

CYNEWULF AND CYNEHEARD: A DIFFERENT STYLE FOR A DIFFERENT STORY

Abstract

One of the most important sources for the study of the Old English period is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Within that chronicle information is structured in entries: one for each of the years about which information is given. One of the entries which has attracted more attention is the one for the year 755. There we find the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard. This story is written in a way that makes it different from the rest of early annals in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: it is longer than any of them and has a very spontaneous syntax many times throughout the text. One of the reasons for this syntactic spontaneity could be the fact that this annal was made up using material from a story which, in turn, was part of an oral tradition. The knowledge about a Germanic oral literature tradition like that of the later Icelandic sagas has led scholars to the hypothesis that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 755 could be the product of a similar Germanic oral literature tradition which may have also existed in Anglo-Saxon England.

Keywords: English, Old English, Literature, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, entry for 755.

Resumen

Una de las fuentes más importantes para el estudio del período del inglés antiguo es la *Crónica anglosajona*. Dentro de esa crónica la información está estructurada en entradas: una para cada uno de los años sobre los que se da información. Una de las entradas que ha suscitado más interés es la del año 755. En ella encontramos la historia de Cynewulf y Cyneheard. Esta historia está escrita de una forma que la hace ser diferente al resto del primer grupo de anales de la *Crónica anglosajona*: es un anal más largo que cualquier otro de ese primer grupo y presenta una sintaxis muy espontánea en muchas ocasiones a lo largo del texto. Una de las razones de esta espontaneidad sintáctica podría ser el hecho de que este anal hubiera sido escrito utilizando material procedente de una historia que, a su vez, fuera parte de una tradición oral. El conocimiento sobre la tradición literaria oral de las posteriores sagas islandesas, también dentro del marco de la cultura germánica, ha llevado a los investigadores a la hipótesis de que la entrada de la *Crónica anglosajona* para el año 755 podría enmarcarse dentro de una tradición literaria oral, igualmente de tipo germánico, que también podría haber existido en Inglaterra en el período del inglés antiguo.

Palabras clave: Inglés, inglés antiguo, literatura, *Crónica anglosajona*, entrada para el año 755.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 755 is probably the one to which scholars have paid more attention. This entry is one of the multiple annals of the aforementioned *Chronicle*, a year-by-year record of events which extends from 60 BC to the 12th century, dating the beginning of its compilation from the days of King Alfred's reign (9th century).

According to Towers, “The story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 755, is unique among the pre-Alfredian entries both for its artfulness and for its complexity”¹ (1963: 310); and, as White has remarked, “In an unusually lengthy entry for the year 757, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounts a complex and well-crafted story, which the chronicler and his contemporaries presumably found interesting, dramatic, and perhaps even instructive and which modern scholars have never tired of retelling”² (1989: 1). These are two of the ways in which the entry for the year 755 has been described. This particular entry, with its account of the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, has been the object of long discussions among scholars, mainly because of the nature of its style within the context of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. After saying this, and in order to better understand the way in which this entry was written, we should analyse the whole literary context to which it belongs.

First of all, we would have to say that not all the entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* follow the same stylistic and syntactic patterns. There are differences among them. According to Cecily Clark we could divide the *Chronicle* before the Conquest, into five main groups of annals, namely: “The Initial Alfredian Compilation”, “The Later Alfredian Annals”, “The Annals for the Reign of Æthelred II”, “The Annals for the Confessor’s Reign”, and “The Conquest” (1971: 215-235). As we can see, annals were written in different styles, and the style of an annal and its date of compilation seem to be related.

About this Cecily Clark comments the following: “Shifts of style in the *Chronicle* must be related to stages in its compilation, some of which are

¹ By pre-Alfredian entries it is meant those annals giving information of the events which took place before the time of King Alfred. Nevertheless, all of them were written during the reign of this king. That is why other scholars like Cecily Clark include them under the category *Initial Alfredian Compilation*.

