

*A Companion to Ælfric*. Ed. Hugh Magennis & Mary Swan. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 18. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009, xv + 466 pp., € 146.00/\$ 209.00.

“History has been relatively kind to Ælfric” (Wilcox, 345): since an exceptionally substantial and coherent corpus of his mainly homiletic and pedagogical oeuvre has survived, he today appears as the most wide-ranging and most prolific religious writer of the late Anglo-Saxon period. The very dominance of his writings for Old English is attested by the fact that his works make up almost 15 per cent of the altogether about 4 million words of all surviving Old English (Wilcox, 345). Ælfric himself, however, also seems to have been fairly kind to Anglo-Saxon scholars because he takes an unusually self-confident authorial stance. His “firm first-person ‘authorial voice’” (Magennis, 7) becomes particularly evident in his prefaces and letters, presenting a number of statements about his education (in particular that he trained at Winchester under Bishop Æthelwold) and declaring the intentions and aspirations for his writings. Ælfric thus – unlike most other Old and early Middle English writers – seems to have an ‘identity’, even though closer examination shows that we in fact know very little about Ælfric as a person beyond “a very bare c.v.” (7) and, more importantly, mainly by or through his own writings (see the chapters by Magennis and Hill, and the discussion of Ælfric’s “self-positioning” [250] in Mary Swan’s “Identity and Ideology in Ælfric’s Prefaces”, 247–269). Without doubt, Ælfric “has been and is a key focus of study” (Magennis, 6) for Anglo-Saxonists, especially for those seeing him as the definite representative of the Winchester-centered monastic revival movement around Bishop Æthelwold and his circle known as the Benedictine Reform. To non-specialists, however, Ælfric has been of little interest as both a literary and an intellectual figure and he is, even more importantly, rarely known by church historians or theologians. That there has recently been an increasing divergence in the perceptions of Ælfric by Anglo-Saxon scholars is reflected in the papers collected in this book: while Ælfric is the most important author in late Anglo-Saxon England for some of the contributors,

others have recently raised doubts about his central position in the Benedictine Reform (see below). For non-experts, it would certainly have been helpful if the editors of the volume had summarized the state of discussion – with reference to the respective authors and chapters in the *Companion* – more clearly in their introduction. In the given form, non-expert readers might find it difficult to distinguish between those chapters which present traditional research and those which follow more recent and innovative approaches.

The *Companion* under review here is the first volume ever to provide a detailed overview of the state of research into Ælfric and his works (earlier studies on Ælfric are very conveniently accessible through the bibliography and the volume's indices; a very precise and perceptive synopsis is found in Hugh Magennis' chapter on "Ælfric Scholarship", 6–34). It is thus a volume long overdue. Between them, the fifteen newly-commissioned chapters – from the "key Ælfric scholars working today and some newer voices" (blurb) – aim at covering the entire Ælfric corpus (English and Latin writings), the major contextual issues as well as the afterlife of his works. Most of the central aspects of Ælfrician studies are indeed addressed: Ælfric's education and life (Hill), his ecclesiastical and secular networks (Gretsch, Cubitt, Swan), his (central?) place in the context of the Benedictine Reform (though from different perspectives and with different conclusions; Gretsch, Cubitt, Jones, Upchurch), his homilies and saints' lives (Upchurch, Corona, Lees, Davis), his pedagogical works (Hall), and the later transmission of his work (Kleist, Treharne). There is, however, one obvious and highly regrettable gap: none of the chapters adopts a distinctively linguistic approach, even though many of the authors stress that it is in particular Ælfric's fundamental preference for the vernacular as a medium of expression ('plain English' in contrast to the 'hermeneutic style' of contemporaneous Latin writings of the English Benedictine Reform) and his 'alliterative' or 'rhythmical' style which make him an, if not *the*, outstanding author of the Anglo-Saxon period. Linguists, of course, make ample use of Ælfric's works because of the substantial amount of 'good' Old English prose by Ælfric which has survived and which therefore also found its way into the major linguistic corpora such as the *Helsinki Corpus*. This lacuna is thus not due to a dearth of scholarly activity but rather reflects the – even more regrettable – fact that historical linguistics and Anglo-Saxon studies have drifted far apart in recent years. Issues related to linguistics (and stylistics) are only addressed in Mechthild Gretsch's chapter on "Ælfric, Language and Winchester" (109–137) and Gabriella Corona's very enlightening study of Ælfric's use of traditional rhetorical means in selected homilies ("Ælfric's Schemes and Tropes: *Amplificatio* and the Portrayal of Persecutors", 297–320). Issues crucial for an understanding of Ælfrician prose and also Ælfric's distinction among early English authors, namely the patterns, effects and peculiarities of Ælfric's 'alliterative' or 'rhythmical' prose, his striking avoidance of the hermeneutic style or his contribution to the development of English prose language in the late Old English and also early Middle English period (due to the wide distribution of his homilies well into the high Middle Ages) are not discussed in any detail in the *Companion*.

