

Edited by
JACQUELINE STODNICK
and RENÉE R. TRILLING



A Handbook of
Anglo-Saxon
Studies

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A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies

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Introduction

Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling

We gesetton on þissum *enchiridion* (þæt ys *manualis* on Lyden and handboc on Englisc) manega þing ymbe gerimcræft forþon we woldon þæt iunge men mihton þe leohtlicor þæt Lyden ongitan and wið ealde preostas ymbe þas þing þe rumlicor sprecaþ, and we woldon þæt þas word heom wurdon cuðe forþon hig synd mid myclum geswince mancynne geswutelode. (*Byrhtferth's Enchiridion*, 120)

(We set down in this *enchiridion* (that is *manualis* in Latin and handbook in English) many things about computus because we wished that young men might more easily understand the Latin and converse at greater length [lit. "speak more spaciously"] with old priests about these things, and we wished that these words would be known to them because they are made clear to mankind with great effort.)

In introducing this *Handbook to Anglo-Saxon Studies* we, like Byrhtferth one thousand years ago, are in the position of reflecting on the purpose and aims of the handbook genre. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Byrhtferth's text should be of little assistance to us in this aim, since the modern term *handbook* is said to descend from the nineteenth-century German *handbuch* rather than the Old English *handboc*, which apparently referred somewhat strictly to a volume of liturgical material. With no suggestion of a standard content, we can surmise that Old English *handbec* contained a diverse range of material, such as homilies and charms, useful to the performance of the ecclesiastical office. As such they would have resembled *collectanea* rather than volumes with overt editorial or authorial intervention, and probably lacked a controlling writerly "voice" serving to mediate, explain, or otherwise justify the textual selections therein. In this respect the Old English *handboc* would seem to differ significantly from the contemporary handbook, the material of which is shaped and constricted with the aim of providing a

comprehensive but portable overview of a topic. Contemporary handbooks are generally written for dilettantes or tourists rather than specialist practitioners; or they are written for novices, those who know little about a subject and who may not care to linger long in its territories. In order to serve both types of audience, modern handbooks not only tend to categorize, classify, and simplify, but also offer themselves as repositories of information, portals where questions will be answered rather than raised. Thus the one salient point of connection that modern handbooks might seem to have with Old English *handboc* is the literal: both designate volumes that are small enough to fit in your hand.

Byrhtferth's comments on his own *handboc* (or *Enchiridion*), however, not only reveal a more expansive notion of the genre than the *OED* definition implies was current in Anglo-Saxon culture, but are also instructive for us in thinking about and in explaining the desired aims of this *Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*. These comments are thus worth examining in greater depth. First are Byrhtferth's stated claims. He notes that the *Enchiridion* will contain not everything but "*manega þing ymbe gerimcræft*" (many things about computus), and he thus explicitly eschews any claim to universality or comprehensiveness. Computus, the method for calculating the date of Easter, was central to the observance of the Christian calendar and was a fundamental aspect of monastic education. Following immediately on these words is a statement of purpose that reveals to what extent the volume is driven by the aim of imparting knowledge about computus: using an authorial plural, Byrhtferth observes that he has written the text because "we woldon þæt iunge men mihton þe leohtlicor þæt Lyden ongitan and wið ealde preostas ymbe þas þing þe rumlicor sprecan" ("we wished that young men might more easily understand the Latin and converse at greater length [lit. 'speak more spaciously'] with old priests about these things"). Unlike a contemporary handbook, which functions to introduce the fundamentals of a subject, the *Enchiridion* is concerned as much with language learning as it is with the acquisition of knowledge about computus. The form of the *Enchiridion* is thus intended simultaneously to induct a novice in two specialist discourses, Latin and computus, and it can legitimately be described as a handbook to both subjects. The bilingual nature of the text ultimately complicates any simple approach to the handbook as a content-driven mode: as that type of text from which the reader hopes simply to extract information. In addition, Byrhtferth's comments indicate that the parameters of the *Enchiridion* extend beyond the confines of the book itself and into the corridors of the monastery. As he writes, he hopes that his work will allow young monks and old priests to speak "more spaciously" about computus. This delightful image of the ways in which a written text can and should open up room for informed conversation surely resonates with most scholars, even though it might not be an outcome expected from the somewhat pedestrian genre of the handbook.

As even this short extract makes clear, Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion* is far from being just a gathering place for those ecclesiastical texts required for the correct performance of monastic duties. Utility is not necessarily the governing principle of the *Enchiridion*, which, we learn in recent scholarship on the text, is also a highly

idiosyncratic volume about language politics and monastic identity, the effects of which are often in direct contradiction to its stated aims. In the above scene, for instance, Byrhtferth acknowledges that an ancillary aim of setting down computistical information, *gerimcræft*, in his book is to facilitate a conversation between novice priests, whose skills in reading Latin still need to be polished, and their older counterparts. But how reliable is this as a claim for authorial exigence? Should we take for granted the way Byrhtferth maps Latin competency in terms of a generational divide, or should we be suspicious about the existence of this group of self-evidently learned older monks? Might they, too, be intended to benefit from Byrhtferth's efforts to express computistical complexity with the clarity of the vernacular? The question of who this *handboc* is for opens up quickly into consideration of the multiple and overlapping audiences to which it is both explicitly and implicitly addressed.

