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Multilingualism in Medieval Britain: Beyond English, Latin and French

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Hellenic Language and Thought in Pre-Conquest England

Abstract: Bede, reflecting on the success of the Canterbury school set up by Theodore of Tarsus remarked: “some of their students still alive today are as proficient in Latin and Greek as in their native tongue” [trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 335]. By the time we get to the court of Alfred two hundred years later, there had been a famous decline in learning from which Greek, as a language, had not yet recovered. However, there remained a strong interest in Greek as a sacred language in liturgies, prayers and magical charms, and later in hermeneutic poetry. Theodore’s influence was not limited to Greek Language, he also brought knowledge of Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius. The influence of Greek mystical theology would find fuller expression in the translations associated with the court of King Alfred via contact with the Carolingian court, but the seeds for this reception in England may already have been sown. This paper will outline the evidence for the use of Greek language in a variety of contexts, including a charm for the staunching of blood, and it will examine the extent of the influence of Greek patristic thinking in Old English texts including both clerical prose and secular poetry.

Keywords: Greek, Maximus the Confessor, Theodore of Tarsus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Lateran Council

1. Introduction

The study of Greek in early medieval England was at its apogee in the 8th century when the language could be studied at the school of Theodore and Hadrian in Canterbury. Both men were native speakers. We know that Theodore came from Tarsus, and Hadrian from a Greek-speaking area of Africa, although it is not known exactly where (Bede, *EH* 4.1, Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 329). Such a school was exceptional at the time; according to Michael Herren, “Theodore and Hadrien

are among the very few names known to us of Greek-speakers teaching Greek in a western location in the early Middle Ages” (Herren 2015, 66). The dearth of Greek grammars, not just in England, but in Europe, attests to the difficulties for any would-be learner of Greek at this time. Those few available were either Greek translations of Latin grammars, verb lists of Greek and Latin verbs, or other Latin grammars from which some knowledge of Greek grammar could be deduced. For full details of the grammars available in Europe see Bischoff 1951, 39–40; Berschin 1988; Bodden 1988, 224–226; Dionisotti 1982, 111–141 and 1988, 1–56; Riché 1988, 143–168; Herren 2015, 65–83.

It was not impossible to learn Greek without a grammar, however, as Bede’s own success indicates. He taught himself to read using copies of the gospels in Greek and Latin and mastered his understanding to such a point that he was able to comment on the meaning of Greek words and allude “to the difference between the senses of Greek and Latin texts” (Herren 2015, 78; see also Dionisotti 1982). For Bede and other scholars, the knowledge of Greek was wanted for biblical exegesis as this was the language of the gospels, and indeed of the Septuagint, the version of the Old Testament quoted in the New Testament.¹ These scholars would require the ability to perceive nuance of meaning, but they would not have needed to *speak* Greek. On the continent, where such a need must have arisen, there were glossaries with everyday phrases that would have been useful for travellers. These date from the tenth to eleventh centuries (Herren 2015, 68). However, although there do not seem to have been any satisfactory grammars in England, there were glossaries and word lists available to scholars, and there is a significant amount of Greek in the surviving manuscripts. According to Catherine Bodden, “more than half of the extant manuscripts from Anglo-Saxon England, both vernacular and Latin, contain Greek” (1988, 217). This, Bodden calculates, equates to somewhere between six and seven hundred manuscripts (1988, 217 n.). These manuscripts show that where an understanding of Greek grammar was rare, Greek vocabulary was more familiar, and indeed a subject of interest. Bodden also demonstrates that the range of Greek recorded went beyond the biblical, encompassing “grammar, dialectic, mathematics, liturgy and natural history” (1988, 220). The instances of Greek in these manuscripts are not only of classical Greek, we find examples of contemporary Byzantine pronunciation, which we can adduce when Greek words are copied phonetically into Latin or Old English, as we will see. This suggests some contact, either direct or indirect, with contemporary Greek speakers.

The significance of Greek in early medieval England is not exclusively tied to an understanding of the language, but also to ideas. Scholars have recently demonstrated evidence of Greek mystical theology in Old English texts, much of it associated with the Alfredian corpus and Alfred’s programme of translation (Treschow 1993; Anlezark 2017; Ponirakis 2021). Whilst these ideas can be demonstrably linked to the work of Eriugena, the Irish translator of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor at the court of Charles the Bald, they may

have found fertile ground in an England influenced by the legacy of Theodore of Tarsus, a man who, there is strong reason to believe, knew Maximus the Confessor personally (Lapidge 1995, 22–23; Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 225).

The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the use and status of Greek language and thought in England between the eighth and eleventh centuries, beginning with the arrival of Theodore and Hadrian. We will consider the evidence for Greek thought in Old English texts which can be seen to reflect the writings of Maximus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and others. We will then consider evidence for knowledge of the Greek language beyond the Canterbury school with a consideration of the use of Greek in the liturgy and other sacred functions. The sacred nature of Greek leads to its use in magical charms, which have a particular interest as they demonstrate the symbolic importance of Greek in a way that treads a fine line between the mystical and the magical, and indeed between the clerical and the lay world. Often dismissed as little more than gibberish, we will look at three instances of a charm for the stemming of blood, commonly known as the ‘nosebleed charm’ which shows a sounder knowledge of Greek than has hitherto been supposed as well as a suggestion of contact with contemporary Greek speakers, before finishing with a brief look at the use of Greek in the hermeneutic style in the 10th century.

