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Educating King and Court: The Exeter Book and the Transmission of Poetic Anthologies in the (Post-)Alfredian Period

Mercedes Salvador-Bello
University of Seville

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Taking as a starting point Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis* (XXIII)—which mentions that Alfred was given a book containing English verse—this article sets out to consider the existence of vernacular poetic anthologies as early as this period. If Asser's episode is true, the book in question must have been a collection of Old English poetry, of which the Exeter Book may have been a later reflex, since it has been argued that this codex contains an anthology (Muir 1994). The design of the manuscript could then be in line with that of the *Anthologia Latina*, the most important model of the early Middle Ages. This compendium originated in Africa in the sixth century and eventually found its way to various European countries, including England. It may thus have become the prototype for autochthonous poetic collections of the kind mentioned in Asser's history. In this light, this paper is the first to seriously consider the hypothesis that the Exeter Book may have been compiled during King Alfred's period, or perhaps not much later (Sisam 1953). In doing so, it envisages the use of vernacular anthologies as educational tools for both the king and the courtiers in early medieval England.

Keywords: Exeter Book; King Alfred; Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis*; medieval anthologies; the *Anthologia Latina*; early medieval vernacular poetry

Introduction[1]

Previous work by Bernard J. Muir (1994) and, more recently, by John D. Niles (2019) has helped to consolidate the idea that the contents of Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS. 3501 (the Exeter Book) represent a poetic anthology. If, as inferred by these scholars, this compilation was viewed as such in the early medieval period, the closest model at hand then may have been the so-called *Anthologia Latina*.[2] Also known as the African Anthology, this was a vast collection of poems which originated in northern Africa

[1] I would like to thank Francis Leneghan for drawing my attention to Kenneth Sisam's hypothesis (1953) that the Exeter Book may have been compiled in the (post-)Alfredian period, and for all the generous feedback he has given me in the course of writing this article. I am grateful to John D. Niles, Rafael J. Pascual, and José Solís de los Santos for their insightful comments. I am also indebted to Francisco Socas, who kindly shared with me his deep knowledge of the *Anthologia Latina*. I should also thank the two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their insightful feedback. Their comments helped to improve the original paper considerably.

[2] Although it might be worth studying the poems contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11 as a further anthology-like compilation, the exclusively religious nature of this codex's contents distances it from the variety of genres represented in the *Anthologia Latina*, which are more clearly reflected in the Exeter Book.

between 532–34.[3] This anthology has therefore been studied in the context of the literary flourishing brought about by the Vandal kings and the learned members of their courts (George 2004; Miles 2005). From North Africa, the *Anthologia Latina* travelled to Europe, where it became extremely influential. In Anglo-Saxon England, knowledge of the *Anthologia Latina*, however, has proved elusive, as pieces from this compendium have mostly been preserved in a scattered way.[4]

Despite this, Michael Lapidge and other scholars have pointed out the existence of unmistakable traces of the influence of this major poetic compilation on Anglo-Saxon literature.[5] Significantly, Aldhelm provides numerous citations from Symphosius's Riddles as examples in his two metrical treatises,[6] *De metris* and *De pedum regulis*,[7] included in the *Epistola ad Acircium* (c. 685).[8] On the other hand, the anonymous *paries/aries* logogriph from the African compilation *Anthologia Latina* (no. 738b)[9] clearly inspired Aldhelm's *Enigma 86* (Aries, ram).[10] Lapidge and Rosier (1985, 248, n. 4) have also pointed out the close paraphrasing of a poem from the African sylloge (no. 543) in the first line of Aldhelm's *Enigma 5* (Iris, rainbow). In addition to this, Aldhelm

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[3] This timespan is given by Miles (2005, 316). For details on the dating of the *Anthologia Latina*, see Shackleton Bailey (1982, iv).

[4] The manuscripts containing larger portions of the *Anthologia Latina* are all of continental origin. English codices have only preserved specific poems. See further n. 15 in this paper.

[5] For example, Lapidge (1975) has drawn attention to a lost book owned by Milred, Bishop of Worcester from 745 to 775, in John Leland's *De rebus Britannicis collectanea*, gathered between 1533 and 1543. Milred's codex (c. 750) mentions an epigram produced by Chintila, king of the Visigoths (636–40), accompanying the gift of a veil for St Peter's in Rome. This epigram, edited by Lapidge (1975, 808, no. 15), also appears in the *Anthologia Latina* (Buecheler and Riese, 1894–1906, 2:46, no. 494). As has been pointed out (Sims-Williams, 1982, 29–30), Milred's collection clearly derives from the *Anthologia Isidoriana*, among other sources. But Sims-Williams (1982, 32–33) has demonstrated that some of Milred's materials are related to the Codex Thuaneus, one of the manuscripts in which the *Anthologia Latina* has survived. On this codex, see further in this article (n. 32).

[6] He also recognizes his debt to this late Roman author in the preface to his *Enigmata*. See Glorie (1968a, 133:371). On the significance of Aldhelm's reference to Symphosius there, see Salvador-Bello (2015, 174). For Symphosius's Riddles, see Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 1:221–46, no. 286).

[7] Citations from Symphosius's Riddles nos. 47 (1), 98 (2), 72 (1), 17 (2), 85 (3), and 92 (3) can be found in Aldhelm's *De metris*. Similarly, a quotation from Pseudo-Symphosius's *Enigma 5* (ice) is included in *De metris* (Ehwald, 1919, 77). Further citations from Symphosius's Riddles 58 (3, twice), 22 (3), 53 (3), 24 (3), 36 (2), and 52 (2) can be seen in *De pedum regulis*. See Ehwald (1919, 93, 94, 95, 96, 154, 157, 160, 167, and 197). Some of the riddle numbers may differ from those used by this editor, since I have given here Glorie's numbering (1968b). Furthermore, the text of some of these quotations, as found in Ehwald's edition (1919), is not exactly the same as that of Glorie's (1968b), as the latter editor sometimes deviates from the former's readings.

[8] Acircius, who has been identified with King Aldfrith of Northumbria (r. 686–706), is the dedicatee of this massive letter. As explained by Lapidge (2007, 24), Acircius is related to the Latin name of the north-west wind, as if evoking the monarch's Northumbrian origin. Aldfrith's reign, in turn, has served to fix the approximate date of composition of the *Epistola ad Acircium*.

[9] The numbering of all the poems from the *Anthologia Latina* corresponds to that found in the edition of Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906).

[10] This riddle is based on the polysemic nature of the Latin term *Aries*, which can allude to a battering ram, a fleece, the constellation, and the ram itself; the latter concept is said to be close to Latin *paries* ("wall") by adding a *p* to *aries* ("ram"). The connection between the anonymous logogriph and Aldhelm's *Enigma 86* was pointed out by Ehwald (1919, 137) and Orchard (1994, 208), among others. For the Latin logogriph, see Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 2:220, no. 738b).

quotes from a poem by King Sisebut of the Visigoths (r. 612–21), also included in the same anthology, in the preface to the *Enigmata*.[11] Similarly, a line from Pseudo-Virgil's "Nocte pluit tota" ("It rained all night"), a pair of distichs occurring in the original African compilation, is cited by Aldhelm in the *De pedum regulis*.[12] In the same metrical treatise, Aldhelm includes a substantial list of phrases alluding to sounds made by different animals that is part of the literary phenomenon known as the *Voces animantium*,[13] a group of poems of lexicographical nature that find a representation in the *Anthologia Latina*.[14]

It is, then, possible that Aldhelm had access to this well-known poetic assemblage, either in a partial or a complete form,[15] while he was a student at the school of Canterbury. Indeed, we may owe the dissemination of the *Anthologia Latina* in England to this institution (founded c. 670).[16] Its two leading figures—Theodore and Hadrian, the latter of African origin—were probably the agents through whom the compilation, or at least parts of it, were introduced. This Latin prototype most likely paved the way for the production of Anglo-Saxon anthologies, which started to be developed sometime after 670. It is safe to assume that it would take at least several generations to produce an anthology of English verse of comparable content and value. However, by the time of Alfred's rule (871–99), a period in which vernacular literary culture no doubt received a great boost, codices offering a selection of English poetry may have been in circulation. Unfortunately, no manuscript preserving such a collection has survived. Only the Exeter Book presents a set of poems that can be likened, in essence, to the *Anthologia Latina*. With its collection of riddles and lyric poems of diverse sort, the Exeter Book compilation seems to follow in the steps of this major Latin model, originally intended to educate and entertain a readership formed by the monarch, his family, and the other members of the court.

