Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Gallagher, Robert (2017) Latin Acrostic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon England: Reassessing the Contribution of John the Old Saxon. Medium Ævum, 86 (2). pp. 249-275. ISSN 0025-8385.

DOI

Link to record in KAR

https://kar.kent.ac.uk/72335/

Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

Copyright & reuse
Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research
The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.
Users are advised to check **http://kar.kent.ac.uk** for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries
For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:
researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at **http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html**

KAR Kent Academic Repository

University of Kent

Latin Acrostic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon England: Reassessing the Contribution of John the Old Saxon

Other than charters, only a handful of Latin texts from Anglo-Saxon England can be conclusively dated to the ninth and early tenth centuries.[1] Remarkably, of these, not one but two are sets of acrostic poetry in praise of West Saxon royalty: the first in honour of King Alfred and the second in honour of his grandson, Æthelstan. Modern understanding of these poems has been defined almost entirely by a seminal article by Michael Lapidge, who in 1980 argued that both are likely to be the work of a single individual, John the Old Saxon, one of the continental scholars named in Asser's Life of King Alfred who had joined Alfred's court in the 880s.[2] Lapidge's thesis is highly persuasive and, indeed, many scholars have accepted his interpretation, despite the direct challenge of Gernot Wieland in 2006.[3] There are, however, important aspects of these verses that have hitherto been overlooked and which have significant implications for their authorship. In the present essay, therefore, I seek to reappraise Lapidge's argument. I also wish to go beyond the question of authorial identity, to begin to consider these texts within a broader cultural context: comparatively speaking, why might this literary form have been so popular with Anglo-Saxon audiences at this point in time?

The acrostics in praise of King Alfred

Let us begin with the earlier of the two sets of acrostics, those in praise of King Alfred. These acrostic verses, totalling thirteen lines of Latin hexameter, survive in a single manuscript, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS Cod. 671, a small ninth-century gospelbook of seventy-seven folios which was written in a hand of either Cornish or Welsh origin.[4] A scribe writing in a late ninth- or early tenth-century Welsh or Cornish script entered these verses onto 74[v], directly below the closing paragraph of the gospel texts.[5] Sometime in the tenth century, another hand, writing in a form of English Square minuscule, then copied into the last few pages of the manuscript four vernacular documents, three of which explicitly pertain to the royal estate at Bedwyn, Wiltshire; thus it seems likely that this book spent some time there.[6] The verses in this manuscript form an attempt at two double acrostics; both the acrostics and telestichs varyingly spell out the name 'Alfred'.[7] This Alfred is undoubtedly King Alfred and thus alongside its tenth-century provenance, this manuscript has strong links with the West Saxon royal household, both in terms of its context and content.

[MS IMAGE REMOVED]

Figure 1: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS Cod. 671, fol. 74[v]. By permission of the Burgerbibliothek of Bern.

These acrostic verses have previously been edited four times.[8] Here I offer my own transcription as well as a new translation, based on Lapidge's:

Admiranda mihi mens est transcurrere gest A	1
Ex[a] arce[b] astrifera cito sed redis[c] arbiter ind E	2
Lex etiam ut docuit typice portendere fraede[d] L [=Aelfred]	3
Flagrantique[e] simul moles mundi arserit igne F	4
Rex formasti his sed melius gnarum optime flammis R	5
Eripis atque chaos uincens Christe ipse necasti E	6
Diuino super astra frui per saecula uultu D	7

En tibi discendant e celo Gratiae tot Æ 8
Letus eris semper Ælfred per competa ate L [=leta] 9
Flectas[f] iam mentem sacris satiare sirela F [=faleris] 10
Recte doces properans falsa dulcidine mure R [=rerum] 11
Ecce aptas clara semper lucrare taltan E [=talenta] 12
Docte peregrine transcurrere[g] rura sophie D 13

a. Es MS
b. erce MS
c. reddes MS
d. faede MS
e. Flagrantice MS
f. Fletas MS[9]
g. transcurre MS

Translation
My mind is to run through marvellous deeds:
From the starry citadel you [will] return readily,
Just as the law taught figuratively, to foretell Alfred,
At the same time the world's mass will burn in a blazing fire.
O King, you created, but from these flames more agreeably and most rightly the wise one
You rescue—and so triumphing, Christ, you yourself destroyed the chaos—
To enjoy the divine visage above the stars through the ages.

Behold, may all the graces descend from heaven for you!
You will always be joyful, Alfred, through the happy crossroads [of life].
May you now turn your mind and be satisfied with sacred adornments.
Rightly you teach, hastening away from the deceptive charm of worldly affairs.
See, you apply yourself always to gain bright talents,
To run wisely through the fields of foreign learning.

My transcription includes eight emendations of the text as it is found in the Bern manuscript. All previous editors have similarly suggested corrections, though there has been some disagreement as to what words should be emended. I agree with Lapidge concerning arce, inde, flagrantique and flectas, though I depart from Lapidge with my remaining four emendations. In line two, in addition to taking erce as a spelling variant of arce, I also take es as ex. In correct prosody es is normally scanned short, yet its position here at the beginning of the hexameter forces it to be long; ex, on the other hand, is naturally long and works well with the ablative arce.[10] Similarly reddes, also in line two, presents a prosodic error. While Lapidge retained the manuscript reading, I instead take this as redis, which would scan as two short syllables, as its position in the line demands;[11] furthermore, this allows us to take portendere on the following line as an infinitive.[12] In the final line, meanwhile, unlike Lapidge, I have taken transcurre as an error for transcurrere. This fits both the sense and the scansion of the verse well and it also provides us with a moment of textual mirroring, since transcurrere also features in the first line of the text.[13] Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, I offer an alternative reading of the last word of the third verse, faedel, which is not a known Latin term. Lapidge took this as an unusual spelling of foedel; instead, I suggest that this is an anagram, employed by the poet in order to complete the telestich in a similar fashion to what we see in the ninth,

tenth and eleventh lines. In this case, the anagram is of the name 'Aelfred' (although the letter r is missing).[14] Elsewhere, I should note that for line ten—a verse with particularly ambiguous syntax—my translations differs somewhat from Lapidge's interpretation: I have taken 'sacris… faleris' as a corresponding adjective and noun, while Lapidge interpreted both as substantives. It should be stressed that none of my emendations alter the meaning of the verses greatly—the syntax remains extremely awkward at times—but in contrast to Lapidge's reading, my interpretation does at least bring Alfred more explicitly into the narrative of the first seven lines. More significantly, collectively these emendations forcefully suggest that the scribe is likely to have made a number of mistakes in copying or, at least, that the scribe was working with an exemplar that contained errors.[15] It should be noted that four of my eight emendations take place in line two, while a fifth is found in the line immediately below. If the scribe was copying from another written context, it may well be the case, therefore, that this part of the exemplar had been damaged and was not fully visible.

There is a clear textual division between the first seven lines and the remaining six lines of verse. This is most clearly marked by the repeated spelling of Alfred's name twice in both the acrostic and telestich: the first seven verses spell the king's name in seven letters, while the acrostic and telestich of the remaining verses omit a line for the initial 'a' of his name.[16] Moreover, while the latter six lines directly address Alfred, it is revealed in the sixth line that the first seven verses are in fact addressed to Christ—that is, after some ambiguity in the opening clauses, perhaps introduced by the poet in order to draw parallels between Alfred and Christ. The division, marked by the end of the seventh line, gives the impression of two separate passages and it has led to some variation in the presentation of the verses in past editions.[17] Perhaps surprisingly, however, no scholar has directly addressed the relationship between the two unequal halves, despite the fact that the scribe presented these acrostics as a single, continuous text.

