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Growing old among the Anglo-Saxons : the cultural conceptualisation of old age in Early Medieval England

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Growing Old among the Anglo-Saxons:

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Growing Old among the Anglo-Saxons:

The Cultural Conceptualisation of Old Age in Early Medieval England

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in 1984

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Preface

This thesis is the result of five years of hard work that could not have been done without the help of many individuals and organisations. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors Professor Rolf H. Bremmer Jr (for his support and advice on all matters of language and life) and Professor Wim van Anrooij (for joining the project in its final stages and making sure that the process ran smoothly); my colleagues in the Philology section at Leiden, past and present, Luisella Caon, Marcelle Cole, Rosanne Hebing and Nienke Venderbosch (for sharing my passion for teaching Old and Middle English language and culture); my colleagues at the English department of Leiden University, in particular my roommate Katinka Zeven (for support and advice); my students (for making teaching Old English my dream job; joining me for film nights and field trips; and trusting me with the supervision of their theses); my fellow medievalist Ph.D. students, Jenneke Janzen, Miriam Jones, Julie Somers and Jenny Weston (for sharing the burden); my fellow ‘young Old Germanicist’ Peter Alexander Kerkhof (for the productive cooperation); Jodie Mann (for her comments on a chapter of this thesis and her efforts as a student assistant); the organisers and attendants of conferences in Brussels, Leeds, Leiden, Manchester and Granada, where parts of this thesis were presented (for insightful remarks and questions); the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (for taking a chance on me and financing my project); Lia ten Brink and Viola Stoop (for providing much-needed administrative support); my friends outside of academia (for their patience); Elizabeth and Gerard Limburg (for all their advice and support); my parents (the first paragraph of the introduction and the last paragraph of the conclusion are particularly dedicated to them); and anyone else who has read this preface looking for their own names but have now found out I accidentally left them out (I apologise).

Last but not least, my heartfelt thanks go to Laura Limburg, who has been by my side for the last twelve years and keeps me healthy and sane. While ‘growing old’ may be a daunting prospect, she makes ‘growing old together’ something to look forward to!

Abbreviations and short titles

<i>ÆCHom I</i>	<i>Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series</i> , ed. P. Clemoes, EETS ss 17 (Oxford, 1997) (cited by homily and line number)
<i>ÆCHom II</i>	<i>Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series</i> , ed. M. Godden, EETS ss 5 (London, 1979) (cited by homily and line number)
<i>ÆLS</i>	<i>Ælfric's Lives of Saints</i> , ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS os 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881–1900) (cited by text and line number)
Amos	A. C. Amos, 'Old English Words for Old', in <i>Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe</i> , ed. M. M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990), 95–106
<i>Archiv</i>	<i>Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen</i>
<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
<i>ASPR</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records</i>
Assmann	<i>Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben</i> , ed. B. Assmann (Kassel, 1889) (cited by homily and line number)
<i>Battle of Maldon</i>	' <i>The Battle of Maldon</i> ', ed. and trans. D. G. Scragg, in <i>The Battle of Maldon, AD 991</i> , ed. D. G. Scragg (Oxford, 1991)
Bede, <i>HE</i>	<i>Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> , ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969; rpt. 1992) (cited by book and chapter)
<i>Beowulf</i>	<i>Klaeber's Beowulf</i> , ed. R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008)
<i>BGdSL</i>	<i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur</i>
<i>BHL</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina</i> , ed. Bollandists, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1899–1901)
<i>Blickling Homilies</i> , ed. Morris	<i>The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century</i> , ed. R. Morris, EETS os 58, 63, 73 (London, 1874–80) (cited by homily and page number)
Bosworth-Toller	J. Bosworth, <i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> (London, 1838), enlarged T. N. Toller (London, 1898), rev. and enlarged A. Campbell (Oxford, 1972)
Burrow	J. A. Burrow, <i>The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought</i> (Oxford, 1986)
CCCC	Cambridge, Corpus Christi College
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latin
Clark Hall	J. R. Clark Hall, <i>A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> , 4th ed., with a supplement by H. D. Meritt (Cambridge, 1960)
Crawford	S. Crawford, 'Gomol is snoterost: Growing Old in Anglo-Saxon England', in <i>Collectanea Antiqua: Essays in Memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes</i> , ed. M. Henig and T. J. Smith (Oxford, 2007), 53–9
<i>DOE</i>	<i>Dictionary of Old English: A to G online</i> , ed. A. Cameron, A. C. Amos, A. diPaolo Healey <i>et al.</i> (Toronto, 2007), http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/index.html

DOEC	<i>Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus</i> , compiled by A. diPaolo Healey with J. P. Wilkin and X. Xiang (Toronto, 2009), http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/index.html
DOML	Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library
EETS	Early English Text Society (os= Original Series; ss = Supplementary Series)
<i>Fontes Anglo-Saxonici</i>	Fontes Anglo-Saxonici Project, ed., <i>Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register</i> , http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/
Gneuss and Lapidge	H. Gneuss and M. Lapidge, <i>Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100</i> (Toronto, 2014)
HA	<i>The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe</i> , http://www.heroicage.org/
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
Ker	N. R. Ker, <i>Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon</i> (Oxford, 1957)
Klinck	<i>The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study</i> , ed. A. L. Klinck (Montreal, 1992)
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i> (Ann Arbor, 1951–2001), http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/
MLN	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
Napier	<i>Wulfstan; Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit</i> , ed. A. S. Napier (Berlin, 1883) (cited by homily, page and line number)
NQ	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (Oxford, 2004), http://www.oxforddnb.com
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary Online</i> , http://www.oed.com
PL	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1855–1864) (cited by volume and column)
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
S	P. H. Sawyer, <i>Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography</i> (London, 1968)
Semper	P. Semper, ‘ <i>Byð se ealda man ceald and snoflig</i> : Stereotypes and Subversions of the Last Stages of the Life Cycle in Old English Texts and Anglo-Saxon Contexts’, in <i>Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change</i> , ed. I. Cochelin and K. E. Smyth (Turnhout, 2013), 287–318
Shippey	<i>Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English</i> , ed. and trans. T. A. Shippey (Cambridge, 1976)
SiP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
TOE	J. Roberts, C. Kay and L. Grundy, <i>The Thesaurus of Old English</i> (Glasgow, 2015), http://oldenglishtesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/
<i>Vercelli Homilies</i> , ed. Scragg	<i>The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts</i> , ed. D. G. Scragg, EETS os 300 (London, 1992) (cited by homily and line number)

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Old English and Latin are my own. All Bible quotations refer to the Latin Vulgate and the translations are the Douay Rheims translation, found on <http://www.latinvulgate.com>.

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Introduction and literature review

Sussex, England, over twelve hundred years ago. A young man named Cuthman led a desolate life: poor and homeless, he had to take care of his paralysed, widowed, elderly mother. To move around, Cuthman carried his mother on a special barrow, which he suspended over his shoulders by means of a rope. One day, the rope broke and Cuthman had to replace it with twisted elder twigs. Some nearby mowers saw the event and mocked his misfortune. Instantaneously, they were punished by a sudden tempest, which drove them from their field and ruined their crops. By this sign, Cuthman realised that God was on his side and, so, he resolved to build a church in His honour wherever the mended rope happened to break next. Reports differ as to what happened afterwards. According to one version of the story, the rope of elder twigs broke at Steyning, Sussex, where Cuthman's church still stands.¹ A second, more sensational version has Cuthman rid himself of his burdensome mother by hurling the elderly woman and her barrow down a hill; he then built his church wherever she crash landed.²

The two versions of Cuthman's story raise several questions: was Cuthman's mother's survival into old age unique in Anglo-Saxon England, and would she have been respected for her old age or would she have been regarded as a burden? These two questions relate to two persistent presumptions with regard to old age in past societies: there were few to no elderly in the past and those who did grow old were highly respected for their 'rarity value'.³ In this introduction, these two presumptions will be considered within the context of Anglo-Saxon England, c.700–c.1100. The first is touched upon only in this introduction, while the second is directly related to the overall topic of this thesis: the Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of old age.

The answer to the question whether many people lived to an old age in Anglo-Saxon England depends, in the first place, on one's definition of old age. Gerontologists generally work with two different definitions. The first, 'chronological age', considers a person old when they have lived for a specific number of years.⁴ This threshold of old age is defined differently in various cultures and even within a single community the chronological onset of age can be set anywhere between 40 to 70 years of age, though the age of 60 appears most commonplace.⁵ A second definition

¹ G. R. Stephens and W. D. Stephens, 'Cuthman: A Neglected Saint', *Speculum* 13 (1938), 448–53.

² Crawford, 59. The original source of the story, the *Vita sancti Cuthmanni* (BHL 2035), does not contain this second version. The work has been related to the mid-eleventh-century revival of Anglo-Latin hagiography, see J. Blair, 'Saint Cuthman, Steyning and Bosham', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 135 (1997), 186–92.

³ P. Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 1.

⁴ See, e.g., P. Johnson, 'Historical Readings of Old Age and Ageing', in *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. P. Johnson and P. Thane (London, 1998), 4.

⁵ J. T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1997), 1; S. Shahar, 'Old Age in the High and Late Middle Ages: Image, Expectation and Status', in *Old Age*, ed. Johnson and Thane,

concerns ‘functional age’: people are considered old when they are no longer able to perform certain communal functions or, in the case of women, lose the ability to give birth.⁶

Taking the chronological definition of old age as a point of departure, it can easily be demonstrated that several Anglo-Saxons managed to live for a considerable number of years. The oldest Anglo-Saxon I have been able to identify was a monk called Egbert, who fell mortally ill along with his brother Æthelhun in the year 664. Feeling the hour of death upon him, Egbert implored God to allow him more time to make amends for the sins he had committed. When Egbert returned to his brother, the latter rose from his bed, crying: “O frater Ecgbercte, O quid fecisti? Sperabam quia pariter ad uitam aeternam intraremus; uerumtamen scito, quia quae postulasti accipies” [‘Brother Egbert, what have you done? I hoped that we should both enter into eternal life together; but you are to know that your request will be granted’].⁷ Æthelhun died the next day, but it would take Egbert sixty-five more years to make his journey hence: he died in the year 729, at the age of 90. Egbert’s story was recorded by the Venerable Bede (c.673/4–735) in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [Ecclesiastical History of the English People] (731). In the same work, Bede also reported the great ages at which other men and women passed away, such as Abbess Hilda of Whitby (66) and Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus (88).⁸ Of others, such as Bishop John of Beverly and Archbishops Bertwald and Willibrord, Bede merely indicated that they retired, died or lived unto a venerable old age; Hildelith, abbess of the Barking nuns, is even said to have become “ad ultimam senectutem” [extremely old].⁹ Bede’s collection of bishops and abbesses can be supplemented by the names of Anglo-Saxons for whom the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) has recorded life dates which indicate that these individuals died at the age of 60 or over (see table 0.1).

1. **Ælfflæd** (654–714), abbess of Strensall-Whitby
2. **Ælfric of Eynsham** (c.950–c.1010), homilist and abbot
3. **Æthelwold** (904/9–984), abbot of Abingdon and bishop of Winchester
4. **Alcuin** (c.740–804), abbot of St. Martin’s, Tours, and royal adviser
5. **Benedict Biscop** (c.628–689), abbot of Wearmouth and scholar
6. **Bede** (673/4–735), monk, historian, and theologian
7. **Berhtwald** (c.650–731), archbishop of Canterbury
8. **Boniface** (672/5?–754), archbishop of Mainz, missionary
9. **Ceolfrith** (642–716), abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow
10. **Eadgifu** (b. in or before 904; d. in or after 966), queen of the Anglo-Saxons
11. **Ecgeberht** (639–729), church reformer
12. **Edward** (‘the Confessor’) (1003x5–1066), king of the English
13. **Eilmer** (b. c.985, d. after 1066), pioneer of man-powered flight

43; S. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: “Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain”* (London, 1997), 13.

⁶ See, e.g., M. M. Sheehan, ‘Afterword’, in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. M. M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990), 204–5; S. Lewis-Simpson, ‘Old Age in Viking-Age Britain’, in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. S. Lewis-Simpson (Leiden, 2008), 244–50.

⁷ Bede, *HE*, III.27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV.23, V.8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, V.6, V.11, V.23, IV.10.

- | |
|--|
| 14. Hadrian (630/7–709), abbot of St. Peter’s and St. Paul’s, Canterbury |
| 15. Hild (614–680), abbess of Strensall–Whitby |
| 16. Ingulf (c.1045–1109), abbot of Crowland |
| 17. Lul (c.710–786), archbishop of Mainz |
| 18. Stephen of Ripon (fl. c.670–c.730), priest |
| 19. Theodore of Tarsus (602–690), archbishop of Canterbury and biblical scholar |
| 20. Walburg (c.710–79?), abbess of Heidenheim |
| 21. Wilfrid (c.634–709/10), bishop of Hexham |
| 22. Willibrord (657/8–739), abbot of Echternach |
| 23. Wulfstan (c.1008–95), bishop of Worcester |

Table 0.1 Names, titles and life dates of elderly Anglo-Saxons found in the *ODNB*¹⁰

Table 0.1 clearly demonstrates that several Anglo-Saxons did grow old, even if the list with its clerical bias is far from representative of Anglo-Saxon England as a whole. More systematic and quantifiable approaches to establishing the number of chronologically old people in Anglo-Saxon England, however, are impossible, since the birth dates of individuals were seldom recorded and medieval sources in general rarely mention the age of individuals involved. In fact, according to one of the leading demographers in the field of Old Age Studies, Peter Laslett, it is extremely hard to find any demographical information about the presence of old people in England for the period preceding 1540; he even argues that the information for the period 1540-1990 is not sufficient enough for a full, complex analysis.¹¹

Despite this lack of viable sources, three historians have downplayed the idea that elderly people were particularly rare in the Middle Ages. Peter N. Stearns, for instance, claimed that the idea of a limited number of elderly in the preindustrial past is based on a “misconstruction of preindustrial demography”: people have confused the low life-expectancy in past societies as an average age at death. In actual fact, Stearns argues, people had a good chance of becoming old, once they had lived through early childhood.¹² Shulamith Shahar draws the same conclusions for the Middle Ages and posits that the elderly made up 5 to 8 % of the population.¹³ Pat Thane, an expert historian of old age in England, argues that the elderly ‘probably’ made up about 9% of the population during the entire Middle Ages.¹⁴ Although such estimates are hard to back up with statistic evidence, it is reasonable to assume, along with the medieval historian Joel T. Rosenthal, that “the actual presence of aged men and women was encountered at virtually all social levels and in all social settings”.¹⁵

¹⁰ For a helpful overview of Anglo-Saxon and related entries in the *ODNB*, see H. Foxhall Forbes *et al.*, ‘Anglo-Saxon and Related Entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004)’, *ASE* 37 (2008), 183–232.

¹¹ P. Laslett, ‘Necessary Knowledge: Age and Ageing in the Societies of the Past’, in *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society and Old Age*, ed. D. I. Kertzer and P. Laslett (Berkeley, 1995), 9–10.

¹² P. N. Stearns, *Old Age in Preindustrial Society* (New York, 1982), 5.

¹³ S. Shahar, ‘The Middle Ages and Renaissance’, in *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. P. Thane (London, 2005), 79.

¹⁴ P. Thane, ‘Old Age in English History’, in *Zur Kulturgeschichte des Alterns: Toward a Cultural History of Aging*, ed. C. Conrad and H.-J. von Kondratowitz (Berlin, 1993), 19.

¹⁵ Quoted in A. Classen, ‘Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Also an Introduction’, in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. A. Classen (Berlin, 2007), 13.

Applying the second definition of old age, functional age, to Anglo-Saxon England is equally problematic. If a person is considered old when he or she is no longer able to perform certain social functions, insight must be gained into the 'experience of aging': what was it actually like to be old and how and when did people operate within their communities? This actual experience of aging is difficult to study, if only because a person's way of life depended on a wide array of additional circumstances, such as social and economic class, nutrition, gender, environment, health and religious status.¹⁶ Any attempt to reconstruct the socio-historical reality of old age will, inevitably, result in a collection of highly contradictory experiences, each influenced by the individual circumstances of the elderly persons under discussion.¹⁷ In addition, Anglo-Saxon sources are not particularly suited for studying the experience of aging: demographic information is scarce and archaeological and osteological evidence can be hard to interpret.¹⁸ Moreover, no sufficient number of (auto-)biographies of old people from Anglo-Saxon England have survived for a viable reconstruction of the experience of aging in this period.¹⁹

The impracticalities of applying the chronological and functional definitions of old age, mentioned above, do not mean that the topic of old age cannot be studied within an Anglo-Saxon context. A third definition of old age, 'cultural age', sees old age as a cultural construct, built up out of a society's expectations, mentalities and ideas about the aged, as reflected in, and defined by, the society's cultural heritage.²⁰ This cultural construct of old age is often considered to be separate from demographic trends and actual experience of old age; the image of old age is not only based on daily perception and actual experience, but also on literary *topoi*, older stereotypes and clichés.²¹ It is this cultural construction of old age, as reflected by the cultural heritage of the Anglo-Saxons, that is the main topic of this thesis.

In present-day Western society, old age is often framed as a threat to both the individual and society as a whole. This attitude is demonstrated by the appearance of self-help books on 'combatting the drawbacks of age', courses in coping with depressions for the elderly and far-fetched proposals for euthanasia booths to deal with

¹⁶ *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, ed. J. Sokolovsky, 2nd ed. (Westport, 1997), xxv.

¹⁷ Johnson, 'Historical Readings', 15.

¹⁸ Lewis-Simpson, 'Old Age in Viking-Age Britain', 246–7.

¹⁹ There is, however, some epistolary source material, notably the letters by Alcuin and Boniface, which are discussed in chapters 3 and 4 below.

²⁰ W. A. Achenbaum, 'Foreword: Literature's Value in Gerontological Research', in *Perceptions of Aging in Literature. A Cross-Cultural Study*, ed. P. von Dorotka Bagnell and P. S. Soper (New York, 1989), xiv; Thane, 'Old Age in English History', 5–6.

²¹ A. Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit. De verbeelding van de ouderdom in de Nederlandse prentkunst (1550–1650)* (Zutphen, 2007), 14; D. G. Troyansky, 'The Older Person in the Western World: From the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution', in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, ed. T. R. Cole, D. D. van Tassel and R. Kastenbaum (New York, 1992), 40–1; Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, 5. For an opposite view, see M. Sandidge, 'Forty Years of Plague: Attitudes toward Old Age in the Tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer', in *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, ed. Classen, 373; Cf. G. Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. S. Hanbury Tenison (Oxford, 1989), 11.

the ‘silver tsunami’.²² This bleak view has led to the somewhat romantic idea that old people in ‘the past’ “had a rarity value” and “were culturally more valued and respected than in the present”.²³

For Anglo-Saxon England, scholarly opinion supports the idealised view of the past as time when the elderly were culturally highly valued. For instance, John A. Burrow asserted that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories:

... if we were to follow Philippe Ariès in supposing that every period of history favours or privileges one among the ages of man, the only possible choice for the Anglo-Saxon period would be *senectus*.²⁴

Similarly, Ashley C. Amos concluded that words for ‘old age’ in the language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons (Old English) mainly had positive connotations.²⁵ More recently, Sally Crawford even called the later Anglo-Saxon period ‘the golden age for the elderly’.²⁶

However, the idea of the Anglo-Saxon period as a golden age for old age is incongruent with the many negative remarks about senescence found in contemporaneous sources. Although some Old English texts attest to the idea that age and experience make an old man wise and worthy of respect, others abound in concerns about ungodly elderly and feature graphic descriptions of the physical drawbacks associated with old age, such as the loss of hair and teeth. Indeed, senescence is often presented as a destructive force, leaving the elderly passive, physically inept and on the verge of death. More dramatically, aging was even associated with the torments of Hell and one author described it as “helle onlicnes” [a prefiguration of Hell].²⁷ The picture sketched by Burrow, Amos and Crawford, therefore, appears one-sided and incomplete; this qualification is reinforced by the fact that these scholars failed to take into account how old age was viewed in relation to specific groups in society, such as clergymen, warriors, kings, and women. As the lives, responsibilities and identities of these groups diverged, so too will they have been perceived differently in the later stages of their lives. The topic of how the Anglo-Saxons considered, appreciated and imagined old age, therefore, requires further study. The present study has aimed to fill this gap in the research by answering the following main question: what was the cultural conceptualisation of old age in Anglo-Saxon England?

²² B. F. Skinner and M. E. Vaughan, *Enjoy Old Age: A Practical Guide* (New York, 1997); R. Haringsma, ‘Never Too Old to Learn. The Effectiveness of the Coping with Depression Course for Elderly’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2008; S. Adams, ‘Martin Amis Calls for Euthanasia Booths to Deal with “Silver Tsunami”’, *Telegraph*, January 24, 2010.

²³ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 1.

²⁴ Burrow, 109.

²⁵ Amos, 95–106.

²⁶ Crawford, 59.

²⁷ *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, ll. 84–5.

Theoretical framework

History is like a semi-submerged frog. In his short story “The Secret History of Eddypus, the World-Empire”, Mark Twain made the following observation:

One of the most admirable things about history is, that almost as a rule we get as much information out of what it does not say as we get out of what it does say. And so, one may truly and axiomatically aver this, to-wit: that history consists of two equal parts; one of these halves is statements of fact, the other half is inference, drawn from the facts. To the experienced student of history there are no difficulties about this; to him the half which is unwritten is as clearly and surely visible, by the help of scientific inference, as if it flashed and flamed in letters of fire before his eyes. When the practised eye of the simple peasant sees the half of a frog projecting above the water, he unerringly infers the half of the frog which he does not see. To the expert student in our great science, history is a frog; half of it is submerged, but he knows it is there, and he knows the shape of it.²⁸

Twain’s description of the academic study of history strikes the present-day historical scholar as controversial. Few academics today claim to generalise “unerringly” beyond what the sources tell them, given the limitations of the source material itself and the temporal and cultural differences that separate the scholar from his object of research. Nevertheless, using what might be called “scientific inference”, in so far as this term covers the plethora of academic methods available to the historian, they can argue for a plausible interpretation of what their sources have to say about the topic they are interested in.²⁹ Contradictory to Twain’s assumptions, however, this enterprise is not without “difficulties”. Following Twain’s analogy with a frog-catching peasant, the “experienced student of history” nowadays first needs to describe accurately the type of amphibious creature he is pursuing, define the advantages and limits of his method of seizing it, the properties of the puddle it is in, as well as reflect on the value of catching it in the first place. The paragraphs below present the theoretical framework I have used in this thesis, by defining what is meant by ‘cultural conceptualisation’, outlining the methodological approach, reviewing the limits of the research material in terms of its applicability to answering the thesis question, and ascertaining the overall purpose of the thesis.

Cultural conceptualisation is a term coined by the cognitive linguist Farzad Sharifian. It denotes “[t]he ways in which people across different cultural groups may construe various aspects of the world and their experiences. These include people’s view of the world, thoughts, and feelings”.³⁰ Sharifian explains that cultural conceptualisations, such as the behaviour expected of an old person or the idea of old

²⁸ M. Twain, *The Science Fiction of Mark Twain*, ed. D. Ketterer (Hamden, 1984), 191.

²⁹ For an effective and sensible defence of the cultural historian’s ability to reconstruct a viewpoint of people in the past and an answer to the ‘Postmodern Challenge’ regarding the unattainability of objective truth about the past, see R. D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford, 1999); cf. R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, rev. ed. (London, 2000).

³⁰ F. Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations and Language: Theoretical Framework and Applications* (Amsterdam, 2011), 39.

age, are “distributed representations across the minds in a cultural group”.³¹ Members of a cultural group typically share physical proximity, speak the same language, partake in similar rituals and interact with each other; through this interaction, cultural conceptualisations are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Ultimately, an idea that may have originated in an individual mind spreads across an entire cultural group and becomes part of this group’s collective view of the world.³² In this sense, a cultural conceptualisation may be said to form part of a community’s *mentalité* as defined by Aaron Gurevich:

Mentalité implies the presence of a common and specific intellectual equipment, a psychological framework shared by people of a given society united by a single culture enabling them to perceive and become aware of their natural and social environment and themselves. A chaotic and heterogeneous stream of perceptions and impressions is converted by consciousness into a more or less ordered picture of the world which sets its seal on all human behaviour.³³

Cultural conceptualisations may be manifested and reflected in various types of cultural artefacts, including language, dance, gesture, poetry and narratives.³⁴ For cultural historians, cultural conceptualisation is a helpful notion, since it allows them to see a homily or a poem not merely as the product of the experience and context of an individual author but also as reflective or constitutive of a collective mentality. As such, the works of Ælfric of Eynsham, while shaped by his personal background and monastic surroundings at the turn of the eleventh century, can be analysed as exhibiting, or forming, the worldview of the broader cultural group to which he belonged.

Naturally, ideas are not shared evenly among all members of a cultural group and idiosyncracies may arise from differences in age, gender and social class, to name but a few factors of importance. Sharifian explains that “cultural conceptualisations appear to be heterogeneously distributed across the minds of a cultural group”.³⁵ Put differently, members of the same community need not share exactly the same ideas about something like old age, and it is possible to encounter slight differences in the way something is conceptualised by an individual. In reality, individuals “show various degrees of knowledge about their conceptualisations”; consequently, an analysis of cultural conceptualisations at the group-level ideally extends to multiple individuals and multiple forms of discourse.³⁶ Cultural historians, then, should not restrict their analysis to a single author or a single genre of texts; they should also expect their sources to reflect the complexity, diversity and richness of cultural ideas that arise from generations of human interaction.

³¹ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 3–17.

³³ A. Gurevich, ‘Historical Anthropology and the Science of History’, in *idem*, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Howlett (Cambridge, 1992), 4.

³⁴ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12–3.

In order to establish the cultural conceptualisations of a group, Sharifian advocates an ethnographic or cultural anthropological approach.³⁷ The disciplines of cultural anthropology and history have a long past of mutual attraction.³⁸ Part of the practical appeal of anthropology for the historian is the latter's value as a source of thought-provoking analogies, as the historian John Tosh explains:

The findings of anthropology suggest something of the range of mentalities to be found among people who are acutely vulnerable to the vagaries of climate and disease, who lack 'scientific' control of their environment, and who are tied to their own localities – conditions which obtained in the West during most of the medieval and early modern periods.³⁹

For the study of old age, for instance, the identification of old women as 'culture bearers' in anthropological studies of various traditional societies is an interesting concept that the historian may wish to borrow in order to see to what extent this observation also holds for the past (e.g., see chapter 8 below). More broadly, anthropology teaches the historian to view past societies as both similar and different to his own. In the past, people had emotions and feelings, they organised their society and expressed their thoughts in writing and art, and trying to understand the culture of those societies is like "trying to understand a group of foreigners somehow dropped in our midst".⁴⁰ However, as Tosh rightly points out, a cultural historian cannot approach his evidence in exactly the same manner as anthropologists do; he always has to recognise the limitations of his source material.⁴¹

The sources considered in the various chapters of this thesis cover a wide range of cultural material, ranging from language itself, to visual arts, homilies, wisdom poetry, hagiography and heroic literature. Each of these types of evidence reflects or transmits cultural conceptualisations in its own way and must be studied in its own specific historical and cultural setting. This varied cultural record calls for a multidisciplinary approach that differs per source type considered. Specifically, language, which according to Sharifian can be mined as a "collective memory bank for cultural conceptualisations",⁴² requires a historical linguistic approach that takes into account the technicalities of a semantic field study; an analysis of homiletic material requires placing these texts in the context of religious and theological traditions that Anglo-Saxon homilists generally followed, or, occasionally, consciously departed from; and any study of heroic poetry must show an awareness of the broader Germanic heroic tradition to which poems such as *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* belong. Much of the methodological framework with respect to the validity and usability of the

³⁷ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 12–3.

³⁸ See, e.g., M. de Jong, 'The Foreign Past: Medieval Historians and Cultural Anthropology', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 109 (1996), 326–42; Gurevich, 'Historical Anthropology'.

³⁹ J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 4th ed. (Harlow, 2006), 295.

⁴⁰ B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 4th ed. (Louisville, 2001), 24.

⁴¹ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 295–8.

⁴² Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 39.

source material is reserved for the individual chapters, since it is not efficient to discuss here in detail the diverse nature of all the sources discussed in this thesis.

However, a general observation with regard to the representativeness of the Anglo-Saxon material considered in this thesis is in order here. With few exceptions, all the documents and artefacts that date back to this period originate from only a small portion of the early medieval English community: the learned, well-to-do members of the clergy and nobility. Even if the evidence of language and proverbs can claim to represent the ideas of a broader proportion of society,⁴³ they nevertheless have come down to us in manuscripts produced in monasteries, often at the bequest of high-ranking members of the secular and religious aristocracy. The Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of old age demarcated in this thesis, therefore, reflects the mindset only of this narrower cultural group and cannot lay absolute claim to representing what went on in the minds of ordinary people, such as farmers, peasants and washerwomen.⁴⁴ There are further restrictions with regard to the source material. For instance, many of the artefacts that circulated in the early Anglo-Saxon period itself have been lost; materials from the later period, on the other hand, have survived in greater numbers, again affecting the representativeness of the cultural record for the entirety of the period under consideration: c.700–c.1100. Additionally, the age of the author, whether anonymous or named, is in the great majority of cases unknown. Thus, while one's perception of growing old is likely to have been influenced by the tally of one's own years, this aspect cannot be taken into account for the early medieval sources under scrutiny in this thesis.⁴⁵ Within these limitations, however, this thesis will demonstrate that it is possible to form an idea of how the proportion of Anglo-Saxons represented by the cultural material from early medieval England conceptualised old age.

A cultural-historical reflection on old age as proposed in this thesis serves at least two purposes. On the one hand, as Gurevich has noted, “[h]istory as a discipline cannot successfully fulfil its social function if it does not pose the vital questions of the present to the culture of the past”.⁴⁶ The greater awareness of societal aging and the rise of ‘ageism’ in the twenty-first century create a need for contrastive or parallel images of how people in the past viewed old age and the elderly.⁴⁷ In addition, this thesis hopes to contribute to the academic field of medieval studies in general and Anglo-Saxon studies in particular by providing a new ‘hermeneutic lense’.⁴⁸ An awareness of old age raises questions about sources that have hitherto been left unasked and calls attention to aspects formerly ignored. For instance, this thesis for the first time calls attention to the importance of old age in the poem *Beowulf* and comes to a new reading that touches upon the purpose of the poem as a mirror of elderly kings (see chapter 7). There is much that can still be learnt about medieval and Anglo-

⁴³ For these claims, see chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.

⁴⁴ Similar restrictions apply to source material from earlier periods, see, e.g., H. Brandt, *Wird auch silbern mein Haar: Eine Geschichte des Alters in der Antike* (München, 2002), 13.

⁴⁵ P. Thane, ‘The Age of Old Age’, in *Long History*, ed. Thane, 27, provides the example of the German poet Goethe, whose successive versions of *Faust* show an increasing appreciation of old age as the author himself grew older.

⁴⁶ Gurevich, ‘Historical Anthropology’, 14–5.

⁴⁷ Thane, ‘Age of Old Age’, 9–29.

⁴⁸ Cf. Classen, ‘Old Age in the Middle Ages’, 15.

Saxon society, for one thing, by surveying how they viewed the older members of their community and, for another, by analysing the multifaceted way they conceptualised old age. In the end, history may be a partly visible frog, but it is worth noting that complete new frogs are discovered every year by those who know what to look for.⁴⁹

Outline of the thesis

In order to establish the Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of old age, this thesis is subdivided into eight chapters, each of which is outlined briefly below.

Chapter 1 closely considers how Anglo-Saxon scholars and artists defined old age in relation to other stages of the life cycle. Encyclopaedic notes, homilies and visual arts featured various schematic representations of the human life span, ranging from three to six ‘ages of man’. This chapter provides an overview of all such attestations in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record. In doing so, I challenge the claim, made by Isabelle Cochelin, that early medieval commentators on the life cycle typically subdivided old age into a ‘green’ old age, when someone could still be healthy and active, and a ‘grey’ old age, during which physical decrepitude would set in.⁵⁰ As a rule, this subdivision was not made by Anglo-Saxon intellectuals, who, instead, typically represented old age as a single stage that began at the age of 50 and was mainly characterised by bodily decline. In order to fully appreciate these Anglo-Saxon notions of the place of old age in the human life cycle, the aspect of ‘transfer of knowledge’ is taken into account: where did the Anglo-Saxons get their ideas from and how did they adapt their sources?

Chapter 2 surveys Old English words for ‘old age’ and illustrates how these reveal what the Anglo-Saxons associated with growing old. Drawing on the fields of ethnolinguistics and cognitive linguistics, I argue that the structure of a lexicon can plausibly be linked to the cultural ideas of its users. Hence, by studying the properties of the lexical items a language has for old age, it is possible to gain insights into how the users of that language conceptualised growing old. After discussing the theoretical background, the chapter turns to methodological opportunities and challenges offered by modern-day research tools for Old English, such as *The Dictionary of Old English Corpus* and *The Thesaurus of Old English*. The chapter finally evaluates and contests the overly positive assertion made by other scholars that Old English words and phrases reflect “a very positive cognitive map of old age”.⁵¹ Instead, my analysis reveals a more nuanced view on old age that included positive aspects, such as authority and wisdom, as well as negative features, such as physical decrepitude and grief. An overview of the results of this semantic field study of the Old English words for old age is found at the end of the chapter, while the individual lexicological analyses of a total of fifty-four lexical items considered are in the Appendix to this thesis.

⁴⁹ K. Mathiesen, ‘Seven New Species of Miniature Frogs Discovered in Cloud Forests of Brazil’, *The Guardian*, June 4, 2015.

⁵⁰ I. Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions of the Life Cycle’, in *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change*, ed. I. Cochelin and K. Smyth (Turnhout, 2013), 11.

⁵¹ Amos; Crawford, 53.

The next two chapters turn the attention back to texts and focus on the ways Anglo-Saxon homilists and poets reflected on the assets and liabilities of old age. Chapter 3 takes into account how the potential merits of old age – respect, wisdom and spiritual superiority – were represented, while chapter 4 reviews and weighs the depiction of the physical, social and emotional drawbacks that could come with the years. The two main text types under consideration in these two chapters – homilies and wisdom poetry – each in their own way reflect commonly held notions about the advantages and disadvantages of growing old, extending from the accumulation of valuable experience to the loss of bodily aptitude. Both chapters re-evaluate Burrow's claim that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories, by showing that Anglo-Saxon authors were well aware that the merits of old age were not for everyone and that old age did not automatically demand social respect or grant profitable wisdom. By contrast, the detrimental effects of age were seen as almost inescapable.

Chapter 5 is the first of four chapters that focus on specific groups in Anglo-Saxon society, taking into account the notion that the consequences of old age depended on various social variables, including an individual's social standing, way of life and gender. Specifically, chapter 5 considers elderly saints and the *topos* of senescence as found in Anglo-Saxon hagiography. As such, the chapter covers mostly new ground by calling attention to a neglected element in various saints' lives: recurring themes that hagiographers used to shape the story of their subjects' senectitude. In all, these saints' lives reveal how Anglo-Saxon hagiographers and their audiences anticipated the challenges posed by old age and how, ideally, a saint would answer those challenges. Senescent saints, often high-ranking members of the clergy, set a standard that was hard to meet for mere mortals: to exhibit the merits of old age, despite suffering from the physical vicissitudes of growing old.

A similar behaviour was expected of the elderly warriors found in Old English heroic poetry – the subject of chapter 6. The chapter initially establishes the historical presence of old men on the Anglo-Saxon battlefield by surveying archaeological, pictorial and documentary evidence. It then considers the representation of veteran warriors in such poems as *The Battle of Maldon*, *Genesis* and *Beowulf*, within the context of the broader Germanic heroic tradition to which these poems belong. Like the old saint, the elderly warrior was expected to persevere despite being physically less able to do so, making himself useful not merely by providing advice or encouraging the troops but also by taking a leading role in the vanguard.

Chapter 7 discusses the application of the ideal of the elderly warrior to elderly warrior-kings. A king's physical inability to fulfill his royal responsibilities in his later years was a real political problem in the early Middle Ages and, as will be shown in this chapter, it turns out to be one of the main topics of *Beowulf*, albeit mostly overlooked by the ever expanding scholarship on the poem. By focusing on how the *Beowulf* poet calls attention to the problems of old age, I suggest a novel reading of the epic poem as a mirror of elderly rulers. In his presentation of the aged kings Hrothgar and Beowulf, the poet juxtaposes two models of elderly kingship: a passive, diplomatic model, represented by the former, and an active, heroic model embodied by the latter. Subsequently, I argue that this reading of *Beowulf* could hold a clue to the identification of an elderly royal patron of the poem.

Chapter 8 comprises a first foray into the study of the status of old women in Anglo-Saxon England. Due to a general lack of poetic representations of and explicit comments on old women in the cultural record, the chapter may seem something of an anomaly in the thesis. Rather than analysing the way these old women were represented by Anglo-Saxon writers, this chapter focusses on how the status of these women might be reconstructed on the basis of how their lives and actions have come down to us in chronicles, letters and wills. Despite the fragmented and anecdotal nature of the evidence, it is nonetheless possible to establish that the transition to old age for these women did not necessarily entail a reduced social status, as has been suggested for early medieval women in general.

The concluding chapter, finally, synthesises the most noteworthy results of the analysis of the cultural conceptualisation of old age in Anglo-Saxon England and briefly considers possible routes for future research.

The remainder of this introduction provides a broad outline of the history of Old Age Studies with a focus on the scopes and conclusions of a number of pioneering medievalist studies. Academic works that have concentrated on the Anglo-Saxon period are then treated in more detail and the reader is directed to the individual chapters of the thesis for an in-depth discussion of some of their claims.⁵² As such, the overview below places the present work within the field of current research and pinpoints which *lacunae* it has tried to fill.

History of the subject

One of the first scholars to present old age within a historical perspective was Jacob Grimm in a lecture for the Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin, in 1860. In his ‘Rede über das Alter’ [Lecture about Old Age], Grimm, aged around 75 at the time, used examples from Greek and Latin authors, as well as from medieval German poets, in order to plead for the advantages of growing old. Notably, Grimm already called attention to the importance of studying the lexicon of a language in order to come to terms with how old age was conceptualised: “es kann nicht fehlen, dasz die geheimnisvolle Sprache nicht zugleich Aufschlüsse des Gedankengangs der Begriffe gewährte” [it cannot be otherwise than that the mysterious language does not also enable drawing conclusions about the line of thinking concerning the concepts].⁵³ In chapter 2 of this thesis, I show how Old English words indeed have much to reveal about how the Anglo-Saxons thought about growing old.

Despite Grimm’s major influence on various fields of academic inquiry, historical approaches towards old age remain scarce until the 1970s.⁵⁴ Two main

⁵² Here, I have only taken into account those works that have approached the general topic of old age in Anglo-Saxon England from a historical-literary perspective. Studies on more specific aspects of old age in individual texts, such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, and some archaeological studies are considered in the remainder of this thesis.

⁵³ J. Grimm, ‘Rede über das Alter’, in *Rede auf Wilhelm Grimm und Rede über das Alter*, ed. H. F. Grimm (Berlin, 1863), 41.

⁵⁴ Before the 1970s, only a few studies on the history of old age appeared, most of which concentrated on medical sources, such as M. D. Grmek, *On Ageing and Old Age: Basic Problems and Historic Aspects of Gerontology and Geriatrics* (The Hague, 1958). A few literary scholars also approached the

reasons have been proposed for this lack of scholarly interest. First and foremost, the marginal position of the elderly in modern society simply did not prompt scholars to consider their case in a historical context.⁵⁵ A more practical reason has been proposed by Lynn Botelho and Susannah R. Ottaway, who observed that “[o]ne of the reasons why old age studies has not come off the ground is that the essential sources on old age have not been identified”.⁵⁶ This observation still holds true for the study of old age in Anglo-Saxon England: many of the sources treated in this thesis have not hitherto been considered for what they reveal about the topic of senescence.

The academic tide turned somewhat in the 1970s, after the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse*. De Beauvoir argued that the marginal position of elderly people in Western society had its historical roots in the negative representation of old age in the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ De Beauvoir’s book served as a catalyst for historical studies of old age, which sought to correct some of her findings. Stearns, for example, rebuked De Beauvoir’s main conclusion and argued that “the elderly have always been treated unkindly”.⁵⁸ Other claims by De Beauvoir, such as that the elderly barely existed before the eighteenth century and that medieval popes were always young men, were similarly contested in other publications.⁵⁹ A second stimulus for the academic attention to old age was the growing political awareness of the issue of societal aging. The rapid ‘greying’ of Western societies and its concomitant economic consequences led to a growth in studies on old age in various fields, including anthropology, historical demography and literary studies.⁶⁰

Within the field of history, the first few studies focused mainly on actual experiences of elderly members of past societies, the development of welfare institutions and the place of grandparents within the family.⁶¹ Later studies started to include the images of old age and attempted to show how changes in the demographic or social context affected the representation of elderly people in the cultural record. Georges Minois’s pioneering work, *Histoire de la vieillesse: De l’Antiquité à la Renaissance*, is a case in point. Discussing the history of old age in various periods, Minois posited a dominant image of senescence for each time period and noted that there was a consistent switching back and forth between respect and ridicule. For each period, Minois related the loss or gain of respect for the elderly to the societal and demographic realities of the elderly in that period.

theme, including G. R. Coffman, ‘Old Age from Horace to Chaucer. Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea’, *Speculum* 9 (1934), 249–77; H. Meyer, *De levensavond als litterair motief. Inaugurele rede* (Amsterdam, 1947).

⁵⁵ P. N. Stearns, *Old Age in European Society: The Case of France* (London, 1977), 7.

⁵⁶ L. Botelho and S. R. Ottaway, ‘General Introduction’, in *The History of Old Age in England, 1600–1800. Volume 1: The Cultural Conception of Old Age in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. L. Botelho and S. R. Ottaway (London, 2008), ix–x.

⁵⁷ S. de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* (Paris, 1970).

⁵⁸ Stearns, *Old Age in European Society*, 8, 21. Stearns called De Beauvoir’s book a “false start” for Old Age Studies.

⁵⁹ E.g., Minois, *History of Old Age*, 1–7, 151.

⁶⁰ E.g., J. T. Freeman, *Aging. Its History and Literature* (New York, 1979); T. R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Ageing in America* (Cambridge, 1992); H. C. Covey, *Images of Older People in Western Art and Society* (New York, 1991); *De lastige ouderdom: De senex in de literatuur*, ed. J. H. Croon (Muiderberg, 1981); *Cultural Context of Aging*, ed. Sokolovsky.

⁶¹ E.g., Stearns, *Old Age in European Society*; *idem*, *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*.

More recent historical approaches reject the idea of a periodic pendulum shift between admiration and abhorrence. A particular commonplace within these studies is the debunking of the ‘golden age myth’, the idea that in ‘the past’ the elderly were more respected on account of a rarity value; at the same time, they reject the notion that old age was solely correlated with frailty.⁶² Instead, these studies concentrate on the persistence, continuity and durability of a dual image of old age: despised for its loss of physical prowess, but revered for its wisdom and experience.⁶³ My thesis is the first book-length study to attempt to show that this more balanced mentality towards old age also existed in Anglo-Saxon England.

Medievalist contributions to the study of old age

The bulk of academic work on the history of old age has considered Antiquity and the history of the last three hundred years. Among medievalists, the subject has remained largely unstudied, as is illustrated by the subtitle of the 2007 volume on old age, edited by Albrecht Classen: *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*.

One of the founding publications on old age in the Middle Ages was a collection of conference papers edited by Michael M. Sheehan in 1990, entitled *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*. The great variety of the papers in this book illustrates the breadth of the topic. Subjects include medieval medicine, the legal position of the elderly, the issue of longevity in exegetical literature, the political position of elderly kings, words for old age, elderly characters in literature, demographical analyses, widowhood, retirement and welfare institutions. The conference papers also cover a large geographical and chronological scope, from the Desert Fathers of fifth-century Egypt to fifteenth-century pensioners in England.

Given the disparity in scope and topic of the individual papers, Sheehan’s conclusion in his afterword is hardly surprising: common patterns about aspects of aging in medieval society are hard to establish. Nevertheless, Sheehan provided a number of interesting general observations about the way old age was perceived in the Middle Ages. First of all, he held that medieval philosophers typically approached senescence as a scientific question: why do people grow old and, more importantly, how can the onset of old age be delayed? Sheehan’s second observation was that chronological age often had practical significance: people past a certain number of years could be exempted from taxation or, conversely, be eligible for certain functions. Thirdly, medieval thinkers distinguished consistently between ‘the old’ (characterised by physical stagnation and mental growth) and ‘the very old’ (characterised solely by physical decline). Finally, old age was considered an interesting problem within the religious context: should old age be regarded as an undesirable delaying of the heavenly afterlife or should it be valued as a necessary preparation for life after

⁶² Classen, ‘Old Age in the Middle Ages’, 11; Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit*, 13; Stearns, *Old Age in European Society*, 10; Johnson, ‘Historical Readings’, 1; S. R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), 1.

⁶³ Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit*, 14; R. Lazda-Cazers, ‘Old Age in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* and *Titarel*’, in *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, ed. Classen, 201; Brandt, *Wirdt auch silbern mein Haar*, 243–4.

death?⁶⁴ These observations do not all hold true for early medieval England: Anglo-Saxon sources do not touch upon how to delay the onset of old age, nor do they define old age chronologically in a legal context, whereas they only rarely distinguish between the old and very old, as chapters 1, 3 and 4 of this thesis illustrate. The discrepancy between Sheehan's findings and my own illustrates that the same outlook on old age was not shared in all parts of Europe during the thousand years that make up the Middle Ages. If the cultural conceptualisation of old age is to be studied effectively, it seems, sensible geographical, temporal and cultural boundaries should be taken into account.

Whereas the papers in Sheehan's collection were all highly specialised contributions to various subfields, the second milestone in medievalist studies of old age attempted to study the topic of old age in its entirety. Shahar's *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* considered both the image of old age, as presented in encyclopaedic and literary texts, and the experience of aging, through investigations of demography, the social position of the elderly and welfare institutions. Analysing a miscellaneous collection of European sources from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, Shahar drew two important conclusions with respect to the medieval cultural construction of old age. First of all, she concluded that people were considered old when they were between 60 and 70 years of age. Once again, the Anglo-Saxon sources I discuss in chapter 1 tell a different story and place the threshold of old age at the age of 50 – another indication that a pan-European approach to old age in the Middle Ages is impractical. Shahar's second conclusion pertained to one of the most frequently recurring themes in medieval discourse about old age from the twelfth century onwards: the decaying body. The body, she argued, was interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, its decayed state reflected the state of the soul and, on the other, the aging body was considered an opportunity and even a means of attaining spiritual elevation; chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this thesis show that similar ideas circulated in the writings of Anglo-Saxon homilists and hagiographers.

Importantly, Shahar further pointed out that the experience and perception of old people depended on their social context: she devoted individual chapters to clergymen, rulers, soldiers, city-dwellers and peasants. Although the last two categories are underrepresented in Anglo-Saxon source materials, this thesis follows Shahar's example in treating the representation of (saintly) clergymen, warriors and rulers separately, in chapters 5, 6 and 7, respectively. On the whole, Shahar's book presents some valuable insights, even if her overview is too general and fails to take into account any regional or chronological differences.⁶⁵

More recently, two further collections of articles have appeared which focus on old age in a medieval context: Classen's *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, mentioned above, and *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, edited by Shannon Lewis-Simpson. Classen's book brings together no fewer than twenty-one articles, which cover the

⁶⁴ Sheehan, 'Afterword', 201–7.

⁶⁵ Shahar has contributed to several volumes on the history of old age, in which she restates her main conclusions, see S. Shahar, 'Who Were Old in the Middle Ages?', *Social History of Medicine* 6 (1993), 313–41; *idem*, 'The Old Body in Medieval Culture', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. S. Kay and M. Rubin (Manchester, 1994), 160–86; *idem*, 'Old Age in the High and Late Middle Ages', 43–63; *idem*, 'Middle Ages and Renaissance', 77–111.

period from the fourth to the seventeenth centuries. The majority of these articles were written by literary or art-historical scholars; some considering single works, such as *Beowulf* or Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, while others viewed old age within the context of a single genre, such as late antique letters or Arthurian literature. All articles in Classen's collection make clear that old age is best studied as a social or cultural construction imbedded in a variety of specific religious, scientific and folkloric traditions. Another aspect which unites these articles is their nuanced conclusions, since they highlight the variety of attitudes towards aging and steer far away from over-generalising statements, such as those put forward by earlier historical gerontologists such as Minois.⁶⁶ Above all, Classen's collection *Old Age in the Middle Ages* highlights the wide range of, often contradictory, perspectives on senescence that medieval culture has to offer.

Lewis-Simpson's *Youth and Age* complements Classen's volume by exploring some areas which are not covered in the latter: the literature of Northern Europe, especially Scandinavian writings, and the evidence of archaeology. Whereas most contributions to Classen's book concerned the attitudes towards aging, the six articles which focus on old age in Lewis-Simpson's volume mainly deal with the social implications of growing old. The authors contend that in the medieval North a functional, rather than chronological definition of old age was used: once people stopped fulfilling social functions, they were considered 'old'. As a result, the elderly generally enjoyed a low status. In part, this outcome is a direct consequence of the functional definition of old age: if only those people who withdrew from society were considered old, it stands to reason that their loss of purpose was accompanied by a decline in social standing. For Anglo-Saxon England, there is little evidence that people were purely defined old in functional terms: some people who were certainly considered as elderly still participated actively in matters of religion, warfare and state, as the cases of Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus, army leader Byrhtnoth and King Offa of Mercia all illustrate.⁶⁷ It is for this reason, perhaps, that the overall conclusion with respect to the relatively negative status of the elderly in Northern Europe conflicts with the claims made by scholars who have studied the situation in Anglo-Saxon England.

Old Age Studies regarding Anglo-Saxon England.

The medievalist studies discussed so far mainly concentrate on the later Middle Ages. Even those studies whose title suggests a focus on the entire medieval period, draw their evidence primarily from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sources and mostly overlook material from the early Middle Ages.⁶⁸ Similarly, studies devoted to old age in medieval England ignore its earliest history and concentrate on later medieval works, notably those by Chaucer and Gower.⁶⁹ Minois may be partially to blame for

⁶⁶ Cf. Minois, *History of Old Age*, 114–238.

⁶⁷ M. Lapidge, 'Theodore of Tarsus [St Theodore of Tarsus] (602–690)', *ODNB*; S. E. Kelly, 'Offa (d. 796)', *ODNB*; R. Abels, 'Byrhtnoth (d. 991)', *ODNB*; see also chapters 3, 6 and 7 of this thesis.

⁶⁸ E.g., Shahar, 'Who Were Old', 313–41; *idem*, *Growing Old*; the chapter on the Middle Ages in Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 44–53.

⁶⁹ E.g., Thane, *Old Age in English History*; Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*.

this gap in the research, since he concluded in his chapter on the early medieval history of old age that:

The early Middle Ages were in fact not aware of old age as specific entity. [...] In a world where no one, apart from a few great individuals, retired, there was no distinction between adults and old adults.⁷⁰

Minois's statement is, of course, demonstrably false as this thesis as well as a handful of studies on old age in Anglo-Saxon England illustrate.

Burrow, 1986

Burrow's *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* explores medieval conceptions of the human life cycle. The book was published in 1986 and was the first of a group of similar studies that includes works by Elizabeth Sears and Mary Dove (published in the same year) and Michael Goodich (published three years later).⁷¹ Of these various works about the medieval schematisations of the human life cycle, only Burrow's book partially addressed English sources that predate the Norman Conquest.⁷²

The first two chapters of *Ages of Man* are concerned with the various stages which medieval authors distinguished within a person's life. Burrow described how several theories coexisted, each imposing a different number of 'ages of man', ranging from three (youth, middle age and old age) to twelve. These schematisations arose from different intellectual traditions: the theory of the four humours was at the basis of the four ages of man, the seven planets were related to a sevenfold division of life and religious analogy provided the necessary confirmation of divisions of the life cycle in three parts by linking them to Christ's Parable of the Three Vigils (Luke 12:36–8), and so on. With respect to Anglo-Saxon source material, Burrow claimed that he had "probably missed no major evidence".⁷³ Nevertheless, as chapter 1 of this thesis demonstrates, Burrow's overview was far from exhaustive, since he had overlooked a considerable number of texts in Old English and Latin and did not include the visual arts at all.

In his remaining two chapters, Burrow focused on how the natural order of the different ages was reflected in medieval narratives. He did so by distinguishing between the 'nature ideal' and the 'transcendence ideal':

People may be praised for conforming to the order of things, or else blamed [...] for failing to do so. Alternatively, they may be praised for transcending

⁷⁰ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 154.

⁷¹ E. Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, 1986); M. Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986); M. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350* (Lanham, 1989).

⁷² Sears's work covers sources from all across Europe (disregarding any cultural differences), ranging from the twelfth century to the fifteenth century, while Dove mainly focuses on English literature from the Ricardian period (Chaucer and Gower). Goodich's work covers hagiographical and encyclopaedic material, again from all over Europe, within the restricted period 1250–1350.

⁷³ Burrow, 1, n. 2.

that order and rising above its natural limitations [...]. These two sets of epideictic possibilities involve, respectively, what I shall call the ‘nature’ and the ‘transcendence’ ideals.⁷⁴

With regard to the transcendence ideal, Burrow posited the theory that the description of someone’s transition from one age category to another implied a “consistent bias” towards the age categories involved.⁷⁵ Burrow argued that, since Anglo-Saxon hagiographers typically described saints as transcending youth by showing qualities associated with old age (the so-called *puer senex* ‘old child’ motif), old age was the transcendence ideal. Accordingly, old age must have been the most highly regarded age of man for the Anglo-Saxons.⁷⁶

Burrow’s claim of an Anglo-Saxon preference for old age is problematic and based on incomplete evidence. As will be discussed in chapter 5, Burrow’s treatment of the *puer senex* motif as a validation of old age is not wholly accurate: some saints included by Burrow in his analysis do not ascend to ‘old age’ but to adulthood. The clearest example is the three-year-old Virgin Mary, whose transcendence is described in the Old English *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* as “heo wæs on gange and on worde and on eallum gebærum gelic wynsuman men, þe hæfde XXX wintra” [she was in her walk and in her words and in all her behaviour like a pleasant person of thirty years old].⁷⁷ In this case, it would have been more correct to brand her a *puella matura* ‘adult girl’ rather than a *puella senex* ‘old girl’. More generally, Burrow’s positive claim with regard to the status of old age can be criticised for not being based on all the material available. His treatment of Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives, for instance, is limited to descriptions of the extraordinary youth of saints and does not address episodes which feature the saints in their actual old age. In addition, Burrow only discussed texts which placed old age in opposition to other ages of man and numerous texts that deal with old age in isolation were thus left undiscussed. As chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5 of this thesis demonstrate, an analysis that takes into account the whole range of available source material leads to a more nuanced image of old age.

Burrow’s positive picture of the Anglo-Saxon view of old age has misled scholars in the past thirty years, as is illustrated by the following remark made by one of the reviewers of his book: “It is good to learn that in Anglo-Saxon England the elderly were never slighted for decrepitude”.⁷⁸ This observation is completely ungrounded: although Burrow only mentioned decrepitude in passing, it appears to be one of the most frequently recurring images of old age in Anglo-Saxon texts, as chapter 4 of this thesis indicates. Moreover, the slighting of an old character for decrepitude is exactly what happens in *Beowulf*, when Beowulf remarks about the old Hrothgar that:

⁷⁴ Burrow, 109.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 105–9.

⁷⁷ *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, ed. and trans. M. Clayton, *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1998), 174–5. Cf. Burrow, 102.

⁷⁸ W. A. Achenbaum, P. Laslett and F. Dittmann-Kohli, ‘Review Symposium: The Medieval Ages of Man’, *Ageing and Society* 7 (1987), 104.

þæt wæs an cyning,
æghwæs orleahre oþ þæt hine ylðo benam
mægenes wynnum se þe oft manegum scod.⁷⁹

[That was a unique king (Hrothgar), blameless in all things until old age took from him the joys of strength – old age that has often harmed many.]

The problem of Hrothgar's decrepitude is discussed at length in chapter 7 of this thesis.

Amos, 1990

A lexicological approach to old age was presented by Amos in her article "Old English Words for Old" in Sheehan's volume *Aging and the Aged*. The article presented a study of four words for 'old age' – *eald*, *hār*, *gamol* and *frōd* –, taking into account their etymology and distribution. Her main conclusion was that wherever these words for 'old' occurred, they were mostly positive in connotation: an *ealdsweord* was an 'ancient, and therefore good, sword', *ealdgestrēon* 'old treasure', was more valuable than a new one. Amos also noted that the positive connotations in Old English compounds and collocations stand in sharp contrast to modern expressions, such as 'old stick-in-the-mud', 'old rattle-trap' and 'old granny hobble gobble' and concluded that "reading modern idioms using *old* is a lowering experience, and a drastic contrast to the Old English patterns".⁸⁰

As chapter 2 of this thesis shows, Amos's conclusions with respect to the Old English lexicon for old age do not hold up to scrutiny. For one, she did not treat all the words for 'old age' which were available to the Anglo-Saxons, and ignored lexical items that reveal more negative associations with old age, such as *forwerod* 'old, decrepit' and *gēomorfrōd* 'old, wise and sad'. Secondly, Amos included the advanced age of objects, such as swords and treasure, in her discussion, which, arguably, is of no relevance when discussing ideas about aged people. Finally, Amos did not consider the broader contexts in which the words appeared. By combining my own semantic field study of Old English words for 'old' in chapter 2 with the analysis of those words in texts, as well as other cultural material, in the remainder of the thesis, I come to a more complete picture of how the Anglo-Saxons conceptualised old age.

Bouwer, 2004

In 2004, Heiner Bouwer published an unsuccessful semantic field study of the Old English words for 'old' and 'new', in which he considered the semantic range of those Old English words that expressed notions of 'Eigenalter' [individual age] and 'zeitliche Relation' [temporal relation].⁸¹ For 'old age', Bouwer took stock of the same four Old English words studied by Amos: *eald*, *frōd*, *gamol* and *hār*. Bouwer's work was not well received by critics on account of the lack of reader-friendliness of the

⁷⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1885b–7.

⁸⁰ Amos, 104.

⁸¹ H. Bouwer, *Studien zum Wortfeld um eald und niwe im Altenglischen* (Heidelberg, 2004)

text: the work was written in convoluted German and did not present its main results in a clear way.⁸² The value of the contents of Bouwer's work was further hampered by the fact that Bouwer only interacted with secondary literature published in German. Consequently, Bouwer's study of the word *hār* 'grey, old' did not profit from an extensive analysis of this word published by C. P. Biggam, six years prior to Bouwer's publication.⁸³ Finally, despite his reliance on the *Microfiche Concordance to Old English* published by the Dictionary of Old English Project,⁸⁴ Bouwer did not make use of the *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* itself for his analysis of the Old English words *eald* and *frōd*, although the dictionary entries would have been available to him by the time of publication.⁸⁵ Instead, he relied mostly on the somewhat dated dictionary of Bosworth-Toller. As a result, Bouwer's work contributed little to the semantic study of Old English words for old age and his analysis of individual words, such as *eald*, *frōd* and *hār*, was already superseded by the time of publication by superior treatments in the *DOE* and the work by Biggam.

Crawford, 2007

Crawford's article '*Gomol is snoterost: Growing Old in Anglo-Saxon England*' starts with the observation that "some passages in Old English sources [...] present a negative view of advanced age".⁸⁶ According to Crawford, these texts should be regarded as exceptional and imitations of classical models of old age, rather than reflecting actual Anglo-Saxon ideals. Summarising Amos, Crawford holds that those ideals are reflected in the Old English vocabulary: "Old English writers had a very positive cognitive map of old age".⁸⁷

In the remainder of her article, Crawford approached the subject of old age from an archaeological perspective in order to establish the social implications of living to an old age in Anglo-Saxon society. Despite the great difficulty in establishing the precise age of adult skeletal material, Crawford indicated that it is possible to recognise the oldest sections of Anglo-Saxon burial grounds; that is, the people who would have been significantly older than most. By comparing the grave goods found in these sections of the burial grounds with the others, Crawford considered to what extent gender roles were compromised or altered for those who lived longer than the rest of the community. This archaeological evidence, mostly from the pre-Christian period, reveals that old age did not cause a dramatic decline in the presence of grave goods, although their value decreased. Artefacts connected to gender roles, such as weapons (for men) and girdle items (for women), were also found in smaller proportions in the graves of older people as compared to other adult graves. Nevertheless, a proportion of the older males were still buried with weapons, suggesting that these men were still ascribed a warrior role in old age or were

⁸² J. Grzega, review of Bouwer, *Studien, Anglia* 125 (2007), 122–4.

⁸³ C. P. Biggam, *Grey in Old English: An Interdisciplinary Semantic Study* (London, 1998).

⁸⁴ *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, ed. R. L. Venezky and A. diPaolo Healey (Toronto, 1980).

⁸⁵ The fascicles of the *DOE* for E and F were published in 1996 and 2004 (the year of publication of Bouwer's book), respectively.

⁸⁶ Crawford, 53.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

remembered for their military endeavours in their younger years. In her conclusion, Crawford stated that the position of the aged in early Anglo-Saxon society was far from secure (as reflected by the decline in value of grave goods), but, “within the mortuary ritual at least, not all old people needed to fear a decline in status”.⁸⁸ Thus, Crawford has rightly called attention to the importance of archaeological evidence for studies on the status of old people in Anglo-Saxon society; on occasion, I have taken observations made from archaeological research such as these as points of departure for my own analysis of the written and visual artefacts of the Anglo-Saxons.⁸⁹

Whereas Crawford’s conclusions on the basis of the archaeological evidence were nuanced, her observation regarding the literary evidence was one-sidedly positive. In sharp contrast to some of the general historical studies towards old age, Crawford even evoked the ‘golden age myth’ with regard to Anglo-Saxon England:

According to the majority of the Old English literary evidence, old people were idealised and venerated in Anglo-Saxon society. There is minimal indication within the literary accounts that old people were in any way maltreated, or pushed to the limits of the social framework. According to the literary evidence, the later Anglo-Saxon period was *the golden age for the elderly*.⁹⁰ (my emphasis)

This thesis shows that this conclusion does not stand up to scrutiny.

Sánchez-Martí, 2008

‘Age Matters in Old English Literature’, Jordi Sánchez-Martí’s contribution to Lewis-Simpson’s volume *Youth and Age*, discusses various stages of the life cycle in Old English literature, “not as a reflection of an historically accurate reality, but as an expression of the Anglo-Saxon social outlook on matters of age”.⁹¹ Briefly reflecting on old age, Sánchez-Martí was the first to refine the overly positive presentation provided by the scholars mentioned above. According to him, old age, while respected for its wisdom, was approached with some reservations, especially on account of its connection with physical decline. Consequently, Sánchez-Martí argued against Burrow’s claim that old age was the most preferred age of man and, instead, demonstrated that ‘middle age’ was the most preferred stage of life. A more extensive discussion of Anglo-Saxon sources in this thesis confirms that Sánchez-Martí was correct in doing so.

Semper, 2013

Philippa Semper’s article ‘*Byð se ealda man ceald and snoflig*: Stereotypes and Subversions of the Last Stages of the Life Cycle in Old English Texts and Anglo-

⁸⁸ Crawford, 59.

⁸⁹ E.g., in chapters 4, 6 and 8.

⁹⁰ Crawford, 59.

⁹¹ J. Sánchez-Martí, ‘Age Matters in Old English Literature’, in *Youth and Age*, ed. Lewis-Simpson, 205.

Saxon Contexts' is a valuable contribution to the scholarly treatment of old age in Anglo-Saxon literature. Discussing Old English heroic poetry and Anglo-Saxon hagiography in particular, Semper identifies two contrasting representations of old age. On the one hand, in heroic poetry, old age is "primarily undesirable" and leaves the elderly "unable to operate effectively as the heroic model demands".⁹² As such, she argues, elderly warriors were often depicted as unsuccessful warriors, unless they acted as wise advisers. Semper's survey of Anglo-Saxon hagiography, on the other hand, paints a different picture: "prolonged old age for those who are spiritual warriors rather than physical ones seems to be desirable: saints may live to be very old, and miraculous extensions of life come from God".⁹³ Elderly saints are either shown to overcome the physical restrictions of their advanced age or their patient suffering in old age is presented as something exemplary.

While Semper has covered a good deal of groundwork for the study of old age in Anglo-Saxon culture, it still falls short in some areas. The article is a rich overview of primary Anglo-Saxon sources that mention old age, but certainly not exhaustive. For instance, most of the pastoral literature as well as two Anglo-Saxon poets who commented at length on old age – Alcuin and Cynewulf, described in this thesis in chapters 3 and 4 – are not treated by Semper. Moreover, she hardly interacts with previous scholarly treatments of old age in Anglo-Saxon England, apart from the article by Amos mentioned above; Burrow's conclusions with regard to Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, as well as the articles by Crawford and Sánchez-Martí, are not discussed. Finally, her negative treatment of the idea of the elderly warrior is particularly problematic, especially when she argues that the two prototypical 'elderly heroes' of Old English heroic poetry – Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon* and the elderly Beowulf in *Beowulf* – are "hardly a reference which emphasises men's ability to function as successful warriors during their old age".⁹⁴ This as well as other interpretations of the Anglo-Saxon source material by Semper are assessed in the various chapters of this thesis.

The overview of the history of the subject so far makes clear that prior to this thesis a comprehensive study of the Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of old age was a desideratum, since considerable material had been left untouched. Advances in understanding how the Anglo-Saxons thought about senescence have been made in this thesis by taking into consideration, for example, pastoral texts which treat old age in isolation, heroic literature, manuscript illuminations and a number of Old English words for old age that were not reviewed by Amos and Bouwer. In addition, the present study contributes to the solution of the clear dissonance between, on the one hand, the conclusions of Burrow, Amos and Crawford with respect to Anglo-Saxon England and, on the other, the general tendencies found in other Old Age Studies. Whereas almost all historical approaches to old age tend to debunk the 'golden age myth' and highlight the variety of attitudes and realities of old age, these Anglo-Saxonists had created the idea that the elderly were particularly well respected and that old age had only or mainly positive connotations. Extending the nuanced treatments of

⁹² Semper, 292, 294.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 296.

Sánchez-Martí and Semper, this thesis indicates, on the basis of an exhaustive treatment of the available source material from early medieval England, that the Anglo-Saxons had a more balanced view of old age.

Within the broader context of Old Age Studies in general, and those concerning the Middle Ages in particular, the present thesis stands out as an analysis of old age that focuses on a single cultural community: the Anglo-Saxons that lived in England between roughly 700 and 1100. As such, this thesis differs from the majority of medievalist publications about old age which have preferred to present a general, pan-European overview. Publications of this latter type, such as those by Minois and Shahar, suffer from a neglect of geographical, cultural and chronological differences and, hence, tend to oversimplify matters. By focusing on a single cultural community, within a well-established timeframe, and by studying the cultural artefacts of that community within their appropriate context, this thesis seeks to do justice to the complexity, diversity and ambivalence of the perceptions and representations which, together, make up the cultural conceptualisation of old age.

Definitions of old age

What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening? The answer to this ancient ‘Riddle of the Sphinx’ – a man, who crawls on all fours as a baby, walks on two legs as an adult and walks with a cane in old age – is possibly the most well-known example of a schematic division of the life cycle in different phases.¹ Such divisions of life in three to sometimes even twelve distinct ‘ages of man’ are frequently found in texts and visual art works, from Antiquity up until the present day.² These textual and visual schemes help to reveal how people conceptualised their lifespan and how they defined old age in relation to other phases of life. In this chapter, I look at how Anglo-Saxon authors and artists divided the life cycle into different phases and what these divisions may reveal about their conceptualisation of old age.

Since the fundamental publications on the medieval life cycle published in 1986,³ most treatments of the ages of man in medieval thought have concentrated on the later Middle Ages.⁴ Only in 2013, Cochelin presented an overview of the schematic periodisations of the human lifespan found in texts from the Christian West dating between the third century to the year 1200.⁵ Within her sample of eighty texts, Cochelin found that thirty-four texts dating from between the sixth century to the year 1120 showed remarkably less variation and unpredictability than those of earlier and later dates. On the basis of these thirty-four texts, Cochelin then established a ‘universal’ life cycle definition:

... between the sixth and the early twelfth centuries, the life cycle can contain three, four, five, six or seven ages, because the three main phases, *pueritia*, *iuuentus*, and *senectus*, can each be divided into two and, exceptionally for *senectus*, even into three ages. A life cycle of three is comprised of the three main phases; one of four means that one of the three phases has been subdivided and so on. Whatever the number of subdivisions, we are still facing one unique, if very flexible, way of conceiving the ages of man.⁶

Furthermore, she noted that the life cycle definition dating from this period was characterised by a “subdivided old age” into a young or ‘green’ old age, during which

¹ *Anthropology and the Riddle of the Sphinx: Paradoxes of Change in the Life Course*, ed. P. Spencer (London, 1990). In this form, the Riddle of the Sphinx is first referred to in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC); I am indebted for this information to Manfred Horstmannshoff (Leiden University).

² *Long History*, ed. Thane.

³ Burrow; Dove, *Perfect Age*; Sears, *Ages of Man*.

⁴ E.g. *Ages of Woman, Ages of Man: Sources in European Social History, 1400–1750*, ed. M. Chojnacka and M. E. Wiesner-Hanks (London, 2002); Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age*.

⁵ Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 1–54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

someone could still be active and healthy, and a ‘grey’ old age, when physical decrepitude set in.⁷ Cochelin also remarked that this systematic division of *senectus* into two stages was less common in Late Antiquity and the later Middle Ages, during which “*senectus* was more often perceived as just one long old age, from its lower age limit, often around forty nine, to its end, death”.⁸

Given that Cochelin’s overview included only four Anglo-Saxon texts and did not take into account visual representations of the ages of man,⁹ the question remains whether this proposed universal life cycle definition, with its underlying tripartite structure and its subdivided old age, corresponds to how the Anglo-Saxons conceptualised the life cycle. In order to test Cochelin’s conclusions, I provide in this chapter a complete overview of all the attestations of the ages of man in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record. In addition, I establish at what age the Anglo-Saxons considered someone old: how did they define the ‘threshold of old age’? Throughout the chapter, the aspect of ‘transfer of knowledge’ is taken into account: where did the Anglo-Saxons get their ideas from and how did they adapt their sources?¹⁰

The ages of man in Anglo-Saxon thought

While the medieval English conceptualisations of the human life cycle are relatively well-studied,¹¹ John Burrow’s seminal work *The Ages of Man* remains the only study that seriously discusses the Anglo-Saxon period. With respect to the sources dating from this period, Burrow claimed that he had “probably missed no major evidence”.¹² Nevertheless, Burrow’s overview was incomplete and he had overlooked a number of representations of the ages of man found in Old English and Latin texts as well as in the visual arts. Below, I discuss each of these representations, alongside the ones that were dealt with by Burrow. The order in which the various texts and works of art appear below is prompted by the number of phases imposed on the human lifespan, rather than their dates of composition. Following this overview, the results will be considered in the light of Cochelin’s conclusions as outlined above.

Two ages of man

In his classic study of the representations of the life cycle, Franz Boll noted that the most simple division of life is a dichotomy between youth and old age, a contrast which stems from analogy with other sets of antipodes, such as day and night, summer

⁷ For this distinction, see also Thane, ‘Old Age in English History’, 31–2; *idem*, ‘The Age of Old Age’, 22.

⁸ Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24, 27–8, discusses Bede’s *De temporibus* (c.703) and *De temporum ratione* (c.725), the *Commentaria in s. Joannis euangelium* by Alcuin (d. 804) and the work of Byrhtferth of Ramsey (d. c.1020).

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, the information about the Latin sources used for Old English texts is derived from *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici*.

¹¹ Sears, *Ages of Man*; Dove, *Perfect Age*; Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age*.

¹² Burrow, 1, n. 2.

and winter, and life and death.¹³ In Old English, the contrastive word pairs *eald and geong* ‘old and young’ and *geong and eald* ‘young and old’ are frequently attested.¹⁴ These antonymic pairs turn out to be mainly used with the sense of ‘everyone’, as in the following description of the victims of death in the Old English prose life of St. Guthlac: “se rica and se heana, se gelæreda and se ungelærda, and geong and eald, ealle hi gelice se stranga deað forgripeð and nymð” [rich and poor, learned and unlearned, and young and old, strong death overwhelms and takes them all equally].¹⁵

Occasionally, the youth–age contrast was appealed to within the context of similar pairs of antonyms, as in the Old English gnomic poem *Maxims II*:

God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið ylðo,
lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið þystrum,
fyrð wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum.¹⁶

[Good must be against evil, youth against old age, life against death, light against darkness, army against army, one enemy against the other.]

This contrast between youth and age will be discussed in more detail in chapters 3 and 4.

The twofold division of life is also found in an exegetical context. For instance, Ælfric (c.950–c.1010) used this bipartite scheme to explain Matt. 8:11 (“And I say to you that many shall come from the East and the West, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”) in his homily for the third Sunday after the Epiphany:

Ðurh eastdæl magon beon getacnode þa ðe on geogoðe to gode bugað. for þan ðe on eastdæle is þæs dæges angin. Ðurh westdæl sind getacnode þa ðe on ylde to godes þeowdome gecyrrað for þan ðe on westdæle geendað se dæg.¹⁷

[By the East may be signified those who turn to God in youth, because in the East is the start of the day. By the West are signified those who in old age turn to the service of God, because in the West the day ends.]

Ælfric probably took this equation between East and West and the two ages of man from a homily by Haymo of Auxerre (d. 865/866).¹⁸ Ælfric himself can be credited for

¹³ F. Boll, ‘Die Lebensalter. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Ethologie und zur Geschichte der Zahlen’, in *idem, Kleine Schriften zur Sternkunde des Altertums*, ed. V. Stegemann (Leipzig, 1950), 161–2.

¹⁴ DOE, s.v. *eald*, sense I.A.1.b; DOE, s.v. *geong*, sense I.A.1.a.viii.

¹⁵ *Das angelsächsische Prosa-Leben des heiligen Guthlac*, ed. P. Gonser (Heidelberg, 1909), 160.

¹⁶ *Maxims II*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 51–3.

¹⁷ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 8, ll. 162–5. Not discussed in Burrow.

¹⁸ Haymo, *Homiliae de tempore*, hom. 19: “ab oriente, qui ab ipsa infantia vel pueritia Deo servit: ab occidente, qui in senectute vel decrepita aetate ad Dei servitutem convertitur” [from the east, he who from his very infancy or childhood serves God: from the west, he who is converted to the service of God in his old age or the age of decrepitude]. PL 118, col. 145c.

adding the connection with the start and beginning of the day, although this was a commonplace.¹⁹

While the frequent occurrence of the contrast between youth and age might suggest that the two ages of man was a dominant theory of the life cycle in Anglo-Saxon thought, it is more likely that the Anglo-Saxons referred to youth and old age as two extremes of a more complex spectrum of life. These more intricate schemes of life call for a more detailed analysis than the twofold divisions discussed above, since they stem from various intellectual traditions, ranging from biblical exegesis to the theory of the humours.

Three ages of man

Boll described the division of the life cycle into youth, middle age and old age as a natural development out of the two-age system, whereby the additional second or middle age always represents “die Spitze der Pyramide” [the top of the pyramid].²⁰ This triadic scheme is often associated with *De anima* and the *Ars rhetorica* by Aristotle (384–322 BC), but these works were probably not directly known in Anglo-Saxon England.²¹ Instead, those Anglo-Saxons who commented on a threefold division of the life cycle mostly derived their inspiration from biblical exegesis.

Bede (673/674–735), for example, related the three ages of man to Christ’s parable of the Three Vigils (Luke 12:36–8). In this parable, Christ compared his disciples to servants who await their lord’s return from a wedding feast during three vigils. Bede’s commentary runs as follows:

On the use of Haymo by Ælfric, see J. Hill, ‘Ælfric and Haymo Revisited’, *Intertexts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Paul E. Szarmach*, ed. V. Blanton and H. Scheck (Tempe, 2008), 331–48; C. L. Smetana, ‘Ælfric and the Homiliary of Haymo of Halberstadt’, *Traditio* 17 (1961), 457–69. For Ælfric’s use of Haymo in this particular passage, see M. Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, EETS ss 18 (Oxford, 2000), 66.

¹⁹ Boll, ‘Lebensalter’, 162.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 163–5.

²¹ In the former work, Aristotle argued that all living things go through phases of *augmentum* ‘growth’, *status* ‘status, stasis’ and *decrementum* ‘decay’; in the latter, he described the emotions and moral qualities of *iuuenes* ‘youthful people’, people *in statu* ‘in their prime’ and *senes* ‘elderly people’. Quoted in Burrow, 5–10, 191–4. Aristotle’s *De anima* and the *Ars rhetorica* are not mentioned in J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597–1066* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006) or Gneuss and Lapidge. See also J. J. Campbell, ‘Knowledge of Rhetorical Figures in Anglo-Saxon England’, *JEGP* 66 (1967), 2. However, Ælfric may have used the *De anima* in one of his homilies, see R. M. Fera, ‘Metaphors for the Five Senses in Old English Prose’, *RES* ns 63 (2012), 723, n. 69.

Another champion of the threefold division of life was Isidore of Seville (c.560–636), who linked the three ages of man to various triads, such as the three animals usually found in fables – the lion (youth), the goat (adolescence) and the snake (old age) –, the three heads of Cerberus and a team of three horses associated with the dead. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, I.xl.4, XI.iii.33 and XVIII.xxxvi.2. None of these Isidorian triadic schemes of life appear to have been used by Anglo-Saxon authors for whom the *Etymologiae* was certainly available, see, e.g., Ogilvy, *Books Known*, 167; Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, 311.

Prima quippe vigilia primaevum tempus est, id est pueritia. Secunda, adolescentia vel iuuentus, quae auctoritate sacri eloquii unum sunt, dicentis: Laetare iuuenis in adolescentia tua; tertia autem, senectus accipitur. Qui ergo vigilare in prima vigilia noluit custodiat vel secundam, ut qui converti a pravitatibus suis in pueritia neglexit ad vias vitae saltem in tempore iuuentutis evigilet. Et qui vigilare in secunda vigilia noluit tertiae vigiliae remedia non amittat, ut qui in iuuentute ad vias vitae non evigilat saltem in senectute respiscat.²²

[Indeed, the first vigil is the youthful time, which is childhood. The second, adolescence or youth, which according to the authority of the sacred word are the same, saying: ‘Rejoice, O young man, in your adolescence’ (Eccles. 11:9). The third, moreover, is accepted to be old age. Therefore, whoever does not want to be awake during the first vigil, should observe the second, so that he, who neglected to turn away from his vices in childhood, is at least watchful of the ways of life in the time of youth. And whoever does not want to be alert during the second vigil, may he not let go of the remedies of the third watch, so that he, who is not watchful of the ways of life in youth, at least recovers his senses in old age.]

Bede’s commentary, which explains that it is never too late to turn to a Christian way of life, was copied verbatim from a homily by the Church Father Gregory the Great (c.540–604).²³

Ælfric drew heavily on Bede or Gregory for a similar explanation of the Parable of the Three Vigils in his homily for the Common of a Confessor.²⁴ Like Bede and Gregory, Ælfric compared the three vigils to the three ages of man: “cildhade” [childhood], “weaxendum cnihtade” [growing youth/adolescence] and “forweredre ylde” [worn-out old age]. He then continued:

Se ðe nolde wacian on ðære forman wæccan,
swa ðæt he on cildhade gesohte his drihten
and mid godum bigengum hine gegladode,
wacie he huru on þære oðre wæccan
and his mod awrecce of middaneardlicum gedwyldum,
forþan ðe he nat þone timan, ðe his drihten cymð.
Gif hwa ðonne bið, þe hine sylfne forgyt
on þam twam wæccum and wunað on his leahtrum,
warnige he þonne, þæt he huru ne forleose
þa ðriddan wæccan, þæt he ne forwurðe mid ealle,
ac huru on his ylde of ðam yfelan slæpe

²² Bede, *In Lucam evangelium expositio*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout, 1960) IV, 257, ll. 1139–58. Mentioned in Burrow, 68.

²³ Gregory, *Homiliae in evangelia*, ed. R. Étaix, CCSL 141 (Turnhout, 1999), trans. D. Hurst, *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies* (Kalamazoo, 1990), hom. 13, ll. 74–82.

²⁴ Assmann, hom. 4. Discussed in Burrow, 68–9. For the sources of this particular homily, see M. Clayton, ‘Of Mice and Men: Ælfric’s Second Homily for the Feast of a Confessor’, *Leeds Studies in English* ns 24 (1993), 7.

his ærran nyttenysse ardlice arise
and mid soðre gecyrrednysse gesece his drihten
and on godum weorcum wunige oð ende.²⁵

[He, who did not wish to keep awake during the first vigil, so that he sought his Lord in childhood and made him happy with good practices, let him at least keep awake during the second vigil and drive away his heart from worldly errors, because he does not know the time when his Lord will come. If, then, there is anyone who forgets himself during the second vigil and persists in his vices, he should take warning that he at least will not miss the third vigil, so that he will not perish completely, but at least in his old age will quickly arise from his bad sleep, his former ignorance, and with true conversion will seek his Lord and accustom himself to good works, until the end.]

Ælfric's admonition to accustom oneself with good deeds and his reference to "yfelan slæpe" [bad sleep] may have been inspired, in part, by a third source, a homily by Haymo of Auxerre. Similarly to Ælfric, Haymo used the terms "somnum torporis a se excutiat" [he should discard from himself the sleep of apathy] and "in bono opere se exerceat" [he should occupy himself with the performing of good deeds].²⁶

Ælfric used the tripartite division of the life cycle again when he discussed the three different types of death in his sermon for the octave of Pentecost:

Mors acerba, mors inmatura, mors naturalis; ðæt is on Englisc, se bitera deað, se ungeripoda deað, and se gecyndelica. Se bitera deað is gecweden þe bið on cildum, and se ungeripoda deað, on geongum mannum, and se gecyndelica, þe becymð þam ealdum.²⁷

[*Mors acerba, mors inmatura, mors naturalis*. That is in English: the bitter death, the immature death and the natural death. The bitter death is called that which happens to children, and the immature death happens to young men and the natural one comes to the elderly.]

Ælfric's source, Julian of Toledo's *Prognosticon futuri saeculi*, had linked the three kinds of death to a fourfold scheme of the life cycle: "Tria sunt genera mortis, id est acerba, inmatura, naturalis. Acerba infantium, inmatura iuuenum, matura, id est naturalis, senum" [There are three kinds of death, that is the bitter one, the immature one and the natural one. The bitter one for the children, the immature one

²⁵ Assmann, hom. 4, ll. 67–83.

²⁶ Haymo, *Homiliae aliquot de sanctis*, hom. 10, PL 118, cols. 788b–9c. This use of Haymo is discussed neither by Hill, 'Ælfric and Haymo', Smetana, 'Ælfric and the Homiliary' nor Clayton 'Of Mice and Men'.

²⁷ *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. J. C. Pope, EETS os 259–60 (Oxford, 1967–8), hom. 11, ll. 112–7. Not discussed in Burrow.

for the young and the mature men, and the natural one, for the elderly].²⁸ Possibly, Ælfric preferred the threefold division because it seemed a more natural fit for the three types of death and, therefore, stylistically more eloquent.

Another Anglo-Saxon homilist to change the fourfold structure of his Latin source into a division into three phases was the author of Blickling Homily 14. This homily describes the birth of John the Baptist, child of the aged parents Elizabeth and Zachary, noting that they had spent their entire lives without sin. Their “yldo” [old age], according to the homilist, was no different from their “iugop” [youth] and “midfyrhtnes” [middle age]:

Ac hie wæron gemyndige ealra Godes beboda, 7 on ælce wisan hie wæron þære godcundan æ swiþe gehyrsume. 7 nu seo heora iugop 7 seo midfyrhtnes butan æghwylcum leahre gestanden, hwylc talge we þonne þæt seo yldo 7 se ende þæs heora lifes wære ne se fruma swylc wæs?²⁹

[But they were mindful of all of God’s commandments, and they were very obedient to Divine Law in every way. And now their youth and middle age stand without any sin, how can we consider that their old age and the end of their life were not like the former?]

As Giuseppe D. De Bonis has demonstrated, this passage is a rendering of a sermon by Chrysologus (d. 450), which compared Elizabeth and Zachary’s “senectus” old age to their “pueritia” [childhood], “adolescentia” [adolescence] and “iuventus” [youth].³⁰ In other words, the Blickling Homilist, like Ælfric, preferred a threefold division of the life cycle over a division into four ages of man.

Another tripartite division of the life cycle is found in a scribal interpolation in the homily “De temporibus Anticristi” by Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023).³¹ The interpolation concerns Simon Magus’s magic contest with the apostles Peter and Paul and describes Simon’s skills in shape-shifting:

7 ða het æt nyhstan se casere feccan þæne symon to him. 7 þa ða he him to com 7 him ætforan stod, þa ablende he þurh deofles cræft swa þæs caseres eagan 7 ðæra þe him mid wæron þæt heom ðuhte oðre hwile þa hy hine beheoldon þæt he wære swylce hit cild wære þæt hy on locedon; oðre hwile eft swylce he medemre ylde man wære; 7 oðre hwile swylce he eald

²⁸ M. McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto, 1977), 134, ll. 17–8. The text from the *Prognosticon future saeculi* cited here derives from a series of excerpts compiled by Ælfric himself.

²⁹ *Blickling Homilies*, ed. Morris, hom. 14, pp. 161, 163. Not discussed in Burrow.

³⁰ G. D. De Bonis, ‘The Birth of Saint John the Baptist: A Source Comparison between Blickling Homily xiv and Ælfric’s Catholic Homily I.xxv’, in *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: Adopting and Adapting Saints’ Lives into Old English Prose (c.950–1150)*, ed. L. Lazzari, P. Lendinara and C. Di Sciacca (Barcelona, 2014), 262–3.

³¹ According to Bethurum, the interpolation was not written by Wulfstan himself. *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), 132, n. 70. J. C. Pope, review of Bethurum, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, *MLN* 74 (1959), 338–9, argues, however, that the interpolation is Wulfstan’s. This attestation is not discussed in Burrow.

geðungen man wære; 7 swa on mænige wisan he hiwode þurh drycraeft fela leasbregda.³²

[And then at last the Emperor had Simon brought to him. And when he came and stood in front of him, then through the devil's power he blinded the Emperor's eyes and those of the people with him, so that they thought at one time, when they looked at him, that he was like a child whom they looked at; a second time again as if he were a middle-aged man; and another time as if he were a distinguished, old man; and so in many ways he practiced deception through sorcery.]

The specific order “cild” [child] – “medemre ylde man” [middle-aged man] – “eald geðungen man” [distinguished old man] in relation to Simon Magus's magical transformations is not found in the source of this passage, the apocryphal *Passio sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli*. The *Passio* gives the sequence “puer” [child] – “senior” [old man] – “adolescentior” [young man]:

qui ingressus coepit stare ante illum et subito mutare effigies, ita ut fieret subito puer et posthaec senior, altera uero hora adolescentior. mutabatur sexu, aetate, et per multas figuras diaboli ministerio bachabatur.³³

[After coming and standing (before Nero), he suddenly began to change faces, such that he suddenly became a boy and after that an old man, but in another moment a younger man. He was changed in sex and age, and through many forms he was raging in the service of the devil.]

Two other Old English adaptations of this apocryphal story are closer to the source than the interpolation in Wulfstan's homily. Blickling Homily 15, like the *Passio*, starts with the sequence “geong cniht” [young boy] – “eald man” [old man], after which there is a gap in the manuscript.³⁴ Ælfric, in his homily on the Passion of Peter and Paul, gave the same order for the first two shifts, “cnapa” [boy] – “harwenge” [grey-haired man], added a third, “on wimmannes hade” [in the guise of a woman], and then ended the sequence, like the *Passio*, with “on cnihtade” [in youth].³⁵ Thus, while Simon Magus's shape shifting act is dealt with in various Old English homilies, the sequence of childhood-middle age-old age in the interpolation in Wulfstan's homily is unique and may be a conscious attempt of its author to model the original sequence of Simon Magus's physical changes on the pattern of the three ages of man. As such, the interpolation attests to the widespread popularity of the threefold division of the life cycle in Anglo-Saxon England.

³² Wulfstan's *Eschatological Homilies*, ed. and trans. J. T. Lionarons (2000), <http://webpages.ursinus.edu/~jlionarons/wulfstan/Wulfstan.html>; *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, excludes the interpolation from her edition.

³³ *The Ancient Martyrdom Accounts of Peter and Paul*, ed. and trans. D. L. Eastman (Atlanta, 2015), 236–7. For the use of the *Passio sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli* in medieval England, see A. Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval and Early Modern Traditions* (Leiden, 2005), 201–20.

³⁴ *Blickling Homilies*, ed. Morris, hom. 15, p. 175.

³⁵ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 26, ll. 172–4.

Another apocryphal story that has often been linked to a threefold division of the life cycle is the Adoration of the Magi.³⁶ Since Matt. 2:1–12 describes the Magi merely as wise men who have come to worship the Child and give Him their gifts; all additional information, such as their names, number, dress, origins and age, derives from apocryphal traditions.³⁷ From the sixth century onwards, the Three Magi were described or depicted as representations of the three ages of man.³⁸ A clear, textual example that may have been known in Anglo-Saxon England is offered by the ninth-century *Collectanea*, a florilegium of riddles and encyclopaedic material. The *Collectanea* was once ascribed to Bede, but its most recent editors argue that “the majority of its localizable contents originated either in Ireland or England, or in an Irish foundation on the continent”.³⁹ In the text, the Three Magi are described, respectively, as an old man, a beardless youth and a mature, fully bearded individual:

Magi sunt, qui munera Domino dederunt: primus fuisse dicitur Melchior, senex et canus, barba prolixa et capillis, tunica hyacinthina, sagoque mileno, et calceamentis hyacinthino et albo mixto opere, pro mitrario uariae compositionis indutus: aurum obtulit regi Domino. Secundus, nomine Caspar, iuuenis imberbis, rubicundus, milenica tunica, sago rubeo, calceamentis hyacinthinis uestitus: thure quasi Deo oblatione digna, Deum honorabat. Tertius, fuscus, integre barbatus, Balthasar nomine, habens tunicam rubeam, albo uario <sago>, calceamentis milenicis amictus: per myrrham filium hominis moriturum professus est.⁴⁰

[The Magi are those who gave gifts to our Lord: the first is said to have been Melchior, an old man and white-haired, with a long beard and locks, wearing a blue tunic, an apple-green cloak, shoes of mixed blue and white work, and a Phrygian cap of varied make: he brought gold to the Lord as his king. The second, named Caspar, was a beardless youth, red-haired, dressed in a green tunic, a red cloak, and blue shoes; he honoured God with frankincense as an offering worthy of God. The third was swarthy, fully bearded, called Balthasar, with a red tunic, and clad in a white variegated cloak and green shoes; through his gift of myrrh he avowed that the Son of Man was to die.]

Parallels of this description of the Three Magi in terms of the three ages of man are mainly found in Irish sources,⁴¹ but also in the *Wessobrunn Prayer* manuscript, a ninth-century Bavarian copy of an unknown, Anglo-Saxon manuscript.⁴² Hence, this

³⁶ Sears, *Ages of Man*, 91–4.

³⁷ For an overview, see G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (London, 1971) I, 94–114.

³⁸ Schiller, *Iconography*, 101.

³⁹ M. Lapidge, ‘The Origin of the *Collectanea*’, in *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, ed. and trans. M. Bayles and M. Lapidge (Dublin, 1998), 12.

⁴⁰ *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayles and Lapidge, nos. 52–4. Not mentioned in Burrow.

⁴¹ *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayless and Lapidge, 211–3; cf. M. McNamara, *The Apocrypha in the Irish Church* (Dublin, 1975), 54–6.

⁴² Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 22053 (c.790, Wessobrunn Abbey). A facsimile and edition of the passage about the Magi is reproduced in U. Schwab, *Die Sternrunen im Wessobrunner*

Latin text may have circulated in Anglo-Saxon England, as well; even though differentiation in age among the Magi is not found in any text in Old English. The earliest mention of the Magi in Old English is in the ninth-century *Old English Martyrology*, where they appear as three “tungolcræftegan” [astronomers], but no further information on their ages is provided.⁴³ Similarly, although Ælfric referred to the Magi in three different homilies, he never connected them to the three ages of man.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the link between the wise men visiting Christ and a tripartite division of the human life cycle was certainly known in Anglo-Saxon England, as it features in various works of Anglo-Saxon art.



Fig. 1.1 Adoration of the Magi on the Franks Casket, front panel (detail).

Depictions of the Three Magi as young, middle-aged and old are found on two Anglo-Saxon whalebone carvings.⁴⁵ The first of these objects is the front panel of the Franks Casket, an early eighth-century whale bone box, kept in the British Museum, London.⁴⁶ On this panel, the Magi are placed in single file and can easily be identified by a runic inscription which reads “MFXI”. The artist differentiated the Three Magi in age through their posture and the length of their beards: the Magus nearest to the infant Christ is depicted as kneeling on one knee and has the longest beard of the three, the second stands up straight and has a slightly less prominent beard, while the third, standing furthest away from Christ, is beardless (fig. 1.1). A second whale bone

Gebet (Amsterdam, 1973), 99–100. On the use of an Anglo-Saxon manuscript by the Bavarian scribe, see G. A. Waldman, ‘Excerpts from a Little Encyclopaedia – the Wessobrunn Prayer Manuscript Clm. 22053’, *Allegorica* 2 (1977), 9.

⁴³ *The Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. C. Rauer (Cambridge, 2013), no. 12.

⁴⁴ See the discussion in U. Nijst, ‘The Magi in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Feestnummer aangeboden aan prof. dr. Aurelius Pompen O.F.M. op zijn zestigsten verjaardag* (Tilburg, 1939), 129–37.

⁴⁵ Both of these carvings are not discussed in Burrow.

⁴⁶ For a recent description of the scenes on the Franks Casket, see R. Abels, ‘What Has Weland to Do with Christ? The Franks Casket and the Acculturation of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Speculum* 84 (2009), 549–81, esp. 558, n. 17.

carving, dated to the eleventh century and kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, depicts the Three Magi in a similar way, although here the beardless Magus appears second in line (see fig. 1.2). The provenance of this second piece is uncertain and it has been variously ascribed to England, Northern France and Northern Spain.⁴⁷



Fig. 1.2 Whale bone carving of the Adoration of the Magi, its Anglo-Saxon origin is disputed.⁴⁸

The Anglo-Saxon illuminator of the Bury St. Edmunds Psalter, is the third artist to depict the Three Magi as the three ages of man.⁴⁹ Apart from two studies on its marginal illustrations,⁵⁰ this manuscript has received little scholarly interest. A drawing of the Adoration of the Magi is placed in the margin of Ps. 71:10–1 (“The kings of Tharsis and the islands shall offer presents: the kings of the Arabians and of Saba shall bring gifts and all kings of the earth shall adore him: all nations shall serve him”), a text which is often associated with the scene. In this illustration, the differentiation in age is again borne out by their posture and beards: one is young and

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the different views, see J. Beckwith, *The Adoration of the Magi in Whalebone* (London, 1966), 31–3; P. Williamson, *Medieval Ivory Carvings: Early Christian to Romanesque* (London, 2010), 359–60. Beckwith ascribes the piece to the area around the English Channel, while Williamson favours Northern Spain.

⁴⁸ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, no. 142-1866.

⁴⁹ Rome, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg.lat. 12 (s. xi^{2/4}, prob. Canterbury, Christ Church; the ‘Bury St. Edmunds Psalter’). Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 912. Not discussed in Burrow.

⁵⁰ R. M. Harris, ‘The Marginal Drawings of the Bury St. Edmunds Psalter (Rome, Vatican Library, MS Reg. Lat. 12)’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1960; A. Heimann, ‘Three Illustrations from the Bury St. Edmunds Psalter and Their Prototypes. Notes on the Iconography of Some Anglo-Saxon Drawings’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966), 39–59. A description of the drawings in the manuscripts can also be found in T. H. Olgren, *Insular and Anglo-Saxon Illuminated Manuscripts: An Iconographic Catalogue, c. A.D. 625 to 1100* (New York, 1986), 44–6.

beardless, the second has a beard and stands, while the third, eldest Magus has a beard and he kneels down at the feet of Mary.⁵¹

There may have been yet a fourth Anglo-Saxon depiction of the Three Magi as the three ages of man. The Antwerp Sedulius, a ninth-century, Carolingian manuscript of Caelius Sedulius' *Carmen Paschale* contains a miniature of the Adoration of the Magi, in which the Three Magi are differentiated in dress, beard and age, in the order youth–middle age–old age (see fig. 1.3).⁵² The miniatures of this manuscript have been shown to reflect a now lost Anglo-Saxon, possibly Northumbrian, eighth-century exemplar.⁵³ Hence, this Anglo-Saxon exemplar may also have contained the depiction of the Magi as representing the three ages of man.⁵⁴



Fig. 1.3 The Adoration of the Magi in the Antwerp Sedulius, 15v.

A final, visual rendition of the three ages of man is found in the Harley Psalter.⁵⁵ The Harley Psalter is one of the three medieval English psalters based on the Utrecht Psalter, in which each psalm is introduced by a line drawing that provides a

⁵¹ Bury St. Edmunds Psalter, 78v. The manuscript has been digitised and this folio can be accessed via this link: http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Reg.lat.12/0166 The architectural enclosure of the scene reveals an interesting parallel with the carving on fig. 1.2.

⁵² Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus, M. 17.4 (s. ix, Liège; the 'Antwerp Sedulius'), 14v.

⁵³ J. J. G. Alexander, *Insular Manuscripts, 6th to the 9th Century* (London, 1978), 83, pl. 291.

⁵⁴ Two further Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, London, British Library, Add. 49598 (s. x² [971x984], Winchester; the 'Benedictional of St. Æthelwold'), 24v; Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, 274 (Y.6) (1014x1023, prov. (and origin?) Canterbury, Christ Church; the 'Sacramentary of Robert of Jumièges'), 37, depict the Magi as three identical, beardless men. Gneuss and Lapidge, nos. 301, 921. The illustrations are reproduced in E. G. Millar, *English Illuminated Manuscripts from the Xth to the XIIIth Century* (Paris, 1926), pls. 5, 12.

⁵⁵ London, British Library, Harley 603 (s. x/xi or xi¹, Canterbury, Christ Church; the 'Harley Psalter'). Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 422.

literal interpretation of the text.⁵⁶ Around the year 1000, the Utrecht Psalter was in Christ Church, Canterbury, and demonstrably influenced a number of English artists there: in addition to the Harley Psalter, the Eadwine Psalter and the Paris Psalter were modelled on the Utrecht Psalter and made in Christ Church, Canterbury.⁵⁷ Despite the reliance of these three psalters on the Utrecht Psalter, each manuscript is commonly seen as a reflection of the culture and period of production.⁵⁸ In the illustration introducing Ps. 104, the artist of the Harley Psalter followed his Utrecht exemplar and drew three figures, holding scrolls (fig. 1.4). The figures probably represent the Three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose covenants with God, here depicted in the form of scrolls, are all described in the Psalm.⁵⁹ The Three Patriarchs are differentiated for age; the first has a slightly crooked posture and a white or grey beard, the figure in the middle has a full, black beard, while the last, representing youth, has no beard at all. To my knowledge, the depiction of the Three Patriarchs as the three ages of man is unparalleled in Christian iconography and is only found in the Harley Psalter, the Eadwine Psalter and their exemplar, the Utrecht Psalter.⁶⁰ Depicting the patriarchs as the ‘three ages of man’ could be an attempt by the illuminators to show that the message of the Psalm applied to everyone: young, middle-aged and old.

A textual attestation of the three ages of man that, uniquely, is unrelated to biblical exegesis features in the Book of Cerne.⁶¹ The Book of Cerne is a prayer book containing a collection of texts for private devotion and meditation, including seventy-four Latin prayers, many of which occur in other manuscripts.⁶² Prayer 8 ‘Confessio sancti penitentis’ [the holy confession of the penitent], one of the seven prayers that are unique to the Book of Cerne,⁶³ mentions the three ages of man:

pro hoc confiteor uobis quaecumque feci in puerile aetate uel in iuuentute
uel in senectute – et sepe peccaui in multis rebus multum deum irritaui.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek 32 (820x835, Hautvillers Abbey; the ‘Utrecht Psalter’). For an introduction to this manuscript, see F. Wormald, *The Utrecht Psalter* (Utrecht, 1953).

⁵⁷ Cambridge, Trinity College Library, R.17.1 (1155x1170, Canterbury, Christ Church; the ‘Eadwine Psalter’); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 8846 (1180x1200, Canterbury, Christ Church; the ‘Paris Psalter’). W. Noel, ‘The Utrecht Psalter in England: Continuity and Experiment’, in *The Utrecht Psalter in Medieval Art: Picturing the Psalms of David*, ed. K. van der Horst, W. Noel and W.C.M. Wüstefeld (Tuurdijk, 1996), 121–65.

⁵⁸ Noel, ‘Utrecht Psalter in England’, 121–2.

⁵⁹ For the identification of the three figures as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, see the commentary for Psalm 104 in K. van der Horst and F. Ankersmit, *The Utrecht Psalter: Picturing the Psalms of David*, CD-ROM (Utrecht, 1996); W. Noel, *The Harley Psalter* (Cambridge, 1995), 87, interprets these three figures as “possibly three of His prophets upon whom the story is hung”.

⁶⁰ Harley Psalter, 52v; Eadwine Psalter, 185r; Utrecht Psalter, 60v; The Paris Psalter has a different illustration for this Psalm.

