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Anglo-Saxon Micro-Texts: An Introduction

1 The Concept of ‘Micro’-Text

[...] we must always keep in mind that our written texts provide us with a mere fraction of what was once a living language, spoken all over England for more than six centuries.

Once this has become clear, however, it seems safe to say that Old English, as compared with other contemporary languages, has been extremely well preserved. Leaving aside single-sheet documents, we still have more than 1,200 manuscript books, or fragments of such books, written or owned in Anglo-Saxon England between the late seventh and the late eleventh centuries. More than a third of them, and a considerable number of twelfth-century manuscripts, are written wholly or partly in Old English, or contain at least short texts or glosses in that language. (Gneuss 2013: 22–23)

As Helmut Gneuss reminds us, the relative richness of documentation that distinguishes Old English from most of its Germanic cognate languages is to a considerable extent due to the preservation of “short texts or glosses”. It is such “short texts”, ranging from one word (often a name) to a few sentences or a limited number of verses, that are in the focus of this volume. These do not only appear on parchment but can be found on all kinds of materials – e.g. wood, stone, metal, textile – and on sundry objects such as coins, pieces of lead sheet or garments. They are scripted in the Latin alphabet or, to a minor extent, in runes or both scripts, and may be a (more or less essential) integral part of the original physical design of their carrier medium. Not infrequently, however, do they take the form of subsequent additions, filling different kinds of marginal or otherwise peripheral positions on the media displaying them, but they by no means serve merely supplementary functions: by providing snapshots of Anglo-Latin and Old English literacy in practice, they are indispensable puzzle pieces that help to create a fuller image of “what was once a living language”.

For these diverse types of short texts, this volume introduces the term *micro-text*, literally ‘small text’, coined both in analogy to recent designations such as *microblog/microblogging* or *micropost* and with reference to the term *macrotext*.¹

¹ For *micro-*, comb. form, see *OED* s.v. For the antonymic conceptualization of formations pre-modified by *micro-*, see *OED* s.v. 1.a. “Forming terms in which *micro-* indicates small (often microscopic) or relatively small size, frequently in contrast with related terms beginning with *macro-* or *mega-*”. On the notion of *macrotext*, see the discussion of *macro-* vs. *micro-text* in **Dekker**, p. 206 and the references given there, and also below, Section 5.

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In literary and textlinguistic studies, *macrotext* refers to the complete, or at least longer, primary text in the manuscript, which a particular micro-text may be part of. These notions are, for example, relevant for the micro-text taking on the form of a *Reisesege*n (as discussed by **Eric Stanley**), preserved in a letter written by an anonymous cleric (its macrotext).

With the current popularity of new digital media such as text messaging (*SMS* = *Short Message Service*), Twitter or *microblogs/microposts*,² short texts have not only gained a prominent role in communication, but also in our awareness of communication. In these new media, the number of characters a particular text may comprise generally ranges from about 140 to 280, and thus – depending on the language – from about 35 to 45 words. Accordingly, a length of up to 50 words was suggested as a rough guideline for the Anglo-Saxon micro-texts examined in the present volume.

In the digital media, we see that such texts – even though (very) short – can be employed by speakers to communicate effectively and efficiently. Since ‘shortness’ in the form of *brevitas* has, moreover, been recognized as a poetological principle since Classical Antiquity and thus also in the Middle Ages,³ it is certainly not anachronistic to also approach Anglo-Saxon verbal records by focussing on one aspect of their material property, namely them being ‘short’. Length, like size, though, is a relative concept, which is why we must allow for some flexibility at the upper end of the scale. Whatever may be responsible for the comparative shortness of a micro-text – restrictions in the available space, genre conventions or some conscious decision by an individual scribe or author relevant for one particular micro-text only –, it is important to note that the quantitative characteristic of reduced length often goes hand in hand with qualitative features. These will now be explored in more detail.

2 The Textuality of Micro-‘Texts’

Definitions of the notion of ‘text’ are numerous and varied; it thus seems best to look for a definition that is broad enough to cover the markedly different conditions under which Old English and modern texts were and are produced. In textlinguistics, where the term occupies a central theoretical status,

² *Microblogging* was first used in 2005 in the sense ‘blogging done with severe space or size constraints typically by posting frequent brief messages about personal activities’ (*Merriam-Webster*, s.v. *microblogging*). For *micropost*, as yet neither found in the *OED* nor *Merriam-Webster*, *Wictionary* gives: “(Internet) A very short posted message”.

³ See the literary examples collected and discussed in Holznagel and Cölln (2017).

[t]exts are seen as language units which have a definable communicative function, characterized by such principles as cohesion, coherence and informativeness [...].

