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The Ages of Man and the Ages of Woman in Early Medieval England: From Bede to Byrhtferth of Ramsey and the *Tractatus de quaternario*

Thijs Porck

Into how many parts should the human life course be divided? Old English and Anglo-Latin texts show a variety of answers to this question, ranging from three to six distinct stages. Individual authors, such as Bede and Ælfric, alternated between multiple schemes and even in two versions of the same text the number of life stages could differ. An example of the latter phenomenon is found in two versions of an early medieval English confessional prayer. Four stages of life are distinguished in the Old English version that was added to a late eleventh-century manuscript:

Ic eom anddetta for eall þæt unriht þe ic æfre gefremede on minum cildhade oððe on minre geogode oððe on minre strengðe oððe on minre ylde þe æfter fulwihte agylte 7 on manegum þingum swiðe gode abealh.¹

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

An earlier Latin version of this prayer in the mid-ninth-century Book of Cerne, by contrast, divides the life course into three parts:

¹ London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius C.i, fol. 160v. Henri Logeman, “Anglo-Saxonica Minora, I,” *Anglia* 11 (1889): 101–2, lines 54–57. Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own. In Thijs Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England: A Cultural History* (Woodbridge, 2019), 30–31, 50, I erroneously ascribed this citation to the related prayer in London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D.xx, which instead reads “Ic eom andetta þara þe ic of cildhade oð þas ieldo þe ic æfter fulwihte agylte 7 on manegum ðingum swiðe gode abealh” [I acknowledge those (sins) which I committed from childhood to old age, after baptism, and with many things greatly offended God].

confiteor uobis quaecumque feci in puerile aetate uel in iuuentute uel in senectute – et sepe peccaui in multis rebus multum deum irritaui.²

I confess to you whatever I committed in *puerilis aetas* or in *iuuentus* or in *senectus* – and I have often sinned and greatly angered God in many things.³

Life course schematizations into five or even six ‘ages of man’ are also found in the wider Old English and Anglo-Latin corpus of homilies, saints’ lives and works of a more encyclopedic nature.

In visual artworks from early medieval England, renditions of the human life course occur less frequently and with less variation. Typically, these visualizations depict three male figures, differentiated for age by the presence, length and color of their beards. In this way, the three Magi are depicted on the Franks Casket and a number of early medieval English manuscripts in order to represent all of humanity: the young, the middle-aged and the elderly.⁴ Similarly, the Harley Psalter and Eadwine Psalter follow their Carolingian exemplar, the Utrecht Psalter, in depicting the three Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) as the three ‘ages of man’: the first has a slumped neck and a long white or grey beard, the figure in the middle has a black beard, while the third figure is a beardless youth (see Fig. 1.1).⁵

Only one figural depiction of the human life course of a possible pre-Conquest origin departs from this threefold facial hair motif. This depiction, found in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, visualizes four

2 Cambridge, University Library, MS L1.1.10, fol. 47v, ed. Arthur B. Kuypers, *The Prayer Book of Aedelwald the Bishop, Commonly Called the Book of Cerne* (Cambridge, 1902), 92–95, lines 15–17. On the relationship between these prayers, see Thijs Porck, “Two Notes on an Old English Confessional Prayer in Vespasian D.xx,” *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 60 (2013): 493–98.

3 In the translations from Latin throughout this contribution, including those by others, Latin age terms *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *iuuentus*, *senectus* and *senium*, etc., are untranslated, since modern English equivalents (infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, old age and senility) do not fully capture the often fluctuating early medieval meanings of these words. See, e.g., Adolf Hofmeister, “*Puer, iuuenis, senex*: Zum Verständnis der mittelalterlichen Altersbezeichnungen,” in *Papsttum und Kaisertum: Forschungen zur politischen Geschichte und Geisteskultur des Mittelalters: Paul Kehr zum 65. Geburtstag dargebracht*, ed. Albert Brackmann (Munich, 1926), 287–316.

4 For a general discussion of the three Magi as the three ages of man, see Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, 1986), 91–94; for the early medieval English material, see Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 25–28.

5 For this unique depiction of the three Patriarchs, see Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 28–29.



FIGURE 1.1 The three Patriarchs as the three ages of man. London, British Library, Harley 603, fol. 52v

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stages of life, using distinctively female figures (Fig. 1.3 below).⁶ This visualization has received scattered attention in existing scholarship on the medieval life course and its dating and localization is a matter of debate. John Burrow briefly discussed the diagram and its accompanying text, the *Tractatus de quaternario*, and identified them as the works of an anonymous twelfth-century author of continental origin.⁷ By contrast, Elizabeth Sears ascribed the visualization and the text to an anonymous author writing in early twelfth-century England,⁸ as did Isabelle Cochelin.⁹ Roberta Gilchrist, lastly, opted for a much earlier date and linked the depiction of the four ages of woman to a named individual: “a rare 11th-century example produced by Byrhtferth, a monk of

6 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fol. 28v. The manuscript is foliated twice in modern pencil due to an error in the foliation in the top right corner (it erroneously counts fol. 27 as fol. 26); in referring to the manuscript, I follow the foliation in the bottom right corner.

7 J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), 20–22.

8 Sears, *Ages of Man*, 23–25.

9 Isabelle Cochelin, “Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions of the Life Cycle,” in *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change*, ed. Isabelle Cochelin and Karen Smyth (Turnhout, 2013), 1–54, at 32–33.

Ramsey Abbey.”¹⁰ Before providing a detailed analysis of this depiction of the life course in its manuscript context, this chapter will give a broad overview of the various schematizations of the life course in early medieval England and, in particular, those found in works ascribed to Byrhtferth of Ramsey. In doing so, this chapter not only serves as an introduction to the issue of life course schematization in early medieval England, it also provides the necessary context to determine whether or not the diagram of the four ages of woman can indeed be attributed to one of the most prolific English authors before the Norman Conquest, Byrhtferth of Ramsey.

1 Life Course Schematizations in Old English and Anglo-Latin Texts

One of the most insightful contributions to the knowledge of early medieval conceptualizations of the human life course is Cochelin’s overview of “more than eighty life-cycle definitions in a variety of sources between the third century and 1200” from all over Western Europe.¹¹ Her overview, neatly summarized in a helpful table, provides an insight into the variability of medieval ideas about how the human life course could be stratified. Early medieval authors variously divided life into three to seven stages, using fluctuating and at times contradictory terminology. However, between the sixth century and c.1120,¹² Cochelin observes a more uniform system of life course stratification. The thirty-four texts from this time period show remarkably less variation than those of earlier and later dates, enabling Cochelin to establish one overarching life course definition:

between the sixth and the early twelfth centuries, the life cycle can contain three, four, five, six or seven ages, because the three main phases, *pueritia*, *iuuentus*, and *senectus*, can each be divided into two and, exceptionally for *senectus*, even into three ages. A life cycle of three is comprised of the three main phases; one of four means that one of the three phases has been subdivided and so on. Whatever the number of subdivisions, we are still facing one unique, if very flexible, way of conceiving the ages of man.¹³

¹⁰ Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2012), 253.

¹¹ Cochelin, “Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions,” 1.

¹² The date c.1120 is that of the *Tractatus de quaternario* and its diagram and, as Cochelin, “Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions,” 32 n. 99, notes, this date is debatable; see below.

¹³ Cochelin, “Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions,” 11.

This scheme in sources dated between 500 and c.1120 is further characterized by an almost systematic division of *senectus* into two or even three stages. Cochelin suggests that a division of old age into two stages may possibly stem from the distinction between an active 'green' old age and a 'grey' old age marked by bodily decline.¹⁴

Since Cochelin's overview includes only four Anglo-Latin texts (two by Bede, one by Alcuin and one by Byrhtferth),¹⁵ the question remains whether this flexible life course definition, with its underlying tripartite structure, fully represents early medieval English ideas of the human life course. Cochelin's table can be complemented by an overview of sixteen attestations of the ages of man in Anglo-Latin and Old English texts, here presented as Table 1.1. This table includes only those texts that explicitly describe a schematization of the life course into different stages, from beginning to end, and excludes works by Byrhtferth of Ramsey, which are discussed separately below.¹⁶ The first column provides information about the text and the three following columns with bold outline represent the three main phases identified by Cochelin: *pueritia*, *iuventus* and *senectus*. Whenever an author subdivided any of these three main phases, this is indicated by dividing the cell in that particular column; age limits (the supposed end point of a particular stage of life) are added wherever they occur. The texts are listed in a rough chronological order.¹⁷

14 Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 14. For this distinction between green and grey old age, see also Pat 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), 31–32.

