

The Dating of Old English Prose: Some Problems and Pitfalls, with Special Reference to the Alfredian Canon¹

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The dating of Old English texts is a far from simple task. In books today we may expect to be given both the name of the author and the date of first publication, as well as details of any subsequent impression or revision. However, in the case of those compositions in prose that have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period, we can put names to no more than half-a-dozen writers using the vernacular, and every stage in the process of fixing a particular work in time – even very approximately – is beset by difficulties. A major problem is the absence of firm information about the dates of birth, and often also of death, of those individuals whose names we do know,² and of one of whom it has even been questioned whether he wrote anything at all. Another is the vulnerability of their works to the ravages of time. There is no way of calculating how many manuscripts have been recycled or destroyed over the years. Of those that remain, a number have lost their opening leaves – the place where an authorial preface might occasionally be found, while apart from copies of legal documents, only a handful giving indications of when they were written have survived.³

¹ It was with particular pleasure that I received the invitation of Trinity College Dublin to give the 2012 Kemble lecture. It was here that my great-great-grandfather read Theology just under 200 years ago. Headings are those used for my powerpoint presentation.

² Ælfric (c. 950–c. 1010), Æðelwold (?904x909?–984), Alfred (?848x849?–899), Byrhtferth (c.970–c.1020), Werferth (or Wærferth, active from c. 872, d. ?907x915?), Wulfstan (active from 996, d. 1023).

³ For a list of ‘MSS and parts of MSS datable within close limits’, see N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), pp. lx–lxi.

1. Charters

Dated charters, however, still exist in some numbers, and in this lecture in memory of John Mitchell Kemble, it is but fitting that I should begin with an example – numbered 364 – from his six-volume *Codex Diplomaticus*. This is a charter issued at Winchester in the name of King Athelstan, probably written by a royal scribe. (Although the bounds are in Old English, the body of the charter is in Latin):

Anno dominicæ incarnationis .dcccc^o. xxx^o. iiiii^o. regni vero mihi commissi .x^o. indictione .vii^a. epacta .iii^a. concurrente.ii^o. quintis Junii Kalendis. luna.xi^a. in civitate opinatissima; quæ Winteceaster nuncupatur. (London, British Library, Cotton Aug. ii. 65, Sawyer 425).⁴

Here, amongst other details, we are given not just the year ('934 A.D.')

and day of the month ('five days before the Calends of June', that is to say, May 28th), but also the regnal year for King Athelstan (the tenth), and the point in the current fifteen-year cycle (the seventh Indiction).⁵

2. Other datable texts.

Legal documents apart, however, the greatest problem is that those few prose texts that have dates associated with them are the exceptions that prove the rule.⁶ At the same time, the information these texts provide is sometimes of questionable accuracy, while often it is incomplete and has to be supplemented from other sources.

2.1. Unreliable dating

A clear example of unreliability is provided by the date in the often quoted rubric which, in London, British Library, Cotton Nero A. i, heads the

⁴ 'In the year of the incarnation of our Lord 934, in the tenth year of my reign; seventh indiction; third concurrent; five days before the Calends of June; with an eleven-day-old moon; in the most famous city, which is called Winchester.' Text at www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/425.html.

⁵ For the epact and the concurrent, recording the cumulative differences between lunar and solar years and between the solar year and the fifty-two-week year respectively, see, e.g. *Byrhtferth's Enchiridion*, ed. P. S. Baker and M. Lapidge, EETS ss 15 (London, 1995), I.ii and commentary, 271 and 262-3. For the age of the moon, see *ibid.*, 269-70.

⁶ For some 'manuscripts and parts of manuscripts datable within close limits', see Ker, *Catalogue*, pp. lx-lxi.

famous sermon on the ‘last days’ by ecclesiastic and lawgiver Wulfstan, who died in 1023: ‘Sermo Lupi ad Anglos quando Dani maxime persecuti sunt eos. quod fuit anno millesimo XIII ab incarnatione domini nostri Iesu Cristi’.⁷

In spite of the date allotted to it in the rubric, there is good reason to suppose that 1014 is not the year in which the sermon was first given. Not only is the number XIII on an erasure, but in another manuscript, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 201, the corresponding figure is VIII and the date thus 1009. As Simon Keynes has plausibly argued, this earlier date fits very well with the hypothesis that the ‘sermon had originated during the tumultuous years when [the Viking] Thorkell’s army was at large in the country (1009-12)’,⁸ pointing to subsequent recycling by Wulfstan.⁹

2.2. Incomplete dating

As for incompleteness of information and difficulties in interpreting it, an example of this is provided by the brief note in Old English, accompanying a number of continuous interlinear glosses in Old English and four Latin collects, that has been inserted in the manuscript, originally all in Latin, now known as the Durham Ritual: ‘Be suðan Wudigan gæte æt Aclee on Westsæxum on Laurentius mæssan dægi on Wodnesdægi, Ælfsige ðæm biscope in his getelde, Aldred se profast ðas feower collectæ on fif næht aldne mona ær underne awrat.’ (Durham, Cathedral Library, A.iv.19, 84r).¹⁰

⁷ ‘The sermon of Wolf to the English when the Danes most greatly persecuted them, which was in the year 1014 from the incarnation of our lord Jesus Christ’.

⁸ S. Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop, and the Viking Raids of 1006-7 and 1009-12’, *ASE* 36 (2007), 151-220, at 210.

⁹ For a discussion of the three versions of *Sermo Lupi*, see, most recently, J. T. Lionarons, *The Homiletic Writings of Archbishop Wulfstan. A Critical Study*, Anglo-Saxon Studies (Woodbridge, 2010), ch. 7, esp. pp.155-6, describing Keynes’ account as ‘the most compelling to date...yet maybe more complex than it needs to be’.

¹⁰ ‘The provost Aldred wrote these four collects for Bishop Ælfsige, in his tent, at Oakley, south of Woodyates on Wednesday, the Feast of St Laurence [i.e. August 10th], early in the morning, when the moon was five nights old.’ *Undern*, in this context, most likely refers to *terce*, the third of the canonical hours, and the service of that name. Facsimile: *The Durham Ritual: A Southern English Collectar of the Tenth Century with Northumbrian Additions* (Durham Cathedral Library A.iv.19), ed. T. J. Brown, EEMF 16 (1969). Edition: A. H. Thompson and U. Lindelöf, *Rituale Ecclesiae Dunelmensis: The Durham Collectar. A New and*

According to this note, when a certain Aldred was copying collects into the manuscript, it was before dawn, and the writer and a bishop called Ælfsige were in the latter's tent in Dorset,¹¹ the date being St Lawrence's Day (the tenth of August). An extraordinary amount of information, the authenticity of which seems unquestionable. However, it lacks one crucial detail – the year in which this event occurred. To attempt to determine this, we have first to estimate the date of the script and then the possible identity of Aldred's bishop, Ælfeah.

2.2.1. The date of the Old English script.

Unfortunately, dating by handwriting is not an exact science. Working mainly with charters, palaeographers are able to arrive at no more than a rough chronological order for different styles of script, with a wide margin of error. As Kenneth Sisam has pointed out, the best they can do 'on the basis of the known fixed and limiting dates' is 'consciously or unconsciously [to] construc[t] a hypothetical scheme of development, and by comparison fi[t] into this scheme the large proportion of manuscripts that cannot be closely dated from their own contents', with the result that the dates they arrive at are 'usually conjectural; and they are relative, not absolute dates.'¹² To take by way of illustration the dating of the Old English gloss in another major manuscript, the Vespasian Psalter:¹³ Sherman Kuhn, using as evidence a small group of charters of Mercian provenance, allocates it to the first third of the ninth century (roughly 800-833). Neil Ker, in contrast, describes it as 'probably of s.ix med.'¹⁴

Revised Edition of the Latin Text with the Interlinear Anglo-Saxon Version, Surtees Society 140 (Durham, 1927).

¹¹ That is to say, by a section of the Roman road from Old Sarum to Exeter, now known as Ackling Dyke, where it cuts across Oakley Down, with its prehistoric barrows. See online under 'Ackling Dyke' and 'Oakley Down' for photographs of the area. (My lecture having been arranged round a power-point presentation, I have had to reorganise its contents slightly here, though I retain the original headings.)

¹² K. Sisam, 'Canterbury, Lichfield and the Vespasian Psalter', *RES* n.s.7 (1956), 1-10, 113-31, at 113.

¹³ London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian A.i.

¹⁴ S. Kuhn, 'The *Vespasian Psalter* and the Old English Charter Hands', *Speculum* 18 (1943), 458-83, at 482; Ker, *Catalogue*, item 203. For other datings, see S. Potter, 'On the Relation of the Old English Bede to Werferth's Gregory and to Alfred's Translations', *Věstník královské české společnosti nauk: Třída filosoficko-historicko-jazykozpytná* (Prague, 1931, for 1930), pp. 1-76, at p. 28, 'ca. 825', and W. Keller, *Angelsächsische Palaeographie*, Palaestra 43, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1906), I, 22, 'around 900'.

Now the term ‘mid-ninth century’ covers the period *c.* 825-*c.* 875, so we actually have an overlap of about nine years. However, like Sisam, Ker is full of warnings. ‘Manuscripts written in the ninth century or the earlier part of the tenth century’, he says, ‘are datable only very approximately by their script’. What is more: ‘All my dates are certainly not right within the limits of a quarter-century. I can only hope that not too many of them are wrong within the limits of a half-century.’¹⁵ In the case of Aldred’s colophon, we have to be content with the very imprecise ‘s. x²’ – the second half of the tenth century.

2.2.2. The reference to a bishop called Ælfsige.

Of the two bishops of that name known to be active in the second half of the tenth century, one was bishop of Winchester until 958, when he was appointed archbishop of Canterbury. (He died of cold in the Alps, the following year, on his way to Rome to receive the pallium). The other was bishop of the Community of St Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street, County Durham. Consecrated in 968, he died in 990. Since Aldred’s note is in a northern dialect (he also added material to the Lindisfarne Gospels) and the book itself ended up in Durham, it is this bishop who would seem the obvious candidate. Once again that identification is of itself of no great help in dating the note. However, coupled with the information that Aldred provides as to the age of the moon the problem might appear to be solved.