2. Beginnings: on Theodore, learning, and the introduction of Maximus the Confessor and Basil the Great to England

Elements of Byzantine influence were apparent in England from quite an early stage. In 674, Benedict Biscop, who had spent several years training at Lérins, erected a monastery at Wearmouth which he had built by continental craftsmen, and a second house at Jarrow; these were decorated with Byzantine style canvases depicting “scenes from the gospels and the apocalypse” (Deanesly 1985, 68). It was at this time that the Byzantine practice of venerating the cross as an instrument of devotion reached Northumbria (Mayr-Harting 1991, 187; Colgrave and Mynors 1969, xxviii), the fervour of which is clear in Bede’s account of St Oswald seizing the cross “in the ardour of his faith” [EH 3.2, trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 215]. This is the environment which produced the Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood* (see Flight 2020, 72–88; Deanesly 1985, 70–74). *The Dream of the Rood* is a poem of devotion describing a vision of the cross which Flight has argued shows evidence of the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, especially in the use of apophatic (or negative) discourse, (Flight 2020). Henry Mayr-Harting remarks on the influence of Byzantine piety in the 9th century Book of Nunnaminster, possibly in the instigation to contemplation of Christ’s suffering on the cross, “the piercing of Christ’s side, the blood and water which had flowed out as a healing medicine for man in the fallen condition, were themes to which the Byzantine prayer books, in particular, constantly returned” (1991, 188).² These are traces

of a subtle Hellenistic influence in both the visual representations of faith and in approaches to piety. Waves of Greek refugees settling in Rome and Southern Italy meant that those Anglo-Saxons who visited Rome may have been exposed to aspects of Greek culture and practice (Cavallo 1995, 63; Moore 1937). Indeed, there were so many travellers from England making lengthy stays that a *Schola Saxonum* was established in Rome, which, according to Tim Flight, was the size of a hamlet (2017, 8-9).

In the 7th century, Pope Vitalian, appointed Theodore, a Greek from Tarsus, as archbishop of Canterbury. There were strong differences of opinion between East and West, as we will see, especially concerning the nature of Christ's will; in this context, it might seem odd that a Greek was chosen for the post of archbishop. There was a serious divide between Rome and Constantinople on the question of monotheletism. Simply put, monotheletes argued that Christ had only one divine will, and the opposing dyotheletes argued that He had two, a divine will, and a human will (see Price et al. 2016, 92–94).³ This was not an argument that simply divided Greeks and Romans, however, as the most important defender of the dyothelete position, that supported by Rome, was Maximus the Confessor, himself a Greek. For Maximus, the fact that Christ had a human nature and human will as well as a divine nature and will, was central to his mystical theology, “the Christ who is known in two natures is able to be the model for our freedom and individuality, and for a mystical union in which man's separateness as a creature is respected” (Chadwick 1981, 211). This important debate on the nature of Christ, central to the Christian faith, would follow Theodore to England, as would the influence of Maximus.

Vitalian had been initially hesitant to appoint Theodore, whose tonsure, Bede tells us, visually aligned him with the Byzantine East. Greek monks shaved their heads entirely, unlike the Catholic monks, who left a crown of hair around their heads (Bede *EH* 4.1, Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 331; Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 65), and Theodore had to wait four months for his Eastern tonsure to grow out, before being able to take on the tonsure in the shape of a crown (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 331).⁴ Vitalian had chosen Hadrian, an African monk, himself a Greek speaker, to take the Canterbury see. According to Bede, the pope only agreed to Hadrian's suggestion to appoint the Greek monk, on condition that Theodore was accompanied by Hadrian, and Bede interpreted this as being to “take great care to prevent Theodore from introducing into the church over which he presided any Greek customs which might be contrary to the true faith,” [*EH* 4.1, trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 331]. Although Bede is not precise about which customs he is referring to, he was clearly aware of important doctrinal differences between East and West. Indeed the question of the nature of Christ and Christ's will were serious matters over which blood would flow. The Lateran Council of 649, headed by Pope Martin I had condemned monotheletism, and Maximus the Confessor was “actively involved in elaborating and drafting the dyothelete theology which is represented in the *acta* of the Lateran Council” (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 225). Bischoff

and Lapidge (1994, 225) argue that Theodore of Tarsus was, in all likelihood, one of the named Theodores present at this council, supporting Maximus, and this offers another and contrasting reason for Vitalian's initial reluctance. Michael Lapidge believes Vitalian's hesitation to appoint Theodore may have stemmed from the Greek monk's participation in the Lateran council, because supporting someone closely associated with Maximus the Confessor to high office, might have been taken as an insult to Constantinople (1995, 25). The Lateran council had been condemned by Constans II as treasonable, leading to the arrest, exile and deaths of both Martin I and Maximus, and in the case of Maximus, mutilation as well. Theodore supported Maximus's position and that of Vitalian, establishing dytheletism firmly in England at the synod of Hertford in 673. Bede records the opening of the transcription of the synod, listing the four kings present, Ecgfrith of Northumbria, Æthelred of the Mercians, Ealdwulf of East Anglia and Hlothere of Kent,⁵ and records the various councils from the council of Nicaea against Arianism in 325 to the first Lateran council in 649 against monotheletism, which Bede (mistakenly) refers to as the heresy of Eutyches.⁶ The synod at Hertford was set up principally to condemn monotheletism in response to a request from Pope Agatho to demonstrate support for the Lateran synod, and it is the only one recorded in response to Agatho's request outside Rome (Price et al. 2016, 103). In effect, Theodore united the leaders of church and state to ensure an unequivocal acceptance of the Christology of Maximus the Confessor.

