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

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Burrow; Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions’, 1–54.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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].<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Burrow, 109; Amos, 104; Crawford, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Whereas I have found little variation between the earlier and later sources discussed in this

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent*, ed. H. Sauer and J. Story (Tempe, 2011) and Wright, *Irish Tradition*.

<sup>6</sup> 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;<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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;<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Minois, *History of Old Age*, 175–9; J. T. Freeman, ‘Medical Perspectives in Aging (12th–19th Century)’, *The Gerontologist* 5 (1965), 1–24.

<sup>9</sup> Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