(Crystal 2008, s.v. *text*)

Even though most of the micro-texts explored in this volume fulfil these principles, a weighting of textual features with respect to their significance appears to be especially useful for those micro-texts that do not belong to the prototypical core. As **Susan Irvine**'s study of the Old English scribbles at the end of the Royal Psalter manuscript demonstrates, even strings of symbols that seem to lack a definable purpose can be assigned a compositional intention and communicative function; they shed light on scribal negotiation with literacy and text as in the case of a scribe familiar with the association between vernacular verse and the psalms.

One-word items such as single names on coins (**Naismith**) or the scratched glosses examined by **Andreas Nievergelt** would naturally defy an ascription of a textual status if the presence of cohesive links were regarded as a necessary condition for textuality. Pragmatics and speech act theory have, however, shown that within communities of practice that share particular modes of expression and discursive strategies, one-word utterances can without problems function as self-contained, semantically and pragmatically meaningful communicative units.⁴ A similar process compensating for a lack of formal textual substance (and thus cohesive ties) can be observed in micro-texts which are an integral part of a specific carrier medium, as is the case with the numismatic inscriptions surveyed by **Rory Naismith**. Even though these inscriptions on coins commonly consist of only one or two words (mostly names and titles), their communicative function of identifying the carrier object as a (valid or no longer valid) means of payment is still clear. Lack of explicit markers of textuality or cohesive ties can also be counterbalanced by coherence signals reflected in particular scribal habits. In an investigation of rubrics and colophonic material in the Codex Amiatinus, **Richard Gameson** can show that "even the briefest, most formulaic of texts when considered holistically in their manuscript context" (p. 100) reveal certain conscious communicative decisions by individual scribes, thus shedding light on the cultural milieu and practices of literacy in which the manuscripts were produced. Compensatory effects may thus be embedded in a particular material and cultural context or common scribal habits, but hold, of course, in particular in the case of genre conventions and intertextuality (see below, Sections 3 and 5).

From the findings of the individual studies assembled in this volume we may conclude that in establishing the textuality of a micro-text, deficits in cohesion

⁴ On single-word utterances in Present-Day English, see Lenker (2018).

can be made up by factors promoting coherence, i.e. the writer's and the reader's shared knowledge, their common assumptions and inferences. This seems particularly relevant for those types of Anglo-Saxon micro-texts which, like dry-point glosses, are practically hidden from the reader's eye or whose sense is intentionally concealed in cryptic writing (see **Nievergelt** and **Scragg**). Similar mechanisms – here of a symbolic nature – may lie behind the communicative functions of other hidden micro-texts, such as the embroidered text found on the *reverse* sides of both terminals of a matching stole examined by **Gale Owen-Crocker** and the hidden parts of inscriptions on lead sheet discussed by **John Hines**. Though such practices may seem to markedly differ from today's text production and display, they are nevertheless based on shared conventions which allow for a better understanding not only of historical text production, but also of the reception of the diverse manifestations of literacy in the Anglo-Saxon period.

3 Micro-Texts across Text Types and Genres

The concept of 'micro-text' cuts across text-type and genre distinctions. It also encompasses different kinds of literary production commonly associated with briefness, such as inscriptions and poems. While in inscriptions, shortness may be triggered by the materiality of the carrier medium and the limited space it provides, it is the genre conventions of poetry that characteristically evoke briefness.⁵ Due to the relatively standardized formal and stylistic characteristics of Old English poetry, a genre-oriented analysis of micro-texts in verse form suggests itself, even though in content and communicative function a *Reisese-gen* within a clerical letter (**Stanley**) is hardly comparable to *Cædmon's Hymn* (**Bammesberger**), the biblical and liturgical *Hymnus trium puerorum* (**Lapidge and Gneuss**) or the metrical scribbles in the Royal Psalter manuscript (**Irvine**).

To establish a parallel group of prose micro-texts would be of little value, as the relevant (sub-)types are simply too diverse and lack a common formal shape. Suffice it to say that most of the non-poetic micro-texts belong to the category of non-literary, 'pragmatic' prose and exhibit a kind of 'practical' or 'functional'

⁵ Composition abridgement and thus relative shortness play an essential role for the small literary forms resulting from *abbreviatio* – a systematic application of the classical ideal of *brevitas* – that seeks to produce skilfully condensed versions of larger texts. For a study of the practice of *abbreviatio* based on 'reduction as a poetological principle' in Latin and German literature of the later Middle Ages, see Henkel (2017). For the full spectrum of Anglo-Saxon poetry, however, length – or rather shortness – is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion. This is, for example, impressively demonstrated by the epic length of *Beowulf*.

literacy that differs from the ‘cultured literacy’ we find in literary texts.⁶ As indicated above, the display (or concealment) of micro-texts on specific materials and objects forms an essential part of their pragmatic effect. These two closely interconnected dimensions will be briefly explored in the following section.