2.2.3. The age of the moon.

According to the colophon, we are looking for a Wednesday that fell on St. Lawrence’s Day (August 10th) sometime in the tenth century, when the moon was five nights’ old. Unfortunately, there is more than just one way that Aldred might have calculated the age of the moon. If we take the ‘true’ moon, then it seems that in the tenth century it was five days’ old on St Lawrence’s Day, August 10th in both 970 and 981.¹⁶ If, however, we take the calendrical moon, then only the year 970 qualifies.¹⁷ Although 970 is now generally agreed to be the year that Aldred’s four collects were

¹⁵ Ker, *Catalogue*, p. xx.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Thompson and Lindelöf, *Rituale Ecclesiae Dunelmensis*, pp. xv and xvi, and Ker, *Catalogue*, item 106.

¹⁷ See *The Durham Ritual*, ed. T. J. Brown, p. 24. For similar detective work, enabling scholars to place the composition of computistical texts see Byrhtferth’s *Enchiridion*, ed. Baker and Lapidge, xxvi-xxviii.

entered on the manuscript,¹⁸ the alternative, 981, must still remain in play.¹⁹ In spite of the wealth of precise detail provided by the scribe, an element of doubt remains.

2.3. The problem of assigning dates to named individuals.

Any date given in a manuscript copy of a document, therefore, (including charters), has to be treated with care and when possible backed up by other information – in the case of the *Sermo Lupi*, an allusion to datable events, elsewhere a reference to a named individual or individuals, though, as we have seen, that too has its problems. To take another of the six authors whose names are recorded – the homilist Ælfric, a prolific writer, who on several occasions dedicates his works to known contemporaries –, merely to put his works in chronological order using criteria such as style in its wider verbal sense²⁰ has proved a considerable task, compounded by the difficulties of determining the dates of either their composition or their first ‘publication’. Thus, in citing 1002 as one of ‘two principal dates’ that ‘divide Ælfric’s work’, Peter Clemoes has to add the rider, ‘if that was the year in which Æthelweard died’,²¹ Ealdorman Æthelweard (d. ?998x1002?) being the person to whom Ælfric dedicated his *Lives of Saints*, while the demise of Archbishop Sigeric, to whom Ælfric sent copies of his *Catholic Homilies*, occurred in either 994 or 995, depending on which version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* you believe.²² The uncertainty here, however, is of minor significance, compared with that of assigning dates to the group of texts traditionally either loosely or closely associated with Alfred, king of the West Saxons.²³

¹⁸ See, e.g., J. Roberts, ‘Aldred Signs Off from Glossing the Lindisfarne Gospels’, *Writing and Texts in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. A. R. Rumble (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 28-43, at p. 29.

¹⁹ See D. Dumville, *Liturgy and the Ecclesiastical History of Later Anglo-Saxon England: Four Studies* (Woodbridge, 1992), p.106, n.1.

²⁰ Including such matters as vocabulary and syntax. See *Homilies of Ælfric. A Supplementary Collection*, ed. J. C. Pope, 2 vols., EETS 259 and 260 (1967-8), I, 94-105, esp. 99-103.

²¹ See P. A. M. Clemoes, ‘The Chronology of Ælfric’s Works’, in his *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in some Aspects of their History and Culture presented to Bruce Dickins* (London, 1959), pp. 212-47.

²² Cf. *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, ed. M. Godden, EETS ss.18 (London, 2000), xxxii-xxxvi, at xxxiii: ‘The evidence for Sigeric’s year of death is full but frankly contradictory, and it is doubtful whether the contradictions can be satisfactorily resolved.’

²³ I must here acknowledge my great debt to those many scholars past and present whose ideas on the subject I have absorbed over the years but have not space to

3. The Alfredian Translations

The texts that have over the years been associated with Alfred are the Old English translations referred to here as the *Bede*, *Orosius*, *Prose Psalms*, *Pastoral Care*, *Boethius*, *Soliloquies*, and (commissioned by the king) the *Dialogues*, along with extracts from the Bible used in the prefatory material to Alfred's lawcode (the *Domboc*). However, this traditional association has, over recent years, been challenged, with Alfredian authorship of the *Bede* and *Orosius* rejected, and the king's very qualifications to be cast in the role of translator called into question. If we should cease to use the year of Alfred's death as an absolute cut-off point, the possible date-range of some of these texts would be greatly extended, even up to fifty years. What then is the evidence for and against Alfred's involvement with these texts and what dates, firm or provisional, can we come up with for them? What are the problems and pitfalls?

3.1. 'Ic Ælfred' ('I, Alfred')

Apart from the *Domboc*,²⁴ only the *Dialogues* and *Pastoral Care* have first-person prose prefaces in Alfred's name,²⁵ apparently pointing to c.899 as the latest date for their composition.²⁶

3.1.1. The Dialogues

Ic Ælfred geofendum Cristes mid cynehades mærnysse geweorðod.²⁷ In the preface to the *Dialogues*, the king explains how he came to commission the translation. However, what is seemingly a straightforward account of Alfred's involvement is not without its problems. For example,

name here. And I apologise in advance to anyone I may have unintentionally misquoted.

²⁴ For the various dates proposed for this text see, e.g., A. J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, 1986), p. 11, and S. Keynes, 'The Power of the Written Word: Alfredian England, 871-899', *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. T. Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 175-197, at pp. 192-3.

²⁵ A first-person preface to the *Soliloquies*, from which the beginning may have been lost, does not name the individual.

²⁶ See further S. Irvine, 'The Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues', *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. N.G. Discenza and P.E. Szarmach (Leiden, 2015), ch. 5, pp. 143-170.

²⁷ 'I, Alfred, through Christ's gift [lit. 'Christ granting'] honoured with the greatness of kingship'. See *Bischof Wærferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen*, ed. H. Hecht, *Bibliothek der angelsächsische Prosa*, 5 (Leipzig, 1900-7), p. 1.

although the preface refers in the plural to unspecified friends,²⁸ in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*,²⁹ the (single) translator is named as Werferth, bishop of Worcester. What is more, since, on linguistic and stylistic grounds, the prose preface would appear to be the work not of a West Saxon, like Alfred, but of someone from Mercia, we find Malcolm Godden suggesting that it may have been Werferth himself who had a hand in its composition, as well as that of the main text.³⁰ However, a word-for-word analysis of the vocabulary and syntax of the (very brief) preface reveals differences as well as similarities between preface and translation, and although these differences do not demonstrate that Werferth (or whoever was primarily responsible for the body of the *Dialogues*)³¹ did not write it himself, neither do the similarities – most of which, incidentally, are shared with the *Old English Bede*³² – prove that he and no one else did.³³ A perfectly plausible alternative solution to the language problem is surely

²⁸ Ibid., 'minum getreowum freondum', 'my faithful friends'.

²⁹ S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's "Life of King Alfred" and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), ch.77.

³⁰ M. Godden, 'Wærferth and King Alfred: the Fate of the Old English *Dialogues*', *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. J. Roberts and J. L. Nelson, with M. Godden (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 35-51, at pp. 36-7.

³¹ For Werferth as possibly working with another Mercian, Werwulf, see D. Whitelock, 'The Prose of Alfred's Reign', *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 67-103, at pp. 67-8. For the suggestion that Werferth may not himself have been of Mercian origin, see below, n. 33.

³² Including a single instance of rhetorical amplification through doublings - the use of a pair of synonyms to express a single idea (see, e.g., Potter, 'Relation', p. 23, and G. Waite, cited S. Rowley, *The Old English Version of Bede's "Historia Ecclesiastica"* (Cambridge, 2011), p.6). See *Dialogues* (preface), 1.12-13, *sohte 7 wilnade*, beside body of the translation, 199.16, *sohte 7 wilnode*; and *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. Miller, 4 vols, EETS 95, 96, 110, 111 (London: 1890-8), I, 420.4 and 450.10 *sohte 7 willnade*.

³³ Pace Godden, 'The Alfredian Project and its Aftermath: Rethinking the Literary History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries', *PBA* 162 (2009), 93-122, at 96, n.10, what the presence of the word *gearolice* (rather than *gearwe*, *georne* or *geornlice*) in both the preface and other texts with Mercian features, but not the text of the *Dialogues*, demonstrates is not that 'the preface must have been written by a different author', but that the possibility of the king's letter having been written by someone other than the author of the translation must remain open. See further, Bately, 'The Alfredian Canon revisited: one hundred years on', in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 107-120, at pp. 114-17.

that, like busy people with secretaries today, Alfred, having received his copy, simply instructed one of his entourage to write whatever was required on his behalf,³⁴ and that person happened to be a Mercian.³⁵ (Since the language used is the vernacular, the king would not have needed to turn, as Charlemagne seems to have done, to a Latin scholar to undertake the task,³⁶ while that only Werferth is mentioned by Asser as author of the text could be because Alfred's original request for a translation had been addressed to the bishop, but that the latter delegated at least some of the task to underlings.)³⁷

As for the date of the translation, although it has been further suggested that the claim that Alfred commissioned it for his personal use is no more than a fiction, and that it was 'put into formal public circulation for the use of others from the outset',³⁸ neither this nor any other hypothesis about Alfred's involvement or lack of it affects our dating of the *Dialogues* to some time before 893, when, it seems, Asser was writing his *Life of King Alfred*.³⁹ However, although a starting date soon after 885 has been taken to be implied by Asser,⁴⁰ I wonder if we can entirely rule out the possibility that the king's commission had been received even earlier, before Werferth (active from c.872), along with Mercians Werwulf and Athelstan, paid the visit to Alfred's court that is also mentioned by Asser.⁴¹

³⁴ See in this context Godden's comment ('Wærferth and King Alfred', p. 37) that 'it seems increasingly unlikely that Alfred read the Old English version at all closely, or thought very highly of it.'

³⁵ Alfred's wife according to Asser was from Mercia, so there might have been a number of Mercians in the royal household at the time.

³⁶ See, e.g., M. Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues in the Old English *Pastoral Care*, and their Carolingian Models', *JEGPh* 110 (2011), 441-73, at 449-53.

³⁷ For the translator of the *Dialogues* as a person of weak Latinity, see Godden, 'Wærferth and King Alfred', pp. 44-8.

