

## ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND: LITERATURE &amp; MANUSCRIPTS

OLLI 672, Fall 2023

Carin Ruff

**Times and dates:** In person, Tuesdays 11:45-1:15, September 26th-December 5th

**Contact Carin:** [carinr@gmail.com](mailto:carinr@gmail.com)

**Course description:** This course will explore the literature of early medieval England from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, and the manuscripts in which it survives. We will read in translation selections from Latin and Old English literature, including histories, biographies, elegies, riddles, heroic poems, biblical poetry, and more. We will end by considering what happened to Old English after the Norman Conquest.

**Course web page:** <https://ruffnotes.org/olli-ase> (Check back starting in week two for useful links, additional reading, copies of slides, etc.)

**Texts:** We will be reading substantial selections from the books listed below. I may provide handouts or other suggested readings as we go along.

Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People; The Greater Chronicle; Bede's Letter to Egbert*. Ed. Judith McLure and Roger Collins. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford University Press, 2009. (The Penguin edition of Bede is also fine if that's easier to get.)

*Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*. Ed. and trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge. Penguin, 1984.

*The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*. Ed. Greg Delanty and Michael Matto. W. W. Norton, 2010 (hardback) or 2012 (paperback).

**Class format:** Class time will be a mix of slide lectures and exploration of manuscripts together online, with discussion as your interests lead us. I will assign a modest selection of readings for most classes, which could best be read before the class for which they are assigned but could profitably be read as a followup to each lecture. I'll let you know when it will be particularly important to do the reading before class and how to prioritize the selections I'm assigning.

**SCHEDULE OF READINGS**  
for the first few weeks

**Week 1, Sept. 26: Bede and an Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England**

**Read** from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, excerpts as follows:

From Book I: Ch. 1, Description of Britain; Ch. 11-12, Sack of Rome and the Groans of the Britons; Ch. 15, Arrival of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. From Book II: Ch. 1, end of the chapter from

p. 70 in the Oxford World Classics ed., covering Pope Gregory the Great and the story of the slave boys in the market; Ch. 9, conversion of the Northumbrians; skim Ch. 10-11, letters from the Pope; Ch. 12, Edwin's vision; Ch. 13, Edwin's council. (Chapters are short, and don't worry if you don't get to all of this before the first class. These readings can roll over into week 2.)

**We will discuss in class:** What we mean by Anglo-Saxon England; an introduction to Bede and his perspective; the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons; and a preview of what's to come in the course.

### **Week 2, Oct. 3: More Bede and an Introduction to Old English Language and Verse**

**Read** from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, excerpts from Book 4: ch. 23-24, on Abbess Hilda of Whitby and the poet Cædmon. Also read Cædmon's Hymn on pp. 420-421 of *The Word Exchange*.

**We will discuss in class:** The role of women in the early Anglo-Saxon church; how Old English is written and spelled; how Old English poetry is structured; how Bede's history and Cædmon's Hymn are preserved in manuscript; and features of Anglo-Saxon narrative that we see in Bede.

### **Week 3, Oct. 10: Manuscripts of Northumbria's Golden Age**

**In class:** We will devote the whole period to looking at manuscripts from Northumbria in the time of Bede, including the Lindisfarne Gospels. Topics to discuss: the melding of Irish, Germanic, and Roman influences; how an early medieval biblical manuscript is structured; varieties of script and ornament.

### **Week 4, Oct. 17: Alfred the Great and His Biographer**

**Read** in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*: Chapters 21-25; 73-78; 87-89; 106.

**We will discuss in class:** The survival (or not) of manuscripts and the controversy over Asser's life of Alfred; the Cotton Library; the nature of Asser's portrayal of Alfred.

### **Week 5, Oct. 24: Alfred the Great's Translation Program**

**Read** in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*: Prefaces to and excerpts from Alfred's translations on pp. 123-132 and 138-39, and browse the rest as it interests you.

**We will discuss in class:** Alfred's program of education and translation; works by Alfred and his contemporaries; the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; more explorations of Old English language (West Saxon prose).