⁶¹ Cambridge, University Library, MS L1.1.10 (c.820x840, Mercia; the ‘Book of Cerne’). Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 28.

⁶² For the Book of Cerne, see M. P. Brown, *The Book of Cerne: Prayer, Patronage and Power in Ninth-Century England* (London, 1996); for the prayers, see *ibid.*, 136–43.

⁶³ A. J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, 1983), 88, notes that this prayer “appears in no other manuscript yet known”; cf. T. Porck, ‘Two Notes on an Old English Confessional Prayer in Vespasian D. xx’, *NQ* ns 60 (2013), 493–8.

⁶⁴ Book of Cerne, 47v, ll. 15–7, ed. A. B. Kuypers, *The Prayer Book of Aedelwald the Bishop, Commonly Called the Book of Cerne* (Cambridge, 1902), 92–5.

[I confess to you that which I committed in the age of childhood or in maturity or in old age – and I have often sinned and greatly angered God in many things.]

These lines form part of a long list of potential sins which a penitent could recite during confession, which means that the prayer was probably intended as a liturgical text for the administration of penance.



Fig. 1.4. The Three Patriarchs as the three ages of man. Harley Psalter, 52v.

As I have argued in a separate publication, this prayer is closely related to three Old English prayers with which it probably shared a common, Latin source, but the prayer in the Book of Cerne is the only one to feature the three ages of man.⁶⁵ The parallel passage in a longer version of the prayer, in a tenth-century manuscript,⁶⁶ lists sins committed in four distinct phases of life:

Ic eom anddettā for eall þæt unriht þe ic æfre gefremede on minum cildhade
oððe on minre geogoðe oððe on minre strengðe oððe on minre ylde þe
æfter fulwihte agylte 7 on manegum þingum swiðe gode abealh.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Porck, 'Two Notes'.

⁶⁶ London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. xx (s. x med). Ker, no. 212; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 395.

⁶⁷ H. Logeman, 'Anglo-Saxonica Minora, I', *Anglia* 11 (1889), 101–2, ll. 54–7.

[I acknowledge all the injustice which I have ever done in my childhood or in my youth or in my strength or in my old age, which I committed after baptism and with many things greatly angered God.]

A shorter version of the prayer, added to an eleventh-century manuscript,⁶⁸ only lists childhood and old age, as two extremes of the entire spectrum of life:

Ic eom andetta þara þe ic of cildhade oð þas ieldo þe ic æfter fulwihte agylte 7 on manegum ðingum swiðe gode abealh.⁶⁹

[I acknowledge those (sins) which I committed from childhood to old age, after baptism, and with many things verily offended God.]

The third Old English prayer related to prayer 8 in the Book of Cerne leaves out the passage altogether.⁷⁰ The common origin of these four prayers is unknown and it is impossible to determine what the source text reads regarding the division of the life cycle. Nevertheless, the differences in the extant versions suggest, at the very least, that while the Anglo-Saxon writers may have differed in opinion as to whether a twofold, threefold or fourfold division was the most suitable way to define the life cycle, none of them felt the need to divide old age into two phases, in contrast to what would have been expected from the research by Cochelin.

The examples mentioned above reveal that the threefold division of the life cycle enjoyed widespread popularity in Anglo-Saxon England from an early period onwards and was represented in both word and image. With the exception of the prayer in the Book of Cerne, all attestations of the three ages of man stem from biblical exegesis and work on the analogy of various biblical or apocryphal triads, such as Christ's Parable of the Three Vigils, the Three Magi and the Three Patriarchs.

Four ages of man

While the tripartite scheme of life stems in general from biblical exegesis, a life cycle divided into four parts has its major roots in natural philosophy. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras (c.570–c.495 BC) is credited with the idea that a man's life can be divided into four stages, analogous to the four seasons in the course of a year.⁷¹ Later, this Pythagorean tetradic life cycle was related to other sets of four, such as the elements and the humours.⁷² This interrelation between the various sets of four made

⁶⁸ London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius C. i (1070x1100, Sherborne). Ker, no. 197; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 376.

⁶⁹ Logeman, 'Anglo-Saxonica Minora', 99, ll. 86–8.

⁷⁰ This text is edited in R. Fowler, 'A Late Old English Handbook for the Use of a Confessor', *Anglia*, 83 (1965), 1–34; see also Porck 'Two Notes', 495.

⁷¹ *The Four Seasons of Human Life: Four Anonymous Engravings from the Trent Collection*, ed. H. F. J. Horstmannshoff *et al.* (Rotterdam, 2002), 40–1.

⁷² Sears, *Ages of Man*, 9–16.

the scheme appealing for two Anglo-Saxon authors in particular: Bede (673/674–735) and Byrhtferth of Ramsey (fl. c.986–c.1016).

The first Anglo-Saxon attestation of a distinction between four ages of man is found in Bede's *De temporum ratione* (c.725), a work on the reckoning of time.⁷³ Here, Bede explained how the four ages of man correspond to four other sets of 'fours': the seasons, the qualities, the elements and the humours. He begins by noting how the four seasons could be understood in terms of the four qualities: spring is moist and hot, summer is hot and dry, autumn is dry and cold and winter is cold and moist. In the same way, the four qualities combine to form the four elements, air, fire, earth and water. Analogous to the four seasons, the human life cycle also consists of four phases and Bede distinguishes between *infantes* 'children', *adolescentes* 'young people', *transgressores* 'the middle-aged' and *senes* 'the elderly'.⁷⁴ Each of these phases is linked to the same qualities as its corresponding season and each is governed by one of the four humours: blood governs childhood, red choler governs youth, black choler governs maturity and old age is governed by phlegm (see table 1.1). Bede then outlines the typical behavioral characteristics that these dominating humours produce within mankind. The elderly dominated by phlegm, for example, are made "tardos, somnolentos, obliuiosos" [slow, sleepy, and forgetful].⁷⁵

Qualities	Moist and hot	Hot and dry	Dry and cold	Cold and moist
Season	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
Elements	Air	Fire	Earth	Water
Ages of man	<i>infantes</i>	<i>adolescentes</i>	<i>transgressores</i>	<i>senes</i>
Humours	Blood	Red choler	Black choler	Phlegm

Table 1.1 Bede's scheme of physical and physiological fours.

Cochelin interpreted Bede's unusual term *transgressors* as referring to the stage of life starting at forty-nine and hence she hypothesised that Bede here presented a subdivided old age into two phases.⁷⁶ This hypothesis, however, is improbable, given that *adolescentia* in most other medieval definitions of the life cycle ends at the age of 28 and rarely directly precedes the onset of old age.⁷⁷ Moreover, Byrhtferth of Ramsey, who based his discussion of the four ages on Bede, interprets Bede's *transgressores* as representing *iuventus*, the stage which typically precedes old age: "Colera nigra (id est melancholia) in transgressoribus uiget (id est qui <in> iuuentute sunt)" [Black choler (that is, melancholy) flourishes in those in a state of transition (that is, those in their manhood)].⁷⁸ Thus, Bede's rendition of the four ages more probably presents old age as a single, undivided phase of life.

⁷³ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. C.W. Jones, *Opera didascalica*, CCSL 123 B (Turnhout 1977), trans. F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool, 2012), ch. 35. Also discussed in Burrow, 12–6.

⁷⁴ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Cochelin, 'Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions', 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3–5.

⁷⁸ Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. P. S. Baker and M. Lapidge, EETS ss 15 (London, 1995), I.1, ll. 112–3.

Not all of Bede's sources for his scheme of physical and physiological fours have been identified. Bede probably derived the basic scheme of the four qualities, humours and seasons from Isidore of Seville's *De natura rerum*.⁷⁹ The origin of his information on the dominant humours for each of the four ages, however, is still uncertain. According to Faith Wallis, Bede's source is possibly the *Epistola ad Pentadium* by Vindicianus (c.632–c.712).⁸⁰ However, Vindicianus's letter seems an unlikely direct source, as it differs from Bede's text in a number of aspects, such as the fact that it posits two dominating humours for each of the four ages rather than one.⁸¹ In addition, Vindicianus described a different effect of phlegm on the elderly: "flegma facit homines corpore compositos, vigilantes, intra se cogitantes, cito adherentes canos in capite, minus audaces" [phlegm makes men calm in their body, watchful, thinking to themselves, quickly bringing gray hairs on their heads, less daring].⁸² Possibly, then, Bede's remark on the slow, sleepy and forgetful elderly was based on his personal experience.

As noted above, Byrhtferth, an Anglo-Saxon monk who lived at Ramsey Abbey, made use of Bede's tetradic scheme. Byrhtferth's rendition of the physical and physiological fours in his *Manual* or *Enchiridion* (1012–1020), a computational handbook, is the earliest known version of this doctrine in English:⁸³

Butan þissum þingum þe we sprecende synt, synt geswutelunga and gehwylcnyssa and twelf winda naman, and synt þa feower timan amearcod, lengten, sumor, hærfest and winter, and eac þa gelicnyssa, þæt ys cildhad and cnihtiugoð and gepungen yld and swyðe eald yld. Lengtentima and cildiugoð gepwærlæcað, and cnihtiugoð and sumor beoð gelice, and hærfest and gepungen yld geferlæcað, and winter and yld ateoriað.⁸⁴

[Apart from these things we are discussing, there are significations, and qualities, and the names of the twelve winds, and the four seasons are written down – spring, summer, autumn and winter – and also the similitudes – childhood, adolescence, manhood and very old age. Spring and childhood correspond, and adolescence and summer are alike, and autumn and manhood keep each other company, and winter and age decline together.]

⁷⁹ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, trans. Wallis, 319.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 101, n. 319.

⁸¹ "flegma in pueris cum sanguine ab ineunte aetate usque in annos XIII, exinde cholera rubra dominatur cum parte sanguinis in iuuenibus usque ad annos XXV. exinde usque in annos XLII maxima pars sanguinis dominatur cum cholera nigra. exinde usque ad summam aetatem sicut in pueris flegma dominatur moriente autem homine haec omnia revertuntur in sua loca" [phlegm, with blood dominates in children from an early age even to 14 years of age, from that time red cholera dominates with a part of blood in the young men until 25 years of age. From then until the age of 42 the major part is dominated by blood, with black cholera. From then to a certain time, just like in children, phlegm also dominates the dying man, all these things return to their places]. Vindicianus, *Epistola ad Pentadium*, ed. V. Rose, *Theodori Prisciani Euporiston libri III* (Leipzig, 1894), 487–9; cf. Burrow, 15, n. 2.

⁸² Vindicianus, *Epistola*, ed. Rose, 489.

⁸³ Also discussed in Burrow, 15–8.

⁸⁴ Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Baker and Lapidge, I.1, ll. 117–23.

Byrhtferth followed Bede in linking old age to winter, water, and the humour phlegm. His elderly, however, are not slow, sleepy and forgetful, but rather cold and rheumy:

Hiemps ys winter; he byð ceald and wæt. Wæter ys ceald and wæt; swa byð se ealda man ceald and snoflig. Flegmata (þæt byð hraca oððe geposu) deriað þam ealdan and þam unhalan.⁸⁵

[*Hiems* is winter; it is cold and wet. Water is cold and wet; likewise an old man is cold and rheumy. Phlegm (mucus or a head-cold) harms the old and infirm.]

Aside from this full discussion of Bede's tetradic scheme in the first book of his *Enchiridion*, Byrhtferth also refers to the links between the four ages, contraries, elements and seasons in his fourth book. The text provided there is in Latin, with Old English glosses supplied by a later annotator.⁸⁶ Notably, these Old English glosses for the Latin names of the four ages of Man differ from the Old English terms used in Byrhtferth's earlier discussion of the physical and physiological fours (see table 1.2). This use of different Old English names for the various ages reflects the difficulty of finding appropriate vernacular equivalents for the Latin terminology (for the terms used for old age, see chapter 2).

Latin terms	Old English text in Book 1	Old English glosses in Book 4
<i>pueritia</i>	cildhad	cildhad
<i>adolescentia</i>	cnihtiugoð	cnihtad
<i>iuuentus</i>	geþungen yld	geþungen yld
<i>senectus</i>	swyðe eald yld	fulre yld

Table 1.2 Old English age terminology in Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*

Byrhtferth further expanded on the theory of the four ages of man in a complex diagram that survives in two twelfth-century computational manuscripts (see fig. 1.5).⁸⁷ The diagram is known as 'Byrhtferth of Ramsey's diagram of the physical and physiological fours', although Byrhtferth himself called it *De concordia mensium atque elementorum* [On the concord of the months and elements]. With this diagram, Byrhtferth shows how various elements of the universe (months, seasons, elements, ages of man, wind directions) are all related to each other: "the diagram is about *concordia*, the way apparently different aspects of the physical universe figure each other, expressing God's perfection in the perfect symmetry of His creation".⁸⁸ Like the *Enchiridion*, the diagram relates the four ages of man to the four seasons, four contraries and the four elements. In addition, the diagram adds the number of years at

⁸⁵ Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Baker and Lapidge, I.1, ll. 131–3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, IV.1, ll. 72–84.

⁸⁷ London, British Library, Harley 3667 (s. xii^{2/4}, Peterborough), 8r; Oxford, St. John's College 17 (1102–1113, Thorney Abbey), 7v.

⁸⁸ Byrhtferth, *De concordia mensium atque elementorum. On the Concord of the Months and the Elements. Also Known as his Diagram of the Physical and Physiological Fours*, ed. P. S. Baker, <http://tinyurl.com/byrhtferthDeConcordia>. Also discussed in Burrow, 16–8.

which each age ends: *pueritia* or *infantia* ends after fourteen years, *adolescentia* after twenty-eight years, *iuuentus* ends after forty-eight years and *senectus* ends after seventy or eighty years.

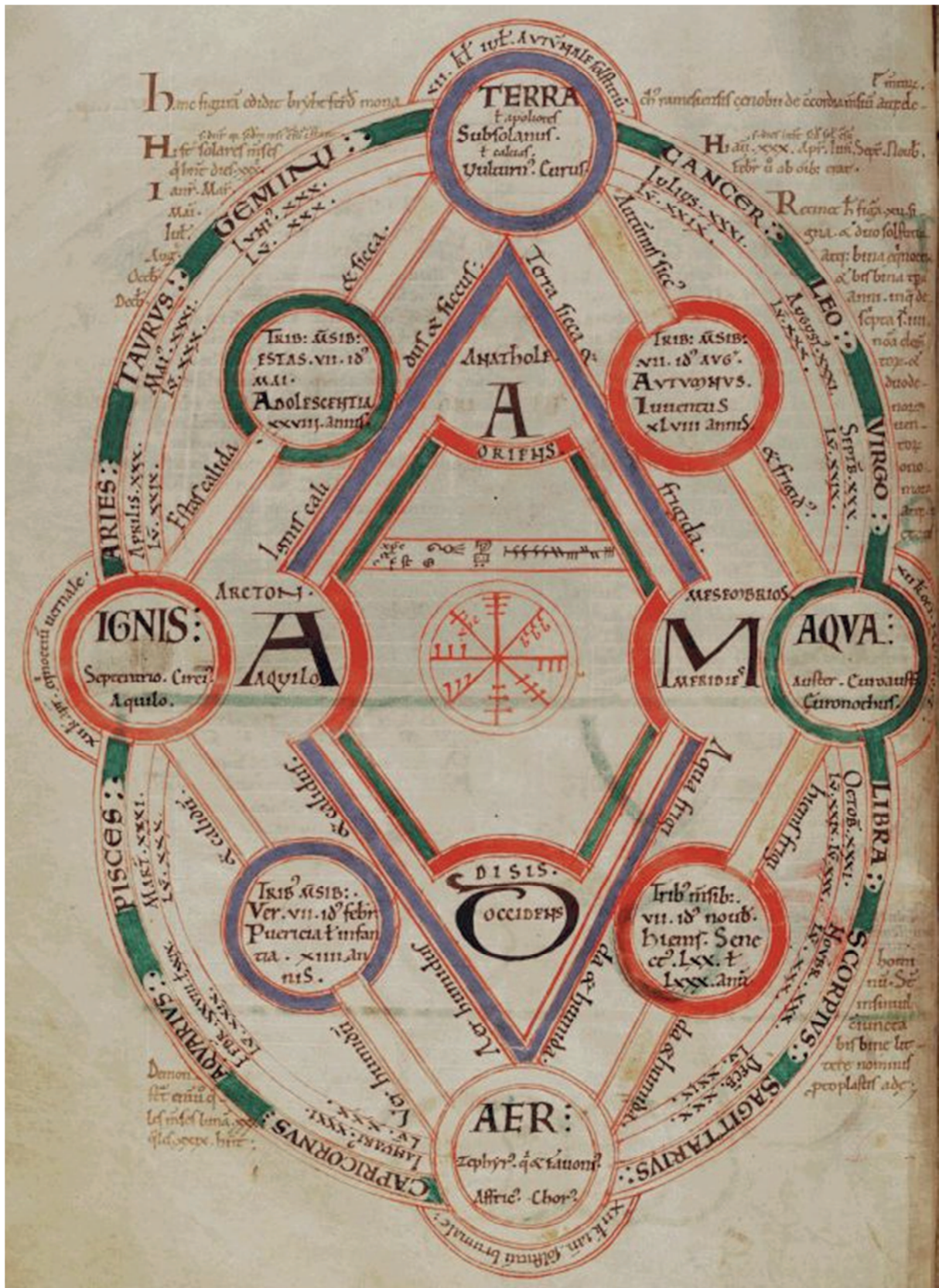


Fig. 1.5. Byrhtferth's diagram. Oxford, St. John's College 17, 7v.

The age limits for Byrhtferth's first three ages may have been derived from Isidore of Seville, who comments on them in two of his works, each describing a six-fold division of the life cycle. In his *Differentiae*, Isidore distinguishes between *infantia* (ends after seven years), *pueritia* (fourteen), *adolescentia* (twenty-eight), *iuventus* (forty-nine), *senectus* (seventy-seven) and *senium* (not limited to a particular number of years).⁸⁹ In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore mentioned the same scheme, but the fourth age, *iuventus*, ends at the age of forty-eight and the fifth, *aetas senioris* or *gravitas*, at the age of seventy.⁹⁰ Byrhtferth's age limit for his fourth age, *senectus* (ending at seventy or eighty), was probably based on Ps. 89:10 ("The days of our years in them are threescore and ten years. But if in the strong they be fourscore years"). Another influence on the age limits mentioned by both Byrhtferth and Isidore is the

⁸⁹ Isidore, *Differentiae*, II.19: "Prima hominis aetas infantia, secunda pueritia, tertia adolescentia, quarta iuventus, quinta senectus, sexta senium. Duae primae aetates singulis annorum terminantur hebdomadibus, propter simplicem vitam. Nam infantia septimo anno finitur, quartodecimo pueritia, dehinc sequens adolescentia duabus constat hebdomadibus propter intellectum et actionem. Quae duae nondum erant in pueris, et porrigitur haec aetas a quinto decimo anno usque ad XXVIII. Post haec succedens iuventus tribus hebdomadibus permanet, propter tria illa, intellectum et actionem, corporisque virtutem. Ista aetas a XXVIII anno exoritur, et quadragesimo nono consummatur, quando et in feminis partus deficit. Porro senectus quatuor hebdomadibus completur propter accedentem illis tribus animi et corporis gravitatem. Incipit enim haec aetas a quinquagesimo anno, et septuagesimo septimo terminatur. Ultima vero senium nullo certo annorum tempore definitur, sed solo naturae fine concluditur" [The first age of a person is infancy, the second is childhood, the third is adolescence, the fourth manhood, the fifth old age, the sixth feebleness. The first two ages are each terminated by a seven-year period, because of their simple life. For infancy is finished in the seventh year, childhood in the fourteenth. After this, adolescence follows, consisting of two seven-year periods for the sake of understanding and rationality. These two qualities did not yet exist in childhood, and this age stretches from the fifteenth year to the twenty-eighth. Coming after this, manhood lasts for three seven-year periods on account of three things: understanding, action, and the strength of the body. This age starts from the twenty-eighth year and finishes in the forty-ninth, a time when, in women, giving birth ceases. Furthermore, old age is completed by four seven-year periods because of the approaching heaviness in mind and body in the three areas of understanding, action, and strength. This age begins from the fiftieth year and ends in the seventy-seventh. The end of feebleness is defined by no particular period of years, but concludes solely with the end of nature]. PL 83, cols. 81b–c, trans. P. Throop, *Isidore of Seville's Synonyms and Differences* (Charlotte, 2012).

⁹⁰ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. F. Gasti (Paris, 2010), XI.ii, 2–6, 6–8: "Prima aetas infantia est pueri nascentis ad lucem, quae porrigitur in septem annis. Secunda aetas pueritia, id est pura et necdum ad generandum apta, tendens usque ad quartum decimum annum. Tertia adulescentia ad gignendum adulta, quae porrigitur usque ad uiginti octo annos. Quarta iuventus, firmissima aetatum omnium, finiens in quinquagesimo anno. Quinta aetas senioris, id est, gravitas, quae est declinatio a iuventute in senectutem, nondum senectus sed iam nondum iuventus, quia senioris aetas est [...]. Quae aetas quinquagesimo anno incipiens septuagesimo terminatur. Sexta aetas senectus, quae nullo annorum tempore finitur, sed post quinque illas aetates quantumcumque uitae est, senectuti deputatur." [The first age, infancy, is of a child being born to the light. It continues for seven years. The second, childhood, is an age which is pure, and not yet able to engender. It stretches to the fourteenth year. The third is adolescence, when one is mature enough to produce offspring. It lasts until one is twenty-eight. The fourth is manhood, the most stable of all ages, ending at the fiftieth year. The fifth age is that of the elder, senior, that is of dignity, gravitas. It is the decline from manhood into old age. It is not yet old age, but it is no longer manhood, being the age of the elder ... This stage begins at the fiftieth year and ends at the seventieth. The sixth age is old age, bound by no period of years; whatever remains after the previous five stages of life is considered old age]. Trans. P. Throop, *Isidore of Seville's Etymologies* (Charlotte, 2013).

classical theory of the hebdomads, which divided human life into periods of seven years.⁹¹ The threshold for old age will be discussed further below.

Lastly, Byrhtferth also made use of the four ages of man in two of his saints' lives: *Vita s. Oswaldi* (997–1002) and *Vita s. Ecgwini* (1016–1020).⁹² In his life of Oswald of Worcester (d. 992), archbishop of York and founder of Ramsey Abbey, for example, Byrhtferth describes how Oswald's uncle, Oda, "pueritie et adolescentie tempus transcendisset et tertium spatium iam aetatis sue adpropinquaret" [had passed the time of childhood and adolescence, and the third stage of his maturity was approaching].⁹³ In his *Vita s. Ecgwini*, Byrhtferth explicitly used the four ages of man as a structure for his account of Ecgwine, bishop of Worcester (?693–717) and founder of Evesham Abbey:

Constat istius uita breuiter edita et in bis binis partibus diuisa; que quattuor partes demonstrant quid in pueritia uel adolescentia siue in iuuentute atque in senectute gessit.⁹⁴

[The life of this man is briefly set out and divided into four parts, these four parts explain what he did in his childhood and youth and maturity and old age.]

At the end of the *Vita s. Ecgwini*, the four ages of man are put into an allegorical framework: Ecgwine attacks each of the four Gates of the Devil's city in the four successive stages of his life; the four Gates are each manned by two evil leaders, whose wives represent the eight deadly sins.⁹⁵

A division of life in four phases appears to have been less common than a threefold division. In addition to the confessional prayer in Vespasian D. xx, this division only appears in the works of Bede and Byrhtferth, who were attracted to the scheme for its similitude to other sets of four found in natural philosophy. In each of the attestations described above, old age features as a single, final phase of life. In contrast to Cochelin's conclusions, it is typically the second of the three "main phases", *iuuentus*, which is subdivided into two phases, rather than the last.⁹⁶

Five ages of man

Boll has remarked that, although a fivefold division of the life cycle seems a natural division, given the analogy with the five fingers, it is hardly ever attested in Classical

⁹¹ H. F. J. Horstmanshoff, 'De drempel van de ouderdom; medische en sociale zorg voor de oudere mens in de Grieks-Romeinse Oudheid', in *Verpleeghuiskunde. Een vak van doen en laten*, ed. J. F. Hoek, N. F. de Pijper, M. W. Ribbe en J. A. Stoop (Utrecht, 1996), 316.

⁹² Burrow does not discuss these two saints' lives.

⁹³ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. M. Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: The Lives of St. Oswald and St. Ecgwine* (Oxford, 2009), I.4.

⁹⁴ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: Lives*, preface.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.1–4.

⁹⁶ Cf. Cochelin, 'Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions', 11.

Antiquity.⁹⁷ The same holds true for Anglo-Saxon England, where we find only two attestations.

The first features in the *Vita Bonifatii* by the Anglo-Saxon Willibald of Mainz (c.700–c.787).⁹⁸ Similar to Byrhtferth of Ramsey in his *Vita s. Oswaldi*, Willibald explicitly used the ages of man to structure his hagiography of St. Boniface, noting from the outset how Boniface flourished “in infantia et pueritia vel adolescentia et iuuentute aut etiam in senectute floruerat” [in infancy, childhood, adolescence and manhood and even in old age].⁹⁹ Walter Berschin has noted that Willibald, in using the five ages of man to structure his narrative, follows the example of other hagiographers, such as Hilary of Arles (c.403–49) in his *De vita S. Honorati*.¹⁰⁰

The second attestation of the four ages of man is in Ælfric’s homily for Septuagesima Sunday, which deals with the Parable of the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16). This parable relates how workers were called to a vineyard at five different hours. In Ælfric’s interpretation, the various groups of workers mentioned in the parable signified people who became Christian at different moments in their lives:

Eornostlice þonne sume beoð gelædde on cildhade to godum ðeawum and rihtum life. sume on cnihtade. sume on geðungenum wæstmæ. sume on ylde. sume on forwerodre ealdnysse. þonne bið hit swylce hi beon on mislicum tidum to ðam wingearde gelaðode.

[Truly some are led in childhood to good deeds and a righteous life, some in youth, some in mature growth, some in old age, some in worn-out old age; then it is as though they had at diverse times been called to the vineyard.]¹⁰¹

Ælfric was not the first to interpret the Parable of the Vineyard in this way. His rendition is a near word-for-word translation of the corresponding passage in a homily by Gregory the Great, who, in turn, probably based his interpretation on the Greek church father Origen.¹⁰² So far, this homily is the first Anglo-Saxon rendition of the ages of man in this overview to feature the subdivision of old age into two phases that Cochelin ascribed to virtually all life cycle definitions found from the sixth century to the year 1120.¹⁰³

Six ages of man

The idea of the six ages of man stems from the analogy of the *sex aetates mundi* [six ages of the world] which was first proposed by St. Augustine of Hippo. In various works, Augustine propagated the idea that the world passed through six ages which correspond to the human life cycle: an *infantia* from Adam to Noah, a *pueritia* from

⁹⁷ Boll, ‘Lebensalter’, 176.

⁹⁸ Not discussed in Burrow.

⁹⁹ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, ed. R. Rau, *Bonifatii epistulae. Willibaldi vita Bonifatii* (Darmstadt, 1968), ch. 9.

¹⁰⁰ W. Berschin, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1991) III, 11.

¹⁰¹ *ÆCHom II*, hom. 5, ll. 101–6. Discussed in Burrow, 61–3.

¹⁰² Gatch, *Preaching and Theology*, 93–4; Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 383–4.

¹⁰³ Cf. Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 11.

Noah to Abraham, an *adolescentia* from Abraham to David, a *iuventus* from David until the Babylonian captivity, a *senioris* from the Babylonian exile to the coming of Jesus Christ and, finally, the present *senectus* which would last until the end of time.¹⁰⁴ Although the six ages of the world was a popular *topos* in Anglo-Saxon writing,¹⁰⁵ only three authors connected the ages of the world with the ages of man, all of them writing in Latin: Bede, the author of the *Collectanea* and Alcuin. Further, three encyclopaedic notes on the six ages of man survive in eight Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.¹⁰⁶ In addition to the works of Augustine, Isidore of Seville's treatment of the sixfold division of life in his *Differentiae* and *Etymologiae* was highly influential.

Bede included a version of the division into six ages in both his *De temporibus* (c.703) and his *De temporum ratione* (c.725). Following Augustine, Bede related the ages of the world to a division of the human life span into six parts.¹⁰⁷ In both texts, he distinguished between *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *iuuenilis [aetas]*, *senectus* and *aetas decrepita*. Thus, Bede divided old age into two parts: *senectus*, which he described as "grauis" [serious], and *aetas decrepita*, a period of decrepitude "morte finienda" [ending in death].¹⁰⁸

The ninth-century *Collectanea* that was once ascribed to Bede, but is now associated with either England or Ireland, features a different version of the theory of the six ages of man. Here, the six ages of man are treated separately from the ages of the world and, in contrast to Bede's and Augustine's versions, the text includes the number of year that each age will last:

Sex aetates hominis sunt. Prima infantia: septem annos tenet; secunda pueritia: alios septem annos tenet; tertia adolescentia, quae quatuordecim annos tenet; quarta iuventus, quae uiginti unum annum tenet; quinta senectus, quae uiginti octo annos tenet; sexta dicitur senium, ultima aetas uel decrepita, quae nullum certum tenet numerum annorum.¹⁰⁹

[There are six ages of man. The first, infancy, lasts seven years; the second, boyhood, lasts another seven years; the third is adolescence, which lasts fourteen years; the fourth is youth, which lasts twenty-one years; the fifth is old age, which lasts twenty-eight years; the sixth is called senility, or decrepitude, the final age, which lasts no definite number of years.]

¹⁰⁴ Sears, *Ages of Man*, 54–61.

¹⁰⁵ H. L. C. Tristram, *Sex aetates mundi: Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren. Untersuchungen und Texte* (Heidelberg, 1985).

¹⁰⁶ For a study of encyclopaedic notes in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, see K. Dekker, 'The Organisation and Structure of Old English Encyclopaedic Notes', *Filologia Germanica – Germanic Philology* 5 (2013), 95–130.

¹⁰⁷ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, trans. Wallis, 158, n. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Bede, *De temporibus*, ed. C. W. Jones, *Opera didascalica*, CCSL 123 C (Turnhout, 1980), ch. 16; Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 60. Also discussed in Cochelin, 'Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions', 24.

¹⁰⁹ *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayless and Lapidge, no. 378. Bayless and Lapidge erroneously translate "uiginti unum" as "twenty years", rather than "twenty-one years". The mutltitudes of seven years show the influence of the classical theory of the hebdomads, for which see Horstmanshoff, 'De drempel van de ouderdom', 316.

The years assigned to each stage of the life cycle are also found in the *Differentiae* by Isidore, who is the most probable source for this passage.¹¹⁰

Alcuin treated the six ages of man in some detail in his didactic text *Disputatio puerorum per interrogationes et responsiones*.¹¹¹ In the fifth chapter of this book, on the six ages of the world, he discusses the six ages of man, copying Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* almost at verbatim:

INTER. Et si totidem sunt, quomodo nominantur; uel quae est earum ratio, aut quot annis continentur ?

RESP. Prima earum infantia est pueri nascentis ad lucem, septem continens annos ; nam infans dicitur homo primae aetatus, eo quod adhuc fari, id est, loqui nescit. Secunda pueritia est, pura et necdum ad generandum apta, tendens usque ad XIII annum. Tertia adolescentia ad gignendum adulta, quae porrigitur usque ad XXVII annos. Quarta iuuentus firmissima aetatum omnium, finiens in quinquagesimo anno. Quinta aetas senior est grauitas, quae est declinatio a iuuentute in senectutem, nondum tamen senectus, sed iam nondum iuuentus ; haec enim aetas a quinquagesimo anno incipiens, in septuagesimo terminatur. Sexta aetas senectus, quae nullo annorum tempore finitus, sed post quinque illas aetates quantumcumque uitae est, senectuti deputabitur.¹¹²

[Question: And if there are just as many (ages), how are they named? Or what is their calculation, how many years are included?

Answer: The first of them, infancy, is from the child's birth into the light, which contains seven years; a man in the first stage is called an infant, because he still does not know how to speak, that is, to talk. The second, childhood, is pure and not yet able to reproduce, extending until fourteen years. The third, adolescence, (when someone is) mature enough to reproduce, which extends until twenty-seven years. The fourth, manhood, the strongest of all ages, ends in the fiftieth year. The fifth age is that of the elder, *gravitas* (dignity), which is the decline from manhood into old age; it is not yet old age, but it is no longer manhood; this age begins in the fiftieth year and ends in the seventieth year. The sixth age, old age, which is not limited to any space of years, but whatever of life remains after these five ages, is considered old age.]

Like Isidore, Alcuin posits the stage *gravitas*, from the ages of fifty to seventy, as an intermediate stage between *iuuentus* and *senectus*, noting that it differs from both.

¹¹⁰ Isidore, *Differentiae*, II.19, see p. 44, n. 88 above. Cf. *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayless and Lapidge, 273.

¹¹¹ Also mentioned by Burrow, 84; M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature. Vol. 2: 900–1066* (London, 1993), 237, n. 10, notes that the text may not be Alcuin's.

¹¹² Alcuin, *Disputatio puerorum per interrogationes et responsiones*, ed. L. E. Felsen, "'Disputatio puerorum': Analysis and Critical Edition", unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Oregon, 2003, V.3, ll. 26–39. Cf. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XI.ii, see p. 44, n. 89 above. The only notable difference is that Isidore has the third age end at twenty-eight years of age, following the classical theory of the hebdomads, whereas Alcuin has it end at twenty-seven.

Nevertheless, Alcuin's *grauitas* should probably be understood as representing the first stage of old age, called *senectus* by Bede, while Alcuin's *senectus* corresponds to Bede's *aetas decrepita*.

Alcuin also referred to the six ages of man in his commentary on John 4:6 ("Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well. It was about the sixth hour"): "Nam sexta aetas senectus est, quoniam prima est infantia, secunda pueritia, tertia adolescentia, quarta iuuentus, quinta grauitas" [Because the sixth hour is old age, just as the first is infancy, the second is childhood, the third is adolescence, the fourth youth and the fifth is *grauitas*].¹¹³ According to Alcuin, the sixth hour here represents the sixth age of the world, *senectus*, in which Christ was born. Alcuin copied this passage from Augustine's theological treatise *De diversis quaestionibus octaginta tribus* [On eighty-three various questions].¹¹⁴

In addition to the work of the three authors mentioned above, three short encyclopaedic notes on the six ages of man have survived in eight Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.¹¹⁵ The first is the following note in a tenth-century manuscript:¹¹⁶

SEX AETATES HOMINIS SUNT

s. aetas .vii. anni a .xiiii. a. xxviii. a .lix.

Prima infantia. ii. Pueritia iii Adolescentia. iiii iuuentus.

.lxxvii. a

Quinta senectus. vi. Senium. que nullo tempore finitur.¹¹⁷

[These are the six ages of man: The first infancy (until seven years); the second childhood (until fourteen); the third adolescence (until twenty-eight); the fourth manhood (until fifty-nine); the fifth senectus (until seventy-seven); the sixth decrepitude, which is not ended by any time span.]

The names of the ages and their age limits make clear that the source for this note is Isidore's *Differentiae*.¹¹⁸ The same note is found in an eleventh-century manuscript.¹¹⁹ The note was probably copied when both manuscripts were at St. Augustine's,

¹¹³ Alcuin, *Commentarii in s. Joannis evangelium*, ch. 7. PL 100, col. 792. Also discussed by Burrow, 84–5.

¹¹⁴ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octaginta tribus*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, CCSL 44 A (Turnhout, 1975), q. 64.

¹¹⁵ None of these notes are discussed by Burrow.

¹¹⁶ London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xix (s. x^{2/4} or x med., prob. Canterbury, St. Augustine's), 114r. Ker, no. 217; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 401.

¹¹⁷ The edition of this note by D. J. Sheerin, 'John Leland and Milred of Worcester', *Manuscripta* 21 (1977), 179, erroneously gives "lxxxvii" [87] for "senectus"; The manuscript reading "lix" for "iuuentus" is probably a corruption for "xlix", cf. P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England. 600–800* (Cambridge, 1990), 336, n. 33.

¹¹⁸ See p. 44, n. 88 above.

¹¹⁹ Rome, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg.lat. 204 (s. xi in., Canterbury, St. Augustine's), 24v; cf. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 337. For this manuscript, see Ker, no. 389; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 913.

Canterbury in the eleventh century, along with Bede's verse life of St. Cuthbert, which is found in both manuscripts.¹²⁰

A second note on the six ages of man, also heavily reliant on the work of Isidore, is found in Cotton Tiberius C. i, 150r:¹²¹

De .vi. Etatibus hominis. In uno homine prima infantia .vii. annos tenet. Secunda puericia alios vii annos tenet. Tercia adolescentia xiiii annos tenet. Quarta iuuentus .xxi ann<os> habet. Quinta senectus .xxi. ann<os>. Sexta dicitur seniu<m> ultima etas u<e>l decrepita. quę nullum certum numerum tenet annor<um>.¹²²

[Concerning the six ages of man. In (the life of) one person, the first, infancy, holds seven years. The second, childhood, holds another seven years. The third, adolescence, holds fourteen years. The fourth, manhood, has twenty-one years. The fifth, old age, twenty-one years. The sixth is called decrepitude, the last age or decrepitness, which holds no certain amount of years.]

The names of the ages in this note are similar to the ones used by Isidore in his *Differentiae*, but the age for *senectus*, seventy, is the one used by Isidore in his *Etymologiae*.¹²³

Another five manuscripts, dating from the ninth to twelfth centuries, contain a third, more elaborate note on the six ages of man, as part of a cluster of Latin encyclopaedic notes identified by Kees Dekker:¹²⁴

Prima ætas infantia .vii. annis. Secunda. pueritia . xiiii. tertia adulescentia .xxvii. an<nis>. Quarta iuuent<us> . xlviii. uel .viii. an<nis>. Quinta senectus usq<ue> ad .lxx. <ue>l .lxxx. an<nos>. ab anno .lxx<esimo>, <ue>l xxx<esimo>. Seniu<m> id <est> decrepitus et nimium senex

¹²⁰ *Bedas metrische Vita sancti Cuthberti*, ed. W. Jaager (Leipzig, 1935), 33. Vitellius A. xix and BAV, Reg.la 204, form a group with London, British Library, Harley 1117 (s. x/xi, prob. Canterbury CC) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 109 (s. x/xi and xi¹, Canterbury, St. Augustine's). Harley 1117 and Bodley 108 and do not contain this note. For these two manuscripts, see Gneuss and Lapidge, nos. 427, 546. For Harley 1117, see also K. O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Manuscripts Containing The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Works by Bede, and Other Texts* (Tempe, 2003), 19–24.

¹²¹ For this manuscript, see p. 39, n. 68 above.

¹²² Tiberius C. i, 150r. I am indebted to Kees Dekker (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen) for sharing his transcription of this note with me.

¹²³ See p. 44, n. 88. 89 above.

¹²⁴ K. Dekker, 'Anglo-Saxon Encyclopaedic Notes: Tradition and Function', in *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. R. H. Bremmer Jr and K. Dekker (Paris, 2007), 279–315. The manuscripts which include the note on the ages of man are: CCCC 183 (934x939, S England,); CCCC 320 (s. x² or x ex., Canterbury, St. Augustine's); London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian B. vi (805x814, Mercia); London, British Library, Royal 2.B.v (additions, s. x ex–xi¹, xi in, xi med. or xi²; the 'Royal Psalter'); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 2825 (s. ix/x, NE France, prov. England, s. x med.). Vespasian B. vi features this note, but does not contain the entire cluster of encyclopaedic notes. See Dekker, 'Encyclopaedic Notes', 302. For these manuscripts, see Gneuss and Lapidge, nos. 56, 90, 385, 451, 882.

dicit<ur>. Infantia hab<et> una<m> ebdomadum annor<um>. id <est> vii. an<nos> pueritia alios .vii. adulescentia duas ebd<omadas>. id <est> anni .xxviii. Iuuentus iii. ebd<omadas>. id s<un>t anni .xlvi. Senectus .iiii. ebd<omadas>. id s<un>t. an<ni> . lxxvii. ebd<omadas> .xi. Senium nullo certo annorum numero finit<ur>.¹²⁵

[The first age, infancy, (lasts to) seven years. The second, childhood, (to) fourteen years. The third, adolescence, (to) twenty-seven years. The fourth, youth, (to) forty-eight or -nine years. The fifth, old age, to seventy or eighty years. From the seventieth or eightieth year, senility, which is decrepit, and is said to be old age beyond measure. Infancy has one hebdomad of years – this is seven years – childhood another seven. Adolescence has two hebdomads – this is twenty-eight years. Youth has three hebdomads – these are forty-nine years. Old age has four hebdomads – these are seventy-seven years (or) eleven hebdomads. Senility is not ended by any certain number of years.]

Dekker suggests that Isidore of Seville's *Differentiae* is the probable source for this note.¹²⁶ I would argue, however, that this note is most probably a conflation of the various theories regarding the age limits of the six ages of man, since it combines the cut off points for each age in Isidore's *Differentiae* (7, 14, 28, 49, 77) with those in Isidore's *Etymologiae* (7, 14, 28, 50, 70), those found in the work of Alcuin (7, 14, 27, 50, 70) and Psalm 89. 10 (70 or 80 for *senectus*). In addition, this note adds 48 for *iuuentus*, a number which would later also be used by Byrhtferth. As such, this note appears to be a conglomeration of the various, competing divisions of the six ages of man that were available to an Anglo-Saxon scholar in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

The sixfold division of the human life cycle was known to a number of Anglo-Saxon scholars through the works of Augustine and Isidore. Whereas the theories of the three and four ages of man were on occasion adapted to the needs of the Anglo-Saxon writers and artists, the Anglo-Saxon texts dealing with the six ages of man are mostly copied, often at verbatim, from well-known sources. All attestations listed above feature a subdivided old age, but there is no clear distinction into an active and healthy 'young' old age and an 'old' old age marked by decline, as proposed by Cochelin.¹²⁷ In fact, for Alcuin, at least, the penultimate stage of life was already characterised by "declinatio" [decline], rather than prolonged health and activity.

On balance, when it came to the human life cycle, Anglo-Saxon artists appear to have preferred a threefold division, whereas Anglo-Saxon writers, depending on their sources and the framework within which they wrote, worked with three, four, five or six phases. Although the theory of the seven ages of man was to become the most popular division of the life cycle from the twelfth century onwards, no Anglo-Saxon evidence of this particular scheme can be found. This absence of a sevenfold scheme

¹²⁵ Dekker, 'Encyclopaedic Notes', 283, 314.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 288–9.

¹²⁷ Cf. Cochelin, 'Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions', 14.

of life confirms Burrow's statement that "[t]here is, so far as I know, no trace of the famous Seven Ages of Man in any pre-Conquest English writer".¹²⁸

The threshold of old age

One of the most common misconceptions about old age in the past is that people were considered old around their forties.¹²⁹ This idea certainly does not hold true for the later Middle Ages: Shahar has convincingly shown that old age was commonly believed to commence at 60.¹³⁰ The Anglo-Saxons, however, appear to have favoured 50 years of age as the onset of old age.

Among the various divisions of human life discussed above, six Anglo-Saxon texts mention the onsets and ends of the various stages of life. Table 1.3 lists each of the age limits proposed by these texts:¹³¹

Byrhtferth, Diagram	Ps.-Bede, Collectanea	Alcuin, Disputatio	Note in Vitel. A. xix	Note in Tiberius C. i	Note in Vespasian B. vi
<i>puerit.</i> (14)	<i>infantia</i> (7)	<i>infantia</i> (7)	<i>infantia</i> (7)	<i>infantia</i> (7)	<i>infantia</i> (7)
<i>adol.</i> (28)	<i>puerit.</i> (14)	<i>puerit.</i> (14)	<i>puerit.</i> (14)	<i>puerit.</i> (14)	<i>puerit.</i> (14)
<i>iuuent.</i> (48)	<i>adol.</i> (28)	<i>adol.</i> (27)	<i>adol.</i> (28)	<i>adol.</i> (28)	<i>adol.</i> (27/28)
<i>sene.</i> (70/80)	<i>iuuent.</i> (49)	<i>iuuent.</i> (50)	<i>iuuent.</i> (49)	<i>iuuent.</i> (49)	<i>iuuent.</i> (48/49)
	<i>sene.</i> (77)	<i>sene.</i> (70)	<i>sene.</i> (77)	<i>sene.</i> (70)	<i>sene.</i> (70/77/80)
	<i>senium</i> (-)	<i>senium</i> (-)	<i>senium</i> (-)	<i>senium</i> (-)	<i>senium</i> (-)

Table 1.3 Age limits in Anglo-Saxon texts

While these age limits undoubtedly belong to the world of monastic learning,¹³² there are some indications that they may nonetheless have played a role in the daily life of Anglo-Saxons. The age limit of *infantia*, seven years of age, for example, certainly appears to have held some significance. According to Bede himself, he entered the monastery at Monkwearmouth at the age of seven.¹³³ Beowulf, similarly, was entrusted to the court of King Hrethel when he was seven years old:

Ic wæs syfanwintre, þa mec sinca baldor

¹²⁸ Burrow, 39. H. C. Covey, 'Old Age Portrayed by the Ages-of-Life Models from the Middle Ages to the 16th Century', *The Gerontologist* 29 (1989), 697, mentions Alcuin as one of the proponents of the seven ages of man, but he provides no evidence, nor have I been able to find a reference to the seven ages in Alcuin's work. Cf. *idem*, *Images of Older People*, 34.

¹²⁹ Shahar, 'Who Were Old', 313, n. 1.

¹³⁰ *Idem*, 'Old Age in the High and Late Middle Ages', 43–63.

¹³¹ Bede did not add age limits to his discussion of the ages of man in his *De temporum ratione*, yet there is an indication that he was familiar with the age limit for *infantia* proposed by Isidore. Bede, *Vita s. Cuthberti*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 1: "Siquidem usque ad octauum aetatis annum qui post infantiam puericiae primus est, solis paruulorum ludis et lasciuiae mentem dare nouerat..." [For up to the eighth year of his age, which is the end of infancy and the beginning of boyhood, he could devote his mind to nothing but the games and wantonness of children].

¹³² The recurrence of periods of seven years also suggests the influence of the classical theory of the hebdomads, for which see Horstmannshoff, 'De drempel van de ouderdom', 316.

¹³³ Bede, *HE*, V.24.

freawine folca, æt minum fæder genam;
heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning,
geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde.¹³⁴

[I was seven years old, when the lord of treasures, the lord of nations,
received me from my father; King Hrethel held and had me, gave me
treasure and feasts, he was mindful of our kinship.]

In his *vita* of Wilfrid (c.634–709/10), bishop of Hexham, Stephen of Ripon described how the bishop asked a woman to bring her child, who had been miraculously resurrected, to his monastery at the age of seven, so that it could start its life as an oblate.¹³⁵ Wilfrid himself, according to the same *vita*, had chosen to live as a monk at the age of fourteen, the age limit of *pueritia*, marking his entry into adult life.¹³⁶ While it is possible that Stephen of Ripon based the details of these, possibly fictional, episodes of his *vita* on the life cycle definitions mentioned above, these age limits for *infantia* and *pueritia* are also attested in other medieval traditions.¹³⁷

Various Anglo-Saxon commentators on the life cycle placed the onset of old age at forty-eight, forty-nine or fifty years of age. Today, the last threshold is often associated with John 8:57 (“The Jews therefore said to him: You are not yet fifty years old. And have you seen Abraham?”). This text may have played a role for the Anglo-Saxons as well, although neither Bede, Alcuin nor Ælfric touch on the issue in their commentaries on this biblical passage.¹³⁸ Gregory the Great, in his *Dialogi*, mentions the threshold of fifty years of age in relation to the law of the Levites, which ascribed those aged over fifty the task of instructing their brothers (Numbers 8. 24–8).¹³⁹ Gregory’s commentary, here in Wærferth’s Old English translation, runs as follows:

‘Be þon wæs þurh Moyses beboden, þæt þa diaconas sceoldon þegnian fram fif 7 twentigum wintra 7 ofer þæt, 7 þonne of þam fiftigoðan gære hi mihton beon hyrdas þara fata 7 madma þæs temples.’

Petrus cwæð: ‘Nu me betwyh læteð hwæthugu 7gytes þyssere forðlæddan cyðnyse. Ac þonne hwæpre ic bidde, þæt me þis geredelicor sy gerihted.’

Gregorius him 7swarode: ‘Cup þæt is, Petrus, þæt in geogoðhade þæs lichaman costung wealleþ, 7 þonne fram þam fiftigoðan geare colað seo hæte þæs lichaman. Witodlice þa halgan fatu syndon geleaffulra manna

¹³⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 2428–30,

¹³⁵ Stephen of Ripon, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), ch. 18. On child oblation in general and this case in particular, see M. de Jong, *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996), 197.

¹³⁶ Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, ch. 2: “Postremo tamen quarto decimo anno in corde suo cogitabat paterna rura deserere, iura celestia quaerere” [At last, however, when fourteen years of age, he meditated in his heart leaving his father’s fields to seek the Kingdom of Heaven].

¹³⁷ Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 11–2.

¹³⁸ Bede, *In s. Joannis evangelium expositio*, ch. 8. PL 92, col. 756b; Alcuin, *Commentaria in s. Joannis evangelium*, ch. 23. PL 100, col. 876. Ælfric discusses the passage in his homily for the fifth Sunday in Lent; *ÆCHom II*, hom. 13.

¹³⁹ Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. A. de Vogüé (Paris, 1978–80), II.ii.3–4.

mod. Forþon þa gecorenan, þonne hi beoþ þa gyt in costunge heora lichaman, heom is neodþearf, þæt hi syn underþeodde 7 þeowian oðrum mannum 7 syn mid þegnungum 7 gewinnum geswencte. 7 þonne æfter þæt on þære smyltan ylde þæs modes, þonne seo hæte þære costunge onweg gewiteð, hi beoð þara fata hyrdas, forþon hi beoþ sawla lareowas.¹⁴⁰

[‘Therefore, it was also commanded by Moses, that the Levites should serve from twenty-five winters and beyond and then, from their fiftieth year, they should be keepers of the vessels and of the treasures of the temple.’]

Peter said: ‘Now this allows me something of an understanding of this testimony that was brought forth. But then, still, I ask that it be explained to me more fully.’

Gregory answered: ‘It is known, Peter, that the temptation of the body is hot in youth and then, from the fiftieth year, the heat of the body cools. Truly, the holy vessels are the souls of the faithful people. Therefore, for the chosen ones, when they are then still in the heat of their body, for them it is necessary, that they are subordinated and serve other men and are burdened with services and labours and then after that, in the calm old age of their mind, when the heat of temptation has gone away, they will be the keepers of vessels, because they will be teachers of souls.’]

The idea that old age is characterised by the exhaustion of natural heat ultimately goes back to Aristotle.¹⁴¹

Fifty years of age also features as the threshold of old age in a medical text on the ‘half-dead disease’, which may have been part of Bald’s *Leechbook*.¹⁴² The half-dead disease is described as an affliction which involved the paralysis of one half of the entire body and has been identified as hemiplegia. According to the Anglo-Saxon text, hemiplegia only afflicted people over fifty (or forty) and should not be confused with a similar disease that could come upon people in their youth:

Soðlice seo adl cymð on monnan æfter feowertigum oððe fiftigum wintra. Gif he bið cealdre gecyndo þonne cymð æfter feowertigum, elcor cymð æfter fiftigum wintra his gærgetales. Gif hit gingran men gelimpe þonne bið þæt eaðlæcnere 7 ne bið seo ylce adl þeah þe ungleawe læcas wenan þæt þæt seo ylce healfdeade adl si. Hu gelic adl on man becume on geogoðe on sumum lime swa swa seo healfdeade adl on ylde deð? Ne bið hit seo healfdeade adl ac hwilc æthwega yfel wæte bið gegoten on þæt lim þe hit on gesit ac bið eaðlæcnere ac seo soðe healfdeade adl cymð æfter fiftigum wintra.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ *Bischof Wærferths von Worcester: Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wundertaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, ed. H. Hecht (Leipzig, 1900-1907; rpt. Darmstadt, 1965), p. 102, ll. 10-32, p. 103, ll. 1-5.

¹⁴¹ Grmek, *On Ageing and Old Age*, 64-5. See also R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (Cambridge, 1951), 214-5, 219-21.

¹⁴² M. L. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge, 1993), 16, n. 27.

¹⁴³ *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, ed. T. O. Cockayne (London, 1864-6) II, 284-5. Capitalisation and punctuation has been added.

[Truly, this disease comes on a man after forty or fifty winters. If he is of a cold nature, then it comes after forty winters; otherwise, it comes after fifty winters of his life. If it should happen to a younger man, then it is easier to cure and it is not the same disease, even though ignorant physicians think that it is the same half-dead disease. How can a similar disease come on a man in youth in some limb, just as the half-dead disease does in old age? It is not the half-dead disease, but some kind of evil fluid poured on the limb, on which it remains, but it is easier of cure; and the true half-dead disease comes after fifty winters.]

The idea expressed in this text that 50 signalled the onset of old age was taken from a Latin source, the *Pratica Petrocelli Salernitani* by Petrocellus.¹⁴⁴

Another indication that the period of fifty years was associated with old age can be found in Old English poetry, notably *Beowulf* and *Solomon and Saturn II*. In *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother, Hrothgar and Beowulf are all said to have ruled their respective realms for fifty years.¹⁴⁵ Given the roundness of the number and its recurring use in the poem, 'fifty years' here is likely to be a symbolic marker of old age or simply 'a long period' of time, rather than a specific number of years. Similarly, in the Old English poem *Solomon and Saturn II*, Saturn, a man bearing the name of the pagan god typically associated with old age,¹⁴⁶ complains to Solomon how a certain curiosity had vexed him for "L wintra" [fifty years].¹⁴⁷ Solomon explains Saturn's curiosity as being the murderous bird called "Vasa mortis"; an answer that leaves Saturn's statement that he had been troubled by this bird for fifty years unexplained. Possibly, the reference to Saturn's fifty years foreshadows the following question that is dealt with in the poem: the riddle of old age.¹⁴⁸ As such, the period of fifty years is linked once again to old age.

In summary, various Anglo-Saxon texts, although mostly taking their cue from older, classical sources, placed the beginning of old age around the age of fifty. Whether these texts reflect social reality in any way is hard to establish, if not impossible.¹⁴⁹ While in Visigothic laws the age of 50 marked a category of elderly

¹⁴⁴ Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, 16; it is unknown when Petrocellus lived and wrote.

¹⁴⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 1498, 1769, 2209–10, 2732–3.

¹⁴⁶ See H. Peters, 'Jupiter and Saturn: Medieval Ideals of "Elde"', in *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, ed. Classen, 375–91.

¹⁴⁷ *Solomon and Saturn II*, ed. D. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Cambridge, 2009), l. 70.

¹⁴⁸ To be discussed in detail in chapter 4 below.

¹⁴⁹ Treharne's translation of the Old English *Life of St. Nicholas* appears to provide a fifty-year old Anglo-Saxon who felt obliged to ask his readers not to judge him too harshly on account of his old age: "Eac, ic bidde eadmodlice ealle þa wise ræderes þe to þissere rædinge ganggað, þæt heo me ne fordeman gif heom þær on aht mislicige, ac gemiltsigan hi, ic bidde, minre elde 7 minre gecynde. Gemunan heo eac hu ic eom nu fiftene gear on elde, tydderlic of gecynde" [Also I pray humbly to all the wise readers who come to this reading, that they may not prejudice me if anything seems amiss to them: but that they forgive me, I pray, because of my old age and my nature. They should remember moreover that I am now fifty years old and feeble of nature]. *Old English Life of St. Nicholas with the Old English Life of St. Giles*, ed. and trans. E. M. Treharne (Leeds, 1997), 83, ll. 22–7, for the translation, *ibid.*, 101. However, Treharne's translation is problematic: "fiftene" should be translated

men for whom the wergild was lower than for men from other age categories,¹⁵⁰ no such age threshold is found in Anglo-Saxon law codes.

Conclusion

Table 1.4 summarises all the information discussed above schematically, following the example of the table in the overview of early medieval life cycle definitions by Cochelin.¹⁵¹ The first column provides information about the text or artwork and the three following columns with bold outline represent the three main phases of an early medieval life cycle definition as posited by Cochelin: *pueritia*, *iuventus* and *senectus*. When an author subdivided any of these three main phases this is indicated by dividing the cell in that particular column.

On the whole, then, the ‘universal’ life cycle definition that Cochelin posited for the sixth century up until 1120 holds true: the life cycle was typically conceptualised as consisting of three main phases (*pueritia*, *iuventus*, and *senectus*), which could each be subdivided.¹⁵² However, Cochelin’s notion that an early medieval life cycle definition typically featured a “subdivided old age” does not hold up to scrutiny. In the majority of cases, Anglo-Saxon writers and artists preferred triadic and tetradic schemes of the life cycle, in which old age was presented as a single, long phase. Furthermore, whenever an author distinguished between two stages of old age, the first stage was never described as a ‘green’ old age without any deficiency. Rather, whether consisting of one or two stages, old age as a whole was identified as a period of physical decline, which set in around the age of fifty.

as ‘fifteen’ and “tydderlic” is more likely to have meant ‘tender’. We are rather dealing, therefore, with a youthful scribe, who apologises on account of his youth, rather than his old age. Semper, 311, altered the Old English quotation to read “fiftig geare”, in order to match Treharne’s translation; the manuscript, CCC 303, p. 172, however, clearly reads “fiftene geare”.

¹⁵⁰ D. Herlihy, *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978–1991* (Providence, 1995), 222–3.

¹⁵¹ Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 3–5.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

DEFINITIONS OF OLD AGE

Main phases (Cochelin)	<i>pueritia</i>		<i>iuuentus</i>		<i>senectus</i>	
Bede, <i>In Lucam evangelium espocitio</i>	pueritia		adolescentia		senectus	
Ælfric, ed. Assmann, hom. 4	cildhad		weaxend cnihtad		forwered yld	
Ælfric, ed. Pope, hom. 11	cild		geonge menn		ealdan	
Blickling Homily 14	iugop		midfyrhtnes		ylde	
Wulfstan, "De temporibus"	cild		medeme ylde mann		eald geðungen mann	
Ps.-Bede, <i>Collectanea</i>	iuuenis		<middle age>		senex	
Three Magi on Franks Casket	<youth>		<middle age>		<old age>	
Three Magi on whale bone carving	<youth>		<middle age>		<old age>	
Three Magi in Bury St. Edmunds Psalter	<youth>		<middle age>		<old age>	
Three Magi in exemplar of Antwerp <i>Prudentius</i>	<youth>		<middle age>		<old age>	
Three Patriarchs in Harley Psalter	<youth>		<middle age>		<old age>	
The Book of Cerne	puerilis aetas		iuuentus		senectus	
Vespasian D. xx	cildhad		geogoð	strengð	yld	
Bede, <i>De temporum ratione</i>	infantes		adolescentes	transgressores	senes	
Byrhtferth, <i>Enchiridion</i>	pueritia		adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	
Byrhtferth, Diagram	pueritia / infantia		adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	
Byrhtferth, <i>Vita s. Oswaldi</i>	pueritia		adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	
Willibald, <i>Vita Bonifatii</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	
Ælfric, <i>CH II</i> , 5	cildhad		cnihtad	geðungen wæstm	yld	forwerod ealdnyss
Bede, <i>De temporum ratione</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuenilis aetas	senectus	aetas decrepita
Bede, <i>De temporibus</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuenilis aetas	senectus	aetas decrepita
Ps.-Bede, <i>Collectanea</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	senium / decrepitas
Alcuin, <i>Disputatio puerorum</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	grauitas	senectus
Alcuin, <i>Commentarii in s. Joannis evangelium</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	grauitas	senectus
Encyclopaedic note in Vitellius A. xix and BAV, Reg.lat 204	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	senium
Encyclopaedic note in Tiberius C. i	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	senium
Encyclopaedic note in CCC 183, CCC 320, Vespasian B.vi, Royal 2.B.v and BnF, lat. 2825	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus	senium / decrepitas

Table 1.4 Definitions of the life cycle found in Anglo-Saxon England

Words for old age

Grumpy old women, dirty old men, old bats, coots, geezers, train wrecks and silver tsunami are but a few Modern English words and phrases denoting people of an advanced age.¹ Each reflects a negative, possibly ageist attitude of English speakers towards the elderly; they connect old age to a number of undesirable characteristics, ranging from bad humour to decrepitude.² Surveying vocabulary in this way is a means to uncover cultural conceptualisations which are anchored in the lexicon of a language.³

At first glance, Old English vocabulary seems to testify to a conception of old age wholly opposed to the Modern English words listed above. Amos observed that the Old English words and phrases used for elderly people were mostly positive: “[r]eading modern idioms using old is a lowering experience, and a drastic contrast to the Old English patterns”.⁴ Basing herself on Amos’s work, Crawford made a similar claim: “[i]f a vocabulary indicates how people think, then Old English writers had a very positive cognitive map of old age”.⁵ However, Amos did not take into account all available material: whereas she only looked at four words for old age (*eald*, *frōd*, *hār* and *gamol*), the *Thesaurus of Old English* (TOE) and various Old English dictionaries list over fifty words associated with ‘old age’ or ‘growing old’. An analysis of all these words, as provided in this chapter and the Appendix, reveals that the Anglo-Saxons did not only frame the last stage of a person’s life in positive terms.

With its focus on vocabulary, this chapter takes a lexicological approach that necessitates a brief word on terminology. The term ‘word’, in particular, is problematic as it is generally used to denote three distinct types of units: an orthographic unit (a sequence of letters separated in the manuscript by spaces on either end), a morphological unit (such as the inflectional variants *dog* and *dog’s*) and a semantic unit (a unit of meaning as found in a dictionary). In the remainder of this chapter, as well as in the Appendix, I follow Dieter Kastovsky’s terminology:

lexeme/lexical item: words in the sense of ‘dictionary entry’ or ‘lemma’ for which the citation form is provided in italics with length marks where appropriate, e.g. Old English *stān* ‘stone’.

¹ R. Rose Shield and S. M. Aronson, *Aging in Today’s World: Conversations between an Anthropologist and a Physician* (New York, 2003), 103–10. For the last term, used to describe the danger posed by a growing, elderly proportion of English society, see Adams, ‘Martin Amis Calls for Euthanasia Booths’.

² For a similar overview of mostly pejorative terms for elderly people in Dutch, see F. Jansen, ‘Voor alle leeftijden. Leeftijdsaanduidingen als barometer van intergenerationeel ongemak’, *Onze Taal* 73 (2004), 112–6.

³ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 39.

⁴ Amos, 104.

⁵ S. Crawford, ‘The Dictionary of Old English, the Archaeology of Ritual Landscapes, and the Burial Ritual in Early Anglo-Saxon England’, *Florilegium* 26 (2009), 223; Crawford, 53.

word form: any individual inflected form of a lexical item, e.g. stan, stanes, stane, stanas, stana, stanum.

word: any actual sequence of letters bounded by a space to its right and left in a text.⁶

The remainder of the chapter is divided into three parts. I first outline this chapter's theoretical framework, taken from the fields of ethnolinguistics, cognitive linguistics and semantic field studies, respectively. I then discuss the research tools that are available for Old English lexicographical studies, such as the *TOE*, the *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* and the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus (DOEC)*. Lastly, an overview of the results of my semantic field study is provided; the lexicographical analyses of the individual words can be found in the Appendix to this thesis.

Theoretical framework: Words as keys to culture

The notion that a language provides an insight into the culture of its speakers is well established in the fields of ethnolinguistics, which studies the relationship between language and culture, and cognitive linguistics, which studies how language is used to conceptualise ideas. Ethnolinguists, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, held that language is “the means by which men create their conception, understanding and values of objective reality”.⁷ Cognitive linguists confirm this disposition that language can be studied not only as a medium of communication, but also as a means for speakers to conceptualise the world around them. The cognitive linguist Sharifian, for instance, has shown that a language reflects the thoughts and mental patterns of its speakers; consequently, each language can be analysed as a “collective memory bank for cultural conceptualisations”.⁸

Although links have been proposed between culture and almost every aspect of language, including morphology, syntax and phonology,⁹ vocabulary is generally regarded as the most direct link between a language and the world-view of its speakers:¹⁰

Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people and changes of the meaning, loss of old words, the creation and borrowing of new ones are all dependent on the history of culture itself. Languages differ widely in the nature of their vocabularies. Distinctions which seem inevitable to us may be utterly ignored in languages which reflect an entirely different type

⁶ D. Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, in *The Cambridge History of the English Language. Vol. 1: The Beginnings to 1066*, ed. R. M. Hogg (Cambridge, 1992), 290–1.

⁷ Their views are summarised in H. Basilius, ‘Neo-Humboldtian Ethnolinguistics’, *Word* 8 (1952), 95–105.

⁸ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 39.

⁹ G. B. Palmer, *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics* (Austin, 1996); *Ethnolinguistics: Boas, Sapir and Whorf Revisited*, ed. M. Mathiot (The Hague, 1979).

¹⁰ A. Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese* (New York, 1997); Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 39.

of culture, while these in turn insist on distinctions which are all but unintelligible to us.¹¹

The theoretical validity of this approach has been questioned in the past, since children can conceptualise ‘food’ before they acquire language, speakers can distinguish between pink and red, even if their language uses only one word for both, and we are often at a loss for words to express our heart-felt emotions.¹² However, I agree with Alaric Hall that the notion of language reflecting culture cannot be denied: “if language did not reflect culture then it would be an absurdly ineffectual tool for communication”.¹³ The next few paragraphs illustrate how various aspects of the lexicon can be used to gain insight into the cultural mindset of its users.

To begin with, the presence or absence of lexical items for certain concepts is possibly the clearest example of the relationship between vocabulary and culture. Frisian, for instance, is one of the few languages to have a specific lexeme for walking over land with ice skates on places where the ice is too thin for skating (Frisian *klune*). This lemma reflects the Frisian fondness of moving over frozen water on special footwear.¹⁴ Lacking lexemes for certain concepts can also be revealing.¹⁵ Old English does not have specific lexemes for the temporal concepts ‘second’ and ‘minute’, suggesting that such precise levels of time measurement were not necessary in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁶

Next, the number of lexical items that a language employs for a concept can also provide insight into the culture of its speakers: central concepts within a culture are represented in a larger number in the lexicon. This principle of cultural elaboration is demonstrated by the fact that the Hanunóo language of The Philippines has ninety different lexemes for ‘rice’ and that Arabic abounds in expressions for ‘stone’, ‘camel’, ‘sword’ and ‘snake’.¹⁷ Instances of cultural elaboration of vocabulary can also

¹¹ E. Sapir, ‘Language’, in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. D. G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley, 1951), 27.

¹² A. Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge, 2007), 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ For other culture-specific vocabulary items, such as Japanese *sake* for ‘rice wine’ and Polish *bigos* for ‘cabbage stew’, see Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures*, 1–3.

¹⁵ Cf. Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, 13: “People can of course conceive of things for which they lack words, and the absence of a word does not prove the absence of corresponding concepts. However, it is reasonable to suppose *a priori* that the distribution of words in a lexicon attests to the relative cultural salience of the concepts which they denote, with absences at least suggesting low salience”.

¹⁶ For a study of Old English words for ‘time’, see L. Kopár, ‘Spatial Understanding of Time in Early Germanic Cultures: The Evidence of Old English Time Words and Norse Mythology’ in *Interfaces between Language and Culture in Medieval England*, ed. A. Hall *et al.* (Leiden, 2010), 203–30. See also R. M. Liuzza, ‘The Sense of Time in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 89:2 (2013), 131–51.

¹⁷ Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures*, 10. A famous, if contested example, is the number of expressions that various languages have for ‘snow’. According to popular belief, Inuits have more lexemes for snow than speakers of English and this ‘elaboration’ of Inuit vocabulary is assumed to reflect the particular interests of Inuit culture. Some linguists have questioned the validity of this example, mostly on the grounds that the agglutinative nature of the Inuit language has been

be found in the Old English lexicon: the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture is reflected in the seventy or more lexemes denoting ‘warrior’.¹⁸ Likewise, the relatively high number of Old English lexical items for ‘bondage, slavery’ suggests the importance and presence of a sizable group of unfree people in Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁹ Similarly, Rolf H. Bremmer Jr has noted that the multiple expressions for the instrument of Christ’s execution reveal the importance of the Cross for the Anglo-Saxons: “A child that is loved has many names”.²⁰

A further method to reconstruct cultural conceptualisations is the analysis of polysemy, the phenomenon that a lexical item can have multiple meanings. To cite a striking example, the Nambikwara, an indigenous people living in Brazil, are said to have one term to denote both ‘old’ and ‘ugly’ and another which means both ‘young’ and ‘beautiful’. These lexical items clearly illustrate the cultural connections between, respectively, old age and ugliness, and youth and beauty.²¹ In the Old English lexicon, too, polysemy is a widespread phenomenon and has been used to identify underlying assumptions and connotations in Anglo-Saxon culture. Caroline Gevaert’s analysis of Old English expressions for anger is a case in point; she revealed that the Anglo-Saxons associated anger with sadness, insanity and unkindness, as reflected in the Old English lexemes *unrōt* ‘sad, angry’, *wōd* ‘mad, raging, senseless’ and *unmilts* ‘severity, anger’, respectively.²²

Etymology, the study of the original form and meaning of lexemes, provides yet another insight into the relationship between vocabulary and culture. The etymologies of Old English *hlāford* ‘lord’ (< **hlāf-weard* ‘guardian of the bread’), *hlāfdige* ‘lady, woman’ (< **hlāf-dige* ‘kneader of the bread’), *hlāfēta* ‘dependant, retainer’ (< **hlāf-ēta* ‘eater of the bread’) and *hlāfbrytta* ‘slave’ (< **hlāf-brytta* ‘dispenser of the bread’), for example, may be reflections of traditional Anglo-Saxon role patterns and the importance of bread in the Anglo-Saxon household. Arguably, however, the etymology of a word may only reflect fossilised cultural values which are no longer held at the time that the word was used, the so-called ‘etymological trap’.²³

Final lexical aspects worth considering are compounds, recurring usage patterns and collocations. Compounds formed with *medu* ‘mead’, for instance, reveal that this

misunderstood. See, e.g., S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (London, 1995), 64–5.

¹⁸ Based on the TOE categories “13.02.10.01 A man, warrior”, “13.02.10.01|01 A man, warrior: A warrior, fighter”, “13.02.10.01|01.01 A man, warrior: A young warrior” and “13.02.10.01|02 A man, warrior: A glorious warrior”; see also R. H. Bremmer Jr, ‘Old English Heroic Literature’, in *Readings in Medieval Literature. Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. D. F. Johnson and E. M. Treharne (Oxford, 2006), 75–6.

¹⁹ H. Momma, Review of Roberts and Kay, *Thesaurus*, *NQ* ns 50 (2003), 80.

²⁰ R. H. Bremmer Jr, ‘Old English “Cross” Words’, in *Cross and Cruciform in the Anglo-Saxon World: Studies to Honor the Memory of Timothy Reuter*, ed. S. L. Keefer, K. L. Jolly and C. E. Karkov (Morgantown, 2010), 231.

²¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 9.

²² C. Gevaert, ‘The Evolution of the Lexical and Conceptual Field of ANGER in Old and Middle English’, in *A Changing World of Words: Studies in English Historical Lexicography, Lexicology and Semantics*, ed. J. E. Díaz Vera (Amsterdam, 2002), 275–300.

²³ H. Schabram, ‘Etymologie und Kontextanalyse in der altenglischen Semantik’, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 84 (1970), 250–3; G. Hughes, *A History of English Words* (Oxford, 2000), 24–8.

popular alcoholic drink was especially drunk indoors, in a *medu-ærn*, *medu-seld* or *medu-heall* ‘mead hall’, on a *medu-setl* ‘mead seat’ or a *medu-benc* ‘mead bench’. Drinking mead might lead to *medu-drēam* ‘mead-joy, jolity’, but drinking too much would leave a man *medu-wērig* ‘overpowered with mead, drunk’. Similarly, compounds formed with *wulf* ‘wolf’ show that the Anglo-Saxons associated wolves mainly with violence: *wæl-wulf* ‘warrior, cannibal (lit. slaughter-wolf)’, *hilde-wulf* ‘warrior (lit. battle-wolf)’, *heoru-wulf* ‘warrior (lit. sword-wolf)’ and *here-wulf* ‘warrior (lit. army-wolf)’. This association is confirmed by searching for recurring usage patterns for word forms of *wulf* in a corpus containing all extant Old English texts (the *DOEC*, to be discussed below): forms of *wulf* often collocate with the adjectives *rēðe* ‘fierce, cruel, violent’ and *rēafigende* ‘rapacious’,²⁴ demonstrating once more that the Anglo-Saxons mainly associated wolves with viciousness.

As illustrated above, several aspects of the vocabulary of a language can be used to uncover cultural conceptualisations held by the community that used that language. An approach which has proved particularly suitable for this purpose is the so-called ‘semantic field study’. A semantic field is a set of lexemes which are semantically related and the structure of which is culture-specific:

[T]he kinds of semantic fields found in the lexicon of any given language [...] may vary from culture to culture, and in fact anthropologists have found the study of semantic fields useful in investigating the nature of belief systems and reasoning in different cultural groups.²⁵

Semantic field studies owe much of their theoretical framework to the German lexicologist Jost Trier, who argued that a language comprises a “Begriffsfeld” [conceptual field] and a “Wortfeld” [lexical field]. On the basis of their meaning, lexemes from the lexical field are tied to certain conceptual fields.²⁶ Lexemes can be tied to multiple conceptual fields, as a result of polysemy, their etymology or the context in which they are used.²⁷ A careful analysis of the range and meanings of all lexemes associated with a certain concept produces an overview that represents the speech community’s conceptualisation.²⁸ Figure 2.1 represents a visualisation of such an overview, based on a highly simplified version of the semantic field study on Old English lexemes for ‘anger’ by Gevaert.²⁹

²⁴ In the *DOEC*, word forms of *wulf* collocate four times with *rēðe* and five times with *rēafigende*.

²⁵ A. Akmajian *et al.*, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, 2001), 240. For a first overview of semantic field studies in Old English Studies, see: V. Strite, *Old English Semantic-Field Studies* (New York, 1989), 49–166. Examples of more recent studies include *Changing World*, ed. Díaz Vera; C. Elswiler, *Lazamon’s Brut between Old English Heroic Poetry and Middle English Romance. A Study of the Lexical Fields ‘Hero’, ‘Warrior’ and ‘Knight’* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011).

²⁶ J. Trier, ‘Das Sprachliche Feld’, *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung* 10 (1934), 428–49.

²⁷ Schabram, ‘Etymologie und Kontextanalyse’; J. Strauss, ‘The Lexicological Analysis of Older Stages of Languages’ in *Historical Semantics, Historical Word-formation*, ed. J. Fisiak (Amsterdam, 1985), 574–5.

²⁸ Strite, *Semantic-Field Studies*, 1–2.

²⁹ Cf. Gevaert, ‘Evolution’, 284.

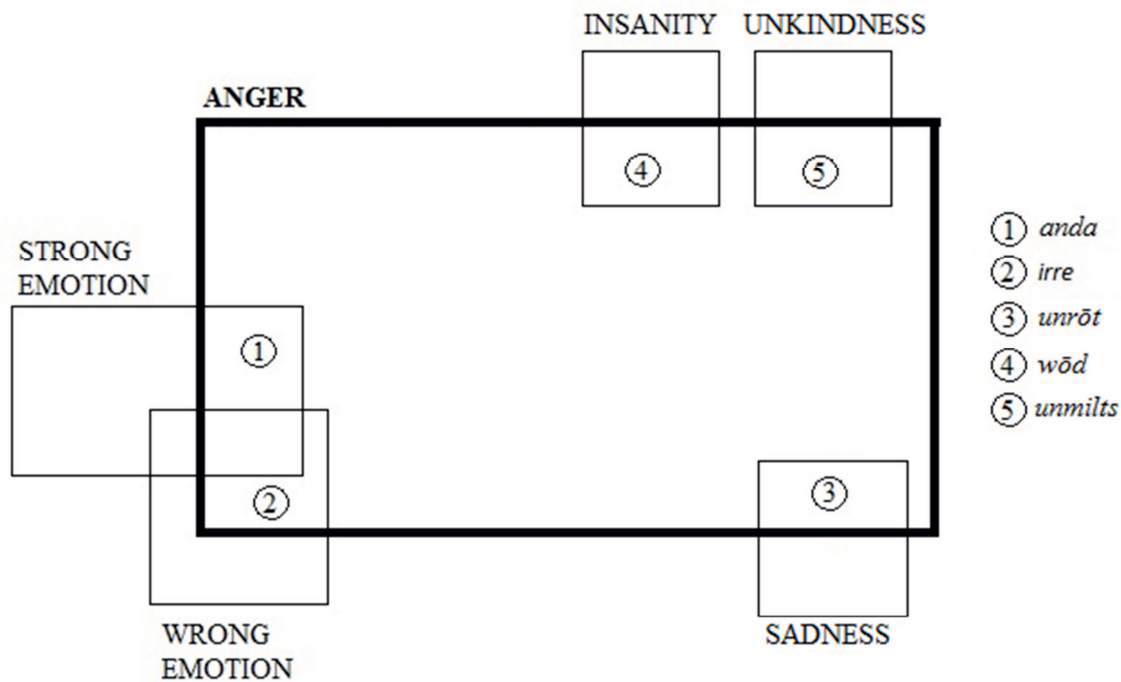


Fig. 2.1 A visualisation of the semantic field of 'anger' in Old English (simplified)

The visualisation shows how lexemes belonging to the semantic field 'anger' also belong to other domains, such as 'strong emotion', 'wrong emotion', 'insanity', 'sadness' and 'unkindness' and, as such, provides an overview of what exactly the Anglo-Saxons associated with anger.³⁰

Tools for semantic field study in Old English

For the semantic field study of the field 'old age' in Old English, presented below, I have made use of the following research tools: The *TOE*, the *DOE* and the *DOEC*. Each of these research tools is outlined below.

Thesaurus of Old English (TOE)

The first step of any semantic field study is to determine the parameters of the semantic field under consideration.³¹ For Old English vocabulary studies, this step has been greatly facilitated by the publication of the *TOE* in 1995 and its second impression in 2000.³² The *TOE* provides an overview of words organised by semantic principles and allows its users to easily find out which words were available for a particular notion or object. Since 2005, an updated, digital version of the *TOE* is available online. An updated and corrected third edition of the *TOE* appeared online in August 2015.

³⁰ On the Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of anger, see also R. H. Bremmer Jr, 'Looking Back at Anger: Wrath in Anglo-Saxon England', *RES* ns 66 (2015), 423–48.

³¹ Strite, *Semantic-Field Studies*, 2, 12.

³² J. Roberts and C. Kay, with L. Grundy, *A Thesaurus of Old English: In Two Volumes* (London, 1995); 2nd imp. (London, 2000).

The semantic classification system of the *TOE* is based on the semantic categories developed for Glasgow University's *Historical Thesaurus of English* project.³³ The *TOE* uses eighteen major categories to classify Old English words, including "The Physical World", "Life and Death", "Work" and "Leisure". These categories are further divided into sub-categories, in a hierarchy moving from the most general meaning to the most specific one. This semantic hierarchy is reflected in the numbering of the categories:

02. Life and Death

02.01. Existence, life

02.01.04. Age

02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old

02.01.04.03|03 Aging, growing old: Old age

The *TOE* covers 33,976 Old English lexemes and some of these lexemes are tied to more than one category. In total, the database contains 50,706 entries (that is: lexemes tied to categories).³⁴ *Wæpen*, for example, is listed under three separate categories: "02.04.06.04.01|01 Male genitalia: Penis", "13.02.08.04|01 Weapons, arms: A weapon" and "13.02.08.04.03 A sword".

The *TOE* has been heralded as an excellent research tool that provides a welcome starting point for any Old English vocabulary study.³⁵ As with any research tool, however, the results generated through the *TOE* should not be taken at face value. For instance, the lexical items *frōd* 'wise, old' and *hār* 'grey-haired, old' are not included in category "02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old", whereas both words are identified by Amos as words denoting old people.³⁶ *Frōd* is categorised, instead, under three headings: "05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new", "06.01.05.02.01.01|01 Sagacity: Wise, clever, sagacious" and "11.04.02|16 Skill, skilfulness: Skilled in an art/pursuit/subject". The exclusion of *frōd* from category "02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old" is all the more remarkable, since that category does include derivations of *frōd*: *infrōd* 'very wise and very old' and *gēomorfrōd* 'sad, wise and old'. Similarly, *hār* 'grey-haired, old' should be included in category "02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old", as it is in other categories "02.04.04.03.02|04 Colour of Hair: Grey-haired, hoary", "02.04.04.03.02|04.04 Colour of Hair: Grey-haired, hoary: Person", "03.01.14.03|03.07.02 White/whiteness: Whitened with frost" and "05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new".³⁷

³³ For more information on the project, see the project's website:

<http://historicalthesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/about/>.

³⁴ Numbers based on C. Kay, 'The *Thesaurus of Old English* Online', *Old English Newsletter* 38:3 (2005), 38.

³⁵ See, e.g., R. H. Bremmer Jr, 'Treasure Digging in the Old English Lexicon', *NOWELE* 40 (2002), 109–13; E. van Gelderen, Review of Roberts and Kay, *Thesaurus*, *Studies in Language* 27 (2003), 200–3.

³⁶ Amos, 95–106. For *frōd*, see also C. J. Zwikstra, 'Wintrum *frod*: *frod* and the Aging Mind in Old English Poetry', *SiP* 108 (2011), 133–64.

³⁷ On *hār*, see Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 100–271.

For practical reasons, the *TOE* does not distinguish between homonyms and polysemous lexemes.³⁸ In other words, if the *TOE* assigns *gelēfed* to four categories (“02.01.04.03|04 Aging, growing old: [Of age] advanced, old”, “02.08.02|07 Disease, infirmity, sickness: Sick, ill, diseased”, “02.08.04|03 Hurt, injury, damage: Injured” and “12.08.06.01.02|14 Lacking moral good: Corrupted”), we cannot be sure whether *gelēfed* is one lexical item which has developed four distinct meanings or that these four *TOE* entries are actually four independent lexemes which have the same form but have no etymological connection. Consequently, an in-depth analysis of each individual occurrence of the lexeme, as well as studying the possible etymologies of the lexical items, remains necessary.

Coping with spelling variation was another problem for the editors of the *TOE*. They mainly adhered to the spellings found in Clark Hall’s dictionary, but, as the editors admit, they “have not attempted to be wholly consistent”.³⁹ As a result, the *TOE* has two separate entries for *gamolian* (included in category “05.11.07.03.03|05 Old not new: to grow old”) and *gomelian* (“02.01.04.03|02 Aging, growing old: to grow old”), which are, most likely, spelling variants of the same lexical item, listed as *gamelian* ‘to grow old’ in the *DOE*.⁴⁰

A final reason for double checking the results generated by the *TOE* is that the editors did not have at their disposal a finished, definitive dictionary of Old English.⁴¹ Instead, they based the senses attributed to the Old English words on the standard dictionaries by Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall.⁴² Various entries in these somewhat outdated dictionaries are now being questioned and revised by the efforts of the *DOE* project in Toronto (to be discussed below). Roberts and Kay admit that “scrutiny of [the *TOE*’s] contents in the light of the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* is obviously very necessary”.⁴³

In short, even though the *TOE* harbours valuable information and provides the Old English lexicographer with the base parameters of his semantic field, thorough checking of the results remains necessary, nonetheless.

Dictionary of Old English (DOE)

The *DOE* is the result of an ongoing project at the University of Toronto, which started in the 1970s.⁴⁴ The project aims to provide a new, authoritative dictionary of Old English, making use of the advantages of modern technology. From 1994 onwards, the *DOE* is published in fascicles comprising a single letter each and, in 2008, the project has reached the letter G. The *DOE* is also published online as *DOE: A to G Online*.

³⁸ Kay, ‘The *Thesaurus of Old English* Online’.

³⁹ Robert and Kay, *Thesaurus*, I, xvii.

⁴⁰ *DOE*, s.v. *gamelian*.

⁴¹ R. Dance, Review of Roberts and Kay, *Thesaurus*, *Medium Ævum* 66 (1997), 312–3.

⁴² J. Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London, 1838), enlarged T. N. Toller (London, 1898), rev. and enlarged A. Campbell (Oxford, 1972); J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed., with a supplement by H. D. Meritt (Cambridge, 1960)

⁴³ Roberts and Kay, *Thesaurus*, I, xvii.

⁴⁴ *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1973), ed. R. Frank and A. Cameron. For a detailed history of the *DOE* project, see P. A. Stokes, ‘The Digital Dictionary’, *Florilegium* 26 (2009), 37–42.

What sets the *DOE* apart from the standard Old English dictionaries by Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall is its use of a computerised corpus containing at least one copy of each extant Old English text (the corpus will be discussed below).⁴⁵ Thoroughly examining all the primary material in this corpus enables the Toronto lexicographers to find new words, discover new meanings for words previously catalogued, and find additional attestations of rare meanings.⁴⁶ Aside from definitions, the *DOE* provides grammatical information, attested spellings and detailed sense divisions for each word. All sense divisions, moreover, are illustrated with quotations from the corpus. Most entries also include typical collocational patterns.

One restriction of the *DOE* is that it is not a dictionary based on historical principles and does not as a rule include etymologies for its headwords. Etymologies are only included in those cases where the etymology is the sole or major source of information about a word.⁴⁷ Moreover, like the editors of the *TOE*,⁴⁸ the editors of the *DOE* do not distinguish between early and late words.⁴⁹ As a consequence, this chronological distinction will not be made in this chapter either, as adding a diachronic perspective would go beyond the scope of this study.

Overall, the *DOE*'s treatment of Old English vocabulary aims to be exhaustive and, upon completion, it will undoubtedly be the definitive dictionary of Old English for many years to come.

Dictionary of Old English Corpus (DOEC)

As described above, the *DOE* relies heavily on its computerised corpus of Old English texts, the *DOEC*. The *DOEC* comprises at least one copy of each Old English text and totals to almost three million words.⁵⁰ In allowing unprecedented digital access to all extant material in Old English, the *DOEC* has proved to be an important innovation for Old English studies in general and vocabulary studies in particular.

The *DOEC* is digitally available and can be searched in a number of ways: 'Simple Searches' allow the user to search for whole words, fragments of words and beginnings of words, 'Boolean Searches' and 'Proximity Searches' allow a user to combine search queries and the 'Word Wheel' option, lastly, enables users to select from a list of all words in the corpus rather than having to guess spellings. Each included text in the *DOEC* is marked with a short title (e.g. Beo for *Beowulf*), which allows restricted searches in a single text. In addition to the short titles, all texts have a unique 'Cameron number', which starts with a letter code to indicate the text type (A for poetry, B for prose and C for glosses) and subsequent numbers to identify individual authors or manuscripts (e.g. all poetic texts in the *Exeter Book* start with

⁴⁵ One of the *DOE* editors estimates that Bosworth-Toller only makes use of one third of the available material. R. Frank, 'The Dictionary of Old English Conference', in *Plan for the Dictionary*, ed. Frank and Cameron, 5.

⁴⁶ A. DiPaolo Healey, 'Sense and Sensibility: Old English Semantics and the Lexicographer's Point of View', in *Interfaces between Language and Culture*, ed. Hall *et al.*, 179–201.

⁴⁷ Frank, 'The Dictionary of Old English Conference', 7.

⁴⁸ Dance, Review, 313.

⁴⁹ This issue is addressed by R. D. Fulk, 'Morphology and Diachrony in *A Grammar of Old English* and the *Dictionary of Old English*', *Florilegium* 26 (2009), 15–35.

⁵⁰ Information retrieved from *DOEC* website, <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/>.

A3, all prose texts by Ælfric start with B1). These Cameron numbers allow searches to be restricted to parts of the corpus larger than a single text.

The fact that texts in the *DOEC* usually reflect only one manuscript can be problematic.⁵¹ On occasion, the Old English dictionaries compiled by Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall supply forms from other editions or alternative manuscripts and, as a result, these cannot be found in the *DOEC*. A case in point is the citation that Bosworth-Toller provides for *gelēfed* ('weak, sickly, aged'): "Her sindon ðurh synnleafa sare gelefede to manege", referring to the edition of Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi* in Henry Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*.⁵² In the *DOEC*, this passage cannot be traced by looking for <gelefed->, since it quotes the more recent edition of the text by Dorothy Beruthum, instead: "Her syndan þurh synleawa, swa hit þincan mæg, sare gelewede to manege".⁵³ R. D. Fulk has also noted the consequences of the lack of manuscript variants in the *DOEC*:

The *DOEC* is not a record of every word of Old English, since it does not generally include manuscript variants, and when a form cited in other grammars does not turn up in a *DOEC* search, determining whether the cited form is a ghost word or a manuscript variant can require considerable effort, and it may not be possible to reach a definitive conclusion.⁵⁴

A further, practical difficulty of the *DOEC* is that the corpus is not lemmatised, which means that one has to search manually for all possible spelling variants.⁵⁵ Such spelling variants can be numerous, due to dialectal differences, unstable spelling practises and inflectional endings. As a result, looking up all the inflectional variants of a lexeme can be a laborious process. For example, the *DOE*, s.v. *eald*, records over one hundred and thirty attested spellings for *eald* 'old' and its inflected, comparative and superlative forms.

In spite of some of the issues discussed above, the *TOE*, *DOE* and *DOEC* together form the essential toolkit for any semantic field study. The *TOE* allows its users to identify the parameters of the semantic field and these results can then be checked with the superior definitions of the *DOE*. Words which are not treated in the published fascicles of the *DOE*, finally, can be traced manually in the *DOEC*.

Overview of results: The semantic field of human old age in Old English

In order to establish the parameters of the semantic field of human old age in Old English, I first combined the *TOE* categories "02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old" (thirty-eight lexemes), "02.03.01.08|01 Adult male: Old man" (one lexeme) and "02.03.01.09 Old woman" (two lexemes) and "05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new" (five

⁵¹ Stokes, 'Digital Dictionary', 52–5.

⁵² Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *gelēfed*.

⁵³ *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, hom. 20, ll. 160–1.

⁵⁴ Fulk, 'Morphology and Diachrony', 18.

⁵⁵ Stokes, 'Digital Dictionary', 56–8.

additional lexemes).⁵⁶ To these forty-six lemmas were added *ǣrgōd*, *blandenfeax*, *ealdhād*, *hārun*, *hārwenge*, *hārwengnes*, *unorne* and *wintercearig*, as the *DOE*, Bosworth-Toller or Clark Hall suggested these words could be used to refer to aged people as well, even if they were not categorised as such in the *TOE*.

Combined, the *TOE* and the dictionaries of Old English identify fifty-four potential lexical items for ‘human old age’: *ǣealdian*, *ǣrgōd*, *ǣtealdod*, *blandenfeax*, *clingan*, *eald*, *ealda*, *ealddōm*, *ealdgeþungen*, *ealdhād*, *ealdian*, *ealdigende*, *ealdlic*, *ealdnes*, *ealdung*, *ealdwīf*, *forealdian*, *forealdung*, *forildu*, *forþgān*, *forweorennnes*, *forwerod*, *forwerodnes*, *forworen*, *frameald*, *frōd*, *gamol*, *gamolferhþ*, *gamolian*, *geōmēowle*, *gēomorfrōd*, *gomelian*, *hār*, *hārun*, *hārwelle*, *hārwenge*, *hārwengnes*, *ieldo*, *infrōd*, *langfære*, *langieldo*, *langlīfe*, *gelēfed*, *līflic*, *ofereald*, *ofergēare*, *oferyldu*, *onealdian*, *onsīgende*, *oreald*, *oryldu*, *unorne*, *wintercearig* and *gewintred*. The individual analyses of each of these lexemes can be found in the Appendix to this thesis. Below, I only present a brief overview of the results.

First of all, the parameters of the semantic field for ‘human old age’ required modification: not all of the fifty-four potential lexical items for ‘human old age’ turned out to be suitable for analysis and twenty-one had to be rejected. Six turned out to be ghost words: *ǣealdian*, *ealdhād*, *ealdgeþungen*, *ealdwīf*, *frameald* and *langieldo* were either unattested in the *DOEC* or were shown to be misinterpretations of syntactic phrases. Two further potential lexemes, *ealdigende* and *gomelian*, were shown to be an inflectional variant and a spelling variant of *ealdian* and *gamelian*, respectively. In addition, the lexemes *clingan*, *forþgān*, *geōmēowle*, *gelēfed*, *līflic*, *onsīgende*, *unorne* and *wintercearig* turned out not to be semantically related to ‘old age’. Lastly, the lexemes *ealddōm*, *ealdung*, *hārwelle*, *langfære* and *ofergēare*, though attested and semantically related to ‘old age’, were never used to refer to people and, hence, are not included in the semantic field of ‘human old age’ presented here.

Out of the remaining thirty-three lexical items, the majority is neutral in terms of their connotations: they either carried no additional senses or did not occur often enough to establish recurring usage patterns. These neutral lexemes include *ealda* ‘old man’, *gamolferhþ* ‘old’, *gamolian* ‘to grow old’, *onealdian* ‘to grow old’ and *gewintred* ‘old’. Another group of neutral words – *ǣtealdod*, *forealdung*, *forildu*, *forweorennnes*, *forwerodnes*, *ofereald*, *oryldu* – meant ‘advanced or extreme old age’, mostly through a combination with an intensifying prefix. That elderly people were associated with the grey colour of their hair is shown by the lexemes *blandenfeax*, *hār*, *hārun*, *hārwenge* and *hārwengnes*, which combine the senses ‘old’ and ‘grey-haired’.

Next, a number of lexemes revealed positive connotations with old age. *Ealdian*, for example, was used to describe how friends, once grown old, are as good as old wine. Similarly, the state of being *langlīfe* ‘long-lived’ was presented as a positive development in a person’s life. People referred to with the adjectives *eald* and *ealdlic* could be old in years, but the terms were also used to describe people of authority and high rank. Likewise, the nouns *hārwengnes* and *ieldo* did not only mean

⁵⁶ From the category “05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new” only the lexemes *frameald*, *frōd*, *hār*, *hārwelle* and *gamolian* were included; other items in this category were either covered either by the category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old” or did not refer to human old age, such as *fæderlic* ‘ancestral’, *gēargetæl* ‘oldness of the world’, *fyrnsægen* ‘ancient tradition/ordinance’ and *gesetednes* ‘ancient tradition/ordinance’.

‘old age’ but also ‘authority’ or ‘those of high rank’. Another positive quality assigned to old age was wisdom: the lexemes *frōd*, *gēomorfrōd* and *infrōd* combine the senses ‘old’ and ‘wise’. Moreover, *eald* ‘old’ often collocated with expressions for wisdom, such as *wīs* and *snotor*.

In addition to these positive connotations, a number of lexemes also reveals a darker side to old age. Those lexemes which mean both ‘old’ and ‘wise’, for example, also constitute a connection with grief. *Frōd* and *infrōd* are often used to refer to sad, grieving old people, while the third lexeme, *gēomorfrōd*, is a lexical precursor of the modern idiom ‘sadder and wiser’, being a compound of *gēomor* ‘grief’ and *frōd* ‘old and wise’. The idea that aging can be a saddening experience also comes to the fore in the collocational pattern of another term for old, *gamol*, which occurs in the phrase *gamol on gehðe* ‘old in grief’.

Another negative aspect of old age reflected in the Old English lexicon is physical decrepitude. The main sense of the lexemes *forwerod* and *forworen* is ‘decrepit, worn out with age’, whilst *ealdian* ‘to grow old’, *forealdian* ‘to grow very old’, *oreald* ‘very old’ have ‘to decay, decayed through age’ as a secondary sense. In addition, *eald* ‘old’, *ealdnes* ‘old age’, *ieldo* ‘old age’ and *oferyldu* ‘advanced old age’ often occur in the context of physical decline or physical afflictions, such as disease, heat, hunger and thirst. Aging, then, could lead to a loss of former status and health, as is also suggested by the lexeme *ærgōd* ‘old and hitherto excellent’.

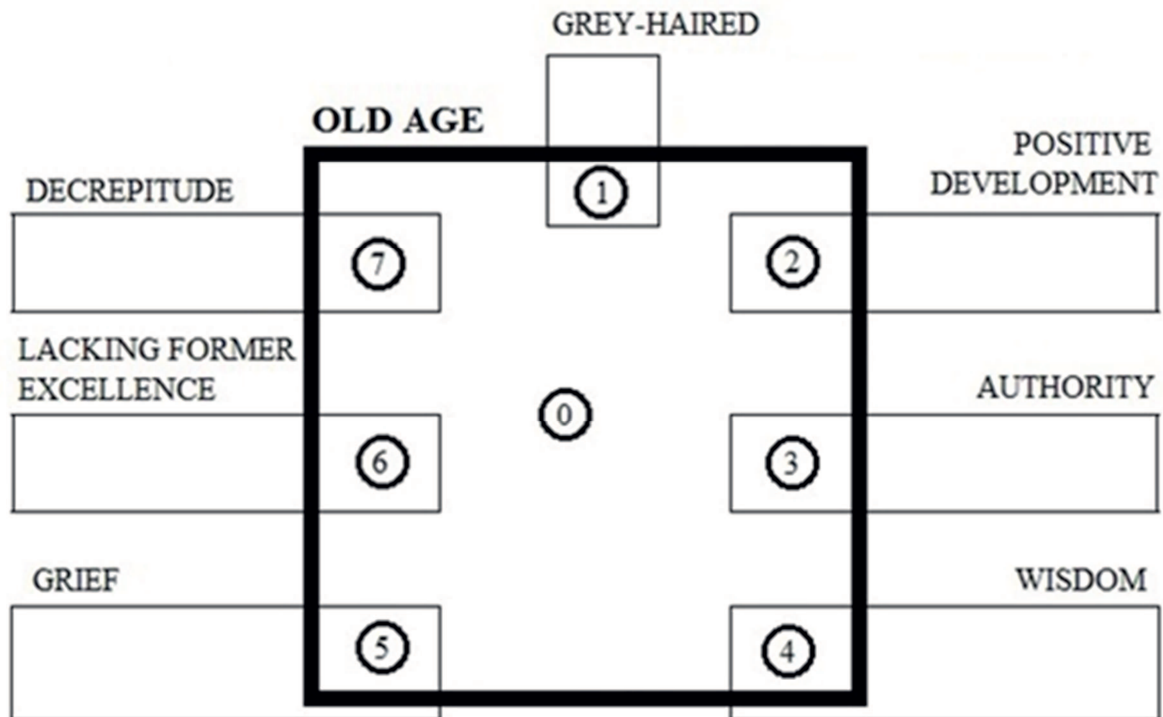
All things considered, the semantic field of human old age in Old English does not indicate, as Amos and Crawford had previously suggested, a “very positive cognitive map of old age”.⁵⁷ On the contrary, the picture derived from the analyses of Old English lexemes for old age in the Appendix shows a more nuanced picture. For the Anglo-Saxons, there were two clear sides to the coin of old age: the merits of old age, such as authority and wisdom, came at a price, in the form of decrepitude and grief. The various connotations associated with human old age and embedded in the Old English vocabulary are presented visually in figure 2.2. In this visualisation, only the overlap with the conceptual field of old age is shown, even though some of the connotations, such as ‘wisdom’ and ‘grief’ also overlap with each other.

Vocabulary is not the only means to uncovering cultural conceptualisations of past communities: according to Sharifian, these conceptualisations are also instantiated in various cultural artefacts, such as visual arts and literature.⁵⁸ Consequently, the remainder of this thesis will turn to the analysis of these cultural artefacts. The next two chapters will consider the treatment in Anglo-Saxon poetry and homiletic literature of the merits and drawbacks of old age, respectively. The four chapters following thereupon will consider how old age affected the lives and representations of particular groups of individuals: saints, warriors, kings and women.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Amos, 104; Crawford, 53.

⁵⁸ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 1, 17.

⁵⁹ Representations of the elderly in visual arts are rare and, therefore, are not treated in a specific chapter; for discussion of some works of art, see chapter 1 (the three ages of man) and chapter 6 (old warriors).



- ① *ætealdod, ealda, forealdung, forildu, forweorennas, forwerodnes, gamolferhþ, gamolian, ofereald, onealdian, orylde gewintred*
- ② *blandenfeax, hār, hārunge, hārwenge, hārwennges*
- ③ *ealdian, langlife*
- ④ *eald, ealdlic, hārwennges, ieldo*
- ⑤ *eald, frōd, gēomorfrōd, infrōd*
- ⑥ *frōd, gamol, gēomorfrōd, infrōd*
- ⑦ *ærgōd*
- ⑧ *ealdian, ealdnes, forealdian, forwerod, forworen, ieldo, oferyldo, oreald*

Fig. 2.2 A visualisation of the semantic field of 'human old age' in Old English.

The merits of old age

The previous chapter has established, on the basis of the Old English lexicon, that the Anglo-Saxons had a variety of connotations with growing old. In brief, they were aware that there were two sides to old age: on the one hand, living a long life might gain the respect of others and increase your wisdom; on the other, age might lead to grief and could entail physical decrepitude. This chapter, on the merits of age, and the next, on its drawbacks, review how various Anglo-Saxon authors dealt with these two opposing sides to old age.