15 Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 24, 27–28, discusses Bede's *De temporibus* and *De temporum ratione*, the *Commentaria in s. Joannis euangelium* by Alcuin and the work of Byrhtferth of Ramsey.

16 This means that references to individual life stages, such as those in Alcuin's writings discussed in the contribution by Darren Barber in this volume, are not included unless a full range is given from birth to old age. Nor have more allusive references to the human life cycle in Old English poetry been included. For these references, see, e.g., Harriet Soper, "Reading the Exeter Book Riddles as Life-Writing," *Review of English Studies* 68 (2017): 841–65.

17 A full analysis of each text is beyond the scope of this contribution and can be found in Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 16–51. The texts that are not discussed in the current chapter are provided with footnote references to the original primary source followed by a short explanatory note.

TABLE 1.1 Divisions of the life course in Anglo-Latin and Old English texts, excluding works by Byrhtferth of Ramsey

Main phases (Cochelin)	<i>pueritia</i>		<i>iūuentus</i>		<i>senectus</i>	
Bede, <i>De temporibus</i> 16	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iūuenilis aetas	senectus / senilis aetas	aetas decrepita
Bede, <i>De temporum ratione</i> 35	infantes		adolescentes	transgressores	senes	
Bede, <i>De temporum ratione</i> 66	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iūuenilis aetas	senectus / senilis aetas	aetas decrepita
Bede, <i>In Lucae evangelium expositio</i>	pueritia		adolescentia / iūuentus		senectus	
Willibald, <i>Vita Bonifatii</i> ^a	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iūuentus	senectus	
Alcuin, <i>Commentarii in s. Joannis evangelium</i>	infantia	pueritia	adolescentia	iūuentus	grauitas	senectus
Ps.-Bede, <i>Collectanea</i>	infantia 7	pueritia 14	adolescentia 28	iūuentus 49	senectus 77	senium / decrepitas
Confessional prayer in Book of Cerne	puerilis aetas		iūuentus		senectus	
Various encyclopedic notes	infantia 7	pueritia 14	adolescentia 27/28	iūuentus 48/49	senectus 70/77/80	senium / decrepitas
Blickling Homily XIV ^b	iugoþ		midfyrhtnes		yldo	

a Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii* 9, ed. Reinhold Rau, *Bonifatii epistulae. Willibaldi vita Bonifatii* (Darmstadt, 1968), 522. In this text, the life of Boniface is divided into five stages.

b Richard Morris, ed., *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century*, EETS o.s. 58, 63, 73 (London, 1874–80), 161, 163. This text differentiates between three stages in the lives of the parents of John the Baptist.

TABLE 1.1 Divisions of the life course in Anglo-Latin and Old English texts (*cont.*)

Main phases (Cochelin)	<i>pueritia</i>	<i>iuuentus</i>	<i>senectus</i>
Ælfric, homily for the Common of a Confessor (Assmann IV)	cildhad	weaxend cnihtad	forwered yld
Ælfric, sermon for the Octave of Pentecost (Pope XI) ^c	cild	geonge menn	ealdan
Ælfric, homily on the decapita- tion of John the Baptist (<i>Catholic Homilies</i> I, xxxii) ^d	cildhad	cnihtad	geðungen wæstm / ful- fremeda wæstm
Ælfric, homily for Septuagesima Sunday (<i>Catholic</i> <i>Homilies II</i> , v)	cildhad	cnihtad	geðungen wæstm / ful- fremeda wæstm
Wulfstan, “De temporibus Antichristi” ^e	cild	medeme ylde mann	eald geðungen mann
Confessional prayer in Cotton Tiberius C.i	cildhad	geogoð	strengð
			yld

c Ælfric, *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. John C. Pope, EETS o.s. 259–60 (Oxford, 1967–68), hom. 11, lines 112–17. This text relates the three types of deaths (bitter, immature and natural) to three ages of man.

d Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, ed. Peter Clemoes, EETS s.s. 17 (Oxford, 1997), hom. 32, ll. 208–11. Four stages of life mentioned in the context of the changing nature of the human body.

e Wulfstan, *Eschatological Homilies*, ed. and trans. Joyce Tally Lionarons (2000), <http://webpages.ursinus.edu/jlionarons/wulfstan/Wulfstan.html>. In this text, the three stages refer to the physical forms that the shapeshifter Simon Magus takes on in his confrontation with Saints Peter and Paul.

On the whole, these early medieval English texts conform to what Cochelin had observed for the bulk of texts made between the sixth century and c.1120: the life course was typically conceptualized as consisting of three main phases (*pueritia*, *iuventus*, and *senectus*), which could each be subdivided.¹⁸ While many life course definitions feature *senectus* divided into two stages, a division into three stages as found in some of Cochelin's examples, is not present in the early medieval English corpus. Cochelin's further suggestion that a subdivided old age in these schemes stems from a distinction between active advanced age and old age proper cannot be verified for the early medieval English material, since in some of these texts even the first stage of *senectus* is defined by bodily weakness. In fact, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, old age in early medieval England was more broadly conceived of as a single long phase, starting at the age of forty-eight, forty-nine, or fifty and characterized specifically by physical decline.¹⁹

Cochelin rightly notes that early medieval life course definitions cannot be presumed to be representative of society at large. They typically stem from a learned, ecclesiastical milieu and were produced by male authors.²⁰ This holds true for the texts included in Table 1.1 as well. Those early medieval English authors who commented on the human life course typically followed earlier models by Church Fathers, such as Gregory the Great, Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville. Their influence on early medieval English life course schematization is traced in the following section.

2 The Learned Context: Biblical Exegesis, Patristic Tradition and Natural Philosophy

Medieval authors who commented on a threefold division of the life course mostly did so in the context of biblical exegesis. Biblical triads, such as the three Magi and the three Patriarchs, could be interpreted as representing different stages of human life and, as a group, they could represent all of mankind.²¹ A good example of this approach is Bede's interpretation of Christ's Parable of the Three Vigils (Luke 12.36–38). In this parable, Christ compares his disciples to servants awaiting their lord's return from a wedding during three vigils – in

18 Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 11.

19 Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 49.

20 Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 2.

21 Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 25–29.

Bede's commentary, each of these vigils represents a stage of life during which a person might turn to God:

Prima quippe uigilia primauum tempus est, id est pueritia; secunda adulescentia uel iuuentus quae auctoritate sacri eloquii unum sunt dicentis: laetare iuuenis in adulescentia tua; tertia autem senectus accipitur. Qui ergo uigilare in prima uigilia noluit custodiat uel secundam ut qui conuerti a prauitatibus suis in pueritia neglexit ad uias uitae saltem in tempore iuuentutis euigilet. Et qui uigilare in secunda uigilia noluit tertiae uigiliae remedia non amittat ut qui et in iuuentute ad uias uitae non euigilat saltem in senectute resipiscat.²²

Indeed, the first vigil is the youthful time, which is *pueritia*. The second, *adulescentia* or *iuuentus*, which according to the authority of the sacred word are the same, saying: 'Rejoice, O *iuuenis*, in your *adulescentia*' (Eccles. 11.9).²³ The third, moreover, is accepted to be *senectus*. Therefore, whoever did not want to be awake during the first vigil, should observe the second, so that whoever has neglected to turn away from vices in *pueritia*, is at least watchful of the ways of life in the time of *iuuentus*. And whoever did not want to be alert during the second vigil, may they not let go of the remedies of the third watch, so that whoever is also not watchful of the ways of life in *iuuentus*, at least recovers their senses in *senectus*.

Bede's commentary, which explains that it is never too late to turn to a Christian way of life, was copied verbatim from a homily by Gregory the Great (c.540–604).²⁴ In his Old English homily for the Common of a Confessor, Ælfric of Eynsham interpreted the three Vigils in a similar manner, following Bede or

22 Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, ed. D. Hurst, CCL 120 (Turnhout, 1960), 257, lines 1039–58.