³⁸ Godden, 'Alfredian Project', 96 and 100, suggesting also that the king may have seen his endorsement as 'a way of...justifying the use of the vernacular'.

³⁹ See further below, p. 62. Unfortunately, apart from a fragment, dated to the end of the 10th c., none of the extant manuscripts predate the 11th c., and the prose preface occurs only in two of them: see the detailed discussion by Godden, 'Wærferth and King Alfred', pp. 38-44.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Godden, 'Alfredian Project', 96. However, I agree with Godden's later, more cautious, reference ('Prologues', 468) to 'the apparent priority' of the *Dialogues*, and (*ibid.*, 441) to its being 'apparently issued perhaps five to ten years before the *Pastoral Care*'.

⁴¹ For the scholars involved and the possible dates of their arrival from the early 880s on, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 26-7, and M. Lapidge,

3.1.2. The Pastoral Care

Ælfred kyning hateð gretan Wærferð biscep his wordum luflice
7 freondlice...⁴²

The prose preface in this text opens with a formal greeting in the third person, before continuing in the first. This time two of the extant manuscripts are from the last decade of the ninth century, one apparently the headquarters' copy, with space for the name of the intended recipient left blank, and a note of the three people to whom the book had already been dispatched: 'Archbishop Plegmund has been given his book ... and bishops Swithulf and Werferth'. The other is the copy actually sent to Werferth. It has an inscription saying that 'this book is for Worcester' and the formal greeting which begins its prose preface contains the bishop's name.

At the same time, acknowledgement is made in the preface of the help of four scholars recruited from neighbouring Mercia, Wales and the Carolingian empire, with whom the king says he studied the text before he rendered it, 'sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense',

swæ swæ ic hie geliornode æt Plegmunde minum ærcebiscepe 7 æt
Assere minum biscepe 7 æt Grimbolde minum mæsseprioste 7 æt
Iohanne minum mæssepreoste.⁴³

Of these helpers, although Grimbald, John and Asser may have come to Wessex in around A.D. 886, Plegmund was not appointed archbishop until 890. On the basis of this information, it would seem that none of the extant copies of the *Pastoral Care* was being sent out earlier than that date. However, this does not rule out translation before 890,⁴⁴ nor, as I shall be

'Scholars at King Alfred's Court (act. 880-899)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Asser does not tell us whether the terms on which the king acquired Werferth's aid were similar to those he had negotiated for himself. However, it was to Worcester that Werferth's copy of the *Pastoral Care* was sent.

⁴² 'King Alfred bids greet Bishop Wærferth with his words lovingly and friendlily'.

⁴³ 'as I learned it from Plegmund my archbishop and from Asser my bishop and from Grimbald my priest and from John my priest'.

⁴⁴ cf. K. Sisam's comment, 'The Publication of Alfred's *Pastoral Care*,' in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, (Oxford, 1953), pp. 140-7, at p.

arguing, does the absence of any reference to it in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. On the other hand, whoever we consider responsible for the translation, circulation of the text could have been in progress as late as 897, the year of the death of one of the known recipients, Heahstan, bishop of London, and must at the latest already have begun by that point in the years 894-896 when another recipient, Swithulf of Rochester, died.⁴⁵

Now Simeon Potter asserts that Alfred had no more to do with the *Pastoral Care*'s final form than with that of the *Dialogues*, while Malcolm Godden has recently argued that 'many hands and minds may have been involved in the creation of the [work]', Alfred's not necessarily among them.⁴⁶ This brings me back to the subject of Alfred as author, and on to the *Boethius*.

3.1.3. The Boethius

Ælfred kuning wæs wealhstod ðisse bec and hie of boclædene on Englisc wende swa hio nu is gedon.⁴⁷

Once again, we have a prose preface naming Alfred as author. But this time it is all in the third, not the first, person; it does not refer to any helpers with, or recipients of, the text; the earliest extant manuscript probably dates from 'around the middle of the tenth century',⁴⁸ though the

145, that 'it looks as if the inclusion in the book itself...was an afterthought, made possible by the interval necessary to produce enough copies of the text'.

⁴⁵ See *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: MS A*, ed. J.M. Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition*, ed. D. Dumville and S. Keynes, 3 (Cambridge, 1986), annal 896.

⁴⁶ Potter, 'Relation', p. 73; Godden, 'Prologues', 442-3. For a useful summary of arguments for and against a team of translators, see C. Schreiber, *King Alfred's Old English Translation of Pope Gregory the Great's Regula Pastoralis and its Cultural Context: A Study and Partial Edition According to All Surviving Manuscripts Based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 12* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 47-9. For my own most recent overview of the subject see Bately, 'Alfred as Author and Translator', in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. Discenza and Szarmach, ch. 4, pp. 113-142.

⁴⁷ 'King Alfred was interpreter of this book and turned it from Latin into English as it has now been done' (*Old English Boethius*, Preface, 1-3). Text from *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. M. Godden and S. Irvine, with a chapter on the Metres by M. Griffith and contributions by R. Jayatilaka, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2009), I, 239.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 22; also I, 146, 'around 950'.

reported paleographical features of a now lost fragment point to an earlier date, leading the editors of the *Boethius* to conclude that the work's 'unknown writer' could have been working as late as about 930.⁴⁹ On the other hand, they recognise the 'probable influence of the *Old English Orosius*, which Bately thinks was written not before 889',⁵⁰ and 'if the attribution [to King Alfred] is mistaken', they propose c.890 as the earliest available date.⁵¹

There is indeed a handful of items in the *Orosius* that might seem to point to the final years of Alfred's reign as the most likely period for that translation.⁵² Unfortunately, all involve conjecture. The first of these is the identification of the *Basternae* of 179 B.C. as a people now known as *Hungerre*, 'Hungarians'. The second, a reference to a saying of the Roman emperor Titus, is found also in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The third, the naming of a pair of Gothic 'kings' as Rædgota and Alaric, occurs in both the *Orosius* and the *Boethius*.⁵³

3.1.3.1. The Basternae and the Hungarians.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 145-6.

⁵⁰ For a possible wider date 'at some point between 870 and 930', see now M.R. Godden, 'The Old English Orosius and its Sources', *Anglia* 129 (2011), 297-320, at 297.

⁵¹ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 146.

⁵² For the accounts of Ohthere and Wulfstan as an interpolation, see, e.g., 'Ohthere and Wulfstan in the Old English Orosius', *Ohthere's Voyages: A late 9th-century account of voyages along the coasts of Norway and Denmark and its cultural context*, ed. J. Bately and A. Englert, *Maritime Culture of the North I* (Roskilde, 2007), pp. 18-58, at pp. 32-5; also J. Bately 'The Old English Orosius', in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. N. Discenza and P. Szarmach, ch. 11, pp. 313-343 at p. 316. For commonplaces about Mount Etna found in both the *Orosius* and the *Boethius*, see *OE Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., II, 307, commentary on ch.15, 17-21.

⁵³ For a possible fourth item, see the location in the geographical section, of a *westen* between *Carendran* (Carentania/ Carinthia) and *Pulgare* (Bulgarians). This, if not reflecting classical sources, might be linked to either Charlemagne's devastation of Pannonia in the eighth century, or similar events in the 880s as a result of which 'Pannonia de Hraba flumine ad orientem tota deleta est'. See further, *The Old English Orosius*, ed. J. Bately, *EETS ss 6* (London, 1980), 13.7 and 18.17, and lxxxix, 171 and 202.

OE Orosius, 110.6-8: seo strengeste þeod...þe mon þa hæst Basterne,
7 nu hie mon hæst Hungerre.⁵⁴

There is no reference to the Hungarians in the expanded geographical chapter of the Orosius. The two earliest references to this people that we have from Frankish sources are in annals dated 862 and 881 respectively,⁵⁵ but though the first describes the *Ungari* as previously unheard of, it does not give any indication of either whence they came or where they encountered the forces of Ludwig the German, while the second refers merely to an attack on *Wenia* ('Vienna').⁵⁶ Why then the equivalence with the *Basternae* in Book IV?⁵⁷ Why in the ninth century would someone translating an account of this nation, in conflict with the Romans in the second century B.C., be prompted to think of the *Ungari*? A possible clue lies in three entries in two further sets of annals, covering the years 889, 892 and 894. Here we find references to attacks by the Hungarians across the Danube and into Pannonia, the first of them describing this 'previously unknown' people as *ferocissima*.

Regino of Prüm, *Annales*, annal 889: gens Hungarium ferocissima et omni belua crudelior, retro ante seculis ideo inaudita quia nec nominata, a Scythicis regnis et a paludibus quas Thanais sua refusione in immensum porrigit, egressa est...Et primo quidem Pannoniorum et Avarum solitudines pererrantes⁵⁸

⁵⁴ 'that very strong people, who were then called *Basterne* and are now called *Hungerre*'.

⁵⁵ *Hincmarus Remensis, Annales Bertiniani. Pars III*, ed. G. Waitz, *MGH SS rer. Germ.* 5 (Hanover, 1883), 55-154, annal 862: 'hostes antea illis populis inexperti, qui Ungri vocantur, regnum eiusdem populantur' ('enemies called Hungarians, hitherto unknown to those peoples, ravaged his realm'). Translation from J. L. Nelson, *The Annals of St-Bertin* (Manchester, 1991).

⁵⁶ See E. Klebel, *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde* (1921), annal 881.

⁵⁷ Cf. St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang.621, with the gloss *Scitarum*. Elsewhere in this manuscript of Orosius' *Historiae*, the term *Ungria* glosses Latin *Pannoniam*. See now further Godden, 'The Old English Orosius and its Sources', p. 315.