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[11] Sisebut had composed this poem on lunar eclipses in recognition of Isidore's dedication of *De natura rerum* to him. The line in question reads "Argutosque inter latices et musica flabra" (2), as found in Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 2:3, no. 483). For the quotation from this poem in Aldhelm's preface (122), see Glorie (1968a, 375). Similarly, the preface (149), also in Glorie (1968a, 375), incorporates a citation from another poem ("Filius . . . ipse hominis, qui deus est hominis," 10) as in Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 2:231, no. 766).

[12] For the quotation in question, see Ehwald (1919, 186).

[13] It should be noted, however, that Symphosius's *Enigmata*, like the *Voces animantium* and the other works known to Aldhelm, were so successful that they started to circulate independently of the *Anthologia Latina*. It is therefore impossible to say whether the English author had access to the complete collection or whether he had only partial knowledge of it.

[14] Although Manitius (1886, 75) considers that Suetonius's lost version of the catalogue is the most important source for Aldhelm's citation, he points to the phrase "caprae micciunt" (Ehwald 1919, 180, 4), which echoes "At miccire caprae" (58), found in a poem ("De uolucribus et iumentis. De filomela") from the *Anthologia Latina* (Buecheler and Riese, 1894–1906, 2:249, no. 762). It is therefore possible that the Anglo-Saxon author could have also been acquainted with the version included in the *Anthologia Latina*. For Aldhelm's citation of this list of voices in *De pedum regulis*, see Ehwald (1919, 179–80).

[15] No complete version of the *Anthologia Latina* has been preserved in England. Only separate texts from this repertoire have been found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. For example, Edinburgh, Adv. 18.6.12 (late eleventh or early twelfth century) contains an imperfect copy of Symphosius's *Enigmata*, together with an anonymous riddle which typically occurs in the *Anthologia Latina*. See Salvador-Bello (2015, 47–48).

[16] Aldhelm was probably a student at Canterbury during the period 670–72, as inferred by Lapidge and Herren (1979, 8) from a letter addressing Hadrian (c. 675).

As we shall see below, most of the works included in the Exeter Book were probably composed in the early stages of the Anglo-Saxon period. Their dating, of course, varies, but generally supports the hypothesis that they may have been part of an earlier assemblage that served as the basis for this vernacular anthology that was finally copied in the second half of the tenth century. As concluded by R. D. Fulk (1992, 408), the composition of a good number of the Exeter Book poems took place between c. 750–c. 850.[17] Accordingly, we could assume that an English proto-anthology of vernacular verse could have originated sometime after 750, which may serve as the possible *terminus post quem*. Since the Exeter Book is the only extant vernacular collection that may have been modelled on the *Anthologia Latina*, it is possible that its contents come from an earlier assemblage, which survived the Scandinavian invasions.

The period in which a native anthology of these characteristics is most likely to have developed to its fullest extent is that of King Alfred, since evidence of the existence of a verse compilation comes from a late-ninth century source. Indeed, as recorded in Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis* (c. 893) one of these autochthonous collections of verse was used for the teaching of the young Alfred, as will be discussed in the following section. It could also be the case that the purpose of such a compilation would not have been solely for the instruction of contemporary princes such as Alfred and his siblings. Indeed, the creation of a poetic anthology may have been intended to be passed down from generation to generation. This hypothetical transmission would explain the favourable conditions that led to the promotion of vernacular culture by subsequent rulers, such as Æthelstan (r. 894–939) and Edgar (r. 959–75), the latter's reign being contemporary with the copying of the Exeter Book in its present manuscript state.[18] Following this line of reasoning, this study supports Kenneth Sisam's hypothesis (1953, 108) that the anthology on which the Exeter Book depends may have been produced during the reign of King Alfred, or possibly not much later. This paper also makes the claim that the extant

[17] Several exceptions to this general earliness have been pointed out by scholars. For example, Drout (2013, 122) has linked the group that is usually referred to as "wisdom poems"—including *God's Gifts to Humankind*, *Precepts*, *The Fates of Mortals*, and *Maxims I*—to the cultural context of the tenth-century Benedictine revival. In addition to these texts, the *Rhyming Poem* (Earl 1987, 187) and *Riddle 40* (O'Brien O'Keeffe 1985) have been dated to the tenth century.

[18] This idea even gives more meaning to the tradition of royal panegyrics in the form of Latin acrostic poems in this period. An illustration of this is the Latin piece attributed to John the Saxon, which is extant in Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 671 (fol. 74v). It was added by a Cornish or Welsh scribe in the late-ninth or early tenth century. As pointed out by Gallagher (2017, 250), this hexametrical poem clearly alludes to King Alfred, whose name is spelt out by means of the acrostics and telestichs, and reveals "strong links with the West Saxon royal household, in terms of both its context and content." A further case is that of the acrostic poem found in Oxford, Bodleian Library Rawlinson MS C. 697, a Frankish codex that must have reached England at some point in the tenth century. At the end of this manuscript (fol. 78v), there is a poem in acrostics that spells out the name "Adalstan," which has been identified as King Æthelstan. As argued by Lapidge (1993, 11), the piece, which is similarly thought to have been the work of John the Saxon, was probably composed in the timespan running from 894 to 899. Æthelstan (c. 894–939) must have been a very young boy then. These cases suggest that a tradition of royal eulogy must have run parallel to the cultivation of courtly vernacular poetry. This practice would later connect with the composition of two Old English panegyrics on the coronation and the death of Edgar, included in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (s.a. 973 and 975). To these, we should add later obituary pieces such as *The Death of Alfred* (s.a. 1036)—commemorating Alfred, King Æthelred II's son—and *The Death of Edward* (s.a. 1065). For a recent study of the latter poem, which pays tribute to Edward the Confessor, in its manuscript context, see Leneghan (2022).

codex originated from an early poetic collection, which may have been modelled after the *Anthologia Latina*. It is probably thanks to the important role that an early poetic assemblage of these characteristics could have played in the (post-)Alfredian period that a manuscript such as the Exeter Book was created, when a second cultural revival was supported by both Edgar and the contemporary ecclesiastical elite.

A possible early medieval compilation model: The *Anthologia Latina*

It can be tentatively suggested that the most important poetic compilation model that was available in Anglo-Saxon England was probably the *Anthologia Latina*.[19] As noted before, the textual core of this assemblage was produced in northern Africa in the early sixth century.[20] This influential sylloge therefore represents the culture of the contemporary Romanized elite of the Vandal court. This initial nucleus is made up of works in verse, among which a large number of epigrams by various authors stand out. A collection of one hundred hexametrical riddles by a writer known as Symphosius is also part of the original compilation. Additionally, the anthology contains poems of various sorts by writers who were active in contemporary North Africa: Luxorius, Felix, Florentinus, Coronatus, Flavius, and so forth.[21] On the other hand, there are numerous texts by anonymous authors. Pieces by Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Martial, among others, are also included, but this canonical representation is ostensibly reduced when compared to that of the other later writers.