Theodore and Hadrian offered an all-round education, as Bede wrote, "they gave their hearers instruction not only in the books of holy scripture but also in the art of metre, astronomy and ecclesiastical computation. As evidence of this, some of their students still survive who know Latin and Greek just as well as their native tongue" [EH 4.2, trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 333–335]. It is probable, given the lack of any real text books designed for the learning of Greek in Europe at this time, that the students learned principally from studying directly with the two men; the orthography of the Greek words transliterated in the Biblical Commentaries supports this, showing contemporary Greek pronunciation, which means that they were writing down what they had heard, rather than what they had copied (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 433). Bede records Theodore's legacy in the success of his pupils. Albinus, for example, who succeeded Hadrian on his death as abbot, "was so well trained in scriptural studies that he had no small knowledge of the Greek language and that he knew Latin as well as English, his own tongue" (EH 5.20, Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 531). Bede tells us that the epitaph on Theodore's tomb consisted of thirty-four heroic verses, the second line drawing attention to his native tongue, *quem nunc Theodorum lingua Pelasga uocat* (EH 5.8, Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 474), "whom the language of the Greeks [Pelasgians] now calls Theodore" [trans. E.P.]. The epitaph is written in the hermeneutic style, with several Graecisms, suggesting it was composed by one of Theodore's pupils, quite possibly Aldhelm.

We are fortunate to have some quite considerable records of the kind of things taught at the Canterbury school. The commentaries on the Pentateuch and the gospels were written by students of Theodore and Hadrian, and are found in several manuscripts and were composed roughly between the mid-seventh and mid-eighth centuries (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 1). Bischoff and Lapidge's edition analyses the content of the commentaries, showing that Theodore's training comes from the Antiochene school of exegesis, which was more interested in the literal interpretation of the Bible than the Alexandrian school which encouraged symbolic exegesis. There is little evidence of mystical spirituality to be found here. Lapidge writes that the commentaries "reveal a persistent concern with explaining the literal sense of scripture: the nature of the flora and fauna, minerals and precious stones mentioned in the bible" (Lapidge 1995, 5). However, they do show a concern with biblical language, and the differences between the Greek and Latin translations of the Old Testament, for example where the commentator explains the Greek expression *πρασιαί πρασιαί* in the Greek NT text of Mark 6.40, where the Greek term *πρασιαί* "literally refers to a 'garden-plot' whence *πρασιαί πρασιαί* means 'in companies' or the like," but the Latin gives a numerical paraphrase. (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 521). There is evidence that the Canterbury school boasted copies of the Bible in Greek, including books from the Septuagint, and of the New Testament in Greek (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 197–198).

As Bischoff and Lapidge demonstrate, the details given in the commentaries show strong evidence of Theodore's travels, with descriptions of Syria and Constantinople. They also show that he was familiar with the writings of the Greek patristic fathers, Basil the Great, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianus, John Chrysostome and Maximus the Confessor and according to Lapidge, that he was familiar with the technical vocabulary of Greek philosophy (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 255-256). Maximus himself read, and wrote commentaries on the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, and this is an influence that we will return to as it resurfaces in the Alfredian translations, via the writings of Eriugena, the Irish monk (Carabine 2000, 16-17).

The *Canterbury Commentaries* show familiarity with elements of Maximus's theology in such ideas as the two births, the first physical, and the second spiritual through baptism (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 225). Although there is no other evidence of Maximus's spiritual mysticism recorded in the *Commentaries*, Rafal Boryslawski has recently demonstrated that the riddles of Aldhelm, one of the pupils of the Canterbury School, may reflect the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius (2008, 205). In addition to any texts that the Canterbury School may have possessed, the writings of both Maximus and Pseudo-Dionysius found their way to England in a copy of the Acts of the Lateran Council delivered to him by the papal envoy, Abbot John of St Martin's in Rome. John was sent by Pope Agatho to attend the Hertford Synod and report back on the faith of the English church (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994, 140-141; Price et al. 2016, 103). The Acts contain extended

passages from Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names*, and were in part composed by Maximus himself and under his direction, so they bear a written witness and record of Maximus's Christology (Price et al. 2016, 99-100).

Maximus's teaching, influenced by the Cappadocian fathers, embraced the idea of union with God through *kenosis*. Christ voluntarily emptied Himself of His divinity to become man, so that man might divest himself of the passions to take on the divine. Éamonn Ó Carragáin has demonstrated that the doctrine of *kenosis* is implicit in the way Christ is described as stripping Himself and willingly mounting the cross in the poem carved on the 8th century Ruthwell Cross, and to a lesser extent in the *Dream of the Rood*, which is a longer poem, found in the 10th century Vercelli book, containing passages also found on the stone cross (2021, 291). Whilst most of the evidence of Greek mystical theology found in Old English texts come via the writings of Eriugena in the 9th century, the early date of the Ruthwell Cross suggests another source. The insistence on the will of Christ, and even perhaps the presentation of two wills through the struggle of the cross itself, which must obey Christ and submit to the ordeal of the crucifixion, without bending or attacking the enemies of Christ, is suggestive of Maximus's insistence on the two wills of Christ united in purpose. (For a detailed explanation of Maximus's theology, see Russell 2004, 262–95).

Basil the Great, another of the Cappadocian fathers, is named in Theodore's *Penitentials*. These contained the statutes that Theodore had presented at the council at Hertford, and according to Gabriella Corona, they contain five direct quotations from Basil's works and "twenty-six possible echoes" (2006, 29). Basil's influence continues to the 10th century, when two of the statutes appear in two Old English collections of canon law, and these were taken from Basil's letters to Amphilochius of Iconium (Corona 2006, 30). Bede was a great admirer of Basil, and drew frequently on his *Homiliae in Hexameron*, employing the translation by Eustathius *italicus* (Corona 2006, 33-34). Corona (2006, 38–41) gives evidence of the cult of St Basil in England before the conquest, and the rise in interest in the work of the Greek father at Athelstan's court, as well as Ælfric's devotion to the saint (2006, 41–50), Basil being the only one of the Greek fathers to find a place in Ælfric's *Sanctorale*.

