examines the production of prose texts in pre-Alfredian England. After reviewing conventional ideas regarding the foundational role assigned to Alfred, king of Wessex, in the creation of the Old English prose genre, the discussion turns to a quite considerable number of non-poetic texts which were demonstrably produced at an earlier time, asking whether these can be regarded as prose. Following an investigation of the medieval and modern understanding of what constitutes prose, an argument is made for a more inclusive definition of this literary genre, one that does justice to the flourishing early literary culture especially of the kingdoms of Mercia and Kent. It is argued that the ninth-century prose productions of Alfred's circles did present some innovation, but were clearly also based on earlier traditions and may to some extent have reacted against preceding compositional techniques and literary genres.

The ninth century is sometimes seen as the foundational period of vernacular prose in English. The late ninth century especially, and more specifically the reign of Alfred, king of Wessex (871–99), tend to be associated with the origins of this genre. Roy Liuzza, for example, comments that 'the growth and development of Old English prose began in earnest … in the last decade of the ninth century, with the educational initiatives of Alfred the Great'; similarly, Michael Alexander suggests that 'Old English prose … was called into being by a decision of Alfred'; according to Robert Stanton 'almost all of the early (i.e. ninth-century) Old English texts come from the last 30 years of the century, a period coinciding with Alfred's reign'; and Donald Scragg writes that 'the documented history of O[ld] E[nglish] prose begins in the reign of Alfred himself and his intellectual circle.'[1] This leaves other early literary efforts out of

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[1] The following abbreviations are used in this article: *DOE*: Antonette DiPaolo Healey and others, eds., *Dictionary of Old English: A–H Online* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2016), https://www.doe.utoronto.ca; EETS, OS: Early English Text Society, Original Series; *HE*: Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); MGH: Monumenta Germaniae Historica; *OED*: *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, http://oed.com (accessed 30 December 2020).

  Roy M. Liuzza, 'Religious Prose', in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, eds. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 11 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 233–50 (235); Michael Alexander, *Old English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 132; Robert Stanton, *The Culture of Translation in*

the picture, however, not just from the pre-Alfredian parts of the ninth century, but from earlier centuries. The aim of the following discussion will be to investigate what may have come before Alfred, and its relationship with literary developments within the ninth century.

That there was a wide range of lively literary activity before the late ninth-century Alfredian reign emerges from a provisional timeline of early textual composition (Appendix).[2] The existence of pre-Alfredian early material had already been highlighted by Henry Sweet, in his 1885 edition of 'the oldest English texts'.[3] For example, several famous gloss collections and glossaries, the earliest repositories of vocabulary, go back to pre-Alfredian times: the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary (composed in the seventh or eighth century), glosses in the Blickling Psalter (eighth century), the Corpus Glossary (early ninth century) and the Vespasian Psalter interlinear glosses (ninth century). Jane Toswell points out that the beginnings of psalter study in the vernacular start with the Blickling Psalter (eighth century) and that, moreover, bilingual psalters represent substantial texts of very high word counts.[4] Hans Sauer reminds us that the seventh- or eighth-century Épinal-Erfurt glossary could be seen to represent 'the earliest English text of any length'.[5] The law code of Æthelberht, king of Kent, 'must have been one of the first documents ever written down in the English vernacular', as well as 'the first Germanic laws to be recorded in the vernacular'.[6] The Lorica Prayer in the Book of Cerne (probably copied between 820 and 840) has been described as 'the earliest extant example of written Old English prose'.[7] Robert Gallagher has recently surveyed the substantive use of Old English in charters dating from the first half of the ninth century, highlighting the linguistic innovation found particularly in the archives of Christ Church Canterbury and Worcester Cathedral, and particularly in productions of the 840s.[8] And there is some good evidence (some of which will be rehearsed below) that the *Old English Martyrology* and the *Old English Bede*, two of the longest Old English

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Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 59; Donald Scragg, 'Prose Style, OE', in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, eds. Michael Lapidge and others. 2nd edn. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 388–9 (388); see also Robert D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, *A History of Old English Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 36; Susan Irvine, 'English Literature in the Ninth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 209–31 (209–13); and Sharon M. Rowley, 'The Long Ninth Century and the Prose of King Alfred's Reign', *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015 (DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.53, https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/).

[2] For an updatable timeline of early Mercian text production in electronic format, see also Christine Rauer, 'Early Mercian Literature', at https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cr30/Mercian/ (in progress).

[3] Henry Sweet, ed., *The Oldest English Texts*. EETS, OS 83 (London: Trübner, 1885), viii.

[4] M. Jane Toswell, *The Anglo-Saxon Psalter*. Medieval Church Studies 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 224 and 400. For the term 'bilingual psalter' see below, note 37.

[5] Hans Sauer, 'Language and Culture: How Glossators Adapted Latin Words and their World', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 18 (2006): 437–68 (438).