As inferred from several surviving manuscripts, at some time in the early medieval period, the *Anthologia Latina* travelled to Europe where it had a powerful impact from the start. The original African nucleus was probably divided into segments, since we know that some of the works had a separate transmission history.[22] It is also clear that once in Europe, the anthology was expanded to include other works that were not part of the original collection. For example, some verse pieces attributed to St Augustine of Hippo are found in later codices containing the anthology or parts of it.[23] There are other poems whose authorship is similarly dubious, but which have been strongly influential. This is the case with Lactantius's *Carmen de aue phoenice* or the Bern Riddles (or

[19] This important Latin collection has an antecedent in the so-called "Greek Anthology," also known as *Anthologia Graeca* or "Palatine Anthology." This other major verse compilation was discovered in a manuscript—Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Codex Palatinus Graecus 23 (first half of the tenth century)—in 1606 by the French scholar Claude Saumaise (also known as Claudius Salmasianus). Containing epigrams, riddles, and other poetic texts from the seventh century BCE to 600 CE, it has been edited and translated by Paton (1927–28).

[20] For a comprehensive and illuminating introduction to the *Anthologia Latina*, see Socas (2011, 7–18).

[21] It seems that the leading figure of this group was Luxorius, the author of some epigrams following the *Enigmata* of Symphosius in the Codex Salmasianus (George 2004, 156). See further George (2004, 133–43).

[22] As explained above (see n. 13), some of the works in the *Anthologia Latina* soon became very popular and enjoyed a separate circulation in manuscripts. This was the case with Symphosius's *Enigmata* and the *Voces animantium*.

[23] On this, see Socas (2011, 23). For these texts, see Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 2:43–45, no. 489; 2:663–64, nos. 785, 785a, and 785b).

Enigmata Bernensia),[24] both of which appear in ninth-century manuscripts and whose impact on Anglo-Saxon literature is undeniable.[25]

As we know it today, the *Anthologia Latina* is the editorial work produced by the French scholar Joseph Justus Scaliger and printed under the title *Catalecta ueterum poetarum* in 1573.[26] This initial version was replaced by a larger poetic selection printed by another well-known French editor, Pierre Pithou (also known as Pithoeus), as *Epigrammata et poemata e codicibus et lapidibus collecta* (1590). A more extensive publication was the *Anthologia ueterum Latinorum epigrammatum et poematum* (1759–73), edited by the Dutch scholar Pieter Burmann the Younger.[27] From the nineteenth century onwards, German philologists took over the task of producing new editions of the *Anthologia Latina*, which was significantly expanded with each of these impulses. Burmann's text thus formed the basis of Alexander Riese's first edition (1869–70), which was published as a volume in two parts. A second edition (1894–1906) was released with the collaboration of Franz Bücheler (Franciscus Buecheler). The most recent edition of the *Anthologia Latina*, corresponding to Riese's *Pars I*, was produced by the British Latinist David R. Shackleton Bailey (1982), who left out some poems from the former publication. However, the Riese/Bücheler volumes remain the standard editions to this day.

The print history of the *Anthologia Latina* is therefore that of a literary compilation whose extremely unstable dissemination determined a complex editorial tradition, teeming with numerous revisions, as well as expansions and contractions.[28] It has been impossible for scholars to establish reliable data on the transmission and circulation of the compilation, as the first copies made in Europe have been lost. The earliest manuscript in which the *Anthologia Latina* has survived is the so-called "Codex Salmasianus" or "Salmasian codex"[29]—Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Lat. 10318—which was produced somewhere in central Italy (c. 800).[30] As explained by Maddalena Spallone (1982, 69), the Codex Salmasianus reflects a collection that was probably assembled in the second half of the sixth century, after the *Anthologia Latina* had reached Italy. The

[24] Lactantius's work is found in Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 2:20–28, no. 405a). For the Bern Riddles, see Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 1:351–70, no. 481).
[25] See n. 95 below.
[26] He was the son of the Italian humanist Julius Caesar Scaliger, also known as Giulio Cesare Scaligero or della Scala (1484–1558).
[27] He added "Secundus" to his name, Latinized as Petrus Burmannus, to distinguish himself from his uncle Pieter Burman the Elder (1668–1741), a renowned philologist.
[28] The elusive nature of the anthology has also determined the current scholarly tendency to produce separate editions of the different items found in the repertoire. Examples of this editorial course include the edition of the *Peruigilium Veneris* by Barton (2018); the sequence of epigrams (Riese's nos. 90–197), published by Kay (2006); and the collection of riddles by Symphosius, edited by Bergamin (2005).
[29] The manuscript takes its name from its first known owner, Claude Saumaise, mentioned above (n. 19) in connection with the *Anthologia Graeca*, who kept it from 1609 to 1620.
[30] Bischoff (1965, 249) concluded that the Salmasian manuscript had been produced in the area between southern Tuscany and Umbria. Spallone (1982, 69), in turn, stated that it could have been copied from a late exemplar from an important Italian scriptorium such as Rome, Capua, Naples or Ravenna. For further information about this manuscript, see Riese-Buecheler (1894–1906, 1:xii–xxxiv), Lowe (1959, 593, no. 5), Shackleton Bailey (1982, iv–vi), Spallone (1982, 3–11), Reynolds (1986, 9–10), Kay (2006, 13–14), Socas (2011, 9–12), Zurli (2010, 209–22), and Zurli (2017, 15–34).

African sylloge was then enriched by the inclusion of recently composed or slightly older works.

As preserved in Paris, Lat. 10318, the collection begins and ends imperfectly. In fact, scholars have estimated the loss of some 88 folios.[31] Together with the Codex Salmasianus, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Lat. 8701 (the so-called "Codex Thuaneus") and Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Voss. Lat. Q. 86 are two ninth-century manuscripts from central France that have been crucial for the editions of the *Anthologia Latina*.[32] Since much of the Codex Salmasianus is missing and the other textual witnesses display substantial differences in content, although they also show considerable overlap, the reconstruction of the *Anthologia Latina* has always been an editorial tour de force. It was precisely because of these difficulties that Riese himself made two editions of the sylloge, the second of which discarded some of the earlier pieces and incorporated some new ones that had been recently discovered. In order to better understand the type of compilation model that the *Anthologia Latina* may have represented, it is worth citing Francisco Socas's explanation (2011, 12) of the possible modus operandi that emerges from the observation of the materials gathered in it:

> Being the disorderly copy of a library, the Salmasian Anthology transcribes what is closest at hand. It is as if, in a fire, it is not the best piece of furniture that is saved, but the easiest to carry and the closest to the door, or the rarest and most irreplaceable in any event.[33]

Accordingly, the *Anthologia Latina* gives the impression of an assemblage in which the materials were brought together in a somewhat hurried or careless manner, as if to preserve an eminently contemporary or recent literary production that was in danger of being lost. It is for this reason that texts of great quality, such as the well-known *Peruigilium Veneris* ("The vigil of Venus"), share the same space with coarse and vulgar pieces.[34] The case may be compared to the Exeter Book, in which elaborate works such as the *Advent Lyrics* co-exist with crude sexual jokes, barely disguised as riddles.[35] As with the poems contained in the *Anthologia Latina*, in the Exeter Book what really mattered, as may be assumed, was the preservation of the literary heritage of an earlier, much-admired past.

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[31] See Kay (2006, 13–14).