23 The notion that *adulescentia* and *iuuentus* are interchangeable terms, backed up by the quotation from Ecclesiastes 11.9, is indicative of one of the recurring problems in medieval writings about the human life course: the relative fluidity of the terminology. See, e.g., Hofmeister, "Puer, iuuenis, senex," 287–316. In most other early medieval divisions of the life course in Table 1.1, *adulescentia* denotes the stage of life preceding *iuuentus*. In his exposition of the four ages of man in his *De temporum ratione*, Bede used the term *adulescentes* to denote the second stage of life, but avoided terminology related to *iuuentus* altogether, opting for *transgressores* instead. Whenever Bede divided the life course into six stages of life, he did distinguish between *adulescentia* and *iuuenilis aetas* as the two stages preceding *senectus*; see below.

24 Gregory, *Homiliae in euangelia*, ed. R. Étaix, CCL 141 (Turnhout, 1999), hom. 13, lines 74–82.

Gregory as well as Haymo of Auxerre, and he uses the terms “cildhade” [childhood], “weaxendum cnihtade” [growing youth/adolescence] and “forweredre ylde” [worn-out old age] to render the three stages of life.²⁵

In another homily, Ælfric interpreted another one of Christ’s parables in terms of the ages of man. In this case, he favored a fivefold division of life to interpret Christ’s Parable of the Vineyard (Matt. 20.1–16). According to Ælfric, people could become Christians during five different periods in their lives and still reap the same reward, analogous to how, in the parable, workers were called to a vineyard at five different hours:

Eornostlice þonne sume beoð gelædde on cildhade to godum ðeawum and rihtum life. sume on cnihtade. sume on geðungenum wæstmæ. sume on ylde. sume on forwerodre ealdnysse. þonne bið hit swylce hi beon on mislicum tidum to ðam wingearde gelaðode.²⁶

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

Ælfric’s Old English text is a near word-for-word translation of the corresponding passage in a homily by Gregory the Great, showing once more how many of these early medieval English definitions of the life course find their origins in patristic writings.²⁷

Patristic tradition also underlies a number of early medieval English life course definitions that refer to six individual stages of life. Bede and Alcuin, for instance, both drew on Augustine of Hippo when they related the six ages of man to the *sex aetates mundi* [six ages of the world].²⁸ In various works, Augustine had propagated the idea that the world passes through six ages which correspond to the human life course: *infantia* (from Adam to Noah), *pueritia*

25 Bruno Assmann, ed., *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben* (Kassel, 1889), hom. 4, lines 67–83. For a discussion of Ælfric’s sources, see Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 22.

26 Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, ed. Malcolm Godden, EETS s.s. 5 (London, 1979), hom. 5, lines 101–6.

27 Milton McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto, 1977), 93–94; Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, EETS s.s. 18 (Oxford, 2000), 383–84.

28 Alcuin’s use of this motif in his *Commentarii in s. Joannis evangelium* is discussed in Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 84–85; Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 39–41.

(from Noah to Abraham), *adolescentia* (from Abraham to David), *iuuentus* (from David until the Babylonian captivity), *senioris* (from the Babylonian exile to the coming of Jesus Christ) and, finally, *senectus* which would last until the end of time.²⁹ Bede included a version of this Augustinian division into six ages in both his *De temporibus* and his *De temporum ratione*. In both texts, he distinguished between *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *iuuenilis aetas*, *senilis aetas* / *senectus* and *aetas decrepita*³⁰; the most elaborate treatment of this six-fold scheme is the one in his *De temporum ratione*:

Quae uniuersali est deleta diluuiio, sicut primam cuiusque hominis obliuio demergere consuevit aetatem; quotus enim quisque est, qui suam recordetur infantiam? [...] Haec quasi pueritia fuit generis populi Dei et ideo in lingua inuenta est, id est Hebrea, a pueritia namque homo incipit nosse loqui post infantiam, quae hinc appellata est, quod fari non potest. [...] Haec quaedam uelut adolescentia fuit populi Dei, a qua aetate quia incipit homo posse generare [...]. A qua uelut iuuenali aetate in populo Dei regum tempora coeperunt, haec namque in hominibus aetas apta gubernando solet existere regno. Quinta quasi senilis aetas [...] [i]n qua, ut graui senectute fessa, malis crebrioribus plebs Hebrea quassatur. Sexta [...] aetas [...] sed ut aetas decrepita ipsa totius saeculi morte consumenda.³¹

This (First Age) was wiped out in the universal Flood, just as the first age of every person is usually submerged in oblivion, for how many people can remember their *infantia*? ... This (Second Age) was, so to speak, the *pueritia* of God's people, and therefore it is discovered in a language, that is, in Hebrew, because from *pueritia* on, when *infantia* is over – which is so called because an infant cannot speak – a person begins to learn to speak.... This (Third Age) was like the *adolescentia* of the people of God, because from this age on, a person can reproduce.... From this (Fourth) Age – *iuuenilis aetas*, so to speak – the era of the kings began among the people of God, for this age in man is normally apt for governing a kingdom. The Fifth Age – *senilis aetas*, if you will – ... in this Age the Hebrew people were weakened by many evils, as if wearied by heavy *senectus*....

29 Sears, *Ages of Man*, 54–61.

30 Bede, *De temporibus* 16, ed. C. W. Jones, *Opera didascalica*, CCSL 123 C (Turnhout, 1980), 600–601; Bede, *De temporum ratione* 66, ed. C. W. Jones, *Opera didascalica*, CCSL 123 B (Turnhout, 1977), 463–64. Also discussed in Cochelin, “Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions,” 24.

31 Bede, *De temporum ratione* 66, ed. Jones, 463–64.

The Sixth Age ... like *aetas decrepita*, this (Age) will come to an end in the death of the whole world.³²

While this life course schematization features a subdivision of old age, both parts, according to Bede, are marked by decline; as such, this life course definition does not feature a transition from a young, active old age to a weakened old age.

In addition to the works of Augustine, Isidore of Seville's treatments of the sixfold division of life in his *Differentiae* and *Etymologiae* were highly influential in the early Middle Ages.³³ For instance, Isidore's divisions are found in two ninth-century works once ascribed to Bede and Alcuin, respectively.³⁴ Isidore's work on the life course was also regularly copied in the form of encyclopedic notes that are found in various manuscripts from early medieval England.³⁵ One of these notes demonstrates some of the variability in this sixfold division in terms of the length in years ascribed to each stage:

Prima aetas infantia .vii. annis. Secunda. pueritia . xliiii. tertia adulescentia .xxvii. annis. Quarta iuuentus . xlviii. uel .viii. annis. Quinta senectus usque ad .lxx. uel .lxxx. annos. ab anno .lxxesimo, uel xxxesimo. Senium id est decrepitis et nimium senex dicitur. Infantia habet unam ebdomadam annorum. id est vii. annos pueritia alios .vii. adulescentia duas

32 Bede, *The Reckoning of Time*, trans. Faith Wallis (Liverpool, 2004), 157–58.

33 Isidore, *Differentiae* 2.19, PL 83, cols. 81b–c; Isidore, *Etymologiae* 11.2.2–8, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge, 2006), 241. In both texts, Isidore gives six ages, but he gives different age limits and names for the last three: in the *Differentiae*, *infantia* (7), *pueritia* (14), *adulescentia* (28), *iuuentus* (49), *senectus* (77) and *senium* (no age limit); in the *Etymologiae*, *infantia* (7), *pueritia* (14), *adulescentia* (28), *iuuentus* (50), *grauitas* / *senioris aetas* (70), *senectus* / *senium* (no age limit).

34 The ninth-century *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae* gives a sixfold division of life, with the age limits as found in Isidore's *Differentiae*; *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, ed. and trans. Martha Bayless and Michael Lapidge (Dublin, 1998), no. 378. Michael Lapidge, "The Origin of the *Collectanea*," in *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. Bayless and Lapidge, 12, notes that the material in this text derives either from Ireland, England or the Continent: "the majority of its localizable contents originated either in Ireland or England, or in an Irish foundation on the continent." Isidore's discussion in the *Etymologiae* is the source for the treatment of the six ages in the *Disputatio puerorum*, once ascribed to Alcuin. The latest editors of this text now refute this attribution, hence it has not been included in Table 1.1 above; *The Disputatio puerorum: A Ninth-Century Monastic Instructional Text. Edited from Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek*, 458, ed. Andrew Rabin and Liam Felsen, Toronto Medieval Latin Texts 34 (Toronto, 2017).