3. Scholarly exchange: Pseudo-Dionysius via Eriugena

Although there is little evidence of Greek mystical thought in the *Canterbury Commentaries*, the introduction and acceptance of Maximus the Confessor and Basil the Great may have created a fertile soil in which the seeds of such thought could grow. The link between Anglo-Saxon England and the continent created a scholarly exchange that was to enrich English learning. Anglo-Saxon monks, were, of course, well received at the Frankish court and famously Alcuin of York

had been Charlemagne's most influential scholar and teacher. Alfred in his turn was to request the presence of Grimbald of St Bertin, a highly educated Flemish monk who had been earmarked for episcopal office by the archbishop of Reims, and he was given to the English court. Alfred's own educational reforms were based on Carolingian models (see Pratt 2017, 57-58). Athelstan too had close, if complicated ties with the Carolingians, taking Louis, son of Charles the Simple into his protection. He was given the sword of Constantine the Great by Hugh Duke of the Franks, and there is a symbolism in that link to Byzantium and indeed Byzantium's link to foundational Christianity as the sword was believed to have one of the nails from the cross embedded into it (Stenton 1971, 345). Another source of Greek ideas in England was Israel the Grammarian at Athelstan's court. He was, according to Flight (2017, 10), and Lapidge (1992, 97-114) one of the most learned men in Europe and was skilled in both Latin and Greek (see Heikkinen 2015, 82-88). But by far the most important figure of all, as far as the diffusion of Greek philosophical ideas is concerned, and most particularly Neoplatonic ideas, is John Scottus Eriugena.

Eriugena was an Irish monk at the Carolingian court of Charles the Bald. He had an excellent knowledge of Greek and for this reason was asked to retranslate the *Corpus Areopagiticum* (including: the *Divine Names*, *Mystic Theology*, and *Heavenly Hierarchy*). These are the works of a Neoplatonist writing in Greek dated to the late 5th century (Louth 1981, 161), but who was still believed to be Dionysius the Areopagite, Paul's convert (Acts 17:34). His theology famously includes positive and negative theology and the doctrine of procession from and return to God (see Carabine 2000, 279-298; Louth 1981, 159-178 and Russell 2004, 248-262). Hilduin, abbot of St Denis, commissioned to write a hagiography of the church's patron saint, had even conflated him with their own St Denis. This imagined local connection meant that the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius was considerable among the Carolingians.⁷ A Greek manuscript of the corpus had been given to Louis the Pious by the Byzantine emperor Michael the Stammerer (see Jeaneau 1983, 140-141) and it had been translated by Hilduin. Hilduin's translation was apparently incomprehensible, being translated word for word, rather than attempting to render meaning, and so Charles the Bald commissioned Eriugena to write a new one. After translating Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena translated the works of Maximus the Confessor, amongst which were explanations of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius allowing him to grasp the more difficult philosophical concepts, and these would influence him in his most important work, the *Periphyseon* (O'Meara 1987, 14). The *Periphyseon* is presented as a dialogue between a Master and Pupil. O'Meara sums up the content by saying that these two are on a quest for truth, "which is nothing less than knowledge of God and of the universe as a creation of God" (1983, 151). Eriugena's answers to these questions were influenced by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor, but also by Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian fathers, and the brother of Basil the Great, mentioned

above. Unlike Basil, Gregory of Nyssa was influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy and incorporated ideas from it into his own theological teachings. Eriugena was also influenced by Boethius and Augustine, and both of these Latin writers had Platonist tendencies themselves, Boethius especially in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Augustine in the early works, such as *The Soliloquies*. Both texts were chosen for the Alfredian translation programme. The *Periphyseon* was to have a great influence on European thought and the presence and importance of these ideas in Old English literature has only recently begun to come to light.

One of the most significant aspects of the *Periphyseon*, is the Platonic doctrine of procession and return (*reditus*). That all things proceed from God and return to God. Linked to this is the idea of *epekstasis*, an eternal striving towards God felt by all things. Two of the most important ideas from Pseudo-Dionysius were the doctrine of return and the question of apophatic and kataphatic theology. Apophasis and kataphasis relate to the degree to which God can be understood, and described using language (see Mainoldi 2020). Deirdre Carabine traces the history and development of this theological theory of expression from Plato through to Eriugena, explaining that according to Pseudo-Dionysius, “the kataphatic, or affirmative, approach states that we can obtain some knowledge of God, no matter how limited, by attributing all the perfection of the created order to him as its source. [...] The apophatic, or negative way, on the other hand affirms God’s absolute transcendence and unknowability to such an extent that no affirmative concepts, except that of existence, may be applied to him” (Carabine 1995, 2). Tim Flight recognises elements of apophatic theology in *The Dream of the Rood*, and Flight presents the poem “as not only the description of a mystical event, but a textual device to allow readers to participate in *theosis* through *catharsis* and *theoria*,” (2020, 72). *Theosis* is the idea of becoming one with God, and the doctrine of return, is a version of this. *Catharsis* here refers to purification, ridding the self of the passions and vices (this is linked to the monastic practices of the desert fathers, brought to the West through the work of John Cassian). *Theoria* is a vision of God. We saw earlier that Éamonn Ó Carragáin has identified *kenosis* in the *Ruthwell Cross poem*, a doctrine typical of Maximus the Confessor, and found in a poem that predates Eriugena. *The Ruthwell Cross poem* is incorporated into *The Dream of the Rood*, copied in the 10th century Vercelli Book, and it is tempting to wonder how this synthesis occurred, and if the poet of the later poem recognised the mysticism of the earlier poem. The *Dream of the Rood* is most well-known for another synthesis, that of the crucifixion with Old English heroic conventions, styling Christ as a warrior and the cross as his retainer. The evidence that the poet appears to have drawn on the work of Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius, reveals an even greater sophistication.