[32] The Codex Thuaneus was named after its first owner, Jacques Auguste de Thou (1553–1617), a French historian and president of the parliament of Paris. Of French origin, a fragmentary manuscript with a text close to that preserved in the Codex Thuaneus is Vienna, Österreischische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 277 (late eighth century). For a detailed analysis of the relationship between these two codices, see Zurli (2010, 232–39). A post-medieval paper copy is found in Vienna Österreischische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 9401, written by Italian poet Jacoppo Sannazaro. The latter, in turn, seems to derive from Vienna, Cod. 277. For further information on the Codex Thuaneus and Leiden, Voss. Lat. Q. 86, see Buecheler and Riese, 1894–1906, 1:xxxiv–xli), Reynolds (1986, 10–12), Kay (2006, 14–15), and Zurli (2010, 222–24 and 239–41).

[33] Translated from the Spanish version found in the introduction to this work (Socas 2011, 12): "Al ser la Antología Salmasiana la copia tumultuaria de una biblioteca, se transcribe lo que se tiene más a mano. Es como si en un incendio se salvan no los muebles mejores sino los más llevaderos y más próximos a la puerta, o los más raros e irremplazables en todo caso."

[34] Note, for example, the extremely salacious tone of some of the epigrams (Buecheler and Riese, 1894–1906, vol. 1, nos. 127–30; nos. 148–49; and no. 317).

[35] See the *double entendre* series of nos. 42–46 (numbering as in Muir 1994, vol. 1).

The anecdote in Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis*

In Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis*, there is an episode that has been frequently commented on by scholars as evidence of Alfred's precocious love of learning.[36] Indeed, this first glimpse of the prince's education in the context of the West Saxon court appears at the beginning of the work, in which the youth's interest in learning is already mentioned as an important part of his personality. But to my knowledge, the significance of this episode—plausibly suggesting the existence of an autochtonous collection of poetic materials, similar to those preserved in the Exeter Book—has not yet been considered. In order to achieve this goal, I will first analyze the passage in question, so that we can extract as much information from it as possible:

> sed, proh dolor! indigna suorum parentum et nutritorum incuria usque ad duodecimum aetatis annum, aut eo amplius, illiteratus permansit. Sed Saxonica poemata die noctuque solers auditor, relatu aliorum saepissime audiens, docibilis memoriter retinebat.[37] (XXII. 10–15)

> but oh, what a shame! Because of the disgraceful carelessness of his parents and instructors, he [Alfred] remained illiterate until his twelfth year of age, or even older. Nevertheless, day and night he listened diligently to Saxon poems,[38] most often paying attention to other people's recitation, and he easily learned them by heart.

This excerpt thus informs us that a possible gap in Alfred's education was luckily compensated for by a frequent exposure to the recitation of English poetry. Public readings at court would, of course, require the continued services of a trained poet or *scop*, assuming that poetry was mainly transmitted orally and not so often written down. Despite this, it is not implausible that anthologies containing a selection of verse in English may have also been produced to facilitate the transmission or to form part of a *scop*'s repertoire.

On the other hand, a court like that of Alfred's childhood would not be lacking access to high quality verse. The prince's grandfather Ecgberht (r. 802–39) had been exiled in Francia for more than a decade, so that he and his entourage may well have been the vehicle that brought Carolingian literary tastes to England. It should also be recalled that, as recorded in Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis* (XI), young Alfred travelled to Rome in the company of his father Æthelwulf (c. 855), a trip that gave them the opportunity to visit the court of Charles the Bald (843–77) of Francia.[39] After the death of Osburh, Æthelwulf married Judith, the Frankish king's daughter, who became Alfred's stepmother. Under these circumstances, it is likely that the prince may have been exposed to the influence

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[36] For a recent assessment of the figure of King Alfred in Asser's biography and other texts from a hagiographic perspective, see Kalmar (2023).

[37] All citations from Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis* in this essay are from Whitelock (1959). Chapter and line numbering are also from this edition. Unless indicated otherwise, the translation of all the Latin passages included in this article is my own.

[38] As with Keynes and Lapidge (2004, 75), I consider that Asser's "Saxonica poemata" refers to poems that were originally composed in Old English. For the view that it may be instead allude to translations of Old Saxon pieces, see Bredehoft (2009, 65–103).

[39] See the entry on King Alfred (Wormald 2006) in the online *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

of Carolingian literature from an early age. After he succeeded to the throne, Alfred did his best to continue this continental liaison by recruiting two leading intellectuals of the time: Grimbald of St Bertin and John the Saxon.[40] The effort to maintain cultural links across the channel is also perceived in the subsequent monarchs.[41] In particular, it has been noted that cultural influence from the continent was a defining feature of Æthelstan's reign.[42] Similarly, Conner (1993, 150–59) has argued that several poems of the Exeter Book suggest a conscious imitation of Carolingian literary models.

Another passage from Asser's work that can give us further valuable information about Alfred's early exposure to English poetry is precisely the one in which his mother Osburh is said to have played a decisive role in the boy's education:

> Cum ergo quodam die mater sua sibi et fratribus suis quendam Saxonicum poematicae artis librum, quem in manu habebat, ostenderet, ait: "Quisquis uestrum discere citius istum codicem possit, dabo illi illum." Qua uoce, immo diuina inspiratione, instinctus <Ælfredus>, et pulchritudine principalis litterae illius libri illectus, ita matri respondens, et fratres suos aetate, quamuis non gratia, seniores anticipans, inquit: "Verene dabis istum librum uni ex nobis, scilicet illi, qui citissime intelligere et recitare eum ante te possit?" Ad haec illa, arridens et gaudens atque affirmans: "Dabo," infit, "illi." Tunc ille statim tollens librum de manu sua, magistrum adiit et legit. Quo lecto, matri retulit et recitauit. (XXIII. 1–15)

> So one day, when his mother showed him and his brothers a book of Saxon poetry,[43] which she had in her hand, she said: "Whichever of you can quickly learn this book, I will give it to him." Prompted by this speech, or rather by heavenly inspiration, and allured by the beauty of the opening letter of this book, <Alfred>—thus answering his mother and anticipating his brothers, older than he in age, though not in esteem—said: "Will you really give this book to one of us, certainly to the one who can understand it more quickly and recite it in front of you?" To which, smiling and rejoicing, she said to confirm: "I will give it." Then taking the book away from her hand at once, went to his teacher, and studied it. Having studied it, he brought it back to his mother and recited it.

The episode has every chance of being true, since it represents the sincerity of the reaction of the child who, especially attracted by the beauty of the book's illuminated initial, commits himself to learning the poems contained in it.[44] The fact that a manuscript including vernacular poetry has an elaborate initial is a revealing piece of information in itself. This idea gives us an insight into the prestige that English verse had reached by then.[45] Indeed, the book that stimulated Alfred's interest in learning must

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[40] For the continuity of John the Saxon's literary activity in Æthelstan's period, see Lapidge (1993, 60–71).
[41] For evidence of the survival of the Alfredian cultural program during Edward the Elder's reign, see Lapidge (1993, 12–16).
[42] Conner (1993, 151).
[43] Literally, "a book of poetic art."
[44] The veracity of Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis* has been questioned on numerous occasions. See Whitelock's comments on this passage (1967, 221–22). The general opinion today is that the story may have been embellished with hagiographic elements, but it has a genuinely original basis.
[45] Initialing was a time-consuming activity that usually required the use of expensive dyes. For this reason, this practice was primarily confined to *de luxe* volumes containing texts on religious matters. It has therefore been assumed that the book mentioned by Asser must have been a volume including vernacular religious texts similar to those found in the Junius Manuscript

have been a volume comparable to the Exeter Book, in which intricate initials have been executed with great skill. The presence of one of these lavishly decorated initials in the book admired by Alfred is therefore indicative of the high regard that the poetic materials contained in it may have had at the time.[46]

There are other elements that suggest the special care that was taken in the production of the extant copy of the Exeter Book. To begin with, the large dimensions suggest a costly production, as inferred from the considerable amount of parchment used in the process. The volume's size is also indicative of the significance attached to the vernacular contents.[47] The workmanship is no doubt commendable, as is the elegant script denoting the copyist's skilled craft.[48] Another sign of the manuscript's inherent value is the meticulousness with which the corrections have been done.[49] The fact that Sisam (1953, 98) detected numerous symptoms of "mechanical copying" suggests that the Exeter Book is probably one of several copies that may have been made from the same exemplar.[50] In this light, it is possible to conjecture that the Exeter Book is a descendant of a highly esteemed anthology with a long-established tradition in Anglo-Saxon England.