⁵⁸ *Reginonis Abbatis Prumiensis Chronicon*, ed. F. Kurze (Berlin, 1890), annal 889: 'The Hungarian people, who were extremely warlike and more savage than any beast, and who were unheard of in previous centuries because they were not named [in the sources] emerged from the Scythian kingdoms...First indeed roaming the wildernesses of the Pannonians and the Avars...' Translation from S. Maclean, *History and Politics in late Carolingian and Ottonian Europe*

Annales Fuldenses, annal 892: Ungaris etiam ibidem ad se cum expeditione venientibus, omnem idem regionem incendio devastandam versebatur....
annal 894: Avari, qui dicuntur Ungari, in his temporibus ultra Danubium peragrantes multa miserabilia perpetravere...totam Pannoniam usque ad internationem deleverunt.⁵⁹

With these passages we might compare the reference to Basternae in Orosius's *Historiae*, telling of their attempt to cross the Danube and describing them too as *gens ferocissima* (*Old English Orosius*, 'seo strengeste þeod'):

Orosius, *Historiae*, IV.xx.34: Lepido et Mucio consulibus, Basternarum gens ferocissima...praedarum spe sollicitata et transeundi Histri fluminis facultate sine ulla pugna...deleta est.⁶⁰

Consequently, it is possible that the naming of the *Hungerre* in the *Old English Orosius* may indicate a date for the translation of 'after c. 889'.

3.1.3.2. Titus's saying

OE Orosius, 138.23–139.2: Titus...wæs swa godes willan þæt he sægde þæt he forlure þone dæg þe he noht on to gode ne gedyde.

(Manchester, 2009). See also *Annales Admontenses*, ed. W. Wattenbach, MGH.SS 9 (1851), 569-99, annal 889: 'Ungari ex Scithia egressi Pannoniam ingrediuntur'.⁵⁹ *Annales Fuldenses*, ed. F. Kurze (Hanover, 1891), annal 892: 'The Hungarians also came to him there [Moravia] with an army, going about laying waste to the whole of the land with fire,' and annal 894: 'In these times the Avars, who are called Hungarians, penetrated across the Danube at this time, and did many terrible things... reduced the whole of Pannonia to a desert'. Translation from T. Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda* (Manchester, 1992). See also Regino, *Annales*, annal 894.

⁶⁰ 'The very fierce nation of the Basternae...induced by the hope of plunder and by the opportunity of crossing the [Danube] without any battle...was destroyed.' Text from *Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri Septem*, ed. K. Zangemeister, CSEL 5 (Vienna, 1882). For another edition see *Orose, Histoires (Contre les Paiens)*, ed. M-P. Arnaud-Lindet, 3 vols (Paris, 1991).

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A, annal 81: Her Titus feng to rice, se þe sæde þæt he þone dæg forlure þe he noht to gode on ne gedyde.⁶¹

The almost identical form taken by these two entries, based ultimately on a report by Suetonius (c. 71-c. 135 A.D.), has long been recognised, with possible intermediate Latin sources suggested including Jerome, *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Galatas*,⁶² and Isidore of Seville, *Chronicon*.⁶³ For Dorothy Whitelock, the presence in the *Orosius*, but not in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, of the words *swa godes willan* (corresponding to Jerome's phrase *tantae bonitatis*) appears to indicate that 'it is the *Chronicle* which is borrowing from the *Orosius*, unless both had a common Old English source of whose existence we have no other trace, and this seems unlikely'. And this, she says, suggests that the *Orosius* was 'earlier than about 890, the date when manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* began to circulate'.⁶⁴ However, the wording of the actual saying (given in indirect, not direct, speech in both *Orosius* and *Chronicle*) is closer to that of Isidore than to that of Jerome. Moreover, an examination of the world-history annals that open the *Chronicle* suggests that it was Isidore that their compiler used, not only to establish an A.D. dating for them, but as a source for a number of the individual entries, including, I would argue, annal 81.⁶⁵

Jerome, *Commentarii*, col. 433: Titus...tantae dicitur fuisse bonitatis, ut cum quadam nocte sero recordaretur, in cena, quod nihil boni die illa fecisset, dixerit amicis, 'Hodie diem perdidi.'⁶⁶

⁶¹ 'Titus...was of such good will that he said that he lost the day on which he did nothing good'; 'Here Titus came to power, he who said that he lost the day on which he did nothing good'. For the construction *to gode* see *Dictionary of Old English, A-G, god* (noun) A.5.

⁶² III.vi.10, Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (PL) xxvi, col. 433, named by S. Potter, 'Commentary on King Alfred's *Orosius*', *Anglia* 71 (1952-3), 385-437, at 434, and Whitelock, 'Prose', p. 74, also citing the slightly less close reading in Jerome's version of Eusebius's *Chronicle*, ed. J.K. Fotheringham (London, 1923), p. 271.

⁶³ See PL lxxxiii, 1017-1058, at §72. Named in *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, with supplementary extracts from the others. A revised text*, ed. C. Plummer, on the basis of an edition by J. Earle, 2 vols (Oxford 1899), II. 8.

⁶⁴ Whitelock, 'Prose', pp. 73-4.

⁶⁵ J. Bately, 'World History in the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle": Its Sources and its Separateness from the Old English *Orosius*', *ASE* 8 (1979), 177-94, at 188.

⁶⁶ 'Titus...is said to have been of such magnanimity that when on a certain night, in the evening, he was mindful, at supper that he had done nothing good that day, he would say to his friends, "Today I lost a day".'

Isidore, *Chronicon*, cols. 1041-2: Porro in imperio tantae bonitatis fuit, ut nullum omnino puniret...: Hujus etiam inter omnia fuit illud celebre dictum: perdidisse diem quo nihil boni fecerat.⁶⁷

Could the author of the *Orosius*, then, have taken the saying with its indirect speech from the *Chronicle*? If he had, he would have had to turn elsewhere for the accompanying reference to Titus's 'goodwill', and that could have come (directly or indirectly) either from Jerome, or from Isidore, *Chronicon*, in the sentence quoted above, which immediately precedes it there. Far simpler to see the entries in the *Chronicle* and *Orosius* as each derived independently from Isidore, with the chronicler opting for brevity, in which case their differences can no longer safely be used as an aid to dating.

3.1.3.3. Radagaisus and Alaricus: Rædgota and Eallerica

Orosius, *Historiae*, VII.xxxvii.1: barbaras gentes [Stilico] inmisit.

OE Orosius, 155.21-3: Stileca...forlet Gotan on Italie mid hiora twam ciningum, Alrican 7 Rædgotan.⁶⁸

OE Boethius, ch.1, 1-3 (I, 243): Gotan of Sciððiu mægðe...mid heora cuningum, Rædgota and Eallerica wæron hatne, Romane burig abræcon.⁶⁹

A notable feature, shared this time by the *Orosius* and the *Boethius*, is the transformation of the Latin names of two Gothic kings, Alaricus and Radagaisus, into the anglicized forms *Eallerica*, *Alrica* and *Rædgota*. In the *Orosius* the reference to the two leaders of the Goths is to their arrival in Italy. Replacing a less precise reference in the Latin original to 'barbarian peoples', it merely anticipates details given there shortly

⁶⁷ 'But he was of such goodness in the exercise of his imperial rule that he punished no one at all....Among all of his sayings, the most famous was that he had lost the day on which he had done nothing of benefit'.

⁶⁸ Orosius, *Historiae*: 'Stilico brought in the barbarian tribes'; *Old English Orosius*: 'Stileca...allowed the Goths into Italy with their two kings, Alrica and Rædgota'.

⁶⁹ 'The Goths of the Scythian nation...with their kings, who were called Rædgota and Alaric, captured the city of the Romans.' Translation from *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., II, 4.

afterwards. However, at the same time, its wording recalls entries in Latin chronicles such as that of Cassiodorus, ‘His cons. Gothi Halarico et Radagaiso regibus ingrediuntur Italiam’.⁷⁰ In the *Boethius*, in contrast, the sole reference (in the very brief historical survey that precedes the translation itself) is to the subsequent sack of Rome by the Goths, under these same two leaders – a claim which is supported by neither the Old English version of Orosius’s *Historiae*, nor the original Latin, both of the latter recounting first the defeat and killing of Rædgota/ Radagaisus and then (as do the Latin and Old English versions of Bede’s *History*)⁷¹ attributing the sack of Rome to Alaric(us) alone.⁷² It is hard to see how any of these four texts, Latin or Old English, could have been the *Boethius*’s immediate source. On the other hand, it is possible that behind the latter’s entry is a reference to Goths unspecified as taking Rome, such as is found in Isidore, *Chronicon*,⁷³ and *Vita Boethii* II.⁷⁴ This, one might conjecture, could then have been modified, carelessly or in ignorance, under the influence of a text which coupled the two leaders in a different context⁷⁵ and arguably maybe also used their anglicised names.

However, only in the *Orosius* and *Boethius* is *Radagaisus* given the otherwise unrecorded Old English name *Rædgota*. How could this have arisen? Now the etymological equivalent of *Radagaisus* in Old English

⁷⁰ Cassiodori Senatoris *Chronica*, ed. T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora, saec. iv, v, vi, vii* (Berlin, 1894), 154. ‘Under these consuls the Goths with kings Alaricus and Radagaisus entered Italy’. See J. Bately, ‘“Those Books that are most Necessary for All Men to Know”: The Classics and Late Ninth-century England, a Reappraisal’, *The Classics in the Middle Ages*, ed. A.S. Bernardo and S. Levin (Binghampton, 1990), pp. 45-78, at p. 60, expanding on a suggestion in eadem, *The Old English Orosius*, xcii, n.1.

⁷¹ *The Old English Version of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Miller, I, 42. 27-44.2, referring to Rome as sacked ‘þurh Alaricum Gotena cyning’ (‘by Alaric, king of the Goths’); *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969) I.xi, ‘Romanae inruptionis...per Halaricum regem Gothorum facta est’.

⁷² Orosius, *Historiae*, VII.xxxix.1: ‘Alaricus, trepidam Romam obsidet, turbat, inrumpit’ (‘Alaric besieged, threw into confusion and burst into fearful Rome’).

⁷³ Isidore, *Chronicon*, PL lxxxiii, 1018-1058, at §108: ‘with Honorius and Theodosius the Younger governing, the Goths took Rome’.

⁷⁴ Quoted *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., II, 249-50, ‘The OE author’s decision to begin...with the Gothic invasion under Alaric and Raedgota (Radagaisus) may owe something to *Vita* II’s simple second sentence recording a Gothic invasion’.