The manner in which writers represent old age is culturally defined: in gerontocratic communities, the elderly will usually be portrayed in a positive light, whereas societies that prefer the qualities of youth over age will generally devalue old age in their literature.¹ Texts have long since been studied as vehicles for the cultural construction of old age.² For instance, scholars of Modern English literature, such as Richard C. Fallis and Richard Freedman, have noted that old age is rarely depicted as something desirable, reflecting an overarching attitude of ‘gerontophobia’: the fear of old age.³ These modern sentiments appear in stark contrast to what Burrow and Crawford proposed with respect to the literary evidence of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards senectitude. The former argued that the emphasis on the moral and spiritual superiority of the elderly was such that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories. Burrow related this Anglo-Saxon predilection for agedness to the idea that “in a traditional society such as that of Anglo-Saxon England ... men must have relied more than they do today upon the wisdom of experience”.⁴ Crawford followed Burrow’s lead and also linked the apparent appreciation of the elderly in texts to their position in society:

According to the majority of the Old English literary evidence, old people were idealised and venerated in Anglo-Saxon society. There is minimal indication within the literary accounts that old people were in any way maltreated, or pushed to the limits of the social framework. According to the literary evidence, the later Anglo-Saxon period was the golden age for the elderly.⁵

¹ J. Hendricks and C. A. Leedham, ‘Making Sense: Interpreting Historical and Cross-Cultural Literature on Aging’, in *Perceptions of Aging*, ed. von Dorotka Bagnell and Soper, 6–9.

² E.g., Freeman, *Aging: Its History*; *De lastige ouderdom*, ed. Croon; *Perceptions of Aging*, ed. von Dorotka Bagnell and Soper.

³ R. C. Fallis, “‘Grow Old with Me’: Images of Older People in British and American Literature”, in *Perceptions of Aging*, ed. von Dorotka Bagnell and Soper, 37; R. Freedman, ‘Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature’, in *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, ed. S. F. Spicker, K. M. Woodward and D. D. van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, 1978), 49–61.

⁴ Burrow, 109.

⁵ Crawford, 59.

In brief, both Burrow and Crawford have proposed an unambiguous appreciation for old age in Anglo-Saxon writings.

On closer inspection, however, their statements do not entirely hold up to scrutiny. For one, both Burrow and Crawford appear to have neglected the negative aspects of old age that will be the topic of the next chapter. In addition, even the analysis presented in this chapter, which takes into account only the potentially positive aspects of old age – respect, spiritual superiority and wisdom –, does not allow for an identification of the Anglo-Saxon period as a “golden age for the elderly”. Although Anglo-Saxon writers often enumerated the positive qualities of old people, they did not do so without reservation: old age did not by definition result in respect, spiritual superiority and wisdom, nor was growing old always considered wholly desirable.

The literary evidence discussed in this chapter and the next consists primarily of pastoral texts and wisdom poetry. The first text type includes sermons and biblical commentary; these texts reveal how Anglo-Saxon scholars and priests discussed the theme of old age within the context of religious doctrine. While the ideas in these texts are mostly representative of the monastic milieu in which they were created, they also spread, in the forms of homilies and sermons, from the pulpit to the people. As such, these texts provide an insight into the kind of notions with regard to old age that circulated among the clerics and churchgoers of Anglo-Saxon England. Wisdom poetry is the second text type under consideration, poetry which aims “primarily neither at narrative nor at self-expression, but deal[s] instead with the central concerns of human life – what it is; how it varies; how a man may hope to succeed in it, and after it”.⁶ Morton W. Bloomfield has noted that the wisdom mediated by this type of poetry is not personal but representative of society as a whole:

The speaker, or speakers in wisdom literature, is the poet speaking as prophet or teacher. He is mediating wisdom and is not speaking primarily of himself. His experiences are to be taken as representative experiences not personal experiences. ... They [wisdom poems] are not self-expression but the communication of inherited wisdom to society at large.⁷

In another publication, Bloomfield claimed that wisdom literature constitutes “the world-view of most traditional societies and the source of its practical morality. It is

⁶ Shippey, 1. The term covers a large variety of Old English texts, including instructional poems, such as *Precepts*, dialogues, such as *The Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn II*, moral reflective poems, such as *The Wanderer*, and collections of proverbial material, such as *Maxims II*. This list can further be extended by adding catalogue poems and parts of longer poems, such as Hrothgar’s ‘Sermon’ in *Beowulf* and Cynewulf’s epilogue to *Elene*. See also T. A. Shippey, ‘*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as Wisdom Poetry’, in *Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. H. Aertsen and R. H. Bremmer Jr (Amsterdam, 1994), 145–58; E. Tuttle Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto, 1988), 5–11; C. Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford, 1993), 1–3.

⁷ M. W. Bloomfield, ‘Understanding Old English Poetry’, *Annuaire mediaevale* 9 (1968), 5–25, rpt. in *idem, Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language and Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 59–82, at 78–9.

the framework in which the world is viewed”.⁸ The contents of wisdom poetry, in this way, may reflect “the core-clichés” of the society in which it was produced; these clichés represent what Anglo-Saxons would take for granted and thus provides an insight into their views on the world around them.⁹ As such, both text types considered in this chapter and the next can be used to reconstruct the way Anglo-Saxons tried to define the merits and drawbacks of age.

Before providing a detailed analysis of how the literary evidence reveals the Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the potential advantages of age, this chapter will first consider the communal roles fulfilled by old people, since their place in society, as Burrow and Crawford have rightly argued, inevitably influenced the attitudes towards them.

Storehouses of knowledge: The communal role of the elderly

“When an old man dies, a library burns down”, an African motto holds.¹⁰ Anthropologists have discovered that old people function in various tribal societies as ‘storehouses of knowledge’ concerning matters of history, ritual and identity.¹¹ A similar role was played in early medieval societies by ‘the wise man’, who is “the vehicle of wisdom and preserves and disseminates it”.¹² There is some evidence to suggest that, in Anglo-Saxon England, as in the tribal societies studied by anthropologists, this role was reserved for the elderly.

Indeed, older Anglo-Saxons were expected to teach and thus disseminate knowledge. Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023), for example, explicitly tasked the older members of communities to educate the young, in his canon law collection *Canons of Edgar* (1005–1008): “we lærað þæt ælc wurðige oðerne, and hyran þa gingran georne heora ylðrum, and lufian and læran þa ylðran georne heora gingran” [we instruct that each should honour the other, and that the younger should listen to their elders eagerly, and the elders should eagerly teach their youngers].¹³ Similarly, Ælfric of Eynsham (c.950–c.1010) wrote in his *Grammar* that it befits the elderly to teach the young, as it is through learning that the faith is kept.¹⁴ The Old English translation of *The Dicts of Cato* likewise encouraged old people to pass on their knowledge: “Ðonne þu eald sie & manegra ealdra cwydas & lara geaxod hæbbe, gedo hi ðonne ðam giongan to

⁸ M. W. Bloomfield and C. W. Dunn, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge, 1989), 106. For a similar approach to gnomic material in Old English poetry, see P. Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), 185.

⁹ Bloomfield and Dunn, *Role of the Poet*, 24.

¹⁰ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 9.

¹¹ J. Sokolovsky, ‘Status of Older People: Tribal Societies’, in *Encyclopedia of Aging*, ed. D. J. Ekerdt (New York, 2002), 1341–6.

¹² Bloomfield and Dunn, *Role of the Poet*, 110.

¹³ Wulfstan, *Canons of Edgar*, ed. R. Fowler, EETS os 266 (London, 1972), 2. Wulfstan wrote similar admonitions in ‘De regula canonicorum’ and ‘Her ongynd be cristendome’, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, hom. 10a, ll. 43–5, hom. 10c, ll. 176–8. Wulfstan’s source is ch. 145 of Amalarius’s *De regula canonicorum*. Wulfstan, *Canons*, ed. Fowler, 23, n. 2. A similar rule is found in ch. 80 of *The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), 327, ll. 29–31.

¹⁴ Ælfrics *Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. J. Zupitza (Berlin, 1880), p. 2, ll. 24–5, p. 3, ll. 1–2.

witane” [When you are old and have heard the sayings and learning of many elders, make them known to the young ones].¹⁵

This didactic role ascribed to the elderly by these monastic texts was also put into practice: various aged individuals appear in the historical record as teachers. A prime example is Alcuin of York (c.740–804), one of the leading scholars at the court of Charlemagne, who remained a teacher until the end of his life.¹⁶ Despite suffering from the physical drawbacks of old age, a fact he often lamented in his correspondence,¹⁷ Alcuin remained a motivated teacher. His unrelenting desire to teach is evinced by one of his letters to Charlemagne:

I shall not be slow to sow the seeds of wisdom among your servants in these parts, as far as my poor talent allows. ... In the morning, at the height of my powers, I sowed the seed in Britain, now in the evening, when my blood is growing cold, I still am sowing in France, hoping both will grow, by the grace of God.¹⁸

Alcuin regarded the situation of an elderly instructor in front of younger students as a natural one, since he described a school in his poem *De schola et scholasticis* [Concerning schools and scholars] as a place where “pueri discant senioris ab ore magistri” [boys learn from the mouth of an older teacher].¹⁹ The Anglo-Saxon historical record also features other famous didacticians of a venerable age, such as Theodore of Tarsus (602–690), who was aged sixty-six when he established the famous school of Canterbury that he would lead for another twenty-two years.²⁰ According to Bede’s account in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Theodore had been chosen as archbishop precisely because of his years of experience, being both “probus moribus et aetate uenerandus” [of upright character and of venerable age].²¹ Bede himself, who died in his sixties, remained engrossed in teaching even on his deathbed, as recorded by his student Cuthbert:

... his breathing became very much worse, and a slight swelling had appeared in his feet; but all the same he taught us the whole of that day, and dictated cheerfully, and among other things said several times: ‘Learn your

¹⁵ R. S. Cox, ‘The Old English Dicts of Cato’, *Anglia* 90 (1972), 6, no. 9.

¹⁶ D. Dales, *Alcuin: His Life and Legacy* (Cambridge, 2012), 127–38.

¹⁷ Alcuin frequently complained of his old age in his letters, see *Alcuin of York: His Life and Letters*, trans. S. Allott (York, 1974), lets. 6, 8, 67, 68, 69, 91, 104, 116, 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, let. 8.

¹⁹ Alcuin, *De schola et scholasticis*, PL 101, col. 744.

²⁰ M. Lapidge, ‘The Career of Archbishop Theodore’, in *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, ed. M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1995), 26–9.

²¹ According to Bede, *HE*, IV.1, the bishopric had first been offered to Hadrian of Canterbury (d. 710), who refused and “ostendere posse se dixit alium, cuius magis ad suscipiendum episcopatum et erudition conueniret et aetas” [said that he could point to another much better fitted both by age and learning to undertake the office of bishop].

lesson quickly now; for I know not how long I may be with you, nor whether after a short time my Maker may not take me from you.²²

Even if there would have been younger tutors as well, the presence and fame of these vigorous elderly scholars may have lent credence to the stereotypical figure of the wise old man that can be traced in Anglo-Saxon wisdom poetry (to be considered below, pp. 87ff).

Next to their role as teachers, in historiographical and hagiographical works old people were also invoked as reliable witnesses. In his preface to his *Historia ecclesiastica*, for instance, Bede explicitly stated that his sources included the testimony of elderly men.²³ Throughout his historical narrative, he assigned particularly wonderful stories to the reports of old and venerable witnesses, such as the “ueracissimus et uenerandae canitiei presbyter” [a priest most truthful and of venerable age] who had heard from Ecgberht’s own lips how that saint had been miraculously cured from pestilence through prayer.²⁴ Similarly, Ælfric’s story of the death of King Edmund of East Anglia (d. 869) in the *Passion of St. Edmund* ultimately relied on the testimony of an elderly eye-witness, mediated by another aged individual and a third source, Abbo of Fleury (c.945–1004). The latter had heard the story from Dunstan (909–988) three years before Dunstan’s death; Dunstan, in turn, had overheard the tale during a conversation between King Æthelstan (r. 924–939) and an elderly eye-witness, Edmund’s own sword-bearer, “þa þa Dunstan iung man wæs, and se swurdbora wæs forealdod man” [when Dunstan was a young man and the sword-bearer was a very old man].²⁵ The complex origin of Ælfric’s account of Edmund’s death shows how the report of an event that took place in 869 was preserved over a period of over a hundred years by two elderly men: King Æthelstan’s informant at least fifty-five years after the event and Dunstan aged over seventy, who told it to Abbo. As Semper has rightly noted, the old age of these witnesses seems to operate as “an index to their trustworthiness”.²⁶

In a similar vein, old people could be called upon to give testimony in court cases, exactly because of their senectitude and the fact that they remembered things long past. An exemplary case took place in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest: the Trial of Penenden Heath, a dispute over the restoration of pre-Conquest rights of the Church of Canterbury. King William I (d. 1087), according to one record of the case,

²² Cuthbert’s *Letter on the Death of Bede*, trans. B. Colgrave, in *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, The Greater Chronicle, Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, ed. J. McClure and R. Collins (Oxford, 1994), 301.

²³ Bede, *HE*, preface, “seniorum traditione” [report of elderly men], translated in the Old English version as “ealdra manna gesægenum”, *The Old English Version of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. A. Miller, EETS os 95, 96, 110 and 111 (London, 1890–8), 2, l. 22.

²⁴ Bede, *HE*, III.27. Other stories for which Bede used the testimony of senior brothers of his monastery include *ibid.*, III.19 and IV.7.

²⁵ *ÆLS*, no. 32, ll. 3–7.

²⁶ Semper, 304. The use of elderly witnesses is by no means unique to the Anglo-Saxons: Gregory the Great similarly credits some of his stories in the *Dialogi* to the testimony of old men. For example, Gregory’s remarkable story about Bonifacius, bishop of Ferenti, saving a vegetable garden by praying for all the caterpillars to leave, is ascribed to the testimony of “senex quidam clericus” [a certain old cleric]. Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, I.ix.15. For more elderly witnesses, see *ibid.*, I.vii.1, I.ix.16, I.x.16–17, III.xii.2, III.xxi.1, III.xxxii.3.

proceeded to gather nobles and elders from all across the land, in order to “diligenter ab antiquis Anglorum juris perquisita veritas” [ascertain carefully from old Englishmen the truth of the law].²⁷ To this end, William also arranged for the elderly bishop of Chichester to be brought to Penenden Heath: “Egelricus episcopus Cicestrensis, vir antiquissimus legum ac consuetudinum Anglorum eruditus qui regis jussione in quadriga illuc advectus est” [Bishop Aethelric of Chichester (d. 1076), a very old man and learned in the laws and customs of the English who had been fetched there at the king’s command in a chariot].²⁸ Another venerable old cleric to be called to the stand in the 1070s was Abbot Ælfwine of Ramsey (d. 1079/1080). In a dispute between Bishop Herfast of Thetford (d. 1085) and the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds over the latter’s claim of exemption from episcopal jurisdiction, Ælfwine “tunc pleno dierum, ac sene” [then in the fullness of his days and an old man] provided testimony that went back to the time of King Cnut (d. 1035), over thirty-five years prior.²⁹ Thus, being called upon to provide their accounts of events and regulations in the past, these elderly witnesses instantiated the role of ‘storehouses of knowledge’ as identified by anthropologists.

Aside from authoritative teachers and reliable witnesses, the elderly are also associated with the role of councillor to the king, as part of his *witan*. Kazutomo Karasawa, for example, has noted that the *witan* often consisted “of old men with accumulated experience”.³⁰ The basis for this observation is the use of the term “ieldstan witun” [oldest councillors] in the preface to the laws of King Ine of Wessex (r. 688–726) and the portrayal of Hrothgar’s councillors in *Beowulf* as elderly men.³¹ Although the term “ieldstan” in law codes can also be interpreted as ‘chief, most important’, the councillors of Hrothgar are undeniably old, described as they are as “blondenfeaxe, gomele ymb godne” [Grey-haired, the old ones around the good one (Hrothgar)] (ll. 1594b–5a) and, in the case of Hrothgar’s favourite advisor Æscere, as “frodan fyrnwitan” [old and wise councillor] (l. 2123a). Furthermore, Karasawa points out that most of the royal advisers in a stereotypical depiction of a king surrounded by his council in the Old English Hexateuch can be identified as elderly on account of their white beards (see fig. 3.1).³² Karasawa’s evidence can be supplemented by the real-life examples of elderly councillors, such as the above-mentioned Dunstan, Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester (904/909–984), and the noble councillor Oslac (fl. 963–975), who is described in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as “gamolfeax hæleð / wis 7 wordsnotor” [a grey-haired warrior, wise and loquacious].³³

The examples listed above show how elderly men could function in Anglo-Saxon society as ‘vehicles of wisdom’ or ‘storehouses of knowledge’ as teachers,

²⁷ *English Lawsuits from William I to Richard I. Volume I: William I to Stephen*, ed. and trans. R. C. van Caenegem (London, 1990), 14. The text is that of a late copy of a late eleventh- or early twelfth-century report.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27–8.

³⁰ K. Karasawa, ‘Wise Old *Ceorl(as)* in *Beowulf* and Its Original Meaning’, *English Studies* (forthc.).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² London, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv (s. xi^{2/4}, Canterbury, St. Augustine’s; the ‘Old English Hexateuch’); Kerr, *Catalogue*, no. 142; Gneuss and Lapidg, no. 315.

³³ *The Death of Edgar*, ed. E. v. K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ASPR 6 (New York, 1942), ll. 26b–7a.

witnesses and councillors.³⁴ Given the presence of venerable and sagacious individuals such as these, it is of little wonder that Anglo-Saxon writers on the whole wrote respectfully of elderly individuals and praised the old for their spiritual superiority and wisdom, even if they did not do so without at least some restraint.



Fig. 3.1 Depiction of Gen. 40:20–2 (the Pharaoh hanging the chief baker) in the Old English Hexateuch, 59r, often regarded as reflecting a typical Anglo-Saxon king and his *witan*.³⁵

“Honour the old man and fear your God”: Respect and care for the elderly

Thane has noted that, according to popular belief, the ‘past’ was a time of great respect for the elderly. Because old people would be relatively scarce, they would be “culturally more valued and respected” than their present-day counterparts. This exceptional measure of respect towards the elderly would also have led to families taking good care of their aged relatives. Thane has rightly argued against this legendary time when elderly people were still unequivocally respected, claiming that “it is difficult to find in historical or anthropological studies of any place or time unambiguous respect for old age as such”.³⁶ The literary evidence from Anglo-Saxon England supports Thane’s claim: although various texts propagated the respect and care due to older individuals, old age did not automatically imply respect, nor were all old people cared for in the same measure.

“Arwurðe ealdne man 7 ondræd þe ðinne God” (Honour the old man and fear your God), the Old English version of the Heptateuch translates Lev. 19:32.³⁷ In a similar vein, several Old English texts demanded respect for the elderly. One of those texts was the translation of the *Theodulfi Capitula*, an instructional work for parish priests compiled by Theodulf, bishop of Orléans (c.760–821) which dictated that a good Christian should not only stay clear of pride and strife, but should also respect

³⁴ Notably, as will be discussed in chapter 8 below, the roles of teacher, authoritative witness and councillor were not reserved for elderly males; old women were no different in this respect.

³⁵ Karasawa, ‘Wise Old Ceorl(as)’.

³⁶ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 7.

³⁷ *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. S. J. Crawford, EETS os 160 (London, 1922), 297.

old men.³⁸ Similarly, monastic rules advocated a respectful demeanor towards the elderly. The terms of address prescribed by the Old English translation of the Rule of St. Benedict are certainly indicative of courteous conduct towards the aged: the young had to call their elders “arwesa” [respected], while the old, in turn, were to call their juniors “leof” [dear].³⁹ In like manner, the Rule of Chrodegang evinces that priority seats for the elderly have a history that stretches back to the early Middle Ages, when young monks were expected to rise and offer their aged brothers their seat:

And swa hwær swa ænig preost oðerne gemete, abuge se gingra, and bidde þæs ylðran bletsunge. And gif se gingra sitte, and se ylðra þær forðgange, arise se gingra, and beode þam ylðran þæt setl, and ne geþristlæce he mid him to sittene, buton hine hate se ylðra.⁴⁰

[And wherever a priest may meet another, the younger one shall bow and ask the older one for his blessing. And if the younger one is sitting and the older one passes by, the younger one shall get up and offer the old one his seat, and he shall not dare to sit beside him unless the older one orders him to do so.]

Thus, generally speaking, the old could expect a respectful treatment in Anglo-Saxon monasteries.

Not only were the elderly to be respected, they also needed to be taken care of in their old age. To this effect, Anglo-Saxon homilists appealed to the biblical commandment to honour one’s parents.⁴¹ Another biblical text that was used to propagate the care for elderly parents was Tob. 10:4. Here, the parents of Tobias express their regret over sending away their child, since he was supposed to be “lumen oculorum nostrorum baculum senectutis nostrae solacium vitae nostrae spem posteritatis nostrae” [the light of our eyes, the staff of our old age, the comfort of our life, the hope of our posterity]. Alcuin used the phrase “baculus senectutis” [the staff of old age] in a letter to the young prince Ecgfrith of Mercia (d. 796), explicitly admonishing the latter to take care of his elderly parents.⁴² The author of the *vita* of St. Cuthman also used phrases from Tob. 10:4 in his description of how this eighth-century Anglo-Saxon saint took care of his aged mother. According to the hagiographer, Cuthman became “baculus senectutis” [the staff of her old age] and “lumen oculorum” [the light of her eyes].⁴³

³⁸ *Theodulfi Capitula in England. Die altenglischen Übersetzungen, zusammen mit dem lateinischen Text*, ed. H. Sauer (Munich, 1978), 331, ll. 91–5.

³⁹ *Die angelsächsischen Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. A. Schröer (Kassel, 1885), 115, ll. 15–9.

⁴⁰ *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 175, ll. 13–6; cf. *Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. Schröer, 117, ll. 1–13.

⁴¹ Exod. 20:12, Deut. 5:16 and Eph. 6:1–3; e.g., *ÆCHom II*, hom. 19, ll. 189–90, hom. 25, l. 89; *Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. J. Bazire and J. E. Cross (Toronto, 1982), hom. 7, l. 176; cf. Shahar, *Growing Old*, 88–97.

⁴² Alcuin, *Epistolae*, PL 100, col. 215a.

⁴³ *Vita s. Cuthmanni*, ed. Blair, ‘Saint Cuthman’, ch. 3–5. The source of the text is the *Acta Sanctorum* but the work has been related to the mid-eleventh-century revival of Anglo-Latin hagiography.

Care for the elderly was not only the responsibility of the next of kin, however, since monastic rules also advocated the care of the old and sick as one of the prime duties of monasteries.⁴⁴ Indeed, even when physically disabled, a monk could reach an advanced age, as the striking example of Eilmer (b. c.985–d. after 1066), monk at Glastonbury, demonstrates. In his youth, Eilmer had been inspired by the tale of Daedalus to fashion himself a pair of wings; he jumped from a tower and broke both his legs, causing him to be lame for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, he grew old enough to remember seeing Halley’s comet in 989 when, over 76 years later, the comet flew by again in the spring of 1066.⁴⁵ By and large, then, needy elderly could find care among their kinsfolk or at religious institutions.

However, the obligation of care did not extend to all elderly in equal measure, nor did old age per se guarantee a position of respect. The Rule of Chrodegang, for instance, made a notable distinction between ordinary elderly and those elderly who, despite their old age, were able to do some good for their brothers and the monastery:

And hæbbe gymene seocra manna and mid ylde gehefogodra and þara <mæst> þe geornlice ymbe mynstres neode wæron þa hwile þe hi for ylde oððe for unhæle mihton.⁴⁶

[And care should be taken of all sick people and of those afflicted by old age, and especially those who diligently worked for the common good of their minster whilst they were able to do so in their old age and sickness.]

In the eyes of this rule, not all elderly were equal and the provisions for them depended, in part, on their actions rather than their old age alone. Likewise, respect did not depend solely on age. In fact, monastic rules repeatedly emphasised that the elderly were not per se superior to the young, referencing the biblical stories of Samuel and Daniel: “forði Samuel and Daniel cildgeonge forealdædum mæssepreostum demdon” [because the infants Samuel and Daniel measured the aged mass priests].⁴⁷ As a consequence, the old and young were to be treated on equal terms and the elderly were to be given no privileges. This principle of equality suggests that old age alone was no guarantee for respect. Instead, the degree to which an old person was respected or cared for depended on circumstances other than age, such as reputation, character and ability. Even for the Anglo-Saxon elderly, respect was something to be earned rather than to be expected.

⁴⁴ E.g., *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 179, ll. 26–8.

⁴⁵ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1998–9), ch. 225.

⁴⁶ *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 179, ll. 26–8.

⁴⁷ *Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. Schröer, p. 12, ll. 7–10, p. 13, ll. 3–7, p. 114, ll. 5–16, p. 115, ll. 5–19. On Samuel and Daniel, see Burrow, 96.

“Venerable old age is not that of long time”: The spiritual superiority of the elderly

According to Burrow, the Anglo-Saxons particularly associated old people with spiritual superiority. At the basis of Burrow’s claim lies the *puer senex* motif: “a medieval literary motif which telescoped old age and childhood in a single figure”.⁴⁸ Various Anglo-Saxon authors ascribed to children the qualities of old age, such as wisdom, a desire for religious instruction and abstaining from childish pastimes. Burrow argued that the transcendence of these saints from one age category to the other implied a “consistent bias” towards the age categories involved. In his analysis, Anglo-Saxon authors show a clear preference for transcendence in the upward-sort (i.e. the youth with qualities associated with old age), which would indicate that old age was regarded as the ‘transcendence ideal’ and, consequently, the most highly regarded age of man.⁴⁹ While Burrow’s analysis of Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives in this respect is not wholly accurate,⁵⁰ his main conclusion that old age was associated with those spiritual qualities that were typically lacking in youth holds some truth. Nevertheless, Anglo-Saxon writers did not attribute spiritual superiority to all old people alike.

In fact, at least one reference to a *puer senex* posits the virtuous qualities of a young saint against aged men who, apparently, lacked the virtues appropriate to their tally of years. When the young St. Oswald was ordained a deacon at Winchester, according to Eadmer of Canterbury, he was selected to be an example for the elderly canons, who were stuck in their wicked ways:

... decanus factus, adolescens praeponitur senibus, quatinus canities sensus illius et immaculata uita illius maculatam senum uitam emacularet, ac pueriles sensus illorum studio disciplinae caelestis euacuaret. Sed illi, magis antiqua prauae senectutis itinera tenere uolentes.

[... and he was made deacon, and though an adolescent, he was placed in charge of men older than himself so that his maturity and his pure life might purify the impure lives of the old men, and he might rid those men of immature thoughts with the study of heavenly teachings. But those men preferred to stick to the well-trodden paths of their corrupt old age.]⁵¹

Oswald’s “canities sensus” and “immaculate uita” recall the definition of venerable old age in Wisd. 4:8–9 (“senectus enim venerabilis est non diuturna neque numero annorum computata cani sunt autem sensus hominibus et aetas senectutis vita immaculata” [For venerable old age is not that of long time, nor counted by the number of years: but the understanding of a man is grey hairs and a spotless life is old age]).⁵²

⁴⁸ T. C. Carp, ‘*Puer senex* in Roman and Medieval Thought’, *Latomus* 39 (1980), 736–9.

⁴⁹ Burrow, 105–7.

⁵⁰ See the full discussion of the *puer senex* motif in chapter 5 below.

⁵¹ Eadmer of Canterbury, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. A. J. Turner and B. J. Muir, *Eadmer of Canterbury: Lives and Miracles of Saints Oda, Dunstan, and Oswald* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 5.

⁵² Also noted by Burrow, 101.

Put differently, the qualities normally associated with age were not restricted to individuals who had lived a long time; *vice versa*, not all aged individuals were by definition devout people, as illustrated by the aged canons of Winchester.

The observation that not all old people were pious is found in various pastoral texts. One such explicit distinction between those who lived piously in old age and those who did not was made by Bede, in his commentary on the phrase *bona senectute* ‘in good old age’ in Tob. 14:15:

For he [God] finds such as these in good old age when he rejoices that by his grace they have devoted themselves to good works for so long. By contrast, he sees in a bad old age, and so will pass by, those who though living longer are still childish in their judgement, not to be venerated for the lustre of their good deeds like one is for gray hair, but are doubled up under the weight of their vices. Of such as these Isaiah says “A boy shall die after a hundred years, a sinner of a hundred years shall be cursed” [Isa. 65:20]. Those who have lived childishly for many years and have never sought to put off a spirit of levity will justly be subject to condemnation for their sins.⁵³

Bede here referred to the *puer centum annorum* ‘child of a hundred years’: a figure derived from Isa. 65:20 and the antithesis of the *puer senex*, telescoping the negative qualities of youth into an old man. Ælfric, too, appealed to the *puer centum annorum* in his Homily ‘De doctrina apostolica’, noting that old men should not persist in youthful foolishness:

Eft cwæð sum witega, *Puer centum annorum maledictus erit* : Hundteontigwintre cild byð awyrged. Ðæt is on andgite, Se mann ðe hæfð ylde on gearum, and hæfð cildes þeawas on dysige, þæt se byð awyrged. Ælc treow blewð ær þan þe hit wæstmas bere, and ælc corn bið ærest gærs. Swa eac ælc godes cinnes mann sceal hine sylfne to godnysse awendan, and wisdom lufian, and forlætan idelnysse.⁵⁴

[Again, a certain prophet said: *Puer centum annorum maledictus erit*: a hundred-year-old child is cursed. That is in the sense: the man who has old age in years, and has the customs of a child in foolishness, let him be cursed. Every tree blooms before it bears fruit, and every grain is first grass. Likewise every man of good pedigree must turn himself to goodness and love wisdom and forsake frivolity.]

Ælfric’s admonition to show behaviour appropriate to one’s age reflects his awareness, along with Bede, that whereas some children rise above the rest of their generation through the display of behaviour generally associated with older individuals, some old men persevere in the follies of youth. In other words, virtuous behaviour was expected of old men, but this was by no means a foregone state of affairs.

⁵³ *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany*, trans. W. Trent Foley and A.G. Holder (Liverpool, 1999), 78.

⁵⁴ *Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. Pope, hom. 19, ll. 19–25.

In fact, some homilists worried about elderly individuals who rejected religious life altogether. Such a *senex sine religione* ‘old man without religion’ was one of the twelve abuses listed in the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin text *De duodecim abusiis* [On the twelve abuses], along with, among others, the young man without obedience, the lord without strength and the wise man without good works.⁵⁵ This text was vastly popular and influential in medieval England and its ideas concerning the old man without religion were picked up by Ælfric and at least one other Anglo-Saxon homilist.⁵⁶ The former produced a vernacular version of the text and, for the *senex sine religione*, he followed his Latin source closely, though excluding the original’s list of physical symptoms of age:⁵⁷

Se ealda mann þe byð butan eawfæstnysse byð þam treowe gelic, þe leaf byrð and blostman, and nænne wæstm ne byrð, and byð unwurð his hlaforde. Hwæt byð æfre swa stuntlic swa þæt se ealda nelle his mod to Gode awendan mid goodum ingehyde, þonne his lima him cyðað þæt he ne byð cucu lange? Iungum mannum mæg twynian hwæðer hi moton lybban and se ealda mæg witan gewis him þone deað. Ðam ealdan is to warnigenne wið þa yfelan gepohtas, for þan ðe seo heorte ne ealdað, ne eac seo tunge, ac þas twegen dælas deriað oft þam ealdum. Wite forþi se ealda hwæt his ylde gedafenige and þa þing forseo þe his sawle deriað.⁵⁸

[The old man who is without religion is like the tree which bears leaves and blossoms and does not bear any fruit and is worthless to its lord. What is ever so foolish as that the old man should not wish to turn his spirit to God with a good intention, when his limbs show him that he will not be alive for long? It can be a matter of uncertainty for young people whether they may live but the old man can know that death is certain for him. The old man must guard against evil thoughts, because the heart does not grow old or the tongue either, but these two parts often harm the old. Let the old man know therefore what may be appropriate for his old age and let him abandon those things which harm his soul.]

In brief, an old man’s irreligious behaviour is all the worse, since he should be aware that death is inevitable. On the verge of the afterlife, an old man would be foolish not to devote himself to good works. The warning against “se ealda mann ... butan eawfæstnysse” was issued by Ælfric in two further homiletic tracts.⁵⁹ As part of a list of abuses, without further explanation, it was also used by the eleventh-century

⁵⁵ *Two Ælfric Texts: The Twelve Abuses and The Vices and Virtues*, ed. and trans. M. Clayton (Cambridge, 2013), 34–48.

⁵⁶ For the popularity of *De duodecim abusiis* in England, see *Two Ælfric Texts*, ed. and trans. Clayton, 52–6.

⁵⁷ On the relation between Ælfric and Latin source, *ibid.*, 58. For the list of physical symptoms, which may have inspired other Anglo-Saxon authors, see Chapter Four.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 114–5, ll. 23–31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 156, ll. 113–21; *ÆLS*, no. 13, ll. 116–20.

composer of a Rogationtide homily.⁶⁰ The appearance of the *senex sine religione* in these Anglo-Saxon sermons and tracts clearly contradicts Burrow's claim that Anglo-Saxon homilists unequivocally regarded the elderly as spiritually superior. Instead, Ælfric appears to have been worried that some old men, even on the brink of death, had not yet fully committed themselves to the Christian faith.

More specifically, Ælfric expressed his concern over the unrelenting sexual appetite of both elderly women and men, both in his letter to Sigefyrth and his homily for the second Sunday before Lent:

Hit byð swyðe sceandlic, þæt eald wif sceole
ceorles brucan, þonne heo forwerod byð
and teames ætealdod, ungehealtsumlice,
forðan ðe gesceafta ne beoð for nanum oðran þinge astealde
butan for bearnteame anum, swa swa us secgað halige bec.⁶¹

[It is very shameful that an old woman should have sex with a man, when she is worn out with age and too old for childbearing, unchastely, because sexual relations are not meant for any other thing but procreation only, just as holy books tell us.]

Hit is swiðe ungedafenlic and scandlic þæt forwerode men and untymende gifta wilnian, ðonne gifta ne sind gesette for nanum ðinge buton for bearnteame.⁶²

[It is very improper and shameful that old and unfruitful men should desire marriage, since marriage is not meant for anything but procreation.]

As Semper has correctly noted: “[e]vidently advanced age does not necessarily result in godly living, since such exhortations to change remain necessary”.⁶³

The concerns over impious elderly prompted some homilists to extend invitations to old people to convert and repent; others, by contrast, viewed such late

⁶⁰ *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, hom. 7, ll. 171–3. This homily is a compilation of various homiletic texts by Ælfric

⁶¹ Assmann, hom. 2, ll. 157–61.

⁶² *ÆCHom II*, hom. 6, ll. 128–31. The exact source for these remarks about abstinence after childbearing age has not been identified, although Ælfric himself cites Augustine as his source. Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 392. Possibly, Ælfric based his ideas on Augustine's *De civitate Dei* XVI.28, where Augustine notes that an old man and an old woman are unable to bring forth children together, but that this would be possible if either partner was young, see Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998), XVI.28. This passage of Augustine was well-known in Anglo-Saxon England. Bede, *On Genesis*, trans. C. B. Kendall (Liverpool, 2008), 294–5, cited it in his commentary on Gen. 18:11, discussing the birth of Isaac, son of the elderly Abraham and Sarah; the same passage is also found in a miscellany from St. Gall, dated to c.800, which was probably copied from an Anglo-Saxon exemplar. For the latter, see R. H. Bremmer Jr, ‘Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Vossianus Latinus Q. 69 (Part 2): Schoolbook or Proto-Encyclopaedic Miscellany?’, in *Practice in Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. R. H. Bremmer Jr and K. Dekker (Paris, 2010), 47.

⁶³ Semper, 301.

acts of reconciliation with some apprehension. The first approach to elderly converts is exemplified by the homilies of Bede and Ælfric on Christ's Parable of the Three Vigils (Luke 12:36–8). The gist of these homilies is that it is never too late to turn to Christ, even for those who have already reached old age.⁶⁴ In like manner, Wulfstan reassured his audience that “[n]e sceamige ænegum cristenum men for his ylde” [no Christian man should be ashamed of his old age] and that, although it was preferable to be baptised as a child, old men could and should still be baptised.⁶⁵ By contrast, the anonymous author of a Rogationtide homily warned against those who delayed their religious responsibilities until old age. One should not be so bold, this homilist said, following the *Liber exhortationis* of Paulinus of Aquileia (d. 802/804),⁶⁶ as to persist in the lusts and sins of youth and only plan to do truthful repentance once old age is reached: “Hwæt mæg beon mare dysignes þonne æni mann þis on his mode geþence?” [What can be a bigger folly than any man who thinks this in his heart?].⁶⁷ More damning still was the author of *Instructions for Christians*, a collection of versified instructional sayings. He held that those who turned to God in old age could never truly be good Christians:

Næfre ic ne gehyrde þæt wurde laford god
eft on ylde, se ðe ær ne was
Gode oððe monnum on iugoð þeowa,
ne huru on ylde æfre gewurðan
wel geþeignod, þonne wolde ær
on his tale mette tale wel þeignan.⁶⁸

[I have never heard that he who had not been a servant to God or men in youth became a good lord afterwards in old age, nor indeed shall he ever become well served in old age lest he wished before to serve very well according to his measure.]

In other words, according to some, redemption was beyond reach for those who only desired it in old age.

To sum up, while good, pious behaviour was certainly expected of the elderly, especially given their proximity to death, there is no reason to assume, as Burrow argued, that the elderly were always held up as religious role models. While Anglo-Saxon homilists certainly praised the spiritually superior elderly and the *puer senex*, they also voiced their concerns over their antitheses: the *senex sine religione* and the *puer centum annorum*. In the end, what mattered was not the age of a man, but his religious devotion, as St. Brendan reassured the young St. Machutus after the latter had expressed doubts as to whether he was worthy of the position of priest, given his youth: “Nelle þu þe tweogean forþon þe seo geonglicu eld nænigum ne deraþ gif he

⁶⁴ For a discussion of these homilies, see chapter 1 above, pp. 28ff.

⁶⁵ *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, hom. 8c, ll. 144–6.

⁶⁶ *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, 125.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, hom. 10, ll. 27–35.

⁶⁸ J. L. Rosier, ‘Instructions for Christians: A Poem in Old English’, *Anglia* 82 (1964), 15, ll. 235–40; for the translation, see *ibid.*, 21.

fulfremed biþ on his mode. Ne seo ealdlicu eld nænigum ne framēþ gif he biþ on his mode gewemmed” [‘Do not doubt since a young age harms no one if he is virtuous in his heart. Nor does old age benefit anyone if he is corrupt in his heart’].⁶⁹

“Often there is cunning in a sooty bag”: The wise old man in Old English wisdom poetry

Like respect and spiritual superiority, wisdom was by no means the sole prerogative of the elderly. Nevertheless, the connection between senectitude and wisdom was such that those who showed sagacity before their years would be called ‘old in wisdom’. For example, an Old English note on various Old Testament figures described Sem, the third son of Noah, as “heora geongost... þeh hwæðere on wisdom e yldost” [he was their youngest though the oldest in wisdom].⁷⁰ The idea that people could be ‘old in wisdom’ without being old in years also underlies Ælfric’s explanation of the word *eald-wita* ‘priest, lit. old-knower’ in his letter to Wulfsgie: “Presbiter is mæssepreost oððe ealdwita. Na þæt ælc eald sy, ac þæt he eald sy on wisdom” [A presbyter is the priest or the *ealdwita*. Not that each of them is old, but he is ‘old’ in wisdom].⁷¹ In a similar passage in a letter to Wulfstan, Ælfric claimed that the priests were called *eald-wita* because of “þam wurðscype” [the worthiness, dignity] and “þæm wisdom” [the wisdom] which came to their position, regardless of their actual age in years.⁷² Beowulf, too, is a young man who displays intelligence in spite of his young years, as noted by Hrothgar:

‘ne hyrde ic snotorlicor
on swa geongum feore guman þingian.
Ðu eart mægenes strang ond on mode frod
wís wordcwida.’ (ll. 1842b–5a)

[‘I have not heard a man so young in life speak more wisely. You are strong in might and old and wise in mind, wise in speeches.’]

In other words, Beowulf, like a true *puer senex*, shows wisdom beyond his years, proving that young men may be wise and old in their minds.⁷³ In the end, the idea of being ‘old in wisdom’ suggests that, while the elderly may not have had a monopoly

⁶⁹ *The Old English Life of Machutus*, ed. D. Yerkes (Toronto, 1984), 13, ll. 8–12.

⁷⁰ Found in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii (s. xi med., Canterbury Christ Church); Ker, no. 186; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 363. A. S. Napier, ‘Altenglische Kleinigkeiten’, *Anglia* 11 (1889), 2–3, ll. 53–5.

⁷¹ *Die Hirtenbriefe Ælfrics in altenglischer und lateinischer Fassung*, ed. B. Fehr (Hamburg, 1914), 11, ll. 40–41.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 108–11, ll. 109–10. Ælfric follows Isidore’s definition of Greek πρεσβύτερος ‘elder, priest’ in the latter’s *Etymologiae*, VI.xii.20: “*Presbyter grecum nomen est, quod latine senior dicitur, non pro aetate [...] sed propter honorem et dignitatem ut sit senex in moribus et sapientia*” [Priest, *presbyter* in Greek, is translated *senior*, elder, in Latin. They are called presbyters not from years or decrepit old age, but because of the honor and rank they received]. Latin quotation provided by DOE, s.v. *eald-wita*; trans. Throop.

⁷³ Cf. Burrow, 131–2.

when it came to sagacity, old age and wisdom were certainly connected in the mind of the Anglo-Saxon.

It is of little surprise, then, to find that old men played an important role in Old English wisdom poetry. In fact, one of the recurring clichés in this type of poetry, identified by T. A. Shippey, is the “image of the Ancient Sage, the fiction of an old, wise man talking”.⁷⁴ That is to say, old men appear in Old English wisdom poems as disseminators of knowledge, as both narrators and teachers, reflecting, perhaps, the social role of old people as ‘storehouses of knowledge’, as established above (pp. 75ff).

Various wisdom poems, such as *Vainglory*, *The Riming Poem*, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, are narrated from the point of view of an elderly narrator.⁷⁵ Each of these poems has traditionally been regarded as an ‘elegy’, a song of lament, but since they all share characteristics with other wisdom poems, such as the lack of narrative and the use of gnomic generalisations, it has become common practice to treat them as part of that broader group of ‘wisdom poetry’.⁷⁶ In all four poems, knowledge is imparted to the audience by means of a monologue by an elderly speaker. This speaker is typically elevated to a position of authority through references to his lived experience. In *Vainglory*, to begin with, the poet invokes a “frod wita on fyrr-dagum” [old and wise sage in days gone by].⁷⁷ This old and wise man then starts a religious meditation on the difference between the children of God and the children of the devil in poetic form.⁷⁸ *The Riming Poem*, too, is a dramatic, reflective monologue by an elderly speaker.⁷⁹ Having lived for a long time – “lif wæs min longe leodum in gemonge” [my life was long in the company of people] – the now aged narrator looks back at the successes and delights of his youth, meditating on the transience of life.⁸⁰ Two further reflections on the temporal nature of earthly happiness, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, also feature wise and experienced speakers, advanced in age.⁸¹ The speaker in *The Wanderer*, in particular, is explicitly described as “frod in ferðe” [old and wise in mind] (l. 90a) and he himself notes how “ne mæg weorþan wis wer, ær he age / wintra dæl in woruldrice” [a man cannot become wise before he has had a share

⁷⁴ Shippey, ‘*The Wanderer*’, 145.

⁷⁵ All are found in Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501 (s. x²; the ‘Exeter Book’). Ker, no. 116; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 257.

⁷⁶ Shippey, ‘*The Wanderer*’, 145–58.

⁷⁷ *Vainglory*, ed. Shippey, l. 1.

⁷⁸ The meditation is based on 1 John 3; J. McKinnell, ‘A Farewell to Old English Elegy: The Case of *Vainglory*’, *Parergon* 9 (1991), 67. McKinnell identifies the old speaker as Bede, on the basis of the poet’s use of Bede’s *In Epistolas Septem Catholicas*. However, following conventions of similar poems in the Old English corpus, the poet does not name his speaker but, rather, presents him as nameless sage, old and wise.

⁷⁹ R. P. M. Lehmann, ‘The Old English *Riming Poem*: Interpretation, Text and Translation’, *JEGP* 69 (1970), 439.

⁸⁰ *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, l. 41.

⁸¹ The narrator in *The Seafarer* is not explicitly called ‘old’, but does seem acutely aware of the emotional and social drawbacks of old age: *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 91–3. Another indication that both poems feature an elderly speaker is the recurrent imagery of winter in these poems: *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 47, 77, 102–5; *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 8–9, 17, 31–3. Winter is traditionally linked to old age and the imagery, therefore, may symbolise the narrator’s advanced age, cf. Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35; Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Baker and Lapidge, I.1, ll. 117–23.

of winters in the worldly kingdom] (ll. 64–5a). Thus, each of the speakers in these sapiental poems possesses the wisdom of experience, allowing them to convey their messages with authority. Although Corey J. Zwikstra has noted that the ‘*frod* wisdom’ shared by each of these speakers is presented as unambiguously positive,⁸² it is worth noting that in *The Riming Poem*, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, at least, the speakers appear to have gained their wisdom through adversity – a notion I will return to in chapter 4.

Furthermore, elderly men are cast in the role of teacher in two Old English instructional poems identified by Elaine Tuttle Hansen.⁸³ In both poems, the wise old man is posited against a young figure lacking in experience.⁸⁴ The first of these poems is the long speech by Hrothgar addressing the young Beowulf in *Beowulf*, ll. 1700–84, a section commonly known as Hrothgar’s ‘sermon’. Tuttle Hansen interprets this passage as a “‘set piece’ of wisdom literature”, which depends on the characteristics of this type of writing.⁸⁵ Following the conventions of the other poems discussed so far, Hrothgar’s sermon features an admonitory address with gnomic content, delivered by an aged speaker. Hrothgar’s advanced age is stressed throughout the poem, as is his wisdom;⁸⁶ even in this sermon, Hrothgar reminds the young Beowulf that he speaks from lived experience three times: he introduces himself as “*eald epelweard*” [old guardian of the homeland] (l. 1702a), notes “*ic þis gid be þe awræc wintrum frod*” [old and wise from winters, I tell this tale for you] (ll. 1722–4) and, finally, declares that he has ruled the Danish kingdom for fifty years.⁸⁷ Hrothgar’s message to Beowulf, to be weary of pride and that nothing is eternal, is conventional and stated in the manner that also characterises other wisdom poems:

‘Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið, Beowulf leofa,
secg bet[e]sta, ond þe þæt selre geceos,
ece rædas; oferhyda ne gym,
mære cempa. Nu is þines mægnes blæd
ane hwile; eft sona bið
þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfeð
oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
oððe atol ylðo; oððe eagenas bearhtm
forsiteð ond forsworced; semninga bið
þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð.’ (ll. 1758–68)

[‘Guard yourself against pernicious enmity, dear Beowulf, best of men, and choose for yourself the better thing, eternal benefits. Do not care for arrogance, famous champion. Now for one moment is the glory of your strength; yet immediately it will be that either sickness or edge will deprive

⁸² Zwikstra, ‘*Wintrum frod*’, 146.

⁸³ Tuttle Hansen, *Solomon Complex*, 46.

⁸⁴ Semper, 298.

⁸⁵ E. Tuttle Hansen, ‘Hrothgar’s ‘Sermon’ in *Beowulf* as Parental Wisdom’, *ASE* 10 (1981), 61.

⁸⁶ E.g., *Beowulf*, ll. 1306, 1307, 1318, 1397; for a further discussion of the *Beowulf* poet’s use of epithets for Hrothgar, see chapter 7.

⁸⁷ *Beowulf*, l. 1769b.

you of strength, or the fangs of fire, or the surging of the flood, or the attack of the sword, or the flight of the spear, or terrible old age, or the brightness of eyes will diminish and grow dark; at last, death will overpower you, warrior.’]

Hrothgar’s reference to “atol ylðo” [terrible old age] once more emphasises his own senectitude and reinforces his authority as a ‘vehicle of wisdom’, much like the aged speakers in *Vainglory*, *The Riming Poem*, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*.

The second instructional poem in Old English to feature an old man as a teacher is *Precepts*, once more found in the Exeter Book.⁸⁸ *Precepts* employs as its framing device an elderly father who teaches his son in the form of ten instalments of advice. No fewer than eight times, the poet emphasises that the father is old and that his authority derives from his lived experience: “frod fæder” [old and wise father] (l.1a), “mage cystum eald” [old/experienced in the customs of kinsmen] (l.2b), “fæder ... frod” [old and wise father] (l. 15b), “frod guma” [old and wise man] (l. 53a), “eald fæder” [old father] (l. 59b), “se gomola” [the old one] (l. 65b), “eald uðwita” [old sage] (l. 66a) and “eald” [the old one] (l. 77).⁸⁹ Throughout his teachings, the old man admonishes his son to respect his teachers:

Wes þu þinum ylðrum arfæst symle,
fægerwyrde, ond þe in ferðe læt
þine lareowas leofe in mode. (ll. 11–3)

[You must always be respectful to your elders, fair-worded, and you must allow your teachers to be in your heart, dear in spirit.]

Similarly, the son is told to choose an advisor who is “spella ond lara ræd-hycgende” [resourceful in stories and learning] (ll. 25b–6a) and, finally, to “gemyne / frode fæder lare ond þec a wið firenum geheald” [remember the wise teachings of your father and always keep yourself from sins] (ll.93b–4). Michael D. C. Drout places *Precepts* in a monastic context and suggests that the poem does not depict a generic father/son interaction, but rather an “image of ‘spiritual fatherhood’”.⁹⁰ This proposed monastic context makes sense in the light of the didactic duties assigned to older monks in monastic rules. In fact, one of those rules even made the pseudo-paternal role of elderly monks explicit:

Þa ylðran mid godum bysnum and mid gelomlicre mingunge læron þa gingran, and lufion swa heora bearn, and þa gyngran wurðion þa ylðran swilce heora fæderas, and mid ealre glædnysse hyrsumion heora hæsum.⁹¹

⁸⁸ E. Tuttle Hansen, ‘*Precepts*: An Old English Instruction’, *Speculum* 56 (1981), 1–16.

⁸⁹ All references to *Precepts*, ed. Shippey.

⁹⁰ M. D. C. Drout, ‘Possible Instructional Effects of the Exeter Book ‘Wisdom Poems’: A Benedictine Reform Context’, in *Form and Content of Instruction in Anglo-Saxon England in the Light of Contemporary Manuscript Evidence: Papers Presented at the International Conference, Udine, 6–8 April 2006*, ed. P. Lendinara, L. Lazzari and M. A. D’Aronco (Turnhout, 2007), 460.

⁹¹ *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 327, ll. 29–31.

[The older ones shall teach the younger ones through good examples and frequent admonitions, and love them as if they were their own fathers, and obey their instructions with complete willingness.]

As such, the old and wise father in *Precepts* may reflect the typical role and status of senior monks in Anglo-Saxon monasteries specifically, although the cultural association between old age and wisdom is very likely to have stretched beyond the confines of the monastery.

Illustrative of the widely held link between sagacity and senectitude are two Old English proverbs. Proverbs are a specific branch of wisdom literature that, according to Paul Cavill, “reflect[s] the world view of the ordinary Anglo-Saxon, they are the common store of everyday knowledge which the Anglo-Saxon would take for granted”.⁹² The first of these two proverbs that link age to wisdom is part of *Maxims II*, a collection of versified articulations of general truths: “[G]omol snoterost, / fyrngearum frod, se þe ær feala gebideð” [the old man [is] the wisest, old in years gone by, he who has endured many things before].⁹³ The second proverb that assigns wisdom to the elderly is one of the *Durham Proverbs*, a collection of forty-six Old English proverbs, some metrical, accompanied by Latin versions.⁹⁴ Number 7 of this collection reads:

Sepe in [u]ile sacculo fulget aurum.
Oft on sotigum bylige searowa licgað.⁹⁵

While the Latin proverb can be translated as ‘Often gold shines in a cheap purse’ and hence expresses the general sense ‘do not judge by appearances’, the Old English proverb is best translated as ‘Often there is cunning in a sooty bag’. The sooty bag, in this case, is someone who sits by the fire all day, hence: an old person.⁹⁶ As such, both proverbs encapsulate the idea that, typically, an old man would be wise. Still, the characterisation of the old man in *Maxims II* as having endured much and the elderly individual in the *Durham Proverbs* as a sooty bag implies that while they may have increased their knowledge, they had to suffer to attain it and have also grown physically inactive and unsightly. This other side of the coin will be explored in the following chapter.

Overall, it is safe to assume that the Anglo-Saxons did, indeed, generally equate old age with wisdom, even if not all wise men were old, nor all old men wise.⁹⁷ The elderly certainly appear in Old English wisdom poetry in the stereotypical roles of

⁹² Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 185.

⁹³ Found in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. i (s. xi med., Abingdon); Ker, no. 191; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 370. *Maxims II*, ed. Shippey, ll. 10–3.

⁹⁴ Found in Durham, Cathedral Library, B. III. 32 (s. xi¹ – xi med., Canterbury); Ker, no. 107; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 244.

⁹⁵ O. S. Arngart, ‘The Durham Proverbs’, *Speculum* 56 (1982), no. 7.

⁹⁶ This interpretation is reinforced by Old Norse analogues. For a full discussion of this proverb and an exact precursor of its Latin equivalent in the ninth-century *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, see T. Porck, ‘Treasures in a Sooty Bag? A Note on *Durham Proverb 7*’, *NQ* ns 62 (2015), 203–6.

⁹⁷ For examples of old men lacking wisdom, see the examples of the *senex sine religione* and the *puer centum annorum* mentioned above, pp. 83ff.

wise man and teacher; references to their lived experience, accumulated in their long lives, rendered their advice and knowledge authoritative. The connection between senectitude and sagacity was also expressed in proverbs, suggesting that this was not mere poetic fancy but a widely held cultural notion. On the whole, Anglo-Saxons in search of wisdom, it would seem, expected to find it in a sooty bag: an old man by the fire.

Conclusion: Longing for longevity?

Given its general, albeit not wholly unambiguous, associations with respect, spiritual superiority and wisdom, the prospect of growing old may have sounded alluring to some Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, Brihtwold, archbishop of Canterbury (692–731), wished a long life upon his friend Forthhere, bishop of Sherborne (709–737): “May Jesus Christ our Lord preserve your Reverence unharmed to an advanced age”.⁹⁸ St. Leoba (d. 782) did something similar when she wished Boniface (672x5?–754) to remain “ever the happier in life as the older in years”.⁹⁹ In a like manner, longevity was one of the blessings for a new bride in a nuptial benediction in the *Durham Ritual*:

*sit in ea iugum dilectionis et pacis fidelis et casta nubat in christo imitatrixque sanctorum permaneat feminarum sit amabilis ut rachel uiro sapiens ut rebecca longeva et fidelis ut sarra sie in ðær iwocc lvfes 7 sibbes gitriwa 7 hygdego gimvngia in criste ðu sie giliced æc halgawara ðerhwnia vifmonna sie lufsvm svæ rah’ vere snottor svæ rebec’ longlif’ 7 gileaffvll svæ sar’.*¹⁰⁰

[May in it (i.e. matrimony) be the yoke of love and peace, may you, faithful and chaste, marry in Christ and also remain an imitator of holy women, may you be as lovely to your husband as Rachel, as wise as Rebecca, as long-lived and faithful as Sarah.]

Ælfric, too, observed that people longed for longevity. However, he objected strongly against this desire, retorting:

Gehwær is on urum life. ateorung 7 werignys 7 brosnung þæs lichaman: 7 þeahhwæpere wilnað gehwa þæt he lange lybbe. Hwæt is lange lybban buton lange swincan? Feawum mannum gelimpð on þyssum dagum þæt he gesundful lybbe hundeahtatig geara: 7 swa hwæt swa he ofer þam leofað hit

⁹⁸ *English Historical Documents. Volume 1: c.500–1042*, ed. and trans. D. Whitelock (London, 1955), 731. This letter is dated 709–731.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 735. This letter is dated soon after 732. In his *Propositiones ad acuendos iuvenes* [Problems to sharpen the young] (c.800), Alcuin has a father wish his son a long life, in a rather cryptic manner: “A son greeted his father: ‘Hello father’; to which his father replied: ‘Hello son. May you live long, as much as you have lived. If you triple that number of years and add one of my years you will have 100 years’ How old was the boy at that time?” (The answer: 16,5 years). Alcuin, *Propositiones ad acuendos iuvenes*, trans. J. Hadley and D. Singmaster, ‘Problems to Sharpen the Young’, *The Mathematical Gazette* 76 (1992), no. 44.

¹⁰⁰ *Rituale ecclesiae Dunelmensis: The Durham Collectar*, ed. U. L. Lindelöf (Durham, 1927), 109.

bið him geswinc 7 sarnys. swa swa se witega cwæð: “Yfele sind ure dagas”
7 þæs þe wyrsan þe we hi lufiað.¹⁰¹

[Everywhere in our life is faintness and weariness, and decay of the body, and yet every one desires that he might live long. What is to live long but to suffer long? It happens to few men in these days to live over eighty years in health, and whatever he lives beyond that age, it is toil to him and pain, as the prophet said: “Evil are our days” (Eph. 5:6), and the worse that we love them.]

Why do people want to grow old, Ælfric asks, if all they will get in return is toil and pain? Ælfric’s remark is hard to reconcile with Burrow’s claim that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories and Crawford’s notion that the Anglo-Saxon period was ‘a golden age for the elderly’. Not only were the Anglo-Saxons well aware that the merits of age were not for everyone, they also observed that there were serious downsides to growing old. These downsides and their expression in the Anglo-Saxon literary record is the topic of the next chapter.

¹⁰¹ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 32, ll. 213–9. Ælfric appears to be following Augustine here, see Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 274.

The drawbacks of old age

One might be eaten by a wolf, die of hunger, perish of thirst, be killed by the hand of an aggressive drunk or fall, featherless, from a tree. The first fifty odd lines of the Exeter Book poem *The Fortunes of Men* consist of a depressing list of the various ways in which a young person might die. From line 58 onwards, the poem takes a more joyous turn:

Sum sceal on geogube mid godes meahtum
his earfoðsiþ ealne forspildan,
ond *on ylde eft* eadig weorþan,
wunian wyndagum ond welan þicgan,
maþmas ond meoduful mægburge on.

These lines have been translated by Shippey as follows:

Another, through the power of God, will in his youth obliterate all his harsh experience, and then be fortunate *in old age*, living happy days and enjoying prosperity, riches and the mead-cup in the home of his family.¹

Translated thus, it seems as if the Anglo-Saxon poet posits youth, filled with dangers, against old age, a time characterised by joy and prosperity. S. A. J. Bradley, however, rendered “on ylde eft” in a different way: “in his maturity”;² apparently translating “ylde” not as ‘old age’ but with the more general sense ‘age, stage of life’ and “eft” as ‘afterwards’, hence ‘in the stage of life afterwards, the next stage’, that is: maturity or adulthood, the stage of life after youth.³ This alternative translation, which has also

¹ *The Fortunes of Men*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 58–63.

² Bradley’s translation reads: “One, through God’s powers, shall expend all his misfortune during his youth, and in his maturity he shall become prosperous again and live out days of happiness and indulge in his wealth, treasures and the mead-flagon, in his family’s midst”. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. and trans. S. A. J. Bradley (London, 1982), 342–3.

³ A similar construction occurs in *Beowulf*, ll. 20–4: “Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean, / fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearne, / þæt hine *on ylde eft* gewunigen / wilgesiþas, þonne wig cume” [In such a way must a young man with liberality bring about, with splendid costly gifts in his father’s lap (during his youth), so that when he comes of age close companions will stand by him, when war comes]. It is worth noting that various translations interpret the phrase “on ylde eft” as meaning something other than “in old age”. E.g., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, ed. and trans. H. D. Chickering Jr (New York, 1977), 49, and *The Beowulf Manuscript: Complete Texts and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. and trans. R. D. Fulk, DOML 3 (Cambridge MA, 2010), 87, give “in his later years” and “later in life”, respectively; *Beowulf*, ed. and trans. M. Swanton (Manchester, 1978), 35, and *Beowulf and Its Analogues*, ed. and trans. G. N. Garmonsway and J. Simpson (London, 1980), 3, both interpret the phrase as referring to the time when the young man “comes of age”, i.e. reaches adulthood.

been suggested by Sánchez-Martí,⁴ is preferable for two reasons. Firstly, the remainder of *The Fortunes of Men* is a list of occupations a man might fulfil as an adult and does not seem to be concerned with life as an old man. Secondly and more importantly in the context of this chapter, there is little to no other literary evidence that Anglo-Saxons expected to celebrate “wyndagum” [days of joy] in their old age. Rather, old age was associated primarily with physical, social and emotional drawbacks that rendered joy impossible.

These downsides of growing old are the central topic of this chapter, which reviews their representation in the poems and homilies of the Anglo-Saxons. The frequency and potency with which these drawbacks occur in the literary record illustrate that the conclusions drawn by Burrow and Crawford that the Anglo-Saxon period was somehow a ‘golden age for the elderly’ is one-sided at best. In representations of old age in poetry and homiletic literature, the physical and emotional repercussions take central stage; growing old was associated with loss of physical aptitude, loneliness and sadness. As a consequence, the old man became a symbol of the transience of worldly pleasures and old age was framed as a prefiguration of the torments of Hell.

‘My poor weak body deteriorates’: Anglo-Saxon experiences of old age

A declining health is part and parcel of the biological process of growing old and the physical ramifications of age were as inescapable for the Anglo-Saxons as they are for us. Indeed, bio-archaeological research into the skeletal remains in Anglo-Saxon graves has found that elderly Anglo-Saxons were prone to suffer from multiple diseases, including osteoarthritis, chronic dental diseases and the development of malignant cancer tumors.⁵ Medical texts of the time also exemplify that the elderly were susceptible to certain ailments. In the ninth-century *Leechbook* of Bald, for instance, the aged feature as typical sufferers of poor eyesight, indigestion and the “healfdeade adl” [half-dead disease].⁶ The last ailment is described as an affliction which involved the paralysis of one half of the entire body and mainly affected the elderly: “Gif he bið cealdre gecyndo þonne cymð æfter feowertigum, elcor cymð æfter fiftigum wintra his gærgetales” (If he be of a cold nature then it [the disease] comes after forty (years), otherwise it comes after fifty winters of his age).⁷ In their treatments of the correspondences between the four ages and the four bodily humours, Bede and Byrhtferth, too, linked old age to physical ailments, specifically those associated with phlegm. The former noted that the elderly were typically “tardos, somnolentos, obliuiosos” [slow, sleepy, and forgetful];⁸ the latter described them as “ceald and snoflig” [cold and rheumy].⁹

As sufferers of bad health, the aged were also exempt from certain regulations or were forced to give up their responsibilities. The Old English Rule of Chrodegang,

⁴ Sánchez-Martí, ‘Age Matters’, 223–4.

⁵ C. Lee, ‘Disease’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. H. Hamerow, D. A. Hinton and S. Crawford (Oxford, 2011), 704–23.

⁶ *Leechdoms*, ed. Cockayne, II, 197, 284.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 284.

⁸ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35

⁹ Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. Baker and Lapidge, I.1, ll. 131–3.

for example, held that the elderly were to be spared from corporeal punishment: if a brother was too old to be physically chastised, he should be punished instead with public reproof, separation from his fellow priests and continuous fasting.¹⁰ On occasion, the elderly were even excused from the fast, as is demonstrated in a homily by Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023). During Lent, he wrote, everyone was required to hold the fast, except those who were unable to do so on account of their youth, ill health or old age.¹¹ On a practical level, aged individuals sometimes saw no other way than to discontinue their occupations. Bede reported in his *Historia abbatum* how the elderly Abbot Ceolfrith of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow (c.642–716) resigned from his abbacy, because he no longer considered himself up to the task:

uidit se iam senior et plenus dierum non ultra posse subditis, ob impedimentum supremae aetatis, debitam spiritalis exercitii, uel docendo uel uiuendo, praefigere formam.

[Now he (Ceolfrith) saw that, being old and full of days, he could no longer prove to be an appropriate model of spiritual exercise for those under him either by teaching or by example because he was so aged and infirm.]¹²

In the same year, Ceolfrith went on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he died at the age of 74. A reasoning similar to Ceolfrith's can be presumed to have underlain the decision of King Ine of Wessex (d. ?726), who abdicated after a reign of thirty-seven years and left his kingdom to 'younger men'.¹³

Epigraphical evidence reveals some of the personal struggles of older individuals. Alcuin's correspondence, to cite a striking example, is rife with references to his ill health. While his bodily state did not force him to lay down his responsibilities, he did on occasion use his poor condition as an excuse for his absence from Charlemagne's court, preferring to stay at St. Martin's in Tours instead:

I beg humbly, meekly, devotedly that I may be allowed to say my prayers daily at St. Martin's. For being so infirm of body, I cannot travel or do any other work. All my physical powers have lost their strength and will surely grow weaker day by day, nor, I fear, will they return in this world. I hoped and wished in days past to see your Majesty's face once more, but as my poor weak body deteriorates I know well that that is quite impossible. So I implore your infinite goodness that in goodwill and kindness you should not

¹⁰ *Rule of Chrodegang*, ed. and trans. Langefeld, 273, ll. 35–43.

¹¹ Napier, hom. 50, p. 284, ll. 28–9, p. 285, ll. 1–14.

¹² Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. C. W. Grocock and I. N. Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford, 2013), ch. 16; cf. Bede, *Vita Ceolfrithi*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth*, ch. 21: "Namque ubi longo iam senior defessus uidit se ultra non posse exemplum pristini uigoris suis praemonstrare discipulis, inuenit utile consilium ut, relicto iuuenioribus regimine monasteriali, ipse apostolorum limina peregrinaturus adiret" [Now when he (Ceolfrith) saw that he could no longer set an example of his vigour of old to his pupils, being already exhausted through extreme old age, he decided that a suitable plan would be to leave the rule of the monastery to younger men, while he himself would set off on a pilgrimage to the abodes of the apostles (Rome)].

¹³ Bede, *HE*, V.7. Elderly kings are discussed in chapter 7 below.

be vexed with my infirmity, but in compassion allow the weary to have rest.¹⁴

Similarly, the letters of Boniface (c.672–754) bear witness to the physical decrepitude which this Anglo-Saxon missionary must have experienced in his later years. In one of his letters, he mentions his failing eyesight when he requests a book “in clear letter written in full”, being no longer able to read “writing which is small and filled with abbreviations”.¹⁵ These specimens of first-hand experiences of age show that growing old could be an arduous road, paved with physical complications.

Another personal account of the ills of old age has come down to us in the form of a Latin prayer with a partial Old English gloss by an anonymous eleventh-century scribe. He added his prayer on a folio and a half that had intentionally been left open by the original scribe of the Lambeth Psalter.¹⁶ The added prayer, written in the first person, addresses God and recalls sins committed in youth. The speaker seeks redemption now that he has grown old:

Iam pertrahit me deuictum senectus ad occasum, floret uertex, hebet uisus, crescit dolor capitis, ruunt dentes, [t]remunt membra, decident tote uires.¹⁷

[Now binding old age drags me to my end, the crown of my head is blooming (i.e. growing white), my vision is fading, headache is increasing, my teeth are falling out, my limbs are trembling, my powers are completely diminishing.]

Unlike similar lists of symptoms of age found in Anglo-Saxon homilies,¹⁸ this list has no known source and may, therefore, reflect the scribe’s own experience.¹⁹ The prayer continues with the speaker’s fear of death and his prayers to God to redeem him, slacken the bonds of his sins, heal his wounds and forgive him for his sins. Finally, the speaker begs God not to deliver him unto Satan and ends with a description of Judgement Day. Evidently, this prayer was composed by an old man seeking

¹⁴ Alcuin of York, trans. Allott, let. 68.

¹⁵ *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. E. Emerton (New York, 1940), let. 51.

¹⁶ London, Lambeth Palace Library, 427 (s. xi¹, Winchester?; the ‘Lambeth Psalter’); Ker, no. 280; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 517. The space was left blank between Psalms 108 and 109. P. O’Neill, ‘Latin Learning at Winchester in the Early Eleventh Century: The Evidence of the Lambeth Psalter’, *ASE* 20 (1991), 146, 162, has pointed out that, since Psalm 109 marks the first of a series of psalms intended for the daily use at Vespers in the Roman and Benedictine office, some space was always left open before this psalm, for an illustration or the addition of personal prayers.

¹⁷ M. Förster, ‘Die altenglischen Beigaben des Lambeth-Psalter’, *Archiv* 132 (1914), 328–9. The partial Old English gloss reads “heafoð, deorcaþ gesihð, wecsð sar heafdes, feallaþ teþ, cwaciaþ lima, hreosað ealle” [head, vision darkens, headache grows, teeth fall, limbs tremble, completely decays].

¹⁸ See below, pp. 110ff.

¹⁹ C. D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1993), 98, n. 209, compares the list in the Lambeth Psalter to the *Vita Tertia* of St. Patrick: “oculi non bene uident, aures non bene audiunt, lingua non bene loquitur, dentium numerus imminutus est, similiter et cetera membra” [the eyes do not see well, the ears do not hear well, the tongue does not speak well, the number of teeth is diminishing and the other limbs (fare?) likewise]. The two lists are, however, so divergent that even an indirect link between the two texts is unlikely.

forgiveness for his sins, afraid of his impending death that was announced by the decrepit state of his aging body.

The examples above illustrate that for many elderly Anglo-Saxons, old age manifested itself as a source of physical woe and mental distress. It should come as no surprise, then, that these repercussions of age also feature widely in the literary record. These texts reflect not only what aged Anglo-Saxons actually suffered, but also what drawbacks were typically associated with growing old and how these were interpreted.

***atol ylðo*: The terrors of old age and the transience of the world in Anglo-Saxon poetry**

On the whole, Anglo-Saxon poets appear to propagate a bleak image of old age. Typically, growing old was grouped with other negative aspects of life, such as evil, death and darkness, as in the group of versified gnomic statements known as *Maxims II*:

God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið ylðo,
lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið þystrum,
fyrð wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum.²⁰

[Good must be against evil, youth against old age, life against death, light against darkness, army against army, one enemy against the other.]

In another set of proverbs, in the Royal Psalter,²¹ aging is similarly linked to processes of degeneration rather than progress:

Ardor refriescit, nitor quualescit;
Amor abolescit, lux obtenebrescit;
hat acolað, hwit asolað,
leof alaþað, leoht aþeostrað.
Senescunt omnia que aeterna non sunt.
æghwæt ealdað þæs þe ece ne byð.²²

[What is hot grows cool, what is white becomes dirty, what is dear becomes hateful, what is light becomes dark. Everything which is not eternal grows old.]

Here, senectitude is framed as a negative outcome, akin to cold, filth, hate and darkness. Both these proverbial treatments of age are exemplary of the underlying negative attitude towards aging in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

²⁰ *Maxims II*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 50–2.

²¹ London, British Library, Royal 2 B. v (s. xi med.; the ‘Royal Psalter’); Ker, no. 249; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 451.

²² *Der altenglische Regius-Psalter. Eine Interlinearversion in Hs. Royal 2. B. 5 des brit. Mus.*, ed. F. Roeder (Halle, 1904), xii.

In terms of the physical drawbacks of age, poets rarely provided detailed descriptions of old bodies. Rather, without much specification, old age was listed among other causes for physical impairment. A typical example is Hrothgar's 'Sermon' in *Beowulf*, cited in the previous chapter (p. 89), where "atol ylđo" [terrible old age] is grouped with disease, fire and attacks by swords or spears.²³ Similarly, old age forms part of a cluster with illness and 'edge-hate' in *The Seafarer*:

simle þreora sum þinga gehwylce
 ær his tidege to tweon weorþeð;
 adl oþþe ylđo oþþe ecghete
 fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð.²⁴

[always one of three turns into doubt everything before its due: illness, old age or edge-hate tears away life from the ones fated to die.]

The collocation of *ād* 'sickness' and *ylđo* 'old age' is also found in two other poems. *Maxims I*, for example, notes that God is affected neither by "adl ne ylđo" [sickness or old age].²⁵ Neither do "ylđo ne adle" hurt the soul, as is implicated by *Riddle 43* in the Exeter Book.²⁶ Thus, while the connection with disease was often made, Old English poetry rarely features any explicit description of physical symptoms of old age, apart from the frequent use of the poetic word *hār* 'grey' to denote the hair colour of the elderly.²⁷

In fact, poets appear more interested in the social and emotional repercussions of growing old. *The Seafarer*, once again, reminds his audience that old age also involved the loss of friends:

ylđo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
 gomelfeax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
 æþelinga bearn eorþan forgiefene.²⁸

[old age comes upon him, his face grows pale, grey-haired he mourns, he knows that his friends of old, children of earls, have been given to the earth.]

The treatment of old age in the poetic adaptation of *Genesis B*, as one of the consequences of Adam and Eve's choice to eat from the tree of knowledge,²⁹ likewise focuses on the social implications rather than its physical symptoms: old age is said to

²³ *Beowulf*, l. 1766a.

²⁴ *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 68–71.

²⁵ *Maxims I*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 8–12; cf. *Beowulf*, l. 1736a.

²⁶ *Riddle 43*, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. v. K. Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, ASPR 3 (New York, 1936), l. 4a.

²⁷ For *hār*, see Appendix, s.v. *hār*.

²⁸ *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 91–3

²⁹ Old age is also named as one of the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience in *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, no. 53: "Ac þa hi þæt ne geheoldan, ða underðeoddon hi selfe ond eall ðæt mænnesce cynn to sare ond eldo ond to deaðe" [But when they did not obey it, they then subjected themselves and all of humankind to pain and old age and to death].

rob people of “ellendæda, dreamas and drihtscipes” [valorous deeds, joys and rulership].³⁰ These emotional and social consequences are also epitomised by a number of grieving, elderly characters in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar, for instance, is described by Beowulf as an old, desolate man, who, ‘bound by age’, sadly sings of his lost youth:

gomela Scilding,
felafricgende feorran rehte;
hwilum hildedeor hearpan wynne,
gome(n)wudu grette, hwilum gyd awræc
soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
rehte æfter rihte rumheort cyning;
hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan,
hildestrengo; hreðer (in)ne weoll
þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde.³¹

[The old, well-informed Scylding told of things far back in time; sometimes the one brave in battle touched the wood of entertainment, the joy of the harp, sometimes he recited a song, true and sad; sometimes he, the noble-spirited king, told a wonderful story according to what is right. Sometimes again, the old warrior, bound by old age, began to speak of his youth, his battle-strength; his heart welled up inside, when he, old and wise in winters, remembered many things.]

Binding old age, it would seem, has broken the old king both physically and emotionally. Aside from Hrothgar, five other characters in *Beowulf* are described as both old and grieving, either for losses in the past or looming defeats in the future.³² Thus, old age occurs in poetry not only as a cause for physical inaptitude, it also takes away joy, companionship and social standing.

The physical, as well as emotional and social, drawbacks of senescence also feature in two Latin poems by Alcuin, which have hitherto been ignored in the few studies on old age in Anglo-Saxon England: *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine et clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii* [On the mutability of human affairs and the destruction of the monastery of Lindisfarne] and *O mea cella* [O my cell]. In both poems, Alcuin explicitly linked the effects of old age to the idea of transience of worldly joys. In doing so, he introduced a theme into Anglo-Saxon poetry that can also be traced in the Old English elegiac wisdom poems *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and

³⁰ *Genesis B*, ed. A. N. Doane, *The Saxon Genesis: An Edition of the West Saxon Genesis B and the Old Saxon Vatican Genesis* (Madison, 1991), ll. 484–5.

³¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2105–14.

³² The four other characters are the old Heathobard warrior who, “geomor-mod” [sad-minded] (l. 2044a), incites his younger colleague to take up arms once again; an old father, “geomorlic” [sad] (l. 2444a) and singing a “sarigne sang” [a sorrowful song] (l. 2447a), who has lost his son to the gallows; the Swedish king Ongentheow, “frod, felageomor” [old and wise and very sad] (l. 2950); and Beowulf himself, who is described twice with the phrase “gomol on gehðo” [the old man in grief] (ll. 2783, 3095). For a more detailed exploration of these characters in *Beowulf*, see chapters 6 and 7.

The Riming Poem, as well as in the epilogue to *Elene* by Cynewulf: the decline in human old age as an analogue to the deterioration of the world in general.

Alcuin's most extensive poetic treatment of this theme is found in the *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, a poem of lament and consolation addressed to the monks of Lindisfarne. The poem is dated shortly after the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793, which Alcuin placed in the context of other disastrous historical happenings, including the death of Alexander the Great, the fall of Rome and the Islamic conquest of Spain. He then drew an analogy between the passing of empires and the decline in human old age:

Thus was the order of this world subject to change and so it will be,
 let no one have trust in the permanence of joy.
 He who once hunted in the fields for the stag
 lies in bed, now that weary old age is at hand.
 He who once reclined joyously on his purple couch
 can scarcely cover his chill limbs with an old rag.
 The long day closes in black darkness eyes
 which used to count each solitary wandering mote.
 Hands which once brandished swords and mighty weapons
 now tremble and can barely convey their food to their mouths.
 Voices, clearer than trumpets, suddenly stick in the throat
 summoning up a subdued whisper for attentive listeners.³³

In these lines, Alcuin painted a pessimistic picture of old age, characterised by a loss of strength and status, as well as sensory impairment. It is worth noting that Alcuin himself experienced the detrimental effects of old age first-hand, as his correspondence reveals,³⁴ and would have been in his late fifties when he wrote these lines. This particular passage, therefore, may have been inspired by his own familiarity with the decline resulting from age.

Nevertheless, his lament is more than a personal reflection, since he used this image of old age to make a more general point:

Let my poem be brief. All youth fades away,
 all physical beauty perishes and falls,
 only the empty skin clings with difficulty to the bones,
 and when a man grows old he does not even recognise his own limbs.
 What he was, another will be, nor will he continue to be what he is,
 he will act as a thief from himself at different times.
 And so the day to come will change minds and bodies
 and may it mark better progress in good deeds!
 Therefore let us always love instead the things of the higher world,
 and what will remain in heaven rather than what will perish on earth.
 Here time changes and you see nothing that is not mutable;

³³ Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine et clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii*, trans. P. Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London, 1985), ll. 99–110.

³⁴ *Alcuin of York*, trans. Allott, lts. 6, 8, 67, 68, 69, 91, 104, 116, 133.

there one day will always be what it will be.³⁵

In other words, the decline in human old age is similar to what happens to all worldly things. Loss and decline are inevitable in this life and eternity and fixedness can only be found in Heaven.

The notion of declining old age and a subsequent admonition to focus on the permanence of celestial joys is also found in Alcuin's elegiac poem *O mea cella*, which was most likely written after the poem on Lindisfarne, when Alcuin himself would have been in his sixties.³⁶ In *O mea cella*, Alcuin described a beautiful place that he could no longer visit as it had been deteriorated and had been passed into the hands of other people. According to Carole Newlands, the poem is best read as "the lament of an exile, severed from homeland through political calamities".³⁷ From this personal lament, Alcuin then moves into a general observation about the fleeting nature of worldly joys and the inevitable decline of a man in old age:

All temporal beauty changes in this sudden way,
all things alter in different fashions.
Nothing remains eternal, nothing is truly immutable;
the shadows of night cover the holy day.
Cold winter suddenly shakes down the beautiful flowers
and a dreary breeze churns up the peaceful sea.
In the fields where the holy youths chased the stag
the old man now leans wearily on his staff.³⁸

Alcuin probably based this contrast between the active youth and the decrepit old man on the similar image in the poem about Lindisfarne.³⁹ Like the latter poem, *O mea cella* continues with an advice to focus on the permanence and eternity offered by God, rather than on the transient beauty of the world:

Why do we wretches love you, fugitive world?
You always fly headlong from us.
May you flee away, and let us always love Christ,
let love of God always possess our hearts.⁴⁰

³⁵ Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, trans. Godman, ll. 111–22.

³⁶ While P. Godman, 'Alcuin's Poetic Style and the Authenticity of *O mea cella*', *Studi Medievali* 20 (1979), 568–9, relates the poem to Alcuin's departure from Aachen to Tours and argues that Alcuin laments the decline of the palace school in his absence, C. Newlands, 'Alcuin's Poem of Exile: *O mea cella*', *Mediaevalia* 11 (1985), 27, argues that it was written on the occasion of Alcuin's departure from York and his vow never to return, following the murder of Æthelred, king of Northumbria, in April 796.

³⁷ Alcuin may have based his poem on Vergil's *Eclogue*, a poem similarly concerning political turmoil and exile, see Newlands, 'Alcuin's Poem', 30–3.

³⁸ Alcuin, *O mea cella*, ed. and trans. Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, ll. 23–30.

³⁹ Cf. Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, trans. Godman, ll. 101–2.

⁴⁰ Alcuin, *O mea cella*, trans. Godman, ll. 31–4.

The pattern Alcuin established in *O mea cella*, moving from a personal lament to general reflection on worldly transience with a subsequent admonition to seek divine permanence, can also be found in various Old English poems: *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Riming Poem* and the epilogue to Cynewulf's *Elene*.⁴¹

The influence of Alcuin's poetry on the three Old English elegiac wisdom poems *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Riming Poem* is suggested by a number of shared characteristics. Michael Lapidge and Anne L. Klinck, for instance, have both noted that all three Old English poems echo the mood of Alcuin's poetry with their personal, reflective tone with respect to the transience of worldly joys.⁴² More particularly, all three poems use the device of an aged narrator whose personal lament over the consequences of old age is linked to a more general regret over impermanence.⁴³ Like Alcuin's narrator in *O mea cella*, the aged persona in *The Wanderer*, first of all, is cut off from his former life, mourns the loss of his friends and now suffers exile in his old age.⁴⁴ This reflection on his private losses leads to a more universal treatment for the topic of transience, culminating in a series of exclamations starting with "hwær cwom" [where are], the Old English reflex of the well-known *ubi sunt* motif.⁴⁵ The monologue in *The Seafarer* also moves from personal to general, when the speaker, after recounting some of his private hardships, remarks: "Ic gelyfe no / þæt him eorðwelan ece stondað" [I do not believe that earthly treasures last forever].⁴⁶ Additionally, Alcuin's link between the fall of kingdoms in Biblical and Classical history and the decline in human old age in his poem on Lindisfarne is echoed by the passage in *The Seafarer* that laments the passing of gold-giving kings, who have been replaced by weaker individuals:

næron nu cyningas ne caseras
ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron,
þonne hi mæst mid him mærpā gefremedon,
ond on dryhtlicestum dome lifdon.
Gedroren is þeos duguð eal; dreamas sind gewitene.
Wuniað þa wacran ond þas woruld healdap,
brucað þurh bisgo. Blæd is gehnæged;
eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað;
swa nu monna gehwylc geond middangeard:
yldo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
gomelfeax gnornað; wat his iuwine,

⁴¹ Newlands, 'Alcuin's Poem', 34, has noted the similarity to *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, tentatively suggesting that "Alcuin introduced to Anglo-Latin literature the pattern that the Old English lyrics, whether consciously or not, would later follow". The similarity between Alcuin's poetry and Cynewulf's *Elene* has hitherto gone unmentioned.

⁴² Klinck, 232–3.

⁴³ Cf. G. V. Smithers, 'The Meaning of *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*', *Medium Ævum* 28 (1959), 10–1.

⁴⁴ M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature. Vol. 1: 600–899* (London, 1996), 22; cf. Klinck, 233, who notes that the persona adopted in Alcuin's poem *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine* and the Old English elegies are "quite different"; she does not discuss Alcuin's *O mea cella*.

⁴⁵ *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 92–3.

⁴⁶ *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 65b–6

æþelinga bearn eorþan forgiefene.⁴⁷

[There are no kings, emperors and gold-givers as there were before, when they performed the most of glories among themselves and lived in the noblest glory. This entire noble band has fallen; joys have departed. Weaker ones remain and hold the earth, use it with toil. Glory is brought low. The very noble ones of the earth grow old and wither, as now does each person throughout the middle earth. Old age comes on him, his face grows pale, the hoary-haired one mourns, knows his friends from former days, the children of nobles, having given up the earth.]

Lastly, *The Riming Poem* also begins by relating the personal experience of an aged speaker, looking back at his youth. He, too, has suffered the mutability of pleasure first-hand and describes the difference between the pleasantries of his youth, such as joy and social standing, and their absence in old age in terms of day and night:

Nu min hreþer is hreoh, heofsipum sceoh,
nydbysgum neah. Gewiteð nihtes in fleah
se ær in dæge was dyre.⁴⁸

[Now my heart is distressed, fearful of unhappy journeys, close to inescapable troubles. That which had been dear during the day, departs in flight during the night.]

As in the other poems, the narrator's experience of aging is then linked to the fate of the world at large: "Swa nu world wendeþ, wyrd sendeþ / ond hetes henteð, hæleþe scyndeð" [Thus now the world turns, sends disastrous events and seizes with hate, puts men to shame].⁴⁹ A final characteristic that these three Old English poems share with Alcuin's poetry is that each ends with an enjoiner to focus on the eternal joys, found in Heaven.⁵⁰ In sum, there are notable similarities between the three Old English elegiac poems and Alcuin's Latin poetry; precise parallels and a direct influence cannot be established, but the vernacular poets did share with Alcuin the conceit of relating old age to the more general idea of transience.

Another Anglo-Saxon poet who may have been inspired by Alcuin to draw an analogy between the decline in old age and worldly mutability is Cynewulf, author of the Old English poems *Fate of the Apostles*, *Christ II*, *Juliana* and *Elene*. Cynewulf's authorship of these poems is based on the fact that they all feature closing epilogues that spell out his name in runes.⁵¹ While Cynewulf is one of few vernacular poets

⁴⁷ *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 82–93. Cf. Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine*, ed. and trans. Godman, ll. 31–110.

⁴⁸ *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, ll. 43–5a

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 59–60.

⁵⁰ *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 112–5; *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 117–24; *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, ll. 80–7.

⁵¹ Generally, *Guthlac B* is also considered part of the Cynewulfian corpus on the basis of style, though it misses the epilogue, since the poem is incomplete. See: R. D. Fulk, 'Cynewulf: Canon, Dialect, and Date', in *The Cynewulf Reader*, ed. R. E. Bjork (New York, 2001), 3–22.

known by name, his exact identity remains a mystery. Attempts to link the poet Cynewulf to historical figures, such as Cynewulf, bishop of Lindisfarne (d. ca. 783), Cynulf, priest of Dunwich (fl. 803) and Abbot Cenwulf of Petersborough (d. 1006), cannot be substantiated, since the name Cynewulf was simply very common: the ninth-century Lindisfarne *Liber Vitae* alone lists no fewer than twenty-one people named Cynewulf.⁵² The works attributed to the poet Cynewulf are dated between c.750 to the end of the tenth century, though a tenth-century date is most probable.⁵³

Various scholars have suggested that Cynewulf himself may have been of an advanced age when he wrote some of his poetry. Rosemary Woolf, for example, has argued that Cynewulf wrote *Juliana* when he was an old man, because it was a work of “uninspired competence”.⁵⁴ Similarly, Eduard Sievers and Claes Schaar saw *Fates of the Apostles* as Cynewulf’s latest poem, considering it “the work of an aged poet, still competent but uninspired”.⁵⁵ The only overt indication that Cynewulf may have been an elderly poet is found in his epilogue to *Elene*, a poem about how St. Helen found the True Cross. In this epilogue, written in the first person, Cynewulf explicitly described himself as an old man: “ic frod ond fus þurh þæt fæcne hus” [I, old and wise, and ready for death because of this deceitful house].⁵⁶ Moreover, Cynewulf notes that God gave him the gift of poetry as a comfort in his old age:

... me lare onlag þurh leohtne had
 gamelum to geoce, gife unscynde
 mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd befeat,
 torht ontynde, tidum gerymde,
 bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand,
 leoðucraeft onleac.⁵⁷

[...the mighty King gloriously bestowed on me His teaching as a comfort in my old age, meted out the noble gift and begot it in my mind, disclosed the brightness, extended it at times, unbound my bone-coffer, loosened my breast-hoard, unlocked the craft of poetry.]

While some scholars have taken this description of Cynewulf’s own old age at face value, Earl R. Anderson points out that Cynewulf’s revelation need not be autobiographical. Instead, he argues that Cynewulf may have used an ‘aged author’ motif.⁵⁸ Cynewulf’s identification as an old man, in this case, would be a stylistic

⁵² E. R. Anderson, *Cynewulf: Structure, Style, and Theme in His Poetry* (London, 1983), 16.

⁵³ P. W. Conner, ‘On Dating Cynewulf’, in *Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Bjork, 47.

⁵⁴ Cited in Anderson, *Cynewulf*, 22

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Arguably, assigning supposedly ‘uninspired’ poetry to an aged poet borders on ageism.

⁵⁶ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. P. O. A. Gradon (New York, 1966), l. 1236. The phrase “fæcne hus” [deceitful house] is a metaphor for the elderly body. Anderson, *Cynewulf*, 17, argues that Cynewulf’s use of this image is probably inspired by Ecclesiastes 12. 1–4, where the young are advised to remember their Creator and the body of an old man is compared to a household in decline. However, there is no need to presuppose a biblical source for this image; the metaphor of ‘house’ for body is well-attested, e.g., in the Old English kenning *bānhūs* ‘bone-house, body’.

⁵⁷ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 1245–50a.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Cynewulf*, 18.

device, rather than a reflection of personal senectitude. Similarly, Dolores W. Frese has argued that Cynewulf's use of the word "frod" to describe himself need not refer to the author's personal old age per se. Rather, this word connects Cynewulf to several characters in *Elene*, such as Sachius, Symon and Judas, who are described with the same word. Moreover, the poet's supposed acquisition of his poetic abilities in later life is paralleled by the "mature conversions to Christianity" of Constantine, Elene, Symon and Judas.⁵⁹

Indeed, Cynewulf's presentation of himself as an old man is certainly conventional and shows some similarities to the old wise man in wisdom poetry (see above, pp. 87ff). As in these other poems, Cynewulf explicitly linked his old age to wisdom: he called himself "frod" [old and wise] and his craft, the ability to write poetry, had been granted to him at an advanced age, "gamelum to geoce" [as a comfort in <my> old age].⁶⁰ Moreover, Cynewulf continued his epilogue with his runic signature that features a now familiar image of an old man, in this case a former warrior, grieving over his diminishing prowess and the fleeting nature of youth and joys. As in Alcuin's poems discussed above, these physical and social drawbacks of old age are then linked to the decline of the world as a whole:

A wæs sæcg oð ðæt
 cnyssed cearwelnum, .l. drusende,
 þeah he in medohealle maðmas þege,
 æplede gold .l. gnornode
 .t. gefera, nearusorge dreah,
 enge rune, þær him .M. fore
 milpaðas mæt, modig þrægde
 wirum gewlenced. P. is geswiðrad,
 gomen æfter gearum, geogoð is gecyrred,
 ald onmedla. .N. wæs geara
 geogoðhades glæm. Nu synt geardagas
 æfter fyrstmearce forð gewitene,
 lifwynne geliden, swa .f. toglideð,
 flodas gefysde. .P. æghwam bið
 læne under lyfte; landes frætwe
 gewitaþ under wolcnum winde geliccost,
 þonne he for hæleðum hlud astigeð,
 wæðeð be wolcnum, wedende færeð
 ond eft semninga swige gewyrðeð,
 in nedcleofan nearwe geheaðrod,
 þream forþrycced; swa þeos world
 eall gewiteð.⁶¹

⁵⁹ D. W. Frese, 'The Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures', in *Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Bjork, 333–4.

⁶⁰ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 1236a, 1246a.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 1256–77

[Until that time, the warrior had always been overwhelmed by sorrows, a failing TORCH,⁶² though he received treasures in the mead-hall, appled gold, he grieved for his BOW, the companion in NEED, he endured crushing distress, a cruel mystery, where before a HORSE carried him over army-paths,⁶³ ran bravely adorned with wire-ornaments. JOY is diminished, pleasure after the years, youth has changed, the magnificence of old. Once was OURS the splendour of youth.⁶⁴ Now the days of yore have, after a period of time, passed away, bereft of the enjoyment of life, just as the WATER glides away, floods sent forth. WEALTH is for everyone transitory under the sky, treasures of the land, departs under the clouds, most like the wind. When it loudly proceeds in the presence of heroes, hunts under the clouds, goes, raving, and afterwards it becomes quiet of assemblies, restrained in a narrow prison, oppressed by throes. Thus, this world will depart completely.]

Cynewulf then launches into a description of Judgement, after which those who have been cleansed of their sins are allowed to “sybbe brucan / eces ead-welan” [to enjoy peace, eternal happiness].⁶⁵ Like Alcuin, then, Cynewulf relates the decline in human old age to the fleeting nature of earthly beauties and, similarly, contrasts this to the eternity found in Heaven.

While the influence of Alcuin on the epilogue of Cynewulf’s *Elene* has been suggested before, especially regarding the description of Judgement in lines 1277ff,⁶⁶ the parallels between Cynewulf’s and Alcuin’s poetic treatment of old age have hitherto remained unmentioned. Both poets, it should be noted, like the anonymous authors of the Old English elegies, used the grieving old man reflecting on his former joys as a focal point for a discussion on the transience of earthly pleasures. Moreover, all poets use this idea to encourage their audience to put their minds to the eternal joys in Heaven instead. As we shall see below, this notion was used to much the same effect in later Anglo-Saxon homilies.

In the poems discussed above, the image of the aging man, suffering both physically and emotionally, was used as a demonstration of the transience of the world at large. Conversely, the author of *Solomon and Saturn II* reversed this idea and used the detrimental effect of time on Nature as a metaphor for the detrimental effects old age would have on Man. *Solomon and Saturn II* is an enigmatic debate poem between the pagan Saturn and the wise King Solomon, dating back to the early tenth century.

⁶² For the ‘failing torch’ as a symbol of a warrior’s life, see T. D. Hill, ‘The Failing Torch: The Old English *Elene*, 1256–1259’, *NQ* ns 52 (2005), 155–60.

⁶³ For the interpretation of “milpapas” as ‘army roads’, see A. Breeze, ‘*Exodus*, *Elene*, and the *Rune Poem*: milpæp ‘Army Road, Highway’’, *NQ* ns 38 (1991), 436–8.

⁶⁴ In translating the ð-rune as ‘ours’ I follow the majority of translators, see e.g. Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, 73, n. 1265b. R. W. V. Elliott, ‘Cynewulf’s Runes in *Christ II* and *Elene*’, in *Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Bjork, 284–5, argues, however, that the rune here must be interpreted as ‘aurochs, bison’, the original sense of the rune as preserved in the Old English *Runic Poem*. As the name of the animal does not make sense in this context, Elliott then suggests it is to be translated as ‘manly strength’, as in ‘Manly strength was once the splendour of youth’.

⁶⁵ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 1315–6a.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

The poem contains several riddles, of which one is the following ‘Old Age’ riddle, posed by Saturn:

‘Ac hwæt is ðæt wundor ðe geond ðas worold færeð,
 styrennga gæð, staðolas beateð,
 aweceð wopdropan, winneð oft hider?
 Ne mæg hit steorra ne stan ne se steapa gimm,
 wæter ne wildeor wihte beswican,
 ac him on hand gæð heardes ond hnesces,
 micles ond mætes; him to mose sceall
 gegangan geara gehwelce grundbuendra,
 lyft fleogendra, laguswemmendra,
 ðria ðreoteno ðusendgerimes.’⁶⁷

[‘But what is that strange thing that travels throughout this world, sternly goes, beats the foundations, arouses tears, often forces its way here? Neither star nor stone nor the broad gem, water nor wild beast can deceive it, but into its hand go hard and soft, the great and small. Each and every year the count of three times thirteen thousand of the ground-dwellers, of the air-flying, of the sea-swimming, must go to it as food.’]

The answer to this riddle – old age or devouring time – is given by Solomon, who first notes how Nature is ravished by old age and then concludes that the same fate awaits mankind:

‘Ylde beoð on eorðan æghwæs cræftig;
 mid hiðendre hildewræsne,
 rumre racenteage, ræceð wide,
 langre linan, lisseð eall ðæt heo wile.
 Beam heo abreoteð and bebriceð telgum,
 astyreð standendne stefn on siðe,
 afilleð hine on foldan; friteð æfter ðam
 wildne fugol. Heo oferwigeð wulf,
 hio oferbideð stanas, heo oferstigeð style,
 hio abiteð iren mid ome, deð usic swa.’⁶⁸

[‘Old age is, of all things, powerful on earth. With plundering shackles, capacious fetters, she reaches widely, with her long rope, she subdues all she will. She destroys the tree and shatters its branches, uproots the upright trunk on her way, and fells it to the earth; after that she feeds on the wildfowl. She defeats the wolf, she outlasts stones, she surpasses steel, she bites iron with rust, does the same to us.’]

⁶⁷ *Solomon and Saturn II*, ed. and trans. Anlezark, ll. 104–13. For a close Latin analogue to this riddle in the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, see T. D. Hill, ‘Saturn’s Time Riddle: An Insular Latin Analogue for *Solomon and Saturn II* lines 282–291’, *RES* ns 39 (1988), 273–6.

⁶⁸ *Solomon and Saturn II*, ed. and trans. Anlezark, ll. 114–23.

In other words, just as old age will destroy everything on earth, it will be devastating to humans. The author's use of feminine pronouns to refer to old age prompted Semper to argue that "the personification of old age as an invincible *female* emphasises how unnatural this process appears to fighting men; she is a foe they cannot defeat, neither man nor monster".⁶⁹ Given the clear monastic context of the text,⁷⁰ however, Semper's reference to 'fighting men' appears out of place and the feminine pronouns are more likely to reflect the grammatical gender of the noun *yldo* rather than expressing the unnaturalness of old age to men, martial or monastic.⁷¹ If anything, old age is presented here as a natural force that leaves nothing in its wake.

In sum, Anglo-Saxon poets approached the drawbacks of old age with apprehension. They typically grouped growing old with other processes of decline and, as such, the old man became a metaphor for secular impermanence. Just as wealth, joy, friends and status do not last forever, so, too, a man's youth is not eternal and old age will get him in the end.

The symptoms of old age: Anglo-Saxon geriatrics from the pulpit

Patristic and biblical texts were not wholly unsympathetic towards the sufferings of the elderly and could provide solace for some aged Anglo-Saxon readers. For instance, Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne how he found consolation for his physical weakness by reading the letters of St. Jerome: "In my broken state of health I am comforted by what Jerome said in his letter to Nepotianus: 'Almost all the physical powers change in the old, wisdom alone increasing while the others decrease.'"⁷² In another letter, Alcuin reminded his pupil Eanbald that physical weakness could help the soul and quoted the apostle Paul: "Let your bodily weakness make your spirit strong, and say with the apostle, 'When I am weak, then am I strong' [2 Cor. 12:10]. Physical affliction should help the soul".⁷³ Boniface used the same quotation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, along with other biblical quotations, when he wrote to the aged Abbess Bugga in an attempt to console her in her old age, convincing her that God "desires to adorn the beauty of [her] soul with labour and sorrow".⁷⁴

Whereas these epigraphical examples illustrate that the writings of Church fathers and biblical quotations could be used to console the elderly in times of physical distress, Anglo-Saxon preachers rarely if ever sought to soften the blow when they spoke of the drawbacks of old age. Rather, evocative descriptions of the physical and emotional repercussions of senescence pointed out the futility of loving secular life.

⁶⁹ Semper, 294.

⁷⁰ *Old English Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Anlezark, 49–57.

⁷¹ A notable analogue to this female personification of old age is found in the Scandinavian *Gylfaginning* [The Tricking of Gylfi], part of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. In a test of strength, the god Thor loses a wrestling match with an old crone called Elli, presented as the wetnurse of the giant Utgarda-Loki. As it turns out, this old woman is a personification of 'old age' and, as the giant later explains, "there never has been anyone, and there never will be anyone, if they get so old that they experience old age, that old age will not bring them all down". Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. A. Faulkes (London, 1987), 45.

⁷² *Alcuin of York*, trans. Allott, let. 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, let. 6.

⁷⁴ *Letters of Boniface*, trans. Emerton, let. 77.

Furthermore, homilists used the symptoms of old age to remind the audience of the inevitability of death and even argued that they constituted a prefiguration of the horrors of Hell. The following paragraphs outline the manner in which these Anglo-Saxon homilists used their Latin sources, often of an Irish origin, to create various images of the drawbacks of growing old in order to make their message hit home.

A recurring device in homilies is a list of symptoms of old age that serve to remind the audience that death is at hand and that one's attentions should be turned to Heaven. This theme can be traced as far back, at least, as the letter of St. Jerome to the widow Furia, dated to 394 AD. Jerome admonished Furia to remind her aged father that he would soon die and that he needed to focus on attaining the heavenly afterlife:

Jam incanuit caput, tremunt genua, dentes cadunt: et fronte ob senium rugis arata, vicina est mors in foribus; designatur rogos prope. Velimus, nolimus, senescimus. Paret sibi viaticum, quod longo itineri necessarium est.⁷⁵

[Now his head grows grey, his knees tremble, his teeth fall out and his forehead is ploughed with wrinkles because of old age, death is near at the gates; a funeral pyre is almost prepared. Whether we want to or not, we grow old. Let him make a provision for himself, which is necessary for the long journey.]

Similar, and occasionally more evocative, descriptions of the aging body, often in combination with admonitions to focus on the eternal rather than the temporary, are found in at least five Anglo-Saxon homilies. Each homily was based on a Latin source and, on occasion, the vernacular preacher added symptoms of his own.

A first Latin text, used by both the Blickling homilist and Ælfric, is Pseudo-Basil's *Admonitio ad filium spiritualem* [Admonition to a Spiritual Son]. This late fifth-century text reflected, among other things, on the virtue of contempt for all earthly possessions. The eighth chapter "De saeculi amore fugiendo" [Concerning fleeing the love of this world], in particular, warned its reader for loving worldly beauty: just as hay will wither in the summer's heat, so, too, will the loveliness of the body fade with time, along with other pleasures of the world.⁷⁶ Following a description of a body decayed through age and death, Pseudo-Basil added a series of *ubi sunt* passages, such as "ubi est suavitas luxuriae et conviviorum opulentia?" [Where is the sweetness of luxury and opulence of banquets?],⁷⁷ underlining once more the fleeting nature of earthly delights.