On the other hand, there is further evidence that can give us an insight into the great value that the sole witness to the Exeter Book must have had at the time of its copying. Indeed, in some parts of the manuscript there are what appear to be remnants of silver and gold powder of the type used to decorate parchment.[51] Whether this ornamental element was intended to fill in the initials of the poems in this anthology, or those in another manuscript, is probably impossible to determine.[52] However, given the generally fine workmanship of the Exeter Book, we cannot rule out the possibility that it was intended to complement the elegant script of the codex and that, for reasons unknown to us, this task was eventually abandoned. In any case, the poetic vernacular compilation

(Bredehoft 2009, 67, n. 8). However, Asser's passage simply alludes to the beauty ("pulchritudine") of this initial, which does not imply decoration with various inks. The Exeter Book, with its beautifully crafted initials, fulfils this condition, as I explain below.

[46] This episode also raises the possibility that a vernacular (proto-)anthology may have existed prior to Alfred's reign, suggesting that its contents were probably gathered during the reign of his father, Æthelwulf (r. 839–58). If nothing else, the gift of this book would help us to understand that collections of English poetry were circulated at the court of Æthelwulf, or even earlier, at the court of Ecgberht.

[47] Gameson (2006, 135) similarly comments on the manuscript's large proportions, rather outstanding for a codex containing vernacular materials. It is not surprising to see that Leofric's inventory describes it as "mycel" (see my discussion below), since the Exeter Book measures approximately 320 x 220 mm.

[48] Flower (Chambers 1933, 83), for example, states that the script "achieves a liturgical, almost monumental, effect by the stern character of its design and the exact regularity of its execution." Sisam (1953, 102) also points to the scribe's "highly schooled, monumental hand." Similarly, Gameson (1996, 179) notes the copyist's extraordinary competence, which suggests that the Exeter Book was produced at a scriptorium with considerable resources.

[49] A similar global assessment of the intrinsic value of the Exeter Book is provided by Hartmann (2016, 30).

[50] As argued by Sisam (1953, 97), "it is unlikely that the compilation was first made in the Exeter Book, whose stately, even style indicates that it was transcribed continuously from a collection already made."

[51] This is a detail about the Exeter Book that is not so well known, and can only be appreciated if one has the opportunity to view the manuscript in situ.

[52] As noted in the official website of the Exeter Book (https://theexeterbook.exeter.ac.uk), the manuscript shows signs of its having been used "as a press for gold and silver leaf."

mentioned in Asser's account cannot have been far removed from the sole extant copy of the Exeter Book in workmanship and literary value.

The possible (post-)Alfredian background of the Exeter Book's contents

Not much is known about the obscure origins of the Exeter Book. What can be affirmed with certain confidence is that the codex is the product of an unknown scriptorium located in south-west England.[53] It is also clear that its copying dates from the second half of the tenth century, as the script indicates that it was copied by a single hand between 965–75.[54] As Sisam (1953, 4) concluded on palaeographical grounds, the materials gathered in this anthology may have been compiled in the Alfredian period, or perhaps during Edward the Elder's reign (r. 899–924) or that of Æthelstan (r. 924/25–39). Although the dating of many of the Exeter Book poems is hard to ascertain, it is clear that many were composed much earlier than the time of their inclusion in the manuscript. As pointed out by Fulk (2001, 16), the dialectal characteristics of *Ascension* and *The Passion of Saint Juliana*, the two poems bearing Cynewulf's acrostic in this codex, suggest that they must have been written by an author of either Mercian or Northumbrian origin in the period c. 750–c. 850. On linguistic grounds, a similar early dating has been proposed by Fulk (2001) for the *The Advent Lyrics*, *Christ in Judgement*, *Guthlac A* and *B*, *The Phoenix*, the *Physiologus*, and most of the *Riddles*.[55] This idea therefore does not contradict the hypothesis put forward by Sisam, and supported in this essay, that these works may have been part of a compilation from the (post-)Alfredian period.

Evidence of the fact that an anthology of these characteristics may be related to this cultural context can be provided by means of a careful consideration of the reference to the Exeter Book in the inventory of Leofric's donations made to the cathedral library.[56] This inventory itemizes objects associated with the religious service, as well as a list of books divided into three parts,[57] which may represent three different categories, or

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[53] As noted by Sisam (1953, 103), the Exeter Book was copied in a "south-western district."

[54] This is the dating favoured by Muir (1994, 1). Alternative suggestions include the years 970–90, the timespan proposed by Flower (Chambers 1933, 90) and 950–70, the latter put forward by Conner (1993, 76).

[55] The titles of works in the Exeter Book throughout this essay are those found in Muir's edition (1994, vol. 1). Exceptionally, for the sake of convenience, I have abbreviated Muir's editorial title *The Life of St Guthlac* in this list. Also, note that I have also used the title *Physiologus* instead of Muir's separate reference to *The Panther*, *The Whale*, and *The Partridge*.

[56] This inventory has survived in Cambridge, University Library, MS Ii. 2. 11 (fols. 1r–2v). The first eight leaves of this manuscript are currently affixed to the Exeter Book. In the other part of the Cambridge codex a version of the West Saxon Gospel survives, among other texts. As pointed out by Conner (1993, 3), the contents of this volume can be associated with scribal activity linked to Leofric's scriptorium. The same inventory is also extant in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Auct. D 2. 16 (fols. 1r–2v), from the tenth century.

[57] This catalogue provides a notable illustration of some of the most highly regarded works of the time. Among others, it includes Gregory the Great's *Regula pastoralis* and the *Dialogi*, Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, Prosper's *Epigrammata*, Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, some exegetical works by Bede, and Isidore's *Etymologiae*. This book catalogue has been edited and discussed by scholars on numerous occasions. For example, see Chambers (1933, 10), Lapidge (1985, 64, n. 102), Conner (1993, 229, n. 10), and Gameson (2006, 141–42).

perhaps the original location of the volumes in the monastic library.[58] At the end of the second part, an Old English translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* ("Boeties boc on englisc") is mentioned immediately before the famous reference to the Exeter Book as "i mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht" ("one bit book in English about various matters made in verse").[59] Joyce Hill (2005, 85) has argued that the placement of these two entries side by side indicates that they were viewed by the author of the booklist as being linked on the basis of a "linguistic association."[60] Clearly, as Hill further explains, this second section of the list is characterized by the presence of several books in English,[61] a feature not observed in the third group, which contains Old Testament works, commentaries on the Scriptures, and other texts by reputed Christian authors, all in Latin.

The fact that the English translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, traditionally considered an Alfredian accomplishment,[62] is juxtaposed with the Exeter Book in Leofric's inventory may be more revealing than previously thought. To my knowledge, no other scholar has considered the possibility that the two books could have been paired in the list because their contents were understood to preserve works associated with (post)-Alfredian literary tradition. As noted by Niles (2006, 192) with regard to the Old English version of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, "this composite work of prose and verse may have been completed not long before the Exeter Anthology was written out in the fair copy that we read today."[63] Furthermore, it has already been pointed out on numerous occasions that some of the Exeter Book poems are clearly Boethian in essence and tone. Examples of this are *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, which convey a reflection on the hardships of exile, a notion that can be extended to other works in the manuscript.[64] In the case of *The Wanderer* in particular, the Boethian characteristics are even more pronounced, as the poem dwells on the idea of the comfort that comes from the pursuit of wisdom.[65]

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[58] Gameson (2006, 142); Hill (2005, 85).