A number of critics have identified similar elements from Greek mystical theology in Old English texts, especially in the Alfredian translations and some of the sermons of Ælfric. A brief overview will give a sense of the importance

of these ideas in 9th and 10th century Anglo-Saxon thought. Michael Treschow identifies a departure in the Old English version of Augustine's *Soliloquies* which corresponds to an idea presented in the *Periphyseon* (Treschow 1993, 281–286). It is commonly recognised that the Alfredian *Soliloquies* often diverge widely from their source. David Pratt estimates that “more than one third of the vernacular version bears no relationship at all to its Latin ‘source’” (2017, 318). The departure here relates to the vision of the damned. In the Old English version not only the blessed, but also the damned are able to see God. As Treschow points out, this is not just a departure from the original (at this point the translation purports to be rendering Augustine's *De Videndo Deo*), but a direct contradiction of the source which argues that “the vision of God is the simple beatitude of the blessed alone” (1993, 281). Daniel Anlezark also identifies evidence of Platonic philosophy and the question of *reditus* in the Alfredian translations of the *Soliloquies*, attributing the influence more generally to that of the Carolingian court, noting that “the author of the Old English *Soliloquies* not only was interested in the inherent problems associated with expressing the soul's mode of perception, but also aware of the debates which had taken place in the 9th century Carolingian schools concerning the origin of the soul and its destination” (Anlezark 2017, 36). In a recent paper, I have demonstrated the presence of an interpolation taken directly from the *Periphyseon*, expounding the doctrine of *reditus* in the *Old English Boethius*. Although there is no evidence of a copy of the *Periphyseon* in England, the evidence of its use and influence is irrefutable, and this not just at the Alfredian court. Jean Ritzke-Rutherford argues that Ælfric uses the *Periphyseon* as the basis for his *De Fide Catholica*, demonstrating convincingly that “both structure and content of a major part of the Ælfric homily neatly mirror that of the second book of the *Periphyseon*” (1980, 225). Significantly, Ælfric does make some important departures from the Eriugenian source. He includes the *filioque* clause describing the Holy Spirit as emanating from both the Father and the Son, where Eriugena, following the Eastern Orthodox belief describes the Holy Spirit as emanating from the Father through the son (Ritzke-Rutherford 1980, 228–229).⁸ The departures of Ælfric, and earlier the Alfredian translator(s), are important in demonstrating that the Anglo-Saxon clerics were not only familiar with the Neoplatonic philosophies present in Eriugena, but discerning in their adoption of them. They welcomed and repeated some of the ideas and rejected others in a way that demonstrates both scholarly understanding and an independent response. Ælfric and the Alfredian translators will have had access to these ideas in Latin translation. We will now consider what use was made of the Greek language.

4. Greek language: evidence of knowledge of Greek and its use in liturgies and charms

There is no real evidence for the teaching of Greek as a language after the Canterbury School. However, Greek was one of the sacred languages of the church, and as such finds its way, if in a rather piece-meal fashion, in a significant number of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. In addition to the beautiful and well known Chi-Rho pages of manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, Christ or Christī is often represented by the abbreviation *Xp̄ī*.⁹ The Lindisfarne gospels also have the Greek word for holy, *agios*, on the illustration pages for each of the four evangelists. These uses of Greek may be a commonplace of the Latin church, but they reflect the importance of Greek. During the consecration of a church, for example, a cross in the shape of an X, symbolic of the cross of St Peter and the Greek letter χ for the name of Christ, would be laid out with ashes onto the floor of the church. Into this, the bishop would draw the Greek and Latin alphabets with his staff going from the East to the West (Berschin 1988, 25; Gittos 2013, 232–234). This symbolizes the all-encompassing nature of God as Alpha and Omega, and according to a Carolingian version of the rite, the letters represented the foundations of the Word of God (Gittos 2013, 232–234).

As stated above, over half of all the extant manuscripts from Anglo-Saxon England contain Greek. Bodden has done a very thorough study of the use and knowledge of Greek syntax and vocabulary, and so we will content ourselves here with looking at a couple of interesting examples. Bodden's conclusions are that outside of the Canterbury school, there is little evidence of knowledge of Greek syntax, which is unsurprising given the lack of Greek text books noted above. More surprising perhaps is the discovery that the Anglo-Saxons appear to have had quite a substantial bank of Greek vocabulary. She estimates that the cumulative Greek vocabulary could amount to around 5000 words (Bodden 1988, 223). One of the finest examples of a manuscript containing quite an extensive amount of Greek, is Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F. 4. 32, known as *Saint Dunstan's Classbook*. The first quire of the manuscript contains Eutyches the grammarian's work on the conjugation of verbs. The most interesting part for our purposes, is the part beginning at folio 20r, known as *Liber Commonei*, or *codex Oxoniensis prior*. This hand is insular miniscule written in Wales (viii). The Greek transcribed by this hand, and dating to the early 9th century, is considered among the most competent in terms of accuracy in Greek, which suggests familiarity with the language in Welsh scriptoria. We find Greek text and examples of Greek used in Latin texts, such as folio 22r, a small treatise on the moon, which begins in partially transliterated Greek with *en onoma Xp̄ī* (in the name of Christ) and the folios 24r to 36r and 19r-v contain liturgical lessons and canticles in Greek and Latin. Folio 24r also has the Greek alphabet down the left hand side of the page, next to a pronunciation guide in Latin script. The pronunciation is classical, rather than contemporary,

with the letter β represented as Latin /b/ for pronunciation purposes, as opposed to /v/, which would have been the Byzantine or koine pronunciation. This section contains quotations from the prophets *per greecam lin[guam]*. Hunt remarks that “these lessons are found in no other source, and the occasion on which they were used is not known” (1961, x). Folios 24v to the first half of 28v have the Greek written in Greek characters. The bottom half of folios 28v to 36r and 19r-v (folio 19 being incorrectly inserted into the manuscript) have the Latin on the left and the Greek on the right, written phonetically, presumably to facilitate the reading for those who were not well versed in Greek. These are the lessons and canticles for the Easter vigil. Hunt, referencing Schneider, explains that “in certain Roman liturgical *ordines* the reading of these lessons and canticles both in Greek and Latin was prescribed” adding that this is the only surviving contemporary witness (Hunt 1961, xi; see also Westwell 2019, 68).