Our discussion of the word *handbook* has thus far been voiced in both of the "two languages" that Allen Frantzen identified in his seminal 1991 collection *Speaking Two Languages* as a feature of the critical discourse employed by any Anglo-Saxonist interested in theory. In beginning with a historical analysis of a word, we are not far from the disciplinary "comfort zone" for Anglo-Saxon studies, long dominated by textual study and specifically philological aims. However, in our attention to discordance – for instance, between stated authorial aims and underlying textual effects – and our acknowledgment that contemporary meanings and concerns inevitably intrude into our work, we are indebted in obvious ways to theory and the changes it has wrought on the practice of humanistic study. Like Anglo-Saxonists, we start with one word; like new historicists, we start anecdotally, packing and unpacking the material of our introduction into and out of one example. In this duality lies the point of this volume, which in many respects aims to erase a troublesome sense of division between the practice of theory and Anglo-Saxon studies: what would it look like to make the two languages one?

Like the *Enchiridion*, then, this *Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies* aims to introduce two intertwined discourses – in our case, the discourses of Anglo-Saxon studies and critical theory – for novices in the discipline. But it also hopes to allow scholars at all levels of the discipline to speak "more spaciouly," and it sets out to challenge the view that to do so means that you must always be "speaking two languages." As the essays in this volume demonstrate, Anglo-Saxon studies and critical theory share a significant number of overlapping interests and concerns; like Latin and computus, we cannot know one without the other. Also like the *Enchiridion*, this *Handbook* aims to be useful to its audience beyond the novitiate, for the ongoing practice of their chosen discipline – a discipline that has been considerably altered since it first began to engage with critical theory. It seems both useful and desirable, then, to consider the ways in which the intertwined histories of Anglo-Saxon studies and critical theory have shaped the current state of the field.

In 1937, Max Horkheimer asked the deceptively simple question, "What is 'theory'?" (188). His answer was far more complicated: theory, he said, must have a comprehensive explanatory power; but *critical* theory must also have the power to

reflect back upon and restructure the initial terms of inquiry. Horkheimer's formulation emphasizes the importance of critical theory as a transformative tool of intellectual discourse, and in the decades since, the field of study known as "critical theory" has effected an epistemological shift in the practices of academia. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s with the battles over semiotics, scholars across the disciplines began to focus on the constructed nature of knowledge, from the fundamentals of language to the institutional structures of the university. The premise that linguistic meaning is arbitrary calls into question all meaning, all knowledge, built on the slippery foundations of language, and what followed amounted to no less than a revolution in how scholars were able to think about both their objects of study and the structure of their disciplines. Structuralism and poststructuralism ruled out the possibility of "givens" or "first principles," and the theory revolution meant that we could no longer study history, art, literature, politics, religion, or indeed any of the social or humanistic sciences without careful attention to the ways in which any such knowledge must be contingent – on the means of production, on the political context, even on our own subjectivities as historically embedded scholars. As Thomas McLaughlin writes in the Introduction to *Critical Terms for Literary Study*:

The basic premises of criticism have been interrogated, again and again, from perspectives as diverse as feminism, deconstruction, Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and reader-response theory. What holds these various and often combative programs and schools of thought together under the rubric of theory is a shared commitment to understanding how language and other systems of signs provide frameworks which determine how we read, and more generally, how we make sense of experience, construct our own identity, produce meaning in the world. (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 1)

The resulting inquiries, hedged about as they are with caveats and qualifications, nevertheless answer the needs of newer generations of scholars who are both demographically and intellectually more diverse than their early twentieth-century counterparts, and their influence has spread far beyond their origins in philosophy and literary studies. Considerations of subjectivity – of how aspects such as class, race, and gender can impact even the most seemingly objective investigations – underwrite intellectual engagement in every corner of the university, including the so-called "hard" sciences like chemistry, physics, and medicine.

The advent of critical theory is arguably the single most profound influence on study in the humanities in recent times. And as scholars such as Brian Stock and, most recently, Bruce Holsinger have recognized, study of the earliest periods of European culture has in many ways been at the heart of this contemporary phenomenon. Not only were a number of the intellectual founders of contemporary theory themselves medievalists, or were influenced by their readings of medieval texts, but scholars of the Middle Ages have been active in dismantling the strictures of Enlightenment progressivism by insisting that the medieval period is apt to any

theoretically charged discussion. Perhaps more importantly, the interdisciplinarity that grounds medieval studies has long questioned both the practicality of firm boundaries between history, literature, and culture and the claims to novelty of post-Enlightenment thought. Medievalists have thus been quick to point out the ways in which postmodern critique, while espousing an anti-teleological rhetoric, has nonetheless replicated a teleology in its own practice, concentrating primarily on the modern and the contemporary while attributing transparency and homogeneity to earlier periods.