⁷⁵ For the possibility of a tradition of a joint invasion and a reference to material in Isidore of Seville’s ‘History of the Goths’, see *ibid.*, II, 251.

would be **Rædgar*, with the equations *rad-* = *ræd* ('swift'), *gais-* = *gar* ('spear'), a name which might perhaps have been handed down in verse, like the names of other warrior-leaders in the poem *Widsith*:

Ætla weold Hunum, Eormanric Gotum,
Becca Baningum, Burgendum Gifica,
...
Ʒeodric weold Froncum⁷⁶

To hypothesise is always dangerous, but I would tentatively suggest that the kind of context in which a substitution of *gota* for OE *gar* could have occurred is likely to have involved glossing, and that one such context is to be found in Orosius's *Historiae*:

Orosius, *Historiae*, VII.xxxvii.8-9: duo tunc Gothorum populi cum duobus potentissimis regibus suis per Romanas prouincias bacchabantur: quorum unus Christianus...timore Dei mitis in caede, alius paganus barbarus et uere Scytha⁷⁷

cf. *OE Orosius*, 155.26-7: Raðe þæs Alrica wearð cristen, 7 Rædgota hæþen þurhwunade.⁷⁸

Could it be that in a copy of the Latin text *unus Christianus* was given the Old English gloss *Alrica*, and *alius paganus barbarus* identified as *Rædgar*, with its associated term *Scytha* attracting the clarificatory Old English gloss *Gota*, 'a Goth'? And might it be that, because of its proximity, the gloss *Gota* subsequently came to be mistaken for a correction to the second element *gar*? In which case, we could trace both the association of the two leaders and the strange reading *Rædgota* in the *Orosius* back to the text's main source. As for the entry in the *Boethius*, we cannot rule out the possibility that this could have been derived

⁷⁶ *Widsith*, ed. K. Malone (London, 1936), lines 18-24: 'Attila ruled the Huns, Ermanaric the Goths, Becca the Banings, Gebicca the Burgundians...Theodoric ruled the Franks'.

⁷⁷ 'at that time two peoples of the Goths, with their two very powerful kings, ran wild through the Roman provinces. One of these kings was a Christian...through fear of God restrained in slaughter; the other, a pagan, barbarian, and truly a Scythian'.

⁷⁸ 'Shortly after this Alrica became christian and Rædgota continued a heathen'.

independently from the same or a similar hypothetical source.⁷⁹ However, it is tempting to conjecture that the form *Rædgota* could have come to the *Boethius* via the *Orosius*. In which case – always provided we accept Alfred’s authorship of the *Boethius* – we might very tentatively propose a date of ‘not before c. 889(?) and not after 899’ for the composition of the *Orosius*, and ‘after c. 889’ for the *Boethius*, thus killing two birds with one stone. But note my warning: ‘always provided we accept Alfred’s authorship of the *Boethius*’. If we do not, then we must at the same time reject 899 as the firm date ‘after which not’ for that text. Problem solved? or a pitfall remaining?

3.2. Arguments against Alfred as author or translator

Of the various arguments that have been put forward over the years for questioning the possibility of Alfredian authorship of the *Boethius*, some are applied equally to all the texts associated with Alfred, drawing, for instance, for support on examples of early medieval kings using ghost writers, or of attributions to rulers that are no more than tropes.⁸⁰ Others are specific to the *Boethius*, such as the claim that the prose preface, being in the third person, is not the work of Alfred himself,⁸¹ or that it is ‘difficult to imagine’ some of the views on rulers and courtiers expressed in the text as ‘emerging from the world of West-Saxon kingship and court circles’.⁸² Not all of these arguments necessarily have implications for

⁷⁹ The reference to the Scythian origin of the Goths in the *Boethius* may point to independent use of Orosius’s *Historiae* here. However, as the editors of *OE Boethius* (II, 250) observe, it could be from an earlier passage in the *Orosius* (153.25-6).

⁸⁰ See, e.g., W.G. Busse, ‘Die “karolingische” Reform König Alfreds’, *Karl der Grosse und das Erbe der Kulturen*, ed. F-R. Erkens (Berlin, 2001), pp. 169-84, at pp. 180-1, and, for conventional and literary tropes, Godden, ‘Alfredian Project’, pp. 97-100.

⁸¹ I am inclined to agree, though I do not rule out the possibility that an existing, possibly very brief, preface by Alfred composed for the original all-prose translation was later rewritten to fit either the new prosimetrical rendering or even an earlier copy of the all-prose version, with the metrical rendering added after it. See Bately, ‘The Alfredian canon revisited’, *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 107-20, at p.114: ‘The question is how much of what we have was actually put together in this place by Alfred himself’; also eadem, ‘Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything?’, *MÆ* 78 (2009), 189-215, at 190 and n. 15.

⁸² So, e.g., *OE Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 144-5, following up and building on Godden’s earlier comments in ‘The Player King: Identification and Self-representation in King Alfred’s Writings’, *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 137-50, and idem, ‘Did King Alfred Write Anything?’, *MÆ* 76 (2007), 1-23. For an

dating. Five, however, cut the *Boethius* adrift from the *Pastoral Care* and its circulation date of c. 890–c. 897, and call therefore for careful reassessment here.

Argument 1: ‘The Boethius does not fit Alfred’s plan as detailed in the preface to the Pastoral Care.’

Writing of the *Boethius* in the context of the arguments for translation set out in the preface to the *Pastoral Care*, Malcolm Godden comments:

This was not so much a book ‘most necessary for all people to know’, but rather a book that was quite dangerous for ordinary people to know. And the supposition that because a book was in English it must have been designed for the uneducated is one we should firmly set aside.⁸³

Much has been written about ‘Alfred’s plan’ for wider education and the ideas for the restoration of ‘wisdom’ to the land that the king is promoting in the preface to the *Pastoral Care*. However, Alfred, having, of course, already produced the translation to which that preface is attached, does not in the latter make any personal undertaking to contribute to any subsequent collection of English versions of those books ‘most necessary for *all men* to know’,⁸⁴ neither does this preface state that he was considering his translation of the *Pastoral Care* as intended for general consumption.⁸⁵ Moreover, whatever interpretation we put on his intentions, in my opinion his proposals in the preface most certainly do not preclude his authorship (with or without help) of the *Boethius*,⁸⁶ or indeed the *Soliloquies* and *Psalms*. (Incidentally, the importance he

important discussion of the minimalist approach to Alfred as author, see D. Pratt, ‘Problems of Authorship and Audience in the Writings of King Alfred the Great’, *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. P. Wormald and J.L. Nelson (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 162-91. For my opinion, see ‘Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything’, p. 191.

⁸³ ‘Alfredian Project’, 114. For Boethius, *De Consolatione* as a ‘difficult and problematic work’, see further *ibid.*, 113-4, and below, pp. 70-72.

⁸⁴ The ‘we too’ of the proposal to undertake translations follows a list, not of individuals, but of other nations who had adopted the vernacular for this purpose.

⁸⁵ For a different interpretation see, e.g., *OE Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 145: ‘the preface...introduces the *Pastoral Care* as apparently the first in a planned programme of translations from Latin, with no other texts specified’.

⁸⁶ I agree with Godden et al., I, 69 that ‘Even if it was translated by Alfred or a member of his circle it does not follow that it was part of the programme’.

attached to the *Pastoral Care* is shown by his reference to the valuable *æstel* he is sending out with each copy, his target audience at that point presumably being clerical).⁸⁷

Argument 2: 'Asser doesn't mention any translations by Alfred, not even the Pastoral Care.'

This is a matter of fact. However, the Welsh bishop's silence on this matter could well be because his *Life of King Alfred* was never completed. For although he refers to events on the continent up to 889 and seems to have still been writing in 893,⁸⁸ once he has finished discussing a meeting he had with the king in November 887, he abandons his practice of giving a chronological survey, never to return to it. What is more, after what might be called a lengthy digression, the text ends abruptly without any indication of closure, suggesting that (in Keynes and Lapidge's words) 'what has been transmitted to us is apparently an incomplete draft rather than a polished work in its finished state'.⁸⁹ (Is it just coincidence that 893, the time when Asser was apparently last at work on the *Life*, turned into a very busy year in military terms, with the king first in action against two Viking armies in Kent and then off to Exeter, where a further group of Vikings was besieging that city? Could Asser have seen this as a good time to make his annual visit to his home in western Wales?)

Argument 3: 'There are significant differences between Boethius and Pastoral Care in both language and approach.'

For the authors of the *Old English Boethius*,⁹⁰ '[despite] the fact that both the OE *Pastoral Care* and the OE *Boethius* claim Alfred as author, there are no apparent links or similarities between them...In the occasional points of overlap the two texts use different language and there seems no

⁸⁷ Though surely not exclusively. See, e.g., David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge, 2007), ch. 10.

⁸⁸ The date of 893 is based on Asser's comment, in a discussion of Alfred's state of health, that he was currently in his forty-fifth year.

⁸⁹ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 55-6, at p. 56. See also P. Wormald, 'Asser', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 'It may have been a draft intended for completion and smoothing at Alfred's death'.

⁹⁰ For convenience, I am quoting at this point mainly from the edition of the *Old English Boethius*, 2009, rather than from Godden's *Medium Ævum* paper of 2007, to which it is indebted.

evidence of cross-influence.’⁹¹ Indeed, they continue, although ‘[s]imilarities in language and style to the OE *Pastoral Care*, which has a rather stronger claim (though not itself a compelling one) to be the work of the king, have often been cited as key evidence for the king’s authorship of the OE *Boethius*...the evidence is far from persuasive, and those who have done most research on the topic have emphasised the differences between the two works, for which there is in fact abundant evidence’.⁹²

Of the two people referred to here as having done ‘most research on the subject’⁹³ (that is to say, on vocabulary and syntax), I am one and the research referred to is set out in my paper on the Paris Psalter, 1982.⁹⁴ The other person cited is Simeon Potter, of whom Godden had previously commented that he was ‘so struck by the differences [in vocabulary] after an exhaustive study of the texts that he argued that Alfred could not himself have written the *Pastoral Care*.’⁹⁵

Argument 3.1: Vocabulary

On Potter, ‘The Relation’

Potter may indeed have at some time made an ‘exhaustive study’ of differences between *Pastoral Care* and the *Boethius*,⁹⁶ but in his paper the only specific details of lexical usage relating to the *Pastoral Care* he

⁹¹ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 137. Continuing: ‘The most striking parallel passage is with the analogy between pigs wallowing in the mire and men immersed in physical pleasures at B 37.112-16’. For which see further, Godden’s earlier discussion, ‘Did King Alfred write anything’, pp. 1-23, at pp. 10-11, and my response to it, ‘Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything?’, pp. 189-25 at pp. 206-208.