There certainly seems to be some textual relationship between the two passages. There are verbal echoes with the verbs docere (in lines three and eleven) and transcurrere (in lines one and thirteen), while there are also thematic consistencies: the term gnarus in the first passage alludes to the dominant theme of the second passage, Alfred's wisdom. The apocalyptic theme that is vividly explored in the first seven lines, meanwhile, is perhaps also implicitly present in the following six lines, in which we find talenta, a distinctive term that in its biblical context is found amid parables relating to Judgement Day.[18] How should we understand these connections? The mirrored use of transcurrere suggests that some of these links may well have been intentional. If so, we may wish to interpret the opening verse, which declares the poet's intention, as applying to all following twelve lines; thus it supplies the a of Alfred's name for the acrostics and telestiches of both lines two to seven and eight to thirteen. Should we, therefore, understand these verses as the work of a single stage of composition and, moreover, the work of a single author? Certainly there are further features that unite the two passages. For one, both contain anagrams that are used to try and achieve a telestich. In addition, all verses contain a strong caesura, with only one (line seven) not possessing a penthemimeral caesura. No verse in either passage, meanwhile, ends with a monosyllable or with a word of more than three syllables. Such details point towards similar attitudes towards Latin hexameter composition.[19] There are, however, contrasts as well. The first seven lines contain six instances of elision, while the remaining six verses only contain one example;[20] the first passage is more dactylic than the second (see figure 3 below); according to my revisions, furthermore, there are no prosodic errors in the first seven lines, while there are three indisputable errors in the remaining six.[21] Given that we are dealing with a small handful of verses and, indeed, that I have suggested several emendations, such discrepancies cannot offer definitive answers. Moreover, stylistic

contrasts do not always indicate differences in authorship. For instance, the more dactylic nature of the first seven lines may simply reflect a desire to invest the passage with dramatic energy; the more frequent use of spondees in the second set of verses, on the other hand, arguably imparts the text with greater solemnity and grandeur. In addition, a poet may be more flexible in their approach to prosody and elision on some occasions than on others, depending on what artistic priorities were at stake in the composition of a work. Indeed, we cannot know the exact circumstances in which the verses were composed and it is possible, for example, that the poet did not have time to revise the verses to make them more uniform or, alternatively, more varied. In other words, comparison of the two passages yields inconclusive results regarding the issue of authorship, but the possibilities must remain that they are the work of either one or more individuals and that they were not necessarily composed on or for the same occasion.

The acrostic in praise of Æthelstan

Let us turn now to the second set of acrostics. These comprise a single double acrostic hexameter poem addressing a certain ‘Adalstan’ that survives solely in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS C. 697, a book containing copies of Aldhelm’s Enigmata and Carmen de uirginitate as well as Prudentius’ Psychomachia.[22] On palaeographical grounds, it appears that this manuscript was created in north-east France in the third quarter of the ninth century but had reached England by the reign of King Æthelstan.[23] This is an important book that has received a considerable amount of attention, most notably from Mechthild Gretsch,[24] since it is likely to have passed through the circle of Æthelstan’s court. Of particular note is the considerable number of vernacular glosses, some of which T. A. M. Bishop has attributed to the very hand of Dunstan, the future archbishop of Canterbury.[25] As to the acrostic, this was added to the last folio (78[v]) in a form of Square Minuscule that David Dumville has associated with Æthelstan’s reign. Given the history of the manuscript, it seems quite certain that the ‘Adalstan’ of the acrostic refers to King Æthelstan himself.[26]

[MS IMAGE REMOVED]

Figure 2: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS C. 697, 78[v]. By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

To date, this acrostic has been edited five times,[27] though no doubt due to the unclear nature of its syntax, only one editor, Lapidge, has offered a full translation. I offer a fresh transcription and a translation adapted from Lapidge’s:

Archalis clamare triumuir nomine sax I	1
Diue tuo fors prognosim[a] feliciter aeu O	2
Augustae · samu · cernentis rupis eris · el · H	3
Laruales forti beliales robure contr A	4
Saepe seges messem faecunda praenotat altam i N	5
Tutis solandum petrinum solibus agme N	6
Amplius amplificare sacra sophismatis arc E	7
Nomina orto petas donet precor inclita doxu S	8

a. prognossim MS

Translation

You, leader, are proclaimed by the name of ‘sovereign stone’

Divine one, may this prophecy happily happen for your age

You will be of the 'eminent rock' of discerning Samuel
With mighty strength against the devilish demons
Often an abundant field foretells a rich harvest
In peaceful days the stone army will be smoothed
You are exalted more greatly in the holy citadel of wisdom
I pray, glorious one, that you may seek and He may provide illustrious names'

Much like my revisions of the Bern acrostics, for the most part I agree with Lapidge in terms of the meaning of the verses. I do, however, offer a handful of alternative readings. My most substantial emendations are in line two, which is by far the most elusive verse. The major problem here is that there is no word that is clearly a verb and there is no verb in surrounding verses that could offer help. Lapidge solved this conundrum by arguing that diue is an anagram of the imperative uide; as such, the jumbled letter ordering is reminiscent of the style of the Alfredian acrostics. However, I do not believe that this is the case. Lapidge claimed that 'there is no such word as diue',[28] which is not correct. Diue can be an adverb ('divinely') or it can be the vocative singular form of diuus ('God, divine one'). Alternatively it could be a Medieval Latin spelling of diuae, and thus could be either diua ('goddess') or a feminine adjective ('divine'). On this occasion I understand diue as the vocative form of diuus. Significantly, there are precedents in Latin poetry, in the work, for instance, of Horace, for the vocative form of this word opening verses,[29] while several earlier Latin authors used diuus to address secular leaders; Ovid, for example, addresses Caesar with diuus, as does Tacitus when discussing various Roman emperors.[30] In locating a verb for this verse, meanwhile, I have instead turned to fors, a word that Lapidge appears to have omitted from his translation, but which I understand as an elliptical form of fors sit ('it might happen'). Admittedly this solution is not perfect, since it does not explain why the Greek borrowing prognosis is in the accusative, but I suggest that the poet simply took this term from a source, unaware of how to decline Greek terms correctly. It may be significant here that I know of only one earlier instance of this Greek term in a Latin text—in Isidore of Seville's Etymologiae, in which prognosis is also found in the accusative.[31]

My other alternative readings are less substantial, but the following should be noted. In line three, I retain the ae in augustae as it is found in the manuscript. Lapidge amended this to augusta, seemingly so that it would match rupis as a nominative singular noun. The standard nominative singular form of rupis is in fact rupes, though as a third declension noun, the former is also acceptable. Rupis can, however, be genitive singular, which is how both Gernot Wieland and I have interpreted it; thus, there is no need to amend augustae.[32] In the final verse, meanwhile, 'orto… doxus' is undoubtedly an example of tmesis of the word ortodoxus and, as such, Lapidge understood it as a reference to God; I instead interpret it as an address to Æthelstan as 'glorious one'. Lapidge's reading of this word was influenced by its earlier appearance in an Anglo-Saxon glossary, where its interpretamenta read 'gloriosus siue perfectus';[33] yet as Samantha Zacher has pointed out, Æthelstan himself is described as perfectus gloriosus in another poem written in his praise, Carta dirige gressus, which was composed sometime during or after 927.[34] In the sixth line, furthermore, I have translated petrinum agmen as 'stone army', as opposed to Lapidge's 'stony mass'. Here the poet, while evidently punning on Æthelstan's name, may well be referring to the Church—and thus we could equally translate this phrase as 'Peter's army'; in other words, the poet is praying that Æthelstan has a successful and fruitful relationship with the clergy.[35] In the following line, I have then taken sacra arx as a spiritual (or heavenly) citadel, rather than as the notion of the eminence of wisdom, as Lapidge translated this phrase. A final point relates to triumuir in the first verse, a word that alongside the neologism archalis strikes a grand

tone to the opening of the poem.[36] Triumuir can be found within the writings of numerous classical authors, normally denoting rulership by three individuals. As Lapidge pointed out, however, it also appears in the above-mentioned Anglo-Saxon glossary, where it is defined simply as a 'nomen dignitatis'—evidently one, however, with particularly strong Roman, imperial connotations. Lapidge thus translated this word simply as 'prince'. I have chosen 'leader' instead, to avoid any assumptions regarding the exact status of the subject.[37]

The case for John the Old Saxon

Having now surveyed the poems themselves, how does any of the above affect the likelihood that John the Old Saxon wrote them? Here, Lapidge's thesis needs to be explained in full.