² According to some scholars, what is told under the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 755 actually took place in 757. That is why here White talks about the entry for the year 757. However, he means the same story referred to by others as that of the entry for 755, that is to say, the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard.

revealed by changes of hand and ink in surviving copies” (1971: 215). Having said that, we should consider the different styles in which the annals were written. First of all, the early annals, those under the umbrella term Initial Alfredian Compilation in Cecily Clark’s article (1971), were written in a very plain style. They are normally very brief and their syntax is quite simple, relying mainly on parataxis. “Adjectives are sparse, and adverbs rare or ... absent, nor is there any complexity of syntax, just a chain of simple sentences rendering a series of simple propositions. Furthermore, with the events noted all falling within a narrow range, vocabulary and phrasing are correspondingly restricted, annal after annal using the same semi-formulaic language” (Clark 1971: 216). As examples of this group of annals, we can point out the entries for the years 1, 47, 83, 485, and 682 (Plumer & Earle 1892, 1: 4-38).

However, within this group we find the entry for the year 755, which is the one we are dealing with here. This annal is also known as the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard.

755. Her Cynewulf benam Sigebryht his rices ȝ West Seaxna wiotan for unryhtum dædum, buton Ham tūn scire; ȝ he hæfde þa oþ he ofslog þone aldor mon þe him lengest wunode.

Se Offa wæs Þincg ferþing, Þinc ferþ Ean wulfing, Eanwulf Osmoding, Osmod Eawing, Eawa Pybing, Pybba Creoding, Creoda Cynewalding, Cynewald Cnebing, Cnebba Iceling, Icel Eomæring, Eomær Angelþowing, Angel þeow Offing, Offa Wærmunding, Wærmund Wyhtlæging, Wihtlæg Wodening; (Plummer & Earle 1892, 1: 46-50; Parker MS. CCCC 173 (A).)

After these entries syntax and style gradually gets more and more complicated. In this new group of annals we find the ones dealing with the Danish invasion and the wars against the Danes. An example is the entry for the year 871 (in Plummer and Earle 1892, 1: 70).

Finally, some other annals, especially those about the Conquest and the 12th century, are also quite complex in their syntax. An example is the entry for the year 1066, about the Conquest itself (Thorpe 1861, 1: 336).

With regards to the layout of the entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, one of the very few exceptions is the anal for the year 937 (Plummer & Earle 1892, 1: 106-108), which is written in verse instead of in prose. Entries like this one are the exception rather than the rule.

After having classified the different entries of the *Chronicle*, we can say that one of the greatest exceptions to this stylistic classification is the annal for the year 755, where we find the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard. This story has attracted scholars' attention both from the historical and literary points of view, but it is the question of its distinctive style and of its uniqueness within the context of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which has led scholars to pay special attention to this particular entry. At this point some questions arise: what is the style of this entry like? And why was this entry recorded that way? The answer to these questions has been a very recurrent object of study.

Several reasons have been pointed out in an attempt to explain the striking difference between this and other annals. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson say: "The narration is so swift and breathless, the selection of detail so deft, that some scholars have felt that the chronicler was recording a saga refined by many retellings in oral tradition" (1992: 208), and they also say: "Supporting this view (and complicating the modern reader's task in following the narrative) is the tale's spontaneous syntax and free word-order, which require close attention to grammatical endings if the sentences are to be constructed accurately" (Mitchell and Robinson 1992: 208). Some other comments on this entry are those by Stephen D. White and those by Francis P. Magoun. Stephen D. White says: "Although it is unclear why such a long, elaborate story appears in a chronicle whose other entries for this century never exceed a couple of lines, the interest of modern scholars in the story is easily explained. Students of early English literature have studied it closely,

partly because it resembles passages from Icelandic sagas and partly because it retreats, in a rhetorically effective way, a major theme in early medieval literature –the loyalty of warriors to their leaders” (1989: 4). On the same entry Francis P. Magoun comments the following: “The passage in question has long been famous and greatly admired by many critics of Old English literature as a purple passage in the usually matter of fact annals. It may indeed be regarded as one of the few passages where OE prose suggests the art of the Icelandic historical and family sagas” (1933: 361).