[6] Susan E. Kelly, 'Æthelberht', in *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia*, eds. Lapidge and others, 14–15; Lisi Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 36; Patrizia Lendinara, 'The Kentish Laws', in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 211–43 (211–12); see also Ingrid Ivarsen, 'A Vernacular Genre? Latin and the Early English Laws', in this special issue, Alban Gautier and Helen Gittos eds., *Vernacular Languages in the Long Ninth Century*, published as *Journal of Medieval History* 47, nos. 4–5 (2021).

[7] Michelle P. Brown, 'Mercian Manuscripts? The Tiberius Group and its Historical Context', in *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, eds. Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 279–91 (289).

[8] Robert Gallagher 'The Vernacular in Anglo-Saxon Charters: Expansion and Innovation in Ninth-Century England', *Historical Research* 91 (2018): 205–35; for slightly later ninth-century charter production and its vernacular element, see also Robert Gallagher and Francesca Tinti, 'Latin, Old English and Documentary Practice at Worcester from Wærferth to Oswald', *Anglo-Saxon England* 46 (2017): 271–325; for mid ninth-century West Saxon innovation

prose texts ever composed, were productions of the pre-Alfredian ninth century. These, and other texts, suggest that the beginnings of English prose could be assigned to a pre-Alfredian period. What are these earliest texts, then, and why do they tend to be excluded from conventional accounts of the beginnings of English prose? To answer such questions, it will be necessary to examine three areas in turn: our modern understanding of what constitutes prose, and how this relates to early medieval notions of textual formats; the relative chronology of ninth-century text composition; and changing preferences in translation style which seem to come to fruition in the ninth-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Defining prose

Defining the concept of prose can be surprisingly difficult. One such definition could demarcate it from its opposite, namely as that which is not poetry, or that which lacks deliberate metrical features.[9] Another, related, definition marks prose out as reflecting unornamented, everyday language, some sort of dictional default, or vanilla-type language. But both these definitions present problems in that they lead to follow-on definitions just as difficult, namely the definition of poetry and that of everyday language.[10] Early medieval written materials by implication tend to preserve high status texts, not everyday language.[11] It is also clear that Latin and Old English prose of any age can be highly rhetorical and ornamental (for example, rhythmical, as in the case of Latin *cursus* or Old English rhythmical prose).[12] Vocabulary can be divided into a poetic and non-poetic corpus, but even that criterion brings its own grey areas if taken into account in making the distinction between prose and poetry.[13] One could further postulate that a definition of prose should imply a connected text of words, some syntactical element, which would at first sight seem to rule out texts consisting of shorter units, such as lists of words, glossaries, catalogues or so-called 'microtexts'. But it could be objected that such texts are equally connected by a unifying concept, even if not always in grammatical units of syntactically

within this genre, see Robert Gallagher, 'The Ninth-Century Development of the Vernacular Boundary Clause Revisited' (forthcoming).

[9] *OED*, *s.v.* prose, defined as 'language in the form in which it is typically written (or spoken), usually characterised as having no deliberate metrical structure (in contrast with verse or poetry)'. See also Monsieur Jourdain's baffled reaction on discovering that he had been speaking prose for 40 years without realising: Molière, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, eds. Georges Forestier and others. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 293 (act 2, scene 4).

[10] 'The prose of any language is not merely a transcription of ordinary spoken discourse, although it bears a resemblance to it.' Daniel Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read their Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 14.

[11] 'We have little "prosaic" language in the quotidian sense of prose.' Tiffany Beechy, *The Poetics of Old English* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 38.

[12] Rafael Pascual, 'Ælfric's Rhythmical Prose and the Study of Old English Metre', *English Studies* 95, no. 7 (2014): 803–23; Haruko Momma, 'Rhythm and Alliteration: Styles of Ælfric's Prose up to the *Lives of Saints*', in *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, eds. Catherine E. Karkov and George Hardin Brown (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 253–69; Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), *s.v.* 'prose-rhythm, Latin'; Terence O. Tunberg, 'Prose Styles and *Cursus*', in *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, eds. Frank A. C. Mantello and Arthur G. Rigg (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 111–21. The last publication contains a technical summary of *cursus* which defines the term as 'the habit of terminating sentences and clauses with rhythmical units known as *clausulae*', 114.

[13] Roberta Frank, 'Poetic Words in Late Old English Prose', in *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E.G. Stanley*, eds. Malcolm Godden, Douglas Gray and Terry F. Hoad (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 87–107 (87–90).

connected clauses.[14] Such texts might also be largely devoid of discernible metrical features, but not exclusively so.[15] As Rafael Pascual has recently summarised for Old English literature, 'whether a text is verse, prose or "rhythmical alliteration" is in the end a subjective distinction.'[16] If modern definitions of prose tend to point to stylistic register, syntactical connectedness of written language, specialised vocabulary, or its distinction from poetic texts presenting metrical patterns, but with some fluidity between ends of a spectrum, then it may be fair to ask: How short can an Old English text be and still count as prose? How poetic? How derivative?[17] The answer to such questions will to some extent be subjective, and texts which may not conform to agreed modern ideas of what constitutes prose may well represent fair examples of this genre, and should be interpreted as such.