⁹² *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I.142-143, following Godden, ‘Did King Alfred Write Anything?’, p. 9.

⁹³ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 143, note 2: ‘Potter 1931, esp. 73; Bately 1982, 78’. Godden is again condensing a fuller discussion in his ‘Did King Alfred Write Anything?’, for a detailed reply to which see my reply, ‘Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything?’.

⁹⁴ In Bately, ‘Lexical Evidence for the Authorship of the Prose Psalms in the Paris Psalter’, *ASE* 10 (1982), 69-95. There, however, I provide explanations for the variations that do not rule out different authorship.

⁹⁵ Godden, ‘Did King Alfred write anything’, p. 9, repeated, *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 138.

⁹⁶ See Potter, ‘Relation’, p. 72: ‘[*Pastoral Care*] differs from [the *Old English Orosius*, *Boethius* and *Soliloquies*] in the painstaking closeness of the translation, in the narrow range of the material added and, most distinctly, in its vocabulary. It therefore stands alone.’

produces are listed on pages 49 and 50, following the assertion, that ‘in vocabulary it is unlike [the *Bede*] and [*Dialogues*], and unlike Alfred’s acknowledged translations, [*Orosius*, *Boethius* and *Soliloquies*].’ Indeed, he continues, ‘we may go still further and say that it is unlike that of any other Old English text. Some words are peculiar to [the *Pastoral Care*]...Some are actually hapax legomena, and would be suspected as ghost-words if they did not occur in more MSS. than one.’

Potter of course did not have access to modern electronic aids such as the Dictionary of Old English, A-G, the Thesaurus of Old English, or an on-line concordance to Boethius’s *De Consolatione*. So he may be forgiven for not being in a position to observe that Latin words such as *Regula Pastoralis hydrocele* (*Pastoral Care heala*), *mamma* (*Pastoral Care delu*), *spado* and *eunuchus* (*Pastoral Care* past participle *afyrd*) are not used in the *De Consolatione* and their Old English equivalents not called for anywhere in the Old English Boethius either, while the hapax legomena *wordsawere* (‘word-sower’, i.e. ‘rhetorician’), and *felaidelspræce* (‘much idle-speaking’, i.e. ‘speaking much to no purpose’) are renderings of *Regula Pastoralis semini verbius* and *multiloquio vacantes*, (‘sowers of words’ and ‘[those] wasting too much time talking’). Another term which Potter considers ‘sound[s] strangely’ is *Pastoral Care tælweorðlicnes*, ‘blameworthiness’ – in a chapter which rings the changes on the concept ‘blame’, Old English *tæl*, a root which is used also in the compound *tælwyrplicost* in the *Old English Boethius*.⁹⁷ (Hapax legomena are in fact also found in the *Boethius*, as indeed are what Potter calls ‘Mercianisms’.)⁹⁸ At the same time, an examination of the entries in Potter’s list of lexical choices in the *Bede* and *Dialogues*, on the one hand, and *Pastoral Care*, on the other, reveals that the majority of the words cited there from the *Pastoral Care* are either shared with the *Boethius*, or the concept involved is not found in the latter,⁹⁹ while, writing as he does in 1930, he draws no attention to a number of words both *Pastoral Care* and *Boethius* share with the *Bede* and *Dialogues*, and which have subsequently been labelled as ‘Anglianisms’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *King Alfred’s West-Saxon Version of Gregory’s Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, 2 vols, EETS o.s. 45 and 50 (London: 1871; repr. 1958, with corrections and additions by N.R.Ker), I, 53.15; *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, ch. 18, line 70.

⁹⁸ See *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 188-90.

⁹⁹ So, e.g., *giemen*, *unwisdom*, *tohopa*, and the ‘Anglian’ *oferhygd*, cited Potter, ‘Relation’, p. 50.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Schreiber, *King Alfred’s OE Translation*, pp. 122-7, and *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 192-4.

On Bately 'Lexical Evidence':

Of the concepts discussed in my paper on lexical evidence for the authorship of the Prose Psalms, Malcolm Godden has selected two, the handling of which, in texts attributed to Alfred, he sees as demonstrating 'radical differences in usage' between *Boethius* and *Soliloquies* on the one hand and the *Pastoral Care* on the other. 'Bately's figures', he reports, 'show that the Psalms and *Pastoral Care* use all three words [meaning 'to rejoice' (*fægnian*, *blissian*, and *gefeon*)] with similar patterns of frequency...but the *Consolation* and *Soliloquies*...restrict themselves solely to *fægnian*'. In the choice between the two words for 'to answer', he continues, the *Consolation* and *Soliloquies* again stand apart from the rest in their preferences.¹⁰¹ However, these are items previously selected by me for the purpose of examining the range of preferred choices for the representation of certain concepts used in the prose psalms and other Alfredian texts. When considered instead in the context of the distribution patterns of their Latin equivalents in the *Regula Pastoralis* and *De Consolatione*, and the very different subject matter and lengths of these works, 'the remarkable disagreement' between *Pastoral Care* and *Boethius* in, for instance, the frequency of use of the three words for 'to rejoice' that they share is of no significance in terms of authorship. In fact, as I have argued in my reply to Godden, there is no justification for claims of startling differences in usage among the texts.¹⁰²

Argument 3.2: Syntax

Drawing on Elizabeth Liggins's analysis of the patterns of 'when' clauses, introduced by the forms *þa*, *þa þa* and *þa...þa*,¹⁰³ Godden notes as an instance of significant differences in syntax between the *Pastoral Care* and *Boethius*, that in such clauses her figures show that the Old English *Pastoral Care* uses the last of these constructions only once in 153 instances, whereas it is the strongly favoured form in the *Boethius* (59 out

¹⁰¹ 'Did King Alfred write anything', pp. 9-10, repeated, *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 136, drawing on Bately, 'Lexical Evidence', pp. 84 and 93.

¹⁰² See Bately, 'Did King Alfred actually translate anything?', pp. 196-99 and 202-3.

¹⁰³ E.M. Liggins, 'The Authorship of the Old English *Orosius*, *Anglia* 88 (1970), 289-322, at p. 292.

of 84 examples).¹⁰⁴ However, the frequency in the *Boethius* has a special explanation, other than a change of author. All but a very small handful of the instances of this construction in that text function as dialogue-markers, and are usually variations on the quasi-formulaic ‘*Ða se wisdom þa ðis spell asæd hæfde, þa ongan he giddigan and þus singende cwæð*’ (‘*When Wisdom then had spoken this speech, then he began to sing, and singing said as follows*’), and ‘*Ða se wisdom þa ðis leoð asungen hæfde, þa ongan he eft spellian and þus cwæð*’ (‘*When Wisdom then had sung this song, then he began to speak again and said as follows*’), used to mark a change from prose to verse or verse to prose, where the *De Consolatione* has either a link such as *inquit* (‘[he/she] said’), or *sic coepit*, (‘[he/she] began thus’), or no speech- or verse-introducer at all.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, not only does this difference in frequency not rule out the same person being responsible for both *Pastoral Care* and *Boethius*, but at a later point in Godden and Irvine’s edition, in a detailed examination of the syntax of the *Boethius*, we are told that ‘Some of the prose syntax is distinctive of that used in other “Alfredian” texts, particularly of that found in the Old English *Soliloquies* and Old English *Pastoral Care*. Rare usages (such as *swiðe hraðe þæs þe*, attested elsewhere only in the Old English Prose Psalms), may be significant in relation to authorship’.¹⁰⁶

Argument 3.3: Differences of Approach

But on to differences of approach. Here we have, for instance, Simeon Potter claiming that, ‘in style of translation [the *Pastoral Care*] stands apart from [*Orosius*], [*Boethius*], and [*Soliloquies*]. Indeed, it is impossible to think for a moment that this accurate, scholarly, painstaking work was done by the man who wrote these last-named texts’, being, rather, the work of one or more of Alfred’s collaborators.¹⁰⁷ While Godden puts it slightly differently in a lively tongue-in-the-cheek account of the unlikely conditions under which he considers King Alfred, ‘with the help

¹⁰⁴ ‘Did King Alfred write anything’, p. 10, reported also in *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, 1, 138. See also *ibid.*, p. 198: ‘Of the forms with *þa*, Liggins notes that [the *Boethius*] is alone amongst other ‘Alfredian’ texts in preferring the divided *þa...þa* within the temporal clause’.

¹⁰⁵ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 21.1–2 and 26.1–2. For the exceptions see Bately, ‘Alfred as Author’, p. 120, n. 29.

¹⁰⁶ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 204. For further instances of shared vocabulary, see H. Gneuss, *Lehnbildungen und Lehnbedeutungen im Altenglischen* (Berlin, 1955).

¹⁰⁷ Potter, ‘Relation’, pp. 52 and 55.

of a battery of skilled Latinists to explain the difficult bits in broken English', might have produced the 'faithful rendering' of the *Pastoral Care*: 'it was hack work but perhaps he could have done it'.¹⁰⁸ However, I would ask in reply why a layman like King Alfred would seek to make major alterations of substance to the text of an important handbook for bishops,¹⁰⁹ issued by no less an authority figure than Pope Gregory the Great – a handbook which, unlike Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and the works of Augustine, does not contain any abstruse or controversial points of philosophy and theology that might call for clarification or reinterpretation, and already provides its own illustrations and justifications in the form of quotations from Holy Writ.¹¹⁰ Is it necessarily an argument against common authorship of the *Pastoral Care* and *Boethius* that the former is a fairly close rendering of its source?¹¹¹

Which brings me to the last two items in my list of final arguments that have been made against the king's authorship of the *Boethius*, and therefore affect any attempts to date the translation of that work.

Argument 4: 'Alfred is likely to have lacked the time and the necessary linguistic and intellectual skills.'

