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

Porck, M.H.

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. **Ecgberht** (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 visuals 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's 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 *Titurel*', 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,
> ælghwæs orleahtre oþ þæt hine yldo 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.