How was the concept of prose understood in the past? Both the Latin and the Old English terminological tradition define the concept of prose through its perceived directness or simplicity, presumably in opposition to the more ornamental poetry. The Modern English word 'prose' is derived via Anglo-Norman and Middle French from Latin *prosa* (*oratio*), 'straightforward speech', from L. *prorsus*, 'straightforward'.[18] Early Anglo-Latin authors do use the word *prosa*. For example, Bede does so when writing about texts surviving in a prose and poetic version (*opera geminata*), such as Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, or his own prose paraphrase of Paulinus of Nola, the *Vita et passio S. Felicis*, and his prose and poetic lives of Cuthbert, texts which arose from a compositional process known as *conversio* or *translatio*, a paraphrase of poetic content into prose language and vice versa.[19] With reference to his *De virginitate*, Aldhelm famously describes prose and poetry as different but complementary media, wishing for his text to consist of 'the walls of prose' (*prosae parietibus*), 'rhetorical foundations' (*rethoricis fundamentis*) and 'the sturdy roof of trochaic and dactylic roof-tiles of poetry' ('tegulis trochaicis et dactilicis metrorum imbricibus firmissimum culmen').[20] The Second Corpus Glossary presents the definition 'prose: normal language' (*prosa communis locutio*).[21] Alcuin suggests that prose 'is direct language composed without metre or verse' ('est recta

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[14] The compendium of Old English texts, Roberta Frank and Angus Cameron, *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), classifies prose (section B) separately from poetry (section A), interlinear glosses and Latin-Old English glossaries (sections C and D), and runic and vernacular inscriptions (sections E and F), although some texts could ostensibly be assigned to more than one category.

[15] The 'Index of Middle English Prose' project specifies what constitutes Middle English (with some chronological limits and excluding macaronic texts and bilingual glossaries) and what could be seen as a distinct text (e.g. in the case of sermons or collections of recipes), but does not define the distinction between prose and poetry: Margaret Connolly, *The Index of Middle English Prose: Handlist 19, Manuscripts in the University Library, Cambridge (Dd-Oo)* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), v–vi.

[16] Pascual, 'Ælfric's Rhythmical Prose', 820. For appropriate caution, see also Donoghue, *How Anglo-Saxons Read*, 89–92.

[17] See similarly Beechy, *Poetics of Old English*, 32–3. It is interesting to note that the same situation applies in other early literatures, for example Ancient Greek prose: see Richard Graff, 'Prose versus Poetry in Early Greek Theories of Style', *Rhetorica* 23 (2006): 303–35, on unstable definitions for early forms of that genre.

[18] *OED*, *s.v.* 'prose'.

[19] On Aldhelm, 'uersibus exametris et prosa', see *HE*, 514 (V.18); on his hagiography of St Felix, 'de metrico Paulini opere in prosam transtuli', 568 (V.24); and on St Cuthbert, 'uersibus heroicis et simplici oratione', 434 (V.28). For background, see also Peter Godman, 'The Anglo-Latin *Opus geminatum*: From Aldhelm to Alcuin', *Medium Ævum* 50 (1981): 215–29, and Emily V. Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 51.

[20] Aldhelm, prose *De virginitate*, in *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald. MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi 15 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), 321; see also *Carmen de uirginitate*, in *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, 469 (l. 2867).

[21] 'Second Corpus Glossary', in *An Eighth-Century Latin-Anglo-Saxon Glossary preserved in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*, ed. Jan H. Hessels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890), 97.

locutio absque metro et versu composita').[22] Ælfric's *Grammar* explains that 'prose, that is straightforward Latin without poetic ornamentation or arrangement' ('prosa þæt is forðriht leden buton leoðcræfte gelencged and gelogod'), showing that *prosa* for him is in this context a technical term specifically for Latin prose, and perhaps not a general concept applicable to prose in any language.[23] Similarly glossing the Latin terminology, the *Old English Bede* author refers to 'straightforward speech' (*gerade spræc*) in a characteristically literal translation (a so-called calque) of the Latin term *prosa* (*oratio*), not with a term grown out of a separate concept of Old English prose.[24] A touch more idiomatic with respect to Old English literary texts seems the later designation of prose as speech that is 'simple' (*anfeald*), mainly used by Ælfric when referring to his own tenth-century prose works and those written earlier by others, including Bede.[25] But one wonders how the ninth-century *Old English Bede* author might have circumscribed the medium in which his own text was written. If such an early Old English reference to vernacular prose is not attested, it does not follow that such earlier authors had no concept of what we call Old English prose; it just seems likely that the same terminology would not have been applied to both Latin prose and its Old English equivalent. If asked to describe their literary prose output with Old English terminology, earlier authors might well have referred to it as being 'in our language', or 'in the English language', as Bede does when he refers to Æthelberht's law code as 'written in English' (*conscripta Anglorum sermone*), or a 'simple [simplified?] account' (*anfeald gereccednyss / racu / gereord*), as Ælfric does on several occasions.[26] Such terminology, then, seems to be less of a technical means for describing a vernacular literary genre, and more of a circumscription for the process of how it came to be composed.[27]