Laura R. McCord has suggested that the eighth chapter of the *Admonitio* was the probable source for a similar series of Old English *ubi sunt* passages in Blickling Homily V.⁷⁸ While she formulated her claim hesitantly, her suggestion can be

⁷⁵ Jerome, *Epistolae*, PL 22, col. 557.

⁷⁶ Pseudo-Basil, *De admonitio ad filium spiritualem*, ed. P. Lehmann (München, 1955), trans. J. F. LePree, 'Pseudo-Basil's *De admonitio ad filium spiritualem*: A New English Translation', *HA* 13 (2010), ch. 8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ L. R. McCord, 'A Probable Source for the *ubi sunt* Passage in Blickling Homily V', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 82 (1981), 360–1; see also C. Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words: Isidore's Synonyma in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 2008), 130–3.

confirmed by the fact that the descriptions of the aging body that precede the *ubi sunt* passages in both texts also share some characteristics. First, both texts compare the human body to withering plants:

Nonne sicut fenum, cum a fervor aestatis percussum fuerit, arescit et paulatim pristinum decorum amittit? Similis est etiam humanae naturae species.⁷⁹ [Surely it is like hay when it has been struck by the heat of summer: it dries up and little by little; it loses its pristine state. The appearance of human nature is also like this.]	We witon þæt Crist sylfa cwæþ þurh his sylfes muþ, ‘þonne ge geseoþ growende 7 blowende ealle eorþan wæstmas, 7 þa swetan stencas gestincað þara wudu-wyrta, þa sona eft adrugiaþ 7 forþgewitaþ for þæs sumores hæton’. Swa þonne gelice bið þære menniscan gecynde þæs lichoman...⁸⁰ [We know that Christ himself said, through his own mouth: ‘When you see all the earth’s fruits growing and blooming, and smell the sweet odours of the plants, then immediately afterwards they shall dry up and wither away because of the summer’s heat.’ So it (the fruit) is like the nature of a man’s body ...]

The Blickling homilist, here, appears to have conflated two statements by Christ – 1 Pet. 1:24 and James 1:11⁸¹ – in order to formulate a biblical quotation to match the Latin original’s image of drying hay. Next, both texts discuss the decaying body in old age:

Succedente enim senectute omnis decor pristinus iuventutis floridae deperit et quos in amorem sui antea concitabat, postmodum in odium eorum efficitur, et quando mors venerit, tunc penitus omnis pulchritudo delebitur. Et tunc recognoscēs, quia vanum est, quod antea inaniter diligebas.⁸² [With the advent of old age, every pure beauty of florid youth is destroyed and what you loved before, you now find hateful, and when death comes, then all	... þonne se geogophad ærest bloweþ 7 fægerost bið, he þonne raþe se wlite eft gewiteþ 7 to ylde gecyrreþ, 7 he þonne siþþon mid sare geswenced bið, mid mislicum ecum 7 tyddernessum. 7 eal se lichoma geunlustaþ þa geogoðlustas to fremmenne þa þe he ær hatheortlice lufode, 7 him swete wæron to aræfnenne.⁸³ [... when youth first blooms and is fairest, then quickly beauty fades and turns to old age, and afterwards he is troubled by pain and by various ailments

⁷⁹ Pseudo-Basil, *Admonitio*, ed. Lehmann, trans. LePree, ch. 8.

⁸⁰ *Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 58–9.

⁸¹ Cf. M. McC. Gatch, ‘The Unknowable Audience of the Blickling Homilies’, *ASE* 18 (1989), 107.

⁸² Pseudo-Basil, *Admonitio*, ed. Lehmann, trans. LePree, ch. 8.

⁸³ *Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 58–9.

beauty will be totally destroyed and then you will recognise that what you loved vainly before was merely an illusion.]	and infirmities. And the whole body loathes to perform those youthful lusts that he loved so earnestly before, and which were sweet to him to perform.]

While the *Admonitio* makes the point that the observer no longer loves the body once its beauty has faded, the Blickling homilist observes that it is the old body itself that no longer loves its former pastimes. Furthermore, the Blickling homilist adds that an old man is troubled by pain and infirmities. Subsequently, both texts turn to what happens to the body after death:

Cum videris totum corpus in tumore et foetore esse conversum, none intuens maximo horror concutieris, none claudes nares tuas non sustinens foetorem durissimum?⁸⁴ [When you have seen an entire body swelling and smelling, surely contemplating it will have struck you with great horror. Surely you will hold your nose, not able to bear the most oppressive smell?]	Hie him þonne eft swiþe bitere þencap, æfter þon þe se deað him tocymeþ Godes dom to abeodenne. Se lichoma þonne on þone heardestan stenc 7 on þone fulostan bið gecyrred, 7 his eagan þonne beoþ betynde, 7 his muþ 7 his næsþyrlo beoþ belocene, 7 he þonne se deada byð un-eape ælcon men on neaweste to hæbbenne.⁸⁵ [Then, again, they shall appear very bitter to him, after that death shall come to him to announce God's Judgement. The body then, shall be turned to the strongest and foulest stench, and his eyes shall then be sealed up, and his mouth and his nostrils shall be closed, and then with difficulty will the dead man be kept in proximity to any living man.]

In both texts, the stench of the decayed corpse appalls those around it, but the Blickling homilist's description of the dead body with its sealed eyes, mouth and nostrils is more evocative. Summing up, both texts show a similar progression of ideas: withered plants are like the human body, the beauty of the aging body fades, the stinking corpse is oppressive. Along with the similarities between the *ubi sunt* passages that follow this series of ideas, the use of the *Admonitio* as a source of inspiration for the author of Blickling Homily V is beyond question, albeit that the homilist has varied significantly from his source,⁸⁶ expanding the burdens of old age and creating a more haunting image of the sealed up corpse.

⁸⁴ Pseudo-Basil, *Admonitio*, ed. Lehmann, trans. LePree, ch. 8.

⁸⁵ *Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 58–9.

⁸⁶ S. Pelle, 'Sources and Analogues for Blickling Homily V and Vercelli Homily XI', *NQ* ns 59 (2012), 8–11, has noted the Blickling homilist's freedom with another Latin source, suggesting that he possibly drew from memory. The same case could be made for the author's use of the *Admonitio*.

The *Admonitio* was also used by Ælfric, who made a vernacular adaptation of the entire text.⁸⁷ A comparison between chapter 8 of the source text and Ælfric's reworking of it makes clear that Ælfric added to the aging body some aspects that Pseudo-Basil attributed to the dead body, namely the swelling and smelling:

Swa byð þæs mannes wlite þe wyrðeð eall fornumen mid onsigendre ylde and se deað geendað þone ærran wlite þonne ongitt þin sawl þæt þu sylf lufodest idel. Foroft se mann gewyrðeð on ende toswollen and to stence awended mid unwynsumnysse þæt him sylfum byð egle and andsæte se stenc and his lustfullnysse him ne belifð nan þing and his wistfullnys him wyrðeð to biternysse.⁸⁸

[In like way is the beauty of man, which becomes thoroughly destroyed by approaching old age, and death puts an end to its former beauty, when your soul understands that you have yourself loved vanity. Very often in the end the man becomes swollen, and is perverted to a bad odour with unpleasantness, so that he is loathsome to himself, and his odour is abominable, and of his lustfulness nothing remains to him, and his good cheer becomes a bitterness to him.]

As such, Ælfric transformed the idea of the disgust over another person's decayed corpse into a poignant picture of a self-loathing old man, appalled by his own swollen and odourous state. In the subsequent adaptation of this chapter, Ælfric followed his source in adding various instances of the *ubi sunt* motif. In this way, the intended goal of the chapter remained intact: to remind readers that eternal spiritual life is superior to physical life, which is temporary.

Yet another description of the aging body, again by Ælfric in one of his *Catholic Homilies*, was based on the first homily of Gregory the Great's *Homiliae in Evangelia*.⁸⁹ Both texts discuss the idea that the world is weighed down by evils and will not last forever, just as a man's strength and health will deteriorate as a result of age. Ælfric once more elaborated on his source's list of symptoms of age:

Sicut enim in iuventute viget corpus, forte et incolume manet pectus, torosa cervix, plena sunt brachia; in annis autem senilibus statura curvatur, cervix exsiccata deponitur, frequentibus suspiriis pectus urgetur, virtus deficit, loquentis verba anhelitus intercidit; nam etsi languor	On geogoðe bið se lichama þeonde on strangum breoste: on fullum leomum 7 halum: witodlice on ealdlicum gearum bið ðæs mannes wæstm gebiged. his swura aslacod. his neb bið gerifod. & his leomu ealle gewæhte. His breost bið mid siccetungum gepread. & betwux wordum

⁸⁷ For this text, see M. A. L. Locherbie-Cameron, 'From Caesarea to Eynsham: A Consideration of the Proposed Route(s) of the *Admonition to a Spiritual Son* to Anglo-Saxon England', *HA* 3 (2000).

⁸⁸ *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Hexameron of St. Basil*, ed. and trans. H. W. Norman (London, 1848), 50–1 (translation slightly adapted).

⁸⁹ Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 339.

desit, plerumque sensibus ipsa sua salus aegritudo est. ⁹⁰	his orþung ateorað. Ðeah ðe him adl on ne sitte þeah forwel oft his hæl him bið adl. ⁹¹
[In youth the body is vigorous, the chest remains strong and healthy, the neck is straight, the arms muscular; in later years, the body is bent, the neck scrawny and withered, the chest oppressed by difficult breathing, strength is failing, and speech is interrupted by wheezing. Weakness may not yet be present, but often in the case of the senses their healthy state is itself a malady.]	[In youth the body is thriving with a strong chest and full and healthy limbs: truly, in later years a man's stature is bowed, his neck slackened, his face is wrinkled, and his limbs are all afflicted. His breast is tormented with sighs, and his breath fails between words. Although disease does not sit on him, nevertheless his health is often a disease for him.]

Specifically, Ælfric shortened the characteristics of the youthful body, but added to the symptoms of age a wrinkled face and defined the original's "virtus deficit" [strength is failing] by referring to afflicted limbs, the antithesis of the full and healthy ones he had referred to earlier. Thus, when it came to describing the aging body, Ælfric did not shy away from taking some liberties to embellish the lists of symptoms of age he found in his sources, in both his reworking of Pseudo-Basil's *Admonitio* and Gregory's homily.

Similar, longer lists of symptoms of age circulated as a *topos* in early medieval Hiberno-Latin texts and gradually made their way into later Anglo-Saxon homilies. Charles D. Wright has called attention to two such lists, found in a seventh-century treatise on the twelve abuses, *De duodecim abusiuis*, and a ninth-century florilegium, *Catechesis Celtica*.⁹² The former text provided the list of symptoms in its description of the *senex sine religione*, 'the old man without religion', noting that these symptoms ought to remind elderly men that their death was at hand:

Dum oculi caligant, auris graviter audit, capilli fluunt, facies in pallorem mutatur, dentes lassi numero minuuntur, cutis arescit, flatus non suauius olet, pectus suffocatur, tussis cachinnat, genuat trepidant, talos et pedes tumor inflat, etiam homo interior qui non senescit his omnibus aggravatur, et haec omnia ruituram iam iamque domum corporis cito pronuntiant. Quid ergo superest, nisi ut, dum huius vitae defectus appropiat, nihil aliud cogitare quam quomodo futurae habitus prospere comprehendatur quisque senex appetat? Iuuenibus enim incertus huius vitae terminus instat, senibus uero cunctis maturus ex hac luce rexitus breviter concordat.⁹³

⁹⁰ Gregory, *Homiliae in evangelia*, ed. Étaix, trans. Hurst, hom. 1, 18.

⁹¹ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 40, ll. 110–20.

⁹² Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 96–102.

⁹³ Pseudo-Cyprian, *De duodecim abusiuis*, ed. S. Hellmann, *Texte under Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, Reihe 3, Band 4, Heft 1 (Leipzig, 1909), 34–5, trans. P. Throop, Vincent of Beauvais, *The Moral Instruction of a Prince*, and Pseudo-Cyprian, *The Twelve Abuses of the World* (Charlotte, 2011), 117. The text was copied almost at verbatim in the *Collectanea Pseudo-Beda*, another ninth-century, insular florilegium of riddles and encyclopaedic material, albeit without the note about the uncertainty of death for young men; see *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayless and Lapidge, no. 119.

[When eyes cloud over, ears hear with difficulty, hair falls out, the face turns to pallid, teeth, having fallen out, diminish in number, the skin dries out, the breath does not smell sweet, the chest is suffocating, the cough grates, the knees tremble, the swelling inflates the ankles and feet, indeed the interior person (which does not grow old) is weighed down by all these things. All these conditions announce that the bodily home is quickly going to collapse. What remains except that, while the cessation of this life is approaching, any old person should seek to think about nothing else than how their future situation may successfully be grasped? For young people the end of this life exists as an uncertainty, but for all old people it is a sure thing that the exit from this life is soon at hand.]

The *Catechesis Celtica* included a similar list of symptoms in its description of the five likenesses of Hell,⁹⁴ which included old age:

Senectus assimilator quando V sensus in ecitem exeunt. Nam oculi caliginant, aures sordescunt, gustus non bene discernit, odoratus uitatur, tactus rigescit; sed et dentes denudantur, lingua balbutiat, pectus licoribus grauatur, edes tremore et tumore tumescunt, manus ad opus debilitantur, canities flore, et corpus omne infirmatur, sed sensus diminuitur.⁹⁵

[Old age is likened to hell, when the five senses pass away at the end of life. For the eyes grow blurry, the ears grow deaf, the sense of taste distinguishes poorly, the sense of smell is corrupted, the sense of touch becomes numb; and also the teeth are revealed, the tongue stutters, the chest grows heavy with fluid, the feet swell with tumors and shaking, the hands are crippled for work, the grey hair grows, and the whole body is weakened, and perception is diminished.]

Wright has pointed out that the correspondences between the two lists, in combination with the divergence in wording, suggest that they were both independently translated from a vernacular list of symptoms of old age.⁹⁶ He further hints at the fact that enumerations of body parts are a frequent feature in Hiberno-Latin prayers, of which the list of symptoms of age may be a logical expansion.⁹⁷ *De duodecim abusiuis* and the *Catechesis* have been linked to two Old English homilies: Vercelli Homily IX and Pseudo-Wulfstan's 'Be rihtan Cristendome' (Napier XXX).

The late tenth-century Vercelli Homily IX, to begin with, describes five prefigurations of Hell which are the same as those listed in the *Catechesis*: pain, old age, death, the grave and torment. The list of symptoms of old age in Old English is similar to the Latin text but also features some notable differences:

⁹⁴ These are to be distinguished from the Five Horrors of Hell, cf. D. F. Johnson, 'The Five Horrors of Hell: An Insular Homiletic Motif', *English Studies* 74 (1993), 414–31.

⁹⁵ Cit. with translation in Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 96–7.

⁹⁶ Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 98–9.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 99; similar lists are also found in the *Book of Cerne* and related Old English prayers, see Porck, 'Two Notes', 493–8.

þonne is þære æfteran helle onlicnes genemned oferyldo, for þan him amolsniap þa eagan for þære oferyldo þa þe wæron gleawe on gesyhþe, 7 þa earan adimmiap þa þe ær meahton gehyran fægere sangas, and sio tunge awlispap þe ær hæfde gerade spræce, 7 þa fet aslapap þe ær wæron ful swifte 7 hræde to gange, 7 þa handa apindap þe ær hæfdon ful hwate fingras, 7 þæt feax afealleþ þe ær wæs on fullere wæstmæ, 7 þa tēþ ageolewiap þa þe ær wæron hwite on hywe, 7 þæt orōþ afulap þe wæs ær swete on stence.⁹⁸

[Then is the second prefiguration of Hell named ‘extreme old age’, because his eyes weaken because of extreme old age, those that had been keen of sight, and his ears become dim, which had been able to hear beautiful songs, and his tongue lisps, that had possessed skilful speech, and his feet sleep, that had been very swift and quick in movement, and his hands become swollen, that had had fully active fingers, and his hair falls out, that had been very abundant, and his teeth become yellow, those that had been white in appearance, and his breath, which had been sweet of smell, becomes foul.]

First of all, references to the three general senses of *gustus*, ‘taste’, *odoratus*, ‘smell’, and *tactus*, ‘touch’, as well as to the tormented *pectus*, ‘chest’, all present in the *Catechesis*, are missing in Vercelli Homily IX. Conversely, the Vercelli homilist expanded the list of symptoms by adding references to the former excellence of eyes, ears, tongue, feet, hair and teeth. He also added a remark about ill-smelling breath, which is not featured in the *Catechesis* either. Moreover, the Old English text has teeth growing yellow and hair falling out, whereas the *Catechesis* has teeth falling out and hair growing grey. It is worth pointing out, however, that the list in *De duodecim abusiuis*, which shares its origin with that in the *Catechesis*, does feature a reference to breath and also has hair falling out. As such, some of the differences between Vercelli Homily IX and the *Catechesis* need not necessarily be attributed to the Anglo-Saxon homilist; in all probability, the discrepancy stems from the homilist’s use of an unknown variant of the list of symptoms of age that stems from the same Hiberno-Latin tradition as the *Catechesis* and *De duodecim abusiuis*.⁹⁹ Whatever its direct source, the Vercelli homilist shared the Hiberno-Latin view that old age was a prefiguration of Hell, a clear indication that, in this respect at least, old age was not preferred over other age categories.

⁹⁸ Vercelli Homilies, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, ll. 84–97. This is the text as it is preserved in Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, CXVII (s. x²; the ‘Vercelli Book’); Scragg, *ibid.*, 167, 169, ll. 71–8, has also edited a related, later reworking of this homily in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 115, fols. 140–7 (s. xi²) that has a near-identical list but skips the reference to weakened eyes.

⁹⁹ J. E. Cross, *The Literate Anglo-Saxon – On Sources and Disseminations* (London, 1972), 5, rightly calls attention to the fact that the exact variant of a Latin text that an Anglo-Saxon author used may be lost. On Vercelli Homily IX and the *Catechesis*, specifically, he states “I, for one, would not presume to say more at present than that they are two examples of the theme. I could not indicate any relationship between one and the other without other evidence”, *ibid.*, 31; cf. Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 99–100.

Another list of symptoms of old age, analogous to the one in Vercelli Homily IX, was the most likely source for the eleventh-century homily ‘Be rihtan Cristendome’ (Napier XXX), formerly attributed to Archbishop Wulfstan.¹⁰⁰ Donald G. Scragg has pointed out that Napier XXX is a ‘cut-and-paste’ homily, derived from a homiliary related to the Vercelli Book but now lost, as it contains parallels to various Vercelli homilies.¹⁰¹ The list of symptoms of age is certainly similar to that in Vercelli Homily IX:

Him amolsniað and adimmiað þa eagan, þe ær wæron beorhte and gleawe on gesihðe. And seo tunge awistlað, þe ær hæfde getinge spræce and gerade. And ða earan aslawiað, þa þe ær wæron ful swifte and hræde to gehyrenne fægere dreamas and sangas. And þa handa awindað, þa ðe ær hæfdon ful hwæte fingras. And þæt feax afealleð, þe ær wæs fæger on hiwe and on fulre wæstme. And þa teð ageolwiað, þa ðe wæron ær hwite on hiwe. And þæt oreð stincð and afulað, þe ær wæs swete on stence.¹⁰²

[His eyes weaken and become dim, that had been bright and keen of sight. And his tongue hisses, which had possessed fluent and skilful speech. And his ears become sluggish, which had been very swift and quick to hear beautiful stories and songs. And his hands bend, that had possessed fully active fingers. And his hair falls out, that had been fair in colour and in full abundance. And his teeth turn yellow, that had been white in appearance. And his breath, which had been sweet of smell, stinks and turns foul.]

Scragg has noted that the compiler of Napier XXX expanded his source by using pairs of near synonyms, such as “amolsniað and adimmiað” [weaken and become dim] for Vercelli Homily IX’s “amolsniap” [weaken].¹⁰³ To this difference might be added that the compiler arranged the symptoms in a different order: eyes-tongue-ears as opposed to the more frequently attested eyes-ears-tongue.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the description of the ears appear to have been conflated with the description of the feet in Vercelli Homily IX that is missing in Napier XXX altogether. This conflation has caused the rather awkward remark in Napier XXX “ða earan aslawiað, þa þe ær wæron ful swifte” [the ears grow sluggish, those which had been very swift] in Napier XXX, which is closely resembled by Vercelli Homily IX’s “þa fet aslapað þe ær wæron ful swifte” [the feet

¹⁰⁰ On this homily and its relation to Wulfstan’s work, see L. Whitbread, ‘“Wulfstan” Homilies XXIX, XXX and Some Related Texts’, *Anglia* 81 (1963), 347–64; D. G. Scragg, ‘Napier’s ‘Wulfstan’ Homily XXX: Its Sources, Its Relationship to the Vercelli Book and Its Style’, *ASE* 6 (1977), 197–211.

¹⁰¹ Scragg, ‘Napier’s ‘Wulfstan’ Homily’, 198–205; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, lxxv.

¹⁰² Napier, hom. 30, p. 147, ll. 23–31, p. 148, ll. 1–7.

¹⁰³ Scragg, ‘Napier’s ‘Wulfstan’ Homily’, 207.

¹⁰⁴ The order eyes-ears-tongue is attested in the *Catechesis* and the *Vita Tertia* of St. Patrick (see p. 98, n. 19 above). Cf. *ÆCHom II*, hom. 1, ll. 184–91: “Ponne beoð geopenode blindra manna eagan. and deaffra manna earan gehyrað. þonne hleapð se healta swa swa heort. and dumbra manna tungan beoð swiðe getinge” [then the eyes of the blind men will be opened, and the ears of the deaf men will listen, then the lame will leap as a deer and the tongue of the dumb men will be very eloquent].

sleep, which had been very swift].¹⁰⁵ The list of symptoms in Napier XXX, then, appears to be rather clumsily copied from a list of symptoms that was similar to that found in Vercelli Homily IX.

A more profound contrast between Napier XXX and Vercelli IX is the context in which both feature the lists of symptoms. Whereas Vercelli Homily IX frames old age as one of the prefigurations of Hell, as does the *Catechesis Celtica*, Napier XXX places the list of symptoms in a context similar to that of the *De duodecim abusiuus*: as bodily signs that must warn an old man of his impending death. In fact, the lines preceding the list in Napier XXX, for which Scragg was unable to find a source,¹⁰⁶ show some similarities to the lines that follow the symptoms of age in *De duodecim abusiuus*:

Iuuenibus enim incertus huius vitae terminus instat, senibus uero cunctis maturus ex hac luce rexitus breviter concordat.¹⁰⁷	ƿa geongan men hopiad, ƿæt hi moton lange on ƿissere worulde libban, ac se hopa hi bepæcð and beswicð, ƿonne him leofost wære, ƿæt hi lybban moston. Se ealda man him mæg gewislice witod witan, ƿæt him se deað genealæcð for ðære oferylde, ƿe him on sihð.¹⁰⁸
[For young people the end of this life exists as an uncertainty, but for all old people it is a sure thing that the exit from this life is soon at hand.]	[Young men hope that they are able to live long in this world, but the hope that they are allowed to live, deceives and betrays them, when it would be most valuable to them. The old man can certainly know that death is approaching him because of old age, which then descends upon him.]

Napier XXX and *De duodecim abusiuus* share the notion that the aging body announces imminent death for the old man, whereas young men are uncertain about their future. Possibly, the compiler of Napier XXX had read *De duodecim abusiuus* and wanted to use the text for his message that death is inexorable, but then preferred the list of symptoms he found in the now lost homiliary that was similar to the Vercelli Book.

The symptoms of old age, so much has become clear, appear as a recurring *topos* in Old English homilies. The often detailed descriptions of the aged body were freely adapted from (Hiberno-)Latin sources and even occasionally expanded rather

¹⁰⁵ Napier, hom. 30, p. 148, ll. 1–2; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, l. 93. On closer inspection, the reading in the Vercelli Book is closer to that in Napier XXX: “ƿa earan aslapað ƿe ær wæron ful swifte to gehyrenne”, which Scragg emended to “ƿa fet aslapað ƿe ær wæron ful swifte” on the basis of the text in Hatton 115 (see p. 117, n. 98 above). It is worth noting that the form “aslawiað” [become sluggish] is more apt for formerly swift feet than is “aslapað” [become weak] and that, in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, the ‘wynn’ (ƿ) and the p are easily confused. Napier XXX, then, may retain the correct reading for this word, as opposed to Vercelli Homily IX.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Scragg, ‘Napier’s ‘Wulfstan’ Homily’, 198.

¹⁰⁷ Pseudo-Cyprian, *De duodecim abusiuus*, ed. Hellmann, 34–5, trans. Throop, 117.

¹⁰⁸ Napier, hom. 30, p. 147, ll. 23–9.

than shortened, resulting in evocative depictions of an elderly person devoid of joy and sensory aptitude. Such images were employed for two distinct purposes: the Blickling homilist, Ælfric and the author of Napier XXX utilised the representation of the decaying body to remind their audience that secular life would come to an end and was, therefore, inferior to spiritual life; the Vercelli homilist, by contrast, framed the drawbacks of age as one of the prefigurations of Hell. In all, the decrepit, aging body was a welcome device that Anglo-Saxon homilists could use to turn their audience's hopes and minds towards the afterlife; an afterlife, as we shall see below, where old age was either absent or present, depending on whether the hereafter would be Heaven or Hell.

Hellish old age and heavenly youth: Age in the afterlife

In her article on old age in Anglo-Saxon literature, Semper has postulated that “Christianity does not simply promise Anglo-Saxons a life without end after death; it promises them an eternal life without old age”.¹⁰⁹ She based her claim on a single description of the resurrection of aged bodies at Judgement Day in the Old English translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*:

Ge, furþum manna lichaman forealdiað, swa swa oðre gescæaftas ealdiat.
Ac swa swa hy ær wurðlicor lybbað þonne treowu oðþe oðre nytenu, swa
hy eac weorðfulicor arisað on domes dæge, swa þæt nefre syððam þa
lichaman ne geendiað ne ne forealdiað.¹¹⁰

[Yes, even the bodies of men grow old, just as other creatures grow old. But just as they formerly lived more honourably than the trees and other animals, so they also arise more honourably on Judgement Day, so that the body will never afterwards come to an end nor grow old.]

In other words, when the dead are resurrected at Judgement Day they will no longer be old nor will they grow old in the future. Similar representations of a restored youth of aged bodies at the time of their resurrection exist, such as Ælfric's notion that “we sceolon arisan of deaðe on þære ylde þe crist wæs þa ða he þrowade: þæt is ymbe þreo 7 þrittig geara; Deah cyld forðfare oððe forwerod mann” [we shall arise from death at the age that Christ was when he suffered, that is about thirty-three years, whether departed as a child or as a worn-out man].¹¹¹ In another homily, Ælfric again noted that, upon resurrection, the dead will be as old as Christ was when he died.¹¹² Thus, whether death ensued in infancy or at an advanced age, everyone would be in their early thirties on the Day of Judgement.

¹⁰⁹ Semper, 314.

¹¹⁰ *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 53, ll. 22–6.

¹¹¹ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 16, ll. 126–8. Ælfric here follows Julian of Toledo's *Prognosticon futuri saeculi*, see Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 133.

¹¹² *Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. Pope, hom. 11, ll. 302–7.

Semper's assertion that old age was absent from the afterlife is further confirmed by various descriptions of Heaven in poetry and homilies.¹¹³ Such literary representations of Paradise often enumerated the celestial joys in combination with the absence of certain horrors that typically included old age. Bede, for instance, wrote in his eschatological poem *De die iudicii* [Concerning Judgement Day] that in the heavenly afterlife one would enjoy the greatest of joys and no longer suffer "fessa senectus" [wearied old age].¹¹⁴ Bede's poem was extremely popular and also survives in the late tenth-century vernacular version *Judgement Day II*, which translated "fessa senectus" as "geswenced yld" [wearied old age].¹¹⁵ The anonymous poet of *The Phoenix*, likewise, presented Heaven as a place without "yrmþu ne yldo" [misery or old age], as did Aldhelm in his *Carmen de Virginitate*.¹¹⁶ A recurring compositional device to describe the afterlife was the formula 'þær is x butan y', where both x and y are antonyms.¹¹⁷ A typical but expanded example is found in the poem *Christ III*:

Ðær is leofra lufu, lif butan endedeaðe,
glæd gumena weorud, gioguð butan ylde,
heofonduguða þrym, hælu butan sare,
ryhtfremmendum ræst butan gewinne,
domeadigra dæg butan þeostrum,
beorht blædes full, blis butan sorgum,
frið freondum bitweon forð butan æfestum,
gesælgum on swegle, sib butan niþe
halgum on gemonge.¹¹⁸

[There is the love of loved ones, life without death, a joyous troop of men, youth without old age, glory of heavenly hosts, health without pain, rest without toil for the well-doers, a day of the renowned ones without darkness, bright full of glory, bliss without sorrows, continuous peace between friends without envy, for the blissful in harmony, peace without envy, among the saints.]

Thomas D. Hill has identified these lines in *Christ III* as belonging to the *topos* of 'The Seven Joys of Heaven', a numerical apothegm that stems from a Hiberno-Latin tradition.¹¹⁹ Variants of this *topos* also regularly occur in Old English homiletic texts:

¹¹³ Semper, 301–2.

¹¹⁴ Bede, *De die iudicii*, ed. and trans. G. D. Caie, *The Old English Poem Judgement Day II* (Cambridge, 2000), l. 129.

¹¹⁵ *Judgement Day II*, ed. and trans. Caie, l. 257b. On the popularity of Bede's poem, see *ibid.*, 35.

¹¹⁶ *The Phoenix*, ed. N. F. Blake (Exeter, 1990), l. 614a; Aldhelm, *Carmen de Virginitate*, trans. J. L. Rosier, *Aldhelm: Poetic Works*, ed. M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier (Cambridge, 1958), 153.

¹¹⁷ H. L. C. Tristram, 'Stock Descriptions of Heaven and Hell in Old English Prose and Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 79 (1978), 102–5.

¹¹⁸ *Christ III*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, *Exeter Book*, ll. 1652–60a.

¹¹⁹ T. D. Hill, 'The Seven Joys of Heaven in *Christ III* and Old English Homiletic Texts', *NQ* ns 16 (1969), 165. Early Hiberno-Latin analogues, including the eighth-century *Liber de Numeris*, the *Catechesis Celtica* and the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, are reproduced in Johnson, 'Horrors of Hell', 429.

in at least eleven homilies “geogop butan ylde” [youth without old age] is consistently listed as one of the assets of Heaven, along with light (without darkness), happiness (without sorrow) and health (without sickness).¹²⁰

Only two unique cases list old age as a property of Heaven, albeit not without reservation. Firstly, Vercelli Homily IX specifies that in Heaven one might experience old age, but that it will be “yld butan sare” [old age without pain].¹²¹ This heavenly property is not attested elsewhere and Wright has hypothesised that it is probably a conflation of two more frequently used joys of heaven: “geogop butan ylde” [youth without old age] and “hælo butan sare” [health without pain].¹²² The second homily to deviate from the apparent norm is an anonymous homily,¹²³ edited by Susan Irvine as ‘The Transience of Earthly Delights’. The homily describes Heaven as follows:

þær is ece eadignesse: þær eald ne graneð, ne child ne scræmeð. Ne bið þær þurst, ne hungor, ne wop, ne teoðe gegrind, ne morþer, ne man, ne þær nan ne swæltæð, for þam ðe þær ne byð nan acenned; ne þer ne byð sar, ne seoregæ, ne nan longing, ne unlustes gewin.¹²⁴

[there is eternal happiness; there the old man does not groan and the child does not scream. There will be no thirst, no hunger, no weeping, no grinding of teeth, no murder, no crime, there no one will die, because no one is born there; there will be no pain, no sorrow, no longing, no strife of evil.]

Irvine was unable to make out the source for this passage. I suggest that it was probably derived from the Latin poem *De mundi transitu* [On the World’s Impermanence] by the Irish missionary and author Columbanus (543–615). His description of Heaven in this poem on the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures corresponds in various places with that in ‘The Transience of Earthly Delights’:

*Ubi senex non gemat,
Neque infans uagitat,
Ubi laudis Domini
Nulla uox retinetur,
Ubi non esuritur,
Ubi numquam sititur,
Ubi cibo superno*

¹²⁰ *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1840) II, p. 400; *Blickling Homilies*, ed. Morris, hom. 5, pp. 64–5, hom. 8, pp. 102–3; Assmann, hom. 14, l. 73; Napier, hom. 29, p. 142, l. 27; M. Förster, ‘A New Version of the Apocalypse of Thomas in Old English’, *Anglia* 73 (1955), 18; *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, hom. 1, l. 160, hom. 4, l. 93; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 19, ll. 173–4, hom. 21, ll. 243–4; ‘Geherað nu mæn ða leofestan hu us godes bec’, DOEC transcript from Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85/86.

¹²¹ *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 9, ll. 174–5.

¹²² Wright, *Irish Tradition*, 105. Cf. *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, 188, n. 173–5.

¹²³ In Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 343 [s. xii²]; Ker, no. 310.

¹²⁴ *Old English Homilies from MS Bodley 343*, ed. S. Irvine, EETS os 302 (Oxford, 1993), hom. 7, ll. 86–90.

Plebs caelestis pascitur,
Ubi nemo moritur
Quia nemo nascitur. (correspondences in italics)¹²⁵

[... where the old does not groan nor the infant cry, where no voice is restrained to praise the Lord, where there is no hunger, where there is never thirst, where on celestial food the heavenly folk are fed, where no one dies because no one is born.]

Thus, yet again, an Anglo-Saxon homilist turned to a Hiberno-Latin text for inspiration concerning the impact of old age.¹²⁶ As elsewhere, old age is here presented as a state that does not unproblematically fall into the category of the joys of Heaven.

Being generally absent from Heaven, old age in contrast does occur as one of the horrors of Hell in at least two other homilies. Contrary to the recurrent mention of old age in instances of the Seven Joys of Heaven, the parallel-reverse motif the Five Horrors of Hell, identified by David F. Johnson, does not normally feature old age.¹²⁷ However, a unique, abbreviated version of this motif found in the homily ‘Be heofonwarum 7 be helwarum’ [On the inhabitants of Heaven and the inhabitants of Hell] reads: “Ðar syndon þa ytemestan þystro butan leohte, þar byþ yld butan geoguðe” [there is the utmost darkness without light, there is old age without youth].¹²⁸ The latter property of Hell is an obvious reversal of the frequently attested Joy of Heaven “geoguð butan yldo” [youth without old age]. Lastly, and unrelated to the Five Horrors of Hell, old age is enumerated in a rogationtide homily as one of nine characteristics of Hell: “þær bið þeostru beþrycced and hungor and þurst and heto and yldo and unhælo and wanung and granung and toða grisbitung” [there will be oppressive darkness, hunger, thirst, heat, old age, ill health, deprivation, groaning and gnashing of teeth].¹²⁹

To sum up the above, when Anglo-Saxons considered the afterlife, they imagined Heaven consistently as a place without old age, while their idea of hellish torment did on occasion include growing old. Thus, the restoration of bodies to their prime at Judgement Day, as claimed in Augustine’s *Soliloquies* and the work of Ælfric, only lasted for those who would go to Heaven; for the souls assigned to the Abyss, their regained physical prime would turn out to be short lived.

Conclusion

Anglo-Saxon writers had much to say about the drawbacks of old age. Poets focused primarily on the emotional and social repercussions of growing old, linking human senescence to secular transience. The old narrators of various sapiential poems had gained their wisdom through adversity and thus embodied their own overarching

¹²⁵ Columbanus, *De Mundi Transitu*, ed. G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani opera* (Dublin, 1957), II. 95–104.

¹²⁶ The Bodley homilist also used Columbanus’s *De mundi transitu* in various other passages as well, as I hope to show in a future publication.

¹²⁷ Johnson, ‘Horrors’, 414–31.

¹²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 427, who also gives an Old Norse analogue.

¹²⁹ *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, hom. 4, ll. 47–8.

message: the fleeting nature of worldly joys. The most evocative depictions of the aging body, however, are to be found in pastoral texts. Rather than comforting those who suffered from the disadvantages of age, homilists referred to physical decrepitude in order to remind their audience of their impending death or to strike the fear of Hell into their hearts. Indeed, one of the alluring aspects of Heaven for an Anglo-Saxon was the absence of old age.

I started chapter 3 by juxtaposing the *gerontophobia*, ‘fear of old age’, established for Modern English literature, and Burrow’s claim, followed by Crawford, that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories.¹³⁰ Everything in chapter 4 suggests that the literary record of early medieval England is not wholly different from that of later ages and, arguably, it is apter to ascribe to the Anglo-Saxons an apprehension for old age, rather than an appreciation. With that in mind, let me return to the start of this chapter and the interpretation of “on ylðo eft” in *The Fortunes of Men* to indicate a period of “wyndagum” [days of joy]. Given the above, the translation ‘in the next stage of life, i.e. maturity’ is more likely than ‘in old age’: clearly, Anglo-Saxon writers did not associate the last stage of life with ‘happy days’. Rather, in the perception of the Anglo-Saxons, the elderly typically spend their days in *gēomor*, *sār* and *gehðo*: sadness, pain and grief.

¹³⁰ Freedman, ‘Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia’, 49–61. Cf. Burrow, 109; Crawford, 59.

frode fyrnwitan: Old saints in Anglo-Saxon hagiography

‘Cuð is gehwīlcum menn
 þæt þis lif is geswinc-ful and on swate wunað.
 Þis lif bið alefed on langsumum sarum
 and on hætum ofþefod and on hungre gewæht
 mid mettum ge-fylled and modig on welum
 mid hafē-leaste aworpen and ahafen þurh iugoðe,
 mid ylde gebiged and to-bryt mid seocnysse
 mid unrotnysse fornumen and geangsumod þurh cara.’¹

[‘Every man knows that this life is full of hardship and it lives in sweat. This life is given over to long-lasting pains and dried up by heat, weakened by hunger, filled with food, made proud by wealth, degraded by poverty, raised up by youth, bowed down by old age, broken down with sickness, overwhelmed with sadness and afflicted by sorrows.’]

With these words, St. Cecilia in Ælfric’s rendition of her *vita* sums up how everyone will suffer from pain, heat, hunger, poverty, sorrow and old age. Since these factors impact everyone in this life, Cecilia maintains, everyone should want to be a Christian and attain Heaven, where such things are absent.

Naturally, however, old age did not affect everyone in equal measure and much depended on a person’s way of life, occupation, social standing and gender. After the discussion of the general merits and drawbacks of old age in chapters 3 and 4, the present chapter and the three following take into account some of these more specific parameters. These four chapters show how old age affected the lives and representations of four specific groups: saints, warriors, kings and women, respectively. How were older members of these social groups portrayed in the cultural record, and what does this reveal about the expected roles of the elderly in Anglo-Saxon England? As the representation of a person’s old age is also influenced by the conventions and traditions of the particular text type in which their lives were recorded, due attention will also be given to the nature of the source material used in each chapter.

Anglo-Saxon hagiography

The lives and deeds of saints were chronicled in hagiography. This genre was very popular in the Anglo-Saxon period; around a hundred saints’ lives survive in Old English and still more in Latin.² The term ‘hagiography’ covers a broad range of texts:

¹ *ÆLS*, no. 34, ll. 141b–8.

² C. Watson, ‘Old English Hagiography: Recent and Future Research’, *Literature Compass* 1 (2004), 1.

from lengthy stand-alone *vitae* of native, Anglo-Saxon saints, written by eye-witnesses, such as Stephen of Ripon's *Vita sancti Wilfrithi* (710–720), to vernacular adaptations of Latin texts about universal saints such as those collected in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* (992–1002), through to the assembled, abbreviated lives in *legendae*, exemplified by the ninth-century *Old English Martyrology*.³ While hagiographical texts thus differ in language and length, each has the same purpose: to present their subject as a recognizable member of the community of saints.⁴ In order to do so, hagiographers tend to model their stories on earlier *vitae*, using conventional phrases and *topoi*. As a result, many saints' lives come across as “badly composed series of stereotypes”.⁵ Yet, abiding by hagiographical conventions was not due to a lack of creativity on account of the hagiographer; it was born of necessity: the more saints had in common with other saints, the more likely it was that their sanctity would be accepted.⁶

Given their conventionality, even those saints' lives rooted in historical reality often reveal more about the mentality of the hagiographer and his audience than about the historical individuals they portray.⁷ As the sociologist Pierre Delooz has noted:

The reputation of sanctity is the collective mental representation of someone as a saint, whether based on a knowledge of facts that have *really* happened, or whether based on facts that have been at least in part *constructed* if not entirely imagined. But in truth, all saints, more or less, appear to be constructed in the sense that being necessarily saints in consequence of a reputation created by others and a role that others expect of them, they are remodeled to correspond to collective mental representations.⁸

Put differently, a study of how saints behave in a given situation does not constitute a reconstruction of historical reality: it provides an insight into how the hagiographer and his audience would expect the saints to have reacted to their circumstances. The saints' behaviour was idealised, and hagiography, above all, provided its audience with role models, rather than accurately reporting the words and actions of historical individuals.

The representation of old age in hagiography has generally been neglected in existing scholarship. A remarkable example of the disinterest in the elderly saint is the

³ Helpful introductions to the text type include E. G. Whatley, ‘An Introduction to the Study of Old English Prose Hagiography: Sources and Resources’, in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. P. E. Szarmach (New York, 1996), 3–32; T. D. Hill, ‘*Imago Dei*: Genre, Symbolism, and Anglo-Saxon Hagiography’, in *Holy Men*, ed. Szarmach, 35–50.

⁴ Hill, ‘*Imago Dei*’, 40; C. Cubitt, ‘Universal and Local Saints in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. A. Thacker and R. Sharpe (Oxford, 2002), 429.

⁵ Hill, ‘*Imago Dei*’, 43.

⁶ J. W. Earl, ‘Typology and Iconographic Styles in Early Medieval Hagiography’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 8 (1975), 17–21.

⁷ Hill, ‘*Imago Dei*’, 36.

⁸ Quoted in D. Weinstein and R. M. Bell, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago, 1982), 9.

wide-ranging, prosopographical study by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell. They studied the lives of 864 European saints that lived between 1000 and 1700 and gathered statistical information for over forty social variables, ranging from area of birth, to status of parental family, through to occupational category, gender, family dynamics and a saint's reputation. While some attention is given to different stages of the life cycle, the three categories used (children, adolescents and adults) did not, apparently, warrant any comments on the old age of some of these saints.⁹ Perhaps more strikingly, Burrow, who mainly used hagiographical sources for his claim that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other age categories, never once referred to a saint in his old age. Instead, he focused on young saints that showed behaviour beyond their years, the *puer senex* motif.¹⁰

There are, to my knowledge, two notable exceptions to the rule. The only study to focus exclusively on people in their later years in hagiographical sources is the analysis of forty-three twelfth- and thirteenth-century French texts by Cochelin.¹¹ She concludes that hagiography is one of the richest sources for the study of the perception of old age, since the texts feature numerous examples of the potential consequences of growing old, such as frailty, the necessity of retirement and intergenerational conflicts. With respect to Anglo-Saxon saints, a valuable contribution has been made by Semper's overview of old age in Anglo-Saxon literature. Even though she only uses part of the hagiographical material available, Semper rightly observes that hagiographers included old age in their narratives for various purposes: to emphasise the humanity of saints, to provide didactic examples of endurance and to accentuate the saint's dedication to his religious duties.¹²

Barring Semper's observations, the aged saint in Anglo-Saxon hagiography is still very much uncharted territory; this chapter presents a first foray into establishing and defining the *topos* of senescence in the hagiographical texts that circulated in early medieval England.¹³ I will take a synchronic approach and focus on how the topic of a saint's old age was treated across the entire range of hagiographical texts produced in Anglo-Saxon England, in both Latin and Old English.¹⁴ Altogether, the examples

⁹ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints & Society*.

¹⁰ Burrow, 96–109.

¹¹ I. Cochelin, 'In senectute bona: pour une typologie de la vieillesse dans l'hagiographie monastique des XIIe et XIIIe siècles', in *Les âges de la vie au Moyen âge: actes du colloque du Département d'études médiévales de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne et de l'Université Friedrich-Wilhelm de Bonn*, ed. H. Dubois and M. Zink (Paris, 1992), 119–38.

¹² Semper, 305–9.

¹³ The analysis is based on all Old English saints' lives and the Latin saints' lives devoted to Anglo-Saxon saints that were available in modern editions. Helpful handlists of Anglo-Saxon saints and hagiographical texts include Whatley, 'Introduction', 3–32; D. G. Scragg, 'The Corpus of Vernacular Homilies and Prose Saints' Lives before Ælfric', in *Old English Prose: Basic Readings*, ed. P. E. Szarmach (New York, 2000), 73–150; J. Roberts, 'The English Saints Remembered in the Old English Anonymous Homilies', in *Old English Prose*, ed. Szarmach, 433–61; J. Blair, 'A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Saints', in *Local Saints*, ed. Thacker and Sharpe, 495–566. Important editions of Anglo-Saxon hagiography published after these overviews include *The Cult of St. Swithun*, ed. and trans. M. Lapidge (Oxford, 2003); *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: Lives*, ed. and trans. Lapidge; *The Early Lives of St. Dunstan*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom and M. Lapidge (Oxford, 2012); *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer; and *Abbots of Wearmouth*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood.

¹⁴ Watson 'Old English Hagiography', 5, notes that discussing the genre in its entirety, rather than depending on authorial boundaries, is valuable, since different materials occur side-by-side in

gathered here reflect the consequences of old age that Anglo-Saxon hagiographers and their audiences anticipated, as well as what they would have considered the ideal response to the challenges posed by growing old.

The presence of old saints in Anglo-Saxon hagiography

In his *Vita s. Oswaldi*, an account of the life of Oswald (d. 992), archbishop of York, Byrhtferth of Ramsey begins by stating that saintlihood could be revealed during all stages of life:

... uirorum ... – qui perplurimi a pueritia agoniste precipui effecti sunt, alique in adolescentia emerito opere compti, plerique in iuuentute summis miraculis gloriosi, nonnulli in senectute et in cignea canitie sunt infulis supernis decorati (sicut millena congerie liquido probari et experiri possumus).

[... these great men – of whom very many were made outstanding contestants from their childhood, others were adorned with veteran accomplishments while still in youth, several were distinguished by great miracles while in manhood, some during their old age and in swan-white senescence were honoured with heavenly insignia (as I could clearly demonstrate and establish with a thousandfold muster of examples).]¹⁵

Despite Byrhtferth's insistence that he could muster a thousand examples of saints of all ages, elderly saints appear only marginally in the hagiography of early medieval England, as is illustrated by three influential hagiographical collections. In the two versions of *De laude virginitatis* [In praise of virginity] of Aldhelm (d. 709), for instance, old saints make up less than ten per cent of the saintly virgins listed: in the prose version, only five of fifty-six virgins are identifiably old in the text and the figures are even worse for the poetic version that only features three such virgins out of fifty-four.¹⁶ The *Old English Martyrology* seems equally devoid of old saints: out of its 238 entries, only eleven are devoted to saints who are either called 'old' or are

manuscripts. Although the study of how Anglo-Saxon authors adapted their source material can be highly revealing, a diachronic approach falls outside the scope of the present thesis. For research on the sources of Anglo-Saxon hagiography, see, e.g., *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture: A Trial Version*, ed. F. M. Biggs, T. D. Hill and P. E. Szarmach (Binghamton, 1990) and *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici*. One interesting adaptation of Latin source material with respect to old age concerns Ælfric's vernacular adaptation of the smith who first had the vision of St. Swithun. In his Old English text, Ælfric transformed the sickly smith of his Latin source into an "ealdan smiðe" [old smith]. Ælfric, *Life of St. Swithun*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, *Cult*, ch. 2, l. 17. The adaptation may be an attempt to lend credence to the story of the smith, given that the appeal to reliable, elderly witnesses was commonplace in hagiographical and historiographical sources alike, see chapter 3 above, pp. 77ff.

¹⁵ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, I.6.

¹⁶ Aldhelm, *De laude virginitatis*, trans. M. Lapidge, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. M. Lapidge and M. W. Herren (Cambridge, 1979), 80 (John the Evangelist), 81–2 (Luke), 87 (Felix), 87–8 (Paul the Hermit), 89 (John the Hermit); Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, trans. Rosier, 114 (Luke), 120 (Paul the hermit), 120–1 (Hilarion).

reported to have reached an age over 50.¹⁷ In Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, made up of thirty-nine *vitae*, only Maurus, Eleazar, Luke the Apostle and Martin of Tours are described in this way.¹⁸ The relatively low number of aged saints in these hagiographical collections may be the result of a keener interest on account of the hagiographers in the lives of martyrs, who, by definition, rarely grew old.

However, the statistics are slightly deceptive, as is often the case, since both the prose and poetic versions of *De virginitate* and the *Old English Martyrology* often simply omit information about the age of saints. For instance, the prose *De virginitate* refers to the fact that both John the Evangelist and John the Hermit reached an old age, but mention of their senectitude is absent from the poetic version;¹⁹ *vice versa*, Hilarion is called an old man in the poetic version, but no reference to his age is found in the prose version.²⁰ Similarly, the *Old English Martyrology* has entries for Benedict Biscop and Martin of Tours without mentioning their advanced ages.²¹ A possible explanation for the lack of information regarding a saint's old age, in the cases of *De Virginitate* and the *Old English Martyrology*, is the relative brevity of the descriptions devoted to each saint. These brief entries only included those elements that the author deemed essential for the saint's sanctity, such as his virginity, martyrdom or extreme asceticism.

Nevertheless, even in longer saints' lives, the hagiographer only rarely commented on a saint's senescence. Only ten saints are identifiably old in the hundred or so Old English prose saints' lives listed by E. G. Whatley (see table 5.1).²² Old saints occur only slightly more frequently in Anglo-Latin hagiography devoted to native, Anglo-Saxon saints (see table 5.2).²³ It is worth noting that the great majority of the latter category of old saints are high-ranking members of the clergy, which means that the model of an elderly saint may reflect, in particular, the expectations an Anglo-Saxon hagiographer and his audience had of prominent clergymen.

1. Eleazar (d. c.168), chief scribe and martyr. ²⁴

¹⁷ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, nos. 16 (Paul the hermit), 22 (Anthony the hermit), 85 (Calepodius), 120 (Tranquillinus), 136 (Simeon Stylites), 194 (Zachary), 196 (Ceolfrith), 207 (Luke), 211 (Hilarion), 221 (Winnoc), 226 (Hild).

¹⁸ *ÆLS*, no. 6, ll. 367–71, no. 15, l. 158, no. 25, ll. 32–3, no. 31, ll. 1371–2. In addition, two minor characters are called old: Eubolus in the *vita* of St. Basileus and Victor in the *vita* of St. Maurice, *ibid.*, no. 3, l. 50, no. 28, ll. 95–110. This overview excludes the elderly saints Zosimus and Mary of Egypt that feature in the *vita* of Mary of Egypt which is included in Skeat's edition of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* but was not written by Ælfric himself, see *The Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. H. Magennis (Exeter, 2002), 17–9.

¹⁹ Aldhelm, *De laude virginitatis*, trans. Lapidge, 80, 89; Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, trans. Rosier, 113, 121.

²⁰ Aldhelm, *De laude virginitatis*, trans. Lapidge, 88–9; Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, trans. Rosier, 121. On the differences between the prose and poetic versions of *De virginitate*, see Aldhelm: *Poetic Works*, trans. Lapidge and Rosier, 99.

²¹ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, nos. 23, 136.

²² Whatley, 'Introduction', 5–7, who, however, does not include the entries in the *Old English Martyrology*, for which see p. 129, n. 17 above.

²³ Anglo-Latin hagiography devoted to universal saints has not been considered, since the majority of these lives are still unavailable in modern editions. Some post-Conquest *vitae* have been included in the analysis, as these may preserve earlier traditions.

²⁴ *ÆLS*, no. 25. Eleazar is described as "har-wencge and eald" [grey-bearded and old], *ibid.* ll. 32–3.

2. **Eventius** (2nd century), martyr.²⁵
3. **John the Apostle** (d. late 1st century), evangelist.²⁶
4. **Luke the Apostle** (1st century), evangelist.²⁷
5. **Martin of Tours** (c.316–397), monk bishop.²⁸
6. **Mary of Egypt** (5th century?), penitent.²⁹
7. **Maurus** (6th century), monk.³⁰
8. **Philip** (1st century), apostle.³¹
9. **Sixtus II** (d. 258), pope and martyr.³²
10. **Zosimus** (5th century), monk that meets Mary of Egypt.³³

Table 5.1 Saints whose old age is referred to in Old English prose saints' lives³⁴

1. **Æthelwold** (904/9–984), abbot of Abingdon and bishop of Winchester.³⁵
2. **Aldhelm** (d. 709/10), abbot of Malmesbury, bishop of Sherborne, and scholar.³⁶
3. **Benedict Biscop** (c.628–689), abbot of Wearmouth and scholar.³⁷
4. **Boniface** (672/5?–754), archbishop of Mainz, missionary, and martyr.³⁸
5. **Ceolfrith** (642–716), abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow.³⁹
6. **Dunstan** (d. 988), archbishop of Canterbury.⁴⁰
7. **Ecgbwine** (d. 717?), bishop of Worcester.⁴¹
8. **Edward the Confessor** (1003x5–1066), king of England.⁴²
9. **Leoba** (d. 782), abbess of Tauberbischofsheim.⁴³

²⁵ *ÆCHom II*, hom. 18. Eventius had been baptised seventy years before his martyrdom.

²⁶ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 4. John died at the age of 99.

²⁷ *ÆLS*, no. 15. Luke died at the age of 84.

²⁸ *ÆCHom II*, hom. 34; *ÆLS*, no. 31; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 18.

²⁹ *Life of Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. Magennis. Mary's age at death can be reconstructed as 67 and she is described as having long white hair.

³⁰ *ÆLS*, no. 15. Maurus died at the age of 72.

³¹ *ÆCHom II*, hom. 17. Philip died at the age of 87.

³² *ÆCHom I*, hom. 29. Sixtus II calls himself "ealde" [old] and is respected for his "ylde" [old age], *ibid.* ll. 37, 55.

³³ *Life of Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. Magennis. Zosimus first meets Mary of Egypt at the age of 53 and then continues to serve a monastery for a hundred more years.

³⁴ Life dates and titles of all saints, except for Eventius and Zosimus, retrieved from *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, ed. D. H. Farmer, 5th rev. ed. (Oxford, 2011).

³⁵ Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St. Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. M. Lapidge and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1991); Ælfric, *Vita s. Æthelwoldi*, in the same edition, is an abbreviated version of Wulfstan's *vita*.

³⁶ Faricius, *Vita s. Aldhelmi*, ed. M. Winterbottom, 'An Edition of Faricius, *Vita s. Aldhelmi*', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 15 (2005), 93–147; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 2007), V.

³⁷ Bede, *Homilia in natale s. Benedicti*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth*; Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood.

³⁸ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, trans. C. H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954).

³⁹ *Vita Ceolfrithi*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood; Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood.

⁴⁰ *Vita s. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Lapidge, *Early Lives*. William of Malmesbury, *Vita Dunstani*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury: Saints' Lives* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴¹ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Ecgbwini*, ed. and trans. Lapidge.

⁴² *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster: Attributed to a Monk of Saint-Bertin*, ed. and trans. F. Barlow, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1992).

10. **Oswald** (d. 992), archbishop of York.⁴⁴
11. **Swithun** (d. 863), bishop of Winchester.⁴⁵
12. **Wilfrid** (c.634–709/10), bishop of Hexham.⁴⁶
13. **Willibald** (c.700–787?), bishop of Eichstätt.⁴⁷
14. **Willibrord** (657/8–739), missionary, archbishop of the Frisians and abbot of Echternach.⁴⁸
15. **Wulfstan** (c.1008–1095), bishop of Worcester.⁴⁹

Table 5.2 Native saints whose old age is referred to in Anglo-Latin hagiography⁵⁰

The relatively low number of saints in tables 5.1 and 5.2 confirms Catherine Cubitt's observation that "saints' *vitae* are generally uninterested in the process of aging and present a static view in which the saint moves from a holy childhood ... to death without emphasis on aging".⁵¹ Indeed, even those saints' lives that do mention a saint's senescence can do so without much further comment. In his *vitae* of Maurus and Philip, for instance, Ælfric merely mentioned the age at which both saints died – 72 and 87, respectively – but refrains from any further comment.⁵² More remarkably, despite the Anglo-Saxon nun Huneberc's announcement in her *Hodoeporicon* of Willibald to "speak of his early manhood, the time of his maturity and of his old age, even till he became decrepit", she did not discuss the saint's old age in the remainder of the text, focusing instead on Willibald's pilgrimage to the Holy Land and ending her narrative shortly after his election to the bishopric of Eichstätt at the age of forty-one.⁵³ Cubitt's observation on the disinterest of Anglo-Saxon hagiographers for senescence is further reinforced by scholarly attempts to present a structural typology of a 'standard' medieval saint's life. These hagiographical molds do not include 'old age' as one of the typically recurring stages, along with birth, childhood, education, piety, martyrdom or death, translation of relics and post-mortem miracles.⁵⁴ In sum, a saint's senescence was not a standard part of a *vita*; whenever a hagiographer commented on the topic at length, he may have made a conscious choice to do so.

⁴³ Rudolf, *Vita s. Leoba*, trans. Talbot, *Missionaries*.

⁴⁴ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. Lapidge.

⁴⁵ Lantfred of Winchester, *Translatio et miracula s. Swithuni*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, *Cult*; Wulfstan of Winchester, *Narratio metrica de s. Swithuno*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, *Cult*. While little is known about Swithun's life, he appears in both these works as a white-haired, old man in various visions; this is not the case in Ælfric, *Life of St. Swithun*, ed. and trans. Lapidge.

⁴⁶ Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. Colgrave.

⁴⁷ Huneberc, *Hodoeporicon*, trans. Talbot, *Missionaries*.

⁴⁸ Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, trans. Talbot, *Missionaries*.

⁴⁹ William of Malmesbury, *Vita s. Wulfstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, *Saints' Lives*. This post-Conquest *vita* is a Latin reworking of the now lost Old English life of Wulfstan written by the Worcester monk Coleman (d. 1113).

⁵⁰ Life dates and titles for all saints retrieved from the *ODNB*.

⁵¹ C. Cubitt, 'Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints', in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Y. Hen and M. Innes (Cambridge, 2000), 65–6.

⁵² *ÆLS*, no. 15, l. 361; *ÆCHom II*, hom. 17, l. 54.

⁵³ Huneberc, *Hodoeporicon*, trans. Talbot, 154.

⁵⁴ E.g., R. Boyer, 'An Attempt to Define the Typology of Medieval Hagiography', in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium*, ed. H. Bekker-Nielsen *et al.* (Odense, 1981), 27–36; R. S. Farrar, 'Structure and Function in Representative Old English Saints' Lives', *Neophilologus* 57 (1973), 83–93.

Despite the relative rarity of a description of a saint's old age, an analysis of the lives of the elderly Anglo-Saxon saints in tables 5.1 and 5.2 reveals that hagiographical portrayals of saints in their later years are as stereotypical and conventional as other structural elements normally found in the lives of saints. Recurring motifs include the senescent saint's role as a spiritual guide; his decrepitude; his necessitated succession; his unrelenting discipline despite his age; miracles that compensate the drawbacks of age for the saint; and his joy over his long-anticipated death and release from his decrepit body. Before illustrating each of these elements in the Anglo-Saxon *vitae* of old saints, I first discuss another *topos* that has been considered important for the representation of old age in hagiography: the young saint who behaves like an old man.

The old child: The *puer senex* motif in Anglo-Saxon hagiography

Saints typically reveal their sanctity from a young age onwards. They disregard the frivolous activities of their peers and, instead, show a greater interest in spiritual matters. Occasionally, such saintly children are said to have an 'old heart' or an 'old mind'. This *puer senex* motif is a "hagiographical cliché" that has its roots in Late Antiquity. The motif probably found its way to Anglo-Saxon England through the writings of Gregory the Great (d. 604),⁵⁵ as is suggested by a passage in Bede's *Historia abbatum* (c.716). Bede described the youth of Benedict Biscop by citing the phrasing that Gregory had used for Benedict's famous namesake Benedict of Nursia (c.480–550):

Qui ut beati papae Gegerii uerbis, quibus cognominis eius abbatis uitam glorificat, utar: 'Fuit uir uitae uenerabilis, gratia Benedictus et nomine, ab ipso pueritiae suae tempore cor gerens senile, aetatem quippe moribus transiens, nulli animum uoluptati dedit.'

[If I may use the words of the blessed Pope Gregory with which he praises the life of the abbot of that name, 'He was a man of admirable character, "called Blessed" by name and by grace. He had the heart of an old man, even from the time of his childhood, transcending his age in his behaviour, and gave his soul over to no lustful passion.']⁵⁶

Burrow based much of his claim that the Anglo-Saxons preferred old age above all other categories on portrayals such as that of Benedict Biscop. In his analysis of Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, he noted that Anglo-Saxon hagiographers showed a clear preference for a young man transcending his age and behaving like an old man. Therefore, Burrow argued, old age was the 'transcendence ideal' and, hence, the most highly regarded age of man.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Burrow, 101.

⁵⁶ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 1. Translation adapted to literally render the Latin phrase "cor gerens senile". For the corresponding passage in Gregory's *Dialogi*, see Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, II. prol.

⁵⁷ Burrow, 105–7.

At first sight, Burrow's observations appear sound. Apart from Benedict Biscop several other saints are described as exhibiting the qualities of old age in their childhood, such as Willibrord (658–739) in the *vita* by Alcuin:

In fact this highly gifted boy [Willibrord] made such progress as the days went by that development of his intelligence and character so outstripped his tender years that his small and delicate frame harboured the wisdom of ripe old age.⁵⁸

Similarly, Ælfric described both saints Alexander and Agnes as “iunglic on gearum, and aldlic on mode” [young in years and old in mind].⁵⁹ Sometimes, the saint himself did partake in the trivial activities of children but was rebuked for doing so by one of his peers that showed behaviour beyond his years, as was the case for Cuthbert (c.635–687), bishop of Lindisfarne. Bede reported how a three-year-old boy, “senili constantia” [with the gravity of an old man], told Cuthbert to stop playing the childish game that had him twist his arms and legs into unnatural shapes and to devote himself to spiritual matters instead.⁶⁰ In all these cases, the intrinsic qualities associated with old age – wisdom and gravity – enabled the child to stand out from the rest of his generation. In this respect, Burrow was right to assume that old age was considered morally and spiritually superior to youth.⁶¹

A closer look at the *vitae* of other saints that Burrow included in his analysis, however, suggests that old age was not the only age category towards which saints could miraculously ascend. A clear example is the case of the Virgin Mary, whom Burrow included in his analysis as a *puella senex* [old girl]. In the Old English translation of the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, however, the way Mary transcended her youth is framed as follows: “heo wæs on gange and on worde and on eallum gebærum gelic wynsuman men, þe hæfde XXX wintra” [she walked and spoke and behaved just like a comely person of thirty years old].⁶² In this case, it would clearly be better to speak of a *puella matura* [mature girl] rather than a *puella senex*. In yet another of Burrow's examples, Æthelwold is described as overcoming the tender years of his childhood by his “uirtutum maturitate” [maturity in virtue].⁶³ In other words, the hagiographer compared Æthelwold's qualities to those of maturity or adulthood, rather than old age. In other cases of saints transcending their youth, including some that Burrow cited as confirming his hypothesis, the hagiographer did not specify whether these youthful saints were endowed with qualities of old age or maturity, but simply stated that they differed from others of the same age.⁶⁴ Thus, the *puer senex* motif does

⁵⁸ Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, trans. Talbot, 5.

⁵⁹ *Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. Pope, hom. 23, l. 7; *ÆLS*, no. 7, l. 9: “cild-lic on gearum and eald-lic on mode” [childlike in years and old in mind].

⁶⁰ Bede, *Vita s. Cuthberti*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, ch. 1.

⁶¹ Burrow, 107–9.

⁶² *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, ed. and trans. Clayton, 174–5; cf. Burrow, 102.

⁶³ Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 6; cf. Burrow, 100.

⁶⁴ Boniface: Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, trans. Talbot, ch. 2; Guthlac: Felix, *Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956), ch. 12; Wilfrid: Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. and

not consistently identify old age as the only transcendence ideal: some saints were described with the qualities of adulthood, while the portrayals of others leave unspecified to what age category the youthful saints had ascended.

Arguably, the only age category which is truly appraised by the Anglo-Saxon renditions of the *puer senex* motif is childhood. In many of the descriptions of the *puer senex* or *puer maturus*, the youngest generation is presented in a negative way. A clear example of the denunciation of childhood implied in the portrayals of saints transcending their age is found in the *vita* of St. Guthlac (c.674–714):

Igitur transcensis infantiae suae temporibus, cum fari pueriliter temtabat, nullius molestiae parentibus nutricibusve seu coetaneis parvulorum coetibus fuit. Non puerorum lascivias, non garrula matronarum deliramenta, non vanas vulgi fabulas, non rucolarum bardigosos vagitus, non falsidicas parasitorum fribulas, non variorum volucrum diversos crocitus, ut adsolet illa aetas, imitabatur.

[And as the time of his infancy passed and he (Guthlac) tried to speak in his childish way, he was never troublesome to his parents or nurses or to the bands of children of his own age. He did not imitate the impudence of the children nor the nonsensical chatter of the matrons, nor the empty tales of the common people, nor the foolish shouts of the rustics, nor the lying trifling of flatterers, nor the different cries of the various kinds of birds as children of that age are wont to do.]⁶⁵

Felix presents childhood as an age of recklessness and frivolity and Guthlac as behaving exceptionally by exhibiting prudence and gravity beyond his years. Compared to his peers, his heart and mind are older, but not necessarily old.

Spiritual guides: Senescent saints in their religious communities

The elderly in twelfth- and thirteenth-century hagiography often functioned as spiritual guides.⁶⁶ Old people commemorated in Anglo-Saxon hagiography were no different in this respect.⁶⁷ According to the *Old English Martyrology*, for example, the introduction of Simeon Stylites to the monastic life had been instigated by an old man, as was the case for the triplet saints Speusippus, Eleusippus and Meleusippus, who had all been taught about the Christian faith by their grandmother.⁶⁸ Elderly spiritual guides also featured in visions: when Dunstan was still a boy, he had a vision of “senem niueo uestitum candor” [an old man, clad in snowy white], who pointed out to him where he would construct the buildings of the monastery at Glastonbury during his future abbacy.⁶⁹ Similarly, Æthelwulf, the author of *De abbatibus* (803–821), a

trans. Colgrave, ch. 2. These saints are also mentioned by Burrow, 100. Another example is St. Machutus: *Old English Life of Machutus*, ed. Yerkes, 5.

⁶⁵ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, ch. 12.

⁶⁶ Cochelin, ‘*In senectute bona*’, 136.

⁶⁷ Semper, 302.

⁶⁸ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, nos. 23, 136.

⁶⁹ *Vita s. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Lapidge, ch. 3.4.

poetic collection of monastic lives, reported dreaming of a venerable old man seated in a shining chair, who told him where to find his old teachers.⁷⁰

When saints themselves grew old, they also served as spiritual guides to the younger members of their religious communities. Indeed, Benedict Biscop, Æthelwold and Dunstan, to name but a few, all spent their last years explaining monastic rules, leading church services and instructing the younger members of their communities.⁷¹ Aldhelm did much the same, after he had been pressured into accepting the position of bishop of Sherborne despite his advanced age, having been convinced by those around him that “quod quanto annis maturior, tanto esset utiis defecator, consiliis promptior” [the older he was, the more purged he was of vice, and the readier in counsel].⁷² Ceolfrith, too, continued to prove a “spiritualis exercitii ... formam” [model of spiritual exercise] until, at the age of 74, he felt no longer able to do so.⁷³ His departure for Rome was a cause for great distress among the younger monks at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, thus indicating that the spiritual guidance of the old saint would be sorely missed. Not only do these examples testify to the spiritual superiority of these elderly saints, they also indicate that high-ranking clerical offices often fell to older members of the community.

A number of elderly saints are shown as being well aware of their exemplary role, especially when choosing torture and death over relinquishing their religious vows. The “har-wencge and eald” [grey-bearded and old] scribe Eleazar in Ælfric’s homily on the Maccabees is a case in point. When Eleazar had been forced to eat bacon and, upon refusal, had been offered the chance to eat imitation bacon instead, he declined the opportunity. He exclaimed that he did not wish to give a wrong example to the young:

Da cwæð Eleazarus: ‘Ic eom eald to hiwigenne
and wenað þa geongan þæt ic wille for-gægan
godes gesetnysse for ðisum sceortan life
and bið þonne min hiwung him to forwyrde
and ic sylf beo and-sæte þurh swylce gebysnunge.
Ðeah ðe ic beo ahred fram manna reðnysse
ic ne mæg þam ælmihtigan ahwar ætberstan
on life oþþe on deaðe; ac ic læte bysne
þam iungum cnihtum gif ic cenlice swelte
arwurðum deaðe for ðære halgan æ.’⁷⁴

[Then said Eleazar: ‘I am too old to pretend and the young ones will think that I want to forego God’s decree in exchange for this short life and then

⁷⁰ Æthelwulf, *De abbatibus*, ed. and trans. A. Campbell (Oxford, 1967), ch. 22, l. 734.

⁷¹ Bede, *Homilia in natale s. Benedicti*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 13; Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 11; Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 41; *Vita s. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Lapidge, ch. 38.2.

⁷² William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom, V.ccxxxiii.5.

⁷³ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 16; cf. *Vita Ceolfrithi*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 21.

⁷⁴ *ÆLS*, no. 25, ll. 94–103.

my pretense will be their destruction and I will be hateful to myself because of such an example. Even though I were saved from the cruelty of men, I cannot escape from the Almighty anywhere in life or death, but I will set an example for the young boys if I bravely die an honourable death for the holy law.’]

Eleazar’s wish was fulfilled and he was martyred on the spot. In Ælfric’s *vita* of Lawrence, the saint’s elderly teacher, the pope and martyr Sixtus II, similarly chose death in front of his younger pupils over renouncing his faith.⁷⁵ In the Old English *Life of St. Pantaleon*, the cruel Emperor Maximianus himself held up the aged martyr Anthimus of Nicomedia as an example to Pantaleon, when he threatened the young saint with torture:

And þa andswerade him Pantaleon 7 he cwæð, ‘Gegearawa þu þine tintregan forðan ic eam gearo to þrowigenne for Cristes naman.’ 7 þa cwæð se casere, ‘Geher þu Pantaleon, hu manige tintregan se ealde Antimus þrowade.’ And þa andswerade him Pantaleon 7 he cwæð, ‘He þrowade swiðe manigfealdlice, 7 hi næs na þe raðer oferswiðed gif he þonne wæs eald 7 he manige tintregan þrowade for Cristes naman; me þænne gedafanað swa miccle swiðor to þrowigenne swa ic eam gingra, þæt ic geearnige þæt ic wære gewuldrad mid him.’⁷⁶

[And then Pantaleon answered him and said: ‘Prepare your tortures because I am prepared to suffer for Christ’s name.’ And then the emperor said: ‘Have you heard, Pantaleon, how many torments the old Anthimus had to suffer?’ And then Pantaleon answered him and said: ‘He suffered very many and he was not quickly overpowered. If he then was old and he suffered many torments for Christ’s name, it seems appropriate to me that I suffer as much more as I am younger, so that I will be worthy to be honoured alongside him.’]

Pantaleon’s explicit retort to Maximianus’ veiled threat is significant: not only does the young Pantaleon feel that Anthimus’s actions are a model worth emulating, the latter’s old age has made his actions all the more inspiring.

Summing up, aged saints, aware of their exemplary function, were typically shown leading the young onto the spiritual path of life. As noted above, the majority of these old saints were prominent members of the clergy. As such, their instructional zeal in their later years may be a reflection of monastic expectations, since canonical rules dictated that the elderly had to teach their younger brethren.⁷⁷ Old saints certainly rose to the occasion, even though, as the case of Ceolfrith illustrates, they were not immune to the physical decrepitude that came with the years.

⁷⁵ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 29, ll. 3–74.

⁷⁶ Ed. P. Pulsiano, ‘The Old English Life of St. Pantaleon’, in *Via crucis: Essays on Early Medieval Sources and Ideas in Memory of J. E. Cross*, ed. T. N. Hall, T. D. Hill and C. D. Wright (Morgantown, 2002), ll. 224–33.

⁷⁷ For the monastic rules see chapter 3 above, pp. 75ff; cf. Cochelin, ‘*In senectute bona*’, 134.

The martyrdom of senescence: Saints suffering the consequences of old age

Semper has observed that, for some aged saints, “extreme old age *without* physical decline is a marker of holiness”.⁷⁸ The model for this *topos* was the influential *vita* of St. Anthony the Hermit by Athanasius (c.296–373). Anthony had survived to the age of 105, but was still in good health, despite being exceedingly old, keeping to a moderate diet, never changing his clothes or even washing his feet:

And yet his health remained entirely unimpaired. For instance, even his eyes were perfectly normal so that his sight was excellent; and he had not lost a single tooth, only they had worn down near the gums through the old man’s great age. He also kept healthy hands and feet, and on the whole he appeared brighter and more active than did all those who use a diversified diet and baths and a variety of clothing.⁷⁹

Anthony’s prolonged health, despite his age and extreme living conditions, set a precedent that was followed in the hagiography devoted to various hermits and desert fathers. Anthony was celebrated in Anglo-Saxon England both in Aldhelm’s *De laude virginitatis* and the *Old English Martyrology*, as were other saints, such as Paul the Hermit and Mary of Egypt, who similarly remained untouched, their long years and harsh lives in the desert notwithstanding.⁸⁰ Ælfric reported that John the Evangelist likewise never experienced any bodily discomfort, even though he lived to the age of 99.⁸¹ In each of these cases, the prolonged health of the saints was regarded as a blessing from God, a testimony to their sanctity.

Nevertheless, most senescent saints in Anglo-Saxon hagiography did eventually suffer from the various bodily restrictions of old age. For instance, when Bishop Wilfrid, “*honorabili senior convectus*” [bowed down by honourable age], undertook his final pilgrimage to Rome, he was struck by a seizure.⁸² Boniface on his travels suffered from “limbs ... weary with old age”, that forced him to rest at the court of the king of the Lombards.⁸³ Æthelwold, likewise, was troubled by infected limbs; Wulfstan of Winchester reports how the old archbishop had to be supported by two assistants in order to rise from his seat, because of his great age.⁸⁴ In addition, Æthelwold suffered from weak eyesight and spent hours training his eyes by

⁷⁸ Semper, 305.

⁷⁹ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Anthony*, trans. R. T. Meyer (London, 1950), ch. 93.

⁸⁰ Aldhelm, *De laude virginitatis*, trans. Lapidge, 87; *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, nos. 16, 22; *Life of Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. Magennis, ll. 594–685.

⁸¹ *ÆCHom I*, hom. 4, ll. 244–70.

⁸² Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, ch. 53.

⁸³ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, trans. Talbot, ch. 7.

⁸⁴ Wulfstan of Winchester, *Narratio metrica de s. Swithuno*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, ch. 4, l. 859; cf. *Idem, Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 30. While Æthelwold’s two assistants could be a historically accurate detail, it should be noted that St. Anthony the Hermit was also supported by two assistants because of his great age, see Athanasius, *Life of Saint Anthony*, trans. Meyer, ch. 91.

concentrating on a manuscript page by the light of a candle.⁸⁵ These old saints, then, appear just as vulnerable to the physical repercussions of age as any other person.

A notable recurring ailment of old saints is their tendency to fall asleep. Æthelwold, to begin with, dozed off one evening whilst training his weak eyes and dropped his candle on his manuscript, which, miraculously, remained unscathed.⁸⁶ Dunstan, too, took occasional naps and even had a comfortable chair especially prepared for his “meridianum somnum more solito” [customary siesta].⁸⁷ Dunstan’s chair and sleeping habits were recorded by William of Malmesbury (b. c.1090, d. in or after 1142) as part of an intriguing anecdote relating how the sleeping Dunstan started to levitate:

... cum ipse primum quodam leni motu percussus, mox cum ipso sedili ad tectum usque subuectus est, inaudito seculis omnibus miraculo, ut cum grauis carnis pondere uacuum per inane ferretur.

[... he was first shaken by a gentle movement, and then carried right up to the ceiling, chair and all: a miracle without precedent, that one weighed down by the burdensome flesh should be borne through empty space.]⁸⁸

The monks attending to Dunstan were struck with fear but their mood soon turned to relief when the bishop, still asleep, was let down as gently as he had been lifted up. When another, elderly saint, Wulfstan, fell asleep, he also scared the brethren around him, though not because he started to fly, but because they thought he had died:

Circumsedentibus enim fratribus et multa ut fit mutuo sermone serentibus, cum repente obstipo capite sopori cessisset, singultantibus omnium lacrimis quasi festino eos obitu destitutus conclamatus est. Nec multo post discusso somno cum causam ploratus addidicisset, respondit his fere uerbis: ‘Crede michi, quantum senile corpus durare poterit, non moriar, nec nisi longo senio dissoluetur haec compago. Postquam autem excessero, tunc uobis presentior ero, nec aliquis ex eis quos timetis uobis poterit nocere, si Deo uelit fideliter seruire.’

[The brothers were sitting around him conversing vigorously as usual, when Wulfstan’s head suddenly drooped and he went off to sleep. Everyone started to sob, thinking that he was about to rob them of him by a swift demise, and giving him up for lost. But soon he shook off his slumber, and learning the reason for their grief replied in more or less the following words: ‘Believe me, I shall not die as long as my aged body can last out; and my frame will only disintegrate after a prolonged old age. But after I

⁸⁵ Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 35.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 36.

⁸⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Vita Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, II.22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* The editors note that William of Malmesbury probably used a now lost Old English life of Dunstan for this anecdote, as it does not occur in earlier Latin lives of Dunstan.

am gone, I shall be the more present with you, and no one of those you fear will be able to do you harm, if you are ready to serve God in all loyalty.’]⁸⁹

Wulfstan’s words proved prophetic and he died at the ripe age of 86, severely ill and enfeebled. Thus, Dunstan, Æthelwold and Wulfstan all testify to Bede’s observation, in his *De temporum ratione*, that old people were prone to sleepiness.⁹⁰

The saints’ decrepitude, coupled to their awareness of their impending death, often prompted them to retire from active life and to appoint suitable assistants or successors – a recurring theme in the lives of aged saints,⁹¹ perhaps influenced by the biblical example of Elijah and Elisha. To cite a striking example, Benedict Biscop was impelled to appoint a successor and went to great lengths to consult with the ailing abbot of Monkwearmouth, Sigfrith (d. 698), as both were severely immobilised. Bede relates how the latter had to be carried into Benedict’s room:

... Sigfridus in feretro deportaretur ad cubiculum ubi Benedictus et ipse suo iacebat in grabato, eisque uno in loco ministrorum manu compositis caput utriusque in eodem ceruicali locaretur, lacrimabili spectaculo, nec tantum habuere uirium ut propius posita ora ad osculandum se alterutrum coniungere possent, sed et hoc fraterno compleuerunt officio.

[... Sigfrith was carried on a litter to the room where Benedict himself lay on his bed. They were put together in the same place by their servants, with both their heads laid on the same pillow, a sight which brought tears to the eyes. They had so little strength that they could not move their faces, placed together, closer to one another to kiss one another, but only managed to do so with the dutiful assistance of the brothers.]⁹²

Following this touching scene, Benedict and Sigfrith appoint Ceolfrith as their joint successor and next abbot of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. The issue of succession is also given particular emphasis in Willibald’s *Life of St. Boniface*. No fewer than three times, the *vita* features an old man whose responsibilities needed to be taken over. Abbot Wimbert of Nursling, first of all, succumbed to old age and died, leaving the brethren at Nursling to implore Boniface to take up the role of abbot, which the saint refused on account of his youth.⁹³ Boniface appealed to the same excuse when he was later asked by Willibrord to become his assistant and “relieve him of the burden of the ministry in his declining years”.⁹⁴ Eventually, when Boniface himself suffered from his senescence, the saint “now weak and decrepit, showed great foresight both as regards himself and his people by appointing a successor to his see”.⁹⁵ As Cochelin

⁸⁹ William of Malmesbury, *Vita s. Wulfstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, III.21.

⁹⁰ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35.

⁹¹ Cochelin, ‘*In senectute bona*’, 125–7.

⁹² Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 13.

⁹³ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, trans. Talbot, ch. 5; similarly, in the anonymous *Vita s. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Lapidge, ch. 19.1, the aged Æthelgar, bishop of Crediton (934–953), dies and Dunstan is asked to take his place, but the saint refuses.

⁹⁴ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, trans. Talbot, ch. 5.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

has justly noted, the fact that these instances of retirement and succession of elderly saints are reported in a neutral or even positive manner reveals that the withdrawal of older members of the clergy was on the whole an accepted and natural phenomenon.⁹⁶

To sum up so far, most saints suffer from all sorts of drawbacks of old age, often forcing them into retirement and necessitating the search for a successor. Bede even went as far as to describe Benedict Biscop's senescence in terms of a martyrdom, noting that the saint was "longis uirtutum studiis exercitatus longo insuper annosae infirmitatis martyrio excoctus" [worn out by the lengthy exertions of his holy duty and debilitated by the prolonged martyrdom of the weakness of old age].⁹⁷ Such references to a saint's suffering may have been an attempt by hagiographers to humanise their subjects, as Semper has suggested,⁹⁸ but descriptions of how saints dealt with their old age could also have had the opposite effect. Indeed, as will be demonstrated below, a saintly senescence, like martyrdom, did not only entail physical suffering; it was also an opportunity for hagiographers to establish the holiness of their saints.

Forgetful of their age: Old saints overcoming their age

With respect to later medieval saints' lives, both Shahar and Cochelin have noted that the aging of the body becomes "an opportunity for spiritual elevation" of the saint.⁹⁹ Typically, the man of God refuses to temper his religious responsibilities when age or illness comes knocking, displaying his unrelenting spirituality in the face of physical decline. An influential model for an old saint's inexorable religiousness was the *vita* of Martin of Tours (316–397) by Sulpicius Severus (c.363–c.425).¹⁰⁰ Three *vitae* of Martin survive in Old English and each shows the saint as someone who refuses to slacken his devotion despite being old and mortally ill. Ælfric's adaptation of Severus's work in his *Lives of Saints* is a case in point and has the saint address God in the following manner: "Ne ic ne beladige mine ateorigendlican ylde. Ic þine þenunga estful gefylde; under þinum tacnum ic campige swa lange swa þu sylf hætst" [I shall not be excused on account of my failing old age. I have devotedly fulfilled your service; by your signs I fight as long as You yourself command].¹⁰¹ When Martin's followers offer him softer bedding to ease his suffering in the hours before his death, Martin firmly declines, noting that he wishes to give them a fitting example.¹⁰² The anonymous Latin life of Dunstan testifies to the influence of Severus' work, explicitly comparing the aged Dunstan's unrelenting religious activity to that of Martin: "oculis interim ac manibus more beati Martini in caelum semper intentis, inuictum numquam ab oratione spiritum relaxans" [Like the blessed Martin, he always kept eyes and hands directed towards heaven and he never relaxed his unconquered spirit from prayer].¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Cochelin, 'In senectute bona', 126.

⁹⁷ Bede, *Homilia in natale s. Benedicti*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, ch. 14.

⁹⁸ Semper, 307.

⁹⁹ Shahar, *Growing Old*, 58; Cochelin, 'In senectute bona', 128–9.

¹⁰⁰ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita sancti Martini*, ed. K. Smolak (Eisenstadt, 1997), epistle 3.

¹⁰¹ *ÆLS*, no. 31, ll. 1346–8; cf. *ÆCHom II*, hom. 34, ll. 292–5; *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 18, ll. 263–7.

¹⁰² *ÆLS*, no. 31, ll. 1349–56; cf. *Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, hom. 18, ll. 278–83.

¹⁰³ *Vita s. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Lapidge, ch. 37.4. The anonymous hagiographer quotes Severus almost ad verbatim, see *ibid.*, n. 294.

The physical weakness of old saints thus allowed hagiographers to emphasise their saints' dedication to their religious calling.

In many Anglo-Saxon saints' lives, a saint's ability to continue his devout duties in spite of his physical decrepitude became a source of praise. Byrhtferth of Ramsey, for one, stated that Oswald was worthy of admiration, particularly because "usque in senectam et senium Deum studuit incessanter querere" [even into his old age and declining years he tried incessantly to seek God].¹⁰⁴ In his *vita* of Ecgwine, Byrhtferth, likewise, praised the saint's resilience by comparing the saint to an "emeritus miles" [veteran warrior].¹⁰⁵ More explicit approval came from William of Malmesbury, in his life of Wulfstan of Worcester:

Wlstanus humanorum excessuum confessione facta etiam disciplinam accepit (ita uocant monachi uirgarum flagra, quae tergo nudato cedentis infligit acrimonia). Quantus hic uir, qui aeuo inualidus, morbo infractus, conscientia etiam serenus, non abstinerit flagellis corporis, ut discuteret si quid reliquum erat animae sordis!

[Wulfstan made confession of the shortcomings to which men are heir, and also received 'discipline', for that is what monks call the strokes of the rod inflicted harshly on the bared back. What a man! – who, though feeble with age, broken by illness, and quiet in conscience, yet did not flinch from corporal punishment to shake off any remaining stain on his soul!]¹⁰⁶

Cochelin points out that this unrelenting asceticism of elderly saints helped to establish their special, supernatural status; especially since monastic rules in general allowed older monks to take the edge off their vows.¹⁰⁷

Another recurring theme in the lives of elderly saints is that the saint, on occasion, miraculously overcame the bodily restrictions of his advanced age and accomplished an unimaginable physical feat. Such was the case for Zosimus, who, inspired by seeing Mary of Egypt, "his ealdan ylde ofergetiligende and þæt geswinc his syðfætes ne understandende, mid hrædestan ryne þenigende arn" [overcoming his old age and taking no notice of the difficulty of his path, he ran exerting himself with a very rapid onward course].¹⁰⁸ Oswald, too, managed to exhort his decrepit body one more time, moments before giving up his spirit:

... cepit senilia membra solo prosternere sua, oblitus cigneam capitis sui canitiem, non recognoscens aetatis sue imbecillitatem; quem alma fides confortauit summe trinitatis et indiuidue unitatis. Tunc nobile caput pontificis cepit sobrie pedes tergere pauperum – non solum lintheo sed etiam capillis.

¹⁰⁴ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, V.12.

¹⁰⁵ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, I.6.

¹⁰⁶ William of Malmesbury, *Vita s. Wulfstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, III.21. Cf. William's similar praise of Aldhelm: William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom, V.ccxxvii.1–2.

¹⁰⁷ Cochelin, 'In senectute bona', 128–9.

¹⁰⁸ *Life of Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. Magennis, II. 227–9.

[... he [Oswald] began to prostrate his aged limbs on the ground, forgetful of the swan-white hair of his head and not acknowledging the weakness of his advanced age; the kindly concern of the highest Trinity and individual Unity comforted him. Then the noble figure of the bishop began circumspectly to wash the feet of the poor – not only with a linen towel, but also with his own hair.]¹⁰⁹

Likewise, on the brink of death and hardly able to speak, the old and weary Edward the Confessor woke from his sleep miraculously endowed with “tanta ... loquendi copia, ut cuius sanissimo nichil opus esset supra” [such resources of eloquence that even the healthiest man would have no need of more].¹¹⁰ In a similar vein, *vitae* often featured aged, barren parents, whose infertility was overcome through Divine power, allowing them to bring forth a saintly child. Typical examples include Æbba and Dynno, the aged parents of Leoba, and the mother of Machutus, who was 66 when she gave birth to the saint.¹¹¹ Old age thus provided a context in which miracles could occur.

Such miracles did not only involve the temporary revitalisation of the saintly body, but could also be manifested in the saint’s surroundings. For instance, *The Old English Martyrology* reports how, when St. Winnoc (d. 716/717), abbot of Wormhout, had grown too old to work outside, the mill that he used for grinding grain started to run “ðurh godcunde miht” [by divine power].¹¹² Equally miraculous is the arrival of a lion to help the aged Zosimus bury the lifeless body of Mary of Egypt. Zosimus implored the beast as follows:

‘Ic witodlice for yldum gewæht eom, þæt ic delfan ne mæg, ne naht gehyðes hæbbe þis weorc to begangenne, ne ic efstan ne mæg swa myccles siðfætes hider to bringanne. Ac þu nu mid þære godcundan hæse þis weorc mid þinum clifrum do, oþþæt wit þisne halgan lichaman on eorðan befæston.’¹¹³

[‘In truth I am weakened with old age, so that I cannot dig; nor have I anything suitable to carry out this task, nor am I able to rush away on so great a journey to bring anything here. But you do this task with your claws, in accordance with the divine command, until the two of us have committed this holy body to the earth.’]

Wondrously, the lion obeys and Mary’s corpse is interred into the ground. These examples show how the physical inaptitude of the old saint provided the occasion for God to conduct miracles to compensate for the saint’s adversity.

¹⁰⁹ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, V.17.

¹¹⁰ *Life of King Edward*, ed. and trans. Barlow, II.11.

¹¹¹ Rudolf, *Vita s. Leoba*, trans. Talbot, 210–1; *Old English Life of Machutus*, ed. Yerkes, 3, ll. 17–8. These aged couples have biblical precedents in Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, as well as the parents of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist.

¹¹² *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, no. 221.

¹¹³ *Life of Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. Magennis, ll. 932–7.

The saint's physical enfeeblement could thus become a token of his venerability. Indeed, the white hair of saints, for some hagiographers, became a visual sign of holiness. Wulfstan of Winchester, for example, likened white-haired saints to angels. Specifically, he portrayed Dunstan as an unmoving pillar, "angelico uultu decorus" [beautiful as an angel], in his *vita* of Æthelwold and later, in his *Narratio metrica de s. Swithuno*, Dunstan appears as "canicie niueus Dunstan et angelicus" [Dunstan, angelic with snowy-white hair].¹¹⁴ When Dunstan himself had a vision of an old priest, Wulfstan described the latter "canis angelicis" [with white hair like an angel's].¹¹⁵ For Wulfstan of Winchester, then, as well as for other Anglo-Saxon hagiographers, the physical deterioration of saints did not pose an obstacle for their sanctity. Quite the opposite, it created an opportunity for the hagiographer to mark them as worthy members of the saintly community.

Death as a release: The long-anticipated end of old saints

Da Sanctus Hilarion wæs on hundeahtatigum wintrum þa he forðferde; ond þy dæge þe he geleorde, he cwæð to him sylfum: 'Gong ut, sawl, hwæt drædest ðu ðe? Gong ut, hwæt tweost ðu ðe nu? Hundseofontig geara þu þeowodest Gode, ond nu gyt þone deað þe ondrædest?' Ond æt ðisum worde he onsende his gast.¹¹⁶

[Then St. Hilarion was eighty years old when he died, and on the day when he died, he said to himself: 'Leave, soul, why are you afraid? Leave, why do you hesitate? You have served God for seventy years, and you are still afraid of death?' And with these words he gave up the ghost.]

These dying words of the eighty-year-old St. Hilarion are recorded in the entry for 21 October in the *Old English Martyrology*. Not only did the elderly saint readily accept death, he even urged his soul to leave his body. As such, Hilarion's death fits Goodich's broad definition of a saintly death as "an example to that saint's followers of courageous acceptance and anticipation of life after death".¹¹⁷

Indeed, for various aged saints in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, death was a welcome release from the toil and labour of this world as well as from their decrepit bodies. Alcuin, for instance, described Willibrord's passing as follows: "He was then an old man coming to the end of his days and was about to receive from God a generous reward for his labours".¹¹⁸ Willibrord's successor in Frisia, Boniface, spoke of death in similar terms, according to the *vita* written by Willibald: "In a short time I shall lay aside the burden of my body and receive the price of eternal bliss".¹¹⁹ The

¹¹⁴ Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 14; *idem*, *Narratio*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, dedicatory letter, l. 72.

¹¹⁵ Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 38.

¹¹⁶ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. Rauer, no. 211.

¹¹⁷ M. Goodich, 'The Death of a Saint: A Hagiographical Topos', in *Hoping for Continuity. Childhood, Education and Death in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. K. Mustakallio et al. (Rome, 2005), 227.

¹¹⁸ Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, trans. Talbot, 18.

¹¹⁹ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, trans. Talbot, ch. 8.

death of Dunstan, too, was described as merciful, putting an end to the saint's lifelong laborious struggles.¹²⁰ For these elderly saints, not immune to the physical decrepitude that came with the years, death not only meant a joyous passage to a higher reality, it also entailed a release from the corporeal vicissitudes of old age.¹²¹

The liberation from the elderly body upon death was visualised in some saint's lives through the rejuvenation of the saint on his deathbed. Wulfstan of Winchester, to give a striking example, related how Æthelwold's face turned to that of a seven-year-old after the saint had breathed his last.¹²² Wilfrid, too, appears to have regained his youth after his death at the age of 76. He appeared as a "hominem iuvenem stantem in albis et in manu sua crucem tenentem auream" [a young man in white who stood holding a golden cross in his hand] to a group of exiles that tried to burn down the monastery of Oundle where the saint lay dead, scaring the arsonists out of their wits.¹²³ Those attending to the corpse of Wulfstan of Worcester were equally shocked by the renewed youth of the deceased saint, particularly because the saint's protruding nose appeared to have been restored to its original size and colour:

Lauerunt ergo corpus, quod iam spe resurrectionis perpetuae prefulgidum stupor et uenerationi uisitentibus fuit: ita perspicuo nitore gemmeum, ita miranda puritate lacteum erat. Denique nasus, qui uiuenti citra modum protuberabat, ita pulchre defuncto subsedit et incanduit ut mirum uisitentibus esset. Illud porro quod dicam non nullo presentibus fuit miraculo.

[So they washed the corpse. It inspired amazement and reverence in those who saw it, gleaming as it already was in the hope of eternal resurrection; for it shone bright like a gem, and was white with a remarkable purity. His nose, excessively prominent while he lived, retreated and paled so beautifully in death that those who saw it marveled.]¹²⁴

Wulfstan's fingers, grown thin and bony from age and fasting, were similarly made anew and the saint himself appears to Bishop Robert of Hereford (d. 1095) with a youthful countenance.¹²⁵ This rejuvenation of saintly bodies after death can be related to the notion, described in the previous chapter, that the heavenly afterlife was a place of youth rather than age.¹²⁶

Anglo-Saxon hagiographers, in sum, described the death of old saints not only as the long-awaited entry into the Heavenly afterlife but also as a release from the physical repercussions of old age.

¹²⁰ *Vita s. Dunstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Lapidge, ch. 38.1.

¹²¹ Cf. Semper, 309.

¹²² Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, ed. and trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 41.

¹²³ Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, ch. 67.

¹²⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Vita s. Wulfstani*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, III.22.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, III.23.

¹²⁶ The archetype for the regeneration of the bodies of aged saints may have been the corpse of Martin of Tours shining brightly white: Sulpicius Severus, *Vita sancti Martini*, ed. Smolak, epistle 3, though no reference is made there of a return to youth. Cf. Semper, 309.

Conclusion

Despite the relative scarcity of descriptions of senescence in hagiography, there appears to have been a typical model for elderly saints. Characteristically, the aged saints embodied all the merits of old age and their wisdom, accumulated through the years or already shown at an early age, made them well respected. They often set a spiritual example for the youthful members of their community and their old age became a mark of venerability. Although some elderly saints defied the drawbacks of old age, most did eventually succumb to the bodily vicissitudes of age. Various old saints grew decrepit, fell asleep during meetings or were no longer able to walk unsupported and were thus forced to appoint assistants and look for worthy successors. Their aged bodies, in other words, became obstacles and, in one case, the saint's senescence was described as his martyrdom. As a consequence, the saint welcomed death as a release from his aged body, a release that was, on occasion, instantaneously realised by the corporeal rejuvenation after the saint's passing.

Nevertheless, the physical duress of saints, while hampering their activities in some respects, also provided opportunity. Their unrelenting asceticism, in spite of their feebleness, became all the more remarkable, ascertaining once more the sanctity of the elderly individual. The physical weakness of the old saint also occasioned miracles that compensated for the saint's hardship. Thus, aged, barren couples were made fertile, and an old saint's duties were upheld in miraculous ways. In many ways, then, a description of the saint's old age contributed to, rather than detracted from the goal of the hagiographer: to show the sanctity of the individual and the Divine power that worked through the saint.

In all, the old saint is represented in a positive way in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, enjoying the merits of old age and making the most of its drawbacks. Of course, the fact that old saints were praised need not entail a positive evaluation of elderly people in general. If anything, the aged saints set a standard that would have been hard to meet for mere mortals: to persevere, despite the physical frailty that came with the years. In this respect, as will be shown in the next chapter, an old saint was indeed, like Byrthferth of Ramsey remarked of Ecgwine, akin to the perfect "emeritus miles" [veteran warrior].¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Byrthferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, I.6.

hare hilderincas: Old warriors in Anglo-Saxon England

“Of what use is an old man in battle?”, Alfred J. Wyatt asked long ago, as he argued against the standard interpretation of the phrase “unorne ceorl” in line 256 of *The Battle of Maldon* as ‘an old churl’.¹ Rather than ‘old’, Dunnere, the character referred to, should be seen as being ‘plain, humble’, Wyatt maintained. Oliver Emerson confirmed Wyatt’s translation and added that assigning the meaning ‘old’ to the word *unorne* is “a sad libel upon the valiant Dunnere”.² While their semantic analysis of *unorne* is now generally accepted,³ Wyatt and Emerson’s reasoning strikes as odd, given that Dunnere belonged to the same group of warriors as the “eald geneat” [old companion] Byrhtwold, led by the “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior] Byrhtnoth.⁴ Moreover, their comments seem to reflect a modern prejudice with respect to the aptness of old men for military activities.

Judging the past in modern terms is problematic; the Middle Ages in particular were a time when elderly men could make themselves useful on the battlefield. The history of the Crusades, for instance, provides numerous examples of active participants of an advanced age: Raymond of St. Gilles (1041/1042–1105), Raynald of Châtillon (1125–1187) and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1122–1190) all died in the Holy Land, well into their sixties.⁵ Perhaps the most impressive elderly warrior of the Middle Ages was Enrico Dandolo (1107–1205), the Doge of Venice and leader of the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204). When the Crusade started, Dandolo was over 90 years old and blind. Despite his age and visual impairment, he participated actively in various battles. At the siege of Constantinople in 1203, to give a striking example, Dandolo sensed that his Venetian troops were hesitant to advance on the city walls and he gave orders to bring him ashore. He ran towards the enemy walls, carrying the Venetian banner; “as Dandolo had calculated, the Venetians were shamed by the old man’s bravery; they could not abandon their venerable leader and rushed to join him”.⁶ Dandolo’s charismatic leadership paid off: the people of Constantinople were surprised by the attack and suffered defeat. Dandolo participated in several other battles before he died in 1205, at the blessed age of 98. These examples reveal that elderly warriors, even those with severe physical disabilities, were a more common sight on the medieval battlefield than Wyatt and Emerson

¹ A. J. Wyatt, *An Anglo-Saxon Reader* (Cambridge, 1919), 282.

² O. Emerson, ‘Notes on Old English’, *Modern Language Review* 14 (1919), 207.

³ E.g., *English and Norse Documents: Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready*, ed. and trans. M. Ashdown (Cambridge, 1930), 87–8; *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E. V. Gordon, with a supplement by D.G. Scragg (Manchester, 1976), 57, n. 256; M. A. L. Locherbie-Cameron, ‘The Men Named in the Poem’, in *The Battle of Maldon. AD 991*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Oxford, 1991), 243–4. For a lexicological analysis of *unorne*, see Appendix, s.v. *unorne*.

⁴ *Battle of Maldon*, ll. 169a, 310a.

⁵ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 193–4.

⁶ J. Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* (London, 2004), 174–5.

presumed.⁷ Accordingly, Dunnere in *The Battle of Maldon* is not unimaginable as an old man and his aged comrades Byrhtwold and Byrhtnoth may not be as fantastical as the dragon fought by the grey-haired warrior Beowulf in the eponymous epic.

This chapter first establishes whether the presence of old warriors in *The Battle of Maldon* is grounded in historical reality, by surveying the evidence in archaeological, pictorial and documentary sources. Next, Old English heroic poetry is analysed in order to speculate about what roles were assigned to old men at arms, thus answering Wyatt's rhetorical question 'of what use is an old man in battle?'.

The (s)word from the grave: Archaeological evidence

Archaeological research into the grave furnishings of buried individuals in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries dating back to the fifth to eighth centuries has revealed that at least one in four men belonging to the oldest age group were inhumed with weapons. Crawford, for instance, has noted that 19% of the oldest age group in her sample of 1600 excavated skeletons were buried with spears.⁸ Taking into account all weapon types, Nick Stoodley calculated that weapons were found in 28% of the graves of elderly individuals included in his study of 1230 undisturbed burials from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries.⁹ An analysis of five further early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries from Hampshire and Oxfordshire, finally, suggests that 33% to 100% of the elderly males were consigned to the grave with weapons.¹⁰

Archaeologists have furthermore observed some distinct features of the weapon burials of elderly men. In his discussion of Anglo-Saxon warrior graves, Heinrich Härke has noted a positive correlation between the age of the interred and the size of spearheads: the older the individual buried, the longer the spearhead that accompanied him.¹¹ This correlation has been confirmed by later studies and even extended to include the length of the whole spear and that of the knife.¹² In addition to the presence of more sizable weapons, Stoodley has discovered that, on average, more elderly were interred with three or more weapons than younger adults were.¹³ Finally, two particular arms, axes and seaxes, have only been found in the graves of the oldest

⁷ Another extraordinary elderly warrior that comes to mind is the English knight William Marshal (1146/1147–1219), who personally led the English army in the Battle of Lincoln (1217) at the age of 70. S. Painter, *William Marshal: Knight-Errant, Baron and Regent of England* (Baltimore, 1933), 214–20.