Anglo-Saxon studies is no exception to this trend, despite being somewhat less shaken by the initial tremors of intellectual upheaval than other areas of humanistic inquiry. By the early 1990s, Anglo-Saxonists such as Allen Frantzen, Gillian Overing, Roy Liuzza, and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe had begun to hail both the importance and the influence of critical theory. The focus on language and material artifacts that is central to any work on Anglo-Saxon England resonates, in many ways, with the linguistic turn of contemporary theory as well as its expansive notion of textuality. And Anglo-Saxon studies, perhaps more than any other subset of medieval studies, was grounded in interdisciplinarity from its inception, despite its primary basis in text; because of the fragmentary nature of the documentary evidence, readings of Anglo-Saxon texts have always depended heavily on evidence from adjacent fields, such as archaeology, history, theology, art history, medicine, and folklore. In general, however, critical theory has impacted Anglo-Saxon studies in ways that are more subtle than the high-theory engagements of literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s. The discipline as a whole accepts the constructed nature of both knowledge and the objects of study: we recognize that there are no *a priori* Anglo-Saxon artifacts until we name them as such; we acknowledge that our own modern interests and personal biases will find their way into our academic enterprises; and we reflect on how these contingencies affect our search for a deeper understanding of the time and place we have designated as "Anglo-Saxon." Over time, the basic premises of the critical theory movement have worked their way into Anglo-Saxon studies, and the last two decades have seen ample evidence of work being done within a wide variety of theoretical frameworks, from psychoanalytic and postcolonial readings of *Beowulf* to feminist analyses of archaeological sites and poststructuralist critiques of the illustrations in the Old English Hexateuch.

Despite recent declarations of the "death of theory," scholarly inquiry remains forever altered by the critical theory paradigm. As Terry Eagleton writes, "There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit . . . If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever" (1–2). Yet, as Eagleton's emphasis on "reflection" suggests, and as Horkheimer's manifesto clearly stated, the purpose of a critical engagement is not simply to "do theory." In order to be a true critical theory, an intellectual engagement must alter that with which it engages; neither the object of study nor the methodological framework emerges from the encounter exactly as it began. Here, too, Anglo-Saxonists have been active in reframing many of the basic assumptions of humanistic study through their own

work. Just one case in point is Martin Foys' 2007 study of representational practices in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon*. Foys uses theoretical insights drawn from the study of new media to think about how the material practices of reading shape the possibility of interpretation. His resulting conclusions address not only how medieval readers would have interacted differently with manuscripts than modern readers do with print materials, but also how medieval reading practices can help us to understand our own engagement with information in the digital formats of the modern age. Such work is a salutary example of how medieval studies has the potential to talk back to the modern theoretical discourses that are brought to bear upon it. And that is the purpose of the essays in this volume.

The goal of our *Handbook* thus differs significantly from Byrhtferth's stated goals in his *Enchiridion*. We do not aspire simply to initiate students in a particular theoretical language, nor do we intend to introduce them to the wide variety of methodologies currently practiced in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies, although we do hope that this volume offers such an introduction. Nor do we set out to argue that theoretical models like postcolonialism or Marxism can be valuable tools in the investigation of the Anglo-Saxon world. Such goals would imply that theory and Anglo-Saxon studies continue to be two languages, and our experience and the essays contained in this volume demonstrate unequivocally that this is no longer the case. Instead, we set out to do what Byrhtferth himself accomplishes, if only implicitly: to open up a space for a "more spacious" conversation about what constitutes Anglo-Saxon studies, its practices, and its relationship to the wider universe of academic inquiry.

Following the model of works such as Raymond Williams's *Keywords* and Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, the volume is organized around a set of key terms of great currency in recent critical discourse, such as "race and ethnicity," "gender," and "disability." Also like these earlier studies, this collection is intended to disarticulate these terms from their accepted positions within the scholarly vocabulary and to make visible those structures of understanding that buttress their current importance. Unlike these earlier works, however, this volume approaches this disarticulation by posing the question of how useful and relevant these terms are for the practice of Anglo-Saxon studies. Each contributor not only examines the critical history of his or her chosen term but also considers to what degree the term has been, or even should be, taken up in the study of Anglo-Saxon language and culture. Have alternate and specialized terms been used with the same sense as these more generalized critical terms? What would the work of Anglo-Saxon studies look like were it reconfigured around these terms? And, importantly, what could the practice of Anglo-Saxon studies reveal about the current use of these terms in general scholarly discourse?