Lapidge's starting points were two features within the 'Adalstan' poem: first, he noted that the poet casts himself as the biblical prophet Samuel, as we see in line three, and thus Lapidge argued that the poet was probably an elderly man, while his subject was likely, due to the prophetic nature of the text, to be a youth. Second, Lapidge drew attention to the orthography within the poem, noting that the Adal- spelling is found commonly in continental names but is highly unusual in an Anglo-Saxon context. For Lapidge, therefore, the profile of the poet was an older individual who had most likely travelled to England from the Continent. With this in mind, Lapidge turned to William of Malmesbury, who in his Gesta regum Anglorum had recounted in rather anachronistic terms the details of a ceremony in which King Alfred blessed his grandson Æthelstan as an eventual heir.[38] This ceremony is recorded in no other source, as Lapidge acknowledged, yet given the prophetic tone of the acrostic, Lapidge proposed that it was for this ceremony that the acrostic was composed. To strengthen his case, Lapidge drew attention to the Bern acrostics, which have an undeniable Alfredian connection, which allude to 'foreign learning' and which, Lapidge believed, share enough similar features with the 'Adalstan' acrostic to suggest that they were all the work of a single author. As to the identity of the author, Lapidge argued that his name lay in the telestich of the 'Adalstan' poem: 'Iohannes', none other than John the Old Saxon.[39]

Lapidge's thesis is highly appealing and it is understandable that so many scholars have consequently accepted both sets of acrostics as the work of John the Old Saxon.[40] It is important to acknowledge, however, that two scholars have already questioned this interpretation, though neither appears to have garnered much support.[41] First, Caroline Brett in 1991, while not addressing the specific points of Lapidge's argument, suggested that the 'Iohannes' of the 'Adalstan' acrostic may instead be John, abbot of Landévennec, who flourished during Æthelstan's reign; as such, the poem may be a testament to the close ties between Brittany and England in the 930s.[42] More recently, Gernot Wieland has offered a more substantial challenge.[43] Wieland stressed the lack of contemporary sources for William of Malmesbury's story and he argued that the tone of the 'Adalstan' acrostic suited an adolescent addressee rather than a young child. Moreover, Wieland drew attention to the use of the plural nomina in the final line, which he saw as an indication that both 'Adalstan' and 'Iohannes' were names for the subject of the poem. As such, he interpreted 'Iohannes' as a baptismal name for Æthelstan and he suggested that the poem was composed for his baptism. Wieland was quite right to emphasise the lack of contemporary evidence for a ceremony involving King Alfred and his grandson, yet importantly Wieland for the most part accepted Lapidge's translation, while he only acknowledged the Bern acrostics in passing.[44] One could argue, furthermore, that his focus on the plural nomina is overly literal: as Zacher has recently explored, this poem is crammed full of onomastic puns playing on Æthelstan's name.[45] The plural nomina could

perhaps, therefore, be nothing more than a nod to this wordplay, acknowledging that the verses contain numerous implicit references to the name of the king.

How might my variant readings contribute to our understanding of the ‘Adalstan’ poem’s possible origins? It seems to me that the persuasiveness of Lapidge’s thesis rests considerably on the connection with the Bern acrostics, which offer contemporary Alfredian evidence to an argument that otherwise is based to a great extent on the witness of William of Malmesbury. If I am correct, however, the most distinctive shared stylistic feature of the ‘Adalstan’ and Bern acrostics does not exist: diue is not an anagram, meaning that the ‘Adalstan’ poem contains only one minor example of the jumbling of letters in a word, Samuhel, which is spelt with the help of temesis as ‘Samu… elh’ in order to provide an -h ending—an ending that is otherwise rare in Latin. Conversely, the ‘Adalstan’ acrostic contains several literary strategies that are absent in the Bern acrostics. There are, for example, several instances of polyptoton and repetition (archalis/arche, solandum/solibus; amplius/amplificare; nomine/nomina). Punning is prominent throughout, while with prognosis and archalis there is an interest in unusual, Greek-derived vocabulary.[46] Perhaps most distinctive, however, are the two examples of tmesis (*Samu…elh* and orto...doxus), which the poet uses in a sophisticated manner in order to maintain the correct metrical values for a hexameter while completing the telestich.[47] The Bern acrostics, in contrast, while not devoid of literary qualities, certainly have less identifiable ornamentation and lack any onomastic wordplay, Grecisms, polyptoton or tmesis.

These differences are further pronounced when we consider the prosody and metrics of the poems—elements that neither Lapidge nor Wieland took into account.[48] As I have already noted, following my emendations there are no prosodic errors in the first acrostic passage in the Bern manuscript, but there are three definite examples in the second. There are six instances of elision in the first passage, but only one in the second. By comparison, the ‘Adalstan’ acrostic contains no conclusive prosodic errors and one instance of elision.[49] These elements do not align the ‘Adalstan’ poem more closely with either of the Bern passages, but the lack of prosodic errors is unsurprising, given the sophistication elsewhere evident with the use of tmesis. Stronger disparities can, however, be found elsewhere. For instance, while only one of the thirteen Bern verses (line seven) does not possess a penthemimeral caesura, this feature is absent in three of the eight ‘Adalstan’ verses (lines one, two and seven). None of the Alfredian verses, meanwhile, close with a monosyllabic word, yet two of the Æthelstanian lines end in this way. In addition, there are no examples of hiatus in the former, yet there is one instance in the latter, in the final line (nomina orto). These features hint at potentially contrasting compositional techniques and attitudes. In particular, monosyllabic verse endings and hiatus were elements of Latin metrical composition that strongly divided opinion amongst early medieval poets.[50] Yet perhaps the clearest contrast between the ‘Adalstan’ poem and the earlier verses in praise of King Alfred comes from the metrical patterning. The first four feet of each of the three acrostic passages, following my emendations, scan like so:

A	SDSS (1)	
E	SDDD (2)	DSSS (7)
L	DDDS (3)	DSSS (7)
F	SDSS (1)	SSSD (8)
R	SSDS (4)	DDSS (5)
E	DDSS (5)	SSSS (9)
D	SDDS (6)	DSSD (10)

Figure 3

A	SSDS (4)
D	DSSS (7)
A	SSSS (9)
L	SSDS (4)
S	DSSS (7)
T	SSSS (9)
A	DDDS (3)
N	DDSD (11)

Figure 4

Within these tables, S indicates a spondee while D indicates a dactyl; for each unique metrical combination, I have assigned a number in brackets, which allows us to appreciate the patterning more readily. As we can see, there is considerable variation between all three acrostics, with every acrostic containing at least one pattern that is not found in either of the other two poems. More striking, however, is the structure of metrical patterning. In the two Bern acrostics, there is no clear structural programme (beyond simply seeking metrical variation), but in the 'Adalstan' poem, we can see a clear pattern that equates to an a, b, c, a, b, c, d, e structure. Again, the 'Adalstan' poem displays greater poetic sophistication.

We are dealing with three extremely short texts and thus it is worth emphasising again that any single statistical observation cannot on its own be conclusive in regards to authorship. Furthermore, as I have already stressed, stylistic variation between texts does not always imply a difference in authorship: authors respond to context, which can be reflected in the employment of varying styles and registers for specific occasions and subject matters. That said, in this instance my sense is that the metrical and literary contrasts between the Alfredian and Æthelstanian acrostics are too numerous and too great to be the work of a single author—or at least, the poet significantly altered his or her technique between the composition of the verses in honour of Alfred and those in honour of Æthelstan. If I am correct, then the 'Adalstan' poem's links with Alfred become very weak indeed—only that there is a precedent from his reign, in the form of the Bern verses, of Latin acrostics praising West Saxon royalty. More specifically, the identification of 'Iohannes' as John the Old Saxon looks increasingly uncertain; the only internal suggestion left is the Adal- spelling, which perhaps suggests that the author was not Anglo-Saxon. We should bear in mind here that there are no prescriptive rules for what should be spelt out in an early medieval Latin acrostic: examples exist that spell out the name of the verses' subject, others that name the author, while others spell out divine invocations and other sorts of declarations.[51] This makes the identity of 'Iohannes' all the more elusive. Lapidge and Brett could be correct in believing that this individual was the author, or at least the patron, of the poem; on the other hand, it is quite possible, as Wieland argued, that 'Iohannes' is another name for Æthelstan. Given the ambiguous syntax of the poem and the fact that neither these verses nor the Bern acrostics are accompanied by a rubric of any sort, we are left only with our intuition.