35 On these notes, see Kees Dekker, "Anglo-Saxon Encyclopaedic Notes: Tradition and Function," in *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer Jr and Kees Dekker (Paris, 2007), 279–315; Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 40–43.

ebdomadas. id est anni .xxviii. Iuuentus iii. ebdomadas. id sunt anni .xlviii. Senectus .iiii. ebdomadas. id sunt. anni . lxxvii. ebdomadas .xi. Senium nullo certo annorum numero finitur.

The first age, *infantia*, (lasts to) seven years. The second, *pueritia*, (to) fourteen years. The third, *adolescentia*, (to) twenty-seven years. The fourth, *iuuentus*, (to) forty-eight or -nine years. The fifth, *senectus*, to seventy or eighty years. From the seventieth or eightieth year, *senium*, which is *decrepitas*, and is said to be old age beyond measure. *Infantia* has one hebdomad of years – this is seven years – *pueritia* another seven. *Adolescentia* has two hebdomads – this is twenty-eight years. *Iuuentus* has three hebdomads – these are forty-nine years. *Senectus* has four hebdomads – these are seventy-seven years (or) eleven hebdomads. *Senium* is not ended by any certain number of years.³⁶

In listing a range of different age limits for each stage, this note conflates various versions of the six ages of man, combining as it does the cut-off points for each stage in Isidore's *Differentiae* (7, 14, 28, 49, 77) and *Etymologiae* (7, 14, 28, 50, 70), as well as adding three more alternative age limits (27 for *adolescentia*, 48 for *iuuentus* and 80 for *senectus*).³⁷ As such, this note is an amalgamation of slightly differing divisions of the six ages of man that circulated in early medieval England.

Another major intellectual tradition that influenced the way authors looked at the human life course in the Middle Ages was natural philosophy. This tradition primarily influenced those authors who conceptualized a life course of four and later seven stages.³⁸ A fourfold division of human life, analogous to four seasons in the course of a year, is generally attributed to the Greek philosopher Pythagoras (c.570–c.495 BC).³⁹ Later, other sets of four, such as the

36 Edition and translation from Dekker, "Anglo-Saxon Encyclopaedic Notes," 283, 314. This note occurs in at least five manuscripts from early medieval England, dated between the ninth and eleventh centuries. The note is included in Cochelin's overview as "Manuscript from Paris (Tenth Century)," Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 27.

37 The age limit 27 for *adolescentia* is also found in the anonymous ninth-century *Disputatio puerorum* 3.3, ed. Rabin and Felsen, 43, line 69; the age limit 48 for *iuuentus* is also used in Byrhtferth's famous diagram; see below. The notion that *senectus* ends at the age of 70 or 80 may be based on Psalm 89.10 ("The days of our years in them are threescore and ten years. But if in the strong they be fourscore years"); Bible references and translations are from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.

38 Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 12–54.

39 *The Four Seasons of Human Life: Four Anonymous Engravings from the Trent Collection*, ed. H. F. J. Horstmanshoff et al. (Rotterdam, 2002), 40–41.

elements and the humors, were incorporated into this tetradic scheme.⁴⁰ In early medieval England, this interrelation between the physical and physiological fours is first found in Bede's *De temporum ratione*. Here, Bede describes how the four ages of man correspond to four other sets of 'fours': the seasons, the qualities, the elements and the humors. First, the four seasons are linked to four qualities: spring is moist and hot, summer is hot and dry, autumn is dry and cold and winter is cold and moist. These same four qualities are found in the four elements, air, fire, earth and water. Analogous to the four seasons and four elements, people can be divided into four age categories: *infantes*, *adolescentes*, *transgressores* and *senes*.⁴¹ Bede then connects the four ages to the four bodily humors and outlines the typical behavioral characteristics that these dominating humors produce within mankind:

Et quidem sanguis in infantibus maxime uiget, in adolescentibus cholera rubea, melancholia in transgressoribus, id est fel cum faece nigri sanguinis admixtum, phlegmata dominantur in senibus. Item sanguis eos in quibus maxime pollet facit hilares, laetos, misericordes, multum ridentes et loquentes; cholera uero rubea faciunt macilentos, multum tamen comedentes, ueloces, audaces, iracundos, agiles; nigra bilis stabilis, graues, compositos moribus, dolosos que facit; phlegmata tardos, somnolentos, obliuiosos generant.⁴²

Indeed, blood is at its most active in children, red bile in young people, melancholia (that is, gall mingled with the dregs of black blood) in the middle-aged, and phlegmatic humors dominate in the elderly. Moreover, blood makes those in whom its potency is greatest cheerful, joyous, tender-hearted, much given to laughter and speech; red bile makes people lean, even though they eat a lot, swift, bold, irritable and agile; black bile makes them stolid, solemn, set in their ways and gloomy; phlegmatic humors produce people who are slow, sleepy and forgetful.⁴³

Bede's rendition for the physical and physiological fours is set out schematically in Table 1.2.⁴⁴

40 Sears, *Ages of Man*, 9–16.

41 Bede, *De temporum ratione* 35, ed. Jones, 391–95.

42 Bede, *De temporum ratione* 35, ed. Jones, 392–93.

43 Bede, *Reckoning*, trans. Wallis, 101.

44 For a discussion of Bede's sources, see Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 33.

TABLE 1.2 Bede's scheme of physical and physiological fours

Qualities	moist and hot	hot and dry	dry and cold	cold and moist
Season	spring	summer	autumn	winter
Elements	air	fire	earth	water
Ages of man	<i>infantes</i>	<i>adolescentes</i>	<i>transgressores</i> ^a	<i>senes</i>
Humors	blood	red bile	black bile	phlegm

a Bede's use of the term *transgressores* is unusual and it is not entirely clear which stage of life he might be referring to here. Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 24, interprets the term as denoting the stage of life starting at the age of forty-nine, usually denoted as *grauitas* or *senectus* in other early medieval life course definitions, especially since Bede ascribes to the *transgressores* "grauis" [solemn] behaviour. To this, we can add that Bede in his exposition of the Parable of the Three Vigils had noted how *adolescentia* and *iuiuentus* were equivalent terms. However, in most other medieval definitions of the life course, *adolescentia* ends at the age of twenty-eight and rarely directly precedes the onset of old age and it does not do so in Bede's rendition of the six ages of man, where *adolescentia* is followed by *iuiuenilis aetas*. Moreover, Byrhtferth of Ramsey, who based his discussion of the four ages on Bede, interprets Bede's *transgressores* as representing *iuiuentus* (see below). As such, Bede's fourfold division here seems to represent a single, undivided first stage of *pueritia* (the *infantes*), a subdivided stage of *iuiuentus* (represented by the *adolescentes* and *transgressores*) and a single, undivided last stage of *senectus* (the *senes*).

To sum up thus far, when commenting on the human life course, early medieval English authors typically followed earlier traditions and, depending on the genre in which they were writing, they could unproblematically alternate, as in the case of Bede, between three, four or six ages of man.