Any volume organized in this way is obviously open to question and critique about the reasons for including each term and for excluding others. Early in the process we decided that the most productive method of selecting terms would be to draw a balance between our own ideas and those proposed to us by our contributors. By discussing a range of possible terms with each scholar represented here,

before coming to a mutual decision about which would be covered, we have attempted to ensure that this volume not only considers a fair slice of critical vocabulary but also reflects those terms currently being taken up within the discourse of Anglo-Saxon studies. Important also is the interdisciplinary nature of this volume, with archaeologists, art historians, and historians contributing alongside those from literature departments. Of course, any shortlist of critical terms will contain notable omissions, and this collection is no exception. In defense of its form we echo Byrhtferth: this is a volume intended to contain “manega þing,” rather than everything. Above all, it is intended to serve as a starting point for further inquiry. While aiming both to introduce students to the discourse of the discipline and to provide more advanced scholars with food for thought, its overarching goal is to foster discussion among all those who investigate Anglo-Saxon England about the stakes of our interest in this period and about potential directions for the field, and in that, it looks as much to the future as it does to the past.

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Borders

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To write about borders in Early England already indicates the creation of a metanarrative of confinement – an essay neatly limited by its topic. However, “borders” in Anglo-Saxon England and into the twelfth century are as complex and messy as any of our modern boundaries. “Borders” can refer to geographically, politically, and religiously defined areas, landmarks both natural and man-made, individual nations, races, regions, languages, demarcations of land ownership, entire chronological periods, the limits of knowledge and cultural influences, the defining of texts and genres, the acceptability and policing of the orthodox, and the censuring and punishment of the heterodox. “Borders” also intimate distance and distinction, or throw into sharp relief proximity and similarity – a blurring of boundaries. Thus, what appears to be a relatively straightforward term is immensely tricky, and particularly so within the bounded length of an essay like this. Here, then, Early English terminology for “borders” will be discussed, with a particular and recurring emphasis on *mearcian* (“to mark,” “to mark out”) and its various compounds and derivatives; and the way land was mapped and divided up will be briefly investigated through Anglo-Saxon charters. Most time will be spent on the in-between, though, in an effort to understand how the Anglo-Saxons might have conceived of the land between borders, those spaces which one might think of in postcolonial terms as “liminal,” on the threshold of that which is on the other side, but which one might also think of as being neither one thing nor the other; or, indeed, paradoxically, looking both ways simultaneously. Since borders or boundaries invoke all these complexities, I shall be treating literal boundaries and border regions within a range of Old English works, to allow multiple readings to emerge while resisting oversimplistic definition or predetermined categorization.

Border Theory has as its champions scholars whose focus is principally modern, and often centered on contemporary America and its borders with Hispanic Central America. Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, first published in 1987, describes the United States–Mexico border as a site “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (25). This “border culture,” a space of the in-between, is akin to the hybridity of postcolonial theory, where the hybrid is created as a destabilizing identity emerging from the contested space between colonizer and colonized. Some scholars imagine an assimilative impulse evolving from the hybrid; this implies that hybridity equates to syncretism or fusion, but this is to oversimplify the complex, processual, and separate state-of-being created in the contested space. In relation to the border, this is a space that cleaves, and thus emerges as “in-between” and mediating adjacent boundaries.¹ Ironically, of course, the present essay concerns itself with a period labeled the “medieval,” the “middle ages,” an often derogatory term that implies transition from one (good) thing to another; the “middle” is the “dark,” the empty, the lacuna delimited by the edges of the defined. This fallacy of the boundary (whether chronological, political, or linguistic) is highlighted by Iain Chambers's sensitive work on the Mediterranean, in which he describes the border as “not a thing, but rather, the materialization of authority,” reminding us that “the seeming solidity of the lands, languages, and lineages that border and extend outward from [the Mediterranean's] shores . . . become an accessory to its fluid centrality” (6, 27). It is this “fluid centrality,” the “in-betweenness,” that might prove most productive for the purposes of this examination of borders in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Translating Meaning

It is always best to begin with clarifying the labels that we use, themselves indicative of the way in which language potentially closes off interpretation, especially when we are required to translate an ancient form of a language into its modern approximation. For the Anglo-Saxons, the word “border” itself did not exist, since it is a French loan (though its semantic range might have been influenced by Old English *bord*); neither did the words “frontier,” “limit,” “territory,” and “genre” exist in English prior to the fifteenth century and later. The Anglo-Saxons used instead a multitude of words to express the concept of the boundary or demarcation of land or nation. One such term is *bord* – itself a polysemic word – meaning “boundary,” particularly when used with prepositions *innan* and *utan* denoting place (“within” and “outside” of boundaries). The most famous use of this concept of a boundary denoting a geographic and political unit is found in the late ninth-century work, King Alfred's Preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, one of the best known and most widely taught texts from the period (Treharne 14–15). In his lament on the state of education in England following the Viking incursions

throughout the ninth century, Alfred looks back to a time when there were far greater numbers of learned men and successful leaders in the country. He comments on how previous kings in Anglo-Saxon England

ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora siodu ge hiora onweald innanbordes gehioldon, ond eac ut hiora eðel rymdon; ond hu him ða speow ægðer ge mid wige ge mid wisdom; ond eac ða godcundan hadas, hu giorne hie wæron ægðer ge ymb lare ge ymb liornunga, ge ymb ealle ða ðiowotdomas ðe hie Gode don scoldon; ond hu man utanbordes wisdom ond lare hieder on lond sohte; ond hu we hie nu sceoldon ute begietan, gif we hie habban sceoldon. Swæ clæne hio wæs oðfeallenu on Angelcynne ðat swiðe feawa wæron behionan Humbre ðe hiora ðeninga cuðen understandan on Englisc oððe furðum an ærendgewrit of Lædene on Englisc areccean; ond Ic wene ðætte noht monige begiondan Humbre næren. Swæ feawa hiora wæron ðæt Ic furðum anne anlepne ne mæg geðencean be suðan Temese ða ða Ic to rice feng.

(both maintained their peace and their morality and their authority within their borders, and also enlarged their territory outside; and how they prospered both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how zealous the sacred orders were both about teaching and about learning as well as all the services that they had to perform for God; and how people from outside the borders came here to this country in search of knowledge and instruction, and how we should now have to get them from outside, if we should acquire them. So complete was learning's decay among the English people that there were very few this side of the Humber who could understand their services in English, or even translate a letter from Latin into English; and I imagine that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot even remember a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom.)

This self-positioning of kingdom, nation and self by Alfred is very revealing for its understanding of discrete and permeable boundaries, political and intellectual roles. In his rhetorical pairings of morality, authority and wisdom within borders (that is, “at home”) with expansionism and warfare outside borders (that is, “abroad”), he contrasts previous stable reigns with his own, where outsiders are now required to bring knowledge to the English that was once sought by foreigners within England's borders.

Moreover, even the situation among the English nation itself is not so straightforward, since natural boundaries – the Humber and Thames rivers in the north and south of eastern England – preclude the provision of an overarching statement, accurately reflecting the divisions of earlier kingdoms in the period preceding Alfred's reign. North of the Humber was the Northumbrian kingdom, and the Thames signaled the boundary between the kingdoms of Kent and Essex; these political borders clearly still meant something to Alfred and his audience, as did the chronology of reigns and the limits of remembrance. When Alfred tells us that he cannot remember a single learned man south of the Thames when he

ascended to the throne, he points to the edges of cultural understanding in this period of transitional literacy – the fraying of knowledge outside the bounds of time and memory. Here, then, the political and geographical boundaries are paralleled with the limits of learning, as if a river can signal the gulf between levels of intellectual prowess, in a way reminiscent of the current stereotypes common to the British (or, indeed, American) north–south divide. Even from this single text, then, the complexity of the border – a natural landmark, a politically authorized divide, an intellectual boundary, an intangible marker of difference – becomes clear.

Traces of the Past

Alfred's remembering of past glories illustrates the importance of memory in configuring history. To combat a reliance on the oral, a dependency on the memories of generations, written records became increasingly important as the Anglo-Saxon centuries from c.500 to c.1100 progressed and the Anglo-Saxon became transformed into the Anglo-Norman state. Although Alfred was not the first English king to recognize the significance of writing (the sixth-century king of Kent, Ine, initiated the recording of law), he was the first volitionally to determine a program of vernacular textualization: the committal of essential historical and pastoral works to a form intelligible to those with a degree of education. In this, he, and his advisors, sought to shore up the foundations of the English nation, to create a sense of continuity that razed the barriers imposed by time with its dissipation of cultural recollection. The recording of land ownership – its tenure, its bequest, and its inheritance – was thus of great importance in the long Anglo-Saxon era, as it is with any emerging nation, since land ownership and its public recognition determine any nation's future wealth and political direction. The ways in which land came to be parceled up publicly can be examined through the records of land conveyancing, a number of which precede Alfred's reign from 871 to 899. These records both reflected the development of Anglo-Saxon communities and contributed to the forging of those communal enterprises. They also permit an understanding of the fixity of the boundaries of land, and of how the Anglo-Saxons perceived their surroundings.

In two ninth-century charters, or grants of land or property, known as Sawyer 265 and 175, the king is witnessed granting land for ecclesiastical use – for the minster of St Peter's, Bath in the first case, and to the archbishop in the second (Sawyer). Charters or diplomas, issued in Latin, usually include boundary clauses outlining the precise demarcation of land granted; interestingly, these boundary clauses are often written in Old English, and sometimes made the more visible, the more separate, by the provision of increased space before and after them in the manuscript (see Thompson). It seems obvious enough that the details of the parcel of land confirmed by the charter should be in the language of the land and

local people, particularly since the landscape in medieval England is itself revealed through the names of particular topographical and visual features, such as Thorndon, which means “thorn-tree hill” or Bristol (*brycg + stow*), “meeting place by the bridge.”²

In Sawyer 265, for example, dated to 808 CE, the Saxon king Cynewulf some fifty years earlier is recorded as the donor of five hides of land in North Stoke, Somerset to St Peter’s in Bath. After laying out the conditions under which the land is to be held, and listing the eighteen witnesses, the extent of the donation is made explicit in Old English:

Et hæc sunt territoria. Ærest of Swinforda upp andlang broces to ceolnes wyllan, andlang hege ræwe to luttas crundele, þanon to grafes owisce, andlang owisce to wege, andlang weges to ælesbeorge, nyþer on alercumb, andlang alercumbes ut on Afene, andlang Afene þæt eft on Swinford.