⁸ Crawford, 57.

⁹ N. Stoodley, 'From the Cradle to the Grave: Age Organization and the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite', *World Archaeology* 31 (2000), 462. Notably, Stoodley defines the oldest group as people aged over 40.

¹⁰ R. Gowland, 'Ageing the Past: Examining Age Identity from Funerary Evidence', in *Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains*, ed. R. Gowland and C. Knüsel (Oxford, 2006), 151–2.

¹¹ H. Härke, 'Warrior Graves? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite', *Past and Present* 126 (1990), 22–43.

¹² *Idem*, 'Changing Symbols in a Changing Society: The Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite in the Seventh Century', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M. O. H. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), 158; S. Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), 72; Crawford, 58; Stoodley, 'From the Cradle', 467.

¹³ N. Stoodley, 'Childhood to Old Age', in *Oxford Handbook*, ed. Hamerow, Hinton and Crawford, 649, 663; *Idem*, 'From the Cradle', 462.

individuals.¹⁴ Whereas no explanation has yet been offered for the connection between these two particular weapons and the elderly,¹⁵ the presence of longer and more numerous weapons in the weapon burials of elderly individuals has been explained as reflecting a special, higher status of the deceased.¹⁶

Although the presence of weapons in a grave unproblematically seems to signal an active warrior function at time of death, Härke, in particular, has argued against this assumption. One of his main arguments was the age range of the burials containing weapons: “mature individuals too old to be effective fighters were accompanied by weapons, as were children too young to be warriors”.¹⁷ Rather than reflecting an active military career, “the Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite was a ‘symbolic act’ ... the ritual expression of an ethnically, socially and perhaps ideologically based ‘warrior status’”.¹⁸ Although it is not unthinkable that the inhumation with weapons may have had a symbolic background, Härke’s underlying assumption that children and elderly were unfit for warfare merely on account of their age is not supported by other evidence.

Härke’s conclusion with respect to children has not gone unchallenged. In her study on Anglo-Saxon childhood, Crawford has convincingly argued that youngsters could in fact be martially active. Historical examples, in particular, such as the Anglo-Saxon saints Wilfrid, Guthlac and Cuthbert, who all started their fighting careers in their teens, support her argument.¹⁹ Additionally, Crawford makes a more general point by referring to the use of child warriors in various present-day war situations: whereas prohibiting boys from fighting on the battlefield may fit modern Western ideals, this disposition is by no means a universal mentality.²⁰ Supporting Crawford’s disposition that boys could and would fight among men in the Middle Ages, an Old Frisian law text, dating back to thirteenth century but possibly reflecting even older traditions, describes an army as including “thrintera mare and ... twelfwintera maga” [three-year old horses and twelve-year-old youths].²¹ Those Anglo-Saxon youths that were buried with weapons, then, may have actually used them, either in combat or on the training grounds.

Crawford’s refutation of Härke can be extended to argue in favour of the likelihood of elderly warriors. While modern notions may rule out old people for warfare, medieval history, as noted above, offers numerous instances of active, grey-haired warriors. Moreover, archaeological finds of later periods also demonstrate the reality of elderly warriors: the bodies of three old men killed in battle were found at the site of the Battle of Towton (1461).²² Pictorial and documentary evidence from Anglo-Saxon England, to be discussed below, confirms the possible presence of

¹⁴ Stoodley, ‘From the Cradle’, 462.

¹⁵ Härke, ‘Changing Symbols’, 156.

¹⁶ Stoodley, ‘From the Cradle’, 467.

¹⁷ Härke, ‘Changing Symbols’, 153.

¹⁸ *Idem*, ‘Warrior Graves?’, 43.

¹⁹ Crawford, *Childhood*, 159–61; cf. H. Ellis Davidson, ‘The Training of Warriors’, in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. S. Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), 11–24.

²⁰ Crawford, *Childhood*, 158–9.

²¹ *Das Fivelgoer Recht*, ed. W. J. Buma and W. Ebel (Göttingen, 1972), XVI.2.

²² R. Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2012), 62.

elderly warriors on the Anglo-Saxon battlefield. A fair proportion of the Anglo-Saxon elderly weapon burials, therefore, may indeed reflect active, military careers.

Picturing white beards in the vanguard: Pictorial evidence

Whereas archeological evidence has served to provide an insight into the early Anglo-Saxon period, detailed pictorial evidence of warfare is only available from the late tenth century onwards.²³ Detailed illustrations of warfare appear in tenth- and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, the Old English Hexateuch and the Psalter, as well as the Bayeux Tapestry. In these visualisations of warfare, elderly warriors can be identified either by their likeness to other figures known to have been old, such as Abraham, or their prolonged white beards.²⁴ As will be demonstrated below, these illustrations provide insight into how an Anglo-Saxon envisioned the battlefield and whether aged combatants, in his imagination or experience, were present or absent.

Prudentius' Psychomachia

The *Psychomachia* by the Roman poet Prudentius (348–413) is an allegory about a battle between the Vices and Virtues, personified as female warriors. In its preface, Prudentius starts by praising Abraham, then still named Abram, and emphasises his active role in the freeing of his nephew Lot, who had been captured by the Elamite army in the aftermath of the War of the Kings. Upon hearing this news, Abraham, then aged over 75 according to the biblical account, prepares 318 of his servants and leads a successful rescue mission, which leads Prudentius to exclaim:

quin ipse ferrum stringit et plenus Deo
reges superbos mole praedarum graves
pellit fugatos, sauciatos proterit,
frangit catenas et rapinam liberat.

[He himself (Abraham), too, draws the sword and, being filled with the spirit of God, drives off in flight those proud kings, weighed down with their booty, or cuts them down and tramples them under foot. He breaks the bonds and loosens the plunder.]²⁵

By describing Abraham as an active participant in the battle, Prudentius embellishes the account in Gen. 14, which glances over the fighting itself. In doing so, Prudentius created an image of Abraham as an elderly warrior, which was picked up and even

²³ Early stone carvings with battle scenes, such as the ninth-century Aberlemno Stone, depicting the Battle of Nechtansmere of 685 between Ecgrith of Northumbria and the Picts, often lack the detail to identify the warriors as either old or young. See, e.g., N. Hooper, 'The Aberlemno Stone and Cavalry in Anglo-Saxon England', *Northern History* 29 (1993), 188–96.

²⁴ For long, white beards as a characteristic of an old rather than a middle-aged man, see the depictions of the three ages of man discussed in chapter 1; Ohlgren, *Insular and Anglo-Saxon Illuminated Manuscripts* does not include 'old age' in its index of iconographic contents.

²⁵ Prudentius, *Psychomachia*, ed. and trans. H. J. Thomson (Cambridge, MA, 2015), preface, ll. 26–9.

elaborated upon by the illustrators of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the text,²⁶ which all depict the elderly Abraham as brandishing a spear and riding his horse into battle (see fig. 6.1).²⁷



Fig. 6.1 Abraham (on the far left) and his servants on their way to free Lot. CCCC 23, 2v.

In nearly all manuscripts of the *Psychomachia*, Abraham is the only warrior to be depicted as elderly. However, one Anglo-Saxon artist added a second old man at arms in his illustration of ll. 109–10 of the *Psychomachia*, “ecce modesta gravi stabat Patientia vultu / per medias inmota acies variosque tumultus” [Lo, mild Long-Suffering was standing with staid countenance, unmoved amid the battle and its confused uproar].²⁸ Here, the artist of CCCC 23 drew an armed, bearded figure (see fig. 6.2), similar to his rendition of Abraham a few folio’s earlier. While his depiction of the aged Abraham of the preface has parallels in other, both Anglo-Saxon and continental, manuscripts, his inclusion of an elderly warrior in the frontlines of one of the armies surrounding *Patientia* is not found in any other known manuscript depicting

²⁶ The popularity of Prudentius’ *Psychomachia* in Anglo-Saxon England is reflected in the use of the text by various Anglo-Saxon authors, including Alcuin, and the number of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts containing the text: ten, of which four are illustrated. G. R. Wieland, ‘The Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts of Prudentius’ *Psychomachia*, ASE 16 (1987), 213–31. The four illustrated manuscripts are CCCC 23 (s. x² or x^{ex} or xi in, S England), London, British Library, Add. 24199 (s. x^{ex}), London, British Library, Cotton Cleopatra C. viii (s. x/xi, Canterbury, Christ Church) and the fragment Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm. 29336/1 (s. xi^m). For these manuscripts, see G. R. Wieland, ‘The Origin and Development of the Anglo-Saxon *Psychomachia* Illustrations’, ASE 26 (1997), 169–86. The cycles of illustrations in these manuscripts are reproduced in *Die illustrierten Prudentiushandschriften*, ed. R. Stettiner, (Berlin, 1895–1905) II, pls. 31–66.

²⁷ CCCC 23, 1v, 3r; Add. 24199, 3r; Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, 1v, 2r. The artists of these manuscripts probably based themselves on various continental models, see Wieland, ‘Origin and Development’, 179–80. Abram is not depicted in the Clm. 29336/1, which only survives as a fragment.

²⁸ Prudentius, *Psychomachia*, ed. and trans. Thomson.

the scene.²⁹ The CCCC 23 artist, in this respect, was not following the established iconographical tradition associated with this text, and his inclusion of the old man in this scene may therefore reflect his conception of a typical line of battle as containing both young and old men.

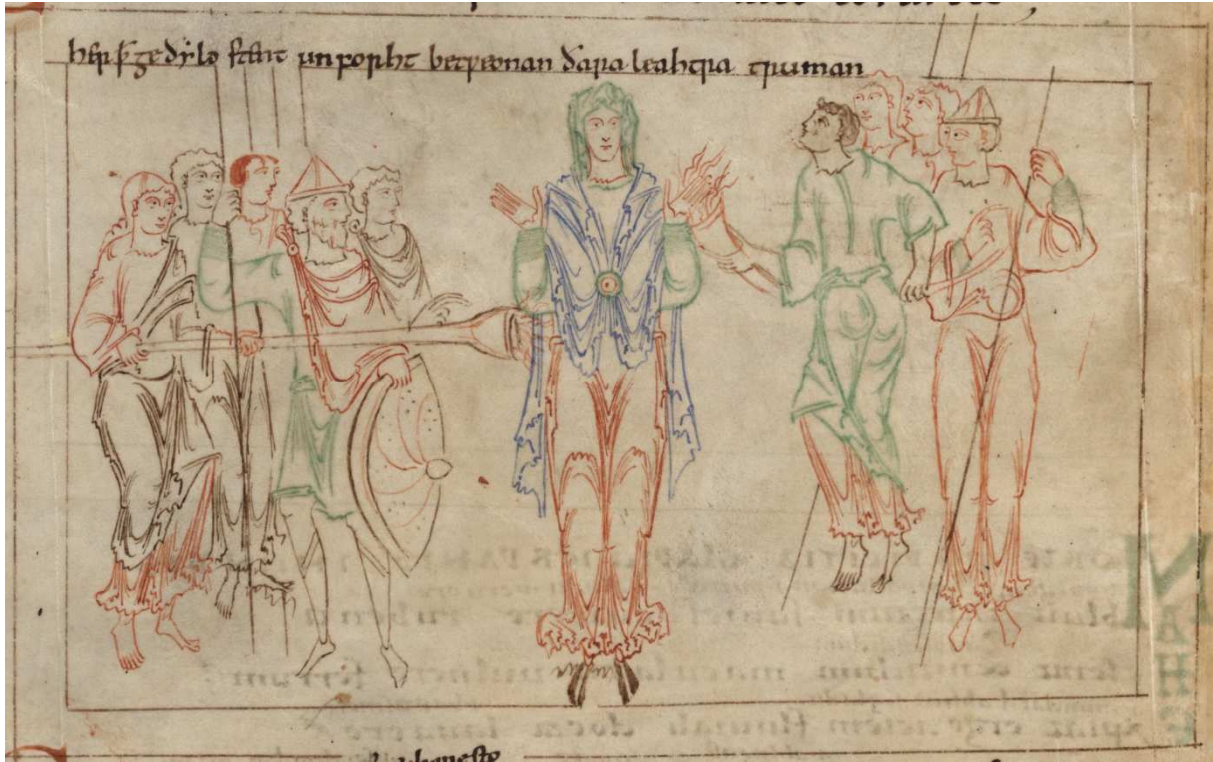


Fig. 6.2 Elderly warrior to the left of *Patientia*, standing between the battle lines. CCCC 23, 8v.

The Old English Hexateuch

The story of Abraham's intervention to free Lot is also vividly depicted in the Old English Hexateuch,³⁰ a translation from the Latin Vulgate of the first six books of the Old Testament.³¹ The illustrated manuscript of the Old English contains near to four hundred coloured drawings, some of which have remained unfinished. The editors of the facsimile edition of the manuscript stress that the illustrations are original and made especially to conform to the text of this manuscript: "In other words, the artist was not copying the pictures of a remote and long-forgotten age; like other creative artists he was thinking in terms of his own life and times".³² Jennifer Kiff has noted

²⁹ *Prudentiushandschriften*, ed. Stettiner, provides plates of all manuscripts featuring this scene; CCCC 23 is unique in depicting one of the warriors in the likeness of the aged Abram; all other manuscripts feature clean-shaven warriors.

³⁰ For this manuscript, see above p. 78, n. 32.

³¹ A large portion of this translation – Genesis up to 24:22, the second half of Numbers and Joshua – has been attributed to Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham. Ælfric's work was combined with that of anonymous translators to form the Hexateuch text, which survives in eight manuscripts. R. Barnhouse and B. C. Withers, 'Introduction: Aspects and Approaches', in *The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches*, ed. R. Barnhouse and B. C. Withers (Kalamazoo, 2000), 1–13.

³² *The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch: British Museum Cotton Claudius B. iv*, ed. C. R. Dodwell and P. Clemoes, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 18 (Copenhagen, 1974), 71.

that this manuscript features detailed battle iconography, possibly to suit the tastes of the educated layman who had commissioned the manuscript.³³



Fig. 6.3 Abraham hears of Lot's capture (top), Abraham and his troops in pursuit (middle) and battle against the Elamite army (bottom). Old English Hexateuch, 25r.

³³ J. Kiff, 'Images of War: Illustrations of Warfare in Early Eleventh-Century England', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 7 (1984), 188.



Fig. 6.4 Abraham (leading his army) meets the King of Sodom. Old English Hexateuch, 25v.

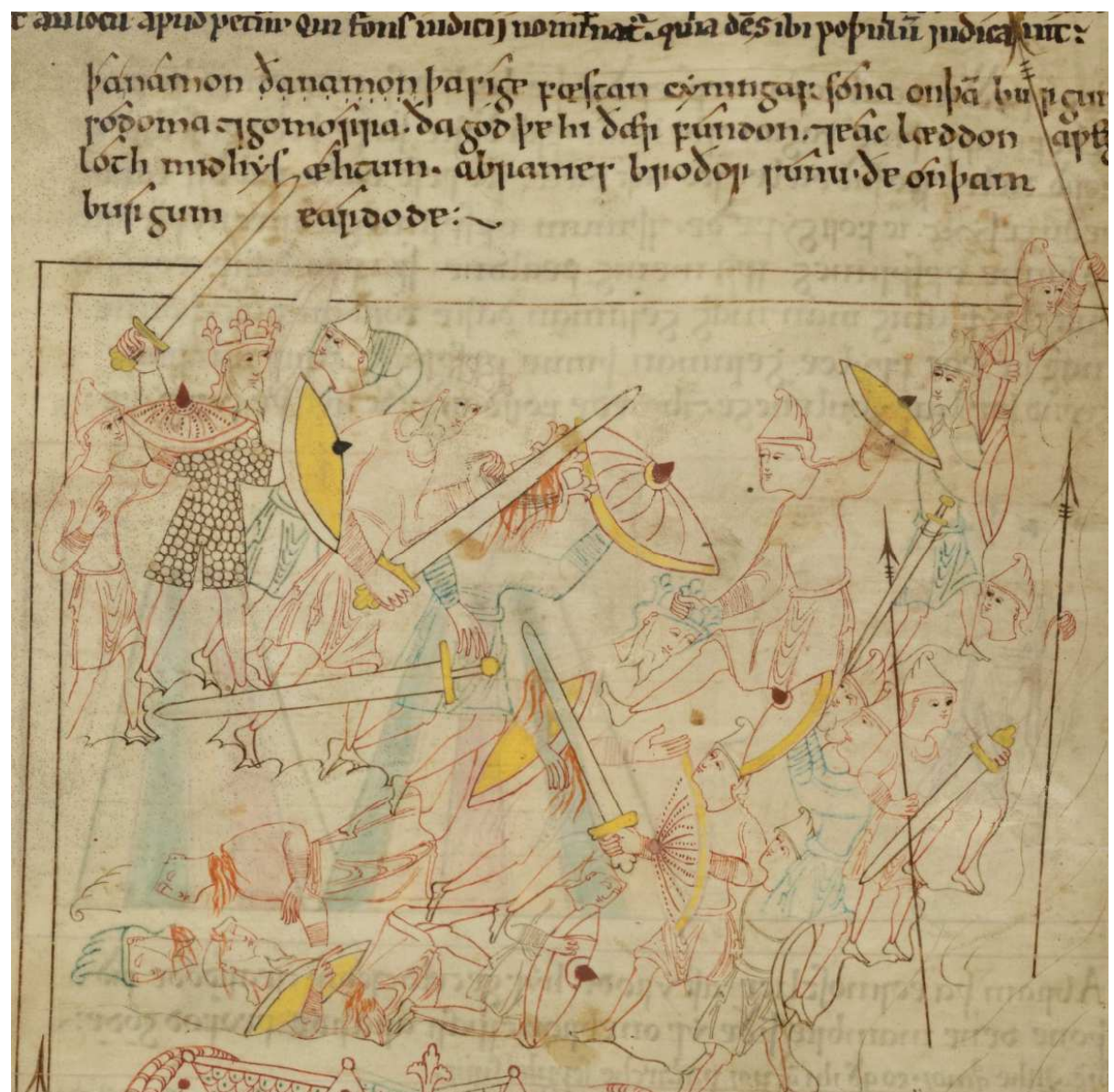


Fig. 6.5 War of the Kings. Old English Hexateuch, 24v.

As in the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the *Psychomachia*, the elderly Abraham is shown armed and actively engaged in the freeing of Lot. Moreover, his band of 318 armed servants contains other elderly warriors with beards like Abraham's (figs. 6.3, 6.4). Figures with a countenance similar to the aged Abraham also occur in many other battle scenes in this manuscript.³⁴ The depiction of the War of the Kings (Gen. 14:13), for example, features eight bearded individuals similar to Abraham, all actively engaged in battle (fig. 6.5). In the top, one of these figures is even pulled by his beard enabling his opponent to strike him in the face with a sword.³⁵ The presence of these elderly, bearded figures in the various battle scenes of this manuscript demonstrates that, for the Anglo-Saxon artist at least, elderly men were an integral part of the battlefield.³⁶

The Harley Psalter

The Harley Psalter is one of the three medieval English psalters based on the Utrecht Psalter, along with the Eadwine Psalter and the Paris Psalter.³⁷ Like its Carolingian exemplar, the Harley Psalter features small groups of armed men engaged in or preparing for combat in some of its psalm illustrations.

Within these armed groups, some bearded men carrying spears can be discerned.³⁸ The war band around a Christ-like figure brandishing a sword and a bow depicted in the illustration of Ps. 7:8,13 ("And a congregation of people shall surround Thee He will brandish His sword; He hath bent His bow, and made it ready") is a clear example (fig. 6.6). The figure to the left of the war band has an extensive beard, to mark his advanced age. The interpretation of this figure as a senior is confirmed by the rendition of the same scene in the Paris Psalter, which not only shows the extended white beard but also a wrinkled face. Interestingly, while the bearded man is present in the Utrecht Psalter that was the inspiration for the scene in the Harley Psalter, the beard is absent in the Eadwine Psalter.³⁹

³⁴ Old English Hexateuch, 25r, 75v, 95v, 103v, 119r, 123r, 124v, 125r, 127r, 127v, 151r, 152r, 152v, 153r, 153v, 154r, 154v.

³⁵ The scene is reminiscent of the early medieval maxim "Frontibus attritis barbas conscindere fas est" [when the heads are bald one must pull the beards], found in the eleventh-century Apocalypse of Saint-Séver. J. J. M. Timmers, *A Handbook of Romanesque Art* (New York, 1976), 82. I owe this reference to mr. G. Limburg (Oegstgeest).

³⁶ Another manuscript to feature a drawing of Abraham leading his army, which includes one other bearded figure (though his beard does not resemble Abraham's), is Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junus 11 (s. x² and xi¹, South England, Canterbury, Christ Church?; the 'Junius Manuscript'), 81; Ker, no. 334; Gneuss and Lapidge, no. 640. The image is reproduced in Ohlgren, *Insular and Anglo-Saxon Illuminated Manuscripts*, 571.

³⁷ For a description of the Harley Psalter and related manuscripts, see p. 36, n. 55, 57 above.

³⁸ Harley Psalter, 2r, 4r, 6v, 13v, 15r, 59v, 60r.

³⁹ This difference between the Eadwine Psalter on the one hand and the Utrecht and Paris Psalter on the other hand, reaffirms Noel's conclusion that the artists of the Paris Psalter did not only base their illustrations on Eadwine's Psalter, but must also have had access to the original Utrecht Psalter. Cf. Noel, 'Utrecht Psalter in England', 121–2.

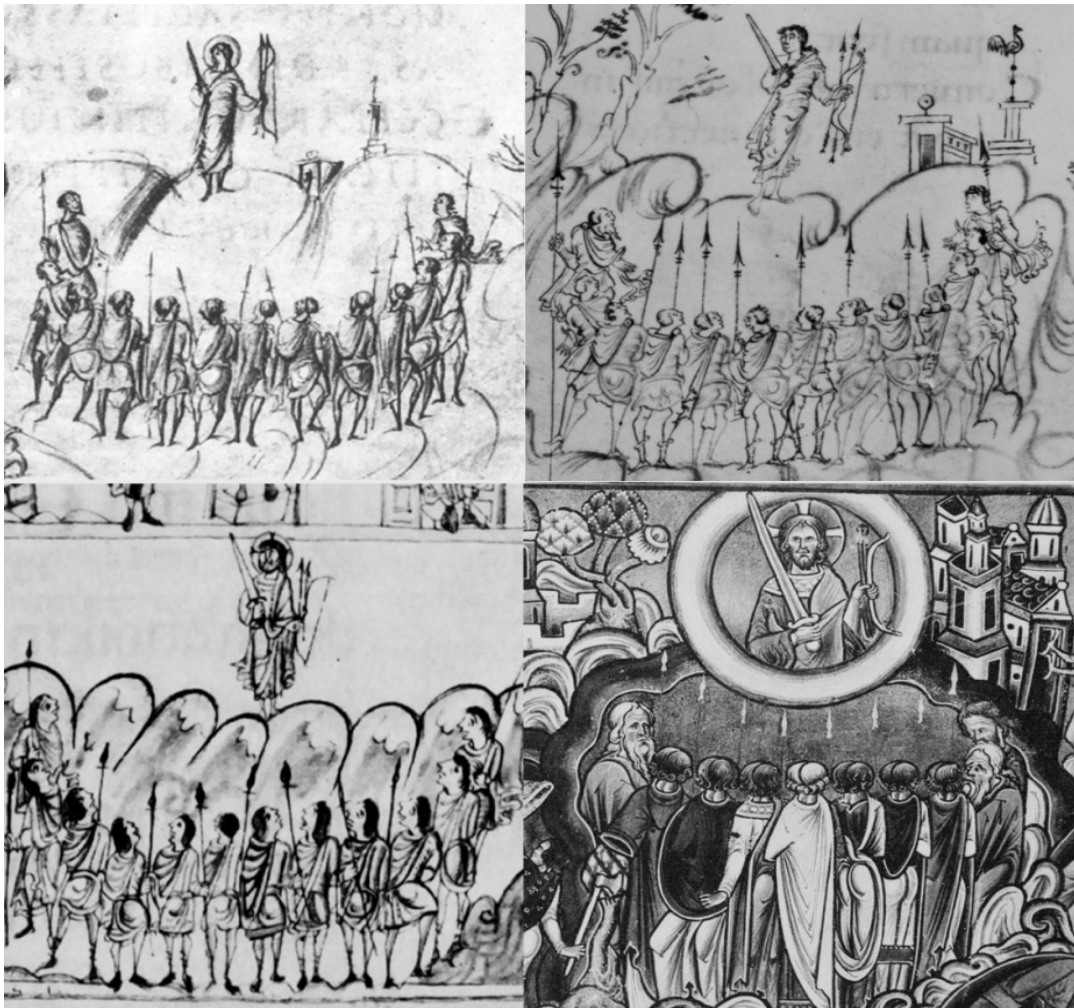


Fig. 6.6 Illustrations of Psalm 7, showing an elderly man with a spear on the far left of the armed band. Clockwise: Utrecht Psalter, 4r (top left), Harley Psalter, 4v, Paris Psalter, 12v, Eadwine Psalter, 12v.

The presence in the Harley Psalter of men with extensive beards amidst bands of armed men, as well as the evidence from the CCCC 23 *Psychomachia* and the illustrated Old English Hexateuch, suggests that various Anglo-Saxon artists envisioned the battlefield as a place for warriors both young and old. In this respect, the designer of the Bayeux Tapestry, the principal visual representation of Anglo-Saxon warfare, was no different.

The Bayeux Tapestry

The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth of approximately 70 meters long, depicting the events leading up to and including the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Probably at the bequest of Bishop Odo of Bayeux, the Tapestry was designed and made in the two decades following the Norman Conquest, possibly in St. Augustine's, Canterbury.⁴⁰ Because of its monastic background, the realistic nature of the Bayeux

⁴⁰ N. P. Brooks and H. E. Walker, 'The Authority and Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 1 (1978), 1–18. Scolland, abbot of St. Augustine's, Canterbury has been identified as the designer of the Tapestry by H. B. Clarke, 'The Identity of the Designer of the Bayeux Tapestry', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 35 (2013), 119–40.

Tapestry's depiction of warfare has been a matter of debate.⁴¹ In particular, the English designer of the Tapestry failed to bring out the distinctions between the different armours and weapons used by the Normans and English, picturing them as identical instead. This ignorance of Norman attire has been attributed to the fact that the Bayeux Tapestry draws heavily on earlier iconographical depictions of warfare in manuscripts created in Canterbury, including the ones described above.⁴² N. P. Brooks and H. E. Walker therefore conclude: "the Tapestry is a more dependable source of the armour and weapons of the English than of the Normans".⁴³

While the depiction of helmets, byrnie and galloping horses reflect English iconographical traditions and may, hence, be somewhat removed from the reality of the battlefield,⁴⁴ the Tapestry gives nonetheless a faithful record of some of the events that took place during the Battle of Hastings. On plate 68,⁴⁵ for example, William the Conqueror lifts the visor of his helmet to dispel the rumour that he had died, as reported by other, written sources of the battle.⁴⁶ Similarly, the depiction of Harold's death by an arrow in the eye, on plate 71, is corroborated by other, near-contemporary sources, although these may have been based on the Bayeux Tapestry itself.⁴⁷ Clearly, then, the designer of the Bayeux Tapestry had been informed of some of the circumstances of the Battle of Hastings; his inclusion of elderly warriors on the side of the English, therefore, may have been grounded in reality.

The elderly warriors on the Bayeux Tapestry can be identified by their white beards and appear only in the English army. There are, it is true, a number of white-bearded figures among the Normans, yet these do not appear in the battle scenes: two white-bearded figures construct a boat on panel 36, another white-bearded man is the helmsman of the first ship on panel 40, while another is seated at Odo's dinner table on panel 48.⁴⁸ By contrast, warriors with white beards take up prominent positions in the English battle lines. Two clear examples are the white-bearded figures in the vanguard of the English shield walls on panels 61 and 62 of the Tapestry. The first elderly warrior, on panel 61, is distinguished from the remainder of the shield wall by his white beard, his longer spear, and the colour of his shield (fig. 6.7a). These distinctive features and his position at the head of the shield wall symbolise the special status or high rank he must have had within this Anglo-Saxon war band. Much the

⁴¹ Brooks and Walker, 'Authority and Interpretation', 19.

⁴² Kiff, 'Images of War', 190–4.

⁴³ Brooks and Walker, 'Authority and Interpretation', 20.

⁴⁴ Kiff, 'Images of War', 192–4. See also M. Lewis, 'The Bayeux Tapestry and Eleventh-Century Material Culture', in *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. G. R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, 2005), 179–94.

⁴⁵ All references to plate numbers of the Bayeux Tapestry are to D. M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Complete Tapestry in Colour* (London, 1985).

⁴⁶ D. J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London, 1986), 141.

⁴⁷ H. H. Wood, *The Battle of Hastings: The Fall of Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 2008), 192–7.

⁴⁸ Perhaps these bearded individuals later occur as the archers in the lower margin of panels 68 and 69. The depiction of these archers, however, lacks sufficient detail to identify them definitively as either elderly or young, or, even, as either English or Norman. In the lower margin of panel 66, a detached head with a long beard lies amidst several corpses, but whether this body part belonged to an English or a Norman warrior is impossible to say, since the Tapestry comments "HIC CECIDERUNT SIMUL ANGLI ET FRANCI IN PRELIO" [Here the English and the French have fallen side by side in the battle].

same can be said for the bearded warrior in the second English shield wall on panel 62, facing the opposite direction. This warrior is second in line and carries the battle standard, as he and his company await the onslaught of the approaching Norman cavalry (fig. 6.7b).



Fig. 6.7 a (top): Elderly warrior in the vanguard of the English shield wall. Bayeux Tapestry, panel 61. b (middle, left): Elderly warrior carrying the battle-standard in the English shield wall. Bayeux Tapestry, panel 62. c (middle, right), d (bottom, left), e (bottom, right): White-bearded bodyguards of Harold Godwinson. Bayeux Tapestry, panels 70–2.

Five further elderly warriors belonged to King Harold Godwinson's personal bodyguard. Three of them are depicted on panel 70, under the inscription "ET CECIDERUNT QUI ERANT CUM HAROLDO" [and those who were with Harold have fallen] (fig. 6.7c). One has already fallen, literally, to the lower margin and lies dead, while the other two are in the process of being killed. The first has an arrow sticking out of his face, while the last is being struck down by a Norman sword. This last figure, in particular, demonstrates the resilience which these elderly warriors apparently could show in battle: no less than five arrows stick out from his shield and one from the back of his head, but he still raises his two-handed battle axe in defense against the Norman invader. Surrounding the fallen King Harold on panels 71 and 72 are two other elderly warriors (figs. 6.7d and 6.7e). The first, on his left, is identified by David J. Bernstein as "the bearer of the dragon standard, the old bearded man",⁴⁹ while the second, on his right, is fending off two other Norman cavalymen with his axe.

Along with the manuscript illuminations discussed above, the evidence from the Bayeux Tapestry clearly brings out that there was a place for old men within the English army. In fact, their depiction in the tapestry at the vanguard of the shield wall and in the vicinity of the king indicates that these elderly warriors must have been held in high esteem among the English military ranks. As such, the Bayeux Tapestry confirms the special status attributed to elderly warriors through the early burial rite with more weapons and longer spears and knives, albeit that the archaeological evidence predates the tapestry by about four hundred years.

The stuff of legends: Documentary evidence

Relatively few documentary sources survive that reveal something of the precise composition and organisation of an Anglo-Saxon army.⁵⁰ Regulations dealing with age thresholds for joining the army or retiring from it, for example, have not survived from the Anglo-Saxon period. Such selection policies, however, appear to have existed around this time, as is suggested by two Icelandic sagas. The saga about the tenth-century elite warrior band called the Jomsvikings describes how they would not select "a member who was older than fifty or younger than eighteen".⁵¹ Similarly, in the saga of Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway from 995 to 1000, the crew of Olaf's boat is carefully selected, so that "no man was to be on Ormr inn langi older than sixty or younger than twenty, and they were to be chosen mainly for strength and valour".⁵² These selection policies do not necessarily indicate that men aged over fifty or sixty

⁴⁹ Bernstein, *Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 145–6.

⁵⁰ In the early Anglo-Saxon period, an army probably consisted of a relatively small number of retainers, supplemented during expeditions by local forces that were levied for the occasion. With the exception of a brief period under King Alfred and his successors, a standing, royal army never really replaced this system of a royal war band reinforced by *ad hoc* troops. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, these additional forces were levied according to the approximate value of landed estates and the army was organised territorially, containing smaller units led by local leaders. R. Abels, 'Army', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. M. Lapidge *et al.* (Oxford, 1999), 47–8.

⁵¹ *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, trans. N. F. Blake (London, 1962), ch. 16.

⁵² Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Snorri Sturluson: Heimskringla*, trans. A. Finlay and A. Faulkes (London, 2011), ch. 93.

were never part of an early medieval war band. Quite the reverse, the fact that these elite forces limited membership to men in their prime and excluded the elderly suggests that this practice was exceptional, rather than exemplary.

Anglo-Saxon armies certainly contained a mixture of experienced and inexperienced warriors. In a letter to Ecgberht, bishop of York, dated to 734, Bede makes a distinction between junior members of a household and experienced warriors.⁵³ The two groups are called “seniores et juniores” by Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, when he speaks to an assembled army in the *Vita s. Oswaldi* by Byrhtferth of Ramsey.⁵⁴ In descriptions of war bands in Old English poetry, too, the *geogub* ‘young, untried soldiers’ are distinguished from the *dugub* ‘tried warriors’.⁵⁵ The difference between the two groups, however, does not appear to be based on age. Instead, a member of the *geogub* was promoted to the ranks of *dugub* through the donation of land by the king after he had proved himself to his lord’s satisfaction.⁵⁶ The ‘youths’ of the Anglo-Saxon war band, then, were young, untried warriors who lived with their lord, while the *dugub* were experienced warriors, endowed with land of their own but not necessarily aged. Nicholas Hooper estimates that a warrior’s career started in his early teens and that he might be expected to be endowed with land in his mid-twenties.⁵⁷ The distinction between *geogub* and *dugub* in the Anglo-Saxon armies, therefore, cannot straightforwardly be translated as a difference between ‘green’ and ‘grey’.

Ryan Lavelle sketches the prototypical career of an Anglo-Saxon warrior as starting in his teens and, if he survived, lasting for about two decades.⁵⁸ The careers of two elderly warriors recorded in Anglo-Saxon history – Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex (d. 991) and Siward, earl of Northumbria (d. 1055) –, however, reveal that an old man could maintain an elevated military status for a longer period of time. Both men were active warriors well into their later years. Moreover, both men became cult figures after their death.

Byrhtnoth led the Anglo-Saxon forces in the battle of Maldon against the Vikings in 991. By that time, he had already been ealdorman of Essex for thirty-five years, having been appointed in 956; he is estimated to have been in his sixties at the time of his death.⁵⁹ During his life, Byrhtnoth had been an influential landowner in Essex, possessing more than fifty holdings in various shires, and his death at Maldon was considered important enough to merit mention in all extant versions of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.⁶⁰ A near-contemporary description of the battle of Maldon in

⁵³ The letter is discussed in detail in R. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1988), 28–35.

⁵⁴ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, IV.13.

⁵⁵ See, for example, *Beowulf*, ll. 160, 621 and 1674; Andreas, ed. G. P. Krapp, *The Vercelli Book*, ASPR 2 (London, 1931), ll. 150, 1121.

⁵⁶ Abels, *Lordship*, 32. See also G. Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450–900* (London, 2003), 58.

⁵⁷ N. Hooper, ‘The Anglo-Saxons at War’, in *Weapons and Warfare*, ed. Chadwick Hawkes, 196.

⁵⁸ R. Lavelle, *Alfred’s Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2010), 15.

⁵⁹ Abels, ‘Byrhtnoth (d. 991)’.

⁶⁰ J. M. Batley, ‘The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’, in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 37–50.

Byrhtferth of Ramsey's *Vita s. Oswaldi* explicitly mentions Byrhtnoth's military prowess, despite his old age:

Percutiebat quoque a dextris, non reminiscens cigneam caniciem sui capitis, quoniam elemosine et sacre misse eum confortabant. Protegebat se a sinistris, debilitationem oblitus sui corporis, quem orationes et bone actiones eleuabant.

[He (Byrhtnoth) struck blows from his right side, not paying heed to the swan-white hair of his head, since alms and holy masses gave him consolation. He protected himself on the left-hand side, forgetful of the weakness of his body, for prayers and good deeds uplifted him.]⁶¹

This passage, as has been noted by Michael Lapidge, is romanticised and has clear biblical overtones. Nevertheless, Byrhtferth does confirm Byrhtnoth's old age and personal participation in the battle.⁶²

After his death, Byrhtnoth achieved something of a legendary status. The compiler of the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis* remarked that Byrhtnoth was "an outstanding and famous man whose righteous life and deeds English histories commend with no small praises".⁶³ The *Liber Eliensis* itself also celebrated Byrhtnoth's bravery at Maldon and described the honorary entombment in Ely, years after the battle, of his remains.⁶⁴ Byrhtnoth's deeds also appear to have been celebrated on a tapestry: following his death in 991, Byrhtnoth's wife Ælfflæd reportedly gave the monastery of Ely "a hanging woven upon and embroidered with the deeds of her husband, in memory of his probity".⁶⁵ This Anglo-Saxon precursor to the Bayeux Tapestry, however, has not survived.⁶⁶ Byrhtnoth's deeds at the Battle of Maldon were also commemorated in the Old English poem devoted to the battle, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Another elderly commander, comparable to Byrhtnoth, was Siward, earl of Northumbria, who first appears in a charter by King Cnut in 1033. He held the position of earl, first of southern Northumbria and later of all Northumbria and, possibly, Huntingdon, until his death twenty-two years later. Like Byrhtnoth, Siward actively participated in warfare well into his later years. During a series of battles against Scotland in 1054, Siward was at least old enough to hear of the death of his own son Osbeorn in battle. Henry of Huntingdon's twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum* reports that, upon hearing the news, Siward inquired whether his son had been stabbed in the

⁶¹ Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Oswaldi*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, V.5.

⁶² M. Lapidge, 'The Life of St. Oswald', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 51–8.

⁶³ *Liber Eliensis*, trans. J. Fairweather (Woodbridge, 2005), II.62. This and other twelfth-century accounts of Byrhtnoth's death are reproduced in A. Kennedy, 'Byrhtnoth's Obits and Twelfth-Century Accounts of the Battle of Maldon', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 59–78.

⁶⁴ The Ely monks were able to recognise Byrhtnoth's body by the round lump of wax that had been used to replace the ealdorman's head, after it had been stolen by the Vikings. *Liber Eliensis*, trans. Fairweather, II.62. On Byrhtnoth's tomb, see E. Coatsworth, 'Byrhtnoth's Tomb', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 279–88.

⁶⁵ *Liber Eliensis*, trans. Fairweather, II.62.

⁶⁶ M. Budny, 'The Byrhtnoth Tapestry or Embroidery', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 262–78.

back or in the front. When he was told his son had incurred a fatal breast wound, Siward said: “Gaudio plane, non enim alio me uel filium meum digner funere” [I am completely happy, for I consider no other death worthy for me or my son].⁶⁷ He then led his troops into Scotland himself and defeated the Scottish forces in retaliation, before dying as an old man in 1055. Huntingdon’s chronicle describes how Siward had been struck by dysentery and, feeling death’s approach, exclaimed:

‘Quantus pudor me tot in bellis mori non potuisse, ut uaccarum morti cum dedecore reseruauer! Induite me saltem lorica mea impenetrabili, precingite gladio. Sullimate galea. Scutum in leua. Securim auratam michi ponite in dextra, ut militum fortissimus modo militis moriar.’

[‘How shameful it is that I, who could not die in so many battles, should have been saved for the ignominious death of a cow! At least clothe me in my impenetrable breastplate, gird me with my sword, place my helmet on my head, my shield in my left hand, my gilded battle-axe in my right, that I, the bravest of soldiers, may die like a soldier.’]⁶⁸

C. E. Wright has identified two parallels to this story in Scandinavian literature: both Starkad, in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*, and Egil Ulserk, in the *Heimskringla*, are elderly warriors that express their wish to die in battle rather than anywhere else.⁶⁹ These old men, it appears, did not want to go down without a fight.

Given their analogues in Scandinavian literature, the stories of Siward’s reaction to the death of his son and Siward’s speech on his deathbed, both reported by Henry of Huntingdon close to a century after Siward’s death, may not be historically accurate. Rather, they may have originated in Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian oral traditions surrounding Siward, or, as Wright put it, they are “the *disiect membra* of a *Siwards saga* which must have been still current in Northumbria during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries”.⁷⁰ The parallels with Icelandic saga material, as identified by Wright, may imply that these episodes belong to the same realm of fictionality as Siward’s supposed descent from a polar bear and his slaying of a dragon, as reported by a Latin narrative in a thirteenth-century manuscript from Crowland abbey.⁷¹ Regardless of the questionable historicity of the episodes, Earl Siward, like Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, is a prime example of a vigorous elderly warrior, who reached a legendary status after his death. In this way, both he and Byrhtnoth

⁶⁷ Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. D. E. Greenway (Oxford, 1996), VI.22. E. Parker, ‘Siward the Dragon-Slayer: Mythmaking in Anglo-Scandinavian England’, *Neophilologus* 98 (2014), 484–5, notes that Siward’s enquiry about the location of his son’s wounds has a close parallel in a similar scene in the Icelandic *Egils saga*.

⁶⁸ Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Greenway, VI.24.

⁶⁹ C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh, 1939), 128. In addition, Siward’s request to be armed faintly echoes Saint Paul’s description of the ‘Armour of Faith’ in Eph. 6:14–7, which would certainly have been known to Henry of Huntingdon, who served as an archdeacon. I owe this suggestion to prof.dr.em. A. A. MacDonald (University of Groningen).

⁷⁰ Wright, *Cultivation*, 129. See also E. Mason, *The House of Godwine: The History of a Dynasty* (London, 2004), 88.

⁷¹ Parker, ‘Siward the Dragon-Slayer’, 488.

prove that it was possible for an old man to maintain an active military career well beyond his physical prime.

A possible third elderly warrior to show up in the documentary record is Oslac (fl. 963–975). Little is known about Oslac, apart from the fact that he was elevated to the position of Earl of southern Northumbria in 963 and exiled from England in 975, following the death of King Edgar the Peaceful (c.943–975). *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 975 in manuscripts A, B and C describes his expulsion as follows:

7 þa wearð eac adræfed, deormod hæleð,
Oslac of earde ofer yða gewealc,
ofer ganotes bæð, gamolfeax hæleð,
wis 7 wordsnotor, ofer wætera geðring,
ofer hwæles eðel, hama bereafod.⁷²

[and then Oslac, the courageous warrior, was driven from the land across the rolling of the waves, across the gannet's bath, the grey-haired warrior, wise and eloquent, across the tumult of waters, over the land of the whale, bereft of his home.]

Given the lack of any further information about Oslac, we need not take his poetic description as a “gamolfeax hæleð” [grey-haired warrior] at face value, for the use of “gamolfeax hæleð” might be nothing more than a poetic convention,⁷³ used to alliterate with the equally conventional kenning “ganotes bæð” [gannet's bath] for ‘sea’. On the other hand, the word *gamolfeax* is exclusively used for people in old age and, given the examples of Byrhtnoth and Siward, an aged, grey-haired warrior need not seem unlikely.

To summarise so far, the archaeological, pictorial and documentary evidence provided above demonstrates that old men could still be active in a military capacity. Archaeologists have shown that older Anglo-Saxon individuals were still regularly buried with weapons, a possible indication that an active military career was not a prerogative of younger individuals. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the presence of bearded figures of an advanced age depicted among younger warriors in battle scenes in manuscripts of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, the Old English Hexateuch and the Psalter, and in the Bayeux Tapestry. Finally, Byrhtnoth, Siward and Oslac were living proof that elderly individuals did remain martially active, even at an advanced age. In short, those warriors who survived the first twenty to thirty years of their military careers could certainly continue to serve in the armed forces. Their presence in Old English heroic poetry, to be discussed next, then, was at least partially rooted in reality.

⁷² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 3: MS A*, ed. J. M. Bately (Cambridge, 1986), 77.

⁷³ The phrase “gamolfeax hæleð” occurs nowhere else in the Old English corpus, but is synonymous with the frequently occurring “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior], for which see pp. 182ff below.

***hare hilderincas*: Elderly warriors in Old English heroic poetry**

Whereas the historical presence of elderly warriors in Anglo-Saxon England, as established above, has rarely been commented on, their role in Old English heroic poetry has given rise to a number of passing remarks in secondary literature. Amos, for example, argued that the occurrence of the compound “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior] in various Old English poems suggests that “[i]n the heroic world of Old English poetry grey or white hair was no stigma”.⁷⁴ Similarly, Biggam claimed that there is no suggestion that the old warriors in heroic poetry, such as Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon* and King Constantine in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, were considered redundant in a military context.⁷⁵ By contrast, Semper noted that “grey hair and success in battle are not usually found together” and that old warriors, unlikely to have been the most effective warriors, typically functioned as advisors instead.⁷⁶ All in all, there is no consensus about the status and role of elderly warriors in Old English heroic poetry; hence, a detailed discussion of their representation in this type of poetry is in order here.

Old English heroic poetry “comprises poems that deal with warriors endowed with often superhuman courage whose actions are motivated by a special set of values, the heroic ethos”.⁷⁷ Central to this heroic ethos is the idea that the achievement of a lasting reputation is a warrior’s paramount goal.⁷⁸ “Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan worolde lifes” [each of us must await the end of life on the world], Beowulf tells Hrothgar, “wyrce se þe mote domes ær deape; þæt bið drihtguman unlifgendum æfter selest” [he who can, should endeavor to win glory before death; that will be best for a warrior after his death].⁷⁹ Lasting glory and fame were especially won on the battlefield, usually by risking death in combat.⁸⁰

Another important element of the heroic ethos was reciprocal loyalty. This ideal required the king or lord to bestow gifts upon his warriors, who, in turn, were expected to show unswerving loyalty in battle.⁸¹ The act of lordly generosity is proverbially treated in *Maxims II*: “Cyning sceal on healle beagas dælan” [a king must in his hall distribute rings].⁸² The loyalty of retainers ideally continued after the death of their leader; a famous passage in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* relates how the retainers of King Cynewulf refused to be paid off by the rebel Cyneheard and, instead, vowed to avenge the death of their lord.⁸³ Similarly, Old English heroic poetry, especially

⁷⁴ Amos, 102.

⁷⁵ Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 236.

⁷⁶ Semper, 296–8.

⁷⁷ Bremmer, ‘Old English Heroic Literature’, 76.

⁷⁸ K. O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic Values and Christian Ethics’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2013), 101–3.

⁷⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1386–9.

⁸⁰ Bremmer, ‘Old English Heroic Literature’, 76.

⁸¹ J. Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers and Their Relationship in Beowulf* (Amsterdam, 1999), 149–88.

⁸² *Maxims II*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 28–9.

⁸³ For an analysis of this event, see R. H. Bremmer Jr, ‘The Germanic Context of Cynewulf and Cyneheard Revisited’, *Neophilologus* 81 (1997), 445–65.

Beowulf and *The Battle of Maldon*, abounds in acts of vengeance to repay the death of a lord.⁸⁴

The heroic tradition in Old English poetry was part of the Germanic ‘cultural baggage’ of the Anglo-Saxons.⁸⁵ Heroic literature in other (Old) Germanic languages, such as Old Norse, Old Saxon and Old High German, features similar themes and values.⁸⁶ Furthermore, several Old English heroic poems, such as *Waldere*, *Widsith*, *The Fight at Finnsburh* and *Beowulf*, refer to heroes that lived on the Germanic continent, rather than in Anglo-Saxon England; their stories, moreover, also feature in the literary traditions of other Germanic tribes.⁸⁷ As a consequence, the heroes of Old English heroic poetry are not unique to the Anglo-Saxons, but are part of a broader, pan-Germanic tradition.

These heroic narratives probably had a didactic function. Their main purpose, as described by Edward B. Irving Jr, was “to provide models of behavior for semi-aristocratic warrior classes” that listened to these poems.⁸⁸ Indeed, Hilda Ellis Davidson has argued that heroic literature was part of the instruction of young warriors and had a practical function in their training.⁸⁹ However, young warriors were not the only ones catered to by these poems: the Germanic heroic tradition also has a variety of characters to whom elderly men might have related. Aged men taking up arms include, to name a few, Árne Audunarson (*Sturlunga saga*), Egil Ulserk (*Heimskringla*), Hagen (*Nibelungenlied*), Hathagat (Widukind’s *Res gestae Saxonicae*), Heime (*Thidrekssaga*), Hildebrand (*Hildebrandlied*, *Thidrekssaga*), Hjálrm Gunnár (*Völsunga saga*), Innstein (*Hálfs saga*), Sigmund (*Völsunga saga*), Starkad (Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*), Volsung (*Völsunga saga*) and Wate (*Kudrun*).⁹⁰ These old warriors function as role models for aged men and provide insight into how they were expected to act on the battlefield.

The remainder of this chapter focusses primarily on the old warriors found in Old English poetry that might be added to the impressive list of grey-haired heroes from Germanic legend. These elderly warriors, found in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, not only reaffirm the conclusion that the military career of an Anglo-Saxon could be prolonged until a very ripe age, they also show what roles, ideally, old men were expected to fulfil on the battlefield.

⁸⁴ O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Heroic Values’, 109–11.

⁸⁵ R. H. Bremmer Jr, ‘Across Borders: Anglo-Saxon England and the Germanic World’, in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. C. A. Lees (Cambridge, 2013), 206.

⁸⁶ C. Țăranu, ‘The Elusive Nature of Germanic Heroic Poetry: A Rhizomatic Model’, *Neighbours and Networks* 1 (2013), 44–66.

⁸⁷ Bremmer, ‘Across Borders’, 203–7.

⁸⁸ E. B. Irving Jr, ‘Heroic Role-Models: Beowulf and Others’, in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr*, ed. H. Damico and J. Leyerle (Kalamazoo, 1993), 347.

⁸⁹ Ellis Davidson, ‘Training of Warriors’, 22.

⁹⁰ List based on H. Naumann, *Germanisches Gefolgschaftswesen* (Leipzig, 1939), 54–75, W. Dinkelacker, ‘Der alte Held. Belege aus mittelalterlicher Heldendichtung und ihr kulturhistorischer Quellenwert’, in *Alterskulturen des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. E. Vavra (Vienna, 2008), 183–202, and my own observations. The elderly warrior appears to have been a common Germanic literary *topos* and invites further study, as most of these warriors show striking similarities, e.g., both Starkad and Egil Ulserk, for example, explicitly express their wish to die in battle rather than of old age, just like Siward of Northumbria.

The old advisor

As noted in previous chapters, old age was associated with wisdom and elderly people were expected to pass on their experience. In this respect, the elderly warriors of Germanic legend and Old English heroic poetry were little different. They functioned first of all as advisors, military experts who shared their experience with younger warriors.⁹¹ Their advice often took the form of a whetting speech, spurring the young into taking action. A typical, but late example of such a whetting speech delivered by an old man are the inspiring words of the aged Frisian warrior Popta which survive in the fifteenth-century Old West Frisian *Gesta Fresonum*.⁹²

‘O myn liauwe broren, alle ws hoep ende traest wolla wy sette aen Goede. Ende stridet Godes stryd mit froliched ende bescermet wse land! Wynna wy’t iefte verlese wy’t iefte wirda wy foerslayn, altida foercrya wy bata ende wyningha, hwant dat ewighe lyand wert ws sonder twiuel iouwen!’⁹³

[‘O my dear brothers, let us place all our hope and trust in God. And fight God’s fight with happiness and protect our land! Whether we win or lose or are defeated, we will always obtain profit and gain, because the eternal land will be given to us without any doubt!’]

Popta uttered these daring words when a group of two hundred crusading Frisians were pitched against an overwhelming force of at least thirty thousand Saracens, near Lisbon. Miraculously, the Frisians came out victorious, aided by St. Maurice and a group of knights who descended from Heaven and defeated the heathen forces. The audacious Popta survived the battle, only to be shot by an arrow when he unsuspectingly took off his armour to quench his thirst. Despite his rather unfortunate death, Popta was remembered for his inspiring speech and declared a martyr of the Christian faith. This late, Christianised legend of an aged Frisian warrior saint may be a remnant of the Germanic heroic tradition that features several comparable aged motivational speakers on the brink of battle.

An earlier prototypical example from the Germanic heroic tradition is Starkad in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*. In a segment that has been identified as the *Lay of Ingeld*, a tenth-century Danish poem that survives only in Saxo’s twelfth-century Latin rendering, the elderly Starkad incites the young Heathobard king Ingeld to avenge the Danish murder of his father Froda.⁹⁴ Starkad, an old veteran and eye-witness to Froda’s murder, is disgusted by the presence at Ingeld’s court of Froda’s

⁹¹ Dinkelacker, ‘Der alte Held’, 189, 192, identifies this role for elderly warriors in both Hildebrand (in the Old High German *Hildebrandlied*) and Wate (in the Middle High German *Kudrun*).

⁹² Popta’s legend is much older than the extant text and was known in the thirteenth century, see R. H. Bremmer Jr, *An Introduction to Old Frisian* (Amsterdam, 2011), 181–3. The legend of Popta, though not his speech, may have been inspired partially by traditions surrounding Henry of Bonn, who participated in the Crusade of 1147, see Y. Poortinga, *De Palmridder fan Lissabon* (Ljouwert, 1965).

⁹³ *Codex Aysma, die altfriesischen Texte*, ed. W. J. Buma, P. Gerbenzon and M. Tragter-Schubert (Assen, 1993), 524.

⁹⁴ For this lay and Saxo’s reworking of his vernacular source, see K. Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet: Studies in the Verse Passages of the Gesta Danorum* (Rome, 1987), 120–51.

murderers as well as by the young king's lethargic and gluttonous behaviour. Outraged, Starkad breaks into song:

'And why, Ingel, submerged in sin,
do you hesitate to revenge your father?
You cannot view your noble parent's death
with equanimity?

Why, you sluggard, do you worship feasting,
softer than harlots lean back your belly?
Does vengeance for your slaughtered father
mean so little to you?'⁹⁵

Starkad's song is lengthy and contains various admonitions to avenge Froda's death, as well as criticisms of Ingeld's demeanour and of his foreign wife. Eventually, Starkad's words do not fall on deaf ears: Ingeld's spirit is kindled towards revenge. Saxo comments: "The young man's integrity had been in exile but had certainly not breathed its last; brought to light with the old man's assistance".⁹⁶ In other words, Starkad has reminded the young Ingeld of his obligations and, as such, he exemplifies the advisory and inspirational role that an elderly warrior could fulfil.

The story of Ingeld was well-known in Anglo-Saxon England.⁹⁷ Famously, Alcuin mentioned Ingeld in a letter to the bishop of Leicester, dated to A.D. 797: "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?" [What has Ingeld to do with Christ?], the Anglo-Saxon monk asked, as he complained of the popularity of heroic stories in monasteries, as opposed to the Word of God.⁹⁸ Alcuin's letter certainly suggests that stories about Ingeld were circulating at this time in Anglo-Saxon England. References to Ingeld are also found in *Widsith* and *Beowulf*. *Widsith* is a catalogue poem, probably dating back to the seventh century,⁹⁹ listing various ancient and legendary rulers and tribes of whom the *scop* Widsith had heard or among whom he had lived. The poem also has a reference to Ingeld's attack on the Danes:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,
siþþan hy forwræcon wicinga cynn

⁹⁵ Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes*, ed. H. Ellis Davidson, trans. P. Fisher (Cambridge, 1979), 188.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹⁷ For all references to Ingeld in Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic sources and a reconstruction of the tale of Ingeld, see K. Malone, 'The Tale of Ingeld', in *Studies in Heroic Legend and in Current Speech by Kemp Malone*, ed. S. Einarsson and N. E. Eliason (Copenhagen, 1959), 1–62.

⁹⁸ For an exhaustive study of the context of this phrase, see M. Garrison, "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?", in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe and A. Orchard (Toronto, 2005), I, 237–59.

⁹⁹ L. Neidorf, 'The Dating of Widsið and the Study of Germanic Antiquity', *Neophilologus* 97 (2013), 165–183; cf. E. Weiskott, 'The Meter of *Widsith* and the Distant Past', *Neophilologus* 99 (2015), 143–50, who argues against this early date, but his criticism of Neidorf's original arguments are convincingly countered in L. Neidorf, 'On the Epistemology of Old English Scholarship', *Neophilologus* 99 (2015), 631–47.

ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna þrym.¹⁰⁰

[Hrothwulf and Hrothgar, nephew and uncle, held peace together for very long, after they drove off the kin of the men of the Wic (the Heathobards) and caused Ingeld's front line of battle to retreat, they killed the force of the Heathobards at Heorot.]

Widsith does not mention that Ingeld's attack against Hrothgar and Hrothwulf was prompted by the rebuke of the elderly warrior Starkad, as described by Saxo Grammaticus. By contrast, the *Beowulf* poet does relate the renewed clash between Heathobards and Danes to the whetting speech of an "eald æscwiga" [old spear-warrior] (l. 2042a).¹⁰¹ Thus, the Anglo-Saxons would not only have been familiar with the name of Ingeld, but probably also knew the background of Ingeld's fight with the Danes and the instigating role played by the aged warrior Starkad.

The matter of Ingeld features in *Beowulf*'s report to his lord Hygelac, king of the Geats (*Beowulf*, ll. 2014–66). Here, *Beowulf* describes the future marriage between the Danish princess Freawaru and the Heathobard prince Ingeld, as part of the settlement of a feud between the two groups. *Beowulf* predicts that this attempt at 'peaceweaving' is doomed to fail, remarking: "Oft seldan hwær / æfter leodhryre lytle hwile / bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge" [Very seldom anywhere, after the fall of a prince, does the deadly spear rest for a little while, even if the bride is good] (ll. 2029b–31).¹⁰² *Beowulf* supposes that an old warrior will convince a younger comrade to resume the feud, pointing out that the Danes are carrying heirlooms that formerly belonged to the Heathobards:

Ponne cwið æt beore se ðe beah gesyhð,
eald æscwiga, se ðe eall ge(man),
garcwealm gumena – him bið grim (se)fa –,
onginneð geomormod geong(um) cempan
þurh hreðra gehygd higes cunnian,
wigbealu weccan. (ll. 2041–6a)

[Then he, who sees the ring, the old spear-warrior, who remembers everything, the spear-death of warriors, speaks at his beer – he has an angry spirit –, he begins, sad-minded, to tempt the spirit of the young warrior through thought of glories,¹⁰³ to stir up war.]

¹⁰⁰ *Widsith*, ed. K. Malone (Copenhagen, 1962), ll. 45–9.

¹⁰¹ For the identification of Starkad with the old spear-warrior, see Malone, 'Tale of Ingeld', 10.

¹⁰² For the discussion of 'peaceweavers' in *Beowulf*, see G. R. Overing, 'The Women of *Beowulf*: A Context for Interpretation', in *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. P. S. Baker (New York, 2000), 219–60; A. Hall, 'Hygelac's Only Daughter: A Present, a Potentate and a Peaceweaver in *Beowulf*', *Studia Neophilologica* 78 (2006), 81–7.

¹⁰³ I interpret "hreðra" as the gen. pl. of *hrēð* 'glory, triumph', rather than the gen. pl. of *hreðer* 'breast, heart'; as the latter interpretation would render the phrase redundant. Cf. *Beowulf*, 232, 399.

In this way, the old Heathobard warrior, like Saxo's Starkad, reminds his younger companion of the obligation to avenge his fallen lord.¹⁰⁴

Two further examples of "the old and barbaric [who] whets the young and feckless to his venerable duty" are found in *The Battle of Maldon*.¹⁰⁵ *The Battle of Maldon* is a fragmentary poem of 325 lines, commemorating a battle between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons that took place in the year 991.¹⁰⁶ The poem features two aged warriors, Byrhtnoth and Byrhtwold, who both encourage the younger troops and embolden them to fight bravely. Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex, is the leader of the English war band and also occurs in other, documentary sources. The *Maldon* poet calls attention to Byrhtnoth's old age by calling him "frod" [old and wise] (l. 140a) and "har hilderinc" [a grey-haired warrior] (l. 169a). Despite the fact that the English lose the battle as a result of a possible strategic error by Byrhtnoth (see below), the elderly leader is presented in a positive light, never ceasing to inspire his entourage, even after the battle turns sour.¹⁰⁷ Before the fighting starts, Byrhtnoth reminds his younger retainers of the ideal to achieve glory before death: "bæd þæt hyssa gehwylc hogode to wige, / þe on Denon wolde dom gefeohtan" [he asked that each young warrior who wanted to win glory from the Danes would give thought to the battle] (ll. 128–9). Even when Byrhtnoth himself has been brought to his knees by fatal wounds, he continues to encourage his men:

þa gyt þæt word gecwæð
har hilderinc, hyssas bylde,
bæd gangan forð gode geferan.
Ne mihte þa on fotum leng fæste gestandan. (ll. 168b–71)

[Still then he spoke that speech, the grey-haired warrior, encouraged the young warriors, asked his good companions to go forward. Then he was no longer able to stand firmly on his feet.]

The old warrior's words seem to have the desired effect: even though some of his retainers flee after his demise, most decide to stay and die alongside their leader. Some of them express their ideals of loyalty in the form of short speeches, while others let their swords and spears do the talking. Byrhtwold, an "eald geneat" [old companion] (l. 310a), is the last one to be given a speech in the poem as it is extant.

Like his leader Byrhtnoth, Byrhtwold reminds the younger warriors of the loyalty that they owe their stricken lord:

‘Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,

¹⁰⁴ The implications of this passage are discussed in full by J. M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville, 2000), 47–60.

¹⁰⁵ R. Frank, 'The Battle of Maldon and Heroic Literature', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 199.

¹⁰⁶ The poem, which lacks beginning and end, survives only in an eighteenth-century transcript, made from London, Cotton Otho A. xii, which was irreparably damaged in the Ashburnham House fire of 1731. With no extant manuscript, the poem is hard to date, but most scholars agree that the poem must have been made shortly after the battle in 991. See *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 32.

¹⁰⁷ G. Clark, 'The Hero of Maldon: *Vir pius et strenuus*', *Speculum* 54 (1979), 257–82; I. J. Kirby, 'In Defence of Byrhtnoth', *Florilegium* 11 (1992), 53–60.

mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.
 Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,
 god on greote. A mæg gnornian
 se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.’ (ll. 312–9)

[‘Spirit must be the harder, heart the bolder, courage must be the greater, as our strength diminishes. Here lies our leader entirely hewn apart, the good one in the dust. He will surely mourn forever, who now intends to turn from this battle-play.’]

The first two lines of Byrhtwold’s speech encapsulate the heroic ethos in the form of a maxim. As such, the lines can be regarded as a general, traditional expression of what defined heroic behaviour.¹⁰⁸ However, coming from the lips of an old man, these words may bear a particular significance for Byrhtwold’s own situation as well, since as an old man he would no longer have been in prime physical condition. Nevertheless, Byrhtwold reminds himself, his own physical decline need not be a limitation: it can be compensated for by displaying greater courage. In fact, Byrhtwold’s words show some similarity to the speech of the old warrior Starkad’s in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* referred to above. In his rebuke of Ingeld, Starkad too notes how an old man’s courage can compensate for the whitening of his hair, a reference to his own physical decline:

‘Let weakling youth yield to old age
 and reverence an elder’s numerous years;
 let none reproach his long span of seasons
 when the man is courageous.

Although an ancient’s hairs grow white,
 his valour persists unaltered, nor
 can sliding Time calumniate his virile heart.’¹⁰⁹

The courage shown by elderly warriors like Starkad, Byrhtnoth and Byrhtwold not only demands respect from their younger companions but also serves as an inspiration; they remain role models, their grey hairs notwithstanding.

An old man as an advocate of proper martial conduct also features in a poem that is generally not included in the genre of heroic poetry: *The Wanderer*. As noted in chapter 4, the speaker in *The Wanderer* is an elderly, exiled warrior, who laments the transitory nature of earthly joys. He also reflects on the death of “modge maguþegnas” [brave young warriors] and then outlines his definition of what makes a man a wise warrior.¹¹⁰ The exile’s words are not an encouragement of heroic deeds and life

¹⁰⁸ P. Cavill, ‘Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*’, *Neophilologus* 82 (1988), 638–41.

¹⁰⁹ Saxo, *History of the Danes*, ed. Ellis Davidson, trans. Fisher, 187.

¹¹⁰ *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, l. 62.

disdaining loyalty, like Byrhtwold's speech in *The Battle of Maldon*, but form a rather more 'Stoic' admonition:¹¹¹

forþon ne mæg weorþan wis wer, ær he age
wintra dæl in woruldrice. Wita sceal geþyldig,
ne sceal no to hatheort ne to hrædwyrde,
ne to wac wiga ne to wanhydig,
ne to forht ne to fægen, ne to feohgifre
ne næfre gielpes to georn, ær he geare cunne.
Beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spricedð,
oþþæt collenferð cunne gearwe
hwider hreþra gehygd hweorfan wille.¹¹²

[Therefore, a man may not become wise, before he has had a share of years in the worldly kingdom. A wise man must be patient: he must be neither too passionate, nor too hasty of speech, nor too weak a warrior, nor too careless, nor too cowardly, nor too joyful, nor too avaricious, nor ever too desirous of boasting, before he fully knows how to. A warrior must wait when he speaks a boast, until, proud, he fully knows where the thought of glories¹¹³ might go.]

The exiled warrior's message is one of reflective courage: a warrior must think before he acts. Like Starkad, Byrhtnoth and Byrhtwold, the elderly speaker in *The Wanderer* functions as an advocate for the proper behaviour on the battlefield, though perhaps with a more pragmatic message.

There is, of course, a long-standing tradition of depicting old warriors as councillors and advisors to younger men, stretching back as far as Homer's Nestor. Nestor's wisdom and experience, acquired in years of warfare, made his advice valuable and he was respected and listened to by his younger companions. At the same time, Nestor's own fighting abilities had clearly diminished and he is not shown as actively involved in the fighting himself. As Hanna M. Roisman describes:

Nestor no longer needs to prove himself and he can accept with grace and honour the younger heroes' superiority in strength, agility, and the other virtues of youth. In fact, he must accept it if he is not to become a laughing stock.¹¹⁴

The elderly warriors of the Germanic heroic tradition often function in a way similar to Nestor – providing advice to younger warriors – yet, as is demonstrated below, their role is rarely that of the passive advisor: they still intend to do battle alongside their

¹¹¹ On the Stoic nature of this speech, see T. D. Hill, 'The Unchanging Hero: A Stoic Maxim in *The Wanderer* and Its Contexts', *SiP* 101 (2004), 233–49; Cf. S. Gwara, 'forht and fægen in *The Wanderer* and Related Literary Contexts of Anglo-Saxon Warrior Wisdom', *Mediaeval Studies* 69 (2007), 255–98.

¹¹² *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 64–72.

¹¹³ See p. 168, n. 103 above.

¹¹⁴ H. M. Roisman, 'Nestor the Good Counsellor', *The Classical Quarterly* ns 51 (2005), 38.

younger colleagues, often fighting on the forefront, rather than comfortably receding into the background.

The active old warrior

‘ih wallota sumaro enti wintro sehstic ur lante,
dar man mih eo scerita in folc sceotantero,
so man mir at burc enigeru banun ni gifasta;
nu scal mih suasat chind suertu hauwan,
breton mit sinu billiu, eddo ih imo ti banin werdan.’

[‘I have been wandering of summers and winters sixty, where I have always been assigned to the company of the spearmen, whereas at no city has death been inflicted on me; now must my own child strike me with the sword, smite me with his blade, or I become his killer.’]¹¹⁵

The eighth-century Old High German *Hildebrandlied* describes how the elderly warrior Hildebrand, after fighting in the vanguard for thirty years, has to fight his own son Hadubrand. The latter does not recognise his father, whom he thinks long dead, and considers his aged opponent an “alter Hun, ummet spaher” [exceedingly crafty, old Hun].¹¹⁶ The fragmentary *Hildebrandlied* ends with the moment that father and son engage in one-on-one combat, striking at each other with their spears. Other versions of the same story in later texts, the *Thidrekssaga* and *Das jüngere Hildebrandlied*, suggest that the old father won the fight, tragically killing his own son.¹¹⁷ Hildebrand, who is estimated to have been fifty-five to sixty years of age at the time of this fight,¹¹⁸ is one of many elderly individuals who still take up arms in the Germanic heroic tradition.¹¹⁹ In Old English heroic literature, too, the elderly warriors do not sit idly by: they fight in the vanguard, leading by example.

In terms of its structure, theme and poetic technique, the *Hildebrandlied* shows similarities with *The Battle of Maldon*.¹²⁰ The elderly warriors at the centre of both poems are also comparable. Like Hildebrand, Byrhtnoth is an experienced warrior who shows no signs of having grown passive in old age. Indeed, Byrhtnoth’s behaviour on the battlefield is nothing short of heroic: having been wounded by a Viking spear, Byrhtnoth furiously removes the weapon from his body, stabs the Viking that wounded him and quickly kills another, roaring with laughter. Soon, he is pierced by another spear, which is pulled out by Wulfmær, “hyse unweaxen, / cniht on gecampe” [a young warrior not fully grown, a youth in battle] (ll. 152b–3a). The poet’s description of this scene confirms that, within an Anglo-Saxon army, the very young did fight side by side with the very old. Thus, the *Maldon* poet paints a picture of

¹¹⁵ *Hildebrandlied*, ed. and trans. H. Broszinski, 3rd ed. (Kassel, 2004), ll. 50–4.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 39.

¹¹⁷ J. Knight Bostock, *A Handbook of Old High German Literature*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. K. C. King and D. R. McLintock (Oxford, 1976), 67–72.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹⁹ For a list of elderly warriors of Germanic legend, see p. 165 above.

¹²⁰ R. W. V. Elliott, ‘Hildebrand and Byrhtnoth: A Study in Heroic Technique’, *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962), 53–70.

Byrhtnoth that is true to Byrhtnoth's own description of himself: "... unforcuð eorl mid his werode / þe wile gealgean eþel þysne" ['a dauntless earl with his band who wants to defend this homeland'] (ll. 51–2). Whereas Semper regards Byrhtnoth's portrayal as "hardly a reference which emphasises men's ability to function as successful warriors during their old age",¹²¹ the examples highlighted above show that the poet at the very least describes an old man more than capable of holding his own on the battlefield.

Condemnations of Byrhtnoth's martial prowess, such as passed by Semper, are based on the aged warrior's decision to fight the Vikings on equal terms. At the start of the poem, the English defence is described as highly effective, since the Vikings could only reach the shore via a narrow and easily defensible causeway. Byrhtnoth's "ofermode" [excessive courage, pride] (l. 89a) inspired the elderly leader of the English to grant the Vikings safe passage and an open fight. Whether this was a tactical blunder made by an "aging English earl",¹²² "too foolish to be heroic",¹²³ or an act of courageous self-sacrifice has long since been a matter of debate.¹²⁴ Whatever the case may be, Byrhtnoth's decision is certainly not condemned by his own followers, most of whom decide to stay and die alongside their leader.¹²⁵ While the outcome of the battle is a definitive defeat, the poet does not describe Byrhtnoth as a failed warrior, succumbing to his own old age. It is quite the opposite: Byrhtnoth leads by example and dies a hero's death.

Like his leader, the old companion Byrhtwold also intends to fight actively alongside his comrades. The last lines of his speech show the old man's willingness to die alongside his lord:

'Ic eom frod feores: Fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men, licgan þence.'

[‘I am old and wise of life: I do not want to go from here, but by his side, by my own lord, by such a beloved man, I intend to lie.’] (ll. 312–9)

Byrhtwold's explicit mention of his old age may be intended to spur on his younger companions, who may not want to be outdone by the older man. At the same time, Byrhtwold here consciously chooses to die on the battlefield rather than shirk away from the fight and die of old age, the only logical alternative. Like Byrhtnoth,

¹²¹ Semper, 296.

¹²² T. D. Hill, 'History and Heroic Ethic in Maldon', *Neophilologus* 54 (1970), 291–6.

¹²³ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Ofermod', in *Tree and Leaf, Including the Poem Mythopoeia. The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (London, 2001), 146.

¹²⁴ E.g., J. Halbrooks, 'Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Philological Quarterly* 82 (2003), 235–55; H. Gneuss, 'The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's ofermod Again', *SiP* 73 (1976), 117–37; S. Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Leiden, 2008), 311–50.

¹²⁵ Clark, 'Hero of Maldon', 278; Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 342–9, argues that Byrhtnoth's decision did not necessarily cause the defeat, but that it was Godric's flight on Byrhtnoth's horse that led to the downfall of the English forces.

Byrhtwold intends to lead by example, not only talking the talk, but also walking the walk.

Beowulf is rife with old warriors, most of whom are described as unrelentingly active, despite their age. Aside from the main protagonists Hrothgar and Beowulf, both called “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior] (ll. 1307a, 3136a), the poem refers to several other old, militant characters, such as Healfdene, father of Hrothgar, “gamol ond guðreow” [old and fierce in battle] (l. 58a) and Ongentheow, king of the Swedes, “eald and egesfull” [old and terrible] (l. 2929a).¹²⁶ In addition, the *Beowulf* poet alludes, either implicitly or explicitly, to four other active, elderly warriors of Germanic legend: Volsung and Sigmund (lines 875, 884, 897), two aged kings who die in battle in the *Völsunga saga*;¹²⁷ Heime (line 1198), an aged warrior who is asked to return from his retirement in the *Thidrekssaga*;¹²⁸ and Saxo’s Starkad (ll. 2020–69; see above). Given these allusions and the fact that two of the main protagonists are old warrior kings, the role of an old man on the battlefield must have been very much on the mind of the *Beowulf* poet. The role of the elderly kings in *Beowulf* is an important topic that requires a full, in-depth analysis, which will be provided in the next chapter. Below, I focus on the poet’s characterisation of Ongentheow as a vigorous old warrior and, briefly, on the difference between Hrothgar and Beowulf in relation to the role the poet propagates for elderly warriors.

The martial deeds of the elderly Swedish king Ongentheow are referred to on more than one occasion in the poem.¹²⁹ The most detailed account of Ongentheow is found in the messenger’s speech following Beowulf’s death (ll. 2922–98). The messenger recounts how the old Ongentheow avenged himself on the Geats by killing their leader Hæthcyn. Ongentheow initially pursued the Geats, but was soon driven back by a superior force led by Hæthcyn’s brother Hygelac. Ongentheow, described as “se goda ... frod fela-geomor” [the good one, old, wise and deeply sorrowful] (ll. 2949a, 2950b), then retreated to Ravenswood where he was hunted down and ultimately slain by the brothers Eofor and Wulf. Ongentheow, however, did not go down without a fight; his last stance is nothing short of heroic and deserves quotation at length:

Þær wearð Ongenðio ecgum sweorda,
 blondenfexa on bid wrecen,
 ... Hyne yrringa
 Wulf Wonreding wæpne geræhte,
 þæt him for swenge swat ædrum sprong
 forð under fexe. Næs he forht swa ðeh,
 gomela Scilfing, ac forgeald hraðe
 wýrsan wrixle wælhlem þone,
 syððan ðeodcýning þyder oncirde.

¹²⁶ S. Gwara, ‘A Metaphor in *Beowulf* 2487a: *guðhelm toglad*’, *SiP* 93 (1996), 333–48.

¹²⁷ These references or allusions will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter

¹²⁸ *Die Thidrekssaga oder Dietrich von Bern und die Niflungen*, ed. H. Ritter-Schaumburg, trans. F. H. von der Hagen (St. Goar, 1989), ch. 393–8.

¹²⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2472–89, 2922–98. In addition, Hygelac is called “bonan Ongenþeoes” [the slayer of Ongentheow] (l. 1968a) and Onela, king of the Swedes, is called “Ongenðioes bearn” [the son of Ongentheow] (l. 2387b).

Ne meahte se snella sunu Wonredes
ealdum ceorle ondslyht giofan,
ac he him on heafde helm ær gescer,
þæt he blode fah bugan sceolde,

...

Let se hearda Higelaces þegn
bradne mece, þa his broðor læg,
ealdsweord eotonisc entiscne helm
breca ofer bordweal; ða gebeah cyning,
folces hyrde, wæs in feorh dropen. (ll. 2961–2, 2964b–74, 2977–81)

[There the grey-haired Ongentheow was brought to bay by the edges of swords ... Wulf, son of Wonred, struck him angrily with his weapon, so that because of the blow the blood burst forth from the veins beneath his hair. Nevertheless he was not afraid, the old Scylfing (i.e. Ongentheow), but he, the king of a people, quickly repaid the onslaught with a worse exchange after he had turned to that place. The quick son of Wonred could not give the old man a counter-blow, because he (Ongentheow) had cut through the helmet on his head, so that he (Wulf) had to sink down, covered with blood ... The brave thane of Hygelac (Eofor), when his brother lay dead, made his broad giant sword, the old sword, break the giant helmet over the shield; then the king bowed, the guardian of the people was mortally wounded.]

In this episode, as elsewhere in the poem, Ongentheow comes across as an admirable, courageous old king, who is always depicted in a positive light.¹³⁰ Ongentheow is not shown as being hindered by his old age and still demonstrates fighting prowess, proving no match for the younger warrior Wulf.

As will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, much of the main narrative of *Beowulf* revolves around the juxtaposition of two elderly warrior kings, Hrothgar and Beowulf. While both are called “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior] (ll. 1307a, 3136a), it is clear that only Beowulf fulfils the role of an active elderly warrior, like Hildebrand, Byrhtnoth, Byrhtwold and Ongentheow. Even in old age, Beowulf displays great courage and leads his men into battle against the dragon. Hrothgar, by contrast, is depicted as a retired warrior, “eldo gebunden” [bound by age] (l. 2111b), who is no longer able to protect his people. As I will argue, this juxtaposition of the active Beowulf and the passive Hrothgar leads to two distinct evaluations of both kings. The elderly warrior king Beowulf is praised as “wyruldcyning[a] / manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ærust, / leodum liðost ond lofgeornost” [of all kings of the world, the most generous and the most gentle of men, the most pleasant to his people and the most eager for praise] (ll. 3180b–2). By contrast, the poem’s description of Hrothgar can be read as particularly negative. In this way, the *Beowulf* poet, like the poet of *The Battle of Maldon*, advocates an active role for elderly warriors. Indeed, like Byrhtnoth

¹³⁰ L. M. Carruthers, ‘Kingship and Heroism in Beowulf’, in *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature: A Festschrift Presented to André Crépin on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. L. M. Carruthers (Cambridge, 1994), 26.

in *The Battle of Maldon*, both Ongentheow and Beowulf are shown as unrelentingly energetic in their later years.¹³¹

A final example of a vigorous, old warrior who leads his troops into battle is found in the Old English poetic adaptation of *Genesis*, in a passage that describes Abraham's freeing of Lot.¹³² As Barbara C. Raw has noted, the description of the battle of the Five Kings and Abraham's mission to save Lot shares several characteristics with Old English heroic poetry:

Both the vocabulary and the sentiments are those of poems like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. The king of Elam, like Scyld, exacts tribute from the people of Sodom and Gomorrah; the warriors are equipped with the yellow shields, javelins, and ring-patterned swords of Anglo-Saxon heroes; birds of prey tear the corpses; Abraham's friends, like Byrhtnoth's *comitatus*, promise to avenge his injury or fall among the slain, and Abraham himself, like Byrhtnoth, gives war as a pledge instead of gold.¹³³

Andy Orchard similarly describes these passages in *Genesis* as "a heroic set piece", illustrative of the way a "poet steeped in heroic tradition can interpret and elaborate a promising piece of scripture".¹³⁴ Abraham, aged over 75 according to the biblical account and described in the poem as "dæg-rime frod" [old and wise in the number of days],¹³⁵ is shown to fulfill the two roles of elderly warriors: speaking strategic and encouraging words as well as jumping into the fray himself:

Pa he his frumgaran,
wishydig wer, wordum sægde,
Pares afera, – him wæs þearf micel –
þæt hie on twa healfe
grimme guðgemot gystum eowdon,
heardne handplegan. cwæð þæt him se halga,
ece drihten, [ðe] eað mihte
æt þam spereniðe spede lænan.
... abraham sealde
wig to wedde nalles wunden gold
for his suhtrigan, sloh and fylde
feond on fitte.
... gewat him abraham ða

¹³¹ Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 324, rightly identifies Byrhtnoth as Beowulf's *Doppelgänger*; similarly, Ongentheow has been termed Beowulf's "double" by L. Georgianna, 'King Hrethel's Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*', *Speculum* 62 (1987), 845.

¹³² *Genesis*, a close paraphrase of Gen. 1–22, with additional material on the creation and the fall of the angels, is one of the four poems in the Junius Manuscript (see p. 155, n. 36 above).

¹³³ B. C. Raw, *The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* (London, 1978), 82.

¹³⁴ A. Orchard, 'Conspicuous Heroism: Abraham, Prudentius, and the Old English Verse *Genesis*', in *Heroes and Heroines*, ed. Carruthers, 57; Orchard suggests the *Genesis* poem may have been influenced by Prudentius's *Psychomachia*.

¹³⁵ *Genesis A*, ed. A.N. Doane, *Genesis A: A New Edition, Revised* (Tempe, 2013), l. 2174b.

on þa wigrode wiðertrod seon
laðra monna.¹³⁶

[Then he, the wise-minded man, Terah's descendant, spoke with words to his princes – his need was great – that they would show the grim battle, the difficult encounter, to their enemies on two fronts; he said that the holy one, the eternal Lord, could the better grant success to them in the spear-hate. ... Abraham gave war as a ransom, not at all wound gold, for his nephew, he slew and killed the enemy in the struggle. ... Then Abraham set out on the war-road to see the retreat of the hated men.]

The Abraham in *Genesis* is a “fyrd-rince fruman” [the leader of warriors], “elne gewurðod, dome and sigore” [made worthy by courage, honour and victory]:¹³⁷ more like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth and less like the Abraham of the biblical account. In other words, Abraham is presented as an energetic, elderly warrior from the Germanic heroic tradition with which the *Genesis* poet and his Anglo-Saxon audience would have been familiar.

The retired warrior

As established above, elderly warriors in the Germanic heroic tradition were ideally expected to continue participating actively in warfare, despite their physical decline. Those that failed to live up to this ideal became the object of scorn and mockery. Carol J. Clover, for instance, has observed how Egil Skallagrímsson, having grown old and no longer able to fight, is mocked and teased by women as he crawls over the floor.¹³⁸ Clover argues that, in Scandinavian sagas, old warriors, once they had lost their strength, moved to the category of ‘powerless’ people. As a result, their condition became linked to femaleness: retired warriors are described as being in the company of women and they also acquire attributes commonly associated with women, such as mourning excessively.¹³⁹

In Old English heroic poetry, those old men that no longer participated actively in battle also appear to have been treated negatively. King Constantine II of Scotland (d. 952) in *The Battle of Brunanburh* provides a telling example.¹⁴⁰ Constantine, a “har hildering” [grey-haired warrior], is shamefully put to flight, while his opponents Athelstan and Edmund achieve “ealdorlangne tir” [lifelong glory].¹⁴¹ Having fled the battlefield, the elderly Constantine is denounced for not having acted like a hero on the battlefield, where his younger retainers, amongst whom his own son, have died:

¹³⁶ *Genesis A*, ed. Doane, ll. 2052b–9, 2069b–72a, 2083b–5a.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 2104a, 2137b–8a.

¹³⁸ C. J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe’, *Speculum* 68 (1993), 382–3.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 382–5

¹⁴⁰ *The Battle of Brunanburh* is one of the poems in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and commemorates a victory in 937 by the West-Saxon King Athelstan and his brother Edmund over the combined forces of Norsemen, Scots and Irish.

¹⁴¹ *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. A. Campbell (London, 1938), ll. 39, 3.

Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com
 on his cypþe norð, Costontinus,
 har hildering; hreman ne þorfte
 mecga gemanan; he wæs his mæga sceard,
 freonda befyllad on folcstede,
 beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlet
 on wælstowe wundun forgrunden,
 giungne æt guðe. Gelpa ne þorfte
 beorn bladenfeax bilgeslehtes,
 eald inwidda.¹⁴²

[Likewise the old and wise man came through flight in his native North, Constantine, the grey-haired warrior; he did not need to boast of the meeting of swords; he was bereft of his kinsmen, of friends felled on the battle-field, killed at strife, and he left his son, young in battle, in the place of slaughter, destroyed by wounds. The grey-haired warrior did not need to boast of the sword-clash, the old wicked one.]

The poet's application of the term "inwidda" [wicked one, deceitful one] to Constantine, in particular, has strong negative overtones. The term is also used for the evil ruler Holofernes in *Judith*, and compounds with the element *inwid-* are used for both Grendel and the dragon in *Beowulf*.¹⁴³ In his description of Constantine, the *Brunanburh* poet foregrounds Constantine's age by employing four different words for 'old': "frod", "har", "bladenfeax" and "eald". Constantine's age is further emphasised by contrasting it with the youth of his son, "giunge at guðe" [young in battle]. Sparse though this description is, the juxtaposition between the young warrior who fell on the battlefield and the elderly warrior who fled the scene adds insult to injury. Constantine is not only unheroic because he took flight, but he has also failed in the responsibilities that his age required.

As we shall see in the next chapter, Hrothgar's lack of fighting spirit in the poem *Beowulf* also leads to a rather negative evaluation of Hrothgar as an old warrior king who can no longer fulfil his responsibilities as a warlord. While Hrothgar is neither mocked nor scorned explicitly, critics have linked Hrothgar's condition, like that of Clover's old men in Scandinavian literature, to femaleness. To give an example, Howell D. Chickering Jr has described Hrothgar's tears at Beowulf's departure (ll. 1870-80) as "weak, unmanly".¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Brian McFadden has pointed out that, after Grendel's defeat, Hrothgar returns to Heorot having spent the night in the company of women, in the "bryd-bure" [bride-chamber; women's chambers?] (l. 921), illustrating that "Hrothgar's defeat in the hall has feminised the lord".¹⁴⁵ The

¹⁴² *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, ll. 37-46.

¹⁴³ D. Schürr, 'Hiltibrants Gottvertrauen', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 68 (2011), 17-9.

¹⁴⁴ *Beowulf*, ed. Chickering, 348.

¹⁴⁵ B. McFadden, 'Sleeping after the Feast: Deathbeds, Marriage Beds, and the Power Structure of Heorot', *Neophilologus* 84 (2000), 633.

feminine side of Hrothgar may not be unequivocally accepted,¹⁴⁶ but Hrothgar at least appears to constitute an interesting English parallel to what Clover has described for the Scandinavian sagas: an audience familiar with the tradition of linking defunct warriors to women may immediately have grasped what the poet tried to imply.

Thus, whereas some aged warriors, such as Byrhtnoth, Byrhtwold and Beowulf, found ways to make themselves useful on the battlefield, others were no longer able or willing to fulfil their heroic obligations. Constantine and Hrothgar were not excused by the Old English poets on account of their age, but rather appear to have been stigmatised.

Exclusion of elderly warriors from the battlefield

While most Old English heroic poems discussed so far advocate both an advisory and an active role for elderly warriors, the Old English *Exodus* uniquely features an explicit admonition against enlisting old men.¹⁴⁷ One of the poem's defining characteristics is the manner in which the account of the Israelites' flight from Egypt has been adapted to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of heroic poetry: the Israelites are designated as a "wiglic werod" [a warlike host], led by Moses, the "herges wisa" [leader of the army].¹⁴⁸ The poem's description of the Israelite army is of particular interest, as it makes clear that the Israelites excluded from their ranks men who were unable to fight, either because of youth, injury or old age:

þæt wæs wiglic werod. Wace ne gretton
in þæt rincgetæl ræswan herges,
þa þe for geoguðe gyt ne mihton
under bordhreoðan breostnet wera
wið flane feond folmum werigean,
ne him bealubenne gebiden hæfdon
ofer linde lærig, licwunde spor,
gylpplegan gares. Gamele ne moston,
hare heaðorincas, hilde onþeon,
gif him modheapum mægen swiðrade.¹⁴⁹

[that was a warlike host. The leaders of the army did not welcome the weak into that company of warriors, those who because of youth could not yet defend the coat of mail of men against a hostile enemy with hands under a shield, nor those who had experienced a serious wound over the rim of a shield, the mark of a wound, valorous combat of the spear. Nor were the aged, grey-haired warriors allowed to be successful in battle, if strength had diminished for them among the bold troops.]

¹⁴⁶ E.g., B. C. L. Rothauser, 'Winter in Heorot: Looking at Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of Age and Kingship through the Character of Hrothgar', in *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, ed. Classen, 103–120.

¹⁴⁷ *Exodus*, one of the four poems of the Junius Manuscript (see p. 155, n. 36 above), is a poetic adaptation of the Old Testament Exodus, though mainly focusing on chapters 12–15.

¹⁴⁸ *Exodus*, ed. P. J. Lucas (London, 1977), ll. 233, 13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 233–42.

The source of this passage remains uncertain. John Hermann has noted that “no source for this selection episode can be found in the biblical book of Exodus”.¹⁵⁰ Several verses in Numbers 1 refer to able-bodied warriors among the tribes of Israel and these verses are frequently cited as analogous passages.¹⁵¹ The verses in Numbers, however, only mention that people over the age of twenty-four are fit for war and do not speak of people being too old for military enlistment. Paul G. Remley has suggested that the episode in *Exodus* ultimately goes back to the Vulgate text of Exod. 12:37: “Profectique sunt filii Israhel ... sescenta ferme milia peditum uirorum absque paruulis” [And the children of Israel set forward ... being about six hundred thousand men on foot, beside children]. Remley argues that the Anglo-Saxon poet has expanded the phrase “absque paruulis” to mean ‘not counting the young, small, weak, deficient and infirm’, making use of the semantic range of Latin *paruus*, of which *paruulus* is a diminutive.¹⁵²

A close and hitherto overlooked parallel to the passage in *Exodus* are the selection policies of the Jomsvikings and Olaf Tryggvason in the Icelandic sagas (see p. 159 above). These regulations likewise stipulated that warriors should not be enlisted if they were too young or too old. Importantly, these Viking war bands are explicitly presented as elite forces and their selection policies are therefore not a reflection of general practice, but, rather, what gave them the edge over ‘normal’ war bands that, we must assume, did include young and old warriors. The mention of the strict selection policy of the Israelite host, then, may have been an attempt by the poet to present the Israelites as an elite force, similar to the Jomsvikings of legend.

While the Israelite host was particular in choosing their warriors, the Egyptian army was not. The Pharaoh’s forces consisted of two thousand of the Pharaoh’s own kinsmen, who, in turn, “ut alædde wæpnedcynnes wigan æghwīlcne þara þe he on ðam fyrste findan mihte” [led out each male warrior that he could find in that period of time].¹⁵³ In other words, a chaotic mustering as opposed to the clear and balanced selection procedure of the Israelites.¹⁵⁴ In this Egyptian “chaotic herd”, Nancy Speirs also identifies old warriors: “hare heorowulfas hilde gretton” [grey sword-wolves greeted the battle].¹⁵⁵ In her interpretation, the exclusion of elderly men that lacked strength from the Israelites is seen as positive, while the Egyptian “hare heorowulfas” carry a negative association: they are a sign of the Pharaoh’s army’s inferiority. Biggam, commenting on the same passage, however, argues that the “hare heorowulfas” here are not ‘old’, but that the word *har* ‘grey’ refers to the colour of the mailcoats worn by the warriors or suit the metaphor of the sword-wolves, since wolves are typically described as *har* in Old English poetry.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Cited in P. G. Remley, *Old English Biblical Verse: Studies in Genesis, Exodus and Daniel* (Cambridge, 1996), 183

¹⁵¹ *Exodus*, ed. E. B. Irving Jr (New Haven, 1953), 82; *Exodus*, ed. Lucas, 109; Remley, *Biblical Verse*, 183.

¹⁵² Remley, *Biblical Verse*, 183–4.

¹⁵³ *Exodus*, ed. Lucas, ll. 187b–9.

¹⁵⁴ N. Speirs, ‘The Two Armies of the Old English *Exodus*: *twa þusendo*, Line 184b, and *cista*, Lines 229b and 230a’, *NQ* ns 34 (1987), 145–6.

¹⁵⁵ *Exodus*, ed. Lucas, l. 181; Speirs, ‘Two Armies’, 145.

¹⁵⁶ Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 174–5.

Whether we interpret the Egyptian army as containing old men or not, the passage in *Exodus* regarding the Israelite army makes clear that, to this Anglo-Saxon poet at least, old men that had lost their strength were no longer suitable as warriors. However, the other Old English heroic poems discussed above suggest that even those elderly individuals who had grown weaker could still participate actively and at least encourage their younger companions. In that manner, they too were considered valuable additions to a military gathering.

Conclusion

militat omnis amans, et habet sua castra Cupido;
Attice, crede mihi, militat omnis amans.
quae bello est habilis, Veneri quoque conuenit aetas.
turpe senex miles, turpe senilis amor.¹⁵⁷

[Every lover serves as a soldier, and Cupid has his own camp. Believe me, Atticus, every lover serves as a soldier. The age which is apt for war, is also suitable for Love: disgraceful <is> the elderly soldier, disgraceful <is> an elderly lover.]

Love is a battlefield, the Roman poet Ovid writes, and it is no place for an old man. However, with the exception of the passage in *Exodus*, there is no evidence that his sentiment was shared by the Anglo-Saxons. Rather than being regarded as disgraceful, old warriors appear to have enjoyed a special status within the Anglo-Saxon war band. This status is reflected in the archaeological record, which shows that weapons found in the graves of the oldest individuals tended to be longer and more numerous than those found in other adult graves. Elderly warriors also feature in depictions of warfare in manuscripts of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, the *Old English Hexateuch* and various Psalters. In the Bayeux Tapestry, they take up prominent positions, in the vanguard of the shield wall or in the vicinity of the king, highlighting their high-status positions. Finally, the cases of Siward and Byrhtnoth illustrate that real-life elderly warriors even achieved something of a legendary, heroic status after their death.

The question 'of what use is an old man in battle?', posed by Wyatt, is answered by Old English heroic poetry, which features a two-fold role model for warriors in their later years: the old advisor, encouraging the troops, reminding them of their heroic duties, and the active warrior, who despite a decrease of strength, displays greater courage and leads by example. This is the model for an old warrior set by Starkad, Hildebrand, Abraham, Byrhtnoth, Byrhtwold, Ongentheow, Beowulf and, in part, by the elderly speaker in *The Wanderer*.

Emerson, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, considered calling *Maldon's* Dunnere an 'old warrior' libellous and offensive. This interpretation seems far removed from the sentiments of the Anglo-Saxon authors of heroic poetry, who, on the whole, have been shown in this chapter to value those elderly warriors who remained active. Outside heroic poetry, too, as noted in chapter 5, the phrase "emeritus miles" [veteran warrior] is used as a term of praise by Byrhtferth of Ramsey to

¹⁵⁷ Ovid, *Amores*, ed. E. J. Kenney, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1994), I.9, vv. 1–4.

describe the vigour of St. Ecgwine in his later years.¹⁵⁸ What Anglo-Saxon poets thought disgraceful, then, was not an active old warrior. By contrast, they denounced the grey warrior who failed to maintain an active role on the battlefield, such as Constantine in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, and, to be discussed in the next chapter, Hrothgar in *Beowulf*.

To a modern audience, elderly warriors may seem unlikely heroes. However, if the idea is accepted that heroic reputation can only be won under the least favourable odds, perhaps it is old age, and its physical repercussions, that enables rather than hampers the achievement of heroic status. In Anglo-Saxon England, old men could still be warriors and, indeed, even heroes.

Excursus: The “*har hilderinc*” in *The Rewards of Piety*

The phrase *hār hilderinc* ‘grey-haired warrior’ is one of the so-called formulae of Old English poetry, since it occurs in no fewer than four different poems. In *The Battle of Maldon*, it is applied to ealdorman Byrhtnoth; in *Beowulf*, it refers to both Hrothgar and, later, Beowulf himself; in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, it denotes King Constantine of Scotland. Finally, the phrase also occurs in a less canonical poem: *The Rewards of Piety*.¹⁵⁹

In contrast to the other three, *The Rewards of Piety* is not a narrative poem, but a poem of religious instruction, outlining to its audience how they should lead their life, if they want to earn a place in Heaven. One of its striking characteristics is its direct address to the sinner, who is repeatedly referred to with second-person singular pronouns. Near the end of the poem, the poet uses the abbreviation “N” for Latin *nomen* ‘name’ to indicate that this is the point where the reciter of the poem can speak the name of the person addressed:

and þa unþeawas ealle forlætan
 þe þu on þis life ær lufedest and feddest;
 þænne gemiltsað þe, N, *mundum qui regit*.¹⁶⁰

[and abandon all the vices, which you previously practiced and loved in this life; then the King of nations will show mercy on you, N.]

According to Graham D. Caie, the replacement of the sinner’s name with the abbreviation N suggests that the poem may have been intended for the use of a priest

¹⁵⁸ Byrthferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, I.6.

¹⁵⁹ Formerly, this poem was known as two distinct poems – *An Exhortation to Christian Living* and *A Summons to Prayer* – until F. C. Robinson, ‘*The Rewards of Piety: Two Old English Poems in Their Manuscript Context*’, in *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture*, ed. P. J. Gallacher and H. Damico (New York, 1989), 193–200, basing himself on manuscript evidence, suggested that these poems must be two parts of the same poem, which he called *The Rewards of Piety*.

¹⁶⁰ *Rewards of Piety*, ed. and trans. F. C. Robinson, ‘*The Rewards of Piety: “Two” Old English Poems in Their Manuscript Context*’, in *The Editing of Old English*, ed. F. C. Robinson (Oxford, 1994), II, 80–2.

during confession.¹⁶¹ In accordance with Caie, Fred C. Robinson notes that the inclusion of the abbreviation N is a common feature of Anglo-Saxon texts of religious instruction; it suggests that, originally, the poem was once addressed to a particular, named, person and was then adapted to a more general audience.¹⁶²

The person to whom this poem was originally addressed may have been an old warrior. In line 57, the reader or listener is addressed with the term “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior]:

And ondræd þu ðe dihle wisan,
nearwe geþancas, þe on niht becomað,
synlustas foroft swiðe fremman
earfoðlice, þy þu earhlice scealt
gyltas þine swiðe bemurnan,
har hilderinc; hefie þe ðincap
synna þine.¹⁶³

[And be fearful of furtive habits, dangerous thoughts that come in the night (and) very often cause desires to sin exceedingly, grievously, for which you must abjectly (and) exceedingly bewail your sins, *grey-haired warrior*, your sins (will?) seem oppressive to you.] (emphasis mine)

Elliott van Kirk Dobbie considered the poet’s use of “har hilderinc” a mere “archaising conceit on the part of the poet, rather than [...] as a reference to a specific ‘grey-haired warrior’ to whom the poem is addressed”.¹⁶⁴ In an early article, Robinson likewise argued against interpreting “har hilderinc” as referring to a specific, old man:

I suspect *hār hilderinc* had only the most general meaning such as Modern English “old man”, which in familiar address could be said to a twelve-year-old boy as well as to a mature adult.¹⁶⁵

In the light of the discussion of elderly warriors above, Robinson’s argument for the phrase *hār hilderinc* to have been used for young people appears unfounded: the fact that *hār hilderinc* is used specifically for elderly warriors in *The Battle of Maldon*, *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Brunanburh* pleads against the use of the phrase as a familiar address suitable for both twelve-year-old boys and old men. Moreover, Old English *hār*, when applied to humans, is used exclusively for old people.¹⁶⁶ Not quite surprisingly, therefore, Robinson moderated his argument in a later article, noting that the vices described in the poem are, in fact, applicable to an older individual:

¹⁶¹ G. D. Caie, ‘Codicological Clues: Reading Old English Christian Poetry in Its Manuscript Context’, in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. P. Cavill (Cambridge, 2004), 9.

¹⁶² Robinson, ‘Rewards’, in *Editing*, 194, n. 82.

¹⁶³ *Rewards of Piety*, ed. and trans. Robinson, ll. 52–8.

¹⁶⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Dobbie, lxxii.

¹⁶⁵ Robinson, ‘Rewards’, in *Hermeneutics*, 199, n. 4.

¹⁶⁶ Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 219–23.

The poet's implied interlocutor is portrayed as one who has accumulated wealth and property throughout his life (ll. 22–4, 34–7, 58–60, 63), as one who has long practiced vices (l. 79), as one who needs to be warned against drunkenness and fornication (ll. 43, 74), and as one for whom death may be imminent (ll. 2–3, 14–5, 19, 60–4, 72–3). All these are consistent with an older man.¹⁶⁷

To Robinson's list may be added the poet's warning against "ungemet wilnung ... slæpes" [unlimited desire of sleep] (l. 45), since sleepiness was also regarded as a characteristic of the elderly.¹⁶⁸ Thus, the original addressee certainly may have been an old man.

Whether that old man was also a warrior cannot be established on the basis of the present poem. Nothing in *The Rewards of Piety* seems to pertain specifically to the life of a warrior, although the lines describing how the sinner must protect himself from demons could be said to have military overtones:

Nu þu ðe beorgan scealt,
and wið feonda gehwæne fæste healdan
sauwle þine; a hi winnað embe þæt
dæges and nihtes ongear drihtnes lif.
þu miht hy gefleman, gif þu filian wilt
larum minum.¹⁶⁹

[Now you must protect yourself and guard your soul firmly against every demon; they will always strive around that [soul] day and night, contrary to the lord's leave. You can put them [the demons] to flight if you will obey my teachings.]

In its initial form, then, *The Rewards of Piety* was probably written for an older man, whose warrior status is uncertain, but, in light of the above, definitely not implausible.