As an interesting test case for defining prose, one could point to the account of Bede purportedly working with two Latin texts on his deathbed, at least one of which he may

[22] Alcuin, *Grammatica*, in *B. Flacii Albini sue Alcuini … , Opera omnia*, vol. 2, ed. J.-P. Migne. Patrologiae cursus completus series Latina 101 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1863), cols. 849–902 (col. 858D); Ronald E. Latham and David R. Howlett, eds., *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), *s.v.* 'prosa' (http://www.dmlbs.ox.ac.uk).

[23] Ælfric, *Grammar*, in *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar: Text und Varianten*, ed. Julius Zupitza. 2nd edn. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1966), 295, a text with a specific focus on Latin language. On Old English terms for 'prose', see Jane Roberts and others, eds., *A Thesaurus of Old English*. King's College London Medieval Studies 11 (London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, King's College, 1995), 09.03.06.

[24] 'ge metterfersum ge gerade spræce': *Old English Bede*, IV.29, in *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Thomas Miller. EETS, OS 95, 96, 110, 111 (London: Trübner, 1890–8), 366, translating Bede, *HE*, V.28; 'metterfersum asang 7 geradre spræce gesette': *Old English Bede*, V.16, in *Old English Version of Bede*, ed. Miller, 448, translating *HE*, V.18. See also *DOE*, *s.v.* 'ahwistlian', which refers to two homiletic examples which contrast indistinct or garbled speech with speech that is *gerad*.

[25] *DOE*, *s.v.* 'anfeald', 4.d, 'of speech, narrative: plain, simple, unadorned; *anfeald gereccednes* "simple narrative" (referring to prose as opposed to poetry)'. Malcolm R. Godden, 'Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents', in *A Companion to Ælfric*, eds. Hugh Magennis and Mary Swan. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 139–63, discusses Ælfric's references to ninth-century prose texts; these references merely specify texts written in English, without going into their more precise poetic or prosaic nature.

[26] Bede, *HE*, 150 (II.5); *DOE*, *s.v.* 'anfeald', 4.d. Bede's eighth-century reference to the existence of a vernacular version of Æthelberht's law code is an important argument in assigning an early date to the surviving law code of Æthelberht; see Lendinara, 'Kentish Laws', 217–18, 231–2 and 239–41 on Bede's attestation, and on the possibility that Anglian language rather than English may have been intended. Other early law codes of uncertain date of composition, such as that of Hlothhere and Eadric, Wihtred, and Ine, lack such early attestations, and it is not clear whether a vernacular law code of Offa ever existed. On the complex dating of early law codes, see now Ingrid Ivarsen, 'The Latin Law-Code of King Ine', *Anglo-Saxon England* 48 (forthcoming), and eadem, 'A Vernacular Genre?'.

[27] Beechy, *Poetics of Old English*, 32–8, rightly suggests that OE *spell* is an unlikely translation for the modern notion of 'prose'.

have been translating into Old English, as narrated in Cuthbert's eighth-century *Epistola de obitu Bedae*:

> During those days there were two pieces of work (*opuscula*) worthy of record, besides the lessons which [Bede] gave us every day and his chanting of the Psalter, which he desired to finish: the Gospel of St John, which he was turning into our mother tongue (*in nostram linguam ... conuertit*) to the great profit of the Church, from the beginning as far as the words 'But what are they among so many?' [John 6:9]. And a selection from Bishop Isidore's book *On the Wonders of Nature*; for he said 'I cannot have my children learning what is not true, and losing their labour on this after I am gone.'[28]

These Old English translations of St John's Gospel or Isidore's *De natura rerum* have not survived to modern times, if Bede did commit them to writing.[29] His more precise aim in doing so is also unclear, whether the texts were intended exclusively for his own religious community, or for wider circulation.[30] Nor is it certain that a translation into prose is implied: Richard North has suggested that the target medium could have been Old English poetry.[31] We do know, however, that Bede was interested in the difficult mapping of poetry in one language onto prose in another: in his account of Cædmon's poetic production, Bede had already given divine sanction to poetry as a medium dignified enough for holy topics derived from Latin prose.[32] In commenting on that account, he focused on the issue of faithfulness, conceding that literal translation between such different media tended to cause problems with word order and beauty being lost in the target text, an awareness which may also explain his anxiety to pass on acquired translation skills even on his deathbed.[33] The alleged undertaking of Bede's deathbed translation stretches our definition of Old English prose in a number of ways: these two texts do not survive, and may never have been written, given that the narrative about their composition could be some sort of origin myth intended to depict Bede as a caring teacher whose intellectual efforts transcend time and death. If the texts did exist, they might not have been written out as syntactically complete versions, but could conceivably have been restricted to abbreviated notes or glosses, for personal or local use only. The texts could possibly have been poetic and not prose at all, or something in between. Should these hypothetical productions still be counted among the earliest English prose texts? That this account occurs in the eighth-century *Epistola de obitu Bedae* at least shows that some early Anglo-Saxons would have