The reason for retaining the liturgy in Greek is in part because Greek was the second biblical language after Hebrew for the Old Testament (Septuagint), and the first for the New Testament. Ideas related to the sacrality of language through the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9. Hebrew was believed to be the first language) and Pentecost (Acts 2:1–31) fed into the belief that the original words of the bible had more power in the earliest languages (see Major 2021, 141–176). The *titulus* of Christ on the cross, where “Jesus Christ King of the Jews” was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, was taken as confirmation of this idea.¹⁰ King Alfred, in his introduction to Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, turns the idea of the three sacred languages a little on its head, by reminding his readers that these languages were originally the vernacular of the writers of the bible, and uses this to argue for the translation of religious texts into English, so that they can be fully understood, simultaneously elevating the status of English in the process:

Ða gemunde ic hu sio æ wæs ærest on Ebr[e]isc geðiode funden, and eft, ða hie Creacas geliornon, ða wendon hie on hiora agen geðiode ealle, and eac ealle oðre bec. And eft Lædenware swæ same, siððan hie hie geliornon, hie hie wendon eall[a] ðurh wise wealhstodas on hiora agen geðiode. (Sweet 1934, 5–7)

‘then I remembered how the law was first discovered in the Hebrew language, and then, when the Greeks learned it, then they translated it all into their own language, and also all the other books. And afterwards the Romans did the same, when they learned them, they translated them all through wise interpreters into their own language,’
[trans. E.P.]

Alfred’s argument for translation demystifies the unfamiliarity of the sacred languages, but in the church, this very unfamiliarity combined with the idea that Greek was the language in which the words of Christ were first recorded, had power. Greek was used in prayers and liturgies, for example in the Galba

Psalter we find four Greek prayers being “a litany of the saints, the Lord’s prayer, a creed [...] and a *Sanctus* or *Trisagion*” (Gretsch 2009, 313). We also find the *Trisagion* in the *Regularis Concordia*, where it is given in context: *Respondentes autem duo subdiaconi stantes ante crucem canant grece: Agios o Theos, agyos <yschiros>, agios athanathos, eleison ymas*, “let the two sub-deacons standing before the cross sing in Greek: O Holy God, Holy and Powerful, Holy and immortal, have mercy on us” [trans. E.P., copied from Old English Web Corpus, cited from Kornexl 1993, 1–147]. When we move away from this as words on the page, and allow ourselves to imagine this as performance, the effect of the singing in Greek, and the charm of the unfamiliar that is also known to be sacred, it is easy to see that this must have been a powerful moment, a moment that held power and something akin to magic.

5. Sacred and profane: a nosebleed charm

The idea that a language can be sacred, means that it is a short step for those languages to find themselves in charms and quasi magical rituals. After all, the writing of the Greek and Latin alphabet on the floor of a church, for example, has meaning, and the ceremony is suggestive of powers at work in this sacralisation of place; it is not illogical to assume that the power of these sacred languages associated with the church could have healing power. Helen Gittos demonstrates the similarities between the rites for consecrating a graveyard, and that of the *æcerbot* ritual to bring fertility back to a plot of land which involves, among other things, cutting squares of turf from the four corners of the field, having them blessed in church, placing holy water and crosses in the holes and praying in the field. Gittos explains, “the stations in the four corners of the field may echo the prayers in the four corners of the cemetery in the consecration rite” (Gittos 2013, 49). Ciaran Arthur (2018, 212) gives several examples of charms employing Greek in his monograph, such as one from Bald’s Leechbook, the ritual for *ælfside* (elf-magic, sickness caused by elves).¹¹ It recommends the writing of the following *greciscum stafum* (Greek characters): ++A++O+y°HρBγM+++++BεppNN |κNεTTAN|. Although this is largely what is referred to as “gibberish”, there does seem to be some method in its madness. For example, the A and the O most probably represent Alpha and Omega (although it is an omicron rather than omega), which represents God, the beginning and end of all things. The penultimate word may also be a reference to St Veronica (Βερόνικα), who was believed to be the woman whom Christ healed of the issue of blood and who was associated with healing.¹²

The charm we will focus on is a medicinal charm, in Greek, for stemming the flow of blood. The charm or remedy is found in at least three separate manuscripts, Bodleian Library MS. Hatton 20, folio 98v, which dates to the late 9th century, St John’s College, MS 17, folio 175r, and Durham Cathedral Library MS. Hunter 100

folio 118r which both date to the early 12th century. The phrase in Hatton 20 is an addition, following an addition made at the time of Koenwald, bishop of Worcester in the early 10th century, and is has been tentatively dated to the first half of the 11th century (Anlezark 2022, 4). The instructions to cure a nose bleed written in the margin of St John’s MS 17, folio 175r combine Old English and Greek, and read, *ƿið blodrine of nosu ƿriht on his heafod on χ̄ρς mel*, “against blood running from the nose, write on his forehead in Christ’s words:” [trans. E. P. Old English copied from Digital Bodleian]. This is followed by:

s
t
o
m
e
n
stomen calcos +
m
e
t
a
f
o
f
u
+

These words have been identified as coming from the Greek mass of John Chrysostom (Grattan and Singer 1952, 49-50), and an echo has been brought to light by Daniel Anlezark in Hatton 20, where the words *Stoīm calos . Stoīm me* are clear and the rest is illegible. The phrase from the liturgy in Greek is *Στόμεν καλώς, στόμεν μετά φόβου* “let us stand well, let us stand with fear [of God]” [trans. E.P.], which phonetically in English would read “stomen kalos stomen meta fovou [fobou in classical Greek]”.