(And these are the lands. First from Swineford up along the brook to Ceolnes wellspring; along the hedgerow to Luttas mound; from there to the edge of the grove; along the edge to the pathway; along the pathway to Æles hill; down to the alder valley; along alder valley to the Avon; along the Avon again to Swineford.) (Kelly)

The detail of this boundary clause allows historians and archaeologists to trace the landscape not simply notionally but in reality,³ to trace the landmarks that create natural borders (valleys, escarpments, groves, and copses) and man-made dividers (hedgerows, pathways, barrows, and burial mounds). There are, however, no cardinal directions in this sequence of clauses, and one can only move “along,” “up,” and “down,” illustrating a way in which the Anglo-Saxons orientated themselves and perceived their place in relation to the world around them contingent upon specific local landmarks.⁴

Boundary clauses provide us with a great deal of evidence for the vocabulary of continuity and division, expanse and containment in the physical world. In a charter of Cnut (S950) to Archbishop Ælfstan, made in 1018 at the request of Cnut’s queen, the king grants a copse (Hæselersc or Hazelhurst) with the following boundary:

Þis syndan ðæs dennes landgemæru to Hæselersc. Ærest andlang fearnleges burnan oð Runanleages mearce; of Runanleages mearce be Holanbeames mearce; of Holanbeames mearce swa on gerihte to Wiglege, bufan ðære smiþðan to þam geate; of þam geate innan þæne sihter; andland sihtres innan þæne bradan burnan; niðer andland bradan burnan be þæs arcebisceopes mearce eft innan fearnleages burnan.

(These are the boundaries of the copse at Hazelhurst. First along the fern-wood brook to Rowley’s boundary; from Rowley’s boundary along Holbeam’s boundary; from Holbeam’s boundary direct to Whiligh, above the smithy to the gate; from the gate into the drain, along the drain into the broad brook; down along the broad brook by the archbishop’s boundary back into the fern-wood brook.) (Brooks and Kelly)

In this sequence of clauses, it is clear that multiple ancient boundaries are already in place in the Sussex area to which the grant refers; the parceling of land is precisely measured by ownership borders that already exist, and the way one understands the delimited area is dependent on one's knowledge of the land. The copse that Cnut is granting in this charter is bounded by land already owned, but which set of boundaries came first? Was Cnut's copse the "in-between"? The leftovers? Or was the copse a royal possession, and other land was divided up against it? Either way, the obvious implication of these charters is the productivity, the potential usefulness of the land in-between the landmarks. Of interest here, too, though, are the terms used to denote the divisions and borders which seem rather less productive than prohibitive: *landgemære*, a compound of "land" and *gemære* meaning "limit," "end," "boundary," suggesting a point beyond which one cannot go forward. Such is the meaning of the term in the Old English translations of the Psalms and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, where *gemæro* renders *terminos* and *on . . . gemære, in confinio* (Bosworth and Toller).⁵

Mark My Words

Denoting "boundary" or "border" for the Anglo-Saxons, and still in use today, is the noun *mearc*, used repetitively in the charter quotation above. *Mearc* exists as a simplex, but is also found in a multitude of compound words (Bosworth and Toller).⁶ Interestingly, it is from the same root as the homonym *mearc* ("mark"), and more on this will be said below. Many of the uses of *mearc* occur in the specialist vocabulary describing the landscape for boundary clauses, though such words must surely have been in popular use to have meant anything related to delimitation of property within a legal context. Thus, for example, *mearchlinc* denotes a boundary ridge and is found in the modern place-name Marklinch (in Hampshire); similarly, a *mearcweg* is a boundary road.⁷ These terms all suggest a marker on the periphery, a feature that is on the edge of something between the viewer and the border.⁸ But *mearc* can also intimate a space that is more than the periphery of the unnamed center; *mearca* includes the "space marked out" – that is, the space in-between the marked. This is most obvious in the case of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia (a large part of which comprises the Midlands in present-day England), the name of which describes the *Mierce*, the "Marcher-people" or "borderers," that is surely *not* those living adjacent to the border, but rather those living between borders, those in the middle of others' edges (Yorke 19–20).⁹ This seems to be reinforced by the cases of *mearcstapa*¹⁰ ("border stepper"), *mearcward* (literally, "a border warden," usually translated as "wolf"), and *mearcstede* ("border land," "desolate district"), where the initial noun in the compound takes on a somewhat sinister meaning.