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[28] Cuthbert of Wearmouth, *Epistola de obitu Bedae*, in *EH*, 580–7 (583); R.M. Wilson, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England* (London: Methuen, 1952), 65–6; John A. Burrow, 'The Languages of Medieval England', in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 1: *To 1550*, ed. Roger Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7–28 (10). The account seems ambiguous on whether the Isidorean text is only being excerpted (in Latin) or also translated into Old English, like St John's Gospel. Bede is known to have written a (surviving) Latin text, *De natura rerum*, which is heavily indebted to Isidore's.

[29] The surviving West Saxon Gospels are thought to date from the tenth century, and are not the ones ascribed to Bede here: see Roy M. Liuzza, 'Gospel Translation', in *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia*, eds. Lapidge and others, 220–1.

[30] It has been suggested that the tenth-century Northumbrian glossator and provost of Chester-le-Street, Aldred, may have known and used Bede's translation: see note 52 below.

[31] Personal communication. The translation of Latin biblical material into vernacular poetry would be a far less exceptional undertaking, even in this early period: see Paul G. Remley, 'Biblical Translation: Poems', in *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia*, eds. Lapidge and others, 70–1.

[32] Bede, *HE*, 414 (IV.24).

[33] Bede, *HE*, 416 (IV.24). See also Paul Klopsch, 'Prosa und Vers in der mittellateinischen Literatur', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 3 (1966): 9–24, on the relative status of prose and poetry as perceived by medieval Latin authors.

regarded the production of study aids in the vernacular as valuable and noteworthy, had they occurred.

Pre-Alfredian text production

There are other reasons to believe that Anglo-Saxon authors were experimenting with vernacular prose media in pre-Alfredian times, both in the ninth century and earlier. In his biography of Alfred, king of Wessex, written in 893, Asser references Mercians as having been headhunted on behalf of Alfred, to assist him in his cultural reform.[34] Our timeline (Appendix) shows that many early productions have Mercian dialectal elements, or are linked to areas of Mercian political influence.[35] Among the earliest Mercian texts are several famous gloss collections and glossaries, such as the Épinal Glossary, Glosses in the Blickling Psalter, the Corpus Glossary and the Vespasian Psalter interlinear glosses, to name just some of the better known early examples. Recent research on glosses and glossaries has emphasised that such texts have their own literary identity, despite being in close conversation with the Latin text with which they are linked. Alderik Blom, for example, has shown that the glossing in the ninth-century Vespasian Psalter already very early on to some extent 'abandons Latin syntax and word order' owing to constraints of the vernacular target language.[36] The production of glosses and glossaries constitutes evidence of some sort of paraphrasing prose composition, even if sometimes only partially written down, and even if the Latin and Old English element of such texts are not of equal status.[37] These literary activities result in the production of glosses as 'three-way mediators between a principal text, its commentary tradition and the teachers or readers'.[38] This may stretch our understanding of how derivative of, or indebted to, its Latin source an Old English text can be without lacking an identity of its own. But Old English text production it is, and if it is not poetic, then an argument may be made to interpret this as a form of Old English prose composition.

Moreover, other early Mercian productions are not glosses or glossaries, for example the *Old English Martyrology* and the *Old English Bede*. There is growing evidence that both these ninth-century Mercian productions are more closely linked to pre-Alfredian Mercian gloss traditions than to the later Alfredian translations. Both texts display a characteristically literal translation technique different from that found in the texts of the Alfredian canon. Both texts seem to incorporate glossed source material, which provides some clue concerning their author's educational background and even the way in which they were composed. Gregory Waite has demonstrated that the *Old English Bede* author was 'grounded in training and reading that involved the glossed psalter

[34] Asser, *Vita Alfredi*, in *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. William H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), 62–3 (Chapter 77).
[35] See Appendix; Mercian productions are given in bold print.
[36] Alderik H. Blom, *Glossing the Psalms: The Emergence of Written Vernaculars in Western Europe from the Seventh to the Twelfth Centuries* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 172–3, 241.
[37] Toswell, *Anglo-Saxon Psalter*, 221–5, helpfully uses the term 'bilingual psalter' to refer to a psalter with some vernacular element; see also 23 and 33 for discussion of 'interlinear translation'.
[38] Blom, *Glossing the Psalms*, 14. See similarly Sinéad O'Sullivan, 'Text, Gloss and Tradition in the Early Medieval West: Expanding into a World of Learning', in *Teaching and Learning in Medieval Europe: Essays in Honour of Gernot R. Wieland*, eds. Greti Dinkova-Bruun and Tristan Major. Publications of the *Journal of Medieval Latin* 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 3–24 (22).