As concerns the general design of the volume, the editors stress that they deliberately decided on a design different to others in the Brill *Companion* series, so that the volume is supposed to offer "a fresh set of contributions which [...] break new ground" "rather than a systematic summary and overview of the state of research" (1). This is certainly true for some of the contributions (Jones, Lees, Swan, Wilcox) – albeit with approaches and on topics these authors have published on before. A number of chapters, however, follow the more traditional *Companion*

format, summarizing – always in a very informed and up-to-date way – research on Ælfric’s life (Joyce Hill, “Ælfric: His Life and Works”, 35–65), on his ecclesiastical and secular networks (Catherine Cubitt, “Ælfric’s Lay Patrons”, 165–192), on Ælfric’s relationship to the Benedictine Reform (Gretsch and, in an alternative view, Christopher A. Jones, “Ælfric and the Limits of ‘Benedictine Reform’”, 67–108), on Ælfric as a teacher (Thomas N. Hall, “Ælfric as Pedagogue”, 193–216) and on Ælfric’s relation to earlier vernacular writing, in particular his use of the works attributed to the Alfred Circle (Malcolm R. Godden, “Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents”, 139–163). Another group of contributions which offer detailed, sometimes even exhaustive, case-studies on very specific aspects of the Ælfric corpus might perhaps have been more profitably placed in publications of a different format, for example Robert K. Upchurch’s chapter on “Catechetical Homilies: Ælfric’s Preaching and Teaching during Lent” (217–246), Kathleen Davis’ study of “Boredom, Brevity and Last Things: Ælfric’s Style and the Politics of Time” (345–368) or – in particular – Aaron J Kleist’s reconstruction of eleventh- and twelfth-century homiletic manuscript compilations (369–398). Clare A. Lees’ theory-oriented examination of the idea of ‘nation’ or ‘Englishness’ in Ælfric’s version of the *Life of Gregory the Great* (271–296) – though perhaps not necessarily expected in a *Companion* of a more traditional type – provides a good test case for examining if Ælfric studies, which over the centuries have tended to remain safely within established conventions (Magennis, 28), could profit from such a more theory-informed approach (even though the answer probably has to be no; see below).

Four characteristics are commonly taken as central for (the study of) Ælfric: his teaching and preaching, his focus on orthodoxy and, as concerns his sources and method of writing, his role as a ‘compiler’. Accordingly, much of the research has concentrated on Ælfric’s sources (in particular for the *Catholic Homilies* and the *Lives of Saints*), resulting in the general understanding that instead of selecting individual homilies by the church fathers he used the major Carolingian compilations besides creating some compilations of his own. Even if Ælfric’s homilies (as Kleist, yet again, shows in his discussion of Ælfric’s homilies for Lent) are never simple translations, since he reorders, adds and combines the materials in new ways, they are essentially and intentionally derivative in nature, to such an extent that we may have to doubt whether the Christianity Ælfric teaches and preaches is distinctly his own (see also Upchurch, 246). This contextualization of Ælfric as a skilful and demanding, orthodox and reliable compiler, which seems to be commonly agreed on as far as his use of sources is concerned, may, however, sway approaches which – like Lees’ study – use (minor) variants in Ælfric’s adaptation of the *Life of St Gregory* for wide-reaching arguments and perhaps also studies which put Ælfric into the intellectual centre of the English Benedictine Reform. An alternative perspective suggests that scholarship has sometimes to “obliquely read reformed ideals into many features of Ælfric’s works” (Jones, 67); Jones in particular contests the notion of ‘reform’ (68–69) and argues that the “determinative category was not our ‘anachronistic’ reform but simply ‘monasticism’ itself” (69). Some authors in the volume stress Ælfric’s “relative oddity” (Jones, 104) or “how *unrepresentative* he is in some important respects of late Anglo-Saxon textual culture as a whole, and of the wider Benedictine Reform movement in particular” (Magennis & Swan, 2–3), and so another, more modest conceptualization of Ælfric also seems to tie in with one of the puzzles of his career, namely his failure to achieve high office (any of the prized abbacies or bishoprics) in spite of his abilities and “despite his undoubted influence over high-placed prelates such as Wulfstan of York or Wulfsgie of Sherborne” (Cubitt, 177).