[59] It has been generally assumed by scholarship that this descriptive phrase found in Leofric's inventory refers to the Exeter Book. Citation from Gameson (2006, 141). The translation of all the passages from this catalogue cited in this article is my own.

[60] The two books are items 22 and 23 in Gameson (2006, 141).

[61] In addition to the *Boethius* and the "mycel englisc boc," two other English translations are listed in the same group as "þeos englisc Cristes boc" ("this English gospel book") and "I scriftboc on englisc" ("one penitential book in English"). Citation by Gameson (2006, 141, items nos. 14 and 20, respectively).

[62] It should be noted, however, that Godden (2007) argued against this general view, concluding that Alfred had nothing to do with the translation of Boethius's work. In the same article, Godden challenges the idea that this translation was carried out during his reign. For the reassessment of the traditional view that Alfred did in fact translate some of these works, see Bately (2009). For further information and a recent discussion of the debate see Faulkner and Leneghan (2024, 19–21).

[63] The manuscripts in which the Old English adaptation of Boethius's work has survived are rather late, the earliest of them being the so-called "Napier Fragment" (or manuscript *N*), probably from the first half of the tenth century. This lost fragment was named after Arthur Napier, who discovered it in 1886. For the dating of the Old English *Boethius*, see Godden and Irvine (2009, 1:146–51).

[64] Niles (2019, 7–10, 98–100, 130–33, and passim) pointed out that the concept of exile is a thread running through a good number of the Exeter Book poems, some of which reflect the anxieties of cloistered people enduring a self-imposed isolation from the joys and comforts of secular life.

[65] On this, see Langeslag (2008).

Building on Hill's idea (2005, 85) mentioned above, the appearance of the entry "Boeties boc on englisc" alongside that of the "mycel englisc boc" may be due to the cataloguer's recognition that both volumes contain English rewritings of works based on Latin texts. This is the case, for example, of *The Canticle of the Three Youths* (also formerly known as *Azarias*), a poem from the Exeter Book based on the biblical account found in the Book of Daniel.[66] In this sense, it is worth noting that vernacular re-elaborations of Old Testament works were no doubt typical of the (post-)Alfredian period, as suggested by the *Prose Psalms* (1–50),[67] traditionally attributed to King Alfred himself, and the *Metrical Psalms*, a verse adaptation made in the tenth century.[68] By the same token, *Guthlac B*, a poetic reshaping of Felix of Crowland's prose *Vita sancti Guthlaci* (c. 730–40), is in line with the production of vernacular versions of lives of saints, as exemplified by the Old English *Martyrology*, a hagiographic collection traditionally linked to the Alfredian cultural revival.[69] Most importantly, a further work contained in the Exeter Book, *The Phoenix*, is a free rendering of Lactantius's *Carmen de aue phoenice* (no. 731), a poem mentioned above as part of the later expanded versions of the *Anthologia Latina*. As the majority of the poems contained in the Exeter Book were produced between c. 750–c. 850,[70] it may be reasonable to conjecture that this vernacular adaptation had a place in collections of the type mentioned in Asser's account. The juxtaposition of the Old English *Boethius* and the Exeter Book in Leofric's inventory therefore seems to respond to associative patterns in the mind of the cataloguer, who probably recognized that the contents of the two books were related to the (post-)Alfredian cultural environment.

Apart from *The Phoenix*, some of the other materials gathered in the Exeter Book reflect the main genres and subjects represented in the *Anthologia Latina*, the compilation that may have also been the model of the verse collection mentioned in Asser's biography. As pointed out above, the African assemblage presents a selection of lyrical poems, epigrams, elegies, encomia, satirical verses, and riddles. It should also be mentioned that some of these Latin texts had a didactic purpose. Part of this generic basis seems to be mirrored in the Exeter Book, whose poetic repertoire similarly suggests a pedagogic intention. Indeed, vernacular lyric poetry in the Old English anthology is exemplified by *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *The Husband's Message*, among others. If we look at one of the poems included in the *Anthologia Latina* ("Ad amicum optimum," no. 405), parallels with some of those mentioned can immediately be perceived:

Crispe, fides dulcis placideque acerrima uirtus (7)

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[66] It is worth mentioning here that evidence of an early circulation of a closely related version to the Old English *Daniel* comes from the so-called "Honington Clip," discovered in 2011 (in Honington, Lincolnshire). Indeed, Hines (2015) identified the runic inscription in this object as the beginning of an early verse paraphrase of the liturgical *Benedicite* (Daniel 3:57–89), corresponding to *Daniel* (362–64) and *The Canticle of the Three Youths* (73–75). As concluded by Hines (2015, 270), the inscription is "an Anglian text, very likely of the period A.D. 750–800."
[67] On this work, see the recent publications by O'Neill (2015), Faulkner (2019), and Butler (2024).
[68] For a recent study on the *Metrical Psalms*, see Leneghan (2017).
[69] For a list of some of the publications presenting this idea, see Rauer (2013, 11, n. 44). Rauer's (2013, 12) dating of the Old English *Martyrology* to the period c. 800–c. 900 does not entirely rule out the possibility that it may be an Alfredian cultural product.
[70] These dates are provided by Fulk (2001, 16). See also Fulk (1994, 393).

. . .
Quo solo careat si quis, in exilio est:
intactae iaceo saxis telluris adhaerens,
mens tecum est, nulla quae cohibetur humo.[71] (10–12)

Crispus, sweet loyalty and kindly stern virtue,
. . .
If anyone is alone missing [you], he is in exile:
I lie bound to the crags of an uncharted land,
with you is my mind, not restrained by soil.

The lines describe the grief of someone whose friend has been banished, thus causing feelings of loss similar to exile in the speaker.[72] The idea brings to mind the following passage from *The Wife's Lament*:

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
under actreo in þam eorðscræfe.
Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad. (27–29)
. . .
Þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg,
þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsiþas,
earfoþa fela. Forþon ic æfre ne mæg
þære modceare minre gerestan,
ne ealles þæs longaþes þe mec on þissum life begeat.[73] (37–41)

I was commanded to dwell in an earth cave, under an oak in a grove of trees. Old is this earth-house. I am full of longing . . . I must sit the summer-long day there, where I can lament my experiences of exile, the numerous tribulations. Because of this, I can never rest from this grief of mind, nor from all the longing that has taken hold of me in this life.

Both the Latin poem and the Old English text employ typical motifs to capture the profound sorrow of the first-person speaker, who must endure the anguish of the partner's banishment. In the two passages, the environment is depicted with natural elements that convey the image of a landscape of harshness, as expressed in the Latin poem with "saxis" and "tellus." In *The Wife's Lament*, this idea is far more pronounced with "eorðscræfe" (28b) and "eorðsele" (29a), referring to the cave in which the first-person speaker lives in total isolation. All these terms are used in both poems to underscore the sense of exile—Latin "exilio" (10) and Old English "wræcsiþas" (38b)—experienced by the two speakers who similarly allude to their troubled state of mind.

In the same Boethian vein, the catalogue of sad stories presented in *Deor* finds an interesting echo in a poem entitled "De fortuna" (On fate, no. 234), attributed to one Pentadius:[74]

[71] All the citations from the *Anthologia Latina* in this article are from Buecheler and Riese, 1894–1906. The numbering of the poems corresponds to this edition. The translation of all the quoted excerpts is my own.
[72] For the possible identity of Crispus, see Socas (2011, 350, n. 63).
[73] In this article, the edition of all citations from the Exeter Book is from Muir (1994, vol. 1).
[74] As pointed out by Socas (2011, 244, n. 711), all that is known of Pentadius is that he may have been a contemporary of Lactantius.