represented by the Vespasian version, glossed Gospels and other books from the Bible, and glossaries of the type represented in [London, British Library], Cotton MS Cleopatra A. III', and a similar indebtedness has been suggested for the author of the *Old English Martyrology*.[39] Both texts are Latinate in the sense of being highly derivative in their coverage of materials and frequently presenting unidiomatic Old English word order (which is partly caused by an over-literal translation style).[40] 'It is hard not to see a particularly literal translation style as a natural consequence of a habitual dependence on glosses and glossaries as translation tools.'[41] That the *Old English Martyrology* is more likely to have been composed in the earlier half of the ninth century than the later one is not only suggested by its link with the Mercian gloss tradition, but also by the availability of its sources.[42] Similarly, in developmental terms, the *Old English Bede* appears to be 'an outgrowth of the early vernacular writing of the glossators and glossary writers, and a precursor of the more mature vernacular traditions (largely independent of one another) initiated by Alfred on the one hand and the monastic reformers of Edgar's reign on the other'.[43]

An important and more or less systematic attempt to chart early Mercian literary production was undertaken by Rudolf Vleeskruyer in 1953.[44] The positive reception this survey received for many years was contradicted by Janet Bately in the 1980s, who dismissed Vleeskruyer's picture of early Mercian prose production as not comprising what she termed 'literary' prose.[45] Other criteria used by Bately to define prose as she saw it included being attributed 'safely' or 'with any certainty' to a particular dialect or date, or texts arising from 'intensive recording', or being produced 'on any large scale': 'it is not until the second half of the ninth century that we have clear and unambiguous evidence of the use of English on any large scale for the writing of prose.'[46] More recent

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[39] Gregory Waite, 'Translation Style, Lexical Systems, Dialect Vocabulary, and the Manuscript Transmission of the Old English Bede', *Medium Ævum* 83 (2014): 1–48 (21; see also 3); Christine Rauer, 'The *Old English Martyrology* and Anglo-Saxon Glosses', in *Latinity and Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, eds. Rebecca Stephenson and Emily V. Thornbury (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 73–92.

[40] Christine Rauer, ed., *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary*. Anglo-Saxon Texts 10 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 9–10; Waite, 'Translation Style', 7–8; idem, 'The Vocabulary of the Old English Version of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*' (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1984), 8: 'at times it almost reads as if it were an interlinear gloss on the Latin text'. Joseph Crowley, 'Anglicized Word Order in Old English Continuous Interlinear Glosses in British Library, Royal 2. A. XX', *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 123–51 (146), demonstrates the syntactical influence that the Latin psalter frequently has on its vernacular glosses, and examples of greater Anglicisation. See Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), *passim*, for non-idiomatic syntax of vernacular glosses, for example vol. 1: § 295, on the topic of post-position of dependent possessives, 'examples from the glosses are, of course, of no syntactical significance', and Manfred Scheler, *Altenglische Lehnsyntax: die syntaktischen Latinismen im Altenglischen* (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 1961), 103–4, for the difficult distinction between Latin-derived features due to direct influence from a source text, or due to more general incorporation into a vernacular idiom.

[41] Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, 58.

[42] Rauer, ed., *Old English Martyrology*, 2–3.

[43] Waite, 'Vocabulary', 8.

[44] Rudolf Vleeskruyer, ed., *The Life of St. Chad: An Old English Homily* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1953), 38–62; for a summary of recent work on early Mercian literary traditions, see Christine Rauer, 'Early Mercian Text Production: Authors, Dialects, and Reputations', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 77 (2017): 541–58 (548–52).

[45] Janet M. Bately, 'The Literary Prose of King Alfred's Reign: Translation or Transformation?', in *Old English Newsletter Subsidia* 10 (1984): 2; Janet M. Bately, 'Old English Prose Before and During the Reign of Alfred', *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988): 93–138 (93); Rowley, 'Long Ninth Century'.