There are several things of interest here. The first is the evidence of contemporary Greek pronunciation of *fofu* in the nosebleed charm. The words are transliterated into English characters, and a medial *f* would have been pronounced /v/, whereas the classical spelling, as recorded in *Saint Dunstan’s Classbook* for instance, gives /b/ for Greek β. To give an example, on folio 28v where Genesis is copied in Latin on the left column and transliterated Greek on the right, the word *ἀβύσσου* (of the deep) is transliterated *abyssu*, indicating the classical pronunciation of the Greek β. The transliteration of *φόβου* as *fofu* (pronounced fovu in Old English) indicates that this was heard, and heard pronounced by someone using

contemporary Byzantine pronunciation. The use of the abbreviation $\chi\rho\varsigma$ indicates that this was written by a learned person, most probably a monk. The only error is in *calcos* for *calos* [καλώς], which could imply ignorance or dittography. The second example is more garbled, but there are interesting things here too. One of them is the abbreviation of *stomen* to *stom̄*, which suggests that the scribe was familiar with the word and expected any reader to be. The other interesting thing about the line in Hatton 20 is the context. This is the last page of the earliest manuscript copy of the Alfredian translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*. Following the text are three interpolations. The first is introduced by *Evangeliiū ihū χ̄ρι* "the good news of Jesus Christ" [trans. E. P.] and records the *qui biberit aqua* of the Gregorian antiphona sung during Lent. This is followed by a transcription of the *titulus* in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (transliterated phonetically), the signature of the scribe, Ælfric *clericus*, and then our phrase from the Greek liturgy. This has been identified with the liturgy of John Chrysostome, but the words are also in the liturgy of St Basil, which is used at Easter in the Eastern church. Put together, this is suggestive of notes for an Easter service. The *qui bibera* may have been inspired by the association of the text with Gregory, and the *titulus* with the opening of the *Pastoral Care*, where Alfred refers to the three sacred languages in his preface, as mentioned above. The Greek phrase *Στόμεν καλώς, στόμεν μετά φόβου* introduces the anaphora before the giving of the eucharist. Of course, this may be another charm, but there are no surrounding indications, and the liturgical context of the preceding and chronologically earlier interpolations may simply suggest that this was an appropriate place to note it down.

The final example is in Durham Cathedral Chapter Library MS 100, fol. 118r. Unlike the other two examples, this is not an addition, but contained within a list of "medical" remedies. The charm or remedy immediately preceding this one sheds some light on the way it is imagined to work, and on the use and understanding of the Greek. The previous charm for restraining the flowing of blood invokes the Holy Trinity in Latin and then reads: *Sta. sta. stagnum. fluxus sanguinis. sicut stetit iordan in quo iohannes ihesum christum baptizauit. Kyrieleison. amen. Pater noster. Ecce cruce* (transcription Skemer 2006, 80). This is a sort of sympathetic magic, where the flowing of blood is likened to the flowing of the River Jordan, and the stopping of its flow on the occasion of Christ's baptism is invoked to stop the flow of the blood. The repetition of *sta*, at the beginning, the singular imperative of *sto*, to stand still, is followed by *stagnum*, a standing pool, i.e. water that is not moving or flowing, in a way that combines meaning – requirement for the liquid to stop moving – with poetic effect in the repetition. The charm following this one, also relates to blood flow, having the rubric *ad instruum* [?] *sanguinis*. Then follows a comparison which refers to Mary giving birth to Christ, *sicut uere credimus quod beata uirgo maria peperit dominum infantem uerum et hominem sic tu uena retine tuum sanguinem* (as we truly believe that the blessed virgin Mary gave birth to the Lord true child and man, so, vein, retain your blood). The Latin is a little

garbled but the sense is clear enough.¹³ Then follows the Greek liturgical phrase, which Skemer has mistakenly transcribed as *Stomen. Kaloc. Stomen. Meta Fonn*. The last word is in fact *φόβου* transcribed into the Latin script, *fouu* (*fovū*) (see Digital Bodleian), as it was in the Old English *fofu* in St John's College MS 17. The previous charm used the Latin imperative, *sta*, stand (in the sense stand still) to order the blood flow to cease, invoking a sacred moment when the river Jordan stood still, and here the imperative *retine* commands the veins to retain their blood. The Greek verb *ἵστημι*, to stand, of which *στώμεν* is first person plural, subjunctive, has the sense 'to stand up' in the context of the liturgy, and this meaning could be guessed at because it is accompanied by the congregation doing just that, and as such, does not seem to be directly relevant to stopping the flow of blood. However, the verb also has the meaning, "to bring to a standstill, stay, check" (LSJ 1940), which has exactly the same meaning as *sto* in the Latin. The imperative form would be *σῆσαι*, but an understanding of something like "let us stand still well (i.e. let us do a good job of standing still), let us stand still in fear of God" could be equally appropriate in the context of sympathetic magic by joining the speaker to the blood in a first person plural. Putting all of this together, this charm reveals an unsuspected knowledge of Greek, not just in repeating the words heard in a liturgy without understanding them, and repeating them merely for their sacral value, but a deeper knowledge of the range of meanings of the vocabulary and an ability and desire to use the language in a meaningful way. As charms, these merge notions of the Greek language as sacred and therefore holding the power to produce change, which reflects the way it is used in Church rites, such as the dedication of churches, or in the liturgy, especially in anticipation of the transformation of the sacrament.