The alternative scenario suggested recently (see in particular the chapters by Cubbit and Jones) is that Ælfric was not a Winchester alumnus in the sense of having been a child oblate there (as seems to be taken for granted by some scholars), but that he perhaps joined the reform late (with a secular priest as the early teacher who is presented as *sum mæssepreost* in the preface to his translation of *Genesis*). Ælfric may thus have lacked the powerful family connections of the Anglo-Saxon religious élite which could have brought him to some higher office; Cubbit (177–178) suggests that he might have been born on one of the estates belonging to Æthelweard or Æthelmær, whose continuing patronage he experienced. Furthermore, the wide circulation of his works may thus not be due to Ælfric's centrality in the reformed Winchester milieu but might rather be connected to changes in pastoral activities at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. This at least is suggested in the very elucidating chapter by Jonathan Wilcox ("The Use of Ælfric's Homilies: MSS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85 and 86 in the Field", 345–368). Some recent studies have shown a remarkable orientation of late Anglo-Saxon monasticism towards pastoral work (in contrast to the Continent) following the breakdown of the old minster system. Wilcox suggests that a universal pastoral system of preaching was looked for at a time of developing models of pastoral care. In this context, a conscious circulation of Ælfric's homilies may have taken place on a massive scale – often in the form of booklets (352–355) – from Canterbury (which seems to have been at the heart of the operation). In Wilcox's view, the sheer number of surviving manuscripts demonstrates "some kind of officially sanctioned pastoral programme of preaching" (368), i.e. the institutionally-adopted status of Ælfric's homilies, which, in turn, led to further massive copying. For this pastoral and homiletic programme with its need for uniform preaching material, Ælfric's writings were very useful and unambiguous, in particular because of his desire to provide orthodox doctrine and his anxiety with regard to apocryphal traditions (and, of course, one may add, because of their refined vernacular style). This is also reflected by the fact that, in the centuries after the Conquest, Ælfric's homilies were themselves used for compilations (Elaine Treharne, "Making their Presence Felt: Readers of Ælfric, c. 1050–1350", 399–422). Post-conquest copyists made use of Ælfric's homilies, for example, for an understanding of those Latin texts Ælfric himself had taken as sources, appropriating them in ways that would not have accorded with Ælfric's own wishes (i.e. in close proximity to homilies with 'un-orthodox', apocryphal material), "culling the vernacular homilist's work for traces of the voices of patristic authority and pluckable useful quotations" (417). Treharne concludes that the "most obvious purpose of Ælfric's homiletic texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seems to be as major religious research tools for monastic readers" (421).

In his prefaces and letters, Ælfric recurrently characterizes himself as a mass-priest and monk. And, indeed, in spite of his training under Æthelwold at Winchester (a fact which he also stresses), he spent his most fruitful years simply as monk, mass-priest and, probably, teacher at a new monastic foundation (Cerne Abbas) and later as abbot at the small monastery of Eynsham. This "conspicuous lack of career advancement" (106), together with his "unrepresentativeness" or "relative oddity" (cf. above) compared to other proponents of the English Benedictine Reform suggest that – as Magennis puts it – Ælfric "is taken to be more of a benchmark or representative of the Anglo-Saxon religious world, even the late Anglo-Saxon world, than he should be" (7). The impressive body of work by Ælfric that has survived, and "his well-developed skills of self-promotion" (Treharne, 399), might detract from the real assets of his works: Ælfric's writings responded to

practical needs in that they provided orthodox preaching and teaching material – with most of whose substance the preachers were already familiar through the Latin homilies of the Church fathers – in excellent vernacular style (similar to collections of homilies for Sunday services provided by certain dioceses or on the internet today). Their survival is due to their high stylistic quality and the fact that they remained useful through changing political and religious circumstances – up until the time that the language ceased to be intelligible – exactly because of their emphasis on Christian orthodoxy (Wilcox, 345). This at least is one of the pictures evolving from this highly important collection of often thought-provoking, though at times not uncontroversial, studies.

EICHSTÄTT

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