[46] Janet M. Bately, 'The Nature of Old English Prose', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. 1st edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 71–87 (71); Bately, 'Old English Prose', 132–8.

commentators by contrast would probably agree that few Anglo-Saxon texts can be dated 'safely' and that dialectology often demonstrates an admixture of varying dialectal forms or indeterminate forms in texts from the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It has always been clear that many Old English and Anglo-Latin texts are anonymous and can hardly have been composed in an environment where literary composition happened 'on a large scale'. One wonders to what extent our modern notion of what constitutes prose is influenced by the parameters of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century prose novel, a genre which was certainly produced on a large scale. In that sense, Bately's criteria seem unhelpfully anachronistic, but have nevertheless had some influence on recent thinking about early English prose, for example when Æthelberht's law code was recently designated as 'almost certainly a transcription of orally transmitted law and not literary prose'.[47] The view that Mercian text production does not conform to notions of 'literary prose', and for this reason cannot be seen as equivalent to Alfredian literary activity, is in recent times attributable above all to the influence of Bately's publications, and seems to have less to do with the nature of the texts themselves. The relatively substantial and diverse list and timeline of examples with some traceable Mercian elements, most of them datable within certain limits, would seem to contradict a binary view of literary versus earlier non-literary prose. Even Alfred seems to have recognised the shared features of both traditions in building his own endeavours on such Mercian beginnings and the personnel who produced or used them.

Readers of early vernacular prose

What kind of reader were early Mercian texts intended for? What literary or linguistic education can be suspected in their authors or readers? If Alfred's circle can be credited with any shift in vernacular prose production, it may be an increasing effort to produce texts intended primarily for non-Latinists, in contrast with earlier productions which seem to imply a Latinate author and Latin readership intent on staying within a highly educated literary sphere. Æthelberht's law code seems to represent an interesting exception, in not being a translation of a Latin source, possibly composed in and for non-Latinate circles.[48] But even with this text, whose content is thought to be early Kentish law, the act of committing this law into writing seems to have been *modelled* on Roman precedents (*iuxta exempla Romanorum*), even if written in English (*conscripta Anglorum sermone*) as emphasised by Bede in his *Historica ecclesiastica*.[49] In that sense, this law code foreshadows a function of vernacular prose which is then redeveloped

[47] Donoghue, 'How the Anglo-Saxons Read their Poems', 177. See also Michael Alexander, *A History of Old English Literature* (Ormskirk: Broadview, 2002), 165: 'prose had been used for law codes, but, in contrast with verse, the use of prose for a range of tasks stems from a decision of Alfred, king of Wessex from 871 to 899', and 166: 'the Mercia of King Offa (d. 796) was a place of order and surely of some civilisation, but its writings have not survived'; similarly Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, 57–8: 'Gregory's *Dialogues* (translated by the Mercian Werferth) and the anonymous translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* show distinctively Mercian features. Unfortunately, though several scholars have tried, it is very difficult to assign any other clearly Mercian texts to the ninth century, so we cannot say that there was an established "Mercian" prose tradition at the time of Alfred's translations.' See also the items cited in note 1 above.
[48] Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1: *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 101. It is not clear whether the earliest written versions of the law codes of Hlothhere and Eadric, and Wihtred were in Old English or in Latin, and it is similarly unclear whether Offa's law code existed as such, or in what language it was written.
[49] Bede, 150 (*HE*, II.5); Oliver, *Beginnings of English Law*, 35–6.

under Alfred later. The picture that emerges therefore is not a linear development of prose that steadily moves away from 'translationese' and towards a more emancipated and idiomatic Old English 'literary' prose, but a more complex pattern of prose production and translation across several centuries partly determined by the educational standards and needs of the people who produced and used it, with even Alfredian circles picking up on earlier philosophies of translation.[50] The changing nature of the *opus geminatum* as a literary genre during the eighth and ninth centuries similarly demonstrates that authors working in this tradition were experimenting with various functions and features of prose composition already in pre-Alfredian times, both in England and on the Continent.[51]

The post-Alfredian picture seems similarly varied, with various translation styles co-existing and being modified across the centuries: it has been suggested, for example, that the tenth-century glossator Aldred was familiar with Bede's purported translation of St John's Gospel and that it may have influenced Aldred's own tenth-century glossing of the same text.[52] It was the same Northumbrian Aldred famous for glossing the Lindisfarne Gospels and Durham Ritual who travelled to Wessex in 970, where prose text production of that age differed substantially from the Northumbrian tradition of glossing which he was used to: again the two worlds of literal translation and glossing on the one hand and more free-standing vernacular prose composition on the other meet.[53]

Another example of this diversity can be found in tenth-century Wessex. Around the year 1000, Ælfric looks back on the ninth-century prose productions with which he is familiar and his attitude is markedly ambivalent, making the varied picture of ninth-century prose production quite clear: as Malcolm Godden has pointed out, Ælfric is less keen on some Alfredian texts, for being 'not entirely orthodox or sound on matters of philosophy or doctrine', but more comfortable with the ninth-century Mercian *Old English Bede* and *Old English Dialogues*, which stay fairly close to their Latin source materials and stylistically verge on 'translationese', and which to him appear to be safe to use, despite their stylistic flaws: 'They were over-literal translations of sound patristic writers, adding nothing of their own.'[54] For Ælfric, looking back on the history of Old English prose, the changing trends in ninth-century translation styles not

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[50] On Jerome's famous Letter 57 to Pammachius, which parallels some of Alfred's own recommendations for translation, see Stanton, *Culture of Translation*, 76–7; Robert Stanton, 'King Alfred', in *Oxford History of Literary Translation*, ed. Ellis, 116–25 (119–24). For a definition of 'translationese', see *OED*, *s.v.* 'translationese', 'the style of language perceived as characteristic of (bad) translations; language in a translation which appears awkward, unnatural or unidiomatic, especially as a result of the translator attempting to replicate closely the specific features of the source text'.