Coniugis Eurydice precibus remeabat ad auras:
rursus abit uitio coniugis Eurydice.
Sanguine poma rubent Thisbae nece tincta repente:
candida quae fuerant, sanguine poma rubent.
Daedalus arte sua fugit Minoia regna:
amisit natum Daedalus arte sua. (7–12)
. . .
Sunt mala laetitiae diuersa lege creata,
iuncta autem adsidue sunt mala laetitiae. (35–36)

With her husband's prayers, Eurydice returned to the atmosphere [i.e. to the world]: again Eurydice leaves [the world] due to her husband's mistake. With blood reddens the fruit, suddenly coloured with Thisbe's death; before it was white, and [now] with blood reddens the fruit. With his skill, Daedalus flees from the kingdoms of Minos: Daedalus lost his son with his skill . . . Evils [and] joys are created on the basis of a different law, but often evils [and] joys are together.[75]

Like the author of *Deor*, Pentadius reviews known cases of misfortune in classical Antiquity, alluding to mythic characters who experienced a complete upheaval in their lives.[76] In a similar way, the Old English poem evokes several examples of extreme adversity by alluding to stories drawn from Germanic myth and legend:

Welund him be wearnum wræces cunnade,[77]
anhydig eorl earfoþa dreag,
hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longaþ,
wintercealde wræce; (1–4a)
. . .
Beadohilde ne wæs hyre broþra deaþ
on sefan swa sar swa hyre sylfre þing—
þæt heo gearolice ongieten hæfde
þæt heo eacen wæs; (8–11a)
. . .
We þæt Mæðhilde monge gefrugnon
wurdon grundlease Geates frige,
þæt hi seo sorglufu slæp ealle binom. (14–16)

Due to hindrances, Weland experienced exile. The resolute man endured hardships; as his companion[s], he had grief and longing, winter-cold exile;
. . .

[75] The poem is an example of epanaleptic verse, in which the phrase opening the line is also the one closing it.
[76] This is the case of Orpheus who was told not to look back until Eurydice had fully emerged from Hades. When he failed to do so, his wife was condemned to return to the underworld forever. The mulberry tree's transition from white to red, in turn, serves as a metaphor for the abrupt change in fortune after Thisbe committed suicide when she saw Pyramus dead. The cunning device made by Daedalus, the wings, was also the cause of the death of his son Icarus.
[77] Note that I have preferred to substitute Muir's "wurman" for "wearnum" ("hindrances"), as proposed by Pope (1978, 39). For a summary of the different readings offered by scholars for this controversial passage, see Muir (1994, 2:567–68).

> For Beadohild, the death of her brothers was not as painful in her mind as her own problem—that she had clearly found out she was pregnant.
> . . .
> Of Mæthhild, many of us have heard that Geat's love became unfathomable, so much so that the sorrowful love deprived them of all sleep.[78]

With the stanzaic format framing each of the various sad cases alluded to, this list of major tribulations affecting mythical characters and the idea of resignation to what fate has in store for human beings is clearly at the heart of *Deor*, in a way reminiscent of Pentadius's "De fortuna."[79]

In addition, a lyric sub-category is the place or city encomium (also known as *encomium urbis*), which similarly has an ample representation in the *Anthologia Latina*, where various pieces extol the glories of the architecture of Carthage.[80] In one of these texts (no. 411), the current decadence of Athens and its past glory is described in a way that recalls *The Ruin*:

> Quisquis Cecropias hospes cognoscis Athenas,
> quae ueteris famae uix tibi signa dabunt,
> "Hasne dei" dices "caelo petiere relicto?" (1–3)
> . . .
> Idem Agamemnonias dices cum uideris arces:
> "Heu uictrix uicta uastior urbe iacet!"
> Hae sunt, quas merito quondam est mirata uetustas;
> magnarum rerum magna sepulcra uides! (5–8)

> Traveller, you who know Cecrops's Athens,[81] which will hardly give you a sign of its ancient renown, will say: "Is this the one the gods sought after they left heaven?" . . . You will say the same when you see the citadels of Agamemnon: "Alas, the victorious one [i.e. Mycenae] lies more devastated than the defeated city [i.e. Troy]." These are [the cities] that Antiquity once rightly admired: you are looking at the great sepulchers of great exploits.

In *The Ruin*, the magnificence and richness of the city, described from the perspective of its former inhabitants, is similarly evoked nostalgically in the following lines:

> Hryre wong gecrong
> gebrocen to beorgum, þær iu beorn monig
> glædmod ond goldbeorht (31b–33a)
> . . .
> seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas,
> on ead, on æht, on eorcanstan,

[78] This passage presents the ordeal experienced by Weland, the legendary blacksmith, who became a prisoner of King Nithhad. The story of Beadohild, Nithhad's daughter, is in turn representative of extreme sorrow, since she endured the deaths of her brothers and unwanted pregnancy. The case of Mæthhild and Geat illustrates a love relationship with a tragic outcome.
[79] It is also remarkable that the female perspective was clearly of special interest for both poets.
[80] For example, see Felix's series (Buecheler and Riese, 1894–1906, 1:179–82, nos. 210–14) and Florentinus's two poems (1:288–90, nos. 376–77) on the thermal baths and the palaces built by King Thrasamund of the Vandals (496–523).
[81] The adjective *Cecropias* refers to the time of Athens's primordial glory, when Cecrops, its legendary first king, reigned.

on þas beorhtan burg bradan rices. (35–37)

The plain has fallen into ruin, with [everything] broken into heaps, where long ago many a glad-spirited and gold-bright man . . . looked at the treasure, at the silver, at the skilfully made jewels, at the wealth, at the possessions, at the precious stone, and at this bright fortress of the vast kingdom.

In some of the texts of the *Anthologia Latina*, the notable prominence of baths as an eminent symbol of Romanized civilization is a frequent subject, as observed in poem no. 123:

Infundit nostris Titan sua lumina Bais
inclusumque tenet splendida cella iubar.
Subiectis caleant aliorum balnea flammis:
haec reddi poterunt, Phoebe, uapore tuo.

The Titan (i.e. the sun) sheds his light on our Baiae (i.e. our baths),[82] and a magnificent chamber preserves the radiance. Let the baths of others be heated by the flames beneath: these may be maintained, Phoebus, by your warmth.

Likewise, *The Ruin* seems to fit in this sub-category of encomia with its evocative admiration of the former splendour of Roman buildings and baths, as illustrated by the following passage:[83]

Stanhofu stodan, stream hate wearp
widan wylme; weal eall befeng
beorhtan bosme, þær þa baþu wæron,
hat on hreþre.[84] (38–41a)

The stone buildings stood, and the river flowed warmly with its wide outpouring; a wall enclosed all in its shiny interior, where the baths were, warm at [their] heart.

Clearly, as in poem 123 cited above, the image of the baths plays an important part in *The Ruin*.