In any case, the poem is a reminder of the fact that the audience of a didactic poem may well have consisted of elderly people; even in Anglo-Saxon England, one was never too old to learn or change one's ways. This line of thought will be taken up in the next chapter, which will consider *Beowulf* as a didactic text for elderly kings.

¹⁶⁷ Robinson, 'Rewards', in *Editing*, 193–4, n. 57.

¹⁶⁸ E.g., Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, trans. Wallis, ch. 35.

¹⁶⁹ *Rewards of Piety*, ed. and trans. Robinson, ll. 64–9.

*ealde eðelweardas: Beowulf as a mirror of elderly kings*¹

‘Remember too that it is no crime to undermine senility, which sags and tumbles to ruin under its own weight. Your father-in-law should be content to have borne office as long as he has. Only a dotard’s power would come your way, and, if you missed it, would fall to someone else. Every attribute of the elderly is next door to decay.’²

With these words, Princess Ulvild tried to convince her husband Guthorm to rebel against her father, King Hadding. The legendary king of Denmark had grown old and his power had already started to crumble – overthrowing this aged ruler was justifiable, Ulvild held, on account of his years alone. This anecdote, recorded in Saxo Grammaticus’ twelfth-century *Gesta Danorum*, is illustrative of the problems that faced early medieval kings once they had reached old age – problems that the poet of *Beowulf*, as will be shown in this chapter, was well aware of.

Mentioning no fewer than twenty-three different kings, the poet of *Beowulf* certainly shows a keen interest in kingship.³ While some of these rulers appear only as part of a royal genealogy, others, such as Scyld Scefing, Heremod and Hygelac, are further developed and function as *exempla* of good or bad rulership. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Levin L. Schücking’s suggestion that *Beowulf* must be read as a *Fürstenspiegel* ‘a mirror of princes’ has met with widespread agreement.⁴ George N. Garmonsway, for example, concluded:

Taken as a whole, the story with its episodes and digressions does form a kind of eighth-century *Mirror for Magistrates* or *Book named the Governor*, wherein those in authority might have seen pictured their obligations and responsibilities, and from which they could have gleaned political wisdom had they so desired, and learned some useful lessons about current moral sanctions governing behavior in general, and heroic conduct in particular.⁵

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published, in Dutch, as T. Porck, ‘Vergrijzing in een Oudengels heldendicht. De rol van oude koningen in de *Beowulf*’, *Madoc* 26 (2012), 66–76.

² Saxo, *History of the Danes*, ed. Ellis Davidson, trans. Fisher, 34–5.

³ Carruthers, ‘Kingship and Heroism’, 20.

⁴ L.L. Schücking, ‘Das Königsideal im *Beowulf*’, *MHRA Bulletin* 3 (1929), 143–54, translated as ‘The Ideal of Kingship in *Beowulf*’, in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. L. E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, IN, 1963), 35–50. On the reception of Schücking in *Beowulf* scholarship, see E. G. Stanley, *In the Foreground: Beowulf* (Woodbridge, 1994), 32–7.

⁵ G. N. Garmonsway, ‘Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes’, in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr*, ed. J. B. Bessinger Jr and R. P. Creed (New York, 1965), 139.

In other words, the intended audience for *Beowulf* may have been a king or a prince who could draw inspiration from the poem.

Schücking further hypothesised that *Beowulf* was composed for the young son of a ruler; possibly the son of a Danelaw king, for whom the poem was intended as a means to learn the Anglo-Saxon language.⁶ Whereas Schücking's suggestion of *Beowulf* as a Danelaw language acquisition project has mostly been rejected,⁷ his suggestion that the poem's lessons were mainly intended for a young audience has gained wide acceptance.⁸ Marjorie Daunt, for instance, identified the intended audience as "all the *geogop* ['youth'], from a well-educated young prince down to a simple retainer".⁹ Similarly, Alexander M. Bruce argued that the lessons of *Beowulf* were intended for young, fledgling warriors, for whom the young heroes Beowulf and Wiglaf were role models.¹⁰ Indeed, at certain points in the poem, the *Beowulf* poet does address a young person directly:

Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
 fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,
 þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
 wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
 leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
 in mægþa gehwære man geþeon. (ll. 20–5)

[In such a way must a young man with liberality bring about, with splendid costly gifts in his father's lap (during his youth), so that when he comes of age close companions will stand by him, when war comes, people will serve him; in each nation a man must prosper with praiseworthy deeds.]

On occasion, then, the poem does cater for an unexperienced prince, but not all the poem's lessons and role models are appropriate to the tastes of a young person.

In fact, the role of elderly kings is such in the poem, that it is more probable that the poet also wanted to accommodate a more mature audience. For instance, the two main royal protagonists, Hrothgar and Beowulf, are both very old men and could hardly have figured as role models for a young king-to-be. Rather, they, as well as other elderly kings in *Beowulf*, such as Hrethel and Ongentheow, demonstrate how a king could act in his old age. If the poem is a mirror of princes, most of the examples it provides relate to kings who, like Beowulf and Hrothgar, had been on the throne for a long time and, in their old age, were faced by threats to their authority.

⁶ L. L. Schücking, 'Wann entstand der Beowulf? Glossen, Zweifel und Fragen', *BGdSL* 42 (1917), 406–8.

⁷ D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), 25–6, argued strongly against this idea: "I should be sorry to believe that the poem was from the beginning what it has since too often become, a work studied by young people to whom the language is unfamiliar".

⁸ M. Swanton, *Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700–800: Beowulf and the Burden of Kingship* (Göppingen, 1982), 11, for example, similarly envisions a "young prince" who might "learn the attitudes appropriate to his place in heroic society".

⁹ M. Daunt, 'Minor Realism and Contrast in *Beowulf*', *Mélanges de linguistique et de philology. Fernand Mossé in memoriam* (Paris, 1959), 87.

¹⁰ A. M. Bruce, 'An Education in the Mead-Hall', *HA* 5 (2001).

In this chapter, I propose that *Beowulf* should be read within the historical context of the political problems that faced elderly kings in the early Middle Ages.¹¹ Within this context, a close reading of the depiction of elderly kingship in *Beowulf* will show that the poet, by juxtaposing the passive Hrothgar and the active Beowulf, offers two models of conduct for aged kings. This reading makes clear that the poet favours (and celebrates) a king that remains proactive, despite the perils of old age. As such, the poet comments on a contemporary political issue: the problematic position of kings grown old.¹²

Historical context: Elderly rulers in the early Middle Ages

In the early Middle Ages, elderly rulers faced serious political problems.¹³ Paul Dutton has convincingly shown that the central power of the Carolingians started to crumble in the ninth century, during the later years of the reigns of Charlemagne (c.743–814), Louis the Pious (778–840) and Louis the German (806–876), all of whom lived relatively long lives (they died at the ages of 71, 62 and 70, respectively). Dutton argues that the old age of these Carolingian rulers lay at the heart of the problems at the end of their reigns:

If they lived long lives, Carolingian rulers faced particular problems that arose from the very joining of agedness and title, which they could not have easily anticipated when younger. Since Carolingian kingship was largely personal, anything that affected a ruler personally affected his governance of the kingdom, and age and health were chief among these things. Efficient government depended more on the king's willingness, energy, and ability to respond to outbreaks of trouble than it did on any administrative agencies within the kingdom.¹⁴

In a time when kingship depended more on personal, martial prowess than on administrative structures,¹⁵ an old ruler's dwindling health formed a serious obstacle.

Dutton has identified three main political problems of elderly rulers. First of all, a ruler's old age impaired his 'peripatetic function': elderly rulers typically stopped travelling around their kingdoms. Given that touring the realm was a means to

¹¹ Swanton, *Crisis and Development*, 28–9, has questioned the applicability of the poem's heroic attitude to the historical practicalities of early medieval kingship. However, P. Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), 3–67, has shown that there are clear correlations between the actual practice of early Anglo-Saxon kingship and what is presented in the poem.

¹² For a similar approach of linking the poem to contemporary political issues (succession and lordlessness, respectively), see F. M. Biggs, 'The Politics of Succession in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England', *Speculum* 80 (2005), 709–41; E. G. Stanley, 'Beowulf: Lordlessness in Ancient Times Is the Theme, as Much as the Glory of Kings, if Not More', *NQ* ns 52 (2005), 267–81.

¹³ P. E. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York, 2004), 151–68; *idem*, 'Beyond the Topos of Senescence: The Political Problems of Aged Carolingian Rulers', in *Aging and the Aged*, ed. Sheehan, 75–94.

¹⁴ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 161.

¹⁵ For the martial nature of medieval kingship, see e.g. Carruthers, 'Kingship and Heroism', 25–6; I. P. Stephenson, *The Late Anglo-Saxon Army* (Stroud, 2007), 21.

establish and maintain authority, the influence of an old, sedentary king often lessened in outlying areas.¹⁶ Charlemagne, for example, remained in Aachen for most of the last twenty years of his reign and, as a result, local abuses of justice went unchecked.¹⁷ A somewhat gruesome anecdote concerning Frodo III of Denmark in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* demonstrates the importance for kings to travel around their realm, even in old age. After Frodo III had been killed, his retainers tried to keep the king's death a secret by carrying the embalmed body of the king around in a royal carriage for three years:

After drawing out his entrails, the nobles kept him embalmed for three years, since they feared the provinces would revolt if their sovereign's end became known. ... For this reason they would carry his lifeless body about, not, so it seemed, in a hearse, but a royal carriage, pretending that this was a service due from his soldiers to a feeble old monarch not in full possession of his strength.¹⁸

The anecdote illustrates that kings, even if they had grown feeble, were nevertheless expected to visit outlying provinces to prevent outright rebellion. In other words, kings who were unable or unwilling to go to the corners of their dominion ran the risk of losing their position of power.

A second problem ascribed to elderly rulers by Dutton is their reluctance or inability to anticipate and respond actively to foreign invasions or internal revolts. Old rulers grew passive and rarely initiated military action. They only responded to incursions, rather than anticipating them; as such, "they played a dangerous game of catch-up they could never quite win".¹⁹ Their hesitancy to go into battle may, in part, have been caused by their apprehension about personally leading their armies. "Ðonne se heretoga wacað, þonne bið eall se here swiðe gehindred" [when the army leader grows weak, the whole army is greatly hindered], an Old English proverb holds, suggesting that, in general, the physical repercussions of old age made an elderly king a liability on the battlefield.²⁰

Thirdly, elderly kings often found it difficult to secure the succession of their sons, while, at the same time, keeping those same sons in check. Dutton notes that the sons of aged Carolingian rulers often rebelled against their fathers:

¹⁶ Dutton, 'Beyond the Topos', 86.

¹⁷ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 162. Another telling illustration of the dwindling might of a sedentary old king is found in the thirteenth-century *Egils Saga*, which reports that when King Harald Fairhair (c.850–c.932) had grown old, tribute proved more difficult to collect than when he was younger. *Egil's Saga*, ed. S. Óskarsdóttir, trans. B. Scudder (London, 2004), ch. 71.

¹⁸ Saxo, *History of the Danes*, ed. Ellis Davidson, trans. Fisher, 157–8. Another story by Saxo shows that a carriage was considered a suitable means of transportation for an old man: a peasant named Hather mockingly tells the elderly warrior Starkad to sell his sword for a carriage, suggesting that infirm elders had better "be drawn by mules; turning wheels are more use to those who stagger on hopeless feet". *Ibid.*, 247–9.

¹⁹ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 162.

²⁰ This proverb is found in annal 1003 in MS E of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. For this proverb and its Anglo-Saxon analogues, see T. D. Hill, "'When the Leader Is Brave...': An Old English Proverb and Its Vernacular Context", *Anglia* 119 (2001), 232–6.

Charlemagne was fifty when his son Pepin the Hunchback led a revolt against him in 792, Louis the Pious was fifty-two when his elder sons first rebelled in 830, Louis the German suffered the first of a series of rebellious machinations by his sons in 860 when he was fifty-four, and Charles the Bald's son Carloman revolted in 871 when his father was forty-eight.²¹

It is not hard to imagine that ambitious sons, who were often given some measure of control over specific regions of a kingdom, grew impatient and wanted to overthrow their fathers. Whereas having potentially rebellious sons thus was a problem for an old king, Dutton notes that the converse situation was equally undesirable: an aged king without offspring was subjected to the ambitions of suitors of another sort.²²

The political problems identified for elderly Carolingian rulers would have equally applied to elderly Anglo-Saxon kings. Establishing whether an Anglo-Saxon king reached old age, however, is difficult, since their dates of birth were often not recorded. Nevertheless, judging by the length of some of their reigns, a good number of Anglo-Saxon kings are likely to have grown old. Table 7.1 lists those Anglo-Saxon kings who remained in office for at least twenty-five years or of whom it can be established that they were aged over fifty upon their death:

	Year of birth	Start of reign	End of reign	Year of death	Age at death	Length of reign
Oswiu of Northumbria	611/612	642	670	670	58/59	28
Aldwulf of East Anglia	-	663/664	713	713	-	49/50
Æthelred of Mercia	-	674/675	704	?716	-	29/30
Ine of Wessex	-	688	726	?726	-	38
Wihtred of Kent	-	690	725	725	-	35
Ælfwald of East Anglia	-	713	749	749	-	36
Æthelbald of Mercia	-	716	757	757	-	41
Offa of Mercia	-	757	796	796	-	39
Cynewulf of Wessex	-	757	786	786	-	29
Coenwulf of Mercia	-	796	821	821	-	25
Ecgerht of Wessex	-	802	839	839	-	37
Alfred the Great	848/849	871	899	899	50/51	28
Edward the Elder	870s?	899	924	924	?50	25
Æthelred the Unready	966/968	978 +1014	1013 +1016	1016	48/50	35+2
Edward the Confessor	c.1004	1042	1066	1066	c.62	24

Table 7.1 Overview of long-reigning Anglo-Saxon kings, c.650–1066²³

Of course, a long time on the throne does not necessarily imply that a king reached old age: Æthelred the Unready (966/968–1016), for instance, was consecrated at a very early age; despite a thirty-seven-year reign, he did not live beyond the age of fifty. Conversely, a king could be consecrated at a later age and, hence, may have been old

²¹ Dutton, 'Topos of Senescence', 87–8.

²² Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 90.

²³ Overview based on *ODNB* and S. Keynes, 'Rulers of the English, c. 450–1066', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, ed. Lapidge *et al.* 500–20.

despite a relatively shorter reign, as may be the case for Æthelwulf of Wessex (d. 858). Æthelwulf became king of the West Saxons after his father Ecgberht (d. 839) had been on the throne for thirty seven years; he was reportedly past the age of fifty when he married the Frankish teenage princess Judith in 836, two years before his death.²⁴ Nevertheless, Æthelwulf's reign lasted only nineteen years. Table 7.1, therefore, may not be an exhaustive list of elderly rulers in Anglo-Saxon England.

Like their Carolingian counterparts, Anglo-Saxon rulers often found kingship difficult to combine with their old age. Some decided to retire, such as Æthelred of Mercia (d. ?716), who abdicated after thirty years on the throne and became abbot of Bardney,²⁵ and Ine of Wessex (d. ?726), who "left his kingdom to younger men" after a reign of thirty-seven years and went on a pilgrimage to Rome.²⁶ Others remained in office until their death, but had to deal with rebellious sons. Æthelwulf of Wessex, to give a striking example, was confronted by a plot of one of his sons to eject him from office. When the old king had gone to Rome in 855 and wanted to return to England with his new bride Judith the following year, his eldest son Æthelbald (d. 860) had made plans to overthrow his father's regime. Bishop Asser, the biographer of Æthelwulf's youngest son Alfred, described the event as follows:

When King Æthelwulf was returning from Rome, his son Æthelbald, with all his councillors – or rather co-conspirators – attempted to perpetrate a terrible crime: expelling the king from his own kingdom; but God did not allow it to happen, nor would the nobles of the whole of the Saxon land have any part in it.²⁷

Æthelbald's attempt proved unsuccessful and Æthelwulf appears to have forgiven his son, who became king after his father two years later. Oswiu of Northumbria (611/612–670), similarly, was dragged into a power struggle by his son Alchfrith (d. 664).²⁸ Conversely, Edward the Confessor (c.1004–1066) did not have any sons to succeed him; as a result, Edward spent the last years of his reign searching for a suitable heir and suffered the unwanted attention of several suitors, including Harold and Tostig Godwinson, as well as William of Normandy.²⁹ In many ways, then, the aged Anglo-Saxon rulers suffered from the same problems as their aged Carolingian counterparts.³⁰

²⁴ For this marriage, see M. J. Enright, 'Charles the Bald and Æthelwulf of Wessex: The Alliance of 856 and Strategies of Royal Succession', *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (1979), 291–302.

²⁵ A. Williams, 'Æthelred (d. after 704)', *ODNB*.

²⁶ Bede, *HE*, V.7.

²⁷ Asser, *Vita Ælfredi*, trans. S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), ch. 12.

²⁸ Alchfrith backed the Roman Christianity of Bishop Wilfrid rather than following his father's example in supporting the Irish church; a conflict which was ultimately resolved at the Synod of Whitby in 664. D. J. Craig, 'Oswiu (611/12–670)', *ODNB*.

²⁹ F. Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (London, 1970), 214–39.

³⁰ Of course, there were also exceptions. A case in point is Offa of Mercia (d. 796), who had his son Ecgrith (d. 796) consecrated as a king in 787 and thus paved the way for a smooth transition of royal power after his death. For a discussion of Offa's reign, see p. 213 below.

Whereas most of the long-reigning Anglo-Saxon kings abdicated or died relatively peacefully while in office, at least one Anglo-Saxon king appears to have become the victim of an entourage dissatisfied with its aged ruler. According to Nicholas Brooks, Æthelbald of Mercia (d. 757) was killed by his own bodyguard because he, like the Carolingian rulers described by Dutton, had grown reluctant to initiate military action:

Indeed the insecurity generated within an overlord's retinue, as age made him less willing to lead profitable military expeditions, may help to explain Æthelbald's murder by his own retainers at Seckington (Warwickshire) in 757.³¹

Arguably, the contemporary evidence for Æthelbald's murder is limited and it is possible that another conflict may have motivated the king's bodyguard.³² Nevertheless, the event does suggest that, after forty-two years, Æthelbald's retinue thought it was time for a change: the old king needed to be replaced.

In short, old age was a genuine threat to the authority of an early medieval king, on the European continent as well as in Anglo-Saxon England. Ideally, an aged ruler would remain as active as ever; in practice, however, a king's old age could impact negatively on his willingness and ability to live up to all of his royal responsibilities. As a consequence, an old king ran the risk of becoming a *rex inutilis* 'a useless king'.³³

The problems of aged kings also inspired Anglo-Saxon poets. *The Riming Poem*, for instance, is an Old English elegiac monologue of an old ruler, who looks back at the successes of his youth and contrasts these to his state of misery in old age.³⁴ The first part of the poem describes how the narrator used to be a prosperous ruler, sharing treasures with his followers:

Pegnum geþwære þeoden wæs ic mære;
horsce mec heredon, hilde generedon,
fægre feredon, feondon biweredon.
Swa mec hyhtgiefu heold, hygedrygt befeold,
stapolæhtum steald, stepegongum weold,
Swylce eorþe ol ahte ic – ealdorstol,
galdorwordum gol, gomelsibbe ne ofeoll.³⁵

[Mild to thanes, I was a famous ruler; the bold ones praised me, they defended me in battle, they acted fairly, protected me against enemies. Thus

³¹ N. Brooks, 'The Social and Political Background', in *Cambridge Companion*, ed. Godden and Lapidge, 8.

³² G. Williams, 'Military Obligations and Mercian Supremacy in the Eighth Century', in *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia*, ed. D. Hill and M. Worthington (Oxford, 2005), 107–8.

³³ For this term and its application in the Middle Ages, see E. Peters, *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature, 751–1327* (New Haven, 1970).

³⁴ K. P. Wentersdorf, 'The Old English *Rhyming Poem*: A Ruler's Lament', *SiP* 82 (1985), 265–94.

³⁵ *The Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, ll. 18–24.

the joyful gift held me, the band of household retainers surrounded me, I possessed landed estates, I had control over journeys, whatever the earth brought forth I owned – the ancestral seat, I sang charms, I did not neglect the ancient peace.]

The mood of the poem changes suddenly after line 43 when the narrator reflects on his old age. As an old man, he suffers from enmity, sorrow and the loss of friends, like so many other elderly narrators in Old English wisdom poetry.³⁶ He further laments his fleeting courage, which he directly relates to old age: “bald ald þwiteð” [old age cuts off boldness] (l. 63b).³⁷ In other words, while the ruler was able to control his realm in his youth, he is no longer able to exert his power now he has grown old: “dreamas swa her gedreosað, dryhtscype gehreosað” [In this way joys decline here, lordly power falls].³⁸ Thus, the author of the *Riming Poem* was well aware of the political problems of elderly kings – in this respect, he was no different from the poet responsible for *Beowulf*.³⁹

Old age in *Beowulf*

The theme of old age is central to *Beowulf*, at least in view of the high number of elderly characters in the poem, the implied senectitude of the poem’s monsters and the way the poet invites a comparison between his two aged protagonists, Hrothgar and Beowulf.

Aside from the two old kings at the centre of the poem, another eight characters are explicitly described as ‘old’. Some of these elderly characters appear as family members or companions of other characters: Hrothgar’s father Healfdene, “gamol ond guðreow” [old and battle-fierce] (l. 58a); Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow, “gamol of gearðum” [old among settlements] (l. 265a); Hrothgar’s “frodan fyrnwitan” [old and wise councillor] (l. 2123a) Æschere; and Wiglaf’s father Weohstan, who “of ealdre gewat” [died of old age] (l. 2624b). Others are first brought to the fore in various speeches given by Beowulf: the “eald æscwiga” [old spear-warrior] (l. 2042a) in

³⁶ See chapter 4 above.

³⁷ The two adjectives “bald” and “ald” function as abstract nouns and, despite the lack of an accusative marker on either of the two, it makes more sense to assume that the second element is the subject, given that this is also the case in the adjacent lines lines 62b–3a and 64b: “flan man hwiteð / burg sorg biteð ... wraþ að smiteð [a man fletches the arrow / sorrow frets the city ... cruelty breaks the oath]. *Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, 155, n. 63

³⁸ *Riming Poem*, ed. Klinck, l. 55.

³⁹ Another Old English text that touches upon the problem of elderly kings is found in the *Beowulf* manuscript. In the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, ed. and trans. A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995), par. 24, King Porus expresses his joy upon hearing that Alexander the Great is an old man by exclaiming: “‘Hu mæg he la ænige gewinne wið me spowan swa forealdod mon, for þon ic eom me self geong 7 hwæt?’” [‘How can he have any success in battle against me, when he is such an extremely old man and I myself am young and fit?’. Porus’s rhetorical question whether an old man can have success in battle is one of the many thematic parallels between the Old English *Letter* and *Beowulf*, though previously unnoted. Cf. A. Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), 25–39; K. Powell, ‘Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf* Manuscript’, *RES* ns 57 (2006), 1–15.

Beowulf's report to Hygelac; the "gomelum ceorle" [old man] (l. 2444b) who had lost his son, in Beowulf's speech before the fight with the dragon; and, in the same speech, the Swedish king Ongentheow, the "gomela Scylfing" [old Scylfing] (l. 2487b), whose exploits against the Geats are also described elsewhere in the poem. This Ongentheow, "eald and egesfull" [old and terrible] (l. 2929a), is said to have saved his wife, who, like him, was also old: "gomela(n) iomeowlan" [the old woman of a former day] (l. 2931a). To this tally might be added two further characters who are old by implication: Scyld Scefing ruled for a long time (l. 31) and King Hrethel of the Danes is compared to the "gomelum ceorle" of line 2444b, as both had suffered a similar loss (ll. 2438–44).⁴⁰

Not only does the human society in *Beowulf* suffer from societal aging, the same can be said for the monsters in the poem. Grendel's mother is certainly old: she had roamed the monster mere for fifty years, "hund missera" [a hundred half-years] (l. 1498b), when Beowulf came to kill her. The poet used the same period of fifty years on two other occasions: Hrothgar had similarly ruled the Danes for "hund missera" (l. 1769b) when Grendel's attacks began, and Beowulf had held the throne of the Geats for the same number of years when the dragon started to stir.⁴¹ Rather than an accurate, specific description of the time Grendel's mother, Hrothgar and Beowulf ruled their respective kingdoms, 'fifty years' appears to be a symbolic marker of a long time and, by extension, old age.⁴² Like Grendel's mother, the dragon that attacks Beowulf's people must also have reached an old age: he is called "frod" [old and wise] (l. 2277a) and "eald" [old] (ll. 2271a, 2415a, 2760a) throughout the poem; its senectitude is also implied by the number of years it has held its barrow: "se ðeodsceaða preohund wintra / heold on hrusan hordærna sum" [the people's enemy held a certain treasure-house in the earth for three hundred years] (ll. 2278–9).⁴³ The old age of both Grendel's mother and the dragon make them suitable opponents for the equally aged kings Hrothgar and Beowulf. They may even be regarded as mirror images of the old kings themselves or as symbolic representations of the senescence that threatened both rulers.⁴⁴

In *Beowulf* scholarship, Hrothgar and Beowulf as old men have mostly been studied as part of the contrast between 'youth and old age';⁴⁵ as the opposites of young

⁴⁰ Hrethel and the old father may be one and the same person, see J. Thormann, 'Enjoyment of Violence and Desire for History in Beowulf', in *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*, ed. E. A. Joy and M. K. Ramsey (Morgantown, 2006), 288–91.

⁴¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2208–10, 2732b–3a; see also Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 64.

⁴² Notably, fifty years of time was also a marker of old age used in Gregory's *Dialogi*, Bald's *Leechbook* and *Solomon and Saturn II*. These references are discussed in chapter 1 above, pp. 53ff. Cf. Liuzza 'Sense of Time', 132.

⁴³ Even without these explicit references to the dragon's senectitude, an Anglo-Saxon audience would associate the dragon with old age, as is suggested by the poem *Maxims II*, ed. and trans. Shippey, ll. 26b–7a: "Draca sceal on hlæwe, / frod, frætsum wlanc" [A dragon must live in a barrow, old and proud of his treasures].

⁴⁴ Georgianna, 'King Hrethel's Sorrow', 848, n. 61, has called attention to the fact that Beowulf and the dragon are described in similar terms and resemble each other in being old, wise, guardians of a hoard and, at specific points in the narrative, swollen with rage.

⁴⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991), 33, 35; E. B. Irving Jr, 'The Text of Fate', in *Interpretations of Beowulf*, ed. Fulk, 172.

Beowulf and young Wiglaf, respectively.⁴⁶ While this approach clearly demonstrates how the wisdom of the old men serves to inspire the young warriors, it has also led to a neglect of another contrast that looms large over the entire poem: the contrast between the passive old king Hrothgar and the active old king Beowulf. The importance of this second contrast was hesitantly suggested by Adrien Bonjour:

Indeed, I am not sure whether we should not perhaps add to the significant contrast pointed out by critics in reference to the Danish part, between Hrothgar the hoary king, and young Beowulf, a contrast between Hrothgar, an embodiment and picture of a king, and Beowulf's own figure as a ruler in the Dragon part.⁴⁷

To my knowledge, a full-fledged comparison between Hrothgar and Beowulf as elderly kings is still lacking in *Beowulf* scholarship.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore how the poet sets up a comparison between the two aged rulers. For one, their situations show clear parallels: both have been on the throne for fifty years and both are faced by a monstrous threat. In addition, the poet uses twenty-one terms to describe old King Beowulf that he had previously reserved for Hrothgar. These terms range from the simple “se goda” [the good one], “se gomela” [the old one] and “se wisa” [the wise one] to more specific terms, such as “eald eðelweard” [old guardian of the country], “ætheling ærgod” [nobleman, old and hitherto excellent] and “har hilderinc” [grey-haired warrior] (see table 7.2). This similitude invites a comparison between the two people to whom these terms are applied.

King Beowulf	King Hrothgar
frod cyning (l. 2209)	frod cyning (l. 1306)
eald eðelweard (l. 2210)	eald eðelweard (l. 1702)
ðam godan (l. 2327)	se goda (ll. 355)
se wisa (l. 2329)	þone wisan (l. 1318)
guðkyning (ll. 2335, 2563, 2677, 3036)	guðcyning (l. 199)
Wedera þioden (ll. 2336, 2656, 2786, 3037)	þeoden Scyldinga (l. 1675, 1871)
æþeling ærgod (l. 2342)	æþeling ærgod (l. 130)
þæt wæs god cyning (l. 2390)	þæt wæs god cyning (l. 863)
goldwine Geata (ll. 2419, 2584)	goldwine gumena (ll. 1171, 1476, 1602)
ðone gomelan (ll. 2421, 2851)	se gomela (l. 1397)
Weder-Geata leod (l. 2551)	leod Scyldinga (l. 1653)
mærum þeodne (ll. 2572, 2721, 2788, 3141)	mære þeoden (ll. 129, 201, 345, 353, 1046, 1598, 1992)
ðiodcyning (ll. 2579, 2694, 3008)	ðeodkyning (l. 2144)
mæra maga Ecgðeowes (l. 2587)	mæra mago Healfdenes (l. 1474, 2011)

⁴⁶ Cf. K. Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1965), 22–4, who argued that the contrast between youth and age, especially in the second part of the poem, lacks elaboration.

⁴⁷ A. Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf* (Oxford, 1950), 52.

⁴⁸ E. B. Irving Jr, ‘What to Do with Old Kings’, in *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*, ed. J. M. Foley (Columbus, 1987), 259–68, and Rothauser, ‘Winter in Heorot’, 103–20, focus solely on Hrothgar as an old king, while J. C. Pope, ‘Beowulf’s Old Age’, in *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt*, ed. J. L. Rosier (The Hague, 1970), 55–64, centres only on Beowulf as an old king.

freodryhtne (l. 2627)	freodrihten (l. 1169)
folces hyrde (l. 2644)	folces hyrde (l. 610)
hildfruman (ll. 2649, 2835)	harum hildfruman (l. 1678)
Wedra helm (l. 2705)	helm Scyldinga (l. 371, 456, 1321)
winedryhten (l. 2722)	winedrihtne (l. 360)
rices hyrde (l. 3080)	rices hyrde (l. 2027)
har hilderinc (l. 3136)	har hilderinc (l. 1307)

Table 7.2 Overview of epithets shared between Beowulf and Hrothgar⁴⁹

Yet another method used by the poet to prompt his audience to connect old Beowulf to Hrothgar is the sudden ‘flash forward’ in lines 2207–11:

syððan Beowulfe br(a)de rice
on hand gehwearf; he geheold tela
fiftig wintr(a) – wæs ða frod cyning,
eald eþel(w)eard – oð ðæt (a)n ongan
deorcum nihtum draca rics[i]an. (ll. 2207–11)

[Afterwards the broad kingdom passed into the hand of Beowulf; he held it well for fifty winters – he was then an old and wise king, old guardian of the country – until one, a dragon, began to hold sway in dark nights.]

This sudden transition to the time when Beowulf is an old king has not been satisfactorily explained.⁵⁰ The poet’s choice to initially ignore the first fifty years of Beowulf’s reign may be attributed to his desire to set up a comparison between two elderly kings. The sudden transition immediately shifts the focus from the matter of the old king Hrothgar to how Beowulf acted as an old king; this effect would be lost if the poet had narrated the first fifty years of Beowulf’s reign in a chronological fashion.

By juxtaposing Hrothgar and Beowulf, the poet presents his audience with two models of conduct for aged kings. The first represents a ‘passive, diplomatic model’, while the latter represents an ‘active, heroic model’. After discussing Hrothgar and Beowulf in turn below, I argue that the poet preferred the latter of the two models in his mirror of elderly kings.

Passive and peaceable: Old king Hrothgar

The poet introduces Hrothgar as a successful king who had earned glory in battle at the outset of his reign. After fifty years on the throne and having amassed a great following, Hrothgar then decided to build a hall called Heorot, “medoærn micel ... / þon[n]e ylðo bearn æfre gefrunon” [a bigger mead-hall than the children of men had

⁴⁹ In each case, the form given in the table is the form of the first occurrence in the poem.

⁵⁰ It has been argued that this flash forward was an indication that the second part of the poem, the fight against the dragon, was an independent composition, added on to the story of Beowulf’s exploits in Denmark as a sequel. However, there are few who still doubt that the poem as a whole has a unity and was composed by one and the same poet. Cf. W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1957), 161–3; A. G. Brodeur, ‘The Structure and the Unity of Beowulf’, *PMLA* 68 (1953), 1183–95; *Beowulf*, lxxxviii–xci.

ever heard of] (ll. 69–70). The celebrations following the completion of Heorot angered the monster Grendel, who slaughtered thirty of Hrothgar’s men during the night. Hrothgar, faced by a conflict “to strang, / laþ and longsum” [too strong, hateful and long-lasting] (ll. 133b–4a), proved helpless against Grendel and had to give up control of his hall to the monster after sundown. Only twelve years later would the terror of Grendel and the subsequent revenge by Grendel’s mother be laid low by the young Geat Beowulf who came to the old king’s aid.

As a king, Hrothgar unquestionably fulfilled one of the main requirements of his position: the generous bestowal of treasure upon his followers. After Heorot had been finished, Hrothgar “beot ne aleh: beagas dælde, / sinc æt symle” [did not leave his promise unfulfilled: he distributed rings, treasure at the feast] (ll. 80–1a). Hrothgar’s generosity is also foregrounded after Beowulf had defeated Grendel and his mother; the old king rewarded the young Geat with various treasures, including horses, weapons, and his own saddle.⁵¹ Hrothgar’s generosity is further underlined by the poet’s frequent references to the Danish king as the “beaga brytta” [distributor of rings] (ll. 352a, 1487a), “sinces brytta” [dispenser of treasure] (ll. 607b, 1170a) and “goldwine gumena” [gold-friend of warriors] (ll. 1171a, 1476a, 1602a).

The king as a provider of treasures is an essential element of the ideals of the Germanic *comitatus*, as described by the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 56 AD–after 117). In his *Germania*, Tacitus noted how a Germanic leader had to provide for his retainers with feasting, rings and armour, in return for future service.⁵² These Germanic ideals also underlie much of Old English heroic literature.⁵³ In *Beowulf*, the importance of royal generosity is illustrated by the negative example of King Heremod,⁵⁴ who is presented as a bad leader due to his greed and refusal to share his riches:

Deah þe hine mihtig God mægenes wynnum,
eafepum stepte ofer ealle men,
forð gefremede, hwæþere him on ferhþe greow
breosthord blodreow, nallas beagas geaf
Denum æfter dome; dreamleas gebad
þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade,
leodbealo longsum. (ll. 1716–22a)

[Although the mighty God raised him over all men with the joys of strength and powers, he would advance further, but in his mind grew a blood-thirsty spirit, he did not at all give rings to the Danes in pursuit of glory; joyless he

⁵¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1020–49, 1866–9.

⁵² Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. and trans. H.W. Benario (Warminster, 1999), ch. 13.

⁵³ Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*, 149–88; K. O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Values and Ethics’, 101–2. The ideal of a generous king is, however, by no means solely Germanic: the ninth-century author Sedulius Scottus offered his audience of *De rectoribus christianis* [On Christian rulers], written for Lotharingian king Lothair II (d. 869), a similar model: “a peaceful king in the glory of his kingdom, when in the royal palace he bestows many benefits by displaying gifts and distributing grants”, quoted in P. S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2013), 25.

⁵⁴ Baker, *Honour, Exchange*, 56–7.

lived to see that he suffered distress of the struggle, long-lasting harm to a people.]

Another instance in *Beowulf* of the importance of gift-giving for kings is cited at the beginning of this chapter above: the poet's advice to a young prince to distribute gifts in return for future assistance. Through his generous bestowal of treasures, then, Hrothgar upholds this ideal of kingship.

A second royal ideal that the *Beowulf* poet appeals to in his characterisation of Hrothgar is that of the wise king. This model, based on the Old Testament King Solomon and the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo, amongst others, was used by several medieval commentators, including Bede.⁵⁵ The latter included in his *Historia ecclesiastica* a letter by Abbot Ceolfrith, which reads:

quia felicissimo mundus statu ageretur, si uel reges philosopharentur uel regnarent philosophi. ... quo plus in mundo quique ualent, eo amplius eius, qui super omnia est, Iudicis mandatis auscultare contendant, atque ad haec obseruanda secum eos quoque, qui sibi commissi sunt, exemplis simul et auctoritate instituant.

the world would be in a happy state if kings were philosophers and philosophers were kings. ... the more powerful men grow in this world, the more they may strive to obey the commands of Our Judge who is over all things; and by their example and authority induce their subjects to observe these commands as well.⁵⁶

Ælfric, too, considered wisdom an essential characteristic of a good king. A clear illustration is found in his discussion of the concept of 'etymology' in his *Grammar*:

rex cyning is gecweden A *REGENDO*, þæt is fram recendome, forðan ðe se cyning sceal mid micelum wisdom his leode wissian and bewerian mid cræfte.⁵⁷

[rex 'king' gets its name from *regendo*, that is from 'governance', because the king must instruct his people with great wisdom and protect them with might.]

Similar remarks about the king's requirement to instruct his people with great wisdom feature in other works by Ælfric.⁵⁸ Thus, during the entire Anglo-Saxon period, from Bede to Ælfric, a king's sagacity was considered a prerequisite for successful leadership.

⁵⁵ P. J. E. Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power, and the Early Medieval Political Imagination* (Oxford, 2011), 174–261.

⁵⁶ Bede, *HE*, v.21.

⁵⁷ *Ælfrics Grammatik*, ed. Zupitza, 293, ll. 7–9.

⁵⁸ See M. Clayton, 'De Duodecim Abusiis, Lordship and Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Saints and Scholars. New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in Honour of Hugh Magennis*, ed. S. McWilliams (Cambridge, 2012), 153–63.

Throughout *Beowulf*, Hrothgar is unambiguously presented as embodying this ideal of the wise king. The poet repeatedly describes him as “snotor” [wise] (ll. 190b, 1313b, 1384a, 1786b), “frod” [old and wise] (ll. 279a, 1306b, 1724a, 1874a, 2114a) and “wis” [wise] (ll. 1318a, 1400b, 1698b). Like King Solomon, Hrothgar is not only sagacious, but he also acts as a teacher for the young Beowulf in his so-called ‘sermon’ (ll. 1700–84): “Ðu þe lær be þon, / gumcyste ongit; ic þis gid be þe / awræc wintrum frod” [Teach yourself by this, understand manly virtue. I recite this tale to you, old and wise in winters] (ll. 1722b–4a).⁵⁹ Notably, Hrothgar’s sermon, which R. E. Kaske classified as “the greatest expression” of the old king’s *sapientia* ‘wisdom’,⁶⁰ also features a warning for ‘terrible old age’, when he discusses the fleeting nature of bodily strength:

‘Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið, Beowulf leofa,
secg bet[e]sta, ond þe þæt selre geceos,
ece rædas; oferhyda ne gym,
mære cempa. Nu is þines mægnes blæd
ane hwile; eft sona bið
þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfeð
oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
oððe atol ylðo; oððe eagenas bearhtm
forsiteð ond forsworced; semninga bið
þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð.’ (ll. 1758–68)

[‘Guard yourself against pernicious enmity, dear Beowulf, best of men, and choose the better thing, eternal benefits. Do not care for arrogance, famous champion. Now for one moment is the glory of your strength; yet immediately it will be that either sickness or edge will deprive you of strength, or the fangs of fire, or the surging of the flood, or the attack of the sword, or the flight of the spear, or terrible old age; or the brightness of eyes will diminish and grow dark; at last death will overpower you, warrior.’]

Hrothgar’s mention of the detrimental effects of old age calls attention to the effects of his own senectitude. Part of Hrothgar’s characterisation suggests that this warning was based on personal experience.

Using Kaske’s terminology, Hrothgar has become “a model of kingly *sapientia* [‘wisdom’] no longer supported by *fortitudo* [‘physical might and courage’]”.⁶¹ Hrothgar’s lack of physical strength is made clear at the outset of the poem, when he is described as unable to cope with Grendel’s terror: “Swa ða mælceare maga Healfdenes / singala seað, ne mihte snotor hæleð / wean onwendan” [Thus, then the kinsman of Healfdene continually broods over the sorrow of the time, the wise hero was not able

⁵⁹ See the discussion of this passage in chapter 3 below.

⁶⁰ R. E. Kaske, ‘*Sapientia et fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*’, in *Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Nicholson, 280.

⁶¹ Kaske, ‘*Sapientia et fortitudo*’, 279.

to change the misery] (ll. 189–91a). The old king’s bodily weakness is further symbolised by the poet’s referral, three times, to Hrothgar retreating wearily to his sleeping quarters.⁶² This image of Hrothgar as a bedbound old man is further emphasised by the slightly humorous scene when Beowulf, unaware of the fact that Hrothgar’s favourite retainer Æschere has just been killed, asks the old king whether he has had a good night sleep.⁶³ Thus, the *Beowulf* poet hammers home the message that Hrothgar has been forced to exchange the field of battle for his bed.

Another recurring element in the poet’s portrayal of Hrothgar is passiveness. With the exception of a single jump on a horse, these strolls to his bedchamber are Hrothgar’s only physical action in the poem. Generally, Hrothgar either sits on his throne or is simply absent. Irving has noted that Hrothgar’s absence from scenes of action in the poem underscores his passiveness; it is a form of “zero grade narration”, whereby “action and Hrothgar exclude each other”.⁶⁴ Hrothgar’s inaction is also addressed by Beowulf, in his speech following the death of Æschere. Beowulf tells the old king to stop worrying and avenge his friend’s death:

‘Ne sorga, snotor guma. Selre bið æghwæm
 þæt he his freond wrece þonne he fela murne.
 Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
 worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
 domes ær deape; þæt bið drihtguman
 unlifgendum æfter selest.
 Aris, rices weard, uton rape feran.’ (ll. 1384–90)

[‘Do not worry, wise man. It is better for anyone to avenge his friend than to mourn much. Each of us must await the end of life in this world; he who can, should endeavor to win glory before death; that will be best for a warrior after he is dead. Get up, guardian of the kingdom, let us go quickly.’]

Inspired by the young warrior’s words, Hrothgar leaps up, leads Beowulf and his men to the monster mere and then fades into the background again. Notably, this episode is the exact opposite of those discussed in the previous chapter, where the old warriors inspired their younger comrades rather than *vice versa*. As Irving has rightly observed, Hrothgar’s paralysed anguish at his friend’s death is “merely a symbolic intensification of his twelve years of immobilised suffering during Grendel’s earlier raids”.⁶⁵

His inaction appears to disqualify Hrothgar as a protector of his people, a term that is nevertheless applied to him. Indeed, Hrothgar does not seem to deserve the epithets “leodgebyrgean” [protector of the people] (l. 269a), “helm Scyldinga” [protector of the Scyldings] (ll. 371b, 456b, 1321b) and “eald eðelweard” [old

⁶² *Beowulf*, ll. 662–5, 1232–7, 1789–92. Possibly, the Dane who needs to look for quarters elsewhere, mentioned in ll. 138–42, can be identified as Hrothgar as well.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, ll. 1306–20.

⁶⁴ Irving, ‘What to Do’, 264–5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 262–3.

guardian of the country] (l. 1702a), since he fails to protect his people himself. Scott DeGregorio interprets this contrast as ironically serving “to underscore Hrothgar’s inaction and, by implication, his fundamental inability to discharge the office of *hyrde* [shepherd, protector] so prominent in these epithets”.⁶⁶ In other words, Hrothgar fails to live up to the titles bestowed on him by the poet.

Some scholars, however, have taken the designation of Hrothgar as a protector of his people at face value.⁶⁷ According to John Leyerle, for instance, Hrothgar’s decision not to fight Grendel was motivated by the old king’s fears over his succession.⁶⁸ Like the elderly Carolingian rulers described by Dutton, Hrothgar had reason to worry about his sons’ succession, since their position was threatened by his nephew Hrothulf. While these worries are never made explicit, the poet does hint at a future conflict between the king and his nephew.⁶⁹ Leyerle suggests that Hrothgar considered the threat of Grendel the lesser of two evils, the other being a power struggle for the Danish throne following his own death while his sons were still young.⁷⁰ Leyerle’s hypothesis about Hrothgar’s concerns over a peaceful succession by his own sons, however, is not supported by textual evidence. Moreover, Hrothgar’s supposed anguish over his sons’ future is certainly contradicted by his apparent, symbolic adoption of Beowulf as a son and possible heir, an act that is criticised by Queen Wealhtheow.⁷¹

Other scholars championing Hrothgar’s case argue that, rather than getting physically involved himself, Hrothgar uses diplomatic measures to take care of his people; hence, he still deserves the epithet ‘protector’.⁷² One example of this diplomatic, peaceful approach is Hrothgar’s intervention in the feud started by Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow. Hrothgar had settled this feud with money and now expected Beowulf’s loyalty in return:

‘Fore fyhtum þu, wine min Beowulf,
ond for arstafum usic sohtest.
Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste;
wearþ he Heapolafe to handbonan
mid Wilfingum;
Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode:
sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg
ealde madmas; he me aþas swor.’ (ll. 457–61a, 470–2)

⁶⁶ S. DeGregorio, ‘Theorizing Irony in *Beowulf*: The Case of Hrothgar’, *Exemplaria* 11 (1999), 324.

⁶⁷ R. P. Tripp, ‘The Exemplary Role of Hrothgar and Heorot’, *Philological Quarterly* 56 (1977), 123. Rothauser, ‘Winter in Heorot’, 116–20. See also the authors listed in DeGregorio, ‘Theorizing Irony’, 315, n. 21.

⁶⁸ J. Leyerle, ‘Beowulf: The Hero and the King’, *Medium Ævum* 34 (1965), 92.

⁶⁹ For this conflict between uncle and nephew, see R. H. Bremmer Jr, ‘The Importance of Kinship: Uncle and Nephew in *Beowulf*’, *Amsterdammer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 15 (1980), 37–8; cf. W. Cooke, ‘Hrothulf: A Richard III, or an Alfred the Great?’, *SiP* 104 (2007), 175–98.

⁷⁰ Leyerle, ‘Beowulf: The Hero’, 92.

⁷¹ For Hrothgar’s problematic succession, see S. Hollis, ‘Beowulf and the Succession’, *Parergon* 1 (1983), 39–54; J. M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), 85–107; Biggs, ‘Politics of Succession’.

⁷² Rothauser, ‘Winter in Heorot’, 116; Carruthers, ‘Kingship and Heroism’, 27.

[‘You, my friend Beowulf, sought us for fights and for favours. Your father brought about the greatest feud; he became a hand-slayer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings ... Afterwards I settled the feud with money: I sent ancient treasures to the Wylfings over the water’s back; he swore oaths to me.’]

Hrothgar places a claim on Beowulf’s service on account of his past diplomatic dealings, as well as his present generosity. As such, Hrothgar can be credited with ultimately finding the solution to the monstrous incursions against his people, even though they had to suffer twelve years until this solution was brought about.

Another problem Hrothgar tries to solve diplomatically is the threat posed by the Heathobards. He does so by marrying off his daughter Freawaru to the Heathobard prince Ingeld. Although this move seems an effective, peaceful solution to a long-standing feud, the poet describes the political strategy of using a woman as a *freoðuwebbe* ‘peace-weaver’ in mostly negative terms.⁷³ The inclusion of a long digression on a similar and tragic political marriage between the Danish princess Hildeburh and the Frisian king Finn (ll. 1063–159a) illustrates the poet’s reservations with regard to this political strategy. Hildeburh and Finn’s union ends in tragedy: the violent enmity between the Danes and Frisians resumes despite the marriage and Hildeburh loses her son, her brother Hnæf and also her husband, leaving her a “geomuru ides” [sad woman] (l. 1075b). In his report to his uncle Hygelac, Beowulf prophesies a similar, tragic end to the marriage between Freawaru and Ingeld. The Heathobards, Beowulf predicts, will find it difficult to forget past injuries: “Oft seldan hwær / æfter leodhryre lytle hwile / bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge” [Very seldom anywhere, after the fall of a prince, does the deadly spear rest for a little while, even if the bride is good] (ll. 2029b–31). Sources outside *Beowulf* reveal that Beowulf’s prophecy came true: the feud between the Heathobards and Danes would flare up again and Hrothgar’s measure, in the end, proves unsuccessful.⁷⁴

To sum up, the model of kingship represented by Hrothgar is that of a generous and wise king. Like the elderly rulers analysed by Dutton, however, Hrothgar has become sedentary and the loss of his strength has left him passive. Rather than taking action himself, Hrothgar seeks diplomatic solutions to the violent threats to his people. The question whether the poet presents this type of rulership as the ideal model of conduct for an aged king or as an ultimately insufficient example of elderly rulership will be considered after reviewing the poet’s portrayal of the old king that takes central stage in the second part of the poem: Beowulf.

Old, but not obsolete: Old king Beowulf

The description of Beowulf’s kingship in the second part of the poem starts in line 2207, at the point when Beowulf has ruled the Geats for fifty years and faces his final struggle against a dragon. Details of Beowulf’s time on the throne can be pieced

⁷³ Overing, ‘Women of *Beowulf*’, 219–60.

⁷⁴ For this feud and the role played by the “eald æscwiga” [old spear-warrior] (l. 2042a), see also the previous chapter.

together from various flashbacks and speeches. In lines 2354–90, the poet narrates how, following the death of Hygelac in Frisia, Queen Hygd had offered the kingdom to Beowulf, who declined in favour of Hygelac’s son Heardred. Only after Heardred had died by the hands of the Swedes, did Beowulf ascend the throne of the Geats, much to the approval of the poet: “þæt wæs god cyning” [that was a good king] (l. 2390b). Later, upon his deathbed, Beowulf himself gives a brief and positive evaluation of his own reign:

‘Ic ðas leode heold
fiftig wintra; næs se folccyning,
ymbesittendra ænig ðara
þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste,
egesam ðeon. Ic on earde bad
mælgescæfta, heold min tela,
ne sohte searoniðas, ne me swor fela
aða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mæg
feorhbennum seoc gefean habban.’ (ll. 2732b–40)

[‘I ruled the people for fifty years; there was no folk-king, not any of the neighbours, who dared greet me with warriors, threaten with fear. On earth I waited for destinies, I held mine well, I did not look for treacherous quarrels; I did not swear many unlawful oaths. I, ill of mortal wounds, am able to have enjoyment of all that.’]

Other details about Beowulf’s rule are provided after his death by the speeches of Wiglaf (ll. 2864–91, 3077–119) and the anonymous messenger (ll. 2900–3027).

Like Hrothgar before him, Beowulf was known for his generosity, which is reflected in the poet’s use of the epithets “goldwine Geata” [gold-friend of the Geats] (ll. 2419a, 2584a), “hringa fengel” [lord of rings] (l. 2345b) and “goldgyfan” [gold-giver] (l. 2652a). Beowulf, as was expected from a Germanic king, had generously shared out treasures to his followers in return for future service, a fact referred to by his successor Wiglaf on various occasions.⁷⁵ Beowulf even displays his generosity on the brink of death, when he takes satisfaction from the fact that he has at least secured the dragon’s treasure for his people: “Ic ðara frætwa Frean ealles ðanc /... / þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum / ær swylt-dæge swylc gestrynan” [For these treasures I (express) all gratitude to the Lord, for those which I was able to acquire for my people before my dying day] (ll. 2794, 2797–8). It is little wonder, then, that his followers remember Beowulf as “manna mildust” [the most generous of men] (l. 3181a).

Beowulf is also portrayed as a wise king, as borne out by the epithets “frod” [old and wise] (ll. 2209b, 2513a, 2800a), “wis” [wise] (ll. 2329a, 3094a) and “gewittig” [knowledgeable] (l. 3094a). Even before Beowulf had reached old age, his wisdom had been noted by Hrothgar. The Danish king commented that Beowulf was wise beyond his years and that the young Geat, therefore, was fit for rulership: “Sæ-Geatas selran næbben / to geceosenne cyning ænigne” [the Sea-Geats do not have any

⁷⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 2633–48, 2864–91.

better one to choose for a king] (ll. 1850–1).⁷⁶ Beowulf certainly lived up to Hrothgar’s expectations and ruled the Geats wisely for fifty years. Kaske finds evidence of Beowulf’s wisdom in the old king’s manner of responding to the dragon’s attacks: Beowulf’s “*peostrum geþoncum*” [gloomy thoughts] (l. 2332a) suggest “a proper and wise *tristitia*” and the old king prudently provides for an iron shield in preparation for his fight with the fiery dragon.⁷⁷

Whereas Hrothgar and Beowulf thus appear similar in terms of generosity and wisdom, the main difference between the two kings is the manner in which they respond to the monstrous incursions against their people. Hrothgar shunned personal interference, but Beowulf decides to take matters into his own hands and attacks the dragon himself. Although there are no explicit references to Beowulf losing his former strength,⁷⁸ the old king eventually realises that his physical prowess will be no match for the dragon and that he is probably going to die: “*Him wæs geomor sefa, / wæfre ond wælfus*” [he had a sorrowful mind, he was restless and ready for death] (ll. 2419b–20a). Nevertheless, Beowulf decides to act:

Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spræc
 niehstan siðe: ‘Ic geneðde fela
 guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle,
 frod folces weard fæhðe secan,
 mærdū fremman, gif mec se mansceaða
 of eorðsele ut geseceð.’ (ll. 2510–5)

[Beowulf spoke, he said with words of promise for the last time: ‘I engaged in many battles in youth; I, old and wise guardian of the people, still want to seek battle, perform a glorious deed, if the man-harmer from the earth-hall seeks me out.’]

He fights the dragon and, with the help of Wiglaf, manages to kill the beast, but he has to pay for this act with his life. Beowulf’s decision to die in battle rather than shirk away from the fight aligns the old king with other elderly warriors of Germanic legend and Old English heroic poetry, described in the previous chapter.

Three elderly warriors from Germanic legend, who, like Beowulf, were also kings, get a brief mention in the poem: Healfdene, Sigemundr and Volsung.⁷⁹ The first of these is mentioned in the genealogy of Danish kings: “*heah Healfdene; heold þenden lifde / gamol ond guðreow glæde Scyldingas*” [high Healfdene; he ruled the bright Scyldings as long as he lived, old and fierce in battle] (ll. 57–8). Healfdene also features in several Scandinavian sources, in which he is similarly denoted as ‘high’

⁷⁶ Burrow, 132, has interpreted this youthful wisdom of Beowulf as an example of the hagiographical *puer senex* motif, the idea of a young man who is old of mind.

⁷⁷ Kaske, ‘*Sapientia et fortitudo*’, 296–7.

⁷⁸ Pope, ‘Beowulf’s Old Age’, 56, suggests Beowulf is “still untouched by the ordinary infirmities of age”.

⁷⁹ For another possible parallel to Beowulf as an old and active king, Wermund, see p. 212 below.

and old'.⁸⁰ Sigemund (= Sigemundr) and his father Wæls (=Volsung), are mentioned in lines 875–915, a digression which compares the young Geat Beowulf to the dragon-slayer Sigemund. Both Sigemundr and Volsung appear in the Icelandic *Völsunga Saga*, where they are described as kings who meet their end in battle after having reached an advanced age, not unlike Beowulf.⁸¹ Indeed, a speech attributed to Volsung prior to his fatal battle shows some parallels to Beowulf's speech cited above:

'while yet unborn ... I swore an oath that fear would make me run from neither fire nor iron. Up to this moment I have acted accordingly, and why should I not keep to it in old age? ... And my decision is that we do not run, and let us act our part as bravely as we can.'⁸²

Like Beowulf, Volsung reminisces about his active youth and, knowing he will probably die, he too makes the conscious decision to meet his fate head on. The resolve Beowulf shows in his old age, then, is in line with the behaviour of other elderly kings of Germanic legend.

Beowulf, as an old but battle-eager king, has one further parallel within the poem: the Swedish king Ongentheow, whose deeds are referred to on more than one occasion.⁸³ As has been noted in the previous chapter, Ongentheow comes across as an admirable, courageous old king, who is always shown in a positive light.⁸⁴ It has even been argued that "Ongentheow is portrayed not as an enemy, but as something like Beowulf's double, an 'old', 'wise' king who dies protecting his 'hoard', here defined with pathos as consisting of his wife and children".⁸⁵ In fact, Beowulf's decision to engage the dragon may, in part, have been inspired by the example of Ongentheow, to which Beowulf himself refers in his long speech prior to the fight (ll. 2425–2515).

In this speech, Beowulf contemplates the advantages and disadvantages of inaction; he "explores possible responses to the challenge before him ... to resolve the Hamlet-like question of whether – and how – to act or not to act".⁸⁶ Beowulf first considers the case of King Hrethel, who was unable to avenge the death of his eldest son Herebeald because this had been committed by his other son Haethcyn. Hrethel ultimately died of grief, caused by his inability to act.⁸⁷ Subsequently, Beowulf compares Hrethel's sorrow to that of a fictitious old father, who is similarly helpless to save his son from hanging from the gallows. Like Hrethel, the old father succumbs to melancholy and lethargy, caused by his failure to avenge the death of his son. Beowulf

⁸⁰ Various accounts of Healfdene and his children are summarised in K. Malone, 'The Daughter of Healfdene', in *Studies in Heroic Legend*, ed. Einarsson and Eliason, 124–41; K. von See *et al.*, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda. Bd. 3: Götterlieder* (Heidelberg, 2000), 950–8; *Beowulf*, liv.

⁸¹ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. R.G. Finch (London, 1965), ch. 5, 11.

⁸² *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

⁸³ *Beowulf*, ll. 2472–89, 2922–98. In addition, Hygelac is called "bonan Ongenþeoes" [the slayer of Ongentheow] (l. 1968a) and Onela, king of the Swedes, is called "Ongenþioes bearn" [the son of Ongentheow] (l. 2387b).

⁸⁴ Carruthers, 'Kingship and Heroism', 26.

⁸⁵ Georgianna, 'King Hrethel's Sorrow', 845.

⁸⁶ L. N. de Looze, 'Frame Narratives and Fictionalization: Beowulf as Narrator', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26 (1984), 146.

⁸⁷ Georgianna, 'King Hrethel's Sorrow', 835–8.

then brings to mind the Swedish and Geatish wars and ponders about the consequences of an active response to threats, touching upon Ongentheow among others. Ultimately, Beowulf decides to act, rather than fall prey to the sorrow caused by inaction.⁸⁸ Beowulf's decision, therefore, is partly inspired by the active role played by his Swedish counterpart in the Swedish-Geatish war, Ongentheow.

Beowulf's fight against the dragon has profound implications: he dies and his final act, as the anonymous messenger and Wiglaf both prophesy afterwards, issues in the demise of the Geats. The messenger announces that they can expect retaliation from various tribes – Franks, Frisians and Swedes – now that the news of the death of their king will spread.⁸⁹ Wiglaf, similarly, in what is often interpreted as a critical note,⁹⁰ predicts that the Geats will suffer as a result of Beowulf's actions: "Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan / wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is" [Often many a warrior must endure misery for the will of one, as it has happened for us] (ll. 3077–8). This anguish concerning the Geatish future is also expressed by the Geatish woman who sings a dirge at Beowulf's funeral and repeatedly speaks of upcoming invasions and terror.⁹¹ Despite their gloomy thoughts concerning their own future, the Geats all agree that Beowulf deserves a worthy funeral. The messenger, for example, is the first to suggest that the dragon's hoard, an unfathomable amount of treasure, be burned with Beowulf.⁹² Wiglaf commands the Geats to do just this and, in addition, heeds Beowulf's final request of building a memorial tower on the coast.⁹³ The Geats ceremonially burn Beowulf's body along with the dragon's hoard and praise him as "wyruld-cyninga / manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ærust, / leodum liðost ond lofgeornost" [of worldly kings the most generous of men, the most gentle, the most gracious among peoples and the most eager for fame] (ll. 3180b–2).

In all, the mode of elderly kingship represented by Beowulf has some elements in common with that of Hrothgar. Both elderly kings are wise and generous, but Beowulf prefers heroic action over diplomatic passivity. As such, he fits the mold of a Germanic warrior king, who, above all, defends his tribe and tries to gain lasting glory, despite the consequences this may have for his personal well-being. His funeral is appropriate of a heroic king, beloved by his people.

Beowulf as a mirror of elderly kings

The *Beowulf* poet presents his audience with two elderly kings who, at the end of a long reign, are confronted by monsters. These monsters, the mysterious Grendel, his aged mother and the ancient dragon, may well represent the threat posed by old age itself to the authority of these kings, a genuine political concern in the early Middle Ages. By juxtaposing Hrothgar and Beowulf, the poet invites a comparison between

⁸⁸ De Looze, 'Frame Narratives', 156. For a detailed discussion of Beowulf's speech prior to the dragon fight, see Georgianna 'King Hrethel's Sorrow', 829–50.

⁸⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2910–27.

⁹⁰ Leyerle, 'Beowulf: The Hero', 97–8; cf. Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 50–1.

⁹¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 3152–5. These lines of the manuscript are heavily damaged and the reading "Geatisc meowle" is an emendation proposed by the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf*. For a further discussion of this passage, see Appendix, s.v. *geomeowle*.

⁹² *Beowulf*, ll. 2999–3027.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, ll. 2802–8, 3120–36.

two models of conduct for such elderly kings. While both models entail the generosity and wisdom required of any early medieval king, the manner in which these old kings stand up to the monstrous challenges to their reign differs: Hrothgar shows restraint and turns to diplomatic means, whereas Beowulf acts with heroic resolve. In essence, then, the question regarding elderly kingship in *Beowulf* boils down to whether an old king must still act heroically in battle or whether a passive, diplomatic approach is more suitable behaviour for an aged ruler.⁹⁴

If centuries of *Beowulf* scholarship have shown anything, it is that scholars have found enough material in the poem to argue both ways. While some regard Hrothgar as an empty shell, whose lackluster performance against the Grendelkin does not weigh up to the heroic epithets bestowed on him, others view Hrothgar as an ideal king, whose wisdom, generosity and diplomacy ultimately saves his people.⁹⁵ Similarly, many praise Beowulf as the ideal role model for a medieval king, but some have found fault with his decision to fight the dragon on his own.⁹⁶ Perhaps, it was the poet's intention to evoke discussion on the topic as a whole, as Scott Gwara has argued with respect to Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, I argue that the poet sets up Beowulf as the ideal model, whereas his characterisation of Hrothgar can hardly have inspired emulation.

One argument against reading Hrothgar as the ideal role model is that his policies are not always depicted as fully effective. For instance, Hrothgar's restraint against the terror of Grendel leads to twelve years of "hynðo on Heorote" [humiliation in Heorot] (ll. 475, 593), something the poet repeats twice and is the cause of great grief for the king and his people. Moreover, Hrothgar's diplomatic solution to the feud between the Danes and Heathobards, as has been pointed out above, is ultimately futile. In fact, the audience is told at the beginning of the poem that the hall Heorot will burn as a result of this renewed Danish-Heathobard conflict.⁹⁸ DeGregorio concludes: "As it turns out, then, Hrothgar's wise act of policy not only fails; worse, it leads to the destruction of Heorot, the social pillar supporting the society of the Danes".⁹⁹ In addition, the image of Hrothgar's political wisdom, although referred to frequently, is somewhat undermined by the poet's further hinting at a future conflict between the king and his nephew Hrothulf.¹⁰⁰ The presence in Hrothgar's hall of the potentially treacherous Hrothulf, as well as the cowardous kin-slayer Unferth,¹⁰¹ raises questions concerning the state of Hrothgar's court and, by extension, the wisdom of the aged ruler's political choices.¹⁰²

Those who praise Hrothgar, regardless of his inactivity and defective political decisions, note that there is no textual evidence to support the image of Hrothgar as a

⁹⁴ Carruthers, 'Kingship and Heroism', 25.

⁹⁵ For an overview of the scholarly debate concerning Hrothgar, see DeGregorio, 'Theorizing Irony', 315–6, n. 22. Some scholars tread middle ground: Irving, 'What to Do', 260, concludes that we cannot see Hrothgar consistently as either admirable or contemptible.

⁹⁶ For an overview of the scholarly debate concerning Beowulf, see Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 8–12.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 82–5.

⁹⁹ DeGregorio, 'Theorizing Irony', 332–3.

¹⁰⁰ For this conflict between uncle and nephew, see Bremmer 'Importance of Kinship', 37–8.

¹⁰¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 587–601a.

¹⁰² DeGregorio, 'Theorizing Irony', 328–9.

failed king.¹⁰³ That is to say, the poet never explicitly denounces Hrothgar. This is a valid point. In fact, the poet even notes that the Danes do not condemn Hrothgar as a leader after the young Beowulf has defeated Grendel:

Dær wæs Beowulfes
 mærdō mæned; monig oft gecwæð
 þætte suð ne norð be sām tweonum
 ofer eormengrund ofer nænig
 under swegles begong selra nære
 rondhæbbendra, rices wyrðra.
 Ne hie huru winedrihten wiht ne logon,
 glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning. (ll. 856b–63)

[There Beowulf's fame was remembered; many often said that neither south nor north, nor between the two seas, nor over the spacious earth nor anywhere under the expanse of the sky was a better shield-bearer, more worthy of a kingdom. However, they did not find fault in any way with the friendly lord, the gracious Hrothgar, but that was a good king.]

However, it is hard not to agree with John D. Niles that these “last two lines read as a classic example of praise that damns”,¹⁰⁴ rather than a ‘rehabilitation’ for Hrothgar. The praise for the aged king certainly pales in comparison to the description of Beowulf as the worthiest warrior between the two seas, under the sky and over the earth. Moreover, while the authorial voice never condemns Hrothgar, the aged king himself makes at least two self-deprecatory remarks. When Hrothgar discusses the death of his older brother, he notes: “se wæs betera ðonne ic” [he was a better man than I] (l. 469b) and he says the same of Beowulf when the latter returns home.¹⁰⁵ If Hrothgar is not convinced that he is the best possible king, the audience of *Beowulf* is unlikely to have disagreed with him.

Another aspect that makes Hrothgar into a less appealing role model is the poet's continuous description of Hrothgar as a sorrowful, almost bitter man. Time and time again, Hrothgar's frustration over his inability to stand up against the monster Grendel is brought to the fore:

Mære þeoden,
 æþeling ærgod, unbliðe sæt,
 þolode ðryðswyð, þegnsorge dreah
 syðþan hie þæs laðan last sceawedon,
 wergan gastas; wæs þæt gewin to strang,
 lað ond longsum. (ll. 129b–34a)

[The famous king, the good old prince, sat sorrowfully, the strong one suffered, he experienced sorrow for thegns, since they beheld the tracks of

¹⁰³ Rothauser, ‘Winter in Heorot’, 111; Tripp, ‘Exemplary Role’, 123.

¹⁰⁴ J. D. Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 111.

¹⁰⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 1702b–3a.

the loathsome one, of the accursed spirit; that hardship was too strong, too loathsome and long-lasting.]¹⁰⁶

Even after Grendel has been defeated, Hrothgar's first reaction to another setback, the murder of his beloved thegn Æscere, translates into immobilised anguish and sorrow. Hrothgar is described as "on hreon mode" [of a troubled mind] when he responds to Beowulf's question whether the old king has slept well: "Ne frin þu æfter sælum, sorh is geniwod / Denigea leodum!" [Don't you ask about pleasures; grief is renewed for the Danish people!]. As pointed out above, it is the young Beowulf who then has to remind the king that deeds are better than a long period of mourning: a complete reversal of the typical scene in the Germanic heroic tradition where an elderly warrior whets the young.¹⁰⁷

After all monstrous threats to his reign have been defeated, Hrothgar is still characterised as a lamenting old man. When he and Beowulf share a last embrace upon the latter's departure, the old king starts to cry, realising that the two might never meet again.¹⁰⁸ Hrothgar's tears have been interpreted as a sign of weakness and even a lack of manliness.¹⁰⁹ Beowulf's departure is not the only time that the old king is described as overwhelmed by emotions; in his report to Hygelac, Beowulf also paints a picture of Hrothgar as a sad man, bound by old age, whose eyes well up when he remembers his youth:

‘gomela Scilding,
felafricgende feorran rehte;
hwilum hildedeor hearpan wynne,
gome(n)wudu grette, hwilum gyd awræc
soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
rehte æfter rihte rumheort cyning;
hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan,
hildestrengo; hreðer (in)ne weoll
þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde.’ (ll. 2105b–14)

[‘The old Scylding, the well-informed one, narrated things far back in time; sometimes the brave one greeted the pleasure of the harp, the wood of entertainment, sometimes he recited a song, true and sad, sometimes the great-hearted king narrated a wonderful story according to what is right; sometimes again, the old warrior, bound by old age, began to speak of his

¹⁰⁶ For other instances of Hrothgar's anguish concerning Grendel, see *Beowulf*, ll. 170–1a, 189–93, 473–8.

¹⁰⁷ See chapter 6 above.

¹⁰⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 1870–80.

¹⁰⁹ The various interpretations of Hrothgar's tears are discussed by Rothauser, 'Winter in Heorot', 118. For a brief discussion of Hrothgar's manliness, see chapter 6 above, p. 178. Not everyone has considered the old king's tears as a sign of weakness: E. R. Anderson, *Understanding Beowulf as an Indo-European Epic: A Study in Comparative Mythology* (Lewiston, 2010), 243–7, for example, interprets Hrothgar's weeping as a public demonstration of charismatic affection.

youth, his battle-strength; his heart surged inside, when he, old and wise in winters, remembered many things.’]

Hrothgar’s continual grief does not make him into an attractive role model. As had happened with King Hrethel and the old father mentioned in Beowulf’s speech before the dragon fight, inaction has left Hrothgar sorrowful. As such, the morale of that speech and Beowulf’s rejection of the modes of inaction represented by Hrethel and the old father, could well be applied to the poem as a whole: Hrothgar’s passiveness leads to grief and, therefore, should ultimately be rejected.¹¹⁰

Some scholars have regarded Hrothgar’s old age as a valid excuse for his lack of heroic deeds.¹¹¹ Britt C. L. Rothauser, specifically, claimed that “Hrothgar’s expressions of grief and failure to protect his people do not suggest his failure as king, but are instead continued evidence of his advanced age” and, moreover, that the heroic ideal of kingship only applies to young kings.¹¹² This idea that martial heroism was a mode appropriate only to young and middle-aged men has been refuted in the previous chapter: old men were still expected to fight on the battlefield and the same would have been expected of old kings. In fact, references in *Beowulf* itself to elderly warrior-kings of Germanic legend, such as Healfdene, Sigemund, Wæls and Ongentheow, create an expectancy for old kings to act heroically despite their years.¹¹³ Arguably, the frequent references to Hrothgar as the ‘son of Healfdene’ ironically call attention to the contrast between the “gamol ond guðreow” [old and battle-fierce] (l. 58a) father and the equally old, but battle-shunning, son.

Hrothgar’s shortage of heroism is made all the more painfully clear by the manner of conduct shown by Beowulf in his old age. In what has been considered an act of self-sacrifice,¹¹⁴ Beowulf decides to fight the dragon and, in doing so, steers clear from the sorrowful frustrations suffered by Hrothgar. Beowulf has no reason to feel humiliated and can take pride in the fact that he has ruled the Geats well and that he has at least gained them the dragon’s treasure: a sharp contrast to Hrothgar’s mournful songs and tears. The poet’s final words concerning the two elderly kings also show Beowulf as the more glorious of the two: whereas the last hundred lines of the poem are an elaborate description of the honours bestowed on Beowulf, one of the last comments of the poet on Hrothgar is short and blunt:

þæt wæs an cyning,
æghwæs orleahre of þæt hine ylðo benam

¹¹⁰ Carruthers, ‘Kingship and Heroism’, 28, has suggested that Beowulf’s “insistence on defending his people single-handed against the dragon is at least partly inspired by a reaction against Hrothgar’s lackluster performance against Grendel so many years before”.

¹¹¹ Peters, *Shadow King*, 100, notes that old age was “one of the canonically recognised causes for certain ecclesiastical exemptions”.

¹¹² Rothauser, ‘Winter in Heorot’, 109, 114.

¹¹³ The assumption that the audience of *Beowulf* was familiar with the stories of Germanic legends referred to in the poem is generally accepted. L. Neidorf, ‘Germanic Legend, Scribal Errors, and Cultural Change’, in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. L. Neidorf (Cambridge, 2015) 37–57, has argued that the Germanic legends circulated in Anglo-Saxon England mainly in the seventh and eighth centuries, the period when *Beowulf* was probably composed.

¹¹⁴ Bonjour, *Digressions in Beowulf*, 52; Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 298.

mægenes wynnum se þe oft manegum scod. (ll. 1885b–7)

[That was a unique king (Hrothgar), blameless in all things, until old age, which has often harmed many, took from him the joys of strength.]

While most critics agree that Beowulf as an old king is presented in a positive light, there are those who criticise Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon on his own. Judith Garde, for one, called Beowulf's final act "an unwise heroic undertaking that effectively destroys the nation".¹¹⁵ The criticism of Beowulf's death can be summarised into the four following statements: Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon was taken rashly and without a thought; Beowulf acted out of pride and put too much trust in his own physical strength; Beowulf leaves the Geats leaderless; and Beowulf's death issues in the demise of the Geats, who will now fall prey to the attacks of neighbouring tribes.¹¹⁶

However, most of these charges can be shown to be ill-founded. For one, Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon was not taken on a whim, but was the result of an intellectual reconnaissance of the options available to him. Especially compared to his rash and reckless uncle Hygelac, Beowulf is a "model of restraint".¹¹⁷ Secondly, Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon on his own can only partially be attributed to pride and his yearning for personal glory: before the end, Beowulf realises he will die fighting the dragon and still decides to sacrifice his life for the well-being of his people. Moreover, by facing the dragon alone, Beowulf also ensures that none of his retainers will perish on his behalf.¹¹⁸ Slighting Beowulf for leaving the Geats leaderless is also ungrounded. Beowulf appointed Wiglaf as his successor before his death; the Geats, therefore, have a leader and one that has proven himself capable of heroic deeds. Finally, Beowulf can hardly be blamed for dying, since his old age had already brought him at death's door.¹¹⁹ His decision not to die of old age may, in part, have been motivated by personal glory, but, in killing the dragon and gaining the treasure, he has also saved his people from a great threat. Moreover, he did not leave them entirely without means of survival. In securing the dragon's treasure for his people, as William Cooke has convincingly argued: Beowulf actually enabled them to bind the best warriors to their cause, had they not decided to rid themselves of it.¹²⁰ If blame has to be put anywhere, the Geats themselves are responsible for their ill-advised plan to burn the treasure along with the old king who died in their defence, rather than putting it to better use.

In conclusion, the model of elderly kingship represented by Hrothgar is one of inaction, which proves ineffective and ultimately leads to humiliation and grief. By

¹¹⁵ J. Garde, 'Christian and Folkloric Tradition in *Beowulf*: Death and the Dragon Episode', *Literature & Theology* 11 (1997), 325.

¹¹⁶ Swanton, *Crisis and Development*, 140–2; Leyerle, 'Beowulf: The Hero', 97–102; Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 48–53.

¹¹⁷ De Looze, 'Frame Narratives', 147–8.

¹¹⁸ Niles, *Beowulf*, 240–7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹²⁰ W. Cooke, 'Who Cursed Whom, and When? The Cursing of the Hoard and Beowulf's Fate', *Medium Ævum* 76 (2007), 208.

contrast, Beowulf's sacrificial act as an old king not only leads to personal glory for himself and safeguards him from years of personal humiliation, it also creates the opportunity for his people to survive and prosper. At the end of the day, the Geats themselves decided to waste their own chances; this cannot be blamed on their old king but, rather, on the decisions of those who came after him.¹²¹ For any elderly king listening, then, the choice between the two models presented by the *Beowulf* poet is an easy one: "gyt ic wylle, frod folces weard, / fæhðe secan, mærdū fremman!" [I, old and wise guardian of the people, *still* want to seek battle, perform a glorious deed!]

Excursus: An elderly patron for *Beowulf*?

In 1949, Dorothy Whitelock called any attempt to connect *Beowulf* to a specific royal court "idle speculation that would lead us nowhere".¹²² Despite Whitelock's warning, the search for a patron has never really stopped: various scholars have placed the poem at the courts of Offa, Alfred, Æthelred II and even Cnut, mostly on the basis of circumstantial evidence.¹²³ It is to this body of circumstantial evidence that a reading of *Beowulf* as a mirror of elderly kings can contribute. Young kings would find little to emulate in the examples of grey-haired Hrothgar and Beowulf; therefore, the poem certainly seems out of place in the courts of teenage kings such as Ælfweard (c.902–924) and Eadwig (c.940–959), who died at the ages of 22 and 19, respectively. If a potential patron for the poem is to be found, attention needs to be turned to those Anglo-Saxon kings whose reign, like that of Hrothgar and Beowulf, extended over a long period of time and for whom old age was a potential but real threat to their authority. Consequently, the long-reigning Anglo-Saxons kings listed at the beginning of this chapter (see table 7.1) can all be considered potential patrons of *Beowulf*. Their old age would make them interested in a poem that addresses the problems of elderly kingship. Of course, it would be at best a speculative argument which would need to be further substantiated with reference to other linguistic, historical and cultural considerations.

The search for a patron is part of the contentious and voluminous discussion about the dating of *Beowulf* and, as such, falls outside the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, I want to offer one further speculation which fits with the metrical, linguistic, paleographical and lexical arguments that date the composition of *Beowulf* to eighth-century Mercia.¹²⁴ Offa of Mercia (d. 796) was one of the longest reigning

¹²¹ Some argue that Wiglaf was unsuitable for kingship as he was not Beowulf's son, see F. M. Biggs, 'Beowulf and Some Fictions of the Geatish Succession', *ASE* 32 (2003), 71–5.

¹²² D. Whitelock, 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 31 (1949), 87.

¹²³ Some of these attempts at finding a patron are summarised in Whitelock 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry', 87; C. Chase, 'Opinions on the Date of *Beowulf*, 1815–1980', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981), 3–8; S. Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 1993), 18–53.

¹²⁴ The dating of *Beowulf* is a contentious issue in *Beowulf* scholarship, but the case for an early date for *Beowulf* is convincingly brought forward by all papers in *Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Neidorf. For alternative views and a summary of the debate until 2000, see R. M. Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*', in *Beowulf Reader*, ed. Baker, 281–302.

kings in Anglo-Saxon history and may have entertained a particular interest in elderly kingship, which makes him a probable candidate for the poem's patronage.

Offa would certainly have been familiar with the ill-fated careers of two other elderly kings: his predecessor Æthelbald of Mercia (d. 757) and his ancestor Wermund. The former had been killed after ruling the Mercians for forty-two years by his own bodyguard, who, as Brooks has suggested, were dissatisfied by the passive attitude of their elderly king.¹²⁵ Offa became king of the Mercians in the year of Æthelbald's death (757) and must have known how his aged predecessor fared. Furthermore, Offa was probably familiar with the story of his ancestor who faced a foreign invasion in his old age: Wermund, father to Offa's namesake Offa of Angeln. Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* describes how King Wermund, having grown old and blind, was attacked by the king of Saxony, who claimed that the aged king was no longer suited to rule his people. Although Wermund at first wished to fight in a duel himself, he was ultimately saved by his son Offa who took his father's place.¹²⁶ This anecdote of Wermund's problematic old age was also known in England and was recounted in the twelfth-century *Vitae Offarum duorum* [The Lives of Two Offas], a text chronicling the lives of Offa of Angeln and Offa of Mercia.¹²⁷ Since it is generally assumed that Offa of Mercia was interested in his Anglian namesake,¹²⁸ he must also have known the story of the aged Wermund. Given the difficulties that both his predecessor Æthelbald and his ancestor Wermund experienced in their old age, Offa likely anticipated that old age could be a real threat to someone who had occupied the throne as long as himself. Could he have commissioned a poem about elderly kings for guidance in this matter?

Scholars have advanced several other reasons that make Offa of Mercia a likely patron for *Beowulf*. Whitelock and Clemoes, for instance, have both argued for an eighth-century Mercian provenance of the poem on the basis of historical and cultural grounds,¹²⁹ while a similar date and place of origin have been proposed on the basis of linguistic similarities between *Beowulf* and other eighth-century Mercian texts.¹³⁰ The main argument for the involvement of Offa in the commission of *Beowulf*, however, is a digression which praises Offa's ancestor Offa of Angeln and also mentions Wermund (= Garmund). These lines describe how Offa of Angeln subdued his aggressive wife Fremu:¹³¹

hiold heahlufan	wið hæleþa brego,
ealles moncynnes	mine gefræge
þone selestan	bi sæm tweonum,
eormencynnes;	forðam Offa wæs

¹²⁵ Brooks, 'Social and Political Background', 8.

¹²⁶ Saxo, *History of the Danes*, ed. Ellis Davidson, trans. Fisher, 106–7.

¹²⁷ *The Lives of Two Offas*, ed. and trans. M. Swanton (Crediton, 2010), 1–16.

¹²⁸ Offa of Angeln also features in a genealogy of Offa of Mercia and his exploits are mentioned in the poem *Widsith*, two texts which scholars have associated with Offa of Mercia. *Lives of Two Offas*, ed. Swanton, xlv–lvii; M. Atherton, 'Mentions of Offa in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Beowulf* and *Widsith*', in *Æthelbald and Offa*, ed. Hill and Worthington, 65–74.

¹²⁹ Whitelock, *Audience of Beowulf*, 60–4; Clemoes, *Interactions*, xiii, 58–65.

¹³⁰ *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, ed. C. L. Wrenn, 2nd rev. ed. (London, 1958), 15–9.

¹³¹ On the name Fremu rather than Modthryth for Offa's wife, see *Beowulf*, 222–6.

geofum ond guðum, garcene man,
 wide geweorðod, wisdom heold
 eðel sinne; þonon Eomer woc
 hæleðum to helpe, Hem[m]inges mæg,
 nefa Garmundes, niða cræftig. (ll. 1954–62)

[she held great esteem for the lord of heroes (Offa), the best of all mankind, of humankind, between the two seas, as I have heard; because Offa was, with gifts and battles, a spear-brave man, honoured widely, he held his homeland with wisdom; from him Eomer was born, as a help to the heroes, kinsman of Hemming, grandson of Garmund, strong in battles.]

This digression and the explicit praise for Offa of Angeln as the ‘best of all mankind between the two seas’ has been considered to be an attempt to compliment Offa’s eighth-century Mercian namesake, in whose court, therefore, the poem may have been composed.¹³²

Interestingly, the eighth-century Offa of Mercia himself exemplifies that old age did not necessarily have a negative impact on a king’s willingness to take action and conduct military affairs. In fact, he was very proactive in his later years. In setting up his son Ecgfrith as the co-ruler of Mercia in 787, for example, Offa used dire measures, as the Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin reminded ealdorman Brorda in a letter: “You know very well how much blood his father [Offa] shed to secure the kingdom for his son [Ecgfrith]”.¹³³ Later, in the 790s, Offa became entangled in a conflict with Charlemagne and, only two years before his death, he still had the rebellious sub-king Æthelberht of East Anglia beheaded.¹³⁴ So, while the patron of *Beowulf* may never be identified beyond any doubt, I would not deem it unlikely that Offa’s energetic old age was inspired by listening to a poem encouraging active elderly kingship, not unlike *Beowulf*.

¹³² E.g., J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), 120-1; Swanton, *Crisis and Development*, 153, Clemoes, *Interactions*, 58. Not everyone shares this view, see Newton, *Origins of Beowulf*, 64–71; cf. F. Lenaghan, ‘The Poetic Purpose of the Offa-Digression in *Beowulf*’, *RES* ns 60 (2009), 538–60.

¹³³ The letter is dated after Offa’s death, in 797. Quoted in S. Keynes, ‘The Kingdom of the Mercians in the Eighth Century’, in *Æthelbald and Offa*, ed. Hill and Worthington, 18. If Offa did commission *Beowulf*, his co-rulership with his son would explain the presence of lessons for young princes, noted in the introduction to this chapter, alongside the elderly role models in the poem.

¹³⁴ For a summary of Offa’s career, see Keynes ‘Kingdom of the Mercians’, 8–18.

gamole geomeowlan: Old women in Anglo-Saxon England

bryd ...
gomela iomeowlan golde berofene
Onelan modor ond Ohtheres (*Beowulf*, ll. 2930b–2)

[(Ongentheow's) wife, the old woman of a former day,¹ deprived of gold,
mother of Onela and Ohthere]

With the possible exception of the monstrous mother of Grendel, Ongentheow's wife is the only woman who is explicitly described as 'old' in Old English poetry. Typically, she remains nameless and is identified only by her relationship to three men: her husband Ongentheow and her two sons. This nebulosity is indicative of the relative disinterest Anglo-Saxon poets appear to have had for elderly women. Even in the unique case of the poem *Elene*, in which the main protagonist is the aged Helena (c.250–c.330), the poet Cynewulf appears indifferent to the old age of his main persona. Though Helena is estimated to have been in her seventies when she made her pilgrimage to the Holy Land,² Cynewulf never once refers to her old age.³ The scarcity of older women in Old English poetry is enigmatic, especially given the widespread popularity of elderly female characters in classical and late medieval literature, such as Ovid's Dipsas and Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath.⁴

In pastoral texts from the Anglo-Saxon period, old women feature only marginally. For Ælfric, the most prolific homiletic author of the Anglo-Saxon period, only one issue with regard to old women was worth commenting on at some length: their unabashed sexual appetite despite their inability to bring forth children.⁵ In his

¹ For this translation of "iomeowlan", see Appendix, s.v. *geomeowle*.

² J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden, 1992), 55–72.

³ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon. An interesting parallel to Cynewulf's blind spot for the old age of his protagonist is found in the anonymous prose *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*. Although Mary's age can be reconstructed as being around seventy-six, this is never made explicit and the author only implicitly refers to her old age once, by mentioning her white hair. *The Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. H. Magennis (Exeter, 2002), ll. 217, 362, 372, 594–5; cf. C. A. Lees and G. R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, 2001), 209, n. 76. By contrast, the other male protagonist of this saint's life, Zosimus, a man aged around fifty-three, is frequently called old, see *Life of Mary of Egypt*, ed. and trans. Magennis, ll. 226–7, 236, 299, 304, 352, 359, 703, 711, 834, 843, 852, 927, 932, etc.

⁴ V. Rosivach, 'Anus: Some Older Women in Latin Literature', *The Classical World* 88 (1994), 107–17; Classen, 'Old Age in the Middle Ages', 24–8; G. Mieszkowski, 'Old Age and Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman', in *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, ed. Classen, 299–319.

⁵ On this issue, see R. H. Bremmer Jr, 'Widows in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Between Poverty and the Pyre: Moments in the History of Widowhood*, ed. J. Bremmer and L. van den Bosch (London, 1995), 77.

letter to Sigefyrth, for example, he classified the sexual needs of an elderly woman as shameful, as intercourse was only meant for procreation:

Hit byð swyðe sceandlic, þæt eald wif sceole
 ceorles brucan, þonne heo forwerod byð
 and teames ætealdod, ungehealtsumlice,
 forðan ðe gesceafta ne beoð for nanum oðran þinge astealde
 butan for bearnteame anum, swa swa us secgað halige bec.⁶

[It is very shameful that an old woman should have sex with a man, when she is worn out with age and too old for childbearing, unchastely, because sexual relations are not meant for any other thing but procreation only, just as holy books tell us.]

In his homily for the second Sunday before Lent, Ælfric repeated this notion: “[h]it is swiðe ungedafenlic and scandlic þæt forwerode menn and untymende gifa wilnian, ðonne gifa ne sind gesette for nanum ðinge, buton for bearnteame” [It is very improper and shameful that old and unfruitful men should desire marriage, since marriage is not meant for anything but procreation].⁷ On the whole, the sporadic presence of explicit comments on old women in the Bible, such as Paul’s encouragement for old women to teach young women how to be good wives (Titus 2:3–5),⁸ do not appear to have prompted Anglo-Saxon homilists to devote much attention to elderly women in general.

Given this lack of poetic attestations of and explicit attitudes towards old women, it is little wonder that the topic has received hardly any scholarly attention in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies.⁹ This chapter aims to fill this gap in the scholarship and focuses on the roles and functions that old women could fulfill in early medieval England. As such, this chapter is narrower in scope than the previous two chapters, which sought to reconstruct the perception of elderly warriors and kings by analysing literary representations within their historical contexts.

Because of their apparent underrepresentation in Anglo-Saxon literature, this chapter first considers evidence of old women drawn from the fields of archaeology

⁶ Assmann, hom. 2, ll. 157–61.

⁷ *ÆCHom II*, hom. 6, ll. 128–31. See p. 85, n. 62 above.

⁸ Ælfric mentions Paul’s Epistle to Titus in his letter to Sigeweard, but, like Bede, Wulfstan and other Anglo-Saxon homilists, he refrained from commenting on this particular passage. See V. Heuchan, ‘All Things to All Men: Representations of the Apostle Paul in Anglo-Saxon Literature’, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2010, 182, 255–8. On the knowledge of Paul’s Letter to Titus in Anglo-Saxon England, see also A. R. Rumble, ‘Church Leadership and the Anglo-Saxons’, in *Leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church: From Bede to Stigand*, ed. A. R. Rumble (Woodbridge, 2012), 4–5.

⁹ Various pivotal publications on Anglo-Saxon women do not pay explicit attention to old women, e.g., C. Fell, with C. Clark and E. Williams, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (London, 1984); S. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, 1992); S. Foot, *Veiled Women: Female Religious Communities in England, 871–1066* (Aldershot, 2000). One exception is the chapter on early medieval dowager queens in P. Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King’s Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983), 143–90.

and anthropology. It then provides an overview of how the lives and actions of aged women were recorded in the written documents of the Anglo-Saxon period, such as chronicles, letters and wills. Despite the fragmented and often anecdotal nature of this written source material, some light can be shed onto the status and possible communal roles of these Anglo-Saxon elderly women.

Grave goods and culture bearers: Perspectives from archaeology and anthropology

Some archaeologists have claimed that the transition to old age effected a decline in social status for women. For instance, early Anglo-Saxon graves of elderly women contain fewer precious metals and feminine-specific grave goods, such as girdle items, than the graves of younger women.¹⁰ This negative trend has been interpreted as implying a reduced social value for women once they reached post-menopausal age, since “reproductive fertility defined the social value of women in the early medieval period”.¹¹ Guy Halsall, who described similar trends in Merovingian Francia, concluded that the value of a woman “to her family was derived from her potential to have children, and thus her value as a marriage counter in alliances with other families”.¹² Put differently, with the discontinuity of their roles as mothers and potential marriage partners, elderly women moved to the margins of their community.

However, these conclusions with regard to a reduction in social status once women reached old age have recently been challenged.¹³ Archaeologist Rebecca Gowland, for instance, has pointed out that the number of burial furnishings for older women may reflect an alteration in gender signification and social role, rather than a reduction of social status. No longer taking on the role of bride or mother, old women may have given their own jewelry and other gender-specific items to their daughters at the time of their marriage or bequeathed them as heirlooms.¹⁴ The fact that these items are no longer found in the graves of older women, then, may be a reflection of their different roles within their communities, rather than an expression of social value.

Gowland’s suggestion of a change rather than a decline in status for elderly women finds support in a study of old women in Carolingian Francia, as well as in a number of anthropological studies of modern societies. For Carolingian Francia, a society in many respects comparable and contemporary to that of Anglo-Saxon England, Valerie L. Garver has shown that old women could still play important roles, as grandmothers, landowning widows, abbesses and dowager queens.¹⁵ Discussing more modern cultures, anthropologists have similarly shown that aging need not necessarily result in a reduced status for women, but may also involve empowerment

¹⁰ Crawford, 58.

¹¹ Gilchrist, *Medieval Life*, 4.

¹² G. Halsall ‘Female Status and Power in Early Merovingian Central Austrasia: The Burial Evidence’. *Early Medieval Europe* 5 (1996), 15.

¹³ Stoodley, ‘Childhood to Old Age’, 663.

¹⁴ Gowland, ‘Ageing the Past’, 150–1.

¹⁵ V. L. Garver, ‘Old Age and Women in the Carolingian World’, in *Old Age in the Middle Ages*, ed. Classen, 121–41.

and liberation from social constraints that govern the lives of younger women.¹⁶ Setting aside their role as child-bearers, old women in these non-industrial societies can function as ‘culture bearers’; they become actively involved in the upbringing of their grandchildren, act as religious role models and function as conveyors of local or tribal history as well as other cultural knowledge, including herbal medicine and dream divination.¹⁷

As I argue below, the examples of old women which are traceable in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record provide no ground for assuming that all elderly women held a particularly low status or were considered socially less valuable than younger women. Rather, like Garver’s Carolingian women, some of these elderly Anglo-Saxon women were still prominent political players; others, like the ‘culture bearers’ of anthropologists, played important cultural roles, as grandmothers, religious role models, teachers, remembrancers and explainers of dreams.

Tracing old women in the Anglo-Saxon documentary record

To note that women in general are mostly absent from the Anglo-Saxon cultural record borders on tautology.¹⁸ Yet, the figures are staggering: *PASE (Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England)*, “a relational database which provides access to structured information relating to all the recorded inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon England from the late sixth to the late eleventh century”,¹⁹ lists only 973 individuals who are certainly female, as opposed to 17196 individuals who are certainly male. These figures reflect the male bias of the period’s written sources and the fact that in the Anglo-Saxon period most of the business considered worth recording, including secular and spiritual politics, was conducted by men.²⁰ For aged women, the situation appears even worse: only 2 of the 973 women listed by *PASE* are labelled as ‘old’.²¹ In part, this low figure is due to a methodological oversight of the creators of *PASE*: other women who are

¹⁶ Gowland, ‘Ageing the Past’, 151; *idem*, ‘Age, Ageism and Osteological Bias: The Evidence from Late Roman Britain’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* ss 65 (2007), 167.

¹⁷ Anthropological scholarship on old women is a vast and growing field. Some studies highlight the role of old women as culture bearers, including S. J. Rasmussen, ‘From Childbearers to Culture-Bearers: Transition to Postchildbearing among Tuareg Women’, *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness* 19 (2000), 91–116; J. Dickerson-Putman, ‘Old Women at the Top: An Exploration of Age Stratification among Bena Bena Women’, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9 (1994), 193–205; J. W. Peterson, ‘Age of Wisdom: Elderly Black Women in Family and Church’, in *Cultural Context of Aging*, ed. Sokolovsky, 276–92; H. Bar-Itzhak, ‘Old Jewish Moroccan Women Relate in an Israeli Context’, in *Israeli Folk Narratives: Settlement, Immigration, Ethnicity* (Detroit, 2005), 97–152.

¹⁸ The absence of women from the cultural record is discussed by Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 1–14; J. T. Rosenthal, ‘Anglo-Saxon Attitudes: Men’s Sources, Women’s History’, in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. J. T. Rosenthal (Athens, 1990), 259–84.

¹⁹ *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*, <http://www.pase.ac.uk>.

²⁰ Rosenthal, ‘Anglo-Saxon Attitudes’.

²¹ Anonymous 286 is labeled as “Æbbe 4’s old nurse” and Anonymous 287 is labeled as “Old nun of Wimborne”. ‘Anonymous 286’ and ‘Anonymous 287’, *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*. <http://www.pase.ac.uk>.

called old in the sources are not listed as such in the database.²² On the other hand, the presence of old women is hard to establish in the sources and the majority of old women, it can be assumed, simply went unrecorded.

One problem in prising old women out of the Anglo-Saxon documentary record is the fact that dates of birth were very rarely recorded. As a result, there is often no way to reconstruct a woman's age. Even the birth year of one of the most powerful women of the Anglo-Saxon period, Emma of Normandy (d. 1052), is unknown, despite her marriage to two successive kings and a chronicle bearing her name, the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, which was commissioned in her honour. In cases where someone's specific date of birth was recorded, there often was a particular reason to do so. The eleventh-century hagiographer Goscelin, for example, recorded that one Brihtgifu was born thirty days after the death of St. Edith in 984 and that, inspired by the same saint, she had grabbed a burning wax taper during her baptism. The same Brihtgifu became the third abbess of St. Edith's community at Wilton and, as Goscelin records, died in the year 1063, at the venerable age of seventy-nine.²³ Similarly, a woman's specific age at death would typically be recorded only when the number of years carried some significance. For instance, Bede reports that St. Hild (614–680) died at the age of 66, having spent thirty-three years as a lay woman and an equal number of years at the monastery of Strensall-Whitby.²⁴ Consequently, rather than relying on the age threshold by which one was considered old by the Anglo-Saxons (50 years of age, as established in chapter 1), other factors need to be taken into account to trace old women.

Sporadically, women are labelled as 'old' in personal correspondence, chronicles and saints' lives. The letter by Boniface (d. 754) to Abbess Bugga is a case in point: it aims to console her in her "beautiful old age". The letter reveals little about Bugga's experience of old age, other than that, as Boniface tells her, God "desires to adorn the beauty of [her] soul with labour and sorrow".²⁵ The letter provides no further insight into what exactly ailed Bugga or how old she actually was. In chronicles and saints' lives, old women are occasionally named as witnesses to miracles, companions of saints or witches. In such instances, it is often impossible to establish whether the women mentioned in these narrative sources represent actual, historical individuals or whether they are fictional *topoi* and so reflect how the Anglo-Saxons expected an old woman to behave.²⁶

²² For example, Hildelith (fl. c. 700), abbess of Barking, is mentioned by Bede as having become "ad ultimam senectutem" [extremely old], but PASE labels her simply as "abbess of Barking". Bede, *HE*, IV.10; 'Hildelith 1', *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*. <http://www.pase.ac.uk>.

²³ Goscelin, *Vita Edithae*, trans. M. Wright and K. Loncar, in *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and Liber confortatorius*, ed. S. Hollis (Turnhout, 2004), ch. 26.

²⁴ Bede, *HE*, IV.23.

²⁵ *Letters of Boniface*, trans. Emerton, let. 77.

²⁶ The stories of two elderly Anglo-Saxon witches (see below: table 8.1, nos. 23 and 30), in particular, are problematic, since they occur in texts written after the Norman Conquest and most likely represent Norman (and not Anglo-Saxon) imagination. A. Davies, 'Witches in Anglo-Saxon England: Five Case Histories', in *Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Manchester, 1989), 42–8; A. L. Meaney, 'Women, Witchcraft and Magic in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Superstition*, ed. Scragg, 30, identifies those working witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England as "young women looking for lovers, wives trying to win the favour of their husbands, or to produce a live baby,

In administrative and legal documents, old women can be identified only by deduction, since the label ‘old woman’ is not used in any charter or law code. A mention of grandchildren in a will, for example, is a clear indication that a woman was older, albeit that one might become a grandmother somewhat before the age of fifty. The various widows that can be traced in the Anglo-Saxon documentary record may well have been old and widowhood is a conceivable aspect of the life of an old woman.²⁷ However, while some of these widows were certainly old, such as the royal widows Eadgifu (b. in or before 904, d. in or after 966) and Emma of Normandy, others need not have been elderly at all: Judith of Flanders, widow to Kings Æthelwulf (d. 858) and Æthelbald (d. 860), had already been widowed twice while still in her teens.²⁸ As such, it may well be that the actions and deeds of various old women were in fact recorded in charters, wills and other legal documents, but there is often no way to identify these women beyond any doubt as being old.

Nevertheless, with some effort, old women can be traced in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record. Table 8.1 lists thirty-two women who can be classified as old, either because it can be established that they lived beyond the age of fifty, because they are mentioned as grandmothers, or because they are labelled ‘old’ in a narrative source:

1. **Hild** (614–680), abbess of Strensall-Whitby.²⁹
2. **Eanflæd** (b. 626, d. after 685), queen in Northumbria, consort of King Oswiu, retired to the monastery of Strensall-Whitby.³⁰
3. **Seaxburh** (b. in or before 655, d. c.700), queen of Kent, consort of King Eorcenberht, abbess of Ely.³¹
4. **Ælflæd** (654–714), abbess of Strensall-Whitby.³²
5. **Hildelith** (fl. c.700), abbess of Barking.³³
6. **Bugga** (d. 759/65), abbess, correspondent of St. Boniface.³⁴
7. **Eangyth** (fl. c.700), abbess, correspondent of St. Boniface, mother of Bugga.³⁵
8. **Sister of Eangyth** (fl. c.700).³⁶
9. **Walburg** (c.710–779?), abbess of Heidenheim.³⁷

or mothers anxious for the health of their children”, rather than the alleged witches of later centuries, “old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul and full of wrinkles”.

²⁷ For widows in Anglo-Saxon England, see Bremmer, ‘Widows’; J. Crick, ‘Men, Women and Widows: Widowhood in Pre-Conquest England’, in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europa*, ed. S. Cavallo and L. Warner (Harlow, 1999), 24–36.

²⁸ Bremmer, ‘Widows’, 64.

²⁹ A. Thacker, ‘Hild (614–680)’, *ODNB*.

³⁰ *idem*, ‘Eanflæd [St Eanflæd] (b. 626, d. after 685)’, *ODNB*.

³¹ D. Rollason, ‘Seaxburh (b. in or before 655, d. c.700)’, *ODNB*. According to the *Liber Eliensis*, trans. Fairweather, I.35, Seaxburh “brought her last day to a close at a good, late age”.

³² A. Thacker, ‘Ælflæd (654–714)’, *ODNB*.

³³ M. Lapidge, ‘Hildelith (fl. c.700)’, *ODNB*. According to Bede, *HE*, iv.10, Hildelith “multisque annis, id est usque ad ultimam senectutem, eidem monasterio strenuissime” [presided over the monastery for many years until she was extremely old].

³⁴ B. Yorke, ‘Bugga (d. 759x65)’, *ODNB*; *Letters of Boniface*, trans. Emerton, let. 77.

³⁵ Eangyth describes herself as “more advanced in years and guilty of more offenses in my life”. *Letters of Boniface*, trans. Emerton, let. 6.

³⁶ Eangyth describes this sister in her letter to Boniface as “a very aged mother”. *Letters of Boniface*, trans. Emerton, let. 6.