4 Micro-Texts on Different Materials: Forms and Functions

The bulk of Old English and Latin micro-texts have survived on parchment, where they may be a regular part of the text. Especially the physically ‘marginalized’ ones among the micro-texts, i.e. those placed in a visibly subordinate position between the lines or in some marginal space, offer valuable insights into the complex genesis of individual manuscripts and different types of interaction between their authors, scribes and users. Text reception and reader response in their more or less individualized forms play a crucial role in the pragmatics of micro-texts, as, for instance, in the scratched glosses and the mark-ups by the ‘Tremulous Hand of Worcester’ examined in the contributions by **Andreas Nievergelt** and **David Johnson**, respectively. **Joyce Hill**’s study demonstrates that the dialogic space between manuscripts and their readers may even extend to a period of about one hundred years, with Coleman’s passionate marginal objections attesting to the continued (and in this case critical) reception of *Ælfric*’s works.

In material, formal and pragmatic terms, colophons can be singled out as a specific type of micro-text on parchment:⁷ not only is the placement of such paratexts at the end of the relevant reference text highly conventionalized. Their authorship lies with the (otherwise mostly anonymous) scribes who, as **Richard Gameson**’s investigation of the colophons in the Codex Amiatinus shows, couch their direct or indirect addresses to the readers – in, for instance, directive speech acts such as prayers, invocations or supplications – in highly formulaic terms.

⁶ For early uses of the terms ‘practical’ and ‘cultured literacy’, see Parkes (1973) and Wormald (1977). ‘Practical literacy’ may extend from the capacity to recognize, but not necessarily sign, one’s own name to the ability to write formal documents in Latin, while ‘cultured literacy’ may range from reading prose in the vernacular to composing Latin in the classical tradition. This means that “the more advanced types of pragmatic literacy might well overlap with the more basic cultured levels” (Wormald 1977: 95). See also below, Section 4.

⁷ For an overview of Anglo-Saxon colophons, see Gameson (2002). For attempts at their study within pragmatic and textlinguistic approaches, see Schiegg (2016).

The provocation of a reader response is here an integral part of the design and the illocutionary force of the scribe's self-identifying utterance.

With coin-inscriptions – “the most plentiful form of micro-text from Anglo-Saxon England” and “the most micro of micro-texts” (**Naismith**, p. 13 and 25) – we encounter another highly standardized text type whose linguistic form and communicative function are to a large extent object-bound. Here often a single name carrying authoritative force suffices to achieve the intended pragmatic effect. The functional literacy of moneyers and die-cutters is paralleled by the “practical runic literacy” of carvers active in Anglo-Saxon England throughout three major historical stages identified by **John Hines** – the Pre-Old English, Early Old English and Late Anglo-Saxon periods –, with the last phase being represented by some recently found inscriptions on pieces of lead sheet. Strikingly, these inscriptions have a “predominantly ecclesiastical and learned character”, but still represent a “mode of literacy quite distinct from the familiar contemporary manuscript culture” (p. 29).

Yet another form of practical literacy in which material and message are interconnected in specific ways are micro-texts on textile. Under the title “Ælflæd's Embroideries”, **Gale Owen-Crocker** introduces us to a particularly impressive example of textile inscription, significantly placed at the reverse sides of a matching stole and maniple. Deposited in the shrine of St Cuthbert, this vestment set was elevated to the status of a textile relic, its micro-texts providing significant evidence of “royal female patronage and piety” (p. 82). It is in particular these kinds of micro-texts that – as recently also fruitfully discussed by, for instance, Orton (2014) and Thornbury (2014) – shed light on the relations and interdependences of the different kinds of Anglo-Saxon literacy.

5 Micro-Texts in Manuscripts: Interdependences and Intertextualities

Prototypically, a text constitutes an independent, self-contained unit. For micro-texts, this property can best be demonstrated by texts that were ‘emancipated’ from their manuscript contexts and took on separate communicative functions. Thus, the prayer at the beginning of St Augustine's *Soliloquia* (its macrotext) is classified by **Hans Sauer** as a special kind of micro-text, namely “a text within a text”, whose peculiarities in genre and form gave it a special position in its original context and made its independent transmission – both in Latin and Old English – possible. Similarly “The Twelve Rooms of Thomas' Palace”, a verbal collection of the elements of late-antique palace architecture,

had a varied circulation as part of the Latin *Passio Thomae apostoli* and in the form of a glossary, which in one instance became integrated into a large class glossary (**Lendinara**). And the *Hymnus trium puerorum*, in all probability “an unrecognized poem by Wulfstan of Winchester” (**Lapidge and Gneuss**, p. 347), very likely found its way from the manuscript into the liturgy of the mass on specific Ember days.