3 Byrhtferth of Ramsey on the Human Life Course

Byrhtferth of Ramsey was one of the most prolific English authors in Latin and Old English with an oeuvre that ranges from computus to hagiography. His most famous work is his *Manual* or *Enchiridion* (1010–1012), which was intended as a handbook for the use of a now-lost *Computus* that he had produced earlier. This *Computus*, a collection of diagrams, formulae and texts on the subjects of time and numerology, has been reconstructed on the basis of three twelfth-century manuscripts, which also contain diagrams that are explicitly attributed to Byrhtferth.⁴⁵ He also wrote two saints' lives, devoted

45 Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Peter S. Baker and Michael Lapidge, EETS s.s. 15 (London, 1995).

to St. Oswald and St. Ecgbwine.⁴⁶ In addition, Byrhtferth may also have been a glossator: a set of explanatory glosses to Bede's *De natura rerum* and *De temporum ratione* have been ascribed to Byrhtferth,⁴⁷ and some glosses that survive in manuscripts of the *Enchiridion* and the *Vita s. Ecgbwini* may also have been made by him.⁴⁸ Throughout his works, Byrhtferth found ample occasion to refer to the various stages of the human life course, as the overview in Table 1.3 demonstrates.⁴⁹

TABLE 1.3 Life course divisions found in works by Byrhtferth

Main phases (Cochelin)	<i>pueritia</i>	<i>iuuentus</i>		<i>senectus</i>
<i>Enchiridion</i> 1.1, lines 102–13	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus
<i>Enchiridion</i> 1.1, lines 120–33	cildhad / cildiugoð / cildyld	cnihtiugoð	geþungen yld	swyðe eald yld / yld
<i>Enchiridion</i> 4.1, lines 74–84	pueritia	adholescentia	iuuentus	senectus
Glosses to <i>E</i> 4.1, lines 74–84	cildhad	cnihtad	geþungen yld	fulre yld
<i>Enchiridion</i> diagram 3	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus
<i>Enchiridion</i> diagram 13	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus
<i>Enchiridion</i> diagram 15	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus

46 For these texts and a complete overview of Byrhtferth's writings, see Byrhtferth, *The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgbwine*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge (Oxford, 2009), xxx–xliv.

47 See Michael Lapidge, "Byrhtferth of Ramsey and the *Glossae Bridferti in Bedam*," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 17 (2008): 384–400. The identification of Byrhtferth as the author of these glosses is controversial, cf. John J. Contreni, "Old Orthodoxies Die Hard: Herwagen's *Bridferti Ramesiensis Glossae*," *Peritia* 22–23 (2011–2012, 2013): 15–52. Regardless of the identity of the author, these glosses will not be discussed here, since the notes to the chapters in *De temporum ratione* that are relevant to this contribution (chapters 35 and 66) do not touch on the ages of man. The glosses were published from a now-lost manuscript in Johannes Herwagen's 1563 edition of Bede's works; they are reprinted in PL 90; for the glosses on chapters 35 and 66, see cols. 457d, 520–21.

48 Byrhtferth, *Lives*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, 305.

49 The references to the *Enchiridion* and its diagrams are to Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Baker and Lapidge. References to the *Vita s. Ecgbwini* are to Byrhtferth, *Lives*, ed. and trans. Lapidge.

TABLE 1.3 Life course divisions found in works by Byrhtferth (*cont.*)

Main phases (Cochelin)	<i>pueritia</i>	<i>iuuentus</i>	<i>senectus</i>	
<i>De concordia mensium atque elementorum</i>	pueritia / infantia 14	adolescentia 28	iuuentus 48	senectus 70/80
<i>Vita s. Ecgwini</i> preface	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus
<i>Vita s. Ecgwini</i> 1.6	pueritia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus
Glosses to <i>vse</i> 1.6	pueritia 7/8	adolescentia 14	iuuentus 50	senectus

This overview shows a particular consistency in Byrhtferth’s use of Latin terminology and his preference for a fourfold division of the human life course. Less consistent was his use of vernacular age terminology. In the main text of his *Enchiridion*, Byrhtferth used no fewer than three different terms to render *pueritia* (*cildhad*, *cildiugoð* and *cildyld*) and two terms for *senectus* (*swyðe eald yld* and *yld*), while giving only one vernacular translation for *adolescentia* (*cnihtiu-god*) and *iuuentus* (*geþungen yld*). If the Old English glosses to the *Enchiridion* are indeed Byrhtferth’s own, they add another two vernacular alternatives: *cnihtad* for *adolescentia* and *fulre yld* for *senectus*. Thus, Byrhtferth’s work demonstrates the difficulty of finding Old English alternatives for Latin age terminology.⁵⁰

Byrhtferth seems to have based his preference for a fourfold division of the human life course on Bede’s rendition of the physical and physiological fours in *De temporum ratione*, a text with which he was certainly familiar.⁵¹ In Book One of his *Enchiridion*, Byrhtferth outlines how the four seasons, elements and ages are all connected through their shared qualities. He provided his text in Latin, intended for reformed monks, and in Old English, for secular clerics. The Latin text runs as follows:⁵²

50 See also Daria Izdebska’s contribution to this volume.
51 Parts of this text were probably part of his *Computus* and one now-lost manuscript contained a set of explanatory glosses to Bede’s *De temporum ratione* that may be Byrhtferth’s; see note 47 above.
52 For a discussion of Byrhtferth’s Old English rendition of this passage, see Philippa Semper, “Byð se ealda man ceald and snoflig: Stereotypes and Subversions of the Last Stages of the Life Cycle in Old English Texts and Anglo-Saxon Contexts,” in Cochelin and Smyth, *Medieval Life Cycles*, 290–91.

Ver et pueritia consentiunt; adolescentia et estas assimilantur; autumnus et iuuentus consociantur; hiems et senectus deficiuntur. Ver humidum et calidum, aer humidus et calidus; pueritia humida et calida. Sanguis, qui in pueris pollet, humidus et calidus est. Aestas calida et sicca; ignis calidus et siccus; adolescentia calida et sicca. Colera rubea crescunt in <adolescentibus>; calida et sicca <sunt>. Autumnus siccus et frigidus; terra sicca et frigida; iuuentus sicca et frigida. Colera nigra in autumno crescunt; sicca et frigida sunt. Hiemps frigida et humida; aqua frigida et humida; flegmata dominantur in senibus. Colera nigra (id est melancolia) in transgressoribus uiget (id est qui <in> iuuentute sunt).

Spring and *pueritia* go together; *adolescentia* and summer are similar; autumn and *iuuentus* are associated; winter and *senectus* decline. Spring is moist and hot, air is moist and hot, *pueritia* is moist and hot. The blood which prevails in children, is moist and hot. Summer is hot and dry; fire is hot and dry; *adolescentia* is hot and dry. Red choler flourishes in *adolescentia*; it is hot and dry. Autumn is dry and cold; earth is dry and cold; *iuuentus* is dry and cold. Black choler flourishes in autumn; it is dry and cold. Winter is cold and moist; water is cold and moist; phlegm prevails among the aged. Black choler (that is, melancholy) flourishes in those in a state of transition (that is in their *iuuentus*).⁵³

As Michael Lapidge has demonstrated, Byrhtferth's text here relies heavily on a gloss by Remigius (d. 908) on Boethius's *De consolacione philosophiae*. Lapidge further notes that some discrepancies in wording between Remigius and Byrhtferth suggest that he is also drawing on Bede's discussion of the four ages in *De temporum ratione*.⁵⁴ Specifically, Byrhtferth clarifies what Bede had meant with the unusual term "transgressores" to denote the third age category. While Cochelin has suggested that for Bede "*transgressores* seems not to refer to *iuuentus*, but more probably to the stage starting at forty-nine" [i.e. *senectus*],⁵⁵ Byrhtferth defines the *transgressores* as those who are in *iuuentus*, a stage of life that, according to him, lasts until the age of 48 or 50.⁵⁶

53 Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion* 1.1, lines 103–13, ed. and trans. Baker and Lapidge, 10–13.