³⁷ C. Larrington, ‘Walburg (c.710–779?)’, *ODNB*.

10. **Old mother of St. Cuthman** (fl. 8th c.).³⁸
11. **Leoba** (d. 782), abbess of Tauberbischofsheim.³⁹
12. **Æbba** (8th c.), mother of St. Leoba.⁴⁰
13. **Old nurse** (8th c.), who interprets dream of Æbba.⁴¹
14. **Old nun** (8th c.), who interprets dream of St. Leoba.⁴²
15. **Dunne** (8th c.), testatrix, leaves minster at Withington to granddaughter.⁴³
16. **Eadgifu** (b. in or before 904, d. in or after 966), queen of the Anglo-Saxons, consort of Edward the Elder.⁴⁴
17. **Wynflæd** (fl. c.950), testatrix, leaves lands, goods and horses to grandchildren.⁴⁵
18. **Æthelthryth** (fl. 964), abbess of Nunnaminster.⁴⁶
19. **Ælfthryth** (d. 999/1001), grandmother of Æthelstan and Edmund Ironside, retires to nunnery in Wherwell.⁴⁷
20. **Æthelflæd of Damerham** (10th c.), second wife of King Edmund (920/21–946).⁴⁸
21. **Emma of Normandy** (d. 1052), queen of England.⁴⁹
22. **Brihtgifu** (984–1065), abbess of Wilton.⁵⁰
23. **Old witch** (fl. 1017–1034), makes a love potion for Thorkell's wife, during the episcopate of Æthelric, bishop of Dorchester (1016).⁵¹
24. **Gytha** (fl. c.1022–1068), mother of Harold Godwinson.⁵²
25. **Vulfrunna/Judith** (fl. c.1000–c.1087), nun at Barking.⁵³
26. **Mother of St. Wulfstan** (10th/11th c.), retired to Worcester nunnery in old age.⁵⁴
27. **Ælflæd** (10th/11th c.), old nun at Wilton, witnesses a lamb come out of the tomb of St. Wulfthryth.⁵⁵
28. **Ælfwen** (11th c.), aged recluse at St. Bennet's at Hulme.⁵⁶

³⁸ *Vita Sancti Cuthmanni*, ed. Blair, 'Saint Cuthman', ch. 3–5. Cuthman's mother is paralysed because of her old age.

³⁹ Rudolf, *Vita s. Leoba*, trans. Talbot, 223, records that Leoba at the end of her life "was an old woman and became decrepit through age".

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 210, describes how "the onset of old age had deprived them [Æbba and her husband] of all hope of offspring".

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴³ S 1255; S 1429.

⁴⁴ P. Stafford, 'Eadgifu (b. in or before 904, d. in or after 966)', *ODNB*.

⁴⁵ S 1539.

⁴⁶ According Wulfstan of Winchester, she was "moribus et aetate maturam" [ripe in years and experience]. Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 2.

⁴⁷ P. Stafford, 'Ælfthryth (d. 999x1001)', *ODNB*.

⁴⁸ Æthelflæd leaves a will dated to 962x991 (S 1494), meaning she may have outlived her husband by as long as forty-five years. According to the *Liber Eliensis*, Æthelflæd "remained perpetually in widowhood, following the example of the blessed Anna". *Liber Eliensis*, trans. Fairweather, II.64.

⁴⁹ S. Keynes, 'Emma (d. 1052)', *ODNB*. Emma is called "seo ealde hlæfdige" [the old lady] in MS C of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 5: MS C*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge, 2001), s.a. 1051.

⁵⁰ Goscelin, *Vita Edithe*, trans. Wright and Loncar, ch. 26.

⁵¹ *Chronicon abbatiæ Ramesiensis*, ed. W. D. Macray (London, 1886), ch. 74. Lived during the episcopate of Æthelric, bishop of Dorchester (1017–1034).

⁵² A. Williams, 'Godwine, earl of Wessex (d. 1053)', *ODNB*.

⁵³ Goscelin, *Vita et virtutes sanctae Vulfrildae virginis*, ed. M. L. Colker, 'Texts of Jocelyn of Canterbury which Relate to the History of Barking Abbey', *Studia Monastica* 7 (1965), 383–460, prol., ch. 13, 15.

⁵⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Vita s. Wulfstani*, trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, I.2.

⁵⁵ Goscelin, *Translatio Edithe*, trans. M. Wright and K. Loncar, in *Writing*, ed. Hollis, ch. 8.

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| <p>29. Ælfwen (11th c.), aged recluse at St. Stephen's, Hackington.⁵⁷</p> <p>30. Old witch (11th c.), curses Hereward the wake for William the Conqueror.⁵⁸</p> <p>31. Old, deaf and blind woman (???), whose youth, hearing and sight are restored by St. Birinus.⁵⁹</p> <p>32. Old, blind woman (???), whose sight is restored at the altar of St. Augustine.⁶⁰</p> |
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Table 8.1 Identifiably old women in Anglo-Saxon England

Quantitatively, the results remain poor and this select group of elderly female individuals cannot claim any sort of representativeness, if only because noble and clerical women are generally overrepresented in the sources. Moreover, the disparate nature and dates of these sources, ranging from wills to chronicles, dating from the eighth to thirteenth centuries, make it impossible to draw a single, monolith picture of the old woman in Anglo-Saxon England. Nevertheless, there is some value in bringing these old women to light and their lives may at least partially represent a general experience of old age for Anglo-Saxon women.

The remainder of this chapter examines the roles some of these old Anglo-Saxon women played as political figures, grandmothers and sources of cultural knowledge. Overall, there appears to be no grounds for assuming that all old women enjoyed a particularly low status or were considered socially valueless; rather, some of them appear as well-respected 'culture bearers', a term familiar from anthropological studies on old women.

Crones at court: Old women as political figures.

Minois, musing on Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122/24–1204) who remained politically active well into her eighties, remarked that "[i]n an age when giving birth was more deadly than participating in battle, only the strongest mothers would reach the menopause, and they would then expend their surplus energy in politics".⁶¹ In Carolingian Francia, as Garver has shown, this certainly was the case and old women, in their capacities as royal widows, abbesses or landowners, still exerted a level of political influence that must not be underestimated.⁶² Although the Anglo-Saxon period did not produce a woman equal to Eleanor, a number of elderly women certainly left their mark on the political history of Anglo-Saxon England.

Gytha of Wessex (fl. c.1022–1068), a prominent player in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, was one such woman. Widow of the once powerful Earl Godwin

⁵⁶ Herman, *Miracula sancti Eadmundi*, ed. T. Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey. Vol. 1* (London, 1890), ch. 8.

⁵⁷ Goscelin, *Translatio s. Mildrethe*, ed. D. W. Rollason, 'Goscelin of Canterbury's Account of the Translation and Miracles of St. Mildrith (BHL 5961/4): An Edition with Notes', *Mediaeval Studies* 48 (1986), 139–211, ch. 30.

⁵⁸ *Gesta Herewardi*, trans. M. Swanton, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. S. Knight and T. H. Olgren (Kalamazoo, MI, 2000), ch. 24–5.

⁵⁹ *Vita s. Birini*, ed. and trans. R. C. Love, *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives*, (Oxford, 1996), ch. 15–6.

⁶⁰ Goscelin, *Historia translationis s. Augustini*, PL 155, l.20.

⁶¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 195.

⁶² Garver, 'Old Age and Women', 133–4.

(d. 1053) and mother of the fallen King Harold Godwinson (d. 1066), Gytha had become a focal point of rebellion against the Norman usurpers. Despite the fact that she aged over sixty, William the Conqueror considered her enough of a political threat to conduct a pre-emptive strike against Exeter, one of Gytha's strongholds. William besieged the town for eighteen days and forced it to surrender during the winter of 1068, causing Gytha to flee to Flanders where she died the following year.⁶³ William had good reason to fear the old lady: she had powerful political connections, such as her nephew King Swein of Denmark,⁶⁴ and, as one of the richest lay landholders in the South-West of England, she was able to rally the support of many men who had been and still were her tenants.⁶⁵

Two other Anglo-Saxon noblewomen remained active within the political sphere despite their old age and, like Gytha, were ousted from their positions. The royal widows Eadgifu (b. in or before 904, d. in or after 966) and Emma of Normandy (d. 1052) are both examples of Pauline Stafford's claim that "[m]any queens reach the height of their careers not as wives of royal husbands but as mothers and regents for young royal sons".⁶⁶ Eadgifu was the widow of Edward the Elder (d. 924) and had a prominent position at court during the successive reigns of her sons Edmund (r. 939–946) and Eadred (r. 946–955), as demonstrated by the fact that she signed various charters as "mater regis" [mother of the king]. When her grandson, Eadwig (r. 955–959), became king in 955, he seems to have considered his grandmother a political opponent and deprived her of her lands.⁶⁷ However, as soon as her other grandson Edgar (r. 959–975) took to the throne, Eadgifu's possessions were restored and began to sign charters as "ava regis" [grandmother of the king]. Later, Eadgifu left the court and probably retired to a religious house.⁶⁸ Emma of Normandy (d. 1052), widow of Æthelred II (d. 1016) and Cnut the Great (d. 1035), was probably aged between her fifties and sixties, when she was actively involved in the rise to royal power of her sons Harthacnut (r. 1040–1042) and Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066). While the first allowed his aged mother to exercise considerable political control,⁶⁹ the latter terminated Emma's political pretensions upon his ascension to the throne. MS D of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that Edward did so because his mother had not supported him enough in the past:

Her wæs Eadward gehalgod to cyngre æt Wincestre on forman Easterdæg. 7
þæs geres .xiiii. nihton ær Andreas mæssan, man gerædde þan cyngre þæt he
rad of Gleawcestre 7 Leofric eorl 7 Godwine eorl 7 Sigwarð eorl mid heora
geinge to Wincestre on unwær on þa hlæfdian, 7 bereafedan hi æt eallon þan

⁶³ Mason, *House of Godwine*, 180. J. O. Prestwich, *The Place of War in English History 1066-1214*, ed. M. Prestwich (Woodbridge, 2004), 28–31.

⁶⁴ Prestwich, *Place of War*, 29.

⁶⁵ Mason, *House of Godwine*, 180–1; P. Stafford, 'Chronicle D, 1067 and Women: Gendering Conquest in Eleventh-Century England', in *Anglo-Saxons: Studies Presented to Cyril Roy Hart*, ed. S. Keynes and A. P. Smyth (Scarborough, 2006), 219–20.

⁶⁶ Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, 146.

⁶⁷ *Idem*, 'Eadgifu'.

⁶⁸ Bremner, 'Widows', 65.

⁶⁹ P. Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), 247.

gærsaman þe heo ahte, þa wæron unatellendlice, for þan þe heo wæs æror þam cyngc hire suna swiðe heard, þæt heo him læsse dyde þonne he wolde, ær þam þe he cyng wære 7 eac syððan, 7 leton hi þær siððan binnan sittan.⁷⁰

[In this year (1043) Edward was consecrated as king at Winchester on the first day of Easter and in that year, 14 nights before the Mass of St. Andrew, the king was advised to ride from Gloucester, as well as earls Leofric, Godwin and Siward with their retinue, to Winchester in secret to the lady (Emma), and they robbed her of all the riches that she owned, which were uncountable, because she had been very tough on her son the king, in that she did less for him than he wanted her to, before he was king and also afterwards, and they allowed her to remain in there since then.]

Although Emma was allowed to return to court in 1044, she, like Eadgifu, spent the last years of her life away from court, dying at Winchester in 1052, in her sixties or early seventies.⁷¹ The fact that it took a king and three prominent earls to deprive Emma of her possessions is testimony to the powerful political position Emma still held in her old age.⁷²

Whether they did so willingly or not, most elderly royal widows in the early Middle Ages retired to monastic communities, often founded by themselves on their dower lands.⁷³ For Anglo-Saxon England, this route appears to have been taken voluntarily by former queens Ælfthryth (d. 999x1001), who retired to a nunnery in Wherwell,⁷⁴ Eanflæd (b. 626, d. after 685), who entered the monastery of Strensall-Whitby,⁷⁵ and Seaxburh (b., in or before 655, d. c.700), who became abbess of Ely.⁷⁶ Life in a monastery presented these elderly royal widows with the opportunity to live out their lives in peace and religious reflection, away from politics.

However, some elderly nuns still played their part at court, as advisors to kings. For example, it seems as if the political influence of St. Hild (614–680), abbess of Strensall-Whitby and one of the “dominant figures in the early English Church”,⁷⁷ peaked in her later years. She hosted the Synod of Whitby (664), an important meeting which decided the future course of the English Church, when she was fifty years old. Furthermore, Bede reports that Hild, despite suffering an illness in the last six years of her life, maintained an active role in ecclesiastical politics until her death.⁷⁸ At the age

⁷⁰ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Vol. 6: MS D*, ed. G. P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996), s.a. 1043.

⁷¹ Stafford, *Queen Emma*, 253.

⁷² H. O’Brien, *Queen Emma and the Vikings: The Woman Who Shaped the Events of 1066* (London, 2005), 208.

⁷³ Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, 175–82.

⁷⁴ *Idem*, ‘Ælfthryth’.

⁷⁵ Thacker, ‘Eanflæd’.

⁷⁶ Rollason, ‘Seaxburh’.

⁷⁷ P. Wormald, ‘Hilda, Saint and Scholar (614–680)’, in *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and Its Historian*, ed. S. Baxter (Malden, 2006), 267.

⁷⁸ Bede, *HE*, IV.23, describes how Hild was “[p]ercussa etenim febribus acri coepit ardore fatigari” [attacked by a fever which tortured her with its burning heat]. R. Smith, ‘Glimpses of Some Anglo-Saxon Women’, in *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, ed. J. Dor (Liège,

of sixty-four, Hild was still politically involved enough to attempt to get her former pupil Wilfrid expelled from the see of York, albeit unsuccessfully.⁷⁹ Hild's successor as abbess of Strensall-Whitby, Ælfflæd (654–714), took part in another matter concerning Wilfrid and was consulted as one of four senior ecclesiastics, alongside three archbishops. Ælfflæd was aged fifty-two at the time and is described by Wilfrid's biographer as "semper totius provinciae consolatrix optimaque consiliatrix" [always the comforter and best counsellor of the whole province].⁸⁰ Ælfflæd's words carried weight and, in the words of Alan Thacker, she "could make and unmake bishops".⁸¹

As was the case for Carolingian women, the political influence of Anglo-Saxon women did not necessarily waver with the onset of old age. Royal widows, such as Gytha, Eadgifu and Emma, were still considered political threats in their later years, while elderly abbesses, such as Hild and Ælfflæd, were treasured for their insights and had the ear of kings.

From child bearers to culture bearers: The cultural role of old women

As outlined above, anthropologists have found that old women in non-industrial societies can take on the role of culture bearers: grandmothers involved in rearing grandchildren, religious role models and sources of cultural knowledge. Some of the old women who appear in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record can be described in similar terms, suggesting that in Anglo-Saxon England, too, the role of some old women was that of culture bearer.

As grandmothers, old women could act as mentors for their grandchildren or could provide them with valuable connections.⁸² Ælfthryth, widow to King Edgar (d. 975), was responsible for rearing her grandson Æthelstan (d. 1014), as is evidenced by the latter's will. In this document, Æthelstan declared that everything he had granted to God and the Church was to benefit not only the souls of himself and his father (Æthelred II), but also that of "Ælfþryðe minre ealdemodor þe me afedde" [Ælfthryth my grandmother, who brought me up].⁸³ Another royal widow, Eadgifu, as noted above, actively participated in the governmental activities of her grandson Edgar.

Two other Anglo-Saxon wills provide further evidence of grandmothers taking an interest in the well-being of their children's children. In her will dated to c.950, the noblewoman Wynflæd left considerable wealth to her grandchildren Eadwold and Eadgifu, such as lands, slaves, and "hyre taman hors" [her tame horses].⁸⁴ A gift specifically intended for her grandson shows Wynflæd's consideration for his stature and ornamental display: "goldfagan teowena[n] cuppan þæt he ice his beah mid þam golde" [a gold-adorned wooden cup in order that he (Eadwold) may enlarge his armlet

1992), 258, has suggested that these fevers may have been "nothing more than the hot flushes of the menopause".

⁷⁹ Thacker, 'Hild'.

⁸⁰ Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, ch. 60.

⁸¹ Thacker, 'Ælfflæd'.

⁸² Garver, 'Old Age and Women', 135–6.

⁸³ *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. and trans. D. Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), 62, l. 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10–6.

with the gold].⁸⁵ Likewise, her granddaughter Eadgifu may have had a special place in Wynflæd's heart, as she bequeathed the girl with the very best of her linen:

... hyre betsþe bedwahrift 7 linnenne ruwan 7 eal þæt bedref þe þærto
gebyreð 7 [gap in manuscript] hyre betstan dunnan tunecan 7 hyre beteran
mentel 7 hyre twa treowenan gesplottude cuppan 7 hyre ealdan gewiredan
preon is an VI mancussum.⁸⁶

[... her best bed-curtain and a linen covering and all the bed-clothing which goes with it and ... her best dun tunic, and the better of her cloaks, and her two wooden cups ornamented with dots, and her old filigree brooch which is worth six *mancuses*.]

Another example of a gift from a grandmother to her granddaughter is recorded in the will of Wulfric Spott, made between 1002 and 1004. Wulfric gave his goddaughter “ðo[ne] bule þe wæs hire ealdermodor” [the brooch which was her grandmother's].⁸⁷ Wynflæd's and Wulfric's bequests are unique among the extant corpus of sixty-eight Anglo-Saxon wills in that they are the only ones to feature bequests by a grandparent to a grandchild.⁸⁸

Another administrative document demonstrates that, on occasion, a grandmother could even favour her grandchild over her own daughter. A charter made during the episcopate of Archbishop Nothhelm (735–739) relates the details of a case brought before the episcopal court, concerning the bequest of a monastery at Withington by grandmother Dunne to her grandchild Hrothwaru:

But the aforesaid handmaid of God, Dunne, granted indisputably the monastery which had been built on the aforesaid estate [Withington], with its lands and also the charter descriptive of the land, over which she at that time alone presided, into the possession of her daughter's daughter [Hrothwaru], when herself on the point of death. But because this granddaughter was still young in age, she entrusted the keeping of the charter of the enrolled land, and also all the charge of the monastery until she should reach a riper age, to the girl's mother, a married woman. When the granddaughter asked that the charter should be given back, her mother, not wishing to give it back, replied that it had been stolen.⁸⁹

The episcopal court ruled in favour of Hrothwaru and condemned the laywoman who had falsely tried to claim her daughter's inheritance.⁹⁰ The charter reveals that Dunne

⁸⁵ *Wills*, ed. and trans. Whitelock, 12, ll. 19–20.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14, ll. 9–12.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 50, l. 16.

⁸⁸ The corpus of sixty-eight Anglo-Saxon wills is provided in L. Tollerton, *Wills and Will-Making in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2011), 285–8. J. Crick. ‘Women, Posthumous Benefaction, and Family Strategy in Pre-Conquest England’, *Journal of British Studies* 38 (1999), 405, has noted that children are rarely mentioned in wills; the same, apparently, applies to grandchildren.

⁸⁹ S 1429. *English Historical Documents*, ed. and trans. Whitelock, 454–5.

⁹⁰ This case is also discussed by Foot, *Veiled Women*, I, 57; Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 68.

was able to independently exert control over her possessions and could, if she wished, bypass her own daughter in favour of her grandchild. In this case, the rationale behind Dunne's action may have been that she, as a nun, had not approved of her daughter's marriage and that she intended her bequest of the monastery to Hrothwaru as an incentive for the latter to also take her vows. At any rate, Hrothwaru followed in the footsteps of her grandmother and entered the monastery, where she later became an abbess.⁹¹ In this way, the case of Dunne and Hrothwaru not only shows a grandmother's interest in the welfare of her granddaughter but also shows an old woman acting as a religious role model.

By no means was Dunne the only old woman who can be regarded as setting a religious example. Much the same can be said for the ten elderly women in table 8.1 who lived out their days as mother superiors of religious houses. These aged abbesses would by virtue of their position act as exemplars for the younger members of their community. Although several abbesses in Anglo-Saxon England never reached old age and senectitude was thus not a prerequisite for the position, there is some circumstantial evidence, in the form of two post-Conquest anecdotes, that old age could at least have been regarded as an advantage for the position of abbess. The first anecdote is found in Geoffrey of Burton's *Vita sancta Moduene uirginis*, a twelfth-century saint's life written in England about the seventh-century Irish saint Modwenna who was also venerated in Anglo-Saxon England. Geoffrey reports that Modwenna appointed one of the younger nuns, Orbila, to become the new mother superior of a convent. Orbila, rather than gladly accepting her new role, burst into tears and complained:

'Quomodo possum obtemperare his iussis, domina, cum sim iuuenula corpore et imbecillis animo et timeam etati mee et pulcritudini ne, si forte absque te remansero, capiar a turbinibus procellarum et iuuenes seculars propter formositatem corporis et speciem capillorum conentur me furari Deo et abstrahere a proposito sanctitatis.'

[How can I obey these commands, mistress, since I am young in body and weak in mind? My youth and my beauty make me fearful that if I stay here without you, I shall be snatched up by the whirlwind and, because of the beauty of my body and the loveliness of my hair, young men from the secular world will try to steal me from God and divert me from my holy purpose.]⁹²

In other words, Orbila argued that a young woman is unfit for the position of abbess. Fortunately, Saint Modwenna had a solution to this problem. When she girded her own belt around the young Orbila's waist, "statimque est caput eius albefactum decora canitie et facies eius inmutata est in aliam effigiem, quasi esset seuere etatis et uenerabilis senectutis" [straightaway the hair of her (Orbila's) head became white and

⁹¹ S 1255. *English Historical Documents*, ed. and trans. Whitelock, 463–4.

⁹² Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St. Modwenna*, ed. and trans. R. Bartlett (Oxford, 2002), ch. 10.

her face changed into that of a grave and venerable old woman].⁹³ After this miraculous transformation, the newly aged woman now felt fit to serve as an abbess, which she did until the end of her life. Hence, for Orbila at least, old age represented freedom from the social constraints and worldly threats that govern the lives of younger women. The second anecdote suggests that having a young, attractive abbess could indeed prove problematic for a nunnery. In his *De nugis curialium* [Courtiers' Trifles], the twelfth-century author Walter Map describes how the young abbess of a convent in Berkeley, along with several of her sisters, were seduced by the handsome nephew of Earl Godwin (d. 1052). Once the abbess and the other members of the nunnery were visibly pregnant, Godwin reported their wantonness to King Edward the Confessor (d. 1066), who then granted the nunnery and its lands to the earl.⁹⁴ Thus, while not every abbess was old and not every old nun was an abbess, the Anglo-Saxons may have been aware that there were some advantages to having an elderly mother superior, if only because their barrenness would eliminate the risk of forced eviction as a result of pregnancy.

In general, old women appear to have been drawn to an ecclesiastical life; more than three quarters of the women listed in table 8.1 are abbesses, nuns, vowesses or recluses. On the one hand, this is a direct consequence of the nature of the source material for the Anglo-Saxon period, which favours ecclesiastical women over laywomen. On the other hand, some reasons can be brought forward why cloisters were a typical place to find old women. First and foremost, entering into a monastery dramatically increased one's chances of reaching old age, as childbirth was one of the main causes of early death. Further, elderly widows in particular choose to enter into cloisters: Hild, Seaxburh, Eanflaed and Ælfthryth all retired to nunneries to live out their lives in peace and religious reflection. They may have been inspired to do so by the example of Anna, the biblical prophetess who remained a pious widow until the age of eighty-four. The example of Anna was certainly invoked by various Anglo-Saxon preachers, including Bede.⁹⁵ Archbishop Wulfstan was the most explicit to do so and gave the following advice to widows in his *The Institutes of Polity*:

It is right that widows should earnestly follow the example of Anna. She was in the temple day and night diligently serving. She fasted greatly and attended to prayers and called on Christ with mourning spirit, and distributed alms over and again, and ever propitiated God as far as she could by word and deed, and has now heavenly bliss for a reward. So shall a good widow obey her Lord.⁹⁶

Even when married, a woman faced with the prospect of old age could still decide to retire to a monastery. One telling example is provided by William of Malmesbury who reports how both parents of Wulfstan of Worcester devoted their life to religious

⁹³ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of St. Modwenna*, ed. and trans. Bartlett, ch. 10.

⁹⁴ Walter Map, *De nugis curialium*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, rev. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), V.3.

⁹⁵ Foot, *Veiled Women*, 115, 128–32.

⁹⁶ Wulfstan, *Institutes of Polity*, 18, trans. M. Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Prose* (London, 1975).

service when old age came knocking.⁹⁷ Thus, aside from being a place of religious devotion, a nunnery could also provide a safe environment for a woman faced by widowhood and old age. Within such convents, elderly women could play exemplary roles.

While a number of Anglo-Saxon old women thus functioned as grandmothers and religious role models, some of them also embodied the third aspect of the anthropological notion of culture-bearers: they conveyed cultural knowledge. For one, elderly women who functioned as abbess would also play a role in edifying the members of their religious houses. Hild, for example, gained great renown as a teacher and no fewer than five of her students would later become bishops: Bosa (York), Ætla (Dorchester), Oftfor (Worcester), John of Beverley (Hexham and York), and Wilfrid (York).⁹⁸ A possible, non-monastic example of an elderly woman as a teacher may be traced in the *Domesday Book*'s entry for Oakley, Buckinghamshire. Here, a woman named Ælfgyth is said to have received half a hide of land from "Godric vicecomus" [Godric the Sheriff] in exchange for teaching his daughter to embroider with gold.⁹⁹ Ælfgyth has been identified as the mother of a man named Godwine Ælfgyth's son, who owned land in Dawley, Middlesex.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, she may at least have reached an age at which her adult son had left his family's home.¹⁰¹ Chapter 3 already established that the elderly were expected to instruct and teach the young; the examples above show that this notion applied not only to men, but also to women.

In addition to teachers, a number of Anglo-Saxon old women occur as 'remembrancers', people who were called upon to report stories of local history.¹⁰² Some of these women feature prominently among the sources of Goscelin, a Flemish hagiographer who travelled around England from 1058 onwards and earned his living by composing lives of Anglo-Saxon saints.¹⁰³ In his *vita* of Edith of Wilton, for instance, Goscelin explains that much of his narrative relies on the testimony of older nuns who had known Edith herself, tapping into a history which stretched back over a hundred years.¹⁰⁴ In other works, too, he reports the stories that were told to him by elderly women, such as Vulfrunna, a nun at Barking, and Ælfwen, an aged recluse at St. Stephen's, Hackington.¹⁰⁵ Another elderly recluse named Ælfwen, situated at St. Bennet's at Hulme,¹⁰⁶ had been interviewed by a contemporary of Goscelin and fellow-hagiographer Herman, who used her testimony in his *Miracula sancti*

⁹⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Vita s. Wulfstani*, trans. Winterbottom and Thomson, I.2.

⁹⁸ Thacker, 'Hild'.

⁹⁹ *Domesday Book. Vol. 13: Buckinghamshire*, ed. and trans. J. Morris (Chichester, 1978), 149b.

¹⁰⁰ A. Williams, *The World before Domesday: The English Aristocracy 900-1066* (London, 2008), 206, n. 151.

¹⁰¹ One possible argument against viewing Ælfgyth as an elderly woman, or even as the mother of Godwine Ælfgyth's son, is the fact that the *Domesday Book* entry for Oakley, Buckinghamshire calls her "puella" [a girl] and does not mention any son. Cf. Williams, *World before Domesday*, 120.

¹⁰² The role of women in the memorial tradition of the Middle Ages is discussed by E. van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200* (Basingstoke, 1999).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 50-2.

¹⁰⁴ Goscelin, *Vita Edithe*, trans. Wright and Loncar, prol.

¹⁰⁵ Table 8.1, nos. 25, 29.

¹⁰⁶ For these and other recluses in Anglo-Saxon England, see T. Licence, 'Evidence of Recluses in Eleventh-Century England', *ASE* 36 (2007), 221-34.

Eadmundi.¹⁰⁷ The fact that both Goscelin and Herman mention the age of these women suggests that they may have felt that the senectetude of their sources added to the credibility of their stories.

Apart from knowledge about local history, old women were also called upon for the interpretation of dreams. In his *Vita s. Leoba*, Rudolf describes how both Leoba and her mother Æbba turned to elderly women for explication of their dreams. The latter, having dreamt about bearing a church bell in her bosom, was told by “her old nurse” that the dream announced the birth of her daughter: Leoba.¹⁰⁸ When Leoba herself dreamt that a purple thread issued from her mouth, she too turned to an older woman, albeit hesitantly:

Now there was in the same monastery an aged nun who was known to possess the spirit of prophecy, because other things that she had foretold had always been fulfilled. As Leoba was diffident about revealing the dream to her, she told it to one of her disciples just as it had occurred and asked her to go to the old nun and describe it to her as a personal experience and learn from her the meaning of it.¹⁰⁹

The old nun, after angrily noting that the dream was Leoba’s and not her disciple’s, announced that the purple thread symbolised Leoba’s wise counsels. In another saint’s life, the *Vita s. Æthelwoldi* by Wulfstan of Winchester, Æthelthryth, “moribus et aetate maturam” [ripe in years and experience], explains to the saint’s mother that her dream of a golden eagle leaping forth from her mouth announced the birth of her son.¹¹⁰ A last anecdote suggests that the association of old women with prophetic dreams may have been typically Anglo-Saxon. In his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Orderic Vitalis (1075–c.1142) reports how the abbot of Gloucester sent a letter to King William Rufus (r. 1087–1100) warning him, on the basis of a dream, to amend his ways. The king replied: “Num prosequi me ritum autumat Anglorum, qui pro sternutatione et somnio uetularum dimittunt iter suum seu negotium?” [Does he (the abbot) think I act after the fashion of the English, who put off their journeys and business on account of the snores and dreams of little old women?].¹¹¹

In summary, in their roles as grandmothers, abbesses, teachers, remembrancers and explainers of dreams, the old women discussed above share several aspects with the culture-bearers described by anthropologists. While some archaeologists have claimed that the value of an Anglo-Saxon woman derived mainly from her ability to bear children, the examples above show that many an old woman seized the opportunity to make valuable, cultural contributions to the community she participated in.

¹⁰⁷ Herman, *Miracula*, ed. Arnold, ch. 8.

¹⁰⁸ Rudolf, *Vita s. Leoba*, trans. Talbot, 210.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹¹⁰ Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of Æthelwold*, trans. Lapidge and Winterbottom, ch. 2.

¹¹¹ Orderic Vitalis, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1975), X.15.

Conclusion

The Anglo-Saxon evidence, fragmented, ambiguous and anecdotal though it is, suggests that the transition to old age for women did not necessarily result in a reduced social status, as has been claimed on the basis of archaeological evidence. In the case of royal widows and abbesses, old age frequently involved ‘empowerment’ and freedom from the social constraints that governed the lives of younger women. Generally, old women still played important roles in the Church, politics and the household; they were culture-bearers, individuals charged with the responsibility of teaching the young and respected sources of historical knowledge and dream divination.

However, despite the generally optimistic tone of this chapter, I would not go so far as to herald the Anglo-Saxon period as a ‘golden age for old women’ – there is no way to prove such sweeping statements, although in the past they have been made with regard to both women and the elderly.¹¹² If not a golden age, the scanty written records do reveal at the very least that for an old woman the Anglo-Saxon period need not have been a rotten age.

¹¹² For a refutation of the claim that Anglo-Saxon England was a golden age for women, see P. Stafford, ‘Women and the Norman Conquest’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994), 221–8. For claims that the Anglo-Saxon period was a heyday for the elderly, see the introduction to this thesis.

Conclusion

This thesis comprises a detailed study of the Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of old age as manifested and reflected by words, texts and artwork of the inhabitants of early medieval England. A synthesis of the most noteworthy results of the investigation is provided below. The remainder of the conclusion then proposes some areas for future research and, finally, reflects on the original contributions this thesis has made to the field of Old Age Studies in general and Anglo-Saxon Studies in particular.

The study started with the question of how the Anglo-Saxons themselves defined old age in relation to other stages of life. Chapter 1 drew on more than twenty-five different schematisations of the life cycle, most of which had been overlooked in the previous overviews, notably those by Burrow and Cochelin.¹ It appeared that Anglo-Saxon scholars and artists typically broke up the human lifespan into three parts: childhood, middle age and old age. Each element of this underlying tripartite structure allowed for further subdivisions, resulting in schemes of four, five or even six ages of man. Each of these schematisations was connected with concepts from the fields of early Christian learning, such as the Three Magi and the Six Ages of the World, or of natural philosophy, such as the four bodily humours. Significantly, old age was only rarely subdivided, contrary to what Cochelin had argued for the early Middle Ages as a whole.² Rather than distinguishing between a ‘green’ and a ‘grey’ old age, the Anglo-Saxons generally framed old age as a single phase that started around the age of 50.

As shown in chapters 2 to 4, the Anglo-Saxons approached senescence with mixed feelings. On the one hand, growing old was associated with the accumulation of wisdom and respect; on the other, the Anglo-Saxons were well aware of the social, mental and physical drawbacks of age. The cultural conceptualisation of the merits of senescence is reflected in Old English words such as *frōd*, ‘old and wise’, the role of elderly narrators as venerable advisors in poems such as *Precepts*, and the homiletic appeal to the old to exhibit clearly their spiritual superiority. This correlation between old age and wisdom, respect and piety, however, was not entirely unambiguous: Anglo-Saxon homilists in particular worried about ungodly elderly and deemed it necessary to remind the aged of their impending death, impelling them to part from their foolish ways if they had not done so already. Thus, old age did not inherently imply wisdom and devout behaviour, nor was respect granted to the elderly solely on account of their years. The idea of an Anglo-Saxon predilection for old age over other age categories, as had been proposed by various scholars, was further challenged by the analysis of the recurring concerns over the disadvantages of growing old. Old English words such as *forwerod* ‘old and decrepit’ and horrific descriptions of foul-smelling, aging bodies without teeth and hair clearly illustrate the Anglo-Saxon

¹ Burrow; Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 1–54.

² Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 11–4.

association of old age with bodily decline. Moreover, the aged often appear as sad and gloomy in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record, as reflected in the word *gēomorfrōd* ‘old, wise and sad’, the phrase *gamol on gehðo* ‘old in grief’ and the image of the mourning old man in wisdom poems, such as *The Wanderer*. Associated with the loss of friends, social standing and bodily aptitude, Anglo-Saxon poets utilised the old man as a metaphor for the transience of earthly pleasures. This metaphor was used to the same effect in the pastoral literature of early medieval England, serving as a reminder that nothing in this terrestrial life is eternal and one’s attention should be turned towards Heaven instead. More dramatically, Anglo-Saxon homilists defined senescence as one of the horrors of Hell, whilst presenting Paradise as a place without age. Thus, rather than a preference for old age, the cultural conceptualisation of the downsides of growing old seems to reflect a sense of *gerontophobia*, ‘fear for old age’. In brief, previous scholarly claims of the Anglo-Saxon period as a ‘golden age for the elderly’ and the Old English lexicon as reflecting a ‘positive cognitive map’ with regard to senescence need to be rejected.³

The literary representation of, and the cultural roles attributed to, elderly individuals were the central concerns of chapters 5 to 8. Chapters 5 and 6, first of all, established how Anglo-Saxon authors of such divergent genres as hagiography and heroic poetry presented role models for the elderly. The elderly saints identified in chapter 5, for instance, exhibited all the merits of old age, acting as wise and venerable examples to the younger members of their communities. Their declining health, revealed by poor eyesight, inability to walk and tendency to fall asleep, was presented as an obstacle, albeit not an insurmountable one. In fact, Anglo-Saxon hagiographers typically focused on the saint’s ability to overcome his decrepitude in order to call attention to the saint’s unalleviated asceticism and piety. As such, the saint’s behaviour in old age became instead a marker of sanctity and provided a model worthy of emulation. In this respect, these aged saints were no different from the elderly warriors of the heroic poetry described in chapter 6. Like their saintly counterparts, old heroes were described as wise and venerable advisors to the younger members in their following and, despite the waning of their bodies, they ideally remained active, leading by example. The old warrior’s uncompromising courage, in this sense, has much in common with the elderly saint’s unrelenting devotion. Indeed, the words uttered by the old warrior Byrhtwold in *The Battle of Maldon* not only encapsulate the heroic spirit demanded from aged warriors, they are equally applicable to elderly saints: “Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað” [Spirit must be the harder, heart the bolder, courage must be the greater, as our strength diminishes].⁴

Aged saint and warrior alike inspired an Anglo-Saxon audience to persevere in spite of the disadvantages of old age. If they managed to do so, they often enjoyed a special status, as demonstrated by active elderly clergymen, such as Bishop Wilfrid and Archbishop Dunstan, who were celebrated as saints. Similarly, real-life elderly warriors, such as Ealdorman Byrhtnoth and Earl Siward, were remembered as heroes. For the Anglo-Saxons, then, old people could still be champions, both spiritually and martially. However, old people did not always meet these ideals and one should be

³ Cf. Burrow, 109; Amos, 104; Crawford, 59.

⁴ *Battle of Maldon*, ll. 312–9.

wary to misconstrue the high expectations Anglo-Saxons had of old people as widespread appreciation.

In actual fact, failing to live up to these expectations could pose a real problem for an old person, especially when he was a king, as chapter 7 has shown. In the early Middle Ages, a king's power still depended on his martial prowess and, once declined in old age, aged rulers suffered politically. This problem of old kings was one of the central concerns of the *Beowulf* poet and found its most poignant expression in his characterisation of the aged, passive and disillusioned King Hrothgar. The contrast that the poet drew between Hrothgar and the heroic old King Beowulf, as well as the various references to active, elderly warrior kings of Germanic legend, serve as reminders that an Anglo-Saxon audience would expect an old king to still stand up for his ideals, rather than cower passively under his bedding. As such, the poem is best read as a mirror of elderly kings, advocating active kingship, even in old age. Subsequently, I argued that the poem may well have been written at the bequest of an aged ruler and a case was made for King Offa of Mercia: an active, old ruler who would have been well aware of the political problems of aged kings.

While chapters 5 to 7 mostly concentrated on Anglo-Saxon views on elderly men, the last chapter was an attempt to analyse the position of old women. Given the almost negligible presence of aged women in the pastoral, hagiographic and heroic literature of the Anglo-Saxons, this chapter turned to a more socio-historical approach in order to evaluate whether or not the transition to old age resulted in a decrease of social status for old women, as had been suggested on the basis of archaeological research. The analysis resulted in the identification of a group of over thirty old women, whose lives and deeds were recorded in chronicles, letters and wills. Most of these old women had managed to make themselves useful to those around them and functioned as respected 'culture bearers' in their roles as grandmother, abbess, witness and explicator of dreams. As long as they proved their worth, it seems, aged women, like their male counterparts, need not have feared being relegated to the margins of their communities.

With respect to the Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptualisation of old age, there are still some opportunities for further research that have not been undertaken in this thesis. One viable route is a comparative analysis with contemporary societies, such as early medieval Ireland and Carolingian Francia, in order to establish what was truly distinctive about how the Anglo-Saxons conceptualised old age. Such a comparison might also reveal more about how certain cultures may have influenced each other; in this thesis, I have already highlighted how Anglo-Saxon homilists adopted Hiberno-Latin traditions with regard to the place of old age in the afterlife. Given the range of interactions between the Anglo-Saxons and the Continent and Ireland, more cultural transfer may have taken place.⁵ Aside from comparing the Anglo-Saxons to other contemporary cultures, it will be worthwhile to study how the cultural conceptualisation of old age in medieval England has changed over time. Cultural conceptualisations are not static, but constantly negotiated and renegotiated.⁶ Whereas I have found little variation between the earlier and later sources discussed in this

⁵ See, e.g., *Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent*, ed. H. Sauer and J. Story (Tempe, 2011) and Wright, *Irish Tradition*.

⁶ Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 3–17.

thesis, notable differences do exist with the period after the Norman Conquest of 1066: Middle English, spoken between c.1100 and c.1500, was influenced by Anglo-Norman French and developed and acquired new words to denote the aged, such as *hagge* ‘ugly old woman and witch’ and *veillar* ‘old man, villain’; the literature developed, too, and only in later medieval English texts do stereotypes feature, such as the *senex amans* ‘the old lover’ (the old man lusting after a young girl) and the old woman as a ‘go-between’ and expert on sexual matters;⁷ the influx of Arabic medical literature in the twelfth century further led to the introduction of new kinds of publications on old age, including the works of philosopher and Franciscan friar Roger Bacon (c.1214–1292?) that described the physiological process of aging and its remedies.⁸ Christine Fell, in a pioneering study, has shown how the Norman Conquest and its aftermath greatly affected the position and image of women in English culture;⁹ it is not unlikely, therefore, that ideas about the elderly were similarly affected. Further research could establish whether the Norman Conquest was a watershed moment in the English cultural conceptualisation of old age as well.

Even though the last word may not have been said about how the Anglo-Saxons viewed old age, this thesis has nevertheless contributed to Old Age Studies in general, and Anglo-Saxon Studies in particular. With respect to the former, this thesis stands out for its multidisciplinary approach, which highlights that a study of how people thought about growing old should take into account as much of the cultural record as possible, ranging from visual arts to texts and even individual words. In addition, this thesis has paid attention to a time period that has mostly been neglected in the historical analysis of old age: the early Middle Ages. Lastly, this thesis’s focus on a single community in a well-established timespan – the Anglo-Saxons between c.700 and c.1100 – has proved to be a more practical approach to understanding the conceptualisation of old age than works that study pan-European medieval old age and disregard all temporal and geographical boundaries.¹⁰

With respect to Anglo-Saxon Studies specifically, this thesis has also made a number of advances. One of its original contributions is its identification of various sources that had not before been studied for what they reveal about how the Anglo-Saxons viewed old age, ranging from the wisdom poetry of Alcuin and Cynewulf to the depiction of elderly warriors in the Bayeux Tapestry. In addition, the lexicological analysis of the numerous Old English words for old age, provided in the Appendix and summarised in chapter 2, has demonstrated that the categorisation of some of these words in the *Thesaurus of Old English* as well as their definitions in the Old English dictionaries of Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall need to be refined or even rejected. Moreover, the thesis has opened up new areas of investigation, such as the status of

⁷ On the *senex amans*, see Burrow, 135. A fine example of the old woman as a ‘go-between’ and sexual expert is the titular character of the Middle English poem *Dame Sirith*, see, e.g., Mieszkowski, ‘Old Age and Medieval Misogyny’, 299–319; for the obscenity of old women in later medieval literature in general, see J. M. Ziolkowski, ‘The Obscenities of Old Women, Vetularity and Vernacularity’, in *Obscenity, Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. J. M. Ziolkowski (Leiden, 1998), 73–89.

⁸ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 175–9; J. T. Freeman, ‘Medical Perspectives in Aging (12th–19th Century)’, *The Gerontologist* 5 (1965), 1–24.

⁹ Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*.

¹⁰ E.g., Shahar, *Growing Old*.

old women in Anglo-Saxon England, whilst also providing novel readings of works that have long been at the centre of academic scholarship, such as *Beowulf*. Above all, this thesis has offered a more complete analysis of the cultural conceptualisation of old age by the Anglo-Saxons than the one-sidedly positive pictures painted by previous Anglo-Saxonists, notably Burrow, Amos and Crawford. On the whole, the Anglo-Saxons were aware of the opportunities provided by senescence, but, at the same time, they were afraid of the consequences; they looked up to those elderly that managed to remain active despite their age, but denounced those that could not.

Finally, let me return to the story with which the introduction of this thesis began. The elderly mother of St. Cuthman, robbed of her husband and physically unable to walk, embodied the social and physical drawbacks of old age anticipated by the Anglo-Saxons. Although her son carried her around in a barrow, it cannot automatically be assumed that she was deemed worthy of respect, solely because she was old. An old person, as the homilies, hagiography and heroic poetry of the time amply demonstrate, was still expected to meet certain standards of behaviour and, ideally, she had to find some way to overcome the vicissitudes of senescence. Should she have failed to live up to these expectations, it is entirely possible that she would find herself being thrown down a hill. Food for thought, perhaps, for the elderly in this day and age.

Appendix

Lexicological analyses of words for old age

In chapter 2, fifty-four potential lexical items for ‘human old age’ were identified: *āealdian*, *āergōd*, *ætealdod*, *blandenfeax*, *clingan*, *eald*, *ealda*, *ealddōm*, *ealdgeþungen*, *ealdhād*, *ealdian*, *ealdigende*, *ealdlic*, *ealdnes*, *ealdung*, *ealdwīf*, *forealdian*, *forealdung*, *forildu*, *forþgān*, *forweorennnes*, *forwerod*, *forwerodnes*, *forworen*, *frameald*, *frōd*, *gamol*, *gamolferhþ*, *gamolian*, *geōmēowle*, *gēomorfrōd*, *gomelian*, *hār*, *hārun*, *hārwelle*, *hārwenge*, *hārwengnes*, *ieldo*, *infrōd*, *langfære*, *langieldo*, *langlīfe*, *gelēfed*, *līflīc*, *ofereald*, *ofergēare*, *oferyldu*, *onealdian*, *onsīgende*, *oreald*, *oryldu*, *unorne*, *wintercearig* and *gewintred*. The individual analyses of each of these lexemes can be found below.

The discussion for each lexical item will take into account its etymology, senses, frequency and direct context (compounds and collocations). Information about senses, frequency, and context is taken from the *DOE* or, for those words which fall outside the present scope of the *DOE*, from an extensive analysis of the recorded forms found in the *DOEC*. Since the aim of this chapter is to uncover connotations with human old age, these connotations receive special attention. Unless otherwise noted, the Old English quotations from prose texts are taken directly from the *DOEC*, rather than from published editions. For the sake of brevity, references to these prose texts are made only in the form of the short titles used by the *DOEC* between brackets; for verse texts, I refer to standard editions. The lexical items are discussed in alphabetical order.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>āealdian</i> , v.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	-
Connotations:	-

Whereas *āealdian* is categorised in the *TOE* under “02.01.04.03|02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age”, it does not occur in Clark Hall or the *DOE*, nor do any possible forms of it appear in the *DOEC*.¹ The *TOE* bases itself on the entry *āealdian* in Bosworth-Toller, which cites a single passage from the preface of the Old English translation of Gregory’s *Dialogi*: “Þe læs þe hi þurh eorþlice dæda a ealdodon (aealdodon ?[...]) fram hyra modes niwnysse”.²

In essence, Bosworth-Toller conjecture the otherwise unattested *āealdian*, a combination of the intensifying prefix *ā-* and the verb *ealdian* ‘to grow old’, in favour

¹ Based on simple searches in the *DOEC* for <aeald->, <aald-> and <aæld->, which did not yield any results. Searching for <aeld-> yielded 31 results, but none of these could be interpreted as forms of *aealdian*.

² Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *ealdian* II. Campbell’s supplement lists *āealdian* as a head-word, with a reference to *ealdian* II.

of the actual manuscript reading “a ealdian”, a combination of the adverb *ā* ‘forever, always, continuously’ and the verb *ealdian* ‘to grow old’. This latter interpretation, however, does not at all appear problematic within the context and is followed by the most recent edition of the passage:

Se ælmihtiga God nolde hy abysgian mid þam geswinceum þyses middaneardes, þe læs þe hi þurh eorþlice dæda **a ealdodon** fram hyra modes niwnysse.³

[The almighty God did not wish to trouble them with the toils of this earth, lest they through worldly deeds **would continuously grow older**, away from the newness of their spirit.]

Here, the combination of the adverb *ā* and the past tense form of *ealdian* may have been the Anglo-Saxon translator’s way to render the subjunctive imperfect form “veterascerent” of the corresponding passage in the Latin original: “qui ne per humanos actus a novitate mentis veterascerent, eos omnipotens Deus hujus mundi laboribus noluit occupari”.⁴

Given the manuscript reading and the absence of other attestations of potential word forms in the *DOEC*, *āealdian* should be considered a ghost word. Consequently, following its exclusion from the *DOE*, *āealdian* ought to be struck from the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ǣrgōd</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	07.02.04 03.01 Excellence: Old and excellent, very good
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	5
Connotations:	Lacking former excellence

With its categorisation ‘old and excellent, very good’ for *ǣrgōd*, the *TOE* follows Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall. Here, the prefix *ǣr-* is interpreted as both a temporal prefix (the adverb *ǣr* means ‘earlier, previously, formerly’, hence ‘old and excellent’) and an intensifying prefix (hence ‘very good’). The *DOE*, s.v. *ǣrgōd*, however, notes that, despite earlier claims,⁵ there is no support for *ǣr-* as an intensifying prefix in Old English. Instead, the *DOE* suggests that the lexeme probably means ‘good of old’, ‘formerly good’ or ‘hitherto excellent’.

Ǭrgōd occurs only five times in the *DOEC*, all in *Beowulf*, and the context of the word forms supports the reading of the *DOE*. In all cases, *ǣrgōd* refers to either a person or a sword that is no longer able to live up to former expectations. The term is first applied to Hrothgar, the old king of the Danes, who had been a glorious warlord

³ *Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors*, ed. Hecht, 6, ll. 29–33. The reading “a ealdodon” is only found in MS H of Gregory’s *Dialogi*; the other manuscripts give “hi ne ealdodon næfre fram heora modes niwnysse þurh eorðlice dæde, 7 ælmihtig God nolde hi abysgian mid þam gewinnum þises middaneardes” [they never grew older, away from the newness of their spirit, through worldly deeds and the almighty God did not wish to trouble them with the toils of this earth].

⁴ Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, I, prol.6.

⁵ E.g., P. J. Cosijn, ‘Anglosaxonica II’, *BGdSL* 20 (1895), 101.

in the past, but now proved helpless against the monster Grendel. The phrase that is used to describe Hrothgar, “æþeling ærgod” (l. 130a), is also applied Æschere (l. 1329a), after he had been killed by Grendel’s mother. The third time *ærgōd* refers to a person is when the poet describes how Beowulf, after having grown old, sets out to kill a dragon and meets his doom:

Sceolde (li)þend daga,
æþeling **ærgod** ende gebidan,
worulde lifes. (*Beowulf*, ll. 2341b–3a)

[The seafarer, the nobleman, **formerly good**, must await the end of his days, of life on the world.]

The other occurrences of *ærgōd* refer to swords that are rendered useless. The first time, the poet describes how Grendel’s arm could not be cut by “iren ærgod” (l. 989a), that is: by no sword, however good it used to be. The last time the poet uses the word is to describe the sword Nægling, when it breaks during Beowulf’s encounter with the dragon (l. 2586a). In other words, as W. F. Bryan has observed: “The fact is that *ærgōd* is not once applied to object or person at a moment when the situation demands an epithet expressing intensified actual vigor or strength or excellence, and that in at least two instances such a sense is altogether incongruous with the situation”.⁶ The senses ‘formerly good’ and ‘hitherto excellent’, therefore, appear to be best suited for the contexts in which *ærgōd* appears.

Notably, in four of its five occurrences *ærgōd* refers to someone or something ‘old’. When they are described with the term *ærgōd*, both Hrothgar and Beowulf have been on the throne for fifty years and, hence, would have been old men. Like the two aged kings, Æschere, too, is an old man, “frodan fyrnwitan” [an old and wise councillor] (l. 2123a), when he is described as *ærgōd*. The sword Nægling, similarly, is not only “iren ærgod” (l. 2586a) but also “gomol and grægmæl” (l. 2682) [old and grey-hued].⁷ Only the age of the hypothetical sword that is unable to cut Grendel’s arm is not made explicit, although the term “ærgod” (l. 989a) marks it out as anything but a new sword.

Given the evidence presented above, the sense “old and excellent”, provided by the *TOE*, might best be superseded by “old and hitherto excellent”. As such, *ærgōd* does not reflect that old age was associated with intensified vigour, but rather with the absence of former excellence.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ætealdod</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 05.04 Aging, growing old: Too old
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	1
Connotations:	-

⁶ W. F. Bryan, ‘*Ærgōd* in *Beowulf*, and Other Old English Compounds of *æþ*’, *Modern Philology* 28 (1930), 158.

⁷ On epithets used for Nægling, see P. L. Henry, ‘*Beowulf* Cruces’, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indo-germanischen Sprachen* 77 (1961), 140–6.

Ætealdod ‘too old’ is a combination of the prefix *æt-* and the past participle form of *ealdian* ‘to grow old’. The intensifying function of the prefix *æt-* is rare,⁸ but might also be found in the verb *æt-eglan* ‘to trouble, afflict, harm’, where the standard, locative function of *æt-* ‘close, to, away, from’ seems similarly inapplicable. The *TOE* categorisation of *ætealdod* ‘too old’ is confirmed by the *DOE*, s.v. *ætealdod*, which lists one occurrence in the *DOEC*:

Hit byð swyðe sceandlic, þæt eald wif sceole ceorles brucan, þonne heo forwerod byð and teames **ætealdod**, ungehealtsumlice, forðan ðe gesceafta ne beoð for nanum oðran þinge astealde butan for bearnteame anum, swa swa us secgað halige bec. (ÆLet 5 [Sigefyrth])

[It is very shameful that an old woman should have sex with a man, when she is worn out with age and **too old for childbearing**, unchastely, because sexual relations are not meant for any other thing except for procreation only, just as holy books tell us.]

Ætealdod survives in Middle English as *at-ōld* and is typically found in a context of infertility, as in this Old English citation; hence, the *MED* provides the sense ‘aged beyond (having progeny)’.⁹

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>blandenfeax</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.04.04.03.02 04 Colour of Hair: Grey-haired, hoary
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	7
Connotations:	Grey-haired

Blandenfeax ‘grey-haired, hoary’ is a zero-derived denominal adjective from a compound noun, formed of the past participle form of the class VII strong verb *blandan* ‘to mix, mingle’ and the noun *feax* ‘hair’.¹⁰ The *DOE*, s.v. *blandenfeax*, like the *TOE*, assigns the meaning ‘having hair which is mingled with grey, grey-haired’. All seven instances of *blandenfeax* in the *DOEC* are found in poetic texts and refer to elderly people: Sarah and Lot in *Genesis*, Constantine in *The Battle of Brunanburh* and Hrothgar and Ongentheow in *Beowulf*.¹¹ Consequently, the *DOE* notes that this lexical item can also be used as a general term for old; *blandenfeax*, therefore, should also be included in the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old” as well.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>clingan</i> , v.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age 03.01.17.01 04 A coagulating, mixing: To congeal, stick together

⁸ Cf. H. Koziol, *Handbuch der englischen Wortbildungslehre*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg, 1972), §207.

⁹ *MED*, s.v. *at-ōld*.

¹⁰ Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 395.

¹¹ *Genesis* A, ed. Doane, ll. 2343a, 2602b; *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, l. 45a; *Beowulf*, ll. 1549b, 1791a, 1873a, 2962a.

	03.01.18 08 Dryness (not wetness): (Of plants, people, etc.) to wither, dry up 05.10.05.02.03 07 To reduce, make thin(ner): To shrink together from heat or cold
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	5
Connotations:	-

Forms of the class III strong verb *clingan* occur five times in the *DOEC* and are restricted to poetry (four occurrences) and glosses (once). The *DOE*, s.v. *clingan*, provides two senses: “1. to congeal, adhere, cling together” and “2. to shrink, contract, shrivel”. With these two senses, the *DOE* deviates from the categorisation proposed by the *TOE*, which also includes *clingan* in the category “02.01.04.03|02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age”.¹²

However, the attribution of the sense ‘to grow old’ to *clingan* is ungrounded. To begin with, the sense cannot be derived from its etymology, PGmc **klingan*- ‘to stick together’; nor is it found for any of its cognates in related languages: Dutch *klinken* ‘to clinch’, Danish *klynge sig* ‘to gather in clusters, crowds together’ and German *sich klinken* ‘to fasten oneself to’.¹³ Furthermore, a closer look at all the *DOEC* occurrences reveals that the process of congealing or shrinking, described by forms of *clingan*, is never attributed to old age. Rather, the cause in each case is excessive heat or cold:

sipþan þa yslan eft onginnað
æfter lig-þræce lucan togædre,
geclungne to cleowenne.¹⁴

[afterwards the ashes begin to lock together after the violence of flames,
clung together to a clew.]

Land wæron freorig;
cealdum cyle-gicelum **clang** wæteres þrym.¹⁵

[The lands were frosty; the water’s might **congealed** in cold icicles.]

Clinge þu alswa col on heorpe,
sring þu alswa scerne awage.¹⁶

[(the speaker addresses a “wenne”, a cyst or skin blemish) You **must shrivel** like a coal in the fire, you must shrink away like dung.]

¹² This sense is not found in Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *clingan*, nor in Clark Hall, s.v. *clingan*.

¹³ G. Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* (Leiden, 2013), s.v. **klingan*-; *OED*, s.v. *cling*, v.1.

¹⁴ *The Phoenix*, ed. Blake, ll. 224–6a.

¹⁵ *Andreas*, ed. Krapp, ll. 1259b–60.

¹⁶ *Metrical Charm 12: Against a Wen*, ed. R. E. Bjork, *Old English Shorter Poems. Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, DOML 32 (Cambridge, MA, 2014), ll. 8–9.

ac forhwon fealleð se snaw, foldan behydeð,
 bewrihð wyrta cið, wæstmas getigeð,
 geðyð hie and geðreatað, ðæt hie ðrage beoð
 cealde **geclungne**?¹⁷

[but why does the snow fall, covering the folds, covering the bud of the roots, binding the fruits, pressing and harassing them, so that they are cruelly **shrunk** by the cold?]

The fifth occurrence of the word is a lexical gloss for Lat. *marceo* ('I become weak') in Ælfric's *Glossary*. All things considered, then, the inclusion of *clingan* in the *TOE* category "02.01.04.03|02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age" is unwarranted.

Possibly, the editors of the *TOE* were influenced by the definition provided by the *OED*, s.v. *cling*, v.1:

2. Applied to the drawing together or shrinking and shrivelling up of animal or vegetable tissues, when they lose their juices under the influence of heat, cold, hunger, thirst, disease, *age*; to become 'drawn', to shrink up, wither, decay. (emphasis mine)

As shown above, however, the connection with (old) age is not attested in the Old English data and may, therefore, be a later development. Consequently, *clingan* should be struck from the *TOE* category "02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old".

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>eald</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 05 Aging, growing old:(Of beings, etc.) old, of great age 02.01.04 02 Age: Having a certain age 02.03.02.03.04 (Of degrees of descent) great-, grand- 05.11.07.03 06 Former times, days of old: Ancient, former, earlier 05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new 05.11.07.03.03 01 Old, not new: Old, having lasted long 05.11.07.03.03 02 Old, not new: Ancient, of time long past 11.05 11 Natural/proper way/manner/mode of action: Habitually done, customary 12.01.01.06.08 A person of rank, elder, great man
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	ca. 3000
Connotations:	High rank/Authority, Wisdom

Eald 'old' derives from the past participle form of PGmc **alan-* 'to grow, to bring up',¹⁸ a verb that survives in Goth. and OE *alan* 'to nourish' and is related to Lat. *alere* 'to nourish'. The Germanic cognates of OE *eald* include OFr *ald*, OS *ald*, OHG *alt* and

¹⁷ *Solomon and Saturn II*, ed. Anlezark, ll. 124–7a.

¹⁸ Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. **alda-*.

Goth. *alpeis*, which all mean ‘old’.¹⁹ The distinctive vowel in OE *eald* reflects the outcome of fronting (PGmc **ald* > **æld*), followed by Breaking (**æld* > *eald*) in the West Saxon dialect of Old English.²⁰

The *DOE*, s.v. *eald*, differentiates between three broadly applicable senses: ‘having lived or existed for a long time, advanced in age’, ‘belonging to an earlier period of time and still in existence, long established’ and ‘belonging to an age or period now past: ancient; former’. In addition, the term can be used simply to refer to one’s age; as in Present-day English, people were ‘twenty years old’ rather than ‘twenty years young’.

With approximately three thousand occurrences in the *DOEC*, *eald* is by far the most frequently used term for old age in Old English. Forms of *eald* are documented in almost every text, appearing in poetry, prose and glosses. Moreover, *eald* knows no restrictions when it comes to referents; it is used for ditches, buildings, wounds, plants, laws, animals, humans and trees. Naturally, outlining and discussing all instances and senses of *eald* is beyond the scope of this study. Consequently, the discussion below focuses on the two connotations with human old age as can be gathered from the information about *eald* provided by the *DOE* and the compounds with *eald*- as a first element.

In line with the *TOE* categorisation, the *DOE* notes that *eald* is connected with authority or superior rank.²¹ This connection is exemplified by the Old English translation of Luke 9:46 “quis eorum maior esset” [which of them was the greater/more important] as “hwylc hyra yldest wære” (Lk [WSCp]). The connotation of old age with authority is also clear from the recurring phrase “yldestan ðegnas” to denote the most important thanes (ChronC; Ch 1422; Ch 1409) and the Old English gloss “yldesta wicing” (AntGl 2) for *archipirata* ‘arch-pirate, pirate chief’. In addition, Old English *ealdor* ‘chief, leader’ and *ealdorman* ‘nobleman, thane’ may be etymologically related to *eald*, suggesting a connection between authority and old age.²²

A second connotation of *eald* is ‘experience’ or ‘wisdom’. The *DOE* indicates that *eald* can be used figuratively, to mean ‘experienced’ or ‘skilled’.²³ This figurative use is best illustrated by Ælfric’s explanation of the word *eald-wita* ‘priest (lit. old-knower, old wise man)’ in his letter to Wulfsgie:

Presbiter is mæssepreost oððe ealdwita. Na þæt ælc eald sy, ac þæt he eald sy on wisdom. (ÆLet 1 [Wulfsgie X^a])

¹⁹ D. Boutkan and S. M. Siebinga, *Old Frisian Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden, 2005), s.v. *ald*; W. P. Lehmann, *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden, 1986), s.v. *alpeis*; A. L. Lloyd and O. Springer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen. Bd. 1: -a – bezzisto* (Göttingen, 1988), s.v. *alt*; F. Heidemanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen Primäradjektive* (Berlin, 1993), s.v. *alda-*; V. F. Faltings, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der friesischen Adjektiva* (Berlin, 2010), s.v. *alda-*.

²⁰ Cf. the Anglian form *ald*, which does not show breaking, since *æ* is retracted to *a* in Anglian forms before *l* followed by a consonant. On these developments, see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), §§143, 248–50; R. M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English. Volume 1: Phonology* (Oxford, 1992), §§5.10–3.

²¹ *DOE*, s.v. *eald*, senses II.A.5, II.B.3 and III.B.

²² *OED*, s.v. *alder*, n. 2.

²³ *DOE*, s.v. *eald*, sense I.A.10.

[A presbyter is the mass-priest or the *ealdwita*. Not that each of them is aged, but he is ‘old’ in wisdom.]

Here, Ælfric translates the definition of *presbiter* from Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*:

Presbyter graece Latine senior interpretatur; non pro aetate uel decrepita senectute, sed propter honorem et dignitatem quam acceperunt presbyteri nominantur.²⁴

[Priest, *presbyter* in Greek, is translated *senior*, elder, in Latin. They are called *presbyters* not from years or decrepit old age, but because of the honor and rank they received.]

In addition, the *DOE* shows that *eald* is often collocated with lexemes meaning ‘wise’, such as *frōd* and *wīſ*.²⁵

Apart from the connections drawn between old age and authority and wisdom, the Old English compounds with *eald-* are worth discussing, since Sheila M. Ingersoll has argued that most of these compounds have positive connotations.²⁶ Before her claim can be discussed properly, the *eald*-compounds first need to be established. The *DOE* lists thirty-three compounds with *eald-* as the first element, but misses nine compounds with *eald-* that feature as headwords in Bosworth-Toller and/or Clark Hall: *eald-cot* ‘old cottage’, *eald-cwēn* ‘old queen’, *eald-land-rāden* ‘established law of landed property’, *eald-letre* ‘next word’, *eald-ge-nēat* ‘old companion’, *eald-ge-þungen* ‘old and distinguished’, *eald-ge-winn* ‘old conflict’, *eald-ge-winna* ‘old enemy’ and *eald-wīf* ‘old woman’ (see table 10.1). Compounds like these are difficult to distinguish from syntactic phrases, especially since they occasionally occur in the manuscript with a space between the two elements. However, in the case of element-separation by a space, a compound may be easily recognised by the lack of inflection on the first element.²⁷

Closer analysis of the nine *eald*-compounds which are not included in the *DOE* reveals that a number of them have erroneously been overlooked. *Eald-cot* ‘old cottage’, for example, certainly is a compound. Forms of *eald-cot* occur twice in the *DOEC*, in the boundary clauses of two Anglo-Saxon charters, in the phrase “æt Sceolles ealdcotan” [at the old cottage of Sceoll] (Ch 855 [Kem 1282]; Ch 1020 [Kem 792]). Since the first element of “ealdcotan” is uninflected, *eald-cot* must be interpreted as a compound, rather than a phrase. The same goes for *eald-cwēn*, which occurs in the *DOEC* as a gloss for Lat. *anacula* ‘little old woman’: “*Anacula eald cwene*” (CIGl 1 [Stryker]). The manuscript reading “eald cwene”, despite the intervening space, must be interpreted as a compound, since only the second element,

²⁴ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. J.-Y. Guillaumin (Paris, 2012), VII.xii.20. Trans. Throop.

²⁵ *DOE*, s.v. *eald*, sense I.A.1.c.

²⁶ S. M. Ingersoll, *Intensive and Restrictive Modification in Old English* (Heidelberg, 1978), 128.

²⁷ Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 362.

“cwene”, is inflected for the dative case. *Eald-cot* and *eald-cwēn*, therefore, should be included in the *DOE*.

Two further potential compounds, *eald-land-ræden* and *eald-letre*, are problematic. *Eald-land-ræden* is only attested once, in the eleventh-century manual of estate management *Rectitudines singularum personarum*, where the elements are separated in the manuscript by a space: “Hede se ðe scire healde, þæt he wite a, hwæt eald landræden sy & hwæt ðeode ðeaw” [He that would hold a shire should heed that he know what the old estate customs and what the customs of the region are] (LawRect).²⁸ Once more, the first element in the manuscript reading “eald landræden” is uninflected. However, in this case, the test is inconclusive, since, in this context, the strong feminine nominative singular adjective form of *eald* would also lack an inflectional ending. *Eald-letre* ‘next word’, only found in Bosworth-Toller, is problematic for another reason. Potential forms of *eald-letre* cannot be found in the *DOEC*, nor is a citation provided by Bosworth-Toller, which only provides a reference to Thomas Wright’s *A Second Volume of Vocabularies* (1873). In this edition of one of the glossaries of London, British Library, Cotton Cleopatra a. iii, Wright apparently read “*Authentica ueterum* mid eald letre”.²⁹ The phrase “eald letre”, however, turns out to be a misreading of “ealdlecre”, a form of *ealdlic* ‘old’ (see below).³⁰ Hence, *eald-letre* must be regarded a ghost word, whereas *eald-land-ræden* may be a syntactical phrase, even though this cannot be proven by the *DOEC* data.

Forms of three further compounds that are not included in the *DOE*, *eald-ge-nēat*, *eald-ge-winn* and *eald-ge-winna*, all appear in poetry and the first element is uninflected for case:

Byrhtwold mæpelode, bord hafenode
(se wæs **eald geneat**), æsc acwehte.³¹

[Byrhtwold spoke, raised his shield, (he was **an old companion**), shook his spear.]

þæt ic on þone hafelan heorodreorigne
ofer **eald gewin** eagum starige.³²

[that I could gaze at the blood-stained head with my eyes after **the ancient struggle**.]

²⁸ Translation from *Rectitudines singularum personarum*, ed. and trans. T. Gobbitt, <http://www.earlyenglishlaws.ac.uk/laws/texts/rect/>. In Gobbitt’s edition, the phrase reads “ealdland ræden”, which should still be interpreted as a compound, since the first element is uninflected.

²⁹ T. Wright, *A Second Volume of Vocabularies* (n.p., 1873), 2.

³⁰ P. G. Rusche, ‘The Cleopatra Glossaries: An Edition with Commentary on the Glosses and Their Sources’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1996, 163; see also *DOE*, s.v. *ealdlic*, sense 3.

³¹ *Battle of Maldon*, ll. 309–10.

³² *Beowulf*, ll. 1780–1.

open **eald-gewin**, þæt wæs fyr mycle,
 geara gongum.³³ þonne þeos æðele gewyrd,

[That famous, **ancient struggle** was much longer ago in the passage of years than this noble incident.]

seopðan Grendel wearð,
ealdgewinna, ingenga min.³⁴

[afterwards Grendel, **the old enemy**, became my invader.]

While the lack of inflection on the first element suggests that they are all part of compounds, rather than syntactic phrases, this evidence remains inconclusive, since, in poetry, the inflectional endings of adjectives could be dropped in favour of the metre.³⁵ Hence, the question whether *eald-ge-nēat*, *eald-ge-winn* and *eald-ge-winna* should be considered compounds or syntactic phrases cannot be answered on the basis of the Old English evidence. The last two potential compounds that are not listed as such in the *DOE*, *eald-ge-þungen* and *eald-wīf*, are discussed individually below, as the *TOE* identifies them as separate lexemes belonging to the lexical field of old age.

With respect to all compounds on *eald-*, Ingersoll argued that this first element functioned not only as a temporal marker, but also as an intensifier. She saw most of these compounds in a positive light: “[t]o the Anglo-Saxon, something which was very old and tried was far preferable to something new and unproven”.³⁶ She illustrated this claim with proposed translations for, amongst others, *eald-cyðð* ‘old (and dear) home’, *eald-ge-segen* ‘old (and good) tradition’, *eald-ge-strēon* ‘ancient and valuable treasure’ and *eald-ge-sīð* ‘old and good (or loyal) comrade’. These proposed translations should be regarded as mostly conjecture, however, as the words she discussed occur infrequently; hence, their connotation, whether positive or negative, is impossible to establish.³⁷ In addition, the proposed positive connotations of the element *eald-* in *eald-ge-winn* ‘ancient and important conflict’ and the various words for Satan, such as *eald-fēond*, *eald-hettend* and *eald-ge-nīpla* ‘ancient enemy, arch-enemy’ are dubious, at best.³⁸ As the element *eald-* combines with both positive and negative second elements, it is best to follow the *DOE* in assuming that the element *eald-* in these compounds is a neutral term denoting age or ancientness.

³³ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, ll. 646b–8.

³⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 1775a–6.

³⁵ R.M. Hogg and R. D. Fulk, *A Grammar of Old English. Volume 2: Morphology* (Chichester, 2011), §3.146. In addition, adjectives following the strong declension would not be inflected for the nominative case, which means that the examples above from *The Battle of Maldon* (for *eald-ge-neat*), Cynewulf’s *Elene* (for *eald-ge-winn*) and *Beowulf* (for *eald-ge-winna*) cannot provide conclusive evidence for the status of these potential compounds.

³⁶ Ingersoll, *Intensive and Restrictive Modification*, 128.

³⁷ Forms of *eald-cyðð*, *eald-gesegen*, *eald-gestrēon* and *eald-gesīð* occur, respectively, five, one, two and two times in the *DOEC*.

³⁸ Cf. Ingersoll, *Modification*, 129–31.

Compounds with <i>eald-</i>	B-T	CH	DOE
<i>eald-bacen</i> ‘stale, literally ‘baked some time ago’’	√	√	√
<i>eald-cot</i> ‘old cottage’	√	-	-
<i>eald-cwēn</i> ‘old queen’	√	-	-
<i>eald-ge-cynd</i> ‘original nature’	√	√	√
<i>eald-cýþþ</i> ‘native land, old home; old acquaintance’	√	√	√
<i>eald-dagas</i> ‘former days, days of old’	√	√	√
<i>eald-dōm</i> ‘old age’	√	√	√
<i>ealde-ealde-fæder</i> ‘great-grandfather’	√	-	√
<i>ealde-fæder</i> ‘grandfather; (male) ancestor’	√	√	√
<i>ealde-mōdor</i> ‘grandmother, (female) ancestor’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-fā</i> ‘old enemy’	√	√	√
<i>eald-fæder</i> ‘forefather, ancestor’	√	√	√
<i>eald-fēond</i> ‘old enemy, Satan’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-fēra</i> ‘old comrade’	√	√	√
<i>eald-gyddung</i> ‘old saying’	-	√	√
<i>eald-hettend</i> ‘old enemy’	√	√	√
<i>eald-hlāford</i> ‘old ruler, ruler by ancient right’	√	√	√
<i>eald-hlāford-cynn</i> ‘old, noble family’	√	-	√
<i>eald-hrýþer</i> ‘maure/full-grown bullock’	√	√	√
<i>eald-hrýþer-flæsc</i> ‘meat of a mature/full-grown bullock’	√	√	√
<i>eald-land</i> ‘old land, arable land left untilled’	√	√	√
<i>eald-land-rāden</i> ‘established law of landed property’	-	√	-
<i>eald-letre</i> ‘next word’	√	-	-
<i>eald-ge-mære</i> ‘ancient boundary’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-nēat</i> ‘old comrade’	√	√	-
<i>eald-ge-nīþla</i> ‘old enemy, Satan’	√	√	√
<i>eald-port-ge-rēfa</i> ‘chief town official’	-	-	√
<i>eald-riht</i> ‘ancient right, old law’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-segen</i> ‘old story, ancient legend’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-sīþ</i> ‘old retainer, old comrade’	√	√	√
<i>eald-spell</i> ‘old story’	√	√	√
<i>eald-spræc</i> ‘ancient utterance’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-strēon</i> ‘ancient treasure’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-þungen</i> ‘old and distinguished’	-	√	-
<i>eald-ge-weorc</i> ‘ancient work’	√	√	√
<i>eald-werigu? eald-wearg?</i> ‘accursed from old times’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-winn</i> ‘old-time conflict’	√	√	-
<i>eald-ge-winna</i> ‘old enemy’	√	√	-
<i>eald-wīf</i> ‘old woman’	√	√	-
<i>eald-wita</i> ‘venerable man, sage, priest’	√	√	√
<i>eald-writere</i> ‘scribe, one who copies ancient manuscripts’	√	√	√
<i>eald-ge-wyrht</i> ‘ancient deed, deed or old’	√	√	√

Table 10.1 Compounds on *eald-* and their presence in the main Old English dictionaries (B-T= Bosworth-Toller; CH = Clark Hall)

TOE lemma:	<i>ealda</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.03.01.08 01 Adult male: Old man 16.01.05.02.01 The devil
Frequency (DOEC):	See <i>eald</i>
Connotations:	-

The categories proposed by the *TOE* are confirmed by the *DOE*, which treats the weak substantival adjective *ealda* in its entry for *eald*. The use of the word *ealda* to refer to Satan is in the sense of ‘the ancient one, the one from days of old’, hence the ‘arch-enemy’, rather than ‘the aged one’.³⁹

TOE lemma:	<i>ealddōm</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03 Aging, growing old: Old age
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

Ealddōm ‘old age’, a combination of *eald* and the abstract suffix *-dōm*,⁴⁰ occurs only once in the *DOEC*. In the *Old English Orosius*, *ealddōm* translates a form of Lat. *senectus* ‘old age’:

ac heo for hie cristendome nu giet is gescild, ðæt ægþer ge hio self ge
hie anweald is ma hreosende for **ealddome** þonne of æniges cyninges
niede. (Or 2)⁴¹

[but she (Rome) because of her Cristian faith is now still shielded, so that
both she herself and her power has more gone to ruin because of **old age**
than of the force of any king.]

Given that *ealddōm* is only used for an abstraction (the power of Rome), this lexeme falls outside the semantic field of human old age.

TOE lemma:	<i>ealdgebungen</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 05.01 Aging, growing old: Old, venerable 07.08.01 02.03 Nobility (of character, rank, etc.): Old and distinguished
Frequency (DOEC):	-
Connotations:	Distinguished

Ealdgebungen, a possible compound of the adjectives *eald* ‘old’ and *gebungen* ‘distinguished’,⁴² has an entry in neither Bosworth-Toller nor the *DOE*. As a

³⁹ *DOE*, s.v. *eald*, sense I.B.1.b.

⁴⁰ Cf. Heidemanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *alda-dōma*.

⁴¹ *DOE*, s.v. *eald-dōm*, provides the corresponding Latin: “si potentissimae illae quondam Romanae reipublicae moles nunc magis inbecillitate propriae senectutis quam alienis concussae uiribus contremescunt”.

headword, *ealdgeþungen* is only found in Meritt's supplement to Clark Hall, with a reference to Napier's edition of Wulfstan's homilies.⁴³ In the *DOEC*, the passage of Wulfstan's homily, based on Napier's edition,⁴⁴ is found with the words "eald" and "geðungen" separated by a space:

þa ablende he þurh deofles cræft swa þæs caseres eagan and ðæra, þe him mid wæron, þæt heom ðuhte oðre hwile, þa hy hine beheoldon, þæt he wære, swylce hit cild wære, þæt hy on locedon, oðre hwile eft, swylce he medemre ylde man wære, and oðre hwile, swylce he **eald geðungen** man wære; and swa on mænige wisan he hiwode þurh drycræft fela leasbregda. (HomU 58 (Nap 16))

[then through the devil's power he blinded the Emperor's eyes and those of the people with him, so that they thought at one time, when they looked at him, that he was like a child whom they looked at; a second time again as if he were a middle-aged man; and another time as if he were a **distinguished, old** man; and so in many ways he practiced many deceptions through sorcery.]

As noted above, the separation of the two words by a space does not necessarily mean that they constitute a syntactic phrase, on the condition that the first element is uninflected. However, the fact that "eald" is uninflected cannot be used to prove that "eald geðungen" is a compound here: as the subject predicative, "eald geðungen man" is in the nominative case and the nominative, strong masculine form of the adjective *eald* would also be uninflected. The evidence is thus inconclusive.

In view of the above, *ealdgeþungen* cannot definitively be identified as a compound; hence, following its exclusion from Bosworth-Toller and the *DOE*, *ealdgeþungen* is perhaps best taken out of the *TOE* category "02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old".

	<i>ealdhād</i> , n.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	-
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	-
Connotations:	-

Ealdhād 'old age', a compound of *eald* and *-hād* 'hood',⁴⁵ is found in Bosworth-Toller.⁴⁶ Bosworth-Toller provides a reference to another entry, the spelling variant *aldhād*, which, similarly, is not found in the *DOE*, *TOE* or Clark Hall. Moreover, in its entries for both *ealdhād* and *aldhād*, no sources or citations are provided to evince the

⁴² OE *geþungen* 'respected' is the lexicalised past participle of the class III strong verb (*ge*)þingan 'to respect' and cognate with OS *gi-thungan* 'respected'. Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. *þinhan-.

⁴³ Clark Hall, s.v. *ealdgeþungen*.

⁴⁴ Napier, hom. 16, p. 99.

⁴⁵ On the status of *-hād* as a suffix or root, see Kastovsky, *Semantics and Vocabulary*, 263–4. Cf. Faltings, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *alda-haidu*.

⁴⁶ Also listed by Amos, 99–100, n. 19, probably on the basis of Bosworth-Toller.

existence of this lexeme. Similarly, searching the *DOEC* for possible forms of *eal dhād* does not yield any results.⁴⁷ It must be assumed, therefore, that *eal dhād* is either a ghost word or is only attested in material outside the *DOEC* and unknown to Clark Hall and the editors of the *DOE*.⁴⁸

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ealdian</i> , v.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 02 Aging, growing old: To grow old 02.01.04.03 02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age 05.11 06.03 To grow old in, continue long
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	c.90
Connotations:	Decrepitude, Positive development

OE *ealdian* ‘to grow old’ is a class II weak verb, ultimately derived from PGmc **ald-* ‘old’ and cognate with OHG *altēn* ‘to grow old’.⁴⁹ Variants of *ealdian* occur approximately ninety times in the *DOEC*.⁵⁰ The verb, which is used for people, objects and abstractions, is frequently found in glosses and prose, but rarely in poetry.

Like the *TOE*, the *DOE* records that *ealdian* refers to the aging process both in a neutral sense, as well as with the additional sense of “to grow frail or wear out with age, decay, deteriorate”.⁵¹ This second sense is exemplified by the use of forms of *ealdian* in descriptions of aging and withering bodies, as in the following passage from an anonymous homily: “Se lichoma **ealdap** & his fægernes gewiteþ & on dust bið eft gecyrred” [The body **grows old** and its beauty passes away and it will afterwards be turned to dust] (HomS 17).

In addition to this negative connotation of ‘decrepitude’, the *DOE* notes a single occurrence of *ealdian* where the aging process is used in a positive sense. In this passage from the *Liber scintillarum* [The book of sparks] by Defensor, the aging process of wine is likened to the development of a friendship:

ne derelinquas amicum antiquum; nouus enim non erit similis illi; uinum nouum, amicus nouus ueterescet et cum suauitate bibes illud na forlæt þu freond ealdne niwe soþlice na byþ gelic him win niwe freond niwe **ealdap** & mid wynsumnysse þu drincst þæt. (LibSc)

⁴⁷ Based on searches for <aldh->, <ældh>, <ealdh->, <eldh-> and <oldh->. Searching for the forms of *eald* and *-hād* separately, similarly, yielded no useful results.

⁴⁸ On the difficulty of declaring something a ‘ghost word’ on the basis of its absence in the *DOEC*, see Fulk, ‘Morphology and Diachrony’, 18. This particular word is first found in William Somner, *Dictionarium Saxonico Latino Anglicum* (Oxford, 1659), b3r. I am indebted for this last reference to Kees Dekker (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen).

⁴⁹ Hogg and Fulk, *Grammar*, §6.130, note on the basis of cognate OHG *altēn* ‘to grow old’ that *ealdian* may originally have belonged to the third weak class, with PGmc *-ǣ-* as stem formative, rather than **-ō-* (i.e. OE *ealdian* < **aldjan* < PGmc **ald-ǣ-jan*).

⁵⁰ The *DOE* features *ealdian* and *gealdian* as two separate headwords with similar senses. I will treat them as the same lexeme *ealdian*.

⁵¹ *DOE*, s.v. *ealdian*, sense 2.

[Do not leave an old friend; truly, a new one will not be like him; like new wine, a new friend **grows old/mature** and you will drink it with rejoicing.]

Thus, the attestations of *ealdian* show that for the Anglo-Saxons there were two sides to the aging process: while the body might wither away with time, other aspects, such as friendship, might improve with age.⁵²

TOE lemma:	<i>ealdigende</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 01 Aging, growing old: Growing old
Frequency (DOEC):	see <i>ealdian</i>
Connotations:	see <i>ealdian</i>

Unlike the *TOE*, the *DOE* has no separate entry for *ealdigende* ‘growing old’ and treats it as the adjectival present participle form of *ealdian*.⁵³

TOE lemma:	<i>ealdlic</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.02 07.01 To grow, grow up: Mature 02.01.04.03 05.01 Aging, growing old: Old, venerable 05.11.07.03 07 Former times, days of old: Of early times, authoritative 05.11.07.03 08 Former times, days of old: Primitive, early (e.g. of church)
Frequency (DOEC):	10
Connotations:	Authority

Ealdlic ‘old’, a combination of *eald* and the derivational suffix *-lic*,⁵⁴ occurs ten times in the *DOEC* and is found in glosses and prose, referring to people, objects and abstractions. Whereas the *TOE* follows Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall in assigning the sense ‘old, venerable’ to *ealdlic*, the sense ‘venerable’ is not included in the definition provided by the *DOE*, s.v. *ealdlic*, which lists:

1. old, ancient; advanced (in age / years)
2. old, mature
3. glossing *authentica veterum* perhaps with the intention of glossing the complete grammatical unit *authentica veterum auctoritate* ‘by the genuine authority of ancient writers’; if so, *ealdlic* could be understood as ‘authoritative’ or ‘authentic’.
4. glossing *serotinus* ‘late’

⁵² A similar admonition to keep your old friends close is found in the Old English *Dicts of Cato*: “Peah þe þin eald gefera abelge, ne forgit þu gif he þe æfre ær gecwemde” [Even if your old companion angers you, do not forget whether he has ever pleased you]. Cox, ‘Old English Dicts’, 13, no. 66.

⁵³ Hogg and Fulk, *Grammar*, §6.107, note that in West Saxon dialects of Old English in class II weak verbs “-ig- is normal before the ending -e(n), but -i- and -ig- vary freely before e in the inflected infinitive and pres.part.”. See also Hogg, *Grammar*, §7.76.

⁵⁴ Cf. Heidermanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *alda-līka-*; Faltings, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *alda-līka-*.

In none of the attestations of *ealdlic* in the *DOEC* does the term necessarily carry the sense ‘venerable’; hence, this sense is rightly rejected by the *DOE*, and the *TOE* should follow suit.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ealdnes</i> , n.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 03 Aging, growing old: Old age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	5
Connotations:	Decrepitude

Ealdnes, a combination of *eald* and the nominal suffix *-nes*,⁵⁵ occurs five times in the *DOEC*. It is used twice to gloss forms of Lat. *vetustas* ‘old age’ (ÆGram, BenRGl⁵⁶) and the other three occurrences are found in homilies by Ælfric. In these homilies, *ealdnes* is accompanied by the negative adjectives *forwerod* ‘old, worn-out’ and *deriendlic* ‘hurtful’:

seo endlyfte tid bið seo forwerode **ealdnyss** þam deaðe genealæcende. swa swa seo sunne setlunge genealæhð. on þæs dæges geendunge. (*ÆCHom II*, 5)

[the eleventh hour is worn-out **old age**, which approaches death, just as sunset approaches the end of the day.]

eornostlice þonne sume beoð gelædde on cildhade to godum ðeawum and rihtum life. sume on cnihtade. sume on geðungenum wæstme. sume on ylde. sume on forwerodre **ealdnysse**. (*ÆCHom II*, 5)

[honestly, then, some are induced in childhood to good deeds and a rightful life, some in youth, some in adulthood, some in old age and some in worn-out **old age**.]

we awurpon þa deriendlican **ealdnysse**: and we sind getealde betwux Godes bearnum þurh Cristes flæsclicnysse. (*ÆCHom I*, 13)

[we threw off the hurtful **old age** and we are reckoned among God’s children through Christ’s incarnation.]

The context of these three occurrences of *ealdnes* show an association of old age with decrepitude.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ealdung</i> , n.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	5

⁵⁵ Cf. Faltings, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *alda-nassjō*.

⁵⁶ In BenRGl, the word *vetustas* is a scribal error for *vetustus* ‘old’, see *DOE*, s.v. *ealdnes*.

Connotations:	-

Ealdung, derived from *ealdian* ‘to grow old’ through the deverbial suffix *-ung*,⁵⁷ has five occurrences in the *DOEC*. *Ealdung* is only used with reference to material objects, such as dress, walls, buildings and bones; hence, this lexeme falls outside the semantic field for human old age.

TOE lemma:	<i>ealdwīf</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.03.01.09 Old woman
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	-
Connotations:	-

Whereas the *TOE* lists *ealdwīf*, a compound of *eald* ‘old’ and *wīf* ‘woman’, as a lexeme, the *DOE* does not include *ealdwīf* in its list of headwords (see table 10.1 above). A search in the *DOEC* reveals that the form <*ealdwif*> occurs only once, as a personal name:

Her cyð þæt Ælfred lareow hæfeð gefreolsad vii men. An is Ædred webbe.
And oðer his sunu Eðered. And þridde his dohtor **Ealdwif**. (Rec 8.3.3
[Craster])

[Here it is made known that the teacher Ælfred has freed seven persons.
The first is Ædred, the weaver. And the second is his son Ethered, And the
third his daughter **Ealdwif**.]

In addition, there are six further attestations of *ealdwīf* in the *DOEC*, where the two elements are separated by a space:

Hit byð swyðe sceandlic, þæt **eald wif** sceole ceorles brucan. (ÆLet 5
[Sigefyrth])

[It is very shameful that an **old woman** should have sex with a man.]

anus eald wif (ÆGl) [**old woman**]

se deofol hine þa selfne gehiwode swylce he an **eald wif** wære. (LS 29
[Nicholas])

[the devil then transformed himself as if he were an **old woman**.]

Þa cwæð God to Abrahame: ‘Hwi hloh Sarra ðin wif & cwæð Sceal ic nu
eald wif cennan?’ (Gen)

⁵⁷ Hogg and Fulk, *Grammar*, §2.37, note that this form of the deverbial suffix (*-ung* rather than *-ing*) is typical of words derived from class II weak verbs, such as *ealdian*. Note: *-ung* can also form nouns with adjectives, see *hārun* below.

[then God said to Abraham: Why did Sarah, your wife, laugh and say ‘Must I now, **an old woman**, bring forth a child?’]

þe ic þæt mynster gesohte, wære sum **eald wif**, þære nama wæs Redempta.
(GDPref and 4 [C])

[when I visited that monastery, there was a certain **old woman**, whose name was Redempta.]

Anula vel uetula **eald wif** (AntGl 6 [Kindschi]) [**old woman**]

As noted with respect to the other compounds with *eald-*, the separation of the two elements by a space does not exclude the possibility that these are, in fact, compounds, rather than syntactic phrases. However, the test applied with the other *eald*-compounds above – to see whether the first element is uninflected for case – is inconclusive in all these cases, since the neuter nominative singular strong form of the adjective *eald* would here similarly lack an inflectional ending. Hence, there seems to be no way of confirming the status of *eald-wif* as either a compound or a syntactic phrase.

However, the latter is more likely; at least in the case of the penultimate example above, taken from the Old English translation of Gregory’s *Dialogi*. Further on in the same text, the old woman Redempta is mentioned again, but now the author clearly uses the accusative singular weak form of the adjective *eald*: “Þa sume nihte cigde heo þa ylcan Redemtan **þæt ealde wif**” [Then some night, she called the same Redempta, **the old woman**] (GDPref and 4 [C]).

In view of the above, the *DOE* is most likely correct in excluding *eald-wif* from its list of headwords. Consequently, this proposed lexeme ought to be struck from the *TOE* as well.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>forealdian</i> , v.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 02.01 Aging, growing old: To grow old/feeble with age 03.02.01.01 02 Decay, corruption, rottenness: To putrefy, rot, grow foul 03.02.01.02 03.01 Decay from age: (Of dead matter) to decay over time
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	c.45
Connotations:	Decrepitude

Forealdian is a combination of the verb *ealdian* ‘to grow old’ and the prefix *for-*. The prefix *for-* exhibits various meanings, of which three are applicable to the prefix *for-* in *forealdian*: an intensification of the verb (to grow very old), ‘too much, to excess’ (to grow too old) or a general pejorative meaning (to grow old in a bad way).⁵⁸ All three options are in accordance with the definitions for *forealdian* provided by the *DOE*,

⁵⁸ K. Sprengel, *A Study in Word-formation* (Tübingen, 1977), 48, notes two other possible meanings, ‘away’ and ‘closing, covering up’, neither of which seem applicable to *forealdian*. Cf. Koziol, *Handbuch*, §§221–2.

which notes that *forealdian* expresses both ‘growing (very) old’ and ‘becoming enfeebled or decayed through age’.

Forms of *forealdian* occur approximately forty-five times in the *DOEC* and are restricted to prose and glosses. The verb is used with reference to people, objects and abstractions. The lexeme is clearly connected to the concept of decrepitude, as is illustrated by the following example:

he bið swaþeah gehæled to ansundre hæle eft on Domesdæg, þonne he of deaþe arist, and syþðan ne swylt, ne seoc ne gewyrð, ne him hingrian ne mæg, ne him þurst ne derap, ne he ne **forealdað**, ac bið ece syþþan, on sawle and on lichaman, orsorgh deaþes. (ÆHom 2)

[However, he will be healed to sound health again on Doomsday, when he rises from death, and afterwards he will not die, nor will he become sick, nor will he be hungry, nor will thirst harm him, nor will he **decay from age**, but he will then be eternal, in soul and in body, free from care of death.]

On the whole, *forealdian* is yet another Old English lexeme that connects old age to something negative: physical decrepitude.

TOE lemma:	<i>forealdung</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03 Aging, growing old: Old age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	1
Connotations:	-

Forealdung, a nominal, abstract form of *forealdian*, formed with the deverbal suffix *-ung*,⁵⁹ occurs only once in the *DOEC*, as a lexical gloss for *senium* ‘advanced old age’ (SedGl 2.1).

TOE lemma:	<i>forildu</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03.01 Aging, growing old: Great age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	2
Connotations:	-

Forildu, a combination of the noun *ieldo* ‘old age’ and the intensifying prefix *for-* (see *forealdian* above), occurs twice in the *DOEC*. It glosses Lat. *senium* ‘advanced old age’ (PrudGl 1) and is used, as a collective noun, in combination with *geoguð* to mean ‘everyone’.

forðig þonne, butan ðam anum, ðe for heora leahtrum of heora endebyrðnysse uttor ascofene synd, oððe for haliges lifes geearnunga innor genumene, ælc oþer, **forylde** and iugoðe, healde his endebyrðnysse, swa swa he to mynstre com. (BenRWells)

⁵⁹ For this suffix, see p. 255, n. 57 above.

[Therefore, then, except for those, who because of their vices are removed from their rank, or because of the merits of a holy life are promoted, every one, **the very old** and the young, keeps his rank, just as he came to the minster.]

Forildu is lemmatised as *foryldu* in the *DOE*.

TOE lemma:	<i>forþgān</i> , v
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 06 Aging, growing old: To be advanced in years 05.11 04 A time, period of time: (Of time) to pass, elapse 05.12.05.07.01 To pass by 05.12.05.09 To go forward, proceed
Frequency <i>DOEC</i>):	2 ⁶⁰
Connotations:	-

Forþgān combines the adverb *forþ* ‘forward’ and the verb *gān* ‘to go’ and must originally have meant ‘to go forward, advance’. The sense ‘to be advanced in years’ is attested in neither Bosworth-Toller nor Clark Hall. The *DOE* does not mention this sense in its entry for *forþgān* either, but includes it, instead, for the phrase *forþ gān on (heora) dagum* in its entries for both *forþ* and *gān*, using two citations to illustrate this sense:

hig næfdon nan bearn, forðam ðe Elizabeth wæs unberende, & hy on heora dagum butu **forð eodon**. (Lk (WSCp))

[They did not have any children, because Elisabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years (lit.: had advanced in their days).]

ic eom nu eald & min wif on hyre dagum **forð eode**. (Lk (WSCp))

[I am now old and my wife is advanced in years (lit.: has advanced in her days).]

Since *forþgān* in isolation does not mean ‘to grow old, to be advanced in years’, the *DOE* data do not provide a basis for including *forþgān* in the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03|06 Aging, growing old: to be advanced in years”. Instead, it could be replaced with the phrase *forþ gān on (heora) dagum*.

TOE lemma:	<i>forweorennas</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03.02 Aging, growing old: Extreme old age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	2
Connotations:	-

⁶⁰ *DOE*, s.v. *forþgān* lists 29 occurrences. However, the *DOE* treats the collocation *forþ gān on dagum* ‘to be advanced in years’ as a phrase of *forþ* (senses A.2, A.3.b.iii, A.5.a.iii and A.6.a.ii) and of *gān* (senses VI.7, I.2.c and II.2.a.i).

*Forweorennas*⁶¹ is a combination of OE *forweren*, *forworen* ‘decrepit, enfeebled with age’ and the noun-forming abstract suffix *-nes*. The *DOE*, s.v. *forwerennes*, notes, however, that an alternative manuscript reading of one of the attestations of *forweorennas* is “forwerignes”, which could reflect an otherwise unattested form of **forwerig* ‘very weary’ and *-nes*.

Forms of *forweorennas* occur twice in the *DOEC*, in glosses to Ps. 70:18, where they translate Lat. *senium* ‘advanced old age’:

Et usque in senectam et senium; deus ne derelinquas me. donec annuntiem brachium tuum; generationi omni quę uentura est. potentiam tuam et & oð on ylde & **forwerennesse** ne forlæte þu me oð ic bodige earm þinne cneorisse ælcra þe toward is anweald þin. (PsG1H [Campbell])

On ylða & **forwerennisse** ne forlæte þu me oð ic bodige earm þinne cneorisse ælcra þe toward anweald þin *et usque in senecta et senium deus ne derelinquas me, donec adnuntiem brachium tuum generationi omni quę uentura est, potentiam tuam.* (PsG1D [Roeder])

[In old age and **advanced old age**: You, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your arm to each generation that is coming, your power.]

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>forwerod</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 04 Aging, growing old: (Of age) advanced, old 02.08.02 07.02 Disease, infirmity, sickness: Infirm, decrepit 03.02.01.02 02 Decay from age: Used, threadbare
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	23
Connotations:	Decrepitude

OE *forwered*, *forwerod* ‘old, decrepit’ is the past participle form of an otherwise unattested class I weak verb **forwerian* ‘to wither, to grow old’,⁶² a combination of the intensifying prefix *for-* (see *forealdian* above) and **werian* ‘to wither, fade’. Through a series of sound changes OE **werian* can be traced to the PGmc. root **was-*, which is related to the verbal stem **weis-* ‘to wither’ that gave rise to OE *forweren*, *forworen* ‘old, decayed’ (see below).⁶³

A search in the *DOEC* yields one possible occurrence of OE **forwerian*, where it glosses a form of Lat. *destruo* ‘to destroy, ruin’:

⁶¹ The spelling of the *TOE* lemma is remarkable in that this particular spelling is absent from the *DOE*, Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall. Possibly, we are dealing here with a printing error for *forwerennes* in the *TOE*. Alternatively, the spelling “forweorennas” may have been derived from the form “forweorone”, found in *The Ruin*, l. 7. For a discussion of this form, see J. E. Cross, ‘On Sievers-Brunner’s Interpretation of “The Ruin”, line 7, “forweorone geleorone”’, *English and Germanic Studies* 6 (1957), 105, n. 6; Hogg and Fulk, *Grammar*, §6.29.

⁶² *DOE*, s.v. *forwered*, *forwerod*.

⁶³ The changes involved from PGmc. **was-* include: **was-j-an* > **waz-j-an* (under Verner’s Law, cf. **hazjan* > OE *herian*) > WGmc. **war-j-an* (Rhotacism) > **wær-j-an* (Anglo-Frisian Brightening) > **wer-j-an* (I-mutation) > OE **werian*.

forðon God <**forwerað**> þe on ende & up aluceþ ðe <&> afærð ðe of
getealde þinum & wyrtruman þinne of lande lyfigendra *propterea deus*
destruet te in finem euellet te et emigrabit te de tabernaculo et radicem
tuam de terra uiuentium. (PsGIF)⁶⁴

[Therefore God will destroy you in the end and take you away and remove
you from your tent and uproot you from the land of the living (Ps. 51:7).]

In the *DOE*, the form “forwerað” in this gloss is treated as a form of *forweorpan* ‘to throw forth, cast out, reject’. Possibly, this is because other manuscripts have forms of *toweorpan* ‘to cast down, break in pieces, destroy’.⁶⁵ *Forwerian* in the sense of ‘to ravage, lay waste, make decay’, however, seems an appropriate gloss for Latin *destruo*. Consequently, “forwerað” might be an attestation of the verb *forwerian* of which *forwerod* is the past participle. If so, *forwerian*, with this attestation, should be included in the *DOE*.

Forms of *forwerod* are found in prose and glosses and are mainly used with reference to material objects and people. The sense division provided by the *DOE* confirms the categorisation of the *TOE*: *forwerod* means both ‘old’ and ‘decrepit’. These two senses are exemplified by the following citations:

næs him cild gemæne: for þan ðe Elisabeð wæs untymende: & hi butu þa
forwerede wæron. (*ÆCHom I*, 25)

[they both had no children together: because Elisabeth was barren and they
both were **old and decrepit**.]

Hit byð swyþe sceandlic, þæt eald wif sceole ceorles brucan, þonne heo
forwerod byð and teames ætealdod, ungehealtsumlice, forðan ðe gesceafta
ne beoð for nanum oðran þinge astealde butan for bearnteame anum, swa
swa us secgað halige bec. (*ÆLet 5* [Sigefyrth])

[It is very shameful that an old woman should have sex with a man, when
she is **worn out with age** and too old for childbearing, unchastely, because
sexual relations are not meant for any other thing except for procreation
only, just as holy books tell us.]

Furthermore, the word glosses forms of *decrepitus* ‘decrepit’, *vetulus* ‘somewhat old’,
valde senex ‘very old’ and *inveteratus* ‘old’:

Decrepita .i. uetula forweren, **forweret** *ualde senex* (HIGI [Oliphant])

decrepita, .i. inueterata **forwered**, forworen, foreald (AldV 13.1 [Nap])

⁶⁴ In the manuscript, <-werað> has been erased. A. C. Kimmens, ‘The Stow Psalter’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1969, 497.

⁶⁵ *DOE*, s.v. *forweorpan*, sense 4.

TOE lemma:	<i>forwerodnes</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03.03 Aging, growing old: Old age, decrepitude
Frequency (DOEC):	2
Connotations:	-

Forwerodnes, a combination of *forwerod* and the noun-forming suffix *-nes*, is found as a gloss for Lat. *senium* ‘advanced old age’ in Ps. 70:18:

on ylde & **forwerednysse** god ne forlate þu me oð þæt ic bodige earm
þinne cynrynes ælcere ðe toward is miht þin *Et usque in senectam et
senium deus ne derelinquas me donec adnuntiem brachium tuum
generationi omni quæ uentura est potentiam tuam.* (PsGlF [Kimmens])

on ylde & **forwerednesse** god na forlæt me oþ ic bodige earm þinne
cypnesse ealle þa towerde is anweald þin *Et usque in senectam et senium
deus ne derelinquas me, Donec adnuntiem brachium tuum generationi omni
quæ uentura est, Potentiam tuam.* (PsGlK [Sisam])

[in old age and **advanced old age**: God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim
your arm to each future generation, your power.]