The ‘Adalstan’ acrostic: a new interpretation

We must maintain a considerable degree of caution when approaching the ‘Adalstan’ poem; it seems unfair, nevertheless, not to offer my own view of this poem’s probable origins and meaning. First, I should say that I think it unlikely that it was composed in Alfred’s reign. The poetic sophistication of this text is almost entirely without parallel in Alfredian Latin literature; in its use of literary devices, it is considerably more ambitious and successful in its execution than the Bern acrostics. Furthermore, the poet speaks as if Æthelstan is already steeped in learning, which, as Sarah Foot has recently commented, is ‘something one would struggle to say of even the most precocious of five year olds’.[52] But perhaps most significantly, while it is quite possible that some contemporaries in the later years of Alfred’s kingship were attempting to position Æthelstan as an eventual successor,[53] it is difficult to equate the sense of prophetic fulfilment of the poem with external evidence from the 890s.[54] Therefore, either the acrostic is the strongest evidence for such an Alfredian campaign to promote Æthelstan as the heir apparent, or the poem belongs to a later context. To my mind, the latter seems more probable, that this poem was composed during Edward the Elder’s reign or during Æthelstan’s own reign. Indeed, the imperial pretensions of the poem and the assured position of Æthelstan within it can, for example, be aligned with several artefacts from the 920s and 930s. Thus, while the acrostic addresses Æthelstan as both triumuir and diuus, comparably the poem Rex pius Æðelstan heralds the king as a terrigenis dux (‘leader for the earth-born’);[55] several contemporary royal diplomas, meanwhile, refer to him as a basileus (‘emperor’).[56] It is my sense, therefore, that this poem and its prophecy sit more comfortably with the Latin literature of Æthelstan’s reign than that of Alfred and, as such, we should consider it alongside Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.16.3, a lavish copy of Hrabanus Maurus figural poem, In honorem sanctae crucis, which appears to have been produced for King Æthelstan himself.[57]

Who, therefore, is ‘Iohannes’? Given that I do not believe that this poem was composed during Alfred’s reign, it is unlikely that he is John the Old Saxon, whose last known movements date to 904, when he attested three diplomas.[58] As I have already said, we cannot be certain that ‘Iohannes’ refers to the author of the text and even if it does, we may be dealing with a pseudonym; after all, the poet does appear—if we accept Lapidge’s interpretation—to take on the persona of the prophet Samuel in the third verse. With this in mind, I would like to suggest, therefore, that ‘Iohannes’ is a reference to John the Baptist. Wieland has already noted this possibility, observing that Æthelstan donated a maniple to the religious community at Chester-le-Street with images of both John the Baptist and John the Evangelist;[59] Wieland used this evidence to suggest that Æthelstan had a particularly affinity with the name ‘Iohannes’. I believe, however, that the poet may have intended for the telestich to be an unambiguous reference specifically to John the Baptist, as part of a Christological scheme within the poem. In the Bible, numerous references are made to John as he who foreshadowed and heralded the arrival of the messiah and it was he, of course, who baptized Christ.[60] John and Christ thus are intimately connected in the narrative of the covenant that Christ represents between God and Christians, and indeed, this is celebrated in depictions of the two individuals together in the Old English poem *John the Baptist’s Prayer* and in a tenth-century ivory carving of the ‘Winchester’ style, as Mary Rambaran-Olm has recently observed.[61] I propose that a similar iconography is at work in the ‘Adalstan’ poem: John is presented alongside ‘Adalstan’, with the implication that ‘Adalstan’ is an earthly Christ. The internal evidence for this interpretation is admittedly thin, but is as follows: the opening word archalis perhaps contains an allusion to the covenant;[62] the reference to Samuel frames Æthelstan as the chosen leader of God’s people, just as Samuel had selected and anointed both Saul and David as the kings of Israel; this is reinforced by the further Davidic allusion

embedded in the fourth verse with beliales;[63] the unction implied through the reference to Samuel, furthermore, offers a parallel with baptism, which several early medieval commentators interpreted as comparable sacraments of rebirth.[64] In other words, a theme of election, salvation and leadership is evident within the poem with reference to the Old Testament prophet Samuel; the reference to 'Iohannes' may be a New Testament continuation of this theme. Here we should remember the ambiguity concerning the addressee in the first Bern acrostic, which possibly alludes to Alfred as an earthly Christ, and there is evidence to suggest that a Christological interpretation of kingship was also fostered during Æthelstan's reign.[65] It may be within such a discourse of Anglo-Saxon kingship that 'Iohannes' is best understood.

Latin acrostics in late ninth- and early tenth-century England

If, as I have argued, John the Old Saxon is unlikely to have written both sets of acrostics, then this has significant implications for our understanding of Latin literary culture in late ninth- and early tenth-century England. We may no longer be able to attribute all of these verses to a known individual, but what we lose in names, we gain in numbers, with at least one additional individual who was engaged in Latin acrostic composition. This is a reminder that the narrative of intellectual life in late ninth-century England cannot be told entirely through the Life of King Alfred (which, after all, Asser ceased writing in 893). Who, therefore, were these people? Emily Thornbury has recently demonstrated that most individuals who composed poetry in Anglo-Saxon England—in either Latin or Old English—are unlikely to have done so as their primary occupation; being a poet in Anglo-Saxon England was not by itself a professional calling.[66] Instead, individuals who are known to have composed verses were also engaged in a variety of other social roles, with Thornbury noting four positions that were especially prominent: those of teacher, scribe, musician and courtier.[67] It should also be noted that if Latin literacy levels were anywhere near the state that King Alfred had claimed them to be in the prose preface to the Old English Pastoral Care (and there are good reasons to believe that the king was not exaggerating) then the number of people who were able to compose such literature was, presumably, fairly limited.[68] The Adal- spelling of the 'Adalstan' acrostic may indicate, as Lapidge argued, that the author of this poem had originated on the Continent.[69] Similarly, the reference to 'fields of foreign learning' in the second Bern acrostic may be a reference to the poet's origins. However, in both cases, another interpretation is possible: these features may be not an indication of the ethnicity of the author, but instead deliberate allusions to internationality, acknowledging either the education received by the poet, the form of the poems or the very language (Latin) in which they were written.[70] Such references to a literary heritage beyond the insular world may indicate the extent to which contemporaries self-consciously celebrated the multinational nature of the West Saxon royal court at this time. These poems otherwise give away little about who their authors were. It remains possible that John the Old Saxon composed one or both of the acrostics in praise of Alfred, but he is no more likely a candidate than other learned members of Alfred's entourage.[71]

There is a danger of embracing a sense of nihilism in all of this, yet there is something powerful to be gained from the multiple possibilities and perspectives that such uncertainty offers us. For one, it is striking that most other pieces of contemporary Latin literature, as they have been transmitted to us, are anonymous.[72] We do not know, for example, the identities of the individuals who wrote royal diplomas on behalf of the king, nor do we know the name of the main author of the 'Metrical Calendar of Hampson', who appears to have been writing in the first two decades of the tenth century and who, as I have discussed elsewhere, is likely to have been Irish.[73] This situation only heightens—and sits in contrast to—the extraordinary nature of the Old English literature in which

King Alfred is not the explicit subject, but rather the attributed author.[74] The potential reasons for the anonymity of such literature are manifold.[75] It may reflect, for example, the humility of the author, wishing not to detract from their message or the focus on their subjects. Alternatively, authorial identification may have been central to the occasion of the text's presentation to its intended subject but is simply not visible within—and perhaps not deemed worthy of inclusion alongside—the words of the text itself. Either way, the acrostics are seemingly anonymous as they are found in their respective manuscripts, suggesting that the scribes who enabled their survival either were unaware of who composed the verses or, more likely, were simply not concerned with authorship or its associated authority. For the scribe, such details did not contribute to the conceptualisation or function of the literature; the identity of the poet did little to enhance the truth of the poem's praise.

Anonymity, as Robert J. Griffin has observed, 'destabilizes our sense of the text',[76] which in the case of the acrostics is compounded by further uncertainties created by ambiguous syntax and scribal corruption. This is not to say, however, that the acrostics are of little value for historical and literary enquiry. Several important questions remain to be explored that could yield rich returns. With which traditions are these verses engaging? In what contexts and manners were they composed and consumed? How and why have these poems survived to this day? What might their appeal have been to late Anglo-Saxon audiences? In particular, the issues of the reception and transmission of Anglo-Latin poetry have received relatively little attention in modern scholarship, yet they are crucial if we wish to understand these texts as fully as possible within an Anglo-Saxon context. In turn, exploration of such issues opens up new opportunities for deepening our understanding of literary culture in late ninth- and early tenth-century England. Before closing, therefore, I wish to offer some brief thoughts that may move us towards answering some of these questions.