6. The hermeneutic style

Greek is also to be found in more playful contexts, and a common area for Greek vocabulary is in hermeneutic poetry. The 10th century saw a rise in the popularity of this style, where Latin texts would be liberally peppered with Greek vocabulary, including neologisms made up from the combining of Greek words, in an effort to create poetry that is highly demanding of its readers whilst showcasing the skill and knowledge of its composer. The style was used by Aldhelm, one of the pupils of Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury School, as we have seen, and proponents of the style in the 10th century drew on Aldhelm's works, the third book of Abbo's *Bella Parisiacae Urbis* in addition to available glossaries (see Lapidge 1975, 73). Lapidge argues that the movement probably originated in Northern France, being brought to England through the leaders of the Benedictine Reform movement, Oda of Canterbury, Dunstan, Æthelwold and Oswald, who had close ties with the Benedictine centres on the continent. Oswald himself had been a student of Frithegod of Canterbury, the Frankish author of the *Breviloquium Vitae Wilfridi*.

Frithegod was a member of the household of Oda, Archbishop of Canterbury, and would appear to have been competent in Greek. Lapidge demonstrates that some of the words employed by Frithegod, such as *monogrammatos* for a word “consisting of one letter”, or *mekotes*, meaning “greatness”, were not recorded in the available grammars and glossaries, they were “excessively rare, even in the Greek lexicon” (Lapidge 1975, 51), and he argues that they most probably derived from direct contact with the language. An amusing and unusual example of the hermeneutic style is found in the 10th century poem *Aldhelm*. The text is preserved in MS 326 Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and introduces the prose version of Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*. E. V. K. Dobbie sees the presence of this style as a continuation, rather than a foreign fashion, “the tradition of Greek learning established in the late 7th century, came down at least to the time of Archbishop Odo” (Dobbie 1942, xci). The poem is unusual because it combines Old English, Latin and Greek, although the Greek is principally lexical. It includes terms such as *ipseos* (4, high), *biblos* (5, book), *ponus* (6, toil), *euthenia* (9, abundance), *boethia* (14, help) and the phrase *micro in cosmo* (15, in the little world). [Trans. E.V.K. Dobbie], in a poem that praises Aldhelm through imitation.

7. Conclusion

The teaching of Greek as a language, most probably did not survive in any sustained way after the deaths of Theodore and Hadrian. However, the importance of Greek as a sacred language, is attested to in the wealth of Greek vocabulary, the copying of Greek prayers and liturgies and even, perhaps especially, in its use in charms. The charm for stemming the flow of blood that we find in at least three distinct manuscripts, demonstrates an unexpected sophistication in its wordplay with Greek, in a way more impressive than that deployed in the hermeneutic poetry of the 10th century. The Byzantine pronunciation, clear in the transliteration into both Latin and Old English script, suggests contact with native Greek speakers, or at least that the pronunciation of Greek in church followed contemporary rather than classical pronunciation.

On the question of Greek thought, especially that of Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius, it most certainly influenced the Alfredian translations and the sermons of Ælfric mediated through the Irish monk at the Frankish court, Eriugena. However, some of their ideas had found their way to England with Theodore, and in the copy of the Acts of the Lateran Council of 649, sent by the pope. Maximus’s Christology, especially concerning dyotheletism, was central to the Synod of Hertford, and Theodore’s insistence that it be accepted right across England, united under the church, if not yet under the crown, may explain why traces of Maximus’s thought and that of Pseudo-Dionysius can be seen in the *Ruthwell Cross Poem* and in the riddles of Aldhelm. At the very least, it seems

likely that the legacy of Theodore may have prepared the way for the acceptance of Neoplatonist theology from Eriugena.

Notes

- 1 In the 3rd century BCE, the Torah was translated into Greek by Greek-speaking Jewish translators, for the Jewish community in Egypt, and became known as the Pentateuch; following this, the other Hebrew books of the Bible were translated and this became known as the Septuagint, after the legendary seventy translators. When the writers of the New Testament gospels quote from the Old Testament, they are quoting from this Greek translation, made before the Christian era by Jewish translators. For important differences between the Greek translation and the Hebrew version, and for the probability that the Greek translators were working from an earlier version of the texts see Barton 2020, 436–442. For Theodore’s use of the Pentateuch see Marsden 1995, 236–254.
- 2 See also Dumville 1992, 101–102.
- 3 Price et al. 2016 in the notes to their edition of *The Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*, and Henry Chadwick in *The Early Church*, demonstrate the political power struggle at the heart of the conflict. The sincerity of the belief of the actors in the drama, however, Maximus the Confessor included, is not in any doubt.
- 4 Bede explains the different types of tonsure and their origins at some length, saving a particular disapproval for the Celtic tonsure because of its resemblance to that of Simon Magus (EH 5.21, Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 546–554). It may seem a small detail, but it was considered to be of great importance, particularly in the ambition to unify church practice.
- 5 If Wessex seems conspicuous by its absence, it is most probably because in 673 it was in a state of transition, temporarily ruled by a queen, Seaxburh, on the death of her husband, Cenwalh.
- 6 Eutyches’s heresy was that of monophysitism, which denied that Christ had both a human and divine nature. See Chadwick 1981, 201–204.
- 7 The *Corpus Areopagiticum* was also available in Rome and the Divine Names are quoted extensively in the Acts of the Lateran council of 649.
- 8 Archbishop Theodore also describes the Holy Spirit as emanating from both the Father and the Son: *et Spiritum Sanctum procedentem ex Patre et Filio inerrabiliter*, “and the Holy Spirit ineffable proceeding from the Father and The Son,” [EH 4.17, trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 387].
- 9 See for example Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F. 4. 32 22r, or British Library, MS. Harley 863, canticle 19.29.
- 10 For a detailed analysis of the importance of the *titulus* and the question of the sacrality of the three biblical languages in early medieval England, see

- Tristram Major's "Awriten on þreo geþeode : The concept of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in Old English and Anglo-Latin Literature". See also Berschin 1988.
- 11 See Hall 2009, especially 119–156.
- 12 See also Kesling 2021 and 2022.
- 13 The reference to birth perhaps suggests this was used to stem postpartum haemorrhage.

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