In both the Exeter Book and the African sylloge, as mentioned above, riddles feature prominently. To the presence of Symphosius's influential *Enigmata*, part of the original nucleus preserved in the Salmasian Codex, we must add the Bern Riddles, which appear in later medieval expanded versions of the *Anthologia Latina*.[85] Symphosius's Riddles

[82] The famous Roman baths of Baiae in Campania are compared here to the local baths.
[83] Contrary to Leslie (1988, 22–29), who views *The Ruin* as an elegiac piece, Mora (1995) has challenged this traditional classification, arguing that this reading is based on a nineteenth-century bias against these works. On the other hand, Howlett (1979, 291–93) considers *The Ruin* as an illustration of the *encomium urbis* derived from the classical tradition, an opinion which I subscribe.
[84] The reference to baths has also been interpreted by Leslie (1988, 22–28), among other scholars, as evidence that the poet had a particular city in mind, Bath (Somerset). For the view that the poem may simply represent an unspecified city, see Niles (2006, 191).
[85] For these manuscripts, see Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 1:296, no. 481).

were no doubt well-known to English authors such as Aldhelm, Eusebius, and Tatwine.[86] A case in point is Exeter Book Riddle 85, which I quote in full here, in order to compare it with Symphosius's counterpart:

Nis min sele swige, ne ic sylfa hlud
ymb [***];[87] unc dryhten scop
siþ ætsomne. Ic eom swiftre þonne he,
þragum strengra, he þreohtigra.
Hwilum ic me reste; he sceal yrnan forð.
Ic him in wunige a þenden ic lifge;
gif wit unc gedælað, me bið deað witod. (Exeter Riddle 85)

My house is not quiet, nor am I loud around [***]; the Lord has made this journey for both of us. I am quicker than him, sometimes stronger, he is more persevering. Sometimes I rest, while he must run; I dwell in him, always while I live; if we are parted, death shall be certain for me.

Est domus in terris, clara quae voce resultat.
Ipsa domus resonat, tacitus sed non sonat hospes.
Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una. (Symphosius's *Enigma 12*)

There is a house on earth that resounds with a clear voice.
The house itself resonates, but the silent guest does not sound.
Yet both run, the house and the guest at the same time.

When read together, it is clear that these two poems revolve around the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the house (water) and the guest (fish). On the other hand, popular didactic poems from the *Anthologia Latina* that have generally been classified as part of the *Voces animantium* tradition find an echo in the allusion to the sounds of various animals in Exeter Book Riddle 24 (jay):[88]

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht, wræsne mine stefne—
hwilum beorce swa hund, hwilum blæte swa gat,
hwilum græde swa gos, hwilum gielle swa hafoc;
hwilum ic onhyrge þone haswan earn,
guðfugles hleoþor, hwilum glidan reorde
muþe gemæne, hwilum mæwes song. (1–6)

I am a wondrous creature, I change my voice—sometimes I bark like a hound, sometimes I bleat like a goat, sometimes I quack like a goose, sometimes I yell like a hawk; sometimes I imitate the grey eagle, the voice of the war bird, with my mouth I convey the sound of the kite, sometimes the song of the seagull.

[86] For example, on the influence of Bern *Enigma 5* (table) in riddles by these three writers, see Salvador-Bello (2020, 222–24).
[87] In Muir's edition, the asterisks indicate that part of the text was accidentally omitted by the scribe (1994, 2:676),
[88] This idea has been pointed out by Warren (2019), who has also mentioned the list of birds of *The Seafarer* (19b–25a) in this regard.

With its combined reference to the goat and the dog, this excerpt from Riddle 24 bears a certain resemblance to one of the poems in the *Anthologia Latina* (no. 762): "miccire caprae, hirce petulce, soles. / Rite canes latrant" (58–59) ("Butting he-goat, you usually bleat at the goat. / Dogs bark appropriately"). A further parallel is found in the poem entitled "De cantibus auium" (no. 733): "Dum miluus iugilat, trinnit tunc improbus anser" (11) ("While the kite chirps, the tireless goose, in turn, cries").[89] The Old English riddle clearly shares with the latter Latin excerpt the use of parallel syntactic structure and alliteration ("iugilat," "improbus," "anser," "trinnit," and "tunc"). On the other hand, the reference to the cuckoo urging to set off on a sea-voyage in *The Husband's Message* (19b–23) and *The Seafarer* (48b–55a), as argued by Michael Warren (2019, 130–31), is a motif that has only been attested in the poem (13) that has just been mentioned. The fact that texts related to the *Voces animantium* sub-category, of which there are several representative pieces in the Latin compilation, were easy to memorize suggests their use as mnemotechnical exercises in a school context. One can only imagine the young Alfred reciting from memory one of these versions in English, which may have been present in the codex mentioned by Asser, in order to impress his mother and win the prized anthology of English poems.

Conclusion

Building on Sisam's hypothesis (1953) that the Exeter Book derives from a (post-)Alfredian collection of poems, this article has contributed to unravelling the mysterious origins of this poetic anthology. In doing so, an analysis of the crucial episode in Asser's *De gestis Alfredi regis* (XXIII) has been provided. In this work, the author alludes to the existence of a vernacular verse assemblage that was undoubtedly essential to Alfred's education. As the most important model during the early Middle Ages was the *Anthologia Latina*, a comparison between this prototype and the Exeter Book has been carried out. Additionally, this essay has also drawn attention to the fact that the pairing of the "Boeties boc on englisc" and the "mycel englisc boc" in Leofric's inventory suggests that, in the eyes of the cataloguer, the contents of the vernacular anthology were viewed as connected with the Old English *Boethius*. The implication is that the two books next to each other in the list were probably part of the (post-)Alfredian cultural milieu.

As the only surviving poetic anthology of the Anglo-Saxon period,[90] the Exeter Book has helped to envisage a literary tradition that is most likely linked to that of the luxurious volume to which Asser refers, and the two, tentatively, to the *Anthologia Latina*. The early character of the majority of the materials contained in the Exeter Book adds further weight to this hypothesis. In this line of thought, the occurrence of the Exeter Book side by side with an Old English *Boethius* is possibly due to the fact that the two items were most likely seen as representing vernacular classics that were still much appreciated at the time Leofric's donation took place (1050). This also implies that the poems included in the "mycel englisc boc," like the vernacular *Boethius* mentioned in the

[89] Buecheler and Riese (1894–1906, 2:198, no. 733).
[90] As explained above (n. 2), I have distinguished between Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11, which is essentially made of religious poetry, and the Exeter Book as a proper anthology, which possibly reflects the generic compilation found in the *Anthologia Latina*.

list, were passed down from generation to generation, as they were part of the Alfredian cultural heritage.[91]

The production of poetic anthologies evidently did not end with the Exeter Book. A later massive *Anthologia Latina* preserved in Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg 5. 35—a manuscript from mid-eleventh century St Augustine's, Canterbury—has frequently been compared to the Exeter Book.[92] The Cambridge codex contains, among other numerous texts, works that typically appear in the *Anthologia Latina* such as Lactantius's *Carmen de aue phoenice* and Symphosius's *Enigmata*,[93] both of which are well represented in the Exeter Book.[94] The numerous parallels shared by the Exeter Book and the Cambridge volume indicate that both derive from a long-standing tradition of poetic anthologies that seems to have evolved from the imitation of the *Anthologia Latina* in an earlier period. Further study is therefore needed in this area, so that this tradition can be reconstructed on the basis of a more detailed comparison of the *Anthologia Latina*, the poems preserved in the Exeter Book, and those of the Cambridge codex. In this sense, this essay is a preliminary investigation in the hope that future scholars will continue this line of inquiry.

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[91] For the view that the ninth century was a "virtual golden age for the reception of Old English verse" with "an audience that spanned at least three generations of the West Saxon royal family," see Bredehoft (2009, 65).

[92] Among the most recent publications approaching this codex and the Exeter Book from a comparative perspective, see Tyler (2016) and Niles (2019, 47).

[93] For further generic and thematic connections observed in the Cambridge anthology and the Exeter Book, see Tyler (2016, 191).

[94] As proved by the presence of *The Phoenix* and the Old English free rendering of Symphosius's *Enigmas* nos. 47, 85, and 86, corresponding to Exeter Book Riddles 16 (bookworm), 12 (fish in river), and 95 (one-eyed man selling garlic), respectively; see Salvador-Bello (2015, 138).

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