TOE lemma:	<i>forworen</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 07 Aging, growing old: Worn out with age 03.02.01.02 01 Decay from age: Decrepit, decayed
Frequency (DOEC):	4
Connotations:	Decrepitude

OE *forweren*, *forworen* ‘worn out with age’ is the past participle of an otherwise unattested class V strong verb **forwe(o)san*.⁶⁶ **Forwe(o)san* has Germanic cognates in OHG *irweranī* ‘weakness of old age’ (derived from the past participle of the class V strong verb *irwesan*), German *verwesen* ‘to decay’ and ON *vissna* ‘to wither’,⁶⁷ which can all be traced back to PGmc. **weis-* ‘to wither’.⁶⁸

Forms of *forworen* occur three times in the *DOEC*, as glosses for Lat. *decrepitus* ‘decrepit’, *vetulus* ‘somewhat old’, *valde senex* ‘very old’, *veteranus* ‘old’ and *inveteratus* ‘old’:

⁶⁶ *DOE*, s.v. *for-weren*, *for-woren*. The form of the past participle is affected by Verner’s Law and rhotacism.

⁶⁷ R. Lühr, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen. Bd. 5: iba – luzzilo* (Göttingen, 2014), s.v. *irweranī*; E. Seebold, *Kluge: Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 25th ed. (Berlin, 2011), s.v. *verwesen*.

⁶⁸ E. Seebold, ‘Die ae. schwundstufigen Präsensien (Aoristpräsensien) der *Ei*-reihe’, *Anglia* 84 (1966), 6–10; F. A. Wood, ‘Indo-European Bases Derivable from Skt. *Áva* ‘Down’’, *SiP* 28 (1931), 536–7, traced *forweren*, *forworen* to PIE **awe-s*, *wes-*, *wā-s* ‘subside, diminish, wane: become or make empty, exhaust, lay waste’. On semantic grounds, the PGmc. stems **wesān- 1* ‘to be’ and **wesān- 2* ‘to consume, feast’ mentioned in Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary* are unlikely origins for **forwe(o)san*.

Decrepita .i. uetula **forweren**, forweret ualde senex (HiGl [Oliphant])

decrepita ueterana **forworen** foreald (AldV 1 [Goossens])

decrepita, .i. inueterata forwered, **forworen**, foreald (AldV 13.1 [Nap])

These glosses show that *forworen* must mean ‘old and decayed’ or ‘worn out with age’. This sense is also clear from its use in the Old English poem *The Ruin*, which describes a set of Roman ruins, decayed with age:

Eorð-grap hafað
waldend wyrhtan – **forweorone**, geleorene –
heard-gripe hrusan, op hund cnea
wer-þeoda gewitan.⁶⁹

[Earth-grip, the hard grip of the ground, will hold the mighty builders – **decayed** and lost – until a hundred generations have passed away.]

Forworen here refers to the state of the bodies of the long-dead builders: decayed and worn away by old age, like the Roman ruins that are described in the poem.

	<i>frameald</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	05.11.07.03.03 02 Old, not new: Ancient, of time long past
Frequency (DOEC):	-
Connotations:	-

Frameald is listed in Bosworth-Toller, Clark Hall and the *TOE*, but has no entry in the *DOE*. *Frameald* is a combination of *eald* ‘old’ and the prefix *fram-*, which in both Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall is taken to be an intensifying prefix, as they provide the sense ‘very old’.⁷⁰ Bosworth-Toller illustrates this headword with the following citation from the Old English version of an Ely privilege: “Seo stow wæs gehalgod in framealdum dagum” [This place had been hallowed in very old times]. In the most recent edition of this text by John C. Pope, who attributes the text to Ælfric, the phrase “in framealdum dagum” occurs as “iu fram ealdum dagum”, with “iu”(> *geo* ‘before, since, earlier (adv.)’) rather than “in” and a space separating “fram” and “ealdum”.⁷¹ The elements “fram” and “ealdum” can be interpreted as parts of a syntactic phrase, i.e. the preposition *fram* ‘from, since’ and the adjective *eald* ‘old’, rendering the translation of the entire passage ‘this place had been hallowed before since old times’.

⁶⁹ *The Ruin*, ed. Bjork, *Shorter Poems*, ll. 6b–9a.

⁷⁰ Also listed by Amos, 99–100, n. 19.

⁷¹ J. C. Pope, ‘Ælfric and the Old English Version of the Ely Privilege’, in *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), 89, l. 31. Note: Pope’s is also the text provided by the *DOEC*. In fact, in the edition referred to by Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall, the elements “fram” and “ealdum” are also separated by a space: *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, ed. J. M. Kemble (London, 1839–1848), III, 60: “in fram ealdum dagum”.

The interpretation of “fram ealdum” as word forms of two separate lexemes rather than one compound is reinforced by the fact that Ælfric employed similar phrases in his other works. For example, he used the phrase “fram ealdum dagum” with the sense ‘since old times’ in various homilies:

Him gedafenode þæt hi ærest on crist gelyfdon. for ðan ðe hi heoldon þa ealdan.æ. and hæfdon cyððe to gode **fram ealdum dagum**. (*ÆCHom II*, 8)

[It befitted them that they first believed in Christ, because they observed the old law and had knowledge of God **since old times**.]

Ðær wæs gewurðod **fram ealdum dagum** sum hæðengild. þæt wæs gehaten Apollo. (*ÆCHom II*, 11)

[A certain idol, that was called Apollo, was worshipped **since old times**.]

Micel menigu geðeah gode of iudeiscre ðeode. **fram ealdum dagum** oð cristes tocyme. (*ÆCHom II*, 26)

[A great multitude thrived to the God of the Jewish people, **from old times** until Christ’s coming.]

The combination of “ealdum dagum” and “iu” also occurs more often in Ælfric’s works, where, in each case, the preposition “on” precedes “ealdum dagum”:

Iu on ealdum dagum wæs sum æðele mæden Cecilia gehaten. (*ELS* [Cecilia])

[**Earlier in old days**, there was a noble maiden called Cecilia.]

Iu on ealdum dagum, ær ðam þe Cristendom wære, menn worhton deofolgyld wide geond þas woruld. (*ÆHom* 19)

[**Earlier in old days**, before there was Christendom, men worshipped idols widely throughout the world.]

Iu on ealdum dagum wæs sum rice cyning namcuð on worulde, Asuerus gehaten. (*ÆHomM* 14 [Ass 8])

[**Earlier in old days**, there was a powerful king, well-known throughout the world, called Asuerus.]

The unique phrase “iu fram ealdum dagum” in the Ely privilege appears to be a construction similar to Ælfric’s “iu on ealdum dagum”.⁷² There is no reason, therefore, to assume that “framealdum” must necessarily be a compound. Hence, *frameald*

⁷² Cf. Pope, ‘Ælfric and the Old English Version’, 108, n. 31.

should be considered a ghost word and is justifiably excluded from the *DOE*; it should, therefore, also be struck from the *TOE*.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>frōd</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new 06.01.05.02.01.01 01 Sagacity: Wise, clever, sagacious 11.04.02 16 Skill, skilfulness: Skilled in an art/pursuit/subject
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	85
Connotations:	Wisdom, Grief

Frōd ‘old, wise’ derives from PGmc **frōda-* ‘wise, experienced’.⁷³ The form goes back to the Indo-European roots **pero-*, **pere-* ‘press, press forward’ and subsequently ‘grasp, understand’.⁷⁴ Hence, the primary meaning of OE *frōd* is ‘wise’, as is confirmed by its Germanic cognates OF *frōd* ‘wise’, Goth. *frops* ‘wise’, OS *frōd* and Middle Dutch *vroed* ‘wise’.⁷⁵ ‘Old’ as an additional sense is found only in OE *frōd* and OHG *fruot* ‘old and wise’.⁷⁶

Forms of Old English *frōd* are mainly found in poetry and in a handful of glosses for Latin *profectus* ‘advanced’ and *grandaevus* ‘very old’.⁷⁷ In his article on *frōd*, Zwikstra has argued that the wisdom and experience referred to by *frōd* is ‘unambiguously presented in a positive light’.⁷⁸ In doing so, Zwikstra seems to have overlooked that *frōd* is occasionally connected to grief. In Cynewulf’s *Elene*, for example, Simon is described as a “guma gehðum frod” [a man, old (and wise) with griefs] and, in *Beowulf*, the aged Ongentheow is called “frod, felageomor” [old and wise, very sad].⁷⁹ In other words, gaining wisdom with age could be a sorrowful experience, as is also illustrated by the grieving speaker of *The Wanderer* (called “frod” in line 90) and the compound *gēomorfrōd* ‘old, wise and sad’ (to be discussed below).

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>gamol</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 05 Aging, growing old: (Of beings, etc.) old, of great age 05.11.07.03.03 02 Old, not new: Ancient, of time long past
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	29
Connotations:	Grief

The etymology of *gamol* ‘old, ancient’ is a matter of debate.⁸⁰ Ferdinand Holthausen suggested that the word *gamol* derives from Proto-Indo-European **gá-mal* ‘stained’ or

⁷³ S. Kroesch, ‘The Semasiological Development of Words for *perceive*, etc., in the Older Germanic Dialects’, *Modern Philology* 8 (1911), 478; Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. **frōda-*.

⁷⁴ F. A. Wood, ‘Etymological Notes’, *MLN* 29 (1914), 70.

⁷⁵ Kroonen, *Dictionary*, s.v. **frōda-*.

⁷⁶ A. L. Lloyd and R. Lühr, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen. Bd. 3: fadum – füstslag* (Göttingen, 2007), s.v. *fruot*.

⁷⁷ *DOE*, s.v. *frōd*.

⁷⁸ Zwikstra, ‘Wintrum frod’, 146.

⁷⁹ Cynewulf, *Elene*, ed. Gradon, l. 531a; *Beowulf*, l. 2950a.

⁸⁰ See Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. **gamala-*.

‘spotted’.⁸¹ This proposed origin is problematic, however, since, under Grimm’s Law, the Proto-Indo-European /g/ changes to /h/ in Germanic languages. Amos has proposed two alternative options for the origins of *gamol*: a combination of the prefix *ge-* and the noun *mǣl* ‘time’ or a derivation from the word *guma* ‘man’.⁸² Both of Amos’s alternatives, however, are questionable as well: it is hard to explain the phonological development that led the unstressed prefix **ga-mǣl* to become stressed and the relation between *guma* ‘man’ and *gamol* ‘old’ does not make semantic sense. For the Dutch cognate of *gamol*, *gammel* ‘old, rickety’, an alternative origin has been suggested: Indo-European **g^hiems* ‘winter’ which would have developed to PGmc **gim*, which is present in Old Dutch *aingimnis* ‘one-winter-old’ and *tuigimnis* ‘two-winters-old’.⁸³ In favour of the relationship between Proto-Indo-European **g^hiems* and Old English *gamol* is the clear link between old age and winter (see also *gewintred*, below); someone who is old has seen many winters, old age is linked to the last season of the year (winter) and Winter is often depicted as an old man. Still, this etymology, too, has its problems, since the phonological shift PGmc **gim* > *gam* is unlikely. In the end, the etymology of *gamol* remains uncertain.

In the *DOEC*, the adjective *gamol* occurs twenty-nine times, exclusively in poetry, and is predominantly applied to people (23 x), occasionally to swords (4 x) and twice to the Phoenix in the eponymous poem *The Phoenix*. *Gamol* is found in only one recurring collocational pattern, “gomel on gehðo” [old in grief], which occurs twice in *Beowulf* (ll. 2793, 3095).⁸⁴ This collocation of grief and old age suggests that, for the Anglo-Saxons, growing old was not necessarily a positive experience.

TOE lemma:	<i>gamolferhþ</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 05 Aging, growing old: (Of beings, etc.) old, of great age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	1
Connotations:	-

Gamolferhþ, a combination of *gamol* ‘old’ and *ferhþ* ‘mind, intellect, soul, spirit, life, person’, is used only once, in the poem *Genesis*, with reference to Abraham:

Ongan þa his esolas bætan

gamol-ferhð goldes brytta, heht hine geonge twegen
men mid siðian.⁸⁵

[The **old** distributor of gold (Abraham) then began to saddle his asses, he asked two young men to travel with him.]

⁸¹ F. Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1934), s.v. *gamol*.

⁸² Amos, 97, Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. **gamala-*, and *DOE*, s.v. *gamol*, favour **ge-mæl* as the origin.

⁸³ *Etymologisch Woordenboek van het Nederlands*, ed. M. Philippa et al. (Amsterdam, 2003–2009), s.v. *gammel*.

⁸⁴ In line 2793, the manuscript reads “gomel on giogoðe”, but for metrical reasons, the reading “giogoðe” [youth] is generally emended to “gιοhðe” [grief].

⁸⁵ *Genesis A*, ed. Doane, ll. 2867b–9a.

TOE lemma:	<i>gamolian</i> , v.
TOE categories:	05.11.07.03.03 05 Old not new: to grow old
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

Gamolian ‘to grow old’ is a de-adjectival verb of *gamol* ‘old’. Erroneously, this lexeme was included in the TOE under two different spellings: *gamolian* (in category “05.11.07.03.03|05 Old not new: to grow old”) and *gomelian* (“02.01.04.03|02 Aging, growing old: to grow old”). In the DOE, this lexical item is listed as *gamelian* ‘to grow old’. The lexeme occurs only once, in the poem *Maxims I*: “ne **gomelað** he in gæste, ac he is gen swa he wæs” [He (God) does not **age** in spirit, but He is still as He was].⁸⁶

TOE lemma:	<i>geōmēowle</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.03.01.09 Old woman
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

Geōmēowle is a compound of the adverb *geō* ‘formerly, of old’ and *mēowle* ‘maiden, woman’. The adverb *geō* is found in various compounds, such as *geō-abbod* ‘former abbot’, *geō-mann* ‘man of old’ and *geō-wine* ‘friend of old’, but only the compound *geō-mēowle* has been related to senectitude. The DOE, s.v. *geōmēowle*, assigns the following meaning: “woman of a former day, (old) woman of the past, alternatively interpreted as ‘one who was long ago a maiden’, i.e. ‘an old woman / wife’”. Pope, however, has argued against the last interpretation, since *mēowle* can refer to any woman, irrespective of their maidenhood. In addition, Pope has pointed out that in other compounds formed with *geō-* the compounds refer to people who have long since passed away, rather than to aged individuals.⁸⁷

Geōmēowle occurs only once in the DOEC, in the poem *Beowulf*, where it refers to the wife of Ongentheow:⁸⁸

bryd ahredde
gomela[n] **iomeowlan** golde berofene
Onelan modor ond Ohtheres.⁸⁹

[he (Ongentheow) rescued his bride, the old **woman of a former day**, deprived of gold, mother of Onela and Ohthere.]

⁸⁶ *Maxims I*, ed. Shippey, l. 11.

⁸⁷ J. C. Pope, ‘*Beowulf* 3150–3151: Queen Hygd and the Word *geomeowle*’, *MLN* 70 (1955), 84–7.

⁸⁸ For some time, scholars have claimed that there is another occurrence in *Beowulf*, ll. 3150–2: “Swylce giomorgyd (s)io g(eomeowle) / (æfter Biowulfe b)undenheorde / (song) sorgcearig” [Likewise, the old woman with bound hair sorrowfully sang a death song for Beowulf]. The generally accepted reading of this passage, however is: “swylce giomorgyd (Ge)at(isc) meowle / æfter Biowulfe b)undenheorde / (sang) sorgcearig” [Likewise, a Geatish woman with bound hair sorrowfully sang a death song for Beowulf]. See *Beowulf*, 270; Pope, ‘*Beowulf* 3150–3151’; H. Bennett, ‘The Female Mourner at Beowulf’s Funeral: Filling in the Blanks / Hearing the Spaces’, *Exemplaria* 4 (1992), 35–50.

⁸⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2930b–2

Ongentheow's wife is certainly old, but this sense is conveyed by "gomela[n]" [old], rather than "iomeowlan", which, if we were to accept the sense 'old woman', would produce a tautology. In other words, both Pope's analysis of the *geō*-compounds and the direct context of the unique instance of *geōmēowle* in *Beowulf*, suggest that the sense 'old woman' for *geōmēowle* must be refuted. Therefore, the word is best struck from the TOE category "02.03.01.09 Old woman".

TOE lemma:	<i>gēomorfrōd</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 05.02 Aging, growing old: Very old
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	Wisdom, Grief

Gēomorfrōd is a compound of *gēomor* 'grief, sadness' and *frōd* 'old and wise'. Whereas the TOE follows Clark Hall's attribution of the sense 'very old' to *gēomorfrōd*, there is no reason to assume that *gēomor*- here has an intensifying function. Rather, as in the compounds *gēomor-gydd* 'song of sorrow' and *gēomor-mōd* 'sad minded', the element *gēomor* in *gēomorfrōd* unproblematically means 'sad'; this yields the sense 'sad and wise in one's old age; sad, wise and old'.⁹⁰ *Gēomorfrōd* is thus a lexical precursor of the modern idiom 'sadder and wiser' and indicates that growing old also brings along a saddening experience.

In the DOEC, *gēomorfrōd* is attested only once, with reference to the aged Sarah:

nu ic eom orwena
 þæt unc se eðylstæf æfre weorðe
 gifeðe ætgædere. Ic eom **geomorfrōd**.⁹¹

[Now I am without hope that a successor will ever be given to us together. I am **old, wise and sad**.]

TOE lemma:	<i>gomelian</i> , v.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 02 Aging, growing old: To grow old
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

See *gamolian* above.

TOE lemma:	<i>hār</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.04.04.03.02 04 Colour of Hair: Grey-haired, hoary 02.04.04.03.02 04.04 Colour of Hair: Grey-haired, hoary: Person 03.01.14.03 03.07.02 White/whiteness: Whitened with frost 05.11.07.03.03 Old, not new

⁹⁰ Cf. DOE, s.v. *gēomorfrōd*, where the sense 'wise' is not included.

⁹¹ *Genesis A*, ed. Doane, ll. 224b–6.

Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	c.155 ⁹²
Connotations:	Grey-haired

The origin of *hār* has been identified as Indo-European **kei-*, ‘surface growth, appearance’; in Old English, it is mainly used with the sense ‘grey’ and, by extension, ‘old’.⁹³ A similar sense development is found in OS *hēr* ‘noble, distinguished, aged’ and OHG *hēr* ‘old, revered, grey’.⁹⁴

Whenever forms of *hār* apply to humans, the term describes elderly people with reference to their grey or white hair. Based on a discussion of all the human referents of *hār* and its derivatives, Biggam concludes that in all cases these words “can be satisfactorily shown to concern elderly people or, in one case [...], someone becoming elderly”. Therefore, *hār* should also have been included in the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”.

In addition to the link with grey hair, Biggam has suggested that the Anglo-Saxons may have associated *hār* with ‘fearsomeness’. Forms of this lexeme often refer to wolves, whose coats were grey and who were considered dangerous, and elderly warriors, who wore grey mail-coats and would have become more fearsome through experience of war.⁹⁵ This proposed association, however, is mostly based on conjecture. The elderly warriors to whom *hār* is applied certainly do not always strike one as outstanding, particularly fearsome warriors. Two cases in point are the elderly warrior-king Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, a “har hilderinc” who is described as too weak to protect his people,⁹⁶ and old King Constantine in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, another “har hilderinc”, who shamefully fled from the field of the battle he had lost.⁹⁷ Nothing suggests that these two warriors were all the more fearsome because of their old age and, therefore, it is safer to reject the connotation of ‘fearsomeness’ for *hār*. The notion of elderly warriors and kings is explored further in chapters 6 and 7.

Below, four derivations of *hār* are discussed individually.⁹⁸

<i>TOE</i> lemma	<i>hārung</i> , n.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.04.04.03.02 04.03 Colour of hair: Hoariness
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	3
Connotations:	Grey-haired

⁹² For a full discussion of all instances of *hār* and its derivatives, see Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 100–271.

⁹³ For the origins and semantic development of *hār*, see *ibid.*, 216–7. Cf. D. H. Green, *The Carolingian Lord: Semantic Studies on Four Old High German Words: Balder, Frô, Truhtin, Hêrro* (Cambridge, 1965), 406.

⁹⁴ Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary*, **haira-*; Heidermanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *haira-*; A. L. Lloyd and R. Lühr, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen. Bd. 4: gâba – hylare* (Göttingen, 2009), s.v. *hēr*.

⁹⁵ Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 233–7.

⁹⁶ *Beowulf*, l. 1307a; see also chapter 7.

⁹⁷ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, l. 39.

⁹⁸ Note: the derivations *hārnes* ‘grey-hairedness’ and *unhār* ‘very grey’ are left out of the discussion, because they cannot be shown to carry the sense ‘old’, despite their often describing aspects of elderly people. The words are discussed in detail by Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 188, 197–202.

The noun *hārunġ* ‘hoariness, old age’ is a combination of *hār* and the noun-forming suffix *-ung*.⁹⁹ Forms of *hārunġ* occur three times in the *DOEC*, as glosses for Lat. *canities* ‘greyness’ and *senium* ‘advanced old age’, respectively:

canities **harung** (ÆGram)

floridam iuuentutem et lacteam caniciem ða blostmbæran iuguðe and þa meolchwitan **harunge** (ÆGram)

[the blossoming youth and the milk-white **old age**]

& oð ylde & **harunga** ne forlæt þu oþ þæt ic kyðe þinne earm ælcere mægðe þe þe is toweard þine mihte *Et usque in senectam et senium deus ne derelinquas me donec annuntiem brachium tuum generationi omni quae uentura est potentiam tuam.* (PsGII [Lindelöf])

[and until old age and **advanced old age**: You, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your arm to each future generation, your power.]

Given its use as a gloss for Lat. *senium*, *hārunġ* should be included in the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>hārwenġe</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.04.04.03.02 04 Colour of hair: Grey-haired, hoary
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	6
Connotations:	Grey-haired

Hārwenġe ‘grey-cheeked, i.e. having a grey beard’ is a zero-derived denominal adjective, derived from a compound noun of *hār* ‘grey, old’ and *wenġe* ‘cheek’.¹⁰⁰ Forms of *hārwenġe* occur six times in the *DOEC*, all in the works of Ælfric. As Biggam’s comparison with Ælfric’s source texts has revealed, Ælfric used *hārwenġe* to translate Lat. *canos* ‘grey-haired’, *senior* ‘older man’ and *senex* ‘old man’; in addition, “harwenġe and eald” [white bearded and old] translates “aetate provecus” [advanced in age] and “ultimate aetatis senior fatigatus” [wearied by the weakness of extreme age].¹⁰¹ As a consequence, we can reasonably assume that *hārwenġe* was a term to denote elderly people and the lexeme should, therefore, be included in the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”.

⁹⁹ *-ung* is typically a deverbal suffix, but here it apparently functions as a deadjectival suffix, since the verb **hārian* is not attested in Old English. Another example of *-ung* as a deadjectival suffix is OE *onlīcung* ‘similitude’ (< *onlīc* ‘similar (adj.)’ + *-ung*). Cf. Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 388; Hogg and Fulk, *Grammar*, §2.37.

¹⁰⁰ The difference in vowels between *wenġe* and (*hār*)*wenġe* is due to i-mutation. Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 395.

¹⁰¹ Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 221, 265–6.

TOE lemma:	<i>hārwengnes</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.04.04.03.02 04.03 Colour of hair: Hoariness
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	Grey-haired, Authority

Hārwengnes, a combination of *hārwenge* and the suffix *-nes*, means ‘grey-cheekedness, having a grey beard’. It occurs only once in the *DOEC*, glossing Lat. *canities* ‘greyness’, *gravitas* ‘authority, importance’ and *senectus* ‘old age’: “*Canities grauitas. senectus harwengnes*” (HIGl [Oliphant]). Consequently, *hārwengnes* should also be included in the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”. In addition, the fact that *harwengnes* glosses *gravitas* reveals a connection between ‘authority’ and ‘old age’.

TOE lemma:	<i>hārwelle</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	05.11.07.03.03 01.01 Old, not new: Hoary
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

Clark Hall assigns the meaning ‘hoary, grey-haired’ to *hārwelle*,¹⁰² which is compounded of *hār* ‘grey, old’ and the unidentified element *welle*. The latter is also found in *līfwelle* ‘living’, *rūmwelle* ‘spacious’ and *deadwelle* ‘barren, arid’ and has been connected to PGmc. **wallja* ‘welling, flowing’.¹⁰³ However, *-welle* is more likely related to OE *welig* ‘abounding, rich’, creating the sense ‘abundantly grey, hence: hoary’ for *hārwelle* and, similarly, *līfwelle*, *rūmwelle* and *deadwelle* can be interpreted as ‘abounding in life’, ‘abounding in space’ and ‘abounding in death’, respectively.

Only one form of *hārwelle* is attested in the *DOEC*, where it glosses Lat. *canescens* ‘whitening, covered in white, hoary’ in the phrase “*canescentem mundum* [...] *harwelle* v[el] *harne middengeard*” [the old or ancient world] (LiEpis [Skeat]); here, *hārwelle* can only mean ‘old’, since, as Biggam rightly notes, “the world is obviously not hairy, and not all white or grey”.¹⁰⁴

The context for the hapax *hārwelle* does not support the proposed sense ‘grey-haired’ in Clark Hall. In addition, since this lexeme is not used here in relation to people, it falls outside the semantic field of human old age.

TOE lemma:	<i>ieldo</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04 Age 02.01.04.03 03 Aging, growing old: Old age 03.02.01.02 Decay from age 05.11.03 Period of time, era, epoch
Frequency (DOEC):	c.550 ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Clark Hall, s.v. *hārwelle*.

¹⁰³ R. Jordan, *Eigentümlichkeiten des englischen Wortschatzes* (Heidelberg, 1906), 104–5.

¹⁰⁴ On the context of the use of the word, see Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 222–3.

¹⁰⁵ Based on searches in the *DOEC* for <æld> (3 x), <ældes> (5 x), <ældo> (17 x), <ældu> (4 x), <ældum> (26 x), <eld> (6 x), <eldo> (19 x), <eldum> (12 x), <ielde> (6 x), <ieldo> (2 x), <ilde> (4 x), <ildo> (1 x), <yld> (109 x), <ylde> (301 x), <ylde> (67 x), <yldu> (4 x), <yldum> (13 x).

Connotations:	Decrepitude, Authority

The noun *ieldo* ‘age, period, old age’ is derived from the adjective *eald*.¹⁰⁶ Forms of this lexeme occur in poetry, prose and glosses. The sense ‘old age’ is illustrated by the fact that forms of this lexeme frequently occur alongside forms of its antonym *geoguð* ‘youth’:

God sceal wið yfele, geoguð sceal wið **yldo**,
lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið þystrum.¹⁰⁷

[Good must be against evil, youth must be against **old age**, life must be against death, light must be against darkness.]

Þær byð ece gefea butan unrotnesse and geogop butan **ylde**. (HomS 6 [Ass 14])

[There (in Heaven) will be eternal joy without sadness and youth without **old age**.]

Occasionally, *ieldo* is used as a collective term for ‘old people, the aged’:

& þy we sceolon medmian & gesceadlice todælan **ylde** & geogope, welan & wædle, freot & þeowet, hæle & unhæle. (LawIICn)

[And therefore we must mete out and carefully distinguish between **the aged** and the youthful, the wealthy and the poor, freemen and slaves, the sound and the sick.]

Ieldo also carries the more neutral sense ‘age, period’, as in texts referring to the Ages of the World:

Seo forme **yld** wæs fram Adame. oð Noe; Seo oðer **yld** wæs fram noe. oð Abraham; Seo þridde **yld** wæs fram abrahame. oð Daud. (*ÆCHom II*, 4)

[The first **age** was from Adam to Noah; the second **age** was from Noah to Abraham; the third **age** was from Abraham to David.]

Searches for <eldu>, <ield>, <ieldes>, <ieldu>, <ild>, <ildes>, <ildu>, <ildum> and <ylde> yielded no results. There may be considerable overlap with forms for *eald* ‘old’ and *ieldan* ‘to delay’.

¹⁰⁶ The difference in stem vowels between *eald* and *ieldo* is due to i-mutation caused by the PGmc suffix **-īn-*, also reflected in OS *eldi*, OHG *eltī*, *eltīn*. Cf. Heidermanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *alda-īn-*; A. L. Lloyd, R. Lühr and O. Springer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen*. Bd. 2: *bī – ezzo* (Göttingen, 1998), s.v. *eltīn*. Through analogy, OE nouns such as *ieldo* fell together with the *ō*-stems, which were formed through the PGmc suffix **-ipō*. See Hogg and Fulk, *Grammar*, §§2.88–2.90.

¹⁰⁷ *Maxims II*, ed. Shippey, ll. 50–1.

In a similar vein, *ieldo* refers to a person's 'age, time of life', in which case the word is usually modified by adjectives such as *cnihtlic* 'boyish', *werlic* 'manly' and *cildlic* 'childish':

ne he mistlice <fugela> sangas ne wurpode, swa oft swa cnihtlicu **yldo** begæð. (LS 10.1 [Guth])

[He did not value the various songs of birds, as often as (those of a) boyish **age** do.]

Eft, þa þa ic to werlicere **ylde** becom, ic awearp and aidlode þa idelnyssa þe ic on cildlicre **ylde** beeode. (ÆHom 20)

[Afterwards, when I reached a manly **age**, I rejected and freed myself from the frivolities which I practiced during my childish **age**.]

In addition, *ieldo* is used in standard constructions to indicate a person's age, such as "Hæfde se bisceop þreo hund wintra on **yldo**" [The bishop was three hundred years of **age**] (Alex).

According to the *TOE*, *ieldo* can also mean '(decay from) old age'. This sense seems applicable to those passages in which *ieldo* occurs amidst other (bodily) ailments:

ac þær bið þeostru beþrycced and hungor and þurst and heto and **yldo** and unhælo and wanung and granung and toða grisbitung (HomS 42 [Baz-Cr])

[but there (in Hell) is oppressive darkness and hunger and thirst and heat and **old age** and unhealthiness and deprivation and groaning and gnashing of teeth.]

mid **ylde** gebiged, and tobryt mid seocnysse, mid unrotnysse fornumen, and geangsumod þurh cara. (ÆLS [Cecilia])

[bent with **old age**, and broken into pieces with sickness, consumed with sadness and afflicted through sorrow.]

Another indication of the apparent relation between decrepitude and old age is the collocation of *ieldo* with *ād* 'disease' in *The Seafarer*, *Maxims I*, *Riddle 43* and *Beowulf*.¹⁰⁸

Finally, like *eald*, *ieldo* can be used to refer to people of a higher rank. The term is used in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to refer to the nobility of East Anglia, which was decimated by the Vikings in the year 1004: "Ðær wærð Eastengla folces seo **yld**

¹⁰⁸ *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, l. 70a: "adl opþe yldo"; *Maxims I*, ed. and trans. Shippey, l. 10a: "adl ne yldo"; *Riddle 43*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, l. 4a: "yldo ne adle"; *Beowulf*, l. 1738a: "<adl> ne yldo".

ofslagen” [There the **nobility** of the people of the East-Anglians was killed] (ChronE [Irvine]).¹⁰⁹

TOE lemma:	<i>infrōd</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 05.02 Aging, growing old: Very old 06.01.05.02.01.01 01.04.01 Sagacity: Very old and very wise
Frequency (DOEC):	2 ¹¹⁰
Connotations:	Wisdom, Grief

Infrōd ‘very old and very wise’ is a combination of *frōd* ‘old and wise’ and the intensifying prefix *in-*.¹¹¹ Forms of this lexeme are attested twice, both in *Beowulf*, where they are preceded by a form of *eald* ‘old’. Hence, in these two cases it could simply convey the sense ‘very wise’:

Him wæs bega wen
ealdum **infrodum**, opres swiðor,
þæt h[i]e seoðða(n no) geseon moston.¹¹²

[he (Hrothgar), old and very wise, had two thoughts, the second stronger, that they afterwards would not be allowed to see (each other).]

ond he him helpe ne mæg
eald ond **infrod** ænige gefremman.¹¹³

[and he, old and **very wise**, is not able to give him any help.]

Here, *infrōd* does not necessarily have a positive connotation, as Zwikstra has suggested for the non-intensified form *frōd*,¹¹⁴ since in these two occurrences, the term is applied to old, grieving men: Hrothgar, who is sad to see Beowulf leave, and an old father who has lost his son and cannot avenge him.

TOE lemma:	<i>langfære</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 04 Aging, growing old: Long-lived 05.11.11 05 Continuity: Lasting, of long continuance
Frequency (DOEC):	7 ¹¹⁵
Connotations:	-

¹⁰⁹ Cf. “Ðar was Eastengla folces yld mycel ofslagan” (ChronF [Baker]); “ðær wearð Eastengla folces seo yld ofslagen” (ChronC [O’Brien O’Keeffe]); “Þær wearð Eastengla folces seo yldesta ofslægen” (ChronD [Cubbin]).

¹¹⁰ Based on searches for <infrod> and <in frod>.

¹¹¹ Ingersoll, *Modification*, 121–2.

¹¹² *Beowulf*, ll. 1873b–5.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, ll. 2448b–9

¹¹⁴ Cf. Zwikstra, ‘Wintrum frod’, 146.

¹¹⁵ Based on searches for <langfar> (0 x), <langfær> (4 x), <langfer> (3 x), <longfar> (0 x), <longfær> (1 x) and <longfer> (1 x). This includes one result for “langfernysse”.

Langfære ‘long-lived, long-lasting’, cognate to OHG *langfāri* ‘very old’, is a combination of *lang* ‘long’ and the element *fære*, an OE reflex of PGmc. **-fāri-*, an adjective derived from strong verb **fara-* ‘to move’.¹¹⁶ Forms of this lexeme gloss Lat. *diuturnus* ‘long lasting’, *longevus* ‘long-lived’ and, in a birth-prognostic, *posterus* ‘coming, upcoming, following’:

diuturna **langfære** (AldV 1 [Goossens]) [protacted, long lasting]

diuturna, .i. *longeua* **langfere**, *langsum* (AldV 13.1 [Nap]) [long-lasting, long-lived]

Puer natus feruidus, callidus, animosus; in postera etate melius agit cild acenned weallende, abereð, modful, on **langfære** ylde bet he deð. (ProgGl 2 [Först])¹¹⁷

[A child born (on this day will be) fervent, crafty, haughty; in the **following** age he does beter.]

Langfære is never used with reference to old people, as is illustrated by its usage in the *Old English Boethius* and works by Ælfric and Byrhtferth:

forðæm nanwuht <nis> **longfæres** on ðys andweardan life, þeah monnum ðynce þæt hit long sie. (Bo)

[because nothing is **long-lasting** in this present life, though to men it seems to be long.]

Swa eac treowa gif hi beoð on fullum monan geheawene hi beoð heardran & **langfærran** to getimbrunge & swiþost gif hi beoð unsæpige geworhte. (*ÆCHom I*, 6)

[Thus, likewise, trees, if they are felled during the full moon, are harder and **long(er) lasting** for building and especially if they are made sapless.]

Eac ða treowu þe beoð aheawene on fullum monan beoð heardran wið wýrmætan & **langfærran**, þonne ða þe beoð on niwum monan aheawene. (*ÆTemp*)

¹¹⁶ Heidermanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *-fāri-*; Lühr, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *langfāri*.

¹¹⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics. An Edition and Translation of Texts from London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii*, ed. and trans. R. M. Liuzza (Cambridge, 2011), 229, notes that the gloss here “misses the sense of the Latin” and that the same Latin prognostic is elsewhere glossed with the correct “æftewardan”.

Eac þa treowa þe beoð aheawen on fullum monan beoð heardran wið wyrmætan and **langferran** þonne þa þe beoð on niwum monan aheawene. (ByrM 1 [Baker/Lapidge])

[Likewise, the trees which are felled during the full moon are harder against an attack of worms and **long(er)-lasting** than those which are felled during the new moon.]

Finally, the deadjectival noun *langfærnes* occurs only once, glossing Lat. *longinquitas* ‘long duration’ in the *Liber Scintilarum* by Defensor:

Quattuor sunt qualitates affectionum quibus mens iusti salubriter compungitur hoc est memoria preteritorum facinorum consideratio peregrinationis suae in huius uitae longinquitate recordatio poenarum futurarum desiderium supernae patrię [...] feower synd gelicnyssa willena mid þam mod rihtwises halwendlice byð onbryrd þæt ys gemynd forðgewitenra mana besceawung elhðeodignysse his on þyses lifes **langfernysse** gemynd wita towerdra gewilnung upplices epeles. (LibSc)

[There are four qualities of love, with which the mind of the just will be healthily inspired, that is the memory of departed men, the consideration of his pilgrimage during the **long duration** of this life, the thought of future punishments <and> the desire for the heavenly land.]

Overall, the *TOE* categorisation of *langfære* under “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old: Long-lived” is correct, but since the word never refers to people, it falls outside the semantic field of human old age.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>langieldo</i> , n.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 03 Aging, growing old: Old age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	-
Connotations:	-

Although *langieldo*, a compound of *lang* ‘long’ and *ieldo* ‘age, old age’, is listed as a headword in Clark Hall, with a reference to Sweet’s *Student’s Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon*,¹¹⁸ its inclusion in this dictionary and the *TOE* is unwarranted, since it cannot be established in the extant corpus of Old English. For one, potential word forms of *langieldo* do not appear without the interruption of a space in the *DOEC*.¹¹⁹ Moreover, wherever forms of *lang* and *ieldo* co-occur with a space, the sequence must be a syntactic phrase rather than a compound. There are four such co-occurrences and in

¹¹⁸ Clark Hall, s.v. *langieldo*; H. Sweet, *The Student’s Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1897), s.v. *langieldo*.

¹¹⁹ Based on searches in the *DOEC* for <langald->, <langæld->, <langeald->, <langeld->, <langild->, <langiELD->, <langyld->, <longald->, <longæld->, <longeald->, <longeld->, <longild->, <longiELD-> and <longyld->.

each the first element is inflected for case; hence, it cannot be interpreted as the first element of a compound. In the first example, the form “longre” is inflected for the dative case that goes with the preposition *æfter*:

And þa ymb þrage, cwæð Malchus, ‘and æfter **longre ylde**, þa ongan ic don hreowe mines siðfætes’. (LS 35 (VitPatr))

[And then after a time, said Malchus, ‘and after **a long period**, then I began to do penitence for my journey’.]

Two further collocations are found in the Old English translation of Gregory’s *Dialogi* and correspond to the Latin phrases “longum senium” and “longam aetatem:

Hujus autem venerabilis viri, cum ad exemplum vitae sequentium in **longum senium** vita traheretur.¹²⁰

Soðlice þyses arwyrþan weres lif in **langre ylde** wæs getogen to bysne þara æfterfylgendra. (GDPref and 3 [C])

[Truly the life of this honourable man was stretched to **a lengthy old age** as an example for followers.]

Hic ergo venerabilis presbyter cum **longam** vitae implesset **aetatem** ...¹²¹

Witodlice þes arwyrða mæssepreost þa þa he gefylde þa **langan ylde** his lifes ... (GDPref and 4 [C])

[Truly, this honourable masspriest, then when he felt the **lengthy duration** of his life ...]

The final collocation of *lang* and *ieldo* is found in the rendering of Ps. 29:6 “habitabo in domo Domini in longitudine dierum” [that I may live in the house of the Lord unto the length of days] in the Paris Psalter as “Þæt ic mæge wunian on þinum huse, swiþe lange tiid, oð **lange ylde**” (PPs [prose]); here, as with the other examples, the first element is inflected and the sequence can therefore only be interpreted as a phrase.

If Sweet based his headword *langieldo* ‘old age’ on one of the collocations discussed above, his conjecture should be refuted. In each of these cases, the first element is inflected and, therefore, should be interpreted as a word form of the adjective *lang* ‘long, lengthy’. Therefore, *langieldo* should be regarded a ghost word and ought to be struck from our dictionaries.

TOE lemma:	<i>langlīfe</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 05.03 Aging, growing old: Long-lived
Frequency (DOEC):	9 ¹²²

¹²⁰ Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, III.v.3.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, IV.xii.3.

Connotations:	Positive development

Langlīfe, compounded of *lang* ‘long’ and *līf* ‘life’, occurs nine times in the *DOEC*. It appears mainly as a gloss for Lat. *longevus* ‘long-lived’ and can be interpreted as a calque or loan translation. *Langlīfe* is almost exclusively used to refer to people and only once refers to ‘peace’, in the *Durham Ritual*: “*longeva pace custodias longlif sibbe gihald ðv*” [may you keep long-lived peace] (DurRitGl 1 [Thomp-Lind]). In four cases, the word *langlīfe* occurs in Old English translations of Deuteronomy:

La Israhel; gehyr nu bebodu & domas ðe ic lære, & do ða, ðæt ðu sy **langlife** & fare inn & hæbbe ðæt land, ðæt Drihten, eower fædera God, eow syllan wile. (Deut)

[(Deut. 4:1) Lo Israel: hear now the precepts and the laws that I teach and do them, so that you will be **long-lived** and travel into the land and have it, which the Lord, the God of your fathers, wants to give you.]

Arwurða ðinne fæder & ðine modor, ðæt ðu sy **langlife** & ðæt ðu sy welig on ðam lande ðe God ðe syllan wile. (Deut)

[(Deut. 5:16) Honour your father and your mother, so that you will be **long-lived** and that you will be prosperous in the land that God wants to give you.]

*Dominus dicit in ęuuangelio honora patrem et matrem ut bene sit tibi et sis longeuus super terram drihten segð on godspelle arwurpa fæder & moder þæt wel sy þe & þu si **langlife** ofer eorþan.* (LibSc)

[The Lord says in the gospel: ‘honour your father and mother so that you will be well and that you will be **long-lived** on earth’ (reference to Deut. 5:16).]

*Honora patrem ut bene sit tibi et sis longeuus super terram arwurpa fæder þæt wel si þe & þu si **langlife** ofer eorþan.* (LibSc)

[Honour your father so that you will be well and that you will be **long-lived** on earth (reference to Deut. 5:16).]

In each of these occurrences, the state of being *langlīfe* is presented as something positive: a reward for good behaviour. A similar positive stance towards longevity is found in a passage from a nuptial blessing from the *Durham Ritual* and in a birth-prognostic revealing the fate of a male child born on the first day of the moon, respectively:

¹²² Based on searches for <langlif-> (7 x) and <longlif-> (2 x).

sit in ea iugum dilectionis et pacis fidelis et casta nubat in christo imitatrixque sanctorum permaneat feminarum sit amabilis ut rachel uiro sapiens ut rebecca longeua et fidelis ut sarra sie in ðær iwocc lufes & sibbes gitriwa & hygdego gimvngia in criste ðu sie giliced æc halgawara ðerhwnia vifmonna sie lufsvm svæ rah' vere snottor svæ rebec' **longlif** & gileaffvll svæ sar'. (DurRitGl 1 [Thomp-Lind])

[May in it (i.e. matrimony) be the yoke of love and peace, may you, faithful and chaste, marry in Christ and also remain an imitator of holy women, may you be as lovely to your husband as Rachel, as wise as Rebecca, as **long-lived** and faithful as Sarah.]

Luna prima; omnibus rebus agendis utilis est mona se forma; on eallum þingum dondum nytlic ys. *Puer natus erit illustris, astutus, sapiens, litteratus, in aqua periclitatus; si euaserit, longeuus erit* cild acenned bið mære, glæw, wis, gestæflæred, on wætere gedyrfed; gif he ætwint, **langlife** he bið. (ProgGl 2 [Först])

[On the first day of the moon, it is useful to undertake all things. A (male) child born will be famous, skilful, wise, learned, tested in the water; if he escapes (the water), he will be **long-lived**.]

To conclude, the context in which *langlīfe* appears suggests that, on occasion, the Anglo-Saxons considered growing old and living long as something desirable, a positive development.

TOE lemma:	<i>gelēfed</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 04 Aging, growing old: (Of age) advanced, old 02.08.02 07 Disease, infirmity, sickness: Sick, ill, diseased 02.08.04 03 Hurt, injury, damage: Injured 12.08.06.01.02 14 Lacking moral good: Corrupted
Frequency (DOEC):	6
Connotations:	-

Gelēfed is featured as a headword in the dictionaries of Bosworth-Toller, with the sense ‘Corrupted, injured, weakened, advanced [in age]’, and Clark Hall, with the sense ‘weak, sickly, aged’. *Gelēfed* can be interpreted as a combination of the adjective *lēf* ‘feeble, infirm, weak, injured’, the associative prefix *ge-* and the attributive suffix *-ed*.¹²³ OE *lēf* derives from PGmc. **lē2ba-* ‘weak, infirm’ and has Germanic cognates in OF and OS *lēf* ‘feeble, infirm’, but has also been linked to PGmc. **lē2pa-* ‘crooked, wicked’.¹²⁴ OE *lēf* is also related to OE *ā-lēfan*, *ā-lēfian*, *ā-lēwan* ‘to cripple, maim, injure’.¹²⁵ Despite the common association between old age

¹²³ Cf. Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 380; Koziol, *Handbuch*, §§227, 439. See also *gewintred*, below.

¹²⁴ Heidermanns, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *lē2ba-*.

¹²⁵ DOE, s.v. *ā-lēfan*, *ā-lēfian*, *ā-lēwan*

and feebleness, an overview of the Indo-European cognates for *lēf* makes clear that the sense ‘old’ is only assigned to OE *gelēfed*:

[...] OE. *lēf* < **lōfi*- ‘infirm, diseased, ill’, *gelēfed* ‘weak, old’ . With these compare Lith. *alpnas* ‘schwach, ohnmächtig,’ *alpstù* ‘pine away, faint’, Gk. *ἀλαπαδνός* ‘weakened, feeble’ [...] Skt. *alpa*, *alpaca* ‘small, weak’ [...] The primary meaning of this group was probably ‘flow, flow out; cause to flow out, empty, exhaust,’ whence ‘weaken, plunder, waste, destroy,’ etc.¹²⁶

However, as will be demonstrated below, there are no tracable attestations of OE *gelēfed* which allow for the additional sense ‘old’.

Finding occurrences of *gelēfed* in the *DOEC* is hampered by the fact that potential word forms, such as “gelefed”, are easily confused with the reflexes of the past participle forms of *libban* ‘to live’ and *līefan* ‘to allow, grant; to believe’. A search for <gelefed-> in the *DOEC* yields twenty results. Seventeen of these are Old English glosses, but none of these confirm the categorisation of the *TOE*: they are glosses for Lat. *licet* ‘it is allowed’ (13x), *credo* ‘to believe’ (2 x), *oportet* ‘it is allowed’ (1 x) and *dimissus* ‘sent off (as in: permitted to go)’ (1 x), suggesting that they are all past participle forms of *līefan* ‘to allow, grant; to believe’. Of the remaining three non-gloss forms of <gelefed->, the first also belongs to the verb *līefan*: the translator of the *Old English Bede* renders Latin “aestimabatur” [was estimated] as “wæs tald 7 gelefed” [was reckoned and believed].¹²⁷ The second form is found in the phrase “riht gelefed mann” (Notes 21 (Warn)), where, presumably, “riht gelefed” is a word form of *rihtgelyfed* ‘orthodox, catholic’. Only the third occurrence outside of the glosses appears to fit the *TOE* lemma and is used to refer to the ill state of the spleen:

Bið aþened se milte & aþunden mid geswelle & eac hat lyft & swolga bringað adle on ðam milte þonne se mon wyrð to swiþe forhæt. Swa bið eac on wintra for cyle & for þara <wedra> missenlicnesse þæt se milte wyrð **gelefed**. (Lch II (2))

[The spleen is extended and distended with swelling and also hot air and hot weather bring disease to the spleen when a man becomes too much heated. So it is also in the winter, because of the cold and because of the variability of the weathers, that the spleen becomes **corrupted/diseased**.]

Searching for alternative spellings of *gelēfed* yields little results. The form <lefed-> is attested four times in the *DOEC*: twice as a form of *libban*,¹²⁸ once as a translation for “devota” [devoted, believing] in the *Old English Bede*,¹²⁹ and once as part of a gloss for Latin *licet* ‘it is allowed’.¹³⁰ There are six occurrences for <gilefed->, all glosses

¹²⁶ F. A. Wood, ‘Etymological Notes’, *MLN* 15 (1900), 165.

¹²⁷ Bede, *HE*, IV.23; *Old English Bede*, ed. Miller, 336.

¹²⁸ “He **lefed**e hundseofontig writen *xiiii* winter [...]. He **lefed**e six hund winter” (HeptNotes).

¹²⁹ Bede, *HE*, II.2; *Old English Bede*, ed. Miller, 100.

¹³⁰ “non licet [...] nere lefed” (MkG1 [Li]).

for forms of *licet* (4 x), *credo* (1 x) and *legitima* ‘legitimate’ (1 x). Similarly, none of the occurrences for <gelefd-> (115 x) and <gilefd-> (50 x) are forms of the word which, according to the *TOE*, means ‘old, sick, injured, corrupted’.

The entry for *gelēfed* in Bosworth-Toller reveals two further possible spelling variants that should be taken into account: <gelewed-> and <gelyfed->. Forms of the first spelling variant, <gelewed->, occur five times in the *DOEC*.¹³¹ These occurrences all denote states of moral or physical corruption and, therefore, seem to belong to the lexical item *gelēfed* as found in Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall:

Her syndan þurh synleawa, swa hit þincan mæg, sare **gelewede**¹³² to manege on earde. (WHom 20.3)

[Here, through injuries caused by sin, as it might appear, too many on earth are surely (**morally**) **corrupted**.]

Ðonne dyde Petrus þurh godes mihta betere þing, gehælde mistlice gebrocode men, blinde and deafe and dumbe and mistlice **gelewede**. (HomU 58 [Nap 16])

[Then Peter, through God’s might, did better things; he healed all kinds of physically challenged people, blind and deaf and dumb and otherwise **injured**.]

Gyf hwa befæste his nyxtan ænig nyten & hit bið dead oþþe **gelewed** oþþe ætbroden. (Exod)

[If anyone entrusts any cattle to his neighbour, and it dies or gets **injured** or stolen.]

Se þe æt his nextan hwæt to læne abit, gif hit **gelewed** bið oððe dead. (Exod)¹³³

[If he borrows anything from his neighbour, if it gets **injured** or dies.]

& swa do ælce dæge oð þæt se dæl þæs lichoman þe þær adeadod wæs & **gelewed** to þære ærran hælo becume. (Lch II [Fragment])

[and do so every day until that part of the body, which was paralysed and **injured**, returns to its former health.]

In none of these occurrences, however, can *gelēfed* possibly mean ‘old’.

¹³¹ For a similar alternation between “f” and “w”, see DOE, s.v. *ā-lēfan*, *ā-lēfian*, *ā-lēwan*.

¹³² Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *gelēfed*, quotes from Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader*: “gelefed”.

¹³³ In these two translations of Exod. 20:10 and 20:14, “gelewed” translates Latin “debilitatum” [hurt, afflicted].

The second spelling variant listed in Bosworth-Toller, <gelyfed>, is based on the *Old English Bede*, where the form “gelyfdre ylðo” translates Latin “provectionis aetatis” [advanced age].¹³⁴ Bosworth-Toller interpret the word form “gelyfdre” as a form of *gelēfed* and assigned it the sense ‘advanced [in age]’, which, in turn, may have spawned the sense ‘old’ in Clark Hall. A search through the *DOEC* – <gelyfd-> (451 x) and <gelyfed-> (115 x) – resulted in only one other instance of a form which can be interpreted as ‘advanced (in age)’: “gelyfdre eldo”, found, again, in the *Old English Bede* as a translation of “aetate provectionis” [advanced age].¹³⁵

The question now remains whether the two forms of <gelyfd-> in the *Old English Bede*, denoting ‘advanced [in age]’, belong to the same lexical item (*gelēfed*) as the forms of <gelewed-> and <gelefed->, discussed above, which denote moral and physical corruption. The answer is not necessarily affirmative. For one, the <gelyfd-> forms in the *Old English Bede* can be seen as spelling variants of the regular past participle form of *libban* ‘to live, experience, be, exist’: *gelifd*.¹³⁶ Thus, in the phrases “gelyfdre ylðo” and “gelyfdre eldo”, the first element must be interpreted as ‘experienced, having lived for a considerable time’, hence, ‘advanced in age’, without having to interpret the form “gelyfdre” as a form of *gelēfed*.

In view of the above, there is no reason to assign the sense ‘old’ or ‘advanced in age’ to the lexical item *gelēfed*. As a consequence, the lexeme should be struck from the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old” and the Old English dictionaries should be amended accordingly.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>līflīc</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01 02 Existence, life: Of/concerning life, vital 02.01.04.03 05.03 Aging, growing old: Long-lived 02.01.02.01 That lives, living 06.01.05.02 01 Intelligence: (Of mind) lively, quick 16.02.01.12 05.01 Spirituality: Spiritually vital
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	86 ¹³⁷
Connotations:	-

Līflīc, a combination of *līf* ‘life’ and the adjectival suffix *-lic*, has as its main sense ‘lively’ and, according to the *TOE*, can also mean ‘long-lived’. However, Stern, in the only word study devoted to *līflīc*,¹³⁸ does not provide the sense ‘long-lived’ and gives instead:

1. Possessed of life, living, animate. [...] 2. Of or pertaining to life; necessary to life, vital. [...] 3. Of an image, picture, etc.: Life-like,

¹³⁴ Bede, *HE*, IV.24; *Old English Bede*, ed. Miller, 342.

¹³⁵ Bede, *HE*, III.8; *Old English Bede*, ed. Miller, 174.

¹³⁶ Note: *gelifd* has a short vowel in the stem, unlike *gelēfed*, but vowel length is rarely indicated in manuscripts and cannot always be plausibly reconstructed in prose texts, such as the *Old English Bede*.

¹³⁷ Based on search in the *DOEC* for <līflīc->.

¹³⁸ See A. Cameron, A. Kingsmill, A. C. Amos, *Old English Word Studies: A Preliminary Author and Word Index* (Toronto, 1983).

animated, vivid. [...] 4. Of persons, their faculties and actions: vigorous, energetic, active, brisk. [...] 5. Of colour: vivid, brilliant, fresh.¹³⁹

The categorisation of *līflīc* in the *TOE* under “02.01.04.03|05.03 Aging, growing old: Long-lived”, is likely based on Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *līflīc*, which provides the sense and two supportive citations from birth lunaries: “II. long-lived: Se þe acenned bið, liflic (vitalis) he bið [...]. On anre nihte ealdne monan þæt cild þæt swa bið acenned, þæt bið liflic (lang lifes, v. l.)”. The sense ‘long-lived’ is thus based on two facts: (1) that *līflīc* occurs as a translation for Latin *vitalis* and (2) that a lunary concerning a child born on the first night of the old moon has come down in two versions: one with the word “liflic” and the other with the words “lang lifes”.

The interpretation of both of these facts, however, is problematic. First of all, Lat. *vitalis* does not commonly have the sense ‘long-lived’.¹⁴⁰ Secondly, the version of the birth lunary that supposedly replaces “lang lifes” with “liflic” does not do so consistently:¹⁴¹

Onre .i. nihte ealdne monan þæt cild þæt swa bið acenned, þæt bið **liflic**.
[...] On .iii. nihte aldne monan se leofað lange. [...] On .vi. nihte þæt bið
lang lifes gesælig. (CCCC, MS 391)

[On the first night of the old moon, that child that is born thus, he will be **lively**. (...) On the third night of the old moon, he lives for a long time. (...) On the sixth night that will be **long of life** (and) prosperous.]

Se ðe bið acenned on an nihtne mona se bið **lange lifes** 7 weleði. [...] Gif he bið acenned on .ooo. nihtne monan se leofaþ lange 7 hydig. [...] Se þe bið acenned on .vi. nihtne, se biþ **lange lifes** 7 geselig. (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 115)

[He who is born on the first night of the moon he will be **long of life** and rich. (...) If he will be born on the third night of the moon, he lives for a long time and chastily. (...) He who is born on the sixth night, he will be **long of life** and prosperous.]

Līflīc, in other words, was not mutually exclusive or interchangeable with “lang lifes” in the Cambridge version of the lunary. It is not unlikely, therefore, that *līflīc* was used in the Cambridge version with the sense ‘lively’. Indeed, the two most recent editions of this birth lunary translate *līflīc* as ‘lively, full of life’, rather than ‘long-lived’.¹⁴²

Given the lack of conclusive evidence for the sense ‘long-lived’, as well as the testimonies by Stern and the two most recent editions of the birth lunary which is cited

¹³⁹ G. Stern, *Swift, Swiftly, and Their Synonyms: A Contribution to Semantic Analysis and Theory* (Göteborg, 1921), 160–4.

¹⁴⁰ J. F. Niermeyer and C. van de Kieft, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, rev. J. W. J. Burgers (Leiden, 2002), s.v. *vitalis*.

¹⁴¹ Citations taken from L.S. Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900–1100: Study and Texts* (Leiden, 2007), texts 9.2.2/1 and 9.2.2./4.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 427; *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics*, ed. and trans. Liuzza, 159, 265.

by Bosworth-Toller as evidence for the sense, it is safer to assume that *liflic* did not have the sense of ‘long-lived’. As such, it should be removed from the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ofereald</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 05.02 Aging, growing old: Very old
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	2 ¹⁴³
Connotations:	-

Ofereald ‘very old’ is a combination of the intensifying prefix *ofer-* and the adjective *eald* ‘old’. Forms of *ofereald* occur twice in the *DOEC*, in two different manuscript versions of the same passage in the Old English translation of the Benedictine Rule. In both, *ofereald* denotes the category of people who are aged to such a degree that they would normally be shown mercy:

Ʒeah hit gecyndelic sy on menniscum gewunan, Ʒæt man mildheortnesse cyðe Ʒam **oferealdum** and Ʒam cildgeongum, Ʒeahhweðere ne scylen hy beon butan regole, Ʒæt is lifes rihtinge. (BenR)

Ʒeah hit gecundelic sy on mænniscum gewunan, Ʒæt man mildheortnesse cyðe Ʒam **oferealdan** & Ʒam geongum cilde, Ʒeahhweðere ne sculon hig beon butan reogele, Ʒæt is lifes rihtinge. (BenRW)

[Although it is natural in human custom to show mercy to the **very old** and the youthful, nevertheless they must not be without a rule, which is the rule of monastic life.]

Here, *ofereald* is used to translate Lat. *senex* ‘old man’.¹⁴⁴

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>ofergēare</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 05 Aging, growing old: (Of beings, etc.) old, of great age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	1
Connotations:	-

Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *ofergēare* ‘old, superannuated’, provide one citation: “Gif wrym ete ða teƷ genim ofergeare holenrinde”, which appears in the *DOEC* as follows:

Gif wrym ete Ʒa teð genim **ofer geare** holenrinde & eforƷrotan moran, wel on swa hatum, hafa on muƷe swa hat swa Ʒu hatost mæge. (Lch II [1])¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Simple searches conducted for <ofereald-> (2 x), <oferalld-> (0 x), <oferæld-> (0 x), <ofereld-> (0 x), <oferold-> (0 x), <oferaeld-> (0 x), <oferyld-> (6 x, but see *oferyldo* below).

¹⁴⁴ *Die Winteney-version der Regula s. Benedicti*, ed. A. Schröer (Halle, 1888); rpt. with appendix by M. Gretsch (Tübingen, 1978), 80: “Licet ipsa natura humana trahatur ad misericordiam in his etatibus, senum uidelicet et infantum, tamen et regule auctoritas eis prospiciat”.

[If a worm eats the teeth, take **old** holly bark and the root of the carline thistle, boil in so hot (water), have (it) in the mouth as hot as the hottest you are able (to have it).]

Bosworth-Toller points out that the construction *ofergeare* is similar to OE *þrigēare* ‘three years old’ and German *über-jährig* ‘superannuated, old’. An alternative translation of *ofergēare* is provided by Thomas O. Cockayne: “over a year old”.¹⁴⁶

The question whether *ofergēare* means ‘old, superannuated’ or ‘over a year old’ is difficult to solve, due to the lack of other attestations. In the *DOEC*, only one other possible instance of *ofergēare* is found, but in this case it certainly means ‘for over a year’ or ‘during the year’:

Sume preostas healdað þæt husl, þe bið on easterdæg gehalgod, ofer gear to seocum mannum. (ÆLet 1 [Wulfsgie X a])

[Some priests retain the host, which is consecrated at Easter, for over a year (or during the year) for sick people.]

Given the uncertainty regarding the meaning of *ofergēare* and the fact that it is never used with reference to a person, I will not treat this lexeme as part of the semantic field for human old age.

TOE lemma:	<i>oferyldu</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03.02 Aging, growing old: Extreme old age
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	6 ¹⁴⁷
Connotations:	Decrepitude

Oferyldu is a combination of the intensifying prefix *ofer-* and *ieldo* ‘old age, age’ and means ‘extreme or very old age’. Four of its occurrences are found in homilies and the stage of a person’s life directly preceding death, characterised by the decline of bodily functions:

Se ealda man him mæg gewislice witod witan, þæt him se deað genealæcð for ðære **oferylde**, þe him on sihð. (HomU 27 [Nap 30])

[The old man must certainly know that death approaches him because of his **extreme old age**, which descends upon him.]

Þonne is þære æfteran helle onlicnes genemned **oferyldo**, for þan him amolsniað þa eagan for ðære **oferyldo** ða þe wæron gleawe on gesyhðe, &

¹⁴⁵ The fact that *ofergēare* here appears as two words separated by a space, rather than one, is not remarkable, as this often happened in Old English manuscripts. See Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 290.

¹⁴⁶ *Leechdoms*, ed. Cockayne, II, 51.

¹⁴⁷ Based on searches in the *DOEC* for <oferyld-> (6 x). Searches for <oferild->, <oferield->, yielded no results. See also *ofereald*.

þa earan adimmiað ða ðe ær meahton gehyran fægere sangas. (HomS 4 [ScraggVerc 9])

[Then is the second prefiguration of Hell named ‘**extreme old age**’, because his eyes weaken because of old age, those that had been keen of sight, and his ears become dim, which had been able to hear beautiful songs.]

Þonne bið þære æfteran helle onlicnesse her on worulde **oferyldo** <nemned>, þonne him þa earan adeafiaþ þa ðe ær mehton geheran fægre sangas. (HomU 15.1 [Scragg])

[Then is the second prefiguration of Hell here on earth is named ‘**extreme old age**’, when his ears become deaf, which had been able to hear beautiful songs.]

Oferyldu is also found in combination with *geoguð* ‘youth’ to mean ‘everyone’ in two different manuscript versions of the same passage in the Old English translation of the Benedictine Rule:

Forði þonne, butan þam anum, þe for heora leahtrum of hyra endebyrdnesse utor ascofene synd, oðþe for haliges lifes geearnunge innor genumene, ælc oþer, **oferylde** and geogeþe, healde his endebyrdnesse. (BenR)

Forði þonne, buton þam anum, þe for heora leahtrum of hyre endebyrdnysse uttor ascofene syn, oððe for haliges lifes geearnunge innor beoð genumene, ælc oðer, **oferylde** & geogeðe, healde hyre endebyrdnesse. (BenRW)

[Therefore then, except for those, who because of their vices have been removed from their rank, or because of the merits of a blessed life are promoted to (a higher rank), every one, **extreme old age** and youth, keeps his rank.]

TOE lemma:	<i>onealdian</i> , v.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 02 Aging, growing old: To grow old 05.11.07.03.03 05 Old, not new: To grow old
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

Onealdian, a combination of the prefix *on-* and *ealdian* ‘to grow old’,¹⁴⁸ occurs only once in the *DOEC*, as a gloss for a form of Lat. *invetero* ‘to grow old’ in Ps. 31:3:

¹⁴⁸ Clark Hall, s.v. *on-*, notes that the prefix is often meaningless, as seems to be the case here.

Forþam ic swigode onealdedon ban min þonne ic clypode ælce dæge.
Quoniam tacui inueterauerunt ossa mea dum clamarem tota die. (PsGlG
 [Rosier])

[Because I was silent, my bones grew old, while I cried out every day.]

Searches for possible spelling variants for *onealdian* in the *DOEC* yielded no further results, as all findings turned out to be variants of the word *onǣlan* ‘to set fire to, ignite, heat, inspire, incite, inflame, burn, consume’.¹⁴⁹

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>onsīgende</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 04.01 Aging, growing old: Decaying 05.12.05.02.01 02 To come upon, meet with: Coming upon, attacking
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	17 ¹⁵⁰
Connotations:	-

Onsīgende is the present participle form of the verb *onsīgan* ‘to sink, decline, descend, approach, impend, assail’, which, in turn, is a combination of the prefix *on-* and *sīgan* ‘to sink, descend’. *Onsīgende* is listed as a separate lexical item in the *TOE*, but does not appear as a headword in either Bosworth-Toller or Clark Hall.

The *TOE* categorisation of *onsīgende* is problematic, since none of its seventeen occurrences in the *DOEC* can plausibly be translated with ‘growing old, decaying’. The lexeme is applied to people as a collective, *here* ‘army’, as well as immaterial things, such as *ǣfen* ‘evening’, *cwealm* ‘ruin’ and *grama* ‘anger’. In most cases, the appropriate translation of *onsīgende* is ‘advancing, approaching’:

Swa oft swa we clypodon to Criste on gefeohte we wurdon sigefæste sona
 þurh his fultum, and we eac oferswiðdon þone **onsigendan** here. (*ÆLS*
 [Forty Soldiers])

[As often as we cried out to Christ during a fight, we immediately became
 victorious through his help, and we also vanquished the **advancing** army.]

Þes weoruldlice dæg þe us gewunelic is, bið iendod mid þan **onsigendum**
 æfne. (*ÆHomM* 2 [Irv 3])

[This worldly day, that is customary to us, is ended with the **advancing**
 evening.]

Gregorius ða ær his hadunge. þæt romanisce folc for ðam **onsigendum**
 cwealme. ðisum wordum to bereowsunge tihte. (*ÆCHom II*, 9)

¹⁴⁹ All results for <onæld-> (52 x), <oneald-> (1 x), <oneld-> (1 x), <onyld-> (1 x) turned out to be forms of *onǣlan* and searches for <onald->, <onold->, <onaeld-> and <onild-> yielded no results.

¹⁵⁰ Based on search for <onsigend-> in the *DOEC*. Possible variants <onsigand->, <onsigond->, <onsygend->, <onsygand-> and <onsygond-> yielded no results.

[Gregorius, then, before his ordination, persuaded the Roman people, because of the **impending** ruin, with these words to repentance.]

He ferde & bodade þæt him wæs godes grama **onsigende**. gif hi to gode bugan noldon. (*ÆCHom I*, 18)

[He travelled and proclaimed that God's anger was **approaching** them, if they did not wish to bow to God.]

Similarly, the Latin words which are glossed with *onsīgende* favour its inclusion under the *TOE* category “05.12.05.02.01|02 To come upon, meet with: Coming upon, attacking” rather than “02.01.04.03|04.01 Aging, growing old: Decaying”:

Vergente...vesperae – **onsigendum**... æfene (HyGI 2 [Milfull]) [advancing evening]

inruente fastidio – **onsigendre** earfoðnyse (LibSc) [approaching hardship]

ingruenti – **onsigendum** be (AldV 1 [Goossens]) [concerning those who are attacking]

Possibly, the *TOE* categorisation of *onsīgende* under ‘Aging, growing old: Decaying’ was based on Bosworth-Toller’s interpretation of the following passage:

Swa byð þæs mannes wite þe wyrðeð eall fornumen mid **onsigendre** ylde and se deað geendað þone ærran wite þonne ongitt þin sawl þæt þu sylf lufodest idel. (*ÆAdmon 1*)

In Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *onsīgan*, “mid onsigendre ylde” is translated as “with declining years”, i.e. years of decline. A more likely translation for the phrase, however, is “with advancing/approaching old age”. This translation is supported by the observation in Bosworth-Toller that *onsīgan* is typically used “of forces approaching to attack” and “of evil that falls upon one”, such as *here* ‘army’, *cwealm* ‘ruin’, *deað* ‘death’ and *grama* ‘anger’. “Ylde”, especially within the context of the passage above, seems to fit into the category of ‘evil that falls upon one’, which would favour the following translation and interpretation of the passage:

Thus is the beauty of a man, who becomes completely disfigured with **advancing** old age, and death ends the former beauty; then your soul understands that you yourself have loved vanity.

This interpretation can further be substantiated by a similar combination of a noun denoting old age and a form of the verb *onsīgan* in a homily by Wulfstan, where the verb cannot possibly mean ‘decline’:¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ For a similar construction, see *The Seafarer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 91-2a: “ylde him on fareð, onsyn blacað, / gomelfeax gnornað” [Old age advances upon him, his face grows pale, the greyhaired one

Se ealda man him mæg gewislice witod witan, þæt him se deað genealæcð
for ðære **oferylde, þe him on sihð**. (HomU 27 [Nap 30])

[The old man can certainly know that death approaches him because of
extreme age, which advances/descends upon him.]

In view of the above, *onsīgende* cannot be regarded as an Old English word relating to old age; therefore, it should be struck from the *TOE* category “02.01.04.03 Aging, growing old”.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>oreald</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	02.01.04.03 05.02 Aging, growing old: Very old
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	2 ¹⁵²
Connotations:	Decrepitude

Oreald ‘very old’ is a combination of the intensifying prefix *or-* and *eald* ‘old’. In the Old English translation of Gregory’s *Dialogi*, *oreald* renders Latin “aetatem decrepitam” [the age of decrepitude]:

Qui uidelicet Valerianus usque ad **aetatem decrepitam** leuis ac lubricus
exitit, modumque suis prauitatibus ponere contempsit.¹⁵³

Witodlice se Ualerianus wæs swiðe leas man & wræne aa, oð þæt he wæs
oreald, & forhogode, þæt he ænig gemet sette his wohdædum. (GDPref and
4 [C])

[Truly, this Valerianus was a very vain man and always lustful, until he was
very old, and he refused to set any moderation to his evil deeds.]

The only other occurrence of *oreald* is in the *Old English Boethius*. This passage, describing Charon has no known Latin equivalent:¹⁵⁴

ða wæs ðær eac swiðe egeslic geatweard, ðæs nama sceolde bion Caron; se
hæfde eac þrio heafdu, & <se> wæs swiðe **oreald**. (Bo)

[Then there was also a very terrible porter, whose name must be Caron; he
also had three heads and he was very **very old**.]

mourns]; cf. *DOE*, s.v. *faran*, sense I.C.4.a “figurative, of old age: to advance upon, assail (someone, on and dat.)”.

¹⁵² Simple searches conducted for <oreald-> (2 x), <orald-> (0), <oræld-> (0), <oreld-> (1 x, but see *oryldo* below), <orold-> (0), <oraeld-> (0), <oryld-> (1 x, but see *oryldo* below).

¹⁵³ Gregory, *Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, IV.liv.1.

¹⁵⁴ *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius’s De consolazione philosophiae*, ed. and trans., M. Godden and S. Irvine (Oxford, 2009) II, 419 (note to 35.219–224).

TOE lemma:	<i>oryldu</i> , n.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.03 03.02 Aging, growing old: Extreme old age
Frequency (DOEC):	2 ¹⁵⁵
Connotations:	-

Oryldu ‘very old age, great age’ is a combination of the intensifying prefix *or-* and the noun *ieldo* ‘old age’. In the Old English poetic verse translation of Ps. 70:17–8, *oryldu* is used to render the Latin phrase “senectutem et canos” [old age and grey hairs]:

A ic wundor þin weorþlic sægde,
and ic þæt wið oryldu awa fremme;
ne forlæt þu me, lifigende god!¹⁵⁶

[Always I have spoken of your worthy wonder, and I will do that continually until **very old age**; Do not leave me, living God!]

The second time *oryldu* is used is in the *Old English Boethius*, but, as with *oreald* above, there is no Latin equivalent for this passage:¹⁵⁷

æc hi hine magon mid goodum weorcum gelettan, þæt he þe lator cymð; ge
<furþum> oð **oreldo** hi hine hwilum gelettað. (Bo)

[but they are able to defer it (death) with good deeds, so that it comes the later; yes, even until **very old age** they sometimes defer it.]

TOE lemma:	<i>unorne</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	12.01.01.11 02.03 The common people: Of lowly rank
Frequency (DOEC):	1
Connotations:	-

Unorne is a *hapax legomenon*: it occurs only once in the *DOEC*, to describe Dunnere, one of the English warriors in *The Battle of Maldon*: “unorne ceorl”.¹⁵⁸ Bosworth-Toller and Clark Hall differ with respect to the senses they attribute to *unorne*: the former gives ‘simple, plain, poor, mean, humble’, the latter ‘old, worn out, decrepit’.¹⁵⁹ Clark Hall’s translation is based on a related *hapax*, *unornlic*, which is used in the phrase “unornlic scrud” to render Latin “ueteribus uestimentis” in the Old

¹⁵⁵ Simple searches conducted for <oreald-> (2 x, but see *oreald* above), <orald-> (0), <oræld-> (0), <oreld-> (1 x), <orold-> (0), <oraeld-> (0), <oryld-> (1 result).

¹⁵⁶ *The Paris Psalter*, ed. Krapp, Ps. 70, ll. 50–3. Ps. 70:17–8: “Deus docuisti ab adulescentia mea et usque nunc adnuntiabo mirabilia tua insuper et usque ad senectutem et canos Deus ne derelinquas me” [You have taught me, God, from my adolescence and until now I will proclaim Your wonderful works furthermore and until old age and grey hairs, God, do not leave me].

¹⁵⁷ *Old English Boethius*, ed. and trans. Godden and Irvine, II, 488 (note to 41.28–36).

¹⁵⁸ *Battle of Maldon*, l. 256a.

¹⁵⁹ Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *unorne*; Clark Hall, s.v. *unorne*, the supplement by Meritt gives ‘simple’ for *unorne*.

English translation of Josh. 9:4.¹⁶⁰ Even though this use of *unornlic* for Latin *uetus* ‘old’ speaks in favour of Clark Hall’s interpretation of *unorne* as ‘old’, the etymology of *unorne* and its Middle English attestations suggest that the sense provided by Bosworth-Toller, ‘plain, humble’, is correct. *Unorne* is a combination of the negative prefix *un-* and the adjective *or(e)ne* ‘excessive’, which fits with the sense ‘not excessive, therefore plain, humble’.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the sense ‘plain, simple’ is confirmed by the earliest attestations of the word *unorne* in Middle English, all of which appear unrelated to human old age and denote plain, lowly-ranked individuals and objects.¹⁶²

All things considered, then, Clark Hall’s translation ‘old’ for *unorne* in *The Battle of Maldon* should give way to the sense provided by Bosworth-Toller and the *TOE* ‘plain, humble, of lowly rank’. Consequently, *unorne* falls outside the semantic field of human old age.

<i>TOE</i> lemma:	<i>wintercearig</i> , adj.
<i>TOE</i> categories:	08.01.03 09.08 Bad feeling, sadness: Sad with years
Frequency (<i>DOEC</i>):	1
Connotations:	-

Wintercearig is a compound of the noun *winter* ‘winter’ and the adjective *cearig* ‘anxious, troubled’. This lexical item has been interpreted in two ways: ‘sad with years, sad due to old age’ and ‘sad from or like winter’.¹⁶³ The former interpretation relies on a metaphorical explanation of *winter* as ‘year’, as in *winter-gerīm* ‘number of years’ and *winter-getel* ‘number of years’, whereas the latter is based on a literal interpretation of the first element, as in *winter-ceald* ‘winter-cold’ and *winter-tīd* ‘winter-time’.

Wintercearig is a *hapax legomenon* and occurs in *The Wanderer*. The term is used to describe the speaker’s state of mind when, long ago, he had buried his lord and had departed from his homeland in search of a new leader:

sippan geara iu goldwine mine
 hrusan heolstre biwrah ond ic hean þonan
 wod wintercearig ofer wapema gebind,

¹⁶⁰ *Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. Crawford, 391. The phrase is used to describe the old, ragged clothing that the Gabaonites use to deceive Joshua that they have returned from a long and arduous journey.

¹⁶¹ The etymology of *or(e)ne* itself is not entirely clear. Hesitantly, F. Holthausen, ‘Etymologische Forschungen’, in *Streitberg Festgabe* (Leipzig, 1924), 157, has suggested that *or(e)ne* was composed of the prefix *or-* and the adjective **(ge)hīene* ‘humble, mean’ and, so, must mean ‘not mean, therefore excessive’. While Holthausen’s etymology is accepted in *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. Gordon, 57, the editors of the *OED* (3rd. ed.), s.v. *orne*, consider the etymology “very unconvincing”, albeit without providing an alternative. Emerson, ‘Notes on Old English’, 207, suggests there may be a connection with Scandinavian *orna* ‘grow warm’, but this would require considerable semantic shifts to get to Old English *or(e)ne* ‘excessive’.

¹⁶² See the quotations provided in *MED*, s.v. *unorne*. See also Wyatt, *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 282.

¹⁶³ Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *wintercearig*: “Sad from age or from the gloom of winter”; Clark Hall, s.v. *wintercearig*: “winter-sad, sad with years?”.

sohte seledreorig sinceb bryttan.¹⁶⁴

[since years ago I cover my gold-friend with the darkness of earth and I, wretched and winter-sad, went from there over the binding of the waves, sad at the loss of a hall, sought a giver of treasure.]

While a connection with either old age or winter makes sense against the backdrop of the poem as a whole – the lament of an old man, which features several descriptions and references to cold weather – the direct context of *wintercearig* does not support either the sense ‘sad with old age’ nor ‘sad from winter’. Nothing suggests that the speaker departed from his homeland during winter, nor did the speaker bury his lord in his old age: the event took place years ago and other memories of “his goldwine” are later presented as having taken place “on geoguðe” [in youth] (l. 35). Eric G. Stanley has argued, therefore, that *wintercearig* is an example of the modern phrase ‘cold care’, an expression which associated misery with the cold.¹⁶⁵ Put differently, the desolation felt by the speaker is *like* that experienced in winter, not *due* to winter or a tally of years.

To conclude, the context for the hapax *wintercearig* does not support the sense ‘sad with years’ provided by the TOE. Consequently, that sense should be replaced by ‘winter-sad, troubled as in winter’ and *wintercearig* cannot be considered part of the semantic field for old age.

TOE lemma:	<i>gewintred</i> , adj.
TOE categories:	02.01.04.02 05 To grow, grow up: grown up, adult 02.01.04.03 05 Aging, growing old: (Of beings, etc.) old, of great age
Frequency (DOEC):	11 ¹⁶⁶
Connotations:	-

Gewintred ‘old, grown up’ is a combination of *winter* ‘winter, year’, the associative prefix *ge-* and the attributive suffix *-ed*, i.e. ‘having many years, hence: old’.¹⁶⁷ *Gewintred* is exclusively used for people; someone who is *gewintred* has experienced many winters and, hence, is ‘old, of great age’ or ‘grown up, adult’.

The sense ‘old, of great age’ is reflected in the use of *gewintred* as gloss for forms of Lat. *annosus* ‘very old’ and *senesco* ‘to grow old’:

¹⁶⁴ *The Wanderer*, ed. Klinck, ll. 22–5.

¹⁶⁵ E. G. Stanley, ‘Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Penitent’s Prayer*’, *Anglia* 73 (1956), 436; Stanley follows L. Whitbread, ‘A Medieval English Metaphor’, *Philological Quarterly* 4 (1938), 365–70.

¹⁶⁶ Based on searches for <-winterad-> (0 x), <-wintered-> (0 x), <-winterod-> (0 x), <-wintrad-> (3 x), <-wintred-> (16 x) and <-wintrod-> (2 x). There is some overlap with *wintredde* ‘winepress’.

¹⁶⁷ *OED*, s.v. *wintered*. Similar examples of adjectives formed by *ge-*, a noun and the additional suffix *-ed/-od* include *geclāded* ‘clothed’, *geglōfed* ‘gloved’, *gesweordod* ‘having a sword’ and *gemōdod* ‘minded’. Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’, 380; Koziol, *Handbuch*, §§227, 439; *OED*, s.v. – *ed*, suffix 2. Dutch *doorgewinterd* ‘experienced’ is a cognate of OE *gewintred*.

annosam **gewintrad**. (SedGl 2.1 [Meritt])

amen amen dico tibi cum esses iunior cingebas te et ambulabas ubi uolebas cum autem senueris extends manus tuas et alius te cinget et ducet quo non uis soð soðlice ic cweðo ðe miððy were gingra ðu walde gyrda ðec & ðu walde gonga hwider ðu walde miððy soðlice ðu bist <**giwintrad**> aðene honda ðine & oðer ðec gyrdeð & ðu lædes ðider ne ðu wylt. (JnGl [Ru])

[(John XXI. 18) Truth, truly, I say to you, when you were younger you wanted to clothe yourself and you wanted to go wherever you wanted, truly when you are **old**, you stretch out your hands and another clothes you and you (are) lead wherever you do not want to (go).]

In two versions of the *Nativity of Saint Mary*, *gewintred* is used to refer to Joseph, Mary's aged husband; in the *Old English Orosius*, it is used for the old Vetrano:

Joseph wæs ihaten sum **iwintred** mon & eode þider mid gungum monnum & his gerde þider bær. (LS 18.1 [NatMaryAss 10N])

Joseph wæs gehaten sum **gewintrod** man, eode þyder mid iungum mannum and his gyrde bær. (LS 18.2 [NatMaryAss 10J])

[A certain **old** man was called Joseph and he went there with young men and he carried his girdle thither.]

On þæm dagum Ilirice gesetton Ueteromonem þone mon to hiora anwealde, to þon þæt hie sibþan mehten winnan wið Magnentiuse; & hi hiene nieddon to leornunga, þeh he **gewintred** wære. (Or 6)

[In those days, the Illyrians appointed this man Vetrano to their government, so that they afterwards might fight against Magnentius; and they forced him to study, although he were **old**.]¹⁶⁸

The remaining six instances of *gewintred* cannot be translated with 'old, of great age', and must mean 'grown up, adult'. A clear example is one of the laws of King Ine of Wessex (d. 726), which discusses what should happen if a child loses its father:

Gif ceorl & his wif bearn hæbben gemæne, & fere se ceorl forð, hæbbe sio modor hire bearn & fede: agife hire mon VI scillinga to fostre, cu on sumera, oxan on wintra; healden þa mægas þone frumstol, oð ðæt hit **gewintred** sie. (LawIne)

¹⁶⁸ "Gewintred" here translates Latin "senex" [old]. *King Alfred's Orosius, Part One: Old English Text and Latin Original*, ed. H. Sweet, EETS os 79 (London, 1883), 284–5. Cf. *The Old English Orosius*, ed. J. M. Bately, EETS ss 6 (London, 1980), 149–50, which does not provide the Latin text.

[If a churl and his wife have a child together, and if the husband dies, the mother is to have the child and rear it: give her 6 shillings to foster [the child], a cow in summer, an ox in winter; the relatives shall keep the family home, until it [the child] has **grown up**.]

Similarly, in the law code of Alfred the Great (849–899), a distinction is made between women who are *ungewintred* ‘underaged’ and those who are *gewintred* ‘grown up, adult’:¹⁶⁹

Gif mon **ungewintrædne** wifmon to niedhæmde geðreatige, sie ðæt swa ðæs **gewintredan** monnes bot. (LawAf 1)

[If an **underaged** woman is forced to have sex, that is the same compensation as for an **adult**.]

In the Old English translation of Gregory’s *Regula Pastoralis*, too, *gewintred* is used with the sense ‘grown up, adult’ or ‘old enough’ rather than ‘old, of great age’:

Ðætte on oðre <wisan> sint to manianne ða ðe medomlice cunnon læran, & ðeah for <miclum> ege & for micelre eaðmodnesse forwandiað; & on oðre wisan ða ðe ðonne giet to ðæm **gewintrede** ne beoð ne geðiegene, & ðeah for hrædhdygnesse bioð to gegripene. (CP)

[That those who are capable of teaching in another way, and yet from great fear and humility refuse to do so, are to be admonished in one way; and in another way those who are not yet **old enough** or experienced enough for it, and yet because of hasty zeal undertake it.]¹⁷⁰

Finally, the discussion of the ‘three spiritual births’ in an anonymous homily shows that one was considered *gewintred* by the time he or she could partake in confession and communion. Again, the translation ‘grown up, adult’ is here to be preferred over ‘old, of great age’:¹⁷¹

Þæt is seo forme accennednyss <gastlicu> þonne we onfoð fullwihte æt ure mæssepreosta þenunge.

Þonne is seo æftre accennednyss gastlicu syððan se mann **gewintrod** bið and þæt geseald hafað þæt he andette his scifte ealle his synna syððan he bið godes þeowa geciged for þan ðe se soða anddetnyss æt frymðe eallra gastlicra læcedoma.

¹⁶⁹ For a different reading of this law code, see C. Hough, ‘A New Reading of Alfred, ch. 26’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 41 (1997), 1–12, who argues that “gewintredan mannes” here must refer to specifically to an old woman, since continental law codes occasionally group underaged women and old women together for purposes of compensation.

¹⁷⁰ Further on in the text, it becomes clear that the people referred to are unfit for teaching “oððe for gioguðe oððe for unwisdome” [either from youth or want of wisdom] (CP).

¹⁷¹ On the background of these three spiritual births (baptism, adult confession and adult communion), see *Rogationtide Homilies*, ed. Bazire and Cross, 68–9.

Þonne is seo þridde accennednyss æfter þam soðan andetnyssa syððan se mann **gewintrad** bið and he hine sylfne gemedmað þurh þa soðan anddetnyse and þurh his scriftes fultum þæt he bið andfenge drihtenes sylfes lichaman and his blode þonne he hafað fullice ealle þa hadas þe hine to þan ece life gelædað. (HomS 35 (Tristr 4))

[That is the first spiritual birth when we receive baptism by the service of our (mass) priest.

Then the second spiritual birth is when a man has **grown up** and has promised to confess to his confessor all his sins since he has been called to God's people because true confession (is) at the origin of all spiritual cures.

Then the third birth is after true confession, after a man has **grown up** and he humbles himself through true confession and through the support of his confessor that he is a receiver of the Lord's own body and his blood; then he fully has all the conditions, which will lead him to the eternal life.]

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Nederlandse samenvatting

Oud worden bij de Angelsaksen: De culturele conceptualisering van ouderdom in vroegmiddeleeuws Engeland

Angstaanjagende gevolgen van de vergrijzing, verwijten jegens de babyboomgeneratie en misstanden in de ouderenzorg. Het thema ‘ouderdom’ haalt binnen de huidige maatschappij geregeld de actualiteit, maar slechts zelden op een positieve manier. Behoeftige, oudere generaties worden veelal neergezet als een financieel en sociaal probleem. Vroeger was het allemaal beter, zegt men dan: toen had men nog respect voor bejaarden. Maar is dat wel zo? Hoe keek men in een ver verleden aan tegen ouderen en ouderdom?

Afgaand op de drie studies van Burrow (1986), Amos (1990) en Crawford (2006) lijkt vroegmiddeleeuws Engeland te voldoen aan het beeld van een vroege maatschappij waarin ouderdom zonder uitzondering in hoog aanzien stond. Volgens Burrow beschouwden de Angelsaksen, oftewel de vroegmiddeleeuwse Engelsen (ca. 450–1100), ouderdom zelfs als de meest begerenswaardige levensfase. Amos bestudeerde de Oudengelse taal en concludeerde dat woorden voor ‘oud’ vaak positieve connotaties hadden. Crawford ging nog een stapje verder en riep de Angelsaksische periode uit tot een ‘gouden tijd voor de ouderen’.

Het positieve beeld dat deze geleerden aldus hebben geschapen is echter onvolledig: een aanzienlijk deel van zowel de Oudengelse als de Latijnse teksten uit vroegmiddeleeuws Engeland blijft onbesproken, net zoals een groot aantal Oudengelse woorden die ook voor ‘ouderdom’ werden gebruikt. Bovendien wordt in deze studies geen onderscheid gemaakt tussen verschillende groepen mensen, zoals heiligen, krijgers, koningen en vrouwen. Een diepgravende analyse van al het beschikbare materiaal, zoals dit proefschrift beoogt, maakt duidelijk dat de culturele conceptualisering van ouderdom in vroegmiddeleeuws Engeland veel genuanceerder lag dan voorheen is aangenomen. Naast auteurs die respect voor de ouderen bepleiten, staan anonieme predikers die ouderdom als een voorproefje van de hel beschrijven en op suggestieve en beeldende wijze duidelijk maken dat de aftakeling van het oude lichaam (gezwollen, uitvallende tanden, vieze adem) al voor de dood begint. Het Oudengels telt inderdaad een aantal positieve woorden voor ouderdom, zoals *frōd* ‘oud en wijs’, maar evenveel woorden met een meer negatieve bijklank, zoals *forwerod* ‘oud en vervallen’ en *gēomorfrōd* ‘oud, wijs en bedroefd’. Bovendien hingen respect en eerwaardigheid niet alleen samen met een hoge leeftijd zonder meer: oude mensen moesten nog steeds voldoen aan hoge eisen. Ondanks de fysieke gebreken van de ouderdom werden bejaarde heiligen geacht te volharden in hun strengvrome levenswijze, moesten oude krijgers meestrijden in de voorste gelederen en werd ook van koningen op leeftijd nog altijd verwacht dat ze actief de leiding namen.

Hoofdstuk 1 van dit proefschrift draait om de vraag hoe de Angelsaksen ouderdom definieerden ten opzichte van andere stadia van de levenscyclus. Hier

worden meer dan 25 teksten en kunstwerken besproken waarin een mensenleven in verschillende fasen wordt opgedeeld. Veel van deze bronnen ontbraken in eerdere overzichten, zoals die van Burrow (1986) en Cochelin (2013). Over het algemeen onderscheidde Angelsaksische schrijvers en kunstenaars drie levensfasen: jeugd, volwassenheid en ouderdom. Elk van deze drie kon verder worden onderverdeeld, hetgeen leidde tot schema's van vier tot zes levensfasen. Deze schema's werden verbonden aan *topoi* uit de christelijke traditie, zoals de Drie Wijzen uit het Oosten of de Zes Leeftijden van de Wereld, of uit de natuurfilosofie, zoals de vier humoren. Cochelin concludeerde voor de gehele vroege Middeleeuwen dat men ouderdom doorgaans opdeelde in een 'groene ouderdom' (zonder fysieke gevolgen) en een moeizamere 'grijze ouderdom'. Van een dergelijke tweedeling is in de Angelsaksische bronnen zelden sprake: veeleer werd ouderdom gezien als één enkele levensfase, die begon rond het vijftigste levensjaar. Zonder uitzondering associeerde men ouderdom met lichamelijk verval.

Hoofdstuk 2 betreft een analyse van woorden voor ouderdom in het Oudengels. Op basis van ideeën uit de ethnolinguïstiek en cognitieve taalkunde wordt bepleit dat de structuur van de woordenschat van een taal verbonden is met culturele ideeën van haar gebruikers. Een analyse van woorden voor ouderdom verschaft daarom inzicht in hoe men dacht over oud worden. Na een overzicht van de methodologische mogelijkheden en uitdagingen voor dit soort onderzoek in de vorm van een bespreking van moderne onderzoeksmiddelen als *The Dictionary of Old English Corpus* en *The Thesaurus of Old English*, toets ik de stelling van Amos (1990) en Crawford (2006). Zij beweerden dat de woorden voor ouderdom in het Oudengels wijzen op "a very positive cognitive map of old age". De waarheid ligt genuanceerder: woorden voor 'oud' hebben weliswaar positieve associaties, zoals gezag en wijsheid, maar ook negatieve, zoals fysiek verval en smart.

Dit genuanceerde beeld van ouderdom wordt bevestigd door de preken en gedichten die centraal staan in hoofdstuk 3 en 4. Hoofdstuk 3 beschrijft hoe de mogelijke voordelen van ouderdom (respect, wijsheid en spirituele superioriteit) werden besproken. Ouderdom werd weliswaar vaak in verband gebracht met deze positieve aspecten, maar de Angelsaksische schrijvers deden dat niet zonder reserves. Tegenover de oude, wijze verteller in wijsheidspoëzie en de godvruchtige *puer senex*, 'oud kind', in preken, stonden de dwaze *senex sine religione* 'oude man zonder religie' en de laakbare *puer centum annorum*, 'kind van honderd jaar'. Kortom, ouderdom leidde niet per definitie tot wijsheid en smetteloos gedrag; ontzag moest verdiend worden en kwam niet automatisch met de jaren.

De fysieke, sociale en emotionele nadelen van ouderdom staan centraal in hoofdstuk 4. Hoewel Burrow een andere mening was toegedaan, wijst ook dit hoofdstuk uit dat ouderdom zeker niet de meest begerenswaardige levensfase was in Angelsaksisch Engeland. Dichters en homileten gebruikten keer op keer het beeld van de oude, bedroefde man als metafoor voor de vergankelijke aard van wereldse geneugten. Erger nog, als de Angelsaks nadacht over het leven na de dood, stelde hij zich de Hemel voor als een plek zonder ouderdom; oud worden was een van de verschrikkingen van de Hel. Met andere woorden: de Angelsaksen hadden zeker geen voorkeur voor ouderdom, maar veel eerder een afkeer die het best omschreven kan worden als *gerontophobia* 'angst voor ouderdom'.

In hoofdstuk 5 tot en met 8 staan de literaire verbeelding en de culturele rollen van specifieke groepen oude mensen centraal. Hoofdstuk 5 richt zich om te beginnen op oude heiligen en geeft, voor het eerst, een overzicht van de typische wijze waarop de ouderdom van een heilige wordt beschreven in de Angelsaksische hagiografie. Oude heiligen belichamen alle goede aspecten van ouderdom. Ze zijn wijs en eerbiedwaardig, en stellen een voorbeeld voor de jongere leden van hun gemeenschap. Hun gebrekkige gezondheid, gekenmerkt door slechtheid, stramheid en slaperigheid, wordt gepresenteerd als een hindernis. Maar die hindernis kwamen ze vrijwel altijd te boven. Angelsaksische hagiografen leggen juist de nadruk op de manier waarop de heilige ondanks zijn vervallen staat toch vasthoudt aan zijn ascetische levensstijl. Ouderdom verschafte de heiligen op deze wijze juist de mogelijkheid om hun heiligheid te etaleren.

De oude krijgers in hoofdstuk 6 verschillen niet veel van de bejaarde heiligen. Ook zij werden met name beschreven als wijze, eerbiedwaardige adviseurs voor de jongeren in hun omgeving en, ondanks hun afgenomen fysieke kracht, werden ze nog altijd verondersteld met de eersten mee te vechten. “Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað” [De geest moet harder zijn, het hart dapperder, de moed groter, als onze kracht afneemt]. Met deze woorden vat de oude krijger Byrhtwold in *The Battle of Maldon* het verwachtingspatroon samen dat geldt ten aanzien van de bejaarde strijder. Oude krijgers in Oudengelse heldendichten zijn rolmodellen, vergelijkbaar met oude heiligen in de Angelsaksische hagiografie: zij belichamen de boodschap dat, ondanks de gebreken van de ouderdom, men toch moet doorzetten. Degenen die aan die boodschap gehoor konden geven, genoten een speciale status. Actieve oude geestelijken als bisschop Wilfrid en aartsbischop Dunstan werden vereerd als heiligen en echte oude krijgers als *ealdorman* Byrhtnoth en graaf Siward genoten een heldenstatus. De Angelsaksen achtten oude mensen nog tot veel in staat, zowel op spiritueel gebied als wat de krijg betrof. Niet iedereen was evenwel in staat om aan dit verwachtingspatroon te voldoen en het zou een vergissing zijn om de hoge verwachtingen van de Angelsaksen te verwarren met algehele bewondering.

Sterker nog: als een oude man niet in staat was te voldoen aan het verwachtingspatroon, dan had hij een serieus probleem, zeker als hij koning was, zoals hoofdstuk 7 uitwijst. In de vroege Middeleeuwen hing de macht van een koning nog samen met zijn fysieke strijdvaardigheid. Naarmate ze ouder werden, hadden oude vorsten verschillende politieke problemen. Deze problematiek is een van de centrale thema's van de *Beowulf* en wordt binnen dit gedicht belichaamd door de bejaarde, passieve en gedesillusioneerde vorst Hrothgar. Het contrast dat de dichter tekent tussen Hrothgar en de heldhaftige, oude koning Beowulf (en de vele verwijzingen naar actieve, oude krijgerkoningen uit de Germaanse heldenwereld) wijzen erop dat een Angelsaksisch publiek van een oude vorst verwachtte dat hij nog altijd ten strijde zou trekken. Het gedicht kan het beste gelezen worden als een vorstenspiegel voor oude koningen – het promoot actief koningschap, zelfs in de laatste levensfase. Het hoofdstuk sluit af met de suggestie dat het gedicht mogelijk gemaakt was in opdracht van koning Offa van Mercia: een actieve, oude heerser die zich meer dan bewust moet zijn geweest van de problemen van oude koningen.

Waar in de hoofdstukken 5, 6 en 7 met name de Angelsaksische culturele conceptualisering van oude mannen centraal staat, richt hoofdstuk 8 zich op oude vrouwen. Aangezien oude vrouwen nauwelijks aan bod komen in de stichtelijke, hagiografische en heroïsche literatuur van vroegmiddeleeuws Engeland, kies ik in dit hoofdstuk voor een meer historisch-sociologische aanpak om uit te zoeken of de overgang naar ouderdom voor vrouwen leidde tot een daling in sociale status (zoals men op basis van archeologisch onderzoek wel heeft beweerd). De analyse leidde tot de identificatie van iets meer dan dertig oude vrouwen, wier levens en daden werden vermeld in kronieken, brieven en testamenten. De meeste van deze vrouwen wisten zich nuttig te maken voor hun gemeenschap. Grootmoeders, abdissen, getuigen en droomuitleggers functioneerden als gerespecteerde ‘cultuurdragers’. Zo lang zij hun waarde konden bewijzen, hoefden oude vrouwen, net zoals hun mannelijke evenknieën, zich er geen zorgen over te maken dat ze naar de marge van hun gemeenschap werden geschoven. De Angelsaksische periode was beslist geen gouden tijd voor ouden van dagen, maar het hoefde zeker ook geen zwarte periode te zijn.

Als geheel draagt dit proefschrift op verschillende manieren bij aan de ouderdomsgeschiedenis in het algemeen en de studie van Angelsaksisch Engeland in het bijzonder. Binnen het veld van ouderdomsgeschiedenis is dit proefschrift vernieuwend vanwege zijn multidisciplinaire aanpak. Om erachter te komen hoe men vroeger dacht over ouderdom moeten zoveel mogelijk aspecten van de cultuur worden meegenomen: van kunst tot literatuur, van tekst tot taal. Daarnaast beslaat dit proefschrift een periode die binnen de ouderdomsgeschiedenis zelden aan bod komt, namelijk de vroege Middeleeuwen. Met haar focus op slechts een enkele samenleving binnen een beperkte tijdsspanne – de Angelsaksen tussen ca. 700 en 1100 – biedt dit proefschrift ook een tegenwicht tegen de vele pan-Europese studies van ouderdom in de Middeleeuwen, waarin voorbijgegaan wordt aan alle tijds- en landsgrenzen.

De wetenschappelijke benadering van Angelsaksisch Engeland is ook gebaat bij dit proefschrift. Allereerst wordt een aantal bronnen geïdentificeerd die niet eerder bestudeerd zijn binnen de context van ouderdom, zoals de wijsheidspoëzie van Alcuin en Cynewulf, en de afbeeldingen van oude krijgers op het Tapijt van Bayeux. Daarnaast geeft de lexicologische analyse van Oudengelse woorden, gegeven in de *appendix* en samengevat in hoofdstuk 2, aanleiding tot de hercatalogisering van een aantal van deze woorden in de *Thesaurus of Old English* en een aanpassing van hun definities in de standaard woordenboeken van het Oudengels. Bovendien heeft dit proefschrift zowel nieuwe gebieden voor onderzoek geopend, zoals de status van oude vrouwen in Angelsaksisch Engeland, alsook nieuwe inzichten opgeleverd in teksten die al sinds lang in het middelpunt van de academische aandacht staan, zoals de *Beowulf*. Bovenal geeft dit proefschrift een volledige analyse van de culturele conceptualisering van ouderdom door de Angelsaksen dan de eenzijdige, positief uitgevallen schetsen van eerdere onderzoekers.

Nog een laatste woord over hoe men vroeger over ouderdom dacht. In het algemeen waren de Angelsaksen zich wel bewust van de kansen die oud worden hun bood, maar tegelijkertijd waren ze bevreesd voor de consequenties. Ze keken op tegen die ouderen die de gebreken van hun ouderdom konden weerstaan, maar keken neer op hen die daar niet langer toe in staat waren. Wijsheid kwam niet altijd met de jaren en respect was ook toen niet vanzelfsprekend maar moest worden verdiend. Wellicht

verschilt de houding van de huidige maatschappij jegens ouderdom dan toch niet zo veel van die van meer dan duizend jaar geleden.

Curriculum vitae

Matthijs Hendrik (Thijs) Porck was born in Leidschendam on 28 May 1984. He obtained his VWO-Gymnasium certificate from Stedelijk Gymnasium, Leiden, in 2002. He then studied medieval history, as well as English language and culture at Leiden University. He received two B.A. degrees, for medieval history in 2005 and English language and culture in 2007, and an M.A. degree in English language and culture in 2008 and an M.Phil. in medieval history in 2010. All degrees were awarded *cum laude*.

From 2008 to 2010 he taught courses in English linguistics and philology at the department of English language and culture at Leiden University. After teaching a course on the history of the English language at the Radboud University Nijmegen and a brief spell at a secondary school, he started his Ph.D. project as a *docentpromovendus* [lecturer and Ph.D. student] at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society on 2 February 2011. During this project, he taught and coordinated courses in Old English, Middle English, the history of the English language and medieval studies. In 2014, he was awarded the *Humanities Faculty Teaching Prize* for the most inspiring lecturer of the faculty of Humanities at Leiden University.

He has published articles on late medieval historiography, J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf* and Old English language and culture. He currently serves as the managing editor of *Neophilologus: An International Journal of Modern and Mediaeval Language and Literature*, a member of the editorial board of *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* and the reviews editor of *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe*.