54 Michael Lapidge, "Byrhtferth at Work," in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1998), 31.

55 Cochelin, "Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions," 24; see also note a to Table 1.2 above.

56 These age limits are not mentioned in the *Enchiridion* but elsewhere; see below.

Byrhtferth used the same Latin terminology for the four ages (*pueritia*; *adolescentia*; *iuventus*; *senectus*) elsewhere in the *Enchiridion*, as well as in a number of diagrams that were used to illustrate parts of the work. These passages and diagrams repeat the links between the ages, seasons and elements, and further develop the idea of tetradic correspondences. One diagram links the four ages to the four wind directions, while another draws a connection with four spiritual virtues: *pueritia* is equated with the West and justice, *adolescentia* with the North and prudence, *iuventus* with the East and temperance and *senectus* with the South and fortitude.⁵⁷

One further diagram survives in the two twelfth-century manuscripts that likely contain versions of the *Computus* compiled by Byrhtferth, for which the *Enchiridion* was intended as a handbook. This diagram is known as ‘Byrhtferth of Ramsey’s diagram of the physical and physiological fours’, although Byrhtferth himself called it *De concordia mensium atque elementorum* [On the concord of the months and elements].⁵⁸ The diagram (Fig. 1.2) visualizes how various aspects of the universe (the elements, seasons, ages of man, wind directions and months) all exist in perfect symmetry. In line with the discussion in the *Enchiridion*, the four ages correspond to the four seasons, elements and wind directions in sharing the same combination of qualities. Breaking with his consistent use of Latin age terminology throughout the *Enchiridion*, Byrhtferth here supplies *infantia* as an equivalent term for *pueritia*. In addition, this diagram adds age limits for each stage of life: *pueritia* or *infantia* ends after fourteen years, *adolescentia* after twenty-eight years, *iuventus* ends after forty-eight years and *senectus* ends after seventy or eighty years. Byrhtferth’s age limits for the first two ages correspond with those propagated by Isidore of Seville,⁵⁹ while the age limit for *senectus* (ending at seventy or eighty) is likely inspired by Psalm 89.10 (“The days of our years in them are threescore and ten years. But if in the strong they be fourscore years”). The information provided by Byrhtferth throughout his *Enchiridion* and the diagrams ascribed to him is summarized in Table 1.4.

57 These diagrams are reconstructed as figures 13 and 15 in Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. Baker and Lapidge, 76–77, 86–87. For a discussion of these diagrams and their didactic function, see Philippa Semper, “Doctrine and Diagrams: Maintaining the Order of the World in Byrhtferth’s *Enchiridion*,” in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. Paul Cavill (Cambridge, 2004), 121–37.

58 London, British Library, Harley 3667, fol. 8r; Oxford, St. John’s College, 17, fol. 7v. The diagram is reproduced as Appendix A. 3 in Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, ed. Baker and Lapidge, 373–74.

59 See note 33 above.

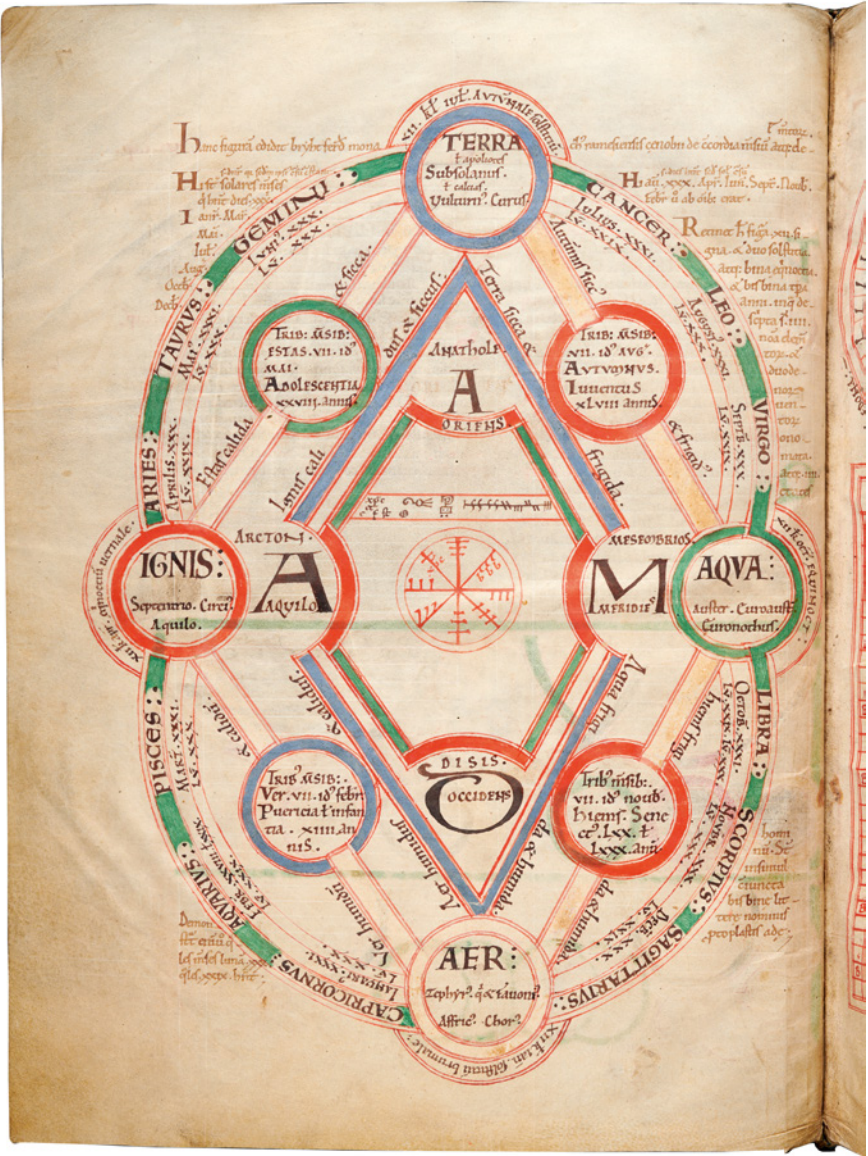


FIGURE 1.2 Byrhtferth's diagram in Oxford, St John's College, 17, fol. 7v
BY PERMISSION OF THE PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE
OXFORD

TABLE 1.4 Byrhtferth's system of tetradic correspondences relating to the ages of man

Ages	pueritia / infantia	adolescentia	iuuentus	senectus
Qualities	moist and hot	hot and dry	dry and cold	cold and moist
Humors	blood	red bile	black bile	phlegm
Seasons	spring	summer	autumn	winter
Elements	air	fire	earth	water
Wind directions	West	North	East	South
Virtues	justice	prudence	temperance	fortitude
Age limits	14	28	48	70 / 80

Outside of the *Enchiridion* and its associated diagrams, Byrhtferth used the four ages of man explicitly to structure his saint's life of Ecgwine, bishop of Worcester (?693–717) and founder of Evesham Abbey. This *Vita s. Ecgwini* (1016–1020) is divided into four books, in accordance with the fourfold division of the life course. In doing so, Byrhtferth hopes to demonstrate “qualiter [...] sanctus Dei presul Ecguinus enituerit in pueritia, fulserit in adolescentia, floruerit in iuuentute et in senectute ceu emeritus miles permanserit” [how St Ecgwine, the holy bishop of God, shone during *pueritia*, glittered in *adolescentia*, blossomed in *iuuentus* and in *senectus* remained like a veteran soldier].⁶⁰ A set of glosses in the only extant manuscript of the *Vita s. Ecgwini* have been ascribed to Byrhtferth by Lapidge on account of the correspondence they show with Byrhtferth's other works. The glosses to the Latin age terms in the *Vita s. Ecgwini* are as follows:

pueritia: .i. .viii. annis [that is 8 years]

adolescentia: .xiii. annis [14 years]

iuuentute: .l. annis constat [lasts until 50 years]

senectute: innumeris annis constat [lasts innumerable years]

pueritia: .vii. annorum constat [lasts seven years]

adolescentia: .i. .xiii. [that is 14 years]

senectute: .i. .l. Sicut sunt quattuor etates hominis, sic sunt quattuor uarietates mundi uel quattuor elementa (.i. ignis, aer, humor, aqua) uel tempora anni (.i. uer, estas, autumpnus, hiemps). [that is fifty. Like there are four ages of man, so there are four parts of the world and four elements]

60 Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini* 1.6., ed. and trans. Lapidge, 216–19.

(that is fire, air, earth, water) and four seasons (that is spring, summer, fall and winter)]⁶¹

The notion in these glosses that the four ages can be linked to the four parts of the world, the four elements and the four seasons is indeed similar to what Byrhtferth propagated in his computistical handbook. The age limits for the ages, however, do not correspond to those provided in his most extensive diagram *De concordia mensium atque elementorum*. While the number of years for *adolescentia* (14) may in fact refer to the duration of stage of life, rather than the age limit, the age limits provided for *pueritia* (7/8), *iuventus* (50) and *senectus* (innumerable years) are clearly different from those in the diagram (14, 48 and 70/80, respectively). It is possible that these numbers were adjusted in the transmission of the glosses or the diagram or that Byrhtferth, not unlike people such as Isidore of Seville, worked with differing age limits per stage of life.