Perhaps the most important point to note is that no earlier Anglo-Saxon acrostics survive that praise secular rulers. This in itself is remarkable and it suggests that we may be dealing with a new literary fashion in the late ninth century. Earlier acrostic and figural poetry exists from Anglo-Saxon England, including efforts by Aldhelm, Boniface and Tatwine, much of which revels in the playfulness of the literary form and its potential for riddling.[77] Our acrostic poets may well have been aware and to an extent influenced by these earlier Anglo-Saxon verses—one thinks particularly of the onomastic puns in the 'Adalstan' poem—but the choice to praise a secular ruler in this poetic form aligns these texts most closely instead with earlier Carolingian Latin acrostics and, in turn, with the poetry of Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, who had composed extraordinarily complex figural poetry in praise of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.[78] These connections are worth pursuing further,[79] but here it suffices to note the clear parallel that these literary connections offer with the most substantial piece of Latin literature associated with King Alfred, namely Asser's biography of the king, which similarly was inspired by earlier Frankish literature, being modelled, as it was, on Einhard's Vita Karoli.[80]

For both the acrostics and Asser's text, much of their significance lies in their inherent royal connections—and here the recent arguments of David Pratt are important: as ecclesiastical life in ninth-century England suffered decline, Pratt has persuasively argued that by the end of the century the West Saxon polity was uniquely centred politically and culturally on the royal household. This development was, furthermore, accompanied by a new 'literate' court culture, in which there was an increased use of books within royal environments.[81] Although certain Anglo-Saxon kings in earlier periods had participated in literary pursuits,[82] Pratt makes a good argument for seeing a West Saxon court culture maturing hand-in-hand with a changing political landscape, encouraged by the royal household's increasing role as a centre of social life.[83]

Specifically in relation to verse, these conditions—possibly influenced by the presence of individuals familiar with Frankish and Old Norse praise poetry—allowed the development of such courtly literature.[84] The royal focus of the acrostics should not, therefore, be taken for granted. They are the products of a distinct historical development, before which it is quite possible that the very idea of composing Latin verses primarily for a courtly milieu (never mind those in praise of a king) may have been unfamiliar to many Anglo-Saxons.[85]

What, therefore, can we say of the specific circumstances in which these poems were composed and consumed? First, it should be noted that neither set of acrostics may survive in its original form, as it was (presumably) first presented to the king. As we have seen, there are a number of errors in the Bern verses that are likely to be the result of poor copying, either on the part of the scribe of the surviving witness or on the part of an earlier exemplar; the 'Adalstan' poem is less problematic in its extant form, but its modest position on the last folio of a manuscript is perhaps not where we might expect a poem to be displayed for its initial presentation. The fact that an individual copied out the Alfredian acrostics in such a state is in itself fascinating—evidently the value of these texts did not necessarily derive from comprehension of their verses—but such corruption does conceal the possible contexts in which they were composed. Nevertheless, when we remember that the Bern acrostics are the only Latin verses known to have been composed in England during Alfred's reign, it seems probable that these poems were highly prized and, like most medieval praise poetry, subject to public presentation.[86] We may go as far to imagine that they were entwined with exchanges of gifts, perhaps serving as inscriptions for donations of books, or perhaps as gifts in themselves.[87] Such verses offered a demonstration of praise for the king and, if they were not anonymous, of learned skill for the poets, while any third party patrons and recipients would have benefitted simply from association with such cultural activity. Moreover, we must expect that in the presentation and consumption of these poems, they would have been both seen and heard. Acrostics set in hexameters are both aural and visual artefacts; one needs to see the words to appreciate the (otherwise hidden) structure, whilst its metrical rhythm would be lost without oral performance.[88] As such, one may draw comparison with the ritualised ceremonies in which the king issued diplomas to beneficiaries. In both cases, the power of performance derived from both recitation and the presentation of the physical text.[89]

By comprehending both the specific cultural associations that these poems invoked and the contexts in which they were composed and received, we can begin to glean the social values that they may have held for contemporaries. Much more could and should be said in these regards, but in short, these texts are likely to have been deeply public performances of cultural aspiration.[90] To close, however, I wish to offer one final thought on the ways in which these verses can be understood in an Anglo-Saxon setting. This relates to the naming of the ruler within the acrostics and telestichs of the poems. On one level, the clear manner in which the names of Alfred, Æthelstan and 'Iohannes' flank the main bodies of the texts would have enabled the participation and appreciation of audiences with varying levels of Latin literacy: even if one could not comprehend the meanings of the verses, the overall focus of the poems is unambiguous. On another level, such naming of individuals on artefacts was a practice prevalent throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, be it on coinage, jewellery or books, and it thus may have appealed for its general aesthetic. However, a more powerful significance may also be at work. This is suggested by the remarkable Old English poem Solomon and Saturn I, which has been dated variously to the late ninth and early tenth centuries.[91] This poem is a polemic on the importance of learning and wisdom through the imagining of a dialogue between the individuals of Solomon and Saturn. The focus for its vernacular author is the pater noster prayer, which he or she explored orthographically, spelling out the words 'pater' and 'noster' and telling us what qualities each letter of these words embodies. The emphasis is

very much on spelling, and behind this focus is a belief that knowledge of individual letters provides understanding of the nature of the words that they form, that the value of an object can be explored through the very letters that comprise the spelling of its name. Its editor, Daniel Anlezark, has already noted that this poem fits into a distinctively Anglo-Saxon interest in the power of writing, which manifests itself elsewhere in word-puzzles and, indeed, acrostics.[92] For us, Solomon and Saturn I points towards a way in which some individuals may have conceptualised acrostic poetry: acrostic verses may have been not only moments of praise and play, but also potent statements of the power of etymology and orthography. Thus the acrostic form, although challenging to achieve, was highly adaptable for a variety of audiences. Limited literacy was not an obstacle in engaging with these texts, yet they could also offer something more for advanced readers seeking greater conceptual nourishment. It is perhaps no wonder, therefore, that at the West Saxon royal court multiple poets took inspiration from this form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:
The research that led to this publication was funded thanks to a doctoral scholarship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. First and foremost I would like to thank Rosalind Love and Neil Wright for their suggestions, guidance and stimulating discussion of this topic. I would also like to thank Albert Fenton, Simon Keynes, Elizabeth Tyler, and the journal editors and reviewers for their incisive feedback on earlier forms of this work. Any remaining errors are my own.

---

[1] For surveys of the extant material, see Michael Lapidge, ‘Schools, learning and literature in tenth-century England’, *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di Studi sull’alto medioevo*, 38 (1991), 951–98, repr. in his Anglo-Latin Literature 900–1066 (London, 1993), pp. 1–48; Michael Lapidge, ‘Latin learning in ninth-century England’, in his Anglo-Latin Literature 600–899 (London, 1996), pp. 409–54.

[2] Michael Lapidge, ‘Some Latin poems as evidence for the reign of Athelstan’, Anglo-Saxon England, 9 (1981), 61–98, repr. in and cited from his Anglo-Latin Literature 900–1066 (London, 1993), pp. 49–86. As an associate of King Alfred, John the Old Saxon witnessed several extant charters; he was also appointed abbot of Athelney. For a summary of his life, see Michael Lapidge, ‘John the Old Saxon (fl. c.885–904)’, in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford, 2004) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/52277> [accessed 9 April 2017].

[3] Gernot R. Wieland, ‘A new look at the poem “Archalis clamare triumuir”’, in Insignis Sophiae Arcator: Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Michael Herren on his 65th Birthday, ed. Gernot R. Wieland, Carin Ruff and Ross G. Arthur, Publications of the Journal of Medieval Latin 6 (Turnhout, 2006), pp. 178–92.

[4] Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series 15 (Toronto, 2014), no. 794 (p. 567). For a recent discussion of this gospelbook, see David Pratt, ‘Kings and books in Anglo-Saxon England’, Anglo-Saxon England, 43 (2014), 297–377 (pp. 313–19).

[5] W. M. Lindsay, Early Welsh Script (Oxford, 1912), pp. 10–16; David N. Dumville, Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History 3 (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 79, n. 110.

[6] For a full discussion of these Old English additions, see Herbert Meritt, ‘Old English entries in a manuscript at Bern’, Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 33 (1934), 343–51.

[7] It should be noted that while the scribe represents the text as also having telestichs, in reality not all verses close with a word that ends with the required letter. For several lines, the spelling of the last word has been jumbled (in most cases spelt backwards) to help with the task of achieving the telestich.

[8] Carmina medii aevi maximam partem inedita, ed. Hermannus Hagenus (Bern, 1877), p. 11; Poetae Latini aeui Carolini, ed. Karolus Strecker, MGH Poetae 4.2–3 (Berlin, 1923), p. 1078; Lindsay, Early Welsh Script, pp. 10–11; Lapidge, ‘Some Latin poems’, p. 70.