Evidence for a usage of a (part of a) text that goes beyond the given manuscript context is often hard to come by. The majority of the micro-texts represented in this volume exhibit, however, more or less pronounced traces of interdependences and intertextualities. This is particularly obvious in the short versified *Saxonicum Verbum* for which the late **Eric Stanley** suggested the literary category *Reisesegen*: it clearly forms a separate textual entity, but is at the same time an integral part of a letter by an anonymous continental cleric, its macrotext. And even if, due to their separate placement, many of our micro-texts are physically independent, they are nevertheless directly or indirectly related to or dependent on companion texts or textual units. The “exasperation of Coleman and his Worcester contemporary, expressed with vehemence in manuscript margins” (**Hill**, p. 140) about a hundred years after Ælfric’s original strictures had been written down, are a particularly striking case of an asynchronous theological dispute carried out on parchment.

Several kinds of micro-texts examined in this volume also attest to forms of accumulation and preparation of information that could be – and sometimes demonstrably were – put to new (textual or pragmatic) usages and thus establish prospective intertextual relationships. The “twelve-room glossary” charting out St Thomas’ palace (**Lendinara**) belongs in this category, as do the encyclopaedic notes explored by **Kees Dekker**.

Even more explicit cases of literacy in practice revealing different stages in the process of the composition of new texts are the annotations, punctuation interventions and other marks left by the ‘Tremulous Hand of Worcester’ in several Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, which were made “with the possible intention of compiling a vernacular *liber exemplorum*” (**Johnson**, p. 225). Yet another case study of micro-texts allowing a better understanding of work in progress carried out by an Anglo-Saxon author are the (hitherto barely legible) drafts and notes in Archbishop Wulfstan’s own hand in London, British Library, Additional 38651, fols. 57r–58v, which may have served as building blocks for his homiletic and legal compositions; in these micro-texts, we see “Wulfstan at Work” (**Rudolf**, p. 267).

As pointed out in Section 2 above, even a mere scribble on the final page of a psalter manuscript (London, British Library, Royal 2.B.v) can, on closer inspection, reveal links to vernacular psalm culture and show traces of versification

which suggest “an interest in producing a series of poetic paraphrases, perhaps in order to facilitate memorization and rumination” (Irvine, p. 145).

Two kinds of micro-textual activities in our sample represent very special types of intertextuality: using a variety of ciphers, cryptograms systematically de-familiarize the material shape of conventionally scripted texts (Scragg). They not only attest to “scribal interest in the wordplay of hidden meanings” (Fulk and Cain 2013: 348), but also display a kind of literacy that makes their author stand out among the ‘writing community’. With scratched glosses, the dependency of an interpretamentum on its model is again deliberately turned (almost) invisible (Nievergelt). Their concealment enhances them with a much more complex communicative function than does the normal gloss written in ink.

Overall, the hermeneutic assets and problems evolving from such interdependences and intertextualities are central to many of the contributions in this volume. In his attempt to analyse *Cædmon’s Hymn* without taking immediate recourse to its Latin version in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, Alfred Bammesberger doubts the poem’s origin in a back-translation of Bede’s Latin version, but stresses its originality, assuming that “Bede’s intent may have been to gloss over details in the Old English text that seemed to him theologically controversial and/or dogmatically doubtful” (p. 329). Exemplarily, the benefits of a minute metrical and stylistic analysis and a detailed textual comparison are demonstrated by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss in their article on the Latin poem entitled *Hymnus trium puerorum* in Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, 1385 (U.107). The proximity of the *Hymnus* to some Wulfstanian hymns in the manuscript as well as striking similarities in metrical practice and diction suggest “that the *Hymnus* is an unrecognized poem of Wulfstan” (Lapidge and Gneuss, p. 347).

6 Conclusion

With only “a mere fraction of what was once a living language” (Gneuss 2013: 23) having survived in written form, our picture of Anglo-Saxon literary activities in Latin and Old English will, of course, always remain fragmentary. The contributions in this volume show, however, how modern research can help to expand our understanding of literacy in this period, especially as regards ‘smaller’ texts and forms. Thus our corpora of scratched glosses have been growing steadily, and also those of runic inscriptions, revealing ever more formal and intertextual interdependences between texts in runic and Latin script. With new technological means, we are also able to rescue and decode text which could not be seen with the naked eye or whose communicative functions have not been fully

clear. Acknowledging also the briefest of evidence in the margins and peripheries of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and taking a comprehensive perspective on Anglo-Saxon texts encompassing Old English and Anglo-Latin verbal records, in manuscript culture and beyond, may help to overcome what has been called “the rather myopic view of Old English literature as little more than ‘*Beowulf* and the Bible” (Fulk and Cain 2013: 319). An integrative view of micro-texts, as taken in this volume, sheds valuable fresh light on the range and role of literacy and the individual and collective decisions taken by authors, compilers and scribes in the various phases of the production and reception of text throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

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