At the end of the *Vita s. Ecgwini*, Byrhtferth attempts to place the four ages of man in an elaborate allegorical framework: Ecgwine is described as attacking each of the four Gates of the Devil's city in the four successive stages of his life; the four Gates are each manned by two evil leaders, whose wives represent eight deadly sins.⁶² As Lapidge has noted, the execution of this allegory is "idiosyncratic and inconsistent throughout."⁶³ Ecgwine first defeats Pride and Vainglory at the Eastern gate in his *adolescentia*; Anger and Strife are defeated next at the Southern gate, in his *pueritia*; at the Western gate, "ab adolescentia" [after? *adolescentia*, i.e. *iuventus*?], the wives named Sodom and Gomorrah are defeated; and, lastly, in presumably the last stage of his life, Ecgwine defeats Fornication and Filth. In Byrhtferth's allegory, the order of the ages as well as their links to the four wind directions are unlike those found in the *Enchiridion* and its associated diagrams, but its overall message is clear: the saint overcame sin throughout his life, from childhood to old age.

With the exception of Byrhtferth's confused tetradic allegory in the *Vita s. Ecgwini*, his treatment of the ages of man is marked by consistency throughout his works. The Latin terminology shows almost no variation, barring a single use of *infantia* as an equivalent for *pueritia* in his *De concordia mensium atque elementorum*. The qualities, seasons and elements that are linked to the four ages of man are consistently in line with the tradition represented by Bede. As will be demonstrated below, this consistency makes it unlikely that the

61 Byrhtferth, *Lives*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, 314. Translations mine.

62 Byrhtferth, *Vita s. Ecgwini* 4.1–4, ed. and trans. Lapidge, 269–77.

63 Byrhtferth, *Lives*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, 269 n. 5.

diagram of the four ages of woman in Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428 can be ascribed to Byrhtferth.

4 The Diagram in Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428

The unique diagram in Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428 (see Fig. 1.3) indicates the correlation between individual stages of life, depicted as women, and the bodily humors and their associated qualities. The earliest stage, at the top of the diagram, features a depiction of *pueritia*, shown cross-legged and raising her hand, possibly dancing. The text in the diagram associates *pueritia* with the humor phlegm and the qualities “frigida et humida” [cold and moist]. The next stage, *iuventus*, is depicted on the right side of the diagram, as a woman wearing a dress and holding up a stylized plant. Her associated humor is blood, along with the qualities “calida et humida” [warm and moist]. Mirroring *iuventus* on the left side of the diagram is *senectus*, depicted as a woman with long braided hair, sitting on a chair and winding thread off her drop spindle onto a niddy noddy, or skein winder, to make skeins (balls of yarn). Her humor is identified as the warm and dry humor red choler or yellow bile. At the bottom of the diagram, *decrepitas*, depicted as a seated elderly woman, spins fiber into thread, using a distaff and drop spindle. Her associated humor is black choler or black bile, cold and dry. If the plant held by *iuventus* is a flax plant, the last three images of the diagram show the process of spinning yarn in a chronological fashion: the harvesting of the flax plant; containing the unspun fiber on a distaff and spinning it into yarn with a drop spindle; and, lastly, making the yarn from the drop spindle into skeins, useful for measuring out, dying and storing the spun threads.⁶⁴ The order of the spinning process is not matched by the order of the four life stages depicted: *decrepitas* (typically the last stage of the life course) spins the yarn, while *senectus* makes the yarn into skeins.

Before placing the diagram in Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428 and the contents of its accompanying text within the context of early medieval English

64 I am grateful to Christina Petty for helping me identify the objects and activities depicted in this diagram. Sears, *Ages of Man*, 24–25, has suggested that the spinning process here may be related to the idea of the ‘thread of life’ and that the artist chose to use female figures to represent the ages because of the connection between the thread of life and the female Fates. However, the four female figures may also simply represent the grammatical gender of the names of the ages, as is the case with other humanoid figures in this manuscript.

but effectively executed. The figure-drawing is very unskillful, not so the ornament.”⁶⁶ The diagrams are typically circular *rotae* divided into four parts, depicting humanoid representations of the four elements, the four humors, the four parts of the world, the four seasons, the four turning points of the sun, the four crescents of the moon and several other tetrads. The humanoid figures typically correspond to the grammatical gender of the nouns that they depict: in the *rota* depicting the four seasons, for instance, the feminine nouns *hiemps* ‘winter’ and *estas* ‘summer’ are depicted as women, while neuter *ver* ‘spring’ and masculine *autumnus* ‘autumn’ are male.⁶⁷ Each of these sets of four is connected to the four qualities: hot and cold; dry and moist.

The manuscript’s origins, whether English or continental, are unclear. The ornamented initials are in a continental, German style and the Pregothish round minuscule script, too, has a number of continental, German features. In particular, the form of the Tironian *et*, the little flag at the end of the *e* and the shapes of the nasal stroke and the narrow long *s* suggest that the scribe was trained in Germany.⁶⁸ The hand can be dated to around 1150, on the basis of the presence of a number of ‘kissing’ and ‘biting’ letters.⁶⁹ While the scribe may have been trained in Germany, this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of an English provenance for this manuscript, since many continental scribes worked in England after the Norman Conquest.⁷⁰ A later annotation on fol. 36v shows that the manuscript must have been in England at least by the fourteenth century, since a fourteenth-century hand added the following, typically English motet:

Ihesu fili virginis
 rex celestis angminis
 vbi nil tristicie
 nichil est molestie.
 Set pax et concordia
 et eterna gloria
 ihesu pie

66 M. R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Gonville and Caius College* (Cambridge, 1907–14), 500.

67 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fol. 32v.

68 I am grateful to Erik Kwakkel who helped me localize and date the script.

69 Erik Kwakkel, “Kissing, Biting and the Treatment of Feet: The Transitional Script of the Long Twelfth Century,” in *Turning Over a New Leaf: Change and Development in the Medieval Book*, ed. Erik Kwakkel, Rosamond McKitterick, and Rodney Thomson (Leiden, 2012), 78–126.

70 See, e.g., Erik Kwakkel, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Continental Scribes in Rochester Cathedral Priory, 1075–1150,” in *Writing in Context: Insular Manuscript Culture, 500–1200*, ed. Erik Kwakkel (Leiden, 2013), 231–61.

Jesus, son of the Virgin, king of the heavenly hosts where there is no sorrow nor affliction. But only peace and harmony and perpetual glory. O blessed Jesus.⁷¹

This addition suggests that the manuscript was likely in England two centuries after the text was written. Another potential indication that the manuscript was in fact made in England is that the book is dedicated to one “Hernalde frater dilectissime” [most beloved brother Hernaldus].⁷² Hernaldus is a name that, in this spelling, occurs in English sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, even though the name itself is typically assumed to be a continental German import.⁷³ In sum, the manuscript seems to be the work of a scribe trained in Germany who was writing around 1150, possibly in an English monastery.

5 The *Tractatus de quaternario* on the Ages of Man

While the manuscript itself was definitely not produced by Byrhtferth of Ramsey, a number of eye-skips in the text suggest that the scribe may have been working from an earlier copy (or possibly a draft version of his own work). Further analysis of the contents of the text, therefore, is necessary in order to see how the diagram and its accompanying text relate to ideas about the human life course in early medieval England, particularly in the light of its possible attribution to Byrhtferth, whose texts and diagrams also survive in twelfth-century manuscripts.

The *Tractatus* author starts his discussion of the human life course by outlining a traditional fourfold division of the four ages and their accompanying complexions:

Est autem prima etas adolescentia que secundum quorundam opinionem calidę et humidę complexionis est. Et est ab ortu natiuitatis usque ad xxv vel xxx annum. Est et iuuentus calidę et siccę secundum eosdem

71 This motet is discussed by Renata Pieragostini, “Rediscovering Lost Evidence: Little-known Fragments with English Polyphony in Bologna,” *Music & Letters* 92 (2011): 350–51, who does not mention the attestation in Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428.

72 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fols. 1r, 29v.