[9] It is worth noting that the ‘a’ in ‘fletas’ may have been written over a ‘us’ abbreviation (as found in the line above with ‘letus’). Thus, the scribe may initially have written ‘fletus’.

[10] There is also a precedent for beginning a hexameter with ex arce by Martial: Epigrammata X.74, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Martialis: Epigrammata, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Stuttgart, 1990), p. 344, line 11. This emendation has previously been suggested by both Hagenus and Strecker.

[11] All three editors preceding Lapidge also emended reddes to redis.
[12] Lapidge, in contrast, interpreted portendere as a passive imperative.
[13] No earlier edition contains this emendation. My thanks to Neil Wright for this suggestion.
[14] Hagenus and Strecker similarly identified 'faedel' as an anagram of the king's name.
[15] Here I disagree with the interpretation of Lindsay, who believed that the composer and scribe must be the same individual, since 'we can hardly imagine such sorry stuff being ever transcribed' (Early Welsh Script, p. 11). To come to such a conclusion is, in my view, to misunderstand the myriad values of the written word in early medieval societies.
[16] Though it should be noted that for the acrostic and telestich of the eighth to thirteenth lines, the scribe spells Alfred's name in two ways, with the acrostic beginning with 'e' but the telestich beginning with 'æ'.
[17] While Hagenus, Lindsay and Lapidge presented the acrostics as two distinct poems, Strecker published the verses as one entry, but with the two passages being numbered seemingly as two stanzas of a single text.
[18] Matt. xxv.14–30.
[19] For further details, see n. 50 below and associated text.
[20] In the first seven lines: arce astrifera; etiam ut; mundi arserit; formasti his; gnarum optime; Christe ipse. In the following six lines: ecce aptas.
[21] These are gratiaĕ, rectĕ and doctĕ.
[22] Gneuss and Lapidge, Handlist, no. 661 (p. 506). For a discussion of this manuscript and its contents, see Mechthild Gretsch, The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 25 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 244–47.
[23] Bernhard Bischoff, 'Bannita: I. Syllaba, 2. Littera', in Latin Script and Letters A.D. 400–900, ed. John J. O'Meara and Bernd Naumann (Leiden, 1976), pp. 207–12 (p. 247).
[24] Gretsch, Intellectual Foundations, pp. 344–47, 350–51 and 368–70.
[25] T. A. M. Bishop, 'An early example of Insular-Caroline', Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society, 4 (1964–68), 396–400 (p. 399).
[26] David N. Dumville, 'English Square Minuscule script: the background and earliest phases', Anglo-Saxon England, 16 (1987), 147–79 (pp. 173–78).
[27] Gulielmus D. Macray, Catalogi codicum manuscriptorum Bibliothecæ Bodleianæ, 5 vols (Oxford, 1862–1900), II, 352; Montague Rhodes James, On the Abbey of S. Edmund at Bury, Publications of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 28 (Cambridge, 1895), p. 45; J. Armitage Robinson, The Times of Saint Dunstan: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in the Michaelmas Term, 1922 (Oxford, 1923), p. 69; Bénédictins du Bouveret, Colophons de manuscrits occidentaux des origins au XVIe siècle: tome I, Spicilegii Friburgensis Subsidia 2 (Fribourg, 1965), p. 181; Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', pp. 60–61.
[28] Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', p. 61.
[29] Horace, Carmina IV.6, ed. Fridericus Vollmer, Q. Horati Flacci carmina, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Leipzig, 1912), p. 125, line 1.
[30] Ovid, Tristia III.1, ed. R. Ehwald and Fr. W. Levy, P. Ovidius Naso: Vol. III Fasc. 1: Tristium Libri V Ibis Ex Ponto Libri IV, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Leipzig, 1922), p. 56, line 78. Numerous examples could be given for Tacitus; see, for instance, his Annales I.43 and III.6, ed. H. Heubner, P. Cornelii Taciti: Libri qui supersunt: Vol. 1: Annales, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Stuttgart, 1983), pp. 26 and 95.
[31] Isidore, Etymologiae XII.7, ed. W. M. Lindsay, Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum siue originum libri XX, Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), II. For knowledge of Isidore's text in Anglo-Saxon England, see Michael Lapidge, The Anglo-Saxon Library (Oxford, 2005), p. 311; Mercedes Salvador-Bello, Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata, Medieval European Studies 17 (Morgantown, WV, 2015), pp. 63–73.
[32] Wieland, 'New look', p. 185.
[33] Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', p. 61.
[34] Samantha Zacher, 'Multilingualism at the court of King Æthelstan: Latin praise poetry and The Battle of Brunanburh', in Conceptualizing Multilingualism in England, c.800–c.1250, ed. Elizabeth M. Tyler, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 27 (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 77–103 (p. 88). Two witnesses to Carta dirige gressus survive, both of which are evidently corrupt. The reference to perfectus gloriosus is only found in the more extensive of the two witnesses (London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.ii, fols 10^{v}–11^{v}). Note that the manuscript reading is in fact 'perfecta gloriosa', which seems likely to be erroneous. For a reconstruction of the poem, see Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', p. 86. Lapidge emended the text to per facta gloriosus, but I prefer perfectus gloriosus. Interestingly, Carta dirige gressus also includes the word cliton ('prince'), a rare Grecism that is otherwise found in a contemporary charter from Winchester that was witnessed by King Æthelstan, S 1417 (as catalogued by P. H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 8 (London, 1968), revised version at <http://www.esawyer.org.uk> [accessed 9 April 2017]). For an edition, see Charters of the New Minster, Winchester, ed. Sean Miller, Anglo-Saxon Charters 9 (Oxford, 2001), no. 9. Cliton can earlier be found in

Isidore of Seville's Etymologiae and Alcuin's De orthographia, in both of which the authors state that it is the Greek for gloriosus (Isidore, Etymologiae, X.126, ed. Lindsay, I; Alcuin, De Orthographia, ed. Sandra Bruni, Millennio Medievale 2 (Florence, 1997), p. 18). Thus in its use of ortodoxus, the 'Adalstan' acrostic draws on vocabulary and concepts that can elsewhere be identified in texts emanating from King Æthelstan's royal circle.

[35] Compare, for example, Bede's reference to the agmen electorum in heaven in his Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum IV.14, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Text (Oxford, 1969), p. 378.

[36] Lapidge understood archalis as a neologism based on the Greek *αρχη* ('sovereignty, command') and I have retained this reading. One wonders whether the poet, in employing (and possibly inventing) this word, was also alluding to the biblical arca, which is used to denote both the Ark of the Covenant and Noah's ark; thus we may wish to translate this term as 'covenanted'. Such an allusion would have been particularly poignant in an early tenth-century Anglo-Saxon context, given the fact that since the late ninth century the royal dynasty had claimed descent from an apocryphal fourth son of Noah who was born on the ark: see Daniel Anlezark, Water and Fire: The Myth of the Flood in Anglo-Saxon England, Manchester Medieval Literature (Manchester, 2006), ch. 5. This would not be mutually exclusive with a Greek-derived interpretation, but it would offer an additional layer of meaning.

[37] It is quite reasonable to believe that the poet employed triumuir as a general if recherché term for a leader, with its Roman associations in mind but regardless of its specific classical meaning. If the poet was, however, referring to a rule of three of some kind, one possible context can be found in the second Anglo-Saxon royal ordo, which was possibly adapted in Æthelstan's reign to refer to the king's rulership over three peoples: the Saxons, the Mercians and the Northumbrians. For a summary and bibliography, see George Garnett, 'Coronation', in The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England, ed. Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg, 2nd ed. (Chichester, 2014), pp. 125–26. Another (not mutually exclusive) interpretation offered by Zacher is that triumuir may be a hint to the audience of three epithets for Æthelstan that are embedded within the verses: 'Multilingualism', p. 91.

[38] William of Malmesbury, Gesta regum Anglorum II.133, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings, Oxford Medieval Texts, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998) I, 210–11.

[39] Asser, Life, ch. 78, ed. W. H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred, Together with the Annals of Saint* Neots, Erroneously Ascribed to Asser (Oxford, 1904), p. 63; trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, Alfred t*he Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 93.

[40] David Howlett has offered further evidence for John's authorship, based on what he believes to be a hidden signature within the second Bern acrostic. I am not convinced by Howlett's identification, which is based on the use of the letters i, o, a, n, e and s. Howlett overstates the regularity with which these letters are employed and presented within the manuscript, while he does not take into account the scribal errors that I and other scholars have suggested: British Books in Biblical Style (Dublin, 1997), p. 496.