As Godden puts the case:

[T]here have to be reservations about the proposition that Alfred had the time or the linguistic and intellectual skills required for such ambitious tasks of translation, adaptation, and expansion, an Alfred who spent much of his life in desperate warfare against invaders, who claimed that knowledge of Latin was non-existent in his kingdom when he became king at the age of 22, who did not learn Latin himself until he was 39, according to his counsellor, mentor, and biographer Asser, and who apparently crammed his translation programme into

¹⁰⁸ 'Did King Alfred write anything', p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ For a valuable summary of the work's reception in early medieval Europe, see Schreiber, *King Alfred's OE Translation*, pp. 5-10.

¹¹⁰ As Godden notes ('Alfredian Project', p. 111), the absence of similar identification of biblical passages in the *Boethius* is in 'striking contrast...with the practice in the *Pastoral Care*'. However, since Gregory's Latin already identifies the Bible as source, and the additional clarification in the Old English rendering is such as might be readily provided by glosses, Godden rightly does not go on to use this fact as a possible indication of different translators at work.

¹¹¹ See further Bately, 'Alfred as Author', p. 141.

the last six or so years of his life, of which the first three were dominated by extensive warfare against Viking armies.¹¹²

Two key assumptions. Alfred was most of his life too busy fighting the Vikings to devote himself to translation, and in matters of education Alfred was a late starter, a mature student. To take the question of priorities first, that Alfred spent much of his life ‘in desperate warfare against invaders’: a breakdown of the armed encounters between Vikings and West-Saxons reported in the *Chronicle* between 855¹¹³ and 894/5¹¹⁴ actually reveals very few years indeed out of the forty-nine of Alfred’s life when he was at some part of the time personally engaged in ‘extensive warfare’. Even in those years, there is ‘nothing that suggests...that he was so continually occupied with military activities as to prevent intellectual, social and other kingly activities’.¹¹⁵

However, on to Alfred the late starter, who therefore would have found it difficult to acquire the necessary linguistic and intellectual skills. This is an argument drawing in part on comments in the preface to the *Pastoral Care* about the state of learning when the king came to the throne, and in part on material in Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*, interpreted as evidence that Alfred did not learn Latin until he was thirty-nine years old.¹¹⁶

A recurrent theme in Asser’s *Life* is the king’s often frustrated personal desire for learning, a theme which culminates in an entry stating that on St Martin’s Day, November 887, ‘Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, first began through divine inspiration *to read and to translate* at the same time, all on one and the same day’.¹¹⁷ Asser’s words, *legere et interpretari*, are repeated by him shortly afterwards. There we are told that the bishop had been reading a passage to the king when the latter asked

¹¹² ‘Did King Alfred Write Anything?’, p. 2, also ‘Alfredian Project’, p. 101; similarly *OE Boethius*, ed. Godden et al., I, 140, with which cf. D. Whitelock, ‘Recent Work’, *Asser’s Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser*, ed. W.H. Stevenson (new impression, Oxford, 1959), p. cxlvii: ‘It must be remembered, however, that Alfred was not working unaided, but had several assistants’.

¹¹³ When Vikings overwintered for the first time in Kent.

¹¹⁴ When the Great Army left southern England.

¹¹⁵ I am indebted to the late Professor Nicholas Brooks for this comment.

¹¹⁶ For some scholars, tied up with the hypothesis that Alfred asked for the *Dialogues* to be translated because he did not know Latin and so apparently justifying a relatively late date for the Alfredian translations.

¹¹⁷ ch. 87.

him to copy it down for him, whereupon he was 'eager to read [the passage] at once and to translate it into English, and thereupon to instruct many others'.¹¹⁸

But are we entitled to assume that Asser is referring to a first attempt by the king to learn Latin? On the day in question, the context suggests that the Welsh bishop was reading aloud from a book in that language.¹¹⁹ Do we have to suppose that the king had not already acquired a decent working knowledge of the spoken, if not also the written, Latin that would have been used in high-level communications of an international nature? Rather might it not be that he simply had never thought (or should we echo Asser and say 'had the inspiration?') to sit down with a passage in front of him and produce his own translation of it?¹²⁰ (Though in any case, even if Alfred had not known a single word of Latin in 887, he still had almost another twelve years of life ahead of him to master the language.)¹²¹

To my mind, however, more significant than the question of Alfred's linguistic skills, or lack of them, is that of his intellectual ones. For Godden, for instance, it is difficult to conceive that the king could have attained a decent level of proficiency to produce not only the *Boethius* but also the *Soliloquies* – 'a level of proficiency sufficient to grasp the arguments of Boethius and Augustine, to master the commentary material which evidently surrounded his text of the *Consolation*, to absorb the further material on classical history and legend, natural history, and theology that contributed to his versions, and then to render the whole into confident English prose, complete with a whole new book of the *Soliloquies*'.¹²²

Indeed, he goes on to argue that the 'dual identity of uneducated layman one day and learned Latinate scholar another, seems to have been

¹¹⁸ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Life of Alfred*, ch. 89.

¹¹⁹ What degree of fluency would the newly-arrived bishop from west Wales have needed to be able to translate Latin directly into Old English as he read?

¹²⁰ ch. 89. And, continues Asser, on that same day, Alfred took it upon himself to begin on the rudiments of Holy Scripture and to study the various passages he excerpted. See further Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 28.

¹²¹ Cf. Keynes, 'Power', p. 197, 'The Alfred we need to leave behind is the Alfred who, having fought his way through the 870s, was so busy in the 880s that he had to wait until the 890s before he could begin to indulge himself in a bit of reading and writing'.

¹²² Godden, 'Did King Alfred write anything', p. 12. For an earlier expression of scepticism, see D.P. Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', *Studia Celtica* 6 (1971), 12-35.

something of an early medieval convention with kings and noblemen'.¹²³ However, it is clear from Asser's *Life* that Alfred had taken advantage of the presence of learned scholars to acquire learning for himself well before St Martin's Day 887,¹²⁴ as the entry for that day shows:

ch. 88: One day when we were sitting together in the royal chamber discussing all sorts of topics (as we normally did), it happened that I was reading aloud some passage to him from a certain book. As he was listening intently to this with both ears and was carefully mulling it over in the depths of his mind, he suddenly showed me a little book which he constantly carried on his person.

Note the statements that 'we were discussing all sorts of topics'; 'as we normally did'; 'I was reading aloud some passage'; 'he was carefully mulling it over'. There is indeed ample support here and in other sections of the *Life* as we have it, for the hypothesis that Alfred had the opportunity on many occasions to discuss not just the basic meanings of a number of Latin texts, but fundamental questions concerning 'theological' and 'philosophical' subjects such as good and evil, fate and freewill, which feature prominently in the *Boethius*.

At the same time, even if the *De Consolatione* was not one of the Latin books whose meaning he had discussed with his scholars long before he started to read it for himself, by the end of the ninth century glossed copies of the Latin were definitely available.¹²⁵ Moreover, even if the king did not, other members of his circle might be expected between them to have had what is in fact the relatively small amount of additional knowledge of the classics and natural history necessary to 'supplement the meagre information in the [*De Consolatione*]' and whatever Latin commentary might be available at the time.¹²⁶ We are nowhere told that

¹²³ 'Alfredian Project', p. 101.

¹²⁴ See, e.g., preface to the *Dialogues*: 'I...have clearly perceived and often heard through the testimony of holy books', and Asser's statements, *Life of Alfred*, chs 76-7, 81 and 88, for which further Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 239, n. 46, also *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹²⁵ See, e.g., *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 4-8. For the 'strong probability' that the translator had access to such a copy, see now R. Love, 'Latin Commentaries on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*', *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. Discenza and Szarmach, ch. 3, pp. 82-110, at p. 107.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 58. I personally see no reason why an Alfred, who, particularly in the dark days of the early and late 870s, must have spent lengthy periods in the open in the countryside, should not early have acquired an interest in the natural history

Alfred ceased to make use of his scholarly helpers once he had finished the *Pastoral Care*, and why would he? Indeed it could be argued that, with ready access to an international team of scholars, he was, like another layman, Charlemagne, before him, in a far stronger position than most individual clerics, however highly educated, to tackle the works of Boethius and Augustine.

What tends, I think, to be overlooked by those uneasy about the extent of Alfred's familiarity with the liberal arts is that the 'challenge' presented by the *De Consolatione* does not lie in the translating of that 'difficult and problematic' work,¹²⁷ English word for Latin word, and that there is more than one way in which understanding of its arguments might subsequently be achieved, even by someone not of great erudition – through glosses, perhaps, or commentary, or even discussion with learned scholars.¹²⁸

How far, then, should we be relying on Asser's account, complete or incomplete, in judging Alfred's abilities? I would argue that the *Life* is not just about the king: a second central character is Asser himself – a man who seems to have had an inflated sense of his own importance. A surprising amount of the *Life* is about his recruitment (or dare I say hiring?) by the king, while, although eye-witness corroboration has its uses, its value in the following examples is highly debatable:

- ch. 22: no one else could approach him in skill and success in [hunting]...as I have so often seen for myself.
- ch. 39: A rather small and solitary thorn-tree (which I have seen for myself with my own eyes).
- ch. 54: that place is very secure from every direction except the east, as I myself have seen.

In the account of Alfred's marriage in which the king's bride is not even named, but his new mother-in-law, Eadburh is, Asser similarly pauses to place himself in the foreground:

around him and the stars in the sky above, and he would presumably have seen and surely discussed the solar eclipse of 878 and its possible implications.

¹²⁷ 'Alfredian Project', p. 113; see also *ibid.*, p. 114, 'exploring dangerous or at least unorthodox territory', and (referring also to Augustine's *Soliloquies*), p. 107, 'bold rewritings of texts known at the time to be difficult, dangerous and distinctly heterodox texts from well outside the mainstream of Christian traditions'.

¹²⁸ For an important discussion of the relationship of the OE version to the Latin text, see *OE Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 50-79.

ch. 29: I often saw her myself with my very own eyes for several years before her death. She was a notable woman who remained for many years after the death of her husband a chaste widow, until her death.