Of these latter three terms, *mearcstapa* is the most familiar to scholars, since it is used to describe the character of Grendel, Hrothgar's foe, in *Beowulf*. This mythical, monstrous cannibalistic figure (still said to this day to haunt the fenlands of East Anglia) is described as having the strength of fifty men, as being flame-eyed, as

carrying God's anger, and as dwelling outside the boundaries of the community of Germanic warriors. The first introduction of Grendel reveals that

Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold
fen ond fæsten; (ll.102–104)

(The grim spirit was called Grendel,
a famous boundary-stepper, who held the moors
the fen and the fastness;)¹¹

Where the poet of *The Wanderer* introduces its exiled warrior as an *eardstapa* ("earth-" or "land-stepper") (Treharne 56–57), here Grendel wanders a different, unbelonging landscape, the "Marches": land that borders a border, and not simply the narrow line of the (often invisible) border itself. Grendel's demesne is intermediate – the waste of the damp moorland, the flat and treacherous fen, the fastness of land enclosed by water.¹² It is the ill-defined land in the middle of territory that is bordered, familiar, mapped. Grendel's watery world separates *eard* from *eard* ("earth" from "land"), making Grendel's border-haunt indistinct, unknown, and unknowable. The potential reading of Grendel as exile and outlaw – *utlaga*, *utanbordes* ("outlaw," "without the border") – has proven fruitful for critics, particularly since Grendel is described as "kin of Cain,"¹³ exiled from salvation, outcast from the civilized.

It is surely no coincidence in the Anglo-Saxon literary world that other outcasts (both voluntarily and involuntarily exiled) similarly inhabit fenland. In the short dramatic narrative known as *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the female protagonist declares:

Wulf is on iegel, Ic on oþerre.
Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen.
Sindon wælreowe weras þær on igel;
willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð.¹⁴

(Wulf's on one island, I'm on the other.
Fast-bound is that island, surrounded by fen.
Death-crazed men are there on the island;
they'll consume him if he comes on that crowd.)

Here, the woman and her lover (?), Wulf, find themselves imprisoned in what should be the relative safety of the high land in the fen. However, Wulf's island is treacherous, inhabited by the death-crazed, arguably (perhaps metaphorically) cannibalistic enemy. Roaming over this landscape is the *mearcstapa* (the "in-between-dweller"), outcast by those who live within the community, within the law. Indeed, as is well known, "Wulf" itself is a term used of outlaws, those on the fringes of society, who are evicted both in secular law,¹⁵ and, in the later

Anglo-Saxon period, in ecclesiastical law: an outlaw will always also be excommunicated, deprived of the salvation of the church and its communion of saints. It is noteworthy, too, that another term for a wolf is *mearcweard* (“boundary guardian”), further consolidating the relationship of the land in-between society’s borders (and thus simultaneously outside, as well as in-between) with things considered dangerous to stability and civilization. In a sense, this landscape is a continuum of borders – the enclosure of the fortified dwelling bordering the enclosure of the fens and fastness bordering other fortified communities. It is the in-between that hosts the greatest danger and that is most often left alone, disrupting, as it does, the comfortable and familiar (see also Brady).

Outer Limits

An ironic reversal of the dangerous borderlands, the intermediate terrain between distinct borders, is the landscape of salvation for the chosen seen in the profound and moving Old English *Exodus*. The poem, the unique written version of which is dated to c.1000, is contained at pages 143–171 of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, now fully available in digital form.¹⁶ In many senses, this is a poem about borders, and the transformation of physical properties. Nicholas Howe writes evocatively about *Exodus* and its place in the Junius manuscript, seeing links between the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea, the Anglo-Saxons’ crossing from Northern Europe to England, and Old English boundary clauses; he also emphasizes the journey motif in this poem and *Genesis*, which precedes it in Junius 11 (208–213). Of the initial journey toward the Red Sea in *Exodus*, Howe comments: “this perilous journey of the Israelites is figured heavily as the crossing of a marginal zone or liminal topography . . .” with the sea designating “the outer limits of a region” (210–211).¹⁷ Rather than seeing the territory crossed by the Israelites as “marginal,” though, we might rather think of the Israelites as akin to the *mearcstapa*, stepping across boundaries – both political and spiritual – and inhabiting, for forty years indeed, the in-betweenness. The relevant passage concerning the flight of the Israelites in *Exodus* is worth quoting in full, so central is it to our understanding of how the land beside and between borders (that is, borderland) functions. For comparison, the biblical verse Exodus 13:18 simply states: “But he [God] led them about by the way of the desert, which is by the Red Sea: and the children of Israel went up armed out of the land of Egypt.” The Old English reads:

Fyrd wæs gefysed; from se ðe lædde,
modig magoræswa, mægburh heora.
Oferfor he mid þy folce fæstena worn,
land ond leodweard laðra manna,
enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad,

oðþæt hie on guðmyrce gearwe bæron.
 Wæron land heora lyfthelme beþeaht,
 mearchofu morheald; Moyses ofer þa
 fela meoringa, fyrde gelædde. (ll. 54–62)

(The army was prepared; valiant was he who led them,
 a noble leader of their tribe.
 With the people he passed through numerous remote fastnesses,
 lands and main defences of hostile peoples,
 narrow single-tracks, unmapped paths,
 until they advanced, ready, upon warlike border-people.
 Their lands were covered with cloud-shade,
 their borderland-dwellings the mountain-keep; across those Moses
 led the army, over the many natural obstacles.)¹⁸

As the Israelites make their way from the edge of the Nile Delta to the Red Sea, it is clear that they are crossing land that is between the known landmarks of the two bodies of water, and that these form, in reality, the borders. The barren and hostile territory that the Israelites traverse (like Grendel's *fen* and *fæsten*) is not, in and of itself, a border, but land that is in-between borders – borderland or marches; that is, not the edge or the limit itself. In this sense, it cannot be regarded as “liminal,” as Nick Howe sees it, but central; not marginal, but, rather, in the middle. It is less this land's signification of the marginal that is important here, and more its unknown nature, its challenge, its *uncuð gelad* (“unmapped ways”).¹⁹ The trust that the Israelites place in Moses, and that Moses places in God, is thus paramount, and one could parallel this trust with that placed in Beowulf and Hrothgar when they lead their warriors to Grendel's mother's mere by “enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad” (l. 1410), a direct echo of *Exodus*, line 58. In this sense, while borders are important, particularly because they are known and defined, it is what happens through experience in the unknown center that matters. In the case of *Exodus*, and to an extent, *Beowulf*, the matter is that of salvation.

As the Israelites make their way from their camps at Rameses to Succoth to Etham and onward to the Red Sea, they are guided – as the biblical source reveals – by “a pillar of fire” at night, and “the pillar of cloud by day” (Exodus 13:21–22). These phenomena function as divinely ordained markers for the Israelites for, through the pillar of cloud

leode ongeton,
 dugoð Israhela, þæt þær Drihten cwom
 weroda Drihten, wicsteal metan (ll. 90–92)

(the people perceived,
 the Israelite warriors, that their Lord had come,
 the Lord of troops, to mark out the camping-place)

This same pillar of cloud becomes not just a boundary marker for their camp, but also a marker for their salvation:

Forð gesawon
lifes latþeow lifweg metan (ll. 103–104)

(In front they saw
their life's guide mark out the way of life)

This marking or measuring of the delimited path of salvation illustrates how these lands between borders become salvific; territories filled with hostile enemies and physical dangers are made safe by God's miraculous intervention, until the Israelites come to the most insurmountable obstacle, the "sæfæsten/ landes æt ende leodmægne forstod" ("barrier of the sea/ at the end of the land [which] stood in the way of the people's army") (ll. 127–128).

Crossing into Life

Many borders are invisible unless marked by a sign or a man-made barrier. Thus, for example, while natural obstacles such as mountains or rivers are sometimes adopted as boundary markers (like the River Severn separating Wales and England, or the Alps separating Switzerland and Italy), political borders, separating peoples, are now enforced or reinforced in the landscape by signs and checkpoints. Indeed, Offa's Dyke and Hadrian's Wall, in-between England and Wales and, loosely speaking, the border of the Roman Empire and the land north of it (roughly approximating, then, to northernmost England and Scotland) respectively, are a visible attempt to make clear the separation demanded by the dominant political power. Before such border controls, how did anyone know they were crossing from one region, or demarcated area of land, into another? As with the Old English boundary clauses, these are real borders, literal edges, and yet, without knowing the landmarks, the limits become invisible, intangible.

In contrast to the intangible border, the very real Red Sea presents itself to the Israelites as a dead end, a terminus. Hot on the Israelites' heels are the 2,000 warriors of the "har hæðbroga" (*Exodus*, l. 118a), the Egyptian Pharoah metamorphosed into the "grey heath-terror," the wolf that prowls its prey (the lost soul of the excommunicated outlaw, the unsaved). Sandwiched between two insurmountable obstacles, it is God's miraculous intervention that again saves his people, when the boundary of the sea becomes instead a path to Sinai, when "sæweall astah" ("the wall of seawater rose up") (l. 302b) and the Israelites crossed, pursued by the Egyptians. The fate of the Egyptians is emphatically described by the poet, as the sea crashes back on top of them: "Flod blod gewod" ("Blood saturated the flood") (l. 463b). And in this way, the complex of boundaries, between-spaces, and crossings become a pass to salvation for the Israelites and, simultaneously, a devastating tsunami for the Egyptians: the "sealt mersc" ("salty fen" or "marsh")