These scholars suggest that this passage resembles the art and style of the sagas, and particularly, and as commented by two of them, of the Icelandic sagas. This suggestion has been one of the most recurrent answers to the question of the unique nature of this text.

Saga is defined by *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* as “a long story of heroic achievement, esp. a medieval Icelandic or Norwegian prose narrative” (1996: 1271). It is also defined as “a series of connected books giving the history of a family etc.’ (1996: 1271), and finally as “a long involved story” (1996: 1271). *Resemble* is defined by the same dictionary as “be like; have a similarity to, or features in common with, or the same appearance as” (1996: 1225).

The Icelandic sagas are a literary genre based on story-telling and an instance of Germanic oral literature tradition. Sometimes the stories told by these sagas have a historical background, but this historical background was normally lost before the story was written down, due to its nature as oral literature. Now we could argue, what the point is for the comparison of an Anglo-Saxon text –the story of *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*– to an Icelandic tradition like the sagas. Normally the explanation given for this comparison has been the fact that, because of its similarities in style with the Icelandic sagas, the nature of this entry is due to its result as an instance of another Germanic oral literature tradition similar to that under the term Icelandic sagas. This would explain the striking differences between the story of

Cynewulf and Cyneheard and the rest of the early entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

The reference to the Icelandic sagas is used as a comparison, which has allowed critics to draw a possible hypothesis to sort out the problem of the origin of the nature of this text within the context of an oral literature tradition in Anglo-Saxon England, which could have been similar to the one which developed later in medieval Iceland.

Having this in mind, the possibility of the existence of a saga tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature, has been discussed by some scholars like Cyril Ernest Wright, who says: “in only one instance has an Anglo-Saxon saga been handed down to us in the original vernacular, namely, the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*” (1939: 70).

Also, Plummer & Earle, have said: “The annal which most recalls the Sagas is the slaying of Cynewulf and Cyneheard under 755; and that too may have been developed orally before it was written down” (1899, 2: xx). So, the fact that the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard developed orally before it was written down, could be a possible answer to the question of why this story broke with the annal format of the *Pre-Alfredian entries*, which were shorter and not as developed as the one for the year 755. This is also quite important, because if we are dealing with the nature of the annal for 755, as opposed to that of the rest of the early entries, we should also analyse the style of those entries in order to find the reason why those early annals were written in that particular way.

As it was pointed out above, the style of those early entries is quite plain, normally relying on parataxis, and following the same structure patterns all the time.

About the origins of the early annals, Cecily Clark has pointed out: “Annals evolved from notes in the margins of Easter tables. Necessarily brief, such notes, being adjuncts to the calendar rather than contributions to literature,

were also factual and objective” (1971: 218). As an example of these notes in the margins of Easter tables we find the following: “1087 *Obiit Willelmus* rex. 1089 *Obiit Landfrancus archiepiscopus*. 1096 *Iter inceptit ierosolimitanum*” (in Clark 1971: 218). These examples, even though they are not taken from the early entries, illustrate the kind of texts from which the early annals are supposed to have developed. Cecily Clark also says: “At all events, many of the seventh- and eighth-century annals consisting of only one line ... could have been derived from Easter table notes” (1971: 219).

This evidence is quite plausible, but not only that, some critics have also suggested that the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard and their feud at Merton, which could have derived from a possible oral saga tradition, was added to a previously existing entry. Janet Bately comments on this possibility like this: “the annal incorporating the story of the heroic confrontation between ... Cynewulf and Cyneheard ... contains features that demonstrate clearly that it was added as an afterthought or additional comment to an existing entry, and so need not be the work of the author of that entry” (1978: 106). According to this the first part of the 755-entry would be something similar to the rest of the early entries and it is only the account of the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard which would have an oral origin. Jane Bately also suggests that the last paragraph of this particular entry –the one which begins with “*Ʒ þy ilcan geara mon ofslog Æþelbald Miercna cyning on Seccan dune*” (Plummer & Earle 1892, 1: 48)– “resumes as though the digression had never been made” (1978: 106). This fact provides us with evidence to see the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard as an addition in the middle of what was the original entry. Thus, the structure of the annal for the year 755 would be the following:

755. Her Cynewulf benam Sigebryht his rices...
Ʒ se Cynewulf oft miclum gefeohtum feaht uuiþ Bretwalum
Ʒ ymb ·xxxī· wiñt þæs þe he rice hæfde...
Ʒ hiera ryht fæder cyn gæþ to Cerdice

ȝ þy ilcan geara mon ofslog Æþelbald Miercna cyning on Seccan dune...

Wihtlæg Wodening:

(Plummer and Earle 1892, 1: 46-50; Parker MS. CCCC 173 (A))³

Taking this analysis into account, at this point one question arises. If the annal for the year 755 was written before –following the style of the rest of the early entries– and if the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard –whose style is different– was added later, then, why was it added? The answer to this question may not be easy, but it is probably in the context of kinship and family ties where the reason for this lies.

The compilation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seems to have started during the period ruled by King Alfred the Great. As Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson say, “Around AD 890, during the reign of King Alfred the Great, Anglo-Saxon scholars compiled a year-by-year record of important events from antiquity to their own day” (1992: 212). King Alfred the Great was a member of the House of Wessex, and ruled over the kingdom of the same name from 871 to 899. Tracing back the genealogy of that dynasty (Plummer & Earle 1892, 1: 2-4) we would find the sort of table I have included in my appendix.

King Alfred the Great belonged to the same family to which Cynewulf, Cyneheard, and Sigeþriht also belonged: the House of Wessex. They were all the descendants of Cerdic, who, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, conquered Wessex from the Britons, and was, therefore, the first king of the West Saxons. This fact can be seen as the source for a hypothesis which may explain the inclusion of the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. What is being suggested here is that the fact that the compilation of the *Chronicle* began during the reign of King Alfred the Great, together with the fact that both Cynewulf and Cyneheard were relatives of

³ Normal type: original entry. Bold type: addition to the original entry.

King Alfred's, probably led to the inclusion of this story under the entry for the year 755 –which had been previously written in an early-entry style. Therefore, this passage could have been included because of the family ties existing between Alfred the Great, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard.

Finally, and as a conclusion, we would have to say, that the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 755, is probably the one which has attracted more attention from scholars, due to the fact that it breaks with the annal style followed by all the early entries in the *Chronicle*. This has led scholars to look for a reason for this breaking with the general style of early annals, thus proposing the possibility of the origin and nature of this entry within the context of an Anglo-Saxon oral literature tradition, similar to that of the later Icelandic sagas, which, according to scholars, this story seems to recall.