73 See Thorvald Fossner, *Continental-Germanic Personal Names in England in Old and Middle English Times* (Uppsala, 1916), 33–35. The spelling Hernaldus for the German name Arnold is found in various English documents, whereas the German spelling is typically Arnoldus, although Hernoldus is also found. See Adolf Socin, *Mittelhochdeutsches Namenbuch: Nach oberrheinischen Quellen des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim, 1966), s.vv. ‘Arnoldus’, ‘Hernoldus’. I am grateful to James Chetwood for sharing his views on this name in the context of twelfth-century England.

complexionis ad xlv vel l annum perseuerans. Est et senectus frigida et sicca lv vel lx annum apperens a finibus suis. Huic succrescit senium frigide et humide complexionis. Que etas sui temporis cursus termino uite metitur.⁷⁴

The first age is *adolescentia* which according to the opinion of some is of hot and moist complexion and this is from the onset of birth until 25 or 30 years. And, according to the same, *iuuentus* is of a hot and dry complexion, continuing until 45 or 50 years. And *senectus* is cold and dry, appearing at its end 55 or 60 years. *Senium*, of a cold and moist complexion, succeeds them, which age of its course of time measures until the end of life.

The fourfold system here is similar to that found in Byrhtferth's work in connecting this same sequence of humoral qualities (from hot and moist to cold and moist) to four consecutive stages of life. However, it differs from Byrhtferth in the terminology used as well as in the age limits attributed to each stage. Indeed, the *Tractatus* author here, as both Sears and Cochelin have noted, follows a system found in the *Isagoge ad Tegni Galieni* by Johannitius (Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq), the ninth-century Arabic physician whose work was translated into Latin at the end of the eleventh century.⁷⁵

In three following chapters, the *Tractatus* discusses “rurs alia secundum philosophus etatum discretio” [yet another division of ages, according to philosophers].⁷⁶ This turns out to be a sevenfold division of life, into *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *iuuentus*, *senectus*, *senium* and *decrepitas* (see Table 1.5). The author explains that the “phisici” [physicians] divided the life course into four, in accordance with the four humors and the four qualities, while these philosophers based their seven ages on the seven planets. This correlation between the ages and the planets is ultimately derived from Ptolemy, whose works only became available in the mid-twelfth century, when they were translated from Arabic into Latin.⁷⁷ Another crucial difference between the first fourfold scheme and this sevenfold scheme in the *Tractatus* is the sequence of qualities associated with the consecutive life stages. Whereas the scheme of the physicians shows a development from hot and moist (blood) to cold and moist (phlegm), the scheme of the philosophers has human life start out as cold and moist (phlegm) and end cold and dry (black bile).

74 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fols. 29v–30r.

75 Sears, *Ages of Man*, 163 n. 69. Cochelin, “Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions,” 33, rightly notes that the *Tractatus* author pushes back old age by ten years, since Johannitius has *iuuentus* end at the age of 35 or 40.

76 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fol. 30r.

77 See Sears, *Ages of Man*, 52; Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 36–38.

TABLE 1.5 Seven ages according to philosophers (*Tractatus de quaternario* 3.2–4)

Age term (Age limit)	infantia (7)	pueritia (14)	adolescentia (21)	iuuentus (35)	senectus (45)	senium (55)	decrepitas (70/80)
Planet	Moon	Mercury	Venus	Sun	Mars	Jupiter	Saturn
Qualities	cold and moist	dry, partly cold, partly moist, partly hot	hotter and less moist	hot and dry	less hot, drier than the sun	partly hot, partly cold, dry	colder and drier

Subsequently, the *Tractatus* author tries to synthesize both schemes and produces a scheme which is deemed “ueritate assistere” [to attend to the truth]. Naturally, the fourfold scheme of the physicians is preferred, but the *Tractatus* links this to the arrangement of humoral qualities proposed by the philosophers. The author also proposes yet another set of age limits, unlike the other two sets enumerated earlier:

TABLE 1.6 The *Tractatus* author’s preferred scheme (*Tractatus de quaternario* 3.5–7)

Age (Age limit)	<i>pueritia</i> / <i>adolescentia</i> (14)	<i>iuuentus</i> (45/50)	<i>senectus</i> (60/65)	<i>senium</i> (–)
Humor	phlegm	blood	red bile	black bile
Qualities	cold and moist	hot and moist	hot and dry	cold and dry

The author then proposes, without providing a rationale, to change the names of the four ages into the traditional terms *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *iuuentus* and *senectus*.⁷⁸ Notably, these terms are still different from the ones used in the diagram of the ages of woman (*pueritia*, *iuuentus*, *senectus* and *decrepitas*), which does, however, show the same distribution of qualities (from cold and moist to cold and dry). In the remainder of the text on this subject, the *Tractatus* author defends at length the correlation between the ages and their proposed qualities, albeit without any further explication of the terminology used or the age limits provided. For instance, the author notes how children might seem hot because of their constant movement but those physicians who ascribe the

⁷⁸ As Sears, *Ages of Man*, 24 has noted, this set of terms is similar to that used by Byrhtferth of Ramsey, which may have led some to connect the scheme to Byrhtferth.

quality hot to children mistake this heat for natural heat. In fact, the author claims, children are actually cold and moist and people gradually lose moisture throughout their lives. This loss of moisture is caused by switching from watered-down food to more solid foods later in life and because of the “*emissionem pubertatis puerilis [...] libidinis [...] etiam successiui seminis*” [the discharging of youthful puberty, lust and also of superfluous seed].⁷⁹ Hence, the last stage of life is ‘dry and cold’, just like the wood that fueled a fire ends up as cold, dried-out charcoal. As such, the *Tractatus* author dismisses the physicians’ claim that the ultimate stage of life, *senectus* or *senium*, is marked by the quality moist. This moistness, according to the *Tractatus* author, is “*non naturalis sed accidentalis*” [not natural but accidental]; it is caused by the degeneration of nerves, muscles and fat, not the kind of life-giving moisture that stands at the beginning of life: “*pueri sua humiditate excrescant, senes incurvantur*” [children grow through their moistness, old people become curved].⁸⁰ Since natural moisture that is consumed in the first two stages of life does not return naturally, the last stage of life must be marked by natural dryness.

From the above reading, it becomes clear that this text, like the manuscript itself, cannot be attributed to Byrhtferth of Ramsey. Instead, we are dealing with an unnamed author who is responding to new ideas about the human life course that entered Western European medical discourse between the end of the eleventh century and the middle of the twelfth century. In fact, the text appears to be one of the first of its kind to explicitly problematize the existence of varying ideas of the human life course and, in particular, the different opinions concerning the relation of the individual stages to the humoral qualities. The fourfold division that the *Tractatus* author eventually defends, moving from a cold and moist *pueritia* to a cold and dry *senectus*, is completely unlike the schemes propagated by Bede and Byrhtferth, which move from a hot and moist *pueritia* to a cold and moist *senectus*.



Whether writing homilies, encyclopedic works or prayers, early medieval English authors stuck to a flexible but uniform definition of the human life course into three main stages, *pueritia*, *iuventus* and *senectus*. These stages could each be subdivided, resulting into divisions of life into four, five or six ‘ages of man’, which could be used interchangeably. Threefold and sixfold schemes typically followed patristic traditions of biblical exegesis, while the fourfold pattern had its basis in natural philosophy. The latter scheme features

79 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fol. 31v.

80 Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, fol. 32r.

most prominently in various works attributed to Byrhtferth of Ramsey, ranging from his computistical handbook with diagrams to his hagiography and glosses.

The discussion found in the mid-twelfth-century *Tractatus de quaternario* represents a departure from the uniform system of life course stratification found in pre-Conquest texts. Specifically, the *Tractatus* author seeks to synthesize traditional connections between the four ages and the four humors, as found in works by Bede and Byrhtferth, with ideas about the human life course that had newly been introduced in Western Europe by the twelfth century. Incorporating insights from a sevenfold division of life, the *Tractatus* author comes to a new fourfold scheme with a completely different sequence of humoral qualities than that found in earlier works. The suggestion that Byrhtferth of Ramsey may have been responsible for the *Tractatus* and its diagram of the four ages of woman must be rejected on account of the *Tractatus*'s explicit dismissal of the fourfold life course definition that resounds so consistently throughout Byrhtferth's literary output. Byrhtferth may have written a lot during his lifetime, but the *Tractatus de quaternario* should not be included in his ever-expanding oeuvre.