As for the gifts that the king showered on Asser, these, the recipient tells us, included two monasteries and their contents, an 'extremely valuable silk cloak', incense 'weighing as much as a stout man', followed later by 'Exeter' with all the jurisdiction pertaining to it in Saxon territory and in Cornwall, and 'countless daily gifts of worldly riches of every sort', which he claims 'it would be tedious to recount at this point for fear of boring my readers'.¹²⁹ A comment which he then goes on to cap by employing the modesty topos:

ch. 81: let no one think that I have mentioned these gifts here out of some form of pride or self-esteem or for the sake of acquiring greater prestige: I testify in God's presence that I have *not* done so for this reason, but rather to reveal to those who do not know the king how lavish in his generosity he is.

In contrast, the contribution made by Alfred's other scholars is barely mentioned.¹³⁰

Is it possible, then, that in giving special prominence to the events of St Martin's Day, Asser was seeking to highlight and claim credit for his part in helping Alfred to take the first steps towards what was to become the king's personal involvement in the business of restoring learning in his country?¹³¹ In which case, if the bishop had completed his *Life of King Alfred*, one might hypothesize that he would have proceeded in a later section to deal with the oeuvre itself.

Did Bishop Asser, however, ever write anything? Doubts about the authenticity of the *Life* were already being voiced as least as early as 1841,¹³² confronting us today with a splendid paradox: one group of

¹²⁹ ch.81.

¹³⁰ Before Asser arrived, the English contingent used to read to the king and through the teaching of Grimbald and John '[his] outlook was very considerably broadened' (Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Life of Alfred*, chs. 77 and 78). Strangely, as a contemporary and – being allegedly constantly in the king's company – as confidant, Asser does not seem to have looked very hard for information from either the king or any one else.

¹³¹ Does the request for a translation of the *Dialogues* precede or follow this apparently momentous occasion?

¹³² Most recently spelt out by A. P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995).

scholars arguing against Alfred's involvement in translation and using in support of their arguments a *Life of King Alfred* which another group has branded a forgery. So should we, or should we not, believe in the 'genuine Asser'? Or put another way: was Asser (if it really was Asser) actually writing before Alfred (if it really was Alfred) had started to produce any of his translations? Allowing us to date them!

I personally am not persuaded that we have to assume that in its original form the *Life of King Alfred* was not the work of Alfred's scholarly recruit, Asser. But at the same time, I do not believe that the material it contains compels us to reject Alfred as author – with acknowledged help – of the *Pastoral Care*. And since I continue to maintain that all the linguistic evidence points to one and the same person as responsible for both that text and the *Boethius*, I see no good reason to reject the year 899 as the latest date for the latter's composition. To all of which I would add just one more observation: Alfred was pretty unusual as a scholar-king, not least because of his background. What must being unexpectedly catapulted onto the royal throne at the age of twenty-two have actually meant to him? An obligation certainly to the embattled people he now ruled and one which he clearly took very seriously, but also an unsought-for situation that resulted in him being constantly beset by 'the preoccupations and cares of this world.' In such a context, it is not surprising that both he and Asser tell us he constantly yearned to escape into the world of books and learning.¹³³ It is perfectly reasonable to suppose that such a person might well seize every opportunity to do so. However, doubts about authorship once raised are, like modern conspiracy theories, not easy to shake off. What alternatives do the sceptics offer? And what possible dates for the work? The editors of the *Old English Boethius* tell us that they have 'worked on the hypothesis that the [prose version] was the work of an unknown writer of substantial

¹³³As the youngest son of a king, with at least five older brothers and sisters, Alfred's illnesses, as reported by Asser, were arguably 'fuelled by a conflict in Alfred's mind between secular and clerical callings', a conflict which was 'arguably the key to his unique creativity', P. Wormald, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 'Alfred [Ælfred] (848/9-899)'. (We may perhaps compare the king's decision to produce a vernacular version of the *De Consolatione* in his spare time with that of the sixteenth-century English queen, Elizabeth I, who, after enduring much tribulation in her youth, unexpectedly succeeded her sister, Mary, and towards the end of her life, working on the text two hours a day, translated it in a month).

learning...working sometime in the period 890 to about 930, probably in southern England'.¹³⁴

Which brings me to the final argument against Alfredian authorship of the *Boethius*:

Argument 5. The case for an author working after Alfred's reign

[T]he impression of the Old English *Boethius*'s learned context [is not] easy to square with the king's emphasis on the ignorance of Latin in England in his time and the lack of books, or the decay of institutions suggested by his own account and Asser's. If the attribution to the king is correct, or indeed if it is a work of his circle with input from the king, it suggests a richer and better resourced cultural scene than has usually been seen. It would perhaps be easier to see the work as emerging from the early tenth-century world of Edward the Elder or Athelstan, when the earliest evidence for the [De Consolatione Philosophiae] in England is to be found.¹³⁵

Note that, having observed that the impression is of a richer and better resourced cultural scene, the editors of the *Old English Boethius* continue, not that 'it is necessary', but that 'it would be easier', to look to the tenth century. I would argue, however, that the 'cultural scene' in Wessex and neighbouring Mercia in the last decade of Alfred's reign was sufficiently well enough resourced to be adequate for Alfred's purposes. To use a medieval rhetorical topos myself, if I were to name-drop, my list would be headed by an international cast: the Frankish Grimbold, John the Old Saxon, the Welshman Asser, the Mercians Athelstan, Plegmund, and Werwulf, and the bishop of Worcester, Werferth.¹³⁶ My list would also include the translations of the Old English *Martyrology*, and *Pastoral Care* (both of these surviving in manuscripts datable to the late ninth

¹³⁴ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 146.

¹³⁵ *Old English Boethius*, ed. Godden *et al.*, I, 144. For Archbishop Dunstan, or 'those who taught him' as people with the appropriate educational background, though 'the dating may be too tight to make this possible', see, e.g., Godden, 'Alfredian Project', 118. See, also, *ibid.*, 109, 'a significant part of [the] expansion reflects the author's reading of manuscript commentary, and especially of comments and glosses that are preserved in tenth-century English manuscripts of the Consolation'.

¹³⁶ Potter, 'Relation', p. 27 and n. 2, observes that Asser does not refer to Werferth as *Mercius genere*, though '[e]ven if not an Anglian by birth, Werferth had at least spent his early life in Mercia'.

century), along, arguably, also with the *Dialogues*, *Bede* and *Orosius* – the last mentioned incorporating a strikingly large amount of additional classical and geographical information. If Latin texts such as these could be translated in the ninth century, why not the *Boethius*? Then what about the development of the *Chronicle*, with its material taken not just from Bede, but also from Isidore's *Chronicon*, and the drawing up of Alfred's Law code, with its Bible translations? We have evidence of Alfred's interest in acquiring information, with the report that he received of the travels in Northern Europe of Ohthere and Wulfstan now interpolated in the *Orosius*. And what about that entry in the *Chronicle* for 891 about the three Irishmen who, setting out in a small boat, without any steerage and with food for only seven days, arrived in England on the eighth and went immediately to King Alfred, bringing with them – it would seem – news of the death of Swifnech, the best scholar in Ireland.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A, s.a. 891: 7 þrie Scottas comon to Ælfrede cyninge on anum bate butan ælcum gereþrum of Hibemia, þanon hi hi bestælon, forþon þe hi woldon for Godes lufan on elþiodignesse beon, hi ne rohton hwær. Se bat wæs geworht of þridan healfre hyde þe hi on foron, 7 hi namon mid him þæt hi hæfdun to seofon nihtum mete, 7 þa comon hie ymb .vii. niht to londe on Cornwalum 7 foron þa sona to Ælfrede cyninge. Pus hie wæron genemnde, Dubslane 7 Maccbethu 7 Maelinmun. 7 Swifnech, se betsta lareow þe on Scottum wæs, gefor.¹³⁷

We also have heavily glossed manuscripts of the *De Consolatione* surviving from the ninth century. And not least, and most recently, we have Malcolm Godden's own conclusion:

There clearly were men of learning around, whose ability to produce works in fluent English suggest they were not imported scholars, and the books had clearly not all been destroyed, since many were

¹³⁷ 'And three Irishmen came to King Alfred in a boat without any oars from Ireland, whence they had stolen away because they wished to go on pilgrimage for love of God, they cared not where. The boat in which they travelled was made from two and a half hides; and they took with them only enough food for seven days. And after seven days they came to land in Cornwall, and then went immediately to King Alfred. Their names were Dubslaine, Macbethath and Maelinmuin. And Suibne, the greatest teacher among the Irish, died' (Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 113-4).

available to the authors of the Alfredian period and the immediately preceding and following decades.¹³⁸

I see no good reason, therefore, to reject Alfred, author of the *Pastoral Care*, as the person, with or without collaborators, primarily responsible for the translation also of the *Boethius*, *Soliloquies* and *Prose Psalms*, the three other members of the Alfredian canon. Indeed, I would argue that his authorship is not ruled out by any solid evidence currently available.¹³⁹ In which case the most likely terminus 'after which not' for the members of the canon would seem to be c.899, the date of the king's death.¹⁴⁰

4. Conclusion

What then can we say about the problems and pitfalls of dating Old English prose texts? That we today are working with one hand tied behind our backs. That we frequently cannot date an event with any degree of precision. That conclusions based on script can only be very provisional. That linguistic evidence can have more than one explanation, with an Alfred as capable as an Ælfric of changing his vocabulary.¹⁴¹ That claims made in surviving Old English manuscripts are not always reliable guides to either authorship or date. That the biggest problem is insufficient and patchy information, leading to the pitfall of over-reliance on hypothesis.

I can do no more than close my lecture with words drawn from the third person preface to the *Boethius*, words which may or may not originally have been composed by Alfred himself, but which seem to me particularly appropriate to the would-be-scholar king, asking that no one should blame me if they should understand these matters better than I do, for everyone must speak what they speak and do what they do according to the power of their understanding and the leisure that they find.

¹³⁸ 'Prologues', 460.

¹³⁹ For the size of the infrastructure required to produce the minimum of ten manuscripts of the *Pastoral Care* likely to have been circulated by the king, see, e.g. Keynes, 'Power', 193-6.

¹⁴⁰ Allowing for editorial work as possibly to have continued after that date.

¹⁴¹ See Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, and M. Godden, 'Ælfric's Changing Vocabulary', *ES* 61 (1980), 206-223.

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