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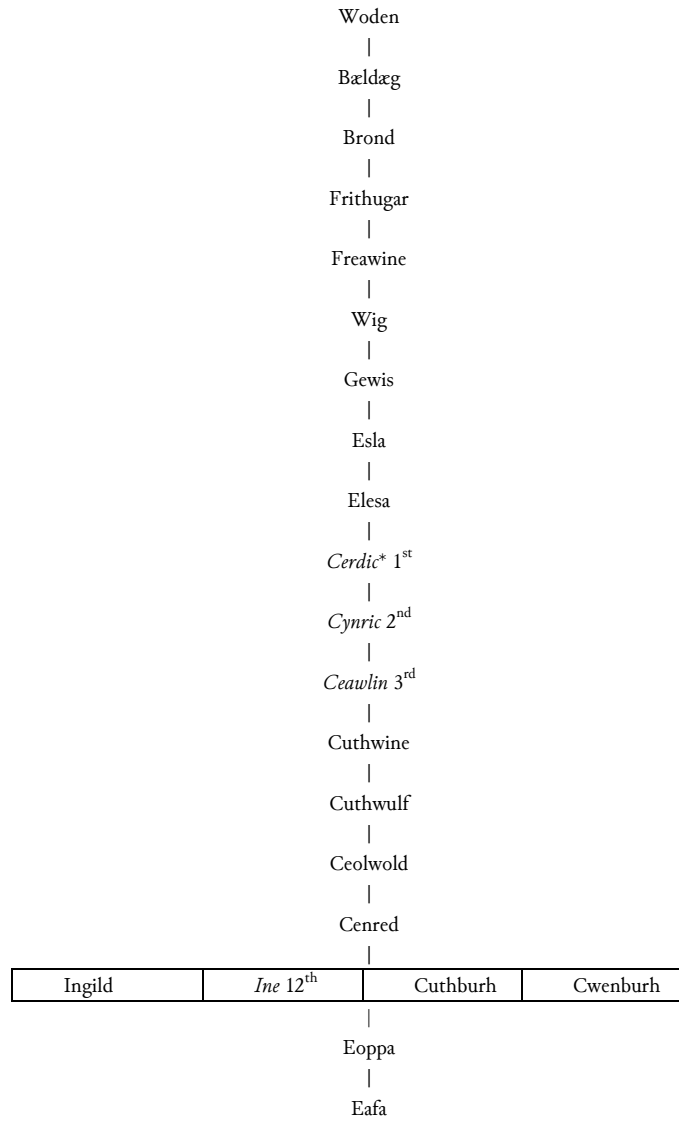
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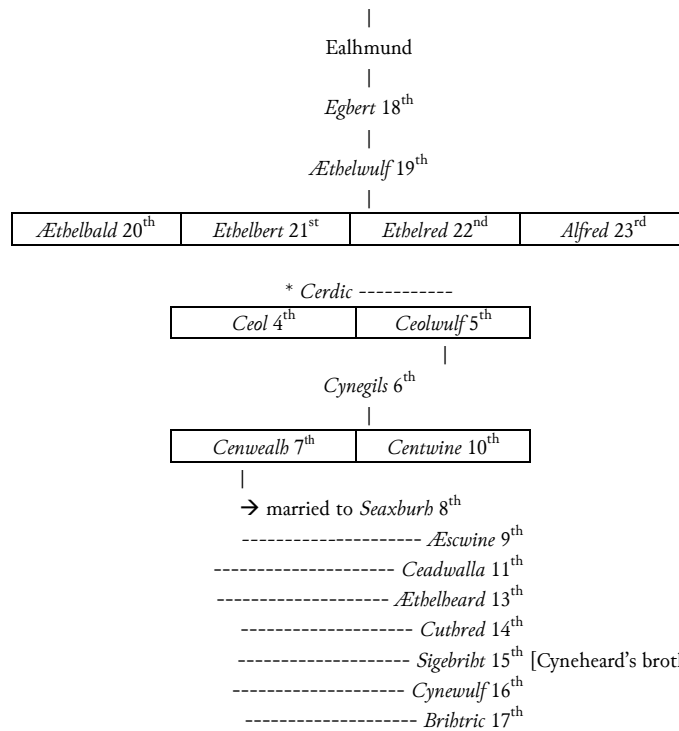
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Cynewulf and Cynebeard: a different style for a different story

Appendix: The genealogical information about the House of Wessex given in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Plummer and Earle 1892, 1: 2-4) can be arranged like this:

The House of Wessex





Key to the genealogical tree: A discontinuous line indicates non-specified family ties, even though, and, according to the text, they all go back to Cerdic. Vertical bars indicate a father-son or father-daughter family tie. Boxes indicate a brother or sister family tie. The only daughters and sisters in this genealogical tree are Cuthburh and Cwenburh. The arrow indicates a husband-and-wife relationship. *Italics* indicate those who were kings or queens of Wessex. Numbers indicate the order in which they succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex. The only queen in this genealogical tree is Seaxburh.

The information in square brackets is not in the text from which this genealogical tree has been compiled. Yet that information is found in the entry for the year 755. The compilation of the information about the House of Wessex into the genealogical tree presented here is my own.

* † *