[51] Godman, 'Anglo-Latin *Opus geminatum*', 225–6. For other insular vernaculars, see Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Of Bede's "Five Languages and Four Nations": The Earliest Writing from Ireland, Scotland and Wales', in *Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Lees, 99–119.

[52] Constance O. Elliott and Alan S. C. Ross, 'Aldrediana XXIV: The Linguistic Peculiarities of the Gloss to St John's Gospel', *English Philological Studies* 13 (1972): 49–72; Alan S.C. Ross, 'A Connection between Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels', *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 482–94; idem, 'Supplementary Note to "A Connection between Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels?"', *Journal of Theological Studies* 24 (1973): 519–21.

[53] Karen L. Jolly, *The Community of St Cuthbert in the Late Tenth Century: The Chester-le-Street Additions to Durham Cathedral Library A. IV. 19* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 9–10; Liuzza, 'Religious Prose', 236–40.

[54] Godden, 'Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents', 163. It is known that Ælfric also knew and used the *Old English Martyrology*, presumably for the same reason; see Christine Rauer, 'Usage of the *Old English Martyrology*', in *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Rolf H. Bremmer Jr and Kees Dekker. Mediaevalia Groningana 9 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 125–46 (136–7).

only brought a more self-confidently idiomatic Old English prose tradition with the Alfredian texts, but also generated ideological problems, once texts acquired an identity and content as 'something of their own'.

Conclusion

The ninth century is undoubtedly instrumental in that a number of prose texts were produced during the reign of Alfred, of a type which is particularly recognisable to modern readers used to the norms of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century prose novel: datable, associated with a known author or at least sponsor, long, consisting of syntactically complete units, with a clear main theme or narrative thread. Yet, with a more inclusive definition of prose, alternative forms of prose can be shown to have existed before Alfred: these include long texts of connected prose, such as Æthelberht's law code, the *Old English Martyrology* and the *Old English Bede*, as well as what could be termed encyclopaedic prose, such as the tradition of glosses and glossaries, microtexts and word lists.[55] Far from being the sole cradle of English prose, early Wessex was in cultural contact with other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, such as Mercia, Northumbria and Kent, which had similarly experimented with various forms of prose at an earlier stage. A river can be seen to come into existence as its minor tributaries emerge from the ground, and not at its first major confluence; in the same way, too, prose has its earlier tributaries. Whereas the early Kentish law codes and the Alfredian productions seem to be used instead of Latin prose, a measure apparently necessitated by the poor Latinity of their age, the intermediate age of Mercian prose production appears to create Old English prose which is complementary to the study of Latin texts, gesturing towards a Latinate aesthetics with its more literal translation style. With Latin proficiency on the wane and a changing translation style, the main contribution of the Alfredian period seems to have been to help Old English prose emancipate itself from Latin, not to bring it into being.

Acknowledgments

Note on contributor

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[55] Blom, *Glossing the Psalms*, 14, speaks of 'paratextual networks', translating a coinage of Claudine Moulin.

Appendix. Timeline of English prose production (up to the reign of Alfred)

Texts listed in bold print are probably, or possibly, Mercian productions (that is, texts with a Mercian dialectal element or a place of composition under Mercian political influence). Not included are lists of names (e.g. witness lists in charters, *Liber vitae*, genealogies, names in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*), locative vocabulary (e.g. in boundary clauses and place-names) and inscriptions.

s. vii	Æthelberht's law code; possibly also those of Hlothhere and Eadric, and Wihtred
s. vii or viii	**Épinal-Erfurt Glossary**
s. viii	**Possibly Offa's law code (lost material; existence unclear)**
s. viii	**Glosses in the Blickling Psalter**
735	Possibly Bede's translation of the Gospel of John (lost material; existence unclear)
*c.*800	**Leiden Glossary**
early s. ix	**Corpus Glossary**
early s. ix	**Lorica Prayer and Glosses to the Lorica of Gildas (Book of Cerne)**
s. ix[1]	**Earliest substantive Old English elements in charters**
s. ix	Interlinear Gloss in the **Vespasian Psalter**
s. ix med.	**Codex Aureus dedication**
s. ix	*Old English Martyrology*
s. ix	*Old English Bede* **(translation of Bede,** *Historia ecclesiastica***)**
s. ix	*Old English Life of St Chad*
s. ix	**Werferth's** *Old English Dialogues* **(translation of Gregory,** *Dialogi***)**