[41] An exception potentially being Zacher, who has recently discussed the 'Adalstan' acrostic alongside poetry of Æthelstan's reign: 'Multilingualism', esp. pp. 86–90. Sarah Foot is notably cautious in her discussion of the poem's authorship: Æthelstan: The First King of England, Yale English Monarchs Series (London, 2011), pp. 32–33 and 110–12.

[42] Caroline Brett, 'A Breton pilgrim in England in the reign of King Æthelstan', in France and the British Isles in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Gillian Jondorf and D. N. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 43–70 (pp. 49–50).

[43] Wieland, 'New look'.

[44] Wieland, 'New look', p. 184.

[45] Zacher, 'Multilingualism', p. 87.

[46] An interest in Greek is also perhaps reflected in the use of sophismata and petrinus (see Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', p. 61; Zacher, 'Multilingualism', p. 88). In both cases, however, it should be noted that a number of prominent earlier Latin authors employed these words, thus their Greek associations were perhaps weaker for the poet.

[47] In addition to the metrical utility of these instances of tmesis, Zacher also argues for their part in the sophisticated wordplay of the poem: 'Multilingualism', p. 90.

[48] For a general introduction to Medieval Latin metrics, see Dag Norberg, Introduction à l' étude de la versification latine médiévale, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 5 (Stockholm, 1958), trans. as An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Latin Versification, trans. Grant C. Roti and Jacqueline de la Chapelle Skubly (Washington, DC, 2004). To date there has been relatively limited discussion in print of early medieval Latin metrics. Concerning Anglo-Saxon and Frankish material, see, for example, Andy Orchard, The Poetic Art of Aldhelm, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 8 (Cambridge, 1994); Neil Wright, 'The metrical art(s) of Bede', in Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies

in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe and A. Orchard, Toronto Old English Series, 2 vols (Toronto, 2005), I, 150–70; Peter Christian Jacobsen, 'Die Vita s. Germani Heirics von Auxerre': Untersuchungen zu Prosodie und Metrik', in *L'école carolingienne d'Auxerre de Murethach* à Remi 830–908, ed. Dominique Iogna-Prat, Colette Jeudy and Guy Lobrichon (Paris, 1991), pp. 329–351; Jean Soubiran, 'Prosodie et métrique des Bella Pansiacae Urbis d'Abbon', Journal des savants (1965), 204–331; Michael Lapidge, The Cult of St Swithun, Winchester Studies 4.ii: The Anglo-Saxon Minsters of Winchester (Oxford, 2003), in passim; Jean-Yves Tilliette, 'Métrique carolingienne et métrique auxerroise: Quelques réflexions sur la Vita sancti Germani d'Heiric d'Auxerre', in *L'école carolingienne d'Auxerre*, pp. 313–27; Seppo Heikkinen, 'Poet, scholar, trickster: Israel the Grammarian and his "Versus de arte metrica"', Journal of Medieval Latin, 25 (2015), 81–110.

[49] The most unusual prosodic element of the poem is the long first syllable of sophismata in line seven. More often one would expect this syllable to be short, although Aldhelm comparably employed sofos with a long first syllable. Frithegod, meanwhile, used sophismata with the exact same scansion and in the exact same position in a hexameter as it is found in the 'Adalstan' acrostic. See Aldhelm, Enigmata C, ed. Rudolfus Ehwald, Aldhelmi Opera, MGH Auct. ant. 15 (Berlin, 1919), p. 149, line 83; Frithegod, Breuiloquium uitae Wilfridi, ed. Alistair Campbell, Frithegodi Monachi Breuiloquium Vitæ Beati Wilfredi et Wulfstani Cantoris Narratio Metrica de Sancto Swithuno, Thesaurus Mundi 1 (Zurich, 1950), p. 57, line 1294. As to the single instance of elision, this occurs on line five with 'altam in'.

[50] For early medieval attitudes to hiatus, see Seppo Heikkinen, 'Elision and hiatus in early Anglo-Latin grammar and verse', in Outposts of Historical Corpus Linguistics: From the Helsinki Corpus to a Proliferation of Resources, ed. Jukka Tyrkkö, Matti Kilpiö, Terttu Nevalainen and Matti Rissanen (Helsinki, 2012) <http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/series/volumes/10/heikkinen> [accessed 9 April 2017]. As to monosyllabic words at the close of hexameters, examples of this can be found in the verses of, for example, Aldhelm, Heiric of Auxerre, Walafrid Strabo and Milo of Saint Amand. Others, however, such as Alcuin, Theodulf of Orléans, Sedulius Scottus and Abbo of Saint-German, were more concerned to avoid such line endings. See Orchard, Poetic Art, p. 94; Tilliette, 'Métrique carolingienne', p. 322.

[51] For a survey of Medieval Latin acrostics, see Ulrich Ernst, Carmen Figuratum: Geschichte des Figurengedichts von den antiken Ursprüngen bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters, Pictura et Poësis 1 (Cologne, 1991).

[52] Foot, Æthelstan, p. 111. This is a point also stressed by Wieland, 'New look', pp. 179–80.

[53] See Janet L. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a royal family: reflections on Alfred from Asser, chapter 2', in People and Places in Northern Europe, 500–1600, ed. Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 47–66, repr. in her Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald, and Others, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, 1999), III (pp. 63–64).

[54] More specifically, there is no contemporary evidence to confirm the occasion of Æthelstan's investiture, which William of Malmesbury described as taking place during his grandfather's reign. See Wieland, 'New look', pp. 180–83; Foot, Æthelstan, pp. 31–33.

[55] Rex pius Æðelstan, ed. Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', p. 83, line 4.

[56] For example, S 441 (Winchester, Old Minster) and 442 (Glastonbury). For further recent discussion of the imperial themes of Edward's and Æthelstan's reigns, see Francis Leneghan, 'Translatio imperii: the Old English Orosius and the rise of Wessex', Anglia, 133 (2015), 656–705; cf. George Molyneaux, 'Why were some tenth-century English kings presented as rulers of Britain?', Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 21 (2011), 59–91 (esp. pp. 62–63).

[57] William Schipper, 'Hrabanus Maurus in Anglo-Saxon England: In honorem sanctae crucis', in Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald, ed. Stephen Baxter, Catherine E. Karkov, Janet L. Nelson and David Pelteret, Studies in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland (Farnham, 2009), pp. 283–98 (pp. 285–86). An important multilingual context, meanwhile, is offered by the small pieces of Old English and Old Norse poetry of Æthelstan's reign, as Zacher has recently discussed: 'Multilingualism'. See also Matthew Townend, 'Pre-Cnut praise-poetry in Viking Age England', The Review of English Studies, 51 (2000), 349–70.

[58] S 372 (Winchester, Old Minster), 373 (Winchester, Old Minster) and 374 (Winchester, New Minster).

[59] Wieland, 'New look', pp. 188–89.

[60] Isa. xl.3; Mal. iii.1; Matt. iii.1–3; Matt. xi.9–10; Lk. i.36; Lk. xli.2; Lk. xli.67–79; Jn. i.6–7. These references are taken from *John the Baptist's Prayer, or, the Descent into Hell fr*om the Exeter Book: Text, Translation and Critical Study, ed. and trans. M. R. Rambaran-Olm, Anglo-Saxon Studies 21 (Cambridge, 2014), p. 62, n. 30.

[61] Rambaran-Olm, *John the Baptist's Prayer*, pp. 138–40.

[62] For this suggestion, see above, n. 36.

[63] Beliales is, as Wieland identified, a reference to the "Canticum Davidis" of II Sam. xxii.2–5: 'New look', pp. 186–87.

