**Interactions Between Old English, Latin, and Greek in the Anglo-Saxon Religious Landscape**

Casey L. Dubois

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

ENG 112 PFA2: Writing/Research in the Disc

Dr. Calvin Jones

February 15, 2023

**Interactions Between Old English, Latin, and Greek in the Anglo-Saxon Religious Landscape**

When Roman missionaries evangelized England in 597 AD, they brought their native language, Latin (and to a lesser extent, Greek) with them. Throughout medieval Europe, these two languages, along with Hebrew, were held in very high esteem, and a common collective name for them was “tres linguae sacrae,” or the three sacred languages (Major, 2021, pp. 141-145; Timofeeva, 2016, pp. 6-8). However, among the Anglo-Saxons, while there was certainly a great regard for Latin, Greek, and Hebrew as scholarly languages, they were more inclined to want the Scriptures and sacraments given in their own language (Miriam, 2017, pp. 41-42). This by no means hindered learned men such as Bede and Ælfric from studying and using these languages to better understand the Christian faith, however.

**Latin Influences**

Latin poetry was used to teach Anglo-Saxon monks how to speak and write Latin, and it influenced how the monks wrote their own poetry as well (Wilcox, 2011, pp. 107-109). One prime example of this is the *Historia apostolica*, a poetic Latin rendition of the Book of Acts, specifically about the apostles Peter and Paul. In its two volumes, it draws out metaphorical comparisons between the two apostles’ previous occupations (fisherman and tentmaker, respectively) and their role as apostles in the Church (Wilcox, 2011, pp. 110-116). Bede wrote that he was indebted to Arartor (the man who wrote the *Historia apostolica*) for his interpretations of the Book of Acts. It made use of many ideas that an Anglo-Saxon poetic rendition of the Book of Exodus would later borrow, such as the correlation between the Israelites crossing through the Red Sea, Peter drawing fish up out of the water, and Christian baptism (Wilcox, 2011, p. 149).

**Baptismal rites**

As the Latin Christians Christianized England, they naturally baptized their new converts (Bede, quoted in Jones, 2017, pp. 39-40). There is not much material that relates how the baptismal rite was conducted, but most assume it was by and large conducted in Latin, since there are no known texts for an Anglo-Saxon baptismal rite before the 10th century (Jones, 2017, pp. 43). And while that is most likely true, there is a rite written in Old Saxon which shows some Anglo-Saxon influence, and may have historical connections to Anglo-Saxon missions to the Continental Saxons in the 8th century (Jones, 2017, p. 44).

Despite Pope Gregory III writing in a letter to Boniface (who was a missionary to the Anglo-Saxons) that there were no theological problems with using the vernacular (that is, the native language) for baptisms (Noble, transl. Emerton, quoted in Jones, 2017, p. 47), Latin prevailed as the language of the Church in England, as it was a symbol of unity with the rest of Western Christendom, especially Rome. That did not prevent the Anglo-Saxons from preserving their own language and culture, nonetheless, and they continued to be instructed in their faith and carry out their daily lives in Old English.

**Greek influences**

The Greek language also enjoyed some usage by the Anglo-Saxon intellectuals, especially when they were writing in Latin and needed to use Greek vocabulary for etymology or commentary (Timofeeva, 2016, pp. 11-12). Its influence was not nearly as extensive as the influence that Latin had, and knowledge of Greek was reserved for scholars (Timofeeva, 2016, p.16).

Perhaps one of the most unique examples of the influence Greek had on Old English is the loanword *martyr.* Originally, the word μάρτυςmeant a witness, someone who testifies to something they have seen (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 419). The meaning that it has today (one who suffers unjustly for the sake of their beliefs) can be traced back to as early as chapter 7 of the Book of Acts, which records the Sanhedrin (the ruling Jewish religious authorities at that time) putting the first Christian martyr, Stephen, to death by stoning (some readers may wish to be informed that the stoning referred to here has to do with throwing stones at a person, and nothing to do with illicit substances). Most of the other uses of the word in the New Testament refer to its original meaning, although its use in Revelation 17:6 seems to be more in line with how it is used in Acts 7.

Jerome used *martyr* in his translation of the Bible into Latin known as the Vulgate only once, in Revelation 17:6, where his usage can be fairly translated into the later definition and convey more or less the same meaning (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 420). Through this introduction into the vocabulary of Western Christendom, the Germanic and Celtic languages quickly borrowed it again, and in Old English this acquisition appears to have happened through the influence of prominent writers such as Gildas and Isidore, with Bede drawing from them and other sources (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 425). There were also Greek Christians who directed the school of Canterbury who established a relatively thorough but short-lived scholarship of Greek in their students (Jacobsen, 2018, pp. 422-423).

Around the 9th century, *martyr* started increasingly appearing in vernacular works like the *Old English Martyrology,* and a translation of Pope Gregory I’s *Dialogi* a few decades later. Of interest to note is how this word interacted with its equivalent Old English words *þrowere* (“one who suffers”, the word that the phrase “death throes” comes from) and witness (which had the same semantic meaning then as it does now). It can be seen how *martyr* came to supplant *þrowere* as it took on more predominantly the meaning of one who suffers, and how witness came to take up the definition that *martyr* had largely (though not completely) left behind (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 429).

**Conclusion**

Latin and Greek, both being languages of scholarship in Western Europe, certainly affected the intellectual and religious circles of Anglo-Saxon England, and many things of value were drawn both from the languages themselves, and the works produced in them. But it can also been seen that the Anglo-Saxons had no problem with using their own language as they saw fit, and used these three tools in sync to derive, as best as they could, knowledge from the writings that helped to build up Western Civilization.

**References**

Jacobsen, D. (2018). The Testimony of Martyr: A Word History of Martyr in Anglo-Saxon

England. Studies in Philology, 115(3), 417-432. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.2018.0015>

Jones, M. A. (2017). The Language of Baptism in Early Anglo-Saxon England: The Case for

Old English. Studies in Church History, 53, 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2016.4>

Major, T. (2021). Awriten on preo gepeode. The concept of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in Old

English and Anglo-Latin Literature. The Journal of English and Germanic Philology,

10(2), 141+. <https://link-gale-com.proxy004.nclive.org/apps/doc/A666502561/LitRC?u=nclivespcc&sid=summon&xid=60f22a9b>

Timofeeva, O. (2016). Bide Nu Æt Gode Þæt Ic Grecisc Cunne: Attitudes to Greek and the

Greeks in the Anglo-Saxon Period. Studia Anglica Posnaniensia, 51(2), 5-29.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/stap-2016-0007>

Wilcox, M. (2011). Creating the cloud-tent-ship conceit in Exodus. *Anglo-Saxon England, 40*, 103-150. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026367511100007X>