[64] Walter Ullmann, The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship, The Birkbeck Lectures 1968–9 (London, 1969), pp. 71–77.
[65] Foot, Æthelstan, p. 219.
[66] Emily V. Thornbury, Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 88 (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 34–35.
[67] Thornbury, Becoming a Poet, p. 39.
[68] Old English Pastoral Care, ed. Henry Sweet, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral* Care: with an English Translation, the Latin Text, Notes and an Introduction, Early English Text Society 45, 50 (London, 1871), pp. 2–8; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, pp. 124–26. This text may date to as early as c. 890: Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, p. 124. Note that there has been considerable debate concerning the levels of literacy in ninth-century England. For the authoritative assessment, see Lapidge, 'Latin learning'; cf. Jennifer Morrish, 'King Alfred's letter as a source on learning in England', in Studies in Earlier Old English Prose, ed. P. E. Szarmach (Albany, NY, 1986), pp. 87–207.
[69] Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems', pp. 62–65. Interestingly, as Lapidge points out, the king's name is elsewhere spelt as 'Adalstan' in S 394, a charter dated to 925 that survives in the archive of St Augustine's, Canterbury (for an edition, see Charters, *of St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury and Min*ster-in-Thanet, ed. S. E. Kelly, Anglo-Saxon Charters 4 (Oxford, 1995), no. 26). Note that the earliest extant witness of this charter dates to the thirteenth century. Due to this distinct spelling, Lapidge suggested that the charter had been produced by a continental scribe. The fact that 'Adalstan' elsewhere thus appears in a document from the 920s only adds to the impression that the acrostic is potentially a work of the tenth rather than the late ninth century.
[70] More specifically, Howlett has suggested that 'fields of foreign learning' may be an allusion to the language and form of the poem: British Books, p. 497.
[71] Here I should stress, given the thematic similarities the Bern acrostics possess with other Alfredian cultural output, that I believe that the poet was familiar with the intellectual and social world of King Alfred's court. I discuss this issue further in 'King Alfred and the Sibyl: sources of praise in the Latin acrostic verses of Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 671' (forthcoming).
[72] The most notable exception being Asser's biography of King Alfred.
[73] For discussion of contemporary royal diplomas, see Simon Keynes, 'The West Saxon charters of King Æthelwulf and his sons', English Historical Review, 109 (1994), 1109–49; Ben Snook, The Anglo-Saxon Chancery: The History, Language and Production of Anglo-Saxon Charters from Alfred to Edgar, Anglo-Saxon Studies 28 (Woodbridge, 2015), pp. 29–56. For discussion of the 'Metrical Calendar of Hampson', see Robert Gallagher, 'An Irish scholar and England: the "metrical calendar of Hampson"', in Insular Cultures: Early Medieval England and Ireland, ed. M. Clayton, A. Jorgensen and J. Mullins, ISAS Essays in Anglo-Saxon Studies 7 (forthcoming).
[74] For the significance of the 'authorship' of Alfredian literature, see David Pratt, The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 4th Series 67 (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 130–34. See also Nicole Guenther Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old* English Boethius (Albany, NY, 2005). Note that recently there has been considerable debate concerning the authorship of 'Alfredian' vernacular literature: M. R. Godden, 'Did King Alfred write anything?', Medium Ævum, 76 (2007), 1–23; Malcolm Godden, 'The Alfredian project and its aftermath: rethinking the literary history of the ninth and tenth centuries', Proceedings of the British Academy, 162 (2009), 93–122; cf. Janet Bately, 'Did King Alfred actually translate anything? The integrity of the Alfredian canon revisited', Medium Aevum, 78 (2009), 189–215; Janet M. Bately, 'Alfred as author and translator', in A Companion to Alfred the Great, ed. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 58 (Leiden, 2014), pp. 113–42; David Pratt, 'Problems of authorship and audience in the writings of King Alfred the Great', in Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World, ed. Patrick Wormald and Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 162–91.
[75] Authorial anonymity and authority are subjects that have received considerable attention in medieval studies. See, for example, A. J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, 1988); Ernst Hellgardt, 'Anomymität [sic] und Autornamen zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit in der deutschen Literatur des elften und zwölften Jahrhunderts. Mit Vorbemerkungen zu einigen Autornamen der altenglischen Dichtung,' in Autor und Autorschaft im Mittelalter: Kolloquium Meissen 1995, ed. Elizabeth Andersen et al. (Tübingen, 1998), pp. 46–72; Conrad Leyser, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford, 2000), pp. 101–28; Mary Swan, 'Authorship and anonymity', in A Companion to Old English Literature, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 11 (Oxford, 2001), pp. 71–83; Thomas A. Bredehoft, Authors, Audiences, and Old English Verse, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series 5 (Toronto, 2009), pp. 3–38.
[76] Robert J. Griffin, 'Working with anonymity: a theory of theory vs. archive', Literature Compass, 4 (2007), 463–69 (p. 467).

[77] Aldhelm, Carmen de uirginitate praefatio, ed. Ehwald, Aldhelmi Opera, pp. 350–2; Aldhelm, Enigmata praefatio, pp. 97–9; Tatwine, Enigmata, ed. Maria De Marco, Variae Collectiones Ænigmatum Merovingicae Ætatis, CCSL 133 (Turnhout, 1968), pp. 165–208; Boniface, Enigmata, ed. Maria De Marco, Variae Collectiones Ænigmatum Merovingicae Ætatis, pp. 273–343; Boniface, 'Poem to Nithardus', ed. M. R. James, 'St Boniface's Poem to Nithardus', English Historical Review, 29 (1914), 94. For discussion of the acrostics of these authors, see Orchard, Poetic Art, pp. 62, 165–66, 196, 199–200, 242 and 248–49. For more on Boniface's acrostics, also see Ernst, Carmen Figuratum, pp. 160–67.
[78] See Mary Garrison, 'The emergence of Carolingian Latin literature and the court of Charlemagne (780–814)', in Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 111–40 (p. 122); Ernst, Carmen Figuratum, pp. 95–142, 168–221 and in passim. For more on the influence of Porphyrius on Alcuin, see Dieter Schaller, 'Die karolingischen Figurengedichte des Cod. Bern. 212', in Medium Aevum Vivum: Festschrift für Walther Bulst, ed. Hans Robert Jauss and Dieter Schaller (Heidelberg, 1960), pp. 22–47; Peter Godman, Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry (Oxford, 1987), pp. 56–59. For an edition of Porphyrius' figural poetry, see Publilii Optatiani Porfyrii carmina, ed. Iohannes Polara, Corpus scriptorum Latinorum Paravianum, 2 vols (Turin, 1973).
[79] I explore this theme further in 'King Alfred and the Sibyl'.
[80] As first pointed out by *Asser's Life*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 3, 88 and 89.
[81] Pratt, 'Kings and books', pp. 305–10.
[82] Most notably, Aldfrith, who was king of Northumbria between 685 and 704/5. For a recent discussion of his learning, see Colin A. Ireland, 'Where was King Aldfrith of Northumbria educated? An exploration of seventh-century insular learning', Traditio, 70 (2015), 29–73.
[83] Comparison here is pertinent with D. H. Green, Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature 800–1300 (Cambridge, 1994), esp. p. 275.
[84] For the development of courtly poetry in Anglo-Saxon England, see Thornbury, Becoming a Poet, pp. 83–94; see also Townend, 'Pre-Cnut praise-poetry'.
[85] A point that is further compounded by the recent work of Thornbury, who identifies John the Old Saxon as the earliest named individual known to have composed poetry within the milieu of an Anglo-Saxon court: Becoming a Poet, p. 85.
[86] See Green, Medieval Listening and Reading, pp. 22, 62–63 and 213.
[87] For poetry as gift in Anglo-Saxon England, see Thornbury, Becoming a Poet, ch. 3.
[88] For the literate qualities of acrostics, see Green, Medieval Listening and Reading, pp. 131–34, 180 and 356, n. 139.
[89] For a recent discussion of the ritual surrounding royal diplomas, see Simon Keynes, 'Church councils, royal assemblies, and Anglo-Saxon royal diplomas', in Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Brian W. Schneider, Publications of the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies 13 (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 17–139. See also Charles Insley, 'Rhetoric and ritual in late Anglo- Saxon charters', in Medieval Legal Process: Physical, Spoken and Written Performance in the Middle Ages, ed. Marco Mostert and P. S. Barnwell, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 22 (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 109–21; Levi Roach, 'Public rites and public wrongs: ritual aspects of diplomas in tenth- and eleventh-century England', Early Medieval Europe, 19 (2011), 182–203.
[90] These points are considered more fully in my 'King Alfred and the Sibyl'.
[91] The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn, ed. and trans. Daniel Anlezark, Anglo-Saxon Texts 7 (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 49–57, argues for an early tenth-century origin, perhaps at Glastonbury; Patrick P. O'Neill, 'On the date, provenance and relationship of the "Solomon and Saturn" dialogues', Anglo-Saxon England, 26 (1997), 139–68, argues for an origin at Alfred's court.
[92] Solomon and Saturn, ed. Anlezark, pp. 30 and 52.